

TE NT ER HO OK



*New writing from BA ENGLISH LITERATURE WITH CREATIVE WRITING
students in the School of English at the University of Leeds.*

Tenter Hook

New Writing from the BA English Literature with Creative Writing



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

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A Note on the Anthology Title

TENTERHOOKS WERE EVER-PRESENT in Leeds during the city's cloth-making boom. Wet woollen cloth was hung on hooks attached to wooden frames called 'tenters' in order to prevent it from shrinking as it dried. In the eighteenth century, the fields along the River Aire were lined with tenter frames, and to this day we have Tenter Hill and Tenter Lane. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word 'tenterhook' is associated with stretching, straining, unsettling, and creating suspense and refers to the state of being 'on tenterhooks'.

Foreword

IN RECENT YEARS, PERHAPS EVEN FOR LONGER, it has become something of a tradition for forewords and introductions of literary anthologies to refer to the present moment. They sometimes argue that the texts found therein speak urgently to ‘our times’ or offer a welcome contrast. Some anthologies even organise themselves around whatever the current situation may be, and this is happening already in relation to COVID-19.

In the case of the work found in this second volume of *Tenter Hook*, it is important to note that these imaginative texts were written and submitted in 2019. They were not – despite the uncanny prescience found in some pieces, or the divergent relief provided by others – a result of our current situation. Their ability to engage current readers despite the time lag speaks to the power of creativity, the power of the humanities and the arts to imagine, reveal, evoke and think things through, across time, space, and circumstance.

I have no doubt these student writers will at some point address our current situation in their writing – some may already be doing so – but, importantly, our situation may or may not be evident in that writing. The influence of our times may reveal itself in unexpected ways, and indeed, that relationship is one area our students explore in the ‘English Literature’ side of their degree as they study texts spanning a range of periods and cultures. On the ‘Creative Writing’ side of their degree they experience this – the nature of creativity – first-hand, at the intersection between their skill as writers and the flow of their imaginations.

For my part, reading and editing this text at my kitchen table and in my back garden has been a sincere pleasure in these times of social distancing and isolation. In these pages I have encountered sophistication, tender-

ness, inquisitiveness, incredibly rich metaphors and symbolism, evocative and sometimes troubling voices and characters, and above all experimentation and joy in language.

I would like to thank my colleagues Karina Lickorish Quinn for her stellar efforts teaching on the programme and Brett Greatley-Hirsch for creating another stunning volume. My gratitude also goes to the writers who led workshops for students on the programme – visitors Naomi Booth and Zodwa Nyoni and our own Simon Armitage, Rachel Bower, Jay Prosser, and John Whale.

I look forward to an in-person *Tenter Hook* launch in the School of English as soon as we are able.

Dr Kimberly Campanello

*Programme Leader for the BA English Literature with Creative Writing
School of English, University of Leeds*

YEAR ONE



Northern Rock

Sean Barton

Spewing from terraced streets
gaspig in disbelief
mobility-scooterred grannies

zimmer-framed old men
wild-eyed mothers towing kids
converge at street corners

chattering in indigenous
tongues. This spirited, wing-clipped,
sad starling throng

sidles funereally up Grey Street
chests emblazoned, hearts branded
with 'Northern Rock',

forming a proud column,
five or six abreast, safety in numbers
crowding together under slate skies

lingering above their bowed heads.
Woodbine clouds mingle heavily
with stale breath and pheromonal fear.

A local lad spits, marking
his place in the line,
tastes the air, readies himself.

Rumours ripple through the crowd
like football scores through
transistor radios.

Imperceptibly the chattering fades
to silence in anticipation of news.
Spooked, they jostle for position

A train sounds from the bridge,
the echo of its horn dissipates into
the mundanity of urban white noise.

Sensing imminent threat, the crowd pulls
together tightly, hardens its flanks,
reassuring itself of an immutable truth

that banks are run
like football clubs or countries
by clever folk who know better.

A thousand eyes flit erratically.
If Picasso was from Newcastle
he would have painted this day

and this crowd morphing into
a singular being that heaves itself
through gaping double doors

and at once disintegrates into a
thousand scared souls wishing
they had just stayed at home.

The truth ripples from front to rear.
There will be blood spilled today,
and tears, absorbed by strangers' shoulders.

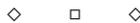
Tonight, a blue star supernova,
tomorrow, fragmented rock fading into dust.

The Enigmatic Mrs McLaren

Sam Bird

THE CHAIR IN THE RIGHTMOST CORNER of the middle groupings of tables was mine. A perfect spot in a classroom contaminated with other children. It provided the furthest shelter away from everyone else with no one sitting directly next to me and with lots of space issuing behind it. Through persistent research I quickly learnt that my tray was the most spacious, slightly deeper than the rest, and with the positioning of the windows, direct sunlight in the eyes posed no problem. In fact, from where I sat, my wonderful little spot, the morning shadows danced quite beautifully on my desk with each minute sway of the blinds. The other small creatures' constant chatter was something that couldn't be overcome, but I found that practicing any new piano piece by tapping my fingers on the table left and right accordingly was an apt escape. I was close enough to the board to not have to squint and far enough away from the toilets to not feel slightly squeamish at alternating breaths.

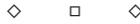
Of course, these were not the only reasons the rightmost corner chair of the middle grouping of tables was mine. It was not only these listed factors that made my spot so splendid. No. Of course there was also the enigmatic Mrs McLaren.



Being eight years old does have its limitations. I can't drive for example. Or drink alcohol. Or operate a chainsaw without supervision. Limitations. It can be frustrating. But instead of wallowing in the muddy water of self-pity like so many other eight-year olds, I put my efforts towards what I am

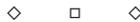
allowed to do. Chiefly, at the moment, piano. Daniel says if I keep at it, I could make it to grade three by summer. I've never found the act of playing piano laborious. In fact, I can get quite swept away in my own little world as I play.

I've also picked up a bit of writing, with thanks to Mrs McLaren. Only journal writings, as follows here, and some poetry when I'm in the mood. I hadn't given much thought to literature before, but noticing my sometimes dreamy-like disposition Mrs McLaren suggested I might be well-suited to it. Now that I look back, it was perhaps that initial prompting that stirred something in me.



The seat I possessed was like a front-row ticket. Mrs McLaren stood only a few paces away and I had the luxury of enjoying her classes without distraction. She was a marvellous teacher. Always insightful, always inspiring and never condemning of a bad idea. She picked up our class after Mr Jacob fell ill. I had always found Mr Jacob very engaging and so was anxious about the idea of a substitution.

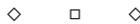
Mrs McLaren was much younger than our previous teacher, perhaps in her late twenties, and with that came the energy and charisma that so often is attached to more youthful bodies. Despite what the name would suggest, Mrs McLaren did not have a Scottish accent. Her voice, instead, was better compared to that of the wind. Soft and light in places but with the capacity to command real authority when it needed to. She had a somewhat extravagant dress-sense. My favourite were her scraggy cardigans embellished with attractive depictions of flowers and animals she had sewn in herself. Her face was always expressive, the smallest change in the creases of her mouth or the raising of a brow able to make even the most immature child attentive.



During our lunch breaks I would stay inside reading at our designated tables when everyone else had finished eating and gone out to play. One

week, however, one of the staff on duty made a fuss of me staying behind and quite forcibly insisted I play with the rest of the children. I took my book with me and tried to find a quiet spot in the playground. It was naïve of me to think this would be possible. Herds of eight, nine and ten-year-olds were running in all direction as though they had just that moment been released from the gates of Bethlem. Screams and cries and howls reverberated against the concrete floors and stone walls. Balls and skipping rope filled the sky so that it was more likely that you would be hit than not be. I rested back up against a near wall, my heart thudding in my ears, as I tried once more to read. It was of no use.

The logical solution I found was to take refuge in Mrs McLaren's classroom. I was a little apprehensive the first time I knocked on her door and asked to spend lunch with her, but Mrs McLaren was not the least bit taken aback. In fact she seemed to be expecting me as she pushed out a seat next to her desk and welcomed me in. She would always have work to do, being a teacher of her quality that was no surprise, so to keep me occupied I would watch fascinating documentaries of mysterious creatures lurking in the deepest parts of the ocean on her laptop. Other times it would be showcasing the wonders of the rain forest, or the heart-breaking devastation of the Antarctic.



This went on for some weeks, the pair of us quite happily spending an hour of the day together with me learning about the magic of the animal kingdom and Mrs McLaren marking the latest work from our class. You may think I would have been eager to strike up conversation with Mrs McLaren, but the way our lunchtime dates operated meant I was never afforded much opportunity. After some deliberation it was about two and half weeks later that I had my idea. Our latest assignment was to write a poem that Mrs McLaren would of course mark. As I've mentioned she often did this during our lunchbreak, so I thought it quite romantic to dedicate a poem to her.

I went home that evening and stayed up all night trying to make it just

right. I thought on every single word and perfected each and every rhyme. I submitted the piece the next day and that lunchtime she began marking them. I hadn't expected her to get to them so soon, and so was a little thrown off. I looked over to her hands marking a paper. It was Dylan's, not mine. I repositioned myself in my chair and tried to steady my thoughts. I had confidence in my words. They spoke what I wanted to say so badly in person on paper. I'm not quite sure what I had wanted to achieve, but whatever it was I knew the poem would do the job.

I glanced over again. Amy's poem. The documentaries were normally so engrossing but today I felt too fidgety. Watching the penguins whiz around in the water just made me feel dizzy and hot. I checked my reflection in the window to see if I was red. Unconsciously, I had begun tapping my most recent piano piece on the desk. I must have been banging away with some vigour as Mrs McLaren shot a confused look at me as if to ask me to stop. I put my hands under the table instead and continued staring at the screen not taking in any of the mystical images.

I looked over one final time. It was mine. Mrs McLaren's expressions were micro. Her lip slightly twitched as her eyes faintly squinted. I followed her gaze down the page. At one point I was sure I could see her mouthing the words. She finished by placing the page back down on the desk. I swallowed my last breath.

For Someone I Don't Care To Name, Part I

Emma Clarke

I love you most at
2 a.m., when all
my common sense has
gone to bed and left
me on my own with
you, and I lose the
capacity to
doubt that you love me
or that I'm making
a wise decision,
letting myself get
so tangled up with
you

Becoming a Beast

Jessinna Dashi

BARE FEET POUNDING THE PAVEMENT, Tom tore through the streets of bustling shadows. He had never been out this late alone before. Every dark corner threatened to consume him but he couldn't stop running.

She wasn't too far behind. Tom knew she was shouting after him but he couldn't hear the words, their sharp edges grazing past his cheek. He still didn't know how this had happened. Still couldn't believe he'd even left the living room. One moment they were arguing, the next he was on his feet. Enough was enough. He wouldn't let her hurt him anymore. He wouldn't let any grown-up hurt him anymore.

Don't stop running. Don't stop.

Turning the corner, he made the split decision to sidestep into an alley lined with bins. He had his pick of which one to hide behind. Shimmying into place, Tom heard her yelling getting louder. Back pressed against the wall and knees pulled to his chest, Tom willed his body to shrink, to become a part of the brick. His ragged breath rattled in his chest, attempting to betray him.

She called his name.

Tom clenched his eyes shut, his hands tightening on his crossed arms. He winced under his own grip. His skin was a painter's palette had she wanted to create a storm. The marks trailed across his back and he knew that they would only deepen if she found him.

Her voice continued growing louder, morphing into a monster, ready to snatch him up and then –

Nothing. She was gone.

He listened to his breath. Relief spread through him like the cold that had settled into his bare feet. He hadn't even stopped to grab shoes. There had been no time. Tom knew he couldn't stay here hiding forever, but what else could he do?

The sound of a bell silenced his thoughts. Tinkling like water in a stream. Tom listened carefully. Something was different. He squinted at the street. The streetlamps, they weren't working all of a sudden. It was like night had fallen and didn't have the strength to get back up.

Slowly he rose to his feet and emerged from his hiding place. The street was completely empty. Where had all the people gone? And he could have sworn there had been tired, dingy shops lining the block before. Now there was only wet pavement and darkness.

Tom didn't know what to feel. He considered panic just as something sliced through the black. Another light blinked in the corner of his eye and he turned just to watch as orange raced passed.

It was then the black world began to buzz. Like the hum of an engine, Tom felt its mechanical song vibrating through his body. He watched as neon shops began to fill his vision. They were brighter than anything Tom had seen before. Born from the darkness, light rained from every window.

Tom tumbled backwards and found himself face to face with what he assumed was a mound of mud until it tilted its head at him, worms falling from where a human's ears would be. It was alive. A figure made of dirt.

Tom went to run but found that the whole street had filled with creatures. Each one made of something that had no business being sentient and yet now moved and interacted with other unspeakable creatures, all apparently not caring that they shouldn't be (surely couldn't be?) alive. Figures made of water, bark, grass and who knows what else. Another orange light zoomed through the air but, this time, Tom made out its features.

Fish. They were fish. Fish flying through the streets, their scales as bright as any star. Tom struggled to find the appropriate response. He backed into a wall and watched the scene unfold in front of him. Whatever these creatures were, they went about their business like regular people.

The dirt creature was still staring at Tom. Not that it had eyes but Tom could feel its attention pressing into him. The creature held out what could have been its arm and Tom flinched, his feet readying to run. From its stump, a small stem began to grow, lilac petals following. Tom blinked up at the creature. It held out its flower to him.

Gingerly, Tom raised his hand and when the creature didn't move, he plucked the flower up. Tom felt like the creature was smiling.

The utter weirdness of the situation suddenly hit him. What was going on? Where was he? What was he even looking at? The creature slumped away. Where legs could have been, mud rolled beneath it like wheels. Tom watched it and, though he could not later explain to himself why, decided to follow it. He stayed close behind. Clutching the flower to his chest. No one paid him any attention and Tom kept his eyes glued to the dirt creature's rolling mud-legs. As he watched the trail left behind the dirt creature, it occurred to him that they were no longer cold. The wet pavement glittered under the lights. Wherever he was, he wasn't sure he wanted to leave.

Dear Mother

Daisy Davies

Dear Mother,

It's been a while, years have gone by, seasons have changed. Me, Father and Juliet, though we've grown older and frailer, we still come together on this same day, our familiar pilgrimage to start the new year. While Father and Juliet have long since left this quiet town, coming only to visit occasionally, I stayed with you, keeping you in sight.

It has been a journey watching you grow; from the day we placed you down in a garden of your own design to the first time I saw those fluttering emerald jewels begin to sprout on your majestic branches, like newborn children. My eyes are treated to the natural beauty and the splendour that surrounds, reminiscent of when you were around in flesh and bone, always so careful in the seeds you sowed. In the darkest times I held onto this. You are Mother and it is the garden you watch over that is in constant flux, ever changing, maturing, ripening. Though the seasons pass, I can rely on the whims of the garden to guide me through. I want to make you proud.

Dearest Mother,

It is Springtime now, can you tell? Your latest offspring have begun to sprout, gleaming, glistening green, as pure and dewy as an early morning. They yawn and stretch out in your widened boughs, breathing in their first gust of wind and opening their eyes to the world around them. They surely

have little idea what an integral part of the landscape they are. How they change the shape of your sturdy form, ornamentally dripping from your arms, adornments that are alive, thriving, synthesising.

In the spring times of my childhood, you scolded me for traipsing round the garden with no regard for what was under my feet. All those flowers you planted! Tulips that thrived in the coldest weather, sensitive daffodils and elegant hyacinths. I broke off large branches from our great horse chestnut and spat out the seeds from our humble fruit trees.

Even with all the care and precision I saw when you gardened, it never occurred to me it meant so much to you, that you'd created a living, breathing space of beauty and fertility. I thought that you cared for them far more than you ever cared for Me, Father and Juliet. I craved you – your touch and attention. I envied those plants. I wanted to know your secrets, what you whispered to them as you trimmed and tilled. If the others felt the same, it never showed, frustrating me more. In the end, all I knew was destruction. You shouted and cried; I was jealous and afraid. You said I was careless. Now, in the garden that surrounds you I watch them become something born, captivating, their innocent truths displayed for all to see, but only for those who are careful to understand. And I am careful now, Mother, I truly am. I can prove it to you.

Darling Mother,

It is time for summer to arrive. I've been watching your children waving in the warm breeze, now with more knowledge of the world around them. I inhale deeply their fresh scent. I want to absorb their essence, Mother. I promise I'm the right kind of curious now, more tender. I appreciate all the delicate lines and intricacies within your design, their veins and fine, threading bones, delicate as all the prettiest things are.

I remember the first time I approached you, after things had calmed down, those tentative steps toward such intimidating green pearlescence. I was kind, Mother, I hope you know that. I treated the offspring with dig-

nity and tenderness. It pains me now to think of my childish ways, those small inquisitive fingers plucking away at your handiwork. Each leaf has its own place and to tear one away forces your pattern to rearrange. Each one is a part of you, an extension of your self. As am I, but in a different way.

It was summer when we first began to notice your breath quickening after rising out of your seat, a hand to your chest after walking up the steps to your garden, a cough you tried to mask, but the red-stained porcelain gave you away. We pulled together, Father, Juliet and I, your live-in nurses at your beck and call, cups of tea and damp cloths on your forehead. The fever grew, it raged and burnt, as aggressive as the sun that arose at midday, filling the room while we sat, sweltering, watching your restless slumber.

Outside of your room, your garden began to unravel, the sun finding roses, sweet peas, begonias, and taking them by the roots, causing more destruction than I could have ever done. You cried out to us to take care of your creation, your small universe, a sanctuary. But, like we could not quell the fever, we could not stop the weeds from invading, infecting each corner of your little world. Overgrown tangles tumbled and wound across each carefully made bed, and in your room the disease grew too large, caving in the walls and smothering us all with its heat. We were powerless, Mother, but both you and your garden fought until the very end. I promise.

