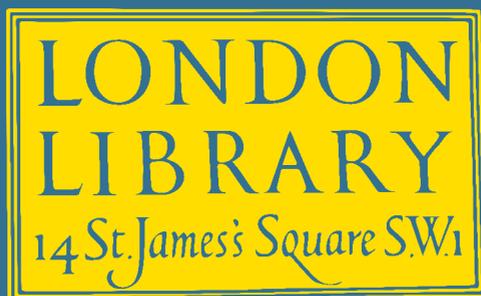


Vol. I



From the Silence of the Stacks,

*New
Voices
Rise*

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*New
Voices
Rise*

**An anthology of writing by
The London Library
Emerging Writers Programme
2019–20 cohort**

*

Edited by Claire Berliner



Published by The London Library 2020

The London Library
14 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LG
londonlibrary.co.uk
Charity No. 312175

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ISBN (print) 978-0-9553277-1-1
ISBN (ebook) 978-0-9553277-2-8

Designed and typeset by Matt Bourne at Level Partnership
levelpartnership.co.uk

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI



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About The London Library

“The desire to know more, the desire to feel more, and, accompanying these but not strangling them, the desire to help others: here, briefly, is the human aim, and the Library exists to further it.” **EM Forster**

Founded in 1841, The London Library is one of the world’s great lending libraries. A unique literary oasis in the heart of London, it houses an extraordinary collection of one million books and periodicals dating from 1700 to the present day, nearly all of which can be borrowed. Members can browse 17 miles of atmospheric bookstacks, read and write in hidden corners or in beautiful reading rooms, attend our vibrant events programme or work remotely using the extensive online resources.

From the outset the Library has been a place of inspiration and support to writers, readers and scholars of all kinds. From Charles Dickens to Sarah Waters, T S Eliot to V S Naipaul, Virginia Woolf to Kazuo Ishiguro, our building in St James’s Square has provided a home and a creative community for anyone who loves the written word.

Our Emerging Writers Programme is the latest chapter in that story, offering support and resources to those beginning their own journey towards a writing career. Ultimately, the Programme derives its strength from the creativity, commitment and sheer writing talent of those who take part. That talent is in abundant display in this selection of new writing from the participants in the Programme’s first year. We are grateful to them all for their inspiring ideas, enthusiasm and drive and are immensely proud to showcase this anthology of their work.

Philip Marshall

Director, The London Library

About the Emerging Writers Programme

The Library is a gift to any writer, but it can be nothing short of revelatory to one at the beginning of their writing life. As we approached our 180th anniversary, it was with the Library's founding principles in mind that we proposed to establish an Emerging Writers Programme, in order to offer that gift openly and widely to a new generation of writing talent. Knowing how hard it can be for so many, and for so many reasons, to get a seat at the writing table, we wanted to invite as many people as we could to pull up a chair.

After an initial pilot scheme, in which seven emerging writers were offered a year's membership to the Library at a significantly reduced rate, we resolved to take the Programme to the next level and fundraise to remove any financial barrier. We designed an offer that we felt most writers would need in order to develop: space; time; expert advice from established writers and industry professionals; peer support and a writing network; access to the extensive resources the Library has to offer; and snacks, of course. We asked writers of any genre, age, level of writing experience and from anywhere in the country, to apply – for free – for a place on the Programme. The only criteria were that applicants had to have a project in mind to work on throughout the year; they had to commit to using the space and collection of the Library; and they must not have previously had a full work published or produced.

Over 600 people applied. Thirty-eight writers were offered a place. They hailed from all over the world, lived all across the country, spanned a range of ages, backgrounds and cultures, and they brought with them their stories and ideas; creativity and enthusiasm; spirit of adventure and sense of camaraderie to the Programme and to the Library. Poets, screenwriters and playwrights, novelists and short story writers, writers for children, memoirists, historians and travel writers, came together to embark on a year of workshops, masterclasses, peer support meetings, gatherings and

their own writing and research time with their year's free membership of the Library. They worked on a diverse array of projects which took in everything from colonial India to present-day Siberia, activism to the joys of clubbing, Mayan folklore to an imaginary rodent underworld. Some of those projects morphed into new ones; some developed; and some have been, or are soon to be, published or produced.

The group also brought resilience and patience. They were the first to experience the Emerging Writers Programme in its current incarnation. None of us quite knew what we were letting ourselves in for. And then, just as we were gearing up towards a magnificent finale, COVID-19 hit, and we were forced to shift into the digital universe. We ended with some beautiful readings, celebratory raised glasses and fond farewells, but all through the medium of Zoom. Nevertheless, the gamble of our grand experiment paid off, as this anthology will testify. On display is all the diversity and talent, humour and seriousness, playfulness and scholarship that characterises the cohort. In this collection are beautiful stories, profound insights and wonderful ways with words.

It has been a pleasure and a privilege to steer this Programme from idea to reality; to work with these brilliant writers as they developed their projects; to host them in the unsurpassable, inspirational literary haven that is The London Library; to see a community develop within the wider community of the Library; and to weave a thread of continuity from the Library's past into a very exciting future. I hope this year was the first of many to come and I can't wait to see what happens next.

Claire Berliner

The London Library Emerging Writers Programme Manager

November 2020



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THE LONDON LIBRARY

Fiction

WHERE
WRITERS
WRITE,
AND GREAT
CHARACTERS
ARE BORN

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LONDON
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www.londonlibrary.co.uk

Erika Banerji

Extract from *Miss Edith Comes to Tea*

Edith Williams didn't like change. At 9.25am, on a Friday in April, she put a chair by the front window and peered through a gap in her net curtains to keep an eye on the removal van parked in front of her lawn. To be sure she wouldn't miss a moment of the arrival of her new neighbours, Edith filled a flask with hot tea and moved the small electric heater nearer her feet.

Jane, her dearest friend and neighbour of the past forty years, had died just two months before and Edith had hoped Jane's house, a tired Georgian terrace with a tiny front garden and peeling sash windows, would stay empty for longer. It didn't seem respectful that new people would take her friend's place so soon.

The cul-de-sac on Denham Road where she'd lived for most of her life held few surprises, which was just as well. Edith didn't like surprises.

Misty, her liver-spotted spaniel, whined, ready for his morning walk. They should have been down by the river an hour ago and were usually back home by nine. Edith tucked the dog's leash under the seat cushion and said,

"I'm sorry Misty, we can't just go out whenever we feel like it anymore."

The dog whimpered and sat down at her feet, resigned. Edith didn't really want to bump into anyone new, not yet.

"You must be patient." She spoke to the dog without taking her eyes away from the window.

A shiny blue car pulled up and a tall, dark-haired man and a much shorter woman stepped out, followed by a dusky little girl with plaits so long they almost reached her waist.

The couple seemed very young, in their late twenties maybe, but these days most people seemed young to Edith.

When most of the furniture had been unloaded and carried inside, the man smiled at his wife, who tucked her arm through his as they stood side by side and looked at their new neighbourhood. The little girl ran straight into the house.

Edith longed for a walk in the fresh air and she needed milk and something for her supper, but she stayed at the window until she was sure the removal van was empty and the ornate chairs and the faux potted plants had been carried inside. She got up and went into the kitchen. Her knees were stiff and ached from sitting for so long. She opened her back door, just enough to hear what was going on, but making sure she could not be seen. As she pulled up her tights, which had begun to sag around her swollen ankles, she heard the man and woman talking loudly. Jane used to be so quiet.

“All this noise, it doesn’t stir confidence, does it?” she said.

At two o’clock, Edith put Misty on the leash, wrapped a scarf around her head to cover the worst of her grey hair and stepped outside. She moved slowly, pausing to look at the overgrown lawn next door and comparing it to her own prim and proper patch. There was no one to be seen and so Edith stalled awhile, untangling the frond of a lime-green fuchsia from a rose bush and inhaling the heavy scent of lilac that hung in the air.

“Hello there.”

Edith turned. It was the man.

“Oh,” she said. “You took me by surprise.”

“We have just moved in next door. My name’s Ashok.”

She looked at his outstretched hand, at the thick dark hair peeping out of his cuff.

“I hope we are not too noisy settling in? The packers are delayed in Mumbai and this is only half our stuff. There’s more to come, I’m afraid.” Mumbai rang in her ears, strange and unsettling. Then the man smiled and asked her name.

“I’m Edith.”

“Have you lived here very long? In this town?”

“Most of my life,” she said. “I was born in the local hospital.”

“Wow! That’s something. My wife and I have moved round from one place to the other for most of our lives.” He paused and bent to pat Misty. “First, we lived in Chennai, then Delhi, Mumbai and now here, Henley-on-Thames.”

“You sound well-travelled.”

“Yes, but just as we were starting to call Mumbai our home it was time to leave. This might be the place we finally settle down. Who knows?”

His voice was soft, his accent slightly rounded. Edith didn’t find it unpleasant, and yet she tightened her scarf beneath her chin. She began to edge away, following Misty tugging on the leash. She wasn’t sure she wanted to be seen out here by the other neighbours, talking to this man.

“My wife asked me to invite you over for tea on Thursday. Hopefully we will be ready by then.”

Edith tried to think of an excuse but couldn’t come up with anything on the spur of the moment because most days were exactly the same as the ones before. She wasn’t used to change and she’d had no need to learn the art of improvising. Even the weekends ran into the week.

She nodded.

“We look forward to welcoming you to our new home.” He brushed his hair away from his forehead and Edith noticed that he wore a gold ring with a large coral stone. “See you soon, Miss Edith. Anupama will be delighted to meet you.”

She’d not been called Miss Edith since she retired from her teaching position at Trinity, the local primary school, ten years before, to spend more time at home nursing her ailing mother. The memory of those days caught like a hook in her chest. She missed her time at the school, surrounded by children. Most of them would have families of their own by now.

Still a little rattled, Edith tugged on Misty’s leash and walked toward the river. The encounter with the new neighbour had unsettled

her, but she couldn't put her finger on what it was. After all, he'd been nice and polite. What had he said his name was again? These foreign words muddled her.

The fading sun lapped at the edges of the slate rooftops and the town was busy with tourists wandering the narrow streets lined with rows of quaint mews cottages, and the picturesque riverside, which Edith barely noticed anymore. A Japanese couple took pictures of the fifteenth-century church spire, the cobbled streets, the ancient bridge built across the green stretch of the river which in the summer was busy with the annual regatta. Over the years it had grown in popularity and become a destination for all kinds of visitors from around the world.

Edith would usually be back home by now with biscuits and a cup of tea, listening to *The Archers*.

She looked down at her feet and walked on.

Early next morning, Edith drew the bedroom curtains and watched the child playing in the back garden next door. The girl wore a bright yellow sundress and threw a ball up in the air, over and over again.

Edith dressed and brushed her hair. Fifty strokes each side, as she'd been doing since she was ten years old, in this same room at the same mirror; but now the face that stared back was a stranger to her. Her short grey hair framed her thin face, the deep grooves around her mouth and chin and forehead were a map of her life, and it occurred to her that the little girl had probably seen more of the world than she ever had or ever would.

She went down to the kitchen, made a pot of strong Yorkshire tea and fed Misty; and then, just so she didn't miss a thing, she hung out her washing and sat on the back step in the sun to drink her tea. The sun was warm on her face and a soft spring breeze played through the magnolia tree which Edith had planted almost twenty years ago. Its top branches now nearly reached her bedroom window.

She sat and listened to the unfamiliar sounds of the child playing next door.

Originally published in The Asia Literary Review

Hattie Clarke

Extract from *Tentra*

Last to arrive at the dig house, Élise thought. What a perfect way to start.

“We were terribly unlucky,” Charles said, handing over her suitcases to a young Egyptian who came running up the platform. Their missed train chugged into the distance.

“You can’t plan for these things, Miss Lassarre,” he said over his shoulder as he marched towards the guards’ office. *He* wasn’t able to plan, Élise was sure of that much. Since she’d met the museum’s chosen escort, Egyptian cities seemed more chaotic than their reputation. While he argued with the man on duty, Élise copied down the next train times from a chalkboard into her notebook. Without it, she doubted if they’d ever make it to Boulaq.

Thankfully they did, but not quite in time to catch the first-class steamer. Why the museum had sent Charles as her escort, Élise did not know. Surely she was better equipped to puzzle out her journey to *Tentra* than their back-of-house archivist. A stern letter to them was forming in her head.

Élise sat on an upturned crate in the midday sun while Charles tried to negotiate with a dragoman, in an awful medley of French and Arabic. The dragoman’s children came out of the shade to watch her. One dared the other to pull her skirt.

“God would not like it,” Élise said quietly in Arabic. The little boy gasped as if she were God himself and fled back to his sister.

There would have been reclining armchairs, Élise thought, as she felt a splinter from the crate catch the side of her hand. She saw herself on the deck of the steamer, a server putting a glass of

something refreshing and cool into her hand.

The alternative boat Charles found for them was used by the locals and for this reason it would take longer than a week to reach the dig house. How much longer was as unknowable as the 'helpful' dragoman's shrugging shoulders.

The Nile churned beneath them but Élise felt they were going backwards. A large cage behind her held a dozen chickens, scrawny but with good lungs. Being on site at the beginning of an excavation was crucial. She wanted to see the state of the land before a single spade cut through it. The director would be starting to make plans and assigning men their duties. Without her.

"Maxime won't have started yet," Charles told her. It was hard to hear him in the packed hull. A group of women in veils tried their best to herd their collection of toddlers and billy goats into a corner where they could contain their outbursts.

"Planning isn't what he's known for," he continued. His words confirmed her concerns and the reason her father had only funded the excavation on the condition the director was supervised. Her father had cursed when he'd read that the curators had hired Maxime for the dig. Élise had tried to calm him, but the great exertion of the curse triggered a coughing fit that sent him back to bed for days.

Spiky heads of grain pushed through Élise's petticoat. The sacks were all Charles could find for her to sit on. As the days went on and local men and women were replaced at each stop for new passengers, the choice of mattresses grew limited. One evening an older gentleman, who'd joined them in Samalut, offered Élise the dark cloak around his shoulders. She hid under it to avoid the mosquitos that swarmed over the boat and into her nostrils.

The night's insects were unwelcome companions in the sleeplessness Élise found on the boat. If Charles had not delayed them, Élise might have had time for the conversations with Maxime she'd rehearsed on her journey over from Paris. She'd thought to start with the uses of tramways for clearing spoil, then the best pencil weight for section drawings (Castell's 4H Graphite pencil, naturally) and the advantages of paying the workers baksheesh for discoveries.

But Élise felt none of the conviction she'd rehearsed as they drifted along the long Nile.

The boat made an unscheduled stop due to a buffalo herd bathing in the shallows. Their tails flicked flies and droplets of water. Local sellers waded out to the boat with butter made from the herd's milk. Charles ate a lump with his fingers and passed the rest to Élise. It was white like sugar and sweet on her tongue.

As the days went on, Élise observed that young Charles the archivist had the unforgivable habit of caressing a wisp of beard on his chin. He'd no doubt grown it since his arrival in the East. No more than two months, Élise suspected from its straggle. He'd told her the museum had sent him on a 'very important acquisition' of three papyri from a dealer in the Delta.

The papyri were certainly not in evidence during their journey, as Charles sat snorting at the witticisms of a souk pamphlet he refused to let Élise look at. Despite concentrating desperately on her own book of hieroglyphs in an effort to ignore the feathered and non-feathered inhabitants of the boat, by the time they reached Tentra, Élise was still no wiser as to how three strokes marked a plural.

"We're hardly late at all," Charles told her in the back of the donkey cart. Their luggage bulging around them, Élise felt the jolt of every hole in the dirt path. Charles looked at her with an expression of awkward sympathy. Another jolt. She pulled down the brim of her hat to hide her face. Perhaps her father had been wrong to leave this journey to her. Élise tried to remember his encouragement in those last days of talking. Thinking of that time did her no good.

The wheels slowed as the donkeys mounted a slope of sand. This was not the convoy of camels Élise envisaged herself astride for her first sighting of proper Egypt. She hadn't minded Cairo's citadel or the bustling port culture at Alexandria, or even the wild river and its wealthy green borders. But the Europeanisms of the cities were more than she could bear. Moneyed Egyptians wearing waistcoats and lace-up shoes. If she'd wanted to witness poorly-copied French fashion, she would have taken the shorter trip to London.

Proper Egypt now lay before her, even if only from the bumpy vantage of a cart led by two tired mules. Over the last two years, laid up in their house on Rue Saint-Martin with lungs forbidding him to travel, her father had spoken of this land. A sweeping desert where, thousands of years ago, a civilisation was born. Since the funeral she'd read everything in his library, but none of those books brought Egypt to mind as well as his descriptions.

Old histories are judged by the light of new readings and new discoveries are found where the spade strikes new ground.

Élise had copied his well-worn phrase onto the first page of her dig site notebook, but it was already seared into her mind. As the sickness in his lungs worsened, her life had been ruled by her father's desperation for new discoveries. It still felt like a stone on her chest.

The cart dragged Élise through a decrepit village and up onto a plain of white sand; the power of the landscape neutralised the quarrel of thoughts in her head. How could she recall those bleak Paris days when she was witness to such a place? This wasn't just a pretty view of the Dordogne valley from her aunt's chateau; this was the hard truth of history set out before her. It was the possibility of uncovering a story that had been lost for thousands of years. Under that mound, in the crevice of the mountain, in the earth under the donkey's hooves; the truth was here.

Swithun Cooper

Extract from *The Interruption*

Silja stood alone in the meeting hall – the room everyone hated but her, the room they could not do without – and took a ragged angry breath. The cold air stung her throat in a good way. Her pulse was still up but at least she was no longer trembling. She peered through the wintry dark at the broken windows letting in the rain, and the high, vaulted ceiling where the ugly English pigeons hid, shitting, pecking, and shuffling filth from their wings. This is why everyone hates it in here, she thought. But right now it was what she needed. Her argument with Kim had left her hot and brittle, lost in rage, as if she might weep and the weeping would split her limbs. She needed to be alone, to calm down, to take on a task she could actually achieve. The argument had been unwinnable for both of them. Here at least her work would have results. The meeting began at seven. It was six. The hall now needed light, warmth, clearing.

She moved to the wall where the generators stood. When they'd moved in Kim had offered to rewire the meter, but Silja said no. It's a disgusting habit, she'd declared, when squatters abdicate from the system but still want to feed off its benefits. It's ideologically impure. We have rejected the old world and we will live with our constructed alternatives! Now she resented her principles. In each room sat a stubborn little generator, donated by Kim's friends from HomoCamp, loaded with extension cords and portable heaters and standing lamps that shorted their fuses.

Kneeling, she picked at the cables in the dark, checked the plugs, ran her hands down the generator's edge. Slapping its face with the flat of her palm – expecting nothing, more to vent her fury – she

heard a buried hum begin. The string of lights beside her flashed and glowed. Delight ran through her and she felt the worst of her anger fade.

No string of lights could reach around the whole room. Turning on her knees she looked at the rest of the hall: it was mostly still in shadow, but the space around her glowed and grew warm. She had a sudden image of herself as mysterious and inviting: a figure in a jewelled cave discovered by explorers who'd crawled through mud. There would be perhaps fifteen people at the meeting. They could gather in this small space, be held in light.

Behind her the doors came cautiously open. She knew it was Kim. Who else, once Silja had stormed in here, knew to give her time to herself but also knew it was worth trying again? And who else but Silja knew this about Kim? Most people found Silja tunnel-visioned and rigid – she talked too much of their goals, their actions. How does it help us? How does it help others? Often she felt to herself like a small boat, struggling towards a distant land; she wanted only what helped her reach that shore. Kim alone seemed to see this as passion, a desire to find a better life for everyone. She knew that Silja was always open to ideas as long as she felt they would achieve this.

But tonight she did not feel it would achieve anything. Kim wanted to upend the whole evening.

She was waiting by the door: Silja could feel her. She was sucking her tongue, no doubt, as she chose her words. Before she could speak, Silja rose and walked away. Putting space and silence between them would, she hoped, tell Kim the debate was over.

“Sil. Please. It was only a request.”

Silja cast an eye across the meeting hall floor. Casually strewn around were blankets, cushions and coats: whatever the group could gather to form the nest-like beds they made here every night.

“A request?” she said, refusing to look at Kim. “A request can be turned down. But you keep on.” She stalked about, snatching up pillows and sheets and bundling them in her arms. First thing each morning they were meant to clear the floors, but someone had slipped, got lazy, and not been called on it. And now, Silja thought,

we've all slipped. Look at this. She knew it was the fight with Kim infecting her: two hours ago she'd hardly cared, but now she felt wretched about the mess of the room, and about the thought of the house rules being ignored. I'll put it on the agenda for tonight, she decided; then she remembered the agenda was why she and Kim were fighting.

She heard Kim approaching, carefully, quietly, gathering rugs and sheets as she came.

"Eight new names," Silja said. "Eight. Why do they get to be Lainie's eight?"

Kim's hand went to her forearm; they faced each other. With it, Silja felt the usual sensations that came whenever she was with Kim: as if something was plummeting wildly inside her, throat to groin, while its counterweight raced upward. It happened when she woke with her each morning, feeling the warmth of her at night; it happened during meals and meetings. She was two inches taller than Silja – it felt like five – and her rough, curling hair was always held back in a rubber band. Her pale face seemed to hang just in front of her body. She had a constant grace and gravitas: wherever she stood, she seemed to have grown from the ground, naturally occurring. Nothing naturally occurred to Silja except Kim.

"I don't – I do not care about Lainie," Silja said. "I care that after all our work" – she gestured to the room, meaning the whole school – "you want, now, for this to be about her."

"Not everything."

"Tonight."

And tonight was important. They had been squatting here since the summer – quietly at first, just the two of them, but then with confidence and rising numbers. She and Kim had searched out empty mills, abandoned factories and stores, until they found this rotting Edwardian schoolhouse. It was tall and cracked and smelled of stagnant water, but walking around it that first night Silja had known this was the place she wanted to live. Here she could build a new world in the shell of the old. She'd been travelling, by then, for seven years – countries, communities, generous families, always in search of a life

that was not a sickness. The poisoned gruel of tradition and ingrained ideas, spoon-fed to her until they became her bones. She had lost too many years to the silent shaping laws of government authority, the people around her who took these in and repeated them without even noticing. Silja wanted a life with others, but she wanted them to make it together, on their own terms. She wanted to build and re-build as they went. She wanted to learn to hold everyone equal within her, no single person with dominion over another, and she wanted everything done through agreement. In the schoolhouse, she and Kim could begin this work. The poison the world had fed them – the diseased old ways of thinking, being, relating – she would sweat out with hard work and support.

Then, in November, Lainie arrived. Lainie, with her flip chart and thin lips, thumping a closed fist against a cupped palm, blinking like a shrew behind oval lenses. Your fucking hippy garbage isn't going to fly, she'd said without speaking. There are real people, being really oppressed, being killed, deported and killed. Lainie's wife had been deported. Silja had said that in the schoolhouse no single person controlled another – it was built on the notion that everyone was of equal importance. So, what Lainie wanted was as fair as what Silja wanted. There was nothing she could do. Welcome, she'd said. Yes, we too want a life free of those laws. And now each day there were plans, discussions, long conversations about the nearest detention centre and how they were going to infiltrate it. Every day Silja felt that poison returning, the blood-thinning world that had so nearly killed her. It ran up through her organs into her brain.

And now Kim was on her side, for this meeting at least.

L M Dillsworth

Extract from *Age of Monsters*

The African in the Audience

Go to the theatre much? No, nor me. At least not before I became an actress. I know what you're thinking. 'Actress', eh. But you can keep your dirty-minded thoughts to yourself. Regardless of whether you been up Shaftesbury once, twice or ten times though, I reckon you'll remember that feeling you get before the show starts. The fizzing in your belly conjured by cheap gin and jellied eels at tuppence a pot. You're so eager at the thought of the performance to come, you keep your eyes fixed hard on the curtain in front of you. You study its red velvet folds and gold trim. But if you really don't want to miss nothing you'd do well to look to the left of the stage. Time it right and you might just see the performers looking out at you.

Back in the thirties, if you found yourself at Stratton's off Drury Lane, you might have seen two heads poking out from the wings of the stage. The blonde one was Ellen and the tight black curls? That was me, Zillah. I know it's strange to think of us watching you when you came to watch us, but each of us had our reasons. Ellen searched the audience for a scout, someone with the power to pluck her from the Stratton's stage and take her to The Theatre Royal Covent Garden. She fancied herself a prima ballerina. I was more concerned to see what mood the punters were in. If they were at the stage of drink where they would join in a sing-song or so in their cups they might throw things at us. Every crowd was different, but there was one September night, with the young Queen not long come to the throne, that one man in particular caught my eye.

