



More Verbal Remedies

Creative Writing by Medical Students

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UNIVERSITY
OF ABERDEEN

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Foreword

Why Medical Humanities and Creative Writing?

The arts and humanities help us to make sense of our experiences, understand the world, who we are and perhaps who we want to be. As medical students and future clinicians the third year students who study creative writing, as their medical humanities option, are taking time to connect with this long tradition.

Fundamentally, the aim of the medical humanities courses is to give the students the opportunity to change their focus and consider alternative perspectives. By engaging with experiences, stories, emotions and characters, in a very different way from the approaches of much of their medical studies, we hope that the students learn about themselves and expand their horizons.

Each patient is an individual and each doctor-patient relationship unique because we are people living in layers of context from family dynamics through to global economics. Many of the medical humanities courses seek to generate a greater understanding of this wider context. Creative writing allows students to imagine and explore context.

In order to write about a character you must step into their shoes, surely an exercise in empathy. Refining and crafting writing require reflection. To show empathy and to be able to develop personally and professionally through reflective practice are now familiar requests for the skills of today's and tomorrow's doctors.

Creative writing reconnects the students with the most natural of human phenomena, creativity, and in doing so equips them with insights and skills to help sustain them through their career. I hope that you are inspired when you read the students' work.

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Spring Break in Kerala

Salina Lalwani

Cane swings are not the most comfortable pieces of furniture to have your meal in. I sat cross legged on the thin worn cushion trying to avoid actually swinging and spilling an assortment of fluids, also known as curries, onto my new lime green salwar kameez from the rimmed steel plate on my lap. I passively swallowed the volcanic rice ball, barely tasting the coconut or the red chillis as I stared at the palm trees that ambushed the lonely dirt road to the house from the stone porch, cocooned by my cane cage. It was almost too green out there, and not the organised green you would expect from nature but an unruly explosion of Mikado pick-up stick proportions. The three crows that never, ever left were doing their daily rounds of the acres of farm land, squawking in time with my unwilling swinging.

“Sit up straight. You slouch just like your mother. And don’t look so dejected.” My grandmother sat a few feet away on the coconut scraper, looking graceful in her lavender sari as she scraped away the flesh of the coconut on the black spiky edges of the blade. The first and only time I tried scraping, I unceremoniously fell sideways off the wooden block and onto the cold grey floor letting the coconut ricochet off of the space on the wall next to the Holy Bible. Suffice to say I was banned from ever scraping again.

“Yes, Ammi.” I scooped another rice ball in my right hand and shovelled it into my mouth trying to remember to chew, sit up straight and look enraptured. I must have failed at the former because I started to cough in that eye/nose watering way that can only occur when the chilli goes down the wrong pipe. My grandmother spared me a glance and an eye roll.

“See! Now you are sick. I told your mother that you both are sick all the time because you worship all those crazy gods. Look at all of those pictures and statues in your house and look at how unwell the both of you are. Your father may take you to fancy hospitals but nothing will work when the problem is inside the house. Dear Jesus, please save my grand-”

“I am fine, Ammi. I stopped coughing.”

“Just eat your food and don’t get up before you do. You have to go give Murli his tea.”

I looked down on my plate to swirl around the different components and colours to make it faster to eat. I hoped the amaranthus wouldn’t be petty enough to stubbornly insist on its flavour when bathed with so much mint curd. My musings about plant politics were cut short when I heard a rumbling down the dirt road. The tell-tale white, bubbled body of an Ambassador car skid to a stop in front of our porch, next to my mother’s Chevrolet. A portly man got out dressed in a sort-of white shirt and a lungi, holding an old brown briefcase that looked ready to retire.

“Dr. Jayaram. I am so thankful that you could come with such short notice. Please, please. Come in.”

While I had been scrutinising our guest, my grandmother had gotten up from the scraper, pushed it to the side and flown down the porch steps to grasp the doctor’s both hands in gratitude. I chewed some more on a food ball and swallowed.

“This is my granddaughter. She is from my oldest. You know the one who doesn’t live here but in Europe? That one is inside somewhere making tea. My granddaughter here wants to be a doctor too.”

I gulped down a particularly gruesome piece of amaranthus leaf to stare blankly at Dr. Jayaram who looked impatiently at me. My fingers dug into the steel vertical edges of the plate as both their stares intensified. I couldn’t help but feel that I was missing a huge point when my grandmother made terse eyes at me from my head to my feet and then back again to my head, all the while smiling whenever her eyes met the gloomy doctor.

“Thank you for coming to see my grandfather today. He has been feeling fatigued lately since he got home from his last hospital stint and now is just having bed rest. He has lost a lot of weight and I’m worried that-”

“Your grandmother is more equipped to be telling me the details. I’m going in to see him.” With

that he waddled past my grandmother into the house, his white shirt looking grubby compared to the smooth white walls surrounding the door.

I closed my eyes for a moment to avoid the inevitable look of irritation on my grandmother's face. When I opened them she almost looked in pain from the fury directed at me.

"Have your parents never told you to stand up when you meet a doctor? Have those basic manners not been taught?" Her voice was grainy and the crows were squawking louder.

I looked down at my half eaten plate of food and slid it off my lap and onto the window sill. I didn't think it would be prudent to speak so I shook my head slowly yet tensely with the knowledge that I might have had to duck my head abruptly at any moment. I hoped she could sense my contrition.

She stomped into the house and almost a moment later was back outside with a steel cup of masala tea. I took the cup and accepted my banishment as I left the porch.

Barefoot and now truly dejected, I wandered lazily through the tall grass and palm trees, sniffing for any tapioca that would indicate any dead snakes nearby. The grass and dirt scratched against the new salwar so I stopped to roll up the bottoms to my knees. I just had to avoid going near the main road or the scandal would just escalate to me never returning. It wasn't very difficult to find Murli; I just had to follow the gruff folk tunes. I reached him in a few minutes without really being present in the moment. My aim was to make sure no tea escaped to the ground.

"Child, is that my tea?" Murli was sat right up at the top of the tree, his feet wrapped in the leather he used to get up there and a white cotton cloth around his forehead. He had his boomerang shaped brown blade with him that he used to hack at the jackfruit perched at his eye level.

"Yeah, I'm leaving it on this cut bark for you."

"You look extra upset. Did the doctor - "

"The doctor hasn't said anything yet so I don't know. When will you be finished with this tree?" I decided to sit on the blunt bark and hold the tea instead. I didn't feel like walking back and sitting on the swing.

"I'll finish in a few hours. There are many on this one. Your grandfather used to get impatient for his fruit and I have gotten used to doing the whole tree in one go." His smile wasn't wistful like others. It was warm and matter-of-fact.

"Used to? Before he couldn't eat them because of his sugar levels right?" I squinted through the blazing light of the sun to inspect the wondrous fruits that I used to fantasize were dragon eggs, all of them huge, green and spiky. My mild disappointment with the truth was eased when I first tasted the sticky yellow flesh. They were dripping with sugary goodness or badness depending on who ate it.

"He still wants them for his grandchildren. He told me to give you five of them and give the rest to the others when they visit."

I tried not to contemplate how many months that amount of jackfruit would last.

"Don't you want your tea?" The bark didn't look that harsh as I inspected it.

"I'll come down and get it some time." He hacked away with each word.

"What if we swapped and you came down here and I got the jackfruits? Then you could have your tea." This idea was perfectly rational in my head.

Murli paused to peer down at me and it struck me how old he was. He then guffawed loudly at my suggestion like the exasperating boys at school.

"Dear girl, you sound just like your mother. She offered the same thing to me at your age. So did your grandfather, dozens of times. And now I know why he wanted to give you five."

I smiled for the first time in what seemed like weeks.

"So that's a no then?"

"No young girl should have feet like mine! You wouldn't be able to walk if you tried it. Plus we are already becoming obsolete as it is. You wouldn't want an old man to be out of a job now would you?" He grinned and I begrudgingly grinned back.

“Drink your tea!” I shouted as I jogged back to the porch, dodging palm trees and the huge well I managed to ignore in my first journey. I sat back on the swing to look out again at the vast green surrounding us and found some order in the way all the branches swayed in the wind and in the crows that circled the acres between us and everything else.

Hospital

Sophie Pitts

I don't like this place. It smells funny. It smells sharp and it makes me screw my face up. I don't want to be here. Mummy says she can't take me home yet, but that we'll go soon. She looks funny. Her face is red and puffy. I don't like it.

A man comes over to speak to me. He's nice. He says his name and points at his badge. I read it. Mummy says I'm good at reading. I don't even need to spell the letters out when I read. There are teddy bears around his name. He asks what my teddy bear is called, and then he and mummy both giggle. Grown ups always do that when I tell them her name.

He speaks to me for a little bit, but I don't want to speak. I want to go home. He asks me if my teeth are hurting. I tell him that they only really hurt when I eat something crunchy, like crisps. He frowns at me, so I don't say anything else. After a while he just speaks to mummy, but as he is leaving he says he'll see me later. Does that mean we can't go home yet?

They won't let me eat anything. I'm really hungry. Mummy usually listens, but today she says I have to be good and do what I'm told. I am trying but my tummy is growling at me, and it feels sore. One of the other little girls is eating ice cream. Mummy says it's because she's had something done to her throat. She says I might get ice cream later, if I want. I don't like ice cream much. I ask if I can have chips instead, but she says I probably won't want them. I like chips, especially the big squishy ones we get from the place in town. They always put lots of sauce on too.

A lady comes over now. She has pretty hair. She starts asking me about what I like to do, and she puts something on my hand. She calls it magic cream. I don't think it really is magic, but I let her anyway. She asks me if I like the teletubbies, which annoys me. I'm a big girl now, I'm nearly 7. I don't watch teletubbies. After a while, she shows me that the magic cream has made my hand not feel. I still don't think it's magic. Just clever.

The man is back. He and the lady and mummy start to move the bed that I'm on out of the room. I ask where we're going, and mummy tells me to be brave. I am brave. But I want to know. I sit up and look around as we go past other little girls in other rooms. They are playing with their mummies, or painting, or watching tv. The nurses are nice here, but I don't like painting. They tell me to lie down while we're moving, but I don't want to. I want to see where we're going.

They turn me into a new room. This room is very bright. Everyone is in matching clothes. I like green. But the lady has covered up her pretty hair. In fact, everyone has their hair covered. The dinner ladies at school have to cover their hair. Am I getting food now? The man is talking to me again, but he's getting something from behind him. Mummy is on my other side, and she keeps telling me to look at her. But then I can't see what he's doing. No, I want to see.

They make me lie down. He's holding my hand, the one she put the cream on. Mummy keeps talking, saying I'm going to sleep, but that she'll see me when I wake up. I don't want to sleep, it's daytime. And she's taken away my teddy bear. What's he got?

NO! It's a needle! I'm crying now. I don't like needles. He's going to jab me like the nurse at school. No, mummy, don't let him! The lady is telling me that the cream will make it better, that it won't hurt. No, I don't want to! Mummy has her arm around me. She tells me to be brave and to lie still for her. But he's holding it near me! The lady strokes my hair and I feel a stabby feeling in my hand. I knew it would

hurt. He's holding my arm, and won't let me pull away. Mummy, make it stop!

I look at mummy through my tears. She's crying too.

I feel funny.

Mummy, don't go.

Mummy?!

My arms are really heavy, as if I'm in water.

Mummy?

And now I can't keep my eyes open. What's happening? What are they doing?

Mu....mmy...

Maggot

Nicholas Png

Fuck.

What was his name? My mind went into overdrive as the officer approached, the sinister clicking of his boots getting louder. Fuck. I should have remembered it from the briefing this morning. I pulled my jockey-cap down and held my breath as his feet entered the edges of my peripheral vision. My heart pounded so loudly in my chest it threatened to alert him to my existence. Hopefully a busy man like him wouldn't have the time to bother a lowlife like me. He marched past purposefully and I breathed a sigh of relief. I turned my attention back to the task at hand and scrubbed with renewed enthusiasm.

“Soldier.”

His deadpan voice was laced with malice. I stopped moving, frozen with fear. Was he talking to me? Maybe he was calling for someone else. Please be calling someone else.

“Are you deaf, recruit? Yes you. The one on his knees holding a sponge. Stand up and face me when I'm talking.”

Fuck.

I jumped up and stood at attention, straight as an arrow. My knees were locked and pressed tightly together; a hypothetical grape would have been squashed between them. I looked at his torso nervously. Don't make eye contact. Don't piss him off. Well, don't piss him off more.

“Is this how you speak to an officer?”

“No, sir.”

“Explain why I wasn't greeted when I walked past.”

“I...”

“I... what? Come on, spit it out, recruit.”

My mouth hung open and I felt the colour drain away from my face. A deer caught in the headlights probably summed it up nicely. Heck, at that point in time, I'd have taken my chances with an onrushing car.

“Save it. One weekend. Confinement. Understood?”

“But, sir, I've got...”

“Drop and give me fifty. Fucking recruits.”

I dropped to the ground with my arms extended and back straight.

“One. Two. Three. Four...”

He bent down and yelled in my ear. I tried to focus on the bending and straightening of my arms.

“You belong to me. Do you understand? As long as that badge is on your arm and that rank on your chest, I own you. Don't you dare tell me you've got plans for any weekend. You're a maggot, and maggots have no rights. I decide if you've got plans for the weekend, or whether you have a weekend at all! Is that clear, maggot?”

"Yes sir. Twenty-five. Twenty-six..." Maggot? That was a new one. It felt like ages as I kept up with the punishment. My arms were getting tired and my form was gradually worsening.

"Forty-eight. Forty-nine..."

Almost there.

"You call that a press-up soldier?"

"Uhh... No, sir?"

"How nice of you to agree with me for a change. Start over."

Fuck this.

"Yes, sir." The words came out as a hiss as they forced their way past my clenched teeth.

"One. Two. Three. Four..."

My arms were numb and my uniform was heavy with sweat. Droplets cascaded down my face and a tiny puddle began to form where my nose was closest to the ground.

"Twelve. Thirteen..."

I was much slower this time. I felt his wicked grin burning a hole through my back as he observed my punishment. I stared at the partial reflection of my face in the pool of sweat. Two more years of this. Two more fucking years.

"On your feet, maggot."

I scrambled to my feet with the grace of a swan – a one-legged swan with clipped wings. I was surprised that I didn't have to complete the set. As I caught my breath, I kept my eyes trained on the bar across his chest that gave him the license to do what he was doing to me. Why was he doing this to me? My mind screamed at him but I kept it within the confines of my skull; my expressionless exterior gave nothing away. I knew better now.

"That was pathetic to say the least. It's fine. Three months and I'll have you whipped into shape."

"Yes, sir." I blurted out. I immediately wished the words would crawl right back into my mouth.

"Yes sir what?"

"Umm... Umm... You'll uhh... Have me whipped, sir?"

"What are you talking about, you sick fuck."

"Into shape, sir."

"You're damn right I will. Watch your tongue, maggot."

My arms throbbed as I pressed them tight against my side. I allowed myself a small sigh of relief.

"Well, your arms are obviously spent, recruit, but let's see how fast you can run."

"Sorry, sir?"

"You fucking heard me! Go and touch that fence! If you're not back in thirty, you'll do it again!"

I stared at the fence. It seemed at least a couple hundred meters out. No way I was going to make that in thirty seconds. I knew where this was going. I forced myself to tune out his voice as he started raining all manner of abuse on my ancestry and me.

"Yes, sir."

I closed my eyes, my hands becoming fists. I wanted to punch him.

"Well what the fuck are you waiting for? Your time started five seconds ago."

My eyes shot open. What? The son of a bitch hadn't even said go. I broke into a sprint towards the fence. I took care not to expend all my energy on the first round though. I knew there was more to come. I knew better now.

Penguins

Awaiss Ellahi

Penguins are cool. They look like they're dressed all fancy. I glanced at Kieran, he was smiling and laughing too. We watched as the penguins dived across the ice into the water. Feeding time is always the best time. Two of the zoo men were throwing out fish and wearing wellies. All the penguins were going mad: jumping, shouting and flapping their arms. Some of the little penguins were cuddled round their mummy. Maybe it was their daddy? I didn't know the difference. I asked Kieran. He said the daddy penguins were the ones that gel their hair up so they can look smart for the mummy. I don't know how I didn't think of that? We stood grasping the fence for a few more minutes. I turned around to look for Mrs. Anderson but it was too busy and I couldn't see her. That was strange. She was right there before? I turned to tell Kieran.

“Kieran, where's the teacher?”

“I don't know, we ran over here when we saw the penguins, remember? “We both looked around but we couldn't see her. My stomach started to feel funny. We were lost. My face started to get really hot and sweaty. I could feel something in my throat, like I was eating invisible food. My eyes started to get really watery.

“What are we going to do, we're never going to find the class here. There's like a gazillion people!”

“I don't know, Awaiss, let me think!” Kieran told me to stay put while he ran to have a look round. I watched as he ran in a circle around the penguin cage. There were so many kids and grownups here. The animals were all so loud, it was hurting my ears. I sat down and started to cry. I wanted my mummy. Even penguins didn't make me happy now. I threw my orange at the metal cage. Stupid penguins. Kieran came back all huffy and puffy.

“I can't see David or Jack. They must be with the teacher too.” The feeling in my stomach got worse.

“I want to go home. I've had enough of the zoo!”

“Awaiss, don't cry, I know what to do”.

I looked up to see what he had to say. He wasn't crying. He put his arm round me.

“This one time I got lost in Safeway. I didn't know what to do but a Safeway Man found me and told me he would find my mummy. He tried to speak to my mum through this black box thing and like magic my mum came over to the desk.”

“That's stupid, Kieran. How can he do that?” My bogeys were runny and I could taste them.

“Magic, Awaiss! We need to find a Zoo Man.”

I stopped crying. Kieran's always so smart. That's why he's football captain. He grabbed my hand and started dragging me. We walked for a few minutes until Kieran saw a zoo man with some balloons. He was giving them out to other kids with funny bright vests on too. The balloons had penguins on them. I hated penguins. We ran over to him. Kieran did the talking. I looked up at the balloons.

“Mr Zoo Man, we have lost out teacher and we can't find our class. Can you help us?”

