

TENTER HOOK

*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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Foreword

WELCOME TO THE FIFTH volume of *Tenter Hook*. This issue marks a change in direction for the journal, which now exclusively showcases writing by Level 3 students on the BA English Literature with Creative Writing. We are proud to showcase this sample of writing from a cohort who overcame several hurdles caused by the COVID-19 pandemic over the course of their studies. I was delighted to see this group come together despite these challenges through weekly peer support sessions to workshop their final year projects, offering constructive and generous critique in a community of writers. Pieces in this year's anthology range from experimental poetry to script, creative non-fiction to fiction, demonstrating our students' wide range of interests and talents. Well done to the Class of 2023!

I am grateful to my Creative Writing colleagues at the University of Leeds who taught and/or supervised students on this programme in 2022–23: Kimberly Campanello, Sarah K. Perry, Jay Prosser, Jess Richards, Ross Raisin, and John Whale. I am particularly grateful to Brett Greatley-Hirsh for design and layout, and to Amy Penrose for generously sharing her artwork that appears on the cover of this issue. Special thanks are due to Audrey Seligmann, Jasmine Morgan, Amy Williams, and Uta Tsukada Bright for acting as Editorial Assistants.

These pieces set a high standard for Leeds's next generation of final-year students in Creative Writing. I hope you enjoy reading, and look forward to working with future Level Three cohorts on developing extracts from their creative writing projects for publication in *Tenter Hook*.

Dr Caitlin Stobie

Programme Leader for the BA English Literature with Creative Writing

L'chaim – A Toast to Life

Alex Affleck

Dear Felix,

You are so lucky to have two loving parents, grandparents, a plethora of cousins and even a great grandma. She has a wonderful Nigerian history that she will teach you as you grow up, and your dad, Andrew, will make sure you know all about your African-Caribbean background. It is up to me to introduce you to your Jewish legacy, which is part of the rich and complex heritage that makes you, my first grandchild, the unique person you are.

When I was a little girl, my grandma Greenman was a strong presence in my life. During the 33 years after my grandpa Maurice died, she presided over her large, ever-expanding family. We were all in awe of her. She lived through the industrial revolution and its reverberations; the Boer War and two World Wars, including the horrors of the Holocaust. She used to tell us about coming to England on the boat from Bialystock when she was only four. When she married Grandpa, she had long auburn hair that she could sit on; she said he used to love brushing it for her. She was a fine needlewoman, making all her own clothes. By the time I knew her, her sewing skills were confined to constant and meticulous embroidery of tablecloths and pictures. You have seen mine in pride of place in our dining room.

However, Grandpa Maurice's history, who died 11 years before I was born, is sketchy at best. What I do know is that he came to England from Dvinsk in Latvia, then part of the Russian Empire, in 1891 alone, with nothing but the clothes on his back. He had learned to speak English at school

but, although clever, as a Jew he was excluded from university. Under the May Laws, imposed by Tsar Alexander III following the pogroms of the 1880s, the crushing restrictions that were placed upon the Jewish population forced them to emigrate in droves. Over a million and a half left for the United States alone in the last two decades of the 19th century, with hundreds of thousands sailing to South Africa, England and other parts of Europe. I remember my dad telling me that many boarded boats without knowing where they were headed, such was their desperation to leave. I picture Maurice arriving in Liverpool, walking down the gangplank onto the dockside, his only possessions a Russian passport and a scrap of paper with a handwritten name and address. Some contact, a friend of a friend of his family, I suppose, put him up. In time, he accumulated a few old chairs and a horse-and-cart, eventually establishing a furniture shop in Aintree, the area of Liverpool in which he settled. His first wife, Fanny, died after they had been married only three years; she was 25. He married Annie Rubin, my grandma, in 1900; he was 26 and she was 20.

Their first child, my aunty Lillie, was famous for her meringues. She hosted lavish family afternoon teas every Saturday for whoever was passing through Liverpool; there were always unexpected visitors and all were welcome. I can taste the meringues even now: just the right mix of crisp shell with slightly gooey interior; great mounds of sweetness encasing soft whipped cream. She's also renowned for the 'Greenman bosom' which, unfortunately, most of the women in my family have inherited. (Technically it should probably be called the 'Rubin bosom', as Grandma was also fairly well endowed, but somehow it never has been). Lillie was quite short with skinny legs and, when she walked into a room, she was preceded by this magnificent, scaffolded chest. We girls marvelled that she managed to stay upright.

The two boys that followed, Uncle Leslie and my father, Victor (your great grandpa), were sandwiched between two splendid women: Lillie, of the meringue and the bosom, and little Ruby. A natural storyteller, Aunty Ruby kept a diary from the age of 15 until shortly after her 96th birthday when, sadly, she became incapacitated by the first of a series of mini

strokes. Any family dispute that arose was easily settled by reference to 'the diary', which detailed both her everyday life and her insightful reflections on society. She could also be relied upon to recount wonderful tales of our myriad relatives, spread throughout the UK and America. Growing up I often stayed with her on visits to London and loved hearing her talk about her memories. She was in constant touch with family near and far, and you never knew who you would meet at her house. Like Lillie, she was hospitality incarnate. My cousin had the foresight, during her 90s, to record conversations with his mum, prompting her with questions about her forebears. I am lucky enough to have copies of some of both her diaries and the recordings. You might like to listen to them with me one day.

Curiously, there are fewer stories about Grandpa than his other family members. Although Maurice left his family in Dvinsk, they joined him in Liverpool within a few years – all except his older brother Solomon, who went to America. Records on Ancestry.com show their birth name as Greenman, the same as mine, although that is likely to be an Anglicised version of the original, possibly something like Groenmann. The American branch of the family changed their name further when Solomon's son Max, with his wife Marie, opened a shop in New York. The story goes that the man who painted the sign above the door accidentally missed out the letter 'm'. This presented them with a dilemma: they couldn't afford to have the sign repainted and the sign painter refused to accept responsibility. After much deliberating they opted for the pragmatic decision and henceforth all my American relatives have been 'Greenans'.

Maurice's father, Lazarus (what a name!), is recorded as having died in Liverpool in 1898, only a few short years after emigrating. Poor Great Grandma Rose was left to provide for her four daughters as best she could. She ran a grocery shop in Brownlow Hill. Two of the daughters, Annie and Dora, worked with her. They will have spoken to each other and to their customers in Yiddish, having little English. Annie settled and was happy, but Dora was miserable and restless. Still a teenager, she ran away to London – as far as I can work out, around the time of her father's death. The family had no means to track her down. A few years later, my grandma

and her sister-in-law (both coincidentally Annie Greenmans) made a trip to London for the planned coronation of Edward VII. They had somehow acquired an address where it was suggested Dora might be living and resolved to seek her out. For two inexperienced young women, to travel alone around London must have been a major adventure.

The way Aunt Ruby tells it, when they found the house, they were amazed to have the door opened by a uniformed maid. Dora was indeed there, with 'two or three babies', a cook and a wet nurse, living in the lap of luxury as a 'kept woman'. You will think it funny when I tell you that, in those 'olden days', it was considered scandalous to have a baby without being married. Information about the children's father, Max Margowski, is vague; he visited sporadically, each time leaving Dora with another baby on the way, before vanishing again for a while. It has been suggested he had business interests in Guatemala that kept him away, although that has never been confirmed. He finally settled in America, sending for her to join him, which she did in 1916, along with her 12 children. She proceeded to have four more babies, making a grand total of 16! Aunt Ruby recalled her visiting England in about 1932; she describes a very glamorous woman with long, dangly earrings and a cigarette holder, speaking still-broken English with an American accent. Aunt Ruby was about 13 at the time of the visit and says she was 'thrilled to bits' with her, especially on learning that she had earned a living selling flowers outside a hospital in Hollywood. This, for the young, star-struck Ruby, was the very pinnacle of romance.

These stories bring my ancestors to life for me, as I hope they might for you, Felix. I can picture Grandpa Maurice traipsing the dingy Liverpool streets, trying to sell his bits of junk. I don't need to imagine his horse-and-cart; we have the photo. I can picture his mother in her shop, gossiping with her customers. I can picture Max and Marie in New York, staring in dismay at their newly painted, misspelled sign, before shrugging and resigning themselves to changing their name. I met them once; they visited England when I was little, they were delightful. Marie gave me a dollar note, which I still have. I can certainly picture Great Aunt Dora, first sitting in her finery in her smart London home and, later, with her exotic dangly

earrings and cigarette holder. These images mix with my own memories and add to the richness of my inheritance. I love being part of such a large and vibrant family and feel grateful that we have had it so easy, compared with the struggles of our migrant ancestors. We have never faced persecution, other than the occasional snide slur, nor had to leave our homeland to reinvent ourselves in a strange place.

