



From the Silence of the Stacks,

*New
Voices
Rise*

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**An anthology of writing by
The London Library
Emerging Writers Programme
2020-21 cohort**

*

Edited by Claire Berliner



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Contents

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| About The London Library | 7 |
| Introduction | 8 |

Fiction

| | | |
|------------------------------|--|----|
| Krystle Zara Appiah | Extract from <i>Rootless</i> | 13 |
| Helen Bain | Extract from <i>What Elspeth Did</i> | 16 |
| Naina Bajekal | Extract from <i>A Better Life</i> | 20 |
| Flora Carr | <i>Greenland Shark</i> | 24 |
| Chez Cotton | Extract from <i>The Brightlands Suicide</i> | 28 |
| Charlotte Forfieh | Extract from <i>April Fools</i> | 32 |
| Russell Franklin | Extract from <i>The Broken Places</i> | 37 |
| Carole Hailey | Extract from <i>His Darling Sister</i> | 41 |
| Lucian Huxley Smith | Extract from <i>Micro</i> | 45 |
| Daniel Marc Janes | <i>Amazon Reviews of a Bucket</i> | 50 |
| Lanikai Krishnadasan Torrens | Extract from <i>Sea Glass</i> | 56 |
| Shakira Moise | Extract from <i>Mami Wata</i> | 60 |
| Charlotte Newman | Extract from <i>The Magpie's Daughter</i> | 64 |
| Yosola Olorunshola | Extract from work in progress | 68 |
| Lisa Smith | Extract from <i>The Land of Milk and Honey</i> | 72 |
| Ana Soria | Extract from <i>Santoku</i> | 76 |

Non-fiction

| | | |
|-------------------|---|-----|
| Gaar Adams | Extract from <i>Guest Privileges</i> | 83 |
| Marta Bausells | <i>Holidays in Saturn</i> | 86 |
| Sarah Clegg | <i>Virgin Ghosts and Failed Mothers</i> | 89 |
| Marina Gerner | <i>The Three Grandes Dames of Impressionism</i> | 92 |
| Aaron Kilercioglu | <i>Crab Farts</i> | 96 |
| Anna Parker | Extract from <i>Cottage</i> | 100 |
| Hannah Partos | <i>Working for a Hollywood Legend</i> | 104 |
| Natalie Rule | Extract from <i>Beep, Drip Pump</i> , a short story | 107 |

Poetry

| | | |
|----------------------|-------------------------------------|-----|
| Zakia Carpenter-Hall | <i>The Earth-Eating Fire</i> | 113 |
| Benjamin Cusden | <i>Note to the New Homeless</i> | 118 |
| | <i>Tomorrow it will be the rain</i> | 119 |
| | <i>Transcience</i> | 120 |
| | <i>This</i> | 121 |
| Natalie Whittaker | Poems from <i>Tree</i> | 122 |

Stage, Screen & Radio

STAGE

| | | |
|-------------------|--|-----|
| Lily Levinson | Extract from <i>The Trial of Israel Lipski</i> | 129 |
| Freya Mavor | Extract from <i>Something, Not Yet</i> | 134 |
| Nancy Netherwood | Extract from <i>Night and Light and The Half-Light</i> | 142 |
| Amy Powell Yeates | <i>You Can't Kill the Spirit</i> | 146 |
| Matt Wixey | Extract from <i>King of Fleas</i> | 153 |

SCREEN

| | | |
|-------------------|--|-----|
| Beth Emery | Extract from <i>The Conch Republic</i> | 156 |
| Kate Perry | Extract from <i>Captain Catch</i> | 159 |
| Nathan Lucky Wood | Extract from <i>The Lost Art</i> | 165 |

RADIO

| | | |
|--------------|--|-----|
| Ayad Andrews | Extract from <i>Episode Four of The Fight of the Century – Ali v Frazier</i> | 170 |
|--------------|--|-----|

| | |
|--------------------|-----|
| Author biographies | 174 |
|--------------------|-----|

| | |
|------------------|-----|
| Acknowledgements | 179 |
|------------------|-----|

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.” **E M 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 seventeen 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, Angela Carter to T S Eliot, 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.

E M Forster’s quote perfectly describes the spirit that embodies The London Library Emerging Writers Programme, designed to offer support and resources to those beginning their own journey towards a writing career. We are so proud to be publishing this anthology of exceptional work from the second Programme cohort who, even through a difficult year, brought commitment, creativity and talent, enriching our community and writing themselves into our story.

Philip Marshall

Director, The London Library

Introduction

This year, The London Library celebrated its 180th birthday. It was founded all those years ago to offer writers, readers and scholars exactly what they needed to create and learn: books and other reading material; space and time; and a community of peers, all engaged in the same literary endeavour. In 180 years, those needs have not changed, but meeting them, particularly for those at the beginning of their writing lives, can be difficult. Thus, The London Library Emerging Writers Programme, which exists to open our unique offer widely and inclusively to a new generation of writing talent.

The Programme, now entering its third year, offers writers a year's free membership of the Library, with full access to all its resources; a structured programme of masterclasses with established writers and industry professionals; peer support meetings and a writing network; and support from Library staff. Writers of any genre, age, level of writing experience and from anywhere in the UK, are welcome to apply – for free – for a place on the Programme. The only criteria are that applicants have to have a project in mind to work on throughout the year, they have to commit to using the space and collection of the Library, and they must not have previously had a full work published or produced.

In the first year, we received over 600 applications to the Programme. In the second year, over 800 people applied, from which forty writers were offered a place. They became the 2020/21 cohort, whose work is collected in this anthology. The group live all across the country, span a range of ages, backgrounds, cultures and nationalities and include poets, non-fiction writers, screenwriters and playwrights, novelists and short story writers, and some who write across multiple genres. Throughout the programme they have worked on projects taking in everything from Mesopotamian demonesses to child superheroes; fictional protests, real protests, miscarriages of justice and the Fight of

the Century; 1930s Rangoon, 1960s Devon and 1980s London; the bird world and the afterlife; homelessness, hauntings, medicine, mental health and even a micro-penis. The projects have morphed and developed over the year and many of them have already been picked up by agents, publishers and production companies.

The cohort began and ended their year in lockdown. All meetings were conducted online and it was not until after their Programme had officially come to an end that they were able to gather as a group in the Library. And yet, it is testament to their commitment, enthusiasm, flexibility, incredible generosity of spirit, and, crucially, digital competence, that they nevertheless formed a genuine community, supported each other, nurtured each other's ideas, encouraged each other and made every effort to connect in whatever way they could. It is no surprise that they have all produced such beautiful work, a taster of which you'll read in this volume but I have no doubt you'll also see much of it in full out in the world in the not-too-distant future. This collection contains all the diversity, talent, insight, inclusivity, curiosity and warm-heartedness that characterises the cohort. It's a literary feast, with every bite to be savoured.

It has been such a pleasure to work with these wonderful writers and to see them fly. It is a privilege to have done so within this always-exciting Programme, which continues to go from strength to strength. And it has been a delight to welcome the cohort into the wider community of the ever-inspiring London Library; a new chapter in our 180-year-old history.

Claire Berliner

Head of Programmes, The London Library

September 2021



14

THE LONDON LIBRARY

Fiction

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WRITERS
WROTE
AND GREAT
CHARACTERS
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Krystle Zara Appiah

Extract from *Rootless*

September 1997

Twenty Years Before

The first thing Efe notices is that the sky is closer here. As the plane begins its descent into the outer lands of the sprawling city, she can feel it pressed upon her shoulders. It follows her down as they come in for a bumpy landing and hovers just out of arm's reach, but every so often it dips down and brushes the top of Efe's head. It makes the city feel cramped. It awakens and unsettles the feeling rumbling in the bottom of her stomach.

The feeling had begun when Maame made the announcement: the girls would be going to London to stay with Aunty Dora and would finish up their schooling there. Whatever the feeling was, it had held on tight over the whirlwind summer break, filled with goodbye parties and capped off with tearful farewells and long hugs with her parents, before she'd taken her sister's hand (because her mum had said she had to), and together they'd boarded a plane heading for Heathrow. And that was it. That was the moment the closed-door conversations and unusual comments had clicked into place – and the beginning of the feeling.

Serwaa rouses from sleep reluctantly. “We're here?” she asks, squinting out the window.

“Yes.”

People jump out of their seats before the overhead sign pings. They move quickly. All around, passengers gather bags and shift into position. The cabin fills with restless energy that only eases when the doors open. The girls have to fight to stay together through the surge of people pushing out into the London air. They wait in long, snaking lines for their papers to be checked and collect their bags, and when

they step out into the slick, bright airport, Aunty Dora is waiting – just like Maame and Paa said she would be.

“*Adjei!* Is that you? Look at how grown you girls are.” She beams, pulls both of them in for a back-breaking hug.

It has been years but Efe and Serwaa would have recognised her anywhere. She stands a half-head taller than Efe. Each time she smiles, full lips part to reveal clustered-together teeth and a faint dimple appears on one cheek. She looks like a slimmer version of Maame, shades lighter thanks to the mild British summers.

“Okay, does anyone need the toilet? The drive is far.” Still smiling, she scoops up one of the heavier suitcases, clamps a hand around Serwaa’s shoulders, and leads the way across the huge, glass atrium. Efe walks beside them, dragging her suitcase over polished floors so shiny she can see her blurry outline reflected back.

On the way into the city the girls say very little. The quiet car ride is filled with the sounds of BBC breakfast radio. Back home, Paa listens to it every morning without fail. He lives a life underscored by dreary weather reports, A3 traffic jams and the latest news from six thousand miles away. Efe imagines him listening now, mindlessly fiddling with the chain on his glasses, and staring off into space at something only he can see. She presses back into the seat and pretends she is sitting with him in his office, watching the light dance across the piles of books overflowing from their bookcases, dust settling on their sun-faded spines. When the daydream begins to fade at the edges, she tightens her grip on her seat belt, turns her face to the window, and watches the rows of identical houses slip past.

The house is called a flat. It is one of many houses stacked on top of each other and stuffed into a bland concrete shell. All throughout the day footsteps slap on the council-approved tiles and the lift grumbles as it drags itself up and down twelve floors, just behind the living room wall. That is when it works; the girls will soon learn that it is out of order more often than not. And for the days and weeks it doesn’t work, they will climb five flights in a bare concrete stairwell that is perpetually cold and damp.

Maame had warned them that in London there is very little space and that people live on top of each other, but they were not expecting this. They have never been in a house so small. To them home is a building with an excess of rooms. Maame has a sitting room specifically for entertaining important guests, her prized possession a hand-carved cabinet filled with gold-rimmed serving dishes that are barely used but cleaned often should they ever be needed. This will take some adjusting.

“I’m sorry it’s not much,” Aunty says as she gives them the tour. She waves a hand towards mismatched furniture stuffed into cramped rooms, wallpaper that is brown and floral, its uppermost corners darkened with damp. The girls smile politely. The bathroom, kitchen and living room all branch off a narrow, windowless hallway, where light fights with darkness.

“And this one is yours.” Aunty smiles and swings the last door open. Miraculously, she’s managed to squash bunk beds, a desk, chair and a wardrobe into the tiny space.

Serwaa’s face turns towards the bottom bunk, eyes widening at the school uniforms laid out. “Are those for us?” She rushes into the room and snatches up a navy blue jumper, runs her hands over a crisp blue shirt. “*Efepah.*”

“The other ones are for you, Efe.” Aunty smiles encouragingly.

Efe, crossing the room in four measured steps, can feel the jittery anticipation brewing in her. Black polyester skirts. Plain white shirts. It’s like something she’d wear to a funeral – a far cry from the golden shirts and dark brown pinafores she’s left back home, in her actual wardrobe, in a bedroom so big she’d never be able to reach out and touch opposite walls at once.

“What do you think?” Aunty murmurs.

Efe turns and gives Aunty a small smile and says thank you, just like she has been taught.

Helen Bain

Extract from *What Elspeth Did*

He sat at the kitchen table, watching her. She wore his shirt over bare legs, her mascara had smudged below her eyes. After lunch, in the rush of that second whisky and wanting to get her into bed, it had seemed a wonderful idea for them to come back here. James topped up his glass again.

“What’s this masterpiece?” he said.

“Squid and chorizo stew,” Alex said, leaning across the table to take his cigarette. The thought of squid brought a twinge of nausea – a harbinger of tomorrow’s atrocities. He whipped the cigarette back and took a drag to quell it.

“Hey!” she said. She moved around the table and tried to awkwardly straddle his lap, one bare leg on either side of his, as if she were Christine Keeler and he were the chair.

“I thought you were meant to be cooking,” he said, tipping her off in what he hoped was a playful manner. It was beginning to dawn on him that he wouldn’t be able to drive her home and he couldn’t very well ask her to get a cab. “What else are we having?”

“This,” she said, unbuttoning the shirt a little further, striking a pose against the fridge.

He laughed, almost against his will. “Come on then,” he said, pushing his chair back. “While the stew is stewing...” He caught her wrists and she screamed playfully.

“Stop it!” she squealed. “Your phone went! No, I heard it.”

“Saved by the bell,” he said, releasing her.

The hall was cold and dark. His jacket was on the hall table, the phone in its pocket. He opened the message. *Tell Els she left her black*

hoodie here. I'll bring it down next Sat. XX S.

He stared at it.

"Who was it?" called Alex. He turned at her voice, then moved to the window, ducking under the curtain to look out. The dark road was deserted. A slim half-moon was climbing above the clouds. Still behind the curtain, he dialled.

"Hello?"

"It's me."

"Oh, James. You got my text? I didn't mean you to call actually, I'm just about to go out."

"Where's Elspeth?" he said.

"Well, she's with you, of course," said Susannah stupidly. "I dropped her at Paddington this morning."

"She told me she was staying up there," said James.

"No, it was just two nights," said his sister. "Because of her English test. She's still got a lot of work to do, she got anxious about it."

He spoke very slowly. "Why would she go all the way to London and then get on a train to come back here on a Saturday morning, Susannah?"

"Because of the test. I told you. What's going on, James?"

"What time did you drop her off?"

"Are you saying she's not there?"

"I'll try her now." He hung up without saying goodbye and tapped out Elspeth's mobile number, listened without surprise to the recorded message.

"Susannah? She's switched it off."

"Oh God..." Her breathing was ragged. "Are you sure she didn't come back and go out again? Have you checked her room? I knew I should have seen her on to the train but she said for me not to wait. There isn't any short-term parking at the station, and..."

"Shut up," he said. He looked over his shoulder at the kitchen door again. Light shafted out from the edges, he could hear Alex singing to herself. "She's gone to find him, you know. I don't know how you can be so fucking stupid."

“James, please. Don’t speak to me like that. Find who?”

“Go and look for anything – and I mean anything at all – that will give an indication as to where she’s got to,” he said. “The wardrobe, the bin. Do it now. I’ll call you back. I’ve just got to deal with something.”

“For God’s sake, James.” Her voice was sharp with reproof. “Have you got a student there? At a time like this?”

“Five minutes ago, there was no *time like this*,” he hissed into the receiver. “Not until you came out of your permanent state of narcissism to notice that your own daughter is missing.” She was silent. His anger swelled. “Isn’t it about time you woke up?” He could hear Alex moving around in the kitchen. “Fifteen minutes,” he said into the miserable silence at the end of the line, and hung up.

In the kitchen, Alex was pulling bottles and jars out of the fridge, piling them on to the draining board.

“Do you know, half this stuff’s past its sell-by date?” she said over her shoulder. She tossed an ancient jar of mango chutney directly into the bin. “Bit like you, I suppose.” She lifted the lid off the pan and poked at the spitting chorizo with a wooden spoon. His mind swiftly made the calculation – time taken to talk her into leaving versus that which involved throwing her bodily out of the house – and the repercussions of each.

“You need to go,” he said.

“Oh, really?” she laughed, lifting the spoon to her mouth. “This is gorgeous, try a bit.”

“I’ll get you a taxi.”

The spoon fell back in the pan. “What is it?”

“Elsbeth,” he said shortly. He moved her to one side, almost lifting her by her shoulders to turn off the gas.

“Your niece?”

“That was her mother. She’s missing.”

“What – in London?” said Alex. “Don’t do that, it’s almost ready.”

“I’ve got to find her,” he said, moving the dirty jars. His hands were shaking.

“Hey, hey,” said Alex. She moved behind him and wrapped her

arms tightly around his chest. He felt her head rest against his back. “Calm down. Let’s think about this.”

“She’s calling me back in a sec. I’m sorry, Alex, but I’m sure you understand.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to leave you,” she said, rocking him back and forth. “Come on. Sit down.” Intoxication turned her concern into sentimentality, sluggish and cloying. Conversely, shock had sobered James up. “Have a drink and tell me exactly what happened. What did... Susannah, is it? What did she say?”

Fury rose in him like a wave. The sound of Alex’s voice saying his sister’s name, her idiotic bossiness and mistimed solicitude, even the material of the shirt falling coquettishly off one shoulder... She poured more wine into his glass and he pushed it violently away. It tipped over, rolled off the table and smashed on the floor.

“I don’t want a fucking drink!” he shouted. “I just want you to get out!”

Naina Bajekal

Extract from *A Better Life*

Dusk was falling when Amrit arrived at the farmhouse in Grasse. White flowers hung luminous over muted stone walls and the air was filled with the heady scent of orange blossoms. He could see Aana lying down under an oak tree, the line of her body hazy in the syrupy evening light.

Amrit moved his hip slightly to dislodge a knot of pain and withdrew a plastic-wrapped carton from his pocket. He pulled a slender cigarette out from its machine-folded foil and lit it, savouring the bitter inhalation, the chemical sweetness of the first pull and the pleasant lightness coursing through his body. After so many months of not being able to choose what he ate, where he went, even the country he was in, there was a small power in being able to make a decision that was categorically bad for him. The thrill of being behind the wheel of his own life for once.

A few hours earlier, waiting at the station in Nice for his train, he had downloaded Instagram for the first time. He was curious to see if Aana had posted any photos from Grasse and when he typed her name into the search bar, he found her account was not private. She had not shared anything new in the past few days and he scrolled through pictures of her with friends he did not recognise and Paris skylines. He clicked on the photos she was tagged in. Someone called Mia had photographed Aana lying on a picnic blanket with olives and a beer. When he knew Aana, she did not drink beer. In another, she was standing in the white space of a gallery, and a man had his arm around her. He seemed older, with a broad, handsome face and dark stubble.

He tapped his screen twice more and found his way to the

man's profile. He was called Tom Sandeman and he was an American photojournalist living in Paris. He had nearly ninety thousand followers and regularly contributed to well-known magazines and newspapers. In his grid, among black-and-white photographs of far-flung places, was an image of Aana, bathed in golden sunlight with the shadowy reflection of leaves on her. 'Ma belle,' the caption read. Amrit winced at the possessive.

Sweat was cold on his neck. He continued to scroll. Further down, there was a video posted with the caption, '35 wasn't so bad.' Would anyone know if he played it? He clicked the little triangle. The footage was blurry and dark, and then suddenly lights turned on and voices were shouting "Surprise!" Aana was there, laughing, as she presented this man, Tom, with a birthday cake and he closed his eyes and blew out his candles. He turned to Aana and she kissed him on the lips. It was a quick, easy kiss between two people who kissed often, and would kiss again.

A sickness lurched up from his chest and he put the phone down. Amrit chided himself for thinking her email inviting him on holiday came from anything other than pity. While he was lying in bed with the memory of them heavy upon him, she was out there kissing other men — doing more than kissing them. In the video, she was so luminous she was unrecognisable.

Now, standing at the end of the driveway in Grasse, he wondered if it might not be too late to leave. He could blame a cancelled train or concoct a family emergency. He could return to London, where he would not have to answer any questions about what he was doing with his life, about the accident, about what he had done in the past year. He could go to the restaurant and peel three kilos of ginger and chop dozens of onions. He could play cards with his sister. He could go to the pub with Nico and Yash and watch the World Cup semi-finals. He could do any of these things, but then Aana stood up and waved to him.

"Hello!" she called as he walked towards her. She was wearing a blue sundress and was barefoot.

"Hi," he waved with his left hand and watched her eyes dart down

to the cane in his right one. He tried to relax his grip on the handle as he got closer to her, seeing that the skin around his knuckles was taut with strain.

“I missed you.” She leant in to hug him, an embrace he could not fully return because of the cane. Her hair was longer and straighter, her skin darker, but she was Aana all the same, with her familiar laundry powder scent. He worried that he smelt of sweat and travel.

“Me too. Not bad here, is it?”

She laughed. “I’ll show you to your room,” she said, leading him over to the house. He let her walk ahead of him so she wouldn’t see how his left leg dragged a little. Movement ebbed his energy from him, leached it out of his bones into the air. He let himself close his eyes, just for a moment, hoping Aana wouldn’t see.

“You’re on the ground floor next to me and Larissa.” She showed him the bathroom across the hallway and the room Aana and Larissa would be sharing. It had chintz curtains, twin beds and wooden beams running across the high ceiling. His own room was large, with peeling wallpaper and a low wooden bed. A blue rug covered the floorboards, and a soft green armchair was helpfully positioned by a reading lamp.

Amrit wanted her to leave so he could shower, but instead, she sat down on the edge of his bed. He hovered awkwardly near the door, trying to decide whether he could sit without drawing attention to himself. She was looking at him with her head tilted slightly to the side.

“How are you doing?”

“Much better. I’m back working at the restaurant.” He made an effort to inject lightness into his voice.

“That’s so good!” She tucked her feet under her, and her voice was softer when she spoke again. “Oh, Amrit, it must have been so hard.”

He knew she was trying to create an opening for him to speak, but he didn’t want to let her see this new darkness in him. He was grateful at least that she had never said any of the platitudes other people did. *You’re so brave. Everything happens for a reason. All this will make you stronger in the end.* A fetishisation of suffering that infuriated him. The pain had not made him a better person. If anything, it had

made him angrier, more self-indulgent, less patient with the problems of others.

“I’m sorry again for not telling you.”

“You don’t need to keep apologising.” She traced the hem of her dress with a finger, avoiding his gaze.

“I didn’t want to burden you, that’s all. It was stupid.”

“It shouldn’t be your decision to protect me from things, Amrit. I can handle it.”

Could she? He leant against the wall, stone cool against his back, and looked at her. She was much thinner than he remembered, her kneecaps jutting out, her clavicle too defined. *Why are you so thin?* he wanted to ask. What’s wrong? The space between them felt heavy with all the conversations they hadn’t had in the past year, their silence calcified into something hard. All the things he wanted to ask her faltered at his lips.

Flora Carr

Greenland Shark

I am adrift. I let the water wash over me. My body is worn smooth and ageless as stone. The sea embalms me. Only my skin gives me away: mottled green and grey. The colours of rot. Above me, the seal sleeps, its head breaking the surface. Plump and oily smooth. Slippery. Difficult to get your teeth into, at least at first. It could outpace me if it were awake. But all creatures need sleep. Rest. And I am in no hurry.

The parasite attached to my left eye floats outwards in the current. A dangling white worm. It will blind me one of these days. I have had centuries of sight, so I suppose I should be grateful.

The land-people claim I am four hundred years old, give or take a decade. That I have been gliding beneath their boats for centuries. A deity; watery immortality flooding my cold flesh. A monster; a drifting spectre.

They are wrong, of course. For I am even older than they say.

I squint with my right eye. This seal is not as skittish as its Arctic cousins. But even those spend too much time looking out over the frozen lands, searching for the white bears that spring from the ground. Noisy and bloody. The ice floor creaking beneath their weight. Once, a dead bear sank beneath the waves, a blue-black tongue lolling out from its gaping muzzle. I saw it float towards me. The bear was thin and weak, the meat chewy. Some wounds on its side. A tear in its black skin. Blood blossoming out in red plumes.

I am never drunk on blood, like other sharks. The White Belly is driven mad by its scent. I have seen them feed in frenzy, ripping lumps of flesh like some short-lived hot blood. They prey on the land-people, too. A foolishness. Each time, they retaliate. I have seen land-people

catch whole whales. Their harpoons like gigantic teeth that cannot be bent or cracked. Sometimes these hunts go wrong. The rope snaps. The hunters' shadows ripple out as they stare down from the side of their boat. The carcass abandoned, but not alone. I am there. Almost always unseen, except for glimpses. Their dark unknown.

I learnt the land-people's tongue from songs. Or at least, I learnt to hear the intentions beneath the words. There have been many boats, but it was easiest to listen when I drifted close to the heavy wooden ships. The wood itself screeched in protest, so far from land and soil. And above it, the land-people. Slow and weak. They swim with great effort, like lost deer. Their long limbs vulnerable.

Over the centuries, there have only been two times when I was tempted. When I could have taken one. Taken one of the land-people.

My first children were beside me when we saw the ship carrying English men and women across the sea to their promised land. This was after the woman with ochre hair had died, leaving her throne to a distant relative. I heard the land-people's prayers, carried on the waves. The hull of the ship creaked with the sound of knees dropping to the floor. Whispers directed to the skies were instead felt in the water below. They would have done better praying to me and my kind than to their cloud-god. They should have asked for kind tides, for gentle swells, for sharks with bellies already full.

But no matter.

We followed them, my children and I, for well over a moon's waxing. When the surface of the water darkened over our heads, we would hear the sighs and creaks of lovemaking in the wooden beast above. A man was buried at sea, his corpse tossed overboard, and his skin oily with last rites. His death was a blessing, his flesh scented as sweet as the flower the land-people named their ship for. Too sweet for me, although not for my daughters.

There was a great storm, and another man, this one still alive, was swept overboard. We could smell the earth in his blood, singing out for a landing, a shore. His body twisted and flailed, his eyes tightly shut, as my daughters floated inches away, watching. There was a coldness in their faces, and I knew then that it would not be long before they

would be fully grown, and would leave my side.