My Mother,

Autumn comes, the stubbornest of months. You always liked it, appreciating the cycle of nature, regardless of the ruin that accompanies it. I still watch you and the children, though now they are adult, fully grown and wise to the seasons. An orange tinge touches them all, a badge of honour revelling in their maturity. Far from the fresh, luscious hues of spring, this time of year brings warmth and depth. However, by consequence, they must also become frailer, more easily broken and occasionally swept away by the wind they once trusted. Crisper, taut and wrinkled, as they fall to

the ground, would you selfishly want to keep them to yourself? As others stomp on them with a satisfying crunch, do you watch above in contentedness or jealousy? Sometimes it gets too much and I must salvage them. I know what you would say – that it is not my place, that the cycle is just as nature intends. But, after what I've learnt from the past, how could I bear it? These infants you have nourished and raised have been torn away from you, just like we were, with barely a chance to say goodbye. Once they touch the ground they are indebted to the whims of the wind, hurricane-like in how they lift and twist five foot in the air, the dance of fall. A dance I have witnessed, too many times, both in and out of the garden.

This time of year, you always walked, breathing in the scent of change, as the seasons of growth turned to the seasons of harvest. Sometimes you'd bring back foraged items, pinecones, mushrooms, adornments for your garden – it remained full even if there was nothing growing there. But this year, the walk was solemn, subdued, as we carried you in an urn, finally letting you become a part of the space you created. Instead of the usual fullness, the soil was filled with rotten crumbling life. As if they knew. We scattered you, Father, Juliet and I, across your land and made a vow to restore it just as you would have wanted.

Mother,

Winter appears, unexpected and quick as always, leaving you barren and empty. I hope you don't feel the cold without your children to warm you. A few dark brown patches remain, clinging on to their mother, now tattered and shapeless, some exposing their insides, not strong enough to hold on to their creased skin. As the frost leaves its icy blanket upon you, the ones left are crystallised, decorative as always but now in a thinner, fragile way. Flakes and icicles pass them by as they prepare for their everlasting hibernation. You smile, I hope, and reminisce on the year just passed, perhaps slightly saddened. Not for long though, as it will soon be time for spring again and you will bear new children.

You were left for a while, a few winters went by, before we pulled ourselves together and began to rebuild your work. We restored your bulbs, your saplings, your vines and poles, to the best of our abilities, and opened it up for the world to see. Finally, we planted you. The weeping willow, the wise guardian of your space. I felt it immediately - your spirit, pulsing through the branches, back out into the garden, shedding light even in those dark winter nights. That is why I stayed, Mother, because I know you are here. It is not often that a mother and her daughter can watch each other grow, in unison. You saw my happiness, my three sweet girls playing underneath you, our old tabby lounging in the shade, Father, Juliet and I drinking fresh cordial from the elderflowers we planted. You also saw my sadness, Father getting weaker, my own body becoming older, and the day we planted my youngest girl next to you, so you can guide her as I could not.

In these past years of tending to your new garden, I like to think I now know some of the secrets the plants whispered to you, I understand what drew you to nature's elegance and beauty - although I still have a lot to learn. I hope you read these letters, as I bury them underneath your roots.

Forever yours,

Your loving daughter.

A Body Entered the Room

Jade Fakokunde

A BODY ENTERED THE ROOM. Despite its attachment to her head, her body was the main attraction. It wasn't as though she had the body of a model, or was wearing anything particularly revealing, it was simply the way she walked through that door. To enter a room involves, for the majority of people, putting one foot in front of the other and carrying oneself through the threshold, from one side to the other. For some, it's a cumbersome movement, one that draws attention for the wrong reasons. Whether it's a lumbering gait, an altogether unsightly appearance, or just a general lack of coordination. Some, many even, have yet to master the art of presenting oneself in a doorway.

For others however, like this woman, this is not the case. Years of practice have honed this fine skill into something of an artform for a select few. It is, at once, effortless, yet demanding of all of your attention. A dance and a poem and a well-written speech. An introduction. And the woman standing with her shoulders back and feet planted solidly at the threshold of the door had well and truly been introduced.

Far from beautiful, the woman's presence still filled the room, leaving little else to look at. She had legs that could only be described as stubby and short, yet they seemed to rise up beyond her body and touch some unknown heights. Her torso was equally as unassuming with no specific or defining feature. She had shoulders that were too broad for her height, a fact that added to the way she took up the space in the doorway. No one else could or would dare try to fit through the space she had just taken up. Looking her up and down once more, smaller, less obvious features take centre stage.

There were large, black boots on her feet that appeared to boost her already short height a few inches, as well as an oversized hoodie that dwarfed her small frame. Overall, she looked like someone who wanted to stay hidden in the shadows. Yet the room wouldn't let her. All eyes were on this faceless being that had interrupted their day with a play at innocence.

She seemed kind, but in this context, unapproachable. Just by entering the room, the space had become hers to play with and there was nothing that could be done about that. A million endless seconds had passed in the moment it took her to look about the room and locate her victim, an unsuspecting chair close to the door she had just come through. She walked quickly and with her head down. Not that it mattered, nobody cared about her face, her steps were loud in the silenced room and the dim lighting and slight whirring noise from the projector gave her an ethereal glow, like something beyond the human.

The murmur that had broken out across the room was finally silenced as the woman's intriguing body settled into the seat. Her small, unremarkable hands worked at her backpack and retrieved from its depths a notebook and single pen. She, once more, planted her feet and turned to the centre of the room where a lone, unhappy face stared back. Everyone else watched from behind her, enthralled, confused and all the while overcome by the power this woman's body held.

The woman looked up with her empty face and spoke, addressing both everyone and one person.

'Sorry I'm late, professor. I forgot to set my alarm.'

Mother's Mountains

Olivia Frankland

And the dishes rise, a monotonous
mound of hardened orange and brown

I drown in their bubbleless water.

Laundry ascends in meters of socks
and smocks and I cannot reach
the summit forever beyond reach –

But I climb.

And their mouths are open, hungry
birds that screech from their nest
desperate searchings for mother's food.

And I cook.

The sun slips below, taking with it
the noise of day, the chaos and tantrums.

They press their soft button noses
against my worn stale face and shine
their limitless love on my soul.

They sleep.

And I rest.

A Person

Anna Harman

I THINK HER FACE IS AVERAGE.

She has beautiful eyes, they say, and how they light up when she hears that! They are the only things about her that sparkle – a pearl in the ocean surrounded by all the congested sand and the enormous weight of the water under which they are buried. They do sparkle, though, and catch the light as they twitch and squint and cry. How blue they are! They are the splash of colour that this old house needed.

She has tried her best to make the necessary repairs – no one can fault her in that respect. She has drilled so many decorations into her plain, old walls, hammering in silver earrings and ripping through the interior with studs and hoops, clamping and pushing metal into her nose just to make her face that bit more interesting and forcing bars into her nipples just in case someone decides to pop in and take a look around. Not that she gets many visitors.

It seems that she has turned the brightness up on her hair; clearly she wanted to give that mousey hue some more light. It glows until it hurts your eyes and the scent of the numerous and expensive hair products she uses are certainly...fragrant. Her hair is soft, growing beautifully into, at last, something perfectly reasonable.

With her hair and her eyes and her jewellery alight, she smiles. Her teeth have undergone an extreme overhaul. It took immense strength to fight against their natural state and overpower their corrupt alignment. What a shame that she lets them down repeatedly by forgetting to wear her retainers, even after everything they sacrificed for her. You can see that guilt when

she opens her mouth.

Her mouth is always moving yet very few can hear what she's saying; she holds her words close to her lips and she pushes people from them. If you step beyond this barrier and look into her throat you will see the delicate skin burned with vodka and cigarettes. You will also find that familiar and prevalent lump that no one seems to be able to get around, despite their best efforts. Deeper down you will find each vein stuffed with so many cheap fats that they become valuable and a hot blood lusting for something romantic, or maybe just for iron. You will find a gluten-free gut and a brain balanced with any and all medication to stop it from aching. You will find a vulnerable set of asthmatic lungs surrounding a panicked heart and weak muscles and some sparse and lonely vitamins intimidated by a thick parade of salt and sugar.

I correct myself; you *would* find it. You can't because you can't get past that chunky old lump in her throat.

Her clothes are so powerful! She has worked hard to pay for this jungle wardrobe in which, it seems, leather reigns despite her vegetarianism. With each fabric fighting for survival (and because only the fittest make it in this world), she spends recklessly, chooses carefully and dresses to impress. How else would she face herself? In her attire, she has reached the summit of her personal development, for now. But even after this climb – after the clothes, the makeup, the hair, the fragrance – she really does look average. And a little tired. Maybe if she loses some weight things will be better.

With that, she gently puts down the mirror and finishes writing this sentence.

Punctured Moon Balloon

Sarah Healey

He must be late tonight:
by now we should be traipsing through fairy-light,
swimming through pools of stars,
and dancing with the jellyfish.

Where is my moon balloon?
Take me to those dancing ribbons of light –
Let me dodge mushroom skyscrapers
and ride on the back of golden lions.

Feed me fruits and let me see those
dripping sunsets that taste like syrup,

heavy and weighted yet stimulated
Sweat beads gather in constellations on my head.
Where is he? Where is he?
Perhaps he is lost in the peppermint woods
where dark treacle seeps in his boots.

Perhaps he has left me for insomnia,
barring me from entering the delights of slumber.

In the midst of painting my own universe,
crafting the sugar snap grass and icing the stars,
I feel a grasp.

It is not the gentle stroke that I am used to
but a sticky, bony hand that clutches tight.

Dark marble replaces magenta skies
and cement clogs my insides:
I am paralyzed.

Giant beetles lick the humid air
and fire breathes down my spine.

I wake, my only company singed sweat,
stale sheets and a punctured moon balloon
lying motionless on the floor.

The Clay Moon

Casper Howell

Sweeping dust from the ancient metal tablet
with the idle slide of a thumb,
I read the Copper Scroll in Calibri,

vaguely illuminated by the same drifting sphere
that has blossomed between billowing branches
since the tantalising directions were inscribed.

When the clouds unveiled it, I shunned the telescope,
but still those delicate dimples and curious craters
were imprinted like children's thumbprints moulding clay.

When the silver danced in the waves, I shunned the boat,
but still the yellow-white road shimmered across indigo
as though painted by Monet's brushstrokes.

Though unlike water lilies, the moon fish vanished
into lightless abyss as I neared them,
dissipating as though threatened by my gaze.

It seems this path which we carved with metal
into the flesh of this old and natural Earth,
can be retraced, yet never escaped.

Luke

Katya Jakob-Whitworth

CROSS-LEGGED, HUNCHED OVER and immersed in his own little reality, the boy began to work. He sat amongst the silky sheets adorning his bed, head tipped downwards like a sleeping bird nuzzling its beak into its feathers. He faced away from the bed's headboard, a large window positioned to his left.

The periwinkle sky climbed into his room. The light formed a silhouette of the boy's body against the wall. His skin was hidden, tucked away under the large grey hoodie he wore like a shield from the outside world. His thick black hair grew like trees in a charcoal rainforest, branches reaching out to one another as they covered the plastic of his headphones.

The brutal penetration of rock music smothered the gentle hymns of his surroundings. He was blindly unaware of the soft scratch of graphite against the creamy white paper and the last few harmonies of the birds before they tucked themselves away for sleep. The serenity of the boy's surroundings became irrelevant to him; his azure irises danced up and down between the paper resting on his knees and the image painted onto his laptop screen.

His eyebrows furrowed, creating small crevices in his skin as he approached the curve of his subject's lips – they were almost impossible to recreate. He released a deep breath and attempted to transport himself inside the unfinished drawing; if only he could enlarge the lines of the pencil marks so that he could capture the pearl white reflection glittering from her earring. He scrunched his eyes together, pupils beginning to strain in the dim lighting of the room, yet he refused to turn the light on. He only

ever worked in natural light, usually around sunset when the sky became a canvas of chalks and pastels, or under candlelight at night-time. He feared that all the hidden inaccuracies would be illuminated by the artificially bright light – ruining his perception of his own work.

Exhaling more curtly and heavily, he threw himself backwards into the cushions splayed messily across his bed. His laptop wobbled dangerously close to the edge of the mattress, threatening to fall, but held its balance. Something looked marginally wrong – *off* – in his drawing. He hadn't caught the coy facial expression on the girl, and instead, she looked mildly shocked. It was as if changing the angle of her mouth by a fraction would complete the whole drawing – like locking the final piece of a jigsaw puzzle into place.

Glaring up at the ceiling, he puffed his cheeks together and blew upwards, discarding the clump of hair which clouded his view. He had milky white skin which starkly contrasted to his black head of hair, and pink cheeks accompanied with a light dusting of freckles. His face was rather pretty, but it was dressed in fatigue. Bruised purple circles tugged at his bright eyes, curved like a pair of crescent moons. He clenched his jaw, forming a deep pool of shadows in his skin.

After relocating himself to the desk where he drew by the warmth of the candlelight, he decided he was finished. A while had passed so that the moon was now yawning and sinking back down into the landscape of mountains. He leant back, crossing his arms, a look of contentment on his face. While his pencil drawing could only offer different tones of grey, he had caught the sensuality of the *Girl with a Pearl Earring*.

Delicately picking the piece of paper by its top right corner, he dangled it above the burning flame which began to sculpt new shapes as it twisted and turned around the paper, engulfing it and distorting it into a broken piece of art. He dropped it onto his desk as he felt the familiar sting of heat grasp at his fingers, quickly putting the fire out. His *Girl with a Pearl Earring* no longer exhibited mystery, but was simply a pile of ashes.

He burned his work every time; it was his own ritual. If he couldn't bear to look at his own work in the light, why should anyone else be allowed

to? The world was pitifully unaware of the budding artist hidden up in the comfort of his bedroom – and every night he would continue to destroy the evidence.

A Strange and Fearful Picture

Sula Levitt

HE SITS AND STARES AND THINKS. He looks out the tall French doors where a spidery tree grows, its arms, five of them exactly, reaching out in all directions. The centre, covered in a thick ivy, stay green all year round. In summer, tiny leaves and seed pods hang from each branch, but the seasons change and the tree grows older and these small things that bring it to life disappear. It then begins to adopt a dying appearance through those cold winter months. A mouldy brown creeps up its branches and the heavy rain, cold frosts and rare snowfall wear them down so they slowly droop lower and lower.

It looks unhappy. The tree stands alone amongst the vast countryside stretched out for acres. It is amongst many he used to climb. The sound of the rustling through the leaves outside brings back to him an old feeling of adrenaline as if he were stretching each arm up the bark, scrambling to find his footing and racing to get to the top. He was competing with someone else, he thinks – is that right? But he can't quite grasp the memory for long enough. It was a long time ago.

If you walk those fields now, you'd find yourself following the muddy path, its layers of memory squelching under your feet. The wildlife has become fairly scarce since this has become a popular place for hunting. A glimpse caught sometimes by the patient birdwatcher who observes and waits for hours on end only to see the occasional hawk, hovering above the fields which holds its next catch, a small hidden mouse. Once spotted, the bird dives, swooping from soaring heights, scooping it up and carrying it back up to the skies. In the past, scattered across the fields, were pheasants,

creating an array of golden browns and reds, a patchwork over the land... until men began to hunt and tread the land with guns in hand. Stocky men, wearing tweed and knee-high sturdy boots. Constantly grumbling as they swat away the sharp spit of rain from their frowning faces.

But this man, sat by his window, had not stepped into those fields for a long time. Instead, he rests on the tattered sofa, passed down generations, embroidered with tiny gold swirls. Light flickers up the peeling walls from the nearly stubbed-out candle; this is the only light source as the sun goes down. Left silhouetted is the spidery tree that reminds him of himself. As the seasons passed and the tree lost all of its leaves, he knew he had to admit to himself that time could not stop. He knows now that under the peaked hat that has perched on his head for almost all of his life, his hair has begun to change. A new hue of silver travels quicker and quicker down each strand, and soon all will be gone.

A fearful thumping comes from inside of his chest. He tries his best to focus on something else. The feeling of the rough and wrinkled material of the sofa beneath his fingers reminds him of something. He runs his fingertips along each bump, indentation and scratch, concentrating on the sensation on his skin. Looking down at his hands now, the more prominent veins glare at him with tinges of purple and green, snaking across the back of his hands, as if poisoned. The skin overlaps around his knuckles and as he slowly turns them over, the yellowing and tough callouses grimace at him. The afternoon when he first bought this sofa, he was holding one side, his arms wrapped around its torso, but someone else's fingers were touching his. They were soft and slightly smaller, a woman's hands. *There had been a woman?* This memory wavers in front of him, just for a moment, enough to reach out and grasp it and feel as he has before.

But then it is gone and he is left staring into the vacant space in the centre of the living room, occupied by a single coffee table. On top, an empty ash tray beside a copy of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* left open for years on page one hundred and two.

A hint of roasted meat from the neighbour's cottage drifts through the air and as he takes a long breath, the smell stirs hunger. And then a mem-

ory. Of a woman cooking. The soft sound of her humming passes from the kitchen to the living room where he sits flicking through the pages of a play, one he never ended up finishing. The scene lingers, then begins to slip through his fingers and before the blink of an eye he is back contemplating his current existence.

He turns his attention back to the countryside out of the window, just as a pheasant struts across the lawn. What a strange tradition, to hunt such regal and beautiful creatures. What a strange and fearful desire, to inflict death. And the spidery tree still stands outside the window.

She Calls Me

Taylor Manning

She calls me Mary,
painted nails
and painted lips – but never before
they parted bare
to snub a 13th birthday candle.
'Mary darling' – like a dinner bell
calling me from the branches
that have already left their marks
on my skin
too many bruises
or something I said
but I never asked for my inheritance.
You gave it to me in tears
one hand on my heart
and the other poisoning a knife
over your favourite calf.

He calls me Mary,
cobalt powder
coating his tongue,
staining the corners of my mouth

my hands
my thighs.
She calls me
She calls me
glitter dripping from her eyes
in indigo
 lapis
 azure
coating her favourite ring
and my bare feet.

When famine hits,
I fill my belly
with seawater and whiskey
lining my organs with maple leaves.
'Mary darling' – like a dinner bell
calling me home from your arms
that have already left their marks on my skin,
too many bruises
something I said.
My feast began long ago.

Estranged Detour

Caitlin McKay

OCEAN SPRAYS EMBRACE whilst the sea-salt air overpowers my senses. My feet glide through the enveloping entrance of the ocean. I explore the vast body of water in search of nourishment and my next hunt. Sunlight reflects on my feathers – cerulean, violets and pigments unfathomable to the naked eye. My wingspan halts the target of my journey as I clamp my impressive talons around its struggling, slippery being. I venture home to indulge.

