

A Double Dose of Verbal Remedies

Creative Writing by Medical Students

Volume I

Selected and edited by Helen Lynch and Enxhi Mandija

In memoriam
Dr Jeannie MacLeod (1874-1902)



My great aunt Jeannie MacLeod was an outstanding medical student and one of the first women to qualify as a doctor in Scotland. Because she was a woman, she could not be admitted to the University of Aberdeen without first undertaking a Lady Literate in the Arts qualification from St Andrew's. Once on the medical course, she worked hard and won many prizes. She was president of the newly formed Women's Medical Society and also contributed to university discussions on arts and literature. As the only woman in her year, she was initially resented by a significant number of the men. Overcoming considerable prejudice, she qualified in April 1902 with glowing references from all her teachers. Tragically, she committed suicide after just a week of working at the Hospital for Sick Children.

Jeannie did not leave a suicide note and we do not know for sure why she killed herself. There was no history of mental illness and none of her family and friends could make sense of her death.

In press reports, long hours and overwork were blamed. Her parents were told of a child on the ward who had died for whom Jeannie felt responsible.

In their work, doctors witness considerable suffering and are often faced with the futility of their efforts. The NHS pays lip service to a no-blame culture, but the reality is sometimes different. Importantly, doctors are often the first to blame themselves when things go badly. This is particularly painful for those who have been selected for academic excellence in science, who often have perfectionist tendencies. Support systems and clinical supervision are clearly essential, but I believe that the medical humanities also have a powerful role to play.

All the arts, but particularly prose, poetry, music and visual culture can teach us a lot about what it means to be human. Studying medical humanities can enhance compassion and improve communication, leading to better patient care. By strengthening professional identity and commitment to the values of medicine, it can also help prevent burnout. Everyone involved in Aberdeen Medical School's Medical Humanities course is to be congratulated for tapping into and facilitating the expression of the enormous creativity demonstrated in this volume.

I am therefore delighted to sponsor this edition of "Verbal Remedies" to honour the memory of Dr Jeannie MacLeod.

Dr Robert Clarke FRCP FRCGP

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Text Haiku
Swetha Anandan

I love you, darling.
Love you, baby gorilla.
Thanks, autocorrect.

Peter and Ailsa
Katherine Blum

“Would you like more coffee? I made a fresh pot.” Peter was standing at the back door and raised the coffee pot to gesture over to her mug. He gave it a small shake while he did it.

Ailsa knelt up from where she had been weeding and removed her muddy gloves, leaving the trowel planted in the soil. She held out her mug to him. He walked over and topped it up. “Thanks,” she offered quietly.

“A bit of a nip in the air this morning.”

“Yeah, it’s definitely turned a corner,” she agreed, taking a sip of the hot coffee and feeling the warmth going down her throat. “Wrestling the dock leaves helps to warm you up though.”

“You were up early this morning.” He was trying to sound cheerful.

She looked away, placed her mug on the ground and busied herself putting her gloves back on. She picked up her trowel and started digging again before answering him.

“I couldn’t sleep. Sorry if I woke you.”

“No, no you didn’t. Sorry you had a bad night’s sleep again. How long have you been out here?”

“Not that long. Thirty, forty minutes perhaps. Thought I may as well be productive. It’s good to keep the hands busy.” She was struggling to loosen a stubborn dandelion root, rocking it back and forth with both hands.

“How are you feeling?”

“Oh, everything. Tired. Guilty. Anxious. Sad. Being out here helps. Distraction, I guess.” She pulled on the root, and it broke away leaving a tenacious segment. “Christ,” she muttered.

“Wrestling with the ground instead of your thoughts?”

“Something like that.” She dug around the scrappy root that had stuck itself firmly in the ground. She pulled on it. It broke again.

Peter watched as she tussled with the root admiring her doggedness, knowing that this was who she was. Who she had been. He pulled a chair out from under the garden table, and conscious he was still holding the coffee pot, he placed it on the table while he sat down.

“Have you decided what you want to do yet?”

She pulled the remaining root free with a satisfying tug.

“Gotcha,” she said triumphantly, throwing the root into the bag. She looked up at his expectant face and away again. “No, not a clue. Every time I think about it, I feel panic start to rise up. Heart palpitations, waves of nausea, my head all over the place. I want to go back. I want to feel well enough to go back. I feel I’m letting the team down, but I just don’t know if I can do it anymore. I feel paralysed, in a limbo really. But I also just don’t know what I’d do instead. Twenty-four years I’ve been a nurse. Close to fifteen in intensive care. I’ve seen a lot of death over that time. But I don’t know, this was just different. I think it was the numbers dying, I just felt utterly helpless. Everything we did seemed hopeless. And there was no dignity in the deaths either. People dying without their loved ones. Saying goodbye over video before being ventilated and not knowing if they would wake again. Just horrible.”

Peter was observing her lightly stroke and run her fingers through the fronds of a fern as she spoke, like she was drawing comfort from its soft leaves and allowing it to unfurl her emotions along with its tendrils.

“You shouldn’t feel guilty, I know you do, but you shouldn’t. It’s taken an awful toll on you. It’s not your fault the hospital was not staffed adequately, and that was before this added pressure. You put in a valiant effort. You really did. But you had to step back for your own health. I don’t think you should go back.” She stopped her hands and looked at him as he said that. “Ailsa, I was so worried about you.”

“I know you were. I know you are, still,” going back to digging up another weed, “but I’m worried about my colleagues, the ones that had the reserve to keep going. I don’t know why I couldn’t be like them, why I was the first who couldn’t hack it anymore. Now they are down a team member that they

may not get back, along with others who are off actually sick. On top of that, I feel guilt that I feel relief that I might not go back. I was so claustrophobic with all that PPE on. Sweating but not allowed to drink any water. Honestly, just the thought of it makes me sweat and my heart race. I think that's why I've been enjoying gardening – not feeling so stifled; feeling that coolness on my face."

"Well, I feel relieved you might not go back. I was terrified you would get sick. That you could die before a vaccine's available. Particularly when some of your colleagues started to fall ill, and then when poor Lorraine died, I was petrified you would be next."

"Yeah, that was awful. God, I just ache for her family." She put her trowel down and another weed in the bag before picking up her mug, leaving her gloves on this time, and sat back on her heels to drink some of her coffee. "She was great to work with. Really funny and just such a genuine person; very down-to-earth. Frankly, I don't know if we've really even processed it. It was such a shock – to everyone. I felt so numb. I think I had to feel numb to protect myself. We couldn't even go to her funeral." She could feel her eyes welling up and brought her elbow up to gently dry her eyes carefully avoiding the dirt on her gloves. She took a deep breath to compose herself. "Until then, I hadn't been too worried that I'd fall sick, let alone die from it, but then to see that we could be vulnerable too, well that just changed everything. I was so scared that I might bring it home to you. I was so anxious about that."

The honking of the first geese overhead heralded the bringing of autumn, and they both raised their heads skywards to watch as the skein passed above.

"One of the deaths that really got to me was because he reminded me of you. He was a few years older, but he had the same colour grey eyes. A very pleasant man – kind face. I can't quite put my finger on it, but he just made me think of you. Even though he was struggling to breathe when he came in, he was so gracious. He was stable for a while, but then, like so many, he took a turn, and it became clear we had to ventilate him. He'd been with us for about a week at that point.

"He spoke to his wife every day, and he'd always try to ease her worries. But on the day we had to ventilate him, he was so weak that I had to hold the iPad so he could talk to her. He tried not to make his wife worry, but you could see how scared he was, and he knew he had to tell her goodbye just in case. His wife was terrified. I held his hand as he spoke and told her that he loved her. He thanked her for the years they'd had together and for how happy a man she'd made him. He said that he just wished that he would wake up and be able to hold her once more. He then apologised to her if he didn't. He said it would be the biggest regret of his life to leave her, but if he did, he wanted her to go live her life and visit those places they hadn't been to. His wife, bless her, had tried to be strong for him, but she just crumbled. She told him how much she loved him, and how much their time together meant to her, and she pleaded with him that he had to wake up – that she needed to hold him again too. She said she was sorry that she couldn't be with him now. They were both crying as they said their potentially last goodbyes, and that was that. I took the iPad away.

"After my shift that night, I just sobbed in the car. He was on the ventilator for twelve days. But he didn't recover. He was taken off ventilation, and then his wife had to watch him pass away over video, as I held his hand for her. It didn't feel like a privilege to be there in such an intimate moment. I felt like an imposter taking the place of a loved one who should have been allowed to say a proper goodbye. Can you imagine the trauma for her – and everyone else who was denied being at their loved ones' side as they died? Just not the dignity in death that we normally strive to give."

Peter was sat listening intently, he didn't know what to say, but he knew she needed to speak. She had been struggling to. It pained him to know the strains she had been enduring over the course of the pandemic. How agonised she was. They sat there quietly for a minute. Ailsa was still sitting back on her heels, cradling the coffee mug in her hands but not drinking it, just absorbing the warmth while she stared off into the distance. Pensive. A blackbird flew down to perch on their fence and broke the silence with a brief song before it flew up to the nearest tree.

"I know it's little comfort," Peter finally said, "but I'm sure he was so thankful to have you there. And I'm sure his wife was grateful that he wasn't on his own. That you tried your best to show them kindness in such harrowing circumstances. I know that I'd be grateful to have you caring for me or a loved one."

"People ask me how I manage to work in intensive care, with so much death. But I always appreciated being able to provide comfort to families and to show that their loved ones didn't suffer when their time came. That we would provide a good death. You got to know the families, and they were so thankful for the compassion we showed them. But the way deaths are now, it just doesn't feel right. With the cases starting to rise again and the coming winter, I just couldn't see an end. I couldn't process going through it all again. That morning, I just couldn't get out the car. Like I was stuck to the seat and my hands to the steering wheel. I sat there for thirty minutes trying to leave the car, but I just couldn't. I

had chest pain, and I was hyperventilating. I knew I was having a panic attack. I was so scared, I just started crying. Eventually, I managed to calm down enough to call in sick, but I was already late. I felt so guilty. Sick to my stomach. And then I just drove until I got to the beach. I needed the breeze and the sea air to reinvigorate me. I needed to just look at the sea to get some perspective. To feel small. And then I came home and phoned the GP for a sick line. Sorry I couldn't really explain before, I just wanted to shut myself away from the world."

"Oh Ailsa, I'm so sorry for all you've been through. I wish I knew how to help. I'm glad you're taking some time. And that you're getting outside now. Those first few days, where you could barely leave your bed or talk – well, I just felt useless." Peter stood up and went over to her. He knelt beside her and put his hand on her back. "You're a good person, Ailsa. And whatever happens, I'll be here for you. Supporting you. We'll get through it. We're a team. Just know that you have options." He kissed her forehead and stood up again. "I'm going to head inside, are you coming?"

She shook her head in answer.

"Okay, I'll leave you here for a bit to do what you need to do. I'll make you some breakfast." He walked back to the house and turned to look at her start digging again. Toiling with the earth and her burdens.

Song of the Whale Shepherd

Niamh McCormick

It was not often someone completely new came to Aeretira, but when they did, they would be obvious from a mile away. Quite literally – the boys at the watch-post would peer through their scopes at the approaching horses, or more rarely, people on foot, and joke when they spied someone clearly unfamiliar with the place.

You could tell by the way they stared, heads tilted back as far as their necks would allow, greedy for a better view of the islands.

The shepherd understood. Well, somewhat. He expected maybe he would gasp and gape the same way if he saw islands that floated on water. He knew they existed, and had seen them on maps, but the idea was utterly foreign to him, as, he supposed, their islands floating a mile or so in the sky must be to these travellers.

They always asked questions, did travellers, and it made him want to roll his eyes. He never expected them to understand whatever complicated combination of magic, poetry, and mathematics allowed their lands to exist. Why did they expect him, a shepherd, to understand this/it?

He knew his flock. He knew how to tell when a whale was unsettled, how to keep them calm when migrating birds flew into their path. He knew when they were tired – the dimming of the soft glow on their underbelly was a dead giveaway of that – and when they were restless.

Neither of these states was particularly well-suited to carrying travellers up to the islands.

"Shepherd! Could we beg passage up to the islands?" An accented voice called out. The shepherd was not good with accents. The men were certainly from the South – their clothing was flowy, using far more fabric than necessary, and was devoid of colour – but the shepherd lacked the knowledge to determine which nation specifically. He smiled and enunciated his words clearly for the foreigners.

"You need not beg, stranger, but you can pay for passage." He hopped down from the windowsill, and approached the strangers, counting four of them, and six horses.

The shepherd pointed to the many baskets slung over the packhorses, who were sunk much deeper into the boggy ground than the rest.

"How heavy is your cargo?" The shepherd kept up his air of polite deference.

The foreign man seemed to start. "Why? Do the islands have a limit? On the weight they may hold before they may fall from the sky?"

The shepherd struggled not to roll his eyes. "No. But the whales do."

Realising this could have sounded condescending, he quickly added, "I simply must ensure I select the correct animal to carry your party and your luggage safely to Upper Aeretira, gentlemen."

The foreigner seemed satisfied, and after some discussion and quick calculations, the shepherd selected one of the larger whales. Using the hollow wooden instrument, a little bigger than his fist, carried on a string attached to his belt, he called her by name.

The travellers marvelled at this too, of course.

"Does this device allow you to speak the language of the honourable whales?"

The shepherd smiled at this. Even if these men had some absurd ideas about his home and his flock, they respected the creatures, as was proper. He always felt the folk of his home took the whales for granted. It never sat quite right with him that having access to tame flying creatures, blessed by the goddess herself, should simply fade into the background of daily life.

He held out the instrument, showing it off to the travellers. He was a little proud of the painting he had done on it – swirling pink clouds on a background of blue and purple. It was the only truly beautiful thing he had ever owned.

“The whales can only hear sounds of a very low tone, gentlemen, so normal speech is of too high a pitch. They respond to requests from my instrument, rather than my voice.”

“Requests, shepherd? You mean commands.”

The shepherd shook his head, but did not explain further, turning to get on with his task.

The foreigners babbled amongst themselves in their own tongue, and the shepherd loaded their cargo on the back of his chosen whale. At least this group was not blown away by the simple pulley system he used to lift their baskets of belongings. He had been asked to explain its functioning several times in the past, and found it deeply tedious, not least because mechanics was a subject for which he held little fondness.

Finally, the men themselves were raised up to the huge, bowl-like saddle affixed to the back of the whale. The shepherd hoisted himself up, and detached the pulley, allowing it to fall to the grass below.

As he turned, one of the foreigners raised a hand, about to speak. The trepidation in his expression made the shepherd repress another eyeroll.

“Be calm, gentlemen. I assure you; the whale is a far more relaxed steed than even a horse. There is no need for any worry about falling or being disturbed during flight.”

He spoke especially slowly, and over-enunciated his words, knowing that, as inane as this conversation was for him, his passengers were likely clinging to the linen carpeting of the saddle with anxiety. They seemed at least somewhat calmed by his words.

The shepherd stepped from the saddle, seating himself on the bare back of his whale. He knew it was simply habit, but it felt distant and improper to direct his whales from anywhere else. The younger shepherds who preferred to sit comfortably in the saddles, well... He was not one to disparage the skill of a fellow, but he did have to admit a little satisfaction when he saw one of their whales fly off-course, or spook too easily.

He lifted the instrument to his lips, his fingers moving fluidly over the various holes to produce a melody he had always found hauntingly beautiful. This music had barely left his thoughts since the time he first heard it as a lad.

The deep, echoey notes flowed into one another, like waves on oceans the shepherd had never seen, and in which his whales had never swam, and together, they took to the sky.

The Phone Call

Stefanie McMullan

“What about the owls?”

“What about them?”

“Who gets the owls?”

“You hate the owls.”

“Yeah, they’re creepy little bastards. But you’ll still need to decide who gets them”

“Well, now we’ve established they’re not your jam, how about the kids get one each?”

“Done. Ok, so who gets each owl?

“What?!”

“Well, they’re not the same, are they? One’s head is pointing that way like it’s heading to the shops, while the other one’s head is pointing that way like it’s coming back home with the change.”

“I think I’ll leave that life-changing decision to you, babe. Give you something fun to do all by yourself.”

“Oh no you don’t, don’t ruin even more of my life. Come on, let’s just decide this now.”

“Ok, so give Isla the one with the chip in its wing, as she won’t even notice or mind.”

“Alright so Chippy goes to Isla, Beaky goes to Logan. Meantime we should put them away, far away, in the loft perhaps, keep them someplace safe, right?”

“Ha ha. Nice try, babe. They were my Nan’s pride and joy; Mum would throttle me as soon as look at me if they weren’t front and centre. Plus, I love the fact Nan left them to me and not Gaby.”

“Didn’t Gaby get a car?”

“Huh?”

“She got your Nan’s car, right? You got creepy ceramic owls. Tell me again what you love about that?”

“It wasn’t just ceramic owls, you cheeky sod. We got the sideboard too.”

“Lucky us.”

“Look, the car is a heap of junk, but Gaby loves those owls, so yes I love that Nan left them to me.”

“Course you do. But you hate them too, right?”

“Hate what?”

“The owls?”

“Oh God yes, I hate the owls. I feel like Beaky’s eyes follow me everywhere I go in here.”

“And yet here they still are.”

“I feel like we should have named them before now.”

“I feel like I should have hidden them before now.”

“You really should be writing all of this down, you know. You’ll never remember any of this without me, and I can’t be bothered dictating it all to you again, I’m going to be too busy planning my goodbye party.”

“Stop it, that’s not funny.”

“What? Until they call me to ask me if I have someone that can come with me, I think it’s safe to say you’re stuck with me for a bit longer.”

