

# A Double Dose of Verbal Remedies

*Creative Writing by Medical Students*

Volume II

Selected and edited by Helen Lynch and Enxhi Mandija

## Dr Jeannie MacLeod Prize 2023/24

### Mental Health, Resilience and Wellbeing: Short Essay by Stefanie McMullan

As a mum of two young children, embarking on a completely new career path in my forties, I have found the pace and complexity of my medical studies particularly challenging to juggle. However, the biggest obstacle I have worked hard to overcome each day has in fact been the feelings of loneliness and unbelonging that come with the territory as a non-traditional medical student.

I am by no means as academically recognised, nor as marginalised as Dr Jeannie MacLeod was during her short, but impactful life and medical career.<sup>1</sup> My learning during the psychiatry block also suggests to me that Jeannie was severely depressed when she died by suicide. Something that I have not experienced personally in my life so far.

However, reading her story, I cannot help but draw comparisons between some of our shared experiences in medical school that can contribute to poorer mental health. Both surrounded by hundreds of others who are so alike one another and yet so unlike us in so many ways. Both dedicated and hardworking students, doing everything we can each day to achieve the same goals as our peers, despite the lack of a supportive network around us. Both viewed as outliers, wild cards, not fitting the traditional medical student mould, fair game for undue scrutiny and social exclusion.

Jeannie wrote letters to her family, and I hope that brought much-needed comfort to her. However, it is hard not to feel despair and sadness that despite her connectedness to her loved ones, she felt that her life was not worth living anymore. Jeannie's story makes me question whether access to creative writing therapy could improve the mental health of healthcare workers.

I was pleased to learn that there are a growing number of organisations that offer writing for mental health, including Cumbria University and WriteWell. Cumbria University offers creative writing to its mental health nursing students to help them to support their patients in the future.<sup>2</sup> WriteWell believes that by writing about upsetting experiences, people can create lasting improvements in their mental health and recently published research to support their views.<sup>3</sup>

My own creative writing experience aligns with the findings of WriteWell's research. The primary reason I chose creative writing for medical students, was to create some much-needed space (both mental and physical) from the punishing demands of my medical studies.

I was then unexpectedly diagnosed with skin cancer before the Humanities block had even begun. Ordinarily I would ruminate over my worries or choose short-term distraction tactics to brush them to one side.

Creative writing helped me to confront my thoughts, feelings and fears head on in a safe space. I was also able to create something meaningful and beautiful from my thoughts. Several pieces of work in my final portfolio were constructed from very real and raw fears. Seeing those stories and poems take shape by my own hand, and then feeling confident to share that with my classmates and tutor was unlike anything else I have experienced previously. Reflecting on the Humanities course, WriteWell's research and Jeannie's story, I wonder if and how Jeannie could have benefited from creative writing to make sense of her own troubling thoughts and feelings? I also wonder if this could have then prevented her from taking the drastic and irreversible decision to die by suicide.

### REFERENCES

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<sup>2</sup> McCarthy-Grunwald, S. et al, 'How can creative writing help individuals struggling with their mental health?', *How creative writing can help with Mental Health*, University of Cumbria. Available at: <https://www.cumbria.ac.uk/blog/articles/how-can-creative-writing-help-individuals-struggling-with-their-mental-health.html> (Accessed: 22 January 2024).

<sup>3</sup> 'The science behind WriteWell.' Available at: <https://www.writewellcommunity.com/the-science/> (Accessed: 22 January 2024).

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## The Unfamiliar

*Katherine Blum*

I pull onto the dark track that leads to the car park, made even darker by towering pines obscuring what little light is provided by the stars, crescent moon, and some distant farms. I park in a space with a boulder at its head, helpfully illuminated by the headlights, and sit for a minute with the engine off and lights on. 5:06 am and two degrees it reads on the display, but it will be colder up the hill.

From the passenger seat, I retrieve my beanie and put it on, tucking stray hairs behind my ears, before pulling the head torch on over the top and tightening the straps to secure it. Removing the key from the ignition lets the darkness prevail, and I open the car door into the brisk coolness. Not wanting to disturb the stillness, I leave the head torch switched off, and let my eyes adjust for a moment to the blackness, allowing shapes to slowly and modestly reveal themselves. Turning back to the car, I open the boot and take out my down jacket, putting it on over the layers. It has been deliberately left off until this moment so as to feel its immediate benefit. Getting my small rucksack out, I close the boot and lock the car, before carefully stowing the keys in one of the bag's compartments. This one won't be opened again until I return, so as not to inadvertently lose them. The rucksack is swung up onto both shoulders and adjusted. The head torch is switched on. After all the fiddly tasks are completed, the gloves are pulled on, and I set off for the path.

I know where I'm going; I've been here before, but the darkness distorts the familiar. Even with the head torch on, I feel disorientated. Objects appear startled by the stark artificial light-beam. Whichever direction I look becomes framed by the light, and the periphery fades into black. The illuminated objects suddenly cease to exist once the head turns. The path leads up through pine trees. These are Scots pine, and their tall trunks don't carry many branches until the canopy, such that the wood doesn't have an oppressive density. They are majestic looking in daylight, but almost more so without it; they loom larger, maybe a change in perspective, and it's as if they have given me permission to enter their territory but will be watching me. At their bases, ferns cover the floor, with their fronds overlapping one another and casting beautiful but eerie shapes that do not welcome you off the path for what they might be concealing. I feel like a trespasser – there's an incongruity to my nocturnal presence.

With the darkness, a quietness is brought, such that my own footsteps and breathing sound almost unbearably present – unwelcome intruders on the silence. At this hour, even most of the birds are silent, though the odd thrush, blackbird or robin pierces the quiet stillness with its crystal-clear songs that carry far in the cold, still air. It makes welcome company. What doesn't, is the sudden unsettling flapping noise of a startled wood pigeon, which momentarily unnerves me in return. There is little wind, although an occasional breeze gently passes through, swaying the tops of the trees, causing them to rustle and their branches to creak. The swishing noises sometimes pick up to a crescendo before waning with the wind's power. With the light diminished, my hearing sense feels heightened; more mindful of the soundscape. It's not the only sense sharpened: smells seem more vivid; fragrant sweet pine mixes with the earthy odours of damp decaying wood. Deep breaths allow me to take it all in as if I was imbibing nature.

The path has been steadily climbing. In the lower sections, the footing is easy, but as it gets higher, and steeper, I have to pay more attention to where I plant each step – I can't trust my peripheral vision and need to look down towards my feet to illuminate any hazards. Tree roots, uncovered by the eroded earth, lie passively in wait for a careless foot to stumble over. The trees start thinning out as the path leaves the wood, then the stars become my canopy. There's a small but perceptible change in brightness, the sky just becoming a midnight blue. I stop and switch my head torch off to look up at the stars. As my eyes adjust, the stars become many, with the milky way clearly discernible as a band of star density across the sky. I don't remember the last time I was in the company of the light from this many stars. The waxing new moon is only a day or two old and does not interfere with the number to be seen. It's a quiet sliver, only delicately revealing itself. I turn to look at the landscape. Under the cloak of darkness, the shapes are brooding entities that don't quite give themselves away. Silhouettes of the brows of lower hills can just be discerned. This landscape that I know so well in the light holds an impenetrability at night. But this is what I have come for: novelty, or maybe to subvert what I know. The air is colder here in the open, and I feel it nipping and drying my cheeks. The heather and grasses are glimmering with the suggestion of frost. I take off my rucksack and retrieve my water bottle. The water is lukewarm, deliberately, so it is easier to drink out in the cold. After taking a few sips, it is put away, the rucksack and head torch back on, and I continue my journey.

The path is getting steeper, rockier, and begins to switchback to lessen its strenuousness. The distance travelled, and yet to go, is concealed – the head torch only lighting a short distance ahead. It allows me to focus on just moving, not concerning myself with destination nor how far I've come. I hear

a few geese in the distance; I cannot see them, but their call is unmistakeable. Either pink-footed or barnacle migrating from further north, maybe Iceland or Greenland, to winter in fields and lochs. It's a haunting sound. As I continue on the path, one half of the sky begins to lose the intensity of the darkness, the blue moving on from a midnight shade to merely dark. The sound of water enters my consciousness. A gentle trickling noise, that rings out to me. Abruptly it comes into view to cut through the path ahead. The moving water a constant through day and night. I'm always amazed at how water that seeps from the hillside, continues to seep, then coalesces to form burns, then bigger burns, tributaries, and rivers. Always flowing. But they commence not far from here. I'm not sure what watershed this will flow to. I step on a rock in the midst of the flowing water to cross the burn.

The darkness is faltering at the horizon, and the landscape is coming into view. More recognisable but still holding a strangeness. I switch off the head torch to walk in near darkness. The rocks just gleam and at times I have to feel my way around them. The walk has become more of a scramble, with steps eroded into the rock by the feet of thousands who have been here before. I wonder who else has carved them at night – I won't have been the first. Did they feel a pull for the solace that a quiet night and solitude brings? My arms pull, while my legs push me upwards. Fingers feel for purchase in the recesses of the rock. Touch augmenting where sight struggles. I scramble my way to the top, a granite tor, revealed over time from sandstone glacially eroded. It's a hard rock, but it too has weathered, polished in parts by wind, water, hands, and feet. The quartz seams lightly sparkle in the breaking dawn.

I turn to face the imminent sunrise. Colour is leaching into the horizon; a band of yellow blends into orange, and a frozen puddle reflects back gold. Behind me the sky is darker, but the stars are fading out. One brighter than the rest I think may be a planet, though it too will disappear under the cover of light. The sun emerges to proclaim the day and end my night exploration. I watch as it slowly rises and uncovers the landscape and features that I know. But as I watch, the objects lower down become hazy; a low mist develops, hanging in the valleys. It builds into a blanket of cloud, which I am above – an inversion – that veils the landscape from me yet again, save for the high ground which float like islands.

### Cinquain

*Katherine Blum*

Wild geese  
Wintering here  
Uplift my heart and soul.  
Sorrow when they go, but then come  
Swallows.

### We've Always Done It This Way

*Stefanie McMullan*

I arrive in a blur of people, all trudging herd-like and harried into the building. I convince myself that everyone else is feeling exactly like me. Nervous about what's going to happen today. Terrified of putting a foot wrong. Overwhelmed by the thought of what's expected of us.

The mass of bodies funnels into a neat, single file towards the auditorium entrance. One by one, we step forwards to go through the dreaded ritual that so many future doctors have done before us. I clock the sober faces sitting behind a table stacked with enough pens and stickers to make WH Smith envious.

“Name?”

“Jill Maclean.”

“ID?”

“Here you go.”

“Ok, great. Here's your sticker. You're pink 132. We'll call your run group when we're ready for you. Go and drop your bag and coat, then take a seat.”

“Thanks.”

The booming voice of the lead clinician startles everyone into stunned silence. “AS SOON AS YOU CHECK IN, GO STRAIGHT TO THE CAGES. THEN TAKE A SEAT AND WAIT FOR THE BRIEFING. QUIETLY!”

I make my way slowly over to the cages, my legs threaten to buckle at any moment, jelly-like and completely uncooperative. Being careful not to stumble head first inside the open cage myself, I crouch

down slowly and pack my coat and water bottle neatly into my rucksack. All the while I am calmly reassuring myself that everything I'm supposed to bring with me to the exam is now either on me (glasses, stethoscope, hair tie, fob watch) or crammed in my pockets (pen torch, inhaler, spare hair tie). I'm equally conscientious about making sure that everything I'm not allowed with me in the exam is now inside my rucksack.

I take great care to position the rucksack upright, like a well-placed Jenga block, so that it doesn't topple over and kickstart an Eastpak avalanche. I imagine being smothered to unconsciousness, but not quite to death, by said avalanche. The thought of this brings a wry smile to my tired face. "That poor girl," they'd say as they ushered me off to a waiting taxi home.

I remind myself glumly that the lead clinician is more likely to prop me up on a chair and grumpily attach a new numbered sticker to my scrubs, before thrusting me into a later run time.

I step carefully down the stairs, one at a time, so as not to career down them. It's not as if I've never walked these stairs before, although the adrenaline coursing through my weary body is making every part of my being jitter and shake. Wry smile well and truly wiped from my face, my bum gratefully finds a seat which creaks noisily as I collapse into it. The sharp trill of the infamous bell is barely audible from the auditorium, yet it still causes more than a few bodies to jump to attention or sag further into a heap every few minutes, depending on the prevailing mood of each waiting student.

Today is non-jeopardy. That's what they keep telling us. I've no reason to worry about failing. But I do anyway. This exam is a cruel rite of passage of an exam within the medical community. It won't be changing anytime soon. "We've always done it this way," they retort if anyone dares to challenge their sacred exam process.

"My flatmate's cousin David says that, like, the examiners are like totally horrible," a petite and neat brunette confides to her friend in the row directly in front of me.

"Well then, like, how are we even supposed to like show them that we like know what we're like doing and stuff like that?" Her not quite so neat or petite friend replies worriedly.

I'd give anything for them both to stop talking so I can quietly enjoy my own catastrophising.

"I dunno babes, like I'm just mega relieved that we don't like even get like a grade or anything for it, you know?" neat and petite says far too casually. The tone of her friend's reply is decidedly spicier.

"Yes, we do, Callie! We like literally get a grade for like every station! We like still have to pass most of them, to get, you know, like a good grade overall and that."

Having unintentionally wound each other up, they each turn inwards. Sitting in awkward silence with arms folded tightly across their regulation black scrubs, both trying to quash the brand new worries rising steadily like bile in the back of their throats. I need to do the same, and quickly, as the Year One Medical School OSCE briefing is about to begin.

**Ashleigh Jenkins**  
*Amelia Fadaly*

By this point, he didn't mind her constant schmooze keeping him company. It was the end of a quiet shift, and the regulars always clear out by three am to sober up a little before returning home, to their loveless marriages and ungrateful children. She is a fascinating customer, compared to the usual demographic of middle-aged, white-collar workers. Although, he only now appreciates the value of their ability to drink in silence. But he can't complain; after all, entertaining the drawls of a garrulous day drinker is part of the job description.

"Like, I ain't sayin' I'm gonna kill myself over it, but it's like the principle init. Listen—"

He does listen, intently, whilst wiping down the polished mahogany countertops for the fifth time. Her accent was agony to endure initially. He isn't a die-hard patriot for Scotland, but still, something about English people had always felt off-putting. It was only twenty minutes into her rambling that he became accustomed to the oddities of the Colcestrian vernacular, although still rather perplexed by her refusal to pronounce the letter T.

"And d'you know wha'. It all goes back to primary school. I had my first archnemesis when I was eight. Ashleigh fucking Jenkins. And when I say archnemesis I mean like with full, unequivocal accuracy. Literally my archnemesis I'm not takin' the piss—"

He can't help but chuckle to himself at the stark contrast between the eloquence in her language, and the manner in which she speaks it. She is obviously an intelligent individual; her NHS badge swings from the front pocket of her black trousers, as she spins from side to side on the barstool. She looks too young to be a doctor, but perhaps she is in training. It's funny how alcohol brings out her old roots. He

turns his back to her, concealing a smile as he rinses out the rag. She must have caught his reaction and quickly follows up.

“Nah listen, nuffink in this story should be mistrued. Misconstrued. Miscon... what’s the word?”

“Misconstrued?”

“Yeah that. Nothing in this story should be misconstrued as satire coz I’m literally being dead serious. She has ruined everything in my life.”

“I understand,” he says, clearly amused. “Go on then, what did she do, this Ashleigh Jankins?”

“Jenkins not Jankins. Even though she was proper janky now that you mention it.”

He pours another jigger of rum into a frosty glass and slides it over to her on a crisp paper coaster. Stirring the ice spheres with her finger, she lets out a tired exhale as she prepares for the next bout of her monologue.

“How do I describe Ashleigh Jenkins. Imagine you’ve got to take a shit after a dodgy kebab. And I don’t mean a normal shit, I’m talkin’ proper, burnin’, lava-exploding-out-your-arse type shit. Like a whole rectal massacre. Then you look at the loo roll holder and it’s empty, and you’re like ‘oh fuck what’d I do now?’ And then, hallelujah, you find a brand new, jumbo-size, roll of toilet paper just sittin’ next to ya, in all its three-ply glory. So you use it to wipe your arse and the seat and whatever else you shat on. End of story, right? Wrong. The universe don’t do handouts. There’s no way that God-sent toilet roll ain’t got a catch. You go back into the restaurant, but everyone is looking at you, disgusted. You look down, and a bit of shitty toilet paper is stuck to your shoe – like STUCK stuck. I mean the fucker is literally cemented on the sole. And you try to shake it off, but it won’t budge; who knew shit was such a powerful adhesive? Anyway, Ashleigh Jenkins is that pooey toilet paper, forever stuck to my shoe. Ashleigh was my best friend from like Year 2 to Year 5. A huge fucking waste of time mate, trust. It all started gaan wrong in Year 4, it was our first day with the new teacher – Mr Peck. The wanker to beat all wankers. His voice alone was jarring, it was like his nose was perpetually blocked. Plus, he was Scouse. Anyway, he made us fill in these sheets about our interests to ‘get to know us.’ Bullshit, mate. That man didn’t even know my name, let alone my favourite weekend activity. I was sat next to Ashleigh, as per. Oh, I forgot to tell you what she looked like. She was like a cross between Ben 10 and the Cheshire Cat. Like that fuckin’ wide, creepy smile and round face. Her hair was ashy brown and very short – kinda like a pixie cut, but not in a cute way. More like the hairdresser had a vendetta against her head and just kept hacking away at it. Ok, what was I saying? Oh yeah, so we were doing the ‘get to know us’ sheet and long story short, we handed the sheets in for him to read while we went to assembly. Halfway through, he came and called me out, in front of everyone, to ‘have a chat,’ which everyone knows is short for getting proper told off. When we got to the empty classroom, he sat on his chair and folded his arms in such a wankery way. If I wasn’t an eight-year-old girl I woulda scrapped him there and then, swear to fuck. He looked smugly angry and just sat there starin’. I was like, bruv you gonna chat to me or what? Eventually he spat it out and said he was ‘disappointed that I felt the need to copy other people rather than be myself in his class.’ The fuck does that even mean?”

