



ORDINARY PEOPLE
EXCEPTIONAL LIVES

2017



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Hillingdon Literary Festival

2017

Creative Writing Anthology



HILLINGDON LITERARY
FESTIVAL



Brunel Centre for
Contemporary Writing



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HILLINGDON
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Introduction – Sebastian Jenner

Festival Producer and Editor
Hillingdon Literary Festival

Inspired by the extraordinary talent in our community – so apparent at each Hillingdon Literary Festival – we last year launched a community creative writing competition and anthology, *Writing Local | Thinking Global*. The volume was such a terrific success, and the submissions of such high quality, that we were keen to offer another such opportunity.

This year's writing competition and anthology, *Ordinary People : Exceptional Lives*, features stories and poems carefully selected from over three hundred submissions. Every single one of these was read with pleasure and awe, and it's a great shame that we could not print more. The talent in our Borough truly is exceptional, impressive and diverse – it's an honour to be able to champion it.

This collection is made freely available to the community, distributed at the festival, to all seventeen brilliant Hillingdon libraries, and online for e-book download.

We trust you'll enjoy reading the proud and brilliant voices of our community.

Foreword - Professor Julia Buckingham

*Vice Chancellor and President,
Brunel University London*

At Brunel University London, we are committed to promoting young and emerging talent and to playing an active part in the local community – so I am delighted that this creative writing competition, *Ordinary People : Exceptional Lives* is a key part of the third Hillingdon Literary Festival. You can see from the entries contained in this anthology that there is no shortage of writing talent in Hillingdon.

I understand our aim in launching the competition was to provide a platform for the diverse voices here at Brunel and across the Borough – and as you can see from what follows we have certainly achieved this!

Getting published is always a challenge for new writers and any help they can receive along the way is very welcome. I hope those included in the volume – and especially the overall winner – are very proud of their achievements.

We are – as indeed the Hillingdon Literary Festival itself shows – determined to be of and

for our local community; working to build

strong, mutually beneficial partnerships, but we also want to help our students and those we support in Hillingdon achieve and value excellence.

The competition and anthology would not have been possible without, on the one hand, the hard work of our judges – Suzi Feay and Professor Benjamin Zephaniah – and Seb Jenner, the Festival Producer, and a Brunel PhD student who has shown himself extraordinarily adept at organising numerous large scale events; and, on the other, our sponsors: the London Borough of Hillingdon, Heathrow and the Arts Council for England.

Good luck to all those whose work is contained in this volume – I am sure we will be hearing more of you in the future.



Lisa Enright

Froth

by Shirley Anne Cook

I'm sitting in an Uxbridge café
drinking a latte, revelling
in the fact that I've filled
my loyalty card.

Next time I'll receive
a free coffee. It matters.

I lost my job.
Lattes are my lifeline.
Each sip a shot in the arm.

I take out my note book,
perhaps I'll have an idea
for a poem. There's always that.
But today they're testing the fire alarm.
A high-pitched scream
tears through my head.
'How much longer?' I ask the barista.
She's puzzled. 'There's no alarm.'

I gaze at the bottom of my cup
and realise that what I'm hearing
is the sound of train wheels braking
though the white-frothed
tidemark of my life.

Uxbridge Station 4pm

by Gael

There's the twitter-twatter pitter-patter of teens
on the move

Red buses roar to the station and more pour onto
the tube

Crushed in till they bust out again – uncorked –
ready to walk

And run and sing – School's out! – And the
holiday dawns

As the brightest Instagram they ever saw...

And there's more... Someone said that golden
guys and girls all must

Like chimney-sweepers come to dust – but not
these kids

They're diamonds dancing on the floor – not rust

Their summer to explore- and more – exams are
over, aced, obliterated.

They're running to futures in places no-one's
even rated on trip-advisor – to jobs that no-one's
scored –

To hook-ups so hot that tinder flamed before it
named them

They're scorching the concrete with their super-
heroic pace in the race

To be bigger, to be better, to be first –
But before tonight's party, tomorrow's date, next
week's trip to celebrate –

Stop and turn to see – the sun glitter in the
asphalt – and
Before the prosecco bubble bursts,
Before the first tattoo begins to hurt,
Before the new kiss chafes and bruised skin
burns –

Feel it

Before it trends and turns and it's too late

To see before the curve and see it straight.

Water Baby

by Yasmin Selena Butt

I was told I'd always been a water baby; apparently I'd even swum around gently in my mother's womb despite the confinement of space. I'd rarely lain still when they'd gazed at me lovingly from the outside, looking in, as she lay in hospital, mesmerised by her distended belly transparent on the screen.

As a toddler I'd be the first in the bath, when she hollered for us all to go up and get ready for the nightly ritual. I was the only one out of the three of us that never needed to be told twice.

Mary was the one who would have to be lifted in kicking and wailing. She had a morbid fear of the shampoo getting in her bright little eyes, but I think she just didn't like the water. I liked that I could choose the 'flavour' of mine. It felt like a very serious choice when you were four years old. Monica was the quietest of the three of us. She would occupy the furthest corner. I liked to be in the middle, which was kind of apt as I was the middle child.

There were no boys in my family, only my Papa, and he left the nightly ritual to Mama. As we got older, we of course learned to do this on our own, and my desire to lie in there, and float would often be disturbed with the anxious

knocking on the door from a sister checking to see I was okay

I had a habit of drifting off into dreams and had often woken chilled and in the dark. My flesh puckered by the water, shivering and surprised. It never hurt to be safe.

So really did it come as any surprise when I reached the age of ten and I noticed these tiny little flaps starting to blossom beneath my budding little breasts? My mother later noticed it when she saw me dressing for school

She peered at me curiously and then pulled me to her to gently stroke the smooth, serrations over my ribs with her work worn fingers.

‘What are those?’ she murmured to herself.

‘I don’t know’ I replied, nervous of her gaze.

‘I have to go to school’ I said, buttoning my blouse. She let me go in silence; a furrow creasing her brow.

Each night I looked at the marks on my ribs and touched them. They didn’t hurt and with time I noticed they grew and when I breathed in deeply they opened and closed. It was a very strange thing indeed, I decided, but I liked being different.

I would lie in the bath, and one day I fancied I was a fish. One hot summer’s day when I was 11 years old, I was the only one home. My parents had taken my sisters out to buy some shoes, and I’d decided to stay in and read a book. After eating a very sticky peach I went into the bathroom to wash my hands and thought to

myself, how lovely and refreshing it would be to sink into pure, cool water.

Why not? I wouldn't be disturbed, and there wouldn't be any interruption. I could already feel the ripples of water, wet and silken flowing over my skin. I put in the plug and flooded the white, iron tub with tepid water and busied myself undressing.

I dropped my clothes at my feet right down to my vest and my cotton underwear. A colourful, crumpled little heap. I've never been very tidy. I stretched my arms up skywards and felt the satisfying crackle in my limbs, a sign I had been curled up for too long with my book. This was going to feel lovely.

I pondered whether to use any oils, fragrant potions, salts and bath milks. For once I fancied something pure and plain. So after the bath was half full, I wound the tap shut and climbed in, sank down smoothly with a sigh into the water. My hair was shoulder length and according to Mary, my best feature. But in the summer it often became a bother, especially in hot weather. My mother was blessed with an equally thick, abundant head of hair. Papa unfortunately was not, but I had his beautiful bright green eyes, which twinkled when he smiled. Monica told me I would be a beauty when I grew up with my ebony locks. Her hair was curly and short.

I lay back in the bath and stretched out my legs, and noticed I needed to cut my toenails. My scalp

prickled pleasurably as I sank further back, submerging my head until I lay prone and unfettered. I gazed up to the bathroom ceiling. Papa had let us paint clouds on it on Mary's tenth birthday. He was a creative soul that was why Mama loved him. He was an artist, so it only made sense that we might have that in us too.

I closed my eyes and breathed in and sank under the water. Peace.

Such peace.

And it felt so good and so cool.

I opened my eyes and looked up at the blurry land above me. The clouds rippled through my watery gaze and I blinked. There were no bubbles to sting me, otherwise I never opened my eyes like this

I fluttered my hands in the water enjoying the motion as my body warmed the water around me. It was lovely to feel this serene. I'm not sure how long I stayed like this, but my head didn't get that feeling like it might explode if I didn't sit up to breathe and I wasn't cold, so I let myself stay down there.

I peered over my breasts, to my ribs, and watched mesmerised as those marks opened and closed but wider than I'd ever seen them do before. My mouth opened in surprise and I panicked as the water flooded in. I cried out, but it was a gurgle as I was sure I would choke, unless I sat up, but it didn't happen, it seemed to flood out of my body from somewhere. God.

This was cool.

I had gills.

Real life gills. Wow. I was a water baby, truly.

Mama hadn't lied then when she called me that.

I touched them again and smiled. Lay back in my watery bed and breathed. Enjoyed my hair

swirling around me as I cradled my arms underwater and then eventually closed my eyes.

I didn't mind what it meant. I smiled and drifted off into sleep. I didn't hear them come home, or call my name. The rumble of voices was very far away from me. It was only when Mama walked into the bathroom and shouted my name that I awoke and my eyes flew open.

I could see her through the water, her hands around her face looking so upset. I opened my mouth to reassure her I was fine, but of course she couldn't hear me.

She leant over to me and grabbed my arms to pull me up. I was embarrassed that she was seeing me naked and put my hands over my chest and curled up my legs

'Melanie, what happened?!' she cried.

'Nothing, I was asleep, I was just taking a bath.'

'I thought you'd drowned!'

'No I'm fine, what time is it?'

'It's 8 o'clock'

This surprised me.

I was sure I'd gone in just after lunchtime. So I had been in there for six hours. I looked at my skin. I was smooth, no puckering, no wrinkles,

and though my hair was wet. It didn't feel bad. My head was still sleepy, so it was hard to think. 'I'm hungry, can we have dinner?' I eventually said. Mama still looked confused, as if she was trying to understand what had happened. She reached across and gently moved my hands away from my chest and looked at my gills. 'Melanie, I had no idea this was going to happen, do you understand what's happening?' she said quietly. 'I have gills, like a fish' I replied. 'How do you feel about it?' 'It's fine; I can breathe underwater, I can swim like a fish and my skin won't go all bad if I stay in for a long time.' She looked relieved at that, but still a bit worried. 'Mama, I don't mind, I like swimming.' I was really hungry, I just wanted to get out now and I looked for a towel. Mama still looked unsure but she gave me a towel and gave me a cuddle and dried my hair for me like she did when I was very little, but I could feel she was still thinking. I put on my clothes and felt as I was still in a little bit of a dream as I floated downstairs. Mary was trying on her new shoes and walking up and down the hall. They were black T-Bar Mary Janes and very smart, but I liked sandals most. My Papa was putting away cans into the cupboard and he smiled when he saw me come in, 'Good bath, Melly?'

Mama whispered something urgently into his ear and he listened intently, but when his smile went away that made me nervous.

Papa's smile is one of my favourite things. It lights up a room when he does it.

He looked at me silently, put the last cans away and came over to me.

'Your ma says you have gills, like a fish, is this true?' he asked. I hadn't been worried before but now I was. I wasn't sure if my gills made him happy or sad, or angry like I had done something wrong. I loved my Papa and I wondered if he would love me if the answer wasn't right. Now I was afraid, and I could feel tears prickling in my eyes.

Mary stopped walking in the hallway and watched. Monica came in and sat down holding her colouring pens.

'Yes, Papa, I have gills' I muttered feeling guilty, but I didn't know why I felt guilty, I didn't make them happen.

Papa closed his eyes. 'It's because of puberty,' he said. 'You're growing up, it's nothing to worry about, we're just not used to it, your Mama and I, it never happened when we were young. Kids were just kids'

I tried to understand, but he didn't really make much sense. Mary came in and sat down, she didn't look upset and she had heard everything too. She was fourteen and much taller than me,

her blonde hair was almost white, it was so pale and beautiful.

‘I don’t understand’ I said to Papa. His smile came back and he sat down and held my hand ‘You’re the first of your kind, all the new children born in the last fifteen years were all genetically engineered so you would be born in the best way you could be, the most healthy, the most strong... Melly you will never ever have any serious health problems. You are going to have a wonderful life, my love. What they didn’t tell us was about the genes that had been added in and what they might do when all these babies grew.’ ‘That was the bit the doctors left out,’ Mama said with a sigh, joining him.

‘So I have gills because I have a little bit of fish in me?’ I said feeling amazed. ‘That’s why I love the water so?’ I wondered if when I grew up I would be like ‘The Little Mermaid,’ like in the cartoon. Mary looked at me with her pretty blue eyes and blinked limpid like and I felt as if I was looking at my sister properly for the first time. She was still Mary, she was still my lovely big sister with a pink, little smile and her bendy body that was so good at ballet. She was still my protector, who could defend me all fierce if the bigger kids ever made fun of me.

But, when she leaned in close... I thought I heard the hint of a cat’s purr in her throat when she said ‘Melly... do you like my new shoes?’

Fleeting Moments of Freedom

by Jasveena Masih

It started at the end.

Most stories end with a dream, this does not...

As Mozart's Requiem sounded in the background, I walked along the dusty alley of a little village in Punjab. My pace was quickening as though someone was following me - power walking, heart racing. I needed to get beyond the high houses on either side to the opening at the bottom. I could see its head, black. It was anticipating my arrival. It was waiting for me. And when I reached it, I fell in love.

There was something so beautiful in its look, like the sun glitter upon the waves of a vast ocean, the single autumnal leaf cascading to the ground, the scratches of pencil on page. I knew in that moment that everything I had been before this moment was a lie. Stripping the strata contrived of environment, culture, influence, this was who I was meant to be. I saw myself in its eye like a reflection that recognised nothing tangible. It beckoned and in that moment, I hoisted myself onto its back.

It needed no command; it had been waiting all its life for this moment – to ride me through the open spaces beyond the yellow of the spinach

fields, beyond the dirt tracks that ran adjacent to abandoned wastelands and into a place that was wild. It galloped. I could hear the da-da-dun of its hooves. I could feel the wind against my face – it rushing past my ears into the past where it belonged. I was headed to euphoria where nobody could find me, where I would be totally free.

There was no saddle, there were no reins, just me.

When I woke up, my heart was racing and my body was tingling. No, it couldn't have been a dream!

I told anyone that would listen, which was ironic because I had always found horses particularly terrifying – the thought of their eyes, thinking things I could never understand. The vastness of their bodies, capable of crushing mine to dust.

*

When I first visited the stables, it smelled like India – a mixture of dirt and manure. The lesson had been basic and I barely moved beyond a march. I had been too afraid to rise in trot, even on the lunge holding desperately onto the saddle until my knuckles had torn through my skin. It was ridiculous. It was nothing like I had dreamt. Where was the drama? The passion? The freedom?

I carried on, in what seemed a vain effort to recapture that moment, to have that sliver of

liberty until months later, the time had finally come.

It was Amber, the Irish thoroughbred. She was fourteen hands high and obedient. She was willing. She wanted to move even without instruction. She was forgiving.

The dream had become a distant memory and I found myself plodding along, literally. I looked out at the horizon, the trees encircling me, the sky a vast blue expanse above me. My mind was completely...blank.

In seconds, she transitioned from trot to canter and we became one; like the surf of a wave, I was carried. There was no more she and I. We were united. I was free.

The next week, I was looking forward to canter once more. My bottom banged the saddle like the rat-a-tat-tat of a machine gun. What on earth was that? I wondered. Where had all the beauty gone?

The week after was even worse. My saddle had twisted, my stirrups were uneven. I knew I wasn't going to make it. There was no way for me to hold on so I decided in that second, as the horse ran, that it would be better to throw myself off than to be trampled underfoot...

I waited for the right moment and pushed myself from its back.

I had fallen. But I refused to let it be over.

In minutes, the saddle was readjusted and I was smiling - laughing. I had mounted the horse once

more. What beauty there was in falling and to get back up. There was no anxiety about the possibility of falling anymore – it had happened and I had survived.

My instructor tells me that you have to contain the horse's energy, keep it moving forward, reminding it of what you want it to do, planning ahead. And I've learnt that in the plodding and marching, trotting and changes in rein, that sometimes, when you least expect it, you find your freedom in the canter, the fleeting moment that leaves you smiling at just the thought of it long after. You're left chasing the high, but it doesn't come in the frantic pursuit; it comes in the perseverance and the endurance, which is the inevitability of life.



Jacqueline Chesta

leaping out through a window-frame

by Marina Cicionesi Jansson

in silk dresses smelling of old theatre wardrobes
with those curls falling down her back
she's the princess I want to be

we stay in character in the garden
Oh how nice wet grass between toes!
What an evening systra-mi!
our audience is the black bird

we dance along to its melancholic summer tunes
Let's go into the lilac!
outside and away from the garden-scene
where our play becomes a film

i syrenen in the lilac the branches stick us like
ghost fingers
we've already made small paths; this time we go
further
out into old streets with cascades of roses down
the walls
picking petals to keep the rose-fragrance close as
we go

we come from a different country where the poor
rule the world
and we whisper and laugh in our own language
Systra-mi, what a pleasant night... systra-mi
let's go down to the water!

my princess sister stands still looking down the
street

petals falling from her hand. *Not tonight.*

I need to dip my toes before bed time!

Not tonight. She turns out of character

her dark eyes make the world become as adults
see it

where spotlights are lamplights along empty
shaded streets;

only a cat looks at us.

Systra-mi please...?

we linger at the school playground,
hang upside down on the gymnastic bars
petals falling like torrents from our pockets

Vi måste gå we have to go; she jumps down and I
do too;

running through gardens; silk dresses and bare
skin washed by dew

small white petals from the honey-smelling bush,
stick on us, illuminating us

as her mum looks at us: *where the hell have you
been?*

the anatomy of a maybe

by Iris Hontiverous Mauricio

i've seen your silhouette lighten in sunrise,
the tectonic plates of your shoulders
shifting apart then crashing back again
as you stretch, scent of sea salt in the air,
constellations of sand dappling your calves,
but you were not beautiful.
even when you smiled, grain-crater dimples
dotting your cheeks, the dark of your eyes
back-lit in honey while pastel blue
watercolour bled across the sky,
your hands warm sandpaper fluttering against
mine,
you were not beautiful.
but you are. there is poetry in you that i've been
trying to pull out of your heart like seaweed.
i'm grasping for words, but they keep
disappearing
into the spaces between your fingers,
falling into your hollow parts, the places i've
never seen, where you keep your oceans.
i haven't known enough of your soul for the
poetry
hiding within you to come easy, and
this is not easy.
this is holding my breath.



Jacqueline Chesta

The Four Lavaan

by Anujit Kaur

“Don’t insta my outfit, yeah? Sim might see it.”

“I don’t think Sim is going to be on Instagram on her wedding day,” I say to my cousin who is, on his wedding day, scrolling through his phone. He flicks through a friend, a cousin, pauses on a girl. She’s pretty. Hovers. Continues scrolling. Good for him. His sister had said to me she wasn’t sure why he was getting married. It was nothing to do with her disliking Simran, just that they were so young.

There’s nothing like an Indian wedding, and if you can ever make an Indian wedding in India... White horses, grand marquees in wide open parks, extravagance and joy and people dancing all night, celebrating a wonderful, loving union meant to last an entire lifetime and the many lifetimes to come.

But we’re not in India, and the extravagance today isn’t marking a commitment forever or a man and his family’s excitement to welcome a woman into their home. The extravagance is a compromise between two families – each trying to one-up a relative or meet an expectation, delivering on the image of a lifestyle they’ve

spent years manufacturing, within a budget. The joy isn't celebrating a union of two souls, it's smiling because you're on the boy's side or the girl's side and you've got to represent.

I'm tired and I'm sitting in a town car early on a Saturday morning. We'd spent hours at the wedding house talking photos of the groom in his *sherwani*, chest square, sword at his side. Move an inch, take a photo, move an inch, take a photo. We stood around awkwardly, decked out – heels, make-up, *dupattas*, and jewellery – waiting to be told, *do this, do that, come here, go there*. It is tradition that the boy's side all leave together and that they arrive happy and excited for the ceremony. It is a tradition that we try to keep.

We arrive at the temple, documenting the journey, hashtagging it on all social media between the cousins, careful to avoid pinning Jas' outfit. They do the *milni* – the meeting of families – and the ceremony starts.

There are four *laavan* – nuptial rounds – that the bride and groom take together. They represent the awakening of their souls and the journey they will take together. The bride's brothers mark the path, guiding her with comforting smiles and scathing glances towards Jas that say, *if you ever hurt her...*

Sim's aunt is tasked with helping her up for every laav. She struggles to keep the bride's skirt out from under her feet whilst also trying to navigate standing up in her own heavily embroidered outfit. *Sarees* and *lenghas* are impractical but they are beautiful and glamorous and Indian couture, so we bring them out for week long wedding festivities and feel like wonders.

The first laav is a commitment to righteousness – renouncing sin. It is about married life being the best state for this couple. It is not about Jas sneaking out from the age of fourteen or smoking weed on his roof. It's not about the underage drinking and the lies and screaming matches with his parents. It's not about Sim's empty rebellion, the boys and drinking in the park when she should have been in Biology.

Sim's oldest brother holds his sister's hand gently as she walks behind her husband-to-be in this nuptial round. The couple sit back down. Jas' sister is sitting behind him and whispers to walk slower – his nerves are evident. Of course. They rise again for the second laav, a little less awkwardly as Sim's aunt gets into her role better. Jas takes a breath and starts walking, this time steady.

The second laav is about the couple putting aside their ego and committing to finding God and

peace. But Jas and Sim were trying to find peace in their own way. Did they ever find it? They both – before they ever met – felt lost. They felt angry never fitting in. There was this idea of India and Britain, and neither was real. They both felt misplaced – questioning where they belonged, if anywhere.

Jas looked for a place to belong in his cousin's – the guys specifically. He sought their approval; they always managed to fit in, to straddle the in between area that comes with being second-generation, in a way that he never could. They embraced the traditions, made them their own. They ignored doing things just because they should, and embraced those acts as something new to explore – a part of one of the wonderful cultures in the world. Jas didn't get that. To him it was just being stuck between being Indian and British. To the guys it was starting life with these two drastically different cultures in your hand as you explored the world and every other culture it had to offer. It was Jas – a struggling hybrid identity – and the guys, sponges of culture.

Jas being guided, eased into something new, started to feel like he belonged. Sim didn't. She only felt something missing. She wasn't looking for the world, just for that one thing. But she didn't know what exactly it was she was searching for.

The third nuptial round is about love for God and the love between the couple. It is about loosening the shackles of influence and of the outside world and letting yourself fall into unconditional love and complete devotion to your soul mate. The shackles Sim loosened weren't the ones stopping her from love; she fell in love with Jas the day she met him. Sim's shackles were the ones of: *we do this for tradition*, and *we do this because what will people think otherwise?* She was unhappy for a long time. She felt trapped. But one day she asked her mother, *why are you doing this?*

Her parents were handing out pistachio *barfi*. She expected a *laissez-faire* response: *it's tradition* or *because we're supposed to*. But her mother smiled and told her about her own mother.

Sim's grandmother showed love through food, and because Sim's grandfather had a sweet tooth she showed lots of love through sweet treats. And for every special occasion she perfected a new dish; when Sim was born she made pistachio *barfi*. All those sweet dishes Sim's grandmother made over the years reminded her mother of her and brought home a sadness, so she never really had them around. But she missed her and when her daughter got engaged she wanted to feel her mother there. She wanted to celebrate her daughter finding love in a way

she valued, and she valued her mother's way of showing love.

Something clicked. Sim hadn't ever asked why they did things the way did; she'd resigned herself to anger at an idea of meaningless traditions. She'd resented the way she was brought up, but she started to question and untangle everything and those everythings started to fit into place. She found the traditions she loved – her family's own, ones she stole from friends and acquaintances. She started to untangle a religion she inherited, the things she really believed in and the things she didn't. She found in her mother someone who would explore history and social mores with her. She was still lost, but no longer resigned to something forced on her. She started to make sense of things, and she created a wedding programme of things she loved and traditions she developed an affinity for – everything meaningful for the most important day of her life.

And here she is. Following the love of her life as they make their final nuptial round, at the end of which she will be his wife. And he will be her husband.

The fourth and final laav the couple make is about attaining the divine – it is a spiritual union

of their souls. One of love and devotion. The entire ceremony is about the union of two souls; becoming one soul in two bodies. It is about a commitment to God and giving their selves to an everlasting and infinite love, the kind that should make up their marriage. But today, it is something else.

It is Jas and Sim, two kids, young as they are, trying to find their way in the world. Lost and scared and hurt before, but now just a little lost and a little less scared and a little but mended because they have each other holding the other's hand while they find their way.

The laavan are done, the ceremony ends. We're supposed to head to the reception together. The boy's side should all arrive together happy and excited with a new member of their family. And seeing these two, way too young to be married but found in themselves and with each other it resonates and comes off them like an energy. We arrive at the reception, happy and excited. It's not a tradition we're following, it's a feeling.



Jacqueline Chesta

Do You Remember?

by Devyn Gonsalves

Do you remember the first day we met? I barely spoke, and you didn't say much either. But oh my god, how much I liked looking at your eyes.

How much I liked that slightly crooked smile, curved up on the right side. I remember berating myself for not speaking more, convinced that you saw me as a fool. But apparently - *my friend smiles at me as we walk away from you and says to me, "He thinks you're sweet."* - you didn't.

Do you remember bowling? I was in the lane next to yours, laughing and sneaking glances your way. *God that smile...* I remember you teasing me for being absolutely terrible at knocking down any pins, sarcastically congratulating me when I proceeded to knock down just one. You would lean over into our lane, making a few witty and competitive comments, as I pretended to watch another person bowl. And each time you walked up to take your turn, you'd smile. *"Don't mess up!" I shout down the aisle. You look at me over your shoulder, and laugh, 'No pressure now.'"* I remember that I lingered long after my friends had left, though what I was hoping for, I don't know...that you'd talk to me more? That you'd ask to call me? That I'd somehow win you over? But I got cold feet as time went on and you

were just as casual as you were before, and left in hopes of appearing less like a lovestruck fool than I already did.