The man smiled and bent down. He said yes and asked us what school we were from. He then pulled out a walkie-talkie and said some things very quickly. He told us to stay here with him so our teacher could find us. He gave us each a balloon and Kieran and I started to play keepy-uppies. The man joined in. He was rubbish. Then, like magic, our teacher and class came round the bend. Mrs. Anderson looked cross. She came over and gave me and Kieran a row. We said sorry and then joined the back of the line. I looked at Kieran and smiled.

“See, I told you the man would be magic,” he said with a cheeser. I looked over to the penguins as we walked away and waved. Penguins are cool.

Kuala Lumpur

Awaiss Ellahi

Like a child, I watch from my seat
Merely a speck in this chaotic illusion
Captivated by diverse possibilities
Slowly, I dissolve into the shadows
KL never sleeps

Like stalagmites, they rise in their numbers, dominating the sky line
Etching wounds so deep, even the smog refuses to engulf them
Delicious cascades of colour hypnotise guilty onlookers
I steal a glance, besotted; their radiance fills me with a warm glow
KL never sleeps

An ocean of ants, they fill the streets, flooding every inch of the pavements
Streaming past one another to reach their destination,
Keeping the fast paced heartbeat of the city alive
I'm fascinated by their failure to appreciate the beauty that surrounds them
KL never sleeps

Headlights flow through the city matrix
Shackled by the constant barrage of traffic lights,
They hunt for emancipation from the clutches of the city
Their fury erupting from the roads, releasing a wave of cries
KL never sleeps

Two Vignettes

Ailsa Bruce

Effects: Ryan

7 days, 13 hours and 24 minutes ago Mummy severed her spinal cord. It was at the level of the 4th thoracic vertebrae, which means she has lost all sensation and movement in her legs. In the UK someone is paralysed every 8 hours. Daddy shouted a lot. He called Mummy a selfish bitch. I told Daddy he was wrong because a bitch was a female dog – I don't think he liked being wrong because then he cried. I was just trying to help. He also forgot to count the peas on Friday.

Today I heard Tammy's mum saying that Mummy tried to kill herself and that's why she is paraplegic. She said it was because I was having difficulties at school. I think it's my fault Mummy is paralysed and sad. I haven't told anyone. I haven't spoken to anyone all day but that's not difficult. Once I didn't speak for 432 hours but I had to tell Mummy to stop because she started shaking me and it hurt. I don't think Mummy will be able to shake me anymore. I'm scared of what people will do when they find out it's my fault. Tammy's mum wears makeup and people listen to her. I don't like it when people get angry.

Daddy found me up the hill behind my house. It was dark and I had my forehead on the ground because the ground was cold and my head hurt. Before it was dark I could hear the gulls and I liked that because they were birds and they didn't care about people. Daddy said he was sorry for forgetting to

count the peas and then he sat down beside me. He didn't say anything for a very long time and it started drizzling. Daddy put his arm round me. Usually I don't like hugs, they make me feel claustrophobic, but it was less wet and that was nice. I closed my eyes and took 7 deep breaths.

The Evening

Twilight dwindle in the lounge. The shadows creep longer and the colour seeps out of the furnishings. Only the electric fire remains vibrant, dancing under the mantelpiece. Sometime earlier the lady had dozed off and missed dusk. She snores gently, cocooned in the electric chair with her chin resting on a sumptuous pink dressing gown. A paper sprawls across her lap, proclaiming that the world is poisonous. Algy shuffles in, as always with a Spaniel at his heel bringing in the wind and burs and some silver birch, now copper with the season. Algy pulls down stiffly on a lamp tassel as the lady snorts herself awake.

“Sleeping, were we?” Algy chuckles.

“No... Yes well running about after you – cooking, cleaning and baking pudding – it's tiring I tell you. Smells delicious though – doesn't it?” she sniffs the air.

“Delightful.” He winks.

“I'm sorry, darling... there should be some magnums in the freezer.”

“Should be? Anyway, I thought we were watching our cholesterol?”

“Sod the cholesterol. Algy, I'm ninety-two for Christ's sake, get me a magnum.

“Well, you won't be going to heaven after all those magnums with blasphemy like that.”

“Since when did you believe in heaven?”

“You're right, I don't. There's nothing and nobody there. When I'm dead not even I will be there. Hmm, that was put quite well. I like that. Dammit, I think it sounds familiar.”

“Be quiet, Algy. Stop being so morbid. As if I'd remember if I'd heard it before anyway, it sounds perfectly like you.”

“Were you reading the paper?”

“It's a load of tosh, but yes the paperboy brought it this morning – he was asking after Moggie.”

“It's Monday, he comes on Sundays. He wasn't here. He wasn't asking after Moggie.”

“Oh yes, that was yesterday - well I clearly slept far too long. What are we giving the paperboy for Christmas this year? He's awfully sweet.”

“I'm getting some tea.”

“I never know what you're thinking when you're quiet. I just know you're thinking,” sighs Algy.

“Sometimes I feel like you can read my thoughts. Hell, one day you might have to think for both of us.”

“I'm sorry, my love, I shouldn't have snapped at you.”

“But you're right, I forgot.”

“Moggie's looking awfully grey, isn't she? Come here, old girl.”

“We make quite the pair, her and I. Two creaking, crotchety old ladies, eh? Algy, do you remember the first time we met?”

“Of course.”

“Remember how dark the blackouts were? They don't know the meaning of pitch black these days. My mother would never let me out, sensible lady, but that time I'd sneaked out and I was so lost.” She shudders.

“You nearly fell over me.”

“And I thought I'd found help. I'd be so lucky! That thug just knelt down -right there on the street. Then, lo and behold, he struck a match at my ankles and drew it awfully slowly all the way up to my

waist - where the match burnt his cocky little fingers. But he didn't stop, he lit another match and reached my face where he said, 'not bad. Not bad at all.' No wonder I hit you with my handbag!" She giggles, and he giggles.

"I never want to forget that, Algy."

"I won't let you, I promise."

Solitaire

Gareth Hopkins

'Black six on red seven, red jack on black queen, now the whole lot on king. Yes! On a roll here. Space free for another king. Red four onto black five.'

Jaden's mum often wondered about her son's odd behaviour when he concentrated. Speaking out loud apparently helps to focus your mind as it is an extra input on top of visual recognition. However, Brenda couldn't have him grow up to be sitting in coffee shops vocalising his every crossword-related thought. She'd hoped he would grow out of it before he started primary school but he'd had problems in class recently and often got teased. Jaden was very bright but she didn't want his talent to be tainted by this habit. Intervening had never been easy but Brenda was starting to feel it was time to sort it out.

'Jaden, honey, who are you speaking to?' she shouted through to the living room.

'Red....king....ace, yes!' she heard muffled through the kitchen door.

'Jaden? Who are you talking to?' She came through to find him engrossed.

'Red two, finally!' he shrieked.

'Jaden, would you please listen to me?'

'Three, four, five, six of hearts - I need you!'

'Jaden!'

He jerked and turned round, startled.

'Yes, Mummy?'

'What have I told you about talking whilst playing that game?'

'But I like it, Daddy showed me how to play.'

'I know he did but I'm not saying you can't play, just try to keep it quiet.'

'Nooo, I don't like it. I don't mean to. It makes me better.'

'Yes I know, darling, but you don't like the other boys saying things at school either?'

'No but I'm happy here. I just want to play.'

'Yes, sweetheart, but you need to practise for school, you know what Ms. Paton said about quiet writing time.'

Jaden expelled some heavy air, 'red jack onto black queen.'

'Jaden!'

'I know, but I want to finish this game.'

'Can you please try for Mummy?'

'I suppose,' he said grudgingly.

'Thank you.'

He picked up a card and placed it down quietly.

'Well done, just keep trying, dear.' She slowly returned back to cooking dinner for when Howard gets home. Brenda stood and stirred the chicken just listening. Quiet. She was proud of her little soldier. He'd been through some tough months at school but there was now brightness on the horizon.

Meanwhile, Jaden sat in the living room, his eyes welling up and his tears spilling over onto his neat rows of playing cards. The room was quiet. The little soldier had no idea what move he could make next.

Wolves

Ciaran McLaughlin

Chasing squirrels through the wood,
I see sunlight scattered on my path.
Between a maze of old pillars,
I run.

I spot a flash of brown movement
in the sea of orange and red
and I follow,
hunting wolves in my head.

Candles

Ciaran McLaughlin

Only ten candles this time,
seventy short of my eighty years.
Vibrant lights dance
as if teasing me with their warmth.
While shadows slither closer
like old friends come to watch.

Flames flicker under my breath.
Their wispy white souls
ascend through the acrid air.
'Happy birthday'
I sing inside my head.

Ewen's Got A Cat

Katie Noble

“Mum?”

“Um hmm?”

“Ewen’s got a cat.”

I roll my eyes whilst not breaking the monotonous rhythm of my right arm driving the scourer back and forth. I don’t have the strength for Chantelle’s moaning today. “That’s nice.” I say holding the frying pan out of the sudsy water to inspect it. There’s still some unidentifiable charred foodstuff stuck to the bottom, too stubborn to shift.

“Mum?”

“Um hmm?”

“Can we get a cat?”

I sigh and give up on that pan. The burnt on stain is just going to have to stay. “No, Chantelle.”

“But Mum, Ewen’s got a cat!”

I pick up the plates from last night’s boxed macaroni cheese and dump them in the water. “That doesn’t mean we are going to get a cat. Rylan is allergic.”

“Oh.”

Chantelle turns back to the maths homework in front of her on the kitchen table whilst I rinse the plates and start on the lunch boxes. I empty out the fruit that Rylan hasn’t eaten yet again, and put it on the counter to be returned to the lunch box tomorrow. They are submerged beneath the water before a careless wiping down and rinsing.

“Mum?”

“Yes, Chantelle?”

“Can we get a dog?”

Reconsidering the obstinate pan I dunk it back down into the water, scrubbing aggressively, water and bubbles sloshing everywhere. “No, we can’t.”

“Why not?” She whinges. “Ewen’s got a dog and a cat and all we’ve got is that stupid goldfish. And it’s not even my goldfish – it’s Rylan’s goldfish and it’s boring and Bernard is a stupid name for a goldfish.”

Admitting a final defeat with the frying pan I dump it with a loud clunk into the clean pile. It sends a plate rolling and I have to lunge to catch it.

“Chantelle, we are not getting a dog or a cat or a hamster or a wallaby or whatever else Ewen has. We live in a 6th floor flat and Rylan is allergic. In any case it’d end up being me that had to look after it and I’ve got enough on my plate with you two whining on.”

“It won’t mum, promise! I’ll look after it!”

“No, Chantelle.”

The water’s gone cold so I pour it away and twist the tap on. Leaning on the edge of the counter waiting for the water to slowly heat up again I sneak a sideways glance over at Chantelle; she’s wearing her little huffy “I’m-seven-and-I-hate-my-life-and-I-have-a-cruel-mum-who-doesn’t-let-me-do-anything” scowl. The tap begins to gurgle and sputter, drawing my attention back to the sink, where the water is now blisteringly hot. I add the Asda’s own fairy liquid and swirl it about, enduring the pain with my fingertips.

“Mum?”

“What, Chantelle?”

“Ewen’s Dad is taking him to Disney Land.”

With an audible groan I pick up a Tupperware box of dirty cutlery and tip it inelegantly into the water. There’s a loud clatter and thud which sends soap suds sloshing over the edge of the basin to leave a wet circle on my abdomen.

“Well why don’t you go live with Ewen and his parents then?!” I growl, angrily picking up the fork that had missed the basin and rattled to the floor. I throw it back into the water, splashing soap into my eye. I squeeze them shut and breathe deeply through my nose for a few moments before squinting back to Chantelle, whose bottom lip has begun to quiver.

“We can’t go to Disney Land at the moment.” I say, softening.

“But Ewen...” she whimpers.

“No, Chantelle.” I plunge my hands back into the water and rest them against the bottom. The couple in the window opposite are tottering about with glasses of wine in their hands, laughing gaily. Out of the corner of my eye I see Chantelle scramble out of her chair to stand facing me, fists clenched, all effort going into contorting her face into the biggest scowl she can muster. I stay staring out the window.

“I hate you!” She screams, then turns and runs out of the room. Her bedroom door slams shut a second later. I sigh and go back to lathering the spoons. I’d love to go to Disney Land too.

Samantha

Katie Noble

Tom is taking the absolute fucking piss! Three days I’ve been asking him for that report. I dial his number again, stabbing the buttons a tad more aggressively than necessary but it’s barely begun to ring when it’s disconnected. I feel the rage begin to rise through my body, a rage that seems to be reserved exclusively for Tom lately, it bubbles and boils and it’s about to splutter and explode out of me but I remember what the therapist said: deep breath, count to ten. I count to 20 before releasing my clenched fists. I inspect them as they slowly fade from purple back to normal. There are dents in my palms from where my perfectly manicured nails (praise for Manhattan Nail Co.) were digging in. I don’t hate Tom. He just infuriates me.

I relax back into the plush leather of my desk chair and stare blankly at the ticking clock for a few moments, working out what to do. Of all our IT services employees, Tom comes out perfectly average. He’s been doing this job for 10 years now – it’s just recently he’s been slipping. A good kick up the arse is what he needs. A good shaking; make him to get his act together.

Twenty five minutes later, with skirt adjusted and composure regained, I head out into the buzz of the main office and weave my way over, head high, shoulders back, and heels clicking satisfactorily authoritatively, to Tom’s desk. He’s sitting there racquet in hand, swishing it about and performing some kind of maintenance; his computer is gradually humming to life in the background.

Pausing before reaching the booth, I take my phone out once more and find his name. His old Samsung begins to vibrate at the side of his desk and in disbelief I watch him glance over, see my name flashing on the screen and swipe right to end the call.

Deep breath.

I rap on the side of his booth and he swings around on his chair, startled, knocking a tacky plastic bobble headed Labrador to the floor with his elbow. “I see your phone works,” I snarl, “That report? I need it by ten.”

“Yeah, I’ve got it right here.” While I tut impatiently he meekly shuffles through the mess of papers on his desk. The walls of his booth are littered with sports memorabilia and photographs of a headband-wearing athletic youth, vaguely recognisable as a younger Tom in his glory days. One depicts him proudly holding a medal in one hand and a racquet in the other. It reminds me of Tom when he first joined the company: squash obsessed, cocky, arrogant...attractive. We actually started around the same time: for him this was only supposed to be a temporary job, he was going to make it as a professional squash player and everyone knew about it. But that attitude gradually faded to

bitterness when it didn't work out and resentment towards me when I began to climb up the ranks. Now in his mid-thirties, going nowhere in the same job and single, his disappointment with his life is almost palpable.

He thinks for a second then reaches down to a sports bag under the desk and pulls out a slightly battered A4 envelope, picking up the plastic dog on his way back up. The tacky plastic letters spell 'Dougal'. He hands the envelope to me.

"What the fuck is this?" I splutter snatching it off him and making the dents worse.

"Sorry, I read it over on my way to the gym." He didn't sound sorry; he sounded bored. I flick through the pages; it's clumsy and half-hearted. "Christ Tom what's the matter with you?" He scowls back, like a child being scolded. I want to hit him, make him stop being so pathetic. He's a shadow of the man he used to be, the man who once thought he could have the world on a plate, the man I once thought I loved. I'm beginning to walk away when I notice a pink and black flyer stuck to the sole of my newly acquired red patent heels. Scowling at his tardiness, I have to awkwardly bend and twist to retrieve it, (why did I buy this skirt so fucking tight?) and I'm about to crumple it up and throw it away when I'm struck by the swirling font. "Where lonely hearts find their perfect match" it reads. With a sinking feeling in my stomach I realise that this was the same speed dating event I had planned to attend that Friday night. Tom's attention has turned to the now functioning computer screen and he hasn't noticed. Placing it back on his desk, I quietly slip away.

Ross the Boss

Gareth Hopkins

Ross rhymes with boss. Yes. Ross has to be the boss then. He's funny and we all listen to his stories. He makes up good games too. His house has lots of toys in it. The best ones. Yeah, Ross is the boss of our gang. Our gang is much better than Duncan's gang. We have a lot more people and our games are better too. Duncan only has two other people in his gang and his name doesn't even rhyme with boss! I like Jamie but I can't be friends with him because he is something called The Enemy. Yeah... Ross's gang is the place to be. Even the name is cool - The Bunnyhoppers. I couldn't have thought of a cooler name. It was Ross's idea for that and the special march we do. Ten of us rule the playground, just as long as we don't go over the yellow lines! Mrs. Welsh told us we weren't allowed to do that. That's where the big boys and girls play. They don't come near us though. Must be scared or something. We have Ross to be the boss and tell us what game we will play next. Races - that's a good game. Ashley is the best at races - he is so fast. Ross isn't very fast though... I wonder why not? I won't say anything though - Ross is the boss.

Familiar Voices

Fong Zheng

Mother

Would it help our daughter if I cried instead?
No right?
Life has been kind to me, lah –
I've got you, and Ah Ling,
what more can I ask, leh?
So please, don't cry for me now.
They said that love is like a fine thread –
it's only noticed when it's ripped apart.
This cancer will slowly kill me, lah,
but it has also made me see
what's most important in my life.
With so little time now – I know
that every moment counts for our family, lor.
Like you always said,
love goes on, and never goes away, right?

Daughter

Daddy, will Jesus take care of Mommy in Heaven?
Pastor told me that Heaven is beautiful –
that Jesus will give ... peace and healing –
and Mommy won't have tummy aches in Heaven.
Isn't that good for Mommy?
Mommy is always tired these days –
at least Mommy won't be tired anymore
when Mommy goes to Heaven.
We can still talk to Mommy, right?
Jesus talks to me when I pray –
I'm sure He will let us talk to Mommy, too.
Right, Daddy?

The Mother in the poem 'Familiar Voices' is speaking in Manglish, a common dialect (or in a more appropriate manner, a creole) that is used on an everyday basis in Malaysia. It is basically a mixture of English with some aspects of Mandarin, Malay, Tamil and various other languages, representing the rich diversity of races in Malaysia. In this poem, I've included certain suffixes that are commonly used in Malaysia, such as:

Lah – It is to provide an emphasis on a statement in a positive manner. If the statement is a negative one to begin with, it serves to 'lighten' the negativity of the statement. E.g. 'I don't think I want it, lah' or 'No matter what happens, I'll be with you, lah'.