He uses a white microfibre cloth to polish the glasses as her story escalates. When she had first walked in – hair neatly clipped back, flushed cheeks from the frost outside – he had expected her to ask for directions or bus routes. He certainly didn’t expect her to be there three hours later, providing such a comical re-enactment of her childhood. As she gets riled up, her Essex accent becomes a more prominent presence and the inflections in her tone become increasingly higher pitched. The way her entire face stretches to produce exaggerated expressions makes him glad he picked up the shift.

“So, he whips out my sheet and puts it next to Ashleigh’s. And lo and behold that muggy little bitch copied my ideas, word for word. I shit you not, she even copied the way I write my Fs. And here he is accusing ME of copying HER. Is he a fuckin’ idiot? Just coz he read hers first, he can’t ASSUME it was her idea, like that’s just STUPID. Which I told him, in a slightly politer way obviously. He called her in to ask her. And that’s when Ashleigh bloody Jenkins opened her weirdly wide mouth, and blatantly, proudly, stabbed me in the back. Absolutely mugged me off. She said it was her idea and that she should have ‘hid her work better.’ WHAT! No seriously what the fuck. It wasn’t even that deep, like she wouldn’t have been punished loads if she owned up. It’s not like she plagiarised a whole dissertation off me mate, it was a fucking ‘what’s your fave colour’ worksheet.”

After such an impressive build up, he was somewhat disappointed with the punch line of her story. She can’t be drinking herself into a mess because of some trivial thing that happened years ago. He interjects.

“Hold on, you blame all of your life’s inconveniences on this girl, when all she did was copy you once?”

“It weren’t once, it was over and over again. I’d forgive her and reconnect and then BAM, she fucks me over. She stole my friends away from me by gaslighting them into thinking I was a bitch, same way she gaslit Mr Peck that day. And naïve little Amelia fell for it every time. I was so desperate to go back to how things used to be, that I’d admit defeat and run back to her. My whole life, I’ve had trust issues and yet am drawn to the most untrustworthy people purely coz of her. She always managed to convince people that I was in the wrong, so I developed this incessant need to prove myself to everyone so that they would reaccept me. I worked double hard in Mr Peck’s classes, and I bought my friends presents with the money Mum gave me for school dinners. I even apologised to Ashleigh, just so she didn’t hate me. My whole fucking life, I’ve been so busy trying to make everyone else happy, that I forgot about myself. And now I’m twenty-one years old and I don’t know how to feel happy. I don’t know my interests. I don’t even know my favourite shitting colour or favourite weekend activity. All because of the crippling people-pleasing complex I developed when I was eight. All because of Ashleigh Jenkins.”

He pauses what he is doing and looks at her in shock. He didn’t expect her to blurt out such an articulate psychoanalysis of her own life. She thrusts the empty glass towards him, on its now sad, sodden coaster.

“And make it a triple.”

### **Piccadilly Line**

*Millie Garnepudi*

God, she needed another cigarette. She was firmly settled in the opinion that taking the tube in London at eight o’clock on a Monday morning was perhaps akin to a form of mild torture. The scarf wrapped around her neck was suffocating her and the air was thick with the smell of someone’s cheap perfume. Kara was standing facing the front of the moving cylindrical hellhole sandwiched between a man falling asleep upright and a mother holding onto her daughter by her backpack strap like it was a piece of luggage that came with a human inconveniently attached to it. She chewed nervously on her fingernails as she observed the way they all swayed like puppets as they came to a halted stop at the next station, trying to hide the chipped nail varnish that she kept forgetting to take off. Her pitiful hungover state and the fact she hadn’t had anything to eat since yesterday made her stomach lurch with the tube’s motion. She so desperately wanted to grab a bagel on her way into work but the lack of funds in her bank account after last night’s spending was now mocking her. As tempting as it was to give her mum a ring and ask her to dinner, where she’d get a free meal and some much needed advice, it had finally reached a point where even her mother would look at her with a sad, mournful look. She couldn’t bear the thought of it; of seeing it all over her face – maybe, at last, she’d succeeded in throwing her life away and now there was nothing left but a thundering headache and a meagre £28.70. The hordes of businessmen, briefcases and beanie-wearing skateboarders that began clambering on at Leicester Square made her consider quitting her job altogether to run away into the countryside where the only mode of transportation was a highland cow. Kara thought about taking out her phone to google ‘organs one can live without’ and ‘how much for them’ so she could pay for the acres of land to house her cows when her gaze landed on a dark haired woman in front of her. She noticed the light blue scrub trousers and wondered what kind of doctor she was. Then she wondered why on earth she’d opt to travel via poorly organised, inconsistent public transport mechanisms instead of braving the congestion charge that she could obviously afford based on the handbag she was carrying. Her head turned towards the doors when they opened and she was taken aback by the familiarity of her face. Where did she know her from? She thought of her uni days, back before everything went to shit. Maybe they had a mutual friend and saw each other at the same parties. No, wait. Did they know each other from primary school? Surely that couldn’t be who she thought it was. Christ, how long had it been? At least fifteen years, she reckoned, but time passed differently for her now. The days were muddled together and going to bed at 5 am most nights certainly didn’t help. She was pretty sure they followed each other on Instagram but she hadn’t checked that stupid app in ages. Everyone was off going to Santorini on a random October weekend because they were bored, minted, or both. If she saw another caption saying, ‘Take me back (cocktail emoji, wave emoji)’ she’d take one of those little red hammers meant for breaking the glass in emergencies and repeatedly bash it against her own skull.

**Hope & Greed**  
*Aqeel Alebraheem*

The alarm is ringing.

I bang aimlessly on my bedside table trying to turn it off. Did I just knock off the water cup? Finally, it's off. Unfortunately, I still have to bite the bullet and wake up. I remember I had something in my diary for my work, online tarot reading. I proceed to check it:

Charlotte – 10:30 – TR

Here I am, dragging myself all the way to the kitchen, passing Sarah's room, my flatmate. She is still sleeping, face down, her pyjama pants rolled up to her knees. I open the fridge's door to see a lemon, an egg and an open Pepsi can. Well, I guess it's an egg for breakfast, boiled, eaten whilst standing up even. I then head to my 'Work Room' to join the online call with today's client, Charlotte. My dimly lightened 'Work Room' has a round table with my tarot cards on it, a chair and a dark curtain behind the chair as a background. On either side of the cards sit two candles, lit for each call. I prepare myself by putting on my work clothes, a black satin dress and a hand chain, my hair untied on both sides of my face. There I sit on the chair with my back straight and chin up, ready to show my confident appearance. My plan is to reiterate some of the usual readings for the client.

Camera on. Join call.

There she is, Charlotte, I assume, sitting on a high-back white chair, wearing a fur coat, a shining necklace with a ruby stone, matching her ring and earrings. Behind her is a massive room, nothing of which I have seen before. Tall windows, velvet curtains and marvellous chandeliers hanging from the ceiling of this room. This must be a castle of some sort. This is not what I was expecting. I can feel my jaw dropping. Oh no, I need to say something.

"Hello Charlotte."

"I need you to come here. Paris. Today. Everything is paid. Bring someone with you to keep you company. I'll pay you £500,000. I'll meet you tomorrow. See you then."

Call ended.

I am still in shock. What just happened? Is this real?

"Saraah, Saraah!"

Sarah is sat in the living room sipping tea from her cup, her eyes fixed on the coffee table in front of her. I rush towards her, breathless by the time I get to her.

"You won't believe what just happened. This client, she wants me to go meet her in Paris. She is paying me half a million pounds. She—"

"Do you have a fever? Are you unwell?"

"No! It's true. You can come as well."

Knock knock.

"Envelope for Ms Reader."

An envelope is pushed through our letterbox. I get up to check it. This envelope is different to the ones we get from banks and that sort of mail. It's framed with silver edges and is pretty thick. I open it to see cash and two letters, the first asking me to spend the cash on the trip to Paris. The second letter has the trip's schedule. The flight is in FOUR HOURS!

I run back to Sarah, show her the envelope and pull her to her room.

PACKING TIME.

I put every piece of clothing I can see in my travelling bag. I grab my handbag and slip my phone, wallet and the envelope in it.

Minutes pass and the doorbell rings. I run to open it to find a tall man in a black suit.

"Greetings, Ms Reader, I'm Mark. I'll be taking you to the airport. Your car is ready."

"Uhh, thank you. I'll be ready in a minute."

"Sarah, it's time to leave."

We go downstairs to find a shining black vehicle parked in front of the door. Mark is holding the door for us. I get in, Sarah follows and the door closes. I can see Mark walking around the car to get to the driver's seat. He gets in and drives us to the airport. As the city's buildings flash before my eyes, I get lost in a daydream. My life is about to change drastically!

The black car stops opposite the airport, where two dark-suited men stand waiting. Sarah and I know the drill by now. So, I grab my handbag's shoulder strap, straining against the leash to travel to Paris. The first man fixes his earpiece and proceeds to open the door for us to alight, and so we do. As I get out, I turn to my right to see the second man getting our luggage. It looks like Mark is giving him a hand as well.

Skipping the whole airport shebang, we are about to board the plane. Obviously, we walked past the other people and joined the first-class passengers. I have never experienced this feeling before. It feels rather peculiar yet so special. We board the plane and are escorted to our seats.

“Do you prefer the window seat?” says Sarah.

“Who doesn’t?” I say as I settle in my seat.

“Wow! This seat offers everything,” I add as I explore it. I start a movie on the large screen in front of me and press the button on the side of the seat to turn it into a flat bed.

“Wake up, wake up. We’re about to land.”

Sarah is trying to wake me up to get ready to see Paris from my window. It feels great, albeit there is a tiny thing ruining my special moment. I need to go to the toilet, but we are about to land. Ugh, I’ll have to wait.

The remaining ten minutes of the flight are feeling like ages for me.

Finally, the plane lands. Sarah and I rush to the nearest toilet to our gate.

“Here, take my bag.”

“Okay, I’ll wait for you here,” Sarah replies.

A couple of minutes later I come back looking for Sarah. I can’t see her anywhere. I’ll just call her—but she has my bag.

I stand there, perplexed.

Sarah is nowhere to be found.

### **Sarah’s perspective**

As I am sitting in our living room drinking my tea, Estella comes running towards me, obtruding my peaceful morning. She is shouting something about a rich client offering her half a million pounds and a trip to Paris to read tarot cards for her. She wants me to come as well.

Does she really believe this tomfoolery? How naive Estella is!

Someone interrupts her and pushes an envelope through our letterbox, which she jumps to go see. She scrutinises its contents and shows me the invitation letters and the money for her to spend on the trip.

As my eyes fall on the notes in her hands, an idea crosses my mind. Oh yes, I know so well what I’m thinking.

Estella holds my wrist and pulls me to my room to pack my bag for this trip. Around the time I close my bag, a gentleman shows up at our flat’s door. He’s taking us to the airport. On our way there, the vehicle’s motion lulls me to a daydream. Money, to spark the beginning of a new chapter in my life.

A luxurious airport service was responsible for us all the way to the boarding gate. We take off and land, and all I am thinking of is the handbag and the envelope in it, Estella’s handbag, the money. She asks me to hold her bag for her as she needs to go to the toilet. Aah, everything is falling into place. This is the plan. Off she goes, and off I go as well.

All it takes is a deft movement, a bright mind and an amenable companion.

### **Going Home**

*Aidan Andrade*

To this day, when I’m asked where I’m from, I’m not sure what exactly I’m supposed to say. Someone once commented that it looked like I was having a stroke when I was answering this question. It was a few weeks after my tenth birthday that I first visited the tropical paradise I’m supposed to call home. I loved flying and I was fascinated by airplanes but after nearly seven hours of travelling, I was relieved we had landed. Little did I know that we were far from being done. The queue at immigration stretched to infinity and beyond. We collected all our one hundred and one pieces of luggage and made our way towards customs. I had heard stories about how cruel customs officers could be. I could see their eyes sparkling, hoping that they would be able to bring some of their stolen treasures home. I still consider it a minor miracle that we were able to get to the other side without being asked to open any of our bags.

As I took my first steps out of the airport, the first thing I noticed was the scorching heat. It felt like I was walking into a blazing hot furnace. Having lived in Bahrain for all my life, this was nothing new to me. However, my ten-year-old brain couldn’t grasp how it could be so hot just a couple of weeks before Christmas. The noise was deafening; there were car horns blaring, the clatter of luggage carts and people chatting away. I had never seen anyone outside my family speak Konkani before but there I was, surrounded by people speaking it. My dad drew our attention to a sign somewhere in the crowd that read

‘Welcome home, the Andrades.’ The next thing I remember, a swarm of people surrounded us. Everyone was exchanging hugs and kisses. I was shocked to see so many new faces and I couldn’t help but wonder whether I was really related to all these people. Finally, a few of them started to introduce themselves. They told me how they had helped change my nappies when I was younger.

“Oh, would you look at that, he’s blushing.”

“Look at you, you’re a big boy now.”

“You remember me, don’t you?”

Honestly, I didn’t but I nodded anyway.

Finally, I spotted the familiar faces of my cousins – Stewart, Caleb and Lizandra. I somehow managed to wiggle my way out of the crowd and greeted my cousins. It was only then that I noticed how much worse my younger siblings were having it. They were completely smothered by these newfound relatives of ours.

After the welcomes had concluded, we made our way to the car park. Trying to fit all our bags into the backs of their cars was like a real-life game of Tetris. It took three jeeps and nearly forty-five minutes but we finally hit the road.

I rolled the windows down and let in the cool, refreshing breeze. Remo’s greatest hits were playing from the stereo. My parents were catching up with Uncle Joaquim as he drove. As much as I found myself fascinated by the beauty all around, I couldn’t help but overhear the juicy gossip that was being shared. Whenever Uncle Joaquim would ask me what I was looking forward to or how I was doing at school, I would first reply with a “Huh?” in an attempt to make it seem like I was not listening to the conversation the adults were having. All of a sudden, my sister, Zoe, screamed excitedly, pointing to the window. I was amazed to see a troop of monkeys sitting on a massive banyan tree. As we got closer to the city, I spotted several street vendors and I could already smell the croquettes, samosas and bondas. Just as I was thinking of poking my brother, Zac, and trying to convince him to say that he was hungry, Uncle Joaquim said that we were nearly there and that there was a grand feast awaiting us. The drive took just over an hour but it didn’t feel like it was anywhere near that long.

As Uncle Joaquim was parking, I saw Grandma sitting on an old wooden rocking chair on the veranda. Zac, Zoe and I ran towards her and gave her the biggest hug. She pinched our cheeks much harder than you would expect the average ninety-year-old to be able to. She told us that she couldn’t be happier that we were there. After she greeted my mom and dad, she showed us inside the bungalow. In the dining area, there was an impressive oak wood table that was more than twice as long as any table I had ever seen before. There were, at the very least, thirty different pots and bowls scattered across it. There were such diverse smells that I couldn’t say with any certainty what even one of the dishes was. I certainly didn’t have this in mind when Uncle Joaquim said that there was a feast awaiting us. Grandma seated us on a sofa beside her and said we could watch whatever we wanted on TV till the others arrived. Giving us that much freedom was a big mistake. How were the three of us ever going to agree on what we were going to watch?

### In a Child’s Eyes

*Janice Su*

The sky had darkened, and the sun dipped low. It was probably about time. I asked Mom what time it was, as I hadn’t learned to read a clock yet.

“Which number is the short arm pointing at?” Mom asked.

“Erm... five?”

“And the long arm?”

“Six,” I answered.

“Well, it is half-past five then.”

Half-past five. That meant there was still half an hour until my sister came back from school. She was ten years older than me, much smarter, knew how to read a clock, and never messed up with the shillings when buying candies from the convenience store.

I pulled out my recorder and music sheet from my school bag. I had just had my first music lesson that day, and Miss Cheah had taught us how to play ‘Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star’ with our recorder. I was thrilled and couldn’t wait to surprise my sister with the new song I had learned. I opened the door, sat on the carpet in front of it, and stared at the gate, waiting for the grey van to pull over in front of my house. But, I should probably practise. I didn’t want to make any mistakes for my first performance.

I could hear the clanging sound of Mom cooking dinner from the kitchen. It was the kind of squeaky sound that the steel spatula and the wok made when they came in contact. I always hated that sound; it gave me goosebumps. But whatever Mom was cooking, it sure smelled really good. Might be chicken curry... oh wait, it was beef rendang!

The sun was almost down, and the carpet was getting darker. I could hardly read anything from the music sheet anymore. I was still not tall enough to reach the light switch, and I knew better than to disturb Mom when she was busy with her cooking; she wouldn't like it.

I moved my stuff to the patio, climbed onto the bench, and continued playing my recorder. The neighbour's dog heard the music, came, and sat by the fence. He probably thought I had another biscuit for him, but not today. Sorry, buddy. He stayed and watched, and now he had become my very first audience. Well, I guess my sister had to be the second one then.

After I finished, I bowed to him like a professional musician, thanking him for his attention and appreciation. He wagged his tail at me as if he was clapping for me. I was glad that we both enjoyed each other's company.

The sun had completely set now. Mosquitoes were starting to come out and hunt for their dinner. I thought I must head back now before becoming the next victim of Dengue Fever. Oh wait! I saw the grey van. The door slid open, and a girl in a blue uniform got out of the van, walked towards my direction while waving goodbye to her friends. That was my sister! I rushed forward, and I couldn't wait to tell her what I had been preparing for her.