“No, honestly, I mean it. I don’t want to do this, it’s not funny anymore.”

“Oh, come on, I thought we were just having a laugh. You’re the one that was divvying up all the stuff a minute ago.”

“I know, because it was funny to begin with, but I’m not enjoying it anymore, can we please talk about something else?”

“Sure.”

“It’s a pretty good sign that it’s Monday again and still no phone call, right?”

“I guess so, yes.”

“You could be a bit more enthusiastic about it, I thought you’d be glad that we’ve not heard.”

“I’m struggling to feel glad about any of it to be honest.”

“Sorry babe, I didn’t mean it to come out like that, I just meant that they told us we’d hear back pretty quickly if there was anything, you know, and it’s been two weeks already so...”

“And so, what?”

“Well, I just mean, we’re past the point of it being, you know, pretty quickly, aren’t we?”

“I don’t know if we are or not.”

“Well look at that woman from your office, that all happened pretty quickly didn’t it, and she’s well, what happened with her again? Anyway, I feel like time-wise we’re beyond the pretty quickly stage now?”

“Her name was Rachel, and she had her gallbladder removed, Callum. It’s not the same thing at all!”

“What’s so funny? I thought you said she had an operation and was really unwell and couldn’t work anymore, no?”

“Yes, she had an operation. To remove her gallbladder, for Christ’s sake. People can live happily ever after without a gallbladder by the way.”

“I never said they couldn’t. Poor girl having to leave her work though.”

“To sell her cakes full-time, Callum. She makes cakes. She’s not dying or dead.”

“Neither are you.”

“No, not at the moment anyway.”

“Don’t start that again. We don’t know what we don’t know.”

“No, that’s true. We don’t. You specifically don’t know very much as it turns out, do you? You really could be doing with listening a lot more, Callum. After all, you are my someone that can come with me to my appointment.”

“Keep taking the piss out of me and you’ll be going by yourself.”

“Fine by me. Mum will jump at the chance to be someone’s someone. Drama for days to divulge in tearful chapters to her Thursday Zumba crew.”

“You’re bluffing and you know it. I’m your someone.”

“Or Rachel, I mean we did share half a desk for ten months before the tragic gallbladder situation unfolded, so we’re practically BFFs. I wonder if she can get time off from all the cake-making though.”

“I’m your someone. What even is a gallbladder anyway?”

“Something to do with the fat in your stomach, I think.”

“Probably to do with all the cakes.”

“She’s selling them, not eating them. This is what I’m saying with the listening, babe.”

“Your phone, quickly, answer it, pick it up!”

“Hello. Yes, this is Lucy. No, not yet, no, I was wondering how long it would be, and well it’s not been that long I guess, and so, yes sorry go ahead, sorry. Mmmm hmmm. Ok yes, I understand. Yep, mmmm hmmm. Uh huh. No that’s fine, yes, I can do that. Ok. Uh huh that’s fine. Yup, ok then. Bye.”

“What is it, are you ok, Lucy talk to me, what did they say?”

“We’re in the pretty quickly stage.”

“Wait, what, why, what did they say?!”

“They’ve asked me to come back to discuss the results tomorrow, Callum. I need to bring someone with me.”

Full Marks

Rabinat Muhammad

“Settle down, kids! Space out and find a spot on the floor, it’s time for the spelling test,” Mrs Turner announces.

My eyes lock onto the cubbies as I hop off my chair. I know I must move fast. Suddenly, Anu stops me in my tracks.

“Did you see the new eraser my mommy got me? It’s not really a toy pig. Look, it rubs out!”

Amazed, I forget the task at hand. I look down at my rubber, old and boring. Pink and blue. Not even the fun blue... Navy blue, with lots of pencil holes in it.

Dylan once told me that the blue part of my eraser rubs out pen ink, but that’s boring because only Mrs Turner and the seniors can use pens.

In an effort to make my eraser look cool, Anu says cheerfully, “Rubbing out pen is like magic!”

“But it doesn’t rub it out. Dylan’s a big fat liar because when I tried to erase the red grade from last week’s spelling test, all it did was smudge it.”

Feeling sorry for me, Anu allows me to borrow her spare cow eraser under the condition that I ‘Only use the legs so it doesn’t look old.’

Fiddling with the new eraser, I get back on track and head towards the cubbies. I can’t help but think about what a shame it is that I won’t need to use it because I know I’m going to get 10/10 on this week’s test. No need to listen to Mum’s complaints as she signs another test that says 3/10.

Oh no! Dylan’s sat next to the cubbies, my spot. What am I going to do?

That week I hadn’t practiced spelling at all. Instead, I had been coming up with a plan; a plan so secret that I hadn’t even shared it with Anu. During recess, I had asked to use the restroom but while alone in the classroom, I secretly slipped a spelling sheet under the cubbies. My plan was perfect! Sit by the cubbies, wait for Mrs Turner to read a word, slide out the sheet, find the word and spell it perfectly.

But no, snotty-nosed Dylan was sitting criss-cross applesauce in my spot.

“Please hurry and take a seat,” Mrs Turner instructs.

I shuffle over to the wall and sit. I guess I’ll have to use the cows’ legs after all.

“Okay, girls and boys, the first word is... Restaurant.”

From the wall, I can see the spelling sheet under the cubbies, but I can’t read it from here. I have never wished more than now that I had glasses, like Emma, then I could read it.

I look down at my blank sheet and begin to spell.

R.e.s.t.o.r.e.n.t.

Sister, Sister

Adejoke Akinrinoye

I breathe a sigh of relief as I unlock the door, glad to be back home after a long day of wearing a mask of grief for every “I’m so sorry for your loss” and “How are you dealing with it all?” The Cape Town sun

has been ruthless today, beating my skin until it cried and stuck to my dress, revealing to the world that my stomach is not quite as flat as it once was. As I enter the house, I take each step with the confident assertion that she is never coming back. This is mine now. Aunt Mirabel and my sister Garai follow with the trays of food from Garai's car. Her husband Karabo arrives in his car and enters behind us.

"You've redecorated already?" says Mirabel, scanning the room like an owl. "My sister's body's not even cold yet. You've wasted your money, I'll tell you that."

"If you don't like it you can leave," I snipe back, wishing I'd lied that Patrick was tired back at the wake to deter them all from coming to the house. Although we grew up here, my sister is looking around like she is lost, walking slowly and with caution as if she doesn't belong in the house where I live, the house we formed twenty years' worth of memories in. We were happy here once. These walls kept secrets we would only reveal to each other. We enter the kitchen and drop the food on the counter. Mirabel goes to the bathroom while Karabo collects the rest of the things from the car, leaving me in the room alone with my sister. It's been a long time since we've been in a room together. She hasn't been to the house since Mom moved into the hospice and I never went to visit my mother so there was no person or opportunity to bring us together. Until now.

"Guess we're officially orphans now, huh," I say, trying to fill the silence. Trying to make up for all the years we haven't talked, haven't joked together as sisters should.

"Jesus, Zindzi," she shakes her head as she lets out a small laugh, enough to see her dimples crown in her cheeks. It's impossible to ignore how beautiful she is. Her skin is like honey, smooth and golden. Our parents used to call her their 'golden girl.' My skin is a deep dark brown, rough, and dull in comparison. My parents had no kind nickname for me, or kindness of any other kind.

"That's the last of it," Karabo says, re-entering the kitchen and releasing the tension. Mirabel joins us and takes a chicken leg from a platter on the counter. She chomps on it like a dog with a bone, assaulting both my eyes and ears. It's almost like my mother is here in this room, forcing me to listen as she tells me how she couldn't bear to see who I had become, filling my ears with ugly images of how I repulsed her. Karabo opens a cabinet to hand Mirabel a plate, then takes out a fork from a drawer on the kitchen island.

"You certainly know your way around the kitchen," Garai says, more of a question than a statement. "Anyone would think you lived here."

Karabo replies with a laugh, the way he does when he's nervous or lying. "I just have a good memory from the last time I was here is all," he says, avoiding my gaze and moving back to stand next to his wife. She rests her head against his arm. I watch as he stiffens his shoulder. He hesitates then puts his arm around her and rubs her shoulder. I feel my stomach turning so I retrieve a glass of water from the cabinet and fill it at the sink. I want to blame the humidity today, but I've been throwing up most days for the past few weeks.

"It's going to be hard, but we will get through this, girls," says Mirabel, wiping her greasy fingers on a napkin. "We have to stick together, now more than ever."

"When's your flight back to New Zealand, Aunty?" I ask.

"I've pushed it forward to next week, there're some things I've still got to sort out with the estate." I frown. "Like what?"

"Zindzi, I don't think now is the best time to talk about this. We buried my sister, your mother, only a few hours ago. This is a time to grieve," Mirabel reprimands me.

I had clenched my eyes to force them to water as I watched my mother's coffin finally descend into the ground.

"Has her lawyer given you the will?" Garai asks, searching through the drawers until she finds the Tupperware and starts to pack the food away. I wish she wouldn't touch my things. Mirabel shakes her head, irritated, as if we had cornered her.

"Well... Fine, we might as well get this out of the way today since you're both so pressed to know. I was my sister's power of attorney, so all her legal documents are in my possession, including the will."

"Just say it, Mirabel, how is the estate to be divided?"

I'm getting impatient.

"Zindzi, relax," says my sister condescendingly, refusing to side with me. "She's getting to it." Mirabel rolls her eyes.

"I don't have the actual papers with me today but the long and short of it is... The estate is tied up in a trust for another five years."

"What the hell does that mean?" I say, sharply.

"Wait, a trust is usually for a child, right?" Garai narrows her eyes. "Is the estate going to Patrick?"

My heart skips a beat. Could it be? My mother did become less cruel in the last few months that she lived in the house. It was almost like she finally accepted him as her grandson. She started allowing Patrick to sit in the room with her when she was plugged into the dialysis machine. He still has the drawing he made of both of them, next to the magic blood washer in his bedroom wall. She was religious so I put it down to a last-ditch attempt to claw her way into heaven, as she knew her days were numbered. Maybe she really did change.

“No,” says Mirabel. “The estate isn’t going to Patrick.”

My heart sinks, returning to its cold notch in my chest.

“So, who is it going to?” asks Karabo.

“Well, you know how much my sister wanted a grandson,” says Mirabel.

“She had one,” I say, clenching my fists to restrain myself.

“I obviously meant a legitimate one,” retorts Mirabel. “Your mother has put the estate in a trust for the first legitimate son that either of you conceive.”

Of course she did. I feel embarrassed for being naïve enough to think a tiger would change its stripes. I’m glad she’s dead and I hope her sister soon joins her. Legitimate or not, my son is my biggest blessing. Something that my sister cannot relate to. Garai turns her back to us and walks cross-armed towards the window. This is probably hurting her more than it hurts me. I am already used to being the disappointment.

I was the one who disgraced the family by having a baby out of wedlock, but at least I could bear children. She was the one that everyone was proud of, the star student, married to a good man she grew up with in the church. Her only flaw was her silent womb, something that my mother never let her forget when she was alive.

I take a step towards her, my sisterly instinct to comfort her waking from its dormancy. Or maybe it’s just my guilty conscience. I glance at Karabo, halting as I face the truth. We might still be bound by blood, but I can’t act like her sister anymore. Not after what I’ve done.

“It doesn’t even make sense,” says Garai. “So, what happens to the estate if we don’t produce an heir?”

“If no heir is conceived after five years, then the estate goes to the eldest child. To you.”

My ears must be lying to me. “What?” I gasp. I know my mother was a vindictive witch, but I never thought she would stoop this low. Even after everything that happened when she was alive, she had never fully cut me off financially, so why now? Even in death she is still playing me against Garai. Her golden girl.

“I see,” Garai says solemnly. She walks to the other side of table and sits on a chair. She looks up at Karabo. He has stayed where he was. This news changes everything.

“You should be grateful she even gave you five years and didn’t give it all straight to your male cousins in Johannesburg,” Mirabel picks at her teeth.

“It’s getting late, I need to put Patrick to bed.” I rise, hoping she will read the room and leave.

“I’ll go,” replies Karabo. “I’d like to see how he’s doing anyway.”

I thank him with a smile as he leaves the room. Garai looks confused, opening her mouth to say something, but stops herself.

“Have you two ever thought about IVF?” blurts Mirabel before the door has even closed behind him.

“I think that ship has sailed,” Garai says. She has a distant look in her eyes, telling us there is more left unsaid.

“You still have time,” I say, trying to smooth things over.

She shifts her eyes to me without turning her head. “Why do you care all of a sudden? Especially since you stand to lose everything if I conceive. What are you not saying, Zindzi?”

Blindsided by her directness, I rack my brains for a response. “A lot might have changed between us but we’re still sisters. You know that I’d do anything for you.” With a sharp movement she turns her head to face me.

“Is that right?” she says, folding her arms. “If that’s the case then maybe you can do some investigative work for me and tell me what is keeping my husband late at the office every other day.”

Slowly, she starts walking towards me. “Or better still, why is he taking three business trips a month now instead of one per quarter?” She is now face to face with me, only a few centimetres keeping our noses from touching.

I struggle to think of what to say as my heart pounds like a thunderstorm in my chest. She wants answers that I can’t give her. I can feel the pain in her eyes and in this moment, I want nothing more than to take it away, or better still, turn back time.

“I am so sorry...” I start. “Maybe there’s more to the story and it’s not what you think. Just talk to him.” I’m not sure if I am trying to help her or ease my conscience. Garai is unmoved, her brown eyes searching mine for the truth. I have forgotten that Mirabel is still in the room, silently watching the drama unfold like a soap opera. “I think we should sell some of Mom’s antiques,” I say, trying to change the topic. “They’re worth a lot of money and at least it’s something until we figure out a way to deal with the estate issue.” I stare at Mirabel, hoping my face does not betray me.

Mirabel finishes licking her fingers. “Oh. Didn’t I say? Since the house currently has no legal owner, you’re going to have to leave.”

“Leave?” My stomach drops. “But where would I go? This is my home. This is Patrick’s home.” My mother is evicting me from beyond the grave.

“This is why I didn’t want to do this today, but you did ask,” says Mirabel, shrugging her shoulders and raising her hands as if she’s just told me she forgot to pick up milk from the store.

“Surely that can’t be right,” says Karabo, standing at the foot of the stairs.

I feel dizzy. I pace around the kitchen, rubbing my stomach as I wonder what will happen to me and my child. Garai watches me shrewdly.

“You and Patrick can come and stay with us until we figure out this mess,” says Karabo.

Garai’s eyes widen. “Let’s just sit down and talk about this first before anyone starts making hasty decisions.”

I hear Patrick’s footsteps before I see his tiny feet, taking the stairs one at a time.

“Mommy?” Patrick stands on the stairs.

“Yes, baby?”

“I want a bedtime story.”

“I’m coming.”

“No, from Karabo. I want Karabo.”

Garai covers a silent gasp with her palm, her eyes wide as she looks from Karabo to Patrick then finally to me. I give her a blank stare as she narrows her eyes and turns to her husband.

“Karabo. I want to go home”.

“I think Patrick wants him to stay a while,” I say with a sweet smile.

“You should go,” says Karabo.

Garai stands helplessly, like a spectator behind a fourth wall, as she watches her husband leave her. I cut myself a piece of cake, savouring the sweet taste as I gently rub my stomach.

Haiku

Aminah Mohammed

Melodious trees
The cool breeze humming along
Dances leaves away

The strong winter air
Snowflakes drizzle, homes and trees
White on a dark night

Caressing golden
Rays touch my skin with their warmth
One more day of life

Patrimonial Pestilence

Amna Irfan

The newborn’s cry breaks through the silence of the dawning desert. It had been a frosty, prolonged night of anticipation. The sweltering heat of a migrating sun is birthed through the chill. Rows of Bedouin tents line the golden sand, housing an entire tribe of people. Our family tent lives on an isolated bend. Inside, the heavy stench of sweat and tears permeates the air. The doula’s hands are stained with blood as she passes the small parcel of a baby into Zaria’s arms. Salt crusts over the new mother’s flushed

cheeks; tears running down her chin, pooling in the dimples of her collar bones. She kisses the arch of her baby's brow for the first and last time.

The tent is opened. Bands of oppressive heat illuminate the inside of it. Rashid stands tall in the entrance. His hawk eyes investigate the situation, roving over the patterned rug, the crimson wool kambal that will never wash white again, the solemn face of the doula, and his wife's face as it crumples like a sheet of paper. Zainab just clutches her child in the cradle of her arms as tortured, wounded noises escape her cracked lips. When heavy steps march towards her, she finally reacts, tightening her grip. He reaches her side and says nothing. Just plucks the newborn from her chest like fruit from a tree. The baby wails as it is lifted by its father. Please, please, please, she begs. It must be done, he reminds her. Rashid soldiers to the ditch he spent labouring over all night. He lowers his daughter into her grave. He covers her miniature features with grains of parched sand and listens as her echoing shrieks are swallowed by the Earth.

A belt of intense pain wraps around Zaria's swollen stomach. Dizzy, she balances onto the veranda pillar crawling with cracked, yellowed stone. A flash of white. The world is a merry-go-round, spinning and spinning and spinning out of orbit. The blue tiled floor is the only reminder that she is still alive. The Earth tilts completely off its axis as nausea drags her onto the ground. She uses the pointed ridge of each rectangular tile to guide her to the outside bathroom. Her nails break under the desperation of her writhing form. The sun slaps the soft skin of her face – the burn in its wake harsher than the palm of any man.

