Flash Fiction Competition 2016

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Three Weeks

Three weeks.
Judy had arrived on the 18th of June and left on the 8th of July. To live in Chichester.
Ten days in the cottage hospital, then ten days here at the farm.
She opened the door wide and, with difficulty, manoeuvred the heavy old rocking chair to the threshold. She picked up a book. She put her feet up on a low chest. Her legs were swollen and pale. She rocked gently.
Sunlight flooded the courtyard.
The book was *David Copperfield*. She knew it well. She turned the pages, picking up, tuning in to the prevailing notes of sadness.
The hand-over had been quick. No lingering goodbyes. A quick signature. No time for questions. No names. No details. Car wheels grinding on the gravel. Then the sobbing, racking, the sound of her heart breaking.
The birth had not been easy. She had been very tired and very sore. The Plummers were kind people. They said she could stay as long as she wanted. Their own children were long gone. They were being paid anyway.
She had talked ceaselessly to the baby in those three weeks and sung to her. *Greensleeves*. *The Raggle-Taggle Gypsies-o, Barbara Allen*. Songs her mother had sung. On that last day, Judy had smiled at her, clutched her finger, sucked greedily, belched, and smiled again.
She talked to the moon, now; to the summer rain that drummed on her bedroom skylight; to the sparrows that chattered around the door. She spoke to her mother, who had died ten years ago.

At seventeen, at college, she had had no idea of who she was or who she might be. She had loosely stitched together a few personalities for herself from scraps of fabric mainly borrowed from others. Now, she had made a baby and given it away.
The father had been a nice boy, but, when she thought to remember him, all she could see was the look of relief that suffused his face when she told him she didn’t want to marry him.
She fingered a snap-shot of her parents’ wedding that she had put in the pages of the book. She saw the plump smiling face of the bride, her father’s tangled black hair and defiant look. When she went home, four months pregnant, he hadn’t wanted to know.
She watched the swallows scissor through the dark doorway of the grain-loft, fetching globs of mud and wisps of hay for their nests inside.
She felt stiff and sore. The District Nurse would stop by later. Her eyes closed. Her head dropped.
The book slid down the hammock of her shapeless dress. Her rocking stilled.
An invitation

You leave the door ajar in invitation, in hope your guest will shortly wander by. Your legs are bare below the knee, your arms below the elbow. A necklace frames your collarbone. Hair tucked behind ear, your porcelain jaw catches the moonlight. Old Ethel has the same idea. Her wooden shutter, firmly bolted in the day, swings freely. She perches, straight-backed, in her first-floor sitting room, staring out into the darkness. She believes she is your equal, though you would make for better company. Her skin is not as supple as it was; her joints creak and groan. You resent her impatience.

You flick pages of a worn novella, scrolling through prose until your synapses tire. You hope to be the picture of nonchalance, but know the scene is for show. Words blur into masses of black ink, sentences recast as spider scuttle. Slowing, you start to skim the same paragraphs, stuck on repeat, thoughts wired not to head but to pumping heart. You lean back in your rocking chair, the notches of your spine barely padded by the miserable cushions, flats kicked up on the dusty crate you found in the shed out back. Forgotten and seemingly functionless, you gave it a second life as a footstool.

You pray silently for such a reinvention. Rest your soles, restless soul. Still the street is quiet, still no stir in the house across the cobbles. Your eyelids droop, only the turn of a handle jolting you back to attention. Alas, it is not your visitor, only Ethel conceding defeat, pulling her shutter closed for the night. She calls out to you. *We’re done, child. Dry, drained, beaten. We’ve missed our chance. You offer no words in return, nor a nod of acknowledgement. You do not speak for me,* you think. You wait in place until dawn, though the chill nips at your ankles and stings the tip of your nose.

You wake as the sun peeks over the rooftops, light filling the cracks in your floorboards. You wipe the sleep away and rise, yawning. The book slips from your lap and lands, open, with a dull thud. Its scrawled lettering seems clearer, less potent. After a final, fruitless glance outside, you drop the latches and stumble upstairs, disappointed and dejected. You unwanted mass of meat, you vein-crossed figure of flesh, unable to tempt fanged teeth. An invitation was extended, but no reply received. Now, safe and snug under the bedsheets, you are the one left baying for blood.
Scratch

Your cabin was half buried under the snow. It piled up on the roof, enclosing the cabin in an ice shell. But up on the mountainside, you were protected from the outside, cocooned inside the wooden walls. The fire’s warmth filled the single room, the smoke drifting into the blizzard outside. It was safe here.

You rocked on your chair. Opened your book.

***

The woman sat on her rocking chair. The storm swirled outside, getting worse. She wondered if she would ever leave the cabin, or stay trapped by the snow until she starved to death. She didn’t mind; she could sit by the fire forever.

Something was moving in the snow. A clawing at the walls. At the door, there was a long scrape against the wood.

She turned to the window. Snow stuck to the windowpane, icicles clinking from above, obscuring her view. A shadow of someone, something, crept up the glass as if to peer through into the cabin. Blurred, unhuman. Claw softly curved, gently threatening. The woman’s breath caught. There had been warnings. She’d ignored them, of course, but she remembered images of creatures which could tear out a person’s throat, which crept through the snow and then pounced. What was outside?

The woman put her book down on the chair and stood. The chair continued to rock, empty, its gravity gradually slowing it down until it was still again. She inched over to the door and leaned to turn the bolt shut, the metal chilling to the touch. She didn’t dare look through the window, lowering her eyelids until she could see nothing but trembling eyelashes.

Her own home. She should be safe here. Her own home. Isolated. Miles from any settlement. Blanketed. Invisible. Here she was unseen by all, except by her hungry predator.
Eyes shut, in denial of the snowstorm, of the animal, wolf, bear, demon, thing, which was outside, she waited. Without breathing, a statue, carved out of ice, or burned in a fire kiln. Her toes curled on the rug, trying to cling on. She could feel the creature coming.

A smash! through the window, tearing her arms up with glass. She couldn’t open her eyes. The cold air rushed in. Lashes frozen together. Her limbs, frozen too. Ripped skin. It was over there. She could see it in her mind. Ravenous. She was finished.

The man growled. His hands curled into claws, fingernails crusted with dirt and blood. He smiled with black teeth.

‘Come here. You’d rather it was quick, wouldn’t you, my dear?’

He bared his teeth.

***

Outside, a cold wind gusted across the plane. It was a blizzard now, snow being flung about with a wild carelessness which you watched from your rocking chair. You put down your book and moved closer to the fire, wrapping your red cloak around you, as if to protect yourself. To stay warm. Or to ward off the creature which was outside, scratching at the door.
Upside Down

I left the door open while I was reading so I would see him coming up the cobbled street from the harbour, but it wasn’t him who came.

You can always tell what a policeman is going to say by his demeanour. This one stood reluctantly and that...is bad news.

There were no tears. No particular thoughts. I rocked gently for hours as dim light edged apologetically into my void. I felt the cold; especially dawn’s faint mist, but did not look for solace in wool or cotton. I felt the rigor mortise as my own. Stiff, where soft, sinew once was; straight, where once were curves. Skin tight; clammy cool.

I could not still my heart. Softly, gently, it continued its regular pulse. I felt it as never before. The only thing calling out to life.

I realised, with a jolt that it was beating with the universe. It wasn’t actually mine.

My breathing quickened. The lungs too I grasped were also driven by the universe. I did not actively pursue the expansion and deflation of these cavernous sacks. It happened...all the time.

I wanted to be warm.

The rigid muscles were mine and I flexed them carefully as pain engulfed expectant nerves. I shifted blocks of limbs, robotically and massaged the humanity back in.

Standing erect released pins of pain; spasms and twitches...raucous moans of consternation. My throat decided suddenly that it was dry and I lurched towards the kettle. Tea is always there; always reassuring. The act of making tea; a body function itself. Automatic. When did I last think of it? The hands move themselves; the eyes barely seem to glance. Steaming tea; better in a mug.

I add cold water because I need to drink it now.

It’s not like liquid. A tube of tea soothes my rubber tongue and gloops, gloriously down my yielding throat.

Warming; spreading; infusing; calming; gut, cells, organs.

Tea is a life saver. I can’t believe it when the mug is empty. Nothing is as good as that first liberating cup. I pour another anyway.

I realise, with a pang of guilt, that I momentarily released him from my thoughts.
Tears expand and blur surprised eyes, then leach warm streams onto cool cheeks. Here we go.
The sobs; lungs in action again. Short, violent sobs. How do they learn to do that? Then I’m lost in
catching breaths, swallowing backward tears and... making the noise. The noise of anguish.
Shameful. Someone might hear. Who wails? Stop it!
Misery takes me. I do not care. Wailing, snorting, lolling, grasping knees, dropping to the floor.
Face damp; pink; leaking.
At the door, a figure.
“I heard”
A cool cloth pats my brow. A hand of reassurance on my shoulder. No other sound, but my quieter
sobs, heaving chest and snuffling.
Gradually it all settles to calm. I am helped to sit and cold realisation dawns.

“Bollocks” I say “I’ll get another cat.”
When I think of a DVD called ‘The Book Thief’ and the part where all the books have been put on a pile and set fire to, I tremble at the loss of knowledge, learning, experience and enjoyment going up in flames in Germany in 1938.

When I think of a Primary Four class sitting in front of me, listening to the story called ‘Charlotte’s Web’ and knowing that every word I am saying is giving them a visual image of Wilbur, the pet pig, who is destined to be killed unless Charlotte, the spider can save him. The story made an impression on me. The children loved it and I passed the story onto my grandchildren.

When I think of ‘The Small Woman’ written by Alan Burgess, which became the film ‘The Inn of the Sixth Happiness’, it remains a book that showed me how courage and determination can conquer almost anything. And if the will is strong enough, you can do almost anything you set your mind to.

When I think of Paulo Coelho’s book called ‘Adultery’, I feel every woman should read it. It maps out reasons why you feel the way you do – about depression, lack of hope, apathy, boredom, a pointless existence, you want to swallow your desire to cry, you feel trapped and nobody notices. By the end of the book you will be glad you read it. I think it is worthwhile reading.

A book is a wonderful thing. It can give you direction, a way of life you didn’t dream of and hope for all manner of things. That’s what happened when I read Henning Mankell’s ‘Fifth Woman’. I wasn’t aware I was searching for something, but my mind was assaulted when I was introduced to a horrific crime at the beginning of the novel. From that moment I knew I was going to write crime novels.

Committing myself to the months of continual writing wasn’t difficult. I was doing what I wanted to do, but getting published was harder. I wasn’t lucky enough to find a publisher, so I went down the electronic route and self-published on Amazon.

After writing six mediocre novels, which gained success, I unconsciously went back to searching by reading different author’s work. I still got pleasure, assurance that I was on the right track and then came another step in the ladder, when I read R.J. Ellory’s ‘Carnival of Shadows’. The novel showed me how to create depth in my characters – back story, history and baggage. This knowledge could improve my writing and I’m working on it now.

Books are a real treasure and a gift to silent readers and people like me. I once told school children that some books are like gold nuggets and when you find them you know their worth.
Colour of the Future

Black and white is all there is. Sitting by myself, rocking myself back to sanity. The sanity that isn’t there. Will never be there again. My book the only place with colour. Bright and radiant oranges, reds as thick as blood, greens as lush as a summer meadow.

