

Writtle

**issue four
april 2022**

VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES

**A journal for
underrepresented
writers**

VOICES

untitled

Ollie Charles
Nicola Lampard
Co-Founders

Paul Stapleton
Design

Iqbal Hussain
Proofreader

untitledwriting.co.uk

[@untitled_writing](https://www.instagram.com/untitled_writing)

[@writinguntitled](https://twitter.com/writinguntitled)

Welcome to the fourth issue of Untitled: Voices, featuring 29 brilliant writers. We're honoured to publish this exciting new work.

Following Ollie's loss at the end of 2021 of his partner, Anwar (who provided the artwork for the programme for the first ever Untitled Writers' Salon), this issue was delayed and we really didn't know how 2022 was going to unfold for Untitled. It's been a long journey but it makes the issue even more special because we were able to consider all the submissions carefully, eventually settling on these great pieces that we felt people needed to read.

As we look ahead to the future of Untitled, we can't wait to read more amazing work, meet more writers and amplify more underrepresented voices.

Thanks for joining us!

Ollie Charles & Nicola Lampard

VOICES

Poetry

Ob / scene

Cheryl Caesar 5

The Road from Hebden Bridge

Elizabeth Gibson 6

It Starts with Birth

Ella Walsworth-Bell 7

Export Me

Julie Dickinson 8

Reminding

Katrina Crespin 10

Head Boy

Lee Campbell 12

Process

Liba Ravindran 13

Structural Integrity

Lucy Goodwill 14

Mourning

Mahima Kaur 15

July 2015: New Horizons

Upskirts Pluto

Mollie Russell 17

The Supermarket Night

Shift Toasts the Pandemic

Mollie Russell 19

Demon's Theme

Neil Benad 20

Inventory

Neil Benad 22

poor bichaud

Nikita Sena 23

What I We Meant to Say (for Mercy Baguma)

Nikita Sena 24

Tsundoku Takotsubo

Rick Dove 25

City Pool Swimming Lesson

Rikki Santer 27

silence

Samantha Moe 29

Rescue

Serge Neptune 30

The Day After

Serge Neptune 31

Adventive Species

Spencer Wood 32

Prose

Waves

Cathleen Davies 34

Bad Cakes

Gary Mooney 36

The Dead of the Night

Iqbal Hussain 39

The Witchy Woman

Jacqueline Harvey 40

Dive (Extract)

Jon Barton 43

Bus Flagging for Women in the 21st Century: an Updated Guide

JP Seabright 46

I Saw You in a Dream

Kiah Olowu 48

Sirens Sing the Blues: a Paramedic's Notes on Life and Death

Kimberley Bussey-
Chamberlain 51

Words are People

Megha Nayar 54

Ghost Stories

Shehrazade Zafar-Arif 56

Disorderly in Conduct

Sossity Chiricuzio 59

A Beautiful Life on the Fringes

Zahirra Dayal 61

Bios

Writers' Information 64

VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES

Poetry

Ob / scene

Cheryl Caesar

I.

A young woman in a limp cotton dress is walking up and down the main street in Riverside, California. This is the Inland Empire, the desert, and people don't walk unless they have to, not even at 10:00 p.m. She goes in and out of fast-food places and convenience stores, with bags and boxes. She seems sweaty and pale. She will not meet my gaze. She is not wearing earbuds, but she seems to be listening to something.

II.

don't look at me! / you have no right
I am engaged / in a private revolution

what I am doing / is not for pleasure
or only at first / quickly it becomes
an exercise / in self-disgust
I am trying / to repulse myself
(do I not / repel you too? / turn away!)
with the grease / and the sugar
and my own sweat / so that
I will never want it again
– never hunger again –

I am punishing / myself for my appetite
I am ingesting / an abomination
like St Maria Maddelena de' Pazzi / licking lepers
– scatophagy – / and at moments I feel
myself all-permeable / open to the universe
and there is a sense / of something sacred
and I seem to hear / the singing of the stars

The Road from Hebden Bridge

Elizabeth Gibson

I now have a mug with a quote from Anne Lister,
about loving women, and women loving her back,
and I can pour myself hot chocolate in my little flat,
and let her words, and your words, warm in my fist.
You were right, about this.

You are like me, you said as you drove, it is okay.
You told me your story, gave me laughter and grit;
when I dug into doubt, you led me out from my pit,
to green hills and blue sky and lanes full of rosebay.
Trust me, kid. You are gay.

I smiled and smiled, wouldn't let myself hide it.
And as we wandered Shibden, her house, her stables,
your sheet of hair and the hoodie round your waist
were always up ahead, for me to follow and find.
We drove back full and quiet.

You told me again, back at the house by the river,
you can make a fool of yourself; you will, probably,
but you will find her in the end, and you will be happy.
We shared some crisps: sea salt and wine vinegar,
your favourite – I still remember.

It Starts with Birth

Ella Walsworth-Bell

Gut-ache cramps my style
I love him, we're
married, it's natural
but we're afraid.
Wishing for freedom
yet wanting the world
to stay only two.
Belly is tight as
a barrel bound with
iron bands. I moan.
My husband makes tea
and toast, as if guests
have called in. I ignore him.
Lights are low. Everyone's
tired. Another midwife comes
"Let's get this done," she says
There's a mewl, and this
thing emerges, this bloodied head
Our baby enters the world
And is loved.

Export Me

Julie Dickinson

Headlights shift along the road as I sit,
car-bound, music blaring,
drowning out the rain.

I look on, bleary eyed morning,
complaining inwardly of a life of drudgery.

