



Verbal Remedies: The Booster Shot

Selected and edited by
Mohammed Rafe Hussain
and Dr Helen Lynch

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 UNIVERSITY OF
ABERDEEN

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Prefatory Words from Dr Helen Lynch

It is, as always, a pure pleasure to introduce this, the latest collection of creative pieces by medical students, just as it is always a delight to teach the writers who have produced them. This is a bumper edition as the coronavirus pandemic meant that there was no edition of *Verbal Remedies* in 2020 and so *Verbal Remedies: The Booster Shot*, the fourth in this series of chapbooks, includes the work of three cohorts of the Medieval Humanities course ME33CW rather than the usual two. It also contains work from the first year that the course was taught online, a year that saw many students isolated, confined for long periods to their accommodation, alone or with a small number of peers, or back in their childhood bedrooms with parents and siblings. Other medical students found themselves dealing with those suffering from Covid itself, and patients' families, as well as experiencing the stresses and solidarity of fellow-workers. All this in a time of heightened appreciation of NHS and all the people who work so hard within it. These circumstances are reflected in the cover image by Morven Greer as well as in some of the haikus threaded throughout the volume.

Spurred by the necessity of having this ready for the launch at WayWORD Festival 2021, I finally creaked into action. In this endeavour, I have had the invaluable assistance of Mohammed Rafe Hussain, who won the annual R.A.M. Case Prize for Creative Writing two years ago, and kindly acted as co-editor, selecting pieces for inclusion, correcting, and proofreading late at night and weekends, despite working on a Renal and General Medicine ward and having at least one coronavirus scare in his own household during the process. I'm extremely grateful to him, and also to Wai-Lum Sung, who produced the typeset copy with his usual speed, judgement and efficiency.

Above all, though, and at risk of sounding like a mutual appreciation society alongside Mo's Foreword below, I'm indebted to the students of the course. They are invariably bright, funny, and dedicated. They work really hard to craft their writing and to develop their comprehension of the processes of creativity. They often put up with derision from their fellow medics for choosing a 'soft option' and 'not a real subject' for their Medical Humanities module, one that, it is assumed, can't possibly be as onerous or intellectually rigorous as other options. Perhaps they are a self-selecting group, but they seem notable for their humility and curiosity, with no sign of the famous arrogance or emotional 'tin ear' sometimes ascribed to doctors. They continually exemplify the importance of the imagination in understanding ourselves and understanding others. To balance my co-editor's claims about the value of creative writing in a medical career in his foreword, therefore, the chapbook ends with a piece of life-writing, or creative non-fiction, on the necessity of reading by a previous winner of the Case Creative Writing Prize. Conor McAvoy's 'Bibliotherapy' was originally written for the Dr Jeannie McLeod Essay Prize in Mental Health, Resilience & Wellbeing, for which it was shortlisted and won the Benefactor's Prize. It argues from lived experience for the pleasures of accessing fictional worlds and crucial role of this activity in dealing with the pressures and secondary traumas of being a medic.

The work in this volume, as usual, reflects the wide variety of interests, personalities, backgrounds, and experiences of the writers. As always, on the course, medical themes are not required but often emerge. There are vivid childhood memories and the distilled meditation or sharp observation of haiku; pieces capturing the rhythms of speech and dynamics of interaction in dialogue, or the archetypal structure of narrative storytelling from folk and fairy-tale; and exploration of the unfamiliar, whether communicating a world known to the writer but not the reader or depicting a narrator in an unfamiliar place or situation for the first time. Russian Formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky claimed that all literary writing is a process of defamiliarisation, and perhaps it is the processes involved in seeing the world differently, and the effort required to enable others to see

the world differently through your chosen words, that provides some of the benefits of writing creatively described above.

The content ranges from the amusing to the distressing, the evocative and informative to the troubling. As such, readers should be aware that subjects such as bereavement, racism, terminal illness and sexual assault appear in these pages. Just as many in lockdown reassessed and rediscovered what was important to them, leading in many cases to a resurgent appreciation for books and creative arts in general, this collection hopefully has some place in enjoyment and self-care for its readers. Though the pandemic runs through *Verbal Remedies: The Booster Shot*, the students' writing here conceivably provides some fortification for the next stage of all our lives. With so much focus rightly on mental health and actual survival, these young writers have remembered to document some of what is important about being alive.

Dr Helen Lynch

Reader in Early Modern Literature & Creative Writing
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Foreword from Mohammed Rafe Hussain

Medics are generally quite boring people, who are seen to only really get the time to save lives. It's always easy to describe us as such. Even in conversations that my mum has with her friends tend to be about how proud she is of me for getting into medical school.

“Oh yes, MY SON wants to be a surgeon, alhamdulillah. He's all the way up in freezing Aberdeen – he's figured out how to cook for himself now though haha mashAllah – but he's so far away and never has the time to come home, but at least it'll be worth it when he moves back to England and...”

It's very easy to categorise medics as two-dimensional nerds with stethoscopes, heavy textbooks and even heavier egos. To an extent – we are. However, we have pressures inflicted upon us that the average person won't have to deal with; this in turn makes it very hard to separate the person from the degree. I like to think of writing as a means to sieve out the silky soft shimmering sands of creativity from the heavy clumps of the emotional burdens that we seem to collect as healthcare workers.

Aberdeen Medical School is unique with its Medical Humanities block, as it's designed to let third-year medical students explore subjects outwith the realms of medicine and thus branch out into different fields in hopes of developing the individual student's lateral thinking abilities. What a scary thought – a doctor who spends their free time drawing and writing poems.

It's tough for doctors worldwide right now, not least here in the UK. With the NHS being stretched to its limits though austerity, and a record high of mental health issues amongst healthcare workers - it can be a daunting time to join the profession for many of us. Having a creative outlet can act as beneficial respite for those under such immense stresses on a daily basis.

I went into the Creative Writing program quite sceptical. I hadn't written anything other than study notes since my days before medical school. I was quite sure that the creative side of me had withered away for eternity, and I was convinced that this is just what it meant to be a healthcare professional in the 21st century. However, I was proven wrong very quickly. Under the encouraging and engaging guidance of Dr Helen Lynch, the seeds of creativity were able to germinate once again, allowing me to blossom as a sarcastic, hilarious and very humble human bean. I had an absolute blast. Listening to the creative works of my classmates for six weeks will undoubtedly be a cherished memory and a highlight of my time at medical school.

Having spoken to other medics who went through the course, the consensus is pretty much the same. We have all been able to get back in touch with our creative sides that had started to erode through hand-washing stations and workshops about mental resilience (I speak for myself, when I say that sitting through those mandatory workshops can be an exercise in resilience in themselves). We are forever grateful for the opportunity to explore Medical Humanities, thanks to the Aberdeen Medical School Curriculum, and the much-needed nurturing from Dr Lynch. We feel like we have gotten back in touch with our real selves. Thank you, Doctor, for you gave us all the medicine that we all so very much needed.

A lot of work has gone into this book. We hope you, the reader, enjoy reading it as much as we enjoyed writing it. It takes two to tango – and we look forward to literarily dancing with you through your reading of this compilation. Thank you for supporting us, when we need it the most.

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Jie Fei Lau

Haiku

I drank the milk
realised it was mayonnaise
quarantine day five

Conor McAvoy

Scrabo Hall Women's Bible Study

The Scrabo Hall Women's Bible Study met every Thursday at 6pm. Each week one of the ten women would cook dinner and then they would settle down for Bible study and a time of prayer. They were six chapters into the Book of Esther (everyone had been impressed with Esther's bravery in Chapter 5) and it was Joan McAlpine's turn to cook.

Joan had just returned from a summer break in Italy with a new recipe she was sure would impress the women of the Bible Study and potentially even oust Martha as the best cook in the group. Spaghetti Bolognese – the most exotic thing to be cooked for the group since Martha had made a shepherd's pie and put bay leaves in it.

They had all arrived except Sadie and were seated at Joan's large dining table. Each time Joan retired to the kitchen to stir the pot, nervous glances were exchanged amongst the women,

"I don't understand... do you serve it with potatoes?"

"I think she's made pasta."

"God help us," Helen shook her head. "We must pretend we are all missionaries and that we will be killed if we don't eat it," she offered seriously. Georgie was still unconvinced. The spaghetti may have been a step too far in a week that had already been trying.

"Has anyone heard from Sadie?" asked Joan carrying a tray loaded with bread and butter arranged in a circle. "It's not like her to be late."

After a murmur of no's from the group, Helen spoke up. "I heard on the radio earlier that there was a handbag left in a changing room in one of the shops in town today. They only said it was a shop on High Street but they didn't name it, so I don't know if it was Woolworths."

The whole room went quiet.

"I'm sure it's only a scare though. There was nothing on the radio about an explosion in Belfast today – it was only a device found. Sure you know it's a nightmare to get a bus out of Belfast when people think there's a bomb."

The ladies shifted uncomfortably in their seats. The Saturday before a car bomb had exploded in Omagh, killing twenty-nine people, including six teenagers, six children and a mother pregnant with twins. Even those hardened by years of horror and death in Northern Ireland had been shocked, though to many in the province this had seemed impossible. Joan's grandchildren lived about twenty minutes from Omagh and she knew that their mother did her weekly shop there. God forgive her, but she had prayed that her daughter-in-law hadn't gone to the scene to help with casualties. There had been a call on the radio when the news broke for all people with medical training near Omagh to come and help.

These days you never seemed to know whether it was just one bomb or, if there was another bomb, where it could be planted. It later emerged that misinformation or just sheer evil had meant the people in Omagh had been evacuated to the area where the second bomb was planted so that more were caught up in the carnage. Joan had rung her son's house repeatedly as soon as she had heard the news. She had cried when the phone was finally picked up by her son who had reassured her that everyone

was fine, they hadn't gone into town that day.

She still couldn't believe it. Omagh was miles from Belfast and Derry where bombs had been regular terrors since Joan had been a teenager. The IRA had called a ceasefire and she had almost begun to hope that things were changing. It had been four months since the Good Friday Agreement but the unsteadiness of peace had been revealed by the bomb last week. Two years of talks and compromise had not been able to prevent twenty-nine more deaths and over two hundred injuries. She just couldn't stop thinking of the unborn twins and how their father was coping.

Joan went back into the kitchen to get the spaghetti. She turned on the radio and twisted the volume down low so the women in the dining room wouldn't hear it.

"... for the Good Friday agreement. The events in Omagh have been roundly condemned by all major political parties in both the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland."

Nothing about any bombs going off in Belfast then – the news had been dominated all week by the Omagh bombing. Her husband had told her that it was proof that all the political peace dealings could never change anything, but she hoped he wasn't right. She carried the large pot of pasta to the sink and poured it into a colander she had bought specially for this purpose in Sorrento.

"A suspicious device was found in the changing rooms of a West Belfast clothes shop earlier today. The device was an incendiary bomb that was found before it could be detonated. Staff were evacuated and the shop will remain closed until tomorrow afternoon."

Joan sighed as she transferred the pasta into a large serving bowl. She had told Sadie multiple times to get a job outside of Belfast. It just wasn't worth the risk; she hadn't been in Belfast in years. She carried the bowl of pasta back into the dining room.

"I never believed it would do any good. The Good Friday Agreement... I think it's frankly blasphemous naming it anything to do with Easter. Jesus would never have wanted any of those terrorists and murderers to be released early for the sake of peace!"

Joan wasn't surprised that Sally hadn't supported the Good Friday Agreement. Her husband was an RUC officer and every Thursday she would ask for prayer for policemen's safety or add another name to the long list of policemen's families left without fathers thanks to the conflict. She remembered reassuring herself when her own children were born in 1970 that at least they would never live in a Belfast like the one she had grown up in. They had decided to move out to the country five years later when the bombs hadn't stopped. It was now 1998 and she wasn't sure even her grandchildren would know peace in Ulster.

Joan went back into the kitchen and returned carrying the steaming pot of Spaghetti Bolognese into the room. The women with their backs to Joan didn't try and hide their disgust at the unfamiliar smell.

"Shall I say grace, ladies?" They all bowed their heads and the more traditional amongst them lifted their berets out of their handbags and placed them on their heads.

"Joan, I'm just going to be honest with you. I can't eat this. I've never had pasta and I've always said I'd never eat it. Our Sarah had some once and she was so ill for days after. I'm so sorry, I just know what I like." As she was saying this, Georgie started loading her plate with bread and butter as if to protect her plate from the pasta. "Honestly this'll do me."

Joan smiled and told her not to worry as she ladled pasta onto the plates of the other ladies. Secretly they were all thinking that they wished they were as brave as Georgie but knew that only one of them could refuse this exotic dish without being rude. Martha's mind drifted back to the bay leaves she had put in her shepherd's pie and cursed her pride in issuing the culinary challenge to the women of the Study to rise above Irish stew and pavlovas. As she stared at the plate in front of her, she finally understood how Haman must have felt as he was led to the gallows he had erected himself.

"We must say a prayer for the people of Omagh tonight. It seems like only a miracle will bring an end to all of this." Each of the women nodded in agreement and glanced nervously at the empty seat that Sadie would have been sitting in.

After the Bible study and prayer time the ladies left in groups of four and five. Martha's car stopped and waited in the queue to be waved through at a police checkpoint near her house in Belfast. Sally McKee took the pause as an opportunity to get out of the car to discreetly be sick in a bush by the side of the road. Spaghetti Bolognese may indeed have been a step to be far for the Scrabo Hall Women's Bible Study.

Jie Fei Lau **Curtains**

I want to see the stars, the bright, diamond-shaped things that blink like they are watching me from outer space while I sleep. I want to see them shoot across the sky; the ones that are called shooting stars. No, wait, they are called comets. I remember their names from science class. In my textbook, it says that comets catch fire when they enter our Earth's atmosphere, and that is why they look like they have a tail of light following closely behind them. I also remember that Hailey's comet (Is that its name? I need to look at my book again, as I may get tested on this in my exam) only appears once in almost a hundred years. That is a long time! I wonder, will get to see it tonight?

These questions keep chasing each other in my head as I sit at my long white study desk, the mushroom-shaped lamp making my science homework glow a warm yellow. I have to finish this by today so I do not get in trouble with Miss Yap tomorrow. The side of my left hand is already lead-black from using my 2B mechanical pencil for too long. It looks shiny and sleek, like the glittery black thing Mom puts around her eyes that makes her look like a panda. I pinch myself so I stop day-dreaming. I rest my chin on my right hand as I write out the names of the planets of the Solar system in the order of the ones closest to the farthest away from the sun.

It is nearly nine o'clock. I am supposed to go kiss Mom goodnight and pack my bag for school tomorrow as I have to wake up at five in the morning. If I forget to bring my homework, I will have another "ice" moment in class. I call it that because my heart does this thing where it feels like it is turning to ice in my chest. This happens when Miss Yap makes me stand in front of the class on a chair as punishment for not bringing my homework, even if I try to explain to her that I did finish it at home. Teachers always tell us not to make excuses, but what makes an excuse different from a reason? Is it an excuse when people my age say it because grown-ups do not trust us? Why do they not trust us?

I rub the sleepiness from my eyes and look over my homework to make sure I have finished it all. I am wondering whether I should erase Pluto from the list of planets I have written down. I read in this thick book on Dad's bookshelf that Pluto is no longer a real planet and is called a dwarf planet. On second thought, I put my eraser back down. Although I tried to explain to Miss Yap the other day about what I have learned about Pluto, she said that for the exams, it is still better to stick to the textbook. I try not to ask her many questions because she would say that I am arguing with a teacher, which is disrespectful. She says students should not be arrogant just because they know a little bit more than other people. I think she looks at me sometimes when she says things like that.

It is getting late. I brush my teeth with my barbie-doll toothbrush and change into my baby-pink nightgown with Disney princesses on it. I put my Bestari science workbook and homework diary into my hot-pink roller-bag. Just as I am getting into bed, I suddenly decide to walk over to the window and look at the sky.

There are no stars that I can see. Dad tells me it is because of the light pollution in the city. I know it is also because the sun is the only star in the Solar system and other stars are too far away to see even at night. The only stars I have seen are from the Peter Pan movie that Dad bought from the pasar malam market.

An idea suddenly lights up in my head. Who says I cannot camp under the stars, like Barney the purple dinosaur does with his friends? Maybe I do not have marshmallows and cannot make s'mores, but I can still sleep in a tent and stare at the night sky.

Without wasting a second, I rush to my bed and grab the corner of my blankets. I pull at them until they slide off the bed along with the pillows, making a soft thud on the wooden floor. I drag the blankets with my right hand and pull the curtains back with my left one. How do I make more space for myself behind the curtain? I think of how Barney and his friends set up their tent. They used long poles to stop the tent from falling. I do not have any poles, but maybe I have something to support the sides.

I spot the bench at my study desk and lift it quietly instead of dragging it across my room so Mom, Dad and Jie Ern do not wake up from the noise. I move to the curtains, place the bench next to them and pull the curtains back across the bench. This way, I have more space to lay my pillows and blankets on the floor. I now have a cosy nest in my tent.

Smiling at my work, I switch off my desk lamp and it is as if another lamp is switched on outside at the same time, giving out this white glow that makes everything look quiet. My tent is the only thing that I can see in the dark. Holding my breath, I enter my tent and lower myself slowly onto the blankets. It is not as comfy as I thought it would be. I can feel the hard floor even through the blankets, but it is okay because this is what camping is.

I look up at the slit between the curtains and the metal pole. My eyes follow the way the cloth flows like a waterfall downwards and over the bench next to me. Moonlight pushes its way in between the metal bars of my window, their shadow showing up on the curtain to my left. I raise my hands, hook my thumbs together, make a butterfly and watch as its shadow dances in the moonlight. I name it Mariposa after the butterfly fairy in a Barbie movie. I create other animal friends that come alive in my tent, such as Wolfy who howls into the night and Brer Rabbit who hops around on his hind-feet.

In here, I forget about Miss Yap and her rotan which she loves to whip through the air. I forget about the black and white uniform in my cupboard. Tonight, I remember what it is like to dream and make up exciting stories that never end.

The moon smiles like the Cheshire Cat from Alice in Wonderland. It hangs over my head and asks me "What are you looking at?". I squeeze my eyes shut. Sleep starts to wrap its arms around me.

Karina Chopra **Music Lesson**

"Crescendo, Karina! Crescendo!" Sarah's voice bellowed out against the heavy bass of the piano. "Keep building, keep it going... No, no, no! Do not bang the keys. Let the notes sing."

A dissonant noise emerged from the piano as Karina's hands slumped down on the keys.

"I didn't think I was banging. The markings say ff."

"Yes, but there's a way to entice the sound out of the keys. Move in to the keys, not on top of them. Try again!" She waved her arm, a gesture, to reiterate the importance of moving into the keys. As if this gesture triggered a reminder, Sarah began making sounds of sharp scratches as she began scribbling away in the notepad.

Karina shrugged and turned back to the piano, making silent movements, whispering under her breath 'go into the keys.'

The haunting sound of Chopin's Nocturne in E minor enveloped the room once again, with Sarah's critiques following suit.

"Good. Move in-to the keys. Play from the shoulder – maintain evenness. Good, good. Now, slowly cre-scen-do."

With each note played, Sarah's echo was even louder than the music. Her petite figure edging off the

chair through sheer excitement at the sounds escaping the piano.

"She's ruining my flow," Karina thought to herself.

"Slowly now, don't give the dynamics away all at once! Really emphasise that first beat."

Karina's playing filled the room with the melodramatic tones of the minor arpeggiated scales, her body now swaying along with the music as she moved into the keys.

"Is this okay?" Silence. "Sarah?"

Karina looked out of the corner of her eye and saw Sarah totally immersed in the music. She laughed to herself quietly and returned her gaze to the music.

As the piece drew to a close, the slow soft sounds drifting away into space, Sarah opened her eyes and uttered the words 'again.'

Karina rolled her eyes. Just another day in the life of a music student. She began to play Chopin's Nocturne in E minor for the umpteenth time.

Haiku

Every day the same.
Eat, sleep, drink, repeat. Eat, sleep,
drink, binge-watch Netflix

Squished avocados,
Rotting brown on the inside,
Makes a sad hipster.

Darcy Frankitti Fairytale

Galahad was nearing the end of his journey. He could feel it in his manly bones. After years of constant journeying, battling every terrifying man and monster that stood in his way, and saving every damsel in distress he came across, there was only one more quest he had to complete before sealing his fate as a Hero of the Land. Step one: collect the Staff of Eternal Isolation from The Great Wizard. Step two: use said Staff to seal away the screeching wasp cobra that had been terrorising the Hungry Marsh for the better part of three centuries. Step three: become a Hero. This is what Galahad was made for, what he was destined to do. He had spent his entire life training and fighting and striving for this moment, and he wasn't going to let anyone or anything change his fate.

As he approached The Great Wizard's tower, Galahad paused and took the time to study the impressive building while giving his aching feet a brief rest. Dark towers covered in purple ivy spiralled into the sky, the tops of which were enshrouded in low-hanging clouds and appeared to be home to dozens of large black birds. They swooped from turret to turret, rising high into the sky before bursting back down through the cloud belt. From this distance, the creatures could almost be mistaken for dragons by the untrained eye. But Galahad was very trained and had in fact fought some of his own dragons in the past, so he wasn't fooled by their appearance.

Galahad galumphed his way down the hill towards the tower's entrance, his intricate armour clattering and the Sword of Triumph strapped to his back bouncing as he went. He rocked up to the large, ornate door and attempted to push it open but it wouldn't budge. It must've been sealed with a Locking Spell. The Great Wizard was crafty indeed but Galahad knew what to do. He looked up the tower's colossal

face and readied himself with a courageous huff. The size of the structure was intimidating but Galahad wouldn't let it affect his resolve. After all, he had seen taller towers made of darker stone. He turned to the purple ivy to the right of the door and gave it a forceful tug. It didn't give. With that reassurance, he began to climb up the side of the tower.

After almost falling to his death three times and being attacked by a black bird, Galahad made it inside The Great Wizard's tower. The room he entered appeared to be a parlour of sorts. There was an assortment of furnishings covered in cauldrons, vials and instruments the likes of which he had never seen before, and that was saying a lot considering Galahad had thought he had seen everything. It wasn't quite the dark magician's lair he had been wishing for, but he assured himself even someone who decorated their mahogany table with white lace doilies could still make for a mighty foe. Suddenly, the door at the other end of the room slammed open and Galahad moved into a fighting stance, hand itching towards the hilt of the Sword of Triumph that peeked over his broad shoulder.

There he was, The Great Wizard, in all his glory. The large, pointed hat he wore cast a shadow over his face and his long grey beard tumbled down over his magnificent... flowered apron. In his hands, he clutched a porcelain plate on which sat a rather scrumptious looking cake.

"You could've just come in through the front door, you know." Galahad froze at the sound of the Wizard's voice, still standing wide-legged in a pose that didn't come off quite as heroic as Galahad had hoped.

"It's a pull door, not a push, people often make that mistake." The Wizard meandered over to an empty cauldron and carefully balanced the cake on its rim. His hands finally free, the Wizard pushed his hat back on his head and Galahad was greeted with the sight of cheery blue eyes and a wrinkly smile. He quickly corrected his posture and offered the wizened spellcaster an extravagant bow. Going through the formalities with which he greeted every stranger on his odyssey, he quickly and keenly introduced himself to The Great Wizard, kindly asked for the Staff of Eternal Isolation, and waited for the adoration that would most certainly come.

"And where are your papers?"

"I, er, I'm not quite sure what you mean, Your Greatness."

"Did you bring your documentation, your qualifications, proof of identity?" The Wizard was met with a blank stare and stunned silence. "You don't even have a reference from your place of work?"

"I- I work as a Hero, I don't have any-"

"Well, how am I supposed to know you are who you say you are? Here you come tumbling through my window, asking for one of my possessions and offering me nothing in return but a winning smile and a flash of your biceps."

"But... I'm a Hero! This is what I'm destined to do! I require your Staff to vanquish my final adversary so I can gain the favour of my one true love, Princess Aurelia. Then we can get married and live Happily Ever After."

"You mean the Princess Aurelia? Of the Ethereal Kingdom?"

"Yes, who else could I possibly be referring to? The wonderful, beautiful, enchanting Princess Aurelia. Every time I close my eyes, I can see her long, platinum hair shimmering in the sunlight, as though the stars themselves are woven into it. Her eyes, the colour of sweet honey, melt my heart and the very sound of her name-"

"Oh, I wouldn't bother trying it with her," the Wizard interjected. "I've heard her parents have already promised her to the Queen of another kingdom. I think you'd be best sticking with someone more local. Maybe one of the barmaids down at the tavern. Or my lovely niece, she helps her mother run the bakery in Selmont. That's not far from here at all and she makes the most wonderful lemon and white chocolate cupcakes – she did learn from the best, of course," he said, eyeing up the cake balanced on top of the nearby cauldron.

"Princess Aurelia is promised to... another?"

The Wizard heard a measly whimper emanate from the once mighty “Hero” and shook his head before making his way over to comfort the poor oaf. After a few sympathetic pats on his muscular arm, the Wizard started to guide Galahad, too dismayed to notice, towards the door.

“Perhaps all this Hero business isn’t for you, eh? It’s not for everyone, after all. Have you ever considered going down another career path?”

Galahad jerked his head up to meet the Wizard’s eyes, shaking his head wildly in adamant refusal.

“No, of course not! This is my fate, this is what I have to do, what I’ve been told I have to do for the longest time.”

“That’s what they all say,” said the Wizard wistfully. “Now, go on. You leave here, go for a nice walk and clear your head. Maybe a more suitable job will come to mind.”

Galahad continued to stammer his protests but the Wizard wasn’t having any of it. All thoughts of getting the Staff were out of Galahad’s head the moment he heard the parlour door slam shut and for the first time in his life, Galahad was left to reflect on what he would do next.

It was so sad, the Wizard thought, that some people were so willing to brainwash individuals into believing they were the one saviour of all humanity. Galahad wasn’t the first to visit him and he was sure he wouldn’t be the last. It was up to him to talk them down from their high and mighty state of mind. Some people just weren’t meant to be Heroes, it was a fact of life. It would be cruel for the Wizard to encourage their delusional beliefs. How could he let them continue on in such a manner? It was the Great Wizard’s destiny to stop a Hero from rising to power. Men are so corruptible after all.

Haiku

The haar consumes coasts
Streetlights like lingering souls
Cling to vision’s edge

Michael Gray Dialogue

“Kirsten, I need to speak to you in the kitchen, please,” Carah says before taking a deep breath. The six sugars in her coffee have her blood pressure high enough without flat disputes taking it further.

“What for?” Kirsten hollers from upstairs.

“For God’s sake will you just come down?”

The unknowing defendant prances down the stairs and into the kitchen but is stopped dead in her tracks when she sees the problem.

“I thought we were done with this but apparently my concerns are a joke to you.”

“Come, Carah, you can’t be serious.” Kirsten sighs with impatient exhaustion.

“Yeah, actually I am,” the plaintiff fires back, “and it pisses me off that you still think this is acceptable.”

“Carah, I thought you were joking. I have never met someone who cared about this as much as you.”

“I just don’t know what to say anymore, Carah mutters as she begins pacing back and forth. The laundry powder on the floor and ring stains on the counter have faded into irrelevance now as the primary grievance gnaws at her patience like she gnaws at her sleeve.