Soaring at an intangible height, I peer down on intimidating evergreen as if it were as insignificant as the lifespan of ants, with myself as their superior. I swoop down to gauge the texture of the lush greenery between my sharp talons. I spread my wings further and increase my pace on this adventure.

Perched in the grandest of old oaks, I scrutinise the lifeforms. They gaze back, piercing my being, featherless and grounded, pointing and speculating on my appearance as if it's abnormal or splendid. They perceive me as a shiny object, a singular huge black saucer flashing like the sun. Startled by this unfathomable setting, I rush my flight, elegantly withdrawing from those estranged from me and my species.

The Gates

Aaron Nichols

EVERYTHING FLOODED WITH RED.

Red light from outside, from the sirens, from the Gates.

Dad shouted from the landing. Time to leave.

Hauling the case out from under my bed, I threw in my government-issued apparel and two out of the three personal items we were allowed to take: a leather-bound journal and a cowgirl doll I've had since I was little. The third item hung around my neck: an engraved sterling silver necklace depicting a bald eagle soaring over a wild mustang. Mom had given it to me the day Avery was born, four years ago – it was my closest connection to home.

'Emma!' Dad bellowed.

And I left.

Orange streetlights hit the road, strip lighting our path like the aisle of a crashing aeroplane. To my right were the Gates: looming blocks of thick steel walls dividing up the state, neighbourhood by neighbourhood. They were only accessible via one heavily guarded entrance. Two steel podiums flanked the closing steel doors. They were topped with red lights that spun like gyroscopes as the evacuation alarms confounded our ears. Nothing could get past them; we were safe. We were safe.

We turned left. The street was flooded with people scrambling towards the opening Gates ahead of us – this time topped with swirling blue lights. Whiskey-drinking golfing fathers and their slim blonde wives, each carried two healthy children towards the gate while their teenagers – who would either take on the family business or be conscripted – ran ahead.

Black SUVs crept out of the darkness from beyond the red Gates and rolled behind the crowd, Soldiers of Congress on either side to deter run-aways. I couldn't imagine why anybody would defect – how could they not understand? The Gates were there to protect us.

We had all seen the news; it had started with the southern border to keep out the Seekers, then New Mexico, Texas, California, Arizona – only the East coast was safe for us now. That's why the Purges had to happen.

But, this... this wasn't what I had imagined. Soldiers, the red emblems of Emperor Boon on their right arm, were forcing people from their homes. Our next-door neighbours were being hauled from their own double story doll's house and thrown down onto a once immaculate front lawn. A Soldier shouted down at the children (Sam, Avery's age, and Lisa, barely older than ten), commanding them with as much authority as Boon himself. Their mother, screaming that they were innocent, reached for her kids as they were all marked with the navy blue of the Seekers and dragged towards the red Gates. I nearly believed her.

'Not... not Sylvia', my mother breathed, watching by my side. A thousand thoughts must have been swarming her mind. How many play dates had Avery and Sam had? What if their kind had influenced him? Would he be taken too for association? He was just a little kid – he was harmless! I glared through the throng. Sam was clutching onto Sylvia's hand and a Scooby Doo toy just as Avery was clutching mine, his teddy bear tucked under his arm.

I felt a pang of guilt like a tear in my stomach lining. He was a Seeker. They were poisoning this country, and yet –

I clasped Avery's hand, shook myself out of it, catching up with my father who marched, headstrong, towards the blue Gates. By now, the flood had narrowed into a stream, any confusion was overtaken by being caught in the riptide of the crowd. As usual during the Purges, protestors were taken along with the Seekers, although this time, there didn't seem to be many of them. Not like there used to be.

Like a collective consciousness, the crowd began chanting: 'Close the Gates! Close the Gates!' We moved like a herd of sheep, the dogs keeping

us in line behind. We began slowly, at our end of the street, but as soon as the movement gained momentum, anyone standing still stuck out like a woman in Congress.

I looked back, wondering what happened to the Gates after the Purg-es were successful, but the white light of the Government SUV headlights blinded me from what lay behind.

‘Emma!’ My dad scolded, grabbing my arm and pulling me forward, struggling slightly with his false leg. ‘What have I told you? Do not turn back. Do not look around. We trust in the Gates and you are not going to let anyone think otherwise.’

I understood. Being one of the furthest houses away, we were close to the back of the herd. I preferred that way: it kept Avery out of the throng of stampeding wildebeest, but I knew that my Dad was on edge. If you were at the back, it meant you were further from the Gates. Further from safety as the steel doors slowly but surely closed. And if you were left outside...

Almost halfway there.

My height gave me an advantage so I could see above the heads of the crowd: the Gates were coming towards us now, rapidly. As more people were funnelled through, the more our pace quickened and the more the soldiers shouted, the more –

Avery.

His hand slipped right through my fingers.

I spun around, feeling my heart pound against my chest as I watched my brother running in the opposite direction of the swarm. His teddy lay wet in the road.

I turned my back on the blue lights, dropped my case, and gave chase towards the red. With tunnel vision, my eyes locked onto him, bending down for his toy as the white headlights cast his body into shadow. My feet pounded the pavement, blood pounded my ears.

I scooped up Avery, holding him tight to my body and grabbing a hold of his teddy bear. Bolting upright, I froze.

The barrel of a gun was buried in my neck while another Soldier of Congress grabbed my arm and clapped on the navy emblem of the Seekers.

The lights from all around me, red, white and blue, danced in my vision.

Small Steps

Lena Panayotova

THE LAMP IN THE TOWN OF X was starting to dim its red hue as 70101 was returning from his shift. 70101 never strayed away from his routine. He woke up when the alarm of the town went off, brushed his teeth with his red toothbrush with its red tufts, washed his face with red soap and then dried it with a red towel. The people in the town of X didn't have a beard or any body hair of that sort so no one shaved. After not shaving 70101 would open his breakfast smoothie bottle – he didn't know what was in it but he never wondered. The smoothies were bland and tasted like a soggy red carton. They contained the exact daily intake of calories one had to take to maintain weight to the gram. After drinking his breakfast he went to work where he remained until the second sirens were heard. Then everyone would get back to their rooms, drink their dinner and sleep. It was how it was and how it would always be – not that the people in X ever thought about the future. They did not have concepts we have like time, and with time notions of past, present, and future, nor did they have such things as feelings, dreams, or family.

The population of X knew everything they needed to know about how to live their lives and they got that information by entering into the town as toddlers. The toddlers were raised in nurseries. The number of children who appeared in X was equal to the number of people who died. With every passing stage of a child's life different responsibilities came. Once they were taught how to write they started keeping a report book of what they had been doing until they went to bed. The next stage would be for them to be divided into categories at random. At random because they were all the

same and there was no way of finding a difference between the children not even in their appearance since they all had whitish blonde hair, milky translucent skin through which one can study the blood vessels in the human body, and dull grey eyes. Their heads were bald and had no bumps on them. There was not a single flaw on their bony bodies.

Once children were put into a category it would be made known what their job would be for the rest of their lives, which was not long by any means. They would start observing how the job is done then at some point would be given small roles to carry out and get used to. And that cycle was repeated. People didn't know how it started, but no one asked. The only proof of the beginning of everything was displayed on the only nursery in the town, which also served as a crematorium. It was a scripture on one of the three walls which said:

You do not belong to anyone.

You do not need.

You do not ask questions.

And that is true – people living in X had never had nor felt what we feel or have. They did not have art, their ears had never heard a melody different from the sirens that howled red on two occasions per day – once when they were asleep and had to wake up and once when they were working and had to go home. They had never seen a text other than the dictionary, the nursery wall text, and the newspaper. Xanians only had one newspaper and in that newspaper there was no news but only the numbers of how many things had been manufactured that day. Every single day the numbers varied but never by more or less than 100. One day there would be 200 pairs of shoes manufactured, the next there would be 300, the next would be 400, the next would be 300, the next would be 400 and so on. People scanned this newspaper when they were riding the train on their way to work. It has always been that way and no one knew that they could not read it if they did not want to. However, of course, they did not want or not want anything. Another thing people of X were able to read was the dictionary. It was not manufactured along with the newspaper since there was a certain number of dictionaries distributed among people and there was never

a shortage or excess of dictionaries in the town of X. It had exactly 5000 words in it, most of them being nouns, which were divided in different categories relating to one's job. However, no one had read the dictionary. People knew the words they needed and needed only the words they knew.

There was no government in X and no leader nor even mayor. Whenever something in town needed maintenance it would be fixed when the lamp was off. And that happened rarely. There was no such thing as vandalism or pollution. The lack of vandalism and aggression came from the lack of feelings but with the nonexistence of vandalism, there was also no existence of the things that came with it. As for the pollution, people did not have anything to pollute with, except of course the newspaper they got on their way to work. No one knew of these terms and the town of X remained sterile because of that. The red fridges in people's rooms refilled by themselves and no one knew how and why. Nobody noticed. They just knew that they had breakfast, lunch and dinner ready. And that that ignorance and lack of curiosity or even more precisely lack of anything humane would be the equivalent to us not asking the most basic question. Why do we breathe? However, the key difference is that we once asked and answered that question. People in X did not know questions. They only used assertive sentences.

When they awoke Xanians got orders about what they had to do via their computer. Everyone knew what he had to do and didn't bother anyone else while doing it. On that same computer on which people received their orders they also had to write their report.

As always 70101 rode the train and as always every seat was occupied by the same person who sat in that seat every time but no one had ever been left standing up. It was all calculated. No one had seen a train on the outside but on the inside trains looked like shuttles and they ran so smoothly you could not tell if you were moving or not. On the red interior of the train, there were no windows. There were two doors and whoever sat in the seats closer to the doors would go out first. However, one never went out through the same door, it did not even open. People went out from the door opposite the one through which they came in. People in X lived in a big square building and the train's doors connected directly to the en-

trance of this one-story building. 70101 walked to his room through the bright red corridor and stepped on the floor which was the same colour as well. The lamps above his head were red just like the ones outside the building. People had their coordinated way of walking in pairs and whenever a pair reached their doors, one on the left, one on the right, they would go inside their rooms through the red doors twisting the red doorknobs and they would shut the doors simultaneously. They looked like shadows, half-ghostly, moving in the intense red light, their outlines barely distinguishable. 70101 went to his room, took his dinner smoothie and gulped it down in one breath then went to sit in front of the screen of the computer to write his report.

In the lab the red light is flashing and the sirens are howling violently. Everyone gathers around the big screen and waits anxiously almost on the verge of fainting to see what has happened. Dozens of scientists squint before the screen.

‘SUBJECT 70101 HAS BEGUN TO WRITE HIS REPORT 24 MINUTES LATE.’

The leader of the group, after consulting with his colleagues, decides to turn on the live feed of what the subject is putting down on his screen. Everyone holds their breath as if breathing would slow down the process of recording words for 70101. The words from his screen start materializing one by one on the screen in front of the audience of scientists.

Entry 4116. I woke up. I brushed teeth. I brushed hair. I washed face. I drank breakfast. I did not wait for the train. When I was on it I read the newspaper. I arrived. I sat at my desk. In front of the desk is another desk. Today I looked up from my papers. I saw the person at that desk. She was not familiar. I looked at her again after I drank my lunch. I looked at her before I left work. I went on the train. I arrived home. I drank dinner. I read the dictionary. I tried to find a word to describe the woman in this report. She was good on my eyes. My stomach warmed when I looked at her. I am now going to sleep. I do not want to.

Everyone in the room watches the screen in disbelief and waits to see if this is some kind of cruel practical joke. Some faces are wet with tears and some bodies have bent in half to keep the excitement in their stomachs in

place. When the first person starts clapping some kind of primal joy comes out in those men of science and academia and they snap back to the reality that is now. They forget their fears and realise that this is the truth now, one thing they know for sure is that this is true and will be true from this moment until forever. Everyone is cheering and not a single one feels guilty for it. Happiness and guilt are two feelings too massive to exist in one person simultaneously, so they push the latter out of their bodies with every heavy breath they take. In the middle of screams and clapping and hugging the director of the project climbs on someone's desk. His dusty shoes stomp on papers and pens but that is not important now. Something cracks when he steps on the surface, his weight too impressive for the thing beneath it. The crack is left unheard, sounds of joy silence it. The sudden anticipation of a great speech and a feeling of everlasting respect for the director replaces the untamed joy. People stare at him with pupils narrowed as if someone has injected some kind of stimulant into their bodies just seconds ago. The director removes his glasses and wipes the tears that have flooded his eyes. He tries to memorize this moment, every set of eyes locked on his, the atmosphere in this exact moment. He clears his throat and some people flinch.

“Today, we have achieved the thing that not only we but hundreds of the brightest minds before us have worked for. The idea of this project started so long ago when we first discovered the effects that isolation from the normal environment and concepts such as time and emotions have on the human body and growth. I know how much excitement my father felt when scientists discovered that we can bend time in a human mind when it has been isolated. That same excitement he passed onto me along with the responsibilities of this experiment. To be exact he started this whole thing eighty-three years ago and since then people have made immeasurable sacrifices but we have finally taken the first step towards greatness. Yes, this is a small step but a step nonetheless. The hard work only begins now but I believe in you and your capabilities, especially now that you have seen what success is. Subject 70101 is the first subject from the seventieth generation. His age now is sixteen years and one hundred and fifty-six

days. Even though we have isolated such things as puberty something has snapped in him thus providing us with what we have been trying to prove for nearly a century now. No matter how strongly a human is oppressed he is a human anyways. A human capable of emotions. Maybe someday in the future we could prove that an oppressed human is even capable of dreams, ambitions and rebellion despite being given the perfect moderate environment for life. With this small report from 70101, we have proven once again that humanity will never cease to exist and that we are free people at heart, independent and true to ourselves.'

The director climbs down from the desk. Where his shoes were just moments ago, are now two defined shoeprints and on top of them, there is a pen broken in pieces. They are left there unnoticed as everyone talks to one another of this project and how much it took from them – time, effort. For the rest of the day, people are laughing and saying 'I still can't believe this! We have made it!' while 70101 is sleeping, tucked in his red bedding.

Plague

Charlie Parkman

Walk in circles,
Muttering,
This soliloquy of sympathy,
Now whispered soporifically.

You slumber in sequins,
While I sink into sickness.
Each nerve twitches like a frog's skinned leg
Salted.
Erratic and macabre.

There is solace in a cool,
Freshly bleached, bath.
Remove the shared sweat of yourself and others.
The condensation of frustration.
Ten passengers through one turnstile.

I hate to inhale,
The heat,
Of dead skin and artificial fog.

I am sick,
So why bathe me in squalor?

Fortress of Solitude[†]

Cameron Pattison

The Vanishing Point – pieces of planets suspended in sky
fearing hellish worlds hanging on Darkseid
barns of Smallville skyscrapers of Metropolis the black of Bruce's cave
and here labyrinths of majestic rock somehow paint patterns out of
Kryptonite
telling tales of Zod and Brainiac Two
out of this broken shard of my world I see my many faces. My Many lives.
Cal. Clark.
The Man of Steel. The Man of Tomorrow.
The days of men lost in red lightning and yellow suits
the days of glistening purple islands and blacked out eyes
the days of golden globes and silvering skies
but none of them compare to what I had beside you.
You were my sunlight beside you gravity would fade and I'd fly
but on days like today the sun roasts to red gravity grows my strength
dissipates.
I am stapled to the ground. I fly no more.
Everything is icy now and I sit alone
in a fortress of solitude
where good men grow old.

[†] after Stephen Sexton's *If All the World and Love Were Young*

If the Storm Were the Canvas, We Were the Paints

Jade Prince

Swallowed by the clearing, we stood
awash with colour and wet,
watching the shades stick to our skin,
adrift on a desolate sea.

Colour and wet wash us clean,
claws of rain plunder our breath, we swirl
adrift on a desolate sea,
bodies swollen green as we bow and fade.

Claws of rain plunder our breath as we swirl
silent, the captives of a world bleeding storms,
bodies swollen green as we bow and fade,
still yet slow.

Silent, the captives of a world bleeding storms
we too join the trees' pained dance and arch
still yet slow,
violet floods sweeping through veins.

We arch, joining the trees' pained dance,
our souls flash emerald, sapphire, grey,
violet floods sweeping through veins
so we bleed the violent palette of the sky.

Our souls flash emerald, sapphire, grey,
the storm a parasite upon lime-tinted flesh
as we bleed the violent palette of the sky
and fall further lost into the sublime's cold embrace.

The storm a parasite upon lime-tinted flesh,
we, swallowed by the clearing, stand
and fall further lost into the sublime's cold embrace,
watching the shades stick to our skin.

Decaying Flowers

Helen Robinson

No one has all the answers she whispers,
the flowers in the room are sweet and light
similar to her reassurance, but the musty smell
of decaying petals lingers as if to remind me.

The flowers in the room are sweet and light
pink and purple entwined with yellow and blue
similar to her reassurance, but the musty smell
hiding underneath the full blooms

pink and purple entwined with yellow and blue
bright sunlight and vivid rainbows contained in a vase
hiding underneath the full blooms.

The dying petals curl outwards, their life lived

bright sunlight and vivid rainbows contained in a vase
leaves litter the table, colours leached, a mildew green
the dying petals curl outwards, their life lived
like doubt fighting back against reassurance.

Leaves litter the table, colours leached, a mildew green
bright vibrancy dulled day by day
like doubt fighting back against reassurance
creates an internal war that doubt will inevitably win.

Bright vibrancy dulled day by day
similar to her reassurance, but the musty smell
creates an internal war that doubt will inevitably win.
No one has all the answers she whispers.

THE SPREAD OF WHAT CANNOT BE SPREAD

Charlotte Smith

PHASE ONE:

'Two thousand more blinded today.'
We all huddled watching the news,
blinking to assert we could see.

It hit the oldest of us first:
easy to ignore their red eyes,
until cars start rolling through red lights.

Segregation chambers were built
'Those who have lost sight are to blame.'
 – their privileges taken away.

PHASE TWO:

Blue is the first colour you lose.
Rules, enforced to help us keep sight
and not sink with the sea of the blind.