Lorries rumble, edge forward alongside.
Cars strain and idle.
A cacophony of human story.
Somehow wrong and without meaning.

Then you are beside me, woolly export.
Faces, eyes, backside, tails,
squashed in, but clear enough to see
as the transport creeps
and I can't look away.

I watch you jostle with every judder of the vehicle.
Where is your destination?
The local slaughterhouse, livestock auction?
Hours and days across Europe?

Does anyone else notice between rain-soaked windscreens?
Wipers swishing with rhythmic intent.
I hope to wash away the image and change your fate.
But I will never remove the glimpse of you.

The memory.

Traffic surges and you are gone in a rush of diesel.

And I imagine, resounding bleats of meaning,
known only to you.
Though I speculate:
pain, sorrow, misery, dehydration
and – I hope – of anger toward us.

The human drudgery rushes forward,
like bad blood in the circulatory system.
And we disappear on exits and roads to our self-importance.

But I will never forget your transport lorry.
Or countless others running these roads.
Feeding the demand of a sorrowful system,
of our systemic damnation.

In the roar of the traffic, I imagine
I hear your faint thoughts, echoed: *Do not export me, destroy me, kill me.*

Reminding

Katrina Crespín

I have heard the moths come
every seven years, but
sometimes it seems like they
are always here, fluttering
against door frame in
praise of porch light.

We don't always forget
the way we are supposed to,
nor do we remember the way
the seasons would like us to believe.

I crawled upon your hand
on fine legs, wing brushing palm,
steadying myself as you peered at
the brown spots on my wings.

You did not crush me,
nor use a flick of the wrist
and a word shoved in haste
to push me away.

The details blur and
the edges of film are burned through
so that all one sees are the big moments,
not the days shifted in between.

My wings against open hand;
you let me stay as long as I needed
and did not protest when I
took again to the air.

How easy I was to release.

I don't remember exact words,
but I have not forgotten your face.
I can't remember why I loved you
but I can't forget that I did.

When I met you
I was introduced to a light show
beyond recognition
to paint the corners of eyelids
and dissolve the kindness of time.

I fell in love with flying,
with candle light, and open window.
I watched the rain from the
safety of your late-lit bedroom,
as it ate the earth
leaving soft teeth marks
in the dirt of your gardens.

It was over twenty years ago
since you made me feel loved
just by the meeting my gaze.

It has been six years since
you died, but I swear I have seen
the moths more than once
since then. They flutter on the window
beside my late-night lingering,
reminding me of the early
hours we shared before the sun approached.

But we had forgiveness
and we had closure;
There was nothing left unsaid or undone.
There is still grief and loss,
still sympathy for the man you became.

That was the last season of the moths,
weaving shaded memories,
allowing faded pictures to surface.
Reminded me that you were once
a light I could not resist.

Head Boy

Lee Campbell

The weekly boys' cross-country run at school, 1989
Always last
Picking players for the football team
Always last
Towel stolen in the boys' showers
Always first
Out of school swimming club competition
Always first
Year 7 swimming every Tuesday
"How did *you* get to swim like *that?*" from a surprised bully
who later became Head Boy
Silver swimming medal followed but school bullies remained
Year 11 swimming every Friday
"How did *you* get to swim like *that?*" from Head Boy, early 1995
The bullies disappeared but my joy was placed elsewhere
In me catching a glimpse of Head Boy naked in the changing room
Only before had I seen such a sight on late night BBC2, 1989
Watching alone in my bedroom, sound mute as to not awaken parents next
door
A young Rupert Everett, full frontal, *Another Country*
Black-and-white TV could not dilute the beauty of his manhood
School Football Final, late 1995
Everyone remembers Head Boy's tackle
I still remember Head Boy's tackle
Me sitting opposite Head Boy on a train, 2001
Me enjoying the discomfort he felt at me seeing him enjoying me looking
at his hairy legs

[View the accompanying poetry film](#)

Process

Liba Ravindran

With a motion in sway,
Our mouths open to digest
The residual waste,
Blurred pitches fork an understanding into nature
How things find themselves again,
Food and cardboard layered like a lasagne
Engineers a carbon-nitrogen fix
Black, crumbly compost presents itself to be used.

Structural Integrity

Lucy Goodwill

What does it mean to me to be alive?
(I am afraid of the answer)

words forced
 from heavy lungs,
deep aches caught,
(I am alive, but am I living?)

To exist in my body is to learn the
structure of pain
 to map its intricacies through
 jagged lines, and hold it steady
 (weak wrists shaking)

The architecture of my body is filled
 with algebraic
- miscalculations

 (I
 coll
 -apse
 in
 on
 my
 -self)

I'm not sure who I am anymore without the paste
of p a r t - d i s s o l v e d opioids
on my tongue.

Mourning

Mahima Kaur

Nudging in deeper
through the thick of her arms
I inhale her,

her musk – sharp yet soothing
her warmth – unrefined yet comforting

before I am woken
by the sounds of the city life
subway chimes, honks and murmurs
 – a glaring disharmony
 – a gross confiction
of the incomplete dream
or did I just wish it?

My Mother
nearly there
back in her arms where she held me –
softly yet firmly
during anxious nights
and feverish reposes;

I mourn her
I mourn the loss –
of old nights gone by
of embraces left too soon
of every bitter word
that was indignation

I mourn the loss
of my mother

of her presence

like the shade of a tree –
the uncomplaining tree
– perennial and weathered out
– the calmness during adversity

Yesterday morning,
during a noise-filled call
she asked me nothing
and I wept –
for I longed for
the questions and the answers
the lost moments of sheltered silence

Today,
I call her again
with a heavy heart and clouded eyes

“What is wrong?”
she asks me

something within dies.