Inside the bathroom is a damp wasteland. Zaria's fingers leave a path of vermillion on brown, water-stained tiles as she reaches the squat toilet. Familiar concrete walls rub small circles on her back. She gathers enough courage to look down at the red ink that stains her clothes. A deep breath. The pungent smell of bleach knocks her out. Then nature takes control and urges her to push. Zaria becomes pain. Pain becomes Zaria. The building pressure causes her ears to ache. Her insides burn with an inextinguishable fire. But she continues to strain through it. In the end, her guts are charred, and a pool of blood submerges her legs. She holds her 20-week-old child in her arms, memorising its incomplete, miniature features – eyes, nose, lips, arms, and legs – to forget about the yawning ache in her stomach.

In the evening, Malik returns from a work-laden day. Zaria ushers him into the drawing room and onto the four-legged wooden charpai that has a fresh, patterned sheet on it. She disappears into the kitchen and returns with warm tea and dinner, sitting beside him. She asks about his day. Exhausting, he replies.

Later, when amber turmeric stains have been washed off the dishes, she stands to his left with trembling hands. Eyes downcast at the familiar floor, she explains what has happened. I'm so sorry. He unfurls from his seated position like an open spring and grips her shoulders in concern. Why didn't you tell me sooner? Zaria just looks at him, you were tired from work.

In the rickshaw, the bitter smell of gasoline accompanies them on the way to the hospital. Malik's face is ashen, his head hits the vehicle with a funny noise as she recounts the day. An unborn foetus has an unmarked, hand-carved grave in their back garden. The remains of its twin are vacuumed up until no trace survives.

The discoloured walls of Zahira's bedroom are her jail. Muffled voices from the radio outside are barely audible. Her new hardwood bed is a sea of chaos with textbooks, notebooks, papers, and pens. She pulls the duvet towards her chin, toppling it all onto the ground. The paisley print of the covers, mixed-in with the mess, forms a nauseating cocktail. An angry knife scrapes her insides, taking with it blood, flesh, and her sanity. Her pubic bone groans as it grinds against itself, like nails screeching on a chalkboard. A warm brick her mother baked on the stove outside, wrapped in layers of cloth, is placed atop her. The distended skin of her stomach is red and raw from the assault of heat. Inside, her guts are home to a medley of painkillers. They do little to calm the rage of her empty womb.

Zahira forces herself into a sitting position. Searching through the mess, she plucks out her biology textbook. Vertigo blurs the words on the page, but she forces herself to recite them. The entrance exam is only a week away. Become a doctor or get married. Her father had given an impossible choice knowing that women are less likely to be admitted. Everyone wanted an educated wife, but no one wanted to educate their daughters. She had to be different from the doctors who told her that the pain was natural. But as her lids grew heavy under the weight of her own expectations, only time could tell if she would succeed.

A few months later, the results are published in the local newspaper. She spends the night begging her father for a second chance. But she has lost the battle. Before she can blink, she is being buried alive in a bright red dress. The colour fills her with deep-seated resentment, an eternal reminder of how her own blood betrayed her. The cycle of pain arrives every month. It never lets the wound of her broken dreams heal.

A scarlet prayer mat is laid on the dull carpet of a third-floor flat. The television plays the loud, repetitive tune of a news channel from back home. A concoction of papers, documents, and files are scattered atop the powdery, brown sofa. On Zahra's left side, a little girl observes her with wide eyes as she engages in the motions of prayer. Up. Down. Up. Down. She remains seated for the final stretch, out of breath from the assault on her swollen feet. Still, her palms come together at the end in supplication.

A storm slams the door open. It is a startling sound, the little girl finding refuge by burying herself within the folds of her mother's spice-scented shawl. The angry thumps of feet crack the ground beneath the carpet, getting louder and louder towards Zahra. But her eyelids remain closed in concentration. When the metallic ringing of binders being tossed onto the ground vibrates the foundations of their house, she is returned to reality. Is everything okay?

In return, Zahra is gifted with a hot, violent palm to the cheek. She scrunches like a disposable tissue, curling into herself. The cotton threads of the prayer mat comfort her. She hugs her stomach in protection as she is uprooted to a standing position from the river of her black hair. Needles prick her scalp, but her expression remains neutral. Her passiveness feeds the flames boiling his blood and it steams into a shove that topples her back onto the ground. The carpet drags against her experienced elbows and her arms splay out to soften the blow. From there, he takes the sharp edge of his biblical sandals and plants strike after strike.

I am poked and prodded in every possible way. They draw my blood, note down my height and weight, ask their questions, and smear a cool gel on my stomach. The doctor points to the screen, there it is, at a fleck of dust that is supposed to be mine. Is it wrong to choose myself over this undeveloped life? My heart wavers. Maybe it would grow to live a fulfilled life, changing the world for the better. But I would have to give up my dreams, my happiness, and my life. What's next? My words come out flat. She just blinks and recites the procedure. Just two pills, one today and one tomorrow. Then she lists a range of side effects and sends me on my way.

I take the first pill in my car. It is an innocuous white circle. I fiddle with it – roll it between my fingers. I recall my mother's words: life is sacred. I wash the medication down with water and drive home.

At home, I eat leftover pasta, respond to work emails, and take a nap. I wake up to my stomach twisting into knots. I sit on the toilet and throw back a couple of ibuprofens while I pee. My pyjamas are stained with blood. After throwing them in the hamper, I pull on a pair of pants and stick an extra-large pad I bought specifically for this moment into the gusset. I watch the toilet flush away the blood and the soaked tissue.

After I'm done, I walk to the kitchen and turn the kettle on. There are dishes piled high in the sink. I wash them. The brown news anchor aggressively debates the ongoing election while I sit on the leather couch, sipping my tea. On the coffee table is the mail. Bank statements, coupons and impending bills. The red-stamped letter I have been avoiding stares at me. My heart pounds as I rip it open.

Dear Ms. Malik, we are pleased to offer you a place in our medical program...

Memory of a Childhood Summer

Millie Garnepudi

Grandad's hand is warm and feels dry when he takes my hand in his and leads me through the front of the house to where he keeps his bike. I use the back of my other hand to wipe the sticky sweat running down my face. I watch as Grandad takes the big white sheet that's hanging in the corner, and it's like a magic trick when the bike appears. It's big and black and the metal bits on it are super shiny. I go to touch it and the seat is hot like the inside of an oven. I look up at grandad and he puts a thick shawl over it.

“Now it won’t be so hot to sit on,” he says, smiling.

He kicks down a big metal rod and shows me where to put my feet and how to climb on. But when I try to do it myself he just laughs and then I feel his arms under mine as I’m lifted up in the air. I’m sitting high up, like I’m riding a horse. The seat is still warm under my bum and I think I can feel my legs sticking to the sides of the leather. I wiggle forwards to make room and Grandad hops on behind me. He smells the way clothes do when mum takes them out of the washing machine and like the white dust that Gran puts on her face when she’s getting ready to go somewhere important. I see his arms reach for the handlebars and then suddenly there’s a loud noise that makes me jump. The seat starts shaking and I think the bike must be broken but Grandad tells me that it’s just the engine getting started. I don’t know what he means but when I look back at him he gives me a kiss on the forehead and tells me to hold on tight. We move slowly at first with Grandad pushing us along with his legs, just until we get out the front gate, and then we go a bit faster. The other people living on our street come out of their huts when they hear the noise and wave to us as we pass them. We turn left onto a road that looks like it’s made of red-brown sand and go past the buffaloes. I hold my breath as soon as I see them because they smell like poo and I can smell them even after we’ve gone around the corner. We’re going much faster now but it’s not scary anymore. There’s so many fields here. It looks different to back home. The trees look different too. They aren’t bushy like the ones on my way to school; they’re spiky and they have coconuts and mangoes at the top of them instead of little pink flowers. Their leaves move side to side with the wind and from far away they look like they’re dancing.

Flowers

Millie Garnepudi

I tried to put the flowers you gave me in a pot,
But there were so many I had to put them in two.
The scissors always go missing from their rightful spot,
So a blunt kitchen knife would just have to do.

I severed the ends and likely killed half the bunch,
Yet they lived out their days in the meagre light of my room.
I’d think of you often, as I sat for my lunch
My thoughts enveloped by their sweet perfume.

I should’ve thrown them out by Thursday afternoon
When the seventh lily started to wither and fall.
Surely flowers should last longer in June,
I thought miserably as I waited, hoping you’d call.

Remove the Vegetables

Aphia Millar

“There’s the big ‘M.’ Surely that’s the place, Cathy?”

Cathy rolled her eyes and feigned a sigh of disapproval. “You always have food on the brain. I told you, Harold, we ain’t going to McDonald’s until we’ve finished with our morning business.”

Her husband’s shoulder vibrated against the soft leather car seats as he tried to stifle his laugh. “Naw, not the yellow ‘M’, the red one. Look!” Harold removed his left hand from the steering wheel and pointed to a large red sign in the distance partly overshadowed by an extravagant new office block. Cathy scanned her eyes towards the direction of Harold’s plump finger while conscious of the bustling crowd taking full advantage of the red stoplight. It didn’t take long for her to detect the luminous sign and her eyes lit up with enthusiasm.

“Oh, Harold! I can’t believe it’s finally come to Chicago. I heard only last week Bill and Helen received their order and everything was perfect with it. ‘A flawless bundle!’ That’s what they told me. Imagine that, Harold!”

Harold again muffled his true emotions, but his thick, bushy eyebrows began to furrow. An ominous sign of disapproval. "Probably cuz he edited every minuscule freckle until he reached his godly standard of perfection," he muttered while the car revved its engine into a new gear.

"Aw, Harrrry! We've gone over all this! You don't want the same problem as Ruby, do you?" Cathy raised her well-manicured eyebrows, giving her husband a pointed look, which immediately closed all discussion of the slightly brewing conversation. Harold knew better than to let a debate erupt; an awkward dinner party with his cousins later in the afternoon was the last thing he wanted. They remained in silence for a few minutes until Harold gently squeezed Cathy's thigh while giving her a warming smile. "No darling, we don't want Ruby's problem, that's for sure..."

Slowly the car came to a grinding halt outside the dazzling office. A couple of businessmen and women were shuffling into the revolving doors, briefcases knocking against each other's legs as they tried to check in on time. Cathy opened the car door, her royal blue stilettos contacting the fresh tarmac. Pulling her tight dress down over her knees she looked upwards and stared at the red sign, her eyes brimming with tears.

"Come here, darling." Harold pulled her into a tight embrace before having his dishevelled hair brushed by Cathy's slender fingers.

"This is the start of history, Harry. Let's not start it off looking like we rolled out of bed!"

Harold grimaced a little but held firm to Cathy's arm while she tottered through the automatic glass door, the strong gust of air conditioning fighting hard to remove a strand of hair from her robust, hair sprayed bun.

"You wanna self-checkout or stand in that queue with all the gawkers over there listening to your order?" Harold questioned rhetorically while Cathy briefly glanced at the long line of people eager to place their order. He began to pace over to one of the self-service machines that were just printing off the last customer's receipt. "Come on, Cathy, let's head to this one before someone else grabs it." Harold used his substantially larger body mass to disperse the crowd of people for Cathy's elegant frame to glide through.

Her hands were trembling with excitement as she pressed the bright green start button on the screen of the polished machine. "First section. Size." Cathy read the instructions on the screen before proceeding to press next. "How tall shall we go, Harry?"

"Last section. Name. Thank goodness we decided on this before coming here today! Gosh, no wonder that queue takes ages to get moving. I bet it took half those parents over there by surprise. Thank goodness Bill filled us in on all the sections before we came today."

"What shall we call it then?!" Cathy stifled a laugh as she overheard a couple next to her, the stress palpable on their faces, flick this question back and forth to each other while the queue behind them grew increasingly in length. "Frankenstein," Harold muttered. Cathy was thankfully oblivious to the remark, and she began to type in their decided name into the empty box.

"That's it then! I'm so nervous, Harold. What if we missed a section? What if we made the wrong choice with the eye colour? Perhaps we should have paid for the extra update of gender change? You know we have too many boys in the family. Maybe extra-smart isn't going to be smart enough. I saw the couple behind us upgrade to Einstein level. It was only \$200 extra. Think of that Harold, a genuine Einstein in our family!"

"You're rambling again. Calm yourself, Cath. We went over every section three times last night and today! The main thing is we removed that pesky chromosome 7 or whatever it is the doc warned us about, you know the one... cystic fibrosis or something like that. Everything else was just nice, extra improvements. Plus, as long as he knows he's better than some kids in his class what else can he ask for from his two parents?"

"You're right, Harry." Cathy squeezed her husband's arm affectionately as they waited for the long receipt to be printed. "Order 21. I just can't believe we managed to do that. What a huge relief."

Cathy and Harold made their way towards the exit. A bright light caught Cathy's eye in her peripheral vision. Ruby was strapping her baby girl into the car seat while trying to settle her screaming three-year-old, who'd just dropped her toy car mirror onto the ground. The baby was smiling eagerly at Cathy, her lower lip not quite making the smile normal while her floppy muscles were being tied under the car seat straps.

"Oh, hello Cathy! Harold! Good to see you. I'm just taking Jack and Lucy here to the shops, but my husband forgot his lunch, so I had to make a quick dash to the office this morning. What brings you out this way?"

"We —"

“Oh, you know, the usual errands.” Cathy gave Harold a sharp dig in the ribs, interrupting his speech.

“Well, Lucy’s getting a bit agitated, so I’ll have to head, but lovely to see you again!”

“You too, Ruby.”

Ruby’s car drove away from the car park while Cathy and Harold walked towards their car.

“Whatcha do that for?” Harold complained as he rubbed his tender side.

“Just some sensitivity was needed, Harold. What with Ruby’s kid having that problem I bet she wished she was order 21.”

“Wasn’t 21 the problem?” Harold muttered, still annoyed at his wife’s behaviour.

Cathy again gave him a pointed look before clambering into the car. Harold sat beside her and turned the ignition. The car slid out of the parking spot away from the bright building with the red ‘M’ sign.

“Come on then, Cath. Let’s get breakfast. I’m ravenous!”

“You’re always ravenous! But I suppose a McDonald’s can’t harm us, now we’ve made Him inherit the athletic build.”

“Does that mean I can remove the tomatoes from my Big Mac?” Harold asked, disingenuously. Cathy chuckled while putting on her seatbelt.

“You can remove the tomato, Harold!”

Substance

Imaan Ahmed

Searching all this time,
Endless nights with my best friend,
Tequila and me.

Among shattered glass,
Devil’s lettuce on the floor,
Still no hand in mine.

Desiring it all,
Nothing but my body left,
I destroy myself.

Just a Girl in a Club

Imaan Ahmed

It’s my first night back, and as the beginning of the semester awaits me, I prepare myself mentally. It’s Saturday night and I’ve finished packing. Looking at myself in the mirror, posing in a way the male species would find sexy. What dissociated and soul-crushing creatures they are, yet I feel the need to please them. I slide on my shortest dress and back-comb my hair for the voluminous ‘she didn’t put in effort’ look. Which is completely inaccurate because I have been looking at myself for the past three hours.

We stand in the line, excessively long, just as if a new iPhone had been released. I never thought I’d reach this type of low. Girls screaming as if they’re little again and the boys with their wandering eyes. As I feel them glare, I feel the need to wash my hands.

I pull down my dress, which prevents me from breathing normally, and plaster on a smile as the bouncer checks my ID. He stands tall as if this were an acting role and looks into my soul as if I’d just killed his whole family. He gestures, letting me in. So I walk with my arm interlocked with my friends, waiting for my mind to take me somewhere I have not been. It’s dark and I notice the music crushing my tympanic membrane. As I enter, I get a whiff of sweat that’s been marinating, which has been covered poorly with cheap cologne. This first impression makes me ponder about my new mattress at home, and how I’d rather be there right now.

We stand by the bar, compressed with one another – as if this were completely normal. My vodka coke in one hand, and the bottom of my dress in the other. I sip and observe: how to dance, how to flirt, how to act not too drunk in front of the bouncer.

Not too many drinks in and I see two of everything, everything becomes louder, and I become wobbly. I hate to say this, but I feel fearless, as if nothing can ever make me unhappy right now. My mind has taken me to a place where my problems are fictional, the smell has faded, and I feel as though I can get with any man in this club. Confidence. I laugh to myself as the girls dance with dilated eyes and hands on their asses.

I let the music flow through my veins and close my eyes to take in every second of this unfamiliar sensation. We jump, laugh, and shout the lyrics whilst taking intermittent breaks for more shots.

I feel him looking at me from afar. I stare and give him a look. A look we women do that can make a man do anything for us. He walks towards me and places his hands on my waist, I pull him closer. I can't see his face clearly, but the touch makes me only want it more. I lift his hand and bring his finger near my lips; I lick it whilst I look at him. What have I become?

Dialogue

Emily Merry

“Can you give me a hand?”

“Why? Cause you’ve only got one at the moment?”

“Ha, ha.” I know he’s pleased with himself when his smirk goes sideways.

“Come on, pleaseeee.”

“Fine.” He closes the last tab and shuts his laptop.

“What’s it tonight? Halloumi with spicy rice? Steak with roasties?” He rubs his hands together with premature optimism. It’s chorizo rice tonight, but I won’t tell him yet.

“I hate it when you make that noise with your mouth.”

“I’m hungry and excited. What can I say?”

I can hear his heavy footsteps as he skips out of sight into the kitchen.

“Right, you. Wash your hands – it’s go time.” I watch him, unimpressed at his low efforts and poor hand-washing technique.

“You missed a spot.”

Silence.

“Don’t give me the dirties. I want salt to season my dinner; not your gammy hand bacteria.”

I can see him hold back his smile.

“Right. First step. Cut the onion and crush the garlic.”

