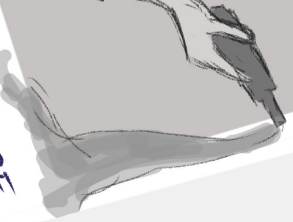




Night over Athens

SYNAPSE

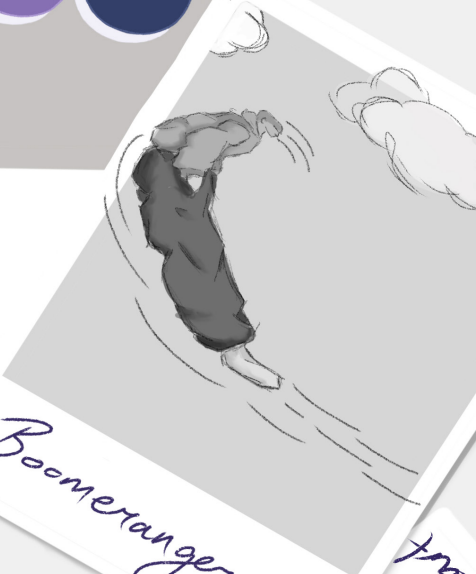


RECTO VERSO

APRIL
2024



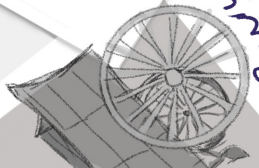
THE
S-Word



Boomerangers



Drawings



*Heart
Bugs
n
Guns*

RECTO VERSO

Edited by Amy Webster, Courtney Walker and Aaron Pavia

First published in the UK in 2024

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INTRODUCTION

This anthology serves as the culmination of our university experience, where we have come together to celebrate our individual voices and achievements, for an audience we hope will enjoy it. From intriguing prose pieces to candid non-fiction, heartfelt poetry to meaningful scripts, there is a diverse collection of work thriving within these pages, all fuelled by our own personal interests, experiences, and over-active imaginations.

We wanted to create something that reflected our time at the University of Lincoln; many of these works are previous assessment pieces from across the degree that we were asked to redraft using the various skills and techniques we learned along the way. In that respect, it seemed fitting that the title should be *Recto Verso* – a subtle nod to the beginning and end of this journey. For many of us, this will be our first publishing credit, which is a pretty brilliant way to round off a Creative Writing degree, don't you think?

Though the production process was, at times, stressful and somewhat overwhelming, it has been exciting to watch everything come together in one place. Knowing that we are the ones who wrote, edited, proofread, and designed this anthology from the ground up is a feat in itself, and to see it in its completed form is incredibly rewarding. But none of this would've been possible if not for the commitment and sheer determination of everyone involved – a simple 'thank you' doesn't begin to cover it.

We hope you enjoy this collection; there are plenty of themes and genres to explore so, please... dive right in. And if you are a proud family member or friend looking for a particular piece of work then skip ahead, find your specific writer – let's be honest, we know you will – and experience the product of our writing journeys so far.

Please note: some of these pieces contain explicit language and/or material of a sensitive nature, this ranges from alcoholism to the gory horrors of war. Please be mindful of this during your reading.

CARRIAGE B

by
Liz Burman

‘Smile, Niamh.’ Gran pointed the Kodak pocket camera with the cracked lens and faded case at her granddaughter stood on the porch step – her favourite place to have every school year photo shoot for the last fifteen years.

‘Seriously, Gran.’

‘Come on grumpy drawers.’

Niamh forced out a smile. ‘Okay?’

‘Okay, now come here for a gruddle.’

‘Gruddle’ was Gran’s pet word for a gran cuddle, and she thought you were never too old for one of them. She pressed Niamh’s petite head to her ample bosom and enveloped her like the coils of a boa constrictor, smothering and squeezing her.

‘I’m so proud of you, you do know that don’t you?’

Niamh tried to nod, her head still pressed against the Virgin Mary pendant her Gran wore for protection.

'I'd better go Gran. I don't want to be late on my first day, and that train doesn't wait, y'know?' She prised herself away from the gruddle, sporting an indentation of the Madonna on her forehead.

'Wait!' Gran drew a sign of the cross and kissed the necklace. 'Okay, and remember—'

'I know Gran, keep to the path.'

'Cheeky beggar. Now, off you go.'

There were two ways to the train station from Gran's house. The most direct route was via the town centre, but there was another way by the wood adjacent. Lectures started at eleven, so Niamh decided to go the scenic route. She laughed as she walked, remembering Gran's words.

After her Mum was last seen deviating off the path with a hooded man in the very woods she'd walked past a trillion times, Niamh had the words 'keep to the path and wear your crucifix' drilled into her.

The colours at this time of year were vibrant. Autumnal orange and red hues peppered the canopies and covered the forest floor so that when you walked, the leaves crunched like Rice Krispies beneath your feet. She loved this time of year, when you could hide under several layers and not feel judged by the super-fit girls.

There seemed to be a kangaroo jumping about with hobnail boots on in her stomach as it churned up all the anxieties for the day ahead. Niamh clutched at her abdomen, trying to calm the sense of dread. *It's university, not a firing squad. Get a grip.*

The breeze carried her Gran's perfume and seized her nostrils with Parma Violets and Pears Soap. The smell comforted her and made her retch at the same time, reminders of what once was. Passing the Woodland Walk with benches, picnic tables, and dens next to the recycling bins for broken homes, Niamh heard a voice. It tiptoed between the swings and under the slide, echoing through the play tunnel to dance in

one ear and out the other.

‘Be careful, he watches.’

The breeze went through her, colder than it should’ve been, cold like a body in the morgue. Niamh pulled her coat around her like a duvet on Sunday morning, but the rawness was ugly, and she shivered. Faded memories came through the branches, twisting and meandering in a fog. It filled the space with whispers, pallid faces, and the smell of baby powder.

What’s happening? Niamh tried to move but couldn’t, as if in a sleep paralysis. *Is this what this is, when you can’t trust your own mind? I need to wake up, but what if I’m not asleep?* A growl from deep in the bowels of the oaks startled her, and she prayed for the breeze to carry her away to any place but here.

She clutched onto the silver crucifix Gran always insisted she wore. She thought she saw a hooded figure retreat into the shadows before the breeze came again, and the world dropped her at the train station.

Shaken, Niamh boarded the train. She wore a cardinal cloak of heavy red wool, but she couldn’t remember how she got it. She sat down at a window seat in carriage B and looked about her. *Now would be an excellent time to wake up and for everything to go back to normal.* The train shuddered and lurched forward, making a young girl stumble and fall sideways onto the seat opposite. The girl gathered herself and then smiled at Niamh.

‘Are you new?’

‘Sorry?’

‘Are you new here?’

‘No, I travel on the train a lot,’ replied Niamh.

‘I didn’t mean the train,’ she laughed and brushed her fringe back with her hand.

Niamh gasped as she noticed a crack in her skull. She looked again,

and the young girl's face dissolved to talcum powder. Niamh shut her eyes, trying not to scream. *I'm hallucinating, this isn't real, it can't be. Dreams pass.* She covered her face with her hands and opened her eyes slowly, peeking through the gaps in her fingers, fearful of what she might see. *Thank goodness, all seems normal.*

The train pulled into Lincoln station and Niamh stepped out onto the platform. Outside, the breeze came again with secrets, carrying her to university and her first lecture.

The day seemed to drag, but it was uneventful, and she was grateful for that as the memories of earlier flitted in and out of her thoughts. When the last lecture finished, it was 3:05 pm. Niamh slung the cloak around her shoulders and picked up her rucksack – twenty minutes to get to the train or she'd miss it. *I'll use the lift today, might save me a bit of time.*

The lift was full of new souls all tightly pressed in, but when it stopped at the second floor, they floated out. Niamh pressed the 'G' button for the ground floor. She looked at her phone to check train timetables, and only glanced up when a male figure with a black hood slunk through the doors before they closed. He stood with his back to her, but he seemed familiar. Niamh felt uneasy, the same knot twisting in her stomach as before.

'Do you know why a gentleman is like a patient wolf?' The hooded man broke the silence.

Niamh moved as far as she could into a corner and did not answer. She began to panic, her palms wet and clammy. She dropped her phone.

'Well, do you?' The man pulled back the hood and turned around, his large frame filled the lift and his head brushed against the roof. He

smiled, but with an ominous leer, his piercing hazel eyes boring deep into Niamh's psyche, extracting her innermost thoughts, secrets, and fears. She bent down and picked up her phone, grasped her crucifix without even thinking, and noticed the man furrow his brow – a monobrow. *Now, what did Gran say about men with...* 'Well, I'll tell you then.'

Before the man could continue, the lift shuddered and the doors opened, Niamh took her cue and ran into the throng of students as if her life depended on it. She heard maniacal laughing behind her but kept her eyes forward, focused on catching the train home and escaping whatever madness this was.

On the station platform, a young girl and boy were making out, barely out of their teens, puffing on joints in between eating each other's faces. Niamh felt repulsed as she boarded the waiting train. *Is this the same seat as this morning?* A chubby woman wearing two coats sat down next to Niamh. Her ample bottom covered part of the red cloak and pulled on the material.

'Excuse me, you're sitting on my cloak.'

The lady looked at Niamh sternly, but something in her eyes told her that she was there to help.

'You know, my dear, the wolf cannot devour you unless you invite it, so just make sure you never do.' She motioned to the other side of the carriage where the hooded man from the lift stood. Niamh gasped. 'The wolf is cunning; it wears many guises. Watch out for those eyes and the brow that meets in the middle, and keep to the path, do you hear?'

Niamh's lips quivered. 'Yes, that's what my grandma says too.'

'Good girl.'

'Thank—'

But the woman had disappeared. Niamh looked back to where she had seen the hooded man but saw only shadows. *Where was he?* The train was now out of Lincoln and going towards Hykeham. Niamh knew there was a tunnel ahead, and she felt safety in numbers would be a sensible option. Standing up, she turned to join others jostling towards the doors in the carriage. Without warning, the carriage lights went out and the train ground to a sudden stop. Niamh and several others fell forward. A silent scream caught in her throat as warm breath stalled across the nape of her neck and arms encircled her waist.

‘You’re mine,’ a thick raspy voice from behind whispered in Niamh’s ear. The lights flickered on again and the train groaned back to life. She spun around, but there was only a young woman with a slashed neck, carrying a dog with three legs and a flat tail, who promptly sat down on the seat she had just vacated.

Niamh nervously fiddled with the bow beneath her chin and tightened the hood on her cloak. She pulled it forward over her auburn locks, ready to leave the train. The words of warning repeated in her thoughts as her eyes searched for the iconoclast.

There he was – standing at the opposite end of the carriage, his gaze fixed on her, uninterested in the other travellers. Niamh felt compelled to look back and noticed the curved fingernails, low set ears, and thick brow that met in the middle. She trembled and huddled deep within the throng.

‘Don’t invite it, don’t invite it,’ she muttered. The train slowed to a crawl and the mob pushed forward. She felt the breeze from outside and got a whiff of menthol and putrescine. The train screeched to a stop and the doors opened. The crowd burst forward with unabashed vigour, moving as one towards the exit, swarming like bees. Niamh’s breath hitched. At her feet, the body of a boy lay with a broken neck

and pink teddy still clutched in his arms; he had started to pale. With frantic hands she began to manoeuvre through the crowd. *Where was the hooded man?* Further up the platform, she saw a policeman.

‘Help, please help!’ Niamh ran up to the uniformed officer. She thought he would move, but he remained still. ‘Officer, please can you help me?’

‘You want me to help you?’

‘Yes, yes, of course I do.’

She tugged at the jagged hem of the policeman’s sleeve and noticed the curved fingernails, and her heart stopped like it had taken a bullet. *Would running be futile now that permission had been granted?* The policeman slowly turned to face her, and the same familiar hazel eyes and mono-brow met her gaze.

The man lifted his chin. ‘As I was saying earlier, it’s because a gentleman can be patient until the line is crossed, but when that happens, they act no different to a wolf and will devour you.’

Niamh didn’t want to die. She looked up and down the platform to see if there were any passengers to help her, but it was empty. As if reading her mind, the man bent down and whispered.

‘Running is futile. You’re mine now.’ She felt a tug and her cloak was already in the man’s hand, the curved fingernails digging deep into the fibres, leaving its impression.

Niamh wondered how much of her would be left to identify her body. *Was this the same fate my Mum succumbed to?* The Virgin herself was unlikely to manifest and help her now.

‘Where are we going?’ Niamh muttered.

The man didn’t blink. ‘Does it matter?’

‘I suppose not.’

‘Here, take my arm.’ The man released the cloak and outstretched

his hand.

Niamh took her opportunity and ran without delay towards the turnstiles. She could hear her heart in her ears. As she got to the exit, a strange fog appeared, and she ran blindly – anywhere away from her stalker was good. The cloak weighed heavy around her shoulders and Niamh’s breath laboured. She looked back, and as she did, she ran head-long into an impasse. The force of impact made Niamh stumble and fall backwards, and she braced herself, closing her eyes ready to meet the ground. But it never happened.

Opening her eyes, she already knew it was him. The fog cleared and revealed its secret. She was at the Woodland Walk with the hooded man.

‘Take my arm,’ the man repeated.

‘Why can’t bad stuff happen to other people?’ Niamh whispered.

People joined them in the wood, with powdered masks and hollowed eyes. They nodded as they passed. Niamh shuddered. Suddenly, the cold brought the smell of Parma Violets and Pears Soap floating in on the breeze.

‘Gran!’

The man smelled the air. He yanked Niamh off the path, but she pulled back.

‘I have to stick to the path.’

‘Who told you that? That’s rubbish. I know a shortcut.’ The man laughed and jerked her arm. Niamh stumbled forward. The slip exposed her crucifix and he recoiled. She recovered her footing and thrust the silver crucifix in front of her.

‘Can’t you remember what you were before you became this?’

‘This what?’ The man spat back. ‘Don’t you know there’s no animal more savage than a human?’

‘This is true.’ From out of the shadows, Gran appeared, carried in

on the night breeze.

‘I wished it with all my might, and you came,’ said Niamh.

‘Of course, dear child. I wasn’t going to let you go on my watch.’ She turned to the man, who licked his lips at his two-for-one meal deal.

‘What big ears you have.’

‘All the better to hear you with,’ he answered.

‘What big eyes you have.’

‘All the better to see you with.’

‘What big teeth you have.’

‘All the better to eat you with!’ And with that, the man leapt forward in a frenzied attack and engulfed Gran. She was gone.

‘Gran!’ Niamh screamed a terrible scream and pulled away from the shadows, but the man blocked her exit.

‘Time for dessert.’

Niamh felt the cold again, and an empty void. She sensed the man’s arms latched around her as he lifted her into the trees. She kicked her legs, fought with every fibre of her being, and clutched her crucifix, but a branch hooked her necklace as they floated upwards.

‘No!’ She shrieked. The man, with an open mouth and jaws that widened past her head, was changing, transforming into a lycanthrope. Niamh peered down the creature’s throat and saw a pair of eyes staring back. Without hesitation, she thrust both her hands down the black abyss and plucked Gran from the belly of the beast, just as it convulsed. The breeze rode in like a raging tempest and carried Niamh and Gran back to the gruddle, back to the porch step.

‘I’d better go Gran. I don’t want to be late, y’know?’ Niamh prised herself away from her Gran’s chest. ‘Where’s your necklace, Gran?’

‘My silver Virgin Mary pendant?’

Niamh nodded.

‘I think I lost it on the Woodland Walk, but don’t worry, I have another.’

Gran pulled out a silver pendant from beneath her jumper. She drew the sign of the cross and kissed the necklace for good measure.

‘Okay, you can go now. And don’t forget – stick to the path.’

‘Don’t worry Gran, I’m taking the bus from now on.’ Niamh pulled her red cloak around her, waved to Gran, and set off towards town.

Meanwhile, on the Woodland Walk, a silver crucifix hung on a gnarled branch, forgotten in the moment.

About the Author

Liz Burman is a third-year Creative Writing mature student based in Gainsborough. Liz has embraced all genres but has found a love for script. She has enjoyed a tour with The Lincoln Company and been published in the *Lincoln Book Festival Review*. Liz enjoys concerts and serial killer documentaries.

NIGHT OVER ATHENS

by

Charlie Collines

The Spartan Sea opened before me. My boat rocked, and the wood – which was already far too close to rotting – creaked, breaking the quiet that brought me no peace. I thought the boat would fall into the sea and become as forgotten in time as the ancient gods, but it managed to stay afloat. The water seemed as if it was waiting, holding me in its waves; it'd brought me here, completing its job. An unnerving calm settled over the water before two monstrous and watery hands rose from the depths, grasping for the hull. I tried to grab hold of a paddle, but the one I caught flew out of my hand and over the water's edge.

The hands wrapped their glassy fingers around my waist, so tight I was surprised I could still breathe. They lifted me away from the boat at speeds I never thought possible. After travelling for miles through the Great Sea, we reached our destination. The hands dropped me onto a small island full of tall trees and small lakes, one which would've been beautiful in other circumstances. I looked upon desolate water, filled

with an emptiness that I couldn't displace or begin to understand. In the distance, I could see an outline of land, but it seemed a shadow had rolled over it, destroying anything recognisable. I knew the land as my own, and a deep remorse for a place I'd loved flooded my body.

I started to think that I'd be alone forever, trapped on an island that I wished I'd known, but a flood of water crept from the sea and rose into a towering stranger before me. They looked like a manifestation of the sea itself, but underneath the watery outline was a form I recognised. They didn't seem to be drowning; in fact, they looked content. That was until I looked into their eyes. They were full of a deep and suffocating life, like the abyss of the sea without a speck of white. In their hand they held a trident, as large as they were tall, that carried a sharp and fretful shadow. At last, I realised who I was facing. His image became clearer in my mind, and I wondered how I had not seen him before. He was the plague that would never let me go.

I didn't think it possible, but the shadows of the night began crawling toward him, making the water cower underneath. The dark slinked up his trident until it was slick with black goo that pooled onto the sea god's hand. His mouth cracked wide open, and from the emptiness came thousands of broken and decaying sea creatures. They crept from his mouth and dropped to the sand below, crawling toward me with a hunger, as if to take my life as their own. I thought to scream, but my lungs constricted. To make it worse, my chiton clung to me, wet and crisp as paper; the water was numbing to the point that if I stayed here, I thought I'd become a block of ice.

With a wave of his shadow-slicked hand, he threw me far from the land and into the depths. The critters held tight. Whether they were seeking safety or a feast, I didn't know. The ocean closed over my eyes, at last giving me the rest that I desired, and I braced myself for the cold

that never came. Instead, the water boiled as if heated by the flames of Hephaestus. I couldn't take it; my skin had started to melt off, and my bones were crisp. Clarity lit up in my brain, despite the death that was bound to take me any second, and I decided that this wasn't how I would go. This wouldn't be my end.

'Agafya!' A voice arose from my room.

I woke up in a heavy sweat that was beading down my forehead. My covers had somehow left my bed, becoming a clump on the floor, yet it hadn't helped how hot I was. I heaved myself up and felt a pang in my arm. Throwing off the covers, I saw underneath my arm, scarred and raw. Fear crept up my spine.

I heard a shuffling and screamed at the someone standing in the frame of my door. Maybe I hadn't escaped after all.

'Daughter, you're going to be late,' my mother sighed. 'I don't know why you insist on waking up so late.'

I sighed, relieved, before immediately falling back into worry at what day it was.

'What?' That was all my lethargic brain could muster, but after a moment I let out a mumble that somewhat resembled agreement. I peeled away from my bed and ran to rummage through my dresser. My mother walked out of my room, muttering something akin to a curse. I changed into the whitest chiton I laid my eyes upon. Athena probably wouldn't be too pleased with the state of its cleanliness, but it had to do.

Behind my house stood the Parthenon, a large and imposing temple to Athena, looming over us. I'd have to trek the mountainous terrain, and I wasn't looking forward to it. The ascent wasn't extensive, yet by the time I'd made my way up to the temple and pushed open the grand

cedar doors, I'd started to tire. I stood at the entrance, greeted by the intense smell of cinnamon wafting towards me in a sudden gush of air. I lingered for a moment and looked in. There I could see priestesses and the occasional metic running about the place, making final adjustments for the ceremony, not taking a moment to pause. Taking another deep breath, I stumbled inside. Moving from room to room, I strolled through the stone pillars of the temple's stretching cellar and avoided each priestess I came across, fearing for conversations that would no doubt last until the Panathenaea was long since over.

I shifted a piece of cloth covering a side room and found my mother taking in a carving on the wall. 'Mother, I need to talk to you.'

'Hold on for a second, dear. Do you know what this is depicting?'

I sighed. 'Yes mother, the war between us and the Corinthians.' I hoped that answer would appease, and the conversation would soon end, but it appeared not.

'Good, but not good enough. This is your culture, please, show some interest,' she reprimanded. 'It was one of the markers for the war between Athens and Sparta. We'd gotten too close to one of Sparta's allies.'

I was forgetting my patience, and I almost began to run in place. I must not have been hiding it well.

My mother gave me a knowing glance. 'That war gives us the strength today to keep fighting, daughter. We should be forever thankful for Athena's protection and her watchful eye. Remember this blessing, remember it today.'

I started to nod in thoughtfulness, but the lesson was going on far too long for my taste. Again, my attempts at feigning interest were not effective.

'Fine, daughter. What is it? And please, take some more care in your appearance.'

I looked at my outfit. *Malaka*, I'd put it on backwards. At that moment, I ignored it and decided that I'd adjust it later. Instead, I turned to my mother. 'I dreamt of the sea god last night.'

'Again?' She held out a hand for me.

'I thought they'd stopped but,' I paused, looking for the right words, 'it was different, he seemed lost.' I neglected to mention that he drowned me, fearing that all it would achieve was panic or confusion, which I had no intention of spreading.

Her hand tightened on mine. 'Lost?'

I nodded.

'My dear,' she paused, 'it's another test, it must be. Poseidon is only trying to steer you away from Athena. But you mustn't listen.' Though there was a determination in her voice that almost made me believe it, I wasn't sure that was it. The dream felt like something I shouldn't disregard so easily. I knew of Poseidon and Athena's relationship; that they'd move Olympus and Earth to destroy each other, but to challenge me in this way felt strange.

I hugged my mother, and her smile almost made me forget my fears for the moment. Almost. 'You're probably right,' I lied. 'I love you.'

'I love you, too.'

The sweet moment was soon interrupted by a fuss over in the other room. I peered over my mother's shoulder and saw my younger twin brothers standing in the middle of the Parthenon's cellar, looking from side to side as if they were the sheep that we'd lost last week.

They took turns pushing and shoving, blaming the other for not finding their mother as quickly as they'd like, but after a moment, they gave in. The two of them fell to the floor in defeat, looking toward the great Athena Parthenos and turning into a kneel, almost synchronised. I thought it sweet that they turned to her for guidance, even for some-

thing as simple as this. She held a shield in her left hand, and the goddess of victory, Nike, in her right. But the shield was upturned, pointing towards the sky.

It happened a few years ago, after a vicious storm that destroyed many Athenians' homes. Diviners still tell of the night after the horror; when the guards were patrolling the area, it's said that something possessed them to look towards the Parthenos. They found the statue had shifted, and they swore that there was a glint in its eyes. Some believed that Athena grew tired of Poseidon's attacks on her land, and so she inhabited the statue to guard against more attacks. Since that point, the storms occurred less, and none were as violent as that night. Word of the event spread, and her reverence grew, so much so that Athens had to build twice as many homes.

Back when my siblings were yet to be born, my mother told me that we worshipped the goddess for her wisdom and bravery. The land of Athens had felt like an offering from Athena herself, and so we should always celebrate it. Though for me, it had felt more personal; I felt connected to our protectress in my heart, as if she were something more than just that.

My mother caught me in my daydream, and I turned back to reality. 'Now hurry, my arms are aching, and the ceremony is starting.'

I hadn't realised that I was still holding her so tight, and I let go, throwing her an apologetic look. 'Yes, mother.' I walked out toward my brothers.

We'd stayed far past our intended time, metics having dragged us into far too many conversations after the ceremony was over. Overseeing our small Panathenaea-like event left us with much to do, as well as

much to talk about, so we had the conversations that should've occurred many weeks ago, had they bothered to show earlier. Leaving the temple, I noticed how late it was; the goddess Selene had long since brought the moon across the sky and returned home. If we didn't do the same immediately, King Alexander would never think of us to host the celebrations again.

The attendees we'd have at our events were never the same, and I shuddered at the thought of Poseidon's worshippers intruding once more. The last time they'd appeared, a group of them had attempted to start a fight and reminded us that the rivalry between Poseidon and Athena would never cease, at least in the minds of some. We hurried back home, every one of us bristling with anxiety. Everyone except for my brothers. Running in front of us, they teased and pushed one another around with playful frowns splayed on their faces. They were both rather young, so it was no surprise, but I couldn't help my growing jealousy at how carefree they had seemed. Before he passed, my father had reminded me that I was like that once, and that same joy I could see in both of their faces was once mine. I should let them live in it whilst they could. I looked behind, half-expecting my father to be standing there smiling at us all. That smile could bring the toughest of gods to tears.

Once we were home, we hurried to complete the preparations; we'd only a moment before they start to gather. I decided I'd retire to my room for a time and prepare myself. Walking in, I smelled a sweet dusty cinnamon in the air that I felt unusual in my room, though it wasn't hard to imagine it drifting from the town. The curtains were blowing through my open window, and I paused to take in the fresh air before breaking away and falling onto my bed, as if ready for the covers to take me to sleep. My eyes grew heavy, and I couldn't muster the energy to stop them. Then, at last, they closed.

It mustn't have been very long 'til I woke as the court outside was silent. I thanked the gods that my moment of peace could still go on. Rubbing my eyes, I prepared to return downstairs, managing to muster a little strength as I got up from my bed.

A gentle yet authoritative voice stopped my walk, coming from behind. 'Agafya.'

I spun around, grabbing a vase of tiger lilies. 'Who are you?' I gripped the flowers as if they were a weapon.

'Please, stay calm.' The stranger gestured with her hands. 'Do not alert others, I'm not a danger to you.'

'Why should I listen to you?' Somehow, despite my asking, I was already prepared to obey. Her eyes held a certain respect that I had to admire, and her clothes, a chiton similar to mine, made me feel as if I were safe.

'Agafya, your life is under threat. Someone is coming for you.'

'Would you care to be more specific?'

'You may not want to hold that tone with me, my dear. And I assure you, if I could be any more specific, I would, but I fear that wouldn't be wise.' The woman grabbed something from behind her, as if it had been in mid-air, and enclosed it within her hands. 'I'm here to give something to you.'

I nodded, understanding without evidence that this was necessary, and she opened her hands to drop whatever she'd held into mine. In shock, I gasped and dropped it onto the ground with a thud.

'Is that real?' I'd spoken far louder than I'd intended, but I expected that my apprehension was grounded. She nodded as I went to pick it up again.

I turned it over in my hands, looking at it with closer precision. It'd looked like flesh, though the heart was pale and almost empty-looking,

lacking any sort of blood, with a texture to it that felt nothing like it appeared. It was familiar, but still a strange sensation. ‘What do you want me to do with this?’

‘You shall hold onto it, at my behest. There may come a time where someone tries to take it, but do not worry. It’ll take care of itself.’ I had no idea what her words meant, but I nodded once again and took another look at the object. As I looked back up, the woman was gone. The only trace was a cloud of smoke that left me in a fit of coughing, wafting the remnants away from me.

I ran about my room, looking for somewhere to hide the heart. As much as I needed to hold onto it, I couldn’t very well take it down to the party, so I buried it underneath the pile of sheets before I crept down the stairs and entered the court. Hundreds of guests were starting to gather, but it felt abandoned despite it being the busiest it had been in weeks. The room felt still, not a breath, nor a breeze. The guests turned around, looking at me, staring with their mouths agape. That was odd enough, but the other half of the room seemed unaware, their eyes glazed over and vacant of any worry.

One person stood out from the crowd, a figure I knew making their way toward me, wearing a golden crown of leaves upon his head. My dream came flooding back to me, and I choked. My throat had gone dry, and I grasped for a goblet of wine. His eyes were cloudier and greyer than I’d last seen. They seemed disconnected, travelling through mine as if for freedom. Then I heard something that filled me with a certain sense of dread, one I was all too familiar with. A voice, a whisper – a beckoning that I could only feel in my head.

A despondent Poseidon spoke. ‘Scion of Athena, we meet at last.’

About the Author

Charlie Collins is a third-year Creative Writing BA student in Lincoln. They specialise in fantasy and young adult – their favourite genres. Their work incorporates developments of gender identity, and growth in the characters' wonderous worlds. They've a keen interest in technology and can be found dabbling throughout the day.

A CHICKEN SHOP DATE

by
Brooke Cullen

Ma nagged before I left the house as per usual.

‘Stay clear of Kingsford Street. If them boys who swear they own the steps of the community centre try and talk to you, just keep your head down and don’t stop walking.’

She sat on her chair with an episode of *EastEnders* on, her eyes glued to the screen as she shouts at me like I’m not in the same room as her. I don’t know what it is about Caribbean mums and their soaps but my Ma loves *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street* and all that. She complains to me about playing violent games and watching inappropriate movies, but I swear these soaps are the ones that be killing a character off each week.

‘And you better wish Miss Lee a good morning, she’s been awful lonely after Roberts death, I want her to know she got people round here who care about her.’

I nod along even though I’m barely listening cos Ma has this sixth sense about her. Even when she’s not looking at me, she can tell if I got

some nasty look on my face. I pulled faces behind her once when I was little and getting told off and somehow, she knew exactly what I was up to and gave me some beats that I don't think I'll ever forget.

'Also, the high street still smells of piss cos of that homeless man who's set up camp there, so I'd take the long way through the park if I were you. But that being said, make sure you cut across the field and don't get too close to the kiddie park; some of them college boys hang round there, and I don't want you getting into no trouble.'

She give me good advice, she the best Ma I could ask for, but she go on forever sometimes. She can never just wave me goodbye and let me get on with my day. She always have to give me a ten-step plan to follow otherwise she think I'll never make it home. I'm used to it at this point, but today I'm running late, so I stand here hoping she'll wrap it up soon.

'Oh, and make sure you say hello to Kayla for me.' She finally turns round to look at me. 'I love you.'

She says it with this big smile on her face. She beckons me over to her, her arms out wide, ready for a hug. She pulls me in, and I almost suffocate cos she squeeze me so tight. Then I kiss her goodbye and walk out the front door onto the landing, slamming the door shut behind me. There's this mysterious stain that's been on the floor outside our flat for the past few weeks, which I always tiptoe round. I have my guesses on what it may be, some make me more nervous than others. But right now, my minds too busy on Kayla to worry about some mystery piss stain.

She my girl, has been for two months now, and I think I love her. The boys say I'm down bad, but she good to me, and I'd be stupid to let her go. I feel bad cos it's been raining out and Kayla never carries a coat cos she hates carrying shit and says a jacket would cover up her outfit. Usually, I can convince her to take my coat if it's cold enough or

if the estate is drenched all over like it is today. But I'm running so late that she'll be soaked through by now, her clothes clinging tightly to her body. I know the weather making her mad cos my phone lights up with her name not even a few seconds later. It makes me smile at first, then I worry if she gonna yell at me, but when I pick it up, she only says *where are you?* And her voice don't sound too angry. Yet.

Yo, b is all I manage to say cos I don't wanna tell her that I've just left my yard. She hates it when I call her that, she complains now telling me how cringey it sounds. So, I tell her *sorry, b* just to wind her up. She laugh down the phone before admitting that *she can't wait to see me*, and I can't help but smile. Sometimes I still can't believe that she *my* girl.

She rambles on for a few more minutes about things I wouldn't normally care about, but I listen intently because it's her. Then she tells me where she'll wait for me, and I tell her that I'll see her soon. It's a lie, it'll take me at least another fifteen to get to her, but I'll worry about that later. Right now, I'm just psyched to see her.

The lift down is grim as always. I think there's puke in the corner, or something that a lot look like it. It smells bad too, so I lift my hoodie up to cover my nose and pull the draw strings tight. The lift lowers down slowly, rumbling like it about to fall apart. I wonder why I never just take the stairs cos I swear every time I step into this metal box, I feel like I'm about to die. But as always it reaches the ground floor and I step out unharmed, leaving the pile of puke behind me.

I walk outta the block and onto the estate. It ain't a long trip to the bottom of my road, our high-rise is situated right by the end of it. So, ain't long before I'm met with a decision. To continue straight ahead, taking the long way to see Kayla, or taking the shortcut down Kingsford Street and facing all the 'thugs'. Ma's words flash in my head. She really don't like them boys. But the only reason she say all them things about

them is because she don't know them guys like I do. She think they a bunch of thugs cos every time she walk down there, they sometimes holla at her. But them boys who hang on the community steps are actually my friends. I'd be scared to admit that to her though.

Lucky for Ma though, none of my boys are hanging by the centre. The only things that point to them ever being there are a few cans of Rubicon and ends of some spliffs. Police patrol this area bares now, it's hard for people to deal stuff round here. So, looking at them empty papers that litter the floor I wonder how they all managed to get any weed. I'd have to see if I can get a hold of a few of the boys sometime soon. A sesh in the park is needed, maybe I could bring Kayla too.

Thoughts of the boys and Kayla circle round my mind as I reach the bottom of the high street. Though I'm pulled out of my thoughts when I hear my name being called from across the road. I could recognise that voice anywhere. It's Miss Lee and her evil chihuahua she has yapping beside her. It's called Angel or something though it definitely ain't a fitting name for that devil dog. Miss Lee keep calling and though I pretend not to notice her, keeping my head down and picking up my pace, I know she can see me. And all I can think of is her calling up Ma and nagging on the phone about how I ignored her. So, I look up, cross the road, and walk up to her little house, staying on the other side of the fence in the hopes that her stupid dog will leave me alone.

'Hi, Miss Lee,' I say with a strained smile on my face.

'Hey, baby. You alright? How's Mummy doing? Where you off to? You being good at school?'

It's already too many questions to answer and I know that if I don't say something now, she'll keep on going; Miss Lee loves the sound of her own voice. So, I reply with a simple 'I'm good' and it seems to satisfy her.

‘You see Dwayne about lately?’ She beckons me closer, keeping her voice at a whisper. ‘He’s been acting strange, boy. Having one of them episodes. I hear him hollering and all when it’s the early hours of the morning. I can barely sleep.’

I nod along, listening to her complain and ramble. Miss Lee the reason I got to know Dwayne in the first place, she talk about him so much. He nice, and I talk to him sometimes, mostly because I feel bad for him. But he definitely doesn’t deserve all the hate he gets. Usually, I’d love to hear Miss Lee continue on and on about all the mental issues he’s been having lately, but right now, I really gotta go. Kayla’s waiting for me.

‘You’ll give him some of these for me though, won’t you?’ Miss Lee pulls out some bread and cheese she got wrapped up in some film that she’s had stored in her pocket. And as much as she nag, and ask too many questions and complain, its moments like these that I see her just like any other aunty round here. She just care too much. And caring is what she finds comfort in. Especially since Dylan died. He her son, or he was.

Miss Lee not the type of person you ever expect to see cry. She a tough lady from Jamaica, she don’t take no shit from no one. But when Dylan died, she broke. I’m not surprised. A mother outliving her child, that shit’s gotta be hard. It’s just been weird, seeing her change so much. I feel bad complaining about her, I know all she really want is someone to talk to. Maybe that’s why she’s clung on to Dwayne so much. He a stand in for Dylan. He’s someone to help her heal.

‘I’d give it to him myself, but I saw you walking by and knew you’d be heading that way. You’ll do me the favour, won’t you, baby?’

‘Don’t worry, Miss Lee, I got you.’

So, I take the bread outta her hand and give her a quick kiss on the cheek, knowing she’ll sing my praises to Ma when she ends up on the

phone with her later on.

‘Catch you later, Miss Lee.’

‘Bye, honey. Keep safe.’

As if he was waiting for me, I spot Dwayne sitting outside the corner shop from across the street. I jog across the road, barely missing getting hit by a car because I’m too impatient to wait for the green man. He see me walking towards him and his face light up. He knows whenever I walk by this way, I’m here to give him something, whether that’s spare change or some of Miss Lee’s leftovers.

‘Yo, little man. How you doing?’ Dwayne shouts making people’s heads turn. He always got this big smile on his face. Joy in the face of hardship or whatever. Everyone could be a little more like him, I think.

People walking up and down the high street look at him like he scum, too loud, obnoxious, someone not worth their time. His clothes are tattered, and I’m sure he ain’t showered in a couple weeks. But I can’t help but have sympathy for the guy. He real nice, but nobody gives him the chance.

‘I’m alright, Dwayne. Miss Lee wanted me to drop these off to you.’ I hand him the little parcel and he’s turn it about in his hands, inspecting it.

‘Oh, she too good to me, bringing me all this food. What’s in it this time?’ He pokes at the package, still grinning.