'No blackberries, blueberries, dates.
No rays even trickled through blinds.
No touch: please stand eight feet away.'

'This decree will help you keep sight.'

Ts&Cs blending into the grain.

I tear the sheet and lift the blind.

PHASE THREE:

The bright yellow walls burn my eyes.

I should worry I'm next, but I

feel only sheer bliss.

This room is meant to help those outside,

it's nonsense, non sense, non-self.

I see clearer now everything's gone.

Blind: to the world and all its life.

But visions, flashing lights, lightning,

are rewarding my bravery.

introduction to networked systems

Nikola Tsonchev

and they tell you to push the black-and-white button
and there's all these kinds of different buttons
 arctic black orange magenta yellow blue grey green
 silver cheese white-gold cyan violet burgundy
 atomic iron colourless pink drowned-robot-brown
and red
and they laugh and they smile and they point to a button
and you laugh and you smile and you point to a button
and they're smiling and nodding
and you're smiling and nodding
and they tell you to push the black-and-white button
and you go and you push the black-and-white button
 even though there isn't one.

Generation

Reese Tunstall

MY MOTHER SAID SHE WAS AN ARTIST, and I believed her.

In our new studio apartment, she tried to teach me to paint with all those family-bred techniques and skills, ways to blend colour and how to keep brushes beautiful for longer on a budget – skills that my hands couldn't grapple with. Often, she'd tell me I had the family talent, like her father before her and his grandmother before him, but my hands fluttered like butterfly wings. With every beat a brushstroke would go wrong.

My mother could paint magic. She'd tell me it was her skill and my brain that earned us the money to move into our high rise after we'd slumped it in our first digs. The spacious floors, deep blue and starlit just like mother loved it. She said the stars were companions, but you could fall in love with them if you really wanted. She said that she was in love with the stars, but the stars hadn't gotten there yet, so she painted the walls like they already were.

Wonders left her paintbrush, colours mixed haphazardly on a makeshift palette made from a plastic box lid, and she'd ask me what to make in that sugary singsong voice of hers. I'd squeal, ready to see the glowing mushroom forests she'd draw, the starlight groves, the faerie weddings and the penguins with frosted tiaras. I was fondest of the wolfhounds, white fur and blue eyes. Downy like a nest, and always with a heart-shaped black patch splashed on his chest, just for me. Always puffed out. Proud. My heart ached to be his friend.

One day, back in our old place, the wolfhound turned up. Exactly the same one – I could tell from his eyes, from the black patch and the way he

paraded around the tiny flat. Confident and full of pride: a monument of a soldier. It felt inevitable for me to love him.

Mother's face pulled back into a cat's snarl when she saw him – an expression I'd never seen before, not a day in my life – but I knew she was an artist. She always used to tell me art is a *performance*. She told me it was a stable production, given in its entirety to an audience; perfected. This time, it was clear to me that she was the art. She was the performance, her fear was her art. I named the wolfhound Champion.

He was everything my mother told me he would be when she painted him. Protective, kind, the perfect cushion. Love at first sight. He would stand prideful every morning, watching over me as I slept and covering me with dog-kisses when my mother's alarm sounded. Champion hated leaving home so much so that he never did. He would wake with me every morning and he would wait for me to come home, greeting me with kisses and a furiously wagging tail and with love every time.

I loved Champion even when mother was still terrified by the sight of him. Terrified enough to avoid him, never touch him, fall asleep in the corridor outside of our tiny apartment just to stay away from him. One day she was terrified enough to rip up every picture I'd pinned up on my walls of him; lovingly cherished and wrinkle-free.

It didn't make me cry because Champion was sat right beside me as it happened, a glassy glint in his sweet eyes. I hid my face in his fur, barely watching as mother's performance blossomed until it defaced him. She ripped his sweet presence to shreds, and within a day or two Champion escaped into the street and I didn't see him again after that.

I thought often about how better suited this apartment would have been to Champion. My proud boy, parading around the open floor plan, claiming the space as his own. Happy to model for my mother's paintings, if she didn't want to avoid him. Even if she did, she had the room to do it now.

She hadn't painted Champion since he escaped, though even as the thought of Champion living here occurred to me, it rushed through my fingers, sand fine. Often, she'd ask me for prompts, and often I'd suggest Champion.

A pause.

Then, she'd ask me if I wanted her to draw diamonds instead, or toys, or something else beautiful and expensive like our tastes were suddenly becoming, and I would always say yes. It was my performance as much as hers and sometimes I had to agree. She'd paint them gorgeously, with beauty like the stars, and oftentimes they would become my favourites.

Mother doesn't like to paint animals anymore, so she makes up people in her head and paints them. I like them. In our bigger apartment she can hang bigger pieces, make her work messier, more fun, more abstract. My favourite used to be a long-haired man, dark skinned and purple-eyed. Grinning cheekily with, per my request, a pair of pink glasses balanced on the bridge of his nose. I felt his friendship burst through his colours, and I named him Crayon to celebrate that quality of his. Mother loved him too, and she hung him up in the living room among the stars.

The day he appeared in the apartment was special. Mother looked at him like he was confirmation, like truth – and for that, we had my favourite meatballs and pasta for dinner. Me, my mother, and Crayon.

He didn't know much. He could speak well, but a lot of the words he said he hardly understood – words like 'plate' and 'tasty' and 'love'. Mother showed him how to use his knife and fork. He glowed with his first mouthful, like a newborn, and we laughed like parents do. Mother said it was just like my first lollipop.

He learned that he loved a lot of things. He loved food, first off, and mother and I adored cooking for him. Simple things like fairy bread and caramel, baked goods like cakes, like croissants, like jam and peaches and cream. He loved the light things, the cream, the swirls, the sprinkles. It's the sweetness, mother said. Sugar feeds the colours. It feeds the stars.

Mother started not to like him as soon as he started asking questions. He aged five years in the span of five days, and the questions were lightning; searching questions, sometimes. Questions like why am I taller than you, where did my glasses come from, where did you learn all the words you know. Questions like are you my mother. Questions like how do you know.

The questioning bored into my mother's ears like drills. Pulling answers from her was dentistry, the answers themselves exposed nerves; always leaving Crayon unsatisfied, and me with seeping dread.

I remembered Champion when mother finally broke and crumpled up Crayon's picture. She twisted the paper until the paint chipped, scattering the floor with his favourite hues, his warmth. Crayon watched as small patches of brown shed from his skin, a lump of pink from his glasses, a clump of blue-black hair.

My mother threw his painting out of the window. Gliding, gentle on the winds, like the paper slowed for my hands to catch it. Star-like, and I couldn't love it well enough to save it.

Crayon, dishevelled and fragmented, left not long after with a dawning realisation that those walls weren't cement. I didn't cry because I didn't know how to.

I was determined to hide my next favourite. Terrified, quietly, in the corner of my mother's art room as she would paint, that one of her pieces would speak to me differently. That I'd hear that voice that says, *that. That's the one. You're going to fall in love with the stars again.* Terrified, quietly, the feelings came anyway when my mother's brushstrokes created a sweet blond boy with a silly propeller hat, striped in blue and red and green.

I named him Arlo, and he was my brother. I hid him in a kitchen cupboard and never let him out in the day, but we talked about everything and anything at night. I'd show him the art room, the kitchen, I'd make him pancakes and talk and reminisce on mine and mother's lives. He was fond of learning new things – a quicker study than Crayon, but with a smaller appetite and palette – and he favoured the kid's books I kept under my bed in my room. I hardly slept, but he beat the tired away with his laughter. His laughter kept my performance fuelled, and for once, I made my own art. Mother wasn't going to find out.

Then the questions started coming; a mile a minute. I learned why mother was so afraid of them.

Why can't I come out of my room in the day, he'd ask. Where's mother? Why can you talk to mother and I can't? I miss her. Tell me where she is.

I found myself lying through my teeth every day after he hit that questioning stage. I told him that the sunlight would hurt his skin, that he was candle-fragile and that he'd start to melt. I told him that mother feared him, like he feared pictures of mice. He wondered briefly what he could change to make mother feel better, but I choked that thought like mother wrings paper.

Arlo, it's you, I said. It isn't anything *about* you. It's just you.

Still the questions flowed like watercolour, and often I gave answers that contradicted others. Hanging threads of lies, a spider's menagerie, cutting and trimming with a pair of scissors. All in a day's work of a stand-in for mother, I thought. It was easy, while joining and separating the liar's tales, why mother hated taking on this job so much.

But still I loved Arlo, and I had to protect him. I taught him to be fearful of mother, but to love her, nonetheless. I taught him to protect his painting like it was his heart; I'd catch him staring at it some days, and I wondered what it must have felt like to breathe in the vapours of your own soul. To see yourself as art, from the outside. I think that maybe I would have been humiliated in his position.

I protected that painting like crystal, but mother was a hammer. The second she found out she blazed, and she burned the paper with a lighter, her performance scorching her heart. The remnants flew out of the window to blister. Arlo's skin melted, the bones under his skin shifting like they were molten, twisting his body until he was unrecognisable besides the darling propeller hat still propped on his concave head. His rage boiled inside him and while he moved and shouted, he never breathed again.

It was pain that Arlo shouted at me, digging into the pores of my skin like he meant to make me formless. His blue eyes blazed with something different that I'd never seen before, and with his chest he screamed at me – *You*.

You were going to let me rot, weren't you. You were going to keep me here and never let me go. You'll never find art like me once I'm gone and I don't care if you never have another lovely thing again. What use would it be? She was right to burn me. You would never let me see the sun.

And I knew something in me had snapped when he walked out the door like the rest of my mother's art did. My mother's eyes were wild, and they reflected the feral clawing in my chest, the ravenous beating of drums in my brain. Something, deep in my soul, snipping at the corners of the portrait that resides there. It stretched the paper taut and found a match to light it with.

My eyes were going to burn through.

My skin crawled like those mice that Arlo was so deathly afraid of, scraping their teeth against the barrier of muscle and flesh – and I knew I couldn't stay. I left mother with no words, unwilling to share any more of my performance with her, and even when she pleaded as I turned my back on her I couldn't say a word. There was nothing I could say, no way to perform here. She'd taken away my friends, my favourites; and there was only one suitable punishment for that.

The moment I left the building, the moonlight brushed a gentle glow into my skin. I became that night, and in that moment on the street, the stars looked down on me and fell in love. They told me I was an artist, and I believed them.

Ulrich

Abi Underhill

HE WAS OPIUM, AND I CRAVED HIM like a starving baby longs for milk. In his absence I could not function; I was purposeless. I would have died for him, a knife to my neck or a bullet to my brain. For him, it would've been easy. Life without him seemed so painfully unimaginable. His absence made me sick; it overwhelmed me with an incapacitating pain. Only he could cure me. Only he knew how. He was the only solution.

If I had three wishes, the first would be to shrink like Alice. I'd make a toast to him, and then I'd shrink. Shrink. Shrink. Shrink. I would be tiny, like a spider, crawling my way around. Invisible.

The second would be for magic ladders. Ladders so small that I could climb down them into his brain.

Then I would wish to swim. I'd submerge myself in his lagoon of thoughts, diving into his memories and floating on his feelings. I could bathe in him forever. I would not drown.

Dolores, Dr Phillips says, concerned.

I'm sorry, I reply firmly, understanding that my brain is going off on a tangent again. It does this more often than it stays on track, these days.

I wanted to become him; I wanted to be him. It was a desperation that I hope I will never feel again, the kind of feeling that has the ability to completely rip you apart. It floods your veins and you suffocate from the inside. It chokes you and nobody can even see. Nobody can help you.

I am here to help you now, *Dolores*.

Yes, I reply.

His name was Ulrich and he was a creative. He was a writer and he liked

to paint, but he was also a pianist. I attended balls and parties at the Savoy Hotel with my mother and father, where he would often play. Everybody marvelled at him and I resented them for it. My sister said he was terrific; she had looked at him, flashing her erotic eyelashes. So I burnt her journal that same night. I set alight to what she cherished most, just as she tried to take my lover for herself. She said that she wanted to talk to him after he had finished playing, unaware of the fact that he did not discuss his shows with anyone. Nobody, except me.

Is that true?

Yes, the truth and nothing but.

He barely spoke to another soul. I expect it was because he was worried. He was a German Jew, you see. He moved to England, alone, with nothing, with no one. He left everything behind and began a life alone, a life of refuge. But he was so empty. Desolate. Until he met me. He told me stories of the war, of men he had killed.

He had never had a woman. He was saving himself for me; he knew he would find me. He had seen me in his dreams, just as I had him. He was crafted by angels. I think he was the Son of God.

You are very innocent, Dolores.

I am not a child.

I did not say you were, but your mother tells me that you do not see any darkness in the world.

I only see the light, Doctor.

I expect your outlook on the world gets you into trouble sometimes. Yes? Do you find it difficult to understand the difference between the good and the bad, Dolores?

Bad people do not exist, Dr Phillips.

What about murderers?

Everybody has their reasons.

We met one evening. I walked out of the hotel lavatory after a show and whilst passing through the reception I saw him. I could spot him in any crowd. I suppose I was always looking for him, anywhere I went. He was slim, with tired eyes that made him look fragile. He had these delicate, feminine lips, so plump and tender. I always watched his lips when he spoke,

with a desperate craving, urging to hear more and more words come out his mouth. His voice set me on fire. I miss his voice. I miss his voice more than anybody could possibly ever imagine. It was wet and sweet, a gentle and perfumed sort of voice that tattooed your skin with each word.

I remember the first time we kissed. We had sat in his small garden outside the narrow town house and lit up a cigarette and a conversation. I did not smoke until I met Ulrich. (I take a drag of a Chesterfield cigarette.) I coughed the first time I had inhaled the smoke and he had laughed at me – the kind of laugh that was both charming and mocking at the same time. I want to hear it again. I will hear it again. Perhaps, once I return home, I may find him again.

Dolores, do you remember why you are here?

Oh, yes, because I smashed Mama's teapot. She believes I need to work on my etiquette. She probably told you about my poor posture too, did she not? (I adjust myself so that I am upright on the chair, as Dr Phillips sighs, taking his pen to paper for the first time in the last twenty minutes.)

I dream of seeing him. I dream of kissing him. I want to kiss him, just like the first time, all over again. I have planned the kiss, revised and modelled it on him – on Ulrich. It is delicate and steady, passionate but gentle: the Ulrich kiss. My Ulrich kiss. My Ulrich.

I love him. I tell God, every night before I close my eyes, then I tell him again in my sleep. I have written to him, although I have not received a reply. I expect he does not have the money for stamps. Ulrich did not have much money. The piano was his passion, but it did not pay well. He could never take me out to dinner; he could only afford to take out his sister, you see. Family always come first. Ask Mama, if you don't believe me.

His sister, was she not in Germany?

(There is an air of hesitation.) He had an English sister too. I met her, three times. She said that Ulrich and I should marry. She said that we should marry on a hill in the country. That's what she said.

He did not like his sister too much, though. In truth, after me, his favourite company was his little ginger tabby cat. She was lovely. Ulrich found her wandering the streets when she was very small. He was always helping

those who struggled. He prided himself on his charity. I liked Margrit very much. She was very soft. Margrit. I think that was her name.

Margrit. She was very small. Margrit the small tabby. The small ginger tabby. No, she was grey. Margrit the tabby cat, with the soft fur. Margrit, Margrit. No that wasn't her name. Marjery, Maggie. Margrit.

Dolores, calm yourself. Let us talk some more about your family.

I cannot remember. I cannot remember. I cannot remember.

Dolores, have some water.

I love him. I love him. I love him.

Nurse Winston, please call Dr Townsend to assist me.

I love you, Ulrich.

The Utopian Manifesto

Tiago Ventura

- STEP 1: Remove every single book ever written and replace it with copies of this guide;
- STEP 2: Erase every religion's symbols and abolish religious beliefs in the world. Replace with the steps of the guide;
- STEP 3: Remove every painting, expunge every colour. Replace with equal amounts of black and white;
- STEP 4: Silence every musical piece ever made and replace with monotonous sound waves;
- STEP 5: Obliterate all technology, paper and writing materials from existence and replace with printed copies of this guide;
- STEP 6: Quash all ideologies, political parties and governments and substitute with the rules of this guide;
- STEP 7: Forget all cultural traditions and customs. Turn instead to these guidelines;
- STEP 8: Eradicate all social rules and notions of family or identity and replace them for a single unified identity – 'human';
- STEP 9: Efface every language in existence and replace them with a new language made from only this guide's words;
- STEP 10: Destroy this guide.

Dropping Temperatures

Jade Whitehouse

THEY ARE KEPT IN CAGES. Forty small cages and two bigger cages for the older ones. Some have been there since birth. The room is always dark. Only a light from the bottom of the locked door seeped through. All the cages are bolted shut. Nobody goes in the room apart from him. It's silent. Not a single utterance is heard. Nothing except whimpers on the first of every month at 23:59. Not a second earlier. Not a second later. The cages are basic. Fashioned out of metal and wood. The bars metal and the base wooden. There's a piece of cloth stretched across the wood base. It's ripped in each of the four corners by the nails keeping it in place. There are cages stacked on top of each other. They won't ever break. Their contents are too light. Every cage has a cage in front of it until they reach the wall. Then the last cages are facing a white, blank wall. There's one area of the room, a small square, which is occupied by him. A desk and computer, a broken chair and one filing cabinet. That's his. There's paper reaching out of the cabinet and a lamp. The lamp is never used. It has no batteries. The computer hasn't been switched on. He doesn't use it. When he does use the room, he sits and stares. Observing the cages and writing. The room has no windows only an air vent. The floor itself is hard to make out. There are so many cages covering it. What little of it can be seen is black and dirty. He doesn't use light so he isn't seen. If he is seen, he's well-hidden. Another shadow in the room or a black mysterious figure.