“And how would you like your onion cut, Madame?”

“Not like that. I’ll tell you that much.”

“What! You can’t tell me you don’t like the diagonally cut onion! It’s iconic.” He laughs at himself.

“No. I certainly don’t.” I can’t help but giggle. The onion is getting cooked either way. I’ll let him have this one.

“And when you say crush the garlic you mean like this, right?”

“Please don’t do it with your hands!”

Too late.

“You’re going to smell for days. If I had two working arms, I’d smack you with a chopping board in one and a spatula in the other; so be glad one’s in this blooming sling.”

He lunges forward.

“NO! NOT THE HAIR!”

“Oh, come on. Everyone loves garlic hair.”

“If you put that smelly hand of yours in my hair, I swear to God you’re... you’ve just gone and done it!”

“I couldn’t be smelly alone, Mil. Together we are a whole garlic clove.”

I pause and look at him.

“Milly. What are you doing? I can see it in your eyes.”

He freezes, matching my body language. I do a sudden movement to see how he reacts.

“AH.” He flinches before freezing again, copying my every move.

I turn around and start to walk away.

“Aw come on, Mil. I was only playing. I can help you wash your hair tonight if you like?”

I can feel him following me out the kitchen. With lightning speed, I turn around – as fast as a person with one working arm can – and with pure precision... strike! He jumps and lets out an excited squeal.

“Damn. You never miss.” I let out a little evil laugh before cuddling him.

“Ooooh, would you look at that?” He pulls down the top of his shorts and boxers to reveal the first part of his buttock.

“You know it’s a good one when you can make out the individual fingers.” He looks at the fiery red hand-print, which is starting to sprawl across his butt cheek, developing a tastier tone of red as the seconds go by.

“I bet a print like this would look really good on you.”

“Oi. You’ve already given me garlic hair. We’re even.”

“I don’t think so.”

“The sideways smirk,” I whisper under my breath.

“Better get running, beany boy.”

I can feel the excitement bubble in me, working its way from my head to my toes. I’m going to explode like a champagne cork. I turn on both heels and sprint as fast as I can in my soft socks on the slick veneer floor.

“You better put that hand down,” I say over my shoulder as I head for the door, fuelled by my anticipation.

I can hear him catching me.

“Eeeee!” I squawk at the top of my lungs.

“Ready and loaded. Precision strike imminent.”

I jump for the sofa, forgetting about my sore shoulder in the midst of battle combat.

I land and don’t feel a thing.

“Ha, you missed! Better luck next time, Jomit.”

I get up from the sofa and laugh in his face as I walk by, heading back to the kitchen.

“Wow, for someone who’s just been wounded in combat you do have an awfully nice strut.”

I turn round and look at him.

“What do you mean? You didn’t get me. I can’t feel a thing.”

“Ok,” he remarks with a cheeky grin before going into the bathroom.

I continue my journey back to the kitchen, pleased with myself and my clear victory.

“Ouch. That’s a bit stingy,” I say to myself. Surely not. He couldn’t. I didn’t feel it.

I pull down my trousers and inspect my now warm butt cheek.

“Ooft. As clear as day, my love.”

“Man down, man down,” he says into the imaginary walkie-talkie on his shoulder. “We’re going to need a medic.”

Medical Student Memoirs 2021

Aphia Millar

Clinical shirt on.

Pyjama bottoms below.

Who would even know?

University.

Time to socialise. Covid.

My pixel box friends.

The Café

Aphia Millar

“I’ll have a latte, please. No sugar, thanks.” I stood by the card machine waiting for the approving words: transaction complete.

“Jim’s in a coma, they said.”

“How are we going to tell Lisa?”

“She’d end herself.”

The two young ladies, on whose conversation I had just unintentionally eavesdropped, picked up their trays and began to scan the seating area for a free table. They were only in their late twenties. Who was Jim? Why was he comatose and what had caused this devastating event to occur? Perhaps Jim was just a close friend or maybe he was Lisa’s lover. Whoever Lisa was, she was clearly going to be impacted. The card machine lit up and I tapped my debit card, automatically deducting £3.50 from my bank account. It always baffles, and slightly annoys me, the expense of the hospital café. Surely there’s enough loss already?

I too scanned the seating area. It was busier today. I spotted a corner booth that had been recently vacated and quickened my pace before it was taken by another unfortunate. Although perhaps calling these people ‘unfortunate’ was wrong. Maybe that person I was taking the seat from was a member of staff and therefore more likely chose to be at this location on a cold, damp Tuesday morning surrounded by bipolar emotions of bereavement, bewilderment, and buoyancy. I picked up the left-over coffee cup, still containing the few last dregs, and moved it to one side to make room for my latte. I noticed the smudge marks of a crimson shade of lipstick still clinging to the side. She had left her mark. What was her story? Did she too know Jim? Had she suffered today, received life-changing news, or finished a compulsory visit to an unloved dying relative?

I sipped my steaming latte slowly, making the small portion size last as long as possible. I had to be back on wards in twenty minutes to shadow another consultant, plenty of time for a short breather. This morning was intense. He had quizzed me nonstop on the coronary arteries. Left anterior descending, left circumflex, right coronary... The terminology still beating inside my brain. Although just a diagram on the computer screen, sitting here amongst real people it suddenly hit me that those arteries belonged to a beating heart. A heart that felt passion, pain, and peace. There and then I realised I had developed slight judgment towards the doctor, I was painting him as inhumane, but hadn’t I done the same thing? Too caught up in answering the correct question and not fully appreciating the owner of the heart. How did he feel when he had suffered the heart attack? Was he alone, breathless, and in despair? Was he now nervously awaiting this operation with nobody to hold his hand? Was this Jim?

“It’s a baby girl! I know! Sandra’s lost that bet, hasn’t she? Yup. Ah uh. That’s the one. I can’t believe that’s another girl! Seven of them! How wonderful though. Yes, it’s all wrapped in the kitchen. That’s what I thought! Buy a neutral white colour and no matter the outcome you’ve not lost money.”

The lady communicating on the phone had eagerly plonked herself on the adjacent seat, giving me a warming smile. She shuffled her bounteous number of bags along the floor, tucked them under the table, and proceeded to blether along to her friend, ecstatically describing the plans of the surprise party to welcome the new bundle of joy.

What an abrupt antithesis to the despondent inner dialogue I was having over the coronary arteries. However, the lady’s joyous mood lifted the spirits of those around her. Nobody, no matter their circumstance, could deny the joy a new life brings.

I finished the last of my coffee and looked at my watch: ten minutes to spare. I decided to make my way towards the wards; better early than late. I smiled again at the lady still engrossed in her phone conversation and slipped out of my seat. Placing my tray back on the shelf, I heard a conversation that struck me to the spot.

“She died last night.”

“No!”

“She was their only child. A miracle. They were told they couldn’t have children. Now after years of treatment and stress that longed-after life has been stripped away from them.”

“Why? Why? Why? She was only two years old.”

“The chemo didn’t even touch her, I heard. The doctors had never seen such annihilative cancer.”

“So much suffering – the nausea, needle pain, the nightmare of hospital stays – only to die five months later. What was better do you think, the attempt to treat or the acceptance of death?”

Another passer-by came close towards me and the previous conversation between the middle-aged man and lady abruptly came to an end.

That profound question had left me feeling almost paralysed. What would I have done if I was the doctor? How would I handle the distressing nature of telling parents – parents so delighted over their gift of life, only to be confronted by death eighteen months later. No toddler tantrums, no homework help, no high school drama.

I turned to walk towards the exit and glanced back at the middle-aged couple seeking comfort by holding hands tightly under the table. She was wiping her burning, red eyes with a saturated tissue and he was trying to remain composed. The coffee steam rising slowly from their mugs.

This is part of life. Death. The final act. When it comes nobody knows. Our days are not written on a script, we don't know when the curtain will be drawn. We go about each hour, day, month, year with the false assurance that we have another scene, another line to say. Doctors confront the fading lights every day. Am I prepared to do the same?

Haiku

Laura McKellar

Loneliness drapes like
Gossamer over me; the
Spider keeps spinning.

Our home breathed with us
In spring, summer, then—the fall.
Reach for me—I can't—

What's a Nipple?

Imaan Ahmed

We all sit together watching a game show. I can see my mum and aunties clearing the table because we have just finished dinner. I can feel some food stuck in my teeth, but I can't be bothered heading to the bathroom to wash it out. I think I'll pick it with my tongue and eat it.

I sit down next to my dad as he is the closest to me. He places his arm over my shoulder, but I push it off. It is too warm. My cousin tells me with her hand to sit next to her, I don't want to, I'm bored of her.

I can smell the popcorn Mum is making, and I look at the screen trying to understand the question. I can only read the answers because they're easy and one word. But I don't know what one means so I ask Daddy.

“Dad, what's a nipple?”

He starts to laugh, and my uncles do too, and I am not really sure why.

I feel shy so I ask my cousin if she wants to play the Nintendo with me. Her battery is dead, and she asks me for my charger. I tell her to massage my shoulders for five minutes then she can use it. I feel bad, but she always does that to me.

Her hands are sweaty because she has rubbed them on my face before starting to massage me. I grab some popcorn and throw it back at her. Mum gives me a scary look. I ask my cousin what a nipple is. She doesn't know either. Maybe I will ask Mum later.

A Night to Remember

Jonathan Keith

‘First, I thought, almost despairing,
This must crush my spirit now;
Yet I bore it, and am bearing –
Only do not ask me how.’
— Heinrich Heine

It was raining that night when he walked home. The street was empty and quiet, its silence only broken by the distant hum of the city and the soft patter of the rain as it fell on the cobbled pavement. Every step was audible as he approached his front door, his path guided by the steady glow of the street lamps. He lived on Milton Lane which ran along the west side of Whitehall Park. The cold, empty windows of the row of Edwardian townhouses glaring down on him. He had been at a friend's house that evening for a

social gathering; all the usuals had been there. Yet, in its unfolding the fantasies of his mind had been dashed against the rocks of reality, and held tightly in his hand were the crumpled words of an unspoken declaration. It had gone so horribly wrong. How could he have been so blind, how could he? The thoughts and feelings that came to him he knew well, but in this recital they returned with a devastating and augmented intensity. He shoved the ball of paper into his overcoat's pocket. A course had now been set and like an obedient servant he would follow the script faithfully to the end. Standing before the old black wooden door that led to his home, he steadied himself. A jangle of keys, the scratch and click of the lock, the echo of steps on a wooden floor, and the thud of the door behind him marked its beginning. The hallway was illuminated by a solitary fixture on the wall that beckoned him inward and upward, towards the staircase. Climbing the stairs to the first floor, each step creaked as he made his way further up, and upon reaching the landing, he let out a long, deep sigh and turned to enter the study. She had been at the party this evening; he knew she would be there.

Opening the door into the study the dim stare of an empty fireplace met his gaze. A dark green wingback chair sat to the right of the hearth waiting expectantly. He made his way across the faded ornate rug and past his desk littered with books and the beginnings of stories that sat underneath the window looking over the park. Rows of bookcases lined the walls, overflowing with tales of long ago, of brave heroes, and far-off paradises. Arriving at the fireplace, he stooped down and began to set kindling on the grate. It was nearing Christmas when he first met her – he couldn't forget that moment no matter how hard he tried. Robert, his good friend, had invited him to an evening party hosted by his employer, Mr Grahame. He said it would be 'good for his spirits' and that he 'must leave his study sometimes.'

The quietness of his study slowly gave way as a symphony of chatter and violins filled the room; sound became sight and darkness gave way to the glittering chandeliers of a grand ballroom. Crowds of guests congregated at the edges of the room, all dressed in eloquent finery. Emerging from the sea of people, she stepped out into the middle of the open floor and began to survey the crowd, intently looking for someone. She made the room grow dim when he first saw her. Beautiful wasn't a good enough word, but it was all he had, and all he could return to. It was in the way she moved, the way she seemed to glide, every action robed in grace. It was in her smile, it was in her eyes, the softness of her countenance. It was in her winged words, in the way she spoke, like Abigail to David. It was her; she was beautiful. Her eyes moved closer to meet his and in fear of being spotted, he quickly interrupted his stare, finding a sudden interest in the glass he held in his hand. Daring to glance towards her once more, he found that he had gone unnoticed, and so he renewed his investigation.

"Who's that over there?" He gave Robert's side a sharp nudge with his elbow. Robert turned to look at his friend. "I was just wondering who that was, over there?" continued James, nodding in the direction of the lady that had enthralled him ever since her appearance. "Talking to Mr Grahame."

Robert glanced over to the other side of the room, spotting the person in question immediately. "Oh, that would be his daughter, I believe." He turned back to find a funny look in James' eyes, he understood. "You should go and introduce yourself."

The sound of that suggestion startled James enough that the glass in his hand seemed to take on fascinating new qualities that he had not noticed before. "No, no, don't be ridiculous. No," replied James, the words fumbling out of his mouth.

"Oh, come now, don't be so ridiculous," chuckled Robert.

"No, it would be improper, I couldn't..."

"Improper! James, I don't believe I've ever heard anything so laughable come out of your mouth as that. Here, I'll introduce you." Without warning, Robert grabbed James by the arm and began to march the both of them across the room.

"Robert! Stop!" His protesting fell on dull ears and before he was able to comprehend the developing scene, there he was, standing before her, with a tremendously dumb look on his face.

"Mr Grahame, quite the ensemble you have put together this evening," said Robert, giving the host a courteous bow and nod of the head.

"Ah, Mr Ortlund. No, I couldn't take credit for all this! My daughter here is the main culprit." He motioned in the direction of the attractive lady standing at his side. "Anna, this is Mr Ortlund, a valued employee at the bank."

"It's very lovely to meet you, Mr Ortlund," replied Anna, giving unsure glances at Robert's fidgeting companion.

"And you, Miss Grahame," said Robert in turn. "Have you met my good friend and most esteemed writer here, Mr Fyvie?" He gave James a good hard pat on his back.

"I don't believe we have, sir. A writer you say?" Mr Grahame extended his robust hand waiting for a handshake, which James met with a delayed urgency.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir,” added Anna.

“Nice to meet the both of you,” replied James with noticeable effort.

“James, why don’t you tell them about that new book you’ve been working on,” said Robert, turning to look at his friend with an annoying smile.

“Oh, I’ve really only just begun, it’s nothing...” stuttered James, rather flustered at that proposition.

“Come now, don’t be so modest, Mr Fyvie. My daughter here reads more books in a week than I could read in a lifetime, we’d be most interested.”

On hearing this, James found a renewed confidence. “Well, it’s a story about a mouse...” As he continued, he was surprised to find that his new acquaintances showed genuine interest in his exposition, and the insightful comments and references made by Miss Grahame did no favours in cooling his infatuation towards her.

“Well, Mr Fyvie, I look forward to when it is finished,” remarked Mr Grahame. “And if you are not too busy with your writing, I have a younger son who is in need of an English tutor, is that something that would interest you?”

“Sir, it would be my honour,” replied James, enthusiastically.

“Excellent, come by the Central Bank tomorrow – I shall discuss the details with you further.” Mr Grahame reached out his hand again, which James met with great eagerness. “A pleasure speaking to the both of you,” said Mr Grahame, reaching now for Mr Ortlund’s ready hand.

“Nice to meet you, Mr Ortlund, and you, Mr Fyvie,” said Anna.

“The pleasure is all ours, Miss Grahame,” replied Robert, as Anna and her father disappeared into the crowds around them. Robert, with a smug grin plastered across his face, turned to look at his friend who was now doing his best to look stern.

“Don’t do that again,” said James, his serious expression giving way to shared laughter.

The scratch and fizz of the match brought him back to his cold and lonely study. The room was still dark, rain drizzling against the window. Lighting the fire, the hearth leapt to life, its light gradually growing to fill the room, casting shadows on the stacks of books and odd ornaments that scattered the place. He slouched into the wingback chair, his overcoat still wrapped around him. “This was not how it was supposed to be,” he thought to himself, “Why her? Why him?” His heart seemed to wretch and twist in his chest as he stared deeply into the dancing fire, his head clasped in his hand.

He went to the bank the day after the party at Mr Grahame’s and took up the offer of private tutorage: Friday afternoons for a couple of hours with respectable pay. It was all for the betterment of the boy’s English of course, but each day as he arrived at the Grahame’s residence, the thought of the possibility of seeing Miss Grahame brought with it a childish excitement. Most days these anticipations were never realised, and he couldn’t help the strange melancholy that seemed to hang over him for the rest of those evenings. However, there came a day when his hopes materialised and there he was, standing before her once again.

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t see you there, Mr Fyvie,” remarked a startled Anna, as James had just turned the corner of a long hallway, very nearly careering into her.

“Miss Grahame!”

He had imagined this moment many times before, practiced conversations in his head, prepared insightful questions he might ask her, but now, face to face – nothing. His mind went blank, words seemed foreign to him, and he could perceive every ‘lub’ and ‘dub’ of his racing heart.

“Sorry, Mr Fyvie, do excuse me,” said Anna as she began to make her way towards an open door.

“No, ah, apologies. M-Miss Grahame,” stammered James, who had managed to recover his faculty of speech. “Have you been, sorry, a-are you reading anything at the moment?”

Anna opened her mouth as if to answer James’ question, but it took her a moment to verbalise a reply.

“Yes, oh, a few things. I’m reading one called *Wuthering Heights*, it’s...”

“Is it any good?” blurted James. He was still recovering from his prior blunder and so hadn’t been listening properly.

“Well,” began Anna, a surprised expression on her face, starting to feel as if she had entered into an interrogation rather than a conversation. “I suppose, I like the story so far, Mr Heathcliff is an intriguing character, have you read it?”