My Jewishness has always sat a little uncomfortably with me. I'm fiercely proud of it but I found the close-knit Liverpool community claustrophobic. It was probably inevitable that I would 'marry out', but it was difficult confronting my father with it. In time, though, he became very fond of David, your grandpa. Now my sisters' children have partners and children of their own: all your cousins. They host the Jewish Festivals, alternating the Passover Seder and Rosh Hashanah (New Year). We do Christmas: I cook, and Grandpa plays Santa (shh, it's meant to be a secret). Your mum, Charlotte, and Auntie Amy have never had much interest in their Jewish roots but are happy to join in when required, and they also love the whole extended family vibe. I hope you will too.

Your parents are more open minded than mine were; you will never need to worry about making your own life choices. I'm certain you will never suffer the persecution endured by your Jewish and Black ancestors. They survived so that you could be born, and live free and proud. Always be yourself and be proud of who you are. Your mum helped me with the family tree that is attached to this letter, to help you remember how we all fit together. Add to it, and add your own stories to mine, to pass on to your children and all the generations to come.

Your name means 'lucky'; I hope you always will be.

Your loving Grandma.

Breadcakes and Blades

Hannah Bacon

ACT 1 SCENE 1

CURTAINS OPEN.

(A LIVING ROOM. THERE ARE 3 SOFAS ARRANGED IN A U SHAPE, CENTRE STAGE. IAN IS SAT ON THE SOFA ON THE RIGHT. HE IS CLEANING HIS SHOTGUN ON THE POUFFE NEXT TO HIS SOFA, WHICH IS COVERED BY A TOWEL. SARAH IS SAT OPPOSITE IAN READING A MAGAZINE. EMILY AND CALLUM ENTER FROM STAGE LEFT. IAN AND SARAH DO NOT KNOW THEY ARE THERE AND CANNOT HEAR WHAT THEY ARE SAYING)

EMILY: Right, I'm bursting for a piss.

CALLUM: Why didn't you just go in the cinema?

EMILY: Did you see the size of the queue - there's no way I was waiting in that. (PAUSE) Right, you coming in then?

CALLUM: (NERVOUS TONE) What, now?

EMILY: Yeah.

CALLUM: It's alright, I'll wait out here.

EMILY: Aw, come on Cal, what you scared of?

CALLUM: (LOOKS AT FLOOR) I don't know. (PAUSE) I guess I just want them to like me.

EMILY: You hear that?

CALLUM: No, what? (HE STOPS AND LISTENS)

EMILY: It's the world's smallest violin being

played.

CALLUM: (LAUGHING) Shut up Em!

EMILY: Right, give over being silly. Honestly, you'll be fine, they're really nice... Well, Mum is.

CALLUM: (SIGHS) Alright then.

EMILY: Good, because I will burst if we don't go in soon. (SHE GRABS HIS HANDS AND BEGINS PULLING HIM TOWARDS SARAH AND IAN) One last thing. (SHE TURNS AND FACES HIM) Mum hates swearing, so just watch your mouth, OK?

CALLUM: (PANICKED) You're telling me this now?

EMILY: You'll be fine, trust me, trust me. Right, let's get this over with then.

CALLUM: This is where I have a panic attack.

EMILY: Shut up drama queen.

(EMILY QUICKLY KISSES CALLUM ON THE CHEEK AND HE SMILES. CALLUM TAKES A VERY DEEP BREATH. THEY WALK TOWARDS IAN AND SARAH. CENTRE STAGE, LIGHTS UP ON LIVING ROOM)

SARAH: (EXCITED TONE) Hello! Hello!

(SARAH STANDS UP AND PUTS HER MAGAZINE DOWN. SHE HUGS EMILY, STOPS, AND AWKWARDLY PATS CALLUM ON THE SHOULDER)

EMILY: Mum, Dad, this is Callum.

CALLUM: Hi. (HE AWKWARDLY WAVES)

EMILY: Sorry, I'm just nipping to the loo real quick.

(EMILY SHOVES HER SHOES OFF AND BEGINS QUICKLY WALKING TOWARDS STAGE RIGHT)

IAN: Clean the skid marks off this time, will yer Em?

(EMILY ROLLS HER EYES AND IS ABOUT TO WALK OFF STAGE RIGHT. SHE QUICKLY TURNS BACK AS CALLUM WALKS TOWARDS THE SOFA)

EMILY: Cal, sorry I didn't say before, but take your shoes off, will you?

(SHE EXITS STAGE RIGHT)

CALLUM: Aw shi- (PANICKED EXPRESSION) Sorry, sorry, I didn't realise.

(CALLUM SLOWLY AND CAREFULLY TIPTOES BACK TO EMILY'S SHOES AND NEATLY PLACES THEM NEXT TO HERS)

SARAH: Aw never mind about your shoes love, it's alright! Come in, (SHE GESTURES) come and sit down!

(CALLUM WALKS TOWARDS IAN)

CALLUM: Hi Ian. (HE GOES TO SHAKE IAN'S HAND)

IAN: Hiya pal, sorry best not to shake mi hand at't moment. (HE SHOWS HIS DIRTY, OILY HANDS. THEY BOTH LAUGH)

(CALLUM SITS AWKAWRDLY ON THE MIDDLE SOFA. SARAH AND IAN STOP WHAT THEY ARE DOING AND LOOK AT HIM.)

SARAH: It's nice to finally meet yer, Callum love.

CALLUM: Yeah, same, same. (CALLUM IS FURIOUSLY TAPPING HIS LEG. PAUSE. IAN STARTS CLEANING HIS GUN)

SARAH: (ANNOYED TONE) Ian, will yer stop playing with yer gun. (GESTURING TOWARDS CALLUM) We have guests.

IAN: (GRUMPY TONE) Sarah - the lad's not bothered.

CALLUM: Honestly, it's fine, don't worry.

(SARAH GLARES AT HIM)

IAN: Well, I guess I'd better stop if I want any tea tomorrow.

BREADCAKES AND BLADES

(IAN LAUGHS AND WINKS AT CALLUM, WHO FORCES A SMILE. IAN RECLINES ON THE SOFA. LONG PAUSE. THEY ARE ALL LOOKING AROUND THE ROOM)

SARAH: Soooo Callum-

(THE PHONE RINGS OVER SPEAKERS)

IAN: (ANNOYED TONE) Leave it, it'll just be mi Dad.

SARAH: You can't just leave it.

IAN: I'll ring him later - I'll say we were having our tea or sommat.

SARAH: Ian, it's past 8'o clock, we're not southern.

IAN: Well, you answer it then. (CALLUM IS MOVING HIS HEAD FOLLOWING SARAH AND IAN'S ARGUMENT)

SARAH: No, he's YOUR Dad.

IAN: (HE SIGHS. PAUSE) Anyways, I can't answer it.

SARAH: Why?

IAN: (HE SHOWS HIS HANDS) I've oil all over mi hands. It'll only ruin the phone, love.

(SARAH ROLLS HER EYES. THE PHONE STOPS RINGING)

IAN: (SARACASTIC TONE) What a shame - I were just about to answer it. (SARAH GLARES AT IAN)

OVER SPEAKERS, THE ANSWER MESSAGE STARTS PLAYING. IN SARAH'S FAKE PHONE VOICE: HI, SORRY THE GUTTMANS AREN'T IN...

(THEY ALL STOP WHAT THEY ARE DOING AND LISTEN IN. EMILY RE-ENTERS)

EMILY: Sorry about that.

SARAH: Shhh - I wanna see who it is.

(ANSWER PHONE BEEP IS PLAYED OVER SPEAKERS)

MALCOLM: (OFFSTAGE) Ian, it's yer Dad. (IAN LOUDLY

SIGHS) I know yer in, (*IAN WIPES HIS HANDS ON THE TOWEL AND WALKS TOWARDS THE PHONE*) so I'm just going to keep ringing till yer pick-

IAN: 'iya Dad. (*PAUSE*) Sorry, din't get to't phone in time. (*PAUSE*) Yeah. (*PAUSE*) Yeah. Nothing much really. Well, Emily's boyfriend's round. (*CALLUM LOOKS TOWARDS THE FLOOR*) Callum. (*PAUSE. HE OVERLY PRONOUNCIATES*) No, Callum. (*PAUSE*) Dad, I'm not asking him that. (*PAUSE. ANNOYED TONE*) Alreyt Dad. (*HE SIGHS*) Callum, my Dad wants to know whether yer a Blade?