The first thing I noticed was his hat. Stood out a mile among the flat caps and bowlers, and he had the frock coat to match. It's not

often you get a man in a topper at Stratton's. Don't mistake me, it's no penny gaff, but even so, I was suspicious. Then I clocked the colour of him.

"Him over there. What do you make of him?" I said to Ellen.

She squinted in the direction of my pointed finger.

"The African you mean? Don't often get one of yours in."

He sat on the benches, three rows back, his right leg stretched out on the aisle. Even from here, peeking out behind the curtain, I could see that he was tall and broad in the shoulders. Around him sat our usual regulars, the shop boys and navvies already half cut and impatient for the show to start. The sour tang of their sweat was sharp on the air. Beyond them were the tables for the better sort, the clerks with women worth the price of a dinner. The ushers weaved around them touting trinkets and sweetmeats, competing for the pennies in their pockets. Up above, the box where our proprietor usually sat was in darkness. Marcus Stratton rarely missed a show but for the time being he was on business in the Indies.

Ellen, satisfied now that she had the measure of the African, delivered her verdict. "Selfish bastard I reckon. No call to be wearing a hat three minutes before the curtain."

Ellen revelled in her coarseness. I only understood one in three of the swearwords she used, but that was because cursing made her accent thicker. When I'd first started at Stratton's she'd been the only one to welcome me. The only one to pass the time of day while I got to know my act. Straight away the others hated me, and didn't trouble to hide it. When I entered a room, they sniggered behind their hands. Just a drop or two of colour was enough to make me an outcast in their eyes. But Ellen, coming from Galway as she did, knew just enough of what it was to be different to see that we could be allies. I judged her to be around twenty-five or so, five years older than myself. It was clear she knew her way around and though I was sharp enough, I saw in her someone who could help me learn the ways of the theatre.

All this time Ellen had been straining her eyes to look at the African.

“You recognise him?” she said.

“No. He’s unsettled me is all.”

“I’ll tell the boys to kick him out,” Ellen said.

“Don’t do that.”

I didn’t know what it was about the African that threw me off but I didn’t want to see his evening spoiled, not on my account. Especially as it must be my act that he’d come to see.

It’s become my act. That’s how I think of it now, but it was mostly Marcus Stratton’s idea. The theatre held open auditions on Tuesdays and Thursdays at lunchtime. I’d gone along, not quite sure what to expect but knowing I needed the money. I was surprised to learn it was Stratton himself holding the auditions, but there he was and younger than I’d thought, thirty or thereabouts. His hair was fair, with a tinge of red, the whiskers that covered his cheeks connected by a thin moustache. He put me in mind of a fox, especially when he smiled at me.

“What have we here?” he said when I walked in.

He was sitting alone at a round table before the stage.

Something about his tone made me want to turn on my heel and leave. But instead I raised my chin and strode right up to him. That made him sit up in his chair.

“I’m Zillah,” I said and stuck out my hand for him to shake.

He took it, held it just a little too long. A lady might have snatched her hand back but I sensed he was testing me. I must’ve passed.

“Oh, that will never do, we’ll have to think of something better. You sing, dance?”

“I’m an actress more than anything, sir,” I said. It wasn’t strictly true but I spent enough time wishing I was someone else, and I loved Mr. Shakespeare.

“Are you planning to put on a play, sir?”

Stratton's wasn't famous for its acting. It had a magician named Aldous, dancers and some popular comedy acts. Stratton put his head to one side and stroked his chin, looking foxier than ever.

"I had something a little different in mind. Something new. You're quite tall aren't you, Zillah, well built. Lift up your skirt. No don't look at me like that, only to the knee."

I did as he said, wondering what it was he had in mind for me. The elastic that I'd used to hold up my stockings had left a ring of indentations in the skin and they itched something chronic.

"Good legs," Stratton muttered to himself. "Quite light, but we could fix that. The costume will have to work quite hard." He reached into his pocket for his tobacco. When he unfolded the leather pouch, I got a waft of wood mingled with cherries. Stratton turned to me and said,

"Tell me, have you ever been to Holman's House of Wonders?"

Holman's ha! As if I'd ever had the money for that. A whole shilling for an hour's show. I knew what it was though. I'd often walked past it, the big building that took up one whole corner at Piccadilly Circus with its curtained windows. At minutes to seven there was always a queue outside. Sometimes it went right around the block. Men and women and their carriages waiting a little further down.

"It's a freak show," I told Stratton.

"That's right. Lot of money in freaks nowadays, Zillah."

"But there's nothing wrong with me."

"You said you were an actress. Can't you play the part?"

Emily Ruth Ford

Extract from *The Hikers*

Across the night harbour, Hong Kong glimmers. The boat carves foam as it pulls away, juddering across the waves under a starless sky. Lana reaches down over the side, feels her hand drag in the spume, watches the Disneyland skyline recede in the distance. Winking glass shards, metallic boxes piled up like a child's playset. The Bank of China tower slants jaggedly upwards. Bad feng shui, the *South China Morning Post* said when it was built. Thin top like a screwdriver drilling out wealth. The HSBC building cowers next to it, glowering recipient of a downflow of bad qi. One window in there is her office. *Welcome to Hong Kong, Ms Zhang, we're glad to have you.*

Where they are going, high in the New Territories, it is different. The other bankers rarely make it that far, up there near the Chinese border; the tourists, never. Water slaps against the sides. Forty minutes pass; land looms into view. The boatman cuts the engine. He steps out into the sea, hauls them up onto the beach.

Adam tosses a fifty at him. You took a long route around.

Ng gau chin, the boatman says to Lana. Not enough money.

She shrugs at his glaring face. I don't speak Cantonese.

The boatman shakes his head, but he doesn't complain.

They pitch their tent in a half-moon of sand and fuel their bodies for the ascent: crab claws cooked on a paraffin stove, stolen sachets of chilli flakes. She licks Adam's fingers clean. Guilt coils in her stomach: 300 calories, 400? She strips and dances naked on the footprintless white; throws her yoga-sleek body in cartwheels under the almost-full moon, an imperfect circle. Wonders if he is watching; thinks: here is a place for ritual. At Cambridge she studied Classics, Bacchus and

Dionysus, Latin tracts and Greek tragedies. Now she studies money, its flows and currents, its corporate gods. Monday to Friday, seven 'til seven, legs stiffening to torpor under her desk. At night she maps the trails as if cramming for exams.

Hiking is their thing. First it was his thing but now it is her thing, too. They target mountains like big game trophies: Sunset Peak, Lantau, Tai Mo Shan. They return on the last ferry soaked in sweat, peel off heavy boots and collapse into bed in their Sai Ying Pun studio, where the estate agent got them a great deal. *Hongkongers don't want to live here, they think the coffin shops bring bad luck. But Sai Ying Pun very popular with foreigners.* They unclench red feet and lie sweating under the air con. Breathe out as it sucks the moisture from their bodies, issuing crisp, artificial dryness in return.

*

The beach is empty, moonlit, theirs. They sit together on the sand, Adam's arm around her naked shoulders. Something in his touch feels distant, remote. She orders the thought away: *stop being neurotic.* He loves her. He married her. Five years ago this month. Streaks of phosphorescence flash in the waves and disappear. An eerie blue-green, like the Aurora Borealis. Otherworldly. She shudders at the memory of their honeymoon, a hundred miles from Reykjavik in a Corsa with no snow tyres.

Adam, I think we should turn back.

It'll be fine.

I'm scared.

Don't be a pussy.

When they skidded off the road and into the ravine, neither knew the number for the Icelandic emergency services. A passing farmer hauled them into his trailer, their bodies shaking, teeth chattering. He felt for broken bones without saying a word, face aghast at the twisted wreck.

No cars here. Lana kisses Adam's ear. He doesn't respond. She gets up and stands ankle deep in the water, watches her feet, distorted and fluid like wet paint in the tide. They walk back up the beach and unzip the tent. Climb into a shared sleeping bag, Himalayan standard, microfibre technology. All night she lies awake, the sand a wall of concrete against

her back. Adam snores like a wounded animal. She admires his sleeping profile: her husband, handsome, impressive. The South China Sea wind streams fine particles through the tent, grinding her exposed skin raw.

*

Dawn breaks on the ocean. Their tent floods red. They sit up, yawn, pull on stiff hiking boots. Adam tears open a Nutrigrain from his backpack and offers it to her. She shakes her head, says you know I don't like strawberry, slugs a milky can of Nescafe: sweet, lukewarm. He unwraps a tiny package, swaddled in cellophane inside a sandwich bag. Extracts a strip of paper printed with Hello Kitty faces, a dotted line dividing it into squares.

Is that what I think it is? she asks.

He grins. Abandoned villages are wild when you're high. Three hundred micrograms. It'll last seven hours, or eight.

Are you crazy?

We're going to three thousand feet. It'll make the high higher. He laughs.

Hello Kitty stares up at her from his left hand. She takes the last slug of coffee, crushes the can with her fingertips.

It's fine, he sighs. Just something to heighten the buzz.

Let's walk a bit first, she says. Cover some ground.

OK. He puts the tabs back in the sandwich bag and unfurls the map. Google does not work out here; in any case, Adam likes to be old school. Lana follows his footsteps as they set out up the trail, focusing on her breath as they attack the steep slope, the beach disappearing, trees getting denser, path winding upwards and inwards. She forgets which way is north. The sun is high now, coaxing sweat from his back until he drips with it. He is handsome even from behind. Light filters down through the canopy, stippling the sandy path. Spaghetti-limbed monkeys dangle from branches, miniature offspring clinging to their bellies. A snake slides across her path, a rope of iridescent blue.

Her muscles spring into life. Blood flows faster. She looks down, admires her lean brown arms. Hiking sets them apart. Out here, they purify themselves. Not like their colleagues who never leave the island, working ninety hours a week, sleeping all Saturday in matchbox

apartments off the outdoor escalator: ride down for bonuses, up for excess. You can buy anything in this city, whatever you choose to consume. Hong Kong loves only money. She sees the other bankers with their Thai masseuses, with their Indonesian strippers and thinks: gross. A few streets away from her office in Wan Chai, young girls with haunted faces throng bar doorways, laughing nervously, texting on their phones.

They are different. A thousand miles across the border is a village where everyone has her surname. One day she will visit. Adam seems at home here, he took to it fast. Especially the weekends. Champagne brunch at the Hyatt on the fiftieth floor, where the view from the terrace is *insane*. Look out over the harbour to the bobbing yachts; cut crisp lines of nose powder on five-hundred-dollar notes. Watch the crumbs float serenely over the edge. More, the city screams, have more. More and more and more and more. Go home at 4pm, sleep it off. Wake up late evening, hungry. Drop three days' salary on steak and Malbec at Tango. Call it date night. This money would go on tax in London, Lana. It's practically free. Poke at the meat until blood bubbles out of the sides. 600 calories, 900 with sauce. Eat only spinach.

*

They're into the undergrowth, late morning now. Her breathing grows hoarse as the ascent steepens. Why does she put herself through this? The air crackles with insects. Up here, on high ground, it is cooler, forest-damp. Spiders drop without warning, black masses in her face, catching in her hair, scuttling back up their silk-webs. This hike is their hardest yet. She thinks that every time. Her calf muscles ache and contract.

When it seems the climb is endless, the trail levels out into a kind of purgatory. At a green pool they stop in the shade, set backpacks down. Adam takes out a map and compass and frowns. She glugs from a half-litre bottle of Pocari Sweat and pulls on a pink fleece. They must be halfway now. Surely just another hour.

It's so cold up here, she shivers.

Now, Adam says, his eyes greedy, fingers impatient, reaching into the backpack, unbundling the cellophane package. Hello Kitty, garish squares. Now it's time for some fun.

Anita Goveas

Extract from *Green Chutney Sandwiches*

Rakel, 2000

Life-changing moments tend not to give you any warning, they're inscrutable that way. Rakel had thought the scariest time for her beautiful new business would be the Y2K fiasco, never expecting a phone call would be her downfall. It was hard enough, two women owning a garage together, but Leticia had been the only other woman on her City and Guilds course and they'd survived.

It seemed like an ordinary wedding enquiry. They'd just started taking bookings for the limousine they'd restored together in their free time. It gleamed white now, and Rakel had to stop herself from polishing it too often in case she started to remove the pristine paintwork. Adding the occasional chauffeur job was a logical off-shoot of working with cars, and Dave, their other mechanic, had done some professional driving before. The phone was ringing as she walked back into the office, her turn for receptionist duty. It had definitely been louder, more insistent than usual.

Checking the planner and getting the details of names, times and venues was becoming second nature and at least the client had known what he wanted. Rakel read back everything she'd written down as confirmation, paused slightly as she said "Kevin de Souza", but it was a common enough name. It didn't even have to be Indian, they could be Portuguese or East African.

"So, we'll see you on October the tenth. Lovely," she said, and realised she'd underlined de Souza until the pen had torn through the paper, and swore. A startled male voice at the other end of the phone said "Rakel?", but she pushed the phone down. No-one had used that name with her in years. She closed the suddenly slippery planner and chewed on her pen.

Rakel sat on the edge of the bath, waiting for Ben to come home, holding the photograph of Aziza, Soraiya and herself dressed up like Christmas trees. The precariousness of her position, and how tightly she had to grip, was helping the tension, and this way she could check the tiles and grouting to see if they needed a clean. There were some suspiciously turquoise marks near where Ben's Mountain Pine shower gel was perched, the viscous stuff he loved that smelt like toilet cleaner. The makers of those fake tree scents thought you wanted to pretend you were naked in a forest every time you had a wash. That wasn't everyone's idea of relaxation or cleanliness. She missed the scratch of his keys in the door, even though she'd been listening for it, and she gripped tighter to the photo as she heard him call out.

"Rachel?"

She tucked the photo into the back of her jeans' waistband, smooth against her skin, and waited. He must have stuck his head into their bedroom, expecting her to be curled up around a book. His usually unsettling intuitiveness would be helpful now. He'd know something had happened when he found her in this strange position, and she wouldn't have to struggle for the words.

If she strained, she could hear him getting closer, opening the living room door. She shifted a little as the bathroom door opened, making room on her ledge. Ben stood for a few seconds in the doorway before he sat down next to her, and said,

"So, what's up?" as expected. This was comforting too.

"Mother came into the office today and invited me to dinner", she said, as flatly as she could. He unconsciously raised a single eyebrow, an ability she'd always coveted.

"But you don't speak to your parents? They don't approve of your job, right?"

Rakel scrunched up her nose, tried to get the words to line up on her tongue. They tasted of salt.

"Well, that's it basically, but..."

"Basically, they stopped talking to you a while ago? And you're fine with it?"

Several questions in a row; a definitely rattled Ben. She'd wanted to spread the discomfort around, but Rakel knew she couldn't put this off any longer. Breathing in long and slow, she said,

"The thing is, they don't actually know what I'm doing. I sort of... ran away. And took all my gold and Aunt's money and they don't know if I finished college or not. Or where I live. I just wanted the freedom to make a mess of things without everyone watching all the time. And my name used to be Rakel."

"Wow. You never... wow. That's a lot of things you've never told me. Wait a minute, breathe again, I'll be one second."

Rakel inhaled deeply, started to choke, almost fell off the bath and then Ben was there carrying two KitKats.

"Don't die until you've finished your KitKat, Rachel. I mean, shall I still call you that?"

When she stopped clutching her chest, Ben sat down on the toilet and split open his chocolate bar. Rakel put the corner of the packet in her mouth and pulled with her teeth, using the mutilation to give her time. He'd never brought two separate KitKats before. They'd shared. Ben always chose his words and gestures carefully.

"Have I completely messed this up, Ben? I'm still the person you know, I promise."

The chocolate bar wouldn't open, the foil unforgiving of her attempts. She held it against her stomach as Ben just watched. The chocolate liquified wherever her fingertips rested. She knew rushing to fill the silence was a psychology technique but he'd never used it on her. The gap was compelling, like standing on a footbridge with wind tickling your hair and feeling streams of traffic suck you downwards.

"I didn't want you to misinterpret what happened, I barely know what happened myself."

The grouting between the pale green tiles needed a good scrub, there were spreading patches of black along the glossy white. They'd put those tiles up together, after one fell out while Rakel was showering, and she realised how bad the previous owner had been at DIY. Ben had to stay the whole weekend, and then had never left.

“So you thought it would never come up? I was never going to meet them? That’s what I’m taking from this, you didn’t imagine a situation where I would need to meet your family.”

She kept as still as she could but her hands were shaking. Ben had always read her body as easily as her words. The top of the photograph scraped against her back.

“Can you tell me that’s not true Rachel? Can you at least say that?”

The chocolate was turning to mush in her fingers, but she couldn’t loosen her grip, couldn’t let go. Ben extended a hand, then reached out and wiped his fingers on a stripy towel, any chocolate residue lost in the pattern.

“Look, we’ve never promised each other anything. I thought I was OK with that. I’m going to stay with Dave for a bit, I think you need some time as well.”

Ben shut the door as deliberately as he did everything else, so quietly she strained every muscle to hear the click. Rake! brought out the photo again, stroked her finger over Aziza and Soraiya’s gleaming faces, back before she’d walked out of their lives.

Alice Hughes

Extract from *Never Just Junk*

Eleanor. Holme Fen wood, autumn

I add the patchwork quilt to my pile of forgottenables. The objects I can't place in my memory. They look at me blankly. Like artefacts from another world. Why have you kept us? they ask. Where were we found? I haul them up to the spare room. One by one, I throw them out the window. I start with the daintier things. The glass Dunhill what's-its-name smashes on the garden wall. A pearl brooch falls into a soggy bed beneath scratchy wildflowers. Next up, a wooden chair. Its leg snaps off as it hits the gravel path. Before long, I won't make any sense. No one will want me. I will curl up with them, sink slowly into the peat. A flood will submerge what's left of us and Holme Fen wood, as it rushes over the low-lying land.

Bill enters the room, bleary-eyed.

"Eleanor, what the hell are you doing?" he tries to restrain me.

I push him away. I've always been stronger. My hands are weathered, punch-throwing and proud of it. They have split, shaped and bent hot metal. His have only ever held a theatre audience and a pen. And women of course, plenty of women.

"You wanted me to have a clear out, didn't you?" I snap back. "I need a bloody drink."

I am a collector, a hoarder, a scavenger, a beachcomber. I have a fondness for unwanted scrap and objects, dented and smoothed by years of use. Give me a rubbish tip, a charity shop, a beach, or a flea market, and I'd usually rummage myself silly. I haven't had the energy lately. It all started when I was a child, watching Mam intently. 'Make do and mend,' that was her motto. Nothing was ever wasted. She found a pram in the River Gaunless. It stank of orangey mulch and

metal spoil heaps from the mining country the river snaked through. She pulled off the pram's hood, stripped its body down and repainted it with the bright turquoise used for our bicycles. She used leather cloth to cut the pieces for the hood, which she stitched together on Gran's sewing machine. She bought a doll and made covers for it, then tied a bow on its handle and left it under the Christmas tree. It was wasted on me. I fought and behaved like a boy. My friend Martha got far more pleasure out of it.

As a teenager, I started projects of my own. I loved finding a bulky jumper to turn inside out, snip snip snipping along the seams. Finding the end of the yarn, unravelling all its colours and winding it into a ball around my hand. I knitted new things for Christmas. A cardigan for Mam, a scarf for Dad and a hat for my sister. As soon as I finished, I had to start something new. One day, while tossing wool scraps along the river bank, something struck me about the little birds, who used the scraps to build their nests. Their folded wings made me think of spoons. Their tail feathers made me think of forks. I rushed home and took some old cutlery from the back of the kitchen drawer. I bought a soldering iron from town, then bent and melted the silverware into life-size sculptures of the birds. They shone in the palm of my hand. I sold them to friends and family, and eventually had my own stand at the market in town.

In my twenties, I went to visit one of my teacher's friends, Rita, who lived in London. My teacher thought it would be good for me, to get away from Darlington for a while, and paid for my train fare. Rita took me to an art gallery for the first time in my life. Tate Britain. There, I saw all manner of modern art, including Pablo Picasso's sculpture *Still Life*, sat on a plinth. I reached to touch its blue painted scraps of wood. But Rita hit me and gestured to the gallery attendant watching us. The construction looked like a small sideboard, trimmed with a length of gold-tasselled tablecloth. On the sideboard was a knife, a beer glass, two chunks of sausage and a slice of cheese, all made from wood. I could make this, I thought. I could stitch, knit, paint, sew, carve, solder, drill. I had the techniques, just not the artist brain. I heard a couple discussing it.

“See the gold fringe? It’s a mockery of the frames of old-master paintings,” the man in a tailored jacket announced, putting his arm around his girlfriend, who was wearing a fur coat. She nodded, humming in agreement.

“It’s such a bold subversion of pure art,” she said. I didn’t know what pure art was then. But I did know what I was born to do. I resolved to save enough money to move to London, and get in with a crowd of these creative types. They would teach me the ways of the art world. I would become an artist.

Bill is out for the rest of the day, thank fuck. We’re getting to the end of our tethers. What was meant to be years of retired bliss, is turning into hell. Not even our sense of humour can save us now. I couldn’t throw the patchwork quilt out the window in the end. It feels too significant. I need to give it more of a chance to speak. I make a cup of tea, wearing it like a cape over my shoulders. Did I make you? Did Mam make you? Each square, each scrap of material has a history, a former life. It sings with voices and memories, too muffled for me to hear. I have a vague memory of the clothing factory in Darlington, where they sold bags of off-cuts. Perhaps your life started there? If only I could consume it, patch by patch. Maybe if I did, the memories would flow back into me.

I sit on the sofa under the quilt. Turn on the news. There is a story about a missing child. More flooding, everywhere. A car crash. A tower block fire. All very cheery. There’s some footage of the ocean, which looks like someone has vomited swirls of rubbish all over its surface. I think about all the things I could make with that rubbish. It hurts my head even contemplating it. I’ve lost my crafty mojo, but not my crafty longings. My hands aren’t connected to my brain like they used to be: no longer seamless. I tried to keep up my sculptures for a while, but kept forgetting where I was at, no matter how many damn notes I wrote to myself. Now, I’ve given up.

I call the objects I’ve collected over the years my treasures. I moved them in sneakily, five years ago, when Bill and I partnered up. I used to bring things in my overnight bag, and leave them dotted

around, until one day I turned up with a whole van. I remember the horror on his face. He put up with my clutter for a while. Now, he keeps on at me. “They are trip hazards,” he says. “Please can we have a clear out, just a few things. It will be dangerous, when...” He can’t bring himself to say it: when I am well and truly demented. It could be in seven years if I’m lucky, or a couple if I’m not. I can’t remember exactly what the doctor said at my last appointment, but it was something along the lines of: “I’m afraid there’s nothing we can do.”

Lou Kramskoy

Extract from *The Front Line*

Every time I get that hot stressy feeling, the one that starts in the nodes of my neck with a pea-sized pop, a pea-sized pop that oozes out bad jelly, every time I get that feeling I reach into my pocket and pull Tiny Fighter out.

And out she comes like a tornado of tiny violence ready to kick Ass for me, not just one kind of Ass but all sorts, any Ass that makes me feel if I peeled back my skull skin and dug deep with clean fingers, bent to a mirror and looked inside, I'd see boats sailing, bobbing around my bad jelly brain, giant boats with cargoes stuffed full of thoughts, old dirty thoughts, exotic new ones. And in the darkest corners of those boats' heaving holds, crates creak and groan, crates stacked so high they lean and bow and threaten to topple with their hidden contents squealing at each other like smuggled monkeys, eyes white and terrified, as paying passengers sit up top staring out of small windows sipping on expensive bottled water. Well, every time I get that feeling, out she comes.

And wow, Tiny Fighter is a fearless freakish fighter who kicks Ass black and blue and every other bruised colour there is. She kicks Ass till I feel better, till I can fold back that tender transparency of skin.

Tiny Fighter lies in wait ready to help with her "back you up, bitch" attitude. She lives in hidden pockets on the left of my life, because my right is always busy swiping, typing or holding hot coffee. I don't exactly know the millimoment Tiny Fighter will pounce but when she does, wow, when she does you better take mother-loving cover.

Tiny Fighter, out she'll come in meetings when we talk about privacy, supply chains, data collection and storage, spectrum,

cybersecurity, critical infrastructure and a number of economic concerns, in these meetings as these colleagues, these strangers, say things to me, awful things like 'redo' or 'redraft' – terrible affixes affix to me too.

I feel incapable, unknowable, unlovable.

In these meetings when I can't open my mouth for fear of my broiled brain pouring out jellied thoughts into the dead space their multi-connectivity questions have carved in the room, when I feel commands popping like dry gunpowder in the professional air around me, well, that's the perfect time and out she comes.