The cages were opened once a year for cleaning. This meant their contents had to be cleared. The contents would be taken to the room which was also in complete darkness and separated by only a door. This room was

bigger but the condition was worse. There was mould growing from the ceiling and a few rats had chewed the skirting boards. Allowing their exit and entrance. They were kept in this room for twenty-four hours exactly. The cages were unavailable so the contents were positioned in lines – not touching. There was a camera to ensure this distance was kept. He would enter the room after twelve hours and watch the contents of the cages. Sometimes he would laugh. His laughing would go on for two hours at a time, with consistent five minutes breaks after thirty minutes. It was a controllable but evil laughter. It didn't sound forced, it sounded cunning and dark like it had been built up overtime waiting to be released. A cannon waiting to fire rounds of laughter throughout the room. He wouldn't laugh in the other room. Just stare.

The cages would be cleaned in a separate room. This room was completely white. It consisted of a long table which reached both ends of the room. The cages were placed on the table and broken down. There was a sink. It had four compartments. A sink, full of cold soapy water where the bars were put. A sink with a shower head. This is where the bars were sprayed and moved into a red sanitiser. They would soak in the sanitiser for three hours. Then they were left in the final compartment to dry. This was the longest compartment. It was made up of a dozen towels stitched together. The bars would be rested there whilst the other body parts of the cage were cleaned. The wooden bases and tops would be scrubbed with a sponge and the nails were replaced. The cloths were put into a washing machine and hung to dry on a piece of rope stretching above the long table. Once cleaned the cages were reconstructed and put back. The cages were cleaned but the contents never. The cages needed to be sanitised and cleansed because the contents were not. They were then dragged back into the cages.

It stayed like this for a long time. The rooms were part of a small building out in a barren landscape no one had heard of. It wasn't hidden it just wasn't noticed. It had the exterior of an abandoned warehouse so no one paid any attention. Everyone assumed it was empty, unoccupied and vacant. That was how he wanted it. He wanted it to be hidden in plain sight. He didn't care enough to try and mask it. He knew people were too busy

to go and see if it was really empty. The truth was in one way or another it was empty. Or at least it felt that way. He was happy with his work and that he'd not been discovered. He could keep doing what he had been for the past twelve years. No one suspected a thing. Well they didn't even have the slightest inclination of what he had going on. It was unfathomable. But genius in his eyes. He wasn't the only one residing in the abandonment. There were two others. They didn't have any contact with the outside world. It was him and them and the cages. He liked it that way. All of them slept, ate and lived there. It was their home or it had been for the last twelve years. He had his own room opposite the others. They shared. Their room was bleak. It had a rough mattress on the floor, a small lamp placed beside it and a mirror hung from a nail on the wall. There were no photographs or posters on the walls or in frames around the room. There were two separate piles of clothes on the other side of the room and a sink. The walls were white and the skirting boards were missing and the floor was black. I'm not sure if it was black to begin with. His room was similar. Somewhat prettier yet worse than theirs.

I won't describe it yet. That can wait. He needed to prepare for the next day, the first of the month. He was not to be disturbed. They locked his door from the outside and left. Three bangs were heard in the morning on the other side. They rushed and unbolted the door.

'Thank you', he uttered, nodding his head. They nodded back and headed down the corridor. He stood outside the door for a few moments. He watched them as their figures disappeared. He turned and walked in the other direction. The air was cold as he got closer. The walls and floors were colder. The air was moist. In front of him was a freezer. The door had been left open overnight. Purposefully. Of course. The cold air had made its way into the small rooms close by. The sound of a fan was heard in the distance, whirring away, adding to the dropping temperature. The cold didn't affect him, he was cold. A warm hand on his skin would have felt like a fire. His hand was an icicle. It felt like the hand of a corpse. Anything that touched him shuddered, inanimate or not.

The freezer wasn't there to spout cold air all the time. It held a few other purposes. One, it was where he kept his food, all of it. He froze anything and everything he ate. Then defrosted it. But it needed to be frozen first. That was his rule. Not chilled, or heated. Frozen. He also kept canisters in the freezer. Around fifty of them. They were small and metal. You couldn't see inside the canister. They were silver and kept together. Only he knew what was inside. But every so often he'd remove one or two. He kept spare ones too. Hundreds of them. Shoved into a drawer. He needed that much. He would make use of the spare canisters every day. The amount in the fridge constantly increased more than it decreased. The third and final use of the freezer was unknown. All that is known is once a month maybe twice on the same night he would take a metal trolley covered in a black sheet into the freezer and leave it there. Nobody saw what was underneath the sheet. One can only assume it wasn't pleasant.

Anyway. Back to this open freezer door. He shut it and made his way into a small room opposite. In front of him, the cages. The room filled with a cold silence and uneasy atmosphere. He slipped and slithered through the cages. Sat down and watched them. The room was black. His face indistinguishable and out of sight. He was a silhouette. The only free thing in the room. Everything else locked in a cage. He liked that superiority. A free soul, free to live, free to do and free to move. The cages powerless. His figure moved towards the cages. He'd left a gap so he could get in between them. He rattled each one. Shaking it, banging on the top of it, slamming his fist and kicking it. The cages never fell over. They whimpered but never tumbled. The cages were strong, their contents, however, were fragile. That was the point. The contents were trapped by something stronger than themselves. He slipped back through the cages and sat in his chair. The darkness hid the emotion on his face but the 'huh' sound echoed his satisfaction. That wasn't enough. The enjoyment of rattling the cages and kicking them would wear off. As mentioned, it was the first of the month after all. He left the room, walked into the freezer picked up two canisters, placed them in his white pockets and left, leaving the freezer door open again.

After two hours and thirty-seven minutes he emerged into the corridor. A clicking sound resonated throughout the halls. A few minutes later, a bell. He ran to the small room with the cages, pulled a lever next to the door and began unlocking it.

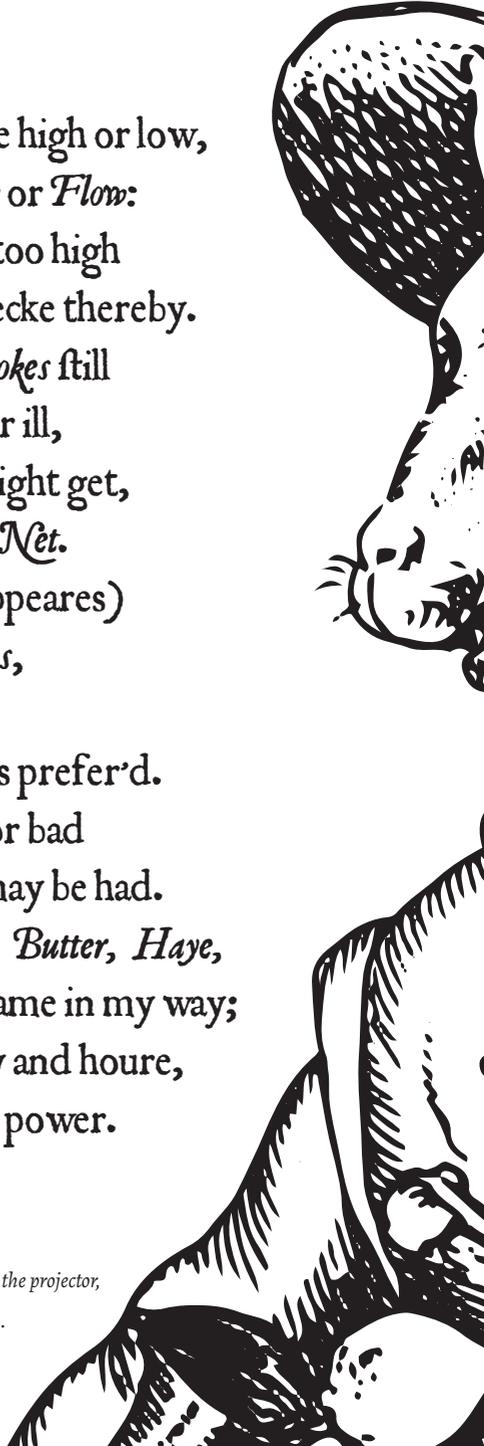
‘Games are my favourite, especially when it is not me trying to win. I love to watch you all play darlings Be free. For now, please’.

It’s silent. No movement.

‘BE FREE’, he shouted followed by forced but weak laughter. Small black figures crawled from the cages, one by one, they scrambled slowly to the empty room opposite. The room was still in darkness. He insisted. The last two cages were released. These figures were significantly larger than the others but equally as thin and feeble. Every figure was now cramped into yet another confined space.

My legs were Screwes, to raise thee high or low,
According as your power did *Ebbe* or *Flow*:
And at your will I was Screwd up too high
That tott'ring, I have broke my necke thereby.
For you, I made my *Fingers fish-bookes* still
To catch at all *Trades*, either good or ill,
I car'd not much who lost, so we might get,
For all was *Fish* that came into the *Net*.
For you (as in my Picture plaine appears)
I put a *Swines face* on, an *Affes eares*,
The one to listen unto all I heard
Wherein your worships profit was prefer'd.
The other to tast all things, good or bad
(As Hogs will doe) where profit may be had.
Grape, Starch, Tobacco, Pipes, Pins, Butter, Hays,
Wine, Coales, Cards, Dice, and all came in my way;
I brought your worship, every day and houre,
And hope to be defended by your power.

from John Taylor, *The complaint of M. Tenter-hook the projector,*
and Sir Thomas Dodger the patentee (London, 1641).





YEAR TWO

Two Girls

Ruby Carbonell

ACT I SCENE 1

EARLY MORNING.

A BEDROOM. THE WALLS ARE COVERED IN PHOTOS, CONCERT TICKETS AND REVISION SCHEDULES. THERE ARE FAIRY LIGHTS ABOVE THE BED.

TO THE RIGHT IS A DESK COVERED IN MAKEUP AND SOME PAPERS. A LAPTOP IS OPEN ON THE BED AND SOME UNDERWEAR IS SCATTERED ON THE FLOOR.

TWO GIRLS STAND AT OPPOSITE ENDS OF THE ROOM.

GIRL 1: This is nice.

GIRL 2: What?

GIRL 1: The bedroom. Your bedroom is nice.

GIRL 2: Oh yeah, thanks. I tried to do it up a bit and make it my own but the cheap fairy lights and photos from home just make it look even more

generic.

GIRL 1: No, I think it's nice /

GIRL 2: / Do you want a drink?

GIRL 1: Sure. What do you have?

GIRL 2: Let me check.

GIRL 2 LOOKS IN HER DESK DRAWER
BUT FINDS NOTHING.

GIRL 2: Nothing, apparently.

THEY BOTH LAUGH.

GIRL 2: Sorry my flatmates are all alcoholics, if you
don't want your alcohol drunk you need to lock
it away.

GIRL 1: It's okay, I don't need a drink really.

GIRL 2: I do.

THEY BOTH LAUGH AGAIN.

GIRL 1: I have some coke if you want it?

GIRL 2: You're rich enough to be handing out coke to
strangers?

GIRL 1: Your flatmates may be alcoholics, but mine love
to get on it. One of them gave me this earlier
today because his parents were coming to visit
and he didn't want them finding his stash.
(PAUSE). Also, you're not a stranger?

BEAT.

GIRL 1: Do you want some or not?

SHE PULLS A BAGGIE OUT OF HER
POCKET.

GIRL 2: Uh, yeah?

GIRL 1: You've never done it before, have you?

GIRL 2 SHAKES HER HEAD.

GIRL 1: Let's not then.

GIRL 2: Why?

GIRL 1: You might be an arrogant asshole on it.

GIRL 2: What?

GIRL 1: Some people become cocky bastards when they do
it.

GIRL 2: Well how do you know that's gonna be me?

GIRL 1: I don't.

GIRL 2: Exactly so, let me do it.

GIRL 2 MOVES CLOSER TO GIRL 1.

GIRL 1: You're eager.

GIRL 2: I know what I want.

GIRL 1 SHRUGS AND HANDS IT TO
HER.

GIRL 1: Bombs away.

GIRL 2 TAKES HER KEYS OUT AND
DOES SOME.

SHE HANDS IT BACK.

GIRL 2: Are you gonna do any?

GIRL 1: No, I'm an arrogant asshole when I'm on it.

GIRL 2 LAUGHS.

GIRL 2: So am I.

GIRL 1: I thought that you've never done it.

TWO GIRLS

GIRL 2 SHRUGS AND THEN SMILES.

GIRL 1: What?

BEAT.

GIRL 2: Why are you here?

BEAT.

GIRL 1: Should I go?

GIRL 2: No, no. Don't.

GIRL 1: Okay.

GIRL 2: But why are you here?

BEAT.

GIRL 1: You uh, didn't you invite me here?

GIRL 2: Yeah but why did you come?

BEAT.

GIRL 1: You know why I came.

MOMENT.

GIRL 2: But you don't know me /

GIRL 1: / Why do you always say that? /

GIRL 2: / Because you don't.

BEAT.

GIRL 1: I don't know you or you don't know me?

GIRL 2: Both.

BEAT.

GIRL 1: I don't believe you. Not for one second. I don't know why you try to give off this persona that you're so mysterious and emotionally unavailable because at the end of the day we

both know that you're not /

GIRL 2: / What do you know?

GIRL 1: Is that the coke talking?

BEAT.

GIRL 2: Maybe.

BEAT.

GIRL 1: Maybe I should go /

GIRL 2: / (MOVING FORWARD TO STOP HER) No, don't.

THEY ARE NOW BOTH STANDING
DIRECTLY OPPOSITE EACH OTHER, SO
CLOSE THEY COULD TOUCH HEADS.

GIRL 1: Am I a stranger to you?

GIRL 2: I've never done this before.

BEAT.

GIRL 1 RETRACTS.

GIRL 2: What?

GIRL 1: Nothing. I just

SHE STOPS.

GIRL 2: What?

GIRL 1: I'm not gonna be your experiment.

BEAT.

GIRL 2: What do you /

GIRL 1: / Stop. You know what I mean.

GIRL 2: I thought you wanted to /

GIRL 1: / I do. I really do. But if this is just

TWO GIRLS

you coked up wanting to experiment for the sake of it then I can't. I've been someone's experiment before and even though it feels nice at the time it's semi-degrading waking up in the morning and being told they want to pretend that nothing ever happened.

GIRL 2: That's not going to happen.

GIRL 1: Don't stand there and say that. You flirt with me endlessly when you're smashed but won't even look me in the eye at uni. That's basically the same thing but without the sex.

GIRL 2: Do you think that low of me?

GIRL 1: I don't think low of you, now you're just trying to make this into something it's not. I just know you and what you're like.

GIRL 2: You don't know me /

GIRL 1: / Yes I do /

GIRL 2 STEPS FORWARD AND KISSES
GIRL 1.

GIRL 1: That's the coke.

GIRL 2: That's me.

GIRL 1 THEN KISSES GIRL 2.

GIRL 1: I know.

END.

Planning Ahead

Finlay Charlesworth

IT WAS FREDDIE'S TWENTY-FIRST BIRTHDAY and he knew what he wanted. It wasn't a gift. In fact, he wasn't really asking anything of his family, but the shock was apparent in their wide eyes and wider mouths.

Dad's brow furrowed. Mum rubbed the end of her cardigan sleeve between a finger and thumb.

Grandma Polly was staring at Freddie up and down, hard, as if Freddie was a crossword puzzle that she couldn't solve. Freddie had a suspicion she was looking for some mistake in the printing rather than the word she couldn't remember – either way, Grandma's eyes looked clouded behind her heavy, thick-lens frames. Beside her was Grandad David: he was her square-jawed mirror image in a corduroy suit and maroon bow tie. Grandpa Irwin, on the other hand – literally, sat on the opposite side of the table from his son's in-laws – couldn't have seemed less concerned. His pudgy lips curled up into a grin and exposed his yellowing dentures as he waited for Freddie to go on.

The last seat at the table was taken by Freddie's younger sister, Laura, who sat in stunned silence. She didn't like the sound of what Freddie had to say. She didn't like the look on her parents' and grandparents' faces. She didn't want to be involved in any of this.

Up until Freddie had made his announcement, the meal had been as turgid and dull as expected. The service was effortlessly efficient, and the food excellent – but the waiters looked like they had been crucified under their suits. In each mouthful of food you could taste every hour of research and refinement that the chefs had put into crafting it, but still be all-too-

aware it would slide down the gullet and into a pit of acid after just a few seconds on the tongue. The décor was *extremely* expensive, and *wonderfully* tasteful. It was all just a bit much. Even worse, Grandma Polly and Granddad David were on *their* territory. They had authority. They had chosen the wine.

A what, now Freddie? It was Grandpa Irwin who had finally broken the silence.

A funeral consultant, Grandpa.

What the hell would you need one of them for, did someone die?

No, no-one's died, Grandpa. Are you dying then?

DAD – hissed Dad at Grandpa Irwin.

No, I'm not dying, Grandpa, Freddie confirmed.

OK, started Dad, taking a breath and trying to be rational. Granddad David was glaring at him. Dad ignored it. So, what is a so-called funeral consultant? Are you sure it wasn't a scam?

Ooh, now that you mention it, it does sound a bit like a scam, Mum added. You didn't give him any money did you Freddie?

First of all, it was a woman, and she had an office in town – *I never said that scammers can't be women! And anyone can get an office in town!* – and I didn't pay her until we had finished talking.

And what did you talk about exactly?

We were making plans for my funeral.

Grandpa Irwin sucked in his breath, smirking and supressing a giggle.

Freddie began again. I mean, Dad let's just say, *hypothetically*, if I died tomorrow – his voice was playful but sincere, the sound of inquiry – what would you do for my funeral?

Dad looked like a goldfish that had just been moved into a new bowl. He shot a longing stare at his wife. His wife stared back at him, hard.

I suppose – he questioned everything as he spoke – it would be in a church.

Dad, *why* would it be in a church? Haven't *been* to a church of my own volition since I was last allowed to be a Wise Man in the bloody Nativity.

Grandma Polly gasped. Dad tried to push on.

Well –

Who would you invite? And what kind of coffin would you put me in?

We'd invite all the family of course, and contact your friends, and find a good coffin.

But I'd prefer a cremation.

Ah well, I'd forgotten –

And Mum, what songs would you have at my funeral?

Her husband silently pleaded with her to defuse the situation. She looked at him, and then at her parents (who sat watching her disapprovingly across the table), and then at her son. She opened her mouth and spoke.

I don't know, Freddie.

And that's why I went to a funeral consultant. That's all. I just wanted a plan, just in case.

Grandma Polly, Grandad David, Ross and Laura looked baffled.