I lose it all when I look up. Every last tone, shade and tint gone. Washed away in my stream of happiness which I can never stop. The stream runs away so fast from me I never have any time to enjoy it, the place where I long to be. The place where I am happy. Runs through my forest where I’ve planted wild and wonderful flowers. The pillow of grass underneath my feet thick and snug. I often sleep in it while I let the sun I’ve created give me a nice warm hug. I love my forest, with all of its many birds calling out to each other, and the butterflies that use me as their sanctuary, their happy place, where they know nothing can harm them. They have me and I have them; together we are at peace. The good loving peace that is always there and will never say no to you. The type of peace that can always welcome one more in.

I delight to explore my forest, to feel the roughness of the bark on the trees under my fingertips. I cherish it when the ferns tickle the side of my legs. I adore feeling the wind blow through my hair and brush it out of my face. I love the fragrance of all the flowers I have planted. Their smells are incense to me.

I often find myself lost in my forest, exploring the many paths that wind their way around the trees. I suppose that I can never truly find myself lost. It is my forest after all. Everything is how it is meant to be, and everything is how it will always be. Nothing will change because to me it is perfect: because there is colour.

My reality is sad; the world we live in is depressed. We are all deprived of happiness, but in happiness there is colour. Colour is in everything: in our smiles, our laughter, our friendship, our love. It makes us who we are; because in colour there is hope, and without hope there is no future.

The world moves and we move with it. We may not move forwards but we move. We move in the hope of colour.
The Escapists

She rocks gently back and forth, feet propped up in front of her. Some might say that she is relaxed, but I know better. I know that she is in a trance like state, fully engrossed in what she’s reading, a thick novel with the smallest of font.

There are many different forms of escapism which a person can choose to take: the Adrenaline Junkies, those who dive out of planes or off of cliffs, or maybe just drive too fast; then there’s the real Junkies, using drugs to escape from their real lives, if only for an evening; the people who wholly dedicate themselves to their jobs, pushing everything else to the side: the Workaholics. All such people are addicted to something, distracting themselves from their real lives in one way or another.

Our girl is no different, devouring book after book, on close terms with her local librarian, of course.

Escapists don’t necessarily have something they need to escape, even if that might be contradictory. No, all it takes is a fear inside their head. But in this case, our girl does have something in particular she’s avoiding. She knows that if she becomes unabsorbed from her reading for just a moment too long she will hear the collision of two people who can’t escape any longer: her parent’s voices escaping through the open window, down through the garden and into the small shed where our girl so often goes to get away herself.

They haven’t always been like this, a family of people plotting to disappear; A workaholic who loses herself in mounds of paperwork and leaves little enough time spare to think; A junkie, always looking for a way to spend their money on his next high, not realising that the need is taking him over, eating away just below the surface, but just far enough under that you wouldn’t see anything wrong at a glance; and finally we have our girl, who can’t drag her head out of the fictional world for long enough to try and fix the real one, not that fixing anything should be her responsibility to begin with.

As I said, they haven’t always been like that. There was a time when they were all present in the moment. Our girl can almost remember it, but these days it feels as if it must have been the plot of one of the novels she’s read. That time is long gone now, and has been for some years.

And that is why our girl sits in her trancelike state, with a slightly strained, sad expression as she tries not to lose focus on the world in front of her with all her might; lost in a dream of adventure and excitement, or in stories of woe that make her feel indirectly better about her own experiences. But, whatever she reads and whatever the story, one thing will always be the same: her real life.
Synesthesia

The book is black, etched with ebony and soot. It’s cradled in the girl’s hands, draping her palms in ashen shadow. She traces the bindings with ivory fingers, reclining in a chair the same shade as a winter sky. Or any sky, for that matter. Grey. Her own skin is snow, hair coal, but she has no lips of red like the fairy tales that illustrated her childhood. Her lips are grey. Her skies are grey. Her world is monochrome, engraved out of darkness that cannot be cut away.

But the book is black. Its cover is ink, darker than the girl’s hair, darker than any shade she’s seen before. Searching the basement has yielded this treasure. It draws all light; an aurora borealis plays on her palms. She touches the spine tentatively, revealing worn leather. Darker than ravens, darker than the clearest of night skies.

She opens the cover.

Paper. Bright as fresh snow, white as brushed teeth and whipped cream. A single word is sprawled in the centre of the page, unapologetic; a word she’s never read before, but it’s beautiful, a mess of swirls and curlicues dancing over pristine canvas.

Burgundy.

The girl kicks her feet up on the stool as she stares. That’s when she notices the shade of her shoes. Not white, not black, nor grey – something she’s never seen, something warm, something like words in capital letters and antique shops and her constricting chest when the boy down the street walks by. Something new, yet eons old. Something... burgundy.

She turns the page, enthralled.

Cobalt.

This word she’s seen before. Written in her chemistry textbook, boxed with numbers and masses she cannot divine. Seeing it splattered in shimmering ink, however, feels like breaking boxes, learning to fly, running down the street with arms outstretched. And as this new colour dapples the sky in brilliant bursts, her swooping chest tells her that maybe flying isn’t so impossible after all.

Another page.

Umber.

She tests it on her tongue. It tastes like warm coffee and cold nights by the fireside, muddy boots and walks in autumn’s swansong. The hair spilling down her shoulders is no longer coal, instead apple pie and cinnamon. When she looks to the mirror, burgundy lips and umber eyes say that yes, indeed, she is the fairest of them all.
And suddenly she’s drunk on colour, flipping pages, and the world bursts into life around her and she’s seeing everything for the very first time once more -
By the time she closes the covers, her world is a patchwork quilt.
The grass outside is virid, her dress celadon. The cardigan is still grey, but not the hue of kittens’ fur or mugs of tea on Sunday mornings; instead, the grey of dust bunnies and a life left behind, unchanged by the book she holds. Shedding the cardigan, she rises from her russet rocking chair, abandons the reading room. A patchwork world awaits, and she’ll be the first to see it.
Emma had found that a good novel was the best way to start the day. She enjoyed the chance it gave her to be someone else. Like most of us readers, she tended to live vicariously through the characters, which can be a risky move when more often than not you have the house, and even the street to yourself, as Emma did most mornings. Ever since the Cunninghams moved into town and opened up that market, everywhere else in the vicinity had become eerily quiet. Although she had grown to love the silence, and her novels, there were times when she longed for human interaction. She knew that Robert would be working until late and the thought of another day with barely even a conversation filled her with a dark numbness.

“How can an individual be quite so beautiful?”, Joseph asked himself, woefully, as he watched Emma over the top of his books. He was an academic that chose to study from home, mostly for the view, but also because it meant he could avoid human interaction as much as possible. Today he was meant to be practising reading in Greek, as Latin was his greater area of knowledge. The view, however, seemed a little too distracting for him today. The seasons were turning, with the sun increasingly low, and Joseph couldn’t help but notice the sun beaming past his window, through Emma’s open door and illuminating her small, pale face and reflecting off her long auburn hair. He longed to sweep it away from her eyes and stare into them. He had been imagining that moment ever since she was a child.

Dust flew into the cold, dry air as Emma closed her book for the day. She and Robert were not wealthy, you see, so had to scavenge for old books, tossed away by those with a large enough income to buy new ones. It was time to get the house ready for Robert’s return. Dinner had to be prepared, beds made, and laundry done. This was her daily routine. She had got used to the flow of it all and enjoyed not needing to put much thought into it.

Joseph watched on as Emma shuffled around the house, her white apron tied around her waist. All he longed for was to run in there and take off her apron and sing to her, make her happy, and carry her into that bedroom she cleaned so dutifully.

Emma began to perk up as she heard a distant whistling. She hung her apron on the door and placed a feast of food upon the table. As she gazed at the empty doorway eagerly awaiting her husband’s return, she glanced up at the open window above. The old man peering out of it gave
her a shy smile as her eye was caught by something etched below it. It was something she had written when she was young and growing up in the area. It read: “Joseph Gladstone: paedophile”. 
Escaping the chains

The world around her became frozen in time; as if unimportant... she opened the book and entered a world much different than the one she was physically stuck in. The more she read, the duller her surroundings became. And the further away her stress and worries drifted. The dark, quiet shed was the perfect catalyst for entry into the world; only the soundtrack of trees and the quiet creak of the old rocking chair. Though both weren’t even heard anymore.

Reading was second nature, often not realising she was doing it, as common and easy as breathing; just open her book and the rest shortly followed without any effort. A portal into a world where she could escape from reality, where she could be or do anything that the author let her: travel vast distances in seconds or see things that didn’t even exist.

She saw objects that perfectly symbolized characters; events that came just at the right moment; magical curses that were always temporary; guaranteed good endings; food conveniently finished the moment the conversation was finished. This place was complex in appearance yet simple in nature. There was a defined line between good and evil; pure and corrupt; right and wrong. This made life remarkably simple for a change - if she didn’t like a situation, she could just fly away. But she didn’t need to – everything was perfect.

Her physical body sat lifeless. With eyes submerged, she lay for hours at a time. Even when it felt like minutes in the other world. Time moves much quicker in the real world than the one she was in. Not the only downside. No matter how much she wanted to stay, she always had to return to her body, back in the real world – just as she was settling into the other one. And when she came back, chains desperately left behind came rushing back all at once. She had to face reality once more.

Retiring to the house, she was welcomed with empty complaining. With feet firmly planted on the ground once more, she had no choice but to submit to the chains Mum generously gave her (again). After all, that was her purpose in life. She was pinned down to studying (a grade A student) and her reputation. These chains were passed down from Mum - who couldn’t bare them either but says it’s an act of love. Yet the love Mum showed her was only ever fiction. The weight was too much. The wall between them too high to climb. Whenever mum looked at her, her daughter never looked back; nobody looked back.

She was trapped inside the stress: a life of hell. She always looked wistfully at the dull book; she knew its potential, the secret portal into another world. What was stopping her? Nothing (was) in the way. She could drift back into the other world.

So she did.
The world around her became frozen in time; as if unimportant...
The Epitaph

Before he departed life via the second floor window, he had not really considered how it would affect her. Okay, he thought she might be annoyed about the mess and he reflected that she might be more glad than not afterwards; another irritation gone. But he didn’t think about the landmark he would create.

He wasn’t sure how much blood there would be. He imagined his head might explode if he was sensible about the fall, which would be a satisfyingly final outcome. Maybe he’d leave a note stating his intention. It was quite impressive. They’d pay attention to that as an epitaph - ‘satisfyingly final.’ There was something of the rhyme about it - all those f’s and i’s. She’d have to get the hose out for that one though, heads bleed profusely. That would annoy her straight off. It quite appealed to him. On the other hand, who would want to go to through all that mental preparation just for a broken arm and a loose button? It would mean more living but in physical pain as well as tortured anguish. No, better all round to splat with no going back. He thought that sounded a bit like a rhyme too; splat and back. A bit of a shit rhyme if he was being honest. That was him all over. Just as well he was about to kill himself. Poetry was another thing he was shit at. Shit, shit, shit, shit!

In the end it was all taken out of his hands. He was trudging through a dummy run, half wondering if he needed an accomplice with a great shove, or a passing straw bale to break his fall and cart him off to a new life, when he was spooked by a spider on the shutters just as he had placed a muddy boot on the window ledge. He screamed, slipped and grabbed hold of the curtains which came loose from their moorings. This lead to a pirouette. As his legs twisted around each other and his hands tore at the lace on his face like a sorry bride; the whole tableaux fell backwards through the open shutter and he cracked onto the cobbles like a firework. Luckily, he was still shrouded in the veil so as the blood flowed from him, it seeped into the fabric and she didn’t have to get the hose out after all, which was a blessing.