Leh – It is to provide a sense of confusion or insecurity to a questioning statement or when a person is not totally confident of their statement. E.g. 'I'm not very sure, leh' or 'I don't think that's the correct answer, leh'.

Lor – It is similar to 'lah' and it is used interchangeable in most scenario, but with a lighter emphasis and a weaker tone – sometimes bordering a lack of sureness of their words or decisions. E.g. 'I don't want things to be like that, lor' or 'Whatever, lor'.

Another common aspect of Manglish is the shortening of a sentence to two words, in this case 'No right?' is used, which means 'I don't think so, am I right?'. Some other examples are 'where got', 'see how' and 'also can'. These phrases are commonly used only with people who are comfortable with each other (e.g. families and friends) and never in formal settings.

Pure Rotten

Joe Cooney

The patter in here is pure rotten man. Nivir changes like. Eywis talking aboot the weather and that, the same conversations day eftir day – Christ, half ay them nivir even go outside any mair other than fir a fag. A couple ay them are sat around the coffee table ogling some wee lassie oan page three ae The Sun. Clarty bastarts. As if they've seen a real wummin in years like? Auld Tam is analysing the Racing Post, deciding which nag he's gonnae stick a massive ten pence oan, when he goes oan his daily pilgrimage tae Hills. Brutal likes.

A repeat ay the darts is oan the telly – the shannest excuse ay a sport kent tae man. Playing it doon the battle cruiser wi yer pals is fair enough ken? But thousands ay radges turning up tae watch it in the flesh. Ah just dinnae get it. Mibbe that's oan account ay me being aw maladjusted and that, but oan this particular occasion ah definitely believe that Jason Stanton Gibson is maist certainly in the right likes. Darts oan the telly is a creation fae one ay the particularly crap circles ay hell, nae doubt aboot it. The daffies in here pure lap it up though, which in fairness doesnae really surprise me one iota.

Ah mind when ah first 'moved in' here, so tae speak. Got gi'en the grand tour, shown how the gaff works. They took great pride in showing eez the telly in the middle ay the communal area; emphasizing the fact it wiz a flatcreen. Ah mean, wis ah supposed tae be impressed wi it? It's like when the bams at the Mail or the Express or that start taking a pure benny aboot how soft the jails are nooadays – there's eywis a mention ae the "luxurious" conditions, how the punters have flatscreen tellys and that. Fucksakes, you huvnae been able tae buy the auld bulky yins fir the best part ay a decade ken? Christ almighty.

Apologies fir ma wee rant there, but ma therapist Clare says its better fir eez to express ma feelings and that as they crop up. Says ah ought tae be mair mindful like, ken, kindae live in the moment? Isnae the worst idea admittedly, but it's aw a bit too limp-wristed fir me. Still, she's sound enough, which makes aw the difference. Unlike ma psychiatrist, Dr Chalmers. Total doss cunt. The gadge is so dismissive, ken? Thinks cause he's haud the private education, and has aw the letters eftir his name, that oan some level he's superior to eez? Pish! Saw him aboot a week ago, total farce.

"So doc, what do think will make me better?" ah says

"What do you think would make you better, Jason?"

"Getting out of here I would say. How long do you think it'll be until I'm well enough to leave?"

"How long do you think it'll be until you're well enough?"

Ad infinitum, ken? Evading every single question ah ask, eywis wanting tae talk aboot ma maw and da and what it wis like when I wis a bairn. Ah mind seeing a quote one time saying that Freud had set psychiatry back aboot a hunner year; looks like naebody decided tae inform auld Chalmers. Ah ken exactly what mah problem is, without needing any psychoanalysis pish; ah jist cannae hack modern life. The baw has burst and ah dinnae want tae play any mair. Why should ah?

Anyways, ah've been here for seven months now, despite my protests tae the contrary. Ah amnae really comfortable wi the notion ay folk being held against their will jist cause they're unwell. You couldnae jist cut open some gadge wi a hert problem wi'oot his permission like, so ah dinnae see how it's fair tae essentially lock eez up, fir ma 'own good'. In fairness, it widnae be unreasonable tae say ah'm a wee bit

biased in ma opinion, ah guess. Ah wid dispute how 'unwell' ah am though. Ah felt pure magic last week, haud this kindae pins and needles feeling doon my spine that ah get when ah'm excited, lasted fir days. Felt barry, like ah wis indestructible, ken? At one point ah wis convinced that if ah screwed the nut, ah cid become the prime minister likes. Or someone like that at least. Didnae last fir that long unfortunately, but ah enjoyed it at the time. That's a kindae mindfulness ah guess. Mibbe ah am progressing? Been miserable fir the last few days though.

There's a hefty queue emanating fae the nurses' station, so ah figure ah might as well go tae my dorm tae get ready fir going oot. Fortunately, the only gadge in is young Bryan, thank fuck - fir a Broomhouse laddie and a schizophrenic, he really isnae that bad.

"Awright, Jase, how's it going big man?"

"No too bad pal, how's your morning been?"

"The usual eh? Had my depot injection this morning. Pain in the arse, eh? Get it, pain in the arse?! Cos they, eh, inject it on your, eh..."

"Aye, I got it the first time bud! Ye dinnae have any fags oan ye by any chance likes?"

"Sorry, Jase, aw oot eh? Where you off tae, gettin' aw tarted up like that?"

"Nae bother amigo. Got an afternoon pass, heading back tae Costa del Pilton fir a bit, see the mates an that. Better split the now anyways, see you later on aye?"

"Sound big man, later on..."

Bryan haud moved intae Forth ward a couple ay days before eez, so we eywis tried tae look oot fir each other. While ah'm thinking aboot it, why is it they eywis name psych wards eftir rivers and mountains and that? Aw a bit euphemistic if ye ask me likes. Ah'd rather they called a spade a spade, and were a bit mair realistic likes; 'Schizo Bampots ward', 'Senile Auld Cunts centre', 'Dodgy- Noncey unit' and aw that. It'd be harsh, but at least it'd be honest. Forth ward isnae the worst ah guess, it jist seems to be where they stick folk who they dinnae have a clue how tae deal wi. The first couple ay weeks wir shan like; getting observed every half hour by some fascist nurse oan account ay the 'incident' that precipitated ma admission. Ah dinnae think ah've ever felt as low as those first few days; made tae feel so small, almost dehumanised ken?

Ah've made a pretty successful attempt at trying tae forget aboot what happened the night before ah wis taken here. It aw seems pretty vague now, almost like it didnae happen - some kind ay fucked-up dream. Ah kin see how everything wis leading taewards it though. Ah've came tae the conclusion that ah cannae deal wi compromise. It's probably a normal part ay growing up, becoming an adult and that; realising that mibbe everything ye haud planned fir yerself might jist no happen. Gutting likes, but maist people come tae terms wi it; well, ah think they do anyways. Ah cannae, ah dinnae want tae. Ah'm no even sure what it is that ah want tae be. Eywis jist wanted to be something mair than a radge fae Granton. When ah wis at school, ah wis well intae my running - Scottish under eighteen champ at five thousand metres and the steeplechase in the same year. Every time ah won, ah felt amazing ken? Like it meant ah wis worthwhile as a person likes. Started dreaming that ah wis gonnae win the Olympics fir a while! Of course, it didnae quite work oot that way. Since then ah've tried tae find another way tae be, ah dunno, special ah suppose... playing in bands, trying tae paint, but it nirv works. Now I'm definitely just a radge fae Granton; except that ah've also been sectioned.

Since it dawned on eez that mibbe ah'm just normal, ah've became increasingly enamoured wi aw manner ay vices; drinking, drugs, shagging, fighting - aw the usual suspects. It beats having tae live that comprised life likes; why choose that when you can have oblivion instead? Obviously, since ah've been in here, the staff have ensured that ah've been living the virtuous life. They say my need tae be special is aw part ay my condition; ken, delusions of grandeur and aw that? Ah'm no so convinced. Heavy dosages ay medication and electroconvulsive therapy dae tend to drive the feelings away somewhat however.

Ah see that the queue has subsided, so head over tae get myself signed oot. Ye nivir really think what it maist be like tae lose your liberty until it happens tae yae like. It's like being a bairn aw over again – hauving tae ask permission tae dae just aboot anything. Mary is the nurse oan signing duty, which is a result. Fir an aulder burd she's great craic likes. There's nothing aboot music that she disnae ken; even saw Bob Marley at Crystal Palace back in the day. How cool is that likes? Ye kin tell she's secretly a bit ay a radge. Definitely loves the bevvies, has a pure bright red whisky nose.

“Could ye sign eez oot please Mary my darling?”

“Nae bother son. Where you off to?”

“Just going tae visit a couple ay my pals for a wee bit, get oot ay this place for a bit ken?”

“Dinnae blame you. You take care of yourself now. Don't do anything I wouldn't!”

“Ah doubt ah'd even be capable ay doing the stuff you widnae, ya auld mentalist! Cheerio the the noo!”

Leaving the hospital, ah stroll past the wee WRVS shop, quickly scanning through the front pages ay the magazines. There's a braw photae fae the Hubble telescope oan one ay the covers. Ah can nivir quite get my heid around the nature ay space and time and that. How cid something be infinite? What wis before the start ay time? Cos it cidnae be nothing, surely? A wave ay nausea passes through ma body. Why wid ye want tae live forever? The thought makes eez terrified. Ma legs feel like they're aboot tae gie way and ah feel like ah need tae boke. But, eh, but but but. STOP. BREATHE. Be in the moment. Ah slouch against the wall, trying tae regain my bearings.

It takes eez a wee while but some sense ay normality starts tae return. Ah manage tae leave the building and emerge beside the therapeutic garden; one ay the few signs ay life amongst this dead monochrome jungle. Ah still dinnae feel quite wi it – it's as if ma body is moving independently ay ma brain like; kindae as if I'm floating through a dream. Cid it be a dream? Ye widnae really ken wid ye? Too much man. Too much.

Within a couple ay minutes ah make it tae Morningside Road. Ah've eywis found it funny how there's a hospital full ay radges and bampots a few hundred yards away fae the epicentre of middle class Edinburgh. Ah wonder what aw the local punters make ay it like. Probably no much in aw honesty, wi us nestled away behind the artisanal bakeries and boutique charity shops, maist Morningsiders probably only ever encounter Royal Ed patients at the bus stop ootside yon posh supermarket.

Some bus stop it is anaw though. Full ay roasters. Ah recognise a few folk ah've seen around the hospital - Stevie and John fae next door on Clyde ward, a tidy wee eating disorder burd, one ay the old dementia gadgies oot wi his daughter. It disnae take long fir the number sixteen tae arrive. There's a brief altercation wi the driver as he informs eez that the single fare is now a pound fifty, a fact ah'm unaware ay, having no been subjected tae the 'delights' ay Lothian Buses ever since ah wis admitted. Still, the boy's only daeing his job ken? Nae harm done.

The number sixteen is a funny one like. The surroundings seem tae get increasingly less salubrious as the journey goes on. A couple ay minutes eftir Morningside the bus passes through Bruntsfield; some barry hoooses there, looking over the links like. Ah wonder what life is like fir them? Dae they have the same kindae problems as the rest ay us? Ah'd like tae think they dae; ah widnae have thought that mair money and hauving nice things makes yae immune tae life's stresses. Christ, some ay thum are probably as bad as me like!

The bus winds its way through the toon and heads doon Leith. Ah can see the stadium as we drive along Easter Road, or as the auld man calls it, the 'holy ground'. Ma middle name is Stanton, in tribute tae his aw-time hero Pat, the mercurial Hibernian midfield legend. Tae be honest, ah've nivir been aw that bothered aboot fitba. Wis eywis jist focussed on the running like. He wis nivir impressed by it though, eywis trying tae get eez tae play fitba instead. Jist no ma scene. What can ye dae likes?

It's no long til ah'm on the home stretch, along West Granton Road. It couldnae be any mair different

tae Morningside likes; wi the scrappies tae my right, and aw the decrepit hooses oan the left. The folk in the street look different anaw. No even jist in the way they dress and that, its oan a deeper level. They look broken likes; as if life has beaten them. That's what ah wanted tae escape like. Nae dreams coming true in West Granton. Nae miracles in Drylaw. Nae nothing. Being as realistic as ah can, ah figure it's probably easiest just tae hauv nae expectations; nae dreams like. Then at least they cannae haunt ye when they dinnae work oot. Reminds eez ay the Springsteen song, The Promised Land. Now ah do have a bit ay a gripe wi The Boss; ah dinnae buy the working man schtick he still comes oot wi, ken, being a multi-millionaire and aw that? But he has it spot-on in that song likes:

Blow away the dreams that tear you apart.

Blow away the dreams that break your heart.

Blow away the lies that leave you nothing but lost and broken-hearted

He kent the score then. Ah still cannae let go though. There must be mair than this fir eez surely? Ah finally jump off the bus as it stops ootside Javit's; still maintaining its status as North Edinburgh's finest purveyor ay deep fried goods. It's only a couple ay minutes away fae big Brogan's flat. Ah've kent him since we wir at Craigroyston thegithir. We wir nivir in the same classes really; ah wis usually in the top set fir maist things; he wis tae much ay a doss fir that kindae thing. He wis properly radge back in the day like; a bammer at the best ay times, and a genuinely scary cunt the rest ay the time. He's jist back fae a wee stay at Her Maj's pleasure at Saughton fir leathering some laddie ootside the Gunner. As ah say, a total radgeworks; but he's a pal.

Climbing up the stairs tae Brogz's crib, ah feel a wee bit ay trepidation. Ah've no really seen any ay the boys since ah've been in the hospital; ah dinnae really ken what they'll make ay it aw like. The heavy black doors look worse than ever, littered wi boot marks – inevitable consequences ay whatever mischief the big man haud been getting up tae. Ah knock a couple ay times and wait until the radge opens up.

“Awright McMurphy! What's the story? How's The Chief? And Nurse Ratched?”

Ah kin tell this is gonnae be a crap eftirnoon.

“Funny cunt. How wis the jail? Have fun in the showers ya buffy?”

“Very gid, American Psycho. Aye wis barry likes. Wis the top boy in nae time. Young Mental Pilton, eywis on top, running amok, nivir stop!”

“Dafty! It's been a while since the YMP days ay no?!”

“Ken, wild likes. Gid tae see you oot and aboot though Gibbo. How long ye been in the asylum fir now? You still radio rental?”

“Ah've been in the hospital fir seven months now. Probably a bit better now though, thanks fir asking. How's the auld 'hood?”

“Full ay fucking darkies ay?”

Charmer. Ah cannae be fucked when he starts aw the racist pish. But ah cannae be fucked arguing wi him either. Ah settle for a grunt in response. Chipsy and Gary are oot their tits in the corner ay the flat, skagged tae fuck. Ah feel a slight twinge ay jealousy. Feels like an age since ah've been in a state like that. Ah try and find something tae take ma mind off it.

There's a barry view ay the Forth oot the living room windae. Fife looks almost glamorous oan the other side ay that glimmering expanse. Ah mind ay going oan trips tae Burntisland when I wis a bairn; happier times. Couldnae be mair different than the scene in front of eez. Brogz emerges fae his kitchen wi his works. Temptation.

“Fancy a shot then Mister Gibson? Fir old times sakes like?”

“Eh, I'm no sure likes. Been off the gear since ah've been in the hospital ken?”

“Ach, I dinnae want tae hear any ay that pish. Ah'm cooking it up.”

“Well....”

Ah ken I shouldnae. But what I wouldnae gee tae make it aw go away, even fir a wee bit. Nae hospital, nae illness, nae shan schemes, nae racist badge pals, nae dreams. Nothing. Live in the moment.

“Go on then....”

Lost Voices

Fong Zheng

Those eyes – I know them.
Buried deep, and though he screams, no one,
no one can hear the pain that echoes
in the chambers of his lonely, aching heart.

*The gulf is but an illusion –
I still see her smiling on a new coast,
its past cleansed by the waves of time.
But his eyes, they speak a language only we can understand.*

Lonely on my island – stirred, only by waters
that threaten to drown me. I brace myself, waiting,
only to hear his voice calling next to me.

*An earnest smile, a gentle prod – all it takes.
The walls crumbled; two souls, a bond, one promise.
I thought I could never forget her, but with him, I can.*

A trust never imagined. We crossed the sea – reaching
the shore that we only dare dream about, every silent night.

*We've made it – the wind is kind, the sands are warm –
a new coast, uncharted; waiting to be explored.*

He sees a new horizon, but I've set my anchor, 'Would you stay here with me?'

With the World just ahead of me, 'Will I hold, or let go, his hands?'

Off Your 'Pedestool'

Jack Chalmers

Margaret peered over the top of the Daily Record to glance at the clock. 9:17am. Rolling her eyes, she closed the paper and placed it with the others that were piled up on the table in front of her. Then she tidied the pile, discretely of course – just so it wasn't obvious to the others around her that she was cleaning up after them. 9:18 a.m. This is rather ridiculous, she thought to herself. Dr Preston never once kept her waiting. She let her eyes wander around the room, and noticed the child across the table was getting restless. The young boy, about five or six, squirmed and winced in his mother's arms as she fumbled desperately to control him. His cough was raspy and a lone drip dangled from the end of his

nose. Margaret sighed, hoping she wouldn't catch whatever illness was plaguing the boy.

'Mrs Strain,' the doctor called.

'Yes, thank you.' As she stood, she glanced once more at the clock – 9:19am. Margaret hoped for a justification for her four-minute delay from the new doctor. She made her way from the waiting area and, on approach, swiftly eyed the man from top-to-toe. He was tall with brown eyes and dark hair combed neatly to the side. A handsome man, probably in his late thirties Margaret thought, wearing a navy blue tie tucked between the buttons of a blue, chequered shirt. Margaret also noticed his cream trousers were well pressed and his shoes gleamed with fresh polish.

'This way please.'

The doctor about-turned and strode down the corridor, leading Margaret to his consultation room. He ushered her through the door and she sat to the right of his desk, which was bare apart from a computer and a pot of pens. The rest of the room was equally basic, but Margaret appreciated its cleanliness.