‘Some bread and cheese, I think. I’ll pop into the shop and grab you a drink if you need?’ He shakes his head and start unwrapping the food outta its wrapper. He gives the sandwich a big sniff and sighs as if he ain’t eaten in days. It throw me off a bit but I guess when you don’t eat much you enjoy them little things.

‘Nah I’m alright, little man. I got some money from some guy all suited and booted. Enough to buy me a drink and new pair of socks. I

can feel I'm on the up, ya know?'

'So, you been good, Dwayne?'

'Yes, never been better.' He start scoffing down the bread I given him, his eyes kinda gloss over, he just focused on the food.

'You know you got people round who care about you, right? Don't ever listen to them people on the streets telling you otherwise, yeah?' I say it cos it's been on my heart ever since I realised how so many people look at him differently. And even though he don't say nothing, I know he heard me. And all I can hope is that he knows that its true. People do care about him, even if it sometime feel like they don't.

I decide to leave him be and say goodbye to him, letting him shake my hand and thank me for the delivery. He leaves some crumbs on my hand, and a bit of butter on my thumb too. I wipe it onto my joggers not thinking bout the grease stain it leaves. And straight away all I can think about is how Ma gonna kill me, and Kayla too.

She always complains about how I dress. It always *why you always gotta wear them tracksuits, you ever feel like dressing nice for once*, and never a simple *you look nice*. These tracksuits she complain about aren't cheap or nothing. But today I tried a little for her sake. Still got joggers on cos I don't think I could ever feel comfortable in anything else, but I put on a nice tee hoping to dress it up. She'll still complain.

'Yo, Messiah, is that you yeah?'

I see my boy Darelle and a few of his friends that I don't know that well cos he met them on the road after he got kicked outta school. Ma got scared after that cos she thought I'd copy him thinking he was cool. But Relle been bad since day one and him getting expelled was bound to happen. I've never been like that. Even with him around as an influence.

'Hey, man. I'm just on my way to meet Kayla.'

I dap him up and watch as his face turns when I mention Kayla.

‘Awh, all you do is hang around with that girl. You don’t have time for your homies no more.’

‘Don’t be like that. I swear I’ll hit your line soon, but my girl comes first.’

‘Bros before hoes, dawg.’

I hate it when he calls her that.

‘She ain’t a hoe, dawg.’

He chuckles before waving me off and walks in the other direction, which I’m kinda glad about since I don’t really wanna talk to him today. He’s pissed me off. He means well, and I love him like a brother, but he always got something to say about Kayla. I lowkey think he jealous of her; though he’d kill me if I ever said it. He ain’t ever been able to hold down a girl cos he a chronic cheater. If he could find the right girl, then I know he’d understand how I feel about Kayla. I don’t look at any other girl now I’m with her.

When I finally get to our meet spot, rocking up on the corner of Milton Street, I instantly spot Kayla. The look on her face scares me and I swear she gonna swing if I get too close. I’m late, in joggers, and it’s been raining so she’s soaking wet. I just know she gonna be even angrier when I tell her where we going on our date.

‘The chicken shop, again?’

I don’t know why she say it like that. The place is mad cheap and the food bangs. It do smell of grease and sometimes you can feel it too. When you place your hands on the counter or rest them on the tables you get this slimy film that covers them. I don’t think they clean in them places, they always got crumbs covering the tables and shit coloured stains on the floor. But there’s worse places I could take her. I know a nigga that took a girl on a first date to the park. They sat on the swings and drank red bulls that he’d mopped from the Tesco Express round

the corner. They ain't been on a date since.

When we rock up to the chicken shop that greasy smell is there and Kayla's face scrunch up. She wrap her arms around herself, her fingers holding onto the fabric of her white Cami top, which is almost see-through cos of the rain, not that I'm complaining. She's paired it with these jeans that I always tell her are my favourite cos I like the way they make her arse look, so I take a few moments to stare while we wait for the cook to prepare our food.

It's not long after we're sat on one of the ripped-up booths, enjoying our chicken, that Omar walks in. Kayla don't notice him at first but of course he goes out of his way to walk over, placing his hands on the grease-covered table and leaning right over us.

'Hey, Messiah. You still taking your girl out for dates at Dixie's?'

He laugh a little, and the boys behind him laugh a lot but I don't think it's that funny. Kayla sets down her box of chicken and wipes her hands on a napkin. She flashes Omar a smile but then her hands dart up to her mouth to cover it. She turns to rummage through her bag and find a small pocket mirror. Flipping it open, she bares her teeth in the mirror, clearing out any bits of chicken that have gotten stuck. My hands ball into a fist and I feel myself getting heated, but I stretch them back out, trying to keep my cool. They used to date and that. And no matter how much she tried to reassure me that there's nothing between them no more, I can't help but feel this insane amount of jealousy build up inside me every time I see him.

I know I should trust her more. But Omar has always had it out for me, especially now that I'm with his ex-girl. He'd take her back as soon as she gave him the chance. I hope it don't ever come to that.

'You enjoying your two-piece, princess?'

His eyes glide over Kayla and her water-soaked skin and her gaze

locks with his. His stare lingers on places I'd rather it didn't, and I swear I'm this close to swinging at him before Kayla pipes up.

'It's 'ight.'

'Yeah, she love this place. It her favourite.'

'Nah, the steakhouse was her favourite. My girl worth more than this shit hole.'

'She not your girl.'

He wrong for that one. They ain't been together for months now. Not since he got charged a while back. He slings all sort of drugs, that's the only reason he was able to afford all them fancy places for their little dates anyway. When Kayla first started talking to me, I used to ask her about Omar. She said she was done with him, done with gangbangers and drug dealers as a whole. But Omar got money, and girls love money more than they could love any date at a crappy chicken shop.

'I'm Messiah's girl now, Omar, you know we've been done for a long time. He don't take me fancy places but at least he ain't a prick. Now leave us alone.'

His mouth hangs open, I watch him and smirk, wrapping my arms round Kayla's shoulders and leaning back in my chair. He bites his lip and his body tense; I see veins start popping out his forehead. Then he wipes his greasy hands against his Levis before giving Kayla a slight nod.

'Alright, I see how it is.'

He's still for a moment, his boys behind him looking like they wanna go, but he don't move. It's almost like he want Kayla to say she was only joking, that she really want him, not me. But my girl got my back, and I have hers. So, when Omar mumbles *you always been a bitch anyway*, I make sure to knock him in his face before he even gets the chance to leave.

'Shit, Messiah,' is all Kayla can manage but for some reason that makes me proud. I knocked her six-foot-three ex-boyfriend to the

ground and that shocked her. It kinda shock me too. But I did it. Now I just got to hope Ma don't find out.

'What the fuck, man?' Omar clutches his nose, the boys around him got eyes wide. I think I can even see one of them legs shaking.

I feel a hand slip in mine, and I look down and see it Kayla's. She squeeze mine hard, so I squeeze it back. Omar continues to scream and swear but he don't move, he don't try nothing. Kayla's grip on my hand gets tighter as she drag us out of the chicken shop, leaving our half-eaten boxes and a bleeding Omar behind. I let her take me and I don't look back. I definitely am down bad; even if I'll never admit to the boys that they was right. I never thought I'd punch a guy for some girl. Let alone a six-foot-three dealer. But Kayla ain't just some girl, she my girl. So, I'd punch that bitch again in a heartbeat. For her.

About the Author

Brooke Cullen is a Jamaican-Scottish student, studying Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln. She has a passion for prose, specifically writing about issues such as race and class, often set in her home city of London. Besides writing, she also finds great joy in her faith as a Christian.

SINGLE-LENS REFLEX

by
Philip Dixon-Smith

CHARACTERS:

Frank is around 60 years old, seedy, and with a handshake that requires hand sanitiser the second it's over.

Simon is younger, has worn better, and is a manipulative glad-hander.

Frank and **Actor 1** to be played by the same person.

Simon and **Actor 2** to be played by the same person.

ACT I SCENE 1

Lights up. A backdrop of a park. Upstage right a few shrubs. Downstage left a kitchen table and two chairs. Centre upstage a large, legible sign. Other signs are waiting to be put up. For now they are unreadable. Downstage left and right are large television screens suitable for viewing by the audience. The signs will appear on the screens, as will photographs.

The first sign reads:

Single-lens reflex: *adjective*

– Denoting the system in a camera that gives the photographer the ability to see what is actually captured.

Actors 1 and 2 enter upstage left addressing each other and the audience.

ACTOR 1: Gives the photographer the ability to see what is actually captured.

ACTOR 2: What is actually captured?

ACTOR 1: Actually captured.

ACTOR 2: Makes you think.

ACTORS 1 and 2: Makes you think.

They hang up a sign that covers the previous sign. It reads:

Capture: *verb*

– Record accurately; cause data to be stored;
take into possession or control.

ACTOR 2: Possession.

ACTOR 1: Control.

ACTORS 1 AND 2: Captured!

Actor 2 exits stage left.

Actor 1 now Frank, hides behind a shrub. He is both furtive and brazen, facing downstage, he clicks away with a Hasselblad 500 c, photographing distant people.

FRANK: Oh yes. Love you. How grubby. You're a candidate.

Changes position to behind a different shrub and looking in a different direction.

Nice... but no. Your lucky day. But then, it's not luck.
Good for you.

Frank *moves again.*

Don't look much... could surprise... oh, yes. What lies
beneath the surface, and you looked so ordinary.

Simon *enters left, walks, and exits right.*

Frank *tracks him, then returns to his original subject.*

FRANK: Where have you gone?

Frank *scans with the camera.*

Of course, there you are, in your natural habitat, tut, tut.

Simon *doubles back, approaching Frank from behind, upstage right.*

SIMON: I know.

Frank *continues taking photographs.*

I've caught you.

Frank *carries on.*

What's she paying you? I'll match it.

Frank *pauses, then continues.*

C'mon, it's over.

Frank *glances up, then carries on.*

I'll double it.

Frank *straightens and looks at Simon.*

FRANK: Go on.

SIMON: I said double. What do I owe?

Frank *pulls out a business card, writes on the back, and hands it to Simon.*

Hell, that's steep.

Frank *sbrugs and raises his camera to continue.*

No, no, that's fine, just more than...

FRANK: Tomorrow, that address, at three.

SIMON: And that's for everything, negatives, the lot.

Frank *lets out a deep sigh and continues with the camera.*

Tomorrow at three. I like the... a classic, but no match for modern digitals. I'm surprised you've chosen to stick with it.

FRANK: I didn't. It's chosen to stick with me.

Simon *exits stage left. Frank* watches him go, then addresses the audience.

He has no idea... but I wonder what was captured? You never know.

Frank *takes more photos, then packs away. He exits stage right.*

ACT I SCENE 2

Stage description as before.

Actors 1 and 2 enter the stage and hang up a third sign. It reads:

Single: *adjective*

– Not in a relationship, not married; only one, on its own and separate from other things.

ACTOR 1: Single. On our own.

ACTOR 2: Single. Separate from other things.

ACTOR 1: On our own... in a relationship.

ACTOR 2: Separate... from our spouse... in a marriage.

ACTOR 1: Only one.

ACTORS 1 AND 2: Number one.

Actors 1 and 2 exit upstage right. **Frank** enters upstage left and heads for the kitchen table and chairs. He sits and busies himself with a pile of photographs, his camera, and a few documents. Also, on the table is a gravy-stained plate on which there are a few cold beans, the disembowelled pastry casing of a pastie, and cutlery. There is a half-full glass of what might be whiskey.

Behind **Frank's** chair is a board displaying several front pages of various tabloid newspapers. Each has a lurid headline and an uncomplimentary photograph of a celebrity-type figure.

Frank *breaks off and eats a bit of pastie casing and nods. He looks through a pile of photographs. He picks up the glass and holds it to the light, sniffs it, takes a mouthful, and smacks his lips.*

FRANK: Better.

Frank *puts down the glass and continues with the photographs. Simon enters back left and walks towards Frank as if examining door numbers. When a few yards short, he stops.*

SIMON: Hello. Are you there?

FRANK: Come.

Simon *moves to the table. Smiling. Reaches to shake hands. Frank ignores it.*

SIMON: I've got the money. Like we agreed.

Frank *takes his time. To the disgust of Simon, he eats the pastie.*

Are these your work, the photos?

Frank *nods.*

He again lifts the glass, holds it up to the light, sniffs it, takes a larger swig, and swirls it around his mouth before swallowing it.

Simon *follows this mini ceremony.*

I remember some of these. The hay-day of celebrity gossip.

FRANK: Better.

SIMON: Probably was. Memories of your glory days?

FRANK: Nope. Not memories; reminders.

Frank *scrapes a few beans onto a spoon and eats them.*

Reminders, but not of glory days. Not at all.

SIMON: Yeah, of course. Reminders of your...

Frank *tidies up the plate, cutlery etc. and pushes them in the direction of Simon.*

I'd like to get this sorted. Better all round, don't you think?

FRANK: Sit.

SIMON: Glad you agree.

Simon *sits.*

The money and the negatives. Remember?

You do remember? Here's the money. Now, I need the negatives and stuff and I'll be off. Done and dusted.

FRANK: Just like that?

SIMON: You get your money. I'm safe from the wife for a while.

FRANK: How is Mary?

SIMON: Her? Never happier. She'll be loving this. Well, you'd know. Getting you to spy, and report back every little indiscretion, every tiny sin. It's all she has to live for, or so you'd think. Her only fun.

FRANK: Not much fun in a wheelchair.

SIMON: Oh, I don't know. It's not all bad, at least she can't fall

down the stairs pissed and break her back again. It's not so much a wheelchair as a support for the inebriated. That's why they put Margaret in one.

Simon *laughs.*

You know, the princess?

FRANK: And You?

SIMON: Good. I still get my fun, just get it elsewhere.

FRANK: You've got things sorted?

SIMON: You have needs, you work out what you want, you get it.

FRANK: Take care of number one.

SIMON: Who else? There's only number one. We all look out for ourselves.

FRANK: How's Samantha?

SIMON: You know about Sam?

He laughs.

Now, she was a girl who kept on giving. Real good times... Haven't seen her now for, ooh, three, four months, more like six, I forget. But don't worry, she won't go hungry, oh no.

Frank *reaches inside his jacket and pulls out some photos.*

He throws one across the table to Simon. Returns the rest.

Simon *picks up the photo.*

That's my Sam. She won't go hungry, not her. Maybe I was a bit quick finishing her?

Nah, it was time. We'd reached the end. It's like a book. When you've read the story, you close it and put it down.

What happened there?

Simon *tilts and moves the photo, trying to see something in it. The photograph is displayed simultaneously on the TV screens, not continuously, but matching Simon's glances at it.*

We see an older Sam, showing the scars of a life of use and abuse.

Take the money.

He throws the money onto the table with the photograph. He holds his hand out to receive.

Hand over the negatives. I'm off.

FRANK: Is Sam going hungry?

SIMON: That can't be.

FRANK: Have another look. Go on.

Simon *lifts the photograph and looks at it. He reacts, but less.*

Keep looking. You know. You can feel it's real.

Simon *remains looking at the photograph with a hint of acceptance.*

SIMON: I don't understand.

FRANK: It's Sam's future. That's what this camera does, it cap-

tures people's futures. That's Sam's future. She'll keep on giving until you've all read her story, closed her, put her down.

SIMON: Sam's future? How can it be her future? It's not possible. It's only a photo.

FRANK: Look at it again.

SIMON: I know what she looks like. A lovely girl.

FRANK: Not lovely enough to be number one though, even in her own life.

SIMON: She knew what she was signing up for.

FRANK: To be another book in your library?

SIMON: She's a grown girl, they all are.

FRANK: Yes, we mustn't forget the others, all grown girls.

Frank brings out the photos. After each name, he throws a photo onto the table in front of Simon.

Let's see, before Sam there was Alice. Before Alice it was Christine. Don't be shy, have a look. Then there was Tamsin. Was she before or after Christine, I forget?

Simon only glances at the photos. Each, in various ways, is like Sam's photograph. One has aged, another is bruised, yet another is emaciated.

SIMON: She overlapped.

FRANK: Did she sign up for that, a bit of overlapping? Did the others?

SIMON: They knew.

Simon *arranges the photographs, glancing at them.*

It was only ever fun, no rules, no commitment. Most of all, no tears if...

FRANK: Go on.

SIMON: There's nothing to go on about.

FRANK: You've seen. Their futures. Where they finish.

SIMON: It's clever. But you're not conning me into feeling guilty.

Simon *jumps up out of the chair.*

God, I've been stupid. They're in this together, the girls, with you. The photos have been staged. Brilliant. And the stories, a few details here and there to give it credence. I can see it, now. A couple of the girls find out about each other, probably by chance, at least at first. Then they wonder, are there others? So, they dig. No, they hire someone to dig. You. That's it. They hire you, stage the photos and set this up to get their own back, to...

FRANK: But it was only fun, no commitment.

SIMON: What is it you all want from me... is it money?

FRANK: It's not money. Try asking Sam or Tamsin what they want.

Simon *starts to rile.*

SIMON: They've already had from me.

FRANK: Soft talk, promises, humiliation.

SIMON: And my money.

FRANK: Mary's money.

SIMON: They always wanted more. More than I could give.

FRANK: What happened to, 'adults in it for fun'?

Simon stands close to Frank.

SIMON: Give me the negatives.

FRANK: They're not here. You'll have to come back. This evening.

SIMON: If this is a con... I'm serious. I've had enough of this crap. If you don't fulfil, if you muck me around, I swear, I'll break you.

FRANK: Go on, do your worst. I probably deserve it. But do a proper job. You won't get any resistance. It's been coming. This, or something like it. It's only been a matter of when. I'm almost grateful.

Frank stands and walks around to Simon's side of the table. He turns his head, offering one side of his face for Simon to punch.

I won't resist. But make a good job of it. No half measures. No pulling punches.

Simon stands still.

I'll have them this evening. Shall we say seven? Guaranteed.

SIMON: Seven.

Simon *starts to leave. He gets so far, then turns to Frank.*

Why?

Simon *exits stage left.*

Frank *waits until Simon has gone.*

He collects the photos, puts them in his pocket, picks up his camera and exits stage right.

ACT I SCENE 3

Stage description as before.

Actors 1 and 2 enter the stage and hang up another sign. It reads:

Lens: *noun*

– a curved piece of glass that makes objects larger, smaller, or clearer.

ACTOR 1: Our lives can help us hide the needs of others.

ACTOR 2: Our lies can blind us to the truth of our actions.

ACTOR 1: We can use the lens of our experiences... to see clearly.

ACTOR 2: Use the lens of our relationships... to see clearly.

ACTOR 1: A lens makes objects clearer.

ACTOR 2: Find the right lens.

ACTORS 1 and 2: See clearly.

Actor 2 exits stage left. **Actor 1** puts a shoe box and his camera on the table and sits. **Simon** enters stage left and makes his way to the table as before.

SIMON: Are you there?

FRANK: I'm here.

Simon enters.

SIMON: Here's the cash, as promised.

Simon throws the wad onto the table. Frank pockets the money.

You've got the negatives?

You do have them?

Frank taps his breast pocket.

Stop pissing me about. I've had enough. Give me the negatives.

Frank pulls a thick wallet of negatives from a pocket. Hands it to Simon, who waves the wallet, pleased with himself.

Wasn't I a busy boy? We did say everything.

Frank pushes the shoe box towards Simon.

FRANK: A few receipts, transcripts of several phone calls with Sam, photos of the other girls, some odds and sods.

SIMON: Phone hacking? You have been a naughty boy. *(Laughs.)* See. We both do what we need to.

FRANK: You've got what you want. And the hacking wasn't mine, it was a colleague at the paper.

SIMON: Oh, well, that's all right then.

Simon prepares to go. Lifts the box lid to put the wallet in, hesitates, takes out photos, and flips through them.

Why have you got photos of Danny?

FRANK: Mary wanted some of when he was with you.

SIMON: Jesus, my son. Spying on me with my own son. He's eight. What connection has he got with any bloody thing? (*Simon reacts to the photos.*) No.

FRANK: He too has a future. That's his connection.

SIMON: But he's done nothing. He's only a kid.

FRANK: Well done. (*Mock applause.*) Progress.

SIMON: What?

FRANK: He's done nothing, he's only a kid.

SIMON: No one's responsible.

FRANK: Try harder.

SIMON: I don't get it.

FRANK: Danny's yours.

SIMON: Oh, it's blame the father. The boy's had everything, the best schools, holidays. Christ, you want to see what he gets at Christmas.

FRANK: What a martyr, what a sacrifice, with Mary's money. Even in the money stakes, you're nowhere.

SIMON: What else can I give him?

FRANK: What if he was one of your girls?

SIMON: I'm not responsible for them. Danny deserves better.

Simon slumps onto the chair still holding the photographs of Danny.

What can I do?

FRANK: The photos can change.

SIMON: But it's the future, how can I change the future?

FRANK: Which hasn't happened yet. Behaviour changes, consequences altered. It's the now that must change.

SIMON: How? Like what?

FRANK: You know what parents do to their children, they don't mean to, but they do.

SIMON: Yeah, I will, I...

FRANK: What?

SIMON: For Danny. For me and Danny.

FRANK: And the others?

SIMON: Who?

FRANK: Sam, Tamsin, the rest. Even Mary.

SIMON: No way. I've not wronged them.

FRANK: You're settled on that?

SIMON: Too right. Why is this all about me? What about you, ever looked at a photo of yourself?

FRANK: You've got what you wanted, we're finished, just go.

SIMON: Ok, ok, only asked... You must be curious.

FRANK: I've seen too many photos, too many futures. I'm not curious.

Simon *pulls a face. Starts packing up and slips* **Frank's**

camera into the shoe box.

SIMON: Just wondered. I'll gather my bits and I'll be off. No hard feelings.

Simon *smiles and holds out a hand to shake.* **Frank** *ignores it.*

Might see you around.

Frank *continues to ignore Simon.*

Well, you never know.

Simon *exits upstage left.* **Frank** *tidies a few photos, reaches for his camera, looks around, puzzled, then realises. Rises, exits upstage right.*

ACT I SCENE 4

Scene description as before.

Actors 1 and 2 enter the stage and hang up another sign. It reads:

Reflex: *noun*

– an automatic reaction to something; a reaction that you cannot control.

ACTOR 1: We act without thought.

ACTOR 2: We react without thought.

ACTOR 1: Reacting automatically.

ACTOR 2: By reflex.

ACTORS 1 AND 2: Without control.

Actor 2 exits stage left. **Actor 1** sits at the table, reading a newspaper. **Simon** enters stage left. He makes his way to the table as before.

SIMON: Hello?

Frank looks up and then continues reading.

Are you there?

FRANK: What are you after?

SIMON: I've brought this back. (*Holds up Frank's camera.*) It was

in the shoe box with the other stuff. Must have been put in by mistake.

Simon *puts the camera on the table.*

FRANK: Thief.

SIMON: Well, thank bloody you.

FRANK: Right, got me camera, bye.

Simon *hovers.* **Frank** *looks up.*

Since you're still here. The photos I took of you in the park, I've developed them.

SIMON: Really?

FRANK: Take'em or leave'em.

Frank *picks up a small pile and throws it towards Simon who lifts one photograph to look at.* **Simon** *reacts. He is unsteady. He sits.*

Is it not your best side?

SIMON: What have I ever done to you?

FRANK: Wrong question.

SIMON: What is the question?

FRANK: Sam, Tamsin, Mary... Danny.

SIMON: Danny, I accept Danny. I've been spending time. I'll even thank you for that. But not the others?

FRANK: Have you got a photo of Danny with you? (*Holds out a hand.*) Don't worry, nothing bad.

SIMON: Yeah. Why?

*Takes one out of his jacket, and hands it over, **Frank** studies it.*

What's this about?

FRANK: Things are changing. (*Nods, hands photo back.*) And the girls?

SIMON: Now you're boring me.

FRANK: Look at the photos of you, again. (*Points to them.*)

SIMON: I took your camera.

FRANK: You've nothing to fear if you've done no wrong. Look at them.

SIMON: It was deliberate.

***Frank** stands, picks up a photo of **Simon** and pushes it in front of **Simon's** face.*

FRANK: C'mon, look. Nothing wrong, so take a look at your future. Where's the harm? One more look.

***Simon** looks at the photograph. He reacts, then jumps up, knocks **Frank** off his chair and stands over him.*

SIMON: Stop it, just stop it. I know what I am.

***Simon** stands up straight, forgetting that **Frank** is on the floor in front of him.*

It's knowing that's difficult.

He looks again at a photo of himself, but he can't muster a

reaction.

Danny was easier. I never intended... I can own up to him. But the girls?

Simon *looks down at Frank as if he has just woken up.*

Get up. You've won. It's over.

Simon *offers Frank his hand and helps him to his feet.*

The good life, the girls, the cars, it was all about punishing Mary. She had the money, the control, and I had to be the obedient little husband. Then she had her accident and all of a sudden, she needed me. It was my door to freedom. I was free and she couldn't follow me. To start with, she would threaten to stop the money, but she didn't. She knew she relied on me for her care. That's when I started with the girls and the rest. And hiring you? She didn't hire you; you went to her with the photos. I am right, aren't I?

FRANK: You're right. She didn't want to know, not at the beginning, but she didn't have the energy to resist.

SIMON: I see that she needs me. Now that she's... she doesn't deserve any more. The girls, they're innocents, casualties in my war against Mary. But Mary? I'll try. I can't promise but I will try.

Frank *stands, facing Simon.*

FRANK: It's not how...

SIMON: I captured you with your camera.

He takes photos out of a pocket.

I don't know why, but it didn't work for you.

*He picks up the camera and hands it to **Frank**.*

It didn't show me your future. I don't know what I did wrong, but it didn't work, not for you. What does it mean? What's wrong with me?

Frank *looks at the camera and then holds it out to **Simon**.*

FRANK: Take it. It's ok, it's yours now.

Simon *takes the camera, pauses, and sets it on the table.*

It means I've atoned. I've done enough for these.

He points at the tabloid front pages.

I caused so much pain, knew it, but didn't care until someone used the camera to take my photo. Like you, I didn't believe at first, but there's no escaping it. Eventually, the camera passed to me, and now it's your turn, the camera is yours.

Frank *exits upstage left. **Simon** stands alone. He looks at the photos **Frank** took of him. Pain and anguish are on his face. He sets the photos down and picks up the camera. After a few thoughtful moments, he walks over to the shrubs.*

SIMON: Let's see what we can see. (*Raises the camera.*) Hello, you look likely. Oh, no. Flattered to deceive. (*Alters position.*) What about you? Oh, yes, plenty going on with you. Scratch the surface.

Simon *changes position again, searching for another person to photograph.*

Come on my friends. The camera never lies.

CURTAIN

About the Author

Born in Belfast in 1961, Philip Dixon-Smith has almost completed a Creative Writing BA. Inspired by his Earth Science background, he has written about the nature of Time and the 'Lost Villages' of the Holderness coast. Describing himself as an Irish Anglo-Ulster-Scot, he unashamedly uses whichever heritage gives an advantage.

WARM WHITE WINE

by

Charley Freeman

'I don't think we should drink anymore,' Aimee slouched across the sofa, her upper body resting against Edith as she spoke. Two empty bottles lay label-down on the floor below. The pair glanced at one another, amused by their drunken haze and the way they never missed a Friday evening spent together. Damp hair tangled down their backs as they remained in the same spot, fresh-faced, tired, and confined to their flat. Aimee waved around an empty mug, yellow droplets dancing onto Edith's lap.

'Thankfully we don't drink red.' Edith used the bunched-up sleeve of her well-loved jumper, leaving a few strands of wool on her thigh. Beneath their tangled together legs was another bottle waiting to be consumed then forgotten about.

'Would you class that as wine or sparkling piss?' Aimee screwed her face up at the contents of her mug. Edith nodded and puffed out her cheeks following a large mouthful. She repeated this motion until half

of the last bottle was missing. Their gradual intoxication meant slurred secrets would be shared with no topic too intimate to be uncovered.

The debates about past relationships and hated family members grew more detailed until Edith panicked about the candle she left burning in the kitchen, filling most of the flat with an uninviting scent of burned vanilla and melted plastic. She slumped back down onto the sofa as Aimee wedged her phone between two sofa cushions and leant against them for added security.

‘Who are you texting?’ Edith prided herself on being perceptive at all times.

‘I’m not.’ Aimee raised an empty mug to her lips while her friend stared. ‘It’s just Jay, he misses me again.’

‘Ignore him. Or let me reply, that’s twice this week.’ Edith placed her hands on Aimee’s knees to shake them.

‘I haven’t replied. It’s our night and he knows that.’ Aimee tried to smile. She proceeded to hover the mug around her lips to avoid having to explain her difficult relationship despite leaving him months prior. She ran her fingers through her hair to separate the layers and felt awkward as she was observed. Following another promise to cut all contact with Jay, a steady silence welcomed itself into the room between legs being rearranged on the sofa and Edith’s gentle snoring after the wine defeated her.

With age, Aimee found herself sharing less with Edith; her judgement was ruthless, and her opinions tailored to her poor upbringing. Aimee sympathised with her friend for having a mother who spent most of her time intoxicated and bedbound. Edith’s lack of love and stability made her distant from people her own age and late to experience things.

When they first met at school, Aimee latched on to the girl who didn't show an interest in others. It was nice to be listened to and feel her life was a lot less dull, as she shared her experiences with Edith. Their initial exchanges of uncomfortable conversation in class soon became ritual. She blamed this on Edith and resented the way her friend caused her to mourn their school days well into her twenties. It was hard to decipher which details shared were real or romanticised. She longed for the feeble frame and permanent smile pasted across Edith's face, pretty enough to evoke kindness from anyone. Aimee felt pressured to lie about how admired she was to become more appealing to her new friend. They both found comfort in other's misfortune.

The dynamic between both girls shifted as they grew through each school year. Edith became known for never leaving Aimee's side, which satisfied her enough. Elaborate stories were formed about Aimee's first experiences with a boy and her first drink. It was Edith's job to believe it all. Their conversations flowed better when Aimee was at the forefront, with her expanding number of ex-boyfriends and her increased lack of self-awareness. Her shortage of encounters with fifteen-year-old boys caused Edith to force a laugh and pretend to understand a life she wanted to have.

Edith stood in in front of the floor-length mirror in her room. The lamp by her bed gave her an unnatural orange glow. She placed a hand either side of her chest and traced down, pressing hard as she reached her waist, and forced it inward.

'I'm sure a man will take pity on you one day.' The door slammed as her brother walked past. She flinched and separated her hands from her hipbones, revealing five small cuts either side. She was embarrassed to

repeat the motion, the crimson trail growing, slipping down her thighs. After turning out the light, she crept around the room, dodging a pile of books and a table filled with photo frames of her mother. She mimicked running fingers through non-existent, waist length hair and soon stopped after becoming overwhelmed with shame.

Simon prided himself on making his younger sister feel unlikeable, she was his chosen victim for all the anger he possessed about their lack of parental guidance. A few years prior, a story about their mum, Sarah, throwing up outside the school gates circulated. He chose to scare people into silence despite wanting to know where she disappeared to when she wasn't stuck to her bedroom. Edith was too young to recall the times Simon had to force his mother indoors and beg her not to disappear for days. But she was reminded by the scar above Simon's collarbone made with a house key on one of Sarah's desperate attempts to escape.

Aimee was best defined by her obnoxious laughter that lingered and stole the attention of anyone nearby. Edith knew she wanted to be seen when she first watched her friend roll her pencil skirt at the waist to reveal her tanned thighs.

They stood by Edith's front door, about to walk to school. Simon pushed past his sister, placing a hand on Aimee's shoulder to steady himself. Aimee smiled as he ran through the door, amused by his wave as a form of apology. She slammed the door and leaned into the circular mirror that Edith closed her eyes to pass.

'I'll have some of that gloss.' Edith held out her hand then swiped the pink tube from between Aimee's knuckles. She applied too much in one motion and removed it with the back of her hand after Aimee gave

her a sympathetic smile.

‘You’re pretty without it. I wish I could be more natural.’ Aimee brushed powder over her face and removed her school tie before opening the door to leave. Edith shoved her tie into her pocket before they arrived at school, anxious to be questioned about it.

A few months after they left school, there was a knock at Edith’s door. She’d become accustomed to staying in her room, inviting the uncomfortable heat through her windows. Downstairs, she heard Aimee’s shrill laughter accompanied by a deeper rendition of her brother’s voice. Angered by the thought of having to share Aimee, she slammed her door.

‘I haven’t seen you in weeks, it’s like you disappeared.’ Aimee invited herself into Edith’s room, careful to not step on the pile of moulding plates around the door. Edith sat on the floor, her back against the metal bedpost.

‘I haven’t had time, I’ve been busy.’ Edith smoothed over her hair, thick with grease. After a series of formal questions about their summer plans, they went to the kitchen.

‘I’ll make us tea.’ Edith wanted something to focus on.

‘I did try, Edith. You read all of my messages, blanked my calls and you hate people coming to the house.’ Aimee reached out for the mug, flinching as the hot porcelain reached her palms. ‘If this is because of the rumour about me and Simon, you should know it’s not true.’

‘I know. It just hurt.’

‘I’d never hurt you.’ Aimee twisted the teabag string until Edith opened her arms. ‘I love you and it’s horrid seeing you like this.’

‘I need to wash my hair. Will you wait here?’

Simon waited for Edith to leave the room.

A swarm of sixteen-year-olds filtered through the school gates with a small sheet of paper. A range of emotions were plastered across their faces. After waiting for the sticky August air to cool and the park to quieten, the majority of the class gathered round in a misshapen circle. A heap of discarded jackets and grass-coated beer bottles were strewn around. Some were desperate enough to retrieve the last drops of vodka from smaller bottles when no one was looking. The chatter was accompanied by the hum of a small speaker in someone's bag.

Aimee signalled across to Edith who sat cross-legged, pulling at the grass. She leaned forward for a hug and trapped a bottle of wine under her arm. After a few large sips, they pulled each other round in circles, not noticing the pinot had landed on its side.

'Did you bring that with you?' Edith signalled to the bottle as the girls crashed onto the ground.

'I might have found it in a bag over there.' Aimee concentrated on a ripped plastic bag. 'Simon offered to pay. I thought you knew.'

Edith stared at her. She imagined Aimee flicking her hair back so he could see her staring at him, hugging him to thank him. The same ways she had taught Edith.

That night, when she wasn't with Aimee, Edith began to build popularity with her peers after being caught with a bottle of Gordon's gin, hidden by her mother under the sink. The discomfort of people asking her questions and complimenting her wore off when she realised it was down to the bottle beside her. The gradual confidence led her to sit on Matt's knee. He left school the previous year and still attended these events with the desperate need for company and to be doted on by

naive younger girls.

‘I like your dress.’ He reached for Edith’s waist and was met with a firm push. The fear of male attention overpowered Edith’s urge to appear more feminine and embody Aimee.

Half an hour later, Edith was hunched over, ridding the copious amounts of gin from her body, she had given up on keeping the dress clean. She felt Aimee’s rings scrape against her spine each time she wretched.

‘Why were you sat with that weirdo?’ Aimee’s hand disappeared from her back. ‘I would have told you to stay away.’

‘I’m fine. I don’t even like him.’ Edith stood up and held onto her friend as they shared a jacket around their shoulders.

‘I hope you don’t mind, I texted Simon and he’s on his way.’

‘He’s my brother, I could have texted him.’

‘Not in that state.’ Aimee rubbed at Edith’s cheek to remove the dried mascara.

Simon arrived to find Aimee hidden behind the park gates, raising her voice at a figure with an armful of beer bottles. She jolted as glass shattered against her feet.

‘Is there a problem?’ Simon stood by his car, raising his chin until it became uncomfortable.

‘No, he just needs to go home.’

‘You’re making her uncomfortable, now fuck off before I come and deal with you.’

Matt released the bottles back onto the field before walking away, he tried to hide his face from Simon who sat against the bonnet of his car.

Aimee woke up beside Edith, half covered by a blanket. She retrieved her dress from the foot of the bed and pulled it on up to her waist, not recognising the t-shirt she slept in. After taking a mouthful of the opened water bottle by the door, she slipped out to the kitchen. Aimee held her mouth under the tap, desperate to rid the foul aftertaste of wine and lemonade.

‘How are you feeling? I remember my first drink too.’ Simon stood in the doorway, stretching to reach the frame. As she dried her face with her t-shirt, he retrieved a carton of orange juice from the fridge, draining most of the bottle before he offered it to Aimee. ‘Good for hangovers. Not as bad as Edith will feel later.’

‘You can’t tell her—’

‘I meant about the hangover. It didn’t mean anything.’

‘It didn’t?’ Aimee hugged her waist trying to hide from Simon.

‘You’re her best mate. I can’t do that to her.’

By September, both girls moved to opposite ends of Manchester for uni. Their childhood plan of getting onto the same English course was stifled by Edith’s mum not being able to help her rent a flat. Instead, she settled for a small townhouse shared by three other students who didn’t speak English. Although her room was cramped and she had to leave an hour before her lectures, Edith was reluctant to visit home during the holidays.