CALLUM: Ermum, well, I'm not really into football.

IAN: He dun't follow football Dad. Rey't, I best be off. (*PAUSE. IAN ROLLS HIS EYES*) Sarah made her risotto. (*PAUSE*) Yeah it were alreyt, rice were a bit stodgy though. (*SARAH GLARES AT IAN, WHO MISCHIEVOUSLY SMILES. PAUSE*) Right then ta-ra. (*HE ENDS THE CALL AND TOSSES HIMSELF ON THE SOFA*)

SARAH: (*ANNOYED TONE*) Yer could have made a bit more of an effort Ian. Yer know yer Dad's by himself.

IAN: Sarah, we've got visitors.

SARAH: Put the phone back then or it'll run out charge.

(*IAN ROLLS HIS EYES AND RELUCTANTLY STANDS UP TO PUT THE PHONE BACK. SARAH TELLS IAN OFF WITH A LOOK AND THEY BOTH LOOK AT CALLUM AND EMILY AND SMILE. LONG PAUSE. THEY ALL LOOK AROUND THE ROOM*)

SARAH: So, Callum whereabouts do yer live then?

CALLUM: Crookes.

SARAH: Crookes? Oooooo, that's dead posh! (*TO IAN*) Actually, your Scott lives in Crookes. (*PAUSES. LOOKS AT CALLUM*) Ian's brother lives in Crookes. (*IAN ROLLS HIS EYES*)

- CALLUM: Oh does he?
- SARAH: What road do yer live on?
- CALLUM: Hallamgate Road.
- SARAH: What road does your Scott live on, Ian?
- IAN: (ANNOYED TONE) I've no clue.
- SARAH: How do yer not know what road yer own brother lives on?
- IAN: Jeez- he's only rentin' Sarah. I'll yer nah, he'll be livin' at Dad's next month.
- SARAH: Hallamgate Road? (SHE THINKS) Hmmm, I don't think I recognise it.
- CALLUM: We did have people move in at the end of the street a couple of months ago.
- SARAH: (EXCITED TONE) Oooo it could be them!
- CALLUM: Yeah it could be.
- IAN: (BLUNTLY) Does he have a big head?
- SARAH: (LAUGHING) Tell Callum that story from last Christmas Ian. (SARAH AND IAN LAUGH)
- IAN: Well, last Christmas, our Scott and his Wendy came for tea. And at the table, I said to 'im, Scott, 'ave yer left yer hat in our porch? He says I might 'ave done pal, let's 'ave a look, and then I show 'im a bucket from the garage!(THEY ALL LAUGH WHICH COMES ACROSS A LITTLE FORCED AND EXAGGERATED. PAUSE) He din't even find it funny. He's got a rubbish sense of humour, our Scott.
- EMILY: Well, maybe it's something to do with you just publicly humiliating him Dad?
- IAN: Isn't that what siblings are for? (LONG PAUSE)
- SARAH: What do yer parents do then Callum?
- IAN: Bloodyhell Sarah - give the poor lad a break.

SARAH: Watch yer mouth Ian. You know I hate bad language.

(PAUSE. IAN ROLLS HIS EYES AND STARTS FIDDLING WITH HIS GUN)

IAN: Anyways Callum, what do yer think of mi new shotgun then mate?

SARAH: (ANNOYED TONE) Do yer really have to clean that thing in 'ere Ian?

IAN: You know them wooden chairs in the kitchen aren't good for mi back love. (SARAH TUTS AND FOLDS HER ARMS)

CALLUM: Erm, yeah, yeah it's cool Ian.

EMILY: (ASIDE TO CALLUM) It's legal by the way, he's got a licence - he's not a nutter or anything.

(SARAH LOOKS AT EMILY. THEY ARE BOTH UNIMPRESSED. CALLUM PRETENDS TO LOOK INTERESTED)

IAN: Yeah, well I've just bought this one. (HE STANDS UP AND WALKS TOWARDS CALLUM SHOWING HIM THE GUN) It's a double barrelled hammer shotgun. 1830s. Only cost 650, absolute bargain.

CALLUM: Ah right, yeah, yeah, nice.

IAN: It's got a pineapple engraved on the for-end. You see? (HE POINTS)

CALLUM: (LEANS CLOSER) Oh yeah, I see it, cool.

IAN: Do yer wanna point?

EMILY: Jesus Dad, he's not wanting to be in the SAS.

IAN: (ANNOYED TONE) Alright, I'm only asking Em.

CALLUM: I'm ok, cheers though Ian.

(CALLUM GIVES AN APPRECIATIVE SMILE. IAN GENTLY PLACES HIS GUN BACK ON THE POUFFE AND PATS IT)

SARAH: Well that's the last one yer getting. Yer've

got loads of em' now.

IAN: Sorry for having a hobby Sarah.

SARAH: Yer can 'ave a hobby when butter dun't cost £6.75. (PAUSE. EXAGGERATED TONE) Can yer believe it? £6.75.

IAN: Get the cheap stuff then.

SARAH: Cheap stuff? I'm not doin' that. Not with Margaret opposite.

IAN: What's Margaret got to do with what butter we buy?

SARAH: She knows everything that woman. I don't want her seein' mi buy cheap butter. Not when she buys Lurpak. I saw it in her fridge last week when she made mi a cuppa, pride of place it were - next to some olives.

IAN: Well, we have olives - sometimes.

SARAH: Not Asda's Extra Specials though Ian.

(IAN ROLLS HIS EYES. LONG PAUSE)

CALLUM: Am I alright just to nip to the toilet please?

SARAH: (STANDS UP AND WALKS FRONT STAGE RIGHT. CALLUM FOLLOWS HER) Of course love, it's just down there, (POINTING) and to the left. The one with the dodgy door.

CALLUM: Thanks Sarah. (HE EXITS STAGE RIGHT)

SARAH: (SHOUTING) Mind the step! (SHE COMES BACK AND SITS ON THE SOFA) Aw, bless him.

EMILY: Dad, did you really have to clean your gun now?

SARAH: In fairness to yer Dad, yer din't tell us yer were bringing him round. (IAN SARCASTICALLY SMILES AT EMILY)

EMILY: We must look like a right family of psychos.

SARAH: Have you seen the state of this living room. If I'd have known he were coming I'd have vacuumed.

EMILY: Don't worry Mum, I don't think he's even noticed.

SARAH: I know but still, it doesn't make the best first impression does it?

EMILY: What with Dad looking like Buffalo Bill over there.

(IAN PICKS UP HIS GUN)

IAN: Pow! *(AIMS GUN AROUND THE ROOM)* Pow!

SARAH: *(LAUGHING)* Ian, give over! He's nice though Em! *(SMILING)* Very handsome!

EMILY: Yeah he is, I actually have standards when picking a man. *(SHE SARCASTICALLY SMILES AT IAN)*

IAN: Ha, ha.

SARAH: He's tall as well. *(IAN ROLLS HIS EYES)* How tall did you say he was?

EMILY: 6'2.

SARAH: Ooooo - 6'2!

EMILY: *(HUSHED VOICE AND PANICKED EXPRESSION)* He's coming! He's coming!

(THEY ALL TRY TO ACT CASUAL. IAN STARTS INTENTLY CLEANING HIS GUN. SARAH AND EMILY TRY TO APPEAR RELAXED ON THE SOFA. CRASH OFFSTAGE. CALLUM ENTERS FROM STAGE RIGHT.)

CALLUM: Fuckin'hell! Forgot about that step.

(EMILY LOOKS AT SARAH)

LIGHTS ARE DIMMED.

Postal Protection

Adam Briggs

Blurp.

Blurp.

Blurp.

Here we go again; another deluded call to attention with misleading intentions. This sharp sound echoing from your phone is synonymous with lust. Each shrill metallic burst indicating that someone, another, is lusting after you. Wanting you and wanting you to want them back in the same carnal way.

Welcome to being a gay man in the twenty-first century: first stop, Dopamine Central.

Hey mate. U accom?

And they say romance is dead. I don't know exactly who 'they' are, but they might just be onto something. A brief scroll yields another thirteen messages, all the same. The rite remains unchanged: a slow pan down the screen, blindly optimistic one of the small boxes will reveal a figure you find somewhat attractive, or at least born within the same decade as yourself. The frail letters hang confidently in the confines of the yellow awaiting your reply.

No response is a response.