We are not a savage species. At least not compared to our cousins. We prefer our larger meals soft and rotting, not flapping in our mouths like fish in a bird's beak.

But he was so close.

Underwater, he tried to open his eyes. Perhaps he sensed our presence. Unearthly monsters. I willed him to open them, to see us there, in the darkness. He would open his mouth to scream, and death would come more quickly. His legs kicked out, as though feeling for the seabed. My daughters laughed.

The land-people dropped a rope to the drowning man. He clung to it as they hauled him back through the rain, for a moment suspended in the air between the two worlds: his, and ours. That night the ship rocked with the wind, and we heard the prayers again, stronger than ever before. The quick-quick stumbles of children as they reached for their mothers' arms.

The second time I was tempted was not so long ago. A span of time shorter than my own childhood. But still, there will be few land-people living who remember that night; and surely none who were aboard that great ship. I was travelling when I saw it. Cleaved in half by ice. One part submerged, the other luminous and refracted above the surface, the light breaking it in two once more. The water teemed with land-people, and their terror infected it; it had turned, sharp and acidic, stinging my mouth. I drifted through the spoilt waves, the kicking legs and white foam high above me. There were so many. Hundreds. I could smell the sour tang of leather, the musk of sweat. A false note of cologne. The bitter taste of urine. Those other scents of the dead and dying.

But I hesitated. Was it a trap? I imagined the silver harpoon slicing through the water. Or what if I feasted and that taste of terror contaminated me, too? I was already fat on carcass meat, I reasoned. And fear never called to me the way it did my warm-water cousins. Instead, I was carried by the current, on the tide of flailing bodies and the small vessels that moved among them. The moaning above was muffled, but seemed to me endless. Lasting for years, decades.

I imagine the dying feel time passing in the same way I do. Every moment stretched out into the gloom.

The seal flicks its tail above me; but it's only a reflex, or a dream. Male or female, the dark shape is blurred to me. I mourn my sight. The image is soft around the edges, like the sweet blubber I know lies wrapped around the creature, just below the skin.

Another flick of the tail.

I drift closer.

The seal is coming into focus. I see the beginning of its whiskers. The white patches on its long grey body. Perhaps it has heard rumours of my kind. The ancient fish that float at the bottom of oceans. Giants that are ever present, but elusive. Perhaps it has seen the carcasses. The bite-marks: round scoops of flesh. Or perhaps it has lived lazily and without fear. Laid out on wet rocks, flirting with the boats that pass. It will have felt the sun's warmth.

The seal is waking up. Its eyes move beneath their lids, but they do not open. Does it know I'm here? The eyes are shut, as though to keep me out. Like a child, retreating into the safety of its own head. *If I cannot see you, you cannot see me.*

Doesn't it know that monsters dwell in the dark?

Chez Cotton

Extract from *The Brightlands Suicide*

Yangon

It's evening, ten o'clock, a colonial villa that's seen better days. Jet lag's kicking in. Through pigeon Burmese and mime, I convey to the receptionist that I'm going for a walk. She is shocked, says she'll get me a taxi. I laugh, shake my head, no, no, I'm only going round the block.

Outside is complete blackness. There is no pavement. There is no road. There is nothing. I realise, in every way, I am ill-prepared.

Back inside, the place has filled with Chinese businessmen. I'm the only woman, the only Westerner. I take a spoonful of steaming, pungent *mohinga*, a fish and shallot broth, topped with boiled egg and coriander. Punky looking teenage boys in sarongs and vests take to the stage with acoustic guitars. They look subdued. The singer's mournful tone suits my mood. It takes seconds to recognise, even with Burmese vocals, 'Life on Mars.' It's not what I expected. I can't keep my eyes open. I drift back thirty odd years, the seventies, my hero, David Bowie. A boy in my class sees me with my family. Back at school he asks, "Why is your dad a Paki?"

"Actually, he's Burmese," I say, but no one's ever heard of Burma. And now here I am in his birthplace, Rangoon, now Yangon, and under military rule; Dad, Gran, the sisters, all dead. I have no idea why I'm here, what I'm searching for.

I sit up quickly, head spinning. I reach for the side lamp, hit empty space, a wall where it shouldn't be. Momentary panic, where am I? It comes quickly. I'm in Yangon, in a hotel, I've been asleep. I lay in the darkness, alone on a faraway continent, no one to tell I arrived safely.

I pat around, dislodging dust from the embossed wallpaper, making my itching eyes worse. A different surface, smooth, cool to touch, the satisfying click of a toggle I know will be Bakelite. The lights flicker, settle, show off the high-ceilinged room, an ancient mahogany chest shining auburn, a beautifully worn parquet floor. The fake antique chairs with lurid brocade seem incongruous amidst the natural grains.

My phone's dead. There's no clock in the room. I lift a heavy, maroon drape. Sunlight hits my face. I flinch, vampire-like, jump back into shadow. Back on the bed, I stare at the overhead fan, wondering if it works, imagining it swirling, breeze drying the layer of sweat sitting on my skin. But my bones won't move.

I doze. A distant voice gets nearer, loud, louder still, finds me.

"Miss, miss." I open my eyes and shriek; a Burmese girl looms over me. She claps, delighted, sing-song voice: "You awake, you awake." She points at a breakfast tray I didn't order. I force a smile, polite, shock hidden, thinking, shit, shit, my stuff, I didn't lock the door.

"What's the time?" I ask, surreptitiously looking for my things. She takes a watch with a broken strap from her pocket, shows me, 10:18. My passport's on the side with my diamond eternity ring, money belt over the chair. I relax, turn to the girl, but she's bowing, backing out of the room before I can thank her, ask her name, worry if I'm meant to tip.

'Shower' is a generous description for the rubber hose attachment. A rusty dribble turns almost to a stream if I keep it at knee height. The coffee is full of sugar and condensed milk, unhealthy but delicious. I need to register at the British Embassy. In theory, this means I will be rescued should there be a revolution or some other type of insurgency. I'm not convinced, but it's a reason to leave the room. The map says it's downtown. Petula Clark comes singing into my head, upbeat and happy. Before I lose the mood, I get down to reception. A young man wearing what looks like a 1960s bellboy uniform orders my car, escorts me to a sofa, says, "Miss will wait here, please thank you."

The lobby is teeming: alien languages, rhythms, discordant pitches, all competing with piped harp music. I spy last night's

businessmen, Pulp Fiction sharp, talking to a saffron-robed monk, cigarette in mouth, Ray-Bans on. Colour co-ordinated Chinese tourists form a neat queue at check-in. My Old Skool smiley t-shirt and combats stand out, but not in a good way. I'll need to buy stuff here, I think, taking out a book and pretending to read so no one tries to talk to me. Moments later, a car horn blasts outside, noisy and persistent. The bellboy comes over, beaming, "Taxi arrive."

I exit the air-conditioned hotel, straight into a wall of intense wet heat and an overpowering smell of jasmine. Before I've reached the bottom step, I'm dripping, full of headache. Waiting there, is an old, tatty Japanese import, perhaps stylish in the 1980s but that's doubtful. I wonder if the driver can reach the pedals, he's so tiny. When I see gaffer tape around the wheels, I realise that's not the right question. I get in anyway, and he screeches off as I'm shutting the door.

"British Embassy? You're from the UK?" he asks, swerving onto a main road without looking. I grip the chair, wishing I had a seat belt.

"London," I answer, surprised at his English.

"My brother, Johnny, that's where he lives, 20 Grove Road, Birmingham, you know him?"

I shake my head, "no, sorry."

"David Beckham, you know him?" I shake my head again. There is silence as he registers this news. But he's not giving up. "The Queen?"

I think hard, reluctant to disappoint a third time. "Yes, yes, by the Houses of Parliament, her car passed as I crossed the road."

He is excited. "She waved at you?"

A fleeting moment years ago, unimportant, I barely remember. "Yes, definitely," I answer.

He nods, it's what he thought. "Of course," he adds, "she looks like the stamp."

"Exactly the same," I say, because it doesn't matter. He is delighted, happy now to drive me. He is Aung Maung, but I can call him Clive. I say my name's Emerald but I prefer Emmy.

"Hah," he says. "I like the jewel name better. I will call you Emerald."

"Er, ok," I say, looking out the window, hoping he'll shut up.

But he starts again. Did I know General Ne Win told everyone to stop driving on the left? His astrologer said it was best for the country. The next day they all did. But the signs still haven't changed.

"When was this?" I ask.

"1970."

"Oh," I say, because it's all I can think of.

Clive talks and drives at speed; beautiful architecture, colonial relics, faded pink, yellow, turquoise, blurring together as we pass. I must change money on the black market only. I'll get ten times more than the government rate. I should speak to old people or young people. No one in between understands because schools didn't teach English between 1965 and 1982. I should take taxis everywhere. Only poor people walk. He will drive me. Do I have a phone number? No, he will give me his. He hands me a card. I must call daily. He will collect me.

We reach Pansodan Street and I'm drained. I clamber onto a gaping slab sidewalk, overflowing with pedestrians. Most seem nervous, step into the road to keep their distance, but some come close, gape. Self-conscious, I put on dark glasses, making myself more conspicuous still. I ignore my audience, hand over a dollar bill, pristine condition, like the guidebooks say. Clive's smile tells me it's too much.

"Why are you here?" he thinks to ask. My mouth opens, nothing comes out. He shrugs, then laughs, points, "your Embassy is that way," and pulls out.

The answer comes to me too late. I shout after him, "I'm here to solve a mystery." But he's gone, blended in with the traffic. I'm alone, standing under a ferocious midday sun.

Charlotte Forfieh

Extract from *April Fools*

“Hello Tide,” said Zee, all cool in his white zoot suit and Panama hat, an antique dress cane at his side. The cane? An affectation. The king of gods needs no walking aid.

I nodded back, *what’s up*. I couldn’t manage much more, even if I’d wanted to. The trudge up Primrose Hill had left me breathless.

Zee patted the bench next to him. I stood and played for time by taking in the view. I could see the BT Tower, the London Eye and there, glinting in the distance despite the clouds crowding in, the Shard. Down in the park, the joggers, dog-walkers and laughing children looked tiny. They had no idea what was going down up here.

“What do you want?” I said. “I’ve got somewhere to be.”

Zee spat into the grass. “It’s about the kid. He’s fucked up.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” I said with a sigh. I’d bumped into Gaia three days earlier and she’d done nothing but curse Chance’s name and wail about how The Donald didn’t believe in climate change. Mars meanwhile was doing my nut in, swaggering around like he owned the place, drunk on the possibility of war. And all because my best friend and flatmate Chance had backed Trump in the US Presidential election.

So, why was it me and not him atop this big-ass hill on a moody spring day? I looked back the way I had come, half-expecting to see Chance in his black leather jacket and Doc Martens, bounding uphill.

“The Council plans to demote Chance from god to concept,” Zee said with relish. “He should never have been promoted.”

Okay. These things happen. I have... what you might call... perspective.

“I could block their decision,” Zee continued.

“You could,” I agreed.

“But I’d want something in return.” Zee leaned forward. “Elton John tickets.”

I started laughing. “Elton John tickets?” I didn’t have time for this. I started to walk away. “See you around man,” I called over my shoulder. I was hungry and not about to be late for brunch.

“Tickets go on sale tomorrow.” Zee shouted after me.

“Tomorrow, Tide.”

Shit. Shit. Shit. The first-of-April-tomorrow? Now things were starting to make sense. Back when I was creating holy days and holidays and whatnot, I’d had a little fun. Some said too much fun. I’d created a day that stripped us immortals of our powers. It hadn’t been my most popular move. If a day I’d created went against me, well, I’d never hear the end of it. And Chance *would* be fucked. The little twerp.

But.

“I won’t change the rules,” I said, turning back to Zee. “Not for you, not for anyone. Tomorrow stays.”

“Whatever you say,” Zee smiled, his eyes narrow. “Your rules, your play. I’m sure you’ll figure it out. After all, your friend’s future depends upon it.”

“You’ll get your tickets,” I said. “See you around, Zee.”

I turned up the collar of my trench coat and strolled downhill under the gunmetal sky.

Le Brunch Spot was packed. White-aproned waiters flitted between tables, filling glasses, carrying trays of prosecco and enamel plates of organic, farm-fresh food. Chance and I sat at a window table with a perfect view of the towpath and canal, waiting for our order.

“I didn’t take Zee for an Elton John fan,” Chance said. “Pinball Wizard, huh? Rocket Man and shit.”

“Is that all you’ve got to say?” I asked, looking around for our waiter. “This is serious.”

“Is it though?” He asked. “I think it’s pretty simple. You relax the rule, we keep our powers tomorrow, get the tickets and I’m home free...”

“Nope. Can’t do it.”

He frowned. “Won’t do it, you mean.”

“Tomorrow you and I, Zee, Mars, the others, we’re all powerless. Normal. It’s just one day a year, and it’s good for us.”

“That’s debatable,” he huffed. “I’m in deep doo-doo and you could make it all go away...” Chance’s usually bright green eyes dimmed with concern. “Help me out here.”

I shook my head. It was a point of principle.

“Well fuck it then,” he pouted. “I don’t care.”

“You don’t care?”

“I don’t,” he said.

Liar. Out of all the gods, he was the most liked. Was he really willing to give that up?

“We’ll get Zee’s tickets some other way,” I promised, but he wasn’t listening. He stared through the window at a pretty barge, draped with fairy lights, as it slipped up the canal.

“Where is our food?” I complained. I hate – *hate!* – waiting. I snapped my fingers at the clock on the wall. Its hands started moving as time sped up. Diners streamed to and from tables; waiters flapped around them like birds. The thirty-minute wait-time went by in a blur.

I snapped my fingers again and time slowed to its usual tick-tock crawl.

“So, Tide... what are you going to do?” Chance asked, after our waiter, a pint-sized, tattooed dude-bro, had plonked our plates down and left.

I raised an eyebrow.

“We. I mean what are we going to do?” Chance said, chastened.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “Zee’s always wanted me to drop April Fool’s...”

“...Because it’s a drag.”

“No, because it’s a reminder that he’s not the boss of me.”

“It must be nice, being you,” Chance smiled. “Above it all, I mean.” He sat forward in his chair and refilled our glasses with cucumber water. “I mean, you’re not a god, you’re not a construct, you’re not a concept, you’re...”

“I just am.”

Chance nodded. “And Zee’s got serious beef with you.”

“Beef ain’t nothing I can’t stick a fork through,” I said. “Let’s eat.”

As I ate, I got to thinking. April Fool’s. I mean, come on, I’d invented the day – there had to be a way to get Zee’s tickets and save Chance without breaking my own rule.

After the meal, Chance grabbed the bill from its white saucer and started scribbling a string of numbers on it.

“What’s that? Your mobile digits?” I asked.

“Nah, next week’s winning lottery numbers. The service today has been excellent.”

He finished writing with a flourish, twirled the pen like a baton and looked around for our waiter, who was nowhere to be seen.

“Are you kidding me?” I swept my hand over our table. Dude hadn’t even cleared our plates away. Typical Chance: capricious; undiscerning. “You know who needs some luck right now? You. To get out from under Zee.”

Chance shrugged. “If I’m gonna be demoted, I might as well have some fun first, right?” He rubbed his hands together. “Would you?” He pushed the saucer towards me.

“Come on man. I’m catching heat for your mistake and I’ve gotta pick up the tab too? I grabbed my coat and bag, picked up the saucer and weaved my way to the till, now manned by our waiter.

As I handed over the white saucer and bill, my bare hand brushed his.
Blam!

I stiffened and everything went dark.

This sometimes happens when my skin touches a mortal’s – I get an intense vision of their future. Or past. In Dude’s case, I saw a limo roll through Piccadilly Circus in slow motion. His outstretched, tattooed arms fist-pumped out of its open sunroof, his hands full of fifty-pound notes. I saw him a year later too, penniless and grubby, tightening a belt around his emaciated forearm.

“Are you alright?” Dude asked as I came to. I took a shaky step, blinked and steadied myself against the till. *What to do?*

“I’m err... Yeah... Sorry about the saucer.” It lay smashed at our feet. I bent down and whipped the bill off the floor; stuffed it into my pocket. “I can’t seem to find the bill,” I said, turning and pointing at the vacated table. “We were sitting in the window.”

He made up a new bill, I paid and booked it out of there. Chance found me on the towpath, scrabbling around in my bag.

“Looking for these?” He pulled my gloves from under his arm and waved them in my face. “You left them on the table.”

I put them on. “Thanks. You know I can’t be out here without them.”

He smiled and wandered off to scatter pennies up and down the towpath. They glowed once as they hit the ground – *ting!* – before fading to their usual dull bronze.

“Where to next?” I called out. “The Seven Stars? Work out a plan for getting Zee’s tickets?”

“Bertrand’s Books,” he called back. “I’m feeling...” he wagged his fingers in the air and danced a little jig, “...lucky.”

This piece is excerpted from the short story April Fools, originally published in The Good Journal (2018).

Russell Franklin

Extract from *The Broken Places*

Greg didn't have to waste time looking for fish. Papa had anchored the boat on a reef more than a mile offshore – a fragile upthrust of coral and clear water in the endless dark push of the gulf stream – and the fish were everywhere, fearless, flaunting their fresh-coat-of-paint colours, their picture-book shapes. Greg could easily imagine he was the first hunter that had ever swum here, and it might well have been true.

He kicked off, eager to be free of the boat whose hull he could hear sounding like a drum with each lick of the water. Beneath him, barracudas hung like daggers, perfectly still in the current. A shoal of bright blue fish he had no name for rippled past, silken electrics dancing from nook to cranny. A little to his left, a large stately jewfish tempted him, but he was wise enough now not to waste his spears on something he couldn't bring down.

He turned in the water, scanning this way and that. A few streaks of silver flicked across the edge of his vision and he twisted, raised the speargun, and fired – all instinct. A second later he had a fat grunt wiggling on the end of his line, writhing and contorting as it died, leaking a line of thin purple blood that spiralled up towards the surface like cigarette smoke.

He hauled it in, pleased with himself. The grunt was a big one. Even his father might be impressed. He looked around for more, but there was only cloud after cloud of tiny bonito and other fast swimmers he had no chance of spearing. He fastened the grunt to his belt and started to swim, trying to let his senses relax into the same state he managed to find when he was batting well, every sense as

open and unassuming as a blank notebook...

...But he couldn't find it, that empty place. Something kept drawing his attention. Again, he turned. In the distance, he could see the end of the reef, all its tangled chaos stopping as straight and sudden as the edge of a table. Beyond that, darkness yawned. Open blue.

Even with the heat of the sun filtering through all around him, Greg shivered. To think that so much of their time in the boat they were mere metres from that void, held up by a thin sheet of bright surface over miles of empty darkness. To think that the big fish his father hunted lived their whole lives in such a place...

There was nothing human there. Nothing warm, or soft, or kind.

And yet he drifted closer, wanting perhaps to take a peek at that distant ocean floor, to see inky sands littered with wrecks and treasure chests and the wandering ghosts of mariners drowned when men still sailed by the stars.

The fish spooled and drifted around him, like thoughts after whiskey.

He kicked a little harder.

A turtle drifted past, going in the opposite direction. Its hard shell was tufted with weeds and barnacles, a piece of the seabed come alive.

The edge approached and the swelling darkness behind it seemed to swing down and backwards at the same time, expanding, trying to suck him up like a pair of monstrous lungs.

Greg hung there, still a little way from the edge, fighting the insistent current that wanted to pull him out. He could feel the small waves of the surface ruffling his hair again and again as he hesitated.

He couldn't do it. He knew now what he would see if he strayed over that edge: the end of everything. A crushing hungry emptiness that fell away forever and ever. And just like that, the magic that held him up would be broken, and he would fall like a stone into a blackness vaster than the sky.

He turned and swam back. Calm, steady strokes, not letting himself panic. In the distance he could see the Pilar's friendly black

hull. A human blackness, a blackness that did not hate him.

When Greg got back, he was going to see if he could steal Patrick's shorts. Just sneak up on him and tug them free all at once. He'd pin them under a rock so his brother would have to dive down – which he hated – to get them, or else climb naked into the boat and head back to shore in a towel.

Well, not really. Greg would get the shorts back for him if he had to, but maybe, just maybe, Patrick would dive and get them himself, and maybe his brother would get over his stupid fear and the two of them would go hunt out an underwater grotto together, find the ruins of some lost pirate ship and become richer than their father in one fell swoop.

That would make Papa happy. His sons famous, but not for writing or boxing or anything like that. Maybe he'd be so proud he'd stop giving a damn about the critics, who were two-bit cock-sucking know-nothings anyway, as everyone knew.

Greg was in the middle of this pleasant daydream when he realised that all the fish had disappeared though he wasn't even halfway back to the boat. There was no flick of fins, no flash of silver. It was almost hard to believe so much life could have packed itself away so neatly, like a conjuring trick.

But there was something – movement over to his left, not bright, but –

–The shark seemed to slip out of empty water, one enormous ripple of muscle powering towards him. And then another, and another. Three of them, tails twitching back and forth, blunt noses forcing the water aside, black eyes staring. Servants of that greater darkness he had eluded come to claim him at last.

He screamed under the water. His speargun slipped through his fingers and spiralled down as he thrashed to the surface, still screaming, calling out for his father in a surge of panic.

“Papa. Papa, sharks! They're after me Papa!”

Shirtless on the deck, his father did not hesitate – did not try and manoeuvre the boat or ask questions or stop to get a harpoon gun of his own – before Greg had finished speaking, he had leaped headlong

over the side, a half-finished glass of iced rum still clutched in his hand.

Greg started swimming towards him, his usually elegant front crawl reduced to a wild thrashing of limbs, expecting every moment to be seized by teeth long as fingers.

When Papa's arms finally closed around him the relief was so great it was like they were already back on the boat, towels wrapped around their shoulders, laughing over the whole thing and picking the sweet white flesh of the grunt from its sweet white bones.

With a calmness Greg would always remember, his father pulled the still bleeding grunt from his belt – *the blood*, he realised, the blood – and threw it overarm in the direction of the sharks as hard as he could. Then he was pulling Greg up onto his back, letting him wrap his arms around his neck and saying, “if anything happens, just start swimming.”

Papa didn't panic. His strokes were strong and steady, just like always. Every second Greg expected to feel two tonnes of cartilage and teeth smashing into them, clamping down, tearing them apart and leaving bright bloody swirls in the water.

Then he was on the deck, shivering, his father crouched over him, his white-faced mother wrapping a towel around his shoulders. He had time to see a swirl of foam out over the reef, where the sharks were squabbling over the remains of the grunt, before his father picked him up, towel and all.

In the years to come, whenever Greg remembered the worst of his father, this memory would always swing up like a counterweight: the feeling of Papa pushing him up and out of danger with his own body, putting himself between Greg's skinny frame and the coiled thing of muscle and teeth below. His father just holding him tight as the boat rocked the both of them, not wanting to let go.

No matter how messed up it all got, no matter how many memories were burned away, that remained.

Carole Hailey

Extract from *His Darling Sister*

They must have been eighteen or nineteen, too old to be called boys really but still too young to be men. They were outside a beer tent and, aware of their gazes wandering shamelessly over my legs, my breasts, my bum, I walked towards them.

“Alright?” I said.

“Hi,” one of them replied.

I looked them over, assessing their suitability. Maybe this was the opportunity I had been waiting for. Two of them – including the one that had spoken – were okay-looking in a sort of ‘fifth member of a boy band whose name no-one remembers’ type way. Bland. Boring. Predictable. Not a lot of fun to be had with them.

The third one was more interesting. Blonde, greasy hair, a line of pimples along his jaw line, he radiated vulnerability, low self-confidence, and hunger. Not hunger for food – if anything he was slightly chubby – but hunger for someone – anyone, other than his parents – to look at him and see the person lurking beneath his needy outer shell.

I put my hand in my back pocket, fingering the £20 note Dad had given me and looked at him.

“Buy me a drink?” I asked.

He looked round to see if I was talking to someone else and when he looked back, I smiled, then bit my bottom lip, just a little bit.

He laid his palm flat on his chest.

“Me?” he said. “You mean *me*?”

I dropped my chin and looked up at him through my eyelashes.

“Only if you’ve got nothing better to do.”

His two friends were staring at me in absolute shock. Take that,

you snotty-nose boy band wannabes, I thought. I took his hand and led him in the direction of the bar.

“What would you like?” he asked, and I scanned the list hanging from the back of the tent.

“White wine.” I knew from my experiments with Mum and Dad’s drinks cupboard that wine would give me a buzz more quickly than anything else.

He ordered a beer for himself and a wine for me. The woman serving him glanced in my direction, but she looked completely bored and didn’t bother to ask how old I was. He put his wallet on the bar, and I pointed at his driving licence.

“Great photo,” I said.

He flushed. “I was going through a bit of a goth phase. Dyed my hair black. Everyone said I looked like a vampire.”

“Can I see it properly?” I asked and he took the licence out of the wallet and handed it to me.

I pretended to consider the photograph.

“You know,” I said, “vampires are sexy...”

I gave him a little half-smile.

“I reckon you look like Brad Pitt in *Interview with the Vampire*.”

He took a big gulp of his beer.

“So, uh, d’you like planes then?” he asked, then flushed again. This was going to be even easier than I had thought.

“No,” I said. “My dad, he was mad about planes... he came to the Farnborough Airshow every year but he... well...” I swallowed hard. “He died a few months ago.”

“Oh my god, that’s terrible. Shit. I’m so sorry.” He looked stricken.

“I thought I’d come today... you know... in his memory...”

I swallowed the rest of the wine in one gulp.

“Shall we have another?” I asked brightly.

The second drink was followed by a third, at which point he admitted that he had no more money and less than ten minutes later we were behind a wall near the car park, kissing. The poor boy got himself very worked up, very quickly. He rubbed himself against me desperately, panting and making a sort of half-moan, half-squeaking

noise. When the friction of his hips against the zip of my shorts started chafing, I reached between us and slipped my hands into his jeans. He moaned loudly and sucked feverishly at my lips and my neck, putting both hands on my bottom, pulling me against him.