'Pleased to meet you, Mrs Strain,' he started, dropping down into his office chair. 'As I'm sure you're aware by now, I'm Dr Fleming. I moved here following Dr Preston's retirement.' His voice was sonorous. Averting his eyes to the computer screen and taking hold of the mouse, he continued. 'So what's brought you to us today?'

No apology for the wait then, Margaret remarked to herself. Dismissing the thought, she answered Dr Fleming's question: 'Well to be quite honest doctor, I have my dear husband to thank for forcing me here today.' Dr Fleming raised a wry smile. 'You see, I feel perfectly healthy and, well, very rarely have I fallen ill in the past. But George, my husband, was adamant that I at least came in for a chat. Just to make sure . . . things were okay. I mean things are okay, but . . . just to be sure?' Margaret rambled. Her fingers were clamped tightly around her handbag and her gaze meandered around the room. Dr Fleming sensed her unease.

'Right, so what sort of *things* are you referring to, Mrs Strain?'

Margaret cleared her throat.

'Well, I mean, I'm eating fine – there's been no changes there. Eh, my appetite is as good as ever.' She paused as Dr Fleming leaned in and nodded, prompting. 'But well, I seem to be em . . . experiencing changes in my, well . . . bowel habits.' Margaret's gaze fell to her feet as she folded some stray hairs behind her ear.

'So in what ways have your poos changed?' Dr Fleming interjected.

Margaret's eyes darted back up to his but they had retreated to the computer screen. Good God, she thought. Dr Preston never spoke to her so bluntly. Taken aback by his question and mildly irritated by his insensitivity, Margaret pronounced, 'Well, on and off for the past month or so, I have had alternating diarrhoea and constipation.' Almost shocked at her own frankness, she glared expectantly at the doctor, whose eyes were still fixed on the monitor.

'I see. Anything else?'

Anything else? Margaret was left flustered and shaken by Dr Fleming's uncaring dismissiveness. It was then she made her intention to end the appointment as quickly as possible.

'Other than a spot of blood – no, nothing else.'

Dr Fleming's eyes left the screen as he finally turned to Margaret. 'Blood in your poos, Mrs Strain?'

She winced slightly. 'Yes . . . blood in my stool.'

'How much blood are you passing?'

'Enough to notice,' Margaret sneered.

Aware of his patient's curt response, Dr Fleming sighed before continuing. 'Okay, so how often does this appear?'

'Oh . . . I can't be certain, but it's only been in the past week that I've had it.' Margaret, remaining displeased with Dr Fleming's discourse, noticed his sudden interest. He leaned in further.

'And have you had any changes in your weight recently that you didn't plan?'

'Now that you say it,' Margaret contemplated, 'I have lost about a stone over the past number of months. But as I mentioned my appetite has been fine.'

'I see... okay.' And with that, Dr Fleming averted his attention back to the computer. Margaret waited, the silence broken only by typing and clicking. After about a quarter minute, anxiety had superseded her anger, and the young doctor finally stopped and turned back to Margaret. 'Okay Mrs Strain, I'm arranging a hospital referral for you. I know you said you feel you're in good health, but we need to get to the bottom of what's going on with your bowels.'

'Why, what do you think could be going on?' Margaret enquired apprehensively.

'Well, at this stage, it's hard for me to say,' Dr Fleming answered. 'However, the symptoms that you have described are fairly common, and potentially serious. At the end of the day, we need to exclude the presence of cancer.'

Margaret froze. Her fingers loosened from her handbag and began to tremble.

'Cancer,' she murmured to herself. Dr Fleming continued to speak, but Margaret didn't listen. His words were muffled and distant. 'I feel fine though,' she interrupted. 'I feel fine. Yesterday I was out shopping with George and pottering in the garden, and tomorrow I'm going to hospital to be told I have cancer?' Her face turned ashen white as her eyes welled with tears. 'And what do I tell George? He'll be so distraught. How do I tell him? I thought we had years left together. How long do I ha -'

'Please!' Dr Fleming jumped in, his face beet red with embarrassment. Margaret stopped and drew a pack of hankies from her handbag, her gaze fixed to the floor. Dr Fleming took a moment's pause before resuming with trepidation. 'I must apologise Mrs Strain, I didn't mean for you to get so upset. I am not saying that you have cancer; I can't possibly know that just from speaking with you. There are many other possible reasons for your symptoms and I was merely highlighting one of them.'

Margaret wiped the tears from her face as her hands quivered with shock.

'It was wrong of me to jump to that so suddenly. I'm sorry. I've not been myself today. I have so much work to do and I'm trying to settle in to the new practice here and I'm aware of Dr Preston's excellent reputation and.... I'm just...' Dr Fleming grew silent as he sunk back into his chair. After about half a minute of silence, Margaret finally summoned the courage to speak.

"So, I don't have cancer?" she asked.

"It is a possibility. However, most probably, you don't. I can't give you a straight answer to your question, Mrs Strain, but what I can tell you is that I shouldn't have spoken to you like that."

Margaret sniffed and cleared her throat. 'It's all right Dr Fleming; you were just trying to do your job. And in hindsight,' she added, 'I shouldn't have spoken to you like that either.' Dr Fleming raised a soft smile and nodded in appreciation. As he did so, Margaret lifted her head, and for the first time in the entire consultation, their eyes met each other's.

One long and tiring week passed before Margaret was finally given the all clear from the hospital. No cancer. It transpired that diverticulosis was the culprit behind her bowel issues. And the weight loss? Probably a result of longstanding diarrhoea, according to the consultant. She was reassured that cancer was very unlikely given her health and history, and that she remained well otherwise. However, despite Margaret's obvious relief over the outcome, and continuing to live as she and George always had, things were different from then on. She laughed more with her grandchildren. The home-grown fruit out in the garden tasted sweeter than before. Holding George's hand became a gift more precious than ever. And by the time she returned to Dr Fleming in five years with a small, round lump in her left breast, she was ready to accept and face the hard and uncertain road ahead of her.

Daylight Rubbery

Ming Hui Elizabeth Fong

“Give me your rubber.”
“But mummy says—”
“Give me your rubber.”
“I’ll tell mummy.”
“Cry baby.”
“Give—”
“No!”
“Just hand over the rubber and I won’t tell mummy you took her pen that day.”
“But I put it back! She said we could use it whenever we wanted to.”
“Liar. She got mad when she found out it was gone. But I was nice enough not to tell her you took it.”
“R-really? Di... did she? She... she didn’t tell me anything!”
“Well, I’m older than you so obviously she tells me more things than you. But you wouldn’t know, would you, mei?”
“Gor, please? Don’t tell mummy I took her pen?”
“Well, I won’t if you don’t want me to—”
“Gor you’re the best—”
“Only if you hand me your rubber.”
“I... I—”
“I’m telling mummy then.”
“No! Okay, here you go. But promise me you won’t break anymore of my rubbers? You know they’re so precious—”
“Okay, okay – I know. But don’t tell mummy about this – that’s not what big girls do. Big girls know how to keep things to themselves. Are you a big girl?”
“Y-yes.”
“Good. Right I’m off to meet the other boys. It’s Country Eraser Game Night. Thanks for your rubber – I’ll let you know if we win.”
“But you promised—”
“Yeah, whatever. Bye mei, be good.”
Door shuts and he’s gone.

Note: mei – chinese for younger sister; gor – Chinese for older brother

Hello Paul

Jasmine Kennedy

Paul closes his eyes, letting it course through his system, taking him higher and higher. Breathing deeply, he stretches, the endorphins still flooding his mind with energy. This is the best feeling and one he ensures he achieves every morning, at the same time and the same place. He needs this.

He showers and the steam surrounds him, forming a light haze through which his thoughts cut sharply. He thinks about today, the little details which he has still to work out; the meeting, the Skype call to the Americans ... oh and he needs to call his niece today as well. He continues to wash, rinsing off the sweat and the soap, barely glancing at his skin where scars from another life are faintly visible. You wouldn’t find them unless you knew his story.

Shaking his head and dispelling the last drops of water, he dresses as the dance beats of the gym pound from the next room. He would hear them again tomorrow at seven. What was the time? Eight o'clock - right then, he had better get going if he wanted to meet Danny for breakfast before that meeting. A quick look in the mirror, Paul runs a comb through his hair and half smiles to himself. He's not one to pose in the mirror, but even he can see the change in the reflection. The last few years have not aged him, if anything he looks younger. His face no longer looks drawn and gaunt, his limbs thin and weak. Paul shakes himself from his reverie to see the changing room door open.

'Hey mate, how's it going?' yawns a tired voice. Paul spins around to see Greg, a fellow early morning regular.

'Not bad pal, just away to head off actually,' Paul says, swinging his bag over his shoulder, 'Got a meeting, but I'll catch you tomorrow.'

'You should take some time off, you've got a meeting every other day I see you,' Greg jokes as he pulls on his trainers.

'No rest for the wicked' says Paul, smiling as he heads outside. If only Greg knew why he had a meeting every day. He often debated telling the guys at the gym about his past, but he enjoyed the company they gave without the stares and awkward questions that would surely come.

He sets off through the streets on the way to breakfast, headphones on, passing newsagents, hairdressers and banks. Crossing the road just before the pharmacy, he narrowly avoids colliding with a man who stumbles on the kerb. He watches as the man hurries into the pharmacy, joining a queue of bedraggled men and women waiting for their medication. Forcibly wrenching his gaze from the man, he continues and enters the cafe. Spotting Danny in a booth near the window, he hurries over. Danny had been struggling lately and even though he might to be late for the meeting, he had made a promise that whenever Danny needed his support he would be there.

'Coffee, tea?' asks the waitress, smiling at them both.

'A black coffee for me, please,' says Danny.

'And for yourself?' she enquires, looking at Paul.

'Just water please,' Paul says, 'no caffeine for me.' He didn't like any additives or even caffeine in his food. Health was of the utmost importance and every component was meticulously analysed, to ensure he knew exactly what he was taking into his body. His meeting would start in half an hour but he needed to ensure that Danny was going to be all right, that his mental state was strong enough to leave him alone.

'Danny ... you will call won't you? If you start having those thoughts again? I've been there, so you shouldn't go through this alone.'

'Yeah, I'll call if I need you, thanks for the coffee and ... and everything, it's great to have someone that understands'.

'It's no problem, that's why I'm here,' Paul claps Danny on the shoulder and leaves the cafe.

Paul was pleased - honoured even - that Danny wanted him to be the person that he could trust. But that breakfast had taken longer than expected, and thinking about the queue outside the pharmacy he quickens his pace. He didn't want to be late for the meeting. Hurrying inside and taking a seat, he notes the new faces around the room and wonders what their stories are. However, today it is his turn to contribute. Taking a breath and pausing slightly, he says the words that he won't let define him.

'My name is Paul and I'm a recovering addict.'

'Hello Paul,' they chorus.

Ice Cream and Suitcases

Chloe Jayne Sui-Bee Yeap

Mother

How do you tell a nine year old
that her auntie Bonnie has been murdered?
The life we built is like cracked ice about to give way.
Ever since the invasion of Iraq, our country has
become even more unstable.
The colour of our skin has become
a target on our backs.
But these are not my daughter's concerns.
She came skipping up the driveway, so excited
to go to Terabish, the new ice cream parlour.
I wanted to take a picture, immortalising
that moment; joyful and innocent,
before I shattered it with the truth of why
we could no longer go.
I wanted her to believe that the world
is still beautiful and bright.
I told her a lie -
said it was an accident.
Did I do wrong?
Maybe. I'm trying my best.

Daughter

We didn't go for ice cream.
Mommy's scared.
She's packing the suitcases -
we might have to leave Lebanon.
She's scared. I know this is nothing new
but now it's worse. She scolds me, she won't let me play outside.
Or else she sits, staring into
nothing. She looks at me and doesn't know who I am.
It started when auntie Bonnie died.
She said it was an accident, but
nobody gets shot in the head by accident.
Is that why mommy's scared?
Is that why we have to leave?
God, can you talk to my mommy, please?
Tell her that everything is going to be all right,
that she doesn't have to be scared.
God looks after us,
He always looks after us.

Fairy Tale

Sophie Pitts

Once upon a time in a distant Northern kingdom, there lived a princess. Having spent her whole life trapped in a high rise block of flats, she gazed across the vast stretches of the Don with longing in her heart. She waited patiently for the day when she would be free to find her true love – her eighteenth birthday.

The night before her birthday, she saw a handsome young man riding a horse along the beachfront. His long, blonde hair waved in the gentle sea breezes, and his face had a look as if he was never far from smiling. She pushed open the window and called to him.

“O, good knight, please halt a while and help me idle away the hours until I am free,” she pleaded. “Fair maiden, so I shall, if you will but tell me how to enter your tower.”

“Alas, there is no entrance until tomorrow morning. On my eighteenth birthday, the door shall open, the lift shall work and I shall be free.”

“Then I shall stay, and whisper sweet nothings up to your ears until dawn.”

The knight and the princess spent the evening in this manner, and, after a time, fell deeply in love. The knight was enchanted by the princess, so fair and temperate, with a voice like the bird of morning. So deep was his feeling that the knight decided to go and fetch his royal father from the palace of Dyce, so that he could introduce him to the girl he wished to marry. The princess was sad to see the handsome knight leave, but reassured herself that he would return before dawn.

When he had not returned, she began to worry for his safety. She knew he would not abandon her, so true was their love. Her heart ailed at the thought of not seeing him, especially since she had heard rumours that if she did not find herself a husband by the end of her eighteenth birthday party, her parents would choose for her. This idea was too terrible, so she decided to go and find him. Using her new freedom and the confusion of the preparations for the great party that was planned, she took a horse from the stables and slipped away.

She rode up the Great Northern Road to find him, but saw no sign of him along the way. She began to despair of seeing him again, until she reached the Haudagain Roundabout. To her dismay, a huge troll had fallen asleep across the roundabout and none could get past. She was completely cut off from her knight.

The princess began to weep bitterly for her fate, until an old man on a hay cart asked her how she could cry so deeply. He listened with pity for her story of young love, cruelly parted. And then he had an idea.

“Ride to the New Library on St Machar Drive. In their special collections, there is a sword of fabled power. It is said that it has the power to vanquish any foe, and turn them to dust with one blow.” Without another word, the princess turned her horse and rode hard for the Library. She tied the horse outside Meston, and hurried inside to find the sword. A librarian showed her to the cabinet where the sword was on display, between a bust of Napoleon and a sketch for an early blueprint of the MRI machine, on the back of an old Tiki café napkin. Unfortunately, he explained that the sword could only be accessed by a man of unimaginable power – the rector. He had the only key to the cabinet, and was currently on holiday in Brighton.

The librarian left her to her tears, which began to flow again at the explanation of how hopeless her situation was. Thinking quickly, she grabbed a flaming torch from the wall, and used it to break open the cabinet. I don’t know, you can take the girl out of the multi-storey flat, but you can’t take the multi-storey out of the girl. Now armed with the legendary sword, she rode back to the roundabout with all the speed she could muster. She feared that she may be too late, and that she and her knight may never be together, as the day was drawing to a close. As she approached the roundabout, she drew the sword.

She steadied her arm and her heart, and bent her thoughts to her beloved prince. With one fell swoop she smote the mighty (if still sleeping) troll turning him into a large pile of fairy dust.

The townspeople cheered as they once again could move through the streets, to Tesco Bridge of Don. She looked across the roundabout and saw her knight, waiting valiantly on the other side, and it only took them 3 tries and 20 minutes to cross so that they were on the same side. The lovers were reunited, and to save money on parties, they had an eighteenth birthday/wedding party, after the ceremony in Kings College Chapel.

And they all lived happily ever after. Except the troll.

The 'Piano-ist'

Nicholas Png

"Casio."

I giggle as I run my fingers over the large white letters emblazoned on the side of the keyboard. Casio is a funny name, like Yoda. I wonder if he makes all the pianos in the world. He must be a busy man. The keys on the piano look funny. I wonder why they're arranged like that. Maybe it's because his name is funny. And how does he fit all those sounds into such a tiny box? Magic? Maybe he's just clever. "Clever, he is." I laugh because I sound like Yoda. I imagine Casio to be a little blue man. The lights on the piano are blue, which means the magic inside is blue. Casio has to be blue then.

I press the buttons to make the lights come on and the sound work, just like Daddy taught me. The box whirs to life and the screen blinks. I test a few keys. I wish I were as good a piano-ist as him.

"Piano-ist."

Violin. Violinist. Piano. Piano-ist. I look at the keys and the big bold letters. I bet Casio is a good piano-ist as well. He'd have to be good, otherwise he wouldn't be able to test the pianos he made. Wait, that doesn't make sense. I know. He's got a team of blue elves to test the pianos, like how Santa has his little helpers. I wonder if Casio knows Santa.

I hear the door open and Daddy walks in. He's wearing the T-shirt that smells like bubblegum. Bubblegum. Candyfloss and bubblegum come from the same thing since they smell alike, like how sunny-sides and omelettes both come from eggs. His tummy bounces up and down with each step. I look at mine, and then back at his. Grown-ups have big tummies. Daddy towers over me and I look up at him.

"You done practising, buddy?"

I shake my head. "Play it, Daddy."

He sits me on his lap and his fingers start to fly across the keys. I don't understand why he keeps asking me to play it when he does it so much better. I'd much rather listen to him than myself. Grown-ups are weird. I observe his hands, and compare them to mine. My hands are tiny.

"Your turn."

Sigh.

We go over the song slowly. The piano sounds horrible when I play it. I think it's a piano for grown-ups, that's why the keys look funny to me. I can't wait to grow up; maybe then I'll be able to play it better, because these funny keys will make sense.

Unfamiliar

Ming Hui Elizabeth Fong

“Sini, ikut mama.”

I feel my mother’s hand wrapped around mine as she tugs me along. My hand looks tiny in comparison to hers. The rush of traffic and noises from the engines of vehicles fill my ears as my nose takes in the smell of dirty air.

I hate how the air smells here. Mummy says the only place here with fresh air is the nearby desa, or village. I trail behind my mother as she guides me along. We move deftly, weaving skillfully in and out of people, cars, and motorbikes. I feel a million eyes on me. I catch sight of other children, staring; deep, jet black eyes starkly prominent against their dark, sun-bronzed skin.

