

the
london
short story prize
anthology
2019

judith wilson
isha karki
caroline rae
cg menon
laurane marchive
jay barnett
deirdre shanahan
joseph regan
hana riaz
s. bhattacharya-woodward
gary budden
jessie williams



**SPREAD
THE WORD**

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Anthology **2019**

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THE LONDON SHORT STORY PRIZE ANTHOLOGY 2019

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FROM SPREAD THE WORD

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To everyone who entered the Prize – we're grateful that you shared your story with us.

And finally, to Spread the Word's supporters and those who are about to read twelve tremendous short stories – we are really appreciative and we hope you enjoy this collection. It was a joy to put it together.

FROM THE WRITERS

Thank you Anthony, Cicely and Felix for your boundless – and much appreciated – enthusiasm, and for all our wonderful walks along the beach.

Judith Wilson

For Keith – who told me to do something with this.

Caroline Rae

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Laurane Marchive

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S. Bhattacharya-Woodward

Foreword

2019 marked my third year of editing *The London Short Story Prize Anthology* and this time I had the additional privilege of managing the Prize. I'm proud to share that we received our highest ever number of submissions: 574 short stories were entered into the competition. Furthermore, for the first time ever, all 50 free entries that we annually offer to writers on a low-income were taken up.

Our team of readers, and judging panel: Eley Williams, Rowan Hisayo Buchanan and Charlotte Seymour have found the best twelve stories, including the winning entry – Judith Wilson's tremendous *Jacking Sea Fruits in the Dark*. Set on a beach in Cornwall, Judith's story is a lyrical portrayal of a lonely woman's persistent quest for treasure. The judges praised its 'sparkling, poetic lines' and described it as a 'formidable study in control: of voice, atmosphere and tension.' Eley Williams concluded that 'the winning piece is a taut and compelling story that lingers long in the mind.' Indeed, it is a joyous play on language and extraordinary writing.

Highly commended were Isha Karki's *Circus* and Caroline Rae's *flesh-meet*. Isha's story is a dazzling description of when the circus comes to the village told from a child's point of view, whilst *flesh-meet* gloriously experiments with form to narrate a story of adolescent romance. Of the shortlisted stories, CG Menon's *The Sum of Things* is a tender examination

of power, racism and the immigrant experience, Jay Barnett's *Wardrobes* uses clever humour to raise questions about class and opportunities, and Laurane Marchive's *This Shaping* follows a young woman's painful navigation of modern dating and consent amidst Soho's nighthawks.

Topical issues and London's socio-politics are examined across the longlist. S. Bhattacharya-Woodward's *Home* is a realistic portrayal of everyday racism in the city, whilst Jessie Williams's *Good Girl* and Joseph Regan's *Keeping His Eye In* present two very different depictions of mental health and millennial rage. Gary Budden's *I Precede Myself* is an exercise in composing psychogeographical fiction to narrate loss and recovery from addiction. The art of writing itself is applied beautifully in Deirdre Shanahan's *Dark Rain Falling*, set in an English seaside town, whilst Hana Riaz's *Love Ocean* is a remarkable homage to the great Olive Senior.

I am constantly astounded by the quality of the writing that the London Short Story Prize discovers, and feel incredibly privileged this year to witness the stories that our citizens want to tell as they move us across continents and inner landscapes. I urge you to look closely – this diverse collection is a microcosm of our modern times and there is so much to see.

ALIYA GULAMANI
Spread the Word
January 2020

'Jacking Sea Fruits in the Dark' is a marvellous study of voice, imagery, and the ways in which ambiguity can be used to create narrative momentum. It's all here: a clear sense of place and an evocation of the tangled and inscrutable nature of a person's relationship to their surroundings and even their own actions.

Eley Williams

Two things particularly stood out as we discussed this story. First, the narration. It's a lilting, turning voice, one that is both charming and slightly off-kilter. The voice summons up our protagonist so perfectly via word choice and sentence length. Second, the twist ending. They're hard to pull off. Done wrong and they can make a reader feel toyed with. But done well and the reader's eyes dart up the page to reread and re-understand. It seemed that was what we had each done.

Rowan Hisayo Buchanan

This was an unsettling and darkly funny story, carried above all by the voice of its narrator – loner, voyeur, magpie-like collector, trickster, and what else, we're never quite sure...

Charlotte Seymour

Jacking Sea Fruits in the Dark

by Judith Wilson

After the earthquake, I came regularly.

I took it as a sign: that significant tremble beneath my left boot, prehistoric mud-caked. I said out loud: 'What on earth happened there?'

(Turns out – my worry had literal roots.)

The earth moved.

South Wales was the epicentre. I felt the quake here too.

'Must be a special place', I told myself. 'Treasures to be found.'

Seaside and inky sky, midpoint on the shortest night,
I proved myself right.

At the start of my coastal sojourn, back then, I rarely saw folks. I moved south late February: the spring lunations were reassuringly quiet. This is wild seascape; roughed-up tides and shingle, elements I appreciate. I only meet dog-walkers. 'No Swimming' advised, people have drowned on this beach.

They're quite a tribe, flat caps and beanie hats, assignments rife.

I spy their guilt. They don't know I'm looking but I am.

'Find your own tribe' the do-gooders told me at school and later at the Centre.

So I did. I've whittled out the dross.

Only me left.

From the get-go, I visited the beach regularly for pebbles and sea-glass. I'd forage for my pleasure and pick the choicest items. I eschew Day-Glo shopping bags, prefer the elegance of pellucid: the sandwich variety, clinical for cataloguing.

April, May, then June arrived. Scorching weather.

More people came and then too many.

Littering the beach. *Literally*.

Now I beachcomb in the dark.

A sharp beam and nimble fingers, it's all I need.

After I plumped for nightshifts, I treated myself to a head torch, B&Q's best. It shoots light to tricky corners, features optional LEDs. Truth be told, I don't look my best when it's strapped on tight.

(The cracked mirror in my workshop offers a diffident reflection.)

Yet here in the briny dark, ozone in my lungs, feet in flip-flops, I enjoy the salt-splashes as I hopscotch on the shore. Outward appearances cease to matter. And that beam sure hounds out gems and superior specimens – the elevated spine of a pebble, a triangle of blood-glass.

I'm a miner on the earth's surface, jacking sea fruits

in the dark.

At 2am you'd think the coastline empty. It never is.

Once I encountered a jogger, puffing loudly in his Lycra. The acrid BO overpowered the scent of seaweed, a piece of it already clinging to my hand.

Another night: a dog-walker, his staffie rampant off the lead.

(I avoided catching his eye. Best be safe.)

Occasionally I winkle the inevitable couple tucked below those dizzying cliffs.

I hear them before I see them, turn my beam to make them stop.

That golden light delivers a certain power.

(I always have a little chuckle at their *in flagrante delicto*.)

I walk my walk and talk my talk, in the company of my terrific tribe of one. Behind me, the frozen rumble of silver-crested sea.

From home it's three miles to the coast. I'm short-term renting. The place is - if I'm honest - a dive. But the bungalow came with a timber workshop, tucked between willowherb and scrub. Warm June nights I stroll from home to beach at around one o'clock. If it's rainy, I ride my bike (I found it abandoned.) The shock of rainwater drenching my neck is a chilly reminder of the sea, the sea, the sea.

I spy water everywhere, and I like it, I like it, I like it.

Swapping to nights required a change in routine. Now I sleep until eight, breakfast at nine. I channel-surf aplenty, before my precious work begins.

Always take a midnight feast.

I wrap sarnies and homemade flapjacks in silver foil. I enjoy the glitter of it when I'm sat on the beach. By moonlight, the foil adds visual frisson. Another plus, it's handy for wrapping spoils, if I'm out of sandwich bags.

You'd think I'd get lonely.

But there's so much to see and do.

I have one single rule. *Rules are made to be broken.*

No, honestly, I respect it.

I'm aware of the tides. This shingle beach, since you ask – and I *think* I heard you enquiring – stretches two miles. The pebbles slide and topple, twenty-four seven, sugared almonds underfoot. It's treacherous, harsh riptides, the land shelves sharply. So it's important to watch the incoming tide, else you're cut off, nowhere to go.

'*Gotcha!*' I said, the day I understood the mechanics. I nicked a *Tide Times* from the local shop. Rumbled my instant solution to a watery threat.

Now I beach walk backwards – so I'm never caught out.

My beam swoops the steps I've taken, my eyes track the tide.

I play a game of cat and mouse, night after night.

The tide is the cat. I'm the mouse. But I'm sure-footed.

No one ever catches me out.

Guess you're wondering about my ocean cache?

The whys and wherefores of my workshop?

(I wouldn't blame you.)

First I wash my findings with water and white vinegar. Then I sort 'em: sea-glass colours, bulk and size. It's complex! I save this task for dawn, when the newborn light adds sparkle.

It's my first chance to rest following the hustle of my shift.

Have you guessed yet? Want to play Q&A?

I'm a jeweller ...

Ha! That surprised you. You thought I was a weirdo, right?

Oh no! I work solo and I bide my time to pick the best.

Sometimes my brand of beachcombing takes *years*.

I travel the country and my essential kit comes too. I've amassed excellent tools: casts, a soldering iron, a secondhand polisher with interchangeable drums. Real gemstones are too expensive. I tumble sea-glass for my baubles. Afterwards, I rub those nuggets in baby oil. You can keep the strident shades of semi-precious stones.

I prefer iridescent hues – deliciously licked by the waves.

(I make rings. Pendants. Cuffs.)

I also cast driftwood, in nine carat gold, sterling silver and brass. Once I made a freeform ring in a bucket of seawater.

(Just saying ... it looked amaze-balls!)

I'll show you some time.

When I was a child, Mum's jewellery box was a thing of wonder. I'd gingerly lift her strings of beads, juicy-fruit colours, then wind them round my neck. Best of

all I loved her precious metal rings. I piled 'em on in stacks of three. (She had generous hands.)

I've always loved a dash of sparkle.

Tonight it's Summer Solstice. I need to work fast because it's the shortest night. But I'm late and I got flustered earlier – no honey-glazed ham at the Spar! My orange-crate table lay in smithereens.

After that, I needed a lie-down.

So I've cycled to make up time. It's three in the morning, the best hunting hour. There's no hint of anyone around yet I'm still wary of the tides. The breeze is soft and cool on my bare neck.

Don't worry. I'll walk backwards.

I'm certain I'll find riches tonight.

You know - that feeling in your bones?

I'm only twenty minutes into seeking when I see the treasure. Bingo!

Right away, I claim it as mine.

I'm not joking. This ring is proper gold, I taste it, set with a burning sapphire, diamonds each side. I spied it in my light-beam; the little Siren coaxed me forth.

(I carry a jeweller's loupe to check quality.)

I'm so excited I nearly drop my plastic bag. I look around, but the beach is deserted. No one wants this prize, right? *It's mine.* By the time the sun peaks high, this diminutive circle would've plunged on the seabed, cheek-by-jowl with diamonds and pearls. (On this beach, earlier this year, divers found a shipwreck.)

After this find, there's no point continuing. I squat to munch my cheddar sandwich, though I only eat half. I

toss the rest, discarded foil squeaking shingle.

I realise that I'm shaking.

I'm still trembling as I cycle home, mint green fuzzing the edges of the aurora clouds. Hands mark the church tower clock: 4am. I want to be alone, lay my treasure on the workbench. Scrutinize it again. Touch it.

If I had a tribe of two, I'd brew a cuppa and *share*.

Never mind.

Instead, it's just the one black tea, chipped mug.

It's been a corker of a night.

I haven't ventured out since. Four days have passed. I've slept through every second of these sweaty sunshine hours. The triumph of my discovery has knocked me back; I've peaked. Everything else, I muse, as I roll the circle of gold back and forth, back and forth, has been a precursor to this event.

The gaudy sea-glass, those silky chunks of stone, they're trivia.

Not the *real deal*. I should know.

That box of Mum's jewellery, the one I loved?

I trawled it round the children's homes, stashed it beneath my bed. Hidden from prying eyes. It was all I had left after Mum passed.

Passed. Silly term. Passed to where? Passed to a better place, they said.

No, if you're listening. Mum died! I'm over it, OK? Fact.

But this one social worker said, looking down her aquiline nose:

'It's junk. Not even worth a car boot sale. Chuck it.'

So I took it out next time. Upturned it.

Watched Mum's possessions slither down the drain.
Sometimes when I am treasure seeking, I'm doing it
with Mum.

A week later, I've got cabin fever, 'workshop fever' to be
correct. That humdinger of a ring is making me anxious.
I can't look at it in sunshine: it's too gaudy, creeps me
out.

Also, I've not eaten in days.

I'm one hundred percent night bird now. Can't go
out in daylight.

But tonight I've an irrepressible urge to return to that
beach. So I scoot to the coast astride my bike, three in
the morning, diaphanous sky.

I wasn't expecting those broad floodlights sweeping
the shingle.

My beach – it's littered with men.

I halt at the brow of the hill, lift my binoculars. There's
no moon and the nimbostratus huddle.

In those police-car beams, pebbles wobble, cham-
pagne diamonds underfoot.

I spy with my little eye – twenty figures, backs
turned, walking by the sea.

Has word got out? X marks the spot for treasure
seekers' booty?

Leave me alone guys!

My mouth drains dry.

It's obvious they're hunting for clues.

I adjust the focus of my binoculars – zoom in.

One policeman grips something tight.

I can't lipread and his words are drowned by the
waves. I see the glitter of foil, though, the leftovers

of my sandwich. A second officer drops the lot into a plastic bag – a clear one - just like mine.

As one, the coppers turn and reverse, as if engaged in an elegant Elizabethan Pavanne. They're beach walking backwards.

Are they keeping their eyes on the tides? Playing cat and mouse, just like me?

No. Something else has captured everyone's attention.

Somebody else, rather.

But she doesn't concern me.

I mount my bike. No one sees.

I pedal off –

I pedal –

I –

The reader is drawn into the world of the short story and its private, whirling mythologies, unpicking the dynamics of power and language itself.

Eley Williams

The narration slowly builds to an ending that feels like a punch in the chest in the very best way.

Rowan Hisayo Buchanan

'Circus' was original in using a vignette structure and plural narrator to pull us into a world of collective wonder, joy, hunger and fear where memory, like language, is slippery and changeable.

Charlotte Seymour

Circus

by Isha Karki

That summer the circus came to our village. *Cirrrcussss*, we said, rolling and hissing when Hari dai taught us the word. Years later, when we tried to remember what happened, What Exactly Happened, memories overlapped, like how the same thing had two or more names where we lived, borrowed from That Side and This Side. Mato and mitti for mud, where mothers and fathers, knee-deep, spent days coaxing things buried too deep. Bhok and bhuk for the ache in our bellies. Some words were the same: khel for play, jadu for magic, and chhi – the sound mandirwalas made when they saw us.

That summer, we drowsed under the ghaam plotting what to eat.

This is what we ate:

1. Sani's Auntie's Sharifa

Sani's auntie had bought sharifa seeds at This Side-market. We squatted barefoot, slapping away mosquitoes, pretending to help with the planting but really marking every seed with hawk-eyes. We imagined its fruit: Sani said it would be like nariwal, hard-shelled and covered in hair, which was stupid because nariwals grew near the sky. We returned

every week, but nothing sprouted, so we went back to chasing chickens and running after bulls. We lobbed dried gobar at each other. When lumps of it broke against our heads, its wet centre glooped on our hair and we shrieked. The stink clung for days. Sometimes, our mothers dunked our heads in water till our arms flailed but often our tap, behind the huts, was cracked and empty.

Months later, Sani overheard her auntie talking about selling the sharifa. We'd become long-limbed waiting for it; even Lure, with his matchstick arms and legs that dragged, managed to grow quicker.

That night, we crept into auntie's patch and took two. Sani plucked them, so it wasn't really stealing. The fruit had green skin, scaly like the crocodiles we'd heard about. We hid them away in the hollow of our tree secretly convinced inside them we'd find teeth.

The morning after, we sat on branches, creamy pulp spilling into our hands. Bark scratched our bottoms but we didn't care. The crocodile-fruit was sweet! We discovered a crowd of seeds within and spat them out, one by one. If someone came upon us, they'd mistake us for janawars shitting pellets that glistened beetle-black.

So when Hari dai emerged from behind the trees saying, *Are you goats or children?* we just clapped our hands, knowing we could sometimes magic things up.

Goats, we chorused. Bakhra! Bakri!

What're you eating, little goats?

Mato-mitti!

He wagged a finger at us, seeing the white smeared around our mouths, then asked, *Have you heard the circus is here?*

A new word! We danced and hugged branches.
What's a cirrrcusss? Who's a cirrrcusss? When's a cirrrcusss?

Except because Hari dai had a lisp, we spat everywhere whilst saying *thirrrcuth*.

Hari dai glanced around before leaning in. He then described the huge tents, and we shouted because we'd seen them pop up overnight behind the mandir. He described swinging monkeys, leaping tigers, lithe bodies walking on rope, balls of fire, clowns with white faces –

We ate up his words. We didn't know what every word meant but colours flashed in our minds.

Before Hari dai left, he said, *Did I see you yesterday with a large football?*

No, we said immediately.

Did I see you yesterday breaking a marble the size of this earth?

No. We screamed and fell about laughing.

2. Hari Dai's Ice Sticks and Coconut

Hari dai was our favourite. He was old but not too old. When we pestered him for stories, he wiped the sweat from his brows and beckoned us close. He smelled like raw onion and his shirt collar was black with dirt. He used to push a tin cart that rattled when its wheels went over stones.

At noon, when we'd find shade and dream of hui rubbed on our dusty brown bodies, Hari dai would trundle along with his cart. We'd heard hui melted the moment you touched it, but we knew if we had some, we'd hold it with such care, it would never yearn for water the way we did. There wasn't much cold here, between jungle and more jungle from where the smell

of plastic burned by This Side and That Side crept into our throats at night.

Hari dai came even when the jhingas, the makkhis, perched on our noses, too hot to fly. We'd hear the tell-tale clatter of the cart and knew it meant ice sticks for us. The milk ones were almost always gone. If there was one left, we'd pass it around, slurping, feeling the indent of each other's tongues. We pressed our numb mouths on each other's skin and yelped. If anyone caught sight of us, they chhi-chhi-ed and spat, but not Hari dai. Not even when we licked sugary water dripping down each other's elbows. If there were no milk ones, Hari dai let us choose from red, blue and green sticks that turned our lips into parrot feathers. We squawked and flapped our wings, pulling at each other's tongues to inspect whose was the reddest, bluest, greenest. Hari dai didn't chhi even then because he knew it wasn't strange to touch parts of bodies that were not your own.

One time, after his cart was broken by the Village Edge Boys, Hari dai brought us a nariwal. We put our hands on its coarse shell and shook it to hear the slosh of ocean inside. Hari dai told us the whole world was inside a nariwal once. We imagined ourselves small, smaller than a speck of dirt, safe inside a white-fleshed cocoon.

Now, we remembered the gift of the coconut and felt bad about the sharifa. As if he heard our thoughts, Hari dai said, *You better save me some next time.*

Yes sir, we chorused and grinned.

He walked off singing.

We wondered what he did now without his cart.

One night, we'd been sneaking behind the temple

trying to get some laddus, when we saw a mandirwala looming over Hari dai. Like us, Hari dai wasn't supposed to touch things, especially temple things. We thought Hari dai was too old for beatings but the mandirwala was holding a lathi. We stared wide-eyed. The dark felt heavy on our shoulders. Plumes of dhoop stung our noses. The mandirwala made Hari dai take his pants off. We winced knowing how much more the lathi hurt on bare skin. But then the mandirwala reached down with his hands and—

We ran off. Later, Lure said, *Which old man hurt our Hari dai? Let's thrash him.*

But we were unable to remember, as if the face had vanished from our minds.

3. Tarbuja from Neighbours

Two days before, we'd stolen a tarbuja so huge, we had to roll it all the way to our tree. We thought our secret mission had been successful until Hari dai brought it up. Who else had spied us? We'd left at dawn, tracked our way to a neighbouring village where we'd heard there was a pit of watermelons. By the time we freed one, it was almost dark. The village dogs followed us halfway back, but whined when they got to the boundary of their home; we said goodbye under moonlight and promised to visit them again.

The next morning, we pushed the watermelon off a ridge. It fell and smashed open. Chunks of red fruit burst out and we scrambled down to gather the good stuff. Hands and knees on the ground, we pretended we were wild dogs, howling and tearing into the flesh of prey. The juice dribbling down our chins like sweet blood. We snuck glances at Pari, turned our faces

quickly when she looked up.

Naagin: a snake who is a woman or a woman who is a snake.

When Pari was little, she sunk her teeth into a boy's wrist. The boy cried and cried, then foamed at the mouth and turned dusky blue. Pari's canines, pearlescent and siyo-sharp, were the first to emerge. They poked her lower lip. When her milk teeth fell out – when they were pulled out with pliers – her father stored them inside a box and put it inside a cupboard. The lock was made of metal so cheap anyone could've twisted it off. So, one day, we waited until her father was out, slid into their hut with its smell of curdled milk, and took out the box. We shook it with excitement, but there was no rattle. We were too late.

That day, Pari's father came back with hens tucked under his armpits and seeds he buried in the matomitti. There were always fresh hot eggs at Pari's house from then – but those seeds never sprouted.

4. The Next Best Thing

When our stomachs were filled with tarbuja, we'd made our way to the stream. We'd heard splashing and grinned at each other. After food, this was our Next Best Thing (we'd decided one day, sitting around, listing all Our Best Things).

We heard clothes thrashed against rocks. Large bodies wading into water. The scent of crumbly soap. The sight of women, petticoats tied over their breasts, breaking the surface. We liked looking at Renu didi and Krishna kaki the best. Their skin dimpled and creased as they moved, their bodies ample in a way we could only dream of, our own were hard planes, jutting bones,

and always-swollen bellies.

We watched them scrubbing each other's backs with stones. Sniffing armpits and laughing. Holding their breath underwater like children. We imagined them pulling us into their pillowy softness and stroking our brows till our eyes closed.

The thought of such warmth made our eyes prickle. We slunk off without washing our hands.

That summer, this is what we learned about the circus:

a) Hathis Like Pahad

After eating sharifa that day, we didn't bother going to the stream, just licked each other's hands Passably Clean. The old men who sat around the peepal tree smoking and stacking cards chi-chi-ed and spat when they saw us.

Animals.

Our eyes lit up. Hari dai's words about the baadar and the baagh bubbled in our minds, and here the world was telling us We Could Be What We Wanted To Be. So we yipped and screeched and roared.

What are you up to children? It was Krishna kaki, carrying a bundle of clothes wrapped in a petticoat.

We're animals in the Cirrrcusss.

Her pitted face folded with laughter. *When I was a little girl, I saw a hathi the size of a mountain, eyes red. It trampled all the vegetables, crushed the roofs of huts and gobbled up babies. The circuswalas ran after it holding a frayed rope.*

We didn't believe her because the village was scattered with huts and idle-eyed babies. But we did look into the distance, towards the smudge of mountains, and tried

to glimpse elephants in the sky.

b) Thieves and Liars

As we were walking, we smelt freshly cut wood and saw Krishna kaki's husband with an axe. Splinters flew as it thwacked down. One bounced off Lure's head, another scratched Pari's face and another – Sani clutched her eyes and howled. Unscathed, I inched closer and mentioned the circus. Kaka glared as his hands swung. His greasy hair stuck up everywhere.

Children have no business going to that filthy circus. We were surprised because usually he ignored us and he'd never called us children before either. He continued, Thieves and liars, all of them. They'll snatch you squirming things out your huts. Why d'you think there's been no circus for years? We ran them out, that's why.

Veins bulged on Kaka's face as he spoke. We glanced at each other. It was him who'd found out we gave pau to those belayatis. They'd handed us chocolate and Coca-Cola in return; we still remembered the drink spitting and fizzing down our throats. How we burped. We never forgot the belayatis' seto-safed skin turning red as they ate fiery pau and ran to the tap, laughing. We wondered if they had to squat later and let the shit flow in dribbles, like we did when we ripped through sheaves of corn. But they were crossing the border to This Side or That Side, so we never found out, just waved them off merrily.

Our parents thrashed us that evening because someone told on us. Lure's father forced him to eat all the chocolate which we thought wasn't too bad, but Lure had stomach aches for two days, so maybe it was.

We left without saying anything more to Kaka. His

chopping got faster so we had to duck and run. Later, we discovered sixteen splinters between us.

c) Snake-women

We came upon Budho ba, grizzled face and back bent, wearing white ganji and lungi. They were so thread-bare; we could see dark shadows bulging underneath.

Budho ba, budho ba, do you know about the Cirrrcuss?

He hawked and spat, then said: *They have giant snakes on stage, and women without any clothes on. They call themselves bhakts of Shiv ji and Bishnu. Such things we have to see, chhi.*

He didn't once glance at Pari, so we steadfastly refused to do so either. He hobbled off and we noticed his phlegm, wobbling where it had landed, a reddish brown colour.

d) Crocodile Dreams

As dusk deepened into night, we repeated the stories we'd heard. Ghosts slunk into our words. Blood dripped from the tusks of pahad-hathis as they stepped on babies – no, they weren't pahads or hathis at all, but crazed people trapped inside wrinkled grey skin.

Inside the huge snakes there was a child, and another, swallowed whole – stolen by the circuswalas whilst asleep.

Goosebumps scattered our bodies.

That night, we dreamed of a creature with karela-like hide, a yawning maw, and shuddered as one. Who told us about the circus pit filled with crocodiles, the rope strung above it? We found ourselves creeping on the floor. We'd never seen a crocodile. Sani said it was better not to know what something looked like, then we could imagine anything and it would always be That Thing –

even if it was Not That Thing.

We were seized with such energy the next day, we played through the scorching midday sun, thoughts of crocodiles evaporating. We'd glimpsed the tip of the red tent again and our minds whirled. Everything became the circus.

These were our inventions:

i) Balls of Fire

Our chungi, a bundle of rubber bands, became balls of fire. We only had one left. One was stolen by Boys Who Hung About at the edge of the village glaring at Boys Who Hung About at the edge of their village. One of the dogs ripped to shreds, elastic snapping their snouts. How they snarled. The other one, well, that morning Lure had the idea of making a *real* ball of fire.

He'd brought matches; he didn't say from where, but we saw the lathi marks fresh on his calves. He struck them against the box.

Ready? His lips split to show broken teeth.

We nodded, eager. Nothing happened for a while. We started moving back, bored, but then the smell snatched us by the throat. We coughed and coughed, feeling like Budho ba. Through a sting of tears, we saw fire licking up the rubber, Lure yelping and dropping the chungi on the ground.

We stared at it, then everyone was peeking at me. I saw my shrunken self recoiling from the smoke. All of us remembered how, after I was born, my mother and father tried to burn the thick coating of hair off my face. The stench of blistered flesh lingered in our hut for weeks, maybe years.

So that's how we were left with one chungi. This

one, we pretended was a ball of fire. We aimed it at each other's heads. Every time it struck, we'd hissss, imagining skin sizzling.

Soon, the smell of another fire made us lift our noses. We followed it, thinking of corn roasting, a gnarled hand holding a fan made of leaves. When we found Rama kaki – sitting just as we dreamed her up – we knew we wouldn't be getting any kernels because she hadn't even roasted her first cob.

For once, our bellies didn't ache with this knowledge, because we saw what was behind her.

ii) Rope Walking

We saw rocks and rubble and coils and coils of wire. The year before – or was it the year before that? – the electricity poles had fallen. The villagers were promised by the Man with The Ticket that someone would come to fix them, but no one ever did.

We scampered over to the heap now. Rama kaki didn't look at us, perhaps worried it would bring bad luck for her business. We unburied the wires with our hands. Sani shrieked, and we rushed over.

Something had pierced her in the exact spot of her scar. Sani was born with index fingers attached to thumbs, just as the images of gods sitting on lotus flowers. How much chingum her mother must've swallowed for that to happen. When word spread, people had prostrated before the solemn baby, brought her offerings, sought her blessing. It all stopped when the mandirwalas called her An Abomination. So, her mother and father sliced her flesh apart. We all remembered – though no one was old enough to – how much it bled and bled.

Now, Sani let her finger drip on the thirsty dust. She was the only one who didn't mind our staring, instead thrusting her hands at us, *Look, the skin's grown again, very soon I'll be a sadhu and you'll have to worship me.*

Because she was injured in combat, we let Sani bark directions at us. We dragged out the wires, looped them around our shoulders and marched back to our copse. When we moved towards the slimmer trunks, Sani scoffed.

So we scrambled up a higher fatter tree and tied the wire tight while Sani shouted, *Make it tighter.* We repeated with the other end, panting, bark scraping our thighs, ants crawling over our arms as Sani told us to *Make it straighter, you gadhas.* We giggled because Sani always did such a good impression of our mothers.