‘Are you sure this is okay?’ Aimee cupped her wine glass and stared into the open fire at the back of their local pub. After Edith’s mum was admitted into hospital to combat the years of heavy drinking, Aimee checked on her and Simon each week.

‘It’s not your fault my mother gave up on me, and pubs weren’t her

thing.’

‘How’s Simon? I haven’t heard from him.’ Aimee pretended to drink.

Edith clawed at her thigh with her fingernails as a reminder to not react. ‘He’s okay, he still visits mum. You must have been too busy to ask him though, spending all that time with your boyfriend.’

‘Jay isn’t my boyfriend; we just see each other sometimes.’ They both stared into the fire until the last piece of wood disintegrated, with the occasional rant about flatmates and wanting to move out.

They had a pattern for meeting in bars and coffee shops, which became less frequent as both girls busied themselves with trying to find jobs to avoid moving back with parents.

‘At least you’d have the money to do it.’ Aimee folded her arms, hidden behind the steam from her coffee cup.

‘I’d have to leave Simon to deal with mum.’

‘I think he’d be okay with that.’ Aimee squeezed her hand. ‘You both deserve your own space.’

‘I’ve been looking at flats, but I don’t think I could cover it, even with the money mum left me.’

‘We could look at one together. We used to be so close, I think it would be good for us.’

‘That was before you and my brother got close.’ Edith scratched at the corner of the table, flicking pieces of wood from her fingernails. She felt like the walls of the coffee shop were leaning over her. ‘I’ll think about it.’

Edith sat on the kitchen floor; the cold stone felt soothing against her

legs. She stared at the pile of boxes filled with mugs, clothes, and the majority of her belongings. Simon helped her move into a flat she found online, he waited until she was settled, but hadn't seen her scrubbing everything taken from the house with diluted bleach and water too hot for her hands to bare.

'Proud of you.' Simon dropped the last box onto the carpet and placed his arms around Edith to cradle her head. 'She'd want to see you happy in your own space.'

'Get out before you start crying,' Edith whispered as her eyes became cloudy. She was overwhelmed by the lifeless feeling.

Aimee arrived later that day with four large suitcases borrowed from her parents. Simon was absent but Edith knew the decision wasn't his.

Edith sat across the sofa after throwing the array of cushions bought by Aimee onto the floor. She watched Aimee take off her makeup at the kitchen table, with each swipe to her face her cheeks remained flushed. Edith slipped into the kitchen, the fridge magnets rattles as she walked past, acting as another reminder that the flat didn't feel like hers. She pulled out two mugs from a cardboard box and began to make tea.

'I didn't think you'd be up for drinking,' Edith set down the mugs, burning her hand against the one missing a handle.

'Simon got me this when I was ten. I must have dropped it.'

'Edith—'

'I've still got so much to unpack. It looks like you've already decorated though.'

Aimee placed hand on Edith's to stop her talking; her fingers were rough from scratching hard enough to draw blood. 'Edith this has been difficult for me too. Me and Simon would never try to hurt you. We love

you.’

‘Why him? There were so many other people.’

‘It was different with Simon. You knew I always liked him, but I waited until we were older. I didn’t think it would be so difficult.’ Aimee’s hand was pushed away.

Edith curled over by the sink as tears collected under her nose and slipped down the drain. ‘I think you should move out.’

About the Author

Charley Freeman is a third-year Creative Writing student at the University of Lincoln, where she found a passion for writing short stories. Her love for contemporary literature soon transpired into producing poetry and she has since created a social platform to share her poetry collections, centred around womanhood and relationships.

BOOMERANGERS

by
Ruth Gretton

Boomerang kids.

I've got three of them. This could be confused with a playground win in the latest *Panini* craze, where you get to swap cards, you have too many of, for the ones you need to complete the set. But no. They are – I'm proud to say – my own flesh and blood, born and raised to be of good character and independent thought. To emphasise the independent part of the parent-child contract, we introduced our offspring to the concepts of self-supporting ideals quite early on. Their Halifax savings accounts, with a free red money box incentive, were opened at birth. They had lessons on how to be savvy with money as soon as we entered the pocket money phase, and the 'go get a job as soon as is legally possible' teachings were all executed with conviction. We had devised an exclusive eighteenth-birthday departure plan that has now passed into family lore. It included the limited edition, home-built, child-dispatching catapult with a feature suitcase slot. We ensured

this parenting clause was well established in their minds by the age of fifteen. We believed three years was ample notification of our intent to rescind parental responsibilities.

I'm not sure why this plan failed but fail it did. In the most spectacular way. By over *ten years* with two of them.

Our success in rearing all three children to adulthood was acknowledged by a police acquaintance who declared one evening, 'If you can get them there without any minor mishaps or, god forbid, major ones involving the police, you've done well.'

Hoorah, we had!

We were feeling pretty smug. And yes, karma would soon come a-calling for that one.

Our kids ended up doing the same as many of our friends and neighbours' kids (an upgrade to their status name – stripling has a good vibe – don't you think?) They had gone to university, lived in house-shares with friends while working, or lived in homes with extortionate rents. But – and it's a big but – to afford a place of their own meant them coming home and saving; our early life lesson number two hadn't stuck. Instead of remaining independent adults in their own abodes, they kept returning in staggered 'tag it's your turn' moments to ours. They'd become part of the now-defined boomerang generation, unable to earn enough to live in comfort on their own, so they bounce back and live in comfort for free with us instead.

'You both don't mind, do you? I'll find somewhere as soon as I can.'

'Don't worry, Mum, it's only for a couple of months.'

'Don't take offence, but I'm out of here as soon as I can.'

These are just some of the little ditties my charming offspring came out with, to soothe our rapidly shredding parental nerves. *Kevin* and *Perry* clones they were not, but with all three of them back under one roof,

it meant our house elf, Not Me, and the sibling rivalries of old were bound to rear their disruptive heads at some point.

I read an article in the online London School of Economics that explored research done by Dr Marco Tosi and Professor Emily Grundy on the effects of boomeranging children and a possible drop in the quality of life experienced by their parents. The conclusion was that returning adult children caused a violation of the new independent life their parents had been experiencing. Or, in our case, an all too brief couple of months before one came back from a summer camp job in Canada; six weeks after that, another was back from travelling Asia; and two months after that, a relationship break-up filled the last available bedroom.

Full House.

If this were bingo, we would at least have won a prize.

It wasn't usual for all of them to return at the same time, but it turned out to be the one time I was happy they all had. The five of us were still in the same household when COVID-19 struck, and with all the implications that lockdown entailed, we were lucky to be together.

A year later, and yep, they were all still here, including Not Me!

We shared heartfelt chats with friends in similar situations, working as unregulated therapy sessions for non-union workers. The solace found in these exchanges cannot be underestimated, allowing us to share our moments of chuntering guilt. We all know we love our children. But the increased workload and occasional tensions their returns created, coupled with our increasing age, meant we all needed an occasional release of the safety valve. The moaning in such a safe environment made it easier to go back and face the trail of mess and chaos, one – if not all – of them brought into my hard-fought-for, tidy home. Two had reverted to their teenage floordrobe, shoes laid out as an indiscriminate

minefield, waiting to down their dad or me without warning. As for my glass tracking, collecting, and stacking skills, they were now good enough to have impressed the most experienced of bar workers. Saint Jude, herself, would have found my pleas for order against the home life chaos to be one lost cause too far.

Sometimes, however, in unguarded chats at open social events came comments from the *free* parents. Those who felt they needed to caution us with forthright idioms, and I quote,

‘You make them too comfortable.’

‘You’re making it too cheap.’

But worst of all was genuine, and I quote: ‘What, still at home?’ I know I’ve just been spouting off about this very fact, but only I can say something negative involving my children. Anyone else starts on them, and I go into full-blown ninja defence mode, even if what these parents are saying might contain an element of truth.

That last comment, though, felt like such a slap, as if there is a time limit on how long we can hold on to our parental job cards. The image of me with my offspring still under my wings made me almost apologetic in explaining that it was what parents of boomerangers had to do. We would continue supporting our children until everything positive in life had aligned, and they could, at last, safely fly the nest for good.

As for my repeat offenders, there continued to be talk from time to time about renting flats or how good the bank balance was looking, but no solid evidence of time frames for departing. Could I fine them for running a poorly kept schedule? No. It would take them even longer to leave.

In desperation, I looked to Martin Lewis, the money guru, for help. He must at least have had some advice for the thousands of weary parents like us. There (on his website) was a glimmer of hope. A First-Time

Buyers Help to Buy ISA. Who knew it could be that easy? Even more surprising, the government had recognised our troubles by promising to add a 25% top-up to their savings. As with all things monetary, there was a catch. This financial assistance was time-limited; in fact, my brood only had a couple of weeks left before the closing date for applications. The hysteria surrounding my pleas for action rivalled the desperate revision begging endured during the multiple exam seasons we had faced together. My hard-learned sales techniques were back in use, and two days before the closing date, all three had opened accounts, with each investing the princely sum of £1. It was a start.

Several months later, tiny mumblings of hope began to circulate. Their lives were changing, and each had hopes of being out by summer (we're in May at this point). Then, out of the blue, it began. Our eldest was making bookings for house viewings, and could I go with him? Another was preparing itinerary lists, visa applications, and cheap flight searches to go travelling and working in Australia with his best friend, Gav. Gap years over, a time-critical university place enticed our youngest to leave. For her, it was the excitement of setting up a timeshare deal between our home and her NEW home.

We started telling friends in that jokey parent way, 'Woohoo, they're planning to (not confirmed, so not filled with total confidence yet) leave home soon?'

The thought of no longer cooking vast quantities of food or lifting heavy supermarket bags that not even a consumed pink *Yorkie* bar would help with was almost too much to bear. Would I miss my amdram days spent reenacting Pauline Fowler's launderette role in *Eastenders*? Truly 30 pairs of boxers on the line in one day, and I will not apologise if that felt too big an image (pun not intended) for this piece. Remember, it was me who pegged them out!

In fact, it takes all of me to keep a home big enough to house five adults, two dogs, a rabbit, girlfriends, boyfriends (or any other half-adopted tag-a-longs they bring home for tea), ticking over.

It sounds so mundane as I'm telling you this, but we did start to think about the things we could do with this eventual returning freedom. How we have envied people who got to watch a programme without constant interruptions. To choose a restaurant without worrying about the size of the bill – they're supposed to be saving to leave, so any monetary challenges to delaying that were a no-no. Not group messaging every day to see who's in for tea, what time to have it ready or that it's a fend-for-yourself evening because 'I'm out.'

Whoa, let me just stop all of you screaming 'Why?' I did it for the sanity of our kitchen and the chaos from four individuals' cooking mess. It's the same with the laundry issues; life was easier all around if I sorted it.

If there are any parents out there having similar struggles with their adult children still living at home, you now know you are not alone. If you are worried about an empty nest or daunted by the 'now what?' feelings, don't get weighed down by it. Any sadness you feel just shows how much we love our striplings, and surely that is parenting at its best. I have a confession to make though: I did feel both exhausted and relieved as we did our final wave goodbye from our front door. We had succeeded in helping them to fly the nest for the definite last time.

Attention now turned to *my* what next?

Okay, another confession. I wanted to join my children on their adventures. They were moving on to exciting new opportunities and travels with unlimited possibilities. I am left watching them choose from the many paths laid out in front of them – age and health on their side – but, instead of fearing empty nest syndrome or rejoicing in the long-awaited

return of our pre-children equilibrium, I was just... left behind.

Would I have felt the same if they hadn't returned home after Uni or not gone over the contract date by ten years? I don't know, but the jealous niggles I had weren't soothed by the financial boost and tension-free household their departure should have delivered.

The niggles were fed by the realisation I had mentally stopped ageing after turning twenty-four and have since spent almost four decades acquiring life experiences. The opportunities available to our young are so much more than we ever had. I wanted to experience those endless possibilities. Not because I needed to be with my children but because I *am* their age, unlike the woman who keeps looking back at me in the mirror every morning and night.

I don't want this to be true, but we are at that period in life where (to our children) time now stands still. What I mean is – and I can remember thinking this myself at their ages when visiting my parent's home – nothing changes. Our house is comfortable. In fact, too large now they have all gone. Our jobs and roles in life have for years been running on a regular timetabled track, bringing our family up, although, a few more rest stops are now required. I have my sofa. He has his. With the TV on in the evening after a hard day working, all bets are laid as to who will fall asleep first. Sound familiar? It's not every evening; in fact, we're very lucky to have a great social life, good friends, and lots to look forward to. Our striplings could disappear for a year, come back, and it wouldn't have changed much at all because that's the point in life we have now reached. Life is settled.

Do you mind if I create a new piece of terminology? Boomeroldies. It is growing on me.

I now find myself doing as much boomeranging as our children did. Not the physical action of leaving the home but a huge emotional sway.

I jump between the one ship heading to new child-free horizons and what I imagine it holds, and another where I get to keep them nearby so I can feed off their youth.

Did that sound too sinister? It wasn't meant to.

Having them around kept us young and on our toes. They would introduce me to new music, TV shows and funny social media videos. I loved engaging in the harsh daily banter only our family could do, laughing with and at each other. And I miss that.

I tried hard to steer away from becoming Marie from the 1996 American sitcom *Everybody Loves Raymond*, a fantastic example of that stereotypical domineering matriarch of a family. Equally, I didn't want the life of Barbara from the 1998 BBC comedy *The Royale Family*, living with the consequences of her continuous over-caring love for her selfish, demanding family. What I'm trying to say is nothing in life comes with a *Haynes* manual. We are all making it up as we go along, although I never admitted it to my children until they left for (what we hoped was) the last time. On the other hand, I have friends who would be horrified that, for many of us, our lives have revolved so strongly and for so long around our children. There is no 'one size fits all' guide for the toughest role in life, parenting.

With our parental responsibilities now downgraded, we hope there is lots more out there for us for as long as our health and money hold out. Assuming there isn't another boomerang moment, this time requiring financial assistance to prevent them from coming home.

My last share on this matter is about the niggling bubble, not quite fear, but it was something I'd been carrying for a while. The epiphany came during a daytime swim session at the local pool. I know I'm going to sound rude, but I was looking at the other swimmers sedately breast-stroking their way up and down the lanes, thinking how old some

of them looked. I had this terrible sledgehammer moment. I hadn't snuck in under the counter, looking too young for the stated age of this timetabled session. I was there because I *was* the same as them. Either I genuinely hadn't realised, or my subconscious didn't want to accept time had continued to move at a terrifying pace during the long parenting years. It was the kick up the backside I needed to boomerang myself back into the thick of it and not get left behind by life itself.

My parting gift starts with a quote from an amazing lady who lived life to the full right up until she died. During an interview in the latter part of her life, Katherine Hepburn was quoted as saying, 'I told you, life goes by like (click).' So metaphorically break your clicking fingers, find what now makes you happy, and in true Frank Sinatra style, sing at the top of your kitchen disco lungs, 'I did it my way.'

Three years later.

I handed back the self-inflicted OAP card after just a few weeks; I wasn't ready. There is something to be said for the latest chapter of life, post-home parenting. Our children are still around, bringing their successes and troubles to us in equal measure. We are offering support and help as much as ever. I have realised now that parenting never stops. I will worry about and celebrate them 'til the day I die, though I have learned to be more relaxed about them. Just as our children grabbed their freedom to do whatever they wanted when they left home, I have embraced that same emancipation to engage with whatever takes my fancy. Find comfort in this declaration and believe it will eventually happen for you, too!

About the Author

Ruth Gretton, a maturing Creative Writing BA student at Lincoln University, has focused on developing skills in the nonfiction genre. Originally from the North, she is inspired by the works of David Sedaris and Billy Connolly and uses humour to expose her idiosyncratic views on the mundane aspects of life.

A TOUCH OF CROCODILES

by
Urte Grinkaite

Seventeen-year-old Lawrence sits in a white-walled room with his back leaning against the plastic chair. The loud whirl of boxy grey computers surrounds him as he does a standard-issue test, questioning his creativity and individuality; one that shapes the future of a hundred-and-something teenagers. The test was to see how many robots in the education system could churn out over a couple of decades. Teachers pace up and down the rows of seated children.

The boy finds crocodiles fascinating. He has done since he was young, his parents spurring on the obsession. They got him an array of reptile themed presents over his life, pyjamas, teddy bears, and crocodile fact books to help him learn to read. That later turned to wildlife documentaries, watching the beasts rip apart smaller, and helpless animals. They shouldn't have been surprised he turned out this way.

'I hope I don't get something boring, like accountant. Imagine that,' Adam whispers to him. Lawrence chuckles at the thought of his friend

sitting at a nine-to-five office job, his suit uncomfortably tight in places it shouldn't be. He is confident in his test, knowing the universe would bless him with the job he's been meant for – a crocodile tamer. Yes, the boy also knew this was unlikely and uncommon, most of these tests regurgitate the same four answers – doctor, teacher, accountant, or lawyer. But just the thought of being near those animals, training them, getting to see how they survive in the animal kingdom was enough to get his heart racing and a feeling of pride coursing through his body; he just needs this test to feel that too.

A loud ping and a flash of the word 'LAWYER' at the top of Lawrence's computer screen brings him back from his daydream. A sharpness claws its way at the boy's shrinking heart, but he won't let this get in his way. His mind starts to wonder, what if he truly isn't meant to do this? His parents didn't love the idea, and this stupid test didn't either.

'Baby, I don't think this is realistic,' his mum would say before he'd go to sleep, snuggling up in his green bed, the assortment of stuffed reptiles almost falling over the edge.

'Don't be hasty about careers, lad, you're only young.' His dad would reason when Lawrence talked about his dreams.

It was only a matter of hours, and he feels like the world has truly begun to spite him.

His mum barely manages to get a breath out before Lawrence bursts through the front door, yelling out 'I'm going to Australia! Nothing you can do to stop me either.'

This wasn't the first time Lawrence was acting out against his parents. When he was fifteen, he bit a child's head because she wouldn't let go of a stuffed alligator toy at playtime. They look at each other before coming together at the dining room table.

'We should probably talk about this, lad,' his father, Doug, sighs.

Lawrence sits down at the dark table, his sweating hands resting on his knees, whole body leaning forward.

‘You know we really can’t afford to move out there, don’t ya?’ The room came crashing down around Lawrence as Doug continues, ‘Look pal, we want nufin’ more than for ya to follow ya dreams but it just ain’t gonna work.’

Lawrence gets dizzy, closing his eyes for a brief moment, just long enough to catch his breath.

‘Why didn’t you say anythin’ before I made this my whole entire life?’ Tears threaten to spill from his eyes and as his head grows heavier, anger rises up his throat, the sting familiar to bile. Blame spins around his head – how dare his parents nurture him like this? How dare they watch him fall down a spiral knowing they won’t do anything to help him out of it?

‘We never promised.’ Doug puts out the cigarette he’d lit, twisting it into the glass ashtray.

‘Don’t do that,’ Lawrence pleads now, his voice shaky and uncertain, ‘I was nine and you promised we’d at least go see them. I remember that, dad.’ He stands now, arms crossing over his front. Standing eye-to-eye with his father, Lawrence’s eyes didn’t falter. Doug can see his son was not about to let this go. Lawrence could feel warm drops of his blood, he was digging his nails into his palm without meaning to. The warmth soothing the sharp pain pulsing through the rest of his hands. His dad shakes his head and stands up.

‘Why are you leavin’?’

Lawrence’s mum walks in, an array of plates and utensils in her arms, paired with a frown on her delicate face. ‘Let’s all take a moment yeah? I’ll go put the kettle on.’ She puts everything down on the coffee table and wipes her damp hands on her pink floral apron.

‘You’re both liars! You know this is all I’ve wanted.’ The poor boy is

distraught, large beads of sweat dripping down his reddening forehead, arms flailing out in front of him.

‘Then go want something else, lad. Something cheaper, please, cause this one is gonna make us homeless.’ Doug sighs, growing restless. He wants the best for his only child, but this is ridiculous. He takes a seat on the yellowing sofa, legs spread and calloused hands on his thighs. He breathes out before lifting his eyes to meet his sons. The two look alike, save for Doug’s balding head and his son’s blonde curls, matching his mother’s. Grey eyes stare into grey eyes, thick air between the two.

‘Y’know, son,’ he starts, ‘if your nan could see ya now, cryin’ and snottin’ all over yourself cuz you can’t go to Australia, she’d be turnin’ in her grave. I always wanted to be a pilot. Couldn’t afford it though, so I settled. Cuz that’s what we have to do, lad, we settle.’ He crosses one foot over the other. ‘What happened to the good days, eh?’

Lawrence’s brows furrow. ‘The good days? Get a grip, dad. Times have changed, so have people, so have expectations,’ he balls up his fists, ‘Not you though.’ Lawrence grabs his father by the collar of his white shirt, pushing him down onto the floor.

‘God doesn’t like liars.’ The first punch went directly to Doug’s nose, and then he couldn’t stop himself.

The door bursts open and Lawrence’s mother strolls in, the promised tea lying in the crook of her bare arm. It takes her a minute to understand what was happening, her husband lying on the floor with a bloody, swollen face. She lets out a light gasp, the teapot in her arm smashing onto the floor, pieces of delicate China flying across the room. She swats at the welts that the water has left on her bare arms.

Lawrence steps back realising what he has just done. Blood spatters over his white shoes, his own father’s head rolling back, barely staying conscious. He stretches his hands out in front of him, taking in the

glisten of the dark fluid that covers them. A light tremor passes through his body.

‘What have you done?’ His mum whispers, her own shaking hands helping up her husband.

‘I didn’t,’ Lawrence stutters.

Silence sweeps over the entire room as Lawrence watches his mother kneel in small puddles of his father’s blood.

‘Ah, c’mon now, can’t even finish off your dad, huh?’ Doug smiles, his yellow teeth now red.

Lawrence lunges for a knife on the table in a blinding rage, twisting the weapon in his palm. He drives it into Doug’s stomach, the blue handle sticking out of his white shirt.

About the Author

Urte Grinkaite is a Lithuanian student studying Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln, with the hopes of also acquiring her Master’s. She developed love for all writing over her studies, specifically for poetry focused on her own immigrant experience. In free time, she enjoys helping at her local church.

FIVE POEMS

by
James Hay-Barr

Potion # 3

I wanted to show where my pain was
cutting my soul with feather-light words
seemed to work – (for you)
for the first time – (admitting)
cursing colours for mimicking the way I bleed
in the reflective image of your dance
sifting through the favourite pose to your song –
(never shared)
looking for the approval of butterflies
they wouldn't notice

you eased me into your bubble (disappearing)
when I said there was no air –
you were amused –
I left.
blending my own palette –
choosing when I would bleed

Dance #8

Do the dancing creatures of your nighwalks whisper secrets forgotten?

(They should!)/

To bring you closer to that moment of flight/

(stretching your perfection)/

To where the world is nothing/

These lessons are not for learning

(exist in them)

Not for purpose/ not passion

They should bring you to where walking alone is growing

(light souled)

Eyes shut seeing where the dust lays on you

(where stars cried)

The tight-lipped singing nithlings tap in poisoned words

(whispered)

Only on the dark side of the mirror you hold up

Is the answer

(at least one of them)//

Former Once Removed

frosted glass moments

lipstick messages on fog —

anything can grow —

striving —

surreal as we —

in the between*

Lost

With the last lingering kiss/

Say farewell//

Remember the shadow of her voice/

Long to touch/

the waiting hand//

Parting between breaths//

A journey/

that we could not share//

In silence, with the Dawn/

comes hope//

Light promises so much/

I am afraid of the dark/

now you are gone//

Timere Oblivisci

This reality/

Tell me again of

The last moments/

The ruins of what has been/

Fist tight, sat waiting for light//

In sleep's shallow pit/

Swaying poppies grow in

Sibilant susurrating rain//

Seeking the root of man/

Only the shadows come into the dark//

About the Author

James is a Creative Writing student at the University of Lincoln. He has lived many lives as a shipwright, airman, musician and teacher. He loves writing in all forms and is passionate about the spoken word. James' poetry is drawn from life's experiences. He also writes fantasy novels.

A CHEF AND HIS SPIDER

by
Bella Higgins

May 27th, 1940.

‘We made it, Spider,’ says Cheffo, clasping my shoulder and giving it a shake.

I nod, unable to comprehend what I see before me. A beach never looked so appealing even though I hate sand. It windles its way into every nook and cranny and, no matter how many times you wash, you can still find it for days following.

It’s less chaotic than I expected. Order has been kept and people are lining up in their regiments. Cheffo and I, as far as I could see, were the only ones from ours. The others were behind, or so we hope. It’s silent apart from the commands of higher-ups, some tommies are lying on the ground – alive, possibly. Others are wading through the surf to a few small, civvy boats just off the shore. We are all sitting ducks.

‘I need a shit,’ Cheffo says as we reach a sand dune. ‘If we got here any later, I would have soiled my pants.’

‘Delightful.’ I scrunch up my nose when really nothing fazes me anymore. When you find people you’ve shared a meal with without limbs, or dead, something like shitting yourself no longer bothers you.

We collapse on a dune and my mouth is gasping for water as if I’ve scooped a handful of sand into my mouth and swallowed. It’s been hours since I had a drop of water. Cheffo has some left in his canteen, but we have to keep that spare just in case we don’t get a space on a destroyer for a while. We can’t resort to seawater; it’ll kill us if the Germans don’t get there first.

I met Cheffo the day we got sent to the barracks for a bit of training. He and I had bunks next to each other, and we haven’t left each other’s side since. I can’t imagine being here without him. I don’t think I’d survive; he keeps the light in the dark. Or at least, he tries too. I accepted my fate early on; I feel it in my bones. I’m not going home. It’s like a heavy weight dragging inside of you. My dad described it to us in a letter during the Great War – *our body has a bundle of chains shackled to every limb. It gets heavier each day until you can’t lug it any further. That’s how you know the end is near.* Each word he wrote is engrained in my head and echoes around me every time a bomb whistles as it plummets down around us. I never saw Dad again, but Cheffo was adamant we would get home, he’s good like that. He has a blindness to the negatives in life.

‘Oi, you two,’ a man, covered in dried blood, shouted from a line a few hundred metres in front, ‘find your mates and get lined up.’

There’s no point questioning orders anymore, as long as they have the same uniform as us, we do as we are told. We will die either way, following orders or not. I pull Cheffo up, he’s scrambling to buckle his trousers as I drag him across the beach.

There’s a line not too far down the beach, we head towards them, getting shoved back by a lad. He doesn’t say a word to us, just shakes his

head and we move on. There are countless grumbles from lads about how long it'll be before they're on a destroyer or a civvy boat, and yet none of them care to point us in the direction of our regiment.

We can't find our own. We'd be able to hear Shrill's shouts by now. They're high-pitched and break every time he speaks as if puberty decided to skip him. It's why he got his name. I don't even recall hearing his real one. Everyone's called something different now. To the government we are a number, to the boys we are Spider and Cheffo, to our parents I'm Edward Webb and he's George Cook. He doesn't look like a George, to me he will always be Cheffo.

'It's just us two, ain't it?' Cheffo says. I'm afraid to admit that he's right. 'Oh well, I like it when it's just us.' He touches his heart and I do the same.

My stomach drops as I peer out to sea, a lad no older than twenty is floating in the small waves, he looks asleep. No further than twenty metres from his feet, another lad, a bit older than him, is taking a few steps into the shallow water, breaking through the water, and edging further out. Waist-deep, he drops below the surface and doesn't come back up.

'We'll make it home, I'll make sure of it,' he whispers to me, 'it's me and you, always.'

By nightfall, we called it quits. We had trawled the beach back and forth, being shouted at by God-knows-who every five minutes, we just couldn't find our boys. Instead, we round a dune and use it as a cover for us to get some shut-eye. I rest on my arms, facing Cheffo as he curls up into himself, clutching his knees to his chest. There's a sharp chill in the air and it bites the skin of our neck. The sky may be dark, but the glow of flames and waft of smoke from a bombed ambulance illuminate the beach.

Awoken by the commands of an officer barking orders at the hundreds of men who had arrived on the beach overnight, I peel my eyes open. Congealed with sand and mud, they have crusted over. I brush as much away as I can with my dirty hands.

There is a strange stillness to the sea. My skin itches not just from the uniform that had dried stale and dirty – spare ones were even worse – but from the heavy feeling that this was as calm as it'd get.

I roll onto my side, Cheffo is still sleeping. I count the freckles on his cheek, ignoring the shouts from further down the beach. I want a few more moments to rest before I face what's to come. The mud smudged across his skin hides the small flecks but they're like stars on a sunny day – there if you really concentrate.

'Bugger off staring,' he mumbles, his eyes opening, squinting in the light.

'I wasn't.'

'Bull.'

He sits up brushing his fingers through his thick, brown hair that's clogged with blood and sand. He got smacked with the butt of a rifle a few days back, he and Shrill were at each other's throats for no reason. War does that to you. It makes you crazy and angry at every little thing. Everything is monotonous, even when guns are being shot at me, it's just the same thing on a different day.

There's a loud rumble, we both sit up and look at one another. I'll never forget the engines of the Luftwaffe. There's a musicality to the Spitfire, it warms you, knowing that the fiery rumble of the engine is there to look after you. The Luftwaffe rings in your ears, it's like a siren which doesn't stop until you gun it down.

'Brace yourselves!' I catch the echo of a lad in the distance shouting, and one by one, everyone drops to the ground covering their heads and

the Germans unload bombs on us.

I edge as close to Cheffo as possible, covering my head with my hands, our helmets long gone. I hear him counting. He does that when he's scared, whether he likes to admit it or not. Sand deadened the impact of the bombs, but the screams came alive.

There's a clatter on my back and I suck in, dreading finding out what or who has landed on me. It presses my waist further into the sand. It'd hardly conceal me from danger. If anything, I'd come face-to-face with another dead Tommy buried in this spot weeks ago. The sand scratches my face, digging in and scraping along my jaw.

'Twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven...' Cheffo's voice is muffled, my ears ring as another wash of sand is flung into the air and rains down on us.

The engines grow quieter, and the screams die down, I wait until he reaches forty before I move one of my hands to hold his. He squeezes but doesn't look up until he counts fifty.

'Where's the bloody Air Force?' I ask. There's a scatter of limbs and shrapnel around us. An arm tumbles off of me as I push myself up. We were at least two hundred metres from the next Tommy when we woke up this morning, now we are surrounded.

'They'll be here,' he tells me, grasping my arm and hauling us both up. 'At least they missed that destroyer.' He points to the blue ship docked on the mole. Heads begin to appear as tommies rise to their feet and nurses appear from where they had taken cover.

'They'll come back for it.'

I bite my tongue, there's no guarantee they will and even if they try, they might not make it back to us.

'Probably,' Cheffo murmurs, 'but we still have to try and get on it if we want to go home.'

I'm tired of fighting him. We have argued many times about getting home. Even if we did, we'd be cowards, we have retreated. I'd rather die than be branded a coward.

I halt in my tracks; he turns to look at me and tilts his head. 'When we are home, we can see each other... alone.' He glances over his shoulders and under his feet. I don't say anything to him, we are in a minefield of dead bodies. Even them knowing about us is dangerous. Spirits whisper in the wind and we are surrounded by hundreds of them.

'People would question it.'

'Why would they? We served in the army together.'

'There's being close, Chef, then there's us.'

He sighs and touches his heart. I touch mine.

Getting closer to the mole, more boys are on stretchers waiting to be carted onto the destroyer. One is groaning and crying out; his leg is gone. The stump has been tended to, wrapped up in a scrap of bandages, but he has been left here. We step past him. If we look at him, we are betraying him, leaving him to die. He's as good as dead to us already. Cheffo nudges my side. We look at each other and his eyes plead me to do something. I nod and we return to the lad and grasp one end of the stretcher each lifting him, trying our best not to hurt him even more.

We shuffle through the mass of men, breaking a path for us to squeeze the stretcher through. There are people in all different states, some are unrecognisable, their noses blown off, some have half a face, some with no arms, or one arm, and a couple with broken legs. Yet, every one of them has a glimmer of hope in their eyes. They're going home. There's a tug on my shoulder and I'm dragged backwards almost dropping the stretcher. It's Shriil.

I grin. 'Oh, I've never been so happy to see your ugly mug.'

He doesn't seem quite as happy to see us. His face is hard, and his

eyes darken at the stretcher in our hands. 'That's not your job, he's already dead,' he says, plucking the boy's dog tags from his chest, skimming them, and dropping back.

'We can get him onto the ship, and he'll get treated,' says Cheffo.

'He's dead weight.'

Shrill's in charge of our orders. We do as he says and place the man down. By the grace of God, some other lads sweep him up whilst we fall into place. Back into being a number. Cheffo pokes me as we take one small step closer to the mole as part of our regiment. There are only six of us now; we started with fifteen.

Hours trawl by before we are even halfway onto the mole. I can see the hopefulness radiating off Cheffo as we draw closer to the destroyer. He's beaming and the brown of his irises has lightened to the colour of sandbags. This is the second destroyer, the one we lined up for has already set off jam-packed with lads.

'See, they haven't forgotten us.' Cheffo grins, but I don't agree. 'We're nearly home.'

His face falls as the whine of the Luftwaffe grows closer; they've circled back, but this time they have company. Shrill pushes Cheffo to the front of our group and I lose sight of him as we take cover. Bullets and bombs ricochet as both our Air Force and the Germans fly overhead. On land, at sea, in the air, we are surrounded.

I squeeze my eyes shut. 'Where's the counting?' I shout, tugging at the roots of my hair. Water sprays over us and the wind thrashes as the Spitfire engines rumble over the horizon pushing the Luftwaffe back. 'Bloody count for Christ's sake!'

'They're going to have us,' Shrill cries beside me.

The mole trembles and there's a loud split in the timbers as a bomb plummets right onto us. Lads scream, but one stands out from the rest.

I go to move but Shrill holds me in place.

A lad beside us shouts, 'Where's the rest of the sodding Air Force?'

One of the engines groans, losing altitude, heading straight for the sea. It whines and with one large splash, it stops. One down. One to go. The rumble of the Spitfires overshadows the remaining Luftwaffe pushing it away from us.

We all rise as their engines fade into the distance, and everyone cheers that our boys took down one of their planes. I can't bring myself to force a smile. I need to find Cheffo. I shove past Shrill and two of our other lads to get closer to him.

The timber creaks and groans as the water laps over the split foundations. Where Cheffo stood, is gone. Debris floats in the shallow water below and he is slumped over the beams like a rag. My lungs try to scream, and my eyes try to cry, but I feel nothing. A hand pats my shoulder, but I can't bring myself to tear my eyes away from him.

Shrill's voice rings in my ears. 'Nasty way to go, but beats drowning I suppose.'

Anger bubbles in my stomach and I want to beat the shit out of him, but he's already pushing his way through tommies on the other side of the hole. They'd laid a plank of wood across so that people could move forward.

'C'mon lad, over you go.' A man, who looks to be in his late forties, nudges me towards the plank.

With every step I take, climbing across a piece of wood laid across the hole, the closer I get to the destroyer, the more I yearn for Cheffo. I'm shoved into the crowd on the other side, men sliding past each other to get closer to the front of the queue. I glance back to where men are going over the plank, all ignoring who is below them.

I'm dragged backwards and met with Shrill and the others. 'He's

gone, Spider. Just focus on getting yourself home, alright?’

Seeing Woody get gunned down in Calais, Butchy losing his leg, Smudger not waking up in the trench, and Trigger shooting himself, I had gotten used to death. But I can’t get the picture out of my mind, Cheffo lying there like a piece of meat thrown to the dogs.

‘They’ll bring him home, right?’ My voice is hoarse.

‘Pray, Spider. All you can do is pray.’ Shrill dips his head and starts his descent onto the ship.

I climb onto the destroyer after him, snatching a blanket off of the nurse and aim to get as far away from Shrill as I can. If I stay close to him, he’ll be suffocated with the blanket.

Despite being on the ship, there’s not a single bone in my body that feels safe. My eyes dart around the ship and I rub my hands over my trousers to try and get rid of the sweat that is building up in my palms. Not even the echo of Cheffo’s words from the night before can ease me. ‘Once we are on a boat, they can’t touch us.’

He must have forgotten about the torpedoes and the bombs. Either that or he chose to ignore the threat they pose. The ship begins to shudder, men cheer as we leave the mole, pushing through the water as bread with jam and water is passed around.

‘Eat up, lads, you’re going home,’ a nurse carrying a tray of mugs shouts. More cheers erupt. People slide past me, clapping each other on the back, celebrating a war they haven’t won. How can you celebrate when we are already dead?

Shuffling past tommies, I get closer to an exit. There’s a ladder beside me and I lean against it, devouring my crust of bread. I can’t remember the last time we had any food. Time passing doesn’t exist in a war but time coming to an end does. The bread doesn’t touch the sides and I snatch another piece from a nurse handing more out.

