

# UNTITLED

**issue two**  
**volume one**

VOICES  
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**A journal for  
underrepresented  
writers**

# VOICES

## untitled

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Welcome to the second issue of Untitled: Voices! After the success of the first issue earlier in the year, we knew we wanted to get right back to work on a second collection. Again, so many of you submitted and trusted us to read your writing – for that we are eternally grateful. We believe it is vital, now more than ever, to work to amplify underrepresented voices. This collection is our part of the fight to be heard. We're so excited to be publishing two more volumes of amazing underrepresented writers from around the world.

We hope you enjoy &  
thanks for reading!

Ollie Charles & Nicola Lampard

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**Poetry**

# Tequila

Arun Jeetoo

You look celestial  
under Hoxton streetlights

these nights end  
with a fistfight

between me and  
some pub stranger

I'm sorry I  
bring you danger

on the nights  
we celebrate us.

## Bridget Hart

When my mum was my age  
she threw Ann Summers parties  
(when she was married these gatherings  
were strictly for Tupperware)

a gaggle of women  
mum's work friends and  
two of my more daring aunties  
filled our flat  
with anticipation  
and avon perfume  
I choked on my first  
cherry vodka jelly  
glimpsed a bouquet  
of Bunnies  
nipple tassels  
on a stranger's tits

\*

In the bedroom  
I mashed layers of  
blue tac into the wall  
trapping boys  
with no burning desires  
they just wanted to sing  
but had ended up topless  
in a Smash Hits magazine

I cut a finger over  
the paper abdominals

sat back against the door  
and thought about  
touching myself

# Home is a Bus Ride

Bridget Hart

The Tesco Express where  
Stacey's parents got engaged  
is always so bare  
the isles could still  
be used for skittles,  
her picture still pinned  
above the bar.

A pensioner kicks  
one of the self service  
machines at the post office  
my grandfather painted  
as a young man.

Clarence Hardware,  
the elder of Voy's Corner  
still beating its fist  
on the old high street  
has outlived four gold brokers.

*Does Grandad know  
his favourite curry house  
is a bar named 'Nichole' now?*

The house where Claire lived  
before she died has grown  
a sickness about it and  
the maple planted  
in her name is  
fever red in the city park.



'Shirley Home Fire Centre:  
a family run business  
for thirty years'  
the son once tripped me  
so hard in the playground  
my tights shredded at the knees.

*Will I ever go  
for ice cream and possibility  
at the Mayflower theatre again?*

This bus stop is where  
he gave me his number  
on the back of a bus ticket  
I never said *thanks*

# don't think about it

Ellen Olivia Warren

we could've been  
anything we wanted,  
and instead we  
smoked cigarettes  
and pondered like  
depressed philosophers.

fingertips cling to  
the bottle like wet  
hair on flushed cheeks.  
it's a memory at the  
bottom of the glass,  
and we kept drinking.

anything is better than  
being sober, it's like  
pulling teeth as we hum  
along to our imposter  
syndrome. soon enough  
we will feel nothing.

# The Last Post-Turning Over a New Leaf

Fiona Linday

Taking my last walk in the country park just a few weeks ago,  
before the gates were locked, I remained positive, even carefree.  
If only I heard what the birds were manically chirping about then,  
I may well have found myself doing the *New Normal* differently...

Instead our group of creative, middle-aged women plus one gent!  
meandered, listening to wildlife and absorbing the wonder of nature.  
As God's paintbrush swept a green palette to add browns, yellows,  
then purple and orange hues graced a lawn of blessed crocuses.

Our intention- to observe the joys of *Mother Nature* on the hoof.  
We bow below an arch taking time to hear the echoed swishing  
of knitted, wiry willow branches thick with waxy, bursting buds.  
To stroke a delicate sculpture as sparrows perch above, whittling.

I missed a blackbird squawk warnings of a curved ball thrown  
by an overseas wild species, including that variety of bat I find  
had since infected us by sneezing out a cloud of the deadly virus.  
We're hi-jacked by *no worries* fake news sent on the grapevine.

Absorbing germs, the treetop saxophone blew a loud melody  
before the storm whipped up an apocalyptic, chorused gale.  
In this vital outdoor space blessed by a cacophony of songbird  
little did I know, the denied right to roam prevented more trails.

To God, I'm thankful He is the same today, as was before  
and tomorrow the birds will sing along to their country dance.  
Where you listen to sparrows merrily chortle from a sand pit  
the blackbirds shout a warning to stay away. No chance!

The branches knew about vital social distancing, even then

when humans were still sniffing the bitter pandemic scent.  
Ash trees grew longer roots to help prevent their die back, so  
we can learn from how these wise, adapted fir trees bent.

Tomorrow, you'll touch and hug your family group and friends.  
Please, gladly listen carefully to embrace everyone's perfect age.  
Appreciate the birds' instinctive twitch to keep a safe distance.  
Tomorrow is another day; try next *rebuilding your nests* stage.

Out of the mouths of those forgiven, wild species chicks live  
so they fly in harmony with you together up to mature treetops.  
Go raise awareness fairly, even on recycled handmade paper  
until, an unhealthy battle between creation and mankind stops.

Now, dig for victory while listening to climate change warnings  
and I pray you live together to breath fresh air for another day.  
This last post I leave you as a thought-provoking legacy because  
my *turning a new leaf* prayer aims to sustain an extended stay.

Included online at Edgehill University's Wow! Festival, Stories of Everyday  
Phrases, 2020.

# The Forgiveness of Sins

Gale Acuff

*I'll be dead before you can say Jesus  
Christ, I mean considering time and how  
it compares to Eternity, it might  
take God that long, eternity I mean,  
to say Jesus Christ and to Him time here  
must be so short that almost even He  
can't make a note of it--I said so to  
my Sunday School teacher but she said that  
that was *blasphemy*, that if I was her  
son she'd wash out my mouth with soap but I  
would've put it *washed your mouth out with soap*  
which is, I guess, not how God would say it  
but how *she* does, I told her so and my  
sin was forgiven. Whatever it was.*

# I Know Why the Ghosts Cry

Ismim Putera

I know why the ghosts  
cry:

they cry  
because the graves are too shallow  
that they hear every gossip we spread about them

what they do is mostly to pull out the nail  
from the oblong coffin  
and crawl out on all fours

the ghost who laughs  
the hardest at the funeral  
cry the hardest at night

and we assume they cry because  
they're too afraid to live  
or too afraid too die again

hell no!  
they cry because we  
*made* them cry like us

we cry like half-crazy banshee  
screeching and groaning and grunting  
they can see the bones in our throat

i know why the ghosts  
cry: the graves are too shallow  
and the dirt is too sweet-scented

# In For Life

Jeffrey Zable

When I joined a Colombian cartel as an English teacher I began by teaching my students simple phrases like, “Pack the cocaine carefully!” and “That is a beautiful machine gun!”

It wasn't long before they were able to express themselves in simple English that gave them confidence should they get arrested and extradited to the United States.

“If I go to jail I will take out every member of your family!” one of my students said with hardly an accent, and another fine student declared, “Anyone messes with me, they'll wind up with a Columbian necktie!”

Overall it's very satisfying teaching these students because they not only learn quickly, but show their appreciation by showering me with extra cash, cocaine, and sexy female companions.

The only caveat is that I'll never be able to leave the organization, because as the saying goes, “Once you're in a cartel, you're in for life!”

# Desire

Jeremy Gadd

Whether motivated by need or  
yearning to achieve a more serene,  
cerebral state or, besotted by beauty,  
to physically possess a body or object,  
desire can become all-consuming,  
erupting with the intensity of a solar flare.  
Is it accidental desire rhymes with fire?  
Desire smoulders, burns, scorches, scars  
and, overwhelming rational behaviour,  
can encourage normally honest people  
to deceive or become a liar for love:  
the search for serenity can lead to a cult  
but desire also incentivises and, for all its  
negative attributes, is the last longing to retire.



# BOOM KANANI

Joe Balaz

Boom kanani!

Da sky is all glitter

and in da carnival day  
dat wen come

wun thundering herd of unicorns  
came running ovah da hill.

Yeeha!

I stay riding on da lead stead  
and da horn is pointed forward

foa poke and trample all da pilikia  
dat like try foa bum me out.

Boom kanani!

My smile is biggah den wun half moon

and I no care wat da negative guys tink  
wen dey tink wat dey stay tinkin

cause dey just like da blackness  
dat like foa swallow me whole

but no can.

It's all joy  
foa dis heah buggah boy

skipping to da loo

and escaping  
from da repressive zoo.

Boom kanani!

I stay all happy  
cause my endorphins like party

and buku confetti  
stay falling from da ceiling.

No can rain on my cascade  
cause I sipping okolehao in da shade

and everyting is fine wit me.

It may be so cliché to say  
but I going say it anyway

while I stay bursting at da dream—

Boom kanani!

boom kanani     Slang expression of joy and excitement.  
pilikia             Trouble.  
okolehao          Liquor made from the root of the ti plant.

# SUPAH BIRD

Joe Balaz

*“Wun progressive paradigm  
is wun pair of dimes*

*replicating plenty kine Roosevelts  
two by two*

*ovah and ovah again.”*

Dats wat da green parrot  
wen say at da Honolulu Zoo

wen all da people  
wuz looking at him.

No one wen believe dere ears  
dat da buggah could be so smart

and it wuzn’t like he wuz trained  
foa say dat eidah

cause da ting

suddenly started carrying on  
two-way conversations

wit da gathering crowd.

Da amazing bird began to talk

about geopolitical problems  
and industrial pollution

along wit da challenges  
of outer space exploration

and everybody's jaws wen drop  
revealing gaping holes in dere faces.

Da news media found about it

hearing dat da public  
wuz calling da bird "Einstein"

and ovahnight  
da green parrot became famous.

Da zoo staff  
nevah know wat foa do at first

but some supervisor

decided to move and isolate da bird  
into wun smaller cage

so it could be observed moa closely.

In trying to catch da ting

da door to da main cage  
wuz mistakenly jarred open

and da parrot  
turned into wun green streak

escaping  
and flying out into da blue.

Some astute observers

wen notice dat it wuz headed  
foa da Koolaus.

Many years ago  
some adah green parrots

wen escape from wun enclosure  
at da old *Paradise Park*

and dey wen establish demselves  
out in da wild.

Dey been flying around foa years

back and forth  
across da mountain range

from da town side  
to da windward side.

So now wen da flock flies ovah  
wit dere cries high up in da sky

even dough dey all look da same

it's going to be  
fascinating to know

dat deah's actually wun genius  
flying up deah among dem.

Koolaus Ko'olau Mountain Range.

# Sister

Kathryn O'Driscoll

*After Danez Smith's 'A Note on the Body'*

your body is still  
your body is soon to be mulch and moulding  
your body into something you think is beautiful  
ultimately  
is trying not to see your death in the mirror

but it's just as good to close your eyes

your body is silent  
your body exhales rot and I smell it in every corner  
of every room I feel at home in

ultimately  
I'm just trying not to see your death in my mirror

I don't want your passing to become my identity  
but you never put a foot wrong if you never move

and I move too much  
and I am too much

and you're nothing left now  
but your body.

# The Grey Garden

Kathryn O'Driscoll

I told you I had wildflowers growing in my veins  
and you thought it was quaint,  
so, when I took shears to my jugular -  
you wouldn't help me cut them out.  
You thought I'd be opheliac  
if they bloomed, splashing white  
into my already paling wrists.  
Maybe you thought the perfume would purify me  
and being a tragic heroine  
would be better than just being tragic.

There's a rose garden planted in my brain

I told you how the roots  
wriggled their spike fingers into my thoughts,  
how the headaches kept me awake for centuries,  
how the thorns kept piercing me when I moved  
and spinal fluid kept leaking from my eyes  
and still  
when I vomited petals, coated in their iron-rich soil,  
you told me that I looked beautiful.  
And I learned that people love the colour of blood  
more than they love me.  
Loved the convenience a friendship built on obsessive selflessness  
even if it was a symptom.

Their roots choked out my heart and the landslides  
slipped soil into my bloodstream so as I died,  
drowning in the after-effects of *Pretty*,  
all I could hear  
was you telling me that you loved  
that I had gardenias in my eyes.

# Call it what it is

Kristian Hoareau Foged

Call it what it is,  
White teen shoplifts,  
So you take me too,  
I must be the mastermind,  
Gangbanger accomplice too.

Words get too heavy to lift,  
Weakening breath screams,  
Don't cause a rift,  
Shouting into deaf ears,  
Denying lived reality.  
Why can't we call it what it is?

Burgundy hoodie on,  
Shopping nice part of town,  
Aisle by aisle, watching frown,  
Labelled jacket 'security',  
Makes your suspicions clear,  
Ignoring others in matching gear,  
Because lighter tones means you don't question,  
Their presence here.

Words get too heavy to lift,  
Weakening breath screams,  
Don't cause a rift,  
Shouting into deaf ears,  
Denying lived reality.  
Why can't we call it what it is?

Spit hits the ground,  
By my feet,



Shouting tell me to go home,  
Back to where I came from,  
Unaccepting I'm standing in my hometown.

Words get too heavy to lift,  
Weakening breath screams,  
Don't cause a rift,  
Shouting into deaf ears,  
Denying lived reality.  
Why can't we call it what it is?

"Fuck off, you're black"  
Comes the reply to my "how's your night?"  
"Haha, but seriously," not accepting,  
That I heard it right,  
"Fuck off, I don't dig black,"  
And leaves my sight.

Words get too heavy to lift,  
Weakening breath screams,  
Don't cause a rift,  
Shouting into deaf ears,  
Denying lived reality.  
Why can't we call it what it is?

Do my avocados cure sickness or fuel murder?  
Are bouquet flowers elegant or poison?  
Am I straight outta Compton when I'm not?  
When is 'attitude' assigned by skin?

Words get too heavy to lift,  
Weakening breath screams,  
Don't cause a rift,  
Shouting into deaf ears,  
Denying lived reality.  
Why can't we call it what it is?

"I can't breathe".  
Twice on camera.  
Unarmed and innocent.  
Black and jogging.  
Following rules when birdwatching.  
Victim untouched by Five in a park.  
Whose lives matter?