It took a while to get the wire as straight as it had once been on the electricity poles. When it was done, we thought what a *chamatkar* it would be if our effort made lightning strike and power up the cracked bulbs in our huts.

When Sani was satisfied, we climbed down to survey our masterpiece. It looked like the daredevil rope a circuswala would walk, we all agreed.

Our limbs were exhausted so we decided to do our rope walking later and wandered off to steal guavas. Our shit had been too runny and we'd discovered that guavas were the alchemical process by which we could produce something firmer.

One of us said, *Do you think they really steal children?*

No, children must run away with them. Think of all the adventures you'd have. You'd get to eat and drink every day, then sleep on something soft.

We imagined leaping through fire, feasting, snuggling into warm flesh, for once admired for our strangeness.

I'm thirsty, one of us said, speaking of the scratchiness at the base of all our throats. Sani shot off, wanting to reward us for a job well done, and we saw her tumbling into thick brush. Lure followed. They returned with their hands full of red flowers. We grabbed a few and sucked the stems, humming as our mouths pooled with syrup. We grabbed another flower then another. After, we wore the flowers in our ears.

Shall we try the ropes? When Lure asked we rolled our eyes, because it was so like him to suggest it during the hottest part of day when we hadn't rested or found any guavas, but we agreed because we were bored and each of us secretly thought we'd be a champion rope walker. We ran back, stones digging into our feet. We fought about which one of us would go first – the first rope walker of our village! – but when we got to the trees, we stopped abruptly.

In the middle of the wire was a knotted bundle, writhing. It took a few seconds to see that it was a snake – or two snakes, maybe even three. A current shot down our spines as if lightning *had* struck and we'd touched a live wire.

We raced off, but something made us turn back. One of the snakes – there were two we saw – fell with a thud. As if it too had been electrocuted, its body straightened at the sight of us, a knotted bundle of children – maybe three, or even four. We'd never seen a snake so rod-like. It made us think of the chungí that the dogs pulled and pulled before the bands snapped painfully against their noses.

After a few moments, the snake slithered off. We didn't wait to see what the other snake would do, and we didn't look at Pari either.

As we were running, one of the women who always made sure to stay two metres away from us, saw the snake and dropped the clay pot on her head in fright. It cracked. Water spilled and splashed our feet. She started shouting that we were cursed, that our wretched bodies should've been drowned at birth.

We ran off.

No one wanted to do rope walking after that.

iii) Circus Tents and Snake Women

After, we wouldn't remember who said it, but there was a chorus of *Let's go*, shining eyes and excited breathing.

We smelt smoke all the way to the tents behind the temple. We saw the huge red one and the squat green ones through a film of dusk. Everything was giant-sized. The shadows of the tents swallowed us before we even got to the compound.

When we tiptoed in, a swarm of machhad surrounded us. We clamped hands over our mouths to stop our shrieks. A few zoomed into Lure's mouth because he was too slow, and we stifled our laughter. Tears leaked out of Sani's eyes; she was red with the effort of holding everything in.

We finally stepped into the arrangement of tents, and it was like we'd entered Some Place Different. The air was cool and thin. The mosquitoes didn't make it through. Instead, a sweet powdery scent hung in the air; a tune floated, reminding us of the time we tasted a cold rasbari.

In this Some Place Different, we wandered in some-

thing of a haze, limbs fluid, mouths in loose smiles. We peeked into tents, unafraid.

Things we thought we saw and heard:

A low growl the shape of a roar. When the tent flap moved – by whose hand? – a glimpse of orange, a flash of something curved and sharp.

A man sat cross-legged, basuri at his lips, fingers moving nimbly over holes. A stream of sound and a sensation of something rising.

A woman, torso bare, something thick draped across her shoulders, slithering down her back. We thought of our own limbs, stretched like dough, twined around our mothers' and fathers' necks, growing heavier.

A shimmer in the air, like a tongue shot out, flickering – then it was gone, all of it, the snake, the woman.

At one point, we realised we were only three sets of feet. How did you not notice when two legs fell off your body? We stared at each other, fear edging into our faces for the first time.

Pari. It turned into a chant deep in our chests. *Pari* was not one for pranks, that was *Lure*. She was the youngest and weakest, breaking skin and bones easily as if they were never made for her body.

Pari, the chant thudded within.

Maybe the circus men got her, someone said. Maybe they've stolen her.

That same current, as when we stared at the two snakes ran through us.

We had to find her.

We went over our steps, our gaits becoming more frantic. We had a sense of time wearing on, but how

long did we search for? Fifteen minutes? An hour?

She was nowhere.

In our panic, we didn't notice we'd stepped into the temple grounds away from the tents, until the air was again thick and swollen, mosquitoes humming around us. Sound came crashing back in. Plumes of incense stung our eyes and nose. We didn't stop to think that we shouldn't be there, that we still had lash scars from the time we'd chased a cat here and the mandirwalas caught us. We hadn't walked for a whole week because our mothers and fathers beat us too, crying that one day they'd wake to see us floating in the stream.

Our feet remembered to tiptoe, as if they knew that the mandirwalas had an ear and nose for things that weren't clean enough. We went around in circles; we couldn't see or hear anything, but we didn't want to leave.

Then, we heard the whimper. The sound was loud in our ears like it had come out of our own mouths, and we knew it was Pari. A cold like we'd never felt before spread from our heads to our toes. We became statues. We were by a window and we knew if we moved we could find her, but we couldn't move.

Another whimper.

Pari needed us. The ice covering us shattered. Our paitalas were suddenly sweaty and we skid on the stone floor, trying to grab each other. We were all off-balance – or was it Pari who was off balance? – and then we were falling forward.

We must've yelped and shouted, but it was as if those Edge of the Village Boys dunked our heads underwater because our ears were muzzy. We became aware of a

figure looming over us.

The circus people! Thieves!

But when we looked, it was a face we'd seen many times at the temple.

From the floor, our arms and legs in a heap, we saw Pari through a door, naked, dark marks smudged on her thighs. Just before the man moved to block our view, we glimpsed the trail of red, winding down her legs.

The next thing we knew, we were walking back to our huts, clutching packets and packets of pau and candies that would turn our tongues into parrot feathers. We didn't know how we got there, or why our teeth were clumped together with sweets. That whole night, we couldn't open our mouths.

Instead, we stared wide-eyed trying to remember what happened.

Years later, this is what we thought:

A) That the circuswalas were thieves.

B) That when we looked through the gap of the mandirwala's legs, what fogged our brains was the sight of a girl-child, her bones contorting and writhing. Then, the thud of a scaled body as it fell to the floor in coils.

C) That Pari was never in that room. That we magicked her up because we wanted her to be there so badly. Because if it was her, surely she'd have turned to us, but she never did.

We couldn't speak of that night. Our memories were thick with smoke. Every time we smelt incense, our stomachs churned. Some nights we weren't even sure who it was. Pari? Sani? Lure? Me? We felt, at once, that it had happened to each of us and that we'd never know

What Exactly Happened.

When we asked our mothers and fathers, Krishna kaki and Renu didi, Budho ba and Rama kaki – even Hari dai – they all stared at us, faces blank, as if they didn't know who we were talking about, as if Pari had never existed at all.

We only knew one thing with surety: we never saw the circus or Pari ever again.

A love story for the ages, drawing upon a Burgess-esque 'horrorshow' vision of glimpseable future London and its possibilities. An ambitious and impressive piece of fiction.

Eley Williams

Refreshing setting and voice-it feels like a mash-up between Romeo and Juliet and Clockwork Orange.

Rowan Hisayo Buchanan

A more traditional story – a Romeo & Juliet of the technological era - with wonderfully innovative language, a dialect that juxtaposed registers old and new, high and low.

Charlotte Seymour

flesh-meet

by Caroline Rae

They had love-lined for a week and now Rad hearted to level-up. To have a meet – a full-on flesh-meet. After 10 days you ticked to level-up or crossed to trash. Yesday they had interfessed good vibes so with 3 days to go he be pure positive twas ripe time.

After task-school Rad speeded off kwik-kwik and dint hang. Pacing thru the gates he cud hear tother lads lolling and jesting. But he dint re-loll and dint re-jest tho twas sore tempting.

‘RAD BE LOVE-LINING! RAD BE LOVE-LINING!’ they loud-verballed.

His mates be spring-greens and dint brain bout love. They only hanged and played footy. When they spyed gels they be cocksure but they dint chinwag ni patter. Since the fresh task-school year kick-off Rad had feeled a self-change what he cudnt share wiff they. Neven Jonxi.

1 hr post at home Rad guised he dint hear his bio-mum when she quizzed and re-quizzed him re task-school tasks. She be foreva quizzing him re suchlike matters jus when he feeled weary and only hearted to line.

‘Have plenty-plenty tasks’ he lo-verballed.

Twas crappy bout guising his mum but he plus hearted to line and he goed kwik-kwik to his bedspace. Straightways he eyeballed his adapple in the mirror and clocked fresh facefluff – he be lad-man changing fo sure.

Rad feeled painful inner bang-bangs but he lined and then signalled that he hearted to level-up. And to be true he signalled in real-pix.

2 secs and blank. 5 secs and still blank. Then blank blank blank.

Be she jesting? Be she now hanging and lolling re him? Gels be foreva larking tog re suchlike fings. Then 10 secs post and she ticked! Now he feeled the joy flooding and plenty inner bang-bangs – she 2 hearted to have a flesh-meet. Truly Rad feeled so jumpup he plus hearted to loud-verball ‘YES!’ But he finked maybe his younger full-sis Flower be hearwigging at the door.

But nex fing he clocked she did tick but not re-signall in real-pix. It dint add. Fo y dint she mirror him?

At supper twas super diff to chinwag cos they all be worming him re love-lining – not jus his mum.

‘Why dint Rad have the flesh-meet here?’ Flower sly-verballed.

His mum and home-dad inter-grinned like twas a major loll-beat. But he blanked Flower.

‘I be well nacked and gonna bedspace’ he verballed.

‘Ha ha! Rad hearts to love-line!’

‘Dint be silly-billy Flower – 1 day twill be yer turn! Leave Rad lone’ re-verballed his mum but she be still grinning.

Tho Flower be a mighty butt-pain his mum never

harshed her. Mine-you his sis be only 10 yrs so he dint normly give monkeys. But twas vexing to hear her bating and jibing re his love-lining.

In bed Rad cud sift the love-line history in pax. Pre date 1 they had ticked 1 on 1. Granted she dint self-name but ni did he. He had quizzed some elderlads at task-school and they all verballed twas plus kool to mask.

At work-school Rads class be processing the Romeo-Juliet saga so then he brained to mask as *Romeo* – R be fo Romeo and fo Rad so twas smart. Then kwik-kwik she had masked as *Juliet* and re-signalled *Hope we gonna have plus luck than they!* Twas a good loll-beat – she be smart-smart.

Then when they had inter-changed personals they match-made 94% wiff a gap of 4 shades and 2 geo-bands. She be plus SE and plus dark than him – much-like his fav porngels. And Juliet hearted to eyeball sky-larking and footy – twas mazing. Bess-all her showpix be v pleasing. Rad brained all gels show-pix be pleasing but hers be vv pleasing! Her eyes be earfbrown, her kisser be red-rose and her mane be... her mane be earf-brown. He musted process plus colors re love-verballing but evryfing signalled go-go-go!

In the blackout Rad cudint shluff. He floated porn but it dint take – stead he feeled maxi sad. He inner-sinked and plus inner-sinked. Be *Juliet* fo real? Then fo y dint she re-signall in real-pix? Twas fo sure some kinda loll. Finely at 3 some dreams dropped in.

At brekky his mum wormed him and fussed him.

'U looky-like well nacked. Did u shluff? U must eat somefing – some porridge wiff hun-sweetner?'

Rad inner-hearted to fess evryfing to his mum – truly he kraved to mum-twine. But when he efforted to verball his words self-deleted. He feeled a lump in his gorge and outtablue he hearted to tear.

'LEAVE ME LONE!' he loud-verballed.

Kwik-kwik his mum exited the table. She guised she be searching milk in the fridge but he cud hear her wiffles. His mum be soft and foreva wiffled when they be crossing.

Then 5 secs post and his home-dad Porsche entered the famlyspace.

'U MAKE MUM-TROUBLE AND U NOT GONNA GET DOLLAR FO LOVELINING – STEAD U UNDER-LINED GONNA GET 24/7 ME-TIME IN YER BED-SPACE!' Porsche loud-verballed.

Porsche be mighty big (truly he ported plus big flesh-hears loll) and he hearted to lash when he be burning-up. 1 time Rad dicked him cos he skreeched at Flower when she smashdropped a glasso-water. Later Porsche had fwacked his butt overnover wiff his belt when his mum be tasking. Truly Porsche be a bastard.

Rad exited and slammed the door behind. He inner-brained he be in ado-mode but wiff Porsche he always feeled he must action so.

And still he be vexing fo y *Juliet* dint re-signall in real-pix.

'RAD! RAD!'

Rad be back-sifting re Porsche lashing his butt so he dint clock what be loudverballing. Then he feeled a pain

in his side and clocked twas his mate Jon what be sharp lbowing him.

‘Tis yer turn’ Jonxi lo-verballed.

‘RAD PLEASE SWITCH ON!’

Twas Mister Savage (aka Eng schooler and mighty sadist) what be loudverballing. Rad be at taskschool and sitting in classspace. Now Jonxi lbowed him a coupla times plus. Jonxi be sometimes 2 a mighty sadist.

‘FANK U V MUCH JONXI. I FINK RAD BE NOW WIFF WE’ loud-verballed Mister Savage. ‘NICEY LOUD RAD. WE ALL HEART TO HEAR.’

‘Romeo and his mates...’

‘Romeo Romeo...’ some1 lo-verballed.

What lad brained he had masked as *Romeo*? Twas only Jonxi what brained it.

‘... are vited to...’

‘Romeo Romeo. I love Romeo...’ some1other lo-verballed.

‘SWITCH ON PLEASE RAD. KWIK-KWIK. U CAN DREAM-DROP IN YER BEDSPACE. OR U CAN VERBALL IT TO WE ALL.’

Rad feeled red-rose on his face. Mister Savage be savage underlined – he hearted foreva to shrink.

‘...are vited to Capulets home and Romeo clocks Juliet...’

Now plenty lads lolled and lolled like twas the plus funny fing on earf. And then he eyeballed Jonxi lolling – he looky-liked he be gonna self-piss.

Jonxi! Twas fo sure Jonxi! Rad had floated love-lining when he be in Jonxis home and they be hanging. Twas the day post Rads 12 yrs bday and Jonxi be well vexed cus he be still 11 yrs and spring-green.

Rad and Jonxi be toddle-mates fro the time they mums friended-up in a fresh mums circle. They famlys habited an identikit bloc in Tottham. So Rad and Jonxi be tog fro babycare thru to lads task-school and they biodads be drink-mates till Rads bio-dad scored a fresh woman and exited. Then Porsche be his home-dad and Porsche dint drink cos he gym pumped most nites. Jonxi be Rads bessmate but now he be hidin his kisser like he be a crim.

Pre task-school Rad had finked to verball wiff Jonxi re *Juliet* and evryfing but now he change-brained. Truly Jonxi be like Flower and jus a kid.

Mister Savage must brain evryfing re his love-lining. Fo sure evry1 in the universe and ousside universe brained evryfing re his love-lining. Not jus on earf.

Post famly supper asper-usual Rad lined and signalled. But now she nored him and dint re-signall. Again he inner-sinked.

Then sudden he clocked a tinsy-tiny flesh-meet notation what be sparking on-off. And he processed her words.

Maxi Tweens Dancehall in Hamsted be a fav tweens nite-spot and 1 time Rad had efforted to enter wiff Jonxi but cos they be 11 they ported fakey eyeball covers what the bounceman clocked straightways. 'FINK I BE BORNED YESDAY?' He dint pass they needlesay.

So now twas hyper exciting to speed fro the tram station and up the hill track braining fo sure 2 fings. 1 he be gonna enter Maxi Tweens Dancehall and 2 he be gonna have a fleshmeet.

Rads brain be buzz-buzzing wiff 1 and 2 when sudden he clocked Porsche on tother side of the track – he be also pacing up the hill. Twas super crowded and Rad cud only spy the back of him but he cud nize his big bonce anywhere cos outtabout Porsche foreva tied his mane in a hi ponytail wiff a ribbon. Today the ribbon be gum-pink and sheeny like somefing what a fash-man might heart to sport. Porsche be super hard and mach but also finked he be kool and modish. Rads mum be foreva yakkin wiff her mates that they rated fellas what sported suchlike fings but truly Porsche be a mighty eejit wiff his dressing. And he speeded like a weirdo – wiff his big legs bouncing on the track and his lbows flying hi he looky-liked like saga superman-hero Overlord Krakak.

Now all Rad cud fink be fo y Porsche be speeding up Ross Hill when he be normly at the Tottham gym. Rad sticked his eyes on Porches bonce going up and down and he paced fasser and fasser. The flesh-meet be in 15 mins and he dint heart to be tardy but he cudint process Porsches game. Then outtablue Porsche swived off rightwards down a diff track.

Rad halted and eyeballed Porsche now pacing to a row of rezes which be in the Net Age style and made fro grey crete. Porsche fingered somefing on the tinsy-tiny door what came up to his chin. 2 secs post he bended down and be sucked in.

Kwik-kwik Rad inprinted the rez id. He sore hearted to sniff-out what his home-dad be scheming but he plus hearted to have the flesh-meet. So twas all he cud action fo now.

Maxi Tweens Dancehall be well plus bigger than what Rad innerpixed and the beats be so meganormous he sensed they in his corps fro the top of his bonce to the finish of his toes. Twas mighty weirdo!

Evrywhere be the stink of lads and gels. Up in the circle tweens be verballing and kissing wiff they love-liners and down in the pit they be shaking down and rolling and hi-lo booting. Tho plenty critters be pacing lonesomas and Rad inner-feeled he be a lone critter 2. Fo a coupla secs he floated his mum and Flower and home and supper – they be eating chickslice tonight. Truly he hearted to exit but he inner-verballed he musted be bold. So he floated *Juliet* and then he eyeballed roun and spied a door wiff the neon FRESH FLESHMEETS. And now he feeled mighty inner bangbangs.

Ousside Rad paced and selfed to style his mane. Then he flashed his eyeballs and the door opened. Kwikkwik he entered pre he cud brain-change.

Twas like a diff planet. This space be buddha-full and kwite wiff zero beats – only a kinda tinkletinkle like water plish-plash-ploshing. Kandy-kandles be on lo and twas jammed wiff tweens mingling and searching they love-line dates.

‘What u be?’ Sudden a gel be nose-nose wiff him and eyeballing his face.

‘I be *Romeo*.’ Rad cuddint fink to guise tho she be a critter.

The gel re-verballed. ‘No fanks I be searching Bock.’

Twas hard to brain why she verballed ‘No fanks’ cos Rad dint give her anyfing. But she made a smiley so he mirrored.

Then she lolled and lolled. 'Romeo? Be u fo real?'

Kwik-kwik Rad swived off. Poor Bock – the lad be not gonna be v jumpup when he brained his love-line gel be a critter. But same time Rad inner-shrunked re his *Romeo* mask. Perchance it truly be well sillybilly.

Then he clocked her and he brained straightways twas *Juliet*.

She be sittin lonesomas in a corner and she beent selfing – she jus be sitting and biding. And she dint looky-like all tother tween gels what be porting slut-rags – she be porting oldy-worldy jeans wiff trainers. Her face lookyliked her showpix but truly he cuddint process what she totalled. He jus brained she looky-liked a gel what he cud chinwag wiff.

Rad goed up to her table and she dint guise not to clock him.

'Hi Romeo' she verballed.

They eyes mirrored and twas like they be familiars fro longago.

'Truly my mates put me on as a bday prezzy fo lolls and giggles. I cudint love-line cos u must be at task-school. My bio-mum be a schooler so she learns me evryfing at home. We be processing Shakespeare at the mo and tis fo y I ticked the 1 on 1 box. I rated yer *Romeo* mask cos I be *Juliet* – twas loll! But kwik-kwik I rated u 2.' And so Lee chinwagged onanon.

She well hearted to chinwag and he hearted hearing her vocals – they be sweetnersweet and soft. But finely Rad be quizzing her jus so he cud sit and eyeball her face. Her face... twas a wondrous fing. She dint port slap jus only grassgreen sparkle on her eyelids so when she

blinked twas like 2 jewels. And in the flesh her kisser be plus sheeny and redrose than in her showpix.

‘MAXI TWEENS BE CLOSIN IN 5 MINS. PLEASE EXIT KWIK-KWIK AND BE HUSHFUL. MEMBER OUSSIDE TIS THE BLACKOUT AND PEEPS BE SCHLUFFING! FANK U ALL FO COMING. TILL NEX TIME...’

All the kandy-kandles sudden be fullon whiteout and tweens be kissing and twining evrywhere – even the critter cus Bock to be butt-ugly and a critter 2. But Lee be still super pritty and they be still hangin in the identikit corner of the flesh-meet space.

They did chinwag nostop bout this-that and Rad dint 1 time clock the tickantock. He be still jus eyeballing Lee’s face. ‘Can I have another flesh-meet wiff u?’

‘Ok. But I must check wiff my mum – she be well tuff and she dint heart that I date 2 much.’

The tracks be full wiff tweens crowding so they be ambling slo-slo down the hill to the tram station. Oncytwicy they be crushed tog so they arms be touching and for a mo they hands touched 2. Then sudden a lad swived on from the road and shoved Lee so Rad feeled her full corps on his. He took her hand and she dint pull away – she closed her ningers aroun his ningers. Now he feeled like he beed foreva happy and never beed sad.

They held hands nostop to the tram station and till her tram fo Lewsham come. Only minus be Rad finked he might dizzy-out fro inner bangbangs.

Twas plus plus later when he be trammin home to Tottham that he membered Porsche wiff his gum-pink ribbon and his bending down. And how he be sucked

into the longago rez.

Nex day be Sunday so there be no task-school and no Porsche. Rad cud lounge and joyself all what he hearted.

1st fing he lined to verball wiff Lee. And yes! She be lined 2 so they cud chinwag like tother nite. But then she re-verballed she must be kwik-kwik.

‘This morn my mum be harshing me bout time wasting. She kraves fo me to enter Oxbridge or some such uni so I must foreva be tasking.’

Now he be well puzzled to hear such fings cos he dint familiar ni lads ni gels what be scheming fo uni. All that task-school kids be scheming be tasking! Nex year Rad be gonna enter the taskschool top and the year after he be gonna task in putation. Oxbridge? What be scheming fo Oxbridge? Perchance she be jestin wiff him?

But nex fing she be quizzing him re what he hearted to read.

‘U heart the *Leavin Earf* sagas?’

He hadint never heard bout they and he feelled shamed cos truly he only read bout footy and sky-lark-ing.

But she dint make a loll-beat and jus goed on. ‘They be bout a lad and a gel wiffout ni bioparents ni famly so they be sent to habit another planet. Normly I don’t rate si-fi crap re habiting planets what in real life nobody can habit. But *Leavin Earf* be truly bout peeps here on earf. And how evryfing be well fucked.’

Never had Rad heard a tween verballing like this. Tweens normly verballed bout dancehalls and sexing and drugs and alky.

‘Where u braining fo our flesh-meet 2?’ he quizzed.

‘Truly I dint heart they dancehalls filled wiff eejit tweens. Fo y dint we amble to the top of Parley Hill and eyeball all they monster buildings? We cud bring samwitches and a nanky.’

Lee surely be ice-kool like a lone shining star in the blackout. But she 2 be warm as mud earf.

In the eve Porsche came back fro his visitation wiff his bio-kids what habited ousside London way-way-way by the NE Sea Wall. He had shluffed in the home of his ex and now he be tetchy and stressy.

But Rad’s mum quested for famly supper. ‘Tis the only time what we be all tog.’ She be foreva questing for famly supper but often twas plus like *Famly Breakdown* mirage.

Porsche be v tuff bout eating rules and he straight-ways clocked somefing to get riled bout. ‘Sit poker when u be eating. U looky-like a zoo monkey.’

Twas Flower what he zoned-on asper-usual. And this made his mum super plus twitchy so she maxi fussed Porsche. ‘Hunny u fink the soup musts plus salt? Be it hot nuff? Heart u a glassso-beer?’

Rad dint rate how his mum actioned re Porsche. She be foreva harping bout how Porsche had joyed 0 vantages and be an alky fro an ado till 25 yrs. Then he be in the program at Tottham Central where she be tasking and she had helped him score a putation job. Rad finked she dint plus musted to habit wiff him but twas like his mum. She be soft wiff his biodad 2. Truly she be like an egg wiffout a shell and Porsche had habited wiff they fo 6 mths – 6 mths 2 long.

But now Rad brained somefing secret bout Porsche and he rolled it roun and roun in his bonce like twas a rare glass marble. Perchance the secret be somefing super bad? The rez cudint be a drug-shack cus Porsche be rip-fit and still in the program – it musted be somefing re extra bio-kids or some suchlike.

Normly the plus his mum fussed him the plus Porche be harsh. So when he spyed Flower sticking her ninger in the soup to feel wevver twas drinking-hot outtablue he fist-slammed the table. Krash!

‘U be well gusting! Fo y be u putting yer filfy ninger in the pot?’ Porsche be yelling and spitting like a sick road-cat wiff his eyeballs all sticky-out and his kisser dripping wiff goo.

‘I wash-wiped my hans pre supper’ re-verballed Flower straightways.

Now there be silence. Rad cudint credit Flower had made Porsche-trouble. He finked she be super bold but he be hyper fearful. And he inner-brained his mum be feeling the identikit fing cos her face goed to hi-lert like a squirrel what clocks a zapper.

Fwack! Porsche slapped Flower on the back of her bonce. Fwack! He re-slapped. Twas like her bonce be a gym-ball what he hearted to pump. Fwack! Fwack! Fwack! Then kwite.

Nex fing Flower be sobbing. Kwik-kwik his mum leaped to twine her squeezezytite. ‘Ssh... Ssh... Sokay my baby sokay... Porsche jus be weary and vexed – he dint fink.’

But Porsche jus sat and sucked his soup.

‘U be a maxi wanker! Fo y dint u fuckoff and leave we lone?’

And now twas like Rad what be the badun.

‘RAD DINT U DICK PORSCHE! GO TO YER BED-SPACE NOW-NOW! AND LOCK IN THERE TILL THE MORN!’ his mum skreeched.

In his bedspace straightways Rad lined and verballed wiff Lee bout Porsche. He be so irefull he cudint sit – he musted to pace roun. But his bedspace be 2 small fo pacing so he goed fro 1 leg to tother overnover.

Kwikkwik Lee be cooking a plan. ‘Nex weekend we be gonna go to the Net Age rez tog and we be gonna guise that we heart to eyeball inner re some task-school task. Perchance we will find somefing so yer mum will be rid re Porsche. Tis ni jus u – I 2 fink he be a mighty wanker.’

Wiff evry word what Lee verballed Rad brained he plus loved her. Now he finked he loved her the identikit sum what he hated Porsche.

All week twas hyper diff to zone-on at task-school. Truly loving be like drugging – twas like somefing be inner him wiff the control panel. Evrytime he strived to process twas jus Lee he finked bout and he sifted overnover wevver she finked bout him likewise. Twas maxi weirdo cus twas plus and minus all mish-mash tog. 1 min he feeled hi-happy and the nex min he feeled super stressy and finked maybe she be gonna inner-change.

Twas vexing at home 2. Cus he had dicked Porsche his mum dint chinwag overly wiff him and he musted eat lonesomas in his bedspace. And Flower dint chinwag cos she feeled sicky and painful in her bonce.

Twas Sat and Rad be waiting at the tram station. Twas the 1st time he had waited fo a gel and when he spy-ed Lee flashing her eyeballs to the gate-man he feeled mighty puffed she be his love-line date.

'Hi!' She be touch-close and cheek-kissed straight-ways. He cud sniff her stink – twas like the hun-sweetner what u put on bread and butter. She ported the identikit jeans re fleshmeet 1 wiff only a slop-top but Lee looky-liked a star showgirl.

'Less go.' She took his han and they shoved thru the crowd till they be on the track. Then they held hans all the way up the hill and they still be holding hans squeezezy-tite when they be ambling to the rez what Porsche entered tother weekend.

Twas Lee what put her ninger on the bell and pressed. The door opened and a woman clocked they upandow. She be maxi porky wiff a bananayello mane what touched her butt and a dress what be so lo u cud eyeball her megateats. And she dint looky-like she be v happy.