‘Plenty more where that came from, sweetheart,’ she chuckles, handing me another piece.

Full of bread, I hold my chest as I watch a nurse hand out lifejackets a couple of groups away. There’s a surge in the water outside growing more prominent like it’s racing towards us. My chest starts to ache, and I rub it as my heart races. Men around me grow silent, looking at each other. They push and shove, getting closer to the exit I’m beside. More follow and voices blur into one as panic sets in.

I catch the end of a word, ‘doe’ echoing amongst the lads as a swell of water crashes through the walls of the ship, engulfing us. I kick out attempting to swim up to the exit, but I’m knocked back by a larger man, who disappears as the exit bursts open.

There’s only a small ounce of light – it’s a lamp on the side of the destroyer – everything else is dark. I’m bashed into, knocked side to side, punched in the gut, tugged by the ankle, yet I’m still kicking. I aim for the exit, there’s flickers of light I can only assume are stars that resemble the freckles that littered Cheffo’s cheeks. As I grow closer to the exit they brighten and get clearer. I climb and climb, battling the people I serve with, fighting my side to get out. My lungs are gasping for air as I beg for the chance to escape. The light distorts in the water, darkness looming nearer and one by one, men above me stop, falling back as if they had become the bombs dropping on us.

I push forward one last time. Not for me. For Cheffo. He’s getting home, I’ll make sure he does. His mum will get to put him to rest, his mum will kiss him goodbye one last time.

The light fizzles out and I touch my chest.

About the Author

Bella Higgins is a third-year Creative Writing student at the University of Lincoln, who specialises in writing historical and dystopian, young adult fiction. Bella runs a free proofreading service for her peers and has published multiple novels on *Wattpad* in her teens which have amassed over 5.6 million total reads.

FORGIVE ME

by
Eleanor Jackson

May, 1536. London, ENGLAND

The firepit burns in front of me. I have been told to wait.

On a day such as this, the King's tennis match is more important than the impending demise of his wife. But I refuse to wait any longer. I have come to plead for my sister's life.

The King's men refuse to let me enter the courtroom, but I force my way through the oak doors and find Henry trying to volley with his guard. I stay silent, avoiding the King's gaze as I look around the room. Well-dressed men sit on the edge of their seats watching the match take place, even though it is a practice game. Each one stares as the ball goes back and forth, a drink in their hands. I sigh, and a small noise slips out as I try to stand close to the doorway.

'Mary?' He does not try to conceal my identity. Shocked he noticed

me, I take a bold step out of the shadows and stare at him over the net splitting the room in half.

His eyes glow with discomfort, either for me or for the guards who did not manage to tame me. Without looking at the people of his court, he dismisses them and strides over to me.

‘Follow me.’ We walk to his private chambers, where he gestures for me to sit. I take in his room – no different to how it had been before. The giant arched window fills the wall behind the extravagant settee I now perch on, and the four-poster bed sits proudly in the centre of the room. The adjoining bathing room door is furthest away from me, and a rich solid oak desk is close by, pulled slightly from the wall. He waves at his squire standing by the door and makes his way to the cart at the edge of the window.

‘Drink?’

‘No, thank you.’ I pause. ‘Sire, I ask for you to spare her.’

He shakes his head. My gaze wanders over to his bed. Freshly made, full regal quilts.

Awoken in the night, the guard leads me down the hallway to the familiar door wearing only my nightgown.

‘You look lovely, Mary.’ He prowls towards me and my shoulders tense with either nerves or anticipation.

‘Thank you, Sire.’

He lightly traces a finger down the middle of my breasts. ‘Tell me, Mary. Do you think of me?’

My body trembles and I lay a small smile on my lips. ‘Yes, Sire.’

He dismisses the guard and leads me to the bed, laying me gently on the edge, and raises the hem of my gown.

His stare pulls me out of my haze, a flash of a smirk on his face before he responds. ‘I will not spare her,’ he states. ‘Unless you came for

something else, I suggest you leave.’

My slight blush disappears. ‘You have already taken part of our family’s blood, Sire, please!’

‘Yes, and your brother deserved it no less than she does,’ he grunts before continuing. ‘Incest is the dirtiest form of betrayal there is. I should have you killed for coming here and asking for her pardon.’ He scoffs into his amber liquid, gulping it down, muttering words of profanity about his court seeing me.

I gasp and nearly choke on my breath. ‘She is my sister.’

His eyes meet my own. A beat of silence hangs in the air. ‘She knew of our affair, Mary. She knew of the bastard child. Whom, I may add, is saving your life this second. I am the King; I will do as I like. She betrayed me.’

A gentle sob breaks free as I look down into my lap. ‘What of your child?’

‘She will survive.’

‘And my father?’

‘Dismissed.’

I hardly dare ask this last question. ‘My son?’

He slams his glass down. ‘Enough! You are dismissed, Mary. Be on with you.’

I stand up and rush to the door. With a last look to the King, I leave, sobbing into my hand as I wipe away the falling tears.

I bear witness to the headsmen gathering materials for my sister’s execution. They position hay on the platform and spread it out evenly. A grey sack lies waiting for her head. One headsmen is sharpening his sword with a solemn look on his face. I hide in the shadows away from

their eyes, but I make note of every detail. The man sweeping the hay has brown hair and brown eyes, and he wears all black. There's a mask in his hand as he sweeps the brush over the platform. The other, with the sword, has blue eyes and black hair. His mask is lying on his head, ready to be pulled down. The headsmen of Calais. Both of them wear heavy expressions.

Likely not wanting to aid the King in killing the Queen.

My gaze moves upwards to the tower. She's up there now, with only her maidens to keep her sane. I cannot begin to fathom what must be going on in her mind, but I know that if I were her, I would be terrified.

I slink back into my shadowed alcove and let out a few unsteady breaths. I have failed at saving my sister now, but then, I failed to save her a long time ago – when Henry first took me to bed. I should have stopped then. I should have never let it start. Although not officially wed, I knew of rumours that my sister was to marry him. I drove her to madness and now she is to die.

A warm liquid runs down my cheeks as my back collapses back into the cold, damp wall. The contrast makes my body heat, and I realise that I am crying.

Voices start to flood the courtyard. Loud mumbling and children screaming. Inching out of my alcove, I see some children are running, playing with wooden swords. Once again, I glance upwards and see the tower looming over the courtyard, shadowing the sun in parts. Walls cage us into this large, tiny space, and the platform to my right where the children play together. I smack a hand over my mouth as tears begin to well in my eyes once more. Why are these parents allowing their children to play fight at an event like this? My sister is about to die, and these children have nothing but joy. Why would anyone bring them here?

I fall back into the safety of my darkened alcove once more. The darkness shields me from view, but not from my own thoughts.

I am killing my sister.

The shouts of the crowd become louder, and I realise that people are shouting their hatred. They hate their own Queen. The King has manipulated their minds. I wish this were not happening – it should be me. You deserve more. I should have given you more, rather than disappearing from our family after being banished.

Our mother is dead, the King killed our brother, and now you.

I suppose the shouts and harsh remarks are not the only things that bring sadness to her. I draw in a sob, to not make a sound. The crowd goes silent.

All of my thoughts disappear.

I peek around from my small hole in the wall and see Anne. A King's man is in front of her, blocking my view, but I can see her black hair. Her three maidens trailing behind look as if they have been weeping. I need to see my sister.

Hands reach out for Anne, pulling and pushing her as she walks to her death through the centre of the courtyard. The King is nowhere in sight. Another sob crawls up my throat. I finally see her face. She appears to be holding her head high, but as her eyes catch the light, I see them shimmer. She tries her best to keep the tears from spilling, but all I can focus on is the look on her face, reminding me so much of us being scolded as young girls. Anne is scared, but she knows it is pointless to show it. If she were to beg, she would be laughed at. So, my sister holds her head high and keeps the tears from streaming.

I start praying to myself in a whisper, 'Please God, have mercy. She does not deserve this. No one should go through this. Please, God, keep her safe. This is my fault, and it should be me walking through these

people, so please, God, keep her strong.’

My guilt blocks out the noise surrounding me. Once again, I can only feel the dampness at my back and the shallow beats of my heart as I contemplate running out and pushing Anne to the side. He forged these crimes of incest and treason, only to get rid of Anne. But no one will believe my word over the King’s.

I am sorry, Anne.

The three maidens climb up the stairs to the platform, behind Anne. Her face hides again as she glances over at the headsman, the one with the sword, his mask on now, concealing his identity. Although everyone knows that he is the famous headsman from Calais, his face will always haunt my dreams from now on. The headsman who led her to the platform leans closer to her, listening to something that the crowd cannot hear. I take the moment to take in what she is wearing. Her most expensive jewellery covers her neck and head, along with a long grey robe. She clutches a small purse. I gasp silently, realising what the purse is. She now turns to the crowd. Her body gives out a small tremble.

She opens her mouth to start a speech; it amazes me that she can speak to the people who have come to see her die.

‘Good Christian people, I am come hither to die, for according to the law, and by the law I am judged to die, and therefore I will speak nothing against it. I am come hither to accuse no man, nor to speak anything of that, whereof I am accused and condemned to die, but I pray God save the King and send him long to reign over you, for a gentler nor a more merciful prince was there never, and to me he was ever a good, gentle and sovereign lord.’

My thoughts go to the King. He is not noble; he is sentencing her to die to rid himself of a marriage. For no other reason than another woman – Jane Seymour, if the whispers I heard were true.

I cannot listen to the rest of her speech, so I imagine that we are still young and enduring the carriage rides to our country house. We would play together in the garden and get scolded for falling on Mother's flowers. We would stay up in our room laughing until the sun came up, mercilessly teasing our younger brother.

The heat rises and warm tears continue to run down my face. Anne is crying now also. Her maidens are dressing her head in a white cap, taking off her jewellery and storing it in their own pouches for safety. They are crying. Once they finish dressing Anne they step away and hide their faces.

Anne turns her attention to the headsman again and reaches out the purse for him to take. He takes it and asks for forgiveness, and Anne accepts. Her tears are running faster now, as she scans the crowd. I stay put, hoping that she sees me. I need this last moment. Her eyes find mine, making her tears flow heavier as she kneels close to the hay. The crowd follows and prayers are spoken. I want her to be able to live. Someone calls Anne's name. She looks over and the sword is swung. The sun catches a reflection before it is covered with her blood. So quickly she is gone. A scream enters the silence. I look around for whoever is screaming, only to realise that it is me.

'I am so sorry, Anne,' I whisper.

Everything moves around me. I am frozen in my spot. Guilt riddles my bones. She is gone. It is over. She died because of me. No, she died for me. I am sorry, Anne.

'I shall keep Elizabeth safe, Anne. She will know who her mother is.' I turn and walk out of the courtyard, staring at the spot where she lies. 'I am so very sorry.'

About the Author

Eleanor Jackson is a third-year BA Creative Writing student at the University of Lincoln. Her first publication – *Forgive Me* – is a first-person narrative based on Mary Boleyn’s thoughts witnessing her sister’s execution. Eleanor has enjoyed reading from a young age and aspires to write a novel alongside a marketing career.

FIVE POEMS

by
Jack Jackson

Wallpaper Diaries

/ intricate petals / of paint strokes / and subtle lines / are only noticed
/ through / keen glass / stuck / on with a paste / roots envy of a hold
/ shove paw prints / in foundations / stubborn / painted over / arms
tied down / by Rose-More Ivory / a green pink / spiced / with misty
strokes / legs / sinking in lagoons

the decorator thought / would clench the longing / of deserts / of
stars / and danger sat / waiting / watching / before hidden under plas-
ter / I'll tell you / tears will / not rip cleanly / from the charcoal garden
/ in the bricks /

Speaker's Teeth

Now a jukebox, with a sign
too covered in graffiti to read.
It was blue once, maybe green.
Fresh-faced strangers press buttons,
and words leave this stereo mouth.

Everyday,

an [unintelligible] worm

tries to make

it make sense

and—

Watching not with a bracelet of awe,
but with smashed casing, this mess of wires
will cram songs into scratches, till
lungs stop aching and turntables
will forever hold the words no language can decipher.

Convert,

blurbs into ballrooms

hold them

till he tries

breathing carpet burns.

Raindrops and Frozen Peas

I make eye contact with Mum over dinner
when you tell a story in the most *you* way possible.
With flailing hands, and eyes full of baby blue mischief,
you tell us about the drama in your friend group,
how you're above it all and that you don't want to get involved.

You say something hypocritical
and I laugh in between bites of homemade pie and frozen peas.
'Look who's talking'
Dad eggs you on, and you start insulting each other,
pointing and prodding in pinks and greens.
Mum and I eat up the digs,
asking how we ended up with you two,
what we did to deserve something *this* loud.

I let my ears wander to the rain outside,
the droplets jump on tile, melts the concrete
and the dog shakes in the seat next to me.
I close my eyes at our antics, and open them to
the microwaveable pie I've lost the appetite for,
an empty dinner table, and
a softer, colder rain out the window.

I now see you grow in stints
rather than with your hand in mine
and I wish nothing but to be sitting at a full table.

At The Very Least, The Film was Good.

Picking polish is easier in the dark than the light
but watching scabs heal isn't inviting in either.

You tell me you don't understand
why I have two copies of the same book.
I said they're like video games.
I lied, they're Xs on maps.

Sometimes, when prompted by various human things,
I dig some back up, yawn into their arms,
and wonder how I ever could have written their eulogy.

At least, at least
bread, when buried, doesn't mould
and book pages stay as they were crinkled.

Again? So soon?

/ miles / six thousand seven hundred and forty-six of them / thirteen
hours seventeen minutes / eight hundred and fifty-three seats / be-
tween ten and twelve / thousand meters high / if you fell / there's thirty
seconds / hope the air does not decide to be capricious / please fasten
your seatbelts / stay seated / try to sleep / ignore the baby crying five
rows in front of you / ignore the feet from the row behind you / ignore
the engines / the wheels / pull up your lungs / push down / on bones
/ hope they do not wake you for the food / it makes the oxygen heavy
/ you do not want to crash / watch the tracker on the screen / cover
the no man's land / over man's land / birds land / clouds land / cabin
crew prepare for land / -ing / thirteen hours seventeen minutes / give
or take delays / six thousand seven hundred and forty-six miles / smush
together / like us / and our arms / welcome home /

About the Author

Jack Jackson (he/they) is a queer poet who grew up in Singapore and recently returned to the UK for university. He's the founder of The Poet's Society at the University of Lincoln and is planning on doing a poetry-centric MA. If he's not writing, he's probably daydreaming about space.

REBEL. REBEL

by
Megan Kennedy

‘Can you pass my lighter?’ David said half hung out the window. Cigarette in hand, he gestured to the ashtray. Jonathan reached over to the dresser, where a bright blue tube sat amongst a pile of burned ashes. He scrunched his nose and plucked it out. He noticed how rough David was when it was in his hands – the pad of his thumb pushed down hard on the metal top, and a light sparked. Jonathan sat cross-legged on the floor, just watching, in the hopes David would let him stay.

‘Are cigarettes expensive?’ Jonathan couldn’t imagine the price of a packet. He’d noticed them at the local shops behind the counter, but there were no labels, so he’d just assumed they were pricey.

‘I spent most of my wages on a packet, but I think it’s worth it,’ David answered, his hand gripped to the opening of the window. Jonathan noted the effortless way that smoke trailed from his mouth it was an enticing display to the eye. David twisted his shoulders to face Jonathan and chucked the lighter his way. With a steady catch, Jonathan felt the

cold of the metal against the inside of his palm. He squinted down at the lighter.

‘I could see your staring from over here. Have at it,’ David said.

Jonathan tried to hide his smile. His thumb hovered over the catch. Then, with a steady hand, he pulled against the ridges, and a flame ignited.

‘Try not to burn yourself, Mum hates smoking.’

Jonathan nodded and kept the lighter straight. The flame calmed, and he watched as it continued to burn.

‘Cool right?’ David hopped down from the window and put out the butt of his cigarette into the glass dish.

Jonathan smiled. ‘Yeah, really cool.’

David crouched down by his desk, revealing a box from underneath. ‘Might hide my cigarettes in here.’

Jonathan peered over the cardboard flaps. A collection of David’s belongings lay wrapped up as if ready to sell. He’d been wondering why David’s desk had been cleared and why his magazines had vanished from his shelf.

‘Where are you taking it?’

‘University. Can’t let things gather dust,’ David replied.

Jonathan frowned. He knew that university was on the table from the leaflets lying around David’s room, but he hadn’t realised he’d been accepted. Jonathan realised the flame had disappeared when he glanced down, his thumb eased off the lighter.

David noticed Jonathan’s sudden shift of expression. ‘Did my mum not tell you?’

Jonathan cleared his throat. ‘Yeah, she did.’

David stuffed the cigarettes between the array of objects in the box. ‘She reckons up north will be cheaper for university. Plus, it’s far away

from home, so it's a win for the both of us.'

Jonathan listened to David as he jabbed at his mum, Janice. He understood why. The woman was overbearing, treating her son like a prized trophy on the highest shelf. Jonathan couldn't say the same for himself. Janice had been a nice foster parent, but she didn't go out of her way to accommodate him unless it was necessary. Even so, he considered himself lucky. There were no physical punishments or a lack of food. Previous foster placements had been far worse.

His stomach tossed. Jonathan couldn't work out whether the sinking feeling was from the news that David was leaving, or the fact he was going to be alone in the house. He wasn't close with David, but there had always been an understanding there. It saddened him to think it would be the last time they sat here together.

'Keep it. The lighter.'

Jonathan squeezed the metal. 'Really?'

David shut the window and the slam vibrated through the wooden frame of the bed. 'Yeah, I have a few.'

'Thanks,' Jonathan mumbled. He struggled to grip the lighter against the clamminess of his hands. 'When do you leave?'

'Tuesday,' David replied.

Jonathan remembered Janice's kitchen calendar; it was Saturday. Three days, and then David would be gone.

'Can I come to see you?' Jonathan's voice was quiet.

David's lip twitched, he sat back on his bed and faced Jonathan. 'I don't think that's a good idea.'

Jonathan's face reddened. He wanted to take the question back. 'Never mind.'

'My mum just thinks since you haven't been with us long, it may be weird to take you up to visit me.'

A sharp twist in Jonathan's side made him pause. He should have accepted the fact that he wasn't really a part of the family. He needed to stop putting expectations on people.

'I think my mum had some things to discuss with you this weekend before I go. She's put the house up for sale.'

Jonathan's face fell at the news. His first thought was to question why Janice would sell the house.

David only shrugged. 'I guess now she can do the travelling she wanted to do before I was born.'

Bile rose in Jonathan's throat. He wondered with David gone where he would fit in the family picture.

Two years later, Croydon, London.

Jonathan cursed at the tarnished blue lighter. He flicked the catch, but it had stopped working. There wasn't a lot of liquid left in it when David had gifted it, and he knew that he couldn't afford to buy another. Flick. Flick. Nothing. He leant back against the open window, a sigh escaping his lips. The estate was stuffy today. The air was unusually warm for a late Saturday in September.

Helen and Mick, his temporary guardians, were at it again. A dissonant guitar rang through the other side of the wall. Jonathan supposed he should be grateful that he had his own room now – it beat the kitchen sofa. Both washed-up musicians, the pair were gone on the weekends, playing to lowlifes in pubs and using the odd five pence they earned on the bar in return.

They ignored Jonathan. If he was lucky, he would get a nasty word or a backhand to the head, and that would be it. He wondered if money was enough of a motive to foster a child. He felt more of a burden than

something of immense value.

Three months into Jonathan's stay, on his thirteenth birthday, social services called. They noted the condition of the sofa he'd taken residency on to be unsatisfactory. He'd grown accustomed to the springs that had poked holes through the cushioning, but just as he'd moulded to the upholstery, it was thrown out onto the grounds of the council estate. The spare room they'd used for storage became his temporary room.

Random junk cluttered the small space, but even with the crap lying around, it wasn't all bad. It was his own space. A gold mine sat between miscellaneous boxes, stacks of vinyls, great music, and genres he wouldn't listen to. It was hard for Jonathan to admit, but for a shitty musician, Mick had taste. The Who, Eagles, The Police, the list was endless.

As if to taunt the boy, Mick kept his record player in his room. Jonathan had spotted it once through a crack in the door, abandoned and gathering dust above his wardrobe. He couldn't understand how someone could have such a great collection and not listen to it.

A shout sounded from behind the door. Helen's scratchy singing had faded, and the noise of Mick's guitar had ceased.

'Boy.'

The voice grew louder. Jonathan scrambled out the windowsill. He caught his kneecap on the radiator and hissed at the impact, but he didn't spare it a thought. Instead, his concern was on the lighter in his hand. Knees to the floor, he yanked a loose plank of wood in the corner of the room. It popped out. A few cigarette papers lay discarded in the hole. He stashed David's lighter with haste, and in the split second it took for the wood to fall back into place, the door swung open.

'You taken my guitar pick?'

Jonathan craned his head, his body in a contorted crouch. 'What would I do with a pick?'

‘Don’t you smart-mouth me,’ Mick sneered down at him. ‘What you doin’ on the floor?’

Jonathan’s eyes darted around to find an excuse, but he could only shrug.

‘Maybe you should be more productive, sittin’ on the floor’s gonna get you nowhere.’

‘What would you suggest?’ Jonathan mumbled under his breath.

Mick’s hand flew to the boy’s collar and the force pulled his frame up with a sharp jolt.

‘Listen here you little shit, we’re playin’ a huge gig at a pub in central London, I’m talkin’ big money. If I find out you’ve taken anythin’ in this house, I’ll know.’

Jonathan waited for the end of his rant. It usually went on, but if luck would have it, that would be the end and he could go about his day.

Jonathan gritted his teeth. ‘You got it.’

Mick broke his hold, the door shuddering as he took his leave. The pillow on the edge of the bed became the victim of furious fists before it toppled to the floor. When the rage inside Jonathan had cooled, he threw himself onto the bed.

The wallpapered ceiling had started to peel. It had been like that for months and when he shut his eyes at night, it inched closer to the bed frame. He hoped, in a bizarre freak accident, the ceiling would collapse in the middle of the night, crushing him into a state of eternal darkness, which would finally allow him to sleep. A soreness burned behind Jonathan’s eyes. He closed them and tried to imagine something, anything.

The flat was free from Helen and Mick who had left the previous morning. Jonathan yanked the fridge open and, still half-asleep, squinted at

the fluorescent light. Bare shelves glanced back, except for a can of beer in the door, and a few boxes of leftovers that Helen had kindly cooked and left for him to eat. Jonathan swore she sabotaged her food on purpose, since Mick never ate her cooking. He grimaced at the unidentifiable slop in the containers and pushed the fridge closed.

A few floors down, screaming had erupted. Jonathan could pinpoint the floor where the noise had originated from when he neared the front door. Like clockwork, Denny, two floors down, would come back from the bar after hooking up with another woman and his wife would holler about his adultery, their arguing echoing between floors. He passed the shouting in the stairwell and continued down.

Light on the lower floor flooded in, unlike the upper floors which lacked windows and made Jonathan question whether it was day or night. The old lady who lived on the ground floor stood behind a walking frame. With shaky hands, she clutched a set of keys. She offered a smile, all gums with a lack of teeth. Jonathan noted her look of surprise when she parted her mouth, she wore a constant startled expression. He gave her an uncomfortable wave. He would be polite, even if she was unsettling.

Daylight seared the back of his retinas when he shoved the outside door open. Like yesterday, mugginess polluted the air. Jonathan shoved his hands into the deep linings of his pockets and avoided the potholes along the paths of the suburban streets. At the rusted phone box, he rounded the corner towards a beaten-down alleyway. A group of lads hung around a driveway, sat smoking on a stack of crates.

‘Oi!’ A whistle followed as he approached.

Several boys turned their attention towards him. Jonathan lifted his head in acknowledgment.

‘Jonny boy, where have you been?’ A skin-headed boy pushed him-

self off the crate.

Jonathan shrugged his shoulders at the boy he'd come to know as Alfie. 'Around.' He gathered it was better to keep the answers to a minimum with the group. Alfie chuckled at Jonathan's blunt answer and stubbed out his cigarette on a scorched patch of wood beside him.

Jonathan had known Alfie for two months. He didn't have a permanent residence – the streets were his home – and Jonathan knew nothing of his past. What he learned is that he would skulk around the estates scavenging for anything he could get his hands on, whether it was cash, cigs, food, or other people's possessions.

Alfie's head was recently shaved. Jonathan thought it was rather odd to shave all your hair off, not that he particularly cared for his own hair which bore a striking resemblance to a carrot. However, he had always been conscious of the colour. Holes gaped at the knees of Alfie's tatty jeans. Jonathan wasn't one to care for his appearance either.

'Have you got a lighter?' Alfie paused before he nudged the shoulder of the small boy at his side.

Jonathan could feel David's lighter in his pocket. It didn't work, but that didn't stop him from always carrying it on him.

The younger boy scrambled to pass the light to him. Alfie slapped it into Jonathan's hand with a toothy grin. He had noticed the chip in Alfie's front left canine. It was more distinctive than the rest of his teeth, equally misshaped from various street fights.

'Cheers,' Jonathan mumbled, reaching into his pocket for the one cig he had been saving. He slotted the stick between his teeth and sparked the lighter in his other hand. He was grateful for a smoke, even if he had to be a beggar.

'So, Jonny, we were thinking of hitting Old Brown's shop. Need a new pack.'

Jonathan raised his brow. 'What's that got to do with me?'

'Well, I lent you my lighter, now you do me a favour.'

'I didn't know you were charging for a spark these days.'

A handful of boys started to mutter between them.

'Yeah well, prices are up lad, can't afford to give handouts.'

Jonathan's expression turned sour. This was classic Alfie – you ask for the smallest thing, and he wants something in return. Jonathan knew not to get involved in their business. Alfie was an idiot, but he wasn't someone to fear. It was the people he did dirty work for that Jonathan knew not to mess with.

'You want me to steal for you?'

'It's only fair,' Alfie responded. This earned a chuckle from the crowd.

'Hardly,' Jonathan stated.

He knew Alfie had heard him, but he chose to ignore it. The bald boy threw a hand over Jonathan's shoulder and pulled him a few paces away from the group.

'I'll be in there with you, all you have to do is nab a packet.'

'Why me? Go ask one of them.' Jonathan gestured at the others.

'You look less suspicious. That sweet face could charm even the worst of people.'

He wasn't going to ask Alfie what he meant. The boy had already started to steer him in the direction of the shop.

Jonathan still wasn't sure what the plan was by the time they stood at the foot of the shop. A ring at the door alerted the cashier. The man lifted his head and Jonathan raised a brow in Alfie's direction. The older man got up from the counter, his hands brushing along the aisles, pretending to look busy.

‘Change of plans,’ Alfie said with a quick wink and disappeared before Jonathan could object. He glanced back at the cashier at the end of the shop, and not a second later a force had shoved him to the floor. Jonathan let out a groan, the wind was knocked from his lungs. Alfie’s face appeared above him – the boy fucking smiled.

‘Make a scene.’

Jonathan’s eyes widened. ‘What?’

Alfie had lost his mind. A shout was heard, and he slipped away.

‘Excuse me, what do you think you’re... are you okay?’

The clerk stood over the boy. Jonathan clenched his teeth, pissed off at Alfie’s dramatics. He groaned again and the man crouched beside him.

‘I fell,’ Jonathan muttered. It was a stupid excuse, but what was he supposed to say? When the clerk shifted his weight to the right, Jonathan spotted Alfie by the counter, a grin ear to ear. Jonathan wanted to slap the look off the boy’s face. Alfie waved a packet of cigarettes in his hand, then backed away from the door. The man peered down, and it was only then Jonathan realised he was still on the floor.

‘Do I need to call for an ambulance?’

It was a ridiculous question, Jonathan thought, since he’d only bumped his head. He was quick to bat the clerk’s hand away and sit up.

‘I wouldn’t get up so fast. You seemed dazed,’ the man warned.

‘I’m fine,’ Jonathan grumbled.

The front bell rung. If it hadn’t been for a stand of newspapers scattering onto the floor, they would have walked out unnoticed. The man turned and let out a loud shout, and Alfie sprinted out the door.

Jonathan knew he was in trouble when the clerk turned his attention to him, the vein on the side of the man’s brow pulsing. He flashed an innocent smile, but the clerk put two and two together.

‘You little—’

Jonathan scrambled up from the floor, his hand grabbed onto an aisle shelf for support. Boxes tumbled from his supporting weight and the sound of them falling to the floor silenced the clerk. Jonathan jumped over the piles of papers, his eye on the door. He threw it open, and a loud laugh sounded from in front of him.

‘Come on,’ Alfie urged, already a few paces ahead.

Shouts erupted from behind. When Jonathan shot his head around, he was surprised to find the clerk running after them. He’d expected him to give up the road over, but what he didn’t predict was the screech of a whistle, followed by Alfie running into a nearby officer.

Jonathan should have learned by now that being around Alfie was a bad idea. He always ended up in a situation when around the boy.

‘You’re lucky we’re separated by bars right now,’ Jonathan seethed. Alfie sat bored on the bench of an opposite cell.

‘And here I thought they separated us because you couldn’t keep your hands off me.’

‘Yeah, my hands on your neck,’ Jonathan countered. His eyes drifted to a metal bucket in the corner. He was desperate for a piss.

‘Mick and Helen are going to kill me.’

‘Calm down Johnny, they won’t call them,’ Alfie stated.

Jonathan started to pace. ‘I’m a minor, they’re the first people they’ll call.’

Alfie stood up at the sudden vibration of metal. Jonathan withdrew his fist that had made contact with the bars and pulled it tight into his chest. Alfie peered through the cell and towards the door where a uniformed officer stood.

‘The way I see it, at least you have someone to collect you. This shithole is gonna be my bed for tonight.’

‘Whose fault is that?’

Alfie let out a low chuckle. ‘You can be a right bitch sometimes, you know, Jonny.’

Jonathan ignored his comment, his eyes fell back on the bucket. The thought of relieving himself was short-lived when the rattle of keys broke the silence. The officer now stood in front of them fumbling with the lock.

‘Baylis, come with me.’

Jonathan was reluctant to look Alfie in the eye. He didn’t want to give the boy the satisfaction of knowing he’d been right.

Alfie tutted. ‘What did I say? You got it good, kid.’

The strong grip of the officer’s hand clutched Jonathan’s arm as he escorted him out.

Jonathan would have been lying if he said he was happy to see Helen, sitting in a small chair as they rounded the reception of the station. He noticed there was no Mick when she stood, a fiery glare projected from the slits of her hooded eyes. Jonathan knew he was in trouble. Whether Mick was there or not, he would suffer the same consequences.

‘You’re free to go,’ the policeman said.

Jonathan lifted his head, a far-from-pleased expression on Helen’s sunken face. She gave the officer a nod and gestured for the boy to head for the door. Jonathan turned his head to see her a couple of steps behind. When they passed the threshold of the exit she hissed, ‘You’ve done it this time.’

The splutter of a dodgy engine sounded. Mick sat painfully upright in the vehicle with his hands tight around the wheel. Jonathan imagined the car part was his neck, and by the twisted look on Mick’s face,

it wasn't a far-off observation. Jonathan opened the passenger door reluctantly. He expected Mick to blow up the minute he got in, but he was silent.

The journey home consisted of Helen sneaking glances at her husband before her cloudy eyes would catch Jonathan in the rear-view mirror. It was clear to him that Helen expected an outburst from her husband, but instead, she gripped onto the dashboard as Mick took close calls on the street corners.

The tension was thick, and when Mick cut the engine outside the estate, Jonathan's heart quickened. The walk up the stairs was one of a death march and he didn't dare to stop his feet. Helen unlocked the front door and watched Jonathan as he walked in. He didn't have time to react. Mick was quick on his heels, and the next thing Jonathan felt was the solid wall.

'You little shit, do you know how much it cost to bail you out?'

Jonathan let out a startled choke, Mick's grip on his collar made it hard for him to breathe. Across the kitchen, Helen turned to face the stove, not bothering to intervene. The strike of a match sounded as she lit the hob.

'You think we want to come all the way down from our gig to pick you up from a cell?' Mick seethed, his hands gripping tighter around Jonathan's neck. 'Speak!'

'I can't bre-' Jonathan tried to say, but his words spluttered at the force on his vocal cords.

Helen had turned. 'Mick.'

'No, Helen. It's about time he gets taken down a few pegs.'

Jonathan clutched Mick's hands, desperate to fight against the lack of oxygen in his airways. Blood had started to swell at the base of his forehead and when he thought he would pass out from the pressure, his

legs gave out. He fell into a clump. The sound of the lighter escaping his pocket could be heard over the thump to the floor.

‘Where did you get that?’

Jonathan squinted through blurry vision and when it cleared, he noticed the lighter had slid across the kitchen floor.

Mick tutted. ‘You stole that?’

‘It was given to me.’ Jonathan was determined to get off the floor, but the shaking of his kneecaps prevented him from getting to his feet.

‘Along with the cigarettes from the shop, right?’

Mick’s heavy boot hovered over the lighter as Jonathan scrambled to stand.

‘Please, a friend gave me that.’

Mitch let out aloud laugh. ‘Friend, my arse.’

‘He is,’ Jonathan pleaded but Mick just smiled.

‘I’ll teach you what happens to thieves.’

Jonathan didn’t get to raise his case before the hard plastic of the lighter crunched under his foot.

‘No!’ Mitch continued to raise his foot up and down in a heated fury.

‘There, that’ll teach you what it’s like to have things taken from you,’ Mitch seethed.

Between glassy eyes. Jonathan noted the lighter in sharp shattered pieces. The metal catch, coated in liquid, lay in the pile. He held on tight to the memory of what the lighter once looked like. Jonathan closed his eyes and prayed when he opened them, that it would piece itself back together.

About the Author

Passionate in writing gritty narrative, Megan Kennedy is a third-year Creative Writing student at the University of Lincoln. After a career change in the arts, Megan started writing, inspired by music and social culture. Focusing on the prose form, she is currently working on manuscripts within the contemporary genre.

EVERYTHING IS GREAT

by
Chloe Mantle

We have a routine. We get up, wash, get dressed, and meet at the food hall. We sit in the long grey room full of cold metal tables in our alphabetically assigned seats. We eat our portions, then we go to the classroom and learn, taught by the woman on the screen. We have lunch, and then do recreational activities until dinner. We do our chores. We go to bed.

It is the same every day. Nothing changes, not even the food. I suppose that is my only complaint; the food is an ugly greyish colour and does not have any flavour to it. It is sort of like eating a pile of mud, except you can only feel the slop and the chunks as you chew them down and swallow.

One of the older residents, Cathy, tells me that food never used to taste like that – that there were many different flavours and textures that would set her tastebuds on fire and make her crave her favourite meals. I cannot imagine what that must have been like, being able to enjoy por-

tion times and savour every mouthful. Everyone just shovels it down and tries not to gag.

During recreational time, I like to go and visit Cathy. She is the oldest resident, at sixty-three, and she is the oldest person I have ever met. People leave the institute anywhere from fifteen to thirty, and while some of them have stayed a bit longer, none have ever been around for as long as Cathy has. We sit next to each other during portion times and talk about everything. She has so many interesting stories to tell, so I would like to think she will stay here to tell me all about them. No one else talks to Cathy. I think they are intimidated by how old she is. She does have a bit of a sour face and rarely smiles. She is hunched over and wrinkled and winces when she stands up or sits down. I do not mind.

She grumbles now, arms crossed in her chair as I settle on the scratchy carpet by her legs. She likes to play with my hair now that it has grown out a bit. She said it reminded her of a child she used to have. She has never told me what happened to it. As much as she loves telling me about the past, in the different days, she rarely talks about herself. I want to ask her, but the last time I did, she shut me out of her room for a couple of days and did not even leave for portion time. Matron was furious.

‘You know, this place used to be a factory, I think. A paper mill, before they changed it and shut us in here,’ she tells me.

‘But we aren’t shut in here.’ I glance back at Cathy, who is shaking her head. She pats mine; her pale blue eyes are watery and wide. I suppose she must have been beautiful, once.

‘Have you ever been outside, Caitlin?’

As Cathy rushes me out of the room, I think about what she asked. We do not speak much after that either, my head too full of questions to bother much as she braids my hair, her gnarled fingers working more

delicately than one would expect.

I have only learned about the outside from the professor on the screen. The people who leave the institute get to go outside, and it is considered a great privilege to be chosen. I cannot wait for my turn, so I can come back and tell Cathy some stories of my own. I have never heard of anyone coming back though, so I decide to ask around.

‘Why are you asking *me* this? Can you not bother your little friends instead?’ One of the older ones asks, a sneer on her face.

‘Sorry. I was only asking.’

‘Well, *do not*. I do not care about your childish games. You know it is not allowed.’

I stop asking about it after that.