It is as if these boxes need a FRAGILE: THIS WAY UP label plastered on their side to warn the recipient of potential danger. The assumption is that these words have value. In actuality, they only devalue those involved. Allegedly, these fifteen characters are enough to win you over, enough to win *you*.

Maybe the best way to keep the prize is to rig the game.

Cheating this system involves boundaries written in code: *NPNC*, *Discreet*, *Masc4Masc*. Each layer adding postal protection, sending boxes back with a bold red attempted delivery notice. The key to navigating the onslaught is clear: you must induce a sense of rejection before the stamp is even licked. Send them wallowing before the hunger grows too strong and the boxes begin to multiply, each one overpowering the last. At some point it becomes clear why your letterbox is surrounded by a thick metal gate.

Blurp. Faggot.

Blurp. Rude.

Blurp ???

Blurp. Is that a no then?

Sometimes space is enough for the yellow to fade to white. Part of you hopes the messages vanish as if they were never there. As if you hadn't had the chance to open and read their contents. As if you hadn't already seen desire take physical form. Meaningless text accompanied by a spattering of unsolicited nudes. You can unsend but it can't be unseen, images tainted and distorted into memory. Each failed delivery notice results in scathing glances shot across aisles of a grocery store, sunglasses and baseball caps

deployed in an abortive attempt at anonymity from the community you once clawed your way into. No combination of tape and brute force can keep them closed once opened. Pandora's box has nothing on the depths of Grindr.

I wonder if whoever said distance makes the heart grow fonder had ever felt the spasm of fear of an impending houseguest. *It seemed like a good idea at the time.*

5000 feet. 500 feet. 5 feet.

Knock.

Proximity does, however, make the heart beat faster. Each refresh of the screen and shrinking distance marking one foot closer to tasting the hot tang of another. Quenching the insatiable hunger that had been growing as the boxes began to pile up, each one filling the body with more endorphins.

The longing to feel and be felt by another subsides, as it always does. Each passing moment drives a desire towards solitude and an empty inbox. Both the messages and their sender soon vanish but the feeling induced by their presence takes an age to leave. An old sock would have done the job without leaving you craving a cold shower, clean sheets, and a time machine. Daring to reach for the box cutters never felt right. Unfortunately, the tape was always out of reach by the time the knock arrived.

Mick, 38, Wakefield

Blurp. Not again.

I should be excited. But I'm not,
the mystery keeping me on edge.
Who might this cold caller be?

His profile picture is a slice of lemon drizzle cake.

Intriguing.

Can I breed you baby?

How do you respond to an offer so eloquent?

Block.

Pak Choi

Mackenzie Cale

GEORGE SANDERS WAS AWOKEN one morning from troubled dreams. In his squint he saw four severed fingers rapping against his bedside table.

'They better not be bleeding everywhere,' he thought. The fingers then leapt out onto the bed and grabbed George by the collar, revealing themselves as agents of a full arm. They pulled him near and said, 'Son, don't forget you're coming home for dinner today. From Dad.' After letting go, the hand slid back into the phone. Dust swam around the lit screen and George, checking the time, sat upright. The coverlet slipped from his shoulders leaving two large pink nipples to stiffen in the early morning cold. He looked down at them and wriggled his toes.

'Phew.'

The room was still dark as winter mornings tend to be, blurring the definitions of night and day. On the wall opposite the headboard, George had tacked on a poster for Campbell's vegetable soup. He'd grown an appreciation for Americana since being told that Kafka said, 'I like the Americans because they are healthy and optimistic.' He believed this even though he had heard it from an American. The poster depicted a woman in a pin-striped apron standing over a soup pot whilst her husband was bent right over the hob, steam rising gaily into his flared nostrils. The couple looked expectantly in the direction of the onlooker. In his half-awake state, George could only make out the whites of their eyes and teeth. Above them in bold cursive script, it read, 'Catch a whiff? Come have a sniff!' This was an at-

tempt at the cool uni bedroom, but the four walls still weren't his own. A convenient truth when it came to issues with damp and mould.

'If only I'd have chosen to move further away,' he thought. 'Then they couldn't expect me round for the day, they wouldn't have that pull over me. Here I feel like a proper adult, a real person who buys washing up liquid and knows the difference between laundry detergent and laundry powder. I mean, for God's sake, I am nineteen years old! But there I feel seventeen again. I'd like to see what happens if I told my father that; if I told him that I had evolved, there'd be scenes. If I didn't have to exercise restraint for the fact that they are my parents, then I would have told them what I thought a long time ago; I would have stood on a chair talking down at them from on high in that peculiar way a bank manager does, making them look up to me.'

He slid back to his previous position. 'What if I went back to sleep for a while and forgot about all this nonsense?' But that proved quite impossible as a car drove past the window. He turned away from the window as the headlights dragged across the room. Have you ever looked over at your alarm clock at quarter to eight and decided to shut your eyes for another five minutes, only to open them and read ten-fifteen? Curiously, when George shut his eyes against the lights, the opposite happened: seconds unfolded into minutes. The light wiped away George's room like a hand wipes a foggy mirror clean, leaving the spaces where it had been changed. Beige patterned wallpaper rolled over stained white paint and the poster was torn from the wall, separating the married couple into two pieces. In its place there now hung a calendar and clock; the hands of which moved swiftly forwards, whirling round nine, ten, eleven ...

By the time the car had driven past his window it was no longer his, and there between the four walls was his parent's dining room. Now, the clock had landed at one o'clock and the blanket was pulled away from George's lap. In front of him, in a flash instant, was his mother and father and a laid table. They were all tucked in at a different table edge: his mother to the left and his father sat opposite him.

'What do you think of the food, son?' His father had prepared a stew of

sorts, bits of green buoyed at its brown greasy surface. 'Can you guess the secret ingredient?' Specks of herbs and chilli flakes were left stuck along the edges of the bowl like barnacles on a sea wall. 'Well, it's not really a secret. It's pak choi, you ever had it before? I don't know, it was on offer, so I thought why not try it,' continued his father.

'Best thing for that, a stew I mean, you're not going to spoil it, are you?' George said, steering a spoon around the bowl. The mother had been grinding salt over her dinner for the entire duration of her husband's icebreaker, casting glances between the two men. Dark crescent moons undercut her deep blue eyes, the same shape as her closed-lip smile. The father, on the other hand, wore glasses and never fully shut his mouth. He ate loudly, in the Japanese tradition as he would say. George and his father were unlike except for their flaws which each held proudly against the other.

'It's slick, huh? Slithery, I mean,' remarked the father as he chewed. George's elbows awkwardly pressed into his sides, his back coiled forwards as he raised a spoonful of stew to his O-shaped lips. The odourless broth jumped down his neck ignoring any supposed teeth. 'So, what do you think? It's not amazing is it but it'll do. What do you think dear?' The mother closed her eyes and nodded slowly, flexing the full motion of her neck. She opened her eyes and turned to her son, offering the salt grinder. George began to speak but was cut off by his own yawn. His mouth opened widely and silently, before producing a forced groan. You'd have expected the jaw to tighten again soon afterwards but George's remained agape, his chin falling into his neck.

'Everything alright, mate?' asked the father.

'Mm mm,' he replied.

'Will she say nothing?' he thought. 'She looks at me like I were a gap in a wall.' George's father gave way and looked down to his bowl, conscious now. George crossed his eyes to check for his nose but must have spun them too far as they slid back to his temples. He had the right eye fixed about his father and was training the left onto his mother. The woman's fingers remained gripped round the salt grinder while her husband lifted the stew bowl to his mouth and drank. George had wished to do the same

but the entire length of both his arms had become weak. Outside, a robin landed near a cockroach, tilting its head left and right in quickening movements, rounding its black eye toward the roach. Confident in what it was looking at, the bird struck. Sinking its beak into the cockroach's back before flicking it into the air and snapping down, swallowing it whole. From the dining room you could hear the birds compliment the robin on its kill. Although you'd have thought they were complimenting the way its breast shone in the setting light of a sleepy winter sun. After all, we cannot understand the birds and know their voices only as noise.

George's father looked round the bowl at his son, and after placing it down, said, 'Why aren't you eating? Is it not good? What's the matter? I like it, do you like it dear?' The mother rubbed her stomach and scrunched her cheeks up to her eyes. 'See, your mother likes it. Now come on, eat!' He raised the bowl back to his mouth, but this time drank slowly and even louder in a mock demonstration. Now all you could hear was slurping and burbling and the ticking of the clock.

'Shut up, old man! As if the issue was that I had forgotten simply how to!' thought George, he had tried to speak but the words hiccupped in his chest, sending his shoulders forward and his hips backward. Trying his arms again he realised that they were sewn to his obliques. His father slammed an empty bowl down onto the table, making the decision to not notice his son's metamorphosis.