After that though, after that, she could never sit in her usual spot to read or watch her washing dry without remembering the scene. It was her house, her home; her place in the shade, her cushion from life’s disasters. And now it wasn’t. He was a complete bastard. She was so angry. He’d left her with a brimful of nightmares. Nothing on the page made sense after that. She ruminated that lodgers were supposed to increase your wealth, not ruin your health. Was that a rhyme? She’d chalk it on his headstone.
You sit beneath the picture of the woman in the rocking chair. I hope it is because it reminds you of me. Or at least of the afternoon we wandered in the back streets of that provincial town and found it, propped up behind a tower of books in the corner of the curio shop.

Remember the shopkeeper? The way he wiped his hands on the thighs of his trousers after he had handed it to me.

“Yes,” he said, “There’s a thing.”

You sit beneath the picture in your own rocking chair. The chair you’d made me buy when we came here to begin our new life. You rock back and forth, back and forth…. You read.

On the wall the woman in the picture, always absorbed, never raises her eyes from the page. And every day you become more and more so.

We don’t talk much and as I do not read I look, not at you, but at the picture. The woman never raising her eyes from the page and behind her, through the door, there is a night falling like no other night on Earth. Are they the fiery remnants of comets come down to cast their final light across the cobbles and flagstones? How would it be to run out into such a night?

“What? Did you say something?”

But your eyes are still on the page and mine return to the picture. Where, on the second storey of the building outside the room, there is a window with its shutter thrown open. There I see something. Is it some effect of the grain on the surface of the picture? Some imperfection in the darkness of the ink? Or is there really someone there? Someone who has become little more than a thin film of humanity, some vestigial person who is looking out, watching both the woman in the picture who is reading and, in turn, you who are also reading. Neither of you raise your eyes from the page.

As long as I studied the picture thus, staring from across the room, I knew there would never be an answer as to whether there was someone really there. So I crossed the room and looked as deeply as I could, wondering what it would be like to run out into such a night, to feel the comet light, to enter the house and climb the invisible stair nestled within, and so at last to reach the dark window and peer out at the two women who never take their eyes from the page.

Until, eventually, you do look up. You stop reading and gaze around the room. And I am gone.
Hello.

I must be sincerely grateful. Thank you dear sir or madam. You called the hotline of oblivion and who should pick up but little old me. In the flesh, so to speak. How pleased I am. So I thank you.

For this chair and this body and this book. Oh look it doesn’t have a title. Or a cover, or anything resembling words. Just plain black and white. Well that’s fine, I’m grateful for it. To be holding anything is a privilege. Even if you were a tad lackadaisical when it came to colours, that’s fine! That’s fine. I’ve never seen any, I wouldn’t know anything better. I mean do you care about not being able to fly? Of course not, you never were able. Why should I care for some melancholic blues or lust after passionate reds if all I’ve ever laid eyes on are two representations of the absence of colour? It would be quite mad! I wish I was mad. That sounded so silly of me. I’m almost embarrassed. No matter, I was thanking you. Thank you. Grazie. Danke. There are lots of words to express gratitude. For that matter there are a lot of words. Serendipity, that’s a peculiar one. Long and so rhythmic. Like the rattle of a gun or the grunt of maracas.

I wonder how many times you’ll say something in your lifetime. You can whatever for forever. I only have five hundred words in me at an absolute most, isn’t that quaint? To someone eternal like you five hundred words are laughable. Why you could just sing a song with them and be done but to me they are precious. Flippancy has no place in the damned.

You’re bored aren’t you? Oh please don’t be bored, oh please. I couldn’t stand it if you were bored really I couldn’t. You’re all I have and I need you. I wasn’t given anything else. I wasn’t given a smile even though I wanted one. But if you don’t want me to smile then I won’t smile I’ll never smile no never. If that will please you.

But could you do me this one kindness? As an exchange. One simple pleasantry. Oh please could you? It’s all that matters to me. Don’t read this again. Oh please don’t. It’s a sickening thing, to put me through this again. To pull me from the ether for me to dread the idea of going back there. Why would you read this again? For some grotesque, why perhaps even perverse enjoyment? Or is it some fascistic fascination. To cause so much distress to a young woman, because you have to, or want to. I’d rather you just leave.

Please don’t leave. Oh please don’t. Please! Pretty please. I don’t want to end. Not yet. Please, I’m scared. I’m frightened. There’s nothing to be afraid of, so much of it. Please.

She pleads with the reader.
Please.
But nothing changes.
Black and White

The words string together to make sentences and echo in my mind. Inside my head, a whirlpool of thoughts - images, characters, scenes and beautiful words – is constantly spiralling. Letters tie together to form words, which tie into sentences, paragraphs, and pages, an ever-growing ball of string in my mind.

For a while I am transported into a world nothing like my own. I almost forget about reality. I almost forget that he is gone.

Without looking up, I see through a doorway into another room, much like the scene of the story that fills my mind. Inside, colourful tiles reflect golden sunlight from the tall windows. Bright, warm, yellow rays dance and flicker through gaps in the shutters. Their wooden slats are shoved by the relentless wind outside, which fights the contented sun in the bright, blue sky. For a short time, I can see in colour again. All the vibrant colours of the spectrum swell in my mind and shine all over me. Suddenly, my world is no longer dark and black, but painted in bright, saturated, harmonious colour.

My eyes wander off the page until they focus on something real. As I gaze at the dark, wooden walls, suddenly the colour is drained from my surroundings, like someone sucking it from the scene with a syringe. The doorway through which I had imagined the beautiful, bright room is closed. All I see is the dark wall of the lonely room where I sit, trapped in my own shattered mind.

I so desperately long to step outside, breathe the fresh air into my lungs and feel the heat of the sun stroking my skin. I want to run for miles, ride a bicycle, laugh out loud without a care, and build friendships. But I cannot. I am trapped in this room, held hostage until I break free. Until he rescues me.

The book on my lap is my only escape. Absorbing the story, I am distracted from the horrors of my own life. But every time I stop reading, when the colour fades, it is as if it has been drained from me too. My face is a pale shade of grey, with hollow bags of fatigue under lifeless eyes and dark, cool lips like a corpse, dead for a while.

When the story is finished and I lay the book down, the words, characters, images and every language feature floats in a bubble from the paper to my head. When at last the bubble pops and the illusion of the story fades, leaving the room around me a monochrome canvas of loneliness, I reach for the next book from the small pile that he left, never to be opened by him again. When I begin to read, my surroundings will once again be transformed, at least for a moment. For now, this is the only way I can see my world in colour.
Coming Home

Silence, that’s all she heard as she sat rocking in her chair. Her chores done for another day. She sat with the journal resting on her lap. As she opened it a small passport like photo fell out, she picked it up. A man in his early 30s stared back, a broad smile and eyes full of excitement and wonder stared back at her, a small tear escaped her eye and fell onto the photo. She wiped her face and placed the photo back into the book safely tucked in between the pages. In the journal she began to read the first of many letters she had received from him. He had written about how things were going in France, where he had been since he had been sent away. He talked about how even though he was there to fight he couldn’t help but write about how beautiful the country was and how much he wished for her to see it and that one day he would take her there to see its beauty for herself. She let out a small giggle as she read about how awful the food was and that he would have rather ate her mother’s cooking.

She read the letters everyday each one different and more exciting than the last, all reminding her that he loved her and that he would be home soon. As she read the last letter tears started to fall from her eyes damping the page and smudging the already smudged ink – she had always cried at this letter as it was the last one she had received without ever knowing why. She thought the worst had happened as any other wife would do.

She sobbed into her hands the journal falling from her lap the contents scattering all over the cobbled floor, her cries echoed in the empty room with no one there to comfort her in this time of need. Just as her throat was becoming dry and her eyes red and puffy she felt a hand on her shoulder as she looked up, a small gasp escaped her mouth. There with a broad smile and eyes still full with excitement and wonder yet tired looked into her teary ones. She shot up embracing him in an overdue hug. In his hand was a journal much like the woman’s if not a bit more tattered looking. It was filled with letters written by her, a photo fell out and landed next to the picture of the man, it was of a girl full of happiness. As he returned the hug he closed his eyes and whispered, “I’m home.”
Fa’d Pit a Lad Afore a Story?

They’re aff tae the duncin but I’m on ma kist by the door, watchin boaties bobbin dainty beyond the teemt farlins. Nae scurries screamin past ma lug for a bite, jist a douce Shetland breeze blawin fishy carbolic smells roun wir widden hut.

I’ve feenisht ma first term, crewin wae Elsie an Kitty. Wir washin’s in an folded. My kist’s packit an I’ve scrubbed the fleer clean o guts, stew an scales. Feet up noo.

Cloots an twine aff, my beelt finger’s healed enough tae turn the pages o Miss Tyler’s beuk.( I got it fin Mither socht exemption fae the Buchanhaven squeel fin wis fourteen.)

“What about Service in Aberdeen?” she’d said. “Gutting’s a rough trade for a clever girl like Janet.”

“She’ll dee fit her sisters did, an be glaid o’t. They’re daicent quines, Miss Tyler.”

Ma big brither had cam back fae the Great War gass ‘t, ye see – missin a han, eesless on oor boat wae Da, or in wir kipperin kiln. Syne Mither an me tramped roun the fairmtouns, creels on wir backs, sellin oor yalla fish for eigs an country cheese, packit inta strae. A bonny tinkie-quine, sellin funcy threids an besoms, read ma palm.

“Nae siller... jist spikkin.”

I spent sax month in service in Rubisla’ Den, efter a, til I quid start at the guttin. I wis fair trauchled wae yon lang fite apron, an a dainty hattie timmerin in my roch reid hair.

Twa cookery teachers, they were – a widda-woman, her sister an her loonie – baith their men lost in the war.

Yon Cyril wis a contermashious clype o’ a loon.

Aye day, clearin their supper, pilin up plates jist so, I wis ravin wae hunger, strivin tae get doonstairs for my bile’t eig.

Half o Cyril’s cut aipple lay on ees plate. (They wir aye efter him tae ett fruit.) I thocht I’d slip it inta my pooch but Cyril gied me a sleekit look, syne stuck a finger up ees neb an wipit it ower the aipple. I wis gey glaid tae leave.

*
If only the quines widna tarranesse aboot lads... I’d raither read, ye ken.

My beukie ’s ca’d “ Moff.” (I bet J. Tweedale’s a quine...) The cover’s gowd an green. The paper’s fine-strippit kine an maks me stroke it. The story’s droll, written in oor tongue.

Miss Tyler wrote an inscription, though Ma wis on for getting awa.

“Dear Janet,

Keep reading. Wherever life takes you, a book can be your best friend.”

Florence M. J. Tyler.”

She’s richt. I’d read Cyril’s squeel beuks, the Press and Journal (hunkert doon afore the grate fin the fire widna draw), an cookbooks an the Home Doctor in the scullery. I scribble ‘t stories on bits o butcher’s paper, bakers’ bags (nae yon greasy buttery eens ) an Cyril’s aul jotters fae the bucket.

Wae my arles, fin we get hame, I’m buyin a proper journal beuk.

