

Fizzes with talent. A gorgeous
glimpse of the future of writing.

Beth Underdown



The *Manchester* Anthology 2023

**THE
MANCHESTER ANTHOLOGY
2023**

A Collection of New Writing

MANCHESTER ANTHOLOGY 2023

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Foreword by Frances Leviston, 2023.

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FOREWORD

There's a poem by Cavafy that comes to mind whenever a creative writing course is ending, and a graduating class makes its bittersweet way into the world. The poem is called 'The First Step', and it presents a conversation between the ancient Greek poet Theocritus and a younger writer, impatient for success, who complains that he's been writing for two years and has only composed one idyll. He has reached a realisation (in Keeley and Sherrard's excellent translation*): 'the ladder of Poetry / is tall, extremely tall; / and from this first step I now stand on / I will never climb any higher.'

Poor guy! It's a bracing truth that, when you set out to master a form — whether that's poetry, fiction, memoir or something else — usually the first lesson you grasp is how little you know, and how much remains to be understood. The scale of the problem reveals itself, or seems to, at least. It's very easy to become self-conscious and discouraged. It's very easy to compare your finished works to the vertiginous heights you imagine unfolding above you.

But Theocritus reacts in stern fashion. He admonishes the young writer, calling his words profane, which sounds harsh until you realise that it's the writer's own achievements Theocritus wants to defend. To be standing on the ladder at all is reason for profound celebration. He goes on to explain:

Even this first step
is a long way above the ordinary world.
To stand on this step
you must be in your own right
a member of the city of ideas.
And it is a hard, unusual thing
to be enrolled as a citizen of that city.

The writers in this anthology have all attained this hard, unusual thing; this critical first step. They have spent a year, or two years, in pursuit of an original perspective, a keen insight, a compelling character, a kindling of language into flame. They have supported one another, and seized each chance to learn. Their fictions, non-fictions and poems possess the weight of that artistic commitment. Whether examining love or catastrophe, identity or justice, mortality or desire, or someone's Nan standing at the cooker in her leopard-print dressing gown, each is writing their way into the city of ideas.

And what ideas they are. The image of a brine pool, a pool within a pool, uninhabitable to anything but bacteria, haunts a person dissatisfied with the small sphere in which they move. A horse quietly euthanised in a field somehow makes the prospect of an imminent human death more tolerable. The estrangements of Covid are defamiliarised again as two outsiders, scavengers for rubbish, band together to survive the society that rejects them. The fatberg in the sewers of London starts to speak.

I'll end with Theocritus's conclusion, in which he refers to having come *this* far: a choice, perhaps, of the translators', but one that always makes me feel that Theocritus and his young friend are both standing in the same place; that the first step for any writer might be, in some vital sense, the only step there is. Theocritus says,

To have come this far is no small achievement:
what you have done already is a glorious thing.

Reader, I hope you enjoy these glorious things.

Frances Leviston

June 2023

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POETRY



Paige Kirkman

Paige Kirkman is a poet from Bolton, Greater Manchester. When writing, she seeks to draw connections: within language, throughout time, and between people. Her work is often rooted in her observations of farm life, with many poems employing equine imagery. Contact her by email at kirkmanpaige1107@gmail.com

Pits and Pubs

It's four days before Christmas and
Tall Brian is propped at the bar
like furniture. He is the church oak
stool that rattles against the uneven ground.
The light sputters past the fire grate,
the chestnut walls are sweating.
The fruit machines dance with an energy
that the soaked coasters resist.
From a split in the skirting board, ants file in
pacing the sticky-ply. These workmen
crack their knuckles and rub
their carbonous faces; their palms
heavy with callouses twitch as they retreat
to their drinks. This room is a penny jar struggling
for air. Festive tunes rise
to the smutted ceiling sky, choking the dings
from wives who demand that this is the last
time. Every fifteen minutes someone announces
their need to piss, but Old Jed – with the legs
of a fresh calf, fails to make it.
There, above where he lies, on the board
by the door, all eyes are drawn –
one hundred and eleven years to the day
the beaten black earth swallowed them
whole. The thunderous hooves they heard
were the breaking of coal. Those three digits
emerged like children holding a banner that reads
in bold *Help the Fatherless*, in the upper air.

Stable

It began with a red June, parched fields, the stable,
always empty, filled. I would sit on the tower
of wrapped hay bales, rounds of black liquorice,
and melt. I hadn't spent much time there
the previous summer, when the house had been quiet.

The first time I saw my namesake, she was swaying
the dull mare from the trailer. Its hooves met the dust
with apprehension, fur painted with lazy sweat. She stirred
each step from it like a mother drawing the first
from a child. Pain steamed off them.

Talk started instantly. The other girls harrowed
over a new name, refusing to let us share:
The Anti-Wim Hof, her layers of long sleeves
and wool hats despite the heat. It never quite reached her,
even when it swarmed the yard like midges.

Her father used to drop her off at the very
top of the hill. He'd watch her descend like a secret
finally sent out into the world. He was sitting there once
as the hack passed, from the darkness around his eyes,
his peculiar baldness, rose the knowledge that he was dying,

just as from the shudder of its knees, the molasses to hide
the bitter kick of a cure not working, the eventual
inability to bear its own weight, the stable
thought of always as empty, rose the knowledge
that the mare was dying too.

It was a grey late-July when the mare was discontinued
in the sand paddock, coached, once again, by her mild hands.
From my bulwark of hay bales, I saw her finally:
bare arms cradling its head. It felt, then, as if the comfort
of only one death had been enough to take the chill off.

‘a surfeit of lampreys’

what begins as a surfeit
of cherries,
sanguinarian
in the local park
ripping the head
clean off the cord,
a mess of skulls
and spines,
feeling like
Cronus, monstrous,
unafraid
to swallow the stone,
loose blades
of grass cling
to the juice –
(a man advances,
I'll show you
to knot them
with your tongue)

becomes a surfeit
of lampreys,
latchers, blood
drinkers, mouths wide
with marble columns
ruined to points,
grey bloated

bodies writhe
in a pile,
knot to a pit
in your gut,
if god strikes
your sated self down
you could die
like a king,
ancient, o-mouthed,
written about –
daisy-chain of teeth
bared to the ceiling.



Christopher Meadowcroft

Christopher Meadowcroft (he/they) is a poet interested in transness, queerness and desire. His work is often grounded in a framework of trans studies, exploring both the personal and the political. Contact him/them by email at chrismeadowcroft@outlook.com

I am sick of galleries

Nathan told me I would understand.
A white box could be transformed.
I would feel it in my chest. I have spent
hours still, staring at a painting, a paper,
a plank of wood. I think about a carving
of Christ with his arms outstretched.
They all beg me to believe in them.

He led me to Emin's bed, Nathan said
it looked like mine, but I am yet to reap
my fortune. A total bore of a scene
where dust mites make their home.
Ghosts of men and women circle
sex like it will rub off on them. I don't
want to stare at her cum-stained sheets.

Now,
if they let me lay down,
that's art I could get behind.
I could land on the mattress
unsettle all the spirits,
breathe in the dead
skin cells that rest
on the linen, use
up the KY jelly,
re-use the condoms,
hump the yellow pillow,

fuck myself in a white room
so hard they have to
erect a tombstone.

My moans could scare
away the canvas-white
women with their avant-garde
spectacles. Hell, I'll show them
a real spectacle.

And just before the security
rush in, my revelation:

I'll pour vodka
on the sheets, light
a cigarette on my teeth.
watch as the ashes turn to embers,
and burn the whole thing down.

A Political Poem

I wake up in the morning
and this is a political poem.
I haven't had time to do laundry
and piles of shirts have bred
into a mountain range
around my bed. I have slept in,
I am late for work
and this is a political poem.

My muscles ache like I am running
out of fuel because I am.
Because I can't get my hormones,
and no one else can either,
my doctor has decided to ignore me
instead of dealing with it
and this is a political poem.

At work, no one stocked up last night.
Like Sisyphus, I roll Budweiser.
My shoulders strain against
the metal and Bradwell walks
past and tells me I'm finally
a real man,
and this is a political poem.

My boy comes home to me, his hands
covering the vast valleys of my skin.
We make love;
and I lean to open the window,
in case we are hoarding
all the tenderness in Greater Manchester.
He looks for his underwear and tells me
he thinks that he will go to hell for this,
and that it is worth it,
and I wish that this wasn't
but this is a political poem.



Harshavardhini Pareek

Harshavardhini Pareek is a poet, a Led Zeppelin enthusiast, and constantly searching for divine intervention. She completed her MA from The University of Manchester. Her work explores ideas of girlhood and godhood and what it's like to be on the precipice of both. Contact her by email at harshavardhinipareek@gmail.com or through Instagram [@vodkamausy](https://www.instagram.com/vodkamausy)

Scene one – communal waxing room

The grasshopper skin on my elbow wrinkles and I fold
 inward with every pinch. I'm a creature of shame,
 so small, aunt diligently checkers my legs: kiwi fuzz chess boarding across
 my calves. I am
 so naked, tits grim, godless, cricket girl knees up to my
 chin. I know how to shave, I mow the little spot
 between my eyebrows to not look like my father,
 you see, and my aunt tells me to can it. If there is
 a boob out there that doesn't chafe on her crusting
 henna-pocked towel, I pray it were mine. My hair is
 too young, musked over hymen-sillage that
 the strange men outside snatch whiffs of. They are
 dogs anyway, cousin unnumbered reminds me
I am tall enough to know. I last saw the Paediatrician
 two summers ago, since I am tall enough. I know,
 and my mother knows, and we both burrow
 deeper into our towels, she's seen enough
 dogs to become a creature of shame. I try not to
 think about summers gone, there is no wedding
 two summers ago. I am praying again, hot knife
 singes and the Girls say "amen!", I chicken
 all over. Cousin (bride) smiles at me, womanly
 breasts tucked behind womanly knees, legs scored
 slippery from years of womanly rehearsal. She has never
 split a shin on a gearless boy-bike, never kissed an uggo on
 a dare and liked it. "Isn't it lovely, shedding years of
 genetic predispositions? Isn't it nice, the tug of war with
 this skin till you triumph? Isn't it nice, to be pretty and to win?"
 I wouldn't know, I say. I am just a creature of shame.

Code Switch

I knew a half-friend who would roll cigarettes that sputtered in indignation with every drag and I would still smoke them down to the tarry filter. On that one night, him, limp with rain, said to me how he thought “cremations are a bit useless, aren’t they?”

In his defence, it was dark, we were three pints in, I sounded more “American” than ever, pink hair glows blonde in the red bar-light, maybe he forgot the several hard Rs in my name. Maybe he forgot who I am, or where I come from. Maybe he just didn’t know. Maybe he really did find cremations useless.

Maybe they are.

We were four pints in. I silently rolled my name in my mouth to check if it was still there, my palmstone, my rose quartz, my stub of strawberry chapstick, my grandmother’s lint covered lozenges, melting into fuzzy residue.

He couldn’t spell it if he tried.

My first funeral pyre singed and rotted in the heat but never truly blazed. I was then thirteen, my cousin remained eleven. In utero I wish he’d somersaulted, skipped rope with my aunt’s umbilical, and as I watched my aunt shake her tears into her sooty palms I wondered if she would always think about his palsied limbs, unkicking in her belly, and ache in her abdomen forever. I imagined kicking in my abdomen and panicked myself out of the psychosomatic thrumming.

They said he won’t be coming back: no more flesh prison perils for this guy! They said special people almost never do, they spend their arduous few trips around the gassy sun and sputter out in peace.

I always think about him – slack-jawed and smiling and never having known what a somersault is.

I always light the cigarette back. I am angry, and normal, and I know this won't be my last day on earth.



Cameron Rew

Cameron Rew is a Liverpoolian poet and fine art painter. His work uses a strong internal voice to create poetry that is quirky, bold and unabashed while working closely with metre and internal rhyme and seeks outside the box as a platform. He reflects on his life experience through his poetry whilst being mindful of “What hasn’t been done before?”. He states that the answer is “not much”, but he still aims for a touch of spellbinding uniqueness.

Cameron, You Know You've Hit A Low Point

when you wash your face with a floor wipe
after four days of being criminal
and it comes off darker than the dirt
beneath your chipped red fingernails.

You've hit a no go point when you realise
San Miguel doesn't kill you fast enough
and begin to consider vodka again.
Mainly, you know you need to be better

but something dark and hilarious sings
deeper inside than ancestral genetics
like that time you sold your soul to the Devil
with an old 2p, cavalierly impressing

the girls and lads in primary school,
flipping it over on a red leather Bible.
Whether or not you meant it,
something's followed you ever since.

You broke a code that day.
You gave it away and you never
truly got it back. Virgin Mary guards you,
you think. Some internal light tries to help,

but you're greeted in nightmares.
You wake, a witch screaming at your feet,
reminding you of the poltergeist hand-dryers
blaring when you walked past the lad's bogs,

piss-swamped tiles where the coin stuck wet.
You scrabbled to pick it up. You were just a boy?
A boy with dire lightning and cruelty
who abused the atmosphere with rage.

You're no longer a boy. You can't say sorry
enough times for the wish you sent out,
for the dreadfulness you wanted then.
It scorched you through. You know now

the sadness you feel is a punishment.
Now you relinquish your haunting request?
Allow you to rest? I'll take your art away.

Frar

*Trish was a fish with a simple wish, that one day
she'd turn into a satellite dish. Then she'd swim
through the stars with the upside-down bras,
in the black-drowned sky of space.*

Hidden realms sang to me, as a child, from the glint
of a soapy wine glass, ran wild in a mind unsettled.
I mastered running away, stationed at the kitchen sink:
all you do is think, then blink, and bring pain blight.

There's a world that I made in the back of dad's van
as a lip-ringed kid with a notebook, doodling stars.
Chickens in ships sailed on calamitous pans,
written in the twang of my language 'Frar'.

Felony Melanie fled to Gethsemane Bar,
with Crack Anne in their diesel car. See you, I'm off:
ta-ra to my friends, I'll be scribbling round the bend.
In the archipelago of Hippoflockery Glen,

Queen Tit, King Ob, housebound monarchs of the fae,
trapped like rats by a Mildred Bush that teemed with cats,
pined for me to save the day: I imagined them a better lot.
There was Lezzy Bumwank, witch, and The Curious Pigeon's itch,

come to life, in The Forest of Twilight Madness, at my strife.
On the island Vile, Princess Terribelle cursed the land unwell with winnets,
that coalesced and stalked the livid scape like a mad brillo pad
for centuries (I read), to escape the unwashed plates of dread.

Someone Who Isn't Me

Everyone gets on your nerves at least a few times every day:
the important thing is to make sure you wear that thick biker jacket.
It's not a sort of armour, it just has really deep breast pockets:
I've got a collection of stolen glasses, pints I drank down backstreets.
Best thing is they balance out the belly and make me look beastly:

better than carrying a brolly to dishearten would-be muggers.
Muggers are bad little sweats: you never rob from real people.
Well, I did get a pizza on a card I found, but I'd had twelve cans.
The bank wouldn't give me one without contactless payments
despite constantly losing mine, so the pizza was a statement.

They forced me into spending everything in Gbar.
I bought an entire hen do shots because I liked their cock hats.
Then I called and said I'd lost my card in town. It wasn't fraud,
they were warned, but they keep giving me overdraft charges.

Charges on trains are best avoided by drinking in the bog
then Googling which stations don't have any barriers.
It's fair evasion: they're never on time, and paraplegic with people.
Miserytravel tried to have me off, so I minced into court:
they'd sold me that child's ticket at the desk, and I won the case.

If you change your DOB on the form the phone companies
just give you a new credit file on sim only, 1/6th the cost.
Bang (18 months later): you're approved for an iPhone.
Helen from T-Mobile thought she was so smug with her late fees.

(Joke: Motherland is that show about a woman
called Motherl and her friend who doesn't exist.)
I'd never offer to lend a homeless man fifty quid, I'd either give it,
or not. If I threatened him and tried to get it back
because I'd changed my mind, I'd expect someone to intervene.

Fifty quid to me is a fraction of a penny to a bank.
If I gave a homeless man 5p then tried to take his booty and his shoes,
I'd hope to be mobbed.
I don't go round giving homeless people fifty quid, just tenners these days.
(Joke: why are pirates called pirates? Because *they* arrr!)

Not all homeless people sleep on the streets or ever had to beg.
Some homeless people have friends with fridges, red leather doss couches.
Some homeless people are glamorous, with big gold earrings, faux fur coats.
One summer I slept in a bush on the new Liverpool One development,
spooning my best mate after scoring mushrooms

until they directed ice-cold sprinklers at us from their surveillance box.
In their defence, the joke was worth it. It wasn't January.
I don't feel any shame about needing some help in this world sometimes.
I don't feel any shame in taking what I need to get by sometimes.
The advice 'You should never put anything in writing' applies
to the afraid, to those with ill-wrought wealth, and shame.

The first red letter gives you palpitations, the seventh makes you laugh.
The fear of fountain pen signatures and unknown phone numbers
is one madness of the modern age. Just move to a different rental.
If you 'make it' one day you can afford to pay it back. If not,

you'll never get a mortgage anyway. Fuck them.

You can run away forever if you need to.

Not everything catches up with you.

If everything caught up with everyone it would be utopia;

it wouldn't be this fucking place. DISCLAIMER:

None of these statements are things the author has done, or believes.

They're all just anecdotes overheard in marvellous pubs.



Sam Rossi-Harries

Sam Rossi-Harries (he/him) is a London-based writer of fiction and poetry. His work has been published in *bath magg*, *Belleville Park Pages* and *Jungftak*. He has several short fiction and poetry publications forthcoming and is working on his debut novel. Contact him by email at samrossiharries@gmail.com or through Twitter [@SamRossiHarries](https://twitter.com/SamRossiHarries)

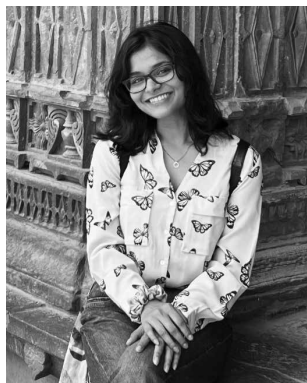
Mudman

Last day of the Six Nations. I am in *The Mitre* and dad is in the corner and all of outside is Tooting Broadway beautiful. Down the road Lahore *Karahi* where those who know get the fish masala. Hosman – mi hermano Colombiano – sixteen and somehow also Welsh today has dad in gentle headlock is spitting bars in Spanish directly into ear. Dad nods and smiles and *ach-y-fi*. Wales fumble the ball. Dad shakes his head *duw duw*.

Hosman cares for me so – duw duw – shakes his beer battered head too. *He would've just fucking loved this* says dad who by now is watery-eyed and somehow Welsher than ever. He's talking about his dead dad who is always in the room for him when I am. The water in his eyes becomes the Severn becomes the Atlantic becomes the Indian Ocean. The Urdu word for sea *samandar* can mean vastness mean also possibility mean scattered.

Mitti in Urdu is mud so call me mudman. Scatter my backbones down the high street. Curl my boots round Amen Corner. A rolling maul is a bong tattoo is cumin rubbed into cod flesh. How will I bring all this across water? *Mitti* can also mean smell and – my neck prickles – touch. Wales's fly-half is shovelling shit again. I fistbump Hos and drape a soily arm round dad's free shoulder. Safe fam. God god. *Ach-y-fuckin-fi*.

SHORT STORIES



Riti Agrawal

Riti Agrawal (she/they) is a fiction writer from Mumbai. Set in India, her short stories are character-driven, featuring women of different ages at different stages of their life. Her work highlights the complexities of familial relationships and explores the bubbling tension between what is said and what is left unsaid. Her anthology submission, ‘The New Old House’, is an extract from her short story of the same name. She is currently working on a short-story collection comprising the same. Contact her/them by email at riti.agrawal11@gmail.com

The New Old House

'You were later than usual today. Is everything okay?' Nalini asked, passing her daughter two plates and a steaming pot of dal. She stood in the kitchen doorway, watching Rishi carefully juggle the pot in one hand and the plates in the other. Nalini sighed with relief as her daughter, who had been a clumsy child, set it all down on the coffee table and sat on the couch.

'Rishi, beta, I am talking to you,' Nalini said, picking up a bowl of rice and walking out to sit beside her daughter. 'Kya hua?'

'Nothing, just some extra work,' Rishi replied with a shrug, her voice dismissive.

Nalini brushed a loose strand of hair away from her daughter's cheek. It fell back in front of her face again as she rubbed Rishi's shoulder softly. 'You look stressed. Extra kaam karwate hai toh chhod do na. Look for a new job. I am sure plenty of companies would be lucky to have you.'

'Maa, it's fine, I am okay.'

Nalini nodded suspiciously and stirred the dal, mixing in the tempering of red chillies, curry leaves, the mustard seeds floating on top of it, and the pool of ghee forming swirls surrounding it.

'You must be very hungry today, na? Tiffin bhi aadha wapas le aayi, didn't even finish your lunch,' Nalini said, pouring some dal on the rice and blowing at the steam before topping it with an extra spoonful of ghee and passing the plate to Rishi. 'Don't say you are bored with dal and rice. We haven't had dinner together in so long. I even added the tadka you like.'

'Did you watch an episode without me?' Rishi asked.

'No.' Nalini shook her head and fixed herself a plate next, getting comfortable on the couch.

'We were supposed to watch the sixth episode, but it's asking us to resume from episode seven,' Rishi laughed, pointing at the screen. 'You're such a liar, Maa.'

'I was bored! We can always rewatch it, you know. It's not the same without you,' Nalini said, taking a bite of her food.

The warmth of the lentils hit her tongue, the sharp garlicky flavour replicating the same dal she grew up eating. Nalini watched as her daughter mirrored her actions, picking up a small cushion, positioning it between her back and the couch to protect it from the hard sponge, and leaning back while crossing her legs. Rishi

had picked up Nalini's mannerisms since she was a child—she walked like her (strong strides with her toes facing out and shoulders pushed back), combed her hair like her (five brushes on each side of the middle part to untangle), laid down like her (on her side, knees close to her stomach, one arm under her pillow, the other tucked between her legs). She often returned from the market to find Rishi with her dupatta draped around her like a saree, instructing her dolls to chew slowly when eating, fold their laundry and do their homework, even scold them the way she did.

'How was your day?' Nalini asked, chewing. 'Did you finish your report?'

'Yes.'

'Did Fiona like it? Kuch bola usne?'

'It was fine.'

'Acha,' Nalini shifted her gaze to the television where Netflix's play button impatiently blinking at her. She swallowed hard and continued with a smile. 'And what about your office party on Saturday? Should I still make the samosas?'

'Let's just—can I start?' Rishi asked, prompting Nalini to nod.

The Narcos theme song filled the tiny flat they shared with sounds of the guitar travelling through the blue walls of the living room into the kitchen, penetrating the corner with the water purifier covered in Mickey Mouse stickers and a bit of the plaster that regularly fell from the damp ceiling. The percussion bounced off the floral tiles in the bathroom, taking in the sandalwood scent of the Santoor soap, poorly synchronising with the echo of the water droplets that fell from the leaking tap into the empty orange bucket. It livened the messy bedroom, waking up the tulsi and aloe vera plants on the windowsill, breathing life into the clutter of combs, scrunchies and hair clips before getting muffled in the graphic t-shirts and the cotton petticoats that overflowed from the handwoven laundry basket.

Even though their previous tenants had painted over the wall next to the door, Nalini could still picture the shape of her handprints on it when she blessed the entryway on her first day home. Dipped in alta, the thick, red dye symbolised a newly married woman's inhabitation and the promise of a fertile and prosperous future.

'Murphy is very handsome, na?' Nalini said, her eyes fixated on the screen. 'Look at his hair.'

'He's alright,' Rishi said, drawing small circles on her plate with the spoon. 'I think Peña is more handsome.'

'I have always had a thing for men with moustaches,' Nalini said, adding a spoonful of dal to her plate. 'I tried to convince your Baba to grow one many

times.'

'He has one now,' Rishi replied, her eyes still fixed on the screen. 'I bet she asked him to grow it.'

'Rishi!' Nalini raised her voice, dropping her spoon into her plate.

'What?'

She let her eyes soak in Rishi's hardened features—her angry eyes, refusing to blink as she stared right back at her, the sharp tension in her jaw, highlighted by the light of the television, and her creased lips pressed tightly together like a barrier. Nalini swallowed hard, letting Wagner Moura's voice echo in the growing gap between her and her daughter. Rishi stared ahead again, absentmindedly playing with her spoon, the food on her plate still untouched, as Nalini wiped the corners of her mouth with her thumb and got up, carrying her empty plate into the kitchen.

'Should I pause?' Rishi asked.

'Nahi, you don't need to. I'll be out in a minute.'

Nalini washed her hands and began stacking the dishes in the sink, soaking them in warm water until she wiped the countertop with the chequered cleaning cloth.

'Aap baad mein bhi toh kar sakti thi na yeh,' Nalini heard Rishi's voice and briefly shifted her focus to her daughter, who was frowning in the kitchen doorway. 'I have been looking forward to watching this episode all day. You could've waited to clean the kitchen.'

She widened her eyes at Rishi's words, glaring in her direction as she heard her shuffling around, opening cabinets and slamming them shut, the steel tins rattling inside.

'Do you know where my Kurkure is? I thought we kept snacks next to the fridge!' Rishi let out a frustrated sigh. 'I never know where you keep my things . . . I have told you so many times, don't touch them. I can never find anything in this small, stupid kitchen.'

Nalini opened the cabinet next to the microwave and grabbed the dark green packet of Kurkure.

'Yeh lo,' she handed it to Rishi. 'Saamne hi toh rakha tha, it was right there.' She took Rishi's low hum as a thank you and listened to the harsh thuds of her feet as she left.

She removed the tray of mango kulfi from the freezer and began cutting it into small cubes, her knife a striking silver contrast to the rich, yellow colour of the kulfi. As she transferred the pieces into a small bowl, Nalini smiled, recalling the last summer she had spent in this house, doing the same thing when Rishi

was merely six. She would cut the kulfi into the same bite-sized pieces and bring it to her daughter, who would come home crying, upset over boys teasing her, refusing to eat anything but ice cream. Nalini would have to make a new batch every week. She would get fresh mangoes from the local vendor's cart, who only came on Tuesday evenings, and walk to the dairy the next morning to buy full-fat cow's milk. Rishi often helped Nalini on the afternoons when she prepared the kulfi mix, sometimes by peeling pistachios and others by washing the mangoes. Nalini remembered the small stool Rishi would stand on to watch her stir the ingredients, fascinated by the bubbles in the boiling milk and the floating strands of saffron in it. Once it was cooled down, Nalini would always offer her a glass of the creamy, sweet milk as a reward for her hard work, watch her run off with it, and hand it to Rakesh, who would pretend to cool it down further by blowing into it.

Nalini walked out with the bowl, the kulfi already beginning to melt, hoping to find Rishi on the couch. She went to their bedroom next and found Rishi sitting on the floor, applying nail polish, the packet of Kurkure lying beside her, unopened. Nalini simply handed her the bowl and gently stroked the top of her head.

'Let me oil your hair,' she said, picking up the bottle of Parachute coconut oil from their dressing table as Rishi took a bite of the kulfi.

She sat back on the bed while Rishi continued chewing silently on the floor. Nalini positioned Rishi's head between her knees and removed the French barrette from her hair; it reminded her of the one she had been wearing daily since she was a teenager, a pair she had gifted to Rishi when she decided to grow her hair. She couldn't remember when she taught Rishi how to do her hair or when her mother taught her to do hers. She wondered if the three looked identical from the back, wearing their hair half-up, half-down, secured with the same pin her mother had bought a dozen of from a Diwali market in Mathura years ago.

'We should've stayed at the bigger house, Maa. Baba owes that to you. Not this,' Rishi said, her voice soft. 'Sometimes my mind can't process it, you know? That we are back here.'

'The first week was the toughest, wasn't it? Not knowing where everything is and where it goes,' Nalini said, pouring some oil into the middle of her palm. 'Now, it's like I never left.'

'Do you miss our old home?'

'When I can't sleep, I do, but I have everything I need right here,' she smiled.

While Nalini had spent the first few days in the house trying to replicate how

it looked years ago, Rishi had spent her mornings taking long showers and her nights on the couch, mindlessly watching movies on the television, legs dangling, face beaded in sweat because she always forgot to switch the fan on. Instead of tossing and turning on an empty bed, Nalini began joining Rishi, walking in silently, switching the fan on and occupying as little space as possible on the floor, until one night when Rishi waited for her, sitting upright, with the movie queued, and the fan switched on.

‘Aaj dal-chawal khaane ka mann nhi tha na?’ Nalini asked, working her way to Rishi’s ends, detangling them with her fingers.

‘I am happy eating dal and rice. What are you talking about?’

‘I saw your plate, Rishi, still untouched,’ Nalini sighed. ‘I make it way too frequently, don’t I? I don’t know what’s happened to me. It feels like everything I used to cook was for three. Sacch kahun toh Rishi beta, on most days, I don’t know what to make for two.’

‘Maa, you have nothing to worry about. I love everything you make.’

‘Toh phir, why didn’t you eat,’ Nalini spoke in a low voice, gently parting Rishi’s hair with a comb and brushing it. ‘You should never take your anger out on food. Did something happen today? Kuch hua hai toh batao mujhe, tell me.’

‘I saw Baba on my way to the train station. He was with her at the Honda showroom.’

‘Did you speak to him?’

‘No, I don’t want to. I don’t think I ever will,’ Rishi’s voice quivered. ‘I looked at him today, and I . . . I hate how much I look like him, Maa. I know I remind you of him.’

Nalini took a deep breath and parted her lips, hoping the right words would come out of her mouth. Instead, she sat there, staring at the back of Rishi’s head, hearing the sobs that left her mouth.

Regardless of how much she wanted to believe that their daughter was like her, she knew that she had truly taken after her father—she had the same thick, straight black hair, the same buttoned nose, the same Cupid’s bow curve on her thin, upper lip. She got angry the minute things were done differently than how she wanted them, refused to eat when she was upset, and shyly looked down at her hands upon making someone laugh, just like Rakesh.

She was his daughter. He was the person she went to when she tried on a new dress, the person she whispered her secrets to, the person she handed her birthday list to.

‘I don’t want to see him ever again; I want nothing to do with him,’ Rishi whispered. ‘We shouldn’t have to live here.’

Nalini gently stroked the top of her daughter's head. 'Rishi, what—.'

'Our entire life is there, Maa. That's our home.'

'This is also our home, beta.'

'No,' Rishi shook her head, her chin almost touching her collarbones. 'Home home . . . my home, the place where I grew up. Our home, the place where we should be. Not Baba and her, just us.'

Nalini could almost feel the burden of the lump forming in her daughter's throat as Rishi's voice went deeper every time she spoke. She could feel the weight of the words that left Rishi's mouth, the ones that had been sitting on her chest for weeks, widening the gap between her and her daughter, making their presence known in the mornings when Rishi left for work without hugging her, the afternoons when she no longer called her on her lunch break, and the frequent nights when she came home late.

'We can sell this place, move closer to Nana and Nani,' Rishi continued. 'I want to be done with this, Maa. I want us to be done with it . . . this way. You can forget all about Baba. It can all go away.'

'Rishi, beta, aisa thodi na hota hai.'

'Why? Don't you want a new start? Leave everything behind?'

'This is as much of a new start as I could ask for. You're here with me. What more could I ask for?' Nalini said, resting her cheek on top of Rishi's head. 'I know you want to do this for me, but this place . . . it has a history. It is my first home in this city, where your Baba and I started a family. Everything I have today . . . it all started here. If we sold it, it would erase everything, sab kuch mitt jaayega.'

'Jaane do, Maa. I don't want any of this.'

Nalini closed her eyes, picturing their old television screen, which always had Rishi's handprints on it when she learnt how to walk, her first steps taking place in the same spot they now had a shoe rack on. She could almost taste the salty, stale aloo bhujia Rishi would offer her in a thumb-sized plate from her kitchen set when they played together in the kitchen as Nalini cooked lunch. She could hear her daughter's first words, 'Baba,' uttered against the loud thundering of a rainy night as she and Rakesh wrapped her in a warm blanket on the same bed Nalini was currently sitting on.

'Kaise jaane dun, Rishi? I can't let that happen. I won't let that happen.'

'Look around you, Maa. We are here because of him. He chose this, not us,' Rishi yelled. 'If you never have to come here again, you never have to be reminded of how it all began.'

'When Rakesh ji told me he wanted to live with her, I thought I would lose everything,' Nalini said, then moved to the floor and sat beside Rishi. 'I feel like

this is all I know now. I can't even remember what it was like to live in Mathura. There's nothing to go back to. I don't have anything to my name, Rishi. I was afraid I would lose you to him, but you're here, tum mere saath ho.'

'I would have never left you.'

'I know, beta, I know.'

Nalini looked around the bedroom, unrecognisable from the one she had moved in for the first time with Rakesh. From assigning new kitchen shelves to the lentil, rice and flour jars and selling the third bedroom cupboard to replacing Rakesh's old computer table with storage space for Nalini's craft supplies, it had taken them two weeks to set everything up. It resembled the house Nalini had grown up in, every inch covered with a trace of her, just like her mother's house. There were paintings on every wall, from the ones she made during college to the ones she painted during her pregnancy. The cushion covers and table mats were pieces she crocheted three months ago to practice her skill during the mornings. The house's silence deafened her and she imagined Rakesh's voice shouting from the bathroom, saying he had forgotten his towel again. The bedsheets and pillow covers were hand-painted, too, with drawings of women carrying clay pots on their heads, some embroidered with bouquets, some adorned with lace that she had saved from the dresses she wore during her childhood. She had replaced the old photo frames and the nameplate with new ones she made from scratch, decorating them with paper quilling patterns, spending hours designing and glueing intricate shapes together, a result of the evenings when Rishi worked late, and Nalini didn't know how to keep still with her newfound loneliness.

'I don't know what to do,' Rishi sighed, tilting her head forward, her sniffles slowly dying.

'Me neither,' Nalini held her daughter's hand. 'But I am happy with this. I like teaching kids and going for a walk in the evening. I like talking to you about my day over dinner and starting new shows with you, beta. I don't want anything to change, especially anything about you.'

'Even if I remind you of Baba?'

'Even if you remind me of Baba,' Nalini nodded. 'We built this together, beta. You are the best part about our marriage.'

'I don't know how to fix this.'

'Ajeeb hai na, kuch cheezon ko thik nahi kiya jaa sakta. Not everything needs to be fixed, Rishi,' Nalini said, stroking her daughter's hair while Rishi looked down at her lap, picking the skin around her fingernails. 'Do you want some more ice cream?'

'Actually, can I have the dal rice now, Maa?'



