



# ANTHOLOGY 2026

CREATIVE WRITING FROM  
THE UNIVERSITY OF GREENWICH

# ANTHOLOGY

## 2026

Creative writing from  
the University of Greenwich

*edited by*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

This is an anthology of creative writing from students at the University of Greenwich. It was compiled and edited by two classes of third year undergraduates who have been studying a module in Contemporary Publishing.

This course aims to provide a thorough overview of the UK publishing industry and the skills necessary to work in publishing. We students look at how books are made and sold and follow the journey manuscripts take from acquisition to their eventual arrival in the shops.

We also put together a book – this book – an anthology of writing from students at the University of Greenwich. At the start of the module we advertise the fact that the anthology is open for submissions around the university – and then we edit and compile the work that comes in.

As we work on these various pieces of prose, poetry and script-writing, we also discuss many different aspects of the publishing industry. The course is structured so that the various subjects we tackle in class can be related to the practical work we do in compiling this anthology. So, when we talk about editorial acquisitions, we're working on getting submissions. When we're looking at editorial case studies, we are also doing our own editorial work. And so on.

Along the way we discuss practical and ethical issues relating to editing and the cultural position of the publishing industry in society. We also look at the history of the written word from clay tablets in

Babylon all the way to the present day. We celebrate enduring success and productivity of this creative and prestigious industry. We also look at the problems the industry faces. Some of the issues we talk about are particular to publishing (in recent years, for instance, we've had to talk about the threat AI-slop poses to real human authors). Some are faced by many industries around the world, where costs are so often rising, supply chains are unstable, and consumers are nervous.

The anthology itself is not immune to some of these challenges; which goes some way to explaining why this edition is a bumper issue, containing the work of students on the Contemporary Publishing module from both 2024-2025 and 2025-2026. Doubling-up in this way has enabled us to spread costs, provided a useful real-life example of how to cope with financial constraints – and helped ensure the continuing production of this University-wide institution.

The Greenwich Anthology remains a proud tradition – and a fascinating snapshot into the lives of students in the 21st century. Every year, the short stories, poems and scripts produced by students express the current concerns of our community in all sorts of unexpected and creative ways. The work in this anthology provides all sorts of insights into youth, the student experience – but also more broadly into life, love and so much more. There is some angst – but there is also mind-bending sci-fi, there are appreciations of nature, and there is good humour. This book is, as well as everything else, fun and creative.

We hope you enjoy reading it.

## II. POETRY



RACHEL BROWN

*Transplant*

The cherry tree at the end of the yard  
droops pink with flowers at this time of year.

Soft velvet blooms, pretty against  
the neat row of blue, black, green bins.

It sits in a pot, no soil in the square of  
concrete slabs for a more permanent home.

Hometown, this is my hometown, but the  
only mark it's left is a fading intonation,

Pronunciation of the words *duck, grass, no,*  
*me, you, help* sound the same wherever I go.

I listen to the seagulls, their caws clawing  
back thoughts of the roast dinners, school uniforms,

boy's names popped into pockets like promises,  
beach bonfires on booze-filled brisk nights.

The roots inside the pot are wound so tight,  
they can't untwist themselves when it's removed,

uncoiling into the freedom of the soil.  
instead they wait and keep their shape,

remembering.

ELLIE CHAVES

*Back To Life*

A blurred memory today is Mr. White-Snow,  
Knocked on doors for centuries — now he is gone —  
Hand in hand with the lowest of the low,  
Going through the land you run out on.  
Now the seasons go by with hustle and bustle,  
All reasons forgotten and nothing has meaning  
He might remember and — come back with a rustle,  
So, listen to surrender when life is finally greeting  
Rest at safe shore of everlasting sublime love,  
'cause all will be restored with tears and blood  
and when the deer pants all will fit like a glove,  
from closed doors to storms even pain and flood.

Dear Mr. White, in this void there is life,  
So, I write, 'cause we know words cut like a knife.

CAITLIN DAWES

*Digital Age*

Disinformation and misinformation are threats to our democratic  
Integrity. The denial of elections, vaccines, war-crimes and climate change are now  
Grouped in with the denial of the Holocaust.  
Intelligence used to be what made a person stand out but  
Today, it's not. Instead, it's all  
Artificial. Fake. Causing  
Large-scale panic, suspicious, fear, conspiracy.

And you expect us to pretend that this is normal? How are we to identify  
Genuine faces? We can no longer tell who is human anymore.  
Enough is enough.

JUNIA DENKER

*On Rereading*

I saw the minds of my generation destroyed by disorders, hysterically laughing in Lockwoodian portals, moving back and forth between mirrors and cameras,  
hypersocial loners daring to embrace the ancient play instinct of gladiators and hedgehogs staring into stars and status symbols trying to make out the difference,  
who burning selfies, smouldering trees, cities, cremated things with feathers set up to drift in carbon clouds and unwashed water contemplating pixels and porn,  
who disrobe their brains to X and Y, see fiends in grey because concrete does look black in the rain, staggering along meta roads of waffling and freedom-like questioning,  
who passed through high school with fully rotatable thumbs, practising genuine 2D connection among masked pre-1983 theorists,  
who write sexual Harry Potter-fanfiction about squids and professors, listening to pigeons meddling on the roof of student halls, underlining the y in political apathy 280 times,  
who glue themselves to streets and trees for the endless joy of generational contracts, radiant 81-year-old presidents and repeated Wannsee Conferences in Potsdam,  
who talk for 20min on voice messages, overanalysing intergenerational trauma and body image, burgers, holidays in Barbados and the possibility of beautiful, buttery bachelors handing them roses that spell 'Daddy' backwards,  
who read Austen, Plath, and Hoover – grabbing, wringing and swallowing – when buses brush them on the streets on their way to Sainsbury's,  
who Wikipedia names 'the least religious generation in history', walking through unseriousness like crocodiles on beaches musing on eating the crabs but deciding against it because their parents did and they destroyed the planet,  
who wear 90s clothes unironically, but would boycott *The Office* if Michael was their boss or the copier wasn't working, printing vision boards despite a deep knowledge of the apocalyptic nature of --

who globalize language accidentally, spitting letters and attention spans  
like half-chewed chocolate chip cookies in the faces of old white men  
in suits and beards that hold more bacteria than toilet seats,  
who have nowhere to go but hand-held social mediums, returning years  
later truly bald except for a wig of blood, and tears and fingers, wondering  
whether Covid made the world even or a wasteland,  
whose parents allow for the gravity of 2020 but emphasise the cyclical  
gestalt of angry generations staring at the Thames, contemplating  
swimming –  
ah, the possibility of standing on a supermarket roof, painting roads,  
listening to Taylor Swift, not intimidated by red lipstick, yet, widely  
aware of inabilities to 'make it', fucking both disinterest and  
involvement in poems we address to ourselves but hope Gen X read and  
feel sorry.

*If I Told You, A Completed Portrait of Me*  
(after Gertrude Stein)

What if I had comma needs.      Would you have me would  
you have me would you have me if I told you I had comma needs.  
Would you let me would you  
tell me would you make me tell you tell you tell you.

If you noticed I was placing commas where the full stops sit like teardrops.  
Would you know and would you let me know you know you know if I  
gained comma needs  
for windows – superior – for doors.

If breathing was like staying would you believe believe believe me  
that Brexit took  
my lungs and lunged for my leftovers.      Would you tell me if I  
forced it would you force me if I told it  
told myself to force it      and forced the force of forcing to  
breeze a fancy down my needs.

I'll stay until you leave me.  
Told you      Told you      Told you I had comma needs.

My mind you know my mind my mind's too fragile for a semi  
colon. Hasn't eaten  
without pain in years. I tell you. I told you. Didn't I tell you I told you.  
Haven't I made telling tell you      Told you to tell me a comma  
story. Made my commas tell you.

Told the commas telling you was telling me and telling turning told  
you tortured me.

Presently. Now the crudeness ceased.

Comma needs –      I would have told you if I had them will  
have told you that I have them  
as I have them      will still have had them      if I told you  
and by telling turned my commas comments      turned them on or  
turned them      left      or wavey.

Told you I was guilty.

Brooks split the windows –  
tears on euro wings – hers –  
blurred right over London.  
    See the rim-filled glass in turbulence?

Perfect radius,  
waddling circumference –  
a waterlily bloomed  
in moments that she knew

        she wouldn't stay.  
                    What a left place – blossoming  
of fear, a space that  
expelled her once a summer.

And what did she do to  
    deserve the chance to go?

[*Angstblüte* – 'fear-blossoming', a German term that describes  
the last bloom of a flower before it dies.]

MEGAN GERMAN

*Wild Geese Go South*

The wild geese go south,  
And are expected to return in the spring.  
Why do they abandon?

Is the warm weather too warm?  
Is the cold weather too cold?  
What if I am already south?  
Will they still leave for winter?  
Fly over the ocean,  
keep going down,  
until they die of exhaustion,  
kamikazeing themselves and nothing else  
into jet black water,  
hitting it like dropping a brick  
through a single sheet of paper;  
until they keep flying so far down  
they end up at the top again.

Maybe they hope to be shot—  
making themselves visible  
during hunting season.  
At least they know  
somebody wants them.  
Or maybe the geese just end up killing  
themselves, because their whole life  
they were told they would be beautiful and swan  
out like the ugly duckling, but realized  
they aren't special like swans,  
nor as cool as ducks,  
maybe they just hate themselves  
and are too self-conscious to stay  
in one place for long.

They aren't so wild either.  
They just tell people they are  
as to keep illusion,  
but have you ever heard of  
a tamed goose?  
Only the pretty ones are depicted--  
the white ones with orange beaks,  
quite duck-like,  
never the real ones. Grey and black  
with beady little eyes  
and full of shit.  
'Cause who would want that?  
Reminding us of the ugliness of nature.  
Maybe they fly south because we made them  
feel unwelcomed.  
Believe everything is shit.  
Taught them to leave.  
To die.  
To hate themselves.

*A Border Of Breath*

In a way I will forever be 14.  
Too young to be respected,  
Not old enough to understand.  
But I am conscious.  
I understand what it means  
To hold my breath.  
I am holding my breath,  
Unbeknownst to those around me.  
They act like I can't even swim,  
Despite being the ones who taught me.

LUCAS GOMES

*Yellow Friday Night*

The cheese as it ages, it flourishes  
To my soul, it nourishes  
Hole by hole it makes me whole  
But after a plate, far I must stroll  
Otherwise, I will roll.

Cheese can be picked with ease  
And to your palate please  
Take it with your hand, a fork, or a toothpick  
Pair it with an olive to give that kick.

The warmth of sharing raclette,  
How can I forget?  
It's one of the best things I bet.  
The music in the sizzling  
The addicting nibbling  
The soft potato on the plate  
Setting the stage for what will be great.  
A concert of the cheese and mortadella  
In the company of family or a fella  
It proves that life can be, quite bella.

I'll make it brief  
Just don't be a thief  
Don't take my piece of camembert  
Don't steal the honey from its bear.

The cheese might make you drool  
But it can turn you into a fool  
As once upon a time  
When I was just a dime  
Quantity was the desire  
Making the situation quite dire

Enchanted by the miracle flavours  
They turned into sins without favours.  
My body was not ready  
My plexus was not as solar or steady  
So they started to rampage out of my tummy  
With a taste that was definitely not yummy.

Even today as a pound  
I feel like a hound  
Hunting for stable ground  
Trying to turn things around.

In my own pensive kingdom  
Where I'm a mere peasant  
Eating this provolone that is so pleasant  
I sit here alone  
A dunce wearing its cone  
Thinking that this dairy item has some finesse  
It does not make me forget I'm still a mess.

Let's not go so fast  
Self-pitifulness I shall not cast.  
They say *c'est la vie*,  
I say bring more brie!

Like the holes of the cheese,  
The voids are part of me!  
Like the funky smell of the stilton,  
My quirks are part of me!  
Like the simple and predictable taste of mozzarella,  
My character is part of me!

I grab my lovely bread  
Believing my hope is not dead.  
I spread my dreamy butter  
Knowing that to my mind, I shall not stutter.  
On top, a nice slice of cheddar

Questioning how to be ourselves and better  
Possibly, the greatest endeavour  
It might take forever  
But to quit, we should never.

You may think these rhymes were crimes  
That I should receive mighty fines  
I know some were lame  
And I take full blame.  
I know some were quite iffy and easy  
But that's just me...  
Being simply,  
Unfathomably Unapologetically...  
Cheesy.

ANA GUDURI

*Raconteurs of Life*

Given a choice to traverse the same strife,  
To anchor myself to the ground, said I would,  
Unsurprised at the gasps that followed.

For the ultimate betrayal,  
Was not a betrothal that's killed,  
It was the one I'd never reconsider.

And what riches does that 'life' bring,  
The one that withers, for love not her own,  
Over and over—?

*I have since desired death's embrace...  
Crushed by the misery of existence*

*Burgeoning Apathy*

crowned the prodigal Aergia,  
to an ill-fated bind between Hephaestus and Métis,  
misfits with Hermès.  
heavy is the head that wears the crown,  
ravaged is the chest that guards the fraying nest.  
flights laced with crystalline predicaments,  
they'd wail at the wake.  
words of sombre praise  
burdensome ancient ires,  
bequeathing their ferity.  
a crestfallen pedigree lays upon the grave.  
can one renounce their descent,  
but still make their way?

## *The Cliffside Flower*

once deemed nefarious, I wandered on edges.  
seeking roots in gardens where bouquets bloom,  
yet always on the brink like a wilting flower.  
praying for the winds that blew me astray,  
rose tinted vicarious gusts,  
scattered with the breeze.  
leaving behind a patch of rot in my wake.  
haunted by the echoes of never belonging,  
yearning for roots that never took hold.  
how many stories have gone untold?

WILMA HERMANSSON

*I Wish I Could Tell You*

Something unspeakable has happened.

*Take Cover*

The clouds rumbled and the sky fell down.

I do not  
fight as you drag me  
across the cold surface. My soul,  
a dying fire, beneath the blades you hold.  
Turn and drag. Drag and turn.  
Drag, drag, drag. Turn, turn, turn.  
Drag and turn. Turn and drag.  
Pierced by your teeth, I lose my rightful  
shape. Under your watchful  
gaze, my worn body  
disintegrates.

We  
are  
told:  
Better  
deny  
your-  
self.  
And  
Nearly every desire is a bad  
thing.  
Indeed  
**we**  
**are**  
**like**  
**an**  
ignorant  
child  
way  
too  
easily  
Pleased.

DYLAN JOHNSTON

*Prometheus*

When my world went up in flames,

skin melted and

bones charred like trunks of

ravaged trees.

I foolishly thought you'd come

running

with a bucket of water and lungs full of air,  
my worthless soul

to save

but instead, you stood there and watched  
as I shredded my vocal cords with

silent cries that stole even the sharpest of pains from my chest in the night,  
the kind with no stars and no moon, only a wild raging  
fire that glowed orange then red as it ate with bloodthirsty  
vigour, the jaws of a beast I couldn't see but could hear its  
roar echoing scarlet in my ears, as flames licked their way  
up my skin like a cursed lovers touch that I had wanted so  
badly I would've burned myself for that illusion of warmth

and I fell for the trap

you so beautifully laid with roses that you promised would  
never die, flowers that bloomed red then rotted black  
like my skin once the vermilion flames

had their fill.

I hope you blushed crimson  
when I turned to ash

confessions made in early  
hours of the morning, when the horizon  
turned balmy and dew assembled  
to eavesdrop

i knew then  
who you were to me

what  
you were

our gentle laughter a curious mate  
to tears we'd let escape  
cages constructed of  
sacrificial rib bones

i thought we'd have  
a lifetime  
to trade  
brave syllables

our own  
intimate infinity

The infant does not  
cry out, born  
with fluid  
in her lungs  
silence becomes her  
anthem, a chorus  
of such  
quiet history  
generations of words  
unspoken, unheard  
inherited in  
water droplets,  
aqueous muzzles  
are befitting  
accessories of a  
woman.  
For it is her  
silence she adorns  
in the hollows  
of her chest  
at the moment of  
birth.

NAVPREET KAUR

*My Familiars*

One is a hush with edges.  
It opens like a wound or a window, never clear which.  
Inside: discord of mind and soul.  
I approach, retreat, return. Again.  
The other is a small, controlled  
leak. It scratches surfaces, bleeds  
meaning. It's light until it isn't.  
Then it drags. Again.  
One waits to be  
marked.  
One marks without  
mercy. I waver  
between  
them.  
Again and  
again.

NAMRUTHA KANIYANDEPOYIL RANJITH KUMAR

*Between Hope and Heart*

I know not where my path may lead,  
Yet every step blooms from a quiet seed.  
At times I crave love's tender ray,  
And whisper soft, perhaps it will find me today.  
The shadows no longer steal, but teach,  
And hope now stands within my reach.

I honour mirrors of my wandering past,  
The warmth of those hands lives on in the lessons they left behind.  
Vows that faded left a silver hue,  
Like autumn leaves kissed by morning dew.  
Love brushed me once and set me free,  
To find the strength that dwells in me.

My heart beats calm beneath the night,  
Its scars transform into stars of light.  
The child within me dances again,  
Her laughter rise after the rain.  
I wear my strength, not as a disguise,  
But as a crown beneath soft skies.

I tell my soul to seek love, be bold,  
For peace and joy are yours to hold.  
Each dawn unwraps a story new,  
Of all I've lost, and all I grew.  
So here I stand, where hope takes flight,  
A heart reborn in morning light,  
Still dreaming one might see, and know  
The beauty in the way I glow.

GARRETT LE

*Thunderstorm Fairytales*

Dad sat on the edge of our beds  
and told us he liked to believe  
the clouds were our memories.

We jumped at the cracks and crashes  
out the window. Dad never seemed to shudder.

He said when something happens to you  
the moment floats up into the sky.  
Then, should you want to remember it,  
it takes shape as a cloud. That's why  
you can see dogs and cats and  
your ancestors up there.

If you count the seconds between the light  
and sound, you can judge its distance.

Sometimes, a moment is too beautiful  
to remember, so it floats up beyond  
the sky and finds outer space. It begins  
to glow, and that's how  
we get stars.

Dad brought extra blankets,  
since he knew how cold we got  
during a storm.

There are times a moment gets heavy.  
It weighs itself down with its want  
to return to Earth. Maybe  
it is a quiet moment, like a picnic  
atop a little hill to watch the sunset;  
a drizzle falls. It could be

the presents wrapped under the tree  
or the little valentine scribbled  
on a scrap of paper and left folded  
neatly on the desk; a rhythm drums  
against the window. But someday,  
you will know moments  
so heavy they come crashing  
down as if the world were ending.  
But it is not.  
I promise you.  
It just means someone  
is trying to find their way back  
to someone they love.

Dad said good night, turned off the light,  
and closed the door behind him.  
After a moment or two, a gentle  
*I love you*  
spilled in from the other side.

We still fall asleep to the warmth  
of the storm.

There  
are some  
stories you don't  
tell. Not because they  
are bad—or intimate, even.  
Just because some stories are not  
worth telling. I will likely never explain  
the view of my house from the canyon  
below. Or the second time I met the librarian  
back home; she hummed the song my mother used to  
sing to me and my brother (the name of which I cannot recall).  
And standing outside that pub in some city before dawn, sharing  
a cigarette with a man with whom I shared no language—counting  
the bricks on the church before us, waiting for its bells to signal us back to  
our homes. There's no story there—only half a cigarette, insomnia, and smoke.

*Merienda With An Old Friend In Late-Afternoon*

When the waiter brought our food  
to our table on the sidewalk outside the restaurant,  
my friend told me of the woman he had met  
just a few weeks before. They were at a bookstore  
or a museum when, by some coincidence,  
they stumbled upon each other.

If I am to be completely honest,

I cared for neither the details of the story  
nor those of the woman described.  
Were you to ask me, I could not tell you  
the color of her hair, what she did for work,  
or even what she called herself. For while he spoke,  
I only watched his face and listened to the longing,  
quiet cadence of his voice.

His words about her imagined in the window behind him,  
where the reflection of the sidewalk opposite  
took on the sole purpose of providing a space  
in which her apparition could exist. The smudges  
in the window blurred her pathway, the waiters  
moving inside cast shadows on the scene,  
pedestrians passing on the sidewalk  
just behind me hid her for brief moments.

His eyes followed this phantom of her  
drifting down the empty sidewalk:  
passing cafes and kioskos without a thought,  
but slowing when she approached the fruit vendors  
and flower stands. How was it that no one  
so much as turned their head as she leant down  
to smell the bouquets of roses with her sundress  
draped so gently upon her? His voice softened,

less aware his speaking was intended for another.

When she smiled, he smiled;  
when she spoke, he paused to hear her voice;  
and when the warm afternoon light fell  
through the rifts in the leaves, his eyes lit up  
as if he had been given a glimpse of heaven—  
as if this ginkgo tree itself were divine—  
and existed in the equal to eternity itself.

I had finished my plate  
while he was still yet to raise his fork.  
Many times he asked me to meet this woman,  
but I came up with excuses to avoid her.  
Why should I ruin such a beautiful composition—  
the woman in the window  
drifting aimlessly

from flower

to fruit

to tree—

which I am given each time we meet for merienda?  
How painful it would be  
should he ever fall silent  
and resort to lifting his fork  
while with me.

SARA AQUINO MARQUES

*Unicorn Horse*

We appear the same,  
We run, we jump, we dream.  
Yet I file my horn for you.  
Do you like it? The blood?  
Red drips down my face  
like pomegranate juice.  
Its bitter warmth stinging my eyes.  
Sometimes I see red...  
Is that okay with you?

We appear the same,  
We carry, we push, we hope.  
Yet you never ask for my help.  
Do I stand too tall for you?  
Does it strain your long necks to look at me?  
What do you see? Do you like it?

We appear the same,  
We love, we wish, we yearn.  
Yet we remain still.  
You dream and wish for power and magic,  
Yet when it stands tall in front of you,  
You shake your head.  
Kick me.

Turn your head.  
Spit and scream at me.  
Just remember,  
My horn shall grow back, And sometimes  
I see red.

ASHLEY OAKLEY

*Uni Weekday (in memory of Roger Oakley)*

It was a Thursday  
I laugh—cried into a bowl of yoghurt  
I laughed because I imagined you  
Chastising my tears  
I laughed because I was getting  
Tears in my yoghurt  
I laughed because I thought about  
How annoyed you would have been  
Had I missed my classes  
I cried because you'll never see me graduate

It was a Thursday  
I drank a cup of tea  
Lots of milk two sugars  
I cleaned and cleaned and cleaned  
The dishes four times  
The bedroom twice  
The bed once  
I bleached the toilet three times  
Another tea  
Honey and whole milk  
I thought about you the whole time

It was a Thursday  
I thought about how  
You never understood poetry  
But you tried  
I thought about  
All the advice you squeezed  
Into every conversation  
I thought about the ways you said  
I love you

Without ever stating it  
I thought about how much  
I already miss your voice

It was a Thursday  
It rained all afternoon grandad  
It was a weird day  
I didn't sleep for a long time  
And then it was Friday  
At 4:00am  
It wasn't the day you left anymore  
So now I'm crying on  
Just another weekday

### *Paper Mache*

Lies that tasted sweet to her ear,  
Left her heart with cavities.  
She fills the holes with  
Cheap booze and cannabis—

A paste of self-pity and shattered pride,  
Won't hold on its own.  
She layers them on;  
The regrets,  
The empty apologies,

Everything that came after.  
Poorly hidden blame,  
Bitter resentment,  
Dipped in a thick syrup of sweet nothings—

Cupcakes in their wrappers,  
Soaked with rain and piss,

And put back neatly in the box.

