

Verbal Remedies: Sixth Sense

Selected and edited by Helen Lynch and Enxhi Mandija

Dedication: *For Dr Robert Clarke FRCP, FRCGP, whose unwavering support for this enterprise has made possible all six editions of Verbal Remedies and secured its existence into the future, and whose furtherance of mental health awareness through the Dr Jeannie MacLeod Fund has achieved so much more.*

For Wai-Lum Sung, whose artistry and collegiality have made the task of producing these six editions of Verbal Remedies a pure pleasure.

Forewords

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 future clinicians the third-year medical students who take the creative writing course, have dedicated time to consider these ideas.

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 their medical studies, we hope to support the student's development self-awareness and compassion.

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 inhabit them and see the world through their eyes, surely an exercise in empathy. We ask students to learn and develop empathic approaches in the curriculum as these are essential skills for the practice of medicine.

Sharing their writing can be vulnerable position but to receive, reflect and respond to feedback in order to develop personally and professionally is closely aligned with the reflective practice central to the training of 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 as I am by the work they produce.

Dr Leeanne Bodkin

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I have been teaching Creative Writing for Medics as part of the Medical Humanities offering to third year students since 2010. It is always a pleasure and always interesting, because each cohort of students has a different outlook, group dynamic, and set of individual and writerly personalities, with their own preoccupations. The course has changed very little in its fundamentals over that time. It is still structured around three focal points over the term: childhood memory, narrative and dialogue, and the unfamiliar. It still operates through writing prompts, generating and sharing pieces of writing in a two-hour workshop twice a week.

The workshops are a safe space to give and receive constructive feedback. We are interested in development rather than judgement of writers in the room – what works, what doesn't quite work, what would work better. Back in the day, when fiction was considered a branch of rhetoric, this idea of creative writing as persuasive speech, honed for maximum effect on readers/listeners was obvious. The students produce work in and for every workshop, have a writing buddy they run their work past in between-times, submit three formative pieces and one final portfolio. In six short weeks, therefore, they produce an awful lot of writing and do a great deal of drafting, redrafting and editing in light of peer and tutor responses.

The preferred genres have changed over time and often change year to year – there are a lot more serial killers, superheroes and vigilantes operating in gritty environments one year, and the next unicorns and magical forests predominate. The ways in which young people, and indeed all of us, 'consume' stories has altered, and the influence of the online media world is apparent in myriad ways, not least that young people read less, and what they read has also changed.

It's very important that the students are not obliged to write about medical 'themes', though they sometimes do, whether their own memories of medical care for their younger selves or for a loved one, or the experiences of studying medicine and the first exposure to ward life. The Medical Humanities bloc is manifestly crucial to their experience of studying at Aberdeen. Students often say what a relief it is to focus on what is inside them and on expressing it clearly, rather than what they describe as 'being filled with knowledge.' It's very important, too, that for those six weeks they concentrate on writing, not for the 'higher' cause of being better doctors, even if it might have that (side-)effect, but for its own sake, as a discipline with its own strictures and delights.

One aspect that I didn't expect, and that has assuredly grown stronger over recent years, is the importance of the course to the participants' own mental health. This comes up repeatedly in the students' feedback on the course and in portfolios and essays entered for (and not infrequently winning) the Dr Jeannie MacLeod Prize in the category of Mental Health, Resilience and Wellbeing. We are extremely grateful to Dr Bob Clarke and the Dr Jeannie MacLeod Fund for making this sixth edition and its predecessors possible, as well as to Wai-Lum Sung for his help in bringing them to press. I hope that, reading these pieces of work, you will see the ways in which writing has helped to expand the imagination and expression of their authors, and be persuaded to enter and enjoy the worlds they conjure for you.

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Climbing Wall

Harachi Ojiako

Koby dusted her fingers with some chalk and grabbed the first boulder.

"Thanks for joining me today. I didn't want to do it myself."

"No problem, it's not like I had anything better to do," Serena replied, tugging on the rope connected to her harness. "By the way are you sure this is safe? I see no reason why we should be risking our lives."

"It's fine." Koby waved her free hand. "There are workers here to ensure we don't fall."

Serena dusted her hands with chalk and began her ascent.

"So how has your week been?" Koby asked.

Serena grabbed one boulder and lifted herself to the next boulder.

"Fine."

"Fine? Whenever you say fine you always mean the opposite. Everyone who knows you knows that."

"You know sometimes I hate that you know me so well."

"No, you don't. You love me."

Serena could not see Koby's face but she knew a smile was plastered on it.

"Okay, I'll tell you but you need to slow down. Not all of us are crazy and go rock climbing every minute of the day."

"You'd be as good as me if you went more. That's why I always ask you to join me."

Koby was quite a distance ahead, her legs in odd positions and her hands far apart.

"You know I don't like exercise," Serena huffed. "Please slow down because I'm not going to say what I have to say out loud."

Koby stayed in place as Serena took several minutes to reach her.

"Okay, now that you're here you can tell me."

A minute passed as Serena hung from the two boulders occupying her hands.

"Ryan cheated on me."

"What!" Koby lost her footing and slipped.

"Koby!"

Without missing a beat, she grabbed the nearest boulder and regained her balance.

"I'm alright. I was just shocked at what you said," Koby rolled her eyes. "So you said Ryan cheated. What an asshole!"

Serena's mouth hung open still processing the near death of her friend.

"I'm sorry, are we just going to brush over the fact that you almost died?"

"I'm fine. If I fell I would have been suspended in the air. It's okay. Plus I've been taking courses to become a licensed rock climbing instructor. I know how to handle such situations."

"Okay but don't scare me like that again. You know I won't be able to live without you. You're my best and oldest friend."

"I get it and the same goes for me. But anyways tell me about Ryan. How did you find out? Did you know the girl?"

"Okay, one question at a time. It was last Friday. You know I usually work late because of my boss--"

"Your jackass of a boss."

"Anyway, for some reason we closed earlier at a normal time like around five pm, so I decided to be the amazing girlfriend that I am and surprise Ryan."

"Rookie mistake, my sweet child. Surprising your boyfriend can make you end up with a fifty-fifty chance of you seeing something your brain can't forget." Koby shook her head, her right hand grabbing the closest boulder.

"Yeah well, I entered his apartment 'cause I have a spare key and... It's just, I'll never forget the

moment I heard those moans. My heart dropped. Like I gave him four years of my life only for him to throw it away for Lacey.”

“Wait, Lacey?” Koby looked down at Serena. “Lacey your coworker I met at the Christmas party that was so nice but I had a bad feeling about her and thought she was fake. That Lacey?”

“Yup.”

“I knew it! I knew she was a bitch! There’s no way someone can be that nice, especially with the office hours you guys have. I know I would be the devil himself. I don’t know how you manage it”

“Well, I guess Lacey isn’t far from the devil. Do you know the crazy thing? When I caught them she had the audacity with her smudged lipstick to smile at me. I didn’t even wait for Ryan to explain, I just left.”

“Yeah, there’s no point in letting him explain. What’s done is done. By the way, you’re not taking him back right?”

“What? Of course not! Why would you think that?”

“Serena, you know I love you but you are not the best judge of character.”

“That is completely false! What, so I get cheated on and I’m a terrible judge of character?”

“Well... Okay forget about Ryan and Lacey. Don’t you remember Peter, your last boyfriend?”

“What’s wrong with Peter? He was a nice guy.”

“A nice guy? He was a drug dealer!”

“Okay fine, besides Peter.”

“Mike.”

“Mike? In my defence, I was going through a phase.”

“Yeah, but he was broke, living in his mom’s basement. He was also obsessed with the dark web and I know he was doing illegal stuff on it.”

“Whatever. I’m happy we ended on good terms. I mean he may come in handy. Who knows when I’ll need stuff from the dark web?”

Koby scoffed in response. She was almost at the top of the wall.

“Also, you’re one to talk. Don’t you remember Theo? Senior year of college, Koby?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Really? Well, maybe Professor Theo would know something.”

“Shut up, you had your phases and I had mine.”

“Yeah well, at least mine didn’t involve our professor. You had him wrapped around your finger.”

“I mean there was no harm. We were single with no kids and you and I were about to graduate. Plus that feels like a lifetime ago.”

“Yeah, it does.”

“We’re so grown now. We have our own jobs and apartments. You know, life moves on.”

“I know, it’s crazy.”

“It is. However, never mention Theo again or I’ll scream about Halloween circa 2015.”

Serena pushed Koby, having climbed to her level.

“Stop. You promised you wouldn’t mention that.”

Koby laughed.

“I know. I’m joking.”

She climbed up further, finally reaching the top.

“Thank God. I couldn’t climb any further. The boulders are too difficult to grab. Rock climbing is hard,” Serena complained.

“They’re not boulders, they’re climbing holds. They have different names depending on their size and shape. Also, it’s not hard. You’re just lazy.”

“I am lazy and I’m too tired to get a lecture on climbing holds so can we please get down?”

“Fine.”

Koby jumped off the wall suspended in mid-air.

“See Serena, I told you it’s safe there’s an auto belay keeping me in—”

A weird mechanical noise cut her off and suddenly Koby began to free fall. Her screams pierced the air.

“Koby!”

The rope flung her into the wall with a stomach-churning crunch. It happened in a matter of seconds. The rope kept moving down until a thud silenced the last of Koby’s screams.

Serena hung from the boulders, frozen like she’d forgotten how to move. She knew if she looked down, her best friend’s lifeless body would be staring back up at her.

Telling Tails

Samuel Dodds

Barking is one of the greatest forms of communication invented since the telephone, I think. When I’m out on my walk; chest-puffed; tail wagging; there’s not a single person, dog or otherwise, who can’t hear my jubilant exclamations. Truly, the outside world is blessed by my narration of potholes in pavements, my announcement of toilet breaks and my personal alarm system for the neighbouring cat.

And indeed, my owner thinks so too. The example of today’s walk, in which I’ve stopped not less than six times, each with a formidable howl, depicts his more than pleased response. Every time I pause he seems more and more determined, even howling and grunting back at me towards the end. Whilst pulling near a feather or the road edge, I can usually turn to receive the most encouraging tug on my leash. That tug says, ‘there are more feathers this way.’ And there always are! When returning home, more often than not, I’m greeted by my choice of either a towel, a bath, or occasionally both. Typically, a treat for my murky endeavours. And then? I hear you ask. What’s next? Well, it’s crate time of course! If only describing it as my four-walled, steel palace would suffice. Truly, one cannot comprehend the comfort I’m presented with after a hard day’s walk.

Once I’ve dried off, and my desire for comfort has been satisfied, it’s onto dinner. I used to get kibble for dinner. It was rough, hard and hurt my teeth, so I stopped eating it. When my owner, Sam, realized that my taste buds are greater than the average dog’s, he quickly made the switch to wet food. Now, I feast like a king. Last night, I had roast beef. Tonight, it’s chicken. And, trust me, I know he was happy to make the swap too. He prefers when I’m well fed. That’s why I’ve started barking at him while he’s having his dinner. He recognizes my talent for taste and even shares his meals with me to gain my expert opinion. It’s truly a mutualistic relationship if ever I’ve seen one.

Finally, after dinner, it’s bedtime. I return to my steel palace, after Sam is done following me around, and prepare for sleep. Sleep takes a lot of preparation for me. I’m a busy body, after all. You can’t just expect me to shut down. Sam gets it. So, I let out my last barks of the night. Sam barks back and I know I’m ready to rest. Goodnight world. Until tomorrow. I snore, but Sam doesn’t mind.

The Test

Kyle Mailer

The house stood cold and lifeless, mirroring the storm raging beyond its windows. Lightning forked across the sky, its streaks briefly illuminating the distant sea as waves crashed furiously against the jagged shoreline. Even from this distance, the water looked menacing, a churning expanse of treacherous power. The rain lashed against the windows relentlessly, its rhythm echoing the pounding of an anxious heart.

Inside, the silence was heavy, broken only by the distant roar of the storm as the wind howled through the cracked walls. Gianluca stepped inside, his shoes leaving damp prints on the floor, his every move shadowed by unease.

"Gianluca, you're here," Elijah's voice came, smooth and low, as he emerged from the shadows of the dimly lit dining room.

"I got your message. You said it was urgent?" Gianluca replied, his voice edged with uncertainty.

"We have your assignment... Your initiation."

"Already?" Gianluca's unease deepened as another flash of lightning lit up the room.

"We work fast," Elijah smirked, but the expression faded with the next rumble of thunder. In the sudden light, Gianluca saw her; a woman tied to one of the dining chairs.

"Who's that?" His voice trembled; his gaze fixed on the figure.

"Your assignment." Elijah gestured toward the woman, her face pale, her expression defiant despite her bindings. "This is Isabella. She's responsible for sixteen deaths. You must kill her."

He placed a gun on the table, its cold gleam stark against the dark wood.

Gianluca recoiled, his heart pounding louder than the thunder outside. "You can't be serious, Elijah! I can't just kill someone – that's not what we do here."

"This," Elijah hissed, "is justice."

"No!" Gianluca countered, his fists clenched as another gust howled through the room. "This is revenge."

Elijah's expression hardened.

"Fail the task, fail the initiation." He leaned in, voice low. "Fail the initiation... You die."

"There must be another way," Gianluca pleaded. The rain outside lashed harder, echoing his rising panic.

"There isn't."

"Please," Gianluca said, his breath quickening. "I can't kill someone. It's—it's wrong!" Elijah's gaze turned icy.

"Tell that to the sixteen people she killed."

"But how do I know for sure?" Gianluca's voice rose, desperate now. "How do I know there hasn't been a mistake? No one should be judge, jury, and executioner."

"Gianluca, pick up the gun," Elijah ordered, his tone sharp and unyielding.

"No, Elijah," Gianluca said, shaking his head as the storm outside reached a crescendo. "I can't, I won't."

"Pick. It. Up." Elijah snarled, pulling a second pistol from his coat. "Or I'll put a bullet between your eyes myself."

Gianluca flinched, the thunder crashing like a gavel sealing his fate.

With trembling hands, Gianluca reached for the gun. The cold metal pressed against his palm, its weight magnified by the crushing burden of his conscience. His breath hitched as he raised the weapon, aiming it at Isabella's head.

"I can't do this, Elijah," Gianluca said, his voice cracking. "I didn't join you to become a killer."

Another flash of lightning illuminated the room, stark and unforgiving. For a fleeting second,

Isabella's face came into sharp focus. Her tear-streaked cheeks glistened in the flickering light. Her eyes were wide with terror. Muffled screams fought against the rag stuffed into her mouth. Gianluca's grip faltered, the barrel dipping slightly as he looked away, unable to meet the raw fear in her eyes.

"There has to be another way, Elijah," he pleaded, the gun shaking. "This isn't justice. This—this is murder."

Elijah stepped closer, his shadow long and menacing in the dim light.

"Justice," he hissed, "isn't always clean. Sometimes it's ugly – but necessary."

His gun remained levelled, unwavering.

"If you can't do what's needed, you don't belong here."

In the distance, the storm began to shift. The thunder's roar softened, its voice less sure. Rain still lashed the windows, but now it came in waves, like a dying argument.

"No," Gianluca said firmly, his voice steady despite the turmoil inside. He let the gun fall, the clatter echoing in the now-quiet room.

"I will not become a murderer. Nothing you say will make me do this." His knees buckled, and he sank to the floor, his head bowed. "Do what you must, Elijah. But I'll leave this earth as something you will never be – a good man."

The room grew still. The rain slowed to a gentle patter. A golden beam of sunlight pierced the clouds, chasing away the shadows and bathing the space in a warm glow. Isabella's sobs quieted as the light illuminated her tear-streaked face, her gaze locked on Gianluca's bowed head.

For a moment, silence reigned. Then, Elijah's voice cut through it, low and deliberate.

"Good," he said, the faintest trace of approval in his tone. "You have passed the test."

The storm was over now. The sea lay still, its earlier fury replaced by a serene calm. The sky stretched bright and blue above. The air filled with the sound of returning birdsong. The world was bright again as if the darkness had never been.

Cinquains

Swipe Right

Kyle Mailer

Swipe Right,
You are my type,
No match, I am not yours,
Swipe right. Nothing. I'm no one's match,
Swipe Right.

For Him

Samuel Dodds

It's hard
To feel this way
To love men but hate man
He is a diamond in the rough
My love.

Lindsey

John Irvine

Lindsey is the name of a blonde-haired girl I went to high school with. We were both in the same classes together: maths from secondary one to secondary five, geography from secondary three to four, administration from secondary three to four, English in secondary five and accounting in secondary six. We also caught the same bus to school together.

The first time I met Lindsey was at the North Mainland Sports Day in 2007, an event at the Brae High School where children from primaries six and seven from the seven North Mainland primary schools competed. I was introduced to Lindsey through a couple of girls from Brae I already knew were going to be in my high school registration class.

How could I best describe Lindsey? Kind, lovely, sporty, caring and smart, but timid. She had straight, blonde, shoulder-length hair. Her eyes were light blue, her face was round and pale with rosy cheeks, her nose was straight, her lips were pink with an undefined cupid's bow and her build was slender. She spoke with a calm and clear Shetland accent. I thought Lindsey was beautiful when I first laid my eyes on her.

I remember our first conversation together on that sunny, hot, blue-skies day of the North Mainland Sports Day. Lindsey and I were sitting together with some of the other primary students on the freshly cut grass, watching the 800-metres race. We spoke about where we lived, our families and hobbies. Lindsey lived on Scatsta Farm, with her mother and father, older sister and younger brother, while her grandparents stayed in the house below where she stayed. I had ducks and Lindsey had ducks too, but a lot more ducks than I had. I really loved ducks at the time and all of my ducks had their own names and individual personalities – Lindsey thought it was cute that I gave all of my ducks names. I really liked Lindsey, she was nice and we had a lot in common with our ducks.

I was twelve years old when we met, I was keeping a secret from her and everyone else that I knew. I am gay. Some of the other children in primary school used to tease me and call me gay – which really upset and hurt me, as being gay seemed to have very bad connotations. Little did I know that this harassment about my sexual orientation would continue throughout my high school years and I kept my secret buried. I did not come out as gay to anybody until I was nineteen years old and on New Year's Eve.

What does Lindsey have to do with me and my sexual orientation? I strongly believed, as a twelve-year old boy, that if I had a girlfriend like Lindsey I could hopefully grow out of my homosexual feelings for other boys and instead have what was considered normal heterosexual feelings for girls. I was so scared of being and growing up gay, which I associated with sadness and loneliness, that I decided from the moment I met Lindsey that I wanted her to be my girlfriend. Returning home from school after the North Mainland Sports Day, I raced to the computer, logged into my Bebo account, searched for Lindsey's Bebo page and added her. The following day, I found that Lindsey had accepted my friend request and I moved her straight to the number one spot on my top Bebo account friends. I thought about Lindsey a lot. I really wanted her to like me and be my girlfriend.

I asked Lindsey to be my girlfriend during the first week of secondary one. She rejected my request. She told me that she was not looking for a boyfriend, she did not find me attractive and that she only saw me as a good friend. I felt devastated inside.

Every Valentine's day from secondary one to six, I would give Lindsey a Valentine's card and a Valentine's present. She always seemed appreciative of the effort I made – although she never reciprocated this. I could feel from the expression on her face when I gave her these cards and gifts that she felt awkward and unsure, and her face would blush a darker shade of pink with a slight embarrassment. Looking back on it now, Lindsey most likely knew I was gay well before I was ready

to admit it.

One clear memory that stands out to me was during the start of secondary two, when Lindsey asked if I wanted to have a photo of her. This was around October 2008, before selfies were a thing and before the creation of Instagram. Now, at the time I was not going to turn down the opportunity of getting a photo of Lindsey from Lindsey! It would prove to myself and everyone else in the school that I loved Lindsey and that I could not be gay. She sent me the photo over Bluetooth. I kept the photo of Lindsey on my phone and I also saved the photo as my phone background, so that I could always see her beautiful face. The photo was a self-portrait of her face, head and neck, in black and white: she was looking at the camera and smiling. This was a stunning photo of Lindsey, I thought.

I remember, around the end of January 2009, showing someone something on my phone. They noticed that I had the photo of Lindsey as my phone wallpaper and found it a bit weird as she was not my girlfriend. They told Lindsey that I had the photo of her as my wallpaper and she pleaded with me to delete the photo. I removed the photo from my background, but did not delete it from my photos. After about a week, I set it as my phone wallpaper again.

Lindsey found out and, disappointed, requested that I give her my phone. I handed it over and she deleted the photo as well as removing it from my wallpaper. I read from her facial expressions that she found the situation awkward and embarrassing, and questioned herself why she had even sent me the photo. I felt extremely annoyed with Lindsey. What was the problem? After all, I really wanted to be her boyfriend and surely having her picture as my phone wallpaper must show her and everyone else that I really, really, really wanted to be with her.

Where is Lindsey now? She still stays with her parents and younger brother – only her older sister has left home and started a family of her own. Lindsey works on her family's farm at Scatsta with her father, like she did as a child, but now as a paid employee. Over the six years of high school, she would often tell me about helping her dad out on the farm with the cows, hens, ducks and geese. Given her love for animals, Lindsey seems to be living her dream of working on the family farm. She was bright and academic throughout high school, but she was consistently concerned about looking after and tending to the animals on the farm and did not really have any strong interest in pursuing a career outside of the family farm.