Do you remember when we sat next to each other at the play? I was so incredibly anxious, I wanted to make up for my silence from our initial meeting, redeem myself in your eyes. I remember feeling relief when you chose to sit next to me, and being at ease when our banter happened naturally. You seemed just as awkward as I was, and I was incredibly grateful for it. When leaving the theatre, on our way to go grab dinner, and you asked for my number. I was so flustered I started giving you my home number instead and had to nervously correct myself. After dinner, while our friend and her boyfriend walked ahead of us with their arms around each other, you casually put your arm around my cold shoulders... *"I feel as though I'm obligated to do the same thing."* you tease with a nervous smile. I laugh and look up at you, teasing in return, *"I wouldn't want you to avoid obligation"*...Walking with you felt natural, sharing each other's weight with each movement. I remember wishing you would've kissed me that night.

Do you remember when I drove you home one night and I sang in the car? *The car was silent except for a voice on the radio.* I never sing, not in front of people, and even then it would be soft and under my breathe. *"Wise...men...say..."* I did

it for a song or two, until I noticed you just staring at me from the passenger side. "*Only fools...rush in...*" I remember trying to laugh it off, jokingly telling you that you better not judge me for it. "*But I...*" And you said you wouldn't, but you smiled at me in a way that made me think you weren't joking. "*Can't...help...*" I wanted to pull over then and there and kiss you until I couldn't breathe. "*Falling in love...*" I should've done it. "*With...*" I should've done it. "*...you...*"

Do you remember our Monday dates? Every Monday, from 5:30 to 7:00, we'd go to Starbucks and get a water and just talk. Talk about school, about future plans, about family, about friends. Hell, we once talked about whether or not fish could see air. I remember peer editing an essay once, and when I looked out of the corner of my eye, you were just...watching me. Simply looking at me. And I felt completely vulnerable, like you could see every layer of me. I blushed. I remember one night, we got into an arm wrestling match and when I cheated by using both hands, you began to tickle me with furious pokes at my side. I filled the air with howls of laughter and pleas for you to stop, but you wouldn't until I was laying down with my head on the centre console...*Your eyes locking with mine...* And then you kissed me. Soft, not as heated as other times, but gentle. Can I tell you a secret about that moment? Yeah? It's the exact moment I knew that I loved you.

Do you remember being eager to kiss me after not seeing each other for a week? We had been looking forward to it since the end of winter break, counting down the days and hours until I got to see you in person. You met my parents that night. My parents said they liked you. That you seemed like a good kid, "a sweet boy", as my mother put it. *And all mine.* I was so proud to show you off, proud you made it past that test. The second we slid into your car's leather seats, right before either of us got buckled...*you smile at me before I realize that you plan on kissing me right then and there...*you leaned over the console to kiss me. Right as your lips closed the gap between yours and mine, my hand wandered to touch your face. I could feel the heat that radiated off your cheeks, and I was eager to live up to my promise to kiss you as hard and long as I could. I was eager to love you, because the saying about distance making the heart grow fonder was all too right. I remember us kissing once for a long time then short pecks after until you claimed we'd miss the movie if we didn't head out. That drive was filled with casual sarcasm and laughter and that parking was hell. You kissed my hair and I was happy. You spoke right in my ear and I felt important. During the movie, there was nowhere else I wanted to be other than in those worn down chairs with your arm around me. I was strangely self-conscious about turning up to

face you, but every time I did, you'd kiss my nose or my head or my lips and I'd forget. I remember that I couldn't stop smiling. *I turn up towards you as I laugh at Tina Fey and you look down at me. I smile, still giggling slightly, and you kiss me. I squeeze your hand, the one still interlocked with mine, and you pull me closer. I hear the woman next to me clear her throat, and I lean away, my cheeks flushing a red that was barely hidden by the darkness.* We were in a rush getting to the car and tried to get in as fast as possible because it was cold without being wrapped in you. You slid in on your side, like some kind of smooth criminal, and all I did was smile at you. I think we said a few things, but not many, because when I leaned on the centre console to tease you, your lips crashed against mine. It's hard to describe, but I was drowning in the fact that you were feeling something so compelling that you wouldn't stop kissing me. You let your hand hold my face, your thumb would stroke my cheek each time we pulled away to catch our breath. I would remark sarcastically whenever you would kiss my nose, claiming that it was full of snot, and that you'd kiss to rebel each time. You thought I wasn't a fan of you kissing my nose...but I loved it.

Do you remember how I'd say and do things just so that you'd laugh? That was my favorite thing, making you laugh. The corners of your eyes would crinkle and your mouth would smile this genuinely happy smile, and you'd always look

down as though in disbelief that I had said what

I said. Your happiness would always be contagious, and soon we'd both be in fits of laughter at each other. I loved making you laugh.

I loved seeing you smile. I loved being able to make you as happy as you made me. Or at least...*I look down the hall, inevitably in your direction, and see you smile. You laugh at something your friends say, your eyes crinkling in the same way they would when I talked to you, your mouth pulling ever so slightly one way when you smile...*I thought I was making you that happy.

Guess not.

Do you remember how I gave you a small smile to try and reassure you after you told me you didn't want to be with me anymore? *You look at the steering wheel in front of you and almost whisper, "I think I want to break up..."* After you said that it wasn't good timing and you didn't want to drag it out any longer and that I overdid being your girlfriend and that you were sorry? *"Okay," I whisper back, staring at you not looking at me.* You weren't smiling anymore. You looked so pale, almost nauseous. *"I'm sorry."* You offer as a weak plaster to the situation. I told you not to apologise, that I understood why you were making that choice. *"It's okay," I softly smile at you, "I understand."* That was the first time I lied to you. I

know that I got out of your car and walked numbly back to my house. I remember hearing

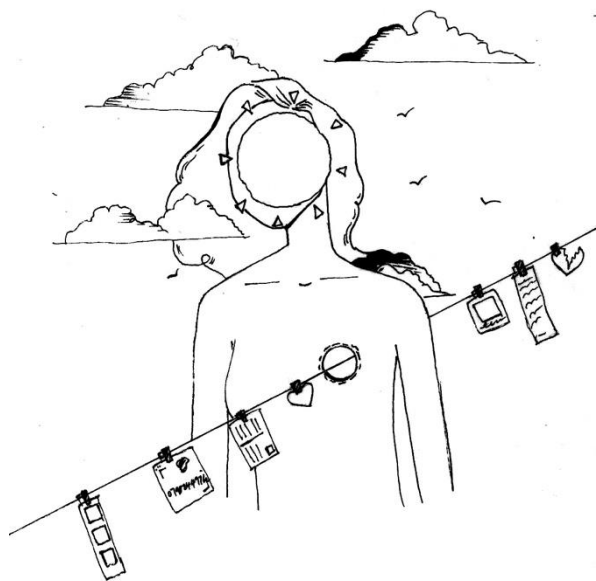
your car speed away. *Tyres scream and screech on the tarmac. You drove away so fast. I feel my breath catch in my throat. That's what hurt the most; that you left so damn fast. Some sort of strangled sound that I've never heard before escapes my mouth. Those screeching tyres still fill my ears at night.*

Do you remember me telling you that it was okay? *I scream, a twisted and injured sound, into my hand...What a lie. I cried when I heard your car leave. I can't see in front of me, everything is blurry and my face is wet and my chest hurts...I hadn't cried in years, but after that, after you, I cried for days. Why can't I breath? I felt weak. I tuck my knees to my chest and have one hand at the base of my throat as I try to get a handle on exhaling and inhaling normally...I cried because I wasn't okay, but you would never know that. I worry that you aren't okay either, and I hate myself for still caring...I cried because my chest hurt more than I thought it would. I am not hungry, nothing tastes good and anything I choke down tends to sit in my stomach like a stone, no room for anything else...I cried because something felt so very wrong and I couldn't tell you what. I am trying to hate you....why can't I hate you? I cried because I was hurt. I cried because I couldn't smile.*

I cried because I remember.

I remember it all.

Do you?



Simi Abe

The Windless Woods

by Philip Marriner

It was during the interminable winter of 2004 that I came into a good inheritance. My uncle's slow decline from a degenerative disease had coincided with me going through the first period of sustained unemployment in my working life as a journalist; the money was, even though I would never publicly admit it, a godsend.

Now entering my mid-forties, I had grown tired of living in Lubbock; the home of Buddy Holly, luminescent gas stations and cheap corn factories. In truth, I was so bored that it felt like a challenge to even blink. Over the last few years I had descended into the trap of nightly takeaway pizza and online gaming so much that it was all-consuming. Whenever I worked, I found myself longing for my bed and the opportunity to close my door on the world outside. It came as a surprise to me, therefore, how quickly things changed.

Within a month of getting my inheritance, I had welcomed in 2005 by finding myself driving a rusty, half-gutted van across the New Mexico state border on my way to Colorado. It was barely a quarter full of all my life possessions,

even though I had bought the smallest van that I could find.

I had bought a disused farmstead in Southwestern Colorado on a whim after browsing online estate agent's websites, selling off my Lubbock flat in the process. I figured that I would work freelance; the description of the farmstead was 'blissfully isolated', which would allow me to focus on my writing, a positive that far outweighed the lack of newspapers or magazines in the area I was moving to.

Giant, snow-capped mountains loomed over a valley that from the road above looked nothing more than a crack in the rocks. The farmstead was perched just outside of the almost constant shadow between the mountains, nestled in light snow. The van almost veered off the edge of the narrow dust path leading to it; it was so steep that I wondered if the aged van had enough power left in it to get back up to the top again. I could no longer call up the auto body shop that was five minutes away from my house in Lubbock, I realised; these luxuries were now lost to me. Indeed the nearest gas station, which was the only form of humanity, was nearly an hour drive away.

If I wanted food, the idea of getting a takeout pizza or even buying in some fresh vegetables

was no longer possible – the gas station only sold soda, grilled cheese clubs and ice cream sundaes. The closest I had previously come to growing my own food was sowing some salad leaves when I was in Elementary school; all the plants were eaten by insects within a few days.

The farmstead was in a terrible state; it looked significantly worse than the online photos had suggested. I had been so eager to leave Lubbock that my mind had clearly conveniently forgotten to see the cracks in the walls and the considerable number of missing tiles all over the massive single-story complex.

The barn had collapsed; it would take five men a week or so to clear it. I walked around the entire site; there were only three rooms in the main house that were not completely devastated by either flooding, layers of mould and fungus or by the destructive efforts of wild animals. The only rooms that were not beyond my minimal talents of repair work were a secondary kitchen, a book-keeping study that smelled of damp rot, but had mercifully had avoided all the damage that seemed to come across the rest of the building, and an old larder.

I moved most of my possessions from the van into the small book-keeping study, including a blow-up bed that I had last used on a camping trip over a decade ago, before all my friends had

married. I resisted the urge to sleep in the van, which seemed more weather-proof than the farmstead itself, even in its corroded state.

A generator was in a shed at the far end of the valley, but I had neither the fuel nor the expertise to work it. Not having access to the internet was something that I had not even considered before buying the property, but as the sun set over the mountains above, the lack of heating was becoming an even bigger problem.

My first night in the farmstead was freezing. No matter how many blankets I wrapped around myself nothing seemed to make any difference. I wondered in the morning if I had passed out from the cold, even though I ended up wearing four layers of clothing. The wind outside seemed to rush through the valley as if it was being pummelled through from a cannon; the walls of the building moved like a piece of paper in the way of a fan every twenty or thirty seconds. Occasional strong blasts of wind caused echoes to float around the desolate landscape outside, causing me to rush over to the window to double-check that nobody was there.

The study overlooked the valley. It had looked narrow from above, but it was only when I approached it for the first time on foot that I realised that it was so confined that a car would

struggle to drive down it without losing its side mirrors. It only took me a few days to realise that the valley only received a few hours of direct sunlight every day. This had caused the vegetation to become significantly less developed, apart from one area of large, thin needle trees located half way up the valley, balanced precariously on the edge of a small uneven platform.

On the third day, I tried my best to clear up the old, dented plywood desk that looked out from the study window. I opened it slightly to get rid of the smell of damp, before getting out my old notebook and a plastic wallet full of pens and began to write an article about living in the wilderness; I could send it to a big magazine in the city when I managed to get electricity and internet installed in the property.

I stared out onto the valley. It seemed to have grown by at least ten feet since I first arrived; the shadow of the mountains was now starting to cover the outbuildings of the farmstead. I stared outside for what must have been hours. I repeatedly told myself that I needed to go back to the gas station, maybe use their phone to quickly sell off to the farm and deal with the consequences later, but I could not convince myself to do it. I did not leave my chair for the entire day, before eventually managing to roll my shivering body into bed as the sun plummeted

behind the valley. I could not close my eyes all night, my mind taken away from rational or comprehensible thought.

Day Four seemed to take the shadow over a larger amount of the farmstead. I could no longer see the peak of the mountain without moving closer to the unpainted window of the study. I opened my notebook and decided that I would write about my experiences. In the back of my mind, I imagined the HBO series made about my life; how the city boy came to the wilderness with little more than a rusty van and his notebook.

I fell asleep without intending to, my notebook still in my hand. I awoke a few hours later to find that dusk was settling in. It had been joined by the first snowfall since I arrived, which had already settled to a ruler's depth. I felt a throb of pain in my stomach and a dull burning in my throat. It took me a moment, such was my haziness, to realise that I had not eaten anything, or drunk any water, for a long time. My mind frantically tried to remember if I had seen any tins of food lying around the farmstead, and I told myself that there had been a few packets of candy left in the glove compartment of my van.

Wrapping up as tightly as possible, I set out from the study. The snow had fallen in through holes in the ceiling. The floor was glazed with a sheet

of thick ice; if I fell and injured myself it would be a death sentence. I had not told anyone about my decision to move to Colorado and even took a moment to enjoy the possibility of my family desperately phoning me and searching for any trace of where I had gone. I refused to believe that they probably hadn't realised I had gone.

As I stepped outside, the snow pelted down on me with such venom that it almost knocked me to the floor. The farmstead in snow looked like a beautiful ruined castle from the British countryside. I wondered if it would still be standing in the morning.

The valley was now black, asleep, maybe waiting. The trees perched on the ledge half of the way up did not even move, however; it was as if it was a calm summer's night, in which you could hold hands with a lover underneath a star-laden, cloudless sky.

I trampled onwards, my back bent severely forward by the velocity of the snow. By more luck than judgement, I found myself in front of the van; it was half submerged. Even if I had wanted to drive to the gas station, the battery probably would have given up on the first attempt at ignition.

I opened up the driver's seat door, wrenching it open so hard that the top bolt came loose. I

scrounged like a fox in the trash through the glove compartment, under both seats and in the sides of the doors. There was nothing here, except the hardened remains of chewing gum that the previous owner had stuck there.

In the absence of anything else, I began to pry them up, wrenching part of the door off in the process. I finally pulled off a white lump, putting it into my mouth ravenously. It was like grinding a rock with my teeth; it was frozen solid.

I tried to hit it against the remains of the door, in the hope that it would magically heat up the gum and make it edible. Eventually, I threw it to the floor in disgust, my arm numbed from the effort.

Frantically, I looked around for any source of food that I had somehow missed. I got out of the van, remembering a survival program on Discovery, and shovelled snow into my mouth with my gloveless, bright red hands.

Whilst this satisfied my burning throat to an extent, it only made my stomach more desperate for a similar reward. I went through the contents of the glove department one last time, in the hope that I had missed a loaf of bread, or some chocolate, on my first investigation. Forcing myself to be methodical, I carefully examined each object before placing it onto the passenger seat after inspection. I went through the

insurance documents of the van, some loose dollar notes and some bootleg cd's before coming across my cell phone.

I played with it in my hands desperately, trying to remember if I had left it with any battery power at all. With my eyes closed, I pressed the button on the side to turn it on. After a few seconds of agony, I felt it vibrate. The bright display burnt through my closed eyes as I looked upon it as if it was a fifth gospel of the Bible. There was six percent of the battery life left; no signal.

My eyes were drawn upwards towards the mountains, having almost forgotten their presence in my terror. Now they towered over me, so big that I could barely see the sky at all. They had darkened in appearance, so black now that they looked as if they were themselves in shadow against the snow that surrounded me.

The tiny valley looked like a small needle, gradually being eaten up by its surroundings.

I decided to run. I saw a snow peak that was, give or take, half a mile away from the largest of the mountains. I felt the phone battery draining with every step, but if I reached the top, I knew that I would get some signal. I scrambled with all the energy of someone who had not eaten for a while - like a blind dog on hot coals - but somehow found my way to the surface. There

was now just three percent left of my cell battery. I held it up to the sky and checked the icon; there was one bar of signal.

I gluttonously tapped at the screen, opening up the menu and half expecting to see all of my contacts no longer there. My mother's name said otherwise. I had no idea what time it was, but as I pressed the screen and the phone began to dial, I hoped she was awake. I heard the connected sound.

"Hello?"

"Mum. I need help."

"Where are you? I can barely hear you, are you by a train?"

I warmed up a little at the sound of her voice and proceeded to tell her what had happened.

"Stay there and get somewhere warm," she said.

"I'm coming."

I didn't have time to thank her before my phone vibrated, a death rattle of sorts, and it turned itself off for the final time. I ran back towards the farmstead, dreaming of my bed in the study as if it was heaven on earth. I did not look at the mountains, but I felt their gaze on my back. As I opened the door to the farmstead, I glanced towards the valley, towards the trees. Their number seemed to have grown a little. Their long, needle like branches glowed a dark, welcoming green; the green of summer,

refreshing cloudy lemonade and marshmallow
fires.

My next memory was waking, cold, in darkness.
I was not alone. I closed my eyes, praying for
sleep to come. All I could hear was the rustling of
plastic at the end of my bed. When I awoke the
next day it had gone, but it did not take the snow
with it.

I lay in bed from sunrise through to sunset,
hoping that every gust of wind was my mother's
Landrover coming down the mountain road
towards me. My body felt drugged when I finally
forced myself to get up; in truth, I wondered if I
was still dreaming. I had no idea how long it
took me to stagger down the stairs to the snow
outside, where I sat down and ate it as if it was a
roast dinner. It was when I stood up that I
realised that the mountains now had the entire of
the farmstead under its shadow.

The next few days were indistinguishable from
one another and due to the ever increasing
shadow of the mountains it was impossible to tell
between day and night. I told myself that my
mother was late because of the weather
conditions, not because she had given up, but it
was hard to get the negative thoughts out of my
head.

A storm, with thunder rolling in the distance, had broken out and snow had started to fall into the study, the fragile remains of the roof slowly disintegrating above my head. I had only ever gone camping a few times in my life, but even a flimsy tent felt like it would offer more protection in the storm than this building. I pulled my duvet close for warmth, but it made little difference.

It was after another of my extended naps that I awoke to a jolt, as if I had fallen. For the second time, I knew that I was not alone. This time, however, the fear that developed in me on the first occasion was absent; maybe it was the hope that it was my mother standing outside the river that made me look.

A lynx sat on the window frame outside. Its long dark ears were sprinkled with snow, but the rest of its ginger fur remained untouched. The way that it was staring at me seemed to suggest that it was slowly making a judgement about me. It was nonchalantly blinking on occasion, its breathing unhurried and steady. I stood up as quickly as I could, to try and scare it away. It did not move, instead it almost raised its eyebrows in contempt at my efforts.

“What do you want?” I said.

The animal looked at me, as if it pitied what I had turned into. It eyed me up and down, before

slowly turning and jumping off the window ledge gracefully. It looked so warm, wrapped up in its fir. I had a sudden realisation, guided by my stomach, that this was the first animal I had seen since arriving. Whilst my mother could arrive at any moment, she could easily be another day away.

I ran to the chair in the room, and tried to wrench the wooden armrest out of its socket. It gave away easily, splintering the chair down the middle. The end of it looked sharp enough; I ran outside. It seemed to be even colder than before, but I put the chill out of my mind as I ran towards where I had last seen the lynx.

It was waiting there, like a parent who was tolerating a poorly behaved child. I ran at it, and it bounded away, towards the valley. I tripped over countless rocks as I chased it, the complete opposite of the animal as it gracefully leapt up the steep ravine, stretching its entire body as it travelled giant distances with one leap. Without stopping, it disappeared into the lush green woods above, and I stopped to catch my breath.

The wind thrashed all around me, and I wondered for a moment if I was about to pass out. Yet again, the woods above barely seemed to register a light breeze.

The lynx did not reappear; it must still be inside, I told myself. I held the remains of the chair hand

rest in my hand. I could imagine cutting through the flesh of the animal; this thought pushed me on as I climbed the narrow valley, not caring about the cuts and bruises all over my body. The progress I made was slow; the valley seemed to stretch and grow as I climbed it, the edge getting so steep I wondered if I was going to have to abseil down it after I caught the lynx. The wind was now pulling so hard at my hair that I wondered if it was going to be ripped out.

Then, my hand reached upwards and the rock that it grabbed hold of was warm. The heat expanded all over my body. I grabbed another rock with my other, bloodied, hand. If anything, it was even hotter. I hoisted myself up. I had reached the edge of the woods.

Someone had turned the heating on. I felt the sun on my back and I closed my eyes in delight. The wind had gone. The trees ahead of me, grand and beautiful, seemed to have fruit hanging from them as the rustled in a non-existent breeze. Little drops of water fell from the leaves. I looked back towards the farmstead. It looked very different now; the old shack was now replaced by a modern, respectable building. Powerlines attached it to a large mast in the background; it looked much closer to the images that I thought I saw on the estate agent's website. More importantly, the long shadow from the mountain

had been replaced by resplendent sunlight. I noticed the remains of a partially damaged van on a drive, although it was nowhere near as rusty as the one that I had purchased from Lubbock. On the floor outside seemed to be the remains of a chair.

In the distance, I saw something moving along the dust road that I had taken to get to the farmstead in the first place. As I focused, I heard rustling in the trees behind me. The lynx was approaching me, silently. I turned around suddenly; it caught my eye and ran deeper into the woods. I followed, weapon readied.

The wood was much bigger than it looked from below. The trees were packed together tightly, maybe for warmth. I was now so hot that I had to take my top off. Sweat pumping out of me, I heard a branch snap in the distance; the lynx. The trees seemed to get wilder and more luxurious as I chased it further inside. I tripped over a giant root. Looking up, the tree that it belonged to over fifty foot in height. I saw the lynx dart to the left ahead of me; I was making ground on it. I clutched my weapon, hard.

Then, we came to a clearing. The lynx stopped inside, clearly out of breath. The animal moved over to me now, without fear. It was here that my strength failed me. The lynx rubbed against my legs, slowly and lovingly. I looked at the animal

and tried to make myself stab it in the chest, but I knew I couldn't do it. Resigned, I sat on the floor, cross-legged. The lynx, like an overgrown cat, purred as it let me stroke it slowly.

With the warmth of the sun around me, I relaxed.

The lynx yawned, and gradually nudged my hands away, seemingly tired of my company. It moved away from me, out of the clearing. I moved to wipe the sweat away from my eyes; as I moved my hands downwards and past my eyes, all the warmth in my body suddenly froze.

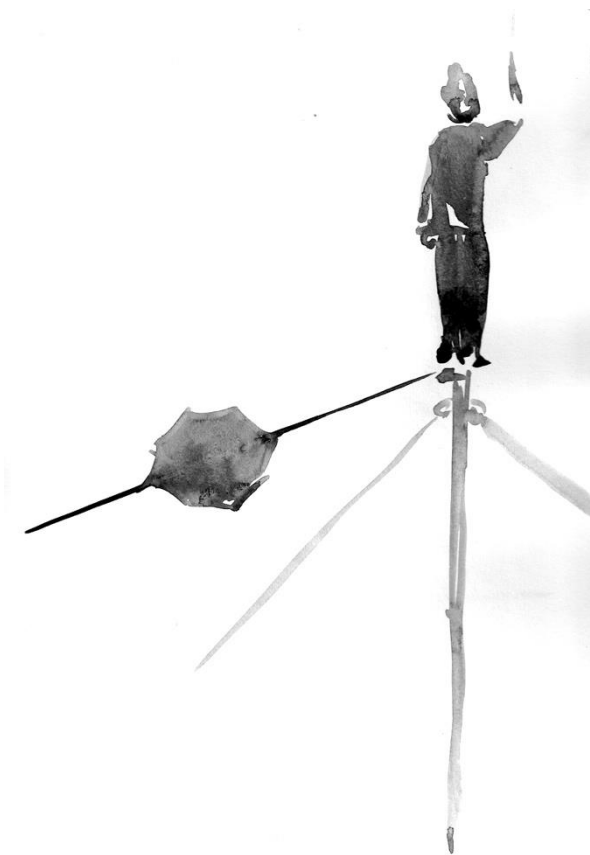
I was standing half way up the valley. Half of my body was entrenched in snow. I was shaking so hard that my teeth felt loose. Thick bullets of hail fired against my bare torso, the thin trees above me offering no protection whatsoever. The farmstead was now completely submerged in shadow. From what I could see, it was even more decayed than ever. My rusty van was now lost under the snow. I looked downwards, towards the entrance of the main building.

Someone was standing there, dressed in a rain jacket. As I looked down at whoever it was, I saw their hood move slowly up towards where I sat. They were gazing straight at me. I thought back to the first night that I had realised that I was not alone in the farmstead. I had not dared to look towards the end of the bed, hearing only rustling.

The person below me had been there; I was sure of it. The sound was the wind coming from the opened window brushing against the material of their rain jacket. He, or she, was standing at the end of my bed. Staring.