“I’m not sure how much longer I can put up with it.”

By this point Kirsten isn't listening anymore. Instead she focuses her energy on looking to the sky and asking God to give her the patience she is quickly losing, but it's not enough.

"Put up with what?! There is nothing to put up with!"

"Oh, I'm sure you'd like to believe that. With your crumbly carpet and tuna mayo mix you leave out."

"Yeah well at least I wash my sheets!" Kirsten throws back.

Carah slowly removes the tattered cuff from her mouth as her jaw drops and her eyes widen. She sees only one solution.

"That's it, I'm packing my bags!"

"Calm down, you're not moving out."

"Well what else am I meant to do?"

"Meditation might help."

"Oh, very funny," Carah grumbles as she storms past Kirsten on her way back to her room.

"Just tell me what you want me to do and I'll do it," Kirsten shouts after her flatmate.

"I'VE SAID IT A MILLION TIMES. PUT THE KETCHUP IN THE FRIDGE!"

"OVER MY DEAD BODY! IT'S STAYING THE CUPBOARD!"

Each more disgusted than the other, they storm back to their rooms and log straight onto Zoopla to search for an escape.

Haiku

No unbroken chairs
The toilet still doesn't flush
My rent is too high

Abigail Wright **Bleach for Thought**

"Don't step on the carpet!" Jenny shouted from the kitchen, hearing Andy stomping over the threshold and slamming the front door.

"Why?" he hollered back.

"I've just sprayed that carpet cleaner stuff."

"What carpet cleaner stuff?"

The one that your Gran gave us."

"You know you have to brush that in, right?" Andy hung up his rain-spotted jacket.

"Yes, Andy, believe it or not, I am capable of reading instructions."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I was just thinking about when you tried to fix the Hoover."

"I did fix the Hoover, and you know it!" Jenny snapped, aggressively stirring her pot on the hob. "There were just extra parts."

"Sure. Why have you sprayed it anyway?" he asked, gingerly stepping through to the kitchen's laminate flooring.

"Because I was cleaning the flat."

"You cleaned?" Andy's hands flew to his open mouth as he feigned shock.

"Don't act so surprised, I do clean." Jenny turned from the bolognaise, noticing Andy now had his head out of the window. "What are you doing?"

"Just didn't want to miss those flying pigs." Andy popped his head back, smiling. Jenny was not smiling back.

"Is that supposed to be funny?"

"Well I didn't say it for the good of my health."

Jenny threw the fridge door open. "I spend all morning cleaning your flat, and this is the thanks I get!" She launched the cheese onto the counter.

"Firstly, it's our flat, and secondly, did you want me to come home with balloons just because you finally did some housework? Maybe we should get you a chart and I'll give you stars when you do your chores."

The fridge shuddered as it was reunited with its door. Jenny ignored him. It was now the turn of the cheese to feel her frustrations as it met the grater. Andy sighed and headed for the toilet.

"Jen?"

"Yeah?"

"Did you put bleach down the toilet?"

"Yeah?"

"Which one?"

"The pink one, because it smells nicer."

"For crying out loud!"

"What have I done now?" Jenny stomped towards the bathroom.

"The pink bleach is the kitchen bleach!"

"Really? I can't believe you right now!"

"You know not to contaminate the bleaches."

"No, this is ridiculous. I've not 'contaminated' the pink bleach by putting it down the toilet. Just like last week when I didn't 'contaminate' the duvet by taking it onto the sofa." She traipsed back to the kitchen, to find her pasta boiling over. "I've just bloody cleaned that hob," she mumbled, scrambling for some kitchen roll.

"Don't start that again!"

"No, I'm fed up with this every single time!"

"Jen, that's not fair. You know things need to have their place." Andy followed her.

"Look, I understand that you need things a certain way, but I have spent all morning cleaning and you have done nothing but complain."

"It's not hard to use the right bleach in the right place. You were there when I bought them."

"I know. It's just difficult. This 'living together' thing is new," her voice was growing softer, "and you don't make it easy when there are so many pointless rules."

"They aren't pointless to me."

"I'm sorry I said that, Andy."

"This is difficult for me too, you know. I can't help how I think about these things. I can't switch it off, it never shuts up." His eyes were brimming with tears, softening Jenny completely. She pulled him into a tight embrace.

"It's okay. I'm sorry, I didn't think about how much these things affect you. You hide everything so well that sometimes I forget, darling."

"I wish they didn't."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

"Now go get some cutlery out, that's your tea ready. Unless, I cooked that the wrong way too."

Andy looked up at her, trying hard not to let the tears escape. "Is that supposed to be funny?"

"Well, I didn't say it for the good of my health."

Phui Yuen Wong

The Boy

He who does not wait to live, will not wait to die.

The sun has dipped below the horizon, leaving in its trail the purplish grey warning of imminent nightfall. A thin orange streak remained in the distance, like an arrow in flight, pointing the way to home. Around him, dark shadows stretched and grew, creeping in to swallow the dapples of fading sunlight. What had been a mosaic work of green, brown and gold was soon rendered a homogenous sea of blue. The cool evening air was heavy with moisture and clung unforgivingly to the skin. All was quiet aside from his own laboured breathing and the steady crunch of dead leaves under his feet. He should stop and build a fire, set up camp before the forest was engulfed by night, but Jarin had been tracking his shadow ever since he crossed the river at midday. He was close. He knew it.

Deep in Virwood, beyond River Khan, where the mountains become the sky.

Those were the instructions from the old shaman. “*But beware boy, for it is a fool’s journey to wander beyond the protection of the water*”.

Jarin remembered the old shaman’s eyes, two black pools of fiery intensity piercing his own. It hurt to look but Jarin did not break his gaze. Instead, he had willed his back straight and asked his legs to turn to stone so that he would not crumple. “But if I find it, if I come back with it, you can save my mother, and everyone else burdened by the plague. Is that right, Healer?” He had surprised himself for his voice was steady and low, though the rest of him was a wind’s blow away from a tremor.

Yes. If you find it, then they shall live. Two weeks ago, an evil storm had brewed in the south, an angry gathering of rolling clouds and tumultuous thunder. A malicious gale had led it to his village and the plague rained down in a merciless torrent. At first, nobody had paid attention to it, a few sniffles and an occasional cough, nothing worthy of alarm. Then the days passed, and rosy cheeks turned to sunken hollows. The light leached away from their eyes hour by hour until they were but empty gazes on ashen faces.

Little Gavin was the first to go. His mother wailed and thrashed in the grip of her husband as they burned the child’s body, along with every bit of what he owned. It was too late anyway. Body after body fell and pyre after pyre was built; first for the young, then the old, then the women.

By the time they finally had the sense to separate the healthy from the sick, half the village had succumbed to the clutches of the devil, Jarin’s own mother included. They waited for help to come from Foran. A messenger had been sent to the capital on the back of their swiftest steed. For days and nights, Jarin had prayed to the *Psuafyr* for his mother’s health and strength, and then to the *Magyoag* for his own patience and courage. The journey to-and-from Foran would take two days each way, one and a half if Bayard was able to find a fresh horse in the next village. Five days had passed and there was not as much as news from either Bayard or the city. Perhaps Bayard had gotten lost, or maybe Foran did not have *Fyrhens* to spare; either way, nobody was coming.

A silver flower that blooms for the moon goddess Naemyr and bleeds for Mother Earth. The shaman’s words rang in his ears as Jarin forced his way through the undergrowth. Not long now, surely. Virwood beyond the river was similar yet not entirely the same. The trees were taller and their trunks thicker. It would take three men to wrap their arms around each of them, maybe four. These were ancient beeches, untouched by civilisation. Their roots were gnarly knots running in wild directions, digging deep into the crumbly earth with vice-like grips. The Gaarthian Range loomed ahead, a towering mound of jutting rocks and menacing cliff-faces. Suddenly Jarin felt small and negligible, an intruding rodent scurrying the floors in the pulsating heart of Virwood. A cold shiver went down his spine and a sense of uneasiness washed over him. Jarin stopped, his weight balanced on the balls of his feet. Someone was watching him, he was sure of it, shielded by the boughs and foliage, cloaked in the darkness of the descending night. Someone, or something.

“H-hello?”

The silence thundered. An eerie stillness enveloped the forest. It was not the tranquillity that you would expect from a deserted woodland, but a quietness that suggested a space void of anything *living*. The wind was at a halt, the leaves did not rustle, and the owls did not hoot.

Jarin did not wait. He shot ahead like a bolt of lightning. As if on cue, Virwood came alive. The beech trees closed in, their limbs flailing with ferocity, licking his arms with stinging bites. A lethal swing came, aiming for his head, and he ducked just in time to receive another assault to the stomach. Jarin came crashing down with a solid thud. For a moment the world was a startling white, but he opened his eyes and was pulled back into the impending horror. Tangled roots slithered across the forest floor and curled around his ankle, his thighs, his torso. He pulled his knife from his belt and hacked at the wooden shackles, but the knife slid off like skates on ice in midwinter. The wind was now a shrieking banshee in his ears. Rivulets of blood streamed from gashing wounds where the boughs slashed and scratched. Jarin could barely breathe as the roots encircled his chest and threatened to crush his ribs inwards. He prayed for *Gjemhrod* to have mercy and send him to a quick demise.

Death would have come if the clouds had not broken at that very moment, sending a pure beam of ivory moonlight to perforate the overhanging canopy. It was almost impossible that the moon could penetrate through with such intensity but it had, flooding the forest floor in its iridescent shine. As if impaled by its beam, the forest retreated. The sturdy roots relinquished their grip and unfurled themselves from his body. The violent gale diminished to a soft breeze and the branches of the giant trees swayed in a gentle dance.

And there, in a small clearing not too far away, a cluster of newly blossomed flowers grew. Their petals, the colour of the first fall of snow, shimmered under the *Naemyr's* blessings.

Ellen Reid
Aberdeen Haiku

Proud granite giants
On good days they are silver
Most days they are grey

Seagulls. Oh, seagulls.
My huge, feathered enemies,
Give me back my food.

Starry midnight sky
The hungry roaring waves are
Angry at the moon

Callum Anderson
We spik Doric up here, yi ken.

"In school, we encourage the children to converse in English so that we can be more inclusive of all children no matter their background or understanding," explains Mrs Wood.

"Aye, bit we spik Doric up here yi ken. It hame we "converse" in Doric, at kirk we "converse" in Doric and at skweel ih bairns should be spiking in Doric," replies Danny.

"I understand that Doric is the local dialect around here but we are trying to equip the children for their future."

"Fit di yi mean "equip the children for their future?" Are yi tryin' to say thit Doric isna an acceptable language ti spik in?" Danny retorted.

Mrs Wood hisses: "No that's not what I'm saying at all. The use of Doric is obviously highly beneficial to the children in life and they can learn this at home or with friends as you've said. However, what I mean by equipping them for the future, is that they will have to use English to converse with strangers that they meet from other places. You wouldn't want them to not be able to speak properly in the future would you?"

"Excuse me? Are yi tryin' ti say thit I'm a bad parent cause I'm spiking to my bairn in the Peterhead language? I'll hiv you ken thit es language his been aroon here since lang afore I wis born, and afore my granda was born and well afore at. I'm prood o' oor local tongue. The skweel should be ina. Folk should learn ti understan' it!"

"I'm not in any way saying that you are a bad parent. You are helping to equip your child in many ways too," countered Mrs Wood.

"Exactly, I ken how to raise my bairn. I dinna even ken why they're comin' here ti be honest. You lot are just teaching him shite," Danny grumbles.

"Please refrain from swearing in the school, Mr Buchan. As you know this is a school and we would prefer if you could regulate your language as such."

Danny barks, "Weel I'm sorry bit you hiv been nithin' bit rude ti me, es hale time I've been here an' quite frankly I jist find it appallin'. Far is my bairn at ? I'm tikin him hame."

"Unfortunately, we can't let you do that at the minute, Mr Buchan. Please come back at the end of the school day as normal and you can pick him up then," assured Mrs Wood.

"Far is he? Yi canna keep him hostage within is skweel. He's my bairn, I hiv a say ower fit he dis, yi auld bag."

Rachel McGuire
Haiku

Frost crisp upon grass
Mist and cold grabbing your hands
A season begins

Jenny Griffiths

The Emerald Bay

After what had seemed like an eternity, the rolling plains gave way to the city of Adratha. The river he had been following opened into the bay that the port city was so famous for, but words barely did it justice. The emerald bay stretched out for miles, with the docks extending just as far. What struck Hallot most of all, was the glistening white walls that shimmered in the afternoon sun. Three concentric rings of white stone, which seemed almost polished from the distance. He was not the only traveller to have arrived today; crowds of people lined up at the outer gate. Livestock, wagons, families and guards all amalgamated into one mess, like an army of ants they swarmed the city as if connected by one hive mind. Opportunistic merchants and thieves prowled the mass alike, almost as if working in unison. Hallot stood still, his eyes darting around. He took only a moment to glare at a small boy that had been creeping up on him, before plunging himself into the mass. The stench of salt, sweat, food and faecal matter hit him hard as he got closer.

He paid his tax to the guards and slipped into the city proper. Hallot made a mental note not to stop in his tracks again, but he couldn't help it – they had wasted stone to make a road. He had heard of it, sure. But large stone chunks, fit together with a skill that only an artisan could muster. Three – no four wagons could ride abreast. The cost must have been astronomical. The road must have been wider than his home village, yet all of it glistened with that white shine. Not the shine of marble that he had seen in the temples, but a soft polished look of white stone. Adratha was famous for its limestone, but he had imagined green not white.

Inns littered Main Street, getting progressively nicer. From peeled paint and broken doors to large three storey affairs with wooden shutters and bars on the windows. Hallot knew that he couldn't afford even the most remedial of inns, ordinarily that was. He still couldn't spend too much, for although he was being sponsored by his town to be here he still didn't know how long he would be here for. How long did it take to petition the King?

He made his way to the port, where he had heard the inns were cheapest. Upon arriving he could see why. Unlike on Main Street where all inns, even the cheap ones, kept their patrons regulated, here by the docks the average person was rougher. From women of pleasure to men sharpening knives, the people here did not look well off. The prostitutes looked as if they had seen better days, their eyes so tired of life they tried to escape the skull through the jaw. However, the view made up for it in his eyes.

Out to sea the water eventually turned a deep blue, but here in the shallower bay it was greener than a lush meadow. Ships proudly displayed their flags, hailing from every country and city: Noble insignia denoting visiting royalty, trade envoys and diplomatic flags of truces. This was the centre of the world, or so Adratha claimed but he had seen maps in his youth when peddlers had come through the village: there was so much more of the world to the East than there was the West. How then could it be the centre? Nobility always did confuse him.

Cargo was constantly being transported on and off the ships, some placed on to barges to be taken up the Adrathian river, others to the local market. More still was transported to other ships. Nothing stayed still. It was as if the King had passed a law that no man could stay still. Was he breaking the law? Was it an unspoken thing? People did always seem to be getting angry at him for standing, but he couldn't help but take in the sights.

He wandered around the market, watching the people – people of all colours and shapes, not just the deep tan that he was used to seeing, mind – dance together in the crowd, effortlessly avoiding each other and picking up the wares they had presumably wanted. Powders in large heaps decorated one stall, fruits and vegetables that he recognised piled another. Some contained religious tokens, others forgetmenots like the one he had given his beloved before laving on this journey. His had been of much simpler design, a small cross with flowers woven into it. These, however, were ornaments fit for a king.

From effigies of small cats to anchors and small ships. Everything was catered for.
Hallot shook his head and went to find somewhere to sleep.

Rachel McGuire

Haiku

A stumble and fall
A keen cry and shaky legs
A new life begins

Megan Lonie

It's Definitely a Maybe

"We've been over this before. I don't think you're old enough Evie," said Terry sternly, his eyebrows raised as he lifted his head from his cluttered work desk.

"Buuuuut Daaaad, all my friends have one now and I'm the only one that doesn't. I'm TEN years old!!" exclaimed Evie as she jumped up and down on the spot and flailed her arms.

"Exactly, Evie, you're only ten years old!" laughed Terry. "That isn't very old, you know. You might think it is, but it's not."

"Buuuuut Daaaaaad," cried Evie as she threw her head back and moaned loudly, "you don't understand what it's like being the ONLY odd one out! Every break and lunch time at school I'm left out because I can't join in! It's really rubbish. Pleeeeeasssssee! Will you at least think about it? I'll keep my room tidy?"

"Evie, you can't possibly be the ONLY one without. That's a lot of nonsense. I am not the only sensible parent in the whole of your primary school, so please!" Terry picked up the stapler.

"Dad, I am! I promise I am!" Evie whimpered, "I swear that I am!"

"Do you know how old I was when I got a mobile phone?" Terry swivelled around in his desk chair to look his daughter in the face, "and by the way, you should be keeping that room of yours tidy anyway. If you can't even keep your bedroom tidy without a phone, how am I supposed to believe that you will keep that damn place tidy with a phone, hmmm?"

"No, but I will. That's what I'm trying to say, Dad! I will keep it tidy from now on. I'll do that for you, if you do that for me... you see?" Evie smirked, "a little give and take never harmed no one?"

"Hmmm," laughed Terry, "nice try but that's not how it works in this house, I'm afraid. You should be keeping that room tidy for yourself and certainly not for my benefit anyway. I don't have to sleep in it and, may I add, bribery will get you absolutely nowhere with me." Terry tilted his head gravely. "Anyway, I asked you a serious question. Do you know how old I was when I got my first mobile phone?"

"No, I don't. But I have a feeling you're going to tell me anyway," sighed Evie with her shoulders slumped.

"Well, take a guess then?" added Terry smugly, "I was fifteen years old, Evie, that's how old I was." Terry swivelled his chair back to face his desk again and began shuffling around piles of paper.

"Yes, but that's because phones didn't even exist before you were fifteen, Dad, or I'm sure Granny or Grandad would have got you a phone," pouted Evie as she lifted her chin with her arms firmly folded. "I know Granny would buy me a phone right now if I asked her."

"Evie," Terry opened a desk drawer and put the paper away, "phones did exist before then actually, smarty pants, it was just people didn't feel the need to use them all the time. You got a brand-new bike

for your birthday just a couple of weeks ago and it's sitting out in the shed, why don't you go out and play with that, there's a park just around the corner? And! By the way... as for your Granny, she does what I say. Not what you say, believe it or not, and I'm saying no, so please don't give me that cheek!"

"But, Dad!" whispered Evie as she looked down at her toes defeated.

"Evie. Am I not being clear enough?" Terry warned as he turned to look at his daughter once again but this time his eyes were narrowed. "You have plenty of things that you could be doing right now other than bothering me. You have every toy imaginable and a new bike. so, go and play. I'm not talking about this anymore."

Evie exhaled loudly, "Ok, well... when will I be old enough to get a phone? You have to move with the times, Dad, you know. It is 2019 now."

Terry sighed and half smiled, "I don't know, I'll need to have a think about that one. Anyway... I'm busy at the moment so off you go and play please."

"Fine, I will go and play but I'm just letting you know that things aren't the same as they used to be when you were my age Dad. For your information, people in my class started getting phones when they were only EIGHT. That's just the way things are now," Evie shrugged.

"Evie," Terry said shaking his head, "Evie, Evie, Evie... I tell you what. When my phone contract runs out in March next year, you can maybe and I mean MAYBE, have my old phone. There is no way you are getting a brand-new phone at ten years old so getting my old one is as much as I'm willing to compromise. AND it's also just a maybe."

"Wait, what? Really?" squealed Evie as she propped her body back up to full height, her eyes wide with surprise.

"Yes, but I am saying MAYBE," Terry reminded as he stapled more bit of paper together, "IF this does happen, there will be no passwords on the phone and I will be able to check it on demand. You might think you're a big girl now but you still need looking after and, like I said before, you are only ten."

"Oh, thanks Dad!! Yes, yes, I'm fine with that," smiled Evie as she balled up her fists in excitement, "Does that mean I can I go and pick out a phone case for it just now?"

"Evie, did you hear what I just said?" laughed Terry, "This won't be happening until March next year so just chill out for now please, and I also said MAYBE, it's not a definite."

"Thanks Dad! Ohhh, thank you!!"

Natasha Lawson **Living for the Weekend**

Its Sunday! Sunday means that it's Mikey daddy and Tash bash day. Dad always picks me up around 10 a.m so I'm sitting on my window sill surrounded by toys that Dad and I have won at Codonas waiting for his white car to drive up the road. I catch a glimpse of his car coming up our bendy road! He's finally here!!!!

I run down the stairs as quickly as I can, just so I can be the first one to answer the door to him. He says 'Are you ready, kiddo?' I grab my bag and scream 'bye' to my mummy and my older sister Stephanie before running out the house.

I climb into the front seat of the car because Steph isn't there and we are off! First stop ASDA. Dad is a DJ so his car is filled with hundreds of CDs. Ok maybe not a hundred but loads! I always get to pretend that I am the DJ for the day and I am in charge of all the music in the car – he's honestly the best.

We pull up to ASDA Portlethen and head straight to the music aisle. Every Sunday Dad buys me a single to add to my collection. Today's choice Outkast – Roses. We get back into the car and start driving to my drum lesson in Ellon. I shove my new CD in the player and turn the volume up. I am screaming 'Roses really smell like poo-ooo' as loud as I can. Dad just smiles and goes along with it

because he's my Dad.

My drum lesson is thirty minutes long, Dad always drops me off and heads to the sweetie shop to pick up my favourite swizzle lollipop. Sometimes if I'm lucky I even get other sweets too!

I rush out of my lesson to see the treats Dad has got me! He's got a bag! It's filled with my lollipop, dib dabs and even flying saucers – this is the best day ever!

He asks me 'What do you want for lunch?' Chips, obviously. So we get back in the car and head to the nearest chipper.

'Chicken nuggets and chips please' I say to the man behind the counter. Dad always gets a macaroni pie and he'll get my daddy chips – you know the big fat ones – that's the deal.

We head back home over the country roads and, after playing 'Roses' over and over again, I think Dad is sick of it so to end the day I change it to our song – Happy People by R Kelly.

Dad's car pulls up onto my driveway, but I can't leave the car until we have sung all six minutes and five seconds.

'Now be happy,' the last sentence of the song. I get out of the car and all I can think is next Sunday is ages away!

'Bye, Daddy, Love you'

'Love you too. Don't forget to tell your mum you had a roast dinner.'

I Miss You.

'Alexa, play RnB songs.'

'Here's a station for RnB music.' She begins to play 'Happy People' by R Kelly out of my speakers. A golf ball sized lump starts to form in my throat and my vision blurs from tears welling up in my eyes. I remember singing this song with my dad. With tears streaming down my face, taking my makeup with them, I wish I could have just one more Sunday.

'Alexa, stop.'

I quickly run to the bathroom to wash away the black crooked mascara lines connecting my eyes and my jaw. I reach for the hand towel and with every dab I take a deep breath, trying to calm myself down.

I grab my car keys and head out to clear my mind. As the car engine starts I begin to feel like I am in control again. Driving around this grey city I am constantly reminded of my childhood and days I spent exploring with my dad. I am usually good at blocking it out but today I feel weak. It's like an allergic reaction, this feeling can happen at any time or anywhere. One memory triggers floods of emotions and I lose control of my body. Pain begins to fill my blood vessels. I feel it circulating around every part of me and there is nothing I can do to make it stop.

I am driving out of the city and travelling the same route my dad would drive every Sunday to get to my drum lesson. There's the office where he worked, the pub he used to drink at, the place he cut his hair, the chip shop we used to go to. I arrive at Tesco and nip in for a few things. I always pick up the brightest flowers for him and today it's yellow roses. As I dodge in and out of people with their filled trolleys doing their weekly shop I find myself on the music aisle. In a world of Spotify and iTunes I am surprised people still buy CDs. I take a moment and look through the various CDs and can't help but smile. With my flowers in one hand and a Motown classic CD in the other I head for the till.

'I get back into my car and put my new CD in the player – 'I Heard it Through the Grapevine' by Marvin Gaye starts playing through my speakers. I get back on the road and drive around the corner. I grab the beautiful roses off the passenger seat and get out of the car. I start walking and see no one just rows and rows of turf with different sizes of perfectly cut granite all equidistant from each other. The air is cold and the sky is grey and all I can hear is the trees swaying in the wind and the swishing noise of my padded jacket every time I take a step. I feel my heart thumping against my chest as I get closer to

my family's perfectly cut piece of stone.

I am here. I look up and read 'Michael Lawson – 30th June 1954 to 1st January 2011.'

Valliamai Muthuganesan

Haiku

Bleak skies, rainy days
I'm alive when the sun hides
Best time for ice cream

Still feeling hungry
Time to raid the fridge – oh look!
Leftover milkshakes.

Jiemin Jamien Ng

The Lifeguard

"Hnnnggghh!" I stand with my tiny arms stretching above my head, releasing all the muscle tension in my upper body. I think I can hear a pop somewhere. Bending forward, I proudly push out my bum as I try to reach for the cold granite ground, stretching the muscles at the back of my legs. As fast as my chubby little legs will allow, I run towards the inviting blue of the swimming pool.

"BEEP!" the shrill sound of the whistle stops me in my track. "NO RUNNING AROUND THE POOL!" a loud angry voice booms towards my direction. Fazed, I look around for the source of it. On top of a tall white chair opposite me, I can see a guy angrily waving a whistle in his hand looking in my direction. Oops, that must be the lifeguard. Sheesh, why must he get so upset about it? Lowering my head in embarrassment, I slowly shuffle towards the pool. As I approach the poolside, I stretch out my toes and dip them in. Ooo, it is cold. I put on my new Speedo goggles that I got yesterday. Huffing and puffing, I take deep breaths as I get ready to embrace the cold water. Leaning forward, I let gravity do its work as I fall forward into the pool.

Splash! I quickly start the process of moving all my muscles to warm up my body. I am a firm believer that the faster I move, the sooner I will get warm. As my breath is about to run out, I twist and turn about until my feet find solid ground and I stand up, the water level sitting comfortably below my chest. I begin to start splashing water about at my imaginary friend. After a few rounds of battling each other, it gets boring winning every round and I want a new challenge. It is time for the 'adult pool' challenge! Every time I come swimming with my sisters, they will show off their ability to swim around in the big pool, leaving me in the small pool. They refuse to teach me how to swim, saying it's for adults only. Every time I get up asking to join them, they push me back in the Kiddy Pool. Aha! They are not around to do that today.

Looking around, I see my mum busily jabbering away on the phone and not looking in my direction. This is my chance! Slowly, I raise my left leg over the coarse granite wall that separates the 'kiddy pool' from the adult pool and lift my body onto it. Taking the rolling approach, I slowly make my way across the wall and "Pssshhh," I am in the adult pool!

Hold on, the ground is too far below me. I cannot stand! I open my eyes only to see water starting to fill up my goggles. Thrashing my limbs around, I try to grab on to anything that I can but there is nothing near me. I must have drifted from the wall. My chest hurts, I need to breathe soon. I open my

eyes again, trying to see how far I am from the surface, but everything looks like a blur. My chest feels like it is going to burst. I feel myself giving up, my mouth opens and I take in three gulps of water. I can't believe that my life is about to end like this.