Words get too heavy to lift,  
Weakening breath screams,  
Don't cause a rift,  
Shouting into deaf ears,  
Denying lived reality.  
Why can't we call it what it is?  
We have to die because they can't stand to call it racist.

# Grindr Gone Wrong

Louis Glazzard

The young men at 25  
who followed you online  
they found you in your baseball cap  
and left you a twisting map...

to the shape of the square screen  
leaving you wondering  
what all of this noise means.

A cocktail with limes  
breeds this time  
an aching.

Invading flesh,  
pink and protruding.

Salt ridden eyes your own,  
a mud masked stranger lets you  
into his home.

Broken door handle  
dusty bed lamps  
his kitchen under revamp.

As you leave after making love  
dazed  
drowsy  
and drained  
by the social age.

The trail to the foot

of your youth  
pulses in your head.

Why did you find a knife,  
under your lovers' bed?

# Portrait of Aphrodite

Lucy Hulton

her hands painted my lips with aloe vera  
juice and olive soap. under her wrinkled  
silk gown, her nipple  
the colour of raspberry  
at the sound of her voice,  
around my teeth—my  
back for my virginity.  
*largest*  
*breasts of womankind* »,  
the firepit spit into  
burns. she

broke free like a fire  
stains on daisy chains.  
my tongue rusted  
senses left me as I begged  
« *Grant me the*  
  
I begged.  
her face— her hair  
dipped her hands

into her lukewarm wine and dabbed out  
the flames. she licked her fingers; & I  
licked them  
*too* .

# A Real Date

Niamh Haran

I suck the lemon before they've even sipped  
their drink & not because I wanna suck up  
anymore second-hand alcohol Spent enough  
time scraping baggies snorting bits of carpet  
for a high I am not looking for love I am looking  
for an excuse A reason to enjoy mobile data  
instead of switching to pay as you go My tinder  
bio dream To suck toxic waste together & laugh  
at this baby of a sweet Potentials always  
wanna go for a drink I wonder what day or if  
I'll tell them Potentials might shave my head  
call me the sun rather than a lemon A sentence  
is a funny thing I make people laugh with those

# old piercing holes

Niamh Haran

grandmother was a dinner lady when she moved  
limerick to hornsey maybe that's why she feeds  
me so much because cows to milk are gone  
like the rest of her generation

her foot doctor tried talking to me hiding  
in the kitchen with mrs brown's boys' calendar  
jaffa cakes stuffed down my throat  
to avoid the confrontation of corns

used to get angry when she said I looked like dad  
toddler to tomboy to femme to whatever  
this is now grandmother has short hair too  
old piercing holes visible

once got an earring stuck inside my lobe  
told my mother and her friends they said  
you don't know real pain just wait until  
you have a baby of your own

# सहारा\*

Niharika Jain

I bring my need to her,  
It unfurls itself, separate from my history  
of suppression and silence.  
The cavern we are in results in echoes,  
Sound after sound of exposure, of hunger,  
of deep longing, of hope lying to the need.  
The two in battle, when they are in fact one,  
One in me, and two for her.  
So I try again to bring my need to her.  
This time, I speak, this time, I say the words,  
Her affection for perfect rhyme  
eludes me, I don't care.  
I need not sing as the echoes create  
a harmony of wanting;  
No longer simple desires  
No longer scribbles at one AM in bed  
No longer shameful ideas  
No longer sins in my head.  
She seems to listen,  
pay attention and close the distance  
between dreaming and wakefulness.  
I try a third time, to bring my need to her.  
This time, an attempt to make it hers,  
That's not the way to go about it,  
As we float further away,  
Echoes get garbled and are lost to  
stalagmites worn shinier,  
in underwater currents.  
I bring my need to her for the last time,  
I am honest, I speak my desire,  
I uncover my own voice,



A new one, which is vulnerable,  
Which doesn't stand in court.  
It is weak-kneed  
It is gloriously proud  
It is laced with experimentation  
It is petal-like fragile  
It is mine.  
We float, together,  
The echoes now  
our joint song, our combined सहारा\*  
in this cavern of meaninglessness.

\*Hindi – mainstay, support, recourse, sustenance, help, anchor

# Dystopian Future

Olivia Toh

Metallic buildings rose sky high, greedily harnessing the sun's scorching energy to power cities. Skies were blanketed with a gloomy patch of constant haziness. The unprotected ones - without masked armours - collapsed continually in the middle of exquisitely engineered streets. Earth. An acidic graveyard of crops and extinct animals. Selfish, foolish humans — fools to neglect Earth's cries of rescue at reversible stages. Now, Earth neglected humans' cries of agony, pleads of reversal. Earth made its final summon to set its last demons free. The sun's tormenting heat shone over Earth, and ice caps pleasurably melted to set dormant viruses free.

# Home

Olivia Toh

Engine.  
Engine means  
he's off to work. Engine marks my safe zone. I wake up after  
hearing engine. I don't pretend to be asleep, hearing engine. I lay foot  
on the marble tiles, piercing cold, like the household, the maid greets me  
and guides me to my morning feast and I munch on the exquisite luxury, trying  
to ignore the aches and bruises stinging on my jaw. Morning flies by in the blink of  
an eye. He comes home scanning for traces of his obedient wife. A glance to the kitchen,  
I brew him coffee, submitting myself to inferiority; a second too late and he pins me onto the  
floor and whips his leather belt onto my face. I close my eyes to bear the sensation  
once more. I deserve it. I'm not a good wife.  
He tugs on the gold pendant on my neck –  
one of the many he got custom made for me –  
strangulation, suffocation – what more is new? It's nothing at all. I am alright. I am  
alright. It's fine. I am fine. At night I cuddle myself  
under the sheets. I like the dark, for shadows won't  
judge me. I can be myself, let out a tear, and no one  
would see. I'm not strong, but I will learn to be. I  
need to be better, better than this. Good enough for him.  
I feel his breath, hot and heavy, next to me. I do not move  
a muscle ; and cautiously , cautiously ,  
f a l l a s l e e p .

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**Prose**

# The Grave Of Robert Johnson In The Mississippi Delta

Caroline Hagen

There is a long straight road called Money Road that runs through the cotton fields of the Mississippi Delta not far from Clarksdale. If you find yourself driving along Money Road, as we do on a fiery hot day in July five years ago, you'll be passing three places that for one reason or another you should probably visit. All of them are to do with death, one fictional and two actual, which makes a kind of pleasing symmetry since we're coming from a day and a night in what the locals in Tupelo call The Birthplace. Up to this point we're all agreed that Elvis is hands down the strangest thing to come out of Mississippi. But the day is young.

We pull into a verge off Money Road and stand on the Tallahatchie Bridge. Maybe you have to be of a certain age, or maybe you have to be a country music fan to understand the appeal of a fairly nondescript bridge over a sluggish river in pretty much the middle of nowhere. Lucky for us, out of the three people in the car, two of us tick both boxes and the third, our youngest son Chris, is fully au fait whether he wants to be or not, due to having grown up in our house.

*I'm sure you know I'm talking about Ode To Billy Joe, and if you don't, hustle along to whatever you play your music on and call it up. Its a slow haunting song, sometimes categorised as belonging to the sub-genre of Southern Gothic. Bobbie Gentry's smoky voice is backed by her own guitar and some swooping strings, and it gave her an unexpected monumental worldwide hit in 1967. It's a masterclass in packing a complex story into a four minute record, and it*

*raised questions that have tormented music buffs to this day. Like, what did they throw off the Tallahatchie Bridge? Was it an aborted or miscarried baby or, as the artist herself once hinted, a wedding ring? A draft card? Why did Billy Joe throw himself off the same bridge to his death the next day? And how come this unexplained suicide somehow broke apart an ordinary Delta farming family?*

The original bridge is gone, destroyed in a fire in 1972 and rebuilt, but it's still worth a visit to us, so that we can say we hung over the rails and looked into the muddy waters off the Tallahatchie Bridge, and that's exactly what we do. The car thermometer reads 94 degrees as we get out and it's about 11am. We've seen maybe a dozen other vehicles in the last hour and now the road is empty and dusty, with the heat rising off the blacktop in a languid haze. We stand there, taking pictures and staring down at the water, singing snatches of the song to each other. The sight of what might be a frog sets Mark and me off, and we warble tunelessly but happily of frogs and county picture shows. I have trouble carrying a tune, but Mark is a whole different level of awful. He's been known to spread confusion and chaos for up to six rows ahead and behind while trying to join in with the hymns at weddings. One couple, dear friends, made our attendance in the church conditional on Mark not singing. That bad. Chris rolls his eyes and starts to laugh.

We're all in shorts and thin vests but it's so hot we can feel the sweat popping out on our top lips and at our

hairlines the minute we leave the air conditioned car. Mark throws a stick off the bridge and we watch it eddy lazily in the brown water. Truthfully, this bridge is a bit of a disappointment. It looks to me like anyone who threw themselves off it could just swim to the bank. It's really not very high. Doesn't even look very deep. We bundle back into the car and the blessed aircon. We've got two more places to get to.

*You can't really call Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market a tourist attraction: the awful story that started there makes it more of a tourist repulsion, but nevertheless people go in large numbers to read the memorial plaque that gives a brief resume of the events of 60 years ago, and to stare at the wreckage of the store. And it really is a wreck; actually dangerous now and held together by plastic safety netting. In August 1955 a 14 year old black boy called Emmett Till was abducted by the store's owner, Roy Bryant, and his half brother J W Milam. They tortured him, shot him in the head, then weighted down his body and threw him in the Tallahatchie River, and they did this because Bryant's wife Carolyn had told her husband that Emmett wolf-whistled her when he came into the store a few days earlier to buy some candy. They were arrested, tried and found not guilty by an all-white jury after less than one hours deliberation. Some months later they confessed to the murder - for a large fee from a magazine - and gave harrowing details. The law of double jeopardy meant they couldn't be re-arrested. A hundred days later, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus in Alabama. She said that she thought of what had happened to Emmett Till, and she couldn't move.*

It's a short drive to the site of Bryant's Grocery. We get out of the car and step into the wall of heat. I scrabble in the pile of clutter on the backseat, grab my hat and jam it on my head. The time is approaching midday and the sky is clear and pale blue with the sun directly above us. We have virtually no shadows, no shade and no company. There isn't another living soul as far as the eye can see, and out here across the flat plains of the cottonfields you can see forever. The old Bryant store building is slumped on the side of the empty road, covered in vines that now almost eclipse the safety netting. The three of us stand in silence, alternately

staring at the ruin and reading the plaque, feeling the fizz of joy from singing together on the Bridge leaking away into the weedy verge. The story of poor 14-year old Emmett Till seems like something that should have happened over a hundred years ago, in a time we can safely disown, not within living memory. None of us can think of anything to say, so we stand there in silence for a few minutes. I hear Chris mutter "Jesus" under his breath, not in a religious way but in tones of horrified disbelief. It's too hot and too sad to stay any longer so we set off for the last of our targets, and the one that Mark has been waiting for. The one that is possibly the main reason for our road trip through the Deep South. The grave of the legendary blues guitarist Robert Johnson.

*Robert Johnson was born in the Delta in 1911 and he died in the Delta at the age of 27. He's considered one of the greatest blues guitarists who ever lived, although the nearest he got to a recording studio was a hotel room, and his entire output comprises some 29 songs. It's said he met the devil at a crossroads, where he sold his soul in return for being able to play the blues. There are many legends around him and few verifiable facts, because there are virtually no reliable written records and the oral accounts are confused and contradictory. But it appears to be true that he had a weakness for whiskey and women, and helped himself to plenty of both as an itinerant musician wandering round the southern states, playing on street corners. He was allegedly given poisoned whiskey by the husband of a woman he was having an affair with, and took three days to die. A doctor was never called. His gravesite has been much puzzled over, but is now thought to be in the churchyard of the Little Church of Zion, directly off Money Road.*

Money Road stretches ahead, straight and white and hazy. You wouldn't think we'd be able to miss the Little Church of Zion but in fact that's exactly what happens. Mark does a U turn and the car bumps up onto the cracked blacktop at the entrance. The thermometer now reads 97° and the humidity is almost unbearable. As we clamber out of the car yet again, I think of all the slaves forced to work these cotton fields in the queasy heat, and now it's my turn to mutter "Jesus" to myself.

Chris and I head straight for a big pecan tree and stand in the welcome shade while Mark fiddles with his camera and starts prowling round the churchyard. The church itself is a tiny white clapboard structure, with a couple of high windows. It's probably about the size of our living room at home. There's a sign that says services are held once a month here, although I don't like their chances of getting any more than 10 people in the building. The burial ground adjoining the church is nothing but a field of scabby earth and sickly looking patches of grass here and there. A few of the tombstones - no more than eight or nine of them in total - are leaning at crazy angles. At some point there must have been a small land slip or something, because we can see the corner of a coffin sticking up out of the ground by one of the more recent looking stones. They seem like a mixture of old and relatively new, but there's one that stands out from the rest by virtue of its size and this, it turns out, is Robert Johnson's resting place.

Across the flashy stone is written "I know that my Redeemer liveth and I know that He will call me from the grave" in a facsimile of Johnson's handwriting, taken directly from a letter that he wrote to his sister. The quotation, although I don't find this out until later, is from Handel's Messiah. Round the bone dry earth at the bottom of the grave previous visitors have left tokens. Little charms, whiskey bottles, a lock of hair, a couple of tiny shot glasses, thin leather bracelets. The silence is absolute and the sun is coming down through the trees like a hammer. Unconsciously, Chris and I have huddled closer together. There's a weird energy about this place that's making me feel very uneasy. I find myself thinking that you couldn't pay me enough to come back here at night when there's a sudden yelp from Mark and we both jump convulsively.

"Jesus!" he says, making it a hat trick for our Lord and Saviour. He's clutching his chest with one hand, the camera dangling on its strap from the other and he's looking utterly bewildered. "What was that?"

"Well, what happened?" I squeak, hand on thumping heart. "We didn't see. What were you doing?"