'Why won't you eat the stew?' He kept darting looks to the mother, but her husband's outburst failed to stir her. She began salting George's water. 'Really helpful! This is it, the day I come loose. For heaven's sake, not here!' George had wanted to get up and run out the room, but he found his knees fused and all ten of his toes coiled and bent around themselves like marshmallow twists. 'What is happening to me? I need to get out.' But when he tried to stand his lower body turned like a key and he was sent rolling out of his chair. His struggling breath panicked him, and he flopped around frantically, beating the back of his head against the chair leg. This writhing abated as the image of George's parents sailed further from his face. His clothes slid away from oily scales and finally his eyes became convex orbs.

They saw like spotlights and sharpened his instinct, telling him to sit still and not be perceived.

Both parents peered over into the frame with his father shaking his head, but it was his mother who said finally, 'It's ok, son. We always knew you were a fish.'

Calving

Lily Page

THERE IS A CAR GOING DOWN a dark road. Fast. It is nearly winter, and the sunset is wounded: red and trembling, bleeding out thick and low and coppery over flat farmland and pine trees. The girl in the back presses her foot down on an imaginary brake as they take another corner too fast, branches swinging close like grasping hands.

She is talking quickly, getting louder and louder as she shakily tucks a roll-up and brushes tobacco from her thighs. A boy is telling her to calm down over and over, but his knuckles are white on the steering wheel, his eyes glassy and roaming – just a snared animal, looking for a way out. What did you actually hear, Pea? The boy in the passenger seat lodges his face through the headrest. She presses her mouth tightly around the filter, rattling the lighter before sparking it.

A body. She takes a steady pull. When she speaks again her voice is quiet, but her eyes are very loud. They found it in the woods, I heard Alfie talking to some woman behind the station. A *dead* body Johnny, what if – The driver makes a small noise in the back of his throat and the car swerves over the pitted surface of the road. Be a bit more fucking careful, will you? Pea runs her fingers through her hair, swearing again as she leaves a streak of ash across her forehead.

But we've done nowt wrong, Johnny says, face draining, his mouth twisting over his teeth. Pea's gaze shudders to the boy slumped drunk next to her, eyes shut and mouth open in a moist, pink snarl. His eyelids twitch under her scrutiny. His snoring is too even. She opens her mouth as if to

speak again but decides against it, clenching her jaw and taking another drag.

The car turns onto a rougher stretch, where craggy tarmac gives way to tightly packed mud and gravel. Flanking birches clasp silvery fingers overhead, like ghostly dance partners. The radio gets louder for a second, blasting some old song before cutting out, spitting static and guttural shards of speech. Johnny moves quickly to turn it off. There is never signal here, not until crossing into the next county. They retreat from the windows, uneasy with how quickly silence descends from the darkening trees.

There is a thump and the car lurches sickly, heaving over something before coming to a dead stop. The sleeping boy is flung into the back of the driver's seat with a muffled yelp. Whatever they've hit is bigger than a fox, but nobody gets out. The driver holds the wheel tighter still, his nails digging raw moons into the moist flesh of his palms.

Wha' was tha'? The boy pulls himself off the floor and scowls at the driver, his voice harsh through thickening dread. What've you hit Lee? Mum's going to bollock me if I've wrecked the car again.

Dunno, the driver replies tightly, pale under a bloom of acne, but it was big. Best check on it then, the boy replies, crossing his arms and making no move to open the door. Nobody moves, looking away or through each other like they are avoiding a teacher's question. There is a moment like a held breath. Pea breaks it, stabs her rollie into the cup holder and clicks open the door. The others follow.

Dusk flattens everything into shades of bruise; the world seems cool, damp, and far away. The wind scuffs their necks. Above, bats chitter like loose coins. Johnny sees the body first, tossed into a narrow ditch: its long, heavy feet stretched across wet grass. He makes a wounded sound and the others jump at its ferality.

Not so big as they'd thought, with how the car had staggered against it, but brutally made: fretted with sinew, flesh stretching tightly over raw bones, bristling with short dark hair. Lee lets out a low, whistling breath.

It's a hare. He wipes his palms on grimy jeans. It's just a hare. They laugh and it sounds like choking. None of them need to say that, for a moment, in

the dark, that body had looked too solid, too long-limbed and double-jointed to be anything but human.

It has long, slender ears but is nothing like a rabbit, not designed to hop and waddle, fat and soft as a knob of butter. It is lean and muscled like a person is, head perfectly formed, staring out from a bottomless, golden eye that seems a plughole around which the world rotates.

Without words, they settle onto their haunches and lift the animal from the roadside, shuffling awkwardly with its unexpected weight. They feel the still-warm flesh, soft as their own, give under their palms. Pea traces capillaries with a fingertip, livid and plummy through the thin skin of its ears.

Together, they heave the body into the boot of the car, acting on pure instinct, like they are covering up a crime scene. The tapered skull collides with the back seat and its mouth lolls open, vivid as a wound. There is a thin line of dark, jammy blood on its muzzle and its teeth are very white and round and even. Johnny leans forward and then recoils.

Something's wrong with it, he is saying, something is wrong. He reaches for it suddenly, trying to wrench it from the boot.

Lee hit it with a car, what d'you expect? The drunk boy scoffs, soberer now, shoving him and slamming the door shut before ambling to the driver's seat.

Oi Dylan! You're not fucking driving. Pea shouts, hands on her hips but Dylan just shrugs. My car, my rules. He ducks inside, giving them little choice but to slink in after him, seat belts on this time.

From the back seat, Johnny makes furtive glances to the rear view, half expecting a long-eared shadow, watching him with great golden eyes. Nothing but the black yawn of the lane opening behind them, somehow darker for having been so recently flooded with headlights. In his mind's eye the creature opens its terrible mouth, and he sees the wrongness materialize: a white picket fence on the surface of the moon. A row of perfect human teeth in the bloody maw of a dead animal.

In the empty space where talking should be, the darkness thickens, settling heavy along their shoulders like a cat. There is only the staccato rasp

of the cheap zippo, which Lee is flicking over and over, and the sound of someone breathing heavy and fast and gasping. It is a distressing noise, but nobody mentions it, just in case it is coming from them.

The road evens out as they swing closer to town: trees slouching into withered hedgerows, and then low, brutal fences. Clumps of yellowed wool hang, gibbeted, from the spurs of two thick cables of barbed wire, strung through stubs of wood. The flocks are gone, huddled down somewhere in the night. Across the field, a lonely torchlight flashes and is gone like the pulse of a lighthouse signal.

As they pass the first house, Dylan slows down and twists his neck round the headrest, propping his arm up casually on the seat. Where we going then? His question tears three pale faces back from somewhere, fidgety and staring. Johnny's hands are frozen in a wringing motion like a martyr's statue. They look as if they have forgotten where they are. Well? He shrugs and turns back.

Drop me off at my Dad's, Pea says, I can't stand the sight of yous. Dylan laughs but she doesn't, crossing her arms tightly over her chest, and slouching very low in her seat. They drive past a row of identical houses, new and ugly with white, shiny window frames and building materials still heaped out front. Most of them are still empty, just the suggestion of life.

As they near the village centre, the houses are older, thatched like post-cards but with the sun-bleached carcasses of children's toys and splintered white garden chairs. A spell is broken by the sudden appearance of other people. Men with big coats and shiny red faces lurch into the pub, talking to each other as their wives trail behind, hands hovering over their handbags. A few kids are shouting at each other across the square, limbs at broken angles on their spindly folding bikes.

One of them waves as they pass, mouthing inaudibly and flicking his middle finger, that Lee answers: unfurling his clenched palm like a chapped, fleshy flower pressed against the window glass. They turn right, off the high street. Pea's dad's van is parked outside and the kitchen light is on. He must have just gotten back from work, Pea says. She chews at the skin around her thumbnail and speaks into her palm.

Her father works at Chatlon & Sons, LTD, which is an official name for a big metal warehouse where they push cows in one end and pull beef from the other. He is a large man, covered with a fine, gingery pelt everywhere except his head – the round, pink bulge of which bobs into view. Beneath sagging blinds, he shuffles across the kitchen and sits himself at the table with a scrape and a thump. The bare bulb swings and flickers. The light is very yellow, harsh and chemical in the blue night coming in.