Suddenly, I feel a hand wrap around my right arm, pulling me in one direction. Now another hand is under my chin and I can feel my head going up. Breaking through the water surface, I immediately open my mouth and take in all the air that I can. I am safe now! I roll my head to the side as I try to catch a glimpse of my saviour.

"Boy ah, stop moving please," a deep, soothing voice says. I guess I shall just stay still then. He drags me across the water and I soon find the poolside wall within reach. Looking up, my mum is just standing there crossing her arms with a very angry look on her face. Uh-oh, I must be in trouble. Back on safe ground, I turn to look at my saviour. Turns out that it is the same lifeguard that scolded me half an hour ago! His red and yellow uniform looks dripping wet and he has a visibly annoyed face. Both of them start to take their turns scolding me for entering the big pool. This is annoying, do they not realise that I've almost died? Give me a break! Their words go in one ear and out through the other.

"Boy, don't go into the big pool unless you can swim. It is very dangerous you know a not?" he told me off in a very calm voice. I slowly nod my head, acknowledging his advice before I turn into my mum's arms to start crying. I can feel her hand patting my head, trying to soothe me. It's time to go home now, I am done with my day at the pool. We begin to walk towards our stuff and I turn to look at the lifeguard. Raising his hand, he smiles and waves at me. I wave back. He must be glad that I am leaving. If not for him, I wouldn't be able to go home today.

Michael Critchell

Haiku

A long time ago
we spent the day together
And each one after

Ellen Reid

Tony

Tony sat at the kitchen table, his blank homework sheet out in front of him. Sinead, his younger sister, sat doodling on her own sheet beside him. She was eager to get finished up so that she could join her siblings playing. They were the lucky ones, not yet old enough to be worried about things such as homework. She could hear them upstairs, a constant stream of giggles, interrupted only by the odd bump or crash.

But Tony was content where he was. His dad had announced at dinner that it was to frost over that night, and so the kitchen fire had been lit, bathing the room in a warm golden glow. Tony's mum also sat at the table with them. He watched her long fingers as they effortlessly fluttered a paintbrush across a canvas, bringing to life a warm summer's day by the beach. She never paused between strokes, never waiting long enough for conscious input from her brain to interfere with her instinct. She began to dab a silvery colour onto the water, and Tony could feel waves ripple over his toes. From her left hand, a long cigarette dangled, sending twirls of smoke dancing into the air.

The thud of heavy boots announced Tony's dad's arrival home. His job as a plumber provided him many an emergency evening call in this frosty weather. Swinging the kitchen door open, he strode over

to his wife. He placed a hand on her shoulder, examining her latest creation and stealing a puff of her cigarette.

'My God, Josie. I can smell the sea just looking at that.'

'Did you manage to fix Miss McCann's pipes?'

'For now, the frost tonight might do them in for good. I'll call round again in the morning.' Pulling out a chair, he joined them at the table.

'Not really feeling like doing homework tonight, are you, Tony?'

Tony's guilty eyes darted up from his empty page, and a thrill of relief washed over him as he realised his dad was joking. A smart remark was forming on his lips, but was never voiced. It was interrupted by three loud, crisp knocks on the door.

'Are you expecting anyone?' Tony's mum asked his dad, as she stubbed out her cigarette.

He gave a small shake of his head. 'Wait here.'

In his thick work boots, Tony's dad left the kitchen, closing the door behind him. Eyes wide with worry, Tony's mum fixed her gaze on the door. Tony wanted to ask what was going on but being the oldest of nine children gave him a keen intuition. He kept his questions to himself. Instead, following suit, he listened intently to the noises from the hall. He could make out the low rumble of his dad's speech against the harsher tone of a stranger's, but no words could be understood.

Minutes crept by and the tension in the kitchen rose, as did the noises from the hall. If it weren't for the scribbles coming from oblivious Sinead, Tony might have been able to pick up the odd word. His mum had sat very still this whole time, but rose abruptly, as if responding to some cue that Tony had missed. She tiptoed over to the door, opening it and peeking her head out to the hall.

When her head returned to the kitchen, her face had drained of colour and her eyes were glazed over.

'Mum? What's wrong?' Tony broke the silence.

'Nothing,' she replied, reaching for the crucifix that hung around her neck, a reflex Tony had seen many times before. She did it a lot when Tony's dad pointed out certain stories in the newspaper, or sometimes when the police pulled over and searched their car on the way home from mass. It did little to convince Tony that nothing was wrong.

'Go upstairs, you two.'

'But I haven't finished my homework,' Sinead blinked in surprise.

'That's ok, I'll sign it off for you.'

Barely believing her luck, Sinead bolted upstairs to join her merry siblings, but Tony held back.

'Please tell me what's going on,' he begged, taking his mum's hand.

She bent down and hugged him, tighter than usual.

'Please Tony, go and make sure your brothers and sisters stay upstairs,' she whispered, still embraced in the hug.

He broke away, prepared to fight his corner, but one look at his mum's face told him not to add to her strain. He raced upstairs and peeked in on his younger siblings, playing in the boys' bedroom. They were settled, happy they had gained a new playmate in Sinead. Leaving them to it, he paced into the girls' bedroom and over to the frosted window with the best view of the road. Standing on Sinead's bed to get a better view, he peered out into the street. At first, everything looked normal. He stood on his tiptoes, forehead pressed into the cool glass, damp with condensation. From this view he could see down into their front garden and the police car parked right in front of their house. It was nestled in among other cars lining the street but stood out boldly from the rest. Tony's heart instinctively skipped a beat. To him, the police meant fear. They meant standing in the cold while their car was searched. They meant keeping your eyes to the ground when you passed them in the streets. They meant only bad things, and scared parents.

As Tony processed the presence of the infamous car on his very own street, he saw three figures emerge from his house. It took a few seconds for him to recognise two of them to be his parents. The

third was wearing a black uniform with a black peaked cap. He watched as the figure, which he now recognised to be a policeman, opened the back door of the car. His dad got in, while his mum stayed on the pavement. She held herself at a funny angle, half bent over to the side, leaning on their garden wall for support. The policeman got into the front of the car and started the engine. Within seconds, the car was gone, taking his dad with it. He watched his mum stay on the pavement for a long time, still holding herself at the strange angle. It was cold, and she wasn't wearing a coat.

Leaning away from the window, Tony twisted back down to sit on the bed. He sat, and he thought, struggling to make sense of what he had just witnessed. In his mind, it was like one of the blurry paintings his mum sometimes did. The scenery could be made out, but no details were clear.

Finally, when his heart stopped racing and his breathing returned to normal, he pushed himself off the bed, and tip-toed downstairs. Fingers crossed behind his back, he quietly prayed that he had dreamed what he saw, that his dad had still been there.

When he entered the kitchen, his prayer was shattered. His mum was bent over the sink, with her back to Tony, no dad in sight.

'Mum,' he whispered. Her whole body was shivering, and she looked so fragile, he was scared that a loud noise would shatter her.

She didn't turn around. He tried again.

'Mum, please tell me what's going on? Why did Dad go away with the policeman?'

'Tony, I need you to go upstairs and put your brothers and sisters to bed.'

'Mum, please.'

'Tony, please.' She still had her back to him, but he could see tears drip into the sink.

'You're my big boy now. Your dad's away for tonight, so I'm going to need your help.'

Tony didn't respond, and silence hung heavily over the pair.

Tony's mum finally broke it with one more, quiet 'Please.'

Tony ran around the kitchen table and over to where his mum stood. He hugged her tightly around the middle, a silent promise that he would do what he could to help.

That night, Tony couldn't sleep. He exhausted his mind by trying to repress horror stories he had heard about people being taken away by the police. Yet no sleep came, and it was a relief to finally see the first rays of sunlight illuminate the bedroom he shared with his three brothers. He got up and followed routine, washing and dressing himself and his brothers. The others raced down to breakfast and Tony took the opportunity of an empty room to offer another pleading prayer for his dad's safe return.

He was the last down to breakfast, and so the last to see his dad's empty seat at the head of the table. His mum was busy packing lunches as usual, while his brothers and sisters made a mess of the tablecloth with milk and jam. His dad sometimes took early morning house-calls, and so none of them seemed to notice his absence from breakfast. Except Tony.

'Dad's not home?' he asked his mum, as she busied herself cutting sandwiches.

'No, Tony, but I'm sure he will be soon.' She turned to him with a bright smile, uncharacteristic for first thing in the morning. It did nothing to hide two bloodshot eyes, encased in heavy dark lids. 'Go to school, and don't let it worry you.'

Her advice fell on deaf ears, and Tony could think about nothing else all day. Not even a wrap over the knuckles by Mr Mullan for his lack of maths homework could distract him. After the longest school day of his life, the final bell rang, and Tony could race back home.

But as he threw himself through the kitchen door, he found it empty. Dinner passed, and still his Dad did not arrive home. His mum's cheery mood from earlier had melted away, and she served her seven children potatoes and beef without a word to any of them. Tony knew there was no point quizzing her further. Instead, he busied himself by taking on his mum's usual jobs; cleaning the dishes after dinner and making sure the little ones were behaving. For a while it helped distract him from the mystery at hand, but by the time bedtime had arrived again, his mind was back to painting scary pictures of his

Dad in a lonely grey cell.

The previous sleepless night, combined with his mind working over-time all day, had exhausted Tony. He had crawled beneath the covers of his bed and was waiting for sleep to relieve him of his troubles, when he heard the snap of the front door clicking shut and the familiar thud of his dad's heavy boots. His heart felt lighter than it had all day, as he gently peeled back his duvet and tiptoed out of his bedroom and down a few stairs. The stairs led right into the kitchen. From the third step down, he was still hidden from view, but could hear his parents' voices. He paused there for a minute, torn between the instinct to eavesdrop and the desire to hug his father.

'They can't do that, Christy! Not giving you any food? Stopping you from sleeping? That's torture!'

Tony just about recognised his mother's voice, an octave higher than usual and loaded with concern.

'They can, Josie, and they did.'

At the sound of his dad's voice, tired and gruff, Tony could wait no longer. He thundered down the remaining stairs and into the brightly lit kitchen. His father was sitting there, in the chair at the head of the table. He was wearing the same clothes as when he left, a cigarette between two fingers, a plate of sandwiches sitting in front of him.

Tony ran to his dad, who pulled him up onto his lap with his free hand. He smelled like the neighbour's dog when it rained, but Tony didn't mind. As long as he was home safely, Tony would never mind anything ever again.

'It's past your bedtime, Tony.'

'Let him stay up,' his dad bargained. 'He's old enough to hear what we're talking about.'

'I suppose he has done a good job of being the man of the house since you've been away.' Tony's mum flopped into a seat at the table. He had never seen her look so tired, but there was a genuine smile creeping over her pale lips.

'I saw you go away in the police car,' Tony chirped, desperately wanting to get to the bottom of his dad's disappearance.

'Yeah, they took me to the police station, that's where I've been.'

'Why?'

'Someone got hurt, Tony. A man from the other side of town.'

Tony nodded in silence, urging his dad to continue.

'That's why the police took me away. I was arrested for hurting that man.'

'But you didn't...' Tony trailed off.

'Of course, I didn't, Tony. Of course not. They don't know who did it.'

'Then why did they take you away?'

'It's all a big show. The police need to look like they're doing their job. If someone gets hurt, they need to arrest someone for it. Even if they had nothing to do with it. Do you understand?'

'A little,' Tony replied slowly. 'But why did they pick you?'

'Because...' His dad paused and looked at his wife. A sad smile on her part was all he needed to continue. 'Because we're Catholics, Tony. We're easy targets.'

'But there are millions of Catholics.'

'Yeah,' his dad laughed bitterly, 'and this time, they picked me.'

'What did they do to you?'

'Not too much. They just held me for a day and let me out, didn't even bother questioning me.'

'But why?' Tony's exhausted brain was scrambled trying to comprehend the workings of the adult world.

'So they can print it in the newspaper tomorrow, tell everyone a man from Drumbeg Estate was arrested for hurting that man. People will assume it's dealt with, so the police get another gold star.'

Tony sat quietly, mulling over this new information, while his dad eagerly tucked into his plate of sandwiches. His mum sat quietly too, watching the father and son. Eventually, the events of the last

twenty-four hours took their toll on young Tony, heavy eyelids drooping closed over tired eyes. His father carried him up to his bedroom and tucked him under the covers. With a kiss on the forehead, he said a silent prayer that when Tony grows up, things will be easier for him.

Madeline Hawkins

Haiku

Phone, keys and wallet.
Off to the shops together.
Damn, forgot my mask.

Rachel Min Yi Low

Journey to the Centre of the Market

Amongst the hustle and bustle, it catches my eye. Finally, after walking up and down the tent, I've spotted it. Sensing a change of pace, my younger brother, Michael, grabs on to the straps of my tote bag. I expertly weave through the massive sea of bodies surrounding me. The damp wooden floorboards add a bounce to my already floaty footsteps. I plunge straight for the counter.

'Jie, can we stop for Potato Tornado?'

'We'll come back for it. I need my kueh.'

Michael sighs. 'We'll have to make such a big round for it.'

'Fine. Go yourself, but remember I have all the money.'

Letting out an even louder sigh, Michael resigns himself to his fate. We continue to move through the crowd and Michael's grip remains tight on the strap of my bag. Masses of sweaty bodies bump into my brother and me. We pass counter after counter, each selling their own delicious treat or cute handmade trinket and each with their own crowd congregating in front of them. None of them grab my attention the way the kueh counter can.

As an expression of his disgust, Michael lets out a high-pitched whine each time someone's sweaty body slides across his already moist skin. The natural heat and humidity of Singapore's weather is compounded by the equally hot and stuffy atmosphere contained in the tent. Sweat trickles down my back. This usually annoys me, but today my focus is entirely on making it to the kueh counter and getting my kuehs.

'You'd think that with the number of people under these tents, they organisers would install some sort of ventilation,' a young woman says very matter-of-factly as I steer past her.

After snaking through the entire tent and bumping into countless people, we've finally reached the kueh counter.

'Where's the line, Jie?'

'Shush, I'm working it out.'

A herd of customers stands at the counter in front of me. To the untrained eye, it may appear to lack even a remote semblance of a queue system. However, years of rigorous guidance by my grandmother has given me the ability to navigate through the crowds here with ease. "Push hard or get pushed" is what my grandmother always says. On most days, my grandma struggles to open a jar of pickles. The moment she's placed in a Pasar Malam,*she suddenly acquires superhuman strength and can push anyone to the ground.

'Hold tight, we're going in.' I lunge forward and straight into the mob of people before me, pushing

aside anyone that I can't squeeze past. I get a few tuts and tsks, but I'm unfazed. They probably did the same to get to the front. I resurface shortly after. My hair's a mess and I'm sure the sweat running down my arm isn't mine. Michael's gasping for air and clenching tightly on to my tote. All these things don't matter because I'm a moment away from getting my kuehs.

In front of me, a small glass panel separates me from the metal steamers and the kueh ingredients: coarse peanut powder, coconut flakes mixed with brown sugar sauce and a special flour which forms the shell that will house the contents of my delicious kuehs. Behind the counter, the culinary genius behind my all-time favourite snack, the Kueh Auntie. The Kueh Auntie expertly steams and packs her kuehs for the devoted customers waiting in line.

The Kueh Auntie hands a transparent plastic bag with a thin, red handle to the old lady next to me. Within the bag, ten of the most beautifully made kuehs I've ever seen. The lady nods her thanks and leaves. The Kueh Auntie returns her attention back to her steamer, but not before I burst out, 'Auntie, five peanut and five coconut.' She nods indicating that she's heard me and sticks out her non-gloved left hand. I hand her four dollars and retreat to the back of the crowd.

'Michael, we've got time to get Potato Tornado. Ready to go?'

'No, Jie, I need at least ten minutes to recover from that.'

I smile. What a weakling.

*Pasar Malam is a night market common in Singapore,

Michael Critchell

Haiku

Leaves crisp underfoot
Sunshine breaking through the trees
Nostalgia for youth

A dying man's dreams
His memories lost in time
Like tears in the rain

(with all due credit to Bladerunner)

Andrew Wall

The Door

Gentle winds whipped dust around the valley, its fruitful bones stripped clean by the hungry fire of warfare decades before. Before the shadow of a great mountain, a bundle of old, dusty rags was slumped against the ground, crushed by the immeasurable weight of the sun. The occupant of these rags had spent months navigating 'the really, really dead sea', the forests of the 'Shadow wraiths', 'the caves of the little pink bunnies' and finally the caves of the 'carnivorous pink bunnies' to reach the 'valley of the totally damned'. These trials and tribulations were all in search of the elusive antidote for the dreadful McGuffin disease. Now she was here, chained to the floor by dehydration and exhaustion. She was prepared to face anything and everything, but nothing could prepare her for the 10-inch-thick steel blast door buried in the mountain. Who this door belonged to she could not tell, the sands had stripped

it all of meaning. Only a smear of charcoal graffiti remained that read “Greg was here”.

Her skin was blistering under the sun, her lips had cracks deeper than those of the Earth and her tongue felt like a block of sandstone. She was stuck staring at the monolithic door that was her failure. The silent valley was disturbed by a whisper. She shifted her head to the left as her neck creaked like driftwood snapping. There was nothing there but a small round stone and she painfully turned her focus back to the door. The grumbling she assumed to be her stomach soon became a voice: “Aye, you’ve been here for a few days, haven’t you?”. She tried closing her eyes to block out the noise. “You’ll become a stone soon if you don’t follow my advice”. As she looked from right to left there was truly nothing around but the stone. She stared intensely at it, waiting for it to move. Its soft lines resembled a face staring back at her. “I see you staring at me. Listen up, lass, yer dying. It happens to the best of us, my tip is to die quickly or eat the sand.” She coughed and shook her head in disagreement before slipping into a daze.

She awoke on a bed of warm sand; the sun began to droop in the sky as it relinquished control over the valley. She heard the voice as if it was coming from inside her skull. She looked up to see the rock. Its soft contours expanded into a deep cravass that was just swallowing mouthfuls of sand. A flow of grains slipped from the corners of its mouth. It said: “oh, baby, it’s really good. Delicate hints of salt and calcium. Come on and try some even if it’s just a nibble”.

The sight of this rock munching made her stomach grumble, her tongue rolled out. The sand stuck to it the way sand sticks to a damp shovel, desperate to be eaten. This delicacy would have to wait though. There was suddenly a loud whistling through the sky and a rather rude loud thud that left a smouldering pit between her and her goal. She tried her best to spit out the grit, but it clung to her mouth and cracked between her teeth. She dragged herself through the dunes as a glow began to emerge from the pit that replaced the dying sun. She peered over the edge and saw before her an orange ball of hot and twisted metal. She could just make out the printed letters on the largest of the shards “Deus Ex Machina.”

She looked around the rubble. As her legs had given up long ago it was a painfully slow endeavour, and as she peered amongst the antenna, she found something. There were two perfectly intact power cells protected by their casings but with the faint glow of heat. She managed to use the last of her strength to pull it apart. A voice shouted from behind her “No, please, darling,, just come back here and get stoned with me.” Ignoring the unhelpful rock, she plugged the cells into her laser cutter and continued to drag herself towards the bulk doors. She tried to fight off the claws of fatigue that tried to drag her down with the reinvigorating thought of her love back home. Images of her welcoming eyes, bouncy curls, and soft cheeks flashed before her. She had always supported her, no matter how ridiculous she was being. Hell, she was even there for her during that ‘gothic witch phase’. She arrived at the ground by the base of the door. She switched on the laser cutter, which fizzled and crackled as it began to melt a small hole.

Inside, the bomb shelter was cool and welcoming. She had to use her old rusty lighter to pierce through the darkness that enveloped the room. Before her, there was a box that read “U.S. government, a subsidiary of Amazon. Rations supply #2234”. Her fingers tore into the soft cardboard as packets of food and water rations flowed out.

After snacking on supplies, she had to lie there for some time on the concrete staring up at dormant lights and, when that bored her, she looked around the room full of boxes. One such box had a label called ‘cassettes’ with another note attached saying, ‘will be worth something one day’, another Box’s label read ‘Funko Pops’. Soon her strength returned and she was able to explore deeper into the labyrinth. As she reached almost the end of the bunker, under a flickering light, that’s when she saw it: one massive box simply called “antidotes”. She opened the box and searched through the vials; Various liquids for various ailments; a cure for the common cold, a vaccine against cuties, and tablets for bone-itis. It was only when she was at the very brink of desperation, and at the very bottom of the box, that she found

what she was looking for. She had done It; she could now be the hero and return triumphantly home with the cure for the McGuffin disease.

Kalvin Stratton

Haiku

Seaside scent prevails
Over the poison-filled air
Of the great city.

As the storm rages
Rain splashes on the window
I feel at peace here.

Safe in the covers
The lightning cannot touch me
Yet I still fear it.

Morgan Smith

Living the Dream

John grimaced, pulling his hands up towards his wind-chilled, rubicund cheeks in disbelief. He had been trying so hard to be quiet and, if it were not for the howl of the wind, the clang of his dropped net needle on a rusty drum would surely have given him away. He was tired. His hands were sore and numb with cold and overwork and he was in no mood for ridicule, especially the kind disguised as friendly banter. He just couldn't be bothered with them today; he couldn't bear to listen to even one 'mair blah' about the fish they'd landed or what they'd grossed. Grown men these were, with businesses, factories; some with fleets of vessels, yet they took up their shore leave standing at the dyke of an old smoke house putting, in their opinion, the world to rights. The locals called it 'Parliament' and mocked them. In many ways they weren't far wrong for it was a closed house, an assembly of the chosen few, yet a few whose opinions, beliefs and actions would often affect the many. To the outside world they may have been perceived as well rewarded labourers, uneducated, simple men with expensive Sunday suits, but John knew better. They were powerful. The outside world had no say here; the wheels of change turning only with their blessing. It was at these moments John questioned why he could not part with this place, why he would rather work in guarded silence in the full force of the North wind than seek shelter in a harbour yard but, as usual, it was a momentary waver and he quickly straightened his back. He stood. Determined, defiant; delinquent in face of their rule and exclusion.

The fish hoose, as the locals knew it, stood high on the edge of the sand dunes facing north towards uninterrupted views of an ever-changing seascape. It was a meeting place for fisher folk. A place of work and ancient skills, a place where old grudges were revisited, fond memories recalled and where folk would gather waiting for the news of those new to the world and those tragically lost to it. To her west, the river mouth raged towards the sea forcing its fresh waters through the salty waves, raising from them clouds of grey spume, like a cauldron, its ingredients at war.

The riverbank was edged with success, each house built in turn grander, bigger than the last and with every new brick and wall of glass the show of wealth grew evermore obscene. To the east a very different

view: village life, modest little fisherman's cottages clustered at the shoreline's edge, huddled round the tiny harbour as if each offered comfort and shelter to the other, their reliance equal. Although there were now fisher folk scattered throughout the old and new town, most still resided on the side of the tracks on which they were born. Some of John's pals had managed to leave Buchanhaven and her creel boats behind for life on the trawlers. Some owned and skippered their own boats but most, like John, would end their lives where they had begun. In John's case he hoped it would be in the cottage where he was born and had raised his own family, across from his beloved harbour just metres from the water's edge.

Although Mary knew that deep down John was happy, and after thirty years of marriage she knew him well, she still sensed that little bit of discontent. Over the years he had often told her that he wished he could have given them a grander life, influenced she supposed by the brags of the 'Parliament crowd', but she never wished for any more than she had and told him so. Their house was comfortable and their lifestyle pleasant. They had seen both their boys graduate and, although they loved the sea, their father did all he could to keep them from it. He swam with them, played by its shoreline, fished from the harbour pier with lines but he never once took them out past her mouth. "I'm feart" he would tell Mary, "feart shi grabs 'em lik' shi grabbit me in thi canna shak her icy grip." He always felt he had little to offer them – an old wooden creeler and a few lobster pots. To be honest Mary never argued with him about that – she would have hated him to think she believed her boys above the fishing – she just never wanted them to follow in their father's footsteps as it was such a hard and tiresome life. If she did ever envy the trawler men's wives it was never for long, as John was in his own bed every night and had been there to see his children grow. To her that was far more precious than any riches. Mary only wished he knew that, and could embrace how fortunate they had all been, but for John, surrounded by the success of others, it was hard.

Sunday was now the only day that Mary would accompany him along the shore and she would walk with him to the drying poles behind the 'fish hoose' where John would check the mackerel nets and creels. This was a special place for them both: a place where they had played as children, shared their first kiss, where John, both proposed to Mary and received word of his first-born son. They would talk about their week, about long ago and about their future. Sometimes they would just sit in blissful silence and admire the view; the rolling dunes with their golden hair, emerald seas and scarlet flame tipped skies. But not today. Their peace was shattered by the familiar boom of boastful voices. "At's Peter", John whispered, recognising the voice of his childhood pal. Peter had little time for John these days, success had gone to his head, and now he was building two new boats. There would be no end to his immodesty.

John began tentatively to rise and Mary stopped him, pressing her finger to his lips and cocking her head closer to the cornerstone so that she could listen.

"Aye, Pete, yiv deen weel fir yersel; a twinty fiter, a forty, in noo twa new it sixty!" said one.

"Aye, 'ere's nae bettermi'nt ti 'at," returned another.

John listened and dipped his chin onto his chest releasing, as he did, a solemn sigh. He could hear the others grunting their agreement and as they settled themselves an older man spoke, his voice strong but worn, "tell mi noo, Peter, fit's next, fit's i' dream?"

"Weel, 'at's easy" he replied, "a'll rin 'es ships intae i' grun, in thi'll niver see lan' till the'r sinkin' wae fish, 'en in an 'eer or twa, a'll be made; mi pooches ful, mi wife cont'nt, in mi bairns skweeled. Sine a'll buy a hoosie at Buchanhaven's shore, in a creel boatie thit a kin rin fin it pleases mi, 'en at nicht a'll sit back at i' watter's edge in jist think o'er mi success."

Mary slipped one hand into John's open fist and pinched him, with the other she lifted his chin from his chest, turned his head and looked at him, a knowing look, one of love and of pride. After a minute or two John rose from his seat, his back never straighter, and with Mary on his arm, he smiled, then turned the corner of the fish hoose, marching confidently through the throng.

“Och it’s yersel, John”, cried Peter, “hoo ye dein ‘ese days?”
With a gentle squeeze of Mary’s hand, John turned and softly said,
“Och a’m livin’ i’ dream, Pete, jist livin’ i’ dream.”

Jiemin Jamien Ng

Haiku

Frigid wintertime
A little, hairy dog lies
watching the still house

Abigail Wright

No

No, I wasn’t drunk
No, I hadn’t been flirting
and given him an itch to scratch
No, I wasn’t wearing frilly knickers
Would that have made it all okay?
A perfect excuse constructed of lace
To distract him from the tears down my face?
Boys will be boys.
What else do you need to know?
Yes, I’d had sex before
Yes, I am on the pill
Yes, he was my friend
This is all relevant why?
To be humiliated, degraded, scrutinised,
Why would anyone lie?
So, I will not be silent
and submissively obey
and you will listen when I say
Me too.
I am one in four,
But I am also so much more.

Kalvin Stratton

Haiku

Silence emerges
I sense everything has stopped
As birds fall silent.

