2020

Life Writing Prize

TWELVE WRITERS

FOREWORD

The Spread the Word Life Writing Prize, in association with Goldsmiths Writers Centre, is now in its fourth year. The writing in this anthology features the top twelve entries from nearly 900 entries in the Prize this year. The anthology will take you on an extraordinary, tender, and occasionally, funny journey. Much like in a life lived; there is much to celebrate, and much to grieve and contemplate.

Spread the Word started the Life Writing Prize in 2017 after I had a chance encounter with our Prize funder and co-founder Joanna Munro at Goldsmiths, University of London. We remarked on how there was a dynamic fiction and poetry prize-scene in the UK, but nowhere near as much to celebrate and profile writers of creative non-fiction, and those who write about and from their own lives. We wondered if there was an opportunity to celebrate writers whose stories may not have been heard. Four years into our Life Writing Prize adventure, we know there is a real appetite and a growing interest in writing and reading about our lives. Spread the Word is extremely proud of the Prize, its legacy and its future in playing a part in bringing a diversity of writing about our lives to readers.

This anthology is the first we have produced in the Prize. We consider it an anthology to celebrate and to treasure – twelve tremendous pieces of life writing, written by new and emerging writers from the UK. Although the Prize has no specific theme; this anthology celebrates journeys and narratives. Topics explored in this anthology include immigration, #MeToo, religion, childhood, death, friendship, family, love, loss, infertility, bereavement, and social change. We welcome new and experimental approaches to life-writing; and are thrilled to present pieces that play deliciously with form, showcasing new techniques in how to share the stories of our lives.

As with every Prize, there must be a winner. This year, the judging meeting took place during lockdown, under a heightened perspective on

each other's personal narratives. Our Life Writing Prize 2020 judges Kerry Hudson, Nell Stevens and Sathnam Sanghera selected Lorelei Goulding's *Birdie* as the winning piece. Candid, powerful and moving, *Birdie* deftly balances humour with pain, to tell a story of a young vulnerable girl and her emerging voice. Indeed, its final lines reverberate on impact, emphasising how words can give us agency and strength. Nell Stevens commented that Lorelei "writes like someone we should have been reading all our lives", and Sathnam Sanghera said: "Beautiful, spare, poetical writing…it's hard to believe this writer is just starting out." Kerry Hudson echoes: "it is a narrative that pulls you in slowly and then hits you with a sucker punch and leaves you gasping for air at the end. Such accomplished writing and surely the beginning of an exciting career."

Joanna Brown's highly commended piece *Birds can be heard singing through open windows*, is a glorious reflection on maternal bonding and loss. It was described by Sathnam Sanghera as: "incredibly moving - I had to put it down on two occasions to cry. A timely reminder of the heroism that permeates ordinary life and the important role literature can play in highlighting it." The second highly commended piece is Laurane Marchive's *For the Flesh is Sour*. Set within the backdrop of the Gilets Jaunes riots, this piece chronicles the aftermath of the death of a grandparent, sexuality, and experiencing life through video images. Kerry Hudson praised it as "structurally complex, elegant and extremely beautifully written", noting that "this story stood out for all of us with its skilfully written prose and extremely impressive ability to conjure setting."

On our Prize shortlist are three truly memorable pieces. Firstly, Maxine Davies's *Dad's Home* addresses the anguish and upset of meeting an absent parent for the first time as a teenager. This witty, pacy piece is praised by Nell Stevens as a "characterful, vivid account of family life interrupted. The wit, the voice, the pacing – it won me over completely." Carla Montemayor's *North of the River* is a collage of stories weaving together the author's personal, family, and national histories. Sathnam Sanghera reflected: "I

could easily read a whole book revolving around the fascinating characters in this story." Josh Holton's *Death and Birdwatching* is an extract from a bigger work in progress book about writing his dad's eulogy. Drawing on fragmented memories, he learns about nature to examine his relationship with his father, an ornithologist with a controversial past. Kerry Hudson said it was "fresh, genuinely funny (I laughed out loud while reading it which is extremely rare for me) and really moving."

The six pieces on our longlist shine. Elena Croitoru's *On Sigma-Algebras* is about identity and estrangement in the post-communist era, and how emigration affects familial ties. Nell Stevens described it as "full of keenly observed details shown with deftness and poise". *Mink Lashes* by SR Shah centres on the author's experience at a Muslim wedding, after being separated from her family for years. Nell Stevens described it as "an energetic, dynamic piece, which is told with swagger and force." Ruby Eastwood's *The Spoon Garden*, written in fragments, is inspired by the author's childhood in Barcelona; a portrait of an ailing father, and a meditation on psychogeography and change. Sathnam Sanghera praised it as "compelling and poetical".

Nicky Watkinson's *This is a story about friendship* is a hybrid work exploring friendship and narrative form through the lenses of cultural analysis, theory, and memoir. Nell Stevens said it: "demonstrates the scope of life writing to tell a story whilst also exploring the follies and joys attempting to do so." Stephen Crawley's *Down Ashton*, set in a small Yorkshire town, follows a young boy's brush with evil. Kerry Hudson said she "was especially impressed with the strong, skilfully realised regional voice." The final piece in our anthology is the totally original *Palingenesis* by Sue Hann. It explores a trip to an exhibition on the art of Lee Krasner. The narrator, who is undergoing fertility treatment, draws delicate parallels between her experience with the life and the work of the artist. Kerry Hudson "found this very moving and confidently written. I also appreciate that it covers a subject so rarely written about."

Putting this collection of twelve incredible stories together reminded me why this genre is so special. The circumstances under which I'm writing this foreword are extraordinarily different to the circumstances in which this round of the Prize opened for entries in November 2019. Yet, I've always believed that life writing can instil great empathy, it can help us to feel connected and understand what life may be like across society's intricate tapestry. We value stories of lives lived, fragments of lives, stories of change. As I write this, during an unpredictable and turbulent time, I am comforted that despite physical distancing and new boundaries, we can still reach across the pages to hear the rich and diverse stories of our lives.

Laura Kenwright
Spread the Word
May 2020

CONTENTS

Foreword 2

Lorelei Goulding
Birdie* 7

Joanna Brown
Birds can be heard singing through open windows 20

Laurane Marchive
For the Flesh is Sour* 34

Maxine Davies
Dad's Home 47

Carla Montemayor
North of the River 57

Josh Holton
Death and Birdwatching 70

Elena Croitoru
On Sigma-Algebras 85

SR Shah
Mink Lashes* 91

Ruby Eastwood
The Spoon Garden 104

Nicky Watkinson
This is a story about friendship 116

Stephen Crawley
Down Ashton 132

Sue Hann
Palingenesis 145

Biographies 154

Acknowledgements 158

*Trigger warning: these stories include references to child sex abuse, graphic sexual images, rape and violence.

Birdie

Lorelei Goulding

In the summer of 1979 we move to a bigger home on a leafy street on the North Shore of Long Island. Audubon Woods – the name of our development – is quiet, submerged in a canopy of green, the houses set far back from the road. When we pull into the driveway on a sweltering July morning, our stained mattresses tied to the roof of our beat-up station wagon with the illegal license plates, it doesn't feel as if we are in the right place.

On the North Shore I learn that the families have boats in the harbour and wall-to-wall carpeting in basement playrooms. The kids wear designer jeans and brand name sneakers, which are new to me. The fathers commute to New York City on the fast train in their suits and ties while the mothers – tanned, unworking – hover in kitchens making lunches or stand poolside, presiding over the running and jumping and splashing. It is not the first time I am reminded of how different my own parents are; my father, diseased with emphysema and malice, works sporadically and sits in his underpants for long periods during the day, barking orders at us for coffee or a clean ashtray. My mother works two jobs – the swing shift at the paper factory and overnights at Dunkin Donuts on the weekends – and is only seen briefly at odd times, if at all. She sleeps a lot.

The days are long that summer. My favourite sister Melissa, who calls me Birdie, is in college in California and can't drive me to the beach, or pull me close to kiss the top of my head when no one is looking. So instead I check the mailbox every day, waiting for her letters, and spend time reading in my room. There aren't many kids around – they don't play stickball in the street, or catch fireflies in jars in the evenings when it is light until well after dinner. There aren't neighbourhood-wide games of

Capture the Flag or Hide and Go Seek, like there used to be at our old house. Here, the yards are too vast and the houses are too spread out, and it could be a long time before anyone might find you.

***

September takes its time to arrive. I am starting a new school and am anxious on the first morning, when it comes. I wear my best outfit, a light blue skirt with a ruffled hem around the bottom, and a matching striped shirt that comes with a clip-on bow tie. I also have long white knee socks and patent leather Mary Janes. The entire outfit was a birthday present from Melissa; brand new clothes, crisp with potential, that weren't hand me downs for once.

But my birthday was six months ago, and this morning as I get dressed I struggle to zip the skirt. The top is tight across my chest, fabric pulling in opposite directions between the buttons so the shirt won't lie flat, exposing skin. When I pull the socks on, they refuse to go all the way up to my knees. I cram my meaty feet into my shoes and fasten the loosest buckle, ignoring my toes, bulging visibly against the fake, shiny leather.

I enter the kitchen, grab the lunch I made for myself the night before. My mother is awake, in the den, entombed in a plume of smoke in her usual spot on the couch. The embers from her cigarette glow brighter as she inhales, and then dim again. Her eyes flicker from the television in my general direction as she waves me off with a hand, distracted: *have a good day*.

The bus stop is at the end of our lane, and as I follow the road around to the left, I can see the yellow school bus parked on a slight verge next to the woods. There is no one else around. When I approach the door and see my reflection in the window, my bow tie is already crooked.

An older man sits, leaning forward, in the driver's seat. His face is saggy, a Basset Hound's face, several chins drape down in folds from his jaw. A newspaper is spread open in front of him, and his belly presses into the bottom of the steering wheel. A cup of coffee, still steaming, rests in

his right hand. He wears a blue jacket, and a cap with CAT emblazoned across the front, in yellow letters. I tap the glass.

"Oh," he turns and looks, places his cup on the dashboard gingerly. He wraps his fingers around the door release and pulls toward him, the two glass panelled doors swivel open, the mouth of a cavern, *open sesame*.

"Come in, come in. Didn't see you there," he says, his eyebrows raised. "Come on in."

I climb the stairs, and sit in the third row from the front, on the opposite side to him. I watch his thick fingers fold up the newspaper. He turns to speak.

"You're the new girl. What's your name?"

I say it quietly.

"Well hi. I'm Al," and he smiles as I nod and look downward.

"Well, you're the only one at this stop," he says, and I nod again, slightly swinging my feet beneath me. "It's the first stop, so I'll be sitting here when you get here every morning."

Al checks his watch and flashes a toothy lopsided smile. "Time to go," and he turns in his seat and starts the ignition. The engine shudders and rumbles, and we trundle up the hill, just the two of us on board. I look at the back of his neck, which is sunburned red, and lined with deep white crevasses. There are several mirrors positioned around the perimeter of the windshield: to observe the kids that sit in the back, to help see around the long sides of the bus, and an additional rear-view mirror to see traffic behind him. I can see his face from several angles, and my eyes roam from mirror to mirror, taking him in. When I eventually meet his gaze as I glance around, I look away quickly. He can see me from several angles too.

At school, I enter room 201 and sit at a desk at the back, while the girls mill around in the centre of the class between the seats, in groups of twos and threes. The boys – noisy, fluid, always in motion – are restless around the edges of the classroom. When my teacher strides in, commanding and tall, a blanket of quiet descends. She sets her things on her desk as everyone takes a seat.

We are to call her Ms., which is pronounced Mizz. Not Miss, she explains, and never Mrs. as she is not married, but Ms., which seems to live somewhere between the two. She is unlike any teacher I have had before; she does not tolerate any nonsense, even on the very first day, and wastes no time in making short work of one of the mouthier boys, forcing him to stand in a corner at the front of the room, an example to us all. My teachers have been kind and full of affection up until now, but Ms. remains unsmiling, and I am a little afraid of her.

It turns out I am not the smartest kid in the class as I was in the last school. I'm still put in the top groups for reading and math, but when it is my turn to read aloud, I stumble over the words, mispronouncing many, even those I know. I have never seen long division and I don't finish the entire sheet. But I know what an antonym is when I'm called on and my penmanship is neat. We write a paragraph about what we did over the summer, and I am relieved I don't have to read mine aloud, after several kids mention pool parties on the Fourth of July or vacations with their parents. After we'd moved here, I had gone to the woods most days, by myself, to read and look at the leaves in the sun, dappled and suffused with light. There hadn't been so many trees in our last neighbourhood.

I peer around the room. The girls are freckled, blonde or brown haired, sun-kissed and clean. They wear overalls or jeans, and their shirts are emblazoned with appliqued rainbows or iron-on unicorns, or both. Their sneakers are Nikes, a single white swoosh – classic, they would be called now – fresh out of the box. A few wear shoes with a slightly stacked heel and they are widely envied. Many have French braids, neatly woven, or combed hair held in place with matching barrettes – the shiny metal kind, not plastic. Plastic is for much younger sisters, grades and classrooms further down the school. No one wears a party skirt, or patent leather white Mary Janes, or a bow tie. I am not spoken to.

At lunch, our class sits together at a single long table. I sit in the middle with the others who have brought their lunch from home, hoping

someone will be friendly, but the girls on either side of me face away, and I am left with their backs – square, impenetrable, forbidding. I open my crumpled brown paper bag furtively, but I can see the girls across from me are watching and signalling the others with their widened eyes or with their feet under the table. I take out my sandwich, wrapped in cling film, the only item ever in my lunch bag. The jam has bled through the white bread, darkening the centre, looking like the bloodied towels I see in my older sister's bathroom garbage every month. The girls across from me have the right kind of lunch; their shiny metal boxes are open, a thermos of milk or soup is plopped upright, a bag of grapes or peeled carrots, sandwiches prepared by mothers who cut the crusts off. They are smirking, each to another, along the table.

I manage half of my lunch before I shove it back in the brown paper bag underneath the table, out of sight. I stand up, ungainly, trying not to call attention to myself, but I feel everyone staring anyway. I make a mental note to sit at the end of the bench from now on so I can slip out more easily. A rookie mistake, but I am learning. I am usually good at sensing when there will be trouble. But not always.

I head for the bathroom, next to the cafeteria. I push the door, enter the end stall, turn the lock. There is no graffiti on these walls, it smells like new paint. The floors are clean. Even the locks on the doors are gleaming, hard and cold. I sit on the toilet, pull my knees up, hug them close to me. I have known for a while that crying isn't useful and can mark you as an easier target. Instead, I look at my white shoes – *baby shoes* someone had whispered behind a hand – and notice the black scuffs. My socks are now baggy around my ankles, not bright and clean as they seemed at home, but dingy grey under the unforgiving florescence of the bathroom light.

When I get on the bus later that day, Al smiles. "How was it?" he asks.

I answer with a nod, and say "Okay" as I fumble past, taking the seat directly behind him. Other kids push and jostle, it is noisy, raucous even, but I stare out the window, away from the school. When the bus moves I keep

my head rigid, staring, letting the woods and houses wash over me in a blur.

My stop is the last stop – since I am the first one on, I am also the last one off. "It'll be better tomorrow, kiddo," Al says, as he opens the door.

Kiddo. I know he can't know that Melissa – so far away, and over a year since she left - signs off her letters to me "I love you, kiddo." But he says it kindly, and it echoes in the deepest cave within me, as I walk home from the bus stop.

***

I am not wrong about my teacher. Ms. rarely smiles, her face a tense network of lines, and she favours no one. I get used to her though, and as the days go by she scares me less, and I even like certain things about her; she has a deep and throaty voice, which she uses to great and frightening effect to get the class to sit still and pay attention. But it is when she reads to us for our fifteen minutes a day from the class book – currently *Island of the Blue Dolphins* – that I feel a strange kind of comfort. Her voice envelops me, provides a warm spot in a cold ocean I can swim in for a time. Even so, I catch her, in those first few weeks, after the book snaps shut for the day, looking at me down the steep angle of her nose. She sees the scratched eyeglasses, the dirty fingernails, the homemade bookbag with crooked stitching and sizes me up, dismisses me accordingly. Her assessment feels accurate, even I know I am lacking – a dull, runny watercolour painting on a cheap and dirty canvas. I am not cute or clean or even very bright, by these new standards. I am also aware that my parents aren't reliable – or even very interested – as some parents are; they will not join the PTA, or make it to back to school night to sit at my small desk, or even return permission slips for class trips we won't be able to afford. So at school I try to shrink into the background, which generally works at home, where I can go unnoticed for long stretches of time if I am quiet.

This tactic works with the girls at school, who mostly leave me alone. I am invited to one sleepover, early in the year, because all of the girls in

the class are invited. I stand in the basement playroom, by a snack table off to the side, busily eating by myself. When it is time for bed I lay in the corner nearest the stairs, listening to the others snigger and murmur and occasionally shriek with laughter. I don't sleep, I am wide-eyed, waiting for anything – I'm not sure what to expect. And after much whispering someone does wander over, on a secret mission, to check to see if I am awake. They don't get too close before they scurry back to the gaggle of sleeping bags, arranged seemingly on top of each other, close as puppies in a box. The realisation that I should have stayed home lands like an adult-sized fist in my stomach, which is not an unfamiliar feeling.

I'm still not the smartest kid in the class, and it is clear that maybe I never will be again. It's hard to keep up. But I have always been a reader and I like words and writing stories. I don't use all the new words I learn – instead I keep some for myself, roll them around in my head like a marble on wooden floorboards in an empty room, or curl my tongue around the syllables as I would a hard boiled sweet. I am saving them, stockpiling them like ammunition, lining them up as they bide their time, waiting for me to march them out when needed.

***

I find Al parked in the same spot every morning, just as he said he would be, next to the woods between the last two houses on Bluebird Lane. He smiles when I arrive at the bus door each morning, his newspaper always spread out before him, and his coffee – a regular, he tells me, which means he has cream and sugar, like my father – sits on the dashboard, steaming up the windshield, obscuring the view of the empty road.

I now sit in the front seat across the aisle from Al, and he turns his whole body to face me, interested in what I say. He asks me questions, but not like a teacher or a parent; he asks about my family, my mom and dad, my brothers and sisters, what I like to do after school, if I have made any friends. I tell him very little about my ill father or my absent mother, or my

many brothers and sisters. I tell him that I miss my sister who lives on the west coast though and he nods seriously, listens, takes it all in.

I tell him my mom will bring home donuts sometimes on a Saturday morning after her graveyard shift, and that my favourite is Boston Cream. "Hey! That's mine too," he says, and I smile.

Al does most of the talking, and he tells me about himself. He was in the Army when he was young. He has been a bus driver for almost twenty years and he has seen things, especially at the high school, he says. He was married but not anymore; he shrugs as he says this, as if he misplaced something and isn't upset about not finding it. He doesn't have children, he says the kids on the bus are enough and he still keeps in touch with those he considers to be special.

"Like me?" I ask.

"Like you," he says. "Wait. I'll show you," and I'm not sure what he means. He reaches behind his back and pulls out his wallet, which is on a chain, and removes a clear plastic insert. He hands it across the aisle to me.

"These are the special kids," he says, as I flip through several photographs. "The ones I still talk to."

I look at the photos, all a bit faded now. In each is an ordinary-looking girl, smiling at someone's camera. They are all blue eyed, with brown hair, similar to mine. *Oh.*

He is watching me. "Maybe you will give me one of your school photos when they come in?" he asks.

I brighten. "Maybe," I say.

***

Not long after this on an ordinary seeming day, I get a package from Melissa. The package is brown, square and plain, unspecial except for my name on the front, in her handwritten loopy script, a tiny smiley face drawn to the left.

The package contains several things, which I spread out in front of

me on my bedroom carpet when no one is around. There is a deep red, clothbound book, with gold gilt edges, rectangular and dense. On the cover is a picture of a bird with iridescent feathers in various shades of blue and yellow and green, both beautiful and – to my mind – completely improbable. The bird is perched in a tree on a knobbly branch, its long, purple beak rooting in a white blossom tinged with pink, against a swirling blue sky. There is some kind of gold writing I don't recognise, tiny strokes of lines and boxes that are wholly foreign and mysterious to me. I touch the cover gingerly, trace the flowering branch with my stubby finger. I turn the book this way and that, watching the gold of the edges catch and reflect the light. I am surprised that when I open the book, I discover it is completely blank, full of pristine white pages; a journal. There is also a red fountain pen, and two cartridges of blue ink. When I hold the pen in my hand, it is heavier than it looks, and I can feel its heft between my fingers.

If my father finds these things, he will hold them just over my head, a schoolyard bully taunting me, taunting all of us, as he has always done. So when I hear heavy footsteps and his emphysemic wheeze coming down the hall, I shove the pen and the journal and the cartridges under the bed hurriedly. It isn't until later that night – after my younger sister Ginny is asleep and I'm under my scratchy, thin bedspread with a dull flashlight - that I discover Melissa's simple inscription on the inside front cover, part instruction and part command: *Write, Birdie. Write!* I try to picture her – I haven't seen her in so long and I can't quite remember the shade of green of her eyes – somewhere sunny, smiling at me, urging me on.

***

The leaves are starting to turn yellow one morning when I turn the corner and see Al standing next to the bus, facing away from me. As I get closer, I can hear a splattering on the pavement. I have brothers, I know the sound, which starts as a sizzle when it hits the asphalt and ends with a *tap tap tap*. I stand and wait for him to finish and when he does, he climbs back up the stairs.

"I really had to go," he says. "I hope you don't mind."

I've seen and heard boys do this often enough, so I shake my head. From now on, when I arrive at the bus stop in the mornings, he is standing outside the door, holding himself as I approach. I don't always hear the splatter, though.

After this we start to move away from talk of family and school and friends, and on some days Al tells me about what the boys and girls do in the cars in the high school parking lot before class, what he can see before the car windows get too fogged up. At first it isn't anything I don't know about – I have seen my older sisters kissing their boyfriends before and looked away. But as the mornings pass it is clear there is more to it, that Al sees more than just kissing from the height of his driver's seat on the bus. When he talks about these things, I look down at my dangling feet, bouncing them gently – one foot then the other quickly after, like a heartbeat - against the metal heater located under my seat.

Al talks about the boys and girls in the cars most days, and I'm never sure what to say, so I remain quiet. Until one morning, after pumpkins start to appear on porches, he asks me if I have any questions. "I can show you what I mean," he says. He seems to think I don't know what he is talking about, that I am somehow confused. Which I am – we are not a boy and girl in high school, and I am not like my sisters with their boyfriends, giggling and kissing on the couch.

"Come here," he says. I get up from my seat clumsily, stand next to his seat. "Closer," he says, and I stand directly beside him. He is smiling when he reaches out with his thick arm and places his hand firmly on the back of my head, palming my skull like a basketball.

***

I'm not sure when I notice the foliage has disappeared. The oaks and the maples had turned golden and pink and fiery red-orange, and on the other side of memory is the dull crunching of dried brown leaves beneath my feet. On a wet November weekend, a thunderstorm strips the remaining

leaves from the trees, revealing abandoned birds' nests and exposing branches, bony fingers pointing sharply upward. From where I am walking along our lane, the dense fretwork of bare, brittle limbs looks clinical and stark; frail capillaries against a white sky. They have been watching me, these trees, all along. Now, as I make my way past the woods, day after day, shivering, the air shrill and cold, they are poised to see what might happen.

I try something different this morning. I walk along the road, close to the edge of where the wood meets the pavement, so I remain unseen. I stop at the bend, before the road curves left and the bus, marooned on the verge, comes into view. I stand still, trying not to exhale so Al won't see the cold cloud of my breath hanging in the air. I wiggle my gloveless fingers, and when I can hear him, finally, turn the ignition, I resume walking. As I round the corner, I am caught in the beam of the headlights.

He pulls on the door handle. "You're late," he notes, his eyebrows a dark line, as I climb the stairs. He is no longer sunburned, merely red-faced.

I turn away from him as I pass the driver's seat. I don't sit at the front like I used to, I sit in the middle of the bus now, further and further back. He doesn't wait for me to settle into a seat, so I am still standing in the aisle when he starts driving, putting his foot down so hard that bus jerks forward suddenly. I stumble, am caught off balance. But I don't fall over, not completely, and I somehow manage to right myself enough to sit down on the cold green bench and slide safely across to the window. The woods whirr by, blurring together as the bus picks up speed. I only look out my little square pane, to my right, unblinking. I don't allow myself to look in the direction of anything towards the front of the bus. Instead I breathe carefully – I always breathe carefully now – as I look to my right, up towards the sky and notice the faint, milky sunlight, glad there is no salty taste in my mouth this morning.

I do the same again the next day, idling for a little while at the bend in the road, waiting. Again, I hear the ignition. Again, I see the low, dim beam of the headlights as the bus comes into view. Again, there is no time for anything

other than driving, or the entire busload of children will be late for school.

The third day I stand at the bend, as still as the naked trees in the windless woods, and I hear the ignition, my signal. I start walking, there is the bus. I can see his mountainous outline through the windshield, and he waves at me awkwardly, something he has never done before. As I approach the door, I can see he is smiling, fleshy lips revealing his gappy, yellowed teeth. He pulls on the handle, the door opens.

"Good morning," he says, as I enter. I raise my head, look up at him from the bottom step, directly into his jowly, rubbery face. He hasn't shaved – his cheeks and chin and neck are encrusted with speckled stubble. His mouth is loose, not the thin slit it has been the last two days. "Did you see if the headlights were on?"

I hesitate; *why would he ask such a thing?* "Yes," I say. "I think so."

"Ah, good, good. Having some problems, just thought I would turn on the engine to make sure," he says, his hand on the keys, casually switching the ignition off with a flick of his forefinger and thumb. He checks his watch as I stand on the top step. "We still have a few minutes before we need to leave." I turn and as I shuffle along the aisle, I hear him grunt as he heaves himself out of his driver's chair, lumbering after me. I turn my head left, towards the row of dirty little windows, looking out at the woods. The tangle of tree branches and limbs continue to be impervious to me. He follows me down the narrow aisle, a space only ever meant for children, and I blink hard as I slide across the seat.

***

I begin to write. The words spill out of me silently across the pages, like a full glass of water that has been knocked over, running off in all directions.

I write ordinary things a nine year old would write; I write about Ginny who tattles on me for eating the last Oreo and is constantly touching my things; I write about how much I would like a pair of brand new white ice skates; I write about the dark-haired Greek boy, Spero, who is too handsome to look at directly. I write down words I come across in books I

am reading that I would like to look up, if I had a dictionary. I write about how pathetic I am at everything – spelling “pathetic” with a y, proving I am pathetic at spelling.

I do not write about my father’s left hand slapping my face without warning at dinner, like a frog’s tongue snapping at a fly, because my elbows are on the table. I do not write about my mother, who sits immobile at the end of the couch in a haze of Camel smoke which makes it always seem like dusk, watching television with the lights off. I certainly do not write these things at home where I run the risk of being discovered. I write in the corridor at school, sat alone outside my locked classroom on the cold marble floor, on the days that the early bus runs. I do not write about why I start taking the early bus to school. Instead, I re-read Melissa’s instruction – *Write, Birdie. Write*! – and silently repeat this to myself, as my fledgling pen scratches across the pages.

Birds can be heard singing through open windows

Joanna Brown

That night, you are teaching me to cook: golden roast chicken, fried plantain, steamed rice, sautéed greens, pepper sauce. You giggle and we wriggle around each other in the balmy heat of the small kitchen. I watch you chop, mix, stir. Look at your beautiful hands: fingers slender, elegant; nails smooth ovals tipped with ivory; ringed with promise, wedding, eternity. Perfectly poised, they stir thyme and lemon, nutmeg and cayenne. You conjure spiced alchemy, the steam rises and drifts, fragrancing the air with memory. I kiss your brown, freckled cheek. Soft, warm.

After dinner, you go to bed early. Being on your feet exhausts you; pain screws your joints tight. It has been four years since you left work. Four years pinned to your bed. I am thirteen when it begins. You need my help in almost everything you do. Need it, but don't want it. It's a cruel reversal for a tiger mother. A spiteful paralysis for a woman always moving. Sang and swang whilst ironing. Danced whilst cooking. Ran for a bus no matter what the distance: legs reaching further with every stride, laughing breathlessly at the driver as you dug into your purse for the fare. Now you lean on me to move from one room to the next; gripping my arm, sucking air through your teeth with each laboured step. I lower you into the bath, lift you out of an armchair. Your bed is by turns your prison and throne. I come and go daily: shopping before school (milk, magazines), shopping after school (medicines, groceries). Locked together, we bicker, we love, we argue, we laugh, we talk, we cry, we fight. Sisters, friends, enemies: mother and daughter, daughter and mother.