She places layer after layer on  
The cracks you left in her.  
She does not know how deep  
The rot goes—  
If she drills deep enough to remove all of you,  
Will only the walls she's built remain?

A shell of a heart,  
Made with paper and glue,  
That doesn't beat.

*no no i—*

how do i  
explain that  
i double  
took because  
i thought there  
was a cat  
in your bag

*tiny mouse*

in the window wheel  
why do you run so fast?

a half-torn, diffused and used,  
bag of dry dead energy—  
or matter.  
a knee-bottle snap cap  
filled with pus-mud  
designed to last long, once used  
never to be confused with  
something that actually matters.  
i don't have the energy to describe to you  
the jagged blue tile fingertips  
or the crystal-like plastic  
purple mucus  
spat  
like a pebble on the floor.  
but it isn't a matter of energy  
but feeling  
to mention in passing  
the navy faux hair neck bracelet  
designed for warmth  
abandoned for convenience  
dirtied with real things  
that wash out and breathe  
light.  
it wasn't any of these  
false things that  
gave me a place to rest  
but a thick, retired, branch—  
that offered it to me,  
when energy was spent—  
and made me think about  
the matter at hand  
energy now found  
and what that should  
be spent on.

EMMA RALPH

*A Sunset For Sadness*

When I saw the sun go down  
I was welcomed to see  
A star to repulse a frown,  
Its friends whispered tranquillity.

The yellow orb buried beneath;  
A blackness stretched above me.  
The silence of sombre sadness  
Scattered out of me...

As my eyes well with tears,  
And as well as I like to cry,  
A new world hung around me,  
One I still have yet to deny.

*For Fifteen Seconds, I loved Thee*

Fifteen seconds  
It took for you to love me.  
To find reasons –  
Reasons for you to keep me.

In five seconds, you saw  
What you didn't see before.  
You see my ugly:  
something I locked behind a door.

You look at me  
You're silent.  
You look at me

I'm broken.

Ten seconds, you stood there  
Vacant in expression.  
Why do you reject  
My first dishonest impression?

Fifteen seconds  
It took for you to leave me,  
To find your reasons –  
Reasons for you  
To free me

### *The People's Party*

People party no more  
If people's feet are sore.  
If liver's poison ran dry,  
We'd have no ties to tie.

The countries have war,  
stemming from the poor.  
Cruelty elicits rebellion;  
the men gather a million.

To rebuke the sense of power,  
allow spring to flower  
Beneath the blackened soot  
of egregious men afoot.

TABITHA TIOLUWANI SAMUEL-ONETTE

*All The Love I Have Left*

In this small life,  
time can make souls gentle,  
the big and brave can be tamed,  
and their fire quelled.  
I never knew how to show my love,  
so, I gave you all, draining without replenishment.  
The clothes off my back if you needed,  
to be washed away in a stream.  
Before this, I would show you my beating heart,  
knowing your hands may scorch it,  
knowing your touch may suffocate it,  
or knowing your constancy may be what it needs to stay alive.  
I trusted you not to let it die in your hands,  
and when you inevitably fell short,  
I forced it back to life,  
only to present it to you once more.  
I knew that even if I was wounded, I would be touched by you.  
If I was broken, I would be grateful for your rebuilding.  
Your betrayal told me we were sacred.  
My loss of you meant you could return to me.  
I looked over the maze and knew I was lost,  
I have lost and will continue to lose you.  
Bonds broken by distance or distaste,  
but I wait to shine for you again.  
Plagued by your distance, pained by your disappearance,  
all poured from me with nowhere to go.  
The foolish became wise but still, I searched,  
hoping your eyes would fall on me.  
When I was hollow and quick to shatter,  
I built up my walls and my spirit,  
only to stand triumphant on the island of loneliness.  
In my small, diminished feelings, I still have all this love to give.  
Even when I was left in the rain,

I would shield you from its damp touch.  
Even when fighting the looming loneliness,  
I still have all this love, though unused, to give.  
I need not your touch nor your love,  
I made my own, brewed from my worst pain.  
I poured into myself and emptied the jug,  
but even in thirst, I would give the last of my wine.  
If you were starving, I could sacrifice myself,  
to be swallowed up by your darkness.  
Because my soul would be your survival,  
and you would know all the love I have to give.  
As you are dying, I will be there,  
waiting, pained, in silence.  
I would grieve you always,  
for this is the last of the love I have left to give.  
My mind for you, my sanity for you,  
at my worst, my future for you.  
My hopes my dreams, all for your smile,  
in the end, you will have all there is left for me to give.

EMILY ANNE SAUNDERS

*The Girls*

At first, we are one.  
Then, we are two.  
Another comes along to make three.  
Adding in another gets us to four.  
The last makes us five.  
We should have stayed five,  
But the first didn't want to be a part of us.  
So, we became four together as one.  
Five on paper, four in reality.

The youngest of the five runs wild.  
The middle three are always alone together in the dry hills of Los Angeles.  
They escape and dream and imagine amongst the palm trees.  
Reality is not safe, so they hide in dream, escaping into the chaos of the city.  
In the dream they can feel, in reality they feel nothing.  
Sometimes for the fifth, the dream bleeds into reality.

We dance in the street.  
We sing when we are alone.  
We cower in silence.  
We flee to the palm trees.  
We wait for the first's departure.  
We dread the first's return.  
We search for butterflies.  
We fight each other.  
We scream.  
We bleed.  
We hope  
For  
The  
End.

BIANCA A SCARLET

*Where Did My Lid Go?*

Under the table?  
Up the stairs?  
Why do I just  
Sit and stare?

It's 3 o'clock  
On the dot  
I have no need  
For such a slot

Where is my lid?  
Why can't I find it?  
Oh!  
There it is  
Inside my wallet!

JON SUTCLIFFE  
*Animal / Setting Sun*

The tiger stripes that scar her face  
Tainted beauty hidden under a veil  
Are sought by rich vainglorious men  
Whose shadows cover their tails  
They rob the dove and the olive branch  
Set by the skies and seas that flail  
It's stolen with poisoned violins  
Drunk winds that flurry and gale  
A ship sail's back with no captain  
Never lowering blood red sails  
Bringing back her dead lover  
With all the stories details.

As I begin to hum,  
I see her turn- turn to run  
Into her setting sun

So she cries for her life- to be taken right here  
From where she stands  
As I watch in the summer rains  
Trying to understand  
But before the setting sun  
Please takes the rags- The captain won

A choir of locusts gather in mass  
To study the dreams in her sleep  
Scrutinizing her mourning soul  
Viciously waiting for her to weep  
Rogues, priests they gather in rags  
Bearing gifts for her to keep  
As I stole a song from the hypnotic tune  
Playing softly through the street

Blood red seagull's tore apart my mind  
As I walked away to meet  
The painted wildcats in the alleyways  
Selling the bride as a savior so sweet

So as I begin to hum  
She turns- turns to run  
Into her setting Sun

### *Bone Structure*

Gazing- into space- Burst- Imagination  
Conjures visions- Majetic Genus Corvus  
Androgenous- An immaculate creating

Its dark Attire set against a nimbus  
A sky threatening to tear itself apart- To shatter  
Into an eternal darkness- Erebus

And other protogenoi preparing for her;  
This devil noir angelica- Bird of Prey  
To signal a shift- For this event to spur

The nimbus swells and consumes the last of grey  
Leaving a trace, a silver silhouette- Brazen  
her head jerks, feathers flare- Along the causeway

To the field- In flight- Doomed as storms hasten  
Winds flail her to the ground, bones splinter- Fracture  
Beaten into rocks- Her Majesty stolen

The waves crash putting salt to the wounds- Rupture  
To ligaments and flesh- Against gravity  
She climbs upright- Damaging perfect structure

Spine, Shoulder and withered wing– Deformity  
Disaster– Such tragedy in conception  
Pricelessly overconsumed in Vanity

The empty space– Now– Too full of destruction

*Pest Controllers And The River Styx*

As I sat gazing idly one day  
My reflection, sky, clouds and sun  
In mottled leafy greenish stream  
A gunshot came from somewhere  
Then silence did resume  
With a sharp breath of grief

*Night And Its Tricks*

In the dark oblivion – Alone with no other  
Mind and its sense  
To assuage and assure  
Ease and cure  
Bring a light to shine  
Within the cavern  
Of night

A Misplaced thought– and its tricks  
Begin to tingle as they tangle  
Writhe and wrangle  
Mismanage and Mangle

ELOISE TUSON

*All Too Much*

Information overload high pitched buzzing ringing in my ears all other sounds muffled sounding echoey distant a strange fizzy tingle of electricity pulsing through my body the panic rising bubbling up wanting to run but frozen to the spot any sense of rationality gone I can't think straight my surroundings slowly slipping away I no longer know where I am a herd of elephants sitting on my chest heart rate quickens beating out of my chest when will it stop people whirring past I feel dizzy their faces blur their voices muffled swirling my head spinning unable to process nothing makes sense the shaking now feeling like convulsions I can no longer feel my legs collapsing into an unceremonious heap on the floor my body heavy floppy no longer responding to my commands body and mind detached breaths laboured hyperventilating I want to scream I can't an invisible force stopping speech everything is too much everything feels wrong it hurts I want to tear my skin off my hair feels wrong I want to rip it out my head is pounding thoughts compressing racing spinning I want it to stop lights burning into my retinas their low hum deafening everything feels hazy bursts of intense panic winded I'm scared my reality unravelling knees tucked into my chest but the move feels heavy and forced like treading water rocking swaying side to side trying to calm down trying to feel the coolness of the walls firmness of the floor my face and fingers tingling shivering to boiling within seconds the heat prickling the noises pulsating through my skull a blanket of fog smothering my thoughts spiralling out of control the world feels intimidating paranoia crippling fear everything crumbling cacophony of sounds ears throbbing a dull aching in my chest the crescendo will this ever stop a sudden wave of exhaustion fizzling into numbness

FARIHAH VAKIL

*Fragments Of Memories*

I find myself wandering back to the past  
To escape the now  
Stuck in the fragments of memories  
Playing like a movie on repeat  
From watching my favourite childhood shows  
To being silly as a teen  
To reminiscing a year ago  
It seems I cannot let go  
Of the versions that live within me  
Life keeps changing  
Yet I cannot accept  
That time does not stand still  
It is peaceful here  
I must admit  
I'm afraid I've disturbed  
What is yet to exist

CHARLOTTE WOOD

*Ceasing To Uphold*

When we embrace  
I believe  
our limbs do not touch.

It is not our arms  
wrapped around each other  
or our shoulders  
delivering the affectionate  
brush of two people.

It is our hearts  
hugging  
when chests are pressed  
together.

Beating so hard  
ribcage bending  
skin ceasing to uphold.

One beating heart  
between two  
pumping enough feeling  
to hold us close.

Arteries and veins  
intertwine  
bending inside  
tangling into  
a warm knot.

We are two minds of one body.

### III. PROSE



## ABISOLA AIYELABOLA

*Feels like Eternity*

Dim, disturbing darkness. That's what greeted the young lady when she lifted her eyes open. She didn't know where she was and it was quite impossible to see through that clouded darkness. How was it possible that there was more light behind her eyelids when she blinked than in the darkness that waited beyond them? All was still ahead. Her breath grew fast paced, the cold exhalation fighting for warmth as it travelled further into the never-ending hallway. She looked down, the thickened air from her cold, frightened breath reflected at her from the surface of something. Crystals of condensation formed, the sight of it hard to catch through the sickening shadows. She reached her clammy palms towards it, unaware of what it was. The golden rim stood out very clearly. A tall glass filled a quarter way full of liquid. A beverage... but of what, she couldn't tell. She held on tightly to the glass, its shiny rim allowing the faintest hope of a way out of here.

She had been walking for what felt like both weeks and seconds, pushed into a strange, never-ending loop. Dehydration weaved in her throat making her steps grow slower. She was never getting anywhere, not that she was before, but only now she knew of it. Staring down into the glass, the liquid held a sense of calmness. Perhaps it was still and accepting of its fate. So, should she be? She took a sip of the liquid. Her eyes glowed, it had a strong, bitter taste. The kind that she should detest. However, the strange flavour drew her in as she took bigger, longer gulps. She wiped her mouth, but the residue stayed, catching onto her skin. She had never tasted anything like that, and she certainly craved more.

It felt absurd to her as she stared beyond into the distance. A tall red door stood there, mocking her. She had rounded the hallway relentlessly looking for an exit, but she'd been met with unrelenting nothingness. The doorknob was glowing with the same golden light as the glass rim. When she touched it, it had a cold feel that sent shivers down her spine, elevating through her body and clasping onto to her soul. Then, her eyes adjusted to the heavy bright light that lived at the other side. An unreeling force pulled her forward, she tried to hold onto herself

but there was nothing to grab, just the unyielding force that dragged her ahead.

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A strange shiver seeped into her skin as she stood in the room. It was weird enough that she had previously lost all the senses in her body, now the beaming red door that led her here suddenly ceased to exist. But that wasn't what sent the shiver down her spine. The room felt familiar, but she knew she'd never been there. The dusty brown wardrobe was filled with frilly long bright dresses. The kind she despised yet her mother forced her to wear. She'd always urged her to dress nicely if she wanted to marry quick. Underneath was her secret stash of clothes, the ones she planned to wear when she ran away. Was she ever able to run away? Did she? On the bed side table sat a journal. It was thick and looked well used. It was near all her things so it must have belonged to her, yet she couldn't recall owning one. Now that she thought about it, she couldn't recall much anymore. Her memories had morphed into one big blur.

She walked forward towards the table but stopped. A strange sound. She peered her head through and saw another room, identical in size to the one that felt like hers, but with unfamiliar strange items. Beads scattered across the floor, liquid seeping across, and the full skull of some creature. But that's not where the sound came from. The sound was coming from the coffin in the corner of the room. It was a deep husky brown and awfully still. The air felt colder the closer she walked towards it. She grazed her hand on the coffin curiously.

'Hello?' she said.

If she was going to find an answer maybe it was more likely from an old scrappy diary than whatever creature lived nearby. She retrieved herself. She was about to walk away when the coffin door swung open. A young woman laid inside, her skin a sickly pale contrasting with her jet-black hair. She was deadly still, the heavy dark bags under her eyes were uncanny. Like someone who had not slept in years. Her eyes popped open. They stared right at her. She leaned back unknowing of what she was seeing.

'Ugh' the young woman spoke, a soft crack to her voice 'I'm still here.'

She uncrossed her arms and slowly crept out of the coffin, the sight of her strange. Only then she noticed what the lady had on. A long, dark dress, the same shade of her hair. Around the white collar was a hint of red, like blood, so subtle, as if intended to be hidden.

The eery gaze from the young lady was unbreakable. Her glowing red pupils latched on to her as she continued to glare. Her look was stoic, yet it felt pitiful.

'I am Winter,' she uttered. Staring, waiting for a response.

She broke her gaze, confusion seeping through her. What was her name? Now that she thought of it, she couldn't recall much, just the darkness that followed her around. Her eyes latched to the small gap between the curtains. A small black bird flew past frighteningly.

At last, she remembered.

'I am Raven,' she responded with a gasp of relief. A loud bell rang making Winter slightly frown. It was the first hint of emotion she had seen from her.

Winter walked by the door turning back at her. 'Aren't you coming?' she looked down at her bed. 'Well, you must get dressed first. Don't be late.'

The door slammed before she looked down at the bed. A long white frilly dress laid there. It had ruffles across the sleeves and was corseted at the waist. She quickly looked down, just the sight of the extravagant dress made her feel sick. There was no way she was going to wear it. She reached for the journal, desperate for something that wouldn't make her feel crazy. Pages fell as she straightened them out. The words were written in unfamiliar symbols. She was sure that this was her journal, but every page had a collection of unique symbols she couldn't understand. Frustration filled her soul. She threw down the journal and kicked it away into the corner. Why was all of this happening to her? She tugged at her long locs with anger. That was it, she was going to leave.

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There was still some sun out, yet the hallway was dim. Each step she took down the spiral staircase felt cold. It was as if there was a presence downstairs waiting for her. There were two doors along the main hallway,

she chose the one closer to her on the left. The room was steamy, and it took time to adjust her eyes. When she looked around there was a fresh roasted smell, yet as she inspected the room there were no signs of any lingering food, just empty dishes which laid on the table with a juicy red remnant across them. Whatever had been cooked smelt wonderful. She caught herself licking her lips. She tasted the drink from earlier on her tongue.

Next, she was supposed to try the other door, yet she couldn't ignore the scent lingering under her nose making her stomach growl. Edging closer towards the smell, she felt an undeniable dread, the kind that urged her to stop, but her thoughts refused to rationalise.

She lightly leaned her shoulder to catch the smell, attempting to peek inside where the smell was strongest by the wall. To her surprise the wall tilted slightly open revealing itself as a door in disguise. The light inside was quite dim, making it hard to see. There were white candles at the centre of a table, next to an oval yellowish shape. The table was draped with a disturbingly deep red cloth and had pretty plates with dainty, auburn flowers painted on them. Each plate had a full set of cutleries perfectly placed by its sides, along with wine and regular glasses.

Whoever organised this must have been very precise. As she rubbed her eyes, she put into place that wasn't just any shape in the centre of the table, it was another skull. This time, a human skull.

Before she knew it, she found herself loosing grip of the wall and falling straight through the secret door. Her dark cheeks grew red as she noticed a bunch of people sitting around the table staring directly into her soul. They looked lifeless as their gaze followed her.

A tall woman with pale hair and features almost difficult to distinguish in the dark, rose at the end of the table.

'Well then.' She looked over at her. 'You better get to your seat before your food gets cold.'

Quickly she ran to the only empty chair, hoping to get rid of the deathly glares. Opposite her sat a familiar pale face. Her gaze lowered to the empty plate, and she bit her lip anxiously. It was hard to read Winter. Was she hungry or scared? She knew she definitely felt so.

'Name?'

The woman's sharp voice pierced through her thoughts. As she

picked the skin of her finger, she looked around noticing the others all wore a dress similar to the one laid on her bed. She stood out like a sore thumb.

'Raven,' she stuttered.

'I see you think the rules are too good for you, Raven.' The tall woman glared at her attire. 'You reek of living, and you will pay for that in the land of the undead.'

It only started to click now. A shadow hovered over her with an entree plate with a silver cover sitting on top. The lifeless skull stared at her. Her hands were shaking as she removed the cover. It was slimy and prickling with dark blue and red fizzling veins. Red liquid scattered amongst the white plate like a halo. The worst part was it was still beating. She drew her hand to her chest, and it was hollow. Nothing remained.

She was officially dead. Yet still alive.



RACHEL BROWN

*Somewhere Different*

The taxi pulls up to the hotel. This one?

But you wanted it to stop at the hotel over the road, at the entrance where purple flowers wind gently around pillars, and green lawn flanks both sides of the driveway.

This hotel is orange, parched stone and terracotta making the air seem drier on this side of the road.

A plastic sign leads us in.

The reception desk sits opposite a wall of windows, where we look out eagerly to see more terracotta. Orange walls tilt against orange floors, in the middle of which is a rectangle of blue pool, thirsty.

The key card leads you up to the 6th floor, promising. As the handle bleeps green you push the door and smell cleaning chemicals and, just underneath, is a faint whiff of smoke, reminding you of boys that you pressed into as a teenager, musty hair mixed with Lynx aftershave.

Closed curtains keep the bedroom cool. You head to the balcony and throw them open: the big reveal.

Terracotta, terracotta. You crane your neck to see the sea, the sky, a mountain perhaps. But there is no sea, the square of swimming pool the only water here. Even the sky high overhead seems tinged with orange.

The sound of the pool bar floats up. Music and scraping chairs mix with scraping plates, the sound of a lunch you didn't eat. Siesta time for them but not for you; new here, suitcase still zipped shut, long trousers, crumpled plane blouse.

A long ashtray sits on the white plastic table next to the white plastic chairs and you wonder, as you do on each holiday, whether now is the right time to start smoking.

Rolling a beach towel under one arm, a book under the other, you take the lift back down to find two plastic loungers – half in shade, the wrong side of the pool.

You breathe in deeply as you walk, nose twitching, searching for a scent of other. Floral air freshener, suntan lotion, chlorine. You remember the smell of scorched soil, pinecones, chocolate milkshakes. Not here.

A holiday rep asks if you want to play darts, you think, although you're not sure as he might be speaking Russian, or some other language you don't speak.

You say no thank you, pointing at the book you're not reading, before closing your eyes behind your sunglasses.

On the sunbed to your left a man rolls over to reveal more pink skin. The orange is making you itch.

Idly you ask for a vodka and coke and drink it back at your sunlounger, in a plastic cup. You don't drink vodka or coke at home.

You wonder if you're having fun, if the flight was worth it, if this was worth a week of annual leave.

You can see, in the distance, the other hotel. The flowery hotel. The pool is bigger there with no inflatables to interrupt the lapping flow of blue. The walls are white, calming. Aloe vera spiking from the balconies looks tropical. You wonder if they can see the sea from there.

It's just a week, he says, and it's just a bed to sleep in. One pool is another pool, we all have the same beach.

You know he doesn't believe it, just like you don't. You sip your vodka and coke, wishing you were somewhere different.

Envy helps us grow, he says, and we're lucky to have a week off work.

You google the price of the other hotel and feel grateful. Furtively, you check an email on your phone. You watch the skin tinge pink on your forearms and wonder what you'll wear to highlight your tan when you get back home.

Next year we'll go to South America, he says. Rio. You'll get your mountains there.

So we plan our next escape, thinking next time will be different.

SINEAD COX

*Don't Fuck With Fate*

To waste time is to waste something you never had at all. It does not wait for you to use it, or to even acknowledge that it is there. The time will pass anyways, relentless and vicious, taking parts of you before you can discover them.

Time, woven. Time, stolen.

In a way, time is fate. Within eighteen months of life, a child will walk and talk. That is their fate. Within seven years of life, a child will read. Fated to read. Fated to open their eyes, to breathe, to fall, to cry.

Bibi despises fate. They were once good friends. She walked, she talked, she read, she cried. And cried. The buzz of the security door pulls her from her ruminations. Her podmate returns from break, two bottles of water in hand. Sora pauses to lock the door before returning to her workstation. Bibi rolls the time back on the surveillance footage and watches the patrons walk backwards with amusement.

