

untitled

issue two
volume two

VOICES
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**A journal for
underrepresented
writers**

VOICES

untitled

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Welcome to the second issue of **Untitled: Voices!** After the success of the first issue earlier in the year, we knew we wanted to get right back to work on a second collection. Again, so many of you submitted and trusted us to read your writing – for that we are eternally grateful. We believe it is vital, now more than ever, to work to amplify underrepresented voices. This collection is our part of the fight to be heard. We're so excited to be publishing two more volumes of amazing underrepresented writers from around the world.

We hope you enjoy &
thanks for reading!

Ollie Charles & Nicola Lampard

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Poetry

1999 - undetermined

Amy Lott

Chip fat thick in the air,

Thighs stuck to each other and

Jammed into a pair of shorts.

Outside the betting shop,

Bored out of our minds.

We sit for hours,

Until we decide it's too cold

Or too dark to walk home.

Then we run home down lit

Paths yelling,

In the knowledge that they can't give us an ASBO anymore.

c'est la guerre

Arden Fitzroy

the perfect cup of green tea is easily achieved ~~i don't have strong feelings about this~~
it doesn't have to steep in ceremony or ritual ~~it helps~~
the most important thing is your relaxed enjoyment
but remember one thing

the water *cannot* be boiling

or the leaves will burn ~~don't come near me with tea bags~~
when selecting your tea leaves

remember:

1. price isn't always indicative of quality
2. you're welcome

but remember one thing

the water *should not* be boiling

once you have your *fresh* water

the correct temperature is wholly dependent on leaf variety

it may be as low as 65C or as high as 80C ~~but that is pushing it they are all so delicate~~

if you are not in the possession of a sophisticated kettle ~~and I am not~~

you must develop mastery of your tea sense to determine

the perfect moment at which to take it off the heating element

wait for the perfect moment

but remember one thing

the water *must not* be boiling

pour and strain and remember that if you leave it to steep for over 1.33 minutes

it's over

remove strainer *do not add milk and sugar do. not. add. milk. or. sugar.*

breathe in the refined aroma of your tea

enjoy having partaken in this rite of relaxation

knowing that one thing in the universe alone is true and correct and that

the water will not be boiling

Menus of mad hatter's tea parties

Chris Tait

Bus shelters in ribbons of rain
Telephone boxes are cartons with veins
Where people are unwelcome
Landlord spiders secrete venom

As monopoly properties
Train and taxi tapestries
The ugliest bits of the city
Hangouts for witches and zombies

People speak like ventriloquists
Snakes and scorpions are guests
Men are werewolves in snowball moons
With gravestone tabs whispering runes

Buildings made of mint toothpaste
That the banshees have defaced
Traffic is like tiddlywinks
Glass splinters three eyed blinks

A horse and cart got hijacked
The busted goods were slipped in sacks
Damaged texts stretching to dictionaries
Menus of mad hatter's tea parties

Creatures used joke books as bibles
Gags and prank shorthand in tables
Vermin and rascals from departments
Where they twisted taxes and rents

They fiddled bills and bank statements

They were convict descendants
Police raided a teddy bear's picnic
Parental advisory lyrics

Passports for journeys that were disrupted
The Pied Piper was interrupted
They taught English as a silly language
Through pages in a paper sandwich

From sack races in bags of flour
Wooden spoons kilted in gore
Insects with rickety stencils
Architecture from poached pencils

The grasshopper council
Funded utterly on hansels

Fast casual

Diarmuid ó Maolalaí

sitting up
and looking at each other
like diners
at fast casual,
the sweat on your breast
very close to eye level
because of course
you are sitting on my lap.

and it's summer here;
all birdsong and close
in my airless apartment,
and touching you
is a glass of water
on a hot
and cloudless day.

my fingers drip
with condensation
like leaves in a greenhouse
and we turn together,
flip sideways like dolphins,
never coming apart,
slick wet with salt water.

and my sheet kicks up
whipping.
waves on the wind.

we're going fast now,
not casual,
very impatient,

very end of the story,
very ready to mean something
and mean something out loud,
and mean something with both of us
breathing together,

all hot, all july -
this is what they mean when they say
hot
hot sex;
you on your back now
ham sandwich
flavored with salt;
fast, casual again,
slowing it down

remembering I'm not just fucking you,
it's love,
hot,
stinking
love.

perhaps next time
we could open a window?

Teen discos

Diarmuid ó Maolalaí

somewhere
on the road
between dublin
toward kerry
and the country
builds around us,
confident
but unspectacular,
sloping away
slunk low and quite shy
like a teenager
with his hair cut
and a t-shirt
pressed flat
by his mother. and the sky,
clear as light
blue dresses
worn by the girls
we used to see
hanging around the corners
of all the teen
discos - rolling hills
smoothed with hairgel,
careful
about probing
too far.

Dead Ted's Garage

John Grey

It's where cars get fixed
or mostly where they go to die.
The owner and his cronies
sit out front of the tin shack
that makes do for an office.
A rusty metal sign says,
"Theodore Erskine Proprietor."
Poor Ted's been dead for thirty years.

One guy thumbs through
an ancient "Playboy".
His buddy stares up at the bridge,
on the lookout for jumpers.
Another rolls his own cigarette,
sticks it in his mouth.
He lights it.
It folds limply.
The fire barely makes it to his lips.

The Dobermans are chained up
but bark and growl their bloody story
of what trespassers have coming to them.
Rats bed down for the day.
A couple of guys in their twenties
scrounge through the heaps
of bumpers and hoods
and twisted steering wheels
for spare parts.

The weather's hot and clinging.
The air can't wait to cool inside

some sucker's lungs.
The owner and his cronies
melt into their fat, their chairs.
Business is as bad as ever.
But that's good news
if you don't plan on getting up.

B is for Baikonur

H Stickings Smith

From inside the hollow cage that was the body of the bird, the movement was not unlike flight from the maze, or labyrinth, in the palace-grey grounds. There was one mosaic of doves perched tightly, around a bronze bowl with the beak of one cutting hard into the water's surface, and white fragments showing the ripple and reflections. There was when I painted terns from the books to remember them. I painted them loud into pale insides of shells and I coloured the edges for an oval kind of frame. The edges were where each shell became half, and I painted each half a different tern. It was said that real birds had been confused by the mosaic and had often tried to land on the rim and been injured. I'm like a bird, she says, and she stands on the bed. You filth, says the wing thing. No wonder, says the wing thing. My favourite part is I'll only fly away, she says.

The Opposite of Things

JP Seabright

The opposite of within is not without,
it is outwith.
I discovered this fact in 1992,
standing in a lift with you.
We were in a car park in Aberdeen.
I think it was a car park,
everything is grey in Aberdeen:
granite, concrete, the sky, your hair and beard.

Next to the door, above the buttons, was a sign.
It said Outwith.
What's that, I said, almost scoffing at their mistake.
The opposite of within, you said, in Scottish.
I've never forgotten this moment, it's stayed with me,
much like I've never forgotten when you raped me
five days earlier.
And every waking moment since has felt like being trapped
in an elevator with your assailant,
who was a once-beloved family member,
who taught you the meaning of strange words,
and the opposite of things.

A Modern Love Story

Nikki Dudley

@Fannyfabulous -

Will you be a fan-a-me?

(Sorry - sounded so much better in my head...)

I have 1289 followers on Twitter. I can improve UR algorithms OFC.

I will like all UR photos on Insta. (I have 401 followers on there).

I'll make TikTok videos dedicated 2 you. People will be like OMG LMAO but

I won't care.

You know, I read poems on YouTube too. Why don't you subscribe?

(SPOILER: some of them are about U).

Let's link our socials, Fanny. Let's put 'in a relationship' on Facebook.

(Does anyone still use it?)

Let's tag each other in photos and comments.

Let's get synced online. People will totally ship us but IRL.

Fanny, dear Fanny, are you signed up 2 Tinder?

We can delete our profiles together.

Let's swipe right

in person.

Pls @ me soon. My DMs are always open for U.

@Hopelessromantic / John

Grounded

Oz Hardwick

Everything's grounded, from international flights to sassy kids in teatime sit-coms, and the air breathes itself back into shape like a mattress when a lover leaves. I ride the bus downtown, standing to feel its shudder and sway, surfing the morning's treacherous ordinary, braced for the big kahuna; but the only wave is a toddler dressed in sealskins, their pudgy hand holding a conch or a cocoon. Each stop is announced in a flat electronic voice, but the doors don't open, and after a time the place names degenerate into nonsense syllables, the cityscape into unfinished architects' sketches. By the time I alight, even the driver has gone, and I understand that there was never a bus, there was never a city, and the only waves are electromagnetic. I think of a wine-stained bed, stripped of linen, and of the sea reclaiming disused airports. I unscrew the lightbulbs, being careful not to burn my hands. I practice TIP skills to ground my anxieties. When I was a child, I never spoke out of turn, and I fear it's too late to start now.

Outpatient

Oz Hardwick

As I enter the surgery the downpour begins, a drumroll of hailstones on the flat roof. The doctor shuffles files, and I wonder why anyone still uses paper for anything other than wiping their arse or covering metaphorical cracks. In any imagined version of this scenario, there would be someone else here to recast the weather as cats, dogs, frogs, or even the Big Bad Wolf with his drumming fists and wheedling insinuations. But there's just the doctor, his face a Venetian mask and his mouth stuffed with detached calm. His lips appear to be spitting out sour milk, or counting to a million in an endangered click language, but the hailstones have grown to the size and shape of little pigs, each one squealing on impact, and a smell like barbecued flesh makes my eyes water. A nurse enters in an apiarist's veil, censuring the room with cherry-scented smoke. In any imagined version of this scenario, I would weigh words and check my diary, talk things over on the short drive home. But there are no words, and there's only the Big Bad Wolf with his golf umbrella and sardonic grin, offering his elbow to lead me further into the storm.

chem

Peter Scalpello

G	<i>meph</i>	<i>more</i> <i>GBL</i>	<i>more</i>
G	<i>meph</i>	<i>than</i> <i>crys</i>	<i>crystal</i> <i>meth</i>
G	<i>meph</i>	<i>tal</i> <i>meth</i>	<i>than</i> <i>G</i>

*body of a toddler wakes to find not its
father where he'd lain as routine*

i don't anymore but at the time
i thought it was adequate to long
for sexual connections & romantic
gratification & project that
ambition onto regular interactions
with guys on the internet or in person
to accomplish validation

this speculative kinship led me to you

*bedroom disquieted
a gradient of sleepy hues moonlit punctures
through curtain cast upon unconcerned furniture
he is not there*

we met at nadia's place
a vision of gentrification
you came with whatsername
i didn't know anything
about you but i'd seen your profile
& that was affirmation enough
in person you were even better
looking & though i wanted to
right away i left it
a while before i made my move
offered you my
mephedrone laced with de-wormer
you seemed happy just
to sip your bud & i too
quenched metaphorical thirst but
you said sure & trusted
the ambiguous powder my doorkey
to oblivion & to i hoped your desire

*brazen curiosity conquers terror & leads you
to the hallway lone & unaccustomed to night
time when murkiness
of the hour alludes to secrecy towards the lodger's*

you were charismatic & so fucking handsome
i tried to mirror your allure to appear
nonchalant but just nodded a lot & laughed
when it seemed i was expected to
really i was gone by this point & only
wanted to blink at your stubble &
prep-blue eyes
your gregarious smirk & nicked tooth said you
chipped it as a teenager chewing
lids off of beer bottles & scar tissue
above your left eye
socket as testament to a facial
modification outgrown

room slowed movements a hazy sojourn
unfathomable sonance
pervades from within you see an image
defined in dusk they are on the bed

submissive to social approval i continued sniffing
with you & sucking roll-ups like a hand down
my throat when you went back inside for a minute
to see if your friend was alright my flatmate came
over & said she'd heard you're quite kinky like into pretty
out-there sex stuff & i faked like i was maybe down
for that too as i tremored in the daisies squeezing
a tobacco pouch that depicted someone lying
in foetal position among sterile bedsheets

it kind of looked like me

you spoke of the first relationship with a man
you were seventeen & he forty-three
a corporate type & not out
initially the thrill was boundless the
precarious dynamic satisfied a vacant
dominance you believed sexuality
capable of relieving
liberation came in the split following
a proliferation of enforced group sex
of which you were keynote
migratory impulse in heartbreak led
you to solo-travelling
archetypal passage from west to east
in search of depth & of authentic self
found
in bangkok a gay sauna
a nostalgia
the same men but on your terms

i sensed your disclosure as manifest
of our entanglement & so
reciprocated

i recounted how in sixth form i befriended in
the negligent sense a man
in his fifties whom i met on an internet chatroom
for gay people his thin eyebrows
a whisper opposing stiff upper lip
of a bushy moustache cast upon incognito browser
my own bareness reflected in his semi
-ironic spectacles
he had a kind smile
& grateful energy so i went
round his house once a week sometimes
he wanted me to suck him off but mostly i just
kept him company
in the months we served each other
i discovered what it meant to be wanted & he
allowed
soon he lost the glasses
started wearing dual diamond-stud earrings
& found someone else
fresher than i

& how prior to this
i endeavoured in the suppressive sense
in heterosexuality i experimented
with expectation upon the female form against
better judgement
a temporary anchor it was
an era of attempted eradication to my deviant
desires & at times i even achieved the normative
assumption persuaded myself
an assured tendency for the womanly as it was
i ascribed to the shameful effeminate
certitude provided a temporary
restoration in the futile notion of divine cure
of correction yet
despite amorality of then self still
this period felt to be my preferable
& in the unsighted scramble
from sexual naivety i endured
favourability

*different skin joined
at the same middle the act
develops as you*

we were an effortless dilation
& the hours accelerated
i drew hands taut against the sharp
dome of my scalp revelled in the bite
of a skull freshly sheared as uniform
controlled & pure we were
as fire upon freeze the economic fibre
of a prius backseat & crotch grabs loaded
with intemperance sting of
your teeth on my neck pleading
a territorial command we occupied
the streets were fleeting through tolerant glass
fervid breath a perpetual condensation
once reversible bruise on a crystal
veil we were practically
neighbours & in my abbreviated state i sussed
this as omnipotent intent so surrendered
myself to the erotics of fate

call out

you led me descending
stone to a doorway that advised obligation
i indulged cumulative
proximity & chemical nerve to galvanise
a performed affirmation of motive
your mattress lay arthritic upon
the encroaching crimson carpet
expressions of predestination implicated a kindling
adrenaline extraneous to lust but in fact
apprehension
horizontal i reasoned the dichotomy
of coveted pleasure & just wanting to cuddle
a wicked confounded craving for intimacy
could we just hug for a minute i said as our noses
touched to behold but a freudian blur

or was it rather could you get me a drink?
you tucked your erection to the groin
of your jeans & left for rum &
ice a pipe & a pipette
of G i slumped across the bedroom wall back bare
& sweaty so my peripheral form clung to the affected
gloss of a photograph withdrawing
from its embrace with feeble defence
the relic uproots in reciprocity willingly
peeled from its altar an image
of contended composition

depicted was a young boy
in the lap of a radiant woman
captured in profile their gaze
upon each other mouths akin
pouted to express a virginal kiss an impossible
bond it was very sweet who's that
said aloud to no one
eyelids licking themselves to savour
the promise of immaculate affinity
with another of something higher
& more &
i passed
out

*that night in your bed i dreamt i was a curlew
my bill a slender downturned rind*

*heart pure intentions soft & my wings
overwrought with escapist desire*

*with beady bird eyes i beheld a plumage lamented
as feathers were plucked from my extremities*

*by invisible force each quill whistled in its departure
a sedative displacement*

*my hide eventually settled atop the shallow channel
fluid to its tide thriving away*

*sapphire teal & perfect indigo
lost*

ISOLATION FUCK

Peter Scalpello

hottest sedative
is the distance between (my)
pink lids and blue light

the screen some faceless
bodies just groin and an ass
or two at close range

grey spaces between
what you see and what can be
briefly imagined

past touches bettered
and fantasies forth coming
of a scripted bliss

the interplay of
carnal and digital brain
distracts only hands

what queer initiative
this need for something
so ordinary

the in-between

Rebecca Webster

i was born in a kind of in-between
neither countryside nor city
i normally say: "it's the most boring thing about me"
to live in the suburbs of one's imagination
among the homogenized lines of straight, white progress.
neither remote, nor connected, neither grey nor green.
i come from residential buildings that lie
cheek to cheek
caressing disused community centres,
flirting with the offie, our-one-stop-shop.
she glistens with the promise of
smirnoff and please-mum-it's-3op-freddo's.
and there's that guy – you know the one I mean?
he never stops looking – unblinking, unrelenting.
especially once the bell rings half past three.
churches. so many fucking churches.
they all sit redundant like chewing gum
dragged by little fingers
under mottled-green seats.
adjacent are the flocks of pubs and gentleman's-only-clubs
squawking and stinking of piss and baldness and golf.
the grass in the in-between is always trying
to grow -
back.
i think it's a reminder
that the air is supposed to be clean here.
that this is success and safety.
so why can't i breathe?