He pulls his T shirt up and we can see a round bright red mark in the middle of his chest, as if someone has hit a tennis ball at him really hard. "Blimey, that hurts," he says, rubbing it. "I was just trying to get a picture of the inside of the church. I held the camera up and then something sort of...sort of... flew out of the wall and bit me."

"Didn't you see it?"

"No! I don't see where it can have come from either.."

We look at the bland white wall of the church. I start to wonder what sort of strange exotic insects there might be round here that could've bitten him and whether we need to find a hospital, but on closer inspection of the red mark we can all see that there's no puncture. We stand there in the hot heavy silence for about a minute, looking rather wildly about us.

"Let's just go," Chris says. "Just drive away now."

This is a popular suggestion. We don't exactly run back to the car but we certainly bustle very briskly indeed. Mark stuffs the camera into the centre console and swings the wheel back onto Money Road, heading towards Clarksdale where we'll be staying tonight. He concentrates on his driving, responding in terse monosyllables to my enquiries.

"Does it still hurt?"

"Yep."

A few miles later: "Does it still hurt now?"

"Yep."

Fifteen minutes further on: "Does it...?"

"God, *Caroline!*"

We pull up in Clarksdale to find the guy with the keys leaning up against his car outside our accommodation. This is two self contained apartments next door to each other directly off the street and rejoicing in the

collective name The Hooker Hotel. Keys man has got no fucks to give about the heat, and is wearing faded Levi's, scuffed up cowboy boots and a long sleeved T shirt featuring a perkily breasted naked lady, in the 1950's Pin Up Art style, hanging onto a pole. Arranged in a semi circle above and below her are the words "Liquor In The Front" and "Poker In The Rear". I can see Chris fancying himself greatly in just such a T shirt when he goes back to University in October and make a mental "oh no you don't" note to myself. The apartments are clean, the air conditioning is working and both are equipped with kitchens, fridges, coffee machines and the like. Ours has a separate bedroom, while Chris's is one big space dominated by a king size bed. The town seems deserted, with keys man the only other person we've seen, and by common consent we heave our cases silently into our rooms and go to bed. It's only mid afternoon but it's already been a long, strange day.

That evening, slightly groggy from sleeping during the day, we meet outside the Hooker Hotel and wander through the darkening town to Ground Zero, Morgan Freeman's blues club. It's a cavernous space, covered in graffiti and furnished from someone's granny's attic. On stage are a band from Kansas playing 10 Years After covers, and the place is surprisingly full given the empty streets we walked through to get here. By a quirk of pricing, there's hardly any difference between buying a gin and tonic, a glass of wine or a beer and normally I'd be G&T and no mistake, but somehow it's been a cold beer kind of day. We sit idly watching the band, rolling our frosted beer bottles round our hot faces and rather hesitantly talking through the events of the day. The red circle on Mark's chest has gone, leaving no evidence that it was ever there, although the experience at The Little Church Of Zion seems even odder in retrospect than it did at the time. But then, we all agree, the whole area feels odd. As we left Tupelo and drove down into the Delta, we seemed to pass through an invisible membrane to a different place. The shadows cast by slavery and racism are darker here than anywhere else in the Southern states, the weight of injustice and unhappiness heavier. But out of all that came the astonishing music: Robert Johnson, Bobbie

Gentry, Sam Cooke, Muddy Waters, Bo Diddley, BB King, Howlin' Wolf, Arthur 'Big Boy' Crudup - the list isn't endless but it's very long.

And now it's 2015 and we're sitting in Clarksdale, "ground zero" for the blues, drinking beer in a club owned by a globally famous black man whose name is Freeman. We clink our frosty beer bottles together and raise a toast to the glorious weirdness that is the Mississippi Delta.



# 1912

## DC Diamondopolous

“Women and children first! Women and children first!”

A brandy snifter in one hand, a cigar in the other, I am alone as I watch people rush about on deck from the comfort of my leather chair in the first-class smoking room. It's past midnight, the lights flicker, but I am ruthlessly serene, for I did not overcome my childhood in the slums of the East End to drown in the freezing Atlantic water.

Second-class is where I belong, but who's to care now? When faced with death, we're all in the same boat.

Perhaps you've heard of me, Julian Grey, or seen my name on music hall marquees from Belfast to London.

I've made an enviable living as a comic, mimic, dancer, and acrobat. But what has brought me my greatest fame, and why I set sail on the Titanic to New York at the request of vaudeville manager, William Hammerstein, is my unfathomable ability to juggle five balls with my feet.

I put my cigar into an ashtray and set down the glass. Twisting the ends of my mustache, I am resolved about what I'm to do next, for I've never been one to pass up an opportunity.

I rise. The ship lurches. Poker chips, chess pieces, and tumblers fall on the floor. With my walking stick, I whack them away and stagger toward the door.

The ship creaks, a slow back and forth. The vessel tilts. I balance myself between the doorway.

The corridor is empty.

I open the door to a first-class suite. What finery, such elegance. There's a diamond stickpin and a ruby ring on the mahogany dresser. Did I mention that I am also a thief? I drop the stickpin and ruby ring into my coat pocket. I open the armoire and glide my hand over the dresses until I choose one.

If costumed in one lady's attire, I might draw attention, so I open the door to the next cabin.

“Excuse me, Sir,” I say. A man holds a whiskey bottle in one hand and a Bible in the other. “Aren't you going on deck?”

“Leave me be young man.”

I shut the door.

The next room is charming, even as the furniture slides to the wall, with peacock patterns on overturned chairs, an electric fireplace, a vanity fit for Sarah Bernhardt. Stumbling, I open a chest of drawers grab undergarments and a scarf.

What I need is a warm coat, ladies' boots, and a hat. The lights go off, then on. I must hurry.

I enter a suite across the hall.

The room is in shambles. The dresser is on its side, a chair on its back. I throw the clothes on the bed and go to the trunk and take out a winter coat, lace-up boots, and a hat with a feather.

What I am about to do may seem shameful.

I sit on the edge of the bed next to the heap of clothes and remove my coat, then my tie and collar. My brother, may he rest in peace, comes to mind as I unbutton my shirt.

The binding is tight around my chest, and I begin to unfasten. Charles, was more than a brother, a father, he was (I continue to unwind) to me, a motherless devil-rat, five years to his twelve. The bandage is off. My breasts are revealed.

I remove my trousers and drawers and pull the padding from between my legs. At a young age, Charles dressed me as a boy — “You’ll be safer, and we can make a shilling or two.” We performed on street corners and in taverns, and as I grew and girls liked me, I liked them back. I am not an impersonator like the popular music hall drags. I am a man, and I’ve made the best of my oddity.

Naked, I dress.

Perfumes from the clothes make my eyes water. I put my wallet, cuff links, and stolen jewelry into the pocket of the woolen coat and squeeze my feet into the boots.

There is a strangeness to it, and I feel an utter distaste, the way the undergarments rustle and swish. Above the dresser is a mirror. I put on the hat and cover my short hair but leave a fringe that falls over my forehead. The mustache, I peel off and put in my pocket.

Pinching my cheeks, the way I’ve seen my lovers do, I leave the way I came and go onto the deck.

Such chaos and panic. A man says good-bye to his wife

and son as a lifeboat is lowered. Their cries provoke pity.

“Is there room?” I ask in a feminine voice.

“No, Miss,” a crew member shouts. “Might be on the other side.”

My unease mounts. I hurry among the crowd. My air of detachment collapses as I shove aside men and go around the stern. A lifeboat hangs from the davits.

“Women and children first!”

It’s mayhem. Men implore their families to board, promising everything will be all right. From their shabby clothes, it’s easy to see they’re from steerage.

“What do we have here?” a shipmate yells. He removes a shawl and a scarf from the head of a man trying to board. “Josser.”

A woman has the vapors and faints in her husband’s arms.

A crowd gathers by a lifeboat hanging from the derricks. Men step aside as I make my way through them.

Before me is a woman and her three daughters. Their tattered clothes arouse my sympathy. I slip the ruby ring into the woman’s coat pocket.

“Come on, Miss,” a deckhand says. He takes my arm and helps me into the boat.

Other than the two in command of rowing, I am the only man.

I dismiss any charge that I am a coward. Be that as it may, it will forever be a blessing, an irony indeed, that what saved me was the hand I was dealt.

# infertile via implant

Emma Dawson

Bridie did not normally have a menstrual cycle due to her implant and it was probably the most amazing gift that technological advances had ever given her.

She knew this was especially true because she was currently having her period and she'd already wasted a lot of time wondering how the hell she used to cope with this once a month. She was pre-menstrual a few days ago and she thought that she'd sunk into pure darkness. I mean, it was months into lockdown, she had a reason not to be super cheery, but still – her emotions were jogging around wildly and she was constantly on the verge of tears. She even tried going for a jog. Nothing! She couldn't do anything and Bridie normally does absolutely everything. Okay, she takes breaks sometimes, but she gets her wellbeing through productivity. People say that it's dangerous, but it just works.

So, when it turned out that it was only a period, Bridie was so fucking relieved. Okay, that's not quite right, she shat herself initially because when you only have one period a year, it's arrival's a real shocker, but then, she celebrated because she absolutely didn't want to deal with this crying because of hormones business! She wanted to cry for an actual reason, or not at all.

She was so thankful that it wasn't something worse that she didn't much mind when breast pain, stomach cramps, and generally feeling utterly depleted followed. Of course, it was still like being ill. *How the hell do women*

*deal with this shit monthly?*

Bridie focused on being lucky and praised the implant.

When Bridie tells people about her wonderful implant, the most common response from women is, "I wouldn't like not having my periods." And Bridie understands. And feels judged.

Her doctor said it was fine.

She wonders why more women aren't delighted like her with the idea of getting rid of most of the mood swings, blood, and pain involved in having a menstrual cycle. *How the hell do women deal with this shit monthly?* Of course, when she went on the implant, she didn't know that it was going to do this to her and obviously, it wouldn't necessarily do the same thing for another woman. But in terms of accidental brilliance, the implant was the perfect thing for Bridie. Because she never worried about getting pregnant while on contraception, so not having that monthly indicator that she wasn't with child was absolutely acceptable. She gets that other women need that.

She doesn't fully understand why her cycle has stopped, but Bridie suspects that other women are concerned by the lack of fertility indicated by a woman of child-bearing age who doesn't bleed. The pill stops fertility AND offers that reassuring blood, for instance. But Bridie was only keen on being fertile when she was

teenager and hadn't quite learnt to think for herself. Not that women who want children don't think for themselves! But Bride knows that, back then, she was assuming that she would live her life as most women do. She read too much into dreams where she was pregnant. She even found kids quite interesting. She wanted something to cuddle.

Now, the only thing left of *that* Bridie is the fact that she quite likes holding other people's babies. It's because they're tiny and warm, but also because it's a safe way of trying out someone else's life. You put the Mum role on for five minutes and you cast it off again. And she's quite fascinated by people who want that all the time.

Bridie began life surrounded by teenagers who knew that they would one day have kids and then she gradually started meeting people who weren't sure and people who didn't want them and it made her feel less alone. Which doesn't mean that she's exempted from getting shit for being unmaternal. From acquaintances mostly, who are baffled that she could possibly not want *that*. They want her to explain it. And she can, but she suspects not in terms that they'll understand.

She tries to make it simple, "I think that I'd be a completely different person if I wanted kids because the whole thing horrifies me."

That upsets people.

If she was diplomatic, she'd just say, "Ooo, maybe in the future." But she doesn't really like bare-faced lies, or pandering to society's general opinion of rightness when she's decided that it's not her own. She doesn't see why she should show such reverence for them when they show none for her.

So, she tells them the truth, normally the somewhat sanitised version, but the truth. And she tries to answer in a way that will prevent them from claiming that they know better about what she wants to do with her life and womb.

When her periods stopped, she felt slightly freer from the bullshit of being a woman, so it was always frustrating when other people started to bring her back to earth. Because if there was an option to still be fertile and to not have periods, you'd think that women would take it, wouldn't you? It's like they think that she's making herself permanently infertile via implant. And she isn't – not that that's her priority. But why does the absence of this messy, nasty, smelly thing freak them out so much? *How the hell do women deal with this shit monthly?*

Bridie is so cranky today that she can hardly heft herself to go to the shops. She feels heavy and sullen and fragile.

This is some sick joke on women, she thinks.

She thinks, *HOW THE HELL DO WOMEN DEAL WITH THIS SHIT MONTHLY????!!*

Then she hauls her body, that feels like a bulk right now, out the door and makes herself go to Sainsburys.

# Reaching

Jon Barton

The ancient cab arrives, spilling us onto the deserted street. We are four bone-jolting hours' drive from Surat – the capital of Gujarat – and the last thing we've seen that could loosely be termed civilisation. Now we find ourselves standing amid the mud and thatch houses, with only the purr of cicadas in the midday heat and the smell of burnt earth in the air. I feel wilted. I brace myself for further disappointments. Neither of us know what to expect: me armed with Lonely Planet titbits; Ben with his copy of Shantaram. The India we expected was no less a fiction.

I knew Ben had always struggled with his heritage. If someone asked where he was from, he'd side-step the question with a retort.

'My surnames Foster, what do you think?'

I'd struggled to speak to him about it because being mixed race is particularly difficult in South Africa, where it had been a punishable offence for his parents to be together. They were never able to marry, and their relationship had been crushed under the pressure of sickening circumstances. His mother told me once that she named him after a righteous son, who is told of in both the Bible and the Koran.

I think she always hoped that in time he might bridge the divide.

I also knew she'd chosen to register him as white, giving

him her last name and leaving his father's blank on the birth certificate. Wracked with guilt at the last minute, she gave him his father's family name.

Benjamin Motala Foster.

This caused a great scandal, but it was preferable to the alternative.

What I didn't know was that Ben was ashamed of his identity – the bobble headed Indian in a gold outfit chatting away in a sing-song voice. This is why, when it came time to plan a summer break, he was reluctant when I suggested India.

It was to be the longest holiday either of us had ever taken after the toughest work year we'd ever had. In my mind, we were already strolling the softly disclosed gardens around the Taj – I would later discover that these were non-existent.