Before these thoughts had finished flickering through my mind, the person had already set off towards me. I let out a shrill scream, looking around me for help. I brushed the snow from my face with my hand, upwards this time. As my hand covered my eyes, I heard the lynx again. It was behind me, purring gently. Warmth again returned to my fingers and toes. An avalanche of heat struck me. The palm trees had returned, just blocking out the sun from the lush blue sky; I was back.

I lay on my back, yawning blissfully. I stroked the lynx as if lay beside me, stretching itself out with a yawn of its own. The green trees above moved in time with one another above me, as if they were singing a lullaby. I closed my eyes and smiled to myself as I fell asleep, just as a single snowflake fell onto my lips.



Jacqueline Chesta

The People's Party

by Max Hallam

Charlie brought up the advert he had seen six months ago on an up-and-coming tech site. "Virtual reality was once a technology only found in movies - something of the future. No longer, with the Oculus, Hololens, Morpheus; VR is widespread. You can explore whole worlds, the expanses of space, ancient civilisations, all from the comfort of your own home.

Nepenthe goes one step further. Everyone has memories. Some they'd rather forget. Some they wish would never fade. Through the new Nepenthe headset, you can bring your favourite memories into sharp relief and banish those embarrassing, angry and tearful ones far out of sight.

Apply as a beta tester today!

Disclaimer: Nepenthe uses proprietary sequences of powerful LEDs to effect opto-genetic manipulation of the brain's acetylcholine neurotransmitter. The technology is still in beta and may cause adverse effects including drowsiness, seizures, nausea and fatigue."

He shook his head slowly, his mouth curling into a grin. Six months of radio silence, and now this! He ran his hand over the package, letting himself enjoy the anticipation.

Soon it was too much, and he tore the cardboard open. Inside was another smaller box, topped with a short note.

"If you're reading this, congratulations! You've been selected as one of the 100 worldwide beta testers for the Nepenthe headset. Unlike our competitors, we have no contract or set guidelines. Play around and test out the hardware. Data gathered from use will be sent from your headset to us every time it is switched into standby after it has been used. The beta phase will last one month. You will not be required to return your headset after the beta, but you may exchange it for a live release product once testing and development are finished.

His phone beeped a fanfare. He sighed and tapped it, opening a live stream.

"-and we can now reveal that the winner of the May 2020 general election is the People's Party!" The screen cut to a figure standing in front of a cheering crowd. "Roderick Darby is the new Prime Minister of Britain, with a massive 76 percent of the vote."

The man began to speak. "Thank you all for coming here today. I promise that as the leader of this great country, I will do my utmost to combat the growing evil of drug addiction. The Psychoactive Substances Act from our predecessors was a good baseline, but we will take it much further-"

He shut off the stream. Politicians. They were all the same, promising this, that and the other. He dropped his phone onto the desk and put the note beside it, opening the second box.

Inside the box, nestled in polystyrene, was a small sleek black headset. It looked like a cross between a phone and aviator goggles, sprinkled with LEDs. He pulled it on over his head, adjusted the strap, and flicked the switch.

Hundreds of tiny lights shone into his scalp, and he sank into his memories.

*

Charlie's phone beeped again the next morning. He tapped it and listened.

"A man from Lambeth was brutally executed last night in what the Met are calling a 'vigilante attack'. The gang known as the Southwark Saviours has taken responsibility." The presenter held her hand to her earpiece and spoke again.

"I'm just receiving word that the Prime Minister is due to make a statement." The screen cut to Darby.

"If you came here today to hear me condemn this attack, I'm afraid you will be disappointed. There are several million drug addicts and dealers in England alone. We have, through our neglect, created a narco-state. I endorse the actions of these brave vigilantes, and I will not rest until we have filled mortuaries with the bodies of these stains on our society. Thank you."

Vigilantes praised by the Prime Minister? Surely that was a slippery slope which could end in extrajudicial death squads like in the Philippines? He shook his head. Since when had he decided to get political? He wasn't any good at it. He took the Nepenthe headset from its case and pulled it on. Time to do some more beta testing. When he finished several hours later, he thought back briefly on the news. The rhetoric was vaguely disturbing, but he couldn't quite grasp why. He wrestled with the question for a moment and then gave up. It wasn't worth the effort, and after all, he was sure the government had its people's best interests at heart.

*

Somewhat unsurprisingly, his phone trumpeted another piece of breaking news the next day. In a nice change of pace, this one was an article instead of a live reporter.

'A hundred dead in neighbourhood cleansing'

'One hundred people have been killed by the Southwark Saviours in a Lambeth

neighbourhood. Eyewitnesses report that doors were battered down and the residents shot dead by members of the London gang. Appallingly, they did not only kill those believed to be drug users, but also their families. These killings are believed to be linked to the Prime Minister's endorsement of the group in a speech made yesterday.

Political editor: the BBC attempt to stay neutral in political affairs. However we at the BBC feel that this situation is an exception, and cannot side with the Prime Minister on this issue.'

Beneath the article was a video, doubtless a repeat of Darby's speech. He ignored it.

Terrorism was always on the news - Isis, Al-Qaeda, Hezbollah - what was one more group? Just another media sensation for a few more years. Besides, terrorists were the present, and technology was the future. He knew which one he'd focus on.

*

He checked his phone's calendar. Two months' worth of empty virtual boxes had passed since the end of the beta test. Today was the day his live release version finally arrived, along with the thousands of people who had ordered the headset following the hugely popular response during testing. He couldn't wait. Itching to use it, he brought up the BBC on his phone, anxious to while away the last few hours. As usual, the news was utterly depressing.

"The Southwark Saviours have released a list of their targets, consisting of addicts, suppliers and manufacturers. The list is available online. We at the BBC urge everyone to check the list and take appropriate measures. The death toll is believed to number just under 5,000, with the Prime Minister offering no comment."

He ran a quick search looking for the list and typed in his name. No results. Of course not.

Something flagged up under his surname; his name still did not appear, but someone else's did. He knew his mother had dabbled in cocaine when she was younger, but she'd never been addicted to it in the first place. The list must have come from people she worked with a long time ago. He idly wondered how the Southwark Saviours had gotten the information from said people, then dismissed it. It was clearly a misunderstanding.

The doorbell rang and his heart leapt. It had to be the headset. He could put this news behind him.

*

A few days later, he sat relaxing with the new-and-improved Nepenthe in the living room. His eyes closed behind the goggle visor, he called up memories from his childhood. A year ago the most he would have been able to remember was a blur, perhaps the smell of warm tarmac as he frolicked in a playground with his friends. With the headset it was all so clear; the vivid blue summer sky, the cool breeze on his arms, the red paint on the climbing frames at the park, even the squawking of the pigeons who circled overhead.

There was a knock at the door.

He took off the headset, wondering who was there.

"Coming!" He heard his mother call. There was a creak as she opened the door and then a loud bang as she slammed it shut.

"Let us in." A rough voice growled.

"Stay away from us!"

"Us? There's more in there." The man seemed to be speaking to someone else with him. "Make sure you get the whelps." They smashed something against the door. Even from a room away, he could hear the wood splintering. Soon the door gave way to them, and heavy booted footsteps sounded inside.

"Please, no." He heard his mother beg. That was odd. He'd never heard her use that tone before.

"Not my son."

Several sounds filled the air, resembling nothing so much as the cracking of a whip. There was a thump as something hit the floor. Had they dropped something? How inconsiderate of them. He was trying to enjoy himself.

They burst into the living room. The man wore a tactical vest and balaclava emblazoned with 'SS'. In one hand he held a phone, and in the other he held a pistol.

"So you're the coke head's son." The man sneered. "Darby wants us to wipe out your disease."

Charlie looked at the man with the gun, shrugged, and pulled the headset back on.



Mark Larkin

D-I-Y Kit

by Stephen Powdrill

'Give half-hour, we'll try some more',
says your father,
pipetting purple juice
into three crystal glasses
then switching to tumblers, mugs,
an old egg-cup harvested from the floor.
'Swill it around like you're spit-balling
slurp it like potato soup'
there was a knack
to tasting filthy strong wine
with class, mature discernment
at half-past eleven in the morning.

With time, it should mature in the glass,
shifting rosily from rotting vinegar
into oaky tones, cherry notes
trilling melodies in the mouth
that inspires him to bellow Johnny Cash
out the kitchen window. 'He didn't need
no woman', he yells between drags
of the chewed up fag
he is swishing in the air like bunting.
Telling him Cash died married seems brash.

You want to wipe the crimson-splattered table
clean,

put the wine back in the cupboard
with the gardening shears
the range of vintage plant pots
and the aggressively gleaming pasta machine
that have arrived gradually
in sad cardboard packages
damp from the postman's satchel
torn open with such enthusiasm
since she left
but you embrace the cluster of buckets
that force you to walk on tip-toes
after watching him pass out in the front room.

'Dad, this one's got a nice flavour!'
You call with hope,
remembering how much it hurt
seeing him weep through
a crack in the door
and how you didn't know what to say
and that keeping busy is all anyone can do
and that at least he's communicating again.

You notice the wine is sour,
under-developed,
and has begun to seep rancid red
into the soft splintered boards
beneath your feet.
It will wash off with bleach,
you convince yourself
as the room wobbles uncertainly.

Monster Baby

by Philip Tew

March 2017 and Jim Dent stared at the blank screen of his desktop computer. He rather fancied a coffee. Instead he ruminated on events five years previously when his father, Howard, had faced various ‘challenges’ as his parent had referred to them. Jim’s mother had also been afflicted by a series of minor ailments. Ironically over Christmas the couple had seemed to have coped well enough, Howard typically tyrannical toward his wife. As spring approached with astonishing rapidity, the façade erected by his parents finally shook, tumbling down that summer. Jim paused after typing his first few sentences. He knew his metaphor was entirely wrong. It had been less a plummeting pile of bricks, more the ripping apart of a set of theatrical flats upon which the frontage of a building had once been artfully painted, but fading now stood vandalised, its huge gaps flapping. The curious monument the Dents had constructed as a centre-point of their marriage had been Howard himself. For as long as Jim could remember, the narrative was that Howard Arnold Dent was strong, a man of good judgment, virtually infallible, and must be obeyed. At about nine, Jim worked out the

machinations and failings of grown-ups. He'd realized one truth, that Howard was wilful, neurotic, and bullying, or, simply expressed a monstrous, overgrown baby. So Jim thought of him, right to the present day. Yet the man looked benign enough, always had, very well turned-out, short, cherubic, and exceedingly clean. Impeccably dressed, and garrulous with strangers, for a working man he seemed atypically charming, often being generous, yet never emotionally or intellectually so. At home Howard was a radically different, as if caged, enraged by his own and others' failings. Held back by marriage, fatherhood, he was angry at his fate, punishing those closest to him, revelling in his visceral retardation. Trapped in a lifelong pre-adolescent phase, at eighty-three he lacked any capacity to quell his emotions, especially if anyone happened to disagree with him, even on minor issues. In fact as an octogenarian he'd worsened in this respect. Nevertheless, Howard's chubby, rounded face, and bald pate still managed to offer a beneficent vision of youthfulness, his skin smooth and unwrinkled, hands like a younger man's. Until March Howard, with the assistance of Jim's mother, had maintained their conjuring trick of Howard still appeared healthy, and fit. Jim lived in the Lea Valley near his parents. An only child, he'd moved back a half mile distance across a park from the modest area where he'd

grown up, so he might assist them as they aged. Rationally he'd known they'd soon be struggling despite their denials, and gradually Jim began to shop on a weekly basis for his mother. Given his father was increasingly nervous about driving, the pair stayed at home. A treat became a sunny day spent at the bottom of the garden. Outwardly they pretended that absolutely nothing was altering, his father beaming to himself on anyone's arrival, scrubbed up, and perched on his leather chair. Yet if the visitor happened to be Jim, he frowned. Within minutes he'd become as argumentative, as aggressive as ever. Howard was prone to flying off into rages, sulking, storming out of the house, shouting, very often literally screaming. He'd always been the same, throughout Jim's childhood, a constantly unstable volcano. It was like living beneath Vesuvius, just like 7th April 1906 when an eruption caused the 1908 Olympics to be moved from Rome to London, at the newly-finished White City alongside the Franco-British Exhibition. At this long demolished stadium Jim and his parents once watched Kipochage 'Kip' Keino run a mile in August 1967, beaten into second place by Jim Ryun, the world record holder at three minutes fifty-one point one seconds. Everyone had anticipated another new record, and so the occasion was tinged with disappointment, even though the race was thrilling. Recently Jim had watched a YouTube film of the event. When he mentioned the

occasion, Howard insisted that Keino had won. Jim had misremembered, must have, since he'd only been a damned bloody child at the time. The River Lea had originally snaked through open countryside down into East London, emptying into the Limehouse Basin and the Thames. The waterway's presence had once brought great wealth, factories springing up in the mid to late nineteenth century, workers drawn from the land in adjacent counties, especially during the agricultural depressions of the late nineteenth century, like his father's family, the Dents, from around Standon in Hertfordshire. Most of Howard's extended family had worked in the various enterprises, the jute mill, the precious metal smelting works, Edison Light Company, the often foul-smelling glue factory, the small arms factory, later various electronics factory and naturally the power cable works where Howard had spent his working life. An area once boasting swathes of industry, heavy and light, mile upon mile of massive sites, its landscape also dotted with various pubs, cafes, multiple yards, suppliers of tools and parts, repairers of vehicles, providers of fuel and lubrication, freelance metal workshops, and myriad other smaller enterprises including shops, banks, sea food stalls, flower vendors, paper sellers, as well as bus drivers, train operators, patrolling policemen, teachers for children, lollypop people for crossing roads,

builders, mechanics, all servicing the behemoths of industry and their workforce.

An array of such activities long dominated, was so immense, so entrenched in local lives that Jim's father thought that such edifices, monuments to working men and capital, would last forever. However, by 2012, the time of his illness, they'd very largely gone, bulldozed years before and redeveloped. Thatcher had long finished her scorched earth policy attack upon the unions and the industries that nurtured them. International finance shifted across the globe where labour seemed eternally cheaper. All of the old factories had vanished, their sites cleared, their machinery sold off and sent to the far-east, following that trail of transnational capitalism. The area Howard knew so well from boyhood had undergone a rapid transition, much of it dying before his eyes, barren areas, empty for many years before its sudden recovery, newer enterprises springing up, bakeries, large retail outlets, offices. A whole way of life and work vanished as if exterminated out of sight, no contemporary Bruegel the Elder on hand to record the dreadful martyrdoms. By the time Jim's mother called him frantically, that way of living only continued in the memories of its survivors, those in retirement, others who'd been made redundant.

Of the struggles facing Howard there were a few clues, the occasional glimpse of a bag of incontinence pads, the mornings when it was

clearly an effort to make Howard presentable, at ten a.m. still unshaved and in pyjamas spotted with patches of piss. Finally on Saturday 24th March, a single fall from the toilet put paid to any lingering illusion, blew away the smoke, leaving only the shattered mirrors, the manner of his parents' trickery revealed. Jim and his partner, Gabi, were out shopping when toward mid-morning his mobile rang in a supermarket, his mother. At his parents' house there was a gaggle of neighbours in the hallway, one Greek Cypriot from next door together with his wife, and an ex-workmate of Howard's and his wife from across the street, his father clearly having been tidied up before anyone had been called to help. Heads crowded. There was a palpable panic one could almost taste. Howard was still lying with his head in the shower, a pool of blood in its tray. Jim's mother hovered, anxious. 'What's happened?' Jim asked no one in particular and from the jumble of responding, overlapping voices he managed to ascertain that his father had fallen as he tried to clamber onto the toilet and he'd bashed his head on the way down, on the shower tray most likely. That much was evident. 'Well, it might look much worse than it actually is.' Jim explained, 'The head bleeds profusely. Such wounds often look worse than they are. And this won't be the first time you've bashed your head?' The last remark was directed at Howard, who nodded vaguely.

Everyone else seemed mesmerized by the scene, so Jim stood back, and searched for an old tea towel in a kitchen drawer, which he soaked in warm water. He returned to his father and gently bathed the likely site of the wound. 'It's virtually stopped bleeding,' he told the assembled throng. 'Look.' His father had a terrified look in his eye, skin pale, slightly out of breath, panicky. 'Nothing to worry about, Dad,' Jim said to him.

'We've called out an ambulance, James,' said the next-door-neighbour. His wife was looking out of the front door, keeping both eyes on the road, a round woman, her body inflated. 'I don't think he really needs one,' Jim said, looking at the wound. 'He's just shaken. He'll be ok.' Jim was more concerned with interrogating his mother, to see why the accident might have occurred, what was at the bottom of this event. Was his father struggling even walking to the loo?

'They're coming, they're on their way,' said the ex-workmate, who'd spotted the blue flashing light.

'I see,' Jim said just as the flashing light was clearly visible, the ambulance pulling up outside. A gaggle of children watched from the other side of the road. Howard was kept in overnight in hospital, given some sedatives and discharged. He continued using his exercise bike in the shed, but decreasingly so, week by week, as if shaken from his resolve by the fall.

Howard tumbled again on 18th April, down the stairs frontwards, bruised, again breathless, but otherwise physically uninjured. He complained of pains in his chest and, after Jim sat talking to his father, he asked his mother whether they should take him to hospital. At their local casualty department, threatened by cuts, Howard talked of his for years as chairman of the hospital radio, set up with younger friends. He reminisced, talking solely to his wife, cheerfully recollecting many happy memories, unperturbed by his surroundings which for him were so utterly familiar. He'd gone round the wards collecting requests. Jim remembered visiting the original studios which his father had helped build, near the morgue, and being confronted by bodies under a sheet serving as a shroud, one taller stiff showing its feet. Howard had greeted Jim. 'Such a wonderful spot,' Jim complained, indicating the two dead souls, the recently departed.

'Don't worry about them,' said Howard. 'The dead don't worry about anything, they're past caring.' Throughout his life a staunch atheist, he hated all religions, their exponents and followers. For what reason Jim had no inkling. He'd always suspected that it was connected with the war, narratives of which had dominated Jim's own childhood.

Howard was kept in for almost three weeks, feeling physically better, he told them. That was

until the diagnosis. On the tenth day perched on his bed he whispered, 'It's pulmonary fibrosis.' He pointed at another patient. 'Poor devil over there has it. Incurable, he told me, but the doctor has said nothing about how long I've got.' 'Well, you might have ages,' Jim suggested. 'Yes, maybe, although maybe not.' Howard sounded gloomy.

'Well, remember that you might,' said Jim. 'Great, but it gets you in the end.' Howard thought about that for a moment, self-absorbed, and for once in his life justified in so being. 'What's the word for how long you've got, the medical term?' he asked his son, who had to think for a moment. 'What do I ask them?' 'Well, you might ask what your prognosis is.' 'Do what?'

'Look, just ask "What's my prognosis."'

'Yes, thanks, son. Well, *prognosis*, that's it, *what's my prognosis*,' Howard repeated to himself in rehearsal for his big moment.

A day later the consultant was doing his rounds. His father was fiddling with a radio and headphones. He had all manner of electronic gadgets in his locker, brought by a young friend from his hospital radio days, Les, who'd charged up the pay-to-watch television. The consultant approached, a rotund Asian man in his forties, and after a brief conversation about how Howard felt, whether he was comfortable, Howard piped up, 'Well, doctor, what is my prognosis.' 'Well, that's difficult to say.'

‘You’ve no idea, at all then?’

‘Well, unfortunately you’ve been diagnosed fairly late, so that’s not great. It’ll be months probably, a year if you’re lucky.’ For the very first time Jim felt sorry for his father. Howard looked even gloomier than before.

‘I see,’ he said. The consultant departed. Howard looked in accusatory fashion at his son, as if he were responsible. After that point he sat full-time in his oxygen mask looking glum.

Howard returned home on 15th May, sleeping downstairs in the dining area, on a new bed in the foot of the L-shaped lounge, near a small window overlooking the garden. Jim visited. His father was clearly struggling, looking wan, agitated. Howard hated being downstairs 24/7, thought the look of the bed—a short one ordered specially by Jim—ruined their home of which both parents were inordinately proud. They loved both extensions planned by Howard: the front porch and kitchen. The latter allowed them to squeeze in a downstairs toilet and shower. An oxygen machine had been delivered the previous day and Howard sat under a mask, breathing heavily. Somehow he’d managed to move the television, despite his condition. It blared, tuned to a channel which Howard ignored. Jim suggested thinking about assistance. Howard furiously rejected any bloody helper, they could cope perfectly well, thank you very much. They’d take care of things perfectly well. When

Jim tried to persist, questioning this assertion, suggesting his mother could not cope, and really needed help, Howard shouted, 'Mind your own fucking business! If we need help we'll ask the Macmillan nurse!' Jim desisted. The old man would only become agitated again.

'You'll be alright,' Jim said, not believing his own words.

'Where did I go wrong? I didn't smoke, ever. I didn't drink that much.' This was true, or at least after Howard was about to reach forty and his wife gave him an ultimatum about drunken nights out and about with friends. 'I was careful about my food.' This was an understatement. After the 1960s and the success with the links relating smoking and cancer, the health lobby had moved onto food. Howard avoided almost everything such journalism proscribed, confused about contradictory reports. A life spent after forty with low salt, low fat, high fibre, no red meat, no high sugars, no artificial sweeteners or additives, avoiding E-numbers, and drinking very little alcohol. Jim's poor mother had been chastised on numerous occasions, accused of trying to kill her husband by offering him ice cream. 'And now I'm dying before my time, before some of those sods I know who didn't look after themselves at all. Where's the justice in that? All that effort in keeping fit, being careful about everything, and I'm going to bloody die before my time.'

'It was work that caused it probably. They used to call this condition carpenter's lung,' Jim said. He'd researched it online, not just webpages, but downloaded articles from American medical journals at the British Library. He'd undertaken similar research the time of his father's extreme confusion in the heart hospital after having a valve repaired seven years previously, offering the consultant a piece of his mind about visible clocks and other such recommendations found in the latest American research ignored by Howard's medical team. 'You were unlucky, it was all that dust.' Jim recollected visiting the carpenters' shop in the factory where Howard had worked, often pretty grim.

'Never ... it's not from work, I don't believe it. There were filters, they were fitted.'

'You'd worked there for years before that, dad. They were fitted much later in the Sixties.'

'As ever you're just plain bloody wrong.'

'Oh well, suit yourself.' Jim tired of arguing.

Saturday 16th June saw another fall in the toilet, his mother so frightened she failed to remove the incriminating evidence. Their adaptation to Howard's plight was revealed. The pair was using an ancient, rickety office chair on wheels, with a frayed brown cloth seat, to transport Howard. His mother had evidently been pushing Howard to the toilet, despite little strength in her thin frame. Their system of transport was unstable, even perilous. 'You've not been using

this?' Jim asked incredulously, worrying about other secrets they were keeping from him. His father determined not to depend on Jim, could not see the despair of his wife, her physical weakness, or the abject quality of their lives. They were terrified someone might interfere, Howard unwilling to change or contemplate intervention of any kind. 'Well, have you?' 'He told me to.' Apparently Howard refused any suggestion of a wheelchair, and admittance of frailty, of age.

'This can't go on, you know. This is totally unsafe. And it's wearing you out, mother.' Gabi and Jim lifted Howard, still a heavy weight, and carried him back to bed. Every movement was painful for him.

Jim took his estate car and bought a cheap commode, something Howard resisted tooth and nail, his frail voice still from the bed complaining, rejecting the whole arrangement. Jim worried for his mother. Everything looked beyond her, physically, mentally, emotionally. So insistent was Howard, despite all the facts, that together the pair could cope unaided, Jim was concerned that through pig-headedness his father would kill her off, as well as himself. Howard's energy was waning, and a day later it was clear even the commode was a struggle, a task well beyond the ageing couple. Exhausted, his mother could no longer lift Howard. Later the Macmillan nurse agreed that Jim's mother was unable to cope, and that Howard

would go into respite care in the first home available for a week. A few phone calls later and transport was booked for the following day. Jim cycled over to the care home near Forty Hill. His father was in a hospital bed, looking happier, fiddling with a radio on his lap.

‘There’s no telly,’ Jim said after looking round. ‘I’m not bothered with the goggle box. You waste your life looking at that contraption,’ Howard replied negatively, but seemed to have perked up, ‘Personally nowadays I prefer the radio.’ He’d reminisced once enthusiastically about listening to a radio in a big mahogany cabinet during the war, which Jim recollected vaguely from childhood visits to his grandparents. Jim sat looking at his newspaper, *The Telegraph*. He suspected the period of respite very likely a prelude to a longer stay, about getting him acclimatised, wearing down his resistance institutionally. Jim guessed this was the Macmillan nurse’s plan. Jim hadn’t warmed to her, too much of a control freak, but medical staff were often like that. Certain controlling types were attracted to jobs dealing with vulnerable people.

Jim was worried about his parents’ finances, especially if a long stay loomed, of ten or twelve months, but there was nothing more any of them could do. His father was secretive about all matters of money, apart from talking endlessly about his occupational pension, another source of

great pride. Jim's mother was about to leave, a lift from a friend arranged earlier.

'Lest I forget,' she said to her husband, 'Is there anything you want from home, Howard?' He waved her away with irritation.

'Leave me alone, just don't bother me.' Jim promised to bring her back later that afternoon; she would take a cab home in the evening, as that night Jim was out. He'd bring her again on Friday, but he was working the following day, his parents' sixtieth wedding anniversary, married on 21st June 1952. When she departed Jim turned to his father.

'Are you looking forward to tomorrow, dad?'

'Why would I?'

'It's your wedding anniversary, the sixtieth, your diamond one.'

'I *know*.' He'd clearly forgotten. 'The food here is bound to be bad. It was bad enough in that bloody hospital.'

'This will give mum a rest.'

'She doesn't need one. We can cope.' Jim was astonished at his refusal to face reality.

'If we got some help.'

'No, I'm not having it. I told you, your mum will look after me.'

'She can't cope with it any more, dad, the strain's too much. Even that Macmillan nurse, the one you like, agreed. That's why she organized your stay in here.'

'Did she?'

'Yes.'