Elif: a shorthand

Siobhan Dunlop

```
if ( we catch eyes in public ) {  
    this could be something  
} else {  
    you could look away  
}
```

```
if ( it wasn't an accident ) {  
    we could look away,  
    look back again  
} else {  
    you could hide your shame  
    beneath coincidence  
}
```

```
if ( there's a chance you understand ) {  
    we could compare notes  
    on the unfairness of existence  
} else {  
    you could leave this place  
    and pretend to forget  
}
```

```
if ( you want to take this further ) {  
    we could exchange usernames  
    admit our social media vices  
} else {  
    you could spend hours  
    hunting for mutual friends  
}
```

```
if ( I'm not misreading your eyes ) {
```

we could to an understanding
} else {
there's nothing more I can say
}

In The Hairdresser's Chair

Siobhan Dunlop

Are you
really
sure
you want it like that?
That
[whispers]
short?

[silence]

Yes.

Well, we don't
we can't
we don't recommend
going from long hair
to
that
short.

I've had it
it's been short before.

[a stand off]

I'll cut it
this
short
and then we can see.

No.
I want it
that
short.
It doesn't need to be a
women's
haircut.
Just a haircut.
The one I'm asking for.

[short hair—that short—occurs]

My Hair Speaks

Toshaunae Norris

Women with palm-silk hair behind white cedar-picket stockades,
They look nothing like me-
I wear an old jumpsuit and sneakers without the laces.
I am from the countryside
with a nappy fro.
Rejections have torn wounds into my heart.
I look into my mirror and see what they want me to.
Frizzy Hair straightened with heat....
I will look less black.
I will look like the girl with raven hair flowing past waist.
I use a brush to remove this unscrupulous nature of mine,
but not as the wind brushes the dandelions in my grandma's field.

My hair cries out,
You are beautiful-
Amidst the heat that unbends her back...
That paralyzes her bodice and her soul.

When the weary sun goes home for rest,
I dream of the stitches of this wounded land;
Reopening-
My ancestors stream through, hand in hand,
Singing Nina Simone's Four Women.
I am Aunt Sarah.
Come my ancestors,
Come, whistle the tunes of the old song.
Sing of the monsters below the mountains
that blame invisible men for the words that poison the minds of our
children.
Make me remember how you fought for my nappy hair.

My hair speaks to me.
Dear Dark-skinned muse,
Admire me...
-Your nappy hair.

VOICES
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Prose

In Essence

Aisha Phoenix

11.30pm

Serena and I are sitting on high stools at the bar with rum and cokes that cost almost half the entry to the club. I would have preferred something non-alcoholic, but she insisted we get proper drinks. Essence speaks to me inside. *We came to dance. Since when did alcohol help with that?* she jabs the lining of my stomach with a long electric-blue nail. My playsuit only comes a third of the way down my thighs and I have goose bumps from the harsh aircon. I'd be wrapped up in my coat if they hadn't forced us to check them in before we came downstairs. On the floor of my stomach, Essence hugs her knees and shivers. *Management policy? These people are sadists.*

"So, how's uni?" Serena says, above a bland RnB tune.

"It's good. Can't complain." I've known Serena since primary school. She was a couple of years above me. Now she's graduated, she loves to stress this difference between us. "How's your job going?" I say.

"I love it," she says, smoothing her long black hair. "My team's really nice, but the manager can be a bit," she pulls a face, then leans in towards me. "I met someone."

Essence rolls her eyes. I love that she can see and hear everything I do, but only I can see and hear her. Serena doesn't say anything more, waiting for me to ask all about him. After telling me more than I wanted to

know, she says, "What about you?"

"Still single," I say, looking at the array of bottles behind the bar.

"Aww," she says, giving me her you'll-find-someone look.

"I'm not really looking, but if it happens, it happens."

12.00am

The playlist ends as the DJ begins to spin old skool hip hop. Essence is on her feet with her hands in the air as we feed off the beat, anticipating the music to come. I want to get up and do a little two-step to keep warm and respond to the call of the music, but when I stand up, Serena shakes her head, so I sit down again. *She's not our keeper.* Essence flops back down and folds her arms. I can feel a slight burn like indigestion as she kicks at me.

1.30am

It's packed and so hot that the walls are wet with condensation; it's even dripping from the ceiling. You can smell the sweat in the air, but no one cares. They're playing all the bashment classics from back in the day and everyone's getting on bad. Essence is doing one of her dances, rubbing her bald head as she rocks from side to side. I'm wining up my waist, when some guy starts

dancing up behind me.

Tell him to step, Essence says, hands on hips. When I look back, I see one fine brother. *Or not*, she says. I smile and keep dancing, and he's with me, following my every move with his hips. When I switch it up, he's in sync. I *like* the way his body moves. I slow down into him, push back. I can tell he likes it too.

Serena's dancing by herself, giving off strong don't-touch-me vibes and using her I-dare-you glare on anyone too dumb to get the message. She keeps giving me a side-eye. *Is she jealous? Didn't she just say she's got a man?* Essence moves her head side-to-side in exaggerated fashion and puts a thumb and forefinger against the side of her face. Serena gestures that she wants a drink. *She knows where the bar is. Tell her you'll be here when she gets back.* Essence kisses her teeth and smooths the trousers of her diamante-studded black satin suit. Reluctantly, I free myself and say thank you to the guy. Serena and I work our way through the crowd and join a mass of people waiting to get served.

The guy comes up beside me and extends a hand. "I'm Richard. What are you ladies having?"

I smile and say, "We're okay."

Essence nods her approval.

"I'll have a rum and coke," Serena says, glaring at me. "Terri will have the same."

Before I can stop him, Richard is making his way to the front of the queue.

"Seriously?" Serena says.

"We don't know him," I say.

"Well you seemed pretty close on the dancefloor."

Why exactly are we friends with her again? Essence says, as if she doesn't remember the acne years, when

Serena stood by me when no one else would. Essence narrows her eyes. *Who was with you when you were seven years old and got lost when it was starting to get dark? Who helped you hide from that pervert?*

Richard returns with the drinks and glasses of neat brown liquor for himself and a friend he introduces as Aaron. "We've got a booth over there, if you want to join us?" he says.

I look at Serena. "Sure, lead the way," she says.

She sticks close to Richard, taking my hand to pull me through the crowd.

Richard and Aaron sit opposite us. "So where are you ladies from?" Richard says, looking at me.

He has intense almond-shaped eyes, a perfect fade, and a goatee. I don't know what it is about goatees, they get me every time.

"South East London," Serena answers promptly.

I think you'll find he was talking to us.

"We're from south sides too," he says.

"All the best people are." I smile at Richard, then glance down slowly and up again, making sure he can see my lashes. Essence smiles.

"So, what do you do?" Richard asks me.

"She's a student. I work in advertising," Serena says. She proceeds to tell Richard and Aaron all about her job, though I'm not sure how much they can hear.

We sit with them for a while and drink our drinks. Richard tells us he works in the city. He tries to sustain a conversation, but it's too loud. I spot Aaron looking Serena up and down when she's not looking. Richard says something in his ear and he heads for the bar. The music's calling to me and I'm about to try to encourage

Serena back to the dancefloor when Aaron returns with more drinks. He hands rum and cokes to Serena and me. Essence rubs a hand across her forehead. *Don't you think we've had enough?* I know she's right, but I'm feeling that warm, happy feeling, so I drink the drink. It would have been rude not to.

The more Richard speaks, the funnier he seems. At one point, Essence lies on her front in the centre of my stomach, laughing until she can hardly breathe. I have to dab at my eyes to avoid ruining my makeup.

They start playing my all-time favourite slow jam. "I'm going back to the dancefloor," I announce, standing up, swaying a little, laughing a lot.

Serena shakes her head at me, but stays seated. Richard gets up and offers me an arm. "I'll take good care of her," he says.

2am

The DJ's playing all my favourites back-to-back. Richard takes me to a quiet corner and dances against me slowly, sensually. Essence leans against the wall of my stomach, fanning herself with her hand. *It's getting hot in here.* We stay like that, dancing as though we're the only two people in the room, until the lights come on. The brightness hurts my eyes.

"Let's go find your friend," Richard says, leading me back to the booth.

Serena's sitting next to Aaron now. He has one arm around her shoulder, as though it's always been there. He hands her his phone and she puts in a number. Knowing Serena, it's probably not hers. *Hmm ... Looks like she's met someone else,* Essence says, collapsing into giggles.

Richard says, "I'd like to see you again." I smile, close my eyes for a moment. When I open them, he's started a new contact under 'Terri', spelt correctly. It's a struggle to focus on the numbers on the keypad, but I manage to

type something in and hand it back.

3am

Once Serena and I have our coats and emerge from the club, it's bucketing down. We don't have an umbrella between us, so we put our coats over our heads.

"How long for a cab?" I ask.

She's searching her app when a shiny black Audi pulls up next to us and the window winds down. "Why are you ladies standing in the rain?" Richard calls from the driver's seat. Aaron, seated next to him, smiles at Serena.

"Just booking a cab," I say, and turn to Serena. "How long will it be?"

"It's saying 10 minutes." Serena screws up her face.

"Doesn't make sense to have you two getting drenched when we can give you a lift," Richard says. "Where have you got to get to?"

"That's sweet, but there's no need," I say slowly, taking care not to let the words trip over each other. Essence nods sleepily.

"Damn girl, you know what the rain does to my hair," Serena says. "Honor Oak," she says to Richard.

"That's cool. We're heading that way," Richard says.

3.40am

Aaron jumps out in New Cross and Serena is quick to replace him in the front seat. The heating's on high and it's so soothing, Essence keeps drifting off. Every time my eyes close, it's a struggle to force them open again. When we get to Honor Oak, Serena directs Richard to her flat. It's raining even harder when he pulls up outside. I move to get out too, but she says, "Terri lives in Crystal Palace, do you think you could drop her there?"

"Sure," he says.

Serena holds open the door so I can ride shotgun. "See you later, babe. Text me when you get home." She gives me a hug. "Thanks for the lift." She smiles at Richard.

3.50am

Richard stops at a petrol station and fills up the tank. He asks if I want anything. I say, no, and he goes inside and returns with a plastic bag that clanks when he puts it in the footwell of the back seat.

"So how do you know your friend?" he says, as we start moving again.

"Serena? We went to school together."

"Seems a bit domineering."

"She can be, but she had my back when I needed her. I owe her a lot," I say, but inside I'm smiling. Glad he can see it too.

"I'm sure she *is* really nice," he says. "But be careful around people like that. They can take advantage."

Visibility is poor when we approach the house, driving rain pounding against the windscreen. "Thanks so much for taking me home," I say.

"My pleasure." Richard peers out and turns off the engine. "I'll have to wait here, I can't drive in this."

I hesitate for a moment. *Don't do it*, Essence says, shaking her head. *Let him wait in the car*.

I don't want to invite him in. I have a room in the shared house and that room's in a state, but he's just gone out of his way to take me home...

4am

"Aren't you going to offer me a drink?" Richard says, giving me a dimple smile.

No. Don't make yourself comfortable, Essence says, standing with her shoulders pulled back. She's always been protective of me, ever since we were little. I used to think of her as the part of me that always knew what to do.

"Would you like some tea?" I say.

"Got anything stronger?" he says.

"Coffee?" I smile.

He raises his eyebrows at me, then smiles. "Don't worry, I've got you covered." He goes across to the shelf and takes down a couple of glasses, then pulls a bottle of rum and a can of coke from the bag he bought at the petrol station. Essence cradles her head in her hands. He pours a triple shot of rum into both and some coke into one, which he hands to me.

"I've had enough," I say.

Damn right! Essence says. She named herself *Essence* the time when I got lost in the dark and a man exposed himself. I was absolutely petrified. After that, she was her own person. She grew more and more independent but always fiercely protective of me. When I really annoy her, sometimes she threatens to leave, but she never does. I'm not sure she can.

"I can't drink alone ... Just take it slowly," Richard says.

He takes a large swig, neat.

"You're driving," I say.

"I can handle my drink." He looks around my small room, taking in the mess of papers and dirty mugs on

the desk, the photos stuck around the wardrobe mirrors and the discarded outfits next to me on the bed. Then he gathers up my dresses and puts them on the chair, sitting down beside me.

4.30am

Any more and I'll fall asleep I move to cover my glass flop over Laugh

He takes it from me fills it rum with a splash of coke Hands it to me

Too strong Coke I wave my arm about he pours more in

I down it

Essence is SHOUTING pacing making me feel sick Head aches I tune her out

You're really pretty His hands on my thigh

I lean against him to prop myself up Struggle to keep eyes

open

5am

room moving

in circles wont stop

close eyes

head moving

round and round

falling

backwards

5.10am

He's on her. And there's nothing she can do. She's out cold.

We've been together a lifetime. Inside is all I've known, but I think I can get out. If I leave, I doubt there's a way back – but I can't sit and watch this. I close my eyes, then push up through her sphincter into her oesophagus, and continue up into her throat. I slip into her mouth like new life emerging from the birth canal. There's mucus and saliva all over me. I steady my breathing, dive through the gap between her lips and roll onto her pillow. I dry myself on the champagne satin pillowcase, watching Richard all the while. His eyes are closed, so he's not expecting it when I lunge at his windpipe and stick my nails into his skin. I pound him with my heels and knees. He flings himself to the floor, gasping, and flails about trying to shake me off, but I don't let go.