Days before our departure, we received a rare visit from Ben's father. As the years passed and laws became more liberal, Mr Motala had rebelled against them, reverting to his roots to seek comfort in the Muslim community. Ben, who grew up in an Anglican household, disappointed his father by stretching ever further from him. I eavesdropped from the Switzerland of our kitchen as they manoeuvred the attacks and retreats of their conversation like oversized chess pieces. I was saddened to detect fissures in both voices:

Ben's guarded, laced with the formality of undelivered expectation; Mr Motala's terse, hardened by uncounted years of persecution.

I was surprised to hear Ben's father instructing him as he left.

"Go to the village of Waretti, outside the capital. Waretti. Not Varadi. In Gujarat."

That was all.

We had no map, address, or co-ordinates. Sitting safely in our pretty flat on our calm, cream, middle-class sofa, wondering at that cryptic command, it never occurred to me what it might mean – and what it might take to get there.

Growing up in South Africa I thought I understood poverty. I knew what it felt like to have people sleeping in the streets. My personal background noise was a gentle hum of gratitude for the roof over my head, coupled with the roaring shame and impotence of helplessness. I could not help the thousands homeless, the millions starving. Yet here in India, the poverty has levels. People do sleep in the streets, but in the evenings they unroll threadbare blankets onto trash-speckled pavements.

They may not be so lucky: if you are too weak, too sick, or too small to wage war for your turf, you may find yourself sleeping in the road instead.

Seeing this knocks the breath out of me. I am on holiday. I could leave anytime, but I can't ignore the savage truth that, for these people, there is no holiday from hardship. Once again, shame finds me.

Despite this, I quickly fall in love with the heady sights and sounds of Mumbai. Ben does too – a city boy at heart. Our allotted two days linger into three, then four. Before we know it a week had passed, and we are still eating pistachio ice cream at sunset on the Marine Drive promenade before hot nights in the Jazz Club.

One afternoon, I stop to buy a book from a street seller. I quickly realise, with his horde of treasures piled high on the pavement I have no chance of finding the right thing by myself. He, like the dragon atop his gold, greets me with riddles.

What am I thinking about today?

How do I judge good and evil?

What, if I pleased, were the most important qualities for a happy life?

His methods seem to work, and while I stock up on Rushdie, Roy and Rowles, the afternoon rolls into evening. We discuss culture, morality, and yesterday's cricket score. As we pack away our purchases, he spots the Shantaram in Ben's bag, and gleefully reveals that Gregory David Roberts used to buy books from him too. Where we were, just down the street from Roberts' usual jaunt in Colaba, I was inclined to believe him.

At six o'clock the Chai wallah came by peddling tea, insisting on buying us all a glass. He reveals (with some satisfaction) he'd been selling all kinds of books, to all kinds of people, on the same street corner for forty years, and the only thing that had changed was the price of chai.

I smile and tell him he is a philosopher; to which he replies that Indians are natural philosophers thanks to their lyrical languages, and the way history is taught through songs and poetry.

I leave with two gifts from him: an anthology of Rumi verses, and the circumspect look on Ben's face. When I ask why, he murmured 'natural philosophers' and carried on looking thoughtful.

We spend the next two months exploring regal palaces and lush gardens, the abandoned city of Fatehpur Sikhri.

Waretti tumbles into the fathomless depths of our growing To Do List.

Everywhere we go is more beautiful than the next, the contrasts more extreme. Our 'summer' holiday becomes a frozen ordeal in the Delhi winter, and my temper (malleable at the worst of times) stiffened in the Maharashtran sun, to snap without warning at one too many travel hurdles, or Ben's hangry fits.

In what felt like no more than a moment, our time was up. It was Wednesday, in some lake city in Rajasthan. We were to fly out on Saturday from Mumbai, two gargantuan states away. Upon closer inspection we realised that Waretti was easily reached, and on a whim we board a sleeper train with little time to spare.

In the morning we head to Surat's tourist office. The turbaned gentleman is kind and firm and assures us Waretti does not exist.

We must mean Varadi – would it please us if he called a cab? No? Then please, let him send us down the road, to his sister's brother's cousin, who owns a travel agency, around the corner.

Mr Sister's Brother's Cousin was not down the road, and as it turned out, around the corner became six very hot corners. When we finally arrive, the man was equally pleased to see us. News of our arrival had clearly preceded us on the telephone. He was just as pleased to assure us that Waretti most definitely did not exist. Didn't we know there were lovely tours available to the Taj? We could leave today.

Six hours, seven phone calls, and five wild-goose-chases later – each with a goose more wildly disappointing than the last – Ben despairs. He is exhausted. He decides that we miscalculated and, thanks to his own pursuit of pleasure, no longer had time to search elsewhere. What would his father say?

I can see he is trying. He is trying so hard. But he is unable to hide the defeat as he suggests we find a hotel for the night. I can't bring myself to look at him. If he has tears in his eyes, I'll cry too, and the geese will win.

I had long lost hope that we will find Waretti but the truth is I can't face his disappointment. I cannot bear it if he gives up. I know that now is the time to summon enough belief to carry us both.

So I make my face calm and my voice low and instead of agreeing I say 'No'.

It makes me feel better so I say it again:

'No. No, no, no.'

There is no way we can leave with an errant goose unchaste.

So we find ourselves in the office of Mr Chaudhary, refined Municipal Liaison for Southern Gujarat. Collapsing into the proffered leather chair in front of his rich mahogany desk, I can see he can't help us but is loath to add to our dejection. He orders tea. Through that time-honoured magic, our spirits lift. Mr Chaudhary's soft voice and mild-manners seem to lift them further.

Ben explains he has no family in South Africa. It is almost an accident that he was born there. On a whim, his grandfather takes his son and left Waretti, shortly after his wife was taken by tuberculosis. He travels to Mumbai and boards a ship for the Indian Ocean Islands, which was blown off course, to dock in South Africa instead. He himself died young and heart-broken, and never told his son about his homeland.

Now here we are, retracing the journey back from South Africa.

Mr Chaudhary listens with his head dipped politely towards us. A thoughtful silence pools around him. Finally, he lifts his head and enquires 'Is it not Varadi you are looking for? You are sure?'

Ben is sure.

Mr Chaudhary crosses to a huge map of Gujarat, covering the wall opposite his desk, where he pours

over the Sanskrit text for several minutes.

At last he says: 'you will drink your tea, I will make a phone call.'

One moment becomes many, as a phone call became seven. The clock crawls past five and Mr Chaudhary's staff escape in dribs and drabs. We sit obediently in our leather chairs, tea finished, despair returning, and nothing left to do with ourselves but wait.

After an age, Mr Chaudhary finishes his last phone call and turns to us. He has found a retired census clerk from the office of the sister office of the Northern Gujarat municipality who remembers there being a small village, called *Varethi*, several hundred kilometres outside of Surat, the capital city. He remembers it because it is Muslim, and Gujarat is largely a Hindu state.

'I think this could be your place', he says. 'I have engaged a driver for you. If you please, he will collect you here at eight o'clock tomorrow morning and take you there.'

To our surprise, we find ourselves standing in the dusty street of *Varethi*. The streets are empty, and I imagine the ominous call of fleeing geese in the air. Our driver reminds us it is one o'clock on a Friday afternoon – the inhabitants are all at prayer. He will go to the mosque and make enquiries.

What on earth could he possibly enquire? How can we know possibly know whether we are in the right place?

Once more, there is nothing to do but wait, so I join Ben sat on the root of a banyan tree that hugs the sand of the obliging road. His nerves dither between excitement and frustration, as fast as his leg bounces. I bite my tongue. Nothing more can be done. The universe is with us or against us.

Then we hear voices, and before we can register that they are coming nearer, a crowd of men appear, led by

the Driver; and an imposing, grey haired gentleman in traditional *Shalwar Kameez* and a *taqiyah* skullcap. The man speaks in rapid Gujarati, punctuated by the occasional 'Motala' as he strides towards us. The Driver, who has been vigorously nodding his head and running alongside, races up to us and crows: 'Mr Benjamin, Mr Benjamin! This is Mr Motala, your uncle, your grandfather's brother! These are your cousins!'

I can hardly believe it.

The next moments feel like a cyclone. Embraces, and more Gujarati, as we are led to the Motala family home. No one speaks English, but that doesn't matter, because Ben is speechless, a scent of a smile roaming over his face as he gushes from one person to the next.

Upon arrival the women are waiting. One of the children must have run ahead and there is more wonderment and more crowing: 'This is your cousin, this is your aunt, this is your Grandmother, no-no, your Grandmother-Sister.'

Our Driver slows to deferentially translate when an old lady – back stooped, a head scarf revealing only her face – grasps my arm and whispers 'We are so happy to meet our missing family. You are welcome here.' I am indescribably moved.

We gather on the porch. Motalas take up every space on couches, cushions and the bare concrete floor. One by one, slowly, softly, and aided by translation, we exchange stories like precious gifts. They eagerly receive news of Ben's father and with grateful astonishment we listen to how he was born in this room. I am floored by their hospitality. They have so little – not even electricity. Yet they want to share it with us, with their lost child, and his pale walking ghost.

They welcome him completely as one of their own.

They express pride in his achievements and the life he has made, further away than they can imagine, but now so near. Stories ebb and flow: realisations, confusions,



coincidences. Bonds form, lineages drawn, and thus, a heritage is found.

You could say our trip to India was a holiday like any other, but there was one afternoon that eclipsed the everyday, as if we'd reached for the unknown and universe had reached back, and leaned down to pull us that last little way up.

And I have noticed these days, when someone asks Ben where he is from, there is a certain lift of his chin, a pride in the tilt of his head, when he says 'I am Indian.'

# The White Hart

Judy Upton

I swore as I checked the mirror and braked hard. It was just before 2am. When I got home I went to bed straight as soon as I'd eaten, but its red eyes burning beneath my lids, stopped me from sleeping. The sunlight pouring through the curtains made matters worse. The material is far too thin and flimsy. If I worked regular nightshifts I'd get blackout blinds, but I've no time to do anything about it now. I suppose I could stick old newspapers over the windows. I don't get one delivered myself, but there're usually a few kicking about in the waiting area.

All us drivers are confined to this one corner of the warehouse now, while our trucks are loaded. There are five plastic chairs, all spaced apart, though currently I'm the only person here. After we protested to management yesterday, we also have a single port-a-loo for our use. Drivers had always used the general staff toilets until we were banned last week. So while it's still fine for the wholesaler's own staff to use their facilities the drivers for reasons unknown, are treated like lepers. We sit on our designated chairs, fenced off by a line of hazard tape, eating our homemade sandwiches and drinking lukewarm coffee from our thermos flasks. There is a coffee machine, but it's now on the other side of the tape border and reserved for packers and forklift drivers.

I miss hearing all the news and gossip from my friends among the warehouse workers. I won't be able to have a chat with any of the supermarket shelf-stackers on arrival either, and supper will be in my cab, as the café at services is closed. As a trucker I'm used to being on

my own for long periods of time, but now, like so many people, I don't see anyone outside of work either.

I live alone in a one-room box, and most of my friends aren't yet into virtual conversations. We do Skype, but we're all a bit awkward and quickly run out of things to say. It's not the same as when we'd go for a meal or to the pub in a big group. Mum rang about an hour before I left tonight, even though I'd told her not to call during my downtime. She can't adjust to me working nights. I'd said I'd drop in any shopping she needs on my way home, but all she wanted were her bleeding lottery tickets. "Can you get me three and a couple of scratch cards, Jen? They won't put any of those in my food parcel will they?" I don't think that was a serious question, but you never can tell with Mum. I told her the supermarket wouldn't be open when I arrived, and that I wasn't going out again later just so she could waste her money. Why do people in their eighties want to win the lottery anyway? Mum always says she has no idea what she would do with a million if she won it. Why then ask your daughter to risk her health for something pointless?

Sitting here alone, as the forklifts bleep and the distant packers shout and laugh, the white stag's on my mind again. When it stepped out in front of my truck last night, I was certain I was going to hit it. I'm seated too high in the cab for that kind of impact to do me damage, unless it was thrown into the air, of course. Knowing my stopping distance, even at only a little over 30

mph, I didn't think the deer stood much of a chance. It disappeared and I feared it had gone underneath, despite not feeling so much as a judder. When I got out to take a look though, there was nothing there. Not a mark on the truck, no movement in the trees, and no sound of any living thing on that deserted stretch of road. The stag had melted away, as if I'd driven through a ghost. At least that meant it didn't have to go in the incident log.

It's only since this crisis began that we've been asked to drive at night. Previously we were used to setting out before the sun was up, but doing whole trips in darkness is a new experience. No one likes to hear heavy lorries thundering past their home in the early hours, or at least they didn't before empty shelves became a problem. At night the motorway lights can become hypnotic and with few vehicles apart from other trucks out there, there's less than usual to occupy your mind. You leave the radio on for the traffic reports and notice how the DJs struggle to play appropriate songs after each news bulletin. Follow it up with something cheerful and it appears insensitive, choose a downbeat track and it'll make us feel worse. In the end they usually just play the bland stuff. It's middle of the road music for the middle of the motorway in the middle of the night.

I'd already left the motorway by the time I saw the white stag. I was delivering to store in a village where there's a winding lane with a tree canopy for several miles before you reach the High Street. That's where it happened. He stepped boldly out from the shadows of the trees. His head was held high and his huge antlers branched wider than a Christmas reindeer. In those few seconds, as he turned his head to confront my 7.5 tonne lorry, he appeared utterly fearless.

Taking out my phone I search 'white stag' and discover that they're actually quite rare. There are several species of deer in this country but by his size I think he must be a Red Deer. They shed those massive antlers around this time, in March or early April, and grow a complete new set by autumn. A large white stag is also known as a 'White Hart' - like in the name of a pub or in White

Hart Lane. It says they're surrounded by superstition and folklore.

Mum's superstitious, but I'm not. Not usually. Though I do suddenly feel the urge to discover whether, like a black cat crossing my path, a white hart is associated with good luck, or with bad. It's mainly because of the way it looked directly at me - those burning ruby eyes meeting mine as if it was trying to tell me something.