I'm still only twenty-one. I might change my mind, and change the plans, or find someone I trust enough to make the plans for me, but I thought it'd be better if I at least had them.

Now hold on, young man – Grandad David was finally ready to weigh in. The look of bafflement had been wiped from his face. Freddie sat back in his chair and listened to Grandad David, and then to his Mum when she interjected, and then to Grandad David again, and then his Dad backing up his Mum, and then Grandpa Irwin asking a confused passing waiter for another bottle of the Cabernet. Then it was Grandma Polly's turn, followed by his Mum again, and his Dad, and Grandad David, who again said now hold on, young man, and it seemed as though the conversation was starting over from the beginning even though Freddie was pretty sure Grandad wasn't talking to him this time.

Freddie tactfully said nothing and let his family work it out. He glanced over at Laura, wedged between Grandma Polly and their Mum. Her hands rested on the seat of her chair, and her shoulders were tense, like she was ready to jettison herself from the table any second. Freddie caught her furtive gaze and smiled at her, goofily, apologetically. She returned him a

tight-lipped grin and an ironic thumbs-up of appreciation. He chuckled, knowing he owed her one.

Grandpa Irwin poured Freddie a glass from the new bottle of wine, brought over by the cautious waitress who wasn't settled at all by Freddie's smile and Grandpa Irwin's whispered *thank you*.

For the record, Freddie, I would also like to be cremated, and I would like my ashes to be put into the sea on Furbogh Beach. Thought you should know that, just in case. Though I suspect I had better write it down somewhere – Grandpa Irwin paused, and exhaled heavily – Lest there be squabbling.

Grandpa Irwin glanced over at his son, nobly battling on against those godawful in-laws: something about how the grandchildren will afford something something property ladder something something economy.

Grandpa Irwin took up his glass and let it hover by his eldest grandson. Freddie picked up his own and held it casually aloft.

Happy fuckin' birthday Freddie.

Freddie's smile widened as they touched the crystal glasses together. They both just about heard the soft little ring over the din of voices.



Once the family had gone, the table waited to be cleaned.

The remnants of their evening lay scattered across it, jostled from where they had been lain so precisely on the tablecloth; even the tablecloth itself had wine and gravy blemishes sullyng its white cotton expanse. The chaos had spilled out and soaked in.

But they were gone.

They were gone at last.

The last glasses were whisked away to the kitchen; the candle moved to a table by the Maître d's podium. With a great flourish the tablecloth was lifted off and a new one floated down in its place. The candle returned, followed by eight clean wine glasses and eight sets of sparkling silver cutlery. A tray of napkins was produced and placed delicately in front of each seat. A speck of dust from the back of one of the chairs was collected in a cloth so

as not to accidentally sweep it onto the floor, or god forbid onto the table.

The waiters filed back to their respective stations.

The table waited, ready to be seated.

They were gone.

Gone at last.



Freddie came jogging through the entrance of the terminal with about ten minutes to spare. Mum was close to losing her sanity and forcing the family through airport security, with or without Freddie.

Freddie was in his final year at university, and he wanted to spend right up until the last minute revising in the library. Or at least that was what he said. In any case, the train from Manchester to Luton had been delayed.

Mum, Dad and Laura were relieved to see him. That relief didn't last. They still had check-in to negotiate.

Dad was a nervous flier. He hadn't been on an airplane since the conference he went to in Dortmund, what, about twelve years ago? Going through security stressed him out no ends. He kept thinking: did I take my laptop out? Does toothpaste count as a liquid? Will my silver tooth set off the scanner thingy? He looked so shifty as he shuffled along the snaking queue from sorting table to the check-in to the scanners and from there to the airport lounge. It was a vicious cycle – the more worried he got about doing something wrong, the more dubious he looked and the more glances he got from the Big Men in Stab Vests; in turn worrying him further.

Normally, Laura might take a dig at her Dad's expense. *She* had been on a plane last October, when she went on that exchange trip to Spain, and she couldn't fathom her Dad's twitches and glances at the slightest disturbances. Today wasn't the day to be taking the piss though. That was the last thing any of them needed.

It was a Ryanair flight – of course – from Luton to Knock. Having not paid for seat selection, they were scattered all across the plane. Laura drew the short straw, sat in the middle seat between a very-businessy-businessman-type by the window and a woman who fell asleep as soon as she put

her seatbelt on. She crossed her legs and prayed the whole way that she wouldn't need the airplane toilet.

The landing was bumpy and the airport small. Mum had read somewhere online that you can sometimes get a better deal on car rentals if you don't book in advance. Freddie and Laura were suspicious of this. The longer they waited at the rental office, the more their suspicions grew. It was one thing after another.

Ask for a 'mid-size family car'. Pay deposit. Discover that they've already sent out their entire fleet of 'mid-size family cars'. Have a 'discussion' with Mum about whether they go up another bracket of car size and luxury or take their business to an alternative rental outlet. Be reminded by a woman in a suit with exceptionally large teeth that if they did that, they would lose the deposit. Try to do some sums; maths fails. Pay a premium for an upgrade. Wind up being handed the paperwork for a very expensive and much too fancy Audi.

Dad took the keys and landed with a weary thump in the driver's seat, exhaling loudly in frustration as he did.

Mum didn't like the look of the car. It reminded her suspiciously of the one Grandad David drove before he broke his hip – and the car – in an accident.

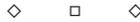
It was then a sixty-mile drive to Galway from the airport. Laura managed to win the race to ride shotgun, after her torment on the aeroplane. She stretched out as much as she could. Mum and Freddie sunk into the backseats, vacantly staring out of windows at the fields and cows. There were so many cows. None of them did anything interesting or spectacular: they just grazed out on the fields, doing what cows do. So many cows and so many fields.

An hour and forty-five minutes felt like forever, sat in silence since no-one could work out how to use the car stereo, with its fancy touchscreen panel and a sticker on the dashboard promising Bluetooth that seemed like a myth. Eventually they arrived at the cottage. Spent five minutes looking for the piece of paper Dad printed with the code for the key-safe on it. Eventually get indoors. It was one of those days where everything that

needed to happen just happened *eventually*.

Decent place, though clearly had been furnished by some pre-Ikea old woman living in a pre-Ikea world. Everything made of heavy wood. The sofas in the sitting room were stiff-backed and retained their posh-Eighties upholstery. They couldn't find the light switch in the kitchen and weren't sure if the fridge was switched on. It was functional. It was very traditional, very 'Irish'. Suppose that's what the punters come for, said Mum.

They worked out a good place to buy some fish and chips for dinner and got to bed.



At about ten the next morning, Dad went around the house, knocking on the doors of his kids and quietly asking them to get up, first Laura, then Freddie. About half an hour later, Mum retraced her husband's steps, just a wee bit louder. This time there was some response and movement started to happen. Dad started doing something he was much better at and got the bacon frying.

The bacon sandwiches were good, aside from Mum forgetting to get the ketchup when she went to the shops. They're just not quite the same without ketchup. Dad asked how long everyone needed to get ready to head out. They agreed about half an hour. A time was set: we're leaving the house at half twelve, OK? Ok.

Dad went up to the bedroom he was sharing with Mum. He'd been ready for hours, hadn't slept well at all. He never did in strangers' beds, he found. There was only one thing he needed to do before they could leave. He pulled out a rucksack from inside his suitcase (it had been too big for carry-on, no matter how ridiculous the thought of packing a bag inside another was to him) and filled it with his metal water bottle, his wallet, and finally, the mahogany box on the dressing table.

They decided to walk. Dad promised it would take a couple of hours, max. If they didn't fancy walking home afterwards, they could get on the bus, but it didn't seem worth driving. Besides, it was a lovely day.

Laura put her headphones in as soon as they stepped out of the door.

Mum asked Dad if he had everything he needed and he said he thought so. He looked in his rucksack again anyway, just to check. The sun was shining but the coastal wind was savage. Freddie immediately went for the jumper he had tied around his waist and couldn't wait to get moving, hoping it might warm him up. They set off in silence along the path to Furbogh.

It took them about an hour and a half.

See, Dad said, not so bad.

Freddie asked him if they were definitely at the right beach, and Dad told him not to be cheeky. Dad smiled for the first time in weeks, or so it felt. It was a strange smile, like his cheeks were fighting against an enormous weight placed upon them. A smile all the same though.

Of course, this is the right beach, spent all my good summers here. Me and your Grandpa.

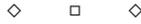
They walked down to the rocks and stopped a moment at the place where the waves lapped just in front of their feet. Across the bay, way off in the distance was the Black Head, a smudge on the horizon, with miles of water in between them. The sun cast shining ripples over the gentle sea, and the wind pulled the swirling, cold fresh air this way and that. It really was a beautiful day.

Dad slid the backpack off and unzipped it. He reached in and withdrew the mahogany box, the sun reflecting off its polished surface catching Dad in the eye and making him look away. His eyes were watering. He said it was the sun.

He passed the box to Laura. She took out her headphones and held it a moment, before passing it to Freddie. Freddie gently rubbed its edges with his thumbs and gave it on to Mum. Mum stared at it for the best part of a minute, standing perfectly still, before returning it to Dad.

Dad held it to his face and pressed his lips against the lid, before opening the box, and releasing it to Furbogh Beach. The dust flickered and swirled in the sunlight, before being carried out from the beach, flying in all directions, spreading far and wide across the waters.

When the last of Grandpa Irwin had been put out to sea, Dad closed the box, and returned it to his bag.



The dust flickered and swirled in the sunlight.

The wind inhaled it; gasped; and expelled it again.

A red kite soared over the bay, cutting through the thin cloud, scattering it further.

You never used to see red kites, not in Ireland anyway. They died out years ago they said, so long ago they'd been forgotten.

It was very, very strange for one of the kites to have flown so far west.

So far from where she came and going further still.

Grandpa Irwin's ashes were scattered on Furbogh Beach, but there they did not remain.

The Cost of a Shilling

E.J. Coates

BRENDA PLACES THE RABBIT PELTS DOWN on the wooden desk. The ghosts of the creatures they had once been still linger; her father had hunted and skinned them, then left them to become dry husks, flat and brown and bunny shaped. He had dried them out in the basement where Brenda was never allowed to go. One year in the depths of a freezing winter, her father had brought home a goose and kept it down there until closer to Christmas Day. She knew that he had wrung its neck with his bare hands, squeezing the life from its feathered body.

She looks down at the rabbit furs and can see where the nose once twitched and the tail bobbed, but there is no sign of a bullet wound. *Must've shot them right through the eye.*

The vendor's little hut is one of many crowded outside the market and it has a dusty, stale smell. In the gloom, Brenda's freckles are lost, and her sooty hair is like the dark smudges that the coal fire leaves on her father's hands.

'Ow do love. What've you brought me this time?' The man behind the desk has a stern face that looks as though it has been carved from Yorkshire stone. She hopes he is in a good mood – they don't have running water back home, but the electric bill is overdue, *again.*

Her father has been careful not to nick the skin when preparing the rabbits, peeling it from the pink flesh in one smooth movement. The pelts are a good quality with their speckled brown coats, and she knows they are worth more than a shilling each.

Market sounds drift into the room. Brenda can hear men shouting to drum up business and others haggling for a deal. Across from her, the vendor picks up the first pelt and runs his stubby fingers through the fur. It ripples beneath them and she knows it is soft to the touch. Brenda has carried them all the way here, through hilly streets and damp alleyways that never seem to dry out. She had passed children playing in the road and a group of men placing bets on a coin toss. Clothes had been hung out in every garden and a chill breeze rustled the laundry. When she got closer to the city, the sound of horse hooves clapping over cobblestones seemed to come from around every corner and she heard train whistles echoing off the high stone buildings.

The vendor's weathered face gives nothing away as he moves on to the second pelt which is a darker shade of brown. The fur is thicker too and she imagines it will fetch a higher price. The last pelt is the most promising of all, large enough to come from a hare but with a luxurious, thick coat that is soft as lamb's wool. Its meat had been dark and tender. Her mother had slaved over the hob to produce a thick stew, loaded with spring vegetables. When Brenda had helped wash their clothes in hot water from the stove, the smell of it had loitered in the air, making her mouth water.

'Aye, I'll give you one shilling for this,' the man points to the first pelt and her heart sinks a little, 'and two for each of t'others.' She hadn't noticed how thick the man's accent was before – most of the men and women who worked in the market had the same stony voices from shouting all day and smoking too many Woodbines. Unlike these people, her parents still had an Irish lilt, but Brenda's voice was thick with the local dialect.

'My father wants two for each.' She didn't like bartering, but there would be disappointment if she didn't at least try.

'He can always take his business elsewhere.'

Brenda knew the man would say this and had no reply. He places five silver coins into her hand and she stares at the grubby silhouette of Elizabeth II. She closes her palm, trapping the shillings inside.

The Chef

Charlie Crook

PIERRE WAS NOT LIKE MOST CHEFS. He had the plump physique, the hairy forearms, the toque blanche, but there was something *different* about him. By day, he worked in the kitchen; by night, he read cookbooks of the great masters: Joël Robuchon, Alain Ducasse, Martín Berasategui. He had studied the knife skills of Yoshiro Murata and the pastry of Jessica Préalpato. When he dreamt, it was of the perfect crème brûlée – a creamy custard base, crunchy caramelised sugar, top notes of vanilla and burnt molasses – or a sumptuous Chateaubriand – rare, pink flesh flavoured with thyme, tarragon and garlic butter – accompanied by duchesse potatoes and Béarnaise sauce.

Yes, if there was one thing that Pierre knew, it was his food.

But his talent didn't match his passion.

Customers would complain that his burgers were burnt or raw, the buns were soaking in grease, the coleslaw was lumpy, and everything tasted either bland or over-seasoned. Pierre knew how to cook: he'd memorised the recipes, the times, the amounts. But there was always something wrong in the application: he messed up the chopping, forgot to stir, flip or season. He'd put things in the oven, then forget about them. He'd tried setting timers but would then realise that the oven had never got up to temperature in the first place – he'd have to finish it by guesswork. No, he was not a good chef. Definitely not a great chef, as he had hoped.

But he still was a chef. *A noble calling*, he thought to himself, feeding meat into the grinder. Two parts beef chuck, one part brisket, one part fore rib – the perfect combination of richness of flavour and tenderness. He visual-

ised it cooking and thought of the word *succulent*. The meat came out in spirals of pink flesh, some whiter than others. The fatty rib hadn't mixed well. *No bother, I'll mix it by hand*. He whistled as he worked, squashing handfuls of raw meat into 6-ounce patties – or thereabouts – then placed the patties on sheets of greaseproof paper.

What next? What next? he asked himself. *Ah yes, the salad*. He grabbed some tomatoes from the fridge: large, irregular Costuluto Genovese shaped like small pumpkins. He'd grown them in his greenhouse (his manager would not sign off on the cost, despite its necessity). He cut them rather neatly into five-millimetre slices. Definitely not the worst chopping he had ever done. Then, he placed the tomato slices – now covered in residue of raw meat – into a stainless-steel container. Next came the salad leaves: a combination of Butterhead and Romaine lettuce, smooth and crunchy. And finally, the cheese: a thick slice of plain old mature cheddar (why alter perfection?).

Pierre waited three hours for his first customer, idly reading some old copies of *Fine Cooking* magazine. He read a particularly interesting article on the relationship between the different feeding methods and taste profiles of veal. When the door went, he almost fell off his stool. A workman came in, walking straight up to the counter.

'Good morning,' he said.

'Good morning,' replied Pierre. 'What can I get for you today?'

'Can I get a cheeseburger please mate?'

'Salad?' asked Pierre.

'Yeah, go on then.'

'One moment.' Pierre ran into the back of the restaurant. He was determined that this time he would make the *perfect burger*. He slapped a patty on the grill, seasoned it nicely, set a timer on his phone. When he flipped the patty, the crust was golden brown: proteins and sugars had combined together intricately into hundreds of different flavour compounds. He melted a thick slice of cheddar on top, bubbling away, all gooey and pale. The burger was cooked beautifully, and he placed it inside a lightly-toasted brioche bun. Then the special sauce was smeared with consummate skill

and he finished it all off with salad and four spears of pickled gherkin. He'd finally done it: *the perfect burger*. He placed it in front of the diner with a beaming smile and watched him eat from behind the counter.

'Good?' Pierre asked.

'Excellent,' said the customer, special sauce dripping down his high-vis vest.

There were three more customers that day, all went away satisfied. It was safe to say that this was the best day at work Pierre had ever had.

Imagine Pierre's surprise the following morning when his manager arrived. Four customers had called up with food poisoning.

'The final straw,' his manager had said. 'Good luck finding a job elsewhere!'

Pierre had failed culinary school three times and finally been handed his notice for his current employment. That was four jobs in six months. The word *failure* crept in every time he tried to think of something else. He thoroughly believed that being a chef was his purpose in life, his calling.

And that's how he ended up here: on top of Hornsey Lane Bridge. He had to walk past it every day on the way home. Now he thought about it, what was the point? He briefly considered all of the wonderful food there was, everything he'd miss. Then he remembered he could neither prepare nor afford the kind of food he desired.

Without hesitation, he fell forwards: tumbling, tumbling, tumbling – SPLAT.

Pierre's crumpled body spilt on the floor like spaghetti and meatballs: pale noodle flesh, minced meat, tomato sauce (one of the five mother sauces).

The crows had a great meal.

Red Robin

Dmitry Fedoseev

'I HAVEN'T BEEN OUT IN A FUCKING YEAR. Could we try *without* the notebook for once?'

Hannah looked up from her jottings, squinting through the pub gloom to bring my face into focus. I looked more haggard than Pete, though I wouldn't admit it. I looked old. Stubble crawled up the sides of my face like ivy, meeting an overgrown forest of fuzz beneath my ears. For two weeks of every month, I'd begun the night freshly showered and shaved and transformed into a mangy, sweaty wolf cub by the dawn. Tonight was the end of the cycle, so I didn't bother to look presentable.

'For *your* brother,' I said earlier on, 'do I even need to wear pants?'