He's gone now. I saw to that.

How will Terri feel when she wakes? Will she be in pain? What will happen to me? Will things still be the same between us? I don't know. What matters is she was worth it. She is worth it.

Terri looks so young, fast asleep. I suspect she'll wake soon, but for now, I'll sit here, by her pillow, listening to her breathe.

The murky below

Andrew Kaye

I've always wanted a boy with a face like his. A thespian's face with a wispy handlebar moustache. There's his caramel curls and angular cheeks; the eyes that dazzle olive green with pupils for pits. And what a grooming regime, so effortless. He spends at least three-quarters of an hour applying creams to his eyelids and moisturising his cheeks. He's fastidious when it comes to nails. His and mine. All the more important, he reminds us, when we think back to our adolescence - the nervous chewing and damaged cuticles. "You've done it again," is his night time cry. "We need to get over our tics."

He's restful now as I see him sleeping to my right - as restful as he ever allows himself to be. He's closed his window. I keep mine open.

I put my phone on silent mode and Ruben's *Instagram* videos sink to the murky below, seeded, for my hand's lissom excitement. He'll be here tomorrow, when I wake up around half-past ten. And he'll get my message, I'm certain of that.

The sea moss heaves like an asthmatic. Water coats the algae and sea urchins with the Mediterranean's afternoon grace. Close to Port Vendres, snorkelers approach, but this is my copper rock, a Fingal's cave of piano keys and alert treble clefs. I curse them under my breath, 'why can't you just fuck off?'

I could be in the Hebrides, it's been so chilly. I'm raging and far away from Dad.

When I woke up, I pressed the *Instagram live* icon with its enticing Willy Wonka bar of brown, pink and red. Ruben must have overslept. He was there an hour later, clicking his fingers and a second later, sharing his latest 'reveal'. A meringue wife beater's vest with a James Dean shirt on top, swaying in London's wind and looking like he needs to be fucked. But it was all incidental, there was no time for me to cum on his grin as I freeze framed his vid.

Dad's wife, Tania, had been in touch. Overnight. Her email was to Dad, but conveniently enough one of her nails slipped. She BCC'd me into the email and daggered it into my chest.

"...I'm not homophobic and what a ridiculous point. I've had plenty of gay friends, but the camp, bitch types, they're the ones I like. Not the serious 'straight' gays who think they're better than everyone else. And look at him, your son dumped again, interfering as he always is, karma, I like to think..."

Touché.

I let the faint reflection of the mid-afternoon sun butter my toes. After a bath, I stir a pot of basil and bolognese sauce from the marché in Collioure. Turn the gas higher to eight, and if I stretch across, there Ruben is,

preparing his dinner too, a Portuguese classic from his home in Obidos. His dish is vegan - of course. I privately messaged him once and it showed me he'd "seen" what I said. Well not *said*, exactly, but seen me in my Nasty Pig *Open All Night* t-shirt. Well, not seen me *in* the t-shirt, exactly. It was half over my head.

There's salsa over my smartphone but I smooth it off with a slip of kitchen roll before there's a line of ants. It's time to call Dad. The dial tone rings its customary four ellipses and then tails off. I leave a voicemail. "Will you call me when you can, because all this stuff Tania sent me overnight, it's just...strange." We still need to talk over that Power of Attorney application. The important stuff.

Evening comes and there's a Christmas bow of velvet clouds, ribboned in the sky to the west. That's where the Pyrenées lie, and Lucas, my cheating ex. With his new guy, a Basque. Christmas isn't too long away now, but I doubt I can afford a flight. I text Dad two more times, followed by seven WhatsApp messages and two more voicemails. Has she taken away his phone? Intercepted his email? Again?

I'm up at three when the distant hum of the refrigerator mixes with the mating of my neighbour's cats. It's out-of-season, but he arrived for the public holiday and I resent hearing the early morning clearance of his throat. Ruben's up this time, and I look how he's been rollerblading through Hyde Park, tagging a girlfriend next to the Serpentine. His videos crawl along and I flick to the right - no need for poses in art galleries - I want his arse and neck.

His last ones are of him in his dog collar and *fuck*, *amazing*, him in his human pup mask. I go to my wardrobe and take my Nasty Pig green baseball cap. Well, Lucas's cap, when he used to be into this and before he fucked things up.

Send. It's *his*. Ruben will message me back. And then an email flashes up on Gmail. I know it'll be from Tania, but no, it's from her ex.

"Tania has advised me that your father has been abusing her and has provided me with your email. As his only child, you have a responsibility. Clearly. Can you please exercise it? Stan."

It could be her dressing up as Stan, the guy she left her children for, or the email could be authentic, but at this hour all I want is to wank.

All Saint's Day sees my neighbour scraping leaves from his back porch. He has a peculiarly large house and a meringued whisk of white hair. He's down from Rouen and tells me he's here to visit his father in the cemetery, a wartime hero from *La Grande Guerre*, a 'great'. I nod and curse his cats who pee and look like creatures Tania would pet. He asks what happened with my father, after that last time we spoke when we both met on the beach at Easter; after I told him the police came round to Tania's and Dad's and I needed his advice as a former sergeant.

"He's gone a bit quiet, I probably ought to get over there sometime."

And then it's Dad on the phone, at fucking last, so I wave my neighbour a Scottish goodbye and take the call.

"Elliot? Can you hear me? Elliot? It's such a bad reception, it's always so bad where you are."

"I can hear you, I'm speaking as loud as I can." I notice my neighbour from my kitchen window as he glances through and fastens his coat.

"You need to stop all this stuff with social services. It's only making it worse. A million times worse."

"Where are you now?" I ask.

"Where do you think I am? Stuck, fucked."

"The point is to get a third party involved, get them to confront her with her actions. Show her you won't be

cowed.”

“Nothing works, but leave us be. Please,” he says.

“Make it work, she’s going to ruin everything. Dad?”

Lucas used to be like this: like Tania, not my Dad. He shrieked at me for leaving toothpaste stains in the sink, he told me to sleep on the sofa. Quite the control freak. What’s more, he prevented me from attending my Grandad’s funeral because his needs came first; it was his graduation, his ego trip. I read about the condition once. Narcissistic personality disorder, or so I think. Lucas kept on talking about it, telling me there were resources online. A cry for help. There’s something on *Mumsnet* about how to spot a narcissist when you’re dating in later life. Or maybe it was on *Age UK*’s website. Something to forward on to Dad.

Midnight. A call. In Britain, it’s eleven pm.

“Look, Elliot, it’s best you stop contacting me. I’ll call you. Sundays. When I can.” The derrrrrrrr of the hanged up phone rings in my ear like last night’s refrigerator hum.

I want to beat my fists on my wall, unbuckle my jeans and fuck Ruben, have him here in my house. I want to swim off the cove and listen to Mendelssohn so loud it wakes my neighbour up. I want to chain Lucas up as he begs his new boyfriend to watch us - him in a harness and me as the pig. But I won’t, and for the moment, I can’t.

Christmas will be just me this year, I can’t get to Stornoway. It was never on the cards. I write Tania a card and post it from *la Poste* next to the tourist train and the *épicerie* that sells anchovies and tourist trinkets. I sent her a gift, it’ll be delivered by a pet store in Dundee with an arrival I hope that coincides with my card. She’s blocked my email and so has Dad. I won’t know the exact hour, I could track it, but I’m tuned into Ruben preparing a Bolo Rei, a Portuguese Christmas Ring Cake. He blocked my old account; but it’s okay because

I’m following him with my *Lucas27bttm* username, and I don’t think he knows.

First, there’ll be a tank, a Seapora 40 gallon aquarium fish tank. It took quite a lot of research but there’ll be a delivery to Tania’s from the mainland and the two piranhas should arrive by the 24th. The card reads;

“I’ve already given them names, one’s Butch Cassidy and the other one’s the Sundance Kid. They’ll be your friends. Don’t worry, even though Butch suggested going ‘straight’, he’s decided that isn’t the life for either of them. Perfect, I thought, since you love *bitch* gays and not the straight, serious ones.”

I like writing New Year’s Resolutions. I might train to become a counsellor, because a lot of people seem to experience ill mental health: Tania, Lucas. His Basque will no doubt see through him soon enough.

And Dad? I can live off the inheritance, when his wife finally agrees to turn the machine off.

There’s a few questions to be resolved, what house I’ll live in, now the tenancy on this place has come to an end and I have a few more options.

On a brighter note, it’ll be my birthday soon and I might take up my neighbour’s offer. He wants to take me for a drink. He can’t be much younger than 70 himself, and has a pleasingly red face.

Do You Remember?

Corey Terrett

Do you remember? Do you remember when we packed our bags and run away? Do you remember your mother looking for us, crying and pleading? Do you remember my mother looking for us, well, she didn't even try, did she? Do you remember when we bunked off school and sat in the fields all afternoon? Do you remember when we looked at each other properly for the first time? Do you remember the beating of my heart? Do you remember growing up, lost in our own world, our own city, our own kingdom, our own planet. Just the two of us. We make the rules; we are the citizens. Do you remember?

Do you remember when my dad left, out of the blue, didn't even leave a note. Do you remember when you held me tight and told me everything will be fine. You said you'll promise to always be there for me. Do you remember? Do you remember when the bullies pushed and pulled, but we are stronger – together – than them. Do you remember what you did?

Do you remember when we camped in the woods, we sat under a canopy of blinking stars. You pointed, naming every single one. Do you remember? To me, it felt as if I was an uninvited tourist and you, my tour guide, showing me the sights. I didn't want to leave. Do you remember when we first kissed? Our bodies in control all of their own. It was in your bedroom, we looked at each other in the silence and you reached out for me and there – right there, it finally happened. I planned this day, this exact moment in my head, in my dreams,

for years. As we kissed, as you breathed on my ear, our clothes started to disappear, crumpled on the floor and for the first time, it felt like I properly saw the real you. Do you remember the first touch? A pulse of electricity charging straight through us. You told me not to worry, not to think too much, to be just present in the moment. Do you remember? I do.

Do you remember when we said those three magic words? I always felt that they were stored in my mind, waiting like a lion in a cave. But waiting for what? I thought those words were actually magic, that each word had importance, urgency. Do you remember when you held my hand, walking along the pier and people started to shout, pointing at our hands entwined. But it didn't seem to bother you. I asked you why and you just shrugged and said to me: *that doesn't matter. We're in our own world.* Just us. But I didn't see it that way. It was real to them; it was real to me.

Do you remember our first argument? It shattered the illusion of a perfect relationship, a broken promise, shattering into tiny, fragile, sharp, delicate pieces. I cried; do you remember? I don't even know what it was about – but does that even matter? You left, the door slamming behind you, leaving me to pick up the pieces.

Do you remember when I came round and had dinner with you and your mother? Do you remember my nerves that rattled inside of me? She cooked us all these little dishes, each one signifying a story, a memory. It

was spicy and delicious, melting my nerves away. Do you remember when she asked if we have sex? Do you remember my face turning red like a traffic light? She laughed, putting her hand on your arm. *I'm only teasing*, she said. Do you remember after we finished the washing up, we went to your bedroom and had the best sex we ever had? That still makes me laugh.

Do you remember when we opened our big brown envelopes, hoping for a ticket to freedom and not a back to jail card? We both passed, you having better marks than me. Do you remember when we promised that we'll go to the same university, so we won't be alone? Do you remember when you told me, with your better marks than you expected, you plan to go to somewhere else, miles and miles away? Do you remember when you said that this could be a good thing for us both – a new chance. To find ourselves, you said. Whatever that means.

Do you remember when I asked if you still loved me? If we're over? If you're bored with me. All I could imagine is you in bed with stranger after stranger, wearing each other's skin. You said, do you remember, that you'll always love me. But I didn't believe you. Do you remember when we said goodbye, went our separate ways, do you? We'll keep in touch, you said. We'll see each other every other weekend. But you went your way, I went mine. I think that this was your plan all along.

When you left, it was like you didn't even exist. You didn't text me, call me. I tried calling you. Do you remember? No, because you never answered. I went to ask your mother who just told me that you're *starting over again*. What does that mean? She looked at me as if she was looking straight through me; as if she could see all of my secrets. My past, my present, and even my future. Do you remember? Do you? Do you?

After that news, that you're *starting over again*, I went in on myself. Do you remember when I told you that I think we came into the world as two, not one. Not that we shared the same womb, nothing like that, but we

were both put on this world *together*. But you decided to break apart, fly away from the nest. Do you remember? I tried to start again, to find my feet, to navigate life without the knowledge, the presence of you. I tried not to think about you, but I couldn't stop myself. I think, wonder, what you are doing, what you are eating, drinking, watching, fucking. I try to move on, to start all over again, but I guess it isn't as easy for me as it was for you. It feels as if you unzipped your skin and walked out and transported into another one. That simple. Do you remember? Do you?

I've been thinking a lot about memory recently. The power of memory. Because it's all that we are, isn't it? Memory. Life is just a way of collecting memories. The good and the bad. And what are we without those memories? A lonely figure lost in the dark trying to find the light.

I hope you think about me, dream about me. I hate to be lonely in these thoughts. I look up to the night sky and I name and point the stars, the constellations that you told me. See, I still remember. Wherever you are out there, I hope you remember, for I do. I always will.

SIGNALS

Daniele Zurbruegg

I always made sure to knock, which might seem strange, but the last time I barged in unannounced I caught him jacking off at the desk by the door, not just jacking off but coming as I saw him, moaning while jets of the stuff spattered across the keyboard. He never even jacked off to me, it was always some random chiselled man getting his hole gaped on the monitor, and at the time all I could think to say was — You're not very discrete, voice tinny in my ears. And he grinned like I'd cracked a joke with his thing still cradled in his palm even though I was being serious, telling me I knew very well he needed it to let off steam, that it helped him work, and the blood rushed to my face despite myself.

When he finally called out I opened the door and said, I brought you food. Holding the microwaved plate (something with vegetables, for his vitamins) so long my fingers were burning. He was sat by his contraption that tangled across the floor, a techno-chandelier bristling with wires and copper plates and diodes of uncertain function, spindly metal dongles that reached towards the ceiling. The foil taped across the windows let through only slits of sunlight that played across the metal, which he'd told me we needed to keep out interfering radio signals.

He turned around to look at me as I walked in and said, You're here! I nodded and smiled as though I was doing him a favour, even though I was always here. Set it down on the desk, he said, Just set it down, and his face and hands were flickering eerie yellow from his soldering. I

stepped over the wires — all bunched together with zip-ties — that connected up to the computer parts under his desk. He never got around to wiping away any of his gunk, his screens were covered in an uneven layer of semen and whatever that half-concealed the site he'd been browsing, little boxes filled with more porn. The whole room had settled into a familiar stench since I'd given up cleaning, old dishes and smoke and newspaper and the coppery, acidic electronics he pulled apart and jumbled together to construct his *beacon*, which is what he called his project instead of a transmitter or a receiver (even though he was trying to transmit, to receive) because he saw it in his dreams always and knew the name couldn't only suggest putrefying wire and current, it had to be something more hopeful, a monument — that was the word he used, and when I finally had to laugh at the absurdity of it all he lunged at me, tried to sink his teeth into my arm until I fought him off. Then he'd cried fat, boyish tears, telling me I was the only thing he loved more in the world than the project before him, that hearing me laugh tore his heart in two, and of course I understood. Well enough to mask myself.