Matron stops me before bed on Monday night. Her face is stern, but not wrinkly like Cathy’s. Her brown hair is slicked back into a bun, and I find myself wishing I had enough hair to do that. Her uniform is tidy, a white blouse with the words ‘INSTITUTE MATRON’ embroidered in black on her breast pocket.

She takes me to her office. It is clean, with a wooden desk that stands in the centre. Although it is stacked with different piles of paper, books, and files, they are all neat and organised to perfection. Metal filing cabinets surround the leather chair she sits on.

‘Caitlin, why have you been causing trouble with your peers?’

I look down at my lap in shame, twisting my hands in the thick itchy material of the grey dress I am wearing. ‘I am sorry. I just wanted—’

‘You have been asking questions outside of educational time. You know that is against the rules here, do you not, Caitlin?’

‘Yes, Matron.’

‘Where have you got these silly ideas from?’

‘I was just talking to Cathy and wanted to know—’

Matron stands up, her chair making a shuddering groan as it pushes against the tiled floor. ‘Time for bed, Caitlin.’

I do not argue. I just get up, curtsy, and leave for the dorms. It is dark out now, and the lanterns go off after bedtime. I have to feel along the rough brick walls to save myself from tripping and falling on the uneven floor, getting myself into more trouble. Matron has always been kind to me, and I feel ashamed that I have betrayed her niceness with my silly curiosity. I know the rules; they have been drilled into us since we have been able to walk. I do not know why I did it. I think I just wanted to impress Cathy by knowing things.

I get into the girls’ dorm hall and find my bed. I hope I am not in too much trouble. The worst punishment is extra chores on the weekend while everyone else has game time. Some of the older residents got caught disposing of their portions once and got extra chores for two whole months. I would hate for that to happen to me.

Nothing does happen, though. I wake up as normal. We go through the routine and line up outside the food hall for breakfast. I sit down and Cathy is not there. I hope I did not get her into trouble as well. I do not know what they would do to her, but I cannot imagine Matron forcing Cathy to do extra chores.

I cannot find her after lessons. I spend recreational time looking for her, checking the playroom, the kitchen, the food hall, and the classroom. She is not in any of them. I run into Matron on my way to check Cathy’s room.

‘Caitlin. Where are you going?’

‘Good afternoon, Matron. I am looking for Cathy, have you seen her?’ She gives me a tight-lipped smile, her face two shades lighter than

usual.

‘Who?’

I laugh, covering my mouth. ‘Cathy!’

‘There is no Cathy here, Caitlin.’

‘What... do you mean?’

‘There is not, and has never been, a Cathy in this residence. You simply have an overactive imagination.’ She turns away from me then, down the hall and around the corner until the sound of her shoes on the floor fades into the distance. Of course, she must be joking. But Matron is not the type to joke. She is always a serious woman with a stern face and a no-nonsense attitude. I cannot imagine that would have changed in the last few hours. I do not want to ask around either. The last time I did, I got a warning for breaking the rules, and I hate the idea of washing the dishes all on my own.

I spend the next few days looking everywhere I can for any sign of Cathy. Even her given room is bare, as if she never existed. I refuse to give up. I know that Cathy is real, I could never have made up those stories she would tell me about her life before, even down to the way she would purposely infuriate Matron. Maybe Matron finally got the excuse she needed to get rid of Cathy.

Or, maybe, Cathy just decided to leave; she has gone to her dream cottage on a cliff with a big garden, and she sits there right now, happy and free just like she wants. She has reunited with the family she never talks about, and the child whose hair she liked to braid is older now, and they hug and cry and they are happy to see each other again after all this time. Imagining that scenario comforts me; it is far better than the alternative. Either Cathy never existed, or I got her into some real trouble,

with horrible consequences.

I go by her old room again. It has been taken over by the new baby that was born last week. All babies get their own room, while everyone else shares the dorms on the first floor. It is fair I suppose, considering the constant care and checks that babies must go through. Matron and some outside nurses take the babies to the medical room and scan them for any defects. If they are fine, they get their own monitored room. I do not know what happens to the ones that are wrong.

I stand outside the door. There is beeping coming from inside, and someone talking. Maybe they are talking about Cathy. I hear snippets, so I put my ear to the door, catching their conversation halfway through.

‘...perfect. I hear they are very tender,’ a voice chuckles – Matron’s, I think.

‘You know perfectly well it is not considered ethical,’ someone else speaks.

‘Oh, I am certain someone has before. I would if I had the opportunity.’

‘You are so bad!’ Both voices laugh, the sound getting louder.

I realise they are unlocking the door a second too late. Matron makes eye contact with me, and I know I am done for. The outside nurse behind her smirks.

‘Caitlin. See me in my office after dinner.’

‘Yes, Matron.’ I nod. She dismisses me, and I try not to run down the corridor. I saw the room. I saw the baby.

I have seen babies before, of course I have. They are released from the monitored room six months after they are born and sent to the play-room until they are old enough to have educational time. But something was different.

I get to my cot bed in the dorm. It is just a hall with about fifty beds

set up inside, each with a small bedside table next to it for our clothes. We do not have any personal belongings, and we only have two sets of clothes each, so there is no need for anything big to store our things. Aside from that, we each have one pillow and one blanket for the bed. There is also a large clock on the wall so we can keep to the daily schedule.

I try to stop thinking about the room. I only saw it for a second, but the image haunts me.

It was still white and had the cream carpet I often sat on despite the itchiness. Cathy's brown armchair was still there, though, surrounded by beeping machines with readings I could not make out. The baby was in a cot, surrounded by a clear walled box with wires trailing out of it. But that is not what scared me.

There was a dark red stain on the carpet by the chair.

I am catatonic thinking about it until six o'clock comes around. I miss dinner, going straight to Matron's office. There is no point in stalling, I already know I am in trouble. I get to the door and knock.

'Come in.'

I enter, keeping my head down as I walk to the chair in front of Matron's desk. I look up when I am seated and am surprised to see a man standing at Matron's right. I have never seen a man on the staff before, so he is an entirely new face. He is tall, slender, and has black hair with flecks of grey in it. He is smiling at me, but his expression is not kind.

'Caitlin, this is Professor Kilne. He is here to take you outside.'

I cannot believe my ears. I thought I was in deep trouble, but going outside – leaving the institute – is a privilege and a blessing. I do not understand. She must see the confusion on my face because she turns to the professor.

'Your educational work has been exemplary, so your application was

expedited,' she smiles. 'And I am willing to look past your recent... misdeemeanours, in favour of this.'

Professor Kilne slowly makes his way towards me as Matron speaks.

'But I am not even top of my class.'

'You will do just fine.'

Professor Kilne is next to me now. I feel a sharp prick in the back of my neck. I touch the spot, feeling the raised skin there. I look up at him. He just smiles.

'But... that is--' I cut myself off, my words slurring together. I cannot seem to keep my eyes open.

'Oh yes,' Professor Kilne's voice rings out in the darkness. 'She will do nicely.'

When I wake up, it is dark, and I feel achy. The floor feels cold and hard like stone, and the walls feel the same. The room is small, about the size of a cupboard, and it smells damp with a sour tinge to it. It is similar to the lemon bleach we use at the institution. The odour is so strong that my head begins to pound with every inhale. I thought I was going outside. That is what Matron had said.

The walls close in on me. It feels like I cannot breathe, my panic mixed with the heavy chemical smell in such a small room is suffocating. I curl up into a ball on the floor, trying to focus on what I know. But I do not know anything.

It feels like hours before I hear a lock undoing and then see a bright light. My eyes sting, but seeing the professor's face is a welcome distraction. Maybe it is time to take me outside.

'Up.' He points to a metal bed and gestures for me to get up onto it. I do, with some help, because it is too tall for me. He buckles me in,

hands restricted at my sides, then wheels me through a corridor. It is completely white, lined with heavy-looking metal doors, all about a metre apart. I hear noises coming from some of them, keening and wailing. They sound like animals.

The walls are white – shiny and pristine, like everything is wiped over and cleaned often. It is different from what I am used to, the old grey of the institute being all I have known.

The professor wheels me into a room full of cabinets. It is awful; I can still smell the lemon bleach and the heavy chemicals, but they do not quite cover up the stench of old metal and something else I cannot quite place. I must make a face because he smiles at me. It is an unsettling smile, stretching his face a little too wide and making his eyes a little too bright.

‘I know. Horrid, is it not?’

I nod, hesitant to agree with anything he says. I do not like this man.

He rummages around in one of the cupboards and drags out a silver canister with a mask attached to it. He lifts my head with one hand and wraps the mask around my face with the other, his smile worsening as he turns a small red wheel on top of the can. I feel myself drifting off to sleep. The last things I notice are the smell of lemons and something cold scratching the skin on my chest.

Static.

‘Meat delivery.’

About the Author

Chloe Mantle is a writer based in Plymouth. She is currently working towards a BA in Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln, aiming for a Master's degree. She enjoys writing horror and dystopian short stories, focusing on the supernatural and uncanny to create writing that unnerves her audience.

PARLIAMENT WAS BUSY TODAY

by
Ben Marsh

Hello, my name is Professor Iain Coogan. What I have here is the diary of Lord James Thornberry (1605–1643), providing his perspective on the events of the 4th of January 1642 – an event otherwise known as the Five Members. He was a member of Cromwell’s Roundheads during the English Civil War. I will be writing notes along the way, these will serve as reactions to the discoveries made here as this will be my first time reading the diary.

(Please note that parts have been translated to the more modern form of English for the sake of easy understanding).

It was busy today. It was strange; not this many typically attend. Most go off to other businesses, and that included me. Would I rather listen to Pym chat his arsewash, or drink plenty of good wine and play with some beautiful harlots? The latter would be preferable. God knows why I was asked to come today. I bloody regretted it, though.

I received a letter from Lord Wittlebone, begging me to go to Parlia-

ment. You see, I owed Wittlebone a massive favour due to the pigeon incident. He was a good man, if a bit bloated due to all he consumed – not that it affected his personality. He was rather unpleasant to look at; just thinking about him made me feel somewhat nauseous. He must have hired a famed French seamster to tailor suits large enough to fit his girth.

My lord, he was a fat slug of a man.

I'm going to have to cut James off here; he proceeded to talk about the size of Lord Wittlebone for half a page. I promise none of this is relevant or bears any importance. If anything, it's grossly offensive (if you are desperate for the writing, please contact me via email).

But I digress. I entered Parliament and instantly regretted the decision to get drunk to excess the night prior. I suffered crapulence to the extent that my servants had to change me in my bed. I could not have found my seat any sooner. I felt like I was going to collapse. Many of the faces were unfamiliar to me – whether it was my blurred vision, or that I was just that uneducated about the goings-on of the time.

The men in the building huddled together, whispering. I felt like an outsider, as if they knew something I did not. Considering I was friends with most of the ones I recognised, they would not even dignify me with answer. It was plain and obvious that something had occurred, and I was none the wiser to it. I must have missed a few months of information. Most looked upon me with confusion, they might have believed I was new – that may have been what they were discussing. But no, those who knew me confirmed my identity. What I could gather from my eavesdropping was that someone had upset someone of note. How anyone could keep up with this and maintain their interest in this God-forsaken job mesmerised me.

I did not miss my father, but times like these made me wish he still lived on this mortal plane.

It's important to note that James' father was a well-respected member of Parliament. Still, as politics was back then, most titles were inherited, leading to James' standing as a member of Parliament. It's still an issue that lingers to this day, with descendants of far more competent individuals being in important seats of government just because of their relationship.

The room was making me sweat like a man who just got caught by his wife sleeping with a harlot. It felt like hell. It did not help with the outfit I was trapped in; I had never been too much of a fan of tights, but these Kenneth equipped on my person had the same results as cock and ball torture. Whoever made these blasted things should be forced to wear them for a few days and truly feel the suffering that I endured today.

They might enjoy it, masochists.

It's assumed that 'Kenneth' is one of James' servants, but this is not entirely clear in his notes. At times a fraternal bond is implied, which has led to some debate about whether he may have been a lover of some kind.

The man I was seated next to, had an unfortunate stench about him. I understood it could be a struggle to find time for a bath during a busy schedule. In truth, there were times when I did not smell fantastic. But this guy had the stink of a thousand dead rats. I tried to move, but I was squashed in tight next to him.

I saw James Broad – an absolute cretin of a man, an oaf, a vagrant – across from me. I was ashamed to share a name with the man.

There was a large amount who were ashamed to share a name with James Thornberry as well.

A countless number of words could describe him. He was infamous for many reasons. There was one such occasion where he had a man hung for sleeping with his sister even though many a man had bedded her, including me. He also married his cousin, which I could understand if she was at all attractive, but she more resembled a cow's anus than a Greek goddess.

Though these accusations may be considered slanderous and offensive, they were highly accredited by many sources. His wife, who was indeed his cousin from his mother's side, had been described in one other notable account from one of Charles's advisors, Wilfred Marshall, as having 'a face more akin to a trampled frog than a person.' Other accounts claim that Broad had a notorious addiction to fighting teenagers and managed to lose most, if not all, of the time. One case displays him being knocked unconscious by a smallpox-ridden eight-year-old after Broad refused to tip when asking the boy for directions.

He glared at me with a vicious snarl. I could not decide whether the staring was due to his bugged eye. His right eye was paralyzed from the time a horse kicked him in the cranium. I looked back at him trying not to blink. Blinking, of course, would show weakness. A man needing to wet his eyes implies that he can cry. An issue that occurred due to this method was that it made me weep. As I was staring him down, a few tears started dripping down my cheeks. At this point, it just looked like I was mortified at the mere sight of James, which in some ways I was. It was not the intended message.

Before James noticed my tear-ridden eyes, a few men went to leave

the room. Five, I counted, and I could not recognise any of them apart from John Pym. You see, I had not been to Parliament for around seven months, too busy attempting to enjoy my life. This Pym fellow had come over many a time to encourage me to return to my position. My father was a work-saddled man who attended every parliamentary meeting he could. Even when he was gravely ill, he would still attend, with his whimpering interrupting every other second, I imagined. So, I was expected to follow suit. But I was not my blasted father. If I could get away with it, I would never work a day in my life. Life was to be enjoyed, not weighted down with duties. I would have stayed back at my manor, had I known what would happen, but hindsight was not my forte. Now I was stuck in one of Wittlebone's smallest guest rooms, because the rest of the rooms were full of 'people more needing of the space.' Bastard, I needed room to think.

Wittlebone often allowed orphaned children to stay in his manor. He organised housing for them at boarding schools and helped pay for their tuition and food.

I did not understand why Wittlebone could not just kick them out. It was a besmirchment of the highest degree. I should get back to how I got here, instead of lingering on my present circumstances.

Anyway, Pym and that gaggle of men left. I wanted to leave and go to the toilet, so I stood. This for some reason caused others to follow my lead. They all started debating each other. The argument went on for what felt like an hour. I was standing for the duration of this debate as I could not work out the timing to shimmy past those next to me. The contents of the debates did not reach my noggin, as all I could think of was the potential of soiling myself. I saw a small opportunity to get out, so I seized it. I staggered through the crowd; I think I may have

elbowed a few in their faces and brought on a few yells. I could not care less – I needed this piss to the extent that I would have sacrificed my firstborn for it.

That is not much of a sacrifice, seeing as I would get rid of Thomas for an apple.

James had three legitimate children. Thomas, his firstborn, died two months after this account was written. He was nineteen. Accounts differ, but he is rumoured to have jumped from a bridge after learning his inheritance would go to his younger brother George, who was only six months old at the time. The other child – a girl of an unknown name – was lost to the depths of time, much to my disappointment.

Once I got down to the door, a man came running through, yelling about how the King had arrived. I attempted to go through the door, but a collection of members closed the door and started barricading it. I was gobsmacked that they would not let me relieve myself, so much so that they had blocked the way. I started hurling expletives.

The members were trying to stop Charles I from entering, not stop a minor lord from entering the toilet he so cherished.

I decided to situate myself in the corner of the room and hoped no one paid me any attention while I ‘unleashed the dragon,’ as one might put it. Luck was on my side at this point with the group distracted. I must say it did reek – my piss smelled like a pig’s buttocks.

A similar event happened in the Dutch Parliament. Politician Luuk Van Jong (1835–1878) was documented as having defecated in the centre of the House of Representatives in 1873.

As I was doing this, I did hear large sounds of crashing and yelling. I could not discern what was occurring; I was too busy looking for something to wipe my hands on. Nothing appeared.

I hoped I did not have to make hand-to-hand contact with anyone.

I went to walk back to my seat, walking past what I only could assume were the King's guards. They were armed and gave me odd glances as I made my way back to my seat. I was careful not to elbow anyone again.

The room now was affixed with this feeling of uneasiness. It was possible they noticed me. This flamboyant figure who had entered took his hat off and started waving it like a stage actor. He directed himself to certain figures in the crowd. It took a long time for me to realise this was Charles – as in King Charles. I should have gotten it from the many times people had said the King was coming and when he announced himself but in the moment my brain just did not work. He did resemble his father in various aspects, his ratty hair being one of the most distinguishable similarities. I saw his father many a time when he would visit my estate to meet with my father.

James I and Thornberry Sr. enjoyed a fruitful friendship; they shared a mutual love of the theatre and the arts. A few correspondences remain, mostly discussing their opinions on plays they had watched. One note discusses their collective dislike of Shakespeare's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream.'

He was a fanciful-looking chap, adorned with a stupid-looking hat. It looked like something I had seen a woman on the streets wearing. There was a quiet stillness that came when he entered. He started yelling about wanting to see five men arrested. I would guess it was those five who left earlier. William Lenthall began to debate with the King at some point, getting up off his chair. There was a big eruption of noise as this happened; either the group was a fan of standing, or his meant something.

I was beginning to find myself dreaming of my bed, so everything was ethereal to my ears.

Oh, my lord, this is painful. William Lenthall was the current Speaker of the House and is known as the first speaker to have declared his allegiance to Parliament instead of the monarch. This was the event that instigated the English Civil War, to put it in the mildest terms.

Charles continued like a babbling fool. God knows why anyone would choose this profession apart from actual insanity. Some continued yelling and I had fallen asleep by now, it may make me look like a complete layabout, but most did it at some point. Next to James Broad was Lord Hendricks, a man who was lingering in his seventies, who found himself occupied with his dreams – or he could have been dead. He already looked like a puppet-controlled cadaver before, so it would be difficult to tell the difference.

I awoke from a shoulder nudge to find Charles leaving with his guards in tow. I looked on, flabbergasted by the entire ordeal. I will confess to being behind on the news of the day, and this made it evident. I stood to leave as I, much to my confusion, once again needed to empty myself. As I went to find a lavatory, I was accosted by the mass of Wittlebone.

I do agree that, at this point, his constant buffoonery comes across as ridiculous and unbelievable, but this man somehow existed and lived past his childhood. The phrase 'falling upwards' could be used, but I think that's a disservice to falling.

He asked me to come with him – blunt as an unsharpened blade, that Wittlebone. I followed him out to the carriage that was waiting outside and hopped inside the cart. Compared to mine, it was in a state of dis-

repair. My opinion of Wittlebone had only been solidified by the day's experience; an awful man. We were about to depart as another fellow joined us. It was of course my mortal nemesis, Lord Broad. He gave me a wide smile as he sat across from me much like in Parliament, just far closer than I wanted. Wittlebone sat next to me, much to my displeasure. James started discussing what the King had just said as Wittlebone crushed me against the walls of the carriage like an execution method one would use for a woman found guilty of witchcraft.

This was an actual form of execution. The accused would have a panel placed on top of them as heavy stones were placed on top of the subject until either they confessed to their crimes or until their lungs burst like a balloon.

Thank God I live in the twenty-first century.

They were saying something akin to treason in my eyes. Charles was power-mad, according to these two. I could not say anything; I was not in any way updated on the situation, and these two somehow expected me to be. I was almost mute by this point; at points I tried to interject to ask questions, but it seemed my perpetual hangover had removed my ability to communicate.

A bad hangover has the potential to kill a man, though the likelihood is low. This is the worst I had experienced for my many God-given years on Earth.

I wish the hangover had killed him. I had the choice between studying this and a text written by an officer who worked under Napoleon; the more of this I read and study, the more I realise the error in my judgement. And to all three of you who are most likely to get this far, I apologize unreservedly.

We continued in the carriage until we arrived at Wittlebone's manor. The place was a mess, almost as if his maids had decided to go off to France. We made it through to his study where, much to my delight, we shared wine. The intention was to discuss the day's events, but I remained quiet, showing a few nods of agreement as such to make it seem like I was part of the conversation. Whatever problems I had with Wittlebone did not carry over to his wine – a wonderful vintage.

The conversation seemed to conclude after I, with great glee, belatedly 'yes.'

Broad remarked something to the sound of: 'I don't like you sir, but it is good we have agreed on something for once in our lifetime.'

You see, the issue was that I had no idea what I had just agreed to.

I stared at Broad for a few moments, his eyes – well, eye – reflected at me with a knowing that I had done something of immense importance. Little did I know what I had done. I claimed I needed to visit the loo, for I believe the twentieth time today. I ran off to contemplate, I listened to the words back in my head. In between the discussion about wine. The word abolishment came up as often as sex when I was on the game.

Jesus Christ, not only can he not understand the gravity of his situation, but he's also using it to become braggadocious about his sex life. I doubt a woman has ever felt at all happy or comfortable when left alone in a room with him.

I entered the room to the two murmuring together. I grabbed my wine and sat down in a chair in the corner. I drank the night away. I awoke in the garden of the house, stinking of wine and – strangely – vinegar. I found Wittlebone absorbed into his chair. I thought he was dead at first, but a few prods with my thumb had him erupting out of his position.

He yelled about a headache he had acquired after the previous night's escapades – one condition I had become accustomed to after years of frivolous drinking on my part. He commented on the fact that our mutual acquaintance Lord Broad had gone to discuss with Lord Cromwell plans for forced abdication. Abdication? I stood face gasped for but a moment, but Wittlebone clocked on that something had gone awry.

'We go may war; God knows that King needs cutting down to size,' Wittlebone droned on for minutes more as I once again went to the vast wine rack.

Oh God, what have I gotten myself into – I am a lot of things, but a plotter of treason? Just thinking of it made me want to drink.

You will be happy to learn this is the end of the writing. It's unknown whether James wrote much after this, and I don't care. This man was, in my mind, one of the worst people I have ever studied, up there with Adolf Hitler and the man who created napalm.

An idiot who would find a good place in modern politics.

About the Author

Benjamin R. Marsh is an English third-year BA Creative Writing student based out of Suffolk, England. His work strives to use a satirical and comedic style to tell stories and entertain and try to educate the reader. In his free time, he enjoys listening to music and playing cricket.

A LOVE SWORN BY THE MOON

by
Holly Pamment

She's drenched, shivering with hands outstretched towards the radiator as if it were a campfire. Wilbur passes her the towel which she takes without a word, prying the hair from her sopping skin and patting it dry. He stands in the doorway of his living room, shifting from foot-to-foot.

The rain continues to hammer against the windows as a sudden burst of lightning floods the room. The winter nights are drawing in and the air is getting crisp; even without the storm, it's dangerous to walk around the city alone at night.

'Why are you here?' Wilbur asks, partly to fill the silence.

In the electric light she looks washed out, the usual vibrance of her skin replaced by a redness that stains her cheeks. She shrugs.

'Ellie, what's going on?'

Her heart jolts hearing him say her name after so long. The sound of his gravelled voice is jarring; there is no softness there. She turns to face him, her eyes welling with tears. He looks much older. The lines on

his face are deeper and more defined, his once bright brown eyes dulled with a tiredness which seems rooted in his mind.

Tears fall down her frostbitten cheeks. Something tugs at his heart, and he moves towards her, but he stops himself. He can't forgive her.

Summer in London brought about the crowds of tourists, even on the outskirts. The park was lively with families and dog walkers, but they saw only each other. Their small patch of grass and the tartan blanket on which they sat kept them in seclusion from the rest of the world.

Wilbur watched as she turned a page, her fingers delicate against the thin paper. Her eyes darted from word to word, drinking in the story with eager anticipation. As she leaned against him, he pulled strands of golden hair from behind her ears, his hands brushing against the pale skin of her shoulder which was exposed to the sunlight.

'Be careful not to burn.' He warned as he brought his lips to her cheek and kissed it. Ellie smiled at him, placing her book down.

'I won't. Could you pass me my bag?'

As he did so, a dog came bounding up beside them. The Labrador tumbled into Wilbur's lap, sniffing, and licking at his face. They both laughed as Ellie got her turn next which she accepted without resistance, fussing the animal until it ran off to its owner again.

'We should get a dog,' she said absentmindedly.

'Together?'

'Yeah, once we get our own place.'

Wilbur's smile widened at the suggestion, and he kissed her on the cheek once more.

The smell of chocolate filled Wilbur's nose as he walked into the kitchen. He set his bag down on the table and wandered over to the freshly baked cake sitting on the counter. The aroma tempted him to slide his finger over the buttercream icing to sample a taste, but Ellie stopped him.

'Don't you dare touch that.'

'What's the occasion?' He asked, turning to give her a kiss.

'It was supposed to be a surprise, for when you get offered the job,' she said with a sigh.

'If,' he corrected her.

'Yes, yes, forever humble.' As she talked, she took a large Tupperware from the cupboard and began to transfer the cake into it. 'How did the interview go, anyway?'

'Actually, I wanted to talk to you about that,' Wilbur began, taking a more serious tone. Ellie raised an eyebrow at him.

'What's wrong?'

'Nothing, but from what they said today the hours are going to be a lot more...intense than we initially thought.'

'Meaning?' She prompted.

'I won't get off work until ten most days.'

There was a pause where neither of them said anything. Ellie watched him intently as if waiting for him to say something else. But Wilbur knew that anything else he said now she would only find fault with.

'Do you still want the job?' She asked.

'It'll set us up for the rest of our lives, El.'

Ellie placed the lid on the cake box with surgical precision, fingering the plastic edges as she did so. She didn't look at him.

'You should take it then.'

He checked the time again. Four ‘o’clock, and the hands kept ticking their way further and further around the face. It was the only thing to break up the silence. Wilbur’s knee bounced up and down against the chair leg. No longer able to ignore his anxiety, he reached for his phone, telling himself that he would only call once more.

Before his fingers could even graze against the cold metal, the front door creaked open.

‘Ellie. El, are you okay?’ Wilbur jumped up to meet her but was met with her waving him away. Her hair and makeup were dishevelled, and her steps were uneven. She was drunk.

‘I’m good... I’m fine, just leave me alone.’ She was slurring her words so much he struggled to understand her. Regardless, he sat her down in the living room and helped her take her shoes off.

‘I was worried,’ he began, his tone soft. ‘You said you’d be back by two.’

‘Phone died.’

‘Why didn’t your friends—’

‘Oh my God, Will!’ Her outburst made him freeze. She cradled her head in her hands. ‘Can you not? I don’t need to update you every two minutes on where I am and what I’m doing.’

‘I wasn’t—’ he said but she cut him off again.

‘You’re being controlling.’

She pulled herself up out of the chair and left the room, an obvious anger radiating from her. Wilbur watched as she stormed up the stairs.

The suitcase by the door sent alarm bells ringing in Wilbur’s head. He bounded up the stairs two at a time and found her in their bedroom, the contents of the wardrobe strewn across the bed and floor. She didn’t

have to turn around to know it was him.

‘I thought you were working late tonight,’ she said, her voice void of any warmth.

‘Were you planning to just leave? Without saying anything?’

Ellie shook her head. ‘There’s a note.’

‘Four years and all I get is a note?’

She whipped her head around and fixed him with a glare.

‘And what did I get out of those four years?’ She asked, her tone steadily rising. ‘You spend more time at work than with me, you don’t listen when I tell you I’m unhappy—’

‘We’re working on balancing things better. We talked about this, but you can’t expect me to change overnight.’

‘It’s been over a year since you took that job.’

Ellie threw the rest of her things into the backpack and zipped it up. He watched without a word, not sure if he should say anything. Not sure if anything he said would make a difference. If he knew anything about Ellie, it was that once she made up her mind that was it.

‘I met someone else.’

Wilbur looked up as she paused in the doorway. Her words were like an assault on his mind, a searing pain in the base of his skull that travelled down his spine and into his chest. She didn’t say anything else, didn’t elaborate, only walked out of the door.

He can’t help but remember that night. She had sat in that same chair while he took off her shoes, her makeup just as dishevelled as it is now. Wilbur hands Ellie the mug, reminding her that it’ll be hot. She doesn’t even say thank you.

‘You...’ he begins, but the words seem to get lost on his tongue. ‘You

left him.’

Ellie nods, unable to hold back the tears any longer as they finally begin to spill over her waterline. Soon she is sobbing, her body shaking with the strength of her emotions. Wilbur takes the mug back and watches as she curls into herself, wrapping her arms around her torso as if it would steady her.

‘Why did you come here?’ He asks.

‘I don’t...’ Her tears stop her from finishing her sentence, but Wilbur can’t seem to find it in him to feel sympathy for her.

‘I understand that you’re upset, but you can’t stay here.’

‘Will—’ She tries to speak but he cuts her off.

He stands up and takes out his phone. ‘I’ll call you a taxi, does your mum still live in Camden?’

‘Wilbur, please.’ She manages to control her crying enough to lock eyes with him. ‘He hit me...’

Her voice is so quiet that for a second, he’s not sure he heard her correctly, but when he searches her tear-stained face he knows he has. A silence takes root in the room, its vines weaving between the two of them and tightening their grip until they are forced into an embrace. He wraps his arms around her, pulling her into his chest until all she can smell is the unusual mix of sandalwood and cigarette smoke on his clothes. The sensation of their bodies embracing one another after so long is strange, like returning home after travelling the world. Bittersweet nostalgia.

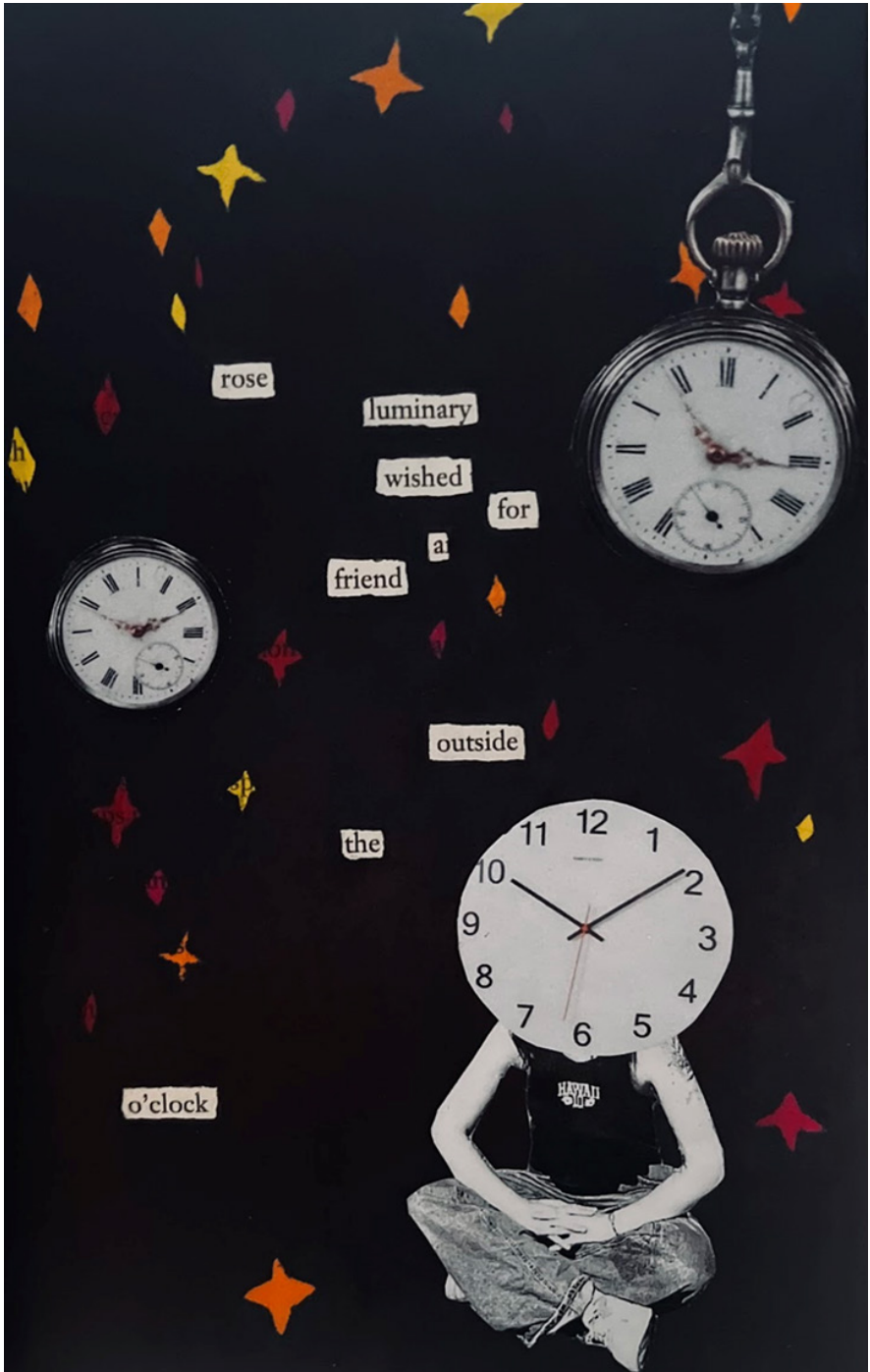
She cries as he slowly rocks her back and forth, her tears and mascara staining his yellow hoodie. He doesn’t care.

About the Author

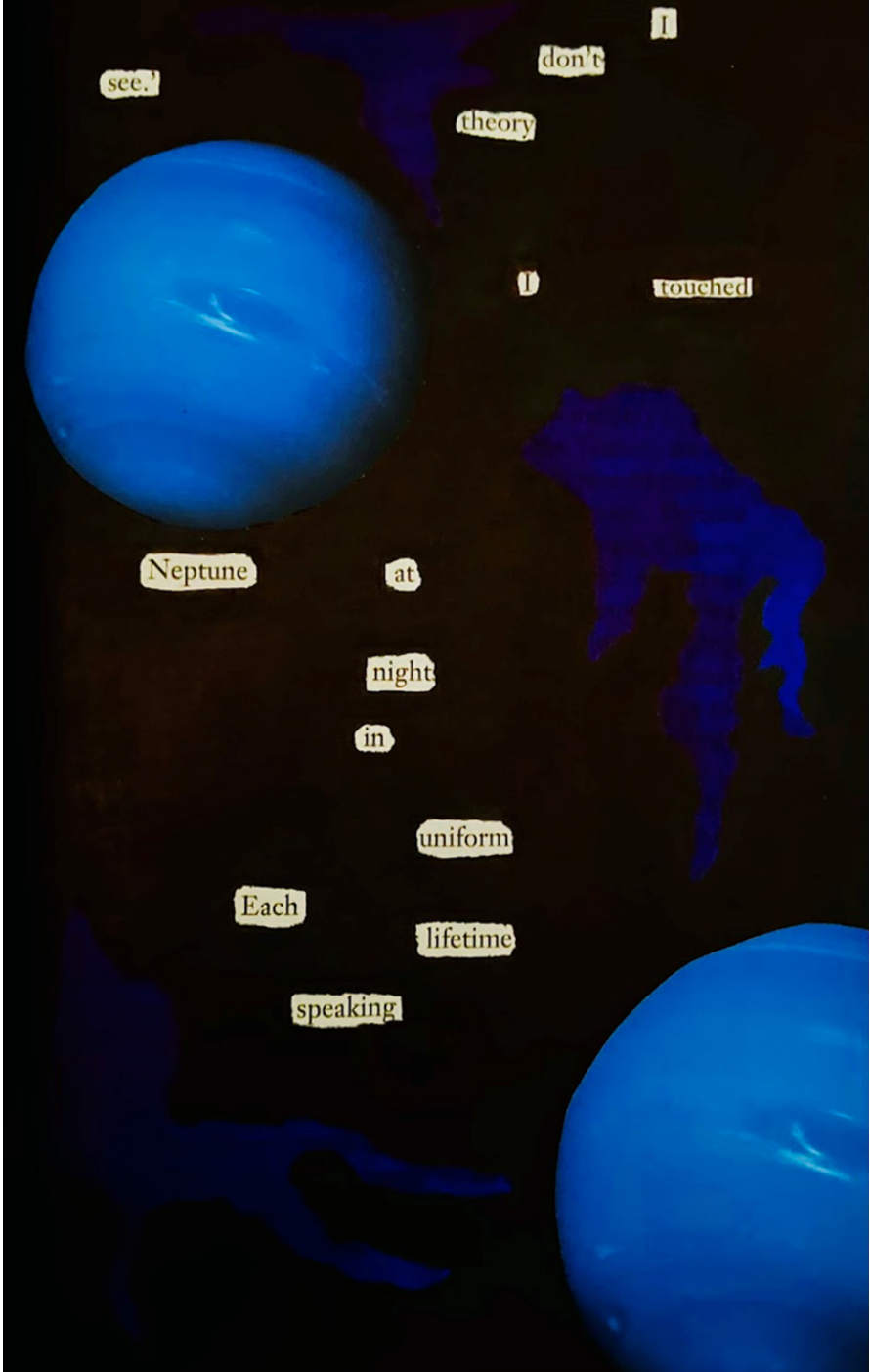
Holly Pamment is a talented young writer with a unique voice, earning her degree in Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln. With a great love for the craft, Holly is deeply involved with every project she begins but dedicates most of her time to the prose form.