I have not spoken to Lindsey in person in over five years. I drove past her car a couple of times when I was last up in Shetland for work, but I doubt she would know what car I drive now. She would speak to my mum and ask about me if they bumped into each other in the local shops, but this has not happened for a couple of years. My mum tends to encounter Lindsey's mum in the local shops more frequently than Lindsey. Mum says that Lindsey's mum always asks after me, which is sweet of her. I think Lindsey has a boyfriend in her life, but I am not sure, as she is not very active on social media. I suppose she must be too busy looking after the animals on the farm.

I hope she is well and that she finds a lovely and caring boyfriend, as she really deserves one. Without a doubt, I feel sorry for acting like someone that I was not during our time in high school; pretending to be straight, praying to be straight, seemed like the most rational and sensible idea at the time. Let's get one thing straight, though: Lindsey will never be my girlfriend and I will never be her boyfriend. I am gay.

Intruder

Kah Kent Tang

I drag my exhausted body into the house after work. The shoe rack is full, and the slippers are comfy but much too big for me. I take the meat out of the fridge, season it carefully, and place it in the oven. While waiting, I snack on a fresh persimmon, gazing out the kitchen window. Winter is creeping into Aberdeen; the days are getting shorter, and darkness sets in earlier each evening. Everyone has returned to their warm homes – even the birds have settled in, leaving a complete silence around me.

Suddenly, the sound of someone unlocking a door and dragging their feet across the carpet becomes all too prominent. Is that the neighbour next door? I wonder, as I live alone. But as I peer through the peephole, I see a tall man – around six feet, with blonde hair – trying to enter my flat. Heart pounding, I rush to my room and hide in the closet, decorated with clothes and a few Barbie dolls. My phone is on the kitchen counter, so there's no calling for help. The child safety lock on the window traps me further. With no escape, I sit quietly in the closet, adrenaline coursing through my veins.

I can hear him moving around the kitchen, and then I hear the oven timer ding. His steps pause, and a strange silence fills the room. Then he starts sobbing uncontrollably, like a madman. Summoning courage, I dash out of the room, hoping to flee, but he hears me, enraged, and gives chase. He catches up to me, and I resign myself to my fate. This is it, I think, as I stop struggling.

He shouts at me while landing punches on my face, "Who are you? What have you done to my wife and my daughter, you demon!"

Haiku

Kirsty Macleod

Soft snowflakes falling
Frost lurking in the crisp grass
Christmas bells humming

Forgotten Man

Kirsty Macleod

I wake up in a small dark grey room. The bedsheets are scratchy and the mattress is as solid as cement. I look around, trying to get my bearings. There are bars on the windows and a small ceramic sink next to a heavy, locked silver door.

I feel my chest tighten as confusion takes over. I splash my face with cold water in an attempt to clear the fog that has captured my mind, but I fail. I don't know where I am but I know I don't belong here. I have to get out. I have to escape.

I try to shuffle to the door but my legs feel stiff and I struggle to go more than a metre. As I retreat back to my bed I hear footsteps approaching, a young blonde lady enters the room wearing a light blue uniform. She smiles at me, a little too calmly, she knows something I don't.

"Good morning Peter, how are you feeling today?"

Who is Peter and why is she talking to me like she knows me. She tells me I'm safe and that I need to get ready for breakfast, but she's lying, I know she is. I try to understand what she's saying but her

words are jumbled.

She doesn't leave, instead she sits down calmly on the side of my bed. I notice her smile with frustration as she tries to get me dressed. Who is this strange woman and why is she touching me?

"Leave me alone," I roar. She jumps up from the bed and hits a strange red button on the wall above my bed.

Almost instantly five more women all in the same light blue uniform come rushing into the room, all of them sporting the same look of worry.

"It's happening again," the first blonde lady says to the rest of them. I watch as one of the uniformed figures walks to a small metal table in the corner of the room, she is fiddling with something that resembles a CD player. All of a sudden the room is filled with bars of music, sound floating about like birds in the sky. I close my eyes and listen to the melody, I recognise it. I begin to sing along.

Once the song has come to an end I open my eyes, there is only one lady left. She tells me her name is Catriona but I already know this. I know who she is and I know where I am.

"It happened again, didn't it?" I ask her nervously.

"Yes it did, Peter, but don't worry, these things happen."

As she says this a young man walks into the room holding a card and a lively bunch of sunflowers.

"Hi Dad, how are you doing today?"

I look at him blankly, why is he calling me dad? I don't have any children.

Haiku **Separated** *Trisha Bhattacharya*

Many miles away,
I whisper at the night sky,
Missing what we left.

We were once whole moons,
Fractured now, two thin slivers
Pretending to shine.

My name on your tongue,
Promises you left undone,
Honey masking lies.

Out of Place *Kirsty Macleod*

The doors slid open and I stepped onto ward 303 for the very first time, clutching my badge in a clammy grip. My slightly damp shoes squeaked against the shiny floor. The hum of activity hit me immediately – a cacophony of voices, beeping, and clatter of trolleys. I felt as if I had been dropped in the middle of a play without a script.

"It's Kirsty, right?"

A brisk voice startled me. A nurse with sharp eyes but an even sharper ponytail appeared beside me.

"You're the new HCSW here for your shadow shift? Brilliant. Go grab a handover, they should be lying on the nurse station round the back. We'll need you for obs."

"Obs," I nervously repeat under my breath, nodding as if I know what she means. The nurse was already halfway down the ward, leaving me in the middle of the corridor. There were patients lying in the beds that lined the walls, some looked up at me out of curiosity, others didn't, too preoccupied with their own pain or drowsy consciousness. One man asked for water, his voice croaky. I paused unsure if I should help, but stopped when I saw a nurse gliding past me with practised capability.

The staff room was messy with half drunk coffee cups and a box of slightly stale biscuits. I sat down and read over the handover sheet. Bed 12:post-op, NBM, DNACPR, 04081946. The words swam on the page like a foreign language.

A buzzer began to beep and I noticed a screen on the wall flashing: HCA Bed 7.

I froze. That was me, wasn't it? But where was Bed 7? I emerged into the corridor, spinning in place as I searched for signs, arrows, anything that might point me in the right direction. A porter pushed past me with a muttered apology, the wheels of his trolley squeaking in rhythm with my shoes.

I eventually spotted a sign on the wall. Bed 7. The patient was an older lady, her skin white against the crisp hospital sheets. A nurse stood beside her holding her notes.

"Can you grab her obs?" the nurse said without looking up.

Obs again. I nodded, my smile faltering.

"Of course," I said, trying to match the nurse's confidence. My hands hovered near the patient as I tried to piece together what I was supposed to do. Temperature? Blood pressure? Something about a machine? The nurse gave me a pointed look.

"The BP cuff is in the trolley."

My cheeks burned as I hurried to the trolley. I grabbed the blood pressure cuff, fumbling with its Velcro straps. The woman's small arm felt fragile as I haphazardly wrapped the cuff around it. The machine began to angrily beep.

"You have to turn it off before you put the cuff on," the nurse said, taking the cuff and putting it on in one swift motion. I retreated, mumbling an apology.

The rest of the shift blurred into a series of small panics. A patient called me over to adjust their bed, and I accidentally flattened it completely. Someone handed me a jug and told me to refill it, but I spent ten minutes wandering the ward looking for a tap.

"Could you please grab a commode for Bed 9?" someone asked later.

"A commode?"

"It's a chair with a toilet in it," the nurse said with a sigh. I eventually found one in the next ward over, my heart thumping as I wheeled it towards Bed 9. The lady looked up at me with a pitying smile. By the end of the shift, my feet throbbed, my once-pristine uniform was smeared with who-knew-what, and my mind swam with acronyms and unfamiliarity. I sank onto a plastic chair in the staff room exhausted.

Bob

Harachi Ojiako

Once upon a time, there was a man called Bob. Bob always wanted money. In fact, he was in dire need of it. He was struggling a lot. No one wanted to hire him and he couldn't understand why. He had done all the right things. He went to school, got a degree, went back to school, got a master's, and now all that was left was his student debt.

Bob spent most of his days alternating between applying online to various companies and wandering the streets looking for stores with vacancies. At this point, he didn't care which job he got as long as they paid him.

One day, Bob was on Reading Street about to give up on his job search when a flyer hit him in the face. He read it aloud.

"Looking for a job? We have the perfect role for you! Call us at +44 994567347. No experience required."

Bob had been looking for this, but it seemed too good to be true. He stuffed the flyer into his jacket pocket and went about his day.

In the evening, at his shabby studio, Bob called the number on the flyer. What's the worst that could happen? Pressing the numbers into his cheap phone, Bob thought of all the possibilities ahead.

"Hello?" Bob asked once the call had been picked up. "Is anyone there?"

"Oh sorry! I'm a bit all over the place." The voice laughed. It sounded feminine with a bit of a musical lilt to it.

"Hi, I'm calling for a job. I got one of your flyers and it says that you have vacancies?"

"Oh yes, we do. Is there any role you are particularly interested in?"

"Not really. To be honest, I'm very desperate. I need the money or I'm going to go homeless. I will do any of the work you give me."

The voice on the other end went silent.

"Hello?" Bob asked urgently. He was worried he had scared the person off.

"Oh sorry again! I didn't mean to make you worry. One of the machines had a problem," she panted out of breath. "You said you need the money and you're willing to do anything for it, right?"

Bob hesitated at the question thrown to him. Was he really willing to do anything for money? Looking at his shabby studio he found the answer.

"Yes, I am."

"Hmm okay. Well, then I'm going to send some contracts to your phone. Do you think you can sign them immediately?"

"Sure."

It didn't take long for the contracts to be sent or signed.

"Okay, I've seen that you signed them. That's great." Papers shuffled in the background.

"You start work bright and early tomorrow. The details will be sent to you tomorrow so you don't need to worry about it. Have a nice evening and prepare for the day ahead."

"Thank you so much. I'm so grateful you offered me this opportunity."

"You're welcome Bob, and I hope you get what you wanted."

Bob went to sleep that night a happy man. He almost couldn't sleep, giddy at the fact that he had finally gotten a job.

The next day, Bob woke up.

"I don't want to get up," he mumbled. "The bed is so soft."

At that point, Bob's eyes widened. Too soft? His bed wasn't soft; it was the exact opposite, hard like a rock.

He shot out of bed scanning his surroundings. It was quite large and elegant. Honestly, it could have

been a hotel suite. He ran to what he believed was the ensuite bathroom and headed straight to the sink to wash his face. Once he dried it, he looked in the mirror and screamed. That was not his face. What was happening? Better yet, whose body was he in?

Toast

Adeela Rana

I nervously peer over at the wooden clock before me and let out a sigh. There are only five minutes left. In five minutes, the bell will ring, and the rest of the class will jump out of their seats and excitedly get ready for break time. Usually, I am a part of this crowd, but today, I sit nibbling at my thumb. I don't want to leave the classroom unprepared for what the playground might have in store for me today.

My stomach churns at the thought of this. I glance at the clock again; just two minutes left. I feel my heart fall into my stomach, and with every passing minute, my stomach tightens. I continue to nibble nervously at my thumb when I feel a gentle hand on my arm. I look over and see my friend Seher. She smiles softly as she whispers, "I brought money with me today. Let's go to the tuck shop and get some toast."

I look at Seher, shocked, and whisper, "But you hate toast."

She did; I remember my first day at this school whilst I shyly sat on the rough, wet benches with Brodie and Brooke during the break; I could see all the other kids screaming, running and skipping around. Beside me, I could hear Brooke and Brodie playing a clapping game whilst singing, "My boyfriend got me an apple." In front of me, I could see Seher sitting alone, drawing something on the ground with a stone. Her long, black, silky hair slicked back into a ponytail. She wore a brown skirt and cardigan, like mine; only hers had the top two buttons missing. I look over to see the circles she is drawing. She looks up at me and smiles when our eyes meet, and I find myself smiling back.

She starts waving at me, saying, "Come draw with me."

Seher looked like the kind of girl to be friends with. In fact, that morning, when the teacher asked the class who wanted to show me around, Seher jumped at the idea. At that moment, I knew I wanted to be friends with such a welcoming person.

I walked over and sat down next to Seher as she reached out and handed me a stone. Taking the stone, I, too, started to draw circles when I heard people shouting Seher's name. I looked up to find three girls from my class waving her over, recognising the curly-haired girl as Inshrah, the tall one as Neelam, and the girl with the hijab as Zahra.

"Come," Seher said as she grabbed my hand and took me to the other girls.

"We brought some toast for you," Inshrah said to Seher. She handed her a yellow and white striped packet covering the toast slice.

Seher made a grim face as she sniffed the packet and said, "Eww! I don't like toast."

"I'll have it," Zahra beamed as her whole face lit up with the idea of having an extra slice of toast.

"No, let Adeela try it," Seher says as she turns towards me and hands me the striped packet. "Try it and see if you like it. Everyone says I am weird for hating the taste of the tuck shop toast."

"Because you are weird!" Neelam laughs and starts nibbling on her slice of toast.

I unravel the packaging and open it to see a slice of white toast; I tear a piece off and put it in my mouth. The cold, soft, soggy toast melts in my mouth; it tastes like cold mush. I try another bite and instantly hate it. I much prefer my mother's toast, which is warm and buttery, filling my mouth with flavour. The others could probably read the disgust on my face as I heard Seher chanting, "She doesn't like it; she doesn't like it."

Inshrah turns to me and says, "Well, what do you think?"

I handed her back the rest of the toast and said, "Thank you, but I don't like cold toast."

At this, Seher turned and hugged me, saying, "You are my new best friend. We can both hate toast together."

As I hugged Seher back, we both jumped up and down excitedly. I had already made a best friend on day one of this new school. I felt the excitement buzz through me at the thought of my new friend's group, but the feeling did not seem to be reciprocated as I felt Inshrah push past me. At the time, I thought it was a mistake; naïve, I thought it was an accident. From that day on, Seher and I have been best friends. We have been inseparable; we do everything together, from PE buddies to reading partners, and we always choose each other.

This is why I was shocked and confused when she told me today that she wanted to go get toast from the tuck shop. She hates their toast.

"I just want to try it again, and my mum gave me enough for both of us," she tells me. I tell her she has tried it enough over the last four years to know she hates it, but I'm cut short by the bell ringing, marking break time. Everyone gets up fast and makes a line, ready to be escorted to the playground by Miss Black. I feel the nervous jitters in my stomach return as I slowly move out of my chair.

Seher grabs my hand and whispers, "Don't worry," pulling me to the back of the line. Once in the playground, all the other children run off to do their own thing. Seher grabs my hand and pulls me towards the tuck shop in the cafeteria. We line up and wait to be served. Seher is talking to me about something, but I'm not listening; I'm too focused on a curly-haired witch marching towards us. I try to cower behind Seher, but it's too late; I make direct eye contact with Inshrah. I frantically scan the room for a hiding spot, but it's too late. She's got me.

Seher must have noticed the fear on my face as she spun around to see what caused my panic. As soon as Seher saw Inshrah, she stood in front of me. My heart, thumping so loud, started to calm down a little. The protective stance of Seher and the anger on her face gave me some peace. Although she's only eight months older, Seher is more confident than me. She can stand up for herself and the people she loves. As I stand behind her like a coward, Seher is ready to fight my battle and send Inshrah to hell.

I don't understand why Inshrah hates me. She, Seher, Zahra, Neelam and I used to be good friends. Inshrah always made me laugh; even though she did say some mean things to me most days, I always laughed them off as a joke. However, lately, things have gotten much worse. Two days ago, she purposely tripped me up, and the day before that, she threw my chocolate on the floor and stomped on it. Yesterday, she pushed me out of the skipping line and told the other girls that if they played with me, she would snitch to her mum. When Seher continued to play with me, Inshrah pushed me so hard that I scraped my legs and knees and had to go to the first aid lady to get cleaned up.

I am scared to play with others every day during break and lunchtime. I hate break time; I wish I could always stay in class with Miss Black, but Miss Black says that is not allowed.

I look at Inshrah as she reaches us.

"So, this is where you have been hiding," she says.

"Leave her alone, Inshrah," Seher warns her, but Inshrah brushes her off.

"If you don't leave right now, Seher, I will tell your sister at the mosque that I saw you holding hands with boys."

I gasp at Inshrah's threat. My stomach tightens as I see Seher move away; I try to catch her eye, but she looks down, ashamed and walks away. My heart drops as the betrayal from my best friend cuts deep like a knife. I feel tears behind my eyes, threatening to make an appearance. I shake my head, refusing to cry in front of this bully. I will not satisfy her like this. I will be strong like Seher used to be. I will stand up for myself. Inshrah must've said something, but blood rushing to my ears out of fear deafens me.

"Loser! Reply to me," Inshrah shouts as she shoves me. She shoves me so hard that I feel my legs buckle as I lose my balance and fall on my sore knees.

"That's enough, young lady!" I hear an assertive adult voice say. I recognise it as Miss Black's. I look up to see Miss Black coming towards us, with Seher leading the way.

They get me off the ground, and Miss Black puts her warm, safe arms around me.

"Are you okay?" she asks. I nod because if I speak, I will cry. I look at my best friend, and the tears I have been fighting so hard to conceal finally appear.

Seher hugs me and apologises for leaving me.

"I'm sorry I had to leave; someone had to stop Inshrah."

I smile and nod. My heart fills with gratitude, as Seher didn't care what Inshrah could do to her; she put herself at risk to help me. I hug her tight, as no words can convey my gratitude for her. My best friend was a role model for me, someone I aspire to be. She had the ability and confidence to stand up against what was wrong and the ability to put others before herself. She was, at that moment, my hero.

Something Like That

Samuel Dodds

"It's not that I don't respect them," the elderly woman turned to her husband as she grasped hold of a tissue from what seemed like the deepest crevice of her purse. "You know me. I respect everyone. I do. Just tell me why they have to make it so public." She sneezed before scrunching the tissue closer to her nose.

"They have an agenda. You know that, Pam," the man retorted before coughing against the edge of his forearm. "All of these young people are so desperate to be different," he continued. "They'll do anything to stand out nowadays."

The bus ground to a halt before the doors shot open relinquishing three passengers onto the kerb. Stepping on after them was a large, vaguely silhouetted man dressed only in black. His neck ambiguous from his torso, you could feel the unsteadiness of his walk as he slugged across the aisle towards the bus's rear.

"Lord," Pam sighed as her eyes fixed on the ceiling. "Richard, look at him," she pointed ahead.

"They'll let anyone on the buses these days," he replied.

"Look at the way he's fallen into that seat. For goodness' sake, why can't people save the night cap for the night?"

"He's decided to sleep through the day instead."

The two cackled before a fit of coughing set upon them. The man slouched across the front edge of the rear row of seats and lay his head down before he began to snore. Just as the bus was about to depart, the driver caught the shadow of a couple of girls in his rear vision. The doors reopened

and the pair leapt up and onto the moving vehicle. They took hold of a nearby railing before quickly taking the seats next to Pam and Richard.

"That was a close one," the girl closest to Pam muttered while trying to catch her breath. "I hate running in front of people."

"Yes, it was embarrassing but at least we made it."

Pam turned curiously to the girls. One had a scarf, similar to her own, tugged tight around the lip of her coat. The other, with hair of a curlier nature, held on to both their bags through the folds of her white woven gloves. They had a certain style and condition which Pam instantly recognized and appreciated.

"It's a nippy one today, isn't it?" Pam remarked. "Good thing you girls made it on in time, eh?"

"Absolutely," the girl with the scarf said as she lifted her face into a smile.

"Are you girls heading anywhere nice?"

"Just into town for some shopping," the other replied.

"Ooh lovely. Getting something for Valentine's Day?" Pam queried as she clasped her bag nearer to her side.

"Something like that."

"You two must have a trail of gentlemen after you?" She smirked as her eyes lit up with interest.

"Something like that."

Pam turned back to her husband. "The youth of today aren't hopeless after all."

"How do you mean, my dear?"

"Those girls seem lovely. Very well spoken and polite."

"Your kind of people."

Pam nodded. Her face gleamed as she once more turned around to address the girls. However, this time, her attention was caught by something glaring which she hadn't noticed before. In between their seats, her vision was no longer able to separate the girls' two hands. They were now joined: fixed like glue, one on top of the other. For a moment, Pam questioned the necessity of this action. Were their seatbelts not securing their positions? They were. Was the heating not providing sufficient warmth for the journey? It was. Pam's only logical conclusion was that these two girls had an agenda. And she wasn't about to let that stand.

"Eh hem," Pam directed her voice as she cleared her throat. "So, you two are aware this a public bus, aren't you?"

Her eyes narrowed. Tucking her bag even closer to her side, she continued. "This is a public bus, girls."

"Your point?" The curly haired girl questioned as she clasped the other's hand even tighter.

"There's no place for that here. I'm just trying to do everyone a favour. Yourselves included."

"Don't," the other countered.

Richard rose from his slumber to support Pam in her quest.

"She's just asking you to keep it to yourselves. Come on."

The girls grunted and turned away in unison. This enraged Pam. She couldn't well let this go on. Rising from her seat, she leaned forward and slid out past the rail and into the aisle. Clinging onto each seat's back rest ahead, she managed to claw herself to the front of the bus.

"Driver," she commanded. "The two girls who have just jumped on are causing a nuisance. Please remove them from the bus at once."

"In what way are they a bother, Ms?"

"It's Mrs," she clarified. "And they just are. Remove them."

"I can't just remove them without a reason." He hesitated as he gripped the steering wheel even tighter. "Please sit down."