Now he'd gotten up, stood behind me. This is actually perfect timing. Mumbling into my ear so that I felt his breath, smelled unbrushed teeth. I need you, he said, I think it's ready.

I turned slowly to face him, his rheumy eyes, and I said No, you don't, you always think it is but it ends up being too early. Remember? Putting one hand gently on

his shoulder and feeling his angles. He tensed up when I touched him.

He shook his head and said he'd figured it out, I've improved the wiring on the — and he began talking about currents and amplifiers and encryption for the eventual communication, but it was just techno-babble, thoughts that looped around and chased each other. He never mentioned the aliens but they weighed on every word. And I nodded and nodded and felt a familiar dread in my stomach, hoping for a reprieve, the realisation the something still needed tinkering with, but then he grabbed my arm and set me down by the contraption. Put it on, he said, The setup hasn't changed. He spoke with focus.

It was a headpiece, a crudely made thing held together with screws and twisted bits of metal that tingled disconcertingly with current when I lowered it onto my scalp. But that might just have been my imagination.

It should be amplifying our signals properly, he said, speaking faster now, They're hovering close by, and if we manage to tap into their — and while he fiddled with the controls and ran to the computers (to the lukewarm food, untouched) I stared at the hulking mass, months of his work congealed into a monster that I'd started seeing in my own dreams as well. It lingered in the corners of my mind, present but too far to touch. He was in those dreams too, younger, unwithered, running his hands through jewelled hair, showing teeth. In my dreams I could listen to him talk in ways he never did anymore, never realising why I wasn't ecstatic until the contraption surfaced and tore me awake onto the living room sofa. Night after night. And the bits of him that now only existed in memory would float around a while longer, tease me as they vanished, and I'd feel hate as deep as the hatred he'd developed for most things outside. He slept by his machine despite the stench, and most nights I could hear the faint, rhythmic tic-ing of his chair on hardwood, imagined his hand rising and falling in electronic glow but never hearing him moan, and I'd continue to hate.

The contraption hummed and flickered with light now. My legs were already sore from sitting cross-legged. He put his metal cap on as well, attended dials and displays, mumbled thoughts he tried to explain but I could never decipher — I still didn't even know what was meant to happen, a sound or a voice or some presence in our heads, maybe just an electric shock strong enough to knock both of us out, terminate us.

Is it working? I asked.

And then again when he didn't hear, Is it working?

One hand had wandered up to his face and was tugging nervously at his eyebrow, the gesture as familiar to me as everything else, while the machine hummed and gave nothing but heat. It's still not right, he said finally, not *right*.

For a moment he sat broken. My hand hovered, I wanted to touch him but couldn't. Then he looked up at me with the clarity he used to have, the him I saw in my dreams, the light from the taped window slicing his body in two, giving me eyes that carried a world I couldn't see.

I want to reach them, he said. I want to reach them so badly.

I know, I said quietly. And you've tried so much.

He stared at the beacon, inert. We'll manage, he said, I'll get it to work and you'll finally be able to understand, and I cracked a smile and said that Yes, we will, I will, and I wanted to believe it so badly I was shaking, I wanted him to grab hold of my hand and take me to wherever he'd gone. But he just stood up, there were adjustments he needed to make, a kind of feedback loop that might've — and I nodded, I nodded and said I should probably let him get on with things, and he said that Yes, he needed to concentrate, to clear his head. I stood up slowly, watched him approach the desk, the cold meal. Waiting until I'd left.

CHIAK LANG (eating people)

Emilia Ong

Crete, Summer 2019

1. It was the way he picked it up and squeezed it you see: the whole globe in one hand. There was no hesitation. He held the gigantic orb deftly, his fingers splayed across the curved plane, the way a baseball mitt cups a ball. Long, adroit fingers; dexterous fingers; self-assured fingers. The melon was bigger than his hand you see but still he engulfed it. Somehow he engulfed it yes and he did his somehow-engulfing with ease. He pressed his fingers' fleshy tips into the erratically corrugated crust whilst I looked on. He pressed firmly. He pressed gently. He pressed with resolution. I wondered whether he'd leave bruises in the flesh, but I wasn't sure whether melons bruised. They seem tough on the outside you see but if there's anything life's taught me it's that what's outside is no indication of what's going on within. Then he moved the vast orb up to his face -

He sniffed the melon. Yes, he held it right up to his nose and it was touching his nose and he took a long, deep, forceful sniff. It was an inhalation. He plumbed the sphere for fragrance and he found it. It was violent. It was sensual. He said the melon was Good and I was pleased.

2. The beach. I look at the breasts the bums the tums because sometimes they are large and isn't the female form just so mesmerising, like a sack of mobile watermelons.

3. Mark Twain: to taste a watermelon is to know *what the angels eat*.

4. It was not a watermelon he squeezed and this is because the minimart is the bane of my days, by which I mean that it didn't have what I wanted and it never had what I wanted and will I ever get what I want and who's to say not me not me not me. No never ever do I get what I want in this life and I confess this is a trope which extends itself far beyond the appearance of this shoddy shop and it has extended itself so far in fact and for so long and with such tenacity to boot that I'm not even sure what I want anymore, so getting it or otherwise has become something of a moot point, pitiful as that sounds. Well so it was probably a honeydew or a cantaloupe or a gala or else none of these, to be honest I've never really known what's what when it comes to other melons. The only melon which stands out is the watermelon you see. It is the queen of all melons. It is the mother of them.

It is the mother, and it is full of hard little black seeds. You can't eat it just like that - *with abandon*. The watermelon resists guzzling. She cannot be easily incorporated.

5. 2011. When my mother was preparing to reverse-migrate back to Penang following thirty years in the land of my birth and when I was preparing to not-reverse-just-migrate after her and when we still used Facebook by which I mean back in the days when we

had not yet come to despise the chatter the noise and possibly the world in general, we saw a picture on of some of the other Ongs at the hawker centre. By which I mean the genuine Ongs, the Ongs who are like my mother and the Ongs whom I am not like or whom I am only half-like. On the tables several plastic mugs with handles were filled with something frosty and flesh coloured: my mother said, Watermelon juice. Oh! I cried, I can't wait! She tagged me: **Emilia** wan, she wrote, alongside a laughing emoji.

6. *Melons are tender plants and need a warm, sunny spot with high humidity. Melons need a rich, fertile, moisture retentive, deep and well-drained soil. Melons cannot be grown in the UK except inside a glasshouse, under a cloche or in a coldframe.*

7. It'd be pretty nice to be that melon, I thought – but did not say.

There'd been some confusion because I'd wanted help in the minimart. I'd found myself saying Today? and pointing repeatedly and it had got embarrassing. It had got embarrassing because I never deal well with a last-minute change in the Plan. The Plan had been watermelon you see and without prior notification there I was, faced instead with this unanticipated and possibly underripe globe done out in a ghoulish attire of yellow green grey, and I was struggling to keep my balance.

The Plan had been watermelon because my mother had asked me if I'd had any yet. And I had not and when I read her email my chest had done its tight contorting thing like the grey rag she keeps by the sink and suddenly it had seemed *imperative* that I did so and that I did so at once and why had I not yet done so and I did not know.

8. And yet I did know: it was because I was a ludicrous, contemptible shell of a girl!

9. But you see, she never knows her own appetites.

10. I love watermelon you see and you don't get her in England but you do in Malaysia and now I'm not in Malaysia but I'm not in England either and so you see there is loss but there's also hope and watermelons are round and not long and of course in this they're the most feminine of fruits and all in all I thought that if I could just eat a bit of watermelon I'd feel – what? –

connected.

(To what?)

Well but the minimart hadn't had any watermelon that day and so I'd thought, *That'll do.*

(It's what I often think).

11. She never knew her own appetites because what was the point? – He'd always told her what she was going to get to eat and He'd always told her she'd Enjoy it.

12. I frequently ask myself just why I am unhappy. I cannot make it out.

13. It'd be pretty nice to be that melon – yes that's what I thought and I'm ashamed to admit it. We have been complicit in our destruction you see.

14. What is the colour of watermelon?

– blood.

15. The beach. I came to be here because my mother is in Malaysia and because although Malaysia is her homeland, I am not allowed to stay in it unless I work. I worked for seven years in order to earn myself the right to stay but then I realised that life was not To Come and I was starting to see the odd grey hair and doubtless these things are connected for all at once I decided the job was Killing Me and that it was not Worth It and so I quit. I quit and I was full of it I must say. Full of Life is Now and all that jubilant blatheroo. Well. But then my mother's land kicked me out, and now I'm out. I'm out and I don't want to return to His land, which is also

meant to be my own land. This means that being out is the same as being homeless and so homelessness is doing the killing of me instead.

It's a difficult situation.

One has to *work* for one's mother's land, you see.

16. Malaysian fruits. If watermelon is the queen, then the empress is –

the fruit that least wants to be eaten –

sharp spined and –

17. The name for Durian derives from the Malay word *duri* (thorn), due to its thick, harsh and thorny husk. Good durian flesh should feel dry on your finger tips, with a yielding, creamy texture within.

If melon meat resembles flesh, what does durian meat look like?

– *foetuses*.

18. Durian does get eaten. Sometimes however she falls on people's heads – no lowly ground-growing for her. Yes, on occasion she launches herself like a grenade, yes just like that and you bet if that happens for sure you'll die one.

19. Is vengeance ever possible? Simone Weil said that *the desire for vengeance is a desire for essential equilibrium*. She adds the caveat, however, that *we must seek equilibrium on another plane*.

To be honest, any plane seems beyond me.

20. The children must always be protected.

21. To be less melon, more durian? Is this a viable solution.

22. Melons: round, globular, spherical.

Sphere spheere spheeeere –

Sphere here sfear.

23. In my rented room I close the shutters and draw the curtains and strip. I place the melon in the sink. I draw out the long bread knife from the drawer. I stand naked leaning over the sink and slice through the melon's heart.

24. At the beach I look and they look at me too. Sometimes they also say things. When I first arrived they said China! and laughed but now they say Sahwadeekaap! and laugh. Now I'm a few shades darker and so you see I've changed my ethnicity.

25. I take up a spoon. I scoop out its seeds. They are gooey as semen. I turn on the faucet and let it all run down the sink. I don't care because it is not my sink.

I don't know how to eat the melon. I try spooning out mouthfuls and then I try cutting slices. When I cut slices I remember how my mother eats melon: she doesn't waste one bit. She eats right down to the rind –

I think about the man again and about how nice it would be to be squeezed.

26. And they say, her mouth was like a freshly cut fig. Isn't that what they say. All those courtesans sitting lustrily in pavilions with chopsticks in their hair surrounded by peonies and what have you, mouths all scarlet and yielding.

27. I eat the melon. It drips down my chin and my arms and into the sink and onto the floor. I see my teeth marks scored into the flesh. The flesh is green not red and the juice is sweet but not very sweet.

It is not sweet enough for me to want to buy this melon again.

I raise my head, teeth bared like an animal.

28. Later I think about the man again but to my horror then I find myself thinking of Him. It wasn't only the squeeze you see, it was that great big suck. That poaching sniff. Plus I'd only ever eaten green-flesh with Him – it's the sort of melon you get in England.

29. His house is filled with books on Asia and with incense and Chinese tea and He practices a self-regarding Buddhism and He loved my mother *before* He had her and *after* He lost her and when He met my mother He said that she was *Just so attractive, how she used to float about the place*. He wanted to be Different that is Alternative you see and that was what my mother was because trite as it sounds she *was* mysterious and she *was* beautiful and maybe her mouth was indeed the reddest sort of carmine and so yes of course He liked her, liked her because she was nothing like His own dreary dough-coloured family. So He desired her yes but the most important element of his desire was the desiring, by which I mean that what He was in love with was his own desire and so He could not have her or else His desire was annulled.

30. After they divorced naturally He was all fired up again. But she knew what He was like by then and so by then she was gone.

She went and then she was over there and she still is over there.

She went –

but He still had me.

31. Terrorisms are only visible when there's resistance – it's something you should know. Children lack resistance: they are soft, squishy, eminently malleable lumps. They are melons in the hand.

32. A melon really could do with a thorn here and there.

33. Grasshopper, be durian!

Finding Me, Finding You

Iqbal Hussain

When I was five, mummy leaved me. I cried and cried. Mummy telled me to be a big boy. I goed after her, but the white lady holded my hand.

The lady gived me a picture of a hen. "Can you copy that, luv?"

My hen looked like a cat. I throwed my pencil. A boy with blue eyes picked it up and gave it back to me. I started crying.

The lady aksed me if I had brothers or sisters. I sayed their names in her ear. She goed out the room. She comed back – with Shaheen! My chair falled over. I runned to Shaheen and hugged her and cried and cried.

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When I was 10, I read voraciously, from Enid Blyton and E Nesbit to Philippa Pearce and Peter Dickinson. The fictional worlds were far removed from my own: a Pakistani household in a two-up two-down in the cobbled streets of a Northern town. I was the only reader in a family of three children, the others content to live in reality.

The rows of terraced houses had once homed mill workers. Now they were filled with fast-growing Asian families and an increasingly depleted White working class. My father worked as a weaver at one of the last remaining mills. Keen to prove to himself and those

back home that this was a land of plenty, he worked more than he rested. We would get to know him anew each time our paths crossed.

Perhaps to make up for his absence, my mother smothered us with love. She plied us with favourite foods: samosas, biryani, chicken curry, pakoras. As the youngest, I received a double portion of everything – and scorn from my siblings.

They were golden years: we roamed the streets without supervision; we rolled down grassy banks, somehow avoiding splashing into the canal; we played tig, sticky toffee, Mr Wolf and a hundred other games.

For the teachers at the local Church of England primary school, it must have been a challenge to educate we children of factory-workers and illiterate housewives.

The formidable Miss Zimmerman, who looked like "the dark one" from ABBA, forbade us from speaking Punjabi or Urdu at school. She flung her chalk at anyone not paying attention, and whacked a size-nine pump across our backsides for more serious mishaps. It was only later I realised Miss Zimmerman's tough love, emphasis on manners and desire to improve how we spoke meant we were better prepared for life and society. Her glassy eyes on our last day suggested we had changed her world, too.

When David joined, mid-term, he doubled the number of white pupils in the class. With his biscuit-coloured hair, freckles and green eyes, he was an exotic creature in our midst. I scrutinised him, trying to work out who and what he was. When he looked back, I turned away, uncharacteristically shy.

Sporty and popular, David didn't mind my geeky ways, which was as much a shock to me as it was to the other boys. He would come find me in the playground, rescuing me from my pitiful pleas to the girls to let me join their skipping games. I'd show him how to turn a blade of grass into a musical instrument, or how to juggle with three balls. He'd demonstrate karate moves or teach me Australian swear words.