Catriona O'Leary

Ultrasound

Katie sits down in the old plastic gynaecology-chair in the radiologist's room while an array of dauntingly big machines beep away next to her. She peers over curiously when the door clicks open and a woman wearing a stethoscope around her neck steps in holding a stack of bunched up white paper.

"Sorry for the delay, we're running behind today," she says as she takes her seat in front of the heavy desk in the corner of the room.

"Oh, that's quite alright!" Katie spits out a bit too quickly.

"So, let me see," The doctor glances down at her sheets of paper. "Katie, you're here today for a trans-vaginal ultrasound, is that right?"

"Yes. I think that's what the GP said."

"Okay. Would you be able to lay back and bring down your trousers slightly for the scan? And we can have a chat about what exactly has been going on. Now, have you ever had an ultrasound previously?" The doctor types vigorously on the keyboard in front of her, giving a subtle background rhythm. Katie starts unbuttoning her trousers and brings them down slightly, the plastic of the gynaecology-chair giving her a sharp chill down her spine.

"No, I haven't – but I've seen them on T.V! But only for pregnant woman so I'm a bit confused, I'm almost certain I'm not pregnant."

"That's fine. We use them to have a look at a number of things, not just pregnancy. It will involve me putting some gel on this probe," the Doctor walks over to the machine stood directly next to Katie and takes the probe from the ultrasound scanner, covering its end with a transparent bag, "which I'll then put on your pelvis. It might feel a bit cold. I'll then move it to different regions of your pelvic area which will give us a picture on the screen here of what's happening internally. It shouldn't hurt at all but you might feel some discomfort. If, at any point, you do experience any pain just let me know and we can stop."

The doctor places the probe back down whilst she washes her hands with alcohol gel and puts on a new pair of rubber gloves. The smell of the alcohol evaporating gives a welcome break to the scent of chlorine left over from sterilising the room between patients. The doctor sinks down into her stool and rolls over to Katie, picking up the probe and squeezing onto it a generous amount of lubricating gel that exits its tube with a little squelch.

"Yeah, that's fine. Is there anything in particular you're looking for?" Katie asks as the doctor places the probe on her pelvis and starts up with quick circular motions that spread cold gel across her abdomen. A murky grey and black picture begins to bloom across the machine's screen. There is a brief silence and the doctor notices for the first time how prominent Katie's hip bones are, protruding from her pale colourless skin.

"We just want to make sure everything's normal or if there may be something going on that would explain your symptoms. May I ask you for a little bit more information about what symptoms you're experiencing?" Her eyes wander from the probe to the screen, squinting at the picture presented in front of her.

"Well, I've noticed some bleeding between my periods and I've dropped a bit of weight... Quite a bit actually. Not that I'm complaining about the weight loss, I've been eating like a pig and getting skinnier, that part's been great! But I just thought it was best to tell my GP, who sent me here," Katie replies, looking vacantly around the room. The movement of the probe begins to slow from its quick unorganised motion, morphing into more concentrated circles over certain areas of her pelvis. The changing picture on the screen slows with it as the doctor presses a series of keys and begins taking screenshots.

"Have you experienced any pain at all?"

"I have actually... It's been feeling like I've been having bad period cramps, but I just assumed it was something normal to do with my cycle."

There is a brief silence as the doctor's eyes are fixated on the screen. Katie notices the mood in the room shift to something more serious. Numbers start appearing, measuring unidentifiable structures then more screen shots, one after another, rapidly.

"Hmm." A low sigh comes from the doctor, quiet and under her breath as though she didn't intend for it to be heard, but Katie does hear it and her stomach drops. She is no longer looking vacantly around the room but, wide-eyed now focuses on the doctor's face as she wipes the gel from her stomach and starts to pack the probe away.

"Is something wrong?"

"You can pull your trousers back up, that's the scan finished now."

The unanswered question lays thickly in the air. Katie's heartbeat picks up and her relaxed smile drops.

"Is everything okay?!" She asks again, sternly this time. The doctor's eyes look up from the machine to meet Katie's.

"I think there may be some abnormalities, I'm going to refer you to a specialist."

"A specialist in what exactly?" Katie demands impatiently.

"Oncology."

Michael Critchell

Haiku

What happened last night?
Where did my other shoe go?
Ah yes. Tequila.

It's not you it's me
I thought you were someone else
across the dancefloor

Madeline Hawkins

Salsa Dance

Charlie's slender hand hesitates for a second before grabbing a packet of lightly salted crisps. He places it delicately into the trolley, next to a bottle of red wine. "James, what else is on your flatmate's list?" He calls out to a tall boy with wispy blonde hair, who fishes a piece of paper out of his jeans pocket.

"Olives, salsa, and whatever cake we want for dessert," he reads. James crumples up the paper between his hands, smiles, and flicks it dramatically at Charlie's shoulder, who feigns injury. Content with his paper attack, James leads the way, with his hand gently pulling on the front of the trolley.

Charlie notices the muscles in James's arm tense and relax as they wander around the next aisle. He looks away nervously, "It really was so nice of Lizzy to invite me round to your place tonight when we ran into her earlier. She seems lovely." James chuckles, turns to face Charlie, and starts walking backwards to hold his gaze. He flicks a strand of golden hair out of his eyes and glances briefly over to a row of olive jars. He quickly picks one at random and drops it in the trolley, then turns back to look intently at Charlie as they continue walking.

"Yeah, she's a good friend. Honestly though, her finding us probably wasn't a coincidence. I reckon

she keeps a list of all the guys I ever mention to her, so she can meet them, or size them up, I dunno. I hope you don't mind."

Eyes wide, Charlie suddenly stops walking and blurts out, "Here's the, uh, salsa." He eyes the small plastic tubs, pretending to pick out a dip. Without looking up he mumbles, "You mentioned me? To your flatmate? I-- um, in what context?"

James watches Charlie for a few moments and finally responds, "Oh, you know, that we met second day of term in that economics class." He steps forwards and pauses in front of Charlie, close enough to see him catch his breath. Then James bends down to pick up one of the tubs, "and how when I came up to you to compliment your shirt, you blushed and mumbled something about a charity shop," James smiles warmly at the memory, blinks twice and focuses his attention back on the boy in front of him.

"I was just surprised! That you wanted to talk to me," Charlie smiles softly.

"Of course, I wanted to, not every day you see such a great shirt." James looks down at the plastic salsa tub in his hands and gently squeezes it. He looks up at Charlie's dark eyes, "You like it spicy?"

Conor Hughes

Haiku

Everything is cold
My love, electric blanket
How I yearn for thee.

Everything is cold
Not enough socks in the world
Do I still have toes?

Lauren Walji

Grandma's House

Dad has to ring the doorbell three times. We're outside Grandma and Granddad's flat, and they know we're here as Dad buzzed up before we all got the lift three flights up. That's three flights of Dad shouting at us not to touch the walls because they're manky.

Grandma opens the door and shuffles back, saying something to my dad in her language, it always sounds angry when they speak but it's probably just them saying hello.

Grandma lets us in and I can see Granddad a little way behind her; Mum always says that they look like the munchkin people because they're so tiny, and they honestly do. I go to hug both of them. I don't want to because it's not nice. I know that none of us want to be here but it's been a while since we've seen them so Dad decided we had to go.

The house smells like one of the foreign food shops we go to at home, and I can see from the hall that something's cooking in the kitchen, the windows are steamed up and something's boiling. I don't feel good about this. Grandma shouts at Granddad and Granddad doesn't hear. Dad says he's deaf but Mum says he should stop switching off his hearing aid. Grandma pushes me and Louis into the kitchen through the beads in the doorway, I don't know where everyone else has gone. She points at the wooden table wedged between the fridge and the wall. I think she wants us to sit so we do. I know what's going to happen and I look at the doorway hoping that someone will come in. I start to panic.

Granma says "Hungry" and nods her head like a question. Me and Louis start to mumble that we've

eaten but Grandma doesn't quite understand. She sets a big bowl of rice in front of us and another bowl of brown curry – looks like chicken, I'm sure it's the same one she always makes. She gets out bowls and spoons and dishes up.

Me and Louis sit there looking at each other. He should know what to do, he's older, but he looks just as worried. Grandma starts pushing on Louis' shoulder to eat. I say goodbye to my mouth and take a bite of the curry and rice mix. My mouth is on fire, my eyes start to cry, and I wish she'd just made sandwiches.

Mum, Dad, Crispy and Granddad come into the kitchen. I can't really see with the water in my eyes but I know it's all of them. Grandma shouts at Dad in the angry language and he shouts back. She goes to the fridge and pulls out a yoghurt container and mixes it into each of our bowls as the snot runs down my face.

She pushes on me now to try again. I pick up another spoon of it and wonder why she hates us. Now it just tastes of spicy strawberry yoghurt.

Conor Hughes

Haiku

The pond has frozen
Locked below the fish must weep
Their tears made of ice

Young leaves of grass sleep
The magpie prays for sun
Each awaits the spring

Madeline Hawkins

Lalao's Broth

A yummy smell is coming from the kitchen, one that I know really well. Lalao is taking care of us today and she is making ron'akoho. I run into the kitchen, leaving my dollies on the floor. If I stand on the little stool, I can see into the pot as Lalao stirs with a wooden spoon. The soup is see-through and a little bit orange, with the small pieces of chicken swimming around in the pot. It looks the same as always, and because of this I know it is going to taste so very nice. Nelly once told me it was her favourite food. I say whatever she likes is my favourite too because Nelly is my big sister and she knows a lot. Lalao calls everyone else into the kitchen for lunch, and I sit down to wait for them. She serves me first because I am smallest. She lumps rice into my pretty bowl with blue dots. "More!" I yell. Everyone at the table laughs, because I ask for more rice every day. Rice is my other favourite food. When I make people laugh like this, I smile and my heart is happy.

Lalao has told me it is polite to eat my broth and rice with a spoon and leave the bones by the side of the plate. Polite means it is good, so this is what I do. You need two bowls to eat ron'akoho because one has the rice and the other one has the soup. It is difficult not to spill the food in between the bowls. First, I put rice on my spoon and then I slowly dip the rice in the hot hot broth and then fast to my mouth so it doesn't spill! Even though I am quick, bits dribble down my chin when I eat. It is salty, and warm and a tiny bit spicy. Nelly says that flavour is called 'ginger'. I leave all the chicken bones at the side of my plate. We all talk together with Nelly who was doing some cleaning before, and we have a fun lunch.

I finish my food the quickest out of everyone because that is what I do every day. I wait very still until Nelly has finished and then I jump up because I want to go play with her outside. Lalao tells me that I have to clear away my bowl and that Nelly has to do it too. So I say "Okay," because that's what is fair.

I know how to clean my bowls because I'm a big girl. I stick out my tongue and lick up all the little pieces of rice from my first bowl. Then it looks so clean and good. So polite! I pick up my broth bowl and I lick the edges of it to get every drop of hot broth. So yummy! Both my bowls are clean now so I can put them back on the shelf. I lift them up and they are heavy but I still carry them across the kitchen to the cupboard. I am being polite and I feel good because Lalao will be proud of me like when she is proud of Nelly. As I reach up to place my bowls on the low shelf, Lalao yells out, "Hey! What are you doing?" I am confused. I say back: "I am doing what you told me to do! I am putting these away."

She laughs and laughs and says, "You can't lick your bowls and put them away! They're not clean. They're covered in your spit!" Nelly laughs at this like she heard a funny joke but I am sad because I'm the only one who doesn't understand. "But Lalao I have cleaned them, you can see because they are so shiny." I hold up the bowls high over my head so she can see. She shakes her head from side to side and laughs again. Then she stands up and waves her hand to 'come here.' "Stubborn girl, come so I can teach you how to clean your bowls properly."

Kalvin Stratton

Haiku

Here the plates clatter
And coffee is sipped by all
Yet I just watch them.

Connor Hughes

Uncle Tommy

"The only thing left was his eyes. The rest was put on ice, sealed in zip-lock bags with ice and given away."

At thirteen years of age, I flinched at this statement from my Uncle Tommy. We were in his house. Five minutes earlier a passing comment about an old friend of his had started him off. Fine by me. Something to fill the silence till Mum got out of work and I could finally get a lift home.

"Oh, Parvious?" My uncle began. "He was born in Niger like his dad, but his mother was from Fermanagh. I remember the first week he came to school everyone hated him. They boys would spit at him, call him some seriously racist stuff – even for back then. Until out in the yard his temper would rise, he'd swing for one of them, then ten of them would jump in. I thought that wasn't fair so of course I got involved as well. I broke two fingers and we were both given suspensions, but it was worth it. I'd made a friend for life. You know?"

My uncle's eyes darted around the kitchen where we sat. They never settled on anything. It was like the intensity of his gaze would burn a hole if left unattended or unmoved. It was frustrating, but it was the same reason I could never look him in the eye for long when he spoke. Fear of being singled.

"So, we stuck close after that. All through school, both left at sixteen and sure we hadn't a clue. But it wasn't until his 21st when it all happened. The two of us out for a feed of pints and, Jesus Christ, if there was one man I couldn't keep up with it was Parvious."

Tommy, laughed and fist-bumped me. It took me off-guard. It was a strange affectation he picked

up on the streets of Manchester after living there for several years. He was forced to come home after a drug-fuelled bender and a stranger's hammer splintering his jaw left him unable to eat solids for a month. Even after all that, he still held onto it. To me at least, receiving the gesture from a forty-year-old felt awkward and forced, but I always obliged.

"I was on my ear, so I decided to head home." His smiling face cracked for a second. A hidden grief reared its head, breaching for air. He left the kitchen table immediately and got up to put on the kettle. "And so Parvious stayed on and ended up down at the Mill Croft, do you know it?"

"I do." The Mill Croft was an old people's home just down the road. I had gone there a million years ago with scouts once at Christmas. The whole place smelled of piss and even at eight years of age I thought, surely there some more dignity left in these people's lives than this.

"So, he climbed up on the roof and it's December and the snow is just coming down all day. And he wanted to scare the people, right? He was always being an eejit. So, he climbed up the drainpipe ... Tea or coffee?"

"Tea, please."

The steam of the kettle was rising now as my uncle sniffed the milk he had pulled from the fridge. The whole house was a mess. Mould encroached on every space of the kitchen that wasn't in regular use. Unwashed clothes lay in mounds on the floor. The air tasted like stale smoke. I hated coming here.

"So it ended up he was making a racket, all these stupid noises and... Did you see say tea?"

I nod.

"And they told me he must have threw up on the roof and slipped. Cracked his head on a pipe on the way down." His eyes glazed over. "You would have liked him, you know?"

He placed the cup of tea in front of me and sat down with his own. I thought about how to respond but the good thing about Tommy was he would fill any gap in a conversation. Especially if it was him who had blown a hole in it in the first place.

"They left his eyes because his mum thought he would need them to see in heaven. Everything else went. The next year we met the man his heart went to, a thirty-something from Belfast. It's nice that there's a bit of Parv still kicking away." He paused. "I suppose I should've stayed out with him that night."

I've never felt a silence so full and thick, twenty years of guilt surrounding me. I looked into the muddy depths of my tea, wishing Mum would pick me up soon.

"I had a dream about him." The borderline mania of my uncle regained light and sound. I could almost hear his innards whirr and click.

"So, in my dream he was there sitting in the living room. So, I sat down in front of him and said 'you know, Parvious, this is great! It's been so long since we've met and...'" My uncle's eyes dampened. Saying it out loud he had caught himself off-guard. His voice wobbled and raised slightly "But he just sat there, shaking his head. I hope he doesn't hate me."

That night before bed I thought about Tommy and how some people, no matter how hard they try, just ache so bad and never stop. I remember thinking about the unfair universe and Parvious. I hoped he could see heaven. I hope in his brown eyes it looked beautiful.

Kalvin Stratton

Haiku

Snow fall clouds the sky
I look for the joyful moon
I cannot find it.

Cara McCorquodale
Terror of the Night

I gasp awake and sit bolt upright. The feeling of someone chasing me slips away like sand from my hands as I adjust to gloomy shadows of my bedroom. My heart is hammering in my chest, sending a pounding noise to my ears. I gulp quick breaths into to my lungs and I feel a layer of damp all over my body. I look down and notice that it is not just my sweat this time that is covering my body, but I have also wet the bed. This is the first time this has happened in months – maybe even years. A wave of guilt washes over me, mixing in with sweat that glistens from the light of the hall seeping through my door. My cries must have woken my Mum as her silhouette is now standing in my doorway. I am too ashamed to look at her. She rushes to my side and embraces me in her firm arms. She squeezes me and it hurts a little, but it slowly makes me feel a little better. My mum has never been the softest person. Her love can be rough at times, but I love it all the same. Her breath tickles my ear as she gently hushes me, but it drowns out the sound of my heart beating.

She releases me and I now build up the courage to look at her. Her eyes are grey and cold, but they are still to this day one the warmest things I have ever seen in this world. The shame and guilt of wetting my bed slips away from me as quickly as it came to me, like how a wave washes up on the shore and falls away. “Come on”, she gently whispers. “Let’s get you cleaned up”.

Mum takes my hand and guides me to the bathroom. I stand there motionless, sniffing back the tears as she undresses me from my sodden penguin pyjamas. My breathing is still shaky. She turns on the shower head and waits for the water to run warm before lifting me into the bath. The water runs over me and washes away the memories of my nightmare, circling round and round the drain before disappearing down the slits into darkness - where it belongs. I look up and see my mum’s face smiling reassurance at me, and I manage a weak smile back at her. She turns off the water and wraps me up in a big fluffy towel. “One minute”, she says. She disappears for a while and I dry myself. She comes back with the wet sheets from my bed, which she wraps up my old pyjamas into. She then passes me a fresh pair of pyjamas. They are my favourite ones and are pink with a big koala on the front which is fluffy. At the time I thought it was just a lucky coincidence that she happened to pick up my favourite pair of pyjamas, but now I realise that she did it deliberately, because she always seems to know the little things that make me feel better. I guess most mothers have that maternal instinct and knowledge.

Now dry and dressed again, she takes my hand and leads me to her bedroom. Dad is away in London for work and so there is a space in the bed just waiting to be filled. I clamber in and my mum tucks the duvet up to my chin. She kisses my head and slips into the bed beside me. The pillow is cold against my cheek from the absence of my Dad, but the duvet around me drowns me in warmth and comfort. I take in a deep breath through my nose and inhale the scent of safety that envelops my parent’s room. The terror of my night is now a distant memory as I drift back to sleep.

Michael Critchell
Revenge Haiku

You are outrageous
I hope you stand on Lego
No one survives that

Darcy Frankitti

Sweet Tea

I'm staying at Granny and Grandad's house for the day again. They like to take care of me. I can tell, because Granny always smiles when she talks to me and Grandad makes me the sweetest tea in the world. I told Mum that Grandad makes much better tea than she has ever made because his is much sweeter and hers tastes like leaves. She had a talk with Grandad after I told her this and now the tea he makes isn't as sweet. She must've stolen his recipe so he can't make it anymore. Don't worry, Grandad, I'll make sure to find your stolen recipe once I go back to my house!

Mum comes to pick me up and take me home. I don't want to leave yet because Granny and Grandad have a much better TV than the one we have at home. It has lots of channels and fun shows that I like to watch. I've asked Mum before if we can get a TV like theirs but she says it will turn my brain into soup. I'm about to ask her again, hoping she will change her mind this time but before I can, I hear a loud noise coming from upstairs. I hear Granny shout for Mum to come upstairs and Mum tells me to stay in my seat before leaving the room.

I continue to watch my TV show and wait for Mum to come back. I thought that she would be upstairs for a long time because when Mum helps Granny or Grandad, it usually takes ages because they are old and slow. But she comes downstairs very quickly – I can hear her feet thump, thump, thump on the stairs as she does – and walks into the room I am in. She moves fast, straight to the telephone on top of the fireplace. She calls someone and waits for them to answer while she looks back at the door she came through. I see the hand that she is holding the telephone with is shaking. I don't know why because it's not cold in here. I'm about to tell her to put on a jumper, like she tells me to do when I'm cold, but she starts talking into the telephone. I know it's rude to interrupt when someone else is talking so I don't, and instead turn back to the TV.

There is a funny feeling in my tummy after seeing Mum. I didn't want to leave before as my show hadn't ended but I think I do now. I have never seen her make that face before. I look at her again and see lots of lines have appeared on her forehead (like the lines Grandad has on his face) and she is talking very quietly and very quickly to the person on the other end. I don't feel like watching TV anymore.

I can hear more sound coming from upstairs. It sounds like the noise my Dad made when he hit his foot off the table and said words that he told me to never repeat. An advert comes onto the TV, one that I like because it has a funny song in it, and I start to sing along. My Mum leaves the room again.

I hear someone knocking on the front door. I get out of my seat to open it but when I get to the hallway, Mum is already there and she tells me to go back into the living room. I stop and turn back, but I don't sit down like Mum told me to. Instead, I stand next to the living room door and look around the corner so I can see who's there.

Mum opens the front door and there stands two people I don't know but Mum talks to them like she does. They're wearing very bright jackets and as they follow Mum upstairs, I see that they have big letters on the back of them. They move too quickly for me to see what letters they are, but it looks like they make up a big word, one I've not been taught in school yet. I go back into the living room and sit down.

It's starting to get dark outside and my tummy is rumbling. I'm so hungry, I really hope we'll get dinner soon. I hear lots of people talking upstairs and when they start to move down the stairs, it takes a really long time for them to get from the top to the bottom.

Mum comes into the living room as the streetlamps go on. She says it's time to go home. We go into the hallway and meet Granny. She has a hanky covering her face, but I can hear her making lots of funny noises beneath it. When she moves the hanky away, I see her eyes are red. All three of us leave the house together. I don't know why Granny is coming with us, maybe she is joining us for dinner. But instead of coming into our car, she goes to a big bright car that is parked in front of ours.

One of the people in the bright jackets is waiting for her. It looks like they are dressed to match their funny car. Granny follows the other person inside and as they drive away, the car starts to make a really loud noise that hurts my ears. Mum starts driving too but we go a different way from Granny's car and soon the loud noise is gone. I'm still hungry so I ask Mum what we're having for dinner but she doesn't reply. At least I got to watch more TV.

Michael Critchell
Revenge Haiku

I hope your plants die
Even if you water them
That'll serve you right

Nicolle Orgill
Stag

"Wake up, it's your stag"

Slowly I feel the warmth and comfort of sleep leave me with every shake of my leg.

"What time is it?"

"3 a.m."

No wonder I feel like I've been dragged into hell. I only got to sleep an hour and a half ago.

"I'm up," slowly trying to convince myself to open my eyes. Hesitantly I begin to remove my arms from my sleeping bag bracing for the cold impact my skin will undoubtedly receive in seconds. I wasn't prepared enough, you never are. Inverness is known for its arctic winds, and, as promised, a gust enters the tent. I say tent, tent is a strong word for what I find myself in. It's called a basha and is a thin piece of plastic that is tied around two trees on one side, the other being pinned to the floor with pegs. I know what you are thinking, where are the side panels? That's the fun part, there aren't any. As always, I find myself struggling to find the zip to my sleeping bag, my eyes still not adjusting to the dark. You have never truly experienced pitch black until you are trying to sort your life out in the middle of a field without a torch. Eventually I find it and unzip it a third of the way. First things first, do I have my rifle? I run my hand outside in the space next to my sleeping bag. My heart begins to race with every blade of grass and mud patch I fumble over – please tell me I haven't lost it. Just when the terror begins to truly set in the cold metal collides with my hand and I breathe a sigh of relief.

Now begins the arduous task of getting dressed and packed. Everyone is different in finding the balance of wearing enough during the night not to freeze to death but still gaining the benefit of layers when they get up. Mine is base layer on top and trousers rolled down to your ankles, which is where I start. As soon as I yank up my trousers autopilot engages and like a checklist I begin. Green t-shirt, check. MTP shirt, zipped and velcro fastened, check. Green fleece, overhead and arms in, check. MTP jacket, zipped and velcro fastened, check. Locate boots, remove socks, put on feet, check. Put on brown leather boots, cry when the material puts pressure on the very blister they caused and lace up, check. Re-find rifle, put sling overhead and tighten, check. Once done I begin the crawl to the outside world. I'm surrounded by the trees looming overhead, the moonlight casting menacing shadows on the ground below.

The eery silence surrounds me like a blanket that sends a shiver down my spine, but it is soon broken by the rustle of leaves and the snoring of one of the boys in the bashas beyond. I don't know if it's down

to the muting of your sense of sight or what, but standing there gazing out into the darkness, it feels like electricity is coursing through your veins. It is with this burst of adrenaline I grab my sleeping bag by the corner and begin to swirl it around in a whirlpool, it's the quickest way I've found to stuff it into the tight space of your bergan.

Finally, I roll up my floor mat and attach it to one of the toggles on my bergan. I do a quick once over, checking I haven't missed anything, grab my helmet and begin my walk to the stag point. The walk to the stag is always an interesting one, all you have is a piece of string and good luck to make sure you get there safely and don't t-total it over a protruding root. This time I make it safely, and soon I take my place next to the poor guy who has been here for half an hour already. Stag is crap but the one thing I've found is it's the best way to become friends with someone real quick. Sure, at the beginning of the night the conversations are pretty tame ice-breaker chats, but get to round three of stag and people are going to see you at your worst. I'm still adamant that tree was moving but that is another story for another day.

Thankfully, tonight, time seems to be speeding past and before I know it, it's shift change for my partner meaning I'm already halfway through. As I see his figure fade into the background only my rifle left to keep me company, I begin to run through what tasks I need to achieve tomorrow in the hopes I can keep my eyes open for just that bit longer. Just as the call from my warm sleeping bag gets too much to ignore, I'm saved by someone approaching. Like a sack of potatoes, he drops himself to the ground next to me with a merely a grunt as a greeting. Soon, as before, I find myself in a somewhat obscure conversation involving aliens and sheep and before I know it my shift is over.

I uncross my legs slowly, allowing the blood to go back to my legs. I can feel the pins and needles already beginning to attack my muscles but this is the home stretch, I can nearly sleep. I wish my stag buddy good luck and make my way over to the string. Now the hard part, where did I put my basha? If I remember correctly its third on the left. I finally reach it and I can only see one pair of boots sticking out: good, I was right. Begrudgingly I walk past and make my way to the fourth tent.

"Wake up, you have stag."

All I get is a grumble in response. So, I kneel down and begin to shake her leg.

"Get up."

"Ugh I'm up."

I hang around until I can see her move and begin to get ready. Happy she is in fact up, I quickly make my way back to my tent. I bend down to my bergan, the soft snores of the person I'm sharing my basha with taunting me with the sleep I have yet to achieve. I unroll my floor mat, placing my helmet on the top corner to hold it down. My sleeping bag is next rolling it out on top. I crawl in just enough that I'm sat at the bottom. I remove my boots and socks and then begin to make my way up and into the sleeping bag. Sleep is beginning to get its claws into me, my eyes struggling to stay open, and without much thought I do the reverse to the earlier check list.

Soon I find myself tucked up in my sleeping bag, my clothes rolled into a make shift pillow and my rifle to the left of me just in arms reach. I don't remember my last thought just the feeling of being content.

"Wake up, it's your stag."

Here we go again.

Michael Critchell **Revenge Haiku**

I am not spiteful
I only kidnapped his dog
What's so wrong with that?