‘As far as I know, I’ve come here to get back on my feet. That’s what I agreed. I’m here to learn to walk again.’ Summer 2005, following a heart operation in a central London hospital, Howard had literally done so, after his post-operative delirium, Jim walking his father twice daily up and down the corridor from his bed, eventually to the lift. After discharge, he led him up and down Howard’s back garden, increasing the distance gradually. During this period Jim first met Gabriella, postponing the first date so as to assist Howard. His father called his walking exercises, lessons. They’d worked eventually. Within four months he was back to his old self, Jim almost relieved when Howard started being more objectionable than ever.

‘This stay is to give you both a break, a rest,’ Jim told Howard, trying to reassure him that it was temporary arrangement, again something Jim doubted. Somehow the Macmillan nurse persuaded his father with a minimum of resistance, probably because of the walking lessons raised by Howard, the idea a residue of Jim’s therapy.

‘Not for lessons in walking, then?’ Jim realized his father was effectively bed-ridden. Was Howard losing it mentally, or had that nurse misled him to smooth the way, to get him there, and easier for her, Jim wondered. He disliked her busy-body ways, her intrusiveness, but the

strategy worked. He was surprised Howard believed her.

'They wanted to give you both a rest; to see whether you liked it here. To tell if you can fit in.'

'I know already I won't like it. It's full of old people and I don't like them.' Howard's own mother had been the same, even in her nineties referring to the others in a centre where she attended a lunch club as 'fogeys.'

'I know you don't.' This was entirely the problem. Once again, he explained that his mother couldn't cope, that the Macmillan nurse agreed, and that Howard was likely to be here a while, perhaps, not because he was old, but because a bed was available. Nothing seemed to sink in.

'Are you going to work, later?' his father asked without preamble.

'No, not till tomorrow. I'm off out tonight. That's why I'm not bringing mum here.'

'So you're going out. Who's that with, some woman or other?' his father asked, forgetting completely his relationship with Gabi, maybe distracted by his condition, his unfamiliar surroundings.

'No, with Matt Evans, I was at school with him, his parents live near your Joan.'

'Don't bloody mention her,' he growled at the mention of his sister. 'And promise me, if and when I go, don't invite her to the funeral. Just promise me that.' Howard and Joan had a falling out over money years before, but their mother

had prevailed and a less than cordial contact continued until her death in August 2002, aged ninety-five. At the funeral a violent family confrontation occurred, one of those internecine wars fought by some of the Dents; such skirmishes were coordinates in Jim's childhood. Nothing Jim said could calm the situation caused by his grandmother's will and years of acrimony. He gave up, battle lines already drawn. Neither side felt they could ever again communicate, the children as foot soldiers, the retired parents the generals. After the battle, a prolonged Cold War, but in this domestic version each side simply ignored the other.

'I did already several times, and I'll stick to it.'

His father pulled off the oxygen mask to emphasize his next requests.

'No death notices either, absolutely nothing in the local papers. I don't want *them* to know. I don't want them gloating, especially bloody Joan.' By 'them' he meant his sister and her entire family, most especially her husband, Simon Tremlett, whom Howard despised.

Already he'd made Jim and his mother prepare a document for him to sign, stating his wishes in that regard, binding them as witnesses to honour the demands that none of the Tremletts were to be notified of his death or funeral, they should be ejected if they were to arrive, and that the event should be stopped if they refused to leave. Jim doubted this declaration's legal status,

concluding it was worthless, but it had mollified Howard. His father was still obsessed. 'Arrange a quick funeral, so it will be over before they've heard,' his father added. The mask was replaced. This was the final skirmish, to be played out by this particular general, even after his death, by proxy.

'Of course, but that's some time off, dad.'

'Just promise me.' He grimaced beneath the oxygen mask.

'Of course I do. Are you in any pain?'

'No, not really, it's just this breathing.

Everything's becoming a right uphill struggle.'

'I'm sorry.' His father was silent, putting on his radio headphones again. 'Look, I'll be off,' Jim said.

'OK.' Howard sounded unenthusiastic. 'When's your mother coming?'

'Tonight. She'll be back later'

'Are you bringing her?'

'No, I'm off out, I told you, with Matt. I'll see you on Friday, all being well.'

'Just don't bother coming. I just want to see your mother.'

'But, I'm bringing mum over here.'

'Well, I'd rather not see you. Just drop her off.'

Was this yet more of the usual venom or confusion, but Jim was upset by both. His father continued. 'I'd rather you didn't visit. I don't like you coming, never have.' Howard always possessed the capacity to be spiteful, indiscreet, and just plain ignorant at times. Jim concluded

Howard was trying to goad him, to inflict pain to offset his own suffering.

'Look, I'm coming over, dad, because I'm bringing mum, so I might as well see you. I'm not driving here and going off somewhere else to wait for you two to finish. You have no real say in the matter, to be honest,' said Jim trying to be firm rather than angry.

'Suit yourself, but I'd rather you didn't come. I don't want your company.' Jim went to the open door. 'So you say this respite care is for your mum?' his father asked.

'No, not just her, it's for both of you. I'm off. Bye.' He waved, but his father ignored him. Howard was preoccupied with whatever sound was travelling through the headphones.

After the night out, in the middle of the night the phone rang. It was Jim's mother. 'They rang me.' Jim looked at his radio alarm. Four-twenty. He had a slight hangover, Matt and he drinking more than a few glasses of wine after a lecture, discussing their lives. 'They said he'd gone,' she added, sounding tearful.

'Who rang? Who's gone?'

'Some foreign woman, from the care home, said your father had gone. I think he's dead.'

'Are you sure?' Jim was aghast. He was thinking of his father settling in just fifteen hours ago.

'That's what she told me. He's gone. I asked them not to close the door,' his mother said. His father could never bear sleeping in a closed room, the

door had to be open, his radio on. The woman manager admitted the nurse on duty had administered morphine, admittedly prescribed, but he'd never taken any, for just as he'd been suspicious of foods that might kill him, Howard tried to minimize medication, suspicious of them all. An aspirin was a personal failure, the pathway to renal failure. Jim knew his father had been querulous and had been quietened, probably forced or cajoled in his confusion to take the stuff. He'd lasted less than twelve hours in their care. Jim visualized the scenario, staff unable to cope with his vehement tantrum, the demands, the viciousness, the vitriol, the insults, the profanities, and next a liquid cosh. Jim sensed that nothing could be done. Howard had died between twelve and two, between the supposedly hourly rounds. Jim wondered why they rung his mother in the middle of the night. Upstairs Jim looked at his father's body laid out on his last resting place, the hospital-style bed. Howard looked calm, as if at rest, completely silent. Back in the manageress' office Jim spotted a name on a whiteboard, J. Tremlett written in black marker-pen.

'What's that board for?' he asked.

'The residents, the rooms, the floors,' the manageress replied. Jim worked out where Joan was related to his father's room of maybe thirteen hours, where Howard's corpse still lay in t bed until collected later that afternoon. 'Oh,' he said, taken aback by a synchronicity revealed by

her revelation. He realized that his aunt was in the room above Howard's, resting just a few feet above her brother as he died. It was as if Jim's grandmother from beyond the grave had been exerting her indomitable spirit, trying to bring her two children together for a final time, a mysterious force reconciliation that would never now prevail. He stayed silent, highly conscious of promises made to his father. Jim would not enquire after his aunt, not in the circumstances. He owed Howard at least that much loyalty. However, he realised at that moment, terrible as it might seem, he would struggle to be sad. The monster baby was gone forever. Sitting before his computer in 2017 Jim sighed, wondering how on earth he might fit together all of his mixed emotions and such confusing events in a story that made any sense at all. He decided he probably shouldn't even try, opting instead for coffee, decaffeinated naturally, being his father's son.



Jacqueline Chesta

You Contain Oceans

by Simi Abe

My mother used to tell me she was of water;
that she bore the ocean inside her body.
She was more vessel than woman,
more element than mammal.

My mother used to tell me I was born from
spiralling waves;
that I was a tiny silver fish wading through her
endless waters
until I out grew the confines of her biosphere.
I am amphibious.

*I used to stand in the playground, belly full of river
water,
hula hoop swimming around my Atlantis hip bones.
I was trying to stir riptides but only managed tender
currents.*

My mother used to say 'lay your head on me'
and listen to the moon tide lapping that bore you.
High tide would crash against the shores of her
ribs,
salt water dappled against her buoyant lungs.

My mother used to say she could breathe under
water
so on days when the thunder spoke too coarse
she'd make a bed for herself in the river,
lilies bobbing along the waterline
like secrets the ocean whispers to the sand.

*I used to measure the bathtub by the length of my
body
With fingertips and toes stretched I could touch both
ends.
I'd close my eyes, a newly deceased bouquet of
wildflowers to the heart.
I am bereft.*

On Live Tweeting Judgement Day & Other Ways I Fail At Documentation

by Momtaza Mehri

*'We once had things in common. Now the only thing
we share is the refrigerator.'*

- Frank Ocean

////

on any given day everyone i love is a symbol / an
extrapolation made flesh / the suckle of ruin /
landmass does what it says on the tin / land +
mass / approximate the distance /
the earth's teardrop weight / the body's lower
extremities / some bodies are worth nations/
some are nations / some are pools of sorrow /
four hundred sink to the bottom /
lower decks reserved for the darkest / skinned /
will the afterlife be as hierarchical /
death has its favourites / this I know / can this
bitch stop calling us like we're friends/
like she knows us like that / like we love her back
/ pop each bone like gum /
even my bones are blushing / memes as coping
mechanism / as dramatic irony /
as in i have more faith in a green muppet than
most politicians/ mercy as a clinical approach /

when the time comes / i want the luxury of
thermostat soup and the rotation of visitors /
not the sudden / the sodden / what renders
language redundant / what cannot be written /
unwritten / by the hands which feed it / some
days / afrofuturism feels like an oxymoron /
these nights / i can't see beyond cellular division /
everyone i love is scratching out a being /
everyone i love is a scavenger / picking at
whatever fate leaves behind /
plump tongues scraping out marrow / to vomit
back into the mouths of the young /
just as in 91' / the mothers who hid gold in
underskirts / crossed rivers /
saved everyone before themselves / two million
dis-placed by the next spring /
a world split at the seam / a country is a religion /
without one / this world brands you a heretic /
what does two million look like? /
a sea falling into a sea / the static of 80s VHS
cassettes / uploaded on YouTube /
memory is smoke under dresses / the good old
days /
will take the shape of cysts under the breast /
hanging ripe from the kidneys /
shadowed eyelids / the invisible family member /
raised alongside us /
we will watch the videos together / i read the
comments in all four languages /
the fourth being HTML / you ask me to translate

The Cold Caller

by Adam Martley

For the first time in a year, Detective John Ballinger's phone rang. This call was the only one he ever received, and just like clockwork, the ringing sounded at exactly midnight on Christmas Day.

As he did every year, the caller wanted to wish the detective a Merry Christmas. But Ballinger was not in the mood for festive messages. The moment the ringing started he had begun to sweat and his mouth became dry.

The detective's fear of the telephone was infamous in the office, as he had always taken great pains to emphasise to his colleagues that they were not to call him under any circumstances. Such a thing was unusual in a detective, who had to deal with people all the time, but talking over the phone had always made Ballinger uneasy. It was the immediacy of a phone call that made him uncomfortable, the lack of time he had to filter his responses, as well as being unable to gauge the expression of the person on the other end of the line. Whenever he did try to talk on the telephone, he would find his voice cracking.

Ballinger had been dreading the call all evening. He sighed as he picked up the receiver.

‘Hello?’ he said.

‘Really detective,’ the man said, ‘is there any need to put that inflection in your voice to make it sound as if you don’t know who it is? Merry Christmas.’

‘Season’s greetings. So who is it this time?’ The man only ever called him to bring him some news. The same news at the same time on the same day each year, for the past ten. Not that that made it any easier to deal with. The voice on the end of the line sounded anonymous, as if it had been put through a changer. The way the man saw it, there was no sense in making things *too* easy for Ballinger.

‘Let’s not ruin the suspense, shall we? I’ve left my calling card, just as usual. But don’t worry, it’s not anybody important.’

The caller’s method of choice was always strangulation by telephone cord. What made it the perfect crime was that there was no motive when it came to the victims themselves. Each one was chosen at random, in a different city every year. Though the murders were much the same.

On Christmas Eve, the killer would patrol the bars in the centre of the city in question, looking for the most drunk female reveller. Not that there was anything sexual about the killings. He prided himself on having higher standards than that. It was just that they were more vulnerable and therefore easier to dispose of. Less likely to put up a fight.

Ballinger was in his sixties now and waiting to retire. In the cliché of clichés though, there was one thing stopping him. The one killer he should have caught but never had. The detective's unit specialised in frozen cases. As such, the man he had come to mentally refer to as The Cold Caller – although he made sure never to mention this name to his colleagues – was not the first killer he had failed to catch. But the reason never solving this case weighed him down more than any of the others was that The Cold Caller was an insider. He was either working alongside Ballinger now or had in the past. That was why the selection of his victims was of little concern to the serial killer and he was so hard to track down. For The Cold Caller's motive was connected to the detective himself.

'How can you say that?' he replied.
'Don't be so naïve, detective. We both know this is about you and me. They are merely bit players.'

'So they mean nothing to you? You are sick, do you know that?'

'On the contrary, detective,' he said. 'If anyone's sick in the mind, it's you. You know, I think about you sometimes, and I can't *help* but feel sad. Tonight, for instance, you've been sat alone in your office on Christmas Eve, waiting for the phone to ring. Nobody to go home to, nobody to miss you. It just makes me feel lonesome, that's all. But if we're being frank – and I hope we can

be frank, detective – I find this whole situation pretty upsetting. Just to think, not only have you been sitting alone in your office all evening waiting for the worst news you've had all year, but you've been afraid of the very method of our conversation. Tell me, can you feel your voice starting to tremble? Could you be, dare I say it, even beginning to shake?'

'I will catch you, you know. Even if it takes me until my dying breath.'

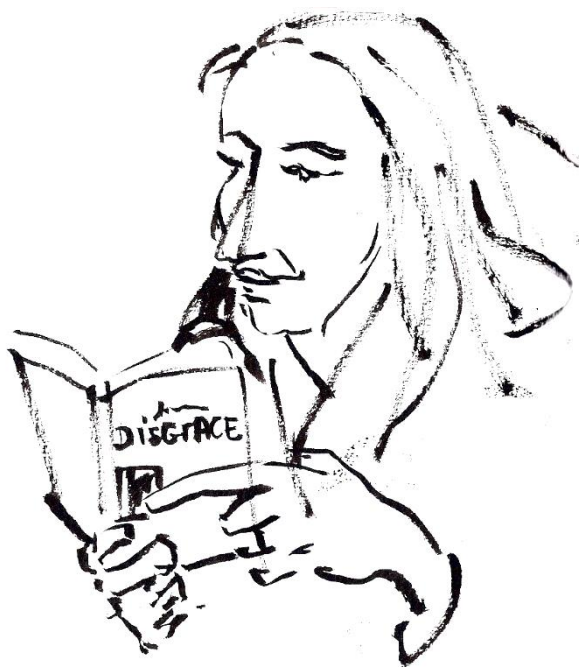
'You will?' he said, feigning surprise. 'See, I'm not so sure. The fact you haven't found me up to now tells me your heart isn't really in it.'

'It's not as simple as that. If you know this unit, then you'll also know that its history is full of people who have dropped off the radar. It's not uncommon for people who've done this job to react that way. Tracking everyone down and conducting a process of elimination isn't that easy.'

This was how Ballinger's unit dealt with a job that had such a low success rate and seldom offered solace to the loved ones left behind.

'You know what I think? I think that on an unconscious level, you don't want to find me. You need me. I'm that one blip on an otherwise exemplary record compared to most people who've been through your unit. Must be embarrassing. I'll bet I'm the only thing that keeps you getting up in the morning. Until next year, detective.'

And with that, The Cold Caller hung up the phone and Ballinger's connection with the killer that he was notorious for never catching slipped away from him once again.



Jacqueline Chesta

Life so Far...

by Joolz Gray

To look back and say
How much my life has changed?
Rearranged
From humble beginnings, no fancy trimmings
Can't complain
Born third to love an family
Grew up the way it's suppose to be
Normal life
School times were sometimes a challenge
Just trying to get a balance
Struggled through
Onto work the big wide world
And all the riches that it held
Join the crew
Develop as a person
Don't let your fears worsen
Become you
Learn about life
Through struggle and strife
Fight through
Relationships.....
They blossom an grow
Until at some point you go
Stop.....
Rearrange the plot
Pit-stop
Don't let your spirit drop

Now it's not just about you
There's another two
Motherhood.....
Time to man up and get the job done
Always see the sun
Misunderstood
Life leading you through twists and turns
Concerns
But always love
Maybe guidance from above
Stand straight and tall
Through it all
Looking back so far
Such a star
Feel proud
Stay strong it won't be long
Until your dreams become
Reality
It could happen to me
Reach out and hear me shout
This is how my life so far
Is telling me you're a star
Reality
You've come so far....

Nine Lives

by Vivien Brown

I go to work each day, eat, sleep. I make love to
my wife.

It's a happy, unremarkable, quite ordinary life.

I've no great wealth to speak of, nothing much to
leave behind,

but while I have my health and still know my
own (sound) mind,

I'm thinking of the day it ends, a time when
Death's hand knocks,

and to a gift that costs me nothing, just a tick
made in a box.

I need to make my wishes clear, not leave it all
too late.

Talk about it. Here, and now. No tears, and no
debate.

So, to my wife and children, or to whom it may
concern:

My body's lost if buried in earth, has no worth if
destined to burn.

I know you'll be confused and sad. I know it will
be hard,

but I've tried to make it easier by carrying this
card.

Nine lives, they say, can be transformed. Nine
lives, just like a cat!
But I won't always land on my feet. I'm well
aware of that.

When the organ plays Jerusalem, and lilies scent
the air,
make sure my own organs are out and just my
shell lies there.
Let them plough deep into me, let them harvest,
let them reap,
because there's nothing in this body that I'm
gonna need to keep.

I hope you cry for me. I hope you mourn me,
miss me, grieve,
but when I'm cold and motionless, please, please
let others breathe.

Let's raise a glass to destiny, to the lives I'll never
see.
Nine strangers – sick and scared, but saved,
perhaps... because of me.

The Flesh

by Sophie Perry

Holding it in a tight grip, Duncan could feel the raised bumps and random dips that covered the skin pressed firmly against his own palm. If he was honest it was, above all else, the skin that had always fascinated Duncan. How it could be soft, hard, scarred, bruised and discoloured but always there: a constant over gelatinous and permeable flesh.

It felt cold in his hand, unsurprisingly. A safe, medium 3°C; exactly like the fridge it had just come out of. Duncan always set things to just below what was the medium level of safe was, call it a quirk or an obsession it was a habit he has never been able to shake. He thought it was a news segment he watched as a child that started the ridiculousness of it all (yes, he did know it was ridiculous). The reporter, a yuppie-ish man with short cut ginger hair, describing in intimate detail how deadly a malfunctioning fridge could be. The screen illustrating his points with a test subject: your average fridge that looked straight out of a 2point4 family home, just like his own, engulfed in horrendous, unstoppable flames. So fridges became the first example of obsession. Be it in his dilapidated childhood house, his first flat in West Drayton or his current two-up two-down they were all set at that odd, but

completely safe and satisfying 3°C. Now, it wasn't just fridges but the freezer too (always - 12°C), the television volume (always number 15) and his lottery numbers 18 35 37 23 37 and 7 (the same every week for the last eight years).

Placing it on the clean, white marble countertop Duncan ran his thumb and forefinger along the length of the skin. Pressing lightly, he mapped out all the soft spots and hardened areas that lay just microscopic distance beneath the surface. He marked a mental 'x on the spot' where he wanted to make his first incision, around three-quarters of the way up and just left of a tiny darkened bruise that looked like a half-moon or Cheshire Cat smile. He needed the spot to be just the right amount of firm. Too soft and the knife will slide through too quickly, unsatisfyingly. Too hard and he'll have to work to penetrate the layers of epidermis, equally unsatisfying. If that happens then all his precision and planning, internet research and time studying videos, as well as the careful selection of the perfect specimen, would be wasted.

Duncan kept a loose hold on his prize as he reached across to the set of draws nearest to him, sliding open the top draw it revealed an assortment of brand new cutlery and cooking utensils. Dipping his hand into the draw he felt along the cutlery tray for the third, and widest, compartment. He knew he had found it when his fingers brushed the familiar notches that made up the tang of his favourite knife. While the knife

itself does not look at any more special than any other, it was, in Duncan's opinion at least, the blade that set it apart. Short, thin and incredibly sharp it was the perfect tool for the messy task at hand.

Lifting it out of the draw by its black handle, as Duncan retracted his arm towards his workstation the stainless-steel blade caught the kitchen's bright light. The gleam danced up and down the length of the blade and back and forth over the printed, light grey IKEA logo at its base. The knife was called Vardagen which translated as 'Everyday' in English and, unlike most people, Duncan had taken the careful time to look that up. After all, even if IKEA did offer practically priced kitchen utensils it didn't mean he was a philistine.

Duncan felt tiny beads of sweat break out on his palm as he began to concentrate, his forefinger balanced where the blade meets the handle and the tip of the knife positioned on his specially chosen spot. He paused momentarily before pushing the tip in, the skin concaving slightly before splitting under the pressure from the acute edge of the blade. Smiling lightly at his success only then, with the knife securely immersed in the flesh, did Duncan begin to run his knife through an invisible trail he had already set out for himself. Gunge unexpectedly oozed up the sides of the knife, and onto Duncan's fingertips, as it moved through both flesh and

skin. He pulled the knife back out, the blade slick with gunk and slime, as the invisible path he had marked out mentally was complete.

The pathway Duncan had sliced open allowed him to pull at the still connected flesh and skin with his hands, separating the whole into two, almost equal, parts. Now able to see more clearly where soft flesh and hardened skin met he repositioned his knife horizontally against this spot, no less than a millimetre below the epidermis layer. Easily sliding it in, he began a cutting motion beneath the skin. It resembled, he thought, the way in which fishmongers remove the skin of salmon. His hand, much as they do, holding the skin steadily in place as his knife glided through the flesh underneath. It was near enough the same if you thought about it, Duncan mused.

Removing it in one, unbroken piece he set the thin skin to the side, pleasantly satisfied with his work. His hands sporadically covered in the oozed gunge, Duncan thought it pointless to wash them just yet. There was, after all, one step left. Picking up his knife for the final time he pressed the full length of the blade against the now exposed flesh. Pushing the weight of the knife down he sliced long, slim segments which were perhaps no wider than a thumb nail.

Yes, Duncan thought, this avocado will go nicely in my salad.

Poem 1: New beginnings

by Mark O'Loughlin

I'm your glittering skyline
Burning the city
With dazzling glass
Instagram pretty.

With your free museums
Flotation tanks
Homeless people
And monumental banks.

Witnessing blank expressions
Open spaces
Armed police
Once tranquil places.

I'm unaffordable housing
Aspirational living
Child poverty
And wealth disparity.

I'm proactive communities
Teenage stabbings
Educational opportunities
New beginnings.

Poem 2: I want to celebrate the mundane

I want to celebrate the mundane
Take it for granted that I am sane
Be grateful my parents didn't call me Wayne
Be ignorant about champagne.

I want to celebrate the ordinary
Feel hunky dory
Believe a ridiculous story
Don't worry, I won't vote Tory.

I want to celebrate the smallest success
Like the gift of everyday happiness
Or having just the right amount of stress
And not leaving the living room in a terrible
mess.

I want to celebrate those tiny moments when I
am mindful and kind
Not oblivious and blind
To the good stuff happening
every single day.



Jacqueline Chesta

GHOST WRITER

by Gita Ralleigh

The city was an ornate ruin. Atrophic and crumbling, those buildings that still stood let out groans as the bombs fell, fissuring tiled facades and causing powdery concrete bones to crack and fracture.

The writer was a lucky man, his neighbour told him. Lucky, to have an apartment and a roof over his head, a fitful supply of electricity, water gushing from the taps in a rusty trickle once or twice a day. This was luck.

Like all old cities, this one had its celebrated ghosts: ghastly spectral traces of former conquerors, sultans and kings. Unhappily, for a writer, he had never seen a single one of these exalted former inhabitants. He had not seen a ghost at all until the day his wife, dead fifteen years, appeared in the bazaar.

She came to him not at the age she died, but as a young bride. Smiling, as she always had in those fresh-wed days, when they sat in seaside cafes and sipped pomegranate juice and she laughed—often, it seemed to him, about nothing but the crystalline sky haloing her head and her reddened lips. The old city basked elegantly in sunshine and serenity: there were few cars in those days, no pollution and bombs were

infrequent, home-made and generally the work of some excitable student. He'd only recently returned from studies in Germany to his wife, a university teaching post and their first child on the way. It had been hard, he'd told her, to believe in heaven under the dismal weight of leaden skies.

He was shocked now, to see her head covered only by a filmy green chiffon scarf, slipping to reveal dark, glossy flourishes of hair. Alarmed, he reached out to adjust it and found himself tugging on the black-shirted sleeve of a young enforcer of the Order.

The writer wept as he begged forgiveness from the stony eyed young militant—he was an old man and his youngest son was with the Order, he explained. His dimming eyes had mistaken the soldier for his own boy.

It was true that his son had joined the Order, as had his third daughter. Two daughters were married and lived abroad, the eldest son left last year with his family. His younger son was less than useless: a lay-about and bully who, until he'd joined the Order, had visited merely to torment his father for money. He hadn't seen him in years. Their third daughter had been the quietest of the three; once, long ago, he'd believed she understood him best. Now her visits were occasional and unannounced, her conversation stilted, every word a small knife, twisting in his gut.