Pea gets out without another word. Runs her fingers through her hair and draws her jumper over her nose, giving it a sniff and pulling a face. She reaches under a loose stone on the front step, opens the door and slips inside without looking back. There are the sounds of a muffled greeting and then loud conversation as her father stands, his bald head rising to a thickly pleated neck and old-fashioned vest, from which broad arms burst like pale, hairy tree roots.

Right then, Dylan says, bringing the engine back to life and backing away. You taking this off my hands then Lee? He gestures lazily to the back of the car and Lee hesitates. He looks very young for a moment. Why? Dylan smirks. Well, your lot won't have to pinch it for a start, that roadkill is five-star that. Would feed you all for a week. Lee goes bright red under his acne scars. For a moment his fists clench with violence and his eyes shine. It is over before it starts, and his mouth loosens into a smile with too many teeth. You're lucky *my lot* are only poaching from your dad, considering. Dylan laughs, throws his arm round Lee's seat like a good-humoured father with an unruly son. To the Manor, he says.

The Manor is a squat, pebbledash bungalow out on the other side of the village, past houses with flowers in their window boxes and clean curtains, to where the countryside reopens its green, swallowing mouth. Lee's family built it right on the edge of Dylan's father's property not long before they were both born. Dylan calls it the Manor because he thinks it's funny, and it pisses off his dad – the same reason he does everything.

The house is dark when they arrive, churning up the muddy drive. It is empty so often it feels more like their secret than Lee's family home. The house always looks slightly askew, as if the wind is engaged in a slow but

victorious struggle with its hasty foundations, as if half-sinking back into the hungry ground.

They get out of the car and lumber over to the boot. Johnny feels sick, a cold, retching feeling coming up from the base of him. Without thinking, he puts his hand out when Lee goes to open the door. What do you think's happened to Mary? The others look up quick as gunshots. Something vicious passes across Dylan's face, shucked as easily as a layer of clothing and smoothed over with his usual unaffected smirk. This again? He shrugs stiffly and brushes something invisible off his shoulder. Stupid cow wandered off didn't she. Lee clenches his jaw so hard Johnny hears his teeth squeak.

His voice is gentler than Dylan's but careful, and he reaches out with a staying gesture. We were drunk Johnny, we didn't mean to leave her there... for long anyway. Johnny cradles his jaw with a damp palm, sucking the salty skin between his teeth. He's sweating like he has been running, and it tastes like panic. Dylan barks a laugh, and it is a harsh, cruel sound like a chair scraping across the floor. She's probably sitting in some Premier Inn somewhere – sulking that nobody's looking for her. Pea is just paranoid; she thinks everyone's out to get her. Lee nods and agrees. Just like her dad. I don't know, Johnny says quietly through his fingers. I don't know. It's a bit – you have to admit, it's a bit weird. And when Pea said a body. We were all together and then suddenly... Nobody just disappears, not round here. It's not like we were in the wilderness is it? It's a copse of trees by a fucking A-road!

Lee winces, and Johnny realises he is shouting. It's not like we hurt her or... We were always going back for her. Speak for yourself, Johnny interrupts, staring down Dylan, who raises an eyebrow and opens the boot, ending the conversation. But the hare is another body, and for a moment they are lifting a corpse from the boot of a car, out in the darkness at the edge of town.

The body is solid and pristine. If it wasn't for the dark, mossy smell of decay beginning to seep from the open compartment, it might have still been breathing. Johnny puzzles over this as the three of them lift its sick

weight. They had hit it going above the speed limit and head on, it should be mincemeat.

One summer, when they were fourteen, Lee and Johnny had been watching older boys racing dirt bikes out by the reservoir, topless in jeans webbed with engine oil and badly rolled cigarettes dangling between their lips. Johnny was small for his age even then and they had laughed and pushed him to the ground, but they'd let Lee have a go – passing him a smoke and sitting him on the handlebars, loosening his arms at the elbows.

Lee had come off almost immediately, skidding across the road like a human hockey puck. Johnny remembers how he'd had kept the fag gripped between his teeth the whole time, a hot coal dangling uselessly from a thin rope of tobacco. Later, in the queasy light from the hallway, Johnny had checked his skin for gravel. Johnny shudders with the image: Lee like a leg of meat hanging among the chipped, peach tiles of his mother's bathroom. His head bowed out of sight, one flayed arm reaching up and behind to prod the chewed-up meat of his back. Johnny had never thought about people as meat before then.

And yet this animal looks untouched, whole. The thought of them butchering it, of putting it in a stew or a pie makes his stomach churn. This is no meat.

The Crash

Tommy Scott

THE SOLES OF HER FEET, though numbed by the cold, stung as she ran. It still beat running in stilettos. They remained in her hand; she hadn't thought to drop them. She hadn't thought to steal a glance behind her. She didn't think. She kept looking forward: to the end of the street, to the next corner, to the dead end.

No! No, that was impossible. Was she lost? But the man lived barely five minutes from her house. Even so, the state of her feet suggested she had been running for quite some time. She half expected to see bloody footprints marking her path. They didn't seem time to do such damage in so short a distance. It didn't add up.

Only whilst stationary did it dawn on her that she didn't recognise where she was. One look revealed the busy junction she had left was now empty, visible only by the dim moon. The light didn't extend to the alley, which was most distinguishable by the scent of petrichor and rotting garbage.

Every blink seemed to bring the frowning walls closer together. Her chest grew tight as darkness massed around her. She retreated from the sensation until her bare back touched brick.

The alley grew cold. The darkness was not merely the absence of light, but rather a physical presence forcing her against the wall. Dank air filled her lungs. Acrid, not in taste, but the profoundly wrong sensation it gave her body.

The gloom didn't mask a gate on her left. Words of thanks mutated into a furious tirade before leaving her mouth. A padlock held shut the gate to

the bright road beyond. She considered the rest of the alley. Recognising no other option, hysterical laughter began to rise inside her.

'No, no, *no!*' She threw her weight against the gate, which rattled loosely. It wasn't locked, just rusted shut.

Over the course of a long exhalation, the girl steadied her hands and silenced her laughter. As she did so, the darkness around her seemed to dissipate. Her view of the gate grew clearer. Grasping the padlock, she yanked and felt it give.

A deafening gale tore past the girl as she pulled the padlock once more. Wind snatched at her clothes and hair with fury. Space stilled around her, and the darkness which had briefly vanished settled like fog. With it came a powerful silence she dared not break, even by breathing.

Thud.

A crack of lightning illuminated the alley. A great winged shadow stretched the length of the floor.

Thud.

Each of the creature's footfalls echoed like thunder. The padlock refused to budge further.

Thud.

Her hands were no longer steady. Overcome with panic she began to shudder, spiralling into hyperventilation, worsened by the tears filling her mouth and snot blocking her nose.

Thud, thud, thud.

By the light of the moon, she caught a glimpse of a clawed foot. Could it be the monster pursuing her was the man she had left only moments ago? Surely not; he had been kind, he had offered her to stay, he had offered to walk her home, only changing his mind since she hadn't far to go.

How had he known that?

The shadow of the figure stretched, and its claws tapped the concrete floor. She wrenched the padlock with all her strength and felt it move another quarter inch. Biting her tongue in frustration, she brought her stiletto down.

With a splitting sound her heel snapped and the padlock dropped free.

The gate swung open and the girl fell after it. Before she hit the floor, a deathly cold hand locked itself around her wrist.

On instinct, she plunged her jagged stiletto heel deep into her attacker's grey arm. It sank into the muscle. The thing released its bone-breaking grip with a guttural roar.

The girl bruised her backside as she hit the floor. Continuing backwards, she found herself in the road. Each desperate grasp at the slick ground further shredded her palms and knees until they were as equally ruined as her feet. Reaching once more to crawl, her body didn't respond. Gradually, her limbs began to move against her will.

Forced to turn, she beheld a monster somewhere between a humanoid and a bat. She could see its rodent face and snarling teeth clearly. Clearer still were its wings, broader than she was tall. It presented a clawed hand.

Brakes squealed and a car barrelled into the monster. The girl dropped to the floor. Her mind bounced between elation and terror. The car door opened.

'Is he okay?' The driver's voice was wet with fear. 'I tried to brake, it's just so wet, and I—'

The thing in the road stirred.

A sob caught in the girl's throat. The only sound was that of sickly scraping as the creature convulsed. Bone scraped against bone stretched against meat, poking taut skin like bent tent poles, contorting the beast into an impossible shape recognisable only by the ragged wings perforating the flesh of its back. It didn't belong upright, as if it only remained there through a great effort of agony.