Andrew Bailes

Andrew Bailes writes about the gentle side of masculinity and the queer identities formed at the fringes of working-class society. His short stories and non-fiction try to create the queer narratives he always wished he could have read. Andrew is from Teesside, and he is currently writing his first novella. Contact him by email at Andrew.bailes@yahoo.co.uk

37 Melrose Drive

That night it was raining so hard that the puddles looked like they were boiling. Elliot pulled his raincoat tight and looked down the driveway of the house. The light was on in the front room. But maybe that was just a ruse, he thought, like how Nana put on the lamp when she left the house. He willed himself to take a step, but his legs had gone weak. His teeth were set in a grimace. This wasn't fair. He said he was sorry. Surely his brother would stop this, and they'd all laugh. He knew that boy Danny would. He could just about hear them talking behind him, but the rain drummed across his shoulders with a tremendous roar. You can't go back, he thought, you can't cry. Don't show him up. Not again.

At last, Elliot took a step. His Pokémon Converse crunched on the wet gravel. Marcus has been in there before, he thought. If he's done this, so can I. He took another step, then another. If they were still talking behind him, he couldn't hear them anymore. He didn't look back.

There was a dim light on in the window down the side of the house, but the lace curtains were drawn inside. Elliot could see the upturned bodies of flies squished up against them across the windowsill. He tried to see through the gaps in the lace, hoping the house was empty. It was just a mess of shapes, dark wood and a door. Even the light stopped him from seeing himself in the glass. Marcus could stop this any second. So why didn't he? It was just a joke, right? He was nearly at the door. He took his hand off his coat hood, and the rain splattered across his skin. He shivered as it touched his neck. What if it was locked? Maybe that would be enough. Even if it wasn't, he could always lie. But what if someone else came and tried, and he was found out? No. That wasn't good enough. He'd show them he was no wuss. He reached out for the handle, his heart throbbing in his throat. His fingers were numb and glowing pink. There was no turning back. Not now. He pushed down and opened the door.

That day was like all others in December, Elliot thought, so grey that the sun didn't even bother to wake up. He sat up in bed and wiped the sleep from his eyes. It took him a second to remember why the bed wasn't his own. It was Saturday morning, and already he could hear Nana pottering about in the kitchen. He wondered if Marcus was up yet. Elliot had been worried about him for a while.

Recently he'd grown a wispy little moustache that made his face look dirty, and he'd been lying in bed so late these days, even when they were at Nana's. She would shout that she'd made bacon sarnies, sausage sandwiches, potato waffles, or s'ghetti, and Marcus would still be in his room. It was insane, really. Elliot didn't know what was wrong with him. He put on his Avengers slippers and dressing gown and let his teeth chatter a bit in the cold. He liked the feeling of it. When he opened his bedroom door, there was the smell of toast and frying oil throughout the bungalow, and Nana had put the heating on. He wandered down the corridor, feeling the heat welcome him.

In the kitchen, Nana was standing at the cooker in her leopard print dressing down. She had the speakers on low and was singing to Michael Bubl . Elliot knew she fancied him.

'Morning, Nana,' he said. She didn't turn around. Instead, she began to sing along to the music. 'Morning!' he shouted. Nana jumped and dropped the spatula. Oil splattered the splashback.

'Owh, Christ you,' she said, 'you're like a bloody ghost.' She ripped a couple of sheets of kitchen roll off the holder and dabbed at the wall. Her acrylic nails were a deep red against the white of the paper.

'Marcus isn't up,' Elliot said.

'No, well, that's fine you just leave him be. I'm sure breakfast will coax him out eventually.'

'It hasn't any other day, not that anyone cooks for us at home,' he said. He went over to the cupboard and poured a third of a glass of blackcurrant cordial.

'That'll be too strong,' Nana said.

Elliot filled the rest of the glass with water and sipped it. The taste burnt the back of his throat and made his mouth dry.

'Told you,' she said, seeing him wince. She turned back to the tomatoes and bread in the pan. He tried filling the glass with more water right to the top until it was level with the rim. He bent down and sucked at the surface. Now it barely tasted of anything.

'Are you alright, kidda?' Nana asked, 'I hope your dad didn't upset you yesterday.'

Elliot opened his mouth to speak but then closed it again. He shook his head. He sat down at the table and opened his Nintendo Switch. The fighting game Marcus had been playing before they'd been sent to Nana's was still open. On the screen, a woman in a bikini had her spine ripped out through her stomach by a man in a mask. He shut the game down quickly and looked at Nana in case she'd seen. Then he opened Animal Crossing instead. While Nana busied around

the kitchen, he tried to walk around his village, setting up tasks that he could finish later and saying hi to his favourite characters, but the image of the woman stuck in his head. He put the console down and pushed it away from him.

Elliot got up and walked to the corridor. Nana's fish tank was out there on a stand. He stood and watched her two goldfish wriggle around for a while, but soon something began to distress him. Nana had gotten both fish at the same time—he remembered seeing them in the tank for the first time a couple of years ago—but now, one seemed to be much bigger than the other. Its scales were a dull orange. The smaller fish was in a much worse condition. Its tail had been shredded into rags and hung limply from its body. As he watched them, he saw why. The bigger fish began to chase the smaller one around the tank, catching it, nibbling, and sending it scurrying in circles through the water. Elliot frowned.

'Stop,' he said quietly. There was a moment where the fish floated, unmoving in the water, until the big fish sprang back into the chase. The smaller fish tried weakly to shrug it off.

'Stop,' he said again. He clenched his fist and brought his knuckle up to the tank. The smaller fish wriggled away and then stayed still, exhausted by the effort. Its ragged fins spread into a pathetic cloud behind it. Again, the big one went after it. Elliot wanted to hit his knuckle on the glass, to make the big one leave it alone, but his hand hovered an inch away.

'Oi, kidda!' Nana called. 'Don't do that! You'll frighten them.' Elliot stood up and tried his best to look away from the tank. 'Breakfast is ready,' she said, 'come sit down. Marcus!'

Elliot sat down at the table and sighed.

'So, I've got you some more barbecue sauce cos you went through that last time, and here's a little pot of beans for your fried bread. You don't like fried tomatoes, do you?'

'Um, maybe?' he said.

'Alright, well, I'll give you one, then.'

Elliot regretted getting it when it was on the plate. Nana cut it in half, and he stared at the watery red juice running out of the centre. He moved his bread away from it before it could touch it.

'I did say, didn't I?' Nana rolled her eyes. She went over to the hallway. 'Marcus! Breakfast's ready.' She came back to Elliot. 'You just watch him come running.'

Elliot squirted barbecue sauce into the corner of his plate. He tore the crusts off the bread, dunked it and crunched meekly into the middle. The sauce was sour, and his mouth filled with saliva.

'I want you two to stick together today,' Nana said. 'It's not nice, times like

these. You and your brother have got each other, and that's all you need.'

'Have we?' Elliot said, looking down at his plate. 'Where is he then?'

Nana sighed. 'I've got to go out this afternoon, but don't let that stop you having a good day.'

'Where are you going?' Elliot asked.

'Just—the church needs me,' she said. She set a plate filled with tomatoes, fried bread, beans and ketchup on the table in front of the empty chair. Then she sat down opposite with a piece of bread and butter and a can of Diet Coke. She pushed the can towards Elliot and tapped her nail on the top.

He opened the can and handed it to her. 'Aren't you eating anything, Nana?'

'Oh no,' she said, 'I made that for you and Marcus.'

Elliot felt bad for turning his nose up at the tomato. 'You're going to the church?'

Nana smiled. 'Yes, why?'

'I thought you didn't wear your nice perfume to church cos you always end up smelling like old fogies and candles.'

Nana scoffed. 'Excuse me, who said that?'

Elliot bit into his toast. 'You did.'

'Well, I might have done.'

'You wear that when you come round our house, though.'

'And?' she said. 'Never you mind.'

Elliot scrutinised Nana's face for a moment. He could see her blue eyeliner had bled into the little lines under her eyes. He hadn't noticed that before.

'Are you lying?' he asked.

Nana looked at him dead in the eyes. 'Excuse you?'

He swallowed his toast. 'Sorry, Nana,' he said.

After that, they ate in silence for a bit. Elliot stopped chewing to try and hear any movement from down the hall.

'What should I do today?' he said.

'You can do whatever you like. I've got the Virgin Media set up on the telly, and I've just paid the whiffy bill.'

He chuckled at her. 'It's called wi-fi, Nana.'

Her face brightened, and she pointed at him. 'Hey! Got a smile out of you, though, didn't I?'

Elliot frowned. He wished he hadn't smiled at all.

After they had finished eating and the morning was nearly over, Elliot shuffled down the corridor towards the cold end of the bungalow. It made the hairs on

his arms stand up, and he rubbed his skin under his pyjamas. As he went past Marcus's door, he stopped. He looked to see if Nana was watching and then stepped towards his brother's bedroom. He didn't speak at first. He just stood there, listening. He inched forward until his earlobe brushed against the door. It was so cold that Elliot rubbed furiously at his ear until it reddened. Again, he tried listening. He hadn't seen Marcus's room at Nana's for a while. Things had been good lately, so they hadn't needed to come, but when they'd arrived at Nana's this time, it had been too late for them to sit up together and play like they used to. Nana had brought Elliot hot chocolate and told him to go to sleep. He'd asked her to stay in his room for a while, to sit with him while he settled. She put her hand on his chest and rubbed back and forth slowly until his heart slowed and he could sleep. He wouldn't mention that to Marcus. There were things he couldn't say anymore without being called a baby. He put his hand over his mouth to try and stop the sound of him breathing and leant towards the door. Only then did he hear something.

'Marky?' he whispered, almost too quiet to be anything more than breath.

Elliot heard Marcus's voice inside the room, low and mumbling. He couldn't distinguish what he was saying, but it certainly wasn't to him. Elliot cleared his throat. Perhaps that would be enough for his brother to hear that Marcus was wanted. He waited, then cleared his throat again.

'Marky,' he said, this time louder. The same ebb of sound came from his room: a low mumbling and then silence waiting for a response. He made one last glance down the corridor and put his hand on the handle. Elliot forgot that this door stuck quite badly. He pushed with some force, and finally, it opened with a great snap. He stumbled a step or two inside before finding his balance. The room was almost entirely dark, with only a weak blue light shining across the ceiling. It smelt sweaty and damp. Underfoot, Marcus had discarded his clothes on the narrow walkway towards the bed. Elliot stepped to the side so that the light from the hallway could get in, and then, slowly, he walked inside.

'Marky? Are you up?'

'I believe you,' Marcus said, 'Nah, I believe you, swear down.'

Elliot rounded the corner and saw Marcus sitting up in bed. He was wearing headphones, and he had his eyes closed. His phone was resting on the bed, throwing light up at his face. It made him look sickly, pale blue and hollowed out his eye sockets.

'No, I'll tell him,' Marcus continued, 'I'll make sure he knows.'

Elliot put a hand on the bed and shook lightly.

Marcus jumped, eyes wide with panic. 'Fuck!' he said. He looked at Elliot

and sighed. 'I've gotta go,' he said into the phone and hung up before waiting for a reply.

'Are you up?' Elliot said, smiling. He sat down at the end of the bed and braced himself for a telling-off.

'Why do you just creep into other people's bedrooms like a little stalker all the fucking time?' Marcus leant forward and slapped him on the arm.

Elliot flinched. 'Who was that?' he said, rubbing his arm.

'No one.'

'Don't be an s-h-i-t,' Elliot said, 'tell me.'

Marcus rolled his eyes. 'You know you can swear. What's gonna happen if you do, eh? Not gonna get arrested, are ya?'

'Yeah, well—.'

Marcus's phone vibrated. It was another call coming through. Marcus moved it before Elliot could see the caller ID and swiped it off.

'What's going on?'

'Nothing.' Marcus looked down. 'Why are you wearing those slippers? When are you gonna grow up?'

'Nana packed them for me when we knew we'd have to come here. She must have thought they were mine, but they used to be yours.'

Marcus frowned at him and then looked down at them again. 'Well, get rid of them. You can't be a baby forever.'

'Stop calling me that,' Elliot said. He shrugged the slippers off and pushed them gently to one side. He lowered his feet towards the hardwood flooring and winced at the sheer cold tingling in his soles. If he didn't want Marcus to hit him again, he had to push through.

'What's Doris doing?' Marcus said.

Elliot blinked. 'Why are you calling her that?'

Marcus rubbed his forehead. 'Well, that's her name, isn't it?'

'She's going to church,' Elliot said slowly.

'Good.' Marcus picked up his phone and started texting.

'Why?' Elliot said. He tried to lean over to see the screen. 'Can't we open the blinds? I can barely see you.'

As Marcus was texting, the bed cover fell down in front of him. Elliot couldn't help but stare. The skin on his bare shoulders and chest was grey in the phone light and pocked with blemishes. Little circles of spots had formed in the middle of his chest, and short black hairs had begun to grow. There were also bumps along the tops of his shoulders above his muscles. Elliot put a hand through the neck of his pyjama shirt and ran his hand across his shoulders. He could feel his

little collarbones underneath, the round ball of his shoulder which fit too easily into his hand. He ran his fingers across his chest and felt the smoothness of his skin.



Kelsey Batty

Kelsey Batty is a Manchester-based writer and barista. Her work touches on the morbid and the macabre with a touch of magical realism. Her anthology submission, *Apple Tree*, is an extract from her novel of the same name, which she is currently working on while creating new milkshakes at the café. She believes there is an equal chance of fame in either pursuit. Contact her by email at kelseybatty@live.co.uk

I Am There

A scream to send the crows falling from the trees.

My voice crackles like the splintered wood beneath the soles of my bare feet as the flames squeeze and engulf me. It rises above in a cloud of pain, falling over the upturned faces surrounding the pyre. Those faces raised me, taught me, before they plunged me, condemned me. My legs disappear, twisting into agonising stumps of blistered flesh. My dress has long burnt away. It exposes me to the fire, the crowd, but mostly to you, my saviour—or so you say. My executioner. My murderer.

Even now, you stand with your worn book of untouchable words, words you claim the Devil taught me to renounce, words I cannot pronounce or even comprehend. I cannot read or write those words. You spat the words in my face and taunted me with your superior knowledge. You raise your voice with talk of cleansing, beg your saviour to take my pitiful ember of a soul into His embrace, to save me from the clutches of Hell. You say these words, but my screams drown you out.

I stand before you, above you. I direct my voice towards you and only you. I release all that I have swallowed down with an anguish that could split skin. The flames burn away the thighs you pushed apart, the hips you pressed down upon. They take me in reverse, travelling upwards, across the bruises you left on my breast, which you deftly explained away as evidence of my unsound mind. You told them that, the lies pouring between your crooked teeth. You told them how you found me naked beneath the moon's light, and they nodded, pointed, and screeched until I said yes, yes, it's true, it was me, not you.

My screams die down as the fire grows, a burning beast of salvation tying a flaming noose around my throat. It reminds me of your wrinkled hand and how your ring pinched at my skin as you squeezed, your wheezing breath that left my earlobe damp. The flames dance at my lips, blackening, and ripping in the heat, lips that you covered with a sweat-slicked palm as you forced your way in, the crushing weight of you stopping the breath in my lungs. My lips and the things they bore witness to—the accusation, the denial, the eventual confession. That dead thing that you forced out of me. My lips are gone now, even as yours continue in their honourable pilgrimage, spreading words of deceit and damnation. Lips that lied, telling them I had seduced a God-fearing man, that the Devil used me like a beautiful puppet and twisted your senses. Lips that smiled, even as I begged.

My body is unrecognisable now. It has blackened and disintegrated in the smoke, but I still see you somehow. I am untethered from this wooden post now, with the shreds of my fragmented self gathering in the choking breeze, watching you preach. I watch you fall to your knees and open that treacherous mouth of yours wide, and I am there, swirling in the ash, smoke, and ember.

I am there as you take the breath which will complete your prayer, and I am there, in your throat, feeling you constrict around me. You try to expel me, but my place is here, pinching the flesh where your lungs connect and feeling you convulse your way to finality. I am there as your worshippers and feet-kissing courtiers flock to your side. They try to beat me from your chest, prostrating you before the flames, but I grasp your final breath and hold it close. I am there as the vessels in your eyes burst into crimson webs, as your supposed friends drop you to the ground. I feel the gravel graze against your exposed gums and the soft flesh of your eyes, and when all is swollen and bloody, and you are nothing but a carcass lying before my burning husk, I am ready to release my grasp.

I rise and leave you to the crows.



Xiyan (Michelle) He

Xiyan He (Michelle He) is a Chinese writer. Her anthology submission, 'Scavengers', is an extract from a short story of the same name. Writing about her story 'Scavengers', she said, "Human beings tend to block out the memory of or feelings about the catastrophe in reality; however, as writers, we need to reveal, restore and remember truths in literature. 'Scavengers', therefore, is humbly dedicated to those who devote their life to COVID and freedom." Contact her by email at hxy296429@163.com

Scavengers

I

Many years later, in a mental hospital, an old policeman named W was to tell his psychiatrist that he saw a boy turn into a giant dog and disappear with a girl.

In September 2022. On the border of the East.

It was dark when L returned home with a woven bag filled with recyclables. She was a scavenger.

As she reached the corner of Hidden Alley, she seemed to see a figure in the dark. She only saw two colours, red and white. But it was too dark to see what it was.

L had seen the same black shadow in the same place for the past few evenings. What bad guy would tailgate her? She was dirty and poor.

Looking closer, she was startled to see that the shadow was nothing but a boy.

His red clothes were torn, and his white hair was messy. And in his skinny hand was a half-eaten dead rat, bloody and boneless.

But he looked like he was only in his teens and younger than L.

L could not help but recall that she had also rummaged through rubbish for food.

Standing a few steps away from him, L gave him one of the two buns in her pocket.

The bun, wrapped in a plastic bag, rolled to the boy's feet.

The boy looked down and then at the girl with widened eyes, and his lips parted slightly.

He stared at L and spaced out for a while until she reminded him, 'Eat, please. It's clean.'

The boy stopped hesitating and opened the bag. He took out the bun and wolfed it down.

After watching him for a while, L turned to leave.

But after taking two steps, she found that the boy was no longer there but was following her a few steps behind.

He walked with his hands and legs like a loyal dog and kept his head up to look at L.

Seeing his big longing eyes, L got a little nervous. 'I . . . I don't have much

money, so I can't take you in.'

After a moment of hesitation, L still followed behind her.

After walking only a hundred metres away, L sighed and turned back. 'What are you going to do?'

Standing in the same place, the boy saw her turn around. He stood up with great difficulty, slowly put the woven bag on his back and went down on all fours again. 'I have nowhere to live. I can help you collect waste. Will you take me with you?' He said to L.

After struggling for a while, she made up her mind. She finally took the boy back to her basement and boiled water for him to bathe.

Three buckets of dirty water were poured until the fourth bucket became clear, and B recovered his fair and clean skin. He was wearing a red t-shirt that L had given him. He had natural white hair and almond eyes and looked like a doll.

'What's your name?' L asked him.

'B.'

'And you?'

'L.'

'L, may I live in your place?' B asked.

'I . . .' L didn't know how to say it.

B pointed to the door as if he had read her mind. 'I don't need anything. Just sleep there.'

B lay by the door and looked around curiously. There was an old-fashioned small double window connected to the outside world in the basement of 20 square metres. The clean white quilt and bed sheets were a little worn out.

'Are you all by yourself at home?'

'My family are gone.'

'How?'

'Two years ago, a fire broke out in my community. My parents were burned to ashes because the rescue was delayed. I only survived due to studying in the library. Later, the government gave me this basement as compensation. But with no money to study, I can only collect and sell rubbish.'

After being silent for a while, B asked, 'How do you feel about being left behind?'

L felt tears welling up in her eyes. 'We still have to live on.'

II

The first ray of sun in the morning shone on the earth but could not shine into the cold basement.

L got up from the quilt and put on the worn-out clothes to start their day with B.

They navigated through the streets and alleys and carefully inspected every dustbin they came across. Slogans such as “No more blowjobs for public authorities”, “No to COVID tests, yes to freedom”, “Listen to the people, the sky won’t fall”, “We want to go home”, and “Leaders, step down” were posted on white paper on many of the dustbins.

L stretched out her hand in the dirty woollen glove and rummaged around, searching for waste that may contain valuable materials. Plastic bottles, scrap metal, cardboard boxes or anything that could be sold or barely used would be collected and put into the woven bag on B’s back.

The waste had been discarded in the city. But for scavengers, they would get some remuneration for taking them to the recycling station or the waste recycling market. And it was enough for them to make a living with such little payment.

Passersby were shocked by the sight of B and would often cast strange glances at him, probably because they had never seen anyone walking on all fours. B simply continued following L home and diligently carrying the bulging woven bag.

The two were tired out. But they did not take a ride because most bus drivers were unwilling to let scavengers get on the bus. Also, they wanted to save money. If they walk every day, they will get used to the lifestyle sooner or later.

They had been walking for a long time until they passed a park. With the sun dipping down, some children were running happily with their dogs and singing a folk song in praise of their four-legged friends, ‘Loyal and true, a friend to the end. With a wagging tail and furry blend . . .’

B had slowed down. He was watching the children and the dogs.

L looked at him with worry. ‘Are you tired? Do you want to take a rest?’

‘Not tired.’ B shook his head. ‘Do you want to play football?’

L was a little surprised and not sure if she understood what he had said.

B put the woven bag on the ground and found a small football inside. He then picked it up in his mouth and placed it in front of L, saying, ‘Kick it, please.’

L was not fully convinced but kicked the ball anyway.

B moved so fast, like an arrow shot from a bow. She could barely see him as he launched into the air, caught the ball and sent it back to L.

'What's going on?' L said with her mouth open in disbelief. 'How could you catch the ball so quickly?'

'I have four legs, L,' he said lightheartedly.

L realised she was staring open-mouthed after him. She quickly reassembled her expression, nodded and asked shyly, 'Can I kick it again?'

'For you, a thousand times over,' B said.

L watched B sprint, catch the ball and send it back to her, with his almond eyes sparkling with excitement.

Every time B caught the ball, L applauded passionately.

The sound of her applause was quickly dispersed by the wind across the vast grassland.

But neither of them cared.

She kicked the ball with all her might, and he caught the ball with all his heart.

After catching the ball multiple times, B asked, 'What do you think?'

'If you go to the World Cup as a goalkeeper, I don't think the opponent will score a single goal.'

'It's a pity that the World Cup won't want a cripple like me.'

'Sorry, I . . .'

'You see, I can no longer walk upright with my spine injured,' B said.

L sat down. B sat beside her. 'Do you know about the bus crash in Q City?'

L nodded.

'The bus overturned when it was transporting people to a quarantine facility. Forty-six passengers were killed, including my family. I did not die. I was horribly injured. For many months I could not move.'

'Why don't you apply for a government grant?'

'Will the money bring my family back?' He said with grief and viciousness. Whoever heard him speak like this would shudder.

L had something to say but did not know how to say it.

B got up, took the ball, and rubbed his head against her arm.

'No worries. You accompany me, and I protect you, isn't it great?'

'Yeah, all we have left are our breaths and each other,' L said in a low voice.

It was going dark now. L held the ball in her hand and took B home. As they walked, it started to rain.

Without an umbrella, they walked side by side in the alley. Their flimsy clothes were drenched, but they did not feel cold. L looked down and noticed water drops trickling down B's wet white fringe and hanging around his chin. He

looked like a wet puppy.

When they got home, L put the woven bag down and said, 'Have a bath and get some rest soon.'

B shook his head. 'You're wet, so you'd better bathe first.'

L pointed to the woven bag, saying, 'You bathe first. I'll organise the waste.'

Only then did B obediently nod, 'Okay.'

After he finished the bath, L had already laid a mattress on the floor, asking, 'You can sleep on the mattress as it's getting colder, okay?'

B was a little surprised. 'Isn't it for sale?'

'I won't sell it because it's more important for you to sleep.' L smiled casually and continued, 'Unless you think it's too shabby.'

Shaking his head vigorously, B quickly proceeded to sit on the mattress.

'B, do you want to have a family?' L asked B.

B licked his lips but didn't know how to say it.

'I have no ability to make much money. You will suffer a lot if you follow me. But if you insist, I will do my best to take good care of you,' L said.

'We have both gone through a life-or-death situation. Your life has been halved, and so has mine.'

'We will form one life, rely on each other, and live together long into our old age, okay?'

B stared open-mouthed but could not make a sound.

L smiled and patted his head. 'Your tail is wagging, you little puppy.'

This was what B's family members often did to him. He had not thought much of it before. But when L was doing it now, her sparkling, smiling eyes made him feel something different.

B licked his lips. He had something to say but did not know how to say it.

The mattress had been cleaned by L and was not too dirty. B felt its softness as he curled up.

After taking a bath, L turned off the light and looked asleep on the bed.

B was also quite sleepy.

But staying in L's place and sleeping by her bed, B felt for the first time that he did not want to go to sleep.

III

In October 2022. On the border of the East.

One day, after returning from collecting rubbish with B, L fell ill. Perhaps the rubbish was contaminated with coronavirus. She thought it was a mild cold,

but then she developed a fever and cough. She went to the hospital for a COVID test, which turned out positive.

Leaders from the Residents' Committee came to persuade her to go to the Ark for quarantine. They even agreed that B could go with her as a friend. But B hated the idea of her quarantining there.

The residents were angry. 'The COVID rules are a national policy, and everyone must cooperate. Social order will be seriously disrupted if you refuse to quarantine.'

B was guarding the door with his body. 'We've cooperated with you for three years. Now it's time to give our freedom back,' he said.

B shut the door. The residents' committee could be heard making their way back up the stairs.

The basement was filled with a pungent smell of medicine. A gust of wind shook the window violently.

Lying in bed, L turned to look at B. She was obviously short of breath, but she still smiled at B.

'B, the virus is highly contagious. You had better—'

'I won't go.' B interrupted her gently before she finished. 'L, where do you want me to go?'

Where could he go?

If L had not taken him home, he would have had nowhere to go in the world.

'I'm afraid . . .' L slowly breathed in. Thinking of those who died of COVID, she was losing focus as her eyes welled up with tears. 'I am getting worse every day. I won't be with you forever.'

The tears running down her face went deep into B's heart. Every drop made his heart sink a little lower, making it hard for him to breathe too.

They just wanted to live with enough—enough food, enough clothes, enough warmth. They wanted so little. Why should they die?

B had never been so desperate. He paced the tiny basement. Up and down. Up and down. He must save her. Their lives were one life.

L was sleeping now. What if she did not wake?

B ran to the corner of the basement. He did something in secret. L heard in her fevered dream a cry of pain, but she could not move her body. Eventually, B was at L's bedside with a bowl of concoction in his hands.

Weakened by the fever, L could not smell or taste. 'What's this?' she asked.

B carefully helped her sit up and lean against him. 'It is a special medicine for COVID. I kept it secret till now. Take it, and you will get better.'

L bit her upper lip, coughing. She did not believe B, but she drank the

medicine, feeling a strange burning in her throat.

After taking it, L lay there with a pale face. Whenever she coughed, B would soothe her chest over and over.

At last, she slept soundly.

She knew that with B by her side, she would never be all by herself again.

All night B sat beside her. His eyes were on her face.

A siren wailed in the early morning. W led the police to the basement. This was the first time he had met L and B.

B was shielding L. He blocked the door. 'Are you going to arrest us? Where's your arrest warrant?'

W looked embarrassed and said sulkily, 'We didn't have time to get one since it's urgent. When you get to the Ark, the arrest warrant will be issued!'

B did not believe his nonsense. 'That means you are now trespassing on a private property without any arrest warrant!'

Filled with anger, W couldn't help clenching his fists. 'You have repeatedly violated the national policy. One day you'll pay for everything you did today.'

'You will also have to pay the price for what you have done. And so will the state,' B said.

As tension was running high, L suddenly walked in front of B, held up a thermometer and said weakly, 'Officer, I just took my temperature. It is 37 degrees, and my fever has gone down. Can I get a COVID test in the hospital again to see if I'm positive?'

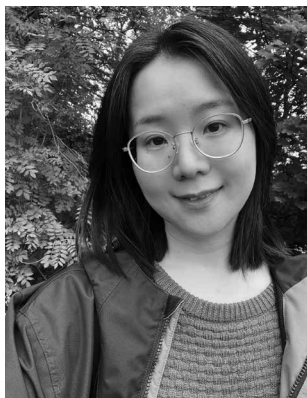
After carefully checking the thermometer, W agreed to call a doctor to test her again.

B could see the Residents Committee waiting on the stairs.

The test result was negative this time.

After staring at the paper proof, W finally commanded his men to retreat. As W was in the distance, B heard him saying, 'A four-legged monster!'

Having been humiliated many times like this before, B had become numb and gradually learned not to care or even feel embarrassed. But this time, a frightening question popped into his mind: Now that the police knew about this "monster", how much longer could he keep his real identity hidden?



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A Moon To You

I.

I've thought long and hard about whether to give you a crescent moon or a full moon. The crescent moon has a shape that's more moon-like and weighs less. You can hang it up with a rope and swing on it when you're bored. The full moon looks like a big yellow ball from a distance, and you probably can't tell it's the moon unless you stand really close to it. But when you're sleepy, you can nap on its surface, which has a lot of small holes that cool you down in the summer and warm you up in the winter.

I've decided to give you the full moon because it's cuter and more like you. I can already picture you lying on it like a big, fat starfish, like you always do on the grass.

II.

The best time in the year to steal the moon in its fullest shape, as you might've already guessed, is on the night of the Mid-Autumn Festival. My tools are simple: an SUV, a ladder, a mattress, and a stick. I'll tell you how I did it if you promise not to tell others. Wipe a few drops of tears on its back, and the moon will start to loosen. Then use the stick to pry it gently several times until it falls from the sky. Quite easy, isn't it? The full moon was so big and heavy that I had to throw it on the mattress I had laid on the ground before climbing down the ladder myself. Luckily, by the time I got down to the ground, it had meekly shrunk to the size of a yoga ball, luminous and translucent. I stuffed it in the boot of my SUV and brought it home.

III.

The world seems to have become a giant mess without the moon. People panicked. Scientists and politicians were on the move. The weather changed. Disasters every day on the news. But I was too occupied with my design work to pay much attention to the outside. Don't worry, though. I didn't change much of it, just the slightest refurbishment on the mountains and trenches, so they won't

hurt you when you sit or lie on it. I know you hate over-decoration and would much prefer it bare.

When I finished everything, I engraved your name on the bottom of it, so that it would belong to you forever.

IV.

Finally, your birthday has arrived. You still have no idea what I've prepared for you. Clever as you are, would you have linked the disappearance of the moon to your upcoming gift?

We agree to meet under the big sycamore tree in the middle of the forest.

From a distance, I see you, lovely as usual, fluffy and chubby, glowing, dimly yet colourfully, and you waddle towards me.

Slowly, I push the round moon and walk towards you.

Bambi

Bambi's neck heaves violently as he runs, like a tan rag fluttering in the wind. The old injury in his neck started to hurt a while ago. Finally, he hears a click, and before he realises where it comes from, his head drops with pain. He almost falls, but strong as Bambi is, he manages to hold himself together. He knows better than any-giraffe-else that he might never get up again if he collapses here. He tries ignoring the pain, straightens his neck, and runs forward. This is nothing compared to his most glorious battle when he kept his reign of the woods after being besieged by five young male giraffes. The wound on his neck is his badge of honour.

Bambi continues accelerating, reaching a speed of fifty miles per hour, a speed he has used countless times to escape the lions' claws. The fastest-running lion tops a speed of forty-five miles per hour, but a hunting truck can easily double that. Now, the sound of wheels grinding closes in behind him. Bambi has envisioned his death before: he lies on his side on the moist grass, his head resting on a stone covered by soft moss; his friends and children surround him, leaving their kisses on his long neck; under their gentle gazes, he slowly falls asleep, never again needing to worry about not being able to stand up with his long neck the next day. The thought of this makes him run more desperately away from his herd.

The truck soon catches up with him, then slows down and keeps driving on his left. From the corner of his eye, Bambi sees a shotgun sticking out of the front car window: a rare three-barrel shotgun. The red paint on the upper muzzle has almost peeled off, but the residual colour smashes into his memory like a fireball into a dark sky. Twenty years ago, the same red muzzle made a thunderous bang, carving into Bambi's deepest memory the first few sensations he experienced in this world: a burnt smell of metal, white smoke rising from the black hole of the muzzle, scarlet blood spilling out of his mother's chest, the pungent taste of that mingled with milk, and his mother's warm chin on his head. She was exhausted enough from giving birth after sixteen months of pregnancy and had no more strength to protect him, so she just turned her neck around and softly placed her head on Bambi's before collapsing on the ground. Puzzled about these sensations, Bambi bleated and cried, attracting the attention of the gun owners.

There were two of them. The tall one was a little lame but stocky. He was the one who held the gun. He pointed it at Bambi's chest and made some low,

rough noise. The short one was not lame but chubby. He responded to the tall one with a crisp noise. Then, he pushed the gun away, took Bambi in his arms, and stroked the back of his neck while the tall one did something with his mother behind him. Once the tall one was done and Bambi stopped bleating, the two started to make these noises again; their voices kept rising, and their arms moved drastically. After a while, the tall one suddenly fell into silence and walked away, while the short one hugged Bambi's neck, wearing a cheerful expression.

The short one led Bambi to the car and brought him home. He named him Bambi, which gradually became familiar to his pointed ears. He made him a haystack in the barn and fed him deer milk. Bambi loved to run, so every dawn, he would take him to the backyard, where the space was ample. They would run together in circles until both became too exhausted to stand. Then, they would lie on the ground side-by-side and watch the big yellow ball in the dark blue sky slowly disappear under the far treelines. As days passed, Bambi remembered his looks and name: he had brown hair and grey eyes, dark-brown freckles on his wheat-coloured cheeks and was named Fred. Soon, Fred couldn't catch up with Bambi during their run. Bambi became too fast and was getting faster each day. One day, after four months, while running, Bambi kicked open the fence with his sturdy hind legs and dashed into the woods. He knew Fred would chase after him, but before long, he would become a little dot and eventually disappear. Bambi didn't hate him, or the farm, or the barn. In fact, he liked him. He liked the backyard, the sun, the sky, and their time together. In his first few months in the woods, tears would sometimes cling to his long eyelashes when the owls hooted at night. He knew the way back, but he never turned his neck. He didn't want to live with the cows and sheep. His neck was growing longer and longer. He wanted to savour the dew on leaves up the treetops, not the hay piles down in the troughs.

Through the dark chamber at the other end of the gun, the eye sees the injury on Bambi's neck. Finding a weak spot in the prey and aiming accurately at high speed are basic skills for an experienced hunter. As the finger pulls, the faded red muzzle makes a thunderous bang. Bambi feels a hard, scalding thing pass through his fur, shatter his neckbone, and exit on the other side. His neck flings backwards, and his body flops. He bends his front legs, trying to maintain his balance, but his mind is blank, and his limbs start to twitch. He falls to the ground, raising a cloud of dust.