“You’re so beautiful,” he said, or at least I think that’s what he said, his mouth was tangled in my hair, so it was difficult to hear.

“Do you want to do it...?” I asked.

He pulled his head away from me.

“Really?” he said.

“Sure. Why not?” I rubbed his dick a bit harder. “You want to, don’t you?”

“Oh baby, yeah,” he said, sounding like I imagined an actor in a bad porn film might.

I pushed down my shorts and pants, and then wrestled with his jeans until they were around his ankles.

“Are you sure about this?” he panted. “I haven’t got... you know... a condom...”

“It’s fine,” I said, “I’m on the pill.” I wasn’t, but he didn’t need to know that.

His dick jabbed my thighs.

“Oh god. Oh god,” he whimpered. “This is... I’m... oh god.”

I pushed against him, opened my legs wider, letting his penis slide between them. Then I squashed my thighs together, trapping him there. He didn’t seriously think I was going to let him put that thing inside me, did he? He thrust awkwardly back and forwards against my legs a few times panting, “Please... let me... Oh god... I can’t hold it... oh god... oh god...”

And then it was all over.

I pulled up my pants and shorts and looked at him. He was ridiculous. Boxer shorts round his ankles, skinny white legs, penis rapidly deflating. He looked embarrassed.

“Sorry,” he said. “I’ve never done that before.” He swallowed, Adam’s apple bobbing. “What I mean is, I’ve never had sex before.”

He looked like he was about to cry.

“I think you’re amazing. Can I have your phone number?” he asked.

“I don’t think my Mum would be happy about that.”

He finished zipping up his jeans.

“Why not?”

“Because I’m only fourteen.”

He turned ashen, the only colour on his face was his acne.

“But you were drinking wine...?”

“Yeah, so?”

“And you said you wanted to...”

I shrugged. “Consent is no defence to statutory rape. That’s what my teacher said.”

He looked terrified. “But I didn’t rape you. I mean we didn’t... I didn’t...”

“Your spunk is all over my legs,” I said, “and by the time I go to the police, I’ll make sure it’s inside me too.”

“You can’t do that.”

“Can’t I?”

“I’m going to university next week. You’ll ruin my life. Please... please don’t go to the police. I’m sorry, really truly I’m sorry.” He was sobbing like a baby.

“I might or I might not go to the police. I haven’t decided. It depends on how I’m feeling doesn’t it, Toby Scheverall?”

When I said his name, he flinched and looked like he might be sick.

“Nice name,” I continued. “Unusual. Can’t be too many Toby Scheveralls around. I’ll give you a bit of advice: don’t be so quick to flash your driving licence. Also, maybe don’t be so quick to try and have sex with underage girls, either. In the meantime, I hope you enjoy prison, Toby...”

Actual tears were running down his face. I touched his chin with my finger, “Acne cream works wonders you know.”

I didn’t report Toby Scheverall to the police. Why would I?

Perhaps I don’t have the same ‘feelings’ as other people but what I can say is that when Dad drove us home from the Farnborough Airshow that day, I was experiencing the most overwhelming joy that I had felt in my whole fourteen years. And, all these years later, I still get a physical throb of excitement thinking about the weeks, the months, hopefully the years that Toby Scheverall spent in a state of terror wondering if today was the day that the police would come knocking at his door.

Lucian Huxley Smith

Extract from *Micro*

I'm headed to a studio in Chiswick. Which is like saying "I'm headed on holiday to Great Yarmouth," words that should never be uttered together. I can't even think of the last time I came to West London, other than to sleep with someone. It's a dormitory for the unimaginative, the settled, the privately-schooled. That and Tories. To paraphrase Kele Okereke: West London is a vampire, it sucks the life right out of me.

What's more, this 'studio' isn't in an industrial estate or on the river as I'd reserved hope for, but three minutes from Turnham Green in a wisteria-draped house. Industrial-house-supremo is hardly what it screams. I walk right by it and FaceTime Hettie, my manager.

"You've found the studio alright then?"

"What the fuck is this Hettie? I'm in West London on a road called...Queen Anne's fucking Grove?"

"And?"

"Well, it's not exactly the Yellow House in Arles, is it? It's...it's..."

"It's what Ben?"

"It's whatever the fucking opposite of that is!"

"And what choice do you have?"

"Surely there's somewhere else I can go?"

"You think good songwriters are just dropping off trees Ben? Oozing out of the woodwork for you? Free at two days' notice?"

"I feel like a matador without a cape. Picasso without a brush. A...a..."

"Are you going to spit it out or shall I just hang up now?" she sounds matronly, Head Girl at *her* private school no doubt.

“A pornstar without a penis!”

Hettie’s face is as disgusted as you’d expect. “Look, you’re not Gauguin, you’re not Van Gogh, no one’s expecting you to cut your ear off and create one of the century’s great artworks. I’m expecting four minutes of credible dance music for you to drop on the biggest opportunity of your career!”

My face, tiny in the top right of my iPhone, resembles a chided toddler’s.

“Got it?” she’s going up the Matron Scale now, almost Trunchbullian.

“Yes, Hettie.”

“Right, so go back to Number 37 and ask for Nicky.”

God I’d forgotten their name was Nicky, how unbearable and unisex. “Are they a boy or a girl?”

“I sent you an email Ben. Don’t contact me again unless it’s to tell me you’ve written the track of the summer.”

She hangs up.

After taking my anger out on a fading bougainvillea round the corner from Queen Anne’s Grove, I return to Number 37’s manicured awfulness. Through the Edwardian bay window I see an upright piano standing in a drawing room. Nicky had better not expect me to go anywhere fucking near that.

I clump my fist against the door and heels clip towards me.

Is Nicky a woman? In heels? No, of course I didn’t check Hettie’s email.

A woman, who is three-quarters leg, greets me. The lines have been scrubbed out of her face by botox but it’s hard-edgedness remains, the functionality of her blonder highlighting suggests a woman in her fifties. Atop her indigo jeans sits a black cardigan that I can tell, despite its plainness, cost three hundred pounds minimum. Is this Nicky? A house-savant deep undercover as a Chiswick housewife? The first of the Ibiza pioneers perhaps?

“Hi, I’m here for *Nicky*?” I say, the saccharinity in my voice disguising the frothing panic in my gut.

“Oh hiiiiiii, you must be Ben?” her face twitches the suggestion of a smile and her eyes beam a psychopathic friendliness.

“Yeah, nice to meet you... *Nicky?*” I really hope it’s not her, I can’t make music with someone wearing cashmere with a huge skylighted kitchen conversion.

“Oh no, I’m not Nicholas”, THANK GOD! “Sorry, Nicky,” she hushes her voice: “he’s going through this phase where he’s changed his name and –” she waves for me to come in and starts walking up plush-carpeted stairs: “–you know how teenagers are?”

Teenagers. I should turn around now.

Instead, I follow Nicholas’ unintroduced mother further up her massive house towards an attic room. She continues speaking. “He’s been so excited about this, I mean, he played me ‘Pheremones’ and I was... well, it’s such a groovy track!”

“Yep, just the track of the summer 2017,” I reply.

“Absolutely! We had it on the Sonos last night and we were all dancing in the kitchen!”

“I bet!” I reply. Was Kevin McCloud there? Doing shots of Beaujolais?

“So, this is the *studio*,” she says as if we’re in on a joke together, I’m not sure if the joke is my career or her son’s? “We converted it about two years ago, once we were certain this music thing wasn’t just a phase.”

She stops and knocks, flattening her ferret-thin frame against the door. No answer.

Then, like only a mother can, she entreats: “Nicholas, your guest is here.”

The door is opened a fraction, no words.

She signals me into the lair and makes good her escape.

We exchange places, our bodies brushing momentarily.

“Can I get you a coffee or anything to get you boys started?” she asks. “We have a Nespresso machine.”

“I’ll have a macchiato Mum,” says a voice from inside the lair.

I truly am in a personal hell. “I’m fine,” I lie.

She rushes off without so much of a wobble on her heels.

The first thing I see inside the studio (or rather inside the bedroom with a mixing desk, an iMac and some speakers, which are only marginally better than those I have at home) is a large poster of a Chelsea footballer who's younger than me but definitely older than Nicky.

I'm in a child's bedroom.

Then there's Nicky, rushing at me with a blinding white smile.

"Hey man!" he says, taking my hand before I've offered it. Then he bumps my chest with his in a manner that's as awkward as you'd expect from a Chiswick teenager.

Less than a year ago I was chest bumped by Theo Parrish for playing "a dope ass set" – his words, not mine. Now I'm with this loser because I couldn't keep my mouth shut about polyamory to my polyamorous co-writer.

"This is fucking crazy man, raddest, like, day of my life!" says Nicky.

Is rad back in?

"Yeah, nice to meet you Nicky." I muster a smile. Over his shoulder I see a gilded plastic trophy, the sort won at a sports day.

"Yeah, shall I call you DJ Oculus or...?"

"Please, call me Ben," I don't feel like DJ Oculus right now.

"Yeah, yeah man, I mean I knew your name was Ben, obviously... from the articles and stuff I've read. I mean it's on your Wikipedia page and..." I know it is, I wrote it. "But you know? Like, I didn't just wanna, like, totally say it? Might be a bit extra?"

Nicky's already ticked the 'extra' box comprehensively. His elongated body looks like a pipe cleaner sculpture, his motions are elastic and his smile is toothy, piano-key large. A pair of heavy-rimmed rectangular glasses perch, then slide down, his snub nose. His index finger has already compulsively slid the glasses back up four times. Why exactly has he gone for those glasses, so clearly inappropriate for such a reptilian snout? From his left ear dangles a silver earring, a cross with a loop at the top. Because of his freneticism it jerks and swings about. He's wearing an oversized bleach-white hoody, *SLEEP* in bright italicised pink stamped at its centre

(not, presumably, a nod to the nineties doom-metal pioneers, rather a single-worded paean to facetiousness), on his lower half are a pair of tartan trousers à la Vivienne Westwood sanitised via Topshop. His hair shoots out in tight curls from his crown and anything beneath mid-ear is shorn down to skin. The effect is that of a widened mushroom. Or, if I'm being unkind, a bellend.

"No, worries, we're all chill here dude," I say, aiming to calm him.

"I see you're looking at the earring?"

He's crossed his arms in a Gen Z manner, suggesting I, the millennial, am about to be educated. I nod.

"It's an ankh, an Ancient Egyptian symbol of life force."

"Cool."

"I've also got a small tattoo beneath my ankle and I really feel ever since I got them, things have started to fall in my lap..."

Yes, Nicky. And, of course, that has nothing to do with your rich parents.

Daniel Marc Janes

Amazon Reviews of a Plastic Bucket

Bucket Hut BRBP509 Plastic Bucket

[Visit The Bucket Hut, Purfleet](#)

★★★☆☆ 16 ratings

Price: £8.49

New (6) from £8.49 & **FREE** Delivery

| | |
|------------------------|---------------------|
| Brand | The Bucket Hut |
| Colour | Orange |
| Material | Plastic |
| Item dimensions | 36 x 33 x 29 cm |
| L x W x H | |
| Capacity | 332.76 Fluid Ounces |
| Shape | Round |

About this item

- Sleek, modern bucket equipped for bait storage, quenching fires, biosand filtration
- Ergonomic handle that feels good on the hand
- EasyPour Recess at the base (ring size M) for hassle-free discharge
- Manufactured in versatile polypropylene plastic, robust and percussive in the event of musical use
- ** FINALIST FOR THE HERA NEW COMPANY AWARD, THURROCK BUSINESS AWARDS 2017 **

[Compare with similar items](#)

Top reviews from the United Kingdom

J.E. Denton

★★★★★ **Have been looking forward to this bucket**

Reviewed in the United Kingdom on 3 August 2017

Verified Purchase

On my bucket list lol

Mo F

★★★★☆ **It's a bucket**

Reviewed in the United Kingdom on 4 May 2018

Verified Purchase

Does the job. If I want another bucket will order another one of these.

Linda Pearson

★★★★★ **Good bucket**

Reviewed in the United Kingdom on 27 December 2017

Verified Purchase

Other half got me this bucket for Christmas, nice and sturdy, can see myself using it lots

Colin R.

★★☆☆☆ **Product didn't arrive**

Reviewed in the United Kingdom on 4 September 2018

Verified Purchase

I purchased four of these buckets on the August bank holiday (27th August). The product web page promised delivery by Friday (31st). The date was important as my son was visiting from New Zealand, I hadn't seen him in three years and as a bonding activity we'd agreed to plant a hydroponic garden together on the w/e of 1st/2nd September. We had been sharing instructional videos on You Tube and we were excited to try the Dutch Bucket Method. I'm an 85 y.o. widower and not as light on my feet as I used to be so I can't just pop to B&Q like billy-oh. He was coming into Heathrow at 4am and going straight here, I wanted to let him sleep rather than send him on a bucket errand. In the end he

stopped off at a hardware shop on the way. He said it was no trouble but when he was younger I used to ask him for money, I'm doing better now though with my pension and I wanted to prove I'm not dependent on him. The buckets were dark green which worked out for the best, I have since found out that dark buckets are better for hydroponics as light buckets encourage the growth of algae. Even so, it does not reflect well on The Bucket Hut. Thurrock Business Award my arse. Will NOT be buying from them again.

Rose Collyer

★★★☆☆ **Offers solid protection but not foolproof**

Reviewed in the United Kingdom on 7 December 2017

Verified Purchase

Ordered ten of these buckets as there was a severe weather warning for the area I live in (Scotforth, Lancaster) and thought it best to be safe. We knew when we bought this property that there had been floods nearby but the land registry search said very low flood risk so we didn't know what to believe. In the end husband urged me to buy the buckets and I'm glad I did as our basement and ground floor were totally filled with brown water. Horrendous. Our smallest thought it would be funny to drink some of the water and two bowel resections later he has definitely learned his lesson!!

Anna Pietkiewicz

★★☆☆☆ **Where is my bucket?**

Reviewed in the United Kingdom on 30 August 2018

Verified Purchase

Bought the bucket. Still no sign.

JoGifford1971

☆☆☆☆☆ **Disappointed**

Reviewed in the United Kingdom on 12 September 2018

Verified Purchase

I work closely with the Essex Chambers of Commerce. I had noticed the recent spate of bad reviews but, as a supporter of local business, was

determined to support The Bucket Hut. (Full disclosure: I met the owner, Nigel, at a business reception and he was a lovely, larger-than-life, guy.) You never know what's behind these reviews or if they're sent by a business rival/rouge customer/Putin bots. As it happened, the reviews were 100% right. The bucket took two weeks longer than expected to arrive and, when it finally did, was badly charred (?!). Frankly insulting.

Stuart Hodgson **TOP 500 REVIEWER VINE VOICE**

★★★★★ **A masterclass in bucket design**

Reviewed in the United Kingdom on 3 April 2017

Vine Customer Review of Free Product (What's This?)

I was pleased to be invited by Amazon to review 'Bucket Hut BRBP509 Plastic Bucket' ahead of its release. N.B. Bucket supplied in return for an honest review.

I use a lot of buckets in my line of work (I run a car wash – Airdrie Hand Car Wash, Ninian Road, ML6 9SE), and have an eleven-year track record of bucket reviewing. I have given a lot of two – and even one-star reviews in my time so you know I am telling the truth and not in the pay of Big Bucket.

This is honestly one of the best buckets I have ever bought. Comfortable handle with no chafing and excellent grip. Perfect size (it can fit under the kitchen sink) and durable enough to serve as a water bucket for a plastic-chewing Alsatian! (You should see what Eric has done to my hosepipes!) Best of all – the genius touch in my opinion – the cavity at the bottom you can stick your finger in to steady it during pouring. Why don't all buckets do this?

Jake

★★★☆☆ **Bit of a rip-off**

Reviewed in the United Kingdom on 23 November 2017

Verified Purchase

Buckets like this are £1 in ASDA so £6.99 is a bit steep. Nice bucket though not gonna lie

Ian Tock

★☆☆☆☆ **DO NOT BUY THIS BUCKET**

Reviewed in the United Kingdom on 16 August 2018

Verified Purchase

THIS IS MY BUCKET THE BASE CAVITY WAS MY IDEA I BUILT IT WITH MY OWN INJECTION MOULDS LISTEN TO ME EVERYONE NIGEL IS A FRAUD YOU HEAR ME YOU'RE LIVING ON BORROWED TIME NIGEL YOU BETTER LOOK OVER SHOULDER NIGEL BECAUSE I AM COMING FOR YOU

Daisy/Moonbeam

★★★★☆ **Cute bucket**

Reviewed in the United Kingdom on 30 July 2017

Verified Purchase

We keep this in our caravan for fire safety – thankfully we haven't had to use it yet!

Concerned

★★★★☆ **I heard this place burned down, was it an insurance thing or what?**

Reviewed in the United Kingdom on 9 October 2018

Verified Purchase

JoGifford1971

★★★★★ **I'm so sorry**

Reviewed in the United Kingdom on 23 September 2018

Verified Purchase

Just got an email at work about it – I'm SO sorry. I didn't realise what happened. Props to Jackie for trying to keep the place going – she must be going through so much right now. Please know, Jackie, Nigel is in all of our hearts and was much-loved in the South West Essex area and beyond. Really hoping you're able to rebuild and get back on your feet before too long.

Andy Slater1

★★★★★ **A great businessman**

Reviewed in the United Kingdom on 1 October 2018

Verified Purchase

I had some dealings with Nigel early-on when The Bucket Hut was raising start-up capital. I knew then that he was destined for big things. All over the Lakeside Basin his name is synomous with buckets. A great businessman, husband, father, grandfather, father-in-law, community figure, Queen fan, snooker companion.

Please let's keep those tributes coming. Busines is suspend but every purchase counts as a donation so that Jackie can get the Hut up and running again. You can also donate through <https://uk.gofundme.com/f/save-the-bucket-hut>.

Kat

★★★★★ **Holy sh*t**

Reviewed in the United Kingdom on 29 September 2018

Verified Purchase

Just awful. We all thought Ian was still on Sheppey.

Martin Froome

★★★☆☆ **Solid bucket**

Reviewed in the United Kingdom on 14 July 2017

Verified Purchase

Holds liquids and everything

Lanikai Krishnadasan Torrens

Extract from *Sea Glass*

I wait for Rebecca in the car park on top of the cliffs. The site is open to visitors until the end of the month. After that, the process of moving the stones further inland will begin, to prevent them from falling into the sea as the cliff erodes. There is a note on the information board explaining everything. It will take months of painstaking work, carefully excavating what remains of the foundations and transporting them twenty metres back from the edge of the cliffs. Below the board is a donation box, on which someone has written: *Every contribution helps us to preserve this historic site.*

There is a cuttlebone lying on the tarmac. It makes me think of mangoes – sucking the sweet husks as a child, my dad splitting them open with a spoon to show me the seed. There is nothing else inside a cuttlebone. It fills with liquid or gas depending on whether the fish wants to float or sink. Something has picked it up and dropped it here, a hundred feet above the sea.

A small tour group are clustered next to a pile of stones nearby listening to their guide, inaudible over the buffeting wind and the gulls. My phone vibrates in my pocket – Rebecca, saying she is almost here. The flag above the information board wraps and unwraps itself wildly around its pole. I wander to the edge, where a thin fence stands between me and the hundred-foot drop to the sea below, which roils and whips itself up against the rocks like egg white. The wind drags back the skin of my face and holds my eyelids open. I go back for the cuttlebone and kick it until it skitters over the edge to freedom.

Then a car door slams behind me and Rebecca has seen me before I turn around. Her hair is loose and crazy in the wind as she walks over.

There is something bandaged round her throat. As she comes closer, I can see it's just an ivory turtleneck beneath her coat. The cashmere looks like gauze. She stops a few feet from me, and the air streams violently between us like we are two rocks in the middle of a river.

I'm dying for a coffee, she says across the gap, do you mind if we do the café first?

The café is dim, even with the lights on. The doorbell catapults itself into action as we go inside and I am grateful for the noise. Rebecca orders a coffee and I ask for the same. The waitress peels the laminated menus from the table as she leaves. Condensation sweats down the window and I press a wedge of napkins into where it pools.

Rebecca's skin is thin around her eyes, like bible paper. There are faint creases I haven't noticed before, and two waxy half-moons of concealer, brighter than the rest of her face.

Renata asked to see you, she says.

Really?

I told her I didn't know if you'd come.

Guilt jumps at my throat. What made you say that?

I didn't know if you'd want to.

Of course I want to, I say.

The waitress returns and Rebecca mechanically takes the cups from the tray and sets them out in front of us. She rips open one of the milk packets and empties it into her coffee.

She doesn't know who I am anymore. She thinks I'm Caroline. She lets out a hollow laugh that sounds like a cough. Are you sure you want to go?

I can't say anything except yes. Of course. Yes.

*

Rebecca's kitchen is small and cold-feeling, the same as the hallway. One of Stephen's prints hangs above the sink, a black and white image of koi carp in their garden pond. She says they dug it when they moved in, she lined it herself with the black plastic sheeting. But the fish are gone now. The water seeped away gradually through a gap in the material, going down imperceptibly until one morning she went

outside with a cup of tea and found their little speckled bodies exposed on the wrinkled plastic, surrounded by the weeds and mosses she'd hoped would make them feel at home. She leads me into the sitting room to point it out through the French windows. There are dents in the carpet where the feet of someone else's sofa used to be.

In the toilet there is a streak of blood at the bottom of the bowl. I feel strange relief when I see it.

*

On the way I buy flowers, irises, for my name.

She won't remember, Rebecca says as we walk down the sparkling hospice corridor. She won't know who you are.

Renata is tiny, propped up against the pillows like a child. Rebecca bends to kiss her hello and I do the same. Her skin is soft and clammy. This is a good day, Rebecca whispers in my ear.

Renata's hair is longer than she ever kept it when we were teenagers. Even with it white she looks younger than I remember.

You're looking well, Renata.

They all look like this, Rebecca says. It's the glow of forgetting.

Renata beams at me. My mouth is dry, she says.

Would you like some tea, mum? I start at Rebecca using the word.

Yes dear.

Rebecca gets up like she has rocks sewn into the lining of her clothes. The door makes a little suctioning noise behind her, the rubber seal kissing the frame.

She's a lovely girl, Renata says to the room.

She is, I say.

Renata studies my hair. You're a nice boy.

I'm not, I say. She purses her mouth. I'm a girl.

I thought you were! She falls back on her pillows, delighted.

You're Iris, she murmurs.

I'm Iris.

You brought me flowers.

Yes.

You're Caroline's friend?

I pause. Yes.

Renata smiles at me for a minute before her face changes, as if a cloud has passed across it. Where is Caroline? She sits up and looks frantically about the room.

I'm here, Rebecca says, coming through the door with the tea. She hands it to me without looking and takes her grandmother's hands in hers. I'm here.

Tears leak from Renata's eyes. Oh good, she says, smiling as they run down her chin. I thought I lost you. Silly me.

I'm here, Rebecca says, wiping Renata's face. We stay until she falls asleep.

*

You're telling her you're Caroline?

Do you want to tell her I'm not?

Rebecca drives me to the station, the houses turning to fields as we go. She has the music on, the bass is turned up too high. I feel it vibrating in my chest.

I just need to listen to this for one minute.

She turns it down and I hear the satnav dinging and repeating itself, *turn around where possible, turn around where possible.*

Fuck's sake, it's always doing this.

She pulls into the car park by the level crossing and I lean awkwardly across the gear stick to hug her goodbye.

From the train I watch her car pull onto the road. I feel a sting in my nose as she checks both ways before making the turn. I fix my eyes on the seat in front of me and the train starts to move.

An hour later, my phone gets signal and a text pings out like a dropped penny into the empty carriage. *Thanks for coming. Sorry you had to see her like that. I think it meant a lot to her. And me. Kiss.* The word, instead of an X. I imagine her dictating it to her handsfree alone in the car. *I'll come again soon*, I reply. She texts back straight away. *Maybe see you soon then. X.*

Shakira Moise

Extract from *Mami Wata*

They tell me that my Mami bad. They tell me that she good.
They tell me that she neva come to land or beach or wood.
They tell me that she sneaky eh, sneaky slippery sly.
They tell me that she sing a song and you gone say bye-bye.

*

It's raining when he leaves. The hat he scavenged for me on the last trip barely helps now, and I can feel the water trickling through the dense brush of my hair to wet my scalp. A line of it trails down the back of my neck, tickling a shiver out of me that makes him smile. He kneels, tall enough that the tip of his hair skims the bottom of the sun, making squiggly black shadows on my arms.

“Do you remember what I told you?” He murmurs.

Behind him, the old rowboat ebbs with the waves. The rope that ties it to the broken dock is frayed and I wish it would snap. Let the water take the boat far away so that he doesn't have to leave again.

I nod, but it's not good enough. His lips pull tight, greying where the salt-dry skin stretches.

“What did I tell you?”

“Stay inside.” I say and squint because there's something in the water, just past his boat, something slick and—

“And?” He quips, squeezing my hands to draw my eye. He looks desperate. I've seen him look this way before. Always just before he leaves and the split second before he sees me when he gets back. I hate it. I hope he brings back more chocolate.

“And lock the doors and cover the windows and muffle my ears before sleep.” I recite and he relaxes. Callouses scraping against my skin when he draws away to stand. He never says goodbye. I said it once, whispered it when I thought he couldn’t hear, and he’d stiffened. Turned rigidly and spat into the ocean. I never said it again.

He wades to the boat and unwinds the rope keeping it moored. It rocks when he gets in, and I see the right hull and the frayed tape that keeps it from sinking. I gulp but when I look to him, he’s smiling, so I try to smile too, even though I feel sick.