When he went back to Melbourne, he took a part of me away with him.

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When I was 15, I ditched my goodie-two-shoes ways. I became a "disruptive influence", often ending up in detention for giving backchat to teachers. I stopped putting my hand up and I failed to do my homework. I tried hanging around with the "hard" kids, but they saw right through me and walked away from the smoking shed, leaving me with just the fumes from their cigarettes.

It was a summer of riots, with police patrols regularly deployed outside the school. When they weren't there, you risked a gauntlet of skinheads, which meant literally going round the houses over the football pitch to avoid them. The teachers seemed oblivious to the racial tensions both in and out of school, despite every wall covered in an NF logo.

I didn't have to pretend to be hopeless at PE. My brother had been an all-rounder, as the sports teacher regularly reminded me, as though I was purposely misleading him with my own lack of sporting prowess. I got used to being in the final two to be picked, my humiliation compounded by losing out to the boy with

the glass eye.

The only saving grace was community service, once a week. I chose Parkview, a private hospital in the Lancashire countryside. Our afternoons there coincided with those of a school from the posh part of town. Over the weeks, I found myself pushing wheelchairs with a boy called Richard. We would stroll around the gardens, like two Victorian nannies, each with our charges.

Richard spoke nicely. He had smartly cut hair. He wore trousers not jeans, and shoes not trainers. He knew about astronomy and science. I could talk to him without him staring at me as if I had a second head. Engrossed, we'd end up almost missing the coaches that whisked us back to our own worlds.

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When I was 20, I had a picture of Linda Lusardi on one wall of my student room and Jane Seymour on the other. From the smirks these elicited from visiting friends, I had clearly chosen the wrong poster girls.

I was adept at confusing others, albeit unknowingly. Anita from the student house next door began popping round with Bombay Mix or a home-made curry. I'd offer her a mug of tea and a Jammy Dodger in return. We would sit on the bed, watching *Neighbours*. Each time Anita put her mug on the table and picked it up again, she moved incrementally closer. By the time she was within touching distance, the jolly theme tune would start up and signal an end to the visit. After several weeks, both visits and snacks dried up. She ended up dating the captain of the rugby team.

Then there was Karen. Our relationship was strictly academic. Karen had a thing for James and his giant teeth. James preferred "Irish Clare", despite a rampant perm that reminded me of a poodle.

Karen was equally unable to help me with my own love life, not least because I was still trying to work it out myself.

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When I was 25, I moved to Manor Park, with Matthew. Older than me by four years, Matthew was light years ahead in emotional stability.

We danced at Club Kali (“For Asian men and their admirers”). It was like a school disco, with a sparsely decorated room and a dodgy collection of blinking lights. In a further echo of school, the floor was a half-and-half mix of brown and white faces, only this time the two groups liked each other. As DJ Ritu spun Bollywood hits, Matthew and I would throw bhangra moves in our waistcoats, flirting with the sari-clad drag queens.

Matthew’s mum and dad treated us as if we were a regular couple. I was sorry I couldn’t do the same for Matthew, as my parents, siblings and the entire culture behind them would never see sexuality as anything other than a problem. Our relationship was conducted with the blinds open or closed depending on who was looking in.

The cracks appeared before the second year was out. With such high expectations and promises, I felt trapped. Dishonesty crept into the bedroom. I convinced myself they were just “little flings”. Long talks became a regular feature of our weekends. The increasing emotional wear on both of us turned the final year into a blur of make-ups and break-ups, before the final cleaving.

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When he was 30, Imran, from Manor Park, focussed on his career as a journalist. Would it be tricky to find love in the largely female environment of young women’s magazines, we asked?

“It’s not ideal,” admitted Imran, “but you do get the odd chap. Not that it’s a good idea to mix business and pleasure.”

What about the Internet? “I’m still figuring it out, but it’s definitely made things easier. I’ve had a number of short relationships,” he told us. “Three months here, six months there. So that’s something.”

It remains to be seen how the romantic year pans out for this hopeful singleton. *Next week: my best friend slept with my boyfriend while I watched TV downstairs.*

There was John, the Tin Tin-lookalike who enjoyed the thrill of the chase but who shut down the minute I said “I love you”.

Alex, the music teacher, dazzled me with his smile and muscled chest. During an evening of country dancing, his friends told me how happy I had made him. So happy that, after two months, we broke up: a limpid parting of ways, with neither of us able or willing to keep the spark alive.

Ryan took drugs and frequented the Black Cap every weekend. Canadian by birth, he insisted on speaking with the mangled vowels of an old Etonian. While dabbing another anti-ageing serum on his forehead, he wouldn’t think twice about leering at some young buck walking past. “Nice arse!”

Finally, there was Harry. Full of anger and mistrust, his handsome exterior belied a paranoid and controlling interior. The crunch came when I apparently did something so heinous he couldn’t even tell me what it was. He announced the break-up via answerphone: “You KNOW what you did! You and are you shitty little friends are welcome to each other. Fuck off!” A second message, left a minute later: “And bring my keys back!”

I pressed Delete and binned the keys.

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When I was 35, viví en Buenos Aires por seis meses. Julian got a job there and I joined him on sabbatical. The jacaranda-lined streets were a world away from the cobbled streets of my childhood.

A natural linguist, Julian picked up the language within weeks. When new friends came for dinner, they would start off in English but soon slide into Spanish. I became the befuddled elderly relative in the room, catching one word in ten, nodding my head and maintaining a smile on my face.

After two years, Julian got posted to Miami for a further two years. Not wanting to stand in the way of his career, I visualised the joyful scenes that would ensue when he came back.

But there wasn't to be a happy ending. The time apart had driven a wedge between us, and our ever-diverging paths over the four years meant that by the end he and I no longer spoke the same language. We had left behind more than just our hearts in Argentina: we had also sacrificed our relationship.

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When I was 40, my sister rang to say my father was in hospital.

While changing trains at Crewe, I got a text from her, meant for my brother, saying the funeral might be delayed depending on when the hospital released the body. She sent a flurry of apologetic follow-up messages but I was too busy throwing up on the platform.

We three children consoled each other in the living room, gathered around my mum. I went to the mosque for the first time since I was a child. Mourners gave their condolences as I sat, cross-legged, reciting prayers, counting them out with an ever-growing pile of date stones.

With the cemetery shut for the evening, my father got to spend a final night in the mosque he so loved. He remained as unknown to me by the end as he had when I was a child.

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When I was 45, after half a lifetime, hidden away in an unlikely meeting place online, I found him: my very own David. The hole in my heart slowly mended.

A Flash Of Silver

Iqbal Hussain

I spot her in the distance, a bobbing buoy in an azure sea. There are just a handful of people on the beach, and no-one else out in the water. I shade my eyes with both hands: the sun is low in the sky, casting little warmth but creating countless glass tips as the ocean heaves and hauls in the wind, alive and brutal.

I take a deep breath. Before I can change my mind, I strip to my shorts and begin walking, jogging, then sprinting towards the breaking waves. Under my bare feet, the sand turns from a crumbling, unsteady carpet to hard wet ridges. I don't break step, throwing up plumes of water.

I dive in.

The cold arrests my breath. Blood retreats from my extremities, its warmth and energy diverting to my heart, keeping it beating. It's all I can do to move my arms and propel my legs, blinking away the sting of the salt. I have forgotten everything I know and find myself at the mercy of the current. I float ever further from the shore, cleaving madly against the powerful pull and push of the tide.

Despite my energetic strokes, I am no warmer and the icy water saps what little strength I have. She watches my approach: curious and cautious. Each time I break the surface, drawing in noisy lungfuls of air, she appears tantalisingly closer. She barely makes a splash as she sweeps the water before her, as serene as I am clumsy.

Like a modern-day Neptune, I am borne aloft on a huge wave rolling back with a powerful rush. It deposits me next to her. I open my mouth, but my salt-burned throat and jagged breath kill the words I want to say. I am spent, with just enough strength to silently float beside her.

Her dreadlocked hair, tumbling kelp, falls about me. Her skin is the colour of coral. Her eyes are inky pools. She drifts around me, circling, coming in and out of my view. I flip over, treading water. Her lips part and a haunting song fills the air. The otherworldly melody is audible over the crash and creak of the sea, which has now become even more choppy. I am entranced. Our fingers intertwine, bodies pull forward and her mouth seeks mine. We kiss. The taste of brine, the tang of ozone. As the waves roll and break, the gulls overhead wheel and scream.

An alien sound breaks the enchantment. Like startled fish, we break away. The sound beckons again, echoing around us. I see something – someone – further out in the water. The dying notes of her song drift back in the wind. I call out, but she is already several lengths away. I try to follow, but my limbs are unresponsive, leaden.

She gazes over her shoulder at me, one final time. Then a flash of silver, as she heads for the horizon, embraced by the dancing, glittering, mocking waves.

I drown in her wake.

The Juice Box Talk

J. Marcelo Borromeo

So juice boxes go in the trash. Do you understand? They are not supposed to stay here forever, no matter how much your hand loves to hold them. At this age, a juice box means sweet. Sweet means good. It means that you are not here for suffering—that life is not all about suffering—at least for as long as you hold onto this juice box.

Now that's a good place to start. But you know what the other things mean. You aren't drinking juice every waking moment of your life, so no juice box means the norm: life just *is*. On the other hand, no juice box when you were expecting a juice box means that life is bad. (Where is the juice box you were promised? Not here, says your hand pensively.) There is a third level to this, which is falling on the pavement, but that means its own worse thing entirely and you're not sure what it is, since pain isn't something that you go out of your way to experience. Pain is not pleasant, you know that much. You don't drop yourself on the pavement on purpose, just so you could know. In fact, if you do fall on the pavement, you do the perfectly acceptable thing. You ask for juice.

Now let's give it five years. What kind of person are you then? What is your attitude towards the juice box? Maybe you are holding something else, but it reminds you of what it was like today. Your hand is growing after all; it may learn to love other shapes. You might still call it juice, even when it isn't. But that's where things get confusing, because if you can call other

things juice, then you can call other things not having juice or not having juice when you thought you'd have juice. You might think falling on the pavement is juice. You might convince yourself that pain is nice. The most likely thing that happens is that when you fall on the pavement for whatever reason, you won't ask for juice because juice is suddenly too small. When did it become too small for pain like this? The pavement didn't grow any bigger. Only you did. I won't have to tell you then that juice boxes go in the trash because you won't want juice boxes anymore. You'll want something else that means life is not all about suffering.

Another five years, you'll have redefined the world. I don't mean you'll drink stones out the pavement or throw juice in your face. I mean you'll be big enough to think of other things. Juice and pavement won't even cross your mind. Maybe, for instance, you might look at Stella and think—*good*. You might look at Billy and think—*good*. (Maybe in ten years, you'll think both, who knows? Certainly not me.) But in ten years, you will be walking with Stella or Billy and you'll go into a supermarket and you'll think, man do I want some juice. You'll turn to Billy or Stella, and Billy or Stella will say, "Oh my God, what's happening to you?" They take you to the hospital. They get you checked up. You're confused, I know. But as it turns out, there is a bigger problem you need to worry about. Something that is enough to make you think—*Was this always meant to happen?* They put you through tests. They'll tell you things that don't mean anything to you yet, things like

congenital or *hereditary* or *escargot*. But this will demand you to redefine the world yet again. You'll ask yourself if redefining things is worth anything at all, because there you are, you've grown past the need for juice, and yet you've still got all this pain, all this suffering. It's been there all along and you didn't know you were supposed to ask for juice then. You don't understand yourself. You don't want to ask for juice now.

Okay, so three more years. Things move faster once you know how often you suffer. Stella has left you. Or maybe Billy has left you. They know what the juice does to you, and that's why they're gone. No matter, you turn to one of those false juices again. You let yourself fall on the pavement and you let yourself fall on the pavement, again and again and again and again. You'll keep wanting the juice, or whatever can make you feel like you have it again, I suppose. But the feeling of juice is long gone. Do you understand? The world is predisposed to encourage your needs. They won't tell you what you want. They won't even try to understand you. They'll just keep pushing things at you and they'll push them until you find a new juice, and that won't last forever. I won't be around to tell you to stop it anymore. I won't get to tell you to let go of the juice, so do it for yourself. Getting older means getting tired of your feelings. And you can do it sooner, or you could do it later, like me. You understand? Juice boxes go in the trash.

All is Not Black or White

Marie Mayingi

In April, during the first weeks of quarantine occasioned by COVID-19, I got into a relationship, almost out of boredom. I'd just finished touring Europe and Asia on my gap year. I wanted this quarantine fling to be light, silly and fun, it ended up becoming much more than that. It didn't start as a traditional relationship, more an entanglement of sorts, but I gradually warmed up to the idea of it becoming more serious and ended up truly committing.

When George Floyd's murder happened, and racial divides grew more and more pressing on a global scale, I believed it was time we'd have the talk because he was white, I was black, and it's something that's got to be discussed when you're looking to move forward with someone who's not part of your community.

My boyfriend had graduated in Law a few years earlier but he wasn't political at all, just your regular working class chap, more interested in clubbing, hanging out at the pub after work and Man City's lineups on their weekly fixtures than the makeup of the House of Commons...That's precisely what charmed me, at first. He had this sort of childish nonchalance, this quirky irreverence that never let anything too serious bother him. Something I never could afford.

From the moment the movement crossed the Atlantic, I became very much involved in anything 'Black Lives Matter' around me; protests, meetings, think-tanks...I could sense a certain discomfort in him each time I mentioned a new thing I was doing, but a part of me pinned it on shame, until, one day, after a rally where a friend and I had been teargassed, he suggested we'd

probably asked for it. It was a very hurtful thing to hear, I did not see how he couldn't understand that staying home, avoiding the news and living as though the very structure of society wasn't rigged against my people and created to demean us was not an option. I didn't expect him to fully understand my situation as he was not a person of colour, but I was reassured when he became more respectful of my involvement in Black Lives Matter as I introduced him to the harsh realities black people face on the daily. He tried his best to understand and I felt like he really wanted it to work.

In the course of a trivial discussion, George Floyd's murder came up. New evidence showed that one of the police officers present at the scene, Thomas Laine, had tried to interpose between Floyd and his murderer several times. I asked my boyfriend what he'd do if he were in the same situation. He casually said he'd let it slide to keep his job and keep providing for his family. Just like that, without an ounce of shame.

He started going on about how it was a matter of taking care of the people he loved in opposition to the people he "did not love". I saw it as an aggression, a slight. I'd never even considered it, but I knew right then and there that I would never give this man a family with black children to disrespect and I hoped no other black or brown woman would. I knew I couldn't commit to a man who would be incapable of defending his partner and potential offspring's honour, but it was deeper than that. It wasn't even really about me, us, or the children we didn't have and probably never would, it was about human decency.

The idea that, what is wrong is wrong, no matter who the target is and speaking up is an obligation.

I went AWOL for a little while, just to digest the information, and he lost himself in platitudes, messages, phone calls and apologies. He seemed very upset and very much ashamed of what he had said and kept saying he'd never let anyone disrespect me or be racist to me, and that he wished he had my strength when it comes to defying authority.