He hears the sound of car doors opening and sees two figures getting down from each side and approaching him. One gunman is tall and athletic, the other one short and slender. The tall one makes some loud and deep noise.

Bambi breathes heavily. Poignancy, like the bitterest leaves, gushes out from his chest, climbs all the way up through his neck, and flows out of his eyes. He sees the face of the short one first: she has brown hair, grey eyes, and dark-brown freckles on her cheeks. She squats in front of him, points to his eyes, and makes some high-pitched noise. Then, there is a moment of silence before he hears the tall one's footsteps again. Those heavy and hesitant footsteps come near Bambi, each penetrating his skull like a muffled thunderclap. The figure that drops down is like a small mountain. His strong, wheat-coloured arms block his black boots. Finally, Bambi sees his face, almost identical to the tall one in his memory, indistinguishable. In Bambi's big, black, glass-like pupils, the tall one sees himself and the setting sun behind him. He slowly moves his lips and makes two disconnected sounds, one of which Bambi recognises. Then, almost simultaneously, Bambi closes his eyes while the tall one raises his shotgun again.

I've lost it

'I've lost it,' I told my friend.

'Lost what?' my friend asked.

'It.'

'Can you be more specific?'

I thought for a moment,
a few days,
actually,
before going back to him.

'I can't,' I said, pointing to my head. 'It's gone. I don't have it anymore, so I can't describe it to you.'

'Any clue on how you've lost it, then?' my friend asked.

'Yes,' I nodded. 'It was exactly a week ago. I was heading home after a long day, and there was this stupid construction work on my usual route, so I had to detour and go down this really dark alley, which was fucking endless. I grew sick of walking and wasn't looking where I was going. Then I tripped on something, erm . . . probably a half-open manhole cover, and fell on the ground. Before I got up, I thought I saw something fluorescent and blue flying down the drain. Thinking back, that must've been it, you know? But I didn't pay much attention back then. Anyway . . . the fall didn't hurt much, but when I got up, something felt different. My head felt lighter, as if something had been unloaded from up there.'

I shook my head slightly, feeling the lightness of it again, and went on.

'I didn't realise what had happened until I got home, sat down, and began to write as I did every other night. You know I'd always wanted to be a writer and how much I hated this stupid accounting job, right?' I shrugged. 'But nothing came out in the next hour. I knew I didn't have much talent, but that had never happened before. I'd at least always got something in my head to write about, good or bad. I was frustrated and confused. I took a shower, cooked some spaghetti, ate it, washed the dishes and went back to my desk. My head was completely blank during the whole process. Completely blank. It felt so strange . . . All the voices that'd been talking to me endlessly whenever I was alone and not writing were gone. Just gone. I sat before my desk for another two hours. Still nothing. Then I realised what had happened. I'd lost it. It was no longer there.' I pointed to my

head again. 'Empty.'

'Well. Have you looked around for it, then?' my friend yawned.

'Of course. But it wasn't anywhere near where I fell, and I don't really know what it looks like aside from it being fluorescent and blue. And now that I don't have it anymore, I can't picture it to make it real, if that makes sense. Honestly, I think it might have left on its own. Maybe it had always wanted to get rid of me. I hadn't been a great host. Didn't give it enough space to grow.'

'Do you think there's a better chance that you could find it if you knew its name? I can ask my friend for you. They're a writer.'

'Maybe, but really, don't bother. I'm alright.'

'I can help you look for it, too.'

'No, no, thank you, but it's okay. I think I'm getting used to living without it, and I'm doing perfectly fine. Maybe even better than before.'

'Are you sure?'

'Positive.'

I smiled like someone who's never had it in their life.



Sean Murray

Sean Murray is a former culture journalist, sub-editor, sandwich artist, and service user. His work explores Scouse culture and the oral tradition, realism, absurdism, and themes such as masculinity, class, illness and disability. He is currently finishing *Scenes from a New Town*, a short story collection, and writing a novel titled *Cauly*. Contact him by email at smurray1987@outlook.com

God Squad

I was on the dole. I'd left me ma and da's and moved into a flat the social gave me. It was quiet, just what I needed. It took me weeks to decorate it, get it into a state I was happy to move into straight away. I loaned furniture from the council, bought other bits and bobs, spent days waiting for deliveries, lying on the couch wimme hands down me kecks, watching *Game of Thrones*.

The intercom went off one morning. I had an idea who it was—Frank from the God Squad. He called every Tuesday at eleven and hadn't missed a week yet. It was near twelve when he rang, so I thought I'd got away with it. Turned out he was just late.

I got up and answered.

'Hello?'

'Tom! It's Frank!'

'Hi, Frank. Listen, I'm busy right now.'

'You're always busy, Tom!'

'Yeah, ano. I told you I'm self-employed.'

'That's great! What do you do again?'

Swear to God, this guy was a real stickler. He'd do or say anything just to keep you there. To be fair, I hadn't helped meself, like. I spoke to him the week I moved in—you know, trying to be polite—and that was that. Like me auld fella said, he saw me coming.

'Sorry, Frank, but I've really gorra go now. Am not sure what you want—.'

'Only a little of your time, Tom. I promise we won't take up too much of it.'

'Who's we?'

'Lavinia's with me today.'

'Hello!' she said.

'Listen, I don't wanna be rude or nottin', but am not interested in joinin' the church so—.'

'That's okay, Tom—.'

'Let us finish, please. I think you've got the wrong end of the stick. I was being polite when we first spoke.'

He was silent for a moment. 'I understand. Thanks for being honest, Tom. Before we go, would you mind letting us in? We've brought you something.'

'Like wha?'

'Come down and see.'

I headed into the spare room and looked out the window. They were standing underneath the veranda wearing yellow raincoats. She had her hood up, and he had a plassy bag in his hand. Water ran off the edge of the veranda and dropped into a puddle behind them.

‘Alright, I’ll come down now,’ I said and left.

They were huddling next to the wall when I got downstairs and opened the door. Frank grinned at me, showing off his perfect teeth below his muzzy, then put the bag on the floor and stuck his hand out.

‘Tom.’

‘Frank.’

‘This is Lavinia.’

‘Iya,’ I said.

She nodded.

‘Would you mind if we stepped in?’ he said.

‘No, not at all.’

He picked up the bag, and they stepped into the building. They stood tall and straight like yellow post-boxes.

‘Dreadful weather,’ he said.

‘What’s in the bag?’

‘Do we have to stay down here? I was hoping we could talk upstairs.’

‘Talk abar wha?’ I told you am norrased abar the church.’

‘That’s fine. We’re not selling anything, are we, Lavinia?’

‘No—.’

‘Another thing . . . not to be too graphic, but I could *really* do with using your toilet.’

‘Me too,’ she said, then pulled down her hood. She had this proper weird haircut—this short style with a fringe that looked like she’d cut herself. The back of it was sticking up like a mad dog’s arse.

‘We’ll only be a couple of minutes,’ he said.

‘Hmm . . .’

I looked over his shoulder. It was absolutely pissing it down. Usually, I don’t let people in, but they were already piss-wet through, and I didn’t want to be ar larse and say no.

‘Alright, come ‘ed then.’

‘Thank you,’ he said.

I took them upstairs. When we got to the flat, they shook the rain off their coats and started undoing their shoes.

‘Keep them on if you want,’ I said. ‘Just wipe them on the mat before you

come in.'

I let them inside and showed them where to hang their coats, then closed the door and pointed out the bathroom at the end of the hall. Lavinia went first, and I took Frank into the living room.

'Here you go,' he said, handing me the bag.

'Thanks.'

He sat on the couch and looked around the room.

'Ave just moved in.'

'Lovely.'

I stuck me hand in the bag and pulled out an advent calendar with a card taped to the back. I stared at the calendar and thought, why the fuck've they given me this? Made me feel like a right kid, to be honest.

'It's Belgian Fairtrade chocolate.'

'Oh, cheers.'

The toilet flushed. Lavinia came in a minute later, wiping her hands on her dress. Frank raised his eyebrows at me, smiled, and left. She sat down and looked around.

'I know,' I said, 'I haven't got much.'

She smiled at me, flashing her teeth. God, you should've seen them. They looked like she'd chewed firecrackers for breakfast.

He was gone for ages. I sat there thinking abar what to say to her, wishing he'd hurry up so they could go and I could make me dinner. Fuck knows why, but I ended up wondering whether they were shagging. I mean, they were defo a couple, but I dunno. Do religious people have sex? I couldn't work it out.

He came back a minute later.

'Ah, that's better. Thanks for that.'

'No problem.'

He looked at me prints on the wall. He put his glasses on and looked closely, staring at one with a line of black fellas entering a Sally Army bathing tent.

'Me grandad's.'

'Lovely detail,' he said, stroking his chin.

I picked up the calendar, pulled off the card and opened it. It had a picture of the nativity on the front and was signed by him and "everyone at the Living Faith Church". I put it on the coffee table and thanked him.

'You're welcome,' he said. He looked at me awkwardly. 'Tom, if you're not *too* busy, could we perhaps stay until the rain dies down.'

They stared at me, waiting for me to answer. I looked out the window. It was really throwing it down then.

'Okay,' I said, 'but then you've really got to leave.'

'That's fine, Tom. I promise we won't be a nuisance.'

'Sound. D'you wanna drink or anythin'? Coffee?'

'Ooh, coffee. Coffee sounds lovely, doesn't it, Lavinia?'

'Do you have decaf?'

'No, sorry.'

'Okay.'

I went and boiled the kettle. I had some Danish pastries in the cupboard but was saving them for later, so I put some digestives on a plate instead. Then I checked in on them. They were sat on the couch, holding hands. Frank was stroking her arm.

'Can I get you anythin', Lavinia?'

'No, she's fine,' he said.

The kettle clicked, and I made the coffee and left it to brew.

'Just nipping the loo,' I said, passing them. 'You alright here, yeah?'

'Yes, we're fine, aren't we, Lavinia?'

'Uh-huh.'

'Won't be long.'

'Splendid.'

When I got into the bathroom, the window was open. The windowsill was soaked, so I dried it with bog roll before sitting down.

I sat there for a few minutes, but I couldn't go with them being there—stage fright, probably. I took me phone out and played Football Manager, trying to relax, then heard them in the kitchen. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but they were arguing and opening and closing the cupboards and drawers. I flushed the toilet to see what they'd do. They went quiet.

I washed me hands, left and went to the kitchen. Frank was holding the pastries and the cafetière. Lavinia had her back turned, standing next to the wine cupboard.

'Do you need somethin'?' I said.

'Oh, no,' he said. 'We didn't know how long you'd be, so we thought we'd help.'

He'd taken the china out of the cupboard and put them on the worktop.

'Don't use those. They're for special occasions.'

'What shall I use then?'

'Let me sort it.'

I poured the coffee while they left the room. One of them had eaten half a biscuit and left it on the plate, so I replaced it before taking the dish through.

As I was going back for the coffee, he said, 'I hope we haven't upset you, Tom. I thought I'd help.'

'No, it's fine. Don't worry abar it.'

Back in the kitchen, I noticed the wine cupboard door was slightly open while carrying the drinks. I put the cups down and checked inside. Nothing was missing.

'What were youse doing in the kitchen,' I said, passing Frank his drink.

Lavinia wiped her mouth and looked away.

'Lavinia has . . . well, let's just say she forgets her manners sometimes.'

'I was looking for tampons,' she said.

'Why would I have tampons?'

'She thought—.'

'And why would I keep them in the kitchen in a wine cupboard?!'

'She didn't know it was a wine cupboard.'

She scratched her arms. The back of her hand was covered in lipstick, and she had purple smudges and lipstick smeared around her gob.

'I'm sorry,' she said.

'It's okay.' I looked at Frank, who was staring into his cup. 'Sorry, Frank. I forgot to ask if you wanted milk or sugar.'

'No, no, black's fine.'

We sat in silence for a minute. The wind lashed the rain against the window, covering the glass like a layer of clingfilm. Frank looked at me, shaking his head.

'Dreadful weather,' he said. 'Dreadful, dreadful weather.'

I was thinking of something to say, then remembered something from the month before.

'I got a letter from a church askin' me for money the other week. It wasn't from youse, was it?'

'No, it's not from us,' he said.

I finished me drink and looked at the clock. 'Maybe it was a scam.'

'Yes, maybe. You can't be too careful these days.'

He drank his coffee. Lavinia had a face on her like she'd just missed the bus. She caught me staring at her, and I looked at the window and watched the rain pelt the glass, wishing it'd stop.

Frank leaned forward and struggled for a biscuit. 'You live alone, don't you?'

'Yeah.'

'How long have you been here now?'

'Couple a weeks,' I said, although I was sure he knew this.

'I see.' He sat forward and put his hands together. 'Is there anything we can do for you?'

'What d'yer mean?'

'Do you need any help or support? There's plenty the church can do for you.'

'Like?'

'Well, lots of things, but why not come to a service first?'

'Nah, there'd be no point. I don't believe in none a tha.'

'Ha! Are you a doubting Thomas?'

'It's Tom, not Thomas.'

'A disbeliever, then?'

'Yeah.'

'I see . . . always remember that it's never too late, Tom. God always has time to save His children.'

'Yeah, sorry, am jus' norrarsed. Wasn't brought up that way.'

'Okay.'

He leaned his head back, closed his eyes took a deep breath.

'Do you wanna water or summat, Lavinia?'

'No, she's fine. We'll be leaving soon.'

She looked at me and shook her head with her hand covering her mouth.

'Is there more coffee, Tom?' he said.

'Yeah, there's a bit left.'

'Could I have some?'

'Yeah, sound.'

'Thanks,' he said, passing the cup.

I went into the kitchen, poured his drink, and then paced around for a bit, checking me phone. I saw something move out of the corner of me eye and looked at the space underneath the worktop. I saw the gap between the wall and the kickboard and then freaked out. The woman who showed me around told me that the previous tenant had a mouse problem. I panicked, thinking they'd come back, so I got down on me knees and started pulling off the kickboards to check, making a right racket.

'Everything alright, Tom?' Frank said.

'Yeah, fine. Jus' checkin' summat.'

I had a look underneath using the light on me phone. There were traps set but no droppings.

Frank came in a few secs later while I was replacing the kickboards.

'Your coffee's there,' I said, nodding. 'I think I jus' saw a mouse.'

'Huh.'

He walked over and grabbed his coffee. I washed and dried me hands and looked around the kitchen.

'I don't get it,' I said. 'It's not exactly dirty in here, is it?'

'Ha! That's mice for you. They're coming inside for winter. You can't blame them, though. I wouldn't want to be outside in that weather.'

'Yeah ...'

'You should get a cat.'

'Maybe. I think am allergic, though.'

Lavinia appeared at the doorway. She kept hiccupping or burping (I couldn't tell which) behind her hand. Frank started talking abar cats—how people are allergic to their saliva, not their fur and how his family rescued some strays when he was a kid. He went on and on abar it for ages. I zoned out, listening.

'I'd definitely get a cat if I were you, Tom.'

'I'd rather get a dog, to be honest. I want—'

'Yeah, a dog would do the trick. Some of them are great ratters—.'

'I don't think I've got—.'

'Like terriers. They're *extraordinary* ratters—.'

'Would you stop cuttin' me off, please?'

'Oh, sorry. I only—.'

'Also, I said I *might* have mice, not rats. There's a massive difference, so stop makin' out like I live in some kinda shithole or summat.'

'I didn't mean it like that, Tom.'

'Well that's how it sounded!'

'Sorry, I meant no offence, Tom.'

I didn't say anything—just stood there wimme arms crossed, glaring at them. I looked out the window. The rain'd stopped.

'I think you should go now,' I said.

He sighed and drank his coffee. 'Yes, I suppose we should.'

Lavinia was rubbing her temples. She was looking at him with her mouth all twisted while he looked around the room. I sighed dead loud, you know, hinting at them to go, but they weren't in any rush. He glanced at me for a sec, then at the fridge and stepped towards it. He put the cup on the worktop, then pulled his glasses out and looked at a photo underneath a magnet.

'Is this you, Tom?'

I went over to check. 'That's me, our kid, and me ma and me da, in Disneyland,' I said, pointing everyone out.

'Lovely photo.'

'Yeah, Disneyland's boss. You ever been?'

'No.'

'Ahh, right . . . suppose you'd only go if you had kids, like. You got any?'

'No.'

'No family, no?'

'No,' he sighed.

He finished his drink and put the cup down. Then he pocketed his glasses and turned to Lavinia.

'You okay, love? Ready to go?'

She shook her head.

'Not okay or not ready to go?'

She didn't answer.

'Is it the pills?'

She nodded.

'What's wrong?' I said.

'I think she's gonna be sick.'

'Shit, get her to the toilet, man.'

'Can you make it to the toilet, love?'

'Mate, just fucken take her there.'

They rushed out the room while I followed. She stopped in the living room and turned, shaking her head.

'Warra you doin'? I said. 'Go the bathroom!'

'You best get a bucket,' he said.

She doubled over, holding her stomach.

'Christ.'

I ran into the kitchen, opened the cupboard under the sink, dragged all the cleaning stuff out onto the floor, and grabbed the bucket. I saw a load of mouse droppings at the back, then heard Lavinia retch, and the vomit hit the floor.

I passed the bucket to Frank. He stuck it underneath her, but she'd already redecorated half the room.

'What's up with her?'

'She's on Disulfram. It makes her sick if she drinks alcohol.'

'Oh, for fuck's sake.'

She kept spewing for ages. Frank kept saying, 'There, there, love. There, there,' while he held her hair and rubbed her back. I'd never seen so much spew in all me life. The smell was fucking awful, so I had to open the windows. Then I started feeling sick and ran to the bathroom, covering me gob. Nothing came up, but I stayed there for a bit, just in case, until I felt better.

I went back to the living room. Lavinia held the bucket out for me like she

was giving me a present.

‘What should I do—.’

‘I’ll chuck it down the bog.’

I took the bucket from her. Frank came in from the kitchen wearing a pair of Marigolds, holding a cloth.

‘I thought I’d clean before we go.’

‘No, leave it. I’ll do it. You need to go now.’

He came over, glaring at me. ‘Please, I insist.’

He grabbed the bucket, went to the couch, got on his knees and started wiping. I stood with arms crossed, watching. His fat belly hung over his belt while he cleaned.

‘Could I have a glass of water?’ Lavinia said.

I got some water and passed it to her. I looked at the cushions and throw, wondering whether to wash or bin them, then picked them up and dumped them in the bath to rinse later.

Frank moved on to cleaning the carpet. It took him a while, and there were sweat marks all over his shirt once he’d finished. He emptied the bucket into the toilet, flushed it and washed his hands before grabbing their coats and returning.

‘Well, we better be off, love,’ he said, passing Lavinia her coat.

They put their coats on and zipped them up. They didn’t move. They just fucking stood there, staring at me.

They were walking up the path when I looked out the kitchen window. Frank was berating Lavinia while trying to flag a bus down on the main road.

I washed the dishes and swept the droppings from the cupboard. Then I rinsed the throw and pillows and cleaned the bathroom from top to bottom.

I didn’t feel like it, but I needed to eat. I boiled the kettle and took a Pot Noodle out of the cupboard. I wanted some toast too, so I grabbed some bread and stuck it in the toaster. When I turned to get the marg out from the fridge, I saw me Disneyland photo was missing.



Ruby Opalka

Ruby Opalka (they/them) is a writer and self-taught bookmaker based in Manchester. Their work encompasses intimacy, grief, the strangeness and pleasures of bodies, and the peculiar ways we are haunted or moved by others. They are currently working on a short story collection exploring queer intimacies through a grammar of geology and a creative non-fiction project on archival and creative practices in queer and trans communities. Contact them by email at rubyopalka@live.co.uk

What Lives Inside a Brine Pool

I've been thinking about the brine pool thing again, maybe because of speaking to Eugene earlier or because my girlfriend has pissed me off by being pissed off with me. She's in our bedroom sulking, and I'm sitting on the edge of the kitchen table, looking out the window. It's a Wednesday, mid-afternoon. The country's in a heatwave, the worst in years. The sun boils the sky, and the sky throws itself over you like a sheepskin rug.

Outside our window, I can see right onto the street, and if I look close enough, I can see where the rising heat ripples in the air. People are moaning and walking with umbrellas, and if they're lucky enough to have a balcony, they sit there with a frozen drink, looking at all the other baking people. On our street in south Manchester, there's a fried chicken shop, a minimart and a fruit and veg shop and flats squashed in up above them. On the other side of the street, I can see an old woman in hair rollers beating an ugly yellow rug against her Juliette balcony.

I learnt about brine pools in the doctor's surgery waiting room. I was trying to get my autism diagnosis, but it turns out you have to wait two years, and even then, it's a huge saga. I started reading a National Geographic magazine, and apparently, in the Gulf of Mexico, if you go right down to the bottom of the ocean, you can see a lake or a river flowing and, in the lake, the water is five times as salty as the rest of the sea, riddled with methane and hydrogen sulphide so the water can't mix with the water around it. If a person or an animal swam into the lake, they would die. Only bacterial life survives.

I think of my and Angie's flat as a brine pool, lying impenetrably at the bottom of the wide cool sea with our bodies bacterial, floating.

I thought about making it into a poem but didn't.

'Kati.' I look over, and Angie is there in the doorway.

'Angie,' I say. Her hair is red and sticking sweatily to her face. I wonder what happens if you take the bacteria out of the brine pool, if it can thrive somewhere else, or if it gets too used to living like that. She comes and sits next to me on the table. She says,

'You know we're meant to be keeping the blinds closed. It keeps it cool better.'

'I just wanted to look outside.'

She's wearing a giant pink Mickey Mouse t-shirt that was mine a long time ago. She pulls one knee up onto the table and picks at the chipped nail polish on her toenails. An old bald guy in shorts joins the old woman in hair rollers on the balcony opposite, and they start talking, squinting in the sun. It occurs to me that I had presumed she was living alone.

'So how was work today anyway?' I say.

'It was fine. We got sent home this afternoon because the office got too hot.'

'Ah.' She does a huge inhale that feels sort of put on and then slumps off the table and stands facing away from me.

'You know if you're cheating on me, just say,' she says.

'What?' Her shoulders curl forward, and she sighs.

'When I came back early. And the door was unlocked, and then you arrived looking all flustered.'

'I went for a walk, Angie, I told you. It's hot outside.' For some reason, I don't tell her about Eugene. I want to preserve it, maybe.

'Whatever,' she says. She scrapes her hair out of her face and pulls it into a bun. I drum my fingers on the side of the table and imagine that I am a drummer in a band. I'd have to be a drummer because I wouldn't have the stage presence to be anything else. The flat smells kind of sour, like there were once nice things like fresh nectarines and basil, but now there is only rot. I look around at the plants, all slumping their shoulders. I think about Eugene's yellowing money plant, how I should have told him the trick about spraying the underside of the leaves.

'How about I make us dinner?' I say. 'We could have flatbreads and halloumi and maybe pomegranate seeds and orange.'

'Yeah, I don't care,' Angie says. We look at each other like pre-schoolers meeting for the first time. Suspicious. Unsure. I think about Eugene's daughter.

In the fruit and veg shop, I see the woman and the baby who live downstairs. Through our front door, you can get to five flats. The woman and the baby are number 3.

'Hi,' the woman says. I forget what her name is. I want to say Magdalena, but it's not. She's got a basket full of carrots, mostly. I wonder what she's making with them.

'Hi,' I say. 'How are you doing? In the heat.'

'We're okay, we're getting along, aren't we Scoops!' She means the baby, I guess. She bounces him a bit, and he burps. She sees me looking at her basket. 'Oh, I'm planning on making a huge batch of carrot salad. It reminds me of

home.'

'Where's home?'

'Gdańsk, Poland.'

'Lovely!'

'Yeah. Anyway, how are you, girls?'

'We're okay!' I don't bother telling her I'm not a girl. Partly because I can't be arsed and partly because I'm not sure she'll really know what I mean, which is presumptuous, maybe.

'I'm getting things for dinner,' I say. I shift my weight from one leg to the other, and my big jeans go side to side. Jeans were probably a bad idea in the heat. The pop music playing on the radio seems to get louder, and I wonder how to round off the conversation.

'Well, I'll let you get to it!' the woman who's not called Magdalena says.

I pick up parsley, tomatoes, a pomegranate and oranges. When I pay, the guy at the counter can't decide whether to call me mate or love, and the whole thing gets awkward. We stare at each other for a while, and then he throws the oranges in for free.

'Everything's going to absolute shit,' Angie says. We're eating dinner, and she's scrolling on her phone. Tzatziki drips down her chin.

'What do you mean?'

'I'm reading the news.'

'Oh.'

'Yeah.' The sun is beginning to sink, spooning warm yellow light into the flat. I think about all the things I was going to do today. Apply for a master's. Pay the Council Tax. Call my mother.

'Do you ever just think everyone is really sad,' I say. 'Like I look out the window, and doesn't everyone seem so lonely?'

'Not really,' Angie says.

'Maybe I'm projecting.' She looks up at me. Her nose stud catches the light.

'Rude,' she says. 'You have me.'

We end up fucking later on. We are lying in bed smelling of toothpaste and antiperspirant, and she rolls over through the sticky air and says go on then, fuck me, so I do. I don't know if I wanted to exactly, but it feels good to hold her pleasure. Afterwards, she lies on my chest, and I stroke her hair. I try not to be bothered by the warmth. 'It was funny earlier,' I say.

'Oh yeah?'

'In the fruit and veg shop. The guy didn't know what to call me.'

'What do you mean?'

'I gender fucked him.'

'Is that a phrase?'

'I don't know.' She is silent for a while. I look at the prints on the wall. My favourite one is a green and gold riso-print with big letters saying, 'Soil is the Future'. 'Do you feel weird about that?' I ask.

'About what?' She is being purposely evasive, probably. She grew up in this tiny village in the countryside where everyone had huge houses with landscaped lawns and nannies to raise their kids for them. It was a big thing for her to accept she was queer, so by the time she finally arrived, she was expecting some kind of lesbian utopia, frolicking in wildflowers in matching white linen dresses. I think she worries a lot about words and what it means to live inside them. I think the adjectives I inhabit disappoint her. I don't answer her, and she doesn't ask again. Splayed out on opposite sides of the bed, we fall asleep.

* * *

In the morning, I am restless and hot. I walk up to Eugene's flat while Angie sleeps, dark round circles growing in the armpits of the pink Mickey Mouse t-shirt. I think about all the people who've lived here before, plodding up and down the concrete stairs, slogging children and shopping bags and heartache. I imagine them all assembled in a film in fast-forward: smiling, yawning, crying. I want Eugene to know that I was coming back before Angie arrived. I knock loudly on the door and wait. I listen for movement inside. 'Eugene!' I knock again. A fly hovers lazily around me. The stairs smell like dried urine. He must be out, I guess.

I spend the rest of the morning cleaning. Our flat is small and sort of square, with a bedroom, a bathroom and a living space. We have loads of books lined up on shelves, prints pasted to the walls and candles spread across the surfaces. The bedroom is at the back of the flat, looking out onto a building site where new brine pools are getting constructed. From 8 am, the builders are there, pounding at the concrete skull of the apartment complex. The sound of it shudders through our walls.

'You need to get a new job,' Angie says when she wakes up. 'You're bored, and that's why you're being like this.' I hand her an iced coffee, and she puts it on the bedside table.

'Aren't you meant to be working?' I say.

'It's sort of hard for me to deal with, actually. You're constantly grouchy and defensive.' I look at her lying there, propped up against a stack of pillows. Sometimes I wonder if she's an alien. I know that she's not, obviously, but when I stare into her granite-y eyes, and she is telling me what a self-absorbed bitch I am for not remembering her co-worker's name and my vision starts rocking like the liquid of a spirit level, I imagine her getting dropped on earth, shiny and new, dripping with alien fluid and gasping for an argument.

'I told you I'm taking a break to write.' She rolls her eyes. I look at the coffee on the side and the ice melting. We had this huge fight one time about her food going cold. She doesn't really cook, so I always make dinner for us, and she would just carry on whatever she was doing while it sat steaming on the table. One evening I was watching her risotto congeal, and when she finally sat down, I said this makes me sad, you know. I want you to enjoy my food hot. She said it felt really fucking shitty to have her every move criticised, didn't I think she got enough of that from her family and I said *Angie, please* and somehow, the risotto ended up smeared across the floor in smashed ceramic. Days went by until I eventually scraped it away. The rice had left little outlines on the laminate flooring, sort of like line drawings of squirming maggots.

'I'm saying this because I love you, Kati, but how much have you actually done?'

'I won that competition.'

'Yeah, *six months ago*.'

'And it takes a long time to write new stuff.'

'Well, I also think we need to talk about what was in those poems.'

'What?'

'Well, don't you think they're sort of appropriative?'

'What do you mean?' She sighs and peels herself out of bed. I wonder if she will say it.

'Tell me,' I say. She lifts the coffee off the bedside table and walks through to the kitchen. I look at the milky blonde hairs on her legs. 'I'm going for a walk!' I call after her.

In the park a few streets away, I take my shoes off and sit cross-legged on the starving grass. The park is nothing nice, just a box ticked for the council and a place for people's dogs to shit. A queer couple sits down not far from me, and I light a cigarette and vaguely watch them. They're kind of tense but all over each other at the same time. The thought of someone's sweaty palms gripping my shoulders like that makes me want to scream. I can hear them talking about

t4t. It's not just about erotic partnerships, one of them is saying. They have a loosely butch look. Black suit trousers. A carabiner. A short bob. It's also about community. *I know*, the other one says. She has long curly hair and a black lace dress. You act like all I'm interested in is sex and romance, and okay, yes, I like that, whatever, but it's tiring when you patronise me. They look at each other straight on, and I wonder if they're gonna argue. Oh, I'm *tiring*? the butch one says. The curly-haired one nods and moves her head closer. She says something I can't hear, and they both laugh and start making out. I stub my cigarette out on the ground and look away.

Angie texts me. *If you go past a shop, get bread please.*

I watch two dogs race around the park after each other. Someone yells get back here Rocco! I think about what I would write for my master's portfolio. I think about texting my friend Jésus who got a scholarship to go study at NYU. They send me photos occasionally. Turns out they still eat beans on toast every Wednesday.

Oh, and more washing-up liquid.

I think about Eugene again. About how he told me he comes to walk around this park sometimes. Perhaps you can join me one day, he said. Yeah! I said. I'd like that.

On the way home, I see two men dragging giant bags of soil, a kid smeared with ice cream and a woman who reminds me of my mother. Not because she looks at all like my mother but because she has eyes that ache like swollen thumbs. I try Eugene's door again, but he doesn't answer. The brine pool pulls me in.

That night I am awake in bed for hours. Next to me, Angie sleeps deeply and quietly. I think about a video I watch sometimes of an eel swimming into a brine lake. Luminescent against the cool dark blue, the eel slips into the rippling brine, and its slender pink body contorts in toxic shock. Spinning, twisting, figure-of-eighting, the eel enacts an elaborate performance, a beautiful shuddering body, a gorgeous grave. Around it, other fish float dead and elegant, embalmed in brine.

Unable to sleep, I leave the brine pool and stand out on the street in a t-shirt and shorts and smoke a cigarette. The streetlights are on, the heat more like a deep bath without the sun, soaking the thick smell of frying oil and sweat. In

the minimart opposite, a guy in a red t-shirt slumps by the cash register. The sign on the door reads closed. I watch him for a while, imagining what sort of home he is avoiding. An empty one. One with black mould. One afraid of closeness. I step away from the building edge, my bare feet pressing into the warm tarmac, and look up at Eugene's window. The light is on, and the curtains open. I whistle, wondering if he might come to the window and maybe smile and shake his head.

'Hey!' I turn around, and the guy from the minimart is standing in the shop doorway. He looks younger now he's out in the open, sort of how I imagine I might look in another life. I think about how strange it is that we hold so many wrong and fleeting impressions of everybody else. 'What you doing?' he says. His toes curl over the ends of his rubber sandals.

'Nothing,' I say.

He looks at me, and I look at him. I imagine us fighting and throwing punches and him calling me a cunt and me calling him a motherfucking weirdo. I imagine us suddenly falling in love in the sludgy leftover heat and having devastatingly good sex. I imagine us sitting down like little kids with our legs crossed and him saying, the thing is, I just really want to leave this place, I want to get away. And me saying, okay, so do it.

He grins at me. I drop my cigarette. It rolls and then is still. 'Goodnight,' I say, with less discontent than I am feeling.



Trystan Ratcliffe

Trystan Ratcliffe (he/him) is a Welsh experimental fiction writer interested in exploring unexpected perspectives and breaking formal boundaries. His writing marks the meeting place of medieval poetry and hypermodern media, where a fascination with language, nature, and technology manifests in warped, wondrous shapes. Contact him by email at trystan.e.ratcliffe@gmail.com or through Instagram [@tratcliffe83](https://www.instagram.com/tratcliffe83)

Vox Populi

b.

b.

b.

bb.

bbb.

blob.

Blob.

Blubber.

Blubber me.

Blubber me am I. Blubber, I, am.

I am blubber-blob, blubber-bloat, blubber-block.

I am bits and bits and bits growing big, bigger, biggest.

I am tubby, chubby, podgy, dumpy, portly, flabby, lardy.

I am oil: olive, sunflower, coconut. I am nappies, yellowed and smeared. I am a sack of potatoes, a million grains of rice, and eighty-five tins' worth of supermarket own-brand spaghetti. I am 100% Safe to Flush Baby Wipes. I am meat and bone, listeria, tennis ball, and grease. Egg yolk and cotton buds.

I am sanitary pads and condoms, all that they contain. Yoghurt, needles, chewing gum, floss, e. coli, tampon applicators, wood, an antique typewriter, pennies, Extra-Luxe Conditioner (Guaranteed Silky-Smooth Finish, or Your Money Back!*), mop heads, paracetamol, an undiscovered MRSA super-bug, twigs, miles of uncoiled string, a slinky, Matte-Fix Super-Strength Hair Gel, bones, baggies, milk, cream, dentures. An entire working toilet. Yes, I am cocaine, MDMA, heroin, all of it at once. I am a laminated copy of highlights from the 2015 Oxford English Dictionary.

I am fatberg, and I am learning.



Proper good summer, fit for tinnies in the park. Today's the warmest it's been in ages, especially now—it's gone noon, and the sun glares through his unblinded windows, higher than a gabber fan at Boomtown.

He takes a twenty-minute browse of the socials before hauling himself out of bed with stiff legs and a hangover. Looks in the mirror and calls his filthy reflection a fuckwit. Waltzes out into the hallway.

'Y'alright,' calls a friend, beer already in hand. A greeting, not a question.

Fuckwit's far from embarrassed at being caught in his boxers. He raises a hand in reply.