Do I tell her that I mourn her?

Mourn the dead, I’ve been told
How do I explain?
I mourn my Mother –

impoverished by her absence
deprived of her laughter
I mourn her
now and always.

July 2015: New Horizons Upskirts Pluto

Mollie Russell

i.

The largest telescope you've ever seen is parting your curtains like legs.
Technology these days is amazing. Smartphones now have robotic
fingernails
that peel back your white dress and brush against the rocky face of your
thighs.
Everything has a GPS system now so they can track how close to the sun
you fly,
and when your "eccentric orbits" force planets to collide,
you can't exit the trajectory until you've passed
under the groping, withered hand of that old moustachioed millionaire
so affectionately known as the Monopoly Man of your body.
Remember that Red Dwarf episode where space travellers lusted after
Wilma Flintstone?
You rip those pearls from your throat and they float,
become hydra and hell and a fishbowl of night. You become someone
excavated.
The lenses explain how something so small takes up so much space.
"Methane ice caps" is just another name for "bitch face."

ii.

According to the International Astronomical Union, there are three
conditions that must be met in order for a woman to be considered a
person:

1. They must be in orbit around a man

she must undo his belt

Gerard Kuiper has collected their bodies

like baby teeth

2. They must be massive enough

to root canal themselves

to bury the skin they lost to the tanner

to be pulled into shape, well rounded

filed down

landlocked

by unquestionable gravity.

3. There must be no bodies nearby

we are here

pressed against your back and erupting

rats watching from the underground tracks

with teeth like knives

blank magazines, dancefloors, mirrors

we empty

into the street

into the sky

The Supermarket Night Shift Toasts the Pandemic

Mollie Russell

So, we're ready to do it again:
sit silent on the sofa, sleep in our uniforms
when we return at dawn to our dozing homes.
Because at least the lights are still on.
Because at least we're getting paid.
Because at least the neighbours clapped
for the stability of fourteen-hour days.
Raise a glass for the sanitation of rage
tied to our heads with elastic.
For shovers and spitters and smiles,
the ones that won't wear a mask.
This one's for all the bags. For life
that used to fill my side of the bed.
For my wife, who misses the metronome breaths
that used to fill my side of the bed.
This one's for all the bags for life
and the ones that won't wear a mask.
For shovers and spitters and smiles
tied to our heads with elastic.
Raise a glass for the sanitation of rage.
For the stability of fourteen-hour days.
Because at least the neighbours clapped.
Because at least we're getting paid.
Because at least the lights are still on
when we return at dawn to our dozing homes,
sit silent on the sofa, sleep in our uniforms
so we're ready to do it again.

Demon's Theme

Neil Benad

In the corner he would sit, yellow Steve, white spittle on chin, sick on sleeve.
Shifting seat, half in half out, always watching the door.
Expectant eyes, stuttering hands, promises.
His veins dance with need. He stumbles, mumbles puzzles. There. Just a hint of face behind.
Twitchy, itchy, sketchy, always going, returning a little bit less each time.
My mate Steve. Ash fingers, cracked lips, skin rotten, sick like bleached leaves.
I ask a question.
Where to, with who, why you? Blank expression.
But I was always curious and drawn to the devious, so I don't give up. Not on Steve.
See, I care for what he has, though I don't know what it is. I know it's what I need.
And though a problem shared is sickness doubled, I plead.
I stick it on him like glue to greed. Tell me!
Then I unroll some notes to note desire and though he sweats ice, he leaves just enough warmth to invite me into the fire.
I want to try, I say, I want to know, only you can show. Guide me to comfort.
He says, please don't be like me, I'm Yellow Steve, white spittle on chin, sick on sleeve.
It will make you ill, sick as sick. Then you'll love it, and hate it, but it's fucking great, and though I know I shouldn't, if you really want to, I'm your friend, so I will.
See, I was always curious, drawn to the devious, enticed by shadows, led.
I left with him that night and I never came back. Chasing shrinking horizons, dancing on wire, two faces, opposing views, white and black.
I call this Demon's Theme for my mate Steve, who went to ground and drowned in screams.

So now it's only me, white spittle on chin, sick on sleeve.
And I was ill.
And I turned yellow.

Inventory

Neil Benad

I've spent mornings in empty playgrounds under blankets of snow,
been pulled from crushed cars by passers-by,
wished I had a hole in the ground to hide in.
I have cradled my dog and watched his breath fade to stillness,
spent other people's money, stuck my nose where I shouldn't,
swallowed my own blood, lost teeth to vengeful men.
I am not that strong. I fake a good fight, can charm the skin off a snake.

I've wasted hours peering through keyholes in cheap hotels,
danced naked on roofs of stolen cars, spent winter nights in windowless
phone boxes.
I have eaten alligator, wild boar, shark,
have scraped tobacco from wet pavements before dawn,
have sat by a grave and talked to dead flowers.

I have listened to the noise of the roof on platform 8 at Waterloo station,
have drunkenly phoned someone I despised at 2:00 a.m. and pretended to
be me
have read books upside down while flirting in coffee shops.
I have wept at weddings, laughed at funerals. I sneer at stop signs.
I seek praise for things I haven't done.
I often spot the problem when peering into puddles.

I once said I love you to a girl I had only known for one hour,
shifted from sex to obsession in 60 seconds,
and nearly made the relationship work.