That was unfair; Pete had tried. He was a big man, so he couldn't avoid the odd sweat blotch on his jacket. But at least he wore one. It got progressively wetter as he swayed back to our table, drinks in hand, and Hannah smiled for the first time that night. She was still on elderflower cordial – 'just in case' – while I'd been downing Newkie Brown since before Pete showed up. It made my breath smell like an exhaust pipe, but at least I wasn't talking. When he sat on the barstool and it gave the inevitable creak, Hannah didn't return my sneer. She just kept writing.

'Here,' Pete began, good-naturedly, 'you still working on that novel, Marco?'

'Not tonight.' I spat, vaguely in Hannah's direction. Pete looked but didn't interrupt her. Since childhood, she was always scrawling in her little black tomes, colouring and reshaping the minutiae of life. She couldn't help but create.

‘Well, I tell you what, I’ve been having a think –’

‘*You’ve* been having a think.’

He frowned. Unlike Hannah, Pete hadn’t inherited their mother’s subtle cornflower eyes; his were small and black, which made him look surly. But still sweet! Like the buttons on a stuffed teddy.

‘Yeah. I know neither of you do sci-fi, but you ever heard of ...’ he swirled his drink about with purpose – the gestural equivalent of an ellipsis – ‘the *superstring theory*?’ Pete quaffed his pint in one, as either punctuation or reward. His beard filled up from the top like he was aging in reverse.

‘Sure. I mean, I’ve heard of the public finance initiative and thalidomide and the Akkadian Empire. Doesn’t mean I know dick about it. Doesn’t mean you do either.’

‘I *do* actually,’ Pete puffed himself up in a slightly embarrassing way. He folded his arms, straightened his back, and lectured: ‘It is the theory that there are more dimensions in the universe than the ones we can perceive.’

‘There’s four, right!’ chirped Hannah. I shot her a look of absolute contempt and she withered like wet tissue paper. When had that become my default response? I used to encourage her to talk more and here I was, stamping on her throat. Not like it was her fault Pete turned out the way he did. Or maybe it was? He had been a little *discarded*, when she came. Left to ‘figure himself out’ with drugs and The Clash and an untempered sense of ego. Now he was finally turning his life around, training as a schoolteacher, and both Hannah and I agreed that was a positive thing.

‘So what are we,’ I smirked, ‘your little test monkeys? You gonna teach us all about the cosmos, Mister Wilcox, sir?’

Pete ignored me and glanced toward his sister. ‘Actually, there’s ten,’ he proclaimed with the flair of a magician pulling a rabbit from a hat. ‘Four’s just the one we live in, where there’s time as well as space. Shit bumps around and changes places and doesn’t just stand still like in a maths book. You follow?’

I took a hefty glug.

‘I follow.’

‘Well, in the fifth and sixth dimensions we start to see into *parallel* worlds, so long as they began the same time ours did,’ his eyes grew as wide as two Smarties to prepare us for his next shocking revelation. ‘So we might – get this – be having this exact same conversation, except I’m a fucking ostrich or something! And you’re a best-selling novelist and you and Hannah... well, you get the idea.’

‘Right,’ I replied, ready to say something snippy when I felt the tiny, almost imperceptible brush of Hannah’s fingers on mine. Small and warm, I always told her, like an infant’s. It brought me back to our night – and it was *our* night, so I just sipped the Dog and listened.

‘Anyway, what I was getting to is: *higher* dimensions. Time doesn’t branch out from the Big Bang, it might start before,’ his breath struggled to catch up to the speed of his proclamations, ‘fuck, it might start *after* and work its way backwards. Every infinite possibility, every condition and outcome that you can imagine... Say, what’s that character of yours called? You know, your gentleman thief –’.

‘Red Robin.’ I knocked my ale back in mimicry of the poor man opposite. ‘Good effort, Pete. I’ve only written *twelve* of the fucking things. But I suppose this had to be the universe where I’m sat talking to a fat alcoholic instead of slamming tiki drinks on a lounge chair somewhere. “*Oh d-d-did you know, Marco, that there’s a world where Red Robin’s real, and all his crimes and adventures are going on as we speak!*” Wow, what a concept!’

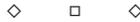
His eyes were more like peppercorns now. I could feel Hannah’s disappointment. Hear her shoulder sag as she wrote all this down.

‘No, Mark. What I was going to say was that there’s probably a world out there where I’m sat opposite Red Robin, talking about this tragic new character he wrote called Mark Mallory. He’s this struggling writer who just can’t seem to pick up a pen these days, and he figures out the reason he can’t write anything new is that he was somebody else’s fiction all along. How’s *that* for a concept?’

Between us, lined up like Skittles, was a row of Guinness tankards. Pete stared me down and through the glass his eyes finally reached a size and shape appropriate to his pudgy face: they were nebulae, expanding with

every half-formed proto-thought bursting into life like a new-born star. I reclined, bracing to fire back when I heard a sort of buzzing to my right, followed by an electronic wail. A high-pitched, robot infant scream. Hannah's writing hand shook violently, and I knew our time was up. We had an hour at most.

'Honestly Peter, if you're telling me there's some planet out there where I'm not stuck having this conversation, then I think I've got a flight to catch!'. I laughed, poorly, and motioned to leave before my goading bore fruit.



Pete understood why we couldn't give him a lift and took the night bus home. Outside, the inner-city smog had given way to a canopy of stellar light, illuminating the country roads as Hannah drove. Her right wrist buzzed intermittently now, the bracelet's way of counting down until 'showtime'. I slumped in the seat next to her, irked by how right Pete had been. How arrogant was it to assume that I – or anyone – could bring something new and original into this world? Pete had given us an out; a way to put up our hands and say, 'Sure we failed now, but maybe somewhere, sometime, we didn't or haven't or won't.'

Without a pen in her hand, Hannah was prone to clichés. She asked if I thought it was true – that all our pasts and futures are just some big cosmic lottery. I didn't pick her up on it. She saw her reflection in the rear-view mirror: still the same teenage countenance as the day we met; that same look of constant, nervous terror, like she was always waiting for Bambi to run out into the road. She was spindly too – paper-thin in the starlight. Only the acne scars offered any depth to her face, like impact craters on the ice caps of Mars. The injections should have made her fat and fertile, but she was a silent, shivering wisp. Not a trace of the fabled 'glow' in sight.

I knew what she was getting at though; she didn't need to say it. If time really isn't linear, then there must be a world where children come before their parents. All these planets, solar systems, packed with perpetual orphans. Our little girl or boy or whatever, just there, dropped onto a rock

and looking for someone to guide and love and nurture them. But they never find anyone because we haven't been born yet. Truly, a concept.

With her hands on the steering wheel, Hannah couldn't stop me reaching into the glovebox and pulling out her notebook. Every word 'Mark' had said looked blurrier than the rest, written in a stiff, sober, serif font. Little lines dripped off big letters, holding hands, no word distinguishable from its neighbour in the midnight dark. Except two of them, which the stars, in their infinite wisdom, chose to illuminate.

'I wish you wouldn't do this, you know,' I said to the rear-view mirror, 'write me like this – I would never call someone a "fat alcoholic". And I do not use that many exclamations! What's with all these italics, Jesus Christ, can't you just talk to me, like a *real* person? Do you know how much easier it'd be for me to work if we just... spoke?'

For months she'd been rutting fruitlessly with this spiteful, bitter ghost of her imagination – was it any wonder we couldn't conceive? Even her brother could see it: I don't exist. Not in my own right anyway, with thoughts and feelings and agency beyond this bloody notebook and the girl who hides behind it every moment we're not fucking for fear of seeing the disappointment on my face. But what if *that's* the fiction?

We both looked into the night sky hoping for divine affirmation, but got none. There were no comets flying overhead to punctuate the moment, no constellations or patterns to the pinpricks of light peering from impossibly far away. Just a steady beeping from Hannah's wrist, telling us her window was nearly expired. Right then, some version of Mark and Hannah Mallory were in this exact same spot, looking up at just the right angle to see their future neatly spelled out in celestial spheres. Arcane laws of physics bending matter into the shape of English letters: 'give up, try harder, she'll die young, he'll grow up to hate you.' Maybe only one of us would be around to read it, but not here. Neither of us was a spectre sitting in that car, but touchy-feely corporeal beings who were very much alive. Maybe somewhere out there our baby was lost and alone, crying out for us to find it, to wrap it up warm and protect it. But here, in this world, it would have to be the other way around.



Emie Grimwood

Is this how you fix yourself my dear?

White lines and warped pink skies,
will not fix the damage in your mind.
Compounds mask your pain,
as for a few hours you know what it is like
to say: 'I am okay.'

You are far from it though, aren't you?

Artificial happiness only lasts so long.
Then you know it will all go wrong.
Perhaps it's why you go back.
To stop yourself from the inevitable crash.

It will soon come.

It gets harder to say no,
the deeper you go.
All you want is to feel.
To you this happiness is real.

But it is far from it my darling.

Love Letters

Freya Howarth

The clock lets out a sigh of relief
as his eyes unfix from its direction.

12:15 exactly.

The chair boots him off
weary from the hours of his rest
a square imprint from his flesh
his thighs squished by his hard
stomach that still sprouts thin hair.

The postman floats down the street
wrapped in red

ignorant
of the company he brings.

A single 'hello' or 'you alright mate'
his only human interaction for the day.

Mail from subscriptions he can't remember
or bills to be paid
or love letters or birthday cards
a reminder to him of himself.

Before the letterbox can take its position
the front door is opened, ready to receive
a single letter today
but nonetheless
it's all he needs.

His sofa his cocoon once again
a smirk on his face returns
letter opener in hand.

A plastic window addressed to Mr John Bakewell

'That's me alright.'

We gaze through the same eyes, you and I

Philippa Kennedy

TWO FISTS BORED INTO HIS FACE REPEATEDLY. Dinnertime was always met with mum's protests that Christian should stop rubbing his eyes. Was it a nervous twitch perhaps or was there some type of itch deep within his skull that his two fists couldn't quite reach? It was continuous. We learnt that if we saw him doing it, we were to pull at his fists and tell him to stop. He learnt that it was best to rub his eyes in the shower or in the privacy of his room, avoiding dinner times and family events. His blood-shot eyes always gave away that the rubbing hadn't stopped but as long as he didn't actively do it in front of us there was little we could do to stop it.

January rolled around and Christian's surgery was booked in.

'It's better to do both eyes at once,' the doctor reasoned, and it was only after that we really understood why. Being completely conscious while needles are inserted into your unblinking eyeball is not an experience anyone would willingly submit themselves to more than once. Many not at all if they knew the true extent of the surgery, but going blind seemed reason enough to go through with the doctor's experimental treatment. Re-mortgaging the house wasn't even talked about when the NHS waiting time was revealed to my parents. It was done. In the time it took for two hundred elderly patients to have their cataracts removed my seventeen-year-old brother would go blind. Not partially or slightly or a bit. Blind.

I remember laying on my mums' bed in the aftermath, the curtains pulled tightly closed and my brother swaddled in a duvet like a newborn. The record player was to the left of the bed continuously churning out Tracy Chapman until my main memory of the entire event was clouded in the

lyrics of 'Fast Car' and 'Behind the Wall'. In that week there was a lot of screaming and then a lot of drug-induced hallucinations when my brother would have conversations with the other chairs in the room. Sometimes he'd try to escape and be hauled back into bed by dad, the door tightly pulled behind him and the curtains repositioned so that no light could enter the room. My main memory of that week is standing in the hallway leading my little sister away from the hysterics and repeating over and over again that things would be okay until my voice intermingled with Chapman's to fill the space.

And that's why we gaze through the same eyes, you and I. Years later when I filled out the details for my provisional license a tab popped up to fill out a donor card. The initial page allows you to opt in and out for certain organs. The bulk of my body didn't really bother me. Why would I care if somebody else has a kidney or a lung from my corpse? They seem so inanimate and unfeeling within my body as if they weren't really parts of me other than the basic function of keeping me alive. Yet when I scrolled down and corneas popped up, I paused. The feeling of giving away my perception of sight seemed to be giving up a major part of who I was. Hazel eyes with flecks of gold that chose the littlest golden pup in the litter that licked my primary school hands and rosy cheeks with his big red lolloping tongue. Or the eyes that fixed upon the baby doll cradled in mum's arms as her pinkish lips erupted into a wail and her porcelain skin bunched up around her own flecked hazel eyes. My memories were shrouded in sight and colour and light and for you to receive that with no knowledge of me, well that was too much. You were asking too much of me.

But in the back of my mind, haunting and plaguing me was the thought that if Christian's surgery ever failed, he too would rely on someone giving up their self-importance and ownership of flesh so that he, a seventeen-year-old boy could see again.

So, forgive me for my reservations in passing my flesh to you because you and I gaze through the same eyes of suffering. You are my brother, the person blinded by their own genetic default and I am the one who retains no flesh of their own.

Elephants

Georgie Palfrey

We don't talk enough of dreams
and their strangeness.
How we dance through dimensions
a thousand times a second

where clouds turn to dust turn to pins
that slice our feet,
and nestled desires
metamorphosize our cruellest fears,
a butterfly born backwards.

Behind the twitching whites
the dream master lingers
performing his shadow puppet ballet.
He flips the world like a beetle
legs flailing, victims
of his spindly fingers.

In this world the colours are searing
blotchy, epileptic,
at times we want to drown in them
until they're drowning us:
anchors on our ankles
screaming, muted mouths.

The elephants on my bedsheets remain oblivious,
immobile in their delicate threads,
nursing their own resentments
of entrapment.

Nobody knows what I'm seeing
and neither do I
three minutes after waking, when I go to make toast.

tenancy

Beth Summerfield

the missing chunk of plaster,
sandstone peeking through, rough
texture encircled by painted purple
faded now to blue. like newspaper
headlines of the 1980s, whispering
beyond laminate graves, each
creak of a floorboard or tiny indent
where a picture frame once waved.

see, the crumbs of hacked cement speak
of bike handles pushed too hard. and
the layers of shades of lilac tell of
homebase hue swatch cards.
the prints of ink you never read share
stories you cannot hear. their
voices stepped on, painted over,
filled in by a trowel smear.

so carve your name in the bookcase
with your toothpick expertise. leave the
atlas of your fingerprints mapped
upon the mantelpiece. before
you unwind the metal ring to
set your trinket free
be sure to sign the guestbook
before handing back the keys

Amen,

Emily Grace Tabern

MY EXPERIENCE WITH EDUCATION officially began at St. Julie's RC Primary School, just two streets away from my family home. That is the home that we moved to specifically to guarantee a place at the St. Helens Primary School, ranked highest by Ofsted six years running, despite having previously lived just fifteen minutes away. There I spent my early years blissfully exchanging dinosaur figures in the sand pit, tracing dot to dot letters with felt tips and of course, accumulating an impressive mental hymnbook of songs about donkeys, some fire, 'his hands' and one particularly jazzy number about midnight in Bethlehem that my friend and I still whip out each Christmas.

Every Tuesday and Thursday morning, my class would venture down the path that separated the infant and junior playgrounds, hand in hand with our chosen partners (mine and Daisy Bradbury's shared enthusiasm for choir club united us consistently), to gather for school assembly. We would gladly belt out our musical repertoire along with accompanying hand actions that deflected from the fact that at age four we didn't quite have the capacity to grasp the subject matter of the songs. I soon realised that in amongst the vigorous clapping and feet stamping, each song would without fail reference at least one member of a seemingly key group: Christ, God, The Father, The Lord, The Holy Spirit, Jesus or in some cases, the rather ominous sounding *Him*.

From what I could tell, this Jesus fellow seemed to be a pretty friendly figure. My first formal introduction to him came in the form of colourful illustrations in a copy of *The Children's Bible* kept in the reception classroom.

We learnt about his works through the medium of story, like fairy tales of goodness from a time so long ago that not even our greying headmaster could remember, all the while being assured that he was in fact our friend. According to my teachers, this strange older man with whom I had never spoken, nor had I seen outside of a picture book, was alleged to be my best friend (of course I couldn't tell Daisy this) and he would always be there to listen and take care of us when we needed him. Despite being somewhat contradictory to the traditional 'stranger danger' message that they were simultaneously trying to enforce at this point, to my little primary school self, the image of Jesus as universal companion of omnibenevolent nature actually seemed to be not only perfectly reasonable, but frankly very pleasant, and so our relationship began.

I suppose I just assumed it was the standard for children across the world to pray at the beginning and end of the school day and that Holy Communion in Year Two was just a necessity like your SATS tests but with a prom-style dress fitting and a Costco cake afterwards. After all, each year we would all take part in Operation Christmas Child, sending shoeboxes filled with toys and treats with the message of Christ and goodwill to children living in other countries, so all the Jesus talk must have been a universal experience. Why else would there be a prayer card in each box? I had been reasonably content during those seven years of biblical-themed crafts and annual nativity plays.

It was only when I was forcefully tossed into the disturbing realms of high school by the name of De La Salle that the mask of ubiquitous Christian values began to slip. When I first arrived in my oversized blazer and knee-length skirt, keenly flaunting the red stripe on my tie to represent my new house team, Bardsey, I was naturally eager to get as involved as I could with what the place had to offer. At that point (before the Ofsted onslaught of 2013 to the present) the school still held an official performing arts certificate so I was ready to finally live out my High School Musical dreams, as well as joining the STEM club because I was yet to realise my deep disdain and overall incompetency for the science subjects. But of course, I would also find time to be part of the chaplaincy group that we'd paid a visit to on

open evening.

The school chaplain, Anne-Marie, had handed out sunflower seeds to everyone and I'd recognised a boy from the class below me in St. Julie's singing along to one of the hymns from church. At the beginning of the week, my friends and I had agreed to all pack lunches for the Friday and go sign up for what had seemed like a perfectly nice lunchtime club. By the time Friday rolled around however, there had been a change of tune throughout the group. Chatter in the hallways of 'the god squad' and 'bible bashers' had begun to infiltrate our own vocabularies and by the week's end we'd found ourselves sat in the lunch hall with cardboard canteen pizzas, in unanimous agreement that we would find something else to do with our time. It was at this point that I started to realise that high school popularity wasn't quite as simple as having glittery gel pens and hosting the best sleepover party, and that it was probably for the best if I mouthed along to the songs in assembly from then on.