Kalvin Stratton
Hakuna Matata

The bus jolts and groans with the unevenness of what is accepted as a road here. Exhaustion clouds me as I lean my head against the window of the large yellow coach; the vibrations of the engine and the jumps of the pot-holes rock me closer to sleep as one might do with a baby. The voices of the other volunteers fade in and out as I similarly fade in and out of consciousness. I barely slept last night—mosquitos must have gotten through the net above my bed and on top of that I've been digging and lifting rocks for the past nine hours.

I am propelled forward as the bus grinds to a halt. The chatter amongst the passengers of the bus still continues as we stop at the checkpoint. A barrier is lowered manually, blocking the bus from crossing a dilapidated bridge, as three Tanzanian men in green uniforms approach the bus. I know the uniform is that of police not military as I had first assumed – I asked our guide when we were stopped on the first day. The men are carrying large assault rifles with a wooden butt and a terrifying metal barrel. I can't remember if they had those last time, and I don't think there were three of them last time either. One crosses the front of the bus: is he going to the door? The other two are speaking to the driver through the window.

Everyone is still chatting amongst themselves, completely oblivious to the three armed men who seem to have an interest in this bus. Through the voices of other volunteers, I can hear some words slip through. The men are speaking Swahili, a language that I only know a handful of words in, but I do hear "Shikamoo," the formal hello come from the bus driver. After that I'm lost. There is a back and forth. My nerves are calmed by the fact that both of the men seem to be chatting. It's not an interrogation, they have smiles on their faces and seem to be having a real conversation. The driver is now rummaging through paperwork in one of his overhead compartments. He must have found what he was looking for, as he holds a bundle of paper and surrenders it to one of the men. Silently, they scan through the papers, one by one. He says something to the driver, now in a different tone. He is definitely in a worse mood than half-a-minute ago. The driver proceeds to get out of his seat and leave the safety of the bus.

Our guide, Ben, who is sitting at the front of the bus is now more intrigued. Both Ben and I are on the edge of our seats. Ben has his eyes fixed on the officers. This tells me that it isn't normal for a driver to be asked to leave their vehicle on a checkpoint stop. The driver walks around the bus and stands facing the officers. I cannot hear them at all, but their faces are no longer smiling and the officer who has yet to speak is gripping his gun instead of just holding it. A green pit develops in my stomach and claws its way up towards my mouth. I can feel my skin growing paler as fear turns into nausea.

It has become a dramatic silent film and I hope to god it is a good one that subverts my expectations. The driver is facing the armed officers, with his hands on top of his head – I feel like I have seen this one before. The other students either still haven't noticed what's going on or have read the situation differently because they don't seem interested. Minutes feel like hours as the driver stands there. I cannot see his face, but I can only assume it is occupied by terror.

A wave of glorious relief runs through me as the driver lowers his arms and his papers are handed back to him. He gets back into the bus, starts the engine, checks the mirrors, and drives. Nothing is said, as if it never happened. The rest of my journey is occupied with retrospection. Did I read the situation wrong; could that have been a normal traffic stop and I dramatized some parts in my head? No one else seemed to notice so maybe that was the case. Maybe the guns made me uneasy as the only time I've ever seen them before is at the airport.

I think like this until the bus stops again. When it does, I grab my bag and head to Ben.

"Ben, what was up with that checkpoint back there?"

"The insurance came up wrong, I think. Took way longer than it had to."

"Yeah, I thought so too. Is that what always happens when the insurance info is wrong?"

"More or less – still a bit scary though."
"So, everything was all good in the end?" I ask.
"Yup, Hakuna Matata," he says with a smile.
"Hakuna Matata." I smile back.

Haiku

Under the strong breeze
Foxgloves and poppies dance
With the wind's singing

Clocks chime out aloud
Drunkards' songs fill empty streets
I long for silence.

Lorna Bull Flying Round

"It's ok, Max. You did good, don't worry," Ellie whispered in her horse's twitching, fluffy ear as he plodded out of the arena.

They'd just completed a below average dressage test at this weekend's trial at her local stables. It had been going well until Ellie had nudged Max into a reluctant canter and he'd struck off on the wrong leg. She could hear the other riders' stifled giggles and her face had burned as she took Max back to a trot and tried again. Things had only gotten worse. Her circles had looked more like squares; her transitions were always a few steps past the desired letter and to top it all off, a plastic bag had blown across Max's path just before her big finish and he'd shied, dislodging her slightly and essentially ruining the end of the test. She'd not been able to look the judge in the eye as she raised a shaking hand to her face in a lacklustre salute. What a disaster. She could feel the stabbing stares of her peers as she dismounted and led Max back to his stable and she could have sworn their horses swished their tails haughtily at Max too. She hadn't quite been able to get all the dust out of his coat, whilst theirs gleamed in the sharp morning sun. She'd woken up especially early and had attacked Max's coat with a curry comb whilst he munched his hay, but even after an hour and a half of steady brushing, when she slapped his rump, a puff of dry dust erupted. His mane hadn't wanted to cooperate either; no matter how deftly her skilled hands had tried to create evenly spaced, neat plaits, Max's chestnut mane had slipped out the rubber bands. Ellie had abandoned the task after she'd been unable to stop tears slipping down her cheeks and Max had looked at her with wide, molten brown eyes as if to apologise for his unruly hair.

And now her dressage test had completely bombed. All she'd wanted was to go out and prove to the other riders at the stable that although she and Max might not be the most elite duo, they made a hearty team. Maybe if everyone realised that, she would at last get invited on group hacks. Ellie consistently seemed to miss the group of popular girls who stabled at the same place as her when they rode out to one of the many beautiful forest hacks winding round the area. Ellie wasn't stupid. She knew why. She knew that their shiny new leather saddles and vast array of colourful riding outfits put them in a different league to her. She'd never admit this out loud but sometimes their smirks and giggles made her wish that Max was a fancy purebred like their horses instead of a hardy Welsh Section. That made her mad because she loved Max more than anything in the whole world. But things would be different soon. All she needed to do was fly round the cross country course and everyone would see that she and Max belonged at the stables.

Ellie led Max into his stable and threw a cooling blanket over his steaming back. She only had a short while before she needed to be out on the cross country course. She hastily shucked off her black show jacket and swapped it for her worn, coloured jersey: a combination of a garish yellow and green that her Mum had picked out for her. She would have much preferred a pretty pink like most girls owned. Ellie strapped on her body protector then took ten minutes for herself, burying her face in Max's soft warm neck and breathing deep and slow. She tried to visualise the jumps that she'd memorised every night for a week in her bed at night. There was one jump in particular that made her heart race: the seventh jump in, about halfway round, was a dug out ditch with a huge log over it. It was wider and deeper than anything she'd encountered before. She tried to imagine herself soaring faultlessly over it but somehow pictures of her landing on her bum after Max had ground to a stop before it came instead. Ellie wiped her sweaty palms on her cream jodhpurs before whipping Max's rug off.

"Sorry, boy. Just a quick rest. You ready to go out there and smash it?" she asked his soulful gaze.

He snuffled his muzzle into her hand, nudging for treats and she laughed and shoved him off.

"Let's do it then," she promised herself as she opened the stable door and mounted up.

The whole way to the course was a blur to Ellie. The rhythmic clip clop of Max's hooves against the tarmac was a steady drumbeat for her raspy breathing. Her hands shook and Max tossed his head to remind her not to grip the reins so tightly in her white hands. She nodded grimly at the steward at the start up box to signal she was ready to go. In reality she'd never felt less ready for anything. She manoeuvred Max into the box and sat deep into the saddle when he began to jog impatiently on the spot.

"Easy," Ellie breathed to him, keeping her eyes on the steward's hand that would let her release her anxious horse.

She let her whole body go loose when that hand shot down and Max tore out of the starting box like his back legs had springs as soon as he felt the tension off his mouth. Ellie took the strain in her calves as she sat forward in the saddle and sized up the first jump- a simple wooden brush jump. She let it come closer until Max smoothly sailed over it, before landing and resuming his steady pace. Ellie let the success of the first jump wash over her and fuel her for the rest of the course. She could do this. The next four jumps were equally simple and she could feel her confidence rising as Max cantered into the forest with its winding paths and low boughs of branches. Was it left at this split in the track? No, she was sure it was right. She pulled Max to a halt as she swithered between the paths. She tried desperately to wrack her brain for the image of the course layout she'd all but burned into her mind, but the brimming panic in her prevented any coherent thought. Tears ran hotly down her face and the darkness of the shadowed forest pressed in from all around. Max snorted loudly and dipped his head down, yanking the reins right out of her hands.

"Max, don't," she cried at him, giving him a sharp kick in the ribs to bring his head back up.

He ignored her and before she could give him a real telling off, a glowing light to the right of her drew her attention. Surrounded by a halo of balmy ethereal shine, a white horse emerged from the trees. A horse, except for the pearly twisting horn rising magnificently from the front of its head. Ellie gaped at it, her shoulders slumped and her jaw slack. Was this a practical joke set up to try and distract her so she did terribly in her cross-country round? But somehow Ellie knew from the flawless sheen of his coat and the deep, wise black depths of his eyes that this wasn't the case. Ellie was staring at a unicorn. The unicorn whickered softly and tossed his head in the direction of the right path before setting off in a flowing trot down it, his tail streaming wistfully behind him.

Ellie might not have been able to speak unicorn but the message was clear: the path to the right was the correct one and she needed to follow the unicorn. She nudged Max into a trot and mutely headed after the glittery glow the unicorn left in his wake, as he stayed a few metres in front. She watched his strong haunches gather as he cleared the number six fence with a graceful ease that Ellie had never seen from even the most senior of show jumping horses. Max followed suit, flicking his back hooves

in a neat arc that convinced Ellie he was trying to impress the unicorn. Before he'd even landed, Ellie felt the dread creep up on her as she realised that fence seven was looming. Sweat dripped down her neck to settle in her jersey and she struggled to keep Max balanced as he pulled at the bit in response to her sudden freeze up. In front, the unicorn gave a proud neigh and seemed to let off even more light, obscuring her vision of the upcoming jump. Without its monstrous size in sight, Ellie could breathe easier and almost convince herself it was a normal jump. Ellie closed her eyes just as she reached it. She felt Max's muscles quiver and bunch before exploding in a burst of movement as he sailed over the ditch. She kept her eyes screwed up until she knew for sure after the first stride of canter that the deep ditch was done with. Flinging her eyes open, she whooped with glee once she realised she was safely over her most feared jump. She looked gratefully to the unicorn, her heart bursting with joy and awe for this magnificent creature, but only empty woods remained. The unicorn was gone.

Ellie and Max breezed round the rest of the course and when they galloped over the finish line, they were met with thunderous applause from the bystanders. The appreciative stares and whispers of admiration were lost on Ellie, who buried her face in Max's sweaty neck.

Unicorns were real and she'd been blessed enough to see one. Nothing else mattered.

Michael Gray **Blanket**

This blanket must be one of the best investments I've ever made. Its soft sherpa texture brings warmth as we draw into the winter months. An ink and teal tartan pattern elevates it from the juvenile realm of blankets I chewed and clung to as an infant but the most important attribute remains: it brings safety and comfort.

Aberdonian weather is far from forgiving. Wind, rain and a piercing chill in the air are always present. Walking to the shops becomes more of a task. The long journey home after a particularly brutal training session drains whatever energy remains but there is light at the end of the tunnel.

The door locks behind me and the overpriced heating allows my fingers to move again. I'm reminded that the seeking of homely comforts is a common struggle as my flat-mates bustle about, turning on the heating, filling the kettle, closing the curtains.

The trials and tribulations of life tend to fade away as we resort back to our own consoling indulgences in place of the unconditional care we received at home as children.

Soon I'll see my family again for Christmas. We'll spoil the dog, watch movies, eat food and wrap gifts but until then a hot chocolate and warm blanket will do.

Valliamai Muthuganesan **Katy B's Life Through Butterscotch's Eyes**

I open my eyes lazily as something warm begins to stroke my back. It's Mama. "...and I've got to get started on my healthy Halloween sweets! I'll dress you up as a spider for the video. You're going to love it." I don't know what a spider is but hearing the excitement in Mama's voice I decide that I am going to put up with whatever she's going to do to me. Short of giving me a bath of course. I like to bathe myself thank you very much. I don't know why Mama insists on giving me one every week when it's an ordeal for the both of us.

I stand up on her lap, leap onto the floor and do a few stretches before walking to my box. Mama's still chattering away in the background. I can hear her keys jangling. She's probably going out. Hmmm...

I wonder if it's to get me some of those delicious treats from last week. Losing myself in a fantasy revolving around my treats and how I am going to take my time relishing them I walk to my favourite spot in front of the huge glass doors that the sun streams through.

Settling myself in the warmth I purr contently. Ahhhh, this is the life. Mama, my brother, sister and I in our little world having the best lives ever. Closing my eyes, I wonder about the man that leaves home at the crack of dawn only to come back once everyone is asleep. He seems perpetually tired and grouchy. Mama tells me that he's papa, but I don't think so. He never spends time with any of us. Least of all Mama. She misses him a lot. She hopes in a few months' time, when my siblings arrive, papa will be more incentivised to be with us.

Mama's always sad when she talks about papa. Come to think of it, she's sad a lot. She tells me that nobody understands her and that she wishes she had more friends. Why wouldn't anybody want to be friends with Mama? She loves us, her babies, and takes such good care of us. I hope the three of us can make Mama happy all the time. Maybe if I give her a gift, a bird perhaps, she'll be happier? Let me sleep on that. All this thinking has tired me out. The last thing I see before I shut my eyes is a little bird hopping about amongst the flowers. As I fall into a slumber, I decide that I will bring Mama a gift to cheer her up.

Catherine Wright **Lost In Translation**

"Hello, I'm here to see Ian, I've come to get a tour around the barn for the ceilidh," I say in a confident tone to the stocky and fierce looking lady at the door.

"Ach, follow me this wye!" She beckons, her face seeming to soften as she does so. For a small lady, she can walk awfully fast, I think as she strides out in front of me, her mane of curly, red hair swooping from side to side in sync with her wellie-clad feet marching on the muddy ground, across a large field full of sheep.

"So, have you been in the events business long?" I ask, a little out of breath, as I do a sort of half jog, half fast walk to keep up with her as she speeds up the hill.

"Ach aye, we're gye experienced, half the toon has their parties here!" She says proudly, swinging herself up and over the silver metal gate at the top of the field, mud flying off her boots whilst rather bemused sheep watch. "An the ither half wishes they did!" She adds with a little chuckle as I, rather inelegantly, follow her lead over the gate and stumble into the next field.

"There's Ian on the tractor. Ging clype him fit wye ye re here an he'll set ye richt," she tells me, indicating a broad man sat upon a muddied green tractor. Not quite understanding the last bit of what the lady said, I go to ask her, but she has vaulted the gate and is on her way back down the hill, without giving me a chance to even say thank you.

I approach Ian, cautiously confident, "I am a young, intelligent and charitable, strong, independent woman" I think to myself to calm my nerves. "Hello," I beam to the man on the tractor, "I'm Kate, I was hoping you could show me round your barn, I'm organising the St John Ambulance Charity Ceilidh this year."

"Ah ken fa ye are, hop on an we'll heid ower. Yer early, was nae expecting ye util the back o fower." The man indicates the seat behind him. I feel a bit bewildered, translating Doric to English is not my strong point, although from the expectant look on his face I deduce that I need to get on the back of the tractor. I gingerly put my foot on the rusty bottom step and accept the stout man's reaching arm to give me a hand up. This was not what I was expecting to be doing as an events coordinator!

As soon as I have taken my rather wobbly seat, we're off at max speed 25mph, bumping over potholes and flying over cow pats. It was exhilarating and rather terrifying, a joy ride truly like no other.

"Here we are, here's yer barn," Ian tells me as we pull up outside a large brick building with a tin roof. Outside there are some sweet fairy lights draped across the top of the front entrance, it looks very twee in a way, perfect for a charity ceilidh. "ah'm Ian bi the wye, the wifey ye met back aire is ma wife Ruby, guid wifie she is, she'll be deein aa yer catering. She maks some affa fine maet, cakes an aal!" Ian makes nothing of my confused expression, it's such a shame google translate doesn't have a setting for Doric, I think, as we climb off the tractor and head towards the barn.

Ian, much like his wife, is short, stocky and a very fast walker. He has a bald spot on the very top of his head and I'm distracted by the way it shines in the afternoon light. "Sae this is far everyone ah'll arrive first an get offert a gless o bibbly," Ian's words snap me out of wondering how he keeps his bald patch so shiny.

"Right," I say slowly as he continues with his tour, turning his back on me and marching off again, arms flying left and right in a sort of dance as he goes. I assume it is to indicate what he's talking about, but he talks so fast, I can barely understand a word.

"The guests ah'll cum ben, here inta the main section o the barn. The band ah'll be up on aat stage aire. We'll hiv a disco ba hingin fae aat hook in the riggin o the ceiling an the bar ah'll be aire on yer richt. The toilets are aat the back aire s signs on tham askng ye tae putten the lid doon afore ye flush, ma wife is affa funny aboot aat something aboot watterie plume or something. Load o tosh if ye speir me! Ye'll be oranising the band, we've gotten a speaker system aa set up. Div ye ken fa ye ve gotten playing yet?" Ian looks expectantly round to me. Realising he has just asked a question, I quickly replay the words in my head and attempt to formulate a response.

"Ah, ummm, errr, not yet, we're still looking round at the best deals." I respond, looking for satisfaction in his face, hoping that answers Ian's question.

"Perfect, ma son has a band, ye ken, a guid een too. He'll play fur ye, nae expinsive aat aa, in fact, he'll be heading doon fur a div tonight ye might catch him as we leave. Anyways, on wi the tour." Ian turns on his heel and marches on towards a large set of wooden double doors on the far-left hand side. Whilst we walk through the vast barn, I look up to see remnants of party streamers and banners hung from the ceiling, too high for anyone to reach. The walls are all painted white with what looks like a stage at the far end. On my right I walk past an extensive bar, I've never seen so many whiskeys, gins and vodkas in my life, I guess this was to be expected though, we are in Scotland! As we reach the doors, Ian begins to fiddle with some keys as I admire the large drapes that overhang what I have decided must be the stage. They're a deep, royal blue, flecked with beautiful gold stars with sparkles dotted in between. I can just see the light twinkling off of them now. This would be a beautiful venue for a party, I think.

"Ach, ere it is!" Triumphant, Ian inserts the key into the lock and opens the doors. Oh, it is beautiful. It's a smaller room, almost an extension to the barn, laid out with circular tables, golden chairs and a large servery at the back. "Sae this is far ye'd hiv yer maet a recht. Denner first then the ceilidh, ye'll need yer smeddum fur it. We supply aa the table decorations, crockery, cutlery, maet an things like aat an aa ye hiv tae div is rype up an enjoy. Ma wife ah'll be in charge o the servery it's her pride an joy." I half listen to Ian as he continues his tour, my eyes wandering up to the crystal chandelier in the centre of this beautiful room, with an elegant theme in complete juxtaposition to the rambunctious, mismatch barn next door. "Ach here s ma son noo."

I drag my gaze down to the eye level of a tall, slender young man who is making a beeline for us across the room. He extends his hand out to shake whilst looking me straight in the eye as a broad smile begins to spread across his face. "Aye-aye min sorry aboot ma da, giving ye the hard-vrocht sell is he? Did he clype ye aboot ma band, ah can play fur yer ceilidh? Ah'll gie ye the best price like. Beat ony ither quotes?"

"This is ma son Dougall, dist me bigsie, goes tae weddings too." Ian says, looking proudly at his son, "Sae, fit div ye say, div ye like the barn? Reckon we cwid putten on a guid ceilidh thegither." Ian asks, turning to me, I look a little confused, which I think Ian mistakes for uncertainty as he quickly adds, "As its fur charity we won't charge muckle, jis fit it costs tae putten it on an a puckle thochtie fur ma

son's time, aat s aa." Seeming content with his answer, Ian looks to me again. I try to figure out what he has said whilst both sets of eyes look eagerly at me. Now did he say barn or bairn? Is he referring to his son or the barn. Now, I can't answer this wrong, he said something about a wedding too, I really hope he means the barn. I smile at the two men in front of me.

"Is aat a aye?" Ian asks optimistically putting his hand out in front ready to form a deal.

"Yes, nice doing business with you," I say as I shake his hand, hoping I've agreed to a ceilidh in the barn, not a marriage!

Chakshu Joshi

Haiku

Alone we exist,
Looking up at bright white stars
Dreaming of heaven

Nicoll Butter

Smoke and Mirrors

Mummy glares at me from the end of the hospital bed. She is immaculately dressed as usual; a russet fur coat hangs to her knees, concealing a houndstooth dress that sucks in her slender figure. Her dark hair is teased up with so much hairspray I fear she'll combust when she lights one of her Marlboros. Her heels click on the linoleum floor as she paces irritably back and forth. The rings on her fingers flash as the evening sun strikes them, causing my vision to spot with white dots. Her lips are the colour of merlot and tighten into a grimace, only opening to reveal slightly crooked teeth when she admonishes me for being so careless. I flinch when she tells me it was my fault. Of course it was, it always is.

Burns cover my entire body, spreading like continents on a map with deep defined edges and pustules like mountain ranges. Bandages wrap tightly around my disfigured body, snaking like tapeworms. Mummy says it was because I never listened to her, she knows best. This happened because I always misbehaved. Doctors come and go, some fill bags with clear liquid, others change the soiled dressings to pristine white strips. Some even just stop to ask how I am, doting on me like a baby. No one seems to even acknowledge Mummy, which is peculiar since she ordinarily brightens up every room she enters. Once they're gone, Mummy turns on me. I don't deserve such kindness, she says. Don't they know what I did? She struts to a mirror hanging over a small basin and applies another film of mascara, darkening the spider legs that curl on her dark smoky eyelids.

Suddenly the smoke is choking me, I can't open my throat to cry for help and tears stream down my face. She catches my eye in the mirror and tells me to stop being dramatic. Do I think I'm in more pain than her? What could be worse than having such a disappointment for a daughter? The burns blister under the wrappings, but I have to stay silent. Mummy hates it when I cry, and I don't want to upset her. She strips off her coat, the lighter in the pocket jingling slightly as it slumps in the corner like a dead animal. Her arms are slim and spotless; I hope I look like her when I'm older. But the doctors say these scars will be permanent.

Mummy coughs hoarsely into her closed fist. I tried to warm her about the harms of smoking, but she wouldn't hear it. She said if there was a choice between lung cancer and such a drastic failure of a child, she knew what she would rather have. She sits on the chair in the corner and smoothes her dress with flattened palms. With her immaculate posture, she could be posing for a portrait. Shockingly,

she ignites a cigarette. I desperately want to caution her, but I know she won't hear it. She never listens.

A doctor enters and approaches me tentatively. He asks how I am, but I still can't make a sound. I look to Mummy so she can answer for me, but she just puffs away like I'm the least important person in the world. Astonishingly the doctor doesn't seem to care. In fact, it's almost like he doesn't even notice she's there. His attention is entirely on me. I'm not used to such scrutiny unless it's from Mummy. With a pitying look, he explains he'll examine my burns again and then informs us there are police outside that would like a word.

The fire occurred two weeks ago. I remember waking up as clouds of acrid smoke began to smother me. I thought I could hear Mummy on the other side of the door. I screamed for her, but no one came. The accident is still under investigation, they tell me. They say that, so far, I'm not a suspect. My home has been destroyed by the blaze. There will be nothing to return to. They say how sorry they are my mother didn't make it.

Omonuwa Iredia

Haiku

Arched back and bent knees
Moving slowly, watching their gait
The elderly dance.

Lauren Ferriday

Grandad & Granny

My little sister and I are racing each other up the hill towards my great granny and grandad's house, running as fast as my legs can go. It's not fast enough as we reach the top of the hill at the same time.

"Draw!" my little sister shouts.

I open the brown wooden gate and we walk into their garden with all the colourful flowers surrounding us. I stop as I see the lavender plant and rub one of the flowers between my fingers as it leaves the nice lavender smell on my fingers. Granny showed me that and I do it every time I walk past it. A wasp flies past me. I jump and very quickly move away from the flowers. As we climb up the stairs towards the white door with the shiny number 68 on the front, we look down to the right and with our arms stretched as high as we can, wave down across all the other gardens of the houses that are between Nana and Granny's house. I can only just see my nana waving back. It's not far, it's just that the sun is shining so brightly in my eyes I nearly have them closed. My sister reaches up standing on her tiptoes, supporting herself against the door and presses on the doorbell. A quiet "ding dong, ding dong" plays out from the living room and reaches us standing at the top of the steps on the other side of the door.

The familiar shadow of Grandad appears behind the patterned, wavy glass in the front door. The glass isn't clear but his dark greenish jumper shows through as he nears the door, his shadow becoming clearer with every step. The keys jingle in the other side of the lock and the door opens revealing Grandad. He's like a giant, he's really tall and is so gentle but his voice almost booms as he announces:

"Ahh, it's the girls!" and stretches his big arms out to welcome us in, giving us a big hug.

This also lets Granny know that we're here as she shouts from upstairs,

"Oh, I'll be down just now!"

We walk into the hall as Granny makes her way down the stairs and gives us both a big hug.

"In you come" she says, with a big smile on her face as she leads us into the living room.

Granny and Grandad are always smiling, their blue eyes friendly and happy. I always look forward to seeing them after school. We go over and sit in our normal seats on the sofa, facing the fire. It's not a real fire, but it looks like it. It has little black lumps of coal sitting in the bottom but Granny says it's not like the one they used to have a long time ago. That used real coal, she tells us. They used to keep it outside in a big stone box which is still in their garden, it just doesn't have coal in it anymore. This one gives off an orange glow and as the light of the pretend fire flickers it makes it feel cosy as if the flames are real. But it's not on today, the orange is replaced with plain black, blending into the coals so you can't make out where they are anymore. The fire doesn't need to be on today, the sun is shining in through their living room window and it's already roasting. It's almost like being on holiday.

I can't understand how Grandad can wear that big, heavy jumper and Gran that cardigan. Aren't they boiling? The golden sunlight streams down the middle of the living room as if cutting it in half until Granny tilts the blinds managing to push the sunlight in another direction away from our eyes.

Granny sits in her chair to the right of the fire and Grandad walks over to the left of the fire and sits down in his big, comfy chair which spins around and has a bit that you can pull to make your feet go up and out in front of you. It's covered by a blanket which makes it even comfier, even though the blanket is made of that slightly scratchy material which tickles your legs when you sit on it. Grandad puts his glasses away, which were sitting on the table beside his chair, and folds up his newspapers that he has been reading as we start to tell them about our day.

Grandad always reads the papers, every day. He reads every page and every single word, even the boring stories, but he always knows everything that's going on. We always sit for ages as we tell them stories about what we have been up to at school that day and Granny and Grandad tells us stories too. Sometimes about their day, if they have been on the bus somewhere, and sometimes stories from the past. I wonder what stories about the farm I will hear today. I love listening to their stories, they always have so many and they're always really interesting and funny. Even though sometimes Granny tells us stories we've heard before, a few times!