Sometimes we are silent together. I climb into bed beside you and read.

My thoughts are entangled in the story of someone else's teenage drama, but I feel your breath on the back of my neck, butterfly soft.
You'll need to look after yourself, you tell me.
I'm not going to be around forever.
You'll thank me when I'm dead and gone.
When I'm in the ground, you'll understand.
One day, when you're a mother…
You love uttering these prophetic wisdoms. Sometimes they are laced with black humour, chased by cackles.
Don't let the boys tamper with you, or I'll come back to haunt you. Tell them I'll come after them with scissors.
I tell myself it's because you're a nurse. You worked nights. It brings out the dark side.

I have just left school. A-levels under my belt, a place at University awaits next year. We don't talk about how you will cope without me. This year, I am working as a medical receptionist at a plastic surgery clinic. You've pulled strings with one of your nursing friends. Every day I don a trouser suit and sit in a bright and airy room, waiting for the phone to ring. Occasionally they let me type up letters or invoices. I once accidentally walked in on a rhinoplasty. I had a phone message for one of the surgeons and went through the wrong door. Four ghosts, gowned and masked, looked up at me, eyes wide with outrage. On the table, a still body with an opened face. The flat insistent beep of a machine. A sickly smell, chemical. I backed out, apologising, and ran blindly for the loos. I made it just in time before throwing up violently. When I tell you this, you rock with laughter, wide smile flashing, hands clapping, once, twice, then held together as if in prayer, thankful for the image.

The job at the clinic is easy enough. It's quiet. When the phone rings, it's usually you. Boredom and solitude prompt you to break off from reading

your magazines and call me, but I hear the pages flap as you flick through them while we talk. *Nursing Times, Nursing Mirror, Cosmopolitan, Hello*.

Do you remember taking me to work with you during the school holidays? It was easy when you were on children's wards. I'd bring a bag full of books and read stories to your patients. Young children with plastic tubes taped to their noses, or sprouting from holes in their chests. Aboubakar, a chatterbox with a gap-toothed grin who had four holes in his heart. Idris, soft-eyed and sad, who loved card games, and had only one kidney. Amina could not move, but her eyes sparkled whenever she heard music. Sometimes I would peek through a half open door and silently watch you rearrange their pillows, smooth their hair back from their foreheads, hold their hands in yours. We had photos of each one. They were my imaginary siblings. I never questioned that my mother was mothering other people's children. I understood. And the other nurses would mother me in turn when you were busy. Bring me tea, biscuits. I loved reading aloud to my hospital family. Fairy tales, nursery rhymes, nonsense poems. The words lisped and tumbled out of my mouth: the children giggled and asked for more. *They went to sea in a sieve, they did. In a sieve they went to sea.*

When each child died, you would place a photograph of them in an album, carefully peeling back a film sheet from a page in a little red book with cushioned covers, and gently placing the photograph to rest in the centre, before smoothing the film down again firmly with the flat of your palm. There. Every now and then, we would take the album down from the shelf, sit wedged against each other on the sofa and turn the pages together, naming the children one by one. Naeema. Irina. Idris. Abdul. Jacob. Aboubakar. *Remember them,* you said. *You can talk to them, remember them, continue to love them. They can still hear you.*

Now you also have a plastic tube sprouting: a little tap taped to the soft

flesh above your breast. You have had so many blood transfusions that the veins in both arms have collapsed and the tube is the only way to get the sickled blood out and the fresh blood into your body now. All eight pints drained and replaced. A week of tough days in hospital, followed by a week of quiet days at home. It takes four weeks for the blood to sickle up again. For it to slow and thicken in your veins, coagulate around your joints in a sticky stubborn mass. Pain is your constant companion. Sometimes it rages about your body, ravenous, tearing away at you from within: other times it just sits patiently, holding your hands and looking you straight in the eyes. You stare it down, but it never leaves you.

Deep into that night, the smell of the chicken and the plantain still heavy and warm in the air infuses my dreams. Something invisible drags me to the surface of my sleep and slaps me awake. I sit up with a jolt. Your voice, somewhere far away. It comes again, crying out my name: shrill, harsh, closer. I stagger into your room, switch on the light. You are lying in bed, struggling to get up, shivering violently. The whites of your eyes are yellow and filmy: you stare into me, not seeing me. Your teeth chatter through clenched jaws. Your hands twist the sheets into thick ropes. I hear my voice cajoling, comforting. Your eyes widen. Trembling and trying not to cry, I grab the phone next to your bed and call for an ambulance. It's a familiar drill. I want to hold you still, to stop you shaking like that, but something has you in its jaws and will not let go. I bring a mug of hot water to your mouth: your teeth clatter on its edge, water spills down your chin, you shudder in my arms.

Flashing lights on the wall. I look at my watch. 1:47am. Did you sleep while I was sleeping? I open the door to a young man and woman, serious-faced, gentle-voiced. I worry about their heavy boots on your bedroom carpet. They take control: offer reassurances, give instructions, ask questions. I stand back. They ask me to pack you a bag. Comfortable

clothes, underwear, a comb, hair oil, toothbrush, perfume, magazines: then, as an afterthought, scarlet nail varnish. You asked for that last time you went in. I watch as they lift you out of bed, into the hall, downstairs to the front door.

"Should I come?" I ask. They tell me no, stay home, phone in later, come tomorrow. Strapped to a metal bed you disappear into the back of the waiting ambulance. It is freezing outside. I can see my breath billow and rise in front of my face with my words: "Will she be warm enough?" When the doors close between us, I stand for a moment in the road feeling foolish, redundant as the ambulance pulls away, spinning blue light, siren screaming. Silence falls again like a cloak over the street.

When I call the hospital, a woman with a heavy, tired voice says she can give me no news yet as you've not been seen by the doctor and tells me to call again later. I give it another hour. The same woman says that the doctor is with you now: try again in a bit. When I call a third time, she says that you are "stable" and that I should go to bed and ring in the morning. *Get some sleep, darling*. Her accent reminds me of yours. Sierra Leonean? Nigerian? It's comforting. Reluctantly I return to bed. I dream that I am standing alone under an umbrella in heavy rain, an open grave scooped out of the earth in front of me. Ice floods my chest, rousing me. I ring the hospital again. Four a.m., fourth call. A soft voice with a Cork lilt tells me that you are asleep now. *I think I should come and see her. Now.* The edge in my voice wavers between assertion and panic. The returning voice sounds weary. *She needs to sleep. Call again in the morning, love*. I want to say, *It is the morning*. I want to tell them about the dream but I don't.

When my alarm goes off, my head is thick with confusion. I can't remember what I've dreamt and what has happened. In your room, the light is still on, the bed is empty, and the sheets are crumpled and damp. On the bedside

table, a half-drunk mug of water. I phone the hospital again. The woman with the West African accent reassures me. You have been seen by the doctor, you are still sleeping, you are stable (that word again) and we should let you sleep now. *When can I see her?* Later in the day, she tells me. They'll run some tests when you wake up. Visiting hours are from two till eight. *Can I come at two?* Yes, do that. This gives me time to go to work for the morning first. That will please you. Try not to worry, the nurse says. I thank her, happy that I know I am going to see you at a prescribed time.

I make a cup of tea. Staring at the wall I think through the day ahead. I want to show you that I can manage on my own, that I can keep up the work, balance it with looking after you. I think about how much easier it will be without having to study in the evenings. I put fresh sheets on your bed, water the plants and get in the shower to wash away the residue of dread from the previous night.

Outside, it is a crisp cold morning. Everyone moves quickly and with purpose, bright and hard-edged in the sun's dazzling light. When my bus arrives, I sit upstairs, at the front, as always: the view is best from here. I'm feeling calmer now. It's been years since you and I took a bus together. You're just not well enough anymore. We used to take trips into town. *Up town,* you called it. Oxford Street, shopping. When I was small, I'd hold your hand from the minute we left the house until we returned, or so it seemed. You bought perfume, watches, handbags from men who shouted from their cardboard box mountains on the street, preachers of thrift. You were a devout worshipper: chatting, cajoling, chastising, charming, bantering and bartering until you triumphed and had exactly what you wanted for just the right price.

Once, we were weaving in and out of the crowds as usual: I hurried to keep up with your determined stride as you pulled me along. I was six, I think.

We were heading towards a crowd on the edge of the pavement. Men and women were standing in the road. I thought they were buying handbags. But you could see something I couldn't. *Hang on, darling*, you said, and you let go of my hand. I took a deep breath as you disappeared into the crowd. People closed around you like water closing over my head. I pushed my way through the forest of legs and emerged breathless to find you kneeling next to a woman lying on her side in the road. You had your ear to her mouth. Her blonde hair was matted with blood. A few metres away, a bike, its front wheel twisted. People were muttering about a taxi. You were pulling a scarf from around your neck and making a cushion for her head. You were cutting clothes from her with your scissors. The crowd continued to jostle and push, watching, murmuring. No one moved to help. Their muttering buzzed in my ears, irritating, menacing. You were bent low over the lying-down woman. Your lips were moving but I could not hear what you were saying. When the ambulance arrived, the crew jumped out in their boxy uniforms and black boots. They joined you on the ground next to her and started asking you questions. I wanted to be over there, with them, with you, helping. Instead, I was in a crowd of bystanders. When the crew had strapped the woman with bloodied hair to the metal bed and rolled it into the back of the waiting vehicle, they thanked you. As the crowd dispersed, your eyes found me; you smiled at me and made your way towards me. Your hands were covered in blood. I watched, blinking away tears as you took tissues out of your bag and cleaned your hands. You knelt down in front of me with your arms outstretched, mine again, and all my fear fell away like black feathers from a fairytale ending. I threw my arms around you and buried my face in your neck. Your heavy perfume filled my nose, a wave of relief. As I sobbed into the sweet warmth of you, pride rose like a lump in my throat, threatening to choke me.

The walk from the bus stop to the clinic where I work is brisk: it clears my head. Working takes my mind off things for a few hours. The reception area is

drenched with golden light and birds can be heard singing through the open windows. I type up invoices and half-expect your usual phone call. I leave at one. That way I can walk onto your ward the moment visiting hours begin.

I wait for ages for the bus. The sky turns grey, it begins to rain, the traffic starts to coagulate. I wait and wait and slowly it dawns on me that I am going to be late to see you. It has gone half one. When the bus finally arrives, I sit upstairs, at the front, staring at the water-soaked window. My hair is wet through and I'm shivering slightly. I try to console myself by thinking about what flowers to buy when I arrive at the hospital. *Which flowers will make you feel loved? Which ones will make you beam as I approach your bed?*

Once you picked me up from a friend's house when you'd finished your night shift and we got on the bus together to go home. I was eight. I was holding a bunch of scarlet roses, wrapped in cellophane. They were a gift to you from the grateful widow of a patient of yours. *Thank you for everything you did for him*, the card read. We climbed the stairs and sat at the front. I laid the roses across my lap. You smoothed down the skirt of your blue raincoat, belted tight over your chequered nurse's uniform. "Oi!" A voice from the back of the bus. Probably not for us. "Oi! Nigger! Nigger nurse!" My heart fluttered like a bird, trapped. Dark laughter. Two, three voices. I grew cold. You stiffened. You stared straight ahead; your mouth fixed in a grim line. "Oi! I'm talking to you, Monkeys!" My insides turned liquid. "Mummy…" I said weakly, shifting in my seat. You stood up abruptly, gripping my hand tightly, and pulled me up. As I stood, the roses dropped to the floor. Instinctively my hand moved towards them, but you yanked me forward towards the stairs. Three shaven-headed youths lounged across the long seat at the back of the bus. One of them leapt up and swung towards us, eyes fixed on ours, half-grinning. Everyone else was either looking down or out of the windows. I stumbled down the stairs ahead of you, trying not to trip. You followed steadily, still holding my

hand. All at once the bus stopped, the doors opened, I heard the hawk and splat of spitting. Flecks of bubbled white landed in my hair, but the mass had landed on you. An oyster wobbled on the shoulder of your raincoat. Instantly you pushed me gently through the open doors, and as I stumbled onto the pavement you turned, clenched your hand into a fist and smashed it up into the spitter's grinning teeth. His head bucked, he staggered back onto the stairs and sat gaping as his mouth filled with blood. You stood over him for a moment, one fist raised, the other hand raised flat towards him, half warning, half curse: he froze. I screamed for you, terrified that the doors would close between us, and the bus would carry you away from me forever.

You straightened your raincoat, stepped off the bus, back straight, head high as the doors closed behind you and the bus pulled away, taking that gaping red mouth and the roses with it. You cleaned up the offending mess with brusque efficiency and tossed the dirty tissues into a bin. On the way home, we stopped to buy another bunch of red roses. Later that afternoon, as we dozed, after a bath, curled up on the sofa, you combed my newly washed hair with your fingers, lifting and dropping the dark, curled tresses in rhythm as you sang in your silversweet soprano, *"Golden slumbers kiss your eyes, smiles awake you when you rise, sleep pretty baby, do not cry and I will sing a lullaby…."* I realised then that you had not spoken a single word on that bus.

When I finally arrive at the hospital, I hurry to buy your roses. I choose ones that will match your nail varnish. Deep scarlet. Perfect. The almond-eyed woman behind the counter lifts the dripping stems from the bucket, wraps them in cellophane, leaving the vivid scarlet heads open to the air, "So they can breathe. Watch out for the thorns," she winks.

I know my way to your ward with my eyes closed: I take the stairs - quicker than the lift. I burst through the double doors, relieved, triumphant.

Breathless, smiling, I stop a nurse, keen to reassure her that I am here now. "I'm so sorry… I'm late." She looks blank. "I waited for ages…. the bus…" She doesn't respond. "I'm here to see Margaret… I'm her daughter." She blinks twice, hard. Says nothing. Disappears. I am irritated now: she's holding me up. I look around but can't see you in any of the beds. Maybe I'm on the wrong ward. Somewhere, a quiet voice says, "She's here."

A young man in a white coat appears in front of me, blocking my way as I step towards him. His eyes are clear green, like glass, but bloodshot and ringed with shadow. "Are you Margaret's daughter?" I hold up the roses in response.
"Yes, I'm sorry I'm late." Still breathless. *Right ward, at least.*
"This way, please." He indicates an open door to our right. I hesitate. He ushers me in, closes the door: the air thickens around me. He sits down and beckons me into a seat opposite. I don't move.

"Is she alright?"
The nurse has joined us and is standing awkwardly, close to the door.
"Please, sit down."
I sit, slowly, looking from one to the other. *Which one is going to answer me?*
"Is she alright?"
"You know, when you mother came in last night, she was very ill."
"Yes. Yes, she's very ill. I know. She's always been ill."
I look from his face to the nurse's and back again to him.
His hands are trembling and his eyes are wet.
"Excuse me, but my mum, is she alright?" *Is that me again?*
He takes a breath, exhales slowly. "When your mother came in last night, she was very ill. We managed to stabilise her and she slept for a few hours."
She's still asleep. Or maybe she's being seen by a doctor again. Yes, that makes sense.
"We were planning another transfusion. But earlier this afternoon she had a cardiac arrest."
Inside my head, a window closes.

"We tried for half an hour to revive her."
The room swims. *Tried?*
Why isn't he speaking? Is it my turn to speak?
"Did she die?"
Why do I say that?
"Yes. Yes, I'm afraid"... he takes a deep, long breath. "She died at half past one this afternoon."
Am I supposed to speak?
Is he waiting for me to speak?
"We tried to call you."
Where was I? At work? Waiting for a bus? On the bus?
"I'm...I'm ever so sorry...."
Something wraps itself around my chest and squeezes...
"...I realise this must be a terrible shock."
I can't breathe...
"Is there someone we can call?"
I see the phone next to her empty bed. I imagine ringing it, waiting for her to pick up.
The doctor speaks again. This time his voice slices open the silence with confident precision.
"Would you like to see her?"

I am shopping for a pair of gloves for you to wear in your coffin. I have been told they must be white lace to match the dress you will be wearing. A whole host of Sierra Leonean women have mysteriously materialised in response to news of your death. I only know one of them, never met the others, but they are very keen to advise on the funeral etiquette and take care of the catering arrangements on the day. One has donated the dress: peach satin edged with white lace. I know you would never have worn it in life but am unable to say so. I watch the women fuss through a fog. Their voices come to me from far away, the sound carried through deep water.

And now I am alone in a carpeted department store in Oxford Street staring at pairs of gloves. They dangle from the silver rails like lifeless hands. *How do I know the right pair from the wrong pair? How will I make sure they fit? Who will put them on you? What do your hands look like now?* I take a pair from the rail and hold them up. I push my hand into the left one. It feels scratchy against my skin: I suppose that won't matter. The lace is delicately patterned: my skin shows through its miniature windows in tiny brown flecks. I imagine that my hands are yours. I try making the graceful flutters your fingers did when you were talking. I stretch my fingers out as though I am waiting for my nails to dry. Suddenly, a young man is at my shoulder. He smiles like an eager child. "May I help you?" Embarrassed, I tear the glove from my hand. I buy the gloves and deliver them as instructed to the funeral directors.

"Would you like to see her?" the doctor asks me. Of course I want to see you. I have come to see you. I have roses for you. They show me to your bed. The curtains are drawn around it. One bed along, a woman with greasy hair smiles weakly at me, her eyes shining with sympathy. The doctor pulls the curtain around the rail to reveal you: a magic trick gone wrong. You look as though you are lying in state: arms at your sides, palms upwards; fingers gently curled; the nails, ivory-tipped, small like a child's, unpainted. You could be meditating, only as I step up to the edge of the bed, I see that your face is closed too tightly, and your tongue is sticking out from between your lips. *How did that happen? Why did they leave you like that?* I hear the doctor and the nurse talking in hushed voices behind the curtain. I watch you for what seems like hours, half waiting for you to open your eyes. You don't. Hanging limply at my side, the roses drip water all over the floor. Eventually I lean over you and kiss your freckled cheek. Cold, already. *Was I really that late?*

Sitting in the front row of the church at your funeral, I have the best view.

Your coffin is made of a plain, sandy-coloured wood: too light, I realise too late. When asked to pick you one from the catalogue, I had trouble choosing. I wanted to laugh. The coffins had English place names: The Warwick, The Oxford, The Sussex, The Kent. Places I had visited when looking at universities. I opted for The Warwick. Now, looking at the light wood, I know that I made the wrong choice.

I lead the line of mourners towards you. You lie drowning in peach satin. My eyes scan your face, trying to find you there: I cannot. You are, and are not, in that box. Your hair is the wrong shape. Your chin is pushed back into your neck. Your lips are pressed firmly together, secrets locked away forever. I wonder what they did with your tongue. Your slender arms are crossed on your chest: they end in the white gloves. Behind me, I sense shifting, people jostling, wanting to move forward to see you. I want them to disappear, I want to be alone again with you, but suddenly I realise that the white lace gloves look all wrong. Your hands seem to belong to somebody else. My chest feels tight. I'm trying to breathe slowly, trying to catch the right rhythm, catch the rhythm of your breath as I used to, but your mouth is clamped shut. I reach forward and touch the glove closest to me. It feels hard, a mannequin's hand. I want to peel the gloves off. I want to take them off and see your hands. See where the skin is darker in the small wrinkles in your fingers. See your smooth oval nails, small like a child's, still unpainted. See your hands elegantly resting on a wooden spoon, see your hands clutching a cup of hot water, see your hands hailing a bus, see your hands smooth down the skirt of your raincoat, see your hands turn the pages of a magazine, see your hands turn the pages of a photo album, feel your hands stroke the hair from my hot forehead, hear your hands clap as you throw your head back and laugh, hear your hands clap when you're dancing in the kitchen, hear your hands clap when I've finished cooking, hear your hands clap when I've finished singing, hear your hands clap when I've finished dancing, hear your hands clap

when I've finished writing, hear your hands clap when I've finished being because I haven't finished being I haven't finished breathing I haven't finished I haven't finished anything yet but you, you have finished, you have finished and I wasn't there and I wasn't there and you died alone and now your hands are silent and still and still silent and you are there and not there and no longer here and I can't breathe and I can't understand and now someone is leading me away so that everyone else can say goodbye and I can't breathe and I'm at the back of the church and I'm far away from you when they are closing the coffin, they are closing it and covering you forever so that you can't breathe and the coffin is closing and I can't breathe and I can't understand I can't understand I can't understand and I want to ask why why why and the last thing I see is those gloves crossed on your chest and I want to know why you are gone and why you are dead and why why why did they make me clothe and hide and cover forever your beautiful, beautiful hands?

Your beautiful, strong, brown, elegant, eloquent, considerate, compassionate, courageous, marvellous hands.

Years later, a friend tells me I have graceful hands and suddenly my eyes are hot and my heart is squatting in my throat. I swallow a lump of solid air. Through an open window I hear the gentle trilling of birds. *Thank you,* I say, after some time. *Yes. Yes. I think I have my mother's hands*.

For the Flesh is Sour

Laurane Marchive

The video is small and pixelated. An animated blue alien with lips of gold, fucking a minotaur. A cartoon girl dressed as a student, surrounded by a group of beer-bellied men. A CGI woman, blindfolded and tied down with ropes, swallowing a green monster cock. A caption flashes on the screen: *Your stepbrother will make you beg for it!* and then *Play this game and try not to come!*

I rub my eyes and wonder if people are really into this. These days, most porn videos have the word 'incest' in the title. Like everyone worldwide is suddenly turned on by inter-filial gangbangs, by stepsisters and stepdaughters dressing up as cheerleaders and throwing orgies. Why am I seeing this ad? Does the internet think I am a horny teenager? Is it a virus? And if so, where did I get it?

More importantly, I wonder whether I am turned on. Should I not be turned on?

After twenty-nine seconds, the ad has run its course, and the screen freezes on the *Click to Play!* button. I do not *click to play*. I adjust the pillows behind my back, poke a knee out of the duvet to catch the grey Saturday sun. The glass on my bedroom window is frosted, the light comes in patchy. Outside, I can see only shadows. Short and stout from parked cars on the street. Tall and brown from the few winter trees.

I close the tab. Open another one. *Le Monde*, another video. The thumbnail depicts a still of the Gilets-Jaunes riots. Paris: a man with a yellow vest, waving a French flag opposite a wall of tear gas. In the distance, small fires and more human shapes, protestors or police. I have lived in London for so long it sometimes feels like I have orphaned myself

from Paris. Still, if I stare at the image long enough, I know I might disappear into it. The walls of my room and the outside light and the thing in my throat that feels like the spiky shell of a chestnut—*bogue*, in French, I never learnt the English name—might dissolve as my brain focuses on the man in the video. On the shape of the flag. On the exact number of silhouettes in the distance. I do feel like crying, but not in an obvious way. More like a background impression, something I know I could do, want to do. But prefer not to.

I open the Eurostar website. Journeys for the next day are expensive, I scroll through options to find the cheapest one. I could take the night-bus/ferry combo from London to Paris instead, but I don't want to exhaust myself. I don't want to fall asleep at the funeral.

When it hits my inbox, the Eurostar confirmation email makes a happy little 'ping' sound. I close the Eurostar tab. Revert to *Le Monde*. The video: protesters in yellow throwing smoke bombs in the streets. On the side of my screen, ads keep popping up, offering me *sex with women in your area* or inviting me to engage in cybersex with cyborgs, or nearby MILFs. The Yellow Vests ask for lower fuel taxes, a reintroduction of the solidarity tax on wealth, a minimum wage increase. Above the video, on the horizontal banner, an ad for a watch, its tagline light and breezy: *Don't Crack Under Pressure*. When I look up the watch, it costs £19,495. The video still playing, a protester says the government doesn't work for them. Says they are being erased. At the end of the clip, another video starts automatically: excited puppies decorating a Christmas tree.

The stairs leading up from the St-Michel station are grey and dirty, with chewing gum shapes imprinted onto them. I take exit number two and resurface at the St-Michel Fountain. Everything is as it always was: the statue wielding its sword, the gryphons spitting water, and tourists queuing to have their pictures taken in front of the fountain. On all four sides of the square, the yellow signs of Paris's most famous library brighten

the damp, silver weather.

I make my way to my grandfather's flat slowly, passing the café where I used to go at night alone to drink wine. I haven't been in a long time. Every time I come back to Paris, I promise to visit more often, but weeks turn into months, and at every phone call I forget words, and my mother says "*Dis donc, tu parles plus Francais!*"

You're losing your French.

At the street corner, my grandmother's favourite cheese shop is still open, and further down the road, the terraces are full despite the spitting wind. The city feels quiet, suspended in no-time. There are no Gilets-Jaunes today, not a hint of a riot. Only tourists munching on *macarons* and wearing berets to blend in. I stop to watch a homeless man drink a beer opposite a bakery. Eventually, he throws the empty can at the window.

By the time I reach the flat, I am late. My mother opens the door.

"Finally! I was starting to get worried!"

"My train was delayed," I lie, "sorry."

We kiss, two kisses on the cheeks, and I walk down the corridor and into the living room. I take my shoes off, the carpet soft underneath my feet. The room is warm. Too warm, like a hen house. My mother wears a dark grey knitted jumper worn out in the sleeves. She looks tired. She empties a white plastic bag on the table.

"I bought pastries," she says. "I thought you might like that?"

"I would," I say. "*Merci*. Where is Grandpa?"

"He's in his room," she says. "He'll be back in a second."

In the kitchen, the radio is on. Fragments of interviews float into the living room. A politician announces that, in preparation for the *Gilets Jaunes* protest this upcoming Saturday, the city plans to display messages on information boards throughout Paris. The boards will let people know which areas to avoid in order to stay clear of the riots.

"I'll turn this off," my mother says. "It's too depressing."

The walls of the flat are covered with paintings and objects from everywhere in the world. Wooden frames and porcelain vases, Indonesian shadow puppets. When she comes back, my mother presents me with a *Mille-Feuille* on a white plate rimmed with gold and chipped at the edge. Most of the silver has worn off the dessert fork. The yellow metal shows through underneath.

"It sounds like they're getting ready for war," I say.

"I know, it's crazy. They're even talking about having armoured vehicles patrolling the streets."

I notice she isn't wearing any makeup. The lines around her eyes are deeper than I remember.

"This whole thing," she adds, "it will blow over, for sure, but it seems like… half the country wants blood, and the other half is exhausted."

I rake the teeth of my fork against the icing sugar. My mother talks about the Gilets Jaunes, the shops that have had their windows broken, and police brutality. I let her tell me all those things I know to avoid asking her about other things, like who else in the family will attend the funeral, or how she feels, or how my grandfather is holding up. I know I should ask, but it's easier to focus on my plate than to bring that up, so I press my fork into the marbled layer of cake. Yellow cream oozes from the sides.

"People want change," she concludes. "They've completely lost faith in politics, and I don't blame them."

She slides a hand through her hair, white at the front, darker at the back. She grabs a spoon and slices through her chocolate eclair. The *crème patissière* is sticky in my mouth. The cream is too sweet, cloying. I swallow, and the lump travels down my throat. My mother keeps her eyes down, absorbed in the task of taking small, even bites, sitting thin and upright like a vase full of water ready to tip. I think of saying something nice, something comforting or daughterly but I don't want the water to spill. Above the table, there is a painting of birds. I push another lump of pastry past my tongue.

When I feel a hand on my shoulder, I look up. In his younger days, my grandfather was a formidable man. Black hair, raven nose, ambitious and uncompromising. I have seen the pictures. I've also heard the stories: how he would forbid his children to speak at the dinner table, how he put his career ahead of everything else, how he scorned anyone who wasn't himself. But I've never seen that side of him; by the time I was born, he'd already softened, and as I grew up, he focused all his ageing love towards his unique grandchild. Reading me bedtime stories. Taking me to the cinema on Sundays. Letting me get away with anything.

I stand up, and he wraps his arms around me. A decade earlier when I was in my twenties, we were about the same height. Now, his body bends forward like the pouring nose of a teapot. I stand taller than him. His jumper is loose and the ridges of his spine poke through the wool. His shirt is crumpled. I don't remember him ever hugging me before. I place a hand on his shoulder, and he holds onto me for balance. I try to think of the right thing to say but before I can open my mouth, he steadies himself and disappears into the kitchen.

My mother looks at me.

"It will be hard tomorrow, at the funeral," she says. "You'll have to be there for him."