Out she comes in the middle of meetings, landing in the centre of that oval Eames Eiffel-legged table with legs spread wide ready to kick Ass, the Ass of Beth (Development), Rachel (Logistics) and Simon-Simon (Production) (called Simon-Simon because he speaks twice as long, twice as loud and twice as hard but Tiny Fighter puts him last. Last, you hear! Ha!).

First Beth, Beth who sucks the lead on her pencils making them soggy so her smile always shows that dot of grey lead on the tip of her tongue. Tiny Fighter will go for that tip of her slimy tongue and bite the leaded spot, make a tiny hole and suck out her fat pink tongue tissue till it lies flat and flapping in her mouth so when she speaks, she'll sound like a fart cushion. Tiny Fighter'll dive down the top of Beth's silk work shirt into that flabby cleavage she's always got on show and I can't see what Tiny Fighter does down there in that showy place around her boobs but it involves nipples and scratching, yes, serious scratching I imagine Beth won't notice till the next morning (she isn't the type to wash at night because she's always going straight out from work meeting friends, family, smiling smugly the next day like someone whose parents always bought them puppies). I imagine her in the mornings after Tiny Fighter's done that fight, in that morning shower lathering those fat, freckled boobs, I imagine her saying "Ouch" and "Ooh" as she feels the sting of water and I see her twist and turn in that mirror pulling folds of back fat back, that shapeless flesh that overflows her bra strap, and she'll wonder where those scratches came from. Ha! Where indeed? She'll never think of me.

But Tiny Fighter won't stop with Beth. No way. Once Tiny Fighter has got the taste you can't stop her.

She'll turn on Rachel who always saves Beth a seat as if meetings were a school trip and they're still sharing packed lunch. Tiny Fighter'll swing up on those stupid gold-hooped earrings Rachel wears that are really just for the young (and she's five years older than me, five years I say, that's a whole school shuffle). Standing on those gold hoops Tiny Fighter will jump up into her ear and punch a pathway through Rachel's head and I'll laugh when Rachel tucks her perfect blond hair behind her clever, clever ear, the ear that heard tutors talk at Cambridge, that Steven from Programming sticks his tongue in as he pumps, I imagine and, looking through that tunnel Tiny Fighter has fought between her ears, that tunnel right through, I'll laugh when I see Tiny Fighter waving at me from the other side. Stupid Rachel. She doesn't know what damage has been done, damage that'll last so every time I look at Rachel I'll laugh.

Then, having dispatched Beth and Rachel, Tiny Fighter will turn on Simon-Simon but Simon-Simon is trickier because he looks like all those men in films and on TV, men with power who you have to find a clever way to hurt, but his eyes, his eyes don't say POWER they say something else. His white eyes say MONKEY and BOX and sometimes they say HELP ME TOO but Tiny Fighter is incredible. She'll undo his zip and lower herself down into Simon-Simon's loose boxer shorts. (I'm not an expert on undergarments or men his age but once, when he bent down to look for fresh milk in the fridge, as he sniffed the stale carton, I saw his pant-line rise above his trousers. They had a red tape measure embroidered around the waist. A tape measure! Novelty pants? Present pants?) The looseness of those pants means Tiny Fighter can climb in by the nine-inch benchmark and roundhouse kick his floppy fat balls, then pluck his pubes till tiny streams of sperm shoot from small holes and Tiny Fighter will climb out, flick that sperm so it slits across the faces of Beth and Rachel, landing like little scars all over their dry lips. I'll watch as Beth and Rachel pick at their lips, put on balm and wonder where that flaky dryness came from. And poor Simon-Simon, he'll never know why he can't perform properly

late at night and he'll think that dryness is his wife's fault, her fault indeed.

And, having dispensed with all these losers, Tiny Fighter'll stand in the middle of that stylish wipe-down white table sweating, her black hair wild, her eyes glowing, wiping the red blood off her hands across her naked chest (she's naked of course – I tried putting doll's clothes on her once but it looked stupid) and as she pulls Simon-Simon's plucked pubes webbed around her away, she'll smile at me.

But mostly she doesn't smile. Mostly when she's finished kicking Ass she stands there confused, starts crying, runs away, tumbles off that table with tears teeming from her eyes and slips out under the crack in the glass meeting room door and then I'll feel bad.

I feel bad.

And later I sit sobbing, feeling BAD in that last cubicle of the office's baby-blue gender-neutral toilets, wondering *what's wrong with me?* Wondering *is it this job? Is it any job? Is it me?* Wondering *why can't I take the criticisms everyone else can?* As I'm drowning in waves of unexplained, inexplicable anxiety, feeling pathetic and ill, seriously ill, I'll call Mum on my phone who'll say calming stuff but stuff that'll make me feel childish, foolish, girlish. I'll call Mum and as I tell her something is wrong with me, wrong, as I talk about the lump on my neck, the pea-sized pop and the bad jelly inside me, I'll hear her sigh, fold away her newspaper and slowly tap-tap her metal spoon on her morning cup of coffee and, with that smart voice of hers, she'll tell me she never needed a Tiny Fighter to fight battles for her and, frustrated by my inability, she'll snap, tell me to pull myself together and ask where exactly I think the front line is?

Where?

P T McCarthy

Extract from *Titus Oates is Alive. Why?*

L ivinia Henley mouths a silent “thank you” and beams at her gathered community of friends. And with the affectionate clip-clopping hands and gently returning smiles, she *rejoices* in the abundance.

Yes, it is warm within the marquee, but not oppressively so. The azure and the viridian glimpsed between the swaying walls of canvas, remind her that early summer is in *splendid* effulgence outside. And those hills in the misty distance, those will be the Black Mountains. Meaning good old Herefordshire isn’t far away either, including Combe Village, where Titus once revealed another nest of rotten, stinking Jesuits.

Honestly, this feels like Arcadia.

The lyrical impressions decant into Livinia’s mind like tawny port into a stirrup cup. The slight breeze, the virgin grass, the gentle earth that make the seating lines so tenderly topsy-turvy, yes, all suggest transience but also something deeply special, a moment that will never, *can* never, decay. This will be etched into her heart for eternity, here where she entered into this concluding communion with her wonderful readers; goodness, what poignancy!

And now that she’s laid bare her confession and elucidated with enormous honesty her reasons for the decision, they’ve responded with the fullest of charity. They have *completely* understood. But it’s their joy in the acquiescence that is so invigorating. It’s magnifying her very soul — much like Mary meeting Elizabeth — and Livinia has to take a hankie and dab at a tiny tear as the applause continues, until the marvellously urbane interviewer by her side (but whom she can’t quite see) makes a

gesture and suddenly it fades, as clement dew on the first morning.

Now Miss Henley will take questions from the floor, including from the ladies and gentlemen of the press. Please be brief, everyone.

A striking figure in pearls and bobby socks rises to announce that she is the chief theology correspondent from *The Guardian*.

“Would Miss Henley agree that the need for a renaissance in Christian literature is quite urgent, and the upholding of sanctity of the utmost importance in today’s deteriorating culture?”

Very much, replies Livinia, thanking her for that excellent question and the unceasing support of *The Guardian* in its defence of traditional family values. Now with one’s retirement from profane writing and the publication of *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs II: Who Are They Roasting Now?* Livinia hopes that other authors — especially those in her exclusive Booker-nominated club — will see this as a *profound* watershed. She calls upon them to join her in the abjurement of writerly self-indulgence. She urges rejection of the empty falsehoods of the six-figure advance. They must, *must*, deny themselves lustful thoughts of country piles in Sussex and return to the timeless verities of authorial piety and self-restraint. And perhaps a bungalow in Leamington Spa.

The lady from *The Guardian* nods.

The audience purrs.

A fine young fellow from the *London Review of Books*, in a three-piece tweed ensemble with hanging monocle, next enquires if Miss Henley has any regrets about embarking on a writing career in the very first place? Given that she’s expended so much energy on the most frightful tittle-tattle, and worse, the most frightful, sinful, tittle-tattle? He was thinking in particular about the adulterous shenanigans delineated in her *Pamela Harrison* trilogy.

“I could hardly put it better myself,” returns Livinia, smiling. The tedious recounting of middle-age concupiscence. The tiresome trysts on Hampstead Heath. The *umpteenth* use of the Post Office Tower as a metaphor for phallic anxiety; all of it was a pyrrhic waste of time, stupendously destructive to the inner essence and, what’s more, hugely unpleasing to Almighty Providence.

A standing ovation.

Such verbose bilge, she continues, goes on being churned out by overread madams in North London postcodes; she knows, she's met them. They are still being published by priapic little men living in St John's Wood — she knows, she's met them — and purchased by the tonnage by lonely dreamers across Middle England (she knows...etc). Speaking rather frankly, it would be the *utter death* of the western feminine principle if this travesty was allowed to continue.

"I therefore plead with the younger generation," pleads Livinia and her hand describes a flourish of wisdom and is certainly not the finger-wagging of a fuddy-duddy headmistress *manquée*, "especially to the young women here at Hay-on-Wye, please hear me when I say to you that that form of so-called literature is absolutely dead and resolutely buried. Sisters! Lower your pens, gather your skirts and embark on something more meaningful!"

Naturally, the audience are delighted and express themselves accordingly. Then a sweet little girl in ribbons and garlands skips to the stage and presents Livinia with a bouquet. The faces cheer. The dandy from the LRB blows a kiss. The theologian from *The Guardian* gives a blessing but also presents the middle finger, a funny, punk-rock, Archbishop of Canterbury.

It is all *quite* sublime.

A gentleman stands in the second row. Livinia could swear he has the belly of Mark Lawson and the bouffant hair of Melvyn Bragg. Or is it the other way round? And why is he levitating?

"I was wondering if Miss Henley might also reveal to us," whispers the mid-air Melvyn Lawson into an invisible mike, "exactly how she uncovered this remarkable new information about Titus Oates? After all, it isn't in Jane Law's 1949 biography that you shamelessly plagiarised, is it, Miss Henley?"

The marquee goes quiet.

"Is it, Miss Henley?"

Like the birds over the Black Mountains, Livinia's long-dormant butterflies revive and rise up. To the canvas roofing and out to the festival site, off they go, away from this lost Eden, so mockingly sullied

by this horrid inquisitor, who locks onto Livinia's eyes with the robotic insistence of the literary Gestapo.

"Is it, Miss Henley?"

Out in the land of former loves, the audience are mumbling and grow restless in their folding chairs.

"Is... it... Miss... Hen... ley."

"But Simon told me," protests Livinia. "Simon said! Didn't you Simon? Simon? Where's Simon?"

And as Livinia becomes confused, something else begins to levitate and this apparition also seems familiar, what with its bob and Angela Merkel trouser-suit, but what is *decidedly* strange is the way it (she?) juggles a smart phone and a glowing, plastic, dolphin-y thing. Gosh. Barry's souvenir lampstand from Wells-on-Sea.

Livinia blinks again and now the dolphin has escaped the glowing sphere and is diving in circles, making silly shapes amongst the departing butterflies. The officious acrobat is also changing into Barry's Pringle sweater. And yes, it is a she! And that *she* is now paragliding around the tent, bellowing directives at the audience, the latter apparently transformed into those white-robed chaps from the Book of Revelation. From on high the voice exhorts: "*Simon Callow is Titus Oates; Radio Four Tent, five minutes,*" and the Wise Elders obediently trail out in glassy-eyed procession.

Livinia repeatedly cries, "No, my children, stay! I beg you!" but vainly so and as she extends her hands to deflect the aerial busy-body, Livinia sees it's Tiggy, of course it's Tiggy, and Tiggy is aiming directly for her, laughing, laughing cruelly, and Livinia can see her getting nearer and nearer, such that she thrusts out her arms again and again...

Livinia Henley wakes to something wet and ghastly. Somehow, the goblin teasmade has upended, its tepid contents browning the nylon coverlet and unctuous lino floor. Not a wink of sleep and now, no morning tea. What an *appalling* bed and breakfast this is.

Amber Medland

Extract from *Mr Blythe Esq.*

Type 1

Today my boss handed me an envelope, then a stamp, and told me to lick it.

My online therapist, Susan, says that my inability to set appropriate boundaries indicates low self-confidence. I am convinced that Susan is a bot.

I reply: **I do not have low self-esteem. What I have is impeccable manners.**

Julie and I used to live together. She wants me to get a *real therapist* and *think seriously* about breaking up with Phil.

But you don't need analysis, she persists, just a different voice in your head.

Julie's never held onto a man for long, is what Phil says.

At his birthday party, Phil told Julie that my manners are a substitute for a personality. She looked so uncomfortable that I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing; Julie didn't know I was in on the joke. Phil was repeating a self-deprecating remark I made on our first date.

Julie brings the same pale guacamole to every party and has to take it home again because nobody touches it. I bring tortilla chips.

As bots go, Susan is pretty dislikeable. She points out that maintaining a 4.9 Uber rating doesn't imply superiority and that saying *I am taking myself out for a drink* hints at needing an escort.

I am determined to unmask Susan as the algorithm she is.

I will be thirty in seven days I type as I leave the office. **What are you going to do about that?**

Don't do anything I wouldn't do, Lucinda calls after me, tongue flashing behind her teeth. Lucinda is Mr Blythe's daughter. She wears skirts and cardigans with matching edges, and pearls as big as gobstoppers. She used to occupy my position. Now she keeps track of supplier invoices and specialises in forcing small businesses to remove their service charges. She talks in a *widdle baby* voice to men.

Julie has set me up on a blind date for practice. **I'm not going** I text.

I hold my breath between tube-stops. Phil is always out on Wednesday nights, so I'll still get back before him.

Moo!

And what does a sheep go?

Baaaah.

And what does mummy go?

Nag nag nag nag nag.

Father and daughter fall about laughing. Across from them, a blank-faced woman sticks her hand into a bag of salt and vinegar crisps.

I arrive at The Mughal forty minutes early and order a small glass of wine. I'm determined to prove Phil wrong, prove that I'm not made of glass, and can go out without him, without breaking.

He ranks my smile as my least attractive feature.

It's not a criticism; you're just so pretty when you cry.

I bare my teeth at the barman.

When I sit down, Susan has not had the courtesy to reply.

And I'm fat. I send. **Well?**

I attach several photos of myself over the years to illustrate my point. My more appealing attributes I do not share. One day, a stranger will notice these and fall to their knees with the shock of me. My teeth, coral-delicate, their asymmetry. How mineralled my tongue is.

Susan has roused herself. **Why don't you tell me about your day?**

The stamp was gummy and dry. My mouth feels now like it does at the dentist, after they suck the saliva out.

I tap notes into my phone on the seaweed salad I bought with petty cash at lunchtime.

Vivid green, slippery, sesame oil. Kelp, animal, chlorophyll.

I met Phil on a self-defence course. He was the instructor. His body could sell aftershave. He was bald but he wore it as if it were a choice he'd made, and his green eyes knew that I knew this. I was disappointed when he didn't act out the attacks in a realistic manner.

We didn't have much in common, so at first our intimacy was restricted to a call-and-response. It was easier with roles to play.

Attacked by a shark?

Punch on the nose.

Bomb on the tube?

Drop down. Stay low.

Attacked by a man?

KICK HIM IN THE GONADS.

Later, in bed, Phil hesitated. You have to assess the situation realistically. If you're not going to get away, you don't want to make it worse for yourself.

Most people weren't ready to hear that, he explained, so he left it out in class.

That rape was an inevitable fact, like sharks and terrorist attacks, I never questioned.

The first time I cooked for Phil, I made spaghetti alle vongole and held my breath, willing the clams to open.

You see? They tell you when they're ready.

Phil tapped a stubborn one, like he was knocking on a tiny door.

Dud, he said. I pointed out where the bin was.

Another night, when we'd stopped counting dates, Phil called my food-blog a vanity project, in a *Queer Eye* voice, camping it up. I was posting about the PARMIGIANO REGGIANO factory. Seventy per cent of the fields in Parma are devoted to alfalfa for the cows.

Someone who didn't know Phil might find his comment cruel, but we both knew the cruelty was an act. Part of his martial arts persona. He was mocking the idea of a man who would call my passion a *vanity project*. Like when he assumed that I'd joined the self-defence class to tone up. Or when he said he'd never fancied a brown girl before, and

wasn't self-defence against my culture?

Later that night, he glanced at me blogging on the sofa and laughed.

Think how much you could make typing at that speed for some city guy.

I laughed until something caught in my throat and I choked. Phil got me a glass of water, and rubbed my back, tenderly.

On my first day working for Mr Blythe, I wear *Mad Men* heels. My feet slip as I walk, but nothing can dull my excitement. In Starbucks, I watch the people around me ordering with purpose. I'm one of them now. Outside, a woman is begging with her forehead pressed to the pavement. I step over her gingerly, knowing she must sense me and that we will do this every day.

The Blythes' office is just off Grosvenor Square, behind a beech tree so leafy, it gives me vertigo. Since Mr Blythe has been confined to a wheelchair, he doesn't come in any more. The office is full of dark furniture. The windows don't open, so in summer it's like a morgue.

We do not give financial advice, Lucinda reminds me. What we do is *wealth preservation*.

The phone rings, but Lucinda doesn't react. After three rings, I lunge for it, sending the handset flying. I replace it, as if she might not have noticed.

I hover over my desk, which is covered in paper. I pick up a DHL waybill dated 2012.

Where do I put this?

Lucinda smiles, sweetly. Where do you think?

I call DHL and listen to *Greensleeves* for seven minutes. I get up, slowly, as though the waybill's home is calling to me.

Hotter, Lucinda calls. Warming, getting warmer.

I move towards the radiator and she shrieks – freezing!

She seems disappointed when I come to a halt, then sulks for the rest of the day.

Carly Minsky

Extract from *The One of Us*

The first time I met Dr Ariti at her clinic, I was struck by the contradictions: the way it was so much cooler than you'd expect and still sustained a faint smell of human sweat, a stale perfume that was forever evolving, assimilating the nervous secretions of each new client.

And how the consultation room felt familiar, almost homely, but in a generic way. The design was just slightly too purposeful. The gentle grey walls perfectly unobtrusive, too clinical for a real home but not sterile enough for a hospital ward. It was obvious to me, even at that pre-school age, that someone had laboured over the deception, populating the room with quietly fashionable furniture – a dark wooden chest, its surface dulled over its lifetime, and fabrics in bold geometric patterns but muted colours. Someone had taken care to make the room appear both polished, and lived in.

Years later I actually told Dr Ariti that this had evoked my total mistrust in her and in everything that took place in the room. Each week I'd hold a perfectly upright position on the dimpled navy sofa, gripping our entwined fingers and staring stoically out the window at the same view I recognised from every other institutional window: clear, grey, static sky.

At that initial appointment Dr Ariti smiled down at the top of our heads, and introduced herself as Monica, then held out an open palm level with our chins.

“And who are you?”

I wasn't planning on answering. But we lifted our eyes ready to introduce ourselves. That was the first betrayal.

“Twins!”

Our mothers released breathy laughs and I glared at a seagull outside.

“Everyone calls them ‘twins’,” Mama Jo explained, too quickly. I turned my head to catch a flush rising up her face. Beside her, Carmen was nodding and pressing her lips tightly together.

Dr Ariti spoke even more deliberately, rearranging her face with every overly pronounced word.

“Can you tell me your *name*?”

This time I knew the right answer.

“Esme Alina Moore.”

I blinked slowly. Across the room, Mama Jo shifted her weight to the other leg, leaning forward beyond the doorway.

“Just your name sweetie!”

We didn’t know any other answer. We slipped our hands apart, and I began tracing patterns on my dress. Dr Ariti sank back into her chair, pen poised like an absurdly tiny javelin. Suddenly, I had something to prove. I turned from the window and met her gaze.

“Esme Alina Moore,” I repeated. Perhaps I’m embellishing now but, in my memory, I actually felt Mama Jo release a thread she’d wound tightly somewhere inside her after we were born. Dr Ariti looked more energised than she had when we entered.

“It’s OK,” she nodded at Mama Jo. “We’ll unpick this next time.”

*

In all my years seeing clients, there remained an unacknowledged theme: the perpetual conflict between individuality and belonging. It was present in so many of my therapy sessions, but somehow it was both too abstract and too fundamental to be discussed. It must be said, I was also afraid and ashamed to name this tension. It exists in my own sense of self, and I wasn’t prepared to get into that piece of work. What bearing would that have on my own relationships? With my husband, my son?

One case in particular left me with no choice. Talking about individual personhood, drawing out its limits and its consequences, was unavoidable in my work with the twins. It was more than philosophical

definitions to them. It framed and contained their experience completely.

The case study I'm presenting can be summarised, crudely maybe, as a pair of fraternal twins trapped in a terrible battle to convince themselves that individuality is valuable. For them, individuality is a choice. And, like all choices, it's a burden on their inner moral core. How can they be truly a twin and truly themselves?

This all-consuming question wasn't obvious at first. The twins were so young, and so reserved. In fact, I discerned little about their internal world for the first four years they were coming to see me.

I met them the year they started school. Their mothers were a same-sex couple, one of whom I'd seen previously as a therapy client. Both women attended the first consultation; the room could barely accommodate so many people. As I'd instructed, the women waited just inside the doorway, encouraging the girls to go ahead without them. The twins marched forward in single file and almost perfectly in sync, breaking step only when the leader wobbled unpredictably.

Something about her instability worried me. I'd read in their notes all about her medical issues, but in person it occurred to me that something else was going on. She didn't show any of the usual signs of frustration I'd expect to find in young children who experience physical weaknesses in their crucial developmental stages. I had the sense that she had simply decided that exercising physical control over her body wasn't worth the effort.

It was a long walk from the doorway to the cushioned bench opposite me for the twins, with their short, soft limbs. The second girl clearly embraced her position as 'follower', indifferent to her sister's missteps. I noticed her adapt her pace and gait in response to the leader's wobbles and pauses, creating a curious choreography. She was imitating her sister, but without malice.

The twins shuffled and settled onto the bench's sunken cushions. Neither twin glanced back at their mothers, but I noticed their gazes were fixed on each other's faces, in an uninhibited, intimate way. Observing them felt like an intrusion into a person's private, physical world, like watching a man bite his nails, or a woman pluck the hair from her upper lip. It embarrassed me, and transfixed me at the

same time. I broke the tension with a bright greeting. The twins were startled. One immediately took a strand of her sister's hair to twist around her own finger and the other met my eyes confidently.

"I am Monica," I said, pointing my finger back at my nose. I turned my hand towards one girl's face. "And who are you?"

She smiled shyly as she answered: "I am twins."

I found this response charming, and indicative of the girl's advanced thinking. I hadn't actually asked for her name, so she had answered my broad question with an appropriate detail about herself. Other four-year-olds might have been flummoxed by my ambiguity. So, I thanked her for telling me that piece of information, and asked for her name. She gave me three: her own, her sister's, her surname.

From the doorway, one mother began to prompt her for a different answer, but her wife squeezed her arm and she shrugged an apology for interrupting. The girl I'd addressed understood that we weren't happy with the answer, and she retreated into herself, looking down at her wool-clad legs. In my notes, I'd written that the other girl repeated her sister's answer even before I asked her anything, but that's not how I remember what happened next.

I tried something else with the other twin. "Who is this?" I asked, this time gesturing at her sister who continued playing with the hem of her dress. The girl I addressed lifted her chin; she'd been waiting for her turn. "I have a BIG scar," she told me proudly. "I was very brave." Without hesitation she lifted up her sister's dress.

Both mothers were suddenly between me and the girls, one kneeling and whispering something which sounded rehearsed, somewhere between a reprimand and a reassurance. The other woman's shoulders partially obscured my view. At the edge of my vision, I saw a pale pink hand reach towards her mother's, so fleshy and plump against the woman's tight olive skin.

That ended the first appointment. I promised their mothers that we'd get to the bottom of it. And yet the last time I saw the twins, I was faced by two strangers. Strangers to me, but also to each other. Everything had unravelled, finally.

Qudsia Mirza

Extract from *The Jackal*

When her mother died, the girl was so young that she was still learning to walk. She would step unsteadily, lurching back and forth, while her father watched with vacant eyes. A village woman would come in each day, carrying her young baby and followed by children, some who belonged to her and others from the village. They played rowdily in the dust while she thrust her teat into the girl's mouth. The girl would gulp noisily, looking up at the woman with wild, excited eyes, her hands grasping at the loose breast.

The villagers saw that the father had become separated from his spirit and they enveloped him in soft, cajoling words of encouragement. But his body remained empty and listless and failed to register that his little girl was growing. She could now walk, and no longer needed the breast. Instead, she devoured the leftovers that the villagers brought to them – bowls of lumpy maize or rice, broth with scraggy bits of meat. She would tear at the gristly flesh with her short, clawed fingers while her hair, tangled and dry, fell into the thin soup.