Pam returned to her seat, filling Richard in on the desperate nature of the situation before her.

"Drivers used to be so much more agreeable. Honestly, they're half the reason things like this go on."

"What did he say, my dear?" Richard yawned as he lay back.

"He said he can't remove them without a reason."

Suddenly, Pam was struck with a flash of inspiration. She needed a reason. Her head swivelled round once again as she started to examine the girls' surroundings. Their appearance was unspoiled. Their outfits were pristine. Their bags were tucked neatly beneath their legs. Their bags! That was it. Pam's eyes drew closer as she focused her vision on one of their backpacks on the floor. A bottle. She had it. One of the girls was carrying a bottle of cider with her. This was the ammunition Pam needed. She rushed from her seat, being careful not to bounce off the ceiling as she did, and once again made her way to the driver.

"Driver."

His hairs shot up from his skin as Pam's voice pierced his through his flesh.

"Driver, you simply have to remove these girls. They're being extremely disruptive. They're sitting giggling and leaning on one another, and I think they might be drunk."

"What makes you think that?" He questioned.

"They're carrying cider. You can smell it."

The bus came to a halt.

"What's going on?" The girl with the scarf questioned as she looked ahead to Pam. "Is she still on at us?"

"Shoosh," said the other. "I can't hear what they're saying. Oh my God. They're talking about us." Her face sharpened with rage.

"This woman is relentless. Why can't she just leave us alone? What is the driver saying? Why have we stopped?"

"He's asking about a bottle."

"A bottle of what?"

"Hold on, let me listen. A bottle of cider."

The girls gasped as a shade of white took over of their faces. The pair's eyes rushed to the floor as the fear of Pam's actions struck them.

"What are we going to do? She's going to get us kicked off the bus."

Pam circled once more to face them. Her expression boasted a look of achievement that hadn't been there before. She walked tall as she grew nearer her seat. She sat down, ignoring the two completely as she did, and let out yet another sigh. Though this time the sigh wasn't one of anguish. Pam was satisfied, having completed her crusade. Her moral determination had been rewarded. The girls were about to get what they deserved. The bus had been saved.

"Throw it away." Brushing her curls from her face, the girl squeezed the other's wrist as she pleaded her case. "Throw the bottle under the seat. Do it."

"I can't just throw it away. It's unopened."

"Just do it."

Rolling her scarf out of the way, she gripped the bottle by the neck and drew it from her backpack, placing it in the row of seats behind them. The driver stood with purpose as he made his way to the back of the bus.

"Ladies and gents, just going to need to take a look under some seats."

Blood rushed through the girls like water through a pipe as the fear of the impending doom took hold of them. The driver bent forward to scan their feet. For what felt like a lifetime, the pair sat in dead silence as the space below them was examined. He then moved to the row behind.

"Oh no! He's going to..." She was cut off.

"Is this yours?" The driver interrogated. "Does this bottle belong to either of you?"

The girls were too afraid to form a coherent sentence.

"We don't. We don't know what that is."

"This is yours. It was behind your seats. It must be yours." His voice became sterner. He tugged his tie tight before pointing to the exit. "This is yours. You can't drink on the bus. Off"

Pam radiated joy as she sniggered to a sleeping Richard.

"That's not ours," they begged.

"It's mine."

Standing from the back of the bus, the man in black stood tall. This time his stance was steady. This time he neither wavered nor stumbled as he walked. Instead, he marched forward to meet the driver, before proceeding with his confession. The girls, absolutely silenced by the shock of his actions, turned to face the man as well.

"The bottle is mine, mate. Sorry."

"You can't drink on the bus," the driver shook his head.

"Aye, sorry, mate. Just helps me sleep, eh?" The man turned as he loomed over Pam's right shoulder.

"A little night cap during the day like."

"You'll need to get off." The driver pointed out the exit as he waved the man past him.

Marching to the front of the bus, the man turned, if only for a second, next to the girls and drew their attention. He gave a subtle smirk before opening his mouth to give a brief whisper. "This was my stop anyway," he said before turning back round.

The man exited the bus through the double doors, and was never seen again. The driver returned to his seat before letting out a great sigh of relief. His shift could continue in peace. Pam lit up with fury as her eyes rolled to the back of her head. That night, she would recount the tale of her supposed injustice over and over again to her husband in outrage. Her husband, who was currently still asleep, would assume the role of audience member until Pam felt her breath was fully exhausted. As for the girls, they weren't down for long. Their plans were left unspoiled, and the heroism that was displayed by a complete stranger would leave a lasting impression on them both. The two would continue to be wholly themselves, together. Air shot through the aisle as the doors of the bus sealed closed. With a turn of the steering wheel, the driver pulled out onto the road and they were off.

Operation

Adeela Rana

I can hear the buzzing of the machines filling the room in the darkness, and faint, hushed whispers grow louder somewhere in the distance. I slowly open my eyes, wincing at the harsh lights as my surroundings come in and out of focus. Blinking, I try to clear my vision and take in my surroundings. As I look around, I see white walls, white ceilings, and white lights. I look down at myself and see wires comes from all directions, some hooking me up to monitors and some lying aimlessly on the bed in front of me.

The constant loud buzzing from the machine feels like a hundred hammers drilling into my brain. I wince and try to get up. I need to get out of here; where am I? Where is this place? What has happened? My mind races with a million questions to which I have no answers. I grasp at fragments of memory, struggling to piece together a timeline of events, but everything blurs into chaos, leaving me restless.

I try to get up again, but my body fails. A feeling of dread consumes me as I attempt to raise my hand, but my body does not respond. I try to move my toes, but again, there is no response. My heart sinks, fear taking hold of every inch of me. I try to scream, but not even a squeak leaves my mouth. Panic and terror rise inside me as my eyes frantically dart around the room, looking for an escape,

anything to help, anyone to help.

Suddenly, I feel a gentle yet firm grasp on my hand. A woman no older than forty, with brown hair and friendly blue eyes, looks down at me.

"You're okay, darling. Just relax. The anaesthesia is still wearing off."

I look back at her with questions in my eyes, the dread and horror written clearly on my face; her grip tightens around my hand.

"You had an operation, it went well, and you're going to get moved to a room soon, where your mum will be waiting for you. Okay?"

She squeezes my hand and then lets it go, returning to the machines. I attempt to thank her, but no words leave my mouth. As the dread leaves my body, exhaustion takes over, and I feel the world start to slip away. The lights get dimmer, and the walls get darker. I feel my mind slipping back into the darkness.

"Get some rest, darling."

Her voice sounds very distant now. My eyes slowly flutter shut, taking me back into the darkness.

My eyes slowly drift open, and instantly, I'm hit with the rush and urgency surrounding me in the room; the room is flooding with nurses and doctors. Some deeply discuss something urgent, while others work on moving a portable chest X-ray machine towards me. I attempt to get up and immediately feel pain rupture in my chest; I clutch my chest and lean forward to help me breathe, only then noticing that I am not lying down anymore; my bed has been moved into a sitting position. As the pain gets worse with each breath, I lean over the bed, gasping for air, and reach for the oxygen mask on my face, removing it in hopes of getting some relief.

As I feel my chest tighten and my breaths give up on me, panic takes over; what is happening to me? Has the surgery not worked? Am I having a heart attack? Each thought worsens my condition and makes it harder to breathe; as tears roll down my face, I clutch my chest and lean back into the bed, accepting my fate. This is it for me; I am going to die here all alone, in a room full of doctors and nurses, yet no one to hold my hand whilst I go. Each tear that falls tears a hole in my heart as the thought of dying without saying goodbye to my family burns deep inside me. I feel the same warm touch against my hand as my mind spins and my breaths slow. I look up to see the nurse from earlier.

"Take a nice slow, deep breath," she says as she puts my oxygen mask back on my face. "And don't remove this again; you need this."

She pulls the chest X-ray machine towards me while another nurse pulls me forward to place a board behind me. One unties my gown and asks me to sit straight, while another aligns the machine with my chest. Someone readjusts my oxygen mask while someone else moves my gown down lower.

"How are you feeling? You've been through a lot today," someone says.

"Poor girl," says another.

"She's only eighteen," someone else adds.

Overwhelmed by all the different voices and the rush in the room, I close my eyes and take deep breaths. What is going on? What is happening? Am I in trouble? When I reopen my eyes, I focus on the lovely nurse who comforted me earlier.

"What's going on?" my voice croaks, barely audible from the gasping the words were causing. "The surgery..." I reattempt, but my voice trails off as I run out of breath and energy. Defeated, I relax back onto the backboard of the bed just as the nurses pull the X-ray machine away. The kind nurse looks down at me with her tender eyes and soft smile as she understands my question.

"The surgery was okay, but you aspirated under anaesthesia... Do you know what that means?" she continues, seeing the confused look in my eyes. "You vomited whilst you were asleep; that has resulted in you developing aspiration pneumonia. We don't know the extent of the impact this has had on your lungs yet, but this is why we are doing an X-ray and taking blood so that we can find out."

I look at her blankly, not understanding what she is saying but too tired to ask any more questions; I rest my head back and close my eyes, exhausted from this small interaction.

“Rest now. We will take you down to your mother soon. She’s very eager to see you.”

I smile in response, happy to know that whatever torturous recovery lies ahead of me, I am not alone. My family is here, waiting for me.

Secret

Aminath Zaha Zahir

I wake up before everyone. Before the sun comes out. I don’t even wait for my mom to call me. I’m so excited. I can’t stop smiling. Today is the day we are going to Thuraakunu and we are staying there for two whole days. Mom says it’s only a one-hour ferry ride away from my island but it feels like we are going to another country. This is my first time going there and OH MY GOD! I’m just so excited.

I want to wear my new blue shirt so I can feel like a traveller. But it’s all wrinkly so I reach for the iron.

“Kids, don’t play with hot stuff,” my mom shouts from the kitchen. I think she heard me dragging the iron across the table. Aww come on! Yesterday she told me I was a big girl and I could pack for the trip.

If I can do that I can do this too right? Being a big girl is just so confusing sometimes.

Anyway, I pack my towel, my sunglasses and a Milo packet for the trip. I love Milo. That’s my explorer drink. My mom packs clothes and food for everyone and I keep asking, “Are we leaving yet? Are we leaving yet?” until my brother shoves a cookie in my mouth. Either he wants me to taste test his snack or he just wants me to stop talking.

When we reach the jetty, the ferry is already there. It’s dancing up and down like it can’t wait either. The smell of fish, sea salt and engine oil are all mixed together in the air. I wrinkle my nose. I don’t like it. But it smells like going somewhere exciting, so I don’t really mind.

I sit by the window and watch the sea. It looks like a shiny blue carpet that goes on forever. I don’t want to miss a single thing but I can’t stop thinking about everything I’m gonna do either. Fishing, collecting shells, painting them and ukaa. I love ukaa. It’s like dodgeball but better because you get to throw balls at your brother’s face.

It feels like the ferry has been moving forever, but somehow we are there before I know it. I finally see Thuraakunu. It looks smaller than Ihavandhoo but brighter. As if the sun likes it more and is standing closer there. The white sand looks golden under the sun and the water is so clear I can see my own reflection. Almost like it’s calling me. Everyone starts unpacking, laughing and talking. But I don’t care about that. I just want to run into the water.

It’s perfect. Cool and soft. The water comes up to my knees then my waist. I start jumping and splashing and shout for my brother to come. I shout again but he doesn’t care. He and his friends are too busy throwing rocks at people. Fine, I will just play by myself.

Suddenly, I can’t feel the ground. I don’t know how, but it’s gone. My feet are not touching the sand. The sea pulls me down so fast I don’t even have the time to scream. I kick and kick, but I’m only going deeper. The water is pressing me from all the sides. I don’t see the sky anymore. Everything is just dark. Scary. Spinning. Endless. And blue. My hands reach for something, anything. But there’s nothing. Nothing but the deep ocean.

Salt burns my eyes and mouth. My chest starts hurting. For a second, everything becomes quiet. I stop moving. The water feels strangely familiar like it’s hugging me. I think the sea wants to keep me. Maybe I will live with the fish now, but I don’t want to disappear. I imagine my mom calling me from

the shore and I try to answer. My voice doesn't come out. It's gone. The sea takes it.

Then something grabs me. Something strong. Someone pulls me up fast and the sky explodes back into view. I gasp, choke and cough out half the ocean. My dad's holding me. His face looks half worried, half angry. I start shivering and crying. Everything tastes like salt. I stare at the sea as my dad carries me back to the beach. It still looks beautiful. It looks so calm. Pretending like nothing happened. But I know its secret now.

Haiku **Sincerely, Your Pillow**

Aminath Zaha Zahir

I'm not your best friend
But I ask for no reward
For all your long nights

I remain quiet
Staying still, letting you dream
Far from all chaos

I wait on your bed
Still creased with the shape of you
I miss being held

I bear all your moods
You punch me then hug me once
I'm patient with you

You turn in your sleep
Your breath warm against my skin
I follow its rhythm

Hoping to help you
I drink the grief in silence
Now drenched in pain

I'm not your best friend
But I know you very well
I can be your home.

Twelve Years and More

Aminath Zaha Zahir

The floor was covered in half-open boxes, rolls of tape and piles of clothes that looked like small hills. The hum of the ceiling fan blended with the thumps of the books being stacked.

Sawa knelt beside the wardrobe, pulling hangers off the rail one by one.

"You really don't need half of these," she said, holding up a sequined top. "When was the last time you even wore this?"

Eashal was squatting by a suitcase.

"Never," she admitted "You made me buy it for your cousin's wedding, remember?"

She rolled a pair of jeans into a tight bundle.

"Oh right!" Sawa laughed, tossing it into the donation pile. "You spilled apple juice on it before the party even started."

"Because you made me dance! But not going to lie, the music was so good," Eashal replied as she dug through a drawer. She pulled out a bracelet. It looked old with the threads frayed and dull.

"Hey! Look at this."

Sawa turned with her hand full of folded scarves.

"Oh wow," she said. "We made those in your kitchen during that power cut."

"Yeah," Eashal wrapped it around her wrist. "We were so bored and you burned half the thread with a candle."

"You were the one holding the candle." Sawa pressed a strip of tape across a box.

"Don't rewrite history just because you are moving away."

Eashal smiled.

"Fine! We were both useless."

Sawa opened another drawer and found a heap of notebooks.

"Are these going with you?"

Eashal looked over.

"The blue one, yeah. Leave the rest."

Sawa flipped it open.

"Oh my God, look at this, Paws and Coffee. You actually drew a logo."

Eashal groaned.

"Stop! Don't tell me you found that one."

Sawa laughed and read aloud: "Menu: pup cakes and human friendly lattes. All pets welcome except snakes."

"You are the one who said snakes are bad for business."

"You agreed!" Sawa was still laughing as she slipped the notebook into a box. "We really thought we would open a dog cafe right after college."

"Yeah. You would have done the talking and I would have done the panicking."

"Same as now then," Sawa said, pressing down tape across another box.

Eashal rolled her eyes but smiled.

"Maybe."

The tape gun squeaked again as Sawa sealed another box.

"So," she asked. "When do you leave again? Saturday?"

"Yeah, morning." Eashal closed the suitcase lid.

"You'll come to the airport, right?"

"Obviously! Someone has to make sure you don't forget your passport."

"Haha, very funny." Eashal dragged the zipper of the overpacked suitcase.

"Just being realistic." Sawa lifted a box and placed it by the door.

“You forget everything except your charger.”

“At least I won’t forget you,” Eashal said, stretching her arms.

Sawa looked at her for a moment longer than before. She reached for another empty box, handing it over.

“There’s something good waiting for you there, but call me if it gets hard, okay?”

Eashal smiled, tucking the box under her arm.

“I’ll call you so much, you’ll wish I forgot you.”

Sawa laughed, shaking her head. But her eyes stayed still. They looked tired, almost hollow. She bent down and lifted a suitcase. It felt heavier this time, like it carried twelve years of their lives inside.

Home

Trisha Bhattacharya

The cold winter air nips at my bare hands as I stare up at the grey, melancholy sky. I miss the dhoop – the stubborn, golden light that used to melt over my skin and whisper, “sab theek ho jayega.” The kind of promise that everything would somehow be alright. Here, the empty streets after 5 pm seem to have been choked by darkness, as if the city itself cowers behind the night. Yeh itna khali kyun lagta hai? Why does everything feel so empty? Like a mirror reflecting the hollowness inside my heart. This stillness is haunting. A quiet that almost feels condescending, questioning my presence here. What am I doing here?

Sometimes I wish someone would brush past me, longing for a shoulder to collide with mine, just so I could relive the familiar chaos of a bheed. A crowd so bustling that people spill into each other without apology, without thinking. Here, the abundance of space around me feels deliberate and calculated. Everyone moves carefully, almost rehearsed, careful not to touch or look too long.

Dar hai ya aadat?

Is it fear or simply habit?

In these silent moments, I find my mind wandering towards thoughts of ghar.

Of home.

Of Mumbai.

I can almost hear it before I see it – the distant rumble of traffic, the auto-walas honking and calling out to each other, people darting across roads without fear, followed by a chorus of gaalis, inventive profanity, thrown out of car windows freely. The aroma of freshly cooked, garam-garam vada pavs permeates the air, evoking hunger from strangers.

And somehow, even the disorder felt warm – messy, relentless and intimate. Mumbai had jaan, a soul, an incomparable liveliness, the kind that settled in your heart whether you invited it or not. A heartbeat that thrummed through the bustling bazaars, the incomplete roads, the local trains and into the people themselves. It was impossible not to be completely entranced by it. Its exuberance and its solace were undeniable.

Here, the air was clean, maybe too clean. Streets are too well-built and straight. Etiquette is taught and followed with care. The weather – always unpredictable, foreshadowing the tone for the day. Mornings punctuated with polite good mornings and hellos, like a tune stuck on repeat. Was it habit, or kindness? Did they prefer the silence?

Yet, I am learning to see it differently. This quiet is not an absence, it is jagah. Space. Space to breathe, away from all the clutter polluting my head. Space to grow in ways the noise of home never allowed. Space to re-invent myself.

“Thoda waqt lagta hai, settle ho jaungi.” It just takes a little time, I’ll settle in eventually, I tell myself.

A mantra on loop.

Ghar ki yaaden will always follow me wherever I go, accompanied by the smell of spices and the warm smiles of my family. Perhaps with time, this place too could become my ghar.

On some days, when the sun manages to break through the clouds, even for a moment, the light caresses my face, and I'm reminded that dhoop is always there. Not the same, not yet, but close enough to remind me that it's not all different here. This place deserves an unbiased chance, a mauka. I wipe the homesick tint off my glasses and, for the first time, truly see this city not just with open eyes, but with a heart ready to belong.

Shifting

Trisha Bhattacharya

The yellow and white building stood tall against the slums framing the background. VIBGYOR flashed across the top of the building, each letter corresponding to its colour on the rainbow. At 7:30 am, the wide green gates opened, allowing a swarm of students to pass through. I felt like a mouse trapped in a herd of cattle. My heartbeat thrummed in my ears as I fidgeted with my new uniform – a red collared white shirt with khaki trousers that had been ironed meticulously. Despite being dressed like everyone else, I felt judging gazes pierce through me, trying to figure me out. Who was I? Why was I there? Whispers floated by, or perhaps it was my insecurities poisoning my mind? The crowd parted like waves receding, and I walked hand in hand with my dad, unbeknownst to the person I would morph into here. My life had flipped on its axis since finding out I was being forced to move across the world to India. A new country, a new city, a new school; familiarity was snatched away from me.

I was met by two male security guards dressed in blue uniforms. Friendly smiles painted their faces as they requested my student card. I hadn't gotten mine yet. A sense of impostorism settled deeper into my veins. I looked at my father expectantly, waiting for him to articulate the words that my mouth refused to say. He explained my situation, and the kind men let us pass through, welcoming us to the place I now often view fondly in my memories. I set foot into the atrium and was immediately overwhelmed by the sheer number of students packed inside. Students stood, their backs pressed against the wall behind, in a straight line, waiting expectantly for the lifts. Two teachers patrolled up and down the line, ensuring everyone was wearing their ID cards and following the rules. Still, this one boy sneakily cut in front of me to join his friends, as the teachers walked ahead. He didn't even ask for permission, how incredibly rude. I felt their unwavering gaze on me. My ponytail suddenly felt too tight. Conversations overlapped each other, Marathi, English and Hindi seamlessly blending into one another. Most of it sounded like gibberish to me. We all looked similar, yet I wondered if they could tell I was not one of them. I clung to my father's hand tighter, demanding extra reassurance. At that moment, I truly felt what it meant to be a non-resident Indian. The disparity was painfully obvious.

With only two lifts on either side of the ground floor: one for the IGCSE students and one for the Indian curriculum students, we were segregated from the beginning. As I inched closer to the end of the line, my palms grew increasingly sweaty. I reluctantly let go of my father's hand. Every possible embarrassing scenario ran through my head; I was determined to make a good impression, or else I could kiss my chance at a social life goodbye. The red lights above the lift glowed, 'G' with an upwards arrow. The grey elevator doors stood proudly, sliding open. I looked back one last time to meet my father's kind eyes. He smiled encouragingly, waiting for me to enter. Realisation hit – this was real, this was happening. I stepped inside, crammed against the other students, patiently waiting for my floor.

The lift chimed 11th floor, and students hurried out in a stampede. I stood there for a minute, my body frozen, unwilling to comply with my mind. I was entering halfway through the year, and catching up would be a futile attempt. Would I look stupid? These thoughts plagued my mind.