As he pleaded and wept, he wondered, was he truly a lucky man? His third daughter had married a man placed high in the Order; perhaps her betrayal had been a means of protection; a charm cast to preserve him in his apartment with his books, glass lampshades, the cast-iron teapot from Japan and the rosewood desk on which his wife and children still stood, glamoured in silver frames.

The enforcer swore and pushed him away with his rifle butt. He stumbled, fixing his eyes on the ground to await the blow, but none came. Daring to glance up, his shoulders juddered in relief at the sight of the black-shirted back striding on to harangue another.

Weak with longing for home and safety, he lurched past the fat man whose once abundant stall now held only grassy, bolted onions, a caged chicken and two cartons of grapes. Still the man remained happily placid, eyes closed and chins settling, one soft bulge upon another.

The former Mayor of the city overtook him in a small wooden cart fitted with bicycle wheels, trouser flaps neatly pinned over his amputated stumps. A sack of rice lay across his lap, the left wheel of his cart squeaked under the pump of his muscled arms. He nodded and smiled at those in his path; the spirit of a man who'd welcomed queens, presidents, film stars still animating his puppet self.

His wife's appearance had shown the writer this truth: ghosts inhabit the living as a glass holds

water. He saw the petulant boy in the frown of the official from the Order; a replete baby in the face of the fat man, robes ballooning in the evening breeze.

Skirting around the rubble of a block shelled in the last round of fighting, he shuffled on. Battles swept the city like plagues and people waited in their apartments for death to come: from shells or rockets or one-eyed strangers, squinting through rifle sights from rooftops.

Death had come for him at last. What could her apparition signify but his nearing end? Perhaps the order had already been given, the trajectory planned, a target marked. Nothing more to do but wait.

Reaching his building, he trod carefully up the pitching concrete steps, splaying his hand to the flaking wall and cursing his customary caution. Better to slip and die from a broken neck than a bomb. Children howled behind a neighbouring apartment door—perhaps he should warn them—but why? Anyone who could leave the city had left, long ago.

At home he brewed tea in the iron pot, took the chair by the window and picked *King Lear* from his shelf. To read Shakespeare in the dusty gold haze of sundown as one awaited death, this seemed the correct approach. He shook his head in appreciation as his copy opened upon the apt lines:

We have seen the best of our times,

*Machinations, hollowness, treachery
And all ruinous disorders follow us
Disquietly to our graves...*

The writer woke in his chair to a darkness so profound he was certain he had descended to the underworld. His wife's ghost stood at his feet, her lips trembling. A grainy darkness clung to the pearly contours of her face; she was a perfect shell, emerging from black sand. He reached his hand out to touch her; she shook her head and receded, gliding back into the gloom.

He followed her to where she hovered beside his old desk. By the pale lantern of her face he saw the surface: dusted, but unused. Framed photographs, stacked papers, a bottle of ink and the fountain pen she'd given him for his fiftieth birthday, shortly before developing the cancer that killed her.

She nodded to the desk, that sideways tilt of her chin he remembered well. He reached for the pen on the blotter and rolled its weight back and forth in his hand.

'What's the use?' he asked her.

The clamour of the city night crowded in, traffic rattling the high old windows, the sirens wailing and dogs barking in the street below. She was a dream, a mind-vapour, nothing more. He aimed the pen at her.

Pray, do not mock me:

I am a very foolish fond old man he told her.

On his desk, the inkpot rocked and tipped. He ducked, fearing the coming explosion, but no detonation sounded and as he watched, the bottle righted itself, the cap unscrewed and the pen slipped from his fingers and hovered above the ink. A faint, familiar thrill seized his hand as he groped for and held the pen. A sheaf of paper fanned before him; a single white sheet flew into the air, brushed his mouth and fluttered onto the polished wood.

He shrugged, seated himself and began to write, the fluency of words, their rapid shoot and flourish from his nib surprising him. He wrote of how his wife's smile had faded after marriage, her slight body grown swollen and round. Two vertical lines had carved themselves carefully into her forehead, a coarse hair sprouted from the mole on her chin, once so tiny and black it had only punctuated her beauty.

Theirs had been a household where there was never enough: space, time, money or patience. The children demanded things constantly: soft drinks, toys, candy, later trainers and CD players. When he tried to work they ran, shrieking, across the apartment until he roared to life, chased them and smacked them. Beneath the crying, he'd hear the faint, heartless mockery of childish laughter, echoing around the walls.

He took to scribbling in cafes at night, returning to a silent apartment, his wife indignant, the

expected fight ending in the declaration that her mother had warned her not to marry him. It was a miracle, truly, that he had managed to publish eight novels and three volumes of poetry. All those years he had longed for silence, an empty apartment. Now he had these things, he had not written a single word in five years.

He fell asleep over his desk, pen in hand, waking when dawn slid around the drawn yellow blinds. Lifting his pen he wrote of a hot blue-black night, flecked with stars, when they'd walked to the Old Palace, the smoky taint of charred meat from the stalls lining the courtyard; the bright-hued helium balloons the children had demanded. He'd tied a balloon around the baby's wrist and hoisted his small, dense weight onto his shoulders on the way home.

He wrote of the pale blue nightgown his wife was wearing on the night of her death. His daughters had kissed her tired hands and wept; his sons paced outside the door. Dry-eyed, he had stared at her yellow face, white hair sprouting at her temples, the gape of her mouth; wondering at the faint surprise that lit her eyes as life ebbed.

Everyone agreed that her illness had been calamitous in its sudden onset, the brutal relish with which the cancer sucked life from her bones. She had not yet reached forty-five, only two of her children were married and her grandchildren, those shining ornaments of one's

old age, were babies who would not remember her. Cancer had gripped her in the belly—her pancreas—from the Greek meaning *all flesh*. An organ embedded so deep that other than the vague stomach pains she had always suffered, there were no outward signs of illness until it had been too late.

He considered now the thought that everyone had been wrong. What had her death been but a blessing? A blessing, to be spared this late, ghostly incarnation of the city she loved and the insane corruption of the baby son she doted upon. For when she died, more than twenty years ago, the city already noisy, polluted and expensive—unbearable at times—had still been a city: a machine for living, not for dying. Her son had been obsessed with killer robots not killer ideologies.

‘What do you think?’ he asked her, for though she appeared to him only when she chose, he sensed her in the apartment as a constant now, a certain background presence, even a trace of orange-blossom perfume. She did not reply. Perhaps her ghost did not know the answer. On the third day, his neighbour knocked. Reluctantly, he opened the door.

‘We thought something had happened to you. And I cooked your favourite!’

‘Thank you. I’m fine. Keeping busy.’ He took the dish from her.

‘But we haven’t seen you go to market. Do you need gas? Tea or anything?’

He showed her the cupboard, stacked with canned lentils, tomatoes, bags of rice, gas canisters under the sink. Her eyes widened at the papers carpeting the floor.

‘Do you want help cleaning?’ she asked him.

‘Not at all—I’m working! You know I was a writer...’

‘Of course, Professor. We have read all your books.’

On the tenth day after he’d received the visit from his wife’s ghost, planes droned overhead for the first time in months. The sky was dark and starless, lights blinked on and off over the city in firefly swarms. The floor of his apartment was tiled with neat stacks of paper. He’d eaten the meal his neighbour left each evening, washed the dish and left it outside his door. The neighbour knocked to tell him. She was leaving for her sister’s place.

‘I’ve had it,’ she told him. ‘I don’t care for my own life but the children! No school, no shops open, nowhere to play. We are all dying here. Slowly.’

On the fifteenth day, he opened his mail and read a letter from the Order informing him his

younger son had been martyred in the service of God. He remembered the day, years ago, when his son had strutted in, bearded and black-shirted for the first time. He'd gripped his own hands as they tremored with the sudden, violent need to punch him.

Sirens yowled mournfully in the distance. He heard the neighbours' feet, trudging past to the basement shelter.

Let the bombs fall.

Blow winds and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!

Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! Spout, rain!

He fell asleep by the window to the crack and boom of shells and dreamed of wiping his toddler son's mouth clean of pink sherbet.

The pulsing silence woke him. His wife's ghost was here again, pale and insistent against the black night. Silly woman.

'What?' he shouted. 'What do you want? We have Shakespeare. The world doesn't need me!' She lifted her head and stared at him, darkness graining her luminous cheeks, a look he recognized and one that brooked no argument. He hobbled over to the rosewood desk and began work.

Here I stand, your slave,

A poor, infirm, weak and despised old man, he told her, bitterly as she faded into the darkness, the trace of a smile misting her lips.

He wrote of the dusty parlour in the old town, where the Iranian owner spoke exquisite French and where amid the bubble of hookahs, ice cream came flavoured with honey, with cardamom, with jasmine flowers.

He wrote of how, when the war first came, people jumped at sirens warning of bombing raids, ducked at rattles of sniper fire, and of how soon these sounds became no more remarkable than a dog barking in the street.

He wrote of the pits of death, rumoured to exist beyond the city limits. Mass graves, dug for infidels and traitors, where sand blew over the maimed dead, their faces alive again with maggots and flies.

Twenty days following the ghost's visit his telephone rang at midnight. He started at the sound. He'd no cell phone or computer, preferring his old typewriter. Calls from abroad had stopped some time ago. He'd assumed the landline was gone. When he lifted the receiver, the voice he heard was that of his third daughter.

'Father. The sun is setting. It's over. Come with us.'

Bewildered, he looked at the receiver.

'Father, please *listen* to what I'm saying. Our day is done, do you understand? We're leaving. We can pick you up tonight.'

He shook his head and placed the receiver neatly upside-down upon its cradle.

The bombs fell from planes; the planes came from the West-or the East, he could no longer tell. They rained upon the old apartment building, which sighed in pleasure as it crumbled around him. The windows were inhaled by black sky; the air bled crystalline glass shards. Papers flocked and swooped around him as his third floor apartment descended in agonizing stages to the ground.

Thunder exploded in his head, pain firing down his right side. He tried to speak, raised his hands and realised he could not feel the left one. Her pale face with its lunar gleam floated above the rubble-strewn floor.

‘Write, she told him.

He stared at her, dazed. There was no desk. There was no apartment. There was nothing left. ‘Write,’ she whispered. ‘Write with bone upon ashes, smoke on the black sky, blood upon the waters.’

The creaking ruin of a building succumbed to entropy. Moments became hours, hours became days and soon it became just another pile of rubble in a city of so many heaped graves. Inside the cavernous darkness, a bony finger moved, scratching words from the fallen dust.

Tandoori Dialogue

by Mike Beranek

A midweek evening. A young couple sit together at an alcove table in a small tandoori restaurant near Ruislip underground station.

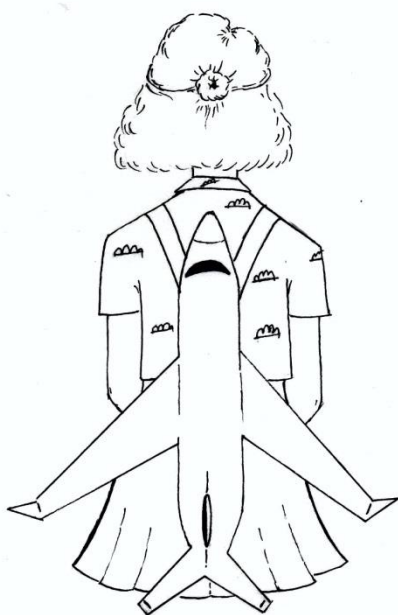
- Beep
- 'that your phone?
- mmm...
- Gosh, 'must be six or seven years since we've been here, wonder if they still do that special Biryani?... the Biryani, remember? Six years Sally.
- Biryani yes, umm, What a cheek! Sarah says I look like a chicken on my Facebook profile... I'm telling her it's better than a wild boar!
- ... Do wish you'd put that away.
- How do you spell 'boar'?
- You're a bore, *B.O.R.E.*, really Sally.
- Get some drinks.
- ... Hello, Yes, two pints of Tiger please, oh, and do you have a wine list?
- Ha! I got two Likes already...
- You know Sally sometimes I wonder where we're going with our relationship. We used to talk to each other.
- Talk, yes darling...
- Ping!

- Now Darren's WhatsApp'd me! Jeez...
Calls me a Fag Hag.... What a total
sissy....Cheers, sorry yes, um, I'm just
telling Darren where he can get off...
- Poppadums, relish?
- Mmm yep, course, bring it on...
- As I was saying, Sally, I sometimes
wonder...
- Wonder what darling?
- TRRRING, TRRING!
- Oh God sorry Sally that's me now.... just
a moment..... 'yea, With Sally at the
Bengal Palace, you know, yes,
....tomorrow?talk later thanks.'
- That was Cheryl..... works do.... I might
be late back tomorrow... We'll have to
train it to Greenwich.
- Work again Justin bor-RING! ... Darren
insists I go to their Gay Film Festival
tomorrow, dizzy queer!
- Now *I'm* switching *my* phone off. You
should do the same Sally. This is *our*
night out.
- Mmm yeah. Yeah. Hmph.. Just Googled
a great picture of a boar wearing a dinner
dress! That's gotta go off to boar-face
now....
- Cheryl says I might as well spend the
night at hers, on her sofa tomorrow.
- Sofa. Sofas give me neck spasms. Always
gotta have a proper mattress.

- Cheryl asked me if we were still actually an item... all the time you're away and I'm away, doing different things...
- Cheryl said what?..
-nothing, forget it... Here's the poppadum platter, make space.
- Like the mango sculpture! Let me get the light right...
- No Sally, not another bloody food selfie!
- Mmm bit of a fail.. my eyebrows look close together in this no? Look! Werewolf! Ahgh!
- 'thinking of getting them plucked
- DON'T.. Putting me off the food!
- What have you ordered?
- Our favourite.
- What's that?
- ... Let it be a surprise then..... For the love of God put that phone away!
- Ping
- Ping
- Now what?
- Nothing. So..... Well.... Six years you say.....?
- At least
- We were off our heads! You just kept complaining about Lizzy, sobbing into your serviette.
- No. I was falling in love with you.
- HA HA!
- Ping

- Sorry, another Darrel one... says I'm 'trans-curious' whatever that....wonder what a switch would cost? ... *Falling in love* darling, yes that's nice.
- This would be a funny place Sally to end a relationship. Between the poppadums and the Tandoori surprise.
- Mmm. What's that? Surprise? God that must be a whole stag party coming in... Can't hear you!
- Forget it
- You alright? You look like someone's stuck a poker up yer bum...
- You really don't get it do you?
- Get what munchkins?
- My late-night engagements, over with Cheryl...
- Ping
- That BITCH! Sarah... Boar face...! Sorry dear... You over with Cheryl? What's she done?
- I don't believe this.... If you can't beat them...
- Now *you* can't put your phone down.... You texting?
- Yes. an S.O.S. ...
- Mysterious, an S.M.S - S.O.S. ... What's it about?
- Look, I've left the money there. I'm stepping out. Stepping out of all of this. I may be some time. I'll...

- Ping
- send for my stuff later. Goodbye Sally.
Goodbye forever.
- Ping
- Ha HA! *Boar Hoar!* ... What's that?
Stepping out for a cig now? Before the
main course?
- Justin....
- JUSTIN!
- Ping
- Ping..... Ping.



Simi Abe

PAY CHECK

by Megan Carter

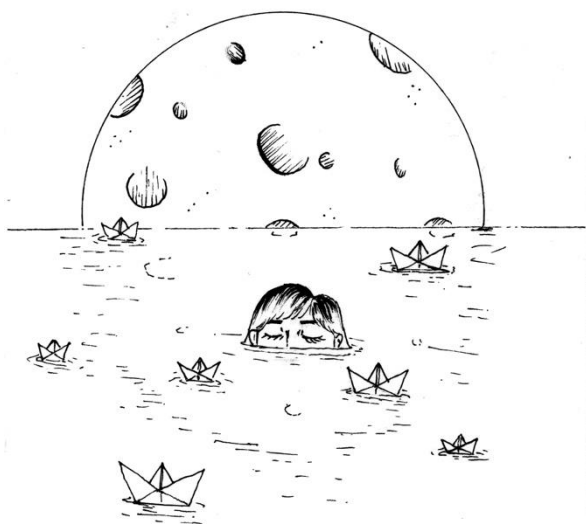
Equal pay is what I say
For any work that's done,
Whether man or woman
We all should be as one.

Women showed their mettle
When Britain was at war,
Building tanks, fitting planes
We did this work - and more.

Work deemed only fit for men,
Driving tractors, ploughing land,
There was no work we would not do,
And gladly leant a helping hand.

But now the dust has settled
And we're destined to our fate,
No longer equal with the men,
We're simply paid a lower rate.

The Alpha male has ruled too long,
Release us from this man-made cage,
Although we're called the fairer sex,
We now demand a fairer wage!



Simi Abe

Narrowboat

by Matthew Healing

Nomad, dreamer of endless seas and whispered
caves; secrets in a heart of stone.

Shikara and Batchworth, Kali-Sara drift through
reveries. Arthur, Rosa, Joshua, and James. These
are the names of forever neighbours; a serenata
to belaboured travellers.

Blackbird, bullfinch, blue tit. On maple and pine
they coop and hoot, on Cowley a coot commutes
to the bridge. Where he'll take rest from his romp
on the ridge. Then back to the canal to join Collie
and Cambronne.

Make this a home, not others, places. In this
creek, carve a nook and crawl in.

Make this a journey, not of pride or passion.

Make this a journey, of life for life's sake.



Jacqueline Chesta

Mirror, Mirror

by Helen Borland

Mirror, Mirror on the wall who's the fairest of them all?

"Snow White..." You replied, breaking my heart.
I heard it smash. I heard it shatter.

I ran away from you then. But you knew that I'd come back. Because you always were my master, and I always was your slave. I just hadn't realised it. It's funny how things didn't become clear to me until the sharp sting of reality slapped me hard in the face. Long, long ago, you see, I believed we were friends; lovers. You fooled me into believing that our love was eternal. But over the years gradually our smiles turned into frowns of discontentment, just as the faint lines of life began to scratch their thick, monstrous talons into the blank, ivory-white marble of my perfectly featured and flawlessly carved face. Now you scrutinise my desperately heavy gaze with your cruel reflections of truth and time. We're enemies now, and yet I still crave your reassurance, your love. So I run to you like I always have and like, no doubt, I always will. You that is me. Me that is you.

But what you once were to me has all but gone.
And as I stare in front of you now, you callously

glare at the suitcases of my past that lie as dark circles under my ice-blue eyes; the hefty bags of weight that sit heavily on my hips and thighs; and the ever-thinning line of my once full, voluptuous lips. My black and baggy clothes hide a multitude of sins. And beneath my clothes I am no longer seductively slender and slim with deceit. I place the palm of my warm, clammy hand to the mirrored ice-cold palm of yours, as a sign of peace, camaraderie, forgiveness, and it sticks.

So, mirror, mirror what do you say? Can I be the fairest of all the kingdom today?

The skin on the back of my hand is thin with thick blue lines running across it, so it looks like the map of a mysterious land that only time itself has travelled. You stare back at me with my very own icy dead eyes, but remain so noisily silent that I know what you're thinking. I try to remove my warm, living hand from the cold-mirrored palm of yours. But I'm stuck. Stuck. Stuck. Stuck. Stuck. Stuck! I want to please you. I'll please you! Oh Mirror, Mirror, I'll please you. At once my hand is released from the frost-kissed palm of yours. Free! Free to do as you please. Free to gain *your* praise.

Oh Mirror, Mirror. What do you want?
I know what you want.

You know what you want.

We want youth.

You want youth.

You want to see her.

I curtsy to you and you curtsy back. I begin to try and paint her face on top of my own. I have to minimise the nose; highlight the eyes; hide the lines; emphasise the lips; the cheeks. I softly smooth out the crevices of the thinly lined skin of my pasty white face and attempt to hide the dark grey circles that lie heavily under my eyes with white powder and paint. I swiftly apply swooping layers of thick clumpy black mascara to my short stubby eyelashes, until they no longer resemble eyelashes at all. Until they look like the legs of ugly spiders attached to the piercing ice-blue of my big bulbous eyes. You say nothing, so I carefully draw the outline of some huge blood-red lips on top of my own thinning lips. An outline much bigger than my lips are now. Indeed, much, much, much bigger than they probably ever were. Bigger than hers. Bigger than yours. But I go ahead and colour them in opting for the colour of freshly bled blood.

Don't go over the line....Don't go over the line.....

Don't go over the.....Perfect.

But the blood-red shade I chose for the colour of my lips isn't quite right. And as I stare at my painted lips, the colour dries and suddenly turns darker, and darker, into the browner red of blood that's no longer fresh, but dead. My lips now resemble the colour of a scab that needs to be picked in order to bleed. But they're still plumper, prettier, and all the more pleasant to look at, I think, you think, we think. I powder a rich rosy blush to my dead hollow cheeks. Suddenly I feel all the more alive. I step back and try to admire my work as a whole.

Mirror, Mirror on the wall who's the fairest of them all?

A picture of Snow White, the woman I used to be, flickers in my mind's eye behind my reflection and then vanishes. What you hold up to me now is nothing but an abstract depiction of what I really look like, not who I want to look like. What I used to look like. I want to be Snow White again. But you can't be Snow White forever. Beauty has to wither and shrivel and die. And snow has to melt. Because we all turn into the Evil Stepmother, eventually. Right now I look like a clown; a clown with lips painted on in a smile and eyelashes that resemble the legs of spiders. I am a joke. You're a joke. I laugh. You laugh. We laugh. Laugh. And cry.

Re-Queening

by Alison Fletcher

Northamptonshire Manor is not the type of place that one would think of as haunted, just by looking at it. Ambling down the driveway, you cannot see why the rumours developed – the only unnerving part of the landscape is the anxiety you feel upon encountering the other guests. You make a personal note to yourself, that you mustn't look as though you are admiring anything; you must look as though it is not uncommon that you should be within a masterpiece of the English Baroque. In fact, you should remain cold enough that it is *their* pleasure to have you in their company, but friendly enough that inclusion within this certain sub-sect of the elite comes as no surprise.

John pulls up to the driveway.

"You alright, Karen, love? You look white as a sheet." For the first time ever, you resent his revealing Yorkshire accent. You take out your compact mirror and dab some powder onto your nose. You snap it shut quickly, and paste a smile to your face. The host, and his wife, are coming out to greet you. When you see that she is prettier than you, your day is quite ruined. Angela is wearing a string of white Southsea pearls, and everybody envies them, including you. John whispers to you that it is an ugly display of her husband's money. This depresses

you because it means he will never buy you a string of pearls, but even more depressingly so, he will never buy you a display of wealth as ugly as – a diamond, per se. If John were ever to marry you, he would buy you a modest, inexpensive ring, and think you appreciate it because *he picked it out for you, and his thoughtfulness is invaluable*. Wrong. The excuse is cheap, you want a jaw-dropper, a blinding rock, the most exquisite jewel that money can buy. And you want people, when they see it, to say ‘I hope she’s worth it, John!’ and he will smile and say, ‘she is worth the whole world,’ and plant a kiss on your cheek as though you are the most precious thing he owns. Angela’s husband interrupts your thoughts, when he asks, “Would my darling like a glass of champagne?” and you find yourself hating John all the more intensely. You know that if you tell John, on the journey home that you found Angela shrill, and her husband wet and dreary, he will see straight through it as jealousy. He will entertain the conversation for a while, commenting on their pretentiously named children; Vatican and Alexandrite, and their outrage at the rise of the mansion tax. But then, he will tell you patronisingly that money doesn’t buy happiness. This comment would be comforting to many partners of men who work as Head of Construction for a C-list housing firm, but not to you. You think about the countless men you

turned down for being too fat, too balding, or too crass – and wish you had been more lax in your choices. Many of those men, now, make money that John, here, would scoff at and shake his head at as if they are deluded to think their lives are better than his. You want to snap at John, *well, those men travel on private luxury jets to Dubai every other weekend. I am forced to travel, second-class, every other year squeezed between you and a bulbous, Dorito-breathed plumber on the way to a second-rate Spanish villa.* What would be the point in life, you think, if you were to die without having enjoyed any of it because your partner is too lazy to chase opportunities for *proper* money?

You leave John to his conversations about New Labour, with Angela's husband, and move to assess the state of the cucumber sandwiches. Despite the weather, they look fresh – even the *weather* metamorphoses around the sandwiches to obtain Angela's unfaltering immaculacy. You don't take one, because you want a scone. You layer it up thickly with butter and blackberry jam (fuck them, you deserve it), and take a bite. The dress you wanted to buy for this occasion was floral, white and coral with a sweetheart neckline. It was also Prada and John told you *absolutely no*. He pointed out a similar one in Marks and Spencer, and you swore at him. So, you came to a compromise, and now you wore a floral, white and coral dress, that was not Prada, but still expensive and – to your shame – rented. This is what makes you so upset when the scone

drools a dollop of jam down the bust. 'Darlings', the likes of Angela, you decide – never have to make hasty exits to the ladies' to mop a sticky bosom. There isn't even time for this, as Angela's husband taps his champagne glass with a butter-knife and announces that it is time to reveal the 'big surprise', as if they hadn't revealed quite enough of their ridiculous wealth. And, would we all be so kind, as to follow them to the orchard? You dab at yourself furiously, and make the stain worse. An older lady, referred to by Angela as Mummy Myerscough, in a blue hat notices and says,

"Don't you worry about that, dear. A dash of lemon and baking soda will get that out." You entertain her and smirk, but you want to take that bloody great big hat and shove it right up her-

"Now, I know there have been whispers about why we've asked you all here today. And though I believe there is no better reason to gather than summer weather and good friends, I am excited to announce my new project." He summoned us around a large fence and pointed forward. "My latest project: Myerscough Honey." You crane your neck, and see – not so very far away – a large wooden hive. You wonder how you hadn't noticed the buzzing before; it was deafening. You seethe as the guests, including John, applaud this new wooden piggy bank. You start to look at John's ridiculous grinning face, and Angela – the

mermaid of a wife. You look at the other guests wearing silk and suede, and... white Southsea pearls. The bees hum louder. You must have been clenching your teeth too obviously, as the woman in the blue hat, *mummy*, walks over and puts a hand on your shoulder.