“And remember,” he says as he dips the oars into the sea and pushes away from me. “Don’t—”

“—let Mami inside.” I finish. He nods once, and then dips his head, concentrating on his task. The sun stings my eyes, but I watch until he is a tiny dot at the sea’s edge and keep looking until it passes over the border of the world and then it’s just blue water and yellow sun and I’m alone.

*

Mami has long hair they say, long as time it be,
She does comb it every day, one time, two time, three.
The comb she use is pretty, *oui*, white as bone and fine,
But should you touch the tip of teeth, you will sleep for time.

*

I keep the door cracked during the sun-hours. It helps to wash the old sweat-air from the room. The new air brings the smell of brine, and it makes my mouth dry. I don’t open it wide, just enough for a moving line of sun to slice into the dark hut. I track the gold line as it slides along the sand floor until it thins to a sliver and then out of sight.

Outside the sea laps against the shore and calls to me under my skin but I ignore it. I make a game by timing the sound of the chase-and-retreat of the water to the beat in my chest until spots blink at the edge of my eyes and I stop.

Something shines in the corner and I already know what it is as I twist my neck to look.

A long thick square, wrapped in scratchy brown cloth tied six times around with red-knot barrier rope. Every inch covered except for the top left corner that glints in the light.

A *mi-ror*, he calls it.

The bottom of its cover is stained black. Sometimes the stains shine like they're fresh and if I breathe deeply enough, I can catch its faint smell, like rotting fish bones left outside. I'm not allowed to take off the covers. I'm not ready, he says. It isn't time yet for me to go see.

I stare at the *mi-ror* until the sun crawls back out across the beach and sea and over and under the world leaving me in the night. I shut the door, wedge the chair against it, push the spongy sound-stoppers in my ear and tie the chain around my ankle to keep myself inside.

Now the only light is a murky, fish-bone white through the grimy window. All along the cloudy glass are deep scratches. I should cover it. Block the light like he does. But instead, I reach up, stretch until my bones pop to trace a cluster of marks. I try to match my fingertips with the lines but they're too deep and wide apart. Too Mami.

Before I sleep, I stare at the stained *mi-ror* cover and wonder if it's wet like water or sticky-thick like fruit and maybe, what it would taste like if I dipped the tip of my tongue in it.

Time slips.

*

Mami snatches river-men and drags them down and down,
Down beneath the blue and waves, down and down to drown.
Wraps them all in rope and vine, she does hear no plea,
Smiles her toothy, laughing grin and sings *it's time to see*.

*

I stay inside for as long as I can. The hot-pit where he cooks fish stays cool, the door stays mostly closed. But soon my skin pimples under the building sweat, sores blister and burst and the sea calls and calls until I break my promise.

I scutter outside, flopping onto the beach, sucking in clean air. The sand burns my sores, and the sun stings my eyes. No clouds today. Just blue endless sky and its twin-sea that stretches forever.

I lie boneless for a while. Hunched on my side like the fishes we drag from the water and set on the sand to dry. Now I am like them, skin broken and mouth open-shut-open-shut.

Soon it's easier to breathe, and I know that I should go back inside but sea sounds rush into my ears. They wind and twist and fill all the silence from the shack and then I'm moving forwards before I know it, sand scratching at my skin as I drag myself towards the water.

It stings at first; my eyes, my nose, my sores, but then it cools, and I let the water fill my mouth and squeeze my nostrils to push the last air bubbles out. I catch a glimpse of myself as I wade in, leaf-shaped hair all tangled into points and then I shut my eyes, push away. I crawl until the water buffets me up. My feet bend and toes skim the settled sand into dust. And then the first true wave lifts me up as it passes and I leave land behind.

The first second of floating is terrifying. Like the world has dropped away and you're falling into nothing. But it only lasts a second. Less than a second. It lasts as long as a blink, just a flicker of fear and then the water comes to cleanse it.

All his words that kept me inside wash away, pulled from my head and dissolve.

I float on my back, then my front and watch the bundles of fish all swimming below.

I wonder where they go when they're not right there, pip-popping in and out of holes the sea scratches into rock. I wonder what they taste like, gooey and wet, not charred like he makes them but burst open red, spilling between teeth and fingers.

Charlotte Newman

Extract from *The Magpie's Daughter*

One for Sorrow

Her wings carry her over the A-road, to the outskirts of the city. Over the trees she goes, hazel, mostly, and ivy dressed with the usual human detritus. A teething ring, a ring-pull. Here, winged with silver birches, is a nest of human making. Lovers have claimed its walls like moss, carved names in shaky hearts, as well as the question:

what are you?

It's a good question.

What is she?

There are others who are like her but not really like her. Garden birds, common as muck – but there's an ancient lesson in *her* blood. She can rasp and pierce and give time the slip as well as tell the difference between a real car and a toy. Nothing's black and white except for her feathers and even some of them are blue and green. She's in-between. And above a field now, which is yellow-bellied from summer. She swoops over to the houses on the edge.

Oh, the human tangle.

She looks!

She listens.

Lawnmowers, ambulances, drunks, articulated lorries, wood pigeons and windchimes from every suburb in London and she's a-hover by Michael Smythe from Dorking's rental, where he is ordering a curry, which he did the night Lexi said he was more like her brother than her lover (Michael Smythe would be willing to work past this, but Alexia Kouris, it turned out, would not). He thinks of her in the home they shared with their bird-of-a-feather boys. She likes the boys, especially their stories, especially the ones with birds.

Down the road she could fly, to the semi where the Wadlows have mated for life. They make time for sexing every second Thursday. They make no time for her.

Or she could soar north, to the city, where she'd find Sunny Anand-Lloyd – that's Sunny, not short for Sunil or Sonny Jim, whomsoever he might be! He wakes to a box of chicken bones. Whimpers. The bright day shows him no mercy-mercy.

But she stays where she is. Something else has caught her beady little eye. She skips on over the rooftops for a closer look.

All a-lonely it is, this house. All on its own. A broken gate separates the front garden from the field. There is a load of tat encrusted in white which she could add to, if she wanted to. This is where the Lamptons live.

There's Timothy Lampton, who had to take early retirement from Salterway College because of the economic crisis; his old students, among whom is a druid high priestess, have set up a Facebook page in his honour. He is packing a sports bag (though he never does sport); in it, he puts his toothbrush.

In the bathroom his son, Patch, is tinkering with some negatives. He is eighteen and the camera was a gift.

And there, in the kitchen, is Holly Lampton, the twenty-one-year-old trying to combat loss by unloading and reloading the dishwasher. She does not wish to heal a mother's absence with domestic labour. She just wants to keep busy.

The magpie gives her feathers the once-over and considers sorrow. She's been known to cause it. She's been known to break into other birds' eggs and eat the membrane within.

One for sorrow, they say. One for sorrow, two for joy.

She's not a songbird – if she were, she'd sing, but nobody much likes her rattle.

All she can do for now is watch the girl who watches the sun move across the kitchen. The girl who is wondering what her little life looks like to someone on the outside.

*

June.

Holly wakes with recollections of childhood summers. If she could, she'd see this one out with her body pressed to her cool bedroom wall. She lies facing the skylight on the slanting roof opposite. From this angle she can't see the trees or the field, or the row of terraced houses on the other side. She sees only pure blue. There are no clouds, and there'll be no hibernation either (her shift starts at 12).

An attic room, she thinks, rubbing her eyes, is a romance that cannot last the season. Temperatures are set to rise all week, with a 50% chance of rain on Friday. It really needs to break. Everyone keeps saying that. It needs to break, but it might not?

Sweat clings to the back of her knees.

She will feel better after a shower. She should get up now. She shouldn't think about it. There are so many things she should do, fix that broken blind, for starters...

She sits up.

There, at the skylight, is a magpie. Its body is so smooth that she can't make out individual feathers. There's a streak of greenish-blue on the tail. It's pretty. Maybe if they weren't so predatory, the species would be a lot more popular.

She reaches, slowly, for her phone.

The magpie seems, and this is a daft bit of anthropomorphism, but it seems pretty unfazed, even arrogant, the way it's staring her down like that. Don't some birds indicate a dead loved one is near? Not magpies though. This one looks like it wants to break in.

10.45!

Holly grabs her towel and peels her pyjamas off; all the while, the magpie watches.

She narrows her eyes at it.

"Perv."

She half-expects a response.

*

Patch is busy turning their bathroom into a dark room, a skill he learnt online. The gift of a Leica sparked this interest, or perhaps it would be

more accurate to say it enabled it. He takes photos of things like the daisy-covered bones of a field mouse and when Holly remarked that his photos had a brutal beauty, he tilted his head to one side and said that he didn't think they showed brutality, only death.

This is Patch all over.

"Sorry, Sister." He removes the sheet of plywood from the bath. "I thought you'd already left."

"I got distracted. There was this magpie—"

"Did you salute?"

"Shit, no."

"Ah well." He smiles, carrying his trays and brushes out to the landing. "Just try not to break any mirrors."

Holly pushes the door to and hangs her towel on the radiator, which hasn't been on for months.

"It would have made for a good photo, don't you think? Magpie at skylight. Monochrome, just how you like it."

"Yeah," her brother's voice fades away as he disappears into his bedroom. "Make sure you call me next time."

It's just been the two of them this week. Well, that's fine; they might be motherless but they are not children. And there was a note, of course. Always is.

Dear Children,

I leave this cider in your care. Please drink responsibly or at least more responsibly than your mother, this was her fave ('Fave').

Money for takeaway in jeans back pocket (my desk) but eat some fruit too. Veggie loaf in fridge if you're feeling brave.

Happy Solstice! Back soon,

Your Father, Timothy Lampton

At the bottom, a self-portrait in biro. In it, he'd drawn himself wearing – for some reason – a cowboy hat.

"Oh, before I forget," Patch calls, "are you around tonight? I thought I'd make ratatouille."

Listen to him, sparrow-light, offering to cook like he's not a teenager. Holly can remember when he lost his first tooth. It is her earliest memory and probably false. Probably, there's a photo in a drawer somewhere.

"Cheers, Brother," she turns on the water. "But I'll be back late."

Yosola Olorunshola

Extract from work in progress

Still Life

Her days were numbered. For another week only, her job title would be Assistant Memory-Maker. Fara had complex feelings about this. It was hardly a transferable position – more appropriate for a magician or a fortune-teller with a side-hustle than a person hoping to pass her landlord’s credit check.

This was not how she imagined the future, as her dreams evolved from *hairdresser*, to *artist*, to *okay, I should at least consider medicine or law*, until quite naturally, but to the confusion of her parents, she settled for *art historian*.

Today was a distant dream from the picture of herself swanning through Europe on the sails of wide-legged trousers, gesturing towards framed lines and dots, finding a narrative in sweeping landscapes, or translating sculptures described vaguely as “wooden fetish figure” into something more culturally precise. Instead of leading tours beneath high ceilings and echoing galleries, her life was spent in a basement beneath a colony of dead flies pock-marking a flickering electric light.

Really, her job was glorified data entry. She converted hand-written notes into digital files, so that one day, if someone were to look for letters sent by Sir Francis Drake to his lover (his Virgin Queen could never know about Miss Ink Feather), her hands would guide them to the source through lines of code and formula across space and time. Not exactly the kind of work you think would keep you up at night.

Fara had lived and graduated through a Digital Revolution as well as a Great Recession, or so she reminded herself when the pressures of real life became too surreal to contemplate. One day,

people would capitalise those moments like she did in her mind and recognise that people like her were some of the last... last of what, she couldn't say. At some point, as she prepared to enter the world of work, or the Future of Work, the museums and galleries she dreamed of inhabiting had decided to leap into the future and rebrand themselves in the language of start-ups, perhaps to woo some of the government's investment back in their direction after five years of austerity. Archivists became Memory-Makers; Learning Teams became Discovery-Seekers; and Front-of-House roles became Experience-Creators. Leadership humbly resisted declaring themselves 'Overlords'.

While her entire degree had been spent burying herself in the art of the past, she was finally ready to sit up and face the future. Just not like this. The worst part was that all the new-fangled job titles could apply to any one of the roles, which meant everyone lived in a state of vague uncertainty about where exactly their jobs began and ended. Unfortunately for Fara, her job ended in a week's time.

*

*Nigerian daughters with degrees from Oxford do not get fired.
Nigerian daughters with degrees from Oxford do not get fired.
Nigerian daughters with degrees from Oxford do not get...*

Fara's pen tore through the napkin and scratched the already bruised table, probably salvaged from an old classroom.

She could hear her mother's voice through the lines, travelling through time: "Didn't I tell you? You can't eat art." This was the dinnertime chorus to summon Fara from her sketchbook, fingers stained with pastels and charcoal as her mum sighed into another pot of golden red stew.

After everything, twenty-seven years of playing by the rules, colouring between the lines and actually avoiding all the lines her friends had started snorting when they gained a modicum of disposable income, here she was.

"I've been made redundant," she mouthed to herself, trying to

make it sound easier to swallow than, “I’ve been fired.”

She hadn’t even seen it coming. If a promotion wasn’t possible, she’d at least expected her role to be merged into a slightly more respectable position than Assistant Memory-Maker.

“We’ve had to make some difficult decisions, Fara,” Melissa said, this time last week. “Funding’s been getting tighter and tighter each year, you know that. Every department has felt the pinch.”

Fara crossed her arms loosely and resisted the urge to pinch herself. Perhaps they were just going to reduce her hours, or ask her to apply for another position.

“Yes, I know everyone’s roles are going to change.” She was ready to reel off the transferable skills that were promised as the fruit of nights in the library and months spent hopping from internship to internship.

“Well, yes.” Melissa cleared her throat and played with the pendant hanging beneath her neck. Her engagement ring gleamed in the light and Fara felt a rush of rage. Work in the arts, marry a management consultant – that seemed to be the only way to survive on your passions these days.

“Senior Management have spent a long time working on this restructure. They are trying to rationalise the organisation and figure out which areas are really adding value – ” Melissa cut herself off. “God, I can’t believe what I sound like. “Creating value, I mean. This is just so hard.”

“And how did Senior Management define ‘creating value’ then?” Fara said, as though it was her job to put Melissa out of her misery.

“It came down to simple maths, I’m afraid. Who’s bringing in revenue? Can you believe it’s come to this?” Melissa shook her head and looked at Fara in the way strangers do when someone has caused a fuss in public, looking for a shared moment of contempt. “That’s the question they asked, and you know, I tried and tried to justify the need for my team but if you compare it to Exhibitions or Fundraising, we just can’t compete.”

“Right.”

“Look, Fara, there’s no easy way to say this but it’s been decided

that the Assistant Memory-Maker role is now redundant.”

Fara opened her mouth to speak but felt herself both disappear and solidify in Melissa’s gaze. For a moment, it took her a while to grasp the situation. She glanced up at the dead colony of flies and imagined them bursting through the glass and swarming the room, a sign that it wasn’t just her life, but the whole world that might collapse at any moment. But they stayed there stagnant, silhouetted against the ceiling.

As she walked out of the swivel doors, Fara was almost swept up by a caterpillar of schoolchildren in high-vis jackets, holding hands like in those Madeleine cartoons she used to love. She let them pass in front of her as they mirrored her direction, walking into the gallery, their whole lives ahead of them, beginning with the simple pleasure of a packed lunch. See, they had things together, these kids – she had never managed to get into the habit of even making her own lunch. Just today, she’d wished she had somebody who would make one for her – her favourite: a sardine sandwich, Capri Sun, a pear that didn’t get squashed, and a single Twix to give her energy but keep the cavities at bay. Instead, her stomach tugged inside her like a bad memory, like a voice wriggling inside her, a gentle reminder: “you can’t eat art.”

Lisa Smith

Extract from *The Land of Milk and Honey*

January 1981

At home time there was the usual procession of mums and children snaking towards the Geoffrey Chaucer Estate. Most of the pupils at Samuel Pepys Primary lived in the silver-grey maisonettes, which sprawled northwards from the school gates, until eventually nestling at the banks of the Thames. Some also lived in the two tower blocks that rose from the centre of the housing complex: Becket House and Pilgrims Court, each twenty-four floors of concrete, steel and glass. I'd heard that all the homes on the estate had fitted kitchens, modern bathrooms and central heating blowing out through vents in the wall. Mum had put her name on the waiting list for a flat on the Estate four years ago. We were still waiting. I lived in a house on a street the council had earmarked for demolition in the 1960s, but had never got around to pulling down. 59 Lime Grove had draughty sash windows and an ice-cold bathroom squashed between the kitchen and the outside loo. The house belonged to my Auntie Sybil and her husband Earl. They and their four children slept in the three bedrooms on the first floor, while Mum and I had the attic room. Miss Gladys slept on the ground floor, in what had once been the dining room.

I was standing at the pelican crossing. The cold seeped through the knit of my scarf, so I wound it around my neck once more, doubling its thickness. I pressed the button again.

"You walk home by yusef?" Connie said, arriving at my side.

"Yeah. I'm almost eleven," I said without looking at him, willing the green man to appear.

"So you nuh live in the flats over there-sah?"

“No.”

“Me have an orange me save from lunch, you want some?”

“No. Thank you.”

All day I'd been trying to be helpful to the new boy without giving him, or anyone else, the impression that just because we were both black, we were the same. I'd only spoken to him when it was absolutely necessary during lessons and had expected that after his run in with Mark Barrett he would follow my example of how to behave. Connie, however, made no attempt to keep his head down. He volunteered to hand out textbooks, collected our grammar test sheets and put his hand up every time he knew the answers to questions. While I could see that some of our classmates were irritated by his enthusiasm, Connie seemed deaf to their half-whispered cusses. During afternoon playtime he leaned against the wall with his hands in his coat pockets, watching the boys play football. Although I reminded myself that it wasn't my job to look out for him, I found myself willing the ball to stay on the pitch, or at least to never go out of play close to where he was standing; that way another confrontation with Mark could be avoided.

The traffic lights finally changed and I started to cross the street, just managing to keep abreast of Connie's languid strides.

“You ah go t'rough the park now?” he said, his tone bright.

“Yes. Why?”

“Me ah go that way too. Is okay we walk together?”

“It's a free country,” I muttered, keeping my eyes fixed ahead, walking a little quicker.

There were privet hedges around the entrance to the park, so once inside you couldn't be easily seen from the road. I decided that I could afford to be friendlier towards the new boy now we were a bit further away from school. Perhaps I could make him understand the *rules*. I was still deciding where to begin when Connie spoke up.

“Miss say you come from Jamaica but you no sound like it.”

“That's because I was born here. My mum is from Jamaica, she came here in 1961.”

“Oh. You ever been to Jamaica?”

“No, but my Grandma's told me loads about it. She came over in

the 70s, when I was still a baby. She was lonely in Jamaica on her own – although she still misses the sunshine.”

“Eh-eh! I know how she feel. Me never able to see me breath before me come here.”

Connie opened his mouth and exhaled a cloud of white vapour. Then came a slow, husky giggle, his shoulders rising and falling in time with his laughter. I smiled, then quickly pressed my lips together to conceal it.

“When did you arrive in England?” I asked.

“A couple weeks ago,” said Connie. “Althea have t’ings to sort out before me could start ah school.”

“Who’s Althea?”

“Me muddah.”

“How come you call her Althea?”

Connie shrugged. “I call her that from when me was small. She say when me call her mama it mek her feel old. Me lickle breddah call her mummy though, but him only a year old so she nuh mind that much. Althea’s a top-notch hairdresser yuh know, she plan to open up her own salon and call it *Noir*, which mean black in French. At the moment she have to work for a witch called Mrs Samuels, but she intend to have her own place in the next four years, by the time she reach thirty.”

“What? Your mum’s only twenty-six!”

Connie smiled, a small dimple appeared in his left cheek.

“Nearly, her birthday not ‘til July. I’ll be eleven on April 16th. When yuh born?”

“May,” I said.

“Yuh Taurus or Gemini?”

“I dunno. Gemini I think.”

“Good. An air sign. Althea say Fire and Air get on well...”

My Mum said only *eediats* believed in horoscopes, but I didn’t say that to Connie. He carried on talking about his mother and her plans, his face all smiles and his accent thickening. I calculated that Althea must have been fifteen when she had Connie; Auntie Sybil was always on at the twins, Marcia and Margery, about the misery, shame

and hardship of being a teenage mum. Yet Connie's mum hadn't been held back, she'd travelled halfway across the world. I silently mouthed her name, letting my tongue savour the softness of the syllables, *Al-the-a*. I decided to add it to my list of favourite names, which currently included: Sasha, Sabrina and Veronique. My Mum's name was Alma, which I once read meant *nourishing, kind soul*. When I suggested that her name went well with her job working as a nurse, she kissed her teeth. "*Me could ah name Florence Nightingale but me'd still end up changing more sheets and emptying more bed pans than all dem white nurses 'pon the ward.*" Mum was forever telling me how important education was. She told me people would be more impressed by my brains than my face, my hair or my name. But from what I saw at school my intelligence and hard work didn't count for much. Being popular went hand-in-hand with being pretty, which meant having a slim figure, silky hair and white skin. As far as I could tell, black beauty also rested largely on hair and skin-tone. Like Mum, I had good hair, but we both had mid-brown rather than light skin. Mum would be thirty-six in October, an old woman compared to *Al-the-a*.

Connie continued strolling along beside me, right up until we arrived at my gate.

"Rawtid! This is a proper ol' time English house!" he said, tilting his head back. "You have chimney and everyt'ing. Is here you live? You ever see any duppy?"

"It's not haunted silly! Anyway, whereabouts d'you live?"

Connie pushed his hands into his coat pockets and shifted from one foot to the other. "Pilgrims Court," he mumbled.

"You're joking! But that's back on the Estate. You've gone in completely the opposite direction." Connie shrugged. "Will you be alright going back on your own? I mean, it'll be dark by the time you get there." Connie was silent. "Do you actually *know* the way back from here?"

Connie looked down at his plimsolls and shook his head.

Ana Soria

Extract from *Santoku*

It happened at a farmers' market of all places. Fifteen food stalls crammed into a square of park that the city council was trying to 'rejuvenate'. August had pushed for them to visit. There would be watermelon cocktails and a steam-powered organ playing them in for the market's inaugural Saturday. Oliver had been persuaded by the promise of a stall selling the Japanese Santoku knives that he wanted for the kitchen.

At the market, they couldn't decide what to eat. Walking through the crowds, August trailed a step behind, admiring the wide triangle of Oliver's shoulders. Rum swilled pleasantly in his empty stomach. Oliver had had his hair cut, and August thought that it looked a little too severe. He had liked it better when he could comb his hand through it and catch the curls between his fingers. Everything had changed with the new job.

I've got to make a call, Oliver said, leaning in to be heard over the music which had started up.

Wait, we haven't seen the organ yet, August said, hooking an arm through his. The market was full of slick young couples who had only recently appeared in the neighbourhood. Before that, the park had been a meeting place for young women who strung lights from the tree branches and gathered around crackly sound systems to dance cumbia. They both reached for a sample of champagne-washed sheep's cheese, then August led them towards a clearing where a group of children sat huddled around an iPad, ignoring the steam organ. Oliver shrugged off August's grip and pulled out his phone. He was shorter than August and hated to be steered around.

It makes me feel like a naughty kid, he had said, the last time they had been out together.

Hurt, August had replied, Well, you saying that makes me feel like an old man.

For God's sake, Oliver had snapped, you're forty-nine. You're hardly ready for your coffin yet.

And before he could bite it back, August had replied, Tell that to the twenty-year-olds in your office.

And that was that. Oliver had stormed off in a huff. He had no patience these days, August thought. No patience at all.

The steam organ dated back to the 1800s and had been lovingly restored by a team of volunteers. August read this out loud from a sign stuck into the grass. As the organ played, a marching band of painted tin figures appeared from between the pipes. Jerkily, they clashed cymbals together and rapped out a rhythm on their tiny drums. August stood close. There was a smell of diesel oil, and air from the pipes blasted the hair back from his head. Each piercing note vibrated through his chest. He leant closer. Underneath the melody, he could make out the sound of pistons and the click, click, click, of the marching band's jointed metal limbs. It really was something. He looked around for Oliver and saw him stepping over a rope that sectioned off the back of the organ from the watching crowds. He had his phone pressed to his ear and was talking urgently into it. Irritated, August followed behind. They barely saw each other these days, and now, on their one day off, he was taking work calls.

The perimeter of the park had been fenced off to stop gate-crashers who wanted to avoid the three-pound entry fee. In this border zone, it was a tangle of electrical cables and crates of unsold stock. Here and there bowls of washing up from the food stands, a few empty bottles of beer. Oliver stood with his back to August, looking out of the perimeter fence. Walking towards him, he wanted to tear the phone out of Oliver's hand. Instead, he touched him lightly on the arm, making him jump.

Jesus! He said, or something like it, August couldn't hear anything since they were standing so close to the pipes. Oliver made a shooing motion, then turned back to the fence and laughed down the phone in a way that August knew was fake. Before the new job in TV, Oliver had dressed in corduroy trousers and cardigans, now he'd taken out a credit card to buy an Armani blazer. He glared at the blazer for a few moments. He had to admit, it was impeccably cut.

The rest of that afternoon had become disjointed in August's memory. He remembered it as though in a dark room with only a pocket torch for light. Its beam illuminated only small patches of memory. He had rested one hand on the side of the organ, he remembered that. He steadied himself to swing a leg back over the dividing rope. The metal panels of the organ were very hot, so he lifted up his palm. His next memory was of looking into the mechanism at the back of the organ, a lot of spinning parts, slick with oil. He'd wanted to stop and look at it a while. There was something compelling about the way that the parts all worked together, like the inside of a body.