2 secs post twas Lee 2 what verballed. 'Hi! I be searching oldy-worldy rezzies what be fashed fro crete like this rez. U fink I cud enter wiff my mate and kwik-kwik take a peek roun?'

'U having a loll or somefing?' She dint re-verball v friendly ni.

'No – we be fo real' re-verballed LEE. 'Tis fo a task-school task. We be processing the Net Age.'

'U can process my arse!' the woman skreeched. And then slammed the door in they faces.

When they be ambling away they cudint quit lolling. Rad took Lees han again. Now he feeled mustard-hot

to hold her han evry time he cud. 'Never-mine' he verballed. 'We efforted and truly u be well bold. I fink she must be a Porsche ex or some such scusting fing.'

Straightways Lee dropped his han. She halted and swived roun so she cud eyeball his face. 'Dint u clock the red kandles behind her? Twas a broffel fo sure. Yer home-dad be sexing wiff a prozz.'

Plenty times had Rad goed to the top of Parley Hill but never had evryfing looky-liked so fresh and wondrous. He be sitting nex to Lee on the nanky on astro what be warm as toast. And they be sitting in kwrite jus eyeballing all the peeps self-joying – oldies driving bout in they tinsy-tiny wheelies and mums pramming and yakking wiff tother mums and dates twining. Plenty elderlads be sky-larking way-way-way off and u cud hear they lolling and wooping.

'The hi City buildings be mazing. I rate to eyeball all they levels.' Lee be foreva the 1st to verbal.

'Me 2. But I dint rate all the rich peeps inner they! So what building be yer plus fav?' And cos she dint re-verball straightways he finked perchance twas a silly-billy q. 'U dint must have a fav needlesay...'

Finely she re-verballed. 'Truly I plus rate The Gherkin. Tis a Net Age building and well diff to find – tis SW under level 4.'

Rad eyeballed up and down but he cudint clock it.

'Tis an incy-wincy lo buildin what looky-likes a pickly-cu. So they named it The Gherkin which be the oldy-worldy name for a pickly-cu.'

'A pickly-cu? I did never eat such a fing.'

'Do u spy it?

‘No...’

Then wiff her arm roun his shoulders and her face right nex to his she pointed wiff her ninger. And Rad feeled he had passed-way to a mirage earf – a v happy earf wiff buildings like veg and warm astro evrywhere. Finely he clocked what she be pointing at. ‘Yes! Tis truly weirdo but I plus rate it 2.’

Then again they sitted in kwite. Rad efforted to fink of somefing plus to verball re the City buildings but he cudint. He goed there 1 time on a task-school visitation but he be spring-green and larked wiff Jonxi. Needlesay they dint process what the schooler be learning they.

But sudden Lee verballled. ‘Hey you ok re Porsche and the broffel?’

Twas mighty weirdo to hear Lee verballing re Porsche – twas the 1st time they had chinwagged bout it since the oldy-worldy rez.

‘Fink so. I fink when I tell my mum she be gonna...’ But now he cudint fink what his mum be gonna action when she brained that the man she habited wiff be a twister.

Lee took his han. ‘She be gonna kick him out fo sure when she brains he be untrue.’

‘Less u and me foreva be true.’ Straightways Rad re-verballled. And then he feared that perchance he be overly bold. Be there a u and me?

But Lee squish-squashed his han and let her bonce be heavy on his shoulder. ‘Ok’ she re-verballled.

And Rad musted only swive his bonce jus a lil-bit to kiss her red-rose kisser.

In bed Rad dint heart to dream-drop cos real life be now

so maxi wondrous. He brained twas early days cos he be no eejit but truly he loved Lee. And he be sifting to chinwag wiff his mum bout Porsche – when Porsche be nex at the gym. His mum be gonna tear and wiffle and skreech fo sure. But then she gonna be wiff Rad and Flower like twas pre Porsche and they be jus a happy famly of 3.

Still he be widey-wakey at 1. Then outtablue there be a signall fro Lee. Maybe she hearted to signall sweet dream-drops or some such fing? Be she widey-wakey and finkin bout him?

Rad lined and processed her words.

Romeo

I cudint shluff so I be signallin this now.

I love-lined cus twas a bday present but also cus twas gonna be a maxi loll to mingle wiff tweens fro ousside what be like the gel and lad in 'Leaving Earf.' Fro moment I be reading they sagas I be spying the blocs and hearting to mingle wiff the peeps what habit inner. Then oncy-twicy I dream-dropped I be fro ousside and at task-school scheming to task in ministration or spitalling or caring. I feeled mighty inner joy to be some1other and I cudint process for why.

Rad truly I dint be a gel named Lee wiff a bio-mum what be a schooler. My bio-mum and biodad task in the City and I be a gel what habits an oldyworldy building what looky-likes a picklycu. So I be at hi-school and not taskschool.

But 1st time I did flesh-meet wiff u twas sudden no loll. I rated u so plus I finked maybe we cud strive to love-line. Jus u and me like Romeo and Juliet. And today on Parley Hill when u kissed me I finked I cud love u 1 day.

Then at home I membered what u verballed bout how we must foreva be true and I innerbrained I must inter-fess what I be. Tis fo y I cudint schluff.

So now I be true cos u be right – tis the plus important fng. You and me tog be like a dream and dreams be sagas like Romeo and Juliet. We be no fo real.

Forgive me. I be v sad we dint have plus lucky fortune than they.

Juliet x

Rad feeled his heart be strip-shredded and he musted to exit. Truly he hearted to race ousside.

In the famlyspace his mum be eyeballing some Romance saga. Post tasking she always sat curled on the couch cos she cudint never schluff straightways after.

‘U be ok hunny?’ She helded out her arms.

Kwik-kwik he goed to her and skwished his bonce on her cushy white teats what be poking forth her home-gown. He floated he cud mum-twine foreva and never beed at taskschool ni lovelined ni had 2 flesh-meets.

‘I be v puffed wiff u efforting pax wiff Porsche. I brain tis diff.’ She petted his mane overnover like he be a toddle.

‘But fo y u love him? Flower must still be guising her bruizer cos it looky-likes a peece of scrambly egg.’

1 2 3. His mum be kwite but he cud hear her inner bang-bangs. 4 5 6.

‘Evryfng changes when u be an elder.’ 7 8 9. ‘Once I quested fo real love but tis a fng what u can spy and sniff. And never touch.’

Much later Rad layed on his bed and shutted his eyes. Now he inner-brained he had truly lad-man changed.

'The Sum of Things' makes wonderful use of well-observed dialogue and incidental detail in order to energise and clarify the dynamics in the story.

Eley Williams

It addresses political issues without falling into clichés or simplifications. It is a story that captures perfectly all that is unsaid but painfully felt.

Rowan Hisayo Buchanan

An impressively nuanced exploration of the fine and shifting balance of power in a newsagent's.

Charlotte Seymour

The Sum of Things

by CG Menon

The shop assistant cleaned windows like a foreigner. Peter and Graham watched him as he scrubbed, inch by painstaking inch, in a way their mothers didn't.

'He's from Pakistan,' said Peter.

'India,' Graham suggested.

It was a hot day, and their school ties were pulled up tight. Peter swung his legs from the bus-stop seat; Graham bit his nails. In a moment Peter would get bored of this game, Graham knew, and insist they go across to the shop for a Coke to share. Peter would get first swallow – he always did – and Graham would get the spit-and-sugar backwash that, by now, he nearly liked.

'Karun's Newsagency,' Peter sang quietly to the tune of God Save the Queen. Karun's sold the cheapest fruit on the street, though Graham wasn't allowed to buy so much as an apple. *You don't know who's touched it*, his mother always warned, in the sort of voice that said she knew only too well.

Graham blinked as a passing car whirled dust, and Peter gave him a friendly shove. 'Fly on your back,' he said, his eyes wide and innocent. 'Nepal.'

‘Bangladesh,’ guessed Graham. Across the road, the shop assistant put the bucket down and went inside.

‘Those boys are play-fighting only, Ravi. Don’t worry, just like puppies, boys-like-puppies-like-boys.’

Venkat let the newsagency door swing shut behind him as he walked towards the back of the shop. Since he’d arrived in England, he’d talked to his son almost continuously. He hummed reassurance, he knotted English words under his breath into rhymes and baby-talk and then smoothed them back out into Tamil. Lovely, this talk, and so easy, with Ravi ten thousand kilometres away.

‘Puppies-puppies,’ he muttered under his breath, and wondered what the boys at Ravi’s new school in Mumbai were like. Puppies too, he guessed, but wolves. Predators, with large eyes and paws laced into shoes a size too big. Over the last six months Venkat had watched hours of nature documentaries and game shows; he’d watched every second of the Falklands crisis and the colliery closures and the late-night infomercials that aired on the new Channel 4. Every week he took two neat bags to the laundrette and watched television for thirty minutes; forty for a boil-wash. Predator, he’d learnt, in those 30-minute slices. Prey. Buy One, Get One Free.

The aisles on either side of him were immaculate. *You have to face-outwards the goods*, his cousin Karun always insisted, as though he were still in the army. Karun wanted tins of soup lined up finger-tip straight with their bright labels outward; he wanted the counter-top polished like dress boots. Other corner shops had dingy

floors and counters smelling of hot hands and glue, but not Karun's. Venkat couldn't bring himself to be proud of that, not yet.

He pushed the door open to the small stock-room at the back of the shop. It was dark inside, crammed with damp cardboard and left-over tins. A calendar from the Sydenham temple was pinned to the wall, open to a page of acid green meadows and lounging gods. There was a small sink on the far wall and he twisted the tap for water, but it only let a dribble through. He was so thirsty these days, he thought, his head drumming and a strange, worrying pain in his feet. His father had had the same symptoms thirty years ago and had died swollen, fat with disease and air, of something that hadn't had a name.

It did now. *Diabetes* was an English word, but a hygienic, precise one; not the kind that belonged to people like Venkat. When the pain first started he'd visited a clinic in Lewisham, where a brisk nurse had explained that he needed to watch his blood sugar; he needed to measure his cholesterol and iron and guard against the menace that, it turned out, was lurking in every cell of his own body. He'd tried to pay, on the way out, but she'd looked at him strangely; *we don't charge, love*, she'd said, *it's the NHS*. Venkat had left the money on the reception counter anyway, more than he could afford. No matter. A word like *diabetes* would have to be paid for eventually, one way or another.

'Venkat!'

He jumped. Karun stood in the stock-room doorway, wearing a white shirt and neat leather shoes. From watching television Venkat knew that his cousin had

managed to make these wrong somehow; the collar a little high and not quite English enough, the shoes extravagantly polished. Karun always looked too clean to trust, as though he'd just scrubbed away something unmentionable.

'Stop lazing, we need the laundry.'

Venkat gulped his water. His own shirt was damp, clinging to his vest and the paunch he'd never had before coming here. He walked back into the shop to see Luke, the owner of the tiny dry-cleaning firm next door, waiting by the counter. Luke was a regular; looked in on them most days. He always said that – *looking in* – as though Karun and Venkat were something to be watched. A gameshow, a nature documentary, a forty-minute crisis to be switched off afterwards. He had a smoker's cough and a tilt to his head that looked friendly, at first.

'All right, Karun?' he said to Venkat.

'Ah, Luke, good afternoon, good afternoon.' Karun put his head out quickly, came bobbing from the stock room. 'A good day today indeed, very good for the footfall.'

Karun spoke differently when Luke was around. More deferential, self-conscious and slangy; Karun was careful to be careless. Luke rarely had much to say himself. He'd been born here, he'd been brought up in English and would never have anything to prove.

Venkat watched as Luke pulled the fridge by the side of the counter open, helping himself to a beer. He cracked it open with a flick of his thumbnail, letting the cap scratch against the polished counter.

'Pay for it in a bit, mate?'

Luke slouched away down the aisles without waiting for a response. He always did this, picking up a beer or a pack of cigarettes then wandering off, leaving Karun coiled taut on the promise of payment. Everything was different when Luke was in the shop, quiet and edgy with the air glass-tight and stretched thin about them all. Luke had always paid in the end, strolling back with his head cocked and the beer half-drunk. He'd hold the coins back in the palm of his hand, waiting for Karun to say thank you before letting them clatter onto the counter top.

Venkat left Karun standing behind the counter, and went into the hall at the back of the shop. It smelt of rubbish out here, but he could breathe better, somehow. Karun's bedroom was directly opposite, looking out over a shred of shared garden. His own room was one floor up, the walls swollen with damp and the insulate of the roof visible through the boards. *I have a room at the very top of the house*, he'd written to Ravi, when he first arrived here. *I am earning well and our shop thrives*.

Our shop. He found himself writing to Ravi as he'd written to his own father, thirty years ago from school. Shining letters, glorious and face-outward in handwriting large enough to hold his boasts. *Count your blessings, Ravi*, he always ended his letters, *and count your curses*. It was something his father used to say, before he stopped counting anything at all.

Ravi hadn't seen the shop, of course, never been to England, or even met Karun. Karun wasn't a real cousin, not the way the English would have it, but a friend-of-a-friend-of-a-nephew from Venkat's home village in Tamil Nadu. A year ago he'd written asking

for a deposit to buy a newsagency in England. Venkat would own it too, he'd said. It would be an investment – an agreement, with a place for Ravi at a Mumbai boarding-school thrown in to close the deal. Venkat and Karun had come to their agreement through introductions and recommendations, through a network of bearded, full-bellied uncles who'd slapped each other on their hearty backs. Venkat had trusted those backs.

And now all the uncles were gone and all that was left was the shop. Venkat's visa, organised by Karun, had turned out to be a dependent visa only. No working, no earning, nothing but television while his body weakened and his investment turned into Karun's profit, and his son got himself the education Karun had arranged. Karun had told him it would only be a matter of explaining, of changing the visa, of waiting. And so Venkat waited – unbearable at first, but over time he'd got used to it, and that was the worst of all.

He pushed open Karun's bedroom door, seeing the dirty clothes folded on a chair. So clean when he had them on, Karun's discarded clothes smelt of dampened underwear and something else, something aged and unhealthy. Venkat checked the pockets of Karun's shirts and trousers as he pushed the clothes into black laundry bags. There was always a stray handful of coins that he dutifully stacked on the chest of drawers. He'd never taken any, not even to pay for the laundrette. Those coins, he suspected, might become Karun's side of the *agreement*.

Once the floor was clear, Venkat lowered himself face-down on the carpet. From here, he knew, if he thrust his head right under the bedframe he could see

Karun's stack of videos. He'd found them a few weeks ago, after months of hearing them at night, mixed with Karun's faint grunts. Venkat would lie upstairs in his attic room, listening to those videos with the blankets pulled over his head and both hands tugging urgently between his legs. He always finished before Karun.

This time, though, he reached further, managing to grab one of the tapes between his fingertips. There was no machine to play it in his own room, but that didn't matter. He wouldn't be able to bring himself to watch these girls Karun kept at arms-length; he only wanted to own them. He pulled the video towards him and something fell off the top of it, hitting the carpet with a soft thud. It was a book, and he pushed his head further under the bed to find a scatter of them stacked up against the wall. They were bound in green leather, and when he got hold of one it nearly fell apart in his hands. It had been read so often the edges of the pages were soft with the smell of Karun's soap and hand oil.

Dickens, read the heading at the top of the page, and Venkat turned through a summary of David Copperfield. The next chapter was George Eliot, with an extract from Middlemarch. And then Trollope, Hardy, Mrs Gaskell all pared down to three pages and a list of characters. He'd read translations of nearly all of these books, in a Tamil Nadu classroom thirty years ago. He remembered that, remembered wishing he could be English because then he would know them off by heart.

Karun had marked every page with a pencil, deciphering sentences and puzzling out words. He'd written translations in Tamil above the margins – amateur translations, Venkat saw quickly, not a school

teacher's. In places he'd misunderstood, got the phrasing heartbreakingly wrong. *Bottom-of-the-standard*, Venkat would have jeered over these mistakes in that thirty-years-old classroom; these unforgiven, unforgivable failures.

He leant down and pushed the book back under the bed. He wished he'd never found it, never seen those pencilled translations. The book made Karun more like the man he became when Luke walked in; a man too small and soft to have ruined Venkat's life. He pushed himself back to his feet, and pulled the bedspread back into place. The black laundry sacks sat squat and bulging at the foot of the bed, the plastic stretching as he picked them up and walked back out into the hall.

Back in the shop, Karun was ringing up a single can of Coke for two schoolboys. Their ties were tight and one of them was hanging back, his hands clasped in front as though he didn't want to touch anything. At the end of one of the aisles a group of girls flicked through the magazines, every strand of hair alert to being watched. Dangerous, thought Venkat, those girls with their pleated, parting skirts. They were second-prizes, dressed up as first.

The girls shied away as Luke sauntered past them, holding the beer can with the wet print of his mouth on it. He'd lit a cigarette too, and flicked ash from its glowing tip as he leant his elbows on the till where Karun stood. There was an immensity about Luke, a kind of looming threat in his muscled arms and washed eyes. He looked straight at Karun, letting his cigarette ash drop onto the polished counter. Karun didn't look down, but Venkat could see that the ash had marked

the wood with a spatter of black. He felt a smile squirm across his face, appeasing and scared, and looked up to see his own expression reflected on Karun's face.

'90p then, Karun?' Luke said to Venkat. Venkat stood there, a laundry bag in each hand and his teeth bared in fright.

'No!' Karun moved quickly to the side of the counter. 'I'm sorry, so sorry,' he said to Luke. 'Venkat is cleaning only. He cannot do transactions.'

There was a kind of pride in his apology, in the way he nodded and blinked at Luke. This was *his* shop, his pleading eyes said and any apologies would come from him. Not from Venkat – a shame, indeed, but Venkat is cleaning only and at least his son is getting himself an education.

Luke shrugged. 'Sorry, mate,' he said, and tapped the end of his cigarette onto the empty beer can. 'Never can tell you apart.'

He started laughing, belly-deep and insistent. Karun blinked and nodded – brimful of appeasement – but his answering chuckle came too late. Luke's smile had already begun to congeal, and he picked his beer can up again. There was an ugly, scraping sound as his nails caught on the metal rim.

'Don't like jokes, eh, Karun? Well *fuck* you, then.'

He leant forward and ground the tip of his cigarette onto Karun's polished counter. There was a tiny hiss, a thread of char and ash winding upwards. For a second, nobody moved.

'I will take these,' Venkat said. 'To the laundry, for cleaning.' His head was hot, and he could feel his heart beat as he picked up the laundry bags. With each step

they crushed against his calves. He could hear voices rising behind him – Luke and Karun, the schoolgirls and then the shop door swung shut behind him.

The two schoolboys were outside, standing by the wooden trestles that Karun kept stacked with apples and softening bananas. One of them drank from his Coke can, spitting half a mouthful back in, and passed it across to the other. They were good schoolboys, Venkat thought in the hot, hurting recesses of his brain. They looked right, in their blazers and ties, in a way that he knew he didn't, or Karun, or even Luke. One day, he thought, Ravi will look like that.

'Come on, Graham,' the first boy said, tugging at his friend's arm. A bus was coming from down the road, approaching the bus stop opposite.

'Yes, just – hang on...'

The smaller boy followed him to the edge of the kerb, then looked back at Venkat. After a few seconds he turned and picked a bruised apple off the top of the furthest stall.

'How much?' He held it to Venkat. '10p, right?'

'Yes, but – '

'Hurry up,' came a shout from the bus stop, and then a warm 10p was in Venkat's hand and the boy was gone, running across the empty road. As he reached the bus he threw the apple up and caught it, snatching it out of the air.

Venkat stood there, with his 10p and his laundry bags, watching the bus pull away. As it passed he glimpsed himself reflected in its windows, and the shop behind him. Karun's Newsagency, he read in reverse, and caught a flicker of movement near the shop

window. It would be Karun, stooping to get a cloth to polish the counter once Luke had gone. He would polish all evening while Venkat sat in the laundrette watching television, both of them translating from English to Tamil and back again. They'd rub the edges off, in their own way; they'd count their blessings and count their curses until it all became nothing but the usual sum of things.

An insightful and moving account of contemporary love.

Eley Williams

'This Shaping' has such a feeling of truth and of an eye carefully observing all the small tics of being alive in the present day.

Rowan Hisayo Buchanan

This story stood out for its spot-on command of dialogue and as a commentary on how we curate our lives through social media.

Charlotte Seymour

This Shaping

by Laurane Marchive

London. An evening with friends in Old Street, next to the big roundabout. Cocktails, an espresso martini and two bitter pink strawberry drinks. It rains of that February rain which spits and slaps and you wrap your scarf closer around your neck, it's dark already but underneath the parasols the rain doesn't land and the light is yellow. The waiter has a vertical line tattoo, splitting his face in half between the sounds of cars and the laughter of booze. You roll a cigarette with liquorice paper, it matches your drink.

You check your phone on the table.

Whatsapp, 12 new messages from 3 conversations.
Messenger. A group chat where someone's friend posted a nihilist meme.

Data usage warning. Tap to view usage and settings.

Ting!

Tinder, Ben sent you a message!

Fri, 8 Feb 2018, 18:56

Dear Mary
Your face is delightful.
Kindest regards,
Ben

Tara says I like this place, let's take a picture! Lucy sends her boyfriend a text, lets him know she'll be home later. You take a group picture. And then a solo one of you, looking fun and mischievous, drink in one hand and cigarette in the other. Let me see, no I look terrible, it's not working. Can you try another one? Ok, look to your left. No, try looking to your right. Maybe my front camera is better, it evens out the skin, the problem is the angle, try a different angle, hold on. Smile? No, don't smile. I think I should just take a selfie, yeah maybe. At the same time, I don't know. Isn't it a bit sad if it's just selfies?

Great cocktail break with @iamthegreatlucy and @blackorchids, so good to see you guys !!
#london #nightout #girls #cocktail #shoreditch
#cute #smile #great #happygirl #lifestyle

iamthegreatlucy _ LOVE YOU GUYS
1 m Reply
blackorchids _ hahaha love this
3m Reply

Going home, you climb into the bus. The windows are covered in steam, the driver lip syncs to imaginary music. A guy with a fedora hat watches you go past.

Up the stairs, an empty seat towards the back. The lines yellow and vertical, and heads in hats poking out of the seats. All wearing coats, staring at phones and going somewhere. Where do they all come from, you wonder how many are drunk, how many going out, how many coming back?

Instagram: @bionjp and 17 others liked your post.
Account update. Options for your Google account.
OkCupid: Someone new +537 others like you!

You take your gloves off, wipe the wet off your nose. On Tinder, you re-read the message. You open the man's profile, Ben. His photos: there's only three. A black and white selfie, a picture of him in a band and another one with friends, laughing. Mouth open, teeth showing. His bio says:

One of my eyes is green and the other is also green.

Fri, 8 Feb 2018, 23:15

Dear Ben

Well thank you

Your eyes are so pretty

and I love your hat on your third picture.

It is the best hat I have seen tonight

Warm regards,

Mary

The bus makes its way through Shoreditch. Kebab wraps on the floor, high heels stumbling on pavement, pints of beer and cider. The bars are already emptying

onto the street; people in pairs or in groups, having fun. A man in a black jacket smokes a cigarette alone, his back against a wall. You catch a glimpse of his face. You would like to see more but the traffic light turns green and the man disappears.

Ting!

Tinder, Ben sent you a message!

Fri, 8 Feb 2018, 23:18

Dear Mary

It is indeed an excellent hat.

It gets me all the girls, to speak the truth.

Best,

Ben

ps: give me your coordinates, sea level, and wind speed, thanks.

23:19

Dear Ben

I am currently riding the 175 night bus towards Kings Cross, at an average speed of very slow per hour.

We almost ran over two drunk people a few minutes ago.

Also email rhetoric is getting tiring.

Mary

On Instagram you scroll past colourful pastel breakfast food. A group of friends around a board game, a party near Waterloo. An ad for a face mask, treating redness

and enlarged pores, someone standing by a beach with a blue sky above.

A selfie of Max with two other men at a party.

You keep scrolling. If it only lasts for a second then it doesn't really count. You see something Lucy posted earlier. You double tap it, she looks –

Ting!

Tinder, Ben sent you a message!

Fri, 8 Feb 2018, 23:20

OK fair. So Mary, what did you get up to tonight?

A woman sits down next to you, she is carrying groceries, her face is covered with freckles, but you look back at your phone and an ad for the English National Opera, a poem written by someone in America. The bus swerves to avoid a cyclist, you see it from the corner of your eye. Stuck at a traffic light. A young woman in a short pink dress sits on the edge of the pavement, feet in the gutter, her shoes next to her, purse in one hand, hair dangling long over her ankles. Bent over. Maybe she is asleep. But maybe she is OK. A man standing a few meters away, hands in his pocket, looking after her. Or over her. Or looking at her.

You scroll back up your Instagram feed, stop on that picture of Max

Max

Max His smile, teeth showing, spontaneous, you only know one of the other men in the photo but it looks like friendship, it looks like happiness, a simple easy way to be, just smiling, just a Friday night, having fun, simple. His hair is a little bit shorter, he's wearing a

grey T-shirt, something you haven't seen before. But the smile always the same, generous, unthinking –

You unbutton your coat, casual. Loosen the scarf around your neck, woollen hat, comb your hair. From your bag, lipstick a shade darker, the bus is moving again; it's hard to do it properly. You give your lips the shape of a heart, something tender. Head turned towards the yellow light, hand under the cheek, showing no knuckles, knuckles, no knuckles, adjusting. So that it doesn't look contrived. So that it doesn't look staged. Posting.

Sleepy bus ride, finally heading home!

#smile #great #makeup #nighttime #busride #bus
#night #ldn #girls #cocktail #cocktails #shoreditch
#cute #cool #babe

Behind you a man is humming loudly. It's a song you can't place and it rings in your ears. You know it, you're sure of it, but whenever you feel like you've got it there's a change in rhythm and you are lost again, but maybe it sounds –

Ting!

Tinder, Ben sent you a message!

Fri, 8 Feb 2018, 23:31

Oh no, I've ruined our rapport with my mundane questions

Are you still there?

23:32

Sorry got distracted

23:32

You're still here!

Ok so let's get a few things out of the way

What are you looking for

Why haven't you found it

Do you think it's you or them

How close have you got to finding it

23:33

All very good questions

You go first

23:33

Ha!

Not how it works.

Too hard to reply, you can't be bothered to enter into the game. Instead, you carry on swiping. Chris, 29, a design engineer with a blue shirt and a serious picture. Jarrett, 32, an anaesthesiologist with brown hair and a bright smile. Ross, 32, wears all black and is an author. There's a picture of Ross on a boat on a blue sea, a picture of –

Ting!

Tinder, Ben sent you a message!

Fri, 8 Feb 2018, 23:33

So?

23:34

...

Maybe I just don't know what I'm looking for.

You close the chat. Open your Instagram feed. Your own profile. A post from 12/01/18. A Saturday night, a selfie just before heading to a party. You're smiling, you look like you're having fun, like you're about to have fun, you remember it still. Anticipation.

That evening. The party was good. Afterwards, you left with Max. Outside, it was freezing. As you waited for the bus your feet were cold, your nose was cold and he rubbed your shoulders to keep them warm but you complained loud and drunk, and your hat kept falling into your eyes. He licked the tip of your nose to make you scream, you pushed him against the bus stand and wrapped your lips around his eyes, pushed your tongue between the lashes.

Back home, you poured yourself a glass of water in the kitchen and then in your room, you kissed. You took off your clothes, you laughed, you fell into bed. A feeling of warmth, a familiarity. You were tipsy, he was tipsy; you were falling asleep. His head nested in the crease of your neck but his hand started sliding along your shoulders, down to your hips and between your legs. He stroked you gently, he licked his fingers. You just wanted to sleep so you resisted but softly, not because you wanted the sex but because you didn't want to break out of character. This shaping, to keep it soft and playful. Eventually he'd take the cue, you weren't really moving. Is this good? Sometimes you're not sure what feels good, you just know what looks good. And maybe this did so maybe you could get in the mood, though all you wanted was for the fingers to stop, but –

Ting!

THIS SHAPING

Tinder, Ben sent you a message!

Fri, 8 Feb 2018, 23:38

So come on. What's your story?

23:38

What do you mean?

23:38

It's midnight on a Saturday night and you're online
chatting to strangers

23:38

Me? So are you

I don't know.

Maybe I'm just bored and lonely

23:39

Dream

Okay

Talk to me

Did someone break your heart?

but Max didn't stop, you didn't want it but you wanted to play nice, to not seem off-putting. The softness of the pillow giving in, but you kept thinking, If I don't move, he'll stop. He'll get tired. The lack of enthusiasm will give it away, eventually. But maybe there was something, in the sounds you made, that sounded like a willingness to participate? The fingers inside you started to hurt a little. Not much, just a little. But enough, probably. You wanted to say something but you didn't want it to be weird; you did like him a lot

and he liked you a lot. He turned you over. Spooning position. You felt yourself not reacting. Not quite a freezing, more a lack of movement, something that should be obvious. A tiredness. Limp. He had to lick his –

Ting!