If any of the other drivers were here at the moment, they wouldn't let me take this white hart thing seriously. "You nearly hit a stag - oh deer!" That's how it'd be. Then Markos would be telling, for the umpteenth time, the story of the squirrel trapped in his cab, whilst proudly showing the teeth-marks left in his thumb. Richard though might be interested in the whole white hart mythology. He has a dream-catcher hanging above his windscreen and likes folk music. Catch him in the right mood and he'll talk about things like water divining and ley lines.

Richard might know if it's lucky or unlucky to see a white hart. I'll text him before I leave and send him links to some of the stuff I've just found about them. A couple of websites mention white harts as part of the legend of Herne The Hunter. He's an antler-wearing lord of the forest who watches over the natural world. Celtic people once saw white harts as messengers from a place called 'the otherworld' - a land of spirits. My Gran was from County Wexford and she was superstitious. Perhaps that's where Mum gets her love of the ruddy lottery. Now I've clicked on a site about English folklore and it says a white hart appears at times of great turmoil and it signifies change. That's certainly interesting, if at present, a little unnerving.

A man wearing a mask from a DIY shop appears, and beckons from a social distance with his blue-gloved hand. I think it's Steve but it could be Dave as they're both bald and around the same height. Either would be a friendly face, in normal times. You start to miss smiles when they're not visible.

My truck is loaded and it's time to go. 'A white hart can lead you down new roads' the folklore website says, which to me sounds suspiciously like a detour ahead. 'It can also symbolise new beginnings, new knowledge and a greater understanding of the world'.

The white hart might not be the lucky black cat I was hoping for, but at least it's no prophet of doom. I'm toying with printing up a photo of one later. I could stick it up in my cab, like the way people are putting rainbows in their windows. I will pop out later and buy Mum her lottery tickets too, I've decided. I'll take them round and put them through her letterbox. It's not because seeing a white hart has made me feel particularly fortunate. It's just that at the moment, we all need to believe in something, whether that's family, friends, luck, or something more spiritual. In this time of uncertainty, there's one thing I now feel certain of. At some point I'm going to see the white hart again. Maybe sooner, maybe later, somewhere down the road.

# Come on Eileen

Mauk Donnabhain

Turkey in the oven. It was the screaming that I looked forward to most. I knew they would scream. I was ready for it. The moment she opened the oven door and said,

“There she is!”

But the screaming was even louder than I thought it would be. A trail of children running from the house. Eileen laughing to herself.

She was my babysitter. Not that I needed a babysitter. But the turkey had come along. With her pink screwed-up face and her constant wailing. And then Eileen had appeared. A cloud of mystery surrounding her. She'd come from a place called Birmingham. A place none of us had ever heard of, where she'd picked up an English twang and a funny way of dressing.

I loved the madness in her. The terrifying feeling of freedom when she was around. You never knew what she would say or do next. Of course, the turkey was safely tucked into her cot in the living room. The turkey in the oven was a real one. It just looked a bit like a baby.

Looking back on it as an adult, I can see how wrong it was. What Eileen did. If it was nowadays, the social services would be called in. People would give her the help she needed. But it was the eighties. Even the adults laughed, when they heard about it later.

The last time I saw Eileen.

I was a teenager by then. Hanging around with a gang of boys on BMXs. Terrorising the pavements with our bikes. Eileen had stopped babysitting us a few years before. The turkey was in school now, and well able to look after herself. I'd missed Eileen when she stopped coming around. Then she'd disappeared completely. Gone back to England for a while. When I saw her again, I was too ashamed to acknowledge her.

The ambulance outside her block of flats. A drama that was important enough to make us swing our bikes around and stand there gawking, like everyone else. Ambulances showed up on our street often enough. There was always a drama. When they brought her out, supported on each side by neighbouring women. Alexis Carrington. Dark glasses. Blanket wrapped around her. Resigned to fate.

“C'mon, Eileen!”

Climbing the steps into the back of the vehicle.

“Look at me.”

A million hearts cried.

“No, see me!”

Da-Na-Na-Na. Come on Eileen.

The time I like to remember her best was when she

taught us how to dance. Me and two of my girl cousins. Lined up in the living room. Music blaring through the house. Shoulders moving. Step forward. Hips swaying. Copying her. She was a ruthless teacher. We repeated the moves. Over and over.

“We are far too young and clever.”

Laughing until we choked up.

“C'mon, Eileen!”

Verging. Doctors and nurses.

“But sure what do they know?”

They wouldn't know about the times we dressed up the Barbie dolls. Fashion parades I wouldn't admit to. Spraying Ma's perfume and swatting the air afterwards.

Eileen talked to me like a grown-up. Her self-confidence rubbing off. An attitude, as my mother would later call it.

Babysitter. Not wife. Not girlfriend or mother. The ambulance. And the neighbours coaxing her in.

“C'mon, Eileen. C'mon love!”

Basted. Temperature high. Skin crackling. Stuffed with life.

My parents' room. The reason Ma hates Da. Doors shut and a whacking sound. Eyes sunk.

“Can you see that?”

“What?”

Screaming and running out onto the street. Sure it was all just a bit of craic.

Late night, national anthem. Soldiers are we.

“Stand up!”

“But I want to sleep.”

It's midnight and, and ...

Another image surfacing. Eileen in the kitchen.

“Let's play a game.”

It's called sitting still. It's called listening to our lives passing.

“Can you hear that?”

Something wrong with her.

“See who can stay quiet the longest.”

It's called silence. It's called giving Eileen's head peace. As if someone had died. As if turkey had been in the oven for real. I waited for a sign. A hint of laughter in her eyes. A bout of tickling. But Eileen's eyes looked empty and I wondered what it was then, that made me love her so much.

Dungarees and the smell of pups being born. Eileen is wild about them. She wants to adopt them all. Save the bitches from being drowned in a bucket of water.

“Can I keep just the one?”

But Eileen can't keep anything, as it turns out.

Not a pup. Not a silence. Not a turkey in the oven.

The things you think as a child. Wishing Eileen was my mother. Wishing I didn't have to stand for the national anthem, when it's midnight and I'm half asleep. Wishing Eileen would smile again. Wishing the doctors and nurses would leave her alone.

At this moment. You mean everything.

# Goodnight, Miguelito

Michael Handrick

22

He called me *Miguel* during the day as he held my hand and pulled me through the National Gallery, the Serpentine and the White Cube. Cupped my ear with his hand to whisper about a portrait or an artist or the history behind a scene. I became entangled in the lilt in his voice, the press of his lips against the spirals of my ear as if it were his own conch to store his secrets in. When he let go of my hand, he danced down the marble hallways leaving me to follow his shadow and the echoes of his laugh deeper into the labyrinth.

At night, he called me *Miguelito* as we lay twined together. His clothes were folded and stacked on my bookcase where he always left them after choosing a book for us to read. His skin shone in the moonlight like the inside of a shell. He smelled of salt and twilight. I rubbed the scar above his lip, a tiny gondola. When he climbed into bed, he pulled me into his chest, and we held *Love in the Time of Cholera* between our hands and he traced each line with his finger as he read them. He translated the words I didn't understand, filled my mouth with Spanish and my mind with us sailing down the Magdalena River in that tiny gondola where the stars had collapsed into the black waters. My body has been fluent in all languages except this one.

'To translate is to destroy. It's disgusting when I say it in English,' he said as he snapped the book shut and put it on the bedside table. 'I'll take you there one day,'

he promised me as I ran my finger along the tattoo on his forearm, a camel in the desert with a crescent moon above it. The mirror propped on top of the radiator reflected his back to me, his spine a thread of pearls.

He kissed me goodnight. It left my mouth laced with cider and cinnamon and sugar. I placed my index and middle fingers on his lids, his eyes like moon slits, and closed them gently. I had no coins to keep them shut. No coins for the journey, for the next story. And as his breathing deepened it sounded like the sighs of drowning men.

I woke up in the moment when time was in suspension. When the darkness was in equilibrium with the light and everything was possible and endless. Just for a second, until the sky brightened, and the room was dripping full of light like honeycomb, a warm, gloopy heat as if it were preserving the moment. The illusion of possibilities was broken the moment I turned and realised that I was alone under half-empty sheets. The room was as it was before he arrived: the space where his clothes were normally kept empty, the glass he had drunk cider from was wiped clean of his lips' imprint on the rim. The remains of his lips still lingered across my body. All that indicated that he had been there at all was the smell of sandalwood on the pillow next to me and the upturned book on my bedside table. The smell of twilight and the sea disappeared in the dusk as he sailed on that gondola alone.

The window was still open as if he had slipped from my arms in the night and escaped through it. We all have our ways to disappear. Just as he arrived in the depths of night, he departed. I lifted up *Love in the Time of Cholera* and flicked through the pages trying to find where our story was, whose it would replicate. I closed it shut and the tiny gold embossed sun beams on the dust cover shone in the light.

23

We'd signed our names in a book to enter. *Just like the witches*, he laughed. We swigged wine from the bottle in the underground Italian bar full of dust-smearing photos of famous people long forgotten and sticky, red Formica tables.

Outside in the rain he kissed me. It filled me with his story since he left: the words unsaid and forgotten, the sighs of his other lovers, their love and languages tied to the root of his tongue. With that kiss I let him erase the past year and a half. As if he had never slipped into the dark and never returned.

He held himself in a perpetual state of readiness as if ready to slip into the night, for one last dance. He spun, turned me under the rain, under the stars. Fleshless, but flesh. Hand-shadows on the floor, on my face. He asked me to dance. Took my hand, stepped from the path, stepped into the night. Peeled away the skin and the flesh until all that was left was the dancing part of himself. He spun new worlds and new stories. Froth lined shores and shipwrecks, sun-speckled forests, gondolas down misty canals and masked faces in the shadows. No time for words. No space to form them. Speak now or forever hold your peace. I drank the apple from his lips. Unlike language and rules, he led me to places unknown, pulled into dances in the dark.

He stood on one of the fountain rims in Trafalgar Square as if conducting everyone to dance to his soundless tune. The water black where the stars thrashed and gasped under its glassy surface. A face stared back up at me, one that collided with my own. I

was tempted to dip my finger in, but I dared not disturb, save the person trapped under the surface. He stared out to the city and I felt myself anchored to him.

He jumped from the fountain, the spray black around him, and held me. His eyes swimming with the white and red and blue lights.

'Let's dance again soon,' he let go of my hand, left me spinning, wanting to dance, alone on the street as he jumped on the bus. As the 88 pulled away, I hugged myself realising just how cold it was stood there alone.

*Did you get home okay?*

The message is undelivered, his profile picture disappeared.

25 - 29

Recipe for love:

1. Download the app.
2. Sort, filter and select by height, weight, girth, race, fetish.
3. Fill out the form, pass the CAPTCHA test. Human or robot? Not relevant in 2D.
4. Order.
5. Delivery an estimated 30 mins.
6. Engage.
7. Feel validated.
8. Return tied nicely in a bow without complication.
9. Repeat.

Set up the code and algorithms. Let's automate love. It'll choose, you choose.

It became mechanical, preordained. I became a network of bandwidth and data. Plugged in the Ethernet cable and pressed start. It was cyberspace, virtual reality, suspended reality. It was freedom for a night, freedom from the past, freedom from connecting. It was freedom



from me. Scrap the data, build a new profile, build a new you, delete and start again tomorrow. Connect to disconnect. Anonymous intimacy.

Always another chance, another opportunity, another swipe, another body to take from the production line of lust. Select the parts and assemble, it's the digital Frankenstein. I've lain half dressed as they humped and fumbled and fucked. The kisses that taste of emptiness. Damp hands over exposed skin, the final gasp, the waiting as they tuck themselves in without a goodbye, without complication. They slide in, slide out as programmed on the production line of love. Carbon copy fucking.

Delete, data wipe, restore to factory settings. It's a clean slate, tomorrow is a new day and a new chance to upgrade them, upgrade you. How many times could I keep reinventing love? The possibilities are limitless in the world wide wantonness. You choose who you'll be. Just for a day, just for a night. There is no past, there is no present when we can erase our history. When we become scrapped data.

The sauna, the new place of worship. We offered ourselves up as tributes to the true God. The libations flowed freely, willingly and they drank greedily. The golden rings flashing in the darkness. A new marriage in steamy darkness. The nods and winks and flicking open of towels. Clammy hand in clammy hand led down dark labyrinths to be sacrificed on altars of flesh and sighs. Pulled into shadow-smearred cubicles with faceless, nameless bodies. They can metamorphosise to who, what we want. There are no borders here. The dark swallows us whole just as we do. Lock the door, lock everything out, leave everything behind. Open the door and wait. Wait for the next, the next dripping back to grip, the same flesh. In the steam all is one and the same. The dark swallows everything.

We all enter with a list of lovers at the door and leave that person at the threshold. Hang up that skin in the changing room. In there I am no one. I have no past, there is no present or future. We make our offerings

and accept. We are silhouettes, shadows, figures that disappear and appear for as long as we need. That is the transaction. Nothing more, nothing less. We enter with no past and leave without one. The list hasn't grown, we haven't developed. We remain the same. Steamed, fresh, purged.

Check who has been messaging. Who has been missed. There will be another chance, there's always another chance at love, at lust. The algorithms will keep selecting. All the algorithms lead to you.

Slide under the covers alone with the afterglow. Never radiated more, never been better. Upgraded and all new available features downloaded. Validated, you've been validated. Plug in and recharge. It says 100%. No cracks in the screen, flawless.

The tears were an error. Something was malfunctioning.

29

I waited after work outside Boots for him to arrive. He was late and I went in and out to use the tiny mirrors above the make-up stands to check my reflection. Pushed my hair up, to the side. Pulled my shirt straight, did up, undid the buttons. I pieced together the fragments of my face. The blue irises cracked with white. The skin around them that had crinkled. The cupid's bow that had started to unravel. The hairline that had edged further back. I pieced them together one part at a time. I hoped that the pieces still fit together to reflect how he remembered me. What did he remember after five years of not seeing each other?

Would he remember me as some preserve of our youth? Mummified in his mind with the rotten bits scooped out ready for him to unwind the bandages to reveal an artefact of his memories long past. Blow off the dust and I'd be fresh, unchanged, untainted. He won't see what has calcified, what is now wrapped in scar tissue inside.