"You must be the new student in 8A... I'll show you to your class," a generous teacher offered.

She snapped me out of my daze, and I followed her blindly till I reached the door. My hands trembled as I turned the door handle. I peered through the glass window, wanting a preview of what's to come. Everyone was already seated, chatting amongst themselves. I took a deep breath and walked in. It felt as though time had stopped; heads snapped towards me, waiting, beckoning. I scanned desperately for a seat, wanting to be out of their critical line of sight. Only one seat was left, right at the front, touching the teacher's desk. I took my seat, shying away from everyone else. Just after I had put my bag down, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around, faced with a girl with her black braid tossed over her shoulder and a soft smile to accompany those curious eyes.

"Hi, my name's Khushi. What's yours?" she asked.

Only later did I realise that this moment marked the beginning of transforming this unfamiliar place into one filled with some of my most precious memories – a home.

Blue Skies Ahead

Samuel Dodds

Precious: that's where the name 'Sapphire' comes from. Mama came up with it herself. It's unconventional, particularly in Cairo, but she wanted a name to reflect her love for me. I've always been really important to her. We both have: my sister and I. We're different though: she favours conformity; I less so, but Mama doesn't see that. She sees her two perfect girls. She only sees that. I'm not sure Mama has ever truly seen me, at least the way that I see myself. Not the girl I am now: my face plain, hair strangled and clothes unadorned; but the woman I want to be. She's never bent, not even once, since my dad left. That's why I had to do it like this. It's better this way. And I know what she thinks. I know what she sees. My dreams? Ha! Forget it. It's all about what she wants. What she thinks. How she sees me. Well, that's over now. Goodbye. Good riddance. Oh God. I've really done it. I've really left her.

I wake to an uncertain tremor. Turbulence? I pause. My eyes dart across the room towards the window to view a pitch-black exterior. Though disconcerting, it doesn't prevent me from straightening my currently contorted legs and prying myself out of my seat. I would have had more space if not for the adjacent passenger. If only describing him as a sleeping giant would suffice. But no, his breath, resemblant of my father after a glass of Arak, now occupies the entire cabin. Escaping to the aisle will be a challenge. Yet, I pursue. After all, I am starving. I haven't eaten anything since the bus and, predictably, I've lacked the foresight to pack a meal. As much as the lack of space and breathable air holds me back, I manage to pry myself up and out of the row. I glance back, just beyond the man's sparse head of hair, to note the time on the monitor in front. It's the evening.

According to the small plane icon on the map, we're about halfway there: halfway to JFK. Even just saying that makes me giddy. I'm going to New York. New York City! It's been my dream for so long. To be honest, anywhere but home has been. But in New York I know I can live, and I mean truly live, the way I've always wanted to. I can be myself and I'll finally have everything that I need. And what do I need right now? Peanuts. Sadly, my sudden surge of joy hasn't deterred the hunger which now plagues me. I go searching for the cabin crew, hoping to find some semblance of a meal.

Whilst shifting through the rows, I study each of their occupants. I wonder if it's a trait passed down from Mama – scrutinising – or if it's simply born out of sheer self-doubt. Either way, as I venture to

the next compartment, I make note of the family to my left, and the young couple to my right. The family is of course a jab to the gut, but it's really the couple on the right that nags at me. They seem young, even as young as me, and yet they appear so, well, together.

I envy this. I'm already twenty-five and my only plan in life thus far has been New York. Yes, I know what she'd say, by the way, in case you were wondering. She would say I'm being silly; to stop being so childish; that I have no plans and no idea what I'm doing. She's not here, is she?

I finish up my internal monologue and promptly move myself forward through the cabin. The trouble with flying at night is – well I've never flown at night – so that's the end of that thought. Oh Lord, the scepticism is taking over. I must be delirious. I am so hungry. I've never been this hungry before. Just as I'm about to faint, out of the corner of my vision, I see the vague yet familiar allure of movement. It's difficult to tell beyond the darkness but I think I can see a waistcoat. He must be cabin crew, I think to myself. Though, as quickly as he appeared, he's now gone behind the curtain ahead of me. I follow him, and as I do, I make sure to remember my seat position. After all, there's no one to remember it for me.

I slide my hand through the small gap between the fabric and the wall and pull open the curtain from its edge. Instantly, I'm taken aback. The man in the waistcoat isn't carrying peanuts, or any food for that matter. He's serving drinks behind a bar. Do all planes have bars? I consider the answer. I'm not sure. Although, this isn't just any bar. This bar is glass: pure, spotless glass with a gold rim encircling some of the most expensive bottles of wine I've ever seen. Truthfully, I'm not much of a wine drinker. Ever since my dad left – taking nothing with him but his duffle coat and a bottle reading Jack Daniel's on the side – I've developed an aversion to alcohol. No, it's not the drink that impresses me, but how the drinks are being made. The station, the tools, the technique: it all seems so intoxicating. I'm fascinated. And suddenly, the plague of hunger I once spoke of seems to have dissipated entirely. In its place, a deep curiosity for bar craft now arises.

Moving more closely, I'm able to appreciate the bartender's art in greater depth. He moves his hands, from side to side; to side to side, while holding not one but numerous glasses and ingredients. I'm tempted to ask him about the drink on the end: the drink that he's just finished making. It appears fresh and sweet and, most notably, it's blue. Blue! As in sapphire blue. It has to be a sign. A sign for me. A sign that everything is going to work out. A sign that, no matter who doubts me, I'm doing the right thing. That she was wrong. Well at least, she would have been wrong if I had given her the chance to tell me what she thought. I lean forward against the glass bar top to inquire about the drink.

The Cure

Samuel Dodds

Full-body and sparkling
You take away today's pain
But promise your own.

Lost in the Heat, Found in the Name

Duaa El-Zarouk

My phone pings. *Welcome to Libya!* I glare at the screen, Three Mobile offering me all these upgrade deals. I can't help but notice my palms sweating. I look at my mum, and she gives me a comforting nod. "حبيبي وصلنا", "we've arrived, my love."

My ears feel funny, and my legs are dead from the hours sat down on the seat. I look out the window of the plane watching the go-kart-looking vehicles drive towards the plane. Please remain seated until further notice.

My mind starts to race. I wonder if anyone remembers me. What if I'm not fluent enough?

"Duaa."

I want to go home. How many cousins do I have? I wonder how hot it'll be.

"Duaa!"

I snap back to the present. My mum's calling my name.

"Yeah, I'm coming."

I grab my little pink suitcase and head for the plane door.

I hear people speaking in the native tongue around me. I don't know them, but their voices settle in my chest like a soft, familiar song. For a moment, I feel the slightest sense of belonging. But how could I? This is a place I haven't been in almost a decade. A place that feels both strange and familiar.

My foot hits the metal steps, and a wave of heat wraps around me instantly – thick, heavy, as though the air is trying to embrace me. The sun is brighter here, almost too bright. I squint as I follow the line of passengers onto the bus waiting below.

My heart thuds. Every sound feels louder. Every scent feels sharper. The fuel from the plane, dust, the faint scent of oud from someone's clothes. I grip my suitcase handle tighter. At passport control, the officer looks at my name, then up at my face. For a moment, I forget how to smile. But he nods, stamps the passport, and hands it back without a word. Somehow that small gesture feels like permission – like the country itself is quietly telling me, you can come in.

We step outside, and the heat hits even harder. My mum is already scanning the crowd for familiar faces. I realise I'm holding my breath.

"دعاء".

Then I hear it – someone calling my name.

My chest tightens. I freeze. I'm so used to everyone saying Dew-ah in English, only my parents and siblings ever speak my name in Arabic. No one else could ever say it right – my school was full of Scottish voices, never quite the right rhythm. But this stranger's voice carries it across the air, soft yet certain, and for a moment my name feels like a secret I've never shared, suddenly alive and exposed in the world again.

Aunts, uncles, cousins I barely recognise rush forward, their smiles wide, arms open. They smell like  I remember from my childhood, like homes I used to run through without thinking. They are talking fast, too fast, their voices crossed between tears and joy. I try to keep up. Maybe I stumble. Maybe my accent sounds clumsy. But no one seems to mind.

My mum squeezes my hand.

"You're home, habibti," she whispers.

And for the first time since the plane began to descend, I let myself believe her. Maybe you can belong somewhere even if it feels unfamiliar. Maybe belonging isn't about remembering a place – but a place remembering you.

I inhale the hot, dusty air again, feeling the weight of it settle in my lungs. My phone buzzes with another Three Mobile notification.

I ignore it. I'm here. I'm home.

Path of the Righteous

Moiz Maqsood

8:27 pm. October 31st. The city streets are crowded for the holiday. Amidst the chaos, there is a criminal element. It's been creeping, slowly making its ground, as the city loses its soul. The powers that be do not care about this spiritual decline. But that is why I am here. I am here to police my city as God has intended me to do.

The moon is risen and pierces the clouds, spotlighting the suspect's home. The downpour of rainwater crashes on top of my car with loud thuds. The screen wipers screech every few seconds, clearing my view. I'm situated opposite a block of flats; 87 McCulloch Avenue is in my sights. This is a decent apartment complex; one that the suspect can definitely afford with his banker's salary. Suspect has a wife and three kids, and they live in the bottom floor flat. Soon, the children will know the truth about their father, and his despicable nature. Scum like him don't deserve kids. Does he think the innocence of children will save him from his sins? Does he really think he can bring satanic energy into a family and get away with it?

"That's him," I whisper to myself. Suspect has arrived at 8:35 pm at his home in his black Range Rover. His name is Errol LeDoux; forty-seven years old; a well-defined, moustached Scotsman of about 5'10". He wears his long brown hair in a bun and has glasses. He runs from his car, dodging the heavy rain, quickly unlocks the front door, and runs into his house. I hate the look of him. Everything about him disgusts me. And after tonight, he's finished.

I've been watching him for most nights over these past few weeks. After I learned of his crime, I knew that only I had the expertise to deal with him. It would not be the first time I've had to deal with an animal of his nature. He comes home at around 8:30 pm, late for a working man. I see him greet his wife in the window every evening. She's always made a lovely home-cooked meal for him. She is a wonderful woman, accomplished in chemistry, but now a victim of a Godless marriage. That is what she is being reduced to by this man. She used to work as a teacher, but now takes care of the kids full time. She chooses an honourable life path, while her husband chooses debauchery and vice. I hear police sirens round the block. I won't need help tonight. This bastard is mine.

He comes out for a smoke after dinner, and that is when I will get him.

8:58 pm. Errol is about to be finished with his dinner. I must be ready. I place my baton inside my overcoat. This is a covert mission, so I must be quiet. I mustn't draw attention to myself, or it's all ruined. Adrenaline courses through my body. My heart is pumping. I can feel it coming out through my chest. This is normal. It happens every time before a catch. I enjoy this feeling. It's God's way of giving me the strength that I need to carry out the mission.

9:04 pm. The door opens and Errol comes out with a purple umbrella and lights his cigarette.

This is it. It's time to stifle one more savage part of the path leading away from righteousness.

I drive forward until I'm parked directly opposite the building. The adrenaline is pushing harder through my veins. I'm ready.

I exit the car. The rain has slowed into a light drizzle, leaving some muffle in the air. I start to cross the road. On the pavement, between Errol and me, there is a father and his son about to trick or treat at Errol's. Damn it. Why didn't I see that? I think to myself. Okay, okay. Just wait. I stand, waiting in the rain until this boy can finish his damn joke. Errol hands the boy a sweetie from a box that was already on the porch and lights his cigarette again. I start walking up to the front door and begin to limp. Errol notices me.

My heart spikes. You've done this before, compose yourself, I tell myself.

I see Errol's face more clearly. As I step into the luminescence of a streetlight, Errol's face wears a frown.

"Father?" His face quickly turns joyous and hosts a big grin. "What are you doing here? Hey father,

are you okay? You're sweating a storm there."

"Son? Errol? Is that you? Oh, son it is so brilliant that it is you. I'll explain why I'm stressed. You see... Oh son, I'm afraid I need some help with my car, son."

False worry slips on to my wrinkled face. Errol nods and asks me to continue.

"You see, my car's engine is acting up. And... and son, I'm not so sure if it is the oil or something else or whatnot. So, then I stopped just there. And here I have found you. I was just going to ask some stranger but here you are. You see over there, that is my car." I slowly raise my arm to point at my 2007 Ford Focus. "What do you say, would you help an old man out at this late hour?"

"Yes, father of course. I can come over and have a look, sir."

I am ecstatic and my face lets Errol know that. He leaves his umbrella by the door, and we slowly make our way to my car.

"You are doing God's work, son. May God bless you and your children."

"No worries, father. You know, my middle child, Stevie, he's turning thirteen next week. I have a whole surprise birthday planned for him. And I'm getting him a video game console he's been begging for for ages now."

He tells me this with such excitement. As if I care. Why should I care? If he really cared about his family, then he wouldn't do what he does. So, he's getting his son a surprise birthday present. Yes, that is definitely going to compensate for all the evils you've done. I'm sure little Stevie will love the games system you got him once he learns what you do. Disgusting boor.

"Oh son, that's wonderful. Absolutely wonderful," I reply. "Say, has it been busy here for Halloween, son? Have there been many, what do you call them, treat or tricksters around here tonight?"

"No, father, people don't seem to be going out these last few years. They're all too busy on their phones. Even my kids didn't want to go out. I guess the rain is a big deterrent."

The rain starts to become more aggressive, once again.

"Ah, speak of the devil." He chortles. Of course, he speaks of the devil. As I limp next to Errol, I look left and right around the road, to see if anyone is there. To the left? Empty. To the right? No one.

Perfect. We come up next to the car.

"Hey, Errol son. Come round this way." I amble around the back of the car to the driver's seat.

"Okay, father. Should we start the car and look for the problem? Usually, it says on the dashboard there." He points at the dashboard through the window. He's focussed on explaining car technology to me. What a fool. Another surge of adrenaline hits, and my heart rate peaks to a new high.

"Errol, son."

He looks at me.

"Could you check the tyre pressure down there, it could be that you know? I don't think I'd be able to check myself."

"Sir, I don't think it will be anything to do with the tyres if you were saying it was an engine failure. You should unlock the car, and I can get a better look at what's going on."

I feign disappointment and confusion with a frown. Errol looks at me apologetically. Slowly I lose the tension in my eyebrows and my frown becomes more pathetic.

"But you know what father, if it makes you feel better, I will check."

"Thank you, son, you are a Godsend." He nods and turns around. He bends over to check the tyres.

Monday, October 8th.

It was a long day. Morning mass was completed in, well, the morning. It was a low turnout. Most morning masses are. People only come for Sunday prayer, as if they can ignore God for the whole week and then expect to be absolved by showing up once for an hour while willing the clock to go faster so that they can go home to ignore God for another week. But God notices, he can't be tricked. They must know this, they're just too lazy to act on it.

I took confessions that day. God is ready to forgive as soon as we seek penance. It is God's greatest gift to his children. Whenever I may sin, I remember every detail. I write it in this notebook and seek forgiveness for everything I can remember.

The first person was a girl. She shouted profanities at her mother and spoke back to her teacher. She said she lost her temper at her teacher and wanted to throw a pencil at her. Another girl came in after her. She was judgmental to her father. She scoffed at his gift choice for her mother; and she broke a promise to her friend by telling a secret to another friend.

But what I confess now is that I don't remember anything else from this day, except the confession of Errol LeDoux. "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." He paused. "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It is three months since my last confession. I am a father and a husband. I work in an investment firm." He paused once again, and cleared his throat. "I have sinned. I have, for the last seven months, been having an affair with my secretary. It has gone further than just simply sleeping with each other, and I have had to move funds from my children's accounts to pay for things for my..." He stopped again. He couldn't find the word.

"Mistress," I told him.

"Y-yes... my, erm... mistress. I've bought her necklaces and rings and books and all sorts of things. Very miscellaneous. Yes... I feel terrible, though, father. I mean how couldn't I? Nobody has a clue about anything. But I have this overwhelming guilt materialising over my every move. I fear I cannot stop Father." He paused once more and let out a sigh. "I must add context that she is rather, well, young. She's just coming onto twenty-two I believe. And—"

"So, she is twenty-one. And how old are you, son?"

"Erm, forty-six. But it's not the age of her I like, I promise. But... I mean, I don't hate the age," he chortled. His laugh filled my body with an indescribable feeling of sickness. What a grotesque man.

He claimed that it started because his wife would not sleep with him because she had been so tired with the kids. He felt as if this woman (if you can even call her that) was the only person that actually paid any attention to him, and he felt seen by her. All I heard was pathetic excuses from a pathetic man. I remember his voice trembling when asking for forgiveness. Claims of ending this infidelity were tossed in the air, but I didn't believe him. I said a prayer for his absolution and let him go. The only feeling left for him was utter disdain.

I confess now to you, God, that I must do something drastic. I must gather evidence of his affair. This man is not suitable for forgiveness. He must be punished before any chance at forgiveness. He is what is at the heart of the deep rot of society. This Godlessness is rampant and must not be permitted to continue freely. It is at the centre of a corrupt plot to degrade the soul of my beloved country. I do not plan to sit idly by while my home is destroyed by these barbarians, these heathens. No. I won't. God, please, I seek penance for what I am about to do. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There he is. Helpless. My prey. I reach inside my jacket and grab the baton. He's crouching, testing for any punctures in the tyre. I take my chance. Using both arms, I raise the baton into the air, behind my head. With all my might, I swing down. His head caves and he falls to the ground, striking the concrete kerb on the way down.

Brilliant. It wasn't messy. I quickly open the back door then grab and put on a plastic apron and gloves. His limp, still body stays lying there. How pitiful. How avoidable is his fate, but his lust could not help him. I grab him, body first and heave him into the trunk of my car. I push him into the plastic covered trunk. The crinkling of the plastic overpowers the sound of the heavy rain. This torrent of rain makes this a lot easier as it should wash away the blood on the ground. I throw the apron and gloves into the trunk and quickly shut the door before anyone notices and jump into the front seat. 9:10 pm. I turn on the radio and start moving. I look around and the street is still empty, thankfully. I drive. And I don't look back.

Where I Found Him

Duaa El-Zarouk

Jules knelt at the headstone, brushing away the moss and dirt that had begun to creep over the engraved letters.

"You always hate this part, Isiah," she muttered under her breath, laughing softly. "Dirt, weeds... Nature's way of being messy, I suppose."

"Hey! I don't hate it. You just don't let me help you clean it. You prefer bossing me around," Isiah replied.

She jumped at the sound of his voice behind her shoulder.

"Isiah! You scared the hell out of me," she complained. "I didn't realise you were right by my ear. Your voice literally rushed through my whole body."

He laughed.

"Maybe you should stop being caught up in your own mind then. You've always been a daydreamer."

She playfully tossed a handful of dirt at him over her shoulder.

They both laughed. Isiah leaned against a tree behind the gravestone, with his hands in his pockets, his grin crooked, his eyes fixed on hers. Jules continued brushing the dirt away from the grave without looking up.

"You remember our first date? At the river," Isiah said. "When you tripped and fell in? I laughed so hard I almost pissed myself, and you were so embarrassed."

"I was not embarrassed!" she argued, scrubbing at a stubborn patch of moss. "You were just laughing at me far too much. I don't regret pulling you into the water with me."

"I loved that about you, when you pulled me in." He sat beside her on the ground. "You've always been so wild and free."

They fell silent for a moment, listening to the morning breeze and the birds chirping. Jules hummed softly, remembering their first date, their long talks, their silly arguments about nothing, and the life they shared that made the world feel as if it belonged to them.

"You think I would actually let you skip cleaning duty?" she asked, taking off her gloves and pressing them playfully to his cold chest. "Come on, Isiah. Gloves on. Get to work." She laughed again. He rolled his eyes and threw his head back.

"Ugh, fine."

Then came the footsteps. A voice that was both sharp and hesitant cut through the moment.

"Jules? Is that you?" a familiar voice asked.

Jules looked up, her hand frozen in mid-movement. She turned to see Isiah's sister standing a few feet away, dressed in black, the morning sunlight catching her puffy, sleep-deprived eyes.

"What are you doing here all alone Jules?"

Jules turned back to the headstone. Isiah's name stared back at her, neatly engraved.

"I... I'm cleaning Isiah's grave." Her heart caught in her throat as she spoke.

The morning air did not carry his voice now. There was only the cold whisper of wind through the trees. Her chest tightened as she pressed her forehead against the stone, tears falling freely down her cheeks.

"I miss him," she whispered, her voice trembling in the empty air.

Her grief ached so deeply it felt almost audible. The brush slipped from her fingers and fell softly onto the earth. For a moment she could almost feel him beside her, a memory of familiar warmth, before the stillness of the grave reminded her he was never coming back.

Haiku

Elissa Burr

Moon and sea spirit
Two koi fish swim together
Everlasting bond

Elin Dargie

Crisp frost underfoot
Colours burst across the sky
Clean air brings clarity

Kiera West

Time, the devourer
Who eats stone and drinks the sun
When will your greed cease?

The moon and the sun
Do they envy the living
Or wish they could die?

Sarah Baxter

Heavy falls the rain,
Washes away all regret,
Misery in change.

Wine After Work

Elissa Burr

“Your wife is so lucky to have you,” the last customer of the day remarks bashfully as I finish up on the build. I flash my pearly whites and subtly puff my chest.

“I do my best,” I retort. “Now, you give me a call if anything else needs fixed.”