"Not now. I need to get a shower and be ready for dinner. I'm starving." She walked past me and straight into the house.

Well, I would have to show her after dinner then.

### **Interlude**

*Janice Su*

"From a child's perspective, it's interesting. So, did you play it for your sister in the end?" my therapist asked after finishing the piece I handed her five minutes ago.

"Frankly, I don't even remember. I wish I could say I did, and she liked it very much, apologised for giving me the cold shoulder early on. Or I didn't, in which case, she would regret hurting a child's heart. But if I must be honest with you, it doesn't matter to me. The expectation was the highlight of all parts. And once it wasn't delivered, whatever happened next just doesn't seem significant to me anymore."

She nodded in agreement. "Has something similar ever happened again?"

"I love to write. I'm not a good writer, but I do enjoy creating something that belongs to me." I crossed my legs, changed into another sitting position, and continued. "I participated in a short story writing competition when I was in high school. I didn't win any prizes, but I did get honourable mention for my creativity. Still, I was over the moon and couldn't wait to tell my Mom, hopefully she would be proud of me for this. I waited the whole afternoon and when she finally got home at night, I told her about this and waited for her response. But all she asked was 'did you win,' and when she knew the answer was negative, she said 'there's nothing worth being happy about'."

"I'm really sorry to hear that. How does that make you feel?" She poured me a cup of chamomile tea and placed it on the coffee table in front of me.

I shrugged. "She's not wrong. I did not win, that's a fact. My teacher commented that it was an 'incomplete piece' and maybe that's why. Or I was just bad at it." I took a sip of the tea from the cup. It was strangely soothing.

"Incomplete piece? How so?"

"It was a story about a skeleton who escaped from a high school science lab and began his journey in search of 'love.' On his way, he met two animals with very distinct points of view on love and shared their stories with him. Well, apparently, I needed the third animal to conclude this piece, just a rule for a fairy tale."

"In that case, why don't you write the third story for your unfinished piece? Let's put an end to it, and maybe it could even provide some closure that you've needed all along." She poured another batch of fresh tea into my cup.

"Hmm." I took another sip.

## Five Cinquains: Process of Love

*Debbie Abiri*

It's a...  
Madness of mind.  
Chaos of chemistry.  
Ignorance of intelligence.  
It's love.

So then  
Do you like me?  
Palms sweaty, heart pounding  
Body frozen, breath held, mouth dry  
Do you?

Let's grow  
Old together  
See ourselves reflected  
In the gifts I give to you from  
My womb

You love  
Me like day loves  
Night, always chasing the  
Horizon into eternity  
Clingy

I see  
Every flaw in  
You and I together  
Separate, I think is better  
Sorry

## Falling Out

*Debbie Abiri*

“What are you doing here?”

“Well, that’s a nice way to greet someone.” She pushes past me, merrily swinging her heavy grocery bags. I slam the door behind her and veer off towards the couch as she makes her way to the kitchen.

“You could have told me you were coming.” I give her a dirty look as I plop down. “Why are you here anyway?”

“To cook. I just thought you could use some TLC after...”

“You can say it”

“After all you’ve been through.”

I stare up into the ceiling, looking at nothing, and close my eyes with a sigh. I lay my arm tight over my eyes, holding back tears.

“Well, I hope you’ve brought—”

“Yes, I know. Chicken and jollof rice with lots of your favourite snacks.”

“This doesn’t look like containers.”

“Well... just the ingredients.”

“You don’t know how to cook.”

“I know, but you do. I thought we could cook together, like we used to.”

“I cook and you talk. Aren’t you supposed to be cheering *me* up?”

“Well, you can cheer us both up and do something, instead of moping around.”

Tears on hold, I get up and grab one of the bags. My favourite cookies are in there.

“I love these, I’m not sharing.”

“You don’t have to,” she says gently.

She starts washing the vegetables and I grab an onion and start to peel. Wanting to take advantage of her placidity, I say, “And you’re doing the washing up too.”

“Yes, that’s fine.”

I tentatively add, “The house needs a vacuum too.”

“Don’t push your luck.”

We fall into a companionable silence as the familiarity of cutting and chopping takes over.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.”

“It will help. How did it happen?”

“I don’t know. These things just do.”

“Yeah, but not to you. You guys were together for years. Did he do anything?”

“No, it was my decision.”

I turn on the blender to muffle her next words. I think more on the decision I’ve made and all the hurt I have caused. I squeeze my eyes tight, not wanting her to see my tears. I will just say something to get her off my back and I stop the blender.

“Okay, I will tell you.” She falls silent. “Hurry up and wash the rice though.”

Well, I’m not sure of the exact time it started but it was years ago. It was a niggling feeling at first, burrowing deeper and deeper. A mild irritation that built, easily ignored amongst the demands of daily life. But it grew, until it overtook all the pleasant feelings I had towards him, someone that I thought I would grow old with. Resentment. He was dragging me down, limiting all the potential I saw within myself. I felt bad at his hurt in us breaking up but, honestly, I mainly felt relief. No more excuses in doing the things that I want to do when I want to do them. I know it seemed to come out of nowhere, and I am truly scared that I’ll have to start over and build everything up again. But I am ready. How can I explain this to my nosy sister without her saying that I’m being silly, that the way I feel will pass? I decide to take the easy way.

“He was cheating on me with a co-worker.” I inwardly cringe.

“No, I don’t believe that. That’s impossible.”

“Why? People have hidden depths.” I pour the ingredients over the rice. I stare intently into the pot, so she doesn’t see the lie in my eyes as she tries to catch them.

“He’s not the type and you’re more likely to cheat than him.”

I stop seasoning the rice and give her a dirty look that makes the first one look pleasant.

“So, what’s the real reason?”

I take a deep breath in and let everything go out in the exhale.

“We grew apart, I changed, and he stayed the same. I was really starting to resent him. There was pressure from people’s expectations, and I knew there was no way I wanted to settle down with him. I know he seemed like the perfect guy, but he wasn’t right for me. Everything about him was starting to annoy me. Simply put, our relationship had run its course.” I take a deep breath, waiting for the recriminations to begin.

“Okay,” she says nonchalantly, sprinkling the seasoning on the chicken.

“What?” I grab the seasoning out her hand, she has always been heavy-handed.

“I mean, to be honest I was surprised it lasted as long as it did. Your personalities didn’t seem to mesh well. Also, I never really liked him, he was boring.” She huffs out a long breath. “I’ve been keeping that in for a long time.”

“Oookkay.”

“He was not right for you; we were waiting for you to figure it out.”

“Okay.”

“So why are you so upset?”

“I was with him for a long time.”

“Yeah... so?”

“He was really upset, he said it came from nowhere and he started crying.”

“Seriously!? Was he ugly crying?”

“Sam!”

“Sorry. I did feel you made yourself small for him. So now it’s time to start a new chapter and do what makes you happy.”

“You could have told me earlier.” She puts the chicken in the oven and decisively slams the oven door shut. I feel a huge weight lift off my shoulders.

“Yeah, well, we try to keep out of it. So, what do you want to do first?”

“I want to travel. I used to travel a lot before him, but he was never interested in seeing the world.”

“I’m not surprised, he was always so boring.”

“Sam!”

“Sorry. So, where do you want to go first?”

“I’m not sure, I was thinking about Japan. I really want to go soon and get away from everything. I just need a break.”

### Sierra

*Mohammad Khan*

It had been a couple of hours since I dropped off Riley and Chase at school. Robert and Emma were at the babysitter’s. I roamed around the house looking for any imperfections; any oddities or impurities I could clean up or fix. Nothing. I had spent the past week or so doing this routine daily. Since we had found a babysitter who was willing to look after my children at any notice, I’ve had all the time I need to keep the house clean. Too much time, in fact. The carpets were freshly vacuumed, the windows were clear, the clothes were clean, and even the damn curtains were dusted. I was alone. Making an Instagram post felt pointless, I didn’t want to bake, and I didn’t even want to knit. I decided to go upstairs.

I sat alone in my bedroom. I hated this room. I used to love my bed, it was the one place where I felt like all my problems would wash away. The soft mattress, the weighted blanket, the luxurious pillows. It was the highlight of my London flat. Sure, it was a shitty one-bedroom apartment that I paid way too much for in a questionable area but even that felt more lively than this place. After long weeks of dealing with angry patients and family woes, I would come home and flop into bed, still in my scrubs. When my grandmother died I don’t think I left my bedroom for a week straight. It was one of the hardest times of my life. I’d give anything to go back to that now. This bedroom wasn’t a place of comfort. It wasn’t a place of rest or relaxation. It was a constant reminder of my loneliness. An empty bed for an empty life. Harry was never home. I don’t think he’s slept in this bed once. I sat on this bed and I thought about what went wrong. I think I sat there for two straight hours, just reminiscing about my youth. Suddenly, my phone’s alarm rang, jolting me away from my thoughts. As soon as I got up I tried to forget it all. No good in living in the past. The kids were gonna be home soon and I needed to prepare an after-school snack. Finally, something to do. I got up and tried to clear my head. Just like my father used to tell me, I needed to stop whining and get to work.

### Birthday Surprise

*Mohammad Khan*

My knee bounced up and down as I sat on the bed. Lazily, I rubbed my eyes. My body was tired but my mind was racing. I was fifteen! Nothing could stop me from having the best birthday ever. I was too excited to stay asleep for long. I had been thinking of this day for months. I quickly got ready and put on my birthday dress. It was a soft pink dress, poofy enough to make me feel like a princess. I put on my pink heels and made my way downstairs. I was going to have a pizza party in the evening with my friends but first I had a family breakfast to get to. I hoped that Mom had made pancakes. I walked down the stairs and turned the corner to see... A camera in my face.

“Hello to the birthday girl! Happy birthday! Say hi to all my followers! I’m doing a live birthday special!” She squealed in her Instagram voice, a little too high and drawn out. “Look at your brothers and your sister!”

I turned my head and saw Chase and Robert wearing black trousers with matching salmon-coloured button-ups. They were sitting at the table waiting to eat. Emma was wearing a plain pink dress, which looked scratchy and uncomfortable. Mom pointed the phone at my siblings and rushingly whispered, “Fix your hair, honey, it’s messy.” As she leaned closer to me I noticed she had a full face of make-up on, along with a rose-colored ball gown that dragged on the floor when she strutted around. I ran my hands through my hair and pushed my bangs aside. She pointed the camera back towards me.

“Hello, Mommy! Hello, Chase! Hello, Rob! Hello, Riley!” I attempted to sound lively and cheerful the way Mom did. “Is Daddy here?” My voice didn’t carry the same tone for that last question; I was already anticipating her answer. She suddenly seemed uncomfortable and looked at her phone. Oops. Maybe I should have waited to ask that. I glanced towards my siblings, who turned away as soon as they caught my gaze. I guess that answered my question. Mom brushed it off quickly enough.

“You know that Daddy is very busy, honey. If all goes to plan he will be joining us for dinner!” She stated optimistically. ‘If all goes to plan’ was the key phrase there. I doubted I would even see him today. Whatever.

“Let’s just get this started.” I moved to sit at the table. Before I could start eating, Mom was quick to move the camera around. She explained each of the dishes in great detail, talking about how she had been up since sunrise cooking and cleaning. She spoke to her phone, telling them how it wasn’t easy but it was so worth it to see the look on my face. Yeah, right. She was so invested in her phone I doubted she even saw it. I let out a sigh and I began to eat as soon as she was finished showing off her hard work. This was going to be a long day.

### Dialogue: Withered Leaves

*Aminah Mohammed*

*Nancy:* The temporary escape withers quickly as the sun shines on my morning face. I pull the blanket over my face, hiding my emotions as if it was visible for the world to see. I feel empty yet heavy from the burden of the many emotions my lifeless sleep-deprived body carries. Why is there a sense of void? Why do I find myself contemplating the negativity and loneliness and ruthlessly discard the positivity? I turn my head searching for temporary comfort in this uncomfortable chair I spent most of my night in. Have I become blind in this colourful world. I hear the keys outside my entry door; I know it’s Rebecca; she has an extra key in case I’m not home.

REBECCA: “Mum?”

NANCY: “Oh hello, darling.”

REBECCA: “I thought I’d drop some groceries off for you. Are you all right? Did you sleep well?”

*Rebecca:* Seeing her like this breaks my heart. I can tell she hasn’t been sleeping well, with the bed tidied in the same fashion as I left it for the day. My heart longs to help her, to understand her, but she refuses any help. She thinks she will burden me, but how can a mother possibly bother her daughter.

NANCY: “That’s nice of you, but there was no need. I would have made the trip myself in a few days. Thank you.”

*Nancy:* I really don’t want to bother her; I know she’s busy with the kids and even more now because of her new job. I can’t possibly burden her with my feelings. I can’t tell her how I spend these lonely nights. The temporary escape each night is what I long for, my body tired and weak. I try and try, but my mind keeps me awake. At times I’m fortunate as I escape in sleep and dream. Dream of the past, my life before becoming a lone soul. I breathe amidst a busy world, searching for my lost purpose and the companion that has long gone. He was my pillar; we were one.

REBECCA: “What would you like for breakfast? I’m going to cook for the both of us.”

NANCY: “I’ll have whatever you have, dear.”

*Nancy:* As Rebecca walks towards the kitchen, I envision a glimpse of my life I once had in this very same house, but it was a place filled with joy, laughter, and love. My life revolved around my family, my darling young Rebecca and Rachel and my life’s companion, or so I thought. We were a unity. This was a home built on a solid foundation. Now, these tall concrete walls confine me forcing me to relive the past that escapes me like sand slipping from my fingers. The stronger I try to grip, the quicker it escapes.

REBECCA: “Would you like tea with your French toast?”

*Rebecca:* I know it’s her favourite and she would always make some for us when we were young. I remember Rachel and I would always try to get the last French toast because it was the sweetest from the sugar at the bottom of the mixture.

NANCY: “These look splendid!”

REBECCA: “I tried, but they won’t taste as good as yours.”

NANCY: “Oh honey, they’ll taste better!”

*Nancy:* I remember my favourite songs playing in the kitchen while I moved my hips in harmony. The smooth honey drizzle on the French toast. Oh, the smell of my bakes from the oven. My life was my family. I would spend the morning trying to master my new baking inventions, waiting impatiently for my kids to approve.

REBECCA: “I have to leave for work soon, Mum. Would you like me to come back after work for dinner? We can have dinner together. It’s been a while.”

NANCY: “Oh no, dear, I think you should go home and spend some time with the kids. It’s the weekend and, besides, I think I will have an early night.”

*Nancy:* I really could use some company at night, but I don't want to form a habit. Rebecca has a family and her work to worry about. She can't always be there for me. What keeps me sane is comforting myself by wrapping myself in a warm blanket at night. Being able to ponder on the memories of the past and the remnants of what remains now.

REBECCA: "Okay, Mum, I need to go now. Please promise me you'll call me if you need anything."

NANCY: "I will, don't worry, dear. Now you drive safe and give little Jack and Holly a kiss for me."

REBECCA: "Will do, take care, Mum. I love you!"

NANCY: "I will always love you, dear."

*Nancy:* I swallow my feelings as I watch Rebecca leave. As the door closes, all that is left is silence, the deafening silence to my frail ears. I turn to face the window. Staring into the distance, I see the tree that is standing tall and bare, with the last few leaves holding tight, not succumbing to their end. My life is like a leaf falling so gracefully to its end. The creak of my rocking chair interferes with my thoughts. This is my reality now. The huge cream cornice mirror hangs lifeless; the same, but what is missing is the laughter, the joy that was reflected. The memories that have perished with time. The walls, dull, darker than ever, the silence louder than the laughter of the past. I ask myself why I remain awake when the world sleeps in peace at night; my heart knows the answer. I know I long for the cosy winter nights next to the fire when my children huddled around the chair; I now rock alone. I read them the same book that now lies lifeless up in the attic in a corner somewhere.

### The Smiths

*Amelia Fadalay*

"Alex, put your penis away."

"But Mummy, it's my lucky penis, it makes sure we don't get in trouble!"

"Not at the dinner table please, you can keep it in your pocket. I'm sure it'll be just as lucky there."

Unwillingly, he rammed the wrinkly severed penis back into the side pocket of his pristine white boiler suit.

"Is it nearly ready now?"

She put the knife down with controlled anger, took a deep breath and closed her eyes, clearly exasperated at being asked the same question for the sixth time in five minutes. "Darling," she spoke through gritted teeth. "Why don't you go help your father and brothers with the cleaning?"

"Daddy says I'm too young to play with bleach."

After a long, tired sigh, she picked up the knife and continued dicing.

"Can I help you instead?"

"I suppose so. Go get a knife from the bag and you can chop the vegetables."

"But vegetables are boring."

"Alex."

Slightly afraid of the stern edge in her voice, he darted to the scruffy black duffel bag by the door and chose the biggest, bestest vegetable knife he could.

"I'm ready to chop vegetables." He beamed with pride at his choice.

His mother, on the other hand, pressed her lips together and raised her eyebrows at the ten-inch butcher's cleaver that he was holding up. "That is not for vegetables."

"But Daddy used it on a vegetable last week."

She shook her head, trying to zone him out. Giving birth to three fat sons was a struggle in itself, and now she had to cook for a family of ravenous men every day, all whilst tolerating the world's most infuriating nine-year-old.

"See, Mummy, I just asked him, and he said he did use it on a vegetable last Monday. The one that tasted weird and made us feel funny in the morning."

The pan boiled over, and bone broth sizzled aggressively on the cast iron stove rack. She rushed to lower the heat. "No, Alex. I mean real vegetables. I mean potatoes and carrots and onions and peas."

"Why would we need to chop peas?" Alex jumped as she slammed her fists onto the countertop. He should probably just be quiet and chop the peas. But he had never heard of a pea knife.