Tinder, Ben sent you a message!

Fri, 8 Feb 2018, 23:45

Anyway, you look fun, are you fun?

23:45

For sure

What do you want to know? Ask me something

23:45

Ok. What are you wearing?

23:45

Are you serious

23:46

Fair enough, scrap that.

What's your greatest fear?

23:47

To die alone.

Isn't that everyone's greatest fear?

moved your hips up and fucked you harder. You thought you weren't performing but actually. Maybe you were. Maybe you just couldn't remember if this felt

good or not. You're always so much fun, you should have been into it. He pulled your hair. Sometimes you like it but then you didn't. You wished he'd just stop, you clenched your jaws. He said 'You like that don't you' and you didn't reply but he wasn't listening. You found yourself wondering, would he be horrified if he knew? And so you said nothing. You remember watching, close up, the light from the bedside table. Silence and the fibres, on the sheet. In little criss-cross squares, repeating themselves. Threads interlocked. A tiny grid, over and over. So many, sand on a beach. The thread, white, running along the edge, sewing it shut at the hem. Folds in the fabric, darker. Lighter. And darker again. A nail, one, the one on index finger, planted into it. To hold on, a grid, the smallest dot.

Background coming in and out.

Like breathing.

Then, he fell asleep almost immediately, spooning you. A cuddle.

Ting!

Tinder, Ben sent you a message!

Fri, 8 Feb 2018, 23:52

Ok, yeah sure.

Not very upbeat though

23:52

No

What's yours?

23:53

To never find TRUE LOVE

23:54

Fuck off...

Afterwards, what happened. Nothing. You didn't mention it. He didn't mention it. Eventually, he said you were acting weird. A resentment. Because, surely, he should have stopped but also, surely, you should have said something. And you still aren't sure: why didn't you say something? In the end he sent messages and you never replied and that was it. And somehow it's not that you couldn't forgive, just that you couldn't tell him; because it would have hurt him. So now you keep thinking that it was no one's fault, you keep thinking and yet, you still see yourself not moving and you'd think, right. You'd think he would have realised, and you'd think he'd have stopped.

Right?

Ting!

Tinder, Ben sent you a message!

Fri, 8 Feb 2018, 23:54

What are you doing on this app then?

23:54

Don't know.

Tinder is basically a broken dreams
graveyard

And we all die in the end anyway
So might as well drink cocktails
with strangers in the
meantime

THIS SHAPING

Across the aisle a man unwraps a bag of fried chicken. The sound of paper unfolds and the smell floats to you. Scratching noises as the bus drives through low branches, sometimes you want to go back, undo the things or at least turn them into stories, snapshots you'd—

Ting!

Tinder, Ben sent you a message!

Fri, 8 Feb 2018, 23:56

I can't fault your worldview.

And I find fault in most

Does it work for you?

23:56

Nope

23:58

Shame...

Keep trying though

Maybe it just needs more testing... ;P

23:59

Yeah, maybe

Behind you the man who was humming a song stands up and climbs down the stairs. You never found the song but in the end maybe there wasn't really a song, maybe he was just rambling in rhythm. You notice you're hungry and the scent of chicken, smell still floating and mouth corners salivating. Your phone vibrates:

Instagram. @Another.blue.flower liked your post.
Tinder, you've been Super Liked! Swipe to find out
by whom.
System Update. New system software now available.
Your phone is running out of internal storage.

Under your thumb, another Instagram post. A few weeks later: 08/02/18. Two drinks, at night, around a pub table. That was the day you thought it was time, you thought, maybe this would cheer you up, at least a change of scenery. So you arranged to go on a date. A guy, someone you met on OKCupid. That Friday night, standing in a crowd. A concert, because he had an extra ticket. The ceilings were high, the people, howling, everybody with their phones up, filming the opening. You were holding a cider. It was cold around your fingers. You posted the video with the caption 'Gig night!' As the gig went on, you were aware of your feet hurting in your shoes. You were aware of the couple next to you, his arms around her body, swaying to the music. You wanted to look like you were having fun even though your thoughts, trapped, swirling with nowhere to go. You thought of checking your phone but you didn't want to look bored.

You found yourself gasping for air.

From downstairs a commotion, the sound of voices arguing, the driver and a man, drunk, what's your problem man? Get off man. Come on man. Everybody upstairs listening and waiting, and paying attention and hoping for a fight.

THIS SHAPING

Ting!

Tinder, Ben sent you a message!

Sat, 9 Feb 2018, 00:03

Hey this app is bugging me. Do you have WhatsApp?

00:03

Sure.

So long as you don't send me any
dick pics

...

I'm joking

00:05

Lol

00:05

(semi joking)

00:05

Wait so... you do want them?

00:05

No no

00:05

Lol. Also joking

00:05

I'm good

00:05

There will be no dick pics

00:05

Great

00:05

Whether you wanted or not

00:05

Thanks

00:05

Let's switch to WhatsApp

00:07

I think there's going to be a fight on the bus

After the concert, it was already late, you went to a pub. He drank whiskey and coke, you gin and tonic. He listened to you talk about your projects, your dreams, your quirkiness. Going through the motions, things you'd said before. To other men. On other dates. Things they'd enjoy. Things they'd find relatable. Or impressive. Cute, even. He talked enthusiastically, of the music he liked, of his hobbies and of his friends and you kept touching your hair, one shoulder leant forward. You smiled, you laughed, you were easy going, and fun, and easy to talk to. When he went to order two more drinks you looked down at your phone.

32 people saw your story.

@Chris_Navet, @another_blue_flower, @Dirty_face_dolly saw your story. @This_is_Pia saw your story.

And others. And others.

Max saw your story. You looked at the screen until it turned black.

He came back from the bar, you posted a shot of your drinks captioned "Thursday fun!" and went to the toilet. In the bathroom the light, too white. The fancy lightbulb was broken, the replacement glare almost grey, almost bright, and the skin on your face reflected in the square. You wiped the lipstick at the corners of your mouth. A glitch. You gave your lips a rest. From the talking. And the laughing. You slid your hands in the hyper modern hand dryer. You read an article about those, apparently all they do is send germs everywhere, it's the least hygienic of solutions.

You weaved your way back in, the place had wooden tables and fairy lights wrapped around the bar. Candlelit tones. Flattering hues. Something soft and your eyes slightly out of focus. They were closing, you shared a cigarette outside. You said, do you want to come back to mine? I have wine.

The bus drives round a roundabout. You see a fox, or cat, something crossing the road.

Snapchat, @PeteTheMonkay and @DavisJames are on Snapchat!

Gmail, From: Emma. 'To do: Monday morning ASAP'.

WhatsApp, Ben

00:10

Hello!

00:10

So what about you then?

Who are you, what's your story?

00:11

Oof. Incisive questions...

00:11

Do you have something better to do with your night?

On the tube that evening, everybody was drunk. A group of teenagers were singing off-key and swiping through pictures on their phones. You walked from the stop to your house, maybe he took your hand, maybe he didn't. Maybe he wasn't the type. Maybe he was. It was cold, you both commented on how cold it was. There were droplets of rain falling on your hair, covering your face, your coat, with beads of shine, like sweat on skin and you could feel, at the corners, the cracking of your lips.

You pushed the front door and dived into a pool of heat, coats off, scarves off. Put on some music from your phone, two glasses a bottle of wine. The formica table, both sitting on a different corner, diagonal. The blinding light of the kitchen, maybe at that point you were already getting sloppy, stumbling your words. He let you do most of the talking. Maybe he was drunk too. You finished the bottle. It was late. What time was it? 4am? 5am? It's late, I think I'm flagging. Yeah, me too. Well do you want to sleep here, I mean it's quite late. Yeah, it's probably –

00:15

Not particularly

Actually I was seeing someone recently but

I got cold feet

I'm a shitmonkey

Truth is I'm not long out of a 2 year relationship
with the girl I thought I was going to spend my
life with...

Not cool to bring this up but hey

00:15

Ouch. That's ok. At least you're
honest.

Near your bed, he asked again if you enjoyed the gig and you said yes. Then taking his jumper off, slowly, folding it and laying it to the side. Shoes, trousers. In a semi neat pile. Swaying. You removed everything apart from your underwear and crawled under the duvet. He followed. A yawn, you turned off the light. Lying side by side in the dark, colours from the outside and cars driving by. Watching the shadows as they came, not touching. You said, do you want to cuddle, I feel like we should cuddle. Yeah sure, let's cuddle. You pushed your body into his side, you said maybe you should take off your t-shirt. He took off his t-shirt, the skin of your skin reaching forward. Maybe we should kiss as well? A kiss, something soft, a thin veiled stro –

00:16

I guess so.

But maybe one day I can take you for a drink

00:16

Good idea. And then we can also have sex and wake up in each others arms feeling sad and lonely but pretending that we're having fun anyways

climbing on top of his body, a kiss still kissing, not quite wanting but not sure why. You removed his boxer shorts, slid them along the legs, the lips a perfect shape, the usual motion, repeating itself, again and again and he didn't really make a sound, maybe enjoying maybe something else. Pushing the hair out of the way, the only sound of skin rubbing against other skin, and saliva getting wetter, after a while you sat up and reached for the bedside table. A condom, you unrolled the latex. Making the sounds they always like, the squeak, the squeal, the moans that moan, a blur of dark and muted tones.

00:18

...

Too much?

00:19

Hahaha no not at all I very much enjoyed that
I was going to point out that you are obviously
a hopeless romantic
But then I got distracted by football

Too much? He kept going soft, sliding out, you kept putting it back in place you kept the hips, moving at

some point he said hey, hey maybe we should, but you said no just let me, no just let me just. Hey I don't think this is working, what do you mean? I think maybe I'm too tired. But you said come on, come on just let me just, just keep going, you tried kissing his temple, his face, the motion still permeating. Hey I think I'm just, wait-

In the end he took your arms from the elbows and pushed you to the side, not too hard just a little, it didn't hurt. I'm sorry, I don't know, I think I'm just quite drunk. It's not working. Sorry.

Oh, ok.

The bus will wait here, whilst the drivers change over.

00:20

God I think I'm going to be on this bus forever.

How is the football? Isn't it a bit late for football?

00:20

Never too late. How is the fight?

00:21

Not sure. It seems over now.

Currently waiting for new driver

But you still wanted it so in the end you placed his arm around your body, he held you and with his face so close to yours, he touched you till you came. Staring up, directly above. At some point you thought of that picture of you and Max standing outside a pub, look-

ing happy and drunk, but the feeling, moving, shapes rippling, circular, repetitive. Maybe you should have taken a selfie with that guy, before this. Something to show, to prove but you forgot.

Eventually you came. Then he fell asleep, or pretended to but all you could do is keep staring. Chromatic streams of the ceiling, swelling, flowing, diluting. To pat it dry before it shows, a water drop on a painting.

00:23

That's a shame. Love fights. Always hope someone gets injured.

00:23

Don't be mean

00:24

Why not. I can't imagine not being allowed to be mean

I would have zero fun

In fact I'd say 98% of all creative thoughts I have are directly associated with being mean

00:25

Maybe you're just a petty bitch?

00:25

No I prefer to see myself as sharp and devastatingly insightful critic of everybody who is not me

00:25

You sound like a dream

THIS SHAPING

New bus driver. Angel station, Jamie's Italian, the big Starbucks at the crossroad. People's windows flickering past, the orange squares where people live. You catch a glimpse of someone still watching TV and of a man brushing his teeth. A few people on a terrace, smoking cigarettes at a party. A couple kissing on a balcony. All framed in bright boxes, fading breathing flashing images.

00:26

Where do you live, Mr Mean?

00:26

Cally Road. You?

00:26

Really?

We're actually gonna drive through Kings Cross shortly.

Wanna meet for a drink?

00:26

That's pretty late notice...

00:26

Come on, live a little.

00:26

But I've got my slippers on and I'm ready for bed!

00:26

Come on

00:28

Hmmm maybe...

You reopen Instagram, your own feed, going backward. 12/01/18: the selfie that evening before the party, looking happy. 10/01/18: Max and you outside a pub, smiling, tipsy beer in hand. 04/01/18: A boomerang someone took in a bar, pulling a silly face just minutes before he arrived. 21/12/17: visiting the Welcome Collection, Max wearing a ridiculously bright woolly hat. 12/12/17: A cropped image where you're both looking at a video on someone's phone captioned "too cute not to post". 13/11/17: A selfie you first sent to him an evening when he was working late. 29/10/17: A video of dead leaves brushing the floor you took together. 15/10/17: A gallery opening when he was supposed to join and at the last minute couldn't, but you wanted him to see and so you posted it and you made sure your hair was big and your skirt was short enough and your legs looked good. 02/10/17: the bathroom selfie with your cat you showed him on your first date. 27/09/17: crispy spring rolls on a plate, eaten, swallowed just before heading to the bar where you were about to meet him for the first time.

Each photo he liked, and you knew that because you checked. Performance for two. And now? Each new image making a point. Looking happy. Pretty. Busy. Having fun. Going out. Meeting old friends and making new friends. Just so he sees. Just so he knows.

Data usage warning. Tap to view usage and settings.
Tinder, You have a new match!

THIS SHAPING

Ting!

Tinder, Tom sent you a message!

Sat, 9 Feb 2018, 00:32

Hello!

Have you ever been a bird?

Do you do voodoo?

Do you believe in previous lives?

-gif of a swan with human arms flying low over water-

00:35

Tinder guy just sent me this.

People are weird.

-send attachment of gif screen capture-

00:35

Hero

What do you think?

U gonna go for it?

00:35

I don't know, why not.

At least it'd be a change

00:35

From?

00:36

The usual.

When I go on dates it's so scripted
I'm never sure whether it's going
well or not. I just keep saying the

same things to different people.

00:37

I think that's maybe the saddest thing I've heard
on this endless vortex of failed love

00:37

Thanks

It's just hard to know if I'm doing
things because I want
to or
I don't know

00:37

Damn, you sound like a proper laugh

00:38

Thank you

00:38

You're welcome

00:38

So. If I get off at Kings Cross, will
you come?

Tinder, Somebody likes you! Open Tinder and swipe
right...

Instagram, @foodforparrots commented on your
photo

_This place is great, best cocktails in town! Heart
emoji.

1m Reply

At Kings Cross you get off. You like to come here because the place is always busy, you've never seen it empty, even in the dead of night, even when it's raining. It's a scene of transit, of movement. You sit on a bench, your favourite bench. From there you can see the clocktower. Once, there was a cloud of Sahara sand over London. At least that's what they said, and the light of the sun just wasn't quite shining through. It was like being on the moon, a different quality to the transparency. Or what you think the moon would feel like. You were sitting right here. It was a few days before the party.

The man next to you smokes a cigarette. He wants to keep sitting there without feeling awkward so he can't refuse you one, not really. You roll it, light it, fill your lungs with more smoke. Something quite reassuring about the way streetlights bounce off swirly architecture. Carving pockets of pale, and black, secret dark corners, swallowing and spitting out the hues on purpose and at will. It doesn't photograph too well either, you've tried it in the past. Maybe you just need a better nighttime camera. But in the meantime it just doesn't work. So it's like it doesn't even exist, or it exists just for you. You feel the cold, the air is damp. There is a thin layer of water in between you and everything you see.

#nighttime #dreamscape #moonlight #streetlight
#escape

00.53

Are you still there?

A painfully funny story about class and aspiration and the beacon represented by a smart pair of shoes.

Charlotte Seymour

A frolicsome and deft story where action and dialogue is dispatched with a playful sophistication.

Eley Williams

'Wardrobes' embraces absurdity. I found myself smiling at each new development.

Rowan Hisayo Buchanan

Wardrobes

by Jay Barnett

The agency had secured me three days work on Cedar Hill. It was an old part of town, well kept. Even the grid covers felt important there. Mum told me to take a flask, 'A cup of coffee'll put you back an hour's wage up Cedar,' she said, and sat down to breakfast. It was 6pm.

Mum worked nights, lit by a brass banker's lamp, taking bookings over the phone for Xander Taxis. Xander Taxis' logo utilised just one X for both words. Xander running left to right, then Taxis running down. It was on every car in the fleet and to the naked eye it read, *Taxis Xander*. Mum told me her customers were often troubled by the truth, that the company they had always thought *Taxis Xander* was in fact *Xander Taxis*. I suppose late nights might have played to strengthen the sense of dislocation. Imagine calling for a car at 3am, guard down and gauzy, only to find that everything you thought to be real, was a lie. My mum had worked there eight years. I worked too, sometimes, temping across the city. Nine of ten positions had me at a photocopier. The taking of a document. The pushing of a button. The collection of a duplicate. Constant and familiar, it was a routine that put my dad's favourite maxim to task. *The*

Day is New, he'd always say before leaving the house. Even said it the day he left and never came back. Moved in with another family. One, I found out, he'd nurtured my whole life up until that point. I was ten.

Mum was scraping the last of her porridge oats. They looked over boiled from where I was stood, 'Got me at the copier again, Mum.' I said.

'You'll turn into a copier,' she finished eating and placed her spoon down.

'What would you do with me then?'

'Well,' she said, rising up from the table, 'I'd just use you, you know? For photocopying.' She walked to the hall where she perched on the bottom of our stairs pulling her boots on. 'Be a love and clear me bowl will you? I'll be late.'

'How long you think you'll work nights, Mum?'

'Nothing wrong with The Stars. Better pay.'

That's what she called her night shift, The Stars. Made sitting in a windowless room with an electric heater sound nice. She unlatched the door and opened it to dusk, 'See you later, dear.'

'See you later, Mum.'

I ironed a white shirt. Laid trousers out. Placed my formal shoes in a convenient place for morning. Slip on black things, no moving parts. I was thankful for this, a buckle or strap would've ruined long ago. My shoes were four years old. I'd tried to plug small slits in the rubber soles with superglue but the rain still made it through. I kept a spare pair of socks in my bag. Sometimes three. The weather had never interested me more. I checked for the week ahead. Sun, three days straight.

A small win – my tenure on Cedar Hill was exactly three days. The yellow icon was there above Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. It made me think of yolk. Of it spilling out the side of a sandwich, messing the white of a polyester shirt. I made a packed lunch and went to bed.

The last time I was on Cedar Hill I was there to pick up my passport. It was that sort of area. High municipal buildings. At ground floor, dark windowed places displayed hanging signs with fonts so gold, so calligraphic, it was hard to discern meaning. These places were well established, as if they'd been here longer than the paths they lined. Old, yet clean as soap. Whatever service was on offer up there it was the high-end sort. Shops. Banks. A place to get your eyes fixed. The company where I'd pursue my three-day-career was called Pettigrew & Giles. I think it was a solicitor. I arrived ten minutes early, stood to admire the lobby.

'Wouldn't like to drop a glass in here,' I was speaking to the girl on reception, the fronds of a nearby palm almost obscured her.

'What?'

'All this marble. Wouldn't fancy to drop a glass on it.'

'No,' she smiled.

'Lively plant,' I nodded to the palm.

'Yes,' she smiled again, but not as broadly.

'What did you say the name of the guy was whose coming to get me?'

'Charles.'

A voice came from behind me, 'Did somebody say, Charles?'

I turned round to face a man in a lift. His suit was too big, roomy at the groin. 'Can't stand here all day,' he said. 'Come on.'

He had his finger fixed on the door-open button. I budged past to stand behind. He didn't turn to face me, just pushed for the basement. The doors slid shut. They were mirrored. This man, according to his reflection at least, had the strangest face. It looked as young as it did old, like he'd aged in the womb for five decades, only to be born yesterday. He spoke to me through the mirror. 'I'm Charles. Barmy Charles.'

'Barmy Charles?'

'Yep.'

'How d'you get a name like that?'

'They think I'm barmy.'

There were bigger questions: Who were *they*? Why do *they* think you're barmy? But all I could ask was, 'Is that Barmy Charles? Or like, Balmy Charles?'

He looked on me with some confusion, until our eye contact broke when the doors opened. 'Follow me,' he said, and we left the lift.

'This is where you'll be, over there,' Charles pointed to a photocopier in the corner of a small room. The olive carpet was at odds with the high buff marble of everywhere else. Six desks sat unused, covered with tall columns of A4 documents. It wasn't a place for clients. Strictly back office. The copier sat beneath the only natural light in the room, falling from glass bricks embedded in the ceiling above.

'You used one of them before?' asked Charles.

'Yeah, I'm well-' he cut me off mid-sentence, spun

the top half of his body to point out the paper piles laden across the desks.

‘Don’t mind the mess.’

‘I won’t,’ I said.

‘So basically, there’ll be people in and out, they’ll have documents that need duplicating. You just get on with it.’

‘Sounds good.’

‘Good?’

‘Well, could be worse.’

‘Ha!’ he sloped back on his heels, hands down in his pockets. That face still looked weird, it was no trick of the mirror. ‘Your lunch hour is at one, stairs are there if you don’t like the lift,’ he pointed to a fire door on the other side of the room. ‘I probably should have asked if you like lifts before you got in ours. Not everyone likes lifts.’

‘I don’t mind lifts.’

‘Well, that’s good then.’

The knack to photocopying is, push the green button. It was mostly green, on the machines I used at least and all I needed to do was push it. My clients came through the day, passed me documents. ‘Six,’ they said.

‘Seven.’

‘Two.’

‘Thirty.’ Whatever, I’d push the button to make corresponding copies.

That first morning, I believed, was some of the best work I’d ever done with a photocopier. It was the light. The glass bricks. They appeared to illuminate me and my workstation, but little else. The glow gave a sense of

worth, which, in turn, made its way to my work. I gave new life to old documents. I was the maker of copies. I was the maker of copies of copies. By lunch, I'd pushed that green button three hundred times or more.

Even the air seemed clean on Cedar. Those sandblasted paths. That shopfront shine. It all alluded to oxygen born of woodland, granite moors, remote and secret beaches. I enjoyed spending lunch up there my first day, freshly ascended from the sunken room. I ate. I stretched my legs. Then, with time left on the hour, I looked through windows at items I could never afford. It's where I first saw the shoes.

Simple things of fine black leather, built by men and women using tools I did not know, or would ever bother learning about. There was something of the past about them. And of the future. A shoe out of time. They sat on a block of polished wood, part of a bigger display across a swathe of dark green velvet. I imagined myself in them, walking to nowhere in particular, but feeling important. They were as comfortable as air.

Day two on the job, blunders were apparent. I had made my way, Charles-less, to the space beneath the path. Someone had asked for twelve copies, and I'd given them eight. The staple cartridge, though full, would not staple. A faint black line brought twenty-seven documents to ruin. All before 11am. I wondered what planet was in retrograde. What sphere had caused these upsets? Mars? Neptune? I worried that planets beyond our solar system, of which we had no name for yet, could slip into retrograde and cause numerous, tiny effects on

our waters and microchips and our thought processes. I felt adrift in my mistakes. To bring myself back down to earth, I went up to stare at the shoes a little bit.

There was something in the stillness of photocopying. I often felt at one with the beige plastic of the machine. I couldn't be sure but peeling away from long bouts at that button felt like returning to earth from space. A certain amount of muscle atrophy after a day's work convinced me it was the same. I felt the stillness, the oneness, that afternoon. I enjoyed the copier's gears immensely. The gentle whirr of onboard motors, the buzz of tiny cogs, the lick of paper rolling through the feed. I wondered if the machine was lost in the sounds of my moving, my thinking, as I was lost in the great din of its miscellane...

'Off the Xerox, time for home.' I opened my eyes, Charles stood in front of me.

'Xerox?'

'The machine. You were near enough asleep at it. Gone five already.'

'Xerox Taxis,' I said.

'You're getting a taxi?'

'Don't think so. You?'

'Why would I get a taxi?'

'Not sure. I'm not sure what we're talking about.'

'Ha!' he rolled back on his heels again, 'And they call *me* Barmy!'

'Or is it Balmy?'

He frowned, 'Get some sleep. I'll see you tomorrow.'

Before going home I checked the ink levels of my machine. Filled the staples. Made sure the waste unit

and fuser kit were ready for another day's work. A great copier is but the sum of his tools.

The obvious downside to an estranged father was, I could never ask for money. So whenever I needed some there was only one person I could call. 'There's these shoes, Mum.' She wasn't happy I'd woken her. I'd forgotten the night shift. 'Ham,' I said. She'd asked about the chewing noises I was making.

I could see the proprietor of the shoe shop. Old, bald, dressed smart as a groom. He moved about in the semi-dark behind the display, his hands crossed over the front of his crotch all formal like some attendee at a stately do.

'I was thinking maybe getting my birthday money early, Mum,' I locked eyes with the bald man, he turned his gaze to dust the toe of a Chelsea boot. 'And my Christmas money early,' I wondered if he'd seen me there three days in a row. 'And next year's birthday money early.' The bald man walked from sight.

Mum reminded me of the benefits in permanent, stable employment, then hung up to go back to sleep.

My last afternoon at Pettigrew & Giles wasn't particularly busy. I must have pushed that green button ninety times or more. Soon I would leave the glow, walk for the last time to catch the bus at the bottom of Cedar Hill.

Charles poked his head through the fire door at the end of the room. He looked as young, as old, as ever, 'Boo!'

'Hello, Charles.'

'Bet you didn't expect me to come in through there.'

'I didn't really expect you to not come in through there.'

'Well, you're pretty much done here. There'll not be more copies need doing. Not like there has been anyway.'

'What were they for, the copies?'

'Do you not look at the documents?'

'I'm too focused on their reproduction.'

'Well, if I told you what they were for,' he leant close, all serious, 'I'd have to kill you!' He stared at me, wide eyes, yellow where they were meant to be white.

'This is you just being... Balmy, isn't it, Charles?'

'Ha!' He rolled back on his heels.

'Don't suppose you have more work, do you?' I didn't want to leave my photocopier, the glass bricks, the sense of worth.

'Let me think,' he screwed his face in mock thought. The way his lips quivered reminded me of a Charles Manson interview I'd seen on the internet. 'No!' he said, and laughed.

I got my coat and my bag, and like that, was cast unemployed to the street above.

I hadn't rushed into this. I'd stood for some time out of sight from the shoe shop proprietor. Paracetamol. Butter. Dental floss. They were the last three items I remember procuring through my credit card. I didn't like to know what I owed on the thing, it was near maxed, of that I was sure.

The shoe shop was dark. Wouldn't have thought it with all them bulbs, but there it was, curious light.

'How can I help you, sir?' The proprietor's voice

came soft. The carpet was so plush it gave the air of a sound booth.

'Pretty decent place to drop a glass,' I said, admiring the carpet. It was darker green than the velvet backdrop in the window display.

'You'd like a drink?'

'What?'

'A glass you say? You'd care for a glass of water?'

'I can get water in here?'

'If you like, sir.'

This was a step up from the high street.

'Actually, I'm fine thanks. I'm interested in those,' I pointed behind me, to the window, all the time holding eye contact with the bald man. I could have been pointing out any pair in the display, but he'd seen me there, and he knew. 'Nines,' I said.

He had me sit in a studded chair, high backed with cushioned arms. I placed my head against its velvet. The proprietor disappeared to leave me alone in the gloom. If there was a clock ticking somewhere, I couldn't hear it. There was something in the ambience that seemed to allow only a metre's circumference to be listened to, all beyond was absorbed by the carpet and the dense wood shelving. I couldn't even hear the bald man return, only saw him up ahead, holding an off-white shoebox with an ornate logo on the lid. He approached and knelt before me, then took out the shoes. I didn't know where to look, flitting between the grey back wall and a low lit emergency exit sign. The only sound was that of tissue paper unfurling from its crumpled state, having been packed tight down in the toe-end of my future shoe. The bald man handled my foot with all the care of a

surgeon and, using a shoehorn, placed the goods on in a singular motion. My feet were encased, a sure grip all about them. The proprietor gestured for me to walk the length of his shop. Up I went. Down I went. Couldn't honestly say they were comfortable, but having finally looked at the shoes, it was clear to see that what little light was in that shop, appeared to double off their surface.

To my disbelief, the credit card worked. Had the planets returned to normal? I didn't want to ruin the moment by pondering the foul debt. Instead, I left the shop in a mild spin, and walked a few lengths of Cedar Hill wearing my new purchase.

I needed money now more than ever, but chose not to work. I wanted to spend a few days at home with the shoes. A kind of paternity leave. I wore them to the bathroom. Boiled the kettle in them. I sat in the lounge, legs outstretched, watching them, not the telly. I did everything short of sleeping in the shoes, but at night, woke intermittently, to sit and view them on other side of the room, glowing in the dark. My shoes were getting to know the world, but they were yet to know me. They still rubbed at the ankles and tip of my biggest toe. With ever decreasing funds, it was time to return to work.

