



FROM **ARTHUR'S**

SEAT

FROM ARTHUR'S SEAT

Vol. 9

A collection of short prose & poetry from the
MSc Creative Writing students at
the University of Edinburgh

F·A·S



2024

From Arthur's Seat

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Foreword

Every city is a mix of veterans and new recruits, yet few cities in the world are as notoriously split and spirited with it. Edinburgh has many faces, each it wears both gloriously and gallusly. Edina is its gorse and gravel; its rowdy underbelly and salubrious suburbs; its bracing coast-lines and craggy hilltops; its sea haar and brewer's plumes; its National Museums and Modern Art Galleries; its porridge bowl and its smashed avocado & halloumi on a brioche bun. I'm in fur it aw.

What's beyond debate, is that this city is bookish to its bones—Edinburgh was the world's first ever UNESCO City of Literature and (arguably) the indie bookshop capital of the UK. Its ancient University is brimful of glorious humans who quest here from across the globe to study, nay worship at the altar of, words. Many will tarry a while, some will never leave.

This is my first year as Writer in Residence at Edinburgh University, and so this is the first unfurling of From Arthur's Seat I've witnessed in the making. As soon as we'd recruited the team, I knew they were going to conjure something

special—2023/2024 also coinciding with (I believe) the biggest ever Creative Writing cohort the University has had in its clutches. Power in numbers, sure, but also in passion and purpose.

What they have cooked-up here is a word casserole that is at once both local and international, both sentimental and smutty, both flagrant and nuanced, both lilted and louche. It's the whole jamboree—tender, triumphant, trilling and thrilling. Like all the beast feasts of the wordy stuff you can wolf it back in a single sitting or tease yourself with tapas-sized nibbles. Either way, the results are the same, the richest of nourishment.

Find within its lustrous mix of ingredient: dreamy grief; feline fierceness; off-duty Elvis; a bulging mattress; lusty prison dick; green gods; love haikus; the weight of Jupiter; reptilian purple; winter jasmine; warm clove; Pink Floyd; anonymous orange fluids; selkie skin; pigeon; & other dead birds; & a feathery resurrection; spoon bending; cliff jumping; hollow hedges; scent of mildew; tall oak/vanishing cabinet; ash scattered streets; her & him; starry everything; mushy mess: rot & roots; brass bands of daffodils; the last sympathies of spring breeze; ring-horn chargers; stink of fox; kissing in the darkness; waiting out the same disease; alien AI; Van Gough diamond twists; moonlight on the flower; halal fried chicken; mashed cherries, dead fairies; a massacre of pastel unicorn; pure cakery; murals & mushroom risotto; Stardust by Hoagy Carmichael; a darkness interrupted by streetlamps.

These ingredients, these lexical musings, were sourced from an astounding spread of places: France, Finland, Romania,

Chile, Sweden, Austria, Canada, Mexico, Iran, China, India, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Saudi Arabia, USA, UK, and the realms in-between. Yet they were hatched here in Scotland, a country known for its wet (and whet) welcomes. And this edition of *From Arthur's Seat* exemplifies that most deftly.

So, wherever you're reading, whoever you are, WELCOME. This is where I leave you reader, you take it from here, it's just a page turn away.

— Michael Pedersen

EVERYTHING EXCEPT TEMPTATION

My Fiancé, the Elvis Impersonator

Elsy Pawelak

USA

The King had entered the building; he was wearing flip-flops, a Hawaiian shirt, and khakis. It's not every day that an off-duty Elvis walks into your bar.

He was tan. His powdery, thick black hair had clearly been subjected to frequent coloring (hazard of the job), his teeth were translucently white and perfectly shaped (veneers), and he smelled unsubtly of cologne (generic). He reminded me of an ornament that you'd buy from some small shop in rural America that sells only Christmas decorations.

He sat down at the only free spot at the bartop and I walked over with a drink list and menu. He was taking off his aviators, brown-tinted and gold-rimmed, when the menus hit the polished wood. His smile blossomed a sense of disgust and intrigue within me. His voice was warm, kitten-like as

he asked how I was. There was no way he was younger than sixty-five. I was only twenty-seven.

If I woke up that morning thinking I'd be turned on by an aged Elvis, I would've stayed home.

We chatted briefly while he shuffled the menus back, not taking his soft, warm gaze off me. I was certain he had glanced at my breasts but I must've missed it. They know when they've been looked at. The crinkles of lines around his eyes showed his age blatantly, and while I'd normally be cautious there was an easiness that held me rapt.

"You look really familiar," he said.

"So do you."

He laughed. "Yeah, I wonder why."

"Have you come in before?"

"I have, but not when you were here. I would've remembered. Definitely."

All but two fingers were stuffed with thick, golden bejeweled rings. The pinky seemed to be home to the largest of all the rings, and I couldn't tell if they were real or not.

During my flirtations, the ticket printer had spewed up at least twenty new drink tickets. The servers loitered around the well, burning a hole in my face as I flirted with Elvis and he decided on a drink. A bitter beer, IPA, not what I was expecting. Real Elvis drank vodka straight, Pepsi, and milk. I liked fake Elvis better. Maybe we'd get married.

His figure was odd against the backdrop of the Pacific Northwest Ocean. The tropical shirt distracted from the cool,

pine covered hills that seemed to grow out of the deep waves beyond the window. The glass candle holder in front of him twinkled in the same turquoise shades as his shirt.

I pointed this out to him after pouring beer number two. He grabbed the candle holder and rolled it between his two hands. It looked particularly monochromatic against his deeply damaged skin.

“It’s heavy, seems really nice,” he said.

“That’s an Orbey. They donate most of the money to cancer research, so they charge a buttload for them. Market price is like, a hundred bucks.”

He raised a thick, manicured eyebrow before setting it down. He decided to order some dessert, the *crème brûlée*. I couldn’t believe it; we had a peanut butter and banana pie on the menu. Guess fake Elvis didn’t like peanut butter and bananas. But *crème brûlée* with beer? Strange. I rung it in and set about cleaning.

Did fake Elvis pay his taxes? I couldn’t marry someone with tax fraud. He sure had a lot of golden jewelry. We would get married in Vegas. I imagined this professional Prima Donna would wear white too. We’d both wear gold and white and his tan would stain my dress, his makeup my neck. Maybe we’d move there and become regulars at the local casinos, off strip.

I lifted my head up just in time to see a piece of peanut butter pie being set down in front of him. He looked unhappy.

“What the hell?” he said.

“I’m so sorry, they must’ve sent out the wrong thing.”

“Is this some sort of joke?”

“No, no, not at all, no one here knows how to actually read.” I grabbed the plate and began to make a run for the back to get the actual order.

I grabbed the spindle full of stabbed tickets at the cold side window, finding his ticket immediately:

Table B7: peanut butter silk.

Goddamnit.

“Hey, Jay, I need a crème brûlée on the fly please.”

I tossed the piece of pie onto the back line in front of three servers, signaling the free-for-all. Jess had a fork in her hand before it hit the steel. The pie was gone before my apron strings skirted the corner.

The order, now corrected, sat in front of him. “Sorry about that, it was my mistake. I probably hit the wrong button because I was thinking how funny it was that you didn’t order the peanut butter banana pie,” I said.

“I’m allergic to peanut butter.”

“Oh.” My face fell. Not just peanuts?

“And I don’t like bananas.”

Awkward.

“And who says I’m not Elvis?”

So, we’re not getting married?

He cracked a smile with those marshmallow white teeth and laughed. And then, a quick little wink. Ok! Obviously he was kidding about at least one thing.

After he finished the crème brûlée, he disappeared. Fake Elvis going to the bathroom made me nervous, real Elvis did not have the best history with toilets. One of the pinky rings, gold and flickering in the sun, sat on the bartop. At the fifteen-minute mark I asked one of the bussers to check the bathroom.

He wasn't in there. Apparently, he had left the building, alive. I toyed with the ring in my hand, absorbing the heat he left behind into my palm. I slid it onto my ring finger, snugly. By the time I noticed the Orbey was gone I saw the note.

Fake Elvis had left me his phone number. His name was Phil. I entered him into my phone as Future Husband.

Paranoia

Elise Yvon

France

I'll be the eyelash stuck in your eye
hiding behind your skull, peering
through your watering retina

the long-lasting itch in your ears
grating your right eardrum,
singing the white constant buzz to your mind

the lukewarm water clinging
to your sock when you walk
into the bathroom, slick and tight to your skin

that single strand of hair twisted
wrapped around your teeth and tongue
swiftly escaping nimble fingers

are you still afraid I will leave?

Girls, Girls, Girls

Nicole Love

USA / UK

Something about twirling girls whispering country French
with spindly arms and golden curls
in the gentle streets of Beauvais
up the road from where the worshipers go.

With legs worthy when they leap past puddles
and carry them places they ought to see.
Not worthy for how wide they'll spread
or for the worlds that could come between them.

They say that grief is love with nowhere to go
but don't you know that the hours you spend
playing with her
used to be spent dreaming?

That when you lay her down
it's like being tucked into bed
after spending daring days scraping
and Sundays praying.

That's why her knees bruise so quickly.
That the crown of her head that your lips think is theirs
used to belong to her father.
And the hand you hold and wrap around you
once picked up her wee brother.

And the space on her neck
that your hands ring like bells
is the place where her mother laid down her pearls
thinking of the man that would love her.

Small things can grow up to be anything at all
but that's not as true as they say.
So remember that before
she grew up to be yours.

She was hers—just like all the other girls.

Juhannus

Amelia Aston

Finland/UK

“In June, the sun never really sets here.”

“Is that so?” David leaned back in his deck chair, bringing his cigarette between his lips. A trail of smoke escaped his mouth.

“That’s what we’re celebrating tonight,” I said, “The sun will stay up all night long.”

I stretched my bare legs along the wooden deck, leaning back to feel the sun on my face.

“So,” David said, edging forward in his seat and taking in the full length of my body. I pulled on the hem of my skirt instinctively. “How do you get any sleep in the summer when it’s so light out?”

I smiled.

“We don’t. Mostly, we take the month off from work. Mid-June to mid-July. So a weird sleep schedule is no issue.”

“And school?”

“I don’t go back until August. Though I managed to convince our principal to let me start two weeks later so I can stay until we wrap up filming.”

“Good girl,” he grinned, exposing his canines. I felt something warm in my chest; a quiet contentment.

Early afternoon sun filtered through delicate birch branches. Bees were feeding off fuchsia flowers that stood in formation along the back of the school playground. The crew had all been surprised by how hot Finland got in the summer. They’d set up a makeshift office for the production at my town’s elementary school, closed until the fall term. It had been four years since I’d been a student here. The day I graduated sixth grade and knew that, come fall, I’d continue in the combined middle and high school on the mainland, I’d carved my initials into this decking. Having used my house key, I’d not managed to dig deep, but I could still run my finger against the faint outline of the letters as I lay there, on my lunch break from my first summer job. My friends were scooping ice cream or selling strawberries while I got to assist on a real-life film set. It may have just been the second sequel to a spy thriller that had been met with mixed reviews but still, I felt I was on the precipice of the rest of my life.

The fall after finishing primary school here, I had to start taking the bus to the mainland with the older kids. Whenever the bus pulled over the bridge that had just been

built, I'd pick out a different soundtrack for the moment we were suspended in air over the sea. Some Britpop, some American country. Never any Finnish music, that's for sure. I'd study my reflection in the window, growing more excited as the mirror image became more mature and womanly with each passing season.

By the summer I worked on the film set, I had already left the island a thousand times in preparation for the one time I swore I wouldn't return. But now, with the world having come to me, here, on this small rock in the Finnish archipelago, it was pride that purred in my chest as I told David about how it was we did things over here.

David was from London. Maybe I could visit someday, he'd told me. He laughed at the idea of our languid summers.

"And how do you get anything done during that time? Who works the tills in the supermarket? Who drives the bus? Who dispenses drugs at the pharmacy?"

"Oh, of course, some people work. But those who don't have to, don't. In general, everything just slows down."

"Is that why everyone in town has been so excited by our arrival? Because they're bored?"

"No! Quite the opposite," I grinned. "They've never seen anything quite like this."

"And you have?" David's eyes sparkled with gentle teasing. I blushed.

"Whatever," I rolled my eyes.

"And tonight?"

“Midsummer night. *We call it juhannus.*”

“Jewhawnhuss,” David tried to bend his tongue around the foreign syllables. Now it was my time to have the upper hand.

“Not even close,” I laughed, maybe a little too loud.

“It’s not my fault your language sounds like banging rocks together,” he scoffed. I felt guilty.

“Anyway, are you guys still coming over to my parents’ sauna?” I tried to salvage the situation, and it worked—David melted into a smile once more.

“You bet! Looking forward to it. Some of the guys are picking up beer and stuff from the mainland.” He rested his elbows on his knees.

“Are you sure your parents are okay with a bunch of burly foreign men coming over to hang out with their one teenage daughter?” He asked, quiet all of a sudden. His worry warmed my heart. I didn’t tell him my parents were out of town and I’d not told them they’d be coming over.

“Well, it’s not just guys though! Mary’s still coming, right?” The makeup artist was from Glasgow and had an accent I could barely understand, but she was nice.

“Us gals have to stick together on set,” she’d nudge me with her elbow, but I wasn’t sure what she meant. All the guys were super nice.

“Mary’s come down with a migraine,” David sighed, apologetic.

“Oh,” I breathed.

“I mean, if you’re uncomfortable, we can totally cancel. The guys and I can just head to the bar. The one bar on this tiny island,” he laughed, shaking his head, never breaking eye contact with me. I squirmed under his gaze. He was really, really hot. This would be great, I told myself.

“No honestly, it’s fine.”

David’s smile widened.

“That’s great! Of course, we’ll all keep our swim trunks on in the sauna—can’t go corrupting our favourite girl!”

There was a lump in my throat I couldn’t force down, try as I might.

“I heard from one of the locals that tonight’s a night for love magic. That if you put seven different wildflowers under your pillow, you’ll dream of your future husband,” David wink at me. “Maybe you’ll dream of one of us.”

I Am Not Your Cat

Georgina Appleton

UK

I am not your cat.
Don't call me that.
I have needle claws, concealed in furry paws.
I'LL KILL YOU.

Don't sit in that chair, I do not want you there.
You belong elsewhere.

purr purr purr purr purr purr

Your gift from niece Lily,
fine porcelain from China.
I don't like it. And now it's broken on the floor. What?

I see the mouse.
I'LL KILL YOU.
He only comes out at night.
Now you've screamed and turned on the light,
he's escaped. Your fault, that's right.

Mwwwweeoooooooooooooooooooooowwww-ooooowwww-ooooowwww
I'm hungry.

Leap in the air, flat to the ground.

There is something moving there. I'LL KILL YOU.
Oh, it's just your toe.
I'm hungry.

Edenic Hell

Ines Renee

USA

By your nineteenth August, I struggled to save you.

My wings charred in the sin-saturated heat as I watched you laugh in the Edenic hell that was California; your girlish giggles escaping from a vessel of skin and bones as if you were Satan's plaything. You were my wrathful wraith, my angelic Lilith drooling divine saliva thick with *Salvia divinorum*. Sounds of sickness unspooled out of you like thread and left you empty. Your unbathed naked body danced in the heat like a jewellery box ballerina, with the grease of your raven hair failing to water the desert weeds. You gulped sour milk out of the jug and it dripped onto the apple cores below. Crouching to slurp up a puddle of milk, you had no time to question why it boiled in your stomach and made you vomit up the flames that you

chose to dance in. I heard your thoughts clearer than ever and tried to untangle the laughter-laced words to no avail. *Pretty pretty pretty pretty pretty pretty*. I can still see your foul, sticky skin and your small, pale breasts glowing against the red sky. Your drowsy, dizzied eyes reflected bleeding sunsets and tin roofs and your pupils expanded from the stench of rapture when you were near the prophet. *He is so beautiful beautiful so is he spinning me dizzy dizzy me spinning turn on tune in drop out out in turn in turn tune drop out drop out drop out*.

I watched helplessly as you gazed into kaleidoscopic patterns I could not see, still cannot see decades later.

I was assigned to you in August of 1949, when I still had reasons to be proud of myself. I had made addicts clean, sinners into saints, the unfaithful faithful. Throughout your youth, I was still confident. I was everywhere; in every unexplainable impulse, in every small movement towards safety. It was an infinite wrestling match that I never tired of. Do not touch the stove. Do not pet that dog. Do not speak to them. I can still see you in your suburban home, with its Tupperware and Jell-O salads, Kennedy mumbling on the television amidst the sputtering of innocence's flames. I see you on Sunday mornings, sitting in a white dress learning of the two extremes, of light and dark. I see you sitting to eat lunch after waking from your slumber in the pew. I wonder if you ever think of that wallpaper in the kitchen, the one with the daisy pattern, now so far away. I know I do.

There was more work to do as you grew older. Every time you saw pills resting on tongues or sitting in the palms of acne-scarred lovers, I materialised my light into large hands and placed them over your eyes. I could still feel you peeking through.

Girls are a different kind of beast; their passions and self-loathing fester into a singular, gaping wound. When you first saw them, you felt certain they could heal these things in you. You watched as they braided each other's long, greasy hair and spoke exclusively in laughter. You tilted your head as if you were trying to decipher each one of their giggles and tongue clicks like it was an elaborate code. I told you, in vain, not to speak to them. They wore their filth elegantly, with their dirty rags hanging off their thin limbs. You devoured the sight of them as if you wanted to rip them open, studying their glowing intestines and glittering organs in hopes that your insides could mirror theirs. No matter how much I focused, you did not hear my pleas.

So began your days in Death Valley. You loved to lick the red sun each evening, to feel the scorch of bittersweet plasma coat your tongue. Dizzy from surviving off of cherry cola, sometimes the sun was your only meal. I see you charging through the air with flames licking your white dress, leaving behind the ashes of Venus in your wake. I think of you in that dress and feel ashamed. You were so beautiful.

A body is only a shell, the prophet had told you. He said that removing a shell is something that the unenlightened call murder. You were taught that removing a shell was an act of love for your people, and that they would die if you did not begin the battle. You had no questions of how or why, only faith in him. Be a good soldier, the girls told you.

He is so beautiful beautiful so is he spinning me dizzy dizzy me spinning.

I am still with you today. Your glossy eyes have woken from dreamy sleep. You no longer look in the sky while in the prison yard, only straight ahead. The thick milk in your stomach has soured. Your mouth, once held open in a perpetual loose smile, now sits closed. The hair on your barren scalp has grown in. Your carved forehead has healed and your eyes no longer see kaleidoscopic patterns.

As the days sludge by, you want me more and more. I watch as you stroke the goose bumps on your arms, aware of the coolness from the cafeteria and the breeze of the yard. I know you fear a day may come when you no longer feel these chills. It was not the flames that made me certain of failure, but the ashes. It is the way you gaze at your chilled arms as if they are sacred.

That is how I know I failed you, my Louella-Lou.

Taboo

Jordan Gill

UK

Sitting on the white bed together, you feel her gentle hand dance trails along your leg. The springs creak and the mattress bulges through the wire slats underneath as you both lean backwards. She provides a gentle squeeze on your upper thigh, scrunching your floral dress.

You give a hesitant whisper, "I can't."

She replies, her voice softer than her light hands, "You can."

A hot choke rises in your throat, stopping any speech from escaping. Your voice becomes hoarse as your mouth dries. You feel a deep heat flaring low as her hand slowly begins to slide further upwards. You close your eyes and embrace the crisp sheets, fresh and clean. *But not this, this isn't clean.* You sense her following your lead, and

she rolls over, hovering above you. There is a moment's awkwardness. She looks at you expectantly, indicating with her eyes downwards. You place a hand upon her left breast, trapped behind a bra, thinly veiled by her shirt. You hold it tenderly and you realise this is the first time you have felt another woman's breast: imagining it to be like your own but feeling nothing through it, the nerve endings belong to her. It feels like a chunk of meat; numb and disconnected from you. But it sparks an excitement within. Something untouched. Something new.

Your wedding ring glints golden in the midafternoon sun, the light spilling forth into the room from the large studio windows overlooking the rest of the city. You pull away again, unsure. You don't feel right.

"It's ok," she whispers. "This is who you are. You're ok."

Maybe you don't have to feel right, you just have to feel good.

Your eyes drift from the ring, pushing past *him*, and towards her. Almost instantly, she surges onto you, kneeling above you on the bed and sliding her hands around your shoulders, releasing you from your dress. The dress *he* bought you. You squirm out of it, desperate to be rid of it. It feels infested and wrong. You yearn to be good, to be born again, born anew. It cascades downwards as it finally slips off, like some lonesome ghost haunting the halls of a previous loved one.

She pulls herself closer to you again and places sweet, wet kisses on your forehead, your nose, your cheeks, your

lips, your neck. Faint red lips stain your skin, and her head descends further down. You begin to squeeze both her breasts, more vigorously this time, as she begins to suck on yours. Her long black hair obscures her face. She could be anyone. *But she isn't.* And then you are caught in the ecstasy between right and wrong—knowing that you shouldn't be doing what you are but doing it anyway. Because what could be better than this?

You've waited such a long time for this, fantasised about it before you truly understood what you were fantasising about.

Pleasure rushes forth into you. A warm tingle. You release a heavy sigh that didn't mean to escape. Almost a moan. Throwing your head back, you take one hand off her and run it through your cropped blonde hair, feeling the warm sun on your face, before resuming your previous motions on her.

The heat within you rises further and further, nearing unbearable as she continues to send wave after wave of ecstatic release. You push her back slightly, catching sight of a momentary spool of saliva that links your wet nipple to her mouth; her warm, plump lips. You try to unfasten the buttons on her shirt, but in struggling to do so you just *fuck it* and rip it open, scattering buttons across the room, flecking the mess of clothes already on the floor.

And there you are, bare chested and naked—save for your underwear and socks—and there she is, above you, dressed in her suit trousers and topless, her gossamer bra

holding her breasts firm. The two of you laying on a bed, in an airy apartment with a wooden floor in the height of summer. The screen glass leading out to the balcony is slightly ajar, allowing a whisper of a breeze to spill into the room, followed by a small collection of crusting leaves, peacefully displacing the white drapes. These windows showcase the whole city to you and you to the whole city, to any wanderer who looked up high enough. And in all honesty, it makes you feel good. And in all honesty, it makes you feel free.

Mona Lisa Smile

Monica Davis

USA

The man with the food came every morning at 7 am. I was up already because I always was. He arrived holding a yellow tray with grey gravy and brown lumps. Today, he, like the day before, and the day before that, and the days and days before that, threw it down on the receiving panel on the other side of my window facing the hall. His face was the first I saw every morning. I loved him.

I found myself daydreaming about our lives together outside of prison. I spent restless evenings thinking about funny things to tell him when morning arrived but when I heard his footsteps, I clammed up. He was a big man, striking, barrel-chested. His hair tufted deep on his crown in billows of cotton. When it came to his forehead, his best feature in

my opinion, I imagined movies playing on it. It was a wide expanse where cattle and emotions could roam.

I thought I saw him smile. I accidentally, honest to goodness, I wouldn't lie, was still getting dressed because I'd slept through the first wake-up call. It was so unlike myself that when I heard the footfalls down the hall, I panicked. I threw off my bedsheets and sleep shirt and pants and got my underwear off too. I reached for my orange top, then a fresh pair of underwear and almost got 'em on. Only problem was I'd drawn my window back to get some light in and he saw me there with my dick out pulling my shirt overhead. Dicks in prison are a dime a dozen but I think that morning I saw the corners of his mouth curl up. I don't know why. Maybe someone told him a joke that he figured out at the same time he passed me. My body is not so spectacular as to elicit such a response from him, but I think it was the surprise of the scenario, see. I am always ready, every morning, bed made, shirt tucked in, shoes on. But that morning, like I said, I wasn't trying to cause trouble, or even show off, it's just I slept in is all, so I scrambled getting ready and well, there I was, *in flagrante*.

That was a Monday. I remember because Sundays are movie nights downstairs. I never, ever choose a movie. Not because I don't want to, it's just that everyone else fights and cries about their choice. We don't have more than a dozen options, so you better believe we've seen *Mona Lisa Smile* about twenty-five times. Jerry, the credit card scammer downstairs, said he met Julia Roberts once in the Detroit airport. He said she was walking through with Kiefer Sutherland back

when they were together in the 90s, before she left him at the altar. Apparently, this is Jerry's report, Kiefer was a mean drunk and Julia Roberts was tall, taller than Kiefer. Some guys can't handle that sort of thing but then I wonder why they choose a tall chick in the first place. Jerry likes to say Kiefer started talking tough to her and Julia Roberts squeezed down to the size of a little girl, teeny like a doll. Every time he watched *Mona Lisa Smile*, he'd say, "This is the best part" when Julia Roberts does the slideshow and gets swept up and says, "class dismissed." He'd always say that line out loud. It became a joke. Sometimes, depending on the day and fraternal atmosphere, we'd join in on Jerry's line. People like Jerry even if he repeats himself a lot.