"That's not what I meant, sweetie."

Her scathing tone eliminated any endearment from the term 'sweetie.' Alex's head hung low in shame as he dragged himself back to the knife bag. Two blissful minutes of quiet passed, giving Karen

opportunity to centre herself again. She opened the oven and prodded the shoulder roast with a fork. It was perfectly crisp from the outside, definitely one of her best yet.

“Alex, did you find one?”

Appearing next to her, he held up a small, serrated kitchen knife. She nodded in approval and handed him a bag of vegetables. But he was still upset that he had to use a baby knife instead of a cool big boy knife. To prevent him from having a full-on strop, she had to assuage at least a little of his misery. That meant putting on a smile and pretending his whiny voice didn’t make her blood boil. “Why are you upset, honey-pie?”

“I’m not upset” he blubbered with his bottom lip jutting out.

“Alex, sweetheart, that woman from last week was not a real vegetable. Your father just called her that because she couldn’t move on her own, just like how this onion can’t move on its own, see?” Bits of onion skin flaked off onto the floor as she held it up to show him.

“It can if you put it on a hill.”

Her ice-cold stare was enough to make him put his head down again and sit quietly. Might as well let him strop; she was too fed-up to care. Her knees clicked as she crouched down to pick the onion shedding off the translucent tarpaulin. She didn’t really need to, but if they kept it clean, then that’s one less piece of evidence to destroy. And even though they were disposable, those tarpaulin sheets were bloody expensive.

“Mummy...”

Silence. With any luck, if she ignores him long enough, he’ll disappear.

“Mum. Mummy. Mum” Still no reply. Maybe he needs to speak louder, after all Mummy is an old person so her ears are not as good as his. “MUUUMM. MUMMY CAN YOU HEAR ME?”

Karen gripped the knife with so much rage that her nails made little crescent shaped indents on the plastic handle. With each time he spoke, the ‘bang’ of the blade hitting the glass chopping board crescendoed, until she was one chop away from shattering the entire thing.

“M U M M Y.”

She finally exploded, threw the knife on the counter, and spun around in a rage. “What the hell do you wa—” She froze, her gaze drifting past her son and towards the front door.

“That’s what I was trying to tell you Mummy. Should I get my penis out again? It might make them go away.”

Her hands were suspended in mid-air, eyes open wide, staring out the window at the blue flashing lights that had silently snuck up on them. She glanced over at the stacks of human-filled Tupperware by the door. “Yes, Alex. We’re going to need all the penis luck we can get.”

## Childhood Injuries

*Mohammad Khan*

I am at the park and I am excited. I like to play on the slide with my brother. Hamza is here as well and I don’t like him very much. I don’t want my brother Saad to play with him instead of me. He is bigger than me, just like Saad, and I feel bad about being the smallest. I don’t know if we’re friends but we keep going to his house and meeting his family anyway. I think that our parents are friends but that doesn’t mean that we are. One time my mom gave him my truck and I was really mad because I didn’t want him to play with my things. If he’s allowed to play with me and my brother then he shouldn’t be allowed to take my toys as well. I walked across the park to Hamza and Saad in the sandbox and I pointed towards the slide.

“Let’s go on the slide,” I tried to convince them.

“No, let’s run around!” Hamza responded excitedly. I’m not very happy because I don’t like being the slowest one. Both Saad and Hamza are faster than me and they can also climb things that I can’t. I’m wearing my favourite pair of boots even though there isn’t any snow or rain. I like how the boots went up to my knees but they aren’t good for running. We all started sprinting around the playground while our parents sat on a bench and watched us. I wish that they would run around too, I like to play with them. In one corner of the playground, we saw two big rocks, almost bigger than me! We all thought the rocks were really cool. I didn’t know if I had ever seen a rock so big. My brother climbed it and jumped from one rock to another. Hamza followed him as well. I thought the rocks were a little too big but I wanted to jump across too so I climbed onto the rock. I tried to jump to the other rock but I lost my balance and I fell down. I heard my parents screaming and running toward me so I knew that something must be wrong. I felt my mom touching my forehead and it was warm and wet. My head felt funny and I didn’t know what was going on. Suddenly, I felt really, really tired and I felt myself falling asleep.

## Childhood Injuries (Again)

*Mohammad Khan*

I think I was four or five years old when I had my first major accident. I remember playing at a park with my brother and another boy named Hamza. Hamza was the son of my parents' friends and he was a little bit older than I was. At that age, I resented him for it because he was closer in age to my older brother. My brother Saad is four years older than me and Hamza was in-between us. I must have been about five years old, Hamza seven, and Saad nine. I was very attached to my brother at that age. He was my best friend and we would do everything together. For that reason, I was quickly threatened by other boys. Especially if they were closer to his age. I would find silly reasons to be angry with Hamza and would be hesitant to let him play with me or borrow my things at all. I would also try to prove myself to him and my brother; showing that just because I was younger, it didn't mean I couldn't do all the things they could. I was scared that they would leave me behind and I didn't want to give them a reason to.

I loved going on the slide at that park, but I was happy to be involved in any sort of game. When Hamza and Saad started running around together, I was worried that I wouldn't be able to keep up but I enjoyed the process of trying. I think that there's something about just running around as a child that makes you forget any of your insecurities or problems. When we found two large boulders, however, I was quickly reminded of my younger age. As Saad and Hamza were able to climb onto them and jump from rock to rock, I was determined to prove that I could as well. I didn't want them to have any sort of reason to think that I was inferior or less than them. I was wearing snow boots at the time, which didn't help my stability at all. I don't quite remember why I loved wearing snow boots so much, but I would wear them constantly. I was worried that I wouldn't be able to make it but I knew that I had to try. I don't remember the aftermath of the jump but I blacked out after hitting my forehead against one of the rocks. My mom told me afterward that I just kept bleeding and bleeding and that she was incredibly concerned. The scar that it left on me is a reminder of that time. It carries the deeply ingrained sentiment of wanting to prove myself, even to the point of danger and injury. A part of me that hasn't fully gone away.

## Time

*Bethany Lyall*

Her bones groaned as she pushed herself up and out of her old leather reclining chair, her gait slow and disjointed to the front door. She could make out a tall silhouette through the frosted glass pane. The lock was stiff but opened after three tries with a grumble and a click. She looked up at the man on the doorstep, eyes squinting without her glasses.

"We really should get that lock sorted, Mum," he said, as he stepped inside and stooped to kiss her cheek. Martin. She wondered when he'd gotten so tall. Or perhaps it was she who had shrunk?

"I've brought Elsie with me."

The girl was slight, her purple dress revealing skinny ankles, her blue eyes full of a shyness that usually wore off quickly.

"Come through here with me, Elsie," the old woman said.

Elsie played quietly while the adults spoke, moving small animal figures about the floor.

"Bill Robertson down the street had a stroke, you know," she said, "his wife is having to do everything for him. And they get those carers in for him now, four times a day."

Bill Robertson's wife didn't think very much of the carers, had always hated having people in the house. In the forty years she had lived on the street, she had never been to the Robertson's house. They had been to hers plenty.

Martin had gone to the car for a forgotten something and had been caught by the neighbour. She could see them through the sitting room window, only the head and shoulders of her neighbour visible over the fence. He'd be telling Martin things, she was sure of it. That she rarely left the house anymore. The last time she tried, she'd almost fallen down the single step, and it had felt like an age before her heart stopped racing. Bunch of old gossiping women, she thought. She had half a mind to go out and tell them as much.

"Do you want to go out to them, Granny?"

"I'd much rather stay here with you."

The young girl looked her grandmother over. "Do you ever go outside?"

"Sometimes, yes. When the weather is nice."

“I’ve never seen you.”

She thought about it. “I suppose it has been a while.” It was something she thought of often, in the long days spent alone in the house.

“Don’t you want to go outside anymore?”

She certainly did. If she thought long enough, she wanted many things that she had taken for granted. She wanted to experience spring again, to see the flowers bloom and grow and for everything to turn green. To smell the newness on the breeze and hear the birdsong, even at 4 am. She wanted to feel the days getting longer, the light eating away at the dark, making it feel as though time were being claimed back. She wanted the heat of summer, to feel the sun on her face and the sweat slipping between her shoulder blades on hot, humid days. The struggle of running over sand dunes and finding it stuck between toes and found in pockets days and weeks and months later. A reminder, her father had told her once. The contented exhaustion from a day well spent in the hills, pale skin sticky with sunscreen and turning to bronze. She wanted to walk amongst old, beautiful buildings and listen to their whispered secrets, feel the stories lost to time of nameless people. The smell of old books and whispered greetings and quiet corners surrounded by peaceful souls. She wanted warm coffee shops on rainy days, the bitter coffee taste on her tongue.

She was only allowed the decaf stuff now, which did not taste the same, no matter what some people might say.

“Can I get a drink?” Elsie asked.

The journey to the kitchen took far longer than it had any right to. Elsie had slipped ahead of her by the time she reached the doorway.

“You are quite slow, Granny,” she said, looking her grandmother up and down. “Perhaps you need better shoes?”

Sometimes, she wanted wings, now that these old legs failed her. To leap and dive and soar, to close her eyes and rush through the world, rather than have the world pass her by. To glide over forests and perch atop trees and converse with the birds. To sit on mountain peaks in that world above the clouds, the colours of the sunrise reflecting orange and pink hues. Other times when lost in thought, she wanted to be a time traveller. Experience old things and make them new once again. To meet him again for the first time, crooked nose and broad smile. A smile she now saw on her son’s face. She wanted adventure, or to experience something new. That’s what books are for, her mother had told her, many times. She had stacks of books around her tiny house. Trip hazards, Martin called them. She wanted to read, to bury herself in the stories of others, to be a different sort of traveller. Her milky eyes struggled to make out the words on paper now, no matter their size.

Most days, she would have settled for the garden, to walk out the door, if not up into the hills, into the mountains. The two steps down from the kitchen to the small patch of grass at the back door now near treacherous. She had refused to use the grey, metal walker that had appeared at her front door one day, sent by her son. It will help you, he’d said over the phone. She looked at it now, gathering dust in the corner of her kitchen. He’d surely scold her for it.

“Oh Granny, look! Can I put food out for the birds?” She had caught sight of the weather-beaten bird feeder through the window, into the garden. “Do you have any bread?”

The kitchen door didn’t grumble as it was unlocked, the door pulled open to reveal two shallow steps with a black metal railing to the right. Elsie skipped out, her dress swinging with the motion. She stopped at the end of the path.

“Aren’t you coming?”

“I’ll watch from here.”

Elsie frowned. “What if I helped you?” She set down her plate of bread and held out her hand to her grandmother.

The old woman looked at her, at the vibrance and youth in the young girl’s face. She took a deep breath, placing one hand on the rail, the other grasped tightly in Elsie’s small, warm hand. Slowly, she took a step, and then another, and then she was there, in the garden. She huffed a laugh. Victorious.

### The Guard Dog

*Swetha Ananadan*

Uncle Rowan is driving us to Dad’s friend’s house. Dad said it was a party for grown-ups. Boring. I look down at my dress. It’s orange and thin and has white flowers on it. I don’t really like it. The flowers are scratchy on my skin and it’s too girly for me. But Mum said I look pretty, and I wear what she likes. I try

to listen to what they are talking about. Work. Boring. I look out the window, maybe there will be something fun happening outside. Nothing. It's dark, and there are some stars, but there is no moon. Maybe it's on the other side. I move to the other side, look out the window and smile, because I'm right. It's a half moon. I smush my face on the window to see it better. It's so high up in the sky. What are the spots of grey? Are they holes aliens dig to sleep in? Or maybe they are very big rocks poking out. Uncle Rowan quickly turns the car and I fall back into my seat. Ouch. The moon is gone, and I'm bored again.

The car finally stops, and Mum opens the door for me. The dress got stuck in my shoe as I got out, and I almost fell. That's why I don't like dresses. They're just annoying. I look up, and woah. It's not just a house, it's a mansion. My tummy starts to feel funny. But It's not just any mansion, it's the one with the big, black dog that barks all the time. The ones you see on the telly where they chase the bad guys. The ones that are super loud and super scary. They have big sharp teeth and nails that can slice through anything. And they're as tall as me. I'm scared of those dogs, just like Mum and Dad. What if they bite my head off? Or, or scratch me so hard that I bleed and have to go to the hospital? No no no. I want to go home. I wish Uncle Rowan would have taken me with him.

Mum speaks to me in Tamil, she says "Ammu, I know they have a dog, but the security guard told us that he's tied up somewhere, okay? He's not here." She looks really serious, so she must be telling the truth. But I still feel weird. My hands are clammy, my mouth is dry, and I can't swallow. "Okay, ma," I whisper. But I'm not really okay, I just know she won't listen to me anyway.

I try to remember what it was like last time. The dog was tied up, so it should be this time too. I hope. Mum holds my hand, and Dad holds the other, and we walk up to the brown door. She rings the bell, and we wait. I feel fine now, I'm happy they checked with the man, and I'm happy the dog is tied up. I'm safe. Mum and Dad will protect me.

The door finally opens, and it feels like we were waiting for too long. But wait, there is no one at the door. That's strange. And then I see it. My hands are now clammier than before, and my stomach is tossing and tumbling and twisting and turning at the same time. The dog turns and starts running straight to the door. Straight at me. Faster than I've ever seen anything run. It has grown since the last time. It's not a dog anymore, it's a monster from my worst nightmares. Its fur is black and spiky, and its ears are long and pointy. It's running straight at me with its claws slamming onto the ground and its tongue is swinging around its mouth. I feel like a deer about to get eaten by the big, black wolf on an Animal Planet show. I look to my right, Mum has let go of my hand, and she's running. I look to my left, and Dad is gone too. I'm alone. They left me alone.

I can't move. My feet are stuck to the ground. I'm stuck. My mouth is stuck. Why won't anyone come and help me? Why isn't anyone here? Am I going to die? It's almost here. I close my eyes shut and hug myself tight. THUMP. THUMP. THUMP. It's getting closer and louder. I can even hear the nasty sounds its breath and mouth are making now. Slurp, smack, slob. The sound of its nails scratching on the floor is pitchy and painful to listen to. My fingernails are digging into my palms and my skin tingles. I think it's blood, but I don't care. It hurts, but I can't do anything. Wait, I don't hear it running anymore. Where is it? I open my eyes and I wish I didn't. It's now at the doorstep and its eyes meet mine. I see the anger behind them. I hold my breath as it jumps at me, and I force my eyes shut for the last time.

### **Happy Endings: A Sequel**

I spent a dozen-odd years trying to overcome the stubborn fear of dogs instilled in me from what I would now call a traumatic experience during my childhood. I failed for most of that time, miserably at that. For instance, I'd cross the road if a dog was even on the same pavement as me, and sometimes even go as far as changing my entire route. I actively avoided going to parties where I knew the host had a dog, and even slightly dreaded going to beaches and parks, knowing they were a dog's haven. If a dog looked in my direction for anything more than five seconds, the palpitations would kick off, my breaths would get caught in my throat and I'd feel sick to my stomach. I'd want to bolt, and sometimes, I would. Pun intended. I wouldn't be here if it weren't for leashes. Godsend.

The incident in Nigeria really stuck with me. I'll never truly know if that dog was just being playful or wanted to gnaw my face off. The former didn't feel fitting at the time. Fortunately, the man behind the door grabbed it before it could hurt me, but the recollection remained vivid. From the teeth to the claws, to the silence just before the rapid scurrying; it haunted me. I knew it was the root cause of my fear, but I never reflected on the experience, thinking it would be futile. In what circumstance would I, as a parent, abandon my child in a time of need? I suppose my parents never acknowledged the gravity of the situation, nor its lasting effects on me. A situation they unintentionally put me in.

To clarify, I've never hated dogs. I was only ever terrified of them, justifiably so. With time, some of the fear turned to a softer feeling. I found myself admiring their cuteness from a distance. Progress. Fast

forward a few years, and I began to enjoy absurd videos, like dogs trying lemons for the first time, in the comfort of my own home, dog-free. It helped that my best friend during my late teens had a big friendly dog called Prince. He was charming, but I wasn't ready for anything more than coexisting with him. It was during that period where I slowly developed a greater fondness towards dogs. I found myself eager to pet them, give them belly rubs and shower them with affection, just like my friends would. But my fear held me back, and I despised that.

Coming to Aberdeen was possibly one of the best decisions I've made. I was able to embrace myself and let go of the fear. The University had an adorable selection of therapy dogs that would come over to the campus every Tuesday. Spud, a Terrier cross, was the dog that had my heart from the start. He had a sixth sense of knowing when I was nervous and remained gentle and loving. Over the course of a year, Spud and I grew close, I took him on walks, gave him pets and even belly rubs. He was also the first dog to ever sit on my lap. Five stars for Spud. Unfortunately, the pandemic hit, and Spud was gone. The news was dreadful, but luckily, my friends have pets of their own. They gave me the exposure, and I steadily progressed from calm dogs to active and hyper ones. Never would I have thought I'd get there, but I did. The love I have for them is most definitely one of the purest forms of love I've felt. I'm proud of myself for having jumped that hurdle, as I now know that one day, I can have a dog of my own to love and cherish.

**Haiku**  
*Swetha Anandan*

At the break of dawn  
You brought me the horizon  
Amidst the thick fog

**Art & Fear: A Fairytale**  
*Darshana Muralidhar*

Have you heard about the frogs in boiling water?

If a frog is put suddenly into boiling water, it will jump out immediately. If a frog is placed in tepid water which is then slowly, incrementally brought to a boil, the frog stays and dies. Everyone thinks they are smarter than the frogs.

'I would know to jump out,' we think smugly. Our place is high enough in the food chain that we will never have to worry about frogs seeking vengeance.