I always tried to act the fool yet fooled no-one but myself.
I have dared to climb mountains in the dark.
I have shed dead weight and gained a little substance.
I used to think I might die young, but now I hope I can act young forever.

poor bichaud

Nikita Sena

maybe there is no self to be chased
maybe there is only the being
and the cupping of hands
under memory, lightly,
an irreverent gesture keeping
the body intact

these days when I think of you fucking me (both in the past and in
my present daydreams) i
think of how wonderful it is to be just
a body (sans mind, sans history)
the flesh
kneaded gripped teased hot breath trawling
through hair making enclaves of curves

do you remember when I tried
to explain what it felt like to be no
one? about nights spent crouching under some one
else seeking thinking
i could trace a self in
the sigh of my name

i want to tell you i love you though i don't know
what that does anymore
i want to tell you that i am
yours though you once told me i was free
(I misread you then wept, lost)
how to explain? that my body
under on top beside astride yours
feels more like my own than when
i'm alone

What I We Meant to Say (for Mercy Baguma)

Nikita Sena

~~What a thing?
For a son to be un-mothered
by calloused hands
moonlighting as invisible~~

~~no, my dear, today you may not work
rent, fall ill or seek alms
best not look too foreign lest we
peruse you with one hand
mark an X with the other~~

~~I wonder. Had we been
less
negligent, indifferent
had we less thirst for new names
more
space for the ones before.
would you still be here?~~

Did you ever dance alone at night, sis?
Your steps marking your spot
Here, sis,
Where you still stay.

Tsundoku Takotsubo

Rick Dove

blossom drifts
fallen tears of Spring
mourning snow angels

The window is measuring how well he is coping
by the height of the stack on the bedside table. Recently
it has risen to be an honoured kaiju, pages scraping
sky, unopened promises casting long memories,
shadows of a high noon he has not seen clearly
in months. *The buying of more books than one can read
is nothing less than the soul reaching toward infinity.*
There are ghosts here. Outside, the streets echo.

There was a decision taken, by those who saw fit,
to welfare check, in rotation. Repetition is a burden.
It takes three weeks to form a habit, but an instant to lose perspective
Confines are time on the wrists watched. A ronin
has his honour, so they say nothing of it, as it passes.
Diligence clearing the detritus of battle, blunted blades,
used mugs, meal trays. His need to escape is real, so
they leave him books. A watchtower kaiju, growing.

The screens are ringing red roses, with everything at issue,
He articulates he misses you. Attentiveness leaving no
loose ends for a tourniquet. He holds the new tome
to his chest, hoping soon to follow you, through
a plot-hole, or narrative misstep. We all fall down.
Words, a murmuration, feathering flesh, swelling
heartfelt into misshapen, inescapable gravity. These tentacles
of cardiomyopathy, somnambulant seppuku, a ronin must travel.

This is a giant in the sandbox, scorpion in the dunes
to spice his nature, invisible hand of industry crescent
shaped moon drawing lines and gathering tides,
a beachhead, prismatic consciousness, while out walking.
*How do I know what I am thinking, until I have read
the thoughts back in a different place, to the one
that birthed them? He says, Never trust a thought that didn't come
by walking, Baby steps, it all unravels, as he and I become one again.*

summer wilderness
rebirth is grief making
hay in emptiness

City Pool Swimming Lesson

Rikki Santer

it was my Atlantic
& Pacific where
summer bodies
blossomed on its shore
or soared like albatrosses
down a slick, yellow slide
where concession
stand was messy
with salt and goo
where the changing
rooms were graffiti,
chipped sea green,
and floor puddles
up to my ankles
 then my first violence
when clammy hands
of a teenaged instructor
hurled me into the deep
for instinct's floating
but instead my fingers
grasped murky walls
closing in
gravel nipping
at my toes
scraping my knees
eyes and lungs stinging
mouth flooding
 then my mother's face
and arms sputtering through,
lifting me to her warm breasts,
pounding heart, carrying

me back, swaddling me
tight in her embrace
as we tremble
together
on the edge
of a plastic chaise
my Tiny Tears doll
face down in the sand
 what a day feels like
when it never leaves
and where its drink
becomes blueprint for
for an ageing non-swimmer.

silence

Samantha Moe

she comes home covered in red sequins
an explosion of colour spilling
on the tiled floor tired
more so from the fighting than the restaurant.
empty house red fridge
ghosts of tomatoes float in the dimly lit hall.
the tub flows clicks its claws
cliques that called you names
now far away memories ghosts make no sound
as they parade warm as dough
fresh
from under the world where you heard rumours of lava
and love cavities. she's come home covered in red
sequins
the ghosts smell excess moonlight a mile away.
Tired, they feast
light is sucked through lamps
via straw.

Rescue

Serge Neptune

& back into the nightwaves I dissolve,
while moonlight snares his chest,
laid among snooty columns, shrubs of myrtle,
lilting belladonna. Pearl of a man,
copper-haired, snatched from hostile
waters. Wet linen, sulking drape of cream,
barely covering his parts.

The owls & nightjars voice their indignation.
The dark boils over with clamour, yearning for this man asleep.
Even the ground wills itself open
to taste his flesh. I grab his ankles, refuse
to let him waste into the staggering dawn.