That evening, in the room that used to be my grandparent's bedroom but is now a spare room—he moved into the small attic room long ago, when my grandmother first went to a nursing home—I lay my funeral outfit on the bed. A simple black dress with little white cuffs and a preppy white collar. Something elegant, yet simple; Grandma would have approved. I originally bought the dress for an ex-boyfriend who was into French maids: every so often when we were together, I would put on the dress, tie my hair in a bun, add an apron and slip into high heels. But the dress is versatile enough to double as funeral wear. So here we are.

I sit on the bed, open my suitcase. I take out my grandmother's necklace:

a heavy velvet ribbon decorated with silver coins she gave me years ago. Something she must have bought in the 1960s in Syria, or in Morocco, or in Lebanon. Born in rural France in the 1930s, my grandparents left the country after the war and spent their lives moving from one country to the next, my grandfather starting from the very bottom and working his way up the French diplomacy ladder. The stories pile up like vignettes. 1956: my grandmother, eight-months pregnant, driving alone across Morocco to get to safety amid the unrest that followed independence. 1968: Iran, my grandfather attending events alongside women wearing short, colourful dresses while the Shah was still in power. 1973: Damascus, my aunt reading *War and Peace* in the basement during the bombings of the Yom Kippur war. The stories are real-life memories, but told and polished so many times they've become legends, bedtime recollections with, at their core, my grandmother: a fantastical character in exquisite gowns and sparkling jewellery, whose friends owned pet jaguars or parrots or monkeys.

I slide one hand under the necklace. The silver is cold, I wrap it around my neck. The velvet, soft, and coins hitting my collar bone. In the holiday home where I spent most summers as a child, a picture of my grandmother wearing the necklace dominated the fireplace mantle. Beautiful, smiling a corner smile. Cunning. In control. Unreadable. I've often been told I look like her: similar features, similar eyes. I would wear the necklace at the funeral, but it is slightly too tight. I can never wear it for too long without feeling choked.

When I lie down to sleep, the sheets are hard and scratchy; they smell of old French country house. I slide under the swollen blanket and pull on the fabric to make it yield to my shape. On the ceiling, a damp stain is spreading, split by a long, threatening crack. The crack has been there for as long as I can remember.

I rub my legs together for warmth. Above the headboard, the same picture of my grandmother in the silver necklace. I wonder how long it has been there. I brought quite a few men back to that room over the

years, whenever my grandparents were out of the country. When I was seventeen, I wanted to surprise my then-boyfriend with a full lingerie set, suspenders and high heels, but I accidentally drank so much I fell asleep on this very bed as he was going down on me. Another time, I brought back a boy I was madly in love with, but when we got back, he was too drunk to have sex. And then, there was that one week spent in that room with an English boyfriend. We kept the blinds shut all day, and whenever the light seeping through the cracks grew too white and too dull, we would go to the bathroom, where the walls were pink and there were no windows, and the extraction fan was so loud the room floated like an isolated purse of warmth and flesh and saturated water.

I roll my underwear down my ankles and slide one hand underneath the sheet. Focusing on the single thought of the bathroom, kneeling in the tub, water choking heat and extraction fan. I start drawing circles with the soft of one finger, slowly then faster. It doesn't work. The skin is dry. I free my hand from the blanket and deposit a small lump of saliva on the tip of my finger. Inter-filial gang bangs and a faceless man in the empty locker room of a deserted swimming pool. Wearing an American schoolgirl outfit and getting spanked in the principal's office. Moaning, tied to a leash on the floor of a manor house, men pulling my hair till-—

Eyes open again. On the ceiling, the damp mark is still there. It almost looks like a urine stain, its edges darker than the centre and the shape both regular and uneven, its extreme periphery a complex pattern of swirly lines. I roll my underwear back up, turn to the side. My phone shows 1:45am. I do feel guilty for not visiting my grandmother more often after she went to the home. As she grew more and more confused, I once went and watched her eat a blood sausage with her bare fingers. Dark red fibres stretched between nails and lips, and red clots stained the edges of her mouth, like in zombie movies when the undead rip apart mortal flesh and skin looks almost elastic. That day, I didn't recognise the woman sitting in front of me, couldn't reconcile her with the woman she had been. I never went back.

The walls of the Père Lachaise chapel are white and smooth. At the back of the room, the altar, and above it, a statue of Mary. Weeping. Holding Jesus's lifeless body. I stand at the first row of benches with my grandfather and mother. Behind them, four or five family members I never knew existed hold the home-printed psalms and prayers. The picture of my grandmother on the first page is pixelated, some of the pages haven't gone through the printer properly; on the left-hand side, the words are cut. The organ starts playing and the singer's voice rises around the stone arches. Four men dressed in grey carry the coffin down the aisle. Catholic funerals are so like weddings. Even the flowers are the same. White lilies.

When the priest comes forward, I try to focus, but I cannot square the fact that he represents God with his black cape and the pompom dangling from its pointy hood. The ceiling of the chapel is, in shape like that of the church of Saint-Germain, where my grandmother often took me for the midnight Christmas Mass. The arches there are dark blue with golden dots, to look like a starry sky.

"Do you believe in God?" I would ask her.

"I believe in God," she would say, "but not in the church."

The priest reads the psalms and prayers. I can hear the four pallbearers talk at the back of the chapel, chatting about nothing, about their day, the hush of their conversation carried by the stones. The priest speaks in a calm, quiet voice, his pompom now hidden.

"...And witnesses tell us in the Bible that before he resurrected Lazarus, Jesus wept. And the people saw this, and they said, 'He must love him very much,' for even though we are promised reunion in the eternal afterlife, death remains, always, a separation."

The priest describes my grandmother as a "discreet woman" who followed her husband throughout his career. A woman who liked "flowers, sewing and looking after other people."

I remember stories of her as an authoritative, red-dressed flamboyant blonde. Speeding for hours on desert or mountainous roads to cover

France–Syria as fast as possible. Smoking cigarettes at the wheel while her children complained in the back.

Discreet doesn't seem like the right word.

The priest calls for two members of the family to come and light the candles. I am aware of my mother crying. I am aware of my grandfather crying. I look at the dead Jesus statue and hear that I am called to the lectern. As I read the prayer assigned to me, I wonder whether my voice is loud enough or too loud, and whether I am giving a good performance. I wonder whether there are tears rolling down my cheeks or not, and which is preferable, and whether I look good or naughty in the little black dress. Whether my mascara is getting smudged and whether I look anything like those glamorous widows in American movies, who wear black veils and cry at the sides of coffins. Whether there are actresses on the market who specialise in funeral scenes, and whose features particularly suit the black and the weeping. Whether I look, at all, like my grandmother.

"Thank you," the priest says.

When my grandfather tries to stand up for the final blessing, he stumbles on his cane. I hold him up, and he rests a hand against the wood of the coffin. Around him the candles still burn; the white lilies glow, naked in their youth.

After the funeral, my mother takes my grandfather home, but I'm not ready to follow. I need air. I cannot breathe. I let them go, and I walk among the tombs of the Père Lachaise cemetery. It isn't raining, though I wish it was. I walk past Oscar Wilde. Past Edith Piaf. Past Sarah Bernhardt. My grandmother won't be buried here; these are elite graves; they are too expensive. Her ashes will be taken to my grandfather's flat where they will sit on the mantelpiece; keeping ashes at home is illegal in France, but he says he doesn't care.

Opposite the cemetery, a small cafe. Inside, everyone wears black. Everyone is mourning. I open my computer; the *Gilets Jaunes* are on

the front page of every news website. Shops boarding up their windows, politicians using the word *guerrilla*. Pictures of Yellow Vests screaming through teargas, armed police hitting the protesters with rods and rows of people kneeling on the ground with their hands held up high.

I close the tab. On the messy desktop, a folder called *Family*.

The clips are in random order. My mother has found old footage and converted it to MP4. The first file: my grandmother, in black and white, holding a baby in her arms. Then me or, more exactly, my mother at fifteen, looking so like me I have to pause and rewind the video. Tehran before the revolution, families in swimsuits playing ball games in the sea. Eerie footage of Sudanese children wearing white garments in 1960s Khartoum. All clips black and white or faded, things moving almost at normal speed but not quite, people speaking to the camera but no sound coming through their lips. Silhouettes moving on and off screen like ghosts, smiling at the lens through the grainy footage. The many children on film are young, some of them presumably still alive, with their own lives and their own griefs, and no idea they are still waving at a stranger's camera on the other side of the world.

The waitress brings me an *allongé* in a see-through cup. Next to me, a woman with white hair sits alone. She stirs the drink in front of her, a yellow brooch shining on her chest. She takes one sip and keeps the cup against her lips, warming them up. In her black outfit, she could be anyone. A retired teacher. A grieving mother. Or the triumphant widow of a mobster, cashing in, at last, on her rich husband's death.

The last video. It is short. My grandmother, white dress and curly yellow hair. Young. Very young. Chewing food with an open mouth. I have never seen her chew with an open mouth, she was a sophisticated woman. But in that video, she is still the farm girl with no manners who only just left France and doesn't yet know not to put her elbows on the table. She chews her food, and she opens her mouth, and she laughs. When the video ends, I press play again.

After my grandmother went to the nursing home, my grandfather was unable to cook for himself. He didn't know frozen chips had to be kept in the freezer, so he would store them in the fridge until they became soft and rotten. He survived mostly on creamy desserts and rice cakes, all the things that were bad for him and his wife had spent decades forbidding. Eventually, he learnt to cook omelettes. To buy food in tins or in jars, things that wouldn't go off.

When I get back to the flat my mother is already gone. My grandfather opens the door. I walk into the kitchen and he goes to the fridge.

"I have a steak for you, for dinner," he says. "You like steak, don't you?"

He hands me a packet of meat in its plastic wrapping. I place it on the kitchen counter. The steak looks dark, slightly grey. When I look at the date on it, I see it's expired.

"Grandpa, are you sure this is still good?"

"Of course it's good. It's very good meat."

He takes out a knife, slices through the plastic. I'm not sure whether the smell is off, or whether I'm imagining it. We put the meat in the pan and turn up the gas.

"Do you know how to cook a steak?" He asks.

"Me?" I laugh. "No... not really. I mean, I can do it, but not very well."

"Really? I thought you were a good cook..."

"I think you're mistaking me for somebody else," I say. And he laughs too, though not really. We both place our elbows on the counter, and our chins in our elbows. Watching the pan, side by side, waiting for a sizzle. Meat does keep well in plastic, I think, but I cannot stop watching the dark fibres grow darker in the heat.

When the steak is ready, he ushers me to the living room table.

"Eat," he says. "It's going to be cold."

"And you? You're not eating?"

He shrugs.

"I'm not hungry. I'll have a yoghurt later."

I slice through the steak. It is soft. I take a bite, and the flesh is sour. I chew the first piece slowly. I can feel his eyes on me, watching me swallow as he fills up his pipe, the tips of his fingers flaked with tobacco.

"Is it good?"

I nod yes, but when he looks away, I spit out the piece and hide it inside my napkin.

There is no way to tell whether the meat is good or not or whether I will be sick.

"Grandpa," I cough, "how did you meet Grandma? You never told me."

He looks at me.

"Really? It's quite a nice story."

I hide a second piece under the napkin.

"It was the fifteenth of August, 1948," he starts. "I was twenty, your grandmother was fifteen. We grew up in the same village, but I'd been gone a few years to study in the city. One day as I was back home for the holiday, I went for a walk and, from a distance, I saw this beautiful girl. The most beautiful girl I'd ever seen, with blond hair and a white dress. A friend told me who she was. I was bewitched. For two weeks, she was all I could think of."

I look at him and I nod and I smile, a piece of meat hovering by my lips.

"Then in September," he continues, "I went to the Harvest Ball wearing my best Sunday suit. And she was there, with her sister. So I went to them, I asked her sister for a dance... I was cunning, you see, I wanted her to feel jealous."

His eyes twinkle. I've never seen him wink, but I think perhaps he just did.

"When the next song came, it was a waltz, and I asked her to dance with me. I thought she would fob me off, you know, but instead, she smiled this big, beautiful smile." He pauses, his pipe now full. "They say that love at first sight doesn't exist, but I can tell you that it does," he says. "We never left each other after that."

I don't have the heart to spit out the next piece, so I swallow the meat.

After dinner we sit down to watch TV. On France's main news channel, the *Yellow Vests* unrest is spreading and the government is failing to come up with answers. I sit on the floor with my back to the radiator. The metal dents dig into my spine and the water runs through the appliance, alternatively too hot and not hot enough.

This radiator has been here all my life. Always the same clicking sound, the same burning heat. Being a child, watching evening movies with my grandparents on that very same spot. And then early morning, waking up, sneaking into their bed. My grandmother would bring me a bowl of cereal, the spoon barely fitting into my mouth, I would spill milk all over the sheet. And then years later, going to university. Sleeping at the flat on Sunday nights before taking the train back to school early on Monday mornings. My grandmother insisting on getting up at dawn to make me breakfast. Still making me breakfast when I started taking Eurostars to London. Even when she started ageing. Even when she began to add salt to the coffee instead of sugar because her mind was beginning to go. I plunge one hand into my pocket, feel for the coins of the necklace. I want to be somewhere else. Anywhere else. To melt into a video. A fantasy. Sex on the floor of an empty warehouse, the smell of someone else inside me. Anything to shatter this ache. To crush it, dissolve it.

The TV presenter announces 263 people have been injured in the riots so far. "The Elysée," the presenter says, "is asking people to stay home, as extremists from the far right and far left are predicted to descend upon the capital in order to 'break and kill.'" I keep my eyes on the presenter's tie, on his shirt, white, on the creases on it. As the *Gilet Jaunes* explain why they are protesting and footage of smoke bombs fill the screen, my grandfather pushes another lump of tobacco down the bowl of his pipe. I see him from the corner of my eye and tense my back against the heat. To be more like her. More in charge. Enigmatic. My grandfather sits back on his chair. He blankly looks at the screen.

"Everything is falling apart."

Dad's Home

Maxine Davies

I am a feather for each wind that blows:
Shall I live on to see this bastard kneel
And call me father? better burn it now
Than curse it then. But be it; let it live.

- William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*

HAPPY MEAL

My dad leaves when I am the size of a raspberry. He announces my mam's pregnancy on a local radio station, buys her a bunch of petrol station flowers and then does off a few weeks later.

I meet him three times before I turn thirteen, which is when he moves into our house.

The first time I am preoccupied in a game of "pretending that the laundry basket is a small boat". I don't remember that one.

The second time is after I start school. Most of the other children in my class talk about an additional person living in their house: a dad. I ask my mam if I have one and she tells me that I do and asks if I would like to meet him. I agree, only to change my mind on the way there, but it's 1996 and mobile phones haven't really taken off yet and my mam doesn't want to stand him up so she tells me that we won't meet him anymore, but that we'll go to McDonalds anyway. I get a Happy Meal. We run into a man wearing a fleece the rusty colour of dried up blood; my mam talks to him in hushed tones as we eat, and then we go home. "That was Trevor's cousin," she says. Something feels off. I don't find out why for over a decade.

The third time, we walk past him on the street and he nods in our direction and then speeds off. "That was your dad," my mam says. I turn around to look but he's already gone.

I SING MYSELF TO SLEEP

My mam occasionally feeds me little scraps of information. I know that he likes the song *Sit Down* by James, I know that he doesn't like flying, I know I look like him when I'm annoyed. I know his name and I know that he lives near the sea. I have no deep longing to hold him in my mind as anything more than an eternal maybe.

NIGHTMARE

There's a knock at the door. I lie on my stomach and press an ear to the

carpet, listening to the low murmuring coming from downstairs. I hear the sofa groan and know that this means I'm about to be summoned. I jump up onto the futon. My mam opens my bedroom door. "He's just outside," she says. "Look." Out of my bedroom window I see him smoking in the back garden under the floodlight. "I hate smokers," I say. A short while after this he gives up, replaces cigarettes with blister packs of nicotine gum which he buys in bulk with shiny red boxes of Nurofen and leaves at the bottom of the stairs.

I've taken up writing a diary after reading Meg Cabot's *The Princess Diaries* and even though I'm achingly shy and despise being the centre of attention, I deeply wish that someone was coming to tell me that I'm the heir to the throne of a small European principality rather than being forced into meeting my dad. In spite of its magnitude, I pay this event very little mind in my diary: *I have to meet my dad later and then I'm going to Sophie's*.

We go downstairs. I sit in my mam's chair, feet tucked underneath me, and bury my face in an issue of *Kerrang!* magazine. I answer his sporadic questions with a series of clipped affirmations and negations. I hope that this comes across as a bold display of complete and utter apathy; combined with the magazine I must seem like a true punk, I think.

Afterwards, I get dropped off at Sophie's house. "That was so weird," I tell her. She doesn't know how to respond, and this isn't a situation where I would expect anyone to know what to say. She has a wall-mounted TV in her room and we squash up in her single bed to watch *The Nightmare Before Christmas*.

MATRIARCH

I treat my friends' fathers with a degree of scepticism. They seem tall and aloof and uninteresting compared to their tender, industrious mothers. My own mother is a shining light and I never contemplate the idea that my life would be improved in any way by the addition of a patriarch.

SMUDGE AND SNOWY

It's Christmas Eve and my mam comes into my room, climbs onto the first step of my bunk bed ladder and hands me a small box containing a filigree cameo brooch with a portrait photograph of a cat on it. "From your dad," she says. "Thought we'd better not let Nana see it. Too many questions." My mam doesn't tell anyone about her and my dad getting back together for what feels like a reasonably long time. When my Grandad finds out he's furious, tells her it's a bad decision, tells her that she must be desperate. I'm angry and hurt by the fact that I have no command over my relationship with my own formerly-absent father, but I still feel a bit like someone has snapped a rubber band around my heart when he says that.

The cats are supposed to sweeten the deal when he moves in, but I'm an alien to them and they won't come into my bedroom. The white one keeps hiding behind the sofa and refuses to be coaxed out. I keep thinking about all of the countless Christmases and birthdays where I begged for a cat of my own, pleaded with my mam and wrapped myself around her ankles in desperation. I had my wishes continually denied. Now I have two cats, but only because I also now have a dad, and I never asked for that.

They move out a few weeks later, back to his ex's house, and he moves back with them. The next time he comes back to us he leaves the cats with her.

THE OTHER PERSON HAS CLEARED

I am born on a Sunday in September. Bryan Adams's (*Everything I Do) I Do It for You* is number one in the charts. My mam asks the nurse to use the phone and it's carried around the corner onto the ward, the spiral cord trapped between the swing doors. He picks up.

"It's a girl," she tells him.

"Right."

There's a smack of plastic as his phone's handset hits the housing.

At least that's how I imagine it happened.

IBIZA

We're on holiday, the three of us, in a small resort to the north of Ibiza that none of us can pronounce the name of. The resort is marketed as a good destination for families, but I'm thirteen and I wish I was hanging out with my friends back in Newcastle and I haven't really decided whether we're going to be a real family yet, so I spend a lot of my time at an Internet Cafe overlooking the beach, messaging my friends on MSN. On mornings, me and my mam get up early and go for breakfast together. My dad stays in bed and meets us later in the day.

One day I get my hair braided by a woman on the beach for a couple of Euros. It is an incredibly painful process, and when I take the plaits out a few days later I lose quite a lot of hair. That afternoon, my dad doesn't call to ask where to meet us. He turns up five hours later with a stranger who has escorted him back to the resort because he's had too much to drink. I stay on a sofa bed in the apartment's kitchen. I set up my clunky laptop on a dining chair and fall asleep every night watching *50 First Dates*. On the way home, he gets into an argument with a teenage girl on the shuttle bus. We don't go on holiday as a trio again.

ANCESTRY

The FATHER box on my birth certificate is a blank space. If my great-great-great-ancestors want to research their family tree they will hit a snag when they reach me.

HERE'S LOOKING AT YOU

It's Christmas Day, the only one we spend together. Me, my mam and my Nana, who has been sleeping on the futon in my room, get out of bed at 7.30am, take it in turns to open our presents and then have bacon sandwiches for breakfast. Our own little tradition.

My dad eventually gets up at 11am, comes downstairs and tousles my hair on his way to the kitchen. "Merry Christmas kid," he says.

FLOCK

I'm fifteen and obsessed with the model Agyness Deyn to the extent that I consider getting a job in a fish and chip shop in the hope that it will kickstart a similar career trajectory. I buy silver winklepickers on *eBay* because I see her wearing a pair in a magazine, and I get my hair cut into a choppy pixie cut with a messy brushed-forward fringe. A short while later we're coming up to Harehills Roundabout on a family day out when my dad makes a joke, not for the first time, that I look like Mike Score from the 1980s new wave band *A Flock of Seagulls*. "You don't know me enough to tease me," I think. "It hasn't been that long." An argument erupts. He tells me that all I do is sit on MSN Messenger, mimicking the notification sound: three notes on a xylophone and the single beat of a timpani. "At least I have friends to message," I say. He practically skis around the roundabout, takes a U-turn and drives home.

HIM

I begin only referring to him using the masculine singular third person pronoun. First names seem weird and dad feels inaccurate. Our relationship is delicate like the wing of a small bird; even an informal noun might fracture it.

PERFORMANCE

I meet my grandparents on my dad's side only once.

In the car on the way there, my mam tells me that I shouldn't talk about Jesus.

"Why on earth would I talk about Jesus?" I say.

"I don't know," she says, "but they're Jehovah's Witnesses, so just don't bring him up, okay?"

"I'll try not to."

When we arrive my grandparents spend the entire visit begging me to play the keyboard in their living room. I politely decline.

I don't think I gave in, but perhaps I blocked that bit out as well.

My dad tells me that he used to read *Tin Tin* under the duvet cover with a torch when he was supposed to be reading the bible. I tell him that I used to stay up all night reading *Girls in Love*. He tells me that his favourite bit of Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* is the bit where Toad is served hot buttered toast and fragrant tea; that's my favourite bit, too. He tells me his favourite song is *The Spirit of Radio* by Rush. I tell him my favourite band is *Good Charlotte*. This is our only currency: trading favourites.

I wonder if my grandparents would give me a blood transfusion if I needed one.

V IS VERY VERY EXTRAORDINARY

Sometimes you hear about children who fantasise that their separated parents will get back together so that they can go back to "the way things were", but I don't have a "were". When Lorelai and Christopher get married in season 7 of *Gilmore Girls*, Rory says, "It's every kid's dream, right, parents back together?" But Rory is only really angry because she wasn't invited to the wedding. I am angry because my dad pretended that I didn't exist for thirteen years and then moved into my house three days a week and stole my mam away from me.

I watch Lindsay Lohan pierce her fictional twin's ears with a sewing needle and an apple slice in *The Parent Trap* as part of a grand ploy to reunite their parents, who separated when they were babies. "History's filled with stories of lovers parted by some silly misunderstanding," she says. This, apparently, is the stuff of dreams. Away from the movies, it's more of an ordeal. I'm expected to have some sort of reasonable parental relationship with a man who is, ostensibly, a stranger.

I joke about it with my friends at school. "It's like the plot of a Jacqueline Wilson book," I say. One afternoon I'm pulled out of a lesson and taken to the school nurse. "We hear you've been having a difficult time," she says. "I'm fine," I say.

YOU JUST GOTTA BELIEVE ME

Somewhat embarrassingly, I only realise that the song *I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus* is actually about the narrator's father wearing a Santa costume when I am in my twenties. The notion of a portly man who runs a toy factory staffed by elves in the North Pole is a more concrete one than the concept of a dad who dresses up and shares a loving moment under the mistletoe with his spouse.

2008

I start a new Moleskine and fill the first few pages with magazine clippings: a model in knee-high socks getting a piggy back from a handsome guy in a knitted jumper, girls with long legs drinking hot cocoa, elegantly decorated apartments with parquet floors. I'm sixteen and figuring out what I want my life to look like.

The first thing that I write is a set of resolutions:

Lose weight

Do well in my GCSEs

Get on better with my dad

THE END OF THE BEGINNING

My dad has been back and forth countless times at this point, but right now he's reading the newspaper next to me on the sofa.

"That would be right," he smirks.

He's pointing to a short column at the bottom right of the paper: "The Top 20 Grumpiest Names". He's singled out my boyfriend's name.

"Fuck off," I say.

He looks from me to my mam, then stands up, grabs his keys and leaves.

(This was the last time I saw him.)

(NO SUBJECT)

I'm seventeen, and I send the following email: "not that you would consider it but please don't associate with me any further."

CLIPPY RUG

I find out that my dad is married via Facebook. His new wife works at a visitor attraction where she dresses up as an Edwardian.

Sometime later, I am in my room when my mam shouts up for me to come downstairs. I step into the living room where she has paused an episode of a TV show where people bring their antiques to be viewed and valued by experts. The show is paused at the point where they visit somewhere nearby the auction rooms to discuss the history of the area. When she presses play my dad's new wife is there in my living room talking about proggymats. We stare open-mouthed at the screen. Later in the same episode, a lady brings in a Beswick mask belonging to her daughter. Her daughter wants to use the money from the sale to set up a home with her boyfriend, who, after seventeen years apart, she has recently reunited with. "That's funny," I say.

I DON'T FEEL SO BAD

My most-listened to song of 2010 is *The Spirit of Radio*. It's been over two years since I last saw him.

BA (HONS) OR… ROUND TWO

I graduate. The next day I check my "Other" inbox folder on Facebook and see the following message: "Hope you are well; good luck with the exams - didn't stop thinking about you and hope you are happy."

This is where the bit of the story that we're still in begins. I keep in touch with my dad through a screen until I feel equipped to deal with the next bit, whatever that might be.

This time around I'm taking the reins.

MAMABEAR

My mam is my mam, and my dad. My best friend, my sister and my worst enemy. She is sweet peanuts in crinkly paper bags. Listening to Eternal Flame on long car journeys. Tea and cake at the pick-your-own farm.

Dancing around the living room rug to the *That Thing You Do!* soundtrack on a Friday night. Watching *Dirty Dancing* sitting on the floor in my bedroom. Coach trips and boat trips and swimming costumes and jam sandwiches. An ear to bend and a shoulder to cry on. Eating spaghetti on floor cushions, on holiday. Picnics and board games, and you doing the voices of all the characters in my storybooks. Billy and Betty buying everything at the sweet shop. Plastic Barbie plates and turkey twizzlers. Soft hands too big to fit in any gloves. A hand to hold.

We hack through the wilderness alone, together.

'Dad's Home' by Maxine Davies uses a quote from 'The Winter's Tale' by William Shakespeare (from The Arden Shakespeare Third Series), p. 216. Edited by John Pitcher, printed by Bloomsbury. (2010)

North of the River

Carla Montemayor

Everything is memory. To tell this story, I must remember others. Selves and parents, clans and nations, all are threads in the same skein.

I learned recently that skein also refers to a flock of geese in flight. Perhaps this is the more relevant meaning for a narrative about leaving and finding home.

1.

I watched my mother dying on Skype.

One day I'll be able to plug this phone into the television and see your faces as we speak, she told us long before the advent of video calls. She had three children in three countries; it was a desire more than a prediction. And she was right, although neither of us ever imagined that our final conversation would take place on what she called the Internet Computer.

In the autumn of 2011, I had been in England for seven years and not been home in four. Studies, visas, jobs, finances, marriage — my circumstances, new and precarious, deterred me from coming and going. My mother understood. All she asked for was to speak regularly with us, with video if possible.

That August she appeared more pensive than usual. She asked about the recent riots in London. I edited my account to spare her the worry. She segued into an odd, self-pitying litany.

I think I might die soon.

What? Did your doctor tell you that?

No, but…my knees are painful.

Ma, no one dies of arthritis.

If I did not think this exchange disturbing, it was because my mother had always been an incorrigible hypochondriac and a survivor of many health emergencies.

In her forties she had terrible migraines and various ailments that she salved with Vicks ointment. She self-medicated with analgesics that landed her in hospital on multiple occasions. She bound her head with my dad's handkerchiefs, headgear popular with sundry rebels in the Philippine countryside. We called her Kumander Ofelia.

For the last three decades she had coped with severe rheumatoid arthritis. Her joints swelled up during the monsoon season, although this did not keep her from socialising in her Zimmer frame in the drier months. We joked that all the steroids she had taken to manage the condition would enable her to compete in the 2012 London Olympics.

It was my brother who noticed the chain of tiny, bizarre behaviours pointing to a more serious dysfunction. He dropped in every day after work, the only one among her children to remain in the country.