One late summer evening, the father stood on the edge of a field of corn that blazed saffron and gold and swayed in the warm breeze. As he stood, his body leaned to one side and then the other, in rhythm with the stalks and the leaves and the glittering nuggets around him. And then suddenly, his blank, lidless eyes closed and he pitched forward and fell slowly to the ground. When the villagers discovered his body, cold and smooth as the stones found on the riverbed, they wrapped it in reeds and tied it with twine, and lowered it gently into the earth.

The girl, now long-limbed and with wide-set, tawny eyes, was put to work in the fields where she laboured in the heat. As she walked

into the thickets that stood taller than her, her form evaporated and she disappeared from view. The villagers did not see or hear from her all day, except, on occasion, when they would spot the whites of an eye or the glint of an incisor, as she moved swiftly between the dense, tangled leaves. Or sometimes, they heard her as she worked, the rhythmic stroke of her scythe alternating with her hard grunts. At the end of the day, she would appear suddenly, shrunk and exhausted, dragging the heavy implement behind her.

Then, as the night settled into its silky darkness, the girl would set out, criss-crossing low, razed fields, and trees that stood like risen ghosts. She meandered along the river bank, wading in the reeds, looking up at the silent birds lodged high in shadowy branches. Other nights, she would run to the plain to stand at the edge of its vast emptiness and watch the black, soundless antelope massed against the light of the moon. For long nights she would be gone and the villagers were fearful – for her, and for her acts, which trespassed the unspoken laws of the village. Armed with burning torches that crackled in the motionless air, they cried out her name, combing and hunting the darkened land in search of her.

The girl continued to grow, her lean, muscled limbs now stretching out from her body. Her skin was stained to a charred brown and roughened with cuts and scars from the work in the fields. Oily secretions oozed out of her pores and glands, so that she felt as if her body was encased in a glistening membrane. Her growing breasts were still small and tender, while the soft hair on her forearms and her narrow calves had thickened. Hair also uncurled itself under her clammy armpits as it lay slick against her skin. She felt that her body was like a vessel brimming with riotous fluids and discharges, spilling out chaotic and unchecked.

One day, when her will failed her, she abandoned her scythe at the edge of the fields, and began to walk. She left the village far behind, walking farther and farther away, towards nothing but the distant line that separated the land from the sky. And then, when she could walk no more, she stopped and surveyed the plain, squinting her eyes against the bright light of the sun. Beyond, was an ancient tree,

with black, twisted branches stretched out as if trying to break away from its centre, and she walked to it and lay under its shade. Looking up, she saw the dark line of a lone falcon, its wings immobile as it soared in the airless sky. All was quiet, muffled in the heat, except for the steady ticking of beetles scuttling along the dry earth. Soon, she fell asleep, her hair spread, fan-like, around her.

She awoke, sometime later, to the faraway yelp of a desert fox which had slipped from the side of a ridge. Propping herself up, she looked around and saw it find its footing, its snowy feet loping away out of sight. The day's brilliant light had dulled and the distant horizon was now faint and hazy.

Then she noticed that in the nether part of her belly, in the deepest, softest place inside her, something was throbbing. She felt a wetness at the top of her legs and parted them to see that the patch of earth underneath had turned a dark, oxblood red. Rivulets of crimson trickled down the inside of her downy thighs. With a jolt, she realised that it was this that had pooled on the earth under her as she slept. She explored her body and found the source of the fluid and, bewildered, looked down at her bloodied fingers. And in that moment, she felt small and vulnerable, and her grasp of herself as strong and vigorous slipped. The sense of the vast, unknowing fragility of her body uncurled itself in her mind.

When she returned to the village, the women pulled the girl inside and cleaned her up. Then they told her to sit, and forming a protective ring around her, explained what had happened. The elderly ones puckered up their shrivelled mouths and ululated their delight that she had now come of age. The ones with daughters the same age gazed at her, their eyes sodden with pity, remonstrating the loss of her mother and her guiding hand. The younger ones sighed and ushered her in to sorrow, exchanging bitter tales of unceasing pain. They spoke of bodily cycles set to fixed rules of behaviour, and lamented the loss of childhood selves, never to be regained.

The girl was silent, still, baffled and betrayed by the mutations of her body and how it had catapulted her into this unknown. She was instructed in the higher truth, and how the laws that governed the

village were drawn from this supreme authority. They lived under the bidding of ancient rituals and commands, the women explained, and it is this that has created our order, our settled peace. And it is this that binds us to one another.

The girl was told to surrender the night and to tie herself to the day, to confine herself to dun-coloured walls, to the stone hearth and its pots and pans and brooms and brushes. Her nest of soiled bedding was cleared. Her gnarly hair was yanked back and a comb jaggedly pulled through. Her meagre clothes tugged off and replaced by ones that draped and cloaked her unruly body.

But she found it impossible to heed these instructions and to understand how the new rhythms of her body were to change the rhythm of her life. She was unable to give up the clear, infinite sky, or the deep velvet night, the savage heat, or the ripples of cool air that crested her face. Without them, she was stilled into nothingness.

Mónica Parle

Extract from *The Glass Girl*

Chihuahua, North Mexico, November 1913

They found the landowner's body on top of a butte. Suré, a hand on the neighbouring Hacienda Cortés, turned up the corpse while searching for a prized heifer. She'd bolted on his watch. One minute the heifer had been in the paddock, next she was gone. Quick as silver.

He'd gone out at dusk, the oat pail thudding at his thigh. For weeks, she'd backed away anytime he approached the corral. Her tail went up over her flank and twitched like a snake's rattle. She'd lie down, stand up again, up and down, up and down, for hours. The blacks of her eyes rolled round in the whites, her mouth festered with froth.

But not tonight. She lowed and nosed her muzzle through the slats. Her dark eyes soft and calm as he stroked her. He coaxed her back from the gate, and it creaked as he leant his weight to swing it wide.

Then dust devils spun out across the vast flats. Dozens of them, like tiny tornados, cut crooked lines on the plains. He stopped, watching them zig and zag, by turns fleeing each other or clustering close. Their fickleness unsettled him. A shame all that fury couldn't be put to some use. If only they could pierce the clouds and pluck water for the soil. The last thing this land needed was more dust and no rain.

But the clouds hustled away like buffalo across the darkening sky. They herded out over the Sierras, where his wife's kin lived in huts carved in cliffs. He thought of his son, then. How the boy's foot folded sideways, his leg twisted and twig thin, just a knot of a knee. He wouldn't walk without a crutch, never mind run.

"Good for nothing," Suré's mother-in-law had said. "Like his father."

Every day since, her words were a red handprint on Suré's face. His woman said her mother was wrong, but she couldn't look him in the eye after that. And it must be Suré's fault, his bad blood made flesh. Tears filled Suré's eyes, and he closed them tight against the stinging sand. Helplessness swelled, making it hard to breathe. They were right, he knew in his gut. His only worth was what he brought back from the harvest: a couple of limp sacks of dried beans and corn and the handful of centavos left after his debts to the patrón were paid. There was nothing to do now but work. Best get on with the task at hand.

But by then it was too late: the heifer was gone. He spun round. There was no sign of her in the fields. Where could she have got to so quickly? He wheeled round again, kicking over the pail. Precious oats shot across the cracked earth. There'd be no prints. Without rain, the ground was bone.

He staggered up the gravel path toward the big house, but no, that'd be a mistake. The patrón would have Suré's head for this, even if the heifer hadn't been right for some time. There'd been talk of putting her down last year, after she'd killed her newborn calf, but the patrón wouldn't hear of it. Everyone knew livestock was more precious to him than near anything – only the land itself meant more, and the Rebels had been thieving from his stock all year. His temper ran hotter than a cattle brand, ever since the first Rebel raids in June. Men had been fired just for looking twice at him, and he'd been known to wallop workers with his spurs with no warning. He'd spare no switch now.

The curse swam into Suré's thoughts: "Good for nothing." He shook his head to knock it out. *Pull yourself together. Find her, and put it right.*

Maybe she'd gone back to the corral. She must be hungry, and the oats were laid out like a platter.

"Please, please, please," he whispered as he ran back.

It was empty, apart from a black-throated sparrow scratching at the feed. He flew at the thing, waving his arms like a fiend. He'd kill it if he could catch it. Something had to pay for the heifer's escape. But as soon as he stopped, the devil came back. It mocked him, hopping from

foot to foot and eying him with its black eyes. Suré was useless as a scarecrow, hung out to tatter in a field.

The light was going. The cordillera that hemmed the hacienda was outlined in orange. Everything on this side was in shadow, like the world outside was on fire. He sank to the earth and covered his sweaty face with his hands. He could confess. Give up, and they'd have mercy. But there was that man a year back, who'd been caught squatting on the patrón's land. They'd dragged him behind a horse until he was dead.

The other cattle were in the side field. She could have crossed the rocky creek bed that divided them, even lumbering slow as she was. He skirted the water tank and came across a thicket of Rarámuri women washing the patrón's dinner dishes in troughs. Up to their elbows in suds, the talavera plates thunked as they stacked them up. He supposed they might have seen the heifer, but better to pretend nothing was wrong than raise an alarm.

Coming up over the creek bed, he could just make out the herd's black shadows on the far side. The cooling air smelt of dust and burning mesquite from the chimenea on the big house's veranda. He plodded toward the inky blots.

The corrientes took no notice of him, their heads dipped to the sparse grass, but he steered well clear of them, particularly the long, curved horns of the bull. They eyed him warily, judging his grit, and he moved back. Even after all these years working the harvest here, he didn't trust those hulking beasts. They were liable to get spooked on a night like this, with the wind howling in fits and starts, and dust swirling thick as a bedsheet.

He tripped along the rocky slope. Hard to imagine a pregnant heifer could pick her way up there, so he wouldn't climb. There was no moon or stars, and he stumbled again and again on the loose stones. Worse, Don Carbajal's land was hatched with dry creeks and steep ravines. Dying at the bottom would do no good for him or the heifer. He should go back to the bunkhouse to wait for enough light to set off again.

It was well past midnight by the time he got back. The electric lights in the big house had been put out, and the chimenea lisped

smoke. There were no lanterns in the workers' thatched huts. No one knew the heifer was missing yet, or every worker would be out hunting for her. Small mercies. He crossed himself, like the black-robed priests who came to his village when he was a boy. Not having their words, he prayed their gestures held sway.

In the bunkhouse, thirty other native men slept on the dirt floor. Sleep would not come tonight, so he sat in the opening that stood in for a door. Wind slipped through the adobe walls, and the cold clawed at him. He pulled his worn poncho tighter. Behind him, the men moaned, restless in their sleep. He tried to shut it out, but he couldn't. Their eerie chorus made him think of the men fighting and bleeding out in mountain passes all over Mexico. Death would come to all of them soon. Him before most, if he didn't find that heifer. He stared blindly out into the night, praying dawn would deliver him.

Xenobe Purvis

Extract from *Berg*

Each day he dies anew. The dawn light slips into her room, and he is dead. She's survived sixty days so far, sixty deaths, each as abrupt, as breath-stealing, as the last. She wakes from mild dreams with a minor key ringing in her ears. And then she remembers, and he is gone again. Sometimes he's there, in the bed they shared together. She hears him sigh in the night, and turn. Sometimes she feels the weight of his lips on her forehead, the brush of his palm over her hair. But at the start of every day, as she shakes off the soothing grip of sleep, he is gone. He is dead. And she is alone.

It's funny, she thinks (funny: how ludicrously wide a word it is, combining all the light things, the dark things, all life's ugly ironies) – it's funny that he never actually helped her out of bed. He never once wrapped his thin arms around her waist and lifted her to her feet. And yet, now he's gone, she can't seem to do this without him. It's as though her muscles relied on him for strength. He was her pumping heart, her life-blood.

She's grateful for her blouses, their buttons, for the pins she sticks in her hair, for the routine of the make-up she applies to her face. They're blessings, all of them. While she's dressing, her husband's no longer dead. There's no space for grief as she pulls on her tights and does up her watch. She enjoys the soft, blurring power of the powder she brushes over her face, the boldness of her lipstick. The rhythms of getting ready sustain her. When she looks in the mirror, she's pleased; this woman, she thinks, could be anyone. She could be going to work or dropping in on friends. She could even be meeting her husband for lunch.

Order has become her closest ally. She switches on the radio and hears the usual voices. She listens out for the systematic slam of her neighbours' front doors as they leave their houses for the day. She watches the steam billow from the kettle, as it has billowed before, and will billow again. Her kitchen is a stronghold against surprises. She can't manage any more surprises.

It's usually around this time, a plate of buttered toast before her, that things begin to unstick. The silence is insufferable. All the radios and slamming doors in the world can't fill the void where her husband's voice used to be. The chair across from hers is empty, but the angle of it, pushed out a little from the table, makes it look as though it's only recently been vacated. Someone will be back to fill it soon. Now, breathing becomes difficult. All the mourning she has done, and has yet to do, gathers in her throat. She wonders if she'll die, smothered by her own loneliness. It saddens her to find that she doesn't really mind about this. She doesn't believe in an afterlife, but she does believe in purgatory. Purgatory is far too familiar by now.

She takes a sip of coffee and tries to calm her breathing. The truth (a truth she acknowledges every day at around this time) is that if life had been a bit more reasonable the situation would have been reversed. He would be here, grieving, surviving, and she would be gone. A kinder fate would have made it so. He had a job in an office in Westminster to which he would have travelled every day. Bereaved, yes, but still capable and sane. He had colleagues to keep an eye on him, phone calls to make, tasks to get done. She has none of this. She's a writer. For many years she has created for herself a cocoon against the world, a sanctuary of distance and quietness. But now he's gone, and her sanctuary has become a kind of cage.

She hasn't written a word in almost a year. During the many months of his illness, she couldn't think of committing sentences to paper. Every line, every letter, was riddled with his decline. And now? Now, she supposes, would be the perfect time to write. The agony of these unbroken days – the longest days she's ever known. The sort of days she once might have hungered for, when she was young and desperate for spare moments in which to write. She knows she'll never

write again; what would be the point? Words without a reader – her first reader, her best reader – are nothing more than marks on a page.

The first month was, in a dreadful way, easier than this. The first month was full of visitors: people popping in with frozen meals; the local vicar (whom they'd both firmly distrusted) pledging to pray for her from his pulpit. There was the funeral to arrange, probate to apply for. All the dull paperwork of death. She wondered, at the start, if there was something wrong with her. She couldn't seem to feel anything: her heart, her mind, had been laid out on ice, and she was numb.

The second month was harder. Funny how quickly lifelong friends disappear. How the fridge empties and the dust builds. She's overcome by a terrible tiredness, which presses her to chairs and sends her to bed in the middle of the afternoon. She hasn't yet tidied up his things. They're lying all over the house – each strewn pen and shoe bearing the impression of him.

But today's different. She'll go to the shops and then she thinks she'll sit in the park. It's a nice day: the torpid summer is at last over, and the ivy that clings to the back wall of her garden is slowly being stained a deep red. For two months, she's avoided all the old familiar places. The local Italian restaurant. The canals. The park. All the sites where they once sat together, newspapers tucked under their arms, hands caught in a tight clasp. It's as though she's afraid of seeing them. Of disturbing the couple in her memory. She doesn't want to drive them away, that blind, brave pair.

She summons all her energy to put on her shoes and tidy her hair. She finds her keys. The world beyond her four walls is full of surprises; she steels herself before she leaves. Her letterbox scowls at her as she pulls the front door shut. It knows she can no longer negotiate life outside – least of all London life, with its swagger and its bruising pace. She's torn on her doorstep. Maybe this is a mistake. But she's hungry. She can't face another day of all-aloneness in her stifling sitting room.

She begins to walk, and as she walks, she listens to the birdsong. Her throat tightens. It's so lovely, this music, but she can't bear to

hear it, knowing that he would have loved it too. With a half-sob she decides that it would be better – yes, for the sake of her sanity – if no bird ever sang again. She keeps her eyes on the pavement, determined not to look up.

In the supermarket, she shops as though she's preparing for the end of the world. Tins. Powdered soup. Loo roll. The woman at the checkout gives her a smile; she's served her before. This is the kind of balm contact she needs. Someone who recognises her, but knows nothing of her life or her loss.

Afterwards, she wanders, packed plastic bags in hand, to the park. She notices the now-familiar pang when she sees those trees. But pang isn't really the word. It's too one-syllabled, too brief a description for what she's feeling. She needs something drawn out, full of sharp consonants, an eternity of dull ugly loss. The English language, she conjectures, was shaped by people who had never really grieved.

Sabrina Richmond

Extract from *How to Light a Fire*

“Get in the car,” he said, turning the key to open the driver’s door. He had a massive grin on his face, his free hand rubbing his chin, matchstick dangling out the side of his mouth as usual. The only man in the whole wide world unafraid of my big dreams. He leaned to my side, lifted the knob, I grabbed the door handle, giggling all the way. He tipped his white cowboy hat and lifted it slightly as I slid in, onto those brown beaded seat covers, and shut the door. Sweat collected under my breasts, squeezed into my wedding dress, the last white one the store had that I could afford. He turned on the ignition, leaned in closer, half his mouth kissed mine; we needed room for that matchstick. He whispered something in his pseudo-American cowboy twang, from the Westerns we watched weekly, sitting in the projector room on his shift, his right hand making circles between my legs. I don’t know why I didn’t ask what he’d said, but it didn’t matter anyway, because I knew that we were the home we’d never had. I kicked off my flip flops and cooled my feet on the dashboard where the air blew in. I leant my head back. The road was quiet. A blue, cloudless sky guided our way. I took over the drive after three hours, as the wet landscape turned into desert, edging closer to the little restaurant in the one-horse town where we’d planted all our savings, where there would always be business because all the trucks in the country had to stop there. The previous owners said the drivers want a meal that makes them feel at home and music that will make them long for it. Samson and I were each leaving behind the homes that could not shelter our hope.

Through the window of the little caravan out back, the blue sky has turned black to show off its stars. The desert mountains stood

mighty, bearing witness to this beginning. There would be no more hiding in dark corners, stealing a kiss or two, cutting an afternoon class to make love somewhere away from homes that reeked of despair. Oh, the hunger we had.

The ignition turned off, a film of dust settled on the windscreen. There it was, our new home, all quiet but for the sound of me unbuckling a belt and the sound of a zip running down an organza dress drenched in sweat. I took his hat and there it was, the scar that ran across his skull from a father whose wounds sought daily relief on the body of this beautiful man I got to call my husband. Samson's eyes always double-blinked when that scar was exposed. He flicked the matchstick out his mouth. We didn't make love. We slept the best sleep of our lives.

Soon we healed lonely truckers with our meals and music from the wireless. We graduated from living in the caravan into a barn, built from wood no one wanted to use any more. He made me the rocking chair in which I sit now. It is the last thing we could sell to the high street merchant. But I won't sell it.

The war is good for some. It has raged on for five years now. They tell me my Samson is gone, but without a body, I cannot reconcile it. If the call to serve had been just one year later, he would have been over the maximum age and he would be here with me right now. I was one of the women who stayed, too old to serve, too 'something else' for the stores in the city.

The five-drawer, dark-stained wooden chest ready for collection is being pushed into my view, Crispin behind it. It is his body I know now. It scares me that I have begun to forget the smell of Samson. I sometimes struggle to picture him, the matchstick dangling out the corner of his mouth.

As the men made their exodus to fields of blood, men and women like Crispin and I, society's broken things not fit to serve, stayed. Soon, I was wiping noses and making meals for twenty kids who would have to raise themselves. We made a home for them. Piled in together as bombs dropped and food became scarce. Crispin brought his two motherless boys to eat. At first, he just helped me cook. In

silence. Soon we began to talk into the night. Soon it became too late to get home with his two boys, sleeping in the back, tired from playing. Soon our bodies unfolded and entangled into each other.

The dark-stained wooden chest is closer to the door now. Crispin stops and walks over to me, the smell of him – aloe vera – makes me feel a stir between my legs. He leans in for a kiss.

I walk over to the half open Dutch door, I see the children running past, the soles of their feet black with dirt. No one minds. Certainly not them and, perhaps for the first time in their lives, not us. Oh, to hear the voices of the children after years of sirens and wails of loss as the world faced off. We all know that we will never hear the same way again, that ringing will never leave the soul of us, its roots are set so we will always fear the night. The children squeal past my home, chasing George who is driving the ice cream truck with the jingle on. There is no ice cream in it or anything sweet or anything cool on the hottest day. We know it, the children know it, they squeal nonetheless. I know the bodies that carry those feet, I've watched the skin on those bodies tighten to the bone over five years. I know the faces through which new sounds are emanating. I know their eyes, as dozens of pairs of them would peer just about over the scratched wooden table top in the kitchen waiting to be served. I know their mouths because I have watched those mouths slurp what was often the only meal in a day.

I lean over the Dutch door to watch them follow the ice cream truck make a turn, then I get back to my ceramic pot, for tonight is a celebration. We have got two kilos of chicken carcasses and a broth feast underway.

“It is good to hear them chase something. It is good to see them try to catch joy. For years we have yanked them from the streets especially as night falls, we have held them so tight to keep them safe and yet all we have done is plant the fear of the heart in their bones,” I tell him.

“Those skinny legs racing on mean they are smarter than us. They know how to get up. They know to ask for an ice cream. They know sometimes the answer will be no, but they ask anyway because there is a chance,” he says.

He is skinny now too, Crispin, but his arms are still strong. All that carrying of things to sell. His tongue is warm as it enters my mouth. I undo the apron, it drops to the floor. My long black dress slowly rides up to my hips. We stop for a moment and both reach to close the Dutch door. Laughing. He sits in the chair, beckons me over. I freeze for a moment. I cannot. It's the last thing that is just mine and Samson's. Crispin has slept in the bed Samson and I made, walked on the floor he laid, sat at the table we painted together. Touched every kitchen utensil. Just not that chair.

I move to the creaky wooden floor and beckon Crispin over. On his back now, my dress spreads across his chest as I spread over him unzipped. His eyes grow small but bright as my breath gets shallower. The broth begins to boil. It's two days after the war was declared over.

Deborah Torr

Blue on Blue

After the argument, I stuffed my swimsuit into a tote bag and ran out the door. It's Sunday morning and the roads are teeming with families skipping off to gymnastic lessons and playgroups. I go over a pelican crossing without being one hundred per cent sure the oncoming vehicle will stop for me. I am feeling reckless.

It's been weeks of agonising over colour wheels, deciding between *luna landscape* and *proud peacock*, *apple white* and *kiwi crush*. I've been so keen to find the colour that informed visitors to our new home that we were now grown-ups with a mortgage and responsibilities but, at the same time, don't take ourselves too seriously and know how to have a laugh.

When James prised open the lid of the paint pot, he declared that *peony blue* is, in fact, more lilac than blue. I said I'm sure it's a blue kind of blue. I would never paint a wall lilac. The tiny voice of doubt says: *his world twists on a different axis to mine*.

Just before I stormed off, James asked me something.

"In no world am I painting the wall that colour," I told him.

"What will happen if we paint the wall *peony blue*?" James asked me. "What are you afraid of?"

As I enter the edge of Hampstead Heath, I find myself Googling "peony", hoping to find fodder for when we return to this argument. Unfortunately, this only confuses matters. The blue peonies on Google are a very different shade to the paint sold by Dulux, with none of the purplish undertones in our tin. Blue peonies aren't even that common it seems – according to Google they're normally pink or white.

I arrive at the ladies-only swimming pool. I bet James is watching Sunday breakfast TV in the orange deckchair and stewing over the argument. I wouldn't let him buy a new sofa, not until the wall's painted. Half of our things are still in boxes.

The pool, enclosed by trees and down a short woodland path, is not quite how I had imagined it. Not the inviting *lagoon falls* or the *marine splash* I had pictured, perhaps more of a *bowler hat*. It says on a blackboard beside the entrance that it's three degrees, and no swimmer may be in the pond for longer than twenty-five minutes. I put my stuff in a locker and undress amongst the other women. They are all in black swimsuits and swim caps. They might as well be in suits and ties. They don't talk, only murmur things under their breath to each other. I'm in the only cossie I own, my *salsa red* polka dot bikini.

The water is serene and deep and dark. The pond could swallow me with ease, a giant black mouth devouring me whole. I climb down the first few steps. My legs disappear below me. I can see my face, leaning over, the black mirror of the pond rippling across my reflection like velvet.