My guard only works weekday mornings, so I don't see him on movie nights. Heck, I don't see him after 12pm which is honestly too bad because I never was a morning person. In fact, I think my personality only develops after lunch. I gotta get fresh air in my lungs, see. I'm an avid exerciser. Every day after breakfast I get my spot by the track and do each 100 times: side to side stretch, high-lows, twists where I reach behind my back vigorously to make sure I expand my lungs and hit the lats, squats, walking lunges, push-ups, Russian twists, and then I finish with pull-ups (these I only do five sets of ten).

Anyway, after the last *Mona Lisa Smile* night, I saw two guys in the commissary closet pull their pants down. That's all I saw. The door was closing, and I wasn't going to run after them to get a better look. Only thing was it was Wayne, Jerry's bunk mate, and a guard, my guard's friend in fact. Now

I don't have a bunkmate because I'm on the third floor and they treat guys like me a little softer. But the craziest thing is I never even saw Wayne and that guard in the same room together before.

I tossed and turned about it all night. Not because of the rule breaking. I think most of the rules here uphold some ancient medieval serfdom and I can say that because I read *Pillars of the Earth* by Ken Follett. But I was thinking, what if my guard was like his friend and was open to that sort of thing, getting to know an inmate in a physical way. Where would we go? I wouldn't ever share the commissary closet with Wayne. He manslaughtered a pregnant lady. Truth be told, I'm not just after sex. This place makes you think harder about what you want in life and, well, I want to live by the sea somewhere. Don't need much, just the sea, a dog and my guard.

God, I don't even know his name. It could be anything and I'd still love him. It could be Sinclair or Reg, doesn't matter. I just want his thick hands on my back saying things like, "Honey, did you want another slice of pie?"

Could you imagine anything sweeter?

INTIMACY

To Blaine, Waco, and Texas

Jon Meharg

USA

We weren't meant for this
but you, for me.

You,
a green god.

Me,
a thrashing sea.

Brother mine,

that Fall, I learned to love
lagers, because you did.

In the arms of that southern oak
under all that starry heat,

my cup smiled, swirling,
twirling to my lips.

I drank, again
and again.

The Legacy of Light Far Travelled

Brianna Clara

USA

Poetic at best

The way cycles occur

My sister reads books that were my favorite

Found first at their age

The way flowers fall

Planting new seeds

Rebuilding remaking always

This experience of mine

That is never singular

No matter how unique it seems

The way the stars know they have been here before

The legacy of light left behind

This life of mine

It is my sister's, my brother's, my mother's

Never only mine

The way the day is always chasing the night

Living so the other can have a name

Wisdom to travel down the line

Nothing if not the legacy of time

Of each other

He

Audrey Renner

USA

He and I stood at the reservoir's edge for hours, following the sun millimeter by millimeter as it ducked below the horizon. Golden hour looked so fine on him, brightening the yellow hues in his skin, braiding through his chestnut hair. I couldn't help but kiss his cheek, and his lips curled up into a smile. He teased me and called me a dumb romantic.

He was right. He usually was.

Autumn in Central Park excused the sun tanners and picnic goers, in place of dog walkers and personal trainers. And, of course, he and I. The sun set at the perfect time for us; we had enough time to get home before the streakers came through.

That evening, we passed a few joggers, but it seemed that we were the only people nearby. So he was fine with putting

his arm around me, letting me fit my head in the crook of his neck. He hated Public Displays of Affection; even after three years, the most he would ever do in public is hold my hand. It used to upset me, but I started whispering compliments into his ear, and he responded lovingly.

I called him a dummy, but he was much smarter than I was. I would never be a doctor, and I hoped he never became one either. His face—the hollow cheeks, sharp nose, thin yet pouty lips, rounded chin, and handsome brown eyes—deserved to be on screen. But he said his acting days were behind him.

I hoped he would change his mind.

Just as he, the world stared beautifully that evening, right through me. The birds sang for him to hear. The wind flowed for his hair. The leaves fell to announce his presence. It made sense that he existed because he fit right into the scene. He always matched, but he never blended in. I could always spot him. I could always point him out.

He deserved to stick his feet in the water, given it was clean. He should connect to nature. He should not belong to me, even though he said. “You complete me” and “you’re my other half”, but these were just words. I would never know if they were real or not.

But I saw him there, the tips of his shoes dangerously close to the water. If the tide came up, if the moon so chose to pull, his overpriced sneakers would soak, and I would get to say I told you so. And he would roll his eyes with a smile and say you’re always right, even though I usually wasn’t.

He'd kiss me if we were inside. But I thought of planting my lips against his, even for a moment. If we'd kiss, I knew he'd laugh, and it would be fine. But he cringed at other couples kissing in the park. I never asked why, and I didn't care to anyway. He was just private like that. I supposed I didn't like seeing two people's tongues against one another, but I just didn't grumble about it.

I looked up and down the walkway for joggers, and I kissed the corner of his mouth. He smiled even more as if the light in him couldn't get brighter. I asked him if I embarrassed him, and he said only a little.

“Just when you make my stomach flutter,” he said.

I reminded him that his nervous system makes his stomach flutter and that I merely exist. I added that he should know that since he's about to become a doctor. He pushed me away, still smiling. I secured my hands on his hip, sliding into his coat. He was the warmer of us two.

In the winter, I was all over him trying to survive. The heating in our apartment was worth a nickel, so he kept me warm, especially at night. He always warned me about frostbite, and I would shove my fingers in his mouth.

He knew exactly what to do to keep my body warm.

He told me he would marry me one day, sat there on the park bench, and I laughed so hard I cried. I could never tell if he was serious about that sort of thing. He was serious about everything, but I was never quite convinced he meant it. I wanted him to mean it; I wanted to marry him too. But

I feared he would drop me as he dropped acting. At least I knew he would never be happy again.

That was rude. I never meant it when I said that. I hoped he knew.

He pulled my legs into his lap, his hand firmly around my thigh. His hands were long and thin, delicate like a pianist's were. I pretended he could hold me in place, crossing my ankles over the armrest of the bench. He asked me if I was happy. I asked for context. When he clarified that he was asking about us, I said that he made me incredibly happy, but he could do nothing about our parents. He knew that. They would sit in the pews at our wedding, but they'd shake their heads in disappointment. "He could have done so much better," they'd say, and I couldn't even disagree. He could have gotten anyone as smart as him, as handsome as him, as funny as him. And yet he was holding me, and he said he was trying to marry me.

On the way home, I dared him to take me to the courthouse, and he admitted that he was tired and wouldn't do it that night. I was fine with that. We were planning people anyway, lining everything up to be perfect. I told him to at least make love to me when we got to our bed. He did.

Haikus

Nicole Love

USA / UK

Love me like the moon
in all my shades and stages—
when I'm dark and done.

Far be it from me
to reject culture and kin—
and begrudge a dram.

I don't fear the fall—
what scares me is how badly
I crave the jumping.

What's the name for this?
It's on the tip of my tongue.
Like lips, fingertips.

Do the days move through
us—without a second thought?
Or us them? Blindly.

An event in which a celestial body occludes another

Maisie Smith

USA

The heaviest organ of your body
is the skin.

Think about it—the time
it takes to shed.

The way it pulls against
your bones.

You unzip it on the grassy knolls
of the Meadows

and lay down beside fleshy tendrils,
muscles glistening

in exposed sunlight.
If you could only take

the weight of Jupiter,
this skin might not be

so hard to carry.
But the only eclipse

happening today is solar,
and there's not much sun

left, but you've still got a lot
of raw to expose.

The Runaway

Jojo Scrymgeour

UK

Right now, every kid in the town of Larne was dragging their feet to school, toast in their mouths, backpacks dangling off their shoulders, and a sinking feeling that they may have forgotten to do their homework. Meanwhile, Armin Carter was sneaking around his room with the grace of an elephant walking on its tiptoes, trying not to alert his parents. He went over his list of items for the tenth time to make sure he had everything.

“Toothbrush, clothes, pyjamas, glasses case, charger, headphones, film for the Polaroid, skincare, mini mirror, wallet, guidebook, allergy card, inhaler...” Armin muttered to himself, “Anything else... do I need vaccinations...? Aren’t there mosquitos in California...? Oh shit...”

His phone buzzed in his pocket and he opened it to see a text from Solange:

“stop worrying about what you’ve packed let’s go!!! :p”

“i’ll be out soon, just have to sneak past my parents.”

“jump out the window!”

“no solange -_-”

“also, do I need vaccinations for california?”

“lmao no.”

Armin rolled his eyes, slung his lavender travel bag over his shoulder and peeked out his door: the sound of the television was blaring from downstairs, his parents’ laughter echoing around the house. Armin felt a lump rising in his throat and softly shut the door. He neatly wrote out an apology letter, before shimmying out the window to avoid his parents spotting him going out the front door. Solange would have been delighted to see his flailing body gripping to the drainpipe like an amateur pole dancer.

He wasn’t necessarily running away, per se, but there was something about a pristine, perfect life in middle-class suburbia that made him want to tear out his golden-blond hair. As he strolled across the streets of Larne, his Converse scuffing across the pavement, he thought about why he was doing this. It was easy for Solange Vanderlinde, his friend and confidant of many years. Her parents were careless hippies, never in sight and never in mind. But Mr and Mrs Carter had done their best to carve their sweet little boy into the soft-spoken, well-mannered student he is today.

Yet, they never bothered to understand him. To Armin, being misunderstood was worse than never being loved at all. They didn't understand that he never wanted to be a medical student, that he was tumbling down an endless flight of stairs, plummeting into darkness, whilst everyone else was climbing ahead to an unobtainable light. He knew what he wanted to do in life, he wanted to create, to inspire, to make something that would last beyond this mortal coil, something to be hung in a gallery, admired by all. But his teachers, his parents, the people who were his supposed guardian angels, built walls around him, trapping him inside and blocking out the sunlight.

He was intensely jealous of Solange's unconditional scholarship to CalArts, bitterly remembering all the times Solange ditched class to smoke weed in a parking lot, when she should have been working on her projects. Meanwhile, he would be pouring over medical journals in the library until his eyes burned, attending night school, earning extra credit and doing everything he could to get into pre-med, chasing someone else's dream. Sometimes after night school when he was walking home, as the rain washed off the smell of sulphur, he pictured Solange and her fashionable new art friends speeding down Malibu Beach in a Lexus convertible. The Californian heat smacking against their tanned faces, the sound of Tupac, the smell of summer, the blue skies and even bluer seas, all of them living in a halcyon of youth. Meanwhile, he would be trapped in the middle of Bumfuck, Nowhere; the rain would be lashing against the

windowpane of his dorm whilst he had his weekly mental breakdown about cardiovascular pathology.

As he got closer to the bus stop, he could see the back of Solange talking animatedly with a stranger, her dyed baby pink hair flowing in the springtime breeze. Most people at school teased him about his relationship with her, prying into ‘if he’s stuck it in yet’. Solange was no doubt the prettiest girl in school, but she didn’t have a penis and he didn’t have boobs, so it was a hard pass for both of them. Yet, the way that the morning light made her aura glow compelled him to sit on a nearby wall, take out his sketch book, and start a portrait of Solange’s profile. He felt a pang of guilt as he drew her hair, lightly sketching cotton candy swirls with a pink crayon. It wasn’t Solange’s fault that her star was brighter than his. She was the star that guided lost sailors to the shore, he was a star that was light years away from the world, ready to implode...

“Nice drawing, mister.”

Armin jerked and looked up to see a pair of sparkling onyx eyes stare at him. Like something out of a sitcom, he yelped and fell backwards onto the asphalt with an undignified oomph. He looked up to see a six-foot tower of tanned muscle towering over him. Solange picked up the sketchbook and scrutinised the drawing.

“You’ve made my nose too big.” she sighed, giving Armin the sketchbook back and hauling him off the ground.

“I hate to break it to you, but that’s your nose, Solange.”

“Don’t remind me.” She rubbed a finger down the bridge of her nose, “When we get to Cali, I’m immediately getting it shaved down, I swear!”

“Speaking of Cali, we need to get to the airport in at least thirty min- Solange, where’s your stuff?”

“I’m a free bird, baby. I don’t need the shackles of material goods to weigh me down!” Solange emphasised her point with a little spin.

“Christ, did you at least bring a toothbrush?”

“Well yeah, I’m not a complete savage!” she scoffed as she whipped out a toothbrush from her jeans pocket. Armin hoped that she had her passport in her other one.

“Are you sure you want to come with me? It’ll be hot! And I mean really fucking hot, Armin. And the rent! And you’ll need to find something to do whilst I’m at CalAr—”

“I’m sure, Solange.” Armin reassured, feeling the weight of his life savings in his backpack, “Now let’s get this bus.”

Echo

Jon Meharg

USA

There's a draft in my dresser.

My dresser—standalone and solid,
whispering to me this morning.

I get up, it stops.

The wind clatters against
my flat window

where all is gray

and green, and stone,
all the way down,
 down,
 down.

I look up, and listen.

In New York, the radiators are turning on,
far, far away.

Only a flower, Only a meadow

Katie Brown

USA

Blue Dawn blighted by new morning
their heavy heads bowed to damp earth
as new blossoms are quelled by old soles.

the Willow girl stands in stagnant haze.
half buried, half breathing
the becoming of weeds.

she strays from the path she knows
soil-lined palms, scraped from falling
Heather and hair tangle with reeds.

Crabgrass veins fan through fertile ground.
her bones creak, brittle upon the rising
from her bolster of Ipomoea arms.

body haloed by the rising sun
her stinging palms of Sage
upturn towards the morning mist.

a weed will live among the flowers
and a girl will rest in the meadow
her body will be an Ivy bed for
the Fen-sedge and the Willow.

On Watching a Woman Smoking a Cigarette

Emily Wheeler

USA

And so, you find yourself standing
by the concrete gum-covered wall
outside the public library
nose flushed red with cold
and fingertips tingling blue

It is just you here
the silence and the night sky

you know it is cancerous
how it rots
 chokes
 clogs
 burns
leaving a little warmth lingering in your throat

But there is a sweetness to the pain
 pleasure in the hazy discomfort
 fulfillment in this repeated motion
So you pull that cancer back in again
 breathing it past your lips

You hold it
for a second longer than you normally would
 letting the taste slink behind your teeth
and the scent lurk through your nose

linger
 and
blow

In Touch

(excerpt)

André Hughes

UK

I saw you glancing, in the half reflection of a barber's shop. I was not trying to see you; I had somewhere to be. I was walking past at a rate of knots. The lines and edges of your face passing through into a high-backed chair. It's not that I think I look in a particular way; my image is flecked with grains of you.

I was caught by the barber's short smile in response to the bobbing lips of his customer, as he combed and then trimmed the top of an already shaved back-and-sides of a thin head. He placed his scissors into an antibac lightning-blue chamber by the mirror. I was almost out of shot. He snags my eye—dumps combed eyebrows at me.

It was only for a second—he barely saw me.

Whatever he saw that I cannot reach—he managed to peer just enough to penetrate to the brain of a passerby. He will never know that he has done so.

Last week, I crossed a street in the centre of town; the lights hadn't turned yet. An older lady—I picture her as a German tourist—stared at me from the other side with wide, unblinking eyes, as if she had never seen someone traverse the flow of a junction before. There's time enough to cross; I don't need a green man. I'm waiting in the middle of the road; her glass eyes widening—almost square shaped—a red FIAT followed by a black, and then a grey Chelsea tractor; a blur of highlights and a shadow.

I had no choice. It was a connection without a word or sound. The expression of someone completely different to me that I would otherwise never meet. The gap had narrowed, but at the curb there was only just enough space for me to lead with my right hand and arm, to turn and dip my shoulder, to acknowledge the separation between us, enough time to squeeze past. There's a chestnut crescent beside her right pupil.

I wouldn't be surprised if I had reminded her of her grandson, who'd died amongst the remains of a car and a bike. Or if it was the fact that she thought it was dangerous, that her gradual decline in mobility of the last ten years of her life had made her forget how young and fearless she once crossed roads.

I cannot assume to know you, any more than I do myself.

Soon after, I got stuck to the corner of a building. It seemed that in the pandemic, the left and the right of a pavement meant something: respect, fear. The first stranger I met on

my one-hour walk; I can't see their smile, but I can see their eyes closing. There was space between those going forward and those going back. There's no reason for a pavement to mean anything anymore.

Papa texted on Tuesday, asking me to go and say *Hello* to a friend of his. *He lives not too far from you. I've cc'd you into our email correspondence.* As if I had much of a choice. *Don't forget to take the parcel that I've sent today with you!* He wouldn't tell me what it was. *You'll have to wait and see. It's a surprise.* For someone who doesn't like surprises, it's surprising that he doesn't mind surprising others. *It's for Billy but you might find it interesting!*

Since turning seventy-six, a once-a-year request has become once every couple of months. A signature on a card to someone I can't remember meeting, but I supposedly met when I was a child. To a tech-related problem, somehow putting together from the random words that I'm given: a solution. *My laptop won't start. I pressed it a few times but there's nothing there. Pressed what?* I say. *The button on the top left; there's an orange light. Plug your laptop in!*

I garnered from my inbox that Mr 'Billy' Addler had rung Papa the week before, as it was already September and he'd forgotten to reply back to a birthday card he received in the post in July. He'd rung the landline. But my parents had got rid of their landline a couple of months before after deciding *It was basically only cold callers that rang it. There's only so many times you can tell an Indian Caroline from BT that you haven't had*

a contract with BT for ten years. Papa told Mr Addler that I had moved to the same city as him and that we should meet up.

Subsequently, he emailed inviting me to his flat: *Why, the young Lamé must come over for dinner, if it is at all possible? Papa aggregated the situation: What a good idea Billy! Do you think you can fit it into your schedule, Fab? It would be an honour to, I say. Whatever that means.*

Google Maps told me it would take an hour and ten minutes to walk there. I wanted to feel expansive, wind against my skin. Taking the bus would detach me too much from the city. I wanted to get out of the centre and open up an area I had not been to before. When you walk, you're more active. There's only so much you can ignore when it's in front of you.

He didn't ask about you; he never noticed.

There are aspects of being young—about youth—that cannot be fully appreciated or realised when young. I may know of some of them. I'm reminded all the time by those older than me and I don't doubt there are many books and shows on this topic. There are parts of people's souls for talking about youth. To some extent I understand what they mean—maybe it's because I'm young but not quite young enough. What am I supposed to do with this knowledge? Be more aware?

I'm not sure if it's better to be closer or further away.

Drop it Like it's Cold

Jennifer Sara Widelitz

USA

I awake to the taste of fresh manure. Shit—not again. Blades of grass tickle my nose. This is the third time in two weeks I've woken up on the lawn, face planted in dirt. It's getting worse.

My head throbs, mouth dry as tree bark. The sunlight stings my eyes. Tears well. I try to stand, will my limbs to move, but I can barely wiggle my toes. There is a heavy weight to the ache in my bones. I'm too tired. All I can do is lay here, the grass cushioning my cold body.

Yet I'm somehow moving. My shoulder suddenly rocking. I hear giggles, feel another jab, and realize I'm being poked with a stick. I slide my eyes toward the culprit—culprits. A young boy and girl who squeal and run back inside the house when they meet my gaze and notice I'm awake.

This can't keep happening.

The whirring of a motor hums across the street. The noise rakes its claws over my skull. I turn my head—gently, slowly—to see the neighbor mowing his lawn. He eyes me but makes no move to help or engage, just casts a nervous glance my way every so often. But he shouldn't be doing yardwork for another...have I lost an entire day?

But I'm not alone. There are other bodies—dozens of them, still as corpses—scattered like dried leaves across the lawn. A splinter of fear lodges itself in my heart. *Shit. Shit*—this can't be happening again.

My lips will not part. I cannot call out to them. Cannot speak, cannot yell. Cannot move. Only my neck, which turns slightly, and my eyes, which scan the yard.

I see her beside me, and I remember: her body outlined in moonlight, a long-awaited night spent together. I had been pining after her since she strolled into town months ago, but last night she made the first move. We were at my place, just starting to—

That's the last thing I remember before waking here.

I feel her arm beneath mine. Stiff. Her body cold—so dangerously cold. The sunlight caresses her scales but offers little warmth, leaving her in frozen shock. Even in this state, she is breathtaking. She is the vibrant green of sun-soaked grass, beautiful—so at odds with me, with my scales the color of sun-scorched blades in a drought. The light brings out the purple in the spikes of her spine and in the striped rings tapering down an elegant tail strong enough to break bones. A creamy magnolia petal floats down from above and falls

across her. I yearn to be the blanket of warmth she needs, the heat her body craves.

It keeps getting worse, each year the winters grow colder and colder. I've never known a winter where I hadn't blacked out for at least one day in the season, but three times in two weeks... that's a new record. After each Blackout, the elders speak the ancestral tales about times when hatchlings could romp and roam in warm winter days beneath sun-streaked palms as easily and safely as in the height of summer. But those memories are legends now.

The wind's chilly fingers pull a shadow across the land. Leaves rustle. I gaze at the branches above where my love and I had laid together. It feels like a mere blink ago. Peering through the boughs, I watch a sea of clouds snuff out the sun.

The temperature drops. I feel myself slipping, my eyelids lowering with each degree. Any mobility I'd regained freezing with my blood. I spot my family beneath the oak on the other side of the driveway. Another mess of iguanas circled beneath the grove of coconut palms on the next lawn over. How long can we last like this? If only the clouds would part and return the warmth we—

I can't believe you've seen me naked

Brianna Clara

USA

Fully clothed, wells called my eyes
I stand in front of you as your newborn
Rema playing in the background
There is no sound as sweet as the music of a home
You don't even know you've lost

There is no way to cry discreetly in public,
At least not this hard.
My words form sentences I have not even fleshed out in my head

I share with you these thoughts because I am on my period and I
need you to know
I would swallow myself whole without you and I am working on it

You do not avert your eyes,
Mirroring my rivers
You say "I could never not be happy with you"

And so I stand
In front of you,
Your creation,
A puddle of curses
You've created

And I wish I had more clothes on

No Turtle's Heart

Jun Zhang

China

Thursday morning. Mira tumbled around her dim, familiar room. Like any other young woman of her age, she was pushed forward by thoughts and worries from the beginning of the day. 'Another day filled with self-disappointment and struggles.' She thought. 'And me one year older.' The day before was her twenty-second birthday. She was visiting her hometown for a short break and had intended to quit birthdays. But the insistence of her parents had resulted in the bundle of flowers on her table, already wilting. She quickly made a coffee from the timeworn countertop, started to sip from the mug while it was still steaming, and closed her eyes.

Dahlia was waiting for her there in her mind, as always.
Stupidity, from eight o'clock in the morning, is not a good omen.

‘But as always, we shall live through.’ Mira replied. Surprisingly, there was no echo. She had gotten so used to Dahlia’s presence over the years, that the sudden silence made her nervous. Dahlia appeared ten years ago when Mira was still Miranda, engulfed by loneliness. She became Mira two years later, turning inert, and learnt to shut up. They had struggled together, Dahlia watching Mira adapt to solitude, accompanying her, and witnessing Mira’s growth. Whenever the sun did not shine, Dahlia was there with her in the dark.

But Mira’s status had been better since she had started to make friends. She started enjoying the halos of kindness emitted by her peers. That was when Dahlia became less talkative. Their coexistence had naturally shifted to talking only when Mira was on her own. Mira’s closest friend, Alison, had heard the story of Dahlia and said Dahlia was just a voice. Dahlia was silent upon hearing that, but Mira had forcefully defended Dahlia’s existence. Dahlia was still Mira’s best angel.

Things changed again two years ago, when Mira moved out. Friends and family became the faraway beacons of her past life. The strong currents of the metropolis made her a mere seaweed in the tide, just washed around lifelessly. She had tried to stumble against the flow, but eventually gave in, and stopped moving altogether. Her dream, their dream, was not to become a dreamy marlin in the sea. A humble turtle would be good enough. It won’t have the strength and speed of the marlin, the capacity to travel and to make dreams. Instead, it is by itself a cubicle, a portable safehouse. The heart would not die, even if numbed, or ripped out. If lucky

enough, a turtle would die happily in its shell after tumbling in the waves for eight decades.

But a turtle would die alone. And it would have barnacles clinging to its back.

‘I like it that way. A shell would shelter us. Keep out the garbage we would never need to hear.’

Do not pretend. Do not pretend that you enjoyed the loneliness.

Dahlia flared the painful memories of young Miranda at Mira. Mira’s hand shuddered. This was a moment when the past provoked her strong desire to flee, to invoke some physical pain to override the mental pain. She went to the windowsill and drew open the curtains.

But the view outside froze her. The wind swayed the willows in the yard. A blizzard of catkin was flowing soundlessly. These were the winds of Miranda’s childhood, and she had run in these winds, innocent and soft, waving like the new willow branches.

The winds haven’t changed, even when you’ve left. The world suddenly brightens up, huh?

Mira recalled a place, flashing back at her rapidly. She felt an urgency to see that same view. She went out, striding swiftly through the familiar streets. Here she had the confidence and power to drift along the current of the city freely. The roads moved beneath her, and she reached her destination before realizing she was there.

In the middle of the street stood an old, abandoned church. Fresh grass sprouted in the soil. Winter jasmine blossoms bloomed on the sides. Distantly, short buildings painted red

could be seen—Mira's high school. It was where Dahlia first found her and adopted her.