I did not understand what he was referring to, it was an organic reaction on my part. It later occurred to me that he probably was referring to the strength I was forced to exhibit ever since

I was a child because society does not allow Black children to behave as such. It does not allow us to be dainty and carefree, or to assume the best in people and situations because we are still wearing the stigmata of the hundreds of Emmett Tills, of George Stinneys and Trayvon Martins there have been. Nothing protects Black people from prejudice and plight, not even our age.

This strength he admired so much was the result of years and years of having to look out for myself because Black people always have to carefully analyse every situation so that they do not let racism slide because if they do it once, if they let their guard down a single time, it opens the door to a thousand others. Ordinary racism is an insidious evil that is incredibly easy to get accustomed to, so much so that if you are exposed to it long enough, and it's imposed to you in a sly and seemingly inoffensive manner, your tolerance to it expands, you cannot detect it anymore and, at once, it turns into something you simply cannot fight. It is the pale, innocent, wandering hand in your hair in the playground, the inquisitive mouth that enquires about your skin and its colour; where you *truly* are from and how you wound up *here*. The bulging eyes glaring at you in awe wherever you go, judging, watching you closely. And soon enough, the kneecap on your throat, choking the life out of you.

He was referring to the strength I had to develop

while attending a predominantly white institution, as I had to listen to white children snicker and call me a slave in class and debate my price if I were to be put up for auction. The strength I'd grown tired of being congratulated for because it had robbed me of my innocence, and tainted my childhood. The strength I'd forgotten I even had, because it was woven in my character.

I was not *just* strong, I was resilient, tenacious. I was not just offended by injustice, I'd become physically incapable of letting it happen, and viscerally sick of it.

We kept seeing each other for a little while after that, but it quickly became unbearable. I kept wondering how someone could deliberately refuse to help another human being in pain, how such an incredible person could forsake his purest instincts out of selfishness, so I asked.

He told me about his tough childhood, how he'd grown up in a modest household and sworn to do all he could to be able to provide for his family, whatever it took. Everything made sense.

I had noticed he had a very strange relation to money and work but I never really wondered why every pound seemed to count for him or why he was baffled by some expenses I made that seemed normal to me but were, in his words, "unnecessary" and "reckless". I'd never needed to work or wonder if I'd be able to make it to my next pay check.

My family had never struggled with money. I was living in the UK and studying at a top university, I had been raised in one of Paris' most cosmopolitan neighbourhoods and I'd only ever been discriminated upon because we were affluent enough for me to attend some fancy boarding school.

I felt like my pain was somehow wrapped in privilege. It didn't make it less valid, but it did put things in perspective and make me realise that all is not fully black or white.

My propensity to offer a quick, stern response to injustice came from a place of disadvantage, of pain. His tendency to prefer compliance and silence came from the exact same place.

Inaction is violence and silence maims, but I have learnt not to judge people for not speaking up, because some of us have been battered and bruised so harshly in life that they just cannot find the strength to stand up for themselves or others anymore, and there is no shame in being honest about that. Shame is an empty, useless thing to feel if it does not lead to self-reflection and generate a genuine will to be more compassionate to others, and ourselves.

What is Psychosis? (brought to you by the NHS)

Michelle K Jamieson

Psychosis *you see, you're a psycho* is when people lose some contact with reality *you've never been in this reality have you?* This might involve seeing or hearing things that other people cannot see or hear (~~hallucinations~~) but this is my reality at the time? and believing things that are not actually true (~~delusions~~). So I am a psycho then? I'm deluded? *You're making it all up*

Symptoms of ~~psychosis~~ going through trauma?

The 2 main ~~symptoms~~ that horrible word again of psychosis *yeah you idiot* are:

- Hallucinations ~~reality?~~ – where a person *you do. you do this* hears, sees and, in some cases, feels *can you feel us touching you?*, smells or tastes things that ~~do not exist~~ outside their mind but if I think it, doesn't it exist at that time? but can feel very real to the person affected by them; a common hallucination is hearing voices *yeah like us, right*
- Delusions this is such a horrible word – where a person has strong beliefs that are not shared by others; a common ~~delusion~~ unusual beliefs is nicer is someone believing there's a conspiracy to harm them *you know they really want to harm you*

The combination of hallucinations and delusional thinking ~~can~~ cause severe distress its trauma and distress that causes this in the first place. It doesn't exist in a vacuum? and a change in behaviour. *Yeah you're idiotic behaviour that doesn't even help*

Experiencing the symptoms of psychosis is often referred to as having a psychotic episode. *Even they think you're a useless psycho*

Someone who ~~develops~~ lives with psychosis will have their own unique set of symptoms and experiences, according to their ~~own~~ particular circumstances. *Make it personal like we know you?*

But in general, 3 main ~~symptoms~~ experiences are associated with a ~~psychotic episode~~ psychosis or unusual experiences:

- Hallucinations seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling things that are happening

- ~~Delusions~~ unusual beliefs. They're real to me *yeah you weird bitch*
- ~~confused and disturbed~~ thoughts I'm not disturbed, I'm scared *you're a deranged little bitch*

Hallucinations *like us you mean?*

Hallucinations are where someone sees *us, us, us*, hears, smells, tastes or feels like I feel their hands on me at night? things that do not exist outside their mind. *We do though*

- ~~sight~~ – seeing colours, shapes or ~~people~~ shadow people that followed me
- ~~sounds~~ – hearing voices or other sounds the three voices in my head
- ~~touch~~ – feeling touched when there is nobody there feeling their hands. Who are they?
- ~~smell~~ – an odour that other people cannot smell onions and burning plastic
- ~~taste~~ – a taste when there is nothing *there is* in the mouth aniseed

Delusions a horrible word to describe what I'm thinking *but you are though?*

~~A delusion is~~ where a person has an unshakeable belief in something untrue. *It's true, you know it!* Even though it's my reality at the time?

A person ~~with persecutory delusions~~ **may believe** an individual or organisation is making plans to hurt or kill them. How textbook I am *Like the government. They're making you ill. You know they are*

A person with ~~grandiose delusions~~ may believe they have power or authority. **For example**, they may think they're the president of a country or **they have the power** to bring people **back from the dead**. *Even mental you know you're not that special*

People ~~who have psychotic episodes~~ are often unaware that their ~~delusions~~ or ~~hallucinations~~ are not real, which may lead them to **feel frightened or distressed**. They are real at the time. Telling me they're not real doesn't help *are you going to pish your pants again?*

Confused and disturbed thoughts

People with **psychosis** sometimes have disturbed ~~disturbing to who?~~, confused, and ~~disrupted~~ patterns of thought you can't even do that right. *You can't keep a thought straight in your head.* Signs of this include:

- ~~rapid and constant speech~~ I thought I was making perfect sense
- ~~disturbed speech~~ – for example, they may switch from one topic to another mid-sentence it made perfect sense *to me you even confuse us*

- a sudden loss in their train of thought, resulting in an abrupt **pause in conversation** or activity it's a bit noisy inside me most of the time with them *with us here as well*

Postnatal psychosis I'll even need to worry about how I'll be seen as a danger if I become a Mum? *Like anyone would have a baby with you*

Postnatal psychosis, also called puerperal psychosis, is a ~~severe~~ it's all relative to the person though? form of postnatal depression, a type of depression some women experience after having a baby. Only some?

It's estimated postnatal psychosis affects around 1 in every 1,000 women who give birth. It most commonly occurs during the first few weeks after having a baby. So they would take my baby away? *They would take it away anyway, you'd be a terrible Mum*

Postnatal psychosis is more likely to affect women who already have a mental health condition, such as bipolar disorder or schizophrenia. Are these labels even helpful? *They let people know you're mad and shouldn't have a baby*

As well as the experience ~~symptoms of psychosis~~, experiencing ~~symptoms of~~ **postnatal psychosis** can also include **changes in mood:**

- a ~~high~~ mood (~~mania~~) – for example, feeling elated, talking and thinking too much or too quickly would my baby be alright? Would I be alright? *No, you wouldn't be*
- a ~~low~~ mood – for example, feeling sad, a lack of energy, loss of appetite, and trouble sleeping *see? A terrible mother*

Contact a GP immediately if you think you or someone you know may have developed postnatal psychosis as it is a medical emergency. If this is not possible, call NHS 111 or your local out-of-hours service. But when I called they never helped me *it's because you were making it up. You're making it all up. We're not real. This isn't real. You're faking it. Am I faking it?*

If you think there's an imminent danger of harm, call 999 and ask for an ambulance. Never the police. Never the police. Even A&E isn't safe.

Psychosis is not the same as psychopath

The terms “psychosis” and “psychopath” should not be confused.

Someone with psychosis has a short-term (acute) condition that, if treated, can often lead to a full recovery. What is recovery though?

A psychopath is someone with an antisocial personality disorder, your personality can't be disordered or broken though which means they:

- ~~lack empathy~~ — the capacity to understand how someone else feels
- ~~are manipulative~~

- ~~often have a total disregard for the consequences of their actions~~

People with an antisocial personality can sometimes pose a threat to others because they can be violent. **Most people with psychosis are more likely to harm themselves than others.**

Monster

Pippa Sterk

There's a monster in the corner of my senses. It only comes out when my mind wanders, when I'm in between tasks. When I'm too tired to focus my vision on the book that I'm reading, I suddenly see a shadow behind me. When I'm cooking, and my hand automatically, thoughtlessly tries to grab a ladle, I will suddenly feel its skin.

.I'm here.

I know.

.I'm always here.

That's not true. You're only here sometimes.

.I'm always here.

Stop lying! You're very often not here.

.I'm here now, though.

I know, but I'm on a call at the moment. Can you give me a second?

.I'll stay here.

Just do something to entertain yourself for a bit, OK?

.I'll stay here.

Whatever.

It never has the same look twice, but there are some aspects of its body that remain constant. It's always sticky. It's always taller than me. Its body always makes a soft humming noise, easily drowned out by music or conversation, but deafening when heard by itself. Most of its body is always just behind me. I can only touch it accidentally. Whenever I've tried to reach out for it, it always seems to be a couple of inches farther away than I expect.

.Can you play with me?

Sure. What do you want to do?

.I want to run.

It's past midnight. I'm in my pajamas. I don't really want to go outside right now.

.I want to run.

Can we run tomorrow?

.I want to run NOW!

How about if we do some other exercise? Maybe some push-ups? Or some stretches, would you like that?

.I want to cut.

Just now, you said you wanted to run. Which one is it?

.I hate you.

.I want to run or I want to cut.

I know.

Well, I don't want to do either of those things.

.How could you know?

.Yes you do.

Because you've told me many times. It's getting repetitive, if anything.

You can't tell me what I do and don't want.

.No, your monster has said that it hates you. I'm not your monster, I'm your best friend.

.I want to run or I want to cut and if we can't do that then I'm just going to scream.

No, you're my monster, pretending to be my best friend. I literally saw you change into her.

Please don't, you'll wake up the neighbours.

.AAAAAAAHH!

.I hate you so much. You aren't even aware of all the ways in which I hate you, because you're too stupid to understand all the ways in which you're inadequate. I'm only friends with you out of social convention, but if there was a way for me to get rid of you without it reflecting badly on me, I would. If you truly wanted to be a good friend to me, you'd leave me alone so I don't have to go through the agony of interacting with you.

You can scream as much as you want, I'm not going to do it.

.You say that now, but you don't know how long I can keep this up. AAAAAAAAHH!

I don't like this trick anymore.

Sometimes the monster can speak in full sentences, and sometimes it can only growl and scream. Strangely, the way it looks and the way it sounds don't always match up. Sometimes it speaks very eloquently and convincingly, but it looks like a boundless mass of slime. Other times, it looks humanoid, elegant, moving smoothly like a dancer, but when it opens its mouth, it just spits and gargles. The worst times are when it looks and sounds almost exactly like me.

.What trick?

.I can do a trick.

Turn back.

I didn't know you did tricks.

.What are you talking about?

.I do. Do you want to see it?

Fuck you. Stop the trick, it's not funny anymore.

Go ahead.

.There is no trick. I just hate you.

.I can look like your best friend.

...

.Hey, I'm back. I'm me again.

That does look like her.

I know.

.It was me all along.

I know.

.Are you angry at me?

I don't know.

.It was just a joke.

It wasn't funny.

I think it might just want attention. It always tries to get me to turn towards it, listen to it, feel it, pet it, feed it. That's fine, all creatures need attention, even monsters. I don't think it can help it. I just don't know how to tell it that I can't always make time for it. I don't know how to explain that, in order for me to want to spend time with it, it needs to be nicer to me.

.Fuck you.

What have I done now?

.Just fuck you. You hate me so much, you don't even acknowledge me. I've been sitting here all day and you haven't even said hello to me.

I didn't know you were there.

.I'm always there.

But I can't always see you.

.That's not my fault. You should try harder.

That's not fair. I can't always be with you. I have a life, you know.

.Leave me alone.

I'm always very relieved when I go a day without seeing it. I seem to get so much more done when I don't have a monster demanding my attention, distracting me from my work. But sometimes when I haven't seen it for a week or so, I get uneasy. I wonder if it's still there. I

never wanted the monster in the first place, and I've been waiting for it to disappear for ages, but I start feeling very bare and empty when I go without it for too long. Then my attention will inevitably waver, and it will appear again and I remember why I wanted it gone in the first place.

.Hi, I'm back.

Oh good, I was worried about you.

.Why would you be worried? You hate me.

I don't hate you, you're just...challenging to be around sometimes.

.Well I hate you.

Cool.

My monster can be very smart. I've learned a lot from it. Sometimes it knows things about me before I know it.

.You shouldn't hang out with her. She doesn't like you.

How do you know?

.I just do.

You can't possibly know. You're my monster, not hers.

.Remember last time you made a new friend? I warned you, you thought I was wrong, and then you ended up hurt, and I had to calm you down.

That's not the same, she was actually horrible.

.But you didn't think that at first. You thought she was great.

It's not the same this time.

.How do you know?

It can be a very good guide sometimes. It's kind of

frustrating, because at least if it was always wrong, I could just ignore it, but sometimes it does just have genuinely good suggestions.

.You should use the blue paint instead of the black.

Why?

.Blue is a nicer colour.

That doesn't really matter, what matters is whether it fits better within the composition.

.Trust me.

I don't trust you at all.

.Just use the blue.

If I use the blue, will you shut up?

.Maybe.

Fine.

.See how nice that looks?

Huh. I guess it does look nice.

.Told you.

But sometimes it's confused, and that in turn confuses me.

.You forgot to turn off the gas.

No I didn't.

.You forgot to turn off the gas. I promise, you forgot it. And now the house is going to burn down.

I cooked two hours ago. If something was burning, I would have smelled it by now. And also I didn't leave it on. I know I didn't.

.The gas is on! It's on!

Fine, I'll check.

.It's on.

I'm standing right in front of it, and it's off. I can see that it's off.

.Maybe that's just an illusion.

Your mum's an illusion.

And for every positive contribution it gives to my hobbies, there are at least three times where it makes life unnecessarily difficult.

.What are you doing?

Singing.

.Why?

I like singing. You know that, we've sung together a couple of times.