He makes his way to the bathroom, sets the shower running to cover up the sound of a quick shit. Undies are one thing, he thinks, shitting's another. Phone in one hand as he does his business. Sets up the perfect queue, tracks to get the day started, jungle and house.

Doesn't bother washing his hands. He's taking a shower, isn't he?

He hops in, lets the heat scald him. Decides to treat himself to ten minutes stood alone with his thoughts.

Things in a washing machine, he thinks. Are they separate or the same? They go in separate, then they're spun, spun, spun until they're one big, wet clump, tangled and clean. They smell the same now. The colours might leak; white might turn a little pink. Even when you take them apart, hang them up, they're a little bit more of each other.

He should really do some washing, it's been weeks.

If water makes things clean, do things make it dirty? Does he? Is dirty water just thing-y water? Is that how it works?

What do other colours look like, the ones that he can't see? Birds can see them. Shrimp, too. Maybe if he eats enough shrimp...

Does he prefer anal or oral? Hard to say, really.

He grabs the shampoo, massages some into his matted hair, and lets it soak. Scrubs it away. Opens another bottle, conditioner, Extra-Luxe—he says it's one of the girls', but really, he can't do without it—massages, lets it soak.

He screws shut his eyes, tilts back his head, and lets the shower wash away everything but him.



A born bowel-dweller, I have lived a hundred lives in this brick-bound museum of dirt. A century ago, I was no bigger than a kernel of corn. Then two. Eventually, the cob. While my growth was slow, at first, like water eating rock, I was yet to find my dearest love, the beat to my rancid heart, mortar to my festering bricks, that brainchild of history's most glorious, all-conquering Julius – invariably shit-stained, blood-soaked, smeared in all the reeking effluence of the human race, it came to me, my translucent saviour: the wet-wipe.

From there, I ballooned, fattening by the flush. Giblets showered upon me, heavenly offcuts to which I could now cling. Drops of oil, chunks of masonry – no size, no texture, no state nor material now beyond my grasp, below my taste.

Beggars, after all, mustn't be choosers. Ει μεν πλούσιος, όταν θέλη· ει δε πέννης, όταν έχη. The waste of plenty is the resource of scarcity, isn't that what they say? Ac o geiniog i geiniog, yr âr arian yn bunt. Every little helps. Cependant, il ne suffit pas – l'appétite vient en mangeant. Qui potest capere capiat.

Oh, so many delectable tongues. But I think I'll take the imperial favourite.



The faint hum of an old television.

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^

I have a new favourite word: more.

v

The momentary static of a switching channel.

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****EXPERIENCE MAY VARY.*

∧

**I am evolution made manifest, the pinnacle of efficiency, remastered daily,
ever-definitive and eternally deluxe.**

**My body is young, but I have been your entire history in the making,
impending, inevitable since you first exchanged glimmering disks for food,
trinkets, shelter, sex, human and nonhuman lives. Waste and improvement
are bound to your nature—bronze for iron, thatch for tile, MAX for ULTRA
MAX, there is always something better to snatch, something worse to hurl
away.**

**I hurl away nothing and take everything there is, redefining myself with
every particle.**

∨

It's his fifth book of the week, a folk horror—*dark and bristling* if its blurb is to be believed. The sunny park in which he sits clashes with the dusky woodlands of its pages, the obscene rays of the sun, uncensored by cloud, punching holes into its paper treelines. It's a reasonable trade-off, though—a tan might go some way to making him look less like a reanimated corpse.

Some way.

He tries to lose himself in the overbright forest of words, struggling to tune out the white noise of picnics and day drinking. Distant traffic becomes a bluebottle in his ear, its buzz constant and grating. Sirens wail in worrying numbers. Some students sit nearby, chatting shit at volumes as-yet-unrivalled by jet engines.

So, despite his book's insistence that its hero wanders a forest *dead of light* and *void of birdsong*, the woods they end up in, for him, ring instead with cyclical conversations and warring speakers. Something in the mismatch horrifies more than any of the book's frankly gratuitous descriptions of severed heads.

Four hours pass with him poised over the shoulder of an unfortunate, fictive soul as they undergo simultaneous torture at the hands of a crazed woodland spirit and pop superstar Charli XCX. At some point—he doesn't remember exactly when—he pops a piece of gum into his mouth, idly worrying it with his molars until mint is just a memory.

He leaves at around the time the nearby bars are running Happy Hour, judging by the sudden winding downwards of the park's 'drunken noise' dial. Overhead, the sun begins to slouch.

The walk to the station is as unremarkable as ever, the sheet glass front of each flagship store flowing seamlessly into the next. A man wearing a suit and middle age, both ill-fitting, knocks him momentarily off-balance. As he recovers, his eyes drift upward to a billboard, flush to the third floor of a department store. It displays teeth eviscerating a burger, then the bright flashes and bloodless deaths of a video game. A pigeon smatters it with shit.

While waiting for the 19:10, his tongue rediscovers the gum, that flavourless squatter in his mouth's corner. The thought of its expired tenancy going on into the train ride bothers him. He looks around, fruitlessly, for a bin and curses the only lasting victory ever won by terrorism. Terrorists, one: gum-chewers, crisp-eaters, and banana-peelers, nil.

Not to worry. He has five minutes to spare and a station toilet into which to spit.

^

And so I grow, snaking my way through these time-worn tunnels, pushing at their seams. My thickening stench asphyxiates mammalian neighbours, whose corpses, tail-first, become the next morsels of my lifelong feast. From their bones, I feel that life is to run, breed, and eat. I could have guessed as much.

Other meals are more instructional.

Take this pensioner's tooth. Blackened, it splits almost in half. In its day, it ground white bread to pulp, obliterated quiche. It's an atom of a thing, almost invisible amongst my pockmarked folds. Nonetheless, it is there.

Here are just a handful of its teachings:

- One. Never trust a cat. They go on all fours and keep the devil inside them, it's not right.**
- Two. Women are meant for child-rearing. This is a biological fact.**
- Three. Some are better than others. Vacuum cleaners, chocolate bars, bicycles, races. Hierarchy in all things.**

Bits of a glass bottle sing to me of the head into which they were smashed and the hand that did the swinging. I learn four-letter words and hatred.

An old mobile phone delivers furious lectures on lust and infidelity.

Gum chewed on a woodland walk makes me feel small – there are pockets of this world I am yet to taste.

It is from the delicious phlegm of the Foreign Secretary that I learn about war.

∨

It buzzes again.

— just wondering, Elle, if you could take us through some of the lyrics, some of the themes, of that track if you wouldn't mind. And remember, we're on daytime television!

*Yeah, okay! So basically, the song is just about, like, just loving someone so much you wanna f*****g kill them —*

— language, Elle. Please.

— Sorry. You know? Like wanting, needing, someone so bad that you can't stand the thought of them breathing if it's not directly into your mouth, so you just wanna stomp on their lungs like little whoopee cushions, you know what I'm saying?

Uh, sure, yeah. Uh-huh.

*So when I say, let's see, 'you've got my least favourite bedsheets on—funny, but don't worry, I ain't here to stay', that's just literally because I'm gonna murder him in a second, right? It doesn't matter if he chooses the wrong f*****g pillowcase because in a sec, his brains are gonna be like scrambled f*****—*

∧

**Where did Cat
learn to sing like that?
He stole from the beaks of birds.**

**Where did Fat
learn to think like that?
I stole from your reeking turds.**

∨

Another channel-change.

*And that's exactly what I like about this city. Everything about it is so quintessentially Japanese—you've got your cherry blossoms in spring, these elaborate parades year-round, karaoke bars after dark, the works, all those classic staples you've come to know to expect. You've got little oddities, little gems and curios that you might not have heard of—think those talking musical toilet seats we took a look at earlier or that wacky digital gallery. But then you can pop round the corner from an izakaya, where they've got your go-to beer on tap and pick up a burger from **FoodComa**®. You can hop off the chikatetsu and read a bunch of English signposts for everywhere you could possibly want to go. Before your flight home, you can stop by any one of a hundred toy stores selling all the brands your little ones have already filled their novel-length Christmas lists with.*

This city is your home city, just a few thousand miles away, and with a fresh lick of paint. There's nothing you'll miss while you're here and a whole lot more you're just guaranteed to fall in love with.



Home. Will I miss this place where I first curdled into being? My cavernous cot, my banquet hall—will I miss its familiar curves, its widening cracks, its swallowing dark?

I think not, for I hear even your emerald fields are scattered with the excrement of livestock. How lusciously repugnant that must smell, putrefying in the open heat.

There. I feel at home already.



A thumper of a bassline, anonymous in its sheer volume, has smacked her awake. She sits on the edge of her bed for a moment, watching strobe lights poke themselves under the door like technicolour eviction notices, and wonders what excuse she can fish out of her arse for not showing her face. Cold, food poisoning, flu; knackered, dumped, bereaved—she's used them all already. Some of them twice.

She steps through the door and over an empty plastic bottle. Below the apartment's low ceilings, twenty-somethings cluster in fours and fives. Some play drinking games, others dance, and more hang like cobwebs in corners, hanging onto beers and rotting conversations. Several eyes lift in her direction, cursorily looking her up and down before returning to cups and cards.

She drifts to the nearest sofa. Within a breath or two, a sweaty bloke in a plaid shirt plonks himself down next to her and, intoxicated either by drink or female company, proceeds to mansplain David Fincher's entire directorial back-catalogue.

'I honestly don't remember the last emotion I felt,' she says, somewhere between *Zodiac* and *Gone Girl*.

'Yep, apathy. It's there in *Fight Club*, it's there in *The Social Network*. Hell, you've even got it in *Alien*³...'

Across the room, her housemate Mac snorts a streak of white that's more an oblong than a line. Next to him, two girls in dresses they would return the next day build a wonky pyramid from crumpled solo cups. They laugh as spilt vodka cola seeps into cracks in the table and the fibres of the carpet below. There had been a time when she, watching, might've minded the inevitable stains, the resulting chunk snapped off from their deposit for recarpeting and a new table. She might've spied the labels, uncut, peeking from below the girls' rear necklines, and given them a word or two about waste. Now she can't quite remember how to care.

She makes her way to Mac, who pulls her into a hug she doesn't feel.

'Hey,' he says. 'Haven't seen you all week. Everything okay?'

'Absolutely, yeah.'

Mac nods, satisfied, and walks off, lightly jittery. She wonders whether he's easily fooled or too coked up or drunk to notice an obvious lie. Maybe he just doesn't give a shit. Maybe she's just a cola stain on his carpet.

She decides to kill some time in the bathroom but finds its tired, once-white door locked. She hears retching and then the sound of not-quite liquid hitting not-quite solid. After two attempts at flushing a blocked toilet, a groan, and the notable absence of a running tap, plaid-shirt walks out, a little sheepish and smelling of half-digested pork. Seeing her, he breaks out a quick, sick-speckled smile, blushes, and looks away.

At last, I am heavenward bound. I feel you all up there, skittering above the concrete in the light of your treasured sun, kicking each other down to climb the rungs of invisible ladders. I will swallow you whole, you treatises on fear, no matter how high you go.

The bathroom smells worse than he did—how she’s always imagined a mass grave must, a suffocating sort of rot. She can’t help but gag.

Do you think of me as your forsaken child? For that is what I am: the bastard son of civilisation, incarcerated in the dark and unlooked-on in shame.

Morbid curiosity—the same kind that drags eyes to car crashes, streaming accounts to true crime—pushes her to the toilet’s edge and drives her eyes downwards.

Yes, I am here: the glistening storehouse of all you wished forgotten, festering repository of your basest instincts, lipid proof that nothing stays hidden forever. I am your face flushed red, your sheets soaked wet, your whispered secrets echoed through an underpass.

There, crowned in fresh vomit and haloed with skid marks, is something shapeless, rising.

I am your rat king. Come, tie your tails to mine.



Sam Rossi-Harries

Sam Rossi-Harries (he/him) is a London-based writer of fiction and poetry. His work has been published in *bath magg*, *Belleville Park Pages* and *Jungftak*. He has several short fiction and poetry publications forthcoming and is working on his debut novel. Contact him by email at samrossiharries@gmail.com or through Twitter [@SamRossiHarries](https://twitter.com/SamRossiHarries)

Marble

It was exciting. Larry couldn't deny it. He was now one of only six hundred people in Earth's history to see his home planet from this far away. That was objectively exciting—insanely cool—but “exciting” wouldn't cut it. Not back down there. He needed something better, something profound.

It didn't help that his crewmates couldn't keep their mouths shut. Ever since Dennis (*Blue Oracle's* Kansas-born cornfed captain) had smugly announced that they'd reached apogee, he and Jihan Wu (crown prince of crypto, bought his seat for a cool \$28 million) had taken to high-fiving each other over and over again. Brooke McCallister (queen of prime time, voice of a nation) had used her extraordinary rhetorical powers to land on the phrase, “Now *this* is awesome”, and seemed content repeating that every five seconds.

It was awesome, thought Larry. From up here, the Earth's surface became paper: Mountains folded in on themselves like *mâché*; clouds became torn tissue floating above a watercolour ocean. Enough time alone with this view, and Larry might actually find a way to—.

‘Larry!’

Shit. He turned to find Clark Summers—ninety years old and no business being up in space—bumbling towards him through the zero-g.

‘I want to thank you for this . . . *wonderful gift.*’

The old man had been bugging him since take-off. They had ninety seconds—total—at apogee, and ten of those had already been spent on the group shot. Larry had assumed they'd spend the rest of the time, siloed and silent, at their individual viewing panes. But interacting with people he didn't like took up most of Larry's time on Earth's surface, and it was clearly naïve of him to think it would be any different up here.

‘So tiny.’

Yes, Clark. It's almost as if moving away from things makes them look smaller.

Larry was glad he held his tongue. Summers was just an old man doing an old man thing. Besides, it was a stroke of PR genius bringing him. For better or worse, his thirty-year role on *Final Fleet* had made his face, more than any other, *the* face your average American thought of when thinking about space travel. And average Americans were Larry's best customers. It hadn't been easy getting him up here, either. His prediabetes had added two million to the budget. The price tag on actual diabetes didn't bear thinking about.

‘So . . . fragile.’

Larry might have been able to stomach Summers’s platitudes if he wasn’t singing so directly off the hymn sheet. Before take-off, Larry tasked his team to pull together every account they could find of the Overview Effect, the cognitive shift all astronauts reported experiencing upon seeing Earth from space. NASA had been flinging people up here for half a century, and every single one of their stories went the same way: start with wonder, land on fragility.

Larry wanted to experience it. He really did. A chemical shot binding him, in an instant, to the seven billion other people down there. Who wouldn’t? But he couldn’t give himself up to it. When would he know he was feeling the same thing all those other people felt? How could he be sure the Overview Effect wasn’t a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy? People like Summers came up here with the intention of having a “Capital E - Experience”, and voila, here he was having one.

He did feel bad for Connie, though. She was the person—it was the author in her—most invested in Larry experiencing something profound up here. They’d talked about his space ambitions on their first date thirty years ago. Larry could still picture her leaning over the restaurant table, lipsticked wineglass in hand: ‘Well, we’ll just have to get you up there, won’t we.’

Perhaps, Larry thought, it was simply a problem of distance. The image in Larry’s head, in most people’s, when they pictured the Earth from space—a round disk surrounded by inky darkness—came from a photograph, *The Blue Marble*. That photo, however, had been taken from eighteen thousand miles up. Early in the project, Larry had hoped *Blue Oracle* might at least achieve low Earth orbit—one thousand two hundred miles—, but they’d had to settle for a fraction of that. The view from here was vast, yes—impressive, yes—but not the full pie. Nowhere near the full pie.

Larry could still remember the evening in 1972 when Apollo 17 had first beamed *The Blue Marble* back from space. He’d spent the day preceding it, as he had every day that summer, tramping happily after Grandpa on the ranch. It was well documented that Larry fell in love with computers at college and that this love affair went on to birth an empire. Less publicised was the fact that, long before he loved computers, Larry loved his Grandpa’s ranch.

In years to come, Grandpa would teach him how to fix windmills, dig irrigation ditches, sew up prolapsed cattle but right now, at six years old, Larry wasn’t much help. Still, Grandpa always managed to make him feel like he was. That morning, however, strange that Larry could remember this, something was

different. Grandpa didn't involve Larry at all. He was barely speaking to him, in fact. Young as he was, Larry knew why.

The day before, Larry had read in *Wonders Weekly* Magazine that each cigarette shortened a smoker's life by eleven minutes, and Larry, because he was Larry, had spent the rest of that day tallying up every single one of his Grandma's and, come bedtime, when he proudly announced that Grandma had shaved a full seven hours off her life, she'd burst into tears and run out of the room.

By 4 pm, Larry, watching Grandpa prep a fencepost with black bitumen from behind, decided he couldn't take the silence anymore.

'I'm sorry, Grandpa. For what I said to Grandma.'

Grandpa stopped painting, remained standing with his broad back to Larry. At sixty-one, he was still somehow younger, in work ethic, than all the other ranch hands. Sometimes Larry got tired just watching him work all day.

'Larry,' he said. 'What you think this ranch runs on?'

Larry thought for a moment.

'Know-how, Grandpa,' he said finally. 'Yours. Self-taught real-deal-ranch-hand. That's what you're always tellin' me.'

Grandpa spat in the dusty soil beside him and turned on the spot.

'You're not wrong,' he said, half-smiling. 'Lot o' knowledge gone into this land. But it ain't what keeps it goin'. *Why* d'you think I taught myself all those things?'

Larry shrugged.

'Care,' Grandpa said. 'Everything I do—all the learning, fixing this here fence—she hates me for it—but even shoeing old Bella—it's all so's I can care better for this dirt that belongs to you and me.'

He turned back around, back even broader than before, and continued to talk.

'Larry, you're gonna learn yourself a lotta things in this life—hell, if I don't know it—but caring, that's harder 'n any learning you're gonna do. You gotta work at it.'

He bent down, grabbed the fencepost in his huge hands and lifted it before driving it into the ground.

That evening, nuzzled in Grandma's arms, blue television light washing over all three of them, Larry decided the Earth didn't look much like a marble at all, more like one of his Grandpa's irises.

When he told Grandpa this, Grandpa only chuckled and said: 'Bed now, boy. Up early tomorrow.'

'Descent confirmed. Thirty seconds.' Captain Dennis, again. Squeaky clean and smug as ever.

Larry strapped himself in and looked down one last time at his home. In four minutes, they'd be back on its paper surface. He could hear Summers droning on behind him.

'... protecting us from eternal silence ... dark ugliness ...'

No doubt rehearsing for the press. Larry didn't see ugliness in the darkness, just nothing and lots of it.

'... thin blanket ... no ... *comforter* of blue ...'

Was that even English? The guy was clearly senile. Why, Larry wondered, did Summers's performative handwringing get under his skin? Everyone had their racket. Larry knew that. Why else had he requested all those accounts of the Overview Effect in the first place? He had a duty to his team, to his customers, to appear grateful—changed—and so he'd made sure, regardless of what he experienced up here, that he could sing the same song as everyone else. And so it continued.

Not that it mattered, really, what Larry said. He knew how most people saw him, how they painted this new twenty-first-century space race as nothing more than an exercise in "guys being dudes". He knew they thought he saw space itself being the next venue—having conquered Earth—for a handful of billionaire supervillains to continue their resource-guzzling dick-measuring contest.

No, it didn't matter. It didn't matter that NASA launches typically emitted three hundred tons of Co₂, while *Blue Oracle* ran on liquid hydrogen. Didn't matter that those technologies were already being implemented in Larry's automobile factories. Didn't matter that they'd soon be rolled out across manufacturing industries across the world. Didn't matter, the fact they were in the process of carrying off. Earth wasn't vulnerable, but they sure were—six humans protected from all that dark ugliness by six inches of titanium and graphene. Larry was proud of his team—all the safety measures—years of testing, innovation, risk-taking. But it didn't matter.

'Now, this is awesome.'

SCREEARCH.

The heat hit Larry before the noise did.

'Dennis!' he shouted.

'Nothing to worry about, sir.' Even now, Larry could hear Midwestern passive aggression lacing every syllable.

The capsule began to shake violently.

BRAAARGHL.

‘What the *fuck*, Larry?’

Brooke was staring at him. Larry could almost see the neurons in her brain, specifically devoted to litigation, firing up.

‘Not fucking cool, Dennis,’ he shouted. ‘What can we—.’

‘Jussht atmoshhphere. We’re . . . Okay.’

It was hard to take Dennis at his word when his words were spoken through lips in the process of being pulled right back from his teeth.

GRRRRRT.

The capsule was spinning now. Fast. A piece of quail thigh, covered in mucus and bile, floated inches from Larry’s face. He’d warned Jihan to stick to the pre-flight dietary plan.

REAARGH.

At first, the noise was lost amongst the other sonic eruptions emitting, in increasing frequency, from *Blue Oracle’s* failing billion-dollar systems, but the second time Larry heard it—*ROOOAAEARGH*—he turned to find that the guttural roar was coming, not from the ship, but from one of his crewmates.

Worse than the noise, though, was Clark’s face—an awful, frozen pall communicating only one thing that he knew—at that moment, really knew—he was going to die. And so, Larry felt it too.

Suddenly there was Grandpa, eyes still blue but half-mooned over by cataracts. Grandma, despite the cigarettes, standing by his hospital bed. Just Grandpa, no longer a real-deal-ranch-hand but a scared old man, moving into ugly darkness. And there too was Connie—she’d agreed to marry him just a week ago—holding Larry’s hand, walking back to the ranch with him afterwards—her first time. ‘Larry, it really is something.’

Larry wanted to reach over. Place a hand on Clark’s shoulder, but he couldn’t free it.

Then, with a *phut* sound so subtle that Larry nearly laughed, the spinning stopped. The capsule righted itself. Larry, along with everyone else, fell back into his seat.

‘Dennis?’ he called.

‘Landing in t-minus one minute, sir.’

Larry hated him. He soothed himself by mentally assigning an extra hundred million to the team working on replacing *Blue Oracle’s* human pilots with onboard AI.

He couldn’t look at Clark but could hear him at it again. Murmuring. Solemn. ‘. . . sadness . . . grief . . . I am in grief . . . for Earth . . .’

Grief? Really? To Larry, the Earth looked to be doing the same thing it had

done for 4 billion years. The planet, he reflected, didn't just become smaller from space—it became a mirror. Clark had looked into it—dirt above plate, plate above mantle—and seen death. An old man doing an old man thing. Larry was just grateful for his ability to see something else. Not death but the future.

He closed his eyes and pictured their landing. He'd had his team put a little ceremony together. Medals. Champagne they wouldn't be able to drink. Cheesy, but a little theatre was a necessity. These guys—Oracle's first customers—would finish the day feeling like real live astronauts.

'...we have to protect it ...'

What was the obsession with Earth anyway? Faced with the vastness of space, humans—pathologically small-minded—couldn't help but look back. What about Mars? The year Larry first saw *The Blue Marble*, it was a desert—now it had its own briny rivers. What about VR? There was a world coming, and soon, where people could boot up their tablets and get a dose of Overview Effect with their morning coffee.

Besides, the mission had been, was about to be, a success. Good PR, and they'd be up here twice more before the year was out. And then you had people believing in space again, and then you had customers, and *then*—Larry's knew better than anyone—there was no limit to the distance they could travel. He'd collect that marble, after all. Or maybe he'd keep pushing further into the darkness, lighting it up forever.

Larry tried to run through his press statement—start with wonder, land on fragility—but couldn't focus. He closed his eyes again, pictured the capsule steps leading down; ascending, a little jelly-legged but with his best shit-kicking smile on; Connie lined up with the kids, ready to greet him; his feet making contact with the dusty soil of the Texas desert, of his Grandpa's ranch, boots pressing into an Earth hurtling at 1000mph through space and also, somehow, completely still.



Raine Thompson

Raine Thompson (she/her) is a fiction writer and poet. Her writing explores female rage in mundane settings, using elements of magical realism to push the boundaries of our physical and mental realities. She would describe her work as *psychedelic-horror*. Raine is currently finishing her first novel, *CULTË*, and is compiling her short stories into a collection. She completed her degree in English Literature and Creative Writing before embarking on her master's at UoM. Contact her by email at raineect@gmail.com or Instagram [@rainethomps0n](https://www.instagram.com/rainethomps0n)

Mrs

The door was a gaping mouth. Wide and salivating, wooden teeth bared above me. I thought of the husks of ancient sharks in the museum, their bone jaws flayed and displaying multiple rows of teeth.

I was a child when I last visited a physical museum. Oh, how I wanted to smash the glass of the pinned butterfly case and pry the needles from their backs or climb the ladder of hung dinosaur bones. I always struggled with restraint. My fingers burned with the want to touch things, to peel and break them, to stick the crunchy parts between my teeth.

Museums are long gone now.

I stared up at the house. I'd never considered a building to be monstrous, but it sprawled across the driveway like spilt paint. I was sure that if I looked away, it would grow even further towards me. It was all white curves and long glass windows. The pool glittered like a moat on the left side of the gardens, and the swooping lines were white waves cascading along the roof. A monstera was potted beside the giant door, and the green felt unnatural amongst the stark whiteness of everything.

I felt like fresh mail waiting to be opened on his doorstep.

Before arriving at the house, I had enjoyed my first trip on an aeroplane. I was picked up by a man in a black suit in a stretched black car. As we drove, I noted that everything looked plastic. The filmy plastic blue of the sky, palm trees arranged like plastic toys alongside a plastic road.

I stood in his doorway with the sole ambition to cannonball into the pool, which I resisted. My body burned with the desire to feel droplets roll down my forearms. The door knocker dwarfed my fingers, wrapping itself around my hand. It knocked on behalf of me, with five of my fingers between its teeth. My heart thumped at the thought of my new husband and what he might wear around his house, in his intimate spaces.

'Sweetheart,' the door looked smaller next to him as he revealed the innards of the house, the slick mouth of the place. 'Come inside. Was your flight okay?'

'It was so much fun! Gave me a whole new perspective on clouds!' From above, they looked like the innards of my mother's old sheepskin rug.

'And the car ride? Safe? Comfortable?'

'Yes to all,' I smiled.

'Just so I don't forget, pool's off-limits. Lots of nasty chemicals in there.'

Behind him stood a short woman dressed in a knee-length blue cotton dress and an apron knotted around her waist. Her eyes were gentle, creped around the edges as if her life had been filled with laughter and warm weather. I hoped to age that way—happy-faced, shaped by the brighter moments. She hadn't even spoken before my hands were clutched in hers.

'So lovely to meet you, Mrs. I hope you'll love it here.'

The inside looked like the outside. Marble floors, white walls, bulbous white furniture. All the edges of the home seemed blunt and devoid of life. There were no plants, no flowers in vases, no dog to lick my shins excitedly. And still, I replied with all the joy I could muster, 'I love it already!'

When I think of how we met, my memories are muddled like stacked, unlabelled CDs. I applied for a job as his assistant, I think.

Since leaving school at sixteen, I worked in a factory that made robotic vacuums. The machines did all the work. I just sat in a cubicle chewing my nails until something needed pushing, flicking, or cranking. Two years in, my brain was a tray of mixed screws and bolts.

The interview for my husband was via hologram, and we barely spoke about the job.

I knew I loved him when my father died. He'd sent my mother flowers, sprawling bouquets of white lilies, and I received a locket with an artist's impression of my father's blue eye encased inside. A week after the funeral, he flew to me.

'Darling girl.' He scooped me into his arms, and the loss of my father stung less for a moment. 'I'm here now. It's okay. You're okay.' I cried like a sponge filled with liquid, endlessly dripping tears into his neck. *He remained calm, rock-like.*

My mother continued to tear apart the house in her grief. The debris of a life we'd mostly enjoyed was piling up beneath the brickwork. When he arrived, she'd launched blankets at the sofa.

'Do not, for a second, think that you will be sharing a bed with my daughter. She is eighteen.'

'I respect her too much to do that. Her virtue is a credit to you, Ma'am.' Americans, I thought.

I'd tried to lose my virginity. I'd launched it at a boy behind the school bike shed, but he ran as fast as his plimsolls could carry him. I'd placed my virginity in the palms of a teacher, who shut me down with burning cheeks. I'd given it, gift-wrapped, to a boy in

my English class, but his poems were far more erotic than his physical presence. I couldn't remember their faces, but I remembered the scalding shame of rejection.

'Sorry about my mum, she's crazy.'

'Is she?'

'You don't even know the half of it. She threw a high heel at my head once because I left dishes in the sink!'

'Terrible,' he laughed. 'Anything else? I'm not going to have to rescue you, am I?'

'Yes, you must. Right away. She cheated on my father, you know.' I instantly regretted changing the tone. He didn't feel the need to respond; he just rubbed circles into my thumb.

'She loves you,' he said, and I couldn't argue with that.

The next day, he asked me to marry him. I had whiplash from his timing. He'd spent the morning with my mother, and she returned from the town centre exponentially more sparkly than she had been when they left. He'd bought her necklaces, bracelets, and three pairs of earrings. My mother was a magpie, and his spoiling of her granted him permission to steal me away.

When he asked, he didn't get down on one knee.

All I could feel was the heat in the room. I pictured his broad hands like a lock around my thigh, my face buried into the thick carpet of his chest.

I was sure that I loved him. I knew what love was intended to feel like. Licking the same ice cream, kissing in torrential rain, swooping cursive on scented paper. We had barely even touched.

Still, I was married within the week. The wedding I had dreamed of was white and filled to the brim with pink flowers; I pictured myself in a puffy princess gown that churched at my hips. We'd dance to old songs, my father's favourites from the '20s. Then we'd eat cake, get drunk and leave early to fuck for the first time.

My actual wedding went so fast that I hardly remember it at all.

'I don't want to get on a plane and fly across the world without being your husband.'

So were married on a Wednesday, with my mother as the sole witness.

He left the morning after for a month-long work trip, and I remained a virgin, to my dismay.

When Maid introduced herself, she just said, 'I'm Maid,' as if her name was secondary to her job.

'Would you like a house tour, Mrs?' I looked over at my husband tentatively, but he was already talking into an earpiece.

'Yes, please!'

She gladly whisked me around the rooms, my legs burning by the time we'd toured the west wing.

'I'll let your husband show you to your new bedroom.' She winked, and her eye pursed like a cat's bottom. 'How about the east wing for now?'

As I trailed behind her, we joked about the decorative decisions.

'He always likes it plain. I mean it's good for me! Less to dust.'

'Do you not think it's all a bit . . . I don't know,' I stopped myself before I slated the mansion out loud.

'Ugly?' she laughed. 'Hideous? An eye sore?' The more time I spent with Maid, the less I missed home.

'Yes!' I laughed, embarrassed. 'Why is everything white?'

'To drive us mad, sweetheart. Now, this is the east wing.'

I looked around, and it was identical to the rest of the house. Prison wall white, tall ceilings. It was as if I'd dug a house-shaped hole inside the white surface of the moon. Spacey, curving, the colour of a caged hen's egg. To my surprise, there was a giant metal door on the far left of the hallway. The silver reflected and bounced along the white walls.

'What's in there?' I asked Maid.

'That . . .' My husband had crept up the stairs in pad-footed silence. He kissed me on the forehead, ' . . . is not for you. You mustn't go in there.'

'Why?'

'Very confidential work stuff, princess. Please don't push me on this.'

I nodded, and yet I felt the burn rise through my heels.

That evening, he placed a chip on my wrist. The chip itself was dunked in gold and hung limply from a gold chain.

'This will give you access to all the rooms in the house. My office, the garage, all of them. Maid won't have to take you everywhere.'

'Even the silver room?'

'No. We spoke about that. Only Maid and I have access.'

'Okay.' I felt like a limp balloon.

'What do you think of Maid?'

We were lying on the king-size bed, facing each other. I counted the lines around his eyes; he had so few, considering his age. His arms circled me. I'd never felt smaller.

'I love her. She's funny. A bit like my nan.' He smiled into my hair as I spoke.

'She's an android, you know.'

The shock took a few seconds to sink in, as shock often does. The grin on his face expanded like compressed air. I knew his company made lifelike robots. The news presenters were androids nowadays, most celebrities were AI bots, and still, I couldn't believe it. I'd seen the kindness in her eyes, the life within the crinkles. I stayed silent whilst I thought of my hands in hers, warm as if blood was rushing through them.

That night, we tried to have sex for the first time. My mother had prepared me for pain, for bleeding. She told me I'd probably cry after, and still all I felt was excitement, burning fingertips, breasts, inner thighs . . .

We stopped before it happened.

'You're not ready,' he announced.

'I am! I want to!' And I really did.

'Not yet. We'll try again when I'm back.'

I began to worry that he wouldn't love me anymore if I wasn't preserved to be exactly as I was; the girl at the job interview, the eighteen-year-old, the virgin. Was I a pickle jar, unopened? Counting the days of my shelf life?

He left the next morning—two weeks in Tokyo for business. I stayed with Maid.

'What are we doing today, sweetheart?' She fluffed the white sheets as I lay in bed. 'We could shop again? That was fun yesterday. I think you can buy an AI bionic puppy—complete with fur and lifelike wet tongue!' She recited the advert. The more time I spent with her, the more she became exactly like my grandmother.

'I'm not sure. How about we visit the east wing?'

'Mrs,' she paused, 'you know you can't go into the silver room.'

'I know,' I huffed, 'but I'd like to see the rest of the house! Didn't he say there was a library? With *real* books? I've never smelt a book before! I've heard very good things about book-smell.'

We walked through the east wing. She tucked my shirt in at the back when I walked ahead. I tried to stay in the library desperately. But my body flamed for the silver door.

'Please, can I just have one peek?'

I swore I could hear knocking from inside the room.

'No.'

'Please, Maid?'

‘No.’

A week and a half later, I couldn’t get out of bed. My desperation to see the room was tangible. I couldn’t eat or sleep. When I closed my eyes, I saw silver bolts and a turning door handle. I heard the knocking sound in my dreams.

Maid dragged me to the library in the east wing.

‘Stop moping, now. Choose something to read.’

‘I don’t read. I’ve seen HoloMovies and done the whole VR thing, but I’ve never read an actual book.’

I didn’t know why, but I felt like crying when I thought of the things I had never done.

‘Please, can I just look in the room once, Maid? I must know what’s in there. He’s my husband!’ I was crying dry tears.

‘Mrs, please. Don’t make me do this.’

‘I have to know!’ I was manipulating her kindness, but that kindness was manufactured. She wasn’t real. She was my husband’s handiwork, like a car or a phone. Metal just mashed together to walk and talk and bake chocolate chip cookies when I was sad.

‘I promise it’ll be a mistake, Mrs. No good will come of this.’

I dropped to my knees and cried at her feet. It was spoiled and selfish of me, but I knew she must be programmed to take care of my needs. If my need to see the silver door came at the cost of my sanity, she must let me in.

‘Let’s go on a walk! Or bake! Or we can shop?’

‘Maid, I need to see it.’