We went to a pub nearby and I automatically bought him a cider and took it to the booth he had grabbed. Our knees pressed together so I crossed them to the side.

'You know I saw you at that concert the other year?'

'Yes, I saw you. Coming out of the bathroom.'

'You didn't reply to my message asking if you wanted a coffee.'

I'd ignored all his messages for a year since he reappeared. The messages from a faceless Grindr profile, which I knew was him as he always started it with 'Miguel', the texts asking when I would be free to meet, if I no longer wanted to dance. We sat next to each other without saying a word. Sometimes glancing at each other but unable to hold the image of the other for long. I ran my finger along the water rims on the table.

He kissed me to break the moment. Because physicality is less revealing than words. He knows words hold power so he speaks with his body as that's where he feels. My body tensed and I let him kiss me.

'That was unexpected,' I said when he sat back.

'It was a moment of weakness,' he laughed. The same wide laugh that made his eyes crease. He whispered in my ear, I nodded and looking at the ground. I went back to his, I don't know why, because that is how it always ended.

With the door locked, he pulled me in. My whole body was alert. The tendons and the sinews and the muscles tensed, alarmed, ready. The stubble on his face scraped against mine. The cider on his mouth now tangy and stale where it had once been sweet and sharp before.

My skin rippled with goose bumps as the feeling of repulsion rose with every thrust, with every slap of his flesh against mine. The grunts, the pants and the moans

as I lay in front of him, his eyes wide and still. His body descended into instinct, every move made memorised and mechanical, reflex after reflex after reflex. Rapid, involuntary, override the emotion, override the heart. Routes and patterns that have been travelled down before. As if I were any other man that lay underneath his sheet.

And I in turn descended into my own instincts. Something inanimate and detached where I no longer even needed to focus hard on the mirror or the wall or a thread coming loose on a shirt like I used to. For the duration I became more and less human simultaneously. Everything became a reflection, a film of two people I didn't know unfolding in front of me. I didn't move. Played dead like the game I played as a kid. I gazed out the window and watched the night pass and the clouds gradually suffocate the moon and stars without regret.

He closed the window as if to stop me slipping from his grip and out through it. When he climbed back into bed, he gripped the sides of my face and stared at me as if to say something. Those wide, still eyes. I waited for him to say something but all he did was release his grip and I listened to his breathing steady. The light off, the moon covered, we lay in silence.

My body held the same rigidity as he rested his arm over my chest. My face trapped against where his heart sat thumping *no, no, no*, while his body said *yes* all the time. I lay there underneath his weight, unable to cradle myself to sleep, staring into the dark. I listened to the sway of the trees, its inky skeleton scratching the window wondering which of us will be left under the sheets alone tomorrow. The room filled with a pale glow, just for a moment, like a ghost had entered the room as the moon was uncovered. Shadows moved and crawled over me until the moon was blanketed once again by the clouds and they retreated into the corners of the room to wait.

'Goodnight, *Miguelito*,' he said so lightly, an echo from a dream.

# Tomorrow, You Will

Mohammed Rizwan

Tomorrow, you will wake up and wish you hadn't.

You will watch the light around the curtains and your cortisol mind will wonder why you didn't buy those blackout ones. As the sun rises, you will lose yourself in the sky-blue colour, memories of a sky-blue childhood imbuing themselves in the curtains' hue. You will have answered your mind's wonderings.

The memories will be sufficient to raise you from your bed and you will remember them as you go through the motions of a morning set adrift on your life but anchored on your survival.

In the shower, the water will cascade down your body and you will wish that it take with it some of your yesterdays and all of your tomorrows. You'll scoff at your own wish because this water never has and it won't tomorrow either.

You will turn the tap blue and look up. Even tomorrow, when you will have done this a thousand times, your cardio-respiratory system will remain unaccustomed because the day after, you won't do this. You won't let your body become accustomed to breathlessness and hyper-everything. When you have out-hyperventilated yesterday, you will turn towards the rest of your body, shivers rocking it back and forth like the rocking chair you haven't taken out of storage.

Was bathing always so exhausting? You will haul

yourself out of the shower and become a different type of breathless as you dry yourself and as you deodorise yourself and as you dress yourself. You will carry the exhaustion with you as you walk into the kitchen where you will fill your water bottle into which you've poured drops of the CBD oil you bought online. You've been buying stronger doses every month because it doesn't seem to be working as well as you thought it would. The aches of your head and the aches of your heart exist in complementary distribution, except for the times when they exist simultaneously. It's a pity the oil hasn't helped. You will make a mental note to remind yourself to buy a more medicinal dose.

You'll take what accoutrements you need to make tea and you'll walk to work. Even though the sun will only have risen for an hour, there will be people around, making the same journey you are, you will assume. You will wonder about their lives and you will compare theirs to yours. You have made this journey many times so you won't need to pay too much attention to the roads. Even if something did happen to you, would that be so bad? You will let your mind adrift, as it does every day, first to the sky-blue curtains and thence to...

Once upon a time you walked and ran in others' shoes. You let the darkness of their paths imbue your heart but that was OK because the vessels of that organ emanated light strong enough to withstand all darkness. Your heart took it and turned it into something better, superior. Along their paths you discovered your own,

hated by your family, reigned by a God who didn't know his own creation. But you only found this out later, when you had exhausted all supplication and all ritual and all bowing, all prostration. You spent years on that path listening to others until you realised that your own thoughts were stronger than even your Lord's. So, you decided that your path would be your own, not littered with anyone else's thoughts or feelings, but...

It was only as you carried on walking the darkness in your own shoes that your heart weakened, its vessels becoming smaller and smaller until only that which was necessary for survival remained, and everything else, all that hope that was once upon a time stronger than even the darkest of dark, disappeared and left you.

Tomorrow, the heat will be bearable at that time that you go to work. You will wonder, though, what it would be like if you stood underneath a perpetual midday Arabian sun. You'll wonder if you'll melt and you'll wonder if there'll be anyone to mop you up or if everyone will stomp in your melted essence and kick this way and that. You'll take a deep breath and come back to your journey. You'll wonder where the time has gone, as if you didn't know that your thoughts warp time, like great celestial bodies floating, moving, changing.

Your face won't have altered in any way since you awoke but as you near your workplace, a vampire that doesn't work on you because all those journeys in others' shoes have already drained everything, your mask will be firmly in place: soldered, nailed, screwed.

The day will be the same as the other days have been. The men on your team won't do anything different, but their very being will make you uncomfortable, as all masculinity has done ever since before you started on your own path. Their lack of emotion at anything, the topics of their discourses, the monotony of their time, will be far removed from anything you can pretend to do, even with your mask, and you will feel lachrymal lubrication loosen it, so you'll nonchalantly go to the fifth floor bathroom, where there's no chance of

meeting anyone you know, and you will lock yourself in the farthest cubicle, and you will rip off the mask, rip off the other men from you, and you will let loose your authentic self, which you hate so much. It'll carve valleys on your cheeks until it falls, drip-by-drip onto the shirt, whose dark colour leaves you hidden, just as you want it, even though you long to wear a rainbow hue.

Your lacrimal glands will be empty by now. Their emptying will have replenished your mask, enough for you to return. You will hold it in your hands, remembering that first time you realised you could build one with events you found on your path. It didn't fit at first and would slip off even at the slightest movement, but as time passed, and events swirled into black holes, you were able to add to it, until it fit you so perfectly, it took on your features. You will marvel that only you can tell it apart from your own face. You will wish that were your mother around, she, too, would look at the mask and know that it wasn't you. But she's not around, and you will place it on your face until it is indistinguishable from your actual visage. As your lips rise at the corners in pretence, you'll take a breath whose oxygen fuels your ersatz façade and you will walk out of the bathroom and back to your desk.

There won't be any point in looking at the clock because the day will end when it ends. And when it ends, you will walk back the way you came, the heat getting inside you. You have changed your working hours so you have time to sleep before you make your way to the one place the work mask refuses to go.

You will wonder as you enter your house what it will be like tonight. It's different every night and it does nothing for you. It will remind you neither that you are alive nor that you are not dead. After your nap, you will shower and dress in clothes that are another mask. These will be vibrant, unlike your work clothes. They will mark you as unique in your house, in your street, in your neighbourhood, but in the place you are going, they will mark you as common, as belonging, as coming home. Because of the former, you will cover them when

you leave; because of the latter, you will uncover them as soon as you have arrived.

In the bus, you'll look at your reflection in the window, and you'll hear the ululating requiems of which your heart was so capable. The dirges it brought forth strengthened you once, strengthened all those shoes in which you walked and reinforced those walls of your heart. But the lamentations of your own path, the one you decided was more important than those of your family, your culture, your God, will be a facsimile, paralleled by the path you now walk, and they won't add any strength.

You'll meet him in the space between lives, yours and his, where the dogs howl, and where nothing but the fox sleeps and survives. You'll meet and meet and meet. Your breaths will hitch and stitch and this seam between you will be unpicked with the same needle and you'll go your separate ways.

For what remains of today, you embrace the darkness, the sky-blue curtains with their sky-blue memories covered by it. Tomorrow, though, you will carry on and live your life without that word's f.

# The Magic Machine

Nathan Evans

Once upon a time in a world like this one, there lived a young worldling called Daimon who was not altogether happy, for he worked all day and every day in an enormous factory as wide as a country and filled to the brim with other young worldlings like him, working all day and every day to make magic machines.

The possessor of such a machine would have magical powers at the touch of their fingers: the power to conjure visions as if from the air, the power to speak with spirits who were not there, to ask any question and be given the answer, to never be lost or lonely or unhappy. Daimon wanted more than anything to never be unhappy again so he went on working, all day and every day, saving all the money he could save from his minimalist wage in the hope that one day he could buy a machine. And become a magician.

He kept the cash in a box beneath his mattress. The factory dormitories were so overcrowded there weren't enough beds to go around, so Daimon shared his with Yann. Every evening they would fall exhausted into each other's arms and Yann would whisper into Daimon's ear how he didn't think it fair that the magicians who ruled over the factory should have all the power and all the money and all the magic things. And Daimon would kiss Yann to quiet him for the magicians were always listening.

Daimon's job was to polish the screens of the magic machines. They were made of a crystal so powerful

it could kill you, so all the worldlings who worked at polishing wore special clothing to protect them from the crystal dust that flew about them.

One day, whilst they were working, the magician in charge of the polishing—Volta was her name—descended through the glass ceiling, upgraded a favoured worker to the upper echelon, then told those remaining they must make more machines in less time. And if they didn't, they knew what would happen: they'd be flung from the factory into the world which lay beyond. A world as hard as an orange, its juice sucked from within. And some dry and desperate worldling would be only too happy to replace them.

Their hearts sank together to the floor for how could they work any harder or faster? But none dared speak anything of what they were thinking, none except Yann.

Volta could not believe it as Yann told her they couldn't do it, that if they were to polish any harder or faster the crystal could catch fire, and why would they take that risk when all profits from increased production would go to the magicians and not to them? He looked to Daimon to support him. But Daimon—who could still recall being a dry and desperate worldling, still see the dry and desperate fingers with which his mother had waved goodbye to him—looked down and said nothing. And when he looked up again a swarm of sorcerers were magicking Yann away from him.

The last disappointed look Yann gave him stayed burnt on Daimon's brain and he worked harder and faster at his polishing, trying to burn it away again. He did not see the meter's warning: he saw was the world turning white then red then black around him. He felt himself flying then falling, smelt himself burning and bleeding, heard himself screaming. The echo in every nerve ending drowned the sound of Volta telling him how he must pay for the damage he'd done as she loomed over him and glitter dust snowed around him and onto his skin or the place where his skin had been and even as it cooled him Daimon knew it could kill him.

And then there was nothing, not even any pain. The world was cool and green again, his mother beside him telling him that one day, one day he would be a magician. When his eyes opened on the perma-lighting of the dormitory ceiling, he did not know if it was the same day or a new one. If he a new person or the same one. His skin had regrown but now it shone, sparkled in the light as he moved. Like glitter, like crystal.

A shadow fell across his glittering skin: the magicians were always watching and—eyes ominous in her own dull visage—Volta was standing over him. 'Well this is most interesting.' She raised her magic machine. 'Put me through to Master Maling.'

Before his head had caught up with him, Daimon was running for the door, faster than he'd ever run before. But ahead of him—though still far—he could clearly see the advancing sorcerers. His skin reflected their fire.

'Alive, idiots!' Volta was advancing behind him, clearly heard though still at some distance. What should he do? Somehow, he knew. With new power in his fingertips he lifted himself into the air duct and never got lost, never got caught up as he turned and twisted through the factory's guts and was born once more into the world beyond the factory doors.

It had been ten years since he'd first passed through

them, clutching the moneybox—now lost—his mother had given him with the instruction to work hard, save wisely and be happy. At all but the first he had failed miserably.

Locks turned in the portals beside him; sadness became exhilaration as he sped into orange sands, only once glancing at the factory behind him. High as a country and piled to the sky like boxes, each one smaller than the one on which it sat, it reached a crystal pinnacle which pierced the cadmium sunset. And in that pinnacle Master Magician Maling— who drew the world's juices to him as a blister draws blood from skin—saw the shimmering trail snaking behind Daimon and knew the time was coming.

Daimon soon returned to earth, or somewhere not unlike it: things were worse, far worse than he'd remembered. He sped, strode, stumbled until the factory was lost even to his super-vision and saw no sign of any other being. But what good were super-powers to him when he still needed to eat and drink like any other human?

On the third day he surrendered to sand, his skin lost in its glittering. In his head he could hear Yann, sweet Yann. But when he raised his head, he heard sweet nothing. Resting it down, there was Yann – like he was whispering in Daimon's ear again, like he was buried beneath him.

In his delirium, Daimon began digging. And with every last soupcon of super-strength, he kept digging. Until he could all but hear the words Yann was singing. He was singing! And Daimon was falling through earth and through air into Yann's arms.

They rejected him. Of course, Yann couldn't recognise him in his shining skin. And Daimon could have been forgiven for not recognising Yann in his stinking one.

'It's me! Daimon!'

Yann stopped resisting, started staring. 'What happened?'