Art loved frogs. He would never think of boiling them. Maybe it's because he was so similar to them? Art used to be an artist. Then he allowed Fear to envelop him. It wasn't in one day. The black kept creeping in at the edges steadily. It could have started last year, it could have started in third grade, but it was there now. The water was bubbling away, and Art couldn't jump out.

Art loved cows too. In the third grade, his class went on a field trip to a farm, where a cow named Nelly ate watermelon out of Art's hands. He loved Nelly so much, that his first ever artwork was a drawing of her. He then found out that people sometimes eat cows. Art didn't believe in violence as the answer, but just to be safe he added a pair of massive horns on Nelly. Not yet having mastery over a white crayon, artistic liberties were taken, and the end result was an assault to the eyes. His teacher didn't seem to think so. Or at least if she did, she hid it very well. People always encourage children; tell them they can be and do anything they want, that the sky is the limit. He's not sure he'll ever reach that high anymore.

Art lethargically, unseeingly made his way to the cave under the cliff head. He somehow knew he would find help there, as if led by some invisible guide. The witch was waiting from him.

"What do you need?" the witch asked.

"I need to find my Creativity. Fear has taken it away." Art replied, his voice thin from disuse.

"A monstrous affliction, Fear. It will not be easy" she warned. "You must follow my instructions exactly."

"I will."

"An essence, a fragment, a sliver,  
Of where you were truly born  
A creation of which you are the giver

And the shreds of your heart torn.

Into a bottle, in the ocean's waves  
Wait for its return with the tide  
It could be within minutes, or many days  
But you will find your answer inside."

He set off on his journey. Although he hadn't thought about it in ages, he knew where he had to go first.

He knew the way even all these years later, as he walked to his third-grade classroom. He wondered what his teacher would think if she could see him now: weak, cowardly, worthless. He made his way past the little chairs he used to sit in, to the teacher's desk. He reached out towards the drawer where his favourite crayons were always kept. Fear suddenly awoke. The undercurrent he always felt, transformed into a beast. The room was dark, but Fear increased the depth of the shadows, drawing them in. The air seemed to leave the room as Art struggled to breathe, cowering under a desk. Like a vicious animal it trampled and stomped and charged towards him. It had giant horns probably to spear him through. Heart thundering and hands trembling, Art knew Fear needed him to give in. The only way to escape this was to give up his quest and concede to Fear. Fear would not leave him, but it would truly own him – he would have no fight left in him.

Fear really did have massive horns. But they were familiar. Like Nelly, the watermelon-loving cow's horns. The ones he drew for her protection. He had kept it under his pillow so he could look at it every night. It had ruined the paper, but he wanted to remember every day that elation of Creating. The delight in showing the world what he sees, the wonder of turning a blank canvas to beauty, the pride in his talent. How long had it been since he had felt that way? Maybe, he didn't have to reach for the sky. Maybe, just taking another step was enough. And Fear shrank and squeezed until the room was lighter once more. Art shakily made his way back to the drawer and pulled out a crayon. As he did so he was struck by the memory of his teacher's kind face.

"The more scared you feel, the more you know you must continue your path."

He might have entered the world years before, but this was where Art was born.

"A creation of which you are the giver."

This was a more daunting task. He could not create and had nothing to give. But he thought and thought and finally sowed the seeds of a hardy little plant. In time, a tiny shoot emerged from the soil giving rise to a weak and spindly stalk. He named it Noodle. He watered and tended to Noodle, diligently waiting for it to bloom. But time kept passing with no sign of flowering.

Art looked at the pathetic stem and felt disgust for ever hoping he could do this. He neglected Noodle and curled up in a corner of his room wallowing in his dejection. Why did he think he could care for something when he had not cared in so long? And Fear was triumphant once again.

One day, a beautiful thing happened. The smallest petal unfurled from a tight bud. It was barely the size of his fingernail but to him it seemed to shine brightly. It wasn't light, but it had a quality to it. Something he could not identify. He knew he had words for it, years ago, but they had since faded. It made him think of the crayon, of the cow, of his teacher's eyes. He didn't know what it was, but he felt such a deep sense of warmth. The warmth was scalding to Fear, and it withdrew, leaving the petal born from Art.

Finally, he went into his studio. Before Fear had gripped him quite so terribly, Creativity still occasionally fought through. But those moments were brief. Strewn across the floor was evidence of those short triumphs but each had ultimately led to failure. He picked up a half-finished painting and felt no remorse in tearing it into shreds. This time Fear rejoiced. It revelled in his cowardice and in his failures. His teacher's face came to him again.

"Failure is a refuelling point for progress," she said, wiping his tears.

The crayon, the petal from Noodle and shreds of his failures were placed into a bottle. When his boat had gone far enough into the ocean, he wound up his arm to throw it with all his might. Fear paralysed him. It writhed and screamed and squeezed. It feared defeat more than Art feared Fear. All these years he was at rock bottom, deep enough that all was dark. But now he could see the light and was so close to breaking the surface. And the closer he was, the more desperate Fear got. It tried to drag him down, tried to fill him with hopelessness and melancholy. It took control of his body. Art tried to fight, to release the bottle. Fear fought back and held tighter through Art's own fingers. With a snap and a splash, the bottle shattered, its pieces disappearing into the water.

No, no, no, no. Art shook his head. He could not have reached this far to fail now. He wracked his brains to remember what the witch's exact instructions were. He had done so much, surely the pieces washing up the shore would be enough for her spell to work?

He returned to the shore and waited. He watched the Sun rise and watched the Sun set and watched it several times more. Trepidation turned to boredom, turned to desperation. He watched the sun peek out the horizon once more and the sky had the same quality that the leaf had. #

'Colour' he remembered. The sky was blue and purple and orange and yellow all at once. The crayon, he remembers was red. The petal was pink. His teacher's eyes were brown.

No bottle came again but this time his hands could not be kept idle. When the Sun set again, the last brilliant rays illuminated the sand around him. His fingers had traced delicate patterns, things he didn't know could be seen in sand. He felt yearning. He wanted paper and his paints with their bright colour. Yearning, trepidation, boredom, desperation. None of these were Fear.

He ran back home streaking past things he had not seen in years. His tunnel vision was clearing, and the black was creeping away. He felt weightless, feet springing off the ground. He sat in the middle of his room and started painting. He was seeing so much all of a sudden and he could show everyone now. He painted frogs and witches and sunsets and cows.

The water was bubbling, stirring, and roiling away and Art sat in the middle painting. Maybe he was better than the frogs.

### Untitled

*Lily Edge*

The sky was bloated and heavy with the thick blanket of clouds strewn across it. Not quite ready for a downpour but straining at the seams. The sun-bleached Ford Focus revved and groaned, as Zara willed the car to climb up the steep track for the final time that day. It was laden with the residual luggage, party snacks, and the last remaining relative collected from the station. She had been shuttling her family from the station all morning, loading up the battered Ford with toddlers, prams and weekend bags; demanding seatbelts be worn even as every lap was occupied with wriggling toddlers or bulging duffle bags. It should have been easier, however Alek's precious Audi had been sent to the garage after he curbed it returning from the shops, which just left her and the Ford. The final trip was just Zara and Soumya, her mother's much kinder and mellower youngest sister. Soumya had kissed her cheeks and squeezed her tightly at the train station, and now they drove back in a comfortable silence. Soumya was one of the only aunts that Zara could stand, and she was grateful for the brief reprieve from her morning of familial interrogations. Eventually the Ford triumphantly summited the hill, and the house rose into view. Soumya smiled and sighed.

"Oh, I've missed this place, I can't believe I've not been back in so long."

"How long has it been?"

"I think it was when Nanajan was still with us? Remember that barbecue for their anniversary?"

"Maybe 2017? 2018? I'm not sure, Mum will know for sure... God I miss Nanajan sometimes. Do you remember the karaoke machine he hired?"

"Oh God, that was spectacular, Nana trying to get the men to sing YMCA with him."

Soumya and Zara cackled at the memories of that evening as they approached the house. Allegedly, it had been originally built on this hill as a home for the laird's mistress some two-hundred years prior. The estate house was visible down the valley, surrounded by walled gardens and pristine topiaries. Their home was built with the same ideas of grandeur, but a century of neglect and a hurried renovation by the estate left it looking like a much humbler, poorer imitation of the Gothic palace below. Their garden was expansive and mostly unkempt, thick with weeds growing around the rusted swing set and the plastic slide. Alek had spent the weekend trying to clear the space closest to the house, so guests could safely spend time outside. Zara knew the nettles would return unopposed within several weeks. The pair saw the buzz of activity around the house as they entered the driveway. Amina, Zara's mother, was setting up the tables in the back garden. The candy-striped bunting had been hung precariously across the patio, attempting to bring colour to the overcast afternoon. A congregation of cousins, aunts, and uncles were milling to-and-from the kitchen, carrying trays of soft drinks, banana leaf rice, chaat and crisps.

Juniper had heard the crunch of gravel and had barrelled out of the house, eager to meet the latest refugee rescued from the station. Soumya jumped out of the car, and swept the six-year-old into her arms and spun her around, as Juniper squealed with delight. Zara had taken her sister to stay with Soumya in Newcastle twice in the past year, and Juniper had been unbearably excited to see her Mausi again. Zara

stayed in the car, turning the engine off, letting the pair have their moment, and trying to prolong her respite from the crowds inside. Zara pulled out a loose beaded bracelet from her pocket. She had taken it off for driving, and now she wrapped it back around her wrist, and checked her phone; no new messages. She tried to not feel disappointed, despite knowing it's unrealistic for someone to constantly text whilst driving. She reread the most recent message from Margaret: *having a coffee at Broxden services but will start driving again soon. Will call you when I reach the village. See u soon xx*

Zara rolled the ceramic beads between her fingers, trying to ignore the gnawing feeling in her chest, and focusing on the expanse of fields surrounding their house. The grass was yellow and brittle, and only a handful of sheep were still trying to graze, most had accepted the supplementary silage brought out by the farmers. Since yesterday, the sky had progressively gathered more clouds, and now was threatening to make up for the weeks of drought in a singular dramatic event. Zara told herself it would be rude to text her now, and probably too late to change the plan anyway, because she may not even see the message until she had arrived in the village. But the gnawing feeling, the sense of guilt, did not subside. She looked at her mother and Soumya as they hugged and laughed together, holding each other's hands. Then, a ratatatat, as Alek sharply rapped his knuckles against the car window and yelled through the glass,

"Are you going to park the car properly or just daydream the rest of the afternoon? You're blocking the drive."

"I was just taking a minute. I've been driving all morning... and it's not like the Audi needs the space."

Alek's nostrils flared, and his lips were pulled tight; he did not like being reminded about his mistakes. He huffed in response,

"Well, you've had your minute. Go check on your Nanijan and see she doesn't need anything, she's also been travelling all morning."

Zara bit her tongue, and remained silent. Alek was an arse, but she could not handle an argument right now. He would take her silence as a sign of victory, but she could live with that. She got out of the car, and walked toward the house. The low hum of conversations, music and clattering of dinnerware grew and expanded as she crossed the threshold into a family reunion that was in full swing. In true Desi fashion, her mother could not host any event without inviting two or three full family trees. Zara dropped her bags and headed up the stairs. The staircase had been drowned in red and green garlands of tinsel, haphazardly wrapped around the bannisters. Her mother had obviously relented and let Juniper help with the decorating. Juniper would never let the mere fact it was August prevent her from utilising all possible decorations at her disposal.

Zara found her Nanijan fast asleep in an armchair in the spare bedroom; the old woman did not have the energy for travelling as she used to. Hannah gently took her shoes off and wrapped her in a blanket. She went to the kitchen, and filled a Tupperware with filled puri, cheeses, and pies, so Nani would not miss out. Zara walked outside to the back and watched the groups nibbling on fruit skewers, and the children running laps around the cleared sections of the garden. Zara took a skewer and settled on a chair beside the cluster of Amina's sisters and sisters-in-law who had gathered around her mother. The women were swapping the bright-eyed toddlers between themselves, so each one could properly meet the additions to the family and congratulate the new mothers. Soumya spotted Zara and gestured for her to come closer.

"And we mustn't forget that Zara was accepted into the Conservatoire for music!"

"Oh wow, congratulations."

"Such a talented young woman."

Her aunts clucked and cooed, asking the polite questions about what kind of instruments she could play, and when was she due to move down to London, would she miss home? Zara tried to be gracious and answer the questions, whilst not making eye contact with either her mother or Alek. This event had originally been planned to celebrate her admission; she had wanted to spend the weekend with her friends, before they went their separate ways for college or university. Amina had invited Nanijan, so she could celebrate her grandchild's achievement, and then another aunt, and then the invitations began to spiral out of control. Zara had been quietly shifted to the background, and was lost underneath the belated baby-shower-anniversary-family-reunion that the gathering metamorphosed into. She had tried to reassert her ownership of the event but had been repeatedly shut down by Alek: 'Why must you be so obstinate,' 'It isn't all about you, you know how much your mother struggled over lockdown,' and Alek's favourite phrase, 'Don't be selfish.' She had bitterly wept over the phone to Soumya after one of the countless arguments about this, and Soumya was obviously trying her best to make Zara still feel celebrated. Zara was only half-listening to the flock, trying to covertly check her phone without seeming

rude. One of Alek's sisters, Heather, a floaty, slightly ethereal woman, covered in scarves and bangles, sat next to Zara. Her breath smelled of menthol gum.

"Now my love, one of my husband's nephews is already studying at the Conservatoire, playing violin. It's such an incredible and creative place. Honestly, I don't know where you got the musical ear from, because I've heard Amina try to sing; it's like cats being tortured."

"Mum said that my father used to be musical, he played the trumpet apparently."

"Oh yes, Frank was quite musical I suppose, or that's what I heard anyway."

Amina had tensed at the name and was watching the pair of them closely. Zara was trying to look interested and absorbed in the conversation, silently willing Heather to continue talking. She sighed theatrically.

"It's absolutely tragic when these things happen, such a loss at such a young age, you know I don't know how your mother managed after he died, by herself with a newborn. You'd think the family would have helped out a—"

Amina had appeared and sat across from the woman.

"Heather! Alek was telling me that you and Roger were currently renovating your bathroom. We've been looking to do the same, what sort of financing have you guys used?"

Heather blinked at the sudden change in conversation, and then started to describe their new bathroom, pulling photos up on her phone and showing them to Amina. Zara was frozen in her seat, staring at her mother who was animatedly discussing tiling. Amina was seamless with her redirection and tangents; swerving around the topic, like avoiding potholes on the dirt road up to their house. Frank Muir, Zara's father, was not a topic that one discussed at family events. Conversation bounced off that dark space as if repelled by magnets. Zara used to be obsessed with finding information about her father; as a child she believed that if she gathered enough clues or pieces of evidence, she would be able to 'solve the mystery,' and the curtains of silence would withdraw. In private, if Frank was mentioned, Amina used to look deeply pained and exhausted, and would quietly say she did not want to talk about him, and then Alek would step in and tell Zara to not upset her mother. Zara had feasted on small clues found around the house; a rugby shirt with a name stitched in the collar, his old trumpet case, and a single box from Amina's time at university. Amidst the battered copy of her dissertation and her essays, were flyers for student theatre productions, concert tickets, and a few photos of Amina and Frank. He was tall and lean, and seemed to always be smiling in every photo. Zara imagined he would have been easy-going and jovial, maybe someone who never took themselves too seriously. She tried to analyse what parts of herself could have been from him and assembled a person out of assumptions and conjecture.

She suddenly noticed one of her younger cousins, Ayman, stumbled and fell, bursting into tears, and Amina swooped down and bundled her nephew into her chest, stroking his head and reassuring the worried toddler. Zara saw a text notification on her phone: *Arrived in village, heading to the house now, xx*

Zara felt a wave of unease and uncertainty go through her. She found Soumya in the kitchen, and gently pulled her into the hallway.

"Soumya, you know how frustrated I was about this whole event?"

"Yeah, I know, pet. It's not fun being overlooked... My sister is so bloody clever, but she can be so obtuse sometimes."

"Yes, but, well, when it was initially going to be about me, I kinda invited Margaret Muir, my grandmother, for the afternoon too, because I wanted her to see the house and meet Nanijan and Juniper and everything."

Soumya paled, and her eyes widened.

"Your grandmother is coming?"

"Yeah, she is just in the village now."

"Oh shit, shit, shit. This is not good. Fuck."

Zara did not understand Soumya's reaction.

"Well, I know Mum doesn't like surprises, but surely it's not that bad?"

"Amina is going to completely lose it. We need to do something."

Soumya ran to Alek and dragged him away from the group he was standing in, speaking in hushed tones. His expression did not change, and he mostly nodded in response. Zara was bewildered by the change in Soumya and the intensity of her panic. She knew Soumya did not particularly like Alek, she found him abrupt and aggressive. Zara felt her chest sink, as she realised she had made a mistake. She watched Alek and Soumya approach her mother, with Soumya taking little Ayman from Amina, and handing him back to his mother, whilst Alek calmly spoke to his wife, trying to do damage control for something unknown that Zara did not understand. Zara saw her mother's face rapidly shift from confusion, to shock, to intense fury and grief. Amina's eye locked on to Zara, and Zara had never seen

her mother look as hurt as in that moment, she wanted to run to her, and beg forgiveness for what she had done, but she was frozen in place. Amina clung to Alek, as she spat out venom at Zara.

“What on earth possessed you to invite that manipulative bitch to our house?”

The murmur of conversation suddenly stopped, as heads turned towards raised voices in the hall.

“Mum, I don’t understand—”

“That woman ruined my life. She ruined your life, and you are bringing her here?”

“She messaged me on Facebook a few months ago. She wanted to reach out, and connect to her granddaughter.”

“You don’t know that woman, and you couldn’t begin to understand. She is a snake, and she wanted to find someone else to control.”