SHALLOW MINDS

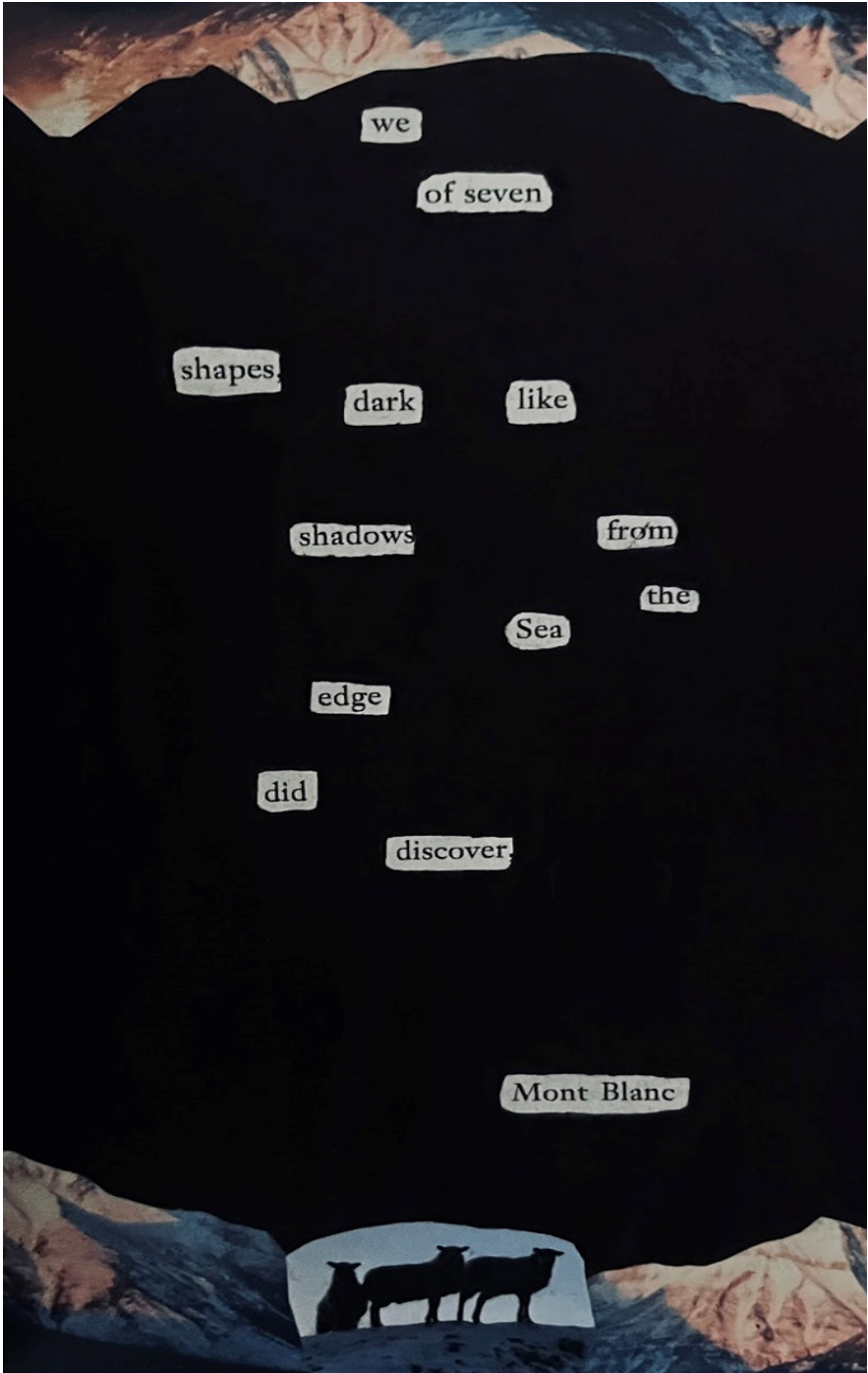
by
Imogen Elizabeth Parish











About the Author

Immy Parish studied A-level art at Queen Elizabeth's Sixth Form in Darlington, Northern England, and Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln. In 2018, she worked as a journalist for the magazine: *Leyburn Life*. *Shallow Minds* will be her first published anthology.

FIVE POEMS

by

Shivani Parsot Patel

F.U.C.K.

Your fingerprints melted into the fabrics of my stretch marks.

Now that you had me.

Do you want me still?

Behind my bedroom door, your jacket on the floor.

Is it my fault?

Was I not pretty enough?

Your sweetened words, spilled from your lips, into the dip of my spine.

Did we fuck up the friendship?

Was I not ~~good~~ enough?

We spoke in tongues, but it was the foreign kind.

The kind we'd never understand.

Everyone At This Party Isn't You.

Here I am back in the same room, back behind the cheap liquor.

With the ~~friends~~ I texted first.

The girl in the corner of the room, crying a bit too hard when “daddy
issues” started playing.

Or his pack of cigarettes stained with blue gin the same colour as your
jeans.

‘YOU. SHOULD. DRINK. MORE.’

Maybe it's the lipstick marks at the rim of the glass that look too simi-
lar to yours.

Or the girl wishing I wasn't here, shooting daggers at the blunt he
swore he didn't have.

Then the brush against my shoulder reminding me to be cool.

But the lemonade spilled over the counter d

o

w

n

your cheeks.

I'm on my way.

Can We Be F.R.I.E.N.D.S?

I wish you looked at me the way Joey once looked at Rachel.

Maybe we'd be the best mistake like Mondler.

Maybe you'd tell me you love me,
but I'd be too busy with my head in a turkey.

Maybe we'd get stupidly drunk and get married in Vegas.

But those aren't real...right?

I'd kiss you and make you my lobster.

And watch you drink a glass of fat.

Maybe I'd put beef in the trifle, but you'd eat it, because you love me
just that much.

We'd argue and I'd wear all your clothes.

But it doesn't matter anyway because,

I'd get off the plane for you.

Dear Diary

My mum made my favourite food. I think she knows.

Coriander was swirling around the top. Like how you were spinning me in your kitchen.

Back when your folks thought we were just friends.

Your homegirl said I should've told you how I felt.

But she didn't know that your hand brushed against my bare thigh,
and I promised myself not to fall
in love.

I sugarcoated my chords,
while you followed the melody I taught you.

But when the music stopped, you were the
one holding me.

Infatuation

We shuffled through like our favourite playlist.

7 b i l l i o n soundtracks — and I only wanna expert yours.

*And I missed you in the morning,
through, to our December,
and I wish that I could say,
the things that yell too tender.*

About the Author

Shivani, a student at the University of Lincoln, developed a deep love for poetry while honing her songwriting skills. Surrounded by passionate peers, as well as talented tutors, she continues to refine her craft, reaching new heights in her poetry.

BURY MY HEART

by
Aaron Pavia

Winter in South Dakota is ever bitter, but this year feels colder still. The rolling hills of Wounded Knee gleam white against a cool grey sky; a whole week passed under violent snows, and the ghost of them now covers every surface. But this chill's not so simple as the weather.

The wagon wheels cry out from the strain of us, and the biting wind hisses as it passes our ears. Otherwise, all is silent. No birdsong on the air, nor a word – not one – from the lips of any man beside me. It feels as if all the world has gone still, a moment frozen dead where it stands. I suppose we must be a funeral procession.

I glance across at the other passengers. Most of their faces are sullen, eyes narrowed at the cold. There's a kid, can't be more than twenty, watching the soldiers that follow behind us. Across from him is a white boy of the same sort of age. Next to him, an older man with creases in his face. He's got that look about him; wise, but like his childhood summers still feel fresh. Mama used to say every crack in a man's face was a

battle he had won, but he doesn't hold himself like a warrior.

'What are you looking at me for?' Says the white boy. He's pale-haired and paler-skinned, with big green eyes fixed on my own. He doesn't sound angry, not outward-like, but I've dealt with his sort all my life. I know what they sound like when they're hunting for excuses.

'Just looking,' I say. He tries to stare me down, but I sit calm as anything, staring right back. He presses his lips together, thinks better of himself, and looks back over the horizon. The older man gives me a knowing glance, something almost disapproving.

It's not too long before we stop. The crisp air tasted clean all the way here, but now there's something else on it, foul and musty. The soldiers round up at the back of the wagon and tell us to get off. One by one, we step into the snow, boots crunching.

I can't place where we are. There's not much to see; snow-capped hills, trees and shrubs dotted every so often. There are dark mounds in the snow – rocks, I'd guess – and a troop of men and horses a little further ahead. A gust nips hard at my face and makes me wish for a fuller beard. Still, though, it's quiet.

One of the soldiers steps out in front of us. He's got a finer coat than the others and a few years on them all, with silver in his hair and lines across his forehead. His hat's made of fur. I feel the numb in my ears as I stare at it.

'Right then,' he starts, 'you're all to receive a dollar for a day of work, and we expect you'll be done by the end of tomorrow. That's two dollars each, for those of you who don't know your arithmetic.' He smiles at the man with the creased face, then gives me a glance as well. 'Get the bodies in the wagon first, and we'll take them up the hill.'

'Where are the bodies, sir?' Asks a swarthy man. His voice quivers – cold or worry, I can't be sure.

‘In the snow,’ says another soldier. He gestures to one of the dark shapes nearby, dusted by ice like diamonds. They had left them, it seems, when the blizzard rolled in, and now they were half-covered and discolouring in the winter air. I catch that smell on the biting wind again, off-sweet. I’m starting to remember it – a dead rat in the wall, back when I was a child. It’s hard to stifle the grimace.

‘Don’t delay, we’ve still to bury them. So far General Miles puts the count at around three hundred.’ The older trooper turns on his heel and starts walking back up the encampment with the other men and horses. They perch on the hillside like crows, dark against the snow, watching.

They give us directions. The younger men, whom they assume are fitter, are scattered about the field. The older of us are sent in pairs to the smaller bodies. They put me with the crease-faced man, scowling down at us both, and pointing us to the outliers. Each frozen body was spaced far apart, though they all trailed out away from the others.

Approaching them confirmed what I’d suspected, or as good as. I stand for a moment in silence, the wind dying to a stillness. A woman, contorted horribly and frozen in place, browning blood soaked into her clothes. She looks young. She’s not armed.

‘Staring won’t bring her back,’ says the old man. He squats down with a grunt and the popping of worn joints and pulls her shawl over her empty face.

‘It’s just thrown me, is all.’

‘You look Indian.’

‘My mother’s Oglala.’

‘Then I’d have thought you’d be used to this.’ The man gets up again with another huff. He gets behind the girl, starts to lift, and looks at me. There’s still a mix of crispness and decay on the air; I can taste it, just by saying so little. I swallow. I wasn’t aware my mouth was so dry, and now

I know I'll be waiting for my whiskey all the way to dusk.

Hours go by, and the sun drifts higher and higher. The work's slow. The crease-faced man tells me his name's Ishtasapa – Dark Eyes – and he looks like he takes note of the way I study his face after he tells me. I tell him my white name's Edgar, my Oglala name Red Bird. I tell him they call me 'Red Ed'. He chuckles.

It's a sombre job. As the day warms with the sun, the crows come down to the bodies. The soldiers help some, but most watch from the edges of the field. The white boy leans over and retches at one point, and the troops mock him for it. Dark Eyes shakes his head and mutters something under his breath.

'The boy didn't think before he signed up,' I suggest. There's a pinch in my lower back as I straighten up from a lift – an ache that runs something awful down my right leg. It's an old injury acting up again, but Dark Eyes notices.

'Neither did you,' he replies, eyeing me.

'They didn't tell us three hundred before.' I stop and pinch the bridge of my nose. Dark Eyes waits for me. We don't dare speak Lakhotiyapi, in case it riles the troopers. 'Do you know what happened?'

'I heard soldiers talking when the wagon came. They say the Indians fired first.'

'You believe them?'

'I don't think it matters.' Dark Eyes glances over his shoulder. The men aren't nearby, but I feel the caution in his body, in the air around him. It's not that he thinks I might tell them – he knows I'm not sympathetic to the white man – but more that he knows what they do, given the chance.

He turns back to me, a sort of shame on his worn old face. 'I know why they fight, the young ones especially, but it won't change – not save

getting worse. All you get from clinging to the past is a shot to the back.’ He looks down at the snow, softening slowly in the midday warmth. Those long creases carve his face like Wounded Knee Creek cuts across the prairie.

‘You don’t ever think of doing something?’ I ask, hushing my voice.

‘When I was young, sometimes. But I was never that sort of man.’

He goes quiet. I rub the small of my back, but the numb in my fingers helps for nothing.

As we return to work, I think back fourteen years to the news of Custer’s defeat at the Battle of the Greasy Grass. Before that, Mama had told me about Sand Creek, the murders of a hundred women and children. I remember the half-hope of Custer’s death. I remember a time when I felt there could be peace and resolution. I’m mad – I’ve long been mad about all this, tired of listening from the outskirts. But that anger gets in your bones, hollows you out from the inside. You hear the stories, feel the pain in your Mama’s words, and it’s like all you could ever want is on the other side of a great wall you can’t go around or over. Whether to keep kicking that wall in the hopes it’ll break, or walk away while you’ve still got one foot intact – that’s not a question I know how to answer.

We haul another body into the wagon, then another, and one more. The sun’s starting to fall again now, and through the deep winter in the air, the heat of the hard labour brings a sweat to my brow. The wagon’s about full, and the soldiers are readying the horses to take them uphill. I sigh deep and take as big a gulp of whiskey as I can manage. A dollar doesn’t seem enough to witness it all, to be somehow complicit.

Dark Eyes calls my name. I turn to see him having walked back again, still sorting through bodies. The soldiers didn’t tell us if they’d be back for more, but the old man seems determined to keep busy. I slip the

flask back into my pocket, and the liquid left inside rattles numbly as I walk. The skies are greying again over the pale hues of dusk, and there may be more snow by morning.

‘What is it?’ I ask on approach. Dark Eyes crouches, brushing frost from another woman frozen. There’s a bump in her shawl, shuffling, and little mutters.

‘A babe,’ Dark Eyes says, all quiet and low. He scoops the baby up and stands with clicking from his knees once more. The baby looks cold, flakes dusting her dark hair, a sore red across her nose and cheeks.

‘Well, I’ll be damned,’ I say. ‘It’s been days, and freezing cold.’

‘She’s a tough little bird,’ Dark Eyes says. He nods for me to come closer and places the little one in my arms. As I hug her tight to my chest, I see a faltering from Dark Eyes. Whether it be from hard work or hard feelings, I can’t say. The baby begins to cry, tiny hands clutching at my coat. She’s a few months old at most, carrying the scent of her mother’s weaving, her cold body, of soiling. But she’s alive – alone and fragile, but alive.

We begin walking back up the hill. Dark Eyes says we should tell the soldiers to give her to the women left in the camp. He seems optimistic, but I’m far less certain. The little girl survived days on her mother’s body, wrapped in furs and hide, just to face a world even colder. What will the women teach her – not just of her people, but of where she was found, of how and why? She will never know the name her mother gave her.

Night comes quickly, and the troops have a fire going now by the grave on the hill, keeping warm as the skies blacken and the dead cold sets in once more. It gnaws at my fingers, my ears, the back of my scalp. It smells worse here, all the bodies brought together, but the smoke keeps some of it at bay. Were it not for the penetrating horror, perhaps

it would warm the soul and the body. Instead, it merely changes the flavour of the worsening wind.

I hold the girl in silence. Dark Eyes does the speaking. The general – I assume he is, at least – seems understanding. He says there are others, that she’s the third they’ve found. He says the women are taking care of them already, and they’ll take her too. The general looks at me with cold grey eyes, takes the infant from my arms, and suddenly my chest feels empty. It’s as if she took my insides with her, that last residue of warmth.

They start pulling the bodies from the wagon, wrapped loose in blankets and tattered skins. The soldiers mumble to themselves, the workers move without a word between them. The winter wind’s howling between us all, blood-stained fabric flapping like the wings of a crow against the rising moon.

About the Author

Aaron Pavia is a writer and artist in her final year of BA Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln. Born and bred in the Lincolnshire countryside, Aaron writes historical and fantasy fiction, inspired as much by the land and nature as she is the tumultuous human psyche.

FIVE POEMS

by
Liberty Price



bee-utiful blood clove

A 2012 study found 98% of your favourite plants
are likely to be early
answer me shrubs
can you itch stuffed in soil
or do you grow inflamed
and sweaty all summer long
why is three-pronged winter cloudier
for plants immune to love
and is it essential digestion
eating herbal irritants hot or cold?

is sadly dead

i've
held
reptiles
before
but when
the snakes
constrict
on my straining
tendons squeezing
sweating shimmering
nobody comments on
my new muscles bulging.
they say drop it don't go
near them because you're
far too small and that is why
i have dyed my hair emerald
(it fades to blue too fast).
i found them in the wild in
the grass across the path
rolling sausages but of course
the front door was locked,
impenetrable, authoritative
i had to sit on the naughty
step and promise earnest

honest swear i'll never
bring them in the house
again. my dad released it
in the field behind the
house he told me so
to keep my feelings
soapy frothing put
vinegar in the
tank. the man
with the crooked
stick wraps it aro-
und its patterns the
slavering insatiable be-
ast the starving fork no
more mice soaked in the
pyloric valve the bulb is
blown it is tired frantic h-
ungry why didn't it scare
the cold away later the
dogs lolling roll over its
freezing bloated and
distended body
they ask nicely
was it a
pet
?

The gnarled salmon fist of the ribbon / On a faded roadside bouquet / Rocks in the hot wind spat out by the Saxo / Acrid pebbles flung moonward they / Collect space grey paint and fall, skittering. / Gnats dodge them but nothing is as fast as a 1.2 with tinny speakers. She grips the seat. / Grinning he goes faster; she goes further /

**south of
the river.**

Forwards they propel themselves / She is nervous – he is unaware. The car / Bumps over a chasm. / He is putting his foot down. / They follow brake lights, undigested oil and crushed panels. / It's getting dark.



south of the river

The gnarled salmon fist of the ribbon
On a faded roadside bouquet
Rocks in the hot wind spat out by the Saxo
Acrid pebbles flung moonward they
Collect space grey paint and fall, skittering.
Gnats dodge them but nothing is as fast as a 1.2
with tinny speakers. She grips the seat.
Grinning he goes faster; she goes further
Forwards they propel themselves
She is nervous – he is unaware. The car
Bumps over a chasm.
He is putting his foot down.
They follow brake lights, undigested oil and crushed panels.
It's getting dark.

On

A squashed chrysalis

Bleeds blue *the sky disappears*

A new leaf unfurls

Pondscape

The waterlily spun on its axis
An ordinary white, it was nothing to behold
Its leaves dripping, its eyelid scraped back
Like all the others it was an attention-seeker, a beacon, a tin bucket
Stuck rusting a circle into white linoleum
Bordering on rudeness it blemished *the tide.*
The water spoke like a mirror does:
'A comet to the chin,' there was venom in its milk –
Still the quest-leaden gathered and kneeled
Their joints soaked in the murk and leaked for years, spilling
'You must reflect the glint inwards.'
inwards.

About the Author

Liberty Price is a Creative Writing student at the University of Lincoln. At the moment, she's probably looking up the meanings of words or thinking of a new story plot. She has previously been published in *Spellbinder Magazine*, *Acumen* and *Visual Verse* with others in the works.

STITCHINGS OF A GOOD MAN

by
Danny Stanton

A dim, chilled sun rose over the black steeple roofs of Slaughterborough. Rain-dusted windows glittered from the rising sunlight. Leather boots and heels against wet cobblestones reverberated through the canyon-like streets. The populace entered their places of employment, sunken-eyed. A shoemaker picked up a hammer. A factory worker clocked in with cut-up hands. A newsboy stood on his soap box, the latest edition in his hand held high.

‘New way of thinking? Has science gone too far with biology? Read it here,’ his little lungs bellowed out to the crowd of marching legs. Some people minded their business and carried on their route, others might have given him a glance, but a rare few did purchase the boy’s paper. One man slipped the paper out of the boy’s hands. He wore a top hat and a rain mantle over his shoulders. He was dressed in a very fine green suit, one that projected wealth and stature.

‘My boy, what makes them say biology has gone too far?’ the profes-

sor asked the young one. He held his pipe just an inch from his lip while his eyes scanned the printed words.

‘I don’t know, sir. I’ve just been told to repeat the headline,’ the boy replied. He was quick to resume his duties, yelling the horrors of biology while Kaplan walked away.

‘Indeed. No one knows anything of it at all,’ Kaplan mumbled.

Kaplan approached the university grounds, where a mob of people gathered before the gates. They didn’t pose a threat to anyone really, but Kaplan took note of who these protestors were. Some were women, dressed in high-society gowns and wrapped in fleece jackets with their service maids beside them. There were also men, some dressed in dreary grey work outfits and others in fuzzy coats and top hats. However, one man was dressed in all-black robes and held a book. Kaplan recognised him; the priest of the nearby church, Father Lawrence.

‘Denounce this heretical place, followers of the Lord. It mocks the very faith we have upheld and survived by for years.’ Father Lawrence held his bible above his head. ‘Have they no shame to taint the minds of our children?’

‘Should children not decide the paths of their own lives, Father?’ Kaplan stood next to the priest. ‘Shouldn’t the future be theirs to decide?’

The Father looked to Kaplan. He noted his large, knotted tie, and his properly steamed suit with no wrinkles. Then he looked to the crowd.

‘And here is one of its demons. His words carry that of temptation, but we will not be tempted by the devil.’ The crowd roared to life and threw obscenities towards the so-called demon. Kaplan could only lower his head as he walked to the gates and waited for the guard to unlock it. They both stood face-to-face for a moment. All they did was give an exhausted nod to each other.

The professor walked into his lecture hall. Grandstands faced him with empty chairs. Kaplan took a deep breath in, only to envision each chair occupied by an eager kindred spirit. He wanted a class that was hungry to explore the field of biology. Upon the ninth strike of the clock, he became acquainted with his first group of students. A room full of shifty eyes, whispers of gossip, and no hands raised. No one asked about the chambers of the heart or oxygen diffusion. Kaplan kept his enthusiasm up for that morning lecture nonetheless. He had hoped that his enjoyment of the biological world would rub off on some of his students, but optimism could only carry a man so far. His allocated two hours had passed – the class was over. Even still, as people hurried to leave, he tried to spark some attention.

‘Does anyone have any final questions to ask? I believe I was a bit hasty when we got to the differences between atriums and ventricles,’ he pleaded for someone, anyone to take interest. The door creaked as it descended back to its resting spot. Not one soul had spoken to him this entire time. With slumped shoulders, Professor Kaplan began to pack up his desk – until his ear twitched, triggered by the soft scratch of a pencil. He looked up to see a student still in his chair.

‘My boy, class has been dismissed,’ Kaplan said. He did not need to yell as the echoing of the room carried his voice. The young scholar looked up.

‘Oh. I do apologise, sir. I shall get going.’ The student had a lot of paper spread about on his desk before he organized and placed it all within his satchel. One piece, however, slipped from his desk and drifted down to Kaplan’s feet. The professor looked down and picked it up. He was amazed to see a sketch of the human heart, with detailed annotations – annotations he talked about in his class.

‘My boy, what is your name?’ Kaplan asked while he began to ascend

the stairs up to him.

‘Malloy. Harry Archibald Malloy, sir.’ Malloy saw the paper in his professor’s hand. ‘Oh, thank you, I must have had a clumsy moment to let that note slip.’

‘It’s quite alright, Malloy. But I must ask, if you were invested enough to use my words to detail an image like this,’ Kaplan pointed to the sketch of the heart, ‘why not speak up?’

‘Well, sir, you explained everything very thoroughly, and I used the knowledge I have to link pieces of information together.’ Malloy stood up straight, his satchel wrapped around him.

‘Your own knowledge?’ Kaplan’s voice gained its optimism back. ‘You studied the marvels of the body too?’

‘Yes sir, independently.’

‘Independently? You know it’s illegal to experiment on a cadaver without approval.’ Kaplan folded his arms.

‘Of course, sir. I used cats and rabbits. They’re a dime a dozen in Slaughborough.’ Malloy had a sense of pride within his words.

‘I see. So, enlighten me, Malloy, what knowledge do you have?’ Kaplan leaned against the table behind him.

The two enjoyed an evening of idle chat, hypothesis of the human body, and potential experiments they could concoct. They walked and talked into Kaplan’s office where they began to dissect a frog and provide theories about one thing that eluded biologists; how do muscles contract? It was never well understood how the body can move itself. Theories from gas build-up to hidden micro-organisms in the limbs were thought to be the answer. Then Malloy produced a small vial of clear liquid.

‘I do have one hypothesis. May I?’

‘By all means,’ Kaplan replied, arms folded as he watched. Malloy

then proceeded to drip some of the liquid onto the frog's leg, which was slit down the middle. To Kaplan's shock, he watched the leg move – only for the briefest of seconds, but it did indeed twitch. 'How? How did you do that?'

'This is a solution I got from a chemist friend. Sodium chloride. Nothing but simple salt and water.' Malloy pocketed the liquid again.

'Salt alone cannot do this. Why in water?' Kaplan had a habit of twitching his fingers when he did not understand something, which had done often while learning biology. But now, an educated man, this habit had died down – until today.

'It eludes my judgment too, but I intend to find out.' Malloy slipped his satchel back over his shoulder as the clock in the office struck seven. The pair had to call it a night there to return to their dorm room and homestead. That entire night, Kaplan couldn't even think of sleep. The idea of such a simple concoction being the key to animating the dead ran through his mind. Formulas, experiments, and research questions. His clicky fingers did not stay still as the owls sang atop his roof.

The school year passed along through the mid-season months. Every day, Kaplan would play his part as an educator, teaching a dismal class the operations of the stomach or the bisection of muscle mass. A few were keen to understand the body, but none were as enthusiastic as Malloy. In the off hours, Malloy and Kaplan would reconvene in the professor's office. In that room, there was no authority of a teacher, nor the submission of a student. They became partners.

'I think I understand the connection between the solution and muscle tension, professor,' Malloy said while he held a magnifying glass to his eye. He was in the middle of examining the exposed brain of a

chimpanzee, a specimen obtained in less than legal ways.

‘What is it, my boy? Is it the reconstruction of flesh, just as we hypothesized?’ Kaplan busied himself at the opposite end of the desk. His quill struck the parchment with utmost ferocity over and over again.

‘No, nothing like we thought of before. The solution is causing some sort of reaction to specific areas of the body, possibly sending a signal.’

‘A reactionary signal?’ Kaplan halted his writing to think. ‘Maybe this is how the brain uses the nerves. It’s not puppet strings, it’s wires.’ Kaplan stood from his desk and approached a bookshelf swamped with leatherbound spines. His finger danced across the varying widths of them.

‘What are you looking for? We went through all our chemical relationship texts weeks ago.’ Malloy walked behind Kaplan, interest piqued.

‘A recent discovery was made in London by one Luigi Galvani. Here,’ Kaplan pulled out a newspaper, of all things, tucked away in the safety of two large books. ‘I saw this article of him running a current from the nose to the toe of a recently executed criminal.’ Malloy took the time to read the article himself. The headline read about how a supposed ‘necromancer’ of London revived a criminal.

‘Why did you hide this? This is key information, professor.’ Malloy’s eyes scanned left to right over the article like a typewriter.

‘I wanted to see if we could discover this ourselves. It seemed you did my boy. I have heard tales of sailors getting small shocks from their cured meat on long trips, particularly after a storm. The salt must be a conductive element that, when in water, can hold a charge. Once exposed to our electrically reactive muscles—’

‘The body moves.’

‘Exactly.’

The focus of experimentation had shifted now. The two of them

were done with mixtures and concoctions. Instead, they devised to make a machine. They went to the office of Professor Hoffman, the head of electrical engineering, to pitch their idea. During their chat, they felt sweat drip down their faces whenever Hoffman asked about why they needed something like this. Nonetheless, Hoffman agreed to its creation, and would have his students begin construction the next day.

A month had passed since the commissioning of the machine. Hoffman delivered it to Kaplan's office personally and assembled it atop his desk.

'The coils were not cheap Kaplan – I hope you know this. Whatever you are planning with this device, it had better make this place famous.' Hoffman slid a giant tube into another with a clunk. He tightened the bolts with a wrench as Kaplan stood to marvel at the grand machine.

'If I am correct, Hoffman, then not only will it make this university and I famous, it will change the course of medicine as we know it,' Kaplan replied with a chipper note to his words.

With the machine assembled, the day functioned as any other. The students attended their lesson, packed their things, and then left. Malloy wandered to Kaplan's office and, on arrival, saw the grand machine inside through the door window. Two large copper pillars flanked both sides of the room, connected with loose wires and a metal frame to hold them up. On the table was a small metal bed, flanked by two pylons topped with metallic orbs.

'This is the machine?' Malloy asked, his eyes fixated on its architecture.

'Indeed. And I know who to use it on first.' Kaplan opened a shelf and pulled out a tray with a peculiar creature on it. While the upper half had that of a deceased cat, its lower half was that of a common hare,

both sewn together with delicate stitches.

‘Our test of interspecies compatibility? I mean, we know the spinal shape and organ sizes are similar enough. But will it be able to live?’ Malloy asked while Kaplan handed him some goggles made from dark glass and lead.

‘Let us find out.’

The machine hummed. A lowering and rising whirl came from its two great coils as arcs of light connected them. And below them, strapped in buckles and leather, was the hybrid. They did not name this creature as an emotional safeguard; it was only ‘it’ to them. Malloy stood to the side while Kaplan grasped the switch. His eyes were fixed on the voltmeter as the needle climbed. Hoffman had said to flip the switch at a very specific voltage; no more, no less. The lights of the office faded and flashed as the machine drew more energy. Malloy noticed and looked through the office’s giant window. He saw the buildings outside flicker with light too. Sweat ran down from his hair to his eyebrows. Kaplan’s fingers twitched erratically. He found it hard to keep hold of the switch. Seventy percent. He licked his lips as Malloy’s chest expanded and deflated. Eighty percent. The lights in the room cut out. The only visibility was from the sparks of the machine.

‘Professor, should we consider—’ Malloy said, but not a word hit Kaplan’s ears. Ninety percent. The machine rattled as steam blew from weak pipe fixtures.

One hundred percent.

Kaplan threw the switch down with all his might. Sparks flew around the room as the two arc coils collided into a mighty thunderbolt. The arcs shot right down into the creature’s chest as it began to convulse and writhe. Both men could only stare.

And then they heard it – an ear-piercing yowl. Once the light show

had subsided, the lights of the office returned. Malloy and Kaplan removed their eyewear, only to be met with their hybrid. Its head moved left to right, and its cotton tail wiggled.

‘We... we did it?’ Kaplan asked.

‘We did it!’ Malloy yelled in victory. They removed the belts from the creature’s limbs and provided it with two small plates. On one, a succulent chicken breast, and on the other, an assortment of lettuce and carrots. They stood back and watched as the creature’s front legs took tiny fast steps while the back legs took long hops towards the plate with the chicken.

‘It behaves like a normal cat. It eats, it scratches. It...’ Kaplan’s brain made attempt after attempt to fathom this, ‘exists.’

The weeks were filled with test after test to verify the genetic integrity of the creature. Despite consistently referring to the creature as ‘it’, Malloy had subconsciously named it Stitchy. They found it was a relatively healthy organism, that it could hop around like a rabbit but had the mannerisms of a cat. It licked and groomed itself, and almost ripped its ear off one time with its new powerful legs while it itched. Only after two weeks did Malloy and Kaplan decide their experiment was a complete success.

‘Homeostatic temperature is normal after day fifteen,’ Malloy held a thermometer in Stitchy’s mouth.

‘My boy, I don’t think our experiment has any flaws that we can find.’ Kaplan leaned back in his chair. His gaze fell through the large window of his office, down upon the dim city. But his eyes came to one single point. An old pub he frequented as a child. ‘I do declare this a time of celebration.’

‘Celebration? Like a party?’ Malloy had Stitchy in his arms and escorted it to its cage.

‘No, no. We can’t let this get out; the world isn’t ready. But I do think we’ve both earned a drink, together,’ Kaplan had already grabbed his walking jacket.

‘A drink? I don’t know, sir. I’ve never touched the stuff,’ Malloy looked to the side. He then felt the professor’s hands on his shoulders.

‘My boy, all the world’s scientists celebrate breakthroughs with a drink. If someone should raise to our miracle, it should be us,’ Kaplan said. ‘They’re on me.’

Malloy agreed, and they both wandered the streets down to the old foggy pub. They entered the bar and Kaplan ordered his favourite scotch. Malloy, ever worried, got a simple beer. Once the tankard touched Malloy’s lips, it sealed his fate. The night was grand. The two sang songs and laughed and drank, until one patron approached them.

‘What’s got you two suits in a right tizzy tonight then?’ The man sipped his own drink.

‘Why, my good, fine fellow of a friend, we made life. It walked and meowed and hopped like a rabbit. Isn’t that jovial?’ Malloy answered in a drunken stupor. The man nearly spat his drink back into his mug as he wiped his lips on his shabby coat.

‘You what?’ He asked. Kaplan stepped in to pull Malloy aside.

‘Ah, pardon my friend. It’s his first time on the bottle and he’s talking shite.’

Kaplan, while a refined man, still had the gift of the gab – but even he knew they should leave soon. His back crawled with the dreadful suspense of eyes that judged without even the need to look behind him. Kaplan escorted Malloy home that night. They swayed left to right with drunken giggles and hearty discussion of different biological processes.

They passed the church, where Malloy exclaimed ‘we did it’ loudly into the hallow streets. A candle in the church dimmed shortly after.

Back at Kaplan’s office, Stitchy was awake. It chewed on its rusty cage and broke through the decayed bars. It stepped out to run through the university halls and slip away into the night. A woman’s scream pierced the sombre night, and a gunshot echoed.

The next morning, Kaplan was in his office. He enjoyed a fresh cup of tea while he read the newspaper. The headlines had nothing of note, but a small story caught his eye; ‘MONSTER SIGHTING in Slaughterborough’. He checked on his experiment’s cage and was shocked to see the creature was gone. A roar of people outside crept into his ear.

‘There he is,’ rang a familiar voice. The bar patron from the other night. Kaplan looked out his window to see Malloy on his way to class, intercepted by a crowd a street wide. He was pushed and shoved and spat on. Kaplan’s heart raced as he ran out of his office, down the university corridors and pushed past students and teachers alike. He got to the gates of the campus to see the tail end of the mob storm off.

‘No abominations!’

‘Death to the man of monsters!’

‘Hang him!’

Kaplan dashed past person after person, but the crowd became denser the further he pressed on. He clawed through the crowd and didn’t care who was in his way. He was in the middle of the mob as he looked to the gallows to see Malloy. The young man had guilt and shame on his face as he approached the noose.

‘Stop this. Hang me. Hang me!’ Kaplan’s voice only fizzled into the crowd. He watched as Malloy smiled. He saw his professor, his mentor,

his only friend, was there for his last moments of life. The last thing Malloy ever felt was the wooden floor open under him.

The next few weeks in Slaughborough were quiet. The students of Professor Kaplan stopped showing up to their classes, as the professor himself seemed to have been forgoing them. His office stood still and cold, with the grand machine inside gone. For many weeks, no one knew where Kaplan was. Despite the university's issuance of a dismissal letter, a select few of his students attempted to locate him, only to be met with silence. Even Father Lawrence found no answer at Kaplan's house, despite numerous revisits. Did he go to mock him? To offer comfort in some sick hubristic intent? Kaplan would never know.

One night, as Father Lawrence closed the gates to the church, he heard a scream; a woman's yell from deep within the city. Then a man's, from another direction. Another, after another, rang out through the echoing streets of Slaughborough right into his ears. Then a warm glow grew around every street corner. Lawrence ran to turn the corner to see what had happened and paused. He didn't dive into the street, only looked into it.

The fire grew out from the windows of buildings as people ran and yelled for their lives. A carriage parked on the side of the path was suddenly crushed by a beast. He watched as the dust cleared; in the crater of the carriage was something akin to a bear. It had the build and brown fur of one, but atop were three goat heads. They sniffed the air, and each looked in a different direction. Lawrence turned to flee but he was stopped by a swarm of similar creatures. Rats with a mismatch of arms, all of them together in a horrible putrid swarm. Again, he ran to flee to the church but was stopped, as behind the gates laid a lion's upper

half, stitched together with a horse's rear. It kicked open the gate, which cornered Lawrence. He fell to his knees to pray.