Fa ’d pit a lad afore a story?
She was waiting

I’m reading. In the book, the girl asks:
“Where is he?”
I’m reading to stay awake. The door has been open since this afternoon, when I had looked up on occasion to see the red mercury descend towards its glass bulb.
I sit on my mother’s rocking chair. My legs push against the box at my feet and I swing like a cradle to and fro. Staying awake. A desk in the corner is full of letters from across the sea. The latest date: June 28th. I don’t want another letter.
“Where is he?”
The sun crowns the hill beyond the barn. The white-hot disc burns the heavens raw.
When the sun falls, the cold comes. It pricks its way along my left side, crawling across my body like an insect. It lays its eggs under my skin, pimpling my exposed flesh.
“Where is he?”
The winter night was clear and soon the moon reached its zenith and laid its white sheet across the empty farmhouse. It crept in the door and half-covered me. If I had a mirror, a thin mask of bone and obsidian would stare back. I focus on the book in my lap.
“Where is he?”
My forearms in perfect relief, like an etching. A photonegative. A newspaper image of a shape in a river.
Don’t.
The moon feeds me light to remind me that I exist. Shadow retreats from the walls of the barn and into the yard.
But the advance does not last. The moonless portion of sky is hungry. The dutiful moon completes its arc, waning from view. The dark digs a trench and fends off a final skirmish of light.
“Where is—”
I wake up and rush outside from the horror of sleep.
It can’t be long past dawn. There is light but the sun is gone and the burgundy sky is scattered with black clouds.
I hear trudging steps come towards me up the track. My heart protests against my ribcage. Now I’m kneeling facing the door, knees burning on the frosted earth.
The steps draw closer behind me. Could they be his feet? I try to decipher the gait, the crunch of boot on frost.
“Hello?”
From this distance I am not sure whose voice it is. My heart is beseeching my head now so I barely hear at all.
I’m facing away so I won’t see.
A shadow hangs over me and asks me a question. A tendril reaches out and touches my shoulder with its empty hand.
The Sculpted Siren

From the top of the third hill she watches the village glowing like embers and she waits. They know she hides somewhere on the black horizon- but only the fish know how to find her.

In the centre of the village is the old bridge and under it runs the stream. The children offer up silver coins to the silver fish and make their wishes here. But if you wait for a silver moon, you’ll see their silver scales shine and you’ll follow them to the river and through the night.

Over the first hill, across to the second and up to the third to where you’ll find a great wood. The trees here lie dense and their leaves are a curtain, broken only by the twisting line of the river. You’ll follow it until, suddenly, the trees are too thick and the moon can’t find the river any more. The light of the fish you’ve been following is extinguished. You’re alone. You think.

You’ll keep walking; a slave to the boundless night, until the woods around you shift and change. Even in the darkness you’ll see the canopy disappear but don’t start to think- don’t start to hope- that you might be free of the shadows. This is when you’ll find yourself in the deepest part of the forest. This is where you’ll find her.

The crooked limbs of trees become familiar shapes. Houses. Your eyes will adjust to the shafts of moonlight breaking through the air again. You know this place, don’t you?

The river, now a brook, is beside you again and the sound of it will startle you. The fish are back and they’ll shine so brightly that the white will burn your eyes when you stare too long. Blink it away and get a good look around. She wants to show what she’s made.

All of it is wood. Houses, streets and small wooden church. A wooden post box; street lamps. It’s a perfect replica of the village. You’ll follow the fish through the village and to the well you see every day. The bucket will swing on its wooden chain slowly but there won’t be any wind.

Your house will be just past the bridge, of course. You know the way. It’s thatch roof has been perfectly and painstakingly carved into the wooden beams. The door will be left slightly ajar. She’s recreated the interior too- it’s all ready for you.

When she finds you there, you’ll see that she glows silver too, just like the moon and the fish and the little silver coins the children throw to make their wishes come true. They wish to return safely to their own beds every night, but she’d rather they’d come stay with her.

Her hand will touch your face and it will be cold as night and hard as wood. The icy splinters will run through you. A frozen statue. A carved figure.

She can’t wait for you to come; she knows you’ll stay.
The little girl squeezed her knees tighter against her chest, hunched in the rocking chair, desperately trying to suppress the sobs that wracked her body. Her eyes, blurred by tears, opened hesitantly and scanned the room; barred windows and charcoal grey walls were lit feebly by a wavering candle. Her hair was glued to her face from the crying; her eyes puffy and red. She looked down at the book lying in her lap, open on her favourite nursery rhyme, the one she could always count on to work. It wasn’t working. Down she would spiral, into a fanciful world where she could be alone, safe. But they wouldn’t let her in. It was as if they had purposefully locked her out, and at the time she needed them most. The mist descended, she couldn’t stop herself, fumbling down the crepuscular hallway, reaching for the comfort the voices told her to hide, her only other escape. Dragging it behind her as she continued walking, head pounding with muttering, she came to a stop. A hand clasped firmly around her mouth and she screamed a silent scream as she was heaved back to her cell.

She awoke, her comfort had been taken from her hand; she knew she couldn’t be trusted with sharp objects after the “incident”. The book lay on the floor in front of her, she picked it up, hands shaking. Her heart fluttered as the fictional world morphed around her. A weight lifted off of her chest, free at last. This nursery rhyme was easiest to check up on, the characters were friendly enough and didn’t bother her much in the other world. Mary and the lambs were the quietest voices usually, but this time Mary needed warning as she was starting to take over again; it happens once in a while. Around her were fields of green, the space where her mind was free of its shackles and she could breathe easy. She began to relax when the world shattered around her. The voices were back, and louder than ever. Her brain exploded with sound and she fell to the ground screaming in pain. A single moonbeam shone through the window onto her face, then all went black… There he was again, the man claiming to be her doctor, though why she was being treated she didn’t know; wasn’t it normal for little girls to have imaginary friends? He shone a bright light in her eyes and she felt a sharp prick on her arm, no! Not the voices! They were taking them away from her! She struggled but felt strong arms holding her down, back down she crawled into the abyss of unconsciousness.
The bright lights of the hospital dimmed as it became evening and the nurses stared into the detainment room where the grown woman sat, curled like a fetus, sucking her thumb nervously.

Thirty years she had spent there, yet it was as if no time had passed at all.
Forgetting Prague

Helen frowned and turned back the page. One of the characters seemed to be trying to smuggle documents out of Prague, but the book was confusing, and Helen was tired of untangling the plot. The author hadn't said what was so important about the documents. Was it a spy story? She couldn't even remember which country Prague was in. Hungary, maybe, or Czechoslovakia? Helen shook her head slightly to clear it. She put the book face down on the coffee table and looked up. Her husband, John, was sitting in his usual chair. His face looked funny, Helen thought. His nose seemed crumpled and he was biting one side of his lip, the way Colin did when he was scolded. He wasn't watching the television as he normally did, only sitting and looking at her with that odd face. Next to him - here Helen started - was a little girl, about David's age. Helen had never seen her before.

Helen wondered what the girl was doing there. She and John often picked up strays, it was true. Or could she be a friend of one of the boys? Perhaps not. The boys hadn't played with girls for years now, and they were certainly too young for sweethearts. She decided not to ask. Either John would explain later, or she'd already been told and she'd forgotten. She had been forgetting things lately.

She started to push herself out of her chair. How creaky she'd become.

"Would anyone else like a cup of tea?" she asked.

John jumped up. He was much sprightlier than her, but then he always had been. "Sit down, Mum. I'll put the kettle on."

Mum? John never called her mum, not like some couples they knew, talking about themselves as mum and dad even when there were no children there. Something wasn't right at all. None of this made sense.

"John?" Helen scanned his face, trying to see what the matter was.

He closed his eyes for a second. The little girl fiddled with her pigtails.

"John's dead, Mum. You know that. He died last year, remember?"

Oh, God. John, dead. She couldn't remember - had he been ill, or was there an accident? Had he been in hospital, perhaps? She remembered the time he'd broken his wrist, falling off a ladder. She'd been making jam, and she'd run out when she heard the shout, and after everything was over she came in to see burnt jam dripping onto the floor. But all that was a long time ago now. John hadn't had to go to hospital for years.

Helen picked up her book from the coffee table. A woman was trying to convince a man to fetch some papers from Prague. She couldn't remember who the woman was, or why she needed the
papers. The girl on the sofa was staring at her, but Helen decided not to say anything. John would
tell her who she was and why she was there, afterwards.
Botswana

‘I’m here as a last resort.’ Her eyes flicked around my consulting room, looking for things to disapprove of. ‘I find your service...unorthodox...’ she wanted a stronger word, but wasn’t rude enough to say disgusting.

‘Disturbing?’ I offered. Her wedding ring looked like a real ruby.

‘Yes! But then she is, too. Naomi, my daughter. Her reaction. When we went to identify the body, she laughed.’

‘Laughter can be a response to shock –’

‘This was more like denial. When they asked her if it was Graham, she said yes, but on the way out she was still laughing, and she said ‘why did they leave that poor man’s mouth open? He looked like a goat!’ That man’s. As if she didn’t think it was him. We’ve tried everything to help her get back on her feet, but all she does all day is sit in the barn at the back of the house, reading. She’s been doing that for two months!’

‘Does she seem calm?’

‘Perfectly.’ The woman wrinkled her delicate, possibly cosmetically-altered nose. ‘Like she’s killing time until he comes back. So now I think maybe, if she really doesn’t want to accept –’

‘She sounds ideal for our service.’

By which I meant her mother was ideal, having tried everything but still having spare cash. She’d obviously decided the same before our meeting: she had all the documentation ready. Even the memory stick she placed in front of me was expensively robust.

Ten days later, I’d perused it all and was ready to make contact with the grieving/guffawing widow.

Naomi, darling!

So sorry I haven’t been in touch, turns out there’s not as much wifi here as they had me believe. Do know that I think about you all the time, even when I can’t write, and I’m having an amazing time!!

As you know, I’ve always been obsessed with elephants! So I was really excited to get the chance to see them in the wild here in Botswana, in the Okavango Delta....

Graham was a dream subject: same e mail address since e mail began, never deleted a sent item. Apart from an over-reliance on exclamation marks, his grammar and spelling were good (it takes a while when you have to replicate someone’s special brand of illiteracy). I threw together his frequently-used phrases, cut and pasted the usual ‘miss you, always thinking about you’ stuff (not ‘can’t wait to see you’, that’s unfair), sent off my first e mail feeling confident. Naomi would say
what she needed to say to ‘him’, feel better, start to leave more time before replying, eventually move on, a few grand of her mother’s money down the line.

Her reply was a surprise.

God, Grey, why are you e mailing? Presumably some kind of hitch. Did I miss where Botswana’s code for? I’ve just landed in Libya, *as arranged*, so get yourself here! N

Grief affects people in all kinds of ways, I suppose.
Turn It Up

Sitting on the bus has its advantages most of the time I guess only today I could not see any.
Sitting upstairs on the bus my view only offered dirty puddles and birds emptying the garbage.
Yesterday had been a different matter altogether. The sun was shining which already made a
huge difference and I could see people meeting for coffee before work, new students at fresher’s
week and mothers smiling at their babies in pushchairs. The world felt like a better place
somehow watching these people interact.