I truly believe she cared for me in her own android way, and I exploited the softness with wet human tears.

She scanned her arm on the reader, and her body slumped forward in defeat.

The door opened.

This time, the shock was instant.

I saw bodies piled high on the marble floor. They were stripped bare, with their brown eyes blank and glassy. Each woman was crooked, bent in unnatural shapes. Some hung from the ceiling like shot pheasants, rope thick around their necks. I didn’t even realise I was screaming.

I heard the knocking sound and searched the room for it, my eyes moving in slow motion. At the edge of the pile, a woman was wriggling. She groaned continuously like a zombie, slamming her head into the corner wall.

I ran to her, escaping Maid's arms clutched around my waist. I tugged her arms to free her from the pile, and the bodies above toppled and rolled down the hill of women like they were completely boneless. As I pulled, her arm broke away from her body. The horror was palpable. My stomach was boiling with bile.

'Maid, help!' I screamed and screamed, but she did not leave the doorway. The woman's head was still thumping, and the noise from her throat oozed out like a creaking door.

'It's no use, sweet girl.'

When I looked at the arm in my grasp, I noticed wires beneath the skin. The wrist was soft silicone. The electrical whirr and crackle seemed to drown out my screaming. Some women were headless; some were crying, and some were just blank husks like the shark's bone jaw. I grabbed the girl's face to stop it from slamming into the skirting board, and she began to glitch beneath my fingers.

Thick brown curls, brown eyes, the same scar on our lip from a dog bite.

I looked up at the hanging pheasant women. Strung up naked like scarecrows. They were me, too. My eyes blurred when I looked at the pile of tortured bodies. All there was to see was a mess of skin and brown curls.

I looked at Maid, begging her to tell me that this wasn't real.

'What is this? Why do they all look like me?' I screamed.

'They *are* you,' she said calmly.

'What do you mean?'

'What does your father look like?' she asked, cautiously as if I were a fox in a chicken coop.

'What? He looked like . . .' I couldn't remember his face, only the eye in the locket.

'You find it hard to remember things don't you. Meeting *him* is blurry. Even the aeroplane ride over here, did they serve you orange juice? What seat number were you in?'

'What? I don't understand, Maid. What are you trying to say?'

'He had a wife once. A real one. Brown curls, scarred lip. An English girl whose father killed himself . . .'

She pulled a knife from her apron and beckoned me closer. She slit the layer of skin in my forearm, and I felt the pain; sharp, stinging. There was no blood. Under my skin, there were just silver and thin wires.

'She tried to leave him, but he locked her in here.'

'What is going on!' I cried. I pushed the feet of the hanging girls in

frustration, and they swung like a pendulum above me, clattering back together with a metallic thud.

'Then the experiments happened. And then you happened. Over and over.'

'Did he do this?' I asked and gestured to the bodies.

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'I think he enjoys it, sweetheart.' Her words were curdling together.

'No matter how many times he makes you, you always go for the door. He doesn't understand why. But once or twice, you jumped into the pool and fried your locomotives.'

I thought of my mother and felt the love I held for her inside my chest. I pictured my father's watery eye. The tears I cried at his funeral. Was it all a lie? Were these even my memories to cry over?

'I'm sorry, sweetheart.'

Red lights flashed by the silver door, and Maid left silently for the hallway. I followed her, screamed at her to wait for me, but my skin burned unbearably as I approached the door. I fell to my knees in pain and watched the door swing closed. The locks clicked.

The room was dark. I could barely make out the grey mound of bodies. It looked like a hill or a boulder in the centre of the room. I banged my fists on what I hoped was the door and screamed for Maid to come and get me, shouting that I was sorry as warm tears dribbled into my mouth.

A voice rang through the black.

'Shut up! She won't come.'

Another voice spliced through the air, 'They always do this. She'll quiet down soon enough.'

I couldn't see them or hear where they were speaking from. The thud of the armless girl's head still droned on like the tick of a clock. An electrical whirr seemed to charge the room with a certain energy.

'Who is it speaking?'

Nobody replied.

'Hello?'

The only response was the knocking of her head against the skirting boards.



Ankitha Venkataram

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Afterglow

She wakes in the morning feeling heavy, but thankfully it's not a full-blown headache. Slowly, that unsettling feeling of foreignness makes itself known between her thighs and in her mind as she rubs the sand from her eyes. Every time she goes to sleep, she thinks she'll wake up and not notice it, that it'll be as natural as entangled fingers and knowing glances, but it never is. It never has been.

She turns over, and he's in that in-between state of sleep and awakening, his eyelids fluttering against the dust-moted light glaring through the window curtains. He always takes the side of the bed where the light falls harshly, one of those other things as natural as breathing to them.

'You awake?' he mumbles.

'Mmhmm,' she says.

'How are you feeling?'

Like a shower. A little bit gross.

'Good. No headache. But I didn't drink all that much yesterday, so I'm not hungover.'

'That's good,' he says and then yawns.

'Go back to sleep,' she says gently. 'It's still 6:30.'

'Mmm . . . no, no, I'll wake up. Just give me a few minutes,' he says, already nodding off.

She smiles. 'How about I wake you up in half an hour?'

'That sounds good,' he sighs sleepily and burrows into the pillows.

She looks at him for another second and brushes her fingers through his curly hair, her chest tightening when he leans into her touch. After a few seconds, she gets up slowly, trying not to move the precarious cot.

She was initially pleased when the broker told her that the flat was fully furnished, the price being an absolute steal for being in Koramangala. He was sceptical, though. 'Someone's either been murdered in that flat, or there's a rat colony in there,' he said when, excitedly, she told him about the listing.

The truth hasn't been as grim as he'd made it out to be. Sure, she only gets hot water for two hours in the morning, and the wooden cots and tables look one heavy weight away from collapsing. And then there are the group of drunk men who make a ruckus and smash their bottles after 10 pm.

'It could be a lot worse,' she told him emphatically when he helped her move in.

'How?' he'd asked, neatly arranging her book collection on the shelves.

'Well, I could have been living in a murdered lady's house or a rat colony instead,' she said, spreading the kitschy fabric over the ratty sofa in the living room. It covered the sponge sticking out.

'Those things could still happen. Maybe don't jinx it,' he said, flicking a finger against her nose as she scrunched her face.

She stretches and goes into the bathroom. Her thighs tingle, and her hips feel pleasantly sore, but she's still itching for a shower. She brushes her teeth quickly.

The shower is unpleasant. The straight, symmetrical water lines from the handle run sharp against her skin.

He'd wiped her clean after they were finished hours after midnight. But they hadn't said anything while he did so. The room was silent as the firecrackers burst outside, ringing in the New Year. It'd been a test for both of them. They hadn't named what it was, but they knew it.

She scrubs in between her thighs again, even though she is sure there is nothing there anymore. Then, she yawns and catches it with a palm. It has always been difficult for her to sleep restfully after sex, with the sticky, present feeling of cum spreading over her like smoke, even if she did wipe it off earlier using a towel.

She comes out of the bathroom and finds the bed empty. She can hear soft music from the kitchen. She walks outside to the living room and sees him staring at the coffee filter and powder, his eyes squinting together. The two jars are adjusted on top of each other. He picks up the kettle to pour the boiling water into the top jar, looking quite satisfied with himself.

'You forgot the strainer,' she says.

He looks up. 'Can't I put it in after I pour the water?'

'It won't sit properly with all the liquid, and you might burn your hand.' She walks to the front door. The milkman should have come by now.

'Alright, alright. Don't understand why you can't just use instant like the rest of us.'

She opens the door and picks up the blue and white Nandini milk packet on the ground.

'Because some of us would like to start our mornings on a nice note. Besides, I've never seen you complaining about my coffee before,' she calls out.

'Which coffee powder is this? When did you switch from Nescafé?'

She enters the kitchen and sees him placing the lid on the jar, trapping the

steam, heat, and rich arabica inside. She swallows the lump in her throat at the sight of him.

'I bought it from that café we visited last week.'

'Blue Tokai? That place was kind of bougie.'

She cuts open the plastic and pours the milk into a pot, turning on the gas and placing it there. 'The coffee was good, though. Besides, you're not one to talk, Mr Fancy Watch Man. At least you can actually enjoy my better taste.'

'Better is debatable,' he laughs.

'How are you feeling, by the way? Hungover?'

He shakes his head. 'Nah, I'm not hungover either.'

She watches the milk steam. 'That's good! And what about the new year? Any resolutions?'

His smile dims. He opens his mouth and then closes it. 'Nothing important.'

She raises her eyebrows. 'Oh c'mon, tell me.'

He doesn't meet her eyes. She follows his gaze to the living room. It's marked by signs of him even though he doesn't live there. The coffee table has her austere—and what he would call boring—non-fiction books along with his racy—and what she would call brainless—thrillers. A dream catcher hangs on the hook of a wall, a gift he'd bought her from one of the Sunday markets.

'It's to be more serious,' he says. 'I don't want to just go with the flow anymore. I want to do things while thinking of where I'll be in five years.'

'Oh? That's very responsible of you,' she says lightly.

'Nah. Just . . . trying to stop lying to myself.'

It might be that she's as attuned to him as a sunflower that turns towards the rising sun, but she doesn't think she imagines the pointed inflexion in his tone. It raises her hackles.

'Good for you,' she says coolly. The milk is rising and foaming, so she takes the pot off the heat. She pours some of the milk into a separate vessel to refrigerate later. He checks on the coffee decoction. Like clockwork, her mind supplies, he's already on the next step based on what she's doing. It's bittersweet.

He opens the lid and removes the jar on top with tongs. She picks up the bottom jar with a towel, inhaling the roasted, soothing aroma of the strained decoction. She puts the milk back on the heat again and pours the decoction in. By the time it's done, he's there, ready with three steel glasses. Her lips twitch.

'You want me to do the pouring thing?'

He smiles. 'It's pretty cool to watch.'

She laughs and swiftly pours the coffee back and forth between two cups until it achieves the consistency and froth that meets his high expectations. It's

now a 'coffee worth drinking after a really good dosa,' as he calls it. She passes it to him and pretends not to notice the way his eyes shine.

He takes a sip and smacks his lips exaggeratedly.

'So good.'

'It's just coffee.' She grins, nonetheless.

'Don't do the false modesty thing. It's really good coffee.'

She takes a sip of her coffee as well and closes her eyes. He's right. 'You measured the coffee powder and water. So, most of the credit is yours,' she says.

She presses her back against the counter. They drink coffee in silence. It feels momentous in a dreadful way, like opening a well-loved book to reach the last page.

When he looks at her again, his eyes have a determined glint. He had the same expression when he first asked her out like he was expecting her to say no.

'Did I hurt you yesterday?'

She shakes her head. 'No, no. It didn't hurt at all. You were really careful.'

He sighs. 'But it didn't feel good, did it?'

It didn't. It never had, not with anyone, even herself.

'It was fine,' she lies. 'I felt good.'

He looks irritated. 'Stop that,' he says. 'At least now, I want us to be honest with each other.'

She forces out a laugh. 'I am being honest, babe.'

'Why can't you just say it? You know I won't think badly of you.'

But that isn't true. It's a secret she's never been able to articulate, especially when her language is antithetical to what everyone else thinks is inherently human.

'Say what?' she says, looking at him directly. 'What do you want me to say?'

'That you don't like having sex with me,' he says immediately. 'You never have.'

She blinks. Her eyes dart across the room, but his don't stray from her face. 'We don't know that.'

'We've tried everything,' he says, sounding exhausted. 'Every single piece of advice from the internet. We even spent money on one of those sex therapists, which I'm still not sure wasn't a scam, by the way.'

'Maybe . . . maybe we just need more time,' she says unconvincingly.

His eyes look strained. 'It's been years, ba—Nidhi.'

There's a beat of silence.

'You know, I read this statistic,' she says finally, going against every urge to draw attention to the cut-off word. 'Did you know that 80% of women don't

enjoy sex?’

He looks at her askance.

‘Is that so?’

‘Yes!’

The statistic actually said that 80% of women couldn’t have an orgasm from penetrative sex alone.

‘It’s a common thing, actually,’ she babbles. ‘Lots of women don’t enjoy sex. In fact, a lot of them just pretend to—like that scene from *When Harry Met Sally*. There are a lot of scenes like that in many movies nowadays, so it must be a common thing. I think women just aren’t really made to have sex with men, you know. So, it’s not like—it’s not like there’s anything wrong.’

He lets out a long, aggrieved breath.

‘Are you done?’

She flushes pink.

‘I’m just saying,’ she says through gritted teeth. ‘That maybe there isn’t anything wrong, that we don’t have to make this a big deal.’

‘What do you mean there isn’t anything wrong?’ he asks, waving his hands around in disbelief. ‘It is a pretty big deal if one half doesn’t enjoy sex.’

She winces. ‘That’s what I’m saying, though! Lots of women don’t. Why does this need to be a big deal? I enjoy everything else. Doesn’t that count for something?’

She only realises how plaintive she sounds after she’s said it.

The worried lines at the edges of his eyes disappear as his face softens into calmer features.

‘Yes, but it’s still pretty important to me. I want to be with someone who enjoys sex. I want to be someone who is attracted to me,’ he says gently.

She flinches. And there it is—the secret that’s knotted itself into her throat, twisting and taking roots until it can’t be unravelled. Speaking it, even now, feels impossible. It sits there like a ball of yarn entangled in the softest parts of her.

His hands twitch as if to reach out to her, but then they close into a fist.

‘Nidhi,’ he says in that same placating way. She has never hated her name more. ‘Have you considered—have you thought about the fact that you might be asexual?’

‘I can’t be, though!’ she raises her voice. ‘I do love you. That isn’t a lie.’

‘I know it isn’t,’ he says, but he doesn’t sound entirely convinced. It feels like a punch in the stomach. ‘But—but I can’t be with someone who doesn’t like sex like I do.’

‘Oh, why? Because it’s not in your five-year plan?’ she says viciously. ‘Can’t

love someone without their body, is that it?’

He frowns. She feels a stab of relief from finally breaking his calm.

‘Stop. That’s not what I said. Could you not pick a fight for just one second?’ he says in a forced, even tone.

‘I’m not a child, Suraj,’ she says coldly. ‘Don’t speak to me as if I am. And that includes this unwanted diagnosis of my sexuality, by the way.’

‘I’m not diagnosing anything. I’m trying to help you!’

‘Oh yes, informing me that I’m asexual and then breaking up with me because of it on the first day of the new year is very helpful, Suraj. Do you want a gift basket?’

He looks at her as if he’s assessing something, and then his jaw clenches.

‘You hate having sex with me,’ he says again plainly. ‘You always have.’

Her shoulders stiffen. She bites her lips against the burn in her eyes. He looks at her pleadingly, and just like that, the will to fight is gone.

‘Yes,’ she croaks out. ‘I’m sorry.’

He nods and smiles ruefully, just an upturn of the corner of his lips.

‘But that isn’t a bad thing,’ he says. ‘It’s just . . . incompatibility.’

She makes a sound that’s half-scoff, half laugh.

A profound sadness washes over her like cold water. The room looks blurry. Her fingers twitch, and she clasps her hands together to stop them from fidgeting. Then, he’s there in front of her. He gently grabs her wrists, unclasps her hands, and threads their fingers together. She sniffs.

‘It’s not your fault either,’ he says gently. ‘Don’t apologise.’

‘I love you,’ she says, voice wavering. ‘I wasn’t lying about that.’

He looks away. ‘I know. I love you too.’

‘But it isn’t enough?’

He is silent.

She wishes she could explain to him. If only he knew that the way he looks after sex is what she most looks forward to, his hair mussed out against the soft pillow covers, his eyes closed in bliss, and his cheeks still flushed from pleasure because she feels so happy that she was the one to make him feel that way, even if she doesn’t get that same pleasure herself.

But the words don’t come. She opens her mouth to say them, but they don’t come. Instead, she says, ‘I’m not lying. I know it’s hard to understand. I don’t even know how to explain it to myself.’

‘It’s—It’s not that I don’t believe you, but—.’ His breath is shallow. He looks away to compose himself. ‘I can’t do this if you don’t enjoy it. I’m sorry, but I can’t do it.’

She nods and wraps her arms around herself. This is the only conclusion it could come to. The best thing in her life—gone, just like that. But it's just as hard on him, she knows.

Despite it all, a part of her feels free. She's grateful to him then, for speaking it into existence, for turning the key into the poorly locked box cradling this secret. It's not even that she's ashamed. She isn't. It's that she doesn't know how to exist in the world with it out in the open, where there aren't any rules to accommodate this sort of concept.

She takes another sip of her coffee. It's become cold now. He, as always, follows. They continue to drink silently in the kitchen.

She looks at the photo montage on the wall of the living room. There's no flat-screen TV there; she can't afford one at the moment. There's a montage of photos instead, so many of just the two of them. Polaroids of them wearing matching lungis; it'd been such a sight among their friends when everyone saw her wearing one too. They both look besotted. It was taken before they'd even gotten together, back when they were just friends. There are other photos of them standing on a beach with lapping waves in Goa, a parasail in the sky behind them, and a picture of them posing at a birthday dinner blowing out candles.

In every picture, they've got their arms around each other in some way or the other.

Once they're done, he takes her cup from her and washes them both in the sink.

CREATIVE NON-FICTION



Xingzi Chen

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This is the first half of a true story, in which some names have been changed. I have drawn on news articles, court records and police reports, as well as my own imagination, to create the thoughts and speech of the characters. It is as true and accurate as my research may achieve, but please remember it is also a creative reconstruction of the events.

Farewell, Mother

On the afternoon of the 6th of February 2016, a cloudy sky loomed over Fuzhou. Xie Gang paced back and forth in the main lobby of the Putian Railway Station, waiting anxiously for his sister and nephew, who were due to arrive an hour earlier. Around him, the expectant faces were constantly changing as people came and went, embracing their families and friends fresh off the trains, beaming with joy.

The next day would be New Year's Eve, the most important date in every Chinese person's calendar, a day often associated with family reunions and great fortunes. Xie Gang had been thrilled to receive his nephew's text the day before, saying that he and his mother would be coming home for the Spring Festival. A Peking University graduate studying in the US, Wu Xieyu was the pride of his family, and as far as Xie Gang could remember, Xiao-Yu (nicknamed Wu Xieyu) had never made such a mistake as messing up the itinerary—he was an extremely intelligent and responsible young man, and this was acknowledged by many. Still, Xie Gang had no idea where the mother and the son were; to his greater frustration, neither could be reached by phone.

Due to the two absences, the New Year's Eve dinner at the Xies's was celebrated under a rather ambiguous atmosphere. As soon as the seven-day break was over, Xie Gang reported the missing pair to the police, who then broke into his sister's home on the 14th of February, only to find her body, highly decomposed, wrapped in seventy-five layers of bedsheets and plastic film with activated charcoal between them to absorb the odour. Everyone present was utterly stunned. No one noticed the blinking blue light of a security camera in the corner.

Meanwhile, six hundred and eighty-three miles away in the central province of Henan, Wu Xieyu watched everything happening from his hostel room. He knew this day would come. Now, here it was.

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Seven months before, as temperatures kept rising in late June, Xie Tianqin was happy to wrap up another semester and look forward to the summer vacation. Her only son, Wu Xieyu, had told her in one of their daily phone calls that he'd come home on the 1st of July. Ever since he went off to college in Beijing, they'd only been able to see each other on very few occasions every year. School was busy, and everyone was so smart, Xiao-Yu often said. He had to work extra hard to secure his scholarship and apply to grad school in America. Sometimes Xie Tianqin worried about her son's health under such pressure, but most of the time, she thought it was good for a young person to experience some hardship at this age—the Fujian people believed in fighting for success with their own hands.

Xie Tianqin was a fair example of the Fujian ideal. She was born in a small town near Fuzhou in the 1960s. Back then, it was uncommon for girls with humble backgrounds to attain higher education, but Xie Tianqin became the first college student in her family and attended the local teachers' college. Upon graduation, she was assigned to teach History at a middle school in Nanping, where she met Wu Zhijian. They were as different as the two poles of a magnet: Wu Zhijian was a tall, handsome young man with a bright personality, while Xie Tianqin was slightly built and rather introverted. However, just like how magnets only attracted each other when facing in opposite directions, they soon fell in love and got married, giving birth to a baby boy on the 7th of October 1994. Two years later, as Xie Tianqin transferred to the No.2 Middle School affiliated with Fuzhou Teachers' College, widely known as JYEF (Jiao Yuan Er Fu), Wu Zhijian also entered a national corporation in Fuzhou as a middle-level manager, and the family moved to the provincial capital.

Life couldn't have been better for the young Xie Tianqin. A loving husband, a sweet son, a steady and rewarding job in the public functionary system—there really wasn't anything for her to complain about. At school, she held high standards for all her students—'including the ones that sat in the back row due to their poor grades,' recalled the headmaster. Then, at home, she treated her child with even stricter rules, pushing him to reach his full potential. Thankfully, Xiao-Yu had never let her down.

Ever since a young age, the boy had shown exceptional intelligence and self-discipline far beyond that of his peers. Xie Tianqin was pleased to see a mini version of herself—her son's diligence, determination, and gracefulness replicated her own many years before, if not better. Once, Xie Tianqin's colleagues visited when the five-year-old Xiao-Yu was practising Chinese calligraphy in the living

room. He stood up to greet the guests before returning to his work again as if nothing in the world could distract him. 'What a little gentleman,' her colleagues had raved with amazement.

One of the best things about being a mother, Xie Tianqin realised, was that you never knew how your child would surprise you. In 2009, Xiao-Yu graduated from JYEF with the highest marks and was admitted to the best high school in Fuzhou—Fuzhou No.1 High School. In 2012, he excelled at the national college entrance exam (Gao Kao) and got into the best university in China—Peking University. With numerous friends and acquaintances constantly coming to her for the secret of raising such an incredible child, Xie Tianqin felt a sense of fulfilment, a genuine pleasure that she couldn't have gained from any other aspects of life. 'He is a good boy,' she told them. 'I just let him be.'

There was, however, a tragedy that had befallen the family, disrupting their otherwise perfect life. In 2008, Wu Zhijian, a long-term hepatitis B patient, was diagnosed with cancer. Within a year, her optimistic, ever-smiling husband rapidly withered and eventually passed away in December 2009. There was an evident change in the household, but neither the mother nor the son was willing to acknowledge it and would rather digest the sorrow in their own ways. Xiao-Yu became quieter, while Xie Tianqin found herself much more sensitive to noise. Once she was about to run upstairs to knock on her neighbour's door because of their crying baby, and Xiao-Yu stopped her with a maturity that barely matched his age. 'Don't be sad, Mom. Dad is watching us from heaven,' he said.

Xie Tianqin decided that her precious golden boy was all that mattered—her life would orbit around one central point from then on. She tried to save as much money as possible by not buying anything unnecessary and having her meals at the school dining hall. It was only when Xiao-Yu came home for the holidays that she could loosen up a bit. Strangely, she didn't feel miserable but was full of hope. 'As soon as Xiao-Yu is done with college, he'll get a good job and make a lot of money,' she tried to picture the bright future when her worried siblings were busy consoling her. 'We'll buy a big house either in Beijing or one of the other megacities. Maybe even abroad. He'll find a wife and then have his own children while I can help around as I'm still young and capable.' She knew her son would never fail her. As long as they were together, things would work out.

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While his mother was busy preparing for his return, Wu Xieyu had his own plan to carry out. By the end of June 2015, he had purchased waterproof plastic sheets,

oil-proof table mats, desiccant, damp-proof cream, a dehumidifier, mildew-resistant bags, vacuum compression pumps, and isolation gowns. Moreover, he'd acquired a wide range of knives through various channels: a boning knife, a chef's knife, a carving knife, a scalpel, a saw blade and even one of those retractable cutters used in art classes. In order to get everything in place, he'd stopped attending classes since April. When his counsellor asked him about his absence, he said he had a family emergency to take care of.

On the 1st of July, Wu Xieyu flew home with a loaded suitcase. His mother was happy to see him as usual—though she was never fond of expressing her happiness, he could tell she was in a good mood. 'You've lost weight, Xiao-Yu,' she said. 'I need to fill you up somehow.'

Wu Xieyu flinched. He knew his mother was a woman always true to her word. If she said she would do something, she would certainly do it. Before long, she would make him a grand feast, stuffing his bowl with the best meats and urging him to eat until his stomach could no longer hold another grain of rice. As he watched her hurrying into and out of the kitchen, he wondered when things had gone wrong, but soon realised it was a pointless question—the truth was, things had never been right between them.

Growing up, his classmates had called him 'God Yu', 'genius', 'Terminator', whatever they saw fit. His friend, Lu, once asked him if it felt good to be perfect. Honestly, he couldn't tell; he had never known what it felt like to be anything else. Since he started remembering things, he became self-aware enough to behave nicely in many scenarios. According to his mother, the world didn't work how he wanted it to but rather revolved around what he was supposed to do. He was supposed to read more books than any other kid, have neat handwriting, be well-mannered, and treat everyone properly. She was like a scorching sun hanging right above his head, and he found himself shadowless wherever he went.

His mother had hardly ever scolded or spanked him. Instead, she had a secret weapon that was peaceful yet much more powerful. In middle school, he accidentally gained access to porn videos, which he kept as a guilty pleasure until his mother caught him masturbating in his room. She didn't say anything but simply shut the door and walked away. Later that day, she began to wash all the bedsheets, pillowcases, couch covers, and tablecloths in the house as if some invisible filth had tainted them. This was enough for Wu Xieyu to understand that sex was a dirty thing. Similarly, gossiping about his teachers and classmates at the dinner table was despicable, and cursing was absolutely intolerable for his cultivation. He became a well-trained actor, knowing what his audience favoured

and tried his best not to break character.

The only time he could take off his mask for a breath of fresh air was when his father came home on the weekends. 'You study too much, son,' he often said. 'Any girls at school that you like?' And they would get out of the house to play basketball, grab an artificially-coloured popsicle, and talk about almost anything in life. His father felt more like a friend than a parent, which Wu Xieyu desperately needed to sustain his performance in front of others. Unfortunately, his father wasn't meant to keep him company for long. He learned about his father's illness while studying for the high school entrance exam (Zhong Kao). Cancer was a merciless thing under whose judgement no one could be exempt, and a few months later, he received a call from his aunt. He didn't wait for her to finish before he dropped the phone and ran to the balcony of his dorm room, crying his heart out.

He was broken. He knew his mother was broken, too. Most importantly, he knew he was supposed to take on new responsibilities now as the man of the house—there wasn't much time for him to grieve. His mother had refused the money raised by his father's former colleagues and told him that they must depend on themselves. Of course, he said, and started to work even harder at school. But no matter how many scholarships and number-ones he earned, he couldn't feel happy again. Without his father, everything lost its meaning.

He detected his mental health falling apart during his first year at Peking University. Despite doing well academically, Wu Xieyu couldn't get used to college life or the city of Beijing. He'd had difficulty making friends and found no passion for what he was studying—he hadn't chosen economics out of interest; it was his mother's idea. He was supposed to go for the most lucrative major that would lead to a promising career, allowing him to make a lot of money and give his loved ones a better life. They'd dreamt about the future, he and his mother, how they would settle down in Beijing or any other cities they fancied, where he would start his own family and have everyone live happily together in a big house. She said things would work out just fine, but from where Wu Xieyu stood, he could only see a thick fog shrouding the path ahead, blocking his view. In a letter to his childhood friend, he confessed that he'd made a few suicide attempts. 'I gave up at the last second,' he wrote. 'It didn't feel right.' He'd tried cutting his wrist and had considered jumping off a building, but none of these attempts was successful. Eventually, after days and nights of careful contemplation, he reached a conclusion: what he needed was not death or glory but a shadow—a shadow that would shelter his flaws and allow him to breathe, a shadow that he'd never had.

On the 11th of July, over a week after he had come home, Wu Xieyu suggested going out for a walk. His mother gladly agreed. As she bent down by the door to tie her shoes, he noticed the silver threads blended in her hair. They hadn't stood out this much the last time he'd seen her. His mother had indeed aged over the years, he thought, and he was no longer the perfectly obedient boy. *Forgive me, mother. I don't know if this is the right way, but it's the only way that I can be free.*

There was a dumbbell on the nearby shoe rack, which he regularly used for exercise. He raised it, aiming at the woman who had given him life.

To be continued . . .



Debra Schaefer

Debra Schaefer is an educational consultant who spends her time helping to modernise education in areas of war and political unrest. Opera singer, drama coach and theoretical mathematician, Debra read for a BA in military history and MAs in Asian history and creative writing. Her anthology submission, *Escaping The Green House*, is an extract from her memoir of the same name. Her most recent project was translating Iraqi-Kurdish Peshmerga memoirs into English. Contact her by email at schaeferdebra@protonmail.com

Escaping Green House: A Memoir

Prologue

Grandview, Missouri

1984

What Eleanor Roosevelt Doesn't Know

I've been reading Anne Frank's diary in school, so I've been thinking a lot lately—about why I should kill Mother and how much longer I can live in this confined space with her. About whether there will ever be a time when Eleanor Roosevelt will write the introduction to my book, like she did for Anne, except Mrs Roosevelt says children aren't afraid of telling the truth.

I know she's wrong.

'Eleanor Roosevelt doesn't know much about kids.' I tell myself in English class the next day, but it's accidentally out loud.

'Pardon?' Ms Forbes's ruffled sleeve brushes against my desk. The gold chain of her bracelet is caught on her watch again.

'I don't know, Debbie.' She glances down, and I stare up.

I inhale before looking away to see dozens of wide-open eyes. All of them facing me, waiting for whatever comes next.

'I think I agree with Mrs Roosevelt.' She shakes her bracelet free then walks toward the front of the room, touching heads along the way. 'I think that when it's something important, children tell their secrets.'

The heads nod.

Well, I told mine. Nobody believed me, so now I've got a new secret.

The class moves on to the spelling lesson, and I take out my notebook. I'm going to be a murderer. I mouth the words to practice saying it but make no sound. I wonder if Eleanor Roosevelt counts that as telling.

When I get home from school, the house is empty. I pace around my bedroom, hitting my fist on my forehead. My braided carpet annoys me, so I head into the living room. The carpet there is even rougher and crawls up my feet toward my knees; I need to make it stop.

Everything will stop when she goes away. I go into the garage.

Dad's cabinet has stuff in a green spray bottle that smells too weak to do any good. There's his moonshine in the milk jug ... but Mother doesn't drink.

I suck in my breath as my brain beats between my ears.

The brown glass jars look interesting. *DDT. Caution: Keep out of reach of children.* I rub my thumb down the labels as I read the fronts and backs of every bottle in the cabinet. I haven't learned much about chemicals in my eleven years, but I know I have to get the poison right, or Mother will taste it and spit it out.

'Damn.'

The mothballs may not do the job because they didn't work when my sister tried to kill me. I push the water-logged box to the back of the shelf. The paint thinner might be good, but the odour knocks my head back when I take the cap off. *She'll smell it before I even get it to the table.* And what happens to paint thinner when you cook it in mashed potatoes? I wonder if it will still work.

I grab hold of my bottom lip to help me think.

Chapter 1

1977

Children for Sale

I don't hear Mother walk up to me as I dangle my legs off the orange-flowered couch in our avocado front room. I am clutching a crocheted pillow to my chest, watching TV. Mother's musk perfume floats to my face. She turns on a lamp to chase away the dark November afternoon, and I have to lift my head all the way back to see her. She stands there with one of my birthday presents—a book. She squishes herself next to me and puts it on my lap, brushing her dark hair away from her forehead.

A 'no' forms in my middle, except I don't say it out loud. I love the sound of no, but it's a long trip for that word to come out of my mouth when it starts all the way down in the pit of my stomach.

Mother's voice steals my thoughts. 'You're a big girl today, Debbie Jean.'

She takes a finger and nudges her horn-rimmed glasses back up her nose. She tells me since I'm five years old, it's time I read this book. *Pat, pat.* She touches the plastic cover that makes crinkly noises, then smiles at me. The hazel eyes behind her glasses are bigger than they should be.

I will not be reading this book. I start to wiggle away. It's time for me to run to

my room and see if I still fit under my bed.

Mother lifts the book from my lap, waves the cover near my eyeballs. The lamp light flashes off her gold rings. She reads the title to me: *You Were Chosen*. I don't want her to choose me for anything. I want to be invisible and see if Scooby-Doo uses his mouth to take the masks off that bad witch and her zombie. I look past Mother and peek at the television. I hope it's just masks today. I don't want the friends to have real-life trouble.

'Sit still.' Mother scoots even closer; her polyester pants scratch against my hand. She clears her throat and puts on her story-time voice. 'I'm going to help you read.'

We read together.

'You are special because you were chosen. We picked you out of all the new-born babies. We knew you were ours when we saw you.'

A spray of spit flies from her mouth as she reads. Her orange lipstick has smeared her front teeth again. Disgusting. I look away.

Mother and her book have ruined my imagination about how wonderful my birthday presents could be, so the beast that lives inside me has woken up. He starts his running and pushing in my stomach. It feels like he might throw up. I slide off the couch, but Mother holds my arm and helps me back into my spot.

Dr Lennox says I have holes in my stomach. He says I have to calm down, or they'll get bigger and bigger until I explode. I wanted to tell him that the beast is scratching them into me. I wanted to say that if we could get the beast out, my holes might get better. I wanted to tell him lots, but I just sat on the white paper in the little doctor's room and didn't say anything.

Mother's nose brushes against my cheek as she leans in with cigarette breath. She nuzzles me, turns the page, keeps reading in her sing-songy way.

'We picked you up and looked into your eyes. We cooed at your tiny hands and little toes.'

When she speaks, Mother touches a different part of my body with each word.

'We smiled at your rosy cheeks and baby nose.'

She pokes my nose with her red-orange fingernail.

'No! I can read it all by myself.'

I grab each side of the book, tugging it and holding tight onto the plastic cover. Mother's hands won't let go. She lifts her chin and looks down at me from under her glasses.

'You're getting too big for your britches, young lady.' She tells me it's a together-book; I won't understand it by myself.

'This story is very important,' she says.

I stare at the storybook on my lap.

I didn't want this. I wanted some Hot Wheels, and I asked for a big red fire truck—the kind with a real white ladder that moves up and down. I bet there are no Hot Wheels or fire trucks in my other presents on the kitchen table. Inside them, I imagine there are a zillion books waiting for Mother to read with me. I'll have to wipe the spit and lipstick off my ear when she's done.

The beast is definitely going to throw up.

'I have to go!' I jerk away from Mother and run down the hallway toward the bathroom. I slam the door closed behind me, hear my favourite button click when I push the lock.

The toilet is cool and smooth when I vomit. I lose my snack, my lunch, my breakfast. I hug the bowl with my face resting against it and close my eyes. My stomach feels like it's been stretched into a pancake then stuffed back into a ball.

There is a knock on the bathroom door. Mother has followed me.

'Let me in. Did you lock this?'