One of them stretches out his palms and walks up to my mother suddenly.

“Bu, tolong bu.” His pleading expression shocks me. It’s a look I’ve never seen before.

I look to my mother to see what she will do. She simply walks on and brushes him aside firmly, but gently. Her grip tightens a little on my hand, and I find myself hurrying to catch up with her.

“Keep close to Mummy, oke?”

I nod, trying to make sense of the situation, and make a conscious effort to plaster myself closer to her.

“Look, Lisa. Look at this pretty pencil holder. Cantik, gak?”

I glance up to see my mother holding a red wooden pencil holder with the image of a sun. Someone has painted the sun a bright, bold yellow against the deep red. I gaze in wonder and I nod. It’s beautiful. Soon I hear her speaking to the old lady who, I think, is the owner of the wooden pushcart stall. I struggle to understand what they are saying, but the old lady turns to smile at me. My mother gives her some money, and she smiles in return, a yellow toothy smile, and hands her the pretty pencil holder in a small bag.

“Nah, Lisa this is for you.”

I happily take the bag from her and hold it in my hands, beaming.

“Let’s go and find Tim and Daddy, shall we? We can show them what we bought.” She shares a playfully secretive look and I grin back.

A man on a rickshaw led by horses lumbers by. My mother holds out her hand to stop him. Yes! We’re taking the becak. We get on and I settle down on the rusty metal seat. The rest of the world drowns in a sea of different colours as we whirl past, leaving the sights and the people behind in a shroud of dust.

Drip, Drip, Drip

Matt Arnold

Drip drip drip. I watch the rain drops slide meticulously down the window as I try to guess which one will reach the bottom first, and then immerse itself into the miniature stream running on to the grass. Once one race is finished, another begins and the excitement starts all over again. I look up at the grey, crestfallen sky and it's obvious that the rain is going to continue all day, maybe all year. I quickly turn my head as I hear the door open but it is only the postman; coming to most likely top up the paper recycling bin. As I turn my attention to the window again I catch my reflection, and look at the sorry person staring back at me. I can see the lines engrained on my face, the dark semi-circles beneath my eyes and the expression of someone desperate for more. I would be lying if I said I wasn't disappointed by where I've ended up in life, but I would be lying even more if I said that I deserve any better. Any friends I have are driven away by my inability to let anyone in, embarrassed by who I have become and too proud to ask for help.

Every day is the same; waking up alone, going to work, and then coming back to an uninspiring, dirty-plate-filled apartment. My job as a receptionist is not one I would have envisaged myself doing when I was younger. I always saw myself in the limelight of the world, maybe an actress or a singer, my name chanted religiously. I think back to school where I was happy, where I had friends and where things made sense. However school was where this all began, where my addiction for attention and pity was conceived, where I would say anything that would place me in the spotlight. But it did not take long before these lies severed any relationships I had, resulting in me being alone, once again.

Even now I can't face up to the truth when I see people. When I bump into acquaintances I engineer some terrible lie about what my life is. I immerse myself in this pretend world that I wish was real, a dream which I know will never come true. An unavoidable feeling of hatred pours through me anytime I see someone that I wish I could be, jealousy relentlessly forcing itself into my mind. I have tried to see someone, to get help, but there is nothing they can do; a disease which cannot be cured. The sound of a patient walking through the door reprieves me from these soul-wrenching thoughts and I greet them with a fabricated smile. The charade begins, once again.

Prickles

Alexandra Mather

“You alright, Al?”

My Dad asked as I tightly grasped my tiny fingers under his chin. I could feel the prickle of his weekend old stubble against my palms.

“You ken you’re choking me?”

I moved my hands to the top of his head, clutching clumps of his thick silver hair. My legs ached from hanging on for dear life. I took in the view all around – extremely smug that I had a better view than anyone else from the top of my Dad’s shoulders – yellow-flecked gorse and splashes of purple that stained the rolling hills as far as my eyes could see. I felt myself topple slightly and with that tugged even harder on my Dad’s hair. A chubby-cheeked girl with her hair plaited in pigtails hanging past her equally chubby neck. She tugged on my Dad’s shorts with her trotter-like hands, squealing to be picked up too. Safe to say she wasn’t the slightest of children, but my Dad hastily agreed to pick her up nevertheless – much to my disgust!

“Hold on tight, hen!”

As he bent forwards and the final word left my Dad’s weather-beaten lips the glistening tufts of silken hair slipped through my fingers like a hot knife through butter. My tiny legs could no longer withstand the weight of my rapidly toppling torso. As my hands were still searching for the familiar feeling of hair – it was my head that was looming closer and closer to the ground. However, it was in fact not the ground I was doomed to meet, but something slightly pricklier! I imagined this was what Alice in Wonderland felt like falling down the rabbit hole. There seemed to be a perfect child-shaped hole in this yellow-flowered porcupine that I would surely fit very snugly into. With my arms still trapped by my sides it must have seemed I was mimicking a penguin as I dove straight into the spiny shrubbery. The mesh-work of spines and velvet flowering buds somewhat softened the blow – protecting me from the inside web of the snake-like thickened branches. I felt a tight grasp around each ankle – my Dad come to rescue me from this thorny hell.

Over the prickly pain of a thousand needles piercing my skin through my cable-knit cardy I could hear his dulcet tones:

“You bloody numpty!”

Fergus

Alexandra Mather

I close my bedroom door so quickly behind me that I almost catch my fingers in the latch. I rest the back of my head on the wooden panels of my door...and...relax.

I let out the deepest of breaths and with that every muscle in my body seems to weaken. I’m suddenly aware that I have been holding in my breath and contracting every muscle from the moment I left this room this morning. It’s a lot harder than it looks holding everything in and holding back for an entire day. It’s as if the knot has come loose on an overfilled balloon. I feel safe in here – I can almost forget...almost. The door, the window, the walls – I’m sealed from the outside world.

I can see the mirror from where I'm standing, I don't want to look but I can't move. I feel as though my entire body weight has fallen to my feet anchoring them to the ground. I see the pencil marks to the left of the doorframe. Barely reaching five feet. My stomach feels as though it's twisting into a tightly wound knot.

"You're such a maggot, Ferg!" I can hear them.

A stabbing pain in the palm of my hands, red half-moon indents from my nails. I didn't even know my fists were clenched. I look down at my hands - my finger still in a splint. I wish I could go back to basketball. I like basketball - it actually makes me feel tall! I'm pretty good...but not the best...not perfect. It's all my Dad's fault. I'll never be tall. Why does he have to work there anyways? As if my life isn't hard enough. I hate him. Everyone knows I hate him - even him.

I look straight at my reflection - barely recognising the person looking back. "Bush baby eyes," they say. I never even noticed them before they mentioned it - now that's all I see. Eyes so huge they swamp my face - bulging out. I swear they grow by the minute. Surely that's not me, it can't be? They're right. I notice the hazy purple bruise on my forehead fading to a green colour at the edges, then my slightly bee stung top lip. I run my tongue over my top row of teeth and a sharp shard slices like glass. I just told my Mum I fell - not that I actually got beaten up by my 'friends' and slapped by a girl.

I hate her. I HATE her.

I don't hate her because she hit me; I hate her because she had the balls to stand up to a bully. I could never do that. They're right - I'm just a maggot.

Out

Jack Abbott

Days all rolled into one. He'd spent most of his time locked in his bare white room. He had no idea why he was there, or even how long he'd been there for. The monotony of each passing day meant that it was hard to judge whether it had been months or years. All he knew now was he'd get his pills in the morning and then some woman would try and talk to him after his simple lunch, usually just some lumpy soup and a stale sandwich; he'd get some more pills and go back to his box. She called herself a Dr Parker but he didn't know what her deal was. She never asked anything about his health all she wanted to know about was his childhood. He didn't trust her now. At first, however long ago that was, he had tried to answer her questions properly, but slowly he began to question her motives. Now he took great pride in the complexity of the lies he was able to spin for her. They had taken him prisoner and he would not give up anything to them. There were other prisoners there too but they couldn't be trusted. Many of them spoke to the so-called Doctors and would give away his secrets. A few weeks earlier, he had slipped up and told one of the snitches where he was from. He was a clever rat, got him to speak while he was still feeling woozy from his morning pill. He'd had to scare him so he'd started to hit him, the man had curled up in a ball on the cream-coloured floor. He couldn't stop hitting him; his anger at everything had built up. He kept lifting his hand up and driving it down as hard as he could. The pain in his hand with every stroke felt more satisfying. Blood stained both of their white robes and splattered over the pristine floor. It wasn't long before the men in uniforms came to save the rat. They dragged him away, his hand still plunging up and down on the rat. They took him to his room and tied him up in a new robe; they called it a jacket. He'd been forced to wear it ever since. His arms were constantly bound but recently they'd freed his legs, allowing him to walk. It still felt claustrophobic and it just angered him more. It was suffocating him; he had to get out of that place. He had been studying the movements of the guards and the routines of the interrogators. Today was the day. All he had to do was make sure he didn't take the pills they so desperately wanted to give him. He queued for his pills as he did every day but today he felt more aware. He looked around noting the

positions of the guards on the door. He knew they would move shortly after everyone had their pills and he would have a matter of minutes to make his move. The only danger was the other inmates. He knew they would tell someone soon so he would have to move quickly. 'Open your mouth,' said the lady in the hole in the wall. He obliged and as she put the pill in his mouth he closed it shut and quickly hid the pill under his tongue. He faked a gulp and opened his mouth as usual to show it had been swallowed. 'What an idiot,' he thought. Routine was the downfall of this place; the lady was obviously too bored to notice. Now he had to wait. Taking a seat in the communal room, away from everyone else, as he always did. He had a quick look around before spitting out the pill onto the floor and kicking it back under the sofa. He'd chosen that sofa carefully; it was out of sight of the pill lady in the booth and he could see the guard on the door so he'd know when he left for his coffee. He felt his heart beating faster and faster. The guard had to go soon. It was the same every day. Success, as the guard turned around to go he leapt up into action. The guard opened the door and headed through. Moving quickly he just managed to get his hand in the door to stop it closing behind him. Ducking beneath the tiny window in the door to stop being seen he waited until the thudding of the guard's boots became a faint noise in the distance. Cautiously he opened the door a little and slipped through into the hallway. The hallway outside was unfamiliar. Carpets and vibrant wallpaper replaced the cream vinyl floors and plain white walls. He moved lightly but swiftly down the hall trying to make as little noise as possible. He wound his way through what seemed like endless corridors. There were many doors like the one he had escaped through. How many people were in there and what did they want? No time for any of that though, he just had to get out. Eventually he saw what he needed. A little green sign above a door with the words FIRE EXIT written in big capital letters. This is it he thought. Taking a deep breath he pushed his strapped arms up against the metal bar and the door with a satisfying click the door swung open. Alarms went off. With sirens ringing in his ears he sprinted out the door and into the open. It was unusually dark for late morning because the sun had been completely obscured by the large black rain clouds that filled the sky. The rain was beating down on him but the cool drops felt refreshing as he ran towards the large iron gates. He was free. He ran on, out of the gates and into the village with the sirens disappearing into the background noise behind him. It was quiet and there was no one out and about in the town, perfect getaway weather for him. Running was awkward without his arms for balance but he kept on going down the street. Looking around he marvelled at all the bright lights of the shops and large grey stone buildings that he had only seen from a distance out the window of his little bland room. Taking a right off the main street he found himself running towards a small hill covered in grass, a park. Running out onto the grass the soft wet ground seemed to absorb his feet as he ran, draining his energy. He felt his breath grow heavier as he pushed himself to the top of the hill. He stopped, panting hard, and looked around. He could see for miles around. He'd done it; he'd escaped their clutches. He slumped down onto the park bench that looked out towards the countryside. Amazed at what he had just managed to achieve he smiled to himself. Looking upwards, he felt all the raindrops hitting him and he began to laugh at the sky.

An Old Man and his Shoes

David Romanowski

"Goodbye father, excellent service again," I said, as I always say, shaking the priest's hand enthusiastically.

"Thanks, Willie, look after yourself," is what he normally says back to me, I can't quite remember; to be honest it doesn't really matter. He's a brilliant priest and a great man and he's done a lot for our community. Sorry, I digress. The road outside the church was dimly lit by a couple of old streetlights, like a pair of fireflies, barely illuminating the ground around them. The snow was hard and made a loud crunch with each step. The night was cold and the sky was clear; any moisture in my breath instantly

became a thick, heavy haze in front of me. The walk home wasn't a long one, I'd done it so many times I could probably do it with my eyes shut, not that my eyes were very good tools anyway, especially in the dark. It seemed like each part of my body was slowly letting me down, one part at a time. It was my ears' turn this year; age is a relentless and cruel part of life. And so, I was walking alone on the glacial road when I heard heavy footsteps behind me. Turning, I saw a teenage boy stop in front of me. I'd never seen him before; he was tall and broad and was covering most of his face with what seemed like a rag. His hands were blue with cold and he was wearing no shoes. In his wake, he left large footprints in the snow. Shivering, the boy pulled out a small shiny knife. "Give me your phone and wallet, old man!" He had a deep, hoarse voice and a broad Northern accent.

"Okay, okay," I said handing him my wallet.

"Phone?" His teeth chattered so forcefully it was difficult to make out what he was saying.

"Sorry?"

"Phone?!"

"My dear boy, I'm seventy-three. You really think I own a mobile?" The boy took one last look at me, staring me up and down, and then started walking away. "My dear boy you've forgotten something. If you're going to be robbing people for the rest of the night you'll need my coat, and my shoes. It's the coldest night of the year." Watching me take my jacket and shoes off, the boy stared at me, stunned. "You look like you've seen a ghost, here take them," I said again, handing them over.

"What's happening? Why are you doing this?"

"If you're willing to risk your freedom over a few pounds, then you must truly be desperate. Take my jacket and shoes, you need them more than I do." The boy still stared at me, dumfounded. After a while he reluctantly took them. He swung the jacket over himself, and then knelt down to fasten the shoelaces. "Do the shoes fit ok?"

"Yeah," the boy said. In the dark I could make out the outline of a small smile creep across the boy's face. "Why are you doing this?"

"Weren't you taught as a kid to be nice to other people?"

"Well, yeah, but I didn't think people actually acted like that"

"Well, we do. I need one thing of you first though."

"Yeah, what? Your wallet?"

"No, son, I need you to give me the knife." Without hesitation the boy handed the knife over. "Thank you." He looked at me once more, puzzled and then ran off into the darkness. I continued my walk home in the snow-covered street in just my suit, with no shoes on.

Swinging in the Wind

David Romanowski

It was past twelve and light grey clouds covered the glaring midday sun. The morning had been beautiful, with no clouds and with birds singing on the fruit trees outside my house. Those birds always cheered me up. By noon, however, the day had turned slightly sourer. The wind had picked up and the birds had fallen silent, though it was still warm. Hearing fast footsteps and loud panting behind me I looked over my shoulder.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry, I got here as fast as I could," she said, hands on her knees, gasping for air. She was red in the cheeks and her forehead shone with sweat.

"I've only been here five minutes," I lied. "That church building's been keeping me entertained. I didn't know it was being taken down."

She smiled and, finally having caught her breath, sat on the swing beside me. "My dad said it's being demolished to make way for a newer church, apparently it was falling down anyway and apparently the

priest is a rich man.”

“I loved that church. We had our first holy communion in that church,” I said, as both of us sat on the swings, suspended in the air, pushing our feet against the ground, floating only slightly forwards and backwards. We both sat there in silence for a while watching the men tear down the church brick by brick. It was a handsome old church that sat opposite the river from where we were. The church used to have elegant stained glass windows and beautiful tapestries on the wall telling the stories of Jesus and all his adventures.

“The builders look like they’re having a fine old time, don’t they?”

“Yeah,” I replied.

“So what’s up? I didn’t just cut through Mrs. Allen’s garden and get chased by her annoying little dog all the way down the street for nothing.”

“It’s my parents.”

“What happened?”

“They’re getting a divorce.”

As I said it, the last remaining wall of the church buckled and collapsed making an almighty crash, leaving only a heap of rubble and a cloud of smoke. The builders gave of a quick cheer then got back to their job. I felt her hand grab mine as I turned to look at her. During the summer she always had adorable freckles covering her nose and cheeks.

“Your hands are freezing!” She clutched my hand with both of hers and started rubbing them together. “Do you remember when we met?”

“Of course I remember, it was here on these swings, we were only, like, five. You sat on the swing next to me and said you bet you could get higher on the swings than me...”

“And I still can.” We both laughed. It was so difficult to feel sad, sat on those swings next to her. Those swings seemed like the one place in time and space that I felt the safest.

“So what’s going to happen to the old church?” I asked as I watched the builders carry away the rubble in a wheelbarrow, to dump in a skip not far away.

“Apparently it’s going to be a new church, even bigger so that half the town don’t have to listen to Christmas and Easter services on the street outside in the cold.”

“That sounds nice.”

“Sometimes change is good. Your parents were arguing for years.”

“I know, it just all feels so surreal, like a bad dream.”

“Where are you going to live?”

“With my mum I think. She’s getting the house. I’ll see dad all the time though.”

“If it’s what your parents want.”

“Yeah, I know. I’ve just got to be there for my mum.”

“She’ll be fine. Your mum’s a tough cookie.”

“Do you want to go get ice cream?” I asked, hopping off the swing.

“Yeah, I’d love to.” The sun was now peeping from behind the clouds again, giving warmth and light back into the day.

“Everything might just be okay,” I said as we walked out of the park, leaving the swings and the church behind us.

Belfast Blues

Fiona Preston

1969

The sounds of the birds were echoing through my room. I stretched and yawned, wriggling out of my warm bed. The sun was shining through the curtains, casting shadows on the plain bedroom wall. I stood, wanting to forget for just one more minute. Reluctantly, I began my daily routine of pulling back my curtains, revealing the barbed wire that surrounded them.

Outside, I could hear the dogs barking for their breakfast. We had six Alsatians...six growling animals. They were supposed to make us feel safer in our home. Their job was to patrol the walled garden that surrounded our farmhouse, but since we had been old enough to walk, Pa had told us to never touch them. They weren't pets; they were guard dogs.