'Merciful God, please hear me. Send unto me an angel for my sins. Forgive me, the demons are here.'

'God?' A voice pierced the chaos. 'God has sent me.' Lawrence turned to see a large horse, with legs clustered along its back and sides. It pulled a wagon with a single lantern on it. He looked to the driver and gripped his pants legs.

'Please, spare me. I have been nothing but faithful,' Lawrence cried to the carriage driver.

'I don't think he can spare you, Father,' The voice responded, but it didn't come from the carriage driver. He saw Kaplan walk alongside the carriage as the goat-bear dragged corpse after corpse to the back with its many mouths.

'Kaplan?' Lawrence looked up. His eyes widened as he saw Malloy. His face was blue and bloated, dressed in the clothes he had died in, and his hands tied to the lantern. 'I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, let me go.'

'Your apologies are wasted on me. You should ask him,' Kaplan said as Malloy's head slumped to the side, to stare into Lawrence's soul. The Father's heart raced and pulsated. Lawrence clutched his chest as he fell backwards onto the cobbled street. Kaplan only stood over Lawrence as his monsters of science surrounded them both. The snarls, the squeaks, the roars. Lawrence could only breathe faster and stare at Kaplan's sunken eyes.

'Take him.' Lawrence's insides began to corrupt with dread, as that gigantic bear thing crept towards him.

About the Author

Danny Stanton is an English fiction writer who studies at the University of Lincoln. He is on track to earn a Creative Writing degree, and mostly writes about the concept of humanity's flaws. This is realised through a love of world design and building.

THE S WORD

by

Alex Urquhart

Get a job. – Dad was scrawled on my whiteboard when I left the shower. It was 8:14 a.m. on a Saturday, but that wouldn't stop Dad. The idea of being considerate – and waiting until everyone woke up with their morning tea – must have failed to breach his frontal lobe.

My trek downstairs was quiet and undisturbed as my stepsiblings didn't leave their rooms a minute before nine. On the other hand, my stepdad, Harry, prided himself on waking up four hours before anyone else. By the time I was awake, the hob was on, the kettle was boiling, and I could hear the prattle of Radio 4 through my bedroom carpet. In the kitchen, Dad was dressed in his workwear while Mum and I shuffled around in our dressing gowns. He lowered his mugshot mug – a gag Father's Day gift from Kai and Ellie – and tipped his head forward to stare me down. I hovered in the doorway. It was as if he was daring me to step out of it.

'Morning,' greeted Mum, handing me my tea in my Darth Vader

mug as I rubbed my stinging eyes. I'd slept too long and now felt like a bus had hit me. I shoved two crumpets into the toaster before Mum stopped me. 'André! Your dad's making a Full English.'

'I'm not waiting that long,' I grumbled, dodging her arm and flicking the switch.

'It'll only be twenty minutes.'

'And then another twenty before I can eat 'cause you'll make me wait until the others are up.' I reached for the butter and jam. 'I'm starving.'

'Oh, fine. But you'd better not say you're full when it's done.' She wagged her finger and left to get the post. The second my crumpets were done Dad cleared his throat. It was the only indication to prepare myself for whatever was coming. I chewed the inside of my cheek and buttered my crumpets faster.

'You saw my note?'

I kept my head down. 'Yeah.'

'Are you going to look for a job then?'

'Where's this coming from?' I braved a glance at him. I wondered if he knew I was considering running away from the conversation and, if the squinting was a sign, he was ready to rugby tackle me to the floor.

'You're older now, and your mum and I can't keep giving you pocket money.'

'I'm fifteen,' I sighed, skipping the jam. Dad raised his eyebrows. 'Okay, I'll start looking. You could have just told me at breakfast, I don't know why you had to be all dramatic and shit.'

'Language.'

I cringed, muttering an apology. Mum returned with the post, handing it all to Dad. He redirected his attention to them – the perfect dismissal. Behind me, he clicked his tongue as I escaped into the living room.

Some local barista and customer service jobs were willing to employ minors. My options were narrowed to one; a retail assistant at a sports-wear shop. The pay was minimum wage, but it was within walking distance. I spent the morning writing my CV, but it was lacklustre at best, so I ended up in Dad's office.

I shuffled into the room where he tapped away at his keyboard under the giant Manchester City flag looming above. I leant against the desk, clutching Mum's tablet. Slouched in his leather seat, he turned to me with raised eyebrows at the ready over the rim of his reading glasses.

'I wrote a CV, but I don't know if it's any good,' I said, thrusting the tablet into his hands.

'So, you're going to fill shelves and stand at a till?'

I nodded. Dad hummed and scrolled. I fiddled with my watch until he handed it back. He slumped further into his seat and crossed his arms.

'Scrap the paragraph about the Duke of Edinburgh Award and elaborate on your Year Ten work experience. Talk about what skills you gained from that.'

'I swept floors the whole week. I learned nothing.'

'Then take some "creative liberties".'

'Is it bad?'

'No.'

'Is it good?'

'It needs a rewrite.' He smiled, returning the tablet. I lingered and he raised an eyebrow, pointing at his desktop. 'Is that all? I need to get on with my work.'

I chewed the inside of my cheek. Dad hesitated and reached out. For a second, I thought he was about to touch my hair, but instead, he clapped me on the back once and swirled to face his screen. Seeing

nothing for it, I left.

When I felt satisfied with the changes, I sent it off. Within two weeks, the manager, Nina, invited me for an informal interview in a broom cupboard of an office. Happy with my competent knowledge of the alphabet, she hired me that week and said I could start Saturday.

For a while, everything went back to normal. No new notes appeared on my whiteboard, and while I had to cancel hangouts with friends and Dad stopped my monthly allowance, it was a relief when the topic wasn't brought up again.

A week into the second month, I got a phone call. At eight in the morning. On the side of the road. On my way to school.

'Hello?'

'Hi, Ahn-dray, is everything all right?' Squawked Nina.

I cringed and moved the phone from my ear. 'Yeah?'

'You haven't arrived yet. Are there any issues getting here?'

I stopped and checked my watch. The cars whooshed past me as I switched on the loudspeaker, not that it was needed. Nina could speak over a heavy metal concert.

'It's Tuesday. My shift is tomorrow afternoon,' I sighed.

'Well, we made a rota change since Kaylee left last week.'

'Sorry, no one told me. When I checked it, it was the same.'

'That's because we changed it last night.'

'Right. Well, since my last shift was Saturday, I wasn't in to see it.'

'Okay... now you're up to speed. Are you coming in today?'

'Now?'

'Yeah. Your shift started half an hour ago.'

'My school starts in ten minutes.'

'Sorry, that's not good enough. You haven't organised for anyone to cover your shift.' Nina clicked her tongue.

‘Because nobody told me I had one!’

I thought that would be the end of it, but the calls returned, asking me to come in and cover Kaylee’s shifts until they found a replacement. Nina’s patience wore thin, so I convinced Mum I was sick so I could come in during the school week. But it wouldn’t last. By the third week, I’d had enough.

Dad and Kai were in the kitchen when I got in from school. I wrinkled my nose at the smell of pasta bake wafting through the hall. I loved it as a kid but lost my tolerance for it when I ate it too much. It’s frozen pizza for dinner, then.

Kai stood by the TV, frowning and pressing various buttons on the remote. I grabbed a margherita from the freezer.

Dad put his hands on his hips. ‘I’m making a pasta bake for dinner, in case you haven’t noticed.’

Kai eyed the pizza in my hand. I ignored them and shoved it in the oven. I smiled at Dad, setting a timer on my phone.

‘I hate pasta bake. I don’t wanna starve.’

Dad rolled his eyes. ‘Not very healthy.’

‘And pasta is?’

‘Better than supermarket pizza,’ remarked Kai, turning his attention back to the TV.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Getting my photos to display. I’m almost finished with my portfolio.’

‘What’s your theme again?’ Asked Dad, sipping his coffee.

‘Wildlife.’

Kai pressed more buttons, and the screen switched to a photo of some birds in a nest. Kai’s photography skills were impressive, but I don’t think he realised everyone else wasn’t as excited by ants on a twig. When he described the process of taking his photos and threw in a

bunch of jargon, the rest of us just smiled and nodded.

‘That’s a big mother bird,’ said Dad.

‘That’s not the mother,’ grinned Kai, switching to the next photo, which focused on a large grey bird taking up too much room in a robin nest. ‘Caught a cuckoo.’

‘You didn’t remove it?’

‘No, should I?’

Dad shrugged. Kai gazed at his photos, hands on his hips, probably contemplating something profound. I chewed the inside of my cheek and glanced at Kai, then Dad.

In the lull of the conversation, I took the chance. ‘Hey, Dad.’

Dad looked up from his mug and folded his arms.

‘You know my job? Could I take a break from it for a bit?’

‘I think you’d need to discuss that with your manager, not me. Can’t imagine you can “take a break” from work, otherwise everyone would be doing it.’ He shared a glance with Kai over my shoulder. They laughed.

‘Sorry. I mean, quit.’

Dad’s smile disappeared. ‘What?’

‘It’s too much. Nina calls me in the middle of school, telling me to come in.’

‘Then talk to her.’

‘I have! But she blocks her ears and talks over me.’

Dad and Kai exchanged another look. Kai snorted. Dad sighed and poured his cold coffee into the sink.

‘If you can’t take enough initiative to fix your hours, then I don’t know what to tell you. Man up.’

Dad pushed off the table and retreated to his office. I fiddled with my watch. Kai was still staring at the TV screen, attention rapt by a photo of a woodpigeon. But I wouldn’t fall for it.

‘Wipe that smile off your face. He’ll put you to work next.’

‘Hardly,’ he said, messing with the Nikon that lived around his neck.

‘You’re on a gap year! Why are you still here?’

‘What? You think that’s an invite for him to kick me out of the house?’

‘Should be, if I have to work while I’m still in school. Instead, you wander around Blackley Forest photographing pigeons.’ I pointed at the TV. Kai grinned and tilted his camera. I blinked when the flash went off. ‘What are you doing?’

‘It’s called a Dutch angle,’ he laughed, showing me the screen, where I had a double chin and my eyes closed. ‘No one looks flattering in this shot.’

‘Are you even listening?’

‘Yes. You said that I needed to move out and stop taking pictures. What does this have to do with Dad and your job?’

‘All I’m saying is that you and Ellie will get your turns soon enough.’ I turned away and took my pizza out of the oven. It smelled amazing, but it was dry. I eyed the fridge, wondering if some extra mozzarella would help.

‘Ellie and I have our extracurriculars. She’s too busy with rounders, and I need to finish my portfolios by the end of the year. What are you working towards?’

‘I don’t know what I want to do with my life,’ I said. ‘Wait, is he still giving you an allowance? You don’t work.’

‘We have commitments. All you do is hang out with your mates.’ Kai shrugged.

‘A cardinal sin.’ I picked up my uncut pizza and went to my room, ignoring Kai’s calls. On the way up the stairs, I passed Ellie. Her hair was tied in a high ponytail, and a duffle bag was slung over her shoulder.

She stopped and looked me up and down but didn't say anything. Billy Idol was playing from Dad's office. I shut my door. Amongst the music, I heard Ellie and Kai's rising voices through the carpet.

The next day, I woke up to a black suitcase by the kitchen door. The French press was filled to the brim, but Dad was nowhere to be seen. When I looked out the window, he was tossing rubbish into the wheelie bin. I made some toast as I waited for him.

'Morning,' said Dad. 'Are you going to work today? Your mum's car has an MOT, and she gave me a shopping list. Pop round the supermarket on your way back?'

'Can't you ask Kai? He's the one who mopes around the house.'

'I'm taking him and Ellie out today.'

I sighed. 'Fine. Text me the list.'

He frowned. 'Wake up on the wrong side of the bed this morning?'

'No, just tired.' I shrugged, grabbing a plate from the cupboard.

'Need to go to bed sooner.'

Mum came in yawning, followed by my stepsiblings. Unlike her, they were dressed and were dragging suitcases behind them. Ellie put her blue one next to the black. Meanwhile, Kai's suitcase was a bag for life overflowing with more camera equipment than clothes. I looked at their luggage, wondering what was going on.

'Morning, André.' Mum poured herself a coffee. 'What's wrong?'

Dad answered for me. 'Kid says he's tired.'

'Oh, you need to go to bed sooner,' she said, inspecting my eyes for dark circles.

'That's what I said.'

I waved her off and poured myself some tea from the remnants of the hot water. Mum looked at Dad and he shrugged, smiling.

'Stop fussing, he's fine.'

I nibbled my toast as I sat down at the table with Kai and Ellie. Mum sat next to me with her cereal and waved Dad over.

‘The rest of the family are coming over to celebrate Gran’s birthday,’ announced Mum.

‘Why are they coming here?’ Moaned Ellie.

I looked at Dad at the head of the table. He was rubbing his eyes. Perhaps it would get rid of the crow’s feet beside them.

‘When are they coming?’

‘Monday.’

Dad exchanged a look with Ellie. Shoving the rest of their toast into their mouths, they stood up and grabbed their coats. Kai sighed and followed their lead, leaving half of his cereal uneaten.

‘Well, I hope you all have fun.’ Mum smiled and handed Kai a bag of snacks from the pantry. The three of them grabbed their suitcases. ‘Better get going, so you don’t miss your flight.’

‘Wait, where are you going?’ I asked.

‘We’re off to Scotland for the weekend,’ said Ellie, wrapping her scarf around her neck and checking herself in the mirror. ‘Kai wants more birds for his portfolio.’

‘Are you going as well?’ I directed my question to Mum.

‘I’ve got essays to mark.’

I looked at Dad. ‘When you said you were going out, I didn’t think you meant a weekend holiday.’

Dad shrugged, slipping on his prized possession – an old oil-skin coat. Kai glanced at Dad and fiddled with his camera.

‘Can I come?’

Dad shrugged again as he buttoned up his shirt, while Ellie and Kai exchanged a glance.

‘You’re not even packed,’ said Ellie, running a hand through her hair.

‘That’s because no one told me about it,’ I argued, watching Dad. ‘Why didn’t you tell me you were going? You didn’t just plan this.’

Dad sighed. ‘Look, this is meant to be father-children bonding time.’

My chest tightened, and I looked at Kai who avoided my gaze. Ellie spared me a glance as she grabbed her bags and left for the car.

I hesitated. ‘And that doesn’t include me?’

‘Wouldn’t you rather spend the weekend with your mum?’

The question rattled my ribs. If I wasn’t with my friends – who had likely grown goatees by now – I was with Mum. I looked away, and Dad approached to rub my arms.

‘Please, can you do this for me? I don’t want to dilute the experience,’ he whispered in my ear. He picked up his suitcase and slung it over his shoulder. ‘Besides, you have work, kiddo.’

Mum stood in the corner listening to the exchange, chewing her lower lip. She offered me a weak smile and nodded. Her stance was clear.

‘So, what am I then?’ I threw back, stopping him from leaving the kitchen. Kai stopped, too, and sent me a sharp frown over his shoulder.

Dad rubbed his eyes. ‘André, we’re going to be late.’

‘Come on. You and I can do something today if you want. How about I take you to Nando’s for dinner? Butterfly chicken and rice.’ Mum came up behind me and placed her hands on my shoulders. I shook her off.

‘No, I want an explanation.’

Dad sighed through his nose. He told Kai to join his sister in the car and took me by the shoulder, guiding me into the living room. He shut the door and crossed his arms. I did the same.

‘I don’t know what you want me to say.’

‘The truth,’ I said. ‘Why am I the one with a part-time job? I’m the only one without any pocket money, and I’m being left behind! Have I

done something to make you angry?’

Dad shifted and shoved his hands in his pockets. ‘You know why.’
‘I don’t.’

‘You need to prepare for adult life so you can move out. Make an income.’

‘Move out? Then what was all that about “diluting the experience”?’
I scowled.

Dad tapped his index finger on his elbow. He inhaled, and I waited as his eyes rolled across the ceiling.

‘You’re not my kid, and I’m not your dad. It would help if you didn’t view me as such. I love you, but you’re the son of your real dad, not me.’

My scowl fell apart, and Harry squirmed. He glanced at the door and then at me. I didn’t know what to say, my mind was blank. A bunch of words swished around my mouth – all of them were gum stuck to my teeth.

Harry relaxed and clapped me on the back. I glanced out the window when the car horn honked. Ellie was leaning over the driver’s seat, hand on the wheel, glaring.

‘I’ll see you Monday. Take care of your mum for me while I’m gone.’
He smiled, grabbing his suitcase.

I drifted out of the living room when I heard the car engine start from outside. I passed Mum, who was waving from the porch and let my legs take me to my room. For the first time in weeks, it was quiet upstairs. I fell onto my bed, pulled the duvet over myself, and lay there for hours. It was something I hadn’t done since I was five, but back then the silence of my old house was filled with smashing crockery.

Over the weekend, I rejected Mum’s invitations to go to the shopping centre, the supermarket, all the fast-food restaurants, and anything else meant to encourage me to leave the house. Instead, I spent my

afternoons playing *CS:GO* in my room and ignoring all the calls from Nina.

When Monday morning arrived, Mum forced me to shower and put on some fresh clothes – of the non-tracksuit kind – ready for Gran’s birthday party. To our surprise, Gran and the rest of my extended family arrived before Harry, Kai, and Ellie. Mum called me downstairs to greet my relatives and wish Gran a happy birthday.

‘Where’s that husband of yours?’ Gran asked Mum after kissing my cheek.

“‘That husband’ has a name. And he’s on his way back. He took the kids to Scotland.’

Gran glanced at me. ‘Well, let’s all head into the living room. I could go for an espresso right about now.’

‘Espresso, coming up.’ Mum turned to me. ‘André, anything?’

‘I’ll have the same.’

Mum nodded, leaving me with Gran and my other relatives as we shuffled into the living room. I gave Gran her birthday present – some pearls that Mum picked out for me – and watched her open it with her usual enthusiasm. I received another kiss as the front door opened.

Harry waltzed in, dragging his suitcase through the porch with a loud thump. Ellie and Kai followed, and everyone, bar Gran and I, flocked to Harry like he was a hero arriving home from the war.

‘Afternoon, everyone.’ Harry grinned, offering everyone hugs while Mum came in with the espressos. She handed them to Gran and me and welcomed Harry home with a kiss. I decided to make up the excuse that my espresso was cold so I could mull around in the kitchen for a while.

He reached me before I could escape. ‘Hey, kiddo.’

‘Hey, Harry.’

Harry winced. I blew on my espresso as Gran hid her mouth behind

her cup and abandoned me. Mum and my stepsiblings watched us from across the room.

‘How was Scotland?’

‘Nice. It rained a bit, but we did some kayaking and went fishing. Kai got all his photos, and Ellie taught some kids how to play rounders.’

‘Glad you had fun.’ I downed the rest of my espresso and took my empty cup to the kitchen. I ignored Harry’s heavy stare as I left the room.

I discarded my cup and looked around for a snack. Everything tasty was on the bench and not to be touched until dinner time. I spied a bowl of some salted peanuts and nibbled on them. My phone buzzed. It was Nina. I let it ring out as I ate my peanuts.

Footsteps approached from the doorway. Mum rubbed my back and offered me one of her watery smiles, carrying Gran’s empty cup.

‘Hey.’ She approached me as if I were a skittish cat, placing the cup in the sink. ‘What was all that about?’

‘Did you know what he thinks of me?’

‘Your dad?’

‘Harry.’

She hesitated. ‘Your dad loves you very much. Him wanting to spend some time with his kids isn’t any reason to be frosty towards him, is it?’

‘If I’m not his kid, then what does that make him? Not my dad.’ I shrugged, popping more peanuts into my mouth.

‘Oh, André, don’t be like this. Go apologise, you upset him.’

‘Upset him?’ I scoffed. Unbelievable. ‘If I’m the add-on he tolerates for you, then that’s fine. If he wants to set that boundary, I’m more than happy to respect it. But don’t expect me to pretend that he’s anything more than the guy you married when Dad is off smoking crack in a four-by-four.’

Mum flinched, then sighed and rubbed my shoulder. ‘One of these days, you’ll realise how young you really are.’

She left and passed Gran in the doorway. She looked down her nose at Mum. The same way she had when Mum told her she would remarry and move to England. She met my gaze and left too.

Harry was in the hallway, hovering outside the living room with his hands stuffed in his jean pockets. I didn’t bother hiding a scowl as I made my way down.

‘Hey,’ he said, fiddling with his watch.

‘What?’

‘You seem upset. Is something the matter?’

I deflated, and something cold settled in. I couldn’t care to get angry or shout. Or do anything.

‘No, Harry.’

Harry nodded and glanced behind. ‘We’re playing Monopoly, wanna come in?’

I followed his gaze. Ellie, Kai, Gran, and Mum were gathered around the coffee table with my cousins.

‘No, I’m good.’

He hesitated. ‘You sure?’

‘Yeah. I’d rather not dilute the experience.’ I grabbed my coat. ‘I’m going out for a bit. I’ll be back for dinner.’

I didn’t wait for permission. I left the house and took the path to my friends’ houses.

My phone buzzed again. I opened my contacts and blocked Nina’s number.

About the Author

Alexandra Urquhart is a writer from the Peak District in her final year of undergraduate Creative Writing. She has read draft scripts for web-comics and gets her ideas from dreams, making her notes under night-light. She enjoys providing her readers with contemporary stories that hit home.

SYNAPSE

by
Courtney Walker

INT. CORNER SHOP. HULL - DAY

LANCE (30s) tidies up around the till. ADA (30s) walks into the shop.

LANCE
Good morning.

Ada nods. She puts a bottle of milk on the counter.

LANCE (CONT'D)
I can never taste the difference in the kinds of milk.

Lance runs the purchase through the till.

LANCE (CONT'D)
I know it's like fat percentages and that, but it's all the same to me.

He turns the card reader towards Ada. Ada pays and walks away.

LANCE (CONT'D)
Have a nice day.

Ada closes the door.

A beat.

Lance ducks under the desk.

CUT TO:

EXT. ANLABY PARK PUB. HULL - NIGHT

CAPTION OVER: 8PM

Ada, TIPSY WOMAN 1 and TIPSY WOMAN 2 stumble out onto the street. Ada clips the shoulder of the BOUNCER.

ADA
Sorry, sorry.

Ada, Topsy Woman 1 and Topsy Woman 2 laugh. They stop by the side of the road.

TIPSY WOMAN 1
Bit cold.

TIPSY WOMAN 2
Bit bloody dark.

TIPSY WOMAN 1
November for you.

ADA
So, what now then?

TIPSY WOMAN 1
You want to call the
taxi or should I?

TIPSY WOMAN 2
My phone's almost dead.

Tipsy woman 1 dials the taxi company.

ADA
We going to another pub?

TIPSY WOMAN 1
Back to mine to get a
Chinese and sober up.

ADA
It's only early.

TIPSY WOMAN 1
Got work in morning. Can
stop over if you want.

Tipsy woman 1 answers the phone.

TIPSY WOMAN 1 (CONT'D)
Hiya, can I have a taxi
to Anlaby Park please?

TIPSY WOMAN 2
Banging Chinese by her
house.

A beat.

ADA
Thanks... maybe another
time though.

Tipsy woman 1 takes the phone away from her
ear.

TIPSY WOMAN 1
You want to share a car
still?

ADA
I only live around the
corner.

TIPSY WOMAN 2

You sure?

Ada hugs Tipsy Woman 1 and Tipsy Woman 2.

ADA

Can literally see my
door from the top of the
street.

TIPSY WOMAN 2

Right, well, don't talk
to strangers.

Ada walks away.

ADA

Other than you two?

TIPSY WOMAN 2

Wait we didn't get your-

Ada turns a corner.

CUT TO:

INT. CORNER SHOP. HULL - SAME NIGHT

Lance hums to himself under the desk. Ada
stumbles in. Lance hits his head as he
stands.

LANCE

Fuck.

Ada uses the cashier desk for balance.

ADA

Can I get that bottle of
vodka behind you?

LANCE

We're closed.

ADA
Sign wasn't up.

LANCE
No, but--

ADA
Door wasn't locked.

A beat.

LANCE
Alright.

Lance takes a bottle off the shelf behind him.

LANCE (CONT'D)
This one?

ADA
That the cheapest?

Lance puts the bottle on the counter.

LANCE
Yep.

Ada fumbles with her bank card. She puts it in front of Lance.

Silence.

ADA
You not going to--

LANCE
Till's turned off.

ADA
So, I get it for free?

LANCE
Guess so.

Ada grabs the vodka bottle.

ADA
Not feeling talkative
today?

LANCE
No, but I can see you
are?

ADA
I'm feeling--

Ada loses her balance. Lance stops the bottle falling.

Ada steadies herself.

Ada laughs.

LANCE
Do you need me to call
you a taxi?

ADA
You caught the bloody
vodka.

Ada sits on the floor.

LANCE
I really need to close
up.

ADA
I could've smashed my
head against the counter
and you reached for the
vodka.

Lance takes his phone out.

LANCE
What's your address?

Ada continues to laugh. Lance sits next to her. He hands her his phone.

LANCE (CONT'D)
Type it in there.

Ada stops laughing. She takes the phone.

ADA
Don't worry. I would've done the same.

Ada types.

LANCE
Sorry?

ADA
Don't worry.

LANCE
I didn't not reach for you on purpose. I--

ADA
Have your priorities straight.

Ada hands Lance the phone.

LANCE
You're sat pissed out of your mind on a shop floor.

ADA
I'm not judging you.

LANCE
Right... Sorry.

ADA
You're a lot less...

Ada motions with her hands.

ADA (CONT'D)
Bright tonight.

Lance laughs.

LANCE
I think we're both a
little different to how
we were earlier.

ADA
Hey, I have a reason for
being a twat. You're
just moody.

Ada opens the vodka bottle.

ADA (CONT'D)
Those security cameras
work?

Ada drinks.

Lance takes an open bottle of rum from under the desk. He sits back next to her

LANCE
Just for show.

Lance drinks. Ada stares at him.

LANCE (CONT'D)
Not everyone's an annoying drunk.

Lance picks at the brand sticker on the bottle.

LANCE (CONT'D)
This makes the thoughts
flow smoother... Without
it I say shit for the
sake of it, like talking
to customers about types
of milk.

ADA
I'd take milk talk any
day... People at work
thought I was mute till
the Christmas party's
open bar stopped the
thought onslaught.

Lance laughs. Ada nudges him with her
shoulder.

LANCE
Sorry... It's hard to
believe the girl who
didn't say one word ear-
lier suffers from think-
ing too much.

ADA
When it feels like
there's more thoughts
than brain cells it's a
bit hard to pick which
one to turn into sound.

Ada taps her fingers against the bottle.

ADA (CONT'D)
Like a trillion little
fireworks in my head.

Lance peels off a part of the bottle's
sticker.

ADA (CONT'D)
So, you're not the only
one who's boring without
a drink in you.

LANCE
Oi, I didn't use the
word boring.

Lance rolls the sticker into a ball.

LANCE (CONT'D)
We just... don't know
how to be fun without
help.

ADA
Fuck's the difference?

Lance flicks the ball at Ada.

Ada offers her vodka to Lance. They switch bottles.

LANCE
Cheers.

They clink bottles then drink.

Lance checks his phone. He spits out his mouthful.

LANCE (CONT'D)
You just typed home.
They laugh.

CUT TO:

EXT. CORNER SHOP. HULL - SAME NIGHT

Ada and Lance stumble out the shop. Ada walks off. Lance locks the door. He chases after Ada.

CUT TO:

INT. THE DAIRYCOATS INN. HULL - SAME NIGHT

CAPTION OVER: 9PM

A clock ticking.

A place for cheap beer rather than good atmosphere. Music playing. Ada, Lance, DRUNK MAN 1 and DRUNK MAN 2 do a shot at the bar.

They all slam their glasses upside down.
Drunk man 1 waves to the DAIRYCOATS BAR-
TENDER.

DRUNK MAN 1
Four more.

Dairycoats bartender pours more shots.

DRUNK MAN 2
What's your guys' names
then?

Ada and Lance look at each other.

ADA
What's your name?

LANCE
What's your name?

ADA
Does it really matter?

LANCE
Not in the slightest.

They entwine arms as they do another shot
each.

DRUNK MAN 2
Wait for the rest of us,
won't you?

CUT TO:

EXT. THE DAIRYCOATS INN. SMOKING AREA. HULL
- SAME NIGHT

Ada and Lance sit on a bench. They have a
pint each. Ada smokes a cigarette.

ADA
Nice blokes in there.

LANCE
What?

ADA
I said nice blokes in
there. The ones who
bought us the drinks.

LANCE
Yeah.

Lance lifts his glass in the air.

LANCE (CONT'D)
Appreciate them.

Lance drinks.

ADA
It's the best part of
all this, meeting people
and being able to talk
to them.

LANCE
And they actually want
to hear what you have to
say.

ADA
No brain in overdrive.

Ada passes the cigarette to Lance.

LANCE
Until it ends.

ADA
Mood killer.

LANCE
It's true.

ADA
Doesn't have to be.

LANCE
Not sure the human body
can handle that.

A glass smashes inside the pub. DRINKERS
cheer.

ADA
Why do we care if it
can't?

CUT TO:

EXT. THE DAIRYCOATS INN. HULL - SAME NIGHT

Ada and Lance are thrown out of the pub by
the BOUNCERS.

CUT TO:

INT. THE HALFWAY PUB. HULL - SAME NIGHT

CAPTION OVER: 10PM

A clock ticking.

Ada and Lance play pool with a group of
STRANGERS. Lance misses the pocket. Strang-
ers cheer. Lance downs his pint. Ada chips
the white ball off the table.

CUT TO:

INT. THE HALFWAY PUB. HULL - SAME NIGHT

Lance lies on the pool table. Ada does a
belly shot off him

CUT TO:

INT. THE HALFWAY PUB. MEN'S TOILETS - SAME
NIGHT

Ada sits on the counter between two sinks.

Lance inspects his black eye in the mirror.

ADA
Always leave before the
morning. Say I don't
want them to see me hun-
gover.

LANCE
Good lie.

ADA
Tried hanging out with a
few of them while sober.

LANCE
Never goes well, does
it?

Lance rinses his face. Ada looks at herself
in the mirror.

ADA
You know when someone
asks you a random ques-
tion in the middle of a
group conversation, and
you can tell it's out of
pity because you haven't
spoken the entire time?

Lance dries his face on his shirt.

ADA (CONT'D)
Met some girls earlier
tonight. Right laugh.
Wanted me to go back and
sober up with them.

Ada inspects Lance's black eye.

ADA (CONT'D)
Said I lived five minutes
away so I could leave.

Ada pokes at the bruising.

ADA (CONT'D)
That hurt?

LANCE
Can't feel a thing.

ADA
I walked for twenty minutes in the dark before I got to the shop.

CUT TO:

INT. THE HALFWAY PUB. HULL - SAME NIGHT
Ada and Lance play beer pong.

CUT TO:

INT. THE HALFWAY PUB. HULL - SAME NIGHT

Ada almost throws up in a corner. Lance holds her hair back. His watch gets tangled in her hair.

CUT TO:

INT. THE RAYNERS PUB. HULL - SAME NIGHT

CAPTION OVER: 11PM

A clock ticking.

RAYNERS BARTENDER stands behind the bar. Ada and Lance push through a CROWD to get to the bar.

ADA
I got this one.

Ada beckons Rayners Bartender.

ADA (CONT'D)
Two cheeky Vimto's please.

wards her. Lance yanks her to safety.

Silence.

CUT TO:

EXT. HESSLE ROAD. HULL - SAME NIGHT

Ada and Lance walk up the pathway.

ADA

I always hated that film.

LANCE

The main character's so good in it though.

ADA

Until he dies at the end.

LANCE

So, a good film's suddenly shit if the lead dies?

ADA

Yep.

LANCE

At the very end of the film?

ADA

Awful.

LANCE

And the death was meaningful and wrapped everything up perfectly?

ADA

Why would I want to waste my time liking a character if none of it matters in the end?

LANCE
I guess, but it's never
just...

Lance and Ada stop outside the corner shop.

ADA
Closer than I thought.

LANCE
The walk felt shorter.

Lance unlocks the door.

CUT TO:

INT. CORNER SHOP. HULL - SAME NIGHT

Ada takes her card from the countertop.

ADA
And now the rounds may
continue.

Ada opens the door. Lance picks up the vodka and rum bottles off the floor.

ADA (CONT'D)
You coming?

He puts the bottles on the counter.

LANCE
I think I'm sober.

ADA
Me too.

Silence.

Ada holds up her card.

ADA (CONT'D)
Can get back to it now.

CUT TO:

EXT. HESSLE ROAD. HULL - SAME NIGHT

CAPTION OVER: 12AM

Ada and Lance walk up the pavement.

LANCE

Bit ironic. The threat
of less drinks sobering
us up.

ADA

Think that might've been
the car.

LANCE

Maybe... Probably.

Silence.

LANCE (CONT'D)

What was your name
again?

A beat.

LANCE (CONT'D)

Actually, never mind--

ADA

Ada.

LANCE

I'm Lance.

They come up to a pub and stop by the door.
A GROUP OF DRUNK WOMEN stand smoking by the
entrance.

LANCE (CONT'D)

I think there's a 24-
hour takeaway ten min
utes from here.

A beat.

LANCE (CONT'D)

If you want.

The group of drunk women stumble into the pub. A DRUNK WOMAN holds the door open.

DRUNK WOMAN

You two heading in or
what?

A clock ticking. Ada stares at the open door. The ticking stops.

ADA

We're good, thanks.

Drunk woman closes the door.

ADA (CONT'D)

A crappy pizza sounds so
good right now.

Ada and Lance walk away from the pub.

ADA (CONT'D)

So, Lance... Like King
Arthur's best mate?

LANCE

Twat.

Ada nudges him with her shoulder. He does it back.

FADE TO BLACK.

THE END

About the Author

Courtney Walker manages solicited submissions for the Finborough Theatre and is a guest reader for LifeBox Theatre. Her work can be found in ChewBoy Productions' arts and literature anthology, Heroica Women's website, Girls On Key's newsletter, and a play of hers was shortlisted for Slackline Productions' slackline sleepover competition 2023.

MY HUSBAND AND I

by
Amy Webster

I shall tell you my story – that of my second life and not of my first. Much like yours, my first life was little more than a fleeting moment void of any real substance – that is, at least, what I was told. Though I fail to see how this life has exceeded the last; all manner of free will was stolen from me in the beginning and has not yet been restored.

My husband – as you well know – is a peculiar man. It had been evident to everyone in town that he was unlike any other. His dissimilarity isolated him from the community of patriarchs he would have otherwise been a part of. While many recoiled from his presence, I found him to be fascinating; he was freakishly pale, uncomfortably withdrawn, and resentful of any occasion that required him to mix with others. And yet, there was something magnetic about him that provoked feelings from within my core that I was unfamiliar with, though not repelled by.

My mother had warned me of such feelings. She would often pass judgment on the young ladies who suddenly declared themselves mar-

ried – she would declare them disgraced without having all the evidence before her. Despite her discouragement, I had read enough to know that such sensations were not uncommon among girls my age.

Perhaps this was what hindered my ability to foresee the trouble I later found myself in.

In the beginning, any and all interaction that occurred between us was limited. For a long time, I was convinced that I had imagined his interest in me. There were moments when I thought I had seen his gaze soften when I entered the same room as him, and others when he regarded me with the same harshness that he applied to everyone else.

My father had – as all fathers did – arranged that I would be married to a Mr. Brackenhurst on the 18th anniversary of my birth. I chased him into his study the night he told me, begging for him to listen.

‘What’s done is done,’ he insisted, waving his hand in dismissal. ‘Mr. Brackenhurst is a fine man, indeed. You could not ask for a better husband than he.’

‘I have never even heard of a Mr. Brackenhurst until tonight.’

His tone remained firm as he spoke. ‘You are well-matched.’

‘This is absurd!’ I cried, failing to maintain the composure I had promised myself I would uphold. ‘I refuse to let you do this.’

‘All girls your age go through this, only without causing such a fuss.’

‘I will not marry a stranger.’

‘You will do as I see fit.’

That was the catalyst that sent the curtain tumbling down around my first life. I fled from my home under the cover of darkness, with little more than a kit bag of clothes to my name. The money I carried was locked in a closed fist and shoved into my coat pocket. It would cover the train fare and *only* the train fare. How I planned to survive once I was standing on freedom’s doorstep was of no concern to me then.

The night was cold, and the street was dark. But, above all else, the street was empty. The clicking of my heels against the cobblestones was light and delicate – *rushed*, but delicate. The sound echoed off the buildings, chasing away the eerie silence. I forced myself to swallow the sense of unease rising within me. It did not matter that a rogue streetlamp flickered in the distance, or that the footsteps resonating in the nighttime air were heavier than my own.

Not at all in sync with my own...