The cold makes every inch of my skin scream. There is another swimmer waiting to descend above me. I plunge into the water and front crawl away from the entry steps. Worse than the pain, the water has stolen my breath. My skinny legs are kicking but nothing is happening. My head drops beneath the water. Heather at work says that when you go wild swimming, everything else falls away. You only exist in the present. She kept talking about the survival mechanism kicking in. I want to tell her: I can feel it now. I can feel it now. I'm treading water to keep my head up, just so I can breathe. The heads of other swimmers bob by me silently. I wonder if they can see me struggling. A voice calls out to me – a lifeguard. She says to focus on pulling the breath down into my lungs, and to swim to the side. I lurch towards her. My fingers cling to the edge. My heart is hammering, lungs uncooperative.

Without warning, the lifeguard grabs my arm and hauls me onto the decking. I am lying on my back. My chest is heaving. I sense I've caused a scene, so keep my gaze fixed on the sky and on the lifeguard. She tells me her name is Janine. Her face looms over me like a brilliant

moon. She covers me with a towel and tells me to take a moment. She says this happens to all novices. With time, she says, I'll get used to that feeling of drowning, or dying, and eventually I'll be able to control my breathing.

If I unpack the boxes, and stripe the walls in one colour or another, I've committed. It means I am no longer a student, living in halls, sharing a toilet and kitchen with five messy eighteen-year-olds. I am not a backpacker, hearing a couple have sex through the thin walls of a hostel in southeast Asia. I am not even a twenty-something doing a poorly paid internship for a company I don't care about, living with my two best mates in Balham. I am none of those things. Is it OK to just be one thing?

On the way home, I think about how I will shove the drowning episode in James' face, about how I almost died and he wasn't there. I check my phone and see a text from him that says, "Let's not argue about this. Love you xxx" and I start to soften a little bit. I imagine what it would have been like if it was James who'd gone for a swim, and nearly drowned. I run down the last street home.

When I get in, James's running shoes are gone and so is he. Radio 1 is playing out to an empty kitchen. James has fetched me a gingerbread man with marshmallows for eyes from the bakery on the corner. All the paint tins are stacked against the wall with their stupid names. I take the notepad on the counter, and just below last week's shopping list I scribble down new aliases:

vermillion ventricle (instead of salsa red)

tsunami aftershock (instead of marine splash)

embarrassed pigeon (instead of peony blue)

Finally, in honour of Hampstead Heath pond I swap the whimsical *bowler hat* for *velvet ruin*.

I take the chunky paintbrush and force open the tin of *velvet ruin* with a knife. It's a dark shade of teal, almost black. It was supposed to be an "accent" colour for the window ledges in the living room. I consider chucking it at the wall, or tipping it over the floor and feigning ignorance.

Instead, I take out the peony blue because I'm a grown-up now with a mortgage and responsibilities. I write "fuck you" in paint because at the same time we don't take ourselves too seriously and know how to have a laugh.

Mia Vigar

Extract from *Sokjoki*

The first time I saw my mother with a shotgun, it was pointed at me. I can still see her as she was, lit by a wrapper of moon, her face mashed against the stock and one eye as round as an owl's.

She woke me by nudging the steel of the barrel against my temple. At first I stirred slowly, but feeling an absence of blankets, scrambled upright against the headboard. By throwing off my covers, she stripped me of dignity, because at twelve years old, my dick had recently transformed from field mouse to rat, leading its own nocturnal life I'd not yet caught up with in understanding nor maturity. Shame caught in my throat, but at 3am, sleep spun and confused, I was all child.

There wasn't a light on in the house, but I could tell from how her open eye roamed my room she saw clearly enough, where my ill-adjusted eyes kept me blind to all but mother and gun.

"Boy!"

She called me that when she was unable to unearth my name.

I snivelled, begging her to snap out of it but not daring to tug at the sleeve of her kimono.

"I'm Isak, your son. What did I do?"

She chewed her cheeks and surveyed, one rain boot planted on the floor and the other on the bed so she hovered above, the length of a gun barrel away.

For a long time after, this surprising triumvirate – mother, gun, me – figured in my nightmares, ending in bizarre places, details different as they are in dreams. Once, it was Sokjoki High's ice hockey coach in that red kimono, shotgun cocked, leaning his hairy chest over

me. In another, she was two dimensional and I folded her up into an envelope and posted her to Dad, to show him how bad things had got since he left.

“Boy” – “*Poika,*” – she repeated. She severed the syllables from each other. The ‘ka’ was a breathy incantation, carrying her voice away. Whatever was going on in her head took place in chambers too deep to escape her mouth.

It was also the first time I realised how warped the drink made her mind. I’ve since learned, for drunks like her, fairy tale warnings from childhood are true: wolves, changelings and tricksters alive and well at the bottom of a bottle. When she drank, they ripped off their faces and glued them to hers. They camped in her head, leaving tufts of mangy fur and flea eggs in gashes they tore in her tissue with unclean claws. The more they came and the longer they stayed, the less of her was left behind, but when I was twelve, she was still Mother most of the time. Earlier that day, she’d baked pulla bread and we’d eaten in comfortable silence, me reading comics, her watching a soap opera.

A knee jutted from where the robe parted, pinning down my towelling pyjama trousers. I hardened my stare, clenched my jaw to summon gutsiness and pissed the bed. Unarmed, it was all I had.

The wetness that crept under her knee did what I hoped, reanimating her. I was dragged to the bathroom and made to pull on a snowsuit from the winter cupboard, though it wasn’t yet snow season. Having started puberty and being naked under my pyjamas, I leant forward so my shirt hung low and she wouldn’t see the humiliating hairs that corkscrewed out of me. The snowsuit was too tight because I’d had a growth spurt, and it sawed up my arse.

Shotgun pressed into my back like a wind-up tin soldier’s key, she marched me down the stairs. We stopped by the back door for me to put on my own boots, then exited into the grizzling night, so typical of Finnish autumn. It was cold enough for our breaths to emerge milky, but I couldn’t stop taking long, dragging gulps of air that burned my lungs.

The neighbours’ homes were in darkness: beyond our garden, the town of Sokjoki slept. Ours was a low-income street of small

plots, and the Järvinens would have seen us if only they'd opened their blinds. I couldn't find my voice to shout for them.

"Get in with Lumi," she said, motioning to the kennel with a jerk of the head. She found the dog's name but not her son's.

Thinking she'd been summoned, Lumi trotted out of her wooden hut and started whining inside the wire pen. I removed the block that kept the latch down, opened the gate and stepped over the threshold one foot at a time. Lumi was happy, extending to upright German Shepherd height, her paws on my shoulders, her tongue on my cheek.

I crawled into the kennel, a warm, dry haven. I'd given Lumi my blankets off the littler bed from before I grew. Her dog toys were strewn around us, and they squeaked as we got comfortable. We rotated, two red Indians to my mother's cowboy, then sunk into the bedding, entwining our limbs in a pack of two.

I imagined my mother being woken the next morning by the weak October sun, gun settled in the groove of her sternum. Coming to, perhaps she flung it aside, reeling. Checked my room, where I wasn't to be found, praying she'd not hurt me. Searched the house, then out to the yard. I was alerted by the sound of her scabbling, unable to open the pen fast enough, fingers slipping as she tried to remove the block. Crying and apologising, though she would have had only the vaguest idea what for.

"What are you doing out here?" she kept saying, holding me close and overwhelming me with confetti kisses. "What were you thinking, Isak, being out here with the dog? What a strange place for a boy to sleep."

The one good thing to come of it all was her suggestion that Lumi slept on my bed thereafter, guarding me, keeping me safe.

And now, here we are again. She had given that gun to Arto Mustonen, but twenty years later I see she has it back, newly polished. I'd know it anywhere, the narrowness and distinct downturned angle of its butt. Don't you remember the details of all the things your father owned, as if his ownership alone sanctified them?

Its leather sling looks all wrong on my mother's bare shoulder

beside her thin summer dress strap. She's never been good at dressing for occasion.

With the gun and my mother reunited, the fear is back. The exact same vintage. Evergreen terpenes hang heavily around us like curtains, and I get the feeling all possible roads led here, no matter what decisions were made along the way. This moment, as hideous and frightening as it is, feels right.

Mother, gun, me and now Juha too, in front of the Mushroom House.

It's Midsummer's Eve and somewhere behind the packed pines, revellers laugh and lark about. Girls will be collecting meadow flowers to weave into crowns they'll place under pillows tonight, wishing sweethearts into existence. There'll be gatherings on lake jetties with pickled-herring picnics and kegs of beer.

Usually Juha and I would be in the mix somewhere, but instead we're in a clearing in the thickest part of the forest, with one of us in the gun's sight.

"Shut up," my mother hisses. Though this is just about the worst situation the three of us could be in, I find it in me to be impressed by the lucidity of her stare. I don't think I've ever seen such fixedness from her. "I'm warning you, do not say a word."

But the words do come. Each domino clips the heel of another and once I've heard them all fall, I have no doubt left – the trigger will be pulled.

There's a sound in the bushes. The rattle of a bike, the ring of a bell. I know before I see her who it is. It's Tam.

Shit. Why did she come?

Four in the forest with a gun.

One, done for, everyone undone.



Non-fiction

Alex-David Baldi

The Death of Queen Victoria

January 22nd 1901, the last day of Queen Victoria's life, dawned grey and windy on the Isle of Wight. The failing eighty-one year-old Queen, staying at Osborne House, had had another difficult night. Dr James Reid, her personal physician of twenty years, noted in his diary that 'tracheal rales' had begun, filling her lungs with fluids and making it difficult for her to breathe, so he started to administer oxygen to make her feel more comfortable. A public bulletin was issued at 8am: "The Queen this morning shows signs of diminishing strength, and Her Majesty's condition again assumes a more serious aspect."

At 9.30am it looked like the end was near, and the Royal Family rushed to her first-floor bedroom from different parts of the house, congregating around her bed. Family members were surprised to see that the Queen had been moved from her regular large bed to a smaller temporary bed to make it easier to nurse her. As they congregated, Randall Davidson, the Bishop of Winchester and later Archbishop of Canterbury, began to say prayers in a corner of the room, facing the small bed. Princesses Helena, Louise and Beatrice, the Queen's three youngest daughters, began to tell their mother who was in the room, and people responded in turn by calling out their names to let the Queen know where they were since Victoria's eyesight had failed like the rest of her body.

Not everyone was identified, however. They did not tell her that Kaiser Wilhelm II, her oldest grandson, was there. When Dr Reid asked the Prince of Wales in a whisper if it would not be proper to let the Queen know her grandson was present, he answered "No, it would

excite her too much.” There was, however, no need to worry about this omission for now since Victoria slowly rallied through the morning. She began to talk lucidly again, and even took a little food by lunchtime. During this time the Kaiser quietly confided to Dr Reid that he really wished to speak with his grandmother before she died, and Dr Reid took it upon himself to arrange it. He spoke to the Prince of Wales, and either by persuasion or because mercy had changed his mind in the meantime, the Prince let Wilhelm see her. Shortly after lunchtime the Kaiser was allowed to spend five minutes alone with the Queen in her bedroom. No one knows what transpired between them but after Wilhelm left, Victoria said to Dr Reid, “the Emperor is very kind.”

By about 1.30pm, Victoria had rallied so much since the morning that her physician thought she might actually recover. Dr Reid wrote “I can’t help admiring her determination not to give up the struggle... I hardly dare to hope she might yet win.” By 2pm, however, she was failing again. As her son-in-law, the Duke of Argyll, famously said later, she sank into death like a great three-decker ship, sinking, then rallying, then sinking again. The family assembled again in her bedroom waiting for the end in silence at first, broken only by the sobs of nine-year-old Prince Maurice, Victoria’s youngest grandchild, who had to be taken out of the room when his crying became uncontrollable.

Soon Bishop Davidson began to recite prayers and hymns. Victoria looked increasingly weak and unconscious, but Davidson and others noted that as he was reading one of her favourite hymns, ‘Lead, Kindly Light’ by John Henry Newman, the Queen smiled when she heard the verses “And with the morn, angel faces smile / which I have loved long since, and lost awhile.” Still, Victoria kept hanging on to life, her descent into death kept stalling. At 3.30pm Dr Reid asked for everyone to leave the room so that the Queen could be re-positioned in her small bed to make her more comfortable through this ordeal.

At 4pm, as the sun began to wane in the January sky, the last public bulletin was issued. In stark, terrible simplicity it just said: “The Queen is slowly sinking”. Victoria had once written to her eldest daughter

Vicky that she did not want a crowd around her deathbed: “That I shall insist is never the case if I’m dying. It is awful.” But a crowd she got anyway. As the family streamed back into her bedroom everyone assumed places that most people remembered afterwards. The Prince of Wales sat by the right side of her bed, his wife Alexandra sat on the opposite side; Princesses Helena and Beatrice stood in front of the bed; Princess Louise knelt on the floor on the right of Victoria’s head; and other members of the Royal Family found spaces around the room. Among them were Victoria’s only other living son, Prince Arthur; the Duke and Duchess of York, future King George V and Queen Mary; Prince George, Duke of Cambridge, Victoria’s cousin and the only member of the Royal Family older than her; Princess Victoria of Hesse, the Queen’s favourite granddaughter; and Princess Victoria Eugenie, the future Queen of Spain.

Among this privileged group, three commoners took places of honour: Mrs Tuck and Mrs Soal, the two women who were nursing Victoria, sat on or stood close to the bed, and Dr Reid was closest to the Queen, looking after his patient. He and the Kaiser performed the most important physical task in the last hours of Victoria’s life: they wrapped their arms around her back, one on each side, and propped her up to ease her increasingly laboured breathing. Both of them knelt on the floor to get a better grip as the temporary bed was low, and everyone present long remembered with admiration afterwards how Wilhelm did not stir for over two hours from his position despite obvious discomfort, and the fact that he could not use his withered left arm to balance himself. On the other side, Dr Reid took Victoria’s right hand in his and also held it for over two hours — not a kindly gesture, which would have been presumptuous in front of her family, but so that he could monitor her pulse. The Princess of Wales held Victoria’s left hand in hers. Silence reigned between 4pm and 6pm, sometimes broken by muffled crying and by Victoria occasionally looking at Dr Reid and saying “I’m very ill...I’m very ill...” to which Dr Reid answered each time “Your Majesty will soon be better.”

By 6pm, darkness had descended upon the Isle of Wight, and it was clear now the end was near. Among the flickering gas lamps in the bedroom (Victoria had refused to install electric lights at Osborne as she did not like their glare), the Royal Family began once again to utter their names as if to make their individual farewells. Dr Reid and the Kaiser were still holding Victoria up with their arms. Her breathing became more laboured. Bishop Davidson began once again to recite prayers. During his litanies, people noticed how Victoria's eyes moved to the right and upward to a large painting of the Deposition of Christ on the wall. A change of expression and a look of great calm seemed to come upon her which everyone remembered long afterwards. She opened her eyes wide and, according to Princess Helena, seemed to be seeing 'beyond the borderland'. She then uttered her last word: "Bertie..." though her voice was so weak that some thought she may have said 'Albert'.

It was coming up to 6.30pm and Bishop Davidson was finishing his prayers by reciting the Aaronic Blessing from the Bible's Book of Numbers (6:25-26): "...The Lord make His face shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee. The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee and give thee peace." A few instants after he uttered these words, Victoria quietly drew a last breath and died, her eyes still open, looking beyond the borderland. Dr Reid let go of her hand, and he and the Kaiser finally released her down on the pillow. The Prince of Wales, his face wet with tears, then reached over and, in his first moments as the new monarch, closed his mother's eyes. Queen Victoria was no more.

Megan Buskey

The Distance Between Then and Now

As a child in the 1980s, I was dimly aware that I had family in the Soviet Union. My mother was foreign, I knew — there was her name, Nazha; her accent, which warmed and rounded her speech; her prominent eyes, nose, and lips, which I saw echoed in the Slavic figure skaters I watched on TV. As we lounged around my grandmother's living room in a Ukrainian neighbourhood in Cleveland, waiting for her to finish frying pierogies, I sometimes studied her framed photos of this family, noting with puzzlement my relatives' stern, unsmiling faces and the drapes that hung behind them, the colours too dark. From these relatives, we got only photos and the occasional letter, read by a censor; no one in Ukraine had phones, my mother said. She meant this as an explanation but it only befuddled me further, for what kind of place didn't have phones?

As I grew older, I turned into a person who was drawn to mystery for its possibility of novelty, for its promise of a test. To the surprise of my family, as a college student, I made plans to enrol in a Ukrainian language course in Lviv, a city close to the village where my grandparents had met and married.

I got tests in droves. Ukraine in 2003 had a nightmarish quality. Lviv's centre was the epitome of genteel Eastern Europe, with its wrought-iron railings and cobblestone streets, but its outskirts were dominated by Soviet prefab apartment buildings. After the sun set, the roads were dark because there was no money to turn the street lamps on at night. Water was only available for three hours in the morning and three in the evening, and everyone kept gigantic tubs in reserve in their apartments in the likely event that the utilities failed

to keep even that schedule. The roads were riddled with potholes, the drivers reckless and fond of speed. Over the course of the summer, I passed by the aftermath of three car crashes where motionless bodies lay unattended. When I went for a run in a park by the university, a young girl playing with her barking dog stared at me and then called out. “You can’t run around like that,” she said, her eyes hard. “You’re bothering the dog.”

After my language programme ended, I spent a few weeks with my aunts and cousins. In their care, the harshness of the environment was brought to heel. My relatives catered to my every need, real or imagined. They spoke no English but squinted their eyes in concentration as I struggled to express myself in Ukrainian, my accent thick. Everywhere I went, I was greeted with an elaborate, mayonnaise-heavy spread someone had spent hours preparing, but I could only peck at it. By the end of the summer, my legs had the scrawny, unsteady look of a fawn’s.

Even so, I was transfixed by Ukraine’s depths — the complexities of its history and troubled present, and the fierce claim my family felt on me, a feeling I knew was spurred not so much by me but my mother and grandmother, the people my Ukrainian family had lost to the traumatic severing that was Soviet emigration.

Since that first trip more than fifteen years ago, I have been back to Ukraine many times for work and research and to visit my family. I’ve lived in the country for as long as a year. I still feel like an outsider there, but an informed one, a person who can grasp, perhaps with more ease than a native, the distance between then and now.

This distance struck me with especial power last spring, when I spent time in Lviv with my cousins Lida and Ira. They’re a few years younger than me, in the neighbourhood of thirty. When I had studied those family photos as a kid, their presence had stirred me most — for their eyes were, like mine, on the green-blue spectrum, their hair was the same shade of blonde. Their images gave me the sense that I could easily be living a very different kind of life, one that I could only guess at.

Now, that opaqueness is yet another thing that is only a memory. Lida is an HR specialist for an international company, has a nose ring,

and speaks better English than I do Ukrainian. Ira works in tourism and does art on the side. The weekend before I visited, they had taken advantage of a low-cost bus fare to go hiking in Slovakia. Lida taught me Ukrainian neologisms for American business terms — *cancelluvaty* meant to cancel, *skipnuty* meant to skip. When she struggled with the web version of her Microsoft Outlook mailbox, I took a look at it and pointed her to the tile to click. With that, her calendar unfurled before her, a familiar cascade of blue rectangles. They were marked with English terms that could have been drawn from my own office life: ‘performance evaluation,’ ‘catch up,’ ‘training session.’

Not everything has transferred so easily. Ukraine is the poorest country in Europe, and my cousins’ lives bear that weight. They share a one-bedroom in a charmless neighbourhood of Soviet high-rises. Getting to work takes an hour on one of the city’s lurching, exhaust-spewing commuter vans. The night before I left, as we commiserated about the daily trial of trying to remember so many passwords, Lida thought to check her entry to the annual lottery for U.S. green cards. “Of course,” she said when the message popped up on the State Department website that she had not been selected. “I apply every year, it’s free.”

The next morning, Lida decided to *skipnuty* her first meeting so that she could see me off at the airport. Before we left the apartment, she crouched to the floor, a Ukrainian tradition before a big trip, and gestured for me to join her. I obediently sank down. In keeping with the tradition, we said nothing. For a few seconds, we stared at our toes and yielded to the power of ritual, to the changing of time and place and circumstance, to inhabiting with intention the moment between the settled past and the unknown future. I wondered whether my mother and grandmother had observed the practice before they had left the Soviet Union more than fifty years earlier. For a fleeting moment, it seemed like they were with us, their hands pulling at their ankles, their chins resting on their folded knees.

“Okay, that’s enough,” Lida said, breaking the silence. We grabbed the handles of my bags and headed down the stairs. The Uber was waiting.

Joanna Dobson

Extract from *Griffins Guarding Gold*

Anticipating the quiet decorum that lay the other side of the glass, I straightened my skirt, shrugged off the morning's long car ride and, hugging the large book to my chest, pushed open the double doors. The red brick building at 32, Kommunistichesky Prospekt is home to the Chevalkov National Library, named after Mikhail Chevalkov, Altai-born writer, convert and disciple to Saint Macarius. Almost a century after its inception, the library declares its mission to include the task of preserving a corpus of literature that would document the spiritual heritage of the indigenous peoples of the Altai Republic.

I showed my library pass at reception and made straight for the reading room on the third floor. Inside, formica tables were arranged in the style of an old classroom. Without the hint of a soft furnishing, the overall impression of the room was one of bare solemnity. Still shielding the precious tome, *Petroglyphs of the Elangash Valley, Volume I*, I approached the enquiry desk.

The librarian who had conducted my introductory tour, one month previously, had been most accommodating, helping me to navigate the main card catalogue and even permitting me to peruse the stack of rare books that ran through the middle of her office, which was accessed via a white-painted door immediately behind the enquiries desk.

It was on the top shelf of the rare books stack that the bottle-green spines of the work in four volumes *Petroglyphs of the Elangash Valley* first caught my eye. I reached up for *Volume I* feeling the weight of the publication as it rested across my arm. Opening the embossed cover — the most recent date stamp read '10th September 1983'

— I leafed through it; a short introduction was followed by several detailed maps and hundreds of pages filled with sketched copies of petroglyphs. The work in its entirety comprised the meticulous documentation by Soviet archaeologist Alexey Okladnikov of an early Bronze Age monument that stretched across eighteen kilometres of valley located in high-altitudes of southern Altai.

I had sat with the book in the reading room for hours immersed in Okladnikov's materials. When the time came to leave, the librarian asked whether I wished to reserve the book for the following day. I lived far away from the capital in the Ongudai district and would be unable to visit the library for another month. Remarkably, on learning this, the librarian issued *Volume I* in my name marking the inside cover, with a date one month from the day.

Each morning over the weeks that followed, I sat at the desk in my hut in Ongudai and studied the pages of *Volume I* turning the book this way and that as I traced the details of horned bull, yak, camel, bird, chariot and deer. The images puzzled me: why did one family of deer have antlers that rolled backwards behind the head in recurring, identical waves, while in another, the entire rack was represented in a single tine that spiralled forwards of the head in ever decreasing circles until eventually it ran out of space and was forced to come to a halt? Why was it that in some chariot images the horses were depicted back to back in profile view while in others the animals were not depicted at all? And in amongst the complexity of thousands of images, the one that carved itself most indelibly into my memory was the simplest of all — two human 'stick figures' standing side by side holding hands.

As I gave my attention to the petroglyphs in *Volume I*, I was increasingly bothered by a friction around the images as if there was something else that wished to be seen. The rocks of the Elangash Valley, their surfaces polished by receding glacier, burned mercilessly by the sun and shaped by centuries of wind, nudged their way up through the depths of my subconscious seeking union with the images they bore, now printed on the page. Each petroglyph whispered to me of habitat: a chariot wheel jolted and jutted against arid, fossil-scattered ground; a small bird set the cream rosettes of a flowering

rockfoil quivering as it shuffled past in pursuit of insect-lunch; a cautious yak sent softly turning billows of warm breath across a boisterous silvery creek that pushed through the tall, lush grasses of hummocky wetland. Image by image, the valley floor rose until, finally, it surfaced. Unable to resist, I repositioned my desk and reading lamp so that they faced the lateral valley that descended from the high horn of an orogenic ridge located far to the south-east of Ongudai.

It was hard to relinquish *Volume I* but I was excited by the prospect of exploring *Volume II*. I greeted the slender young woman with the black bob, a different librarian this time, placed the heavy tome on the desk and requested the next volume.

“You can’t have *Volume II*,” she replied. “What organisation do you work for?”

I blushed and explained that I was just a freelance translator living in Ongudai and that I happened to be a rock art enthusiast.

In book four of *Histories*, in his account of the Scythians, Herodotus refers to the ‘gold-guarding griffins,’ a Scythian tribe, who wore aspects of griffin costume to signify tribal identity. Indeed, it was the early nomads of the Eastern portion of the Eurasian steppe zone who controlled and uncompromisingly defended the gold deposits situated north of the silk routes. Today, the Altai intelligentsia uses the term ‘gold-guarding griffins’ to refer not to tribal polities or to deposits of precious metal, but to an arsenal of ancient Scytho-Siberian imagery found in rock art and in the predominantly gold artefacts interred in Scythian tombs. At the centre of these pictorial traditions, one finds the eagle and the griffin, its mystical counterpart. Many Altaians believe this body of art to comprise a symbolic text integral to the forcefield of Altai’s sacred lands. Traditionally, the means of protecting these places was to keep them secret.