I grabbed my toothbrush and headed to the bathroom. The house was very quiet, so I guessed I was the only one up. I rubbed my eyes and glanced in the mirror. God, I looked awful. The stitches holding my cheek in one piece were so itchy, and next to the huge bags under my eyes, I looked like an extra from a The Night of the Living Dead.

I had been finding it hard to stay asleep without waking up shaking and sweating. After the doctors at the hospital had stitched my face, they explained to me that I might have nightmares for a while. Even Dr Nesbitt tried to give me pills to help me sleep. I didn't need them. I needed my memory erased.

I twiddled the tap and a weak flow of water trickled out. One of the water pipes must have burst last night, I thought. I placed my toothbrush under the drip and placed a dollop of toothpaste on it. Another day. The thought scared me.

Downstairs, I heard someone rustling about. It was Niamh, my younger sister. Only twelve years old, and she was already an expert in the daily practices of surviving. Pa would be down any minute to take us to school. We had to be ready or we would make him late for work. He said the UDR did not like him being late.

'C'mon, Sweetie,' I whispered. 'I'll make your sandwiches, you go up and get dressed.'

As usual, the three of us rushed down the drive in the crisp spring air.

'Morning, Ma'am. How are we today?'

'Good thank you, yourself?' I replied.

Tom was the nicest of our guards. The others never spoke to Niamh or me; always just Pa. As we stood talking to Tom, Pa and the others went to check underneath the car.

'All clear. Now come on girls! We're running late!'

Hopping into the car, I held Niamh's hand. She was finding school tough recently. We all were. I knew she wanted to be anywhere but in this car heading to it. I stared out the window. The green grass and daffodils whizzed past. The budding flowers lighted up the rolling fields. The horses made me miss Barnaby. Pa had sold him just before the troubles started. I wanted to go back to that time. I closed my eyes and prayed. God never hears me though.

I was lost in my daydreaming when the car came to a sudden halt. This was strange. It was definitely a new checkpoint. The rolling fields had disappeared long ago. Now we were surrounded by half-erected buildings, and burned-out car wrecks. Four armed officers surrounded our car, peering in the windows and talking to Pa. I felt Niamh's hand getting sweatier. Her eyes never moved from them. Wondering what we had done to deserve this, I squeezed her hand tighter.

We passed through three more checkpoints before reaching school. Our school was one of the oldest buildings near the Shankill Road. My heart skipped a beat as I saw the battered remains of the building. Getting out the car seemed to be getting harder each day.

'See you later, kiddos. Be good. Ma's picking you up, so I will see you later tonight. I love you both. Have a good day!' Pa yelled out the window, as he sped off.

Our school was already a small one, but every week or so the numbers would dwindle. Sometimes, this was due to parents wanting to keep their children safe at home, other times, because someone was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. I stared at the empty desk next to me. A tear rolled down my face before I collected myself and focused on what Mr Morrison was saying.

The morning dragged on. Outside, armed men patrolled the ground. The atmosphere in school just wasn't the same anymore. We weren't allowed outside during school hours. This used to be a happy place, where we worked hard, and, where we felt safe. But this sense of security had vanished. A couple of weeks ago, during a break when everyone was out in the schoolyard, a young boy in Niamh's year, saw smoke coming out of one of the bins. He was too young to know, too young to know to run.

His curiosity had got the better of him. He never even made it to the bin before it exploded, taking with it half the school building. Black Thursday we called it at school. We lost too many friends and teachers that day. No matter how hard I try to forget, I can still see the fire spreading like a rash through our buildings. It kept growing. My friends and teachers were trapped; they had no chance. People were running around crying, screaming for their Ma and Pa. I can still hear them. It's like a soundtrack constantly playing in my head.

I had left gym class early that day. I had had a sore stomach, and Mr Hutchie had sent me to see the nurse, Miss Simpson. I shouldn't have been there. She was taking my temperature when the smoke appeared. Then the lights cut out, and we were in darkness. I felt something smack my head. But from then, I can't remember much. The next thing I knew, a man was pulling me out from under rubble. An armed officer saved me. He couldn't find Miss Simpson.

Startled by a ringing alarm, I looked around to see everyone running. What was going on? Teachers were pulling us into the dimly lit room we used for prayer. I sat next to Anna, frantically searching for Niamh. All I could see was a vast ocean of terrified faces. Friends held on to each other, praying they would make it home for dinner. The room was too packed to move, so I closed my eyes and asked God to keep Niamh safe. Maybe he would listen to me this time.

Nobody told us what was happening. Where was Niamh? We were going to die under God's roof. Why couldn't he listen to me just once? Something jolted me from behind. Relief hit me, as Niamh clambered over and sat on my knee. Her big brown eyes were pools of water, the fear brewing inside her. Despite growing up with regular bomb scares, I never felt prepared for it. I sat holding my baby sister, trying to make her feel as safe as I could. I wished somebody would do the same for me.

A voice echoed from the front of the room. I couldn't see anything; there were too many frightened bodies in the way. Then I heard the radio boom out.

'Approximately one hour ago, more IRA riots began in Belfast's city centre. People are advised to remain indoors. We would like to reassure our listeners that the British Armed Forces & UDR are here to keep them safe. God be with you all and God save the Queen,' read the news presenter.

By now, Niamh and I had pushed ourselves to the front of the room. The radio kept blasting out news of the riots, but was only tuned into 'Free Ulster'. Mr Morrison was trying to plug his TV in. It was a tiny, black & white screen, but big enough that some of us could see. Grenades were being thrown into local buildings like confetti. There, straight into the Post Office. Oh my goodness! Mr Neill!! Shock rippled through the room. Everyone knew Mr Neill. Poor Mr Neill, there was no way he would have survived that.

I could hear the guns before I could see them. British soldiers rushed about, firing their guns in all directions. People were being dragged out of cars. Women and children were trying to escape, and getting caught in the crossfire. Bins were being set alight, and the UDR were trying to usher people into safe hiding places. No one in the room moved or said a thing, our eyes never moving from the screen.

'You put that down, ya piece of shit. I tell you, I will shoot you.'

A man appeared on our screen. He stared at us. His eyes bore straight through me. He just stood

there, and kept blinking. He looked mid-thirties, younger than Pa, and clearly hadn't shaved in a while. His yellow teeth stuck out of his dirty mouth. He definitely was not a British Soldier. Which meant... Before I knew it, we were looking down the barrel of his gun.

'Let this be a warning to the people of Britain. Go to hell!'

I tried to hold back the flood of tears I could feel building up inside me. Thud! Mr Morrison yanked the TV plug out of the wall and the screen went black. It didn't matter though, we all knew what was about to happen. Suddenly, the room began to feel a lot smaller. What about us? Could this really be it?

As we sat for hours in that tiny room, saying our prayers over and over again, and asking God to have mercy on us, my mind raced. We were trapped in here. I closed my eyes and grasped my hands together. I tried to hold them still, but fear had taken over my body. Looking around, I shuddered at what had become of us. Brothers and sisters clung to each other. Teachers tried to comfort the ones that had no family there. We were sitting ducks; surely it was only a matter of time. I did all I could. I prayed for Pa. I prayed for the UDR, the men Pa worked so hard with, to protect us. I prayed for God to spare us. He had to listen this time, just had to!

Niamh's body has finally stopped shaking, and her sobbing has ceased. We can no longer see outside, as Mr Morrison and the other teachers have boarded up the windows, but I'm guessing it's dark. Some teachers have gone to the cafeteria to try and get us some food. I can't even think about food just now, I feel sick to my stomach. The sounds of bombs exploding stopped a few hours ago, but if I listen closely enough, I can still hear the screaming. I can hear mothers screaming for their babies. And I can hear men shouting orders. We can't tell if it's the UDR or the IRA. We wait to see who bursts through the school doors.

I pull Niamh closer to me. Thankfully, she is sound asleep. She is lucky to have someone to hold her. I never have such luck, but I guess that's life. I wish Pa was here. He would hold me close and let me drift off to sleep and escape this nightmare. I softly rock Niamh back and forth and gently kiss her forehead. That's my job as big sister. And I'm happy to do it. I close my eyes and try my hardest to fall asleep. I wonder if Pa will make it home for dinner. And I wonder if we will be there to greet him.

'God, if you are there, please listen, if only just this once. We don't want to die. Niamh and I have our whole lives to live. Niamh wants to be a doctor, and I want to be a teacher. And Pa, well, where do I start with Pa. He is just the best....'

The screaming and shouting softens as I drift off to sleep, unsure of whom or what I will awaken to.

The Creaky Step

Tarak Chouari

"What is that noise?" she asked.

"How am I supposed to know, Emna!" I moaned. I didn't really care what Mummy was doing, I just really wanted Charmander to level up. It's all I really wanted since coming home from Belgium.

"She's probably just found another spider in one of the boxes," Emna answered.

"Yeah..." I replied. Charmander's health was down, down loads. I didn't want to think about the spider, nor mum screaming; but she didn't stop. I just wanted to play my GameBoy, I just wanted to choose Charmander's flame attack and finish off this battle for some XP points.

"Tarak, go help Mum!" she said selfishly. There was no point in arguing with her, she was older, and Mummy said I should always listen to my sister. I paused the gameboy, ran out the door and along the landing, stopping at the top of the stairs; I could hear someone else in the living room...

Was that BRENDAN? He wasn't supposed to move back for at least another five sleeps. I wonder if he brought me back my Diabolo... he better have, he promised me he would on the phone last night!

"Elaine, calm down!" he said, almost as if he was trying to whisper, "Emna and Tarak are just upstairs."

Mummy wasn't replying, she was screaming, not as loud as before. It was more like she was crying, but she seemed angry. Why was Mummy angry, and why wasn't Brendan making her laugh like he always does?

I slowly made my way half-way down the stairs, stopping just before the creaky step.

"Elaine, you're going to scare the children!" he said loudly. Wait. That wasn't Brendan, that was GRANNY! What was Granny doing here so late? Why hasn't she called me down to see her already? Was Brendan still in Belgium? And WHY was Mummy going to scare us, she's never scared me before?

I didn't want to go near Mummy or Granny, I wanted Grandpa, and I wanted to know what was happening.

Using the bannister to balance my body I lowered my right foot onto the creaky step. I managed to put my weight on the step without a creak. Yes! As I went to lower my left foot, I heard something smashing. It sounded like that time I hit the ball through Mummy's bedroom window, only a LOT louder. Mummy screamed that time too, but it was different. Her scream that time didn't really scare me.

I looked back up the stairs. Emna was standing there with her finger up to her lip. I didn't speak.

She slowly tip-toed down the stairs, joining me on the creaky step. I grabbed her sweaty hand and she squeezed back. Together we made our way to the bottom of the stairs and sat on the bottom step. Rubbing our feet on the rough carpet we quietly listened in...

I couldn't quite understand what they were talking about. Mummy was shouting a lot of bad words. She has been screaming for so long now, why isn't Granny making her better? I turned to Emna. I wanted to ask her what was happening. I wanted to ask her everything that was running through my mind, but I couldn't, she was crying...What had she to cry about?

"What is that noise?" I asked.

"How am I supposed to know, Emna!" he shouted in my ear over the Pokémon melody on his Gameboy Colour. He hasn't got off that bloody thing since we left Belgium, no wonder he looks so pale; he hasn't seen sunlight in at least three days, nor talked to Mum for that matter. If I didn't know better I'd say he didn't care about Mum at all...or his appearance!

"She's probably just found another spider in one of the boxes." I decided to answer my own question; I knew I wasn't going to get anything out of that immature zoned-out zombie. All he cares about is levelling up Charibesaur, or whatever that Pokémon is called... Pokémon is shit.

"Yeah..." he stated half-heartedly, fixated on his two- inch screen.

He never listens unless Mum raises her voice. Maybe if I scream he'll pay attention to me... "Tarak, go help Mum!" I screamed! He looked at me, initial horror followed by acceptance, as he jumped up and scurried out the door.

I put my feet up on the pouffe and turned my attention back to 'MTV My Sweet Sixteen'. My Sixteenth Birthday wasn't going to plan itself, plus, Mum owed me a BIG bash after all this shipping around we've done the past few years!

I hadn't even finished jotting down 'pink carpet' when I was interrupted by Mum screaming again. She seemed in pain? Why was she in pain? Why wasn't Tarak down there helping her?

I decided to put the birthday planning on hold in order to investigate what exactly Tarak was doing, and, more importantly, if Mum was okay. I walked across the landing to the staircase. Tarak was halfway down the staircase messing around on the creaky step! I was about to shout down to him when suddenly I heard something smashing. It wasn't a window, sounded like something was being smashed off the wall. Did Mum throw one of her ornaments off the wall? Why would she do that? What is going on!?

Tarak had a terrified look on his face; he was a lot younger than me. Mum has always told me I'm older, more mature, that I need to look out for Tarak and set a good example. I lifted my finger to my mouth, I didn't quite know why I wanted him to be quiet, nor why I was being so stealthy when I tip-toed down the stair case to join him. I just knew being quiet was the best option.

What was going on? Actually I didn't even know if I was prepared to find out. Tarak grabbed my hand, I knew he was scared and confused. I was too. I squeezed back on his hand just to let him know I was there, in some sort of pathetic attempt at making my younger brother feel safer. I hope it worked, God knows what was running through his head.

Together we tip-toed down to the bottom step where we sat together, listening intently. There was someone in the room with Mum but I couldn't quite make out who it was or what they were saying, I just knew Mum was upset, angry, confused and somewhat manic. I suddenly realised it was Granny in the room. I could barely hear her speaking but it was just enough to realise...

My throat felt like someone was twisting rusted barbed-wire from within it, cutting off my air supply, cutting off my ability to speak, to cry out. Tears were streaming down my hot cheeks. I didn't want to wipe them in hope that Tarak didn't realise I was upset, in hope that he didn't hear what I heard...

Memories

Christopher Leiberman

Peculiar thing, the mind –
so compelling, curious and complex,
yet, so fragile.

It defines us – our thoughts, our dreams,
our ideas – makes us unique.
An identity distinct to us all.

Softly spoken words resound raucously –
Incurable, they said. Only going to get worse.
Nothing to do but wait. Devastating consequences

when it begins to elude you.
Each day lived over again.
Each day lived over again.

Eminess stares through your eyes –
your son – unrecognisable,
the grandson that never existed.

Vanished from the garden you tended with care.
Gone forever, the memories you made,
the memories you gave, never forgotten.

Palliative

Christopher Leiberman

Mother

Untreatable. Untreatable. That's whit he said so it wis.
Mind you, whit dis he know – he still looks like a bairn.
Aye, surely there must be somethin ye can dae, ah says.
He says, naw – you've haud the lot, it's no worked.
Only thing that's left is pall-yee-ah-tive. Whitever that is -
ah dinnae ken. Wouldnae be surprised if he dis -
whit am a gonnae tell her? Ma wean – she's only ten like.
Aefter her Da walked oot, ah'm aw she has left.
Whit's she gonnae dae? Whit am a gonnae dae?
Ah'm still young ken.

Doctor

Oh god. It was horrible. For the both of us.
How do you tell someone something like that?
How do you even prepare for it? Oh god, it was horrible ...
How did you do it, your first time?
I don't think she even understood what I was saying –
pall-yee-ah-tive – I tried to speak slowly
and be empathetic like you said - honest, I did.
How's she going to tell her daughter? She's only wee.
If only it was good news I gave her, she deserves it
poor woman, she's been through a lot.

One to Remember

Christopher Leiberman

“Surprise,” bellowed my living room.
“Happy Birthday,” it cried.
Crammed into every inch, and every corner –
like jubilant sardines – my friends, my family,
and the family of my friends.

Like an ill-rehearsed choir, they struck up a voice –
tone-deaf and talentless, belting out as one.
Eighty years of practising that smile –
and I'm still no better – standing awkwardly,
waiting for it to end.

The smell of smoulder caught everyone's attention;
eyes following the smoke, sneaking from the kitchen
It emerged blazing, like a flare from the sun
the cake drowning in flame and wax –
from all eighty candles – lovingly bought.

Lost

Callum Williamson

Wildlife documentaries always make me think about how totally defenceless and dependent a human child is. As I sit watching young barnacle goslings throwing themselves off a cliff edge, I think back to my childhood and how, if I had been born a barnacle goose, there is no way I would have survived into adolescence, let alone adulthood.

There's one particular time I remember, getting lost in a large supermarket, and running around helplessly screaming and balling trying to find my mother. It was probably on a Saturday, as that is the day we always went food shopping with my grandmother. My mother would go inside to collect my grandmother, and I would wait in the car, whilst they fussed about over lost gloves and coordinating the right brooch with the jackets they were wearing.

I grudgingly moved into the back of the car as my grandmother took prime position in the passenger seat. I used to hate that. I never understood why, because I was the youngest, I was always banished to the back of the car. The resentment I felt was never soothed by sympathy for my grandmother's arthritic knee or her much more robust build than my own. Instead I would sit in the back seething, whilst my mother and grandmother gossiped over idle matters, like the length of their neighbours' lawns or some mistake my dad had made whilst cooking last night's tea. My grandmother only interrupted this by dramatically and patronisingly pointing and shouting every time an aeroplane soared overhead. I know now that she was only trying to engage with me and draw my attention away from my Gameboy for a few chance seconds, but I remained stand-offish and unsocial. My grandmother is one of the funniest and kindest women I have ever known and I regret the amount of time I missed spending with her as a child. But still, what child wants to speak to somebody sixty years his senior?

We arrived at the supermarket, after a trip to the retail outlet next door. I still to this day hate clothes shopping and I blame this entirely on my mother and her six a.m .Boxing Day Sales, but I suppose she couldn't exactly leave a six year-old alone in the house whilst she went and indulged her passion for last season's haute couture at low, low prices.

Once inside the supermarket, I ran off to play on some computer game or with the latest toy. It would have been something overpriced and high tech. I was never one to be satisfied with a simple colouring book.