We adopted each other. Like puzzle pieces, me a part of you, and you a part of me.

Mira felt the cycle of life. From childhood to adulthood. The turn of seasons begins in May. The current April was the end of the last cycle. She waved her hands in the air, feeling the airflow raising the thin hairs on her arm. Seeing a dandelion in the field, she bent down. Instead of plucking it up, she knelt upon the soil to blow the tiny wind-borne seeds away.

She thought of the wind then, and bent down in the field. Her mind turned ajar. Dahlia would always be with her, so she would never be on her own. *But together we are one. Me or you, it is not really that important. I can be just a voice at the back of your head, but you are not alone. Isn't that all you need?*

Humans do not have the hearts of turtles. *You don't need one.* You just need the courage to be you. And you will always have someone to count on. *Together we shall challenge the daily currents.* Wasn't it like this all the way along?

The voices rejoice and joined together. Mira felt embraced by Dahlia. As the winds ceased, she became Miranda once more. The separated piece was home again. Closing her eyes, she began humming, together with the wind, the tune of an old rhyme. Her troubles had slowly dissolved. This sense of spring and belonging filled her with courage for the coming cycle. Spring was not the season of remorse for her, but was a time of reunion. As the years passed, the pains were ever deepening with the more she knew. But she was also more

tenacious. Even seaweed would grow roots. And she belonged here, where she was raised. Where they first met. Now it is also where they had their wordless valediction. Such ordinary miracles that clung to our lives were truer than turtles' hearts.

Now she knew her way home.

In Love at Christmas

Georgina Appleton

UK

An artist plays by candlelight.
Fingers dancing on keys of black and white.
Straight-backed, summoning the magical night.

Then you arrive under a cold moon,
stars twinkling in the sky,
reindeer breath steams from wet noses,
boots crunch snow.

There is only diamond light in this fairy flight.
You are holding me close, sparkling in a frosty glow.
You smell of snowmen in the forest,
trees breathing earth and warm clove.

Our work is done:
the presents delivered, the pudding steamed,
nuts cracked, wine mulled.
The creatures are fed and the elves are singing,
their silver bells ringing.

You don't leave again for days.
This is our time.
Love is out here and inside, waiting to be explored.
I pull you in.
Yule,
eu—,
yew,
you.

Lightness

Sarz Savage

USA

My ears sting in Edinburgh's wind. I'm walking home from the gym. Down a little path in the big big Meadows.

A vinyl stand.

I have no interest in vinyls. But I see one. *The Dark Side of the Moon*. I recognize the cover, from my sister. I grab it. I must get her a gift. A Christmas gift.

It's covered in plastic. I like how it feels on my fingertips, how it smells.

What're you doing?

I look up, see a man wearing a brown beanie.

It's fully sealed, don't worry. The 50th edition special! We only got one.

Wow.

You're getting it?

I check the price. A lot of money for a pretty thing wrapped in plastic. I should shop around first. Do you take returns?

Returns? We . . . can take returns, if it's in the original plastic, sure. A gift, I take it?

Exactly. For my sister. I want to ask if she still likes the band.

I see.

Actually, would you be able to hold it? Then I could call her and make sure. I'd call her now, but with the time difference in Seattle . . .

I . . . suppose we can. But hurry back, it's prime time for us. Christmas season, you know.

Right. Thank you. Just a couple hours, I promise.

Then I remember: We don't have a record player.

Oh well. Maybe she can put it on her wall or nightstand, or something.

It's cold walking to the store. The wind keeps picking up. My ears sting. I grab my red headphones from my backpack, the ones I wore at the gym, big ones that go over my head. I put them on. Phunk music seeps through me.

There's a girl working, probably twenty-five. She has shortish blond hair.

Other people come in with me: A man in his forties, a couple college girls, a teenaged boy.

The worker girl says hello to them.

She doesn't say hello to me.

I wonder why, and then I figure it out. There are two groups of people: the headphone users and the others. Maybe the others are wearing headphones too, but Studio Buds or AirPods that are easily hidden under hair or hats. Mine aren't. So she probably put me in the first group, with the ones who don't look like they want to talk, who probably can't hear anything anyway, ones who look like they browse vinyl shops frequently, who probably take it seriously. Because of the headphones. The overhead ones that I'm wearing just this once, because they were in my bag, because of the gym, and that I'm wearing now because of the wind.

There are sections for electronic, pop, alternative, soul. I flip through every vinyl, spot none I know. I'm sad, but maybe I should be happy. Because if one is special enough to be special to so many other people then can it really be so special to me? Where does that cutoff lie? Because someone must like it, and some more someones must, or it wouldn't exist at all.

I hear the girl again. Her voice weaves through waves of cowbells, drums, synthesizers, leaks through air bubbles of diluted voices, beats. She's asking people if they need help.

She doesn't ask me if I need help. She probably thinks I do this a lot but I don't. Just this once.

I leave the store. I realize I forgot to check prices, the whole reason I went, but they didn't have Pink Floyd anyway. I checked every one. I feel bad still, wonder if that makes me selfish.

The wind's picked up even more. I stick my fingers in my pockets, then take them out and smell them, you know, to make sure I was really there.

I get back to the stand.

Hello, I tell the brown beanie.

Need help?

He must not recognize me. It must be because of the red headphones; I wasn't wearing them before.

Yes, I say. I set a record aside earlier. Pink Floyd. I pull the headphones off my ears, slide them around my neck.

Something seems to click. Ah, yes, yes.

Yes.

So, what's the verdict?

It's a yes.

Good, he laughs, good. You know, funny thing, he says. He suddenly seems more cheery. When you said you weren't sure if she still liked the band, I thought you were crazy. Pink Floyd! Who suddenly starts hating Pink Floyd?

Well, I smile. She's fourteen, so. You never know.

Ah. He types the total amount into the machine. You go to Edinburgh Uni?

I do.

Good. He points to a little glass building. You know that little glass building?

I nod.

Well, not that one, but the one back behind it, they played there. Pink Floyd, 1971.

Wow.

Then they released *Dark Side* a couple years later, 1973, of course, then played at Usher Hall a year later. 1974.

I didn't know that. That's very cool.

Anyways. Need a bag?

No, thanks.

Well, I'm gonna get you a bag. The 50th edition special! You're very lucky. He hands me the vinyl in a thick green plastic bag and thanks me, turns away.

It's okay, you know.

He turns back toward me. I'm sorry? he says.

The wind picks up. The tips of my ears sting. I pull the red headphones from around my neck, slip them back on. Phonk music returns: the high-pitched drift, the low bass, the dampened voices; the excitement, the calm; the cosmic, the horror; silence. Almost like a flat effect is slapped over the whole thing. I feel so light. I can barely be sure his voice is coming from him anymore.

That you doubted me. You didn't think I'd return.

Something changes in his face again. Return? he repeats. You must be confusing me with someone else.

Sorry, I say. I must be.

I turn to leave. But turn back.

Pink Floyd played in that hall, I say. I point to the big building behind the glass.

He lights up. I know! 1971. Ain't that something?

Yes.

Something.

Gourd Gouge

Leah Levy

Canada

I cut you open like butternut squash,
and you spill measly orange fluids out.
I squish you crumbly between sticky palms
and lay in wait for you to scream. You squeak.
You scald your body soft in warm puree,
translucent, squeeze it dripping into my
hands. Every sentence you groan reeks
of you succumbing. Eyes insulated,
unseen between your flickering eyelids.
I cut them open in slits.

THE DEAR DEPARTED

First Session

Xabier Usabiaga

Chile

It seems just yesterday
that we flew on bicycles down shuttered streets escaping
propelled by psychotropics in a burning country
scared shitless breathtaking rallying even the flowers
Oh the love of my tribe for anthems and gunshots
Oh my profuse tribe gone hysterical

Scattershots and flashing lights It's October
in the middle of winter It's October once again and always
4th of July in Plaza de Armas
The stones rise the names spread the armed forces
besiege the square
An Aymara woman films
the injured street vendor on her telephone
The flesh agitated in flocks of smoke and the desire to cry
An old man crumbles bread for his friends again
Boilthrong Cackling Again the gas

Alamiro and Laval and I would shoot up whatever we had
Yes They're coming with us
Look there at Oppen He's smashing

the asphalt with a crowbar

Look there at Berenguer Making 5 military heads turn
Elvira hasn't been able to come but in her name a monument
explodes Raúl is sad His white suit's
been stained with blood

We won't go gentle into that good night

We won't go gentle into that good night

We won't go gentle into that good night

The slogans have changed says Alamiro

They've changed radically

It's the decade of fire and yet at home

after the horror la Dickinson, cautious Dickinson

oils our eyes in feline scoldings

She cleans our wounds with love

Pelt

Holly Sargent

UK

Folktales and Ballads. Passable Boundaries. Gothic Pathologies.

There are no easy answers. I've looked in all the obvious places, and every time I draw a blank. It's a good thing the library is open twenty-four-seven. 3am rolls around and almost everyone is gone. It's a fluorescent-light wasteland, bordered by endless dark corridors of books. There's a table of girls dozing with those spongy aeroplane pillows clamped round their necks. The lid of a pizza box flaps wearily, buffeted by the aircon. I wish I'd thought to bring food. I'm not sure when I last ate. I'm just so busy these days! I cast my discerning eye over the slackers and get back to my books. The tower is perilously tall now, but I feel strangely proud watching it grow. It's evidence, bloodshed, proof of how hard I'm trying to find you.

The next book is bound in red leather. The pages are browned and drifting from the spine. *Celtic Werewolves*. Think fur, inexplicable rages, strange and sudden disappearances. It's no good. I can't see it. It's not you, Sylvia. I breathe out and my insides collapse, my shoulders sag. My eyes are itchy, with sleep or maybe tears. But why tears when there's so much hope left?

That last day, we had gone thrifting in Sylvia's favourite vintage store. She's into all that, the weird stiff fabrics in sweet pastel shades, the costume jewellery and dusty glamour. I entertained myself by trying on the novelty sunglasses while she wound pearls round and round her neck and flounced about in puffy skirts. I was slipping on a pair of heart-shaped lenses when she called my name. She was holding a cascade of silvery fur—short, spotted white in places, like some kind of pelt. What the hell, I said, is that a rug? She called me an idiot and unfurled it, slipping her arms inside. It was a coat, ankle-length, velvety and luxurious. I can't remember anything about the precise cut except that it fit her like a second skin.

I gasped and waggled the heart-glasses at her. She pressed her lips together, smothering the smirk, but kept on preening. I loved her confidence, her arrogance, the sparkle of her twirling in a room full of people. We went to the till together and she pinched the glasses right off my head.

Those are too big for your face, she said. And they were, I can admit that. But I'm wearing them now and they really

dull the awful lighting. I went back last week to buy them, in memoriam.

The cleaners wake me up around six. They nudge a Hoover around me and open the windows, and I'm grateful—it has gotten a little stale in here over the past few days. My comrades are awake too. One of them is chewing a pizza crust, in deep contemplation. I'd better get a move on. I push the heart-glasses into my hairline and treat myself to a glimpse of sunrise burning red over the rooftops. Morale—so important.

Psychopathology. Body Beyond the Law. Andrina and Other Stories.

Sylvia loved George Mackay Brown. She was leafing through *Andrina* the first time I saw her, chewing on her pen and scribbling in the margins.

Orkney. Waves, isolation. The crash of water against rocks. That has to be something. Our first date, we caught the bus to Portobello—Sylvia's choice—and walked along the beach in the freezing cold. Her hand was like ice and her lipstick left an imprint on her coffee cup. So charming, so endearing.

Stay focused!

She was so sweet in the beginning. The way her hair stood on end in the morning, the crush of her eyelids as she squinted in the sudden light. I never complained when she drank juice from the carton or left clumps of hair in the shower. She didn't like my friends or the way I checked up

on her. You're smothering me, she said. And then she disappeared, just like that.

Shetland Tales. The Island of the Women. The Selkie Wife.

It's obvious. It hit me like a bolt of lightning. I see her standing there on the winter beach, wrapped in her fur coat, gazing at the sea. And I just know.

I'm there again, face-to-face with the ocean. The cold air stings my lungs—I'm breathing out steam, rapid clouds of it. She isn't here, of course she isn't. The promenade is deserted. But I know the game now, I know what I have to do. I take my shoes off and the sand grates against my skin. My footprints sink, leaving a trail all the way down to the surf. The tide splashes over my feet, and the pain is sharp, and then there is nothing at all. The cold is numbing, clarifying.

George Mackay Brown wrote about *selkies*.

Sylvia was right, I am an idiot. To mistake her skin for a rug—how stupid of me! How insulting. I suffocated her, keeping her with me. I should let her go, and go home to my empty flat, the unmade bed. The space she left.

That's the thing, isn't it? I'll never find another Sylvia. There is no one like her; these other girls, they turn their noses up at me. I'm not good enough. I'm not. And Sylvia is under the waves, wrapped in her fur, safe from harm. Light shining through the water. Her black eyes.

Does she remember me? Does it matter?

God, I am so cold. It's laughable, isn't it. The whole thing, from start to finish—me and her, the very idea of us. Me, swaying in the shallows, facing down the whole entire ocean. I tried to go wild swimming once and I chickened out. The North Sea in winter is nothing to sneeze at! The sky is practically black, or maybe that's the glasses. The horizon melts into the water. The horizon has her.

You've got to believe me.

Endling

Al Henderson

UK

For Martha, the last of the Passenger Pigeons. Despite conservation efforts, Passenger Pigeons were hunted to extinction in 1914.

They used to call me Martha, now they call me *Endling*.

I don't know what it means but they say it sadly. When they first brought us here this space felt small and cold with unbreakable twigs stopping our flight but after years it now feels big and empty. Even the shiny twigs have dulled now. There were dozens of us then, hatchlings screeched, keeping me up at night but now only I remain.

I sit on my ledge. The friendly giant has had to lower it for me, I can't fly like I used to. I still perch, like I have every day since arriving here. I watch the ever-changing ones pass

the dull twigs each day, they look similar to the kind giant but different with each sunrise. When the others were here they looked at us excitedly. Now, they are further away and stare sadly at me just as the friendly one does. They used to be closer but the friendly one moved back the branches that separate us. They did this, I think, to protect me from the others. Several winters ago I began moving slower and the ever-changing ones became angry; they liked me to flutter around my space but once I was alone I no longer had the energy or desire to. One day the new ones threw sand at me, it was coarse and painful as it hit my eyes. I flew, like they wanted, to escape their sand. That was the only time I saw the friendly one angry. Their sounds were like those of the flock protecting one of our own from danger.

I miss the sky. All together we would fly for days, boundless in our mass. I was surrounded by the warmth of family and friends. Now, I only know the cold of my space. I still don't know why they put us here. We used to wonder if they hated us, if we were kept as food, or if was it to save us from the lightning-less thunder that sounded in stormless skies and ended countless flights. I don't care why anymore, I just wish they would bring me another to pass the time with. George was the last one with me and his flight ended four winters ago. I miss him greatly; he wasn't perfect and we were not always close but we were together. Together is better than alone. Then was better than now.

Several sleeps ago I thought I was finally to end my flight and join the others. As I fell from my perch in the sunlight I thought I heard their voices again, coos that were only

memories to me. It was not time. I woke and saw the friendly one over me with tears in their eyes. Since then, the friendly one has come many times a day to check on me. I welcome the touch of being picked up and the tenderness in their huge clawless talons that hold me. They don't coo but the sounds they make from their beakless face are soft and kind. I wish they understood when I spoke. No one has heard me in four winters. To be heard is to be understood, to speak to the flock was to be known by them. What is left of me aches to be known once more.

The sun wakes me. Its warmth is nice as the heat has started to leave again, winter will soon return. It reminds me of waking in my mother's nest. I hatched shortly before winter. She would help me to perch on the edge to see the vastness below. Trees stretched beyond my sight, the sky was full of possibility and early risers from the flock were out in search of food or simply flying to stretch their wings. Now, the friendly one comes and helps me onto my perch, the one I cannot reach alone. I cannot see the vastness anymore but through the square hole in the giant's flat grey nest, I can see the sky I once called home illuminated in pinks and oranges. Even if they let me out of this space, I couldn't return to the sky. My flight has ended, but my body still tries to go on. Twenty-nine winters I have felt, each one colder than the last. Even before this space, I never heard of or met one like me, who saw more than fifteen.

The sun has risen but the nest has not opened to let the ever-changing ones in yet. I sit on my perch, it's silent. I hear the click of the friendly one's steps. They walk to my

space and open the barrier of cold straight twigs. They reach towards me, I lean into them.

They are warm, it's nice.

They lift me from my perch and out of my space. I don't remember when they last took me from here. They make a small nest with their talons around me and begin to move. Their featherless skin has more lines in it than it used to, I wonder how many winters they have seen.

They carry me to the edge of their nest, where the changing ones come from. The nest wall moves without them touching it, they carry me outside. I feel it, the sun on my worn feathers feels warmer than inside their nest. I haven't felt this since I was with the countless flock. I wish they were here with me now. I feel the wind on my face, I'd almost forgotten its cooling touch. Before the lightning-less thunder, I could hear others on the wind.

I can't hear them anymore, they're all gone. What happened?

As the friendly one holds me in the silence of the outside, understanding settles in. I know now why they call me *endling*.

Our flight is over.

Time hangs over me like a guillotine

Maisie Smith

USA

I am always thinking of moments as memories.
Meanwhile, the throat-soaked accent of the bus driver
points out one lone duck on the long loch,
half-hidden in the mist.

In the Highlands, they built a road right through
the center of the water, splitting it in half like
they knew I'd be coming through. I, too,
am always fractured.

Now, December loiters on the corner, cold
dragging its nails over my cracked window.
I see less of the sun, and spend the dark
missing where I already am.

A year from today, I won't be in this city.
I'll be half-human in some other light
and I'll think about that duck until
I'm a contortion of feathers and wings.

What if the sun rises and is sad that I am not watching?

Kayla Slack

USA

I tell my doctor that I can't focus, and he tells me I should sleep more, but I think I spend too much time in bed. It wasn't my goal to watch every sunrise in Scotland, but I'm on such a streak now that I might as well continue. I tell him *yes, I'll try to sleep more*, but I don't say when. It won't be during the night because those hours are reserved for staring at walls and hearing my flatmate in the kitchen well after midnight (I'm not alone, at least) and wondering *why* birds are singing at 2 a.m. My friend in Atlanta realizes the hour and says *I forgot you don't sleep!* and I said *I do!* as if she or I would believe that lie for even a second. My friends in Japan wake when I'm only beginning to wind down and I fall asleep only when they have gone to lunch. *Time is such a fickle thing.* I tell the doctor. *Sometimes I want more of it, others I want less.* I could have both if I could just stop watching the sun rise. But I've never had freedom quite like this—to watch sunrises if I please. They're beautiful. I think I need to see a few more before I quit.

One more before I go.

Love Letter

Yue Bai

China

Dear Charlie,

How are you?

How are you, Sophie?

“Dad! It’s time!”

Charlie follows the sound. It’s his daughter Maria, leaning her back into the door frame. She sees her father sitting on the chair right beside the window with a paper in hand.

Before Charlie could say anything, Maria smiles. “You know what, I’ve still got something to pack. I’ll let Amy come to you later, ok?”

Charlie looks a bit surprised, but it soon turns into a gentle smile. Those eyes behind the glasses are blinking with stars.

“Sure, my love.”

Maria grins softly as she is about to leave.

“Wait, Hon.” His dimple appears. “Thank you.”

Maria winks. “Just take your time.”

Charlie watches her leave, and slowly glances through the photos on his desk from left to right. He looks at the one of Maria’s college opening ceremony. He chuckles; he and Sophie looked so nervous, as if they were about to enroll. And the one of Maria in her wedding dress. He would never forget how hard he cried and Sophie laughed. And that one, when Maria found out she was pregnant. She ran all the way from upstairs to downstairs. It was so hard to tell whether she was scared or excited. But one thing was for sure, that Sophie was both.

Charlie laughs, even with tears flooding out, as he suddenly recalls the scene when Sophie was chasing Maria all around the house. Where was he? Oh yes, he was taking photos. Look, there it is, with a blur on the edges. And right next to it is Amy, his lovely granddaughter sleeping soundly in her mother’s arms. Now look at her, stepping into high school. How time flies!

His eyes light at the last photo, just beside his right hand. Charlie takes a deep breath. The photo shows a refined and lively girl in a white dress, surrounded by sunflowers. She is turning her head to the camera, as if someone has just called her name. Her dress floats like a flower, dancing in the summer breeze. She looks like an angel from above, spreading happiness and love. The smile on her face is sweet as honey and those beautiful brown eyes shine like the sun.

Her hat is slightly lifted by the naughty wind. Charlie remembers the next moment when she tried to catch her hat. She was chasing a summer dream; he was chasing her. The photo may be in black and white, but Charlie can see it clearly.

She was the color; she was the dream.

She was his first love.

She is Sophie.

I am spectacular!

You guys are probably heading to the cemetery, and Maria has taken care of everything, am I right? Oh, my sweet Charlie, she is just like me, isn't she! But not that time, when she was pregnant. How could she scare her mother like that for heaven's sake, jumping up and down! And you! Laughing the whole time. Wait, you must be laughing right now. Oh, I promise, one day I am telling Amy about you two, always making me worry!

Now, speaking of which, I may not be around but I can still help you prepare. This year... I'm thinking of flowers. What about sunflowers? I love sunflowers! Do you still remember our first date? I wonder if I could still fit in that dress. But you know what, Amy is going to look gorgeous in it. You should let her have it! Hope she won't feel weird wearing an old lady's dress. Ha! I know she wouldn't. She is our pride! Make sure she knows that I will always be proud of her.

And Charlie, do promise me to take care of yourself. Stop staying up so late on the computer! You always lose time when looking at photos. Oh wait, that reminds me. You must be taking more this year! I wonder where you are traveling this time. Ah! I worry so much

about your legs. Don't feel bad about asking for Maria's help, ok? I know you don't want to trouble them but they are family. I'll be watching you! I'll always care about you.

Well, I won't keep you any longer. I'll leave something for next year. I have so many things to say to you. I will probably meet you in your dreams. I must look fantastic. Don't tell me, I just know.

I love you Charlie, I always will. Leave a wink to me when you get there. Your beautiful brown eyes will always light me up.

I'll be in your heart, honey. Tell the kids I love them.

Yours always,

Sophie

“Grandpa! Time to go!”

Amy runs into the room in her grandmother's white dress. She sees a feather disappearing after a blink, gently touching Charlie's cheek. An angel must have left a kiss.

“I'm coming.”

“It's from grandma, right?” Amy chuckles.

“You are right, pumpkin.” Charlie nods.

Amy walks towards Charlie. She holds her arms out and hugs her grandpa, “I miss her.”

“We all do.” Charlie pats her on the head. “She misses us as well.”

“Really?”

“Of course.”

“I wonder how many letters she wrote to you. Have you counted?”

“No. That will be my treat every year.”

Amy looks up and grins, her eyes bend like the moon; she looks like a cupid.

“Oh, but we have to go. Mom and Dad are already in the car.”

Charlie leaves a kiss on her forehead before she goes out. “Pumpkin, tell your mother we still have one thing to get.”

“Sure, what is it?”

Charlie turns his gaze to the photo; he gently touches the figure, leaving a kiss there.

She does look gorgeous in your dress, you'll see.

“Sunflowers.”

A Dream That Never Ends

Eryca Worthen

USA

As I wake, before I've opened my eyes,

I reach out to the right. There is nothing.
My arm hanging over the edge of the bed like it's a chasm.

I must have fallen asleep on the wrong side,
so I roll right and reach out
expecting the tips of my fingers to run ever so gently
over every vertebrae of his spine, his skin warming my cold touch.
Oh, that warmth! I'll seek it like Icarus to the sun.

Tucking myself under his arm, safe and warm
our breaths mingle together
here, I know love, here we are together,
life is as it should be because he loves me.

I roll left and reach out and find I've hit a wall,
I open my eyes and see the wall that stands beside me,
sterile white and cold.
If I roll right, I'll roll off the edge.
I am back in another twin-sized bed,
in another dorm room, in another country, at another college,
he is not here; I am not safe and warm. Under his arms.
He does not love me. He only exists in my head.

With Love

Tara Healy

USA

Thank you. I know this is hard for all of us. At least, you don't have to give a speech.

It's not right to speak ill of the dead, but if we're being honest, it's not really right to speak ill of the living either, is it? Just because someone's dead *now*, we shouldn't speak ill of them anymore? Maybe we just shouldn't speak ill at all. I don't think that's possible, and it's not something I choose to live by.

I never spoke ill of Molly because I didn't want her to find out. She can't do that now, can she?

Molly Cooper was my roommate in undergrad. If she was still with us today, she would call me pretentious for referring to it as my undergrad, and I'd tell her it isn't pretentious if there's a need for the distinction.

I was a finance student. Molly did philosophy. We met at one of those freshman lectures that everyone has to attend. I teased her after class, asking what kind of job she was hoping to get with a degree in philosophy. She called me a corporate sellout. We moved in together the next semester.