Chakshu Joshi **Dada & Dadi**

I clatter down the stairs loudly, happy to be out of my school uniform and into my matching pink tracksuit. It's my favourite outfit and I wear it specially for my daily walk with my Dada and Dadi. My Dada and Dadi are my dad's mum and dad and they have come from India to stay with us for a few months, filling the house with new smells and lots of homemade food, like aloo parathas and kheer. Their cooking is so tasty and they love seeing me eat, even more than Mama! They are the most caring gentle giants in my small home, always ready to give a warm hug or a soft wrinkled hand to hold. Our days are filled with games and laughter, with quiet afternoons of naps and prayers. I love doing everything with them because it's my job to make them proud and show them my life here.

Every afternoon after school, we go for a walk around all the houses in the area and into the park nearby. Sometimes, I take my bike because Dada and Dadi walk so slowly. I feel like a superhero speeding past them. The whole way there, we sing old Bollywood songs into the cold winter air to keep warm. I like learning old Bollywood songs because it makes them happy. They sound sweet but I don't really understand them. It must mean something really important because every time my Dada or Dadi sing, the other one claps and smiles and says how talented the singers are. I also don't think Dada and Dadi like the weather here because they always wear so many jumpers. When we go out, my Dada puts his hat down so low and scarf so high I wonder how he can see where he's going!

I giggle at this idea while I shove my shoes on excitedly. I hear the sound of bangles clinking together and look up to see my Dadi, but not in her usual jeans and cardigans she wears for our walks. She's

still wearing her Indian clothes, a pretty purple Punjabi dress with white patterns and silver jewels. It reaches past her knees and is worn with matching purple trousers. I love this dress of hers because it's my favourite colour and Dadi's favourite colour too. Even though I love wearing purple, I can't understand why she was wearing that and walking to the front door. Isn't she going to change? No one wears those kinds of clothes here. I think of all the other kids in the park and picture them laughing at me because of the way she's dressed. I picture them being rude to my Dadi and her getting upset like I do when people are mean. They are going to ask me questions that make me feel like I'm stupid. I get hot inside and feel something weird in my stomach. All of a sudden, I don't want to go to the park anymore.

I step in front of my grandma and the door. Without thinking, I blurt out "aren't you going to change? You can't go out like that!"

"What do you mean, beta?" she says with a smile.

For some reason this makes me feel small and I can't find the words to speak. I stand in silence while she puts her shoes on. All the while, my heart is banging against my chest making it hard to breathe. I begin to worry I have failed at looking after Dada and Dadi. My Dada comes and moves me away from the door, laughing at me and my natak, which is another word for drama. Usually, I join in with the fun, but I can't stop thinking something bad is going to happen. He and Dadi step outside, telling me to come with them. There is no going back now. I have to be strong and pretend everything is normal. I feel so shy and want to run away – maybe that will stop everyone finding out I am Indian. I look outside to see my Dadi smiling at me. Her dress looks so bright against the white houses. My eyes almost can't believe what they're seeing. I take a deep breath and walk outside, noticing how different everything feels.

Valliamai Muthuganesan

Haiku

Woke up feeling warm
I rolled onto a wet patch
My son loves me

Catherine Wright

Learning To Walk

Mummy opens the car door for me as I fiddle with the seatbelt buckle. These things are just not kid friendly! Aha! I'm free! I leap out the car, grabbing my trusty sidekick, Jingle Cow, as I go. Jingle Cow has been with me since I was a baby. He is the smartest, cuddliest and softest teddy of my own. He actually looks like a giraffe with his orange fur and brown spots but as the toy I had before him looked like a cow, Jingle Cow must also be a cow.

I run across the garden and jump up to reach Daddy's doorbell.

"Ding, dong, ding, dong" I sing along dancing with Jingle Cow. At Daddy's house I always play and win Monopoly. I've never lost a game of Monopoly, I must be the best player in the world or something.

I can hear Daddy coming, see his shadow through the window of the door. "Daddy!" I scream as he opens the door, but looking at his face, he looks different. One of his eyes is all purple and black and won't open properly and he is standing all funny.

I laugh: "Daddy, do you need a wee or something?" I keep giggling, he just looks so odd standing there, not quite balanced.

Daddy looks down at me. He is so tall I swear he's secretly the BFG! I wonder if that makes me Sophie? Oh no, wait, I can't be, Sophie isn't the BFG's daughter. Does that mean one day I'll be as tall as Daddy?

Daddy laughs and says, "No, I don't, but I do walk funny – hopefully I'll be better soon."

I shrug this off. I have much more important things to do. Now normally there's a Victoria sponge in the kitchen. I wonder if I'll get a slice when we play Monopoly.

Ooh, it's looking good, we're heading into the living room. Daddy is right, he does walk funny, maybe that's why he has a black eye, maybe he fell.

"Daddy, did you fall over?" I ask.

"No, but I've had an operation," he answers. "Why do you ask?"

"You have a bruise on your eye, Daddy, and I only get bruises when I fall over and you're walking funny so I thought that made you fall over."

"Ah ok, well, I had an operation on my brain, the surgeons had to go through my eye socket, that's why my eye is bruised. I'm walking funny because the operation made my legs forget how to walk."

I'm confused. Why not go through his ear rather than his eye to reach his brain? There's already a hole there so why not use that? Then Daddy wouldn't have a big bruise. But Daddy seems to already be talking about something else so I won't ask.

Oh, I've just heard my name, guess I should stop thinking about how I'm going to be champion of the Monopoly board soon and how the Victoria sponge will be all mine as my prize.

"Are you going to come and teach me to walk again then?" Daddy asks as Mummy takes my hand and we make our way into the garden.

Rachel Min Yi Low **Cereal Obsession**

I turn to my side and peek through one eye at the clock. "Night time" is all I know, but that's because it's dark outside and I'm feeling sleepy. I still can't tell the time, but Dad says he'll teach me soon. I roll to my right side, or is this my left? I'm not sure about that either. Mom and Dad should be home by now. They always give me a goodnight kiss before I go to sleep. "Matt?" I call out to my brother who sleeps on the top bed of our double-decker bed. "What time will Mom and Dad be home?" He lets out a big snore. I guess he's asleep.

My tummy makes a loud rumbling, just like Pooh Bear when he hasn't had any honey. I decide it's time for a midnight snack. I move onto my tummy so that my legs hang off my bed. I wiggle myself backwards until my toes touch the ground and I can stand. It's dark outside my room and I can't see anything. I put my hands out and move slower than a snail! When I finally reach the kitchen, my tummy makes the same rumbling, but much louder. I decide I'll have some KoKo Krunch. I made my first bowl of cereal this morning. The milk bottle was heavy, but I could get the milk in my bowl without spilling any. Dad told me how good I was for being able to pour my own milk because Matt's eight and he still needs someone to pour his milk. That must be it! Mom and Dad must be out getting me a present for pouring my milk so well. I hope it's the new Barbie Doll playhouse. I saw it at the toy shop this morning when I was out with Ahma and Gong Gong,* but they didn't let me get it.

After grabbing my favourite Barbie bowl from the cupboard, I start to look for the KoKo Krunch in the snack cupboard. The KoKo Krunch is on the tallest shelf and I'll need a ladder to reach it. Hmm, I don't know where we keep our ladder. I stand with my arms crossed and think of how to get the KoKo Krunch. AHA! I know what I'll do. I'll just climb the shelves. They look just like the ladder that Matt uses to get to his bed. I move some things on the lower shelves out of the way to give my feet space to climb. When I'm on the middle shelf, I stretch for the KoKo Krunch. I start to feel the box when,

CRASH, I'm on the ground! My bum hurts, I see all my favourite snacks on the floor next to me and I feel like I'm covered in sand. I look up and see that the middle shelf isn't there anymore. Uh-Oh.

I start to put the snacks back into the cupboard. If I'm fast I can run back to bed and Mom and Dad won't know it was me. The kitchen lights turn on, "Who's there?"

I'm sure it's Dad. I take a deep breath in and start crying as loud as I can. Dad sees the broken shelf and stands over me with both hands on his hips. He looks at me with his eyebrows close together and a big frown on his face. I don't think Dad's very happy with me. Dad dusts me off, picks me up and takes me to my room. "We'll talk about this in the morning. Go to sleep sweetheart, good night." He tucks me into bed and kisses me goodnight.

I wipe my face on my blankie. Phew, I'm safe for tonight. I close my eyes and fall asleep right away.

*Grandma and Grandpa in Mandarin

Michael Critchell
Dumped by Haiku

It's not you it's me
I'd rather take things slowly
Can you tell the kids?

Jenny Griffiths
Princess Enthissa and the Owl Prince

Rebecca clambered across the bed, pulling the covers over her as quick as possible. "See, I'm in bed. Now you have to tell me a story, daddy. Mr. Snuggles has to have his bedtime story." She nodded solemnly as she held out a stuffed pink bunny rabbit.

Her father laughed, a hearty one, sat down on the small pink stool by the bed and tucked Rebecca in. "What story would you – Mr Snuggles – like to hear?"

Rebecca feigned thinking for a second: she placed a finger on her lips, tapping it for a second. Her hands shot into the air, disturbing the veil that hugged her bed. "The story about the princess, and how everyone from everywhere wanted to marry her because she was the mostest, prettiest lady in all the lands."

"Okay, if you lie down and allow me to finish tucking you in and I will tell you the story of Princess Enthissa and the Owl prince. "

Rebecca immediately lay down, and pulled the covers up to her chin, both hands clutching the disturbed duvet with anticipation. "Well? What are you waiting for?"

The father smiled patiently. "There was once –"

"That's not how it goes! Everybody knows that a fairy-tale has to start with 'Once upon a time.' Otherwise, it isn't a fairy-tale, silly!" Rebecca pouted, turning to face her father.

He shook his head then brushed her hair away from her doey eyes. "Once upon a time there was a Kingdom of such beauty it was said that even the Gods would be struck in awe whenever they gazed upon it. The name was Rathagen. It had emerald forests so dense that even experienced woodsmen would often get lost and was said to be a hideout of the Gods. Its deep blue lakes, perfect in every way, were so full of life that they could heal even the gravest of wounds. But, Rathagen's most important treasure, held above all others, was not its wealth or its magical lands. It was Princess– "

“-Enthissa! And she was beautiful and smart too and everyone wanted to marry her!” She held Mr. Snuggles up in the air, waving him around in front of her. She accented each word with a jerk of Mr. Snuggles, her eyes glowing with enthusiasm.

Her father placed a solitary finger on his lips then waited for her to be silent. “Do you want to tell the story, Rebecca?”

“No.” She buried herself back under the covers, risking a glance in her father’s direction. “I’m sorry.”

“Yes, Princess Enthissa had many suitors: people from all corners of the world came to petition for her hand. However, every single one of them was turned down. They came bearing gifts of jewels, land and entire kingdoms. Yet still she wasn’t satisfied. Her father asked why she was turning down all these eligible men that would strengthen the Kingdom. She replied,” his voice went up an octave, sounding not unlike a strangled cat, “These men know only greed. They want both me and the Kingdom as their prize. Their blackened hearts will come to destroy all we know and love.”

Rebecca pulled her covers to her eyes. “What happened?” she whispered.

“They created a tournament to win the Princess’ hand. Hundreds of thousands from all around the known world gathered in Rathagen, anxious to show their worth. They had expected to joust and brawl. Instead they were offered a challenge.” He coughed before putting on his best falsetto voice. “I have invited everyone here to prove to me their worth. There are three categories: Courage, Strength of Character, and Love. My father’s magicians shall provide each contestant with a charm that allows me to know when someone has completed all three.” He paused. “But even she couldn’t have guessed what happened next.

Rebecca pulled Mr. Snuggles in closer. “What happened next?”

“This competition plunged not only Rathagen but the whole world into war. Men convinced that she wanted a show of brute strength tried to conquer other nations; convinced that love was lust, and that courage was the drive to take what they wanted. It was a dark time, but one light shone through. He was a military commander for the Kingdom of Rathagen by the name of Kavorin.”

“The prince,” Rebecca whispered.

“He was not royalty but had shown his worth throughout the years, allowing him to don the rank. Anyway, his first trial happened to be the trial of courage. The war had turned nasty, with several armies invading Rathagen, all wanting to claim their prize. He knew that alone he had no chance, so he decided to venture into the biggest forest in the centre of the Kingdom. No man had ever survived the trek, but it was said that the Gods loved this forest the most. And so, he entered hoping to ask a boon. A week passed, and the outside world had still not heard a word of him. They thought him dead. They prepared their defences without him.”

“But he didn’t die, did he? He has to marry the Princess!”

He smiled. “You’re right. In that week, he got lost. He almost ran out of food, water was scarce, and the trails seemed to change whenever he looked back. This was not a place for men. And yet, the Goddess of the Woods took pity on him. She sent him a silver owl. The owl continuously brought him food, led him to streams and eventually, to the Goddess.”

“She had to help him, didn’t she?”

“Rebecca, what have I said about interruptions?” he said sternly. “If you want to tell Mr. Snuggles the story I can leave.”

“Sorry,” she mumbled.

“The Goddess listened to his plight. Her gift was the owl, able to bestow visions of places far away as long as they were near a wood or forest. Although he was disappointed that the Goddess couldn’t give more aid he understood the importance of knowledge in war. He set off back home and received word that the invaders had breached the mountain pass defending the kingdom. This was when he completed his second trial. He rushed back, the owl following him every step of the way. He gathered a small army, not even a tenth of the size of the invading force. But with the owl he knew when the

enemies had to split, when and where they went to forage. For two months he ambushed the invading force again and again. Weakening their force substantially. It looked as if the day was won.”

“Was it not?”

“No. The army had sent a large force towards the capital that had managed to avoid all forests, completely by chance. By the time he had realised, the army was already a day’s march from the capital. The city fell, and the Princess was captured. He had rushed back as quick as he could, but came to a city of fire. The beautiful keep lay shattered, the wall with large holes. They had breached the walls that day. Their numbers no longer matched his army’s, so he took the chance to eliminate all who had destroyed his home. He found the Princess, but before he could save her, they stabbed her in the gut in front of his very eyes.”

Rebecca gasped, hugging Mr. Snuggles tightly.

“The men had been angry that she still hadn’t wanted to marry them after they had shown their military might. But Kavorin couldn’t bear to see the Princess, so perfect, bleed to death. He strapped her to his horse as soon as he could, ignoring all protocol and rules. This was when he passed his third, the final, trial. The challenge of Love. The lake by the city was on fire, but he took her to it regardless. It was the only lake near enough that could potentially save her. Everyone had heard of the healing properties of the lake, but he had no idea if they were real. He had to take the risk. He took her to the shore furthest from the fire. With tears in his eyes, the Princess cradled in his arms, he walked into the lake. Her dress, soiled with blood, floated in the lapping waves.”

Tears welled in Rebecca’s eyes. “Did it work?” she asked weakly.

“Nothing happened. At first that was. Then light blossomed, the lake engulfed both of them. He thought he was drowning at first, but then he realised he could breathe. As quickly as it happened, he was back on the shore. And in his arms was the Princess. No evidence of the sword wound on her belly. She had been healed.” He kissed Rebecca on the forehead.

“That’s not the end? It needs a happily ever after, silly.” Although tears were running down her face, her words still carried her infamous sass.

“Right you are,” he said. “He gave his orb to the Princess, forfeiting his right to her hand. He said that he did not deserve it after failing her so miserably. However, she, hearing none of it, asked the wizards to review it. He had completed all three tasks, and after a few months they were married. Together they rebuilt the kingdom, stone by stone, person by person. The owl remained his faithful companion, and they saw many years of peace.”

“And?”

He sighed. “And they lived happily ever after.”

Rebecca nodded, content with the ending.

“Bedtime, young lady.”

“What about another story?” she asked.

He chuckled, then turned off the light. “Next time. You know the drill, one per night.”

Conor Hughes **Barry The Wolf**

Once upon a time there was a young wolf called Barry and he wanted more than anything to be leader of his pack. He was just as tough and fast as any of the other wolves. He could howl just as loud, but he needed something else, he needed an edge. One evening, when explaining his woes to his canine compatriots and sipping his wolf pint at the wolf pub, Barry was told about the magic wishing cave that virtually everyone in the town knew about. His best friend, Muttley, said he should head off into the woods at midnight. Past the river and into the mouth of the white cave. Grumbling about how he was

the last to hear about anything, but generally up for a laugh, Barry finished up his pint and headed for the cave.

The journey took about forty-five minutes with very light traffic, so he was there with time to spare. He looked at his fit-bit and on the stroke of midnight, he could see thick, black plumes of smoke billowing from the mouth of the cave.

"Who goeth there?" a voice cried from within.

"Barry the wolf...eh Baz to my pals."

"Enter then, doggy boy!" The voice croaked.

Inside was a small hovel lit by candle light. A small, black crow was sitting on a stained porcelain chair whilst wearing a small but beautifully embroidered fez which read "Daddy's little Ottoman." Both his eyes were missing and stitched over. It quickly cocked its head to one side.

"The fates have told me you want to be the leader of your pack."

"I do."

"Are you not the strongest and fastest wolf?"

Barry scratched his head. "erm... I could be?"

"I know what you require."

In an instant the crow flung himself across the room and crashed into pile of shining objects. It began desperately rummaging through balls of tinfoil, Asda jewellery and old Michael Bubl  Christmas CD's. From its wiry clutches it presented a small red collar with a golden bell on it.

"Is that not a bit domestic? Not judging like."

"Do not doubt the ways of the old magic."

"Fair enough" said Barry, as he clipped the collar around his neck and jingled out of the cave.

Barry returned to greet his new underlings at the pub. He kicked open the door and was greeted with roars of laughter at his new magical accessory.

"Listen up, buckos. I am your new leader so bow down now or face my wrath."

"I beg your pardon?" said Fluffers, the leader of the pack, sitting at the end of the bar. He stood to face our hero.

Barry knew his time was upon him. He had to prove himself. And without hesitation he howled the most high-pitched howl he possibly could. All the windows in the pub shattered as all the wolves dropped to the floor covering their ears.

Fluffers looked up at Barry in fear. "JESUS H CHRIST, YOU CAN BE LEADER OF THE PACK SO LONG AS YOU NEVER DO THAT AGAIN." he shouted a fair few decibels above normal speaking volume, with blood dripping from his ears. And so, Barry looked upon his pack with pride and announced this was a new era for all of them. No one would never go hungry and under his leadership they would become the most powerful wolf pack in the area.

His subjects looked at him in confusion as Barry seemed to be emitting a very loud and high-pitched frequency in lieu of speaking. And as it turns out this is how Barry destroyed the pack's reputation and economy in one fell swoop, leaving all members suffering with chronic and deafening tinnitus. From his cave the wily crow laughed. "Easy come, easy go," he muttered to himself as the sultry tones of Mr Bubl 's "Jingle Bell Rock" serenaded him. History will remember the infamous "Barry the Shrill" for years to come.

Michael Critchell
The Red Bike

“Okay, let’s go.”

My dad opens the back door and we all step into the garden – me, him, my big brother and sister, and my mum holding my new wee brother – who they say is called Alan, but I’ve decided his name is ‘Buzz Woody Lightyear Critchell’. My dog Baffle follows us. He seems excited, like he always does when we go for a walk. My dad picks up the red bike he says I’ll learn to ride today. I don’t understand how he can pick the whole thing up with one hand – I don’t think I could ever do that.

We walk around the house and down the path to the road. At the bottom of the path I see my dad’s motorbike. It’s giant, and whenever he turns it on it’s really loud. He says I’ll learn to ride one of those too one day, but I’m definitely too scared for that. We walk along the path, past all the houses and towards the field at the end. Baffle crosses the road and goes down onto the shore, exploring. We usually do that together, but I have to learn to ride a bike today. My big brother and sister start to fight, but my mum tells them off. Buzz looks at them and laughs.

Me and my dad walk up a hill in the field. My mum and Buzz stay at the bottom, and my big brother and sister look around for something to play with. My dad puts the red bike down and tells me what we’re going to do.

“You cycle, and I’ll hold onto you so you don’t fall.”

My mum says my dad has taught all the kids to cycle – except my cousin Sean who just couldn’t do it. I get on the bike, and from behind me I hear “Go!” I start to cycle, the same way I’ve cycled my trike loads of times before. It doesn’t really seem any different, except I can feel my dad’s hand on my back. We stop when I reach my mum and wee brother.

“Good, now let’s do it again.”

We go back to where we started, and I cycle down the hill again, towards the rest of my family. Baffle must have finished his exploring because now he’s wandering around the field sniffing everything.

“Perfect! Now let’s do it once more.”

We walk back up the hill again, and my dad tells me to cycle a bit faster this time. I get ready, and he says “Go!” I cycle harder, pretending I’m racing Baffle, who has started running along next to me. I reach my mum again, and she’s smiling. She points behind me. I turn around and see my dad still standing at the top of the hill. He wasn’t holding me! I cycled by myself! My big brother and sister clap. Buzz is asleep. My dad walks down to the bottom of the field.

“You did it!” he shouts.

“Thanks,” I say, glad I’m not like my cousin Sean and can cycle a bike. But I hope my dad doesn’t make me ride a motorbike now.

Omonuwa Iredia
The Pool Incident

I walk into the sports centre with mum. Myself on one side and my sister on the other. It hits me: the heat of the place and that weird sports centre smell. It’s the only place I go that has this weird smell. It’s not bad, in fact I quite like it as it makes me think of being in the pool. That’s why mum has brought us here today. I like being in the pool. When I wear armbands, lie on my back with my eyes closed and float on the water it makes me feel like I’m on a cloud.

Mum leads me into the girl’s changing room along with my sister. I feel funny about this. I know that I am a boy and that there is a boy’s changing room, why am I not there? I don’t ask, and she doesn’t say, she just leads me into the changing rooms.

I'm allowed to change in my own cubicle. This makes me feel better, at least nobody can see that there is a boy in the girl's changing room. I don't want anyone to laugh at me. I finish changing and it's time to leave the changing room and go into the pool area. I feel funny again. Like I'm scared, angry and sad at the same time. I feel warm, especially my face. I can't allow anyone to see me coming out of the girl's changing room. The changing room opens out directly to the pool and so I decide to run straight out and jump into the pool.

My feet don't touch the bottom and I don't know how to get to the top. The world is blurry, and I can't breathe. I can hear noises, but they don't sound right. I feel firm hands under my armpits lifting me up and through the water.

Suddenly, the world is no longer blurry, and I can breathe again. I'm coughing a lot and my nose and throat hurts. I can hear voices, I hear mum's voice. I look around and everybody is staring at me. I see the lifeguard in a red uniform but he is now wet from head to toe. Even his trainers and socks are wet. I see my mum, I've never seen her look so surprised. I don't know what is going on but think I'm in going to be in trouble when I get home.

At least no one's laughing at me.

Anna Yeats **Disconnected**

A generation
Connected by bright blue light
Yet left in darkness

The scene is idyllic. Trees are draped in their golden leaves, which flutter in the breeze. Many are scattered on the ground, the aftermath of the wind's playfulness. Flocks of birds soar and squawk into the depths of the sky. In the distance, groups of friends wave in greeting and huddle together to discuss the day. The wind rustles in the grass and the sun glints through sparser branches in the trees.

'Jo! Hurry up! You're going to be late for school!' My mother's voice jolts me away from my senses. My eyes blink and break their connection from the photo of the scene on my phone. The greyness of my bedroom re-establishes itself in my peripheral vision. Disconnected.

I do not anticipate the icy grip of the air as I step outside. I drag my feet through the carpet of leaves as the wind drags through my knotted hair. The trees lurch threateningly into my path under the influence of the gale. My school rucksack clings to my back in protest. Ahead, a couple of girls from my class wait for their friend. I lift a hand to wave but it is confronted by averted eyes. I feel my cheeks burn despite the persistent chill. Disconnected.

I readjust my rucksack, the weight of my school books suddenly intensifying, and try to hurry past the girls. Birds jerkily take flight as I approach. Leaves hurriedly escape their branches' grasp in any and every direction. Disconnected.

A huddle of students seems to tighten as I walk past. The wind rustles in the grass – or is that their whispers? I gulp to dislodge a lump that has formed in my throat.

In the distance, a bird squawks – or is that my phone? I quickly retrieve it from my jacket pocket: another response to the scenic photo I uploaded yesterday. I am lifted by a pulse of recognition, of approval. But as quickly as it comes, it is whipped away, like the wind's instability. Disconnected. My eyes shift from the scene in front of me, back to the photo. Why does the screen serve as a connection to others, when in fact it should be a barrier?

More students drift into my field of view. Excited voices and warm hugs fill the path into the school grounds. Exchanged appreciation of one another. With every step, I feel like I am intruding. The straps

of my bag squeeze my shoulders like a vice. Trapped, yet disengaged.

My phone exclaims in satisfaction at yet another response, another fleeting connection achieved.

The school bell rings, and I am once more disconnected.

Omonuwa Iredia

Haiku

Tap tap tap the screen
Boredom or entertainment
A millennial.

Rachel Min Yi Low

Mario versus Movie

Furiously, he twists and turns his remote as if it were a steering wheel, 'I'm so close, I can feel it!'

'That's what you said the last round, Tim. Give it up or we'll never make it for the movie.'

Tim twists his arms over his head as he tries to convince Yoshi to turn ever so slightly more and avoid falling off the sides of Rainbow Road. 'No, for real Emily, this time I'm going to do it. I'm going to beat my Mario Kart high score.'

'You know twisting your arms like that doesn't help, right?'

'It helps me get in the mood, Emily. I need to feel like I'm actually on Rainbow Road.'

'You look ridiculous.'

'You look ridiculous,' Tim mocks as he coils his arms tighter over themselves.

'I've married a man-child.' Emily throws her arms up into the air in surrender and settles herself onto the couch as she watches Yoshi overtake Bowser.

Eyes still glued to the television screen, Tim turns so that his torso faces slightly towards his wife, 'No, Emily, you've married a focused individual. You'll be pleased to know that I'm always challenging the limit.'

Emily rolls her eyes and folds her hands over her chest. She lets out a grunt of frustration. 'You're challenging the limit of my patience for you. If you take more than five minutes, I'm leaving without you.'

Tim leans forward and widens his eyes, trying his best to pour out even more focus on the game: 'You can't put a time limit on success, Emily!'

'Watch me.' Emily sets a timer on her phone for five minutes and sets it next to the television.

Oblivious to the timer, Tim concentrates hard on the centre of the screen. His arms are held out wide in a chicken wing position as he glides along with Yoshi. 'No, don't fall off, don't fall off! Great, I'm back in last place.'

'Today's not the day, Tim! Just give it up. Let's leave now.'

'My five minutes aren't up! Go do something else and leave me to race in peace. I can't afford to divide my attention when I'm on Rainbow Road.'

With a minute left on the timer, Emily decides it's a lost cause. She gets off the couch just as Tim starts a new race. She walks over to the television, picks up the remote and jabs down on the power button. The screen turns black.

'Hey! I can't believe you just did that!'

'Well believe it. Get your coat, let's go.'

Lauren Walji
The Noorani Boy

People flit out of the mosque, the evening air much more palatable than the stifling heat inside. A woman stops just outside, the hem of her cotton blue dress ripples with the light wind. The door opens out onto the dirt of the street, cars littering the yard a few steps away. The smell of hot buttered sweetcorn calls to the children, begging francs from their parents.

"Shamsah!" the woman in the blue dress calls out to her friend just stepping out of the doorway.