“No, I don’t think I have...” James replied rather sheepishly. His mind was working overtime to think of a way to continue the conversation. “Have you been reading any better books?”

James couldn’t believe his own words, ‘any better books?’ Anna looked both embarrassed and insulted at James’ condescending question, but before he could do anything to redeem himself, Mrs Grahame appear from behind the open door through which Anna had first sought her escape.

"Anna, there you are! I've been searching all over for you, we're going to be late," declared Mrs Grahame. "Ah, Mr Fyvie, good afternoon, how did your lesson go with our Michael?"

"Good afternoon. Well, thank you, Mrs Grahame, he is a bright young lad," said James, trying his best to hide the mortified look on his face.

"That is wonderful to hear, Mr Fyvie, we are ever so grateful for all your help," thanked Mrs Grahame.

"Oh no, not at all, Mrs Grahame," came James' polite response.

"Apologies for interrupting, Mr Fyvie. We have guests from Mr Grahame's work for dinner this evening – your friend Mr Ortlund should be coming in fact – and myself and Anna here need to go into town to pick up her new dress before the guests begin to arrive." Mrs Grahame turned to smile at Anna who was glancing repeatedly at the open door behind her.

"That sounds most exciting, I do hope it goes well," replied an absent James. His thoughts were still lost in the painfully awkward conversation that Mrs Grahame had brought to an abrupt end.

"Now, look at the time, come on Anna, we mustn't be late," exclaimed Mrs Grahame, looking down at her wristwatch.

"I shan't keep you any longer Mrs Grahame, I'll see myself out," interjected James, who was initiating a hasty retreat.

"Okay, Mr Fyvie, goodbye for now," returned Mrs Grahame.

"Goodbye, Mrs Grahame. Miss Grahame."

The recollection of this memory made him squirm in his chair. Raising himself abruptly from his stupor, he added a log to the fire and moved over to stand, hunched, at his desk. Looking out of the window before him, the park glared back through the shadow of darkness that covered it. He wondered to himself if things could have been different, could he have avoided all the events that led him here, or was this the way things were always meant to be? His head dropped. On his desk were the pages of his half-finished story and several attempts at poetry – he had never had the bravery to finish most of them. A Swan fountain pen sat on top of the muddle of papers, it had been a gift from Robert. He took the pen into his hands, and examining it, read a small inscription on the top of the lid – 'A.G.'

Closing his eyes, he could hear the approaching sound of a horse and carriage, the cries of a newspaper hawker, and all the commotions of a busy high street. The sun shone brightly onto the rising marble columns that held up the engraved architrave which read 'Central Bank.' Coming down the steps of the impressive building was Robert, who on spotting James gave him a wave.

"James, good to see you!" announced Robert, giving him a firm pat on the shoulders as he reached his old friend. "How are you doing?"

"Well, thank you, how are you?" James replied.

"Never better, shall we?" came Robert's jovial response, directing his hand up the street.

They would often go for walks on Robert's lunch break, who saw the activity as something akin to a charitable service. James' social ineptitude led him to have few friends, but of the friends he did have, he highly valued. James and Robert had known each other from their youth, their fathers being good friends and work colleagues in the financial sector. James, however, never really cared much for the profession of his father, seeing it as an all-consuming, soul-sucking beast, that could never be satisfied – a pigeon-holed existence. No, he found solace in the pages of books, the ability to see through the eyes of a myriad, yet still remain himself. Suffice to say, his neglect of the more 'practical' subjects during his schooling won him no favours with his parents, but Robert always encouraged him, told him his writing was the 'stuff of greatness,' even when it really wasn't. Nevertheless, James appreciated his friend's kindness and so, even as they grew older and Robert followed in the footsteps of his father, joining the world of money and credit, they remained good friends.

"Come now," said Robert sympathetically. "It can't have gone that badly."

James had finally mustered the courage to disclose the uncomfortable events of his last encounter with Miss Grahame – he had done his best to avoid her ever since. "It was dreadful, utterly dreadful. What was I thinking in saying that?"

"Look here, I'm sure she has forgotten all about it, that must have been weeks ago by now," returned Robert, trying his best to console his companion. However, seeing that his efforts weren't having much effect, he began to rummage around in the inner pocket of his jacket. "Here," said Robert, pulling a black fountain pen with brass trimming out of his jacket, "Take this."

"No, no, I couldn't..." James began.

"Take it," insisted Robert. "You'll have better use of it than I will."

James carefully took the pen, giving Robert an earnest thanks. Turning it in his hands he noticed an inscription on the end of the lid. "A.G?" He looked up at Robert for an answer.

“Andrew!” exclaimed Robert.

James gave his friend a puzzled look.

“Andrew Grahame, Mr Grahame,” proceeded Robert, less excitedly. “He gave it to me as a gift when he had a few of us from work round for dinner.”

“Oh, I forgot to ask about that, how was it?” inquired James, momentarily forgetting the pen and its engraving.

“Fine, fine, you know how these work meetings are,” answered Robert. Anxious to change the subject, he continued, “Look, I hear she likes poetry, heard her mention a certain Wordsworth, I’ve heard you talk about him before.”

James was not quite sure how to respond to this information, returning his attention back to the fountain pen. Robert examined his pocket watch momentarily. “Well, I better get back to work,” sighed Robert, returning his watch into his pocket. “Why don’t you put that pen to good use now,” he suggested. “I’ll see you soon, James.”

“Goodbye, Robert,” called James, as his friend began to retrace his steps down the street.

He opened his eyes again, the inscription of ‘A.G.’ staring back at him. He could feel a fire burning inside him now, growing hotter and hotter. Red fury coursed through his veins, as a consuming anger mounted in his stomach, spreading into his chest, then into his head, then into his hands that tightly gripped the fountain pen. An ugly turn came across his face, as he spun round violently and hurled the pen against the wall behind him, letting out a painful cry. The pen crashed into the wall causing it to split asunder, splattering black ink all over the wallpaper. Deep and heavy breathing ensued as he grappled the desk behind him. The rage slowly subsided leaving behind an empty, hollow feeling in his chest. He walked over and picked up the broken fragments of the pen, placing them on a side table stacked with books. A book atop the one of the piles read, *Poems in two volumes, by William Wordsworth*. Picking up the worn hardback, he let the pages flutter open in his hand. He must have read this volume cover to cover repeatedly after his walk with Robert, funnelling inspiration into works of his own. It was brought with him everywhere and he studied it meticulously. As summer approached, he would often wander across the street to Whitehall Park to bask in the daylight and read it, the birds singing in the trees, and the clouds wandering by in the sky above. It was on a day very much like that when he saw her again.

He looked up from the pages of his book to see a figure approaching him. “Miss Grahame!” exclaimed James, rising from his bench.

“Good morning, Mr Fyvie,” replied Anna.

“How are you?” inquired James, who wasn’t entirely convinced that she wasn’t just a figment of his imagination.

“I am well, thank you, Mr Fyvie. I didn’t mean to interrupt your reading, it’s just...” answered Anna, now searching for the right words to continue. “Well... curiosity got the better of me. I walk by here often and I always see you there, reading that old book.” She pointed at the book of poetry underneath James’ arm.

“Oh, this?” James pulled the book into view. “It’s Wordsworth.”

“Oh, how delightful!” came Anna’s enthusiastic response. “Are you a fan of his also? Please, what poem are you reading?”

James was only too happy to divulge the subject of his reading, and they discussed at length their shared enjoyment of romantic literature. The sun cast down rays more glorious than he’d ever encountered in that moment, the birds appearing to have composed a new song just for this occasion. Every smile and glint of her eyes made time stand still, as if all creation were joining him in his admiration of her being. However, time can only make so many concessions before it must return to its strict schedule. Therefore, sooner than James wished, their conversation came to its inevitable end, and so she gave her farewell, and he gave his. “Goodbye, Miss Grahame.” That was the last time he had seen her until the events of this evening – he wished it had remained that way.

He closed the book with a sudden thud, raising his head to look back out at the park again. There was no sunshine, there were no birds, and there was no Miss Grahame. The empty, hollow feeling in his chest began to be filled again, not by anger this time, but by a rising sea of grief and sadness. He placed the book back on the table and returned himself to the dark green wingback chair that sat facing the fire. Rummaging around in the pocket of his overcoat, he grabbed a hold of the crumpled ball of paper that he’d shoved there earlier and brought it into the light. His hands were visibly shaking as he unravelled the crushed paper, displaying a small poem titled ‘My Louisa.’ Beginning to read it, he couldn’t find the strength to continue, and so folded the paper back along its creases again, his head buckling into his weak hands. He had been at a friend’s house that evening for a social gathering; all the usuals had been there.

He arrived late. He was meant to meet Robert after work outside the bank to walk there together, but he'd been so busy writing and re-writing this poem that time had got away from him. Entering the foyer of the luxurious west end residence, he was met by a cacophony of loud chatter and orchestral music, accompanied by the occasional clink of tall glasses. He searched diligently for his faithful companion. He was eager to tell him his brave resolution: he would boldly tell Miss Grahame how he felt. The delicately crafted poem waited, folded in his breast pocket, for the perfect moment. However, in every room he searched, he could not find Robert. "Maybe he didn't bother coming?" he thought. He decided to go and get some fresh air, to clear his mind, to prepare himself, and so made his way outside into the garden. Dark clouds were visible in the distance, but in this moment, the full moon highlighted all the contours of the peaceful garden below. He began to walk along one of the garden paths lined with foxglove and primrose, reciting in his head the exact words he would say to her. Coming round a bend in the path he stopped still as if he'd walked into a solid brick wall. His mouth went dry, his heart plummeted into his stomach, and he felt as though his legs would fail. He stood there, paralysed, a passive observer of the unfolding nightmare he had stumbled upon. There at the end of the path was his friend, his confidant, his brother, knelt on one knee, ring displayed proudly in his hand, before her, an expression of great joy and delight in her eyes. There was the one he loved, the one whom he longed for, in the arms of another, in the arms of his friend.

He collapsed from the chair onto his knees, sobbing desperately, shredding the piece of paper in his hands into a myriad of pieces. Only cries of anguish and deepest despair could interrupt the stream of tears that tore from his eyes. He cast the ripped poem into the fire, returning to his uncontrollable grief. A barrage of emotions came to him one after another, each one as fleeting as the last, until he sat there, exhausted, empty again, letting the fire fade away into the night.

Dumped by Text Haikus

Laura McKellar

It's not you, it's me.
I just want sex that lasts more
Than fifteen seconds.

I got a baseball
Bat. If I see you again,
I'll aim for the knees.

I found your condoms.
I put one on my pinkie.
Made me think of you.

Headshot

Laura McKellar

"David?"

As the door opens, warm light trickles into the room, sharply contrasting the vicious brightness from the TV screen. Turning over his shoulder from the bed, David squints to attune.

"Huh?" he grunts, before finally placing the voice to a face. "Oh—wait, what? Mo?"

"Yeah, sorry." The door opens further, and in steps Mo, smile strained and eyes flickering around the room. "Your mum let me in. Can I...?"

"Oh, uh. Yeah. Sure." Clearing his throat, David pauses his game to move up his bed, allowing room at the foot of it. "In you come."

"Thanks." Mo pauses, before closing the door behind him. David's floor is littered with clothes, unfolded piles that block Mo's way to the bed. After navigating his way through the mess, he lowers himself onto David's crumpled duvet, back as rigid as a board. "Sorry about barging in."

"No, no, no worries. Want a controller?"

"Oh. Sure. Thanks."

David retrieves one from beneath his screen, passing it over to Mo, who starts to slouch a bit, smile mellowing too. The familiar sound of thumbs and fingers hitting plastic buttons fills the space instead of words now, harmonising with the artificial sounds of gunfire and cries of death.

Mo starts after a moment, “So... how’ve you been?”

“Good, thanks. Yeah. What ‘bout you?”

“Yeah, same. Been good. Just, you know. Getting on with school. And club and shit. Busy as ever.”

“Yeah... I bet.”

“You gotten any better?”

“Huh?”

“I mean—you’ve been off school for a while. Few weeks, right?”

David frowns, eyes not leaving the screen. “Yeah, well. Bit longer than that, but. Yeah.”

“So—you’re better then? What did you even have?”

David shrugs. It’s Mo’s turn to frown.

“Are you coming back?” Mo presses. “To school?”

“Yeah,” answers David at once. “Course.”

“Well... when?”

“Don’t know. Here—watch your back.”

“Oh, shit, cheers. Who’s all on?”

“Some guys I went to primary with. Oh, and John.”

“Nice. So, soon then?”

“Soon what?”

“You’ll be back to school soon?”

A yell of pain blares from the television. At his death, David swears. He then sighs, “I don’t know, man. Can we, like, not talk about this?”

Mo’s frown only deepens. His fingers slow in their flurry, and his character stands idle, swaying on the spot. He turns to face David.

“Why not? David—mate, you’ve been off for more than a month. What’s going on?”

“Nothing.”

“Doesn’t sound like nothing.”

“Well, it is,” David snaps. “It’s not like it’s any of your business, anyway.”

“It’s not?” Mo stares at him. “David, we’re best mates. This is the sort of thing you chat about with your best mates—don’t you think?”

David says nothing. Mo turns back to the screen but his eyes can’t focus, unable to see his character already respawning. His gaze can’t stick to a single pixel, slipping off the screen as he dies once more. Next to him, David clicks on, firing away. He still hasn’t even turned to look at Mo since he sat down.

Slowly, Mo starts again—running after David and gunning down the enemy. As he loses once more, David’s frustrated sigh is even louder. He rakes a hand through his greasy hair, mouth moulding into even more of a scowl than he had before. Mo shakes his head.

“Did you even read our messages?” he wonders, clicking a single button over and over. “The ones we sent. Like, every day for this whole time.”

For a moment, David’s hands still. He faces the field on which they fight, vulnerable, exposed, everyone running around him on their own killing spree. He only starts to move again when someone starts to fire at him.

“Did you?” prompts Mo, casting a glance over at him again.

“Yeah,” mutters David at last. “I did.”

“Yeah. We were all wondering. Lachlan told me you were reading his and not replying. Same with John. You know—a simple ‘I’m alive, by the way’—would that have been too hard? Just to—I don’t know—let us know you weren’t dead?”

He takes down two players, then aims for a third. Before he can fire, there’s a blow he doesn’t anticipate.

“I’m... I’m not well.”

Headshot. Mo watches himself collapse, respawning in an instant but he can’t keep the shock from quickly leaking out of him. He haemorrhages, lost for words. In the same moment, he whips his head around, staring at David.

“Not... not well?” he echoes, voice faraway. “What—what do you mean?” He gives his heart some time to catch up, now pounding against his ribcage sickeningly. He breathes, “Jesus, David.”

“I’m fine,” David adds quickly. Stare downcast, he no longer pays a morsel of attention to his player either. He’s shot, respawns, is shot again. Over and over, like some sort of sick joke. After inhaling slowly, he says, “I’m, like, not going to die, or anything. I’ve just—yeah. Not been a hundred percent.”

“So...” Mo licks his lips. “So, you’re better now?”

Again, David doesn’t answer the question. Mo feels himself sink impossibly further into the mattress, wanting to rip himself away from it and away from the fists that pound against his skull now.

“What is it?” he demands. “What’s wrong with you?”

David draws his lips into his mouth, not offering the words. His reticence blankets the boys, thick like Mo’s trepidation that he attempts to bat away to no avail.

“Mate,” Mo snaps.

“Remember... do you remember Mandy Miller?”

“What—Minging Mandy?” Frantically, Mo racks his brains, but he’s not sure for what. “Uh, yeah?”

“It’s...” David gets out between gritted teeth. “It’s the same problem.”

Blankly, Mo looks at him. Nothing comes to mind. “Yeah, no, I don’t remember. What was wrong with her? Like, I know she left school, yeah, but...”

“She...” begins David, only to trail away. He traces the contours of his remote, mouth opening and closing around absent words like they stick in his throat, like he chokes on them. Eventually, he manages, strangled, “Anorexia.”

It’s too big for the room—the word. It pushes on the large screen, threatening to shatter it like glass. Mo watches it in disbelief. He watches David die, respawn, die, respawn. The vicious cycle.

“You’re joking.” Mo breathes in slowly. He turns back to him. “You’re—you’re anorexic? Seriously? Since... since when?”

“A while. Watch that sniper.”

“Just—pause the game, would you? You’re not even playing at this point.” Mo turns to him, brow furrowing. Reluctantly, David pauses the game, but still refuses to meet his eye. He grips his controller until his knuckles gleam white—or maybe he’s been doing that this whole time and Mo hadn’t noticed. He tries, “How long’s a while? You don’t—I mean, you don’t look anorexic.”

Immediately, David bristles. He exhales sharply. At last, he turns to Mo.

“You can’t—don’t fucking say that. It’s—it’s all in my head. If you—you say shit like that, I’ll never get over it.”

Taken aback, Mo struggles to say something, before managing, “Alright, sorry. I... I didn’t know.”

“I’m just... this is why I didn’t want to tell any of yous. None of yous would get it.”

“We—okay, like, it might take some time getting used to,” admits Mo. “But—but David, mate—we’re not going to make fun of you for it. Nothing like that, yeah? We’ve just been so worried for you. We’re all wanting to see you again.” Slowly, David nods. Unconvinced, Mo puts a hand on his shoulder, emphasising, “I’m serious.”

“Yeah, yeah.” David rolls his shoulder back, attempting to shrug him off. “Can we, like, move on now? I’m done talking about this.”