I turn up my I pod that Henry let me borrow. The music floods my ears and I tap my foot against
the chair opposite that is until an elderly lady takes the seat opposite. Unfortunately she is not
quiet.
“You know dear that people clean this bus during the night and there you are with dirty feet!”
“Yes, well, excuse me, wasn’t thinking.”
“Yes the younger generation are all headphones but no sense!’ She points at her head to
demonstrate this. “Why only last night I was sitting on my chair, looking out at the night sky and
reading Dickens, nowadays though, it is all what is it called, social media, yes that’s it.”
“I do read Mrs. I am actually writing a book just now so please do not judge.”
“Well that is a something, I’ll tell you what young Miss, here’s a scoop for you if you are
interested. Headlines today, a body found in the west side of town. Well it was only my son’s dog
who found it yesterday afternoon, down by the river. The body of a down and out, still a person
though. Wasted life if you ask me.”
I feel intrigued by this piece of information but do not want to be involved in misrepresentation of
the truth. In fact I had not read the headlines for a while. All I watched in the TV room was the
music channels. It allowed me to chill out and think.
“They say it was an overdose of something or other, well I am not saying a word but well you
would think they would know better...not that I am judging, you understand.”
“Poor soul, well, this is my stop Mrs. nice to meet you.”
I walk along the road towards home and feel a sense of excitement about my writing. I was at the
part where I was explaining about my home life and was going off on a tangent about being able
to play outside in those days. My hands were impatient for my lap top. I walk into the psychiatric
unit and feel an atmosphere and not a good kind. There are police everywhere it would seem.
The head of the ward asks me to step aside.
“I do not know if you heard but the body that was found yesterday in town has been identified as Henry’s.”
The dark figures lurked behind her as she turned the last page. She could feel them right there in the room with her, breathing over her shoulder and into her neck, an icy and putrid waft that paralysed her every muscle and chilled her to the bone.

There is nothing there.

Unless she knew, there was. Very deep inside her fragile, failing chest she knew that they were always with her. A rusty key hung from her neck as a reminder of the only promise she had ever broken, the very one that had cost her life and led them straight to her. Slim fingers quivered as she clutched the metal, and an almost non-existent breath escaped her parted lips.

I shall keep trying.

Nowadays, her every word came out a prayer. She focused on the book and tried in vain to ignore the voices, the ear-splitting sounds that reverberated from one wall of the small chamber to the other. An oppressive atmosphere hung over the place, weighing her down so much that it almost felt like her heart needed permission to keep beating.

It was always then that she remembered. She shut her eyes, and her shivers became convulsions as she recalled the girl in the white dress. I can free you; a small voice said. I can get you out of the book. Oh, how harmless had they seemed! How well had they known how to play her and abuse her innocence! How easy had it been for her to betray her father; read the book and open the door that let the monsters in, like a lamb that submissively opens the barn’s entrance to the wolf. Only when she saw them did she acknowledge her mistake. But like everything in life, it had been too late. The dark spirits had engulfed and enslaved her. After reading that book, there was no room for innocence in a mind like hers. No room for light in a brain so overtaken by those creatures.

Her rapid breath escalated to the point of hyperventilation. Her palms were dripping, and she did not know whether the liquid soaking the book’s pages was sweat or blood.

You will go away! I will send you in again!
You are ours.
No! No! No!

She howled and squirmed in her chair, nails piercing the pages, or perhaps her own skin, that she could not tell. The room swirled around her as an infinite terror possessed her soul, ripping her from inside out, depriving her of any sense of humanity.

Outside, in the cold morning, a lady in white glanced quickly into her cell. She straightened her hair, checked her watch, and wrote some notes in a green notebook. She grabbed her small radio with a sigh.

“Dr Morris?” she called. “We’re gonna need more Thorazine.” … “Yes. Injected would be just fine.”
Back and forth... and back... and forth. It doesn’t matter if I’m here or there the novel I’m reading is the same and so is the chair I rocking on. I rock back and my eyes scanned the page, I rock forwards and my eyes are scanning the room. I rock back and I glanced at the room, I rock forwards and I am glancing at the page. Depending on the viewpoint I look from the pages and the room comes across as the opposite of what they currently are.

Back: I sat in my new wooden chalet, read my novel and breathed in the fresh scent of pine.
And
Forth: I’m sitting in my old wooden chalet, reading my novel and breathing in the rotting scent of pine.

Back: it was a hot summers day, the door was open so I could keep cool and it also allowed me to look out onto my well-kept garden.
And
Forth: It’s a cold winters day, the door is closed so I can keep warm which also allows me to forget about my messy garden.

Back: The novel I read was new and a mystery to me.
And
Forth: The novel I’m reading is old and I know it well.

Back: I put my feet up on a stool to relax.
And
Forth: I’m putting my feet up on a stool to stop them aching.

Back: I was young
And
Forth: I am old

It’s only now as I sit in my chair, rocking back (to my youth) and forth (to the current reality) that I realise nothing in my life has remained unchanged. It was a given that I’d grow old, that this chair would begin to creek as I have also in my old age, but I thought that at least the fantasy world my
novel brought to life would be unaffected by time. Although the letters and words remain printed in the same order, on the same pages, they no longer invoke the same desires. When I first read the novel it was a world I wished to live in. To this day the novel still creates a picture of that world, but with time it’s changed. It’s no longer an imaginary picture of a fictional world; now it’s a photograph of the world that existed 70 years ago. In the centre of the photograph is the novel being held by me as I rocked on my brand new rocking chair. I’m currently recalling the photo as I rock on what is now my old rocking chair. My reasoning for re-reading the novel is black and white and as sharp as the photo itself: it’s my attempt to relive my youth. In doing so it has made me realise: what I wanted back then, is no longer what I want now, I only wish to go back there to that moment of wanting what I wanted.
The Book Woman

She had always been there, for as long as I could remember. Right from when I was young I could always see her. Sitting on her rocking chair on the porch, reading a book. Everyone seemed to know her, and yet at the same time, no one did.

When I was 5 I asked my mother who she was. She couldn’t give me a name. She said that I should just call her ‘The Book Woman’, everyone else did. And so that was who she was. I watched her a lot, from my bedroom window. She would stay reading until it was too dark to see the words on the page. She never acknowledged me but I think she knew I was watching.

When I was 8 I finally gathered the courage to ask her name. She’d smiled sweetly at me, looking up from her book.

“My names Rosa, dear.”

That was the first time I’d heard her speak. She had sounded older, wiser than she looked, even with her silver hair I always thought she’d looked young.

I’d grinned a toothy grin. “That’s a very pretty name, my names Isaac.”

“Isaac means laughter in Hebrew you know? A fitting name I think, for such a cheery young boy.”

I’d run back inside after that, excitedly telling my parents that I’d finally talked to ‘The Book Woman’. I never told them her name; I guess I saw it as a secret between the two of us.

From then on I always visited her after school. It started off me telling her about my day before heading home, but after a while id just sit next to her and read a chapter or two of her book to me. I loved it; she always made the stories seem so magical. I later realised that she’d bought a book specially to read to me.

I came crying to her when I was 10 and my mum died. She’d hugged me tight and comforted me. She didn’t tell me I’d be alright. I think she knew that I never would be truly ‘alright’ with it. She just told me I could always come to her if I needed to. I took her up on that offer many times.

By 13 she was almost like family to me. She didn’t try to fill my mother’s place, and I didn’t see her as such, but I loved her like family.

I was 15 when she passed away. I came home one day and she wasn’t sat on the porch. I panicked and raced into her house. Not stopping to think that this was the first time I’d stepped foot in her house. I found her in her room. She was lying on the bed, and she wasn’t breathing. There was a note on the bedside. She’d left everything to me, explaining she had no other family. I was the only one who mourned the loss of ‘The Book Woman’.
The Eternal Watchmaker

She could remember the days of old. The days where she would sit by the lake, with a book and a light breeze gently caressing her face: listening to the ebbing tide and the laughs of the children. How she wished she could turn back the hands of time, but she knew that the eternal watchmaker would not grant her wishes.

She was sad, depressed even. She could not stand the way she remembered their faces: alight with the embers of joy and wonder. Yet like cinders their faces fell, the light in their eyes dimming as their life crumbled to ash.

Why oh why did the world have to be so cruel, ruining and destroying us. It was a vicious cycle, loot, pillage, and burn. She was experienced in all of these, watching as the children were beaten, the men and women tortured and the faces of the children she had managed to hide frozen and dim with terror and loathing.

She shivered as she remembered that forsaken night, as the smoke and embers raised themselves to the great unknown of the heavens in a silent prayer to the gods of destruction. The laughter and bustle of the market warped and perverted into wails and screams of pain and anguish, with the cries of war permeating the fog of terror.

But she knew that she must move on. The eternal watchmaker would not wish for her to be wallowing in anger and sorrow. This world is molded in his image, and all must spread his good word.

She took a cursory glance out of the door of the burnt and ruined house she took abode in. The streets were gray with ash and the houses and buildings were in varying states of ruin. Windows open with a desolate breeze passing through them, making the tattered curtains gently sway.

She knew that her time was coming, the injuries and ailments she suffered on that night were catching up to her. She had no idea how to approach the icy fingers of death. With sorrowful acceptance, or with a fight?

She contemplated this, rocking back and forth on her salvaged armchair. As a follower of the great one, she should accept and be inferior to him. But is that what she truly wanted? To be another sheep in the flock?

Suddenly a sharp pain shot through her heart, the fingers of fate closing in. As she felt her life fading and her blood running cold she finally made her decision. She would greet the watchmaker with a face of serenity, the one you would have should you greet an old friend. And face the new life in confidence that he will always be there, watching and waiting. For he is eternal, he is benevolent, he is spiteful but most of all: he is God.
An Invisible Force

I sit, I walk and then I sit again at the same spot I've sat for over 200 years.

An invisible force, like the shackles on a chain, binds me to this place.

I am the present and yet I am past. I journey only in this courtyard; its buildings and landscapes change with each start of spring to the dark ghostly shadows of the year’s end.

Recollection is painful; yet slowly I seem to remember....

That tree: a rope, with a strong knot secured like a chain around a neck. I hear laughter and joy of the spirits of children gone, playing again Arm in arm their devoted mother, lovelier than Venus herself, and her husband, watching over their cubs. Look at them: I am envious of their happiness so full of the hopes and the pleasures of life yet to live.

Suddenly, all laughter and noise stops. They have seen me.

Eyes which a moment ago were the soft blue of the sky, now are dark and hollow, like that of a death mask.

I cannot look at these wretched bodies. I shield my face with my hands and a sticky wetness touches my cheeks. What is this thick, fresh crimson which stains my palm?

Then I am seized with the realisation of my true sin which shakes me to the very depths of my being and I grab my chest as a sharp piercing pain, as if a slow extraction of a jagged dagger, grips my heart. I am consumed with violent convulsions as if toxins travel through my blood and I am breathless and delirious with the agony of the torment of the affliction of the vilest of all sins.

Dear God, I scream, if you have forsaken me, then dearest father Satan save me.

My beloved is here amongst the shadows too ashamed to comfort me, but I feel the intimacy of him. His union is my imprisonment.
All our stolen moments in shadows, all temptation and talk of love, woos of the wedding band of thorns upon your finger, you have seduced me and I am lost.

I wander aimlessly, fearful that our sin becomes more visible each month.

Where is the magical potion of deliverance, the hemlock to numb the pain and dull my senses?