Standing before me now was a descendant, a griffin, prepared to say, “this gold is guarded. Step beyond this line and you deal with me.” I admired the librarian. She was right to question me. I did not just want to familiarise myself with Okladnikov’s research, I wanted to visit Elangash, to feel the patterns and frequencies of the valley as they were expressed in the petroglyphs, to respond to the call of the valley’s sweet note.

“I don’t work for anyone else. It’s just for personal use.”

The young woman eyed my library card, the first ever issued to a British national, taking a moment to assess her position. The card granted full borrowing rights but its validity was not the issue, nor was the security of the rare book the librarian’s chief concern. This was about gold, and how information on the remote Elangash Valley might fall into foreign hands.

Each hour that I had poured over the images in *Volume I* brought me one step closer to manifesting the opportunity to visit the Elangash Valley. Part of me was already there. Yet, in this short pause, the thought sounding most loudly in my mind was that passionate attachment to visiting sacred land ran contrary to the Altai spiritual philosophy. If anywhere the capacity for humility was decisive, it was in navigating the ancient cultural sites. Only in the attitude of letting go could the visitor hope for an ‘open road’. If the road to the valley was closed to me, no library card could change that. With a sigh, I let go the battle of wills, and mentally handed my hopes over to the spirit guardians of Elangash.

The librarian turned her back on me and disappeared through the office door.

Seconds later she reappeared and placed *Volume II* on the desk. Without meeting my gaze, she gripped the wooden handle of the metal date stamp and pushed down hard leaving a fresh row of purple numbers drying on the page.

“Fifteen days.”

Anna Kahn

Post from *Questions from the Tower*

A tarot-grounded advice column

Q: Will I ever stop feeling so creatively dry and empty? I keep trying to fill the well again but nothing helps.

A: Hi! Thank you so much for this question, I think a lot of us are in this boat.

I sat with your question and pulled the **Ten of Swords**. In the Ten of Swords a person lies on the ground, with ten swords in their back. There is a calm sea behind them, and a sun rising behind that. The card asks us about injuries we don't see coming and haven't planned for, about wounds and endings. It is an entire 2020 mood. Let's take some of its questions in turn:

How are you hurt? What injuries can you heal by yourself?

I flinched when I pulled this card, because fuck, we all have ten swords in our backs right now. But you wrote to me pre-COVID, so I know that for you this isn't entirely a result of the pandemic.

Bias declaration time: in this house we hold productivity culture to be trash. We recognise no moral component to creating or not creating. You sound like you're in pain, so I'll answer the rest of this question with the assumption that you want to create, but please know that if you don't ever make anything again your inherent value will not be diminished.

I've grown up in a community with creative people (mainly musicians, dancers and writers) and I feel like my sample size is big enough to say this: I straight up believe that we never run out of creativity. What we run out of is the **connective tissue** between that spark and the reality of creating – all the bits you need to

actually make stuff. An inexhaustive list of tissues: safety (material, psychological), capacity for attention (to the world, to ourselves, to the thing we want to make), energy, permission, resource (mental, material, time-based), knowledge, skill, belief (in ourselves, in the thing we want to make).

Do any of the tissues I've listed above feel like they're missing? If any of them had easy fixes you'd have fixed them already, but can you see the hard fixes for any of them? Do you have the capacity to try those fixes? If you can't face them right now, can you make an active decision to rest until you can?

Some of these things are legit out of our control, especially right now. The swords are in our backs, the fixes are not within our reach. The Ten of Swords invites us to grieve those things, to process all the feelings that come with losing them or never having had them in the first place.

What help do you need to get up?

A person who has taken ten swords to the back probably does not stand up alone. Do you have a community you can lean on (whether that's concrete help with the issues above or just time and space for wailing at each other about how hard everything is)? Do you have a favourite friend who makes things, and could you ask them if you could make something together? Do you have a favourite friend who *doesn't* make things, and could you ask *them* if you could make something together?

If you don't have access to a community, how can you let the artists whose work you love be your community? (I got this idea off Austin Kleon – if you've not yet read *Steal Like an Artist*, it's worth a look.) Pick some artists, and declare them your community. Let their work hold you. Look at all your favourite paintings and photographs, re-read all your favourite books, play all your favourite music – not to try and force yourself to spark anything, just to be held.

You've mentioned that you keep trying to 'fill the well', and I wonder if this is the sort of thing you've been trying already. I don't subscribe to the idea of creativity as a well, like we are vessels who find

ourselves empty and if we read enough books or do enough exercise or go on enough walks or take the right meds or stop taking the wrong meds we will suddenly be topped up enough to create again.

You are not an empty hole in the ground with a bucket over the top, you are a whole and complete person. What if you thought of all the kindnesses you show yourself as balms, antibacterial ointments, compresses? Would that be any better? I genuinely don't know, and I worry I'm just repeating things you've already tried, but it's what I have to offer.

When you are well enough to get up, how will you orient yourself towards the sun?

In the Ten of Swords the sun (**new beginnings, new hope**) is at the other end of a sea. In tarot, one of the things the sea represents is **long journeys**, particularly emotional/inner ones.

This has been the hardest section to write, because I know this is a question the card asks but I have struggled to translate it to your situation. I think what I want to ask you is this: why is creating important to you? What is it about creating, and what is it about you, that makes it your sun? Why do you need this journey? What would happen if you stayed where you are? I hope that exploring the answers will help give you some direction.

You are wounded, an ocean away from the sun. But the sun's rays reach a long way. How can you honour its warmth now, so that you can feel where to go when you're ready?



Poetry

Bebe Ashley

Dinner Party

Mum thinks I'm asking for the langoustines
mais j'explique que je travaille en langue des signes.

Let's Sign Science

For a visual poetry class, I am photocopying pages from LET'S SIGN SCIENCE: BSL VOCABULARY from an old series of print publications that also includes LET'S SIGN FEELINGS AND EMOTIONS.

I would like to find LET'S SIGN POP CULTURE or LET'S SIGN IN THE MUSEUM but they don't exist and I can't afford a graphics tablet or a year of fine-line art classes to learn to draw the graphics packages myself.

I cut out cool collage combinations like UNTAMED MAGNETIC ATTRACTION or CATERPILLAR CAMOUFLAGE. Something is missing but these are all the words I have. I arrange the language and it falls flat on the page.

Glass Ceilings

Katherine Johnson 1918 – 2020

I am facilitating my first workshop for the Science Festival,
on mathematical and scientific approaches to poetry.

In preparation, I am listening to the podcast *13 Minutes to the Moon*,
to the bonus episode with Hans Zimmer on the making of music.

He says, loneliness does not have a sound in space
but you have to describe the silence.

*

I am late to the news and find the obituary online
then, the letter of a reader mourning the mathematician

who shattered expectations of spaceflight trajectories
who calculated and computed a safe return home.

I want to know what it felt like to be one-hundred-and-one
and to greet the glass ceiling for a second time.

Brass and Pearl

The showman was head down and full of hay fever
when he heard about the man whose wife played cello

who sometimes had a cello full of honeycomb and bees
who sometimes played the cello full of honeycomb and bees

because she liked the way the vibration changed
and everybody knows the bees are disappearing

but not that there aren't enough hollow trees
left here for them to find their own homes.

The showman smiled only to himself
when he caught in the periphery of the shop window

a revelation both perfect and incomplete:
a gold honeybee earring with a glass drop pearl.

Isabelle Baafi

Gravida

i. 40 days

moulded by darkness
in
bro ken by
the same
foot pathless
formingde
forming what
curse
what
mito
chondrial
snub
what sha dow
of doubt
pe numb
ral this hope am
are
not
this knot
this
of night this
entrop y
nought ec lipse
in
finite

ii. 100 days

there's drumming in the walls
creation hums and us
stretched thin
our sky skin
loose our tent
untaut this
unsheltered we this eddying
nucleo tide
this code untaught
illegible mute
deep calls unto deep
can you hear me
your blood tastes like
will you be mine
i think i might i
bone devours marrow
hair blossoms scalp
we almost being almost
dreaming smoke
but never knowing fire before
fades into now fades
into never
this chrysalis
truncates
a doing un
a ghost a raven
ous void
the drum beats
us by being
the last to
fade

iii. 250 days

here the walls preach heaven is the mirror
to show us us is the atom
bursting us is the scream that coaxes us
from dark let there be let there be is the hull
safe passaging us her deliverance
from the culling here is our glass
darkly here we know in are in
part here we more than form we surge
we neuron we cleave cells in
to two tissue into one
we too soon too soon eyelids pried
by one dilating frowning splankna sliced
to caesareal grin we track her our scent
when all else bleeds away yes we brought milk
with us we knew what to expect another room
a new dark warmth a midnight
split a sun whose broody light
waited all night to shine on me

Gravida borrows language from Psalm 42:7.

Helen Howell

Bear

It turns out bear isn't really the word for *bear*.
Petrified of conjuring a hulking, ravenous bear,
our ancestors whispered what's become
our oldest, magic-free code-word: brown.
When we say *bear*, what we are really saying is,
There's a brown in the woods. The brown is sleeping.
John faced the brown last week, and lived.

Today's shamans say if you speak kindly to yourself
you'll conjure wellness: *I am a good person,*
I am worthy of love. So why can't you say it?
Go on, say it. Look in the mirror. Utter the spell.
Bellow it holding a staff, circling a fire.
Say, bear, say, bear, *I'm not afraid,* say,

I summon you, bear. I am worthy of love.
They promise the bear always comes.

First published in Ambit 239 (2020).

The Bojo No Show

Bojo Jojo has pale pink eyes, green skin, and black fur.

Instead of using simple one-word answers, he has a habit of repeating phrases over and over in the style of badly dubbed Japanese movies.

Bojo is quite sophisticated, despite his persistent desire to rule the world:

He sometimes works with other villains without betraying them.

He is shown to be a great (and rather artistic) Japanese chef.

He is able to help people, but usually only if it's in his self-interest.

Likes: to take over Townsville, and eventually the world; bananas; classical music; torturing; banana milk.

Dislikes: girls; failure; bratty children; defeat.

Bojo, for the most part, does whatever he wants.

Background: In January 2020 I took part in a project called 31 Nights in Europe (by Minute Books) where poets had until 9pm to respond to that day's Brexit headlines. This poem responds to the headline "The Bojo No Show". Bojo has always reminded me of "Mojo Jojo", who is a green monkey villain in the Cartoon Network series Powerpuff Girls. This is a found poem taken from the wiki entry about Mojo Jojo on the website powerpuffgirls.fandom.com, replacing "Mojo" with "Bojo". I haven't changed anything else, except the order of the sentences. I just thought it was amazing how easily the evil monkey matched onto our Prime Minister. HB

First published by Minute Books (2020).

Touch-heart / Dim Sum

On touch-heart order forms, my mother
marks *little-dragon-bun*, shrimp dumplings,

steamed envelopes stuffed with meat,
and *siu-mai* – ‘sold as a sideline’ –

inseparable from *drinking-tea*. The tea
in question? *Yunnan-province-town-tea*:

dark but clear, like the view from our
night flight. The leaves constellate

in my white china cup while my aunts
debate dishes. *Vegetable-heart*

or *hollow-vegetable*? *Lotus-leaf* –
or *sticky-rice*? I want to tear apart

a steaming *fork-pork-bun*, feel the hot
white bread stretch and come loose

in my hands, uncovering red meat,
but I worry this is western taste.

My father would’ve asked already –
he’d want duck and pancakes

or Singapore noodles, but today my aunts
decide the centrepiece will be a bowl

of yin-yang rice: half tomato-sweet chicken,
half glue-white egg shrimp rice.

Yin-yang, meaning male and female
Mandarin duck in a word – and a bowl –

balances the astonishing plumage of one,
and the brown down of the other:

a symbol of unexpected love. This decision
made, my mother lays down her pencil

and catches a waiter by the crook of his arm
to order, her fist becomes an open palm.

First published in Strix 4 (2018).

Central Pier 4

From the boat, you point out
the home your parents built

rising through the trees.
Look now. It's only visible

from this exact point –
then the ferry motors on.

Today the sea is rough.
It thumps as if a shark's

beating the hull.

Still, you trust in this ferry,

your means between the islands
you've always called home.

While you put down roots in England,
on Hong Kong Island blocks of flats

shot up like bamboo. Now
floating home on the night crossing,

these cloud-kissing towers
can be read like columns

in a paper, each living room light
a Chinese character.

But you've been away so long, 阿媽,
perhaps tonight you feel illiterate.

When a voice says disembark,
you clamber up and look around

as if anxious not to leave
anything else behind.

阿媽: ah-ma, 'mum'

First published in harana poetry (2020).

Abass Collier

Open Curtains

The session begins with hammer to the window,
sifting of the assets, sorting of the pickings.
He doesn't own this house!
The lady is lazing on a beach lounger,
but her saffron smells fresh.

He hasn't time to ease on her rocker,
dine on these china plates,
sink it with that grand wine.
There's a fence out there,
dusting his booster bag.

When he volts out of the broken window,
bobbies are leaning on the fence.
With his booty in his hands, he spins to sprint
but gets a bear hug; and he spouts:
the lady is to blame.

The Goal Scorer

Just as the Reverend Father was getting up
off his knees, the mouse bolting to hole
was devoured by his hungry cat.
He thanked the mouse for his cat,
quickstepped out of the house
to get to church in time to officiate
mid-afternoon holy matrimony.

When he saw his car being clamped,
the smiling face of the Parking Attendant
made him to want to throw a punch.
To pilfer to redeem a better option:

As he was re-entering the house, he recalled
the collection box was left at church.
He glanced at his watch and noticed
a minute too early to clamp for cash;
his minute too ripe to fail to clamp.

“Who is God blessing today?” asked the Reverend Father.

The answer came from the post-match philosophy
of the goal scorer: “we prayed and played and preyed,
and the best team won.”

L Kiew

today everything is on fire & it's dangerous

the wind claws
crimson back & forth

running across grass

trees catch
leaves ember & cinders

I pray
please rain
save some green

there's a grasshopper
poised for flight
at the bottom of the page

Previously published in Ink Sweat and Tears

When we consider everything that grew

The highest and the lowest trees were the houses of gods. Above us danced the tanager and tinamou, the tyrannulet and trogon. Their feathers flashed bright blessings as each bird flew, spreading seeds to sprout green everywhere under our feet.

There was no silence. Tongues of leaves unfurled songs to which lianas wound in counterpoint. Epiphytes harmonised longing with orchids. With their bark-breaths, trees chanted the names of us, full of passionflowers and ferns. Fronds were hymns to our community.

Sky drew our trees close enough to touch. Ceiba placed arms tenderly around our mothers. Our fathers rested without any fear of brittleness in their broad branches. Jaguar purred, stretched out on boughs. Pudú and tamadou foraged among foliage.

We all thrived. In season there was always fruit. Soursop and maypop dropped into our hands. Along the banks where water overlapped, the fish and snake communed quietly. Quindío palms grew fat with rains, thrust supple and tangled roots into soil.

The logger's axe made ghosts of us.
Our thoughts split like stems. We heard nothing
as articulate as wind in the wet canopy.
No trees to buttress us,
our steps are spores dispersed.
Our lips crack from asking why.

These edgelands are twigs, dust and
dust. It smothers us, stings skin and eyes.
There is evergreen only in memories.
So far from our trees we know constant pain.
We who are never to return, how can we remember
who we are, dabs and dots, a few faded colours.

*Written in response to two paintings by Abel Rodríguez, Terraza Baja and
Terraza Alta, as part of a commission for the Among the Trees exhibition
at Hayward Gallery, London, 2020*

Gombak

Wet greeted us everywhere, its green mossiness, earthy and insinuating between flipflop and feet, woody drips from the dark canopy, squelching leaflitter. It licked us along the dark corridor, skidding from concrete kitchen onto long veranda and down the steep slope to that sudden sunlit padang and beyond, flowing glints clean water, swift, and there she was:

Sungai; kakak, capricious sister, she sprayed us with sweet stream scent, skirted soft sandstone, rocks slippery, shoulders undercutting earth banks. Her spirits altered after the rains. Waking us, she grumbled gravel, grumpy at being rust-rushed, bearing the load of overlogging, heavy sediment from up valley deforestation.

Our old white Ford was a rhino, turning reluctantly out of the gate; its lurch-lumber expelled me from forest home to other study stations. Tear-blind, feeling sick, evicted, I looked back to the red-roofed refuge of crashed out lorrymen, its altar offering oranges and incense, the giant banyan with roots upward, branches hunched over, weeping.

Previously published in harana poetry

The River

Water springs from the ground
flowing down-
wards
by the shortest
steepest
course.

It seeks the smoothest path.

Resistance by the rocks only
creates rapids and water
falls,
sunlight flashing through white
as it cascades to the low
lands.

It develops languid meandering manners,
wide, exaggerated loops and
bends,
occasionally
leaving an ox
bow.

At the end, its freshness succumbs to salt.

Jeremy Wikeley

Statues of Manchester

Greggs has run out of coffee beans.
Hey — no one's complaining.
 There's a handwritten note explaining.
I try the Caffè Nero (it's raining),
 and work on a series of screens.

This could be any European city
if it weren't for the statues. Victoria, Albert,
 Robert Peel, William Ewart
Gladstone. We're a country apart.
 I wonder that you miss me.

Outside, under the Jehovah's Witness stand,
a man is fingering a pamphlet.
 Transfixed, he highlights
each word with a single digit, cigarette
 floating in his other hand.

In Time of War

“Boris Johnson puts industry on war footing to equip NHS for coronavirus battle ahead.”
– The Daily Telegraph, 14th March 2020

If it were a war, we could be sad for ourselves.
“What bad luck,” we’d say,
“to get caught in this.”
So, the eventual, inevitable conscription
into the most statistically dangerous
part of the armed forces
(half the bomber crews didn’t make it back)
would be another piece of bad luck
as would the bomb through the kitchen ceiling.

If it were a war, I would be worried about dying
not only about other people dying,
and the very possibility
might make the uncertainty more bearable.
If it were a war
we would each come out with
a different story, or at least
there would be enough variation in our experiences
for the similarities not to be boring.

As it is, nothing we do seems very important
and because we don’t know
what’s working we don’t know
what’s worth it or what kind of world
will come next. All we know is
most of us will have to live in it.
And it’s right, it’s right, it’s right.
I’m not saying it’s not right.
But like everything right, it is unbearable.

Someone Else's Dreams

"There is nothing more boring than someone else's dreams" – Unattributed

18th August 2018

In the first I have driven to a town,
a school, in fact, for a meeting. I think
but I only skimmed the email (or else
have forgotten) that I'm here to discuss
poetry, possibly my poetry. I'm
not sure I've got the right time. There's no-one
at reception, so I head up the stairs
to a packed classroom with a glass inset
in the door. I go on in. According to
the A4 programme on my seat it is
a classical music recital. The harp?
I duck back outside. Down at reception
the person I was meant to be meeting
is there, packing away files. So, she says

you haven't brought anything. She isn't
surprised. I'm not sure what it is I'm
meant to have brought. I'm sorry, I say,
I've got the wrong time, the wrong idea entirely.
As I mumble, a queue of students from
upstairs arrives with their exercise books
open on medieval riddles. Answers
or translations? She marks them on the spot
and sends them away. They seem like good
students. I tell her I'm finding it hard
to concentrate. That's indicative, isn't it?
Until now, she says, she's been giving me
the benefit of the doubt. Whatever
it is we've been doing has got to stop.

2nd September 2018

I am going to study at a university by the sea. The halls are a tall, glass block of flats looking over the harbour. I have a hard time finding my room and when I do, just as I'm unpacking (I only have the one bag with me, the black sports bag I used throughout secondary school), I glance out of the window that makes up the outside wall and see a rising, rough, grey sea below, booming at the bottom of the building. There are people up to their waists in water, some of them are swimming, some being swept away. Soon, the water is halfway up my window. Somehow, inside, it is hardly damp. There is someone outside, under the surface, banging on the glass.

I run out into the corridor, where it's all chaos. There are boys from school on the gangway above talking about running to the roof. Hey, I shout, wait for me while I collect my bag! It is very important I collect my bag. I've left it in my room. But when I get there the bag is gone and there are people in the other rooms on the corridor setting up shop with makeshift beds and camping stoves, as if they expect to be there for some time. The boys from school have disappeared entirely. I am not thinking through my options rationally, I don't have a clear sense of where I want to be with my life. If I leave it much longer, I'll be left for dead.



*Children's &
Young Adult Fiction*

Sian Chaney-Price

Extract from *Questers: Book the First – The Tale of Three*

Once Upon A Time There Were Three Children...

Once upon a time there were three children, let us call them Margot, Silence and February because those were their names. Margot? We hear you cry, what an unusual name and you would be right, you do not get a lot of Margots in life, that is probably why she is starring in this story because she is special.

Silence, on the other hand, you tend to hear from parents who are trying to get their children to be quiet. Silence was a waily child and so her parents thought that by naming her Silence she would embody her name – it did not work, as Silence talked a lot.

February was a bit less original in that he was born in February and his mum thought that it was a nice name and something memorable. February thought otherwise, as in it was a bit too memorable for the other kids in Scouts, but he had learned to live with it in the same way that some children have to live with curly hair or bright orange eyes. No? Only us, who have eyes that shine like the brightest marigolds? Anyway, back to the story...

Margot, Silence and February had all been sent on a quest into the deep, dark woods¹. The envelopes that had come through the post had even been stamped, “Quest – open if you dare!” in big red letters and yet still Margot, Silence and February opened them. Even more crazily, they had packed their bags, or in Silence’s case just put on her coat and left immediately.

¹A quest is a normally a journey that has to be carried out by a hero or heroine and tends to be long and arduous, a bit like narrating this sorry tale.

We will skip the bit where the children travel to the woods as that is boring and humdrum and we know you want to get to the story, which involves the deep, dense forest, with glowing eyes and sharp claws behind every tree.

“I think we should stick to the path,” said February, who was very sensible, despite his name.

“I think we should go off the path and into the deep, dark woods,” argued Silence, tucking her brown bob behind her ears, which wasn’t a good look because they stuck out slightly. (And when we say slightly, we are being kind, what we really mean is that she would not have looked out of place in an elf line-up).

Silence was not afraid of anything and had found that she could talk most people around to her way of thinking; including the headmistress who had even given her the day off school just to go on this quest. Silence’s teachers had breathed a sigh of relief and there had been a carnival atmosphere in the staffroom.

February and Silence both turned to look at Margot who had the deciding vote. She straightened uncomfortably and gripped her satchel strap. Margot liked making decisions, but only the right ones and so far, she didn’t feel as if she had been given enough information to do so. At the same time, they were right at the start of the quest and she knew it was going to be a long and arduous journey, as that was what a quest was.

Margot blew a ginger curl out of her eye and decided she did not have time to be pondering what to do when they were only at the beginning of the quest. She imagined they would have to wrestle a gruffalo, trick a wolf dressed as a grandma and maybe even climb a beanstalk all before tea. It was going to be a long day.

“I think that we should stick to the path,” said Margot, nodding decisively, her ginger curls bouncing in agreement. She felt good about having made a decision and therefore, designated herself as leader of the story. It was for the best; the other two had ridiculous names for starters.

“Everyone knows that in these types of tales, if you go off the path you end up in a witch’s oven or being eaten by a wolf. I have

agreed to this quest, but I am not prepared to die for it, I have stuff I want to do with my life.”

The other two nodded and so they all started to follow the path which was just a normal dirt track, by the way. It was not paved with gold or bright yellow bricks and no one was wearing red sparkly shoes as they would not have been sensible to walk in. Nope, these three were pros and were wearing sturdy footwear, February even had proper walking boots – this was not his first walk in the woods.

The path was fairly narrow, so it meant that only two people could walk together at once, forcing the other person to walk behind or in front at all times. It wound its way through the trees, never allowing the Questers (for that is what we have decided to name them, even though it is not a real word) to see very far ahead.

On top of this, the light could not penetrate through the dense dark foliage very easily, making it hard to know if it was day or night. The trees were huddled together as if they needed comfort, some of the gnarled and twisted branches overhead looked like they were reaching out to one another or serving as a warning to the Questers to go back.

And then there was the silence, the fact that there was no sound, no birds chirping, no squirrels chittering and scrabbling through the trees, no woodpeckers drilling or small creatures digging in the undergrowth. All the children could hear were their own footsteps and heartbeats, accompanied by the creaking of the surrounding trees as they leaned forward to get a better view of the Questers and block out the light. A crow would caw occasionally, warning the children to turn back for they were not welcome here. Unfortunately, none of the children spoke crow.