Sora tosses a water bottle over the top of the monitor, and Bibi catches it with ease. They're not permitted to drink in the surveillance room, but it's been a long day. Ten hours and thirty-two minutes, to be precise. Bibi takes a swig of the water. She places it down with a heavy hand, and a drop of water bounces onto the desk. Another hour and twenty-eight minutes until the relief shift comes.

Another two minutes pass: Bibi knows because she's watching the clock instead of the surveillance cameras. She reaches for her water once more. A small dark spot draws her eye to the opened cap. An unmistakable symbol.

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'This is a bad idea, Bibi.' Sora wrings her hands together.

'I don't care about my job.'

'I mean, this is dangerous.'

From here, Bibi can see the royal palace atop the mountain of Jilowen City. The skyscrapers cannot reach even half of the height that the royals live at: between heaven and earth, blue lights separating mortal from

royal from god. Her lip curls, and she tears her gaze from Jilowen Palace.

They stand at the fence separating Jilowen City from Chihai Industrial City. Even at a decent distance, Bibi can feel the heat of electricity from the fence. She zips her jacket to her throat. The leather is a comfort when standing so close to death by twenty thousand volts.

'I'm military trained. We'll be fine.'

Bibi turns to her friend.

Sora fixes her with a weary look. The lights from the palace are clear as the sky on her black hair. Bibi wonders if Sora would ever dye her hair such an electric blue. 'And what will relief say when they arrive to nobody in surveillance?'

Bibi shrugs. 'We'll just say I was having a hard time in the toilet, and you were holding my hand for support.'

'I'm not even going to respond,' Sora shakes her head. Once more, Bibi turns away to face the royal city. The glass and steel towers taunt her, reflecting light across one another like lasers in the air. She wonders what the royals will be doing at this time; it's almost three in the morning. Will they be rising, or will they continue their sleep until late in the morning?

She cannot remember the schedules.

A faint whirring sound gets closer, and then stops. Bibi hears Sora gasp out: 'Your Highness!'

'I told you not to call me that,' Bibi grumbles, angling her head over her shoulder. Her voice dies in her mouth. A tall, slender woman exits a car—one that isn't normal in the Industrial City. Black, clean, sharp lines, emblazoned with the royal crest of a blue crescent moon atop a silver cross. Sora's hands gripe at Bibi's legs, signalling her to kneel. Bibi refuses.

'Get up, Sora,' she hisses. When Sora doesn't move, Bibi forcefully pulls her from the ground. 'You don't need to do that.'

Roughly, Sora tugs out of Bibi's grasp. 'She's royal.'

'She's my cousin,' Bibi scoffs.

The topic of their conversation pauses before them, arms folded over her chest. She's in dark leathers, the royal crest embroidered over her right breast. Black hair is tied into a tight updo, curls running down her back. It's like Bibi's come face-to-face with an alternate version of herself.

She'd forgotten how similar she looks to Princess Karina Palentini.

'She's right, Ms. Ottessore,' the princess says. 'No need for pleasantries.' She fixes Bibi with a hard gaze. They stay that way for a single minute. 'Are you here to stare at me, or is there something you need?' Bibi sighs. A small smile fights to break out on Karina's face. 'It's nice to see you too, Bibi.'

'If you wanted to see me, you wouldn't have waited seventeen years, five months and forty-eight days.'

'You still count time?'

It's always ticking. Bibi stays silent.

'Let's get to business then. My mother is unwell,' Karina drops her arms to her sides, flexing her fingers in tight leather gloves.

'With all due respect, why does this affect me?'

'With the Sickness of Fates.'

There's no quick retort for Bibi this time. The name takes her back eighteen years. A year before her exile. The kind of torture no six-year-old should ever endure. Bibi fights to compose herself, blinking back memories she swears were forgotten. She isn't apathetic to her aunt's suffering of the affliction, but she also knows it is not her business. The King made sure of that.

Karina turns. 'We should talk somewhere private.'

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The last time Bibi had been in a royal car, she was being escorted to the Industrial City. She'd been holding tightly onto her ratty old teddy bear, and Sora's hand. She holds nothing now, staring out of the front window with a stony face.

'I'm sorry to hear of Aunt Mieke's illness, Karina,' Bibi begins, 'But I can't understand why I need to know. And why you risked coming out here to tell me. I know it isn't because of familial ties.'

Sora sits in the back, eyebrows knitted together. She catches Bibi's gaze in the rear-view mirror. Awkwardly, Bibi pushes a half-hearted smile on her face to attempt reassurance.

'You're right. I debated this for a long time.' Karina makes a smooth turn right. 'We both know the Sickness of Fates isn't natural.'

'Get to the point, Karina.'

'Your father sacrificed my mother to tie your fate. Now, when you

are fated to ascend, she falls ill. She will die in place of your ascension.' The car falls uncomfortably silent. Her cousin has always been blunt, but Bibi can't fight the feeling of guilt. As though her own destroyed fate is the same one that will destroy others. How can she be blamed when she hasn't breathed near the palace in almost eighteen years?

'I am angry, Bibi,' Karina says. Her voice isn't angry: it is flat. 'I want Maddox to pay.'

'Okay,' Bibi breathes. 'So, usurp him.'

Karina scoffs. 'Simple.'

Bibi runs her tongue over her teeth. 'Why are you telling me this? What am I supposed to do?'

'You have the gods, Bibi.'

'Well, King Maddox ensured I'd never ascend, so I do not, Karina.'

'You will have the gods.'

'Forgiveness, Your Highness,' Sora's voice is like a summer's day from the backseat. 'Bibi is being awkward to prompt you to be direct.'

They turn onto the main road leading from the Industrial City to Jilowen City. Karina slows, the car crawling towards the gate separating the two cities. Two watchtowers are posted either side, constantly manned by three royal guards each and an automated recognition system.

'Heads down,' Karina demands. They do as she says. Sora squeezes onto the floor, and Bibi does her best to fold her body down. The car comes to a stop, and cold air rushes in when Karina rolls the window down.

There is no need for her to speak. The camera to her right swivels to identify her, and a booming robotic voice declares: 'Her Royal Highness, Princess Karina Palentini of the Jilowen Dynasty.'

Blue lights flood the road, announcing her journey into Jilowen City.

She presses on, closing the window and letting out a measured breath. After four minutes of quiet, Bibi feels a tap on her back and sits up.

'Why are we in Jilowen City?'

Finally, a smile breaks out onto Karina's face. 'The Three Fates are found between heaven and earth. We meet with them at the sixth tone.' In the back, Bibi hears the shuffle of Sora sliding back onto her seat and refastening her belt. Bibi had never put her own seatbelt on in the first place.

'Between heaven and earth is a vast space, Karina.'  
'King Maddox never told anyone. The Fates are in the palace catacombs.'

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Between heaven and earth, human and god. Jilowen Palace. It hasn't changed at all, and yet has changed so much. It's aged. Bibi knows time does not slow or accelerate: it ticks at its own pace, never changing, always. But driving through Jilowen City feels more than forty-seven minutes.

White light flashes from evenly placed streetlamps, glass buildings reflecting the shine onto the road to create a never-ending daytime. The city works without break—even the highest floors are still awake. Bibi cranes her neck to peer to the top of the skyscrapers. She counts the floors of each building: thirteen, forty-one, twenty-eight, seventeen. On and on, glass and steel covering each corner.

She knows when they begin the climb to the palace not because of the incline, but because the buildings bow to their rulers. They grow smaller until they reach another checkpoint of electric fence and surveillance towers. Jilowen Palace. Even from the base of the mountain, Bibi recognises the cold marble stone striped along the top with rhodium, the columns made of a thick silver and steel mixture. Blue lights already blind her.

Another forty-one minutes to reach Jilowen Palace. They drive in silence. Bibi cannot think of anything to say. The Fates are in the palace. Her father destroyed her fate beneath her feet. He looked her in the eye knowing he would exile his first-born daughter.

Karina does not drive up to the palace. She turns all of the lights off and steers them right, towards the hunting forests. Bibi remembers watching her younger brother be taken to the forests while she had to remain in the palace for her watercolour lessons.

'What is in the forest, Karina?'

'Do you think you can walk straight into the palace?'

Bibi crosses her arms.

'There is a concealed entrance to the catacombs.' Karina slows the car, then stops.

In the backseat, Sora is slow to unfasten her seatbelt. She looks in

the rear-view mirror, catching Bibi's eyes. Fear clear as day, even in the darkness of the forest. Bibi clenches her jaw and looks away, climbing out of the car. It's silent. Still. Shouldn't there be life? Deer to shoot? As far as Bibi can hear, there is nothing. She can't even hear her own breathing. Not even the ticking of the clock seems to follow her here.

Karina opens the boot of the car and slings a shotgun over her shoulder. At Bibi's disconcerted expression, she offers: 'Precaution. But hunting season is over, so we should be fine.' It does nothing to settle Bibi's heart.

'I am a handmaiden,' Sora whispers to Bibi. 'This is not what I am supposed to do.'

Bibi takes Sora's hand. 'I know. Stay close to me.'

This isn't how she imagined her return. She's had years to come up with many iterations of her explosive comeback, from storming the palace with a rebel army to calling down the gods to level the mountain they stand on. Instead, Bibi Jilowen returns home by the catacombs of her ancestors.

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Time does not freeze, nor does it warm. Time is intangible, unreachable. Karina leads Bibi and Sora through what feels like a maze. Murals line the walls: stories of threads woven and cut, three women dancing in the tangles. It doesn't take a genius to understand that this is not a catacomb for the Jilowens. This is a catacomb of time itself. Bibi finds that the ticking is most prominent down here. She wishes she listened to Sora.

Her skin prickles. There's an unexplained dripping sound, louder than Bibi's own footsteps and the tapping of Karina's shotgun against her thigh. By Bibi's count, there is one minute until the sixth tone today. When Karina had said they will meet the Fates. They take a sharp right, and the labyrinth opens out into a large, domed hall.

Sora lets out a small gasp. Bibi can understand. The hall is filled with threads. Millions of threads, pearlescent as though wet, fall from the highest point of the dome. Over and over, they curl, twist, tangle, and pull taut at random intervals. Through the mess of the threads, Bibi can see three figures. One dark, hunched. Another tall, willowy.

The third stands between them, a shadow against the threads.

'Birina Jilowen, Seventh Hand of Gods.' A low, feminine voice echoes through the dome. 'Sora Ottasore. Karina Palentini.'

Three white threads begin to glow. One of them is knotted a quarter of the way in. Bibi swallows. She tries not to stare at the shortest of the three threads. She ignores the selfish hope that it isn't Sora's. Almost unnoticeably, the threads part. The three Fates are elevated on a gilded platform, white and waxy like the fates they weave.

Now that Bibi sees them clearly, a deep-seated terror takes hold of her heart. The hunched figure is devastatingly beautiful, black claws long enough to wrap around her wrists, her eyes a void. The taller Fate is covered in white robes that seem to be part of her skin and does not have eyes at all. The third, the middle, watches them with large red eyes. Even from far away, Bibi can see the individual threads knitting together to form her body.

Beside her, Karina is on her knees, head to the ground in prostration. In a rush, Sora drops to follow suit. Only Bibi remains standing, locked in a reverie at the sight of the Fates before her. Her chest hurts. Did her father feel the same when he came to tie her fate? Or did he hate the Fates and their feminine forms?

'A brave show,' the feminine voice sounds again. None of the Fates move or appear to speak. With a start, Bibi realises the voice is in her head.

'You seek something.'

Bibi shakes her head. Karina rises.

'To release your fate.'

Sora follows the princess to stand.

'To ascend.'

Bibi feels that there is no air in the hall.

'You require a new thread for your fate to run.'

She turns to Karina. 'What is this? What are they talking about?'

'I need the gods, Bibi,' Karina says.

'I don't have them,' she growls.

Karina points to the tied thread. 'Untie it, and you will.'

'They said they need a new thread.'

'Like your father took my mother's thread to tie yours.'

With a start, Bibi realises that it is indeed a separate thread that

wraps around hers. Mieke Palentini's fate blocks Bibi's. Her heart leaps to her throat.

'But you want revenge on him. He's yours to take.'

Karina sneers. 'Aren't there others? Who took your birthright? Who took your place?'

'Xen?' Her younger brother. He had no part in her ruination. Bibi takes a step back. 'We can't fuck with fate, Karina. My father did enough. You don't need gods for revenge, just use a knife.'

'Xen Jilowen.'

A droplet of trepidation runs down Bibi's spine.

'I need the gods, Bibi.' Karina turns to the Fates. She watches a new thread unfurl from the mess above them.

'No, no, I didn't say that,' Bibi walks forward. 'Do not touch his fate.' A new thread for fate to run.'

Her cousin has changed so much in seventeen years. Or perhaps she was always this callous. To force somebody's hand for her own gain. Bibi pushes on, but the Fates get no closer.

'Xen Jilowen. Birina Jilowen.'

Bile rises in Bibi's throat. She was never close to her brother. But he's still her brother. She's older: she's supposed to protect him. He was three years old when her fate was tied. How does he deserve to be implicated?

'Do not untie my fate,' her voice shakes with dread.

She watches her thread be plucked from the air by the middle Fate. A new thread descends, and she knows without a doubt that this is Xen's. 'No.' She reaches her hand up, trying to touch the thread. It passes through her like it isn't there.

Her thread is cut by the darkest Fate. She falls, a ringing filling her head. Faintly, she hears Sora calling out her name. Then Xen's thread joins onto her open-ended thread. Her body doesn't feel right. Tears fall from her eyes, but she doesn't feel them on her skin.

'A new thread for fate to run, unimpeded.'

Bibi knows her original fate. To ascend to the heaven as the Hand of Gods on the night of her twenty-fifth birthday, to act as a messenger from god to royal. There were thirteen days left of her twenty-fourth year. So now, when burning agony wracks her entire body, she can only guess that the gods are finally reaching her.

Silence.

Footsteps trained under scrutiny. Voices... each breath utterly restrained. All traces of life were luxuries that should not be seen nor heard. Then, that decisive finger pointed in his direction and the call was made. It was time.

Rifle in position, he surely made his way up to the front and led the way forward. Travelling under this moonless sky, hearing was much improved. Of course, they had each been told that when one sense had been dimmed, another would grow stronger. They had not believed this at first, but now those words rang true. You did not need the light to know when a bullet dropped one of your men.

Faster than the breath that he let out, his squadron of four had become a team of two and he was glaring down the barrel of a gun. Three years of deployment and death had not yet come to greet him. He had almost forgotten it existed.

'One left. I can put it between your eyes, or you can both come with me.'

Sleek, refined... charismatic. He could not place the voice, could not determine age or nationality or gender. The only aspect somewhat visible was the eyes, but even those were shadowed by the dark.

How had his team been ambushed by this lone figure when they had searched this area of wilderness for two full days? He considered shooting his way out, but the six or so feet between him and the one aiming the gun could not assure the accuracy he needed.

Surrender.

Both soldiers lowered their heads, emptied their rounds and threw the rifles into the adjacent bush.

'After you.' Without so much as a nudge, he and his comrade pressed together and walked toward certain uncertainty.

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A faint yellow had begun to appear through the ever-clouded sky. Usually a signifier of time and direction, the sun had been markedly absent over

the past two months. The soldiers had been forced to trail hidden paths in constant hope of finding the one that would lead them back to base.

The path they were on now led up to a derelict hut, exposed and weather-worn; how had they not discovered this before? As he glanced at his fellow soldier, their eyes meeting briefly, he was sure that they had been past this way before, although neither of them had seen this little area of open ground, nor any hint of occupation.

Reaching the hut, he did not wait for instruction before opening the door. A slight groan gave way to an interior that demanded caution. Cynical as he was about the situation, however, he did not hesitate to enter, the sound of his comrade's footsteps accompanying him. Now enveloped in a shade of deep crimson, all three bodies halted. The soldiers turned to the assailant, who merely nodded towards the center of the hut where a round table claimed the space, a chair on either side.

He sat down first, his comrade a breath behind, before they observed each other. Mentally, they noted a distinct, yet subtle, smell of unburned charcoal (once set alight, it possessed no odour).

He watched through his peripheral vision as the perpetrator began to pace, taking time to notice how this figure's features were entirely hidden behind darkened clothing. The figure seemed to notice, for it stopped beneath the main lightsource. It was tempting, to truly take in its details, learn more about who they were dealing with.

The eyes. They were entirely black. A trick of the light? Maybe. Except he knew that was impossible; he had looked into its eyes earlier. They were black. The air in the hut seemed to grow heavy, and as he breathed deeply, he felt it. An intensity akin to power and wisdom exuded from the being, who had mercilessly taken the lives of one half of his squadron and commandeered the others. How had they not come across the hut before?

Two tankards appeared in front of the soldiers, one half-filled and one half-empty. 'Drink.'

Both men gulped down what was inside. He knew that they each relied on confidence now, knew that this could be what ensured they walked out in one piece. Setting their tankards down at the same time, they waited, gazes focused on each other. For a minute, there was nothing. No-one moved. No-one blinked.

Then, in progression, the assailant set its gun down on the table, stood back and closed its eyes. An open invitation. A test. Shoot their attacker...

what would come next? Thirty seconds turned to sixty, continuing on for what felt like an eternity before it was concluded: they had passed:

‘That bullet, it is not meant for me.’

The two soldiers had made that choice, willingly or not.

The assailant pushed off from the wall it had been leaning against and resumed its pacing.

‘Your names?’ Although the manner in which it spoke indicated answering was optional, he knew it was not.

‘Langley,’ he stated.

‘Hayes,’ his comrade followed.

Silence erupted from their interrogator, different from before. It knew the names were false.

‘Try again.’

‘Whitlock. Matthew Whitlock.’ That brave soldier sitting opposite him, who had been at his side through it all, now lowered his gaze.

‘Jackson Shaw.’ His head lifted higher in defiance.

A wily chuckle emitted from the assailant, perhaps because it was pleased. Both soldiers watched as it removed the scarf from its face to reveal a paradox. There were wrinkles around its eyes, lines around a mouth shaped into mischief (the corners were ever so slightly upturned) and yet, its skin otherwise resembled the smoothness of a child’s.

‘Whitlock. Shaw. I am afraid that I possess no such name. I am simply Unknown.’ A pause.

‘And we are going to play a game.’

To signify the commencement of said game, this ‘Unknown’ summoned a chair with a click of its fingers and gracefully lowered itself onto it.

‘The trigger of this gun will be pulled...’ Unknown picked up the gun it had previously set down on the table and steadily pointed it at them, Whitlock first then Shaw. ‘Pulled by one of you as it is aimed at the other. The purpose of this game is to convince me: which one of you gets to live? Which of you will fire the gun?’

Unknown placed the gun back down between the two soldiers. ‘Jackson Shaw, you first.’

He looked across the table, waited until his comrade looked directly back at him. ‘Your wife is waiting for you. Ada? She wrote to me, begging me to make sure you go home to her. To your child who has yet to

meet you.'

'Nova and Logan also made me swear to that same promise... Bring their father home.' The two soldiers mirrored each other, both in faith and position. The game had just set about and already they were at a standstill, evenly matched in desperation.

'Do you truly expect me to make it home, only to explain to your wife that she will have to raise your child alone because I killed her husband?' Shaw felt the strength in his voice, determined to keep his tone steady.

'Do you think me capable of explaining to my godchildren that I have taken their father from them? That I am the reason they will never again answer the door to your smiling face?'

Shaw turned to Unknown. 'What if we both refuse to pull the trigger?'

'At last!' Unknown whacked its hand against the table, threw its head back and then almost toppled over its chair. 'That should have been your first question. However, unfortunate as it is, the rules of the game do not bend that way. Neither of you have your weapons and this is my hut. The odds of both of you making it out alive...' Unknown did not need to utter another word. The game must be played.

'Matt...'

'Don't you dare, Shaw''Take it.'

'I am begging you-'

'Look after them for me.' The call had been made, willingly or not.

Tears were falling, slowly at first, as Whitlock realised reality. Tears from a man that had cried only twice in the company of others: once on the day he wedded his darling Ada and, later, on the day he was told he was to become a father. Shaw nodded. His lip quivered but, unlike his brother-in-arms, he did not cry. He would not cry. He just waited as, for the first time in three years, Whitlock reached for a gun with unsteady hands. Reached, but did not grasp.

'You have played the game.' Unknown had stood up, snatched the gun and shoved it under its chin before either soldier had time to react.

'You have played the game.' Tremors wrecked through its body as it seemed to fight an internal battle.

'You have played the game. The call for a life has been made. I have chosen myself.' The tremors grew more violent, then stopped entirely.

Unknown let out a breath that both Shaw and Whitlock imitated:

relief. The whites of its eyes gradually became visible as that crimson glow gave way to a warm orange. Shaw now found himself staring at a young man, devoid of wrinkles and lines and mischief.

'I have no wife. I have no children. I have no home. I am Unknown and I choose myself.'

And then, a hint of a smile as this man glanced between Shaw and Whitlock.

'Leave.'

They did not wait for him to repeat himself, instead wordlessly slipped out of the hut and into the radiance of day. The light outside was blinding, and both Shaw and Whitlock momentarily shielded their eyes from the brightness of the sun. Then, they looked at each other, Shaw recognising a new-found solace on his friend's face, one which he knew was also on his own.

Before them now lay a path, one different to that which they had travelled on earlier. So they set out, side-by-side, neither soldier having turned back at the sound of a gunshot, nor to the flames that engulfed the hut.

The charcoal? Gunpowder.



'Don't you think you've had enough?'

It's early in the morning, and I have been sitting on the emergency exit steps of the building, cast in shadows, for what feels like barely a moment, when he suddenly appears, asking me this. I don't need to look at the small burnt pile forming in the ashtray to know what he is talking about.

'Nah.' I blow the smoke out of my mouth defiantly and take another shaky drag of the blunt held loosely between my fingers. I know I'm losing my mind, but my heart welcomes the loss anyway.

My friend sighs, shoulders dropping and lips pursed. Then, after a beat of what seems like hesitation, he resolves to sit next to me on the step.

I glance at him, curious and apprehensive, as I take another hit. Whatever, I think, shaking my head.

More silence passes, heavy and full of the unspoken, until finally, he says, 'I heard they counted five.' I freeze. 'I guess one wasn't enough to get the message across.'

The inflexion in his voice makes it sound like a question, as though he is unsure of how to speak to me, as though he believes that if he doesn't tread carefully, I'll break. I am almost offended, but then my heart pangs and I start struggling to breathe, and I find myself unable to blame him.

I turn to the side to glare at the earth, at the way the ice in the air crystallises the grass, to distract myself from falling with the snow, but it does little to help.

Desperate not to come apart in front of him, I begin to send up a silent prayer when I sense him waiting for me to say something back. I almost do, but then my throat tightens from the weight of my woe, and I decide that silence is the best course of action.