Slipped, he must have slipped, that's all. Even though he was sure that he had been standing still, and the ground hadn't been at all slippery. *Surprisingly strong*, this was the only thought he had as his hand disappeared, and his arm was yanked downwards so hard it felt as though it had pulled from its socket. He wasn't in pain, there was only a loose, floaty feeling. And when he tapped Oliver on the shoulder a second time, Oliver dropped the phone, his mouth hanging open. He remembered the tenderness with which Oliver had lowered him gently to the ground, then tied the sleeves of his blazer tight around August's bicep.

I'll be right back, he said. August smiled.

The St John's Ambulance volunteer fainted when she saw it. Luckily, one of the stall holders had a lot of brand new tote bags, so they wrapped August's hand in those while they waited for the ambulance. Oliver was next to him the whole time, sitting close to him in the grass, speaking in a reassuring voice. August leant his head on Oliver's shoulder. The organ had stopped playing.

De-gloved, we call it, the paramedic said cheerfully when the ambulance arrived. She peered at August's hand, much less dramatic than it looks.

You're lucky it's only the one finger. She wrapped it tightly in gauze and helped him into the back of the ambulance.

Just a minute! Oliver shouted, jogging back towards the spot where he'd dropped his phone. The Armani blazer had been reduced to a bloody rag. As they pulled away from the park and out into the traffic, August felt serene. Oliver rode alongside him, perched awkwardly on a fold-down chair. The phone was in his hand once more.

Plugging a finger into one ear, Oliver leant towards the paramedic. Do we need the siren? he asked.



Non-fiction

Gaar Adams

Extract from *Guest Privileges*

Before dusk could settle over the vacant lot, I climbed a pile of cinder blocks to watch two taxi drivers wrestle bare-chested in the sand. The shorter one, standing a full head beneath the furrowed brow of his challenger, punched his thighs in pre-match theatrics while plumes of dust sprouted from the makeshift ring like ill omens portending his swift defeat. But when the fighters locked arms to grapple, the scrawny man pulled loose, swinging a heel into the crook of his larger opponent's knees, pitching him to the ground. As beads of sweat coursed down their torsos, the smaller wrestler grabbed the fallen man's *kaupina* loincloth, using it for traction to climb atop his hulking frame, triumphant. In under a minute, the bout had finished. But this unexpected underdog victory felt like an aftershock to the initial surprise of the event itself: two South Asian cabbies, nearly naked, sparring in a barren sandlot along the edge of Dubai. In a place where simply donning shorts can run afoul of the city's notoriously strict penal codes, I felt like I was witnessing not just a feat of athletics but a challenge to an entire sociopolitical order. It would take much longer to understand that the subversion I'd experienced that evening was also personal.

I was not the only spectator that day. The victor bounded out of the ring and a stout, bearded man pulled him into a firm embrace, wiping away the sand that caked his brow. Clutching each other's shoulders, the men grazed foreheads and grinned through a muted exchange before a throng of fans encircled them, hoisting the wrestler upon their shoulders. In the far corner of the ring, the next pair of wrestlers stripped out of their *shalwar kameez*, rubbing their biceps for warmth as they waited for the rabble to subside. Only a small

tract of reclaimed land separated the sandlot from the open water, and fresh January winds blew in steadily off the Gulf. I jotted a quick line in my notebook about making sure to mention this winter chill. It was one of those things I often heard people back home in Midwest America invariably getting wrong, spouting some variation of “Oh, but isn’t it always hot over there in the desert?” When I moved to the United Arab Emirates in 2010, I tried to dismiss questions like this as innocuous, but I was just beginning to recognise the outsized role they played in how I spoke about the region.

I drove 150 kilometres from my home in Abu Dhabi to the sandlot earlier that afternoon for the same reason I often hopped into my car back then: to research an article. It was 2014, my fifth year living on the Arabian Peninsula, and I was filing arts and culture pieces for a variety of American magazines and international media outlets. The personal maelstrom of packing up my life and shipping it to the Middle East for the first time coincided almost to the hour with a larger seismic shift: President Barack Obama’s January 20, 2009 inaugural address, in which he took the remarkable step of singling out the Muslim world by name, calling for “a new way forward based on mutual interest and mutual respect.”

Living in the Middle East in the early days of a new American presidential administration, the mood felt almost buoyant, as though the region had emerged from the Bush foreign policy era as one might from an extended hurricane: unfurling from a defensive crouch to open up the shutters, survey the damage, and let in the light. But over the ensuing half-decade, I watched as American rhetoric on the region failed to match the ideals that Obama’s speech entreated. The same year I began research for the wrestling article, *Newsweek* — at the time, one of the most storied magazines in US publishing — ran a cover photo on the Arab Spring that featured two bearded men, fists clenched, with the headline “Muslim Rage” in bold, capital letters. Eschewing any nuance as to how long-standing political grievances were morphing into a complex web of organised protests, the cover seemed to encapsulate the dual lens that the American media offered to view most of the Muslim world: violence and danger.

I first pitched my editor this article about *pehlwani*, a traditional form of South Asian wrestling, in the spirit of offering a critical response to this worldview. In addition to the heterogeneity of the sport's origins — the 16th century Mughals who conquered northern India melded their Sufi-infused Persian *koshti pahlavani* wrestling with the region's Hindu-inflected *malla-yuddha* form — *pehlwani* wrestling also enjoyed popularity across a wide swath of culturally varied Indian states, Pakistani provinces, and Bangladeshi districts. I imagined penning an article that illuminated how Dubai, the diverse capital of an Islamic country, uniquely brought together die-hard wrestling fans regardless of passport colour, socioeconomic status, or religion. My hope was that if I could illustrate this reality to even a few readers, I just might be able to provide a counterbalance to the onslaught of inflammatory headlines and cover stories around me.

In the face of so many misconceptions, my initial impulse was to fortify this *pehlwani* article with a glut of historical research. So, I dove in, treading through minutia, including the physical mechanics of single-leg takedowns and the linguistic particularities of Urdu wrestling vocabulary. But, when it finally came time to sit and write the article, instead of striking the keys on my laptop, I found myself continually hitting 'play' on my audio recorder. Again and again, I would return to the interviews I'd conducted, pouring over hours of conversations with wrestlers and spectators, both banal and consequential, on topics ranging from laundry to love, jobs to heartbreak, lifelong dreams attained and those yet unfulfilled. It was a troubling pattern I noticed intensifying with each new story I pitched: an inability to begin writing, coupled with a looming sense that the glut of completely unrelated material stored on my recording device was somehow more salient to my articles than any of my other research.

And so it was, that, in those days, I would sit and stare at a blinking cursor for hours, caught between a deadline, a word count, and a nagging dread that I could not at all capture the reality of such a misunderstood place without starting the story somewhere else entirely; a beginning rooted not in historical narrative, but buried somewhere in the depths of my recorder.

Marta Bausells

Holidays in Saturn

One night in July, my mother was looking at a star that has existed for at least 20,000 years. Her job is to study how stars die – how they expand, then implode. For a week, my phone buzzed non-stop as she flooded the family chat with pictures of the enormous Chilean telescope where she was working. I had to put her on mute.

We all look at the past every day, of course. It takes sunrays eight minutes and 20 seconds to make the journey to our skin. The moon we see every night is that of 1.28 seconds ago. Some stars in the sky are long dead; by the time their light reaches our pupils, having travelled distances our minds can't even grasp, what we see no longer is.

Because I grew up with two physicists for parents, these notions were somewhat familiar to me as a child. On the walls of our Barcelona apartment were framed posters of the Andromeda galaxy; on the shelves sat books with titles like *Black Holes* and *Time Warps* or *Gravitation*. At school, I didn't know how to explain what my parents did – I barely understood myself; Mamà an astrophysicist, Papà a microelectronics specialist, each dealing with phenomena bigger or smaller than the eye can see. Any romanticism or mysticism about space was out of the question.

My parents lacked what I considered to be the minimum level of coolness one required to exist in the world. I was into daydreaming that I'd won Oscars or Grammys, or that I lived a life of hedonism with my idols, or that I dated the hot Power Ranger. I never wanted to look at life with a mathematical eye. I wanted humour and lightness, even if that meant being oblivious and not always literal or all knowing. They, meanwhile, applied science and logic to the most mundane situations,

like the time they cut the last olive in quarters because there were four of us.

And yet, somehow, I began an unlikely love affair with planets in my teenage years. I watched *Powers of Ten*, a film by Charles and Ray Eames. In it, they zoom out beyond our galaxy, moving 10 times farther away every 10 seconds, and then quickly zoom back into Earth, to a couple having a picnic, and then into his arm, hand, skin, atoms. It gave me a mix of existential fear and solace; the infinite universe was too much to digest. But the solar system itself seemed to me like a bunch of friendly, protective neighbours – especially Saturn.

The first time I saw it, from an observatory on the hills of Barcelona, it made me conscious that I was looking at an inconceivably massive object in the actual universe. It was like what I imagine seeing Leonardo DiCaprio in person might be; something you've always seen in two dimensions suddenly presents itself in three. I later took to learning about Saturn's weather and environs, almost as if I were planning a holiday. The planet's climate is cold as frozen hell, at an average of minus 288 degrees Fahrenheit; it's surrounded by a mysterious system of 53 moons; and if you get up close, you can see its epic storms, which are roughly as large as the Earth and whose clouds look like drops of milk first touching tea.

Sometimes my friends would think that my mother worked in astrology, to her absolute horror. But over time, I secretly began to learn some astrology myself. Saturn is considered the master of the universe, signifying responsibility and rites of passage between the big phases of life. The period called Saturn Return – defined by when Saturn is in the same position as the time we were born – happens around the ages of 29, 59 and 88, natural times to reckon with who we are and where we want to go, of endings and possible beginnings. I don't actually believe that the planets' positions have any interventionist link with our lives, but I've found the act of putting cynicism aside to be therapeutic.

The best quality of Saturn is, of course, its unmistakable rings of ice and rock, which are cartoonishly iconic, irresistibly proportional to

the human eye. Sure, there is the mighty Jupiter, with its spectacular patterns and gravitas. But where Jupiter is all fire and brimstone, Saturn is composure and balance. Saturn's existence has always given me a real sense of possibility: Those rings don't only exist in tedious school diagrams – they're there, for you alone to see, on the other end of the telescope. Glancing at them has the effect of making you feel simultaneously insignificant and momentous, which is a pretty sobering, and useful, emotion, usually telling you: 'Let's get to work.'

Later that summer, I travelled home for my mother's 60th birthday party. It consisted of a workshop in her honour in a small Catalan coastal town, with current and former colleagues of hers. I spent the day alone, swimming in the sea while they presented papers to one another, and joined them for meals. All I had to do was sit, chat and quietly observe details, for example, the fact that an aloha-shirt-clad Arizonan astrophysicist had the wonderfully apt name of Starrfield. As I floated in the Mediterranean, soaking up sunrays from eight minutes ago, I thought about the dedication of this group of people: the kinds of men and women who would travel to a scenic location to celebrate a birthday, then wind up sitting indoors all day to discuss star implosions. I might not appreciate the sky for the same exact reasons as they do, but they are definitely my kind of people.

Sarah Clegg

Virgin Ghosts and Failed Mothers

In 306BC, as the heirs of Alexander the Great fought over control of his empire, Ptolemy I's fleet was captured at the battle of Salamis by the young ruler of Macedon, Demetrius Poliorcetes. Aboard one of Ptolemy's ships was a courtesan by the name of Lamia, who was taken as a concubine by Demetrius. While we have little information concerning how she felt about this, we do know that she quickly became Demetrius's favourite – not, apparently, due to her looks (as Plutarch insists on repeating throughout his account of her life she had 'already passed her prime' when she was captured by Demetrius), but because she was witty and 'prompt in repartee'.¹ She was also (supposedly) demanding and prone to extravagant whims, which were often indulged by a besotted Demetrius: we have multiple accounts of lavish feasts that he threw for her, and according to Plutarch he even levied a substantial tax on his citizens to pay for her soap.² A curious anecdote about her has also survived, concerning a discussion between a group of Demetrius's representatives and a Macedonian officer called Lysimachus. During a lull in the conversation, Lysimachus began showing off the scars on his leg and back, souvenirs from a time he had fought a lion. Demetrius's men laughed, and claimed that their king, too, had scars on his neck from a 'dreadful wild beast' – Lamia.

This was not just a reference to Lamia's supposedly controlling nature, but also a pun – the king's lover shared her name with a mythical monster.³ This monstrous Lamia was said to have been a beautiful queen of Libya who was loved by Zeus and forced by an envious Hera to devour her own children. Driven mad by grief

and guilt, Lamia turned into a demonic creature – serpentine, terrifying and vengeful. She spent her time slaughtering and eating mothers and their children, furious that they had what she had lost, sometimes ripping open the wombs of pregnant women to devour the fetus inside. This monster was the Greek and Roman equivalent of Lamashtu, a direct descendent of the Mesopotamian child-and-mother-killing demon.

Given this, Lamia might seem like a strange name for a courtesan, but although Lamashtu had never made a pretense at sexiness, Lamia was not just a child-killer. She was also given to seducing handsome young men, concealing her monstrous features so as to appear a great beauty, and eating men alive once their guard was down.⁴ Her name was perfect for a prostitute who, according to Plutarch, had ‘utterly vanquished’ her royal lover.

The mythical Lamia, like her Mesopotamian counterpart, still gives us deep insight into the tragedies of infant and maternal mortality, and the desperation with which women struggled against these horrors. But Lamia has another side as well: she shows us how womanhood and femininity could be policed. In every way, the monstrous Lamia stood opposed to the Greek and Roman ideals of womanhood. Where a good woman should be a mother, Lamia murdered children and prevented pregnancies; where a woman should be a chaste wife, Lamia was unmarried and seductive; where a woman should be beautiful, Lamia was hideous (albeit able to appear a beauty when she needed to); and where a woman should be submissive and meek to men, Lamia manipulated and murdered them. In some cases, Lamia is even depicted with testicles or a phallus, a way of emphasizing how completely she was the antithesis of the ideal of femininity.

The courtesan Lamia was breaking the standards of womanhood in similar (though less dramatic) ways – she, too, was the opposite of the chaste wife and mother she was supposed to be. She was seductive, unmarried, argumentative, ‘past her prime’, dominating her man as opposed to being dominated by him, refusing to conform to the societal standards by which women were judged.

The constant comparisons between the real-life Lamia and her mythical namesake make it clear that these characteristics did not just make the courtesan unconventional – in the eyes of some, they made her monstrous. And while comparisons between a woman and the monster who shared her name might seem fair enough, ‘Lamia’ would eventually become a more general insult, thrown at any woman who was deemed insufficiently feminine, a tool for literally demonising those who dared to break with the societal ideal of womanhood.

¹We have some examples of this wit, especially relating to the case of Thonis, another courtesan. A man offered Thonis a small fortune to sleep with him, but after the deal was struck, he dreamt he had sex with her, and, his desire sated, withdrew his offer. When Thonis took him to court, claiming that she was still owed payment, the judge ordered that the money be brought in and moved about in front of her so that she could only grasp its shadow, since ‘a thing imagined is the shadow of reality’. Lamia felt this was unfair, pointing out that ‘while the dream put an end to the man’s passion, the shadow of the money did not set Thonis free of her desire for it’.

²As a captive of Demetrius, it’s unlikely Lamia actually had much control over him, but the ancient (male) authors certainly didn’t see it this way. Demetrius deferred to her publicly, abused his citizens and claimed he was doing so for her, and acted as if he were indulging her – the fact that he was her captor, and that she likely had very little say in this, gets no consideration in the ancient sources.

³Demetrius’s representatives to Lysimachus were not the only ones to make this joke – Demetrius’s own father did as well, along with a man called Demochares of Soli, who called Demetrius ‘the fable’ because he had his own legendary beast. With this and the debate about Thonis, the long winter evenings must have flown by in Demetrius’s court.

⁴It’s not entirely clear whether the courtesan Lamia’s name was a purposeful reference to the monster, or whether it was a coincidence (there was certainly at least one man with this surname – Lucius Aelius Lamia – who was teased about it by Horace), but people were certainly happy to draw the comparison. While we’re at it, this monster was not in any way connected to the popular Arabic girls’ name ‘Lamia’, which comes from the word for ‘radiant’ in the Arabic language.

Marina Gerner

The Three Grandes Dames of Impressionism

With its shimmering waterlilies and rainy Parisian streets, Impressionism draws big crowds to museums and big sums to auction houses. But, back in its nascent years, this new art movement was too radical for many. Dissolving traditional form in favour of vibrancy and movement and replacing mythological creatures with everyday people, was a novel approach, so much so that many Impressionists were shunned from the government-sponsored Salon.

Instead, they decided to stage their own exhibitions. “An unfortunate group struck by the mania of ambition have chosen to exhibit their work,” a critic remarked at the time, describing the group of artists as “five or six lunatics, one of them a woman.”

The so-called lunatics and their art are well known today – they include Claude Monet and his pond of waterlilies, Edgar Degas and his stretching ballerinas and Pierre-Auguste Renoir with his couple at a country dance – but let’s turn our attention to the woman in question. Her name is Berthe Morisot and she was one of the genre’s founders.

In her lifetime, Morisot was renowned and financially more successful than some of the other Impressionists, but, like many other female artists, the magnitude of her fame was subsequently written out of art history – until recently.

Born in 1841 in Bourges, France, Morisot lived at a time when art was seen as the domain of men. What was considered appropriate for middle-class women was to be amateur painters, whose pictures were used to decorate their homes. When Morisot was 16, her mother decided her three daughters, Berthe, Edma and Yves, should take art lessons so they could draw birthday cards for their father.

After a few lessons, Yves lost interest, but Berthe and Edma persisted and before long, their teacher Joseph Benoît Guichard noticed the two sisters' immense talent. In a letter to their mother, he wrote: "My teaching will not endow them with minor drawing room accomplishments; they will become painters. Do you realise what this means? In the upper-class milieu to which you belong, this will be revolutionary, I might almost say catastrophic." Madame Morisot was not deterred by this warning. Guichard proceeded to introduce the Morisot sisters to the practice of copying Old Masters at the Louvre, which would have been unseemly for young women without a chaperone, so their mother accompanied them, knitting nearby.

In 1864, the paintings by both sisters were exhibited at the Parisian Salon. After marrying a naval officer in 1869, Edma decided to focus on being a wife and mother, but Berthe remained committed to her art, despite societal expectations to the contrary. What's more, she delayed getting married until the scandalously advanced age of 33. And she chose a husband, Eugène Manet (Édouard Manet's brother), who was not intimidated by her talent, but admired her accomplishments and put her artistic career before his own.

Soon, Morisot was socialising with Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot and Edgar Degas and became a founding member of the group of artists who organised the first Impressionist exhibition in 1874. In her landmark biography *Berthe Morisot*, Anne Higonnet, Professor of Art History at Columbia University's Barnard College, New York, argues that Morisot immediately understood that Impressionism gave women a chance at artistic careers.

Impressionists ignored artistic institutions to which women had little access and preferred to learn in the field. Women were not allowed to draw nude models, but this group of renegades preferred models dressed in modern clothes. Given that Impressionists often painted outside, their equipment was more portable and included pliable paint tubes, which were invented the same year Morisot was born. Their canvasses were smaller too, and thereby easier to carry for women in corsets. After all, "a 12-foot canvas is a considerable liability on a cliff in a high wind," writes Higonnet. By breaking with previous

traditions, the genre became more inclusive.

The second of “*les trois grandes dames*” of Impressionism, as one critic described them, was Mary Cassatt, who was born in Pennsylvania in 1844. At 15, she attended the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, but found its pace of teaching too slow and convinced her parents to let her travel to Europe, where she studied the Old Masters. She settled in Paris in 1874, where her work was regularly on display at the Salon.

One day, she saw a pastel work by Edgar Degas in a gallery window. Flattening her nose against the glass, she described the experience as life-changing: “I saw art then as I wanted to see it.” Around the same time, Degas saw Cassatt’s painting at the Salon and said: “This is someone who feels the way I do.”

A few years later, they met and became inseparable. Their studios were blocks from each other in Paris and Degas invited Cassatt to abandon the Salon and join the Impressionists. “At last, I could work with total independence, without worrying about the opinion of a jury,” she wrote. “I started living.”

She became the only American associated with the Impressionists. As she was barred from painting subjects at bars or brothels, as her male peers did, she chose the domestic realm, and became known for her intimate modern-day ‘Madonna and child’ paintings. Several of her most innovative paintings depict women at the theatre, leaning out of their loge, looking through binoculars, while being watched by others, including us.

It was Cassatt’s friendship with a young American woman in Paris, Louise Elder, that helped to bring commercial success to Impressionism. Cassatt convinced her to buy a pastel by Degas, and when Elder married Henry Osborne Havemeyer, a sugar baron of the Gilded Age, Cassatt helped her, as well as many other American collectors, to assemble large collections of Impressionist work. Today these paintings are spread across American museums.

The third *grande dame* was Marie Bracquemond, perhaps the most intriguing of them all. She was born in Brittany in 1840 to parents who were not well-off. Apart from some lessons from “an

old painter who restored paintings and gave lessons to the young women of the town,” she was mainly self-taught. When the painter Ingres recognised her talent, he encouraged her to paint still lifes, but she countered it was her goal to “work at painting, not to paint some flowers, but to express those feelings that art inspires in me.”

Like Morisot, Cassatt and other artists, Marie copied Old Masters at the Louvre. There, she met the engraver Félix Bracquemond, and the two married in 1869. She was drawn to painting outdoors and light became her obsession. Her masterful understanding of light effects can be seen in her paintings *Tea Time* and *Under the Lamp*.

Recognising her talent, Monet and Degas became her mentors. But her husband was increasingly resentful of her brilliance and refused to show her paintings to visitors at their house, according to a biography by their son Pierre. Worn out by continuous arguments, Bracquemond saw no choice but to abandon her art. But she remained an advocate of Impressionism, saying: “Impressionism has produced... not only a new, but a very useful way of looking at things. It is as though all at once a window opens and the sun and air enter your house in torrents.”

Ultimately, Impressionists’ paintings were never intended to hang on palace or church walls, writes Higonnet, “but on the living room and dining room walls of middle-class homes. Where, after all, amateur women had hung their work for quite some time.” We know about the three *grandes dames* of Impressionism, but we may never know how many other women painted masterpieces that hung inside their homes.

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Aaron Kilercioglu

Crab Farts

I have two memories of you.

In the first, you are driving an old taxi. '89 Skoda Rapid, pride and joy. Like a refraction of its original, we are being driven free of charge. You keep the yellow light-up *Taxi* sign in the glove compartment. Sometimes you use it for the thrill of being a korsan, a pirate. Sometimes you use it to supplement your pension. You are driving us to the airport, even though we've hardly seen you this summer. Your brother - my dad - is sat in the front, my brother and I are in the back. I remember trying to fasten my seatbelt and I remember my dad telling me off for being rude:

Ayip!

And I remember your wink, yellowed smile through thick bristled moustache.

You don't speak English. So how do you build a home, not despite, but through distance?

I remember driving past a lot of construction. Tall beige blocks of flats, divided by wide concrete squares, scattered, seemingly at random, along the motorway. Baby teeth sprouting in the economic miracle that is Turkey in the early 2000s. I remember you liked to talk of your plans.

"Your uncle lives in the future," my dad would say.

I remember how my dad, despite being seven years your junior, gives you advice, reprimanding, instructing. I remember it having something to do with our living abroad. 'Abroad' means dignity, wealth. It means proximity to something I later understand to call 'whiteness'. You couldn't have known that my dad longed for nothing more than

to return to where he is welcome, where he feels at home, where the border is breath, where hospitality does not come conditionally.

Para ihtiyacim var, you say. Money. You're asking my dad for money. *Ne?* Dad seems annoyed.

You two speak in Turkish, but I remember in English – how does that work?

Perhaps honesty lies in the gap between meaning and translation. “I just need a bit”, you say, “a few thousand euros.”

“Thousand?” my dad’s face flushed, “I don’t have thousands.”

Someone once said that the task of a writer is primarily that of a translator. Perhaps they were also missing their uncle.

My dad looks at us. I look back. Your eyes are on the road. Perhaps I’m trying to translate.

There is one golden rule to going abroad: flex or die. And the greater the flex, the fewer words are required. My uncle knows this, my dad knows this. To live abroad is to give, to return material home, because why else go?

To come back does not mean coming back. Which is to say: how do you return to a place you never left?

“I’ll take some money out at the airport.”

You’re quiet after this, and so are the rest of us. It is Istanbul, so silence isn’t silent, it’s car horns and muezzins and dust and sweat. Here, silence has to be felt, not heard.

The second memory starts without you, but your absence is the point. When we, my dad, my brother and I, are on a motorway again, this time in the southwestern Muğla Province, we are stood in the breakdown lane under heavy, dry, July heat. We are on our way to visit you and you had told us to get off the bus at this spot. You said it would be easiest to pick us up from here. Only you are not answering your phone. Only we’re on the side of the motorway. Only I don’t understand. Why did you do that? It’s cowardly of me, to ask this now, when there can be no answer, but I still don’t understand. I’m trying to understand, you see?

I take my shirt off and tie it around my head to block out the sun. My nose is getting burnt.

I'm not acclimatised, you see.

Eventually dad manages to flag down a taxi, which takes us to a local bus stop, where a bus takes us to your local town. It is now 11:42pm and it is raining gently, a refreshing relief. Your home in this place, where you will stay forever, is sturdy, solid. Concrete. You keep shaking your head as you open the front door, trying to catch my dad's eye. When they finally meet, you say:

"Tea?" But words aren't enough, words hardly say anything. I should know, I'm writing to you in a language you never knew. It is your gaze that speaks in that moment, loud. Even at the time, I translate. You say: *you left and I stayed*.

Words will not speak and the silence freezes into the image of distance. But why am I translating your look for you? Perhaps translation is projection.

I grip my backpack tight, as my dad, speechless, shakes his brother's hand. I watch the rain falling through him, strings snapping over tight shoulders. I see this: A break. A crack. A memory.