Zara felt the familiar dark space of her father’s absence be brushed aside, and her own rage bloomed outwards.

“Well, she actually was willing to talk about my father. Because I don’t know shit about him! You have never told me anything, and every time I ask, it’s like I am bringing up a horrific secret, and I don’t know what happened! Was he abusive or some psycho? Like, what am I meant to think?”

Amina pulled away from Alek, and marched towards Zara, her face unblinking with fury.

“You don’t know what I’ve been through. That bitch made our lives hell, controlling every single thing Frank and I did. I loved him so much, and he was such a good man... And he’s gone, and I’m going to have to see that woman again, and she is the reason he’s fucking dead!”

As the words flew out her mouth, Amina stopped, clapping her hand across her mouth. A moment passed, and the entire house was silent, and then her face melted, as she began to uncontrollably sob. Juniper ran from the side lines, and wrapped herself around her mother’s legs, trying to hug the distraught woman, but Amina was disappearing into her grief and did not notice. The spell was broken, and the family moved to shepherd Amina into a private space, gathering tea and blankets and comfort. Soumya moved to Zara, standing rigid in place, and reached out to touch her arm, but Zara flinched and pulled back at the contact.

“Why didn’t you tell me? Why did no one tell me?”

“Amina wanted a new start and didn’t want you to know about the awful things she had been through.”

“But you could have told me...”

“I didn’t kn—”

“No. You could’ve told me.”

Zara stepped away from Soumya. She was her aunt, but they were so close in age, they had always considered themselves to be like sisters. Zara couldn’t feel that connection anymore, just the visceral anger. Zara turned away and ran out of the house outside. Soumya stumbled forward, calling out, “Zara! I’m sorry!”

Soumya heard the sound of crunching gravel piercing through the hallway, as a car pulled into the driveway. The engine hummed before it was turned off. Soumya looked through the open front door, and could only see the parched fields and the sky above. The thick blanket of cloud had begun to come apart, the stitches loosened and snapped, as the rain began to fall.

## A Winter Story

*Mai Alkari*

I zip up my jacket and shove my frost-bitten fingers deeper into my pockets, feeling a chilling shiver run down my spine. Twinkling snowflakes pepper kisses on my rosy cheeks and nose before melting in an instant. Thick white snow surrounds me. I love the way snow looks like a blank canvas just waiting for the footsteps that will transform it into a masterpiece. Winter has always been my favourite season for several reasons – fluffy socks, hand-knit sweaters, hot chocolate, the crackling fireplace. But my favourite thing of all is the snow. It makes a regular old town look like something out of a fairy-tale or a dream. I don’t mind the cold, that’s what jackets, hats, scarves and gloves are for.

The air feels crisp and fresh. With each breath I let out, condensation forms clouds, and with the white sheet blanketing the ground I can almost believe I’m up in the sky above the real clouds. When I was younger, I used to think clouds were bouncy like trampolines and of how much fun it would be to boing from one to the other, light as a feather and free as a bird. I also imagined it tasted like candyfloss,

deliciously sweet. Then I grew up and learnt about the water cycle at school and just like that, poof, my fantasies were gone, replaced by boring facts.

I glance at the frozen lake to my left and a younger version of myself blinks back, her eyes bright and full of wonder. Both of her pink-mitten hands are held and she's being pulled along a make-shift ice rink by her parents. Her mother is wrapping her up in a cosy blanket. Her father is handing her a slice of his famous chocolate cake. The most resounding thing is their smiles. The little girl back then had no idea that her perfect world was going to shatter.

It always bewilders me when I think about how things were when I was a child. The world around me was different, I experienced things differently and saw things differently; I was different. I lived life easily, unknowing of the mountain of worries and stresses that would pile up on my shoulders. Heavy, so heavy, with the risk of an avalanche teasing me constantly. Sometimes it feels like I'm lost in a snowstorm, stranded in a blizzard. I call and scream for help, but the wind steals my voice and howls louder than me. Sometimes it feels like I'm walking on ice, having to overthink my every move and look over my shoulder, scared of my own shadow. And sometimes I just want the ice to break and the ground to swallow me whole.

The ringing of a bell breaks me out of my spiralling thoughts as I push the door to the dessert shop open. A rush of warmth embraces me like a comforting hug and the sweet smell engulfs me. I take in a deep breath, welcoming it. It smells like my childhood home and reminds me of my dad. The upbeat atmosphere washes away all the negativity that was consuming me, leaving only a space reserved for happy thoughts. The waving hand of my best friend catches my eye and I make my way towards her, a bright smile stretched across my face. This is exactly where I want to be, surrounded by sweets with the person who cares about me, knows me. Snow is second only to this.

### Cinquain

*Mai Alkari*

Tell me  
Honestly, when  
Rain falls down like my tears  
Do you think of that time when you  
Broke me?

### Ante-natal Ward

*Maria Borodkina*

It's dark by the time I make it back to the flat. It takes a moment to find a parking space in the courtyard where my neighbours' cars have already gone to sleep for the night. Like usual, mine is the last one in among them; I've gotten used to this routine but tonight, it feels shameful. Tonight, I have no reason for being this late back, beyond my decision to drive around for hours while battling with the heavy feeling sitting in my gut like a weight threatening to drag me underwater. I had hoped it would bring me some relief, but instead it became unbearable to stomach any longer. So, I park, step out into the fresh air and the feeling continues to rattle about in a way that makes me feel sick as I make my way home.

Inside the block, the ground floor hallway is once again permeated with the stench of weed coming from the flat shared by three students and I rapidly climb the stairs upwards to prevent the background nausea getting even worse. I pass rows of identical red doors, only differing in their numbering and the very occasional taped note addressed to the postman.

On the third floor sits number 39. His boots are already on the tatty, faded doormat which once upon a time depicted a black cat bidding you welcome. They're caked with a fresh layer of muck. I knock, but I'm already reaching for the keys in my coat pocket. I don't bother a second time.

The lights are on in the sitting room and in the dim of the foyer, I hear soft droning snores coming from there. I follow the sound and find he's asleep on the sofa, head tipped back against the cushion, bundled up in a large hoodie. He looks so peaceful that I momentarily feel bad for bringing him back to reality.

“Hi, sleepyhead. I’m home,” I say as gently as possible, giving his shoulder a small shake. He startles slightly as he forces himself upright at the disturbance. One fist rubs his eyes as he looks up at me and smiles his slightly crooked smile.

“Hey, birdie. Sorry, did you knock?” he says groggily, stretching out his long limbs. “I was gonna make dinner, but I made the mistake of sitting down on the sofa as usual.”

I lean over, brushing his hair away to give him a kiss on the forehead. “It’s fine. I’m guessing no three-course meal tonight?”

“Aye, probably not at this hour. You feeling a takeaway instead?”

I’m not feeling much but the desire to crawl into bed and try to forget that the day ever happened, but I still plan to join him on the sofa after I change out of my work clothes. In the foyer, I toss the highlighter yellow lanyard in my hand into our key bowl and make the mistake of looking back at the image of my face depicted on the card. She smiles at me, all teeth and full of brimming optimism about her bright future. I turn away before I begin wondering if she would be ashamed to know who I was now.

“How was work?” he asks me over the screen of his phone, his face illuminated in orange by the food delivery app, as I settle down next to him.

I pick at the fringe of the blanket I drape around us, avoiding his eyes. “Yeah... fine. Same old. How was yours?”

My voice must have come out too airy because he puts his phone down then and turns his attention to me. There’s a sudden surge within my chest and I feel the sting of tears that are desperate to escape. His hand falls to rest on my shoulder.

“Hey... none of that now, alright? What happened?”

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My shoes tapped out a rhythm on the polished white floor as I made my way to Room 15, a heralding signal amongst all the soft-soled clogs and trainers of the other staff. A sea of familiar eyes, smiling behind ubiquitous blue masks greeted me along the way. We exchanged a few words about the condition of my next quarry, and then I continued onwards. A computer was parked near the cubicle, and I hopped on to see what other information I could gather about her condition today.

Amy Reid, 39 years old. 36 weeks. Hyperemesis gravidarum.

Nothing new in her clinical records caught my eye, and I decided simply for a general check-up. I scrolled to the updated lab results. From that morning, one read ‘urine culture positive for Group B Streptococcus. Advised antibiotic treatment during labour. Nil else of note.’

That was when a hard lump began to form in my throat. I ignored it then, trying to swallow it down as I knocked on the door, waited for my patient to give me a signal in the form of a hand-wave, and walked in.

I was quick to greet her then, almost impatient as I pulled the thin blue privacy curtains around the bed.

“Afternoon, Mrs Reid. How’re you doing today? Did you manage to eat something for lunch?”

A portly woman with stick straight black hair, ends dip-dyed crimson lay in the bed opposite me. Crow’s feet formed at the corners of her eyes as a smile took over her face. Her hands rested on her belly which swelled hugely underneath them.

“Aye, doc. They had fish and chips on today. Wasn’t bad, all things considered,” she said with a humour in her voice that reassured me of her condition immediately. “I feel much better today. Really did just need some fluids and rest, I think.”

I did my usual routine, asked her questions, listened to her chest. She was in good spirits compared to when I saw her last, and her cheeks were flushed and full with the rosy hue of life instead of a sallow pallor. I took her pulse. She looked at my hand as I felt the rapid flicker of life underneath my fingers. 90 beats per minute. Normal.

“You married, doc? Course you are, smart wee thing like yourself,” she asked then.

In a force of habit, I looked down at my own hand, the thin gold band on my finger. I gave her a smile, although it was mostly to myself.

“Yeah, I am.”

A familiar pattern of conversation set in then as I moved down to the other patient in the room, the one growing underneath her protective hands. What’s your husband do? Oh, he’s a builder. Ah, really? Mine’s an electrician. How long have you been married? Coming up to about 5 years now...

Then, the inevitable question came.

“Do you have any kids yourself?” she asked, comfortable and smiling as I began to feel around the mound of her abdomen. There was a small thump against my left hand of a foot demanding freedom to the outside world.

“No... no, we don’t.”

Her question was innocent, and it wasn’t her fault that it made me feel like plummeting through the floor. That feeling rose once again in my throat and stayed there this time.

“Ah, well, make sure to enjoy your life before you decide to have a little one. You’ll be saying goodbye to it once they’re here,” she laughed as she spoke. “Three were more than enough for me, but I suppose God decided he would give us number four.”

I should have laughed with her or made any inkling of sound as a response at all, but I held my jaw so tightly shut I thought my teeth would shatter. Instead, I picked up the small ultrasound probe from the bedside and placed it to her belly.

The baby’s hummingbird heartbeat echoed strong around the room. I felt like mine could have been in sync with it as I took a breath to bury the torrent of fury building inside me and told her about the lab results, about the infection she carried. She didn’t seem to pay much attention. I couldn’t hold my breath anymore, felt like I was drowning when I told her of the risks it posed to her baby, and she just ran her hands over her belly like she was trying to soothe the little soul inside her. She hardly so much as glanced at me as she spoke the words that finally broke the paper-thin dam.

“Oh, this one’s an active little blighter from the way he’s kicking up my guts all the time. I’m not worried about any of that, and I don’t want anything for it. He’ll be fine.”

I couldn’t hold back the beast pounced out of my mouth, directed at her.

“This is serious, Mrs Reid. Do you really want to introduce that risk to your baby, no matter how small?” it snarled. “You have no way of knowing if it’s going to be fine. If you cared about him at all, you would take the antibiotics in labour. You should be grateful that you even found out about the infection at all and are being given the chance to be treated.”

Silence followed as she stared at me with her mouth agape, then her eyes glazed over with tears. Big, ugly sobs began to emanate from her, and I felt the exhaustion take me over as I came back into myself. I stood there, shaking like a cold dog, until the door to the cubicle opened and the blue curtains parted. My vicious attack had attracted the attention of the staff nearby, and one of the nurses had come to her rescue. I couldn’t say a word more but let him put his hands on my shoulders and push me out of the room.

The other staff herded in the corridor began to murmur and one of them said something to me, but I couldn’t comprehend it for the sound of my heart’s crescendo in my ears. Instinct took over. My feet took me straight to the toilet where I promptly collapsed down onto the lid and let the feeling take me over. I began to howl.

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In my silence, he seems to understand as soon as the waterworks start flowing down my cheeks. He pulls me into his side and begins to rub my arm soothingly.

“It was horrible, Ant. There was a lady who we found out had an infection like the one I had. We were chatting and she asked if we had any kids and... I don’t know what happened, but I just lost it,” I admit finally, wiping the shameful tears away with the sleeve of my jumper.

He says nothing for a moment, just continues to soothe me while my noisy sniffs fill the silence between us.

“What do you mean you... lost it?” he asks tentatively. “Did something happen?”

“I screamed at her because she didn’t want treatment. She just didn’t take it seriously and I couldn’t deal with that. I was monstrous... I made her cry, but something inside me just broke. I had to leave work and I just couldn’t bear coming back home ‘til now.”

He gives a deep sigh and, in my shame, I still can’t look at him. I don’t want to see the stony expression that takes over his face whenever the elephant inevitably comes charging into the room.

“You’re not awful, birdie. It’s alright to feel the way you do,” he says, but the words aren’t soothing. Instead, they set my nerves further on edge.

“No, it’s not alright!” I lash out again. “Do you really think it’s fine for me to go and shout at patients because I’m upset? God, I just want this all to stop. I don’t want to feel like this anymore.”

“I know, I know,” he murmurs, still rubbing in a rhythmic manner that’s beginning to feel painful. “I get worked up like that sometimes too – my boss keeps this picture of him with his youngest son on

his desk. Every time I see it, I feel sick. Like I've met the kid before when he's with him and it's been fine, but that damn picture always sets me off. You're doing fine, I promise."

I pull away from him and I feel the anger rise at his attempt to placate me. I manage to look at him then and find a hardness in his eyes. The foul creature in my chest, awakened and indignant at being pushed down, stirs again and finds a new target.

"It's not the same. I wanted to hurt her, and I felt satisfied seeing her get upset. It's making me sick to think about," I bite back at him. "How do I deal with that? How am I supposed to show myself at work again when all of the other staff heard what happened? I can't just bottle it all up like you do and pretend nothing's wrong!"

His face shows cracks as the words strike true, his voice is heavy and slow with sorrow as he responds. I feel hot with shame as soon as I see his expression.

"I'm sorry, birdie. I'm so sorry that you're hurting like this but it's not fair to take that out on me. And it's not fair on that lady either, but I don't blame you for getting upset. I'm sure she wouldn't either if she knew what you've been through."

"... No, I'm sorry, Ant," I almost sob as I put my head in my hands, wishing to bury myself in the darkness so I don't have to witness the hurt I caused him. "You're right, that wasn't fair of me. None of this is fair. I just miss him so much; I can't stand it."

The anguish hits like a tidal wave then, sucking me into its dark currents. I can't breathe again; I can't move or do anything but let it batter me over and over and over. I learned some time ago that there was no point in fighting it. I just had to let it until it decided to recede.

Despite my cruelty, he holds me through it, like he has done a hundred times before. The familiarity of it brings me back to myself and I wonder how I dared to fault him when he is the rock I cling to in order to ground myself, so I am not carried away into waters unknown. Eventually, the waves break, and I emerge wet, shaking, and gasping. He waits until my breathing slows, still ragged but compatible with life, before he speaks again.

"It isn't fair. We were dealt the worst hand imaginable and somehow, we've got to find a way to live with it. I think we should forgive ourselves if we're not perfect in our grief... but I'm on your side, birdie, always."

I have no strength to reply, but the words bring me some sliver of relief. As I extract myself from him, I notice his eyes and cheeks are wet too.

I am not in the position to do much after that. He brings a blanket, tucks me into the sofa, makes me a cup of chamomile tea, orders a plain cheese pizza because he knows I'll at least eat that, does this all for me even though I drew blood between us. I think back on the days before, the ones I would rather forget, the ones I spent curled over the toilet weeping so hard I made myself sick, the ones where I couldn't fathom getting out bed, and how he was always there to care for me, to feed me, to brush my hair or help me to wash my swollen face.

My misery must be smothering – I have not allowed him room to breathe, to comprehend his own grief. I feel that I am to blame for how closed off he is; it hurts me to look at him and see no spark of life there anymore, but some part of me thinks that I would have sunk a long time ago if it weren't for his steadfastness. I need him to be secure and constant when I cannot be.

I am selfish and a hypocrite. Before all this, when I dealt with patients in the same position as I, the obvious answer to all their emotional difficulties was always 'therapy.' We have yet to utter the word between us, but I no longer wish for small, stupid reminders to make me feel like I'm back at square one again. I do not want to accept what happened, but I am tired of playing this morbid game of spin the wheel every day, wondering which one of the five emotions I'll feel next. Perhaps enough time has finally passed to think about moving forward.

We go to bed as usual. I summon the strength to shower, to brush my hair, wash my swollen face. He's waiting for me when I crawl under the covers with him and wraps me up in his familiar embrace. No words pass between us for some time, but I know he is still wide awake by the way his arms are tense around me.

"I'm sorry again. For everything," I start, hesitant to take the plunge. He shifts around me, and I feel him relax in an exhale of breath.

"I forgive you, birdie, I promise. I'm not going to hold it against you," he says softly. "Don't worry about it anymore. There's nothing we can do but keep going."

"I was thinking... maybe it's time we talked about going to see someone about all this," I continue, feeling that lump in my throat again. I push past it this time. "I don't want to be like this anymore. I'll destroy everything around me if I continue on and I can't do that to you."

He is quiet as the breaths pass between us, his getting heavier until he finally speaks again in a voice fraught with tears.

“Yeah... maybe you’re right. I can’t keep pretend everything’s fine when it’s not. I think it won’t do no harm to get some help.”