Defeated, I place the blunt down in the ashtray beside me. Another sigh breathes through him before he suddenly reaches over and snatches it up. He eyes it apprehensively and then takes a hard drag before I can stop him. It isn't a surprise when he suddenly doubles over, coughing and spluttering.

I reach over to pat his back but find myself hesitating. The moment suddenly reminds me of when we were still in school. We were barely fifteen, and he'd approached me in the school courtyard with his blazer discreetly pulled back. Inside his pocket, a half-smoked joint stared back at me

I could tell by how he looked back and forth between me and the patrolling teachers that he was buzzing with nerves and anticipation. Then he said, with a devilish smirk, 'You tryna have some fun or what?'

We didn't know what we were doing, what kind of tragedy we were etching into our futures with our choices back then. We were just kids caught up in the shadowed world their parents had borne them into, not really knowing that better only lived in the light, if we only remembered to flip the switch.

When I'd asked him where he'd got it from, he told me it was from his brother. I could have asked more - like if his brother had given it to him or if he'd just taken it. But I didn't because, in all honesty, at the time I didn't really care. I just wanted to get high.

So, we did, in the staff parking lot behind our math teacher's old 1993 blue Saab during class. I'd taken the first hit and then passed it to him, and just like now, he'd taken too hard a drag and started coughing and spluttering all over the place. He'd made so much noise that the school security ended up finding us and taking us to the headmaster. But somehow, we only got suspended for three days.

My chest tightens at the memory.

He calms down eventually and, regaining some composure, places the blunt back in the tray with an attitude of disapproval. 'I can't believe you still smoke this stuff, man. That's evil in a stick.'

I huff and shake my head, 'You're so dramatic. It's only on special occasions, anyway.'

He rubs his throat and frowns. He glances back and forth between the building behind us and me with his brow raised.

'I think we have different definitions of special.'

My heart jolts, and my body warms. 'Whatever, man. Keep your damn judgments to yourself.'

'Come on, bro.' He reaches out to place his right hand on my shoulder, but I hardly feel it. 'You know I didn't mean it like that.'

I grow quiet as I fester, and in my silence comes again a memory

from our past. He'd been caught up in crime and drugs for so much of our youth that there were times I struggled to remember who he was before it all - before everything got more serious, more dangerous, more real.

We'd drifted for some time, as most school friends do once the routine falls away. Our paths just started to head in different directions, with him on street corners and me avoiding them. We eventually grew blind to the meaning in the things we had in common, and our history, which had kept us in each other's lives after school, wasn't enough in the end. So, silence became our rhythm.

Then, after years of nothing, when I was on my way home from a long day of work, I got a call from an unknown number. I almost didn't answer it; I was so tired, and it was so late, I didn't care to start a conversation with what I assumed was a scammer. But as I went to press the red button, like the gentle rush of a slight wind, something nudged me to push the green one instead.

'Hello?' I answered.

'Yo, what you saying?'

I paused. The voice was strangely familiar. 'Who's this?'

A beat. Two beats. 'Damn. You really don't remember me? Has it been that long?'

Then it hit me. It was him. His voice had changed; it was deeper, heavier, rougher, as if he were carrying the weight of bad choices in it. To my own surprise, I smiled. 'It's been a minute, man. How you been? What you doing now?'

He told me about how he'd given up the turbulent life he'd been leading since youth, how, when he almost lost himself to it, he stumbled upon a purpose higher and greater than himself, and has been devoted to it ever since.

Initially, as he was speaking, I found myself thinking he sounded crazy. I had trouble believing him. He had been this version of himself in my mind for so long that I had difficulty reconciling the old him with the apparent new one. But he sounded serious, and his attitude seemed different, more hopeful. So, in the end, I decided to take his word for it.

The more he talked about his life, the more intrigued I became, and I wanted to know what this higher thing was that had changed him so

much. So, when he invited me to his baptism at the end of the call, I accepted.

'I'll be there, bro.' I promise. 'I'm counting on you, you know.'

'Don't worry. You know I've got you.'

I could hear the fondness in his voice as he said, 'How could I forget?'

When I attended the following Sunday, I saw that, besides me and a cousin or two, few of his people had shown up. It made me feel for him. I remembered him always surrounded by a crowd, even if that crowd was made up of wolves.

'I invited them but...'. He shrugged. 'Don't think they're ready yet.'

'Ready? Ready for what?'

'I mean... we're at a church, man. What do you think would be stopping them from coming here?'

'I don't know.' I laughed. 'That's why I'm asking you, bro.'

He smiled that smile he used to and said, 'Well, look at it this way: when you've been living bad your whole life and you come across something good it doesn't feel real. Feels like you're living the truth, and everyone else is in la la land. It's like being suddenly exposed to light after you've been in darkness so long; it almost hurts and it makes you recoil. It takes a certain type of strength to be able to stay in the light despite the discomfort. Cos even if life was bad, when you don't know any better, you start believing that seeing figures in the dark is better than being blind.'

I was silent for a moment, then asked, 'What type of strength does it take then?' His response was quick, as if it carried no thought, as if it were obvious

'One that isn't your own.'

After that day, we kept in touch more frequently, and eventually it started to feel like we'd never grown apart to begin with. But the problem with being a man with a troubled past is that it always catches up to you in the end, no matter how much you want to forget about it and no matter how hard you try to erase it. There will always be those living in that past you left behind, still festering in whatever ugly bitterness you left them in, wanting justice.

'Do—did you ever miss it?' I ask now, my irritation having been long subdued. 'Hm?' He seemed to have been deep in thought, too.

'This,' I say. 'Smoking. Getting high.'

He ponders for a moment. 'Yeah, at first. I mean, I was worse than you, remember?' He laughed, but it held a sadness in it. 'But as time went on, and I was growing deeper in my faith, it just... got easier to resist. Not to say there weren't times after that when I would stumble across it and be tempted to take a hit.' He looks over at me, and we briefly share a knowing smirk

'But yeah nah, generally I don't.' He nods up to the sky, 'I'm high on that good life.'

As I look at him watching the sky, I realize this is the first time since he sat down that I see him. Ebony skin, brown eyes so dark they appear black, a broad, flat nose and big lips that used to get made fun of when we were kids. I also see the scar on his cheekbone, long and dangerously close to his eye. It's faded, almost a phantom of a scar, and I think about how that must have happened when he became someone I didn't know anymore. I try to etch his face into my mind.

Just then, he turns back to me. Something flashes behind those dark eyes of his, like he recognizes something, sees something in me, and I look away in discomfort.

'What?' I ask.

I see him shrug out of the corner of my eye as he says, 'Nothing,' and then, 'You been praying and reading your word?'

I roll my eyes and kiss my teeth. 'Why you always tryna preach to me?' I pick up the blunt again and take a hit. As I exhale, the smoke muffles my words slightly as I say, 'Can't we just have a... I don't know, a heart-to-heart—'

'—heart-to-heart?'

'—without you tryna save my soul?'

He holds up his hands as he chuckles, 'I'm not tryna do nothing. I was only asking.'

He leans forward, forearms on his knees, and as I watch him do this, his movements seem to drag on. 'Why are you getting all defensive for?'

I suddenly notice the dryness in my mouth and the slowness with which his words process in my mind. A wave of relief washes over me as I welcome the familiar feeling of being high. I relish the sensation for some time, and to my surprise, he waits patiently

I almost don't respond to him, having half a mind to pretend like I

didn't hear his question. But then all of a sudden, my heart feels heavy with guilt and another feeling I can't pinpoint. I look at the burning paper between my fingers and feel the sudden urge to throw it away.

'I don't know,' I find myself confessing. 'Sometimes I feel like... when you look at me, you can see right through me and that scares me.'

'Why?' he asks.

I search for the words but come up short. 'I guess cos you got powers now, innit? Being a Christian and all that.'

He eyes me incredulously, then suddenly bursts out into howls of laughter, throwing his body around like he can't control himself. His joy is so contagious that I start laughing with him too, and soon we're both looking like idiots.

'I just meant,' I wheeze out, 'that you're close to God now so you're, like... I don't know, man, tapped in?'

Wiping away tears, he tries to compose himself, but his fat grin remains fixed as he says,

'You watch too many movies, man. I ain't Black Panther.'

I laugh. 'Shut up, man. You know what I'm tryna say.'

He smirks, and one side of his mouth raises higher than the other, and it looks so boyish that I'm reminded again of our youth, of a time when that same smile used to get us in and out of so much trouble.

'I'm playing. I know what you meant.' He pauses, and his eyes seem to soften. 'But you're being silly, man. There's no reason to be scared. Ain't nothing in you that wasn't already in me.' He smiles, and it's so comforting that the backs of my eyes begin to sting.

I look down at the burnt-out blunt in my hand and then back up to his face, still watching me closely. Then his face flickers, like a flame blown by a gentle wind, and I feel an immense sadness wash over me. Suddenly, I can't breathe.

'Whoa. Why you crying for?'

'What?' I reach up to touch my cheeks and feel that they are wet. I quickly try to hide my face.

'Damn. Didn't even notice.' The more I try to wipe them away, the more they keep falling, and I feel my body begin to shake. 'My bad, bro. Don't know what's wrong with me.'

'Why you apologising now?'

I try to respond to him, but the words don't come out, and the

reality of the situation begins to settle in as the tears continue to fall.

'You're making me wanna console you, bro. You look like a wounded puppy when you cry.'

I almost snort. 'What, can't a man cry when he's down? Damn.'

'Not out in daylight for every man to see. No way you'll ever catch me crying outside like that. You gotta keep them things private, you know? Can't let man know you weep.'

My chuckle sounds hoarse to my ears. 'Didn't you cry at your baptism?

And when your sister got married—

'—wait a minute now—'

'—and the other week when you found out your wife is—

'Hey, hey!' He laughs, 'You're really coming for me, you know. I was joking.' I shrug, smiling. 'So was I.'

He shakes his head, then, after a moment, he says, 'But all jokes aside, brother, stop apologising for things that are normal. Own it. You're a man, no?'

I glance at him sideways. 'I think we've got different definitions of what being a man is.'

'Maybe. But we grew up in the same ends. And I'm telling you, we don't gotta hold onto the things we learnt from back then, bro. We can let the past go and embrace something new and different, something better. We grown now. I think it's time we start acting like it.'

I nod slowly, and just as I'm about to say something, the door behind us opens and his wife pokes her head out from behind the door.

'Andre,' she says, walking up to us. 'There you are. We've been looking everywhere for you. The funeral is about to start.' She's about to sit down when a boy, no older than three, comes waddling out after her, sniffing and calling for her.

When she picks him up to console him, I notice the dark circles under her red eyes and the furrowing of her brows, and my heart pangs.

'You need me to take him?' I offer.

She hesitates, as though considering my offer, but just as she's about to hand him over, the little boy drops his dummy and starts wailing. It rolls over to his dad, who is watching the two with a wretched sorrow that strikes me to my core.

'Sorry, Andre. Could you pick that up for me?' She asks, and it sounds like she's choking.

I look at the man next to me, still watching his wife and son with the brokenness of a man who's lost everything, and I almost break right there in front of them.

Andre?

I snap my eyes up to her, then back at the dummy discarded in front of her husband, and hand it to her.

'I'll be with you in a bit. Gimme a sec, yeah?' I say as she takes it.

She eyes me, worry etching her face. It's with considerable effort that I offer her a reassuring smile and say, 'I'm good. I just need a few more minutes.'

I've been playing make-believe for too long. There are people who need me, but I've been too busy holding onto a moment that isn't even real.

She nods and leaves. When I shift back to look at him, I finally notice, with a sinking dread, the way the edges of his body seem to blur and the way the late morning sun shines through him. He'd seemed so solid in the shadows that now, seeing the truth, I realise I'm not ready to let him go yet.

But still, I must.

'I'll look after them,' I whisper.

He doesn't look at me as he nods, only keeps his gaze fixed on the slight creeping upon us.

I look at it too, the way the ice melts under its warmth, and I dare to ask, 'Is it time?' A beat. Two beats. 'Almost.'

From the corner of my eye, he seems to shimmer, and I can't tell if it's because of the sun or my own mind losing its grip on the memory of him. There's still so much I want to say, but in the end, all I can manage is a broken, 'Damn.'

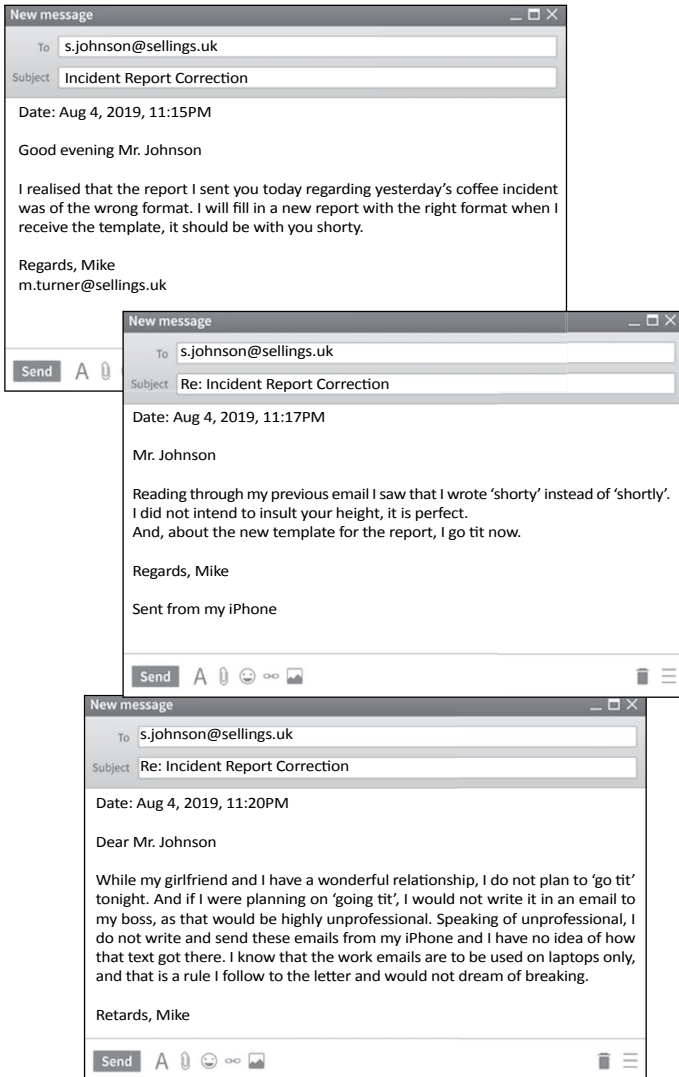
The tears well, my nose tingles, my breathing shudders.

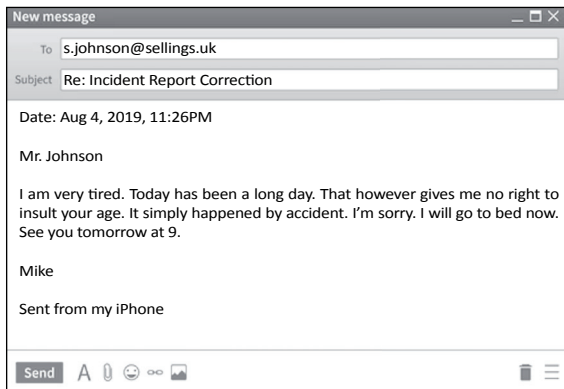
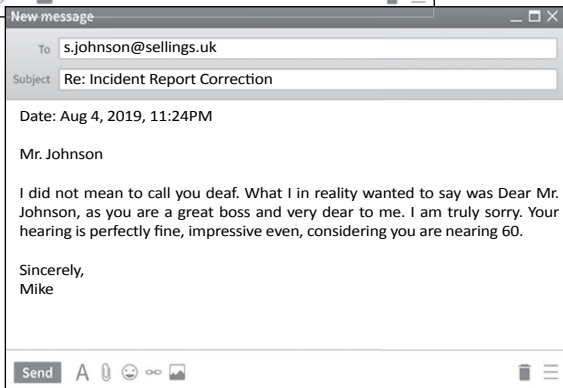
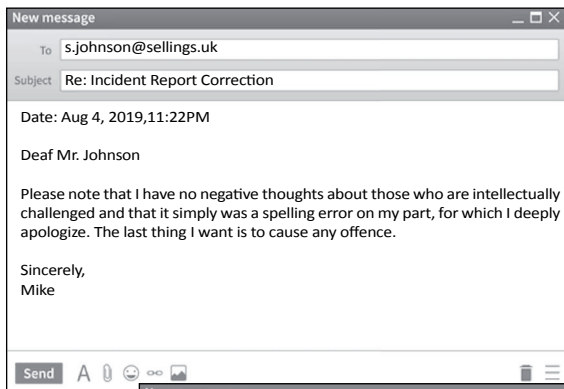
Even through my blurry vision, I notice the way his face softens, and when he goes to place his arm around my shoulders, all I can do is try to remember the feeling of it.

Then, without another word, he leaves the same way he came, like a shadow fading in the light.

## WILMA HERMANSSON

*I Go Tit Now*





## ANNA LYTOVCHENKO

*Finally*

On one side of it — coal, boiler fire, fireman's heavy sweat and puffing of pipes. On the other side — a pleasant company in a soft coupe, speed, knocking of wheels, and a cup of coffee. This transport loves steam traction, difficult routes through bridges, tunnels, and natural landscapes. The station is just around the corner. And the platform, on a cold fresh morning, gives the palms warm breath, wraps in a scarf and pulls the hat on the ears stronger. A unique feeling settles in, where slumber and waiting are almost indistinguishable. The roofs of the depot started to shake: a long beep warns loudly. In the blue-grey sky, like that soot, a trace of the path is imprinted. The clouds of smoke aesthetically delight better than any cigarette. The station saw the power of the industrial revolution — a steam-powered locomotive. It's getting closer and closer, delivering long-awaited loved ones... There were joyful, cheerful shouts 'Finally, the express has arrived!' Only for the sake of this happiness, the locomotive hurries to its destination.

*Human Model*

The uncontrolled steering wheel turned to the side and the sailboat tilted, surrendering to the water. The noise of the ocean was broken by the crackling of the rope's tension. Our ship never overcame the North Atlantic current and took the crew to the seabed. Almost all of it.

On the edge of consciousness, I swam, squeezing a fragment of the barrel. One of those where supplies were stored until recently. Was there cheese, beans, or groats? I felt all these smells at once. But it's scarier, through salty eyes, to discern the shore. After all, the green rocks in the distance could just be a mirage.

Pearl glare on the umbrella-shaped bell. A gentle blue light, slid nearby, and I shuddered with pain in weakened leg. An ancient creature injected poison into my skin. A nasty burning sensation. Outwardly,

the jellyfish slightly resembled the 'northern sea nettle'. Although this species cannot be found in the Atlantic Ocean. The thinnest tentacles fascinated me with their luminescent colour. Suddenly the dome of the jellyfish stretched out sharply in deformation.

I started rowing away. The splashes clouded the water, and I lost sight of the jellyfish. But then some invisible force picked up and dragged my body. It was a man! Not a vision or a ghost, but a new look of the jellyfish! The whole of his body was identical to mine from now on. But his muscles, tissues, hair, and even organs were translucent. My glowing copy was carrying me to the shore! From excessive load, holes were formed in his vulnerable shoulders, which were quickly healed by regeneration.

'You're so kind...' I whispered, trusting the mystery of evolution. And yet, how did the jellyfish manage to make a human model?

### *Night Atlas*

My investigation began with the smell of roses. At night, this exquisite colour becomes so pleasantly sugared that it flies into my slanted hut. This fragrance provides me with restless sleep and protection. But when I woke up tonight, I suddenly noticed fresh traces.

Of course, because the floor in my hut is not even covered with boards, human traces appeared in the middle of the stains of dry ground and sand.

'Who dared to get into my abode and leave a mess on the iron tables?!

All my instruments, mechanisms and graphics were scattered. 'Who brought it? Who left the robot here?' In the middle of my hut. Hut, with low walls made of massive wooden beams. With a dry but still strong roof.

'This insolent man left the robot right in front of my bed! So that I would only open my eyes and come across him! How dare he!? Where is he?' rushing around the room, I was convulsively looking for even a little hint. But the criminal was careful: he didn't leave any evidence. Suddenly, the curtains that closed the entrance to the house opened: it was me who, spreading this curtain to the sides, ran out into the yard.

The river was still flowing nearby, of course, where could it go? It's still green: both the grass and the thicket that took this glade into the ring.

'Maybe someone was passing by, or intentionally found me in the middle of nowhere? Where did he go?'

There's no one to answer. Even the roses, the colours of the girl's kiss, seemed to be asleep. With sharp stems, they twisted the hedge, folding their buds on it as if on a lush bed. The flickering of fireflies that swarmed by the yard allowed me to see the lumpiness of juicy grass in places. It's like someone was dancing the wild ritual movements on it tirelessly all night until I woke up, or was moving in circles, persistently thinking about some plan. Or maybe there were a lot of them, scoundrels, that brought me this nonsense with artificial intelligence?

But the yard was calm. The quiet was all around. The coolness refreshed me with a wave. A slight taste of night wind. Yes, it has a taste. When you feel like the only one given to wildlife, or the dominant king in it. How I want to absorb the taste of this freedom! Immediately wandering into the river to the waist, I knelt down. Small stones crashed into the skin, and the anxious waves gently lay on the chest and neck. I washed and shook my head, corresponding to the wolf's habits, directing a confused gaze to the starry sky, 'What should I do with him now? Here's good evening!'

'Good evening!' there was an inhuman voice from somewhere out of the hut. So unexpected that I almost turned grey like that wolf.

'Just wonderful!' splashing the water with my palm, I headed to the threshold, on which the robot fought unsuccessfully with the intention to drive into the yard. 'What are you doing?! Stop it,' I growled, from head to toe, wet and cloudy.

'The starry sky is not recognised. Put me outside,' demanded the robot.

'Oh, and you're going to command here?'

'Put me in the fresh air so that I can update the map of the luminaries.'

'Well, if you want it so much!' lifting the weighty robot and dragging it into the yard, I fell on the grass nearby. And the blue eyes of the Android - sensors started running, as if on the signal, analysing the starry sky.

'Well, who are you? Robot astronomer?' I threw it sceptically.

'I'm an Atlas robot. At your service. My specialisation is astronomy and related topics. What would you like to know?'

'The identity of criminal person who brought you here.'

'The question is not clear. Say it again.'

I rolled my eyes, sighed and randomly poked my finger into the sky.

'What kind of constellation is this?' I asked.

'Your finger points in the direction of the constellation Pegasus.'

'Why, that's right. And near it?'

'Constellations of Andromeda and Perseus. According to one version of the myth, Perseus, the son of Zeus, defeated Medusa Gorgon, saved Andromeda and performed many other feats,' it seems that the robot has entered the taste, and I did not stop the measured monologue of the metallic voice, 'Perseus gave the head of Medusa to the goddess Athena, for which she gifted him a place among the stars.'