I look you up online. You have six different Facebook profiles. I click on the one with the most mutuals - five. My dad's not one of them. According to Facebook we are also not friends. There's a picture from 2018 of you taking a group selfie with people I don't recognise. It looks like you are sat in the back of a tractor. Next to you there's a woman in a colourful headscarf, her head tilted towards the camera. You are smiling. You seem content. It looks wrong to me. It fractures an image I hold buried. A break. A crack. A memory.

In the third, we are in a living room. Probably yours. You are not here, and again your absence seems to be the point. Why does that keep happening? Everyone around me is clad in black, drinking çay out of tiny tea cups and the special blue tinted glass plates are laid out on the coffee table. They carry quartered radishes, sprinkled with salt. Music plays: *Hayat Yoruldum*. One of your favourites.

This is the third time we meet. Unfamiliar, though it feels more honest.

Would it be different if I wrote this in Turkish? Maybe this is for me after all.

Even if I learn about your death a month after they carried you through empty streets, this is how I say goodbye. Or rather, how I say hello. Something in between again. That's our space. How do I build a home, not despite, but because of distance?

Perhaps an honest meeting does not need translation.

On your Facebook page the most recent posts are from 2019. There is a link to a Facebook group. The group image is a rooster, the caption reads, in all caps: ARAUCANA AMERAUCANA CLUP***TÜRKIYE***. I scroll further and I see more strange videos, mostly of chickens.

What really catches my eye though, is a gif of a man in a swimsuit screaming "Crab Farts!" in English, posted on the 26th of August 2018. It's not the gif, but your caption that grabs my attention.

You wrote: 'Görüşebilir miyiz?'

You wrote: 'Can we meet?'

Crab farts.

We never did understand each other when we spoke the same language.

Perhaps an honest meeting does not need translation.

This is what I know: Your name is Mesut. Mesut amca to me. You were a taxi driver in Istanbul for 20 years. Before that you drove lorries between Turkey and Germany. I think once, before I was born, you might have stopped to visit my dad. You liked to smoke and drink raki. You were never particularly political but you liked hanging around my dad and his communist friends. You have a wife, who is still alive. We never speak, never have. I once de-boned bream with her. Your wife always liked my mum. They met in the gap between Turkish and English, hands, eyes, feet, bodies doing the work words never could. They met honestly. Maybe we can learn something from them. You look like my granddad. Or rather, the one photo I have of you looks like the one photo I have of my grandfather. I have two memories of you. I never knew you, not really. But you are my uncle. And so we meet one more time. Crab farts.

Anna Parker

Extract from *Cottage*

My Czech family's holiday cottage (in Czech, a *chalupa*) sits halfway up a modestly sized mountain, in front of a pine forest that is so dark green that, viewed from a distance, it looks blue. A low stone wall divides the uncultivated meadows that lie around the cottage from its large garden, in which enormous daisies like fried eggs offer their faces up to the sky. Its brown and white wooden frame is subject to a seemingly never-ending reconstruction project led by my uncles, who come up from Prague on the weekends to mix cement, lay bricks and paint timbers. As they lug power tools back and forth across the porch, they politely greet the stream of passers-by taking the road up towards the mountain's peak. During these weekends, our neighbours from the cottages on either side of us often appear unexpectedly inside the house, striding uninvited into the cool dim living room to question my uncles about the mechanics of each repair.

This mountain region of north Bohemia has not always been a quiet backwater. Located on the edge of the Czech lands, on the border with Germany and Poland, our cottage sits in an area once called the Sudetenland. The Sudetenland had been occupied by 'ethnic' Germans since the sixteenth century, when they moved across the border to Bohemia and founded a thriving glass industry in the dense forests. Thus, when Hitler rose to power in 1933, he saw the Sudetenland as an easy landgrab, eventually seizing it in the summer of 1938. From this base he went on to occupy the rest of the Czech lands in March 1939.

During the Second World War, the Czech government, safe in exile in Britain, put together plans to rebuild the Czech nation without

German influence. They agreed to strip all Sudeten Germans of their citizenship and property, and to expel them from the Sudetenland. Although the exact numbers of those displaced in the post-war period is disputed, in 1996, Czech and German historians working on a shared commission estimated that by 1946, 1.3 million Sudeten Germans had been deported to West Germany and 80,000 to East Germany. An estimated 15,000 to 16,000 Sudeten Germans died in the process, either murdered by Czech neighbours or killed by severe deprivation. A further 3,600 Germans died by suicide, preferring to take their own lives rather than be exiled from home.

Numbers do little to convey the reality of forced migration. One Sudeten German, expelled together with their daughter and two grandchildren on the 20th of June 1945 recounted their departure to an oral historian: “At 5am [we] gathered with all our belongings that we were allowed in rucksacks. The rest of our possessions, including valuables and other assets, with great sorrow we had to leave behind, so naked we had to leave our homeland.”

When I picture this family leaving their cottage in the rising dawn, it is the smallness of their rucksacks that makes me feel the greatness of their grief. In every expulsion, the person forced out had to part with their house, their land, and their livestock. Packing up to leave in the dark early hours, this family had no choice but to leave behind the possessions – spoons, bed linen, crockery, odds and ends – that their house would have layered up, like a protective shell, over generations. It is impossible to rebuild a home from the contents of a rucksack.

Remarkably, our cottage was not part of the reprisals. An old German man lived there with a goat, and, when the expulsions began, he was able to prove to the Czech government that he was a committed anti-fascist. The cottage directly downhill from us on the mountain’s slope was occupied by a German woman who had also made a successful appeal to stay. Given its location, I saw this cottage most often from behind, and never beyond the dense net curtains that hung on the windows. It was painted black and white, and it crouched in the deep shadow of a pair of enormous linden trees that swung

wildly during storms. The cottage seemed ominous enough without my parents telling me that this was where a very old German lady lived. This information was delivered with a knowing tone that suggested – infuriatingly – that I should understand its significance, although, being a child, I could not. After the German lady died, her cottage lay empty. We returned one summer to find one of the linden trees had crashed down onto the building below. The thick trunk had cleaved the roof in half, its branches stuck through the rooms on the upper floor.

Immediately after the expulsions, the Czechs set about cementing their hold over their newly cleansed land. Key to this was erasing all memory of Sudeten Germans from the region. The Nazi practice of removing gravestones from the Bohemian villages and towns that they had flattened was now turned against the local German community. Gravestone desecration is a favoured tactic of occupying forces because it directly challenges the grounding power of history. Gravestones memorialise the names of those lost, and, through dates of birth and death, count out a family's connection to one place over generations. By desecrating local graveyards, the Czech pulled many centuries of German life in the Sudetenland back out of the region's soil. Stripped of their homes, citizenship, and of their family graves, the Sudeten Germans were left with nothing that said: "so many of us once lived here". How strange it must have been for those who remained, rootless.

The eradication of German history from the Sudetenland was, on the surface, a great success. To my Czech family – the settlers of re-occupied land – our cottage is a place of joy and peace. So too for the visitors we bring with us. One year, my family arrived for the summer. It was the beginning of August. The long grasses in the meadow were torched gold. Dust kicked up by cars loaded with mountain bikes had dulled the green leaves of the birch trees. We were caught in the disorder of moving in our suitcases, reacquainting ourselves with the space by walking from room to room, identifying what was new and noticing old pieces of décor, that, seen again against the context of another year of life, suddenly stuck out and became more interesting than before. In the hall, my great-aunt was energetically emptying

a cupboard of its clean bed linen, shouting a series of instructions in Czech to no one in particular. My boyfriend, who I had taken to the cottage for the first time, was unflustered by her barrage of sound. His rucksack still on his back, he stopped and turned to me. With the earnestness for which I loved him, he told me that the cottage had an atmosphere that was deeply kind. A brightly coloured bedsheet came flying through the air.

Although it is beautiful to pass through, the Sudetenland is a place where it is difficult to fully dwell, in the sense of a long-term home. The displacement of industry, culture and thousands of people quietly haunts the land. Very few people stay permanently. Even in the height of summer when Czech tourists fill the holiday cottages, the centres of the many little towns are quiet. Pastel pink buildings stamped with art nouveau script decay gently, the floral plasterwork peeling off their dirty facades. People in groups of two or three drink bottles of beer together, sitting in the sun in the children's playground and watching passers-by with idle interest. Restaurants establish themselves one year and are shuttered the next, opening and closing with the regularity of the seasons.

A home, once broken apart, cannot shelter new inhabitants. A house always remembers what has happened within its walls, even if the housed do not. One bright afternoon like any other, my uncles were digging in the back garden. One shouted out, calling us over. They had unearthed a gravestone, lying flat, face-up under a shallow layer of soil. The day was shattered with frightening speed.

Hannah Partos

Working for a Hollywood Legend

It is 2011 and I am a student in Paris, teaching English for a year and renting a small flat only two metro stops from Olivia de Havilland's residence. Her personal assistant is my friend Kate, whose duties include bringing De Havilland her daily tippie – she likes to have a glass of champagne at 6pm. Planning to go away for a long weekend, Kate asks if I'll hold the fort chez De Havilland.

I say yes straightaway and am invited round to meet my new boss. I take the metro to Porte Dauphine, in the smart 16th arrondissement and, as instructed, phone Kate to tell her I'll be arriving in a few minutes “so that Olivia can reapply her lipstick”. I can't quite get my head round this: a Hollywood legend taking the time to polish herself for a scruffy 20-year-old student.

De Havilland's home is a stately white *hotel particulier*, or Parisian townhouse, five storeys high, in the same street as three foreign embassies and a sprawling mansion that, I later discover, belongs to former French president Giscard d'Estaing (a police officer hovers permanently outside). Kate leads me upstairs for introductions. De Havilland is sitting on a small couch, dressed in a cream silk blouse and dark skirt (probably Dior, whose designs she's been faithful to since moving to Paris – “under the reign of King Christian the First”, according to her memoir).

Although nearing her 95th birthday, she is a commanding presence, with her red lipstick, her large pearl earrings, her white hair set in a bouffant – and a surprisingly deep voice. I'm particularly nervous as Kate, a Canadian, has hinted that her boss isn't very fond of Brits; being hard of hearing, De Havilland now favours American

accents. Most of her former assistants are young women recruited from the American University in Paris. But when we shake hands and start chatting, I'm struck by how smiley and warm she is, at pains to thank me for offering to help out. I tell her it's a pleasure. Afterwards, I get a text from Kate: "OdH said you were 'adorable' and 'a dear'!!!!"

The weekend goes smoothly. I get on with the admin tasks, rearranging a hair salon appointment and checking her inbox. She doesn't do email herself; her assistants print off messages and she dictates replies. On the wall of her study, there's a framed letter. "As a young man," it reads, "I must confess I had a crush on the saintly Melanie Wilkes in *Gone with the Wind*. Yours, Barack." I notice, too, a message from her agent mentioning a *Guardian* journalist who has been requesting an interview for several months. "Shall I tell her to go away?" the agent has asked.

De Havilland rarely does press these days, and only makes the odd public appearance. Actually, she doesn't often go downstairs. One day, after a mix-up over who was supposed to give me the keys, I'm unable to enter the house, so she throws them to me in the street from an upstairs window. "Yoo-hoo!" she trills. "Watch out!"

Only once do I see her ready to go out – dressed all in black, with oyster-coloured satin ballet shoes, waiting for her car to take her to some evening event. She spends most of her hours in the same small room, sitting on the velvet couch that doubles as her bed at night, and doesn't usually venture much further than the study next door.

But De Havilland still likes to think of her life as a hectic whirl. When my temporary stint is over, she asks me to stay on to make an inventory of all the books and magazines in her attic, while Kate works downstairs. De Havilland has a fetish for parcels and correspondence to be "just so"; letters must be placed in pale blue envelopes, and Kate will often find herself re-wrapping a package to meet her boss's exacting requirements, or noting down dictations for the third draft of an email (De Havilland is a stickler for elegant prose). "Oh, we're so busy today!" she will often complain, clearly delighted by the idea, even though there aren't any urgent tasks on the agenda.

I never see her so happy as the time when Emily, one of her cherished former assistants, drops in for a weekend to help out, and there are three of us young assistants milling around. Emily and I are of similar height and colouring and De Havilland jokes that we're twins: "I'm seeing double!" At mealtimes, her cook, Rosa, is also there, busy in the kitchen – I can tell when she's arrived by the inviting smells which waft up to my post on the fifth floor of the house.

As I'm mostly working around the dusty shelves of the attic, my boss nicknames me Cinderella and Jane Eyre. She is endlessly impressed with the pages I produce, even though it's hardly the most demanding job: typing out titles, authors, dates of publication, leafing through stacks of *National Geographic* magazines from the 1970s and old textbooks from her children's schooldays. De Havilland insists, often, on paying me far more than she owes me for the hours I've worked – on one occasion, double the amount. I protest that she's being too generous.

"I'm getting a message from the Lord," she explains, in her booming voice, "telling me to pay you more."

"Well, that's very generous of him," I say.

"Oh yes," she says, "he's *known* for that."

Her sense of humour sometimes makes me laugh out loud.

Working in the attic one day, my phone beeps with a message from Kate: "Olivia told me she was once frisked at an airport. And it was 'delicious'."

De Havilland moved to Paris in 1953, after meeting her second husband, Pierre Galante, the then editor of *Paris Match*. They had one daughter, but divorced in 1979. Looking back, my one regret is that I only got the chance to work for her towards the end of my time in Paris. I wish I'd had more time to get to know her better. I can still hear her Hollywood drawl, lingering over the syllables in "*maaaarvellous*". Her twinkly eyes and her deliberate, theatrical pauses. She had no time for understatement or half-measures. She was a performer, playing the part of Olivia, the veteran movie star. I remember, once, overhearing a tense telephone conversation and asking her afterwards if everything was all right. "Goodness, no!" she said with a smile. "It's all *desperate*."

Natalie Rule

Extract from *Beep, Drip Pump*, a short story

I'm seated on a bed in a narrow room at the Royal London Hospital. The space is functional, the walls are loaded with buttons, electrical sockets and cabinets containing medical supplies. The furnishing includes a sink, a variety of chairs, two computers, a long mirror and a beeping drip pump attached to my cephalic vein. It's day two of my infusion therapy, which sounds like a production procedure involving herbal tisanes, only I'm the teabag. This morning I've swallowed a handful of pills and, direct to my veins, I've had antihistamines, antibiotics, half a drip bag of steroids, and soon, the drug which is supposed to stop my multiple sclerosis. A nurse enters the room. I clap my book closed and look up.

It's Nurse Lea; she clicks her tongue and inspects the bleating drip pump. Taking a pen from her top pocket, she coils the silicone rubber tube around it, letting it unwind, then, quick like a crow, flick, flick, flick, the back of her index finger snaps against the pipe.

"Machine problems?" I ask.

"Yes, too big bubbles can cause embolism," Nurse Lea says.

Her brown eyes narrow above her surgical mask. Her long hair is pulled off her face and tied just above her neck. I watch her repeatedly flick the large air bubbles into smaller ones. The successive clicking of her nail against the silicone tube combs the machine's mechanical beep, creating a hospital rhythm of beep, flick, beep, flick.

"That's rare though." Nurse Lea says. "Most bubbles in veins exit in patients' lungs." She meets my eyes.

"Ok." I nod, inspecting the tube. The beeping has stopped. Like fizz in lemonade, the bubbles are now small and flirty.

“Almost finished,” she says, her attention focusing on the drip bag containing steroids. “I’ll be back with the next infusion.” She exits the room and I return to my book.

Like most of the nurses I speak with on the ward, Nurse Lea prefers working here because the shifts are eight hours, Monday to Friday, but commutes can be long; one hour each way is typical, meaning relationships with children midweek are curbed.

When Nurse Lea enters the room again, she has already injected a small glass vial of alemtuzumab into the saline bag she is carrying. Now that it’s no ordinary drip bag, she covers the top half of the machine with a shiny brown cover.

“How are you finding the steroids?” she asks.

I don’t say zipity-do-da. I’ve been up since the crack of, pairing odd socks in my children’s drawers, before Ubering to the western corner of Kensington Gardens, where I walked east, straight across the green – yellow dandelions popped, not yet turned wishing-white – past the statue of the man on the horse, towards the lake, where some ducklings waddled behind their parents until, at the water’s edge, the feathered family plopped into the Serpentine, paddling towards brave swimmers in speedos, whose silvery arms rhythmically stroked the water’s surface, but they fell from view behind the lido café, where I found a garden bed that reminded me of southern France because planted together were viburnum, jasmine, honeysuckle, oleander – all blooming *à la fois*, but the *choisya ternata*’s scent trumped even the white lilac’s, a cheeky torn flower of which I held to my nose until I arrived at the rose garden, although, of course, it’s too early for roses, the garden’s springtime planting complete with pansies, bluebells and alliums were arranged in dainty repetitive patterns, the primary colours loud and daring... daring like crossing the bike lanes and walking amongst cyclists through Wellington Arch, then straight down Constitutional Hill, dipping into Green Park, via the Commonwealth Memorial gates, there was no sign of deck chairs yet, but walkers and joggers abounded, then skirting around the Victoria Memorial, I continued across The Mall and into St James’s Park, where swans, herons and ducks floated calmly underneath the little bridge while

I trotted over it, along the path next to the water's edge, past Duck Island Cottage – cute like a gingerbread house – right across Horse Guard's Road, south on Downing Street – the London Eye winked and whirled across the bank – before I turned left at the Thames, entered Whitehall's tulip-lined gardens, continued along Embankment and only stopped when I arrived at Temple tube station, which I'm not supposed to enter without a functioning immune system, but everyone is masked, distanced, it's never been cleaner, and Whitechapel station is just a skip across the road from the hospital.

Instead, I say to Nurse Lea, “The steroids make me feel a little jittery, but I managed to sleep a bit last night.”

“You never take steroids before?” Nurse Lea says.

She is surprised because steroids are often given to multiple sclerosis patients.

“I was given prescriptions, but I was too scared to take them around my children for fear I'd behave strangely.” I pause. “I regret that now. They're really something.”

Nurse Lea laughs.

“The infusion was okay yesterday? We speed it up?”

Nurse Lea replaces the steroid bag with the alemtuzumab bag and rests her fingers on the dial, waiting for my response.

“Let's crank it,” I say, “it will be nice to get home earlier.” I regret saying this, though, because her face twitches, reminding me she would probably like to go home early and see her children.

She twists the dial on the machine and the miracle poison begins to drip, drip, drip into the chamber where it's pumped down the tube through the cannula, direct to my blood.

“Two hours alemtuzumab. Then two hours observation.”

I nod okay, and so begins the second dose.

When Nurse Lea leaves the room, I close my eyes, aware now that there's another pump in the narrow, windowless room. Only this pump is abstract, and it drip, drip, drips something ethereal into my blood which leaks across the blood-brain barrier, surges along neural pathways, flashing, dancing even, in the prefrontal cortex. I think

it's dripping hope, relief, or a combination of the two. It's difficult to comprehend that if I can get through this week of infusion and the treatment next year, my trajectory will shift dramatically.

Developing an incurable disease, first recorded in Britain in 1873, that medicine finds a cure or a near-cure for during my lifetime, to which I have access, is a fluke reversal of bad fortune. Today, roughly one in five hundred people in the UK have MS; suffice to say, it feels like a lucky time to have an unlucky diagnosis.

Untangling the nuances of how this treatment changes my future is for later, but the immediate gain is that I'll probably never experience another lesion on my brain or spinal column again. Also, my brain won't atrophy; well, it will when I'm older, but not more than any other person's.

One big effect is that this illness won't stop me from caring for my children, nor will it continue to shape their childhoods. The last time I fell in front of them, I was carrying a plate of food into the kitchen, fish and potatoes flew through the air, chunks of salmon smashed against the window, leaving a greasy smudge on the glass before hitting the floor. I followed the same trajectory as the fish. My son, being six, has spent half his life falling over, so he found it funny, but my daughter, who is old enough to understand that most people don't fall randomly, looked stricken and grew quiet.

For almost a decade, the stress of this illness weighed on me, like a pot of fear balanced on my head. Only now that fear has begun to heat and bubble, transforming to steam, evaporating into air, into nothing. Good-enough health to parent adequately, while intangible and priceless, is something most people take for granted. Stopping this disease, reversing some of the damage and knowing my children's infancy won't be marred by my declining physical and mental ability makes me want to cry, constantly, from joy.



Poetry

Zakia Carpenter-Hall

The Earth-Eating Fire

“They said if we suppress all these fires, we end light burning, we will have great new forests. And we did – we had so much great new forest that we created a problem.”

~ Stephen Pyne, fire historian

Oya’s dress of smoke hangs in the air
a texture of haunting, a series of negatives,
transparencies, x-rays. we see through an oak’s
missing heartwood, ghost of gnarled roots
upturned, exposed, releasing an ecology of spirits,
the whole forest spins, as if on display.



open pinecones gummed in resin,
sink them into soft soil, spell of effluvium,
fumigate – smoke be the cure.
separate good fire from wild,
peel back brambles layer by layer.
may running waters reach our interior
with the help of your embers.



the fire-fearful,
fear flames will jump holding lines –
(run, fly, shape-shift) as they sometimes do
into communities
fear fire cannot be ~~controlled~~ conned
something as powerful as fire
fear fire in all forms

– an escaped fire (cause for alarm)
burning to distinguish good fire from the wicked kind
see fire as funeral, as pyre,
as a spreading crematorium,
a burning act of aggression.



Anomaly of Wind

SsssSSSSssssshhhhhHHhHhShShshshshshshshshshshshshshshshshhhhh
WhhooooooooowhhhhoooooooooooooooooThhhhhhhhhhhssssssssssss
Hisss
eeeeeeehheeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeSsssssssssssssssssssheeeeeeeee



in the raging wildfires, you wonder what sounds the trees made
as they burned.



in a flash, a spiky feeling,
everything can change,
volatile as a compound
that refuses stasis, steals
protons and electrons
from passersby to become
some other form.



joy can come with mourning,
for a while it was difficult to celebrate
the hardest thing that's happened.
i mourned but the joy did not come.
i think of how best to commemorate this pruning.



the god who sees problems
as opportunities to dance, was showing me
beauty — or the edge of my suffering
is exquisite, a prescribed burn, or that pain
is a circle with vegetation along
inner and outer rings. my senses grew
in acuity to feeling, i listened
for the lyricism in crackling,
the artistry in chewing through dry matter,
breaking down the fourth wall of thorns.



this was no butterfly tasting my hand with its feet
or stealing a drink from my sweat,
this dragonfly, former nymph,
which i had always thought meant 'fairy',
clung to my hand and flew away, only
once i asked it to.



anti-logging protestors
plant themselves in cement
using an iron seed
called 'sleeping dragon', or
wedge themselves
in tripod barricades
made from felled trees,
or nest in branches,
or block roads
made for lorries
to protect the old groves,
trees half the age of Gilgamesh.



i named you each month that you remained:
habitat, medicine, food, health, dense woods, canopy, respite, shade.



this heat will devour undergrowth lap tree moss
blister hazel stalks coax brave new shoots for
newborns'
wicker baskets caps & entice
acorns
to
fall.

heat will broil
rain guzzling
invasive plants
so chilled water
streams through
flames' charred wake,
down into watershed
and Klamath river nourishing the salmon.

Soon bear grass
huckleberries reaching
for water
overrun by scotch brook,
fir trees
thickets of blackberries
animals will travel here
for a dip in ash baths'
cooling
natural antiseptic.

but this fire will not cure the climate.



prescription: eight parts dead leaf. one part sun. three parts ozone
charged firmament. six parts still undisturbed air.



on the eve
of an afternoon,
in a little clearing,
below an amber sun
and canopy of pines,
the cultural burn begins.

Notes:

Oya is a goddess in the Orisha pantheon of deities. 'Cultural burn' is a modern term to describe traditional indigenous practices of creating small scale fires for a variety of benefits including to safeguard against wildfires. Some sections of this poem are found text from an article on prescribed burning.

Originally published in Poetry Wales, 2021.

Benjamin Cusden

Note to the New Homeless

The ground is hard – always hard, always cold –
it doesn't matter where you are, it's ungiving.
Spread out an army of blankets, clutch of sweaters,
a murder of trench coats – it'll still be hard and cold.

*The Sun, The Moon. the circle of stars,
time is the freedom of doorways.*

Bend poor person's elbows and arms and stretch
to support the neck, this provides the position
to protect your head, keep eyes open
or hair triggered shut – ready to jump.

*The Sun, The Moon. the circle of stars,
time is the freedom of doorways.*

Peer out through your covers – hoody and woollens,
remnants, your handouts, the trash you've collected,
newspapers, cardboard, polystyrene padding –
be prepared.

*A murder of doorways, The Sun, The Moon,
freedom is hard and cold.*

Tomorrow it will be the rain

My smile is rare,
it's a spear to pierce your flesh –
a stick across your head,
a dagger on the street with glint and tip
and edge – sharp to slice –
but now disguised
as frown across my face
that's hidden in another life.

I don't say thanks as you drop a coin
or if you smile as if you'd like to help,
pat your pockets with a shrug then walk away.
Your conscience clear,
at least you saw me sitting here,
at least you recognized my fright
and didn't pass as if the night
had left me a transparent space of air.

Your conscience isn't my concern,
you're anonymous in every sense,
you are my transience,
in crowds of coats and trouser legs
hidden in the blur that walks straight past –
consumed by jobs and politics,
you are the pain I've witnessed,
to me your life does not exist.

My smile is rare –
tomorrow it will be the rain.