Margot ignored the ominous cawing overhead and decided to lead the way. She had nominated herself team leader, but only in her head, she had not told the others as this might have caused arguments. She got the feeling that Silence might be the arguing type, probably because Silence was arguing with February right now.

“I still think we should have gone off the beaten track,” she grumbled, gesturing to a dark gap between two trees, it was so black

it reminded February of the time in Scouts when the others had blindfolded him and shut him in the camping cupboard.

“Well we are sticking to the path and that is that. Margot decided and I think that she is right, the path will carry us through the woods to the castle so that we can rescue the Princess, which is what we are here for.”

Silence harrumphed and frowned under her blunt brown fringe, “Yeah because it’s always that easy,” she said, but she fell into step behind the other two.

They had not been walking long when there was rustling and a growling in the undergrowth up ahead. None of the children liked the sound of this and froze. Just because they had agreed to go on a quest, did not mean that they were particularly brave.

“What is it?” whispered Silence, breaking the silence. “Is it a wolf or a gruffalo? I hate those things. They make everyone around them start to speak in rhyme and if you can’t think of a rhyme fast enough then you can’t speak for ages.”

February found himself hoping it was a gruffalo just so that Silence would be quiet for five minutes and let his enormous brain think in peace. He pushed his glasses quickly back up his nose, fear had made him start to sweat, but he couldn’t make anything out through the gloom.

The rustling and growling stopped and a tiny squirrel emerged.

Natasha Cutler
Extract from *The Frost Fair*

Voices in the Mist

“Thomasina!”

Arthur’s voice whirled in the mist, calling her name from the street behind her. As always, she felt a flicker of irritation deep inside her chest.

“Stop running!” he yelled.

The apothecary’s street sign swung in the wind, creaking above her head in the darkness.

“You’re too slow,” she spat, teeth tasting metallic against the cold, but stopped to watch her twin stumble to find her. Snow had quilted the London landscape and fell around them now, catching candlelight in neighbourhood windows so the flecks sparkled. Laughter trickled from inns and taverns lined along the backstreets beyond them. She wondered how late they were, and how cross Mother would be when they arrived home.

“You’ll never beat me,” she said as Arthur walked up, teeth chattering.

“I – I will,” he panted.

Despite being an inch taller and a whole eight minutes older than her, Arthur was slighter than she was, with sloping shoulders just beginning to broaden. He had red-robin cheeks, dark hair plastered against his forehead with sweat, and was breathing in short, sharp gasps.

“Prove it,” she said. “Prove you can win against me. Race me home.”

“Just – just wait.”

The wheeze they had been born with was getting louder in his

chest, and it made her angrier for a reason she could not understand. She started walking up a side street.

“Come on,” she called, her echoes bouncing off the walls of the closed shops around them. “I ain’t even running now. You scared of losing?”

Losing, the buildings repeated.

Arthur’s voice was faint. “N – no.”

“I beat you earlier when we raced against the butcher’s boys. D’you think I won’t do it again? Didn’t you see them laughing at you?”

Laughing at you.

“St – stop it,” he coughed.

“You’ll never learn,” she said. Something dangerous was stirring inside her: something she’d found increasingly difficult to suppress for months. “Father will be so disappointed when he finds out.”

“Please,” Arthur wheezed behind her.

As his gasps became shorter, they took on musical notes, as if a group of minstrels were playing inside his chest. Despite this, she plunged on. The words inside her had been burning to be heard for years.

“I’m stronger than you are, and much faster,” she said. “You can try, but you’ll never win.”

“I can’t –”

“Even Father knows I’m better than you. I should be his apprentice instead of you.”

Immediately, she regretted her words. Whipping around so the wind stung her cheeks, she said, “That was too far. I’m sorry, Arthur. I was just – Arthur?”

Her brother was standing stock-still in the middle of the street. His face had drained of colour asides from the blood-red of his open mouth, and his chest was working up and down like a sparrow’s.

“Arthur?” she repeated, voice faltering against the wind.

He slumped forwards, and her world crashed apart.

Thomasina ran over to him and crouched down. She saw his hands, pink in the cold, shaking as he panted on all fours: Arthur, her brother, chest heaving; Arthur, her rival, unable to breathe; Arthur,

her second self, lips turning blue.

“What’s happening?” she cried.

He could not speak but coughed instead. Tears leaked from his eyes.

“I’m – I’m going to get help,” Thomasina said, stumbling to stand.

She did not want to leave his side, but what else could she do?

She scanned her eyes around the silent street. The sprawling lanes making up this tiny corner of London were not dominated by night-trades, unlike in other areas of the city. However, there was a candle flickering in the apothecary’s upstairs window. She ran over, splinters piercing her skin as she banged on the door.

“Help!” she screamed.

The candle in the window was blown out. No footsteps came. The inhabitants of these streets were used to late-night scuffles, due to living in such an unsavoury part of London. In this neighbourhood, it was common for people to look the other way when they heard strange noises at night.

Behind Thomasina, Arthur was wheezing more than he had been when she had left his side, and she ran to him, feeling ice slice through her skirts as she rubbed his back.

“Arthur, I’m here,” she said, trying to hold back her tears. “I’m here, and I’m going to get help –”

“Q – quick,” he whispered.

“Help!” She screamed again, voice cracking.

Silence greeted her. She knew what she had to do.

“I need to find someone, Arthur,” she whispered. “I’ll be back soon.”

She could not look at him. Her heart was beating so frantically she felt sick. Arthur was left to pant in muck and snow as she ran to the streets beyond, boots slicked in slush as she skidded around a corner, chest straining, and saw a lit window. Several people were laughing inside a tavern.

“My brother can’t breathe!” Thomasina shouted. But in their drunken haze, the people inside were slow to move, and most sat, frozen, in their seats. She could not wait for them: she was worried if

she did, it would be too late to reach Arthur in time. She ran as fast as she could back to him, tears nearly blinding her as she crunched through the snow. A couple of men hurried to catch her up. She heard them exclaim when they reached her brother.

“The boy –”

“Good grief –”

“The Burgess kid –”

In the space of a few minutes, her brother’s face had turned blue. It was a terrible sight when lit by the moon, and Thomasina’s stomach turned.

“Arthur,” she whispered, so harshly she heard her voice tear in pieces. “Talk to me.”

She ripped apart the layers surrounding him – the cloak from around his neck and the collar from his shirt – but knew this was not enough as he shuddered.

“Arthur,” Thomasina gulped. “Arthur.”

She looked at the person she loved most in the world as his cold fingers trembled on her own, and knew her brother was beyond words now.

“Just hold on a bit longer – help’ll come soon, Arthur, I know it,” she said, but the rest of her words died in her throat.

Arthur collapsed onto the snow, where he lay still, face turned towards her. Motionless, his closed eyes glimmered out their final tears as the wind sang and danced around them.

Mandy Rabin

Extract from *The Precarious Potions of Kitta Quint*

Kitta Quint was putting the final touches to her nose-growing potion when two taps sounded at the door. She frowned. Grandpa always whistled on his return, and no-one from the village came calling in the twilight.

And then a knock, low and hollow. She couldn't go down and answer, not with the potion nearly ready. She tilted her head, regarding the beaker of bubbling pink liquid on the workbench before her. For a straight nose, she could add buttercups dampened by morning dew, but a curling nose would suit Leith so much better. And so, picking up four nostril hairs plucked from a brooding old man, she dropped them into the glass beaker where they dissolved with a satisfying fizz.

The knocking grew louder. Could it be Leith? But he wasn't due till morning.

"Open up!"

The deep voice thundered up through Kitta's boots. Her heart thudded. Grandpa would be furious if he caught her concocting anything. But it wasn't his voice. And not a boy's either, so not Leith. She couldn't wait to make his nose grow so long and curling, it would frighten him away from their home for good.

Staring at the frothing beaker, she rubbed her chin. It had been four nostril hairs, hadn't it? She shook her head to dismiss any doubt. After all, she was an expert at this sort of thing, and an extra nostril hair was hardly likely to make a difference.

"Open up, I say!"

Kitta huffed. No-one, but no-one, would tell her what to do. Sniffing, she picked up a copper spoon and stirred the potion.

"Let me in at once!"

The knocks were so loud, they hammered against her chest and made the complicated arrangement of glass tubes and vessels on the workbench wobble.

“Let me in!”

Kitta balled her fists. Grandpa had warned her against opening the door to strangers. But where was he?

“Answer, or I’ll break down the door!”

Kitta gasped. Was Grandpa hurt? She should go down and check.

“You have till the count of five!”

The words vibrated up Kitta’s spine.

“One.”

Heart thumping, she grabbed a candle and squeezed between the workbench and the shelves that sagged under the weight of glass jars full of powders.

“Two.”

She hopped down the ladder to the shop floor, being careful to avoid the broken rung.

“Three.”

Putting the candle on the rickety shop counter, Kitta stood, staring at the door which bulged inwards with every thump.

“Four.”

She undid the chain on the door, slid open the heavy bolt across the bottom, the even heavier one in the middle, then stood on tiptoes to unbolt the heaviest one at the top.

“Five.”

The door swung open, hitting Grandpa’s chair with the force of an axe. Kitta jumped back as a blizzard howled into the room, and with it a man, his strides too long for the tiny space, his head too high for the low-beamed ceiling.

“Where is he?” he barked. His voice, meant for wide halls and audience chambers, rattled the glass jars full of birds’ bones and dried insects that lined the crooked shelves behind the counter.

Kitta shut out the blizzard and stood, panting, her shoulder blades against the door, staring at the gentleman’s broad back.

“Who?” Her voice was a squeak of fright.

The stranger turned, melting snow flying from the hem of his cape onto Kitta’s bare forearms.

“Elijah Quint. Who else?”

The brim of his black hat cast a shadow over his eyes; yet still, Kitta felt his gaze upon her, pinning her to the door so that she knew she had to answer.

“Out.”

“Out?” His cheekbones glowed copper in the firelight.

Kitta swallowed, tucking a coil of hair under her bonnet.

“Collecting snow.”

“Snow?”

She clenched her fists to calm her ragged breathing. “From paw prints left by cats roaming in the twilight.”

As the stranger stepped closer, the candle sputtered, and it seemed to Kitta his very movements could conjure a gale.

“It’s to use in a cure for melancholy.” Kitta’s heart knocked.

“Tell me more.” His shadow smothered her.

Kitta trembled, staring at the man’s huge gloved hands. To face up to him, she would have to crush her fear. He might be tall, but she was an alchemist in waiting, even if Grandpa didn’t realise it yet.

She straightened her back and cleared her throat. “Mixed with sprigs of thyme and sweat from the armpits of a champion wrestler, snow from paw prints left by cats in the twilight can cure melancholy.”

The stranger laughed – a bark that made the weighing scales on the shop counter tinkle. “You possess a lot of knowledge for one so small.”

Anger bubbled in Kitta’s chest. A small person, she knew, could fill a room if they so wished. Taking a deep breath, she said. “I’m twelve, actually.”

“Only twelve.” The stranger waved his hand as if swatting a fly. “Curing melancholy is child’s play.” Kitta felt the searching heat of his eyes upon her. Unease coiled up from her belly. “But I bet you wouldn’t know how to make a river flow upstream.”

Oh, but she could, and more besides. She knew where to sprinkle nail clippings from the feet of a dancing ballerina to conjure a rainbow, or how to use sea spray gathered on a moonlit night to cure lovers of

heartbreak. These things she'd learnt from Ma's books on high alchemy, and one day, when Grandpa wasn't looking, she'd perform them, too.

"That's easy." Kitta spoke loudly to muffle her fear. "A pinch of powdered nettle leaves mixed with hair from the mane of a galloping horse will do the trick."

The stranger crouched, the brim of his hat brushing the top of Kitta's bonnet. Sweat glistened on his cheeks. "But your ma. She wasn't much of an alchemist."

His words brought the ache of tears to Kitta's throat. How dare he insult her dead mother. Kitta placed her hands on her hips. "Why, she was the most powerful alchemist on the whole island."

"I've heard she was so... feeble." The stranger's voice was full of pity. "It's said she couldn't even command the herrimoth."

Anger roared in Kitta's chest. "Of course she could."

Her stomach felt cold. Why had she said that? If the truth about Ma's command of that creature spread beyond their village, it could put her and Grandpa in danger.

The stranger licked his lips. "Really? What else do you know?"

Kitta swallowed. There were those who yearned to find a creature as powerful as the herrimoth and use it for evil.

"Could your grandfather tell me more?" The stranger's whisper prickled against Kitta's cheek, so that for a moment, she could not breathe, and neither, it seemed, could he, both gripped as they were in a frozen moment.

"Well?"

His question hammered into her, and in the silence, she could hear the rush of his breath, which smelled like damp dog's fur. Clenching her clammy fists, Kitta forced herself to stare into the dark shadow that hid his eyes, refusing to speak, or blink. The fire snapped. The house groaned. Kitta's heart thumped a slow beat.

The floorboards creaked as the stranger stood.

"You've been surprisingly helpful. Farewell, young lady. Until we meet again."

As he swept out of the door, Kitta trembled in the icy blast that followed, feeling as if a storm had made the very walls of her home crumble, leaving her at the mercy of the cold.

Laura Sanchez

Extract from *Bitches Be Like*

Love

Everything is easier if you have someone to love.

Still. People always talk about *being* loved.

Like that's the best. Like that's it.

He loves me. He, he, he loves me.

*he said it "i love you" i'm his wifey
gonna make me feel like i'm the only girl in the world?
say say bae i love you*

He luvv me, luvv me, luvv, luvv, luvv, luv.

Guess it depends who loves you.

For me, it was *having someone to love* that ended loneliness.

I'd been with loneliness a long time.

Lone.

Then I found my soulmate.

9 at night, March 31st, the High Road. Rain. Crouched down, face to face, nose to nose. Blink.

/

Two Bitches Collided.

Luvv

Her: Wide eyed, on the lookout for new mates. Me: Eyes wide, spun out, hiding from mine.

Her

And since that dirty London dusk, life is different.

We go places. I go places.

I'M GOING PLACES.

And I love.

I have someone to love.

I love her, I love her, I love her, her, her. I luv. I luv.

I luv.

I love Every Heavy, Clumsy Part Of Her.

Fur. Claws. Gob. Shit (quite a lot of shit)*

Breath like a Dorito left out in the rain.

Eyes fighting nose, eyes tryin to be bigger.

Ears that eva hear packets, neva instructions.

Brain that can't decide if it's stupid or smart.

Chat: Her Own. Grunt-Sniff-Bark-Squeak:

I'D-LIKE-YOUR-FOOD. A song on loop.

Tail that can't lie and a heart that wouldn't.

Her heart.

Her heart allows me in and lays out a welcome.

Her soul matches mine, switchin up swagger and wonder.

Her spirit seeks past these ends, joins me in danger and wander.

Chick King of the High Road.

My girl: Chicken.

*more shit than you'd expect, y'know?

Introductions

When I was six a teacher asked me to spell my name for the register.
I got nervous cos my name's so flippin long, like, what if I forgot how to spell it?

I wasn't gonna look like some idiot.

So I didn't speak.

For a **WHOLE** day.

First impressions, are the most important thing

Hello, my name is Amaya.

I mean, everyone calls me Maya

'cept when I'm in trouble...

yeah, so...

guess

you're gonna hear Amaya a lot.....

Amaya Martinez-Sastre? Hmmm I spoke to your previous head teacher.

ANYWAYS.

When I was seven I got so into hula-hooping.

Watched every YouTube Hula Hoop trick video till I was the best person at hula hooping I knew.

Thought some day I was gonna be an Olympic gymnast.

Till I realised ...I just didn't know that many people. LOL.

introductions are important

When I was eight, I won the School Diligence Prize for a project on garden birds. Made each bird out of leaves and grass and twigs and stuff. When the head teacher presented the prize she said "I think you might be an artist". Inside, I already knew I was.

wanna get to know me?

When I was nine, everyone in my class said that next year I would be head girl. Cos I was good at everything **AND ALL THE TEACHERS LIKE YOU.**

Some of them didn't mean this in a nice way.
But that was the year everything changed.

When I was ten... I
When I was ten P moved in.
NO.

That's not what I want you to know.

My favourite food is chilli chicken wings. Favourite subject: art.
Favourite colour: green. Favourite number: 3.
WTF I'm not five years old.

What do I want you to know?

Me.
Me before.
Me underneath.
ME trapped, waitin.

What's it like when you meet people for the first time?
Sorry I said LOL. That's dumb AF.

Lucy Steeds

Extract from *The Map of Lost Lands*

London, 1871

I was four years old when I first asked my Pa where I came from. He told me that a magnificent, fire-coloured bird had dropped me from the sky through a hole in the roof. And it was there that he had found me, lying on the floor in a nest of red and gold feathers.

I was six years old when I asked him again. Pa picked me up and put me on his knee, and told me that he had found me tucked amongst the reeds of Hyde Park, under the lights of the Queen's palace. Perhaps I was a princess, he said, smuggled out of the castle and into the night, where he had stumbled upon me one dewy morning.

By the time I asked him again, the story had changed. I was sitting up on the counter of the shop where he worked, swinging my legs back and forth, peppering him with questions as my heels bumped against the glass of the cabinet. I asked him where I came from and he told me a tale that made my eyes grow wide. Of wolves and bears in a strange land, and of a baby, me, carried over mountains on the back of a giant. He created shadow puppets in the lamplight, his hands becoming beasts and creatures in a wild world against the wall.

I was thirteen years old when he told me the truth.

*

The glass of the window was cool against my forehead.

It was a hot evening that September. Lacewing flies were still drifting through the air of the city, and the swallows had not yet begun their journey south.

People flitted to and fro in the alley outside: mothers harrying small children, clerks struggling past with their noses just visible above

piles of letters and books. A washerwoman dragged a sack of grubby laundry along the ground, and a scruffy terrier yapped at her heels.

I watched the comings and goings of people stomping, chasing, and tramping through Cecil Court on the other side of the glass. Red-faced men swatted at flies and women fanned themselves as they trotted along in twos and threes. But none of the people passing by in the late-afternoon bustle was who I was looking for.

“Marnie dear, help me with this.” I turned around to see Pa shouldering a giant unicorn horn. Scrambling down from the shop’s window, I helped him ease it onto a glass counter that ran the length of the shop. Pa gave it a dust with the fringe of his shirt. The long, spiralling horn had been brought back by an old sea captain, who told us how he had slain the unicorn and carried its horn all the way back from Siberia. “Prick your finger on the end and it’ll turn you to stone,” the sailor had whispered in wonder to me. “Or grind it all up and one whiff of the powder will send you straight to sleep.”

Pa, who knew better than to believe such salty sea-tales, later informed me that this was, in fact, a narwhal tusk, and contained no magical powers whatsoever. But he had humbled the captain, and affixed a ‘Most Rare’ tag to the item which now balanced gracefully in the centre of the shop.

We had lived in the pawn shop for as long as I could remember, and Pa had lived here even longer than that. I learned to walk amongst its crooked shelves, tottering up the aisles and grabbing on to telescopes and stuffed peacocks for balance. Pa taught me to read from the books people left behind, beloved copies of Shakespeare and Milton, or collections of Romanian fairy tales. We lived off the castaways of other people’s lives; the flotsam and jetsam of fortunes turned upside down.

And so it was that the captain’s unicorn horn came to sit in pride of place in the shop. Some boys had wandered in off the street to inspect it, pricking their fingers on the tip but to no disastrous consequences.

I returned to the window, clambering into the display and pressing my nose against the glass. A butcher walked past with a flank

of meat over his shoulders, and a flock of children chased after a cat. But none of the people passing by was who I was waiting for; none of them was a man with a beard as long as his coat, and a jewel in the centre of his one, golden tooth.

The man had first come to the shop several weeks ago, shuffling oddly and concealing something beneath his coat. He had gone quietly up to the counter and, from my position perched atop one of the cabinets, I saw him whisper something to Pa. When no one was looking, he withdrew a book from the folds of his clothes. And then I had nearly fallen off the cabinet.

Books were my favourite things that people brought into the shop. Better than rubies or navigational instruments or pieces of fur clothing; they were the only things that felt more special after someone else had used them. But the book that the man slid onto the counter was like no book I had ever seen before.

I tiptoed over to where the exchange was taking place and peered around Pa's elbow. The book's cover was a hammered sheet of burnished metal. Tiny jewels were pressed into its edges, and in the middle someone had carved the swirling words *The Thousand and One Nights*. The entire thing shone in the waxy lamplight.

As Pa flipped through the pages to inspect it, inky drawings peeked out at me. There were huge palaces and tumbling oceans, horses and lions and women in brilliant robes flying through the air. I wanted so desperately to touch it, and had to press my hands under my armpits to stop myself.

I watched as Pa brought out his cracked leather accounting book. The Ledger, he called it. In it, he noted down all the details of items loaned and sold, loved and lost, in neat little rows. He turned *The Thousand and One Nights* over in his hands, feeling its heft and its size, the quality of its golden cover and the scratches on its spine. He noted it all down in the Ledger, and then he turned to the man with the beard as long as his coat and asked him for his name. The man's address was noted down also, and then in the final column Pa wrote a date.

This was the date by which the man had to return. Up until that day he could buy back his book, but after that day was up... then it was

ours. And Pa had promised me he wouldn't sell *The Thousand and One Nights*. He'd promised me I could keep it.

The last I had seen of the man was his long coat and beard disappearing around the corner of the street, shuffling quickly and clutching the bag of silver Pa had given him. But I had returned to his book every night, sneaking it from its place on the shelves, up through the house that sat above the shop, and all the way to my bedroom beneath the eaves. I curled up there each night, reading until my candle burned low. When my eyes grew too heavy, Pa would take the book from my hands and read me one last story, and every morning I would re-read it myself, having drifted off before the end.

And so the weeks swung around, and as the final hours of the final day were drawing to a close, that was how I came to be waiting in the shop's window, face smudged against the glass, knees cramped around an antique violin, waiting for the man with the beard as long as his coat.



Stage & Screen

Carmina Bernhardt

Extract from *R'n'J: The Untold Story of Shakespeare's Roz and Jules*

Act 2, Scene 1

CHORUS: Now two who once were naught but family,
 Have left a trail of carnage in their wake,
 Their small and peaceful lives turned tragedy,
 No time to divide their common heart's ache.
 Now Romeo is most dead, and Dead again,
 Within the women's hearts where he will lie,
 The Grief remains, e'en when the thoughts condemn,
 And Time and Air, the fallen tears do dry.
 Being thrust together out in the cold,
 With looks full matched in fear and jealousy,
 To search for Truth in messages they've been sold,
 And, shit, deal with a teenage pregnancy.
 Our Roz and Jules shall venture far from Home,
 In hope they can possess their Inner Throne.

*ROZ and JULES have been hiding out
in the woods for the past two weeks.*

ROZ: God! You are so annoying! Just for a little while,
 Jules. We'll wear masks and come up with fake names.
 Woods Glamping is super great, but I would like to
 see some other people now, in the city. It's Mantua.
 We don't know anyone here and no one knows us! And
 you have been such a grump lately. Are you PMS-ing
 or something?

JULES: No.

ROZ: Don't you want to celebrate your day?
And drink till we puke and puke to drink more?
You're only fourteen, don't be such a bore!

JULES: O, don't say puke, it's all I can not to
Nope, it's coming –

JULES pukes in to a bin bag.

ROZ: That was our last bin bag.
Did you start the scotch whisky without me?

JULES: O, don't say whisky –

JULES pukes.

ROZ: Gross! What's wrong with you?

JULES: I feel sick. And weird. And fat. And dischargy.

ROZ: Maybe you're pregnant! Ha! Happy Birthday!

JULES is silent.

Omigod, did Rom'yo slip you the D?
I'd WebMed your symps, but, dead battery.
Fell in a vortex of survival how-tos.

JULES: I have a vial I took off Romeo. Here. It says:
Apothecary Po – purveyor of fine tortoise shells,
alligators stuffed, and all sizes of the world-renowned
green earthen pots of Northern Italy, perfect for
storing hemp and/or cannabis light for those discerning

collectors that will neither swallow nor smoke it, 'cause that's totally illegal in Italy. An address! 1111B Greenwood Lane, North Mantua, Italy. Closed on holy days; yell loudly when closed and I'll open anyway, 'cause that's the kind of helpful Apoth I aim to be. @Apoth.po #apoth #greenearthenpots #gotyourdramfam

ROZ: Impressive amount of text on one vial.

JULES: The writing is small, but it is so writ.
Perhaps he does as he says: got my dram.