The Day After

Serge Neptune

Dawn has broken like a vase
from a wedding registry

It was agreed all along. My body dissolved
into a clusterfuck of bubbles

It's in all biology books
dissolution of organic matter

into proteins lignins lipids
offshore breakdown of algal blooms
drifting

It was agreed all along – the day after
he moved on to love another
my heart would somehow crack open

Beloved, I'm sorry
I disappointed

always damp and chilly
oh well – I guess this too is eternity

In the ass-broken dawn a naked man
water up to his calves

dick wrapped by his hand
delivering quick motions
back & forth

There I am, foam brushing at his feet
like an adoring lover
waiting for that fountain of light
that final burst

Adventive Species

Spencer Wood

I didn't wear fleece when we met
now I'm emptying a used tea bag.
The garden is suddenly spangled pink,
a Bullfinch, you say did you know they mate for life?
Later I read they do this to avoid wasting energy in spring.

You're out there scraping worms
from the rim of the compost bin, throwing them
back into their dark work, and whilst they throb
I'm becoming half-porcelain in the bathroom, waiting
for the water to run clear, for you to come in.

At the sink again, rinsing a pull-ring
tin can, its lid bent backward like a chin
lifting to expose the throat and its hollow body,
I think of the jockstrap at the back of the drawer
gathering lint.

Our living room looks out onto the road
and sometimes the road looks in,
like when the school kids passed by,
my hand was on your cheek in plain sight
and I flinched.

VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES

Prose

Waves

Cathleen Davies

Kiera had impressed him when she'd said her favourite writer was Virginia Woolf. That was a lie. Kiera's father was a lecturer at the local university and he specialised in the study of *The Female Flaneurs*. He liked to rant about his research during their Sunday dinner after a few slowly gulped glasses of red. He was passionate about literature. Kiera's mother, on the other hand, always rolled her eyes and said things like: "Darling, please, no work at the table." She had read avidly once, but now she worried too much about house renovations.

Kiera's father was a handsome man. He wore smart glasses over kind and wrinkled eyes. He kept his hair long but well-cut, wore button-up shirts and jeans, staying sharp yet aloof, casual and formal all at once. Kiera's friends liked him. He was funny and sarcastic and made them feel clever just by chatting to them. Kiera only pretended to be embarrassed by her dad. Her mother was also beautiful, but she wore too much red lipstick and had mean creases round her mouth. Her hair was originally the auburn of Kiera's, but she dyed it chestnut brown, the loose waves dropping to her shoulder blades. Kiera's mother was in good shape for her age, but she smoked too many cigarettes. She argued that at least it kept her thin. Recently, Kiera had noticed how the lingering gazes of men on the street had started to land, not on her mother, but on her. She understood, too, when she saw her fresh, pale skin in her reflection, hair wet and brushed back after a shower, her freckles standing out with childlike beauty, why many men preferred her youth.

When Kiera Blake lost her virginity to the man she

had wanted to impress, she internally thanked Virginia Woolf. She hadn't read any of her work, but she knew what phrases to parrot. She knew to talk about stream of consciousness, the breaking of literary barriers, how she was very much a female icon, etc. Her lover was older than her and she had wanted to impress him. She told him how she'd felt a connection with Woolf, how she'd always found her writing challenging and interesting, and her lover would kiss her on the nose and tell her that, yes, she was very clever for someone her age, and it was brilliant to see her excel in the arts, but that he was most impressed by her piano skills.

Kiera's lover was a music teacher. He wore black t-shirts and always had stubble framing his jawline. He would lean over the students' shoulders while they sat at their keyboards, making sure they knew what they were playing. The girls savoured the smell of his cologne and coffee breath. Like most young teachers, he recognised the effect he had on teenage girls. Around Kiera's shoulder, he always lingered. He wasn't shy to touch her fingers, spreading them further to help her reach the chords. During parents' evening, he called Kiera his star pupil and told her parents she was bursting with potential. Kiera could feel the heat spreading over her cheekbones.

Woolf drowned with rocks in her pockets and Kiera understood this was ironic, but all the same it felt intensely humourless. The water was taking Kiera down now. She didn't feel calm, peaceful or accepting. There was panic. She struggled. She waited for the euphoria to hit her, for her life to flash before her eyes.

Kiera was aware that the water tasted bad. She could feel her chest starting to hurt and she wished she didn't have books in her backpack, wished her parents had taken her to swimming lessons instead of art galleries, wished she'd actually read some Virginia Woolf.

Woolf was not Kiera's favourite writer, and now this misrepresentation would forever be immortalised. Kiera still liked *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*. Kiera was fifteen and she didn't deserve to die. All she'd wanted was the space to learn, to practise being the person that she'd hoped to one day become. At the funeral they'd talk about her wasted talent and untapped potential. Kiera wondered whether, if she'd been permitted to reach adulthood, she might have eventually become the person she was already pretending to be. Maybe she really would have enjoyed *The Female Flaneurs*, like her father did. Perhaps she would have been the sort to demand commitment in relationships, to insist she got respect or else she'd tell the world their secret. And perhaps if she were older, with red lipstick and cigarettes and wrinkles around her mouth, it would have worked. He might have listened. But not at fifteen.

Through the murky water, she saw the shape of her lover watching her drown.

Bad Cakes

Gary Mooney

Dad haunted Carricks, Cooks and Greggs, buying Battenburg, Sly cake and Russian cake, Apple squares, Rocky Road, chocolate cake, custard tarts, blueberry muffins. I haunted Books for Amnesty, the RSPCA bookshop and Oxfam, buying Hill, Smith, Brownjohn, Hamburger, Tomlinson, Mitchell, McGouch, Porter, Holbrook and Henri.