First he reported that she had accused someone of reneging on a debt and hauled them to the community arbitration court. Serves the swindler right, my sister and I remarked. This was not out of character at all. My mother was combative and litigious. A frustrated lawyer, she was quick to sue when aggrieved.

Next some neighbours revealed that she had been spreading rumours about them. *What sort of rumours?,* we pressed my brother. Lurid ones, he replied. We began to worry.

I tried to pick up any troubling behaviour during our Skype sessions. There were none that I could detect. She was generally cheerful, she discussed current events cogently, complained about her aching joints as usual. Finally my sister flew in from America to help assess the situation. My mother asked her who she was when she walked in.

None of us had anticipated that her mind would fail so rapidly. We had not yet seen a force that could defeat the body that birthed us, battled

snakes and hurricanes, and resisted its own ossifying cartilage. She was 76 at this point and had survived my father's death for over seven years. We prepared ourselves for a drawn-out struggle with dementia.

We would hire carers, my brother would carry on with his daily visits, my sister had just been to visit. We devised an elaborate rota around work leaves and prices of long-haul flights to Manila. I booked my turn for November, intending to stay for two weeks. My siblings believed that if anyone could coerce her to go to hospital, it would be me, her eldest child.

On the morning of October 29th I spoke to her as my brother propped her head up. Her eyes could not seem to focus on the screen but she was coherent.

Do you have money to fly home? I can send you some.

Don't worry, I've bought my ticket.

Oh yes, I forgot that you're married now. Let your husband pay for it.

I have my own money.

Good. Do you know that I love you?

Yes. I will be there in a few days.

Remember that always.

Please don't speak like that. I'll be there soon.

I spent the afternoon trying frantically to rebook my flight. I was in bed when I received a call from my cousin's wife. I knew from her sobs that my mother had gone.

I remember little of my journey home through several time zones. My husband put me in a cab to Paddington. It was a late-night Emirates flight from Heathrow via Dubai. I stood around in the airport's fake oasis during the layover, wearing sunglasses at dawn. Airport cleaners and staff, mostly fellow Filipinos, stared. Maybe they recognised grief in my face.

A cousin collected me at the Manila end on a humid midnight just after All Souls Day. From the taxi I tracked the cityscape for changes since I last went away. Highways and uprisings merged in my head.

Here was EDSA, the long thoroughfare that connected north and south of the capital. There had been two peaceful mass protests here, the first in

1986 overthrowing Ferdinand Marcos. The second in was 2001; I had been old enough to take part in bringing down the Estrada government.

We passed Megamall, which is as massive as it sounds. Smaller ones lined the route until we got to the one fronting my old high school: SM North Edsa. There used to be a terminal across the road from where I took jeepneys to my university in the late '80s. Now there was a rival mall, a posher one, I was told. Everything was new but familiar.

Only at one point in the journey did I struggle to identify my location. Several acres of trees had vanished from a length of highway. In their place was a huge concrete block bathed in security lights. Another mall. We were in Novaliches, my cousin assured me. I grew up in this district, spent over thirty years commuting along the very same road that I now could not recognise.

Our house was just about two miles away but I insisted on going straight to the funeral home, the same one where my father's wake had been eight years earlier. We arrived at past two in the morning. I dragged my suitcase up the driveway, two weeks' worth of clothes and homecoming presents.

Wakes are all-nighters in the Philippines. The dead must never be left on their own lest their souls assume that they have been abandoned. Mourners on a break stood in the hallways, checking their mobiles and fanning themselves. They glanced at me and nodded. Everyone was accustomed to returnees arriving at all hours, summoned from the ships, deserts and hospitals of the world.

I passed posters promoting the funeral home's package called e-libing: Live-streamed funerals for the benefit of loved ones in the diaspora. Libing means burial in Tagalog, the infinitive being ilibing, phonetically identical to the electronic version. Who the hell punned about death in two languages? Onli in da Pilipins. The smell of ylang-ylang assaulted my nostrils as I opened the door to the room where my mother's body lay.

2.

I had seen two or three births before my mother's delivery. I had seen and heard the cries of pain and the contortions of the mothers' faces as they laboured to bring out a child. And I wondered why there were many children. I would tell my fellow peeping toms or tomasitas, 'See how hard it is to give birth? I will never give birth. Mark my words.'

When my mother was six years old, her closest friend died of a nameless fever. Neighbours formed a nest of arms and carried her to her friend's house, up the wooden steps, and onto the floor next to the casket. My mother sat near the doorway for hours, her swollen leg outstretched, not understanding why her friend was lying still when it was she who could barely move.

Days earlier, she and her three older brothers had been stealing fruit in the church orchard. They had planned the theft for weeks, circling the perimeter after each weekly catechism lesson with the aged Spanish priest. They decided to time their attempt for high noon, the least likely time of day for anyone to be wandering about in the brutal heat of April.

When the search for the ringleader unfolded, it emerged that my mother had planned the mission. She had also put herself forward as the best suited to climb the slender pomelo tree. She had shimmied up the trunk, eager to prove that she – the youngest bagtit and a girl at that – could pluck the fruit as large as her head.

The agreement was to divide it into four portions, hers being the largest. They would eat it in the afternoon, to fill their stomachs before the inevitable evening meal of rice, boiled camote leaves and salt.

They had not counted on the caretaker appearing with his bolo when he should have been eating his lunch under one of the acacias in the graveyard. My mother jumped right onto one of the spikes that surround the base of every pomelo tree. Running home barefoot drove it further inside, where it would remain for days.

Back home, her father prodded the sole of her foot, oblivious to her agony. He struck the back of her head with his palm, sending her sprawling onto the bamboo slats. *You brought this on yourself, you stupid girl. I'll cut your leg off myself. No one will want you for a wife.*

Her mother sat by the window, her belly bulging above the heap of shelled peanuts piled on the lap of her skirt. *You will be a big sister again soon enough*, she said, *stop being so free.* She kicked the sack of peanuts towards my mother. *Be useful.*

No one could recall when the rabid dog entered the clearing and writhed its way towards the dead girl's house. Everyone heard the warning yells before they saw the twitching, snarling animal. Dozens of feet rushed up the nearest hut and trampled my mother's gangrenous foreleg, squeezing the pomelo thorn out of her foot in a puddle of blood and pus. It is said that her screams could be heard from the next village.

3.

A dog picked me for a housemate. I never tire of recounting this to people who ask how I ended up in this corner of London where I live now.

In 2008 I moved down from Sheffield while I finished my studies. I had a part-time job at a non-profit in Angel and I was exhausted from commuting back and forth, sleeping on my friend's couch in Finsbury Park two nights a week.

Up north I must have moved homes six times in three years, in step with the rhythm of the academic calendar. I was in my early thirties and living with strangers after leaving 10 years of comfort in my Manila apartment. Some mornings I was confused by cornices and squares of light on strange ceilings.

A Japanese colleague invited me to an interview at her shared house in Stoke Newington, a short bus ride away from my office. I hopped on the 73 straight out of St Pancras, rehearsing my answers to hypothetical interview questions.

How could I convince them to share a home with me? I was tidy but not obsessive, cool but only just. I would describe myself as sociable but not nosey. All true in bits, all false in parts.

I entered the house just as a dejected applicant was leaving. Good luck, he muttered, as he walked out. I went into the lounge where four residents welcomed me.

After five minutes of awkward preliminaries, the landlady's dog strolled straight towards me, jumped on the sofa and lay on my lap. I moved in a month later with all my possessions: One large suitcase of clothes and two boxes of books and crockery.

4.

I met Andy online months after I moved to London. I decided to omit this detail when I announced to my mother that I had a new partner. What was I supposed to say? That I found him on the Internet Computer?

Two years later, Andy and I informed my mother via Skype that we were preparing for our wedding. It had been a fraught process. We received the Certificate of Approval from the Home Office weeks before, then a requirement for non-EU nationals marrying British citizens. I was 41 years old and needed permission to wed from Theresa May.

My mother considered the news and asked to speak to me alone. I dreaded her response.

Was he speaking in English?

Ma, he IS English.

Is he divorced?

No, and I don't care.

Is he Catholic?

No, neither am I.

You will always be a Catholic. He needs to convert so you can get married in church.

We're having a civil ceremony here in London.

Unimpressed, she ordered me to leave the room and send him back in. It took days of badgering to extract bits of their conversation from him.

She said you were very stubborn. Sure, it must be a heritable trait.

She said you were not normal. He chuckled at this.

She said that if I ever tired of you, I should give you back to her.

Of course. Here I was, finally about to marry, and my mother was anticipating divorce.

She said the very same thing to my brother-in-law when my sister announced their engagement in 1995. A reminder infused with a threat: Husbands were welcome but ultimately dispensable. Whereas as we, her daughters, were always hers and would never be discarded.

My father had said nothing on that occasion. No man-to-man talk with his prospective son-in-law, no congratulations. He handed the phone to my mother and sprinted upstairs. My brother and I burst out laughing. My mother shushed us and turned to me. *When you get married, your father will weep.*

I went to check on him. He was in bed, swaddled in his blanket, feigning sleep at seven in the evening. I could hear my mother downstairs, still on the phone delivering her spiel.

5.

> *The machine guns were positioned before us. The soldiers went around the group and kicked some men. They asked for guerrillas. No one could answer them as the barrio folk could not understand the soldiers.*
>
> *Finally, a soldier asked my father, after slapping his head to knock off the hat he was wearing.*
>
> *You guerrilla! Guerrilla?*
>
> *No, sir, I am a farmer. Here is my family.*
>
> *The soldier grunted something which seemed to mean "This one speaks English".*

My mother's family were in Isabela, northeast of the Philippines, when Manila fell into Japanese hands in 1942. That her father was a Northerner himself and a government employee were enough credentials for them to be considered respectable newcomers, even when the war turned them into refugees. As Japanese troops advanced, they joined the exodus of townsfolk from the provincial capital of Ilagan into the skirts of the Sierra Madre.

The reality of the war intruded when Japanese soldiers appeared on occasional raids, searching for guerrillas and practising their marksmanship on crocodiles basking on the sandbars of the Cagayan River. Their bullets bounced off. The river was wide, the crocodiles ancient. My mother and her brothers swam in the river most days while womenfolk washed clothes in a shallow pool off its banks.

My grandfather obtained permission from the Spanish landlord to clear a bit of land for farming in Barrio Dos. What could not be grown was procured from the jungle with help from Agtas, seasoned hunters who led expeditions to trap wild boar and deer. Once a year, before the monsoons came, Agtas guided the men and older boys of the village into the jungle and out into the eastern coast. Only they knew where to bed down to avoid snakes, which stalks to slash and sip for water.

It took three days of trekking to reach the bay, another three to boil down seawater in a large cauldron and empty oil tins. They would return home with a small bag of salt to be shared among the households. Food and drink could be sweetened with crushed fruit and honey, but every crystal of salt had to be wrung from the sea.

At night the Agtas sheltered with goats and chickens under the villagers' elevated huts. Once in a while my grandfather would summon them upstairs to frighten my mother into silence during her nocturnal tantrums. This was his last resort when his beatings failed to calm his daughter.

In her old age my mother confessed her nightmares to me: Hunger, crocodiles, tiny coffins. And her father, whipping her with a dried stingray's tail until small silent people in loincloths hauled her from fitful sleep.

I grew up listening to stories from this fabled era, hers and my father's. I knew very few relatives old enough to remember what came before. I only discovered from books much later that the history of the North was also mine.

The president of the First Philippine Republic, Emilio Aguinaldo, had retreated to Isabela to evade American forces in 1899. His military strategist, Antonio Luna, had set up headquarters in the northwest, shifting to a guerrilla campaign against the new occupiers who had succeeded the Spanish.

Aguinaldo led his dwindling army east, across two mountain ranges and towards the Philippine Sea, the same coast where my uncles harvested salt with Agtas. The Tagalog general had been sheltered by the North in his flight. He was captured in Palanan, eastern Isabela, in 1901.

As for Luna, himself a Northerner, he had been hacked to death by Aguinaldo's men in Cabanatuan two years earlier. Growing up I heard vague resentments from Ilocano uncles about the duplicity of Tagalogs. No one spoke of what followed.

The subsequent American campaign to "pacify" the islands resulted in the deaths of an estimated 200,000 to a million Filipinos. The Americans did not make distinctions among the natives. Northern or Southern, they were all wild and vengeful, emboldened by a successful revolution against their Spanish masters. The first republic in Asia was thus crushed but rebellions would never cease.

No one cared that the Agtas lived in the region long before Tagalogs or Ilocanos. What they had endured and remembered, no one thought to ask. The Japanese were only the latest of violent strangers they had to put up with over the centuries, all of them intent on conquest. And now they had to share the jungle with these Filipinos whose restless children they had to pretend to abduct in the middle of the night or no one would sleep in peace.

By the time I visited Isabela in the early 1990s, much of its feral majesty had faded. The Cagayan River I encountered was a pitiful creek in the dry season and a raging torrent when rains cascaded unchecked down denuded mountain slopes.

The crocodiles were long gone, as were the Agtas. Five decades of military and logging operations had wrenched tribal peoples from the plundered jungle into nomadic destitution around the Isabela and Cagayan provinces. They emerged on market days to sell honey and handmade spears.

As with my travels through benighted corners of the Philippines, I asked myself: How did my mother escape all this? This mesh of oppressions and betrayals, both intimate and collective. How did anyone escape?

First you free yourself, she insisted during the frustrating debates we had throughout my twenties. Untouched by the brutality and deprivation that had shaped her views, I found this inwardness difficult to accept. I had grown up under a tyranny and was invested in the grand project of tearing down systems and structures, the elaborate scaffolding that holds a society up or down.

Yet while she did not possess the language of ideology, her own life was her most powerful argument. A successful teaching career pursued alone in faraway towns where she had no kin or connections. Four decades of an extraordinary marriage, more equal and modern than I have observed in that generation. Relative affluence achieved through foresight and frugality. Three children lovingly raised in defiance of her own violent upbringing.

Throughout her wake, I listened to kin, friends, neighbours and colleagues pay tribute to Nenet, Ofelia, Ofie, Fely — all the different names by which they knew my mother. All were variations on the theme of courage.

At the crematorium my aunts insisted that the coffin be opened one last time, overruling my protests. The belief is that to prevent a string of deaths, the rosary clasped in my mother's hands would have to be cut. The keening reached a crescendo in a brief display of the dung-aw, the Ilocano ritual of sung lamentation and praise for the departed.

I imagined my mother cringing at the spectacle. She had breached so many layers of tradition and history to free herself. To honour this legacy, I swallowed my sobs.

6.

> *When the war ended, my father received orders from Manila to open the post office in Ilagan. Our belongings were placed on a big bamboo raft, timber for our new home loaded. Rattan, for fastening them together, nipa leaves for roofing. Three men accompanied us as oarsmen. They had long bamboo poles to manoeuvre the raft when the current became stronger.*
>
> *How we enjoyed the trip. The men and the boys angled for fish for our meals. In the shallow parts of the river, we would dive and splash around. To us, it was a beautiful life.*

I stayed on at our family home in Novaliches for a week after the funeral. There were duties to fulfil, domestic and devotional.

I cleaned and cooked, taking note of the fading state of the home I had grown up in. Paint was peeling in big blobs, plywood curled at the edges of the ceiling.

In the afternoons I hosted the nine-day novena for the dead, recited in archaic Tagalog by the local rosary brigade. I lip-synched along, secretly proud that they had stopped inviting my mother to meetings when she threatened to call the police to arrest one of their husbands for domestic abuse.

In the early hours of the morning, I Skyped with Andy just as he returned from work to our home in Camden. “Maybe we should start looking at flats again”, I suggested. I had moved in with him when we got married, now I wanted us to build a home together. We would stay north of the river, we agreed, possibly in Hackney where he grew up.

My brother and I went through old papers and possessions that my mother hoarded in elaborately carved wardrobes and cabinets. This was furniture she had commissioned from Isabela over the years, most likely sourced from the jungles of her childhood. There were presents we had given her, perfumes and handbags, all unused and saved for best. She even

hoarded make-up way past its use-by date. My mother believed in keeping things for a lifetime, even perishable stuff.

In one of the drawers I found pages and pages of ruled yellow paper filled with her imperious handwriting. Letters sloping to the right, with sharp peaks and pointed Os. Even with fingers gnarled from arthritis, she maintained a penmanship fit for archival manuscripts.

One account was about her younger sister whose birth she had witnessed during the war. Another was about her brother the physicist who was part of the pomelo raid. The more I read, the more I wondered where she was in her own narrative. Why did she consider her siblings' lives more storied than hers?

I found her in a few paragraphs in the middle of the war that forged her: Six years old, hungry and ferocious, long before she could imagine herself as a mother or a wife. Of the cruelty of her parents and the poverty of her youth, there were only casual mentions. There was no bitterness or fear, only remembering.

At the end of her life, my mother had gentle regrets. Saying goodbye to a beloved river. The song of creatures abandoning home. These sorrows repeat. These sorrows recede.

Death and Birdwatching

Josh Holton

Fragments of a eulogy are rattling around my tired head.

A thuggish debt collector, an addict, a grave digger, and a birdwatcher with data and papers published on British bird populations; Dad was a man of eclectic interests.

Memory isn't chronological. It is randomly provoked by triggers including smell, music, bird song, context, and the most inopportune moments to present itself. My eulogy for Dad will be similarly chaotic, as his life was.

~

Dad's appearance changed a lot, so for ease, I'll describe him as my favourite of his incarnations. I'll revive him as he was when he was forty. He could still do a headstand and narrowly manage a handspring. He had a bushy beard and moustache that started in his ears and nostrils. His broken nose was smeared across his face. Little purple blood vessels flared on his cheeks. Sea green tattoos covered his forearms and bustled onto his hands. He had very few teeth. Most of the time he delighted in popping out his false ones, but sometimes he got pissed off if you asked him to do it.

Whenever he went outside, he wore one of several hats. If it was raining hard, he wore a cowboy hat woven from black straw. If it was sunny, he wore either a Golden Virginia branded baseball cap or a camouflaged Cuban cap. If he was tending to farm animals, he wore his flat cap. When it was cold, he wore a faux-fur trapper hat. All these hats smelled of chip grease. He had many other hats that he liked in principle but never wore. I assume this was because he never found the right situation for them

or didn't trust them to cover the small holes in his confidence that his bravado distracted from. He fluctuated between thirteen and fifteen stone, most of this in his muscles and beer belly. His hands were huge with white callouses from labour and yellow callouses from roll-ups.

He wore the cleanest of seven pairs of dirty, blue jeans that each cost a fiver. He usually wore three layers - a t-shirt, rugby shirt and fleece, but would put a waterproof or smock on top when he went outside.

~

"Oi, Josh," Dad shouted to me through the house. "Come and have a look at this."

I found Dad in the bathroom, standing over the toilet, his cock in his hand.

I shook my head and covered my eyes, "Oh har har, you made me look at your nob. Well done."

"No, don't look at my nob, you perve! My piss! Look at my piss!"

"Why?" I asked.

"Well you're at uni aren't you? Does it look alright to you?"

"I'm studying psychology, not piss."

"Oh, you know what I mean. Just have a look."

I walked over and peered into the toilet bowl.

"Is that just piss or did you do a shit as well?" I asked.

"It's just piss."

"Then that's definitely not right."

"Yeah, I didn't think it looked good," frowned Dad. "Don't tell Mum though, she'll make me go to the doctor."

"I think you probably should go to the doctor."

Dad scrunched up his face into a disgusted and disappointed grimace. "Fucking hell. Not you n'all."

"I'm just saying it wouldn't do any harm to check."

I left the room to the sound of the toilet flushing and Dad saying, "There we go, all sorted."

When I was a small child, I used to have anxiety attacks over the

prospect of my parents dying. Dad always made me feel better. He told me he was too hard to die. I believed him. He would point to the scar that ran the length of his beer belly and say, "They've tried to kill me before and it doesn't work."

Even at nineteen years old, having just seen he'd pissed out what looked like half his kidney, I thought he'd probably be fine. He was right, me and Mum did fuss too much. After all, I studied psychology, not piss.

~

Since childhood, I've had episodes of panic where the world doesn't feel real. It feels as though a draught, charged with electricity, gently shifts the curtain which is the world we see around us. Some days, it seems like less effort has been put into hiding whatever's behind the veil. Far off mountains look as though they've been painted on a canvas and there is no depth to the sky. Grand old buildings are clearly two-dimensional artifices that no one can enter. In these episodes, I'm accosted by the tingle of déjà vu and the sensation that my sight is coming from further back in my head than my eyes. My description is unclear now, but it was less clear as a child. Sometimes, the feeling of being boxed off from reality reduced me to screaming tears.

Dad would half hug and half restrain me, the coarse bobbles on his jumper were abrasive on my face. He told me, firmly, to calm down, "Of course it's real." Mum would hug me but chuckle at my distress, calling me a silly sausage and a dafty. Her condescension was meant to be comforting. I wondered if they were in on a conspiracy to keep cosmic secrets from me.

They must have been more concerned than they let on. I began regularly seeing an NHS psychiatrist, and I was taken out of primary school for being disruptive and scaring the other kids.

~

Dad told us he was dying. Doctors said we had three months. Three months to try and collect as much of Dad's essence as we could whilst he was still there for reference. I was consciously downloading a backup of him to my

brain, so I could still have him when he was gone. The problem was that I didn't feel like I could let him see that that was what I was doing.

I regret being less thorough and candid in questioning him. Especially now people are expecting a eulogy from me.

He became more loving after his prognosis. He hugged us regularly, told us he loved us every day. He started taking Mum out to nice places. For a couple of months, death gave him a new lease of life. But eventually a change happened, at first so subtle that I couldn't tell you when. One day, he started getting quieter.

~

When I was about sixteen. Dad was driving me to a house party. He drove me anywhere I wanted, whenever I wanted, without question. We lived on the nature reserve he wardened, miles from anywhere. Whenever he drove, there was time for conversation to get deep. I don't remember how we reached the subject of Dad getting stabbed.

"I was queuing for fish and chips," the story began, "and two lads thought they were special and tried to jump the queue. I was having none of it, so I stuck the nut on one of 'em. I'd lost my rag, so I was really giving him some welly, and my mates couldn't drag me off. The lads legged it and I didn't bother chasing 'em because it was now my turn to order chips.

"We went outside the chippy and a car pulled up. The window rolled down and the guys I'd been fighting were in it, shouting insults, so I passed my chips to my mate and ran over to the car. I yanked a door open and started leathering the nearest cunt. He only got one punch into my gut, and it wasn't a goodun, but very suddenly, I felt all wobbly and couldn't punch anymore. I looked down and saw a big bloody hole in my belly where I'd been stabbed and at the same time the guy slammed his door shut on my arm and his mate sped off. I got dragged about fifty metres down the road before I tumbled on the tarmac. They were off. My mates scooped me up, took the drugs out my pockets and dropped me off outside the hospital."

I would mention in the eulogy that Dad had died before. In hospital, after he was stabbed, he flatlined and had to be resuscitated. He told me that dying felt great, once the pain went away. He saw a light and felt overwhelming happiness like every worry he'd ever had was forgotten and irrelevant. He felt himself floating upwards, and everything was warm and cosy. "If that's death," he told me, "then I'm not scared of it at all."

~

The first time I walked the reserve, after Dad died, I took his *Field Guide to British Wildlife* with me. He'd have liked to have passed on what he knew, but I could only learn from heirlooms now.

I hoped the walk would be a momentous event, in which I would unlock the secrets and wisdom of nature and somehow manage to bond with Dad in the afterlife.

I stepped out of the house that I grew up in, beneath a cloudless sky, in the cool October air. The tips of the grass and tree leaves were tainted by the tiniest, cold hints of grey and brown. The birds sang a song of the summer I had missed while I was lost in hospital corridors and my own thoughts. A distant tractor hummed along, accompanied by the buzz of damselflies.

I read that male damselflies gang-fuck single females competitively. Their penises have adapted to work like rough wire brushes and scrub the female's insides of contending semen. They remove between ninety and one hundred percent of the sperm of their competitors.

~

I was about nine. It was sunny. Mum, Dad, my brother and I sat in leafy public gardens. We were enjoying *Mr Whippies*. Seeing the ice cream clinging in globules to Dad's moustache put me off mine a bit, but not enough to stop me eating it. A wasp buzzed about with threatening inquisitiveness. Dad, moving only the muscles in his neck with lightning speed, headbutted the wasp out the air, leaving it stunned and twitching on its back. He was the self-proclaimed headbutt king and ensured that my brother, Mum and I

were all trained in the art of sticking the nut on someone.

He instructed: "You must only ever stick the nut on someone if you really mean it. You've gotta proper go for it, else you'll hurt your head more than the other bastard. Make sure your forehead hits him right on the nose and you'll deck the cunt, no bother."

The great spotted woodpecker can generate a force a thousand times greater than that of gravity with a headbutt. It has extra eyelids to stop its eyes popping out of its skull, which is made of a spongy interlocking mesh of trabeculae bones. The skull structure allows its beak to deform and diffuse the force away from its brain. It can aim its beak more accurately than other birds, ensuring that it strikes at different angles each time. Its tongue wraps around its brain as extra cushioning.

I suspect the great spotted woodpecker only sticks the nut on something when it really means it. It could deck a cunt, no bother. They've been sighted scavenging meat from corpses.

~

The snowcock avoids human persecution and predation by living in severe climates and high-altitude areas where there are few living things to worry about. It's a cold and lonely life, but the only way such a peaceful and palatable creature can survive.

This made me think about why Dad chose to live where we did. Over the country road, in front of the nature reserve and the house I grew up in, was the Solway Estuary, an expanse of white-trimmed sea, when the tide was in. When the tide was out, it was quicksand and worm riddled mud. Green fields, purple mountains, and hazy horizons swaddled us in a blanket against human relationships and the consequences of mistakes. Birdsong dissipated raucous thoughts of far-away, dystopian cities.

There was nothing here to judge you or punish you. You could hide here, even from yourself.

~

In a peat bog, cool temperatures and saturated soil makes organic matter

take a long time to decay. When I walked on the bog behind my home, I sunk into the spongey moss releasing pockets of gas and memories of walking with Dad.

Dad liked peaty whisky. He liked to drink it on his own until he staggered upstairs, karate chopping the air. As I walked, I wrote a poem for the eulogy:

A gentle spirit,
with the smoky flavour of thirty fags a day,
and mixed notes of 1960's number ones,
sang whilst meandering through a peat bog,
soaking up all it had to offer
on the way to the bottle.
Nose: Broken
Best Served: With a pinch of salt
and a forgiving smile.
Once it's gone,
it's gone.
The last
drop
is
the angels' share.

I realised this poem was shit and that Dad would've cringed for both of us. I knew it was a cliché to start writing poems when you were sad, so I kicked myself for falling into such a well-documented trap. Dad would've kicked me harder.

~

Dad's books told me that pairs of Leach's petrels remain faithful until the death of their mate. Leach himself, the zoologist who discovered this breed of sea bird and never married, named nine other species after a

woman named Caroline, of whom nothing else is known. Leach died of cholera, alone, at the age of forty-five. Maybe Caroline didn't know. Maybe she wasn't bothered.

After Leach's death, Sir Francis Boott described him as, "The most laborious of zoologists". A few years before his death, Leach suffered a nervous breakdown, spending too much time trying to learn and teach about the beauty and horrors of nature.

~

Racked with guilt, I told Dad when I cheated on my first girlfriend at uni. He said he was proud of me for feeling guilty. "A lot of people do stuff like that without breaking a sweat, mate. Don't tell her though. She'll over-react."

He drove all the way to Edinburgh to drive me back home after I'd been dumped. I'd told her.

I was depressed after getting dumped. Dad helped me deep clean the flat, so I didn't lose my deposit. He did the oven whilst I cleaned up the stain from the pile of sick I'd left next to my bed for two whole weeks.

~

A story inappropriate for the eulogy:

When Dad was a teenager, he worked as a gravedigger. During burial services, he and a colleague hid behind angelic monoliths so as not to hover ghoulishly over the grieving party. He saw so much death it became boring. Every burial was the same. The same priest said the same words to people who wore the same black clothes and reacted in the same black way. His colleague made the same stupid joke at the same point. All that changed was that Dad got angrier each time.

"In the name of the father, the spirit, and in the hole he goes."

"In the name of the father, the spirit, and in the hole he goes."

"And in the hole he goes."

"And in the hole he goes."