She blushes and bats her eyelids at me, offering just a wave as she sees me off. I am well respected in the local village – the kind of person people rely on to do an odd job or have a gossip with in the local shops.

I keep the grin on until I enter my van and then let my face relax. Done with the pleasantries of the day, dealing with the rotation of fawning women that I work for – they always seem to find additional tasks for me to do. Their husbands like me as well – after a bromance it seems. They want my respect.

It is my duty to provide for my family, I guess, but it would be easier if my wife did more for us at

home. Perhaps she needs more encouragement or positive reinforcement. I flick through the radio channels before settling on silence as I take the winding roads back to my house in the middle of nowhere – the grey rain drips down, filling puddles on the potholed road home.

I pull into the gravelled driveway. I note the bike sitting out in the rain; which one of my three children has left that out? Sighing, I turn my key in the lock, listening out for the scurrying of feet on the wooden floorboards. As I enter the children hug me. They stand in a line with my wife at the end, greeting me one by one. The house as always is spotless; I like it that way, although the smell of bleach is stronger than the wafts of dinner coming through from the kitchen which is off-putting. I suggest to my wife that she stops using such harsh chemicals – it can't be good for the kids. Meekly she agrees, averting her eyes from me. I roll mine in return.

The kids are well behaved. They sit in silence around the table, focused on the steaming portion of shepherd's pie on their plates. I pour a large glass of red wine, then another – well-deserved after working all day. Everyone else has water. I take another bite of my dinner – it's alright, a bit bland. My mother's version of the same dish would be far superior. I refrain from commenting on this though – ever the doting husband.

I signal to my wife to pour me my third glass of wine. She does so, rising from her chair and then shuffling over to the bottle which is nearing on empty. Her hand shakes as she pours into my glass – she resembles a deer in headlights; I find her annoying. I politely ask her to hurry up – not unreasonable by any sane person's measure – I have been working all day and I am tired. She flinches at my request; the wine bottle rests for a second too long on the glass and after a second or two it teeters on its side. The wine once encased in the glass spilling like blood over the table.

All eyes are on me now. The kids' attention focused, waiting my response with bated breath. Heat rises from my chest to my neck and then towards my face and I feel the veins on my forehead pulse. My ears ring as I block out her incessant apologising, the red haze over my eyes makes it harder to focus on her pale shaking hands.

I rip the wine bottle from her grip and in one swift movement throw it at her. It contacts her lip before falling to the floor. Shattering. Glass shards mixed with drops of deep red cover the floor now. I can't believe she has made me do this – I don't have the energy for it after such a long day at work. Her eyes sheen over but she says nothing as she walks away, presumably to get the brush and mop. I sit back down. Calm now. The children and I go back to our dinner. They don't seem to be eating though, just pushing the food around their plates.

"Eat the peas," I tell them firmly; they oblige.

A New Tomorrow

Faris Shaikh

The alarm went off on my phone. I stretched and tried to reach it, but this time something felt off. I did not snooze the alarm, which was very weird, because on any other day I would have just thrown my phone off the bed. Today felt different. I tried to get up and get out of my warm, cosy bed, but I struggled. I was not struggling to get out of bed; I was struggling to remain in bed, which was strange. Finally, I got up from my bed, but I was not tired or sleepy or looking for an excuse to go back to bed. Instead, I felt energised, like today was the start of a new life. As I opened my blackout curtains, I was surprised – it had been two months since I had seen the sunrise, which was weird because I usually woke up when the sun set. Today was different.

I went to Spotify, played my playlist, and started ironing my white formal shirt and black trousers, which was weird – one, because I would never iron my clothes, and two, because I never wore formals. Today was different. I pulled out my brand-new black loafers and my new white socks and

put them on, which was weird because I would never wear loafers. Today was really weird.

I looked at myself in the mirror as I did my skincare routine, which was weird because I would never do a skincare routine back home. Now that I was done getting ready, I looked at myself in the mirror again. As I looked from top to bottom, something was really strange. Something looked really strange. Something felt very strange.

I was not looking at the guy I had been yesterday – that irresponsible, spoilt kid who had no idea what he would do in life besides spending his dad's money. Instead, I was looking at a guy who looked like he had his shit together, knew his purpose in life, and looked like a future doctor. Today marked the start of a new life.

I needed to make some food; I was starving. I said, “Mum, can you make some Benedicts on toast, please?”

It was followed by silence. Then I realised – oh shit – I had left my home.

I headed to uni, and as I looked around, I saw different characters. Some looked like me today – those who had their shit together – and some looked like me yesterday—those who didn't have their shit together (spoilt brats). Everyone was talking to someone else. Everyone had a partner to talk to, a best friend to talk to, someone to talk to. But I was just there, pretending to be busy and messaging someone on my phone, when in reality I was just swiping left and right. I was lost.

I felt thirsty. Maybe it was nervousness. Maybe it was loneliness kicking in. I headed to the café area to get something to quench my thirst. Now I was stuck. Did I go to the long queue with hundreds of people, all of them having someone to talk to? Or did I head to the short queue, where everyone was like me today – lonely, with no one to talk to?

I headed to the quiet café, where there were quiet people and the only sound was the coffee machine. When it was my turn to order, I didn't know what to say. Sweat dripped down my face, my heart started to race, and my chest suddenly felt heavy. But everything stopped as soon as she asked, “Hi, what would you like to order?”

I didn't order my regular – a Coke Zero large with extra ice. Instead, I ordered a caramel macchiato grande. Not like I knew what it meant, and not like I had ever had one before. I just wanted to look like I had my shit together.

I had my shit together now.

Or did I?

Haiku

Faris Shaikh

Phone died yesterday
Plugged it in charge at night
Didn't turn switch on

Hours pass by
Med exam is tomorrow
I give up

The Little Green Balloon

Elin Dargie

Today isn't a normal day. I don't have to go to nursery. I'm bored and so hungry, but Mam says I can't eat just yet. We're in the car, but it's stopped. Mam says we're at the hospital. I poke my head through the gap between the two front seats and Mam kisses me on the head. She keeps saying the same thing to me. I think she's been saying it for days. I'm going to be put to sleep and have teeth taken out. I wonder why? Maybe I don't brush them properly? Mam sounds a bit funny when she says it, very serious. I bounce around across the back seats. Why is this taking so long? Finally, we walk towards this huge square building with lots of square windows. But first, to get in we have to go through those doors that turn and chase after you. They scare me. What if I get trapped? What if Mam is taken away from me? I hold Mam's warm big hand, and we walk across orange and green floors. They are so shiny and they squeak under our shoes. Purple walls. Cool. I wish I could have purple walls.

Mam and I sit in a room. I'm bored again. People keep coming in and out of the room. I sit on Mam's lap clutching her neck. The sun is shining in through the big windows making the floor look sparkly. A woman comes in and speaks to Mam. She puts a paper bracelet around my wrist with pen on it. It's too tight, I try to rip it off, but it won't rip. She tells me off.

The next thing I know, I'm lying back in a comfy bed. There are lots of people standing around me, but I don't know them. They keep saying things, but I don't think they're speaking to me. It's a plain white room we're in. I think there are machines with tubes and things coming out of them. It feels small in here. I don't know what's happening. I hear Mam's voice, but I'm not sure where she is. I think she's talking to that man with the orange hair. He doesn't smile. I think he's grumpy. He sounds a bit angry. At least he's not speaking to me. I feel a bit funny; I want to go home and for Mam to give me a cuddle. Then suddenly, a woman turns to me holding a yellowish rubber cone thing towards my face. She speaks, but I don't know if she's talking to me. I hear Mam say that it's ok, but I don't feel ok. I watch the yellow thing get closer and closer until they put it on my face. I see a green balloon on a tube. I usually like balloons. I feel sleepy, I try to keep my eyes open as I watch the green balloon get bigger then smaller then bigger again. I have to keep them open. I can't close them. My chest feels weird. I want to cry. I'm scared. I want Mam. I feel so sleepy. I close my eyes.

Haiku

Elin Dargie

Birds' restful chirping
Shadows prowling intently
Silence descending

Roaring sea draws back
Thundering waves crack ageless rock
What are we here for?

Ayaan

Faris Shaikh

As the sun set, I was there with Ayaan playing some cricket. He was batting, and I was bowling. Everything seemed so perfect – birds settling down, couples in the park chatting over some tea, the roads empty. Ayaan hit the ball onto the road. I rushed to get the ball, but as usual, my dad's words echoed in my head: "Before you cross the road, make sure you look left and right – not once but twice, okay? Twice, I said."

I did what he told me to do. I looked left and right, not once but twice, and whispered to myself, the coast is clear. Everything seemed so perfect at that moment. While I walked toward the ball, I told myself what a wonderful day it was. I thought I would finish playing with Ayaan, head to the mosque to pray, and then go back home to eat the delicious fish my mum had made.

I finally bent down, picked up the ball, and as soon as I turned around, I stood there with nowhere to move – no time to move, no time to think – as I saw death coming toward me in an SUV. A white SUV. A big white SUV. I told myself it was time to leave this world. What I thought was a perfect day turned out to be my last day, I told myself.

I heard, "White SUV 76908, white SUV 76908, whi-white SUV 76908." But every time the voice repeated it, there was a sniff. I tried to give myself a second chance. I tried to figure out where I was. Was I dead? Was I alive? Was I dreaming?

I opened my eyes, and the first person I saw was my dad – the same person who had said, "Look to your left and right twice, then cross." He picked me up and rushed me toward the hospital, and I was still confused about what had happened. I looked at my left hand, and there it was – my left wrist hanging off something I couldn't figure out.

As my dad laid me on the wheelchair, desperately waiting for the ambulance, he wiped his tears and said, "Don't worry, I will always love you." As he turned around, his white shirt was stained with my blood. I had left my mark with him – on him – hoping that Mum, Dad, and my sister would remember me.

The sirens started to approach, and my life began to fade. I was rushed into the ambulance. My eyes started to shut. The paramedics said, "We are losing him." Everything was going downhill. Some of them said, "Start CPR," others said, "Clear – shocking." That was the last thing I remembered before I left this world – or so I thought.

I felt my soul being lifted. I begged God desperately, Please give me a second chance. Please let me live.

And suddenly, I opened my eyes to a harmonic voice – a voice of an angel saying, "Faris, please wake up. Please don't leave me this soon."

And there she was.

My mother.

Interview

Kiera West

I shouldn't be in here.

I didn't do anything wrong.

Sat behind the desk, my hands clasped on the cold metal table. My feet rhythmically tapping on the hard floor. They aren't making much of a sound, I didn't have a chance to put on my nice shoes before coming here.

They are asking me questions again. Where were you at twenty-three hundred hours of Thursday evening, Thursday being yesterday – why didn't they just say that? Where were you at zero one-hundred hours of Friday morning, that being this morning – why didn't they just say that? There's two of them now. There was only one earlier. The one earlier was in a suit. I could hear him coming down the hall from the clicking of his shoes. My shoes should be making that noise, but they didn't let me put on my nice ones. His shoes weren't nice, they were just loud. You could tell by the fact they shined too much. That's the thing about those type of shoes. Expensive ones you buy matte and polish yourself, and you should only polish the toe. Everyone knows that. His were shiny all round, meaning he had bought them shiny, making them cheap shoes. Brilliant, I thought, they've got me a cheap one.

He had been gone for a while now. It was him who'd seen me first. I hadn't listened to him though, if only he wasn't wearing such distracting footwear. I wonder if he gets this a lot. Yet I imagine most people don't notice the flaw in his shoes, that's sort of the point of them, to look expensive. But they aren't. He talked for a long time. kept asking me if I understood. Yes, I replied, only once, obviously I understand, you're speaking English aren't you? He didn't seem to like that. I'm not really sure why. I could understand him, and he was speaking English. He left soon after that. Not before telling me what I should say, what I shouldn't say. Something like that and probably some more stuff. I wasn't listening anyway. It didn't matter, I shouldn't be here, I didn't do anything wrong. There he went, he'd left but I hadn't noticed. Not until I heard the shoes clicking on the floor again. There he goes, there he went. I wonder if he left footprints on the floor, he had brought slightly wet footprints in the room. He must have just been outside. It was raining now. It had been last night also. I'd left muddy footprints on my floor with my nice shoes. I should have wiped them up, but there wasn't any time. They woke me up early, I was going to do it in the morning. I should be sleeping now still, I shouldn't be here.

The two of them are still sitting in front of me. Why are they still here? They don't have nice shoes on, these ones aren't even pretending to have nice shoes on. It's like they're not even trying.

"Do you know this person?"

He slides a photograph over. I'm not looking at the photo, I'm looking at him.

God, look at his shirt, that's cheap too. And ugly. It's got a small stain on it he's tried to rub off, it looks fresh. Ketchup I think. I wonder if he just ate a burger, or maybe a hotdog. Or maybe he's one of those people who put ketchup on things it shouldn't be on, like pasta. I think back to the man with the shine all the way around his shoes. Polish shouldn't be there. I shouldn't be here. I didn't do anything wrong.

"It will benefit you to cooperate."

Dear, now she's speaking too. She looks tired. I wonder if they woke her up in the middle of the night too. It was four in the morning when they woke me up, I'd barely gotten two hours sleep. Busy night. They didn't even let me put my nice shoes on. Or did they? Maybe I just couldn't find them. It was dark when they woke me up. Lots of banging, very noisy. Where did I put my nice shoes again? It hadn't been long since I wore them last. I always wear my nice shoes.

"I'm going to ask you once again, where were you between twenty three hundred hours of last night, and zero one hundred hours of this morning?"

God, will she stop speaking? Her voice cuts right through me, it's giving me a headache. I've had so

much to deal with last night I do not need her giving me a headache. I shouldn't be here.

"Are these your shoes?"

She sits a heavy plastic bag on the table, they make a tap as she puts them down. Oh yes look, my nice shoes. The ones that click when I walk and only have polish on the toe. Yes, there they are. Those are my shoes. I've been looking for them. I wonder where they found them.

I didn't do anything wrong.

I didn't do anything wrong.

"We found them this morning in the park three streets from your house," the man with the stained shirt starts.

Why are they talking like this, I didn't do anything wrong.

"In the park, next to the body," the woman says.

No, no that can't be right. It can't be. I didn't do anything wrong.

Did I?

Cultural Narrative

Maria Azeem

Looking in the mirror, I sometimes see the fourteen-year-old version of myself I left in Pakistan. A quiet girl melting in the Karachi heat with her dupatta slipping off her shoulder. But when I look again, I see a face that has lost its masoom look, its teenage innocence. My memories flow like quicksand; the more I think, the deeper I sink, trapped in a past that was unkind to my younger self. A past that festered a quiet rebellion, one that followed me like a shadow, refusing to part.

Sometimes I still feel the cultural suffocation, the remnants of a child who was told to behave in ways that pleased elders, even at the expense of her own happiness. Their words would tug and try to tighten the loose ends of my Western self, stitching me into quiet obedience to avoid sharam – the dreaded shame that came with having dreams unapproved by society. Culture weaponised, wielded to extinguish even the faintest flicker of ambition.

I grew to loathe the concept of shaadi; the marriages around me were disguised as a sickening stripping of identity and control. Every second of my zindagi was training to become someone's future wife. I refused to be a perfect symbol of oppression, refused to be hidden away, my talents reduced to mere decorations to boost my marital profile. My country is full of colour and life; I wanted to add to that vibrancy guilt-free, not end up in the shadows like the women around me, resenting a life that was never truly theirs.

As I hold my cup of chai and look out the window, I have a sense of relief wash over me. The cold Scottish breeze reminds me that I still love my home country, but I also value azaadi, my freedom. I am one of the first women in my family to live a life without carrying the inherited shame of being a woman. To live freely, without having to minimise my dreams to suit the patriarchy. Without the familiar trauma of *louge kya kahagni gai?* – What will people say?

My passport is inked with both my identities. Legally, I am a citizen of both, but why do I find myself calling the UK my ghar? My true home. Despite this contrasting duality, I find a certain beauty in the silence of running between two homes, propagating between two different lives, never quite being satisfied with either, yet still having affection for both.

An Awkward Outing

Elin Dargie

The bitter wind whips at my tight perm and rustles my scarf's tassels. I try to push my gloves further onto my hands, momentarily letting go of my walker that I depend on so much. My whole life, I've been able to get around just fine and then all of a sudden, I now have this dodgy hip which has tied me to this bloody frame that I can't seem to move well without. Why does it have to be so obvious that I'm getting old? I sigh, poking my head forward to see if I can spot the bus which is late as usual. Thankfully, the bloody bus is finally trundling along the road towards the bus stop. Relief warms me. The relief of not having to stand in this bleak weather.

I can barely feel my fingers anymore. As the bus drives up, I scan through the windows to see if there is space near the front in the area designated for people like me. It looks busy already, even without the queue of people waiting to get on. Joy. I take a sharp breath in. I feel that gnawing anxiety making my heart thud a little quicker.

Thankfully, I'm let on first. I fumble with my bus pass, almost dropping it, my fingers painfully stiff from the cold. I feel a red heat climb up my neck and spread to my cheeks. God, now I'm holding up that whole line behind me.

After scanning my bus pass, I turn and begin to shuffle further along, looking desperately at the already seated passengers, practically begging for someone to let me sit. I hate being an inconvenience. My eyes search for the best place for me to sit and of course there is a teenager sitting in the perfect spot for me and my walker, scrolling on her phone. Probably on Snapchat or whatever it's called.

As I approach the teenager, she doesn't look up from her phone. She pops a bubble of gum and continues to chew noisily. I try clearing my throat, but she doesn't flinch. A middle-aged man across the aisle takes pity on me and moves to let me sit, which is very kind of him, but I just know that this is going to be awkward. I breathlessly thank him and waddle forward, just about managing to turn around and stiffly lower myself into the seat, avoiding falling into the pole that so handily restricts my walker from sitting in front of me. In the seat next to me sits a sour-faced woman dressed to the nines in her faux fur coat and with bleach blonde hair that definitely isn't natural. She sighs and turns her head towards the window. My walker is now awkwardly positioned half in the aisle with one of its wheels digging into my foot. The heat that was in my neck earlier seeps back as the people who were queueing after me navigate around my stroller to find seats and awkwardly stand around our feet. As the bus drives off, I desperately cling to my walker, praying that it doesn't fall over or knock into someone.

Unfamiliar

Maria Azeem

"Number forty-five, please step forward, the Doctor will see you now," barked the reception clerk. Cries of misery and pain filled the dingy waiting room. The lighting, no matter the time of day, was always dimmed. Even the lightbulbs felt pity and didn't want to highlight the suffering within. Paint peeled off the walls and chairs like dead skin, as if the horrific conditions of this subsidised polyclinic repelled the room itself. Flies swarmed the room hazily, spreading more disease than the patient arrived with. These people were not just deprived of their health but of basic dignity.

Inside the doctor's room, more patients lay. Some were slumping in their chairs from exhaustion,

others crowded together on a charpai, the uncomfortable wooden bed that groaned as more people sat on it. Sweat was more prevalent in the air than oxygen; the room's natural environment became accustomed to the overpowering musk. Everyone waited patiently for their turn, listening intently to the doctor's diagnoses. They winced upon hearing the ailments of others, fully absorbing their pain. Even if their conditions were unkind, that did not mean they would be cruel themselves. Sighs of relief rippled within the room as the doctor cleared someone of their illness; in sickness and in health, these strangers all stuck together. And despite the lack of patient confidentiality, the people had formed a community within the clinic, uplifting each other.

"You have haemorrhoids, bhai, please use this cream after using the bathroom," the doctor said flatly.

"Okay, Doctor Sir," winced the patient, hiding his face behind his handkerchief in shame.

"Doctor sahab, can you check my daughter too? She says she has a tummy ache."

The doctor scanned the room, his eyes darting back and forth at all the patients in line. His shirt was wrinkled and slightly damp with sweat. The old fan let out desperate sighs, struggling to cool the room. The doctor's heart softened after he met the helpless pleas in the man's eyes, as he clutched his daughter tightly.

She's only a child; she won't take too long to examine, he thought, rubbing his temples, then gesturing for the child to come forward.

"Okay, Guriya, what's wrong with our young doll?" smiled the doctor.

"Doctor, this isn't fair! I have been waiting for one hour, and I came before all these people," another patient shouted, standing up in his chair in protest.

Words buzzed in the air, some in support, others against, some trying to hush the commotion. The doctor didn't pay attention. He seemed oblivious to the injustice, or perhaps he was immune to their constant suffering. Each day brought the same cases of aches, infections or preventable diseases. The solution was obvious. Uncontaminated water supplies. This alone would decrease infection transmission and reduce infant mortality significantly. However, despite knowing the cure, the doctor was helpless. How could one man overturn years of generational teachings and entrenched remedies? Unknowingly, the doctor, respecting the patients' autonomy, was allowing it to work against them.

As the gruelling day came to a close, the heat finally subsided. The day's rotation of patients came to an end as the doctor switched off the clinic's lights. He stood in the dim room. His nose scrunched at the malodorous yet comforting smell and reflected on his day. Despite his limited funds and lack of control, he tried his best not to let that affect his quality of care. And even if his practice did not meet global standards of cleanliness or ethics, he and his patients knew they did not need ethics plastered on a website to make their compassion official.

Unspoken Words

Elin Dargie

"Are you dealing, or shall I?" Peter asked.

"No, you go." Tim gestured with one hand towards the table, while with the other he held a gingham handkerchief to his mouth, attempting to control a coughing fit.