.Stop it.

Why?

.You're awful.

Last week you said I was good.

.That's not true.

It is! You did say that!

.I can't remember. Are you sure you're not making that up?

I don't know.

...

Why do you think I'm awful?

.Your technique is just horrible. And your presentation is nowhere near performance-ready, I mean look at your posture! Even the best music teachers wouldn't be able to do anything with that.

It's not like I'm trying to be a professional, I'm just doing it for fun, I don't have-

.Good, because you're going nowhere singing like this.

Don't interrupt me.

.Why not? It's not like you have anything of value to say.

Fine. I'll stop. Happy now?

.That's why you never achieve anything. You give up as soon as someone gives you the slightest bit of criticism, and you never see things through to the end. Look at your friends, I bet they're all working, practicing, improving their lives. And here you are, crying because I gave you a bit of constructive feedback. All your friends will soon get tired of you, because they'll have surpassed you in every aspect of life.

I thought you said I didn't have any friends.

.I never said that? You're always twisting my words.

I don't know what to do with it anymore. Some days I think that I can accept that the monster will always be in my life, and I'm just going to have to learn how to live with it. Some days I want it gone. And some days we actually have nice conversations.

.Pay attention to me.

Not now, monster.

.Am I just 'monster' now? Not even 'my monster', or 'you'?

Why not? We've known each other for a while now.

.Do you call your friends 'human'?

No. But they have names.

.Do I have a name?

I don't know. Do you want one?

.I don't know.

The Others

Stacey Ellis

Chapter 1

All the boys are upside down. Above me is a jungle gym of stray clothes, levitating beds and storage trunks that the boys swing from like monkey bars. They travel the length of the dormitory from the door, six beds away from me, to the loos right at the end. I roll onto my stomach and everything flips back down to ground. From under my bed I follow the light that slithers through the window cracks like laser beams and pierces the memorial plaque above the door. The names of the forty-five boys who died in the war look like they're on fire.

The Witch's Heir: A History of Modern Witchcraft. My finger pauses on a familiar name sprawled inside before I flick through to where I last left off.

'Animal Inveiglers – or in plain speak, animal charmers are able to charm creatures to do their bidding. Captain Hassan Gerard, the most infamous practitioner of this gift utilised his talent during the First World War (1914–1918) where he led military campaigns against the Central Powers, backed by his own personal army of elephants, gorillas, tigers, panthers and a patriotic swarm of bees. Captain Gerard was awarded the British War Medal for his service, but this honour was short-lived following an amendment to the 1916 Military Service Act in 1922 which barred Other men from enlisting and invalidated the service records of Other veterans.'

The school bell rings so hard that the floor buzzes and makes my head pound too. With a scowl I shove the book inside my mattress and slip out from underneath. If they caught me with the book, I'd be lucky to be let off with a month's worth of detention. All of us here knows that there's a fifty-fifty chance we could grow up to be an Other or a teacher. I don't know what would be worse. OK, I guess being a teacher wouldn't be too bad. But I'd hate to end up like Mr Keller, who used to be a student here years ago. The adults whisper that he left for the big wide world when he was sixteen, only for the world to sniff him out as Other scum and spit him right back.

I squeeze my feet into my trainers which gnash their teeth at me in turn. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up when I feel someone's eyes on me. Seth! He sneers, fiddles with his prefect badge and then coughs a cue for us to line up behind him like dominoes from oldest to youngest. While we wait, he smirks at me, and I bite the insides of my cheeks to stop myself from making him shut up like I did last night.

Theo turns his head and through clenched lips mutters, 'Ignore him.'

I wonder how he does that.

'Thanks,' I whisper, but not low enough judging from Seth's annoyed glare.

Theo makes a sound like he's been hit, and his hands tremble so hard that it hurts to look at him. My eyes dart from scuffed floorboards to rows of ten beds on each side of me and then up to ash-coloured walls besmirched with dark stains and broken up by four sets of boarded-up windows on my right. My gaze shifts to Mason who still hasn't moved from his bed. Landon rests on his lap and his fur, along with Mason's fingers, are spotted with faded red ink stains. Landon snorts when he senses me looking, while Mason glances up and quickly places the hedgehog out of sight before the door hatch flips open to reveal Warden Woolf's blue eye glaring at us from the other side.

Woolf enters and, with his sunglasses perched on his nose, prowls towards us like he's in a slow-motion action scene. Near the front Jayden cranes his neck for a better view, while his hands drift to the black Aviators in his pocket that he stole off Woolf weeks ago. Woolf always moans that the ceiling lights here are brighter than a tanning booth and took it out on all of us when his original ones were stolen. If it had been anyone else, Seth, or the others would have turned him in. But in here Jayden's the only person you can go to if you have something to trade like a pack of gum for a torch. He catches me staring and raises his eyebrows as if to say, 'It's not worth it ... for now.'

'Don't!' Theo warns under his breath and I disguise my chuckle with a cough.

Woolf stalks past and huffs the morning roll call to check that all nineteen of us are present.

'Detention!' he snaps when Mason slips in line.

From the corner of my eye I follow him to the bathroom and swivel my head to the front the moment he reappears to inspect the large hanging mirror for finger smudges. Finally, he saunters over to the corner bookcase and sounds almost disappointed to see the titles are in alphabetical order.

'Anything to report?' he barks at Seth.

Seth surveys us through narrowed eyes. 'Nothing to report, sir.' Theo's hands relax. 'I mean, nothing new since last night,' he says with a jagged smile in my direction.

Woolf stalks over to me and my nostrils flare at the stale smell of baby milk that clings to his khaki green uniform. I stare at him and swallow the lump in my throat. He lifts his sunglasses and twists his bulldog features into a look of utter disdain to stare back.

'Did you think you'd get away with it?' He juts out his chin. 'Well?'

My mind flashes to the power I've just read about and for a moment I fantasise that I'm an animal charmer backed by a pack of wild beasts that await my signal to jump on Woolf and wipe the self-satisfied grin off his face.

'Are you deaf now, Alfie?' he says. My eyes snap open, but the only wild creature in sight is Theo's stupid dinosaur slippers that peep out from under his bed.

'No, he's just dumb, sir,' Seth cracks, and my nails dig into my fists when everyone chortles at his joke.

'You're right, Seth,' Woolf agrees. 'Let me remind you, Alfie, that you have two choices. Option One: Apologise to Seth for your unprovoked attack yesterday—'

'It wasn't unprovoked, sir!'

'Or Two: Detention with Mrs Phelps.'

'Detention,' I answer with a glare in Seth's direction, only to buckle over like an old man when Woolf whips his fist into my chest.

'Good choice,' he concedes and grins at my strangled-wheeze retort. My chest feels like it's on fire and my ears ring from the amplified footsteps of the other boys who trail after him to the breakfast hall.

'I'm fine!' The words settle on my chest like a dead weight. I grimace and brush away Mason's outstretched hand. 'Just go,' I mutter, but he lingers until I'm back on my feet. I stagger past him as the impact of Woolf's punch deepens into a bruise to join the rest on my skin like a signature.

Chapter 2

'Would it have killed you to apologise?' Theo sets his breakfast tray down on the tray next to mine with a deliberate clang. Most of us are already seated, while the rest wait at the serving counter for Mrs Murphy to hand out their breakfast. She's old and rumour has it she's been around since the school opened over a hundred years ago. Wardens Woolf and Daniels lock the doors after our teachers who hurry over to their corner table laden with fresh orange juice, fruits, croissants, bread and scrambled eggs.

Daniels flops at the end of our table and sets about demolishing his plate, while Woolf does a quick scan of the surroundings and then joins the teachers. The dining hall, which doubles for our sports hall, is brick-brown with two huge curtain-covered alcove windows. The wood-beam ceilings are interspersed with dusty bright fluorescent lamps and safety mirrors that Daniels occasionally glances up at.

'Alfie,' Theo murmurs, impatient for my answer.

'Yeah, it probably would have.'

He bites into his toast to hide his grin.

He's starting to warm up to me again, I think. We are friends, or rather we used to be until...

I cough to clear my thoughts. It's better not to have friends, I decide, with a glance at the boys I've grown up with, knowing they wouldn't hesitate to turn me in if I turned out to be an Other.

My gaze settles on the twins: *They're the only exception,* I think. I'd never be able to tell them apart if it wasn't for Oscar's twisted leg or the gleam in Oliver's eyes when he's up to something. Daniels' eyes flutter when the twins start eating in unison. Something about the possibility of Other twins seems to push him over the edge.

'Stop that!' he snarls at Mason who's sat next to them. He faces Daniels with a blank gaze and then picks up his spoon and times his bites in unison with the twins. Daniels' eyelashes flutter faster than an insect's wing and, fully defeated, he turns his attention to the small TV in the corner.

I shake my head and decide to try harder with Theo. I eat my cereal without tasting it and watch Mr Bakker stand to draw back the curtains with the tips of his fingers. The brown fabric is stained with sweat patches from our PE lessons, and I chuckle at how quick he is to smear globs of hand sanitiser on his weathered hands once he's done.

Did you think today would be any different?

His mouth droops at the expected sight of the locked window shutters decorated with black and white photos of the outside of the school. A group of students from the school's founding are eclipsed by the imposing grey gates and the brown-bricked building that hovers ominously in the background. I wonder if it still looks like that now. Mr Bakker sinks dejectedly in his chair. He's the fourth English teacher we've had since Miss Ali left two years ago and Jayden already has a bet running on how long he'll last.

The excited chatter of Miss Key's voice pulls me back to reality. 'Beach. Sunburnt. Ice cream.' I rush to piece her words together like they're a jigsaw puzzle.

'Did you hear the last thing she said?' I ask Theo.

'Huh?' he says, his eyes glued to Miss Key.

'Forget it,' I mutter at the silly grin on his face and almost gag when Seth combines eating with flexing his biceps on the off chance she happens to glance over. That's not the worst of it. Woolf, Mr Keller and Mr Bakker nod along to her tale with inane grins on their faces and lean in so close to her that Mrs Phelps is almost elbowed off her seat.

You're in the way.

Seth, who has mercifully stopped flexing, stands over Nick, who's perched on the edge of his seat to get a closer view of the TV. He must have thought Seth would be too busy ogling Miss Key to mind him taking his place. Daniels acts like he's deaf to what's going on, while Woolf favours the scene with a cursory glance before looking away. Technically, the TV is for the Wardens, not for us, but Seth's the only one allowed an unrestricted view. Part of the perks of being a prefect. Nick's acne-covered face stretches tight in embarrassment and he shifts back into his seat. A small part of me feels sorry for him. Compared to Seth he's harmless, just not smart enough to see that Seth has flunkies not friends.

Jayden rests his sunglasses on his lap, and I catch a slight view of the TV that he reflects from the mirror overhead. I have a good view until Daniels adjusts his position and blocks out our view entirely. A flicker of annoyance runs through me like lightning. I tilt my head up and start to count the ceiling cracks in the hope that the number will change or even better the roof will crack open and let daylight flood in.

I lose count when Mrs Phelps huffs in annoyance and turn around to see Woolf whisper something in her ear. She re-wraps her scarf around her like a winged creature in flight and I shudder when she sets her beady eyes on me.

'I told you,' Theo chides me in between another mouthful of toast.

I shrug my shoulders and watch Woolf deliberately

ignore Mr Keller while he regales the others about his family weekend. He sniffs like there's a bad smell under his nose and Mr Keller shrinks back in his seat.

Does it hurt? I want to ask and turn my head when he catches me looking. Ever since I can remember, my whole world has been this hall, the dormitory, our three classrooms and the cells. The thought of things being like this forever hurts more than any one of Woolf's punches. Through lowered eyes I study Mr Keller and try to guess what was so bad about the world that made him run back here.

'Turn if off!' I jump in my seat as Woolf almost flips over the table in his rush to reach Daniels and Seth. His face is red, and he's so focused on his targets he misses Miss Key's flinch or the anxious looks Mrs Phelps exchanges with the other teachers.

A stuttered apology tumbles from Daniels' lips, but Woolf ignores him and presses his forehead against Seth and roars.

I've dreamt of the day when I'd finally see Seth get his comeuppance, but I'd never pictured it'd be like this. No one breaks into laughter. By some silent cue everyone finishes their breakfast and pretends like nothing unusual is happening. My ears ring from Woolf's screams and a quieter tinkling sound that I realise after a quick glance is from my spoon clanging against my cup.

'Turn off the TV!' Woolf yells when Seth in a panic fumbles with the remote. He sinks to his knees to pick it up, leaving the screen in clear view.

'Labour MP John Hall has failed to garner enough support in the House of Commons to repeal the Other Act of 1912, which gives the government legal guardianship of Other children. Hall has this to say: "No other country in the world so blatantly discriminates against Others! And unlike what our dear PM would have you believe, they're in no danger of being overrun by an Other horde—"'

'Don't look!' The screen goes blank as Seth switches it off and stares at me with a murderous gleam in his eyes.

He sits down and Woolf breaks the long silence with a joke. Seth chuckles loudly, but his voice sounds like it's about to break. I can't eat, but I must be the only one with a problem judging from how quickly everyone resumes stuffing their faces. I'm half-convinced I hallucinated what happened until Seth in-between laughing with Woolf stops to throw a hard look my way.

'Why do you always have to make things so difficult!' Theo hisses.

'I don't know!' My chest throbs at the lie and from the pointed way he turns his back on me I know he's not convinced either. The truth is that there's a part of me that can't look away, no matter how much it hurts.

Tomorrow

Ye Min

I had never seen the sea before. That's why I was standing on this sandy hill just staring at it. They say know your enemy. The sea is my enemy. The sea is what stops me gaining my freedom. Now I can see it, smell it and hear it. Churning and groaning. Foaming and crashing onto this miserable cold windswept beach. Teasing me.

'Are you brave enough to challenge me? Do you think you can best me? You? A mere man..'

You might ask. How can a grown man. A man, who is man enough to grow a beard. How can such a man, never have seen the sea?

You have to remember that I was born in the mountains, in a land surrounded not by the sea but by other, unfriendly lands. There were no great rivers, only clear streams flowing down boulder strewn mountain sides providing just enough water for ourselves, our animals and the poor crops that we grew. Life was hard but for generations we had hardened ourselves to that unforgiving life. We welcomed it. We gave thanks every day for having just enough food and just enough water to stay alive.

Hardship is one thing but war is another. Other peoples' wars broke us. Shattered our hardiness. We wondered where the next bad thing would come from? From the air? Delivered by someone whose face you'll never see? From someone who might look like you, who may even

be known to you? Someone with whom you might have shared a cup of tea and your last piece of bread and cheese only yesterday, who smiled, gave thanks and left, then returned the next day to kill you? That happened to my father, brother and uncles.

The abiding memory of my homeland is of the women and children wailing, and weeping. At the last family funeral my mother hugged me then said, 'You must go. Save yourself. There is no more hope for us.'

She pressed all the money she'd been saving into my palm. Maybe she knew such a day would come.

She kissed me for the last time saying, 'Do not speak to anyone.'