'Are myth stories loaded into your program?'

'The map of the luminaries contains a number of celestial bodies named after mythical characters and animals. Even my model is named after the mighty titan from ancient Greek mythology — Atlas, holding a heavenly vault on his shoulders,' the robot narrated, 'according to the most common version, as a result of Titanomachy, Zeus threw the titans into Tartarus, and put the sky on Atlas's back. In some interpretation, Atlas appears to be the guardian of wisdom, and the sky is the accumulated knowledge.'

Then I trembled, starting to remember: this myth was familiar to me. But when had I read about it?

'More information on the request of "Titan",' I firmly set the command to the android, with the presence of which I decided to get used to for a while.

'Titanium is a chemical element of the 4th group, 4 periods of the periodic system of chemical elements of Mendeleev, with atomic number 22. Simple substance titanium under normal conditions...'

'Wait,' I tiredly rubbed the bridge of my nose and muttered, 'chemical element... But there is a myth that the thought of the periodic system came to Mendeleev in a dream. Although the scientist de facto has been developing this idea for years.'

The robot responded, 'The question is not recognised, creator.'

That's where I was shocked. I froze in place, stopped breathing and immediately shook my head fiercely. 'No, it can't be! I don't believe it! How could the fragrance not protect me?'

I had planted these roses for the sole purpose: to wake up at night as often as possible. So that desperate ideas do not embody, they do not pierce the thick of 'no'. Now I remembered. The Android astronomer was really named by me in honour of Atlas. Over time, this titan began to be depicted as a man who took on a heavy burden — the globe. What has become a symbol of the 'atlas-people': industrialists, scientists, inventors, and everyone who moves human civilisation. But now a person has the opportunity to share the burden of knowledge with such progressive creation. Atlas can straighten his back, look around, consider this knowledge from the outside. Can give a chance for something new to fly out into freedom in a completely new form. After all, intentionally or not, people are drawn to progress. And some eccentrics make robots even in the wild forest backwoods at night.



PROLOGUE, B.R.I.C FACILITY

Tract 0.503 had been swallowed by an indiscriminate darkness, but the generative photoreceptors made it possible to observe the room as though it were a greenhouse basking in the morning tides. The datapads mounted against the opaque walls were shattered beyond repair. The bioprocessors, Spiral préces and DNA synthesiser did not share a bit of life between them. Everything was gone, at least in there.

25 coats worked in this particular lab, 44 across the sub floor, and 258 across the entire facility. Every single one was dead: the lack of heat signatures within a 1.2 mile radius made that clear. No bloodshed, however; at least their ends had been tidy.

The cryochamber tucked in the farther end of the room was once ravaged by a deep red light, but now was devoid of all colour; this was also the case for the body which inhabited it. The braces clamped across the barren corpse's shoulders kept it afloat within its glass confines. Its silver limbs had fallen stiff along a jagged edge. There were holes where its eyes should've been, and its head was no longer able to hold itself up against the weight of the bulky neurasthenic cable attached to the back of it.

That cable slithered from the chamber ceiling, down its glass panels and stopped at the bow of the web-crawling barrel where they laid. They eventually detached the other end of the cable from their skull before braving one last look at the lab, to which they smiled.

Everything was gone, and they were finally free.

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ONE, MOSCOW STEN

There were only fifteen seats in the STEN's Premium Carriage, yet Bardyllis must have seen triple that number of faces during the two hours she occupied the eleventh space. Her parents' compulsive

obsession for hosting meant she remembered each passing figure as well as her own reflection, but little effort was required to make memory of these passengers, as each train stop brought about an increasingly peculiar batch of people dressed in aesthetics more glittering than the last. As the STEN dove further into the nucleus of western Europe from Moskva, drab silhouettes – constructed with dark leathers – were gradually disenfranchised by sharpened collars and shortened hems born of neon fabrics. Cybersthetics, which melted into the skin of the Russian patrons, were a second layer amongst the German and French. One woman who boarded at Munich had shed her natural skin completely, in favour of a coat of chrome which bounced off the burgundy walls. Foreign advertisements were not common in Moskva, yet the ones that were permitted to grace the Big Village's skylines downplayed the true nature of western grandiosity. Neon excess was fierce, almost confrontational: Bardyllis came to first understand this once this lifestyle appeared before her in full effect.

For the most part of her journey, the gaudy bystanders made for better entertainment than what stretched beyond the STEN's frameless windows, which was nothing more than laps of mossy hillsides with the occasional blink of a dusking city skyline. But once the STEN arrived at Charles de Gaulle, where a blinding infestation of metallic passengers flooded the train, the excitement of people watching also staled.

In hopes of alleviating her boredom, Bardyllis moved from her velveteen seat to the bar. It encircled the centre of the Premium Carriage and was lit up by white LEDs which travelled along the circumference of its crystalline panels. She ordered a salmon tartare and a single shot of Sleeping Bear vodka with raspberry tonic. So much for being frugal, Bardyllis told herself as she took a sip of her drink, chilled enough to warm her with a taste of home.

Her eyes responsively lifted to the triad of screens hovering above the bar while she waited for her meal. The news had been playing all evening, yet contrary to her own inquisitive nature, Bardyllis only found herself taking interest in it now. Canada would be doubling down on strict European immigration laws; NiTech were in talks of appointing a new director, and DuBois Penitentiary in County City (formerly Northamptonshire) was under lockdown after an inmate suffering from NMS killed 23 people. No mentions of home; Russians were big on privacy.

It was easy to forget chaos was a driving force of nature when the Commands back home worked diligently to root it out. But there Bardyllis was, diving headfirst into a realm where order was considered decorative instead of principle. Bardyllis almost laughed as she considered her flippancy.

The silvering views of Paris eventually eclipsed from carriage view and were replaced by another dull landscape, except this one was different to all the other countries. The hills did not boast the youth of colour or profound heights. The skies did not give way to a pallid sun that spilt its joys across nature's floors, nor was there any semblance of solidarity, where land belonged to only itself and its makers. Instead, these hills were ragged and bristled, the skies were a unique grey. And man owned these land, as made clear by the piles of campsites with little bouts of fire, which Bardyllis consumed in perfect resolution once she adjusted the zoom on her SeviVan Ocular set.

At some point, these rural sights dissolved from the carriage windows. In due course, she saw it: the London Eye. It was once an oversized symbol of patriotism in the times Bardyllis' existence was barely even a topic of conversation. Now, it barely lived up to a fraction of its glorious legacy: half of its cable cars had been bitten off by the fangs of civil unrest, whereas the other half was left in the custody of a century's worth of floods. London stood as nothing more than just that; a big nothing. So, it did not occupy any further space in Bardyllis' mind once the STEN passed that disastrous site.

Following a couple sharp turns and tunnel passage, the Premium Carriage eventually found itself in the comforts of a neon embrace. The passing exteriors shifted from jagged silhouettes of decrepit buildings to perfectly sharp outlines, which grew taller and taller as the STEN tugged deeper along the railways of this junior metropolitan. Bardyllis adjusted her Oculars once more: the face of a young woman, no older than thirty and with a distinct blue hairdo, made an appearance across several billboards in the span of fifteen minutes. Rosenthal, Avoir Garde, Delémont. No average campaigns, no average woman.

As the STEN drew nearer to its final destination, Bardyllis ordered herself another drink, then made a silent toast to the beginning of her end. She had no roots, no plans and no means of life beyond the 'emergency' cognibit her father insisted she took with her. Those lines would colour themselves in due time, probably. But all concerns for her lack

of concern seemed to matter little the second Bardyllis took note of the back of train station platform. There stood a free-standing plaque, its capitalised letters inked in blue and read; WELCOME TO NEW LONDRES.

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## TWO, CENTRE VILLE STATION

The Centre Ville New Tube and STEN Station had several exits, and Bardyllis was compelled to follow the one leading to Consortium Street only because she liked the name. Her vanity favoured her, however, as it turned out this street was where the station's taxi rank laid. She activated her communications processor to request a Corea. The processor raised an alarm between the barriers of her audial brackets, then projected a capitalised text across her Oculars.

*Thank You For Using Corea. Your Driver, Hans Bakker Is In Vehicle Ay-556-Bg.*

Bardyllis fed the license plate number into her New Londres database, hoping to identify her ride in the line up of Acariums. Her Corea was the last car furthest to her right. She could not have been sure there had ever been a moment in her life in which she had to deal with weights that were not her flesh and bones, so although that journey across the bustling pavement was only brief, it was embarrassingly challenging. Having lost half her energy in that six second pursuit, Bardyllis loaded the car trunk with a lot less vigour. But she had immediately forgotten about her fatigue the moment she sat in the car and lost herself in the views of New Londres' eclectic oasis. It was pretty understandable why New Londres held the moniker of Blue City. It was a cold-blooded thing, as the prints of fog, embroidered in the night sky, were lit up by the blue lights weaved into the panes of skyscrapers which disrupted the solitude of the moon. However, the youth of its heart, evidenced by how fresh and tidy everything was, ventilated an air of warmth across the streets and in its people, making that chilling aura feel simultaneously inviting.

'You visiting?'

Bardyllis' current astonishment took a left turn. It was not often,

or in fact ever, she heard the serfs talk. It was for that reason she had difficulty searching for his gaze through the rear view mirror as she responded with a cagey 'no'.

The driver must not have liked her answer, as he did not speak a word for the rest of the journey.

COGNIBIT ñ 96€. COREA LTD.

After forty minutes, the Corea pulled over onto Corbin Way, stopping right outside the Bexley Building; an industrial lot which took on the likeness of an improper fraction. Bardyllis exited the Corea then made a beeline for the car's trunk. As she began to disembark her luggage, she saw a white-haired woman dressed in a matching fur coat leaving the complex. She had taken no notice of Bardyllis in the time she made her exit from the building and entered the Arcarium SUV beating its coarse breath against the pavement.

Even once the vehicle pulled away from the quaint residential street, that ivory image was already engraved into the steel walls of Bardyllis' peripheral. Enough with the daydreaming. Once she had a firm grip on her pair of suitcases, she made a clumpy endeavour for the concrete stairs which led into her new home.

The Yalunin Estate was situated far from the inherent liveliness of Moskva so, contrary to ramblings for new beginnings, Bardyllis could not help but seek out a place that would provide the quiet she had gotten so used to. From her research, albeit brief, East Londres offered that solitude whilst also being a stone's throw away from the action of the city centre whenever she wished to indulge in it. Bardyllis reached the third floor via the janky elevator and was met with a quiet that was however all too eerie to have been homely. The centre ceiling light was busted, and the adjacent ones were flickering to a disjointed rhythm, occasionally spotlighting the strange blemishes smeared across the walls.

Bardyllis rolled her suitcases out of the elevator and pivoted right, but stopped where she stood once she caught sight of a real life vending machine. Westerners love these things, apparently. Her awe for this machine was funnelled through a tunnel vision, making her blind to the woman who was stood right in front of it.

'If you're going to stare with a slapped ass you could at least make yourself

bloody useful. Piece of shit ate my stans!' The woman yelled at Bardyllis.

Surely that could not have been English.

After pulling back the layers of colloquial jumble, Bardyllis managed to gauge what this woman was saying. Promptly, she activated her Oculars and scanned the vending machine for discrepancies.

'The drop sensor has gone flat so the drinks are stuck. You should shine a light underneath the...flap.'

The woman pulled out her phone, turned on its flashlight then slotted it into the flap thingy, from which two cans of Cordones hastily spawned. The woman grabbed the pair of cans before returning her attention to Bardyllis, having now curbed her aggression.

'Hm, glad to know our landlord has decided to start renting out to some respectable people. Was getting real tired of having right dickheads for neighbours!' The woman kicked the door to the left of the vending machine, prompting a man inside to bellow aggressively.

'Piss off, Lise!'

'Who is that?' Bardyllis asked. The woman slipped one can into her back pocket while opening the other with her teeth.

'Fucking Dykman. Guy's not booked a single event but swears up and down he's the best DJ in Ronson, so's up playing his dogshit until the ass crack of dawn. Swear, that's some kinda side effect of metacaine, gives ya a big fucking ego.'

'Well, if this Dyke-man poses too much as a problem for me, I will be sure to reprimand him appropriately.'

This made the woman, whose name was apparently Lise, laugh.

'Okay, I see you, black jacket. You sound cute as hell; where you from?'

'Moscow.'

'Moscow? Like, in Russia? You a refugee or somethin'? Don't get many of them lot moving to our lovely little island. I'm Lise.'

'Bardyllis.'

'Well, Bardyllis. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours. Lemme help you with your stuff. You're on this floor?'

Bardyllis nodded.

In due course, the two women made their way to the end of the third floor, stopping at the door bolstered with an iridescent sign that read 318. Bardyllis locked her sights into the facial recognition censor fitted above the sign. As soon as her metrics were recognised, the steel

door swung open, revealing a ready-made loft painted in a dusky ambience.

'Woah,' Lise commented in an almost whisper. 'Well, I should let you get settled in. I'll be seeing you, babe.'

'Would you like to spend some time together?' Bardyllis' words smothered Lise's. It seemed wise to stay on the good side of a clearly erratic woman, and having a friend in the building would've been somewhat of a convenience. Lise shrugged modestly.

'Sure thing, babe. Let's connect our silver linings.'

Bardyllis blanked: this mutation of English bested her at last.

'Let's get each other's comms, so we can call.' Lise looped her pink braids to one side of her neck to reach for her neurasthenic cable. Meanwhile, Bardyllis had moved her suitcases to the other side of the doorframe and up against the closest wall. Once the space between them was unclogged of her effects, Bardyllis picked up the other end of Lise's neurath. It only required seconds for their communication metrics to sync, and once that was completed, the two women waved each other goodnight.

The flat's steel door shut itself firmly once Bardyllis made her way inside. Her unit wrapped around the corner of the Bexley, making it the largest one on her floor. It was split between a lower floor and mezzanine which hosted both her sleeping space and an en-suite tucked behind the wooden staircase landing. Ignoring her suitcases, Bardyllis practically ran to the living area then fused her leather-clad skin with the acrylic fabrics of the curved sofa. To the left of the sofa was a rustic gable window which adorned most of the wall that faced the city. She watched the outside carefully, observing how the cascading skylines dipped and gave way to a stretch of rural land. Not much of it could be seen past the views offered by street lamps peppered in the suburban areas, but it would probably be a sight for sore eyes once daylight returned. Bardyllis pondered this heavily, until fatigue softened her apt for thought and eventually sent her to sleep.

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THREE, ZENITH CAF...

There's a reason it is such an effective form of corporal punishment: after being exposed to such depravities, the only way to forget them, is

to forget yourself completely.

This is what Bardyllis' mother said about synoscapes, in response to a teenaged Bardyllis asking her why she wasn't allowed to watch them. She avoided delving into all of this with Lise, however, when she probed Bardyllis over her apprehension for going to a synoscape lounge for their first hang.

'I've never been allowed. My parents say they're dangerous for all minds.'

'Never been allowed? My parents? How old are you?'

'Twenty-four.'

'Christ, this conversation just got so sad.'

Naturally, Lise pushed even further for this particular outing, but to recall the past in this manner would be to suggest that Bardyllis ever had a choice in how they would be spending their day together. Day-crawler was the name of the place, a velvet padded shindig holed away somewhere in Ladbroke Corner, or maybe Leicester? There were still a lot of places to remember.

The synoscape made Bardyllis feel things; she was aware that summary was stupid because that was quite literally the whole point of them. But those emotions, which monopolised her capacity for thought, did not feel like her own. Well, her in question not being the Bardyllis who currently existed, but a Bardyllis who occupied space in another reality. A Bardyllis who lived by another name, who never touched Europe but grew up in the Southern Belt, where her first family resided. It was mere coincidence that Lise opted to indulge in an Texas-bound trip: she apparently loved the countryside.

'English country has nothing to offer but muck, and I can't afford the tickets there so this is the next best thing.'

On the back of Lise's virtual horse, Nexus Morningstar, the pair rode into the jaws of the Narrow Vale, cupped between the palms of a beating sun. In cyberspace, their ride lasted two hours; barely thirty minutes had passed in real time.

They spoke of many things while Nexus lead them across the golden terrains. Bardyllis had learned Lise was a barmaid at Judy's, that she loved the colour pink and was dating a Diplomate (someone from the French gang...no, organisation).

'You ever read ROM on the city? We call these groups by a thing that reflects their...je n'sais quoi.'

'You would think England did not have a government with the way criminals are the face of the nation!'

'Who cares about all that moral shit? No point in shaking up the system if the system works just fine.'



## ISOBEL NICHOLLS

### *Soliloquy*

*The Lady is sitting alone at her dressing table, canvas propped up with an array of paints and brushes on the side, a mirror set down beside her. Paul is fast asleep in the next room. Her mind troubling her, keeping her from her own sleep, The Lady has resorted to painting a self-portrait. It is late, moonlight keeping the room lit.*

My Paul – sweet and fierce, a pairing as perfect as the moonlight illuminating my portrait. I wish to perceive myself how he sees me, how he'd be nimble at my caress yet mighty in my aid. A warrior and his tigress, I wish history to believe us to be as such. Though I suppose a tiger is prettiest as décor, when it is skinned. Thus, I predict a tragic end for my Paul and me.

It pains me so to foresee, but I would bludgeon my tyrant husband if harm came to my sweet darling. I must protect him, my sweet Paul. My mind plays his soothing words, an Englishman's cries of address: 'My Queen, My Queen' my Paul would caress me with his words. I was shocked by the difference – and oh my, how it was different! – between my husband and my lover, threatening and pure. I can't say I've seen myself as pure before my Paul, but I want to observe myself through my admirer's eyes, and every brush stroke matters. There is no room for mistake.

I showed him the tenderness that I reserved just for my lover, but that put him in the danger of my tyrant's eye. Succumbing to me was my selfish influence, my caprice, my love, my Paul. I remain a mystery, so it can't be true, as Cleopatra's claim of power was deceiving so is my claim to him.

*She picks up the mirror*

As I glance in the mirror, I see not what he sees – a Queen as he boldly claims. My eyes grow weary with age, but I still see the lines of my dented complexion as my youth fades. But this means nothing for it is not how Paul, my Paul, sees me.

It is not enough. I am in love, but it is too late. Married in my prime to a cursed man who taints my soft flesh and grew casual with our love. I bore him no children, fulfilled no role of his or my own and now I am

lonely. Until my Paul, I was lonely. Alas, I burn with the feu sacré. He brought me a flush of fiery pleasance and in return I fought depression for my sweet Paul. His literature which he blessed me with reading, "The Lady and the Tiger." A tale of a choice, give her lover to death and the tiger- or to a woman of youth and ripe beauty. It is a selfish demand, but I'd give him to the tiger a hundred times over before I'd see my Paul accompanied by a beauty in her prime.

The mirror lies! It mocks my mortality, forcing my eyes to watch as I grow older and depressed. How is it I see this? I lock my eyes with mine own as the sun rises each day to dress my face with colour. Powder for the eyes and cheeks, always a deep red for my lips. I have watched as it completes me less and less. How can my sweet Paul see me as his fine lady, his Queen when my reflection speaks my history for me. When my own husband cares not to even glance at my efforts no more.

Regardless, I have lived the life God had intended me. I shall not stand in the way of my Paul's. I will lie myself on the tiger, embody it, to protect my lover and face the tyrant that is my home. I revealed a part of my fierceness to him. If you could believe it I boiled, I boil still with fiery hatred for the man I married, a useless, vicious weakling too feeble to deserve a fine death-I had told Paul. Partly I prayed for the offer to complete this for me, to extinguish the part of me I detest, my foul husband. Yet my Paul is too sweet a lover. Dmitry had given him his pistol if one could believe it. My sweetheart of an Englishman, the best of them all firing a pistol - my protector. Shook me to death the thought of my feeble-minded husband finding him.

### *Admiring herself in the mirror*

It was then I knew, I suppose. I realised I had hidden myself from my lover, remained a ghostly queen to him for a strict purpose. I am his protector, his Queen who sits upon the tiger for him. Yet I am not strong enough to face him as I leave, not strong enough to reveal myself and face what will be I assume the end of God's intentions for me.

I'll do it. For my Paul.

I shall write him a note of passion, alongside my portrait. I get to keep this though, to see myself through his eyes shall motivate my every step hereon. Disappear as the ghost I am, remain his lady and mistress of the

past. Pray, I will, to find him again in this life or our next. My Paul we are destined for each other I believe, suited for a life of love. One where I can reveal you even my name.

My Paul, I am sorry dearest lover. Dinner tomorrow I promise you and myself will be superb. A grand goodbye. I love you, my sweet Paul.

*She turns her portrait to reflect in the mirror.*



*/to her/*

Your fingers were the first non-inanimate object that was not my own body inside of me. They were the first piece of a foreign body that was inside of my body. All this behind a white campervan at around midnight on a summer Thursday. This is how one loses virginity. One loses virginity five minutes before the occurrence of the white campervan. It only takes a bathroom inside of a bar, four to five pints, and a new black lace bra from Lidl's Valentine's section for 3,49 €.

*/me/*

I wanted to rip her open like a jute sack of walnuts. My grandma would store them in an old cattle shed with ready-chopped wood for the decades of winters to come. A young moth couple moved into the wooden walls back when they had to share with a spotted cow and a stray puppy, who was an assumed mongrel. Grandpa shot a hole into his ear when he caught him stealing his wife's sourdough. He named this puppy Bread after his wife suggested he should have shot the Bastard's head off. Bread did not care much about his re-christening. Dogs can't read past the first letter in words. The moth couple became a moth family the following spring when Bread unlearned stealing freshly baked sourdough. He started licking the crust instead to avoid being chased by grandma looking for the missing particles of bread. The moth family established itself as an independent colony on the day Bread died.

I wanted to knock on her chest just above her breasts as if asking for access to her lungs. It was a place to break into. It was a place to infiltrate. The place stored two jute sacks of walnuts crawling with an empire of moths. She opened her mouth to accept more larvae into this collection, and she let me slightly rip her left jute sack. A walnut fell out and split open on the rocky pavement behind the white campervan. We shared this fallen treasure that tasted like what I imagined the bi-monthly copulation of my

grandparents would feel like. It was sex from the ages when clitoris had its mythological status.

*/to her/*

'You know you could maybe like girls...', you said when your bra finally fell to the ground. Fingers-deep inside of you, I said I'd think about it when I get home. And when you were fingers-deep inside of me, you saw her walking by like a shadow. Ica was waiting. Like a crow. She was getting closer and closer, we could tell by her smell. Her purple hoodoo full of rips and stains has most probably never experienced a washing machine cycle. She wanted to ask us for another cigarette, but then she saw our fingers were busy with something else. Then a young man walked by and watched about two seconds of lesbian porn live-stream for free. Ica stayed. She remains.