The driver shattered the terrible silence with a scream. The monster locked its fiery eyes with his and closed its fist, hammer-strikes of rain ceasing mid-fall. Stupefied, the driver made no attempt to flee the creature and the girl could do nothing but watch, enraptured.

The bat-creature seized the driver: clawed fingers encompassed his head completely. It began to squeeze. Initially, the bone withstood the compression. Then, like crushing a tin of beans, the driver's skull succumbed. A mixture of blood and brain, dotted with little shards of teeth, oozed free of

his crumpled cranium.

All the while, his anguished screams tormented the girl. The pain should have ceased when the driver's head opened, but he somehow survived the entire procedure. Satisfied with the suffering, the bat-creature tossed him aside. Ghastly grey-pink brain sludge filled the cracked tarmac, assaulting the girl with a sweet metallic stench.

Exhausted from the pursuit, the girl attempted no further escape. Nowhere remained to run even had she the energy to try. Shivering, she gave herself to the creature without complaint. It didn't even provide a quick death in return.

A Rainy Day in Milan

Audrey Seligmann

I WALKED AROUND, LOOKING at the paintings on the walls, sometimes pausing on certain pieces that inspired me more than the chubby babies or the war scenes. There were not many people around. One thing I enjoy as much as looking at the art in galleries is looking at people. I do this in most places; I make an image in my head of their lives, give them stories, and try to imagine the conversations they are having. In museums, I am fascinated by the range of people that go through the doors: you have the artists, the intellectuals, the families, the tourists that are interested in art and history, the tourists that are here because it was part of the list of '10 top things to do'; you have the couples; you have the second-daters wanting to do something better than drinks (their first date); and you have people like me, no artist or intellectual, just someone who appreciates the time and effort of artists I will never meet, someone who happens to be here at random, with no forethought and genuinely enjoying the experience.

There were no families, thankfully. A couple of tourists were passing by each piece at a fast pace, just not fast enough that they were speed-walking. A young woman wearing a classic Burberry trench coat was on her own, walking slowly, sometimes taking long detailed looks at the paintings. Someone – I took a wild guess and put them in the artist category – was sitting on one of the wood benches, in front of a statue of a naked... warrior?... bodybuilder?... conquistador?... who knew. I hadn't read the description of that sculpture yet, though I admired its craftsmanship. The person was sketching on a black paper pad with what looked like white

chalk. Two girls were going around, stopping at every other painting, their laughs echoing around the gallery.

I turned back to the young woman who had moved to another painting. She seemed to be floating around from one painting to the next, seemingly unaware of the world around her: so captivating, it was as if she was a piece of art herself.

I started moving towards her without realising it, until I was standing right next to her, and went numb looking for what to say. It was like all the Italian I had learned through the past 7 months just vanished from my brain the moment she turned and looked back at me. I definitely looked like a creep; not one of my finest moments, that's for sure. I thought to myself: just say something Ale, anything. At that point anything would have been better than the 'Jared Leto reacting to the green coat' impression that seemed to be happening on my face. But nothing was coming to me – she must have wondered if some part of my brain was missing. She stared right back at me, her eyes furrowing. She brought her left hand up to her ear and took out an earphone that had been hiding behind the draping of her hair. And she stayed quiet, looking at me with those brown eyes that seem to be an X-ray right into my soul baring me of all thought and purpose, patiently waiting for me to come back to my senses.

'Cia-lo!' That was not even a word! Que pendejo! But then, her frown vanished, and her lips turned upwards, before she bit them in an effort to contain her laughter – which I learned later is a contagious snort-filled melody.

'Cia-lo.'

It was my turn to talk again... right. But of course, I had no idea what to say, and for some reason my brain decided to snooze and not make sense when a word would leave my mouth, leaving me with nonsense like 'cia-lo.' Apparently it was too hard to speak one word – let alone one language – when a beautiful girl talked to me. Well, not talked per-se but stared. This was mortifying. Was I even breathing? I forgot how to breathe. This was not happening. My brother would be laughing so hard at me, thinking about it, my sister would be laughing the hardest. Where was my swag-

ger, my smoothness, any semblance of charm? Oh right, I forgot it back at home, far away from stunning European women who made me lose my senses. Just breathe, Ale.

‘Ciao.’ Yes! That was a word! The word I did mean to use before which morphed into bullshit when it travelled from my brain to my mouth. Now, all I had to do was get some more out, while she smiled at me patiently, probably a bit mockingly if we were being honest. Maybe I had it all wrong; maybe not being able to form words was better than talking when it came to this, whatever this was. But I didn’t want her to leave, not when I finally said a word. I had to ask her something, it should not be that difficult. What was the word for painting again?

‘Ti piace questo...’ I gestured towards the painting of ‘The Reader’ in front of us, unable to remember the word. But no matter, because she answered me anyway.

‘Sì, non conoscevo Faruffini ma adoro i dettagli di questo dipinto.’ She took a closer look at the painting. ‘E ’abbastanza impressionante come la diversa consistenza di oggetti sono dipinti, l’orecchino, il fumo in movimento.... Penso che sia bellissimo.’

Tell me again why I thought Italian was going to be easy to learn because I know Spanish? I don’t even know proper Spanish; I know Dominican which is actually quite different if you think about it. My abuela calls it ‘el español del po y del pa’ because, according to her, we butcher the Spanish language when we talk, not saying our ‘s’ and such. Personally, I find it welcoming and familiar, like a cold beer from the freezer on a warm day at the beach.

While she talked about the painting of the girl reading, I tried to decipher what she was saying. I was obviously no expert, but I could tell her Italian was very good, though a slight accent was breaking through, making me wonder where she came from. As she was talking, I could see her eyes taking in the piece of art while I was taking her in anew now that her eyes were not scrutinising me. She turned to me again with a noticeable and teasing grin.

‘... e tu?’ she asked politely.

'Anch'io.' I needed to say more than this surely. 'Penso che è... bellissimo.' I barely had a look at the painting, but I thought it was remarkable, nonetheless. And while the art around the gallery was admirable, my attention had been captured by a different work of art. So much so that I hadn't noticed the tourists moving on to the next room and a couple people coming in. I wanted to keep talking with the girl, well, more like keep listening to her talk. She seemed passionate about art, and I hadn't creeped her out, yet, which was a good sign (or maybe I should have questioned her survival instincts).

'Sono Ale.' I introduced myself and offered her my hand to shake.

'Katerina,' she answered, rolling the 'r' as she accepted my handshake.

Note to self: Picking up girls in another language is challenging, but can be done if she is patient, likes to talk, and knows a language you are better at so you can continue the conversation.

The Hidden Melodies of Subways Around the World

Kat Sjodal

1.

You hurtle through the darkness beneath a restive city, and
think to yourself
Not all subway stations are created equal.
Some are made of rigid heavy materials:
Tile, stone, steel, and concrete.

When it first starts driving
You can notice a constant electrical buzzing sound in the background.
What is that?
Tile, stone, steel, and concrete?

The appeal is the simplicity.
How can there be so many different variations of beeps?
You listen, and they're all so different.
Tile, stone, steel, and concrete.

The walls are better at reflecting waves,
Allowing sound levels to build up naturally
With no need for microphones or loudspeakers.
So it will come to no surprise when you hear
Tile, stone, steel, and concrete.

Subway listeners are immersed in a bath of echoed sound.
 The same sound, heard up close, has much less reverberation.
 It's clear of course that the sound originates
 In the electrical motors of the train.
 However, you can't explain the pitch changes
 Which don't seem present in other devices containing electrical motors,
 Some far bigger than those in a regular metro:
 Tile, stone, steel, and concrete.

Neste stasjon er Holstein¹

It is a critical element in the design of all performance spaces;
 It's the same reason why so many people enjoy singing in the shower.
 The musicians wallow in it.
 The passengers variously savor, ignore or avoid it.
 Maybe you think to yourself
 'When this is all over,
 I'm going to leave my headphones at home for a while
 To just take in all the sounds'
 Of tile, stone, steel, and concrete.

Dørene lukkes²

2.

Girl (16) died after a subway accident in Oslo.

A 16-year-old girl passed away Thursday afternoon after being run over by the subway at Holstein station in Oslo.

It's an accident, says operation leader Finn Belle to VG.

Last Updated 3 of February.

3.

The hidden melodies of subways around the world.
 This one, never so quiet as now.

-
1. Translation from Norwegian: Next station is Holstein.
 2. Translation from Norwegian: The doors are closing.