~

A carrier bag hung from our door when we came home. It rustled and convulsed.

"Oh God, Norman, what's in it?" flinched Mum. My brother and I hung back. Dad cautiously approached the squirming bag. He opened it to reveal a black head, with a silently gaping beak. It was a gull.

"Someone thinks I'm a vet because I work on a nature reserve," Dad tutted. He wrang the bird's neck - holding the bird upside down, tightly by the legs. Its breast rested on Dad's thigh and he pulled its head down sharply, dislocating its neck. He said this meant it died without pain, but it flapped with crazed energy and wriggled like a burning child. Apparently, this death dance is involuntary, painless spasms by the nervous system, but it looked really sore to me and it made me cry.

And in the hole he goes.

My best friend told a similar story of his own dad, who came across a bird with a broken wing when walking on marshland. He thought it would be kindest to euthanise it. He tried to wring its neck, but didn't know the technique and the bird struggled, stronger than he expected. Instead, he tried to stamp on its head, but the spongey marshland wasn't robust enough to support a death blow, just repeated, squelching, non-fatal stomps. The bird had to die, not just for its injuries but so that my friend's dad could prove he was up to the task. He took the bird to a rock pool where he held its head below the water for two minutes until it was motionless.

And in the hole he goes.

~

We had a tortoiseshell cat called Turtle. Mum loved her to bits, making her fat with treats and saving her the best spot by the fire. The rest of us found her incredibly irritating but living with a sentient being for fourteen years makes it part of the family. Turtle loved us simply because we were there, not caring what we were trying to do at the time. She spent her last bloated week of life splayed across newspaper by the fire, wheezing. We honestly couldn't pay a vet.

"Sal," Dad shouted up the stairs to Mum, dourly business-like. "The cat's got maggots."

I didn't know how maggots manifested themselves in cats, but I was warned not to look, so I didn't. Behind a closed door, Dad smothered Turtle in a towel then walked through the house carrying a cat litter bag with a bundle of tortoiseshell fur slumped at the bottom.

Dad dug a little grave in the garden.

And in the hole she goes.

~

One summer I worked as a shepherd on the farm next door. The flock I was minding were Texel sheep; square-headed brutes that looked like woolly bulldogs, but bigger. One task was to check they didn't have maggots. The way to spot this was if large numbers of flies congregated around the sheep's mouths or udders.

My heart sank the day I found one of the sheep with a buzzing, crawling, black beard. The farmer was away, so I asked Dad what I should do. "It's alright," he said, "They just need spraying. I've got a can in the workshop."

Despite the squareness of the sheep, and the stumpiness of their legs, they were hard to catch. Dad and I chased the afflicted one all over the field. I wanted to show Dad that I was strong and capable, so I tried extra hard. I cornered the sheep and wrestled it to its back. I felt like I was taming nature: and Dad saw it.

"Nice one, mate," he said, approaching with the spray.

The flies buzzed in the sheep's mouth and in my ear. I held tight as it jerked sporadically. Its udders undulated with a black, many-legged horde. Dad sprayed the can at point-blank range. My face was engulfed with the million tiny flies, still warm with the stink of their flesh nest.

I'm dramatising it was more like having a bucket of raisins thrown at your face. It was still gross though.

~

The only magic that Dad showed us he could do was water divining. He

trudged across the peat bogs with two thin metal rods wobbling in his hands, confident he would pick out seams of underground waterflow. When the rods crossed it meant water had been found. He divined water so consistently that people at his work stopped laughing and paid for him to travel to their reserves to do it. Locating water is crucial in land management.

One Christmas, Mum bought the best bottle of whisky she could afford and hid it. She said Dad could only have it if he found it with his divining rods. He searched for hours, spanning days and weeks. He didn't find it and Mum didn't give it to him. Everyone forgot about it.

After Dad died and we were packing the house for Mum to move, it tumbled out of a gash in a mattress my brother and I were moving. As did a nest of screeching, scurrying mice.

There was a tag around the bottle neck in Mum's handwriting. It read, "Well done Normy, we never doubted you for a second."

~

I remember Dad taking me to see an osprey at Dodd Wood, in the Lake District. As I tried to write about this for the eulogy, I realised I was making most of it up. The only facts I have are that the walk was uphill, and that my small, seven-year-old legs were heavily tested. I knew there were trees present. I couldn't describe them as I was far too occupied with walking as fast as I could up the hill, to try and prove to Dad that I was good at something. I remember feeling my wellies slapping and chafing against my scrawny legs, and a sock had slipped off one foot and hidden in a corner of the cavernous boots. Dust and hassled pebbles crunched beneath, on the path. At that moment, Dad was a pair of legs, clad in blue denim, that extended above my field of vision, setting a pace to push towards.

~

At night our garage was terrifying. It was heaped with rusty farm tools the colour of dried blood, lit by one flickering strip light. It was perpetually under invasion from huge leopard-print slugs, toads that crawled over and under bare feet, spiders the size of mice, and rats. Cobwebs, as thick as

zombie hair, draped every surface. Towels, damp with mould, crumpled to create hollows and crevices from which any creature that liked moist darkness could scurry from, towards an open trouser leg.

Every so often, Mum would squeal when she went outside to the chest freezer. Sometimes it was because of creepy crawlies but sometimes it was what was hidden in the freezer itself.

An opaque, blue sandwich bag nestled between chicken nuggets and a tub of ice cream. The knot was hard to undo, especially with chilly, numb fingers. It had to be one of Dad's, so she opened it, nervously. A little, furry face with leathery skin, sharp teeth and a snout made her scream.

The blue bag rattled Dad's TV dinner tray with surprisingly heavy impact.

"What the fuck is a dead bat doing in my freezer?" yelled Mum, eyes bulging, face flushed.

"I'm going to take it to Mike at Tullie House Natural History Department. I don't know why it died and I thought he might-"

"You don't know how it died? And you put it in the freezer with the food for our children? It could have fucking rabies!"

"Come on, Sal, it's in a bag," said Dad still trying to watch the snooker.

"You'll be in a fucking bag if you do this again. At least ask me. Warn me that I might stumble across a biohazard when I'm looking in the freezer for a *Cornetto*."

"Why would I tell you when I know you'll react like this?"

I should have expected Mum's scream when she found the otter. It was an awkward forty-five kilograms and Dad had asked me to help him get it in the freezer slowly and carefully. "I could have got it in myself," he said, "but you know your mum would go mental if an ice cream cone got accidentally crushed."

~

Aged eleven, my schoolmates and I towered over the baby swallow like cyclopean deities. The choice of life and death was ours. We chose mercy. We chose death. The tiny bird had fallen the distance between heaven

and hell. It would never return to its familial nest. It lay flat and purple, grotesquely melded to the tarmac, below the eaves of the school library. Only its straining bald neck moved, its head squealing, eyes closed. We recognised the ubiquitous language of pain and panic. We all winced. None of us thought ourselves able to kill the baby, though the decision was unanimous in favour of its death; to end its suffering sooner rather than later.

I turned my back, raised my thick-soled school shoe and crunched my heel onto the tiny head with three heavy stamps. I dragged the last blow along the ground, smearing the pink corpse across the tarmac.

Each of us present considered ourselves to be tough, as all eleven-year-old boys do, and we had each proved it by bullying our weaker peers. But we were all silenced by the baby bird's death and not one of us said anything, leaving the scene with sadness and respect.

And in the hole he goes.

~

Dad never said that he lived in a crack house. He told me that he lived in a two-bedroom house with twelve other people and his bedroom was a bathtub. He said his friend was an artist and spent all day painting pictures on the walls then painting over them again when he ran out of space. He said, genuinely, that he was lucky to get the bathtub as there was space for him to spread out. Somebody else's room was a cupboard.

~

I used to wake up on a weekend to the sound of Dad's voice reverberating through the wall as he chatted with Mum in bed in the morning. His voice, though not particularly deep or high, hit a certain resonance that vibrated through walls and shook windows. Maybe the house was just knackered, but it was another way his presence seemed to fill our home.

This chatting died off as Dad awoke later and later with less and less vitality.

~

In his deathbed in the hospital, Dad's suffering transfixed me, much like that of the dying baby swallow. He had the same purple desperation and

panicked inability to communicate. Mum asked the doctor if there was anything he could do to speed along Dad's death. The doctor said no but reassured her it was a common request. Dad stared up through the space between them with dry, yellow eyes as brown foam gurgled from his mouth like a blocked toilet.

We watched Dad, and when the foam began to overflow from his thin, white lips, we pressed a button for a nurse to come and put a hoover down his throat to suck it all out. He wasn't allowed any fluid or food.

On his death bed, I told him to die; to give up and let it go. I told myself I was telling him for his own sake. He'd had no food or fluid for four days and was still hanging on to the last wisp of parched life. He might have been strong enough to hold on forever, but I wasn't strong enough to watch him try. I told him to join his dead friends and our dead family.

I'd been watching him die for three years since he was given three months to live. I wanted to give up. I couldn't give up until he was dead. I failed him.

~

A sentiment not appropriate for the eulogy:

I did nothing to make Dad proud of me in his lifetime. He only saw me fail. He picked me up from the police station, from hospital, from park benches. He always had to bail me out, and he always did so willingly, supportively and without judgement. There was nothing that I could help him with. He was so wise, so skilled and so strong. There was nothing that I could impress him with, but he still always said he was proud of me. How could he have been?

~

The day after Dad's death I walked up the stairs of our house and saw his tie, neatly curled up on a shelf, never to be worn again. Dad was not big on wearing ties, and when he did wear ties it had never been this one, but the notion that he would never be able to wear this tie again, whether he would have wanted to or not, reduced me to tears.

Mum followed me up the stairs and asked, “Are you alright, lovie?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Sorry. Just saw one of Dad’s ties and it got me.”

Mum hesitated and said carefully, “Josh, that’s your tie. It came in one of those god-awful shirt and tie combo boxes you buy, and you just left it here.”

As soon as she said this, I realised that she was right. I was a twat.

~

I collected Dad from the crematorium in a cardboard tube, wrapped in a pastel sunset. The tube was the same shape as the package of a whisky bottle. Dad would have made a joke about that and taken the chance to mock my lame poem. I moved the tube of Dad around, so it didn’t tire of the view.

I wondered if the dust inside the tube contained his dreams, wishes, jokes and ideas, as well as the body that failed him. Thirteen stone incinerated down to four kilograms. I hoped it still had the good stuff.

On Sigma-Algebras

Elena Croitoru

I sneaked my passport into my back pocket, hoping my father didn't see it. Flights were being announced over the tannoy so I couldn't hear what he said. Because I only saw him once a year, it seemed as if parts of his old self were disappearing with each encounter. The only remnant of his youth was the summer-sea blue of his eyes. It made me wonder how little of us is left by the time we grow old. His skin – which had one deep wrinkle for each year we spent apart – hung loosely around his cheekbones, then bunched up on the sides of his mouth when he smiled.

"I'm so happy to see my little Ana," he said. When he hugged me, his hands felt shaky on my shoulders. "When do you have to go back?"

I planned to return to London the next day, but I knew that would disappoint him, so I said, "Let's go to the bus stop. The wake is in one hour."

The wake. Such a strange word. The ritual of watching over somebody who will never be awake in this world again. The last time Professor Coman and I saw each other, I had lied to him. I said I couldn't stay on as a lecturer in his department because I liked programming better. I didn't want him to think I chose money over research. During his last lecture, he barely looked at me. He stood in front of the blackboard with his hands covered in chalk dust and talked about sigma-algebras, which formed the basis of programming languages and helped machines unequivocally interpret what we meant. He defined them as pairs of sets and functions. Even a person was a sigma-algebra: a set of circumstances and the actions available to them.

My father and I headed out of the air-conditioned airport and into the overheated street filled with exhaust fumes. A group of kids gathered around

a sliced watermelon that lay in the trunk of a Dacia. Its fragrance wafted our way, reminding me of the hot summers I used to spend solving geometry problems and eating chunks of sweet, cold watermelon at my parents' country house while the macramé tablecloth left an imprint on my forearms. Nowadays, I wasn't studying much maths, just working in an office.

My father took my suitcase and kept lifting it, to protect it from scratches.

"It has wheels Dad," I said. "Don't lift it. It's bad for your back."

He gazed ahead as if he hadn't heard me and moved with the energy of a teenager, though I knew he had taken an overnight train to Bucharest. I wondered at what age he would finally stop proving himself.

We boarded the bus and sat on hard plastic seats as a small TV screen showed food adverts. There were Romanian words I hadn't used in a while: *sarmalute* – vine leaf wraps, *visinata* – sour cherry brandy, *mortal* – something so amazing you'd die for it. Over the years, my native language had been fading and by the time I reached thirty, it felt as though my childhood had happened to somebody else, a foreigner who had divided their time between a cramped concrete flat and a classroom that smelled like diesel (which they used to treat the floors). I leaned against the dusty bus window and felt drops of sweat sliding down my back, beneath my voile blouse.

"Your mother is buying a wreath. She wouldn't let me do it. I said she should just buy a medium-sized one, but she's taking her time. She asked the florist to show her five different designs. Five."

I couldn't understand why after so many years, we still weren't used to each other's flaws. When I was little, my parents argued every day, sometimes my father would drink, sometimes my mother wouldn't let him into our flat. Between their arguments and the boys who bullied me in school corridors for being too skinny, there wasn't much room for silence. Back in London, there was silence in my flat, then silence in the office.

My father cast proud glances at me while I pretended not to notice. Dusk still lingered in the sky, so the tower blocks lining the boulevard looked like matrices of gold and black squares. I imagined their residents

keeping their kitchen lights on so they would feel more awake. I remembered what it was like living in a small flat. Back when I was in school, I used to think these places were containers for limited destinies.

"I think she is depressed," my father said, leaning toward me. "You know how she used to scold me every time I shopped at the supermarket, always saying I bought the wrong types of apples or meat that's too fatty?"

I suppressed a smile. It would be the first time he was able to tell anything concerning Mum.

"Well, she doesn't do that now. She's upset about something. I can tell."

"Give it some time," I said, but I agreed with him, it wasn't like her to hold back.

"Your mother and I are coming with you to the cemetery. It's Ceausescu's anniversary." He sighed and wiped his forehead with a battered handkerchief. "We used to be better off when he was alive."

My father's generation seemed convinced that communism was better for us, but I wasn't sure. It was hard to know what a person needed, let alone an entire country.

We got off in front of the University of Bucharest. My mother was waiting under the shelter of the bus stop. Her slight figure had been shrinking for years and now it drowned in folds of black cotton sateen. She was still in mourning even though grandma had died five years ago.

"Look at you, you're so slim!" she said, her arms flailing in unison with her words. "Why are you slim? Do you eat enough? You know your immune system can't function if you don't eat. Are you taking any vitamins?"

"You worry too much," I said. We were in front of the Mathematics building where I used to study. The Faculty of Languages and Literature, which she attended, was just a few meters away.

My mother shuddered when she saw the crumbling marble steps. Back in the early nineties, there was a miners' riot. Led by a former communist, they came all the way from Targu Jiu on foot and beat up passers-by who looked rich, then entered university amphitheatres and attacked students.

My mother was alone in a classroom, working on her PhD when they caught her. They dragged her by her hair, into the street while the skin of her legs bruised and turned red. She kept looking up at the sky as they shouted because she thought they would trample her to death and she didn't want to die without facing heaven. When they weren't looking, she got up and ran as fast as she could, then hid behind a yet-untorn monument dedicated to the Communist Party. Maybe that was when she became so fearful of everything. All this happened after the revolution. Our people let the wrong kind of wilderness out after being trapped for decades, or some of them hadn't wanted communism to end because their lives had been better back then. Every time I thought about it, I wanted to kick those men, to curl my fingers into the flesh of their necks, though I knew they were probably dead by now. Their life expectancy had been low. Life had been hard for them so they had wanted the same for others.

I wrapped my arm around my mother's shoulders. Now, we were surrounded by morning commuters who rushed to the metro station. How our country had changed.

We entered the building and followed the crowd which had gathered in the Ghica amphitheatre. The faculty staff made speeches but I wasn't listening. Professors sat on chairs, around an improvised stage and I recognised a few faces. The students in the back rows looked far younger than me.

I tried to remember some of the names of the undergrads I used to know. We used to borrow bread, Boeuf salad or leftovers from each other whenever we were too hungry. My days used to be the same: go to work in the morning, then study all evening in my dorm's hallway, while sitting on the polished concrete floor with my back against boxy radiators. Professor Coman once told us about stopping time sigma-algebras, which involved repeating an experiment until a particular time passed. I could have said to him this was what I tried to avoid by leaving, but I doubt we would have understood each other better. He loved those who gave themselves to ideas, whereas I gave myself to my own life.

After we arrived at the cemetery, I followed the funeral procession while my parents stood by Ceausescu's grave. I often thought about our former president and his execution which was broadcast on national TV. The way his body jerked as they shot him, again and again, stayed with me for decades after that. He had said, "Don't shoot my children, don't shoot." I was taken in by these soft words, even if they came from a dictator. Besides, how did they weigh his sins and decide how many times he should die? People often said he was condemned not so much for his crimes but for what he could say about other members of the Communist Party who didn't want the truth to get out. As I was growing up, I tried to build my life around this memory of violence, but it was always there and my past hardened around it. I sometimes think that when I saw him dying on that crumbling patch of red concrete, I decided I wasn't going to stay, though I was too young to have decided that. Even so, maybe my ability to leave places and people was a form of quiet violence.

I was ahead of the group of students and ended up close to the freshly dug grave which smelled of damp soil and crushed grass. A man with thick-rimmed glasses nodded at the priest and talked about the professor's legacy in theoretical informatics. I realised he was Professor Coman's research assistant. My replacement. He had the life I could have had and looked content enough underneath his apparent sadness.

The professor's pallid face was unrecognisable and all the inexplicable light that used to surround him had disappeared. It also felt as though my past was crumpled and crammed among the heads of red and white carnations lining his coffin. I tried to count all the flowers that were cut for this funeral, thinking their number expressed our wealth as a nation on a given day, or at least this was what Professor Coman would have said. Or maybe he would have looked at them and tried to discern a pattern in the way they were laid. One wreath, arranged in a circle with a split at the bottom and another bouquet at the top, looked like the Mandelbrot set. It made me think about the shape of his soul, out there in the nothingness.

He was the first person to say, “You can do things, Ana.”

Professor Coman could see things nobody else could.

“But don’t forget the important people,” he had also said.

My parents stood close together a few meters away, looking forlorn even though they were surrounded by a small crowd. I wondered if my mother had figured out that I had applied for British citizenship when I asked her to send me my birth certificate. She had an almost mystic intuition.

A man read from an old newspaper over Ceausescu’s grave, but my parents didn’t seem to be listening and kept looking at me.

I watched four men lower Professor Coman’s coffin into the grave and dropped my plane ticket onto the soft, black soil.

Mink Lashes

SR Shah

I sullenly watched a small child walk across a glass plate bearing an assortment of small glass bangles. She could cut her feet up bad. She played around the ankles of aunties, sisters, grannies, and mothers as they somehow managed to superficially ignore the child. Their attentions held by food on plates and twisted necklaces resting on a cousin's nape. But the child was never without super-vision. My mother tapped me on my shoulder gently,

> *I had been here for three days. For a wedding, a cousin's. I decided to surprise mum with a visit and throw a curveball at her disappointment in me. Three days ago, the vibe had been one of joyful confusion. Having used imbecilic energy for fun rather than insolence, I played a prank on her. I pretended, after her hard work in selecting fabrics and beaming with pride that her only daughter would be attending this wedding in Frankfurt with the extended family, that I was unable to make it. It was semi-true, anyway. I travelled to the wrong airport on the day of my flight and thanked every God for the chance to travel back to Hackney and smoke up for another evening of peace. I, an adult, somewhat unwittingly travelled to Stansted instead of Luton. Here's the part that we agree on: my subconscious was in survival mode and simply did not want to go. I wasn't let off the hook, by any means. My brother sent me money straight away to book a flight for the next day. It was a sweet compromise. I had one more evening with spliffs and red wine before travelling first class to Germany, to then travel to*

Berlin and stay with a lover. I was perpetually lost in a haze of musical algorithms, ambling towards a week-long performance of sobriety and marital networking. My brother and I took this opportunity to feign my resignation from attending this wedding. Oh, mother was positively livid. Her flaky, unreliable, artistic, and queer daughter has once again proven a public disappointment. Fortunately, she had taken all her anger out on the present family so that when I crept up behind her as she sliced onions, I was able to finally take nothing but joy and pride.

As I stealthily rolled underneath windows and tiptoed in through the door from my brother's car, who had showered and shaved to go to "the pharmacy for something," I marvelled for a brief second at this vision of my mother caught off guard. This perfectly coiffed, always ready, blesser of children is natural. Her round cheeks almost gently breathed with a relaxation and her eyes shone bright. I stared at the way she cupped onions in her hand and lovingly sliced them open, as though presenting a gift or sacrifice. For a moment, all I wanted was to touch her hand. I had to wrench myself away from that moment that muffled my ears with a reluctance to bring my feet back onto the ground. Excited as I was to surprise her by proving I'm not a heartless piece of shit, I didn't want to ever stop gazing at this sweaty, small woman with frizzy hair laughing with her sister and daughter in law. Cutting up those fucking onions.

"What do you know about Newton, anyway, Wahaj? Of course gravity exists, you can barely float in the water!"

"I think we should take him to the Dead Sea, Mum."

The knife, along with my mother, whipped around violently with a shriek and a fall to the floor. Propelled upwards, she looked a ghostly vision before burying her face in her hands, shoulders shaking with sobs or surprise. I had never felt prouder. This had been the first time I was able to reduce my own mother to tears of happiness.

"You okay, beta?"

"Ji, mum. Just a headache."

"Eat some food, jaan."

"I've already eaten. I'm not too hungry."

.

"Mum…"

"Ji beta?"

"Why doesn't Uncle keep in touch with his white daughters? He's dying as we sit here looking at him. If they need a dad he should be a dad, right?"

"Well, beta, your uncle also has a son from a Bengali woman before this English lady. They had moved to Pakistan. What did he want his current wife to do? What did his daughters want from a father taking a new wife who was their age? You're all hardheads from your dad's side of the family. But he was the one at the end of the day who tried keeping the family together. It just took your dad getting terminal cancer for him to admit that. Now he's gone and we're left with oceans of unsaid words."

Nodded. Sometimes I just needed encouragement to remember dead men

fondly, away from violent stories and scandals. I had kept a part of my nine-year-old soul protected from the harsh realities of adult life, that we all do things we're not proud of. Mum tenderly touched my face that was covered by a luminous green to counteract the redness upon my cheek. A colour wheel of cover ups. A knowledge shared by wizards and makeup artists and renaissance painters. I smarted ever so slightly. We watched the baby rattle the cheap bangles around and I scooped her up as a candelabra narrowly missed colliding with her head. We were at a mendhi and the decorative bride was about to arrive. Before then, drumming, clapping, and a lot of bad singing. The off-beat rhythms reminded me of twilight conversations on the roof in Punjabi villages. A Christian, Muslim, and Sikh flag would flutter around us, shrinking in comparison to the rising kites and growing moon. In this family, time and space is mercury-like, a shape shifter. Smells and sounds interweave with memories and almost certain futures, so I wasn't entirely sure if I was in Frankfurt, Lahore, or London. I wondered briefly as I looked at my mother, her freckles covered by makeup green, blue, flesh, and then white, as if this was their magic. A subtle witchcraft. A distortion of time and space. I wondered if my severance from the family at times expelled me from these abilities, and other times I was certain my mother's fierce love is what draws me back each time.

I feel like a borderline rapist at weddings. I had felt this from a young age. Even though I didn't know the inner workings of harems, irrespective of violent cult classics consumed from seven, I felt as though the bride might as well be naked and taking bids. Which I suppose is counter intuitive to the wedding. But the stark contrast between keeping a woman hidden from the wandering eyes of boys and men and the proud display of a woman about to be fucked for the first time unsettled me as a child. It still does. Am I looking upon a woman who has signed her life away for some social convention? And what am I going to do when the convention inevitably falls upon me? I knew what to do. I left home a few years back.

After violent sex I'd observe myself in the mirror smoking whatever. I would wonder if when I turn 40, would I regret never marrying who my family said to marry? When I'm around them and at these weddings, those thoughts disappear miraculously. For a religion that boasts modesty, we do have a load of coded peep-shows that embody —

"OW!"

A small child pulled my hair. Filled with the light of my mother, I didn't mind. I let them play. The child looked up at me with big eyes through a mass of thin and curly hair and asked me,

"Are you the same aunty with the short hair? You look different. Like a princess now."

"I am the same aunty. I went to the beauty parlour today and she put something underneath my hair to make it look bigger. She also did my makeup. Do you like it? I don't. I look like a ghost. Am I scary? BOO!"

The child squealed with delight and ran off before falling over a glass table. The witchcraft is back because this is a regular occurrence and I have never seen any of the babies wounded. Constantly enthralled with the fluid motions of light reflected from tinsel and fake gold necklaces from within a stuffy living room, unable to step out for a smoke in a begrudging complacency. Alhumdulillah. *Bismillah*, a mother would say if their child wobbled precariously on a chair before swooping in to save them. An incantation or a protective spell floats among us as we occupy these different levels of being, of eating, of understanding why we're here. Mum and I had spent 3 hours earlier getting our hair and makeup done up to standards. I walked into the parlour to service my automated-body. I wanted to be well oiled, updated, and shiny for the pictures. I wanted to

be a trophy. I want to be locked away in a glass cage for everyone to look at where I don't need to do anything ever again and everyone can look but they can't touch and I don't care if they laugh at my naked body because it's my naked

> *"I'd like glitter on top of the gold please. Here's the foundation I use, for reference. Please don't make me white like a dulhan, I like to look a bit tanned, stay true to my skin tone."*
>
> *"Got it."*
>
> *"Also, add maroon-red to the brown. I'd like a nude lip with pink undertones and a contour. Blend the contour around my jawline properly because I know I look like I have a slim face but the triple-chin always shows through in pictures."*
>
> *"Theek hai, jawab."*
>
> *"Hair. Add some bumps and backcomb it so it's a beehive. I'm going for the classic Pakistani/drag look so mama's happy. I'm wearing this suit, see? She chose the fabrics and designed it herself. You see the gold isn't a bright one, it's muted and is leaning towards white. I want that in the inner corner of my eyes. Also, do you have mink lashes?"*

I had long since learned to talk in a no-nonsense manner with Pakistani beauticians. You need to say exactly what you want or they'll go on a creative journey which will leave you looking like eighty-year-old porcelain kept in your gran's basement. The far-removed beauty construction that is less opinion based, and more standard based. I always thought the men were queer because they chased after women who looked like queens. They could all tell there's something different about me. But I can't help

flirting, even with men, which elicits a glimmer of hope in countless eyes. I had over two-hundred pins in my hair, eyelashes that boasted three inches, staggering heels, and earrings that weighed my head down a pound on each side. I would jokingly complain about the pressures of being a woman to the younger children because I could get away with it. If I had made jokes about gender to the elders, I would have been hit for acting up. The bride had entered at this point, and the room fell silent to watch her. Like eager perverts undressing her with their eyes and moral convention.

> "I think I was too harsh on you. All the girls are wearing tops that are above the knee and short coats. Everyone's more relaxed these days. I was harsh, forcing you to wear the headscarf and burqa after your father died."

Her trailing duppata caught onto her stiletto, hindering the pilgrimage to the garish purple and pink stage, adorned with summer flowers orange and yellow. They were fake. The flowers are the only thing I like about weddings, so I was affronted to smell plastic. Her lips pulled back in a semi-grimace, semi-smirk. I could see the foundation collecting upon each of her pores, causing her skin to look bumpy. The beautician should have used a smoothing primer after exfoliating. Even if it's not a facial, you want your work to look good. It never does. The slightly older girls were throwing real rose petals over her head as she walked, flanked by two old ladies, with a stoic energy, as though she was walking to her death. She seemed happy enough. We all do. I looked at the girls and wondered what they could be if their biological clock wasn't defined by age old traditions that we can't even make sense of anymore. I wondered what truths we were running from. What horrible reality would come from letting these women unbind themselves and be able to run full pelt. I stared at the bride, and she looked at me. I did not smile.

"Mum, don't, it's fine."