*/me/*

And then you taste it. Yourself. Not only because you want to taste hers, but also because you want to assure yourself everything is okay with your own [REDACTED]. And perhaps you just want to. Losing your virginity is having your first gynaecologist appointment behind the white campervan, because you could never tell your mum you love to stuff yourself with inanimate objects. You [REDACTED] would never tell your mum you started masturbating shortly after you saw her masturbating with a shower head. And she said you were [REDACTED] too young for it.

You could [REDACTED] tell your mum how much that phrase would mean [REDACTED] in your life.

'Please stop', you yelp seconds before you would orgasm outside of a club after mentally edging yourself for over forty-five minutes. And [REDACTED] you can't let go because it was

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illegal until midnight, but you still can't let go when you get home at [REDACTED]. And then he wraps around you.

You [REDACTED] let go. You could [REDACTED] tell your mum you had to let him go.

You  
cannot  
him.  
Just  
home.  
Go

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home:

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*/to her/*

And you just asked, 'What was Ica doing out so late?' as if, for a minute, you didn't know she

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*/to her/*

You once told me I was the most celibate whore you ever met. And how I wasn't fully there. Not even back then. Not ever perhaps. Under your beige curtains I once confessed I hated vanilla ice cream. And that I could not fully understand love. Maybe I was just bad at eating ice cream. Or I simply happened to be the first milkshake appreciator in our town. As a child I would bite the tip of the cone off, and then wait for the ice cream to melt, and then suck it all out. This is how I wanted to put an end to love too, suck it all out of you, until your body is empty with no irreplaceable organs left. You often said you noticed me craving an extra ice cream cone, the kind that is dipped in chocolate. Covered with rainbow sprinkles surrounded by an army of gaps of some sorts.

*/me/*

If I could ever settle down, I would buy a studio flat between these gaps. Or I would squeeze a comfy sofa in between kisses. In between the pairs of lips. And in between the short moments before the actual fluid exchange. During hot summer days I would sit in a swing nailed it into her ribs swinging right above me, tickling my belly. From this swing I could reach the short gap before an orgasm, the gap when our bodies melt, and flow out of the milk-soaked cornettoes. Perhaps there was love of some sort between the gaps and synthetic vanilla flavourings. I loved all her gaps. And her colours.

She often shunned me for loving her during her blue periods more, because I knew that the orange ones hurt more. Behind those happy eyes, there was warmth gnawing at her retinas, ripping out her hair and then forcing her to laugh at her pain. Orange was an inversion. Blue was easy to love, blue was holding hands, caressing a cold forehead. And engraving my face onto her breasts. It was staying when staying was needed and wanted. Orange was when staying was needed but yelled at, thrown TV remotes at, and later laughed at. Orange was keeping her hands from sharp glass, Xanax, and the new Asos collection.

*/to her/*

You once told me that I was a new invention; a nothingsexual. Then you declared that the nothingsexual flag would be blank, almost transparent, but they would just sell it as a piece of white cloth, not caring too much for the blankness. Because they could not put blankness over their brands in June. Rainbows were always easier to sell. I-want-to-items were always on sale, or at least when the season was right for selling I-want-to-items, and I-would-rather-not-items were getting eaten by moths. Because there was no way to market items-that-would-rather-not. And there was no way to market a flag nobody could see. They would try marketing it as white-that-would-rather-not-get-stained. Talking of this flag always made me go full Descartes on you.

*/us/*

They would not make it any of the typical hospital whites. It would not be the cotton-white-white, or the white-walls-white, or the straitjacket-white, but the white of a piece of gauze used to sterilize the forearm of a crying child about to get vaxed for tetanus. They always squeezed us into the tight corridor with walls cyan uncomfortably. One side of the corridor was guarded by the old nurse Mary. 'Soon to be retired Mary', they kept saying until Mary was too old to leave. Until Mary's husband died and she could no longer leave. And the other side with the clinic door belonged the fat nurse Berta, who would shout out our names. She loved lining the other children up, and making them march to get marked by our friend Maya. Betadine stain was the mark of the beast.

Hýkal only liked vaccinated kids. He often said he liked the light blue plasters with our favourite Maya or the little hare in green vest from Ну, погоди! Hýkal used to say it was always the Betadine smell that made those children cry. It was not their arms slowly getting pierced until their skin rips a bit through cartilages and veins, halfway to their ulnas. It was the smell of death that would make the children cry because they knew. He could tell by their little faces covered in tears and snot, and sometimes tetanus. He could tell when he tried to comfort them. He could tell when he peeled their plasters of.

*/me/*

'I saw you crying in the corridor! Fourteen is too old to be afraid of death. You must be over at least a dog or two!' said Samuel when I walked into the classroom holding tightly onto a box of sweets that was shaped like a dog with a blue fedora hat. I denied what Samuel said, as I always did. One has to unlearn that all boys called Samuel are wolves.

*/to her/*

I sometimes think terrible things like what it would be like if one of us unexpectedly passed away and the other one would write this book about the deceased one. I would write a book that my family could not read. A book

that my lecturer warned me about. A book that would take me to court. The book that would take him to court. Or maybe you would not write a book at all. You would make a TV show. Something like Friends, but with some glamorous subscription benefits. You called me your celibate whore again. Then you sank between my thighs. I spun you around longing to undergo an experiment on the fragility of our labia.

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*/to her/*

It was the day when the yellow dress arrived. We always said yellow was your colour, and you bought this dress just to prove that our observation was correct. It completely embalmed you. There were no blues or oranges for a moment, only a new yellow dress and your smile. If you suddenly decided to look for a better life in my neighbour's fields in 'The Village, you could just lay down among the sunflowers that were about to bloom heavy with their swollen uteruses full of unripe seeds. You said that it was so painfully obvious we could barely call it a metaphor. And then, you just stood there, in front of your mirror with its dark wooden frame, and said, 'Carrots, sometimes...sometimes, I just love being a girl.'

*/me/*

Christmas dinner. Your mum is talking to some family member you barely know, you barely ever knew as a child, but for some reason she knew you when you were a child and knows what size of diapers you wore. And then she says, 'You raised your girl so well. Oh, how proud you must be about raising her that way. And how proud she must be about being a girl!' Your mum smiles and looks at you and says her daughter truly loves being a girl and once had said that power comes with being a girl.

Being a girl is being eleven. Being a girl is being eleven and getting asked by your first-so-called-boyfriend if he could touch your breasts. Being eleven is saying yes, but only through a tank top, because you knew a bra was something your mummy wore and what you would wear when the time is right. Being eleven is saying but there's not much there yet. Being a girl is wearing a

green tank top with a sheep with a pink face while your first-so-called-boyfriend touches your breasts, and he says, 'Well, yes, there is nothing much there.' To which you suggest, 'Maybe I'll wear a bra in one or two years. Maybe I will take it off, so you could touch them through my green tank top with a sheep with a pink face.'

Being a girl is being in the toilet with your first-so-called-boyfriend while your teacher shouts out your names. And there you are not answering the teacher's call. And there you are in you sheep tank top asking you boyfriend if he could kiss you instead. Being eleven is when neither of you know how to kiss yet. Being a girl is aging during your first kiss. Because you didn't know that it would be wet. Then you sit down in front of your teacher. Knowing you just wasted your first kiss on your first-so-called-boyfriend, who was thirteen, and just touched your breasts. He said they weren't there. You still kept the butterfly painting from the first-so-called-boyfriend, and you will still have it at the age twenty-two. Even though he said it was just a bet. Or that's what he said at least. And then you are a bet. You are your first-so-called-boyfriend's bet that he could date you, kiss you and touch your breasts. Being a girl is loving your first-so-called-boyfriend because he said, 'I never told the others that there was nothing there yet.'



AMELIA M. PEARCE

*The Winter Prowler*

Artie was convinced he was getting frostbite. He rubbed his sore hands together, cursing himself for leaving the house without any gloves. But how could he have known that the night would turn the drifting snow into a blizzard? He dragged his eyes up from his salmon-coloured hands. Staring out at the cascading snow, Artie felt incredibly thankful that this lonesome bus stop had a shelter. He stared at the board and sighed, five more minutes until the bus would come and rescue him from the gale. Even so, it was still a forty-minute ride from the edge of this town to his own.

*I should work closer to home*, he thought, gazing out into the darkness. Thoughts of other places to work began to spiral in Artie's mind, until a loud crunch interrupted them. He snapped his head to the right like a deer in headlights and watched the figure stumbling towards him. The shelter's light illuminated the shadow, revealing a man who was well dressed for the weather. He wore a thick coat and an ushanka. His hands were buried deep in his pockets and his eyes were glazed over as he lumbered to a stop beside Artie, who had gone back to staring forward. The two stood in silence, both staring out into the snowy abyss, the only sound being the lashing wind.

Artie cleared his throat, gently turning his head towards the man, 'Some whiteout we're having, huh?' His voice came out squeakier than expected, making him inwardly cringe.

The man turned and stared briefly, not uttering a word, before returning to his mission of watching the snow fall.

*Rude*, thought Artie. The two stood in silence for a while, before the stranger let out a brutish cough. Artie thought he could see specks of blood on the man's chin, but the man quickly wiped them away, revealing incredibly pale hands.

'I'm Hugo,' he muttered, not breaking eye contact with the snow. The strangeness of the situation made Artie's anxiety grow. He desperately tried to avert his mind away from thoughts about the winter of 2005.

It was twenty years ago now, when a string of murders had rampaged

through the town of Doebrook. Artie had only been three years old when it happened, but trepidation of what occurred echoed through most of his youth. He remembered eavesdropping on his mother as she gossiped on the phone, stories of bodies found buried under piles of snow, their hearts always gone but ripped out in different ways. One particular corpse had its spine ripped out in the grizzly process. Artie shuddered as he remembered, his dread deepening as he thought about how the scourge was never caught. They'd vanished once the snow had melted away.

Hugo was looking at him now, desperation in his eyes. 'I was just at Antler Point,' he rasped, pointing towards the darkness with his thumb, 'you know, the woods? I got lost, I've been lost for a while.' He began coughing again.

Artie felt some of his nerves dwindle away. He began to feel foolish, *of course he isn't the Winter Prowler*, he scolded himself. *This man must be only a few years older than me, he would have been a kid back then.* He began to clear his throat, ready to offer his sympathies, but Hugo's speech barged on.

'I knew your mother. I helped her with something a long time ago.' His voice was wet from his spluttering and his eyes were narrowed with burning animosity. 'I saved your sister's skin and in return your mother promised me your decay.'

Artie was like a scalded cat, backing away so fast that he smashed into the side of the bus stop shelter and almost slipped on the ice. Hugo leapt forward, latching onto Artie's arm, and the two began brawling. Soon they were both on the ground. *It'll be over soon*, Artie comforted himself with that thought. He had pinned Hugo down and was winning. The man was willowy, not a scrap of muscle on him. But his fingers were still locked around Artie's arm and had pulled up his coat sleeve in the scuffle, exposing his forelimb to the frigid air. They tussled until Hugo glanced at his exposed arm and gasped.

Long ago, when Artie was a toddler, he was in an accident. He had been trying to play with some kids at his local park but no matter how hard he tried they excluded him. Bored, Artie had wandered off into the woods near the park and spotted an ancient oak tree. He ran and began attempting to climb the tree when he lost his grip on the brittle

wood and fell onto exposed glass. He was lucky that his mother had spotted his wandering and was following close behind, but this memory had always bugged him. He would always tell his mother that someone else was there, that they never went to the hospital for it, that a stranger had helped heal him. She always denied it, insisting they rushed to the hospital to get it stitched up, that the near-death experience was messing with his memories. He eventually shrugged it off, but the scar that ran from his wrist to his elbow would always be proof, to him, that something had protected him that day.

Hugo suddenly went limp, making Artie loosen his grip in confusion. Hugo then thrashed about before clawing his way back into the gloom of the night. Artie stood up, pulled his coat sleeve back down and stared into the patch of darkness that Hugo had fled to. He looked down at his covered arm, feeling beholden to his scar. *Something must have protected me that day*, he contemplated, *something that scared him away*. He began rubbing his arm, kneading the scar as he scrutinized Hugo's words, *I don't have any sisters, unless he knows about...* he pushed that thought away, and the prick of fear he felt with it. *That's impossible, there's no way that he could know*, he tried to argue with himself, *but my scar would confirm it*. He blinked a few times, the way ahead suddenly felt lonely.

He shook his head, banishing these thoughts away. A bright light shone on the horizon, and Artie's bus had arrived after five glacial minutes.



ALFIE STEVENSON

*To Whom It May Concern*

To whom it may concern,

I was told to write a letter for a class; one addressed to the person I hate most in this world. I don't know if I hate you. I don't know if I'm even allowed to – you were just a kid. But then again, so was I. One so much younger than you. You were in big school, I'd only just hit key stage 2, I think. The years blur together. Maybe you were younger than I thought you were but for someone who could barely reach the bathroom sink, you were giant. For a long while after the event, I never spoke about it. Never even thought about it. You were such an anomaly to everything I knew my mind threw you out the second I got home. And for a long while you just weren't. You had no place in my life, to me you were just the person who got me in trouble with my mum after she saw it happen.

You weren't an abuser or... or anything else. I'm getting distracted. I don't hate you. You were nothing to me. Until I was old enough to learn and understand. Then you were everything. Not to me, but in spite of me. Thinking back on it, I think I do hate you. Not for what you done, but because you made me a victim. You forced yourself into every aspect of my life. Every little secret I held, every disgusting thing I loathed. You were always at the top of that list. I hate that. You forced your way in twice, once without even knowing it. What's worse is that you still haven't left.

*Prompt: Attempting to write an emotional piece as a monologue. I was lying in bed.*



ROCIO RODRIGUEZ-INNISS

*Three, Two, One*

My baby she is cold. I cover her in ten-pound notes, but they are cold too. A pharmacy sign lets us know that the temperature has dipped below 0°. Freezing temperature. The sign flashes; green cross, 9:05PM, *freezing*. My baby starts crying. Green cross, 9:06PM, *freezing*. Her cries get louder. Green cross. 9:07PM.

Frozen.

My baby's cry is suspended in a block of ice. Her little toothless mouth open wide, I can see down her miniature throat. Her arms are held up, her fingers outstretched towards me.

The silence is good.

I take a chisel and chip, chip away at the ice. I need the ten-pound notes.

Molasses comes out of the shop next to the pharmacy. They say he took a girl's virginity when she didn't want him to. He says they're lying. I believe him.

Today Molasses has small eyes. Sometimes he has big eyes and when they look on me their brown flows into my chest and I feel warmer. But today he has small eyes. Luckily, they do not make me feel cold.

They make me feel tight. I can distinctly feel the skin holding my nose to my face. I crinkle it.

Molasses bends down towards my baby frozen in her ice block. I can't see his face but he must have looked at her with his big eyes because cracks begin to form. For a moment they halo her fat little face, then, crack. The ice block shatters and my silence is gone.

'The baby's crying,' Molasses says.

I like his deep voice. It rumbles along at a slow pace each, word, landing, softly.

'I know,' I say.

I look at my baby and will her to freeze again. But the pharmacy sign flashes; green cross, 9:28PM, 1°.

It isn't freezing temperature anymore.

My baby stays hot and loud.

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We walk along the high road. There is a florist. I think of the Big House. Each room in the Big House had different colour vases filled with different flowers and I could name them all. Azaleas, Gardenias, Lisianthus, Peonies, Snapdragons, Chrysanthemum, Thistle, Phalaenopsis Orchids, Gypsophila, Lilies of the Valley. We are right outside the florist but my feet do not slow. Then we have walked past the florist. Thoughts of flowers and the Big House are gone.

Molasses bends into the buggy again.

He has tucked a pink lily in beside my baby. She isn't crying anymore. Why does my baby get Molasses' flowers and big eyes?

Molasses holds a yellow rose in front of my face. My eyes feel crossed looking at it.

I don't like yellow.

'Thank you,' I say.

I do not take it.

He does not move the flower or his hand. We carry on stepping forwards.

I cannot see what is ahead. Maybe we will crash and my baby will tumble out of her buggy and skid along the icy pavement leaving a trail of pink petals behind her.

He moves the yellow rose.

'Bitch,' he says.

He drops the flower on the ground. Steps on it. Still walking I look behind me for a moment, to see its trampled form and broken stem then... Molasses' hands are on mine. Big hands, rough hands, their heat burns. He takes the buggy handle from me.

Now Molasses has my baby.

Molasses' baby.

Molasses walks with Molasses' baby. My feet stop.

There is a silk thread stuck in my stomach. It stretches out and is tied to them.

There is a silk thread stuck in my back. It stretches out but it is not tied to anything. It is frayed and dragging on the ground searching for Chrysanthemums and the Big House.

Molasses stops walking.

He turns and looks at me.

His eyes are not small, they are not big. They are searching and pulling.

Molasses pulls on the thread. The skin on my stomach pulls with it. I do not move. I can feel the skin being separated from my insides. If I do not step forwards a hunk of my flesh will tear off, fly across the street, and hit Molasses, hit Molasses' baby.

The thread in my back stays limp on the ground. There is no pulling there.

I do not move.

I look deep into Molasses, into Molasses' baby.

Molasses' pulling continues. I hear a ripping sound from my abdomen and my mouth is warm with the metallic blood taste.

I take a step forwards.

The blood taste goes.

I walk slowly towards them.

I stop and stand close.

I look at my silk thread, still long from the pulling, now pooled on the ground between us.

'I'm sorry,' Molasses says.

He holds my hands, thin hands, cold hands, and puts them on the buggy handle. We start to walk again.

I step forwards, forwards with my baby.

My stomach thread gets short and close.

My back thread trails behind.

'My baby is cold,' I say.

'Our baby,' he says.

I look at him sideways.

He takes ten-pound notes out of his coat pocket and covers her and the pink lily with them.

I smile.

\*\*\*

We have come to the entrance to a park. The grass is iced over. When we walk, we break necks under our feet. The moon is out tonight. Its light makes the cold glisten.

There is a distant clock. But, I can see the time. The big hand is creeping past the 12 and the little hand is creeping past the 10. The littlest hand is a broken nub so I cannot see exactly where it is going.

I am in the clock face and there is ticking and thumping. I see in the distance three people: a man, a woman, and a baby.

'Here,' he says.

I am back in the park and Molasses is pointing to a small alcove penned in by bushes, sheltered by a low arching tree.

'This is where we will sleep tonight.'

Me, Molasses, and our baby.

TOM P SIMMONS

*The Thousand-Year Sea*

The cicadas are loud in summer. Even from the sea you can hear them chirping and creaking, like some orchestra amongst the bushes and trees. They sing of things you and I could not comprehend, of nature, of the sky, the sea and the land. Of the order that anchors them to the birds and the wolves. I so frequently wonder if we are even part of this order, or part of a different one. We seem to have evolved past being animals at this point. Tell me, do you hear all this as I do?

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The air is a warm haze of canary from the Mediterranean sun, but the water is a clear icy blue. Through its glassy surface, fish swim among the salted weeds, and turtles come up for air. I can see the rough bronze rock in the shallows near the coasts, and how the sun has tanned it with the ebb and flow of the tide.

I am on this sea, an empty sea, thousands of years wide. My body is a lonely island here.

It is silent in the night. I can almost hear the flakes of salt crackling against my skin as I move. Sometimes I feel as though I am the intermediary for the sun and the sea.

I bought a boat after you died. Ships have always been female, so I couldn't name it after you; I am sorry. Perhaps I am constricted by tradition, but you were too. I know you were. We were both bound by our own environmental order in that way— I doubt the cicadas would care for the gender of a boat.

I named her *Andromeda*. I spent what money you left in your will on her, I hope you would've liked that. She is around sixty feet in length, shaped like a machete, and lined with portholes stamped upon the sea-shell white hull. The deck and the cockpit are of varnished burnt mahogany. The sails are pearl white, and the ropes hard with use.

She is a fine vessel; handles well and cuts through water like a blade.

Since I launched *Andromeda*, I haven't returned to land. I think it's been months by now. I must confess to you, I have not eaten in days. The

nearest island is Corfu, but I shan't go. If the ocean refuses to serve me a fish, or a squid, or a lobster, then so be it. I wonder what happens to the other fish when I kill one and eat it. That kind of reflection only comes at times like this, I suppose. Would a fish have grieved for you the way I have? Would a seabird have crashed and fallen as I have? Would a wolf have cried into the light of the moon as I have? And would those cicadas have sung for you as I have?

I brought Kallistos with me. I think he is enjoying himself. He leaps into the water to try and catch fish, and he barks at the gulls congregating around the rigging. The first week out here he barely moved from his bed. His eyes drooped, and his fur greyed as he laid there. He wouldn't even look at me. Perhaps I reminded him of you. He has his own natural order, but he cries for you every night. In some sense, he knows you're not going to walk him through the cypress trees again, or feed him meat from the grill.

The sea air has changed something in him, though, and he seems to have understood your death now in a way that I am yet to. Sometimes I look upon him as if he is wiser than I. He was your dog after all, and you were always the far greater man out of the two of us.

Being a greater man must have taken its toll though. Maybe that's why you did what you did. Or maybe I am a fool to ascribe meaning to it, or to any workings of this absurd earth. Would you tell me why if I could speak with the dead? Or would you have told me when you were living, and I only needed to ask?

Time works slower out here. I waited for you among the stillness, while the springtime turned slowly to summer. Those months felt eternal, and now, as summer draws to a close, I wonder if you and I would have had more time if we had fled to the ocean.

I have your guitar. I play to the sea creatures every night, the song you composed, lit by moonlight. The strings on that guitar are those of my own heart, and I play them. While I do, I picture your face, but the picture gets more foggy with every passing day. Kallistos cocks his head as I play. He recognises the chords, I think.

If you were to invert the sea and the sky, and I were to be sailing amongst the clouds and the stars and the moon, would I find you there? Or are you only to be found on land, in the ground? Would the stars gleam through the water, and the fish float in air? Would the land be

submerged, and your grave be decorated in seaweed? I alone would float above it all, as the whales echoed song into outer space.

That sounds lonely. I wonder what those lyrics you wrote meant. The kingdom of the sea is more accessible than the sky. Why would you want to abandon the kingdom of land, of humankind? It's so lonely out here.

But I can't bring myself to return. I know how you felt now. All those times you went off into the ocean on Father's rowing boat, that was your way of escaping.

Whose grave was it in the song? Maybe that song was meant for me to sing once you were gone. Tell me, brother, did you plan all of this? Was it all of your design?

I shan't return for food.

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I can hear Kallistos whining. I look towards him, and his canine jowls are drooped in a frown. He's hungry too, I can tell. His eyes are glassy with sadness. I walk over and pat him on the head.

'Are you hungry, boy? Let's go back home and get something to eat then.'

And so we return, to the cypress trees and orchards, to the grills and the olive branches, to the white houses bleached by the sun, and to the cicadas that chirp and creak their orchestra.