Peter started shuffling the tattered deck of cards, and glanced across at Tim.

"You alright mate?"

"Oh aye, just the back of the old throat got me, you know." Tim attempted a chuckle which then exploded into another coughing fit.

Peter furrowed his brow in concern but remained silent. He began to deal the cards between them.

He placed the remaining deck upside down, threw away one card and placed one on the table face up.

"Right, left of the dealer Tim. Place your bet."

Tim studied his cards before clutching them tightly to his chest. He selected his chips and pushed them forward. When he settled back, Tim held his handkerchief to his mouth.

"I'll call." Peter did the same.

Tim leaned forward to place his next bet, inducing yet another fit of coughing, his shoulders seizing up behind him from exertion.

Peter hurriedly got up and shuffled over to the side, where he decanted whisky into two crystal glasses without measure.

"Here you go, that should hopefully sort you," his voice breathless.

"Cheers."

Tim took his whisky gladly with a frail shaking hand and rested himself back in his chair, the brown weathered leather squeaking underneath him. He took a moment to recover his breath before downing his whisky in one.

"Jesus, Tim!" Peter laughed superficially. He grunted as he stiffly lowered himself back into his own chair. "Seems you're not the only one with problems old friend. Onto the next round then, are you going to raise, or do want another card?"

"Uh, I'll have another card." Tim struggled between breaths.

"You coming to the pub tomorrow to see the game?"

"No, I think I'll just stay at home. Don't really feel like going out"

"Would you like me to drop in; we could have a few beers together?"

"Honestly mate, you enjoy the pub. I don't want you to waste your afternoon with me!"

"Well, I'm wasting this one with you now!"

Tim laughed half-heartedly, and this time he had the most hacking of coughs. His body seemed to shudder while he gasped for air.

"Tim, I'll get you some water this time." Peter began to lift himself from his chair.

"No, just leave it," Tim gruffly managed between barks.

Peter ignored this and placed a small glass of water on the table in front of his friend before sitting down again.

"Come on, that old hanky must be all filthy now. Here, I'll lend you mine." Peter leaned forward and offered his handkerchief. Tim took it gratefully and when he finally recovered, he lowered the handkerchief in his lap. There were specks of red spattered onto it. Tim looked up at Peter, dreading to see his friend's reaction.

"Pete, I..."

"It's alright mate." Peter reached over and grasped his friend's knee. He turned his head, to hide his face.

Tim nodded and inhaled deeply, looking up to hide his brimming tears. He sunk back into the chair that consumed his frame, and whispered, "Aye."

A Visitor to Another World

Keira Easton

The rotunda entrance spins round and round, bustling with people in various shades of blue. Through this sea I make my way to the door. The ceilings are high, with hundreds of signs hanging down telling me where to go. None of them what I want. Continuing my walk which seems to stretch on for miles, down to reception. Finally finding the sign I need, I head in that direction. Down the corridor, turn right and go up the stairs, then turn left. The stifling heat in the stairwell nearly takes the breath

out of me as I make my ascent. I arrive at my destination, somewhere I will call work for the next year: ward 102.

As I step into the ward an overwhelming smell of bleach hits me, practically burning my nose hairs off. The uneven green floor feels sticky under my feet. I thought a hospital was calm, quiet even. I couldn't have been more wrong. It is nothing short of chaos. People weave in and out of the corridor, diving off into different rooms or behind the desk. They dodge out the way of the others, all working as one unit. Their chatter fills the room, words that I should know but don't understand in this context. Cabbage, drain and news. I feel incompetent. I don't belong here. Throughout this some sort of shrill intermittent beeping noise fills the very little silence this place has. Someone comes over to me, while I look around gormlessly. I manage to sputter out that I'm here for a tour, and he tells me to wait there, in a small room off the side of the corridor.

Fiddling with my hair I wait for someone to arrive. The walls are covered in posters; some about study days, others about new policies, and one about a Christmas party. There is a large whiteboard hanging from the wall, littered with yet more posters; names on the left-hand side stretching from one end of the board to the other. I manage to pick out my own name from the plethora on the wall. The only words I can understand are my start date. A woman pushes the door open; she looks manic. Hair which I assume was once pristine, now a messy blob sitting on top of her head. Kind eyes, now smudged with eyeliner. She introduces herself as charge nurse of the ward, whatever that means. She's going to be the one giving me my tour.

We leave her tiny office behind and walk down the stretch of green outside. Several people stop her along the short walk to the end of the corridor, asking her questions or telling her stuff, not even acknowledging me; they look busy, so I don't take much offence. As we are stopped by at least the third person on our journey, I start to hear the huff and puff of someone as they round the corner. It's a very big man. He has on a gown with the word hospital written all over it, in many different colours, with funny white socks that stretch up past his knees leaving only a tiny patch of skin visible. Two smaller women stand beside him, one holding a tank that connects to his face, the other holding a clear cylinder filled with a mysterious liquid. Half red, half yellow, it looks like a cloud; it's very chunky. Part of me wants to look away, but my fascination takes over, inspecting the man even more closely. My eyes trace the tubing attached to the object up to the side of his chest. It seems to be inside him. Anchored down by the tubes and women beside him, he shuffles slowly past us.

The woman I'm with ushers me along the ward, telling me where everything is. She brings me into another side room, telling me this is a sluice. I can't even pretend to recognise that word. She shows me what looks to be a bedpan, sick bowls and another oddly shaped cardboard object that I don't even want to know where it goes. I ask the burning question: what is a sluice? She heads towards a cuboidal item in the corner of the room; with a circular lid on top, it looks very industrial; well-used. She opens it up and I wish I never asked. A rancid smell leaks out, engulfing the room. I can feel myself starting to retch, but I hold it in. I can't embarrass myself on my very first day. I seem to be the only one affected by this stench, as she happily closes the lid and leads me out.

We are outside the ward now; she is taking me to our ICU. We cross the same path I took to find the ward, turning up a hidden corridor that I didn't register before. The hallway is very dim, that sort of artificial light that tries to trick you into believing it's sunlight. A huge double door blocks our way, signs saying caution – staff only stuck to it. Carelessly she swipes her keycard, and the door opens. The cold air whips me in the face, a relief from the boiling ward next door; not realising how warm it is until stepping foot into this room. It feels like a different planet; colder, louder, more vulnerable. Bed after bed line the walls, people in scrubs at their side. The noise is overwhelming; chimes and beeps overlap each other, creating a symphony of machines. People lie in bed unmoving, with monitors surrounding them, covering every inch of their body. I shudder, a feeling of unease washes over me; that's a person. Someone with a family, kids maybe, a life of their own. Stuck in a place in-between

living and death.

As we walk along, I see one of them sitting up, still attached to an abundance of cables. A strange tube hangs out of his mouth, connecting him to yet another machine. Hospital gown stained with blood. On the one exposed area of flesh I can see, a long scar sits in the middle of the chest. Bright red and angry, still oozing a mysterious liquid. His eyes bore into me, making me feel very uncomfortable; like I'm an intruder. My mouth goes dry, I should not be seeing any of this. All at once the droning sound in the background comes to life. Ramping up the intensity, the chimes become erratic, increasing in noise and frequency. A mechanical alarm starts, blaring above the rest. I can feel the hair stand up on the back of my neck, my palms becoming clammy. I definitely should not be here.

As the charge nurse whisks me away, an ear-splitting scream ripples through the room, shrieking incoherent words. I try to look back to catch a glimpse of the scene behind me. All I see is a pair of limbs flailing; swearing and shouting at anyone who comes close. An overwhelming sense of guilt fills me, I should be doing something; instead, I'm standing here uselessly. Before I have time to react the door shuts me out from seeing the rest. The tour has ended right then and there. She tells me she is excited for me to start, bids me goodbye and walks away. I'm left standing in the middle of the hallway, brain short-circuiting. My head swimming with everything I've witnessed today, I think any normal person would want to run away from here and never look back. But something about the chaos draws me in.

Haiku

Keira Easton

The lecture drags on
Everyone typing away
What is happening?

Racing hands reach up
They speak another language
Incoherent speech

I pretend I know
Everything they discuss but
The unknown fills me

My face heats up quick
Scared to be called upon
Imposter Syndrome

Classroom Full of Believers

Sarah Baxter

We're all sat around our cosy classroom table doing groupwork. It's only 2 pm but it's already getting dark outside because it's getting closer to Christmas. We're all crammed in the back of the class pressed up against the Christmas tree our teacher has put up. The baubles are all mismatched and the fairy lights are twinkling away. Speaking of Christmas, I have an invaluable piece of information I'm

itching to share with everyone sat at my group.

"Did you know Santa isn't real?" I announce to the six other kids sat next to me with a glowing grin. I watch every single one of their faces drop.

"No he's not – he's real," one of the girls argues back. She's in the year above us but has been made to join our group. I am beaming now, even one of the older kids hadn't discovered this fact yet. I only figured this out myself last night when watching one of the Christmas specials on TV – where they showed the mother of the family running around the night before Christmas panic buying her family all of their Christmas presents – when the ball dropped. I haven't even told my mum and dad about my discovery yet. Instead, I am keeping it to myself and eagerly waited to tell everyone I know in school about it. All my classmates immediately start arguing back to me.

"But then who puts all the presents there on Christmas morning?"

"Your mum and dad – it's the same on Easter and the tooth fairy. It's all just your mum and dad."

I can't contain my excitement that I get to be the one breaking the news to everyone. I'm surprised I'm actually the first person to figure this out. I'm not very good at problem solving. Whenever we do maths in school, I find it so difficult. We're supposed to be doing maths right now, but I'd much rather tell everyone else about my amazing discovery. Panic is slowly rising in our group as everyone starts to realise I'm right. This is the best day ever.

"But I went and visited Santa last week in the garden centre so he must be real!"

"That's just a random guy dressed up as Santa."

I have the answer to every single one of their arguments against me. I worked it all out last night. One of the boys in our group then claims he already knew this and figured it out last Christmas. I know he is lying though. I saw his face when I told everyone, and he was just as shocked. I point this out and he quickly goes back to doing his work. I'm not letting anyone steal my glory from this moment. I lean back in my plastic blue chair and keep letting the questions flow.

"But my older sister still believes in Santa!"

"She's probably lying to you because she thinks you still believe in him. But now you know."

Everyone is still in shock; the teacher then shouts from across the room that I shouldn't be swinging in my chair and need to get back to work. I wonder if she knows Santa isn't real. I should tell her. There's probably loads of grown-ups who haven't realised yet. I'm only in Primary 4 and I know. I glance at the clock, it's almost home time. I wonder how many more people I can tell before I meet my mum at the school gates and walk home. Surely, at least the rest of the class. Maybe if I have time, I can tell the other Primary 4 class as well while we're all putting our winter jackets and shoes on.

Cinquains

Keira Easton

The leaves
Tumble downwards
Dancing in the sunlight
Faded shades of summer just past
Dried out

Sarah Baxter

Snowflakes
Dancing through air
Each delicate and light
Searching for place of final rest
They fall

The Conflict in the Amazon

Jing Mun Hoh

The Amazon forest was filled with skyscrapers of various shades of green which were anchored to the depths of the earth by their tortuous roots, endless streams of running water weaving their way through it. The moist air was saturated with the pungent scent of animal waste and damp dirt. The hidden city was isolated from the rest of civilization until it was invaded by a mother and a daughter.

“Emily, we need to talk.”

“Right here? We might get engulfed by this living maze, if we don’t pay attention.”

“Please Emily.”

“Ok, so what is it that you want to talk about, when we’re surrounded by these towering canopies and who knows how many unseen creatures are lurking around, silently spying on us, waiting to make a move?”

“Well, it’s about... Benny.”

“Oh, him. I don’t want to talk about him nor am I at all interested, Mom. Did you intentionally bring me here today so that I can be trapped by all this greenery with no way of escape and forced to listen to your bullshit?”

“Look sweetie, I know you’re upset, but this is important, okay? Please give me a chance to explain things so that we can sort this out together. I really need you to hear me out, okay?”

“You want me to hear you out? What, so I can hear you justify why you’ve already hopped into bed with another man you just met at McDonald’s on a random Sunday, just two months after Dad passed? I do not and I refuse to understand any of this nonsense.”

“Sweetheart, I see why you’re so upset by this but trust me, it’s hard for me, too. Your father’s death has absolutely wrecked me from inside out, but ever since Benny has come into my life, things have changed for the better. I’m sure you’ve seen how he often comes over to deliver our groceries during the time when I am going through depression. Furthermore, I would never in a million years try to replace your dad and neither is Benny here to be his replacement. He’s just someone new in my life. He’s important in helping me in my journey of healing.”

A ray of sunlight pierces through the canopy above, spreading its glow across the forest floor, highlighting the tiny creatures that have camouflaged themselves in the labyrinth of greens and browns.

“It’s not just that. It’s... it’s that you’re acting like Dad didn’t matter at all to you! How can you move on so fast, especially from someone who has loved and cared for you so deeply. During the last moments of his life, all he could talk about was us and how worried he was for us. He has never put himself first in any point of his life, but now you are here being so selfish, thinking only about yourself and you expect me to just go along with this? Do you even care about how I feel?”

“Em, I do care. You’re my daughter. You’re my life and so was your dad. But my feelings matter too and I am sure your dad would want me to be happy as well. After everything we’ve been through – after all the countless hospital trips, after constantly witnessing your dad on the verge of death – I

deserve to move on from all that and find some light in life as well.”

“But I’m not ready to move on, I still miss Dad very deeply. This new guy of yours, all he does is ask me if I want to go shopping, if I want to go to the cafe. I can tell he is only doing all this to please me and win my approval. Plus, I hate how he always smokes in front of us. Doesn’t he know Dad passed away from lung cancer? How can someone possibly be so insensitive? This Benny dude will forever in my eyes be a random stranger who has just barged into my life without any warning and now I’m expected to welcome him with open arms. You are making me feel like a traitor towards my own father! You can’t just force me to accept this relationship of yours. Tell me, what’s next? Me calling him ‘dad’?”

“Emily, I’m not trying to force anything on you and I promise that you will never have to call anyone else dad if you don’t want to. That will always be your choice. But you just need to give Benny a chance and get to know him more. Then I can assure you that your view of him would change completely. He really is a kind soul, just look at how he helps out at the animal shelter every Friday without fail. How can someone like that be a bad person? If it makes it more comfortable for you, you can just treat him like a friend of mine. It doesn’t change the fact that your dad is your dad.”

“I can’t comprehend this, though. How can you just go from being so in love with Dad, then just forget about him after such a short time and plan to start a new life immediately with someone else. I just... I don’t want things to change. I want everything to go back to the way it was, although I know it will never be the same without Dad.”

“I know sweetheart, I wish we could turn back time but we know that’s just not possible. Your dad will always remain a part of me and the memory of him will forever follow me throughout my life till the day I set foot into my coffin. But we do need to find new ways to live in the present even if it might take longer for you.”

“Mom, I just don’t want to lose you.”

“Baby, you’re not losing me. I will always be your mom. I will always be there for you no matter what. Benny would never replace the bond we have between the two of us and you will always come first for me. And I’m not expecting you to accept Ben right now immediately, I just want you to at least give it a try, okay?”

The Man Called Guilt

Kiera West

The place where our story takes place is a strange one. It, when compared to our everyday experience, does not make sense. In this world, for example, Famine is a thin man with sunken eyes, who wears rags and wanders through villages, leaving starvation in his wake. Death is a pale rider who knocks on your door, Envy is a woman in green robes with a forked tongue, and Luck is a hooded merchant who sells to the highest bidder. But there are times when the veil between this world and ours can thin, fray, or even tear entirely. It has been known in these instances, for things to slip through. One frequent pilgrim of this voyage is a man called Guilt.

He is a shy man. In fact, he does not speak at all. He makes no attempt to talk to others. He prefers to follow them. He follows many people throughout their lives. He has, perhaps, even followed you. You may have seen him sometimes, in your room in the middle of the night, or in the corner of your eye. He lingers in the dark spaces, and these are where he’s felt the most. If you have ever been followed by Guilt yourself, you can likely relate to the following tendencies he displays. He will keep his cold hand wound around your throat. It’s always there, loosely of course, but can be felt somewhat at all times. And then, on special occasions in which he wishes to make his presence known, he tightens his hand. A sudden constriction may take over you, when for no apparent reason at all, you can feel tightness

in your chest. He may even lose all solid form entirely. Instead, draping over you like a thick, dark curtain, making it impossible to see anything but him.

He often enjoys clinging to your ankle, his cold hand resting there. Still, he makes no attempt to talk. He simply grips your leg as you try to walk. At times when he is doing this, you may feel an inexplicable weight pulling you down, dragging you back, or stopping you from being able to move at all.

The one time in which Guilt may speak to you is when you sleep. Dreams are another place in which the fabric of the veil is pulled tight, creating small holes. Large enough for Guilt to slip through. Even Death on his pale horse comes riding through occasionally. It is in these dreams that Guilt may choose to speak to you. What he says, of course, is entirely specific to the person, and cannot be predicted. Guilt knows all about you, he knows all about everyone. But he is very good at keeping secrets. He will never tell what it is he knows about you, but of course, the more there is to know, the more he visits. As a matter of fact, the more shameful truths you keep to yourself, the heavier Guilt will weigh on your ankles, and the tighter he will squeeze around your neck. However, he does not do this out of malice or ill-intent. Truthfully, he does not mean to cause the negative feelings that he does. He just enjoys company, and will only stay with you for as long as you permit him to.

So, remember this. Guilt does not thirst, he does not tire and needs no rest. He can even follow you for an entire lifetime, but only if you let him.

The Price of Peace

Nairn Markie

Alannah knew what was coming, what she had to do. She had to do it for her friends, her brother, even her mother. He had to be stopped. His grip over her homeland had led it to ruin. The people starved in the streets, the armies maintaining order through sheer brutality. The plagues ripped through the populace. The fields grew barren and desolate. All while he gorged himself in the palace. Bedecked in jewels and precious metals.

She needed to save them, all of them. All but him. That was the cost. The Witch of the Woods had given her the vial of poison nigh two weeks ago now. *On the twelfth hour, she had said, with the full moon in the sky, a choice you shall make.*

Alannah knew already her decision. *One drop to sleep, deep, like a barrel of wine sunk too soon. Two to weep for those who die however painlessly or purposely will always move others to tears. Three.* Alannah knew what three would bring. She knew the horrors of the Demon's Dream.

Tonight was the night. Two hours until midnight. The full moon rising to its precipice. She began to ready herself. A black leather gambeson, her black iron shoulder pad, throwing knives adorned her garments. Her twin short swords Luna and Sola for the moon and sun, each shining with a subtle light of their namesake's colour, crossed in their sheathes on her back. Her wrist-bow on her left wrist. She had been gifted the contraption nigh three years past on her journeys to the east. Even the peoples far beyond this land knew what she must do to prevent further calamity. Her platinum hair was neatly held in a tight bun to keep it from falling. Finally, a black cloak and hood with a face cover.

"Are you sure?" asked Diana, pointedly. "You don't have to do this alone."

"Yes, I do," she replied, securing her last remaining accoutrement, the dagger her father had given her once upon a dream. She secured it to her calf as a last resort. The metal seemed to hum gently as it was sheathed.

"I will be back by morning. To a new day, and a new dawn for our land."

She pulled her friend into an embrace and kissed her gently on the forehead. After a lingering glance, and so many words left unsaid, she made her way outside into the streets of the capital.

The streets themselves were dark, save for the sparse oil lamps that the wardens had lit. That made her job easier. She had learned the art of stealth at an early age. Her father would play hide-and-seek with her in their home. She would hide for what felt like hours making next to no noise, knowing a single out of time breath could give her away. He always found her in the end though. No one else ever could.

Here she was, so many years later, still sneaking as she had as a child, but the stakes were so much higher. She darted through the streets avoiding the patrols. She would have to climb the palace walls when she got close. The patrols were efficient, thorough but confined to main streets, the alleys she used were nigh empty. She passed two wardens beating a helpless man as a third held back a wailing woman, striking her face, his wife she assumed. They yelled aloud the accusation of ‘Thief!’. Alannah feared then more for the woman than her broken and bleeding husband, knowing what the slightest power did to the minds of men. She could stop this she knew, as she watched. A glance at the sky, the moon still ascending. Tonight, this ends. For all, she vowed to herself, her chest tightening as she moved on from the helpless couple.

The walls were high. Steep, dark, grey. Perhaps twenty feet tall. She began to climb grasping gracefully from one jutting rock to the next. The visage of the Witch of the Woods still haunted her. *Three drops to... well child, you know what three drops would bring, don't you? And let it be known that upon that hour the fates will change; you, daughter of night will alter the fate of this world, for good or ill.* The wheels will be set to motion, the die cast and life will never be the same. It had to be done. No matter the cost.

Before long, she was atop the wall. She had picked her spot well. After three days of scouting the wall, she noted this stretch of wall was nigh absent of guards at this hour, a change in the watch perhaps. The outer courtyard provided little issue, sparse guard patrols and dim lighting allowed her to get to the second wall, little more than a stone fence around the palatial estate.