At the agency, Alfie took me in to his office. His hair was shiny, his trousers shinier.

'So like, admin, clerical stuff?' he asked.

'Yeah. You know? The kind of stuff I've done before. Check your books. I'm good with a photocopier.'

He scrolled a mouse, looked across his monitor,

'Yeah, I can see here. You done a few copy jobs.'

'Yeah. So, just that kind of thing, really. Whatever you can get me.'

'Ok,' he scrolled his mouse some more. 'Not much—but, ah! There's something come up here. Starts tomorrow. Says admin.'

'Sounds good.'

'It's down in Hillgate, not far from the station. You know that area?'

'I'll look it up. What's the company called?'

'Zure-Point.'

'Zure-Point? What do they do?'

'Err,' he checked his screen. 'Let's see. It just says, Zure-Point. Services.'

'Services?'

'That's what it says on our system, but I'll tell you what. I'll take a look on the internet proper. Might tell us more.' I looked at the frosted window in his office. Followed its grey light down to my shoes. They somehow appeared newer than they had yesterday.

'Yep, there it is,' said Alfie. He turned his monitor to face me. On it was a map of the Hillgate area with Zure-Point marked out on a corner. 'You know that area?'

'I'll work it out. Does it say what the company is?'

'Zure-Point. Services,' he said again. 'Let me call Lucy. Lucy's good on the clients.'

He picked his phone up and dialed an extension. 'Lucy. Hi, Alfie. You know we have a company on the books, Zure-Point? Yeah, what is it they do?' He waited for her response then said, 'Hmm, we checked online, just says services.'

He looked at me as he nodded along to Lucy on the other end. 'Yeah, yeah,' he said. 'Yeah.' There was a silence. He breathed gently through his nose. 'Ok. Thanks, Luce,' he placed the phone down. 'It's an office,' he said.

'An office?'

'It's that sort of area. Lots of offices. You know?'

'OK. So I'll dress for the office?'

'Sounds like a plan.'

I sat in a café across from Zure-Point thirty minutes before I was meant to start. I looked at the building. A red brick place. Big. I counted eight floors and guessed they could have upwards of six photocopiers each. I'd dressed formal. Shirt. Tie. Trousers. And the shoes. I was careful not to forget plasters. The leather was stubborn but worth every rub.

I entered at ground level through automatic doors. They were fixed open and cold air blew about the reception. I approached a lady sat behind a desk and told her I was from the agency. She made a call and asked me to take a seat. I noticed she had an electric heater just by her legs. 'Why do they leave the doors open?' I asked.

'Best for the clients,' she said. 'Easier for them getting in and out.'

I looked over at the entrance, 'But they're automatic.'

'If you'd like to take a seat, sir. Don will be right down.'

I sat in a waiting area, rubbed my hands in the breeze. A pile of magazines sat on a low table. Dog-eared. Out-dated.

'Are you the lad?' I looked up. A man in a short-

sleeved shirt stood by the reception desk.

‘Lad?’ I asked.

‘Lad from the agency?’

‘That’s me.’ I stood to approach him.

‘I’m Don,’ he put his hand out for me to shake. Tattoos on his forearms had turned to blurs they were so old. ‘Follow me.’

We walked down a corridor as wide and as drafty as the reception. ‘Been looking for the keys all morning,’ said Don. His pace was quick, I tailed in middling pain.

‘Keys?’

‘For the store. Found ‘em now I hope. Was told that man over there got em.’ He pointed to a caretaker at the end of the corridor. Bearded, one hand on a broom, the other in the pocket of his boiler suit. Don approached him while I stopped by a radiator to remove my left shoe. A plaster had come loose. The caretaker pulled some keys from his pocket and handed them to Don. ‘Got ‘em,’ he yelled, and started back towards me.

I stared past Don to the caretaker. He shot me a smile through his beard to expose a surprising amount of gum. It was something like a toothless grin, and would have been were it not for the fact he had all his teeth.

Outside we walked a path lined with mobile units and sub-buildings. I assumed they were connected, in some way, to the main Zure-Point office. The air was cold, I could see goose bumps forming over the old tattoos on Don’s arms. ‘Have you done this sort of thing before?’ he asked.

‘Yeah, I’ve been temping since I left school really.’

‘No, I mean demolition.’

We stopped before a squat building, green wooden doors big enough for a bus to pass through. Just in front of it was a huge empty skip, ‘This is the store,’ said Don. He unlocked the doors and we entered.

It was little more than a concrete barn, forty foot squared, packed wall to wall with wardrobes. Couldn’t move for them. The only space was right there by the door, beyond that, wardrobes. Used wardrobes.

‘What we need to do,’ Don said, ‘is flatten these, and throw ‘em in that skip there.’ He looked at my forearms, ‘I’ll get Eugene to give you a hand.’

Most seemed to be made from plywood, but here and there, I could make out an ornate butterfly hinge, a fine oak grain, a mirrored door faded as if a century old. ‘Where are they from?’ I asked.

‘Various places.’

‘Various places?’

‘Yeah.’

‘And why are you getting rid of them?’

‘Need the space,’ he walked off rubbing his hands together in the cold. He shouted back from over his shoulder, ‘I’ll send Eugene out.’

I looked at all that wood. I looked at the skip. I looked at my shoes. They appeared to be looking back, like a kind of pet. I wanted to take a picture.

Eugene arrived. He was big. Maybe the biggest man I’d seen. He had a sledgehammer slung across his shoulder. ‘Hello.’ I put my hand out and he shook it with a frightening grip.

'U-Geen,' he said, in low, drawn-out syllables.

'Where are you from?' I asked. He frowned. I made a swooping gesture with my hand, like a plane taking off then landing, 'From? Country?'

'Ah,' he pointed to an emblem on his sports jersey, XXL and near to bursting.

The emblem was an ornate *D*, surrounded by strange geometric letters. In all its ambiguity, it narrowed Eugene's origin down to maybe a million locations.

He gave me a pair of thick gardener's gloves, pointed to the skip, and went head on into the wardrobes.

He made light work of the job, a cyclone personified. All was a cloud with splinter and hinge. The stone floor twinkled with the glass of broken mirror. Poor guy was in for about a hundred and forty years of bad luck. The debris he threw in my direction, which I dodged, mindful of the shoes, then threw in the skip's direction.

It was a deeply unpleasant task, and far removed from pushing a button at a copier, but I enjoyed how specific it was. This wasn't any old clean-up-and-throw-out job. This wasn't a pile of junk, unwanted odds and ends. These were wardrobes. I couldn't honestly say to someone that I'd spent the day chucking stuff out. This wasn't stuff. This was wardrobes. Only wardrobes.

After a few hours on the job, I looked at my shoes. I'd so far managed to keep them unscathed during the demolition. Some stiffness had built in my coccyx so I arched back until something popped. I looked over at Eugene, he was taking similar respite, dabbing his forehead with the elastic wrist of his protective gloves. We locked eyes, shared something. Not quite a smile,

but pleasant all the same. He pointed to a small wardrobe, it was white, no more than four foot high. MDF. He picked the sledgehammer up and gestured towards me. He grunted. One syllable. With the aid of his eyes, I knew what it meant: *Go on, you might like it.*

I raised my palm, as if to say no thanks, but he insisted. I stood in the cooling air, still. Still as a day with the copier. The beige plastic. The atrophy in the muscle. *The Day is New*, I thought, then trod carefully through the jettisoned debris to take the hammer from my mentor.

It was surprisingly light, though not something I'd like to make a career with. I held it with one hand near the top, and the other at bottom. It's how I'd seen Eugene using it. I looked on the wardrobe, inanimate, but alive as ever now that I was about to kill it. I lifted the hammer above my head and couldn't help but think, 'Wardrobe. Somebody loved you once. Or, at least, found you very useful.'

I bought it down quickly. A nice crack opened right across the front. Again. Thud. And the crack doubled. I took a swing at the side, by the hinges. The door came away completely and fell towards us. We quickstepped out of its way, Eugene gave nods of approval. I bought the hammer overhead in my largest arc yet, an attempt to buckle the wardrobe in on itself. I misjudged the angle, catching it off centre. Not as satisfying as I would have liked, but a blow was a blow.

All day I'd watched Eugene do this, I had appreciated his efficiency at the job, but I'd been jarred by the noise that went with it. The sound of breaking wood, I learnt, was best heard close, and felt with sure

vibration through the arms and into the chest. I enjoyed that sledgehammer immensely. Me, the maker of copies, bringing a small wardrobe to ruin. Eugene lined up another. Bigger this time. I did three, four, six in a row. Elation. Annihilation. The Day *was* New.

In all the excitement I'd forgotten about the shoes. I could see a mess of wood in my peripheral but didn't dare look down. I lowered the hammer and stepped from the scene. The grind of splinter and nail vibrated between the floor and sole of my shoes. I kept moving back, all the way until I bumped into the skip where I shimmied around its hard side, my spine pressing against its rust. Eugene hadn't noticed me disappear. My feet hurt. I could see my breath. Surely I'd find a bus somewhere.

I still didn't know if my shoes had been scuffed, or if they had been changed somehow. All I knew was one day, they would be old.

Uncanny, violent, seething.

Eley Williams

'Dark Rain Falling' shows us a woman's internal struggle to escape a bad affair.

Rowan Hisayo Buchanan

Juxtaposed beauty with violence, in a style that suggested a great novelist in the making.

Charlotte Seymour

Dark Rain Falling

by Deirdre Shanahan

Now the sky was washed clean of clouds. Light poured out, poured down, as the rain had done on earlier days. Relentless radio reports had told of surrounding villages flooded, road closures, buses stuck and stranded. The two hundred-year-old bridge in Lettermore had been reduced to a crumble of grey stone.

Kaye took the walkway, a Victorian pier from the hotel to the beach. It had been constructed for genteel ladies to take the air, according to the hotel brochure, and so she saw women with frilled bonnets and parasols strolling to the end, but not too far, retreating to the spread of trees nearer the gardens. Further out, past dunes where grasses snagged the wind, the pier was cracked. A fissure exposed a rub of orange rust on iron joints and clips; wood weathered and split, joists hewn apart, the bricolage of elemental damage. But staying at the hotel for the weekend was not so foolish, she told herself. The worst rain was over.

Along the strand a woman walked a dog. She wore a green beret, small protection against the weather, but still, thought Kaye, protection of a kind. At the edge of

the sea, waves chuckled themselves up in the last gasps of a storm. Kaye sat on a boulder by tricklets of pools. A couple of months back, children had played here, had run and squabbled, gathered sand, trawled for treasures to fill buckets, and she might have wandered down to the shore to sketch in that season but Gerard had become clingy and discouraged her. He had grown more dependent and although, on some level, this might have been what she wanted, his needs were stifling. As they were fortunate enough to enjoy the freedom to be together, he'd said, she should not let her interest in art carry her away from him.

Tresses of seaweed writhed over the rocks. She raised a handful of dark knots and they dripped torn and pulled like a flurry of wild hair. Dried scabs of mussel shells had chipped like nails from their hard ridges. Lips of the sea. Purses of night. Blue intensifying to lavender at the nip of the base. A bruise of deep ink.

She had not noticed the bruising until she sat on the toilet at home. In the sandalwood aroma of the white tiled bathroom, she'd pulled up her dress and saw on her gloopy thighs, the stain. Darkened capillaries milled into a desert of mauve. A smash and grab of her. And at her knee, scratches from his nails. In time, the marks would dull to the brown of dank leaves, waxy yellow, a smudge of peat, and gone.

The couple ahead were old country folk, she supposed, for he wore a cap and she a headscarf as they headed towards the church. Married, probably, as most people were, although she knew this was fanciful and not the case. When she had started teaching at the girls' school,

everyone seemed to be married. Her friends. The girls' parents. Or, if not, they at least belonged in couples. She had known he was married, at the start at the teachers' conference, because he had mentioned his wife and worn a ring. He had not deceived her. It was an inconvenience they'd managed to overcome with planning: small hotels, long weekends. She became good at working out routes and over the year they must have travelled to every county. The first time in a rented cottage near Youghal he had snaffled her, nibbling her stomach, rising to her breasts. The lip and lick of him drenching her with spit and sperm as they had rolled in and out of all the places of each other. Longing had warmed her through for days afterwards.

A trail of lights spanned the quay with odd ones missing, knocked out by the previous night's rain. The effect was a bracelet, sparkling. A couple of trawlers at anchor, a speedboat, a currach. A self-important red yacht which could not have belonged to a local.

In the foyer, diners were visible beyond the smoky glass screen, lost to the clamour of eating, the glitter of cutlery and chit-chat between couples with little of meaning to say.

'Can I help?' the boy at the desk asked.

'Might I have a pot of tea brought to my room?'

'Of course.' His raze of a beard was gingery and he smiled with ease, but he was pale as if he'd rarely been outside this side of the summer. He added, 'you're not too late for dinner.'

'It's all right, thanks. I'll have a sandwich too. Ham. Or anything but cheese.'

'Right you are.'

In her room, sitting on her bed, she relished the taste of soda bread and the slink of salty butter such as her aunt had made. When she returned the tray to the front desk at gone nine, the boy was lugging a sandbag to the front door. He knelt to shift it into position, pulled another to stack on top.

‘More rain?’ she asked.

‘So says the fella on TV.’

‘A long day for you?’

‘It is. Some of the others couldn’t get to work because of the roads.’

He pulled out a sandbag from a pile and she bent to help him, to grip the other side, so they could shift it in one movement towards the door. The sandbag sank like a drunk and she kicked it into place.

‘You’ve a good hit,’ he said.

‘If you want a thing in place you have to make it secure.’ She smiled.

‘True. I don’t want any bit of water in. We’ve enough already. The lawn in the bag is marshy and I’ll take some draining.’ He stepped back, wiping his brow. ‘Thanks,’ he said. ‘These are new fellas. We’ve some from last time, of course, but you can never have too many.’

As she left for breakfast, he was pushing a trolley along the corridor. He slipped into one room, leaving its door open, and set about making a bed, sniping in the corners of the sheets. The trolley was piled with linen and towels in the lower section, with packs of biscuits and tubs of milk on top. She swiped a fresh towel and sunk her face into its brilliant pile. She let the fresh aroma seep into her, then before she set off she took two packets of bourbons.

No one else was up except for two suited men at separate tables. Business or funeral, she guessed. At the buffet she ladled blueberries and raspberries into a large bowl and took two glasses of juice. Before she had urged him to leave his wife, she'd drunk two shots of whiskey. Then she issued an ultimatum. After these months, she'd told him, we owe it to ourselves: her or me. She had not thought her words would sound so strong or deliberate, yet they'd come out that way and she heard her voice rising in a strain: 'We can't go on. Two years like this, buzzing between hotels. Avoiding towns where we might run into someone one of us knows. Two years is enough. Be fair to her. And to me.'

He'd kept his elbows on the table, held his face in his hands.

He had come up with reasons, as he had before when they skirted the subject. Too soon. Too much for his wife to bear. He needed more time and she'd let his reasoning stand, saddened by his dilemma. His eyes were dark with worry and afterwards, as she drove back alone, she chided herself for being precipitous. What was the point of burdening him with stress? They had each other. They had each other in ways she liked and which were convenient, most of the time. He was always at the end of the phone, if not always there for her in person, and he showed up in real life whenever he could manage it. Showed up at his best, not worn out by a trudge through days of domesticity; showed up with effort, for her. She bit her lip for in many ways it was convenient indeed.

Still, the next time they met, when he was at a seminar

for deputy principals in Dublin, she said, 'You must say something.'

'I will. Of course. I want you.' He grasped her hand in the French restaurant off St. Stephen's Green. 'I want us to be together,' he said. He traced a finger around her face and over her mouth. She sipped his middle finger. He moved a moist index finger across her cheek, to her ears, where the gold of his ring hit. He said, 'I want all of you.'

At the front desk the boy was on the phone. He spoke in a raised voice and kept his back to Kaye as he huddled in a corner. A girlfriend, she thought. She could never make calls at work or receive them. Not unless she took refuge with her mobile in a spare classroom. But he had never called her. Texts only, they'd agreed.

The boy put down the phone.

'Sorry about that. My mother...'

'Is she okay? After the floods, I mean?'

'She's okay. But she gets anxious. Panic attacks the last couple of years.'

Kaye was touched at his telling.

'Since my dad left,' he said. 'She phones every day.'

'I suppose mothers always worry.'

'I guess so. You going for a walk? The pier'll need repair or there'll be accidents but heaven knows when the council'll do it.'

She went out anyway. For space. For light. The beaches she had visited with him raced through her mind. Beaches in France and Spain. They'd visited the Île de Ré and he had remarked upon the women in elaborate white headdresses, a custom sustained, he

said, because it was an island, in the same way as the isles of Aran kept their ways. He said they'd catch a boat from Galway to Inishmore in the spring.

Walking in the opposite direction to the previous day, she found the bay opening out and becoming wilder, free of buildings, with scrabbles of rocks and shingles, and the stray tangles of seaweed. She carried the necklace in her pocket. Here was a good place to have done with it. Pointless to keep such a gift, for she would not wear it even though she had loved peridot and tourmaline. He'd bought it for her when they were in Nice. An impulsive flurry of a weekend arranged at the last minute when his wife was away with her sisters. He'd taken Kaye's arm along the Promenade des Anglais and found a jeweller.

'No one else will remember this,' he had said. He stood behind her and draped the necklace around her to fasten it. When he kissed her nape, his words lodged in her heart. And now? Better off in the sea than bothering her, or beckoning her, at the bottom of a drawer every time she searched for clean underwear. Taken and carried away on the tide. Only a means to win her, keep her against the odds. And yet. Her fingers wrapped around the chain and the cuts of stones.

When he announced he had told his wife at last, she'd been caught unawares and realised she hadn't believed he'd ever be so bold. They had sat in a bar in a hotel in Longford while the business of the town swelled outside and traffic passed through, to and from Dublin. His face was ashen as he relayed his confession. His wife had called him brutal, cruel, a man of low morals,

entirely selfish. He had agreed and his wife had stormed off, slamming the door behind her. Later, when she'd recomposed herself, she told him to find somewhere else to live and hurled more stony words at him. The more he relayed, calmly, quietly, the more Kaye could hear the firestorm that devoured their domesticity.

He found a flat above a hairdresser and went back and forth between there and his old home to gather his possessions; his vinyl records, suits and shoes. But afterwards he drew deeper into himself, grew quiet, became sullen. Once, when they had stayed in a country house in the Burren, he found he had forgotten to bring his favourite jacket and so he mooned around for hours, depleted, lost for the lack of it. It seemed to Kaye as if a whole part of his life had gone the same way and she could not lift him out of the lows. He'd had to leave behind other favourites, a chair and Edwardian desk with a run of little drawers up each side, and she sensed that he blamed her for it. But he'd been the one to suggest the weekend in Belfast. They might be together more easily, he'd said, knowing no one there. Plus they could visit the Opera House and the new concert hall near the docks. A possibility of his coming back to life flickered, trembled before her.

They returned to their room from a meal in the hotel restaurant where he had enjoyed two bottles of red wine with his lamb casserole. He lay on the bed. Accommodating the pillow behind his head, he stretched an arm towards her. She hovered by the bed and said she could not go on. Wanted to break things off. Cold anger filled his eyes. That was when he lunged. Grabbed her. Pinned her on the grisly pink candlewick

bedspread. His fingers. His grip at her neck. In the small of her throat. Her voice like a trapped bird. His, full of gravel. 'You bitch. All I've done. The things I've given up for you.' His thumbs pressed into her, hard, as his whole body thrummed with rage. She forced his head away from her, caught the skin of his cheek on her nail, and tried to prise him off her until he relented, deadened with either the effort or the fill of drink, and fell back onto the bed. In the bathroom, she gathered a few toiletries and smoothed out her clothes. Then she picked up her handbag and left.

The necklace dangled off the edge of the dressing table. Faint light caught on the chips of its stones as Kaye pulled the door closed.

Downstairs, the boy at the front desk was checking a computer screen while other residents breakfasted on black pudding and wilting bacon.

'Hello there,' he said when he saw Kaye. 'Did you hear the rain in the night?'

'I did not.'

'A blast from the sky. I thought the window frames in the old part'd be blown out. There won't be many out today.'

She paid the bill and stepped outside. Light green moss dressed the trees. Distant fields floated in a mist as she left, as she drove away. The chain, the stones, released at last. The boy's mother might make good use of the piece. Might be charmed and drawn to wear it. When he cleaned the room, he'd find it. Driftwood brought to his shore. The sea, unruly, agitated, depositing debris before its retreat.

Detailed characterisation and nuance...

Eley Williams

'Keeping His Eye In' examines a particularly challenging mother-son relationship.

Rowan Hisayo Buchanan

A poignant exploration of a bright, articulate man who is in someway 'difficult', and the love and shame that his mother experiences.

Charlotte Seymour

Keeping His Eye In

by Joseph Regan

Michael stands, fleet of pulse, with a humid grip on the lining of his parka. A bus looms, perhaps his, creaks into position, tears off again after admitting its quarry. His mother is now at the tube entrance almost directly opposite; he watches her neatly trouble her bag for her rail card, slip through the barriers and out of sight.

It can't only be maternal concern. He won't grant her that. No, his mother comes to his appointments with Agnieszka because of their novelty, their American aspect. The only experience she has of professional interest in the lives of others is gleaned from the Hallmark Channel, binging as she does on those soft-hued and silly tales of family woe. She watches scenes of confession and despair, problems parcelled out in plush Upper East side apartments. His therapist's underheated and somewhat stark office on the outer limits of west London must disappoint her. She comes too so that she can give what he has, what he is, some form of medical mooring, so as to distract her from her own composite picture of her son as a charmless and strange figure who puts them all in a tight spot.

Michael feels himself straining, almost keeling forwards. He considers catching up with his mother, saying something, until a middle-aged man, in construction hard hat and high-vis jacket, approaches a bin next to the bus stop, and with an empty and balled crisp packet at his side disposes of a bottle of Coke which he's yet to open. As the man colours, things lighten and lift for Michael. There will be no scene on his mother's train. His coat rights itself through his slackening hand. Others too!

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It was decided during the session, after Agnieszka had suggested it, that Michael's mother would visit him at his flat the next day around lunchtime. They could talk over coffee, and perhaps put up his new shelves that had been delivered earlier in the week. Michael rarely stocked anything, so she had brought with her this morning a decent blend and a homemade carrot cake that she wasn't entirely happy with.

As she sweeps through the exit of Earl's Court Tube Station she runs through what was said yesterday. That the state of his health and flat worried her. That he has plenty of potential and brains but no real self-interest or even pride. That it pains her sometimes to talk about her son when in the company of friends, but not for the reasons he'd claim. 'But none of this is meant to pain or undermine *you*, darling', she'd said to him, a little short of breath, and looking to the impassive Agnieszka for some nod or comment in support of this. 'Who said anything about either?'

Michael had shot right back with, his voice rippling under the impish joy (for it was a form of joy, she had always felt, whenever he was angry) that had disturbed it. And she had hated him at that moment, hated him for using that old uncharitable trick against her, as if merely saying something, weighing up and putting the case for the other side, makes you immediately guilty of it. And from him of all people! Someone who prides himself, as he never tires of telling people, on a hatred of cliché and tired thinking! Her thoughts tumble in this way, which is all they ever do when he sits at their centre. She has a little mantra she invokes when she feels things spinning out in this way, a little something of Virginia Woolf's from a novel she can't recall. Was it *Dalloway*? No, she's definitely forgotten. All she remembers is that someone lets 'the tongue of the door slowly lengthen in the lock', and invoking that has always brought her a kind of calm, however fragile and passing it proves.

She quickens her walk, feeling perhaps that she's been dragging her feet along like a child. Better not to bring all this thinking into his flat, where she imagines him, at that moment, sitting at his desk, perhaps dressed, putting together another of his letters. Why he had taken to writing them she couldn't quite grasp. It was a phase, unlikely to harden into anything professional or productive. He told her that it was his way of *keeping his eye in*, which she didn't much understand.

He had given her one to post on her last visit to his flat. The envelope had been unsealed, perhaps intentionally. Holding it in a terse hand she had read the letter, which was addressed to a well-known tabloid

newspaper, outside his building, and with an instinctive glance up and down the road had neatly folded it and slipped it into a skip in front of a house in the midst of renovation.

Dear Editor,

When it has been proven, beyond any reasonable doubt, that it was Alice Duggan, of sepulchral chat room fame, who committed these grisly murders enjoying such coverage in the press; that it was she who as good as gutted those dreary Welsh teens for whom a trip to London, although a fatal one in this case, must have daubed some colour onto a canvas much in need of it, then perhaps you may like to use 'Alice Aforethought' as your headline, credit me with its construction, and compensate me with whatever sum you see fit. I only hope that no meddling psychiatrist intrudes a report mitigating criminal culpability, thereby scuppering a perfectly funny and serviceable pun!

I believe the sentencing is scheduled for Thursday week. My contact details are enclosed.

Sincerely yours,

Michael Agnew

She had been faintly aware of the case the letter referred to. Why was he involving himself in it? No, she wasn't going to send something like that for him. No mother in her right mind would.

Michael's flat is technically in well-heeled, sought-after Chelsea, but the road on which he lives has an almost slummy and provisional air. It's bisected by a busy junction, and she hates crossing it, but Michael's

portion of road is just beyond it, and the only other station that his flat is within reach of is appreciably longer to walk from.

At the junction, the red light is forever coming, and when it does the traffic slows to what feels like a grudging halt. As she crosses, two trucks and a minibus eye her archly. Once on the other side she hears them fill the space she'd been seconds before, racing to recover the time she'd cost them. As a girl she'd been knocked down outside St Mark's Church in Edinburgh, where her family attended mass, not on a heaving Sunday but after a confirmation class on a cold November evening after school, and it had taken her some time, despite the superficial injuries to her leg and back that she'd sustained, to cross one again.

The houses on his road, which must once have been grand, seem now to be trading on their height and heft. Many appear vacant, with boarded windows and scree of leaflets, tins and cans. The brickwork seems slightly scorched. Roads like this, she thinks, let the borough down, need to be scrubbed, made over.

Feeling slightly let down by things, she lets herself into the ill-lit hallway of Michael's building. She bends to collect a small pile of letters, sifts quickly through them; they are variously addressed to a Mark Powell and a Brendan Fitzgerald. Men who, she concedes, may both have good jobs and live with girlfriends met at university or work; though it's more likely they both share in Michael's problems, for his is a building administrated by the National Health Service, part of its housing provision for patients afflicted by mental illness.

No letter for Michael. Nor are his shoes among the two pairs of similarly sturdy walking boots on the landing - which both suggest, to her eyes anyway, muted, muffled lives. She suspects that all three avoid each other, each attuned to the others' patterns of departure and return, and doubts that Michael has spoken to either.

In fact, he has met one of them. Three nights before he heard a door open, footfalls on the landing, a sudden rush towards his door. An awkward sequence of knocks followed, as if the person outside was trying to imitate or recall a casual acoustical greeting from their past. What a hopelessly ragged effort at seeming poised, Michael had thought, as he stood waiting for the knocking to resolve itself into silence. He opened his door as his neighbour was beginning to knock for a second time, pushed it until the chain rattled in its silvery protesting way, and perceived through the gap a freckled, mixed-race face that gave unto a high wavering hairline. Michael was hit by that shameless tobacco smell that he had come to associate with his fellow sufferers, an association that had no doubt developed from those trips to Calais and Brussels which were organised by his health worker as a way of bringing together those who were 'in the same boat as you buddy', and which involved taking long coach journeys with blotchy and irredeemably strange people with sudden arrhythmic laughs, people who hummed along to songs that perhaps didn't exist, adrift in their raging and sifting words, and who disembarked in that disordered way from the coach whenever required to, some striding

out into the road, heedless of approaching cars, and the small team of professionals corralling the poor dupes into a group of sorts by a cafe on the roadside where most would flick out cigarettes and ask around for lighters with tongues lolloping faintly behind filter tips, whilst Michael wished that he wasn't there and swore that next time he wouldn't be.

'Did you slash my tires?' the face in the gap asked.

Michael ran his finger along the chain. 'On which car?'

'It wasn't mine anyway', the man said, suddenly all conciliation.

'Oh, I see.'

'Have the council changed the rubbish times?', he asked with what sounded to Michael, absurdly, like pity, as if he was suddenly the erratic one who needed to be put at his ease by this uninvited man at his door.

'Not that I know of. They're due to collect tomorrow, I believe.'

'Look, shall we just talk about this inside?', the man said, like a detective trying to spare the criminal Michael from further scandal on a very public doorstep.

Michael pulled the door to, returned to his bed, and resolved not to answer again unless for family.