Mark sat uneasy in the chair, quickly checking his suit for any signs of folds or creases. He had been waiting in this room for 2 hours. And he hasn't been the only one. All around the room there were similarly dressed individuals. Mark could guess who these people were, or rather who they are representing.

*Potential investors and collaborators, from a multitude of different companies I don't know, he thought. Or care, they're Just competition.*

He then turned and looked at several people that looked like they were in a group. They were dressed like everyone else, but with one notable detail: a badge pinned to the left side of their suits that marked them as government officials.

*That's odd, I know this company is well known by the public, but I haven't heard of any connections to the government. Oh well, at the very least that will make anyone think twice before acting out.*

Suddenly, the double doors on the far side of the room swung open, and three people entered. Mark knew one instantly as Derek Armstrong, E.T.M's Head of Marketing and public face for the company. He wore an expensive suit, much alike the ones worn by the investors, with one noticeable difference. The suit had no sleeves, nor any replacement. This was deliberate, as instead of arms of flesh, muscle, and bone, Derek had prosthetic arms, their artificial nature being proudly displayed.

As for the other two, Mark was uncertain. He could guess from the white lab coat one of them wore, a sharp contrast to the dark navy and blacks of the suits the investors wore, that it was one of the scientists of E.T.M, the brains of the operation. As for the third person, Mark had no clue. He was not wearing a lab coat or an expensive suit, instead a noticeably cheaper looking, yet still functional, suit. Both men had neutral looks on their faces, as opposed to Derek, with a mischievous grin from ear to ear, began to speak.

'Greetings, potential investors,' he said in a booming voice, arms outstretched like he was showman at a circus.

'I must apologise for our lateness, someone tried to bore me with logistics

and other nonsense like that,' after saying that he let loose a mighty chuckle.

It seemed to be infectious as some of the investors laughed themselves. Mark noticed however that the men that came in with Derek weren't laughing, with the one in the lab coat's expression having changed from the neutral look he had before, to a grimace.

*I don't need to be a genius to think that guy was the one Derek was referring to,* thought Mark.

'Anyway, what matters is we're here. I know you all have been dying to see what we at E.T.M have cooked up-I know I am, and I already knew it!' Derek once more punctuated his talk with laughter, followed by most of the investors' laughter.

'Jokes aside, if you all would follow me, we will kindly show you what we have been working for,' Derek then proceeded to turn around and walk out the door where he came in, only this time closely followed by the people he came in with and the investors.

The congregation walked through several hallways lined with glass walls. Some of the investors would peer in through the glass walls to try and see what was on the other side, with whatever it was only catching their attention for a little time, before they got bored and re-joined the group. All the while the mass moved, Derek was talking, clearly delighting in being the centre of attention.

'As some of you may know, we did not start out like this. Now I can't say much of the true beginnings of what would become E.T.M, as I wasn't present at the time. But from what I know, the origins of this company come from one mind: Adam Stone. He saw the good that artificial prosthetics could do for everyone. But as you know, the prosthetics at the time weren't quite up to shape.'

'And so, he designed his own! With only readily available materials he was able to build the first artificial limb that could do everything a normal arm can do. He made modern history that day. But he didn't stop there, oh no he didn't! Using the infamy and wealth that first success brought him, he would create a company to share his gift with the world. To symbolise this, he named the company Enabling The Masses. And just like that, E.T.M was born.'

Upon finishing that statement, Derek stopped walking and stood in front of a doorway. Upon further notice Mark realised it was a large elevator door.

'Now I must apologise but the elevator ride might be a little tight' he said. The doors to the elevator opened, almost like it was timed to after Derek spoke, and everyone walked into the elevator.

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*He wasn't lying about how tight this elevator was*, thought Mark, as he tried to manoeuvre himself into a more breathable position, narrowly avoiding a jab to the ribs. Fortunately, Mark felt the movement of the elevator stop, quickly followed by the doors of the elevator opening. Instantly, everyone in the elevator spilled out, desperate to not be jammed into such a tight space.

'Now then, just a little walk through the innovation wing and we will be at our destination. Onward!' said Derek, practically shouting the last word with glee, before walking forward at a quick pace. Mark and the investors quickly followed.

As the group moved forward, Mark seized the opportunity to edge closer to the man in the lab coat. He carefully and artfully manoeuvred himself throughout the moving crowd till he was walking alongside the presumed scientist.

'I'm guessing you don't like that Derek Armstrong that much?' quietly asked Mark.

'Oh, I didn't see you there. Well to answer your question, yes. I understand that Derek's attitude and behaviour are necessary for his job, but I don't appreciate my colleague making fun of me in front of others,' the man in the lab coat said, trying to hide further frustration.

'So, you were the scientist he was referring to,' Mark responded.

'Yes, I am Dr Charles Andrew, though most people here just call me Charles or Dr Charles. I am one of E.T.M's top scientists, and unfortunately working on this new project.'

'What do you mean?'

'You probably already know this, but this newest project is nothing like E.T.M's previous ones. Whilst we have primarily focused on humanitarian projects before, one of the main reasons I applied in fact... this one is... different,' Charles said, his tone uneasy and his expression tight with discomfort.

'How so?'

'Now, now, Charles,' Derek cut in, his voice dripping with mock

cheer. 'We wouldn't want to spoil the surprise, would we?'

Charles let out a barely audible grumble of frustration, before going silent.

'Besides, we have arrived, and with it I can reveal the name of our newest initiative.'

Derek then walked up and pressed a button that was implanted on one of the walls. Suddenly, what Mark thought was a wall, but was in fact a large industrial door, began to open.

Derek, once more using the same booming voice he had at the start, boldly announced 'Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce you all to Project Predatech!', the name echoed boldly down the corridor, leaving dead silence in its wake.

At that point Mark was finally able to see what was behind the door, which on the surface didn't look too different from the rest of the innovation wing. It was a long corridor, with security doors on each side continuing down the length of the corridor. There were also large glass windows on the walls in between doors.

*Wait, Mark thought, these are test chambers.*

'Now before you all bombard me with questions,' Derek spoke, 'allow me to state what the project is. Already some people, especially those of a military background, saw the potential of our cybernetics outside of what we were doing before. Those people have also debated the next stage of military advancement, as the idea of drones can only go so far. Sure, they're strong and efficient, but rigid. In a real combat scenario, they would struggle. But a human, a human with our tech, could solve that. It would combine the strength of mechanics with the adaptability of a living being.'

Mark could barely believe what he was hearing. E.T.M, a company renowned for saving lives, was now working on something that would take life instead. *Perhaps if it was any other corporation, thought Mark, But E.T.M? A company that prides itself on helping people, a company that has openly stated they care not for financial gain, a company that has up until this very second seemed to have no interest in military affairs, why? It doesn't make sense.* Before Mark could ponder more, Derek announced 'And now I will let our lead researcher and scientist for the project take the reins. Take it away Charles!'

At the mention of his name Charles walked out of small crowd and stood beside Derek, a clear look of discomfort on his face. This did not

go unnoticed by Derek.

'Now, now Charles, don't look so glum. I know you still have your reservations about the project, and I know that this is a ghastly business, but lighten up a bit. Show our investors that wonderful smile of yours.'

Charles did not smile. Instead, he simply took a deep breath and then spoke.

'We currently have four prototypes near completion. Each one has been uniquely designed to fulfil specific combat functions. If you would all turn your gaze to the chamber I'm pointing to,' he then pointed to his left, which was Mark, and by extension most of the people in the hallway, right.

They looked through the window to see a large sterile room with light grey walls, floor, and ceiling, its starkness broken only by a heavy black steel door on the far side. Said door then opened, seemingly automatically. Then a person stepped through into the chamber. Or was it, thought Mark. It certainly had the shape of a human, specifically of the male physique, but from even this first glance, Mark could tell that there was very little human about them.

The thing was covered in head to toe in a robotic suit, various panels covering the presumed internals. It was hard to tell what parts of its body were simply covered in armour or entirely artificial. The only clearly organic part left was the head, and even then, Mark could notice some form of tech attached to the lower back of its head. What the hell is this, he thought, a chill running down his spine. But before he could look further, Derek began to speak again.

'This is Subject 03. He is currently in what we call Civil mode. This form allows them to blend in with the public more easily. It also allows them to be re integrated back into regular society. This is because, while in Civil mode, they lack access to any harmful enhancements. They can also be locked into Civil mode, or the other mode, where they will be unable to change between forms. Otherwise, they can change freely between forms with a simple mental command.'

Derek then walked towards a panel with buttons next to window and pressed one of the buttons, 'you may commence mode change, Subject 03.'

Upon hearing this, 03's body began to change. The panels covering the exterior of his body began to move and reshape themselves, changing colour from dull grey to an off white with stripes of orangey red. The

lower arms seemed to almost magically increase in size, with the hands folding away as they are replaced with a pair of mechanical pincers, the right one being noticeably larger and almost fist like. A large, hollow, panel reminiscent of a crustaceans' abdomen folded out of his back and rested behind his legs like a coattail. Lastly, a contraption came out of the upper that unfolded and refolded around 03's head, creating a helmet, the detailing resembling a deep-sea insect.

Suddenly, Derek spoke.

'Now, now, Charles, shouldn't you be using the codename I was so gracious to come up with?'

Charles retorted: 'You might not have dignity, but I do, and I am not calling Subject 03 'Pistol-Grip' no matter how many times you insist on it. It is bad enough you had me conform to this animal theming.'

'Not just any animals, predators. The beasts at the top of the food chain. The beasts' people both fear and adore. It's in the name of the project, Predatech, as in predator. It's all marketing, which as the head of marketing is in my curfew.'

'What's the point in marketing appeal if the public aren't aware that this project even exists.'

'Because they are not our market for this project' Derek then points to Mark and the investors 'They are, now I would appreciate if we could continue this dispute away from them, if you are inclined Charles.'

Charles sighs, then starts talking again 'Right, as my colleague has just said, each of our subject's enhancements are loosely based on the abilities and attributes of our planet's natural predators. Subject 03, or as Derek calls him 'Pistol-Grip', enhancements are loosely based on a Pistol Shrimp. As such, as you can see, the subject's right arm has an enlarged pincer attachment, which whilst struggles to function as a pincer, has enough force to punch right through concrete walls. Observe.'

Suddenly a part of the floor of the test chamber opens and a concrete wall as thick as an elephant leg rose up from the hole. Then almost as if acting on instinct, Pistol-Grip drew back his right arm, before thrusting it towards the wall. Just like Charles said, it punched straight through the wall, debris scattering all around the chamber. The fact it happened so fast, combined with the seeming lack of actual effort in Pistol Grip, made Mark reflexively step back in fright.

'Additionally,' Charles said, 'the claw is equipped with a built-in firearm.'

Whilst it only packs as much power as a pistol, due to the cerebral interface it is much more accurate.'

Just like before, holes opened in the floor and out popped several walls, these decorated with target marks. Then, a panel in the right claw of Pistol Grip's arm opens and a nozzle extends out of the cavity. Then, in just a few swift motions, Pistol Grip aims and fires at each of the targets. It was over in seconds. This time it wasn't just Mark that took a step back, several of the other investors did as well, most of them not in fright but rather in astonishment.

Derek once again spoke 'And this is only one of our current four working prototypes, with plans for several more, each one with their own different toolset of gear. This means that whilst a foe could possibly adapt to deal with one Predatech, they won't be able to deal with all of them.

'And where exactly are you getting the people for you to experiment on, couldn't help but notice you left that out' came a voice from the crowd of investors.

'Who said that?' asked Derek, his voice taking on a slight threatening tone for a second.

'I did, Evan Brown, journalist for the Peoples Voice' the voice said again, with this time Mark seeing who it came from. It was man roughly in his thirties, from what Mark could gather. He had slightly unkempt stubble and had a look of defiant cold fury on his face. 'Ah, the independent journalist organisation, I have heard so many things about them. Particularly how they target good and honest corporations looking to help people and villainising them,' said Derek, in slight mocking tone.

'Oh please, you do that all yourselves. Look no further than this Predatech Project. Turning people into weapons, its inhumane. Furthermore, I have evidence suggesting where you get your 'subjects' from and'

'Alright that's enough, security!' yelled Derek, with surprising urgency. Immediately, the other man that was with Derek walked forward and grabbed Evan by the arm.

'What, let go of me!' Evan screamed. Then another person, presumably more security, grabbed Evans other arm. Evan seemed to try and struggle but couldn't get out of their grip. The men then quickly dragged Evan away from the crowd by the arms. All the while Evan cried out for freedom.

'Right then, apologies about that, if you would all follow me, I will wrap things up' said Derek, quickly regaining his composure, then walking back the way he and the investors came from. Everyone quickly followed him, except for Mark.

*They dragged Evan away, but not to the exit*, he thought. Perhaps I should see where they went. Mark then, instead of following the crowd, walked in the path he saw Evan being dragged away to.

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Mark, having walked for felt like five minutes finally found himself at the end of the corridor he saw they dragged Evan to. At the end there was darkly lit room, its true size unknown. And he saw Evan.

He was strapped up in what appeared to be an operating table. Mark then remembered what Evan had said, *where exactly are you getting the people for you to experiment on?* Holding back a reflexive gasp, Mark realised what E.T.M planned to do with Evan.

*I must get out of here and call the authorities*, he thought. Suddenly, Mark felt electricity coursing through his body, paralysing him. He falls to the floor, quickly losing consciousness, but not before hearing a voice, stern and almost machine like.

'Inform Derek we've got another breach. At least this means another subject for Project Predatech. All for E.T.M, *Evolution Through Machines.*'





#### IV. SCRIPTS



## STEPHANIE IVANOVA

### *Women Of Any Age*

#### CHARACTERS

WOMAN 1/6/11: Woman of any age/race

WOMAN 2/7/12: Woman of any age/race

WOMAN 3/8/13: Woman of any age/race

WOMAN 4/9/14 : Woman of any age/race

WOMAN 5/10/15: Woman of any age/race

NOTES: The play requires at least 5 different actresses, each one to play a different woman in every act. If the possibility arrives, all women can be played by different actresses, in this case, they will all stand on stage in the dim part once their part is over, as an echo to the next generation.

ACT I: *Lights up. The stage is bare. Cold, dark. There is one central light, it's dimmed. WOMAN 1 enters the stage. She moves in the light. She does not speak; her head is down. A moment later WOMAN 1 exits the stage. WOMAN 2 enters the stage. She looks down, her hands in front of her, she is obedient.*

WOMAN 2 Yes, father.

WOMAN 2 bows down, before she exits. WOMAN 3 enters the stage. She is emotionless.

WOMAN 3 I'm to be the wife of a wealthy man.

WOMAN 3 exits the stage. WOMAN 4 enters with fearful steps. Her dress is torn.

WOMAN 4 (*crying*) No, please. Master, I beg of you... please... please...

WOMAN 4 exits the stage. WOMAN 5 enters the stage, walking slowly, clearly in pain. Her nightgown is covered with blood.

WOMAN 5 A healthy son finally blesses our house after so many daughters.  
He is my husband's pride.

*WOMAN 5 exits the stage*

*ACT II: The stage is bare. The central light is a little brighter. WOMAN 6 enters the stage. She is wearing a coat and holding a suitcase.*

WOMAN 6 Good afternoon, ma'am. I was told you are in need of a maid.  
I do cleaning and cooking, and I could take care of the children.  
I won't bring any problems. I only require a place to stay and an honest work.

*WOMAN 6 exits the stage. WOMAN 7 enters the stage. She holds a poster saying Votes for Women.*

WOMAN 7 Am I not part of this world? Do I not have a say as to what is to be? Do I not have the right to protect myself? I am as just as they are. You tell me I have no right, as a mother, as a wife, as a daughter? If this world is by the people, for the people, then why are half the people being held to have their say? Is my future, not mine?

*WOMAN 7 exits the stage. WOMAN 8 enters the stage. She is constantly pulling on her blouse, trying to hide bruises on her body.*

WOMAN 8 (*quickly*) It's nothing. Just a little bruise. It will heal and won't leave a mark. It never does... leave a mark, not on my skin. It's fine. It... it won't happen again. It was my fault. I was so... He didn't mean it; he doesn't know his straight. I should have ... I have nowhere else to go. He was just tired, and it happens, that sort of thing. That's all. Everything will be okay tomorrow. He won't remember. And I'll be silent.

*WOMAN 8 exits the stage. WOMAN 9 enters the stage. She is squeezing an envelope between her hands.*

WOMAN 9 I told him it costs a little more, than what it does. That way I can save a little on the side, you know just in case. Well, you could never know these days, what may happen. I'll just hide it in one of the jars in the kitchen, he will never even think to look in there. It's good to have something on my own. To be prepared. To be safe.

*WOMAN 9 exits the stage. WOMAN 10 enters the stage. She wears a working uniform. She paces a lot.*

WOMAN 10 There are sixty seconds to every minute. Sixty minutes to every hour. I earn sixty seconds, why is he paid sixty minutes? Why has the time slipped from me as if sand washed by the sea? Are these hands not as crafty as his? Is this mind not as quick? Are those eyes not as sharp? Is this tongue not as fast? Then why do I not get paid as such?

*WOMAN 10 exits the stage.*

*ACT III: The stage is bare. The central light is bright now, but there is still darkness at the edges of the stage. WOMAN 11 enters the stage. She holds a set of keys and a contract.*

WOMAN 11 It is not big. A little flat right over the Coop shop. The wall papers are fading, and it has this smell of old shoes. The bathroom is dim, and the kitchen needs a new sink, but I could make it work. It's so close to the bus stop, right across it. The path is well-lit in the evenings when I will be coming from late shifts. It feels safe. And it is mine. Only mine.

*WOMAN 11 exits the stage. WOMAN 12 enters the stage. She is excited, rumbling a lot.*

WOMAN 12 It's already there, you can find it. Just google it. My little company is up and running. It's been up for a few days, but I still can't believe it. I constantly check it, a few times a day. Is it still there,

is it really there? Or have I dreamed it? And guess what? It is there. I did it! I created something on my own when no one believed in me. Do not waste your time they said. Get a proper, paying job they were nagging. Nah... (*laughs*) I already have my first client.

*WOMAN 12 exits the stage. WOMAN 13 enters the stage. She walks and speaks slowly. Her voice breaks.*

*WOMAN 13* It was not easy, to put myself through it again. To speak of it. Of what he said, and what he did. To relive it, moment by moment, while my soul was falling piece by piece. I could no longer live with it; with the thing I've become. The thing he forced me to become by taking the most beautiful part of me and breaking it... just by the wimp of his desire...

*WOMAN 13 exits the stage. WOMAN 14 enters the stage. She is wearing a soft summer dress, and smiling a lot, she is in love and being loved.*

*WOMAN 14* Isn't it curious? How fast they grow up. How hard it is to let them go. Yes, I know. It's just school, he will be back before I know it. I will tidy around the house, and cook something, and it will be time to pick him up. Oh, the stories he will tell me while we take the afternoon walk in the park, waiting for my wife to come from work. Yesterday it rained. That soft summer rain makes you smile and be alive. And he holds our hands, jumping in the puddles, laughing. People look at us as if we have lost our minds. Being so childish, being so in love.

*WOMAN 14 exits the stage. WOMAN 15 enters the stage. She is wearing a costume; her head is held up high.*

*WOMAN 15* You should have seen their faces. As the banner opens, my name and the word Partner right next to it. The youngest in the firm. They were eating themselves up with jealousy. All those sleepless nights filled up with caffeine in the university's library, finally paid up. Passed the bar on my first try. Case after case, not a single loss.

And now... the world is in front of me ready to be conquered. By a woman.

*WOMAN 15 exits the stage. WOMEN 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15 enter the stage. They hold hands, saying nothing. The women exit the stage.*

*(In case the play is acted by more than five actors, the light is brightest with the last five Women, slowly dimming to the rest, standing in the back. The women exit the stage by the order of WOMAN 15 to WOMAN 2. WOMAN 1 stands alone on the stage, lifts her head, and smiles. WOMAN 1 exits the stage).*

**LIGHTS DOWN.**



## FREDDIE ROLLS

*Licence And Registration  
'Unsex Me Here' Episode #117*

PREVIOUSLY...

Sergeant Gianni Caulsan, of the Met Police, has his world turned upside down when his wife, Elizabeth, kills a teenage boy in a hit-and-run. The Caulsans attempt to conceal the crime, with Gianni diverting the police investigation.

However, police manage to retrieve footage from the doorbell camera of a house near the scene of the crime. Gianni proceeds to take the evidence by force, thereby revealing his involvement to his colleagues. The Caulsans have now fled to a family estate in the Scottish Highlands.

Exiled from his home and career, Gianni is haunted by what he has done and the awful things he has done to help Elizabeth evade justice. But what exactly was that hit-and-run all about? How could his wife be so ruthless? Who even was the teenage boy that she killed in the first place?!

Maybe the doorbell camera footage will have some answers...

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INT. SHACKLEY MANSION - MASTER BEDROOM – NIGHT

*FIRE!! An orange flame spits and flickers. It consumes the frame, burning everything into oblivion.*

*But this flame is actually coming from... A SCENTED CANDLE! Not so scary after all. It's been positioned on the bedside table. The only source of light in the room.*

*ELIZABETH is having the best sleep of her life. Sprawled out on her stomach in a wild starfish pose.*

*But next to her... GIANNI is wide awake. He turns to face the bedside table.*

*Catching sight of an EMPTY WINE GLASS next to the candle. He smiles slightly.*

*Flinging the duvet off, GIANNI moves towards the PILE OF CLOTHES on the floor. He searches for his shirt clumsily in the dim of the candlelight, when suddenly--*

*A thud. Something falls onto the floor from within the pile. GIANNI frowns. He looks down at his feet to find something shiny, something metallic. Squinting at...*

*Robert's watch!! Shimmering in the light. Resurrected.*

ELIZABETH (V.O.) *No one's going to miss him. Not a single fucking person...*

*The air is knocked out of GIANNI's lungs. Totally dazed, he swivels back towards the bed. ELIZABETH is still sleeping soundly. Her body glowing next to the candle.*

*GIANNI crouches down. Picking up the watch with trembling fingers. He watches it tick away. Utterly lost.*

#### INT. SHACKLEY MANSION - LOUNGE - LATER

*A lavish space. Paintings and armchairs everywhere. In the centre of the back wall, a FIREPLACE crackles.*

*GIANNI sits close to the fire. Staring in the direction of an EMPTY SUIT-CASE on the floor. Beside him, that glass of wine has been filled to the brim.*

*Finally, he leans over towards the suitcase. Delving into one of its corner pockets. And eventually produces...*

*the USB STICK.*

GIANNI holds it in his palm for a while. Gazing at it in the light of the fire. So very haunted once again.

He moves over to a coffee table in the centre of the lounge, where his LAPTOP is waiting patiently. He inserts the USB STICK. Takes a deep breath.

\*\*\*

File Explorer opens up, with dozens of VIDEO FILES now on display. Welcome to the doorbell camera archive!

GIANNI's cursor searches for the correctly dated file. Double clicking on the right one. The video loads...