"Be careful, dear. Don't give yourself away." You laugh, and brush her hand from your arm playfully. The presence of old people makes you uncomfortable because they look too fragile and temporary. Your own parents died young; you were never exposed to firm skin turning to tissue paper, and vital organs slowing to a halt.

"Pardon me?" You ask, and she winks, irritatingly, and bends forward, summoning you to lean in closer. She smells, disgustingly, of lavender and money.

"These fools may not notice you," she says, "but the bees can see." Dementia, you think – and you want to get away from this reminder that one day, you too may have scrambled-eggs for brains.

You want to go back into the garden, where there is air and leeway to spill. The rubbing-together of leather makes you uneasy, and there is leather *everywhere*. You have made three marks on the floor already with your stilettos – though they are small enough to go unnoticed for the remainder of the party, and frankly, you're bitter enough not to care about Angela's antique softwood flooring. You notice a painting hanging between the bookshelf and window and you

move closer to admire it. It is an Edouard Manet original, you recognise the style immediately, and cough your champagne back in to the glass. These people are far more wealthy than you thought. With that, you etch a line into the softwood with your heel (if they can afford Manet, they can afford more resilient flooring). You can hear the bees, even from here. They are so loud it feels as though they are in the room. You go to close the window, but it's already shut. John is in the kitchen, and you are bored without him, so you follow. Angela's husband has the table lined with various pots of honey. Bloody hell, you think, you have made a bad decision. Now you will be more bored than ever listening to the dreary old sap drone on about the execution of his new business plan.

"Now, it's coming to the end of Summer, and at the beginning of autumn, the hive will need re-queening."

"What a horrible idea," Angela says, "To think how replaceable the queen is."

"Of course, some queens are *irreplaceable*" John interjects, and he is not talking about you. Angela simpers sickeningly. John tries to hold your hand, but you move it, pretending to fix a pin in your hair.

"It will be Britain's first Manuka honey. The plantations in Cornwall have begun to produce pollen, and I will be bringing these last groups South the day after tomorrow."

"Britain's first? How will you know that it works?" John asks,

"Well, my friend, it is already working. We have filled one hundred pots and counting."

"The health-buffs will love it," you interject, "I know all my friends would buy it." Angela and her husband turn and look at you for a second too long.

"Yes, quite," he eventually replies. You are embarrassed, so you excuse yourself in search of a bathroom mirror. You locate one on the second floor. You feel like you are inside a glass of rosé; the towels and walls blush against the creamy floors. You have needed a piss for quite some time, and – finally – as you do, you can let your face take its natural expression. The smiling contortions you have been forcing all day have made your muscles ache, and you feel your cheek involuntarily twitch. You take five squares of toilet paper and wipe yourself, but mid-process you notice that you have started your period. You rifle through your purse hopefully, though you know that you have not packed a tampon as this purse is newly bought to go with the dress. With your knickers still at your ankles, you search Angela's cabinets with hope of finding a tampon. No such luck. *I cannot ask Angela for a tampon, you think; it will make me seem disorganised and trashy.* So, you do the only thing you can do, and stuff your knickers with a thick layer of toilet roll and hope that it doesn't leak through. You wish you hadn't picked a white

dress after all. You turn the tap and watch the water run from its embellished head. You wet your hands and dab your neck and face. As the water runs, you are sure that you can hear the buzz of the honeybees. But, when you turn off the tap, you hear nothing. You dry your face on a towel, add a layer of powder to your cheeks, and leave the bathroom. You run straight into Angela's husband on the way out. He is holding a wooden box and looks startled. Wide-eyed even.

"Karen, there you are – we thought we'd lost you." He smiles at you, which you think is strange due to his cool hostility before.

"I just needed to find a bathroom," you say, "You know, powder the old nose." He laughs at this, perhaps a little too hard, then begins walking towards a thick wooden door. He points towards it.

"Come in here, I want to show you something." You are hesitant because John will notice you are gone. You suspect that Angela's husband wants to do a line of cocaine with you, and you have no objection to this, as the bonding could lead towards a useful connection. You follow him into the room, and you see immediately that it is his office. This is the office of a real man; this room is not like the rest of the house, it is not the room of an English country manor house, it is the lair of Dr. No. The wallpaper is geometric and black. The desk, the floors and the drinks cabinet are

black also, and the remaining items – appropriately – are leather; black. John's office is cupboard-sized with a 90s monitor and blinds that don't open all the way. He loves that office, the blind fool. Your eye lands on a large, bronze bust of Aristotle; its eyes are hollow, and you think you can see something moving inside it. A spider, perhaps. Angela's husband stands behind you, shiftily.

"Do you like it?" he asks,

"It's, grand. Truly grand." You smile and look towards the wooden box expectantly.

"Just Angela's necklace," he says, "It's becoming very heavy on her neck, poor thing, I'm putting it away." He starts across the room, but you touch his arm.

"May I see it?"

"See... the box?"

"Yes, the necklace." He looks uneasy, but complies. You watch him open the box and inside you see the beautiful string of white Southsea pears. You bend closer, and you can see your face reflecting back at you. You are frightened by your own eyes, they have a desperate edge to them. You turn away and Angela's husband closes the box. You wonder, if he is not going to entertain you with hard drugs, what does he want? It hits you suddenly, he has taken you into this *private* place – just you alone, and away from John. You watch him place the box next to the bust of Aristotle. Could you do it? He is attractive, you decide, and much more so

than John, who is attractive in a boyishly charming kind of way. This is a *man*. His hands are large and strong, and you think of the things he could do to you with them. The main thrill, you get from this, is the thought of Angela downstairs with your pathetic boyfriend talking about the miracle of British Manuka honey. You stop yourself, when you remember your period, and mourn the missed opportunity. Angela's husband turns suddenly, to a drawer, and pulls out a pot of honey. He hands it to you.

"This one, is for you, I knew I had one spare up here." he says. Not only, you realise, are you not getting a fuck, but this 'something' he is giving to everybody and you are only getting the 'spare'. You read the label aloud,

"Manuka Honey. Myerscough. Squeezy, Clear." He beams smugly at you, as if he has given you the best orgasm in the world. "Thanks. I can use this for my hot water, lemon and honey blend. Sore throats, you know?"

"Yes, very good for that sort of bother." You both cock your heads when you hear a glass smashing downstairs.

"Now it's a party," you comment, but he doesn't look amused. He nods at you, and hastily runs to the stairs to see what rare antique has been broken. You notice that he did not put away the box, as he promised his wife. You move closer to the bust, and – avoiding whatever insect is flailing around inside its head, you snap open the

box and snatch the pearls. You try to think of what your own favourite piece of jewellery is. If you had been a mother, it could well have been a string with pieces of glittery penne glued together. You shudder at the thought of wearing one. You do not want to admit this to yourself, but the piece of jewellery you like the most is a single pink freshwater pearl on a delicate gold chain. An ex-boyfriend had bought it for you, and it was the first real jewel that you had ever owned. John had bought you a pair of amber earrings once, and you threw them back in his face. Why on earth did he think you would want to walk around wearing earrings containing tiny dead insects? *They're fossils*, he reasoned. Fossils my bloody backside, you think – they were trash. You realise, suddenly, that you have slipped the necklace on without realising. You feel solemn, that you have never been worth more, right now, than you have ever been your entire life. And this was wearing a rented dress, with somebody else's pearls. You panic, suddenly, when you begin to hear the humming of a bee. *I'm going quite mad*, you think, *I need to get some air and get out of this horrid place*. The humming gets louder and more frantic, and you realise the insect inside the head of Aristotle, is not a spider at all. You tilt the bust, and the creature flurries out. Irrationally, you are thankful when you see that it is not a bee at all, but a bluebottle. John appears at the door. He looks tired.

"Peekaboo. This is nice," he says, admiring the floor. He looks solemn for a moment and you wonder whether it's finally sinking in that his life, in comparison, is worthless. "Come on you, they're about to dish out the trifle."

"You don't like trifle", you reply.

"No," he says, "I don't. But when in Rome..." He stretches out his hand and you take it. You walk with him down the stairs, and look around to see if you can spot the broken object that made such a racket earlier. You don't see it until you reach the kitchen where pieces of glass from a potpourri bowl lie deceased in the sink. You notice John looking at you strangely, and realise you are still wearing the pearls. You unclip them from the nape of your neck as subtly as you can, and slip them in to your handbag.

You imagine maids throwing pillows, pulling first-editions from their shelves and tearing up rugs, trying to find Angela's white Southsea pearls. Her husband, and the only person who knows you were in the office, is – thankfully taking his colleagues to see the 'babies'; the Bentleys. You imagine John looking at your bag, knowing the pearls are tucked safely between Myerscough's clear honey, and stolen loo-roll – that he cannot understand why you've swiped. *Just tell them you made a mistake*, he tries to tell you, *that you didn't mean it to go this far*. But you have no choice, your reputation would be in pieces for the rest of your life. Dash that, you

could go to prison. All over some silly string of pearls. Your heart drops. You imagine Angela's husband coming back in and asking what all the ruckus is about. Then you imagine him pointing at you, miming slowly *the...office...* You will deny it, of course.

"Angela, why on earth would I do such a thing?" you protest, and she will nod as if to say *I really didn't think you would, darling*. Then, unexpectedly, that old bitch; Mummy Myerscough will take the stand.

"I saw her carving heel marks in the floor earlier," and everyone will stop, because they will remember that they saw you make a peculiar motion with your foot before – but passed it off as a piece of grass being stuck to your shoe. "And of course, the bees see everything." You imagine Angela's husband growing angrier and angrier to the point where he demands to see your bag. John will try to reason with him.

"Come, now, let's all be reasonable. Let's go in to the garden, get some fresh air and all calm down. Karen, love, don't cry." But Angela's husband will be too furious, he'll wrench the bag from your hands, pry it open and...

You imagine this all happening, but it doesn't. You excuse yourself, and take a glass of champagne outside with you, to sit and ponder your options. You can leave it somewhere, you decide, and make it look as though one of the maids moved it. Yes. You decide that, that is precisely what you'll do. For now, you need time

alone, and you take a private walk to the orchard. The sun is beginning to set, and the air is cooler – and feels fresh against your hot cheeks. You notice, on your way through the orchard, that besides apple trees, there is a vast array of flowers you had overlooked upon your first visit this morning. You see – predictably – red roses, though you are surprised by the amount of lavender, as it is a very cheap flower, if you recall correctly. Very cheap indeed. You ponder the day's events, and feel exhausted with loathing. You think about your mediocre life with your mediocre boyfriend and decide you are going to leave him. You open your bag and take the pearls out to admire them. You don't care what the Myerscoughs think of you anymore, you are already an embarrassment. You will never belong in this exclusive clique that you have accidentally stumbled into. With that, and without thinking, you take the pearls between both hands and snap them. The pearls slide between your fingers, and you are sickened by what you have just done. You bend to pick them up, and notice a dead honeybee lying among them. You lean closer, to get a better look, and suddenly it springs to life, and stings you. *Fuck!* You panic when you hear more buzzing growing louder from beyond the orchard. A huge swarm of furious honeybees are approaching, but you are frozen with fear. You are helpless to do anything except watch as the

bees engulf you. You feel stings pierce your arms, your calves, your face. You can feel them furrowing and buzzing into your ears. You want to scream but you are afraid that they will get into your mouth. You can feel your eyes swelling and your throat closing up. In your last minutes of panic, you think something you haven't thought in a long time. You wish that John were here.

The next morning you are found quite dead in the orchard. At first, people are not certain that it's you, because you look so astoundingly different. Your eyes are swollen closed, your lips protrude startlingly, and your hands have ballooned to twice their original size. Your period has leaked through the tissue and looks alarming against the white of your dress. People notice, after the period blood, that there is a prominent jam stain down the front of you, and they rationalise this to be the reason why the bees were attracted to you. The bees also laid dead in a myriad among the pearls around your corpse. People decide, that you had tried to steal the pearls; making a hasty escape through the orchard so's not to get caught. Someone nearly comments 'red handed', though stops himself at the insensitiveness of the pun, and the presence of John.,

"The bees always see," Mummy Myerscough comments, although nobody listens. Not that it matters; as the bees' duty is done and are now dotted dead around their victim. People are too

dense to notice that the bees were haunting the manor after all. *Ghosts*, she thinks, *do not always appear as one expect them*.

John cries for you on the drive home, and never returns to Myerscough Manor. Though he buys a string of pearls – not white Southsea, but pink freshwater – and places them in your coffin.

When this happens, for a while you are outraged. *Had to take me to die, did it, John?* Next, he places in a pair of forgotten amber earrings, which, under the circumstances, you appreciate more than the pearls. You realise, then, though you were never a pearled darling to John, your place was far more important. You realise that, to buy the pearls, would have taken most of John's savings; savings for engagement rings, tutors for future children and summer holidays. You are warmed, when you realise what this means. *Good old John*. You are never going to be re-queened.

What about a stud?

by Ada Kalu

It wasn't there and then it was and then it wasn't. Yet somehow, this silver dot on his face had made all the difference in the world. Maybe, this was the final overstepping with no safety net. X wasn't quite sure yet but he knew something had changed and something had definitely been revealed. Mumbblings in the air of recent had made its way to his ears. Talks about projection and insecurities had wormed their way into his rebuke. It was clear, that silver dot carried the tremendous weight of irresponsibility, and it sent the wrong message, though not necessarily about him. It made no sense to him and perhaps that's what he struggled with the most. He'd been doing a lot of thinking, a lot of crying and inner conflict was brewing in him like a storm breaking.

He thought to himself, 'I was wrong. I shouldn't have gotten it behind his back. Maybe things would have been okay, maybe everything would have remained as it was and I'd be okay.' But he wasn't so sure. He just couldn't let it go, the one incessant bother, the worry about others. He'd been thinking about that a lot this holiday, the impact of an individual's being on everyone

around them. People just had so much to say. He'd realised a lot you see, his life was bigger

than him which seemed a gross contradiction as everyone ensured him that it was his to live so he had to be comfortable.

What about a stud?

The needle's piercing pain had opened up more than a small hole in his nose, it had allowed through a conflict he'd been dreading and he wondered if he'd make it through this.

He was struggling to eat, struggling to sleep and he couldn't tell anyone, didn't want to tell anyone, he was tired. And in his fatigue came a darkness that nearly terrified him, a sheer force threatening to overpower him. He'd experienced this before but repeated words he'd heard before, *'influences, mere influences you've opened yourself up to.'*

Like the sinking stud in his nose, X was falling, falling, falling through.

Tea

by Sam Green

The leaves of English Breakfast are bagged,
a head of a hostage, ripped
Assam lost in British brick terraces.
I pour the boiling water, pinch
its nose as it bubbles up,
each plucked dry sprig
swishes the water,
muddied
with the soil from their
fingers, the hunched figures;
they quench my thirst.
Swirled milk assuages
the bitter black beneath
which I sweeten with two sugar cubes
dropping like silver into my builder's brew.



Jacqueline Chesta

Tanweer

by Alexander Noir

2nd April 2011

“Chair, Judges, honourable opponent, the motion that we are discuss today is most important one for future of our school. Should Eton become mix-gender learning place? Would this improve development socially for its student? Would already very great performance of Eton boy be even better, if girl also train academically here? My belief is yes. Statistic show, that even though all boy school like Eton and Harrow produce greater result, with seventy-nine percent A* GCSE average this year, boy from mix-school only little below place like these, in the general, say they is happier. So, letting girl train at Eton maybe make us boy happier. But, this is selfish motive. More important, is issue of equality...”

The muttered scoffing echoed throughout The Floor. Ishak could make out the whispers of his name, even at such a volume it sounded harsh and blunted rolling off an English tongue. The country's voice seemed unable to master the melody of Arabic.

“In 1840, first womans graduate with degree, since 1918, woman can vote in this country, and continue in become, stronger as a sex, to this day

when woman is considered equal as man. This historic school, since 1440, produce some of most finest minds, most accomplished musikans, and incredible leaders the world ever sees. Is it not time, woman too has chance to walk in footsteps of great men? And let future generation walk same halls, in footsteps of great *people*?"

The collective body of The Floor exhaled a smattering of applause, and for a moment, Ishak smiled. He'd done his best to disguise the quiver in his fingers, the way of a centurion who knows he doesn't have the numbers. He tried to lock focus on the floral patterns above, their similarity to the design along the Masjid floor brought him comfort. The whole room looked inspired by a more ancient temple, with its sandy pillars stretching so far to give support. They made Ishak feel small, as if this event may swallow him. But his opening speech was almost over, and the meagre encouragement from the audience was easing his anxiety about fighting for the losing side.

"Chief Ofsted inspector, Michael Wilshaw himself say he believe in mixed-school being better. So, I ilmpore you consider, why when all can win, should we force one half to lose? Better for man happiness to mix with woman, better for woman in life to share our school. Let girl into

Eton, and be better together. Thank you, I hand over now to Chair."

"Our thanks to Ishak Abadi there, with his case for the motion." Said The Chair with a smirking testament to his own impartiality.

12th September 2010

Dear Mama,

My first week at Eton has been tired. Is no adhan here is hard to get used to. Teachers is very exact about when I am to eat sleep sport and make I learn rules from other boys which sometime does not tell I and they laugh. I am work hard and the food is jayyid. Air is very cold on England and I am give thanks for big uniform which keep me daffi. One boy I do not like he is very rude about home. In Ramadan he is always eat haram in front of I. But other boys say he is qaleel adab. So I do not worry. I am write you now on wood desk in I room I do not share and is very daffi at night. I like it much. Doctor Michael is Political Master and he has qalb tayyib and he like me also. He is who tell I write home in English so I learn with speed. I know Uncle must translate for you but see how good I am get! Doctor Michael say I must involve in extra-circular activity to meet rules of offer and debate team is good for this. I feel little nerves but much excited also. The boy in room next say debate is rowdy this mean much loudness and rudeness but that is how boys can be here. I miss you and Papa and Ahmad, and always I miss Alya. I am tire now but I write again soon.

*Ahibak da'aiman
Ishak*

"Harry Landon will now address The Floor. Mr Landon, you have two minutes."

"Thank you Chair, Judges, and *questionable* opponent..."

The Floor inhaled, rabid with anticipation for Landon's opening. He looked so familiar standing before a lectern. From the clinical parting in his hair, to the self-assured smile, it was as if he had been bred to look down over others.

"The proposition, is quite right; Eton is truly a magnificent institute of learning. Most years, the highest performing college of any throughout our erudite nation. However, might I suggest the proposition is spending too much of his time in the library, if the only girls he ever meets are those overshadowing his performance during Mozart's Requiem!"

Howling from The Floor ignited an irrepressible spasm of embarrassment in Ishak. He looked down to his feet in hope of disguising the depth of the wound.

"Order. Order!" The Chair barked, disingenuously attempting to conceal his own amusement. "Please, Mr Landon, continue."

“As I was saying, Eton *is* exceptional. And it’s with thanks to *tradition* that this is and has always been the case. What the proposition *implores* you to consider, is the tarnishing of the very thing that makes us great. To allow girls attendance at our fine academy would be a perversion of tradition, and I don’t believe I need to explain the ramifications of such a scenario. If your intention was to make this debate about equality, then your argument Sir, is as weak as your English.”

The Floor came to life once again, tipping back their heads and squinting, like excited children reacting to the gruesome climax of a nasty film.

“We live in a time of equality, you are quite correct. That is why we have Wycombe Abbey, Benenden, St Mary’s, surely, over the course of your extensive research, you have not failed to acknowledge such academies? These schools are Eton and Harrow’s little sisters, fine places of learning fit to educate those who will become our equal wives. Places where, like Eton, tradition is respected. I assure you, they aren’t gathered today debating such ridiculous notions. The Girls’ School Association are on record as having said ‘You cannot simply say mixed schools are better’ clearly, the very women you’re supposedly defending have their own reservations about this absurd proposal. Need I say more?”

“Mr Landon, your time is up. Please be seated.”
Said The Chair, as Landon descended smugly to
a score of cheering. “Order! Mr Abadi will now
retort.”

January 1st, 2011

Dear Mama,

I have homesick at the present. I am still much enjoying my time here, but weather is so freezing I am only warm in my room. It is very dark and making day short, but I work same amount. My study is difficult but still I get top grade in most. Is only when I'm demanded write in English that struggle happens. But I am getting better. It is very pleasing that Uncle praises my language, as you see I am already improved. Most boys has forgotten how I got here which is good. But that boy is still make life hard sometime. We play English game rugby, and each time he say 'do not worry we don't play with human head here'. Is very rude and no knowledge of aihitiram but I just keep on with study. Tell Ahmad he is very silly boy, of course I have not forgotten him, but I is glad he enjoys the extra space at night. I have joined in with activity like Doctor Michael say, even I do some debating in class and is very good. When I have practice more I will debate in chamber in real one, but not yet. I miss the warm and you and Pa and Ahmad. Alya would be proud of her brother here, I think of her in every Salat. One day I will talk their way and go Oxford where are more people, and origin is more easier to hide. Future is mushi'il, I only wish was not so cold!

Ahibak da'aiman

Ishak

Ishak rose slowly to his feet. He studied the rows of sadistic toothy grins at odds with the calm frames which supported them. Predatory spectators tamed docile. The leather upholstery beneath them seemingly stained with the dirty-blood of derided past motions.

“Mr Abadi, you have two minutes to speak.”

“Honourable judges, my opponent is true, there is all-girl school to provide education good as Eton since nineteen hundred. This is good step for equality. And yes, tradition is big part of what make school like Eton great. But let us forget not what make all humans great, is ableness to adapt. Without adapting, we would not have school, or motorcar, or aeroplane. We always have learned as time forwards, when we learn we make change for better life. Adapting to more learned time does not have to ruin tradition.”

Ishak swallowed hard, sinking the bile in his throat. And from the bitter well in his stomach he found the courage to continue.

“It was tradition once for boy to be beaten in school, it was tradition man of colour have no school, then, separate school, but now I am myself at Eton. If Eton make most powerful men in the world, then, by not allow woman to come, you say most powerful men can not accept to

learn at side with woman. This mean, you disprove equality is true in our society. Think, is this what you want world to believe? Henry V intended to educate, and Eton does this. But for more than eleven year, girl average more higher GCSE than boy. Maybe then, allow girl to learn here makes founder's legacy even more strong? Thank you."

Frustrated with the abruptness of his close, Ishak hadn't noticed how bad the shaking had become until he took his seat. He did his best to stare at his script, and not at the savage pack in front of him. There was no applause. But no heckling either. The Floor wasn't looking at Ishak at all, but at Landon. Eyebrows raised over uncertain faces, they seemed not to breathe until the opposition rose.

"Uh, thank you, Mr Abadi." Said The Chair slightly uncertain of himself, "Mr Landon will now respond and we'll bring this debate to a close. Mr Landon," The Chair looked towards him with a provocative glance, "The Floor is yours."

Landon stood and leant forward, his arms casually resting on the lectern. He scanned the faces of the audience, then to that of his opponent, and he decided his close would best be understood if delivered without notes.

“Thank you once again, Mr Chairman. It’s interesting that Ishak should raise the issue of his background, as clearly, it’s this that’s impeding his judgement. Eton, certainly, has made a great many changes since the days of Henry V. The scholarships made available to people like my opponent for example, who require assistance from *our* culture, if they’ve any hope of a civilised life. Perhaps it’s necessary, from whence Mr Abadi originates, to be constantly making changes, in order to avoid descent into complete barbarianism. But here, where we’ve had order for longer than this school’s been standing, we understand one need not try to fix what isn’t broken. As for equality, well, it seems curious to me that an Englishman should ever be lectured about the rights of women, by a boy whose own sister was claimed by an illness that would have been treated over *here*.”

Silence overcame the chamber, and was broken only by Landon clearing his throat to continue.

“To conclude then, it takes a mind of enlightened origin, to fully comprehend why *this* motion is absurd. I am confident, therefore, that our Honourable Judges will be among those in the room who require no further convincing that they should *remain* against the notion. Thank you.”

1st April 2011

Dear Mama,

Tomorrow is first real debate and I very nervous. Dr Michael has teached me much in how to speak and keep my arguing strong. But I am made to ask for motion no boy will like, and friend say I will lose no matter how it happen. I am not sleep well because of fear. It is hard now to study well because debate is so important. It is not logic to make me fight when all here know I lose already, even if I believe what I meant to say. Is no sense, and I am having much confusion. Dr Michael say this is politics and it is not matter if you lose just long as someone say it. We have script and know what will be saying each, so I just must read. Does make sense to you? English is hard people to understand and sometime I want to be home instead. Chamber where we debate is very beautiful, it is shameful that we use it not to be peaceful. I will try always as my hardest, I just do not know how to have success when decision is already made.

Wish your son luck.

All my love,
Ishak

Landon received no applause, but appreciative nodding from the bolder members of The Floor. The rest merely exchanged awkward glances.

Ishak, holding his script tight between clenched fists, stared into his lap forcing back tears.

“Thank you, Mr Landon” said The Chair, “for bringing our debate to that resolute close. We’ll now let the judges-”

“Something I have to say.” Ishak said softly, hidden behind his lectern.

“I beg your pardon, Mr Abadi?”

“There are somethings I have to say.” Ishak repeated, more forcefully this time, his eyes meeting The Chair’s.

“Mr Abadi, your opportunity to speak is ove-”

Ishak stood and lay down his script, ignoring The Chair’s refusal. He grasped each side of the lectern and looked once again to the floor.