After Daimon had told Yann everything, after Yann had told off Daimon for not seconding his protestations, an extraordinary thing happened: as lip met lip the glitter slipped from Daimon into Yann. And he too became a magic being.

Yann had been keeping watch, singing to keep himself up while the others slept: he'd been adopted by some factory rejects eking an existence amongst the elements. When Daimon woke next morning, Yann was no longer with him: he was with them. Daimon found him further into their subterranean dwellings, a woman beside him, flaunting her glittering skin.

'Welcome to the commune,' said Yann, 'Here we share everything.'

Daimon's specialness had been short-lived. So too his happiness. He wanted his powers—and Yann—for himself alone, resented sharing. And, in spite of their new empowerment, the sharers seemed to resent him.

One evening he was sat, as usual, on the rim of their circle as they shared the meagrest of meals. And, as usual, conversation turned to the magicians.

'What is to be done?' Raine fed Yann his cue-line from her seat beside him.

'We must bring down Maling!' Yann did not disappoint, not her at least.

Daimon saw a chance to again monopolise Yann's affections. 'I can lead you to him!'

On a night with no moonbeams to betray their sparkling skins, Daimon led the factory rejects back to the factory doorstep, back through the factory's guts to the dormitory duct. How strange it seemed to return a free being to the place he'd been enslaved so long and to see two new dull-skinned worldlings in the bed he'd

shared with Yann.

'I still love you,' said Yann, beside him. 'But that doesn't mean I can't love others too.'

'So, this is the Boy's dorm,' Raine joined them. 'I always dreamt of breaking in.'

'Well, now's your chance!' Daimon all but pushed her below. 'Power to the people!'

'I love you,' Raine called back to Yann. 'But that doesn't mean I can't love others too.'

Yann didn't much like the taste of his own medicine. Daimon led the team onwards and upwards to Maling, unerring, though now navigating a part of the duct he'd never been in. They knew they'd passed through the glass ceiling when they paused at another portal to peer within.

Machines, row upon row of them, magicians bowed before them conjuring visions. And there was Volta's favoured worker, machine to ear, speaking with spirits who were not there. He looked more miserable than before.

'Poor things,' said Yann, 'to be so enslaved by machines.' For he could see that every time a machine rang, a magician sped to serve it. But Daimon wasn't ready to have his illusions upturned yet.

They left the others to overpower their oppressed oppressors and Daimon continued alone with Yann, happy to have him to himself again. Up and up and up—Daimon almost wished it wouldn't stop—until they emerged from the darkness of the duct into the vertiginous brightness of the crystal palace.

It seemed to be sculpted from light beams alone. And through them one could see the planet unravelling like the rind of a discarded orange. 'I'm afraid the gardens aren't much to look at, at the moment.'



The beams converged at the centre of the structure to succour a decrepit worldling there. 'You must be Daimon. And may I compliment you on your glowing complexion?'

'Who are you?' demanded Yann.

'I'll give you a guess: it starts with an M.'

'You are the Master Magician?'

'Magic is illusion merely. It exists only in the minds of those who wish to believe.'

Yann did not understand. 'If you are Maling then we must inform you that the factory is under new management.'

'Yes, I heard you've been spreading yourself about.'

'And you must abdicate or die!'

Maling laughed coldly, 'Darling, to kill me you must kill the machine. And to kill the machine you must kill each and every worldling, for they carry its mechanics within. Though...' he added, airily, 'all, except we three, are as good as dead already.'

Daimon grabbed Yann's hand as the floor beneath their feet turned transparent and the crystal began rising, like a giant magic machine, away from the factory it had rested upon.

'What good a glittering skin when there is nothing to feed the body within? It is a gilded husk. As this planet is a husk. Its last essences are now powering us.'

'Where are you taking us?' Daimon's voice shook.

'That depends very much on what you do next, so let's get down to business.' Maling's deadened eyes focused on Daimon alone. 'You, young man, have something I need and I have everything you want.' He went on, 'I, the mighty Maling, have harnessed about

me the powers of this planet but you, a lowly worldling, have harnessed them within, been reborn. As you can see, I could use a new lease of life, so you share your powers and I shall share mine.'

'No!' Yann gripped tighter on Daimon's hand.

'But Yann, I thought you shared everything? Or is that only with pretty young worldlings called Raine?' Yann felt his friend's grip loosen. 'You understand me, don't you Daimon?'

And then Maling was holding the moneybox Daimon's mother had given him. He rattled it to and fro. 'I've been saving this for you.' It sounded full. 'I may have added a coin or two.'

Still spellbound, Daimon took his hand from Yann's, reached out to claim his hopes and dreams. 'Not so quick.' Maling withdrew them. 'First a little kiss.'

'Don't!' cried Yann. He was reaching again for Daimon's hand when the floor dissolved beneath him and he was falling as fast as the machine was rising.

'Yann!' In moments, Daimon's love was lost to even super-vision.

'I have no idea what you saw in him. But if you would you like to join him I can let you out at your convenience.' Maling grinned. 'Alternatively, there's a position going: mistress of a new planet – lovely spot I've picked for us, just a few light years off.' He offered the box again. 'But you do need to hurry up and make a decision. We'll be leaving *this* world at any moment.'

Daimon looked up at Maling, tears tumbling, worldview upturned.

'You'll never want for anything and never be unhappy again.'

Maling's breath smelt of death. Daimon opened his lips. 'I don't believe,' he said.

The illusion was shattered, the machine destroyed and with it Maling, and with it Daimon. But the earth's essences—which had been so selfishly stolen—returned to the planet in a fine crystal rain.

And it all began again.

# M-uh-th-er

Nicola Borasinski

Something buzzes up ahead. Agni keeps her eyes focused on the pavement. One foot, then the other. Rain pockmarks the ground, light at first, but growing heavier as Agni heaves herself along the street.

A faint whine follows her and that's when it happens. Her stomach twists in agony, as if someone has taken a poker and wedged it deep into her skin. She cries out, stops, leans against the wall of a building. Pain ripples through her thighs.

Agni leans back, taking a deep breath and wiping the sweat from her forehead. When she straightens, she finds herself staring at a drone.

A red light blinks underneath it, a camera. There is a subtle sound of machinery, the buzz without the bee, as the drone angles the camera down. The lens tightens, fixing on her face. She shouldn't be down here.

"Fuck off," Agni says, waving her hand towards the drone. It darts out of the way, avoiding her hand by a comfortable distance. The fans whirr louder as the drone circles back, squaring up to her. Agni squints through the rain, at the bright light at the drone's centre. It shifts as if recognising her look.

Her stomach clenches as a dragging sensation echoes deep within her. She groans as the pain erupts through her body, like a hand reaching in and ripping her insides out. She crumbles against the wall, sinking

to the pavement, a hand wrapped around her bump.

"You don't look so good," Stevie says, reaching a hand across the table. "Are you ok?" Agni pulls her hand back and folds into herself. "I'm fine."

Wind lifts leaves from the ground. They twist and turn into the air, as if they're stuck in a whirlpool. The park, if you could call it that, is dead.

This is the first time they've seen each other in a year. Stevie suggested the park, a no man's land, where they could talk without being overheard. "How is," her eyes glance towards Agni's baby bump, "everything?"

Agni nods, but can't bring herself to tell Stevie about the pain. She clears her throat and folds her arms over her tummy. "I - we're fine."

Stevie nods slowly, staring out across the park. Agni follows her gaze and they stare at the pond in silence. The fountain in the middle used to shoot out great jets of water. Now, the pond is more of a smear, patches of concrete visible where the water's dried. It's only beautiful when it rains.

Agni opens her mouth to speak but she doesn't know how to articulate the words: *I miss you.*

Stevie sighs and leans back into the bench. She glances up at the sky as dark clouds roll in the distance. "When are you due?"

Agni, her hand resting on her bump, looks at her ex. There are more grey hairs than when they were together. When did they get so old?

"Twenty-second of October."

Stevie nods, rubs her nose. "Not long then."

Agni shakes her head, dislodging memories of the two of them walking through the park when the trees were green, parakeets soaring above, darts of green against blue.

Stevie would always shout excitedly, scouring the sky to catch a glimpse. "They live happier in groups. Did you know that? One parakeet on its own doesn't last as long."

Agni looks down at her feet, the trainers falling apart on the tarmac. Shoes Stevie bought her.

Stevie's eyes are as steely as the drones that circle around the park. "Are there any side effects?"

Agni opens and closes her mouth. The truth feels too large, the words too hard to break down into understanding. "No." The lie slips out, runny as honey on the tip of her tongue.

Stevie frowns, her face pale. "Beth is suffering. There are days when she can't walk from the agony."

Agni grits her teeth. She doesn't care about Beth but the worry lines on Stevie's face pull her in. "How long has she been in the programme?"

"Four weeks."

Agni nods. For her the pain wasn't intense back then, maybe the machines are getting stronger. "When

is she due?"

Stevie sighs and her body deflates like a balloon. "How did we get here?"

Agni wants to laugh. Stevie might've forgotten the arguments but she hasn't. Nights spent lying in separate rooms, listening for the slightest cough, any sound that would indicate Stevie was lying there, same as her, awake and wondering about the future.

Stevie shakes her head, stares out into the distance and leaps from the bench. She moves so quickly that Agni jumps. Stevie looks up at the patrol drones and yells. "FUCK OFF!"

Her scream echoes around them, lifting Agni to her feet. She fills her lungs and shouts too. As her anger builds, words reduce to their base level of sound. Agni can feel them, all of the women who've been forced into this programme. Their bodies pile up in the park. She screams until her voice breaks.

Once they've stopped, her and Stevie look at each other, laugh. The air around them feels lighter, despite the metal blocking the sky. They sit back down and look out across the park in silence.

It doesn't take long for one of them to appear. Its blue body whizzes into view, the red light blinking at them. "Due to incoming weather, all visitors are asked to evacuate the park."

Agni rises to her feet, stumbles. Stevie catches her arm, steadying her. Their eyes find each other. Agni opens her mouth, about to speak when – "Storms approaching. All visitors must leave now."

The walk from the park is short but Agni's feet trip over themselves. Wind pulls at her like desperate hands. She wraps her arms around her bump and urges her legs to move faster.

Up above, the drones are doing a coordinated dance as they move higher into the air. Specks of grey on grey. Agni hates that metal is unaffected by the storms. She turns the corner, her street visible in the distance.

Stevie's face swims in front of her vision and she is struck by a longing so acute that her knees buckle. Something whines by her side. She looks up - a drone.

Is it the same one as before? The metal bodies all look the same, the four fans rotate so quickly they look invisible. Agni reaches out a hand but the machine doesn't move.

The camera tilts as the drone flies closer to Agni's face. A breeze from the fans buffets her cheek and she throws up her hand. The drone leans to its side, like a dog tilting its head to a question from an owner.

She reaches out again, her fingers so close to the metal. *Are we allowed to touch them?*

A siren pings high above as the drone lurches forwards. Agni lunges to the side as metal flashes past her. The drone spins quickly, its camera fixes on her, the red light flashing. Agni runs.

The sky crackles above. Agni stops, static. She looks up and immediately wishes she hadn't. Drones. Twenty, no more. They hover above her, a wall of metal and red light, as angry as wasps.

Agni searches for her front door and finds it. The space from here to there is small but her legs are lead. Agni grits her teeth and darts towards home.

The buzz of drones roars in her ears as she pumps her arms and legs. She keeps her eyes on the dark blue door, scared to look up. Her t-shirt clings to the sweat on her back. She is almost there and pulls the key from her pocket.

Her hands stumble, fumble with the metal in their hands. She wipes them on her jeans and grips the keys

so hard the teeth leave marks in her skin. She slams into the door and turns round.

The drones stop suddenly before switching their direction. Agni stands, transfixed as they form into a shape. *Is that a mouth?*

The thrumming of the fans subsides and Agni stumbles back in horror. The drones have formed a face. A baby's face.

Agni steps back and hits the door. Her wrists shake as she struggles to fit the key into the lock. She glances over her shoulder at the drones. Goosebumps break over her skin. The baby's mouth moves.

Finally, she forces the key into the lock and tumbles into her home, slamming the door shut. Agni drops the keys and turns around. She presses her shaking palms against the door as nerves vibrate through her body. There is a small peephole. Agni takes a deep breath and brings her eye to the glass.

The drones are gone, replaced by the baby. Agni watches in horror as it mouths something to her. She copies the shapes trying to understand what the child is saying.

*M-uh-th-er.*

# Sticks and Stones

Yvonne Clarke

The taste of chips and coke lingered on my tongue, seasoned with a dash of despair and served with a helping of self-consciousness. I licked the grease off my lips as I decided which ball to select. I settled on the black one, the heaviest – I thought it would create a better impression: more macho, more confident. The holes were a bit loose for my spindly fingers, but the weight of the ball, I figured, would make it go further and straighter. I tensed up like an arrow drawn back in a bow. So much depended on this; I didn't want to let my team down. Schleppling towards the foul line, I let go of the ball too soon in my nervousness. There was a collective groan from my colleagues as the ball banged down with a sound like thunder onto the smooth polished maple and scudded seamlessly into the gutter. My cack-handed efforts had just earned me *nil points* in a tie break between Personnel and Production. I sloped back self-consciously towards my team, vision blurred, eyes unable to meet anyone else's. Not the most promising start to my new life.

My lack of coordination had always been a problem. I was the person who couldn't catch a ball, ride a bicycle, dance in time to music. It wasn't such a problem in primary school, but when I became a teen the issues escalated. Always the last to be picked for a team, I felt myself flushing scarlet as the number of selectees grew smaller and smaller. As I waited in vain, as always, to be chosen I was infused with a mixture of acute embarrassment and shame. With animal intuition I sensed, long before I experienced, the unwillingness

of others to engage with me. What had I done wrong? I made an appropriate amount of eye contact (I had researched this so as not to appear too threatening), I used deodorant and I brushed my teeth regularly. I wasn't the class swot or bully, yet I didn't 'belong'. I have been branded as an oddball, I concluded.

Mum didn't help matters. She nagged me, half concerned, half irritated.

'Why don't you talk to your classmates?'