And the screen fills with a black and white image of Porter Street. GRIMALKIN is back from his midnight stroll, walking up the driveway and through his CAT FLAP.

Impatient, GIANNI hits fast-forward. GRIMALKIN disappears as he spams through the footage. And then--

VROOOOOM!! A familiar TOYOTA CAMRY screams by! The sound of its engine distorted by the audio quality.

GIANNI's breath quickens. He starts tapping the fast-forward button more urgently. Until finally...

EXT. PORTER STREET - DOORBELL CAMERA - CONTINUOUS

ELIZABETH appears. Slowly wandering into view. She staggers down the middle of the road. Staring around wildly, as though looking for something.

She turns suddenly, facing the camera directly. Then storms up towards the front lawn. Grabbing hold of one of MEREDITH's ornamental rocks.

*ELIZABETH holds it in her hand for several moments. Now standing close enough for the camera to pick up her breathless panting.*

*Her movements sharp and robotic, ELIZABETH suddenly turns and marches away from MEREDITH's house. She passes out of view, back in the direction of her Toyota...*

INT. SHACKLEY MANSION - LOUNGE - SAME

*GIANNI watches with broken eyes. He doesn't blink, doesn't scream, doesn't cry. He's just empty.*

*The audio from the doorbell camera footage starts to invade GIANNI's senses. Scratchy, distorted, incoherent. Not a single recognisable sound, until- A MAN SCREAMS. A bloodcurdling, awful noise. It cuts in and out of the footage. And then... nothing. The quietest silence you've ever heard. But the truth is deafening.*

*GIANNI blanks. Still wearing that empty gaze. Slowly, he leans over and disconnects the USB STICK. Shutting down the laptop like his brain is on autopilot.*

*In front of GIANNI, the FIREPLACE continues to glow gently. Embers hissing and burning..*

\*\*\*

INT. SHACKLEY MANSION - KITCHEN - MORNING

*ELIZABETH leans over the sink. She washes her breakfast plate under the blast of RUNNING TAP WATER.*

*Behind her, GIANNI appears in the doorway. A blurry figure in the background. Not making a sound.*

*ELIZABETH switches the water off. Registering her husband's presence.*

*Keeping her back turned to him.*

*She tenses. Holding her breath. We hear the sound of a CAR ENGINE IDLING over her panicked expression...*

EXT. PORTER STREET - NIGHT - FLASHBACK

*TARMAC. Slowly moving along the road surface, the sound of the engine growing steadily louder...*

*A TORSO enters the frame. Its owner writhes around in agony on the ground. Groaning. Choking. Dying.*

GIANNI (V.O.) Where are you? Are you hurt?! Do you have a road name or something? I'll be right there!

ELIZABETH (V.O.) It's-- I'm checking now! Porter Street! I just came off Junction Fifteen, it's not far.

GIANNI (V.O.) Don't move! I'm on my way!

*A scuffle, then... the sound of GIANNI HANGING UP. Meanwhile, the owner of this torso is becoming more and more distressed--*

*ERIC ERIKSON. He clutches at his chest. Trying to breathe and failing miserably. He lurches forward, retching violently.*

*And eventually... VOMITS UP BLOOD.*

*Above ERIC, ELIZABETH's Toyota idles. Everything is going dark. But he can just about make out the car door slowly creaking open. The driver steps out...*

*And LIZ slams the door shut. She walks over to ERIC, leering over him. Her breathing heavy with adrenaline.*

*Still choking, ERIC holds his hand up towards ELIZABETH--*  
ERIC Please... please help me...

LIZ just stares, hyperventilating. Her eyes wander towards ERIC's wrist, indeed porting ROBERT'S WATCH.

\*\*\*

Then, without warning, ELIZABETH raises her leg and begins PRESSING HER FOOT into ERIC's chest! We hear an awful CRACK as she applies more and more pressure--

And ERIC finds his voice. Letting out an awful, ear-splitting SCREAM.

ELIZABETH (between breaths) That's a 1920s Silver Oyster you're wearing. It's rare! Couldn't help but notice back at the club. It's just like my father's!

ERIC just lies there, convulsing in distress. Trying to make sense of what's happening right now.

In a flash of movement, ELIZABETH leans over and grabs hold of ERIC's arm. Wrestling the watch from him.

\*\*\*

ELIZABETH (cont'd, spitting venom) Give it! Give it here!

ERIC You bitch! You crazy fucking bitch!

\*\*\*

Finally, ELIZABETH pulls the watch free. She lifts her foot from ERIC's chest. Watching him sob on the ground—

ERIC (cont'd) It's just a fucking watch!!

ELIZABETH's whole demeanour changes now. Eric's words seem to knock her off balance. She backs away. Her hyperventilating stops. There's trauma in her eyes. And then--

Silence. All sounds fade into an eerie NOTHING.

LIZ pockets the watch. She turns away from ERIC, now facing the houses further up the road. And starts walking.

As she storms up the road... Her THUMPING HEARTBEAT becomes the only source of sound. Getting faster. Each beat like the sound of war drums. PA-DUM, PA-DUM, PA-DUM...

Meanwhile, ERIC continues to sob deliriously on the tarmac. He whimpers with pain and confusion. Craning his neck, trying to keep his eyes on his psychotic attacker.

PA-DUM, PA-DUM, PA-DUM... ELIZABETH is marching back towards ERIC. Holding the ORNAMENTAL ROCK in both hands.

She straddles him, sinking all her weight down. ERIC tries to wriggle free, letting out another SCREAM that's drowned out by the heartbeat pounding away...

ELIZABETH RAISES THE ROCK over her head, her face twisted with rage. She swings it down—

\*\*\*

INT. SHACKLEY MANSION - MASTER BEDROOM – FLASHBACK

The CANDLEFLAME, as before. Spitting and flickering on the bedside table...

EXT. PORTER STREET - NIGHT - SAME

And with one lethal motion, letting out her own SCREAM of grief and fury and madness and horror-- ELIZABETH caves ERIC's face in. His body goes limp underneath her. His hands flop lifelessly to the side. A pool of BLOOD slowly forming on the road next to his body.

LIZ stares down at her work. Dropping the rock. And all we hear is that

heartbeat. PA-DUM, PA-DUM, PA-DUM...

INT. SHACKLEY MANSION - KITCHEN - SAME

Back where we left off. ELIZABETH is still frozen and facing the sink. Her head spinning with memories.

From the doorway, GIANNI stares in horror at his wife. After an agonising beat, he takes a step forward. Slowly edging in the direction of the kitchen counter—

Where a BUTCHER BLOCK sits. The home of THREE CARVING KNIVES. Looking so very sharp...

GIANNI pulls one free. As he stares down at the knife in his hand with terror...  
MATCH CUT TO:

INT. OLD CAULSAN HOME - KITCHEN - FLASHBACK

A YOUNG GIANNI, transfixed by the KNIFE on the floor. The closest he ever came to murder.

INT. SHACKLEY MANSION - KITCHEN - SAME

LIZ knows exactly what's happening behind her. But still, she doesn't move. She exhales, shuddering. Closing her eyes with painful realisation. The truth is out.

Over her shoulder... GIANNI advances. Knife in hand. As he slowly approaches his wife, walking towards oblivion...

END EPISODE





## VI. NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

### ABISOLA AIYELABOLA

Abisola is a psychology student with a strong love for reading and writing. She began writing creatively for fun and it grew into a long-lasting passion. Through her fiction, she enjoys exploring character dynamics and human behaviour, allowing her academic interests to shape the emotional depth of her stories. Her fascination with why people think and act as they do provides a steady source of inspiration. In her spare time, she loves reading literary fiction and watching sitcoms.

### RACHEL BROWN

Rachel Brown has just completed an MA in Creative Writing at the University of Greenwich. She is currently writing her first novel, *Shadow Dance*, an earlier version of which was longlisted in the Women's Prize 2022 Discoveries competition and shortlisted for the Indie Novella 2023 prize. Set in two of her favourite locations, London and Ibiza, *Shadow Dance* explores the triggers that can throw lives, love and friendships off course.

### ELLIE CHAVES

Ellie Chaves is a Costa Rican author. As a child she navigated the world through books and as a teenager she discovered poetry when she

inherited a notebook of poems from her grandmother and now writing is her favourite means of expression. For many years she worked as a IT Support Manager at an online university in Latin America and this year she is graduating from the Masters in Web Design and Content Planning.

#### SINEAD COX

Sinead Cox is a BA Creative Writing graduate from Kent. Her work has been published in the anthology two years in a row, and she keeps up this tradition this year with a prose piece in line with her future plans to develop as a novel writer. She weaves in themes close to her heart—the fear of time passing, and the fear of losing something she hasn't yet found. She likes to think her craft improves the closer she moves towards her truest self. Outside of academic work, Sinead is working on her first novel.

#### CAITLIN DAWES

Caitlin is an English Literature student with a passion for poetry, who says: 'In the future I hope to go on to become a successful poet and a lecturer in English Literature. I am obsessed with John Keats, anything purple and my kitten, Moni.'

#### JUNIA DENKER

Junia Denker is an English Literature student from Germany, obsessed with Emily Dickinson (who she only partially regrets writing her dissertation about). Her poetry has become increasingly prosaic and more political over the last three years; it is often focused on language and loves to play with the absurd. Junia's work has been published in the Greenwich Anthology before.

#### APRU DUNCAN-SHAH

Call For A Life was written by Apru during her second year of university. Now a graduate with a Bachelor's Degree in Creative Writing, she sees

her love of the arts shine through every day, whether that be in the form of weekly short stories, developing the plot of her feature film, or reading (rather, re-reading) her favourite novels.

**MEGAN GERMAN**

Megan German is a recent graduate of English Literature with Creative Writing. Megan moved from Boston to London three years ago and is thrilled to have learned and lived in deep history. The poems collected in this anthology touch on topics that the author believes to be universal experiences of being in your 20s – such as grief, heart-break, and lack of confidence. They are excited to be sharing their work with Greenwich and grateful for the opportunity to speak their voice.

**LUCAS GOMES**

Lucas graduated from University of Greenwich in 2022 majoring in BSc Computer Science. He was raised in Portugal and moved to London to study and stayed there ever since. He reads sparingly and he writes once in a blue moon. Even so, he thinks poems are an engaging way to write thoughts and have fun on the commute. He enjoys cooking for his family and going to the cinema. The cheesy poem was inspired by his memories and the love for cheese that his friends from work (The Webbies) had.

**AALIYAH GRAVESANDE**

Aaliyah Gravesande is an English Literature undergraduate at the University of Greenwich. While education was an uphill battle in her early years, she eventually found her place in the world of literary fiction and fantasy. Soon after her discovery, she began writing her own stories, drawing from personal experience and exploring themes of loss, abuse, love, and faith. After years of struggle against mental health, she found new purpose through her faith in Christ, and though this may deter some from engaging with her work, she hopes readers will discover something meaningful between the lines, nevertheless.

#### ANA GUDURI

Personifying Plath's *Fig Tree* analogy by indulging in various kinds of art, on days where you don't find Anagha traipsing through the streets of London, lodged in a cozy corner with either her camera, her sketchbook or her journal, you can find her hunched over a desk in her room either pondering upon the next colour that will adorn her hair, or surrounded by a bunch of crumpled papers with unfinished poetry. Anagha has recently graduated from her second Master's Degree in Criminology and Criminal Psychology working towards becoming a counsellor hoping to focus mainly on those in need of assistance with rehabilitation using her love for the arts, juxtaposed with Psychology in discovery of a new approach to traditional therapy.

#### WILMA HERMANSSON

Wilma Hermansson grew up in a small town in Sweden. She started playing the piano and the trombone at a young age and has been playing with lots of different bands and orchestras since. Together with her big band she even got third place in Sweden's national jazz band competition a couple of years ago. Although music takes up a big part of her heart, reading and writing has always been her big passion, which is why she's now studying Creative Writing. Wilma is really enjoying living in England, but she misses her family and her two cats back home.

#### STEPHANIE IVANOVA

A Bulgarian writer and an artist, currently studying in London. Her work has been published in *Greenwich University Anthology 2023* and *Streetcake Magazine*.

#### DYLAN JOHNSTON

Dylan Johnston is an international student studying Creative Writing & English Literature at the University of Greenwich. Her passion for writing stories and poetry began at a young age, and she later discovered an ambition to share her work with the world, bringing her to continue

her studies in London. The poems collected in this anthology touch on themes of grief and anger and, most importantly, quiet strength. Dylan's inspiration comes from her own personal experiences and observation of society. She is grateful and excited to share her work.

#### NAVPREET KAUR

From a veterinary background rooted in the anatomy of the living, Navpreet has turned to the alchemy of the word. She is currently charting the experimental territories of her MA, mapping the fluid intersections of poetry, prose and performance. Fascinated by the shadows that gather between genres, her work is a quiet dissection of the things we see and the things we feel. She writes to evoke, not to explain, to shift the ordinary, leaving only the resonant echo of an untold story.

#### NAMRUTHA KANIYANDEPOYIL RANJITH KUMAR

Namrutha Kaniyandepoyil Ranjith Kumar is an MSc Engineering Management student at the University of Greenwich. She draws inspiration from the complexity of human connections, observing how moments of vulnerability and resilience shape our lives. Through her writing, she explores these experiences, both her own and those she witnesses, translating feelings and fleeting moments into words that resonate. Balancing her analytical studies with creative expression, Namrutha aims to bridge the technical and the emotional, hoping her work inspires thought, empathy, and reflection in readers who see their own experiences in the emotions and encounters that define everyday life.

#### GARRETT LE

Garrett Le is a 25-year-old writer from Malibu, California. Enamoured by the concept of story from a young age, Le pursued a Bachelor's Degree in Creative Writing at Pepperdine University. In his seeking to understand his own fascination, Le found his interest lay in the magical

embedded within the ordinary—that the magic lay without the events of the story itself, rather within the storyteller. The title of storyteller extends beyond the writer, even beyond the speaker or narrator. Within each of these pieces, the speaker serves as both recipient and teller to explore the murky realm where the two meet.

#### ANNA LYTOVCHENKO

Anna Lytovchenko was born in Ukraine (Kharkov) on October 31, 2005. She is currently studying English Literature at the University of Greenwich. She enjoys the mist in romantic paintings and the sincerity in texts. Anna believes that writing is like the mighty horse Bucephalus. It fears shadows, but there will always be someone willing to look into the sunlight.

#### SARA AQUINO MARQUES

Sara Aquino Marques was born in Lisbon and spent her early years in Portugal before moving to Ireland, where she lived for five years and learned to speak English. She has lived in the UK for nearly a decade, shaping her multicultural outlook. From a young age, Sara discovered a deep love for reading and writing, consistently excelling in language-focused classes. Today, she continues to nurture her creative passions, especially through reading and writing poetry. Her lifelong connection to literature remains a defining part of her identity and continues to inspire her personal and creative growth and guide her future work.

#### JOANNA MUBENGA

Joanna Mubenga is an MA Creative Writing student who graduated from the University of Bristol with a BA in Classical Studies in the summer of 2024. Initially interested in pursuing law, Joanna opted to invest in a career that spoke truer to her creative inclinations and took an interest in screenwriting, as well as becoming an author versed in sci-fi and fantasy. Her creative inspiration is mainly derived from all things, wanting to encapsulate the emotional and aesthetic drives that

are rooted in video games, comic books and animations. She is currently working as a journalist for a gaming news site and as a storyteller for a mobile game studio, with her ultimate goal being to become a writer for Rockstar Studios.

#### ISOBEL NICHOLLS

Isobel Nicholls is a Drama and English Literature student at the University of Greenwich. Her adolescence was spent pursuing her passion for theatre through the physicality of performance as well as the technical aspects, including script writing. The soliloquy found in the anthology is Isobel's interpretation of giving autonomy to the *Lady in Elinor Glyn's Three Weeks* (1907). Alongside her literary works, she participates in the performative side of her passions as part of the Common Thread Theatre Company, a versatile group that creates performances grounded in authenticity and the representation of the underrepresented.

#### ASHLEY OAKLEY

Ashley Oakley, known as Allie in poetry circles, is a writer who encourages others to embrace their true selves and find peace in imperfection. Her debut collection, *It Doesn't Have to Be Perfect, Darling*, explores mental health, neurodivergence, and healing, offering an honest reflection on personal growth. Recently, Ashley has been captivated by the ways reality, imagination, and spirituality intertwine, delving into these intersections with curiosity and care. Guided by her motto, 'Live in the pursuit of joy,' Ashley's work seeks to empower others to follow their hearts and embrace life's messy, beautiful journey.

#### PETRA PALKOVACSOVA

Petra has been published in multiple anthologies including the *Bluebird Anthology*, and zines such as the *Streetcake Magazine*, *Marezine*, *Un-Rise Zine*, and *BASH Magazine*. She has performed at the European Poetry Festival, Bobinska Brownlee Gallery, and at the George Tavern and Pushkin House. She self-published her first collection, *Mythologies*,

in 2023 and she founded a publishing house called Femmesocial Press in the same year.

#### AMELIA M. PEARCE

Amelia M. Pearce is a second-year Creative Writing student from East London. A lifelong passion for fantasy and horror has helped her pursue her love of writing at the University of Greenwich. As a child, she loved visiting the library and bringing home piles of books to entertain herself for hours on end. Although she has enjoyed writing all her life, her love for the craft truly began at age thirteen after she threw herself headfirst into Stephen King's books. She aspires to write for those who feel as if their story hasn't been told. This is her first published prose piece.

#### EMMA RALPH

A second-year student studying Creative Writing and English Literature, Emma Ralph is captivated by fiction and poetry alike and aspires to explore both forms as much as possible. Her poetry is influenced by poet Emily Dickinson, an important figure for Emma as her poetry saw her through some of the most challenging parts of her life thus far – a key poem being 'Hope is the Thing with Feathers'. Emma dreams of working in publishing and wishes to excel in every way possible in the career.

#### ROCIO RODRIGUEZ-INNISS

Rocio is a Londoner of Spanish and Trinidadian descent. She studied Creative Writing at the University of Greenwich. Rocio writes about the duality of things and of people because, for her, it's in this realm of possibility where magic is found. This duality, this sense of normalcy being able to change abruptly to fantasy, is where she sits. *Useless Now but Beautiful Still*, a pamphlet of short stories, was published by Palewell Press.

#### FREDDIE ROLLS

Freddie Rolls is a Creative Writing student who developed a passion for screenwriting as an early teen after gaining access to the Final Draft

screenwriting software. He has spent a dangerous proportion of his spare time since playing with the software, first indulging his love of sci-fi with an eight-episode series about a mysterious race of gods living at the edge of the universe. Closer to home, he has written a ten-episode sitcom about four schoolteachers and a pilot script for a series all about humanity's last year of existence before Earth is destroyed by a comet! In case it wasn't obvious, he'd love to write for television.

#### TABITHA TIOLUWANI SAMUEL-ONETTE

Tabitha 'Tioluwani' Samuel-Onette is a creative from South-East London. She has always been a storyteller; from writing poems in greeting cards to being a former drama student, her notebooks never stop filling up. Her artistic growth is heavily inspired by an appreciation of film, live theatre and retellings of Greek Mythology, like the work of Madeline Miller. She now marks the passage of time with cups of tea drunk and pages written while she is undertaking her first novel.

#### EMILY ANNE SAUNDERS

Prior to starting her Creative Writing Master's degree program, Emily led a very different life as a supply chain professional in the retail industry, with a focus on supply planning and data analytics. From Los Angeles originally, she has also lived abroad in Italy, China, Japan, and most recently, prior to moving to London, Singapore. Emily is working on becoming a published fiction writer. She aims to tell stories that bring a strong sense of connection to readers and help people see the world anew.

#### BIANCA A SCARLET

Bianca is a student of Creative Writing and English Literature at the University of Greenwich. She is a big fan of fantasy fiction books, sometimes non-fiction if she's feeling brave. She aspires to be many things, mainly a published author. She is currently writing *The Rule of V*, an ambitious fantasy project. Bianca also aspires to one day write for games; to create something meaningful and genius, a world filled

with options and fantasy that people can be excited for. When she isn't studying, which she is guilty of, she writes, games or reads.

#### TOM SIMMONS

Tom Simmons is an English writer currently studying Creative Writing at the University of Greenwich. He was born and educated in the south of England, only a few miles from the South Downs. He is also currently sitting on a pile of unpublished works that could, admittedly, still use some editing. He typically writes in a range of forms, including short stories, songs, and longer novels. He typically endeavours to push as much meaning into as few words as possible. He isn't in it for the money.

#### ALFIE STEVENSON

Alfie Stevenson is a 22-year-old studying English Literature at the University of Greenwich. He has a passion for writing short stories that explore emotion and human interaction. In his spare time, he enjoys reading fantasy novels, playing the guitar, and going on hikes.

#### JON SUTCLIFFE

Jon Sutcliffe is an English poet and songwriter from the edge of London, Crayford in the southeast, and is now a mature student at 37. He has published work to date in a few anthologies, as well as his own collection *Dust; Poems and Songs*, performed spoken word pieces on BBC Radio Kent, and had a song released ('Masquerade'). Currently studying at The University of Greenwich on the Creative Writing undergraduate course, he is working towards further publishing opportunities, and new horizons to document in poetry and song. He is a reclusive type of artist, with no need for more than a pad and pen, some gin and smokes and a guitar.

#### ELOISE TUSON

Eloise Tuson is a 20-year-old student from Essex. She is currently in her third year studying Creative Writing and English Literature at the

University of Greenwich. She likes writing and reading about camels and murder (fiction) or murderous camels. However, she also likes to focus on ASD in her work which, sadly, provides less opportunity for camels. She enjoys writing prose and longer, narrative poetry which is especially strange as she will do what she can to say as little as possible as she strongly dislikes speaking aloud.

#### **FARIHAH VAKIL**

Farihah Vakil studied at Medway School of Pharmacy for five years and has graduated with a Master's degree in Pharmacy. Farihah started taking interest in writing at the age of 18 and has continued to explore her writing since then. Farihah enjoys writing poetry to discover her true feelings. She is interested in writing stories and wants to use poetry as a form of expressing the stories she wants to tell. Farihah's plans for writing include finding a way to share her work with others and be able to engage with other writers.

#### **PHILLIP. J. WATTS**

Phillip. J. Watts is studying Creative Writing at the University of Greenwich. Diagnosed with autism from an early age, all throughout his life he had a passion for stories and storytelling. At school he stood out from his peers with his enjoy/obsession with reading, particular science fiction books and anything involving prehistory. He decided to become a fiction writer partway through secondary school, this decision directing his education from then onward. Often quick to joke and make light of a situation, Phillip is always caring towards others. He currently lives in Gravesend with his mother and pet dog, Buster.

#### **CHARLOTTE WOOD**

When she doesn't have her nose in a book or a pen in her hand, Charlotte is an avid concert goer and hopes to eventually specialise in music journalism.