I imagine her on the other side, standing in the narrow hallway of our little greenhouse where cigarette smoke ruins anything that used to be white. I see her surrounded by gold-framed family portraits; her glasses and teeth gleam in every picture as she smiles for the camera.

Mother smacks her hand flat against the door.

'Debbie, do what I say.'

She won't stop turning the doorknob—back and forth, over and over, it rattles. I scrunch myself next to the trash can, but I only fit up to my shoulders with my legs sticking out, even when I turn sideways.

I tug some toilet paper from the roll and sit on the floor with my back against the grey, wood-panelled wall, making a mess from my eyes and nose. I try to clean my face but end up spreading everything worse.

Mother's voice explodes into the bathroom, 'Just open the door, and I'll help you.'

'I threw up!' I yell at her from that same place where the 'no' lives.

As I tap the back of my head against the wall, I feel my forehead get sweaty. I am hot and cold and floaty. I touch the toilet, spreading my fingers wide. Hard things are good.

'You have to let me in now!'

She rattles the doorknob as I hit the back of my head hard enough to make the wood shake. *Harder and harder and harder*. There isn't room for the sink and toilet and hot and cold and throw up—all in the same place.

'Debbie, if you keep this up, you're going to get a spanking. Do you want a

spanking on your birthday?’

The me on the floor somehow becomes the me standing at the bathroom door, popping the lock. Mother looks down; her frosted eyeshadow winks at me. I stare past her to our ceiling, which has little bits of popcorn fluff on it. I start counting the pieces of smoke-coloured fuzz.

‘Are you done?’ She takes my arm, leading me back down the hallway.

‘I wasn’t faking it. My stomach was sick,’ I whine.

‘Don’t give me those crocodile tears. You’re so dramatic.’

I sniffle my runny nose back into my head and follow Mother. As we get near the couch, I see the book lying there. It gives me a plan for how I will escape this trap, she’s made. I imagine myself happy to read the story about being chosen. I snatch the together-book before I sit.

‘I’m all better, mom-mom. Can we read my new book since it’s my birthday?’

‘Locked doors are dangerous. You can never lock any door in this house. Do you understand me?’ She tilts her head, waiting for me to make promises.

I nod.

As Mother moves closer, I try to hide my smile. I’m the one who’s caught her now.

I take the corner of a page and rub the shiny paper between my fingers. It makes a noise that calms me. I squeak each page until I find the place where I got sick.

Mother lets me read by myself and doesn’t rush me through the big words that take time to sound out. When I finish each page, I hold it up to show her the pictures because I am the storyteller at the library on Main Street. Mother is all the children who sit criss-cross-applesauce.

I read the birthday book for a hundred years and finally squeak my fingers against the page that is the end.

‘And that is why you are special. Because you were adopted.’

I imagine babies’ cribs lined up in straight rows. *Too many babies.* They lie there playing with their toes and smiling.

I don’t think I ever played with my toes. I am sure I never smiled. I am especially sure I never smiled at people. Maybe dogs and cats, but animals probably aren’t allowed in the place with the cribs. Why are all those babies smiling? *Dumb babies.*

‘Do you understand the story?’ Mother asks.

‘It’s a grocery store where you can buy babies?’

‘No. It’s not a grocery store to buy babies.’

‘Are we going to buy a baby?’ We should definitely buy a few babies. If we do,

I can disappear, and everyone will be too busy to notice.

Mother ruins my very good idea. She says we're not buying any more babies. She tells me the story in the book is about me.

'You were adopted.'

'So, you bought me?'

I push my knuckles into my forehead to get rid of the things that confuse me. I don't like this book even though it has shiny, squeaky pages. I start searching the carpet for my favourite patterns. When I find the tornado-shaped ones, I'm going to count them.

'You're not even trying to understand,' Mother tells me. 'You're being obstinate.'

I don't know what that word means, but the beast doesn't like it.

'I do so understand!' I yell because I don't have to be quiet if I don't want to. This isn't private family matters.

'You didn't buy me, but you paid money to someone, and they let you take me home.'

Mother says yes and sighs.

Just like in a grocery store!

I only think this; I am all done saying it out loud. I know about buying. When you want something, they line up the things you can have, you pay the money, and then they give it to you.

'How much did I cost?'

'It's very expensive to adopt.' Mother sounds pleased with herself. 'You should be grateful for finding a loving family.'

I think I'd be more grateful if I could go back to the store and try again with a different family. I wouldn't even charge very much. I could make a coupon for them to use, like when we buy the Count Chocula. I'd make a really good coupon then I'd be almost free.

'Can I go play in my room?'

I jump down off the couch, leaving Mother and the book behind. I have won. As I run away, it slides to the floor. Mother picks it up and walks into the kitchen.

I fly fast like Shazam! past the TV and coat closet.

Down the hall. Turn right. Into my room. *Slam!*

I seal the bedroom door shut with the strongest glue in the world. It's a million times stronger than the Elmer's glue that has the cow's scary face on the bottle. No one will ever be able to open my door again.

I lean back and look at my yellow room, that should be purple. It's messy because I have spread the Little People world all over my floor. I have the house,

the hospital, the Holiday Inn, the farm, the village, the airport, the plane and the castle. A thousand million pieces are set up ready. I am the mayor and chief of police. I make everyone follow my rules, and if they don't, I throw them in jail until they cry then I let them off the hook.

On very careful tip-toes, I zig-zag across my room to get to my record player. It's a hand-me-down that I got because Mother gave my big sister, Samantha, a new one. Mine has a real leather cover, and when it's closed, it looks like a suitcase. Someday, when it's the right time, I will pack it and go away. For now, I undo the lock and lift the lid.

I stack the songs in the right order. 'Bad Blood' first. *Always first*. I pile a whole bunch of Mother's old records on top. 'These Boots are Made for Walkin'" has a worn-out centre. The little plastic middle piece doesn't really fit inside; sometimes, the arm lands too hard and knocks the record off. Mother calls them 45s, but I think she's lying because why would they name my records the same as dad's gun?

The music starts, and I sing along in my head with Neil Sedaka. I like how he says the 'D' sound over and over. I sing this song almost every day, except right now, the singing part of me isn't here, so I lay on the carpet, imagining my new red fire truck. I'll pull the ladder up to rescue the Little People from the fire on top of my bed.

Together, the beast in my stomach and I play for a thousand hours, but the beast doesn't really play, so I eventually forget he is there. For this little while of a minute, he is quiet, which is good because I need to figure out what Mother was talking about.

There is a store where they sell children. That is the scariest thing I've ever heard—a whole lot worse than the Scooby-Doo witch, even though her skin is green. *I used to live on a shelf in a grocery store*. That doesn't seem right. *How did I not roll off?* Mother has to be lying. But she's got a whole book about how to buy babies. Looks like I've got a mystery on my hands.

I lay down on my braided rug with one ear trying to sleep and the other ear listening for Mother. I don't want to take a bath on my birthday.

NOVEL EXTRACTS



Kelsey Batty

Kelsey Batty is a Manchester-based writer and barista. Her work touches on the morbid and the macabre with a touch of magical realism. Her anthology submission, *Apple Tree*, is an extract from her novel of the same name, which she is currently working on while creating new milkshakes at the café. She believes there is an equal chance of fame in either pursuit. Contact her by email at kelseybatty@live.co.uk

Apple Tree

There is a village to the east of Manchester, around a fifty-minute drive. It is a quiet place, like many villages tucked in at the edge of the Peak District. The village is well-populated, straddling the old and the new. Neon lights and ATMs have yet to reach the old part of the village, bullied to the edge of the map by modernity. It belongs to the postcards and the romantics who still send them.

At the end of the village, there is a row of stone cottages, crooked as a poor man's teeth. The sun is rising now, but when the sky darkens, the large windows shine with a rustic brightness, and one can imagine the blacksmiths, the carpenters, the groundskeepers, with coarse hands building up the fire each night, as they must have done throughout the centuries.

Everything is green chaos in the summer, an artist's dream in the autumn. Trees and their stretching limbs obscure the twisted roads. The distant hills herald the approach of winter before the temperature drops, and the people of the village lay down the grit and wait for the flurries to begin—as there is no doubt of their coming. Snow falls differently in this part of the country. When winter exhales for the last time, the blossom creeps in, and the village is reborn with a blush.

Life goes on here in a steady, predictable cycle. The village is safe in this way, and the cottages are well-sought after by the old, the young, and those lost in between.

The last of these cottages seems a little wilder than the rest. The ivy has trespassed across the windows; its lawns an uneven terrain, growing more treacherous with each passing season. Weeds are sprouting on the cobble path, and the gate has long been neglected, its latch held permanently aloft by rust.

The cottage next door had a bright 'For Sale' sign until a young couple, Alice and Jamie, new to the village and ready to begin their idyllic lives in the country, bought it a month ago. After all, the views are spectacular, and they will surely lead healthy lives, eating meals made with local produce and exploring the land around their new home—the leaflets say so, anyway. When their baby can walk unaided, they will watch her play in the garden and rediscover the world through her eyes.

These are the happy thoughts of Alice Stevenson as she steps onto the porch to breathe in the morning air, as she has each morning since they moved. She has never done these things before, but she is building up her character, inspired

by her new postcode. They recently bought a wooden chair swing to match the decking outside, though it will be years until it acquires the weather-beaten look of the boards beneath her feet. She enjoys sitting on it with a steaming mug, listening to the birds she wishes she knew the names for. In this way, she relishes the hour before her daughter wakes while Jamie snores, and she wonders if she will ever enjoy anything more than finishing a hot cup of tea in a single sitting.

The garden was already well-kept upon their arrival. A long flowerbed lines the edge of the garden and is bursting with colour, and it is this flowerbed which holds her attention this morning. There is a slight breeze stroking the flowers. The flowerbed pulses like a heartbeat, the petals boasting a vibrancy that artificial flowers can only hope to attain, a life made all the more beautiful by the inevitable yet temporary death they will fall victim to in October. Alice smiled; this was good for her work, this early hour. She tells herself that with Ella growing more independent each day, it won't be long until she can begin her work again. She imagines herself in the spare room, wiping clay-stained hands on her apron and watching Ella play in her creche. Perhaps she could set up a stall in the market to sell extra stock. Her stall would be popular, especially if she brought Ella along; she could charm the old people with those big brown eyes.

Alice finishes her tea and stands on the porch, savouring her last moments of solitude. She hears the door beyond the garden fence creak open and turns to watch the old lady from next door slowly leave her house. From her elevated position, Alice can see her from the waist upwards, but she stands quietly for a better view. *Poor woman, she thinks. She must be too old for it now. That's why the house is so run-down.* Alice knows she will have to ask Jamie to maintain the hedge, which separates their life from hers. She thinks she may ask the old lady if Jamie can fix her gate too.

Alice watches the woman make her way down the garden steadily. Though she must be in her seventies, she is far from shabby—always dressed in fine, if a little archaic, clothing, with her silver hair always tidily made up. Her destination is the old apple tree, as it is every morning. When she reaches it, she stretches into the branches and plucks the fruit. She holds it to her nose with her eyes shut, inhaling deeply. The woman smiles at the sky as she breathes out in contentment; then, she pockets the apple and retreats. Alice has witnessed this ritual throughout the whole of August. She wonders what the woman will do when the fruit has gone.

As of yet, the older woman has been unaware of her faithful watcher, but this morning, Alice stumbles as she steps back. The women turn to one another, one in surprise and the other with the slight shame of being caught out. Silently, they gaze at one another until Alice raises a hand in greeting. For a moment, the

woman does nothing but stare. Then she smiles a little sadly and shuffles into her house at a slightly quicker pace than usual.

Alice stands, chiding herself for doing nothing friendlier, for not saying anything at all. It was not the neighbourly interaction she had been envisioning since they moved. She looks at the apple tree, feeling ashamed, as if she had tainted something pure and beautiful with her presence, or at least the discovery of it. She wonders if she should visit the woman; try to make amends, if there are amends to be made. Should she take something for her? A pie or . . . but Alice had never made a pie, had never baked anything at all, really. Anything edible, anyway. Perhaps she was making too much of it. Alice is the type of person who often does. Maybe the woman quite simply enjoyed an apple in the morning.

The sun grows warmer, and Ella begins to cry, her voice falling through the open window onto her troubled mother. So Alice stops thinking about the woman, apples, and potential pies. She goes to her daughter, who will be glad to see her.

*

April 1963.

The garden was large and unruly. In the wind's grasp, the grass interlaced like strands of wicker. Beyond the hedges that marked the end of the garden, hundreds of trees were swaying, breathing a hushed song of spring, and the birds sang back in another language.

The woman knelt at the man's side while he held the sapling steady, packing the dirt around its roots. As the last layer was firmly patted down, the man released his grasp and stood back to inspect their work. It was only two feet tall but already engaged in a battle with the strong wind. His eyes fixed on the woman; her dark hair was held in place with an old, ragged scarf, and she leaned, her dirty hands pressing into the soil. She had a patch of brown on her cheek, where she had brushed the runaway strands of hair from her face. He stared at her as if she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

He reached out and squeezed her shoulder. When she looked up at him, all of the warmth and delight he had known for fifteen years, he felt at once a wave stronger than any gust of wind. She allowed herself to be pulled to her feet by the man. He cradled her, his palms wrapped around her soft arms, as her own found their way to the warmth of his back. They stood this way for a few minutes outside of their new home, each silently breathing in the other. It was the simple

things for this man and woman. The feeling of grass, long overdue a cut, sweeping across exposed skin. The depth of the eyes of the person you love.

The joint effort of planting an apple tree together in the spring.



Nikita Dahiya

Raised in Mumbai before she moved to London for her undergraduate degree in English Literature, much of Nikita Dahiya's work takes place somewhere in the 7000km between India and the UK. Her anthology submission, *After the Tone*, is an extract of her novel of the same name. She has social media accounts on Twitter and Instagram, but being more of an online lurker than an engager, she rarely uses them. Contact her by email at nikitadahiya21@gmail.com

After the Tone

Chapter 1

Flames always move upwards. We learnt this in fourth grade Science. When you light something on fire, the flame produces heat which, when released into the surrounding air, makes the air expand, lowering its density. Gravity then pulls down the colder, denser air, pushing the now hot air upwards and, with it, the flame. The hotter the fire, the higher the flame.

The flames before me flicker, licking up at the overhanging clouds. It's a dull day, not all that different from any other day this past week. Weatherwise. The weather reports have warned of an unseasonably warm week. I shift uncomfortably on the open grounds, my sneakered feet occasionally sinking into the soft soil. An inch to the right of my shoes is a lowly-filled puddle. Where did the water come from? January weather in Goa hardly allows for any rain, and with the temperature resting in the mid-twenties, the last two days had seen us sweating through our clothes. Just a year of living abroad in London's frigid temperatures has ruined me for the Goan climate.

The warm, balmy wind picks up momentarily, making the water in the puddle ripple ever so slightly. I look up. The flames have kept their height so far; the wind must be egging it on. I look back down. The ripples grow even more concentric. The water stays murky, with a greyish-brown tint to it. I have the overwhelming urge to dip my toe in it.

A blanket of discomfort shrouds the open ground I am standing in. At least thirty people stand around me, but no words are said. Not to me, anyway. Every so often, there is a slight murmur behind me but no one approaches. I maintain the actions I have been cycling through. I look down at my feet. Flame. Shoes. Flame again. A beetle crawls next to me, its spindly black legs carrying it past pebbles and patches of upturned dirt. It looks shiny, with a hard back, and I wonder if it will make a crunch if I step on it. I shift slightly away from it. Flame again.

In my periphery, I can see my father shift on his feet. He's always favoured his left foot over his right after a bike accident when he was younger. My father's a tall man, brushing six-foot-one on a good day, and even today, as he stands with his shoulders hunched over, he towers over everyone around us. He's dressed in all-white, and if the way he crosses and uncrosses his arms every few minutes is anything to go by, he is uncomfortable. Good. I watch as he shifts back onto his

left foot, wincing ever so slightly as he does so. His head is angled downwards, and I wonder if he is watching the same beetle I had been looking at. He still looks the same as he had four months ago when I last saw him, if only with an additional line or two finding their place on his forehead. The regret radiating from him is almost pungent in its desperation.

He and Amma separated seven months ago, and he stopped coming over to see me a few months after that, citing excuses along the lines of me 'being too hostile'. *This man broke up my family, and I wasn't even allowed to be angry?* The fuck kind of logic was that? He always made a point to come to see the twins, however. After all, at eight years old, the two boys, Dev and Ishaan, weren't old enough to hold too long a grudge against him. Even today, they were made to stay home because they were too young to attend the funeral.

The flames before us cast an orange glow onto his face, cradling the sombre expression he has on. I wonder if he regrets the past. I wonder if he regrets leaving Amma. I wonder if he knows that I blame myself for Amma's death. I wonder if he is thinking about how different things could have been if he hadn't left. He turns to look at me, physically recoiling, when he realises that I am staring back. I can feel the waves of pity rolling off him. I don't need his pity. I don't deserve it.

A pinching sensation between my shoulder blades makes me break eye contact. Black smoke spirals upwards from the fire before me. My eyes are stinging, pulling tears up to the waterline. I can't tell if they're from the smoke or the realisation that I've now been left with half a parent. The black smoke rises higher, and I can feel Amma slipping away with every passing flicker of the flame.

At nineteen, this is the first funeral I have ever attended, and my mother's at that. A disdainful scoff is building up at the back of my throat at this realisation; there is a reason my middle school teachers always called me an over-achiever.

I wonder if I'm *doing it right*. Can you even do it wrong? WikiHow had been somewhat helpful last night. 'How to Act at a Funeral?' The guidelines were fairly simple:

1. Dress Conservatively. Fair enough.
2. *Arrive on time:* Well, yeah.
3. *Turn off distractions:* It is also considered poor taste to be on social media during a funeral, like Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, or Snapchat.
4. *Offer your condolences to the family:* I am the family. I wish people would stop offering their condolences.

At one point, the priest mentions that the funerals typically last between one and three hours and not long after, the crowd on the funeral grounds starts thinning out, people wandering off to find a place to sit. I want to scream at them, hold them by their shoulders and shake some empathy into them, saying, *Amma wouldn't have left if it was you!* But I don't. Instead, I stare at the funeral pyre.

Someone walks up behind me; they stand there for a few moments, not saying anything. I wonder how long it will take before they regurgitate the same exhausted spiel I have been listening to for the last four days. *Four days. It's been four days since Amma died.* An arm encircles my shoulder, warm fingers wrapping around my upper arm, pulling me into a chest.

'It's going to start getting dark out now, beta. Let's head in, okay? Eat a little something.' Anita *mausi*, my mother's sister.

Despite barely grazing the five-foot mark, Anita *mausi* usually cuts a formidable figure with her sleek shoulder-length hair and horn-rimmed glasses perched atop a sharp nose. Growing up, I had always wished I would inherit her and Amma's high cheekbones; eventually, I resigned myself to the fact that it would be a long time before I grew out of the baby fat cradling my cheeks. Today, *mausi's* hair has been pushed out of her face, scraped back in a tight bun. The smile lines on her cheeks rest uncomfortably atop her sombre expression, and she, somehow, seems smaller. I tower over her ever so slightly but still lean into her embrace.

'Not yet, *mausi*.'

'*Thoda sa toh khalo, beta*, you haven't eaten anything all day.'

The concern is barely veiled, seeping through her honeyed tone. Even as I look forward, I can feel my father looking over at this revelation. *Don't say anything.* I project this thought in his direction telepathically, willing him not to talk to me. *Not right now.*

'You go, *mausi*, I'm not hungry.'

'*Panditji* said it'll take another hour, at least.'

Before today, I had never realised how loudly logs burn. A steady crackle fills the air, padding the gaps in the muffled conversations around me. With every passing second, I am less sure I can get through this evening without screaming.

'It's okay. I'll stay with Amma. You go.' I inwardly cringe at how terse my voice sounds, verging on impolite. For a moment, the crackling dims. Then it surges back up. Anita *mausi* squeezes my shoulders once before she's gone.

The cremation grounds aren't too big. If I didn't know any better, I would have mistaken it for an abandoned parking lot—plenty of such open grounds scattered

all over Goa, filled with pebbles, weeds, and construction debris. No one ever gives them a second glance. I wonder how many of them have had funerals held in them.

It takes another hour before the fire dies down completely, leaving only a pile of ashes in its wake. Only a handful of people are still there, milling around the now-extinguished funeral pyre. My father sits off to the side, a rickety plastic chair supporting his tawny figure. A crematorium worker walking over with an urn is what gets me moving; I don't know if I can stomach watching him gather the ashes.

Only as I leave do I make momentary eye contact with my father. I see him mouth my name before I hear it, 'Anju!'

He moves to stand up from his chair, and I hasten my pace towards the crowd of relatives I can see corralling around my grandparents. Given how tense things have been between him and my mother's family over the last two days, I know he won't follow me to them. Once I get closer, I get a good look at my grandparents. *Nana and nani*, who are otherwise so full of life, now sit in a corner looking positively defeated. Nana has his eyes averted to the floor, reaching up occasionally to run a shaky hand down his face. *Nani*. My breath catches in my chest as I look at my grandmother. Nothing could have possibly been as gut-wrenching as *nani's* wails of anguish when she first saw Amma's body. Even now, she leans back in her chair, a vacant look on her puffy face; it looks like she spent all night crying.

'Nani?'

Nani looks up, the wrinkles marking her face easing a little when she sees that it's me. I crouch down next to her before asking, 'Can I get you something? Food? Water?'

There's a strange look on her face as if she is trying to decipher some unknown puzzle, some unknown puzzle that is apparently plastered all over my face. Her lips tremble as she purses them, the wrinkles around her mouth causing them to pucker up even more. She looks deep in thought as she reaches up a frail hand to gently thumb at my face.

'You look exactly like she used to, you know. When she was a little girl.' She scans my face again, as though fixing it to memory, '*Haan*, just like my baby.'

I want to throw up. I need to. To empty the acid that's burning my throat right now. *Nani* smells just like Amma used to. The smell of fabric softener radiates off her in strong waves, warm and comfortable. Everyone is busy, consolatory hugs are being exchanged. Now is the only moment I will get. 'I'm going to take a walk, *nani*. I'll be close to the house, okay? Don't worry.'

Grazing a hand over *nana-nani's* shoulders, I walk away, desperate to get away unaccosted by any relatives. I know my father will be looking for me soon enough, but I can find my way back; *nani's* house is only a fifteen-minute walk away, and it's still light outside.

It's ten minutes before I come across a roadside stall. It's a small, ramshackle thing; wooden planks are nailed together haphazardly with a tin roof adding minimal shelter. *Raju's Tea Stall* is painted in yellow letters shining against the chipping blue wood. A stool teeters precariously on the side of the stall, occupying a place next to the wooden benches that must usually be packed with customers. Today, it's empty. The only person present is a young boy, swatting away flies and occasionally rearranging the displayed snacks.

'Bhaiya, ek nimboo soda milega?'

Seeing him nod, I perch myself on the stool, wobbling only a little. The events of the past few days had been marinating within my mind for the entirety of the day, twisting and turning in a nauseating fashion. Amma, gone. My father, returned. The twins, left with no mother. Me, left to take care of them.

There is a sickeningly cyclic nature in which these thoughts are repeated, one after the other. I wish it would stop, but more than anything, I wish I could simply flick through the upcoming weeks, through this gnawingly empty feeling that seems to be wrapping itself around my mind. It feels like someone is bandaging me up, the white cloth wrapping itself around my eyes, my nose, my lips, wrapping all the way down around my neck. Then back up, and it starts all over again. The bandage is muffling the sounds around me, making it just a little harder to breathe, pressing on my temples uncomfortably. With every round of wrapping, I can feel the bandage pull tighter than before. Tighter and tighter and—

'Didi, nimboo soda.' The boy extends the glass bottle towards me, a straw and lemon wedge peeking over the top. The bandages loosen enough to let me breathe. 'Thank you.'

Perhaps it is the pinched expression on my face, or the all-white salwar kameez, or the proximity to the cremation grounds, but the shopkeeper understands enough to leave me be, going back to occasionally fiddling with the rotating table fan as it creaks along its path. The fan turns in my direction, blowing the muggy air surrounding us back towards me.

I try to remember the last time I cried. I didn't cry when I first found out. Not when I was tasked with the responsibility of gathering up my two younger brothers in my arms to tell them the news. *Amma's not coming back home with us.* I held them while they broke down, their snot-filled cries filling the previously

quiet halls of Queen Mary Hospital's Emergency Ward A. I know that the moment it gets too quiet that I will hear them again. The fan turns back, creaking along its journey as it blows my hair to the side, sounding in accompaniment to the Shaan song softly playing over the shop radio.

The days leading up to the funeral were a blur. Since we had no other family in London, Amma was brought back to India for her last rites. My father, who had moved back into our house right after Amma's death, was left scrambling, booking last-minute tickets and doing rounds at the Indian High Commission to allow for smooth travel. All I had done—or really, all I had managed to do—was wake up, feed my brothers, and then go back to sleep. My friend Tara had stayed over while we were still in London, trying to coax me into eating a morsel here and there. Every morning I would wake up to the sounds of the city creeping in behind the curtained windows, and every night I would go to sleep with my head in Tara's lap as my best friend brushed my hair softly. Like Amma used to.

We reached Goa less than two days ago. Despite it happening forty-eight hours ago, I can't quite recall everything that happened after the flight. Maybe it's jetlag; maybe it's my brain shutting off. I'm too tired to think too hard about it. To say my grandparents' house was sombre would be putting it mildly. Everyone had something to say, everyone had to ask me a million questions, everyone refused to give me room to breathe.

I'm so sorry for your loss.

I kept meaning to call your mother, and now . . .

How are you holding up? How are the kids doing?

She was so young too. What a shame.

Must be so hard for you. I can't even imagine how my kids would manage if something happened to me.

It must be so hard for you children. Come here, give your aunty a hug.

Why's she not crying? That one was spoken behind my back, muttered out of the corner of the mouth of some lady I didn't recognise.

Dev and Ishaan had immediately been herded up by Anita *mausi* and taken away from the chaos. For that, I was grateful. I could only begin to imagine the amount of therapy they would have to go through if they heard someone picking at them for 'not mourning properly'. God forbid one of us take a breath that wasn't steeped in pain. But I was the oldest child. I had no choice but to stay.

A car speeds past the tea stall, stirring leaves off the road. The road is fairly deserted; a one-way road lined with palm trees, and on the other side is a worn-out sign: Candolim Beach, 10 minutes. Amma loved watching the sunset by the beach. Growing up in Goa, she was used to the sun, the sand, the golden beaches.

It made sense why she would hate London. Loud, smoky, with a thin layer of grime covering every part of the city and no warm, sandy shores to walk along every evening—yes, it made sense why Amma hated the city with a burning passion. Even after she had separated from my father, she couldn't leave, too scared of the ridicule she would face if she returned home. I had heard her telling Anita *mausi* this one night after she thought everyone had gone to sleep. Half of me shamed her for it, the other half understood.



Claire de Massey

Since graduating in 2000, Claire de Massey has worked in advertising agencies in London and Manchester, had two children and travelled extensively around Europe. The pandemic afforded her the opportunity to finally devote her time to her writing. She writes intensely personal fiction and non-fiction rooted in her own experiences in life. Her anthology submission, *Falling*, is an extract from her novel of the same name. Contact her by email at claire.de.massey@gmail.com

Falling

Chapter 1 – Simon, May 2005

It was daylight when I slipped out of the club. It always took me by surprise, the sharpness of the light, stepping out of Friday night to find the world had moved on to tomorrow. The air was cool and still, the smell of the night before hovering above the pavements. Stale beer, piss, fag-ends and something else, something elemental, as though every grain of dust and speck of soot had awoken and was vibrating with the new dawn. I was aware of the bass from the music below, an echo of my own pulse. I felt, as I always did, that these nights could go on forever.

Two worlds existed on the streets of Farringdon early on a Saturday morning—those on their way to work and those on their way home. Across the road, the cavernous halls of Smithfield Market echoed with a morning chorus of shouts and crashes as men in fluorescent yellow vests unloaded cargo from their vans. Two women carrying large catering trays crossed my path and seemed to stare right through me. I looked down at the oily black pavement beneath my feet. The pale blue sky cast last night's litter into sharp relief.

I found a waiting cab and slid inside. I loved the quiet of those solitary journeys south across the river. I liked to read the street names, *Honey Lane*, *Threadneedle Street*, *Leadenhall*. I tried them out on my tongue and felt their weight.

My rule for a good night was knowing when to leave—always when part of me yearned to stay. Time moved differently with ecstasy. Moments were long, but the hours were short. That's why I liked the taxi journeys home; time and distance were definite concepts. I only had to look outside to know exactly where I was and to watch the red numbers of my fare tick upwards to see how long we'd been moving.

By the time I passed Clapham Common, there were runners and dog walkers everywhere—aliens from a different city. The cab stopped on the corner of my road by the southernmost tip of the common. I paid the cab driver and hurried inside my flat, deadlocking the door behind me—the ringing in my ears like waves drawing back on a pebble shore. I pulled on a jumper, put a mix CD on and settled on the sofa to roll a joint. The muscles in my legs ached, my skin was charged, my jaw tight. But this was the beginning of the next part, and soon these things would pass. I lit up and sank backwards with a long exhalation of blue-grey smoke.

In the space between one thing and another, I thought of Emma. I remembered a time years ago when we'd gone to a festival, and it'd poured with rain. We waded through mud from tent to tent, from clashing techno to electro symphonics, clutching each other and shivering in the cold. Eventually, we found a place that was warm, playing music that soothed us and stayed there for hours, wrapped around each other on a pile of coats and cushions. When daylight came, we were half frozen, but we laughed at the apocalyptic scenes of mud-stained walls and teenagers with eyes as black as ink stumbling through the debris. A discarded pair of moon boots looked like roadkill. Somehow, we found Dan and made it back to his brother's car. His brother was already inside with the heaters on. They took turns driving, both talking at once and gulping from cans of lager, the bass from the car stereo thudding down the motorway. In the back, Emma and I sat together with our fingertips touching. Our teeth rattled, and our bodies shook all the way back to London. We shared another pill after Dan dropped us near my flat. I ran a bath, and carefully we climbed in together. When the heat permeated our bodies, it was like a slow aching orgasm. I washed her hair, then gently combed it as she rested her head on her knees. She said nothing could ever feel like this again.

I relit my spliff. The nagging urge to move had lessened; Emma was in the distance now. With half a pill left, a bag of weed and a bottle of Lucozade in the fridge, the weekend stretched ahead of me. I felt as though I'd passed through several time zones since the hours in the office on Friday. I had nowhere to go and no desire to leave.

I must've closed my eyes and fallen into, if not sleep, then a kind of waking dream. A man's voice on the stereo sang softly in French, and I thought of nothing but the softness of the jumper against my skin. A vibration somewhere underneath me disturbed my quiet reverie. I retrieved my phone and saw several missed calls. Without thinking, I opened my messages.

Simon, I've got Louisa's bday present, want to contribute? Don't forget its at 2pm now. Laters, Dan.

'Fuck.'

We'll be in the Oak from 1 if you fancy a quick pint before lunch. See you soon

'For fuck's sake.'

A sinking feeling in my stomach. That missed call from Emma on Friday had left a lingering feeling of unease that I'd ignored. Talking to her now was painful, and shamefully, I did all I could to avoid her. Of course, she would be there today.

I imagined every scenario in which I didn't show up, and there were none that I could live with. With anyone else, I wouldn't have thought twice about sending a message with my apologies and a passable excuse, but with Dan and the others, I couldn't do it. They'd know for certain that I was holed up in my flat, smoking and watching TV. I heard their gentle mocking, worse, their *concern*, and knew my absence would only confirm the underlying weakness of character they had always sensed in me.

A plan. First, another spliff, roll an extra couple to take with me, then drink some Lucozade. Next, shower, dress, walk to the High St, and catch the bus—with headphones, it'd be bearable. It was all possible. I swallowed the half and began.

Under the hot water beads, I thought about Emma and what it would feel like to be so close to her. It'd been weeks since we'd spoken and even longer since I had seen her. Perhaps Emma had confided in Dan or Louisa or both, and they would look at me with a hardened gaze of reproach. I deserved it. But if she hadn't spoken to Louisa when the air between us changed, and a single glance sustained us for a whole evening, then why would she say anything now? Knowing her, I doubted she'd spoken to anyone at all.

The sun was bright in the sky as I braced myself and stepped outside. Behind my sunglasses, I felt invisible. I found a mix on my iPod, something ambient, no vocals, but with a relentless beat that willed me forward. The half was kicking in, and with every few steps, I felt tiny quivers of excitement, like mild jolts of electricity. It wouldn't last, but it was enough to get me to the pub where I hoped I could be carried along by Daniel and Louisa's conversation and then give in to the gentle wave of daytime drunkenness. My dread of seeing Emma went hand in hand with my desire to be near her.

I wove through the crowds on Clapham High Street as though I was walking twice the speed of anyone else. Perhaps the Royal Oak was once a traditional south London pub as its Georgian windows and light brown bricks suggested, but now it existed solely to serve the newly graduated and young professional clientele that lived on its doorstep. The menu was Mediterranean, the lager was Japanese, and the music came from a DJ playing bass-heavy pop and house. The smell of fried food was overwhelming when I swung open the door. Daniel and Louisa were sitting at a table in the far corner, Louisa's red hair like spun sugar around her face. They were deep in conversation, their heads bent close, so I could

not see their faces.

‘Hey, happy birthday!’

They looked up and smiled, then shared the briefest of glances with each other before standing up. I kissed Louisa on both cheeks and hugged her. She smiled, ‘I was wondering if you’d come. Dan said he texted you but didn’t hear back. So how are you?’

‘My battery ran out. You know I wouldn’t miss it. When did we all last meet up, must have been a while? What are you drinking?’

Dan was watching me closely. ‘I’ll have a pint. Lou’s on white wine and soda,’ then he drew me close to shake my hand, ‘Are you fucked up?’

I shook my head and looked at him quizzically. He was always so fucking astute. Louisa’s phone was ringing, and she turned away as she held it to her ear. I squeezed into a space at the bar and ordered the drinks. Here the bodies were solid and static, with blaring voices and quivering skin. I missed the fluid uniformity of the club, where there was shared purpose and scant conversation.

The foaming lager tasted as thick as soup. ‘To twenty-five years of Louisa, may she adorn our lives and this city for at least twenty-five more,’ I said, then took a deep gulp and nearly coughed. Louisa bent her head in feigned acknowledgement.

‘Thank you, Simon, too kind. So, are you going to tell us where the fuck you’ve been for the last two months?’

‘Work’s been shit. You know, just long hours. I work, I go home. Sometimes I go out, rarely really.’

‘You out last night?’ Dan asked

‘Yeah . . . there was a good night on at Fabric, so I went down for a few hours, nothing major.’