**

'Only me son', Michael's mother calls as she opens his door. 'Fine', he replies imperiously with a few seconds later, from somewhere inside, which has the effect of jolting her into the kitchenette first, where she puts the coffee and cake to one side. She feels like a fly that's

rattled the silken calm of some monster's web, thrashing around with noisy illegality at one of its corners. On the kitchen counter in front of her is the box of Panettone that they bought together, weeks ago, for Agnieszka. He said he'd given it to her, and she hadn't thought to check whether this was true. It must have been sitting there, she calculates, for just over a month. Its little tag of thanks- *Dear Aggy, just a little something to show our appreciation-* clings to one of its sheer walls, like some improbable flowering on a cliff face.

She walks out and down his hallway, and finds him at his desk in the narrow living room, sitting with very little space. There are boxes either side of him, and two cardboard rolls, the kind that store large wall posters, that lean oppressively against the wood. One is almost grazing his left elbow.

'How are you darling?', she asks as he half swivels to face her.

'I'm ok. Tired. Sorry for the mess.'

'Not at all. I brought coffee, and carrot cake.'

'Ah, homemade cake. The great balm.'

'Well, that's, perhaps not quite. And I'm not sure this is one of my best efforts.'

'Nonsense, it'll be lovely. I'm quite sure of it.'

'Well, that was the hope. Oh yes, and Hannah sent this today. I thought you'd like to see it.' She digs out a postcard from her straw shoulder bag, passes it to him, and retreats to make the coffee.

Michael watches her twitch away from him. He looks down, and sees that the card is already slightly furled under the pressure of his grip. If Lombroso looked for signs of criminality in skull types, then some other

crank, surely, could look for the scale of a son's disdain for his mother in the way his fingers tried to warp whatever object they alighted on. More unbidden madness, he said to himself, with something like a smile.

The front of Hannah's postcard bears an aerial photograph, and a caption beneath it in gaudy font. Visovac Monastery – a lone settlement on a tree-ringed island, hemmed in by sea, an insistent and perhaps even doctored blue. To live in such a place, Michael thinks, would be either immensely trying or wonderful. The small print at the bottom of the card clarifies the location. Yes, of course, his sister's in Croatia; his mother had mentioned that. He flips the card over. 'Dear fam'. Already excruciating.

He reads on. Between talk of local cheer and her friend's heat stroke flashes the sentence: "Croatia has a liminal loveliness, nestling between the Mediterranean and Baltic". Michael returns to it after working quickly through the rest. Liminal?

Michael is a year older than his sister. They went to the same school, where Hannah had excelled and been well-liked. She became a prefect; won a poetry prize (a garrulous eagle narrates the plight of weary migrants across the Levant); represented Libya at a Model United Nations conference in Belfast.

Now she studies sociology or anthropology at one of Oxford's more modern colleges. She's sufficiently pretty, with thick chestnut hair and rich, darkly sympathetic eyes. She could pass for an Italian or Greek, which has always amused their parents, both of fair, Church of Scotland stock.

Hannah is involved in the life of her university.

Michael has heard his mother say this a handful of times. In her first term she wrote a piece for a journal linked to her college about 'hygge' – the Danish mass noun which denotes 'cosy contentment and well-being'- and confected something about how we could all do with a bit more 'hygge' in our increasingly unstable world, in this fear-addled Europe that seems content to usher in all these demagogues and petty nationalisms.

'Are these cups clean?' his mother calls.

'Yes. Well, they've been rinsed.'

Don't say, whatever you do, that that's not the same thing, Michael thinks. *Mum's the word,* she thinks back at him, decanting the supermarket-own branded detergent into both cups.

Michael puts the postcard on the desk. The monastery seems to diminish each time he looks at it. The monks must be amiable by nature, to stomach such confinement, or else have boats to row out in when it gets too much.

His mother returns with the coffee, dexterous fingers splayed so as to divide the two cups between thumb and forefinger of her left hand. In her right is a plate of cake for him, which she puts, along with the cups, on a small side table that he very occasionally eats at.

'What do you think of Hannah's card?'

'A lovely missive, wasn't it? I'd actually forgotten she was there.'

'Almost a week now. And how typical of Alicia. Such a flighty girl. Madness not to respect the sun.'

'Well, I can't bear it. I don't understand why people seek it out. Never understood it.'

‘We don’t have the skin for it. Well, Hannah does, somehow.’

He fingers the corner of the cake. She flicks her face away, and then notices the shelving panels, and their metal supports, arranged haphazardly against the far wall.

‘Are we giving the shelves a go today then?’

‘Please, another time mum. We’re no use anyway. Dad can help next time he’s off work.’ Michael swivels to face his mother properly, who turns again to meet his gaze. ‘I forgot to mention this yesterday, and Aggy would have loved it, but a few days ago the neighbour on the landing below knocked around midnight. He asked me if I’d slashed his tyres! Guess what I said in reply? Which is your car?! Which one! Sort of sums it up really, doesn’t it?’ Michael’s mother tightens, as if before impact. His gaze, and the singular way he makes those pincer motions with his hands when unsettled, is hard to face. She looks away, gesturing to the cake and coffee. ‘No, darling, it doesn’t sum anything up. You were being polite. Maybe better to not answer the door though after dark, unless you know it’s one of us three.’

Yes, sharing that was worthwhile, hit its mark, she’s looking for better and firmer words. As she twists in her chair he notes the grey of her hair, which she seems less concerned these days about hiding. It fans out from her roots, silvered reeds tipped with brown. She takes a sip of her coffee and pushes Michael’s cup towards him.

‘Well yes, that’s what I decided on.’

She is consoled momentarily by this point of agreement, but no, he means to go on, and it strikes her anew

just how any telling of anything that has happened to him transports him to such a very great extent. He's coaxing a cat now; two fingers have replaced the pincer's five. 'He asked really disconnected questions too, completely unrelated. There was no exchange really, just me fielding these disembodied questions of his. Although "question", I suppose, is too grand a term for the stuff he was throwing out. A question is a bridge, isn't it? This man was all island'. He reached out and tapped Hannah's postcard with a fingernail. 'All island.'

'The poor love sounds confused.'

'Yeh, I think "confused" fits the bill quite nicely. If he wasn't confused then we've been doing it all wrong up to this point. Tying ourselves to the wrong conversational habits.'

Had he finished? He had. Always worth waiting to find out, she had learnt. 'Be that as it may,' she offered quietly, 'I just don't like to think of him struggling alone in that room.'

'No, well, he'll be alone for a good while yet if he keeps up that kind of small talk. I thought of a great name for him afterwards though!'

'I hope it's a kind one.'

'I'm practically killing him with kindness! Drum roll please, mother! Don Sequitor!'

Michael laughs, immoderately, flashing his stout and yellowing teeth. His mother pulls her cardigan tighter around a milky ridge of collar bone, and gulps blindly. This shame of hers, he thinks now, as she avoids finding his face with her own, a sense of it anyhow, has been present throughout his life, although it's probable she

hasn't always felt it. How often he could have diminished it, checked it with kinder and saner words. Wasn't it true that he used to try? But no, he doesn't like the grammar of the question – he isn't responsible for his mother's opinion of him.

But at what point would it have occurred to her that things would only worsen from here on? He can't speak for her of course, and he wouldn't want to, and it's certainly hard to pinpoint now, but things really started to shift at the start of his sixth form, perhaps because, with the admission of girls after five years in an all-boys, Catholic secondary, many around him suddenly made some slight but unnerving adjustments. Including Eoin, a sunnily stupid classmate with reddish hair and large papery ears, who had taken him in, or rather kept him alongside his sturdier group of friends who played rugby and spoke to girls freely on trains.

A few years of this sporadic warmth with Eoin, until Michael cooled it, cooled it once he saw that certain things weren't going to be reciprocated. For he had loved Eoin, he was quite sure, or at the very least had felt something close enough to it. Whatever the feeling was, and whatever language it was couched in, it had been strong enough to pull at the seams of his life; the pain of losing Eoin, in the months following the end of their relationship, would often just shoot through him suddenly, a physically wrenching that was followed by a totalizing sense that he had nothing to show for anything.

He finds, when looking back at it, that much of their friendship had been motored by Eoin's love of dares and Michael's ability to supply particularly inventive

ones. Shaking with laughter, and taken over by a kind of perverted pride, he would watch as Eoin minced around a tube platform pretending to be a rent boy, or would feign a fit of epilepsy in a busy shopping centre. It didn't matter that their characters were fundamentally at odds, that Michael read Suetonius during reading periods while Eoin exasperated their teacher with his constant, witless chattering, because both boys had found a weird and giddy middle ground on which each could find something in the other. For there is more than one way to be yourself, Michael would often remind himself, a reality which people who are quick to comment on the outward incompatibility of two friends often forget.

But separate they eventually did, and what was there to do about it, really, when it came down to it? Michael had too much to say, perhaps; but it was useless to try and make Eoin, who no longer had a need for him, and who was wholly deaf to feeling once it was put into words anyway, see what the loss would mean for at least one of them. Not that this deafness was necessarily something undesirable. For what was the good of all this receptiveness when the result was just more strain? After all, keeping one's ear to the ground doesn't stop the inevitable rush and trample of hooves. Michael's own inner life, he felt in more honest moments, was florid, self-regarding, self-circling, a mere first draft of feeling that wasn't even near to resolving itself into the gauntly polished final version that Eoin had quietly achieved. Eoin's was a smaller remit, of course, but that's what made it more coherent.

Years ago now. And it should feel as such, Michael concedes, but how can it when he's done next to nothing ever since? Events that tremble, faintly, in the aspic of his obsessive, circling mind. Let it go now, he tells himself, before the thought crests and crashes into the realization that he probably never will.

Michael's mother watches him now – distant, troubled – and imagines that it is those school days that he is thinking of now. Days that were difficult for both. He went in, she remembers, more and more infrequently, and then only for exams. The school behaved well about it, made allowances, told her that it was a stressful time and lapses like this were inevitable. Her Volvo would hover on a side road whilst he sat each paper, as she wasn't to park up by the gates. On one occasion she had looked back at his revision notes on the rear seat, and had gripped the wheel and screamed.

She thinks, often, of that first Friday of sixth form. Michael's year had got together for drinks at somebody's house, and he had frightened her, in the hallway of their home, his father asleep, shortly before midnight, she not expecting him back for another hour, spilling out for her what had happened and what it would all mean going forward. Just how much effort the party had extorted from him, the exhausting social revolutions that he now knew lay ahead, the inevitable and boring struggle for priority among new voices, and the impotent rage that results from watching someone secure and mediocre being exactly that around people taken by them, and the paralysing thought that you'd be just as well-received if given the chance, if circumstances had shimmied an inch either side, and how the evening

ended with a toké or two of cannabis with two girls whom he recognised from his English class and an effort to be amusing which backfired, an effort made in reply to a comment by one of the girls that Flora (at whose house they were at that evening, and who was fairly fat but had what everyone agreed was a beautiful face, fine and luminous, with eyebrows that arched hare-like over bright eyes dipped with blue, and who was already the star of Drama Studies and belonged busily to a youth theatre outside of school) 'was a social butterfly', and he had said in a tone that sounded more sullen than intended that he wasn't sure there was much of the butterfly in her, but instead the caterpillar, which she certainly put the word pillar into.

Minutes pass, half an hour, while Michael and his mother go over familiar ground – BBC dramas; the upcoming programme at The National Theatre; next month's film schedule at the French Institute. Has she booked Krakow? Yes, a weekend in September. Your father would have rather Bruges. Doesn't appeal, and anyway, he chose the last trip. The coffee is finished, the cake eaten, and, he agrees, not quite her best. She'll be going now, unless he's changed his mind about the shelves. Next time, when dad's here. Next time.

**

Outside his building the air feels sharper, and the sky, now streaked with blacks and greys, has lost its bloom. Time spent with him has had this effect. A ridiculous thought, she admits, and anyhow he seems better, if only slightly. Her cardigan is now insufficient, and she

wonders at her decision that morning to leave without her coat.

The love I do feel for him brings me very little, she thinks, as she fingers the envelope he passed to her as she was leaving. Would she buy a stamp and send it for him? Yes, she supposes so. He doesn't have one in the flat? OK, yes, she'll take it to the post office on the way home.

Who petitions newspapers at his age? Or at all anymore? He's falling out of time. An ambulance at the junction ahead half circles, turns back the way it came, and straddles the middle of the road as it grimaces past her.

She slips the letter from its covering. This one, lord help her, is addressed to the Editor at the Oxford English Dictionary.

Dear Editor,

Seeing as you welcome into your eloquent arms various new words each year, I'd like to offer you one of my own. The word 'solipsism' (already on your books) could perhaps be stretched slightly further. 'The quality of being self-centred or selfish' doesn't quite cover the types we see now looming large over our entertainment landscape, the types that make a cult of who and how they fuck, doesn't quite do justice to the high degree of sexual broadcasting among those perfectly happy to maul and paw things that should remain intimately unrevealed. So perhaps 'trollopsism' would –

No, nor this one. She quickly folds the letter, and after a scan up and down the road, places it among

the dregs of metal and plaster in the skip outside the neighbouring building. Throwing his work away again was, she thinks, a nasty inversion of what mothers were supposed to do. You enlivened your home with what your children produced, forwarded it to friends, colleagues. But it had been mainly Hannah's paintings or poems she'd tacked to the fridge when they were young. His school work, when it did arrive home, was scrunched and ripped and often strange and anyway he hated praise, absolutely hated it. She's not sure she ever has put anything of his up. She must have done. But certainly true that he didn't like praise, didn't seek it out like other children. In France one year Michael, who must have been no older than ten, had spent much of the holiday by the pool snarling at a Scandinavian boy of a similar age, long and treacle-limbed, whose hair was almost silver in the sun, who had insisted that his mother, fantastically blonde and blithe, follow each dive with a lovely eye. Maybe it became easier to throw things away after she'd found the photograph of Eoin in Michael's desk drawer (taken, no doubt, on that East German SLR he had wielded, moodily, throughout his GCSE year); the photograph of Eoin sprawled asleep on an inflatable mattress with his olive-green boxer shorts adjusted for the shot. The finding of which had effectively ended her relationship with Eoin's mother Imelda, for how could she tell her? And, perhaps more pressingly, how could she not?

As she walks to High Street Kensington Station, she considers that perhaps he'd find some modest success if he wrote with less venom and a greater detachment, about things that people actually wanted to read and

respond to. That would improve things, if he brought less of himself to what he did, although that can't really be expected of anybody. But if he managed to, if he managed to conceal the way things were like others seemed to, then she could actually leave him at his desk with a mother's quiet pride and utter, amongst friends or colleagues later, that her son, the writer, would be spending the coming weekend with her.

Powerful, operatic themes.

Eley Williams

Love Ocean delves into an abusive marriage.

Rowan Hisayo Buchanan

A tale of how violence begets violence, which was impressive in its brevity.

Charlotte Seymour

Love Ocean

by Hana Riaz

After Olive Senior's 'Love Orange'

Some men aren't afraid of anything. My husband was one of them.

Of course, we met in the rain, caught in a torrential downpour on the coast of Borneo. We watched the streets flood for maybe an hour, our tables only inches apart. When it stopped we finally spoke. For some reason the storm had us in a kind of trance. We walked back to what we realised was the same hostel.

It turned out that Shakil had just started working as a junior doctor only a few miles away from my office in London. I was surprised to see someone like him travelling alone and we both laughed at how uncommon it was for Asians to travel for the sake of it. I explained how my family thought I was there with a group of friends.

When I asked him what brought him to this part of the world, he remarked the ocean. How warm the water was, how everything looked limitless and possible from a distance.

We spent the last two weeks of our trip together and

I tried everything from jet skiing to diving. With him I surrendered against my instincts to the rhythm of a tide I had previously only watched from afar.

Growing up, if I was to say I loved the ocean in a care-free way, I would have been lying. I was in love with it the way people love something they are afraid of.

During the week my father would come home from his shift at the factory. We would stay up and watch documentaries on the National Geographic Channel with him, my mother pleading with us to go to bed. We would look at him, settling on to the stained couch as he imitated her moaning. With us tucked into either side of him, he would turn the telly on.

We would watch everything, from David Attenborough uncovering parts of the ocean that seemed fit only for our imagination, to programmes about tsunamis engulfing everything. Those were my father's favourites and each time it gave him a boyish wide-eyed joy watching something once so calm swell ferociously and take everything with it. I remember watching news clips of Sri Lanka in awe, bodies swept up, others running from the beach to nowhere as a wave swallowing the skyline chased them.

'You should always respect water, the ocean. There is nothing as powerful,' he announced.

I began to believe this to be true and somehow imagined love to be most like the ocean: vast, deep, infinite, sometimes giving, at others taking, an equilibrium.

After putting us to bed, he would go back into the living room and sit on the couch where my mother

would serve him dinner on a plastic tray. He would turn on the news or cricket before complaining about how the food was not good enough. *What was she doing all day that she couldn't prepare her husband a decent meal? Her husband who slaved away all day even though others were beginning to strike because the conditions were so bad?*

It would always end the same way. She would apologise as he smashed a plate or glass and as she swept it up, asking under her breath if she should make him something else.

Shortly after I turned ten, we took our first trip to the beach. I couldn't tell the difference between the sea or ocean but it didn't quite matter. I would finally feel real waves and sand beneath my feet.

The whole car journey, my father warned my brother to watch out for the tsunami. I knew that there weren't tidal waves in this part of the world. Those TV programmes only showed places really, really far away. But he believed it.

When we arrived, the beach wasn't sand, soft or white. It was small brownish stones that pricked at the bottom of your soles. The water, like the sky, was grey but I was still excited. My mother put down an old sheet and some towels. I took off my t-shirt revealing a pale blue swimsuit with stars but kept my shorts on.

My father marched on ahead of us and was already at the shoreline. He picked up a smooth pebble and threw it so far we couldn't see or hear where it fell into the choppy water.

He turned around and yelled, 'It's going to be cold but come on.'

For a moment I stood next to him, my brother on the other side of me, in awe of how much more beautiful it looked in real life. The horizon really did appear to be round and infinite, giving the impression that the ocean could not or did not ever end.

I grabbed my brother's hand and ran into the water. All I had wanted was for him to feel how much I loved him. A wave that came up to his shoulders crashed against us, his light body disappearing into it.

My father came running after him and pulled him out, my mother yelling at me from a distance. We walked back, with him sobbing into my father's neck.

We weren't allowed back into the water for the rest of the afternoon and played beach cricket instead. When the ball landed in the water, we'd wait for it to bob back with the tide. Killing time, my mother unwrapped shami kebabs and samosas from tin foil, my brother and I sharing a can of coke two sips at a time.

Before I knew it, Shakil and I were married. My parents were shocked and relieved that I'd managed to find someone, let alone a doctor. They kept reminding me how lucky I was.

After our daughter Mia was born, he let me work part time, insisting he could take care of us. But he expected our home to be everything it was not. I realised I was not a natural homemaker. I cooked and cleaned because I had to, not because I wanted to. As a consequence, I often burnt the bottom of the pan, letting the rice grow soggy, or when I cleaned I forgot to lift each item from the surface, letting the dust collect in places he could only notice if he looked from certain

angles.

And then it began. When we had things to argue about. And even when we didn't, he would find a reason to hit me.

Initially I was afraid. I didn't know how to hide the bruises; I didn't know how to hide at all. It became a familiar routine. He was careful to never do it in front of Mia. Sometimes he would cry after, apologise, and blame his father and then grandfather and then every other man he knew in the process. The next day he would bring flowers home. At other times, he would act as if nothing had happened, even when I'd flinch under his touch. I was convinced that unlike my parents' marriage, ours was love.

I stopped knowing when to be afraid and when not to be. I was constantly teetering on the invisible line where the ocean and the sea met.

Three years passed and I had stopped praying those lonely before-bed prayers altogether. We had begun trying for a second child, hoping it would be a boy. Shakil had recently been working long hours, locuming around the country. I had given up working entirely now to keep the peace, passing my days with looking after Mia and watching vlogs on YouTube to learn housewife hacks I'd never actually try to do. My favourite part of the day was lunch time when Mia and I would eat whilst watching the National Geographic Channel together. She'd often coo whenever she saw something she found to be extraordinary and colourful like a bird that seemed impossibly real. I'd look at her knowing that although she had Shakil's mouth and eyes, she was

half of me. In those moments, I knew I was alive.

It was early autumn when I fell pregnant again. The weather was still mild, and we decided to go to Cornwall for a long weekend. I kept needing to stop along the way to throw up. We arrived at the cottage later than we had anticipated. Mia was fast asleep. I changed her into her pyjamas and put her into our bed whilst Shakil showered. I was in the kitchen unpacking the groceries we'd brought with us when he came down.

'Where's the wine?' he asked.

'Oh, shit! I think I forgot it. We got everything out of the car, right?'

Just as I turned to face him, I felt the heavy weight of his hand against my cheek. It took me a few minutes before I tasted the blood trickling from my lip and heard the faint sound of the car pulling out from the driveway and driving out into the distance.

We spent the next day walking along the coast, scrambling up and down boulders on secluded beaches. Although it wasn't too cold, it was wet and windy. I told Shakil that there was a storm warning on the forecast that morning.

'Don't you remember the storms in Borneo?' he dismissively responded.

My nausea was worse that day and my cheek ached every time I threw up, but I persisted with the walk only because of Mia. Her face lit up more with every pebble or broken shell she found, running after Shakil with a skip in her small step eager to discover more. Her yellow and black raincoat made her look like a flighty

bumblebee.

The wind began to pick up and I insisted we head back to the car to eat lunch where we could still see the beach. We shovelled down the sandwiches I had made, Mia fell fast asleep with her juice carton still in her hands.

‘She needs to nap for a bit otherwise she won’t sleep through the night. We’ll catch up with you as soon as she’s up,’ I said.

The storm was now brewing, a local radio station warned people to stay safe and away from the coast. The wind lashed at the sand, leaving uneven ripples across the expanse of the shore.

I must have drifted off to sleep for barely fifteen minutes when Mia woke up crying in the back. I turned around to put her in my lap.

Squinting, I could see Shakil far off, his silhouette hazy in the heavy rain, perched atop some rocks that had revealed themselves in the low tide.

Mia was fidgeting with the radio buttons when a ten-foot wave emerged out of nowhere turning everything into a blue-ish, slate grey. When the water settled, the rocks emerged bare.

I got out of the car, grabbing Mia and carrying her reluctantly towards the beach, neither of us wearing our coats. The raindrops lashed at our skin.

‘I’m cold. I want to go home.’

We waited ten more minutes before walking calmly back to the car.

I strapped Mia tightly into her baby seat. The brooding sea, indistinguishable from the sky, turned to fade in my rear-view mirror as we set off home.

Finely tuned and minutely observed.

Eley Williams

'I Precede Myself' offers up the throngs of London.

Rowan Hisayo Buchanan

The narrator's tragic past trickled through cleverly in his hunt to pin down his sense of self through the records he has loved.

Charlotte Seymour

I Precede Myself

by Gary Budden

Camden is PK's first stop. Already he can see himself arriving, Trev's welcome face as it creases up into a goofy smile; he can smell the vinyl records and their plastic sheaths, categorised and sub-categorised, documenting over four decades of a spiderweb of subculture. And as always, he pictures himself glimpsing Cerise as she boards a shining new routemaster bus; as she hops onto the tube carriage two-along from him at Edgware station; as she disembarks into the crowd at Chalk Farm before running up the steep stairwell and into the light. He pictures his sister sitting silently on a bench next to the sunglass-wearing wire-mesh men who guard the platform at Golders Green. She is all over the city, now. Always with him, just ahead of him.

PK is on the hunt for a record, a cherished thing he once had but then lost, a rarity now the years have slipped away. Scarp's second LP, *Your Degenerate Architect*.

In a recent interview looking back at their legacy and looking forward to what the reformation would mean, Scarp's singer, Danny Eider, revealed he had taken the title from an old London novel by the writer Michael

Ashman, a story of panic and Blitz rubble popular in the nineteen fifties. PK has never read it.

Scarp were allegedly named after the North Middlesex/South Hertfordshire tertiary escarpment to reflect the band's interest in the landscapes and deep topographies of Greater London and its surrounding counties; or, it has been suggested, it was a contraction of 'scarper' i.e. the British slang meaning 'to run away'. Danny Eider never gave a definitive answer on the subject.

Only five hundred copies of the album were ever pressed on vinyl. There's a CD edition that can be picked up for a few quid secondhand, but no one cares about that, certainly not PK. Three hundred copies pressed on marbled 'London grey', two hundred on a deep 'Middlesex green', put out by the now-defunct Positive Records. They went under in 2010, taking a decade and a half of the underground with them. The funny thing is, PK *owned* that Scarp record, on Middlesex green, he had the damn thing in his possession, and he sold it in 2009 when he was down on his arse. He'd like to say he sold the majority of his physical possessions due to the calling of some higher spiritual purpose, an Eastern spiritual thing like some of his hardcore heroes, a rejection of the consumerist world he knew was poisoning all of us. But no. He just needed the money.

For a while, he liked to blame the economic crash of 2008 and its ripple effect through the next decade for those miserable days and his constant struggle to support himself, but the truth is he was lazy, putting half the money he had up his nose. Nights in the crumbling buildings of the city; buildings soon to be bulldozed and replaced with luxury apartments, better people,

sour coffee. PK thought it radical to work cash-in-hand whilst still claiming housing. Believed it was punk rock to swamp his brain with booze and sneer at the nine-to-fivers as he spent his mornings with stinging stomach acid and stale ash and *The Wright Stuff* for company. The good old days, eh? Well somewhere in those days his girlfriend, Jenny, took off, and who could blame her.

PK sold most of his records soon after Jenny jumped ship. He kept the party going with Melissa and Billy for as long as they could all manage it. And somewhere in that mess, as he floundered in an empty black ocean, he lost his sister. His sister who had tried to help him, who acted as the medium between PK and their mum and dad, the one who set him up with work he never followed through on, the sister he let down again and again.

Cerise was caught in the attacks a few years back, the vans and ceramic knives down London Bridge way. Drinking with mates at a new craft ale place near Borough Market. Bad luck, nothing more, proof there was no logic to any of this. PK was fucked at the time, dribbling in a squat in Deptford, and it took a while for the news to filter through to him. He didn't even know she was gone for two days after it happened.

And so, PK strolls to Edgware underground station, leaving his small flat out at the suburban edge of London, sucking on an electronic cigarette and missing the ashy bite of the past. A beggar stops him, asks him for change. He's on Spice, the synthetic stuff that's decimating London's homeless community, a population that swells despite the damage the drugs do. PK

can see it in the man's eyes as he presses a few coppers into a chapped and flaky palm. The signs are obvious to those who can read them.

Pathetic wreckhead.

You despise what you recognise in yourself, right?

PK is at the station now. Two Jehovah's Witnesses stand by the taxi rank; today the leaflets and pamphlets they offer are in Polish. They stand out here, smiling dead smiles, in all weathers, multilingual and dedicated. They stand among cigarette butts, chocolate wrappers, the dust of the city.

A small child's glove, dirty blue, lies on the edge of the pavement where it meets the gutter. PK kicks it into the road, grimacing.

He feels contempt for the Jehovahs; bites the feeling down, sucks on his vape, exhales, tries to be more understanding.

These fucking God botherers. The nerve.

Cerise always said he should try to be less judgemental. Who was he, after all? Nobody, that's right.

His sister gives him more guidance, now she is one with the city and gone from him, than she ever did in the days when she would grasp his hand and give it a concerned squeeze, slap his face in desperation, pound the top of an old wooden table as tears streamed down her cheeks.

These promises of false salvation.

Calm it down, PK.

He half-jogs down a wide staircase to the platform, passing a row of recently updated advertisements: a copper orangutan selling audiobooks; a new mindfulness app dedicated to inner peace and exploration

of the self; and an album from a popular celebrity, in collaboration with the drummer from a defunct indie band. PK stops briefly to examine the advert. The celebrity has made a name writing whimsical children's fiction, and self-help memoirs aimed to combat the spread of depression and anxiety that PK sees colonising society like a creeping black and choking mould; the celebrity uses the modern communication channels, social media and digital personality, adroitly, and has a legion of devotees.

There is no authority but yourself.

PK tries to quieten the outraged voice inside him, the one that's been raging his whole life. Without the liquids and powders he once used to drown it out, the gorgeous swamp he used to wallow in, ignoring the constant running commentary in his head is a daily battle. The voice, always two steps ahead of him gets in there first.

Monetising spirituality. Charlatan. Another way to rinse the lost and lonely. Bunch of mugs.

Please be quiet.

It's true that PK cannot stand the celebrity, and the cult he's spawned disturbs him; but whatever helps people, he reasons.