“Boys, you have much fear. This I know. As Landon tries to say, where I originate there is much fear, and many problem. Times are not so peaceful as is here. In Lebanon, I work hard and get good studies, so Eton offer me to study here. I do use *your* culture to better me, so future can be better for my family. Woman is not treat so good as here, is true, I had sister Alya with no money for medicine, now we speak only in prayer. Is true, here treatment is simple and girls are not

dying so young. We can not all have such luck and be born in the right place. That is *my* culture, I want improvement. But yours say is already most improved, yours say is example for rest of world. How can this be, if boys is truly afraid of girl? It is dishonest to pretend there is no problems, is why I admit ours. If you are not to fix yours, you should, I think, least admit them. If you must be afraid of others, is better to be true in yourselves, and honest to all of *us*. Thank you, for opportunity to debate today.”

Ishak turned to sit but stopped, he looked around in front of him to find the lone spectator who had begun to applaud. Walking forward from the back of the room, came Dr Michael, stern faced and very much impressed. Soon after, The Floor followed suit, and The Judges came to their decision.

Gathering in the foyer afterwards, as was custom following a debate, the boys indulged in tea and biscuits, discussing the morning's antics. Ishak stood at the window, hands pocketed, deep in thought of home. There were flowers growing outside his own front door, but nothing like the college gardens. The vibrant greens and purples, so neatly planted and maintained, reminded him of scenes in books his English Master made him

read. The sky outside was dreary, and Ishak was baffled by rain in Spring. But the colours were beautiful.

A tap on the shoulder brought him back to Berkshire, and there stood Harry Landon offering Ishak his hand.

“Solid performance today Abadi, why, you almost sounded English.”

At this comment, friends of Landon stood close by began to laugh. Ishak turned back around to enjoy the view of the gardens.



Jacqueline Chesta

Family Link Up

by Marjorie Bahhaj

Leen:

I am Princess Leen
You know me
I am a refugee
With mama I had to flee
My roots torn from my family tree
I was born in a camp
In winter cold and damp
I learnt to walk tall
Holding on a United Nations tent pole
Then mama & papa were scared
The crossing to Greece dared
We made it on to Greek shores
To shouts, screams and roars
Pulled to safety, our boat without oars.
To another camp we went
A cabin not a tent
With others I made friends
We learned to play and follow trends
As visitors from a far came
One called me Princess with my name.
We helped mama together and played games
And photos of me she brought in frames.
We shopped together and found a pet to cuddle.
Chased the pigeons in the square in a huddle.
We laughed and giggled and played ball
She now thinks I am growing up tall.

Marjorie:

I am one of those visitors that came
Yes gave the title Princess to her name
Princess Leen I saw was a light
Her eyes, her smiles shone bright.
No matter where she is, she a ray of sunshine
And she felt in my heart.... and mine
With her family I care and befriend
Our love and care true not pretend.
My princess took my heart when I first saw
Her standing in the UN tent holding the centre pole
not to fall.
Then to Athens they were located
I travelled with clothes and toys donated.
My first time to hold her was awesome
The strength of this little girl inspired, great and *truly*
is awesome.
She dressed in clothes I had brought
You could see her deep in thought.
She wore with pride & laughter in her eyes
Her young life strong and wise
She could feel the warmth of love for her
From all that had sent their hearts to her.
The most fun was her gift of Paddington bear
Her first time seeing of this famous bear
The book with his picture was a delight
Her eyes full of fun and light
She had a companion that was famous
But now she is also famous
Yes we would shop together
Visit the city as a family in all weather.
Ice creams and candy, dolls and clothes
These visits to the shops she chose.

In the Camp:

Leen is a star that shines
With all the families caring
All her beauty and her energy sharing
She loves to play football
For all she is so small.
Her giggles and her excitement heard
All in the camp watch and shared
Every time the ball kicks and rolls
She even scores amazing goals!
Then she likes to draw pictures for the wall.
With others she goes to the school hall.
With excitement and giggles
Colourful crayons, she scribbles
Then she runs and falls
To mama she calls
Quickly she picks herself upyes a moment tear
Then off she goes, to find another adventure with no
fear.
She learns her languages with listening
Sometime a word of French
Sometimes a word of English
Then we hear her Yorkshire accent from Marjorie's
visits. "oh that's nice, wheres me mother!"
An English friend like a Grandmother!
A global family we feel, to all we are full of pleas
Sometimes it is great to forget we are refugees.

Subnote: Now Leen and her family are in Belgium
flown by the UN for resettlement there.



Jacqueline Chesta

Venetian Blinds

by Vivienne Burgess

I go into the petrol station to buy a packet of cigarettes, and a chocolate bar for my nephew. A festive song plays through speakers above the shelves. The cashier has a bushy grey moustache and smiles the whole time I'm paying.

He is struggling to separate a blue plastic bag from the big wad behind the counter and I am drumming my fingers, making sure only one is touching the counter at a time. I am doing this with my left hand and notice the sound of the ring tapping against the counter too. A little but important sound. I wonder if the cashier is paying attention. He bags my things and, still smiling, wishes me a nice afternoon. We make eye contact as I wish him the same.

I imagine kissing him with his moustache. I imagine us as soulmates. Then I leave and as I open the door the bell in the corner tinkles. You press one of the little buttons on the arm rest and the window on the passenger side lowers.

Upending one for luck, I offer the first cigarette to you. You shake your head.

'But it's the best one,' I say, lighting the end. I take a long long drag and blow my breath out through the window where it is stolen by the rushing air.

'I don't want to arrive smelling like shit,' you say.

I finish the cigarette before we get out of town and flick the end out the window. You press a button on your arm rest and the windowpane rises with a slow, comical droning.

‘All this pointless technology,’ I say. ‘We are becoming too advanced.’

‘Oh, definitely.’ You pull us onto the motorway. ‘Playing God like a fiddle.’

*

At home, mum flicks the switch on the kettle.

‘Follow your gut,’ she is saying. ‘It’s a gut feeling, in the end.’

‘I’ve already said yes,’ I say.

‘It’s okay to change your mind.’

I wait until the kettle has boiled and is screeching steam into the room before I remind her, ‘I don’t want to change my mind.’

She pours the boiling water into three mugs, two with a teabag and one with instant coffee. She fetches milk from the fridge and I see that, despite all her promises to stop, she is still accepting deliveries to the door by the milkman. They come in glass bottles, rather than cartons. You aren’t supposed to keep the bottles. She washes them out when they are empty and leaves them back on the front doorstep for him to collect next time he comes. Sometimes, if the weather is bad, they topple and break falling down the stone steps. The milkman has never once complained. He has a purple beard.

‘Still haven’t told ol’ Purple Beard?’ I say.

‘I just can’t bring myself. I might be his only customer.’

She pours milk into the three mugs and makes to start carrying them through to the living room, where I can hear my nephew squealing at something you have said or a face you have made in the middle of telling a story. I put my hand out to stop her.

‘No,’ I go, ‘did you put sugar in it?’

She looks down at the mug with the coffee.

‘Needs a sugar in it,’ I say and unhook the mug from her finger. She leaves and goes into the living room, joining the laughter.

I add one and a half teaspoons of sugar to your coffee and then, as I push open the door to the living room with my elbow, I imagine I am the last actor to step out onto an over-lit stage.

*

I wake up to a bright white light shining all through the window. The curtains are drawn but they are doing nothing. It has been snowing in the night.

I put on a dressing gown that is too small and go into the spare room at the end of the corridor. You are reading on the bed with your knees tucked up to your chin like a little kid. Your nose is pressed so close to the pages I wonder if you can smell the machine that printed them. I wonder if the text is even in focus. You don’t look my way until I say something.

‘How long have you been up?’

You turn to me with a blank face then check your phone, then go back to reading.

‘About an hour.’

‘Why didn’t you come say good morning?’

You give me a weird look. I realise I am not even fully in the room. I am peering around the door with my hands clutching the wood like I am your mother or something, checking to see you’ve finished your homework.

‘Sorry,’ you say, ‘I just started reading. Want to finish it before we go back.’

‘Do you want a coffee or something?’

‘No thanks. I made one.’

And then I notice the mug on the window sill. You haven’t put a coaster down and I can see that you have stirred your coffee clumsily because there are faint brown looping stains on the white sides of the mug. It will leave a ring. Someone will have to wipe down the window sill. I leave you to your reading, making sure the door clicks after me.

As I go downstairs I run my hand over the fake holly and berries tied to the bannister. The little pains from each fake holly leaf wake me up a little bit more each time. I make myself some cereal and sit down in the living room in front of the TV without switching it on.

Our Christmas tree is huge this year. My brother, who is earning so much money, splashed out and bought a new artificial one for

mum. The fake pine needles look dull. The whole thing is dull. The tinsel. The chocolate decorations. Dull red and bronzy gold, standing in the corner like an old heavy wardrobe we have been meaning to carry to the dump.

I put down my cereal that I have not yet touched and get on my hands and knees. I feel under the tree for the plug and extension cord and in my blindness manage to attach the two. The tree lights up, but the lights are on a setting that makes them flash like strobes and I panic. So close to the tree I am blinded. I fumble under the wire branches for the lead again, feeling for that little button that switches the settings. I find it, but there are three more awful flashy settings before the one that lets the lights just shine. I sit back, breathing on the floor. My head hurts like I have just run down a hill. I hear someone come into the room.

‘What you doing on the floor?’

Your voice is smirking. I don’t look around. Already the day has been too much and there is still so much left of it.

‘Just turning the lights on,’ I say, reaching for my cereal bowl and deciding that now I am going to eat it right here on the hard floor because I don’t care. I’m on holiday.

‘Okay,’ you say. ‘Do you have any brown bread?’

*

The snow in town has turned grey and been pushed to the curb by all the cars. There is none

on the pavement because of all the people walking. I cannot walk for people walking.

The automatic doors open and I enter the shopping centre. I stand in the way for a moment, stunned. I take off my scarf. It is hot inside and there are so many people coming and going that the automatic doors cannot catch their breath. I hear them sighing non-stop behind me. They blow out a gust of cold air each time that I feel on the back of my neck like you, exhausted.

I start walking and immediately forget what it is I need to buy. Everyone seems to be carrying an oversized shopping bag filled with silvery tissue paper. They all look angry. They all want to ignore this season of giving but have too many kids. All the kids look angry too. Their little shoes scampering around the adult shoes, everyone's shoes moving so quickly and angrily. Everyone wants to get home.

I find a pillar to lean against where I can take off more layers. I check my phone too. I have a message. It is my mobile network reminding me to check out their Christmas contract deals. I don't even delete it. Half way through reading I put my phone back in my pocket.

I remember what I want and I buy it. On the way out again I check my pockets for change for the bus but I have none. I walk all the way. I pass under the bridge and wonder where all the homeless men are because this is where they

used to sleep. It is the middle of the day. I see more angry people, some of them walking their angry dogs.

I pass a couple on their way into town. They are holding each other's hand loosely, like it's no big deal. As we pass each other I hear what the woman is saying and see that the guy is waiting, with a look on his face that shows he knows he is going to laugh whatever it is.

The woman finishes, 'well I'll make my own fruit cake then, and fuck you.'

And the guy does laugh, which makes her laugh.

I imagine them in a fight, wanting so badly to hit each other but knowing they mustn't or the fight will become about that. Then I imagine them naked in bed together. I contort their bodies like puppets in my mind, really trying to imagine what exactly they might look like when they are entirely alone. They must have passed under the bridge now. Their voices echo.

*

After Christmas we drive back down to our tiny apartment. It is far enough away from both of our families that the city is ours. Before we get in the car you ask me,

'Forgotten anything?'

And I say, 'I won't know if I've forgotten it.'

At this point I look directly at your face. It feels as though I haven't really seen you in

weeks and I am startled by how you look in this moment. You look exactly the same. You smile and I smile too, out of habit.

‘Ready to go?’

You throw your keys up in the air and catch them with your other hand. You grin at me with surprise.

‘Let’s go, baby.’

About half way home we get caught in traffic because of some road works and I am so desperate to prove something to myself that I make you pull over into the hard shoulder.

I don’t care about all the cars going past and if they might be able to see. I don’t even care at this point. At the end of it all you kiss me on the shoulder and help me off your lap. I put on my shirt and you fumble with your belt.

‘Are there any tissues?’

I check for you. There aren’t. We pull back out into traffic and I plug your iPod into the speakers so that neither of us feels inclined to speak, and ruin it.

*

In our apartment, the bathroom is a smaller room inside our bedroom. We have a single bed and venetian blinds over the window.

You are in the shower. I am on my laptop researching venues. ‘We don’t want anything extravagant,’ you said. Each intense red price tag is over five digits long. There is a psychology behind colours in marketing and red is used to

implant desire and excitement. The long names of the manor houses all blur into one. I rub my eyes until I see galaxies. I'd rather just get on a plane and go.

You are humming a song. Actually, maybe you are singing it, but I can only hear the vague tune over the noise of the water. I check my phone and try to gauge how long you have been in there. I switch tabs and scroll down the page of last minute flight deals. £150 for two tickets to someplace. Just cabin bags, no hold. One way.

The apartment complex is so small it seems to only house couples who are just starting out and don't mind living on top of each other. The couple above us are watching Friends again. I recognise the episode. It is New Year's Eve and Phoebe's boyfriend is moving to Minsk. She is telling him how to break up with her and I say the line along with her in my head.

'And then you leave,' we say, 'because you don't want to start the new year with us if you can't finish it.'

You drop something in the shower and the water noises stop. I close the flights tab without bookmarking. I know how to find it again.

*

At the end of December, we go round one of your friend's and stand in the driveway as the countdown begins, staring up at the great black, expecting. Someone down the street lets off the fireworks. Red, green, red again. I cling to your

arm and as we are going back inside you grab me round the waist and whisper into my ear that that was your favourite part. The next day we book a venue.

A nice big hall with nice big grounds, plenty of space for dancing. We pick a date too. We'll be married in a warm month, so no one has to bring a coat and the little kids can take off their shoes and run around on the grass, staining their rented clothes. As if to We take down the decorations, packing them back into boxes with love and care. With no attic we are forced to leave the boxes in the corner and pretend we cannot see them.

We spend our last day of holiday reading in our tiny living room, either end of the sofa, our minds split down the middle, one half in the room and the other in our private elsewhere. We have a big window in this room and a tree in full blossom stands outside it. The light falling through the petals turns the whole room pink. The heat and the pretty light – or maybe it is something you are reading about the earth shifting – turns our silence into stroking, which turns to kissing, which turns to pulling a spare mattress out from behind our tiny sofa and pushing the tiny coffee table to the side of the room.

As if to cover our noises, the couple upstairs decide to cook a meal, banging pots in their kitchen. Afterward you sprawl on the mattress,

bare back exposed, and sleep. I sit very still and quiet at my end of the sofa, letting the room turn dark. I switch on the TV but nothing interests me. I kick the mattress. You do not stir.

I go to brush my teeth because I've never liked swallowing and while I am brushing I stand at the window in our bedroom and watch the cars on the street. I separate the blinds with my fingers and look across the street to the other apartments. They have balconies but I never see anyone out on them. There are a few plant pots, and a tea towel draped over the railing. The sky is deep and dark clouds are moving across it quickly as though someone in charge of it all is pressing fast forward. I pinch an individual slat between my finger and thumb and tilt it up and down, covering and uncovering the balcony. Tea towel, no tea towel. Tea towel, no.

I realise I have been standing at the window brushing the same spot in my mouth for over ten minutes. When I spit my mouthful back into the sink the froth contains a pink swirl of my blood. I suck my gums. The spot of pain is a small one on the roof of my mouth but feels bigger because I can only see it with my tongue. The more I suck, the sharper the pain.

I go back into the living room and you are sitting bright eyed in my spot on the sofa. You prefer to change when I am not looking even though it's confusing, like playing a trick on me. I sit down and you nudge my foot with your foot. You smile with your molars when I catch your eye.

The differences in the bottle labels are so subtle that I can never remember which wine was the last one we tried. You like to have a different one each time. And you remember all the names.

I stand in the aisle looking at a bottle of Barefoot pinot grigio with a green footprint on the label and say, 'What about this one?'

I don't reason that I need to turn and look at you to say this. In marketing, they use green to instill peace, serenity, affinity with all things natural. I am wondering why, then, a foot? when you clear your throat and I realise you haven't answered me.

I turn and say, 'What about this one?'

You are staring at top shelf, eyes on a label. Name, origin, vintage. Something special obviously, but you haven't let me in on it. You don't say anything.

I say 'Hey, what about this one?'

I feel foolish. I feel the fool. I can hear the lights high above us whirring on the ceiling. You don't seem to breathe. You have done this so many times I am beginning to suspect that I can stop time. There are other people in the aisle and they are moving, they are talking to each other, why aren't we?

I say it again, though it doesn't matter anymore what exactly I am saying. I don't know who is meant to be protesting or what either of us has to gain.

‘What about this one?’

If you snap out of it right now and ask me to point out which one I won’t be able to tell you it from Joe. It doesn’t matter. It’s not about the wine. You cough again and there is a twitch in your mouth. You are trying not to smile. The heel of my shoe makes a ridiculous squeak as I turn and walk away, walk right out of the shop, still holding the basket.

When you eventually come to find me you explain that you were lost in your own head again and I can’t blame you for that. I can’t keep getting mad about little stuff like that. You can’t keep having the same fight. I can’t stop time.

*

In the warm month, we spend the night before the wedding sleeping in separate rooms at the hall. I cannot sleep. It is deep into the night. I am afraid to look at my phone and find out the time. I am afraid of bags under my eyes in the photographs. The room is enormous. So is the bed.

I lie on top of the covers in a towel I wrapped myself in after showering. I know I will shower again in the morning. The towel is dry now. There is a plane in the sky. It has been moving behind the huge window for a while. There are no blinds here, only a big sheet of glass, like at an aquarium. Lights on the wing tips blink and from somewhere I hear water babbling, and sad whale song. The plane is to me a lonely fluorescent

thing living on the deep sea bed that hasn't seen another of its kind in years.

I think so deeply about aquariums that I have to shake away thoughts of the glass bulging with the weight of water behind it and breaking onto me. I turn my head on the pillow. My neck aches wherever positioned, and the plane is always there. No blinds to hide it.

The plane is always there and I imagine myself on it, looking down over the fields that are blue in the night time. I cannot see me from up there. I imagine that I do not exist, but that has always been hard, and I can't really do it.

My phone buzzes on the table. Twice.

You are in another room on the other side of the hall. I wonder if you have a window, and what you are seeing.

I pick up my phone and move my finger across the screen, connecting the dots and unlocking it.

Two texts. One from mum:

Big day tomorrow, So proud of you! M xx

One from you: hey are u up?

The room is far too big. The plane has made a full journey across the entire window and has just slipped off the edge.

I strain my ears to hear the noises from the other couples but they are not here. I want all my friends to be with me in the room, squished on the floor in colourful sleeping bags.

I close the messages. I tap on the little internet icon that resembles a globe and type into the search bar my go-to web address for last minute flights. I type in Minsk as the destination. I don't even know where Minsk is. Do you?

My heart knocks against the mattress while the grey circle next to the search bar spins.

£311 for two adults, one way.

I return to the previous page and reset the details. My hands are shaking and it takes me three attempts to press the right things.

£148 for one adult, one way.

The grey circle spins.

My phone buzzes and I drop it hard on my cheek. I shout out in pain and then panic that, with it being so quiet and still, you have heard me. I pick up my phone and close the browser quickly. My phone stalls a moment, I panic again that it has broken and you will see what I have done, but then I am on the home page with all my apps and favourites and we are in the background, smiling, from nine months ago.

A little envelope waits in the top left corner. I am afraid to open it. I can't even look at it directly.



Lisa Enright

Walk the road

by Paul Ryan

My father hated walking – what it meant
you were lonely, sick or unemployed
had nowhere else to go but walk the road.
You might as well grow dirt beneath your nails
or drink all day at the top of our street.

Or live beyond the police station
shacked up on the Lakeland Poets estate
where blankets hung as curtains, Mr Twist
the ice cream man dripped snot onto your cone
and even the grass growled. My father said:

‘I saw Tim Sullivan walk the road, poor man.
He’s not the same since that poor woman died.
He looks shook. You remember that quiff he had
thick as a hedge, taller than Everest, stiff
as a corpse. Now all he does is walk Swan Road
hoping to meet someone. It’s no life.’

And when it was his turn to walk the road
my father shaved each day and wore a suit
and wouldn’t stop to speak to other men
but crossed the street and bowed his head
like he was praying for himself or them.



Mark Larkin

Bittersweet Carnival

by Grace Quansah (aka 'Akuba')

Beat the pan
For Notting Hill carnival,
But remember for many,
It's no fun at all.

For while crowds dance
To sweet Soca sounds,
Loved ones are mourned
That remain unfound.

Unfound in a Tower,
Now darkened and grim,
That once was 'home'
Where many families lived in.

Pat the drum and strum,
While the sun beams overhead,
Though, never ever forget
Those uncounted dead.

Dead but never forgotten,
In a Tower so very tall,
Which is why for many
Carnival 2017 is no fun at all.

So, as culinary spices
Seduce hungry bellies,
Local residents await
Justice for a horrific tragedy.

A horrific tragedy, in London's West,
In a Tower so grim and tall,
Diverse families, mostly working class,
Fought bravely for survival.

Those who fought bravely for survival,
Relive flashbacks night and day,
Unsurprisingly, some affected families,
Decided this year to stay away.

Staying away for many others,
Was not an option they wish to choose
Instead carnival offers a sacred space
To pay silent homage with a respectful muse.

A respectful muse drew many together,
As white doves flew high above,
A cultural *Bridge* soothes *Over Troubled Waters*,
Everyone present could feel the love.

Feeling the love with tearful eyes,
At 3pm all at Carnival hold their beat
As the Grenfell Tower families are remembered,
This year's vibe is bittersweet.

SINK OR SWIM

by Paul Joseph Foley

As the moon fails, the same moment the sun
prevails

and polar ice caps melt to flood the Earth,
extinguishing all fires.

If any of the race are left to swim this world, of
hope bereft, they'd best forget candle-lit repasts
and the smoke of funeral pyres.

Evolve a tail, a fin and flippers. Think no more of
cosy slippers.

Expand your lungs and flee from danger. Learn
again the laws of nature.

Once you preyed on all its creatures, now you're
engulfed within their reaches.

You weak and helpless 'babe in manger', beware
the sight of every stranger.

Now there are no homes to live in, devolve your
thumbs and become a dolphin.

No boats to build without good timber, burnt by
the sun till but a cinder.

No forests left where once were many. Not trees
enough to 'spend a penny'.

The land has now been swamped by deluge and
you must sink or swim.



Lisa Enright

Colin or Colene

by David E.J.A. Bennett

Through the window by which I sit at my desk upstairs, I can see the top of a tower.

It sticks out like a sore thumb on a fingerless hand, which has been severed from its once-accompanying arm, and placed in some kind of embalming tank surrounded by desperate neon letters saying, "PLEASE LOOK AT ME!" – but slightly more sightly.

It's certainly an anomaly, put it that way. Amid the otherwise innocuous, boring things visible from this suburban West London window – a smattering of trees, the watercolour sky which is framed from below by the rooves which top the adjacent row of houses – there's this pastel-like lime green, pyramid-shaped roof with a strange, globular adornment atop it, which sits on top of the tower.

I can only see the top two segments of the tower: its green roof, as just described, and the second-to-top segment. Of those which I can see, each side of the second-to-top segment has five embrasure windows. It doesn't look like a mosque, but it does have an air of the Middle East about it... I don't know why, because it's not Middle Eastern at all. I guess it wouldn't look too out of place in Valetta, the fortified capital of

Malta, but then again maybe it would. Who knows?!

What is certain, to me at least, is that you could quite easily imagine a deformed man or woman living up there, cast asunder by a society not yet evolved enough to accept that some people look different to the anonymous mass. You can imagine him or her – let's call him or her Colin, or Colene (you choose) – sitting up there, peering through the glassless embrasure windows down at the unknowing ants below, as he or she sobs endlessly into his bowl of lukewarm water, which has bits of soggy bread in it for some reason.

All Colin or Colene wants is to be allowed down from that bloody tower, and to have someone know him or her for who he or she is inside, and not just know him or her for his or her abnormal exterior from a distance. But the crazy thing is, Colin or Colene is up there of his or her own free will. His or her debilitating self-consciousness is what drove him or her to have a breakdown, break into the building from which the tower rises, climb the tower's steps, and live a life of self-exclusion in the damp and cold surrounding of the top of the tower – which certainly has no Wi-Fi connection.

The funny thing is, if Colin or Colene came down and once again walked among the people of West London, in their myriad forms, those West Londoners *would* notice him or her, sure. But

they would think nothing more than a passing “oh, he/she looks slightly different”. And then completely just go back to thinking about whatever shit they need to pick up for dinner later that night, or some hilarious meme they saw on Facebook earlier that day.

In all honesty, if Colin or Colene marketed him/herself properly, he or she could become an internet sensation in this ‘eternal-fifteen-minutes-of-fame-for-no-particular-reason’ world in which we all fester. If only he or she realised that, instead of self-reflecting a largely outdated attitude of society towards individual difference, he or she could do well for him or herself.

I mean, who knows?! With the modern world of internet dating flourishing as it is, he or she could even find him or herself a nice lady friend, or man friend (I don’t know his or her sexuality); perhaps someone who shares his or her anxieties... all he or she would have to do would be to pluck up the courage to send her or him that first message, and then they could get talking, and both realise that they are not alone in their debilitating visions of self. Perhaps, if he or she plucked up enough confidence, he or she could meet someone who didn’t have the same self-consciousness as him or her, but was just a good enough person to not see people as shells and instead see the deeper them.