Mo purses his lips, weighing up his options. Despite his reluctance to move on, he accepts he’s done quite well to get more out of David in the past ten minutes than he has in the past six weeks.

“Fine,” he yields. “But we’ll talk about it another time, yeah?”

“Don’t tell the others,” orders David.

“Yeah, no, I won’t. But—you and me, yeah? We can chat about this again soon?”

“Fine—maybe. But not playing COD though. Forgot how shit you were at it.”

For the first time in the past ten minutes, in the past six weeks, Mo sees a sliver of a smile traced on David’s face. Mo lets go of him, but only after a shove. It conjures a laugh out of David, slow-acting but warm. Mo can feel his heart tug at the sound, almost like it’s nostalgic.

“You prick,” accuses Mo, but starts to smile himself.

“Thought you said you’d missed me?”

“I take it back. Jesus. Let’s play opposite teams—I’ll fucking show you. Make you eat your words.”

“Sure,” drawls David. He starts the game back up, and the two of them watch Mo get sniped instantly. They both smirk, even if Mo rolls his eyes. “You were saying?”

“Shut the fuck up. Get ready to be destroyed.”

“Told you to watch the sniper.”

“Shut the fuck up. Twice.”

David clicks back to the menu, still grinning.

We Do Not Belong Here

Mariam Mohammed

“Tu parles français?” the taxi driver called out, with eyes fixed to the road ahead.

“Non, monsieur. Do you speak Arabic?” my auntie sighed in response. She stared, unphased, out of the car window, likely exhausted from giving the same response to everyone we had come across since landing in Paris this morning. No one could understand us, and we couldn’t understand them. Earlier at the airport, we had spent hours waiting for an Arabic or Somali translator, but the immigration officers had no luck, which seemingly frustrated them even more than they already were. It was only until an Emirates air hostess happened to be walking nearby and overheard us that we were able to get some help communicating with the airport staff.

“Yes, I speak Arabic!” he exclaimed. My auntie’s head darted to the taxi driver’s direction and her face lit up, eyes wide in disbelief.

She smiled. I hadn’t seen her smile in so long. She gleamed her perfect white teeth and got closer to the taxi driver’s seat.

“What is your name?” she said, trying to contain her excitement.

“Ahmed. My name is Ahmed, what is yours?” he responded. I could hear the smile in his voice.

“Oh, my son is called Ahmed,” she said, clasping her hands close to her chest. “He is four years old. My name is Maryam, and this is my niece, Ayan.”

“Hello, Ayan, how old are you?” he softened his voice when he spoke to me. My Arabic wasn’t great, but I could conjure up a few sentences.

“I’m... I’m nine years old,” I whispered through my massive puffer jacket which covered most of my face. I had been using it to shield me from the piercing cold in this city. It was never liked this in Somalia.

“She’s nine years old,” my auntie repeated a few seconds later. He must not have been able to hear me.

“Oh wow! Almost ten!” I liked him; he was kind to us, unlike the countless airport staff who scoffed at us when we didn’t speak French. I could tell they did not like people like us.

“Where are you from?” my auntie asked.

“Cairo, but I’ve been living here for four years,” he replied.

They both continued to speak about their lives. Ahmed lived close to the airport with his brother. He told us he had a wife and children back in Egypt. I wonder why they don’t live here with him, I thought to myself. Probably because it’s cold and smelly here.

My friends back at the refugee camp said it snows in France. I’ve never seen snow before. My friend Safiya said it snowed when she went to Canada to see her cousins. She said she made something called a ‘snowman.’ I pretended to know what she meant because she would make fun of me in front of my friends at the camp if I told her I didn’t know what a snowman was.

I stared out of the window immersed in deep thought about what life would look like here in Europe. I couldn’t help but think how different Paris was to home. The tall cream-coloured buildings all tightly packed together. The streets were bustling and busy with people walking in all directions. I thought about whether I would make friends here and if I could find someone kind enough to explain what a snowman is. I could feel my eyes fill with tears as I thought about my friends back home, wondering if they had made it to safety. Will I ever see them again?

“I will be come back soon, God willing,” I whispered to myself, making sure no one in the car heard.

“Oh wow, you guys came from Somalia. I heard about what’s been happening. Very scary. I hope you and your family are safe.” The taxi driver looked back at us with a reassuring smile. He had a strong, chiselled face with a sharp jaw and thick eyebrows, yet he had a soft dimpled smile with warm eyes that reminded me of honey. His light eyes were contrasted by his jet-black hair which had small curls framing his face.

“Thank you,” my auntie whispered, as she sank back into her seat. I could see her processing what he had said, and she turned her head to look out the window.

Our reality must have sunk in again for her. We carried on the rest of our journey in silence until we reached our destination.

“This is the place. Let me help you with your bags,” he called out in Arabic as he got out of the car.

I opened the car door and inspected my surroundings. I took in a deep breath and was met with the smell of cigarette smoke and stale urine. The streets were grey, cobbled, and busy with people pacing,

strolling, or sitting outside of the café a few meters away. I could hear car engines and horns blaring on the congested roads as well as people conversing in French.

They talk so fast here, I thought to myself. It's so difficult to pick up what they are saying.

"Here you go, Ayan." The taxi driver handed me my suitcase and then closed the boot of his car. "Take care of yourselves." And with one final smile and a hand on his chest, he walked back to the front of his car to leave.

"Thank you. May God reward you," my auntie responded waving at the car. "God help us," my auntie sighed.

As soon as she said that I felt my heart sink and I was washed with a wave of grief.

We were all alone.

A Bad Trip

Shoumita Bardhan

I was leaving my friends' flat and heading homewards. As I stepped outside, the cold, sepulchral air greeted me unkindly. The euphoric warmth of the party room faded as I entered the night. I had left the comfort of my friends drinking and smoking away in the red, dimly lit interior of the flat. Streets that I had previously frequented now felt strange and unfamiliar. It was a place I once knew; however, now it was a terrifying, unknown entity. The drugs seared into my bloodstream altering my stream of consciousness to a state of confusion. I felt the panic almost rising in the very core of my body.

"My phone! My phone" My hollow cries rang out in the imposing silence around the college, resonating against the walls. Marischal College was an empty street where my lost phone could be found anywhere. A glint of silver flickered on the floor in the half-light. My phone! But no, how could my senses betray me from feeling what was true and correctly identifying my surroundings. It was Strongbow cans littered on the ground which became a hallucinatory phone. The distinction between true and untrue became blurred, my consciousness slipping in and out of my control. I was a puppet, dragged and contorted around in a semi-reality; I was controlled by some lipless, unseen puppet master above. Except the stage was empty and I was entirely alone. My heart was a cascade of beats falling one after the other, faster and heavier, bringing me to my impending doom. My fate was foreseeable. Palpitations crept up on me with rising urgency. It was an emergency and it had to be treated as such.

I was sitting on the rainbow steps of Bon Accord. I asked a passer-by if he could find my phone. Alas, he merely laughed. My fear and anger was uncontrollable at this mirthful passer-by for dismissing my serious enquiry.

"Have a good night!" he laughed.

I felt like a strange force had taken control of my limbs that tingled like overactive synapses. I was left simultaneously powerful and powerless: I was empowered by this force yet at the same time I had succumbed to it. I didn't feel entirely existent or in need of possession of anything. Belongings of mine lay scattered on the pavement wet with leftover rain. It was an abandonment of all values.

The night was so dark yet my adventure was colourful. Like a nightmare that threatened to lapse into nightmare and then transformed into the permanence of a living reality.

All of a sudden, I was in the taxi. The taxi was when I was speaking to Lennon; it was a strange conversation with someone reality declared as long dead. His round glasses were peering at me in the back seat of the taxi. He was very much living. It must have been his album *Imagine* that scripted this alternate reality that I had become inextricably a part of. Outside the taxi, the black sea looked like an inviting swim. I wished to leave the taxi and enter the cold water fully clothed like a baptism in the hope that it would cure this feeling of paranoia. But the taxi rolled on through many wrong turns and alleyways that did not bring home any closer. The taxi driver chuckled at my serious enquiries of what was happening to me, saying that I only needed my bed as though that was going to cure everything. I was in a paroxysm of anger and terror about what was going to happen to my existence and whether this was the end of my existence. I had so many questions left unanswered.

I had returned to my room but no, it wasn't my room. I wasn't sure whose room it was. I needed to phone the ambulance; the urgency seized me at the slightest opportunity. This woman was speaking on the phone. It was the ambulance woman. Her voice was far from calming but largely irritating as she seemed to not comprehend the urgency of the situation. The ambulance was coming, she said. I asked her again. She said they were coming. I said how much longer.

"Just a little longer."

I was unsure if she was a figment of my hallucinatory imagination or a part of the bare bones of existence in this world. I questioned her being like I questioned the existence of the trees around me. The confusion and dysphoria came with tumultuous and manic energy. I was so angered by her powerlessness over the continuation of time that seemed to pass by so slowly. Time had dilated. One second lasted over an hour. The frustration at my vulnerability to passing time was overpowering my limbic system.

Then, nothing but white and a sudden loss of colour. It was this blanching of light. In my bed, a vertigo overpowered me uncontrollably, seizing my mind. I was disconnected from my viscera yet tyrannically a part of them, bound to them. The puppet master must have been chuckling as he watched my antics.

Memories still flashed like scenes from a horror film. Memories of the strange, red lights of the room's smoky opiate interior flashed in my head. I learnt truths about others and became disillusioned and disenchanted with what I once believed was true. I desperately held on to what I thought was true. Then later, that surge of abandonment of all truths would rise within me and I regressed into an alternate multiverse of terror.

I sunk into my bed like a small child quivering with fever. Now, I remember the closest I had ever been to this state of existence was in one of my childhood fevers where I frightened my mother by my hallucinatory, non-sensical sleep talk produced at the edge of consciousness. My mouth worked faster than my mind which struggled to keep up in this race that only increased its pace and intensity of exasperation. I was aware of what was happening to me yet unable to understand it. And I was left trying to understand what could not be understood. All I felt was trepidation.

It was dark and the fever was out and the room that was not mine once more became my own.

I'm Staying

Mai Alkari

I cannot believe him! How could he just pile more work onto me and think I'll somehow manage? I'm already overwhelmed with assignments and studying and now I've been given extra shifts at the diner. It's getting to be all too much to juggle with just these two hands. I feel like I'm going to break under the pressure, reduced to nothing more than a pile of rubble to be trampled on.

A loud thud reverberates throughout the room as my phone makes contact with the marble countertop. "Is everything okay?" I hear Aiden call from the other room.

"Yep, just fine. Everything's perfect. Nothing to worry about." Sarcasm soaks my words, but I don't have the energy to care. I fling open the cupboard door above me, almost whacking my head in the process.

The sound of footsteps shuffling towards me is barely noticeable, shadowed by the rage bubbling inside me like a bomb about to blow. "It doesn't sound like everything's fine, love." Aiden's voice is closer now.

"I said it's fine so it's fine!" I don't mean to raise my voice but I can't help the frustration that breaks through the door I always battle to keep locked. I take out a tea bag then slam the cupboard door shut, flinching a little at the banging ringing in my ears.

"Lia, talk to me."

"There's nothing to talk about."

"Don't say that. You know I can always tell when you're lying so why don't you tell me what's wrong?"

Angry pools form in my eyes, clouding my vision. "I'm not lying," I say, then wish I hadn't since I failed to stop my voice from breaking.

"Okay fine, so you're not lying but you can still tell me what's wrong." Aiden's voice is honey, so smooth, soothing and inviting. It takes everything in me to not run into his arms.

I can't face him. I can't let him see me cry. I can't show him how weak I am. I'm meant to be strong as steel. The girl he fell in love with isn't the one standing before him right now. She's not me and as soon as he realises, I'm sure he's going to run for the hills as fast as his feet can take him. My heart aches like a hand is crushing it into smithereens.

You know he's going to leave eventually, Amelia. Everyone always does. So why not speed up the process?

"Aiden, just stop," I plead. I expect him to walk away but hear no movement.

I ignore him and focus on my hands taking the kettle, filling it with water, turning it on. Another cupboard door opens and crashes shut, now one mug short. I desperately try to will my tears away but they're having a field day and won't listen to me.

"Ow!" I open my eyes that I haven't realised I've squeezed shut and find a shard of glass has pierced my skin. Crimson blood trickles down my hand, leaving drops of red on the clear countertop like paint to a canvas. What just happened? I take in my bleeding hand and the broken mug sitting a few centimetres away. The pieces fit together like a jigsaw. Did I seriously break the mug?

Why are you so useless, Amelia? You can't do anything right.

"Lia," I hear a voice call but it's so faint that I convince myself I imagined it.

I sprint to the sink. If I was thinking rationally, I would've never yanked the chunk of glass out of my hand like I just did. Pain surges through my arm and I bite my lip to stop from screaming.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Hot tears roll down my face and mix with the blood to create the gentlest shade of pink. It's the same colour as the scarf Aiden wrapped around my neck on our second date.

Distracted by the pain, I don't feel the presence crawling its way towards me until it's just behind me. "That looks bad. Here let me look at it," Aiden says, reaching for my hand. He sounds concerned.

Well done, Amelia, great job. Now you've made him worry.

I snatch my hand away from his grasp like it's fire and push him, but he doesn't move, stuck in place as if he's a tree taken root. "It's fine, I'm fine. Just leave me alone." I shove him again but to no avail so I just pretend he's not there and apply pressure to my hand to try and stop the bleeding.

Suddenly, a pair of arms snake their way around my waist, leaving a tingling sensation in their path, and pull me close. My back connects with a hard yet soft wall. "Aiden, let go of me," I complain, fighting against him to struggle free.

His arms just tighten. "No."

"Leave me alone."

"No."

"Please, just go." I'm begging now, praying that he'll abandon me before he sees me at my worst. Maybe that way it'll hurt less.

"I'm not going anywhere. I'm never going to leave you, Lia." I freeze, my eyes widening. What did he just say? He turns me around to face him and this time I don't try to stop him. His eyes stare into mine and all I want is to drown in them and let them swallow me whole.

And just like that my resolve breaks.

I give in and throw myself at his chest, taking fistfuls of his shirt and sobbing into his shoulder. He wraps his arms around me and my body moulds into his like it's made just for me. I let his warmth drape over me, comforting me like the fluffiest blanket.

"You mean it? You'll stay with me?"

"Of course, I'll stay with you. I'm going to stay right here by your side. I promise. You're stuck with me whether you like it or not."

I cry even harder.

"It's all going to be okay. You're going to be okay," Aiden whispers in my ear, rubbing my back soothingly. And for the first time I believe those words that too often are thrown about carelessly but from his lips sound like an oath.

The Marionettes

Katarzyna Gałka

Master Aramis Corneille placed his wooden marionettes on the backstage table. He looked at the dolls with satisfaction; they were a masterpiece, undoubtedly his greatest work. Aramis was especially proud of the female one, her Vitruvian body proportions, brown curls, and impeccable skin. The male puppet was not beautiful, but it was intriguing. After the last show, one of the critics called it 'a dancing vulture' because of its grotesquely thin limbs, long neck, and pointy nose. Aramis decided to apply another layer of his secret ointment, a wax paste that gave the wood a live tissue appearance. He had been developing this recipe for years, and now it was finally perfect. Corneille walked slowly to the wardrobe standing in the corner of the theatre warehouse, which he converted into his own storage room. He studied the rows of bobbins neatly arranged on the shelves and chose the micro-threads number four for the torso, six for the legs, and number seven for the arms. Although his last performance was described as phenomenal in

the press, Aramis couldn't forgive himself for the small, near imperceptible mistakes he had made. He concluded that the arm movements were a millisecond late compared to the rest of the dolls' bodies. The size six micro-threads were too heavy and thick for the limbs, so he decided to replace them with lighter and thinner sevens. Aramis organised all of the bobbins and started planning his tasks. It was going to take him a lot of time to connect all ninety-eight micro-threads to the small hooks placed on the marionettes, especially since he had to do everything with the magnifying lenses. The man was excited for the hard work ahead, just him and his...

“Master Corneille?”

Aramis almost tore the micro-thread when he jumped on his stool. “Do you always have to be so stealthy, Elio?!” Aramis gritted his sharp, yellow teeth, but closed his mouth fast enough to not scare the child unnecessarily. “You should have knocked first.”

“I knocked three times!” the boy poked his tongue out, pretending to be offended. “You haven’t heard!”

“Is that so?” Corneille put down his tools and looked at the young boy. “How are you?”

“Just finished helping in the market! And I nicked today’s paper! Have you seen it?!” the kid asked, pulling the newspaper out of his back pocket. He jumped unceremoniously onto the chair next to him and tried to read the headline. “The Marionette Tango was pfemonenal, atsoshining and unpre... unprece...”

“Unprecedented.”

“Exactly!” Elio sighed loudly. “You are a true master, Master!”

“Thank you, boy, means a lot,” Corneille mumbled and smiled almost imperceptibly.

“Wow!” The boy shouted, leaning over the mannequins. “Is that the special ointment? No wonder the audience can’t figure it out! Even up close they look alive!”

“Move aside!” Aramis grabbed the little boy by the arm and dragged him back. “You’re going to break something!”

Elio was so enchanted he ignored Aramis’ command and swiftly freed himself from his grip. He touched the female doll’s red dress, played with her silver necklace, and twirled her brown curls around his finger. “It even feels real! Ha! It looks just like a lady that came in last night to ask about you! That’s probably because of the wax!”

When Aramis heard these words, his heart skipped a beat. His legs almost buckled under him, so he slid onto his chair to stop himself from falling on the floor. “What did you just say? The doll looks like who?” he asked falteringly.