Boredom set in, so I dutifully set off to see how they were getting on with their weekly shop. But I couldn't find them. I methodically trekked down the middle of the supermarket looking up and down each aisle in turn. I still couldn't find them. And then the panic set in. I can feel it now, that feeling of abandonment, of hopelessness. This was, of course, a total over-reaction. This had happened before and would happen many times after. But at that moment in time, I forgot all previous life experience, as the shelves towered over me and seemed to close in, making me more claustrophobic and apprehensive. I resorted to the one thing I knew that would definitely get my mother's attention: wailing like a banshee.

Crying and running, I tore through the supermarket like a miniature tornado. And this wasn't just any supermarket. It was one of those Tesco-Extra stores, everything-under-one-roof-including-several-kitchen-sinks, and, as I thought at the time, several children who had been abandoned there, to spend the rest of their days stacking shelves, waiting for the return of their mothers.

After what felt like hours, a sales assistant approached me. Even at that tender age, where my head was being filled with the dangers of abduction and not getting into a car with a strange man, I must have recognised her as someone I could trust. For a start, she was a woman and evil child-abductors were always men. Also even at such a rudimentary age, however pathetic I may have been, I could still recognise a Tesco uniform and name badge.

She brought me over to customer services, and tried to distract me whilst she called my mother, who arrived with no sign of urgency or emotion. She hadn't even noticed I'd strayed from the toy department.

Rather than than her flying off the handle and shouting at me in front of the whole customer service team. How mortifying that would have been for such an easily embarrassed child.

Relief coursed through my body as I embraced her, smelled her, making sure it really was her. But it was her, from the used tissue stuck up her sleeve, to her sensible shoes, to her horrifically garish green frogger jacket. And all my worries had been immediately absolved. I was safe once again and as we headed to the car and I picked up my Gameboy, those feelings of utter betrayal and desertion seemed a lifetime away.

Waiting

Callum Williamson

The long, sterile corridor snaked on for what seemed like hours, as the couple turned corner after corner until they reached the middle of this labyrinthine building. Brian grasped his wife's hand tighter as they reported to the stern looking nurse sat behind a glass enclosure. She continued typing for a few seconds before demanding Norma's name without even glancing up. The glowing monitor illuminated the frown lines on her face and exaggerated her skeletal features.

Brian followed Norma over to the black, metallic seats that were firmly attached to the wall and sat on the one with the most stuffing remaining in the cushion. She placed her handbag on the beige, unsoiled floor. The fluorescent lamps on the white ceiling were beaming uncomfortably brightly, causing spectral spots of white light to bounce back up, in some vague attempt to reach their original source.

'How are you feeling?' asked Brian, his hand still firmly attached to hers.

'I'm fine, it's just another day waiting isn't it? All we ever seem to do. Wait.'

'I know, but after today it will all be over, won't it?'

'Yes. Hopefully.'

Norma managed half a smile and looked at the leaflets sparsely dotted around the cream walls. The bold, black, block capitals were focused on all manner of medical conditions, with meekly smiling sufferers staring out at her with their departed eyes.

'Brian, when I die I want to be cremated and I want Summertime to be played; the Ella Fitzgerald song.'

'Why are you talking like this? You're going to be fine. I don't see why you're preoccupying yourself with silly thoughts like that, because everything is going to be absolutely and completely fine.'

'We don't know that, Brian. These results are going to potentially change both of our lives forever and we need to start preparing for the inevitable. I am going to die eventually. So are you, so cut out the embarrassment and stop being so bloody British about the whole thing.'

'I just don't understand why you're talking about this now. You shouldn't be worrying about this. Would it not be cleverer to wait until you have the results before you start talking so morbidly? You don't even know if you're ill yet, darling.'

'And what if I'm not ill? What harm does it do to know my final wishes? What if I were to get the all clear today, walk outside and go straight under an ambulance? It's just practical. We aren't getting any younger and we should have discussed these things before now.'

'I suppose you're right. But you certainly pick your places to bring up the subject!'

Brian looked away to the space on the wall where a window would usually be. The room was roaring with noise in his ears. The incessant clicking of the nurse typing away, the constant whirring of the mechanical extractor fan and the gradual tick tick ticking of the clock mounted invisibly high on the wall above. Faceless individuals staring blankly ahead surrounded them on all sides, none of them speaking.

'You want to be cremated,' Norma interrupted the silence.

Brian looked at her, bewildered.

'How do you know that?'

'You want to be cremated and have your ashes scattered at Linn O' Dee in the Cairngorms. And you want to have Stereophonics Graffiti on the Train playing. But the live version from your LP, not the album version.'

'How on earth do you know that?'

'A few years ago at Sheila's funeral you said the idea of worms eating your body made you feel physically sick. And Stereophonics are your favourite band and that is your favourite song. I can't go on one car journey without you playing it.'

Brian looked at her, with his mouth slightly open.

'I never realised how much you know me. I'm sorry.'

Norma squeezed Brian's hand tighter and kissed him softly on the cheek.

'I know you more than you know yourself, you silly man.'

'Mrs Norma Bates, Room Nine.'

The nurse shouted from behind her glass wall. Norma picked up her handbag. The leather was cold from sitting on the frozen floor. Bag in one hand, Brian in the other, she led him to the fawn door with an authoritative black number nine nailed to it and knocked.

'Come in,' called the voice from inside.

Finest Treat

Sashrika Shetty

With the dawning of the new millennium, it was evident that the world had changed in more ways than its inhabitants had ever perceived. It had become more efficient, with less destruction and strife amongst the people, the countries had finally learned to live in harmony. Alternatives for fossil fuels had been discovered, ways to cultivate food and other necessities had been developed, with elaborate schemes to provide for the ever-increasing population. In short, planet Earth had finally reached the comfortable status towards which people had striven for millennia.

Technology was more advanced than ever. Science had reached new heights, and with it came great knowledge of how to take the best parts of the Earth's natural resources and manipulate them to create something useful, something needed, something that suited everyone. It was no great secret that one of the most important necessities on Earth was food. People delighted in it, adored it. Every day they would go one step further for greater enjoyment of it.

One such individual was Icarus Leaftop, a small-time scientist who soon shot to fame as a result of his invention and development of Finest Treat. The concept was simple. It was designed to add a new dimension to any type of food, a clear serum which was administered by injection directly into the food product. The components of this serum were secret and Icarus Leaftop had publicly declared during a conference that the secret would stay in his family, that Finest Treat would be confined within his bloodline. And the rest of the world was content with that. Nobody needed to know what exactly made their food so great. It was easy, just a quick jab directly into a roast chicken to make it the most delectable morsel on the plate. The people of this new age were content to live with this lack of knowledge. They were, after all, now a peaceful race.

However, despite the benefits of Finest Treat, there were, as with most new advances, possibilities for abuse ...

I was late. Unequivocally, unquestionably late. But I had learned from previous experiences that visiting my sister on an empty stomach never turned out well. She had the capacity to drain my energy,

almost feeding off it to sustain her existence. But I was the only family that she had left and I just didn't have it in me to abandon her entirely.

Breakfast today was a perfunctory affair – I had opted for quick and easy whilst using the last two remaining eggs in my fridge. I scrambled them with assertive speed and dumped them in a bowl, setting them down on the kitchen table with a fork and a glass of orange juice. I might be late but I was damned if I was going to eat standing up and not in a comfortable seat.

Staring down at my meal, I sighed. It did not look at all appetizing. The eggs were clumped together (I had no milk to add to the egg mixture before scrambling) and had taken on an unattractive beige hue, generally just a greyish mess inhabiting the otherwise pristine ceramic plate. Even the orange juice seemed to lack vitality, the juicy bits settled limply at the bottom of the glass. In the end, the fact that I had forgotten to season my eggs inspired my decision to reach for a vial of Finest Treat. I had an entire box of this wonderful serum tucked away in a darkened corner of my cupboard and I tried to use it as sparingly as possible, not wanting to end up like my sister or those other poor unfortunate souls that I had often seen on the news.

As I made up a small syringe of Finest Treat to Inject into my food, my thoughts drifted back to my sister. Trinity was two years older than I was and I had spent the majority of my life looking up to her. I was always lucky that she had never seen me as the irritating younger sister as most elder siblings do but instead as a companion, as a friend. My sister was smart and excelled in most things she did but her compulsive nature always got her into trouble. Unfortunately, now the trouble seemed to be permanent.

I never found out when she first started doing it. I had never even discovered what had even possessed her to do it. But I always had my theories. I had always blamed her friends. Those girls who seemed to be walking adverts for Anorexia; the type of girls who would have been beautiful if their clothes didn't hang off them like coats on a coat rack. Trinity was never able to see this though. They were her friends, and she seemed to have the best time with them, taking no account of the fact that they rarely ate and always discussed calories and dieting to that point that I began to refer to them as 'The Skeletons'. In a direct contrast to them, Trinity was beautiful with lovely blonde locks and large indigo coloured eyes. She used to be the definition of health but it wasn't long before her friends influenced her judgement.

Finest Treat had taken the world by storm and for a long time, the production and use of it went swimmingly well. Then, one day, some poor weight-conscious individual realised that if the serum was injected directly into their body, they could bypass all of the 'side effects' associated with eating, avoidance of weight gain being the most desirable outcome. Soon, this news took flight and within days, people of all different backgrounds around the world were trying the technique out for themselves. But gradually, they realised how unsafe it was, how much danger they were putting their bodies in. Finest Treat was excellent for making anything taste decadent but it lacked the nutrients and the essential vitamins that our bodies needed. Thankfully, humans were not an idiotic race. The majority of them soon realised that without proper food, they would severely shorten their life spans and live out the rest of their shortened lives in pure misery. This whole Injecting practice was swiftly disregarded and classed as a psychiatric disorder and those who were found doing it needed to be treated immediately.

I had been the one to walk in on Trinity and The Skeletons as they injected, sitting in a circle in her room, syringes held firmly in their arms, expressions of pure bliss on their gaunt faces. To be honest, I blamed myself for not spotting the signs earlier. Trinity had been losing weight, her clothes no longer fit her well and her skin had taken on an unhealthy pallor. She and I normally spent most of our time together but she frequently ditched me for The Skeletons, sometimes for days. And whenever she came back, she always looked thinner and increasingly unhealthy. I have no idea why it never occurred to me that she had been taken in by the Injecting Craze.

I remember screaming and shouting, forcefully pushing The Skeletons out of the house, slamming the door into their confused faces. Then I had turned to look at Trinity. My once strong and independent sister, kneeling down by the bottom of the stairs, tears leaving track marks down her face as she insistently pressed the plunger of the syringe, determined to get the last few drops of Finest

Treat into her system. I cried along with her and she had promised me never to do it again. But within a few days, I caught her trying to hide a stash of Finest Treat in her room and I came to the horrifying revelation that my sister was an addict. I had no choice but to admit her into Oakland's Medical Centre, an establishment which dealt mainly with those who injected.

I shook my head, attempting to shake the unpleasant memories away as I finished incorporating Finest Treat into my food. The eggs looked far more delectable now and even before I took my first bite, I knew they would taste just as good. They had just the right texture balanced with the perfect saltiness and went excellently with the sharp sweetness of the smooth orange juice. I polished off the contents of the small plate within mere minutes.

The drive to the medical centre was bleak and uneventful, pretty much the same as it had always been. But this time, I was going to meet Trinity with a new weapon – one that I was hoping would help her get better. It was sitting harmlessly in the passenger seat. I had spent so long meticulously putting it together that I couldn't bear to stuff it unceremoniously into a bag. I'd even strapped a seatbelt around it out of whim, wishing I could offer the same protection to my sister.

"Good morning, Miss Snow," the receptionist greeted me as I stood in front of her desk, my keys in one hand and the 'weapon' clutched in the other. "Here to visit Trinity?"

"Of course," I replied, smiling as she tapped away on her keyboard. I was well known in the centre. I had come to visit my sister almost every weekend for the last five years. The medical staff here was always friendly and understanding towards me but the pity in their eyes had never escaped my notice. I knew that they thought I was fighting for a lost cause. Luckily for Trinity, I didn't agree with them.

"Trinity is waiting for you in the Yellow Room." The receptionist offered me a genuine smile.

"Thank you," I murmured, already knowing that this visit wasn't going to start off well. Trinity hated the Yellow Room. She said that it was too happy and reminded her of what she used to be. God forbid her to be happy.

A deep masculine voice called my name as I turned to head down the corridor towards my assigned meeting place. Trinity's doctor, Carl Thomas, was making his way to my side. I always had respect for Dr. Thomas. He was a fortyish, pleasant man who normally went out of his way to help others. I strongly believed that, without him, Trinity would be far worse than she was now. He had a calming manner that soothed even her on occasion.

"Dr. Thomas," I greeted him, waving. "How are you today?"

"I'm very well, thank you," he replied, rubbing his tired looking eyes. "And yourself?"

I nodded. "I'm good. I'm just visiting Trinity. I've got a little present for you." I pulled a small box of chocolates out of my handbag and passed it to him.

His eyes crinkled up in delight. "Coffee liquor chocolates! How lovely – after the night I've had, this is most appreciated. Thank you!"

I smiled. Every weekend, I bought him the same gift, knowing that they were his favourite. And each time I presented them to him, he behaved as if it was an unexpected surprise.

"I've brought something to show Trinity." I gestured towards the 'weapon.'

He peered at it blearily as we started towards the Yellow Room. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Yes, it is. I finished it a while back and thought now would be an appropriate time to try it."

"I don't know if that is such a great idea."

"What do you mean? When I first told you about it, you thought it was a good thing to do."

"Yes, but...Trinity had an episode last night. It took us a few hours to calm her down. She isn't in the best way this morning and I'm afraid she might dissolve into another episode if you show that to her."

I squared my shoulders as we reached the door of the Yellow Room. "Dr. Thomas, I appreciate your concern but this is my sister. I'm going to try anyway."

He nodded sombrely. "Good luck."

I opened the door and stepped into the room. Trinity was curled up in a chair by the window and her dark, emotionless eyes stared out through the panes of glass. She was wearing a loose, black, short-sleeved top and baggy, black sweatpants; her hair was uncombed and lay limply over her shoulders. Her face was pale and gaunt, she looked painfully thin and unhealthy – a stark contrast to the bright and exuberant ornaments and paintings decorating the room.

She turned her head as I shut the door behind me. “Elsa?” Her voice was weak and raw, as if she had been shouting for hours.

I smiled as cheerfully as I could, trying to ignore the pang of sadness in my chest that I felt every time I saw her fragile body. I made my way over to her and took a seat by the window too, reaching out to clasp one of her wafer-thin, cold hands in my own.

“How are you, Trinity?”

“I’m okay.” She paused, looking into my eyes. “But I guess they already told you about last night.” My sister had always had an uncanny ability to read my innermost thoughts. If only I had been able to do the same for her before we had got into this mess.

“Yes. What happened?”

“They said I was good, that I had earned a treat.”

“What was the treat?”

“They were going to put some Finest Treat in my food.”

I shut my eyes, guessing what must have happened. “And then...?”

Trinity’s hand curled into a fist as she fought to control her anger. “I tried to inject. I stole it from them and I tried. But they wouldn’t let me. They stopped me.”

I could picture the scene perfectly. Dr. Thomas and his staff fighting to wrestle the needle from a screaming Trinity, simultaneously trying to subdue her. She must have screamed and fought for hours afterwards. She always did.

“It doesn’t matter, Trin,” I said soothingly, stroking her papery skin. “You’re doing so well.”

“Help me, Elsa,” Trinity whispered, peering at me. “You don’t know what it’s like in here. I have to get out. You have to help me.”

I bit my lip, trying to ignore the warning Dr. Thomas had given me. “You must show them that you can manage without Finest Treat. You must prove that you won’t inject again, that you’ll live a normal lifestyle. I can...I can try and help.”

“How?”

I slid my ‘weapon’ towards her. “Take a look through this.”

“What is it?”

“A photo album of you,” I replied steadily, watching her reaction.

She opened the first page and flinched slightly. It was a picture of her at her nineteenth birthday party before this mess had started. She had worn her favourite party dress and done up her hair so that it cascaded down her back in thick blonde curls. It was one of my favourite pictures of her – she looked so healthy and vibrant.

“I thought it might help,” I whispered when she didn’t say anything. “If you just saw who you used to be. You could still be her. She hasn’t gone away completely.”

Trinity wordlessly turned the page. There were roughly fifteen pages within that photo album and I had made sure to fill each and every one of them with photographs of Trinity in chronological order right until this moment. She started off looking like the girl she once was – one that was full of life – to a person who barely resembled my bubbly sister and the photos were excellent evidence of that. I knew it was a risky thing to do but I didn’t know what else I could try to bring my Trinity back.

I watched anxiously as she turned the last page and shut the album, pushing it back towards me.

“Go.” She spoke so softly that at first I wasn’t sure if she had spoken at all.

“What?”

“I want you to leave.”

“Trin –”

“That is not me,” she interrupted in a harsh tone. “That girl is ugly, she is fat, okay? That’s not how I look! She is not me!”

“You weren’t fat!” I exclaimed, appalled. “You were nowhere near fat. How can you say that, Trinity? Can you not see how unhealthy you are now?”

“I could be healthy if they let me have Finest Treat.” She tilted her chin at me defiantly. “The people here are the reason I’m unhealthy – if they’d give me what I want I would be fine! They’re idiots!”

“No, you wouldn’t! You’re wasting away and you’re not who you used to be,” I pleaded, feeling tears sting my eyes.

“So you aren’t going to help me get out of here?” she asked quietly, lowering her gaze.

“I can’t. You’re not better. I can’t unless you’re –”

“Leave!” Trinity screamed, smacking the side of my head. She was so frail that the action probably hurt her more than it hurt me but the intention to hurt me was still obvious. “Just leave, Elsa. I never want to see you again, you understand? Unless you give me what I want, I don’t ever want to see you again. Now get out.” Her voice rose to a shriek again as I ran wildly towards the door, desperate to get away from her before she launched completely into her episode. Staff ran into the room after Trinity’s furious and desperate screams reached their ears. I didn’t wait to see what would happen but instead bolted down the corridor, towards the car park. Only when I was safely locked in my car did I let the tears flow.

I had been too late. Unequivocally, unquestionably late. My sister was never going to be the way she had once been. I needed to learn to accept that.