The next morning I left, walked up the mountain just like any other day, then walked down the other side. I kept on walking, not talking or speaking to anyone. I avoided anyone who might know me or who might know of me. Anyone who might tell someone else, so that someone who does not have my best interests at heart might do me harm. They can steal my animals, and take my crops if that's what they want to do in the name of their cause. I am a nothing man. What you see standing before you is all I am.

I walked for days then begged lifts until I came to a city. There, I found a man who could take me many miles in

a truck with other silent, sad people. There were women with children, even some children travelling alone. The women and children cried, so too did the men. Such sadness no man should know. We slept all the time to stop our eyes seeing what was right in front of us but I knew we all had the same bad dreams.

Our drivers were careful. If they were caught, their bosses would lose money and would not be pleased. We never met a boss. We only met little bosses. We had to be careful, If we were caught we would be sent right back to where we came from. We had been told not to say where we were from but policemen are smart. They can tell by our language and names where we come from. I saw enough to stay silent and keep my own company. I knew not to upset the drivers. We did as they said, when they said so. We didn't ask questions. We followed instructions. They had complete power over our lives and this scared us. Yet, even though they were scared of their own bosses, they were clever men. They could cross borders into countries I didn't ever see. You could tell me the name of a country and I will say, 'I spent four days inside a dark truck and only saw the night.'

I have travelled many thousands of miles but I know nothing about it. All I know is how to be a nothing man. A man with no family. No home. A man who hardly exists. A man who stands in the shadows and fearfully melts into darkness and safety. I wonder if I am even a man anymore?

I stare at the sea. The sea knows I am a man and that the sea is always the sea. The mighty sea. I have heard people talk about this sea. They say you must fool the sea into helping you. The sea can crush you, drown you, scatter you and your friends like a school of tiny fish. The sea can do these things and has no love for men. You have to honour the sea. Ask for its help. When I feel less scared of the sea I will honour it. This will be hard for me. A man whose country was not bounded by the sea and its ways. A man whose mountain language did not have a word for the sea. Big water or mighty river do

not say enough. I can see no end to it. It keeps coming and coming, its strength and anger never diminish. It beats itself onto the sand and pebbles then tries again and again, never tiring. I must be like the sea and never tire but I am weak.

I am sitting on some rough grass. I study the sea and its ways. I must find a way for it to love me enough not to drown me. If the sea can love me enough not to drown me, maybe the country that lies beyond the sea could love me too? I will pray for that to happen.

I pray many times a day. It's all I can do. I do not have the power to do anything but be grateful to my maker for giving me this opportunity to have lived longer than others in my family. For this I am grateful. I am grateful to share a shack with Mr.Rabat, my Iranian friend. We share everything. Shelter and food, everything we have, we share. This is how human beings should be. I knew no Iranians before I met him but he is a kind, gentle man. Like all men should be. Like all of our gods and teachers tell us to be. I trust no-one the way I trust Mr.Rabat. He won't let me down and I won't let him down.

The truck came to a place where our drivers told us all to run for our lives. I jumped out and I didn't look back. I heard shots and screams but I didn't care for anybody but myself. I ran and ran and then I hid. I hid among some goats in a shed. I know the ways of goats and I felt safe but a boy found me. Then he told his Grandfather. They said I couldn't stay but saw that I was frightened. They found a man who could help me. Everybody should know somebody who can help. This man knew another man and then I was with another group of runaways. There were some people I recognised from the truck. We said nothing. We waited a long time in the dark and then we were told to get inside another truck and left that place for other nameless dark places I hope I will never see again.

I don't miss the stink of so many people living and breathing in such a tiny space. I'd never treat my goats

like that. I loved my goats. My life depended on them. I was grateful and respected them. No-one is grateful or respects people like us. We were treated like the mess we were forced to live in. Some people became ill but there was nothing we could do for them. When they became too ill the drivers took them away. When a child became ill the mother went with them. We never knew what happened to them nor did we ask.

Mr.Rabat and I, we do not talk of our journeys to here. We only talk about what we need to do now or what we need to do next. That is all that matters. What you do next is important. I have learned to think quickly about what to do next. It has kept me alive until now.

There came a point when we didn't have to stay hidden all the time but I still kept my head down. I didn't speak unless I was spoken to. I stayed away from police and officials. They are just as dangerous as the bad people in my country.

I walked towards the sea and knelt down at the waters' edge. I raised my arms and implored my maker to help me continue and reach journeys' end safely beyond the sea. I asked the gods of the sea, whoever they are, to help this poor honest man live his life again. My forehead was pressed against the cold, wet sand so too were my hands. My fingers curled tightly into themselves and clenched the wet sand. How I prayed! Praying for forgiveness and giving thanks. I asked the sea to help Mr.Rabat whose needs are the same as mine. My hair was dripping wet and I looked up to see one of those big white gulls staring at me. Then it began thrashing about and I noticed one of its legs was trapped by a loop of plastic which was blowing about in the wind. I grabbed one end of the plastic and pulled the struggling bird towards me. It squawked and flapped its wings but I yanked it towards me and tugged the bag free. The bird waddled away, realised it was free, made a raucous sound then flew off. I still held the plastic and pressed it flat. It was a blue and white bag with words written on it. Could this be a sign?

I thanked the sea gods for sending me this message, carefully picked it up and returned to our shack.

Mr.Rabat was not there. I lit the stove and boiled some water. When the tea was ready, I told myself that Mr.Rabat will appear but he didn't. I even poured some tea into his tin mug still expecting his arrival. I began to wonder if he'd managed to get away but he wouldn't leave without me. Then I recognised his soft footsteps approaching and the curtain across our doorway was pulled aside, there was Mr.Rabat. I was so glad to see him! He had bread and cheese to go with our tea and sat down, gripped his warming mug then smiled.

I showed him the blue and white plastic bag and told him the story of how I had found it.

I asked him what the writing said. He smoothed it flat and silently stared at it for a few moments.

'Yes, it is a sign. A good sign. The words are English words. They say, Boots. It is a greeting for us. I also have some news.'

I sat and waited but he remained silent.

I asked him directly for his news.

'I have found us a boat. We can leave this shack.'

'When?'

'Tomorrow.'

The Garden

Zach Murphy

The wildflowers wilt over their own feet as I trudge through the dusty, jaded soil. One of my legs is broken. My mouth is parched. And my stripes burn.

I wonder if the workers before me dealt with this kind of heat. I wonder if the workers after me will suffer even more. I wonder if there will even be workers after me.

The honey isn't so sweet here anymore. The dream has melted away. This planet is no longer my garden.

As I use my last shred of will to drive my stinger into the wrinkled ground, I pray that my final moments will be graced with a cool breeze.

Bios

Aisha Phoenix

In Essence

Aisha Phoenix is completing a speculative novel. Her collection, *Bat Monkey and Other Stories*, has been shortlisted for the SI Leeds Literary Prize and she has been longlisted for the Guardian/4th Estate BAME Short Story Prize, the Bath Short Story Award and the Fish Flash Fiction Prize.

🐦 @FirebirdN4

Amy Lott

1999 - Undetermined

Amy is a working class artist from South London, and is currently studying for a BA in art. Amy's poetry is mostly autobiographical, and documents her environment and interactions with the council estate spaces that she has grown up on.

📷 @amy_lott_art

Andrew Kaye *He/Him*

The Murky Below

Andrew is a queer writer experimenting with creative non-fiction and short stories. He recently participated in the London Lit Lab course on queer words with the author, Jonathan Kemp. He's had writing published by Huffington Post, *Clavmag*, *Untitled* and *Mechanics Institute Review (MIR)* (forthcoming).

🐦 @JKaye82

🌐 andrewkaufman.co.uk

Arden Fitzroy *They/Them*

C'est la Guerre

Arden Fitzroy is a London-based writer-poet, actor, and producer. They believe in experimentation and blurring the boundaries of genre, gender and art forms. They were shortlisted for the London Writers Award in Poetry 2018 and the Creative Future Writers' Awards 2020. They are on the current longlist for the 2020 Primadonna Prize.

🐦 @ArdenFitzroy

📷 @ArdenFitzroy

🌐 /ArdenFitzroy

🌐 ardenfitzroy.com

Chris Tait

Menus of Mad Hatter's Tea Parties

Chris has published two graphic novels "Diablo the fantastical adventures of an unloved chess piece" and "Diablo and the leprechaun figurehead."

From attending writing groups and open mic sessions across the Central Belt, Chris has had poetry read on the radio and recorded.

Chris is also involved with playwriting and collaborated with the In Motion Theatre Company in connection with *See Me* mental health.

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📷 @taitchris6

🌐 /ChrisTaitScribbles

Corey Terrett *He/Him*

Do You Remember?

Corey is twenty-three years old and living with his partner Ryan in Swansea. He's a recent graduate in English Literature and Media Studies with a Masters in English Literature.

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Daniele Zurbruegg

Signals

Dan Milo is originally from Switzerland and lives in London, where he studies politics and tries to write. He doesn't use his real name because it's impossible to spell.

🐦 @cute_dan_milo

🌐 danmilo.com

Diarmuid ó Maolaláí

Fast Casual / Teen discos

DS Maolaláí has been nominated seven times for Best of the Net and three times for the Pushcart Prize. His poetry has been released in two collections, "Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden" (Encircle Press, 2016) and "Sad Havoc Among the Birds" (Turas Press, 2019).

Emilia Ong

Chiak Lang

Emilia is a British writer, born in Hackney, London, in 1983 to an English father and Chinese-Malaysian mother. In her work she is interested in side-stepping formal boundaries in order to present urgent content in a freshly compelling, intimate way. A now ex-English teacher with a degree in philosophy, she is currently working on her first novel.

🐦 @e_o_n_g_

📍 @e_o_n_g_

🌐 emiliaong.com

H Stickings Smith

B is for Baikonur

Han is a writer, translator and community literacy teacher who has been published/commissioned by The Interpreter's House, Perverse, Litro, the European Poetry Festival, Versopolis and Hotel, and for fiction have been shortlisted and longlisted for the Mslexia / Galley Beggar Press Novella Award, the Desperate Literature Prize and the UEA New Forms Award.

Iqbal Hussain *He/Him*

Finding Me, Finding You / A Flash of Silver

Iqbal works for a large City law firm, but spends his spare time writing and composing music. He is currently editing his first novel, Northern Boy, a coming-of-age tale about what it feels like to be a "butterfly among the bricks".

🐦 @IHussain_Writer

J. Marcelo Borrromeo

The Juice Box Talk

J. Marcelo Borrromeo is a Filipino writer with an MA in Creative Writing (Prose Fiction) from the University of East Anglia. They live in their hometown of Cebu, Philippines, where they are writing their first novel, entitled Residents. J. Marcelo Borrromeo's work has appeared in Kill Your Darlings.

🐦 @miostark

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John Grey

Dead Ted's Garage

John Grey is US resident. Recently published in Spillwords, Trouble Among The Stars, Cavalcade Of Stars and Artvilla.

JP Seabright

The Opposite of Things

JP Seabright is a queer writer living in London and working in information security. When not doing that, JP writes, reads and listens to records. With poetry published in two anthologies and short stories published online and in print, JP is (allegedly) trying to complete novel-length fiction and nonfiction work in progress.

🐦 [errormessage](#)

🌐 [randomrecordreview.wordpress.com](#)

Marie Mayingi

All is not black or white

Marie was born in Paris in 2000 and is currently attending the University of Exeter and studying English Law and French Law, Marie has released two poetry chapbooks, “Ravings” in 2018 and “Happier” in 2019.

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Michelle K Jamieson *She/Her*

What is Psychosis?

Michelle Jamieson is a working-class, queer, Glaswegian, community psychologist, hybrid, creative author, and current PhD Candidate at the University of Glasgow. Her current PhD research deals with exploring the relationships between ‘Severe Mental Illness’ and employment status across the lifespan. Michelle’s creative writing is a blend of experimental and autobiographical to explore the meaning and lived experience behind mental health, disability, and working-classness among others.

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Nikki Dudley *She/Her*

A Modern Love Story

Nikki Dudley is managing editor of streetcake magazine and also runs the streetcake prize. She is the leader of the MumWrite programme. She has a published novel and a collection out with Knives Forks and Spoons.

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Oz Hardwick

Grounded / Outpatient

Oz Hardwick is a European poet, photographer, and occasional musician. His prose poetry chapbook Learning to Have Lost (Canberra: IPSI, 2018) won the 2019 Rubery International Book Award for poetry, and his most recent publication is the prose poetry sequence Wolf Planet (Clevedon: Hedgehog, 2020).

🌐 [ozhardwick.co.uk](#)

Peter Scalpello

Chem / Isolation Fuck

Peter Scalpello is a poet and sexual health therapist from Glasgow, currently living in London. His work has been published internationally. His debut pamphlets will be published by Broken Sleep Books in March 2021.

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Pippa Sterk

Monster

Pippa is a mixed-race lesbian writer and researcher from the Netherlands, currently based at King’s College London. Her work integrates topics of sexuality, education, language, and everything deemed ‘strange’. She has previously written opinion pieces and reviews for the London Feminist Film Festival website, The F-Word, LesFlicks, and Strand Magazine.

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Rebecca Webster *She/Her*

The In-Between

Rebecca is a poet, writer, actor and freelance tutor currently living in the depths of leafy South London. All-round creative, over-thinker and feminist, Rebecca recently had a rehearsed reading of her debut play performed prior to lockdown and is now working on posting poetry semi-regularly on instagram.

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Siobhan Dunlop *They/Them*

Elif: a shorthand / In The Hairdresser's Chair

Siobhan Dunlop is a UK-based poet and book blogger with poems in 404 Ink, Pixel Heart, meanwhile magazine, Crêpe & Penn, 3 Moon, Vamp Cat, TERSE., Door is a Jar, perhappened, and elsewhere. They love reworking classic texts and reading about tech, and can be found on Twitter under @fiendfull.

🐦 @fiendfull

Stacey Ellis

The Others

Stacey is a civil servant based in London who's attended writing workshops taught by authors Lou Kuenzler, Valerie Martin and Jeff Shapiro. Stacey is currently writing a YA historical fantasy novel about a witch hunter's apprentice.

Toshaunae Norris

My Hair Speaks

Toshaunae Norris is a part-time poet and a pre-university student from Jamaica. In May 2020, Toshaunae received an honourable mention for the essay on "How does consumer protection law benefit me and my region?" in the CARICOM Regional Youth Essay Competition. Toshaunae has a passion for writing short stories, essays and poems.

Ye Min

Tomorrow

Ye Min is a retired ex teacher and drama therapist for the NHS. Ye Min has always loved writing and have had positive feedback from some publishers. They were 'commended' by the Fab@FaberPrize for YA novella, 'Crossing Over' and shortlisted for the recent Creative Futures Awards.

Zach Murphy

The Garden

Zach Murphy is a Hawaii-born writer with a background in cinema. His stories appear in Adelaide Literary Magazine, Mystery Tribune, Ghost City Review, Spelk Fiction, Door = Jar, Levitate, Yellow Medicine Review, The Bitchin' Kitsch, Crêpe & Penn, Ellipsis Zine, Wilderness House Literary Review, Drunk Monkeys, and Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine. He lives with his wonderful wife Kelly in St. Paul, Minnesota.

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