What was I doing? Didn't I want this acknowledgement that will ease the passage for accountability? Damn my diplomacy. I can't bear to see someone apologise for the trauma they've caused me. In my eyes, it makes them as pathetic as I see myself. I didn't want my mother snivelling. She needed to be the high priestess who stalks her children's dreams like a jaguar, a beacon of hope and resoluteness. God damn, this apology that's coming is going to make me feel sick. I wanted to run away from this sudden reveal of broken childhood. Of sexualising my eleven-year-old body. I didn't want to hear the times I wasn't able to stay in my house alone due to builders working in the garden. I didn't want this to erupt into a fountain that poured forth these fucking truths that

FUCK YOU. FUCK YOU AND YOUR FUCKING MODESTY. FUCK YOU FOR NOT TEACHING ME THAT I CAN SAY NO TO MEN. FUCK YOU ALL FOR TEACHING ME THAT WHATEVER A MAN WANTS HE GETS. I'VE BEEN RAPED BY THREE MEN BY THE AGE OF TWENTY-TWO AND I COULDN'T EVEN TELL YOU ABOUT THE ABORTION I HAD INSTEAD I PRETENDED I WAS AT COLLEGE FOR THE WHOLE DAY AND I WAS EXPERIENCING SOME MILD CRAMPS I JUST NEEDED TO BE ALONE BECAUSE I KNEW IN YEARS TO COME THIS WOULD REPEAT AND I'D BE A BROKEN MESS THINKING IF I JUST STAYED UNDER THE VEIL I'D BE

"Laiken, it's the truth."

"I suppose. But it's okay. Not too much damage. I suppose you don't know how I feel about most things."

She nodded enthusiastically. The crutch that all lovers use. We just don't

know what you're thinking, babe, how do we reach you? No cunt reaches me. I willed the water to become gin or vodka, and wanted to hug myself for behaving like a child.

"You kept running away."

You kept locking me in.

The dance begins. A wonderful thing, a marvel in the diaspora. The audience are passive. Half of them, the main event, are in the other room with the groom waiting to join us for an hour of painfully awkward photos. The trick is to toe the line between friend and family. Keep complimenting her on her parenting, usher away any notion of apology. For I, your daughter, cannot demand this. It must be given.

"I'm in therapy, you know."

I paused to look at her to gauge her reaction. She nodded; I was allowed to continue. I was surprised my heart wasn't beating faster. I remember when she flushed my anti-psychotics down the toilet after I had a miscarriage and called the ambulance to section me. But right now, I'm observing my body with a cool steeliness, like I observe most things. I've had my tears about the abortions, the rapes, the miscarriages, the fucking stupidity of a bright young girl who trusts anything that's beyond the veil.

"I think it's interesting that none of you can believe I love you, let alone think about you. And here I am, every week for one hour, just trying to make sense of it all."

"But what does family have to do with your sickness?"

Down with the sickness. Here we go. I feel like I can apply pressure to the breaks on this one.

"I was very confused when dad died. Everything was changing. Family, my body, we moved."

"But we all loved you the best we could after your father passed."

I guess I toed the line towards friend a bit too eagerly.

"Sure. I mean then my brother left which set off more abandonment stuff."

You can't tell her about the other stuff. You can't. She said she'll split your legs in half with a knife when she caught you with that woman. Remember when she said she'd slice you down the middle and throw one half of your carcass on the street as a degrading spectacle and the other to hell? When you wore that tank top and she ripped it off your body and locked you out of the house for three hours one cold October night? Just play along.

"I guess I just have stuff to figure out. It's confusing as a nine-year-old. Trust me on that."

She nodded. We stared at each other for a while before we were both shaken by a cousin of mine wanting to take photos before we ate greasy tikka. I felt desperate. I wanted to fall into the arms of my partner overseas even though I was desperate to run away and so close to suffocating the romance for good. I wanted to smell her hair and taste her breasts before we got lost for a few hours, resurfacing to fix each other a drink or a spliff, dancing to slow jams. I wanted to be back in south-east London where I could sit and stare at the trees for an hour uninterrupted unless someone asked for change which I would normally give them. I wanted her to kiss my neck and open me up, I wanted to just run —

A crash. We whipped our heads around and saw glass on the floor. Our instincts can tell us within a second if this was violent or a mistake. It was the former. I whispered to my sister in law, what's going on? She said uncle doesn't approve of the bride and groom sitting together before the papers are signed. It's ungodly. I couldn't help but smirk at the theatrics. Any way to make the wedding about us, and righteously so. It's what I'm doing, isn't it? The man hurriedly collected his wife and children and made a hasty exit. Well, he waited for his wife to get all three small children ready as he stood at the doorway with a stony face. I giggled.

"So who are you going to Berlin with?"

My face was coated in steam from the chicken and rice. Children had eased into their games and women were talking about their friends. A few men had snuck out for a cigarette and I longed to join them. I had lived outside of this gender binary for so long, evading its grasp and I felt like a mug for becoming subservient again. Inside was cramped, it was getting hot. I felt restricted. I could feel a wild personality creeping up my spine which I berated quietly and carried on.

"Myself. I've always wanted to check it out. Seems pretty artsy."
I'm travelling alone to defy the law of God which pressures the hyper-surveillance of women, actually.

"And what will you be doing?"
I know you're going to do unspeakable, ungodly things.

"Checking out the Berlin Wall and some museums."
Recording sex tapes and taking acid to open a ceremony of divine feminine lust and using psychedelics to process trauma and free our minds, man.

My mother ushered me over where she was speaking to a woman. Mandatory salaam. She worked me over with a look and asked what I do. Makeup, teach. I write sometimes. Just graduated with a masters. Her voice was such a murmur and her pronunciation was lazy, but I got the gist. *Sort her out. You need to send her to another family while you still can*. I laughed it off with a few jokes before sitting back down and ignoring it all.

Sambaalo: Pack it up. Put it away. Look after it. A thing you would do with delicate china or a sentimental ornament.

I tried not to pay attention. But it grabbed me. I could see my mother and uncle talking in low, serious voices in the hallway. She kept glancing back at me with a worried look on her face. I recognise this widower's expression. She was calculating how to defend our honour whilst allowing me to live. But there's not too much she can control without a husband so brothers and uncles have their fair say. She shook her head at me slightly as I got up to join them, which I ignored. I was going to Berlin as an act of defiance, in their fucking faces. A big girl now, not the little child who cried when her uncle shouted at her. A huge gulp of hot milk gushing down this seven-year-old chest, flowing forth from a mouth agape in pained despair, mixed in with salty tears. The chest heaving in retches, leading to a silence lasting just over a decade.

Funny how we remember the feeling of the consequence, but for the life of me I still cannot remember what I did wrong. I remember the beastly face of a big man looming over me with a rage in his eyes I have since locked away in nightmares. Funny, how we bury the cause of the trigger deep into our psyches to be gently coaxed out by degree-bearing psychiatrists. Funny that, the feeling of pain is psychologically whisked around our minds and renders it inevitable. The inevitability, or perverse lust for the collision of a hand incoming five minutes from now, the backs of white-hot knuckles rearranging the face my father had given me during my time in Berlin.

Hell, perhaps I was a bad girl.

I began resenting the small child and all the fantastical, tender magic surrounding her in a bubble of protection. I then began to recall associating that bubble with a prison. To pop, break, shatter, ruin. After years of dedicated catastrophe, I had broken out. Pressing my hands within the cracks and scooping the shards out with my first two fingers on each hand.

Perhaps I was a really bad girl.

On the bus to Berlin from Frankfurt, a smile coyly plays around my mouth to complement the dull ache of my jaw that my uncle's fist collided with two hours ago. If ever there was a good reason to smirk in the face of a monster and perform a graceful stroll to the suitcase to deftly close the door behind me, it's after a public assault. I relished in it. I have to smirk to stop myself from sobbing.

The Spoon Garden

Ruby Eastwood

1. Castle in the air

The picture is probably all that survives of the place now, and it's a shame it's so grainy. Taken in the last of the light, the city skyline in the background is tinged with orange, but the block itself, with its unlit windows, is shaded by the more sombre colours of twilight. The bell tower of a Romanesque church appears above the building, looking like a part of its design; whether intentionally or not, the angle at which the picture was taken has transformed the rooftop block into a strange, derelict castle, with monstrous black wires and TV antennae growing from its sides. In the eerie, crepuscular half-light of the photo, this illusion, which turns my father's crumbling attic into a fairytale palace, lingers somewhere between tragedy and comedy.

In Spanish, the name for the place where my father lived is *palomar,* an untranslatable word which literally means that it is fit for pigeons to live in. Through the long summer months, all the windows were left open, and I hung from the ceiling objects that would chime or rustle in the cross-breeze, thinking to make the place into a giant wind accordion. During the winter, the windows were shut but the wooden door would swell under the sea fog so it wouldn't shut, and the whole frame of the place seemed to expand and shrink like a breathing thing. To us it was not a place to live in but a place that lived with us, like the exoskeleton of an insect. I knew where the walls peeled, and the white cracked to show the layers of pastel pink and pea-green that through the years had been covered over with new paint. Hours of boredom had taught me to trace constellations across those walls; the cracks were rivers on an unsure map, and the stains like

continents I couldn't name, or else faces speaking to each other across the room in a language I didn't understand. I knew which floorboards creaked, and which could keep a secret, and I think that if I shut my eyes, I might still remember the choreography that took me out onto the roof in silence.

2. Aliens

The terracotta tiles of the rooftop were warm in the daytime. Men and women in varying states of intoxication floated in and out amidst the chimes of the clock tower and the strumming of the old guitar. But at night, the roof became a haunted place, and this is when the spoon garden, risible by day, really came into its own. The spoon garden began as a kind of cemetery; each spoon marking the spot where another plant had finally surrendered to my father's neglect. As the scores of dead increased, the spoons took on a ghostly aspect, gleaming in the dark, and the whole place looked like the playground of a mad scientist. Half-finished Frankenstein bicycles, assembled from abandoned parts, were scattered around, and a deconstructed washing machine in the corner was being turned into a space pod. Even the city at night was a wired, whirring spectacle, flashing like a broken circuit board. I don't remember how it was first impressed on my child's brain that this rooftop, due to the abundance of reflective objects, would be an ideal place to commune with extra-terrestrial life, but the idea captured me. I only remember the frustration of feeling that if I could somehow grasp the elusive connection, beyond mere sound, that drew *moon* and *spoon* together, then the link might bring me closer to the beings who seemed so impossibly far. Perhaps their world was like ours but slightly different, a little distorted, just as when we see our reflection in a spoon it is still ourselves, but upside down and strangely magnified. Years later, when I heard NASA's recordings of radio emissions in space converted to sound waves, I couldn't help thinking that a similar sound might be produced by knocking spoons against each other.

3. Devil Spawn

I never got a response from the aliens, so I suppose in time I gave up waiting and turned my mind to healthier concerns (tree climbing, Hannah Montana, being mean to boys). My father never outgrew his taste for aliens, perhaps not until his Space Age Party killed all innocent enjoyment of the subject for good. M&Ms were organised by colour and evenly arranged on the surface of the dinner table (a task allocated to me and my friend who was staying for a sleepover that night). We were also told to colour match the brightest drinks and arrange them accordingly. As soon as the first guests arrived it became obvious that such laborious preparations had been unnecessary. Bellarmino the Ice Cream Man was already, in my father's words, "high as a kite", and his entourage were similarly disposed to have a good time regardless of the entertainment offered. A video of that night was put on YouTube and quickly removed (to my father's infinite amusement) after an anonymous complaint of obscenity. All I remember was sagging, naked men licking whipped cream off each other, and making 'space-inspired' tinfoil thongs and headdresses. Knut, who had always struck me as a very sober man, was strangely deformed by cling film and sellotape, and sat on the floor pouring a bottle of wine over his head. My little friend was inconsolable in the corner.

Me and my friend had painfully little in common, even back then, except that her flat was shouting distance from my father's. She was always unusually melancholic, and had slanted, feline eyes, which my mother said, with crushing accuracy, made her look like devil spawn. They were remarkable because they were so incongruous with the cherubic face in which they were set, with pink cheeks and golden ringlets. The Space Age Party affected her, as most things did, in some more sinister way than I could understand, and seemed to draw her nearer to me, as though she identified in me that night a protector. Perhaps it is only in retrospect that I see it that way, as I find it impossible to disentangle the ruddy child from the frail, pallid teenager she became, when she would get nosebleeds constantly from all the cocaine.

4. Ghosts

The dark, narrow street that leads to my father's house was named after Eulalia, the patron saint of the city, because during her martyrdom she was put in a wine barrel studded with sharpened oyster shells and rolled down that street. The street was probably chosen because it was at a slow incline, but not steep enough to cause instant death (and they wanted her to survive, so that they could cut off her barely formed breasts). When looking through a book a while ago, I came across Prudentius's account of the self-narrated death of Saint Eulalia: *Look, Lord, your name is being written on me. How delightful it is to read these letters, for they mark your victories, O Christ! The purple blood itself that is drawn speaks your holy name.* My father used to quote from the Bible and one of his favourites was: *The word became flesh.* But at Eulalia's death, the flesh became word, and her young body was transformed into a page on which the terrible love of her God could be read, just as it is said that when the Romans cut off her head, a white dove flew from the broken bone at her neck.

5. The Underworld

Beneath the cramped garrett was an even smaller system of tunnels and rooms, their blueprint unknowable and out of accordance with the confines of the rooms above. Only I understood the dreamlike logic of its interlocking chambers, and the low beams of the ceiling that kept out adults. This was the dark side of my father's minimalist life: dusty and dark, cluttered with bits of broken machines and curious relics from the streets, a labyrinth to hide the monster Chaos.

Sometimes bits of the mess would creep upstairs (they came in through the floorboards or got out at night when nobody was watching) and over the years a circus of old toys had gathered in the house. There was a big blue eye, held by a curling wire to the top of a wine bottle, which watched over us, and a sad little Superman, whose once triumphant fist had broken off at the joint, and dangled limply. There were a few vinyls:

Serge Gainsbourg, The Doors, Aretha Franklin and Leonard Cohen, but no record player. A desiccated lizard hung on the wall above the dinner table along with a dried up rose and a sepia photograph of the young Juan Carlos I (my father became inexplicably dewy-eyed when he spoke of the King of Spain). By the bed, the wrinkled face of a marionette was stuffed into the body of an old piggy bank to horrific effect. My least favourite was the burlesque performer doll, with her freakishly thin waist, holding up her red dress to expose her fishnets and garters. This collection expressed a macabre sense of humour and a mind that delighted in whimsy but was helplessly drawn to darkness.

This disposition was the organising power behind the bookshelf (and certainly the only organising power in the place). He had Hemingway and Nabokov, Shakespeare and Cervantes, but the serious literature was stored in the less accessible corners, while the pride of place was taken up by Edward Lear's *Limericks*, *Peter Pan*, *The Jungle Book*, Ogden Nash, *Alice in Wonderland, Le Petit Prince*, Roald Dahl… My father used to quote to me from the children's books he loved; never, it seemed, for my enjoyment, but for his own. He wrote his own children's book called *Gorble the Grook*, complete with frightening illustrations, about a lonely man who lived in a high up tree house and drank too much beer (unsurprising that when scientists trained a monkey to draw, the first thing it drew was the bars of its own cage).

Perhaps it was the children's literature which had contaminated my father's mind with notions of heroism. His was a heroism of the wrong kind, a venomous mixture of the Spanish matador, the Renaissance explorer and the medieval knight. During the summers he would disappear to live out his Cavalier fantasies, and returned every time bent a little more out of shape, but with an unvanquished ego. Once he left to go sailing and wasn't heard of for many months until he showed up at my school gates in late autumn, with a big Russian coat, a gruff voice and three cracked ribs. I was pleased to see him, but my mother was furious,

and his girlfriend, unwilling to assume the role of faithful Penelope, had found herself someone else. "What sort of victory procession is this for a long-lost hero?" wheezed my father.

He was a demi-god in his youth, he used to say (only half joking) and now, alone in his crumbling shepherd's hut on the mountain, drinking litres of red wine and looking up at the wind turbines, he fancies he is Don Quixote. He is Prometheus, too, though he doesn't know it; pecking away at his liver every day only for it to heal in his sleep. There is no water, or wine, on the hill, and when he goes down into the village and returns up the steep slope, buckling under the weight of bottles, he is also Sisyphus.

But it is absurd to compare my father to these tragic heroes; tragedy, as Aristotle conceives of it, is complete, brief, and grand. A spotlight on a dark stage, a milk-white mask contorted in a howl of pain, and a single action which turns a great king, in a blinding flash, into a beggar. Death is horrifying but clean and is dealt with somewhere offstage. Next to the eloquence of this vision, my father's slow decay, the gradual glazing of his eyes and his ever more incoherent rantings, can only be described as a comedy.

5.5. Dinner Time

He went out one night to buy garlic and wasn't seen again for three days.

6. Idols

In 2010, bullfighting was banned in Barcelona, and the large arena was turned into a shopping centre. I was never taken to see the gory show as a kid, though many of my friends had been, and carried the experience with them as a badge of their superior maturity. The closest I got was watching a black and white reel of a bullfight, and then I was too old to take it seriously. The matador, in sparkling tight trousers, dances around the bull with a curious combination of macho pride and perfect camp, like an Elvis tribute act gone wrong.

It strikes me now that it is in fact Elvis who was imitating them, almost

as an act of protest. Towards the end of his career, he took more and more to wearing their typical bejewelled jumpsuits and velvet capes. As his performances got increasingly out of control, and the various drugs bloated his body beyond recognition, his costumes seemed to assert that this dangerous dance with death was a part of the performance. In this footage, he breaks down in front of his audience, cackling like a lunatic or panting uncontrollably. Yet the audience never stopped coming; the demand for tickets kept going up. The matador persona Elvis created reflected the audience's cruelty back onto them: his outfits acknowledged that they were no longer there for the music, but to marvel at the spectacular implosion of a man. The glitter and gold assert the message that Jim Morrison shouted angrily in an overpacked auditorium in Miami: *Love me. I can't take it no more without no good love. I want some lovin'. Ain't nobody gonna love my ass?* Jim worshipped Elvis and imitated him in everything, down to the weight gain and erratic performance style. But Jim beat Elvis to the punch: he died six years earlier than his master. Both died in the bathroom and both were found by their girlfriends.

"If these men wish to destroy themselves they can go right ahead," my mother says, "I just don't see why I always have to pick up the pieces."

7. Mistakes

Looking up at Christopher Columbus's imposing silhouette one day, my mother noticed something: "He's pointing the wrong way. America is in the opposite direction." Indeed, the statue seemed to be pointing towards the wrong place. Perhaps the architects, like Columbus himself, had simply confused the points of the compass, and realised their mistake only when it was too late. Or maybe the bronze finger pointed not in the direction of the New World, but towards India, where Columbus had originally intended to go. Whatever the reason, this new knowledge ironised the statue to me; it took away all seriousness for good. The rigid pole which asserted the might of the man who stood upon it (guarded

by lions and adorned by marble angels) was now undermined by a shade of doubt, and the grandeur of the whole monument collapsed. The world around him has been irrevocably changed by his simple error, yet there Columbus stands with his eyes cast somewhere above the wrong sea, still dreaming of India.

During the night of San Juan, they would light up the monument and shoot fireworks from that square; my family would climb out the window to the uppermost part of the rooftop to watch. Columbus's last words were in Latin (as reported by his family, in whose interest it was for them to be as respectable as possible): *In manos tuas, Domine, commendo spiritum meum.* Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit. The crowds of tourists gathered below to watch the colourful lights shoot up into the dark sky, and the sound of drunken brawls drifted up like smoke between the explosions, which I called "fire mistakes". The drama of sight and sound made the whole sky tremble, and over the years I took to fashioning fire mistakes of my own. Once, with some lighter fluid I found, I set a dozen cockroaches on fire, and watched from above as they circled in frenzy, their fiery paths burning traces into my retina as they danced about the rooftop in the dark, and then were suddenly still.

This was perhaps my most extreme action in the Cockroach Wars, which raged for years and which, in spite of small victories like this, I must admit I ultimately lost. They never struck out against my little displays of cruelty but lead a silent resistance over the years, refusing to be intimidated or extinguished. These beings, I later learnt, could survive nuclear radiation, electricity and decapitation (until, having no mouths, they starve); they could fly, and crawl up vertical surfaces, and swim underwater for up to 40 minutes. Even equipped with gasoline, I was an inadequate adversary.

They invaded the kitchen, making their beds in the warm crevices behind the fridge. My mother would suggest cleaning the stacks of dirty dishes piled in the stagnant water of the sink, but my father always put it off for tomorrow (just as he would fix that broken guitar tomorrow).

Cantamañanas: another untranslatable word. Literally, it means he who sings of tomorrows, and is used to mean irresponsible, untrustworthy, or delusional. The only place that was safe from the cockroaches was the packets of vervain tea. It pleased me that in the fantasy books I read, vervain was used to ward off vampires. Much later, I discovered the plant is used as a treatment against depression.

8. The Watermelon

"When your mama was a punk," he says, "she always wore Doc Martens, and she was wearing them on the night we met. She found a watermelon on the pavement outside the bar and smashed it to a pulp with her big boots."

"You were besotted," says mama.

"Quite the contrary," he replies, "I remember thinking she was bad news and I must stay away-"

"I remember it well… some time in September- or was it Spring? And the moon was full."

"Damn that melon…"

9. The birds

Anyone who has ever seen a seagull kill another animal has witnessed one of nature's most powerful performances. The first time I saw it, the victim was a pigeon. Tough talons grip the fluttering bird, heave it into the air and drop it. The motion is repeated until the bones are all crushed. The seagull thrusts its curved beak into the ridge where the ribs meet, and tears out the heart, then flies away, without eating a morsel.

One summer we had a duckling on the roof, which we gave silly names and fed lettuce. From one day to the next, it was gone, and my father was reluctant to say where it went. I suppose he had to clear up the mangled remains before I arrived.

Recently, he surprised my mother by telling her a story she had never heard before about the aviary at home which he was entrusted to look

after. He drove off for the summer in his father's Cadillac, promising to get a license on the way, which he never did (the driver's license cost twenty times more than the fine for driving without one). When he returned the birds had got so hungry that they had eaten each other. "I thought I knew all your anecdotes," my mother said with tears in her eyes. Beyond its Hitchcockian quality, something about that story touched her in some unknowable way and softened her towards him forever.

10. *The absurd does not liberate, it binds.* - Albert Camus.

My mother remembers a different moment of pathos which confirmed to her that my father never acted out of malice, simply incompetence. She was leaning over the balcony, and saw him below, struggling out of our front door with an old toilet bowl he was taking down to the bins. He stumbled, and the white toilet bowl shattered into pieces on the floor. She says he stood above it for a while looking stooped like an old man, and then walked away. I remember it too, though I came later. I remember giggling at the scene: a broken toilet in the middle of the street and my father, walking beneath the lampposts, appearing and disappearing as he passed in and out of their pools of light. "He's so conscientious," she lamented, "it really isn't like him to just leave it there. I guess I should go down and clear it up."

11. Melancholia

When I think of the place on the rooftop, I return to the image of a diaphanous, white sheet hanging from the clothesline, and the memory of chasing its cooling shade as the sun drew its slow arc across the sky. Even now, barely four years away from the last of such idle summers, that way of life seems antiquated and fragile. I am almost surprised that the sound of drilling and destruction all over the city had never struck me then as a warning of the bulldozer which would eventually erase the place. I haven't been there since, but I'm told the building is now quite a nice hotel, with a swimming pool on the roof.

Throughout the months of legal struggle, my father's neighbours were displaced one by one, and the only light left on in the building was the little lighthouse of the *palomar.* Towards the end, when my father's grip on his home was slipping, and he would grope up the stairway in pitch blackness, past the bricked up doorways of his neighbours, the electricity and water shut off, it was unsure where he would go. More and more of his days would pass on park benches, and it seemed like the natural process of entropy would place him there permanently. My mother suggested the hut on the mountain, which though isolated and uninhabitable, was a more bearable prospect. When it was clear that the battle was over, she took him there on the train and left him on the mountain with a packed lunch. "Even as a toddler you were never such hard work," she told me. He has written to me a few times and sometimes the skeleton of a leaf or a sprig of rosemary makes it in with the letter. *Up here there are two options* he wrote, *to go insane or to at last become sane*. Though I don't think the latter is likely, it reassures me to think of him there, where time acts upon you in a different way, as if you are moving not through air but honey. I picture him sitting on my old swing, hearing the wind rush through the olive trees, or watching the eagle, with its majestic wingspan, glide across the sky over the craggy tops of mountains. In his letters, he meticulously documents the litres of rainwater that have gathered in the cistern, and I like to think of him in his solitude, counting each raindrop like a bead on a rosary. *It is so peaceful*, he writes, but really I know that it is a complaint; that he would give anything for the feel of concrete under his shoes, for the neon flash of bar-signs reflecting off windows, for the smell of sewage and cigarette smoke and the sound of laughter.

Until my mother dragged him by the hand and forced him up the mountain, he stubbornly refused to think of the future, as he had always done, surrendering himself to the clutch of luck. Instead of making plans, he accepted defeat, and drank himself into increasingly dire states. It was about this time that his obsession with the song Ziggy Stardust appeared.

He would play it over and over on his old guitar, slurring the words and stripping them of all their rock n' roll. *He took it all too far but boy could he play guitar…* My mother's theory about why he would generally break down in tears just before that line was that he, like Ziggy, had taken it all too far, but unlike Ziggy, my father couldn't really play guitar. What he felt was not sadness, he said, nor depression, but *melancholia*, a feeling infinitely more poetic. He said the feeling was black tar and treacle in his lungs and heart and soul, sickly bitter-sweet, sticky and dirty like guilt.

12. ***Melancholy****,* n. Via late Latin from the Greek melankholia, from melas, melan- 'black' + kholē 'bile', an excess of which was formerly believed to cause depression.

13. Generations

There was a zoo in the park where my school was, and sometimes peacocks wandered into the playground. One day someone pointed out of the classroom window: "Mira, joder! Cuantos loros!" The netting of the parrots' cage in the zoo had broken, and all the birds were flying into the air. We cheered for them, and after school we ran to the park to admire them up close. Their feathers were a wild, iridescent green and each had a plastic tag around their ankle with a number engraved. Over the years, I have seen more and more parrots without a tag, and now there are none left that carry with them the emblem of captivity.

This is a story about friendship

Nicky Watkinson

This is a story about friendship.
Which is to say, this is a story about how we destroy one another.

Clarification: this is not so much a story as an *attempt* to tell a story.
Before you can tell a story, you must know the story.
This is an attempt to uncover the story, and then tell it.

Story (n.1)
Connected account or narration of some happening, c. 1200, originally *narrative of important events or celebrated persons of the past*, from Old French estorie, *estoire story, chronicle, history*, from Late Latin storia, shortened from Latin historia *history, account, tale, story* (see history).

History (n.)
Late 14c., *relation of incidents* (true or false), from Old French estoire, estorie *story; chronicle, history* (12c., Modern French histoire), from Latin historia *narrative of past events, account, tale, story*, from Greek historia *a learning or knowing by inquiry; an account of one's inquiries, history, record, narrative*, from historein *inquire*, from histōr *wise man, judge*, from PIE *wid-tor-, from root *weid- *to see*.

Story, from *history*. Trace it back – see how history, too, is a story. An account, a narrative. Not definitive.

See how history is an enquiry. This book, too, is an enquiry: into friendship,

into the past, into form.

This book is an account of the enquiries I make of myself, trying to discover the story.

The story is pressing down on my insides, curled under my ribcage, trying to work its way even deeper. I try to feel its contours. I try to find something to grasp, to hold onto so I can pull it out. It wraps itself around bone and sinew, parts of me I didn't know existed.

I write to try and see it.

Sometimes I worry that there is nothing to see, only empty space, only a gap: between then and now, between you and I.

A story is a *connected account*. It should not have gaps.

Stories can be episodic; they can have gaps in order to heighten dramatic tension, or for other narrative effect. But the gaps must be fillable. I worry that our story's gaps are not fillable.

But then, history is full of gaps. The archive is full of gaps. Storytelling is an attempt to cross over those gaps. Only fiction has no gaps, and this is not fiction. This is a true story, a true history.

The story is full of gaps. I write not to fill the gaps, but to explore them – to feel their depth, their walls. I write to get a sense of the story's outline, to trace the contours of the gaps.

I tell a version of the story, an approximation, something which fits the mould – what if this is all there is? Only echo, never sound.