Molly was a good student. Good, not great. Can you even be great at philosophy? How do they grade you on that? *Yes, you conceptualized the universe very well today.* Maybe I don't understand what philosophy really means. But I don't buy into all that. If Molly were still here, she would say that's because I'm an Aquarius.

I don't buy into that, either.

Now, I don't know if it was a package deal that came with being a philosophy major, but Molly always seemed very morally superior, you know? Holier than thou. *Corporate big leagues bad, study of ethics good.* I'd like to clarify—I'm not condemning ethics here. I think it's great. Really awesome stuff. But isn't it exhausting? I can't always give everyone else the benefit of the doubt. Surely I deserve some of that benefit.

But that wasn't how Molly thought. I was always wrong, and whoever wronged me always had a reason to do so. Would it have been so hard to give me a, "Hey, I'm sorry you were wronged," once in a while? Must have been. I never heard it. I felt like I was a philosophy major, only I didn't get any credits for it and my classes all took place whenever I wanted to go to my room—*my* room.

We had a final exam once. Well, actually we had them a lot, but this is the one I'm talking about. Corporations in

Society. An easy enough class. I was sitting in the back row next to Brett Michaels—not that one. Apparently, it wasn't an easy enough class for Brett because he felt the need to cheat off me.

Now, I'm no narc, so I didn't want to say anything to our professor. But I turned to Brett to tell him—I don't even know what I was going to say. I didn't get that far. Guess which one of us got caught and which one failed. I'll give you a hint—neither one was Brett Michaels.

I was looking for nothin' but a good time—again, different Brett Michaels—and instead, I failed Corporations in Society. “Maybe Brett had something going on at home and he couldn't study.” That's what Molly said to me. I told her I didn't even care about Brett; that I was just pissed at our professor. “Have you thought about it from her perspective? It probably did look like you were cheating.”

Are we joking?

Molly went to the dining hall for lunch after that. She wanted to eat a well-balanced meal before her presentation that night. I think it was for Ethics in American Law. When she told me about that class, I laughed. I thought the course title was a joke.

Her laptop was charging on her desk. It was an old piece of junk that weighed a thousand pounds. She had to charge it up until the last second or it would die in class. Her classroom was even older than the laptop and there weren't any accessible outlets. I knew all this because she told me the first week of the course. Some *other* poor student had to

charge his laptop and couldn't, so Molly sent him her notes; since that was the morally just thing to do.

Here's what *wasn't* the morally just thing to do.

Please don't interrupt—I need to get this out there. Molly would want it that way.

No. No, she wouldn't. I'm lying. Molly would not want it this way. But I'm almost done, and I know you're curious.

She left for lunch and I unplugged her laptop. I just kicked the cord right out. It was very finicky—could have happened all on its own. That's what Molly assumed.

Her laptop didn't make it for her final presentation. She failed the course.

And Molly was pissed. Turns out, when you fail a course due to something that isn't your fault, it can bring out some anger in you. "Half the class just talked about *Legally Blonde!* Sure, it's a great film, but this isn't a fucking media literacy course! At least my project required some level of actual intelligence to make!" She just went on and on.

Molly liked to bitch after that. Suddenly, not everyone was given the benefit of the doubt. If I got cut off in traffic, she was cursing out the Ford Focus before I even could. A lot of people didn't like this new Molly. She didn't care. Just gave her even more to bitch to me about. I loved it.

Alright, fine. I'll end it here. Molly Cooper was my best friend. May she finally rest in peace.

Jean-Baptiste

Elise Yvon

France

Epitaph: You are invited to come to honour Jean-Baptiste for the last time, this Wednesday. Please note: For those of you who will have to skip class for the funeral, any rituals to honour the dead are to be discouraged on school grounds.

When you left us all alone in that amphitheatre,
dreading the exam that was about to be cancelled,
we thought you had skipped.

We stole metal spoons from the canteen,
(the shitty ones you liked to bend)
and we stuck them, firm, in the ground
at our spot, at your feet,
hoping you'd bend them once again.

The Soles of Her Feet

Riley Donovan

Canada

I look at the bouquet of flowers. Red, yellow, and white roses dripping off a slab of stone. I stand behind a large oak tree. The casket descends into the ground. It didn't seem right to be with her family. I barely knew her. People in black hug, rain begins to spit from a bloated cloud, and umbrellas pop open. I look down at the star-shaped tattoo on my forearm.

A month ago, Fallon walked into the jewellery shop near the end of my shift, went up to the counter, and scanned the expensive rings. Black hair touched the glass as she got a closer look, finally pointing to one. Her brown shirt was inside out, I could see a floppy tag hanging from the side.

She slipped a tungsten silver band on her middle finger, "I'll take this one."

“Great, would you like me to put it in a box?”

“Nope, I’ll keep it on,” she said, digging her hand in the pocket of her jeans.

“Have any plans for the day?” I said, filling the silence.

“Cliff jumping, then camping.” Her eyes looked up at me, light blue irises, contrasting jet-black hair. They sat above dark, tired bags and a protruding red line on her right cheek, a blood vessel that gave up. “Want to come?”

We drove in her car to the cliffs, an hour north of Parry Sound, my feet crunching fast food bags on the dirty floor mat, two men arguing on the radio. Her left hand gripped the bottom of the steering wheel. There were pink raised lines, fine etchings, up her wrist. I couldn’t tell what they were exactly, or maybe I could.

“I don’t know why I said yes to this, I’m afraid of heights,” I said as we zig-zagged around cars.

“We’ll jump together.”

It was the low tone of her voice, deep, masculine, steady, that calmed me. When we stood on top of that cliff, looking down at the rippling water, she grabbed my hand, and interlocked our fingers. As if we knew each other.

Clothes piled underneath a pine tree, strong wind interrupting the flight of birds, my heart caught somewhere between gut and throat.

Fallon turned to look at me. “Be brave and powerful, harness that twisty feeling.”

It was there. In the way she read my nerves with ease. How her collarbones stuck out like wishbones. How she never broke eye contact. Love, when it arrives suddenly, feels sharp, like getting hit in the stomach.

I nodded and she began to run, pulling my arm with her, and we pushed off the warm stone into weightless air.

She had tattoos on the soles of her feet. Thin black shapes—a spaceship, a sword, block lettering—stretched from her heel to the base of her toes.

Beside the glow of a log cabin fire, I watched her stick a sewing needle into black ink held inside a bottle cap, then pierce the skin of her sole, creating designs derived from our surroundings. Under a smattering of bright stars, she tattooed the big dipper. Black bangs flopped over her forehead as she concentrated, thin lips slightly parted.

“Why do you tattoo the bottoms of your feet? Won’t they rub off?” I asked, while she finished the bottom of the ladle. A spot of blood trickled down her heel.

“The pain feels good, and I like when they fade. Not as permanent.”

That was her.

Messy like the wind, and I fell treacherously in love.

She finished her big dipper tattoo, but still had some ink. I watched the orange flames flicker against her clear eyes, then, without fully thinking, rolled up my sleeve and held out my bare forearm. Her hand pressed against the skin of

my wrist, holding it in place, and she looked at me, eyebrows raised. I smiled, meeting her gaze, blood pounding in my ears.

The first prick was painful, like pressing on a splinter. Her breath warm on my skin.

“Why did you ask me to come with you?” She dug the needle in again. I bit my lip and tried to keep still.

“I don’t know, really.” The needle went back into the ink. “You looked bored, staring at the clock on the wall.”

Her voice wavered. The confident tone began to sound like a choppy radio frequency. Wind shivered the leaves above us as I moved my face closer to hers.

“Maybe I didn’t want to be alone today,” Fallon said, the shape of a star taking form.

An odd thing to say. Questions floated around my mind, but I couldn’t speak. Was I scared of knowing what she meant? Or that by unravelling her, all that festered in her mind, it would muddy the person I found? The person I created the moment we fell from that cliff.

She dropped me off at my house in the morning, ran her thumb along the star etched on my pale skin, and said it suited me.

Then she drove away.

I spent days unable to find Fallon online. When I began to question my sanity, the plausibility of our encounter, I looked at the ink staining my arm. Weeks later, while scrolling through Instagram, my eyes caught an obituary post of a girl with long black hair and bright blue eyes. Estelle Mackenzie.

Died suddenly. It all clicked when I searched through the comments and found this one:

Fallon, Queen of our galaxy, you will be missed. Love, your fellow player.

That night I wept selfishly, like a water balloon split at the seams, spilling its guts onto cotton sheets. I didn't understand then, and maybe I never will.

The funeral has been over for an hour. Two people linger near the grave, the rest of the crowd has left. I walk towards them, mud underfoot, eyes watery from the breeze—mostly.

I approach a woman who I think is Estelle's mother. "Hello, Ms. Mackenzie?"

"Yes?"

"I'm so sorry to show up on this day. My name is Lily. I knew your daughter for a moment, and I just wanted to say what a special person she was." I look up at her, and realize I am standing under her umbrella. A tear falls from her eye, illuminating the blue. They look the same. Wordlessly, she drops the umbrella, a prong stabbing into the wet grass, and pulls me into her chest.

The Hollow Hedgerow

Jacob Wahlqvist

Sweden

Helena, painfully aware of her mother's old age, presented her with the idea that if she wished, she could arrange for them to go visit her brother, Rolf. And in her mother's eyes she saw the glimmering tears of someone who never takes a dawn for granted. "I would really want that," was all she responded.

Vivianne tracked down her brother's telephone number from an old leatherbound book, and Helena dialed the call. A familiar voice that had become old and weak broke through the other end of the line. "You have no idea how much I would love that," was all he said.

This would be the first time Vivianne and Rolf would meet in thirteen years.

One might be led to believe that this is a story of a fragmented relationship between two siblings troubled by a past of grave

mistakes and regrets, who, as the breath of death draws near, seek reconciliation. That's not true at all. Vivianne and Rolf love and respect each other and have always done that. Never has Vivianne wished for her brother anything but the best in life, and Rolf has always carried Vivianne's sorrows as if they were his own.

Perhaps, should one live to old age, one would understand why they hadn't met for so long. When you're old, the world can be a daunting place. When you are unable to drive your car because your vision narrows and darkens, the road can feel like a stormy sea, and when your hip is made of metal and feels like its splintering to dust whenever you sit down for more than an hour, travelling across the country can be an unbearable agony. There's also the bitter insight that life is behind you, that all that is left for you to do is to contemplate the life you had and rejoice in the journey of the young.

Wrapped in the warmth of a blanket, Vivianne is sitting on her thirteenth-floor balcony, overseeing the rooftops she has come to call home; they are pale and lifeless under the November sky from which large raindrops now fall with a sense of finality. In the kitchen behind her, Helena is making sandwiches for the trip. She tells her mother that it's time to go.

They take the lift to the ground floor and walk to the car park where the vehicles stand like neglected tombstones in puddles. Helena opens the car door for her mother, and together, they leave the concrete neighbourhood and go onto the highway. Vivianne has her head on the cold window. Outside, the trees are bleak and naked, dreaming of blossom,

and the sky is rippled and dark but knows that the sun will come back.

White and red houses in close proximity and vast hills; they are almost there. Every house, path and corner of the village seems familiar. The scenery tickles gentle spots at the back of Vivianne's mind, and she smiles. Through the wet car windows, the remnants of a bygone era swish by like the strokes of an abstract oil painting.

They pull around a big hollow hedgerow, and through it, although her vision is cloudy from old age, she can see her brother clearly. He's standing on the porch, awaiting them, hands in his pockets and his shoulders shrugged high. He's wearing a brown and yellow checkered cardigan and biscuit-beige trousers pulled high over the waist. She recognizes those peacock-blue eyes that remind her of her own.

Helena parks the car, and for a moment, the heavy fetters of elderliness seem to lose their weight as Vivianne hurries up the stone steps and lands in her brother's open arms. They shut their eyelids, behind which tears now brim, and grip each other fiercely. He's digging his fingers into his sister's coat, and she's relishing in the warmth of her brother's embrace.

That afternoon, they sit and have tea in the sunroom. The air is cool and crisp, and the birds sing. Over a pink and white tea set with painted flowers, Helena witnesses the sibling's reunification. She can't help but notice the effortless nature of their conversation. Everything they say falls with great weight and wisdom. They are wizards with their words and gestures; they speak in turn, and never once do they miss

each other. Using the innate bond between two siblings like a magic bridge, they deliver everything with containment and say only what they must, condensing years of experiences into pithy sentences. They laugh, smile and bewitch. But they never cry.

After two hours, everything that had to be said had been said. Vivianne and Rolf look at each other. Whatever's beautiful is short.

When they hug each other farewell on the porch that afternoon, an ambivalent embrace in which there is the melancholy of an inevitable departure and the ecstasy of an eternal reunion. Vivianne, 87 and Rolf 80-years-old: those two siblings who had experienced the great wonders of growing up together, who shared the same peacock-blue eyes; those two who had hiked the alps and spent their first summers in a boiling camper van; those who at the unmistakable groan of the bomb alarm in 1943 had told each other fairytales in the root cellar to keep darkness at bay; those two who always carried each other's sorrows and celebrated each other's successes; those two siblings who during early adulthood had met partners and started families; those two who's partners now were nothing but precious memories; those two siblings who entered the grey valley of ageing individually; those two siblings who hadn't seen each other in thirteen years, not because they didn't want to, but because when you're old, the world can be a daunting place; those two siblings now know, as they wave farewell through the hollow hedgerow, that they will never see each other again.

Blackbird

(excerpt)

Felicity Deacon

UK

When I was a small girl, my mother used to say to me, *Grief is for the living*. I remember her holding me close to her chest when Grandmother died, whispering it to the both of us like a secret. Like we weren't allowed to miss her out loud.

Grandmother had always lived with us. She raised me more than my parents did, when the farm was still young and demanded all their attention. There's a memory at the back of my mind—or perhaps it's a dream, just wistful thinking—of her singing to me as she rocked me in her arms, the gods battling and taunting one another with gusts of wind and flashes of lightning.

When I was old enough, we would sit under the old olive tree, and she would teach me how to write my name in the dirt. When Mother and Father came in from the fields, I

would show them all I'd learned. Mother would praise me, but Father would just turn away silently.

Grandmother was always quiet when Father was home. Mother said it was because they had argued once, before I was born. Grandmother had found a small blackbird that had fallen from a pine and brought it back home to nurse it. Mother and Father had both been out working on the harvest, so she left the blackbird on the table by the hearth and went outside to find some soft moss for it to rest on.

But Father returned before Grandmother and thought that the bird had flown into the house and injured itself in a panic. So he took it outside, broke its neck, and threw it to the dogs. Grandmother flew into a rage, the kind that I had better hope I never saw, Mother would tell me, and I would tuck myself into her neck in fright. Grandmother blamed Father for killing an innocent animal. Father protested that he couldn't have known, but it didn't help. She never really forgave him.

On my tenth birthday, Grandmother woke me early and ushered me outside to watch the sunrise. Where normally the rolling hills were full of golden wheat and cattle, instead the tips of the frosty, barren fields glistened and shone against the horizon, and we watched in awe as the world awakened. She held me tightly, always so warm, even in the winter.

She died that spring, silently, in the night. It felt wrong, like she had been taken from me too soon. I didn't feel her go; none of us did. She didn't deserve a quiet death, a quiet grieving. She deserved the whole world to know about her, remember her, mourn her.

We buried her in the woods, in her favourite little glade. It was filled with crocuses and bluebells, a carpet of colour. The little stream weaving through the silver birches was blissfully unaware of the sorrow of the three people standing nearby. I had always loved sitting with her in the dappled sunlight, making crowns out of dandelions and looking for frogs in the shallows. When Father was at market, Mother would come and join us. It always felt more like home than our creaky house did, even in the winter, when the flowers had gone and leaves littered the ground.

We couldn't afford a proper burial. There would be no urn, no jewellery save for a simple gold bangle Grandfather had given her. I placed the first weaving I had ever made over her face. Mother said it would bring her some comfort as she crossed the River Styx and entered the Underworld. I didn't say anything back.

Mother and I watched as Father's spade cleaved through the soft, damp earth. He had never been to our glade before. His presence felt like an invasion. But there was no way that Mother and I could have buried her ourselves. I felt as though we had broken something we'd promised to keep safe forever.

We lit a candle and offered up a lamb to the gods, and Mother chose a stone to mark the spot. I never went back after that. It felt wrong to be there without her, even though she was already there, in the ground. I know Mother went, every once in a while, to sit and remember her. She even said she could feel her, sometimes, but I still couldn't bring myself to return. It felt like a false hope, like if I went back she'd magically be there, alive and whole. I couldn't risk that

being a lie. Better that she was out there, hiding in the trees, basking in the warmth of the sun and listening to the birds. Better that she was out there and I would never see her, than to try to look for her and never find her.

I missed her most of all on my wedding day. She had always spoken about how I would be the prettiest bride, just as Mother had been, and she had been, and her mother before her. I would laugh, and she would throw purple petals over me, as if I was a fresh bride and not a giddy child. I would ask, *How did you know that Grandfather would be a good husband?* and she would say, *Because he was kind.* I knew she did not think that Father was kind, though he was good enough to me and Mother, and treated Grandmother as best he could. She thought him careless and blunt, too quick with a blade and too slow with a smile. He always brought me Thessalian apples in the autumn and would make sure to buy the extra thick wool when we could afford it, to spin ourselves new blankets and cloaks. But Grandmother couldn't see anyone but a man who had killed a little blackbird without a second thought. *Yes, marry someone kind, Eurydice, she would say, and you'll be sure to live a good and happy life with him.*

The Lidl Bag

Barbara Athanasoulas

Canada

I want to know who put my grandmother in a Lidl bag. I'd just like a few words.

The stone church that's older than my grandmother's grandmother is attached to an ossuary, which opens out onto a graveyard hardly big enough even for those bodies that haven't been exhumed.

It's more like a vault than a room, the air is stagnant and musty. The windows on the front-facing wall are cracked, barred, and covered in grime. There's just enough light to make peering inside worth the effort. The space between the piles of bone-boxes isn't quite a walkway so much as floor yet to be filled. The limited emptiness a promise that the ossuary can still serve the ever-dwindling population.

It's in this ossuary where my grandmother's bones are blocking my path in a plastic Lidl bag. Where else could she be? I have checked every headstone in the cemetery, and every bone-box from the last century.

The plastic handle is broken and I can't bring her home unless I wrap my arms round and clutch that dusty Lidl bag close to my chest the way she used to carry me to bed. But I don't think I was ever meant to be this near to her bones. I don't think we were ever meant to be this close.

The wooden boxes emit a scent of mildew, they are covered in cobwebs and layers of dirt that make the inscriptions illegible and blur the photos taped over the lids. As I crouch, I waver from the ball of one foot to the other, keeping my sweaty thighs away from the newer, blistering hot, metal boxes on either side. This would be easier if she were in a box, as she should have been.

I would tuck it under my arm, put my purse over top, and make it home before any groggy early-risers stared too long at my cargo.

But maybe I shouldn't. Maybe I should leave her here and go home. She wouldn't understand why I'm leaving her. It's in the Bible—The Lidl Bag—Saint Paul's Letters to the Grocery-Shoppers, they told me so at Sunday School. Or maybe I'd taken too much of the intoxicating Blood of Christ that week.

Home is too empty when she isn't there, scolding me for feeding the neighbourhood cats slices of meat meant for our sandwiches. If she could see me now, she'd say I'm too old to

be concerned about the cats and too underdressed to be this close to a church, even in this mid-August heat.

As it stands I'm crouching in the dirt in the ossuary, and her femurs are rubbing against each other as if she were only sitting, one leg thrown over the other, in her favourite armchair. I wrap my arms around the Lidl bag and my eyes are watering because of the bone dust not because I miss her not because I can't lift her the way she used to lift me not because I'm blinded by the extreme capacity for rage I inherited from my grandmother, who always tampered hers down unless it was on my behalf.

There's a hole in the Lidl bag and her bones are touching my skin and I know we were never meant to be this close.

My grandmother is in a Lidl bag on the dusty floor in the ossuary and I'm on my knees on the floor of the ossuary with her, and maybe God will make his way in between her dry bones and my bare skin and again be that barrier that we had in life. Me, hiding my novel under my skirt in the pews; her, flipping through the Divine Liturgy to catch up with Father Nektarios because I made us late. The largest of my church-purses hid the smallest of my novels. This insignificant Lidl bag shouldn't be enough to contain the greatness that was my grandmother.

Why did a woman so good as her decompose in the dirt of her homeland only to be exhumed and left in the ossuary in an old plastic Lidl bag with a broken handle and a hole in the side? Is that all there is after you toil for eighty-nine years (as a baptised and sanctified soul) to make a life for yourself

and build a family and sustain a community and even find time on Sunday afternoons to needlepoint pastoral scenes?

Who in God's name would put her in a broken plastic bag without telling me, without calling me, without even letting me know the exhumation had happened? Whose neck can I wring for such an undeserved act? For such a slimy, low, disgusting, villainous—

“Child.” A shadow on the threshold blocks the noonday sun. Black robes made dirty by the dusty stone floor. I raise my head, my neck strains. Father Nektarios is older, but so am I. He's no longer the bright-eyed, dark-haired young priest of my memory. Not the family man who could get the most jaded of youths to sit through a sermon, hidden novel untouched. He has the grey beard of the monks on Mount Athos, hands folded over his paunchy stomach, with a mournful wedding band that inspires a twist of pity in my young heart. His *presvytera* is on the shelf over the door, over his head, in a solid metal box with a picture of them on their wedding day.

“I have to bring her home.”

His eyes are just as round and brown and holy as they were when I was young enough to hope that Sunday-faith would be enough to see me through funeral after funeral. He's retained that childlike belief that made the atheists cynical and the agnostics envious.

He hasn't called me child in a long time. I wish I remembered the exact day Holy Communion changed. *Child of God—Receive the Precious Blood of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* turned

into *‘Servant of God—Receive the Doubt and Guilt of Your Over-Precious and Long-Expired Teenage Angst.*

“That’s not your grandmother.” He reaches out his right hand, his ring glints in the sun.

That’s what they all said at the funeral. A body is just a corpse after the final exhale. But remains should be properly interred, not confused among unlabelled bones. If this is not my grandmother, then that golden band is not his wife, and maybe we both have something to set down.

An Oak Tree

Abrianna Sigel

USA

After she finished eating her dinner one evening, a young girl climbed into the lap of her grandmother. The girl's grandmother began to recall a story to her, and her eyes widened as she listened.

When I was a little girl, all the children in our neighborhood would play together in the hills. After school, we would all run back to our homes to kiss our mothers on the cheek, and then right back out our front doors. Just down the road, everyone would gather at the hills, and run around in the rolling fields just outside town.

One day as we played, one of the little girls - I remember that she was called Sheila - decided we should all try to climb the tallest oak tree as a competition. Sheila was the shortest in her family.

Her older brother had always been taller than her, but just this past spring, Sheila's little sister had begun to overtake her. She had a little bit of a temper and a bad habit of stomping on the foot of anyone who beat her in kickball. But, besides that, she was a fine girl. Most of the smaller girls tended to be the fastest runners, so personally, I always wanted to be on her team for recess games.

Anyway, Sheila walked up to the base of the tree, and the closer she got to the giant trunk, the smaller she appeared. We all turned our faces up and stared into the dark leaves. Sheila had a big smile, she was sure we could make it to the top. Some of the girls were mumbling and grumbling excuses, hoping nobody would notice them shuffling away. Two or three other girls and I were up for at least giving it a go.

As I began to climb, I thought to myself that perhaps I had never seen a tree that towered quite as high as this one. Looking straight up along its trunk, the leaves were so thick that I could hardly see any blue sky peeking through. The other girls and I slowly made our way up the first few branches, testing the strength of each one with an arm or foot before placing our full body weight onto it. Sheila moved quickly and clambered up above us. She would occasionally laugh, proud of herself, and call down to us to let us know which branch to choose next and then to hurry up. But the distance between us only grew. Soon, she had pulled her little body up into the leaves, and we had to strain to even catch a glimpse of her skirt moving through the green.

I remember finally seeing the bottom of her Mary Jane shoe pull up into the leaves, to rest on the next branch. And then I couldn't see her anymore. We got lost—or at least I did—focusing on my own climbing. My arms weren't very strong, but I heaved myself

higher, trying to keep my breaths quiet so nobody would think I was working too hard. I paused, pulling my skirt from a piece of bark it snagged on, and I realized I hadn't heard from Sheila for a few minutes. I called up to her, but she didn't respond. The girl below me called up as well, and soon we all joined. We scanned for any sign of movement, a rustle in the branches. But there was no sign of Sheila.

All there was left to do was continue on, and the thought of my own distance from the ground completely left my mind. I kept calling for her, I didn't care about seeming out of breath anymore. Some of the twigs and bark of the branches were scratching against my arms and face, but I felt driven forward and I couldn't stop now.

Finally, there were no more branches to reach for. I had reached the top of the tree. And Sheila was nowhere to be found. The other girls finally rose up through the tree and reached the top, pausing on branches beside me. We squinted and scanned even more, we rustled the branches. We even bounced the branches to try to scare Sheila into making noise, we thought surely she must have been hiding from us and playing a trick. But there was nowhere to hide.