Transience

Every day has ritual: make tea on the Gaz;
wash in the public toilets; steal loo roll;

unpack and pack – clean clothes on top with
dirty underneath, rearrange bits of yesterday
to be ready for tomorrow;

*mouth, jaw and nose fuse and elongate, legs grow
thin and compress, feet become claws;*

make sure the bag is balanced; tie bootlaces
tight – bunny ears in double knot;

*with ease, tendon and muscle stretch and take flight
as cryptochromes behind eyes read the magnetic
routes of the Earth;*

fingers count, recount coins in pocket,
head holds a mantra: 10, 20, 30 – desperate
to reach a hundred, 70, 80, 90 – 70, 80, 90,
enough for a can of White Lightning;

*some nights flying at the wedge-head of geese;
others lost in skeins of starlings; and often alone –
an owl kills its prey. Each route is open, without
boundaries until the shackles of morning's*
t

r
a
n
s

*f*ormation into a mule again;
home, strapped to back with the past;
present held in vacant hands; future
shod with well-worn Doctor Marten boots.

This *after Jane Hirshfield*

was once a poem of certainty
with foundations of childhood memories,
concrete proper nouns and scant adverbs.
It sailed down the Eden River with Tom
and his dad, saw a dead sheep tangled in the reeds;
pulled ollies on its skateboard with best friend Geoff
in the Summer of '76 – scraped its knees on gravel
and called them raspberries –
took these medals with honour.

This poem was beautiful and wandered freely
through time and space, an innocent observer
to life, a reflection of corporeal in ether,
a meditation on what was and
what might be.

But then this poem stuttered, took a turn
in the wrong direction –
preferred to stay out drinking
than get home for an early night.
This poem grew sad and wondered why
it didn't feel like a Betjeman, Hughes or a Larkin,
why it felt more like a Berryman or Plath.
This poem feared being read,
feared never being understood.

Now this poem is uncertain.
It sits within walls, locked in under its own volition.
It sprays itself with anti-bacterial spray until
its words become blurred and indistinct. Until
syllables become uncountable, until
consonants mix into vowels, until
ink runs from its paper, until
this poem hasn't been written at all.

Natalie Whittaker

Poems from *Tree*

tree

on the path to the station
there's a tree that marks the seasons
look baby blossom
look baby leaves
look baby autumn
next year I'll show you autumn and it will be so beautiful
the world is so beautiful
I will show you

one day I wake up and it's November
bare branches are faulty umbilical cords
failing to implant the sky

Sands

one night it is November I steer headlights through drizzle pull up outside a church that's switched off in the dark

across a car park of puddles a community hall squats like a secret shame its orange striplights draw five broken moths our wings torn off

Deren calls us all hun says thanks for coming hun pours tea from a cheap white kettle as we introduce ourselves to ourselves ugly shadows sleepless post baby bodies with no babies

we sit in a circle of plastic chairs stare down at Ugg boots stained by rain and talk about our babies

Carly talks about her Evie's grave the fairy lights so she wouldn't be in the dark

Vicky hasn't slept in her own bed hasn't spoken to her father since giving birth she has a holdall and friends' sofas she is nineteen

I talk about not having a photo of her face not holding her at the time letting them take her too soon how four days later we went back to the hospital had her brought up from the morgue so we could name her

Tasha says mental health services are shit they just give you drugs or section you put you in a room where the curtains are held on by magnets says of course I'm suicidal my baby died

and we smile because we know we have to meet in back rooms at night broken moth women swept out of hospitals and waiting rooms sedated or trapped in wardrobes panicking against the doors

departures

we leave the hospital without our baby try to drive out of
the car park but the barrier is down I push a ticket into the
machine stay duration 24 hours pay ten pounds eighty but
the barrier stays down we reverse ask the man can we
please leave the car park leave the hospital without our baby
the barrier is down pay ten pounds eighty we leave the car
park and a motorway is lowered in front of us we have to
drive on it lights swell on the Dartford Bridge we've left our
love our baby in a morgue the night is lowered in front of
us it stays down

clocks

one morning I wake up and it's November
I stay in bed until it gets dark it's still November
I'm sure yesterday was June

the clocks have gone back one hour
it's not enough I need six months
I'm sure yesterday was June

the parks are spitting out fireworks
a bomb has gone off inside me

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Stage, Screen & Radio

Stage

Lily Levinson

Extract from *The Trial of Israel Lipski*

SCENE ONE

Fanfare. Queen Victoria enters, preceded by Soldiers and State Officials. Everything is red and gold. Cheering crowds, waving flags. Pomp. Circumstance. The Procession marches slowly across the stage.

The Editors appear. They shout excitably over each other, and over the proceedings.

Editor One: These PALL! MALL! GAZETTE! pronounces the Queen's Golden Jubilee ceremonial a most excellent success! No other function has illustrated Modern London more perfectly, nor brought out so fully the unity of / the people –

Editor Two: Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper, LARGEST CIRCULATION IN! THE! WORLD!, declares that in Queen Victoria the world beholds the Foremost Monarch of the age! The congratulations she received from almost every civilised nation on the Face of the Earth were a tribute to the greatness of the Anglo-Saxon race –

Editor Three: Helmets and Swords!

Editor One: – the remotest of improbabilities that anyone now living will see such a scene again. To millions of the young it will serve for the rest of their lives as a great historic day during which all went right!

Editor Four: In the Jewish Chronicle, her Majesty's Jewish subjects, who yield to none in the strength of their loyalty, join with their fellow countrymen –

Editor Two: To recapitulate all the features of our national and Imperial progress during the past fifty years would be impossible, but –

Editor Three: Hats and Handkerchiefs! Fortnum and Mason!

Editor Four: – even intensified in her Jewish subject's hearts, for they have but to contrast their lot with the misery endured by their brethren in foreign lands –

Editor One: – Great Britain grouping itself around –

Editor Three: An Enormous Cake!

Editor Two: British rule in India now extends over a population of two hundred million. The army and navy have been remodelled, the Law has been simplified, and the national administration –

Editor Three: Union Jacks!

Editor Four: – nearly every obstacle to the social, political and educational progress of the Jews of England has been removed since Her Majesty's accession –

Editor One: – the Twenty First of June, Eighteen Hundred and Eighty Seven, the longest and most Glorious Day in the 50th year of the long and Glorious reign of Her Majesty the Queen!

*The Queen, the Procession and the Editors
depart, to reveal –*

SCENE TWO

Israel Lipski sitting alone onstage, at a kitchen table at 28 Watney Passage, Whitechapel. He cuts his food carefully.

Katie enters. She's smart. She watches him eat for a moment. They speak in Yiddish.

Katie: Good?

Israel: Very good.

Katie: The best?

Israel: The best ever.

Katie: *(Satisfied)* Good.

Israel: Very good.

Katie: *(Smiles)* Alright, alright. Eat, go on.

He does, a bit.

Did you get everything you needed? Reuven said he saw you on Philpot Street.

Israel: I went to see Shimon Rosenblum.

Katie: Why?

Israel: To ask him to work for me.

Katie: Oh. And will he?

Israel: He's starting tomorrow.

Katie: Mazel tov, then.

Israel: He was good at Katz's. He can bend metal with his hands like it's nothing. I've seen him work.

Katie: So, good. Now eat – we're celebrating! Mr Business Man Israel Lipski, from tomorrow.

Israel: You don't like him.

Katie: I didn't say that.
Israel: Why don't you like him?
Katie: Iseleh...
Israel: No, tell me.
Katie: I don't know him.
Israel: You know him enough.
Katie: What's the matter?
Israel: Nothing's the matter.

A pause. They watch each other.

Katie: He laughs at you. I've seen him talking to you and then he looks over your head at other men and laughs.
Israel: Not at me.
Katie: Maybe not. It doesn't matter. I said, I don't know him.
Israel: He asked for seven and two a week.

Katie doesn't say anything.

Israel: Rosenblum. He asked for seven and two a week. And the landlord's put the rent up because I'll be using the room as a workshop – *(rising panic as he says it out loud)* the same room, Katie! By three shillings. I can't afford it / yet.
Katie: Hey, / love –
Israel: And I met a man yesterday in Schmidt's and I think he might be a mistake, he's starting tomorrow too but I panicked, there were three of them and he was the, the tallest or something, I don't know why I chose him, he's not even a woodworker, he's a locksmith, Katie, I'm an idiot, I'm not cut out / for it.

She kisses him. He backs away.

Israel: No no no, you don't understand.

Katie: What do you need?

Israel: I'm not asking you.

Katie: How much do you need? No, wait. Listen. It's a loan.

She takes out some money.

And I know you're going to make it back. And then we're going to get married and my money will be your money, your money will be my money, and it's going to be fine. It's going to be perfect. So let me help.

Israel: They laugh at me.

Katie: You're allowed to ask for help, lseleh.

Beat. He turns around and walks out.

Katie stands there with the coins, then suddenly throws them on the floor. Then she crouches down and starts picking them back up.

Israel re-enters. He kneels down next to her.

Israel: I love you.

He waits.

The best ever.

Katie: *(Holds out the coins)* Twenty-five shillings.

Israel: I'll pay you back. By the end of next week.

Katie: I know you will.

Freya Mavor

Extract from *Something, Not Yet*

SCENE THREE

Complete darkness. Voices over this.

Leon: Wait. Wait wait wait. What?

Delphi: I know.

Leon: You dropped the baby?

Delphi: Yeah.

Leon: Deliberately?

Delphi: Yes.

Leon: Why would you drop the baby?

Delphi: I don't know.

Leon: That's fucking dark.

Delphi: It is dark. I told you it's dark.

Leon: Are you trying to kill it?

Delphi: I want it dead. Yes.

Leon: Why?

Delphi: I don't know, it's a dream.

Leon: Okay.

Delphi: I've lost all my teeth, I'm freaking out and /

Leon: You kill the baby.

Delphi: Drop it. I don't know if it's dead.
Leon: Then what?
Delphi: What d'you mean?
Leon: You lose all your teeth. You drop the baby. Then what?
Delphi: I wake up.

The lights flick on.

The two are sat across a table from each other, on chairs. They are still handcuffed together, their locked arms draped across the table between them, which is littered in empty drinks. There is a half-full/half-empty glass in front of them.

Why am I telling you this?

Leon: You're drunk.
Delphi: Hey. It's not like you can escape anyway.
(Shakes the cuffs)
Leon: Maybe I'll do an Aron Ralston.
Delphi: ... Huh?
Leon: 127 hours. /
Delphi: Who's Aron Ralston?
Leon: Come on. You climb. Guy gets trapped in a canyon. /
Delphi: Ohh /
Leon: Saws his arm off. Did you see / the film?
Delphi: How do you know his name?
Leon: I told you. I'm a fucking geek.

He necks the rest of his drink.

Simultaneously:

Leon: Do you want another drink? / Delphi: You think I'm evil.

Leon: What? No.

Delphi: You do. I can tell. Your eyes are all... shifty.

Leon: Sounds like you got some anxiety around babies.
And dentistry.

Delphi: I'm never having kids.

Leon: You serious?

Delphi: Yeah. Probably get my tubes tied.

Leon: Seriously?

Delphi: Yeah. I know it's a personal thing but, it feels kinda selfish to have a kid now knowing what you'd be bringing them into, y'know?

Leon: But we don't know exactly, do we?

Delphi: I mean we've got a pretty good, scientifically backed guesstimate. A high probability of the world getting bleaker, scarier, and possibly entirely unliveable. I know that sounds cynical / but

Leon: It does. /

Delphi: Don't you think that just charging ahead blindly as if that's not the case, acting like there's no possibility of that being true, don't you think that might not be, I dunno, a little selfish? Immoral, even?

Leon: Okay. So. You're worried about the future. / Like everyone else.

Delphi: And most people just have children to give their lives some meaning.

Leon: What's wrong with that?

Delphi: It's not about the kid. It's all about legacy. 'Let me feel less alone in the world.'

Leon: Again. What's wrong with that?

Delphi: Get a cat.

Leon: C'mon.

Delphi: What?

Leon: That's reductive. We're human. It's the experience of living a life. Aren't you just giving up?

Delphi: I'm fighting back.

He raises his eyebrows. She points at him.

Delphi: Right there. That!

Leon: What?

Delphi: That look.

Leon: What look?

Delphi: Do you know how many times I get that look?

Leon: Wanna wrestle?

Delphi: All I'm saying is, knowingly bringing a kid into a climate that is *undeniably* going to get a whole lot fucking worse – Sorry, it's selfish. Aren't you terrified of what the world looks like in five years' time, let alone fifty?

Leon: No.

Delphi: Great.

Leon: I disagree. I think there's a lot of hope to be found, actually.

Delphi: In what? Bioengineering?

Leon: No. Humanity. *(She pulls a face)* I think the force of good ultimately wins.

Delphi: So what, you're a Star Wars fan? *(He laughs)* Well. Good for you. Your optimism is cute. Delusional, but cute.

Leon: Okay. Two words: Greta. Thunberg.

Delphi: Um, okay. More words: literally any government or big business in the world /

Leon: Fuck you. That is bullshit!

Delphi: It's not! /

Leon: CEO of Unilever. Tesla. Patagonia. Mark Carney. Jacinda Ardern. Naomi Klein. AOC. / Fucking, Jeff Bezos.

Delphi: Tesla? You're seriously – Politicians are never going to be on board with any 'green' policies or legislation if they think they're bad for the economy. Because 'progress' is short term and always means more. Getting bigger, wealthier and consuming more ad infinitum – I'm sorry but people are selfish fucks and, ultimately, we do what's best for us.

Delphi necks the rest of her drink.

And fuck Jeff Bezos. Are you serious?

Delphi looks at their locked arms.

Do you mind if I lift this arm for a bit? I'm starting to lose the sensation in / my hand.

Leon: Oh. Yeah. Course.

They both lift up their arms and sort of shake them a bit in the air.

Another drink?

Delphi: If I get them.

Leon: No way.

Delphi: Why not?

Leon: Because.

Delphi: You got the last three.

Leon: And?

Delphi: It's weird.

Leon: I insist.

Delphi: I have money.

Leon: I don't doubt it.

Delphi: Don't be a dinosaur. Let me pay.

Leon: I'm not being sexist by buying you a drink.

Delphi: I know /

Leon: What do you want? Beer?

Delphi: What if I feel like champagne?

Leon: Yeah. You really strike me as a champagne kinda gal.

Delphi: Fine. Something fancy you can set on fire, suck out of a straw.

Leon gets coins out of his pocket, spills and counts them out on the table. Delphi watches.

Leon: (Counting) Five, Five Fifty, Six...

Delphi: What are you...

*He continues counting. Frowns.
Reaches back into his pocket.*

- Leon: I'm sure I had a note in here somewhere.
Delphi: Who pays with cash? Just use your card, no?
Leon: I can't.
Delphi: How come?
Leon: Cos I've reached my – I've – I've got a note in here somewhere.
Delphi: Okay. Can I pay? I'd like to pay.
Leon: No.
Delphi: It would make me really happy.
Leon: AHA!

He pulls out a ten pound note from his pocket.

- Delphi: I'll take a beer.

He puts the note on the table. Pause.

- Leon: Have you always known you wouldn't want kids?
Delphi: Uh. No. It's a pretty recent thing. Political decision.
Leon: Does your boyfriend want kids?
Delphi: That's an intimate question.
Leon: Does he know you're locked onto a strange man in a dimly lit bar?
Delphi: Okay. Just so we're clear. The only reason we're still here drinking is because of this. (*She shakes their handcuffed wrists*)
Leon: Fine. Has he called?

Delphi: What?

Leon: Your boyfriend. Has he called?

Delphi: I /

Leon: What about Fern? Any news from her?

Delphi: (*Frowns*) No...

Leon: Just asking, cos you haven't looked at your phone once since we got here.

He smiles.

Delphi slowly and pointedly gets her phone out of her pocket with her free hand –

Don't.

She stops. They look at each other. She puts the mobile down on the table.

Wait. Has this suddenly become a date?

Nancy Netherwood

Extract from *Night and Light and The Half-Light*

Wakeworth House, Lincolnshire, the country seat of the Caldwell Family, creeping with illicit magic and ghosts. No sense of modernity has ever survived in the house. Even when we're not in the house, we're still in the house in spirit. We're also in the theatre.

PROLOGUE: LANTERN

Darkness. Then, seventeen-year-old LORNA opens the shutter of a dark lantern, spilling a little window of light into the void. She waits. Then she closes the shutter. She looks out, waiting for a response.

Somewhere else in the dark, a light shines back. Then darkness again.

A clock chimes twelve.

PART 1: HALLOWEEN/SAMHAIN

1922. AOIFE, 18, emerges from the darkness. She's an Irish farm girl, dressed simply, practically – no unnecessary embellishments or fuss. She's a girl who has worked and lived her life outdoors and it shows.

Aoife is covered in soil, like she's crawled out of the earth. She looks haunted.

The darkness shifts around her. She is stripped down to her slip and dressed in something formal, fitted, a little dour. Her hair is pinned up. She looks older, a little girl in her mum's clothes – or maybe more like a doll, squeezed, tugged at, lovingly puppeted. There is care in it, and there is violence too.

Then she's alone. She's in a no space, a darkness. When she speaks, she conjures – maybe we start to hear the wind, the sea, the birds.

Aoife: There's,
Water. Water beneath me and all around. Beneath the
shrunken boards of the boat and the,
Eating up the shore. Pulling it under, swallowing it.
The House. Our house. Up on the cliff, hanging on, limpet
house going under the tide line and,
You. On the jetty. Your hair like seaweed, rippling in the
close breath of the storm as it comes, whipping up the
waves. It's pulling at you, and your hat,
Gone. It drifts for a moment like a bird on the crosswind,
circles, soars. Then into the water. A wicker casket for
some fish or mermaid not yet dead.
It's bad luck to have a coffin when you're still living.
Ireland shrinks away 'til it would fit in my pocket, 'til it's
a smear of green on a grey horizon, a smudge on glass,
wiped away with a,
I've never seen it as something outside myself. Something
separate. It has always been the only thing, the only place,
singing in my blood and the air in my,
In me.
If that world is a shape small enough to vanish then what
are you, my dear sister? How will I find you again?

How can I,
I,
The sea opens up around me and it takes the breath out of
me. The guts out of me. The wind gauzes around me like
it could pick me up and carry me carry me back carry me
home carry me anywhere,
I see Him watching me and I think maybe I'll jump. Maybe
I'll climb up on the rail and hold out my arms and let
myself,
Just let myself,
Go,

A shift.

The sea starts to shrink and then the shrug of the land,
looming out of the water. England with its flat, grey arms
open to catch me. The sick magnet draw of it, the reeling
in, the whirling plug hole,
England.
England.
Poisoned ground that runs with blood,
Hard under my feet, clogged with rocks and hidden bone,
torn up for roads and railway tracks. Dead leaves and
brown water. Stale air. Dearth.
There's a house.
It's rooted on the edge of a town on the edge of a forest. It
sits in the shadow of a red brick factory that manufactures
steel.
He owns it. My,
My,
The man I,
James Caldwell owns the factory like his father did, like
his grandfather who built it. It belongs to him because his
family's money bought it.
His family's money bought Wakeworth House.

Aoife is in Wakeworth House. Maybe she was always in The House.

At the heart of the room/The House/the theatre space is The Cabinet, covered by a dust sheet. The Cabinet is a Victorian display cabinet that has become something else, half-dolls house, half-treehouse – each section is laid out like a room, but the dolls and tiny furniture are overrun with stones, dried flowers, taxidermy, pottery. It's chaotic but strangely harmonious, eerie but charming, a little magical. You get the feeling that everything in it will come alive the second you turn your back.

But we can't see this yet. For now, it's just a shape under cloth.

They bought the land from wild earth into brick, into windows and chimneys and sconces like wedding cake. Into a Morning Room, a Dining Room, a Gallery, a Library. They bought hard lines where there were only leaves and water and animal skin. They bought locked doors to keep the forest out.

That was a mistake.

But they don't know that yet. The Caldwell family suffer from a terminal lack of imagination.

They don't know what it means to be haunted.

Amy Powell Yeates

You Can't Kill the Spirit

*A dawn chorus: robins, blackbirds, woodpeckers.
The sun is rising gradually through the scene.*

ROSE (50s) sits on a muddy patch of grass, eating an apple and reading a book. She is dressed in a giant handmade teddy bear costume.

A mesh wire fence looms behind her but it's not yet light enough to make out the top of it.

MORFYDD (early 30s) enters, also dressed as a teddy bear. She has a camera strap hooked around her neck and is holding a smaller teddy. A moment of acknowledgement between them. Morfydd looks around curiously with her camera.

Eventually, she points the lens in the direction of Rose. The shutter clicks and Morfydd quickly moves the camera away. Rose looks up.

Morfydd: Sorry.

Rose: Would it have hurt you to ask?

Morfydd: No. Sorry, it wasn't actually of you. Don't worry.

Rose studies Morfydd.

Rose: No? What was it of then?

Morfydd: Well, you might be a bit... You might be in it but you weren't you know, In It.

Rose looks behind her. Nothing. She returns to her book and her apple. After a while, she offers Morfydd a bite.

You're alright, ta.

Rose shrugs and goes back to her book.

I'd kill for a bacon butty though.

Morfydd laughs. Rose does not react.

Before I left, I told Dylan – Dylan's my eldest – leave the meat in the pan as long as nerve will allow. Crisp the fat, and never be tempted to go too early with the red sauce on the bread while you wait. You'll only end up with a soggy orange layer 'tween your rasher and your slice of Hovis and no-one wants that. And go easy on the marg for Dad. No doubt Angharad'll start making his lunch before long and we know what she feeds her Dai. Butter basically oozing out of the crusts.

Looked at me like I'd spat in her face, when I told her I was coming here. Tightened her lips as best she could but eventually the words just came spilling out of her: 'It's not always all about you, Morfydd'. She kept crying on my Trevor and saying he didn't deserve any of it.

D'you have children?

Rose: New are you?

Morfydd: Ish. My friend Rhiannon was meant to come too but she had a last-minute change of heart. Actually, it was her Mam. I know it was. She –

Rose: What was it, Myfanwy?

Morfydd: Morfydd (Mrs Evans) –

Rose: Which gate?

Morfydd: Oh... yellow. And what about you?

Rose: It's alright there. Rose.

Morfydd: Great to meet you Rose. Yeah, people have been really kind.

Rose: Cushty.

Morfydd: Yes! Well. I'm not sure I'd go that far.

Rose: Who have you met there?

Morfydd: Oh, heaps of women, yeah. They're all really nice.

The lights gradually fading up begin to reveal coils of barbed wire around the top of the fence. Rose finishes her apple and lobs the core over the top of it. Morfydd looks at the barbed wire.

Rose: If you want meat you'll have to go into the town.

Morfydd: We went in for the fabrics. Not sure I'd go back in a hurry. They were good to us in the department store though mind, snuck in some bolts with the off-cuts.

When we got back, we stitched and stitched. And I made this with the leftovers. (*She attaches the teddy to the fence.*)

Rose: Well, they'd better get a move on.

Morfydd: I have to say I did think the point of meeting so early was for the cover from the light /

Rose: / light. That's the idea, yep.

Morfydd: Can I ask you, is there a girl who lives here?

Rose: Plenty have brought children.

Morfydd: But there's a girl I often see on her own and I could have sworn it was her I saw on my way here this morning. Looks as though she's patrolling the grounds, weaving through the silver birches. Disappears behind a bender tent as fast as she appeared from around a fence corner. She has a blue raincoat and her hair is in terrible knots. I feel as though I ought to give it a good brush.

Have you seen her?

Have you been inside the base before?

What was it like? Were you arrested?

Rose: You know you don't have to go over.

Morfydd: I know.

Rose: Just don't delay the rest of us will you.

Morfydd: No. Yes. I won't.

Morfydd puts a hand on her belly. It sparks a splinter of sympathy in Rose. The coils of barbed wire are now in clear view. A pause.

Rose begins to sing Sarah's Song. She sings with conviction. The song is a tool of strength, it's not a lullaby.

Rose: They can forbid nearly everything
But they can't forbid me to think
And they can't forbid the flowers to grow
And they can't shut my mouth when I sing

Morfydd joins in.

They can forbid nearly everything
But they can't forbid me to think
And they can't forbid the sun to shine
(*Rose looks at Morfydd*)
And they can't shut my mouth when I sing
...How do you know –

PHOTOGRAPHER (PG) enters

PG: Sorry to interrupt (*he's clearly not sorry*). Are you the ladies going over?

Morfydd: Hi, yes, yes, we are.

Rose: (*To Morfydd*) This a colleague of yours?

PG: You don't make it easy for us lot finding you.

Morfydd: (*To Rose*) Wha d'you mean?

Rose: (*To PG*) I'm sorry, we thought trying to save the human race from itself might be sufficient without a tourist information point.

Morfydd: (*To Rose*) A colleague?

Rose: (*To Morfydd*) You talk a lot. It can be a sign. Kept going on about bacon sandwiches.

Morfydd: I was trying to be friendly.

Rose: And the camera. And how do you know Sarah's Song?

Morfydd: I can't believe this.

PG: (*Entertained*) Now now, ladies.

Morfydd: Thank you for being here. The profile, it's very important.

Rose: (*Wry*) Essential, in fact.

Morfydd: Well, it is.

PG: Thought I might have missed it. Would've been a wasted journey at crack of dawn. Where's your pals?

Rose: All waiting for you, David Bailey.

Morfydd: (*To PG*) Most of the women are coming with the ladders and carpets, they'll be here any moment.

(*To Rose*) People like you think you can do all this on your own. Well, I'm afraid you can't.

(*To PG*) Can we answer any questions at all?

Rose: Don't even bother.

PG: Yes actually.

They both pause, ready for his question.

What's with the bear thing?

Buzzing chatter can be heard as women in teddy bear costumes begin to pour through the auditorium.

They cross the fence. Except Morfydd. She's the last one, hesitating. From halfway up another woman holds out a hand. Morfydd takes it and crosses.

From near the fence, MARY, a little girl in a blue raincoat emerges. She surveys the scene, looking for debris and keepsakes. She notices the teddy on the fence and, stretching for it, she unties it. Distracted by the barking of dogs behind her – she scarpers with the teddy.