That's bollocks and you know it.

Whatever helps, that doesn't hurt others. That's what Cerise would have said. The problem is, PK does not believe it, but he wants to. Maybe that's good enough.

Whatever works? Like the Spice and the bottles of super-market voddy and the pills and powders?

Shhh. That *did* hurt people, didn't it?

PK reasons that the Jehovahs' have their judgement day that will never come, he has his landscape punk

and his posi-hardcore records, and the celebrity has his platitudes that help people, if not swim, then at least stay afloat. This city is awash with anxiety, it's knackered, overly caffeinated and depressed. People need to cope somehow.

That's all it is. Coping. No solutions.

PK can swallow this argument, with gritted teeth if necessary, that the Aldi-brand spirituality can help, the packaged salvation is a welcome ointment. He can accept it; if he finds it narcissistic, gauche, what does that matter? He is after Scarp's second record on Middlesex green. That music, that scene, that gave him a way to get through the days and nights and now it does again. How is what the celebrity peddles, what the apps sell, any different?

The celebrity's album is titled *Keep Going*, and has just been released on a major record label, one arm of a global and wealthy corporation.

PK hops onto the tube. Two orthodox men engage in a vigorous conversation in Yiddish; they are noisy, bellowing at each other as the rattle and hum of the train increases, so he rams his headphones into his ears as the train departs. Thumbing and fumbling at his cracked phone, he locates *Break Down the Walls*, and sticks it on. 'Make a Change' kicks into life like a violently revving engine.

Won't turn away any longer.

He's been listening to a load of the old edge and youth crew stuff of late – Bold, Judge, Gorilla Biscuits, Youth of Today, Shelter, you know the stuff. Since he lost Cerise in one of London's nightmares. It felt to him an imported ideology into his London, but it always

inspired him, despite the fact PK was a fixture in the pubs of the dirty city for fifteen years; despite the many years attempting to outrun himself through. PK sucked down smoke with a religious fervour for a decade and can recount twenty-pint sessions and then the rest. This is London and the edge thing never fully fit, but PK understood what it was all about, it was the same thing we all believed in our scene, and this was global anyway, right? Right. Believe in yourself, stick together, ditch the meat and the dairy, maintain a bit of human compassion in a world gone mad, etc.

Make a change.

PK is sober now; he could never outrun himself, regardless of the speeds he travelled at. He's down to a few fags a week.

Your Degenerate Architect can, of course, be listened to on online streaming services, and it is downloadable and yeah you can find the whole record on YouTube with pictures of the original sleeve and liner notes and the Middlesex green vinyl; Christ, the band have just started playing a few reunion shows, to the joy of those who followed them between the years 1999 and 2006, so no doubt there's a reissue in the works; vinyl sales are on the up and up. PK can see it now: a boutique label, new liner notes from a fashionably underground writer, deluxe packaging, 180gsm.

He has tickets to see the reformed Scarp play at the Boston Music Room in Tufnell Park later that summer; he's going with Melissa and Billy, just like the old days before they turned into the dark days. PK can already see the three of them there, as if they've already arrived.

Bill fighting his way back from the bar clutching frothy plastic pints. Mel rolling loose Golden Virginia into a cigarette.

That's the past.

So it is. Coke Zero and a vape, maybe one of those no-alcohol blue Becks, then.

PK skips on from *Break Down the Walls*. Something heavier, darker; 'Take Me Away'. It sounds like black clouds coming in, a storm about to break on an unprepared and depopulated coastline.

Help me stay clean.

He sold his copy of *Your Degenerate Architect* to a sniffy record-dealer prick in one of the exchange stores in Notting Hill Gate. PK is certain now he was ripped off, but the guy fluttered a few notes in his face and that was enough for him; he could see what the paper would buy, how the notes could be coiled tightly into tubes.

The dealer was the kind of guy who'd claim the live version on the unofficial bootleg from the ill-fated Japanese tour was the best representation of a song. A joyless twat, more Victorian entomologist than modern music fan.

PK is flooded with memory as he travels to Camden and the tube thickens with people. Further down the carriage, he watches Cerise hanging slackly from the metal bar the standing travellers cling to, moving with the currents and eddies of the underground, thumbing her phone and laughing silently to herself.

He writes her letters sometimes, little text messages, emails that can't be sent. Passing thoughts about loneliness and self-improvement and how perverse it is that we can all imagine better worlds but never reach them.

He looks up from his phone and notices there's another advert for *Keep Going* on his carriage. He sighs.

Self-improvement is being presented as saleable commodity. Mental illness is the fault of the individual. Get confident, stupid!

Calm it PK. It's helping people.

It's your fault you're unhappy, not society's. Burrow further into yourself. Dig in.

He could murder a drink at times like this.

No.

Change the track again. 'Start Today'.

Today, he might be able to put something right; if he is to rebuild, to make a change, reconstruct himself into a new form with a chance of surviving this life, then he needs to reconnect with the things he loved and cared about. It seems small, but he needs to find this record. It's something to build on. They say if you can't love yourself, how can you be expected to love anyone else? Treat yourself. Go on, PK, you've deserved it mate.

Narcissist nonsense, capitalist mantra, lullaby of the atomised society.

Magnesium Records might have a copy – today's the day Trev sticks the new stock that's come in out on the shelves, labelled and stuck in those plastic sleeves with the pleasant chemical smell. Magnesium specialises in the kind of music PK thrills to, the stuff he once loved and is helping him fight his way to the surface again: punk, hardcore, Oi, post-hardcore, crust, youth crew, that sort of thing.

He owns the other Scarp records, still; they managed to survive the purge. One he particularly cherishes is

the split EP, *The Between Places*, they recorded with the Finnish hardcore band, Etiäinen. A record in support of the joint tour the two bands took across Europe in 2004. That was a time: PK is lost to memory again. He is right there again, bilocated. The cheap, long coach ride nipping whiskey from the hipflask with Mel and Bill, over to Amsterdam to get blazed and catch the beginning of the tour, following them on to Berlin to see them play at the Kopi, a punk rock jolly out of London before returning a week later for the hometown show at The Underworld, right here in Camden.

Do you remember, Cerise?

She was with him at that gig, she was part of the scene at the time. Nomadic Tribe and Dead Industrial Atmosphere in support at the hometown show. What a lineup! You could almost call it definitive; capture it in amber and you'd have preserved a perfect day when the landscape punk scene was really a scene and PK and Cerise, and Melissa and Billy were right there in the middle of it, documenting it, living it, drinking it, breathing it. It was around then that Melissa stepped up what she was doing with the *Magnesium Burns* zine. When Cerise had her hair red and the lip piercing and the bull ring, the happy years before the junk took over PK and whatever he thought he was.

Nomadic Tribe released only one album, the critically regarded *Concrete Palimpsest*. It's rumoured they may be making some new music soon. PK is a big fan. Dead Industrial Atmosphere are still going strong, with albums like *City of Worms* and *Miracle at New Cross Gate* are considered staples of any discerning underground music fan's collection.

In his worst days, his sister said it was like talking to a drunken doppelgänger, a pathetic, weaselly clone, a coked-up facsimile of her brother.

‘You think you’re a bar room philosopher, some kind of visionary, but you’re just a selfish cunt.’

Some wounds never heal with the passing of time.

But all that came after. That tour, those years, they were genuine, they meant something. It must have been how stoned he was at the time – a joint before breakfast and another for a chaser after his cornflakes – but each venue felt like a homecoming, as if they’d all been there many times before. That was one of the very good, one of the best things about the scene, the sense you could travel the world and still be right at home in basements, clubs, squats and pubs that had the right symbols and the right people, like the multilocation Scarp sang about. It wasn’t going nowhere; it was being everywhere.

The Between Places had three songs from each band, on ten-inch, marble pink vinyl: a gorgeous thing that’s worth a fair bit now. It was going for a hundred quid the last time PK checked on the Discogs website. *The Between Places* has one of his favourite Scarp songs on it, ‘Bilocation’, later collected onto a B-sides, EPs and rarities CD given the name *What Never Was* and that – as is often the way in the punk scene – became one of their best loved songs, and frequently the track they’d encore with.

If Trev doesn’t have *Your Degenerate Architect* in stock, he may have a lead on the record. PK knows he’s a fan of the band, they know each other from the London scene back in those days. That’s how PK knows Mel – Melissa

Eider – through Trev; he’s aiming to pick up her book there too. It’s had a few good reviews in the alternative music press and on the punk and hardcore sites. *Magnesium Burns: The Collected Zines, 1999–2011* (Positive Press) is a collection of the long running zine-cum-mag that Melissa ran, now all collected together into a heavy, fat book printed on thick paper with new essays from Mel putting the whole thing in context. She even got Danny from Scarp, her brother, to give an endorsement on the cover. It’s a must-buy; he supposes he could have cadged a freebie off Mel, but it’s important to support those close to you. He knows that now.

And it’s more than that. PK needs to redocument himself, pin down what he loved and why. Otherwise the past is just fog and smoke; it’s just Cerise bleeding out beneath a fruit and veg stall in Borough Market as sirens and people scream and shots are fired as the Thames flows oblivious.

The scene was adept at documenting itself, perhaps aware that no one else cared. It was like they could see ahead, could see themselves in the very near-future and that gave them the ability to realise that they were going to have to document what they were doing; or so PK reckons.

Hence the proliferation of the zine culture, both online and still in print – he has his old piles of the original *Magnesium Burns* zines, *Fracture*, *Punk Positive* of course, and even the zine he wrote for and produced for a couple of years, that he gave the unbearably pretentious title of *Through This Mud We Find Ourselves*; forgive PK, he was just really into the whole landscape

punk thing back then. He was passionate.

Mel's an interesting woman and a good mate to have. Get her on a few vodka and oranges and talking about her family and she'll tell you about her great uncles, Danny and Gary. The Eider family have a colourful history. Gary got filled in by a bunch of skinheads; a homophobic attack it's reckoned. Found dead in the gents on Finsbury Park back in the winter of 72/73. The story always makes PK think of when he lived round that way, near Manor House tube in the warehouse, when that barmaid was found on Boxing Day, strangled and dumped in the park's undergrowth. A tattooed little thing, who'd been pulling pints at The World's End for a few months. She was Italian, if he remembers right.

He is, he supposes, glad to be alive.

Anyway, if all else fails, he can always buy something else from Trev; in fact, he knows he will. There's a new Youth of Today reissue he has his eye on; he once owned that record, and he will again.

PK enters Magnesium, the door making a tinny tinkling sound as he pushes it open. The walls are plastered with gig posters, old ads for new records. A plastic leaflet holder overflows with fliers, black and white and cheaply Xeroxed.

'Alright Trev?'

'Easy, PK. You forgotten something?' Trev has vinyl stacked thickly against his chest; he reminds PK of a waiter teetering with dirty plates through a busy restaurant. His slight beergut is visible, a black Cro Mags t-shirt rucked up.

And PK laughs, unsure. 'What are you going on about?'

'You were just here weren't you? I was out the back sorting out the stock, but Gemma says you came in, bought the Scarp record I'd just got in. I knew you were after it. Said you barely said a word. I thought was unlike you, you gobshite.'

Gemma is Trev's wife and helps him run the shop. PK thinks Trev is on the wind up, making one of his obscure cockney jokes he only ever half-understands.

'Pull the other one, Trevor.'

'Swear down. I sold it this morning. She must've got her wires crossed; I mean, here you are, right?'

And Trev makes a kind of 'her indoors' face. PK doesn't laugh. Gemma has sold the record, the idiot.

'You're fucking kidding me.'

Trev shrugs.

And so it goes, PK traipsing London's record stores, finding that someone else has been in before him, preceding him, asking after the same record, before they finally struck gold at Magnesium.

Adverts for *Keep Going* and the mindfulness apps are everywhere; the orangutan too. But what does PK expect? This is central London, consumer ground zero. Perhaps he thought he'd find peace in the eye of the storm, but no such luck.

Around Oxford Circus, on his way to Berwick Street, he finds himself surrounded by a flock of Hare Krishnas, saffron robes, funny haircuts, tinkly bells like the door opening to Magnesium. They're just saying 'Hare Krishna' over and over.

*Do they not get bored of their mantra?
What like
You can't love if you don't love yourself
Haha.*

PK returns home, defeated. He sees Cerise, headphones in, her hair a Middlesex green, on the top deck of a 73 bus as it passes him near Euston, and he smiles. He has a copy of *Magnesium Burns: The Collected Zines* that he picked up from Trev, and he'll get Mel to sign it when he sees her next. Maybe they can grab a coffee somewhere; one of those new healthy vegan places, full of punters that remind PK of all those people over the years who took his dietary choice as an affront. Things change. Everything is up for sale.

And he can see the days and weeks ahead before the Scarp reunion gig, sober days that he intends to spend trying to reconnect with the people in his life.

Give mum and dad a call.

Check in with Bill.

Think about the apology he'd give to Jenny if it wasn't all way too late.

Keep writing those notes to Cerise, the notes he will never send.

Think about others, and how he fits in with them, and how they all fit into this insane and polluted city.

But give him a bit of time. He's getting ahead of himself.

Tense and searching story.

Eley Williams

A portrait of man's secret vulnerability.

Rowan Hisayo Buchanan

Set in contemporary London and through a very different pair of eyes we again built a troubling picture of alienation and inequality where even among those who have the least, a strict hierarchy remains.

Charlotte Seymour

Home

by S. Bhattacharya-Woodward

In the shopping centre, all the homeless people were on Spice. At least once a week, sometimes more, someone would have a fit. The ambulance would come blazing. It sickened William. At least that's what he told everyone.

Standing with both feet half a metre apart pointing slightly outwards, his hands behind his back, fingers flexing in and out, William waited as the market traders wheeled the metal frames of their packed-up stalls past him. They ran the juddering wheels into the gullies that ran out from the sides of the main thoroughfare which ran down the length of the building. Another Saturday ending, William would finish his shift and head home, open a can and enjoy the evening sun. Let the others deal with the next fitting hobo. But not before he'd seen Tanisha.

He unhooked the clunky radio comm from his belt and walked past the closing market and shops on either side to the clatter of metal until he reached the heart of the centre, a large, empty circle from which the roads of the mall radiated like spokes. On some Saturdays, there would be a stage erected, and talent shows with

out-of-tune kids with scrunched-up faces warbling their little hearts out. At night, the skateboarders used to take over, using the smooth surfaces of the mall as runs and its central heart as a rink or flat skate pit. But they'd had near-misses with too many people; the citizens had complained and the skaters ousted, sent home to their mums probably. Now mostly, the central circle of the mall was full of vagrants. Sitting on benches. Propped up against walls. William walked past three homeless men heaped on one of the central benches.

Turning left into one of the spokes that ran from the centre, William walked tall as a sphere of teenage boys almost collided into him, fracturing at the last moment and flowing around him, joining back in one movement. He passed the pound shops, the pawnbroker's and the clothes shops with their £5 rails. To the right was an entrance: the opening of a mall within a mall. Walk through this portal, and it was a different place: narrow higgledy-piggledy walkways with small shops like phone booths crowding in, slightly bigger than hawker stalls but not by much. The smells of sugarcane juice, and chow mein, and biriyani in foam boxes, and the cheery neon signs promising cheap electronics, transported William to another country. A jolly indoor market, somewhere in a tropical clime.

He reached the hairdressers.

'Will.i.am!' Andy opened the door and bowed William in. He entered the almost empty salon, stooping his shoulders and turning slightly through the door.

'Hey, you're back,' Tanisha glanced over her shoulder at William, and turned back to the woman whose hair

she was straightening. Holding the hot tongs high and looking at the reflection that filled up the mirror in front of her, she said, 'How was St Lucia?'

'Hot. Okay. Family, you know, spent all my time visiting people.' Still in his high-vis, William sat down on a plastic chair, the middle in a row of three that sat tight between the door and Tanisha and her customer. 'Glad to be back to my own life.'

'What's cooking big man?' Andy slapped William's broad shoulder and wheeled up a chair from behind the narrow reception desk. Andy was a good bloke, but did he have to roll up his chair? Didn't he have to do whatever salon owners do at the end of the day? And then there was the kid. Tanisha's teenage daughter swept the offcuts of hair from between their feet where the salon's one fan had blown them. William felt as though the girl's sullen eyes were on him. Why wasn't she at her Dad's this weekend? So much for getting Tanisha on her own.

'Ah, I can relax now, you're my last client,' Tanisha said to the seated woman in the mirror. She held out a frond of hair at the front of the woman's face. 'What do you reckon? Length okay?'

The woman nodded. 'Best not to go too short in one go. I know you say you want to, but you don't want to regret it. Especially if you're on antidepressants, you know. You don't need that on top of everything else. Just come back in a few weeks if it feels okay and we can go shorter. Do it gradual like.'

The woman in the mirror nodded. 'So do you get to see him?' Tanisha went on.

'First visit's next week,' said the woman. The corners

of her mouth turned down.

‘So you want to look nice for him? I get it.’

The woman nodded.

‘I can’t believe it though, it’s harsh innit?’ said Tanisha. Then turning to William and Andy. ‘Her boyfriend got put away for five years. He didn’t do nothing. But he was there, wasn’t he?’

The face in the mirror crumpled.

‘Yeah, his friend stabbed someone and he was there. He saved the bloke. He stopped his friend from going at him again. It’d be worse if he hadn’t had been there. Even the bloke said so. But still went down. He was there, wasn’t he? They’re trying to teach people a lesson, innit?’

‘It’s tough but you got to deal with crime, you have to make examples of people. Rules are rules,’ said William, adjusting the shoulders of the high-vis tunic over his crisp, blue shirt. ‘It’s like these homeless guys. Seriously, all they do is take Spice and fit. There were four of them fitting the other day, and I just walked past. Someone said to me “don’t you feel anything?”, and I said no, no I don’t –’

‘You get used to it, innit?’ offered Tanisha, spritzing more protector in an arc over her client’s hair.

‘Yeah,’ said William. ‘They beg for money and spend it on Spice, and get the ambulances out. What a waste. Those ambulances could be going to somebody who really needs them.’

‘I’m not being funny but immigrants – those that have skills and work hard – we need those. But these people are wasting NHS resources, taking up ambulances,’ joined Andy. ‘They’re turning people racist.’

‘Yeah, yeah, they’re all from Eastern Europe. Why do they come to this country to be homeless and take Spice,’ said William, watching Tanisha’s arms wield the straighteners to the other side of her customer’s head. He wondered if he’d gone too far with it all.

‘What happened to that homeless guy who sat outside Poundland with all his stuff in a trolley? I haven’t seen him for weeks.’ As Andy leant forwards, the wheels of his chair slid back a little. His blue eyes were bright in the salon’s strip lighting.

‘Dunno. But someone stole his trolley,’ said William.

‘Last time I saw him he was really agitated,’ continued Andy. ‘He was standing outside Poundland waving his arms and shouting over and over – “I do speak English you know! I do speak English!” I thought “Ooh, who rattled your cage?” He does actually speak really good English,’ said Andy. ‘I tell you when I came over from Durban, London wasn’t like this. It’s got worse in the last ten years, I swear.’

Tanisha paused and put down the straighteners next to a Coke can on a ledge in front of the mirror. ‘Still, must be hard though...for those homeless blokes – and girls. They can’t have come here for that reason.’

‘It’s the benefits,’ said Andy, leaning forward in his chair.

‘Yeah,’ said William.

William felt Tanisha’s daughter glowering at them. At him. He shifted his weight in the chair, shuffling from one foot to the other. He watched Tanisha pick up the straighteners again, her toned arms wielding them high above her head. He couldn’t ask her, not with that girl watching, her eyes boring holes in him.

'Oh did you hear what that Kanye said?' Tanisha said.

'Oh yeah. He's mad in't he?' said Andy.

'Yeah, as if black people had a choice about slavery. Lifestyle choice, right? Seriously.' Tanisha rolled her eyes. In the mirror, her customer nodded.

'I tell you, it's ever since he married into that family,' William leaned forward his hands spread on his knees. 'It's not good.'

'What d'you mean, them Kardashians?' said Tanisha.

'Yeah, awful I tell you,' said William. 'My old flat-mate, he was obsessed with them. Used to watch them all the time, for hours – in my living room.'

'And then what?'

'Then nothing,' said William. 'He'd get up, go to work at the call centre, come home, and then watch the Kardashians. For *hours*. And then the same again the next day. And the day after that. And after that.'

'What a life, innit though,' said Tanisha.

William watched the rise and fall of her chest with the deep exhalation of breath that followed. Now was the moment. William leaned forward to ask her. Then thwack! Something hit the side of his foot hard. He might have had tough, old boots on, but even William winced.

'Oops,' Tanisha's girl looked up at him, her eyes coals burning in dull orbits. She leaned on the broom handle.

'Hey, be careful!' Tanisha said, touching the girl's arm lightly. The girl swayed against the plastic handle of the broom, and looked at William, her head slightly to one side.

'Er, er...I better head.'

‘Already?’ said Tanisha.

‘Yeah, yeah, got things to do innit. See you later.’ William got up. Did he imagine it, or was there disappointment in her voice? Maybe he should man up. But no, she hadn’t dated since she split with her ex years ago. And who was he that she’d want to go out with him now? No, Tanisha was just friendly to everyone. She was a grafter – she worked hard at her job, for her kid, and the customers and strays who came through the salon door.

William stooped through the doorway.

‘Later,’ said Tanisha, turning back to her customer. Andy got up and pushed his chair back behind the reception desk.

As William walked back through the shopping centre, he was kicking himself. Why? Why do you always say those things? And that girl? So what? Why d’you bottle it? Tanisha likes you.

He reached the central circle of the shopping centre. Three homeless men were clustered on a bench. One sat lower than the other, who appeared to be doing something to his head. William looked closely. As he walked past he saw the man sitting higher had an electric razor in his hand. He was halfway done on a buzzcut. The haircut had got the attention of other passersby too. A woman in a smart dress walked past trying not to look. ‘Love you darling!’ one of the guys leant forward.

A few skater boys were milling around, but their skateboards were up perpendicular to the dull sheen of the floor. Most of the shoppers were gone now, though a few stragglers headed towards the exit, balancing the thin straps of shopping bags on red arms, as children

tugged and hung off their limbs.

William took a turn off the central concourse, he headed down the mall past the coffee shop and Polski Sklep, towards the natural daylight which streamed through the glass doors at its end. He thought about Tanisha, and the things he said. And the look that girl gave him as he was saying them.

Sometimes he had no idea why he said the things he did. Sometimes he meant them, though not with any deep feeling – more simply through irritation. Other times, he didn't mean it at all. It just came out. Again, irritation. Why was everything so damn irritating?

Three double glass doors were at the exit. The sensors on the automatic doors on the right were broken, as well as the farthest door itself, in which the glass pane was fractured into a brilliant fan of small shattered shards held together in their mutual brokenness.

The sphere of boys he'd encountered earlier stood gathered round the doorway of a shop on the left of the mall. Pulling himself tall and broad, William's work instincts kicked in as he neared the tight ball of kids. No. He relaxed his shoulders. The day's over, you're not on the job now, he thought.

But as he passed the edge of the sphere, William could not stop himself from scoping out the situation. Through a gap in the circle he saw the dull shine of dirty coins spilled out on the pavement. There was a knocked over paper cup from the coffee shop. Moving closer, William saw a bag stuffed with blankets and a homeless man – the one whose usual place was outside Poundland. He sat slumped over on one side; a straw man pushed over. On the side of his body which arched

over was a white line of spray paint, following the curve of his torso.

‘Hey! What’s going down here?’ William plunged forward.

There was a clatter as a spray can hit the hard ground and rolled towards the homeless man.

The group juddered backwards and unknit itself to stare at William. He felt himself surrounded. A dozen, maybe more, sullen eyes on him. He took a breath in and with it his shoulders and chest puffed outwards in its high-vis casing. William was a big man.

A couple of boys, the oldest, took a step forwards, their shoulders taut, clenched fists by their sides.

‘What are you?’ said one. ‘You ain’t no fed.’

William moved towards the boy. He was almost a full head taller than him. The boy held his ground. Eyeing William’s yellow high-vis jacket he laughed. ‘You’re a security guard. Nothing. You’re nothing man.’

The boy turned and started walking. The sphere formed again, the boys morphing into some seamless lifeform to ebb and flow away.

William looked at the homeless man. He hadn’t moved the whole time. He was still bent over sideways like a broken doll, his eyes cast downwards and half covered by a dark blue beanie hat. The white stripe that ran along the stretched side of the man’s torso perplexed William. He saw the arc of white spray, pristine against the dirty white of the double doors of the shop against which the man was propped. The spray on the man’s clothes merged with the spray on the door. William felt a sudden sickening. The inside of his stomach rolled. The painted side of the homeless man merged with the

door. He was being erased.

Breathing out slowly, William got a hold of himself. Leaning down towards the man, he touched his shoulder gently. The man didn't move. William touched him again. 'You all right mate? Do you need anything?'

The man raised his eyes. One blue eye seemed to focus lazily on William and the man haltingly straightened himself. He seemed to mutter something to William.

'What was that? You okay?' said William, bending his frame forward. The man whispered again. Home, something about home. William felt a pang for this man with no home. Cast out. Rootless. Discarded. He bent further down, balancing awkwardly, close enough to see the weeping cones of acne on his cheekbones.

'I said...' the man's quiet voice started to raise above a whisper. And then more audibly, 'I said...'

'Yes?' William's eyes were level with the man's. His hand gently touched his shoulder again.

'Go home.

Go back...

Go back to Africa.'

William sprang back. He felt a hard, electrified jolt to his stomach. The homeless man was stationary, apart from his eyes, which moved over William. They seemed to smile at him.

William took a deep breath in. He felt his jaw muscles clench. Nothing came out of his mouth. What could he say? He felt an old wound. A sickening, helpless feeling. He couldn't do anything. Just absorb. Put up, shut up – that was the way, wasn't it?

Wasn't this man worse off than he was? Whatever

William had spouted about the shopping centre homeless, they were worse off, weren't they? Deep down he knew, what was that old saying? There but for the grace of God, the Devil, or whatever, go I. He heard his Dad's voice. Rise above it. Rise above it William.

And hadn't he heard that taunt just about a thousand times before? Water off a duck's back. So William kept silent and turned.

He walked away from the shopping centre, crossed the road and took a shortcut to his flat through the churchyard. As he walked, William felt himself shrinking. He grew smaller and smaller, so that by the time he entered the gate of the church he was altogether a smaller man; the size of the teenagers who had squared up to him. At the edge of the churchyard, he wavered. His eyes rested on a small sign affixed to the wrought iron gate: 'Public right of way. This is consecrated ground. No alcohol. No litter. No use as a toilet.' Concentrate. '...Right of way...consecrated...no....no...no right of way.'

William was shrinking still. He walked through the gateway and along the path that cut resolutely through the flat headstones lying horizontally on the ground; their names worn and scrubbed-out. William was the size of a child. He was eight again and in the school playground.

'You have to go on that team,' said his best friend Greg.

'But I don't want to. Why do I have to?' said eight-year-old William. Behind Greg, he saw Luis, smiling. The other boys were growing impatient, the football dribbled listlessly between them.

Greg looked to Luis in an appeal. 'No. It's the rules,' said Luis. 'Christians versus Muslims.'

'But I'm not a Muslim. My Mum makes me go to church every Sunday!'

'You're on that team,' Greg pointed. 'It's the rules.'

William looked over. 'But I'm not Muslim. Neither's Raj. He's Hindu. Why's he there?'

Greg looked to Luis again. He turned back to William. 'Rules are rules,' he shrugged, moving towards the other boys and the ball. William stood.

Luis stood and stared hard at him. 'Go home.'

'What? It's not home time yet?' said William.

'Go back to where you come from.'

'What – Canning Town?' William's brows knit.

Luis smiled, his mouth slightly open, teeth bared. He started walking towards Greg and the other boys. As he passed William, Luis charged his shoulder hard into him. 'Africa!' he hissed. 'Go back to Africa.'

He reached the gate on the other side of the churchyard and stepped back onto the road. Two more crossings and he should be home. The sun's shafts in his eyes; he fixed his eyes on the ground. He just wanted to be behind closed doors. He no longer wanted to sit out in the sun.

William climbed the stairs to his flat, opened the door and threw his bunch of keys onto the sofa. He pulled off his high-vis, and boots and slumped into the sofa's cushions, craning back so that his face turned up to the ceiling, exposing his stout neck. He stared at the tiny fissures that crisscrossed the discoloured paint. He sat this way for a few minutes, sighed and went to his fridge. He took out a can of beer, pulled the metal ring

inwards and back, and took a mechanical glug. What to do? William switched on the television and searched behind his sofa cushions until his hand found the right remote. He flicked through screens till he found it. There it was.