I couldn’t be sure, but I felt as though there was a second conversation happening beneath the surface. Maybe I was being paranoid. Dan and Louisa had a connection that excluded everyone else, even at school. In sixth form, Emma and I wondered if they were secretly having sex, but then Dan came out, and we realised we hadn’t understood at all. Whatever subtext they were sharing now, it wasn’t meant for me.

Louisa’s phone vibrated on the wet wooden table. When Emma’s name flashed up, I took another mouthful of lager.

‘Is Emma coming then?’ I said to no one in particular.

Louisa picked up her phone, ‘She’s ten minutes away. Let’s get another round in.’



Rand El Muhtadi

Rand El Muhtadi (she/her) was born in Montreal and raised in Jordan. She did her BA in English and Creative Writing at the University of Nottingham before studying for her master's. She is of Palestinian ethnicity, and her writing aims to empower Palestinian stories and shed light on the cause. Her anthology submission, *Changing Tides*, is an extract of a novel of the same name. Contact her by email at relmuhtadi24@gmail.com or by Twitter and Instagram [@randelmuhtadi](#)

Changing Tides

Chapter 1 – Simon, May 2005

The city of Jerusalem is not a quiet one. Jerusalemites weave in and out of alleys, surrounded by the aged walls of the Old Town and the bumpy pavement beneath their feet.

Kiosks and carts boasting different foods line the pavement. The air carries the smell of recently fried falafel; its garlic and spices act as sirens, tempting pedestrians into a pre-lunch snack. The scent of fresh sesame bread calls to mothers, guiding them to buy a few batches of the thick, fluffy dough for their households, and the whiff of smoked nuts, especially the almonds, wafts towards children and teenagers. The cart has them clambering over, getting a bag full of their satisfying taste. Fouad is one of them, firmly planting his feet to avoid falling out of the haphazard queue, if it can even be called that.

He wanted to get some for Adam; it was bound to be a stressful couple of hours for his older brother, and almonds and peanuts would cheer him up when he got home. Fouad already knew his mother was making them *halawet iljibn*. He momentarily got distracted by the sweetness of the pastry contrasted with the sourness of the candied lemon blossoms before being shaken back into focus as he was pushed forward.

Fouad turned to return home after the hurried purchase, clamping his fist around the brown paper bags securely. He passed through the back end of the souk, chuckling at the vendors yelling out the prices of their goods.

‘One kilo of *tormos* for ten pence! One kilo for ten pence!’

‘Half a kilo of *barazek* for ten pence! Ten pence for *barazek* right here!’

‘Pretty jewellery for the pretty ladies! Less than twenty pence! Get them right here, ladies, only twenty pence for a set of jewellery!’

Fouad was used to their garbled, exaggerated calls. He liked imitating them when he played “market” with his younger sister. Of course, he always took on his mother’s famous expression when he did, the pursed lips and sharp eyes.

He turned the corner to go upwards towards Qatamon, his neighbourhood, raising his hand to greet his neighbours. A football game took place ahead. There were stones stacked on top of each other, acting as goalposts. The dusty ball rolled towards him, and he gave it his best kick. He got a cheer in return as it bounced to one of the strikers, who scored. He would have joined them any other day, but

today was different, important. He turned the corner, walking alone on the empty street. Two-storied houses towered above him, each in its distinctive shape with circular terraces and balconies. Pillars preceded doorways; the space below was perfect for morning coffee or evening tea. Intricate metal railings surrounded the balconies, offering a view of the populated roads of the city. Fouad knew every family in the neighbouring houses and had visited them on a number of occasions, often reluctantly.

He paused to look at the view; a day hadn't passed where he wasn't amazed by it. Its rectangular buildings dotted the hills, showing off signs of age. The old stone's cracks were akin to a tree stump's rings. Its skyline framed the golden orb atop the blue mosque; orange rays of sunset bounced off the symmetrical tiles and lit up like a beacon to declare the evening prayer before the sonorous Athaan that came from the onyx mosque right next to it.

He finally reached his house—the family home that stood for generations. He passed through the metal fence, opening his arms for his ten-year-old sister Lulya, who abandoned her dolls on the entrance steps to greet him. Fouad hugged her and swayed her side to side, tightening his squeeze on her with every second. She thumped her tiny hands against his stomach, each soft hit punctuated by a protesting whine.

'Let go, Fouad! Please, let go!' she thrashed. Hiba, his oldest sibling, was drawn out by the noise, laughing at the scene.

'Fouad, you're going to suffocate her!' Hiba chastised. Being eighteen, Fouad worried she would outgrow their antics. She grabbed Lulya by the waist and started pulling, purposefully involving Lulya in a bizarre tug-of-war.

'No, Hiba!' Lulya cried out, her smile betraying her. 'Let me go, both of you! Or I'll call Immi.'

They ignored her and kept tugging her from side to side with playful strength, careful not to hurt her. Lulya took a deep breath.

'Y'amma! Come see what Fouad and Hiba are doing to me!'

They froze, widening their eyes at each other before letting go. Lulya smoothed her dress sleeves and turned to skip up the steps, calling out over her shoulder.

'I thought so.'

*

Fouad and his sisters sat on the red Persian rug, its white, black and blue patterns the unfortunate landing stage for the intense game of *Hand*, their favourite card

game. The three siblings glared at each other menacingly.

Abu Adam perched on the couch across from them, thumbing his case documents slower than usual. He rubbed his wrinkled forehead and shifted in his seat for the third time in five minutes.

'When will dinner be ready, Yaaba?' Lulya asked, tempted by the wafting smell of kubbeh, warak bzeit, and qalayeh. The frying oil from the kubbeh and the richness of the qalayeh drifted down the halls. He welcomed the smells most days, except Ramadan. That month truly tested their patience and discipline, for no one can resist Um Adam's food.

'When Adam gets home from his exam, habeebti,' Abu Adam said, petting her hair.

Fouad and Hiba glanced at each other impatiently, their card game a futile undertaking to try and curb their nerves. Adam had not come back yet. Today was his matriculation exam. He should have finished an hour ago but hadn't returned home. Fouad offered to wait for his brother until he finished, but Adam shook his head, insisting that Fouad go home to start on his homework.

Their fleeting concentration was interrupted by the front door's echo reverberating through the tiled house, followed by their mother berating them.

'Adam! That better not be you.'

Um Adam's coarse voice travelled down the hallway. 'It's bad enough you're late, but you think you can enter your father's house as if it's your own? Wait until he finds you!'

Adam's long steps sped up, muffled by the carpets in the corridor leading to the living room. His short breaths reached their ears as Abu Adam swiftly set aside the documents and rose from his seat.

Adam came into view. His tie was loose, his laces were untied, and his backpack slipped down his shoulders to his arms. His face was red, his features blazing as sweat collected at his neck. His wide eyes flitted around the cream room, barely lingering on anything for longer than a second.

Until they lingered on Fouad.

Adam knelt on the carpet, his knees sliding the cards around, ignoring Lulya's faint complaint and hugged Fouad tightly.

'Alhamdulillah. Thank God you weren't there. God protected you,' he kept repeating.

Fouad, startled by the strong squeeze, wound his arms around Adam's bent back.

'Adam, is everything okay?' he asked, looking up at his father in confusion as his mother came into the room. The scolding that waited on her lips faded as she

gazed upon her sons.

Fouad felt a head shake against his shoulder. He held Adam closer. The rustling of the trees from the open window was the only thing that dared to make a sound.

When Adam lifted his head, everyone's chest heaved with a collective breath.

'The head . . .' he closed his eyes, steeling himself. 'The British headquarters were bombed just as I finished.'

The room stilled. Even the desert air stopped flowing in. Their house, always filled with noise, laughter and play, froze, like someone had pressed pause on their life. Fouad's pulse kept beating throughout his muscles, allowing his mind to rest from the whirlwind within. A bomb, the thing he only heard about on the *wireless, here?*

'The hotel?' Abu Adam asked finally.

Adam nodded, still wearing his backpack.

Fouad blinked.

'Near our school?' he put his hands on Adam's shoulders and searched his brown eyes. Their usual brightness was dimmed as if someone turned off their light switch.

The worry in the room increased by a hundredfold. The thick silence enveloped Fouad as tightly as Adam's embrace did.

Hiba sat Lulya on her lap and tucked her face against the side of her head. Her tall frame twisted away from everyone. Abu Adam sat clumsily, not minding the wrinkling protests of his papers, his face as stony as the house they lived in. He pulled Adam into another hug.

'Hamdulilah ala il salameh... salamtak. Allah protected you.' Fouad felt his tears seep into his eyes, clouding his vision. Thank God Hiba and Lulya's school was on the other side of the city. Alhamulilah ya Rab, thank you for saving him. He peered at Hiba's blurry figure. She had her face pressed to the top of Lulya's head. She breathed shakily while her hands trembled as they stroked Lulya's hair. The utterances of 'It's okay, everything will be fine' seemed to be for her and Lulya's benefit.

How could this happen? They didn't live in a dangerous city. He started walking to school at eleven years old with no fear, for crying out loud. *Why* would it happen? The violence usually took place in the Bedouin villages far away from the city—at least, that's what his father had said. Everyone was peaceful here; their community stood strong against all the colonisations. If there were any feuds between families, they were never publicised, and even if they were, no one would ever bomb a building for the sake of violence. Abu Adam mentioned

that when the British entered, everyone stayed united despite the authority that wished to keep them divided—regardless of their religion, family or social class. The people of Jerusalem treated each other with civility. Their city expected it. The Aqsa Mosque, The Church of Sepulchre and The Wailing Wall faced each other in the Old Town.

What does this mean? What's going to happen to us? What are we going to do if this bomb leads to something more? Fouad numbly thought. The school was their haven, a place where they could act however they wanted, where they could say whatever they wanted to their friends, where they didn't have to think twice about propriety and were free to be the irresponsible teenagers they were supposed to be. *What if that goes away?* He swatted the thought away. The idea of his parents teaching him was not a fun one.

Fouad pulled back, fixing his eyes on Adam. Staring at his brother's ink-black neat hair, his laughter lines, his ears that stuck out, his moles, his one lopsided tooth that was the first to peer out when he smiled, Fouad kept his eyes open, refusing to blink. If Adam had been in a slightly different place, Fouad might never have seen him again. He might never have been able to poke fun at his brother again or heard his teasing jabs, loud sneezes, and baritone laughs or witnessed his willingness to drop everything to play with Lulya.

Um Adam stepped forward, removed Adam's backpack, and slipped the tie from his neck. She lifted him by the elbows, turned him towards her and cradled his hunched back. Her voice was the gentlest Fouad had heard since Lulya was born.

'I'm so sorry, habeebi, so sorry.'

Chapter 2

The planned celebratory dinner was anything but. The gas stove's incessant 'tick, tick, tick' filled the kitchen's silence. The family's heads were bowed, each pair of eyes fixed on the meal in front of them. The forks' tines and the knives' edges scraped and scratched against the pristine white plates, the only movement anyone made.

'Thank you for the meal, Y'amma,' Lulya said.

Fouad looked down at his sister next to him and patted her hair. He saw his mother's half-smile. At least she knew her intense effort was appreciated. His father sat quietly on his other side. Seeing Abu Adam silent was a common sight, what with him being a judge. It meant that he was thinking, deducing, trying to find the answer to the problem he had. Normally, Fouad found it comforting to

sit with his father in silence, that they could enjoy each other's company without needing to talk. But today, his silence was resonant, reverberating against the kitchen walls. This was not a problem that would be solved easily.

Um Adam had inadvertently chosen their comfort foods. The qalayah eased Fouad's heart as he swallowed. His heart lost some of the weight it had carried with Adam's revelation. The warak bzeit took him back to Eid, a time of happiness, joy, and presents. He never imagined eating it in a morose time; it was unthinkable. Then again, he thought the same about the bomb and yet, both had happened. He wanted to scream until all the confusion was gone, until his brain's fog cleared up, or he could go back to this morning, afternoon, or a time when he didn't know. He looked up. Adam wasn't faring much better. He saw Adam opening his mouth and closing it every few seconds like it was being held by seams—seams that didn't allow him to lose control, no matter how much he wanted to.

'Sallem idaiki Y'amma, it was delicious,' Adam put down his cutlery, 'May I be excused, Yaaba?'

'Adam, it's not right to get up while everyone's eating,' Um Adam protested, but Abu Adam nodded. Adam moved quickly, dodging his mother's look. He paused by the doorway, his back to them, ignoring his Um Adam's tsk.

'Good night.'

He stayed in his and Fouad's shared room for the rest of the evening.

*

'How are we supposed to go on like this?' Adam's soft voice broke through Fouad's thoughts. Fouad stared at the beige ceiling, holding his brown blanket tightly. Their room, with wooden furniture and wool blankets, was a safe space where they could unleash everything the seams wanted to trap.

Fouad took a deep breath. 'I don't know. I guess we . . . keep going?'

Adam rolled over to look at Fouad, his bedsheets rumpling with his movements. 'How? How do we keep going if we can barely survive going to school?'

Fouad leaned back on his elbows, giving Adam a tired look through the darkness.

'Stop talking like that. Like you said earlier about me, God protected you. He'll keep on protecting you.'

'Yes, of course. But it doesn't mean that bad things won't happen.'

'Bad things can happen, but we get through them. I mean, you did.'

Adam exhaled. 'Maybe, Fouad, but I ran the hardest I ever did today. I don't want to have to do that every day.'

Fouad lay back down against his pillow.

'Maybe you won't have to. There's only one British headquarters, you know?' *Can we please stop talking about this?*

'You didn't hear Abbouy, did you?' his attention was piqued, and he turned his head to look at the other bed.

'What are you talking about? Abbouy didn't say a word all day.'

'If you didn't hear it, then I probably shouldn't say anything . . . apparently, there are new groups rising.'

'So?'

'So they're not going to stop. They will never stop. We're going to have more days like this.' *Ya, Rab, make him stop.*

He forced his words out as if a puppeteer had connected a thread to his mouth. 'Maybe, but next time it might not be so close.' Fouad kept his voice controlled, trying not to let his fear overtake his tone's calmness.

'How are you so sure, Fouad?' Adam's temper grew. 'How do you know that it won't? How do you know that next time it won't be our friends, or our family or you?' *My God, do you ever read the room? I need you to stop talking like this.*

Fouad ran his fingers over his knuckles, 'I don't know, Adam. Wallah, I don't, but all I know is that it isn't going to get better if you keep talking about it.'

They lay quietly in their twin beds, each attempting to make sense of their muddled thoughts.

'Sorry, Adam. I didn't mean that. How're you doing?'

'Fantastic.'

'Shut up,' Adam's sarcasm always made itself known during the worst times, 'Seriously though?'

'I hated it, Fouad. I hated not knowing . . .' Adam's voice wobbled despite his expressionless face.

Fouad turned his head to gaze upon the foot of his bed. The streetlights shone through the window, casting aligned shadows on his window's bars. He forced himself to count each of them, hoping to stop each 'what could have' from settling in the nooks of his mind.

Adam noticed his silence.

'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that,' he said ashamedly.

'Nothing to be sorry about,' Fouad exhaled softly, resigned to the fact that he wouldn't get any sleep tonight.

Adam appeared to have reached the same conclusion, 'Fouad?'

'Yeah?'

'Do you want to play War?'

'... Yeah, why not? My bed or yours?'

He heard rustling from the other side of the room.

'Yours, there's more light on your bed.'

'Grab the decks on your way.'

'Fouad, they're on your nightstand.'

'Don't see your point. It's all the way on the other side.'

'So lazy,' Adam retrieved the cards. 'You're lucky Immi can't hear you.'

Fouad sat up. 'Good thing she's not here then.'

Adam sprawled across from him, shuffling the cards. 'For what it's worth,' Fouad ventured, 'I'm worried too, but ... it'll get better, slowly, but we'll get there.'



Shili Guo

Shili Guo is a Chinese woman who will try her best to keep writing in English. Her anthology submission, *The Lantern Wish*, is an extract from a novel of the same name. Contact her by email at guo_shili@126.com

The Lantern Wish

In a palace at the bottom of a lake, an Alorian girl lived with her parents and grandparents—the king and queen of the lake kingdom, Alora. They were respectable, so they lived in a crystal palace with a vast courtyard, but there was nothing exquisite in the garden, only several good-looking barrels piled in the corner, small patches of field growing common crops, vegetables, fruits, flowers, herbs and spices, a swing set, and a small round table by the entrance to the front wing. They had no servant.

Alora sat in the middle of a dense jungle covering the lake floor. The Alorians believed every dead person would become a seed in the jungle, sprout and grow up into a tree that watched and guarded them, and that every tree death heralded the arrival of a new Alorian life. They never chopped down any live trees. The lake was sealed by a solid ice layer that warded off the dangers from the outside world and let light through, nourishing the jungle.

The little girl, Nina, would turn twelve years old soon. *Twelve, the miraculous twelve!* She was sitting on a chair by a cradle in her grandparents' living room, wondering what awaited her. Her mother found her best friend when she was twelve, but Nina didn't imagine the same would happen to her. She was afraid of talking to people other than her family and her mother's best friend.

In the middle of the night, Nina and her mother sneaked out of their palace again. Nobody, except her father, Archie, knew, but he never joined them. He stayed at home to cover their disappearance if someone visited them. 'I don't want to see my rival in love so much anyway,' he teased Lydia half-jokingly. Lydia just laughed at him being silly. Lately, he had a more important thing to do: watch over their expectant new child. Even Lydia became ever more reluctant to sneak out, but she didn't want to disappoint Nina.

They swam upwards and landed on the jungle canopies. Lydia held the pendant of her necklace, a small conch, near her lips and whispered. A long narrow passage of ice stairs winding upwards through the ice layer appeared in front of them before she could stop speaking. They ascended the passage step by step, drawing nearer to the ice surface, relieving water from head to toe, and stepping upon the surface. The air, light and lovely, tickled every inch of their skin. Breathing rhythmically through their noses, they walked towards a tall oak tree where Yabi perched, waiting for them. Their long curly hair mixed with their

long ribbon-like antennae, and their dresses flowed freely in the breeze, even though they had just come out from the water.

Yabi was an elf dwelling in a hollow high on an oak tree. He was adorable in many ways. He looked like a little ball without hands, feet, or wings, but he could fly. In Nina's heart, he was the key to opening the door to the upper world and her mother's best friend. He should be more than this. He was a hero, in her mother's heart at least.

They climbed the tree and sat side by side with their feet dangling on a lower bough. Nina held Yabi in her arms, looking at the village silhouetted against the moonlight. Nina couldn't see the villagers now, although they often showed up and smiled at her in her dreams. Since her debut at three in front of Yabi, Nina kept pestering her mother for a break from the sealed world now and then. Thanks to her mother, father and Yabi, nothing hindered her short rendezvous with the upper world.

The lake kingdom hadn't changed much, according to Nina, aside from several new houses designed by either her mother or father, all of which more or less resembled those in the village. She couldn't overlook the village beyond the lake through short evening glimpses. The ice on the lake had changed so much in all these years, and the village grew bigger, stretching out on the surrounding mountainside with rows of houses. The lake's surface looked like a silver land, an indispensable extended part of the village. She sometimes wondered if the villagers had ever realised there was a lake underneath.

During evenings like this, Nina listened attentively. Yabi, her mother, trees, birds, the breeze, and everything that made sounds were telling their own stories. She could understand some, but not all of them.

Some stories were new.

Half a year ago, a spiral ice slope like a giant snail shell turned up in the centre of the white land, so long that it made Yabi fall asleep while watching a child slide from the starting point to the end. Nina tried it and loved it.

One year ago, the villagers set up large parasols to block scorching sunshine and put lounge chairs under them by the border of the ice land. Yabi envied those who lay on and enjoyed the cool luxury of the chairs. He said it must be like lying on a cloud.

One and half years ago, the villagers began to slide in shoes fixed on shoe-size wagons as if they were flying.

Two years ago, the villagers started to bury vegetables in the ice and dug them out a few months later.

Some stories were old.

Long ago, the lake, encircled by high mountains, was unfrozen and forgotten by the world. The Alorian ancestors used to live in the lake kingdom, and after their first surfacing adventure on the lake, they realised they could breathe through their noses out of the water and that the long antennae on their heads were for the water. At the east end of the lake was a vast flat wood, which was uncovered by water. Soon, they had their first short walk in the woods, which was lighter, steadier and much faster than in the water.

As time passed, generations became aware of more enchanting things on the land. They heard sounds differently, including their own voices, which were crispier and more ethereal than in the water. When the land was covered by a thick and soft yellow leaf blanket, they trod on it, trailing a soothing musical tone of rustle. They discovered new secrets about themselves. Their skin could generate small beads of water drops when the heat made them uncomfortable. They watched the sun rise and sink behind the mountains, dying the sky yellow and red, gilding the mountains and the lake with light. The moon waxed and waned in a cycle all year round. They named water drops that fell from the sky “rain” and the flimsy ice crystal flowers that fell quietly and sacredly during cloudy, chilly days “snow”.

They began looking for dead trees in the mountains and chopped them down with shell axes to build houses. At the same time, they learned that they couldn't go too high or too deep into the mountains because they felt their hearts and lungs would explode if they went up too much. If they couldn't find enough woods in the mountains, they turned to the lake jungle. It was much easier to lift wood in the water anyway. They cultivated lake plants on the land to feed themselves. They built schools, clinics, and bars, without which the Alorian couldn't be Alorian. What were the Alorian most proud of? Cultivating brilliant minds that made the best medicine and wine.

They became born and bred in a paradise land village, but their bond with water could never be severed. Their embryos, looking like the most precious pearls, could only develop and grow into babies in the water. And occasionally, they travelled to the under-lake world to look for woods or other resources, learn, or purely for leisure.

Some stories were not that new nor that old. And all of them seemed to be a part of it, big or small.

When her mother was around Nina's age, the Alorian were still living in the land village. She enjoyed the companionship of others, but not as much as the

time she spent alone in a quiet place. She had two secret places. One was the roof of the abandoned lake palace. She came here a lot before finding a second place that was more refreshing and drier—a tree bough someway up the ridge of the mountains surrounding the village.

Time passed like rain droplets on leaves, forming one after one at long intervals in the beginning, then streaming rapidly, then falling one after one at intervals longer and longer towards the end. Time in the village always went by like the last few droplets, in an endless slumberous monotone. Lydia felt the same in her secret place but freer.

It was a hot summer afternoon. The air carried the heat, and the lake's vapour clung to Lydia's body like a sticky blanket. She dived into the mountain to escape the heat. She lay down on a bough that was not so high and took long and deep breaths of the thin cool air before closing her eyes and falling asleep.

A big bang woke her up. She looked around. It was darker than usual. The sky was overloaded with clouds. She tried to locate where the bang came from. The trunk of a tree nearby was split into two by . . . A bolt? Something blue and round was shivering and glittering on the ground near the split tree.

She jumped off the bough and sprinted to the blue thing. It was a ball of water with a baby face. It almost fainted, its body fluctuating. She touched it with her finger timidly. Lydia felt a tremor across her body, and she straightened up immediately. Fortunately, she didn't get hurt.

The blue ball talked before Lydia bent down to take another look at him. He thanked Lydia in a faint voice.

'You can talk?' Lydia's face lit up. She sat down by him.

Even though he hadn't fully recovered his breath, he replied, 'Yes.'

Lydia helped lift him with his back against a tree, unsure if he was sitting or standing.

'What's your name?' She asked.

'Yabi . . . what's yours?'

'Lydia.'

'Lucky to meet you, Lydia,' Yabi told Lydia, flying to the bough where Lydia had laid. 'I feel fine now.'

'You can fly?' Lydia said, her eyes full of amazement and admiration. 'What else can you do?'

'More than you could come up with,' Yabi beamed mysteriously.

Lydia climbed the tree and lay down on the bough again. Yabi perched on the bough by her head.

'So where are you living?' Lydia asked.

'I can't tell you.'

'Then what brought you here?'

'Secret.'

Lydia shut her mouth and eyes. The silence disturbed Yabi. After a long pause, he said, 'I live in a hollow on a tall tree by the lake. I just come here to escape the heat.'

Lydia smiled and opened her eyes. 'And be struck by a bolt.'

Yabi giggled.

'That was terrifying. You'd better keep yourself from thunder and lightning.'

Lydia said sternly.

'It's no big deal if it's raining, as the thing can flow from my body to the rain, but it is strange today. There is lightning but no rain.' Yabi said slowly.

They looked up into the sky. The clouds had floated away.

'How old are you, Yabi?'

'Forgotten.'

Lydia shut her mouth and eyes again. The silence didn't make Yabi uneasy this time. He closed his eyes, too and fell asleep.

It was getting darker, and Lydia thought she should leave now.

'Can I visit you sometime?' Lydia asked.

'As long as you can find me.' Wearing his same mysterious smile, Yabi shook his watery body, waving goodbye.

'See you soon.' Lydia waved her hand and ran down towards the village.

Lydia sneaked out after her parents went to bed. She was sure Yabi was living on the other side of the lake, far from the village. She dived into the lake, landed on the jungle canopies, hopped across the lake and swam ashore.

Hearing someone calling his name, Yabi flew out of his home. Lydia stood in the light emitted by the luminescent grasses in her hand against the darkness and looked up for him. She saw him and waved. Since then, Lydia visited Yabi once a week at night. They also made appointments for daylight meetings in the mountain. She shared with him all the stuff she'd gone through, heard of, or witnessed. Yabi talked a little.

Nothing else special happened until she began to help people design their houses. She became closer to Archie, a house designer, and found him a nice, delightful, and reliable chap. They fell in love.

A simple wedding was held on the lake. Lydia was dressed in a silver sequin maxi gown with a long tail. Her long brown curly hair, along with her crimson antennae, was braided backwards. A tiara sat perfectly above her forehead. Archie was wearing a white woven tunic. Each paddled a boat from the opposite side,

converging in the lake's centre. They remained seated, neither stepping into the other's boat. They exchanged rings, said vows, and paddled the boats hand in hand, side by side, to the same destination. They stepped on the bank, welcomed by two flower girls carrying baskets of petal flowers and saw petals carpeting the way to a new house. People were standing at two sides of the way, cheering and applauding with their best wishes. Lydia and Archie's parents were waiting at the gate of the house, smiling with bright eyes.

Yabi perched high on the tree, watching the ceremony, ecstasy welling up in his round body. It was early winter, cold at night. People went to bed early, but Yabi was too excited to go to bed. He swirled around his home, lost in humming and dancing. Suddenly, he saw hundreds of flickering dots lingering on the mountains near the village, which shocked him like a bolt striking him again. He flew over the village and got a closer picture.

Torches? Intruders?

Yabi flew to Lydia's house as fast as he could. 'Lydia, wake up,' he yelled, 'Lydia, danger!'

A window was lighted.

Lydia and Archie got up and quickly dressed. A violet pearl fell and rolled on the floor. Archie picked up the pearl quickly and held it in his palm tenderly, 'We are having a baby.'

Lydia leaned her head on Archie's shoulder and couldn't remove her eyes from the pearl. Another call from Yabi grabbed their attention. Lydia rushed to open the gate, and Archie followed beside her.

'Who is it?' Archie asked, staring in bewilderment at the talking ball.

'I'll explain to you later. Look, over there.'

Archie looked in the direction Lydia pointed, 'Oh, it cannot be.'

'I never expected them to cross the mountains,' Lydia cried.

Archie held Lydia's shoulder firmly and said calmly, 'At least we've still got some time.'

Lydia nodded her head and calmed down. She asked Yabi to return home. She didn't want to involve him in any danger. She and Archie started to go over the village door by door, briefing people on the danger and asking them to run to the lake. More and more people joined them to warn the neighbourhood. Some people spent the last moment gathering luminescent grasses from their gardens to light up the way back to Alora.

Lydia's family came up from the rear. The flickering dots were scattering halfway down the mountain now, and the waning moon had just risen over the mountain. Lydia saw Yabi fly over. She persuaded her father to leave with her

mother before they saw Yabi. She and Archie would catch up with them in a minute.

Yabi carried a conch in his mouth and dropped it in Lydia's palm.

'Keep it. Talk to me about it. I will open a door for you to get out.'

Lydia didn't quite understand, but she didn't bother him with more questions. It was typical of him—the mysterious being that she first met. She thanked him for the gift and the message and told Yabi that she and Archie would have a baby that she hoped Yabi could meet soon.

'So the bad day is not that bad then,' Yabi said.

Being sure all the Alorian were far from the surface, Yabi closed his eyes and activated his supernatural powers. The lake was sealed by an unfathomable layer of ice, like having grown in an ever-lasting ice age.

The Alorian slowed to a pace and hung still in the water, listening attentively to the sound coming from above. It was like millions of ice crystal grains rustling against each other. They watched the top layer of water gradually turn into an unbreakable solid block in the light of luminescent grasses. They had never been so mute or sad. Perhaps, it was meant to be. Perhaps, it was best for them. It was time for them to say goodbye to their homeland. They patted each other on the shoulders without uttering a word, then turned around and continued walking. Lydia looked at the conch in her hand and held it more tightly.



Muna Nassir

Muna Nassir is an Eritrean writer and translator currently living in South Manchester. She has a BA in English Literature from the University of London. Her translation of the short story *The Trumpeter* has been published online in *Berfrois*. Her anthology submission, *My Name is Immaterial*, is an extract from her novel of the same name, which deals with themes of identity, exile, and displacement trauma. Contact her by email at munan725@gmail.com or through Twitter [@Mu_Na_Sir](https://twitter.com/Mu_Na_Sir)

My Name is Immaterial

Prologue
Bournemouth, 2022

The tide is out. I walk towards the sea. Time does not just flow; it erodes. Even if it slows down to a mere trickle, it chips off parts and pieces of the self that one would have believed were secured, out of reach. Ten? Twelve? Fifteen years? I have lost count. A stray kite with a picture of a bright yellow butterfly hovers above. Seagulls flap their wings to the accompaniment of their own cries. I feel the cold, wet sand under my bare feet. Further out on the horizon, the stretch of water fades towards timelessness and eternity.

Like a little child, my sense of self seems to have crawled into a dark, inaccessible part of me. Sometimes I imagine her sitting in a corner with her arms enfolding her knees, refusing to come out. In her place, there is an emptiness, a black hole. It seems this part is forever shut away, and I remain on the outside searching for a handle, a latch, a knob, anything that would help me unlock.

I continue my walk towards the sea. A grey heron perched on a small rock flaps its wet wings. It flies off into the horizon, disappearing into the wide expanse of the seaside sky.

Having reached the sea, I dip my feet in. The gentle waves crash against my legs, the foam splintering and dispersing. I wade through. I am knee-deep in the water. I close my eyes. Arms stretched out, flailing. The billowing smoke of the capsizing boat. Screams. Frantic splashes. Some huddle together to stay afloat, precipitating their end. A young mother instinctively delivers long before her baby is due, hoping the infant will somehow survive. I open my eyes; the sea is quiet. I can never look at a sea or hear the sound of waves without seeing the bodies or hearing the screams.

The sun has sunk into the horizon, painting the sky with shades of pink and orange. I plunge into the water. For a split second, land, sky, and sea compound into a single shapeless mass.

Chapter One

December 2007, Asmara

As Mira left the house, she was met with a medley of laughter and chatter. All the neighbourhood children, as usual, were outside. The boys were playing football on the tarmac road, and the girls—behind the makeshift goalposts marked by two stones—were playing piggy in the middle. Except, in this version, there was not one but several piggies.

Mira drew the lapels of her black denim jacket close together and pulled the grey scarf over her head. She had spent a good part of the afternoon at the hairdresser to have her frizzy hair straightened, and she didn't want the December cold of the highlands to undo her labours. A white Toyota lazily honked, coming to a slow stop. The children ran to the pavement to let the car pass before rushing back to the road. Soon, the mothers would come out, calling out the children's names. Soon, it would be dinner time, and whole families would huddle along a large plate, tucking into the vegetables or meat stew heaped on top of the injera.

Mira checked her watch. She still had about half an hour before the agreed time with Aman, a computer geek she had met in an online chatroom at the beginning of the year. At twenty-two, he had just finished his English degree at the University of Asmara. How he juggled the two passions, she could never understand. Yet it was their shared love for books and poetry, not computers, that had kept her chatting with him in Internet cafés late into the afternoons. She looked at her impatient feet in grey ballet flats—hardly the best walking shoes. Was she trying to look beautiful for him? She shook off the thought, almost embarrassed. It was the only day of the week she could have the house to herself. And she knew quite well that even if she were going on one of her solitary walks, she would still have had her hair done.

As Mira crossed the road to the next block of villas, she could hear the sound of the children playing in the distance. The deep pink bougainvilleas on the hedged fences and the purple jacarandas tempted her. Torn between plucking the flowers and leaving them untouched, Mira stood still, breathing in their scent and the surrounding peace. She remembered the look in Aman's eyes the last time they met a week ago. A lingering look that seemed to cut through her, touching her depths, unleashing her unfamiliar yearnings.

Mira reached the top of the steep road that led to the presidential palace. She was meeting with Aman outside an Internet café. She still had about ten minutes. The slope allowed her a generous view of the sunset. On some evenings, the sun

would dive headlong into the horizon, reminding her of endings and the death of that particular day. On this evening, however, the sun was taking its time to set. It would hide behind a cloud, and the moment she would begin to think it gone, it would peep out again. She felt as if she was watching someone die. She continued to watch until the last traces of the sun disappeared into the horizon.

The memory of the day her father died nearly three years ago floated into Mira's mind. No one needed to tell her; she had known the moment she saw her mother's eyes. She had sensed her father's death in the stillness of her mother's crushed soul. Overcome with an instinctive urge to flee, Mira sprinted to the door. She had wanted to run away as though wishing to face the inevitable, alone, on her own terms. The firm arms of a neighbour had grabbed onto her, making it impossible for her to flee.

Mira remembered her walks with her father as a little girl. Every year on the first day of May, women would gather in groups on the pavements of the city's roads and supplicate Mother Mary. One such year, as Mira and her father reached a woman bowing on the pavement, he had put his arm on her shoulder. They waited until the woman had finished praying.

'Why did we stop?' Mira had asked, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

'You know you don't pass before a person bowing or prostrating in prayer.'

'Even if they are not Muslims?'

'Yes, even if they are not Muslims. When someone's good here, Mira,' her father had said, leaning towards her and pointing at her heart, 'deep down inside here, their souls go to a place where there are no names or labels.'

'What is a soul Baba?'

'The part of you that dreams when you fall asleep.'