*

I searched for volumes of the *Penguin Modern Poets*. To this day, I'm missing volumes 8, 9, 17, 14, 24, 25, 27 and 36. I still buy a volume whenever I see one, cross it off my list. But I no longer read them. My love of poetry turning to just collecting these volumes – slim, battered, secondhand books that might cost a pound or two.

*

The cakes sat on a cold metal shelf of peeling grey paint. There were just a couple of packets of each flavour. One pack had bright, pink-coloured cakes, another had ones seemingly topped with coconut, while a third promised to taste of apple. Each packet had a yellow label on it: 99p.

The first time I saw them, I knew one day, when I deserved to hate myself, that I would buy them. They spoke of failure, artificiality and penance.

When I did buy them, I went late at night, just before the shop was shutting. There was one other customer. I waited until they left. The man behind the counter was talking on the phone and barely looked at me as I paid. If he was surprised that anyone had bought such items, he didn't show it.

I put the cakes in the thin blue plastic bag he gave

me and left feeling like I had achieved something. When I got home, I pulled off the cheap cellophane wrappers and stared at them. Should there be a ceremony? Perhaps a poem from *Penguin Modern Poets 10* – one of the Liverpool Poets? Mr Henri, would you like to say a few words? Read us "Death in the Suburbs"?

I decided the bad cakes themselves represented a disregard for all formality or standards. No need to start looking for dignity now. It was far too late for that.

I took one of the bright pink cakes and bit into it. It tasted of nothing. I tried one of the apple ones. What had I been expecting – the taste of grief? Expecting to taste sadness on my tongue sadness where I could at least feel it and maybe experience it outside of my body on the colour of my tongue or on my lips – sadness that I could spit out, walk around and look at – so that it was not just in me all the time? How was I expecting that to be? Except they were tasteless, and empty, produced in a factory by people that did not care. What sort of person makes cakes like that and who do they expect to buy them? People like me.

*

I sometimes mistype sad for dad. It is easy to do – try it sometime.

I want to open a museum of sadness. Light drizzle on the window, a muted TV showing a half-remembered sit com, music from a radio that isn't tuned in right. Everything these days is so clear – digital sound and HD pictures. I long for static, for interference.

My Dad killed himself without warning. So sometimes the grief hits me without warning. I don't

know if I bought the bad cakes because of him or because of a woman breaking up with me.

I'm buying cakes neither he nor she would ever eat.

I'm buying poetry I will never read.

*

So, I get the bad cakes home. I wish I could say that I enjoyed them and finished them off with relish, but I didn't even have that small victory – I ended up throwing them away.

When it was confirmed what I knew anyway (that she was leaving me), I knew then that I could buy the cakes. I did not matter anymore – she would have hated them and despaired of me eating them and it would have been one more reason to be disappointed in me.

*

One day, I was shouted at: 'Are ye the kid that likes poetry?' I can't remember which bully it was, but he was bigger than me and I knew what would happen. I pushed my copy of *Penguin Modern Poets 10* deeper into the pocket of my school blazer and, summoning my thickest accent, "A divent knaw wat ya meen," I said, and the thing is, it worked. He understood that someone like me – like him – couldn't possibly like poetry. The implications of so doing being unthinkable, just like I never thought my dad could like poetry. It was only after he was dead that I found out that as a young man he had written poems – but he never mentioned it when he was alive. None of his poems survive. I never read one word. More literature of the lost.

*

Her mother was from Liverpool. She once told me that her mother had hung out in arty circles in the 1960s and had known a lot of the Liverpool poets. I said nothing.

When I first moved down south, I met David Holbrook at a party. I said too much.

*

When I was young – when I found out you could be a poet and be from Liverpool – it was not too much of a stretch to think I could be a poet from Newcastle – and I tried.

Submitting poems to *Iron* magazine, then ringing up and asking for them to be sent back, unread.

*

There is a kebab van opposite the shop, near where you

can park. To get to the shop, you must cross the road on a bend, looking out for traffic that speeds through what once was a village. The door beeps loudly (twice) when you open it. The kebab smell follows you in. It's cold inside. There is a shelf of energy drinks, bottles of Pepsi Cola, cheap lemonade, cartons of long-life tomato juice and orange juice. The tiles on the floor are cracked and worn. It looks like a place no one cares anymore, least of all the owner. But it is where I have come to find something out.

And the shop window covered in posters: 4 cans for 99p, a missing cat (reward offered), the National Lottery, Health Lottery, Postcode Lottery. Maybe the cats are winning the Lottery and just fucking off. Or the middle-aged men who buy the cheap lager in bright blue plastic bags – maybe they kidnap the cats for the money to buy more lager. I can barely see in the shop – dirty neon tubes without covers – and the hum of old freezer cabinets nearing the end of their life.

The shopkeeper is always on the phone. A sign on the counter says card payments must be over five pounds. Fifty-pound notes are not accepted and they don't give change for the launderette – which is redundant because the launderette closed a year ago. I think the chief thing he sells is alcohol – cheap wine which he always has a deal on – and crisps, chocolate, canned Fray Bentos pies, Pot Noodles, scratchcards. Someone has started a Slimming World group, which I would be welcome to attend. The local church invites me to coffee every Tuesday morning at 10:00 a.m. The sports centre does football on the same day.