The inner courtyard was another matter. Dozens of guards, well-lit and the hedge maze, still well maintained despite the economic decline of the kingdom. Exotic flowers adorned the place, imported from lands far and wide. Magnificent sculptures of royals past and present lined the main path from the gates; Alannah hoped his predecessors felt shame. His own visage graced the square directly in front of the palace. The grandest statue in all the palace grounds. Bedecked in gold and jewels, somehow facing no tarnish from the elements. Some whispered he had sent for enchanted metals from the far north to preserve it. Vanity, she thought, arrogance, greed, his sins knew no end. She took the path through the blood-peach orchard; a former queen had planted them herself, it was said. It was barely an orchard, a few dozen trees, but good enough for her purposes. The trees were large enough to hide her figure if need be and it was unlikely many of the guards would patrol that route.

The moon was nearing its peak. She was in the final hour now. Nothing could get in her way. Yet, there he stood, at the end of the orchard path. A guard stood at the small gate that isolated the orchard itself from the palace building. The wall adjacent was spiked, for decoration more than to deter intruders but still she could not assail it. She would have to go through him. She emerged from the shadows, a dark silhouette against a darker night, and approached.

“Who goes there?!” the boy shrieked; he was no older than she was. She proceeded.

“Announce yourself!” he exclaimed, mustering what little courage he had. He bore his spear in her direction. She loomed ever closer and dropped her hood and face cover. He lowered his spear.

“P... Pr...?” His question was answered before it could be asked. Crimson rivulets flowed down his neck onto the royal purple cloth he wore, his eyes wide with shock. He made no sound again.

“Requies,” she intoned in his ear as she passed him. ‘Rest’ in the old tongue she had been taught once upon a dream, a life long since passed. She had taken lives before, but this felt different. This did not feel righteous despite her goal. She would lament later.

The palace itself was easy enough to enter. Five stories tall and He would be on the fifth. The décor

made it easy to scale, crenelations and gargoyles adorned the lacquered walls. On the fifth floor she found the royal apartments, silver and gold metalworking from the door handles to the tableware. Gemstones inlaid upon the door and bedframe. A small feast was laid out. Grapes and cherries, cheeses and cold meats and, most importantly, the wine. An imported vintage she had no doubt, rich and red. Three drops were all it would take. His goblet was already filled awaiting his imminent return. Alannah produced the vial from her vestments.

One. Two. Three.

The deed was done. She took her place on the elaborately carved, ebony wood chair, opposite his. She removed her cloak and face cover and waited.

"A... Alannah?" he asked as he entered the room, almost not noticing her, as if she were a ghost. "You've come back to me."

"Father," she replied in a flat tone. She would not let him know how her heart was bursting. A mix of emotions and adrenaline surging through her with every breath.

"You've come back to me my sweet girl!" His eyes welled with tears; his lip quaked as the tears fell. "It's been so long."

"Yes, Father. I've come home. To set everything right." Her eyes were fixed on him. She knew what he would do next.

"A toast sweet thing for this victory! I knew you would come back to me. I always find you in the end, don't I my dove?"

He grabbed her from the chair and embraced her. Roughly at first and then tender. Alannah could not deny that she had missed the man he once was, before the trials of power eroded his wits. She allowed herself a moment to feel the love once more before steeling herself for what was to come.

"Yes father, let us raise a cup, for a new day." She raised a second goblet, and he eagerly poured for her, before draining his own cup in seconds.

"The things we will do now my dove! I shall name you my heir and the people will rejoice! As I ha..." His voice trailed off as his skin grew pale, his hands reached for his throat. His eyes grew bloodshot. The realisation dawned upon him then. This would be his last toast. He keeled over in agony and tried to scream but nothing came out but a stifled and horrid guttural noise before the muscle cramps began. His body twitched in ways that looked so unnatural she could barely watch, but she did. All the suffering he had wrought was now his to bear.

It was many minutes before the convulsions stopped and his body collapsed motionless. His hollow eyes transfixed upon the princess.

"Requies, father."

A tear escaped her eye, betraying her.

Timeless Encounter

Su Yunn Myat Soe

The small bell inside the coffee shop door jingles and Christian glances up from his newspaper. His eyes widen as he recognizes a familiar figure walking in.

Katherina.

It's been years, but he recognizes her instantly – the same curious spark in her deep navy eyes, a confident stride, and silky brunette hair that he could never forget. She wears a long brown coat that fits her perfectly, paired with an oddly worn-out navy umbrella.

"Katherina?" he calls, standing from his corner table.

She turns around, and instantly breaks into a wide smile.

"Christian! Oh my God, I can't believe you're here!"

She engulfs him in a tight, warm hug, which he reciprocates immediately.

"It's been so many years! What are you doing here in England?" he asks as they sit down.

"Just traveling around, I guess," she says, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. "But wow, this is such a surprise. How have you been?"

"Same old," Christian shrugs. "Work, bills, bingeing Netflix. You know the drill. Do you want to order a coffee first?"

"Nope, it's fine. I just wanted to check this café out, and besides, coffee makes me feel kinda woozy."

Christian recalls the time Katherina used to drink coffee religiously. *I guess people change over time*, he thinks to himself.

He brushes off his thoughts and asks, "What have you been up to? Still into all that... Sci-fi stuff?"

Katherina grins, leaning in.

"Of course! I have been into time travel lately."

Christian blinks.

"Time travel?"

"Yes! Okay, let me begin." She scoots her chair closer. "Time travel is not just fiction any more.

Scientists have been exploring this for centuries. Have you ever heard of Albert Einstein's theory of special relativity?"

"Uh... Something about space and time?"

"Exactly!" Her hands move erratically as she continues to explain. "Albert proposed that time can speed up or slow down based on how fast you are moving. For example, if I travel close to the speed of light, time moves slower for me than it does for someone on Earth. This is called time dilation."

Christian nods slowly. "So... It's like living in slow motion?"

"Sort of. Then, there is something called wormholes which lets us travel instantly from one time to another."

Christian leans back, trying to process.

"Wait, so people can hop across time?"

"Potentially," Katherina says, her voice dropping into a dramatic lower tone. "But time travel isn't just about the how – it's about the consequences as well."

He raises an eyebrow.

"Consequences?"

"Hypothetically, let's say you travel back in time. You may experience a grandfather paradox. It's a question basically asking what happens if you stop your grandparents from meeting. Do you think you would stop existing?"

Christian frowns and pauses for a second. "So... Would I?"

"Maybe." She breaks into a sly grin. "Or maybe not. A lot of people believe your decisions could create an alternate timeline where you never existed – but you would still exist in your actual timeline."

Christian stares at her with admiration yet confusion.

"But there are risks. Little changes, like simply choosing another cereal brand for breakfast could lead to fatal consequences. That is referred to as the butterfly effect."

"That's... heavy. Are there any upsides?"

"Of course!" Her face lights up. "Imagine the knowledge we could gain. We could witness historical events in person and even explore the future of advanced technology, like flying cars!"

"That does sound incredible," he admits. "But wouldn't people misuse it? What if someone rewrites history for their own gain?"

"Some people think only trained experts should use it. But in reality, it's hard to control something so powerful. Anyone with the power of time can create huge chaos."

Christian shakes his head.

"So, time travel is a double-edged sword? It can save the world or ruin it?"

"Yup."

Christian stares at her. His coffee is probably cold now.

"That's terrifying. Why would anyone mess with it?"

She leans back from her chair.

"Because we are human. We're curious. We want to fix mistakes and chase endless possibilities."

Christian exhales. "Okay, I'll admit, this is way cooler than I expected. But let's be realistic, no one dreams of actually doing this, right?"

Katherina hesitates, then whispers, "Well, I would."

Christian chuckles, shaking his head.

"Katherina, you haven't changed. So, tell me, what do you do?"

Katherina pauses and stares at him as her eyes soften. In a split second, she breaks into a playful smile.

"Well, that's for me to know and you to find out."

Christian smiles back, and before he can ask for her number, she stands abruptly and glances at her non-existent watch.

"Oh well, look at the time. I need to go."

"Wait – Katherina!" Christian protests.

She pulls on her coat, her smile soft but unreadable.

"It was good seeing you, Christian."

As she reaches the door, she pauses, looking over her shoulder.

"You know, some people don't just dream about time travel. . . They live it."

And with that, she disappears in the flesh, leaving Christian frozen. His eyes land on the umbrella she left behind. At that moment, a film of memories starts replaying in his head – he thinks back and realizes that it's the same umbrella she had lost when they were together.

Home

Nairn Markie

"This place is a state!" Nathan exclaimed, looking around his kitchen in dismay.

"I don't know why I bother!" he announced to himself, opening the fridge, rummaging for ingredients.

"What are you moaning about?" came a voice from the living room, adjacent.

"The dishes, the washing, that ugly table, the sink. I'm trying to cook, and this place is driving me mad!" he exclaimed in response, peeling an onion like a man possessed. "I've noticed I seem to do all the cooking and the cleaning. Funny that."

A knife slammed through the onion onto the wooden chopping board making a loud, sharp impact.

"If you're going to be such a whinge about it then fine," Sammy announced as he ambled through the door, half-dressed and looking as if he had just got out of bed. He had. It was 6 pm.

"Get out of my kitchen! You're going to get in my way. You can clean up after we eat."

Nathan had turned around and mindlessly pointed the knife he was tightly gripping at his flatmate.

"Oh my days, well this at least needs to move now."

Sammy was dragging the clothes horse into the living room, bashing into his friend on the way. A heinous scraping noise escaped as the metal contraption was dragged across the floor.

"Rude."

They both rolled their eyes.

The countertop was filled with the dishes of the past two nights when Nathan had cooked for them.

As the clothes horse had been removed, he breathed a sigh of relief. He took the new opportunity to take Sammy's clothes from the washing machine and dump them on the table.

"Sam, if you don't hang these up, I'm going to bin them. They've been in there for three days!"

"Uh, yeah, they're nearly dry now."

Nathan ignored this comment from his flatmate lest he scream and returned to his cooking. The pasta water had begun boiling over onto the stovetop. A yelp escaped from his mouth as he hurried to turn the heat down.

"Well, I need to use the bloody machine."

"Why? You put a wash on, on like Monday?"

Monday was five days ago.

"Unlike you, Samantha, I actually like to keep my clothes clean."

"I'm always clean."

"Clatty maybe, clean no." Nathan was on the war path now. "Make yourself useful and pour the wine then." He pointed to the bottle sat waiting for them on windowsill, illuminated by the dying rays of the early autumn sun.

"You've not even fridged it." Sammy grabbed the bottle and the bottle opener next to it and began to bore into the cork.

"I'll fridge you in a minute." A pop announced the bottle had been opened. "Thank God. Mama needs a drink."

"Wah wah, you're such a moan." Sammy took the opened bottle across the kitchen to the cupboard filling the kitchen with the wine's aroma, a fruity wine, hints of peaches and apricot. The only two clean glasses remaining were two large black wine glasses. He removed them gracelessly and poured gracefully, handing one to his flatmate as they surveyed the chaos around them.

"Where do we even start?" he asked.

"I don't even know," Nathan replied, his hand shaking as he held the glass. They looked at each other and giggled. They raised their glasses as the water boiled over once more and their mess surrounded them.

"At least it's ours," they said in unison with a clink of their glasses and smiles.

Aviemore Campsite

Elizabeth Murphy

I can hear the rain spitting onto the roof this morning, it sounds like lots of little mice running everywhere. The smell of burning toast moves through the curtains into my bunk. As usual my wee brother huffs and puffs, I wonder if he knows he's snoring. Maybe he just does it to annoy me. I can hear the heavy footsteps and my dad grunting as he hits his head on the roof, there's holes in it because it's happened so many times! This morning mum wants to go for a walk, I don't know why because it's so wet and cold. Every single day I have to go. I'm so sick of it. My feet are almost touching the end of the bunk. Soon we will have to go camping in a tent instead!

"Morning darling," mum says softly trying to wake George, he's always so lazy.

Dad's phone starts to make a loud noise, he quickly picks it up and wanders out of the caravan. I watch him as he strolls further and further away. For some reason his shoulders are moving up and down, he stops walking. I don't know why he wants to go outside to answer his phone instead of staying in here. Shrugging my shoulders, I ask Mum what's for breakfast. She doesn't look over at me when she quietly says, "Just toast or cereal sweetie, whatever you like."

"Where's Dad going?" I ask. When she finally takes her eyes away from the window, she looks over at me and I can see her eyes are wet.

"I'm not too sure darling, just nipping to the showers I think. He won't be too long," she sighs. Silly Mummy, she must have rubbed them too much and now they are all wet. I jump up to see what George is doing.

Me and Georgie run outside to play with the dogs. My tummy starts to hurt from laughing so much at Jeff the dog. There's also Jeff the man from the village, we always make sure to say which one we are talking about! He keeps licking George's face. Dad finally comes round the corner after what feels like days. Once he gets closer his eyes are all red and big and he stares at the ground. That's weird, the shower must have been cold and he must have rubbed his eyes too much too! George runs over to him shouting, "Dad, where did you go?!"

Dad smiles, gives him a hug and then walks into the caravan. I watch through the window as mum and dad hug each other. Mum opens the door shouting, "Beth, George come back inside now. Your hot chocolate is waiting for you!"

Shoes muddy and clothes drenched in water me and George hop back into the caravan, racing each other.

All four of us are sitting on the couch drinking our hot chocolate, George playing games on his Nintendo. Dad's quiet today, I can't think why. He must be really bummed about his shower this morning, or maybe I upset him by saying I didn't want to walk today. I watch as Mum looks over at him and reaches for his hand.

"Beth, George, that was auntie Katie on the phone to your dad," Mum sighs heavily.

"Uncle Tom passed away last night," Dad says quietly. Mum comes over to me and George and gives us a hug. I feel sad, tears fall down my face. Uncle Tom was the best.

The Weight of a Single Moment

Su Yunn Myat Soe

I lie on my bed, wide awake, as my brain randomly recalls memories from my childhood. One memory, in particular, stands out, forming a clear image of myself on a sunny afternoon. A familiar concrete playground comes into focus, and a feeling of guilt tightens around me as I grip my blanket closer.

In my mind, I am back there, staring at a crumpled piece of paper in my hands – a singular digit scrawled in dark red ink. I had studied, lost sleep over it, and poured everything I had into preparing for that test. My worst nightmare had always been the look on my parents' faces after every single exam.

From the corner of my eye, I saw her: Lee, grinning at her paper, which had a bright gold star. The dents my fingernails left in my palms still linger, even now. Out of nowhere, Daphne broke through my bitter thoughts with her usual carefree energy.

"Hey, it's break time now. Wanna play tag?" she asked, flashing her wide smile.

I remember wanting to say no, but instead, I swallowed my resentment and forced myself to smile back.

"Sure."

Right after, an annoyingly familiar voice chimes in.

"I'm down too!" Lee's high-pitched voice echoes in my mind.

I remember the sting of annoyance as I rolled my eyes. At that point, I'm not even sure what I felt. My petty thoughts overwhelmed me. Why did she always have to be included? Why couldn't she ever let me have something of my own?

Out on the playground, my resentment grew stronger and stronger as Lee continued boasting about

her grades. I was on the verge of going home – something I regret not doing to this day. But then the game began. Lee was ‘it’, and the chase started.

I ran as hard as I could, pushing myself until I felt sick. But Lee was fast, and soon enough, she was right behind me, laughing. The moment she tagged me, I collapsed onto the ground, clearly hyperventilating. I admit I was never the most athletic person in my class. Then, I heard the exact words that finally made me crack:

“Maybe you should lose a few pounds.”

With a new surge of anger coursing through my veins, I tried to steady my breath and waited for the timer to restart. She ran ahead. I recalled the teasing grin she shot at me. And suddenly, something inside me snapped. All the emotions I had barely bottled up exploded.

I bolted forward, fuelled by something much darker than playfulness. I remember the feeling of my hand reaching out, then the shove.

And... Then the thud.

Her fall played out in horrifying slow motion. The metallic smell of blood imprinted itself in my brain. I recall her scream echoing through the playground and the unsettling image of her dislodged tooth.

At that moment, time stopped. I felt the weight of a thousand eyes on me, every pair staring with blame. In that split second, the lines blurred.

Even now, the question lingers as my eyes start to close, a shadow I can never escape from:

Did I do it on purpose?

I Miss Them...

Ihfazul Bhuiyan

Another day has passed, and it was somewhat of a productive day. I am bone-weary from the strain I put myself through in the gym, expending all my strength and mental resilience. Resisting the bouldering pressure that risks completely flattening my body, with nothing but my strength bringing my mind to complete silence and tranquillity, each repetition suppressing negative thoughts and emotions of loss. It brings about the only sort of salvation in my life, keeping me sane from the daily drag of reality. I guess I have made use of this activity by producing content out of it, hoping to inspire others to keep moving forward and encouraging them to be healthier and more disciplined. Now, I rest in my cold, hard bed as the lingering emptiness takes hold.

“Why does life seem so full of suffering? Why must it be so cruel?”

In my dismay, my thoughts wistfully wander to Smudge, my late cat. His playful antics would brighten otherwise dull days. Now, his absence makes my feelings of dread far more palpable. And I must accept that he is gone.

As I reflect on my dear friend, my thoughts drift to my late wife. I pick up my phone and scroll through old photos. She looks so beautiful, her luscious green-blue eyes brimming with enthusiasm, harmonising with the colour of the sea, her smile as happy as ever. I miss her silky blonde hair, bright as it glows like spun gold when it catches sunlight. I can still feel the gentle texture of those strands slipping through my fingers as I assist her to untangle and brush it, each stroke a moment of connection between us. I miss her touch, her voice, her laugh. She’s gone now; I can’t help but feel a deep sadness with a hint of anger as I have failed to protect her.

“Why did she leave me?”

The weight of these words hangs heavy on my heart, a heart burdened with the weight of grief and loss.

I can’t help but dwell on this until sleep overcomes me.

Feeling the cold sand trickling under the soles of my feet, listening to the waves as they gently approach me, and hearing the seagulls in the distance, I gaze at the sea, which glistens brightly as the sun rays pour down on it. I turn to see my beautiful wife in my hazy vision as she gently smiles into my soul. Around her feet, I see Smudge purring to me. I crouch and delicately pet his face, my wife doing the same, petting his back. My eyes become watery, and I rub them as I sniffle.

“What’s wrong, honey?”

Isabelle gently places her delicate hand on my cheek, looking at me concernedly.

“Nothing... Everything’s okay, don’t worry,” I try to assuage her concerns as I hug her softly.

“I’m just happy that you’re with me,” I mumble as tears begin to well up.

Isabelle replies with a smile, her face radiating reassurance. Smudge is also rubbing his cheeks on my leg, trying to comfort me. Moments later, I notice Smudge is trying to grab my attention as if trying to tell me something. After a moment, I realise he wants me to look at the sea. I turn and squint, and in the distance, I see a tennis ball bobbing gently at the surface of the ocean. I turn to my wife.

“Just give me a moment. Let me grab Smudge’s tennis ball.”

I dart into the sea, chasing after the ball. I swim and swim, but strangely, the ball is not getting any closer. I accelerate even more, but again, the distance is not getting any smaller, the ball remaining stubbornly out of reach. My vision is getting more and more hazy as I continue swimming. With every fibre in me, I try to propel myself even further. Just as I am about to raise my head, I get startled by a tremendous wave, ready to bring me to my demise.

A torrent of water barrels down on me with a force that defies nature, completely engulfing me into its depths. I scramble in pandemonium, trying to make out my surroundings as the saltwater dampens my vision. My limbs thrash while I search for anything to grab onto, my lungs struggling to breathe as I absorb the cold seawater like a sponge, and panic arrests me. I fight, clawing upward, desperately kicking against the heavy pull of the deep. Everything around me fades – sounds, light, even my sense of direction. I notice the light from the ocean surface diminishing further and further while my consciousness slips away, drowning in the silence of the endless blue.

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP. BEEP!!!

With a gasp, I sit up straight and alert, my lungs struggling for air as if I am still drowning. The familiar weight of my blanket acts like an anchor, pulling me back to reality. I realise that I am safe, dry, and very much alive. My hands fumble for the alarm clock, and with a weary slap, I silence its piercing shrieks. Gone are the tender nudges and soothing purrs of Smudge; I now have to wake to a mechanical cry. My heart thumps, remembering the adrenaline, and I can still feel the ghostly tug of the ocean and the deafening roar of that gargantuan wave. It was just a dream, but the memory of the moment I had with my wife and cat lingers, leaving a haunting reminder of what I have lost. Before, the mornings were bright and full of life; the world would embrace me with tenderness instead of this unsettling jolt back to consciousness as if I had been brought back to life after a horrifying heart attack.

This sensation reminds me of what happened to my wife. It was a rainy Tuesday evening. I was peacefully driving that night on the motorway. I remember the hum of the radio as Isabelle sang along to every song. She was an exceptional singer with a beautiful, soft, and carefree voice. Pure bliss entered my ears as we were going back to our home after a quiet dinner. The wind howled, the car very slightly swaying back and forth, and the rain poured down on us relentlessly as the wipers fought hard to keep the windshield clear.

“Maybe we should pull over,” I suggested.

“It’s just a little rain. We’ll be fine,” my wife advised.

Screech... Thud!

A truck materialised out of nowhere. Its high-beam headlights blinded us as it lost traction and aquaplaned into our lane. The screech was that of the truck tyres as they lost their grip. Everything happened far too quickly for me to react. The collision was ear-splitting, the car whirling like a

tornado, metal screeching as it imploded around us. I tried to open my eyes and check on Isabelle, but my vision was hazy, my ears ringing, and all I saw were red and bright yellow flashes of fire. And then, silence...

I awoke and noticed bandages on me and a bag full of fluid, thin wires running down it, injecting liquid into my veins.