Whoever it is, it could be the start of something truly beautiful. Happiness, even. Perhaps they would fall madly in love, and he or she could

propose to her or him outside Leicester Square tube station, or something, and she or he could say “YES! GOD, YES!!!” and they could move in together shortly after. They could plan a wedding together, and both get decent jobs in order to afford a nice quality of life – a shared life. And, of course, then would come the talk of children. They could spend hours thinking up the ideal names for their boys and girls – ‘Jemima’ for a girl, and ‘Finlay’ for a boy, perhaps. They *could* have twins, and little Jemima and Finlay could grow up to lead perfectly normal lives, unhindered by their father’s or mother’s passed anxieties. Finlay would perhaps flourish at football in his younger days, and then grow into a highly intelligent debater and, perhaps, a respected author; and Jemima, she could flourish in mathematics as a child, and then go on to be the maths expert on ‘Countdown’, raking in a six-digit salary. And then, with the kids doing so very well, both having their own highly successful children, Colin’s or Colene’s story would be a mere blip in the family line. A blip which was overcome with the most astute bravery, surpassing even the successes of his or her brilliant children, and his or her children’s’ brilliant children. So, it’s a shame that he or she can’t see through the distorted image of him or herself, it really is. Anywho, it quite an odd building to see from such an innocuous vantage point, as I say.

The Circus

by Marianne Winters

The Headteacher

Roll up, roll up! To see the greatest show on earth
(or certainly this side of the Atlantic!)
(Wink at the audience)

Today, you will see AMAZING feats of daring,
wonder, and *death*-defying skill,
all before your *very* eyes!
(Dramatic pause for impact)

**(Now put your excited voice on; it's not like
you've done this five times this week. Grin and
bear it)**

Soooo.... watch out for thrills, spills, excitement
and *tension*!

Who will crumble in front of such a tough
audience?

Who will perform their hearts out?

And whoooo... will take their skills to new
heights?

**(Let the power and magnitude of the circus and
its delights sink in)**

It's tiiiiime to find out!
Drum roll please!

(Gesture to drum roller; it does not matter if he is drunk. Grin and bear it)
(Usher the first act on; keep smiling; walk off majestically; flop onto a sofa at the earliest opportunity)

Year 7

As you can see, these are the youngest members of our circus community.

Docile, gentle, innocent of *bad behaviours* of the older lot,

(for now anyway!!!)

(Wink wink, nudge nudge!)

They will, of course, not do anything *too* dangerous today,

but, aaaaasssss circus life is a baptism of fire, they *will* be jumping through burning hoops!!!

(Let this news sink in; ignore the gasps from the performers themselves – *they* should know better than to behave so dramatically. Honestly, can't get the staff. DO NOT GET SIDE-TRACKED. PROCEED IN THE USUAL FASHION – GET THE AUDIENCE TO CLAP, USE ANY MEANS NECESSARY. ANY MEANS)

(Reassuring voice)

Now, my good ladies and gentlemen,
there is *nothing* what-so-ever to be afraid of!

Our performers *are* trained professionals!!
**(Grin and bear it. Whether they are or not is
entirely beside the point)**
**(Get the clapping going again – think of the
after-circus drinks)**

Sooooo, my good ladies and gentlemen,
who is ready for thrills?
(Whoop like you mean it)
And, potentially **(in fact, quite likely)** spills????

Okaaayyy, let's welcome your performers!!!!
**(Go off beaming; forget after-circus, get a drink
right now – you're going to need it)**

Year 13

(One more to go – you can do it)
Wow, weren't they AMAZING!!!
**(Do *not* listen to performers booing – grow up
for heavens' sake)**

Aaaaannd, it's always nice to know that our
lovely ambulance crew are *so* accommodating,
when
mishaps occur.

Anywayyyyyy... now it is time for our final act!!!!
(Thank God – I feel a headache coming on)
Our most senior troupe!!!
Some of you *may* have seen them before;

some of you may *remember* the ones who didn't make it;

(Emotional face; hand on heart)

some of you may have thought that they would *never* make it!!!

(You weren't the only ones)

But noooooow, I can *proudly* present our final act!!!

Who knows what they will do after they have trapezed over a pit of killer sharks???

Who knows if they will make it out **(dramatic pause)** alive??????

Who can TELL?????

(Who cares, quite frankly?)

But noooooow, I give you our *performers*!!!!

(Over for another day, thank God. Move quickly and with a plastic grin on your face; do not look into the Big Top, I repeat do not look into the Big Top. Grin and bear it)

Greatness Bestowed

by Nerissa Taverner

By the end of tonight, I will have reaped the rewards of my patience and commitment over the years. As the crème de la crème of society look to find their seats in a vision of silk and top hats, sweat starts to drip down my neck. Breathing hard, I feel a reassuring hand rest on my shoulder. This comforts me slightly and I nod gratefully, slowly turning my attention to the stage down below. The lights start to dim, quickly followed by limelight highlighting the performers. Looking around, I notice people starting to shuffle in their seats in anticipation and I know it's time. I close my eyes and allow myself to become just another member of the audience.

As the evening goes on, I try not to let my mind wander but something inside me brings me back to that significant Friday night of the year 1871. As London's day scene ended, bringing forwards its night fantasies, I had just finished another unbearable day at the Royal Academy of Music. I admit it, I had not wanted to go there intentionally. It had been my mother who'd forced me to follow in my late grandfather's footsteps. I tried telling her that I had no musical talent whatsoever but it was all in vain. A year

had passed and I still hadn't improved. My fellow students called me a disgrace to the Arts and that I was wasting my time studying music. I came to agree with them, it was the truth after all. As I entered my minimal student accommodation, I started to entertain thoughts of the darkest kind. I thought of ending my life, thinking that I would be free from the music that I could only enviously hear from others and not create myself. It was then that everything changed.

As I wallowed in self-pity, I heard an unexpected rustle of my curtains. Thinking that I was about to be robbed, I quickly picked up my pocket knife and held it out in front of me. A soft chuckle interrupted my one moment of courage, irritating me.

"Whatever little childish game you're playing on me, it won't work," I said, staring into the darkness of my unlit room. I waited for a moment but there was no reply.

"Who are you?" I shouted out, now starting to feel frightened. "Show yourself!" My words had no effect, the silence continued. "What do you want from me?"

Those were the words that prompted a response from the unseen, mysterious stranger. Without warning he reached forward and grabbed me with both hands around the wrists. I cried out in surprise. Finally, he spoke.

“Perhaps the right question is what can I do for you?” he asked in hushed mellow tones.

Without any warning, he let go of me abruptly and in quick succession shot out one of his fingers and pressed down firmly on my forehead. What followed was something that I will never forget. His abrupt touch elicited a sharp pain at first but was quickly followed by a warm, almost pleasurable feeling. It was as if some sort of energy source had entered my body and was spreading throughout my entire system. I found I could no longer stand. As this was all going on, my unwanted guest clicked his fingers once, the sound resonating throughout the room. A hazy light appeared all around us and at last I could see him. He was a young man, not much older than I was at nineteen, wearing a black, calf length frock coat with a contrasting waistcoat best suiting the upper middle class. His eyes twinkled as he smiled down at me and from that moment, I was no longer afraid of him. He bent down slowly and whispered in my ear, “Everything will be all right now.”

That person was called Oscar Braithwaite and it’s that very man who’s sitting next to me now, just as enraptured by the performance as everybody else in the hall. After that night I didn’t see him again for another month but I quickly became a completely different person. I could finally hear music in my mind and this time it was heavenly, the music of angels. Everyone at the Academy

was in awe at this unforeseen change. Out of nowhere, all the music in the world, and beyond, had been made available to me. Finally, after another long yet fulfilling day, he returned. I cannot remember the whole conversation but as I recall, a part of it went something like this.

“You’re probably wondering what I did to you.”

“Yes but whatever it was, I can’t thank you enough.”

“Now, now, I am not some sort of saint. Far from it in fact. To put it simply, as a child, I was visited one day by some sort of *entity* who gave me a power and told me to give it to somebody in great need. It would help them when they needed it the most. I could not use this power myself but all these years later, I knew you were the one.”

As my life went on, Oscar’s friendship itself became a gift even with his eccentricities. He’d take me up onto rooftops at night to practise underneath London’s dark skies. He’d smoke opium whenever I played for him, the fumes making me feel relaxed and good about myself. Although he’d had no formal musical training, he always seemed to know how to help me reach my true potential.

Now just over five years later, I watch with pride as the concert ends with tumultuous applause,

knowing that the conductor and musicians had played my own music exactly how I wanted it. I wait until my name is mentioned. When it is, I don't move for several seconds. However, Oscar looks at me so intensely that I find it in myself to stand up, and acknowledge the commencement of my fame.



Jacqueline Chesta

I am Malala

by Angela Narayn

In Birmingham, England, doctors fight to restore
my damaged brain.

An outpouring of support; I drown in their
letters.

My face splashed across the world's media,
Schoolgirl shot in the head by Taliban.

Amid these grey, greasy streets, terraced houses
and littered pavements,

My shattered body heals and life is reclaimed.

It is 2014: I am the youngest recipient of the
Nobel Peace Prize.

Looking out over the curved tiers at the UN
Youth Conference,

Row on row of expectant faces, the air charged,
I stand alone, a schoolgirl, five feet tall, a Pashtun
from Swat Valley.

My words stare up at me unflinching, darkening
the page,

Then my voice lifting through the space, each
word winged with fervour.

"One child, one book, one teacher, one pen can
change the world."

A moment's silence then a frenzy of applause,
reverberating,

A haze of motion, people are on their feet,
standing on chairs, waving, calling out.

A voice comes to me, a bright light engulfs me
“Who is Malala?”

His gun cocked and aimed at my head.

The human warmth draws me back;

I am education activist, human rights
campaigner, Nobel Peace Laureate.

“I am not a lone voice. I am many. I am those 66
million girls who are deprived of education.”

I am Malala. Malala Yousafzai.

Shirley Anne Cook

Shirley is a teacher and author of children's books, based in Uxbridge, and also runs poetry workshops for school children.

Gael

Gael has lived in the Borough for forty years, and has chosen to remain otherwise anonymous.

Yasmin Selena Butt

Yasmin Selena Butt grew up in London with a love of music, the English Language and writing stories. After gaining a postgraduate CAM Foundation Certificate in Communications she worked in PR and Marketing, and, abroad in the Maldives as an English Language teacher.

Following this, she promoted and reviewed established acts and up and coming bands through social media and online journalism. She took a career sabbatical to self-publish her debut novel, GUNSHOT GLITTER, which was cover endorsed by best-selling author, Lisa Jewell. She is currently recording an audio book version which she hopes to launch in the New Year.

Jasveena Masih

Jasveena describes herself as: a lover of the written word. Works as an English tutor.

Married. Has a passion for history and humanities. Worked as a mentor to offenders in and out of custody. Believes in humble beginnings and mini victories in a sometimes difficult world.

Marina Cicionesi Jansson

Marina Cicionesi Jansson is currently studying BA English with Creative Writing at Brunel University London. Her upbringing in the Swedish countryside in an artist home, where international creative and cultural exchanges are everyday life, shaped her worldview and feeling of a global home. Moving to London was a natural step, 'I feel at home in London's multicultural atmosphere and creative flow'

Marina explains, 'becoming able to write skilfully in English will help me reach my dream of working internationally.' When not studying, Marina works as an art director, photographer, film photographer and web designer with a focus on environmental and social issues.

Iris Hontiveros Mauricio

Originally from the Philippines, Iris is pursuing a Creative Writing degree in Brunel University London and while not particularly devout herself, most of her writing bears strong influences of her Roman Catholic upbringing, along with themes of history, mythology, pop culture and the arts—things from which she draws much inspiration. When she isn't busy wrestling her muses and challenging her creativity, Iris can be found living a sedentary life similar to that of a feline's: eating, limited socializing, succumbing to bouts of lethargy when caught in warm patches of sunlight, and binge-watching shows and films

Anujit Kaur

Anujit has a Bachelors degree in English with Creative Writing and a Masters in Creative Writing, both from Brunel University. Her undergraduate special project *Beginning of an Indian Summer* won the Arthur Scott prize and an extract of this piece was the ten-page centre in the SADAA *Against the Grain* publication. Her Masters dissertation *Mad* was shortlisted for the Curtis Brown Prize.

Apart from being a Brunel alumna, her parents have run our family business in the area for 18 years so it's very much a community that she has grown up in.

Devyn Gonsalves

Currently, Devyn is a second year student at California Polytechnic State University studying English and Dance. She aims to become an English teacher at a high school in the United States, but began writing as a hobby when she was 13 years old. She studied abroad in London this past summer, a choice made mainly by her appreciation for Shakespeare and his works. When she visited the Borough of Hillingdon, she fell in love with the greenery and quaint atmosphere that differed greatly from the bustling city where her university classes were held. If given the opportunity, she would definitely move to London, specifically an area like that of Hillingdon, in a heartbeat.

Philip Marriner

Philip Marriner is the author of the forthcoming dark young-adult fantasy adventure novel 'Littledale'. He is a local teacher of History and Classics and has led creative writing courses for young adults. Philip writes predominantly under candlelight in the depths of winter, when the rain is rattling hard on the windowpane and the shadows outside mask unknown terrors.

Max Hallam

Max Hallam studies Creative Writing at Brunel University London. He lives in Hillingdon with his family.

Stephen Powdrill

Leicester-born Steve Powdrill is a writer and performer living in London, currently in the final year of his Creative Writing and Theatre degree at Brunel University. His work has featured in various anthologies and a Nationwide Building Society advert in 2017, which aired on television and online platforms. Themes and topics covered range from coming of age stories, LGBT matters, political satire and other comedic tones. He is also contributor to *Le Nurb* and *HEY MILLENNIALS*, two university media outlets, focusing on theatre and culture topics. Blending performance and poetry is important to him, and he has recently performed in an adapted devised show based on Kate Tempest's, 'Hold Your Own'. He believes poetry should be accessible, relatable and should seek to bring people together.

Philip Tew

In the 1970s and 1980s Philip Tew published poetry and stories in various magazines, giving numerous readings, but secretly he also wrote longer fiction which remained unpublished. In 1997 he was awarded a Ph.D. on experimental British novelist B.S. Johnson. In 2016 he submitted successfully his second doctorate, on creative writing (a quasi-autobiographical novel and critical commentary) at Brunel University London where in 2006 he had been appointed Professor of English (Post-1900 Literature). Tew has authored, co-edited or edited twenty-five academic books, many concerned with contemporary British fiction. Anticipating retirement, he is returning to his earlier passion of writing fiction.

Momtaza Mehri

Momtaza Mehri is a poet, essayist, literary studies researcher and meme archivist. Her work has been featured (& is forthcoming) in DAZED, Vogue, Sukoon, PANK Magazine, Bone Bouquet, VINYL, Poetry Society of America, Mask Magazine and Poetry International. Her poetry has also been anthologized. She is a Complete Works Fellow and winner of the 2017 Outspoken Page Poetry Prize. Her chapbook *sugah lump prayer* was published in April 2017 as part of the

New Generation African Poets series. She also edits Diaspora Drama, a digital platform showcasing international immigrant art. As of 2017, I have studied in the Hillingdon Borough (Brunel University).

Adam Martley

Adam has lived in the borough his whole life and graduated from Brunel with a Journalism degree in 2012. His day job is as a writer for a contract catering company. His favourite author is Haruki Murakami, but he is also very partial to classic 20th century novels. He's also particularly fond of the band Radiohead and the TV series Game of Thrones. You can find him on Twitter under the handle @AdamMartley

Joolz Gray

I was born in Hillingdon and have lived here all my life so far. my parents and their families all hail from the area, so it always feels like home and now I'm bringing my own family up here. I began writing poetry at a young age, just rhyming words together to see how they looked, this has developed as I've grown and writing is a major passion of mine now. I'm hoping to develop it even more over the coming years, as my passion for poetry grows.

Vivien Brown

For many years, Vivien Brown worked with young children and their parents in Hillingdon's libraries and children's centres, but is now a full-time writer. Specialising in professional nursery magazine features, short stories and full-length women's fiction, her novel 'Lily Alone' will be published in paperback in October 2017. Vivien enjoys cryptic crosswords, rhyming and comic poetry, TV dramas, looking after her little granddaughter and two adorable cats, and eating copious amounts of chocolate. She is an avid reader, usually of romantic novels or psychological thrillers, and is a member of The Romantic Novelists' Association.

Mark O'Loughlin

London-born, I've been a resident in the London Borough of Hillingdon since 2003. I've completed a number of short writing courses at Birkbeck, City Lit and most recently at Faber and Faber (October 2012 – March 2013 – Writing a Novel, Faber Academy, London) and I have written a novel (Dad Died in Vegas) and various short stories (unpublished) since then. In December 2016 I started to write poems and one of them has recently been published on the Dog Ear Magazine website: <http://dogear.co.uk/> I've also been writing non-fiction for the website: www.goodnewshared.com since July 2016.

Gita Ralleigh

Gita Ralleigh is a consultant radiologist and writer who received her MA in creative writing in 2015 from Birkbeck College, University of London. She has published short stories in Wasafiri, Bellevue Literary Review and on the Word Factory website. Her work has also appeared in anthologies published by Fox Spirit, the Emma Press and Freight books (forthcoming). She lives in Hillingdon and loves its libraries, parks and green spaces. She can be found on twitter @storyvilled.

Mike Beranek

Brought up in North Yorkshire, born in California, the author had a 17-year career as a hospital doctor and junior psychiatrist before mental health related problems led to retirement. Writing, and studying writing forms part on his ongoing rehabilitation. He is a Quaker, and serves his local Quaker Meeting in Uxbridge as Clerk and in various other roles for the London West Area Quaker Meeting to which he belongs. Other hobbies include photography, and reading books of fiction & on spirituality. He moved to West Drayton to be near his resourceful Lithuanian partner, a dinner lady, over six years ago.

Megan Carter

My first job was as a P.A. in London, followed by working as a school secretary. After the birth of our son I worked in the NHS as a Relaxation Therapist being part of the Occupational Therapy Team. I have also worked as a volunteer for a local Hospice, and Cruse Bereavement Services, seeing clients in a drop-in centre and making home visits. I enjoy writing and belong to a local writing group Phrase Writers. I have written short stories and poems but prefer the latter and have had poems published. I also enjoy reading, gardening and jazz.

Matthew Healing

Matthew Healing is a twenty-year-old writer of short fiction, poetry, screenplays, and journalism.

Born in Edmonton, North London, Matthew began writing sports journalism as a teenager and quickly got published by a number of websites for opinion pieces and match reviews.

Taking major influence from authors such as Wordsworth, Fitzgerald, and Shakespeare, he began writing his own prose and poetry. It was from here that Matthew began to experiment with other forms of writing, following his passions to Brunel University where he studies Creative Writing.

Helen Borland

I have lived in Hillingdon all my life and am a proud ex-Brunelian. I attended Brunel University from 2008 to 2011 where I did a BA in English with Creative Writing and achieved a 1st. I am currently working in the IT Sales company, but do still like to indulge with my creative side when I can. Writing will always be my passion and is something I hope to spend more time doing in the future.

Alison Fletcher

Originally from Stratford-Upon-Avon, Alison Fletcher is a third-year student of Creative Writing at Brunel University, London. She is a writer of prose fiction, and themes of her work focus primarily on surrealism, satire and critique of human behaviour. Her influences include Miranda July, Katharine Mansfield, Lewis Carroll and Roald Dahl. Alison is also a writer and editor for blog Hey Millennials; her work usually centred around the theme of London Living. Previously published in Bernadine Evaristo's 'It's Complicated' Anthology 2017.

Ada Kalu

I am a blogger and content writer for Culture Custodian, an online news and event platform that caters to millenials within Africa, particularly Nigeria in which it was founded. I am also a second year English Literature and Creative Writing student at Brunel University.

Sam Green

Sam is a Creative Writing student originally from South Wales. He enjoys reading and writing, and is particularly fond of sleeping, though has little issue sacrificing it to binge-watch TV shows or films; the cinema is practically a second home to him. He has been studying at Brunel University for two years and has in that time developed a dependence on coffee and cynicism.

Alexander Noir

Alexander Dommett is a writer of poetry and prose. Some of his most recent work has been published by /TheRules in their *Seeing Wetiko* campaign, and shortlisted for the 2016 Hillingdon Literary Festival writing competition. Originally from Devon, he now lives in Greater London studying English and Creative Writing at Brunel University.

Marjorie Bahhaj

It is difficult to keep anonymous as Dante and I wrote last year in the festival. This is a further look at my work befriending the Syrian refugee family. My travels to Eleonas Camp. Athens to help with Dante's sister and her daughters Leen and now Celine and led to this submission for 2017. I have lived in the London of Borough of Hillingdon since 1994 I am now a retired nurse and midwife that is an activist on domestic and international issues. I am frequently using my freedom pass to travel into Parliament to lobby and attend meetings.

Vivienne Burgess

Vivienne is a Norwich born, Northern raised 22 year old. She moved down to Hillingdon in 2013 to study and graduated in 2016 from Brunel University London with a First in English with Creative Writing. She now rents a flat in Uxbridge with her best friend and works at the university, writing short fiction and poetry in her spare time. At the moment, she is reading Junot Diaz *This Is How You Lose Her* and Leone Ross *Come Let Us Sing Anyway*. One day she would like to work with animals, and publish a collection of short stories.

Paul Ryan

I was born and brought up in West Drayton (where my poem is based), the son of Irish immigrants who came over from Ireland and settled in Hillingdon in the early fifties. I have lived in the borough for most of my life and am interested in exploring it in my writing. I have taught English abroad and worked as a journalist. I have had a short play performed at the Questors Theatre in Ealing and at the moment am working on a play set in Hillingdon during the early 1970s.

Grace Quansah (aka 'Akuba')

A former OU lecturer, I am currently work as a British Museum school's facilitator (2005 to date) and performance artist, touring educational and heritage sites, especially with my Marcus Garvey-inspired educational resource, *Unpacking That Trunk*, which based on my father's work with the Ghanaian shipping liner, the Black Star Line. In 2008, I founded *WAPPY* to develop the writing, artwork and performance skills of young people, with opportunities for performance, exhibition and publication. I've also co-edited *The Soul of a Child*, with Maureen Roberts, and, *Mame Nwia-Amah*, by Esther Ackah with Eric Huntley. I'm working on my own poetry collection and hope to undertake doctoral research at Brunel University.

Paul Joseph Foley

I was born in December 1966 in Chiswick. I grew up in Hounslow as part of an Irish family and was always encouraged to sing and write. I have been married for 18 years and have two beautiful children. I write solely for my own entertainment although when my children were younger I often wrote poems for them which they found amusing.

I have worked at Heathrow Airport for over 30 years which I consider to be my birthright. My other interests include nature, music, family history, playing banjo and learning Portuguese.

David E.J.A. Bennett

David is a Kentish man living in West London. Having left compulsory education at 15 with no qualifications, and no real prospects, David sought to educate himself in his late 20s after a tough start to life. At the age of 30, he enrolled on an English Degree at Brunel University London. He is a prolific journalist, and the new Political Editor of a current affairs magazine. David is also a published poet, although he hates the poetry he writes.

Marianne Winters

Marianne is a short story writer and poet, currently working on her first extended piece. Living locally, but embarking on studies further afield, she one day hopes to follow dreams of becoming a published author.

Nerissa Taverner

I am currently a Creative Writing student at Brunel University and am starting my third year.

I love writing with science fiction and fantasy being my favourite genres. I enjoy writing stories about possible futures or those set in the past but with a fantastical twist. While I like writing scripts, poetry and plays, I prefer writing short stories and longer pieces of prose. I started writing a science fiction novel for young adults before starting my university course but since I've been at Brunel I've found that my writing has improved. When I'm not writing I enjoy dancing.

Angela Narayn

I have an interest in writing and I'm currently a member of the Ruislip Writers' Group. I have attended many creative writing classes at the City Lit and locally in Hayes and Harrow. I am a mother and always took a keen interest in my children's education. I see education as the great leveller and crucial to social equality. I worked as a learning assistant with students with learning difficulties at Harrow College and believe in lifelong learning.



Jacqueline Chesta



Jacqueline Chesta

Illustrators

Simi Abe

Although Simi Abe is studying Creative Writing, she spends a lot of her free time drawing and painting. Within her work, she enjoys experimenting with concepts and themes, particularly those that explore the surreal. Even though she has more experience drawing with graphite, she is open to using different mediums and is currently teaching herself digital art. You can see more of her work on Instagram @the_simiverse

Jacqueline Chesta

In 2006 Jacqueline started drawing sketches of people on the Metro and the RER in Paris. *Croquis sur Toile* (sketches on canvas) is a series of oil paintings on nonprimed canvas. In May 2010 a selection of 36 sketches was published under the title: *La Ligne B*. Since 2013, still sketching on the metro, she has now been drawing people everywhere in cities. That started another series entitled "Cities' soul", oil paintings with collages, mixing art, poetry and literature. Jacqueline attended both the 2015 and 2016 Hillingdon Literary Festivals, sketching numerous sessions and fast becoming a hit with our community. www.JacquelineChesta.wordpress.com

Lisa Enright

Lisa is a self-taught artist from Hillingdon and has been painting and drawing for the last 10 years. Her artwork is generally inspired by wildlife and nature, though she has recently been experimenting with figurative art.

Lisa regularly exhibits locally at the Cow Byre Ruislip and Uxbridge Library. She particularly enjoys the challenge of producing new and varied work for themed exhibitions.

Mark Larkin

Mark is currently homeless, and has been drawing and selling sketches as a means of getting by.



ORDINARY PEOPLE
EXCEPTIONAL LIVES



HILLINGDON LITERARY FESTIVAL 2017

ORDINARY PEOPLE EXCEPTIONAL LIVES

Shirley Anne Cook	Mark O'Loughlin
Gael	Gita Ralleigh
Yasmin Selena Butt	Mike Beranek
Jasveena Masih	Megan Carter
Marina Ciconesi Jansson	Matthew Healing
Iris Hontiverous Mauricio	Helen Borland
Anujit Kaur	Alison Fletcher
Devyn Gonsalves	Ada Kalu
Philip Marriner	Sam Green
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Sophie Perry	Nerissa Taverner
	Angela Narayn

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Simi Abe, Jacqueline Chesta, Lisa Enright, Mark Larkin

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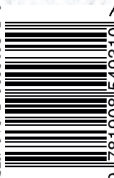
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