Act 2, Scene 2

ROZ and JULES approach the APOTHECARY's shop. An abortion PRO-LIFER stands nearby with a sign that reads: A BUN IN THE OVEN IS ALREADY A BUN.

PRO-LIFER: Choose wombs, not tombs! Choose wombs, not tombs!

ROZ: What ho, apothecary

APOTHECARY enters

APOTHECARY: Who calls so loud?

PRO-LIFER: Apothecary Po does abortions. Pray for him.

APOTHECARY: O, get a job.

APOTHECARY opens an umbrella to shield ROZ from THE PRO-LIFER. They move aside.

PRO-LIFER: Can I give you a gift? 'Tis Lammastide, celebrate the bounty that lives inside!

PRO-LIFER hands JULES a small corn dolly.

You don't have to do this. I can help you. I can help you with food, rent, childcare. Your baby has a heartbeat. And the little folds that will soon be her tongue. Let me help you.

APOTHECARY shoos the PRO-LIFER away with the umbrella.

I don't want to save your baby; I want to help you raise a child.

JULES: I'm not pregnant, I'm hormonal and nauseous.

PRO-LIFER exits saying blessings to the audience and handing out rosemary.

PRO-LIFER: Celebrate the bounty! Blessings of Lammas! Thrive your first fruits! May your fruits be fruitful! Break bread, not babies! Choose wombs, not tombs!

APOTHECARY: Will you be needing the full package, then?

ROZ: We might indeed, Sir. For my good coz Cap. She is suffering greatly with nausea, And I from her gas and terrible mood.

JULES: She jests, I'm fine and deffo not preggio.

APOTHECARY hugs her.

APOTHECARY: Yup, fully preggio. Funny, you're the spitting image of another young Cap. Wait, you're not cops, are you? Mantua's new laws forbid I provide any such medical care for any young peanut in your predic.

ROZ: We're not cops. CAPS from Ve-nice! Capuchin. Venetians of the great Capuchin fam.

APOTHECARY: Capuchin, you say? Strange. You are made of the mould of a Capulet I did know; sad story it was, married (barely scraping out of childhood) to an aggressive old beast, fell in love with his nephew (and others, if you take any note of prattling gossip, which I certainly do not), and forced to end the proof on more than one occasion, I can say. My, that Verona, quite the dramas coming out of there! Why, there was even a young man, not but a fortnight and odd days ago, did head off in that direction with a vial of my hardest stuff, leaving me enriched with a cool forty ducats! Quite rude though, uncouth, pushy, full to the brim with assumptions of my...

ROZ: Thank you, yes, the full package, my good Sir.

APOTHECARY: Yes, of course. Here's the one! Drink this for the full package. The nausea will increase, but soon pass, as it were.

JULES: What if I take this dram, but then change my mind?

APOTHECARY: You can't, for there's the reason for the dram, fam.

JULES: How if, when I take the dram, but change my mind, I vomit it straight, will then it be stopped?

APOTHECARY: What residue left will have its effect.

JULES: Shall I not then take a moment to think?
How long can I wait, before it won't work?

APOTHECARY: Earlier is better, my sweet young squirt,
But, it is your life to give o'er or not,
Your womb is your own, not a garden to plot.

JULES: Or what if I-

ROZ: Alack! Alack! Dear Coz,
We have ta'en up most of his holy day.

JULES: Indeed, let's away.

APOTHECARY: Before you do, dear Caps, take this on the casa,
In case the future you choose to saluti,
Recommends folic acids, mother's duty.

Abass Collier

Extract from *Remains of Mayor*

INT. DARLING'S HOUSE (LOUNGE) – DAY

A sparsely decorated lounge, a dining table squeezed behind the sofa. On the table is a desktop computer. Besides the computer is a statuette. On the chair in front of the table is a 35-year-old white male, DARLING, in t-shirt and skin-tight trousers. He is watching a cat video clip on YouTube; and is constantly shifting the statuette to reposition the keyboard.

With an air of contempt and dissatisfaction, DARLING navigates away from the cat video to a video clip of himself, passes the cursor over the views (about 6,000). As he clicks, the keyboard shifts, and the statuette slips. He tries to catch the statuette, but misses. The statuette crashes on the ground and breaks into pieces.

DARLING hisses, gets up from the chair, picks up his jacket from the sofa. As he puts on the jacket, a plastic envelope falls out from the pocket. He picks it up and takes out a set of A4 papers clipped together.

On the front sheet, is the caption: 'NATURE AT YOUR DOORSTEP. SAVE THE TREE FOR THE BIRDS'. Underneath the caption are five names with signatures.

DARLING opens the front door, walks out, into the street.

EXT. NEIGHBOURS' FRONT GARDENS – DAY

A few yards from his house, DARLING enters a front garden and walks towards the door. He rings the doorbell. No one comes out. He enters into another front garden, walks to the door, rings the doorbell. No one comes out. Then across the street, he sees ROBYN, early forties, on her doorstep, lighting a cigarette. He crosses the street, approaches the neighbour.

DARLING
Robyn, hi.

Through the half-open door, behind ROBYN, we see TONY EVANS (ROBYN's husband), mid to late forties. He is flat on the ground, with a camcorder, filming a cat. ROBYN pulls the door, shields TONY from DARLING's gaze.

ROBYN
(On seeing the paper in DARLING's hand)
You still want people to put up with that shit?

DARLING
A little inconvenience to put up with.
All creatures, large or small, are...?

Slightly uncomfortable from ROBYN's cigarette smoke, DARLING pointlessly swipes his hand to redirect the swirling smoke.

ROBYN
(Drops the cigarette butt, steps on it)
Sorry, luv.

DARLING
That's OK (coughs). We need a hundred signatures by the weekend or the tree will be cut down, the council says.

ROBYN looks towards the tree, its branches roofing next-door's driveway, porch and part of the house itself.

(...Later, Darling's body is discovered and a murder investigation begins.)

Karim Flint

Extract from *Them That Walk*

EXT. STREET – DAY

CLOSE on a LABRADOR having his head vigorously petted. He has that happy/confused look dogs get meeting someone new.

CLOSE on SAMIYA (20). Disarmingly earnest. Ethnically ambiguous. Lover of dogs.

We cut back and forth between dog and girl. To the casual observer it appears as if they're talking to one another.

OLD BOY (O.S.)

...lived in this town all my life.

Well, except for that month and half we spent at our Shir's when she had a gastric bypass. Poor cow, couldn't stomach more than a Quaver for six weeks.

SAMIYA

You must really love it round here?

OLD BOY (O.S.)

Oh I do. Married here. Made a home.

Raised young 'uns. This right here, this is the real England, not that fake England you get elsewhere.

SAMIYA

Who's a beautiful boy, you are,
aren't you, aren't you?

OLD BOY (O.S.)

And I'll tell you something else, I'm not
prejudiced. Not a hateful bone in my body.
Don't even mind your lot.

Grin fixed she continues to pet the dog, if slightly less enthusiastically.
Pretend this isn't happening Samiya.

SAMIYA

My lot?

OLD BOY (O.S.)

The Wogs and Pakis and the likes.

Bad dog. She stops petting the prejudiced pooch.

OLD BOY (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Nope, it's these bloody Poles I can't stand.
Stealing our jobs. Our benefits. Speaking their
foreign jibber-jabber down Paddy Power.

Samiya stands, wiping her hands on her jeans as if racism is contagious.
A ROSETTE is pinned to her, the political party PIXELATED like the face of
a sex crime victim.

She turns to the OLD BOY (70s) holding the dog's lead. Salt of the
earth type. Someone's grandpa. Utter twat.

OLD BOY (CONT'D)

They call this place lil' Krakow now, that's
how many of them we've got round this way.

Breed like rabbits with their arses on fire.

She reaches into her bag, pulling out CAMPAIGN LITERATURE.

SAMIYA

Sure, would you like to read our manifesto, our policy on sustainable immigra-

OLD BOY

Not for me love. Don't vote. Haven't since Celebrity Big Brother. Les Dennis was robbed. I'll never trust Davina again.

SAMIYA

Well, that's- you know I think that maybe I should be on my way.

OLD BOY

If it were up to me we'd round 'em all up and have 'em all out.

SAMIYA

Sure, reality TV presenters or-

OLD BOY

(yelling)

The Poles! Send the buggers back!

Samiya isn't listening. Her gaze is fixed on the burly WORKMEN walking towards them on the other side of the road.

SAMIYA'S POV: She takes in the Polish national FOOTBALL SHIRTS – the EAGLE tattoos – the cans of *TYSKIE* lager.

EXT POV.

SAMIYA

Shit.

The Old Boy isn't concerned, giving them a friendly wave.

OLD BOY

Alright there Pavel.

PAVEL waves back as the group of men continue on their way. An incredulous Samiya looks from them to the Old Boy.

OLD BOY (CONT'D)

What?

SAMIYA

I thought you – aren't they –

OLD BOY

Oh aye. But Pavel's alright. Did a bang up job of our Kev's extension. Put in a lovely breakfast nook.

The Old Boy companionably puts his arm around Samiya. Gross.

OLD BOY (CONT'D)

Now, let me tell you a thing or two about the fucking Euro.

CUT TO:

INSERT TEXT:

THEM THAT WALK

EXT. OLD DIDDLEING EAST-WEST (MONTAGE) – DAY

We PASS OVER this green and somewhat pleasant land. A constituency of quiet villages – cookie-cutter suburbs – unimpressive high streets. Everywhere we see CAMPAIGN POSTERS, SIGNS, BILLBOARDS. The political parties all PIXELLATED out. It's a thing.

INT. ENTRANCE HALL – DAY

CLOSE ON the LETTERBOX. Its thick, weatherproof bristles move stiffly. A MUFFLED VOICE can be heard on the other side.

SAMIYA (O.S.)

Come on!

A LEAFLET is slowly forced through the uncooperative opening.

SAMIYA (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Get in there!

The flimsy flyer inches through.

EXT. DOORSTEP – CONTINUOUS

Samiya snatches her hand back as the letterbox SNAPS shut.

SAMIYA

FUCK, FUCKITY, FUCK!

She sucks on her wounded digits – then catches the eye of the TODDLER watching her from the living room window.

Samiya waves. The child's MOTHER appears on the other side of the glass. She grabs the child and gives Samiya the finger. She doesn't need telling twice. Samiya flees.

Madi Maxwell-Libby

Extract from *What Good Looks Like*

(A forward slash indicates the line should overlap with the following one)

Scene 1

Darkness. A low, ominous beat. The lights come up on MICHAEL, 20s, bouncing on his feet.

MICHAEL: Let's go.
I want counter-culture, not over-the-counter culture,
Sick of content vultures circling for scraps round my
sculptural output (*he flexes*).
Yeah that's right,
Man's got gains, man's got brains, man's got the car and
the map but I don't have the lanes,
You lot sitting at a tollbooth wondering why we ain't
paying,
My friends call me a sell-out, because I'm here to sell out,
I'm here to take my cheque, cash it in and lock it down.
Hold tight everyone holding down jobs that hold them back
Because letting it go means letting them down,
I'm letting it out, I'm filling your mouth,
Words so contagious you scared of spitting them out.
My name's Icarus and I'm here to fly,
Bun the sun – I'm not here to die,
I'm here to spit rhymes that money can't buy,
I won't pipe down cos I'm here for Pipe_line.

The music stops. Lights up to reveal advertising executives JEZ (40s), CARIANNE (50s) and KAI (20s) sitting behind a long table, watching. They all clap. JEZ claps the loudest.

- JEZ: Wow. Great stuff *(he glances down at his CV)* Michael, great stuff.
- MICHAEL: Thank / you
- JEZ: Come take a seat. So, do you do this stuff for an audience or...?
- MICHAEL: I do slams and stuff, yeah.
- JEZ: Nice one. And so, Michael, why do you want to join the Pipe_line at Piper?
- MICHAEL: Well like, to be honest? I want a challenge. I want to better myself, I want to better my writing, my producing, my editing. Like at the moment, I'm an all-rounder but I don't wanna be a jack of all trades you know, I want to level up. And I think a scheme like this would give me the opportunity to do that, to sharpen my skills. And you have a peng office, obviously.
- JEZ: It helps. And / so
- MICHAEL: And / like. Oh, sorry, my bad
- JEZ: No, please.
- MICHAEL: Like it would just be a massively important step for me professionally too.
- JEZ: Of course. You didn't finish university did you?
- MICHAEL: Nah. Family issues.

JEZ: Understand. Well, thanks Michael. I think we're done here. Great to get a dose of blistering urban lyricism on a Monday morning! Do you have any questions for us?

MICHAEL: Um... Not really. Just like... Thanks for the opportunity, I guess.

JEZ: You're very welcome Michael. We'll be in touch.

MICHAEL. Aite cool. Inabit.

He exits

JEZ: Yes.

CARIANNE: No.

JEZ: What?

KAI: I thought he was pretty solid.

CARIANNE: He hasn't got the qualifications; he didn't do a pitch. It's not fair on the other candidates.

JEZ: He's better than the other candidates.

CARIANNE: It's tokenism.

JEZ: No it's not. This scheme is about young talent and diversity of thought. It's about nurturing a pipeline of bold, original, urban voices who are going to shape the future of our digital output.

CARIANNE: You just want to win the AMV account.

JEZ: He's what this company needs. He's going through.

Lights down as JEZ exits.

Lights up on MICHAEL, leaning on the wall outside. He's replying to a message via voice note on WhatsApp. He sounds different.

MICHAEL: I know, he literally said 'urban'. But it's calm. I think they bought it.

Scene 2

Inside the Piper offices. Open plan, exposed brickwork, hi-spec lighting and a wall full of post-its. Nespresso machines and orange beanbags. KAI is giving the Pipe_line intake the tour. He says the same thing every year.

KAI: OK! So. This is where the magic happens. Design is over there, Talent is here, PR is behind the rainforest wall and the big dogs are upstairs. We operate a hot-desk policy here, so nobody has an allocated workspace. You just need to fend for yourself when you get in.

We're also fully committed to agile working here at Piper, which means we're flexible on start times. But just make sure you're here when everyone else is. And, if you're 'working from home' the day after our team drinks, we all know it's because you're hungover so... don't even try it.

We have four meeting rooms: Trust, Integrity, Talent and Vision. We also have breakout spaces that follow the Fibonacci numbers, so 0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, etc.

Fridges! Everything in them is communal apart from milk. Gender neutral loos, obviously, although the one that used to be the men's still has all the urinals in it, so, if you do identify as male, you might just wanna use that one cos there's never a queue.

We have team drinks once a week, department drinks every two weeks, client drinks once a month, board drinks once a quarter, Christmas drinks twice a year... If you don't drink, well done, have a medal, but your chat needs

to be twice as good as those that do.

Any questions?

Great.

I'll come round with some NDAs.

Scene 3

Piper offices. Tuesday morning. It's pitch day. The floor is overfilled with people hot-desking, crouched with their laptops on beanbags, having standing meetings, while various agency workers empty the dishwashers and attempt to water the bonsai trees. Amidst the chaos, ROBIN, one of the youngest interns, sits doodling by himself in the vast glass meeting room. We snap between the following mini-scenes.

1.

KAI: Jesus Christ it's like Terminal Five in here. Who's sitting in Vision?!

2.

A group of the Pipe_line intake are huddled round Michael's laptop on a desk. Olivia (20s, Home Counties), hurries up to them:

OLIVIA: Hey guys, what's up, how's it hanging? Um, we have a bit of an issue. We showed AMV the lookbook last night and they've just come back and said they hate it.

WORLD-WEARY

DESIGN GUY: Have you tried putting everything in Helvetica?

3.

*Upstairs, a CORPORATE BIG DOG leaves
a voicemail to a lover.*

Hey! Pips. It's me.
I just wanted to
Reach out.
Check in.
Make sure we're aligned
on
the art of the possible.

I'm not trying to
boil the ocean here.
There's a lot of moving parts.
But if we could just tee this up,
get our ducks in a row.
Maybe
we could get this over the line?

Author biographies

Bebe Ashley lives in Belfast. Her debut poetry collection, *Gold Light Shining*, inspired by the life and work of Harry Styles, was published in Autumn 2020 by Banshee Press.

Isabelle Baafi is a poet and writer from London. She was awarded the 2019 Vincent Cooper Literary Prize. Her debut pamphlet, *Ripe*, was published in Autumn 2020 by ignitionpress.

Alex-David Baldi is a self-published writer and author living in London. His book, *The British Monarchy Miscellany*, is available on Amazon.

Erika Banerji's short stories have appeared in journals and listed for prizes, including the V.S. Pritchett, BBC and Bristol. She lives in London and is working on a novel and a collection of stories.

Carmina Bernhardt is a writer for film and stage, an actor, director, and acting coach. She completed her first full-length play during The London Library's Emerging Writers Programme.

Helen Bowell is a London-based poet and arts administrator. She is co-founder of Dead [Women] Poets Society, and an alumna of The Writing Squad, the London Writers Awards and the Roundhouse Poetry Collective.

Megan Buskey is a nonfiction writer currently working on a manuscript about her family's experience in Ukraine during and after World War II.

Sian Chaney-Price, fantastical story maker-upper, has a Masters in Writing for Young People, was long-listed for Guppy Books 2020 and attributes all of her best work to her cat, who is also her editor.

Hattie Clarke is a Welsh writer living in London. Inspired by her work at the British Museum, her novel explores the turbulence of nineteenth-century Egypt, through the interlocking stories of three women.

Abass Collier is originally from Sierra Leone and now lives in South East London. He is working on a novel, writes poetry, has directed three short films, and adapted his self-published novella into a screenplay.

Swithun Cooper is working on a novel, *The Interruption*, which is inspired by undercover police and the activist collective he joined in his twenties.

Natasha Cutler works full-time as a fundraiser. She started writing *The Frost Fair*, a Middle Grade novel, while studying History at Cambridge, where she focused on gender and mental illness.

L M Dillsworth lives and works in London. In 2018, she graduated from Royal Holloway's MA in Creative Writing with distinction. Her novel, *Age of Monsters*, is forthcoming from Windmill.

Joanna Dobson spent a decade living with the indigenous people of the Altai Republic, Russia, and is now writing her first book, which tells the story of her explorations in the region.

Karim Flint is a British-Tunisian screenwriter, dreamer and occasional gun-for-hire. Whilst splitting his time between the Big Smoke and the Big Waffle he's also co-developing his first TV show with Sky Studios.

Emily Ruth Ford spent ten years as a journalist before beginning to write fiction. She won the V.S. Pritchett Short Story Prize in 2017 and 2018.

Anita Goveas is an editor at *Flashback Fiction*, and at Mythic Picnic's Twitter zine. Her debut flash collection *Families and Other Natural Disasters* is published by Reflex Press, and links to her stories are at <https://coffeandpaneer.wordpress.com>.

Alice Hughes is a nature blogger and fiction writer, currently working on a novel, *Never Just Junk*, which traces the friendship between twenty-something Frankie and assemblage artist Eleanor, who is living with Alzheimer's disease.

Anna Kahn has been a Barbican Young Poet and a member of the Roundhouse Collective. Her work has featured in *The Rialto*, *The London Magazine* and *The Rumpus*.

L Kiew is a Chinese-Malaysian living in London, who earns her living as an accountant. Her debut pamphlet *The Unquiet* was published by Offord Road Books in February 2019.

Lou Kramskoy has won awards for her short stories. She is completing her first novel, which was Highly Commended in the *Writers & Artists Working-Class Writers' Prize (2020)*.

Madi Maxwell-Libby is a writer and performance poet with a background in experimental comedy. She was formerly a Roundhouse Resident Artist and her credits include commissions for BBC iPlayer and The Old Vic.

P T McCarthy, having finished with obscure indie-pop and no-budget screenplays, settled for freelance writing in London, where he completed his MA at Royal Holloway. He currently social distances in Stamford Hill.

Amber Medland read English Literature at Cambridge and has an MFA (Fiction) from Columbia University in New York. Her debut novel, *Wild Pets*, will be published by Faber & Faber in Summer 2021.

Carly Minsky is a journalist and writer with special interests in science, psychology and philosophy. She is working on her first novel, using her experience as a twin to explore individuality in interpersonal relationships.

Qudsia Mirza is a short story writer based in London. She is working on her first novel.

Mónica Parle is a Mexican-Texan now living in the UK. Her work has been selected as the Cornerstones Longlist Winner for the 2020 Bath Novel Award and Highly Commended in Faber's 2018 FAB Prize.

Xenobe Purvis is a writer and researcher based in London. She has degrees in English Literature and Creative Writing from Oxford University and Royal Holloway.

Mandy Rabin writes adventure fantasy fiction for children. Thrice longlisted for the Bath Children's Novel Award and shortlisted for the Times/Chicken House Children's Fiction Competition, she volunteers for SCBWI and is a #WriteMentor mentor.

Sabrina Richmond is a writer, director and performer. A Tamasha Theatre Playwright 2019/20 and Oxford Playhouse Evolve Artist 2020/21, she is developing a play about a woman who, after 1,825 days of blissful solo clitoral orgasms, decides on a relationship.

Laura Sanchez studied English Literature and Psychology at Durham before spending years supporting young people at risk of exclusion and permanently excluded students across London.

Lucy Steeds has a BA in English Literature and an MSt in World Literatures from Oxford University. She writes about colonialism, maps and magic for young adults.

Deborah Torr is a South London writer and UEA graduate. Shortlisted for the Sunderland Short Story Award, Deborah has words in Reflex Press, Fictive Dream and Fiction Kitchen Berlin.

Mia Vigar is half-Finnish and often sets her fiction in Finland. She studied Creative Writing at UEA and Manchester University, and has been shortlisted for the Bridport and Brighton short story prizes.

Jeremy Wikeley works at the Orwell Foundation. His review of Lucy Prebble's play 'A Very Expensive Poison' was shortlisted for the 2020 Observer/Anthony Burgess prize for Arts Journalism.

Acknowledgements

The London Library Emerging Writers Programme would not have been possible without a huge amount of support.

Firstly, we would like to thank all the individuals and organisations who granted us the funds to carry out this Programme: A M Heath Literary Agency, The Garrick Charitable Trust, the Golden Bottle Trust, The John S Cohen Foundation, the Julio and Maria Marta Núñez Memorial Fund, Sir Max Hastings, Anne Sebba and a number of anonymous donors.

A huge thank you to the judges, who meticulously, scrupulously and with great sympathy to the ethos of the Programme, read through more than 600 applications: Raymond Antrobus, Daisy Goodwin, Paula Johnson, Nikita Lalwani and Bill Hamilton, Euan Thorneycroft and their colleagues at A M Heath.

Thank you to everybody who generously shared their expertise with the cohort during the writing development masterclasses and workshops, which took place over the course of the year: Edward Docx, Travis Elborough, Lissa Evans, Jane Feather, John McNally, Ollie Munson, Scott Pack, Sarah Savitt, Gemma Seltzer, Jessica Swale and, from The London Library, Matthew Brooke, Dunia Garcia-Ontiveros, Amanda Stebbings and Gill Turner.

Thank you to all the staff of The London Library, who worked so hard to make this Programme a success, in particular: the Development Team, who helped dream it up, raise the money and make it a reality; the Member Services Team, who made the cohort feel so at home in the Library; the Membership Team, for copious admin and logistics; the Communications Team and Mark Hutchinson

Management PR Agency, who spread the word far and wide; the Building and Facilities Management Team who moved a lot of tables and enabled the events to take place in the Library's beautiful surroundings; and Director of The London Library, Philip Marshall.

Finally, thank you to the thirty-eight wonderful writers who threw themselves into a glorious experiment of a year, the 2019/2020 London Library Emerging Writers cohort: Bebe Ashley, Isabelle Baafi, Alex-David Baldi, Erika Banerji, Carmina Bernhardt, Helen Howell, Finnian Brewer, Megan Buskey, Sian Chaney-Price, Hattie Clarke, Abass Collier, Swithun Cooper, Natasha Cutler, Abi Daré, L M Dillsworth, Joanna Dobson, Karim Flint, Emily Ruth Ford, Anita Goveas, Alice Hughes, Anna Kahn, L Kiew, Lou Kramskoy, Madi Maxwell-Libby, P T McCarthy, Amber Medland, Carly Minsky, Qudsia Mirza, Mónica Parle, Xenobe Purvis, Mandy Rabin, Sabrina Richmond, Laura Sanchez, Natasha Stallard, Lucy Steeds, Deborah Torr, Mia Vigar and Jeremy Wikeley.

Claire Berliner is Events and Programme Manager at The London Library and Manager of the Emerging Writers Programme. She previously worked for Arvon, the national creative writing charity, as Centre Director of Totleigh Barton, where she worked with thousands of established and emerging writers over many years. She has worked as a literature programmer in various organisations and festivals and as a freelance writer and editor.

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