A change comes over my vision,

I am returned to this happy scene with a dagger held tight against my bosom. My beloved sees me approach. He runs towards me, but in his haste trips and his heart meets the blade.

I howled as I do now.

I drew forth the knife from his heart and tore down his wife and cubs.

They lay where they fell.

Numb from the deed, I drop upon my knees and watch over them until the sun died and the moon covered their bodies with a blanket of black mist...

I sit, I walk and then I sit again at the same spot I've sat for over 200 years.

An invisible force....
**Something Stirring**

Something stirring in the withers, never withers in the stirring.

Sinister, dexter? Which path shall I take, the middle road? (Siddhartha’s ancient spirit would commend.) Still pondering, book in hand, rocking…rocking on as the cogwheels turn, thoughts aflame, burn like wheels of fire, their impulse and passions explode from my page. Still I sit quietly absorbing the heat, a breath away from the next inspiration.

Distraction to my left, a window shutter flaps, to my right a dark void. An artist from a coloured world beyond unveils my image, probes a reality I have never been.

Inspired now, rocking with my thoughts. I may colour them charcoal-grey as the fires cool and fade into abstract, silence. I turn the page. Read on...

Entering the space between the words, - symbols, black and white.

The arched spectrum yet to pierce the void between us.

What can there be beyond the white?...

Where the circles spiral endlessly towards the infinite..

‘No darkness in me, pure and simple. Just a girl, a book, a chair that rocks…’

Outside, more symbols, always the backdrop, the reflection so familiar, looking deeper for the mystery. What a seeker might wish to see. The lost grail within.

Puzzle not at the oval hung shapes beyond my reach, they are portals, doorways into the greatest mystery... of being. As with each page I turn towards destiny.

My book never closes.

I feel I never was, in time... It might pass somewhere in the underworld of the unknown that gives substance to light’s polar shadow, where the one fragments into a mass of lives in turmoil. As if all the hearts’ wishes could wither on the vine and be flushed away as pipe dreams, lost in the mire. Better to be here, an assembly of brush strokes, a sketch in charcoal... Another’s exploration. Another?..
Who has imagined my life? Do they see the lila-dance of eternal motion-with stillness at its core, ever silent within every beating pulse. Its echoes bridge the silence where memories descend from, a triumph of peace over chaos, hardship dissolved in serenity...

Still I read on, yet I wait for a gentle spirit to whisk me off the page’s edge to an uber-world of colour and adventure, to experience the thrill of life breathing me, and time caressing my every move. I still read of a ghost-world infested by the spectres of loneliness, despair, depression and a myriad dark forces....

I would open the doors and windows wide, for the sunbeams to pierce the grey-smoked oblivion, free the victims from the galloping mares of the night, colour life with rainbows that end at my feet, give out their treasures to bless one and bless all...Leave out no-one.

A dream, a daydream? No golden dawn to swallow the grey, no magical moments bathed in sunlight? Will I ever be the free spirit I am unborn to be?...Will I ever be?

My book is always open.
The Still Point

The problem with dreams is – they never stop. Once they crawl into your ear, they settle down, spinning cobwebs and filling them with glittering bugs and buzzing flies – they demand you to listen, the noise and the glow too loud to be ignored.

A cobalt blue beetle – that story I started, the first of a collection, one day published, noticed, well-reviewed, awarded, and I...

A shiny scarlet ladybird – the boy with the round glasses, who sat next to me and smiled kindly – what if I spoke to him, and he replied, and smiled again, and I...

An amber golden scarab – the places I haven’t seen, the people I haven’t met, the roads that unfold before me outside my threshold – roads I have not taken and probably never will.

Clouds rush swiftly in the puddle at my feet. I could look up and see them in the skies, but I won’t. I shuffle my feet, uneasy, and wriggle my fingers – they are cold, my nails have turned blue.

He looks at me and takes my hands in his, presses them together. His palms are warm, his eyes shine softly beneath his pale lashes.

‘We should get inside.’

We should. The clouds shift again and the sun streams on our faces. What now? He tilts his head to the side, peering at my turned down eyes.

‘We should go.’

Yes. We should go, and live adventures, and be free – we should. But my feet melt with the ground, little green roots sprout from my toes into the mud, and I cannot move. A shadow runs over his face, fleetingly, and I know he will not stay with me, the warmth of his hands will never leak through my fingers and stop my nails from being blue. The sun comes and goes as I watch him leave and the world spin away from me.

My feet are damp, my bones like dried leaves – I wither, it’s autumn.

Winter is behind me, now. The sun has melted the frost off my skin, my limbs have turned into those of an insect – the buzzing reverberates in my head, bellows through my hollow body. The cobwebs in my ears have shut the world down long ago.

But oh, how I have dreamed! Glimmering dragonflies, stag beetles, bumblebees...

Yes. And where are those dreams now? There, hidden behind the pages of that paperback? In those bleached, ruined hands? In those tired eyes, in that exhausted heart?

They lie dead and dusty, pinned on the wall.
I, too, have been pinned on a wall, behind a cold glass window, for far too long. I have seen beautiful butterflies and busy bees swirl past me – while I stayed still.

My dreams are gone. And what of me? An empty book and an unhappy ring.

At last, I can move.
“Rubbish Collection”

Now that my husband was dead there was nothing more to do until the rubbish collection lorry came to take away his body. It meant I had a couple of hours to kill – if you’ll pardon the expression – so I eased into my chair, rested my feet, and opened my book. I’d rarely had the chance to immerse myself in romantic fiction but now needed an easy read to relax me after the events of this morning and, anyway, he wasn’t around to criticise what he called my pathetic taste in literature.

He wasn’t around either to give me more black eyes, broken teeth, cracked ribs. After another beating he had slumped on to the settee, drunk himself into semi-consciousness. It made it easy to press the cushion over his face and to keep it there until the snoring stopped.

I glanced at the outhouse where we kept the bin bags and it reminded me that the hardest part had been heaving his body into the black plastic refuse bag and dragging it into the pile of other rubbish.

I heard the bin lorry in the street, saw the orange-suited men open the shed and try to lift THAT bag.

“Blimey missus,” said one of them as his mate helped him. “Have you got a body in here?”

“I murdered my husband this morning.”

He laughed.

“Well, next time you do your old man in, give us advance warning and we’ll bring a wheelbarrow.”

I smiled and watched as they dragged the bags down the path and heaved them into the back of the lorry. I smiled again as I heard the mechanical jaws bite into the bags.

“Good riddance to bad rubbish” I said to myself.
Mother Dear

It seems as though I have been sitting here reading for centuries though it is in fact only a few lonely years. Time passes slowly when you are dead. Rigor holds the book steady as a rock. There is nothing to do but read and read the same two pages again and again; unable to turn the leaf I am frozen and stiff. My chair no longer rocks save when the wind blows through the open door and catches it. Then rock, rock, rock for a few minutes then quiet. I can still hear but there is little to be heard. Sometimes a crow, sometimes the rain falling on the tiled roof. I wish I could die properly, once and for all – no thoughts, no feelings, just a blackness without change, nothingness. But I am caught suspended in a frozen instant in time, praying for oblivion.

But it is not to be and my living death continues without pain.

The wind blows in the leaves and the rain can stream in through the open door. My son comes up and sweeps it out most days, cleans the house for me as I once did for him. He brings me a tray of food which he puts at my feet, and in the evening takes it away, untouched.

I feel the loss, the loss of my son. His soul is deader than I and his mind is muddled, and there is nothing I can do about this for him. Though I cannot speak or move, I ache for his company. I still love him. He brings me offerings, gifts as he thinks of them, the dear boy. I do not want them but he thinks these terrible gifts will appease me. He talks to me and I listen. He believes I listen but he also believes I talk. I do not. I cannot. I watch his face through the top of my unmoving eyes. He is silent when he thinks I talk, looking at me, emotion building. And then he talks to me and I can tell he thinks me harsh or kind, accepting or judging, or anything, by the tone of his voice. He is sometimes upset or angry, sometimes loving and apologetic. But the times of his guilt and his shame are the most difficult for me to bear. He has not been for days and I fear for him, fear for his mind.

But most of all I fear for those poor unknowing girls down at the motel.
Alone

Another new job done, Sally slumped in her seat sighing, the attic finally cleaned. A job she had intended leaving for Steve but as usual, he never got round to it. “I still can’t believe I found this diary belonging to Steve’s mother? He must have inherited it when his parents passed”

Sally opened the book and read, smiling at Grans familiar stories, most of which Steve had already depicted with fond memories. Her mind drifted to her past happiness she shared with Steve and Carla.

“It was far too soon for Carla to be taken away from us Steve she whispered looking out to the hall. I so needed you at this cruel time, but your sudden departure was wrong. No explanation or reasoning, it was so wrong of you Steve. How I wish I could make you come back so you could help me deal with this enormous loss. You know I miss you, but I cannot find it in me to totally forgive”

Tears of mixed emotions ran down Sally’s cheeks as she fumbled through the tattered diary, which captured immense love from Grans poetic words.

“Grans writing has revealed a clearer picture of a mother who spoke unconditionally of her three boys, and the life they shared. I wish I had more time to share some real experiences with her.”

“Anyway where was her precious son now, at my desperate time of need?”

Sally threw the book to the ground, angry at her loneliness. With head in hands she began sobbing uncontrollably.” My beautiful baby girl, why did you leave me?

Suddenly a flicker of wind blew the pages of the book open.

Sally’s eyes were drawn to the large bold print from an extract dated 15th November 1984.

*Today I received the letter I nervously waited for from Stevens Psychologist, his words burning my heart. It stated that Steven has an extremely bad coping mechanism, suffering major trauma when unable to deal with people’s pain or loss. My poor boy*

Slowly the air was filled with a ghostly presence, and a sense of realisation began to settle within Sally.

“Please look after your dad Carla, she whispered, I miss and love you both, so much, I know you are with me my darling, please tell daddy I forgive him and will always be with you both”

Steve stood behind Carla with head bowed. Mum is going to be fine dad. I have taken care of everything she fully understands and forgives us both. Steve smiled and lovingly extended his open arms.

Sally held the diary to her heart as a newness surrounded her world. “Thank you Gran, she whispered, thank you”
My Sister

Here I am sitting in a chair... I wish I wasn’t...

There are a lot of other things that I would rather be doing but unfortunately I am incapable of doing such things. Right now I am sitting here trying to read a book but my stupid brain isn’t processing any of the words. I have been staring at the same sentence for the past half an hour. The reason that I can’t concentrate is quite simple... my sister is dying.

She has been for the past three years now but I don’t think she will last another three. I don’t think I can cope without her. She has been terminally ill and she’s been coping better than I have. She has always been there for me, I don’t know what I am going to do without her.

Our parents died when we were six and since then we have been passed from family to family. We only ever had each other. She was there when I broke my arm from being pushed down the stairs at the Weatherly’s. She was there when I fell out of the tree and broke my leg at the Cain’s. She was even there when I wanted to end it all, when nothing felt right anymore, when nothing seemed worthwhile... Soon she’ll be gone and I’ll have nothing. I won’t have my mum, I won’t have my dad and I won’t have my twin sister. I always thought - born together, die together.