"Ah, Nishat." This woman wears a plain green sari, simple compared the dress of her friend. "I did not see you in the crowd." The two women embrace and Shamsah spies her husband wandering towards the truck behind Nishat.

"How is Hassanali? How is Shemshir?" Nishat fires off these questions without expecting answers before continuing, "Have you heard of the Noorani boy?"

Shamsah stifles an eager smile, her friend has a head full of nothing but gossip, and consequently they are good friends. "No I haven't, Nishat, you mean Salim?"

"Yes, yes Salim. Have you heard what happened?"

"No, my friend, tell me. Ah, hello, Yasmin." The two woman are joined by a third, who has diverted from the last trickle of women still exiting the mosque. Yasmin greets both women with a kiss to both cheeks and a 'bonsoir', switching their conversation from the Kutchi, used most commonly in the Ismaili Mosque, to her much more practised French.

"Yasmin, have you seen the Noorani family at all?" Nishat peers at her friend, eager to stretch the anticipation. Shamsah gives a sigh at the restraint, aware that Shemshir is probably beginning his third sweetcorn. He will be sick.

"No, no but I've heard all about little Salim –"

"Yes, Salim." Nishat hurries on. "The military were at his school, you know the public school he goes to?" Shamsah makes a noise of encouragement while Yasmin nods energetically in confirmation. "They took the boy out of lessons to go to the headmaster's office, they told him he was in trouble." Nishat lowers her voice to a hush. "Both the Nooranis were there with a general."

"They didn't take the boy?" Shamsah frowns, her face anxious and her eyes narrowed towards her friend.

"Yes. They said Ridi had seen the boy take a pen and mark the President's photo."

"No!" Shamsah refused to acknowledge this.

"Yes. The boy was taken to the Dilala military prison. He's still there, I believe." Nishat spares a brief glance over her shoulder, "They are trying to get him out but you know the Nooranis, they have nothing."

Both other women nod their heads, the melancholy rests heavy on them. "Alfred will be signing his name tomorrow, we told him to sign up to take the bakery," Shamsah tells her friends. "I hope we can trust him more than the Nooranis could trust Ridi."

"They should never have let him sign up for them, he has stolen from them before. It was an unwise decision." Nishat looks grave, she moves her hands over her skirt, smoothing out creases that aren't there.

"Yes, but they believed he would be fair. They thought he would act as representative while they kept the shop. He has worked for them for fifteen years." Shamsah replies, defeat substantial in her tone.

"Nationalisation." Yasmin clicks, "first they don't like the Belgians and then they do the same thing and call it nationalisation. You know the foreign owned farms, the Belgians left? Given to the Congolese, a general's son. First the businesses, then the land and soon they talk of banning western clothing and names and food."

"It was the same in Tanganyika and Burundi and now here, it's inevitable," Nishat reminds the

women, “but the Nooranis are hoping to get the boy out, perhaps with help from family, and then they will go to Canada.”

“The book will need to be thick to get the boy out.”

“Forget the bribe, Yasmin, how will they take the boy food? If they cannot pay guards then the boy cannot get food,” Shamsah’s genuine concern even overshadowing the joy gained from a good gossip.

Over by the faded pearl blue Peugeot, Hassanali has taken what he believes is Shemshir’s fifth sweetcorn away from him. The sounds of low murmurs and mumbles across the multiple groups gathered in the yard are quiet enough so that the faint whine of mosquitos can be heard above them. And yet Hassanali’s scolding is barely audible, his tone soft and his words successful. Shemshir leaves the sweetcorn vendors alone and climbs into the back of the truck.

“Did the boy really do it?” Yasmin wonders.

“You are stupid, no? Of course not. Ridi said that the boy marked the photo. That he saw the boy do it at seven in the morning. He said that he saw it from the open hallway window,” Nishat explains

“Ah, I see.”

“Yes, you do. The boy would not be up at seven, he is like my Karim. He would not be up before eight. He wants to be rid of the family, greedy man. He has the business, legally it is his. He doesn’t need them. And no one leaves windows open. You wouldn’t offer a thief a drink, would you?”

“Emigrating, it’s really the only option left,” Shamsah determines, peeking over to see her husband falling asleep in the front of the truck as Shemshir swings from the bare tarpaulin bars across the back. The other two women groan. “I can’t see Shemshir being taken to Dilala, or Kasapi just down this road. The younger generals coming in, they want money quickly. They know the shuffling goes on in the party, so they do this. They know we will pay quickly, before they can be moved about.”

“And yet given some time, we will not be able to pay.” At Nishat’s statement the three women fall silent.

The crowd thins and the wind picks up. The sun begins to set.

Conor Hughes **The Conversation**

Ring ring. Ring ring.

“Hello, you’ve reached the 02-messaging service. The person you are calling is unavailable. Please leave your message after the tone.”

“Aw, for Jesus sake, James, would you pick up the bloody phone for once in your life, you ...”

“Hello?”

“Oh, hi James, it’s Colin here. Just calling to see if you need picked up from the airport?”

“No, don’t be daft. I’m fine”

“Are you sure? Eh it’s no problem at all.”

“No, no I’ll just get a taxi or a bus or something.”

“It’s just the funeral starts at ten and... well... mind what happened at Dad’s?”

“Are you for real?”

“I’m not starting anything. I just think Mum would have wanted us all to be on time. You remember what she was like.”

“I told you for the last time. I took a flat on the way there and that’s why I was late. You’re one to talk, living two minutes down the road! Jesus Christ. Colin up on his high horse again.”

“A flat? Ah come off it! Is that why you came smelling of a few pints and so?”

“Get away and jump.”

The line goes dead.

Ring, ring.

"Hi, James, look, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have snapped. I just feel so terrible and I'm sure you do too. I've just been so stressed about this and-"

"It's grand."

"Listen, what time do you get in? Marie and I could pick you up. You could stay for a few nights and get some hot food? Might be good for you? You wouldn't have to worry about accommodation or cost or anything like that."

"I'm not some stray dog you know."

"Awk, James, I'm just trying to be civil."

"I don't need your charity. I was talking to Catherine yesterday and she's told me the bill for Mum's headstone and that, so I'll be paying my fair share."

"That's not really necessary, all things considered."

"And just what would you be considering now?"

"Just your, you know... situation and all that's gone on. C'mere, I'll pick you up from the airport and we'll sort it all out then?"

"I'll meet you and Catherine at the church."

"Please, James, stop being so difficult for once."

"Ten o'clock start?"

"...Ten o'clock."

"Good luck, Colin."

"Fine."

The line goes dead.

Elizabeth McMeekin

Scans & Scots

"It's a sequencing syndrome?" The baffled man in bed 4C asked me.

"Not quite. It's Brown-Sequard syndrome. Don't worry about the name though, it's just named after the man who first realised how it worked."

"Aye, right, okay. So ah've got a problem wi ma neck the doactor said? See ma Fiona will be phoning tomorrow and she's right nosey and she'll ask whits going on so you'll need tae explain it tae me so ah can tell her the morra."

"Yep, I can do. I tell you what, I'll start at the beginning and then you just jump in and stop me if you think I've said something wrong or you want me to say something again. Deal?"

"Aye, sounds grand, darlin." His white hair seemed to bounce as he nodded in agreement.

"So you had TB," I say. It's not quite a question, but not quite a statement either.

"Ah've always hud problems wi ma lungs you see, hen. Aye, that old chap said it wis TB but then ma back started tae hurt and so a thought it couldnae be the TB that wis the problem cause why would ma lungs make ma back sore? It disnae make sense."

I grab the yellow folder from the foot of his bed and flick through the notes in it to make sure I'm not about to speak a load of nonsense. "You're right, it is TB. So, it started in your lungs but it spread through your blood to some of the bones in your back. It's in 2 of the bones in that make up your spine. It's the same artery that supplies both the bones so it went into both of them."

"Ah didnae even ken ye could get TB in yer back. In my day it wis jist in yer lungs and then boof, either it's gone or you're gone. Simpler times, eh? Right so ah've got a lung problem in ma back. That'll make ma Fiona's head spin so it will." He chuckles to himself.

I try hard to hold back a laugh at the pensioner's statement. "Basically. It's a bit more than a lung

problem now though,” I say, gesturing at his drooping left wrist hanging off the side of his bed.

“Ach well, a jist always like tae be a bit extra. Ah’ve always like that. Even at the school. Ah remember when ah wis jist a boy, mibbae 8 or 9, ma best pal broke his wrist playing fitbaw. He wis the keeper aw the time, and a smashin’ wan at that. An older lad pelted the baw at him fae the penalty spot and busted his wrist up. An that wis him in a sling fir 3 weeks. A day or two aifter he wis back on the pitch we were playin’ against the next school ower and this bug brute o a boy slide tackled right intae me. Double fracture eh baith the bones in ma leg. Worst fitbaw injury the doacter had ever seen he said.” He smiles wistfully at the memory and then looks down at his left side, raising his eyebrows at his out of use arm. “Ach, I suppose ma airm is jist as much use as Davie’s airm wis back then, eh? Is it the TB that’s causin’ it to be aw useless then?”

“Double fracture? That’s impressive I’ll give you that. Well, it’s a bit more complicated than just the TB now, you see. You know the MRI you had done?”

He nods, his wire rimmed glasses sliding down his nose. He pushes them back up with his first finger and makes eye contact with me to indicate I should continue.

“So, the consultant has had a look at it, and she’s found an abscess in your neck, beside the bones that the TB is in. And that abscess is pushing on the spinal cord that runs down the middle of your neck. So that’s what’s making you unable to move your arm we think. Your other side is numb around your tummy area, isn’t it?”

“Right. So ah’ve got a lump in my neck which is stoppin’ ma brain from moving ma airm? Jesus, that sounds bad! Is it bad? Tell me!” His normally pale face is flushed and his eyes are staring intently at me. He completely disregards my question about the sensation on his trunk.

“Take a breath, Mr Slater. Take a nice deep breath.” I try to speak in my most reassuring voice, but I think I just sound like my voice had been put through a slow-motion app. “I’m sure the surgeons will be round to see you soon. In fact, I think they’ll be round before dinner today. That alright?”

“Aye, okay. That sounds fine. And they’ll be able to tell me aw aboot how and when they’ll be cuttin’ me open?” His face doesn’t look quite as flushed as before, but his voice is still a few octaves higher than usual.

“Yeah, they’ll be able to answer any questions that you’ve got and they’ll give you some more information about the timings and things too. In fact, if you’ve got any questions right now then you might want to write them down so you don’t forget.” I tilt my head in the direction of the pen lying diagonally on the lined paper which is balanced on the bedside table.

“Aye, ah’ll dae that. It’ll be like wan ae they quiz shows fae daytime TV. Except ah’ll be the laddie wae the microphone and they’ll aw be the wee contestants shittin’ thursels!”

He struggles to keep his laughter at bay till he can get his sentence out. I sit back further in the hard blue plastic chair, relaxing now that all trace of anxiety seems to have vanished from his body. “Hing oan, how does a lump in ma neck cause ma airm to be aw useless and ma other side tae be aw numb and tingly? Am sure wee Fiona will be asking me all sorts a hings aboot it.”

“It’s to do with different sets of nerves, which do different things, running together in the same bit of your spinal cord. It might be easier if I draw it out. Can I borrow your pen and paper?”

“Aye, aye nae bother.” He pushes the thin white bedsheets down from his chest to his hips, swivels around to face his bedside cabinet and lifts his right arm to grab the pen and paper. After twisting back around, he hands them to me but doesn’t lie back down. Instead, he leans further forwards, his good hand pushing him forwards so that he can see the notebook I am now holding.

Crossing my right leg over my left, I tuck a stray strand of red hair behind my ear before balancing his notebook on my right knee. I draw a rather large, imperfect rectangle in the middle of the page before drawing two horizontal lines through the top and bottom of the wonky shape. “Right, so the rectangle is your spinal cord. With me?”

“Aye.”

"And the top horizontal line is the bottom of your brain, or the top of your neck. Whatever way you want to think about it. The bottom line is your shoulders, or the bottom of your neck." I glance over the top of my glasses to see Mr Slater nodding away to himself. "So if you think about your spinal cord as a road with 2 lanes. So you've got 2 lanes going one direction. One lane for the left-hand side of your body and one for the right. And you've got one of the road for sensory signals and another for movement signals." I quickly draw one large line straight down the middle. I indicate each of the segments, "And each of those lanes is a different type of nerve doing a different thing. And the cars on the lanes are the nerve signals travelling up those nerves (or lanes). At some point, each of these cars needs to swap over to the other lane. You still with me?"

"Aye, ah am. The nerves are aw the lanes on a road and they've got tae overtake and cheinge lanes on the wigh up. Ah wis a lorry driver aw ma days, hen. Ah ken the roads o' this country like the back ah ma haund. Ye can keep goin'"

"I couldn't have picked a better way to explain this then, eh?"

"Yer right oan the money there."

"So, in your case your road has a roadblock on 1 of its lanes right at the top line. And that roadblock is the lump caused by the TB in your neck." I flip the pen upside down and trace the cap along the horizontal line representing the bottom of the brain. "So depending on when the cars switch lanes, they may or may not get caught up in the roadblock. The cars on the first lane overtake as soon as they join the road but the cars in the other lane don't swap till later." As I speak, I draw. My first line begins on the left-hand side and proceeds upwards before crossing to the right-hand lane and continuing the rest of its journey on the right. My second line also travels up the road on the right but switches over just shy of the end of the rectangle and does the last stretch of its journey on the left-hand side. I mark a cross on the top of the left box to signal the roadblock AKA Mr Slater's neck lump. "And if the roadblock is on the first lane (like yours is) the cars on the first lane miss the roadblock, but the cars in the other lane will get caught up in it when they swap later on. So that nerve signal is being stopped at your lump and can't get to your brain. That's why you've only got that tingly and numb feeling on one side. And the same thing happens the other way around with the signal coming from your brain to your arm. So only one lane of the signals gets stopped at the lump and so only one of your arms isn't moving right." I raise my eyebrows at Mr Slater to see if I'm making any sense.

"Right oh. Ah'll be aw ready to tell Fiona in the mornin' when she phones askin'. Can ah keep yer picture to show her?"

Andrew Wall

Haiku

Twisting, turning night
Blank sky, no moon, stares back
Oh, why can't I dream?

Finlay Paterson
Another Happy Landing

“Hey Arthur,” I say excitedly.

“What’s up, Alex?”

“Let’s get this thing going, alright?”

“Sure! Will you manage on your own in the cockpit?”

“Of course I will, I sat my pilot’s exam last month!”

I get out my single bunk, Arthur on the top bunk and myself, the lucky one on the bottom, take a quick glance at my Space Corps Issue Pilot’s licence and delicately kiss it for good luck making sure Arthur doesn’t notice. I haven’t consulted the books since my exam (it went bloody great!) and I don’t think I need to any time soon considering how well I did. I’ve only had three accidents in the space of a month! Not many pilots can say that!

I slam down the hemispherical door release button and the mag-lock door makes an almighty clunk and a whoosh as the door slides open and reveals an elongated passageway with multiple mag-lock doors the same as each other. I pass through and come to the end of the lobby, where there is a door which states: “Captain and authorised personnel only.” Sitting the Pilots’ exam makes me authorised, at least I bloody hope so. I pass through the door with the same sequence as to the sleeping quarters, a thunk and a clunk in Space lingo. I sit down in the Captain’s chair: an imposing desk chair, grey leather and incredibly comfy - the perfect chair for everyone. I slot my all-access keycard into the ship’s dashboard which lights up a multitude of blinking LEDs in colours I can only imagine in dreams, along with multiple screens of varying types including one old cathode ray tube from the last century.

The beige backlit keyboard forms the main body of the console which appears to be an input for the whole control panel. The old screen appears to be a green monochrome variant and displays one word: “Password.” I enter the start-up sequence: one-three-blue-green. The screen clears and presents the same phrase as before. I know what I am doing! I enter another sequence: three-one-green-blue and the screen clears again but a dim image of the face of a man appears: military haircut, angular features, green eyes, green hair, green shades of everything.

“Hello, Captain, glad to see you’ve returned,” it says.

I must have entered the password correctly and it only took two whole attempts! How great!

“Walter, plot a course for Alpha Centauri,” I return.

“Alex, you are not cleared for this action,” it says scornfully, making my cheeks flush red.

“I sat the exam! I have a license! I’m a great pilot and I’ve studied all the books! What more can you ask for?” I retort.

“You have not passed your Space Pilots’ examination” it says.

“What? Yes, I have! Here’s my ID card!”

“Alex, your license is counterfeit and you failed your Pilot’s examination.”

“No it’s not! I’m a great pilot, I’ve operated many ships, ask Arthur!”

“Alex, I do not take kindly to your lies. I am alerting Captain Arthur and reporting you to the authorities,” said Walter in his artificial monotone voice.

I mutter curses under my breath... I sit back in the chair, helpless, waiting for Arthur. Arthur turns up after a short while after and screams at the top of his lungs, “What the hell have you done, Alex, you bumbling buffoon?”

“Well, I tried to plot a course to our destination but um, you know the rest,” I say in despair.

“You amaze me, you utter airhead! You think you’re the dog’s bollocks but your lies go on ad nauseam!”

“I’m sorry...”

“Maybe I’m too harsh on you, I won’t let Walter report you but you’re one strike away from shovelling shit or the being the scout for a landing zone.”

What could be worse than shovelling shit? I'd hate to do that for a living! Arthur fires up the computer again and has no problems with it, brings up the map and notices I plotted the wrong course. We were told to go to Alpha Centauri to see how the colony there is getting along so it's not like I was wrong. Arthur takes a deep breath and calmly explains that it's Proxima Centauri b - the planet and not the star. Of course, it's not the star but the planet, I know that.

The course is set and Arthur checks everything doubly and triply before engaging the engine, taking us up off the ground with a rumble and a faint hum from the engines. The Moon is disappearing from us at an astounding rate and before you can say Bob's your space uncle, the Moon is gone. Arthur engages the faster-than-light drive to take us to Proxima b, allowing the 4.2 light year distance to be covered in a matter of minutes rather than years or even generations like it used to half a century ago. Upon arrival, Proxima Centauri is right there, red and magnificent, divine and enthralling with the destination planet contrasting as a dark spot in front of the star.

Arthur takes us down into orbit, spotting a few plains where landing may be possible. He asks me to take the escape pod down to the surface, along with a navigation beacon for landing guidance – I willingly agree, after all what is there I can't do (apart from legally pilot a ship)? It might also make Arthur forget about getting rid of me. I walk out the cockpit and pass through the same corridor that the quarters are in and push the mag-lock release button for the door titled "Emergency Pods" and march in, with my chin up confidently – I'll do Arthur's task for me well, so well he will be proud of me. I enter one of the pods, it's small and smells of mould. There are two seats in it, a single control stick and a key card reader. I may not be able to pilot the ship but surely I can release the pod. Finally, something I should manage without a hitch, the pod door slams shut with a deafening clank and I am shoved out into space at some rate of space knots. The pod quickly shoots for the planet surface and lands half submerged in dusty ground with a huge wallop – the electronics are done for, there are no lights or communications with the exception of the emergency door release, which I pull, using all the might in my body until the door shoots off the front of the spacecraft.

The atmosphere is breathable here: who would've known? I clamber out of the shuttle and my feet hit the dust with the familiar softness of Earth. I retrieve the beacon, it's a long pole on a tripod with a small antenna on the top of it, activate it with a ping and wait for Arthur to come down. I prop myself against the antenna and hear the craft coming down faintly, getting gradually louder and louder until I feel the scorching heat of the engines directly above my head and slowly there was nothing more.

I had done my job, almost too well, so much so it cost me everything.

Jennifer MacLean **A Long Road Ahead**

"We wouldn't be in this situation if you had just swallowed your pride and asked for help," curses Beth. Euan's palms attack the steering wheel as they come to an abrupt stop at the service station.

"Well, if the GPS that you sang the praises of actually worked, then we wouldn't have gone the wrong way and ended up here either." Euan grabs the handbrake aggressively, jerking it upwards to engage it.

"Well, it's not my fault – I told you to take that turning miles back. But did you listen to me? Of course not. Yet here we are, getting even more petrol and spending more money. And we are still hours away."

"BETH! How many times do I have to tell you? That was completely the wrong direction. I don't want to hear about this turning again!" Euan's eyes spin as he stabs the buckle, freeing him from his seatbelt.

"This is your problem, Euan. You cannot admit when you're wrong."

In a single rash movement, Euan swings the door open and exits the car. With his hand grasping the doorframe, he leans his head back into the vehicle to face his displeased girlfriend. "I think you'll find; it's not me who thinks they're never wrong."

Before Beth can hurl her rebuttal at him, Euan's hand drives the door closed, sending shockwaves through the car. He paces to the passenger side where Beth's head is now leering out of the open window.

"How many times did I tell you to plan the route beforehand? This could have been avoided, Euan."

Euan turns to strip the fuel cap away from the car, avoiding Beth's stern glare. Before he can begin his task, Beth's voice sweeps through the entire station.

"Are you ignoring me now?!"

Euan's eyes dart to meet hers. "I'm not going to include everyone at this station in our conversation," Euan hisses.

"Would you just fill up the tank so we could actually try to get there before dark?"

Euan grapples with the fuel handle. "What does it look like I'm trying to do?" He fills the car to capacity, returns the nozzle to the frame and slams the car's cap shut.

"I found a route online so if you just take the next slip road we'll be on the right track," Beth looks up from her phone to face Euan. "At last."

He secures his seatbelt and mutters through gritted teeth, "There's a long way still to go on the motorway. I'm not going off the beaten track again just because you can't read a map."

Euan connects the key with the car and jolts it clockwise to start the engine.

"I'm not stupid. Is that what you think of me?" demands Beth as Euan taxis towards the junction.

"No, you're just twisting my words now," Euan's gaze dashes between left and right.

As the car nears closer to the junction, the haunting flash and ring of the 'check engine' notification erupts.

"What have you done now?!" shouts Beth.

Euan catches Beth's darting stare at the dashboard's flashing light. "I haven't done anything! Whatever it is, you would think that it's my fault, wouldn't you?"

"Where has that come from?" asks a bewildered Beth.

Suddenly, their heated exchange is interrupted by a churning engine that weakens as it rejects the fuel. As realisation creeps in, Beth fires her glare at her boyfriend:

"Surely not. Don't tell me that you've done what I think you have."

Jie Fei Lau

Haiku

I love you more than
Donald Trump loves himself and
white supremacists

I want to shower
then eat a tiramisu
and cry my heart out.

Callum Anderson
Positive (an Extract)

A pink spotlight lights DSR. Tom stands next to a tall table with a martini perched on top of it.

Tom: Ah'm HIV positive. It es pint Ah've come ti terms wae at. Nine month ago ah wis diagnosed an' nine month ago ah staired receivin' the peels as treatment. Er's nae pint gan inti the details oh how it happened, it jist did. Bit fit's for yi winna ging by yi.

Fan ah foon oot ah jist shut doon. Ma hale body jist froze, and ah couldna spik, it felt like my wirl'd wis crumblin aroon mi. Ih words birl'd roon ma heed as though they were een oh they balls in a squash court. Fit happent aifter at wis a whirlwind wae me stanning in ih centre jist tryin ti figure oot fit wis next. Ti be honest, ah didna ken fit wis next. Ah niver wis feert for ma life or onythin – da get me wrang – ah kent thit cause oh the peels ah wid be able to live langer an healthier. Fit ah did fear wis ih consequences, ih attitudes, ih folk ah could potentially lose foriver. At wis the maist frightenin thing.

Ower ih followin couple oh month, ah decided ti reveal ma status ti a few oh ma closest pals. Although shocked, they were generally affa supportive an continued to gee me the same love thit they ayeways hid. Ah kept these folk close ti mih and formed my ain cocoon; awa fae the rest of the wirl'd. Faniver ah needed them, they were 'ere, an they ken't. Bit... they could only ken so much. They couldna understan fit ah'd been through. They couldna understan ih moment far yi learn your "status". They couldna understan ih stigma thit surrounds me ivry single day.

A puckle oh months doon ih line, ah built up ih courage ti tell ma close faimly. Es wis een oh the scariest things ah think ah've iver deen. Ah mine tellin ma mam like it wis yisterdi.

Ah arrived back ti oor faimly hame to an overwhelmin supply oh butteries an tea. Ma mam his ayeways been well kint as a hostess wae the mostest. She smiled as she walked tiward mih wae her arms wide open. Ah automatically cuddled inti her, it reminded mih oh her cuddles aifter the time ah fell aff ma big reid bike. My hairt poonded in ma chest as though it wis tryin ti escape its bony cage. A'm still surprised thit she niver felt it or even heard it. She did her usual of pushin mih quickly into the living room, the posh een mind you and nae the back een, we sat down with oor big Sports Direct mugs an got comfy. Ih posh livin room is ih een wi keep fir special occasions, yi ken? Christmas Day, Hogmanay, Funerals. Ih rest oh ih year it's like North Korea, yi ging naeway near at place or risk death. So, ah must be in ih gwweed books. "Ah pit three sugars in, jist how you like it!" she winked. Ah laughed and took a big sip, "Ta, Mam". Ah sat tryin ti find ih words ti say, nithin wis comin. "Hiv yi heard fit Paul and Michelle hiv cahed their newest bairn? Yi'll niver believe it!" Mam said excitedly. Ah played along jist ti fill in some time, "No ah hinna, fit hiv they cahed it?" Shi repositioned hersel so thit she was properly facin mih, "Weel yi ken thit ih rest oh thim are cahed Matthew, Marc, Luke, John, Abigail an Rebecca... Well they've cahed es een PIRELLI?! Ah thocht Marc wae a C wis bad bit at jist tiks the buiscuit!" Ah laughed, genuinely surprised it ih name, bit ih laugh faded inti silence.

Immediately shi kint somethin wis wrang. Am sure it's nae jist my mam. Ah mams hae some sort oh sixth sense far they jist ken fit yer thinkin or feelin withoot yi haein ti say a word. Ah love an hate at quality in ma mam, shi's ayeways been able ti catch mih fan I've lied. Ih worst bein ih time ah decided to hae some drinks at ma pal Chloe's hoose doon ih road an came hame blootered tryin ti say ah wis sober – shi wisna pleased ti say thit least.

Ah burst into tears. Here it wis, ih moment ah hid bin dreadin wis right there in front oh mih.

"Mam, Ah'm HIV positive."

She came over to the cooch beside mih and hugged me, ah cried inti her shooder. Ere wis nithin else ah could dee bit cry. Ah kent shi was hurtin ina bit she jist kept a brave face an held mih. A obviously hid ti explain thit ah wis safe, takin ah ih peels and protectin mysel. But ah kent shi wis scared, probably jist as feirt as ah wis...

Grindr app notification SFX.

Ach shit sorry! Ah forgot ti turn ma phone onti silent...

Tom quickly checks his phone to see the notification that has appeared, and he pauses and takes a deep breath.

A recently foond ih courage ti doonload Grindr again. At app his bin the bane oh my life fir a lang time bit it's sae addictive. Ah deleted it jist aifter ma diagnosis cause ah couldna bear ti read ony oh the messages. At wis the aul me, ah wisna at person onymare.