We led a group of adults back to the tree and told them what happened. That Sheila climbed and climbed, and we followed her, and she was gone. The adults climbed the tree, and they searched the fields. But they didn't find Sheila. I never saw her again.

The little girl couldn't believe her grandmother's story. She tried to get her grandmother to confess, but she replied that she hadn't meant to scare her granddaughter and that the

story was only the truth. The girl's grandfather, who had been sitting in his armchair doing a crossword, spoke up. He said something similar had happened in his neighborhood when he was a boy. He said that a kid from his neighborhood had also disappeared in a tree, or maybe behind a boulder, he couldn't remember. He returned to his crossword, and the grandmother only shrugged.

The girl wondered briefly if her grandparents were going crazy, but the chances of both of them losing their mind at the same time seemed unlikely, and they still looked pretty normal to her. She wondered how they could both be so calm about this and then another thought struck her. Her grandmother seemed so unphased, so accepting, that it must have been a normal occurrence. How many other people in her life had disappeared?

That night, the girl curled up under the covers of her bed. She thought to herself that tomorrow at school she would be sure to give a hug to every one of her friends, and to hold each one of them extra tight.

The Gloves

Bridget Shea

USA

Lucky King Midas with his touch of gold, what a *gift* to have. Mine was far, far worse. I pulled my thick leather gloves from my hands and gripped my coffee mug lovingly. The comforting warmth filled me with something like joy. I cradled it a bit before taking a deep swig of fresh black coffee. I always took care to brush my teeth *before* the coffee, the coffee-breath often gave me a wide berth in public. If I ever touched a person with my bare hands the way I touched this mug, I would be filled with the images and senses of their most powerful memory. “Wow, you can read minds! That’s amazing! What a life hack!” You must be thinking, but it’s not quite that simple.

When I was eight I tried to get the answers to an exam out of my maths teacher. Turns out maths wasn’t her deepest love, but her next door neighbor’s husband was. I learned quickly

not to touch someone unless they told me honestly what I would see once my fingertips made contact with their skin. That was what it came down to: honesty. The honest type was few and far between. I could understand why my high school boyfriend lied and told me that his most powerful memory was the meatball sub he'd had for lunch that day, when it was actually that time he saw Margot Robbie's tits for the first time. I didn't take it too personally in the moment, they were nice after all. I started to take it more personally when he had seen mine and the memory didn't change. Every now and then I'll find an honest person and I'll be able to put up with them long enough to form a meaningful relationship. It doesn't take long for people to start hiding things and telling lies when you tell them that you have a gift like mine. The only relationships that are a constant in my life are those with my parents and sister, or I guess mom and sister. When Dad died in the crash, every time I touched Mom from then on, all I could see was his mangled body through the car windshield, swaying uselessly back and forth and back and forth. "All I want for Christmas" by Mariah Carey playing hauntingly as Mom screams for help. Christmases are weird now, because Dad's not here, and because we're not allowed to play any Mariah Carey around the holidays.

On the day of the funeral, Mom, Carly, and I stood silently by Dad's casket in the dimly lit funeral hall. The attendants of Briggs and Son's Funeral Home floated in and out of the rooms like trapped flies. I wondered if they would serve dinner in this exact room. Would there be a steak option, or would it all be vegetarian? Pigs In A Blanket were preferred—

“Can’t you at least pretend to be sad?” Carly scowled at me from my right, between me and Mom. The dark bags under her eyes were glistening with wetness.

“If you had seen death as many times as I have, Carly, you’d eventually feel indifferent too.” I retorted.

“Whatever.” She wiped at her cheeks. “Just don’t manage to make this day about you.” The repeatedly stepped on deep blue carpet and ageing cream-coloured walls made the room feel stagnant and trapped the scent of death. This place smelled like it had in all of the memories of funerals I had seen: something of chemicals and smokey pine, the kind of smell that isn’t bothersome at first, but slowly starts to grate on you. Relatives, some that I recognized and others who I had never heard of, drifted down the line of my remaining immediate family members, offering condolences and hand shakes. Uncle Ira waddled over, sweat scattering his forehead like morning dew. The way he huffed when he walked, I’d heard him coming from across the hall. There were people that I avoided touching all together because I had a feeling that what I would see would make my skin crawl. Overtime and after witnessing many illicit thoughts I grew out of this avoidance. I kept my gloves off the day of the funeral in an effort to both distract and entertain myself, but I quickly started to question that choice. I looked over to the coat rack at my gloves, too late. Uncle Ira trudged closer and offered his sausage-link fingers out to me.

“I’m so sorry for your loss, girl. Tobias was a great brother and father.” You’d have thought that lunch had already

been served, by the smell of his breath. I would have taken embalming fluid over that stench any day.

“He certainly was.”

I reached out to him preparing to see something that would surely make me ill. As soon as my skin touched Uncle Ira’s, I could feel a gentle summer breeze dance through my hair. I was young and strong, with the body of an athletic teenage boy. I stood waist deep in a pair of beige waders. The lake water was beautifully warm as it trickled down the fishing rod and onto my pruning hands. The sun, high in the midday sky, kissed my cheeks. Deep in the Desolation Wilderness of California, Lake Genevieve’s water lapped gently against the rocky shore. The lapping of the water was one of the only sounds present at the remote lake, other than the chirping songs from the birds within the pines. The surrounding mountains shot up into the sky and reflected perfectly on the water’s surface. I was warm, still, healthy, my future ahead of me. I was happy.

“I’m proud of you Ira, and the person you’re becoming.” Someone said tenderly from my right, so tenderly that my heart ached.

I turned to face the voice, keeping my fishing rod towards the centre of the lake. It was Dad. His face was young, a version of him that I had never met, but loved later on. He stood there whole, every bit of the man who raised me. His smile reached his eyes the way it always had, and made his nose crinkle slightly. His raven black hair fell in long strands, poking out from underneath his camo beanie. His hands were

gripping his fishing rod tightly, not yet calloused by years of hard work at the lumberyard, but they were Dad's hands nonetheless. "Keep it up, little brother." He turned back to the water. I felt my heart swell with pride and love.

I dropped Uncle Ira's hand suddenly.

FURTHER TIMELINES

Respite's Arc

Aakarsh Asoka

India

For a moment, everything halts.
The weight of the self-vanishes.
The world pauses, the mind hums,
And the isolated room,
With its half-closed window, echoes laughter.

For a breath, the tension breaks.
And the ache in the mind is known by the heart.
Listen to the pulse's thumps,
To the wires and pipes,
They wither and snap, allowing blood to flow again.

For an instant, the cold machinery fades,
And the warmth of the abyss is felt.
The burdens of living are forgotten,
And the light dissolves,
Allowing darkness to blanket us.

For a second, respite is granted,
And no God stands above, monitoring grimly.
For now, there are no threats,
And the gaoler's axe
Turns into a wreath of deathly white lilies.

Aurora

Florentina Jungwirth

Austria

“What’s your name?” I asked the little girl in front of me. Aged four or five, I had never seen a child so brimming with joy and radiant with life. Every flower she touched appeared to open up and grow its petals by just the tiniest bit as she ran around the gardens touching and smelling all of them. All the adults up to the elderly aristocratic castle owner who briefly walked past the wedding party bowed down to her and couldn’t help but laugh as they were handed a handful of rose petals from her little wicker basket. Even the castle dogs, two young golden retrievers, appeared to have fallen for her charms wholeheartedly as they kept returning to her, throwing themselves onto the ground in front of her with their bellies in the air. If I had been told right there and then that she was the centre of the universe, the point to which all

of us were being pulled and the heart around which all the rest of the stars and planets were revolving I would not have doubted it for a moment.

There had been no mention of her when I had accepted the invitation, no word of her existence when I had talked to my old friend at her bachelorette party months ago. Yet, it was the little girl alone I had watched throughout the ceremony as she threw the rose petals while walking down the aisle. It was her I watched as the bride walked in, the girl seated right next to her father in the front row. Her little eyes lit up as she turned back to watch the bride walk down the aisle and threw a last handful of petals, coaxing a laugh out of the bride just as she was gathering her dress to walk up the few stairs towards the groom and registrar. She was watching the ceremony attentively, singing the hymns and clapping at appropriate moments. Sometimes her father's hand would find its way to her little head, adorned with a flower crown, and linger there for just a few seconds. I'd had to lie upon being asked by the groom's mother whether I had liked the vows.

It should have been easy enough to lose sight of her in a crowd of one-hundred-and-twenty-people during the drinks reception on the castle grounds after the ceremony, yet she always found a way back in to my field of vision. Every cartwheel she did in her dress widened the smile on my lips and every laugh I heard from a distance kept echoing in my ears. Yet, I kept my distance as everyone else was readily taking the flowers she offered. It seemed too dangerous to get too close to her. It might just trigger a particle explosion, a black hole opening and swallowing me up just by me entering her

radius. We could not exist in the same world but different versions of reality that either she or I could be part of but never both. We were incompatible to live in the same universe. We could not both be. And yet my little wrinkle in time kept circulating around me, divorcing me from any version of my life I could have imagined.

Perhaps I had fallen into a coma while pregnant and they had cut her out of me. My hand shut to my lower belly—no scar. Or I was suffering from amnesia, being unable to remember my own daughter. Every day, I had to be told my own life story and reminded of her existence due to early-onset Alzheimer's. Whoever's duty it was to remind me of my own daughter had failed. She was perfect, she was everything. The same shade of blonde hair her father and I shared fell down on her shoulders and wrapped around her little fingers as she played with it. Her eyes were her father's, Lake Tahoe blue, rather than my own, a dull grey. Her cheekbones too, recognisably his but adorned with freckles neither of us possessed. She was the first of the two children we had agreed on seven years ago. A girl too just like we both had wished. A girl as radiant as any daughter we could have wished for, filling our lives with the happiness and sunshine that we anticipated she would and we wished to name her for. Aurora for a daughter we had agreed on, after his favourite fairy tale and my favourite time of day.

“Would you like to have some rose petals?”

I slammed my chair into the table, knocking over my glass of champagne as her little voice startled me from behind.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t wanna scare you!” she grabbed a napkin and started wiping off some of the champagne that had spilled on my dress.

“It’s OK, it’s just champagne. It won’t leave any stains.” My voice broke while I carefully waited for her to put down the napkin.

“Your dress is so so pretty! Like the moon!”

“Thank you.”

“Do you wanna have some rose petals?” she grabbed a handful from her basket and held it out to me. The universe might cease to exist but I had no choice but to cup my hands under hers and pour the petals into them. Her pinkie briefly touched mine and she beamed up at me as my hands were filled with her petals. I couldn’t resist.

“What’s your name?”

Medea, revisited

(text reworked from Medea by Euripides)

Katherine Catchpole

UK

Justice, victory, my enemies are set.
The winds hopeless and storm-tossed.
This appears done,
and my plan will give little pleasure.

I will change
and make wisdom in our interest.
Only let the children leave here.
They will be my death gifts,
silk and beaten gold.

This fatal poison touches easy.

What comes next, my children,
no one will ever take from me.
The murder, my own,
that most unutterable of crimes,
I will endure.

So, let me loose,
I never have fled my falling.
But the gods will pay,
writhing and mild.

I am kind.
I love my own—
and will destroy for a life.

Mayfly

Evan Qu

China

Frederick III, after taking over the authority from his father, Frederick II, finally had a stage to showcase his ambitions. The interstellar war, now in its third century, would come to an end with the successful conquest of the FY13 galaxy. However, the Republic showed no signs of surrendering this galaxy, despite the Imperial fleet surrounding it completely. The Republic leaders continued to formulate galactic defense plans, attempting to salvage some dignity to avoid the history books attributing the fall of the Republic to the incompetence of its leaders.

In the war room, Frederick observed the star map, proud of his outstanding strategic abilities that had turned the tide in favor of the Empire over the past decade. Under his leadership, the Imperial forces were unstoppable, transforming

the once gloomy star map into a dazzling spectacle. The title of “bastard son” was no longer uttered, and his humble origin became inconspicuous against the backdrop of remarkable achievements.

“I’ve done it, Father.” he murmured to himself.

“You will become the executioner of countless civilizations.” a voice suddenly echoed in his mind.

Frederick immediately activated the spaceship’s interference system, determined not to let anyone attempt to destroy his mind through mental control. However, the voice maintained its transcendent calmness, resonating in his mind.

“Who are you?” Frederick knew the other person could hear his voice.

“Put on your combat helmet; we have connected it to our civilization system.”

He complied, and his consciousness entered a virtual world. Yet, he quickly realized it was different from his virtual worlds; here, anything could be generated through thoughts.

“You are still so combative.” The voice came from a middle-aged man in white robes. He stood on a wooden boat in the center of a river, with the moon pouring silver light down from the mountains behind him. He looked at the swords and spears generated by Frederick.

Frederick surrendered; he found his thoughts couldn’t harm the other person.

“You can call me Su Shi.” The middle-aged man invited Frederick onto the boat, where a wooden table and a jug of wine were arranged with two delicate cups.

“I know, an ancient Eastern poet from a civilization called Earth.” Frederick played with the cup.

“That’s him.”

“Him?”

“Yes, what you see is just him. As for me, I can manifest in any form.”

“Who are you really?”

“I am just a representative of the mayfly civilization, following orders to converse with you.”

Frederick’s heart sank; this was one of the mysterious civilizations he had heard of before. The lifespan of mayflies was only 0.05 seconds, allowing for 20 iterations in a single second. Scientists suspected they were one of the most advanced civilizations in the universe, yet strangely, they never initiated communication with the outside world. Unexpectedly, today was the day he encountered them in this way.

“The slaughter must end.” Su Shi drank a cup of wine, and the fragrance of osmanthus blossoms wafted from the jug.

“Do you think I’ve destroyed too many civilizations and become the most infamous dictator in the universe?”

“Such things happen every second on countless planets; you’ve just expanded it to the entire universe.”

“All I’ve done is aim for universal unification. You know, the confrontation between the Republic and the Empire has

lasted for tens of thousands of years. The number of people who die each year is countless. After unification, there will be no more wars, and people can live peacefully. Isn't that good?"

"You have no right to interfere with the life and death of all life; everything is governed by natural law," Su Shi stood up, and the pure white robe that had gathered around his waist rolled down, emitting a simple and sacred white. "For mayflies, we don't care about life and death. In countless iterations, we have completed the evolution of our neural system. The speed at which our brains process information cannot be described by rates anymore. Once connected to this virtual system, we can live as we please, and 0.05 seconds become eternity."

"Theory of relativity. The faster the speed, the slower the time." Frederick commented.

"That's roughly it, a more popular explanation," Su Shi responded. "Life and death have no meaning for us. We have already achieved everything we want: wars, wealth, status, and none of these concern us. But we just want all life to be treated with the respect and mercy they deserve."

"Are you saying that all life has value?" Frederick found it hard to believe. This was a proposition that was weak and repeatedly mentioned; life in the universe was the least valuable. Frederick had seen countless planets that existed only for the purpose of mining, whose inhabitants could only be miners for a lifetime, whose entire life's labor might only be enough for a ship to sail once, and whose owner was shuttling between the vast universe, engaged in the slave trade.

“No, just mercy. Our civilization has spread across the universe, and often, a passerby’s step can mean the extinction of an entire family. Despite this, we still don’t care about life and death because our entire life has passed in that one moment. But life spans in the rest of the universe are measured in years, hundreds of years, or thousands of years.”

Frederick pondered.

“Great Frederick III,” Su Shi sat upright, “I hope you will have mercy on the people of the FY13 galaxy as an act of redemption for your countless slaughters.”

“In the end, life is just a drop in the ocean...” Su Shi finished his sentence and downed the wine in the jug.

He gradually disappeared. Before leaving, he said, “As an aside, the reason for asking you to stop the slaughter is also because of your mother, who is currently in this galaxy.”

Frederick opened his eyes suddenly; the star map in the war room flickered. An ephemeral being floated at his side, then disappeared in an instant.

One Final Visitor

Aakarsh Asoka

India

When the Apocalypse comes knocking,
bringing the end times as a gift,
I think I will invite him in.

We will sit like old friends,
laugh about the greatest of taboos,
dance to the most morbid of music,
and feast on falsest of truths.

When the day has passed
and he must leave to sleep,
I think I will kiss his forehead
and tell him, "Come and try again."

Vigil

Dorian Rose

UK

You were sleeping in a tent six miles from the nearest village when something screamed, somewhere in the woods. You sat up, struggled free from your sleeping bag and listened.

Another scream echoed through the trees, and the night erupted. Tens, hundreds, of shrieking voices joined the first and shattered against your eardrums, ricocheting through your body with a force that drove you to the ground. You were surrounded, panic surging cold through your veins and—

Quiet. Only the ringing in your ears.

With trembling hands, you unzipped the flap of your tent. Shone your torch into dark woods—white glow on the pines, deep shadows framing one shivering circle of light. You swept the beam across the forest floor, stepped out and paced around the tent. Not a single footprint in the mud

besides the ones that matched your boots, as far out as you could bring yourself to walk. You returned to the mouth of the tent and stared for a while, uncomprehending. Unable to convince yourself it was a hallucination, a dream.

You considered trying to rest, but even you couldn't sleep after that. You packed your camp away and walked through the night to reach the village. Arrived after dawn to find—nothing. The people were gone. There was ash scattered through the streets.

The people were gone. The storefronts shuttered, the houses dark and quiet. Several front doors stood open, creaking in the breeze, and when you called no answer came.

You thought of aliens, then evacuation. Perhaps the shrieking you heard was a siren, distorted as it rebounded over valleys and hills. Perhaps somewhere, bombs had fallen and as you stood there breathing in the open air, fallout chased across the skies.

You decided to stay. Wait out the radiation. Wait as long as you could last, and maybe someone would find you. You raided abandoned shops for supplies and sheltered in the cellar of the local pub, hoping trespass and shoplifting weren't an overreaction.

Hoping they were.

Days and nights enough to lose track down in the musty dark, where shadows lapped the edges of your dreams and you thought of nothing but sunlight. There was a clock down there, hidden somewhere amongst the crates and barrels.

You heard the *tick tick tick* of the gears and searched for days. You never found it.

Your patience ran out before the supplies. You emerged stiff-legged into glaring light and found the cobblestone streets tangled with weeds. It felt like summer.

You were hopeful, then. Believed you couldn't be the last person alive. Your hope drove you to wandering, from village to town to farmhouse, through fields and overgrown country lanes. For months you walked in search of anyone, anything, alive. But even the insects were gone.

You missed the imperious gaze of your neighbour's cat.

You learnt you could miss bluebottles.

You dug into the earth with your bare hands once, looking for worms. And these, you did find. Limp strips of flesh that split open when you held them up to the light, and crumbled to ash.

You stayed away from the city for a long time, unable to face the undertaking it would be to clear the place. How many weeks, months would it take to scour every street? To cover miles of buildings thoroughly enough you could be sure that nothing was missed?

But autumn came. The trees dropped their leaves and made you think of skeletons, and you decided to pass through. To take a day – just one, to wander the streets. To shout a few times, and see if anyone came running.

You were halfway to the centre when you found yourself at the bottom of a stairwell, sunlight spilling through a skylight far above. No recollection of the building's exterior, or how you'd got there. Just your hand on a basement door, and something pulling. Something pulsing in the darkness beyond, beckoning you in.

You knew better than to open it. And still you did. Faint sunlight trickled past you, cast your silhouette against the floor within a rectangle of light. You could see nothing beyond its reaches—only shadow, solid and black. And within—

You thought they were mannequins. Dozens, strewn across the floor. But where the light touched their skin, it cracked and blanched. The flesh beneath sloughed away in clumps of ash and you thought you saw something where there should have been bone. Something black and wriggling, burrowing deeper as the light closed in.

Tick, click, a sound like clockwork gears.

The bodies jolted. Writhed and twisted their way towards the sound on crumbling limbs. You heard them still again, just beyond the reach of the light.

You closed the door. Kept your eyes on it until you turned a corner in the stairwell, and then you ran. All the way out of the city, to the edge of the woods. You walked until dusk, as fast and as far as you could bear.

But you woke in the dark, that night. Not to sound or smell. To presence felt. Something was there, outside the tent. Something was waiting, focus latched onto you. Thoughts

tugging at the edges of your mind like waves pulling back from a shoreline.

You didn't move, didn't reach for your torch. You stared into the black and thought of the cellar.

It didn't come for you then. Nor all the nights you've felt it since as you struggle for sleep, wondering what you will be when you wake. Listening to the *tick tick tick* like a clock, somewhere out there in the darkness.

You shelter in your tent and hope—and wonder why—the shadow lets you lie.

Nostos

Kayla Slack

USA

I stand among the ruins
to feel the ground shake
with newborn cries

I was born here
made here cursed here

My feet are called
to a corner
wreckage

I kick a chunk of concrete
it skips
like a flat rock on creek water

Where it lands, I look
up a few floors
imagine begrudging doctors
dragging their feet to my mother's
room

It seemed I was ready
to join this world
but no one was ready
for me

I can almost hear my newborn
self, begging to crawl
back inside my mother

The hospital
the first place
I am from
Is gone

In a Parallel Life

Maddie Heidari

Iran

In a parallel life, HE did love HER back, even more so; HE'd just run out of options to save HIS own skin. HE knew how much pain and heartbreak HE'd caused HER, only HE was in twice as much anguish. HE'd been the one keeping all HER photos in a hidden folder on HIS personal computer. HE'd been the one keeping an eye on HER throughout the years, even though THEY'd been estranged for a very long while and said goodbye on the worst of terms.

In a parallel life, the now-wife, the then-so-called-friend of HERS, had gotten permanent amnesia, with no recollection of ever meeting HER, much less exchanging secrets of their love lives. In a parallel life, the wife had no idea how hard SHE'd fought to finally have HIM. Her affluent father had found a picture of HIM on her phone after the accident,

surmising that she'd been seeing HIM, possibly in love. He'd reached out, letting HIM in on what had happened, asking for help to give his brain-damaged daughter the chance of a stable life, saying he'd pay good money in exchange for HIS hand. The boy, then stuck in the harshest possible financial circumstances, accepted the offer with little hesitation. Even though HE'd had the scarcest interest in that girl and was formerly in the habit of mocking her ludicrous poses and acts shared online, HE was now left with one obligation at hand and that was to make her happy and keep her so for the rest of their lives; that is, if HE wanted to keep the paychecks coming in. Hence, the PDA and the super cheesy wedding footage.

In a parallel life, HE hated HIMSELF more than SHE did. Each night before bed, HE would go over the memory of THEIR first kiss; how innocent and awkward it had been and how happy THEY used to make each other back then. That serene embrace of HERS used to lull HIM to sleep. It was not as if HE'd been ashamed of being seen with HER because HE felt SHE was beneath HIS station, but vice versa. HE didn't want people to judge HER. Who in their right mind would go out with that fella after all? What did HE have to offer? Something must be amiss with that girl, no doubt.

In a parallel life, HE used to gather every single strand of HER hair left on HIS mattress, not to dispose of, but to keep and treasure as memorabilia. HE missed HER dearly and wanted to reach out, to explain why HE did what HE did, maybe to get HER back. However, SHE'd moved on after a year or so, met someone decent-looking and started anew. HE tried so hard to do the same, seeking solace in

the idea that SHE was better off without HIM. This new guy seemed legit after all. Nonetheless, something bugged HIM about this whole affair. So, HE dug up some info on the rival and discovered a load of dirt. The supposed gentleman turned out to be a serial womanizer, a true lecher. At first, HE thought this would be a winning card to get HER back, so HE contacted HER, after so many years, to warn HER of the deceit and lies SHE was surrounded with, hoping this would soften HER heart towards HIM. How naïve of HIM, though! SHE retorted nonchalantly that SHE knew all about the partner's infidelities and that there was an arrangement between the pair to do as they pleased, as SHE did, warming the beds of several men at a time. To make matters worse, SHE called HIM delusional for assuming that there had been a trace of mutual affection between THEM in the past. SHE called it a stupid fling, sort of a one-night stand.

In a parallel life, HE gained much weight as a result of taking tons of anti-depressants to cope with this mess of a life HE'd made, not because HE was having the best time ever.

In a parallel life, HE was the one regretting every decision HE'd made in the past eight years, not SHE.

Conversation with Polaris

(excerpt)

Sawyer Sinnett

USA

You are standing on a rooftop.

Your neck is aching from staring up into the soft black of space when a staircase descends from the sky.

You'd once thought that if this was ever going to happen, it would've been a ladder instead. But it is a cement staircase before you and you're grateful: stairs are much more manageable.

You are climbing a staircase into the sky. Your footsteps make no sound and you are resolutely not looking down at the world below. Instead, you keep your eyes trained ahead, and you're rewarded with the sight of a young man waiting for you at the top of the steps. His hair is white and his eyes are black and you know his name, but you do not say it. Not yet.

You step off the staircase, you step into nothing, onto air. The star blinks at you, waiting.

“Do you know about the sharks?” You ask.

He smiles.

“I know of them. They’ve been around for some time.”

“400 million years.”

He nods for you to continue.

“It’s just,” you start. Stop. Start again. “You’ve only been around 70 million years, and I thought the stars were older than everything.”