"Where am I?"

I looked around me, only to see white walls and cold fluorescent lights glaring down on me. I felt a sharp pain as I gazed around me, slowly gathering my bearings and thoughts. As my thinking became clearer and I was slowly able to connect the dots, the reality dawned on me.

"Isabelle... Oh no... No, no, no, no!" I panicked with dread. My adrenaline kicked in as I readied myself to sprint towards her.

A nurse approached me just as I was about to leave the bed.

"Hold on, Mr Marcus! You need to rest. You are not ready to move just yet!"

"Where is Isabelle? Is she okay? I want to see her now!" My mind raced, my body convulsing with fear.

"Isabelle...?" murmured the nurse. "Oh, you mean your wife. We don't know about her status yet. A doctor will come and let you know about her soon. I understand that it is a hard situation to be in, but please, I request your patience. A doctor will be with you soon with an update."

"Hmmm, okay..." I responded, reluctant to accept it. However, I knew I was not in control of whatever happened from then on.

My mind raced, my body quivered in fear, and my thoughts clung on to any hope to hold myself together amidst the wait, which felt like an eternity. The nurse stayed there to keep an eye on me. I stared at the clock for distraction, watching every tick of the second hand as I waited patiently for the news. Eventually, as the monotonous seconds completed their full circle, the doctor arrived.

The doctor introduced himself and checked my name and date of birth to verify who I was. I answered and then anxiously asked, "Is Isabelle okay?" as a drop of sweat ran down my forehead. The doctor's expression turned to a grimace. With a deep sigh, he spoke the bitter truth that I was desperately trying to avoid.

"I'm so sorry, your wife did not make it."

I kept completely still, emotionless. In that moment of silence, I felt nothing. My chest caved in; my breath stolen by the weight of the loss. The soul from my body had escaped at that moment. My mind was still trying to process the reality, but any optimism in my being shattered like glass. Isabelle was gone, the person I truly lived for, the person I had been trying my best to protect all this time, her visage crumbling into dust.

That moment put a stabbing pin on the life I once knew. After Isabelle's death, nothing felt real anymore. Smudge, our cat, became my only source of ease, but even he could not disperse the shadow that still haunted me. My stable job, the one I hung on to for so long, began to feel meaningless. I couldn't sit at that desk, pretending to care about deadlines and reports when the person I had strived so hard for was no longer there. So, I left. I walked away without a second thought.

Day in and day out, I called out in prayer to any deity to answer my calls for Isabelle to return. However, the more I prayed, the more the harsh reality dawned on me that she would never walk through the front door again.

In my search for solace amidst the pain, I turned to Smudge, my loyal companion, hoping his presence would bring some ease. To my shock, Smudge, once healthy and whole, had turned frail and emaciated. Subconsciously, my thoughts wandered to the prospect of Smudge being gone too. Smudge had been there before Isabelle. I still remember that desolate, freezing night as the blizzard tested my resolve. As I fought to slowly creep up against the blizzard, I heard a faint, strained purr. I hurried in the direction of this cry and found, lying under a small, abandoned shed, a shivering,

scrappy kitten, too weak to even flee when I approached. His eyes, wide and vulnerable, met mine, and without hesitation, I scooped him up. That night, as he nestled into my jacket, his tiny purring gave me the willpower to brave the howling blizzard and reach home.

Before Isabelle, Smudge was everything. He would wait for me at the door after long shifts at work, nudged my hand when I stared too long into nothingness, always engaged in play with me, and kept me tethered to a semblance of purpose.

I can still recall the day I named him. It was the day after I had taken him in, and after a long day of work, I was reclining on the sofa while browsing through channels on TV. While mindlessly surfing through my options, I suddenly heard the cat flap open and a loud SPLASH. Turning my head, I saw, to my horror, Smudge standing in a pool of blank ink, partially covered by it himself as well. I stood there for several moments, unable to process what I was seeing. However, looking at the absolute mess before me, I began to chuckle.

"I've barely known you a day, and this is how you greet me."

I crouched down, grabbing the nearest towel, and began wiping the ink off him.

"This is not how I expected to spend my evening," I joked, hardly able to contain my smile.

As I wiped the ink off his body, I suddenly realised, "Wait, you don't have a name, do you?"

While saying this, I noticed I had actually smudged some of the ink back into his fur rather than removing it.

"You know what? I'll call you Smudge, seeing as this ink I've smudged on you probably won't come off," I laughed.

It was several years after this when Isabelle arrived. Smudge, ever perceptive, welcomed her with a cautious affection that grew into something more. It was as if the cat understood what Isabelle meant to me and approved, curling up beside us as we planned our future together. But that future had now crumbled into dust.

As I cradled his weakening body on the final day, I felt the weight of my grief pressing down like an unyielding tide. Smudge's breath was shallow, his once-vivid eyes clouded, but they still sought my face as if to say, You'll be alright. I wasn't sure if that was true.

I whispered through the tears streaming unchecked down my face, "You've been with me through everything, Smudge. You've carried me when I couldn't carry myself. What will I do without you?" My voice cracked, breaking under the weight of the question I already knew the answer to.

Smudge exhaled a final, fragile breath, his tiny body still in my arms. For a moment, I stayed there, motionless, clutching him as if sheer will could bring him back. But fate had never been so kind.

Standing over the tiny grave, I whispered, "Goodbye, my boy. Thank you for staying with me... even when I didn't deserve it."

Now, I make ends meet with content creation. The gym is my sanctuary, the only place where I have some control over my feelings. But even as I lift the weights, as I push my body to its limits, I can't flee from the nightmares.

The mornings used to be different. As I still crumble in my bed, I remember Smudge used to sneak onto my bed as the first rays of sunlight crept through the blinds. His tiny paws would pad softly across my tummy, then to my chest, and with the lightest touch, he would nuzzle his whiskers against my cheek, purring softly. His warmth, his weight, a slight reminder that life still held pieces of gentleness, even when the world seemed harsh and unkind. I would wake to that, not to the mechanical shriek of an alarm. And for a moment, it would feel like everything was alright.

The faint scent of cooking would tingle the hairs in my nostrils, a teasing reminder of the delicious breakfast prepared by my beloved Isabelle that I was soon to devour. The smell of sizzling eggs with the rough, meaty, savoury smell of sizzling bacon on top, my mouth salivating at the thought of the rich aroma and taste of it. I gradually got up from my bed and followed the trail of smell towards the kitchen, and there she was, Isabelle gracefully moving from counter to stove, her hair catching

the morning light. I would take small, sneaky steps, preventing any noise from being generated, and slowly embrace her from behind. With her sweet, gentle voice, she replied, “Good morning, honey,” and softly held my hands and leaned her head on my shoulder.

“Good morning, darling,” I happily replied as I felt her melt into me.

The entire earth could turn into chaos, and all hell could unleash at any moment, but the world I had here with my wife and cat was a perfect heaven.

But that is no more. Only a painful void lingers, haunting my every breath.

I lower my eyelids, feeling the weight pressing down.

With a sudden resolve, I raise my hands and slap my cheeks as hard as I can.

Smack!

The pain is sharp, slicing through like a blade. My stung face and the hot flush which spreads across my face serve as a reminder that the past is gone, and no amount of reminiscing can resuscitate it.

This agony is a cruel but effective tether to reality.

I inhale with a serrated breath and let the ache settle.

“The past won’t come back,” I whisper, the words carrying the resignation of someone who has learned to live with loss. The tone has no softness, only a quiet acceptance of what can’t be changed. I stand, the motion deliberating, dense with the heaviness of all the memories that can’t have any place in this life anymore. Crossing the room, I reach for the curtains and pull them open. Light floods in, bitter and grey, illuminating every corner of the dark, lonely space I now call home. I venture to the nearest window and gaze out into the distance.

There is nothing left for me in the past. Only the present I must face remains. And I must face it head-on with nothing but my resolve.

I have not discarded the past, it lingers as a bittersweet echo instead. I keep it with me, not as a burden, but as a testament to the love and resilience it carries.

The clang of the barbell hitting the floor reverberates throughout the gym, a sound that blends with my thoughts and resolves into a single, undeniable truth:

I am still here. And I will keep moving forward.

The Funeral

Jing Mun Hoh

“I will drop you guys off first. It’s room B4 on the 4th floor,” Dad says in a solemn voice. Mom and I enter this tall glass building through a set of automatic doors. The building has a very minimalist design, the walls surrounding us painted white and grey. There is something about the tranquillity of this place that is strangely unsettling.

“Where are we going, Mom?” I ask, my voice echoing through the hollow space.

“You’ll see later. I’ll explain everything to you after we leave. In the meantime, just behave yourself and follow me,” she replies.

Why is Mom acting all mysterious? What is the big deal? I wonder to myself.

As we walk towards the lift, I realize we have not passed by a single soul. The lift doors open, and a man who is carrying a large bouquet of white lilies greets us.

“Who or what are those for, Mom? They are so pretty. Can we get some for our house?” I ask.

“No, those are not for decorations, and neither are they suitable for our house. Let’s go,” replies Mom with a hint of impatience in her voice.

The lift doors open once again, and we reach the 4th floor. I follow Mom as we exit the lift. This floor is populated with more people, but I notice that everyone is oddly carrying a similar expression on their faces. Their eyebrows are scrunched up, their eyes swollen and puffy as if they had been stung

by bees. Traces of dried-up tear streaks can also be seen stretching down their cheeks.

"Mom, something horrible must have happened here. I just know it," I whisper to Mom, my voice filled with concern, but once again I receive no reply from her.

We then walk past clusters of people, who are hugging and burying their faces into each other's shoulders, crying. Moving past the different rooms, I spot the white lilies, which we saw earlier, being placed in front of the doors in abundance.

Room B4 is indicated on an electronic screen, next to the door.

"This must be it. Let's go in," states Mom monotonously.

The moment we enter the room, a large picture of a man placed in the centre of a table catches my eye. The picture is framed in a wooden frame with gold accents. The man in the picture has the widest smile stretching across his cheeks. He is dressed in a white buttoned-down shirt, topped with a black coat. On top of the table lies a bunch of white and yellow flowers, candles, and some plated fruits.

"Who is this? Do you know him, Mom?" I ask, yearning for an answer.

"He was a childhood friend of your father's. They knew each other since they were both five. Although I did not have a chance to meet him personally, your father has always shared their childhood stories with me," Mom finally answers me properly for the first time today.

I notice how Mom has kept using the word 'was', which intrigues me, but I choose to keep my silence, because she does not seem to be in the mood to answer more of my questions. The last thing I want to do is to trigger her.

Mom then leads me to an area behind the picture, where a huge, wooden, rectangular box with an open cover is placed. As I follow Mom's footsteps and move closer to the box, my jaw drops. I am startled by the sight of the man lying in the box, shielded by a layer of glass. His eyes are closed, his skin is pale as if his blood has been completely drained from his body. His expression is calm and at peace, mimicking a baby in deep slumber. Although a red blanket is wrapped around his body, I can still see part of his outfit peeking through. It is the same outfit from the picture.

"Is he sleeping, Mom? Is he going to wake up and greet us later?"

"No, he will never wake up again. This uncle of yours has unfortunately passed away yesterday. We are here to pay our last respects to him."

Her answer sends a chill down my spine and makes my heart skip a beat, as I did not expect to see a dead body for the first time in my life. Furthermore, Mom and Dad have never discussed the topic of death in front of me, ever before. So I am genuinely startled by what I am witnessing.

While I am still overwhelmed by disbelief, Mom's phone rings suddenly. It is Dad on the phone.

"Where are you guys? Why do I not see you guys?" I can hear Dad's faint voice.

"We are at the casket viewing area. You should be able to meet us here," responds Mom.

"Dear, I am at the casket viewing area, but I don't see you," Dad replies in confusion.

"What do you mean? You are scaring me, honey. This is not the time for jokes," says Mom, growing impatient.

"Dear, tell me which room you are in right now?" questions Dad.

"Room B4, just like you told me. Jing heard it too," replies Mom.

"Esther honey, I said D4, not B4..." Dad's voice panics.

"What?! Then who is this man that we just saw?" Mom asks hastily.

"How the hell would I know?" Dad exclaims.

No Space to Breathe

Sarah Baxter

I pull the straps of my pristine white apron tight around my waist, suffocatingly tight. Suffocating. That's the only way I can describe working in this kitchen. At the end of every shift, I feel like I've just been submerged under water for eight hours. Only to emerge at the end of the night feeling breathless and exhausted dreading my return the next day. I swiftly enter the immaculate kitchen to see everyone lined up at their stations ready for the Saturday dinner rush to ensue. I give a slight nod and a weak smile to each of my co-workers as I pass them, the commis chefs clustered together around their station chattering quietly amongst themselves. The sous-chef station is positioned directly across from head chef's. I steal a quick glance over to Martin's table and see he's yet to arrive. A breath of relief, as I realise I managed to get here before he did. Last time I was late he forced me to stay behind and scrub every crevice of the grill, with him looming over my shoulder the full time reminding me.

"There is always punishments for tardiness, no matter what your rank in this kitchen is."

Speaking of the devious head chef, his presence is made immediately apparent as the heavy doors leading to the kitchen swing open and he struts in. A tall beast of a man, face permanently reddened making him appear constantly furious. His thin, wiry black hair is hidden under his ridiculously tall chef's hat, his bushy moustache already twitching over his top lip as he glares at the saucier who is still tucking her hair into a hairnet. The brigade of chefs that have previously been happily catching up with each other and casually leaning over the stainless-steel countertops, now all stand rigid and upright in silence. Martin saunters over to his station, I greet him and smile, only to be met with a grunt.

The large electronic clock that looms over the porter's window blinks the time at us.

17:59

One minute. I close my eyes and try to relax for this last minute of silence before all hell of the night unleashes. The second the clock strikes six the expeditor begins bellowing out orders of food and everyone launches into action. It feels like the heat of the kitchen is rising by the second. Over by the service window, I can see our newest waiter Alex passing over customers' orders. Even from the other side of the kitchen I can see his hand shaking as he passes the receipt across. Alex is new. He is the owner's nephew and was barely seventeen before being thrown into a part-time job at our Michelin star restaurant. In the past, the restaurant exclusively didn't hire anyone under twenty-one; we had standards to uphold and having some untrained, spotty-faced teenager serving customers was not one of our criteria. Until Alex. Martin despises Alex. They don't have many interactions due to their opposing positions in the workplace but the few they have are not pleasant. I've been a victim of Martin's outrages many a time over the years, but the way he shouts at Alex even makes me shudder. Nepotism may have gotten him this job, but it definitely hasn't done him any favours amongst the kitchen staff.

20:41

We're in the depths of it now. Almost three hours since service started and three more to go. Not that I'm keeping track. I delicately stir the saucier's miso butter sauce before tasting.

"Needs more sugar."

She diligently nods back at me before returning to work. Across from me I see Martin. As much as he frustrates me, I have to admit, watching him work in his element is quite mesmerising. He places the final flourish of garnish onto his dish before yelling,

"Service!"

A porter rushes over immediately to whisk the dish away. Martin dabs his forehead with a tea-towel to wipe away his sweat, before looking up at me and locking onto my gaze.

“Do you have an issue chef?”

“No, chef.”

“Then get back to work.”

My cheeks flush as I lower my gaze back onto the dish I was plating up. After five years of working under Martin, I’ve learnt when to keep my head down and pretend his words don’t stick to me after service ends.

22:03

A loud clatter is heard from outside the kitchen, followed by a sheepish opening of the door and Alex emerges into the kitchen. Martin’s neck snaps up at the sound and scowls at the disturbance.

“Out! No front of house in the kitchen during service hours!”

“Y-Yes chef, but I—”

“Are you deaf or dumb? What part of ‘out’ don’t you understand?”

Alex is practically cowering in the corner as Martin ridicules him in front of the entire kitchen. After many apologies and stutters, Alex finally blurts out his reason for invading our space. He has dropped a dish. Martin’s dish. Martin looks like he could snap the poor boy’s neck when he finally stutters out his confession. The dish also just happens to be easily the most complicated dish on our entire menu, involving so many different elements it will take at least another twenty minutes to reassemble it. This sets Martin off like never before, his voice louder than the entire restaurant, reverberating through the walls. All the kitchen staff keep their heads down and desperately try to ignore the outrageous comments Martin is making towards the poor boy. I contemplate stepping in, but truth be told, I’m just grateful his anger isn’t aimed at me this time.

“M-My Uncle says you’re not to raise your voice at me anymore, chef...”

“He what?!”

Martin grits the last question through his teeth, the vein on his forehead pulsating and his eyes look like they could pop out of his head at any moment. He turns on his heels and marches towards the fire exit, plucking a pack of cigarettes from his back pocket.

“If your Uncle doesn’t want me to shout at you, tell him he can make that dish you dropped himself!” Martin spits before pushing the door open and stomping out of the kitchen.

Cinquains

Iseabail Moran

My hands
Rough and ragged
Clean is not clean enough
Scrub and scrub and scrub until lots
Of blood

Mirror
Shattered in parts
My face wobbles in front
My hands gush with the mirror’s blood
Mirror

Ageing
I am so scared
The bonnet on my car
How does it open again? Wait
Call Dad

Stranger
Pick up your phone
If you called would I? Yes
Without hesitation I would
-Your friend

Limoncello Man

Iseabail Moran

It was a scorching July afternoon when I arrived in Milan. The doors of the plane opened and I was instantly met with dry air and the smell of blistering tarmac. I was wearing shorts and a sweatshirt, a weather-appropriate choice for Edinburgh but in Italy, the sweatshirt was a sin. Walking down the steps of the plane I could feel the sun reflecting off my translucent skin. I had planned ahead and layered on the factor fifty that morning but this was a heat I had never experienced before. I could feel my skin crisping like a roast chicken in an oven. The flight was good, uneventful, just how it should be. Me and Levana spent the entire time yapping and gossiping. We barely even noticed the time pass.

We walked together into border control following the sea of people who had just gotten off the plane. I fiddled in my bag looking for my passport whilst feeling that familiar queasy feeling I get when I'm anxious. My mouth filled with spit and my brain felt frozen, knowing I had minutes before I would throw up. I stood hunched over, clinging onto Levena, waiting on the line of people to clear. Luckily the queue moved quickly and I was out the other side without vomiting. Airports have always made me feel weird. The atmosphere feels so false and the air reminds me of the gas you get given before surgery.

We walked up the steps of the metro station and were instantly met with the bustle and unease of a busy city. There were Vespas driving on pavements, dribbling in and out of pedestrians and cars so small parked in non-existent spaces. Everybody wore big sunglasses and smoked. I would smoke too if I lived here, I thought. With an Aperol spritz in my hand and a cigarette in the other, it felt chic and mysterious. Levena led the way towards our apartment with the familiar glow of Google Maps lighting her phone. Traffic light signals appeared to be optional, with cars driving through red lights at speed, playing chicken with pedestrians. It felt like the streets were on the edge of disaster. Even trying to cross the road here felt thrilling and dangerous, something I didn't tend to experience in Aberdeen. I could feel the heat off the pavement through my trainers, regretting my shoe choices. I had only brought one pair to save money on luggage. I picked my comfiest pair, my trusty, but scabby, blue Adidas with a sturdy brown heel.

Once we arrived at our apartment, we headed straight for the supermarket. The shelves were lined with snacks and drinks I didn't recognise, with labels I couldn't read. The shop was small and poky with an uneven floor. It travelled round in a loop from one end of the cash register to the other. Going round the wrong way would have resulted in a head-on collision with another customer. We gathered supplies for the night ahead, gave a small 'graci' to the man behind the counter (our pronunciation was poor) then headed back to the flat.

The following hours were spent dancing, laughing and drinking cocktails in our lovely air-conditioned apartment as we got ready for dinner. I must have tried on all of the clothes I brought, looking for the perfect combination. I picked my favourite skirt; a blue, denim one which my mum always tells me is inappropriately short. I paired it with a black lace cami top and my big sunglasses. My hair was slicked back into a bun to try and tame my Irish curls which clearly didn't agree with the Italian climate. Sabrina Carpenter blared from one of our phones as we twirled around taking pictures, a little tipsy from the cocktails and the lack of food in our stomachs.

We walked into a bar with a sign outside that said 'Takeaway cocktails three euros'. Levena had never had limoncello before so I forced her to try one. We made our way over to the bar where the man serving us flirted outrageously, leading to us getting drinks for free. We ordered two limoncello spritz which we sipped cautiously after seeing the amount of alcohol that went into them. After a quarter of the drink I felt dizzy and everything sounded so much funnier. We took our drinks to go and found a lovely spot in the town square to sit.

There are moments in life where you're just completely present. Your mind is clear, nothing worries you and you're just happy to be alive. I took a breath of warm air, a sigh of relief, I felt so content. We sat in the square for hours, yapping, giggling and talking about the future. We also took many trips back to the bar with the lovely bartender that we affectionately nicknamed 'limoncello man'. We were both so drunk. Not wanting the night to end, we googled clubs we could go to for a wee boogie.

The warm air wrapped around me as we skipped up the street, arms linked, towards the club. The club we were going to had a terrace that looked out to the Duomo di Milano, one of the most famous churches in Italy. I felt so small looking up at the Duomo. I wasn't so drunk that I couldn't appreciate its beautiful architecture. I could have stared at it for hours, days even, each time noticing something new. We finished the night partying on the terrace, listening to techno music which wasn't to either of our tastes but the one million limoncello spritz consumed in the hours prior helped us enjoy it.