'Why do you never have any friends?'

'Why don't you join in the games at break time?'

She only knew this from parents' evenings. I was acutely uncomfortable knowing that the teachers had noticed and were concerned about me.

I did try. I hung around on the periphery of the football games at break time, hoping fervently that someone would invite me to join in. They never did.

Then the name calling started.

'Runt!' 'Weirdo!' 'Mong!' Each word a dart into the bullseye of my heart.

'Can I have your chocolate and crisps? My mum won't give me any.' In an effort to be accepted I started

giving away my packed lunch, first sporadically, then regularly. I still didn't make any friends. The boys ignored me and the girls called a tomboy.

Mum taught me what to say.

'Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me.' I'll try that tomorrow, I promised myself. But the playground insults continued relentlessly as I tried to hold back the tide of hot, brackish tears which stung my face as though I'd invaded a hornets' nest.

But it gradually dawned on me that I was not only an oddball, a loner. I felt like I was a foreigner within my own body; a parasite growing and invading me from within. The onset of puberty made me reach a profound and irrevocable conclusion – one which I realised held the key to unlocking all my problems. I decided that facing up to my issues was the only way forward, otherwise I would be forever trapped – a tiger within the confines of an ever-tightening cage.

Maybe coming out at breakfast time was not the best idea.

'Who's been filling you with these crazy ideas?'

'They're not ideas, they're facts.'

'It's just a phase you're going through.'

'It isn't; I think I've always known. You just didn't want to acknowledge it.'

'You're too young to know what you're talking about!'

'I've never been so sure of anything in my life.'

Hysterical tears and self-castigation from Mum. Dad, poor man, was out of his depth and tried to assume the roles of both mediator and counsellor. They both needed as much time to digest my pronouncements as I had needed to be able to broach the subject with them.

So began the first steps in my transformation. I cut my hair as short as I could and bought masculine clothes. The relief I felt at no longer having to pretend was immediate. And I tried different names for size, finally settling on Mark. Martha to Mark – I rolled it round my tongue, trying it for size. Martha to Mark. Yes, it sounded right.

'Are you a boy now?'

'Not really, not yet.'

'Perv!' 'Dyke!' 'She-male!'

*Sticks and stones... sticks and stones....*

The litany of insults continued. Eventually, inevitably, real sticks and stones did come, on my way home from school via the cemetery short cut. This I saw as the death of my feminine guise: they didn't break my bones physically, but they did mess with my mind. Defenceless, defeated and bloody, I propped myself up painfully against a tombstone. I read the inscription. RIP Martha Marshall. Funny coincidence. Funny strange, that is, not funny ha ha.

But sticks and stones are used to build as well as break. As I sat there, I watched the rooks gathering twigs for their nests, preparing for the renewal of life, just as I was. Stones mend missing pieces, fill gaps and build bridges with which to connect places and people. When I emerged from my chrysalis, when my metamorphosis was complete, I would start to build my bridges. If I could just get through my last two terms at school, I would be ready to make a new start, just like the rooks.

*One year later*

It's my second ten pin bowling night, and this time I feel more comfortable in my new skin. Despite my previous pathetic efforts, I had been invited again – a tiny triumph for Mark, my new persona, but one which holds massive significance for me. I flex my

fingers and assemble myself into a tighter format. This time, I choose a lighter ball, one which matches my frame and my fingers: I have nothing to prove any more. The atmosphere around me is a coiled spring of tension. I swing my arm back gracefully, moving with the measured stride of a stalking tiger. I arc my arm forwards like a pendulum on a clock. I release the ball at the critical moment. It rolls on a smooth and true trajectory, straight as a Roman road, towards the pins.

Strike!



# Bios

## Arun Jeetoo

### Tequila

Arun Jeetoo is a poet, short story writer and secondary school English teacher based in North London. He is a wanderer who possesses the gift of compassion known for his dirty realism style of work, provocative and raw imagery, and dark humour.

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## Bridget Hart *They/Them*

### 31 / Home is a Bus Ride

Bridget Hart explores discomfort, resilience and survivorship with wry anger and wit that inspires to kick back against the world and dig deep within our own introspective selves. A master of DIY, immediate and intimate performance. Tying together multiple and often contradictory identities, Bridget encourages readers/audiences to embrace their inner-conflicts.

🐦 @beehartyeah

📷 @beehartyeah

🌐 [bridgethart.wordpress.com](http://bridgethart.wordpress.com)

🌐 [bridgethart.bigcartel.com](http://bridgethart.bigcartel.com)

## Caroline Hagen

### The Grave of Robert Johnson in The Mississippi Delta

Caroline had a career as a film publicist, which might sound glamorous but wasn't really, although it had its moments. Now in her 60s with time on her hands, she's started writing short stories and creative non-fiction with a view to - maybe - a novel. It's never too late, right?

🐦 @carodarcy

## DC Diamondopolous

### 1912

DC Diamondopolous is an award-winning novelette, short story, and flash fiction writer with over 250 stories published internationally in print and online magazines, literary journals, and anthologies. DC's stories have appeared in: 34th Parallel, So It Goes: The Literary Journal of the Kurt Vonnegut Museum and others.

## Ellen Olivia Warren

### Don't Think About it

Ellen Warren is an enigmatic, young writer with a passion for poetry, which she has loved since she was a child. Since graduating from a creative writing degree in 2019, Ellen has been inspired by innovative poetry and is fascinated by art that explores emotions and mental health. The poems are unapologetic and physical, reflecting the experiences in her life that have now made it onto the page.

🐦 @vorago\_lit

@ @voragoliterature

## Emma Dawson

### Infertile Via Implant

Emma is a short story writer and playwright. Emma's short stories have been published by Dear Damsels and Inkapture. The full-length play, Mum, had online readings with Dramatists Guild of America and Up 'Ere Productions, whilst short plays have been performed at Theatre503, Battersea Arts Centre, and Pleasance Theatre.

🐦 @emmaruthdawson

## Fiona Linday

### The Last Post-Turning Over a New Leaf

Fiona wrote the YA, "Get Over It, Adventures," Onwards and Upwards. Before my prize-winning short story, 'Off the Beaten Track' was published. Winning the Unique Writing Publications Short Story Award with 'Love', in American anthology called Spiritual Awakenings. Published in eBook anthology of short stories, "The Heavenly Road Trip" and she edited "Family Matters, an anthology of new writing", Dahlia, 2019.

🌐 fionalinday.co.uk

## Gale Acuff

### The Forgiveness of Sins

Gale has had poetry published in Ascent, Reed, Poet Lore, Chiron Review, Cardiff Review, Poem, Adirondack Review, Florida Review, Slant, Nebo, Arkansas Review, South Dakota Review, Roanoke Review, and many other journals in eleven countries. In addition Gale has authored three books of poetry: Buffalo Nickel, The Weight of the World, and The Story of My Lives.

Gale has taught university English courses in the US, China, and Palestine.

## Ismim Putera *He/Him*

### I Know Why the Ghosts Cry

Ismim Putera is a poet and writer from Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo. His work has appeared in Anak Sastra, Ghost Heart Literary, Prismatic, and forthcoming in Omelette magazine and Voice and Verse Magazine.

🐦 @ismimputera

## Jeffrey Zable

### In For Life

Jeffrey Zable is a teacher, professional musician, and writer of poetry, fiction, and non-fiction. His writing has appeared in hundreds of literary magazines and anthologies, more recently in Arierl Chart, Corvus, Boston Literary Magazine, Pensive Stories, Derelict Lit, Third Wednesday, The Stray Branch and many others.

## Jeremy Gadd

### Desire

Jeremy Gadd has previously contributed poems to literary magazines and periodicals in Australia, the USA, the UK, Canada, New Zealand, Germany, Belgium and India.

He has MA Honours and PhD degrees from the University of New England and his writing has won several literary awards.

He lives and writes in an old Federation era house overlooking Botany Bay, the birthplace of modern Australia.

🌐 [jeremygaddpoet.com](http://jeremygaddpoet.com)

## Joe Balaz

### Boom Kanani / Supah Bird

Joe Balaz writes in Hawaiian Islands Pidgin (Hawai'i Creole English). He is the author of *Pidgin Eye*, a book of poetry. The book was featured in 2019 by NBC News for Asian Pacific American Heritage Month, as one of the best new books to be written by a Pacific Islander.

## Jon Barton

### Reaching

Jon writes plays, work for children and young people, and is an author-in-progress. Work includes *Bush Meat* (HighTide), *Serious Heroes* (Old Vic) and *Oedipus* (Almeida). Children's work includes *Mr Gobble's Garden* and *Red Riding Hood & the Wolf* (Little Angel Theatre / HOME Manchester). He runs City Academy's writing department.

🐦 @jnbarton

## Judy Upton

### The White Hart

Judy's an award-winning playwright with plays produced by the Royal Court, National Theatre, Hampstead Theatre and BBC Radio 4 etc. 'The Bulbul Was Singing' was a Radio 4 Drama Of The Week (2019). She's had two feature films and a TV drama produced, plus a novella published by Orion Books.

## Kathryn O'Driscoll

### Sister / The Grey Garden

Kathryn O'Driscoll is a spoken word poet, writer and activist from Bath. She talks openly about disabilities, mental health, LGBTQIA+ issues and joys and gender politics in her wide range of poems. She's a Bristol slam champion who has performed at the Edinburgh Fringe and competed at UK National competitions.

## Kristian Hoareau Foged *He/Him*

### Call it What it is

Kristian is a twenty-nine year old part-time poet and full-time communications consultant and social commentator. He's a mixed race, third culture kid: ethnically Danish and Seychellois, he grew up in Denmark, Uganda and Greenland before moving to England to study and, eventually, work.

🐦 @Kristian\_Foged

@kristianhoareau

## Louis Glazzard

### Grindr Gone Wrong

Louis Glazzard was born and raised in Yorkshire, England. After graduating with a degree in English Literature, Louis has been working as a queer writer and poet. These poems have been featured and shared in various creative spaces across Manchester and beyond, including the BBC, Waterside Arts and London LGBTQ+ community centre. In July, Louis' poetry was published in *New Critique* and he headlined *Verbose Manchester*.

🐦 @lourowpoet

@lourowpoet

## Lucy Hulton *She/Her*

### Portrait of Aphrodite

Lucy C. Hulton is a bi-bilingual poet and translator. She has an interest in hybrid forms and she was shortlisted for the Streetcake Experimental Poetry Prize 2020. Currently, she is studying for an MA in creative writing. Her work often incorporates themes of mental illness and environmentalism.

🐦 @lucechulton

📷 @lucechulton

## Mauk Donnabhain

### Come on Eileen

Mauk Donnabhain is a working-class writer from Donegal, Ireland. A knowledge artisan and aspiring polymath, he has lived in different parts of the world including France, Russia, Thailand and Uzbekistan. He currently lives in London.

His short story 'The Rabbit and the Moon' was shortlisted for the Colm Tóibín International Short Story award 2020 and he has had other work published in *The Honest Ulsterman*, *The Blue Nib*, *Cold Coffee Stand*, *Pendora* magazine and *The Galway Review*.

🐦 @maukee

📷 @maukdonnabhain

📘 /Mauk Donnabhain

🌐 [wordpressmaukdonnabhain.wordpress.com](http://wordpressmaukdonnabhain.wordpress.com)

## Michael Handrick

### Goodnight, Miguelito

Michael Handrick was born in the UK and raised in various countries. A graduate from the Creative and Life Writing MA at Goldsmiths, University of London, his short stories and journalism have been published in various anthologies and publications including *Litro*, *Attitude*, and *PYLOT*, with academic research published by The Inter-Disciplinary Press. Michael has been shortlisted for Penguin Random House's *Write Now 2020* and the Creative Future Writers' Award.

🐦 @michaelhandrick

## Mohammed Rizwan

### Tomorrow, You Will

Mohammed is a UK-based writer who's writing is informed by their cultural and religious background. Mohammed is currently working on a YA LGBT novel.

🐦 @MoRizwan1983

## Nathan Evans *He/Him*

### The Magic Machine

Nathan's poetry has been published by, amongst others, Manchester Metropolitan University. His first collection was long listed for the Polari First Book Prize; his second is published by Inkandescent. He is long listed for the Live Canon 2020 International Poetry Competition. His first short story was published in *Untitled: Voices*.

🐦 @nathanevansarts

📷 @nathanevansarts

## Niamh Haran

### A Real Date / Old Piercing Holes

Niamh Haran is a queer non-binary poet based in London. They are an English Undergraduate at King's College London and member of The Roundhouse Poetry Collective. Some of their poems appear in *Perverse*, *Abridged*, *The Babel Tower Notice Board* and *The Interpreter's House*.

🐦 @niamhjerrie

## Nicola Borasinski

### M-uh-th-er

Nicola Borasinski is a writer from Stoke-on-Trent. She currently lives in London with her partner. In 2018 she completed the Faber Academy course and was long listed for the Bath Short Story Award. She is currently working on her first novel.

🐦 @NTicky

## **Niharika Jain**

### **सहारा**

Niharika collects stamps and loves painting her nails, eating chocolate, making lists and watching TV dramas in the mystery genre. Used to be bed-fellows with impostor syndrome and is frenemies with anxiety. In 2020's global pandemic, she has given herself what she needs from herself: courage and self-belief.

## **Olivia Toh** *She/Her*

### **Dystopian Future / Home**

Olivia Toh is a high school student from Malaysia. She is featured in The Global Citizens Innovative Solutions SDGs Challenge's book, "Resilient Youth: Emotional Wellbeing in the Wake of the Covid-19 Global Pandemic". Outside of school, she enjoys brush lettering, poetry and dancing. She is also passionate about travelling around the world.

@@zhihuitoh

## **Yvonne Clarke**

### **Sticks and Stones**

Yvonne Clarke has been a teacher of English as a Second Language for twenty years. Prior to this she was a copy editor for a number of publishing companies and also worked as a content editor for Pearson Education for several years.

She has had several flash and short stories published. She was a finalist in the 2020 LISP Short Story Prize and runner up in the 2020 Broadway Arts Festival Flash Fiction Competition.

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**issue two**  
**volume one**  
**nov 2020**