I am interested in echoes, especially as metaphor: the expression *to ring true* is to do with echoes, right, it's about something which makes the *right* echo when it is sounded, at least I think so. The sound is pure, uncorrupted, authentic. It makes me think of throwing something into a well – the something strikes the bottom, clear as a bell.

The story of Echo, of course, is a metaphor. Myths are metaphors – they are a way of talking *around* the subject. The story of Echo is simple: she was an Oread, a mountain nymph, who consorted with Zeus, and when Hera found out she cursed Echo to only be able to speak by repeating the last words spoken to her. The mingling of this myth with the myth of Narcissus, the beautiful boy who rejected the love of others and became consumed by self-desire, seems to be Ovid's own invention, but the stories go well together: Echo cannot communicate her love for Narcissus because she can only speak his words back to him; she wastes away, losing corporeal form and becoming only sound. Meanwhile, Narcissus falls in love with his own image and he, too, wastes away, becoming only image: the gold and white flower which bears his name.

(And in this way, two separate stories become one story – the story of Echo, the story of Narcissus, become the story of Echo and Narcissus. What was once a story with a beginning, middle, and end, is now another story with a different beginning, middle, and end. In this way, stories change, they absorb other stories, they never end. They carry the echos of all the other stories with them through time.)

But when we tell the story, we are not talking about Echo and Narcissus, real people, we are not talking about real events that happened. We are talking in metaphors – we are talking about jealousy and vanity and love as destructive force and gender dynamics, probably, because this is Ovid, after all.

When I tell our story, I am less interested in talking about what literally happened than I am in talking about what it *means*. It happened years ago, it is over, in the sense that we no longer speak and our relationship, in the most fundamental sense, is over. And yet, it echoes. It reverberates. It remains inside me, in my nerves, in the way my fingers shake for no reason sometimes.

The reason is you.

It is the echo of a movement long since completed.

My story and your story have become part of the same story, and for as long as I carry the echoes of that story with me in my story, our story will not end.

I write to preserve the echo.

I write an account of these things that happened to me. I write to clarify, not to obscure, although I worry about my success in the matter.

I worry that instead of excavating the gaps I am writing over them, erasing what is underneath like overwriting a computer disc or a saved game.

I do not want to erase the story – I do not want to forget, although the only thing I want is to forget. I do not like forgetting things which have happened, although I wish none of this had happened.

I worry that writing will obscure what happened. I worry that it will not exorcise the story but ossify it – trap it inside my lungs for the rest of time, bound there by layers of words. I worry that writing over the story will make remembering harder, not easier. I try to treat writing as an act of memory, of memorialising.

Memoir (n.)
Early 15c., *written record*, from Anglo-French memorie *note, memorandum, something written to be kept in mind* (early 15c., Old French memoire), from Latin memoria (from PIE root *(s)mer- (1) *to remember*). The more specific sense of *a notice or essay relating to something within the writer's own memory or knowledge* is from 17c. Meaning *person's written account of his or her life* is from 1670s. Related: Memoirist.

I write to try to unfasten the story's grip on my ribs. I write to remember. I write to set the record straight.

The record is nonexistent, at least in the public sphere. The record consists of a digital archive, of texts and WhatsApps and Facebook messages and photos, very few of which are actual printed, tangible things. And a few other material objects – cards, a cushion, a mix CD.

I write to bring the intangible things into being, to define what is, at the moment, undefined. I write to make legible what is at present without language.

Our story, my story, is beyond and outside language. Are all stories? Perhaps.

This is a story about friendship, which is to say, this is a story about grief and longing and betrayal and failure. It is not the story *of* a friendship.

This is a work of nonfiction. This is a work of theory. This is a work of autobiography. This is a work of cultural criticism. This is a work of memory. This is a work of therapy. This is a work of collage.

This, which you hold in your hands, or which you read from a screen, or hear spoken aloud, this is an attempt to theorise friendship, in general, and our

friendship, in particular. It is an experiment. It is a work in progress, a draft.

It is true, in the sense that everything I write here literally happened, or in the sense that it rings true. It is a work of history, in the most elemental sense of *historia*: it is a list of questions.

But first, here is a story.

We meet at university. We like the same music and books. We are the same age, give or take six months. We are both blonde; one of us feels insecure about her fringe, but the other of us also has a fringe, which is reassuring. We learn about *Paradise Lost* and *The Waste Land* and *Disgrace* together. (All of this is true.) One of us dyes their hair blue one day, then cuts it short. The other one cuts hers shortly after (she will dye it, eventually, too).

Time passes. We make other friends. We are a crew. We have a group chat and favourite coffee shops and a spot in the common room. We – the two of us, the original we – become even closer. We plan our future tattoos together. We move in together. We read each other's essays and hold hands in public and watch movies in bed together.

(One of us has a boyfriend, by the way. This is not that kind of love story.) But, throughout this, hairline fractures. Beneath and behind the façade, we are struggling. Things begin to fall down the cracks, are lost, cannot be recovered. We make plans despite this, road trips and Taylor Swift concerts and more tattoos, perhaps in the hope that the more stuff we add to the relationship, the more we can lose and still keep each other. We have big fights and small tearful conversations, but the cracks continue to appear faster than we can fix them.

Roughly four years after we met, the fracture between us is now over two

hundred miles wide. We are no longer in conversation – we are talking, but not listening, to one another. We decide, in the end, that we are no longer a *we* at all.

I stop talking to you.
I block you / you block me.
I avoid you.
I go to the Taylor Swift concert.
I move on with my life.

I stop talking to you.
You block me / I block you.
You ignore me.
I go to the Taylor Swift concert.
I move on with my life.

The end.

End (n.)

Old English ende *end, conclusion, boundary, district, species, class*, from Proto-Germanic *andiaz (source also of Old Frisian enda, Old Dutch ende, Dutch einde, Old Norse endir *end*; Old High German enti *top, forehead, end,* German Ende, Gothic andeis *end*), originally *the opposite side*, from PIE *antjo *end, boundary*, from root *ant- *front, forehead,* with derivatives meaning: *in front of, before.*

End (v.)

Old English endian *to end, finish, abolish, destroy; come to an end, die,* from the source of end (n.). Related: Ended; ending.

What does it mean for a story to end?

Does this story end when their friendship ends? (When is that?)

When they stop talking? (When is that?)

When they agree to no longer be *best friends*? When the last message is sent, when there are no more replies? When will that be?

(For as long as both of them are alive, the story does not end. They both carry its echoes.)

Does it end before then, when the friendship – unbeknownst to either of them – passed into irrecoverability? (When was that?)

We have not spoken for over a year, but it does not feel like the story has ended.

I write to try to make it end, to give it a conclusion. To capture the echo and fix it in place, like a pinned butterfly, like a taxidermy animal, like something tender and weak which has been captured and stunted because the only way to preserve the ephemeral is to destroy what is ephemeral about it.

Before I start writing, I read. I read fiction and memoir and poetry, I read about scammers and abusers and friends who steal from one another and I read about self-harm and disordered eating and suicide and substance abuse, and I read about queer family-making and recovery and friends who save your life.

In these books, I find echoes of our story, but I cannot find our story.

When you google "famous books about friends", what comes up are not books about the difficulties of friendship, its intricacies and obstacles. What comes up are: *my 8 favourite books about female friendship*, and *9 novels that celebrate the joy of friendship*, and *12 books you should read with your best friend*.

Although there are many books which feature friends and friendship, there are fewer books about friendship in the way I want to read about it. I want to read about friendships which are damaging and devastating, friendships which haunt you forever – not friends who are psychopaths or undercover spies or sleeping with your spouse, but friends who are trying

their best to love you, and failing; friends whom you fail to love.

5 books about friendship I wish someone would write:

1. Miss Codependent: A Survival Guide To Queer Platonic Relationships
2. Texts from My Suicidal Friend (an illustrated coffee table book)
3. The 7 Habits of Highly Manipulative People
4. Jealousy: A Mindfulness Colouring Book
5. The Power of Boundaries (with activity sheets)

I have read a lot about friendship, relationships, personality disorders, attachment styles, but nothing has been right – they are all either too critical or too generous, too definitive or too vague. Much like us, I suppose – both critical and generous, kind and cruel at once. Never one or other, always both, always escaping definition.

What I want is to understand how and why we do bad things to one another. I want someone to tell me how to deal with a friend in need without vilifying them as inherently evil *(a wolf in sheep's clothing)* or elevating them to martyrdom, like their pain is more important or real than they pain they cause *(emotionally sensitive people)*. I want someone to tell me which messages I need to answer and which I can ignore without being a bad person. I want someone to tell me what to say *after* "I'm listening". I want someone to tell me what to do. I want someone to tell me what I should have done, what we should have done.

But no one can. So I stop asking questions of other people, and I turn inwards, ask questions of myself.

I ask myself a lot of questions, in order to discover the story. Before I can begin to tell a story about our friendship, I must first answer the questions: what is friendship? what could it be? what was our friendship? what could it have been?

Only once these are dealt with can we address the main question, which is: **how to tell the story?**

Language is full of gaps.

I know it's silly, but I suspect that there is a right way to tell the story. That if I speak the right words in the right order, like an incantation, like a rite, then the story will be free and so will I.

But language is slippery, it is full of gaps. How, then, to tell the story?

Genre (n.)
1770, *particular style of art*, a French word in English (nativized from c. 1840), from French genre *kind, sort, style* (see gender (n.)). Used especially in French for *independent style.* In painting, as an adjective, *depicting scenes of ordinary life* (a domestic interior or village scene, as compared to landscape, historical, etc.) from 1849.

I write the same story over and over in different ways. I read the same story over and over, except it's never the same story, except all stories are the same story.

I wonder what your story is. I wonder whether I will ever know your story. I wonder whether you will ever know mine – will you read this?

I grapple with form, with the way this story resists legibility. It does not want to be read, it does not want to be written. It makes me sick. It makes me cry in the middle of the night on the broken paving stones outside my home.

It makes me want to run away from myself, from the ways in which I am cowardly and selfish and bad. It chases me, it eats me up from the inside

out. It hovers in the corners of my vision.

After years of running, of trying to look away, I finally stop and look it in the eyes.

I try starting the story in so many places.

From the beginning, from the middle, from the end. From two thirds of the way through.

I write in so many places, on the train and on the bus and on the tube and at work and in bed and while walking down the street, sometimes.

I grapple with the shape of it, with not *knowing* how the story looks except in the vaguest terms – I don't know where it starts or ends, I don't know what's important, all I know is a rough mass which changes when you get close to it. I know how it *feels*, lodged in my chest, but I do not know how to convey that feeling to anyone other than you, probably, who probably feel it too and don't need me to explain it.

I experiment with fragmentation, with stream of consciousness, with nontraditional structure. I go back to my roots, our roots, back to the very first year we knew each other when we learned about narrative together. I think about the heroic, the epic, the comic, the burlesque, about Milton's Grand Style, about tropes and motifs.

I try starting in *medias res*, like an epic. I try introducing a messenger from the heavens a third of the way through, our very own Raphael or Hermes, come to warn us. I try sending us on a visit to the underworld, although to be honest, we went to hell and back several times, didn't we.

Relationships are not art. They are not metaphors. There is no narrative arc. And yet.

Coincidences occur – more than occur, they proliferate. At one point, we are both in love (or claim to be) with the same man. He claims he cannot love anyone; two years ago, a woman broke his heart for good. She has the same name as you.

Incapable of loving one another, we both try to love this man, as though he is a plot device, a stand-in, a metaphor for our misdirected love for one another. We both fail. We all stop talking to each other, sooner or later.

If this story were a story, instead of true, it would be considered too heavy-handed. As it is, it is still too heavy-handed. Looking back, I struggle to believe any of it. It seems ridiculous, too perfectly terrible to be true. That is the only way I know it is true.

The story is just too big to tell, it is infinite, it is not over and never will be. This attempt to tell an impossible and unknowable story, is a wild goose chase – a cock and bull story. I cannot control it, any more than I could control our relationship, which was the whole problem, wasn't it.

The problem with our story is that it is both general and specific, universal and personal. I do not know how to capture this dual quality without leaning too far towards one side. It is too vague for me to pin down, but also too precise, a contradiction in terms. Again, maybe this is true of all stories.

But I do think, you know, that there is something uniquely modern about our story. Maybe other people who live like us have gone through something similar, maybe this is more general than I thought, but I am struck by the precision with which I *could* tell the story, if I chose to. When

a relationship is primarily conducted, or at least mediated, via the digital, the question of time becomes more exact, more exacting.

Every conversation that we had via Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, text, and WhatsApp is timestamped, to the minute. The length of every phone call is recorded, to the second. Every in-person conversation we had that I told someone *else* about via Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, text, or WhatsApp is also recorded, in a way, and every conversation *you* told someone else about is, too, assuming you did tell people about our conversations, which I know you did.

Created: 2 Nov 2018 Updated: 13 Jan 2020

Untitled

one night as i was writing on the train i realised that the programme i was using had stored my location and was displaying it at the top of the screen, along with the other metadata about that note. my longitude and latitude, precise location on the earth, was stored

This kind of minute tracking could not have been possible, back in the day. Although I don't think any of our emotions are new, I would argue that we experience them differently now – the past is repeatedly brought into the present, the present is precisely recorded, ready to be excavated at a moment's notice. I remember when people first started posting memories on Facebook, which you could only do by using a second party app; now the practice is so ubiquitous that it's built into not only Facebook, but also Snapchat and even Google Photos – the latter is not even a sharing platform (provided Google+ never takes off): it is a personal archive, for the user only, but the assumption that we want to revisit our past leads developers to code this into updates alongside the ability to record location data and recognise faces. The Snapchat [and Facebook] archive[s is / are both] called simply *Memories*; the idea that one can literally dig out

memories, whole, and re-experience them is pervasive throughout social media, which is of course a collection of many archives on the internet, that ultimate archive.

"Proper" historians, and other pedants, may scoff at the idea that Snapchat or Google Photos is an "archive", but what else do you call a themed collection of data? Instagram stories – by design, ephemeral updates which self-delete after 24 hours – do not delete after all, but are perpetually accessible to the poster through the Story Archive, from which you can not only download your stories, but re-post them to a Highlight tab on your profile, where any visitor can watch them with no time limit. Although hashtags like #latergram have somewhat died out, it is still generally accepted practice to identify anachronistic posts as "throwbacks" or similar. When posting a picture taken on a previous date to your story, Instagram will recognise the temporal dissonance and superimpose a datestamp. I'm not a historian of social media, so I leave this line of enquiry to the experts, but I do wonder why we assume *ipso facto* that posts are from the front lines, as it were, of an experience unless we are told otherwise.

Anyway, the point from which I have wandered is this: our lives are now so precisely mapped out, in multiple dimensions (spatially; temporally; photos and videos store visual and aural information, too), that any loss or major upheaval will be felt in the digital sphere as deeply as in that of "reality". More, perhaps – I have friends with whom I interact more online than I do in real life, due to unfortunate realities of geography and circumstance. The loss of a friend online – the absence of their icon in the sidebar or of their username on a timeline – is as noticeable and real as their removal from your daily life.

What is by far worse, though, is when someone is lost to you emotionally, in that your relationship is over, but not digitally, not yet. When you stop

meeting someone in real life, it is that simple, you stop meeting them. When a relationship with any level of digital interaction ends, you must go through a whole removal process which is far more pervasive than boxing up their stuff.

When we stopped talking, I started by archiving our WhatsApp conversation. (I tried to un-archive it for this book, but I can't find it, so I must have deleted it in a fit of pique. It is odd that I don't remember that. I also do not really believe that it's gone forever; I remain convinced that it persists, in the ether, some combination of 0s and 1s that could be located and revived one day if I tried hard enough.) I already had you muted on both Twitter accounts, so nothing to be done there. I rarely used Facebook or Snapchat at this time, and we didn't tend to DM on Instagram.

What was more insidious by far were the other traces of your presence, the ones that hid for weeks, months, years after. One day, I sat down at my mother's dining table and googled "remove autocomplete", or something to that effect, and spent several hours systematically scrubbing my online world of your presence: removing your parents' address from my Amazon account, removing your card details from Google Pay, removing your details so that your name – alphabetically before mine – would not supersede mine on my own computer.

There are many other reminders of you – music we both listened to, playlists you made for me or I made for you, clothes of mine you used to borrow. The music is especially hard: the music I want to listen to is music we shared, for the most part. The day we stop talking for good, I spend my 30-minute lunch break walking around York listening to "No Children" by The Mountain Goats, a band you introduced me to. I have long associated this song with our friendship – *I hope the fences we mended / Fall down beneath their own weight*, which indeed they did – and I want to reinforce this, I want this moment to be soundtracked by this song, I want

to preserve this feeling so that whenever I listen to these lyrics I think of you and vice versa. *I hope when you think of me years down the line, you can't find one good thing to say*, I think, and I mean it.

The Mountain Goats are a band that I have no choice but to associate with you, so I make a point of establishing my own relationship with them once we have stopped talking. I force myself to look up lyrics and find my own meanings in them beyond you. The last night I was in London, we went to a Mountain Goats gig, as I am sure you remember. The rest of you went and fought your way to the front but I couldn't stand to be near you so I sat on the floor at the back and played games on my phone until one of our friends arrived with her brother and the three of us bopped along happily on the fringes. I wasn't very familiar with *Goths* because I just hadn't got round to listening to much new music in the last couple of months, but one song in the setlist stood out to me, and the next day I got a Virgin Trains East Coast train from Kings Cross to Leeds and I listened to it on repeat for the whole two-and-a-bit-hour journey, *Andrew Eldritch / Is moving back to Leeds*.

After five or six months in Yorkshire, we stop talking. I delete (or "archive") all of my Instagram posts and start again. The first picture is of the Leeds market, and the caption is a lyric from *Andrew Eldritch Is Moving Back To Leeds*, about goodbyes. I start rebuilding my online life without you: I don't want to merely delete pictures of you, that's not enough. I want to consign our relationship to the past, to the archive; to remove evidence of the me that was your friend, too. Maybe this seems harsh – but then, you're the one who blocked me on Facebook and lied to everyone about it. I think it's fair to assume we both needed the two hundred odd miles I put between us.

Down Ashton

Stephen Crawley

"Coming for a trip? We're not going far. I've got crisps and pop here. You know me, don't you?"

Outside were near half-dark. Way it goes early at this time of year, when leaves turn yellowy brown, and the air feels wet river damp, like wide mouth frogs slip-sliding-dancing off your skin.

Seen it a couple of times the car, circling. Filthy, dirty it were. Autumn headlights on full beam. Circus lights. Blinding people with their cheek.

Every Saturday, since mum and dad said I were old enough, I've been going shopping down Ashton with my big sister Franny for food for the weekend, especially dad's favourite garlic sausage that he liked on a thick sandwich with Piccalilli, before having forty winks in front of the telly after he'd heard the footie results.

When we went shopping, Mum's list's also depended on what part of the year it were. Like buying Parkin cake for Bonfire Night, that went just right with hot jacket potatoes, cooked in silver foil in the bonfire's embers, then pulled out for you safely with a big stick by your dad and juggled between your hands until they were cool enough to get your teeth into, as you watched the fireworks going off.

Usually though, we bought the same things, but shopping were still exciting because there were always lots to see going on. At the butchers, I loved watching bacon getting sliced and listening to the low swishing noise the blade made, then straight after sniffing at the bacon through the greaseproof paper it were wrapped up in, and that I let our dog Tassy lick,

when all the bacon had gone.

The worst thing about being down Ashton though were our Franny, who wouldn't ever let me watch at the things I liked for long enough. Always pulling me away from enjoying myself quick-sharpish she were, and not caring at all about any of what I was interested in. Saying I was just plain immature and not good for her image. That's mostly because she thought she were older than she were and really grown up, and it made her especially angry when people treated her like a kid. Me being with her made people do that she said. But she had to suffer it on Saturdays and have me there, to show me where things got bought and help her with the bags because mum said so, and Franny hated that.

Garlic sausage, and Sunday's bacon got, we made the last on our list visit to Woolworths, to buy a pair of tan tights and a Beatles record for our neighbour Shirley. She were going to be fifteen tomorrow, and the record and tights were a birthday present from all of us.

Then I were glad the shopping were done, because I liked to be back home and have my tea on my lap in time for Jimmy Clitheroe on the telly - Saturday being the only day we were allowed to eat in front of the telly because dad did. Not that mum liked it that way.

But then go and believe my flippin luck, and like she does because she can, Franny went into a Franny-tizzy and decided she had to go and buy a girl comic that had a special girl prize in it. And making me hold both the shopping bags, she swanned off to join the queue at the little paper stall. Blurting out bossy in my face as she went.

"Stand where you are, where I can see you. And don't even think of going into them men's toilets, even if you do want a wee, because a boy had had his willy chopped off in them toilets a week ago, and that will happen to you if you do."

So arms weighted down with the family grub, I did as I was told, which I didn't really like doing, and not only because of Jimmy Clitheroe on the telly but because the nights were drawing in and my bare legs weren't best friends with the creeping cold that came with them. Me, stuck there, like

a jelly at a funeral, trying extra hard to not think about Jimmy Clitheroe, having a wee, or getting my willy chopped off - my legs crossed tight, my eyes fixed scanning the brand new bus station in front of me.

Its olive-green paint not long dry, Ashton's new bus station were built of long shelters of glass that looked like standstill buses without wheels and all held together on the insides, with dull grey metal bars shaped and welded together into low fences for people to lean on and talk to each other as they waited for their buses, and that kids like my younger brother Peter liked to swing around on like they were in a park or something.

He's tough my brother Peter, and can fight just about anybody. Even boys and girls who were much bigger than him, and he got into trouble a lot, he did, doing all of them things that he was told he shouldn't. Getting in trouble never bothered Peter though, he just shook things off quick and then carried on getting himself into even more of it. Just because that were what he were like and nobody were going to change it anytime soon because they already tried. I've seen it so I know what I'm saying about that for definite.

For something to do, and much closer now to getting frostbite, I concentrated my mind and remembered the thin little terraces with their dolls house windows and smelly old drains that used to be here before the new bus station came. Just a few streets of them there'd been, and pulled down because they'd got something nasty growing in between the bricks and mortar that were a serious threat to the health of the whole of mankind so my dad said.

Looking down over the shelters, with the bus inspectors' offices underneath it, were a great big spanking clean café that opened really early and shut really late, and had fluorescent lights everywhere that flickered on and off sometimes and made your skin look bluey purple as if you'd had an operation to have your tonsils out, which I had. I'd only been in the café a couple of times myself, when it'd had been cold, or rainy, or if

buses were late. I never went in there regular on my own or nothing. But when I did go in I were always pulled automatic by myself towards the tall and wide churchy looking windows to watch at everything going on down below outside.

Seeing the world passing by, when I'd been up there, reminded me of sitting in the balcony at the pictures, except there were no *James Bond* or Disney's *Mary Poppins* to see. Up there once I did see an old man get blown over by the rough wind, then nearly got run down by a bus before he could stand himself up. That were frightening that were. Especially when you could see from up there that the driver hadn't seen him, and had only stopped the bus just in time because another bus conductor saw the old man fall and ran in front of the bus waving his hands fast. Just like one of those quick and exciting things though that you might see in a film that makes want to put your hands over your eyes and peep through your fingers at it because it were dangerous and frightening. This here were more real than the pictures, but I were happy the old man didn't get hurt or die, and I breathed a big glad breath to myself to feel better about it. Like your mum rubbing butter on a bump on your head when you‘ve banged it.

Over my shoulder, with our Franny still queuing, I were getting real extra fed up now, even with all that looking and remembering. Out here it had gone extra freezing cold real quick, so I turned and shouted, "Hurry up you can‘t you?" to Franny, who pulled a proper ugly face at me then showed me her fist.

I don't know why she wanted a girly comic anyway, because she played football with the boys on our street most of the time, which I knew mum were embarrassed about because I heard her telling dad once, and he told mum not to be daft. And daft was just how I felt standing here like a jellying jelly fish.

Then at last I spotted Franny getting served and I thought hip-hooray, but then the big show off went and shouted over that she were going for a wee because she were bursting her knickers down and I weren't to move

nowhere from where I were, before she went traipsing to the ladies to do hers. Cheeky rotten mare she were.

Always did what she wanted. Always. And even now when I were near shivering my bones to death. So I put the bags down to bend over to pull my socks up my legs as high as they would go, and looking up when I did it I saw two people up in the bus station café window doing a long slobbery kiss. Flippin-heck I thought. Flippin-heck. Seeing them two kissing made me think of a Lassie film I'd seen the week before that had made me cry to myself, which I thought I definitely might do again in a minute if it got any colder than it were, so to stop myself acting like a baby, I went and imagined eating a bowl of mum's potato hot-pot that heated your insides up and just right for when it were cold like this.

Ashton's Pennine landscape all around, the market hall's big clock flooded out loud over the stripey tops of the market stalls, the purpley-blue whiteness of the bus stations' lights trying to bleach out peoples wobbly shadows. All of them, hop-scotching in and out of the florescent brightness hurrying to catch buses home.

Then in front of the stalls, the multi-coloured bulbs of the market's roundabouts bounced about on electric wires to tinny sounding old fashioned music, with children's balaclava covered heads bobbing up and down in little cars - laughing and waving to their mums and dads and everyone, as the roundabouts went round. Happy eyes, like you have in Blackpool on the beach and on the trams. Big Tower lights flickering hello. Everywhere, about them all there down Ashton, shining and damp with November cold.

The twilight mist dropping hard, me still cross-legged waiting, that were when the car came back round again, slowing right down this time. And it were here, there, then, that certain things about people I'd been properly warned about were brought forward to me in an uncomfortable strong way.

Three passengers the car had on board, I could see now. Two grown ups and a lad. The lad I knew straight off. My age he were, with bags of confidence, and that jokey grin of his on him that shouted dangerous fun, and made me feel giddy and a bit scared both at the same time.

"Coming for a trip? We're not going far. I've got crisps and pop here. You know me, don't you?"

Most usually I only saw the lad on Saturdays on the inside market when me and Franny were doing the shopping, him giving an hand to them stallholders who wanted his help, outside stallholders included. Doing things like sweeping up and folding cardboard boxes he'd be. Or running for cups of tea and balancing them back to his boss of the day with a bag of Eccles cakes. I've even seen him getting plates of pies paddling in gravy puddles with splodges of peas sliding into them and near coming off the plates altogether.

A mini landslide happening in the palm of his hand. Him cool as a breeze not even flinching. Whenever he were doing stuff like that I'd watch hard at the way he got on with everything. Really extra brave I thought, and knowledgeable, as if he'd been trained by everyone on the market to do whatever they asked him, and as good as *they* could do it without him even being old enough to speak about their sorts of things or interests. Laughing along with them and pretending that he knew what the punchline to every interesting joke or conversation was about and what it meant in life's programme of things. His grazed, knobbly-kneed legs jerking, him wanting to add his say, as if he sensed the people who mattered were making notes on him for a later date when they might need his services again. When he were really busy, and saw me watching him, he'd always give me a rapid nod hello as if I were his favourite pal in the world and he were asking without talking for me to take part in things. Us in our identical grey shorts, me nervously twisting my fingers, my hands

a bit sweaty, my brain and the whole inside-outs of me gawping at the excitement of it all.

At those times, right there guaranteed, I reckon nearly anybody on the planet could have taken the lad's photo if they wanted, and straight off win him the personality-boy-of-the-year photo competition. Won without even trying, because everything he did came so easy. Even just doing alive and breathing. Like once, when I saw the butcher giving him two chickens with their heads still on and he skipped on the spot like a pantomime actor who's just got into Aladdin's cave and found all the gold and jewels and those colourful silky things that people from abroad wear without blushing because those things have always been part of who they are.

There were also the time I saw the skinny biscuit man give him a one pound note along with two boxes of custard creams and he ran about in small tight circles, Jack Russell jumping, whistling his grin all over the shop. It were near Christmas, and obvious why the skinny biscuit man did that I suppose, but as good a Christmas present as anybody could want.

Another thing as well about the lad that I liked was that he seemed to know loads of people, old and young. But I don't know whether that were because it were in his particular character as to who he was as a person to chat to all and everybody. The same as a bird chats you up in the morning from sleeping till you make a move. Then when it knows you're awake it flies off to another tree or windowsill to do the same to somebody else.