I know I’ll have to get up in the morning, go to work and face up to what I did. I do not think I’ll sleep any easier tonight for it, but I can at least be ready for when they give me the ultimatum of seeking help. For now, I allow Ant his moment as I hold him and let him weep like he deserves to.

### **Family**

*Thoms Diffley*

I look at the man; the one who raised me  
Whose car used to bottom out on pothole laden roads  
His scolding would send me running for the refuge of the garden  
Endless hours tying fishing rigs, fascinating me  
Tales of shark-infested water explaining away his scars

He’s weaker now, but still stoic  
His drug list fascinates me, the life-sustaining pills and caplets  
Weekly clinics now the norm  
Walks shorter, punctured by breaks

I listen to his lungs, patchy with a fine crackle  
Only complaining about his cold feet and hands  
Who’d apologise to the dog for not ‘giving her a good run’  
Options slowly running out  
“When I’m gone, I’m gone.” A confession only I would hear.

He lies now, too still in the pristine hospital bed  
Open mouth gaped, black.  
Thinning hair being stroked by his wife  
Lukewarm hands I held, telling myself it was inevitable  
His hearing aid batteries I keep in the safe.

### **Genie Out the Bottle**

*Sasanka Range Bandara*

“How many glasses until we get drunk?” asked Ryan. I could feel a tinge of reluctance in his eyes, warming up, stronger than before, with each sip. He smiled and placed the glass down.

“I da ken... give or take aboot three,” replied Lewis. “Four fer ye obviously.”

He chuckled at his own joke and rubbed his hand on his jeans and left a trail of salt down the side. A sliver of oil formed. Ryan winced. We weren’t kids anymore, yet Lewis hung on to a faint glimmer, to the dimming light in the backs of our mind that said, if we ignored the oncoming storm, maybe, just maybe, this moment might last a few seconds longer.

“You’re still a virgin right, Lewis?” snarked Ryan. He looked at me for support. I smiled.

Ryan was tall and skinny, not in the sickly kind of way, but in the way that you knew he had other priorities in place. Better ideas and bigger dreams, bigger fish to fry that swam in a sea way larger than our pond. He had a sharp nose, and his complexion was pale. Owl eyes, ticking away. Except for moments like these; no more droning voices or mumbling speeches about logarithms and reactions. For Lewis’ sake, the pressure of not fitting in a sink right. Over the past year, Ryan had made efforts to get a job in Glasgow, or Edinburgh, or Stirling or Strathclyde. Anywhere but here. He only broke the news yesterday that he was moving to Glasgow tomorrow for good. Better salary, better food, better cars, and I assumed, more interesting people. Ryan finished University a year before me. I guess it was inevitable. It still hurt, however. That the idea of mellowing together, for a little longer, never really struck him. I took another sip of wine.

Lewis seemed fixed on working for his father, he even cracked his knuckles like him. Thick fingers. Loud crunches. Like cracking walnuts. The perfect plumber hands. He was about a year younger than me yet aspired to fit in with a crowd we never understood; the football hooligans, the pint-in-a-pub-after-the-game kind of folk. Meal deals and greasy pork pies. We didn't really expect any different. He had a beard and wore white sneakers, the fruits of his labour I presumed. He used to wear my cologne before but now he wore his own. It smelt musky, like fresh timber. When he had joined us today, he seemed larger, and his laugh more bellowing. His frame wider than before. The bottom of his belly peeked from underneath his polo. How many pies contributed to that? I wondered. Because we never saw each other as often as we used to, so when a different haircut or a new coat appeared, it stood out like a sore thumb. I glanced at Ryan's brown brogues, they looked expensive. He crossed his legs and his shoes gleamed in my eyes. I thought back to when he wore skinny jeans and beat up Vans.

“Do you think I look good in this?” Ryan shouted, holding my shirt.

I remember the reflection in his mirror. The evening of prom. I battled with my bowtie, Ryan sought an outfit, Lucy, Ryan's girlfriend, was doing her hair downstairs and Lewis was late, as usual, for the pre-party.

“You look fine...” I replied.

I was lost in what knot to tie. I heaved at every imperfection whilst poor Ryan struggled to find a good colour of shirt. The bowtie slipped out my fingers.

I stared at the mirror. He'd been nagging me the whole afternoon. If this colour goes with that? Should the tie be ironed? What cologne? Will it rain?

“Hey... guess who asked me out?” I asked. “Charlie Evans...”

Ryan didn't reply. I stared at myself in the mirror.

“I told her... our kiss was a mistake... she thought it meant more... I mean... sure she's cute but...”

I turned around to see him huddled behind his bed. His back heaved. He was crying. He ate up his sobs in quiet grunts.

“Hey man... what's wrong?”

I wrapped an arm around him. I sat on the ground and pulled him closer. As things were at the time – I let him take a minute for himself, he curled inwards and sighed heavily. The gravity of the situation hits much harder now.

“I'm... I'm scared”

“About what?”

“Exams...”

The idea that exams bothered him bewildered me. Until, I realised, it didn't. He continued to sob, and I started to think. Unnerving. Ryan was always there for me... I struggled to fit the role of being there for him. But I knew well enough.

“Is it the medication?”

He nodded.

“I've read... this is the brutal period. You did go for it then?”

He nodded.

I remembered him joking about in class.

‘Who'd take anti-depressants, right? C'mon, if you're feeling sad... just smoke a joint... right?’

The comment itself hadn't bothered me. The fact he made ten different anti-depressant jokes over two days did. I remember in vivid detail, him asking me for help. Begging me to keep him on track and remind him to take it. We even wrote it down. I still have the note somewhere. Twice daily, one in the morning and before bed. He'd skipped it over the week to try, through what he felt, to normalise himself for prom. His thoughts had eaten away at his mind. He needed grounding.

Lucy opened the door downstairs and he wiped away his tears. It left his cheeks rosy. I walked him to his desk and pulled out a pill, placed it in his hand and glared him down.

“We're all breaking apart at the seams... if... you need some extra glue... that isn't embarrassing. Drink up. I'll remind you tomorrow and every day after that... Here...”

He pushed it down without water. I joked about that, and we both laughed. Lewis slumbered in with Lucy behind. Through hugs and stupid jokes, Ryan didn't shy away from opening up. We all did. No problems left hidden; Lucy was worried about university, Lewis told us he worried he'll fail math. I told them how I worried we'd eventually grow apart. They reassured me everything would be fine. We'd always have each other; we'd always be friends. We'd always have each other's back.

I looked at the rum in my glass.

Lewis shoved some crisps in his mouth, pieces flew like shrapnel onto me. I watched Ryan dwell miles away. Every now and then he'd glance down to check the time, a new Apple Watch on his wrist. I'd never seen him wear one before, he took five minutes and checked his calorie balance for the day while I forced Lewis to fill the silence by explaining the difference between a butt and rabbet joint.

"Honey Rum?" Ryan asked.

I smiled.

"You still remember, huh?"

"Well... we used to worship this stuff... nectar of the gods we called it..."

I felt the glow of the drink trickle down my throat. It warmed my belly, it nestled in my bones, and I felt a familiar cover, blanketing almost, shielding me from December winds. We had all yelled at Lewis for booking an outside table despite the pouring rain. The air was miserably cold.

"Oh, the memories..." I whispered. I stared at the liquid. "Before I drank vodka, and you became a whiskey man..."

Lewis cracked his knuckles.

"Nae me, fellas. Nothing better than a good 'ol pint a Tennent's"

Lucy threw a piece of raspberry at him.

"Oil Watch the shirt!" He yelled.

He shoved his hand in a pot of peanuts, submerging it before pulling out a handful, throwing a fistful down his throat and one at Lucy. She leaned to the side, and it fell into the bushes. I looked at Ryan.

He sat, oblivious. Beady eyes illuminated by the glow of a small screen, he pressed in a message on his watch. I could see a small smirk after it made a ding. I think he set a reminder. He was younger than me, though at that moment, in his white Tommy Hilfiger shirt with stripes down the front, in his neat Crombie coat and brown brogues, crisp navy chinos, rolled up at the bottom, for once, he looked much older. I pulled at the collar of my jacket and yanked it to cover my neck. The rain pattered on.

"Ryan, how're your meds keeping up?" I asked.

He shook his head. In a flash, a moment of shock fell on his face. He hid behind his wine.

"Don't take that stuff anymore... no need," he muttered.

"Fit stuff?" interrupted Lewis, in between dodging Lucy.

Ryan gave out a nervous giggle.

"Nothing... just some heart stuff... don't worry... got a reminder on daily to take this prescription."

He glared at me before taking another sip. I stared at him.

"For your heart?"

He nodded.

"Lincoln Dutch... they don't hire the... weak. So... I'm not going to tell them..."

"About your heart?"

"Yeah..."

Lewis and Lucy honed in.

Ryan giggled nervously. It was painfully clear he was blushing. He fiddled with the buttons on his shirt.

"Have you tried Glenfiddich 18?" he asked.

He bit his lip and threw a peanut at Lewis to distract him.

I shook my head. We started speaking about whiskey. How Ryan had been trying out all the expensive types. I just nodded and listened, our conversation drowned out by childish insults between Lucy and Lewis. She threw a mint leaf from her mojito at him, he would hurl another peanut in response. He seemed fixated on using them as his sole artillery despite Lucy avoiding them with ease. Lucy was still humourful as she was during school, she still sang karaoke on Sundays and preferred cocktails over pints any day. I couldn't picture her doing the same with work colleagues, though she went out much more with them. 'Team building' she had described it earlier, 'meant to elevate morale.' She was interning as an accountant, the quiet and refined type. Black leather shoes and crisp collared shirts; briefcases, and piles of paper. She even wore her hair in a bun now. I wondered if she missed looking like Rapunzel and vaping in the toilets; singing ABBA terribly and seeing who could spit furthest from the balcony. I watched as she caught one of Lewis' projectiles, she hurled it back and it skimmed past his ear, it knocked on someone behind him. She turned to me and hid a laugh. The man stood up. His group fell silent. Two of them started to walk towards us.

"This one's a baby Guinness, that's tequila and that's sambuca."

I recalled reaching for the little black shot.

“Why’s it called that?”

“Trust me... you’ll like it,” Lucy replied.

I watched Lewis sink the sambuca and Ryan the tequila, Lucy sipped on her daiquiri. I drank it with reluctance.

“That’s... pretty good.”

Lucy smiled.

I recall the wedding ceremony that night, Lewis’ sister’s wedding. Two years older. I proceeded to have five more baby Guinness and the night delved into singing and madness. I accidentally threw myself into a crowd. Intoxicated, I’d pushed into the groom’s entourage. Big, beefy men. They didn’t see the funny side. One shoved me, one sank their shoulder into my chest. Called me a bender. Lucy was the first to rip them off.

“What’re you doing?”

The beefy guy pushed her aside.

“Get lost you little twat. He started it.”

Lucy slapped him across the face. Lewis and Ryan marched over. The broken disco ball clouded us, loud voices singing along to ‘Sweet Caroline,’ too busy to notice the slice of chaos ensuing in the corner. Lewis grabbed the guy’s arm before he could retaliate.

“Ye da wanna dee at, bud.”

He sank a fist into Lewis, it got lost in his belly. He groaned. Ryan threw champagne at the rest and Lucy pushed one down. The strobe light fell over and clouded us in darkness. I clambered on the guy’s back and captured his arms, the beer had given me extra strength, enough to hold him until Lewis landed a steady blow. He toppled over, I fell on a mass of balloons. Ryan grabbed me by the arm and pulled us out the fire exit. I held on to Lewis, he clung on to Lucy. One by one, like a barrel of monkeys, we slithered out the hall.

We took to the overlying hills. Three am. A foggy night. Freezing cold and not a soul. We felt the frost dampen our bottoms and nip our skin. We all collapsed into each other for warmth.

“Now that... was exciting,” I exclaimed.

“Are you kidding me?” said Lucy.

“Did you see Ryan spray them with champagne?”

She giggled and nodded. She nudged Ryan. Lewis broke open a bottle of malbec.

I remember us talking the night away. A single bottle of wine to keep us warm. We talked about music, about what happened and made fun of each other. Each of us taking quick turns of sleeping on someone’s shoulder, no one wanting to miss a second of watching the dawn rise. Admittedly, I didn’t really want the sun to come up. I just wanted that moment to last forever.

A fist grabbed my collar.

“You got a problem, ya little shit...”

I was pulled back into reality. A man stood before me. His bomber jacket stunk of cigarettes and cheap booze. He seemed about twenty. This was clearly their first time here. I could almost taste the angst. His friends snarled behind him.

“Which one of yous threw that at me?”

Lewis sunk in his seat and eyed Lucy. Ryan remained quiet and fiddled on his watch, he glanced at Lucy and Lucy looked at me.

I stood up.

“Listen, gentlemen... sorry about that... didn’t mean anything by it... wasn’t meant for you. Just a little fun and games... you guys have a good night, alright?”

The man shook his head.

“I’ll fucking break yer heed in ya poof.”

He pushed me back in my seat. Everyone stayed quiet. Lewis coughed and Ryan fiddled with his watch, Lucy swirled her drink. I looked back at her, seeking the shelter of her snarky remarks. She simply looked away. She refused to meet my gaze. The men walked back, and I recognised their faces. Kids from the year below. Scrawny weeds who wouldn’t dare look in my general direction back then. The seeds of time had sprouted.

“Ladies... guess fit?” Lewis started. It was as if he’d blanked over the whole scene before. He reached into his pocket and heaved out a phone trapped by skinny jeans.

“New apartment... fit dee ye think?”

I stayed silent. I waited for some acknowledgement or validation.

Lucy just tapped her wrist. Ryan nodded. Yet Lewis locked us in with his phone.

It looked cosy and warm. His plump fingers clutched the small screen. I struggled to picture his giant body squeezing through those tiny frames. I nodded.

“Looks good buddy. What’d Chloe saying about it?”

Lewis droned on about his girlfriend. He spoke with such passion, such enthusiasm. It felt alien to see him so confident about a relationship. He was pathetic at small talk, even worse online. He always relied on me for help.

‘Ye gotta tell me how tae get the birds...’

“Y’know... this appearance thing... It’s just a fallacy. Like, she’s not gonna reject you simply because you can’t bench 70 kilos or you wear XL...”

I remembered shaving in the common room bathroom one time. Lewis slumped, heaving on the toilet behind me. He’d always go to empty his bowels between fifth period and sixth. I had free periods every afternoon, so we’d agreed for meaningful discussions during this most sacred time when everyone else had class and no one would ridicule him asking for relationship advice. I tapped the razor on the sink and smiled.

I had a good jawline back in the day. A lighter complexion too, the bags beneath my eyes not yet born and my hair was shorter. I parted it in the middle just like Hugh Grant.

“Ye da ken how hard it is fer me... I asked Erica oot fer a meal last week... she said she was busy...”

I laughed at that.

“Erica? Busy? You’re kidding, right? She spends half her time getting wasted at parties and the rest crying about how she can’t get a C in Home Economics.”

“Exactly...”

Lewis heaved.

“Listen... bud... You need to stop going for girls way out your league... why not settle for someone like...”

I thought of the most repulsive person I could picture.

“... Jessica Cartwright?”

“Fack off...”

I laughed and slid the razor in my bag. Lewis stepped out the cubicle. He always washed his hands twice after finishing his business, and religiously forgot to dry them afterwards.

I plucked some paper towels and threw them at him. He almost waited for it instinctively.

“Listen, school finishes in April... understand? We’re still kids now... but when we go out in clubs and pubs... now that’s where you meet real women...”

“Ye gonna get me a bird in a club, ‘en?”

I nodded.

“I’ll find the grottiest, most bogging, middle-aged woman, smelling of cigarettes and wanting to forget her untimely divorce and introduce her to you...”

Lewis hurled the mass of paper towels at me.

“Oi, watch the blazer...”

I pulled my collar straight and he stood beside me.

“Ye ken... after school... we can get an apartment, get drunk all a time and have birds coming in and oot... how does that sound?”

I laughed. I nodded and turned to him. I held out a hand. He grabbed it.

“Is that promise then, bud?”

“Aye... The two amigos... The world better be ready...”

I heard the music echo from the dance floor. The crowd roared.

‘Super Trouper, beams are gonna blind me...’

I smiled.

‘But I won’t feel blue...’

I nodded at Lucy.

‘Like I always do...’

She pressed her watch and flashed it towards Ryan. The light met him in the eyes.

“You got your train in the morning... We better go.”

Ryan finished his wine and stood up. He patted himself down; his coat for his phone, his jeans for his wallet and circled his wrist for his Apple Watch. All there. All expensive. He ruffled Lewis’ hair and held a hand towards me.

I stood up and shook it. I gave Lucy a hug and they both started walking.

“Keep in touch, fellas,” Ryan shouted. The back of his head bobbed as he smiled at Lucy.

Lewis held a thumbs up. Staring off at the trees.

“Send me a postcard fae Glasgow...” he yelled. It echoed into the night.

I watched as they slipped through the door. It slammed with a heavy thud. Lewis and I sat, drinks in hand and stared off at the trees.

“I best be heading aff soon, you ken how the missus gets... got work in a morn.”

“Yeah?”

I pressed the glass against my lips. Lewis stood up and belched. He patted his belly and threw on his jacket.

“Where aboot ye living now?” he asked.

“Still looking for a place,” I replied. “Got kicked out the last one.”

I looked up at Lewis.

“Oh...”

I shrugged. He chuckled and came in for a hug. I watched as he too, faded away. I finished my drink. The waitress arrived.

“Can I order a round of...”

I looked behind me.

“Six pints and a... Martini, please. For that table over there.”

I pointed at the group of kids. She nodded and went away. I took a seat next to the guy who’d threatened me before. He laughed.

“W... was... it you...” he slurred.

His friends laughed in unison. Their faces blurred into a mass. I nodded and sipped my Martini.

“All’s good... cheers for the pints!” his friend said.