I like to think we are all capable of sensing danger before it presents itself. Our minds work hard to preserve us. No matter how many times you glance over your shoulder and find nothing but a deserted street staring back, it will not shake the feeling that something lurks in the shadows. It will not reassure you that the second set of footsteps is nothing more than a product of your imagination.

It most certainly will not help you to realise that ducking into an alleyway and praying that whatever it is will leave you alone could cost you everything.

And it did.

I do not expect you to understand how much pain one person can inflict upon another. But what I felt, trapped at the end of that alley, knowing that I had no escape... I would not wish it on anyone.

I awoke some days later in a room that was, by no means, unusual. It looked like every normal parlour, complete with a chaise and blazing hearth. I should have been warm – comfortable, even. But I felt neither. My skin was cold as ice, cold enough that it almost burned to the touch, and I was consumed by an unquenchable thirst that had my body screaming for relief.

A man lingered at the edge of the room. His presence was the anomaly in this otherwise ordinary environment. The intensity of his stare

reignited the unease I had felt in that street and burned a hole in my patience as I asked question after question.

There was never a need to question who he was; I knew his face well enough. It was the same one I had glimpsed across countless crowded rooms – the one I had grown so fond of from afar. It also happened to be the last thing I saw before the world slipped from under me.

‘You cannot leave.’ Those were the first words he ever said to me.

I stood by the door, with one hand on the brass knob. It would not open, I knew that. I had already tried. But I refused to stray too far from it. ‘I have to get home.’

‘This *is* your home.’

‘No, sir, it is not,’ I challenged while he continued to watch me with an amused look in his eyes. Like a lion hunting a gazelle. ‘My family will be worried.’

His amusement shifted into something darker. ‘You did not seem so concerned with that the other night.’

Something about the subtle change in his tone made me want to run. But my feet were rooted to the spot. The way he looked at me suggested he knew *exactly* what I was thinking. He appeared smug, almost like he knew I could not escape him, no matter how much I might want to.

I recoiled as he stalked towards me, took my left hand into his own, and slipped a gold wedding band onto my ring finger. ‘Welcome home, Mrs. Brackenhurst.’

It is only fair I now confess to you that, in the beginning, we were happy. He took the time to ensure I understood the changes my body had undergone – that I could sustain myself without his aid. I remember feeling like a child learning everything for the first time; almost everything I had known before was no longer relevant. The only constant remained that we had to eat to survive.

When he wasn't away on business, we would dine together, and attend all manner of public occasions. We spent many engaging hours learning about each other's lives, what we liked, disliked, and such. The frustration I had felt at his initial intrusion in my life whittled away into nothing; it is hard to hold a grudge against a man who continues to show you kindness.

That is until the first of you came along.

She was presented to me, in our dining room, on the night of our anniversary. I watched as he led her to where I sat frozen at the table. I had thought we were waiting on the main course. 'What is the meaning of this?'

'This is how we survive,' he explained, tracing his fingertips down her bare neck. I waited for her to react – a shudder, a blink, *anything* – but there was nothing. She simply continued to stare straight ahead with a blank expression on her face. 'It is high time you learned how to put food on the table.'

I frowned. 'I don't understand. You said it came from the hospital.'

'And now I am telling it does not.'

'Well, if not the hospital, then where—' My gaze slid over to the girl at his side, my stomach lurching at the possibility that sprung to mind. I returned my attention to him. 'Surely not?'

He nudged her forward. 'This is the way of all life. We are simply accelerating the inevitable.'

The implication was clear, as was his frustration when I refused to do what was expected of me. Upset as he may have been, he assured me that hesitation was normal for the first time. I tried not to flinch as he dispatched the young woman and served us our main course as though nothing untoward had happened.

I did not eat that night.

Weeks went by without mention of that dinner. I was beginning to think that the incident had been forgotten. In many ways, I was grateful. The look in his eyes when I had told him – in no uncertain terms – that I did not wish to inflict pain on others in order to survive had been terrifying.

I was relaxing in the parlour when he strode in one evening. I looked up from the pages of my book to find him standing beside another young woman. She wore the same blank expression as her predecessor and nothing else. Her nakedness was my husband's way of flaunting his activities in my face – he had been holed up in his study for hours, claiming to have business matters to attend to.

Jealousy had been his goal. Perhaps he thought it might encourage me to carry out the dark task he once again demanded of me.

His response to my refusal had been less than kind.

From then on, I spent little time in his company. He dined alone, would make himself scarce on an evening, and hardly uttered a word to me. My belongings were uprooted from our bedroom and cast into one of the spare rooms.

I spent one night in that bed before he dragged me beneath the house.

The darkness of the cellar became my only loyal friend, and the metal shackles that bound my wrists together pinched my pale skin each time I ventured too far from the wall that anchored them. For years, I knew nothing but pain and an overwhelming thirst that worsened with every passing day. The only time I left that room was when we received an invitation to an event and were required to appear in public together as husband and wife.

He would spend those nights sizing up the young women in attendance, occasionally making some hushed remark about how he intend-

ed to replace me.

When we arrived home, I would be forced to lie with him until morning. Then I would be dismissed back to the shadows and forgotten about until the next occasion presented itself.

He never had to force them, though – nor you, I imagine. Perhaps that is why he did not bother with me too often; he could get what he wanted elsewhere. The other girls – and there were many – did not last as long as you. No, you waltzed into his life and ensnared him somehow. It appears you possess something I do not, though I am yet to determine what.

For centuries, I have suffered – tortured by the changes he imposed on me – unable to quiet his voice inside my head. I feel him watching, don't you? He's always watching.

I think he senses that my patience is at an end.

I can see the fear in your eyes – the desperation, too – but it would be pointless to struggle. There is no escape, believe me when I say that.

I have spent too many years fighting every part of myself that longed for this day, wrestling with the thought of taking another's life. He has waited a long time for this, too, and resented me more each time I refused. But you... you make it all seem so easy. You see, this is a matter of life or death, and I do not have it in me to resist any longer.

The contest between my life and yours is at an end. His instructions were clear: one of us lives, the other... Well, I suppose you already know. I have lived a long life – seen the turn of many centuries – yet there is still so much I wish to do.

So, I am afraid that person will not be you.

About the Author

Amy Webster is an aspiring novelist, studying Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln. Her debut short story – *My Husband and I* – is a dark and twisted tale of desire, inspired by her long-standing fascination with vampiric fiction. Aside from writing, she loves to bake, read, and play *Animal Crossing*.

DROWNERS

by

Robin Wilson

We used to have a thriving lifeboat service to rescue drowning girls. Now we just have red flags dotted along the curve of the coastline. Don't swim.

It's difficult to heed such advice while high. They just found another one, a teenage boy, face down in Brudd pool two nights ago; he'd only been there for six hours this time. Last seen dancing across the beach and yelling at the sky in hysterical mirth.

I wonder if the sailor drowned him too.

They told me to stop thinking about it. That people drown every day and I should count myself lucky. They were counting themselves lucky that their precious little prodigy wasn't swept out to sea. Get back on with your studies, child, and make us all proud.

But I couldn't. My lungs never forgot the feeling of being filled by the ocean. I couldn't breathe right anymore. I saw his face in my sleep, in the mirror, the haunting sadness. The lack of remorse.

They scoured the bay for a man matching his description, even though I insisted that it was no man. That his face was made of water, and his eyes were far too angry for that of normal folk. Our town has never indulged in legends of Merpeople and sea monsters. The only monsters are in men.

I didn't tell anyone about the navy cap on his head. Or the stitched inscription that indicated his regiment was the same one our great grandparents sank back in wartime, mistaking them for German spies.

He certainly had the eyes of a ghost. Haunted, desolate, desperate, pulling a young girl down towards the ocean floor.

The relief that emerged when they pulled me out was short-lived. People smiled for a few days, then frowned, then gave into their mounting disappointment and started the scowl. They shook their heads, clicked their tongues, and claimed I was never the same again. I suppose I never was. A month later I got my first period, and everyone's precious little prodigy was suddenly just another teenager who needed to live up to the same expectations as everyone else. Well, I met expectations alright. Those clicking tongues only got louder when word got around that I was using the same drugs I tested positive for at birth. Their stares turned sour like they weren't the ones who broke our society, who allowed the poison to flow from a single needle and puddle against everyone's ankles like a rising tide.

I take the briefest of seconds to crack my back, and my eyes wander over to the sealine. From here it doesn't look like a threat. It looks beautiful. Sparkling coast, shining sand, and the deep, indescribable blue that only exists just beneath the swimmable surface far out. It doesn't look like just another trash pit for us junkies to throw used needles into. From here, you can't see the currents that will suck you under and choke you all the way out to a place too far gone for anyone to reach you.

Someone shouts something about returning to work, and it's enough to grab my attention. Now that I'm not their prodigy, I'm nothing, and without a paycheck, I'm a nothing who sleeps on the street, so I'd better prove to myself that I can at least do this.

Dishes go clink. Bottles rattle. All of them go under the soapy surface of the sink to be picked clean. They sparkle on their way out, mirroring the cheerful sea and sunshine.

'Ahem, excuse me ma'am?' There's an out-of-town looking bloke seated at a table towards the end of the terrace. He waves his hand at me, his coffee mug empty.

'I don't fill cups mate, just clear tables. Talk to Dolores.'

'Well actually--' he fumbles with an expensive-looking notebook. 'I'm a researcher, I write for a coastal-themed paper. I wondered if I could ask you some questions about... your town,' his voice falters when he sees the needle marks up and down my arms, sleeves rolled up in the heat.

'I'm sure Wikipedia will be able to help you a lot more than I can,' I snap at him. 'They've got all sorts of statistics on there. I have a shift to get back to.'

'It will only take a moment! In fact, I'll pay you for your time.'

A crisp flash of pound notes stops me in my tracks.

'Keep talking.' I'm due a break, so with my eye on the serving hatch, I take a seat across from him. He's not bad looking. Little older than me, with dark hair and, a pale face. Definitely doesn't belong in this nook of the county.

'I'm interested in some of your local legends,' he says. 'I believe ten or so years ago there was a news article on something called the Drowner?'

A thin shiver works its way up my spine, like a trickle of water in

reverse. 'You mean the mystical force that lives in the bay and drowns unsuspecting swimmers? Yeah, he's real.'

'Fascinating. And is there anyone who has seen this creature?' His eyes sparkle with a thirst I haven't seen since I was a young girl. Ambition. Between his shiny tie and even shinier glasses, he's a far cry from being one of us.

He's just another prat coming to write articles on how deluded we all are. If I was sober, I probably would have just walked away. But what the hell, it's a beautiful day, and I'm at least getting paid this time around.

I flash him the proudest smile I can fake.

'You're looking at her.'

'Then this is my lucky day!' He slaps the table hard enough to make the salt and pepper rattle. 'Have you witnessed the act of drowning? Does your ghost sailor drag his victim down like a kelpie, or is it more brutal holding their heads in the shallows?'

He has a crazed glint in his glasses as they reflect the sunlight. This man... is excited about murder.

Maybe he does belong here after all.

'More of a dragging you under. Most of the instances are reported as accidents.'

'To withhold suspicion,' he grins, again, a little too manic for my liking. 'Do you know of anyone else who has seen the monster for what it is?'

'Just me,' I narrow my eyes at him. 'No one else he dragged down ever came back up.'

'So, you were the source of the article?' He frowns, and his eyes once again drift to the scars on my arm.

'Yeah, yeah, I know what you think. I'm just another crazed junkie trying to call attention to my delusions for a cheap buck. Are you going

to pay me, or shall I call Dolores to get you another coffee?’

He blushes violently. ‘No, no ma’am, I just, ahem. Could we discuss this at another hour? I see your boss attempting to wave you over. Perhaps you could meet me at the coastline, dusk?’

‘Dusk? What is this, Victorian era?’

He rolls his eyes. ‘Seven-thirty.’

‘Make it eight,’ I stand up. Of course, this could be a trap to lure a wayward young woman out of the watchful eyes of the public like in an old-timey morality tale, but this guy has less backbone than seaweed. I could definitely take him.

‘I’ll see you there. Hey, in the meantime,’ he slides two fivers across the table like my dealer does. ‘For your troubles.’

The waves crash against the rocks as he stands, framing his head. I try not to sit caught in his shadow.

‘I’ll be there. If you have the cash, of course.’

He strides away, and I allow myself the merest few seconds to gaze wistfully at the sealine, before standing and once again installing the pain into my spine. It feels like I have barnacles in there sometimes, eating their way through my will to live.

More dishes, wiping off their grime against my battered arms. My talk with the reporter, who I’m just now realising never gave me his name or wrote down anything I said, has my memory prickling. I haven’t thought about my near drowning in years, though the sailor’s eyes haven’t stopped following me around.

No matter what anyone tells me, it was real. They were the junkies back then, not me. No twelve-year-old could have made that kind of pain up, no imagination could conjure those angry eyes staring at me through the mirror.

I miss the hopeful little girl who went paddling in the sea, the water

tickling her legs and holding her up. The way she breezed along a sea of memorised facts and didn't notice she was all alone and drowning until she was too far out to be saved.

My shift ends four hours later, and I am left to drag my aching body over the promenade. Back in the thirties, the place had been awash with colour and tourists, but now grey murkiness laps at the creaking boardwalk. Most of the businesses are shut up and ancient. In all the faded, peeling posters, there's an undeniable sense of before.

Before the war, before the harpoons and home-cooked tin can bombs sank that submarine in the bay. No one has the gear to dive for her, but we know she's down there. Down where the light doesn't reach and the only thing you can feel is the water.

I wonder if the sailor gets lonely down in the bay by himself. Maybe that's why he drowns people. I wonder if he's cursed. Maybe everyone is. Maybe that's why we never recovered from the guilt.

The town library is just another building, grey, shuttered up, graffiti where teens have tried to make their mark. There's an air conditioner that rattles and someone smoking behind the desk, but my apartment has all those things and no computer, so I'd rather be here.

The S. S. Prodigy was a peaceful spy ship heading towards Dover to restock, but there was an emergency on board, and they were encouraged over the radio to dock in our bay. I suppose the Navy tried to send a message to us, but even back then we were screwing something up on our end. We thought we were doing right by our country, sinking the sub. But we were just dooming ourselves. No one sends supplies or support to the traitor town.

'Psst, hey!' A tug at my sleeve snaps me out of it. A young girl wear-

ing a swimming costume for a shirt is standing next to me. I swivel around in my nearly busted computer chair and sweep my eyes over the library. Deserted, except for the smoking librarian, who's frowning over a magazine.

'Emily?' It may be a junkie town, but it's a small seaside town, and in every small town you best believe everyone knows everyone. Emily knows the waitress who puts an extra marshmallow in her hot chocolate, and I know the one little girl around here who smiles from the peak of 'top of the class'.

I hope she stays smiling for as long as she can.

'My ma said to find someone to watch me in here,' Emily quips. 'You're the only one here.'

The librarian locks eyes with me and dares me to mention her.

'I guess.' I check the computer clock. 'I have somewhere to be soon though.'

'Can I come? Ma will take ages in the store!'

Rolling my eyes is obligatory, but for her, I relent. 'Alright, fine.'

Emily swings her arms by her sides as we walk. Unscarred, full to the brim with energy. The beach is a familiar no-no ground. Too much sharp glass for bare feet. The rocks are even sharper, rising to a cliff on either side of the bay. Several paces to the right is the stretch we've named dead body beach because it's where the drowned druggies keep washing up.

Mister doesn't tip (Dolores told me) and is sitting on a rock, scribbling in his notebook. He looks up as we approach.

'Ah, you made it! Thank you for taking the time.'

'Sure, whatever,' I begin to roll my sleeves down. Dusk means darkness, and that's when I start to shiver. Emily tugs the hem of my shirt.

'Can I go paddle?'

‘Knock yourself out.’

She stumbles off, laughing, and the splashing of lapping water overtakes the sound. I face off against the reporter.

‘So, we’re here. What have you got to ask?’ The sun is going down, and it only helps illuminate all the broken glass nestled between the sand, each one a chunk of painful light. ‘You sure it’s worth it, dragging yourself down here?’

‘Oh, trust me,’ his own glasses glare like twin suns, and I have to squint just to see him clearly. ‘Anything is worth it for the right story.’

Seconds later, he’s all setup, notebook and pen ready.

‘Where does the Drowner usually strike? Presumably out in the bay?’

‘It did for me,’ I say. ‘Right out there, see? There’s a fast current that can really take you far out. I’ve actually been doing a little of my own research.’

‘I see.’

I clear my throat. ‘The sailor, erm, ghost that is, presumably drowned when the town sank the old spy ship back in ‘44, and some kind of curse got inflicted on the descendants of the townspeople who drowned him.’

‘Fascinating! More local legend.’

‘More of a warning,’ my fingers tighten against my threadbare sleeves. ‘Around here, drowning is easy. We don’t have a lifeguard anymore, only warning flags. And they don’t work.’

The beach is dark and quiet now, fabric flapping over in the distance. My fingers tighten over my sleeves. ‘This, this is the sort of town where no one bothers when you slip under. You turn up in the morning and it’s not a tragedy, it’s a ‘well this was bound to happen’. Everyone’s drowning in one way or another,’ I avoid the gaze behind his glasses. ‘You should get out while you still can.’

He hums and seems to consider. Then: ‘Your local sentiment is dig-

nified. Might I quote you on this?’

Rolling my eyes is voluntary this time. What did I expect?

I had forgotten about Emily, but when she screams, I can’t ignore it. The floor of the bay dips into deep water very suddenly, and that line can be easy to miss in the dark. Emily’s head isn’t visible, just a splashing arm.

‘Shit!’ I dart forwards, but the water slaps against the sand-line, warning me away. She belongs to us now; the sea calls out. She beckoned to the sailor with the angry eyes.

‘What’s happening?’ The reporter barks. His eyes have vanished behind those glasses, and for a moment I can imagine there’s nothing behind them at all. My stomach churns into a whirlpool, and I shove him aside as I crash into the shallows.

Instantly I’m struck. I haven’t touched the ocean in ten years.

They called me paranoid. I guess they were right.

‘Will she be taken? Oh, I should have brought my camera!’ The reporter’s voice drifts out to me. I’m still shaking.

‘It wouldn’t do you much good.’ The air is so sharp in my throat that I can hardly talk at all. ‘You won’t see it from here, you, you can’t see a drowning. They just get dragged, then they’re gone.’

He sighs. He sounds disappointed, I don’t know. All the sound around me has faded, replaced by an awful ringing between my ears. The ocean shouldn’t be this silent, but it is, the tide breathing in and out. The water’s frozen my bones, I can feel the cold in my spine. I can feel strong arms around my small body, pulling me down. I can see his eyes, locked with mine, beaming through the dark water.

I can see his eyes.

They stand out from several meters away, bobbing along the surface. I always thought of them as the same blue hue of water on a clear day,

but now I can see that they're green – which only makes this whole thing eerier. Green, angry eyes, bobbing below the water's surface.

'Please.'

No response, just staring.

'Please give her back,' something about being milked for corny quotes has loosened my frantic tongue. 'She's too young. It is not bound to happen. Screw what I said, you and me, we, we know each other right? I see you in my mirror like a crazy person, and I guess you see me from the shore. She's not meant to drown,' I swallow down a gulp of cold air. 'She's meant to be better than us. Please don't let her drown.'

The current ripples against my ankles, gently this time. The eyes continue to stare into mine. I hate every word coming out of my mouth, but it feels right, and I can't stop.

'I know what happened to you... sucked. But you're like her, you know? She didn't ask to be born into this place, and you didn't ask to be—' another swallow. 'Killed. She's just a kid. She has her whole life ahead of her. She should be able to define it. Not this town. Not... not you.'

The eyes quiver. Then vanish. The ocean is silent and... it's over. She's over.

And then a hand slams against my back.

My mind races in a whirl. As my body tilts and falls, over the sand line into the deeper water, I can scarcely piece together what's happening.

He... pushed me?

Sociopath!

By the time my body realises I should be screaming, it's too late to draw in air. Water crowds and clogs my mouth, turning my screams into panicked gargles. The sea is all around me. It's rising around me and I can't remember how to swim.

Swim...

I wiggle my fingers and move my arm a bit. Wave it about. But nothing changes. No matter the water I displace, there's still more water.

Always more water. It rushes into my mouth, and I feel my eyes flicker closed.

Oh well. We all drown in the end. Might as well, right?

Just before my eyes slide fully closed, I see a glimmer of green.

The water tightens around me, and for a moment I think he's going to squeeze the life out of me even faster. But then I feel the pressure dim and thin before my head crashes through the surface.

Cold air freezes the water on my cheeks and the cries on my lips. Kicking hard and frantic, I try and keep my chin above the water.

Just breathe just breathe just—

My toe touches the sandbank, and I frantically plant my feet. It shifts, it's unsteady, but it's not going anywhere.

In and out. Like the tide. I figure out a rhythm to sift through the water and manage to swing myself to shore.

With my back on the wet sand, the stars blur above me. At first, they're beautiful, but then they slowly become meaningless, before they're blotted out altogether by a rude and unwelcome visitor.

'Oh, come on,' the reporter snaps. 'You could have put on more of a show, what kind of story is that supposed to make?'

It takes me a while to find my voice again. When I do, it's painful and shrill.

'What the fuck is wrong with you?'

He's about to speak again, and then the water explodes. Foam splatters us, and I look wearily up.

All across the shoreline, the water has pulled back entirely. The sand gasps for breath, and I stumble back as the water reaches the dip line

into the deeper section of the bay.

The water rises into a wave. Perhaps it intends to drown me after all, except when it rises, it defies all those physics I burned my soul out studying. It curves up, up into the shape of a torso, and arms. Arms holding..

‘Emily!’ I reach for her out of instinct. I haven’t realised just how hard my heart has been pounding until her little body is in my arms. She’s unconscious but breathing. I tuck her against my frail jacket to try and stop her from shivering.

‘Thank you,’ I breathe, as the seawater rises into full form.

I was right about the hat. The details are there, right down to the military inscription and worn threading. It’s old. Older than 1944. He must have been underwater for such a long time.

‘I’m sorry,’ I say because that’s all I can say.

A phone camera clicks behind me, and those angry eyes get angrier. They’re like two furious sea snails as the water surges forward, soaking my would-be murderer and his phone with a plunging wave.

‘Whoa, hey!’ All those pretty pictures on his phone are now at the bottom of a puddle. ‘What the hell, man?’

Fury again. Another wave surges and knocks his face down. I look around anxiously, but there’s no one else here to witness as his breath gurgles and his hands flail.

Apparently, our local sailor likes to force the head down after all.

The reporter finally lies still, and the waves move to take his body out to sea, where it can be washed up in the rock pool tomorrow morning. I clutch Emily tighter and turn my eyes back up to meet his.

He looks young. Maybe only a little older than me when he died. We stare each other down before he glances towards the sand at my feet, and I follow his gaze, too scared to do anything else.

Instead of legs, his torso is supported by a column of seawater. The water at the base laps back and forth, and the ripples leave inscriptions in the sand. Words.

You were the first.

I nod, taking a step back.

‘I, I guess?’ Scarcely anyone drowned before my accident. That’s why the babbles of a traumatised little girl made local news.

The water laps back again, erasing, reprinting.

I was trapped. It all went red. I drowned.

I swallow.

‘I, I know. I’m so—’

The words vanish. And are replaced.

I am sorry.

‘For, for the others? The ones who died?’

The sailor’s head moves, looking over his shoulder. I’ve lost track of all the dead bodies that have been carried almost respectfully to the rock pool by dawn. There must be countless ghosts sitting on his shoulders. Countless junkies sitting in the streets of this town. Apathy is nice until everything you’ve pushed away comes crashing back down to hit you in your stupid face.

Countless people, all drowning. And it seems like only one person ever noticed.

Something cold touches my ankle. I glance down and see the water curling around my feet. It clings on, then recedes.

More words.

You were saved.

I bite my lip.

‘It, it isn’t that simple.’

He tilts his head. I guess for a man who has literally had the ocean

steal his breath and reshape him, there's a big difference between dying and surviving.

'I couldn't stop drowning. Everything just got so hard all of a sudden. I know I should have tried harder.'

He frowns, but his eyes are no longer angry. His hand comes forward and grips my shoulder.

It's exactly what being touched by the ocean should feel like. Gentle, and foreboding.

His other hand raises into a salute. I finally get it. Buck yourself up missy and stop complaining.

My hand trembles by my side, but I lift it anyway, all the way to my temple until my spine is straight. I salute him back with all the dignity I can muster.

Fellowmen, drowning.

We nod and he recedes. Just another wave melting into the sea. Taking the mystique with it.

Emily wakes up the moment I step onto dryer sand. She coughs a bit and smiles when she sees me.

'Did I drown? Like you?'

I shake my head.

'Nope. You're fine. So am I, by the way.'

She leans her head against my shoulder, smiling.

'Good. I'm thirsty.'

I lick my lips, feeling saltwater drying against my legs.

'Yeah, me too.'

About the Author

Robyn Wilson grew up in Yorkshire where they received local awards in poetry, before falling in love with prose. Studying the Creative Writing BA, they often write stories about fantasy, magical realism, occasionally the real world too. When not crafting narratives, Robyn enjoys acting, and anything dangerous involving the outdoors.

THE DEPTHS OF YOU

by
Sarah Wilson

Tamari woke with a sword to her throat. It was flecked with rust and curved roughly from its hilt to meet a point at her skin, cool and warning. Tamari's own dagger was inches away, sharpened, and clean beneath her pillow. Her fingers shifted towards it as she sat up, but then she noticed the person behind the blade.

She tried to calm her heart, but her shock morphed into anger the longer she sat there.

'What are ye doing?' She demanded. There was a fearful edge to her tone that she tried to quench. No matter how vulnerable she was, how much sleep still clouded her thoughts, this would not get the better of her.

'Fabian?'

'Apologies for wakin' ye, Miss Pembroke. But we have matters to discuss.' He jerked his head to his left, lip curling into a snarl.

Tamari's gaze shifted behind him, where two more of Fabian's crew

– she clocked their faces as Benny and Gundiguts – were holding another figure between them. This one was knocked out, dangling between the pirates’ arms, and had a dagger against their throat. Tamari couldn’t see much of them, save a lock of red hair peeking from a battered hat.

‘What is this?’ Tamari asked again, clumping the sheets into her hands to stop herself from jumping forward. Fabian’s sword ready to impale her was enough of a preventative.

She wasn’t sure how she felt about being so exposed in front of the two crewmembers. It wasn’t in her nature to hide away, or to be ashamed, but she liked to choose her moments personally. Vexed and restless, Tamari moved to stand, only to have the metal pressed further into her skin.

‘Careful there, Pembroke. ‘Tis not the time for accidents.’

She let out a sound of frustration, but froze nonetheless. Despite how well she knew Fabian, she was sure he really would hurt her right now. ‘Fabian, whatever this is, we can handle it. Without these two corny-faced lobcocks—’

‘Enough.’

Fabian leaned in close, sword edge pressed firmly against her skin, and she felt a trickle of liquid on her neck. She was scared to breathe too much, should it cut into her further.

‘Just stop talkin’,’ he hissed. Tamari could see his façade was getting chipped away, and she wanted nothing more than to reach out and pry it apart.

‘Then what do ye want from me?’ She whispered, hoping to appeal to the side of him she knew, the side she could reason with. The one with mischievous green eyes, and a wit as sharp as the blade under her pillow.

She had been on this ship for years, ever since she had helped him

claim control of *The William* back at Nassau Harbour. He'd been her captain and more ever since. She'd seen his face full of joy and hate; she'd seen it in battle, at alcohol-laden funerals, during intimate nights alone, bathed in candlelight. After all this time hating him, knowing him, loving him, she thought she had seen every variation of his face that existed. But now, as he considered her question and held her life against his sword, she saw a completely new one.

He was hurt.

There was anger there, for sure, but it stemmed from some pain she couldn't make out, though she desperately wanted to.

The slouching figure behind them groaned as he started to wake, but Tamari kept her eyes on Fabian. She figured it was the safest thing to do right now and was trying her hardest to figure out what had happened to make him storm in here, weapons drawn.

'Tell me what has happened.'

Fabian's expression softened for a moment before he straightened, hand tight around his sword's hilt. 'You are to choose,' he said, keeping his voice even as he tipped her chin up with the point of his sword. A scowl settled on Tamari's features as he did so. 'The sea or death.'

Tamari was speechless for a second. 'What?'

Fabian waited for her response, and his silence enraged her. She looked to the other crew members, but they said nothing. They'd saved her life in battle but would not help her now.

Tamari stood. She ignored the sting of metal against her neck and was thankful that Fabian didn't skewer her right away. 'I am to be killed without even knowing why?'

'I gave ye options. No need to be dramatic, Tamari.'

'Options?' Her voice was a half-shout now, but she no longer cared. "'The sea or death' – as if they're different things.'

The sea had been her home for a long time, but it bowed to no one. If she chose it, it would swallow her the same as anyone, and that was not the way she intended to go.

‘I call a duel.’

The shuffling behind Fabian ceased and tension settled over the cabin. The sway of the ship was all that remained. It was a feeling Tamari knew well amidst a situation she could not figure out how to handle.

‘Don’t recall that bein’ an option.’

Tamari crossed her arms and huffed out a laugh. ‘You offered death; I chose how. Pick your freebooter,’ it would be Fabian, she knew ‘and if I’m to die, that’s how. I win, you release me unharmed next port. I lose... then I’ll take my trip to the depths, not knowing why.’

‘Why?’ Fabian said, and his emotions slipped once more onto his face.

His sword left her throat, and he forced the half-conscious body forward. Now she wasn’t fearing Fabian’s blade, Tamari recognised the figure. An inkling of understanding began to make its way through her at the sight.

‘Maybe ye need ta be tellin’ *me* why.’

Fabian’s hand was fisting the collar of a familiar blue coat as he glared at Tamari. The left sleeve was torn at the shoulder, and the bottom six inches were covered in a permanent layer of dirt. It was the figure of Joe ‘Blunderbuss’ Wynn.

‘I will not have betrayers of any kind on this ship. So, ye’ll choose. Or I kill ‘im now.’

Joe’s head lifted and met Tamari’s eyes. They were missing the fear she knew they should hold and were instead full of rage, though it wasn’t directed at her.

‘Send those two maggots away,’ Tamari said, motioning towards

Gundiguts and Benny. Fabian had not expected that response, as he froze and furrowed his brow.

‘Oh, come on, Cortés,’ Gundiguts spoke up, voice rough and bored. ‘Get it o’er wi’. Let’s make ‘er dance th’empen jig, send her to Jones’ locker. ‘Ave done wi’ it.’

Benny’s face grew into a slimy grin as he approached Fabian, eyes on Tamari’s exposed collarbone. ‘Could watch ‘er dangle a bit. Better yet, leave ‘er ‘ere fer a bit. Could ‘ave some real fun wi’ a bushel bubbly like ‘er, Cap’n. Right up in Eve’s—’

Fabian’s sword came within less than an inch of Benny’s face, and he was silenced. Still, Tamari was horrified by the words left unsaid. Fabian didn’t turn to look at Benny, but there was an obvious disgust in his expression. Tamari had spent years with these pirates, and this was what they thought of her? It served them she might be dead soon because if she wasn’t, they would be.

‘Another word an’ I’ll kill you first,’ Fabian growled, eyes still on Tamari. ‘Out, both o’ ye.’

Benny grumbled but obeyed. Tamari resisted the urge to grab Fabian’s sword and gouge Benny’s eyes out with it. She knew it was best to focus on keeping her own life right now, but the thought was tempting.

‘Next time I see him, I’m gonna stick that sugar stick right up his dungbie,’ Tamari muttered, earning a half-amused smile from Fabian. A blink later and he’d hidden it away. *How frustrating.*

Tamari hesitated before crouching by Joe. ‘Ye alright?’ She asked, receiving a nod in response. The interaction didn’t seem to aid Fabian’s mood, but he also didn’t kill them on the spot, which Tamari supposed was something. She helped Joe onto her bed, which seemed to gnaw at Fabian’s patience.

‘Speak,’ Fabian said, clearly bothered by Joe’s new seat. ‘Now.’

He was still gripping his sword at his side, but that was better than against Tamari's throat.

'Oh, put that down. Yer not gonna kill me.'

Fabian raised a brow, eyes narrowing. 'Don't be so sure about' that yet.'

Tamari wandered over to Fabian's chest of drawers and tugged on a pair of trousers. Her belt was across the room – past Fabian and his sword – so she opted for one of his. It didn't matter to her if they were a bit loose.

'I'm sorry fer this whole confusion. I can't imagine it's good to think I'm bedding another man,' she began, taking a shot in the semi-dark. His silence told her she'd been right. 'I mean, if I thought that about you, I wouldn't've woken you up before I castrated ye. Almost did it once in Port Royal, now I'm thinkin' about it.' Another smile from Fabian; this time it lingered. 'Anyway, I'm close to Joe, but not fer that reason, ye dumb scallywag,' Tamari said, stepping over to him and touching his cheek. Her thumb brushed over a couple of scars before she walked back to Joe. 'Come on. Coat off.'

Joe was looking between the two but shrugged off the coat and hat. Fabian stared for a moment before realisation slid onto his face.

'A woman,' was all he managed to say. His expression seemed to say very little, which Tamari knew to mean he was embarrassed.

'That's right, *Captain*. A woman on yer ship. Been dressin' like this fer years, even before *The William*. Found it easy to relate to once she told me.'

Most of Fabian's crew knew Tamari was a woman – she'd given up caring years ago, when she'd learned to gut anyone who doubted her or called her bad luck – but it wasn't always like that, and she knew it was easier to hide it when needed.

‘Name’s Josephine,’ Joe said gruffly. ‘Figured there was more loot goin’ on account; didn’ need the hassle of bein’ a woman. You got a problem with that, Cortés?’

He still looked a bit dumbfounded but shook his head. ‘Those bilge-suckers out there might, though.’

Joe gave him a suspicious look. ‘Not if ye don’ tell ‘em.’

‘Either that or they come after Tam fer bein’ close t’ye. And I give more of a damn ‘bout that than you.’

Tamari perched on Fabian’s desk while the two bickered. She watched the interaction like a play, picking up an apple and crunching down, amused.

‘Then don’ tell ‘em an’ drop me off at next port. Simple enough.’

‘I’m sure that’s not necessary, Joe,’ Tamari piped up, tugging the stalk of her apple and flicking it onto the desk. Joe and Fabian turned to her, one with a raised brow and the other looking frustrated. A smile tugged the corners of Tamari’s lips.

‘What else you suggestin’ I do? If he goes an’ tells everyone—’

‘He won’t.’ Fabian stepped forward, but Tamari continued. ‘Look, I’ve dealt wi’ this lot fer years already. So long as *somebody* stops tryin’ ta kill me in my sleep, I can handle those lot easy. They try anythin’, and I can deal wi’ them in my own way.’

Joe didn’t seem bothered by either option. Tamari knew she’d gone between crews enough to be used to it, but her motives were entirely selfish. As much as she could handle Fabian’s crew, it was nice having someone share her experiences. And she was hoping she could help Joe find somewhere she could stick with, too.

Fabian analysed Tamari’s face for a moment before sighing. ‘Fine wi’ me. I won’t tell anyone so long as Tam’s okay. Anyone comes fer her though an’ I’ll—’

Joe snorted out a laugh. ‘Kill me? Aye, got it.’ After a pause, she shrugged and shirked on her jacket. ‘Works fer me, I guess. Yer head they’re after, anyway.’ Tamari raised a brow and bit down on her apple again, shrugging one shoulder. She wasn’t wrong. ‘Anyone needs me, I’ll be by the rum.’

Without another word, she tugged on her hat and left. Fabian looked a bit confused and a lot irritated, but he didn’t try to follow her out and debate it further. Instead, he dropped his sword onto the bed before striding over to Tamari.

‘How d’ye manage ta be friends wi’ that?’

Tamari smiled, giving her apple another bite. ‘Well, first off, I didn’t start with death threats an’ accusations.’

Fabian had the decency to look somewhat ashamed. ‘What’d ye expect me to think? Yer a pirate first and foremost.’

‘So are you.’

Fabian cupped her chin with a calloused hand, swiping away a drop of blood with a frown. ‘I’m sure there’s room fer ye above all that. Just a bit, mind ye.’

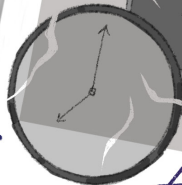
Tamari tilted her head, grinning. ‘Better.’

‘Pologies fer threatenin’ to kill ye. Any ideas for how I can make it up?’

Tamari threw her apple in the general direction of his rubbish sack. ‘Hm, maybe one or two,’ she said, and tugged him down to kiss her.

About the Author

Sarah Wilson is a Yorkshire-born writer with a focus on fantasy and historical writing. She studies Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln and is a published finalist in the 2020 *Wicked Young Writer's Award*. In her spare time, she is either sketching or learning how to sew.



A love Sworn
by the Moon



Rebel,
Rebel

Shallow
Minds



Carriage
B



For
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