Ah also made ih decision ti show thit am HIV positive an on medication on my profile. Ah'm undetectable an untransmissible. Es means thit even though ah hae the disease ah'm still able ti hae unprotected sex wae folk an nae pass on ih disease. Ah still prefer ti use a condom though, jist ti make sure thit bathe oh us involved feel comfortable.

Ah thocht ah wis deen the right thing, bit obviously nae... At message ah jist got is a message fae an anonymous profile cahin me a dirty whore fa deserves to rot and die cause of fit ah've deen. Anither message followed at een questionin why ah hid ih nerve ti show ma face on Grindr again aifter gettin HIV.

Es is ih reality. Es is ih stigma thit us folk livin wae HIV continue ti face. These are thi things thit folk dinna understan. Even ih folk you'd think wid understan ih disease dinna. A try ti stay strong an live ma life ti ih fullest, believe ma ah do, bit here ah am bein pushed back into ih same shame an self-hatred ah've tried so hard ti push through. Ah canna thole it.

Grinder notification SFX. The spotlight dims to a blackout.

Omonuwa Iredia **80th Birthday**

My knees hurt as he bounces on my lap
But the joy overrides the pain

My younger self stands before me
Tall, bright and strong
But with my wife's eyes

He smiles warmly, my son,
Then with a strength I once had
Scoops my genes from my lap

My 80th Birthday:
I see my own life before me,
An endless cycle, repeating.

Without real self-doubt
The life I might have sought out.

Rachel McGuire

Diner

The jingle of the doorbell rings as we push the heavy door into the diner. Before I can get my bearings, a smiling American rushes into my face. A blond haired blue-eyed American dream with beaming smile to match. Her walk is bouncy and manner happy, either a true lover of the job or wonderful actress. She shouts hello and begins imploring us to allow her to help us get to our seats, which is somewhat disconcerting.

The tables are built into the wall with red plastic benches, large containers of sugar and syrup and a large menu which looks more like a book. A typical American diner.

She finally allows us to sit alone and have a moment of peace but only after begging us to ask for help should we need. I guess this is the famous American customer service, but it all seems a bit much for me. Everyone else in the diner seems to be smiling and enjoying themselves, no uncomfortable faces. It seems rather that this is how things are expected to be and that people are fond of this treatment. Suddenly my being Scottish makes me the odd one out, that my reaction is now the strange one, though I find it hard to believe people enjoy that kind of treatment.

I look at the multitudes of options and decide to go for something familiar- pancakes. No need to try something new when already I am out of my comfort zone. With that ordeal over, I start to look around. I see that half of the place is full of smiling families and happy eating. It decidedly warm in here with smells of fried food and a homey feel, I think it's rather nice.

We go to look for our waitress and, like the good little worker that she is, she appears as if out of thin air, tail wagging. I remember at this moment the way she earns her living by mostly tips and think that she really is putting the work in. She graciously takes our orders and we settle back to wait for our food, looking around some more at this new environment.

It was at this moment I discovered a previously unknown fact about America and a horrendous one at that. Something that realistically should not have got me so worked up and angry but shocking nonetheless. Maybe it was the jetlag that could be blamed for such a visceral reaction, but I still stand by what I say in retaliation. I had discovered that Americans do not know how to use a knife and fork. A skill so simple and basic, it is not even thought about until it is done so incorrectly you cannot avert your eyes from the travesty. Something so natural to be made so unnatural that it grabbed my attention and I was unable to look away.

I watched in horror as these people used forks only, struggling to hack away at their meals with a blunt fork edge. They would saw and saw at a piece of meat for what seemed like an age, with none other than their god forsaken knife right in front of them. The knife sat tauntingly so close to them, but clearly, so far. I watched and watched and was increasingly dumbstruck. I wanted to stand up and shout that the knife was right there, that the time for struggling is no more. That there was no such need to be so inefficient, the tool they needed was there- they just had to pick up and use them.

No one else seemed to pick up on this issue. Again, my being the stranger became apparent as these smiling people stayed smiling. It was clearly my problem, but only if they could see if it was really theirs. I was starting to look to myself now. Was it me? Was the British method just old fashioned? Were our American cousins on to something revolutionary?

No. Definitely not. One woman was practically building up a sweat just trying to cut into her breakfast. I refuse to believe it's a better way. It was all going downhill, my admiration for America dwindling, my trust, my dreams. All ruined by a knife and fork.

But then a hero arose. A man in the table next to me stood out from the crowd, a maverick amongst measly men. Average height and build with brown hair, but he was turning out to be no average joe. He had ordered a steak (this was still breakfast time by the way) and using his knife so beautifully he started to cut. I thought: my goodness; this man deserves an award. An elite soldier sent to save them

all. Someone valiant and daring. Being the odd one out in a room full of your countrymen, to go against the grain so boldly and you alone to reap the benefits. I was so proud of him, a tear nearly brought to my eye. And as I was about to stand and congratulate this wonderful man, I watched as he put his knife down again and switched his fork to his right hand.

My knight in shining armour; a sheep in wolf's clothing. He was teasing me with a vision of what could be. I guess there is just no hope.

My spirits were low, but here came our waitress with a mountain of food. I thought, well at least she is impressive: the sheer volume of food she can carry is a talent. The true hero of this America ought to be her. While it seems utensils might be beyond them, this loyal worker bee has done her job with noticeable effort and her smile still in place. I cannot yet say this type of service is my cup of tea, but hard work is hard work.

These monstrous piles of grease and stodge seemed a great way to drown my sorrows and I gave a good American effort at eating my plate. I used my knife almost more than I needed just hoping someone around might notice and see how truly useful it could be. I don't believe anyone did, but I was trying and that is what counts. It strikes me dumb that in the supposed 'best and most advanced' country in the world would be unable to use a knife and fork.

But then a smile is brought to my face, I think that it's a rather good thing in the end. No matter how big and powerful America is, it can always be remembered that its people cannot grasp how to efficiently use a knife and fork. We all need humbling sometimes I suppose.

Haiku

Humid heat rising
Vibrant colours all round
Light enraptures all.

Mohammed Rafe Hussain

Marhaba

"Marhaba, welcome to Saudi Arabia. We have safely landed in Jeddah, the local time is 13:47. We hope you enjoyed your flight. Please keep your seatbelt fastened until the sign turns off"

Either no-one on this plane understood English, or they simply didn't care about decorum. There was a rush of pilgrims jumping out of their seats to reach for their luggage in the overhead compartment. I couldn't blame them; the midday sun was beaming in through the oval windows and the pilot had turned off the air conditioning for landing – but the restlessness in the atmosphere only boiled my blood. We were all roasting in this tin-can.

All but a few on the plane were dressed in the pilgrim's ihram. For men, this was two large pieces of white cloth fashioned into what could be described as a kilt crossed with a toga. As a chubby teenager, I was embarrassed to be entering the airport looking like a lost chocolate Mormon monk. Once on the plane, I was so relieved to see others dressed like me that I didn't mind the smell of body odour permeating the cabin – but my brother disagreed.

"Mo, you stink," the ten-year-old mini-me, Nabee, squealed.

"No, I don't, mate. I emptied the can of Lynx before we got to security. It's that geezer in front of us." I pointed to the skinny Arab man in front of us, clamouring for his Gucci backpack whilst trying not to let his toga-kilt fall.

This caught the attention of my mother. Bless her soul, she had been dealing with our bickering the entire flight whilst trying to read her Qur'an and tending to our toddler brother.

"Remember why we've come here, bubba." My mother gritted her teeth trying to keep composure on this holy occasion. My father with his newly grown salt and pepper beard nodded in approval.

It felt unfair. Just because my parents recently rediscovered God, it didn't mean that I had to come halfway across the world to perform pilgrimage with them to appease their sense of Muslim Guilt, right? I was only fourteen years old and had just found out what 'girls' were. What did I even have to repent for?

The cabin doors finally released and the desert heat blasted into the cabin like an oven door had just been opened. How was it even possible for the temperature to rise? Everyone began to charge through the doors as if the Archangel Gabriel himself was beckoning them. Of course, our family refused to partake in this savagery. We waited for the rush to die down and were the last to leave the plane, which meant that we were also the last people to get to the terminal.

Up until this point, my shiny red passport had meant that I got preferential treatment in airports all over the world. Not in Saudi Arabia, though. There were only five immigration officers trying to serve the hundreds of people arriving for umrah rituals. This was all made worse by the fact that no one had an inkling of what it meant to stand in an orderly queue. After half-an-hour of waiting, my father's mellow mood turned sour and his Bengali instincts kicked in. With my giant father at the helm of our formation, the five of us juggernauted our way through the swathes of pilgrims, bulldozing the elderly and children with no remorse. We were impenetrable with our arms interlinked so well that a Roman Testudo formation would be put to shame. As we reached the desk, we were greeted by a sleep-deprived Arab man with a forced smile and a five o'clock shadow.

"Ahlan."

"We're from the UK, we're here to perform Umrah." As my father waved our passports and tickets, the officer's cheesy smile dropped.

"Sorry, you are not Arab? This is Arab line only." He spoke in broken English.

My father winced, holding back the urge to deck the officer – who had literally just served a family of Malaysians. My mother stepped in.

"How much to stay in this queue?"

"Five-hundred Riyals, five of you, so one-hundred each. Great price."

"What's that in British pounds?"

"British pound?" The officer pulled out a calculator, tapped some numbers and showed my father.

"ONE. HUNDRED. POUNDS?" My father was bright red at this point.

"Honey, remember why we are here." My mother gently stroked my father's bare arm poking out of his kilt-toga. It somehow worked. He sighed and pulled out two fifty-pound notes from his money-belt and handed them over to the officer who was now smiling again.

"Great. You can go now."

"You haven't stamped our passports."

"Oh yes, sorry, I will do this now!"

When the officer had completed our paperwork my father snatched our passports and stormed through the rotating turnstile. We followed quickly behind like little hatchlings after an angry bearded swan.

At the exit we were welcomed by a sea of men also wearing the kilt-togas, but with official looking "Ministry of Hajj" security passes dangling from their necks. A scrawny one with a long white beard held a sign; "Mohammed & Family" written in Arabic.

"Is that our tour guide?" My brother asked me.

"I don't know, man. Why did he only give his first name? It's not like Mohammed is the most common name in the world."

“Ah shit. We’re going to be here forever”

“Language!” My mother heard our whispers with her sonar hearing. She knew we were right, though. How on earth were we meant to find our guide in the chaos? Dad had the answer. He would simply call the gentleman. After fumbling around for a few minutes, my father was able to find a SIM card and install it in his phone. A barrage of notifications in Arabic came through and crashed his phone.

The scrawny man with the long white beard noticed my father fumbling about. He slowly walked over to us, looking like his shins would snap under the weight of his own body.

“Mohammed and family?”

“Are you our tour guide? We’re looking for one called Mohammed.” My father replied.

“Yes, assalaamu’alaikum, I am Mohammed, I am your tour guide! This must be Mohammed, Mohammed and baby Mohammed? Lovely to meet you all, you came out very early! Usually our British guests are the last”

“Yes, this is my wife, Lin”

“Good. Let’s get you to Makkah so we can perform umrah immediately.” He didn’t even glance at my mum.

I was shocked. We were trusting this man blindly. He might be some black-market organ thief. As we were getting into his blacked out 4x4, my dad finally checked his details. He was indeed Ustaadh Mohammed, our tour guide.

The journey from Jeddah Airport to Makkah is about three hours. However, the endlessness of the desert meant that it felt significantly longer.

“Shweya...SHWEYAAA!” My mum screamed. She had learnt this word only five minutes ago when our tour guide muttered it to our reckless driver. She didn’t like the fact that we were hurtling across the desert roads at what felt like 200km/h, overtaking buses and trucks without hesitation or use of indicators.

“Is that a bus without a roof?” My middle brother pointed amazed.

The tour guide turned to us, excited. “Yes, some of the Shi’a pilgrims believe that they can’t cover their heads. Meaning that a roof on their bus would be invalidating their pilgrimage. Crazy isn’t it? The things people do for religion”. I looked down at my toga-kilt and sandals.

“Yeah, crazy,” I muttered to myself.

“Wait, but doesn’t their plane have a roof?”

“Well this is the thing; they don’t consider the pilgrimage to begin until they put on their ihram. So, they just put it on when they get here.”

“Wait, so I didn’t have to wear this costume through airport security?”

“It’s not a costume, Mo! It’s an ihram!” Mum bit back.

I crossed my arms and slumped in a huff.

“How long do we have left of this journey, Ustaadh?” My father longingly asked the tour guide. He could sense that things were getting tense.

“About forty-five minutes. We’ll drop off your luggage at the hotel, get you all something to eat and then begin the rituals at the Holy Mosque. Then if you still have some energy, we’ll go shopping for perfumes!”

“Sounds great! See boys, we’re almost there!”

“Wait, so we won’t get a chance to nap?”

“You had your chance to sleep on the plane! You just chose to watch Friends instead of sleeping.”

“What? This is child abuse!”

“Back in my day, there was no such thing as child abuse. If we spoke back to our parents, we’d get hit in the face with the slipper”

“Now that’s clearly child abuse, Dad.”

“No, that was discipline. You boys are spoilt. Discipline builds character. I should have disciplined

you boys more. People would kill to be able to visit the Holy Lands.”

“Well, they wouldn’t be very good Muslims if they did that, would they?”

My father immediately started reaching for his sandal.

“Kamal, remember why we’re here.” My mother’s calm voice pacified my father. He put his footwear back on, closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and sighed.

“Oh look, we’re driving past Ta’if. This is where the Prophet, peace be upon him, had one of his hardest trials.” Ustadh Mohammed was really trying to de-escalate the situation. “There’s a really good Hardees here, do we want to stop for a break and some food?”

“YES.” We all cried out. I was warming to this Ustadh dude. Everyone knows that the quickest way to an obese teenager’s heart is through American fast food. It was all halal, too! God Bless Saudi America. Ustadh spoke to the driver in Arabic and gestured towards a sign that said Ta’if.

We pulled up, the smell of grease was surprisingly refreshing. Nabee tugged at my ihram.

“Bro, how do they eat?” He pointed to a table of women wearing niqaabs. We both stared, hoping to see the answer to how these women were going to tackle their pile of individually wrapped cheeseburgers.

“Ooh, I think she’s going to take it off!”

“Doesn’t that defeat the purpose?”

“Wait, she’s just lifting it up. Look! She’s just sliding it under her niqaab!”

“Doesn’t she look like one of those automatic piggy banks that takes your pennies?”

“Oh yeah, she does. Looks like she’s eaten a lot of coins in her time.”

Hearing us, our mother slapped us both on the back of our heads so hard that we could feel our brains rattling inside our skulls. Surprisingly, no one turned around to see, except my father.

“Honey, remember why we’re here.” Dad chuckled to himself.

We walked towards The House of Allah, my senses overwhelmed; my eyes were struggling to focus as I was blinded by the bright rays of the sun reflecting off the dust in the atmosphere, unable to settle due to the constant hustle and bustle of life on the street kicking up more dust into the air, never letting it settle. My sense of smell assaulted by the car fumes mixed with the aroma of mint tea being poured, liberally from great heights, into tiny curvaceous glasses by street vendors. My hearing deafened from people shouting the contents of their menus and wares, fighting over the constant sound of cars frustrated car horns, in an attempt to lure in new customers to their tiny cafés. My skin felt like it was going to blister from the heat, I thought I could see my sweat evaporating.

As we reached the Holy Mosque my head was beginning to feel dull and heavy. This paired with disorientation made it impossible for me to walk in a straight line. I was drunk on sleep deprivation. I wanted to go home.

“Take off your shoes, we are entering the Mosque area!” Ustadh urged us, snapping me back to the reality of where I was.

I looked up and saw a pristine marble arch that would allow the passage of two elephants, the ancient oak doors adorned with grand geometric gilding made me feel so tiny. I wondered how strong the people who close it at night must be – but then I remembered that these gates never close. They are gates to The House of Allah, always open, as they should be. Technically, every Mosque around the world is a House of Allah, this one being the only one that is truly open at all times.

None of us spoke a word. We were all in awe of our surroundings. My mother was staring at the towering minarets, with intricate carvings that are even visible from what seemed like miles away. My father pointed at the top of the arch,

“Look here, it says Baab Fattah, which is the ‘Gate of Victory’, if you get lost, find someone wearing a Ministry of Hajj lanyard and wait for me here.” Dad looked at our blank faces.

"Boys, this is serious. What is this gate called?"

"Baab Fattah"

"Good." He gestured to Ustaadh to lead the way.

As we stepped in, a cool breeze laced with aromatic musk and incense sent shivers down my spine. It wasn't air-conditioning; it was a genuine breeze – in the middle of the desert! I looked around, seeing thousands of people around me here for the same purpose. Some were reading the Qur'an, some were resting, and others were drinking water from the endless supply of holy water. All waiting for the adhaan, the call to prayer, to signify the time for the congregation.

My attention turned to an elderly man sobbing, prostrated on all fours with his head on the floor. My line of sight followed the direction in which he was bowing. There it was – the Ka'ba. My knees gave way, and I began sobbing inexplicably. My wails felt like they were resounding across the world, yet no one paid any attention to me. With every tear my chest felt lighter. I didn't know it had become this heavy. I wouldn't be able to express those emotions with justice. It was pure euphoria – I finally understood. It was as if I had been alone my entire life up until this point.

I had seen depictions of the Ka'ba my entire life, but no one told me how inspiring it would be in person. It was nothing like the tiny black box I had seen on television and paintings. Instead, it was a giant fifteen-meter by fifteen-meter black structure, adorned with verses of the Qur'an in gold thread running all the way around it. Hundreds of people marching around it in swathes whilst chanting. This was called Tawaf, the first action of Umrah.

"Subhan-Allah, Alhamdu-lillah, Allahu-Akbar, LA ILAHA IL-ALLAH." My heart started beating to the rhythm of the supplication. My entire perspective on life was changed. I felt insignificant and tiny, yet I had never felt as strong as I did in that moment. I was no longer alone – it was as if I knew what it truly meant to be a human. For the first time in my life, I felt connected to my Creator. For the first time, I was not thinking of only myself. I didn't care about anything else other than this exhilaration. Not the high expectations of my family nor the cruelty of bullies and teachers at school. All I cared about at this point was embracing my insignificance in relation to the infinite cosmos of life.

My father embraced me and together we joined the Tawaf. Being lost in the crowd of white ihrams. Walking side by side with strangers, with other creations of Allah. The once beaming sun had begun to set. Our faces were lit orange from underneath by the reflection of the fiery sky in the white marble flooring. Reminiscent of the yellow glow produced by buttercup flowers on the school field on a hot British summer's day. I held onto my father for dear life, so I would not be consumed by the rush of people looking for eternal salvation. People running away from their troubled sinful pasts and chasing a future of blessed tranquillity. People clamouring to reach the black stone on the eastern corner of the Ka'ba – said to be once white, now blackened by the sins of mankind. People kissing the stones of Abraham. We were a part of this mass hysteria yet were wholly aware of the absurdity of it all. But I understood what they were all feeling – I was one of them.

As our shadows began to lengthen across the pristine white floor, the call to prayer echoed through the chambers of the mosque. The whole Tawaf slowed down, as if to show respect. My father grabbed me by the arm and pulled me out of the frenzy. As I gasped for the first time, I noticed how sweet it was to breathe. I felt reborn.

Valliamai Muthuganesan

Haiku

Still feeling hungry
Time to raid the fridge – oh look!
Leftover milkshakes.

Afterword: Bibliotherapy by Conor McAvoy

As long as I can remember, I have always been a reader. I distinctly remember being bought a small lilac copy of, *The Twits* by Roald Dahl in a bookshop in Fermanagh and being proud that it was the first proper book that I had read. This childhood love of reading doesn't seem to be a rarity amongst medics – most people who start their medical training are regarded as academic and often when you are in school, this means being encouraged to read.

However, it seems to be much more unusual for reading novels for fun to continue into adulthood, especially when we start university. The amount of time spent reading about medicine within the course is undeniably a large one and the rise in knowing how to spell hydroxychloroquine often coincides with a decline in reading anything for pleasure.

At the end of my third year of medicine the house that I had lived in was becoming a convent (which is a story for another time) and I was to move out. While I was packing my room up, I realised that the majority of the books that I had bought or brought with me to the house were largely unread. I looked at the wooden bookcase beside the bed and realised that I had read almost none of the books in it.

I was moving out of the house to go and spend a year in Inverness. I was moving into hospital accommodation which would be a four bedroom flat with a small kitchen and very little room for anything. I didn't have a car but I was getting a lift with my friend Sara. As I sat crying on the staircase (partly out of sadness in leaving my home and also because I realised how much stuff I was about to try and exploit poor Sara to shift to Inverness), she arrived.

She stared at the ridiculously large pile to move in disbelief.

"Is this bookcase really coming?"

"Yes."

"We can put it in first and see what we can fit in around it, but I'm drawing the line at taking more than two vases."

"That's fair," I replied, moving one of the four vases to the charity shop pile.

The fourth year of medicine is largely a clinical year at the University of Aberdeen. You begin in summer and rotate through all the medicine specialities grouped together with similar specialities in blocks. It is often regarded as the hardest year in medical education. You transition from a largely academic study of medicine and actor patients to time spent in hospital with real patients and real doctors as well as trying to revise for your medical finals. And to call it fourth year is a bit of a misnomer as it ended up lasting well over a year thanks to the global pandemic.

The year in Inverness threw many surprises my way but the one that maybe surprised me the most was my rediscovery of the sheer joy of reading for pleasure. I don't think I could have got through the difficulties of fourth-year medicine without reading. I'm not sure what exactly reignited the spark for reading other than the guilt of making Sara drive a bookcase in a Clio as it isn't like I had more time to read. I had also recently started going out with a beautiful English Literature student who was better read than me, so that probably helped too.

Arguably, one of the biggest spurs may have been the fact that my conversations in Inverness became firmly entrenched in medicine. I was living in a four-bed flat filled with medical students, in an apartment block also filled with medical students, five minutes from the hospital. Almost everyone I knew in Inverness was involved in healthcare and it meant that my access to non-medicine related topics of conversations was woefully depleted. Reading a novel felt like I gained some access to something that wasn't medicine and for the time that I was reading I didn't have to think about what was going at the hospital I could see from my kitchen window.

My year in Inverness brought me into contact for the first time with patients who had genuinely awful things happening to them. The incident that stands out most occurred just before Christmas (around five months into fourth year) on my obstetrics and gynaecology placement. As a male medical student

I had anticipated an easy block due to patients preferring not to have anyone extraneous present during intimate consultations. For some reason everyone in Inverness seemed happy to have me present for every uterine prolapse surgery, pessary placement or cervical smear that was going. Instead of having half days thanks to a patient's right to refuse a medical student, my contact time seemed to have trebled.

The awful incident occurred while I was on my night shift with the midwives. I had been with a patient who was labouring with her sixth child for five hours. She was a young mum, her previous births had not been complicated and the delivery was going well. However things quickly changed when it was realised that she had a placental abruption and the baby's heart rate started dropping and labour was not progressing.

The room was quickly flooded with clinicians and I stood in a corner, terrified that I was about to watch a mother and a baby die. The baby was delivered with great difficulty and the floor was covered with blood. He had to be cared for in neonatal ICU for several weeks after. As I walked home in the morning I was struck by how awful what I had just seen happen and what was more awful was that that was just a working day for some of the healthcare workers that had helped at the birth.

I imagine that birth might be one of the worst days of that woman's life. She will probably look back on it for years to come and still be traumatised by what happened. But that wasn't the only baby or mother that I saw come close to death that week and I had only been there a couple of weeks and I was just a medical student!

I left after that birth but the midwives I was working with went straight into looking after another patient. It helped me realise that medicine can never be allowed to become the only thing that we have in our lives. There is no way I think I can get through a career where I might be present at the lowest, scariest points in people's lives and have nothing outside of it to take my mind off it. For me, I believe that rediscovering reading for pleasure was my way of having some escape in that difficult year.

By February, I was finding that I was starting to struggle. The year had been long and final exams were getting closer. A good friend of mine died in February so around the anniversary I have found that I tend to feel much more blue than usual. That year I spent most of the anniversary reading.

I picked something that I had read before and knew I loved – *Cold Comfort Farm* by Stella Gibbons. It is the story of Flora Poste, who moves to the countryside to live with her estranged relatives after her parents die. The eponymous farm is deep in the Sussex countryside and the comedy of the novel deals with the contrast between Flora, a practical cosmopolitan woman, and her melodramatic, highly strung rural relatives.

It is one of the funniest books I have ever read and reading it is frankly a pleasure. I once lent it to my mum who said she found it middling and I have never really trusted her taste ever since. While reading *Cold Comfort Farm* that day I was still unhappy in the sense that it hadn't removed my grief or the fact that things were difficult, but I was given a respite while reading it. I gave myself access to a world where I could laugh at someone else's life without having to worry about what was happening in mine. 2020 will not just be remembered for me personally as the year I rediscovered reading. In March COVID-19 led to us having to suspend our studies and move out of hospital accommodation. Due to the lack of any clarity about what would happen, my dad decided to drive to Inverness and move everything we could fit into his car and drive back to Ireland. The last couple of days in the accommodation were fraught and emotional. When my dad arrived after driving twelve hours from Belfast I was reminded of why I had cried the last time I had to pack a car. With bookcase taking up most of the car once again we travelled back but this time much better read.

I remember on the ferry on the way home to Ireland reading *Slapstick* by Kurt Vonnegut. It's a dark comedy about an alternative America where a mad president presides over an island in New York thanks to the decimation of the country by a pandemic. On reflection it seems slightly too on the nose to be enjoyable, seeing how the rest of 2020 panned out, but at the time, in the middle of the uncertainty, there was definite release in reading about something I knew wasn't real and engaging in

an activity that allowed some escape from stress.

Finals were pushed back and back and my return to Scotland was uncertain but the way I occupied my time in lockdown was by reading. I started with Joan Didion (I cannot recommend *Play As It Lays* enough) then *The Plague* by Albert Camus (again slightly on the nose but don't think there is a better time to read it than in a pandemic), a Beryl Bainbridge book, books about civil rights, the diary of Anne Frank, murder mysteries, numerous short story collections – and discovered how much I enjoyed MFK Fisher, an obscure mid-century food writer who I'm not sure could cook (one of her recipes involves toast soaked in milk) but can definitely write. I also learned that I really truly hate James Joyce and wouldn't subject *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* on a fire.

When finals started getting closer again, now in August, I almost doubled my reading as all my life seemed to consist of was revision. Having a break for half an hour to lie in the sun and read something that taught me literally nothing about medicine was a joy and what helped keep me from breaking under the stress.

By the time 2020 finished I had read just over one hundred books, probably ten times more than I had read the year before. The benefits of reading novels for medics I'm sure extends into our clinical work. I think reading about other people must make you more empathetic and reading almost certainly helps your communication skills. Both skills are vital to be a doctor but they aren't the reason I read. I think, to me anyway, the most important benefit to reading novels is simply that it brings me great joy... Faced with some of the days that I have already had in medicine I am glad I have found a simple pleasure like reading. In medicine having something we do for pure enjoyment is worthwhile... because some days having a simple pleasure outside of medicine is all we will have to help us cope.

Omonuwa Iredia

Haiku

Full, ripe with flavour
Dry and shrunken with flavour
Grape versus raisin

Cover illustration: Morven Greer
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