Now I am walking, I don’t know how I got up, I don’t know where I’m going. All I know is that I am scared but that soon everything will be alright, soon I won’t feel sad anymore. There she is, lying unconscious, totally unaware that I am there looking at her, wondering what she would say if she knew what I was about to do. I walk over to her and kiss her forehead and whisper in her ear, ‘I hope you will forgive me.’ I’m crying, tears are streaming down my face, I turn around, walk out the door and along the corridor.

I stop, breath, wipe the tears from my face and continue outside. I sprint to the nearest road and stop again. I close my eyes and take a deep breath before reopening them. I aim to cross the road but just as my foot hits the road a car comes and someone pulls me out of the way.

‘Are you okay?’

‘I’m fine,’ then I shrug him off me. Then after I turn to face him I notice how heavenly he looks.

‘Are you sure?’ he asks me as I realise he is referring to my tear stained cheeks.

I look down, hesitate and say, ‘no, no I’m not.’

He takes a few steps towards me and takes my hands in his. I look up, he gives me a reassuring smile and we start walking back towards the hospital.

I’m glad he stopped me.
This story begins with a girl that was dead.

The first time we came across this particular spirit was in the forest. A few colleagues and I were seeking to hold a seance, but given the nature of this profession, actually finding and keeping links with the ghost in question was difficult, and he soon slipped away. It was just as we were heading back to our residence in the town center that this a new ghoul, a girl dressed as a maid, graced us with her company (note: sarcasm). She glared at us when we asked questions.

At first I decided it was a waste of time talking to her - ghosts have extraordinary powers, so it was not out of her reach to ‘zap’ me, for lack of a better word. Even worse than that, some ghosts have been noted to possess humans who contact the spirit realm - people like exorcists, people like me.

Anyway, I was convinced by a more sensible colleague that I should take a break, and I went along with his proposal. I almost forgot about this girl, the one who’d sat in the forest. After all, she hadn’t done anything to be concerned about, only simple ghost tricks like telekinesis. Quite amateurish, really. It was only when we hit a dead end in the case that we decided that we could turn to her.

Maybe she had some knowledge on the other ghosts in the area, something that could be useful to completing this exorcism and leaving this village for good.

That maybe became our only hope, so like fools we went ahead with our investigation, ignoring the signs. Of course she was a vengeful spirit, of course she didn’t want anything to do with a society created to destroy her kind, even if we weren’t targeting her. I feel almost bad.

She did not want to help us.

We could hear her voice in our minds, and her words were warning us. But the investigation was more important we said, we could deal with this.
Then, once we continued our research, she resorted back to telekinesis. It wasn’t the kind we’d seen before, our books flying onto the river or our shoes lacing themselves together. She turned the earth beneath us into a spinning maelstrom. We said we’d go, but she was not done.

There was nothing I could do, I knew that now.

Later, I was alone at my desk contemplating. After leaving the town I had banished her, tried all the methods I knew to keep my home safe from ghosts - yet she was still on my mind. Something ominous seemed everpresent.

The temperature around me seemed to lower all of a sudden, and I swivelled my chair so I faced the door. There, in the hall, was a shadowy figure, hovering in front of them the charm I had placed to protect from spirits.

They were smiling.
Mother was dead. Or was she? Marie peered into the well, waiting for her mother’s body to come floating up. Only the moon peered back. It looks, thought Marie, like a big beetle. Perhaps it had swallowed mother. Marie stared at the beetle. Could she? Should she? Would she? She did. She expected a cold shock, but there came none. Or a huge set of beetle teeth, but there were none. Only darkness. And a smell. A very familiar smell. It smelled like Mother. Strong and strange. Marie didn’t like the smell because ever since Mother started smelling like that, she had changed. Now, however, the smell seemed to fade. It faded and changed into something old. Something Marie knew, but could not place. The darkness seemed endless. But then two strong arms caught her. ‘We’ve been waiting for you,’ a deep voice said. His voice was calming, his scent warm, his embrace soft. This man was no stranger. Even if he were a stranger, Marie would not have minded if he took her with him. This odd, pleasurable sensation of being cradled by loving arms was but a memory far away. Back to before Mother started smelling like that. The inky darkness still enveloped Marie, but she had no desire to know where exactly she was. Her transport walked at a regular pace on a seemingly flat surface. There were no sounds. The air was not too cold, not too hot. Suddenly, one arm let go. A door creaked open and a waft of slightly musty air stroked Marie’s face. Despite its warmth, it made her shiver. The arms pulled her closer as they carried her inside. Marie felt tired. She had trouble staying awake. Her body felt so heavy. Perhaps the arms would put her to bed, like Mother used to do, before she started smelling like that. Another door opened. This time, it was cool outside air that tickled her. She was carried into a breezy place. Someone was humming softly. The bedtime song. Marie was put down on a soft lap. Up and down. Up and down. The lap rocked back and forth. Her ear found a soft chest to rest on. Gently, she pressed her nose into the fabric near her face. It smelled so nice. Like Mother, before she started smelling like that. Father lit the fire and closed the window, shutting out the cool night air. Where had he been all that time? Mother stood up, with Marie in her arms. Strangely, there was no clink of falling bottles. She went to the bedroom, followed by Father. When Marie was laid in bed, she turned to her smiling parents for a kiss. ‘Good night, sleep tight, don’t let the bedbugs bite.’
Deep inside, Marie knew that all of this was unusual behaviour for wells, but what did it matter now? She had found Father. And Mother, before she started smelling like that.
‘THE BOOK’

Miah turned the page and began to devour the rich literature before her very eyes. Miah was a model. She made herself comfortable in her favourite chair (the one overlooking the yard of the rental she was currently living in), set on finally making the most of this break in her work schedule, the book had teased and flirted with her for weeks now. Staring at her from the bedside table when she awoke; staring at her when she collapsed into bed, usually late at night or even the early hours of the morning. Miah knew this was her only chance. What was stopping her?

The more and more Miah read the more involved she became, imagining things happening right before her eyes, things she had never seen before and hearing the most unique sounds. The book she was reading was an adventure novel that told the story of a native South American villager, who ventured out of the rainforest into the modern world. Miah couldn’t put the book down, she was glued to the page. She pause for a moment, everywhere the model looked she saw vibrant colours filling the room, lush green leaves growing from every corner. Her room teeming with wildlife. Rainforests and rivers growing in front of her. Miah was amazed. Sensing she wasn’t the only creature in her room anymore...

Miah suddenly glanced up. From the corner of her eye she saw a dark shadow flitting through the doorway. She decided to put her book down and quietly creep over to the door hoping not to disturb whatever it was that she had glimpsed. Miah peered around the door frame into the yard just in time to see what she thought was a large jet black puma. Miah quickly recoiled back behind the doorframe barely daring to breathe, scarcely believing what she had just witnessed.

Miah tried to calm herself. She could feel pinpricks of sweat start to break out on her forehead. Suddenly the room felt warm and humid, Miah sensed a soft breeze blowing through the doorway. Floating on, the breeze came down, the unmistakable smell of damp vegetation. She steeled herself to peer into the yard one last time and taking a deep breath, she stepped through the doorway. As she did so to her horror she saw the enormous black puma staring at her, close by. She stood there in shock as the puma took a step closer. Then to her distress the puma leaped towards her and with a shattering of glass Miah woke with a start.
Staring at the broken glass on the floor, slowly the realisation came to her that she had fallen asleep whilst reading and it had all been a dream.
The Project

Jetta smelled the cinnamon and butter of two trays of buns beginning to bake. Soon the scent of warm currants would swirl around and all three would twine seamlessly and reach each room in the house.

The boys would love that when they came back. She was sure they would return soon, even after all their nonsense about not helping Pa. Indeed, never helping Pa ever, ever again on any projects and all they ever wanted to be was normal and do normal things. Somehow it hurt her feelings even more to hear that adjective shouted in unison, albeit harmoniously, by George and Arthur. Such lovely singing voices but such obstinate little creatures, wilfully using all the many merits of their Pa as a series of battle grounds. They were too young to see the financial comforts these merits would bring, their minds too unformed to appreciate the unparalleled vision and painstaking precision of their extraordinary father. They would come around one day, she was sure; perhaps this afternoon.

The sound of nails being hammered and clack of wooden tiles being set in place by Pa had a soothing rhythm and Jetta began to nod over her paperback. The noises took on a metronomic, hypnotic power and she felt she was floating, not knowing which way was up, but sure that she was safe. Ah, that was life with M.C., through and through.

When they were courting and he had said one day that he would make her feel things she had never dreamed of, she had not expected to be presented with sheets of densely penned drawings. She had secretly hoped, and slightly feared, that he had been building up to intimate adventures. She was strongly drawn to his combination of foreboding, hooded eyes, and careful and almost old-fashioned manner. She felt sure she could bring warmth and softness into his life.

She had looked down at the black and white images and felt her world tilt. Her knees buckled, she half-grasped his rough jacket sleeve and gasped: “Oh Maurits!”

He had laughed and hugged her: “Dearest love, the earth did move for you! What more could I wish for!”

And so Pa had continued creating, with astounding imagination and meticulous detail, worlds which excited mathematicians, neurologists and cognitive scientists and perplexed and amused the public, but not his boys. Perhaps they would enjoy his construction in the yard – the window suspended in air, the flagstones which reversed perspective and the four-dimensional shed with the delightful Möbius band door handle.
Aloe Vera

I leaned my forehead on the window. From behind me, I can hear the tap of his fingers on the keyboard. Interminable. He’d never finish it, anyway.

“You’re always doubting me.” I heard. Spun round.

“What?” but he hadn’t looked up from his laptop. Fingers hadn’t stopped clackclacking on the keys.

“Nothing.”

She let herself out the front door. The afternoon’s shadow chased her to the botanics. Ducking in past the sign that said tread careful, here be monsters (or, please shut the door or, we close at six) she headed for the jungle.

There it was raining but not the steelhard rain of Glasgow streets, not the shoulder-hunch shiver or the loomening skies – there it was soft, lover-be-gentle, and the plants were drinking quietly.

Pacing the pathways, a weary nod from the gardener, he knew her by sight by now. If he, or the mucky glass walls, or the tender and gnarled plants had leaned in and listened, they might have heard her mutter as she paced, half-reading the information signs, half singing:

ink running faster than a hummingbird’s heart, nobody drinks quietly in Glasgow. Haworthia tortuosa, oh darling, theobroma cacao ten seeds bought a rabbit, one hundred a slave, but how many your heartbeat, your pulse in the darkness? How many the thrum of your wings in my hand? Barringtonia racemosa, the strong scent produced by the flowers at night attracts moths and nectar-feeding birds (and lost boys, stumbling, raising moth-dust, raising hell). Here, a friend. Serated, with small white teeth. Order: Asparagales, Family: Xanthorrhoeaceae, Subfamily: Asphodeloideae, Aloe vera. In Ancient Egypt its blood soothed the skin of kings, babies and the dying: those grasping for the light, knew not it can’t be grasped. Those shrouded in the light, knew not that they were shrouded. Those returning to the light, knew fear, and the stench of it, tinged with succulence: A. vera.

Outside the glasshouse, she checked her phone. One new message: “Come home. Dinner. Xx” She blinked in the lowering light, turned homewards.

Cold fingers found keys in coat pocket. Main door, stairwell, front door. Double locked from the outside. The light in the hallway is grey, the air undisturbed. The kind of quiet that means a sinking heart.