Carmel was a bit of a different story. There, religion peacefully stepped aside, fading into near irrelevancy while the college focused more on increasing our political awareness, bringing in guest speakers and supporting the student petition to have *The Sun* banned from the local shop. Officially, it was a Catholic college set on embodying Catholic values and being an inclusive community (and willingly accepting funding from the Archdiocese), but realistically, only around half of the students had been baptised, and even fewer of those had any fragment of actual faith left in them.

No longer was Religious Studies compulsory, meaning we were exempt from watching modernised short films about various parables and uncomfortably listening to Emily Ashton's Islamophobic rants. In fact, my English Literature's teacher's blasphemous humour quickly became the norm, making jokes about expecting a crusade from the chaplaincy every time he insulted the odd, true to scale crosses that appeared around campus without warning. This was a stark change from the time that Mr Holland stormed off to sit in his car when someone made a dig about Catholic

priests around the campfire on the Duke of Ed expedition (I'm sure you can imagine the subject matter).

It seemed that the loose take on Christianity and religion as a whole that came with the shift in school coincided with the changing attitudes in the world around me. With the help of Twitter and dozily listening to the news during breakfast, I was becoming increasingly aware of the unavoidably messy relationship between the political and sacred. I had always been taught the importance of empathy – we all know the whole 'love thy neighbour' shtick – and in this sense, at least in my mind, it had always been a given that this applied to anyone and everyone. Of course, I was well aware of the traditional arguments used by devout evangelicals seeking to justify their homophobia (you don't get an A* in GCSE Religion for nothing), but these had always felt easily dismissible. Having had a pretty relaxed religious upbringing by the standards of many, the majority of those around me were, as far as I was aware, fairly liberal-minded about these concepts.

However, with the increasingly loud right-wing ideology bleeding into our news from America and plenty of lunch times spent discussing Louis Theroux documentaries, my perception of Christianity began to shift from merely a trivial part of daily life that I was slowly forgetting, into something that left a bad taste – and I don't think I was the only one. The active attacking of marginalised groups that friends of mine were very much a part of in the name of God caused new feelings of disdain. I found myself rolling my eyes at the sight of biblical quotes in Instagram bios and hesitating for longer than expected over the religious belief selection on the UCAS application form. By the end of college, I'd long since become disconnected from the idea of the church on a whole, though this wasn't something that had ever particularly worried me. Around Year Ten, when the majority of my louder classmates were happy to express that they didn't *give a shit about any of this Jesus stuff* and didn't see why they should have to learn about it, my teacher had assured us that one day we might change our minds and find our way back again, in the same way that he had. I think that fifteen-year-old me might have taken this to be a sort of escape clause for the whole unconditional devotion thing, reassured that if I allowed myself to neglect

faith while I was busy doing my own growing then I could always slip back into God's good books down the line with no hard feelings. But as I'm approaching twenty, the clock is ticking and I don't think I can recall the last time I went to mass for any reason other than to get that warm fuzzy feeling on Christmas Eve, counting the pews then the lights then the bricks to keep myself from getting bored. The rosary beads that I was gifted for my Holy Communion in Year Two that used to sit beside my bed have accumulated a thick layer of dust (not that I ever actually understood their use in the first place), and the slight twinge of guilt that used to come with dressing as a fallen angel on Halloween evaporated a few recycled costumes ago. So, when the question of 'so anyone religious or anything then?' came up when meeting my first-year flatmates I found myself offering little more than a shrug, because in all honesty, I'm not too sure anymore.

Thrillseeker

Mariella Walker

EXT. CLEARING IN THE WOODS - NIGHT

EDWARD, mid 20s, is pacing next to the parked car. He is dishevelled, and has a slightly wild look in his eyes. We can hear him mumbling to himself.

MARGOT, early 20s, very shrewd, is leaning against the car, deep in thought.

EDWARD

Oh my god... Oh my god oh my
god.

MARGOT

Calm down.

Margot begins to busy herself with something in the boot of the car. Edward's breathing becomes erratic.

MARGOT

We've done nothing wrong. Ok?
Look at me.

Margot grabs Edward's face. Her fingernails are crusted with dirt. And something that looks like blood. A

BEAT.

THRILLSEEKER

EDWARD

Ok...ok.

Edward tries to calm himself.

Margot and Edward are silhouetted against the car headlights, the only source of light in the clearing.

A twig snaps in the distance and Edward whirls, only to be faced with a wall of skeletal trees and darkness. Any control Edward had over his panic is immediately lost.

In the distance, dogs can be heard barking.

AERIAL SHOT of the forest as a team of police with dogs begin to scour the area, working in a pincer motion.

They begin to enclose Edward and Margot, unbeknownst to the two.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVE TV STUDIO - 1983

A GAMESHOW HOST strolls onto stage. The audience goes wild.

Next to him, five contestants stand behind podiums, all but one radiating nervous energy: CAMERA WHIPS UP AND ZOOMS IN ON: Margot.

Even the obnoxious shoulder pads and halo of permed hair can't hide her trepidation.

Margot stands at the far left of the stage, uncharacteristically uncomfortable at the sight of the screaming crowd and harsh lights.

On another podium, Edward sports a mullet and is lapping up the waves of applause.

MARIELLA WALKER

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GAMESHOW HOST

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to...

AUDIENCE (O.S)

FIND! YOUR! FORTUNE!

SUPERIMPOSE: 'FIND YOUR FORTUNE!' (80s style graphics)

GAMESHOW HOST

Tonight, we'll see five new
thrill seekers battle it
out for the chance to win a
whopping one hundred thousand
pounds! But there can only be
one winner on... FIND YOUR
FORTUNE!

The crowd begins to cheer again.

GAMESHOW HOST CONT'D

But first of all, let's see who
our first contestant is...

Gameshow host walks to a giant, glitter-covered wheel
and spins it. It lands on Margot's name.

GAMESHOW HOST

Let's give a warm welcome to
our first thrill seeker...
MARGOT!

BACK TO:

EXT. CLEARING IN THE WOODS - NIGHT

Margot opens the boot of the car. We cannot see what
is inside. She looks stony-faced.

THRILLSEEKER

MARGOT

We need to bury this.

EDWARD

What?

The sounds of footfall and barking become louder and louder.

Biographies

Year One

SEAN BARTON graduated in Law from the University of Leeds in 1997. Having been a lawyer for twenty years, he has taken a career break and is studying English Literature with Creative Writing. Sean has a particular interest in writing poetry, but he is open to all forms of literary expression. In contrast to writing in a legal environment, he particularly enjoys the aesthetic and emotional rewards that come with creative writing.

SAM BIRD comes from a filmmaking background, writing and directing a number of his own short films during his time spent in London. Moving to Leeds to concentrate on writing, Sam is particularly interested in families and how they operate in the modern world. Some of his other interests include film criticism, bouldering and close-up magic. Sam is currently studying English Literature with Creative Writing.

EMMA CLARKE was born and raised in Vancouver, Canada. In addition to writing, she enjoys reading, drawing, listening to music and spending time with her friends and family. Her favourite books are *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Slaughterhouse Five*, and *Wuthering Heights*.

JESSINNA DASHI has always had a love of books that has now translated into a love for creative writing. She has a love for photography, film and would also like to pursue work in the production of film and theatre in the future.

DAISY DAVIES has been writing since she was in primary school, winning the award for English and not stopping there. She is currently studying English with Creative Writing at University of Leeds. Her favourite authors are Terry Pratchett and Lemony Snicket.

JADE FAKOKUNDE grew up in North London, attending school a ten-minute walk from her home. Growing up, she lived with her aunts from the age of two, greatly influencing her perspective on childhood, parenting and thus her writing. Much of her writing also focuses on the social and political aspects of growing up as a black girl going to predominantly white schools, prompted by her study of Government and Politics at A-level. Jade is currently studying English Literature with Creative Writing at the University of Leeds.

OLIVIA FRANKLAND grew up in Leeds in a working-class family. She attended a disadvantaged school and left without any GCSEs. At the age of twenty-five she returned to education and achieved the highest grades in her GCSEs and A-levels. Now studying English Literature with Creative Writing, her passion for the subject continues to grow exponentially. She is currently working on her first novel and a collection of poems.

ANNA HARMAN comes from Hull and chooses to talk and write about it more than one might consider necessary. She hopes her tendency to rant about politics and emotionally overshare in her writing will one day excite and entertain anyone who chooses to read it. Her favourite writer is still Jacqueline Wilson despite years of wider reading and she often aspires to become a Northern Phoebe Waller-Bridge.

SARAH HEALEY grew up in Cheshire and much of her writing focuses on childhood experiences, living amongst nature and growing up in a small town. Sarah's passion for writing started at an early age after reading the Harry Potter books. She loves creating immersive worlds for her readers and is currently interested in crafting poetry.

CASPER HOWELL grew up in Derby, where he felt torn by negative and positive influences. Whilst occasionally finding himself in trouble, he values these experiences as learning curves and is proud of his personal development. He has always enjoyed opportunities to be creative, particularly through writing, and much of his work incorporates visual imagery which often has metaphorical importance. He finds inspiration in family issues and relationships, social injustices, music, film, literature and the world around him.

KATYA JAKOB-WHITWORTH grew up in a very small and remote village in Cumbria. She found that the lack of things to do, paired with the beautiful scenery surrounding her, allowed her imagination to flow and inspire her to release creative energy through the practice of the arts. She loves to draw and write, putting her myriad fantasies onto paper. Her passion for writing arose when she began reading creative pieces on forums online, and she soon realised that she also has a love for taking control of characters and plots, while entertaining readers.

SULA LEVITT grew up in Bath and from an early age has enjoyed reading and writing and has since developed her passion further. Her main focus has been poetry, but studying English and Creative Writing has led her to experiment with new forms and styles. Other interests of hers include music, languages and travelling.

TAYLOR MANNING grew up primarily in North Florida and developed a love of writing at a young age. Continuing her writing into her later teens and falling in love with authors such as Mary Shelley, eventually she pursued writing at university. Her work often reflects personal experiences and darker themes. Taylor is currently studying English Literature with Creative Writing at the University of Leeds.

CAITLIN MCKAY is from a working-class background in Manchester. Her fascination with the art of writing developed along with her passion for illustration. She is inspired by authors Richard Adams, Peter S. Beagle and Stephen King. She is currently working on a book series that depicts her own original characters and their world.

AARON NICHOLS's passion for writing has been present ever since his youth, setting his sights on being an author since he was seven. He has recently also taken to poetry during his first semester at Leeds. His Drama and Classical Civilisation A-levels reflect his interests in history and theatre, while his other hobbies include cycling, weightlifting, trampolining, and spending time with friends.

LENA PANAYOTOVA is an aspiring writer. In secondary school she was introduced to Bulgarian and Russian poets, who have played a major part in the forming of her writing style. She is fascinated by all styles of writing, but her main goal at the moment is to find a way to link both of her main interests in writing and philosophy. Lena likes thinking about different ways to convey her reflection on existential questions through creative writing.

CHARLIE PARKMAN spent most of his life living in South London before moving to Leeds. Charlie's preferred form of literary expression is poetry, particularly with a coherent rhyme. This stems from a strong passion for music and appreciation of intricate lyrical choices and structure to songs. Some of his favourite artists are Renounced, Sanction and Slipknot. When he's not writing, Charlie enjoys walking in nature, appreciating theatre and cinema, seeing bands and spending time with his housemates. Charlie studies English Literature with Creative Writing.

CAMERON PATTISON grew up in Leeds, but from what he writes about, you would have thought he grew up either in space or a parallel universe. And yet his main aim in everything he writes is to capture something

human. He loves sci-fi and adventure novels as well as stories trying to say something deeper, and he'd love nothing more than for his first novel, *A View of Death*, to be able to do just that.

JADE PRINCE grew up in Essex but most certainly does not sound like Gemma Collins. Her creative writing began aged five and has continued all the way to university degree level. Jade dedicates her time to watching copious amounts of films, reading and listening to records. She is currently writing her first script, *The Age of the Understatement*.

HELEN ROBINSON is a first year BA English Literature with Creative Writing student from York. An avid reader and writer since childhood, she decided to explore this as an adult through further study. She currently enjoys writing short stories and poetry but is excited to experiment in other forms throughout her degree. She also has a keen interest in writing in different genres and would particularly like to explore science fiction and horror in her future work.

CHARLOTTE SMITH grew up in the natural beauty of Helsinki, Finland, thus much of her writing centres around nature and the influences which it can have on physical and mental health. In her free time Charlotte plays guitar, writes blog posts, films creative informative videos for YouTube, reads philosophical literature and practices yoga. Charlotte is currently studying English and Creative Writing.

NIKOLA TSONCHEV is a student from Bulgaria. He decided to study creative writing after participating in numerous regional and national competitions. He is interested in all things technology, canines, and is a raging climate alarmist. Nikola is currently procrastinating on his first poetry collection, *Introduction to Computer Systems*.

As a queer nonbinary person, REESE TUNSTALL finds their passion for writing in their love for the LGBT+ community. They have been writing

their whole life, and their poetry featured as the 3rd place winner in the 2019 Lancaster Writing Award. Currently they are deeply inspired by music, books, and anything their friends have been writing recently.

ABI UNDERHILL has been a keen writer for as long as she can remember. Some of her favourite novels to read are period dramas and she hopes to one day publish one of her own. Abi's favourite writers include Lewis Carroll, JD Salinger, Wilfred Owen and Stacey Halls.

TIAGO VENTURA is originally from Portugal, having moved to the United Kingdom six years ago with no previous knowledge of the language. He fell in love with the language and literature. His main focuses are fiction writing that is out of the norm and reflects political, social and personal concerns. Tiago is currently studying English Literature with Creative Writing.

JADE WHITEHOUSE is a Manchester-born student living in Leeds. Her writing reflects on past experiences, memories and dreams. Her desire to write was prominent from a young age. All of her A-levels – Art, English Literature and Psychology – are still present in her life as she maintains interests in painting and researching psychology, which also inspires her writings. Jade is studying English Literature with Creative Writing.

Year Two

RUBY CARBONELL was born and raised in South East London and is currently in her second year studying English Literature with Creative Writing at the University of Leeds. Her writing tends to explore a sense of self and belonging, mainly through the forms of playscripts and poetry, yet she is starting to experiment with other forms such as screenplays. Her interests outside of writing include music, film and completing BuzzFeed quizzes.

FINLAY CHARLESWORTH specialises in short fiction and playwriting. He was born in Livingston, Scotland, and grew up near Cambridge before moving to Leeds in 2018. In the next year, he plans to take a break from his studies to complete a placement year in communications and the arts, while continuing to work towards his debut short story collection and completing his first play, *A Gravedigger*.

E.J. COATES is a poet and author from Leeds. His short fiction has been published and illustrated by Endless Ink and his poetry has appeared in *Poetry and Audience*. He is currently working on a conceptual poetry project which will be published by SOX in Summer 2020.

CHARLIE CROOK is a writer from a working-class background. He has worked in gyms, warehouses and call centres. His first play, *Meathead*, has just been staged by Leeds University's Open Theatre Group and he has upcoming short fiction about to be published in *Scribble Magazine*. His favourite authors are Martin McDonagh and Philip Ridley.

DMITRY FEDOSEEV is a Russian-born writer hailing from Lancashire. His literary interests range from transgressive fiction to native folklore, and he is currently working on a stage adaptation of a Soviet sci-fi novel. When not writing short autobiographies, he studies English Literature with Creative Writing at the University of Leeds.

EMIE GRIMWOOD grew up in a small town in Suffolk in a good family home. A great deal of her writing comes from dealing with problems in her teenage years, and she has always used writing as a coping mechanism and tool to help other people. She published a poetry anthology when she was seventeen. She is now studying English Literature with Creative Writing at the University of Leeds and is exploring with different forms of literature, as well as writing her first novel.

FREYA HOWARTH grew up in Oldham, Greater Manchester, and proudly so, as much of her writing echoes the scenery that she has grown up in. During her exploration of Drama at A-Level, her passion for writing emerged. Freya is currently in her Second Year studying English Literature and Creative Writing and through this has explored poetry, prose and memoir writing. Reading, together with film and music, fill her spare time and are great sources of inspiration. She is currently writing *The Party*, a play based on Andy Shauf's album of the same name.

PHILIPPA KENNEDY grew up in Kent as the second child of three. Her passion for writing developed in her early teens when she won an internal school prize for a piece celebrating Amnesty International. Her History and Art A-levels reflect her wider interest in the Humanities and Arts, and she counts diary-keeping, sketching, and climbing as hobbies. Philippa is currently studying English Literature with Creative Writing at the University of Leeds.

GEORGIA PALFREY is a BA English Literature and Creative Writing student from Oxford. She has been writing since she was a child and would fill notebooks with elaborately complicated stories in almost illegible handwriting. She enjoys all forms of writing, though has a special preference for poetry. Some of her favourite writers are Adrienne Rich, Emily Dickinson, Donna Tartt and Sarah Waters.

BETH SUMMERFIELD is a BA English Literature with Creative Writing student from the West Midlands, currently spending her second year at university exploring the genres of short fiction, poetry and screenplay. She is particularly enjoying working with rhythm, metaphor and voice to convey social critique and lyricism through her writing.

EMILY GRACE TABERN grew up in St. Helens, Merseyside, before making the move to Leeds to pursue a degree in English Literature with Creative Writing. In the last year she has enjoyed developing her mem-

oir writing as well as recently experimenting with screenplay. Alongside writing, Emily's interest in the arts is reflected in her love for dance as an active member of her university's dance society, spending her free time performing and competing.

MARIELLA WALKER is a second year BA English Literature with Creative Writing student. She lives near the Peak District and enjoys walking with her dog.

Editorial

KIMBERLY CAMPANELLO is Lecturer in Creative Writing, Programme Leader for the BA English Literature with Creative Writing, and a member of the Poetry Centre at the University of Leeds. In early March she represented the UK in Munich at *Klang Farben Text: Visual Poetry for the 21st Century*, a three-day visual poetry festival inspired by the international concrete poetry movement of the 1950s and 60s.

BRETT GREATLEY-HIRSCH is University Academic Fellow in Textual Studies and Digital Editing at the University of Leeds. When not studying sixteenth- and seventeenth-century books, he is supervising a small herd of Guinea pigs or playing uilleann pipes.