I watched as they laughed and jeered. They sang, like we had done once, they ate chips and threw them at each other for fun. They’d tell stories about dates, about last night and Uni. I saw a reflection in them, of my own past. They were simply moments behind us, and I just wanted to grab them by the collar and tell them. Tell them to enjoy it while they can, because one day, it’ll all just be a distant memory. Every single person here will be alien to the other, even though they were huddled in a chain now. Time will break that chain and no link is too strong. I knew that I’d never remind Ryan about his meds or get into fights with Lucy or be Lewis’ wingman again. When they walked out that door tonight, we walked out of each other’s lives. Next time, I’ll just be a youthful memory, a thought to smile and laugh about. Forgetting about how strong our bonds were once woven, probably, because the stitches had opened so long ago. They’d never be whole again. Just try to enjoy it while it lasts.

### Out of Touch

*Andile Ngwenya*

I think about death a lot. I wonder how the final moments are like. Does life really come flashing before your eyes like everyone says? You’d think they’d be of the happiest moments but what about your worst, like regrets? I wonder if she ever did have regrets, especially today, considering I just delivered one of the most important eulogies to the people of Matabeleland.

In the moments leading up, I stood there, in front of dozens of unfamiliar faces – faces I never met. They knew who I was, but I didn’t know them. It was a surreal moment. As I searched amongst the faces of the unknown, I caught a few awkward glances too. Glances that didn’t meet mine, as if they were ashamed of being around me. As they should be. But I had to be here. I was representing the wife of one of the most reputable leaders of the Zulu tribe, who also happened to be my mother. A part of me didn’t even want to do it, but as part of Zulu tradition the first born of the bloodline of the person who has passed bears the responsibilities of delivering their eulogies. I was greeted by my cousin, who I grew up with. I hadn’t seen her since I ran away so it was reassuring to see a familiar face. She gave me a pre-written eulogy as she knew I wouldn’t be able to write one myself. I quickly skimmed it and realised everything written was far from the truth.

As incessant raindrops trickled down my forehead, I took a deep breath and looked down at the written eulogy.

“Thank you for being here, to celebrate the life of a remarkable woman, Na Lydah. She was the most loving mother–” If only these words were true.

I paused as a gust of wind almost knocked me over. I looked around the crowd. Some people had already started crying, mourning a person that I couldn’t.

“She was the most loving mother to me. When we were poor and could barely afford food or clothes, she would still ensure that there was a home-cooked meal on the table when I got home from school.” We were so poor that she dressed me in her old clothes. It was a hard life, she worked tirelessly at a factory to provide for me. She would often take me to the beach after school and promise a better life and a better future for me. She was truly a loving mother, till she met my stepfather. He changed her for the worse. She no longer wanted to look after me. She began to stop caring for me, things just weren’t the same. Some say she didn’t love him but was too scared to leave him as he provided her with a sense of financial security and status. He was the chief of the village after all, which is the equivalent of royalty in this village.

He didn’t like me, as I wasn’t his child biologically, so to marry him he gave her the ultimatum – continue a poverty-stricken life with me or ditch me to live a successful life with him.

“As the clan chief’s wife, she was involved in all aspects of trivial life...” She valued this new power and authority more than me and chose the latter. She left me to start her new life, and relatives took me in. Few of them sympathised for me, but at the end of the day the tribe came first before your family.

I locked eyes with my aunt who took me in when my mother abandoned me. Growing up, she wasn’t the kindest, and often would project her own troubles and frustrations from her failing marriage onto me. My older cousin witnessed the beatings and tried to save me from the whippings of the belt by intervening. But unfortunately, this would be seen to be rebelling against your elders so she would be disciplined even worse for doing so. As abused kids, we developed a unique relationship and filled in the void left by my mother. Sadly, our relations were not long-lived as she moved out of the village due to family commitments.

I was overwhelmed by pain that I didn’t know I had buried in my heart for so long, pain so strong that I couldn’t find it in me to continue reading lies. She wasn’t the most loving mother to me at all, in fact she was barely in my life. How could I read something that wasn’t true? How do my relatives expect me to do that? This isn’t fair, but sadly in Zulu tradition you are obligated to speak only good words of those who have passed, despite their wrong actions.

I couldn’t find the courage to continue reading lies nor speak from my heart, and just moments later I felt a nudge behind me. It was my cousin whom I hadn’t seen since we’d been separated at a young age. It was a relief that I’d at least recognised someone. She was one of the only relatives that made a genuine effort to keep in touch.

“You don’t need to do this,” she whispered, and so I let her take over.

As she continued the speech, I zoned out and I couldn’t help but wonder, if my mother was still here now, would she be able to recognise me? Did she ever regret abandoning me to live a better life when I was younger?

“With admiration, we recall her sense of selflessness, duty and dedication to our tribe...” my cousin continued. Selflessness? She was the most selfish person I ever met. So selfish, she had to cut ties with her only child to start a new life. I looked out at the crowd of people, sitting row on row and wondered if anyone else realised this. Some heads were bowed in shame – especially my aunt who abused me, whilst some nodded, agreeing with what was said.

At the age of sixteen, the abuse I endured at the hands of my auntie became so unbearable that I ran away to start a life of my own and fulfil my mother’s empty promises. I moved cities, obtained a degree in nursing, found a job, and worked as a nurse. Despite my move, my cousin and I remained in touch along the years. Decades passed, yet I longed for my mother to return to me, apologising for leaving me. Telling me she made a mistake and begging for my forgiveness. The pain transformed into resentment, and I started to hate her. In fact, I despised her. She never once reached out to me till a year before she passed. I received a letter titled ‘To my darling Babbu,’ which was a nickname my mother had given me, so it could only be from her. But it was too late. I wanted nothing to do with her and out of anger I burnt it. I regretted it the day after, but my pride and ego got the best of me, so I never made the attempt to reach out to her and find out what she had said.

Last week, my cousin notified me of my mother’s passing. She died in her sleep. I never had the chance to process it, have felt numb ever since. The chanting’s started. This is believed necessary at funerals, to ‘renew’ the dead person’s soul. It wasn’t until I saw the casket that reality hit me. The realisation that I would never be able to amend bridges with her. Why hadn’t I just opened that letter? The rain fell heavier as the men lifted the casket onto their shoulders and slowly carried it towards the grave. With each step that they grew closer to the grave, the singing grew louder. Heartfelt images of how our reunion could have panned out played in my head. Her hugging me and telling me how proud she was of me. Telling me how much she loved me and missed me. The casket finally reached the grave, and

slowly descended into the ground. Tears trickled down my face. I wasn't just mourning her, but what could've been.

It was a painful moment, but there was also a sense of relief. Not that she had passed but that I could now finally cut ties with the heavy pain and resentment that I have carried for so long. I now can put an end to a chapter and start a new one. It stopped raining, and as the chanting came to an end I looked up at the sky and saw a rainbow. A banded bright light in brilliant hue which replenished my pain and sorrow and replaced it with hope. I released all the resentment I held towards my mother, my aunt, and my past. It gave me confirmation that the bridge that I thought was long burnt had now been amended – and gave a clear path of new beginnings. I felt someone's hand interlock mine and looked over. It was my cousin. Despite running away at such a young age and being separated for so long, there was always an unspoken love and care we had for each other. A care that I will never take for granted. Even though my mother left me, I still understand the value and importance of family. It has shown me how not to treat my children. I'll do better, better for me and better for my future children.

### **The Bus**

*Louise Innes*

Headlights pierce the dark of the early November morning, signifying the arrival of the school bus. About time. Horizontal rain and gale-force winds are never good at the best of times, but there is a certain vindictiveness to it when you've been waiting in it for a quarter of an hour, weighed down by a school bag with six jotters, three textbooks, a pencil case, a PE kit, and a tote bag with extra clothes for after-school rehearsals. I might as well not be wearing my jumpers, jacket, hat and scarf.

The bus doors creak open unevenly and the driver grumbles in acknowledgement through a disposable mask as I, and the other, equally frozen students, mask up and clamber onto the bus, desperate to escape the elements. Leaving no time for us to get to our seats, the bus driver pulls away and we all lurch forward, grabbing onto seats to save ourselves from flying down the aisle.

Sitting in my seat, earphones in, a blank look bordering on a scowl half hidden by the mandatory mask, in a crowd of identical earphones, blank faces and masks, I understand why teenagers get such a bad reputation.

“No one talks to anyone anymore!” people always like to complain. “Kids these days don’t know they’re born,” they mutter.

I get it – I really do. But no one has the energy. Between six a.m. wake-ups, global pandemics, hour-long bus journeys, exams, and homework, everyone is just exhausted. I look out the window, watching the dim silhouettes of the old ruins and the abandoned tractors. As much as I hate the daily bus journeys to and from school, there’s a sort of peacefulness to them; watching the small villages pass by, replaced by the crags filled with grazing sheep, replaced by the looming mountainsides as the bus drives between them, eventually giving way to the sea on one side and yet another village on the other.

The bus journey, as long as it is, gives me time to think, to get my thoughts in order before the day really begins. I usually start by planning out my day: first period, Maths, second, English, break, then double Biology, Drama, lunch and double Modern Studies. Today is Thursday which means Drama rehearsals after school – I’ll need to get a late bus pass at the desk. Late bus isn’t until half past five, so I’ll have an hour to kill, maybe get a snack from the shop.

Once I have successfully planned out my day, I go back to looking out the window. It’s starting to get light now, but the rain is still coming thick and heavy and at one point the wind actually blows the bus onto the other side of the road as we come round the corner. Typical Skye weather.

The bus stop at Sconser is predictably empty as the Raasay ferry is not running due to the extreme weather, the Raasay kids getting yet another day off school.

Twenty minutes later and we’re coming into Portree. The bus pulls into the school bus circle in its usual spot, furthest away from the school entrance.

I gather my bags and zip up my coat, preparing to run the final gauntlet.

I’m nearly blown off my feet as I step off the bus and start my mad dash up to the main entrance, just in time to hear the bell for the start of a very long day.

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“What time’s the bus again?” the tall girl with the green backpack and a black hoodie asks.

“Half five-ish, I think,” responds the shorter girl wearing a blue waterproof jacket with a black backpack over it and a scarf wrapped round her neck.

It’s quarter to five and the two girls are walking together to the bus stop down the street, having been kicked out of the school canteen by the cleaning staff.

“Ugh that means I won’t get back ‘till like half six and I still need to revise for that Maths unit test tomorrow, plus like two hours of Modern Studies because I’ve got that essay to hand in,” the tall girl huffs, tightening her hoodie to keep out the bitter wind of the cold November night.

It starts to rain and both girls groan.

“Yeah, it’s so stupid how she made us come to rehearsals today even though we literally did nothing but lie still the entire time,” the shorter girl complains.

“Oh, but then the stage wouldn’t look right while she spent the entire hour working with Iona and Oscar on their lines,” the tall girl interjects.

“It’s such a stupid play to do, like why choose a poem that can literally only be divided into two parts and try make it a play for ten people to do.”

“Do you know what Iona said to me the other day?”

“What?”

“Well, last week I told her I was gonna skip the after-school rehearsals cause I had shit to do and all we were gonna do was pretend to be dead the whole time anyways and she had a go at me being like ‘there’s no small parts’ and ‘if you signed up to do the play you can’t just be a diva and not bother going when you don’t feel like it. We all have to play our part,’ like, honestly, what a bitchy thing to say!” the taller girl rants.

They’ve reached the bus stop now and just have to stand and wait for the bus to come in half an hour.

“Yeah, that’s honestly so unfair,” the shorter girl agrees. “Like I get we all need to commit to it even if we got shit parts but if I’m just gonna lie on the floor for an hour basically as part of the set I may as well not go cause they’re not gonna miss me and it’s Highers this year, and I need to do really well to get into uni.”

“And you know they’re only bitching cause they don’t want to admit that we have a very valid point.”

The girls continue ranting until the bus turns up half an hour later, and when the bored-looking bus driver opens the doors, they mask up, hand over their late bus passes and make their way to the back of the bus. The conversation continues as the bus drives out of Portree, stopping briefly at Sconser for no one in particular, moving seamlessly from after-school rehearsals to prelims and exams to what they were wearing to the Christmas dance.

As the bus passes through the tiny villages, there is a lull in conversation and the girls look out the windows, squinting to make out the dim silhouettes of the old ruins and abandoned tractors. Lights shine through curtains in some of the inhabited houses as they get closer to Broadford where the tall girl gets off the bus to her waiting mum in the car park across the road.

The shorter girl waves goodbye to her friend and gets her headphones out of her pocket and puts her music on for the last fifteen minutes of the journey.

She sighs; it’s been a long day.

### Thyme, Echinacea, and Yarrow

*Niamh McCormick*

There was a witch who lived in the forest. Her hut was so old that trees had grown over and around it, roots stretching their twisting appendages between crumbling bricks. Dreha had heard whispers, but no-one she knew had ever seen the witch. Dreha could hear her heart thumping in her ears as she stood before the door, but she was desperate, so she raised her fist and knocked.

The woman who opened the door was not gnarled and wrinkled as Dreha expected, though her clothes were old-fashioned. Petticoat skirts and a linen overall with deep side pockets – the kind a grandmother would pull dull copper coins or paper-wrapped toffees from.

The witch tilted her head and gestured for Dreha to speak. Taking a deep breath, she did her best not to stutter.

“I come to request a boon, witch. I have rosemary and cinnamon bark to trade.” She held out two small pouches, neatly labelled and wrapped with twine, containing the plants she had carefully gathered and dried.

“Hm. And what boon do you request, girl?” The witch’s voice seemed to echo, as though the wind picked up the words and swept them back and forth over and over.

“I want people to like me. I want to have friends.”

“The boon is for you. I cannot change other people. I can change you.” Dreha paused, unsure for a moment, but then she nodded.

“Alright. Make me pretty. Then people will like me.” She smiled as the witch took her payment, tucking it into a pocket.

“Go home and sleep. In the morning you will be changed.”

Dreha looked over her shoulder at every sound as she ran home.

In the morning Dreha sat before the window, turning this way and that to marvel at her reflection. Her hair was long, and no longer stuck out in uneven curls. Her body was thin and dainty, bereft of the thick frame she had built up over years of labour. Her eyes were larger, her cheeks more pink, and her face was no longer round, but pointed.

Dreha smiled. The girls in town would surely notice her now that she was beautiful.

#### *Thyme – courage, strength, power*

Dreha knew the path well this time and did not hesitate to knock on the wooden door. She wondered if it had been painted green, or simply overtaken by moss and lichen.

The witch answered immediately, pulling gloves from her hands, and tucking them into her belt.

“You are not satisfied with your boon?”

“No! I am grateful, Lady witch. And satisfied. You gave me what I asked.” She proffered three small pouches.

“I bring thyme, and tarragon, and nutmeg. I would request another trade. If it pleases you of course.”

The witch crossed her arms across her chest, silent, and Dreha sent up a prayer that if she were turned into a toad or a worm, no-one ever find out.

“You offer fine gifts.” The witch nodded, “Ask what you will.”

Dreha sighed in relief, bowing her head in deference. “I am grateful to be pretty, for now the girls do not ignore me entirely, but I find they grow bored or perturbed with me quickly. I do not know the right things to say, or how to act. I want to... I want to know the things they know.”

The witch raised an eyebrow but nodded. “A little abstract, but I shall see what I can do.” She took the pouches of herbs, and as Dreha turned to leave, she was bewildered to hear a soft, “Thank you.”

The witch’s voice reminded her of wind chimes, and Dreha only looked back to smile before she headed home.

In the morning, Dreha found her head was busy with thoughts that felt foreign – like mint spreading over and choking out a native flower. How she should stand to appear demure. How she should speak to an acquaintance versus how she should speak to a friend. Ways to convey you are speaking unkindly without uttering an unkind word. She suddenly had an awareness of which girls were friends and which were rivals, and felt foolish for attempting to befriend them all, when that was simply impossible!

With the new knowledge she held, it would be simple to fit in – her mind now contained instructions on how to make friends.

#### *Echinacea – courage, resilience*

The moss was spongy in the rain, and Dreha’s passing was marked by deep footprints. Water dripped from the hood of her cloak as she lifted a trembling hand towards the door, which swung open before she could touch it.

“Come in out of the rain, you must be freezing!” Her cloak was whisked away and hung on a misshapen hat stand, and a cup of warm, sweet-smelling tea was pressed into Dreha’s hands.

The witch seemed unable to keep still, bustling around the room – which Dreha was sure was too big to fit inside the stone hut – tidying surfaces and collecting books into piles.

“I’m sorry.” The witch did not face Dreha as she spoke. “It seems I’ve failed again.”

No longer fearing the wrath of someone who sounded so dejected, Dreha shook her head.

“No, please. It’s my fault, I should have known you can’t just... magic people into being your friends.” She took a sip of the tea, which tasted like pure honey, and spread warmth all the way to her fingertips.

“I came to ask if you would be willing to... undo my boons. I already cut off the long hair, it just got in the way. I cannot carry as much as I used to, and my head is so full of social customs that I am worried I will mistake nightshade for twinberry honeysuckle one of these days.” She ran out of breath, gasping between words, “I know, it is a terrible insult to your power, and I apologise profusely, Lady witch, but please...”

The witch looked out a window (which was certainly not present on the outside of the hut), watching the rain in silence for a long moment. Anxiety began to creep up Dreha’s spine, like the spindly legs of an insect on bare skin.

“This shall require something significant in trade, Dreha.” Her voice was like the twinkling of stars.  
“What could I offer that would be enough?”

The witch smiled. “I have for some time been in need of a reliable herbalist.”

*Yarrow – healing, support, friendship*

There are two witches who live in the forest. Their hut appears old and crumbling, but inside it is warm. One witch laughs like wind chimes, the other like crisp autumn leaves, and neither one is lonely.