He says nothing.

“I mean, you look down on it all and you watch us change and grow, you probably grow with us, but you’re still only 70 million years old.”

“And the sharks are older,” he adds. You nod.

“They’ve been swimming and growing and evolving for 400 million years. Aren’t you afraid they know something you don’t? That they have something in them that’s been building for...” You huff out a breath, overwhelmed. “For so much time I can’t even picture it. So much time it’s just part of them at this point, that knowledge is built in. And you can’t hold that in your hands. They’ve got it all stored there in their fins, and you won’t ever have it in your hands. Aren’t you supposed to know?”

You are standing in the sky and asking the North Star a question you don’t think you want the answer to, a question you don’t think you could ever answer, even with

70 million more years under your belt. Strands of his hair glimmer with their own light. All of space and time is sucked into those dark eyes.

“What is this ‘supposed to?’”

You blink.

“What?”

“‘Supposed to.’ I’m unfamiliar with the concept.”

“Well, it’s—” You frown. Space is not as cold as you imagined, but there is still a chill. Your hands are shaking, just a bit. “You have a role to play, I guess. And you have a responsibility to that role, you’ve got to fulfill the requirements, play the part. Cross the t’s and dot the i’s.”

“And what t’s have I left uncrossed, which i’s?” His question is gentle, his smile patient.

You have no answer. He doesn’t push.

“Aren’t you afraid?” You ask again. “How do you know you’re doing the right thing, that you’re not messing it up?”

You are asking the North Star such human questions and you know it is futile, but you can’t bring yourself to stop. Who else could you ask?

He is so beautiful, here in the sky. A prince content in the courtyard of the castle; relaxed, composed.

“What is my name?” He asks you.

The word shines on your tongue.

“Polaris.”

“And do you know of any before me?”

You try to think back, prodding at the recesses of your mind for any other who has shared his name.

“I don’t think so. They used other stars to navigate, but time passed and now it’s you.”

“That’s just it,” he says. “Time passed. I was not born the North Star, I did not ask for a role. I do not even fill it. Like the sharks, I just am.” He pauses to let you take in his words and envy coils in your gut, unwelcome and embarrassed. What freedom he has, to just exist. He continues. “I was born, and time passed. And now I am your North Star, and time will continue to pass, and one day I won’t be that anymore.

“But I will always be Polaris. That is the only thing I am ‘supposed’ to be.”

You are facing the North Star, your whole body trembling, and you reach up to find tears streaming down your cheeks. He stretches his hand out and wipes away a few himself, but you cannot feel his touch. There is only a momentary coolness against your saltwater-warm tears.

“Besides,” he says, “The sharks were 70 million years old once. All of this knowledge that they have and I do not, is only a ‘yet’. I can’t hold it in my hands yet.”

Polaris is shining before you, and his light glows brighter through the haze of your tears.

“330 million years will pass, whether the knowledge comes or not.”

You are gazing reverently into his black hole eyes when he tells you, “The meantime is not something to fear.”

You are weightless in the sky, the North Star coalescing into a ball of flame before you, and his light burns away the chill of space. As you close your eyes against the blinding light, your feet touch down onto solid ground, and you're warm again.

Time passes.

An eternity later, without notice or fanfare, the world behind your eyelids is dark, dark as if it was never light in the first place. You brave the new world, peek at the space around you.

You are on a rooftop.

You are on a rooftop in the heat of summer, bare feet on stone, neck aching with the strain of staring into the soft black of space. The stars are bright and the city is brighter but somehow, somehow, he's there. Polaris. Shining strong and steady in the sky, like he's always been there. Like he'll be there for 330 million years to come.

Time passes.

Parade

Ellie Boland

UK

I wish I'd just killed that fucking bird.

None of it would have happened if I had. It would have been kinder for the creature and it would have saved my brother, saved both of us, from exile. I should have snapped its tiny, feathery neck when it fell out of the sky and landed at my feet, its broken wing bent backwards and twitching furiously. That was the thing, it landed at *my* feet; Felix was a few paces behind. I could have put an end to its suffering and tossed the dead bird into the bushes for the foxes to find, and that would have been the end of it. But I'd bent down and picked it up, even as its nasty little beak pecked my fingers and snipped the skin open while it soiled itself in fear, until blood and bird shit ran hot and sticky down my arms.

And then Felix had come running over, his bright brown eyes wide with curiosity.

“Oh no!” he’d cried and immediately scooped the bird out of my hands, not caring about the mess. It stopped struggling as soon as Felix held it, as if it sensed something in him. He’d uncoiled his scarf and wrapped the bird snugly inside, dodging my hands when I tried to stop him and ignoring my protests that he would catch a cold. He’d cradled it the whole walk home and made a nest for it out of blankets by the fireplace, only interrupting his vigil to treat the cuts on my hands.

I always thought his gift would be Healing. He has more kindness in his little finger than a grown man has in his whole body: on winter nights when the frost strangled our crops and my fingers were too numb to draw my hunting bow, I would go without dinner to make sure he ate well, but Felix would refuse to touch a single bite until I served myself a helping. Gifts were often hereditary, but we knew he wasn’t destined to be a Caller like myself and our parents had been. We could call the wind to soothe us during the blistering heat of summer, or call the storm-clouds when the crops were parched and desperate for rain, but when Felix tried to sing things tended to run in the opposite direction.

It didn’t matter. The village didn’t need two Callers, but Healers were always useful. So I let him bring the bird home and tend to it, quietly hoping that his gift would finally manifest and he would heal the broken wing. He stayed up all night, keeping it warm and feeding it mushed up berries, and when dawn came and the bird was dead it broke Felix’s heart. I resented the stupid thing for dying and causing him

so much pain. He'd been too young to understand when our parents died and this was his first dealing with death. I watched grief twist the spray of freckles on his cheeks into a mask of sorrow and drown them in saltwater as he sobbed, burying his face in the dead bird's feathers, its neck hanging limp from his arms.

His every cry was a barb in my heart and I couldn't stand it. In my desperation to comfort him, I didn't notice the darkness spreading through our hut until it snuffed out the sunlight. A strange, earthy smell filled my nostrils and scratched at my throat. It was so cloying it felt like someone had stuffed a handful of soil into my mouth and I was choking on it. Then I realised the smell was coming from Felix. His beautiful brown irises had disappeared and his eyes were pure white, as if they had rolled all the way back in his head, and his skin was webbed with a tangle of black veins.

And then the dead bird twitched. I could hear the sickening pop of its tiny bones and I scrambled backward as it leapt out of Felix's arms and landed on its side. Its wing was still broken and jutted out at a grotesque angle, but it didn't seem to hurt the bird anymore. Felix gasped and his sobs morphed to laughter as he picked it up and set it on its feet where it tottered and dragged its crippled wing across the floorboards. The light had returned and the black veins on Felix's skin had disappeared, but I could still taste rancid soil on my tongue. The soil of an open grave with a decaying body inside.

I was so paralysed with shock that I wasn't quick enough to stop him when he took the bird and ran outside. "Look look! It's alive! I brought it back to life!" he'd gleefully declared

to the neighbours. I regained my senses and sprinted after him, clapping a hand over his mouth, but it was too late. The neighbours took one look at the bird's vacant stare and broken wing, maybe they caught a whiff of the soil, and I saw the horror boil into murderous intent. No village wanted to house a necromancer.

I grabbed Felix's hand and ran for the woods.

That was a few days ago. There are others now, a little parade of dead animals that follow us. Felix insists on reviving every corpse he finds. A badger. A fox. A rabbit. He feels guilty leaving them behind, he says. I don't have the heart to stop him.

The bird is definitely the worst. It knows I don't like it. It stares at me with its dead eyes and sometimes it flies into the back of my head and its talons tear into my neck before it falls to the ground. I don't know why it can't just walk, or waddle, like the rest of them, but it keeps trying to fly.

Maybe it's punishing me. Maybe I deserve it. If there had to be a necromancer in the family it should have been me.

Green

Sophie Walker

USA

The sun had just begun to rise as the transport submarine broke the surface, gliding up into the sand. The water here was empty of all life—sluggish and brown, the way it was near every other coastline. It wasn't as bad as it was in places with coastal cities. In fact, the sea around the Highlands was one of the cleanest left on Earth. It was 5:30 in the morning—they had to start work before the sun climbed too high in the sky.

The airlock depressurized, and Nora and the crew stepped out onto the beach, heavy work boots sinking into the soft sand. The light, filtered through clouds and pollution, was a dim grey. The smog up here was not so bad that they needed full protective gear, the way most of the Surface crews did—for those who worked on the solar farms at the Equator, any exposure was out of the question. Here, in what used to be

Scotland, there wasn't enough sun to do damage, all they needed were breathing masks.

The group split in two. One team headed south, and Nora and her team—Matt, Jenkins, Carolina—to the north. They trudged up the rocky beach to their storage shed. It wasn't locked, since there was no one to steal from them. Armed with tool kits, they began their trek towards the farm.

The sun was higher in the sky now, and weak, grey light illuminated their path. The crew was quiet as they trudged through the sand and sludge, up the slowly eroding hill. Their footsteps were the only sound against the empty landscape.

At the peak, the atmosphere was different. With the higher elevation and strong wind, it was a perfect place to plant turbines. They stretched out for a full mile in orderly rows, towering and imposing and grey, like the rest of their surroundings. The only splash of colour was the complicated network of blue and red electrical cables, winding between the rows on the hard dirt ground.

Setting down her toolkit, Nora unclipped the oxygen mask from her face and inhaled deeply. The air was clean and cold and didn't taste like salt and rust the way it did inside the habitat dome, where there was no wind at all. This was the only place she felt able to breathe properly.

“Hey,” said Matt, noticing, “not for too long. You know the rules.”

“Just a little longer.”

Matt shrugged, and nodded. It was one of the few perks of this kind of work. They all took off their masks when they could.

It was hard to conceive that her kids would never breathe fresh air, never see plants growing naturally, never climb mountains, never experience changes in weather. Even if her wife's team at the Surface Conservation Project cracked the code tomorrow, it would likely be generations before it was safe enough for habitation again. She wouldn't see those days, and neither would her children. But maybe, someday, they'd get it right.

Nora stretched her arms above her head as she strolled down her row, inspecting each turbine in turn. The cold air felt so good on her face and lungs, even if it would mean a scolding from the department doctor. Sighing, she turned her attention to the third turbine in the row, which was moving point-oh-oh-three percent slower than it should have been. Bending down to the base of the post, she connected her tablet to the diagnostic port, and was about to start a system analysis when she noticed something on the ground.

The wind farm was built on a stretch of dry, hard dirt which was an uninviting grey-brown. Sprouting through a crack in the tightly packed soil was a clump of scraggly green grass that had definitely not been there last week.

Nora crouched down to inspect it, removing a glove to touch one of the blades, carefully. It was firm and smooth under her fingers.

“Jenkins,” she called, “come look at this.”

Jenkins shuffled over. “What’s up, Nora? You’re supposed to be wearing—” He stopped short as he saw what she was looking at. His eyes went wide. “Is that...”

Nora nodded mutely.

Jenkins crouched down next to her, staring at the tiny tuft of grass. “Matt,” he said into his earpiece, “Carolina, get over here. Row six. There’s something *growing* here.”

There was an explosion of noise over the earpiece. The rest of the team hurried over from their various positions and began talking, all at once.

“When did it get here?”

“*How* could it have gotten here?”

“Is there more?”

“What else might be still alive?”

Matt was calling the Surface Conservation Project. There were tears in his eyes. She could imagine the scene—there would be champagne popped, research projects frantically begun. Her wife would be preparing for a press conference about what this meant for the human race. There would be celebrations in the dome streets at the idea that maybe, someday, they might be able to go back home.

Looking at it, she felt...she wasn’t sure. Peaceful, maybe. Or just sad, that they were cheering for such a small victory. God, how had they ever gotten here?

“Nora.” She felt a hand on her shoulder, and she looked up to see Matt. He gave her a sad smile. “The mask.”

“Right.” She cleared her throat, and strapped the mask back over her nose and mouth. The canned air from her oxygen tank tasted stale. She straightened up. “I should finish checking the row.”

Matt nodded, and squeezed her shoulder again before walking off to continue his own repairs. Nora continued on her route, the cold air stinging the exposed parts of her face. As she walked, more tiny patches of green caught her eye. The whole farm was covered in little sprigs of hope.

GEOGRAPHY AT ODDS

Arctic Voyages

Kai Ray

USA/UK

And I remember
my voyage there,
 where ice sheets towered,
carved cold as glacial spires.

Where we sailed,
miniatures beside the frozen white.
Through fractal canyons,
 a narrow slip into the garden's icy maze,
its hedges cathedral high.

We could not cultivate these blooms again,
their crystals melt away,
and returning,
I find shards
 crumble
 crash,
 wilting.
Ruins in the blue.

Rosaline

Blanc Yuan

China

This morning, I went to the nearby supermarket. I was looking for the cutest flowerpot I could find. It could be neither too big or too deep (too much soil would accumulate too much water), or too thin (because someone will eventually break it). After that, I went to the riverbank for some nutritious silt. I then went home and sat in the flowerpot and doused myself in the silt, leaving only my head in the air.

I am going to become a flower.

The doorbell rings. The door is not locked. Everything worth taking was moved out of my house. I have nothing to lose. The doorbell rings again and I find myself wishing that I had removed my doorbell, too.

It must be Mom. She has been learning gardening, in preparation. She promised to come and keep me safe and sound. The door opens, and my doctor enters quickly.

“Rosaline, eighteen, diagnosed with Florasia. It’s your transformation day. How are you doing?”

He is the one who accurately estimated my transformation day and advised me to get a nice flowerpot and silt in advance. I kind of remember that we had an appointment today to check my situation, but I’m not sure. My memory feels like it’s fading away. I can feel my brain shrinking. I try to talk.

“Don’t even try. You are losing your ability to speak.” He stops me. “It seems that you are doing fine, and, hmm, I think you will become a member of the rose family. You are growing thorns on your skin.”

(Thorns are OK. At least I have protection.)

He keeps talking. Ignoring the noises, I begin thinking about Mom again. She sounded truly happy when she got the news about my Florasia. She promised that I would be pretty, nice smelling and long-lasting. I guess that means I’ll be living longer and being loved more deeply than anyone I know.

The doorbell rings again and the doctor rushes to answer it. Is that Mom? She’s always busy, but today is my transformation day. She promised to come and keep me alive.

But mom is still absent. There must be a bunch of other people flooding into the room; whispering, laughing, screaming, and crying erupt around me. I can’t distinguish anyone individually because I’m becoming both deaf and blind. I’m becoming a flower.

I can sense soft arcs in their voices, sounds like sparrows; it might be those girls. I realize they will never laugh at my plump legs ever again. My legs will transform into healthy and strong roots, full of nutrients. I'll grow prettier than anyone ever was.

If I could make any sound, it would burst out of me, but the girls have already left, their annoying giggling floating away from me. I'm left standing in my perfect flowerpot like a survivor in the muddy wreckage after their storm, temporarily forgetting that I will be fed by that mud forever.

Someone else is coming near. I believe it's Ty; I can smell his sweetness and feel his breath on me. My vision has become so dim that I can barely see his silhouette. My secret crush. My first love and only muse.

"Don't touch her. A flower can't stand your temperature." The doctor is making noises again.

(Let me try, I think I can.)

But he's gone. The doctor seems to be explaining to everyone in the room that I will not be able to think after a while, but I'm not sorry about it. My mind floats. All sounds diminish gradually. There seems to be classmates here, though I can only recall a few; there are teachers that didn't care for me and relatives that I never talked to, and a love that is lost. Everyone who cast a shadow in my life seems to be here, but I don't know who called them to witness my transformation. Should I feel lucky, at the age of eighteen, to be burdened with a room that could have been empty but is instead unprecedentedly full?

(Or does its fullness make it empty?)

The waves tumbling inside my body seem to fade along with those last words that cannot be articulated now. I suddenly don't care and barely feel anything anymore. I can barely hear or see, leaving only my thoughts rushing through my head, giving birth to ecstasies that fly around like butterflies. I guess this is how it feels to be a flower.

But is Mom coming?

"No one came into this room, Madam. I kept her safe and sound." That's the doctor. What?

There is a warmth. I'm lifted and carried away... I think. I'm out of my empty, deserted house now. Wind flows along my body and penetrates my veins. Mom is holding me, the tiny little me, in her arms. She promised to keep me alive. But why is she the last to come?

"Oh, my Rosaline!"

That is the last cry I'd hear from anyone for the rest of my life. I thought you would be happy for me as you promised. I will be pretty, sweet smelling, and long-lasting. Most importantly, I will be still alive.

"Welcome to the funeral of our beloved Rosaline."

My consciousness gradually slides away.

"Madam, please plant the memorial rose before the tombstone."

Mom leaves me there. My roots find comfort and warmth. The perfect flowerpot I'd searched for all morning is smashed. As my vision fades in the dusky twilight, I'm finally pretty,

sweet smelling, and long-lasting. I, Rosaline, age eighteen,
bloom in spring, wither in autumn, grow leaves in summer and
disappear in winter. I'm buried alive in my own tomb, loved.

Hunger of The Wood

Katie Brown

USA

All your lovely words are spoken
Spoken gently in the sun
Over sun-dappled forest floor
A floor of moss and foliage
The foliage hazed by mist
Mist melts through the trees
The trees of the forest you know

All your lovely leaves have fallen
Fallen heavy to the mushy mess
A mess of limbs in the undergrowth
The undergrowth of rot and roots
Roots abandoned to the earth
The earth lives in solitude here
Here where you will stay

All your lovely breaths are taken
Taken from the cradle of your bones
Bones left to nothing but air
Air heavy with silence and sound
Sound your body barely makes
You make the forest your own
You own nothing here

All your lovely skin is sinking
Sinking languid through damp leaves
Damp leaves supple your body
Your body craves the ground
The ground devours your hands
New hands pull your body down
Down into the belly of The Wood

Autumn's Relief

Elysia So

Hong Kong/UK

Summer fought the cold away,
But valiantly took the fall.
The trees bled amber and red,
'Til there weren't any leaves at all.

The year began with an unprecedentedly early spring arriving in London one mid-January evening as if it were the knock of a much loved, but unexpected relative. Hidden under the cover of night there was a hurriedness about it. An eagerness pulling towards or away from something. A faint floral musk wafted through on a breeze, perfuming the air and growing intoxicatingly strong as it welcomed itself in prematurely. It hadn't been a particularly bitter winter, nonetheless it had

committed itself to being grey and overcast. That was until our untimely guest appeared, and peeled back the dreariness that had previously enveloped the city.

By daybreak, what had formerly been frozen, melted to glistening morning dew. As it thawed, the frostbitten earth creaked like old floorboards under weighty strides. What was brought forth was a carpet of fecund soil, soft and flecked with a green that revealed new life. Ivory clouds seeped into a cerulean sky like excess glue from freshly hung wallpaper. It didn't take long before the soil began to stir, restless with anticipation and on the brink of fruition. The ground rumbled in suspense then, in a grand explosion, up shot thick stems laden with foliage and greenery. Heavy-headed snow drops dotted lush grass with a pale luminescence. Brass bands of yellow daffodils quickly gathered together, poised and ready to play their trumpets frilled with scalloped edges. Forget-me-not's swayed in the wind to a tune they vaguely remembered, alongside tight-lipped tulips, pursed as if to kiss the fickle butterflies in flight. Magnolia trees blinked buds onto branches like the whites of startled eyes, as ivy silently strangled their trunks. Clusters of violet crocuses reached petals up to the sky as if they were the outstretched arms of impatient toddlers, eager to be picked. All of a sudden, a house that had held the bare bones of winter was fleshed out with spring.

It was a strange and peculiar sight, Mother Nature in limbo, still decorated with leaves not yet rotted from the old year. Soil busily receiving the dead with open arms, now pushed out new life; a mortician turned midwife. How odd a

time to be celebrating birth before the dead had been buried. This did not last long, for the early spring departed as quickly as it came, leaving February in an accelerated flux.

A ruthless sun rose to power, and the land fell prey to summer. Irate sunlight lay siege to fields of crops. Piercing rays cut short the lives that only recently had hastily bloomed. Flowers burst open like bullets, unfurling petals that dripped from open wounds. Leaves only days ago as delicate as newborn skin, tumbled from limp stems, burnt and withering. It was all too soon. Atop bone-dry dirt, what was now dying foliage quickly turned to ash and was carried away with the last sympathies of a spring breeze.

The heat grew ever-worse and was, of course, felt beyond the natural world. It enforced a slower pace on London, a tempo determined by an unremitting sun. Citizens once grateful for summer, now grew resentful. Transport was stifling as businesspeople crammed into unventilated carriages on their way to work. Toddlers threw tantrums that dried tears to their faces in streaks of salt. Traffic halted as aggravated drivers melted into their seats, sweat dripping off elbows and down the backs of their fidgeting legs. Even car horns fell flaccid. The blaring sounds soared then drooped in the stagnant air. Those who dared brave the temperature outside adopted a slow, uniform lumber. Couples staggered through the streets together, partners side by side, bodies retracting from one another's warmth. The customarily resilient sun worshippers, blistered and burnt, retreated to the shade and gathered around fans circulating indoors labouring to move the heavy air.

Helios, swollen and plump, had been fattened by days unclaimed by rain. He sat above the earth like a forgotten orange in a fruit bowl, overripe with overstayed welcome. Londoners were crazed and became delusional. As weeks passed, the memory of cold became heavenly in its absence; a reminiscence almost to be revered. It was remembered only as benevolent with mercy, virtuous and forgiving, unlike the tyrannical sun. Those who still recalled cooler times, talked fondly of snow and ice, laying themselves at the altars of fridges and air-conditioners—Siemens and Smeg, the artificial sons of God. Baptisms by cold showers brought temporary relief. Months of torrid heat ripped through the soil like tissue paper, as water usage limitations and hosepipe bans were imposed. Irrigation restrictions left fields with an unquenchable thirst, whilst the overheating population eased themselves into ice baths.

Then all at once the fever broke. An endless summer conceded with a sigh and rain descended at last. Ominous dark clouds invaded the sky like grey-suited office-workers surging down into tube stations. Raindrops fell from above as if from burst pockets emptying with spare change, glass coins shattered on hot pavements. Commuters steadied themselves down station stairs, the rattling leviathan steamy with humid breath. Fields once thirsty began to quench and nature restored to its full strength. The marauding sun, once a lonely orange in a fruit bowl, had finally been squeezed dry and dripped onto the earth.

In a great triumph the trees burst into autumn like fireworks. Leaves changed colour in a hurry on branches

that looked like lit candelabras. Tungsten trees cascaded down rolling hills. Flax and mustard hues vignettted dense thickets and shrubbery. In the crevices of towering oaks, birds' nests hid like black crotchets on wavering staves; forests full of endless and unfinished scores. To the tune of crisp leaves and the return of a gentle breeze, nature sang with the penultimate season's swan song. All was now filled with relief at the rapid change and vibrant colours, as amber washed over the city like spilt honey.

We Are Not Rams

Kai Ray

USA/UK

We are not rams.
Not ring-horn chargers on the ledge
disputing what cannot be claimed.
No clash of crowns can pierce
thought through bone.

We are not rams.
Not even rivals on the rock—
wrestler's wounds—faint ink stains now.
No tangle-lock would break
half-formed horns.

We are not rams.
Poisoner of tender gesture,
who could not best a child—
that sure-footed roadkill kid.

We were not rams.

Maupassant, a Mirror and the Big Red Ball

(excerpt)

Anjali Venugopal

India

While living a life on foreign soil and conforming to the rules of a land rife with nuances of culture and language and philosophy so unlike our own, sometimes little parts of us, vital parts of us get pushed onto the back burner. Some parts of us remain unused for such a long time that they fade into the background of a future dream. Just like the forest, its hungry moss usurping unsuspecting corners that guard secrets and memories of many a forgotten species, it takes little effort to misplace certain marks of character that we carry on our skin. It requires toil to keep them alive, to keep them breathing and close as marks of who we are and where we come from. They are living testaments to all the storms we have weathered, when no one, not even the Internet, was watching.

In societies like mine, local languages play second fiddle to the Coloniser's tongue. It takes persistence and resolve for local voices to be heard above the cacophony of praises sung for the English language. I, for one, have always taken my mother tongue for granted. I was born with it. Malayalam needed little nourishment. It grew defiantly in the pot categorically reserved for the royal rose bush—English. Malayalam was the hard work my mother did under the roof of our house, day and night. No one paid attention as long as things remained immaculate. Like my mother, Malayalam gave us no reason to be noticed. As long as English words flitted off our Brown tongues as they would a White man's, we had all won. Yet the weed grew, with barely any water or attention or devotion set aside for its sustenance.

Maybe it was never purely about the language. Granted, a large chunk of parents and caregivers back home, for want of a trustworthy statistic, continuously prod their young to sharpen their anglicisms as means to better lives and opportunities. They are not wrong; it is the world they have known. But it remains one thing to sharpen one prong of a forked tongue, and a whole other matter to actively blunt the other.