The pounding beat of 'Joan of Arc (Maid of Orleans)' by Orchestral Manoeuvres In The Dark.

Matt Wixey

Extract from *King of Fleas*

PROLOGUE

Dialogue is in Mandarin in this scene.

Darkness. A GIRL, Chinese, young, on an army cot. Beside her, on a low stool, is a Chinese SOLDIER in military uniform.

In the far corner is an older Chinese COLONEL. He smokes and observes the other two calmly.

The screen flickers to life. Grainy, black-and-white, crackling with static, it begins to show subtitles.

Soldier: What else did he tell you?

Girl: Everything he told us came true. He is the king.

Soldier: You mean the emperor?

Girl: He is the king of fleas.

Lights up.

Soldier: The king of /

Girl: He will find them. He will never stop looking. He will part the roots of the grass to find them.

Soldier: Where is he now?

Girl: He lives by a field and the grass is red.

Soldier: Grass isn't red.

Girl: The grass is red.
Soldier: People were killed in the field?
Girl: Not there.
Soldier: Killed somewhere else? Where?
Girl: In the house.
Soldier: What house?
Girl: In the house there are rooms that do not open. Rooms with numbered doors and all the things I wish were not true. Nothing there is able to speak.
Soldier: What's inside the rooms?
Girl: There are men who breed fleas.

The Soldier glances at the Colonel, who looks back at him, expressionless.

Soldier: Why do they breed fleas?
Girl: The king tells them to.
Soldier: How do they breed them?
Girl: They wear coats and never take them off, even in summer. The fleas live inside the coats and the men collect them. Their tribute for the king. 100 fleas a day. His men come and put them in jars.

The Girl moans in pain, delirious.

Soldier: Who are the men who bring the jars?
Girl: The men who made the grass red.
Soldier: Grass isn't red.
Girl: They are the men of the sun. They march behind it. All the people in all the rooms are dead. There is only silence there.

Soldier: They march behind the sun...

The Soldier turns to the Colonel, who slowly pulls a folded piece of silk from a pocket. A Japanese imperial flag. The Girl sees it. Screams. She has a violent fit, bucking and writhing.

For a few seconds, the Colonel watches, then crushes his cigarette. He puts the flag away. The Girl quiets down. The Colonel lights another cigarette.

Colonel: Continue.

Soldier: Colonel, I /

Colonel: Ask her if she knows what she has.

Soldier: Do you know what made you sick?

Girl: The sweets. The king gave us sweets. He said it was the Emperor's birthday and we must honour him.

Soldier: You think the sweets made you sick? Who is the king? This is important. What did he look like?

Girl: They came on horses and in trucks. Smiling and handsome beneath the sun. We gave them flowers and they gave us sweets and we died. He led them.

Soldier: Do you remember his name?

Girl: Zhijiang Silang. Zhijiang Silang.

The colonel looks up sharply.

Colonel: Ask her again. Ask her if she's sure.

Soldier: Tell me his name again.

Girl: His men called him 'sir'. They came on horses and in trucks and waited for him to speak, and then the devil opened his mouth, and said /

Screen

Beth Emery

Extract from *The Conch Republic*

EXT. SMALL ISLAND, THE FLORIDA KEYS – DAY

Sparkling blue sea, stretches of pale sand beaches, palm trees.

Everything is quiet, peaceful. It's a tropical paradise.

There are the odd few sunbathers, a couple of swimmers bobbing around in the gentle waves, and a fisherman with skin hardened by decades in the sun waiting patiently for a bite.

SUPER: THE FLORIDA KEYS, APRIL 1982

Quietly at first, but growing more and more insistent, EARLY 80S POP MUSIC disturbs the moment.

The sunbathers stir, swimmers tread water and the fisherman, pissed, loses his chance of a catch. All look around for the source of the noise.

EXT. US ROUTE 1, NORTHBOUND – DAY

The music is obnoxiously loud. It contrasts sharply with the aggressive red car that's playing it. So shiny, its reflection is as blinding as the sun, but there's rusting around the wheel arches and the engine sounds knackered as it strains to accelerate.

It whizzes along, momentarily disturbing people going about their business as it passes.

The drive is stunning. The highway cuts between the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic, linking the islands that make up the Florida Keys. Each island is its own little world, idyllic beaches, ramshackle bars and much-used boats tied up in marinas.

INT. MAX'S CAR – DAY

MAX (late 20s) looks more like his car than his music choice. All muscles, shaved head and tattoos. He's worked hard to look this intimidating.

Under the music, unnoticed by Max, car horns HONK. Unaware of the commotion he's approaching around the next bend in the road, he taps his hand on the steering wheel in time to the beat.

A SCREECH of brakes. Cigarette papers, cans and dollar bills fly from the dashboard.

*

Max saves himself from smashing into the steering wheel, but is unable to stop the debris and trash from landing in his lap.

He's stopped just in time, bumper to bumper with the battered campervan in front of him. What a stupid place to park.

HONK. HONK. HOOOOONK.

The campervan is not moving.

Max leans out of the window gesticulating furiously at the campervan, his furious words lost under the cacophony of horns.

The CAMPERVAN DRIVER gets out, he's tall, beardy, hasn't washed for a couple of weeks.

Max leaps out to meet him. Realizing his music is still bouncing away, he leans back into the car and turns it down so forcefully that the dial comes off in his hand.

MAX

What do you think you're doing?

CAMPERVAN DRIVER

Sorry man, nothing I could do.
Haven't you heard on the news?

He approaches Max, hands up slightly. He doesn't want trouble. Max bristles, doesn't back up, but sweeps a quick glance over the trunk of his car.

MAX

Screw the news. Dumb place to park.

CAMPERVAN DRIVER

No choice. *(He gestures behind him.)*

Max storms onto the other side of the road. In front of the campervan a line of cars stretches to the horizon.

Another HONK, a blast of a SIREN. Max leaps out of the way of an oncoming police car. It zooms by on the wrong side of the road, sailing past the queue of traffic on its way to the source of the hold up.

MAX

Fuck.

He's back in the car fast. More cars are coming to a standstill behind him. It's tight but he manages a three-point turn and speeds off back the way he came.

The music dial sails through his open window towards the lapping Atlantic waves.

Kate Perry

Extract from *Captain Catch*

INT. PRISON – NORTHERN IRELAND – DAY

VISITING HOURS

A small red ball rolls along the floor of the visitors room.

We follow the ball as it winds its way between a sea of legs. Some crossed, some spread. Quick fingers flip contraband into a sock. Painted toe nails with diamond studs, sneakers with laces undone, worn shoes, fancy shoes. Swollen ankles stuffed into sandals.

Suddenly a BLACK rubber-soled boot SLAMS down on the ball stopping it in its tracks. The camera pans upwards to reveal navy trousers, black belt, buckle, holster.

We pull back to see CHARLIE MCGUIRK, aged 4, freckle-faced on his hands and knees looking up at the PRISON GUARD. A moment... the guard lifts up his boot. Charlie grabs the ball and legs it back to safety, back to his parents.

SEAN (early 40's), pale, wiry, EDEL (late 30's), an attractive brunette, sits bolt upright, her jaw tense.

Sean clocks her name on a badge pinned to her shirt.

SEAN

You got a job or you scared of getting lost?

EDEL
We're all lost.

SEAN
It's something.

EDEL
It's £7.50 an hour.

Sean turns his attention to Charlie.

SEAN
You being a good boy?

CHARLIE
I got a dog. I call him Dog 2000.

SEAN
Dog 2000? Right.

Sean smiles. Charlie brightens.

CHARLIE
He sleeps with me...and mummy.

SEAN
Nice.

EDEL
Another mouth to feed.

Charlie looks around the room, now distressed, he leans into his mum for protection.

SEAN

(Regret written all over his face) Edel ...

He puts his hand over hers, she pulls away. Sean hardens.

SEAN (CONT'D)

Don't bring him in again. It's no place for a kid.

A bell rings. Visiting hours are over.

Sean leans across to Edel hoping for... anything.

They look into each other's eyes, still love there, but now, only hurt.

Charlie tugs at his mother's sleeve. He wants to go.

Edel turns away from Sean, not ready to forgive. She picks up Charlie and heads toward the door. From over her shoulder Charlie watches Sean. A prisoner with a tattooed neck catches Charlie's eye. He buries his head in his mother's shoulder.

Sean watches them go. The door closes. His shoulders slump.

FIVE YEARS LATER.

EXT. GRAVEYARD – DAY

A long shadow is cast over a grave. From behind we see a man in a full-length coat. It's LOAF MCCANN, the local armchair general. Fuel smuggler etc. A bunch of flowers awkward in his big hands.

CLOSE ON a photo of a young man astride a motorcycle on the gravestone. The lettering underneath reads – Brendan McCann. Taken too soon. R.I.P.

INT. BATHROOM – DAY

Sean soaks in the bath. Water drips from the tap. He stares at an action man propped up against it.

Suddenly Sean immerses himself under the water. The action man topples in.

INT. KITCHEN – EARLY EVENING

Through the window we see occasional glimpses of Charlie now aged 9, jumping on a trampoline in the backyard in a superhero get up.

ROCK THE BOAT, The Hues Corporation, plays over the scene. Sean sings along not comfortable in his own home yet, but in a good mood. Unseen, Edel enters holding two bags of shopping, still in her supermarket uniform.

*Sean spins around in a dance move.
He holds out his hand beckoning her to join him.*

SEAN

So I'd like to know where, you got the notion. Said I'd like to know where, you got the ...

*Edel's phone RINGS. As he grabs her arm to dance it falls from her pocket and on to the floor. CLOSE ON screen of phone. TOMAS. Edel looks guilty. Sean picks up the RINGING phone and offers it to her.
A moment.*

SEAN (CONT'D)

Go ahead?

Sean holds her gaze, the phone PERSISTS.

SEAN (CONT'D)

It's for you.

The ringing STOPS. The mood has changed. Edel puts the shopping on the table. The moment of truth.

SEAN (CONT'D)
Who's Tomas?

Edel juts her chin and it's very clear.

SEAN (CONT'D)
Say something.

Edel stands firm almost glad he's seen it.

EDEL
Don't make me feel bad for you.

There is a heavy silence in the air then...

EDEL (CONT'D)
You think you just can waltz back in... back in like nothing happened? I was left here to rear your kids and face people. I had to hold down two shite jobs while you were handed three meals a day and watched television. Don't talk to me about being cheated!

Sean can't tell her the truth. All he can muster is...

SEAN
Edel.

But Edel isn't finished.

EDEL
You're not the only one who did time. Five years. In these walls. What about my sentence? Did you ever stop to think about that?

Edel storms off. In one furious swoop Sean swipes the groceries off the table. They hit the floor with force. A noise distracts him. He turns. Charlie is watching him through the window.

FADE ON... Rock the boat, rock the boat, rock the boat.

INT. CHARLIE'S BEDROOM – NIGHT

Charlie sits at a desk in his Spiderman pyjamas. We hear the front door SLAM. He watches Sean go.

CLOSE UP on the blank page of a lined exercise book. An epiphany.

Charlie picks up a pen. PEN ON PAPER.

CATCH CATCH. RiDder oF eVil. An odd mixture of upper and lower case. Charlie speaks as he starts to star in his very own superhero comic book.

CHARLIE
Captain Catch. The beginning.

Nathan Lucky Wood

Extract from *The Lost Art*

INT. ARTIST'S STUDIO. DAY.

JIM GALLOW, 45, a schlub in paint-spattered overalls, stares intently at a BLANK CANVAS on an easel. In his hand, not a paintbrush – a KNIFE.

He concentrates.

He breathes.

He slashes –

But he's thrown off his stroke by an elderly male VOICE calling out:

DON

(O/S) Jim? You hungry?

JIM

Fuck's sake, Dad! I'm working!

Jim has cut a jagged ugly gash across the canvas.

DON

(O/S) Bite to eat help? I'll fix us something –

JIM

No! Stay out of the kitchen, okay Dad? I'll make dinner when I'm done. You watch your shows!

No answer comes.

*The camera pulls back – we see more of the studio – and see that it’s also Jim’s bedroom. The walls are whitewashed and flecked with paint, the furniture huddled into one corner, and as much space as possible given over to *The Making Of Art*.*

He turns back to the canvas. Another disappointment. Throws it over his shoulder onto a huge pile of nearly identical canvasses: all blank, all slashed, all failures.

*He sets a fresh one on the easel.
Stares at it.
Breathes.*

CLEO

(v/o) I don’t get it. I could do that.

IRINA

(v/o) Oh my God Cleo! You can’t say that!

Jim remembers:

INT. ROTHWELL’S SALEROOM. DAY. [FLASHBACK]

An identically framed shot of an ALMOST IDENTICAL CANVAS – but this has a single, perfect diagonal slash, and is hanging on the wall of the opulent saleroom at Rothwell’s London Auctioneers. Two SUITED POSH MEN stand in front of it, murmuring to one another in hushed tones.

Pull back to reveal five people standing in a line near the back of the room. From right to left: Jim, now in the crisp uniform of a Rothwell’s art handler; BEN, also an art handler (30s, cheerful skinhead); IRINA and CLEO, the two interns we just heard whispering (both early 20s, pretty, smart and posh), and at the end of the line, EVIE PATEL – 29, smart but comfortably dressed, hair tied back in a practical ponytail.

CLEO

What? It's just a canvas with a hole in it. It must have taken like three seconds.

IRINA

It's actually the culmination of a long tradition of modernism –

One of the posh men, ARTHUR, turns around. Instantly Irina shuts up and they all stand up a bit straighter.

ARTHUR

Chaps?

Jim and Ben step forward.

ARTHUR

About eight inches to the left, if you don't mind.

They expertly lift the artwork off its hook and shuffle it eight inches to the left. Arthur turns to the other man.

ARTHUR

Isn't that great? I think that's great.

Rothwell's Head of Contemporary, TIMON GREAVES (40s, obnoxiously handsome) says nothing. Jim and Ben hold the painting still. Everyone expectant, waiting for Timon's verdict.

Without turning, Timon addresses the interns.

TIMON

What do you girls think?

Flustered, Cleo and Irina stand to attention again.

CLEO

Me? I think it's great.

IRINA

A superlative placement.

EVIE

It's upside down.

Silence.

All eyes on Timon. He thinks.

TIMON

She's right. It is upside down.

Jim and Ben rotate the canvas 180 degrees.

ARTHUR

(Icily) Thank you for your help, girls. Now please – the gift bags aren't going to fill themselves.

Dismissed, the interns file out. Ben glances after Irina. Timon and Arthur move on as Ben and Jim lower this one to the ground, and Ben starts to hammer in a picture hook.

JIM

(Stopping him) It's alright – I got it.

He takes the hammer. Grateful, Ben runs after the interns.

BEN

Irina! Hey!

Jim hammers in the hook and lifts the painting onto it. He's alone with it now. Takes a moment to examine it. Then he reaches forward and puts his finger into the slash in the canvas.

*Shuts his eyes.
Gently brushes his finger down the slash –*

INT. JIM'S STUDIO.

...And with his eyes still closed, as graceful as a Samurai, Jim slashes the knife across the canvas.

Opens his eyes.

A smile breaks across his face.

On the easel is a perfect replica of the one in the gallery.

INT. ROTHWELL'S SALEROOM. [FLASHBACK]

ARTHUR

What are you doing?

Jim opens his eyes. Arthur is staring directly at him as he stands with his finger in the artwork.

JIM

Sorry.

He withdraws his finger.

ARTHUR

Please don't touch it like that.

Jim goes. Arthur watches him leave, suspicious and baffled. Then he takes out a LITTLE FOAMBOARD LABEL which he sticks to the wall beside the painting:

Lot 139

'Spatial Concept: Waiting'

Lucio Fontana, Italy, 1960

Estimate: £15–17 Million

Radio

Ayad Andrews

Extract from Episode Four of *The Fight of the Century – Ali v Frazier*

By 1970, Joe Frazier is undisputed world heavyweight boxing champion. Muhammad Ali is still barred from professional boxing and under threat of jail. But, while his legal team are exploring ways to circumvent the ban, Ali does whatever he can to make money, including signing a deal to write his autobiography.

Frazier and Ali have an odd relationship at this stage – not quite friends (they have had tense run-ins outside the ring), they are still able to share time together, despite Ali’s constant ribbing of Joe.

Note – Denise is Joe’s on-off girlfriend, Belinda is Ali’s wife.

Narrator: August 1970, Philadelphia.
And here’s Ali, waiting on a ride to New York
from the one person you’d least expect...

EXT. PHILADELPHIA STREET – DAY

A woman calls out to Ali.

Elderly

woman: We’re all praying for you, Mr Ali.

Ali: That’s mighty kind of you, ma’am, I appreciate it.

Young

woman 1: Hey champ! Go get ’em!

Young

woman 2: Ain’t he cute.

Ali: My, my, my. The weather is not the only thing that's hot in Philly today.

FX – CAR HORN

It's Joe, in a gold Cadillac.

Frazier: (*Laughs*) Hey! Heavyweight chump!
Leave them foxes alone!

Ali: The people love me, Joe. What can I say?

Frazier: Get in. Careful of the paintwork, the car's new.

Ali: What colour is this Cadillac? I think I burned my eyeballs!

Frazier: Jus' get in, y'already made me late.

FX – CAR DOOR OPENS AND CLOSES

INT. CADILLAC – CONTINUOUS

Ali: Did you dress to match the car? That's alotta yellow, Joe!

Frazier: Denise picked it out for me. She says I look real gone.

Ali: She still on the scene?

Frazier: Nah, we had a bust-up. Happens. She'll be back.

Ali: What's with the cowboy hat?

Frazier: Oh man, didn't you hear? I'm the sheriff of this town.

Both men laugh as Frazier drives off.

Ali: This is a nice interior. I might have to change my ride.

Frazier: What you drivin'?

Ali: Maroon El Dorado but I got my eye on a Rolls.
Belinda drives a green station wagon.

Frazier laughs.

Frazier: Man, you may not be 'The Greatest' but you sure is
'The Cheapest'!

Ali: What does she need a fancy automobile for?

Frazier: So, what's this koo-koo thing you've roped me into?

Ali: I'm tellin' my story.

Frazier: What story?

Ali: My story! My life story.

Frazier: Pff! Who wants to hear that?

Ali: Whole world. The public doesn't know much about
Muhammad Ali.

And now Joe is really laughing.

Frazier: Oh man, you're a trip! What's left for them to
find out?!

Ali: I been keeping all the good stuff secret, ready for the day.

Frazier: I'd pay you to stop your yakking. How much you
gettin'?

Ali: Random House wrote me a cheque for two hundred
and twenty-five thousand.

Joe whistles.

Frazier: Serious bread. Okay, well, press record on your
machine and start your questions.

- Narrator: For two hours they shoot the breeze, Ali recording it all to use in his book. They sing songs, badmouth other boxers and discuss how it would go in the ring if they ever got to meet –
- Ali: Bell goes, start of the fight, I'm dancing, I ain't gonna hit you, I'm just gonna be dancing. And you ain't gonna get close to me.
- Frazier: Now how you gonna keep me off for a whole round?
My style don't let you dance.
I'll be on you so tight you'll be breathing on my head.
- Ali: By the third round I'll be hitting you with whipping jabs, combinations, upper cuts while you come at me with predictable punches.
- Frazier: Ain't nuthin' predictable about my left hook in your glass jaw.
- Narrator: In New York, they separate, both with business to take care of. Joe, generous as always, loans Ali a hundred dollars so he can get a room for the night. They've even bigger business in New York coming soon, but neither man knows that yet.

The Fight of the Century – Ali v Frazier *is available now via the BBC Sounds app.*

Author biographies

Gaar Adams is a writer and PhD candidate at the University of Glasgow. His journalism has featured in *The Atlantic*, *Foreign Policy* and *Rolling Stone*. His manuscript is supported by Penguin Books' WriteNow programme.

Ayad Andrews was born in Baghdad, Iraq but, due to the volatile political situation, his family were forced to leave the country in 1971. He currently lives in Fareham, Hampshire.

Krystle Zara Appiah is a British-Ghanaian writer, screenwriter and editor. Her debut novel, *Rootless*, was won at auction and will be published by The Borough Press in spring 2023.

Helen Bain is a writer and editor from Sussex. She is a PhD candidate at King's College London and working on a novel set in Devon in the 1960s.

Naina Bajekal is a journalist based in London. She is an Executive Editor at *TIME* and is working on her first novel, which was longlisted for the Bath Novel Award (2020).

Marta Bausells is a London Writers Award recipient and was a 2021 shortlistee at the Freelance Writing Awards. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, *ELLE*, *The Guardian* and *The Paris Review*, among others.

Zakia Carpenter-Hall is a writer, tutor and critic. Her pamphlet *Event Horizon* appeared in 2017. She's commissioned with Africa in Motion Film Festival (Scotland), and is an editorial intern with *Magma*.

Flora Carr is a writer working on her first novel. She previously won the prestigious *Vogue* Talent Contest, and was Highly Commended for the *Harper's Bazaar* Short Story Prize.

Sarah Clegg has a PhD in ancient Mesopotamian history from Cambridge. Publication of her first non-fiction book, which traces a family of demonesses from ancient Mesopotamia to the present day, is forthcoming.

Chez Cotton, flash fiction writer and civil rights lawyer, is London born of English/Burmese descent. Her first novel is a suicide mystery set in 1930s Rangoon and modern-day Yangon.

Benjamin Cusden's poetry has been published in the UK, USA and Brazil and shortlisted for several prizes. His pamphlet, *Cut the Black Rabbit*, was published by Against the Grain Poetry Press in 2020.

Beth Emery is a Devon-based writer. She studied a Screenwriting MA at the University of Manchester and is currently writing a screenplay about the Florida Keys' one day secession from the US.

Charlotte Forfieh graduated from Birkbeck's MA in Creative Writing in 2018. She writes speculative fiction and her stories have appeared in *The Good Journal*, Issue 1 (2018) and *The City of Stories* (2017).

Russell Franklin lives and works in London. He loves stories in all mediums and genres. Writing helps keep him out of trouble.

Marina Gerner is an award-winning journalist and Adjunct Professor of Commerce & Culture at NYU London. Her book about femtech (technology for female bodies) will be published by Icon in 2023.

Carole Hailey's debut novel *The Silence Project*, which was shortlisted for the 2020 Bridport Prize Peggy Chapman-Andrews First Novel Award, will be published in 2023. She lives in Pembrokeshire.

Lucian Huxley Smith is a writer and teacher from London. He has an MA in Writing for Performance from Goldsmith's College and has previously developed work with The Royal Court. *Micro* is his first novel.

Daniel Marc Janes's writing has appeared in *The London Magazine*, the *TLS* and *Review 31*, where he is deputy editor. He directs short films and is a staff writer for *The Crown* (Netflix).

Aaron Kilercioglu is a writer and director, mostly for stage and screen. He is the winner of BOLD Playwrights and was shortlisted for the Theatre503 International Playwriting Prize.

Lanikai Krishnadasan Torrens works in theatre on community projects with young people and adults. She started taking writing classes with Write Like A Grrrl in 2018 and is working on a novel.

Lily Levinson writes for and about theatre. She received a British Council Theatre and Dance bursary in 2019, and is a graduate of the Soho Theatre Writers' Lab and the Royal Court Script Panel.

Freya Mavor is an actor/writer living and working between France and the UK. She works in film, theatre and television in two languages, writes poetry, climbs and runs a London performance night.

Shakira Moise writes about women, mythology and the Caribbean. Her first short story is due to be published next year in *The Gathering Dark: An Anthology of Folk Horror*.

Nancy Netherwood is a playwright and screenwriter from London. She uses elements of folklore, fantasy and horror to explore queer narratives, mental health and loneliness and connection in the 21st century.

Charlotte Newman is a London-based writer with an MA in Creative Writing from Royal Holloway. She's working on a story collection, inspired by the Greek myths behind the Zodiac.

Yosola Olorunshola is working on her first novel, exploring the question: who gets to make history? Her writing on art, culture, history and race has been published in *British Vogue*, *Quartz* and *Refinery-29*.

Anna Parker is a writer and PhD researcher. She is working on a non-fiction book, *Cottage*, which tells the story of twentieth-century Europe through her Czech family's cottage in Bohemia.

Hannah Partos is a freelance journalist (*The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *Wired*, *VICE* and others) with a strong interest in organ and tissue donation and environmental issues.

Kate Perry is a writer/actor/comedian from NI. A recipient of 2019 John Brabourne Film/TV Award, she has written for radio and her short film *Ruthless* won Best Irish Short, Indie Cork Festival, 2021.

Amy Powell Yeates is a Welsh writer and theatre producer. Her work has been published in *The Observer* and she is currently writing a script inspired by the women of Greenham Common.

Natalie Rule is working on a collection of short stories inspired by her life and a middle-grade fiction novel. She lives in London with her two children.

Lisa Smith lives in South London. She won the Pat Kavanagh Prize in 2019, and the 2017 Guardian 4th Estate BAME Short Story Prize. She is writing her first novel.

Ana Soria is a British-Spanish writer. Her stories have been published by *The Moth* magazine and TSS Publishing. Her debut novel was longlisted for the Primadonna Festival Prize 2020.

Natalie Whittaker has published two poetry pamphlets: *Shadow Dogs* (Ignition Press, 2018) and *Tree* (Verve Poetry Press, 2021). *Tree* explores her experience of stillbirth.

Matt Wixey (wixeywrites.com) is a playwright and writer, recently longlisted for Channel 4's 4Screenwriting. His first novel will be published in 2022. His debut play, *Stray Dogs*, was produced in 2021.

Nathan Lucky Wood is a writer across theatre, prose, film and TV. His play *The Levellers* was longlisted for the 2020 Verity Bargate Prize. Lucky really is his middle name.

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