“A lady came in through the back door like they always do, you know. Asked if you are here. I thought she is some noisy press person or that she will try to get free tickets, so I told her to go away and whacked her with my broomstick, just for good measure!” the boy announced, very pleased with himself.

Aramis sighed loudly and buried his face in his hands. “Excellent, well done,” he said, rolling his eyes. “But what did she look like?”

“Ha! I told you, just like that doll! Very slim, and had long, curly hair! And she was wearing a silver necklace, with all the sparkly stones. I was quite tempted to borrow it to be honest, but she was too tall for me to reach.”

“Oh, good heavens,” Aramis mumbled. “What did you tell her? Before you hit her with your bloody broom, I mean.”

“Well, she asked if she can speak with you, and I said no. And then she asked when is the next performance, because she really wants to see you dance. I told her that it’s very rude to sneak on people like that. And that she is silly because it’s your puppets that dance, not you. I’ve never seen you dance! You can’t do that, can you, Master?” the boy asked, getting more and more curious.

Aramis shook his head slightly and started biting on his nails. He closed his eyes and tried to stop the tears from flowing. “I think you should go now, Elio. I still have loads of work to finish. Come back tonight before the show. And if you ever see that lady again, tell me about it immediately. And please don’t whack her with your broomstick again.”

Aramis started sobbing the moment Elio left. He had been crying for over an hour when he glanced at his marionettes and decided to walk up to his old dressing table. He opened one of the bottom drawers and nervously flicked through the pile of documents stored there. After a few minutes of swearing and sweating, Aramis finally found the old photo he was looking for. The picture showed a young, cheerful couple holding a trophy together. The man was tall, muscular and handsome, but it was the woman who attracted all the attention. She had a perfect hourglass figure, long legs, and beautiful curls. Her smile seemed to shine almost as brightly as the diamonds in her necklace. The inscription on

the bottom of the photo was faded, but Aramis was still able to read it: *The Elite Ballroom Dance Competition, Tango Division Winners: Aramis and Annabelle*.

Although he looked so overjoyed in the picture, the memories of that day were bittersweet. It was the last time they ever danced together. Minutes after the picture was taken, one of the judges approached them. She bluntly congratulated Aramis and asked him if she could have a moment with Annabelle. She was promised an international career. Firstly, they tried to talk about it, then they just argued. Before she left, she told Aramis she truly loved him, but dance had to be her number one priority. That was the last time he saw her. And now, if little Elio wasn't mistaken, she was back.

Aramis diligently examined the organ before his performance. A great artist had constructed the instrument for him a long time ago. He looked critically at the buttons to make sure each one was properly extended or hidden, and delicately moved the micro-threads attached to the keys. Master Corneille took a deep breath, placed his small feet on the pedals and bony fingers on the keyboard. He had been modifying the instrument for years, adapting it to better fit his odd posture. The chair was widened to give his barrel-shaped torso more freedom of movement. Last month Aramis added extra keys, creating new, precise moves for his marionettes. The dance will be perfect tonight. It is showtime, he thought. Aramis took a deep breath and was about to open the curtains, but he noticed Elio sliding off one of the rusty pipes in the scaffolding above the stage.

“Master! Master!” Elio shouted.

“Shhh, boy, the audience will hear you!”

“But Master! I just climbed up to make sure your threads are all okay! And that lady, the lady from yesterday! She is in the first row! I saw her! Definitely saw her!”

Aramis turned pale and started feeling cold sweat on his forehead. He tried to quickly wipe it away but his trembling hands prevented him from doing so. “Are you absolutely sure?”

“Yes! She had the curly hair and the sparkly necklace and all that!”

Aramis looked the boy in the eye and put his hand on Elio’s shoulder. “Listen, there will be a change of plans tonight. I need you to buy me some time. Go on stage and announce that it will be Master Corneille himself dancing tonight.”

“Really? But... how? Why?!”

“Just go do it, you will see later. I trust you know what to say?”

“Master, I always know what to say!” the kid shouted with excitement before he turned around the corner and ran down the stairs. Before going to his dressing room, Master Corneille peeked behind the curtain to make sure Elio had completed his task. He saw the little helper briskly entering the stage, with a smug smirk on his face and Corneille’s top hat on his head. He stood in the middle of the platform and took a bow.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” He raised his arms in an attempt to calm the audience. “There will be a slight change in the programme this evening! It is my greatest pleasure to announce what I am sure each and every one of you always wanted to see! Master Aramis Corneille himself will dance for you!”

He had never seen applause so long and loud.

For the first time in years, Aramis used the wardrobe to dress himself, and not his dolls. He had to clean the dust and dirt off the mirror before he was able to see his own reflection. Aramis took the old photograph from the bottom drawer and put it in the corner of the mirror frame. He remembered how he felt in that moment, content with his life and excited for the future. He had everything: turned his passion into a lucrative career, and his closest co-worker was the love of his life. The young, handsome man in the photograph looked nothing like his reflection now.

After Annabelle left, he discovered it was dancing with her that he loved, not the dance itself. He stopped practicing and started drinking. Aramis always thought his tragic story made him unique, and added value to his artistry, but now he realised how cliché it was. How pathetic. There was no muscle left on his skinny limbs and he could now perfectly see all the spots on his bald head. Aramis brushed the handful of hair that remained. He practiced a smile without opening his mouth so as not to scandalise the audience with his sharp, yellow teeth. It took him a while to apply the makeup. He was clearly out of practice, but at least he didn’t look as pale as usual. He painted his lips with red lipstick and put some colour on his cheeks. When his face was ready, he pulled out a golden wig from the drawer. He had

bought it years ago but never thought he would have to use it. Aramis put it on and looked at himself. The more he looked at his reflection, the sadder he became. He slowly took the wig off his head and put it back in its place. He reached for water with alcohol and cotton wool to remove his makeup. It was not an evening for marionettes. He wanted to show Annabelle that he was still an amazing performer. He wanted to make her miss him. At least for one second, he wanted to make her feel the same way he had felt for years. He had to be himself to do that, at least for one night.

He looked back. Elio stood in the doorway, waiting patiently.

“Play the music exactly on my signal,” Aramis commanded. The boy looked at him, smiled, and nodded his head. They could hear the lively conversations in the audience. It was showtime. Elio opened the curtain and Master Aramis Corneille went on stage. The nerves and bright headlights made him dizzy and he realised that he had made a huge mistake. Blinded by love, desire for revenge, and his own ego, Aramis could not think clearly. Dancing and controlling the marionettes were two very different skills.

He could not change his mind now; it would ruin his career completely. And most importantly, it would prove to Annabelle that she had made the right decision years ago. He would probably never see her again. Aramis pretended to bow to see if he could find her in the audience. There! She was sitting in the middle of the front row! She looked like she hadn’t aged at all. Aramis had done a magnificent job when he constructed his marionette to look exactly like her.

That thought brought an insane thought to his mind. He cleared his throat and started speaking. “Ladies and gentlemen, it is an unimaginable honour to be able to perform for you tonight. However, as we all know, Master Cornellie’s theatre is known for tango performances! And you need two to tango.” The audience laughed as he expected.

“There is a very special guest with us here tonight that will perform with me. Let’s welcome her, an international star, Miss Annabelle.”

Elio pointed a spotlight at her the moment Aramis finished his last syllable. Her name was well-known in the art world and the audience went wild with excitement. Without a moment of hesitation, the woman climbed the side stairs onto the stage. She bowed graciously and approached Aramis to adopt the posición cero. Elio played the music and they started dancing.

“It was surprisingly easy to convince you,” Aramis whispered.

“It’s disappointing that you think I needed any convincing.”

Although he hadn’t danced in years, when Aramis was in Annabelle’s arms, he started to remember basic figures and poses. She was leading that dance and he followed her. Aramis closed his eyes and imagined his marionettes. In his mind, he was not dancing, he was merely pressing the buttons on his organs. He imagined the micro-thread number seven, started sistema cruzado, and stepped back with his right foot. Number six and he turned in enrosque. He looked at Annabelle again and decided to wrap his leg around her in enganche. Then, he closed his eyes again and visualised different organ buttons, micro-threads and figures. When the music started to slow down Aramis lifted Annabelle in the elevacion posición and kissed her in the air.

The music stopped. Master Corneille raised his head and looked at the audience emerging from the shadows. The audience was silent.

The Right Answer

Kirsten Boswell

The petals are delicate, like silk, between my fingers.

I’m covered in dust and grime from unpacking but the warm sun above me settles my nerves. This is a nice place. My husband made a good choice. It’s much more peaceful here than in London. Cobbled streets free of litter or chewing gum led me to this little square filled with potted white flowers. Barely any traffic roars past and all I can hear is the gentle buzz of bees. The sweet shop opposite wafts the rich, sugary scent of fudge into the air and I relax onto the bench. It really was a good idea to move. I close my eyes and wonder why I’d been so reluctant.

Someone clears their throat. I open my eyes.

A woman stands in front of me. Her white hair is neat and tidy and cut into a blunt bob hairstyle. She stares down, her gaze moving between me and the lovely white flowers. I slowly withdraw my hand and sit up straight.

This appears to be the right move. Her thin lips spread into a smile. “Mrs Barbara White.” She raises a pink-tipped hand to her chest and says proudly. “You may have heard of me. Generations of my

family have held the role of secretary in the town council. I, myself, took the role from my father ten years ago."

Another one? Everyone seemed to be part of the council here. Or part of some sort of housing association, or garden association. I'd yet to have a neighbour pop by who wasn't the treasurer, deputy lead or minute-taker of some organisation.

"I'm Kate." I'd already forgotten the woman's name. There's been so many introductions in the past couple of days. Every neighbour on the street has already visited. No one came empty handed. One came with a white frosted cake, another balanced a pie and another held up a plate of perfectly round scones. The estate agent had emphasised how friendly the town was when she'd shown us round the house. She wasn't wrong.

"Kate? Sorry, dear, I thought it was a Katherine Fraser who moved into number thirty-six?"

"Yes, that's me, but you can call me Kate." Her smile begins to disappear. I'd clearly given the wrong answer. "But Katherine's fine, too."

"Lovely. Good morning, Katherine. How are you settling into our wonderful town?"

"It's great. Nice and quiet. My husband and I still have a bit of unpacking to do but we're getting there. Sorry, what did you say your name was again?"

"Barbara, dear." Barbara pulls her black handbag strap off her shoulder and sits on the bench beside me. "I trust you received this month's newsletter?" Before I can answer, she carries on. "Will you be donating something to the charity raffle? I heard you had two huge moving vans yesterday and another two scheduled for later today." Her pink splodged cheeks wrinkle as she smiles. "Donating something will give you some extra space. Nothing worse than a cluttered house, dear. Or garden, there's an entire committee for that and don't get me started on the paperwork if you violate the rules for an untidy garden." She giggles.

I blink. I've been so busy working on the new house that I haven't got round to reading the newsletter. In fact, I hope it's not the paper I stuffed under the paint pot to catch the drips.

"I'm sure I'll find something to donate," I say, trying to smile warmly. As my husband said the minute the first neighbour walked up our front path: it's important the people here like us.

"Wonderful." Barbara places her hands on her lap. As she does, I notice a slight mark on her sleeve. A grey-ish smudge on the otherwise pristine lilac coat with polished bronze buttons. "Then there's the bake sale. It's always on the last Sunday of the month. We all bring something. What would you like to bring?"

I open my mouth and then pause. There's a correct answer here. "What would you like me to bring, Barbara?"

Barbara beams. "An apple crumble is always a crowd pleaser. I'll note you down. Now," she shuffles closer, as if we're old friends about to gossip, "I heard you've moved out of a horrible home in London. You were searching for ages but everything was too expensive. How lucky you are to get Mr Willow's house at number thirty-six. Lovely house. Four bedrooms and a big garden – just what you wanted! It really is a terrible shame that it's lain abandoned for so long. I heard that was reflected in the price though," she winks, "and now you're here to fill it with life again. You and your husband. He's a teacher, isn't he?"

A prickle of unease touches me. Barbara seems to know a lot about us. But my husband's words repeat in my mind: we must fit in.

"Yes, he's a teacher. He got a new job at the local school."

"Lovely. And yourself? Do you work?"

"I do." Finally, a subject I can easily chat about. "I'm a—"

"Oh dear," Barbara's face twists into an empathetic grimace. "What with the price you paid for the house in the auction, I'd hoped you'd manage to be a stay-at-home wife. It takes so much time, you see, to keep a house nice and get involved in the community. It's not like London here, my dear, we all need to do our bit."

"I'm sure we'll still have time to get involved." The smell of fudge is getting stronger. It's too sweet on my empty stomach. Even the warm afternoon sun is becoming unpleasant and my dusty old t-shirt is starting to stick to my back. "And if you need any help with organising anything just let me know." I stand. "Well, I better get back to unpacking. Can't spend all day enjoying the sunshine."

"Oh, but you can." Barbara gets to her feet. She barely reaches my shoulder.

I glance at the mark on her sleeve again. This time she notices.

Her smile disappears and she crosses her arms in front of her. "Soot, my dear. From the fireplace. It gets everywhere. I'd imagine you'll have to clean your chimney soon. The housing association is quite

firm on that one. Too much soot creates a lot of smoke. It must've been before the accident when it was last cleaned."

Silence. Barbara's smile returns but she doesn't say anything else.

"Accident?" I ask.

"Didn't you ever wonder why the house was so cheap? It's a shame really. We usually get," she looked me up and down, "a much different class of people than yourself moving in."

"The estate agent said the previous owner was moving to assisted living. There was no mention of an accident."

"Yes, Mr Willow did move to assisted living. He couldn't cope living in the house. It was too big for him by himself. When his wife and daughters lived there it was easier to manage. The memory of the accident must have factored into his move as well. I heard he had new oak flooring put in after it all happened. I also heard you were polishing them before the sofas were delivered yesterday. How lovely for you. I'd be careful if I were you though, as proven with the previous homeowners, oak tends to stain."

Another smile creases her too-pink cheeks. "Goodbye, dear. I'm sure I'll see you soon."

She walks off, her polished shoes clacking on the cobbles.

Unsure what to make of the ending to our conversation, I retreat from the little square and follow the perfectly maintained pavement back to my street. As I round the corner and my new home comes into sight, I see my husband talking to someone I recognise as the man who lives across from us.

They finish talking before I reach them and the man returns home.

"What did he want?" I ask my husband.

"Just pointing out the door's marked," my husband says. "We must've scuffed it bringing the sofas in."

It's true. There's a grey-ish smudge on the white door. "That's a shame." I rub at the mark but it only smears across the polished surface.

"We'll need to paint it," my husband says as he steps inside ahead of me, his voice fading into the hall. "Can't be the only ones on the street with a marked door."

"No." I stand and look behind me at the windows of the houses opposite. "They wouldn't allow that." I expect to find someone watching but every window is empty.

The Door

Kirsten Boswell

The door is a problem.

It's white and polished. Or it used to be.

The feet of a red sofa scuffed it when it was moved from the van into the house. The grubby mark just below the letterbox now boldly offends everyone in sight. And those in the next street.

My husband wants to paint it. He's ordered the same shade of white paint.

The neighbours seem to favour him ever since I brought a pie to a bake sale instead of a crumble. He even keeps the housing associations guidelines pinned up on the fridge. Twice this week he's been out to sweep the path and polish the letterbox. He never did anything like that in our old townhouse in London. I used to just be grateful he took the bins out.

The townspeople have a lot of opinions. And make a lot of comments. At first, their comments were like the odd fly swirling in through the window on these summer days. But, now, they're swarming and crawling all over my skin.

My husband is the one who wanted us to leave our old home. The neighbours were loud. The streets smelled – sometimes of cooking, sometimes of sour rubbish – and everyone was too close together. The doors there were a variety of bold reds, purples, glossy pinks, wood and glass. They were different shapes, too. Some were crowded by ivy, some needed a good painting, and others had stickers on them warning off cold callers. Here, there are strict rules – white is just one of three approved colours for our doors. There are no bright pink doors here.

Summer lingers and the heat grows. Colourful flowerpots begin to droop and still our door is marked. The delivery of the new paint is delayed and my husband begins to fret.

We're invited to a craft sale. I bring along knitted flower brooches. I made their petals with white wool and, when my husband is nearby, I get a lot of nice comments from members of the town council, but no one buys any.

The next day, a letter from the housing association regarding the door drops through the letter box.

“I’ll sand the door down,” my husband says.

“Why?” I ask, dotting my un-sold flower brooches around the front room. “There’s no paint yet.”

“Sanding it will remove the mark. And the paint will be here soon.”

“You know the council’s rules are not law, right?”

He looks at me. “We have to fit in, Kate.”

I shrug and try to push a loose stitch on one of my flowers back into place. “Our door has a mark on it – so what? It’s still white. You still polish the letterbox every Friday and Tuesday. I don’t see the problem. It looks better as it is than it will when it’s sanded down. Can you even leave it sanded? What if it rains?”

“The new paint will be here before it rains. It’s coming tomorrow.”

“Well, why don’t you wait till tomorrow?”

He agrees, reluctantly. And I agree, reluctantly, to bake something for the people opposite.

“It’s good to be neighbourly, Kate. Especially since we haven’t fixed the door.”

I bake white chocolate cookies and wrap them in tissue paper but when I ring the bell next door, no one answers.

The first leaves of autumn cover the front path and my husband sweeps them up before a note from the neighbours can complain. And then, to my husband’s delight, two big pots of paint arrive.

“Finally,” he pries the lid off one pot. But there’s a problem.

“They sent the wrong paint. It’s not the end of the world,” I say. “I don’t know why you’re so upset.”

“Because we need to paint the door, Kate.”

“Then paint it. There’s paint right here.”