I have, several times, been privy to conversations at mostly White dinner tables where people have passed 'honest' opinions about people like me. I am embarrassed to say that I have, in the past, laughed along politely because I rarely found the right words to confront twinges of generalisations I wasn't sure were intended. It only took a few glasses of wine for people to confer me with "you're not like the other Indians we have met." Perhaps an innocuous attempt to decode all

the layers of a land home to 1.4 billion people ranging from billionaires to families who go to sleep hungry, in a single evening. To be unlike the rest of us, to be unlike me—isn't that the dream? I was awarded with the status of 'an insider' during those painful exchanges of drunken words. For those of us far away from home and familiarity, who spend our days and nights looking longingly into brightly lit windows, still searching, still yearning for that 'better life' that we came for, we will ourselves to take every scrap of kindness with folded hands. It is difficult to ask big questions at those ephemeral junctures, for a masked identity weighs heavier than the earth. But I can't be that person anymore. I am not an insider. I am only tired.

Aziz Ansari joked that "this edition of White people is trying the hardest" to be nice to minorities and we appreciate it. However, when he likened it to a "secret, progressive game of Candy Crush" where people tally up points for all the goodness done—long paragraphs on Instagram about race and White privilege, vociferously rooting for Black Panther to win Best Picture (etc.), all branded as exertions towards equality, *while* proceeding to cross the road at the sight of a coloured man, we laughed hard. However, do we realise that in a parallel universe some of us play the same game to gather points fastidiously for each layer of Indianness shed? For every non-Indian acquaintance squirrelled, for every Brown child branded with a White name? We post unremitting flurries of felicitations for every White passport appropriated. It is a matter of vanity to be unlike me.

What is it about our Brownness and our history that makes our reflections so repulsive? What is it about our Indianness that makes us want to hide? We laughed along at Ansari's joke while sitting in unwitting shame about the Brownness of our minds, of our languages and our accents, of our curry smells, of coconut oil. Despite many years of expat living, I worry an inordinate amount to this day if I am *troubling* my neighbours with the smell of my food, with the sound of my music.

We whiten our accents and shorten our 'exotic' names to integrate, to assimilate, we say. Conformity is the language we speak. We scratch out sounds and dialects and vocabularies of migration and history that lace our feelings when all they do is add a pinch of colour and spice to an otherwise bland meal. We work hard every day on a subliminal level to bleach our facades and our tongues so that we can clip our roots and belong to a world where the dreams of our ancestors live, where we think happiness breathes. I am tired. I have a long way backwards until I find the parts of me that I buried, until I reclaim the layers that I peeled away. But this journey is necessary, for it is to acknowledge that the beautifully forked tongue of this bilingual child is brown. That her teardrops will fall, first in Malayalam and only then in English, when she beholds for one last time the big, red ball sink into the ocean that kisses tirelessly the soil that raised her. Where does happiness live?

What Do We Have in Our Pockets?

Salsabeela Alrehaily

Saudi Arabia

A broken phone, a pacifier, keys, a pen, stones, a soap bar, my ID, a silver anklet, and two five-shekel coins. Only a fraction of what I have in my pockets. Is it any wonder they are so heavy? If anyone were around, they would ask, “Why are you carrying so much in them?” I’d show them what I have in my pocket if they need it.

There is not much left in this city, so whenever I find something, I collect it. The pen is to write the names of lost children on their arms. The anklet is the only thing left of my wife. The keys once opened the door to my house—where my children were when I left them to join the rescue.

You might ask what’s the use of the five-shekel coin? It’s not like there is anything left to buy and sell. No one left to buy and sell for. No, “Daddy, Daddy, I want candy,” or “Can

we please buy chocolate milk?” She will not hold my hand as we cross the street. She will not look at me with her sad brown eyes and little pouted lips when I tell her she can only choose one. She wins, and I end up buying her whatever she wants. “I won’t tell Mama,” she whispers. She would smile, and I would carry her on my back.

I am lucky I found a bed sheet to wrap her in. She was the only one of them left intact and at first, I thought she was just unconscious. *Surely, if she is not bleeding, there is hope.* I carried her all the way to the hospital. The doctor ran to me. He needed her to be alive as much as I did. “Say we belong to Allah, and to him we shall return,” I pleaded with him to look at her. He sat me down on the street, and the men held me as I screamed and held her little body against my chest. I carried her back to the rubble of our home. I laid her down as I gathered what I could find of the limbs, brains, and guts of my children and wife in a corner, but I didn’t find a place to bury them.

So now you know. That’s what I have in my pockets. On the chance, I survive this. A slight chance. Not big, not even probable. I know that. I’m not delusional. A tiny chance that when the occupation ends, I will be able to fix my phone and look at my children’s faces, smiling, happy, whole. Or die before the victory and join them in heaven.

Woman: Upon Reflection

Katherine Catchpole

UK

*I'm not a woman, I'm a crooked stitch,
stern of a ship, recursive daughter;
your sacrificial holy slaughter.*

I've tried to be your woman of the sea,
woman of the earth,
woman of the flames,
but it never works,
I'm all smog.
Woman of good air;
woman of pollution;
woman lying heavy on the world.
Breathe me in,
choke me down.

I'm not a woman, I'm your hand
reaching out from the fog of boredom,
grasping at the first thing it finds.

I'm a stage, upon which
you perform your old play.

Skeletons

(excerpt)

Anne Ward

USA

Yucatan honey, Mexican chocolate, coffee from Chiapas. Souvenirs, bead bracelets, a sack of pottery. We emerge from the artisan market, our backpacks heavy with treasure, and step out into the sunshine. It's good to get out, to breathe the clear mountain air. I've needed this time with my son to take my mind off things...to forget I've lost my mother. We shoulder our packs and move on through the crowd.

Today is the First of November, the first of the Days of the Dead. Already the costumed skeletons are dancing in the street, their faces slick with grease paint. People pretending to be skeletons. Or skeletons pretending to be people.

We're crowded like sardines, brushing shoulder to shoulder. We pass vendors selling rag dolls, ice cream, little silver rings. There's a face-painting stall. Do I want my face

painted? I could join the skeletons... For a few extra pesos, I can get glitter on my cheeks, rhinestone tears, one beneath each eye, artificial roses, garlands for my hair. You can get lost in these colors. *I do, I'm losing myself now.* Red is good, it's my mother's favorite. *Was. Used to be.*

My son sees my musings, opens his mouth to speak. But whatever it was, it's lost. Blaring trumpets, a crash of cymbals, sounds of a marching band. We scurry out of their way and squish, cheek and jowl among the revelers.

The crowd swells, sweeping us along. Skeletons and people surging through the gates of the cemetery. Rows of gravestones lit with candles, strung with garlands of marigolds. Kids play tag amid the tombs. Little ones cling shyly to their mothers. Tourists pose for photos. Young girls clad in white play their violins. Voices soar, rhythms pound. Surely the Dead have been roused. Picnics are spread, photos of loved ones displayed. A little girl twirls. A couple of boys, eight or nine years old, come with outstretched palms, offering for ten pesos, to use their long-handled shovel to turn up the grave of my loved one. "*No, gracias,*" I say. Disappointed, they trot off in search of a better patron. I can't help but think of the box that holds my mother's ashes sitting on the mantel.

The stilt-walkers come out of nowhere. They billow past, all gauze and plumes, awkwardly graceful, precarious. A carriage follows, an old-time team of horses, Death driving at the reins with Lady Death beside him. There was a time when Death was worshipped here, when predictions were read from the stars, and people were buried with dogs and weapons and food, provisions for the afterlife. Death was here

then, and it is still here, because it has never left. Death, the unknown, our only certainty.

The marchers join hands and swirl, then, with a flourish, let their partners go. They dance with...then between...then alone. There's nothing to do but surrender. We whoop and laugh, let ourselves be swept along, until warmth fades into evening and the thin air of the mountains turns to twilight blue.

I snap pictures till my energy, too, is spent. My phone blinks. *Battery dying.*

I wave to my son, shout to him over the crowd. "Phone's dead! Gotta go!" I hold up the useless phone. Then, in the thick of it, I stumble. I lose my grasp and the phone flies out of my hand. I panic, stoop to grab it, and someone collides with me. Not just anyone, but The Grim Reaper, wearing a mask and hood, carrying a scythe. I regain my footing and text in desperation, *Where are you?*

Then it dies for real. I can't even turn it on. The crowd surges wildly and I can't see over them. I glance around...but there's no sign of my son.

What if I can't find him? We have no plan, no agreed meeting place. There's no way to send him a message. Not only that, but I'm lost. Then the weariness sets in, because it's been a long haul and nothing has been easy. It's enough to make me sit down right here on the curb, fold under the weight exhaustion.

But no sooner do I give up than he comes skipping along, jubilant—"Wow! That was great!" He looks at me. "Hey, are you okay?"

I nod. “My stupid phone. And I didn’t know where you were.”

“Aw, Mom. You found me. Let’s go home.”

A breeze whips our hair; billows in our clothes; jostles the banners and flags; scatters the petals of the marigolds. So much I don’t understand; and yet, her voice, still in my saved messages, is consoling—I love you. See you soon.

Fox

Rebecca Harrison

UK

You are starving almost all of the time, so you will never remember the moments you were full. You are lean and wiry and your eyes glimmer. You will never know how they entrance with their amber glow. You stalk the streets in search of supper. You will never understand that people want to kill you for it.

Here are the things you do know: You were born blind and shivering in a hole in the ground. This hole was beneath a shed of rotting wood and rusting hinges. Your body could not make its own heat for weeks after, so you curled close to your mother and lived off hers. You were, in these days, a languid thing—half-killed by the act of creation. A month later you were bounding out from underground, a limber, liquid creature of russet paws and canine jaws.

This month was your first—and nearly only—season of plenty. You played with your sisters for hours at a time and slept for the hours in-between. You were not a hunter yet. You were a mouth that your mother dropped food into; so, a meal was not a bloody, violent thing, but an act of love. There was fresh grass all around, soft against the pads of your feet. Your world was small, sheltered, and you knew satisfaction more intimately than anything.

Another month passed. Suddenly the den was too hot to bear, and your body had doubled in length in all directions. The grass of your little home was drying out beneath the sun, no longer a comfort against your skin but almost painful. Another month and your mother was as thin as you are now. New notions were forming in her. Every meal dropping into your mouth was a meal dropping from her own.

You did not see it coming.

You thought, when she came toward you teeth first, that she had come to bring you a raw carcass, as she had so many times before. Cub, she had come to make *you* a carcass. You limped as you ran from her, fur peeled back to show your pink, pearlescent flesh beneath. Only a few months after this your mother was dead.

But you do not know that. You did know a whole new world of smells. You were sore for a while, and sad (though you did not know the word for it), but once the pain had passed and the sorrow had flattened, you began to roam. You learnt to track where your family's lands began and ended with your nose. You learnt to stalk and kill birds—in theory. In reality

you caught very little, still encumbered as you were by the inelegance of cubhood. You learnt to regard your sisters as rivals; they were far more successful hunters than you.

You learnt to pick through rubbish for the best scraps. You knew no shame as you did this because there was no shame: there was chicken. Your fur grew long and thick. The days contracted. Winter threatened you with her white and icy teeth.

You were an adult, grown now, and you knew you had lingered in the territories your family called home for too long. It was an automatic knowledge, like eating had been. You woke and loped along the night dimmed streets with hopes of finding somewhere new and warm and brimming. You passed one of your sisters along the way and her jaws parted, just a little. A meek farewell. All you saw in that moment were the pine needle points of her canines and the healthy flush of her gums. You would miss her come spring.

Instead of something brimming, for a while what you found was nothing short of threadbare. Pathetic trees, slim pickings, shallow plots of dirt too hard and dry for a den. And then you found what was to you a veritable buffet, all neatly packaged in black plastic. There was a garden near enough as well, one that held the sun's attention all through the afternoon.

You will never know why the man whose litter you foraged through tried to kill you, but you learnt from him the taste and torment of poison. You were sick for days, blind and shivering beneath the ground once more. You forgot what

it was like to be empty of pain. You wanted your mother, despite her violence. You missed your sisters. You longed for sweet spring grass and the plushness of youth.

You survived, barely, and had no choice but to move again. So, you set off in search of a newer home.

The snows fell and lay on the ground, becoming grey and rotting patches. You embraced cold as a state of being. You scrapped and strove for your survival, drinking and sinking your teeth into whatever came to you. There was no softness to you anymore. You had hardened into the creature that arrests the hearts and minds of so many people, who makes them feel seen and known and filthy and small.

You came to another garden, exhausted. You had not known rest for what seemed like nearly your whole existence. You lay down. You slept. When you woke someone had left a bowl of food in front of you. A child watched you through a garden window and you watched him right back. You ate and rested and come sunrise you moved on.

After this you began not just surviving but thriving; running, lurching, sunning yourself on empty pavements, heart alive with the scent of the wildflower and the humming of the bee, mind alive with that famous cunning, but also with unadulterated joy. One day soon, you would starve again, but not yet. You went back to that place in which you had been born, back to the shed of rotting wood and rusting hinges. You rested there a while, content. You rest there now.

The Tree

Mălina Todoran

Romania

The sun was setting, and the woman was screaming in the streets.

The children had been called inside the houses, the parents had finished their chores outside and were all seeking the shelter of their homes. The warm, golden light of the sun was caressing all in its wake, a tender touch, one that left no room for words nor utterances of any kind, and yet the cries had been sending shivers down people's spines, even after all this time.

"Shut up, you fool," someone whispered in the streets, but it was almost noiseless, so not even the wind could catch it. For weeks now, she had been in this state, wailing and knocking on people's doors, but doing no harm to anybody.

The man was the only one that brought her some food, but the rest considered her crazy and some even hit her with pebbles.

“Crazy bitch,” another one mumbled.

People did not know what had happened when, last spring, the wind first met her voice and carried it along the way through the deserted streets of the town.

“Save it,” she was crying. “Please, I implore you, save it.” Nothing else, just save it, save it, save it, on and on and on.

Curiosity brought them out of their homes and into the desolate city centre where they saw her sitting next to the tree, the only one that remained. The woman was young, surprisingly so. Her hair was copper, taken, it seemed, right from the rays of the sun at sunset and so long that it almost touched her knees. Her skin, almost translucent, allowed for thin blue veins to be seen on her face. She was sick, it seemed that she always had been so, with her screams and tears, as if she was feeling everyone’s pain all at once, at full intensity.

“Please save the tree, please save it” she was saying over and over again, as if these words were a substitute for the air that she breathed. They left her there that day and all the days that followed, not knowing what to do with this peculiar person and not wanting to ask each other anything. The only person who would feign any sort of interest in the girl was the man that moved into town. He had neither a family nor a partner and he bought the biggest house in the tiny town because he was massive and strong and mighty and because he could. He would often venture into town and look curiously

at the girl, sometimes coming closer to her than anyone else would dare.

He even managed to find out her name, one day, when he approached her with some soup.

“Hazel,” she said.

Hazel, he thought. *Oh Hazel, Hazel, Hazel...*

The second night after the girl arrived, she knocked on a woman’s door. The woman, absolutely appalled, opened it, not knowing or understanding why anyone could do such a thing. It had been years since someone knocked on her door, out of the blue, without being invited. She looked at the girl, frail, weakened and tired, silently crying, her already reddened eyes becoming brilliantly incarnadine.

The woman stared at her in shock and shut the door back in her face. She called the patrolling officer, not because she was frightened - the poor girl could not lift an arm—but because the mere audacity of someone knocking on her door shook the woman to her core.

The officer took the girl to the station, locked her inside the small jail, but released her after a couple of nights. She had no papers, no identity whatsoever and that, of course, made the officers uneasy. But after two days of her constant sobs, they could not take it anymore. She was innocent, they decided. She wasn’t hurting anybody; she was barely alive.

After she was released, she asked the police to bring her back to her tree. People started murmuring that they saw her, with her forehead leaning against the tree, whispering to it, sharing secrets that only her and the wind knew. Other

people believed her to be a witch with her willowy frame and copper hair, others declared her plain crazy. But day after day, she was there, near the tree crying out and weeping, begging for someone to save it. The man was watching her. Silently, without interacting with her. *No, Hazel. Not yet...* She became a constant, really, her lament accompanying the children to school, her sobbing was the background noise for quiet family dinners, people taking it in and adapting to her and adjusting to it all.

Autumn came along, he was getting more settled, and she was getting thinner, so much so that she was not able to stand up without propping herself up against her beloved tree. Her hands were full of splinters, her forehead was crinkled from pressing her head on her beloved tree more and more every day. But the tree was in danger as well. The branches started to dry out one by one, the leaves falling on the ground, surrounding her. The wind was becoming harsher and rougher too with the ones that were standing in his way. Some people carried on reporting Hazel to the police, but only out of habit, not because they were disturbed by her in any real way anymore.

One day, when the children were returning from school, when the parents were quietly preparing supper and the woman was weeping in the background, the mighty man was standing in the middle of the town and was listening to her. *No, Hazel, this will not do...* A gunshot rang out. All the noises came to a halt. A moment when everyone stopped, the interruption making even the wind speechless too, when everyone looked up and at each other. But only for a second, before resuming

their activities, failing to notice that the cries were taken by the wind and were never heard again.

It Could Have Been a Perfect World

(excerpt)

Awi Chin

Indonesia

It felt like I could only kiss him in the darkness.

I heard the sound of the waves from the distance. The night sent the melody of darkness to my room, traversing through every grain of sand and petal of frangipani. I kissed his forehead this time. Then in the reflection of the lonely moon caressing his body, I saw his silhouette. He asked me, whispered to me softly, “What’s on your mind?”

“You,” I whispered back at him. “What’s on yours?”

“Bunch of things.”

“Such as?”

“You know, the probabilities of us. What could’ve been between us.”

“Tell me.”

He didn't reply, but rather he took a deep breath. As if his silence could entangle the secrets that this universe holds. And that silence could tell me the what-ifs. I was not the type of man that could wait, I knew that for sure. But it was not like him as well to take his time like this. So I stayed silent. I could hear our breath dancing in the air, creating a symphony of salvation.

“In another world, we can kiss on the beach and hold each other's hands in the street. And our love will be celebrated. We do not have to hide in the darkness. In another world, your family would still be complete. Your father and brother would still be alive. Who knows, maybe they will accept you the way you were, you are, and what will become of you. And in that world, this country did not kill my family. We would still live happily together. Maybe I won't grow up to be a cynical man like this and you could meet the happier version of me.”

“In another world, your broken English would not be a problem. We can share our feelings with no words, no language. No grammar or tenses borrowed from foreign languages.

“In another world we were fireflies. Flashing our lights to guide each other home, *we were each other's home*, before our sparks gently faded out. Or we were a dolphin, mating for life, voyaging the sea from the north to the south. Through the depths of oceans, coming back once a year to Bali to commemorate our beginning, never our end.

“We were a wanderer in another world, and this realm is our playground. We venture into the storm, brave the waves,

and conquer the ocean. To the horizon where one line of one blue meets another blue, there is where we come through.

“In another world, falling in love with you will be so easy with no consequences. Because like the meaning of your name, Ida Bagus Gede Karunasankara Harsa Larik Surya, you bring light in everything that you touch. Even when you leave and night comes without invitation, people will always remember the way you shine, the way you gave them warmth.

“In another world, the snow fell in Bali only to touch your cheek.

He stopped his imagination. And the night silently crept into us. “In a perfect world, we would be together,” I added.

“But not in this world.”

We could, but those words lingered in the back of my mind, lost in my discouragement. I could not make him stay, but at least we could let go of each other in a kind ending. I let my lips greet his in a despairing attempt. My room suddenly felt so strange. In every breath I took in that kiss, I felt love and despair coming in and out like the dawn and dusk in this Island of God. Our kiss stopped and our sight lingered in each other. Loving him would be so easy. But there was no place for us here.

It felt like I was only allowed to kiss him in the darkness.

But darkness was all we had.

DEDICATION TO CRAFT

On Re-writing and Re-writing

Leah Levy

Canada

I could write about the dementia.
It starves my grandma to be sane.
Smiling, she eats her simple social routine,
she eats mechanically when she forgets what it is to be hungry,
she eats until her stomach ruptures and forgets she can put the fork
down.

I could write about the need to leave.
It unfastens my older sister from me.
The room we used to share is an echoing,
acrylics dripping over her murals that mildew on the wall.
I could compress it all into thinly-papered lifetimes.

I could write about the many summers.
It took me all of them to relearn how to write.
A whole season I washed over my face with its suds,
lay out drying for eight hours and woke up still with no words,
dunked my wrists in the ink of dawn and pulled them out pruned
and worn.

I could write about old sickness in a new city.
At the Royal Infirmary, hear eleven needles
squelch as they fill the air with my blood.
In the Anne Rowling waiting room,
we all bend necks trying to see each other's lesions.
We wonder if we are waiting out the same diseases.

I could write a final poem and title it and wrap it in my scent.
I would still have fallen short,
spitting out lost words sunken under my tongue.

You could read it and forget the page and my name,
and I could write it in synonyms, all over again.

Collection

Sophia Newton

USA

Andrew's office was small, part of the original tunneling work, and even smaller after seven years of transporting his amateur geology finds into the room. His special request during construction had been to carve shelves into the bare mountain walls so he could have rock-shelves for his rocks.

'I've done it,' he thought, reaching into his bag to pull out a rough poppy jasper specimen, the reddest one he'd ever found. Setting it down on the edge of the third and highest shelf, it filled the last bit of space he had. He appreciated it next to the hundreds of different sized, shaped, and colored rocks covering his back wall.

His desktop pinged, and the pride of his collection faded into the slump of another day's work. Another day of this. There's no way they liked that ancient slab. And he was right;

when the screen flickered to life with today's message, it read: *Who are you?* for the one hundred ninety-seventh time.

So, they didn't like that scan of the Rosetta Stone. That's okay; he hadn't either. The next thing on the list was a recording of human voices saying hello in fifty-five languages, the last message he had left to try from Voyager.

Many people had dreamed of how wonderful human contact with aliens might be; Andrew guessed they'd be pretty annoyed if the aliens rejected *their* introductions two hundred times. The two presidential advisors Andrew worked with had already approved this submission, so he sent the greetings through.

He checked his email, bracing himself for another message from Advisor Two, who really liked to have ideas. There was only one, so far: 'What about Jackson Pollock?' read the subject line of the email he would've liked to trash immediately.

Of all the ridiculous things to send to aliens, Andrew could not think of one fucking thing worse than a Jackson Pollock.

If the aliens had only reached out with this *Who are you?* shit first, then this could have gone out to the world. It could be anyone's problem. As it was, they started sending complicated engineering instructions first, and the decision became: 'to build or not to build?' The United States had chosen to build. Even though they still had no clue what it was. Better *our* secret underground alien puzzle than *someone else's*. Those faint signals from space have been classified for seven years now.

Until six months ago, Andrew's work had been a fabulous translating job from alien tech to human tech. Sure, AI did most of the grunt decoding—the real messages came in the pitch, spin, and wavelength of hydrogen atoms. But he used to be the one who saw those blueprints for the first time, coordinating a project with real extraterrestrials—far superior engineers, centuries ahead of humans. That had been his job until the instructions for their underground project stopped, unfinished, replaced by this relentless *Who are you?* question.

The aliens had rejected the collected works of Shakespeare in fourteen minutes. Human DNA hadn't worked, or any other DNA, nor had any genre of music, film, or painting been accepted yet. They hated ancient French funeral dirges the most, though, rejecting those in two minutes. Bouncing the question back hadn't done anything either; the aliens didn't seem to feel much pressure.

Andrew had never seen a structure as complicated as the one being built in the cavernous workroom under this mountain. He wanted to see this completed. He scratched his head and turned to his shelves of rocks. The new jasper made him smile, remembering how the glimpse of its red color made strong by the rain had helped him spot it amongst the colluvium on that hill.

Two months ago, he'd sent a rock guidebook to the aliens and they'd spent forty-five minutes on it. He'd even convinced the advisors that sending a picture of his collection might pique that same interest, and the aliens spent an hour and two minutes on that. Months passed, though, and they hadn't reacted similarly to any rock messages. The project withered.

Today, his collection was finished. He thought of sending the aliens an update, they did talk every day. Every day, wow. Taking a look at his shelves of rocks, he realized what else he had shared with them. And what if he shared more?

Andrew took out his pen and notebook, raised the pen over the paper, and felt silly. It was like writing to Santa.

I'm Andrew Hart, I finished that rock collection I sent you. I've always liked rocks. That's how I got into space exploration, actually, since it's just advanced geology. I agree with your assessment of French funeral dirges, pretty dull. I do like the Talking Heads, though, and I think you should have given them more than 12 minutes of listening last week. I've been here for the past seven years, reading your blueprints and building your designs. It's the finest engineering I've seen, and I'd really like to see this project completed.

He paused; he'd never been a good letter writer. Actually, he'd never mailed a letter in his life. This whole thing better stay top secret because if his mom found out he had mailed a letter to aliens before he'd ever mailed her, he'd eat last at Thanksgiving for good.

This is crazy, he thought, and sent the letter in secretly through the backdoor.

Forty-six seconds later, he heard a message come in on his computer. Ah, a record rejection speed. They're ready for the translated Encyclopedia Britannica.