Source material:

https://youtube.com/watch?v=jCe__D7UQWI&t=29s

<https://nytimes.com/interactive/2021/08/13/arts/subway-train-sounds.html>

<https://theverge.com/2020/5/19/21263468/mta-nyc-subway-sounds-app-sound-board>

<https://openculture.com/2021/08/the-sound-of-subways-around-the-world.html>

<https://aps.org/publications/apsnews/200412/subway.cfm>

https://reddit.com/r/askscience/comments/ug3gy/what_causes_the_typical_sounds_of_an_accelerating/

Biographies

ALEX AFFLECK embarked on her degree after retiring from full-time work. She has always enjoyed reading and playing with words, especially cryptic crosswords and Scrabble. She has loved the freedom to explore her desire to write and is hoping to continue writing fiction after graduation. The writing will have to fit in around playing with her two new grandchildren and doing some travelling while she still has the energy.

HANNAH BACON recently discovered her love for script writing and particularly enjoys experimenting with naturalistic and humorous dialogue. Her favourite writers include Sally Wainwright, Phoebe Waller-Bridge and Caroline Aherne. One day, Hannah hopes to bring home the bacon by writing sit-coms and theatre productions. In her spare time, she enjoys supporting *The Mighty Blades* and spoiling her dwarf hamster, Stella.

ADAM BRIGGS specialises in writing to convey unconventional narratives through unconventional forms. He works on blending prose and poetry to explore the Queer experience, shedding a light on unique moments. His work plays with form and content to push the relationship between the two in an attempt to offer something new to the canon.

MACKENZIE CALE wrote a short story collection called *Men Without Women* in response to Ernest Hemingway's and Haruki Murakami's story collections of the same name. He blames Kafka for the collection's absurdities and Richard Brautigan for its obsession with fish. He blames both for his insecurities.

JASMINE MORGAN is a first-year student keen to grab all opportunities they can at university. Alongside her degree, she has a passion for drama and is very excited to be performing a piece in the Edinburgh Fringe Festival this year thanks to Theatre Group. They are always halfway through at least three books – at the time of writing, *Jazz* by Toni Morrison, *Vile Bodies* by Evelyn Waugh and *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf.

LILY PAGE's work explores the unstable, merging relationship between the human body and the environment in the wake of climate change. This is her second attempt at writing a novel – she has a short attention span. Her writing is informed by a range of other interests including archaeology, folklore, the Gothic, deep ecology, fungi, and Julia Kristeva. She has at least thirty Wikipedia tabs open at all times.

AMY PENROSE is President of LUU Art Society. Her undergraduate dissertation was on Virginia Woolf's use of colour, and she finds constant inspiration for her creative writing from her eye for visual art. As an artist she primarily creates oil paint portraiture. Amy has been a School of English student representative, making suggestions on behalf of her peers in student-staff partnership forums. In 2023 Amy embarks on her Master's degree in Modernist to Contemporary Literature at the University of Edinburgh. She hopes to pursue a career in publishing.

TOMMY SCOTT grew up in the North-East of England and spends much of his time reading science-fiction and fantasy. He chose to study a degree in Creative Writing to encourage him to branch out his interests. As such, his submission reflects a desire to blend the Gothic tradition of writing with modern social commentary in the form of horror short fiction.

AUDREY SELIGMANN is an international student who grew up in Switzerland and France in a family of artists and art enthusiasts. She studied hotel management before following her passion for reading and writing at the University of Leeds. When she is not reading or watching movies,

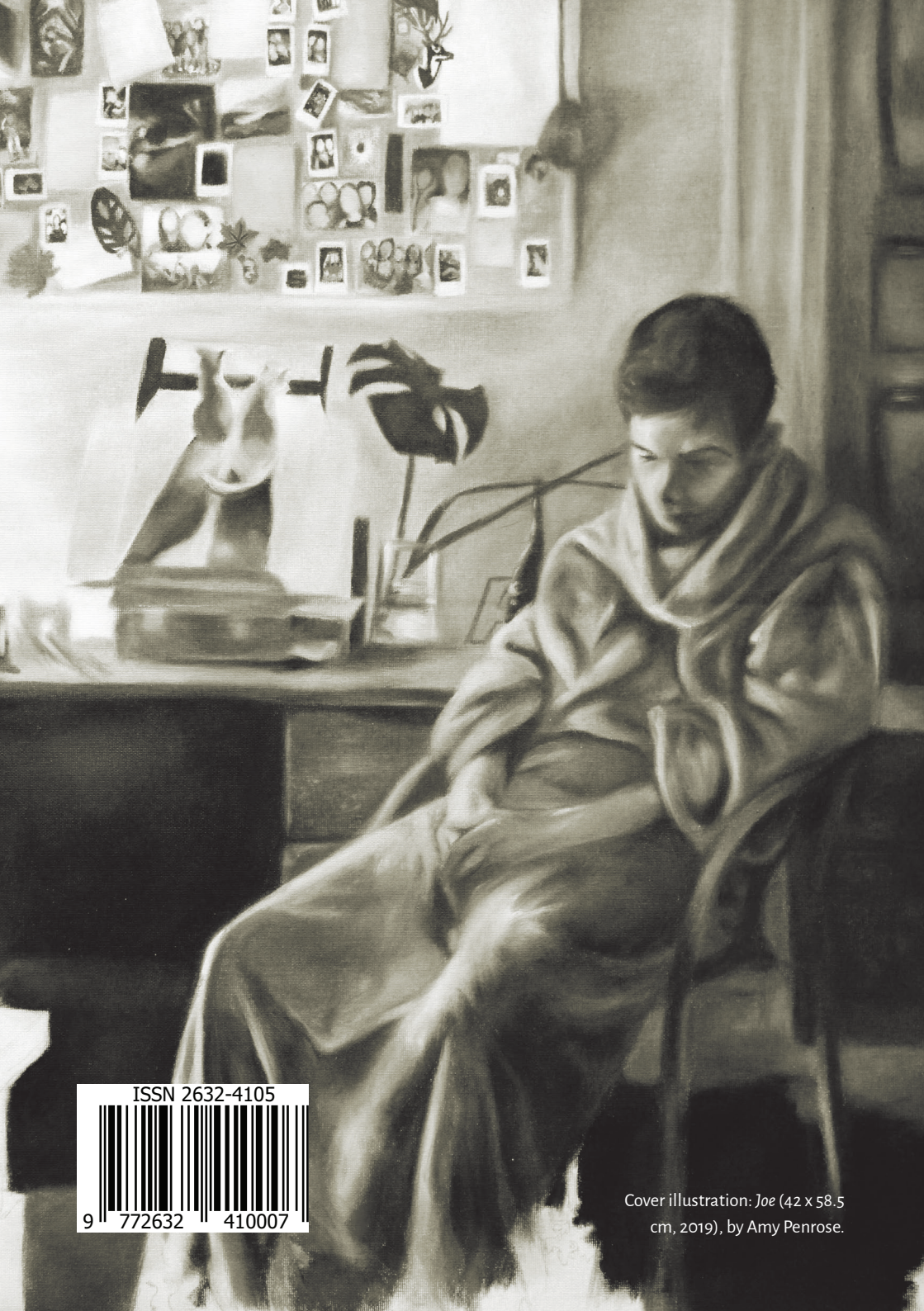
she enjoys adventure and trying out new recipes. She aspires to travel the world (in books and in real life) and learn about as many things as possible.

KAT SJODAL is originally from Oslo, Norway. She is currently working on an elegy in found poetry called *ALTER ALTAR*, where she is creating an altar by altering found material about her friend's death. The source material is limited to text found online. She is interested in exploring how the internet has become the modern-day altar, where people turn to Facebook and other websites to mourn the dead. This is an interesting hyper-space where the abstract ideas of death and internet and space (as not physical but symbolic) meet. She wants therefore to pull the language out of context, to see what is in the DNA of the language that describes loss.

CAITLIN STOBIE is a Lecturer in Creative Writing and Programme Leader for the BA English Literature with Creative Writing at the University of Leeds. She is the author of *Thin Slices* (Verve Poetry Press) and *Abortion Ecologies in Southern African Fiction: Transforming Reproductive Agency* (Bloomsbury Academic).

UTA TSUKADA BRIGHT has had a love for literature since childhood, a trait that was nurtured by her book-worm parents. An active imagination and plenty of daydreaming led her to be drawn to narratives and stories. With a primary interest in prose fiction, since studying English Literature with Creative Writing at Leeds University she has begun to explore writing poetry and creative non-fiction.

AMY WILLIAMS is a Swedish-English student who mostly writes short stories and poetry, though has been experimenting more frequently with a variety of different styles. Amy's favourite books and authors are constantly changing, but one of her current favourite writers is Haruki Murakami.



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