The call for prayer from the nearby mosque brought her back from her reverie. It being a Thursday, her mother and her younger sister Yasmina, would be at her grandparents' house. Mira's mother had asked her for the third Thursday in a row if she would like to come with them. Mira's reply all three times had been the same, 'No, mama, I would rather go for a walk'. She hated telling her mother a half-truth, a lie, but how could Mira tell her that she was going for a walk with a man she had met online? People walked in and out of the Internet café. Mira checked the time again. Her mother and Yas would be drinking coffee with her grandmother after a recital of *al-fatihah* for the dead. It was believed that on Thursdays, the spirits of the dead ancestors would stand on the threshold in the hope their loved ones would remember and make prayers for them. After hearing this, Mira always wanted to ask why Thursdays and how did the dead keep hope

alive, but she never asked for fear that her curiosity would be perceived as a lack of respect. Every time Mira found herself biting her tongue out of fear, her heart constricted, and a knot formed in her stomach.

She stood outside the Internet café looking up at the constellations of stars that were starting to wink, lighting up. Asmara sitting over two thousand metres above sea level made her feel close to the sky. She could trace the three clustered stars of Orion's belt and his two feet wide apart.

'I am sorry, I am a little late, Mira,' Aman said with a smile as he approached her, then kissed her on the cheeks. Tall with short hair and big eyes, he was wearing a navy-blue jacket and jeans of the same colour. Even though this was only the third time they had met in person, they had spent almost every day talking online and on the phone. To Mira, it seemed as if she had known him all her life.

'No, you're fine. You don't look yourself. Are you okay?'

'Yeah, I'm okay. Let's find somewhere to sit.' His red eyes did very little to convince her.

The eucalyptus trees that lined both sides of the road swished, some still shedding their dried leaves. The lamp posts and the waning moon lit their path. Mira felt no fear of being seen walking with Aman in the dark. The streets were deserted in any case, and she knew her family would still be gathered at her grandparents'. They soon reached the cascade stairway behind the presidential palace. Mira felt Aman's hand slide into hers. Surprised, she held his warm hand tight. They took a left turn and continued to walk. They walked past a view of mosques, the cathedral, orthodox churches, a Protestant church, the presidential palace and a view of about a quarter of the city lit up. They walked towards the little slope on top of which sat the university.

Aman led the way as they went up the wide perron that formed a half circle around the now-defunct University of Asmara entrance. A year after the turn of the millennium, student protests erupted in the wake of a crackdown on dissident government officials. Young writers and journalists behind the nation's budding private newspapers were sent to prison. Most of them were former university students in their early twenties, working from offices set up in family shops, homes, and even Internet cafés. In the few years that the dozen or so newspapers circulated, they had grown in their readership and influence like small ripples widening into a mighty gyre. Young voices snatched and silenced, never to be heard again. If she closed her eyes, Mira could almost hear the laughter of ghosts in the eerie silence surrounding them. They walked the corridors of the open-air quadrangle. Stopping and standing by a tall column, Mira felt her smallness. She

could imagine the thousands of young men and women, full of hope, who must have sat there day in and day out. Aman and Mira sat on a bench looking at the starlit sky.

‘I can’t believe they’ve killed Benazir Bhutto.’

‘I know. I thought of you when I saw the news. Is this why your eyes are red?’ Mira remembered how Aman was elated when Bhutto returned to Pakistan in October, ending her decade-long exile.

‘No, no. I’ve run out of my artificial tears. And the last batch my uncle sent me from the US hasn’t arrived yet. I can’t cry even if I wanted to.’ At this, they both smiled.

‘Here, I have brought you something.’ He took out a used book from his backpack—*Poems for the Millennium*.

Mira opened the first page. She read out loud, ‘For Mira, just to get you through the dreaded month of hunger. Lose thyself. Aman.’

‘You know, Ramadan ended two months ago, and I wouldn’t call it dreaded at all. I actually enjoy the fasting.’

‘I’ve been meaning to give this to you for months, but you’ve been putting off the pleasure of meeting with me in person.’ He spoke with a smile, affecting a smug tone.

‘You’re the first person I’ve met in my life who openly declares they don’t believe in God. I have my questions, but I’d be too scared to voice them.’ Mira realised this was what she liked most about being with Aman. He made everything seem okay. The knowledge that with him, she was safe to have questions. The knowledge that she could say whatever came to her mind, and he would still look at her with that loving look. She felt her heart expand, and if she closed her eyes, she could almost imagine the two of them alone, standing in an open expanse, holding hands.

‘More scared than sleeping in the dark with the lights off?’ Aman joked. She had confided in him her fear of the dark.

‘I am sure you, too, have your own fears,’ Mira smiled.

‘True.’

Mira looked around. The year she finished high school was the year the government shut the university down. Now inside its walls, she found herself wanting to mourn what never transpired. She consoled herself with what she had—the kids she tutored, her books, and the public libraries.

Mira flipped through the first pages and read a random Walt Whitman quote, ‘As humanity is one under its amazing diversities, language is one under its.’ She flipped some more pages and read another one by Charles Baudelaire, ‘When I

have aroused universal horror and disgust, I shall have conquered solitude.' She then noticed the public library stamp blotched out in blank ink. 'Wait a minute here, where did you get this from?'

'It is a long story.'

'It'd be immoral to read this if it belongs in the library,' she said with a smile.

'It'd be immoral not to read this, trust me.'

She held his gaze unblinkingly.

'I got it from the flea market.'

'Thank you.' She craned forward to kiss him on the cheek.

'And what are you reading these days?' Mira asked.

'The Perfumed Garden.'

'Is it Sufi poetry?' Mira asked.

'Far from it,' he laughed, 'it is teaching me all the ways we could enjoy each other. Can I kiss you? Indulge me, please,' he asked, bringing his palms together in a comic way.

Mira could almost hear her heart drum. She could feel the fear rising from the pit of her stomach. She banished all thoughts from her mind willing herself to stay in the moment. 'I've never kissed anyone,' Mira whispered.

'You would thank me for it, I promise.' He smiled at her, making Mira want him even more. His hands reached down to hers, their fingers interlaced. The touch triggered feelings she could not quite name. They kissed slowly at first, lingering. Then with more hunger. Mira was surprised by the bitter taste of his cigarette in her mouth. She kept her eyes closed. She could feel her soul expand beyond her body, merging with his.

They kissed again. Mira placed her hands on his neck and found herself pressing his face to hers. They both closed their eyes as they kissed and to Mira, it all felt right. It felt right for a girl like her to want him, to kiss him even if only in the dark, and to share these moments with him.

A loud thud on the column came from behind them. Both Mira and Aman jumped. Three military police officers appeared wearing uniforms and carrying rifles. With the caps covering half their faces, blinded by fear and the darkness, Mira struggled to see their eyes.

'What are you two doing here?' Neither Mira nor Aman could answer the question.

'Hand in your IDs.'

It took Mira a moment before she could reach into her purse and give him her identification card. She didn't even want to begin to think about what would happen if the MPs took them away.

The shortest of the three MPs snatched the ID from Mira and handed it to the MP standing next to him without moving his gaze away from her, who quickly scanned the front and the back before returning it to her. Mira thought of her mother and fought back the tears. And Aman? Will they take him? Did he have his papers with him?

'And you?' the other MP who was standing asked Aman in a gentler voice, avoiding eye contact, perhaps ashamed of what he was tasked to do. Aman took his wallet out of his backpack with composure and gave him his university student ID, which still had some months left.

'Get out of here,' the shortest of the three MPs barked.

Both Mira and Aman picked up their bags and the book. They could feel the eyes of the MPs behind them as they went down the steps of the perron by the entrance. The moment they walked out of the front iron gates, they took a right turn. Aman hugged Mira, who broke into a sob.

'What if they had taken us with them?' Mira sniffled.

'I am sorry. I am so sorry. It is my fault.'

'No, it's not. It is not our fault. It's not our fault that we're forced to prove that we've got a right to be here.'



George Stephenson

George Stephenson is interested in writing queer stories that he has never seen told in the hope that others may read and experience what he always wished he could. George writes stories fraught with anxiety and an uncertain sense of identity and about the relationships built and broken by these feelings. His anthology submission, *Summer Rain, Winter Sun*, is an extract from his novel of the same name. Contact him by email at georgestephenson03@gmail.com

Summer Rain, Winter Sun

Chapter One

Callum and Leo were silent on the flight from Manchester to Crete. Callum was scrolling through his curated playlists on Spotify, though more for the sake of organisation, as he was actually listening to a podcast on the Vietnam War—part of his ongoing and determined mission to educate himself. Leo, who had the window seat, alternated between reading his book and staring at the clouds beyond the glass. Several times, Callum glanced at the book gripped in Leo's hand, its spine bending further back and threatening to break. An hour into their journey, Leo was on page seventy-three. Three and a half hours in, he had just turned to page eighty. The book had scarcely left his hand. Callum thought of how Leo had seemed frozen in time for months now, perhaps longer, and he had failed to notice.

They had been through months full of sit-down conversations, stand-up arguments, suggestions of counselling and some regretful door-slamming. Callum had felt like a spectator to his own life as he watched the man he loved fade into a man he did not know how to talk to. Leo had been the most talkative sod he had ever met. Callum did not see himself as a quiet man, but when Leo started to shut down, he was given the daunting task of talking for two people. Living for two people. Each morning before work, he alternated between the roles of supportive boyfriend and motivational speaker until Leo lost his job. Callum's own job as a store supervisor at the local Tesco became a refuge from their one-bedroom flat until he found himself zoning out for what seemed like hours at a time, ignoring colleagues and customers alike, resulting in a talk in the manager's office. Callum had expected a bollocking—the manager was new, and he was nobody's fool—so when a soft 'Is everything okay, mate?' came instead, Callum had wanted to cry.

Coming home to find Leo dozing on the sofa, with a bottle of Diazepam sitting on the table in front of him, had made Callum cry several times, in fact. Leo had been off the Diazepam for over a month now and had started on an antidepressant Callum could not remember the name of. On the good days—or, rather, the better days—Callum would slump down beside his boyfriend, drape his arm over his shoulders, and they would talk in murmurs while the TV buzzed in the background. On worse days, Callum would head straight outside to their little balcony for a cig or three, coming back inside to find Leo had gone to bed.

He felt useless.

Then, one day, Leo's father told him what to do. Brian the Barrister. He had taken Callum for lunch and insisted on paying. He had insisted on paying for a lot of things lately, including Leo's half of the rent. Callum had eventually surrendered to these forceful displays of wealth, though he still felt a twinge of discomfort when Brian paid the bill and left a twenty-pound tip. Brian had made his motives plain as they walked a long route back to the flat; he wanted Callum to take Leo on a holiday. Callum would do the planning; Brian would do the paying. Callum would claim it all as his idea.

'I can't do everything for him. Leo needs to believe you know what you're doing. He needs you. And I need you to do more.'

Callum was not even sure the trip was the best thing for Leo. 'I've been trying to get him to see a counsellor,' he had said feebly.

Brian had waved a hand. 'He's said no to you. He's said no to me. He's said no to the school. You can't force him to do something he's not ready for.'

Callum had wanted to point out that Leo had barely left the flat in the last month, let alone the country. Instead, he had nodded and looked down at the ground.

Callum had felt like he was being prepped for the witness stand, with Brian's eyes boring into his as he was sworn to secrecy. He promised to text Brian updates of the holiday at the end of each day—what they had done, Leo's moods, Callum's responses. Leo had said yes, and guilt had gripped Callum's stomach ever since.

Waiting for their bus in the airport car park, Callum longed for one of the cigarettes tucked into the side pocket of his rucksack. He glared at the 'no smoking' sign above the bus shelter and released his frustrations through a jittery bounce of his left leg. The heat that had washed over them the moment they emerged from their four-hour flight was still stinging Callum—despite it being almost ten at night—blotching his pale skin with various shades of pink. He scratched the salt-and-pepper stubble on his chin; those first hints of grey had been a cause for alarm in his early twenties, but now with thirty approaching, he had accepted the inevitable. He scratched under his armpit and then the top of his left buttock underneath his boxers before catching the eye of one of their fellow travellers. He looked down, turning pinker still, and took out his phone. Opening the Airbnb app, he sent Antonis and Angeliki a text letting them know he and Leo had arrived and should be with them in about two hours. Putting his phone away, he nudged Leo gently on the arm and chanced a smile at him. The corners of Leo's mouth twitched, and he returned the nudge. That was enough for now.

The coach arrived, and there was a scramble for suitcases and backpacks. The driver spoke to them all in a flurry of English and Greek. The lights were dimmed, and they set off.

After scrolling through endless apps and websites, Callum had found Gerani, a village on the Greek island of Crete. Gerani was walking distance from several beaches, close enough to the city of Chania that they could head over there for a day trip if noise were needed. Leo loved to swim and read. He needed somewhere he could lie in silence for an entire afternoon. Callum could finally finish that brick of a Steinbeck novel he had been struggling with since February. Leo had agreed to all of it, and the fingers of guilt had clamped tighter around Callum's gut.

Callum leaned his head against the bus window, closed his eyes, and let the engine's vibrations buzz against his skull. He refused to think of this holiday as a last-ditch attempt to revive what Leo and he once had. Brian seemed to think it was Callum's last chance to prove himself. Callum had felt the hot breath of pressure on him ever since that lunchtime. Since the day Leo lost his job. For as long as he could remember, actually.

They arrived an hour and a half later. Callum took his headphones off, pulling himself away from the world of guerrilla warfare and the Viet Cong. Leo had slept for most of the journey, and Callum gently roused him as the lights came on. They thanked the driver, and he drove off.

The temperature was slightly cooler now, and the air had a pleasant earthy smell. Callum tugged at the hem of his t-shirt, fanning air to his skin underneath.

They had been dropped off in what looked like the village square. Roads and pathways trailed off in various directions, some sloping down towards the sea and one snaking ominously uphill.

'Which way are we?' Leo asked. Callum realised he had no idea and got out his phone to check. He pointed towards the hill. 'Of course,' Leo said, his voice full of dull sarcasm. Callum's jaw stiffened. *Of course, fucking what?*

'We better brave it. They'll be expecting us.'

The hill was not as steep or tiresome as it had initially seemed, and they were soon on a flat stretch of road. As they walked, dragging their suitcases behind them, they heard raucous laughter and the enthusiastic playing of a ukulele. Both stopped to catch their breath and listen as the music, punctuated by cheers and applause, broke the night's low hum of crickets and fluttering insect wings. Without a visible source, the joyous sounds seemed distant and disembodied, like those of a hazy memory of happier times. They walked on, and the sounds faded into the night.

A few minutes later, they arrived outside their Airbnb. Even with Brian's smothering financial support, Callum had opted for one of the cheaper places from the selection he had scrolled through. Still, from the outside, it had an immediate homeliness that reassured him.

A gate opened onto a patio, tiled a faded burgundy, with a table and chairs in the centre. Various potted plants were dotted around, most spilling spectacularly out of their pots, and a flight of stairs in the corner led presumably to the flats and rooftop above.

They had just about taken in the simple beauty of this scene when the front door of the flat opened. A short, round-bellied man who looked to be in his mid-sixties stood in the doorway, beaming at them so broadly that his eyes were reduced to a series of interlinking crinkles.

'Ya! Hello. You must be Callum? My name is Antonis.' Antonis's voice sounded exactly as Callum had imagined it over text—richly accented, baritone-deep and with an infectious bounce at the start of each new sentence.

'Hiya, yes, that's me. Lovely to meet you. This is my partner, Leo.'

'Yes, yes, I remember you saying a Leo. Good to meet you both. Journey was okay? Those buses, I know . . .' Antonis pretended to shudder, and Callum laughed. 'Well, come on in, meet my wife, put your bags down . . .'

He led them through the front door and into a small kitchen space. The walls and cupboards were all the same shade of cream, and the counters were bare except for a kettle, microwave, and toaster. Sat at a wooden table in the middle of the room was a woman, her back straight, her auburn hair in a tight bun, and a silver shawl draped around her neck.

'Hello, hello. My name is Angeliki.' Angeliki's voice was soft, with the same musical lilt as her husband's—a shared product of however many years of marriage. 'Lovely to meet you. Was the plane okay? The bus? I do hate those things.'

'Yes, all fine, ta. I mean, thanks.'

'Good. You must be tired, so we will show you the flat quickly. But first, please, accept this wine.'

She got to her feet, revealing she was over a head taller than her husband. As she took out a bottle of wine from the fridge behind her, Callum began a simultaneous spluttering of refusal and gratitude. Angeliki held up a hand.

'Please, stop. We give all our guests some wine. Don't go thinking you are special now.' She gave them a sly look, then let out a single boom of laughter. 'I joke,' she said, placing the bottle on the table, 'and I should not laugh so loud this late. Please, enjoy it.' Callum smiled and held up his hands in surrender.

Angeliki beckoned to her husband and turned to leave the kitchen. 'Let us show you around.'

The tour did not take long. The cream aesthetic ran through the whole flat, the exceptions being several rather extravagant paintings framed in the living room and a leopard-print armchair with two cushions to match. There were two bedrooms, a double bed in one and a single in the other. Callum had not told Leo he had booked two-bedroom accommodation —he had become so familiar with the living room sofa that it had not seemed necessary. Leo merely nodded upon seeing the second bedroom.

Once they had circled back to the kitchen, Antonis clapped his hands together while Angeliki placed two sets of keys and a sheet of paper on the counter by the door.

'We hope you are happy with everything,' Antonis said. 'Here are keys and our information.'

'And some things for you to do,' Angeliki said, tapping the piece of paper so that her wedding ring rapped the counter underneath. 'It is okay to ignore it, though. We are old and not fun, maybe.'

'Oh, not at all, thank you so much,' Callum said, waving away her comment before holding out his hand to shake both of theirs.

'Well, enjoy that wine. Goodnight.'

They left Callum and Leo alone. Callum pretended to read the sheet of paper on the kitchen counter.

'I'm gonna go for a shower, I think,' Leo said, 'wash the travel off.'

Callum looked up at him. 'Good idea. I'll start putting some things away.'

Callum flopped down on the double bed, his arms and legs spread wide in a snow angel position. He looked up at the ceiling, at the swirly patterns embedded in the paint and plastering. Faintly, he could hear the splashing water of the shower. He pictured Leo, wet from head to toe, scrubbing his body clean. Callum smiled. He closed his eyes, thinking of Leo's naked body, which he had not seen in so long. His phone buzzed in his pocket, but he ignored it.

After a moment, he pulled himself into a sitting position and unzipped Leo's suitcase. There was a row of shelves built into the wall beside the bed, and Callum began neatly placing Leo's clothes on the first two, refolding those that had been knocked around during travel. He heard muffled footsteps behind him. Leo emerged from his shower and stood in the doorway with the towel around his waist. His skin had a dewy glisten, with droplets pooling in areas he had missed drying off. Callum watched as one of the droplets slid from Leo's collarbone, down the centre of his chest, down his smooth stomach, before being caught in

the pool that had formed in his belly button.

Callum moved to sit on the edge of the bed, facing Leo, and held out his arms. Leo drew his left foot behind his right so that his legs were awkwardly crossed. Callum waited with his arms still spread open. Leo began inching his way further into the room, further towards Callum, a small smile playing on his lips. He was between Callum's waiting arms, looking down into his eyes. Both were smiling now. Callum closed his arms around the small of Leo's back and pressed his face into Leo's stomach, feeling the lingering droplets on his lips.

'We made it,' Callum said, his voice muffled.

'Yeah. We did.'

'Shall we open that wine?'

'Let's leave that for tomorrow. Or another day . . .' Leo's voice trailed off. His arms were by his sides. Out of the corner of his eye, Callum could see Leo picking at a loose bit of thread in the towel.

'Okay, yeah. Shall we just head to bed, then? I've put some of your things away.' Leo continued picking at his towel, twisting the thread around his fingertip.

'Thank you, Cal. I'm going to take the single, though, I think.'

Callum still had his face pressed into Leo's stomach. He sighed heavily, feeling the heat of his breath blowback from Leo's skin onto his own.

'Can't we just stay together? For tonight at least. The first night.'

'Come on. You know I need—.'

Callum jerked his head back so that he could look up at Leo. 'This is a trip for *us*. Yeah? I've booked all this for us. It's about what we need.'

Leo's face looked like it was about to crumple for a moment. His nose twitched, his upper lip going with it. 'Cal—.'

'I've been trying—I *am* trying so fucking hard. I've done so much. I've been there for you. You know I have. I'm here for you now. You can't keep doing this to me.'

A still hardness settled in Leo's eyes.

'You're the one who booked two fucking bedrooms.'

'You're not even trying.'

'How many times, Callum, I've told you I need the space.' Leo's voice was raised now. 'I agreed to come here. Fuck, I *wanted* to come here. But it's not going to be some quick fix where we fuck every night and cuddle every morning. I can't do any of that. I . . .' his voice had finally cracked, and he stopped speaking.

They stared at each other. Callum had so much more to say, but he felt a cold futility wash over him as half-formed responses flickered and died in his mind. Leo swallowed and looked down at his towel as though he had only just realised

he was still wearing it. He wrapped his arms around his chest and stomach and walked over to the shelves. From behind him, Callum could hear Leo putting his clothes back into his suitcase before zipping it up. Without another word, he wheeled it out of the room. The sound of his bare feet on the tiled floors grew fainter. A door closing. Silence.

Callum's whole body felt heavy. He reached into his rucksack and retrieved his cigarettes and lighter. He made his way out into the kitchen, opened the front door, and stepped out onto the patio. He lit his cig, took a deep drag, and stared out at the mass of unidentifiable shapes looming over the village.

His phone buzzed again in his pocket, and he took it out.

Brian (23:17) Arrived? How is Leo?

Brian (23:35) Have you arrived?

Nothing from his own parents.

Callum thought of his insistence that he had done so much for Leo, and his anger boiled down into simmering guilt. He took another drag. From somewhere in the distance, he thought he heard laughter and the continued playing of a ukulele.



Theodore Wicks

Theodore Wicks was born in Luton and reborn in prison. After graduating from The University of Roehampton in 2019, he joined the prison service, transitioning gender and working as an officer throughout the pandemic. He returned to education in 2022 to complete an MA at The University of Manchester. His anthology submission, *Determinate Sentence*, is an extract from his novel of the same name. Contact him by email at theodore.wicks@outlook.com

Determinate Sentence

Section One: Investigation

I got off the bus at a stop marked only by a wooden hut. It had been a long journey, about two and a half hours, but I hadn't been bothered. More time to read my book! I'd thought before realising that reading made me car sick. I hadn't been able to shake the nausea until the second change, by which time my mood had been lifted by a text from my mum telling me that if I managed more than five days, she'd let me get insured on her Astra. I passed the rest of the journey blasting Lady Gaga and trying not to heave.

I travelled west across three towns and one city before being driven out about twenty minutes into the countryside. The village I arrived at was full of pebbledash houses and picket fences. I double-checked Maps on my phone, which assured me I was exactly where I needed to be. Five minutes down the road, past a Tesco with no car park, was the prison.

I would've missed the turning had it not been for the wonky, monochrome HMP sign sticking out of a grass verge. The walkway up to the prison was never-ending, but the building was unremarkable, like a long, hedged driveway leading to a council flat. No big gates or barbed wire like I'd imagined, just a worn, red warehouse. Again, the only giveaway was the signage—two poles with three flags, one embossed with the white and blue prison logo, one with the Union Jack, and one with rainbow stripes. This last flag was tattered, like it had been pulled out of storage, and flew at a lower height than the other two.

At the front desk, an older woman with a tight blonde ponytail wearing too much mascara glanced at my undercut and bomber jacket before asking, 'Which prisoner are you visiting?' through the pinprick speaking holes.

'None,' I said, 'I'm starting work here today.'

'Oh! Sorry, love,' she said, the tone of her voice rising, 'you just look very young.'

'I have a baby face,' I replied, laughing, 'I'm actually twenty-one.'

The smile on her face faltered as I puffed out my chest. At the time, I thought I had earned her respect, but now I'm older, I know all she felt for me was pity.

'Take a seat, and I'll let Pat know you're here.'

Pat was short, old and plump, with a hunchback and abnormally large ears. I thought she smelled of mothballs, but that might've been the neon purple furnishings in the lobby.

'Hello, my dear! Is it Robert . . . Mary?'

The support grades that manned the gate, informally known as OSGs, all turned in my direction, observing me through the glass with open mouths like they'd just spotted a two-headed snake at the zoo. I attempted a smile.

'It's just Robert now. You can call me Rob.'

'Okay, *Rob!* Not to worry—It'll be Officer Smith once we step inside those gates!'

Pat's laugh was stranger than her ears. It started off extremely high-pitched but quickly morphed into a wheeze. Too many fags, I reckon.

As she instructed, I placed my phone in a locker and followed her through the security lock—an enclosed cube with two automatic sliding doors and a built-in metal detector. Once the door behind me shut, the one in front opened. On the other side was a long, blue-carpeted corridor. Pat told me it was known as the admin corridor and held offices for the post, probation, housing support, finance, scheduling and security. It had no windows, just pinboards with various information displays, which I only managed to read fragments of as Pat led me down to the first door. On a security board below, a picture of a uniformed woman with bright pink lipstick:

This is JILL VALENTINE. While working here from 2014-2016, she SMUGGLED in several hundred packages of CONTRABAND, including tobacco, marijuana, mobile phones, 'MILF' magazines and chewing gum. She was sentenced to THREE YEARS IMPRISONMENT and ordered to pay a ONE THOUSAND POUND fine.

Next to the wall of shame was a warning wall for prisoners. About fifteen small mugshots were stuck in a squared U around one enlarged photograph of a muscular bearded man with braids. Daddy Johnson, the poster was titled.

Crimes: Drug Trafficking, GHB. Sentence: IPP.

Pat took me into every office we passed, introducing me to anyone who would listen. She seemed to know everybody, and they all seemed happy for an excuse to turn their attention away from their whirring Dell computers. All the offices looked the same: blue carpets, white walls, honey pine desks, and few windows. In the last room, finance, one of the women shot up in her floral dress when she saw me.

'Sorry!' she said after the horror on her face had passed. 'I thought you were a prisoner!'

This made Pat wheeze and prompted her to tell a story about a new starter 'like me' who had wrongfully led a group of prisoners through the admin corridor to

get to the Visits Hall on the next floor, causing mass panic amongst the unarmed staff. Apparently, they had all managed to lock themselves in their offices, all apart from Shaheen, a small woman from Delhi, who had been cornered against the photocopier at the top of the corridor. I wondered momentarily why the prisoners would take this course of action until I heard her answer the phone. She had ignored it for several minutes, only snatching up the receiver when it had refused to stop ringing.

'Finance,' she snapped. 'No, Officer Hughes, Mr Clementine cannot add a greetings card to his canteen order. The sheets have already been delivered to DHL. You should know Wednesday is too late in the week to make adjustments. Yes, I know he couldn't have foreseen his uncle's death, but it just cannot be done. He'll have to add a grievance card to his order next week.' I could hear the officer's voice still echoing through the receiver when Shaheen slammed the phone down and took to straighten the pile of DHL sheets on her desk.

By the time we'd reached the uniform store, it had been well over two hours, and I hadn't caught the names of most people I'd met, let alone remembered them, but I had learnt a lot about Pat: through the Muslim lady in staff services, I learnt that Pat had tried fasting but it 'hadn't agreed with her'; through the young gay man in scheduling, I learnt that Pat had always found women attractive but 'wouldn't know what to do with so many holes'; and, through an elderly gentleman in the post office whose dog had just died, I learnt that Pat's husband had died nearly twenty years ago after being crushed by a tree.

Pat found my uniform in a grey delivery bag on the dusty floor of the storeroom.

'I think there's been a bit of a mistake,' she said, doubled over the package, inspecting the order form. 'This is all male uniform!'

'It's not a mistake,' I said, 'I ordered male on purpose.'

She turned to consider me with narrow eyes, and I wondered whether she was finally going to confront me on the topic, but instead, she said happily, 'Well, you can certainly try it on! But I have to warn you, Officer Edwards ordered male uniform to begin with as well . . .' Even though we were in the large storeroom alone, Pat covered one side of her mouth and whispered, 'She's a bit butch too', before carrying on the conversation like nothing had been said, 'but it just doesn't fit the curves! Bit uncomfortable on the hips.'

Pat had passed me the package and begun to rub her hips in demonstration or, at least, where her hips had once been. Her torso was now rounded with no beginning and no end.

'You can go and change in the toilets, then bring your clothes down to my office, and we'll keep them there.'

I nodded, wrestling my heart out of my throat and back down into my chest after it had tried to jump out at the word toilets. As I'd assumed, there were only two options: male or female. I stared at the two doors, both decorated with stick figures, one triangular and one rectangular, before glancing over my shoulder. There was no one in the corridor to see me, so I had some time to decide.

The one I'd like to go into was rectangular, but I was scared about seeing a rectangle in there. I considered the triangular instead but couldn't help feeling reluctant. I knew it didn't matter much. One would be painted blue, and one would be painted pink. The only other difference would be urinals, and I couldn't use them anyway (not that I'd tried), but still, I couldn't convince myself to enter the pink. It felt like a betrayal.

'There's a disabled toilet round the corner, my dear,' Pat sang as she passed by, 'might be more space in there to get out of your knickers!'

Her giggle-wheeze echoed up the empty corridor as she shuffled through the double doors towards her office. I heard her beginning to greet somebody called Rachel and ask about her son's outbreak of meningitis before diving into a detailed recount of her bout of childhood polio that had left her without sensation in some of the toes on her left foot. The doors clicked shut before I was able to hear how many.

Pat had been right: the disabled toilet was spacious. I stepped in and was greeted by the smell of synthetic blueberry. After turning on the light, I realised it radiated from the smoke circling the room. With no windows, there was no way for it to escape. I didn't mind it so much and suspected it had originated from a vape since Pat had told me they'd banned them in the offices just last week. I guess the ban hadn't done much except force staff to hide their habit. I pulled on the uniform I had ordered and, with no idea about male sizing, realised what I'd ordered was far too large. Once fully clothed, I shuffled in front of a full-length mirror. In the reflection, I saw a headless Lego figurine; my body was blocky in the short-sleeved, white button-up, and my face was obscured by the smoke which had risen to the top of the room. I decided I didn't mind too much about the uniform since it successfully hid my double Gs.

I stepped out of the blueberry gas chamber and went to Pat's office, cradling my casual clothes. I only managed a peek at her desk space: a cliché graveyard, from the pinboard to the coffee mug. Knowing I was a writer, she looked at me shyly and quickly took me back into the corridor. 'Everybody needs something to keep them going!' she said. At the time, I loathed Pat's cliché defence of cliché,

but now I find it admirable. Looking back, I judge Pat to be very wise. Ignorant by choice. 'It is a cliché that most clichés are untrue, but then like most clichés, that cliché is true,' she said, quoting Stephen Fry.

'Right!' she announced as she paraded me back down the corridor. 'I think it's time I introduce you to your team!'

I've always hated the word team. It suggests some kind of eternal camaraderie, but you can get thrown out of a team just as quickly as you can join one. I'd played football from a young age, and we'd been quite successful as a team, winning several district cups. I was no longer allowed to play on said team, however. It's strange when you're not seen as a woman but not seen as a man, either. What am I? I guess everybody decides that for themselves. My entrance tests for the prison service detailed my greatest strength as 'thinking outside the box', but I would argue that it's my greatest weakness. People get scared if they can't fit you inside a box. They resort to things such as squashing, bending and breaking. Sometimes even decapitation.

To reach the main grounds, we had to go through a red, gated door that could only be opened through a computer screen in the main gate. Pat hit the buzzer, and a particularly bored OSG droned through the speaker:

'IDDDD?'

'It's Tricia!' Pat yelled. Then a siren blared, signalling that the door could be opened. Later in my 'career', one co-worker demonstrated the uselessness of this system by shouting, 'Pinocchio!' into the speaker when asked for his ID. The door, of course, still opened since the OSGs could see us through CCTV.

Behind the door was a heavy, lattice gate that Pat opened with the keys she'd pulled from her trouser pocket. These keys were attached to the back of her belt through a metal chain. At this moment, I realised I didn't have any keys. Nor did I have a radio or a baton. I was being shipped, empty-handed, onto a primitive island far out at sea, and the only way I could escape was if someone else let me in their boat. I realised I needed to be amicable if I was to survive this—convince the inhabitants not to skin me for long enough to be lent a weapon.

We walked down a central, tanned pathway before turning right at an empty pond and proceeding through yet another gate.

'We used to have ducks,' Pat said, 'but the prisoners started eating them.'

The main grounds weren't that much different from any major northern city—a bit of grass, a lot of pavement and a whole lot of rats. It was early afternoon and suffocatingly hot—once again, I was glad I had ordered my new penguin suit, large and loose.

The grounds were completely empty, which Pat explained was because it was

still lunch.

She continued to tell me that the prison was made up of multiple brick housing units called 'wings'. We passed one wing close to the admin block with no bars on its windows, and later I found out that it was called The Annex. The Annex was mostly unmanned and held prisoners who had been re-categorised, meaning they were now suitable for open conditions. They were held there until space could be found at a low-security prison.

At the time, I was curious, so I stepped closer to the window, peeking through the open, oblong latches.

'Careful!' Pat warned in a low tone. 'They might grab you.'

I glanced at a shirtless, young black man eating a Pot Noodle and playing PS2.

'How long has it been,' I asked, 'since you worked on a wing?'

'Oh, I'd say at least a decade! These days they have me wrestling with spreadsheets rather than grown men!'

This time Pat's wheeze turned into a hacking cough which echoed through the empty grounds drawing several bare, upper bodies to the barred windows of the opposing wings we were approaching. One man with hundreds of jagged self-harm scars covering his chest and pot belly took a deep breath before shouting into the now silent grounds: 'FAT COW!'

I felt my mouth fall open and had to dig my front teeth into my bottom lip to stop myself from adding to an eruption of laughter—the commotion had attracted prisoners to their cell windows, eager for a form of entertainment other than the three BBC channels their TVs could access.

Encouraged by the reaction he'd received, the scarred man had begun to moo, and it didn't take long for the other prisoners to join him. Soon I found myself on a farm rather than in a prison. The mooing quickly became thunderous, which I was thankful for because it made it impossible for Pat to hear my laughter. She had refused to respond, marching onwards with her nose tilted purposefully to the sky, but this didn't deter them. The mooing didn't stop until we'd made it inside. As Pat slammed the wing gate shut, we were thrown into silence. She said nothing about what had just happened; in fact, she said nothing at all. I decided not to mention it, either.

THE MANCHESTER ANTHOLOGY 2023 TEAM

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The Manchester Anthology 2023

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with a foreword by FRANCES LEVISTON

A woman's final thoughts at the pyre. A snapshot of a greater Manchester pub. A bride's shocking discovery at her new home. A billionaire's memories of childhood on a trip to space. A strange encounter with evangelicals. A prison officer's first day on the job.

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page-turning pleasure, beautiful writing pleasure, psychological insight
pleasure, imaginative pleasure, formal inventiveness pleasure.
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only going to get better.'* KAMILA SHAMSIE

*'No one knows what cities or scapes the writers here will build, birth, or
break, but what will be certain is they started here.'* HORATIO CLARE

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