But it didn't really matter how many people this lad knew because to everybody who worked in the market he was who he was. Though when he were showing off once in the usual way that he did and not harming no one, I overheard a fat woman, with a hard poker face, say to another sour-mouthed looking woman, that he were a cheeking urchin with an eye on everybody's purse and that decent folk were to watch out for him - poverty and a big family being the culprit, the Herrings said. And for him, there'd be no future that needed books or certificates, his dirty bare hands wedded to a life of common graft and chip papers covered in weeks old

filth, and for the rest of his days he'd be existing on scraps and handouts, him and his would be. According to what they said, the backyard hard-up were meant to stay backyard hard up because that were best for everybody.

And that's where any proper friendship between me and the lad started and finished, my mum being pretty much on the Herrings side, and her glad I'd heard it from elsewhere so she didn't come across as just plain spiteful. Saying to me to make it straight, that his family were nothing but rough, which were a bit difficult for me to understand not really understanding what rough was. We lived in a council house with only one carpet, no telephone, or soft toilet roll, and a dirty coal fire that was my job to set every day and that gave me housemaid's knee when I was ten. So I don't know what was tops about that lot. But my mum, with her nose higher in the sky than the clouds, still kept on that we were better then everyone else. She spoke posh whenever she saw a teacher and when the insurance man visited, which made me believe she'd done stuff and been to places that I'd only go to when I were older like her.

"Coming for a trip? We're not going far. I've got crisps and pop here. You know me, don't you?"

The mucky circling car were at a complete stop now, but with its engine still running, and I saw the lad say something to the man and the woman and they all gave me a quick look. That's when I got a proper stare at them.

The woman had a trendy blonde beehive a bit like Dusty Springfield's, and it were obvious even from where I were stood that blonde weren't her proper colour but it were right for the times it were. I don't know whether Dusty Springfield's hair were original either but I still liked her.

My mum had recently had hers dyed Dusty blonde and she were mousy-brown in real life. If you met my mum you might have thought she were a girlfriend of one of The Beatles because she were pretty and could rock and roll jive properly like they did on the telly. Only lasted a weekend

though, mum's "bottle blonde," and were a big mistake from start to finish. The rotten cheap bleach burnt her scalp all red-raw and itchy and my dad saw it and told her she looked like a street walker or something like, and was to run back sharpish to Joyce's hairdressers and change it or she'd be in for it extra time with him if she didn't. Dad had been in the navy for fifteen years and you all did as you were told or suffer for it, mum included. I know for definite he loved her loads, but she still got it in the neck.

This woman's hairdo weren't like brand new like mum's was, but really well settled in as the roots were showing a lot. I thought she best not bump into my dad and look at him twice. Not if she had anything about her she hadn't. All around this woman's eyes and as mucky looking as the car, were dollops of mascara, smudgy and tired looking, like the same as Dusty wore on the telly when she sang one of those songs that made you go shivery, as if a fast train was about to smash you down and kill you where you stood but it never arrived.

This woman wasn't singing though, but more sort of hurting and enjoying it, and when she saw me looking at her, she started to smile then stopped herself. I hated that because she were telling me something about herself that she didn't want to, and that I had no chance of ever understanding. And it wasn't only due to me being a boy and her being a fully grown-up person either. I'm talking uncomfortable thoughts and things, that no matter how you want them to, they don't come across right. Same as jumping when you see a weird looking picture in a comic or a book when you least expect it. I don't like things like that, they're like the dark dreams, you have without wanting them.

Because of that trembly feeling I got, I made myself look away. But inside I knew she'd really made me wonder about her and stuff and I slowly looked back again. She were turned away now, like she were talking about me again to the lad and the fella who got what she were saying straight off, because the fella started looking alligator-eyes dead at me, and I jumped at the scariness of them.

Top greasy he were, and his skin hung on him like it were too big for his body because I saw his skeleton bones more than I did him. And when he looked at me he sort of mouthed something I couldn't hear, that was aimed at being friendly but made me feel awful weird inside.

I didn't know him and decided immediately because of the way he was that I didn't want to. It were more than clear he wanted to get to know me - and in "funny ways". That were a saying I got off mum from one day when we stopped for petrol and two handsome men who wear sitting in a car next to us and wearing ladies eye make-up just stared at me but nicely with no harm done. Until my mum saw them and me looking at each other that is and near twisted my head off with her tongue, saying that men like them have "funny ways" and "normal boys" as I were, "have to be careful, walk quickly away, and not ever even speak or think of speaking to them". So because of the way mum had said it I never did speak to people I didn't know, and especially men in ladies make-up. But I still looked if they looked at me.

This fella in the car were nowhere near like them ort of fellas, and I saw him wink at the lad to egg me on - me on the edge of the kerb gawping, me balancing my body with the weight of the bags and near falling over with all of it, trying to do too many things at once.

Then the lad went and smiled at me. Showed me all the smile of his that I knew, and opened the back door window and shouted out loud to me.

"Coming for a trip? We're not going far. I've got crisps and pop here. You know me, don't you?"

And the greasy fella turned right round in his seat and leaned his skeleton body right over the lad and shoved the back door open and he winked properly horrible at me when he did it, his thin mouth opening up slowly a little bit, like a poisonous snake does just before it bites you.

After the lad had shouted that at me, all three of them stared full on at me now, but the lad were the only one I could see who were being nice

about it. The woman and the fella were just too rotten strange, and they had really wet lips. The sort you have just before you eat Sunday dinner when the gravy's been poured. Or the sort your mum and dad have after they've been kissing for ages. Only I didn't think the woman and the fella were the lad's mum and dad.

Then sudden like, as if every single light bulb in the world had gone out a sharp slap brought me back home to myself. It were our Franny. "Eh, what you doing!? You know you're not allowed to get in cars with strangers." And with the biggest children's rule ever decided by adults echoing around my ears, the car door got quickly banged shut, and went off faster than fast, as if them in it had just robbed a bank, the three of them disappearing into the thick autumn mist that had arrived nearly as suddenly as them.

"I've got crisps and pop here. You know me. Don't you?"

The back of my neck still smarting from her slap, Franny dragged me and the bags away as I looked quick but careful over my shoulder seeing the lad grin at me, then wave through the cars grimy back window, like he were saluting. Only I couldn't smile or salute back because I didn't really know what to do, or what to think because Franny had just done all of that for me when she pulled me away. And so I just watched after the car as it went and breathed a heavy sigh as I did so. My misty breath mixing in with everybody else's.

The lad's brilliant smile stuck hard in my head, I shoved the bags at our Franny and went and had the longest shivery wee ever, and watching all the time I was in the lavvy, that no one was nearby to cut my willy off.

When we eventually did get back home, Franny, as was her job as she saw it, went and told mum and dad what she thought I was about to do,

which I never were at all. But dad didn't want to know that and he still half-murdered me, with mum chipping in her five bob's worth from the side-lines, before I was sent to bed without any tea and not allowed to watch Jimmy Clitheroe either.

I did get a sneaked apricot jam sandwich after an hour in bed off Peter, who tiptoed it into me. But no kiss goodnight off anyone - which I hated. So I just lay down and whispered night-God-bless to myself. And not long after with the them three in the car, and the roundabout lights and the market spinning round my mind like an old Charlie Chaplin film, I dropped off to sleep. All through that night I woke up a lot. My eyes being made to open by bad dreams, as the lad, the man, and woman, and the market, and all the market people and their different lives jumped in and out of the dreams. The lad's face getting more twisted up. The man and the woman getting more and more especially horrible as the nightmares went on and on. Me worrying and wishing I hadn't seen anything.

Next day morning everything were still knocking about in my head, and I felt like I just wanted to see the lad again before anything else occurred. Just to make sure things were ok with him. Just so I could prove all of the bad things I dreamt of were wrong. And then without really thinking of it I remembered what my gran told me once when I'd had a bad dream.

She said, "Dreams weren't ever at the same meeting as real life. Awake and asleep, being two different ways of being alive."

So I tried that, but it did me no good listening to what gran said, what with all that worrying and scary thinking. And then underneath I were also much too scared of what mum and dad might do to me if I were to even ask if I could go and find out if the lad were ok. I was so churned up inside about those two that I never bothered.

To try and feel better I whispered words to myself. "Where it's green, is life serene and hope is more then just a dream." I learnt that at Sunday school I did and whispered it to myself whenever I were coming over sad.

"You know me. Don't you."

After all that had gone on, and I'd near gone and forgotten all about what had happened, the next time I did see the lad, were a week later. His face, right there, on the front of the Ashton Reporter. His jokey grin shouting out stories to me. Some big scary letters underneath it saying: TWELVE YEAR OLD BOY. MISSING! *"Coming for a trip? We're not going far. I've got crisps and pop here. You know me. Don't you?"*

Palingenesis

Sue Hann

On the day that I am due to start progesterone injections, in the slow hours before the hated needle, I am standing on the tube platform caught in a tangle of weekend shoppers. The poster in front of me advertises an exhibition at the Barbican: *Living Colour* by Lee Krasner. It is a bold blast of colour against the beige tiled wall of the station. An orange and pink background is overlaid - collage-style - with fat stripes of black, its raw edges revealing rips, and slivers of fuchsia. I have never heard of the artist, but I could do with this kind of colour-with-attitude in my life right now. On a whim, I recalculate my journey as I step onto the tube — two stops westbound.

The Barbican is busy and there is a queue for tickets to the exhibition. A pregnant woman and her partner stand in line in front of me. Judging from the size of her bump, there isn't too long to go. I try to imagine their lives; they live somewhere trendy but still edgy in East London; they are fitting in a cultural event before the chaos of a newborn. They have promised each other that their lives won't change that much, that they will bring junior along to galleries in the sling they bought together in John Lewis. The warm cosiness of their shared hopes and plans is almost visible as a protective bubble around them. She is blooming in a light summer maternity dress; he rubs the small of her back protectively. This gesture feels as intimately painful as someone rubbing my eyeball.

The queue is moving slowly, and I rummage in my bag, checking again to make sure that I have it: the medication, syringe, sterile wipes. The fertility clinic was very specific about the time I start the progesterone. I've done it so many times now, these rounds, that I know what's ahead: the drugs, the scans, the waiting, the creeping hope, the build-up to test day

when everything hangs on the appearance of one line or two.

Taking out my phone, I see a message from my husband: *Landed safely, miss you xx*. He's away for work and I'm not sure how I feel about this. I know he can't be here for everything, that it's a long process with lots of waiting time, life has to go on and all that. But still. I miss him. Angrily. But there's no point in going over all that again, so I read up on Krasner. I know nothing about the exhibition, not even that Lee is a she. I start by looking up the image from the poster — it's a detail from a piece called Desert Moon from 1955. In an interview Krasner said the moon made her feel "more emotional, more intense – it would build a momentum of some sort". Here was a woman embracing emotional intensity and using it as an energy — *yes,* I think, *maybe I'm in the right place*.

Lee Krasner, born Lenore in 1908, was one of the pioneers of Abstract Expressionism, but her work was often overshadowed by her marriage to the more famous Jackson Pollock. As I mooch through the gallery, Krasner's early self-portraits are confident, bold, full of colour. In one, she hangs a mirror outside, and paints herself painting herself in her garden. The candour and fearlessness of her gaze draws me in. She is young, only twenty-two, still childlike in her features, red-lipped and apple-cheeked, and looks out at the world with a confident curiosity, oblivious to the ups and downs that life has in store for her. I remember being her age, when the future was infinite possibility; when life opened up rather than narrowed in and when the not-knowing was a good thing.

My phone vibrates and a message pops up on the screen. It's from my neighbour Sarah, thanking me for coming to her birthday drinks last night. She has sent a photo of a group selfie from the night before. The girls are pouting and looking at the camera out of the sides of their eyes. The boys are pulling funny faces, making finger-guns at each other. They are young and shiny looking, box-fresh to the world. Then there is me in my work shirt and sensible shoes, looking every year of my decade older than them.

Part of not having children is being out of step with peers. Evenings out with friends who have young children, which by now is pretty much all of them, are a rare occasion, so I try to say yes to other social invitations. I don't know Sarah all that well, and the age difference feels much more pronounced in a group. I felt old. I made myself stay for two drinks' worth of the night. Sarah had introduced her friends sitting beside me: "This is Josh and Boo." I turned to Boo, and while wondering what Boo could be short for, I stuck out my hand. She looked at me, then back to my faltering hand, and then, leaving it a beat too long, held up her flat palm. "Let's do a high five" she said. A flash of dislike and embarrassment flared — would it have killed her to shake? In that instant, I felt like a dated aunt, all antiquated habits, while at the same time feeling like a child rebuked.

Krasner's marriage to Pollock was a difficult one. Pollock struggled with alcoholism for most of his life, and the couple left New York to get away from the social scene. In upstate New York, they lived in relative poverty before Pollock became a commercial success. In the mid-1950s, as her husband was falling deeper into his alcoholism, Krasner started working on collages. From pieces of her past failures, she made something new and beautiful. Eleanor Nairne, curator at the Barbican, said of the collages: "In order to fully appreciate it, you have to imagine what it takes to destroy work that you've laboured over, to tear and cut it into shards." Krasner cut up early work that she didn't like, tearing canvases into long jagged strips; some ragged and frayed at the edges, some sharply snipped. She ripped up her charcoal drawings and merged them into collage with canvas, mixing materials, adding colour. This series of paintings brought her work favourable attention in the New York art world, after nearly ten years of little or no recognition as an artist in her own right.

Pain arrows across my temple, settling behind my eyeballs, where it strikes in debilitating pulses. It stills me completely. I am used to this now. It has happened before as the drugs build up in my system, and I know to

wait. I stand motionless, facing the artwork but not seeing until the tide of pain rolls out again. This piece, *Milkweed*, is an abstract of blacks, whites, greys, with a peep of orange, and I focus on the orange, a landing spot that brings me back into the room.

It's time to take my second dose of hormones, oestrogen this time. I back out of the knot of people and wind my way through a crowd of Japanese tourists taking selfies against a background of the canvases. Trying to be discreet, I fish in my bag for the blister packet and my water bottle. I have learned not to be fooled by the size and innocuous appearance of this tiny pill. Over weeks, it sets up a hormonal whirlwind, wreaking chaos along the secret highways of my body. Coded messages zip between glands, along veins, arteries, bidding organs to respond and play their piece in this new concerto. I may be the owner of this body, but I am the last to know its plans. There is anarchy, uprising stirring within. My body sends me signals; a mysterious patch of dandruff, red angry pimples that appear overnight, straw-like hair. As the sebaceous glands on my head dry up, my tear glands go into overdrive. I well up at the slightest thing until it is hard to know what is me and what is the hormones, and eventually, whether there is any difference between me and them. The pill is a shiny blue, and I think of a line from Maggie Nelson's *Bluets — If a color could deliver hope, does it follow that it could also bring despair?* It tings against my teeth as I swallow it down and pray that is doing its work, and will be a bringer of hope, will lead to two fat lines on the stick, to a bump and then a baby. I chant it silently in my head as I swallow: hope, hope, hope.

Krasner never had children. In some interviews, she said that her husband was too needy, too child-like himself for her to want to bring a child into their marriage. Other interviews however leave it more vague and quote her as saying that she married him to become an artist, not a mother. Whatever the reason for choosing not to have children, and perhaps there

were many, I admire her bluntness and refusal to apologise for her choices.

"Do you want children?" a colleague asks me, as if the wanting is the thing. I haven't yet figured out what to say in response. I have to brace myself whenever the question arises, arrange my face into neutral, steel my lips against any tell-tale wobble, and cut off from any emotion. Including an immediate anger toward them for asking the question.

Pollock died, aged 44, in a drink-driving car crash. When asked about how she managed to continue to paint following his death, Krasner responded: "Painting is not separate from life. It is one. It is like asking — do I want to live? My answer is yes — and I paint." In the three years following his death, Krasner moved into Pollock's studio at their home in East Hampton, experimenting on large canvases for the first time. Her paintings from this period, — the Umber series — are downstairs in the gallery, they need the extra room because of their size. Some are fifteen feet long and I push through the crowd to peer at the name placard before standing back to take them in, savouring the titles as much as the painting. *Uncaged* is almost frightening to look at: a writhing mass of snaking arcs. Or *curvilinear sweeps,* as the guide calls them, a little more sophisticated than my impressions.

I sit on one of the benches, allowing people to swirl and flow around me, and find out more about Krasner and her work. I scroll through articles and reviews, and watch interviews with her on YouTube, hungry for more background, more knowledge about this woman. I come across a detail that stands out, a line from Rimbaud that was a favourite of Krasner's: *I ended up finding sacred the disorder of my mind.*

Krasner, through her art, was able to take her grief and her loss, her internal world, and express it externally. She took what was in her head and her heart and pinned it to the canvas for dissection. Her mind and her work are one. Sometimes the gulf between my internal world and my external presentation creates a kind of a schizophrenia, in the literal sense,

from the Greek *split* + *mind*. I get lost in the gap between this private grief and longing and my outward persona. I admire Krasner's commitment to stay with her experience, to inhabit her grief, probe its size and shape, feel its depth.

Krasner had severe insomnia during this period, and as a result, worked through the night. The Umber series are all painted in earthy tones because she couldn't see bright colours as clearly as she wanted to in artificial light. The hormones give me a kind of insomnia. I fall asleep without difficulty, but then wake up suddenly in the early hours, brain instantly switched on. They didn't mention this in clinic, but on the online forums it appears to be a common side-effect of the treatment, similar to sleep disturbances experienced during the menopause. This preview is not enticing. I lie awake for hours, my mind more alert than it ever is during the day. I download podcasts and play them at low volume so I don't wake my husband. I became a regular listener of a particular fertility podcast, finding comfort in listening to two women going through the same thing. There is a validation in hearing someone else say, *yes, this is hard, I'm struggling too*. Then one of them gets pregnant, and shortly after the other does too. I am alone again in the early hours with only my thoughts for company. And it feels like a betrayal. I switch to current affairs.

Polar Stampede is tiger-like with black curved lines against muddy tones. I pace the length of it. There is video footage of Krasner using a long paintbrush, jumping a little to reach the top of these huge canvases. Creation spills out of her, flows through her body, arm, hand, brush, not stopping to fetch a ladder, the momentum carries her forward, onward, onward. Reflecting on the Umber series, she said "my painting is so biographical, if anyone can take the trouble to read it." Here is her grief writ large in sludgy colours.

I painted my own grief on my face. Although grief feels like too small a word for my feelings - too sanitised, too tidy. It felt more like a terrible

fury and overwhelming sense of injustice. It was early on, shortly after another failed cycle, and I was stomping around at home, getting ready for bed. Muttering to myself that I was sick of everything, fed up with it all, that it was so unfair. And I walked with this furious force into the bathroom door, knocking my face on the corner of the door frame. Rage boiling, I crouched on the cold tiles of the bathroom floor, wailing like a child, cradling my face. Finally, something physical to focus my feelings on, finally the not-fairness had somewhere to land.

I went to work the next day with a black eye. It was a dark purple with red veins threaded through, which faded over time to blue, then brown, then a dirty yellow, a palette straight out of the Umber series. I fretted about how to explain this at work when it sounded like such a cliché. Roddy Doyle had even used it as the title of his book about an abusive relationship — *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors*. I incorporated this into my explanations: "I walked into a door, really," with an eye-roll and a smile, the worst of the bruise covered up with concealer and beige eye shadow. One woman in particular looked at me with a sad recognition when I explained. She said nothing, just an involuntary tug of her lip, downward. The less she said with her words, the more I babbled, trying to dissuade her from her unspoken conclusion. The angle of the door jamb, I gesticulated, how clumsy I am, basically dyspraxic… Whatever my words said, the pain written on my body was clear.

In 1976, Krasner made another collage series, this time incorporating figure and still life drawings made nearly forty years earlier. With titles based on conjugations of the verb *to see*, the series alludes to vision and revision. I am thinking about this as I stroll from room to room, canvas to canvas. How what we see continues to shift and change over time, and this viewpoint is not the final viewpoint. The question that has been circling my mind like water in a drain for the last few months is: *If this cycle doesn't work, how do I live? How do I, we, survive this?*

Krasner's collages chart her life. She said of them: "This is where I've come from: from there to here… It renews my confidence in something I believe. That there is continuity." She hated stasis and was constantly reinventing. I can't help feeling that my life is on hold. Around me, friends' lives change, their preoccupations change — what type of buggy to buy, when to wean, which are the best schools — and I am a bystander, stuck on the sidelines while all around me life continues. This stuckness scares me. I am afraid of day following day, each the same as the one before. I am afraid of a lifetime of days without the marching measure of a child's feet. I am afraid of staying in this place of missing, of continuing like this, day after day, not knowing where it ends, or if it ends at all. Or whether I will return to it again and again, like an endless game of snakes and ladders.

Standing in front of Krasner's collages, I can almost hear the rip of heavy paper, the rich rent of woody fibres. I can feel how the grim disappointment might slowly catch fire, becoming the giddiness of the destruction, until it blazes with the energy of destroying, and then eventually cools to form something new. Out of pain, she created beauty; not despite, but because of. Krasner said of her collages: "Obviously I'm hauling out work (drawings) of thirty years ago... Dealing with it. Not ignoring, [not] hiding it." She is telling me something through her work: *You can't fix it, but you can survive it.* I stare at the canvases, trying to soak up some of her strength.

Krasner was brave enough to take her past with her, refashioned, into the present. I only go back to the past to beat myself up. I should have started trying for a family earlier. Why didn't I push for more aggressive treatment sooner? I wish I could cut up my past, like her collages, rip it up, attack it with scissors. I would rend these thoughts, these judgements about historic me, into tiny slivers. *We made those decisions for a reason, with the information we had at the time*, my husband often tries to reassure me. And he believes it. But did we? Did we really? I can't say. That person, who

made those decisions, doesn't feel like me anymore. How can these pieces be put back together?

Glancing at my watch, I can see that it's nearly injecting time. There is only one small section left — her most recent works. I allow myself one last painting before I have to leave. The colours of this one draw me over; *Palingenesis,* the placard reads. A riot of greens, hot pinks and whites, in hard-edged geometric shapes. It is bold, perky, confident. Art critic Robert Hughes described it as "rap[ping] hotly on the eyeball at 50 paces". I am no art critic: it reminds me of the Fuzzy Felt art boards I used to play with as a child. I spent hours sticking felt shapes on to the fuzzy background enjoying the sensory pleasure in mixing colours and shapes to make a picture.

And then there's the name, *Palingenesis*, from Greek - 'palin' meaning again and 'genesis' meaning birth. All of Krasner's work emphasises rebirth, metamorphosis. It feels like a fitting ending as I leave the exhibition to inject myself with progesterone, this hormone that prepares the womb for the egg. Again, birth, I hope.

BIOGRAPHIES

Winner

LORELEI GOULDING is originally from Long Island, New York and lives in rural Somerset with her husband, three children, and a very unruly dog. She is currently completing an MSc in Public Health at UWE Bristol and is particularly interested in Adverse Childhood Experiences and how they impact health over the life-course. She has been keeping disorganised journals and writing stories since childhood. 'Birdie' is her first published work.

Highly commended

Raised as an only child, losing her parents young further fuelled obsessive reading and diary writing. A qualified teacher, **JOANNA BROWN** facilitates creative writing workshops. Recent work includes the development of the literary education programme: Africa Writes: Young Voices, linking poets with London school students to explore writing from Africa and the diaspora. She is now immersing herself fully in her own writing practice, unearthing her personal family histories to honour and celebrate unsung Black lives in Britain.

Highly commended

LAURANE MARCHIVE lives in London. Her work has appeared in *The London Magazine*, *The Mechanics' Institute Review*, *Review 31* and the *TLS*. Laurane is a previous winner of the French Escales des Lettres. She was recently longlisted for the BBC Short Story Prize, shortlisted for the Spread the Word Life Writing Prize 2019, and the London Short Story Prize 2020. She holds an MA in Creative Writing from Birkbeck. She also runs a circus.

Shortlist

MAXINE DAVIES is a writer born and bred in Newcastle upon Tyne. She has an MA in Modern and Contemporary Literature from Newcastle University. Her writing has been featured in *Visual Verse* and *Mslexia*. She came third in the Autumn 2019 Reflex Fiction competition, and in 2017 she was awarded funding from the Young Writers' Talent Fund to set up her small press, Maybe Later.

Shortlist

CARLA MONTEMAYOR has worked in communications and politics in the Philippines, Indonesia and the UK. She studied economics in a previous life and returned to university as a mature student. She has an MA in Political Communication from the University of Sheffield. She has written satire, poetry and short fiction on and off, and now aspires to do more life writing and perhaps a novel. She is an avid cook and photographer.

Shortlist

JOSH HOLTON is an ex-MMA fighter who took too many blows to the head and now writes weird fiction and non-fiction. He quit his stable office job to find fulfilment in the study and practice of storytelling. He now survives on instant noodles but loves his life. Find him on Twitter @JHoltonWriter.

Longlist

ELENA CROITORU lives in Kent and has an MSt in Creative Writing from the University of Cambridge. Her work has been selected for the Best New British & Irish Poets 2019 and she won second place in the Edward Thomas Award, third place in the Open House Poetry Competition, and was highly commended in the Wales Poetry Award. She was shortlisted for the Gregory O'Donoghue Prize, Wasafiri New Writing Prize, Bridport Prize & other awards. She is also editing her first novel & working on a poetry collection. You can find her on Twitter @elenacroitoru

---

Longlist

SR SHAH is a working class queer Muslim poet and philosopher hailing from South London. They are interested in the dynamics between poetry and death, the abundance of London, and honouring migrant histories. They have had their Instagram philosophy series exhibited at VFDalston for "unfinished," and host a quarterly literary event, "untitled." By day, they are a makeup artist.

Longlist

RUBY EASTWOOD is 19 and studying English Literature at Oxford University. She grew up in Barcelona, where she returns whenever she can. She is inspired to write by Leonard Cohen, Virginia Woolf and Donna Tartt.

Longlist

NICKY WATKINSON is a cultural critic who writes and speaks about art in all its forms. A freelance writer for five years, she's also a speaker and workshop leader. She has a BA in English and an MA in contemporary literature and culture, both from UCL: her academic research focuses on theories of identity, grief, the fragment, and narrative form. She is particularly interested in inter-disciplinarity and tackling questions of form in her work. She writes fiction, creative nonfiction, and drama.

Longlist

STEPHEN CRAWLEY hails from Ashton under Lyne in the foothills of the Pennines, a town considered "bare, wet, and almost worthless," until the introduction of the cotton trade. From that historical perspective Stephen prides himself on being a working–class writer, his heroes being Barry Hines, Alan Sillitoe and Nell Dunn, who have all influenced his work, and being a Northerner, Stephen isn't scared to proudly admit that fact. A late starter writer, Stephen enjoys constructing first person narratives, and began taking writing seriously after receiving a screenplay commission from Film Four without any writing experience or educational qualifications under his belt.

Longlist

SUE HANN is a psychologist and psycho-sexual therapist, interested in the interplay between psychology and creativity. Her work explores how psychology and art both try to make sense of the universality of pain and suffering. She writes flash fiction and creative non-fiction. Her work has been published in online and print journals such as *Popshot* quarterly, and included in the National Flash Fiction Day anthology. She lives in London with her husband and a problematic number of books. She is a London Writers Awards recipient 2019-20.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Spread the Word would like to thank:

The twelve writers whose words make this fantastic anthology: Lorelei Goulding, Joanna Brown, Laurane Marchive, Maxine Davies, Carla Montemayor, Josh Holton, Elena Croitoru, SR Shah, Ruby Eastwood, Nicky Watkinson, Stephen Crawley and Sue Hann.

Our judges: Sathnam Sanghera, Kerry Hudson and Nell Stevens.

Our reading team: Ruby Cowling, Julia Forster, Georgie Codd, Kerri Ní Dochartaigh, Daisy Henwood, Anna Owen, Martha Stenhouse, Hannah Trevarthan, Joe Sedgwick, Joe Bibby, Tricia Wombell, Zeba Talkhani, Kathy Hoyle, Charlotte Forfieh, Jamie Hale, Fran Hill, Farhana Shaikh, Mel Charters, Zakia Carpenter-Hall, Aliya Gulamani, Eva Lewin, Bobby Nayyar, Ruth Harrison.

Our Prize Patron, Blake Morrison, and all at Goldsmiths Writers Centre.

Our mentors: Max Porter, Colin Grant, and Kerri ní Dochartaigh.

Our Public Relations Consultant Jane Acton.

All the writers who entered the Prize in 2020, for taking that step from writing things down privately to sharing it with us - we value each and every story.

Our Prize funder and co-founder Joanna Munro, and our principal funders Arts Council England.

And Aliya Gulamani, for your careful and conscientious editorial eye.