Scene

James Brechin

Two women sit in the relative’s room in a hospital ward.

“How are you feeling, Mrs Buchan?”

“I’m okay, I’m okay.”

“Now I understand you are Jim’s daughter, is that right?”

“Yes.”

“I just wanted to have a wee chat with you about him. Is that ok?”

“Er... yes of course.”

“Well, Mrs Buchan as you know your Father had a heart attack a few weeks ago.”

“Aha.”

“So, he had that heart attack and he was admitted to this ward this past Friday because he was vomiting blood. Have I got things right?”

“Well, yes, but he wasn’t vomiting blood to begin with, it was just – you know – normal sick but it started having blood in it late on the Thursday night.”

“Right, ok. Well, Mrs Buchan, since your father came in on Friday, I’m afraid to say he’s become really quite poorly.”

“...”

“Unfortunately he’s still bringing up blood in his vomit and has become quite agitated and distressed.”

“...right.”

Tears well up in Mrs. Buchan’s eyes.

“At this point Mrs. Buchan we feel it’s in Jim’s best interests to stop treatment and make him as comfortable as possible.”

Mrs. Buchan sobs.

"He was... fine... just three weeks ago... before his... before his heart attack."

"I know, Mrs. Buchan, and I'm sorry to have to tell you this but Jim's condition has deteriorated quite a bit since he came in."

"Isn't there anything you can do?"

"I'm really sorry but we're sort of stuck between a rock and a hard place."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the drugs your dad was put on after his heart attack were to help thin his blood. Unfortunately, these blood thinners mean you are more likely to have bleeds which is what is happening to your father and why he is bringing up the blood."

"So the drugs did this?"

"They have contributed towards causing a bleed but they won't have caused it. It's likely that it was going to happen and the drugs brought it on a wee bit faster. We've tried to fine tune his medication to lessen the bleeding but we can't reduce them any further or your father will have another heart attack."

"You said he was agitated. He's not in pain is he?"

"We'll make sure he's not in any pain."

Mrs. Buchan's crying continues.

"Th-thank you."

"We'll do all we can for your father, Mrs Buchan. Do you have any more questions at the moment?"

"No, not that I can think of."

"Ok, well if you have any questions at all, I'll be on the ward. Don't hesitate to come to me with anything, anything at all."

"Thank you."

The doctor gives Mrs. Buchan a forlorn smile and rises from her chair.

"I'll have to go and write up some morphine for your father. Goodbye for now, Mrs. Buchan."

"Goodbye."

The doctor exits the room, leaving Mrs. Buchan alone.

Work Call

Karim El-Shakankery

Phone rings:

"Hello?"

"Oh hi, just me."

"Hi there, what's happening?"

"Nothing much, just seeing what you were up to."

"I'm at work, love, the same place I always am at 11am on a Monday."

"Of course, love, I know. I've just got so much to do before Thursday. I'm just so stressed out about it."

"Eh? Where on earth has that piece gone?"

"What?"

"Sorry, love, talking to myself. Just trying to fix a washing machine."

"Right, well anyway, I've got so much to do before she arrives."

"It's made of bloody metal. How could that have even broken off? There's no fixing that."

"Are you even listening to me, Kevin?"

"Richard, need you to try to find me a six millimetre pressure washer for a Hotpoint. This one's completely snapped and half of it's gone. If you can't find one we'll have to go source one."

"Kevin, listen to me when I speak to you."

"Sorry, Beverly honey, just busy. Of course I'm listening to you."

“Hmm. So, anyway, I was saying I’ve ordered the flowers. They’re roses. I wanted lilies but....”

“Aaaaaah there you are you little bugger! How the hell did you even get in there? Richard, I need a smaller Phillips head while you’re over there, I’m going to have to open up the detergent chamber - I think the machine is going to need more than a new washer.”

“KEVIN LISTEN TO ME WHEN IM TALKING TO YOU”

“Beverly, if you haven’t already noticed I’m at work, and I’m trying to concentrate. Is there a reason why you called or was it just to distract me?”

“Well, maybe if you were listening to me you would know why I rang! Also, speaking of washing machines, have you paid the electricity bills yet? They were due two weeks ago. AND you still didn’t call an electrician about the fixing the shower because you ‘don’t have time to fix it.’”

“I’ll do it, I’ll do it.”

“You’ve been saying you’re going to do it for the last three weeks. How about you get your arse together and actually do it?”

“Just get off my back, woman. I’ve got enough on as it is without you screaming down my neck.”

“Surprise, surprise. You’re just so bloody selfish these days, Kevin. You think I haven’t got loads to do? It’s YOUR bloody mother who’s coming to stay on Thursday and I’ve got a never-ending list of things to do. How about you get your act together and.....”

Kevin hangs up the call.

Power

Jacob Flapan

“Yeah, but Chelsea are way better than Arsenal,” I said matter-of-factly.

“No they aren’t,” came Tom’s reply.

“Yes, they are. Chelsea have got Lampard.”

“So! Arsenal have got Theirry Henry.”

“Pffffft.”

“Jacob, he’s scored, like, twenty-three goals this season.”

“So, Lampard has made, like, tonnes of passes more than him.”

“Oh my God, you don’t even know how many passes he’s made.”

“Yeah I do,” I said, thinking hard for a reasonable figure. “He’s made over a thousand!”

“NO WAY he has!”

“Has to. And he scores better goals than Henry.”

“Jacob, you are talking so much rubbish. You’re wrong and you know you are. Just admit it!”

“Yaaaaah,” Lee chipped in accusingly, “you ARE wrong, Jacob.”

I felt myself flush red. They both said I was wrong. Maybe I was, but I wasn’t ready to let them know that.

“Just admit you’re wrong, Jacob.”

“But I’m not,” I said, crossing my arms and turning away from them both. They sniggered at me.

“So, Lee what are you doing after school?” said Tom.

“Dunno. You?”

I grinned.

“I know what I’m doing.” They both turned.

“What are you doing then?” said Lee pouting, “apart from learning about how bad Chelsea suck?!” He and Tom high-fived.

I smiled casually, “Nothing you guys would enjoy. It’s too cool for you guys. Besides, it’s only for Chelsea fans.”

“Awww, tell us!”

“No!”

“Please!” they whined together.

“Nope, only people who know Chelsea are better than Arsenal are allowed to play it!”

“What is it? Please, Jacob, tell us!”

I sat back and enjoyed them both begging for a while before delivering my line. “Meh, only FIFA ‘08 for Playstation 2.”

They both gasped.

“But, like I said,” I paused for effect, “it’s only for Celsea fans.”

“Oh, Jacob, that’s so shan! Can we not come and play it? Please?”

“Well, maybe, but you have to admit Chelsea are better than Arsenal!”

“No way!”

“Fine, I’ll play it by myself,” I said smugly.

“Fine.... Chelsea are better than Arsenal,” they moaned.

“In fact, say that they are the best club in the world!”

“But they’re not! EVERYONE knows that’s Barcelona, even you have to admit that, Jacob,” they chirped indignantly as if I had just committed football sacrilege.

“Nah, not today, boys.” I was trying so hard not to let my grin get any bigger.

“Fine,” said Tom.

They both looked at the ground, grimaced, and muttered the words: “Chelsea are the best team in the world.”

“Ha, see, I told you so! I knew I was right! And I proved it!”

Later that afternoon we played FIFA. I went Chelsea. Tom went Arsenal. I won.

Fractals

Saarah Ebrahim

Lost in chasms of silence -
faltering I stumble through a tunnel of inner darkness.
Alone I lie in the prison that is this hospital room.
My fists are curled in fits of frustration,
paroxysms of helpless torment. Through the misty window pane,
I look to the sky beseeching someone for help,
ruminating in the fractals of hollow questions -
morosely they are answered by the bitter reflections of oneself.
Drowning in the dregs of my past sorrows,
my fears of self- destruction unfurl.
I seek sanctuary till rivulets of the moon
seep into my eyes. Blind.
Coursing through my web of veins
till the nib of pen bleeds
blear blue and smears the sullied page,
with blotches of feelings.
Shards of a fragile life rest in the palm of my hand.
A powerful drug bleeds through my engorged veins,
and my anger ebbs
like the lacklustre glow of once lit embers,
diminishing into the transience
of my confused world.
As the medicine takes its course
my mind is unbound and
the shackles tethered to my past life are broken.
Thin films of my skin shed like dew as
I revel in the clarity of a new day free of worries and woes.
Surging from the billowing ashes
holograms of hope
reform and renew.

Geography Class

Salina Lalwani

I swear that I'm trying. I'm really trying to keep my gaze on my new Pokemon notebook and not to look up at the face of doom: Nara. I'm also really trying to not glare at Mr. Dibnah for placing her across from me when I know he suspects she is the reason my foot is shaking uncontrollably. Adele is giving me a look as if to suggest that I should stop shaking the table with my dramatics. Well, tough. She revoked the rights to best-friendship when she chose to sit across from Augusto today instead of Nara, only to weird him out with how often she flips her hair. I mean, really? We are only ten. I think it's the influence of Mean Girls. Sigh.

I brave a sneak peek at Nara and visibly cringe as her clear blue eyes meet mine with a type of malice reserved for Sauron or Voldemort or whoever hates the main kid in the books I read. I look back down again, hiding my notebook slightly when I see that hers is a bright pink Britney Spears one. Of course it is. I can feel her eyes on me as I try to trace back to a point where I must have annoyed her enough to break the dam of civility she has with every other girl in the class. Maybe it was that time she randomly bit me on the shoulder when we were five. Perhaps not since Marlisa bit me too. Perhaps it's just me. Not everyone needs to like you but I always thought disgust needed a reason otherwise it isn't logical. The one thing I know I am is logical.

On the plus side, she hasn't called me "feia pretinha", or in English, the Ugly Dark One today in her girly, nasally voice. I consider that a definite improvement in our non-relationship. Nor has she told more little kids in the years below that I have gypsy blood and will curse their families into baboons or something equally ridiculous. I knew I shouldn't have gone to the carnival as Esmeralda but in my defence there aren't many Disney characters I can go as without the typical, "But you are brown ...how can you be Aurora?" question being hurled around before I point out that the boys are dressed as ninja turtles.

I know I'm digressing. Wait! Rewind! I should probably accept that some of it has to do with her resentment that my house is bigger than hers when all she sees on TV of Indian people are old ladies and children crying in little huts in the deserts of Rajhistan. I should have clued up when Mrs. Dixon asked her for an example of a contradiction and she replied with the fact that I come to school in a nice car. Nara probably thinks it's not right that I could possibly have more than her. She probably thinks all of this but I don't want to believe that because that would mean that it matters to some people out there. I don't want to believe that because it means that her parents are teaching her this in contrast to my own who teach me to love everyone, even her. I especially don't want to believe that because, apart from Mr. Dibnah, no one really defends me wholeheartedly and I don't want to think about what that means. So I'm not going to. I'm going to avoid being logical this one time. I'm going to believe that she hates me because I am clever and she can't remember the multiplication table for thirteen.

"Again, what's the capital of Australia?" a voice drones shaking me out of my thoughts. Mr. Dibnah is growing impatient because no one is answering his question, all of us in our own worlds thinking about food, the latest Gameboy game or in the case of the overly ambitious Augusto, world domination. The need to answer to avoid his awkward stare takes over and I slowly start raising my hand. Nara sees this and whips out her hand so fast I think I hear the swipe in the air. What is she doing? We stare at each other as the typical western movie gun song plays in my head. Mr. Dibnah looks really surprised that she bothered to raise her hand and unsurprisingly chooses Nara to answer. I stay still with my eyes narrowed and wait.

"Sydney!" she almost shouts proudly. I try to contain my smug smirk and wait patiently for Mr. Dibnah to shake his head and turn to me.

"Canberra. The capital of Australia is Canberra." I can't help it and I smile widely. Honestly, I didn't really try that hard just then.

A Glimpse of Inertia

Salina Lalwani

The Portuguese Day of National Defense is one of those events that make you wonder what the government was thinking when they devised it. Yanking a bunch of eighteen year-olds from their daily lives of tacky soaps and Facebook drama and taking them to a military base in Beja to be lectured on the armed forces is not going to be received enthusiastically. If it weren't for the heavy penalisation if one were to miss it, I doubt anyone would show up, especially me. I cursed the timing of the Equality Act of 2010 which forced me to attend this abysmal day. Hundreds of years of sexism, and they just had to introduce an Act compelling girls, too, to register in the military, just as I turned eighteen.

Knowing I was going to get a lot of attitude anyway for having left our city-but-really-town of Lagoa, I cocooned myself in my burgundy hoodie and sat in the furthest corner of the drab seminar room to avoid any possible conversation. So far I had seen a few of the people that I went to nursery with but no one seemed to recognise me; everyone was almost comatose in their boredom and the only person talking was the quintessential class clown character who kept sniggering about the instructor's unusually round haircut. No one was paying me any attention and I liked it. I would get through this day quietly and would return to medical school in Scotland with this day as a distant nuisance of a memory.

As the instructor droned on about job opportunities in the Navy, I noticed a cute brunette staring at me. She looked familiar in an alarming way, as if I should know immediately who she was but her name was escaping me. I did that thing we all do by pretending to look out the ornate window right next to her but actually analysing her from head to toe in my peripheral vision. She was an average height with the typical Algarvian tan and had a small face with a splatter of freckles that added to her cuteness. A rush of anxiety went through me when I realised who she was. My cheeks heated and a wave of bitterness hit me.

This was Nara. If I were the type to go see a therapist, she would probably be mentioned regularly as the root catalyst for my self-esteem plummeting in my early years. I rolled my eyes at my ludicrous luck. I didn't dare have any eye contact in case I invited her to saunter over and point out how my eyebrows are too bushy for my face or something equally obvious. As if I were having an out of body experience, I saw myself retreating into the shell of my hood and curling further into the corner to avoid her scanning me and finding flaws. It irked me that she was getting a reaction. Avoidance was paramount.

Lost in my musings, I was startled to find everyone getting up and heading outside. I shuffled behind them quickly to keep up with their spirited march; I should have realised the enthusiasm emanating from the boys was because we were going to be shooting rifles. I became so nervous about that daunting task that I didn't realise that Nara was just behind me when I felt a hand on my shoulder. I yelped and turned around.

"Remember me? God it's been like six years!" She smiled and looked, frustratingly, genuine.

"Obviously," I muttered quietly. "How have you been Nara?"

I needed to deflect and keep this to small talk. She would eventually get bored with how polite I was being and entertain herself elsewhere.

"Oh I've been alright. I'm working in Aldi right now outside of Lagoa. It's a good job considering what is happening now in Algarve. You know how it is."

I did know. Portugal was being ground to dust in the recession and it was the youth that was coughing up. My father foresaw this and moved me to Dubai to prevent the inertia in this country extinguishing my ambitions but I wasn't ignorant enough not to realise that he could do this because he could afford it. Unfortunately, most parents couldn't do that for their children when they realised that their futures had become bleak here. Nara was one of many.

"Yeah I know. But that's good that you have one." I tried smiling at her but stopped when it was

coming out as a grimace instead. She was undeterred.

"I heard you had a good time these last few years. You're at university in the UK now, right? I honestly didn't expect you to show up either. I thought your dad would get you out of it."

I instantly stiffened at the assumption but forced myself to relax when I saw that she wasn't making a jab at me. Not really. She was smiling softly.

"I doubt anything but the plague could get me out of this." I giggled in that comedic graceless way you sometimes hear on TV. I couldn't believe I was having this conversation today with Nara of all people. I couldn't believe she was actually laughing along with me when I had just impersonated a hyena.

We reached the shooting range and all chatter stopped immediately. I really didn't want to hold a gun, let alone shoot one, so I stood listening studiously to the instructions so that I wouldn't end up injuring anyone. A long time ago I would have probably joked in my own head about shooting Nara in the leg by "mistake" as retaliation for all the years she tormented me but it didn't feel right anymore. Well, as right as joking about shooting someone gets. Turn after turn, Nara and I watched as the rest of the group failed miserably at hitting any of the targets. What was interesting was the jubilance I saw in each of them; this was going to be the highlight of their week. It struck me as comforting that for one day all of us were the same before we all dispersed to different lives with different journeys. Nara proceeded to tell me all about her bartender boyfriend and how he gets her flowers that he steals from the garden across the beach. She described her Mum's rustic cooking and how she is learning to make Thai food. I listened intently because I realised this would probably be the last time I would really talk to her or any of these people that were born in the same month in the same town as I was. When it was my turn, I missed every target due to my talent at shooting the floor. Why did I need to be good at shooting anyway?

The day dwindled until we were finally at the bus stop where we would be picked up. Nara had sat with a friend of hers in the bus which left me some time to catch up on some lecture notes I had stowed away in my bag. I didn't expect a farewell so I walked towards my car.

"Hey, Salina! Wait!" She panted a bit as she caught up with me.

"What's up?" I didn't really know what to expect but a part of me was waiting for the insult.

"I know you guys don't live here permanently anymore but if your parents ever need some help around the house or the garden please call me. Aldi is good and all but it doesn't play all the bills. I would appreciate it if you could tell your mum for me."

Momentarily stunned, I first felt like angrily pointing out that she was horrid to me when we were kids. In the next split second I felt horrible and petty for what I had just thought. The humility shining from her face didn't deserve such a rebuttal and the years of resentment was exorcised out of me with a deep breath out. Awkwardness was the last thing that crept into the moment as I answered.

"I'm really sorry but at the moment we already have someone to take care of things at home when we are away. I'll let my Mum know though. Thanks, Nara." I smiled at her genuinely for the first time.

She smiled back and turned to walk away but swiveled back and waved at me as she walked to the café across the street. I took in all of the others walking to their cars or hugging their friends and savoured that moment that I would never be a part of again.

Cover illustration:

Count Back From Ten

Oil on canvas

by **Bethany Hastings**

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Bethany is a third year medical student who undertook an art project as her medical humanities option, exploring the complications of pregnancy. She describes how this painting encapsulates for her the mother's fears of not knowing or understanding what is happening with their baby. The minimalist approach on the doctor's faces gives an intensity to them. They are calm within the storm, the people the family has no choice but to count on. This painting's perspective forces you to be absorbed within it, experiencing the helplessness of the parents.