A sparsely populated magazine rack has a couple of tattered *Daily Mails*, *Take a Break* and crossword puzzle books, *Top Gear* magazine, *Woman's Weekly*, *The People's Friend*. The freezer sells individual chicken dinners and fishfingers and oven chips (family size packs, though no one who shops here seems to have a family). On the shelves, KitKats, Cadbury's Twirl and chewing gum. Cheap toilet rolls – four in a pack. Behind the counter: cigarettes and paracetamol and the more expensive drinks – Bell's whisky, Highland Park, Svedka vodka. Beside the fridge there are packets of crisps (grab bags), sandwiches (handmade, according to the packet), peanuts, Pringles (sour cream and chive), tins of

Corale baked beans, Tyne Classic Irish Stew, tomato soup, loaves of white bread, a single packet of dark rye bread, bottles of curry sauce, Sharwood's poppadoms, Cheddar cheese wrapped in tight plastic, garlic sausage, a few vegetables, four apples in a white polystyrene tray, pork pies (topped with Branston pickle), teabags, instant coffee at £1.99 a jar, milk (full fat in one-pint cartons), Cornflakes, Coco Pops, sugar, strawberry jam, biscuits, chocolate Hobnobs, Rich Tea, chocolate digestives, tubs of Flora margarine, tins of sardines, plastic squeezey bottles of tomato ketchup and mayonnaise, packets of spaghetti, dog food, toothpaste. And all the poems I never wrote.

*

My brother always has to be on a diet. He confides in me that he buys packs of Mars bars and hides them around the house. He eats them when his partner isn't around. I buy secondhand poetry books and never read them. Which one of us is worse? Which of us is the most deceitful?

*

I can't live with bad cakes on the table. Trying to imagine a taste they don't have. Trying to imagine my dad's poems when I have no idea of the words he used.

*

This year, on the anniversary of my dad's death, I put a copy of *Penguin Modern Poets 10* in my pocket and go to a cafe out of town. A place where I will never see anyone I know. For that day I am someone else.

I order coffee and chocolate cake, apple pie, a jam tart, a custard slice, a scone with cream and jam, a fruit flapjack and a slice of lemon drizzle cake.

Afterwards, I write words on the paper napkin.

I think they might be poems.

The Dead of the Night

Iqbal Hussain

“Beware of women whose feet point backwards.”

My mother meant the banshee-like *churails* who were said to haunt abandoned houses, *peepal* trees and cemeteries. Murdered by their loved ones, these fearsome spirits avenged their untimely deaths by returning for the males of the family. They hid their pig-like features, wild hair and black tongues in the form of beautiful women. The only thing they couldn't disguise was their feet, which pointed forever back to front.

Mother warned that *churails* also stole away naughty children. “Once you hear their steps on the floor, then, well ...” She would leave the sentence trailing, the unsaid words making us immediately cease our clamour.

The *churail's* screams filled my dreams. Her screeching outside the window heralded her arrival, clawed feet scraping on the marble floors as she shuffled towards your room. Many a night I hid under my blanket, trembling at any rustling sound from the courtyard, the ropes of the *charpoi* creaking with my every panted breath. I grasped the *taweez* around my neck, sending up *kalmahs* to Allah to pray for forgiveness and invisibility.

What fairytales! *Churails* have better things to do than terrorise the innocent.

I unfurl myself from my earthly bed. The night is still and no-one is up at this hour. I catch my reflection in the lake as I pass – the “woman in white”, the groundsman call me. Keeping to the shadows, I negotiate the avenues, which have many new residents since I was first here.

I slip through the gate. Nearby, an owl hoots, its call carrying through the air like the cry of a dying man. A lonely rickshaw sputters past, a *filmi* song escaping

from its glassless windows. The scent of jasmine fills my lungs. I fancy I hear my heart beating.

I approach the *haveli*. It glows white in the moonlight, its many towers rising up like bleached bones. Over the years, the lights behind the shutters have gone out, one by one. Tonight, there is darkness. The owl floats overhead, its pale body trailing a ghostly path through the inky sky.

He is in the garden, motionless, frail as a skeleton. Age has caught up with him. I begin to doubt my own memory. Then he laughs to himself – a mirthless sound – and it comes rushing back. His disbelief. Shock. Then anger. No daughter of his was going to marry an Indian boy. What would people say?

I hear the strike of the match and the whoosh of kerosene; the smell of smoke fills my nostrils.

My step falters. The *ghungroo* around my ankles chinkle.

He looks up. He gasps. The blood drains from his face. “You!”

I walk towards him, concentrating hard on each step. “Father. I have come.”

As he struggles to rise, wobbling on his walking stick, I see myself reflected in his eyes.

The last thing he sees are my feet, visible under the hem of the *lehenga*.

The Witchy Woman

Jacqueline Harvey

To outsiders, the bayou may conjure romance. The cypress trees draped with Spanish moss, especially in the haze that hovers over the water, are icons of these parts. To outsiders, but not always to those who call them home. The bayous and swamps are mysterious places. When the sun's gold is elbowed away by the moonlight to bathe instead with blue and the breeze flutters through the moss, they appear to be another world, another time.

Parents tell children not to venture too far into the swamp. Alligators may ambush unwary victims, dragging them down to the depths – never to be seen again. They warn that other creatures lurk there, too; creatures not of this world. As children we believe our parents – but as we get older and braver we are more likely to heed our peers. The threat of danger, of the unknown, begins to evaporate even in the mystical atmosphere of the bayou.

At the age of twelve, my fear began to evaporate. Denny and Lucas, two years older than me, had already grown fearless; fearless enough to want to find out about the strange woman who lived in the cabin by the creek. We all wondered about her. She arrived like a hurricane in a beat-up old flatbed truck. The ramshackle cabin that had lain empty for a long time became her home. What, if any, connection it had with her we never found out. The local busybody asked her while she was loading the truck in town one day, but a dismissive wave of the hand and a throaty chuckle was her only reply.