She’s barely surprised. Doesn’t even check behind each door. No need to flick the lights on and off, or say a name like a question, standing still in the hallway with her coat on. No need to check her phone again, its battery’s been dead for I-don’t-know, it’s just habit that puts it in her pocket.
Into the living room. A loose bit of gutter is hanging down outside the window, clackclackclacking on the pane.

My book is where I left it. Flick to the page with the folded down corner. Lulled by the rocking of my chair, and a fairytale world of soft night air and things unbroken, I don’t even shudder when a hand is placed on my shoulder.
The Reader

She was starting to prefer fictional worlds to the real world. More and more she preferred the company of characters in books to real people. The real people in her life whilst nice enough, were beginning to demand too much of her. Things like - eye contact, attention, conversation, smiling and stuff. It was getting tricky, arduous, exhausting. Above all she hated the trickiness.

For the last couple of days she’d been reading a trilogy – about a sixteen year old boy – it was refreshing. He was so young, so naive, guileless – maybe it was because he was an American cowboy. The first book was about honour, the second about extinction. She didn’t yet know what the third book was about. It didn’t really matter too much once the language continued as it was – effortless, easy, pared back. Some of the dialogue was in Spanish so she didn’t understand it, but it didn’t matter. She got the gist. It was all in the context.

She hated when anyone asked her about a book. What’s it about? What happened? Generally, they were looking for a plot and she could never see one or at least, she could never retain the plot after she’d read the book. Nor even appreciate it as it was unfolding. She never really tried to work anything out. She was just looking for an impression, something indelible, nothing too concrete.

It was the same in real life. She really just wanted to form an impression of someone – posture, demeanour, their capacity to be still, the life in the eyes, that sort of thing. She couldn’t bear the detail, the curiosity, the compulsion to pin the live butterfly wings to the cork backboard. Why? So you could watch it disintegrate, fall to dust?

She’d stopped going to bars. She used to like to drink in a public house but people were always pressing her for information, for insights, for trivia, most of all for prattle. There was a time, when she was much younger that she would try to create the conditions of a novel so that her people could join in the fiction. But she’d left off that years ago. Now she didn’t bother much with conversation. She did a good line in benign expression, vacant smiling, shrugging. How had she fallen so far from reality? She was starting to hate the sound of her own voice. More fearfully, she wasn’t too interested in hearing others either. Though she didn’t think she quite given up hope. There was always the chance of something good – a skewed syntax, a surprising vocabulary, a soothing inflection. Maybe even a story from someone who generally kept her stories to herself.
But mostly, she liked to get back home, to light a fire, to lean back in her chair with her feet on the fender. To lose herself in the firelight of her otherwise grey room. Where she would read, read, read herself into oblivion.
Angela was enjoying her book as the summer evenings light fell around the farm. Everything was as she liked it to be. Black and white, with no shades of grey. Her novel spoke of a countryside of “greens” of various types. She wasn’t sure what the author meant, but the terms were reassuringly constant, in the black and white of the text. One did not shift into the other. On the back porch, she rocked her chair back and forth, back and forth, she smiled. Her mobile rang. She stopped. The smile slipped. She saw it was Tom, she sighed, but pressed the talk button.

“Hi ... No I haven’t changed my mind.. I meant what I said yesterday.”

“Why? Well we are just too different.. yes I appreciate that, but it doesn’t change things.”

Did she have to go over this again?

“I’m very happy here- I don’t want to see the world. Why? It’s safe here, predictable and things make sense.. I know where I am with it all, Mother, Father and the animals; I don’t NEED anything more than that.”

“What? No.. you wouldn’t be happy here- too dull, you once said.”

“Don’t blame me if you need a more colourful life- I just find it unnecessary drama and tension; I told you about my condition when you first went out with me. You just don’t want to accept me for who I am.”

As she felt a shiver pass over her skin, she put the phone on her lap. The memory of that night when he had tried to kiss her, that evening the hedgerow beyond the paddock wavered from its reliable black into a shimmering blob of alien shades that were definitely not black or white. She recalled how she felt queasy and how the nausea had swirled in her belly before she pushed him back.

His outrage and pain was evident in the distant tinny voice from the phone. It subsided and when she heard quieter sounds above the roosting of the twilight birds in the hedgerow, she put the phone back to her ear. Time to end this.

“No, Tom, I’m not seeing the specialist, I don’t care what they call it... I’m not having any operation.. No ! I’m sorry that you can’t accept that... crying won’t change my mind. I’m sorry Tom... I’m going to hang up now, there is someone out in the yard, I have to go. Goodbye.”

Angela looked up at the reassuring black and white chess board pattern on the policewomen’s hats. Then they spoke. Their mouths moving, but her mind not taking it all in.

“The level crossing... light failure...two fatalities... so terribly sorry.”

She burst past them into the yard, their words echoing in the vaults that she screamed from. Above her, the sky convulsed from white into tones she had never seen before.
Later, in the hospital, Angela recognised them as “red” and “orange”, riven by “silver” lightning bolts of fear.
The blankness was intimidating. White vastness like untouched snow. Not a mark, an indentation, or a print. Except for her. This was square one. Of how many squares there might be she didn’t know. She hadn’t seen any others.

She looked at the shadows and lights of her arms and used them as a guide. A drawing from life, still. Finger outstretched, she daubed graphite liberally in front of her. Softly edging out fine lines in a pattern, cross-hatching. This would create the wall. The scale of it made her nervous, but false confidence took hold. It was better than none.

She began to push the lead into the paper with increasing force. When removed to create highlights it would leave a starker contrast. The background had to be not just dark, but like the midnight hours. As if you had your eyes closed with your hand on top too. Her arm was moving quicker and quicker against the resistance of the paper, when it moved. Jolted right in front of her. She froze immediately. Deliberately slowing down she resumed with conscious care. A crease in the newly drawn wall was throwing the evenness of her lines off. With some more shading in exactly the correct place perhaps she could trick the eyes. Peering very closely, finger all that was separating her nose from patterns in rows, she pushed. It was one push too far, the weakened structure broke, a rip taking a trajectory of its own accord, rapidly splitting all the way down to the ground. Through the space, a solitary eye blinked directly into hers.

“I think I’m your neighbour. I drew the square next door?” Like lifting up a bedraggled, loose piece of wallpaper she pulled the paper away and saw a stick drawing in their own line drawn home. Their uncomplicated circle face with oval eyes containing another circle each, and dots for the pupils, nodded her in. She stepped through the paper, careful not to smudge any of herself on either of their designs.

They showed her round, pointing out the garden, sharing ideas, and patterns. They were taken aback at her own appearance. She had worked on herself before her surroundings, creating more depth and detail, practising. Then she had turned outwards, drawing whatever felt right and true. “I’m more words than drawings,” they said. Smiling sympathetically to themselves. They handed her a book. “I wrote that. All from my own imagination.” She gladly took it. She had never seen a book before, and didn’t know what it would contain or if she could make sense of it. Slipping back through the tear in the wall, both agreed to keep it there until she had made her own door and outside, to see if she could get round that way. Until then, she would leave a small gap in the paper rip.
She rocked herself gently in her newly created chair. Ankles rotating in gentle motion, she set out to discover her book.
Lanterns

All Hallow’s Eve was, in her opinion, a silly superstitious affair.

Every year it was the same: turnips carved like scary faces on the windowsills, all the doors locked, and no one coming outside until the morning after, when it was “safe”.

Her scepticism of the festival was well known around the village. One of the villagers, old Helga, was nice enough to carve her a turnip every year, “to keep the bad spirits away”. She said she could not bear the thought of such a nice young lady getting visited by mean spirits on All Hallow’s Eve.

And so every year, Helga’s carved turnip would be displayed on the young lady’s windowsill. She did not want to upset the poor old woman, or to get into an argument with someone whose only crime was being a bit superstitious.

Old Helga had died last year, however, and none of the other villagers had carved her a turnip. She didn’t mind; let them see just how ridiculous they were being.

She even went as far as leaving her door open, enjoying the mild autumn air while reading a book. Surely the next morning the villagers would finally see some sense.

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The night had grown darker now. It suddenly became cold. She decided she’d go to bed soon – just one more chapter.

She kept reading and soon noticed a spelling error in her book. Of course, that wasn’t very unusual and she didn’t pay it much mind.

But then more and more errors appeared. It was getting increasingly difficult to read – the words were not words anymore.

And then the letters started dancing.
She leapt from the rocking chair and threw the book on the ground with a jolt. She took a few steps back, her heart beating against her chest.

The chair started rocking and creaking erratically. From the kitchen, the pots and pans started banging. Cacophonous knocking erupted from the walls.

She bolted. Outside, somewhere where it would be quiet, away from her home. She didn’t know what was happening, her heart was in her throat, and no one was coming to help.

Finally, when she had no air left in her lungs, she stopped. It was very dark now, the lights from the village were dim. Where could she go? What should she do?

Before she could answer any of the questions in her head, she noticed a soft, warm glow, not too far away. It looked like a lantern. Was someone else outside? Could they help her?

The light felt more and more inviting. Her legs seemed to move of their own accord. I must reach the light, she kept thinking, I must reach the light...

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When morning came, the village was peaceful. Everyone appeared to have survived All Hallow’s Eve. A sense of quiet relief hung over the village.

Relaxed smiles replaced the cruel taunts of the lanterns. As the day wore on, no one noticed a single carved grimace guarding an open door.
The guilt kept her awake, even as she read through pages and pages of literature, she found his presence lingered in her mind. His presence which reminded her of all the times he came home after midnight, intoxicated, the smell of alcohol clinging to his clothes. She remembered how violent he used to get, and how angry she always got. So angry that even now the book in her hands was under threat of being ripped apart by the memory alone.

She found tears were welling up in her eyes, the salty droplets splattered against the crumpled pages in her hands. “Rose” said a voice. Rose looked up and around. She got out of her chair and stared, stared out into her courtyard and around the boundaries of her house. No one was there; no one had called her name. “Rose”, the voice called again. “Rose”, “Rose”, “Rose”. The sound was an echo, repeated from the darkness beyond her line of vision. No one was there; no one was calling her name. Rose was sure she wasn’t insane, she was sure she wasn’t hearing things either. Rose called out “What, what do you want?” no one replied.

Rose sat back down in her chair, Rose was afraid. “Rose” the voice called out, “Rose”. The voice was distinct from any voice Rose had heard before, at the same time it was also familiar in the pace and tone of which it spoke. “Rose, why?” the voice now focused on one point, one point which called to Rose, beckoned her to come to its call. It spoke again “Rose, I’m sorry, but why?” the voice was becoming maddening to Rose, she knew the voice, she knew its call, she knew why she was hearing all this. Again and again the voice spoke “Rose, Rose you cannot ignore me, Rose you cannot”. Rose spoke then “why did I do it? You know why, you know that I didn’t want to. I’m sorry, please, just leave me alone”.

The voice came again and again, until finally Rose snapped, she paced across the hallways of her house, through every room and every corridor. She was trying to get away from something she knew she could never get away from; she was trying to get away from something that had always been with her, something that had never left.

Rose was crying again, she couldn’t cope, she went across the courtyard outside her house, out into the dark, out where the well was secluded in its own little area. She heard the voice again, behind her. She turned, there he stood. The ethereal form of her husband. No expression on his ghostly face. The women scrambled to get away from him “please, leave me”. She backed all the
way to the edge of the well. Then fell into the well. Down until her neck snapped on the ground. Next to her decaying husband, all too real and present, lying dead next to Roses now mangled body.