The mock classical columns and curved arches reflecting in the bliss of the Californian swimming pool, like the geometric splendours reflected in the garden pools of a fragrant Moorish palace. Today, Khloe was showing the cameras around her new home.

Tense social skewering and interrogation.

Eley Williams

'Good Girl' takes on the patriarchy.

Rowan Hisayo Buchanan

This story took an enjoyably dark turn in an expression of millennial rage.

Charlotte Seymour

Good Girl

by Jessie Williams

She's the kind of girl who smiles at strangers walking down the street, as her ponytail swings from side to side. The kind of girl who likes to please everyone. The kind of girl who worries that people don't like her. Even the postman. I say girl. She's 23. She left home five years ago. She has a degree, can change a light bulb, do her own laundry, even build an entire IKEA wardrobe by herself. Technically she is an adult, but honestly, she still feels like a child; not quite fully-formed, or ready, and yet so ready. Perhaps you could call her a Promising Young Woman, but when does that promise start to weigh you down?

The girl, let's call her Lily because she likes the smell, would love to say she lives in Williamsburg and enjoys kicking the crunchy, orange leaves in Prospect Park during Autumn, or maybe a tiny *appartement* in Saint-Germain-des-Prés where bougainvillea blooms in the Spring. Alas, she lives in a council flat in Tower Hamlets, and currently icy rain is hammering at her window. That's what happens in February. London becomes a palette of greys; if God was an artist even he

could not rid this murky shade from his paintbrush. It's a suffocating colour that makes you want to slash the sky with a knife to let the sunshine through.

Lily works at a bookshop down Brick Lane. It only takes her 40 minutes to get there if she power-walks her way through Stepney Green and Whitechapel, while listening to the latest episode of whichever crime podcast has taken her fancy. She normally arrives by 9.35am breathless and flushed, resulting in a lewd comment from Steve, her Brompton-bicycle-riding, pervy boss. Lily just rolls her eyes good-naturedly, whilst imagining chucking *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* at his balding head. At lunchtime she hides in the storeroom, basking in that new book smell, while reading and sipping coffee from her KeepCup.

Lily is currently rereading *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath. She had to look up the word 'cadaver' though and can't get the image of one lying cold and blue on a table overlooked by curious medical students, out of her mind.

01/02/2019: 43rd day of Winter, Harry Styles' 25th birthday, 57 days until the Brexit deadline.

Lily was always pining for something or someone. An escape from the mundane confines of reality; searching for the zing that had somehow dissipated from her life without her realising. She used to be determined. The kind of determined that sees plants grow through cracks in the concrete. Then it felt like she was sat in the back of an Uber and the driver was asking where she wanted to go, but she had forgotten so he was just driving around in circles until she remembered. When had she become

such a passive observer? These should be the best years of her life – her prime! Joan Didion once wrote about the moment she lost the conviction that lights would always turn green for her. Lily was stood at those very same traffic lights.

A smile, politeness, and hard work can only get you so far in this world. She had learnt this very soon after graduating from UCL with a 2:1 in English Literature. Broken-hearted (she had fallen in love with her dissertation supervisor; it cost her her first) and numb with disappointment, she spent the first month wallowing in her overdraft; sat in her childhood bedroom surrounded by her dolls, eating bagels, listening to The Fray, and scrolling absent-mindedly through various job sites. But the noose that is student debt was gradually tightening around her neck and in sheer desperation she applied to everything – expecting a slew of offers. Alas, she only received one invitation to an interview: an admin assistant at a tech startup in Piccadilly.

Her generation – millennials with the world at their fingertips – had been promised that they could be anyone they wanted to be. This caused great confusion for Lily, because, what if you didn't know who you wanted to be? Of course she had prepped for the dreaded 'Where do you see yourself in ten years' time?' That was assuming that planet Earth would still be turning on its axis and inhabited by human beings in 2029, what with the childish men currently toying with their nuclear weapons, and Mother Nature understandably feeling a little under the weather.

On the day of the interview Lily wore her best suit which she spritzed with her mum's Chanel No.5. She

checked her star sign predictions for the week: Pisceans were due for an exciting career development, but then so were most of the others. As she crossed Piccadilly Circus she thought that today would be the first day of the rest of her life. A flicker of hope grew from the pit of her stomach. Finally, she felt like she could be on the cusp of adulthood. The clouds had cleared as she strode purposefully towards the office, and as the traffic lights tuned red she promptly had a panic attack and passed out.

Failure was not something Lily was used to. A high-achiever throughout school, she became accustomed to receiving praise until one day it stopped coming, like a waterfall-turned-trickle-turned-dried-up-hole-of-nothingness. It made her feel empty and forgotten and panicked. Everyone needs validation in life, but Lily was ravenous for it. She feeds off it like a vampire sucks blood. It was one of the reasons why she started a blog. She knew hardly anyone read it, although according to the site statistics she has a handful of followers in Azerbaijan. Her last post was 'Why We Love to Hate Becky Sharp', an analysis of William Thackeray's social climbing protagonist in *Vanity Fair*. It got 10 views – her best yet.

Like everyone else she had dreamt of writing a novel. She had scribbled stories ever since she could form sentences, and not always on paper. Her parents' walls and even their car bonnet had acted as pages for her day-dreams. And now, what better time to write than when she's surrounded by great works of fiction everyday? Tolstoy's name winked at her from in front of the

till. Austen was next to the store cupboard. Waugh, Hemingway, Brontë, Kafka; they all peered at her when she looked up from her afternoon scroll on Instagram. Surely she could absorb some of their talent through sheer osmosis? But when she sat down to write, the blank Word doc stared at her menacingly, white as white. The cursor blinked at her, and the words never came.

Maybe it was because she felt so defined by her ability to work hard, to impress, that she didn't know who she was without it. Slowly her friends faded away, going for coffee with new friends to discuss their Tinder adventures and job promotions. Oh, to be young and in London! It might also be down to her ignoring them on Facebook messenger. She didn't want to have to explain once again that she was yet to find a proper job – one that meant career progression, a good salary, regular holidays, and eventually buying a house and getting a cockapoo. Although she knew this was unattainable – she could barely afford to pay her rent, let alone save to buy.

Lily's only regular social interaction was with the friendly Bangladeshi family next door whose delicious curries she could smell from her room, and her Swedish flatmate who doesn't do or say much apart from bring boys home every night. There's also Mabel, the succulent Lily bought from Columbia Road Flower Market, which she has managed to keep alive for five months. She has beautiful thick, pulpy leaves edged with soft spikes, and sits on Lily's window sill looking out over a dingy square in the centre of the council estate.

It was chilly even for February – a draught was creep-

ing in. Lily was perched on her window seat, cup of chamomile in hand, stroking Mabel's velvety fronds, looking out into the darkness. She had been reading a book but had got distracted trying to think of something witty to post on Twitter. She wasn't good at it; she wasn't good at much these days. A commotion outside startled her. She turned her lamp off to best see what was happening below. There were two teenage boys having an argument – not an unusual occurrence on the streets of east London. 'FUCK OFF!' yelled one of them, his voice high-pitched and desperate. The other boy, with lanky limbs ensconced in a tracksuit, loomed over him. A swearing match ensued. The two boys had a gaggle of friends egging them on from behind. They both can't have been a day over sixteen. There is a kerfuffle, and the word 'cunt' is thrown about. And then a flash of blade comes out of nowhere. The taller boy grabs his side and crumples to the ground, like a Jenga tower destroyed by an eager poke. The other boys leg it, while the victim's friends just stand gawping at the now quickly blooming red wound. She should go down and help him, thought Lily. She knew that would be what any other person would do. But something rooted her to the spot - she couldn't move - and it wasn't fear freezing her. She felt a frisson, like a lightning bolt shooting through her, seeing the fragility of humanity, the fleet-ingness of it all; how life can be so easily taken away. To kill a fellow human being seemed so easy, so simple.

The flashing blue lights swiftly came and cleared everything up. The boy was taken to The Royal London Hospital, where most stab victims get taken – one of the best trauma centres in the city. The next morning

Dawn Watson was told her son wouldn't be coming home.

That day, Lily had a spring in her step as she walked to work, passing the yellow police tape that she had grown accustomed to over the past few years. None of the police officers batted an eyelid at her – why would they? She recycles, pays her council tax, flosses every morning, is vegetarian, reads with local primary school children once a week, and has just reached Italian level 2 on Duolingo.

Her mood wasn't even dented when Steve called in sick, leaving her in sole charge of the shop, or when a bunch of selfie-stick wielding tourists wandered in and messed up the previously tidy shelves. Lily allowed herself a twenty-minute break at 2pm when it was relatively quiet. She sat at a juice bar eavesdropping on a pair of teenage girls discussing their dream nose job. 'No, hers is way too turned up, like a ski slope,' said one, analysing a photo on Instagram. 'Yeah, and her nostrils are huge. I prefer Kendall's,' said the other. 'I just want my bridge to be less prominent, and my tip to be perkier. I've already found the perfect surgeon.' Lily imagined a scalpel slicing through skin, following a dotted line along the girl's nose (which in all honesty was a sizable one). She was just picturing what she would look like without a nose – Voldemort-esque she thought – when her phone started ringing.

It was her Mum. 'Just checking in, darling.' She was doing this a lot lately. Ever since Lily had the panic attack and ruined her chances of getting a perfectly respectable job, she had been gently encouraging her to try to find something else.

'Working at a bookshop is sweet, dear, but it hardly puts to use that degree of yours, not to mention the pay,' she kept repeating. Lily could hear her Dad watching the rugby on TV. 'Touch, pause, engage,' demanded the ref.

Long sigh; 'We won't be helping you pay your rent forever you know, love.'

'Yes Mum, I know. I have been looking every day.'

'And did you find anything you like the sound of?' A roar from the crowd, and squeals of delight from her Dad.

'Dave! Please shush.'

'Yes, I applied to a few.' She *has* been applying to at least three a day for two months now and was yet to hear back from any.

'Brilliant. Well I'm sure you'll hear something soon.'

'Fingers crossed.'

The exchange always went like this. Every week, rotating between Mum and Dad. Lily was now avoiding returning home to their questions and well-meaning advice. Although she was missing the fresh country air and home-cooked food. She wanted to see the stars at night and wake up to the chiming of church bells and distant mooing and the robin who sings its heart out every morning at 5am. They live in a cottage on the edge of the Cotswolds, all honey-coloured stone and ponies grazing in a paddock. The kind of place where gossip spreads like wildfire. The heartland of the Conservatives - her Dad is one of them. Tory councillor and Boris Johnson admirer; a 'Take Back Control' type. He still doesn't know Lily voted Remain. But Lily had such a love/hate relationship with London: yes, it was

miserable during winter, expensive, and cut-throat, but it also allowed blissful anonymity. She relished nothing more than slipping into the crowd and being forgotten.

Later, Lily closed the shop and took a detour along Regent's Canal. The evenings were just beginning to get lighter, and the sky was crisp and clear after a bout of showers. A pinky smudge high above the rooftops heralded the descending sun, just out of eyeline, probably somewhere behind a skyscraper. She walked along the towpath towards Hackney, quiet now except for the occasional cyclist whizzing past in a flurry of bells, and the beating of a pigeon's wings. The sound of sirens was never far away, and the smell of weed. She breathed in a big gulp of air pollution, and slowed her heart so it wasn't racing so much. There were snowdrops lining the edge of the path. The word 'BREAD' had been spray-painted in silver on to the underside of a bridge. To her left the swirling black water had taken on an eerie sheen in the twilight – you couldn't see the bottom. Lily wondered how long it would take for someone to rescue her if she fell in.

She was teetering on the edge of a sinkhole. But instead of fearing the darkness below, she desired it.

'Don't even think about it,' said a voice from behind. Lily turned around to find an old man sat on a bench watching her. He was wrapped in a sleeping bag.

'I've tried it, and it doesn't solve things. Trust me.'

'Oh, I wasn't thinking about jumping in, don't worry,' she lied, flashing him a smile.

'I know that look,' he replied pointing at his eyes, which were sunken and encircled by crinkled skin. She

could tell he used to smile a lot. But he wasn't smiling now. She approached him and offered a few pounds.

'I don't want your money,' he said. Lily gave it to him anyway. And then she sat down next to him. They listened to the buzz of distant traffic. Commuters making their way home on a Tuesday night, thinking about what to have for dinner. Lily's stomach rumbled.

'This city can suck the life out of you. Ya know?'

She nodded. Yes, she knew.

'Don't let it.'

The corners of his mouth twitched. It was an almost smile. She thanked him and walked into the darkness.

01/03/2019: Greta Thunberg's climate strike week 28, the first cherry blossom begins to bloom, 29 days until the Brexit deadline.

Lily decided it was time she bought a new kitchen knife – she had struggled with her blunt one for too long. The woman at the checkout warned her it was sharp. Of course it is, it's a knife, thought Lily. 'Be careful of those little fingers!' the woman chuckled as she walked out.

That afternoon Lily was rearranging the bookshop's poetry section when she heard a familiar voice after the tinkle of the doorbell. It was a Scottish burr. Warm and smooth, like butter melting into a toasted crumpet. It slid down her spine and made her knees almost give way. It was him. She was standing on the other side of the shelves which split the shop down the middle – invisible to anyone standing in the front half of the shop, which he was. Lily peered between the rows of books that had, just a split second ago, been the focus

of her attention. There he was; tall and broad, wearing that plaid shirt he always wore, chatting affably to Steve, a Daunt Books canvas bag slung over his shoulder. The man who cost her her first. The catalyst of all this disappointment. He was looking for Ali Smith's latest masterpiece, of course he was. Why was he here? Did he know Lily worked here? Was he teasing her? The past two years came flooding back. She fought back the urge to vomit. When he left – as quickly as he entered – she rushed after him, tripping up on the uneven pavement as she followed him towards Shoreditch High Street Station.

'Hello stranger!' he said, looking surprised. His floppy hair had flecks of grey around the edges. His smile was just the same; roguish, inviting. Don't fall for it Lily. Not again. She smiled back – wide, so her dimples appeared. Acting nonchalant, she asked how he was, what he was up to, what a coincidence that they had bumped into each other? She didn't listen to his answers - she just took in his face hungrily. Those pale blue eyes that had so easily charmed her during their dissertation tutorials. She felt anger boil up inside her. They arranged to properly catch up after work at a new bar she had found down a side street just off Brick Lane. Insane cocktails she told him. It didn't exist; she had made it up.

After work, Lily stood waiting in the disused skate park behind the station that she had directed him to. The newly bought knife sat at the bottom of her satchel. The rush of a passing train ruffled her scarf, and made her dig her hands deeper into her pockets. She spotted him walking towards her, sheepishly at first, looking

bemused at the surroundings. He was so insignificant – just an ant caught in the cogs of the machine that is this city. She remembered how she idolised him; the font of all knowledge who coaxed her out of her shell only to slam it shut again. Yes, she was sure she wanted to do this. Lily was tired of being walked over. She was ready to step on some ants.

On the tube back Lily drowned out the rush hour chaos with Ludovico Einaudi. The woman sat opposite stared at her. Her face was pale with dark crescent moons under her eyes, her hair lank and heavy. She smiled and Lily realised it was her reflection in the mirror. There was a glint in her eye. A secret. The potential to slip into evil was a comforting escape. Suddenly, Lily felt the most alive she'd felt in years.

The new knife had brownish stains on it. Her flatmate didn't seem to notice as she chopped an onion for her spag bol. 'It's so much better,' she said delightfully. Lily refrained from telling her that she used it to slit the throat of the man she once loved, in one single flourish. When she had returned to the flat she had spent a good twenty minutes scrubbing the blade with bleach – listening to all those crime podcasts had paid off. It was lucky that Lily wasn't particularly squeamish; there was a lot of blood. Hot, scarlet liquid gushing so forcefully that she had to look away. When it was done, and he had finally stopped gurgling, Lily was reminded of a nature documentary she once watched where a silverback gorilla had been killed by poachers in Virunga National Park. That evening she donated £20 to the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund.

‘A man in his early thirties was found dead this morning in Shoreditch, east London.’ Fiona Bruce read the ten o’clock news the following evening. Lily was in the middle of an intimate moment with a jar of peanut butter. ‘The cause of death was a knife wound to the throat.’ Her clipped BBC voice echoed around Lily’s head. It made it sound real. ‘The man’s watch was also stolen. The Metropolitan Police suspect he was the target of a criminal gang which is known to operate in the area. As the killing took place in a CCTV blind spot, police are appealing for any witnesses to come forward.’ Lily had always liked his Rolex, she remembered it glinting from under his cuff whenever he pointed at the whiteboard.

A week later Lily’s phone vibrated with a number she didn’t recognise. She was sweaty after a run around the park and just wanted to jump straight in the shower but answered it anyway.

‘Hello, is this Lily?’ Her heart stopped. Have they found her?

‘My name is Malika. I’m calling from Tower Hamlets Council about a request you made to access our free counselling service.’ A sigh of relief. That was months ago thought Lily.

‘Your name was put on our waiting list and now a free spot has come up. Would you still like to proceed?’

‘Uhhh...’ Always so indecisive, just make a decision and stick with it, said a voice in her head.

‘...well actually I’m feeling alright now. I’ve discovered a new coping mechanism, and it seems to be working. So... no. Thanks.’

‘That’s good, I’m glad to hear it. I wish you all the best.’ She’s nice, thought Lily. She had a soothing voice, couldn’t she just keep talking?

That night Lily dreamt she had joined a circus. It’s showtime and her job is walking the tightrope in a candy-striped big top. She’s dressed in a leotard - it’s tight and uncomfortable just like the one she wore to ballet classes as a child. If she just focuses on looking straight ahead and not at the audience below she can make it across. Don’t look down, don’t look down, don’t look... too late. Lily glances down, and suddenly she is tumbling through air perfumed with popcorn and peels of laughter, the ground zooming up to meet her. Except it doesn’t. There is no impact. She woke up in a cold sweat before she hit the floor.

23/03/2019: The People’s Vote March, US-backed Syrian Democratic Force declares victory over Islamic State, six days until the Brexit deadline.

A rare day off and the heavens have opened. Typical. Lily heads to Tate Britain to get lost in J.M.W Turner’s paintings, wishing she could transport herself into the misty landscapes where golden light caresses everything and anyone it falls upon. She comes here often. It’s peaceful in the bowels of the museum, beneath the hum of the city and above the rumblings of the underground. A purgatory between worlds. Time seems to stop in front of a Turner. ‘War. The Exile and the Rock Limpet’ is her favourite. A depiction of Napoleon during his exile on Saint Helena. The sunset is blood red, the uniformed figure is isolated and looks as if

he's hugging himself. He stares into a rock pool – either at his reflection, or at the limpet that is poking out of the water. Lily can't help but feel sorry for him. She wonders what it would be like to be forced to live alone on a remote island. 'No man is an island,' wrote John Donne, but what about a woman? She imagines herself marooned on a scrap of land in the middle of the ocean, with rolling waves stretching for as far as the eye can see. No one to talk to, or even compare herself to. Ideal, thought Lily.

The torrential rain slows to a drizzle by the time she makes her way outside, so she decides to take a stroll along the Thames. Big Ben is still encased in scaffolding, looking like a spaceship had landed in the middle of the skyline. The Palace of Westminster always seems to be having repairs done. Lily wonders which will crumble first; the building or the government inside.

Lily tries to dodge the People's Vote March, but it's impossible if she wants to get to the tube. She feels like a stray dog getting caught up in a fight she doesn't want to be part of, and yet she feels happily at one with the tide of people swelling into Parliament Square, chanting, placards held high, fists thrust into the air. She lets herself get carried away on the strong current that is community. But as the person with the loudspeaker asks, 'What do we want?' and the crowd yells 'Revoke!', she starts to feel like a fraud. A familiar feeling that grips her heart and tightens her chest. Her ears fill with a delicate hum. The murmur inside a seashell. She sits down to catch her breath under the statue of suffragette, Millicent Fawcett, who holds aloft her 'Courage Calls to Courage Everywhere' banner, almost mockingly. As

if to say: 'You will never be as brave as I.' They chained themselves to railings, got arrested, went on hunger strikes, and threw themselves in front of horses in order to get the vote. And Lily? She gets heart palpitations in crowded places.

The evening brings a bombshell. Poppy is dead. Lily's best friend. Gone. Her black Labrador with a grey face and relentlessly waggy tail. The dog she ran through fields with since the age of eight, and curled up next to on the sofa every night. The dog whose velvet ears she kissed, and whose affectionate licks melted all her teenage troubles away. But now the dog is dead. Lily's parents tell her that she is buried in the garden under the apple tree she used to lay under on those hot summer afternoons. She goes out with some friends and raises a glass to her beloved pet in a throbbing club with boys grinding up against her. The music drowns out the thoughts in her head and the alcohol numbs the pain.

On the night bus she sits at the front of the top deck. The window is open; Saturday night floods in. 1am and everyone is out. The smell of fumes mingles with kebabs and beer and cigarettes and something else Lily can't quite put her finger on. London's lights twinkle like a diamond necklace on the neck of a glamorous woman – stealing the limelight from the stars above. Over Tower Bridge they go with the Thames snaking underneath and zigzagging through the concrete jungle and its people, like a fault line. A mishmash of strangers and loners, outcasts and outsiders; the city is the thread that binds them all together. Lily finally gets an inkling of what it feels to belong. Perhaps all her life was just a

lead-up to this moment – this is the chrysalis, the part where she slides out of her cocoon and takes flight. She trembles like a butterfly on its first day of freedom.

Lily walks back through the residential streets of Hackney, her ears ringing. She follows the foxes as they trot along, sniffing and occasionally nibbling at some rubbish on the ground. She inhales a lungful of the night and stops to rest her aching feet. And then she hears the sound of footsteps. Heavy and full of intent, getting closer and closer. She hobbles faster along the footpath and dives down an alley. Her paranoia at fever pitch. She shouldn't have drunk all those espresso martinis. Thank goodness for her knife. She regularly takes it out with her – the bouncers never check her bag.

There is a man, intoxicated, clearly struggling to walk in a straight line. Lily hopes he'll stumble past but he stops to light a cigarette a few metres from where she is standing. As he exhales a plume of smoke, he catches her eye. She immediately turns to walk away but even in his drunken state he is quicker than her. He grabs her shoulder and pushes his beer belly against her – pinning Lily against the wall. His breath is hot and pungent. His pores ooze alcohol and sweat and longing. This time Lily isn't hesitant; she plunges her knife into his abdomen, twisting and pushing deeper and deeper until it won't go any further. His eyes widen in shock. And then she pulls it out. He releases an agonised grunt and slumps to the ground. She wipes the knife on his coat, checks to see if anyone is watching, and runs. She runs past the Betfred, the greengrocer, the estate agents, the Sikh gurdwara, the playground. All the way home. Barefoot. A smile on her lips. Flying through air.

About the Authors

Judith Wilson is a London-based writer and journalist. She graduated with Distinction from the MA Creative Writing at Royal Holloway, University of London, in 2019. She won 3rd Prize for the Brick Lane Bookshop Short Story Prize 2019 and was shortlisted for the London Short Story Prize 2018. Judith is working on her first novel, set in London in the 1860s. Find her at www.judithwilsonwrites.com @judithwrites

Isha Karki is a British Nepali writer based in London. Her stories have appeared in *Lightspeed Magazine*, *Mslexia* and *The Good Journal* and were shortlisted in the Brick Lane Bookshop Short Story Prize, London Short Story Prize and Mslexia Short Story Competition. She is a graduate of Clarion West and a 2019 London Writers Award Awardee. @IshaKarki11

Caroline Rae gained an MA in Screenwriting from London College of Communication (UAL). As well as screenplays, radio plays and travel articles, she has written short stories and novels for children and adults. Originally an actor, Caroline lives in London and is currently working on expanding 'flesh-meet' into a novel.

CG Menon is the author of *Fragile Monsters*, which will be published by Viking in 2021. Her debut short story collection, *Subjunctive Moods*, was published by Dahlia

Publishing in 2018. She has a PhD in pure mathematics and an MA in Creative Writing from City University, for which she won the annual prize. She's won or been shortlisted in a number of competitions, including the Fish, Bridport, Bare Fiction, Willesden Herald, Asian Writer, Leicester Writes, Winchester Writers Festival and *Short Fiction Journal* awards.

Laurane Marchive is a French writer and director who lives in London. Her work has appeared in *The London Magazine*, *The Mechanics' Institute Review*, *Review 31* and the *TLS*. Marchive is a past winner of the French Escales des Lettres. She was recently shortlisted for Spread the Word's Life Writing Prize and she holds an MA in Creative Writing from Birkbeck. She also runs a circus.

Jay Barnett was born in Macclesfield, Cheshire, in 1981. His writing has featured on BBC Radio 4, and appeared in *The Mechanic's Institute Review*, as well as Hamish Hamilton's *Five Dials* magazine. His story 'Area Of Outstanding Natural Beauty' was included in *Salt Publishing's Best British Short Stories 2017*. Jay completed his MA in Creative Writing at Birkbeck in 2017, where he was the recipient of The Sophie Warne Fellowship. He was longlisted for the Bristol Short Story Prize in 2018. He lives and works in London.

Deirdre Shanahan was published in *The Best of British Short Stories 2017*, won the 2018 *Wasafiri* International Fiction Award and an Arts Council England award. In 2019 Bluemoose published her novel, *Caravan of the Lost and Left Behind*. *The Irish Times*: 'Well written

debut...one of the strengths is the writer's way with place.' Tim Pears: 'The novel drew me to the characters difficult journey, surfing on the finely wrought details. The ending is brilliant, hopeful in an honest, unsentimental way.' @2busy2bhere

Joseph Regan is a London-based writer of short fiction. He holds an MA in Modern English Literature from King's College London. His work has previously been published in *The Stockholm Review of Literature*. His first novel is forthcoming.

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S. Bhattacharya-Woodward is a writer and Londoner. She won 3rd prize in the Bristol Short Story Prize in 2019; was shortlisted for the Bridport Short Story Prize in 2018, and longlisted for the Commonwealth Writers Short Story Prize in 2019. She is also an award-winning science, health and arts journalist whose articles have featured internationally. She recently graduated with an MA in Creative and Life Writing from Goldsmiths, University of London.

Gary Budden is a writer, editor and the co-founder of award-winning independent publisher, Influx Press. He is the author of *Hollow Shores* (Dead Ink, 2017), *Judderman* (as D.A. Northwood) (Eden Book Society, 2018), and *The White Heron Beneath the Reactor* w/ artist

Maxim Griffin (2019). His work has appeared in *Black Static*, *The Lonely Crowd*, *Structo*, *Year's Best Weird Fiction* and many more. He lives in London.

Jessie Williams is a 24-year-old freelance journalist and assistant editor at *Restless Magazine*. Her interest lies in global current affairs, politics, culture, and women's rights. She's had work published in *The Economist*, the *Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, *Dazed*, and *Refinery29*. She grew up in Oxfordshire, moved to London for university and has been here ever since, except for a year studying abroad in France. Fiction writing is a secret (now not so secret) hobby of hers, which she hopes to continue.

@JessieWill5

About Spread the Word

Spread the Word is London's writer development agency, helping London's writers make their marks on the page, the screen, and in the world. We kick start the careers of London's best new writers, and energetically campaign to ensure mainstream publishing truly reflects the diversity of the city. We do this by supporting the creative and professional development of talent, by engaging those already interested in literature, those who will be, and advocating on behalf of both.

Our annual London Short Story Prize seeks to discover, publish and profile the best stories and writers coming out of the capital.

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the london short story prize anthology 2019

We are thrilled to be publishing the entire longlist from the 2019 London Short Story Prize run by Spread the Word and published by Kingston University Press.

The Prize exists to showcase the most creative and talented short story writers living in London. This year, upwards of 570 entries were judged by acclaimed writers Eley Williams, Rowan Hisayo Buchanan and literary agent, Charlotte Seymour at Andrew Nurnberg Associates.

This collection will take you across the capital city and beyond; from the slums of India, to the Cornish coast, and the forests of Borneo. Join a man's quest to find the ultimate vinyl, check out instagrammable cocktails in Soho, or even smash up wardrobes in Cedar Hill.

The realities of racism, living with mental health and recovering from addiction are told in poignant detail. And yet, there is also love-lining, newfound courage and joyful glimpses of inky skies.

'From imagined future worlds to recent history, from detailing the clamorous to the clandestine, alongside forensic portrayals of the present moment, this anthology contains all that short stories can be. What a delight to be part of its compilation.'

Eley Williams,
London Short Story Prize
2019 Judge

'It always feels exposing to enter creative work for a competition, yet to have my short story picked out from so many entries has been an incredible boost for my writing confidence. I feel I'm in tremendous company with the talented London writers in this anthology!'

Judith Wilson,
London Short Story Prize
2019 Winner

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