Alarms blared.

He looked up to see the message, but his computer had blacked out. The lights went immediately after.

Everything was dark and quiet, as it should be deep in the heart of a great stone mountain.

Then, there was music, the Talking Heads. Far off in the universe, an eye caught its interest on a speck beneath Earth's transparent surface. Andrew felt the mountain move. California experienced a small earthquake.

Blundering

Emily Wheeler

USA

I ate my words today
 they tasted like dirty socks
left in the laundry
for a week too long.

Putting my foot in my mouth
is not a choice I love
but it seems my
tongue and
 teeth have
 separated
to make space
for an unwelcome intruder.

I don't often eat my words,
barely choking
them down like a pill
that is just a little bit too big to swallow
 so I chew it

breaking the shell,
that bitter taste coating my tongue,
swarming in, and I'll throw every
 piece of laundry,
 sweaty sock,
 stained article of clothing
into a laundry basket,
repulsive words left to
 rot.

More Than a Mere Book

Hannah McIntyre

UK

Nestled amongst the imperfect pages of my peers, I watch the customers who wander the narrow aisles and stare at us. I'm wedged in. Held tight in the allotted space between my well-ordered siblings all hailing from the same pen. A thin layer of dust marks the edge of our realm on this slanted shelf.

Opposite, the more popular children's books draw all the attention with their cartoon images and fonts. A small child picks one up and flicks through the pages with their finger lodged firmly in their nose. The toddler begs and screams until they receive the fateful nod from their father. The happy picture-book is placed on the counter.

We all dream of leaving the store. Each one of us yearns to be selected from amongst the many, to be taken to the home where our existence will begin anew.

All of us here have lived a life already; the luckiest have lived many. We have been privileged to give companionship to the solitary, joy to the grieving and adventure to the bores.

Though, some piteous tomes have only lived a half-life. Originally purchased for a single purpose, for a class or a reference. These leaden textbooks were fleetingly made use of, forgotten on a bookshelf or banished to a loft. The readers browsing the store shun their superior tone, rarely bestowing the privilege of a second glance.

But we, the classic novels, have traversed time and space and fiction and truth. In our forays with human hands, we have travelled the world gaining grains of sand and splashes of wine framed by creases in our pages. Our spines may be cracked, our covers scratched, and our pages dog-eared. Still, we wait for our next chapter with the eagerness of a fresh print.

My history began with a woman who tossed me when the mood took her, yet tenderly held my pages but a few inches apart when she read. She took me abroad where I acquired odd blemishes of sun cream smudges and developed an immortalised tan on my yellowed pages. When finished, she left me on the bus—to be sat on by a man whose fingers were cold.

He read and reread me. He folded pages and underlined words. His loving acts made me unique from the twin copies of my batch.

With him, I became more than a mere book. I was the friend he held onto during appointments. I was a shield to hide his face as he cursed the rooted nature of disease and bodily failings.

He grew frail and his attentiveness died. He coughed and wheezed into me on the seldom occasions he picked me up. Only he and I know how much of him is preserved in these pages which so occupied his life.

As his grip on my sides weakened, he wrote a note in biro pen. This handwritten message never reached its intended. I was promptly packed up and shipped here, to the room of a thousand used books.

Fingers trace my serif font and I feel electricity flow between us. They are betwixt, enraptured by the combination of my name and author. I'm shimmied from the shelf and interrogated at every angle. My blurb is searched, reviews are read, leaves thumbed to reveal the page count and price.

And then they find it.

An anonymous note that's almost lost its meaning.

A message inscribed for someone else's eyes.

'I hope this book keeps you company while I'm gone.'

Breaking Through at Forty-Two

(excerpt)

Amaan Shahbaaz

India

I am, above all, an honest man. About everything, really, and I pride myself on seeing things just as they are. I just never have the courage to utter any of it. But, something of a renewed spirit has begun to stir within me, and I am writing on account of this. I suppose having a sense of my form and history is worth mentioning before I delve into the substantial stuff.

My father always said a man gets the face he deserves at forty. At forty-two, I've got a shocker. Notably, a mound in lieu of a forehead is sandwiched by the protrusion of my Dumbo ears. I am saved only by my large, doleful eyes, even if they are set frightfully apart. All these components assemble into a dreadful pubescence. To my grief, it doesn't earn praise for conserving my youth but instead,

a revulsion at having done nothing and knowing nothing. I remain embalmed and mummified. My baby-softness is quite a deception considering I frittered away my life in limping humdrum.

For the better part of my days, I fulfill my managerial appointment at H.F.C (*Halal* Fried Chicken) covered in the spittle of lard that erupts from the barrage of fry-ups and fuck-ups and return home to get half-drunk at night. May He forgive me for boozing, but I think He will because I haven't hurt too many of His precious creations, and I think I'm granted some freedom with the life He's given me. I'm just a naturally fouled-up type. Alas, no grand rewards lie at the end for me, but maybe a glowing certificate for my participation and trying my best.

Growing up, I didn't ask much from this life bestowed on me. At the time, I only yearned for a family to get back home to. Ideally, a wife, a daughter, and I—placed as a sort of terrestrial Hercules—protecting these women, powerful and devout in my duty towards them. I dreamed they would look up to me with courtly veneration, murmuring, “There's no one like *him*.” This has proved to be inconceivable because I am impeccably sterile, which came as no surprise to my ex-wife, who always assumed an impotence that pervaded my laboured spirit.

I did succeed in being a proud husband for four years. But it's been a little more than a decade since we parted ways. On a bright Tuesday morning, while Bombay's sun incinerated its work-shackled residents, she told me she's never coming back. This was right after I asked her how

she wanted her ‘eggy weggy’s’ done. I suspect it cemented an immovable desire to escape my gloom and doom.

The last I saw her was this August, and she was with a child in her arms and her new husband at the supermarket. I hid behind a shelf and pretended to read the literature behind mega XL toilet paper that advertised its anti-tush-chafing stance. She looked happy, and in a way, I was happy for her. Still, I couldn’t quite stomach the sight of the chump beside her. I tracked their trail through the spaces between the shelves and watched them leave—guerrilla stalking in the city centre. When I left, I continued cowering behind a tower of TP in my cart. As is my way, I felt embarrassed flaunting my colossal stock of poo wipes. I guess it’s that shame that started at sixteen and spread to everything.

It occurs to me that perhaps another reason I write on this soggy night is just to blow some steam and go ‘grrr’ alone in my world. A bit of palliative care for the soul of this old dog.

Lately a wet pooch-like mustiness hangs over me, and no amount of cologne, deodorant, loofah, or pumice stone seems to conceal it (I’ve tried everything). I always sweat bullets with discipline, but this is new. I think it’s seeping from an unused and rank bit of my soul that I’ve let rot through deprivation.

Speaking of rot, I lost a toe to its activities seven months ago. I was demonstrating the proper procedure for grease disposal to a newbie at work when I fumbled the searing load and dropped some on my sandaled foot. The burn, which I left unattended, ushered in the development of an aggressive

gangrene. When I went to the doctor, he asked me, with characteristic dullness, why I came in so late. I shrugged and said it didn't seem that serious. In truth, it agonised me for two nights, but I held a certain pride from bearing my agony, more definitive than the low-simmering tragedies I am accustomed to. A day later, the doc told me he was going to have to amputate my ring toe. I felt dignified at having endured such a calamity, avoidable as it was.

You see, my whole life, I've been a scaredy-cat. But now, as I balance it all before me, I am set to become the King of Kings (of my tiny domain). Or maybe I'll find I'm just a kitty cat. It doesn't matter, I'll be proud because I tried and then stumbled, unlike some cold, timid souls. I used to be on the eve of destruction, but now, I want to say grace and gobble the life I am allowed to live. Even if I am told this life of mine, as it is now, is all I have and will ever have, I am OK with it. I am breaking through. At forty-two.

The Hermit

Casey Peterson

USA

In spring the hermit chose a heathered span beneath the mountains, a place where sea salt stung his nose, and there he set to work. He ranged far to find basalt blocks of the perfect heft and form, sometimes only finding one in a day, sometimes none. While he labored, he slept in the starry open, weathering the wind, the warmth, the rain, and the cold, as to feel each passing comfort and discomfort was to be alive.

Over damp, subterranean winters and sun-yellowed summers the structure took form: a packed imprint in the earth, an outline, walls. The stones were steadfast owing to their careful fitting, but the true strength was in the mortar. The hermit made it by an obscure recipe and its tenacity was such that, once set, it would outlast the earth.

He made provisions for others. Surely if he built with care, someone else would join. With square, trowel, and plumb, he puzzled out each detail, assured that if even one traveler wandered by, never speaking a word, that traveler might in time be moved by the effort of his design to raise a monument of their own, and the hermit's work would be worthwhile.

But through the long years he saw no one.

Time tempered his intensity. The work and the wild slowly drained of wonder, and he no longer savored the seasons' vagaries. Hunched with age, hands worn rough as mortar grit, he persisted on a solitary hope: that someday from their cities they would see, at least, and understand.

When all the stones were set, he descended to the shore for a final task. He found a fallen tree, rolled smooth in the surf, and split it into planks. He dragged them back and, with what mortar remained, fashioned a door. It was a clever design which, once fitted into the frame, could only be opened from outside.

His labor completed, the hermit cleaned his rusted tools. He looked longingly across the plain for the last time, went in, and pulled the door shut.

The Devil Makes...

Dinah Capparucci

UK

A week or so into that freakishly glorious April during lockdown 2020 a note appeared on my doormat. Not especially welcome, (it was from Wynne next door), but that was the great thing about lockdown; being anti-social was the new positivity. Others could crawl out of it grey-haired, alcoholic and fat if they liked. I was investing in a pupa phase. Mornings, I worked on my beach body in the garden, (gentle to moderate exercise on YouTube). Afternoons, I wrote the book I always knew I had trapped inside me, (well, I gave it a lot of serious thought anyway), and, in the evenings, expanded my horizons with unlikely boxsets whilst trialling the ultimate mojito.

I read Wynne's note with serenity. After all, it couldn't be an awkward invite. Apparently, Alan had taken up baking and

was making too many cakes for them to get through. Wynne hoped I didn't mind, but she had left one on my doorstep.

This was mildly intriguing. Alan and Wynne were epitomic, well-off retirees; Damart poster pin-ups, target market for Wayfair and Viking River Cruises. I doubted Alan even popped his own toast.

Yet the cake was surprisingly impressive. Three tiers no less—practically wedding standard—with cream-coloured icing and an overlay of piped mauve latticework with little sugar violets in the centre of every diamond. There had been a bit of a, let's say, kerfuffle, icing-wise, but that was only on one side. And it tasted nice; light and pleasantly violet.

Possibly, my 'thank you' note was rather too effusive because two days later Wynne dropped off another one. Yummy, admittedly, with crushed honeycomb and mascarpone topping, but, as I said in my second thank you note, (in which I returned the little bee decorations), really too much for one person; I was only halfway through the first one. Oddly enough, this cake had a sort of anomalous icing kerfuffle as well and I wondered if Alan was having turntable issues.

Anyway, after that Wynne got in a bit of a bind. By now Alan was making up to three cakes a day—she told me loudly, from two metres across the garden fence—and the neighbours on the other side had said they were diabetic. Yet to have binned Alan's creations immediately upon completion, presumably seemed too harsh because she started putting them in the garden.

Initially they were still quite normal-looking; peppermint, flower and animal themed; a raspberry-covered sachertorte; the kiddie cake with sweets in the middle; a flat one, with luminous blue waves and lumpy decorations which Wynne (whose greys were quite prominent by then), said were marzipan mermaids that Alan had made himself. But by mid-May their lawn was entirely obliterated beneath a lurid cake apocalypse; a massacre of pastel unicorn; train crash, bombed castle, crushed clock; floods of neon jelly; mashed cherries, dead fairies, edible gold leaf, spun sugar, black liquorice; an eerie dead tree with chocolate matchstick branches; a polluted Toblerone rocky shore; doomy high-rise with Biscoff windows; something entirely covered in eyeballs that Wynne said Alan had made himself, out of very thick jelly, edible pen and gobstoppers; all melting inauspiciously in the sun. And, always, through their French windows, that relentless, sickly smell of baking.

Birds arrived in their hundreds. Even by night there was a constant squawking and flapping of wings. The seagulls, especially, took on the hues of M&Ms, and rats, too fat to function, collapsed pitifully in cavities of ready-roll icing. But I didn't like to say anything, Wynne had enough on her plate.

Nonetheless, I was seriously wondering how one does approach an overstretched mental-health service about someone who makes too many cakes, when things took an upward swing. By then, lockdown restrictions had eased a bit, and Wynne, finally able to leave the house, had apparently sought sanctuary in the church.

“I did try ringing the doctor,” she explained, “but I was one-hundred and seventy-ninth in the queue. So, when a nice lady from St. Saviour’s suggested an exorcism, I thought, why not? I mean, we had to do something didn’t we? And, oh my goodness, it was lucky we did it when we did.”

This was the third week in June and Wynne, sweating in the heat and a pink pair of washing up gloves, was scooping the cakes into heavy-duty, garden sacks at last.

“And it worked?” I asked.

“I’m not going to lie,” she said, “it was a struggle. Poor Alan, he breathed in that much holy water they had to resuscitate him twice. But it had to be done. A landmark case of demonic possession they called it. Cakery. Apparently, there’s cases recorded as far back as medieval times.”

I imagine I eyed her sceptically over my sunglasses.

“You don’t, er, think it could just have been, you know, the strain of lockdown?” I tried, wincing as a gangrenous giraffe’s head distorted horribly upon impact with the sack.

“No,” said Wynne.

She went and got Alan’s phone to show me.

“I always did wonder why he only posted the bad sides,” she said in the tone of a cheated-on wife, “but now we know don’t we?”

Like Wynne, I’m not going to lie. Incredibly, as soon as you enlarged the icing “kerfuffles” on Alan’s Instagram pics’, it was there as clear as day; a little smirking devil’s face peeking out smugly from each and every one.

By November lockdown, I'm afraid that, what with "eat out to help out", and getting covid, I needed another pupa phase. And Alan, who had been doing quite well up to then, took up crafting. Wynne didn't even wait for the road map. On Christmas Eve she took advantage of the "three families", seven-day rule and moved in with her sister. As she said in her Christmas card (signed, out of habit, I suppose, from both her and Alan), there's only so much demonic possession a marriage can take. The truth was, he probably wouldn't even know she was gone.

The Hand of an Artist

Sevyn Michaela-Rose Waters

USA

Vernon's hand rests in hers, limp and lifeless. Ann studies the curve of his wrist, the sunspots on his fingers, the wrinkles around his knuckles. Despite his old age, his skin feels smooth to the touch. The hand of an artist. What beautiful things he had created with these hands. Murals and mushroom risotto, the beige plates and bowls in the kitchen, her own ecstasy.

Ann blinks as the nurses file out of the hospital room, heads bowed. He's been dead for at least sixty seconds. She shivers. The room is cold and smells of hydrogen peroxide, the evening sun dimmed by sky-blue curtains printed with illustrations of smiling birds. They mock her.

Tomorrow Vernon will be carted off to the funeral home to be pumped with fluids, manicured and placed in a coffin for the family to gawk at next week. Perfectly preserved. All

the while she herself will go home with an estimated sixteen bottles of wine and wonder what she's going to do with her life at seventy-two. Perfectly preserved.

She told Vernon when he went into remission that his body had listened to hers. It knew she couldn't bear for him to die first. Looking at his peaceful face, Ann realizes it's all a big joke. She wants to scream. She's known loss before, but this is Vernon. This is the twenty-two-year-old boy who rescued her from the saddle of a wild horse she lost control of. The twenty-seven-year-old man who held her hand through every second of childbirth. She wants to pick up the vase of lilies on the bedside table, throw it against the wall and watch the glass shatter like her life.

Let go, Ann.

She doesn't. With her thumb, she traces circles around his palm, thinks about how every bit of his mind billowed up into thin air with his final breath. Everything he knew about Baroque art or growing tomatoes was gone. His experience in France during World War II, vanished. The day of their marriage in 1940 no longer remembered. Ann closes her eyes, the loss unbearable.

She wonders what he saw as he flatlined. Those sacred milliseconds before the activity in his brain stopped. Did he see his eight-year-old self fishing on his grandfather's boat off the coast of Maine? Ann recalls the photo in all its golden hazy brilliance. His yellow bucket hat, the shadow cast across his coy smile.

Or did he think of the moment he sold his first painting? It was an oil painting of a desolate field in France. He never talked about his time at war, but he painted it. Looking at his work always felt like walking into the kitchen and forgetting what you went in for. The emptiness, the absence of something, always there haunting you.

Did he see Erin, their daughter, with her beautiful blue eyes? The first time she wrapped her tiny hand around his pinky? He used to hold his ear to her chest as she slept, his fingers lightly tapping on whatever was around to the rhythm of her heartbeat.

Morning kisses and crossed ankles, hands in hair, and the shape of his silhouette in the shower. Ann's life with Vernon cascades like water through her mind. She thinks of the moment they met when he pulled her onto his horse. Her cheeks were flushed, her long brown hair whipping over his shoulder as she clung to him. When she leaned back to thank him, she saw those dark blue eyes—Erin's eyes. There was something about the shape of them, a softness.

That softness remained, somehow, even after he came back from the war. His first night home he barely said a word. Instead, he kissed her shoulder as she cooked, held her hand as they ate, clung to her body in bed as if she'd disappear.

Silence squeezes the room with a white-knuckle grip.

Ann screams, but nothing escapes. She knows if she were to look into a mirror, her eyes would be swollen, the wrinkles more pronounced. Then, under the weight of her

tears, white hair and green blouse and blue curtains would bleed together. A blurred haze of unreality just sweet enough to pretend she was young again and Vernon was still here. Then they could go home and dance to “Stardust” by Hoagy Carmichael. Then she could feel his hand grasp hers.

Let go, Ann.

Blue Lines

Xu Guo

China

Jump out to the roof and look at the lines of blue
Can't leave the loop so jump back to the room

Step I: colour practice

in the beginning you create blue. it is easier than white. palette into and out of the sink. mix blue with muddy *Red and Black*. you are not Our Lady. you are without assumption to the sky. only casual blue is allowed. like Van Gogh twists blue into *The Starry Night*. like Picasso be-blues the coffin and child. from 1901 there is continuous loneliness and despair. sages are full of blue. the requirement of enlightenment. there should be light or white above blue. or below, it doesn't matter. you have not been enlightened. try to walk out of the darkness. refuse black. and *Negroes Fighting in a Tunnel by Night*. you are lost in thought. throw a canvas into blue water. name it *Blue Boat between Sea and Sky*. finally find that Klein has created it in 1960 with the boring name *IKB-1*. it reminds you of Minimalism. but you cannot be a minimalist without anything. your wall needs at least one window. you know there are more useless kinds of blue behind the wall.

blue of Massive Attack which makes the temple shatter.

blue of Bombay Sapphire which makes you drunk on Cowgate.

blue of Toru Watanabe which he feels in his thirty-seventh year on the plane.

you stand up and want to see the blue sky. overturn the blue paint. dyeing half of the building blue. you do not look back.

Step II: line trick

'blue lines are the reason why the temple had to shatter'

A
triangular
prism wall
at an angle
of seventy-
five
degrees
to the
ground
with one
diamond
window
on each
side

a roof without slates but a hole
occupying two-thirds of the area,
exposing an H-shaped crossbeam

[there should have been
a wall here, but now
there is only the sky]

A
s t r a i
ght wall
with six
windows
disposed
in a two
by three
arrange
ment

a wooden roof of a podium in which
two of the five planks have disappeared

everything is given meaning by another thing:

the overturned blue paint touches a brush.

the wet canvas is drawn with blue lines.

whowillgiveyoumeaning wheneveryouthinkaboutit youfindithardtobreathe.

you live alone in a ruin outside the world,

recalling the past torn painting and a kiss.

it is no coincidence that you drew these lines.

you live inside the window of the first row on the right

(blue glass)

you finish the painting in two days and a night

(blue lines)

sixty minutes in a flower's life between nineteen to twenty

(blue hour)

you jump outside and nip the flower from the crevice.

Step III: crush story

'meaning, meaning, meaning'

not knowing how to end you write down:

On Seeing the 100% Perfect Girl One Beautiful April Morning.
passing the ruin passing the windows passing the painting,
along blue lines she is here taking the flower from my
hand.

in blue lines I spend fifty years loving the one I am with,
twenty years forgetting her after my death.
please put into my coffin my blue pigment and my diary,
her last kiss before turning around, my closing eyes.

write three poems for me let me die three times
in the form of elegy, lyric and hymn.
then I close my eyes. when I open them again
she has vanished.

flower on the floor
moonlight on the flower
words all over the floor
not knowing how to start you write down:

O N S E E I N G T H E
1 0 0 % P E R F E C T G I R L
O N E B E A U T I F U L
A P R I L M O R N I N G

The Head

(excerpt)

Jesús Nares Jaramillo

Mexico

During the year of celebrations marking the centenary of Amedeo Modigliani's birth, three heads presumed to have been sculpted by the artist were found in the old waterways of Livorno.

The heads turned out to be a hoax.

In darkness interrupted by streetlamps, the hiss of falling weight; the initial splash and the subsequent burble of sinking stone.

Italy, 1984. Night turns to day, and with it comes the sound of excavators in reverse, anchoring themselves to the ground to fish with metal claws in a canal in Livorno.

Livorno, Tuscany's Venice, pushed against the sea. Tongues of sea and land interlocked. Ramps reaching for the water. Old concrete rectangles protrude to the sea; the low tide unrobes the rocks, exposes their slippery green coating. Elms, downy oaks, lime trees. Only pockets of shade, besides high-vaulted colonnades. The sun bleaches the rocks and darkens the necks of locals. Shapely balustrades project stout shadows. Long boardwalks. Lighthouses dart up like antennae and survey the checkered floors. Terrazza Mascagni. White boats, green canals. Pastel, angular buildings—salmon, terracotta, white—against an earnest block of sky.

But now it's early morning. From under a white tent, standing next to a table with rocks of various sizes, Vera Durbé observes the work of an excavator, safety helmet dancing on her grandmotherly head.

She watches as the machine picks up an oval rock covered in mud and lays it gently on the ground, where two hairy, moustachioed men in vests hose it down and carry it towards her. Vera examines the piece and smiles.

“Take a look, boys. We've got ourselves a Modigliani.”

Everyone knows the legend. The sculptures were too heavy, so he left them behind, commissioned in via Gherardi del Testa, before going back to Paris. On a foggy night in 1909, he threw them into the canals. Out of spite. The unfinished heads, half-emerging from the rock, were remnants of his dirty bourgeois days. A sailor saw him one November night stumbling in

the fog. The contour of a man and a stroller. The streetlight diffusely bathing the bridge. Triplets: pointed-chinned heads like prehistoric masks. *Porca puttana*, Modigliani slurred, stumbling under the weight of the first one. They are down there, lapped by the waters, holding their breath, waiting.

So maybe it goes like this:

Palm trees. 30 degrees at 11. Tricolor flags. Blue expanse, white triangles.

With summer, tourists arrive from the north and Michele, Francesco, and Piero go to the pebbled beaches and get bored. Francesco lights a cigarette and pats his belly. The saxophone of “Careless Whisper” plays on the radio.

“The other one was English.”

“*Ma quale?*”

“The girl from last time was English. I was dialling wrong, so the call didn’t go through.”

“And this one?”

“From Milan.”

“Eh, but she won’t answer you.”

Their open laugh. Squawking. A seagull bobs its head like a boxer, studying their ice-cream cones. Iridescent crests dance on Michele’s sunglasses. Piero licks his green gelato.

“I don’t want to go back to Tedeschi’s class!”

“Did you hear that they are looking for Modi’s heads?”

“Eh, Tedeschi only talks about himself.”

“They’re not going to find anything.”

The salt air and tobacco fill their lungs.

“They’ll find *something*,” says Francesco.

Two French women pass, and three heads turn, like sunflowers.

Or this way:

Piero’s shoulders ache. Seven laps. The sun dries them up. The car seats are hot. Michele drives with his right and leaves a trail of ashes with his left. From the elevated Ligurian road that takes them back to Livorno, Piero looks at the Tyrrhenian Sea to the left, a rugged mirror of water whose flashes hurt his eyes and tire him out. The noise of the engine and the conversation of his friends lull him to prophetic sleep.

A mirage dances on the road. Floating water, warm water on top of which an egg rests. The egg has the face of a person; the chin of the egg is triangular. Egg faces, triangular chins, three giraffes graze with their tiny slits. A screech.

The FIAT’s tire is flat, and they are skidding over it. While they wait, three rocks attract Piero. He puts them in the trunk.

“*Ma che cazzo fai, Piè?* We’re stranded here and you’re playing with rocks?”

“I found the new Modì.”

And everyone saw that it was so.

Or even like this:

In the roundabout, exit 2 missed, Piero calls from the back:

“But have you seen Modi’s heads?”

“Anyone could make a head like that.” Francesco cracks open a window. Tobacco flutters, swirls out.

Michele looks towards the sea, “Yeah?”, sucks on his cigarette. “Let’s make one, then.”

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