“This isn’t allowed.”

“Who cares if it’s allowed?”

He looks at me like I’m crazy and I wonder if I am. Why do I not care about painting the door an approved colour? Why do my husband and I argue every day since moving here?

“You shouldn’t paint the door to try to please other people,” I say.

“I’m not trying to please other people. I’m trying to please you. You’ll be happier here when we’re part of the community. As usual, I’m the one who needs to do everything.”

“Painting a door that doesn’t need painted won’t make this place home.”

“Then what can I do? You’re not happy here. It’s obvious. Even the neighbours have noticed. You mope around and don’t go outside. What can I do so that you start acting normal again? You’re embarrassing.”

I stare at him and say very slowly, “Do not touch that door.” I retreat to our bedroom and draw the curtains. We never used to have arguments. It’s new. Like having a garage. It’s just something we have now.

A vibrating rumble pierces my sanctuary. He’s sanding the door down even though I told him not too. I drop onto our bed. I’m fed up with talking about paint. Fed up wondering why the mark doesn’t bother me. Fed up trying to matter more than a door. Matter more than what the neighbours want.

After spending the night alone, I open the curtains at dawn and stare out at the silence and frosted grass. What my husband said last night was correct: I’m not happy here. I’m fed up with white.

I creep downstairs and leave through the newly sanded door. It still closes with a heavy click but it’s not the same. Fallen leaves crunch as I reach the garage where the un-approved paint pots are. By the time the sun rises enough to warm the frost, I stand back and admire my morning’s work. Inside, I hear my husband fumbling about. Soon, he’ll see what I’ve done. Soon, they’ll all see.

The door is bright pink and glossy. And it’s perfect.

Dissection

Tebra Perumal

Pale hand
Adorned with veins,
arteries, muscles, skin
“What nerve is this?” I only see
pink nails.

Vaccines and Vegetables

Tebra Perumal

The garish clock in the living room ticks adroitly, announcing to the empty room that it is five pm. Priya's foot taps in a steady rhythm on the floor, while she idly plays with the throw pillow, tracing the swirling patterns with a lazy finger. She watches Milo stretch his limbs languidly and settle back into his usual spot by the dinner table.

She calls out to him, but he politely declines with a swish of his tail.

She wonders how he is never bored, sitting in the same spot everyday, thinking the same thoughts – much like her in this never-ending lockdown.

The cup of coffee on the table in front of her grows cold as she ponders, looking out at the fleet of jeeps at the front of the house. A fly buzzes irately in her ear and she swats it away. What a nuisance.

The quick tapping of feet down the stairs declares the arrival of her husband.

His starchy white shirt groans over his belly, pouring over the twig-like legs cloaked in black trousers. His balding head is peppered with clumps of greying hair, perched like curious pigeons around his scalp. She looks up at him and forces a smile.

“Guess what?” he says, a grin occupying his round face.

Priya looks at him with an eyebrow raised.

“They are bringing down some stocks of Pfizer! Top secret, no one knows yet. I spoke to Paul – you know the agriculture minister, no? Yes, anyway… They are bringing them down to vaccinate the ministers and other Government officials. Paul owes me a favour, so I managed to snag some for us. How’s that ah? I asked for extra so we can get the domestics and drivers vaccinated also.”

“Really?” Priya asks, her sombreness disappearing instantly. “So, we can finally get it and be rid of this awful stress?” After a beat she adds, “What about for the public? Are they getting some for the elderly and all? You know, the vulnerable ones?”

“No, no. Not yet. Right now, the priority is to vaccinate the important people, they will get more for those other ones later.”

Priya’s face falls.

“Why dear? You’re not scared to get it, no? I will come with you, of course.”

“No, it’s not that… Sam, is it right of us to get the vaccine when we are young and healthy? When there are other people that need it more? Think of the cancer patients on the wards… how much they will suffer if they get the virus, no?”

“Pri, they will get it eventually. You can’t think of others all the time. Sometimes, you have to be selfish to get what you want… ” he pauses.

“Of course, if you want to get Amma vaccinated I can ask Paul. She will have to travel to come to Colombo, so small issue with the restrictions, but no worries, I can manage to sort that also—” His spiel is interrupted by the musical chiming of his phone.

“Ah, it’s Paul. One minute.” He slips away into the adjacent room.

Priya’s mind whirls with a million thoughts and images, all accented with the overwhelming feeling of guilt. The conversation she had with her mother two weeks ago plays in a loop at the back of her mind. Amma had called wounded with grief over the loss of her dear friend, sobbing into the phone as though her tears would bring Mari back.

If only they had the vaccine here, baba, she had choked out, maybe she would have been able to fight it. Priya thinks of Amma’s other friends, of Amma, patiently waiting for the Government they trusted so much to make good on their promises of vaccinations and herd immunity. But she could see where the Government’s loyalties lay – with their own kind.

Almost sensing her agitation, Milo slinks over and bops her foot with his nose.

“What do you think, Milo?” she asks, stroking his orange fur.

He purrs in response – half in agreement, half because he is just happy to be petted.

Sam emerges from the other room, tapping away indignantly at his phone.

“Is everything okay?” Priya prods gently. She knows he doesn’t like being disturbed in the middle of business affairs.

“Er… Ah… What? Yes, yes, fine. All fine. Just to confirm some details about tomorrow and some other business matters. Nothing important to you,” he says distractedly, while continuing to stare at his phone, zooming in and out of something with a confused look on his face.

“So, we are still getting the vaccine tomorrow then?” she asks, searching his face for confirmation.

He stuffs his phone away into his pocket and responds, “Yes. All sorted. The driver will take us at eight am sharp to meet Paul’s guys. I arranged for the other driver to take the domestics afterwards.”

“Eight o’clock? Where?”

“Colpetty market.”

“Colpetty market? What? Does Paul’s contact need to get some vegetables or something?”

“Don’t be stupid, Pri, this is no laughing matter. It’s because no one will question us there. Plus, it’s quiet at that time in the morning, just the vendors setting up their stands. Paul said when we arrive to call him, and his guy will take us to the corner stall. We will get it there. As simple as buying vegetables, as you say.”

His phone plinks, and once more he is distracted by its contents. He trots back up the stairs and shouts back to Priya, “Let’s order a Chinese to celebrate!”

Womanhood Haiku

Stefanie McMullan

Hormones and hugging
The girl and her mum await
Their separate Springs

Mammy in Hospital

Saoirse Pagel

When I get out of school, Grandad and Nanny are waiting to pick us up. We hate Tuesdays. I can already see Svea’s grumpy face as she makes her way across the yard. We have dancing on and as usual, have not practiced. Lorraine is going to kill us.

Nanny gives me a hug and we start heading for the car. I have already spent the last hour coming up with excuses to get out of today. I could pretend to be sick. Or invent a school project. That will work.

Nanny belts us in and Grandad sits behind the wheel. “We’re going to see Mammy,” he says before I get in about the extra piano practice I need. “What about dancing?”

“You can skip it today, pet. We’re heading straight into the hospital and Papa will meet us there. We can’t stay long though.” This is great news. Svea has a big smile on her face too. We will make sure to practice for next week now.

The car is quiet. Grandad puts the radio on, and Nanny is on her phone. The hospital is not far away but there is a lot of traffic. I hate hospitals but Mammy has been there for a few weeks, and she likes it when we visit so I always try to close my eyes and not look at other people. The wires and machines scare me.

When we get there, Papa meets us outside her room. I think it’s a new one, but I don’t really remember because we haven’t been in for a few days. She has put up the pictures that Svea and I drew of the beach. There’s a big bunch of colourful flowers on the table. They annoy me. I wanted to buy her flowers the last day and Papa said we couldn’t because her friends had already bought her some.

Mammy starts crying as soon as she sees us. She gives us a big hug. Then Nanny starts crying. Even Grandad looks upset by the window. She feels a bit bony, but she still smells of Mammy. Papa sits down on the bed. “Mammy is going to have an operation tonight,” Papa starts. “The doctors are going to cut out all the sore parts of her tummy and then she’ll be all better.” Mammy hugs us tighter.

“And then I can come home, and I won’t have to stay in hospital anymore, princesses.”

I don’t really know what’s wrong with her. She says that she has bleeding cuts in her tummy and that’s why she’s in hospital. They even bought us a book with a body to show us where it hurts. This is good news though. We’ve missed her. I also want to go home again. We’ve been staying at Grandad and Nanny’s because it’s closer to school, but I miss my room and Fiachra. He sleeps at Mau’s.

We stay a while longer cuddling with Mammy on the bed. Nanny sits with us and rubs Mammy’s leg, the way Mammy rubs our legs when we’re sick. “Time to go,” Grandad says. Mammy starts crying again. I start to panic. We haven’t been there that long. What if they make us go to dancing after all? That would be so unfair. Svea now starts crying and doesn’t want to leave. I also don’t want to go. Tears fill my eyes, but I don’t even know why I’m upset.

We head to the lifts. Papa is staying here with Mammy but says he'll see us later. "Can we come back tomorrow?" I really want Mammy to come home with us already. I'm sick of the hospital. "Not tomorrow, baby. Soon." The lift opens and we have time for one last hug. We jump in and then the door closes leaving us on one side and them on the other.

A Photograph to Remember

Louise Innes

A young girl clinging to her teddy bear as she's pulled from the rubble by first responders. One of my finer pieces of work, so good in fact that it won me a Pulitzer. Taking that photo changed my life; it cemented me as one of the leading photojournalists in the world, but I hate everything about it.

The photograph was published in every major newspaper and various other media outlets alongside a message of hope – 'If this little girl can survive against all odds, so can we.'

Several analysis pieces were put out discussing the significance of the teddy bear – did it represent her innocence and childhood or was it a commentary on how resilient the younger generations are? However, they never seem to mention that the rubble the little girl is pulled out from is the remains of her home or that, while she may have survived, everyone else in her family was killed.

But hey, at least she's still got her teddy bear.

Currently, I am sitting at my kitchen table, drinking coffee and enjoying a moment of peace before my seven-year-old scream machine Lucy decides she's hungry and tells me she'll die of starvation if she doesn't get lunch soon. I shouldn't complain really, she doesn't yet understand that some children actually are starving, still it can be grating sometimes. I should also count myself lucky, all I have is a noisy little girl disrupting my morning coffee, at least it's not bombs or gunshots or the sounds of people dying in the streets...

I don't know exactly why I started thinking about the photo of the girl and her teddy bear, perhaps guilt at being able to sit here and enjoy simple pleasures in life – and have the nerve to complain about them – that she may never get to experience, if she's even still alive.

Mercifully, the doorbell rings, interrupting what was likely going to be a deep dive into the horrors of humanity and a very uncomfortable self-reflection with it.

"Donna, Charlie, hi," I say, slightly bewildered. What are they doing here?

"Hey, neighbour. Charlie is super excited to build her brand-new Lego house with Lucy. Isn't that right, Char?"

Playdate. Right. The one we set up last week and I totally forgot about.

"Come in, Lucy's in her room, Charlie." I step aside to let them in and call upstairs to Lucy to let her know her friend is here.

"Thanks, Evan. And it's a Lego spaceship, Mum!" Charlie huffs as she heads upstairs.

"Coffee?" I ask.

"I'd love some," Donna replies.

I lead her into the kitchen and I'm in the middle of making coffee when she tells me, "You forgot about the playdate." Not a question but a statement.

"Yeah, I'm so sorry I must've got the dates mixed up and..."

"Relax," she smiles. "We've all been there. How are you getting on anyways? I heard the Johnsons talking about how lovely their new family portrait is."

"Uh yeah, new baby and all that, wanted some pictures for the grandparents." I yawn. I didn't realise how tired I was.

"How long have you been back for, now?" Donna asks. Straight into the deep stuff. "About four months. Only been doing family photos for about two months though. I was thinking of doing some landscapes too though, the market for family portraits just isn't what it used to be."

It's a weak attempt at a joke and I'm rambling, eager to change the topic. She doesn't let me though.

"Make sure you're taking care of yourself and if you ever need any help, I'm right next door, ok? I've been where you are and it's tough coming back home where no one really gets what you went through and having to deal with all the complicated feeling of coming home – guilt, hopelessness, hell, even boredom. But you don't have to deal with it alone. Ok?"

I nod my head, sometimes I forget Donna used to be a doctor for MSF and has worked in many of the same places as I have; arguably witnessing much worse things than me.

I'm sure it will be great to have her to talk to about everything when I'm eventually ready to talk about it, but I'm not quite there yet.

"You know, you've probably got other things to do, I don't want to keep you from your day. How about I drop Charlie back in an hour or two, sound good?" I usher her towards the door and thank her for coming. I get her out the door just in time for the tears to start streaming down my face and my legs to give way and suddenly I'm curled up on the floor sobbing uncontrollably.

Euston Square to Liverpool Street

Amelia Fadaly

The day I first took The London Underground was the day I finally understood the meaning of peace. I had been quite nervous about the whole affair; I'd never taken a train on my own before, and the station was so crammed, as if the entire population of London gathered to watch me. I tapped my phone on the barrier and blew a sigh of relief as it opened. This type of thing usually goes wrong for me, and I had half-expected my card to be rejected and alarms to go off and police to appear and handcuffs and search dogs and imprisonment for suspected terrorism. Then again, I am told my apprehensions about most situations are unsuitably dramatic. My parents say it's anxiety, but I maintain that I'm just appropriately vigilant.

Fortunately, the barrier opened without complication, and I stepped through faking nonchalance so as to fit in with the locals. I didn't realise, however, until I crossed the threshold, that I was venturing into an entirely new world. A world where the concept of personal space ceased to exist. All of a sudden, I was wrapped in a blanket of bodies pressing up against me on every side. We moved together as one – I had no idea where I was going, nor did I really care at the time. Something about the bustling environment felt soothing to me – the tangible equivalent of white noise. And so I allowed myself to be absorbed into the river of people flowing through the station. A horde of us physically entangled but spiritually secluded.

I'm not sure how, or when, everyone dissipated, but the platform I found myself waiting on was relatively empty. Beside me, a group of young teenagers in school uniform were sat on a bench, vapes in hand, cackling about something. Instinctively, I put my hood up and head down. I was probably five years older than them but, let's be honest, do teenagers ever stop being intimidating? Looking at the ground, I noticed the line running near the edge of the platform. The first time I had ever seen such a miserable shade of yellow. The very same colour that English teachers insist connotes sunshine and happiness, being used to stop people from accidentally killing themselves. It had a sad, brownish hue about it, and in fact would be better described as a shade of medically-concerning, opaque urine. I saw the train coming before I heard it. White, glaring lights pierced the tunnel's dark void. I had AirPods in, but the feeble efforts of Bruno Mars were no match for the mighty roar of the train racing towards the platform. A metal-on-metal screech, hitting high notes that would rival Mariah Carey herself.

It was at this point in my journey that I began to notice the therapeutic benefits of the underground. I had only been sitting on the train for five minutes, and the silly observations I was internally vocalising had already usurped the overwhelming thoughts that permanently reside in my mind. Inside, the train had a unique climate. It was thick and heavy with sweat-induced humidity. Sour staleness of cigarette smoke was the main circulating scent. Well, not circulating per se because the air was effectively stagnant, but circulating in the sense that gusts of it would punch you in the face when somebody got on or off.

The next station is – Farringdon. Change for National Rail services.

Part of me resented there being only three stops left. I would have stayed for an extra circuit if I didn't have another train to catch soon. By Farringdon, there were only three other seats free, but most newcomers opted to stand anyway. Maybe they enjoyed the rush of not knowing when the train was going to move off, and the consequent stumble every time it suddenly did so. At King's Cross, a man had staggered so violently he tripped over a young woman's shiny Doc Martens. She glared at him with a level of rage which, in my opinion, was disproportionate to the misdemeanour.

Speaking of misdemeanours: Walker's cheese and onion crisps – a criminal offence when consumed in a confined public space. As the woman opposite me opens the packet, a pungent odour erupts into the carriage. Not that it was smelling particularly nice in the first place, but I could have done without the onion-y aroma mingling with the pre-existing train stench. I smiled to myself; it was nice to be troubled by such trivial matters.

That's the thing about the underground, there was so much going on that all my senses were bombarded, and I was distracted from burdens that typically govern my thoughts. Insecurities, car insurance, broken friendships, calories, exams, bills, work, love, hate – they all exist above ground. Smelly crisps and scary schoolkids, that's the worst of my troubles here. It wasn't just a mode of transport; it was the perfect setting in which I could be left to my own thoughts, without being consumed by them.

Three women clambered on just as the doors were about to close. They were loud and chatty and very American – another criminal offence for confined public spaces.

"Oh my God, did y'all catch what Stacy said? Twenty minutes on the subway here is the same as smoking a whole cigarette"

"No way, you're lying!"

"Deadass I swear."

The next station is – Liverpool Street. Change for the Central and Hammersmith & City lines and National Rail services.

That meant it was nearly time to get off. It wasn't a long trip, yet by the end I felt changed. I had grown comfortable with the customs of this new world. It didn't bother me when the fat man's thigh brushed against my own every time the carriage jostled, and I didn't jump anymore when the train did its deafening metal-on-metal screech at random points in the journey. Only about a minute left until I had to navigate my way around Liverpool Street, and I was sad about my imminent departure. The American Women babbled on. The Cheese And Onion Lady was neatly straightening the edges of the packet, preparing to tip the final crumbs into her mouth. Angry Boots Girl cranked up the music in her headphones, to a volume that could probably be heard by the next carriage. And The Villain Who Scuffed Her Boots eventually decided to take a seat.

I just sat there with closed eyes, finding inner serenity amongst the chaos of The London Underground.