We wanted to check her out for ourselves. The way to the cabin took us along a track off the creek road. To

follow her was too difficult, though, as while the truck could cope with the mud, our sneakers couldn't. Should we reach the cabin all we would be able to see was the back, so Denny came up with a plan. He would borrow his dad's field glasses and we would hide on the other side of the creek opposite the shack. We would be safe, she wouldn't be aware we were watching; we could find out what happens. Folk suspected "nefarious" goings-on. I didn't understand what the word nefarious meant, but judging by the hushed tones in which they spoke I suspected it was something dodgy.

We slipped off after supper. Telling my mom I was going to Lucas' house, I got my flashlight and went to meet my friends. We needed to be in place before sunset because "what went on" started around sunset – according to the whispers. Going through the trees in the almost dark was spooky, with much rustling among the shadows. There was just enough light to make our way and to hopefully catch the Witchy Woman. What her name was we never found out and I had never her seen until that night. The nickname we lifted from the Eagles' song. It suited her well, according to the description by those who had seen her: raven-black hair and ruby-red lips. In the song, the Witchy Woman was driven to madness with a silver spoon. What that meant I didn't know. Not then. I do now, of course.

Her cabin came into view; we got settled. The mist on the water made it appear to be floating, hovering. Lanterns hung along the porch – coloured lanterns that gave an eerie glow, their reflections dancing on the mirrored water of the creek.

We could hear movement and, barely whispering through the almost still air, wind chimes. Denny studied them through the field glasses, then passed them to me. The chimes were unlike any I had seen before and definitely did not come from the local hardware shop. No way. There were shells and sticks and beads and a silvery spoon and bones; bones larger than the other items that hung there. Where did the bones come from? Had she killed something – or someone? I shuddered. We all shuddered.

From inside came voices, laughter; crazy laughter. Not hers alone but a man's voice, maybe two men's voices. They came out. Yes, two men. They flopped down on an old worn settee – frayed and dirty like a tired lumbering animal but they didn't care. They looked right at home. I remember what they said.

"Where is it? Bring that sweet stuff out here, honey – the best."

"Always the best here, y'know that. Everything you get here is the best."

She laughed – a laugh unlike anything ever from a woman. I still can't explain. She sashayed out carrying a glass flagon and swilled the contents round and round before pouring into mugs for the men. She was beautiful and wore a dress that my mom would regard as indecent. Our eyes popped. Lucas thought he recognised one of the men but couldn't be sure. Perhaps just as well. Moonshine – the flagon contained moonshine. Lots of illegal stills were hidden away deep among the cypresses and the good stuff didn't come cheap. I recall listening to mom and dad talking about Witchy and how she got hold of it with no means of support – how she paid. She must have "reciprocal arrangements", they decided. As with nefarious, I had no idea what that meant at the time.

When the men finished downing two mugs full, the biggest one stubbed out his cigarette among the parched flowers in the lopsided window box and they drifted, staggering inside. She went in last. She paused – didn't actually look round, but wagged her finger behind her. It was as if she knew she was being watched and, maybe, warning us off. Lucas and Denny were fidgeting; they didn't notice – but I did. We waited a while as odd noises emanated out – noises we were not familiar with, but

decided we better scoot home before the darkness closed in completely. We didn't speak to anyone about that night. It was our secret.

Soon after, she was no longer around. She disappeared as suddenly as she had arrived. No one saw her or her truck in town. No gossip snippets about her exploits – imagined or real. She seemed to have vanished. No one was surprised. No one really cared – well, some did, but they weren't telling. Me, Denny and Lucas decided to visit the cabin – this time along the now dried-up track. We dared, despite being scared, what we would find. I pushed the door, which creaked open. It wasn't locked. We went inside. Empty. Nothing. We went onto the porch. Stuffing poked out of the old settee and mice had made their home inside. The window box held a multitude of cigarette butts among the long-dead flowers. The wind chimes, however, no longer hung on the nail where we saw them.

We left kind of disappointed; nothing dramatic. What I expected I don't know. Denny expected a body – a rotting corpse, he said. Although if that had been the case I think he would have fainted – I know I would have – but, given what he went on to do for a job, perhaps not.

All that happened over twenty years ago. I left for a corporate job in St Louis, got married, got divorced and came back to visit my parents from time to time. Just before my last visit, a monumental storm caused havoc over the bayou. Not a hurricane, fortunately, because they are always a threat in this part of the country. That was why I came – to make sure mom and dad were ok. The thunder, lightning, heavy rain and wind had passed now. The oppressive heat had returned to suffocate everything living and the air moved not an inch.

Whilst on this visit I met up with Denny. He moved away to become a police officer in New Orleans, also married but stayed married. On his recent return, he became elevated to Chief of Police. Lucas relocated up north to Boston, so just the two of us reminisced about our childhood and the time we spied on the mysterious Witchy Woman. Was the cabin still standing? I asked him. Apparently so, and only visited by boys about the same age as we were – or teenagers up to nefarious purposes of their own. Witchy never returned. We

would go visit, for old time's sake.

As Denny and I stood on the side of the creek where we spied from all those years ago, we heard wind chimes. Heard them clearly; the sound chimes make when the breeze is strong. The sound they shouldn't be making at all in the motionless air – even if they still existed. But they didn't and hadn't since she disappeared. Why, then, if they no longer hung, could we hear them? It was as if they called to us somehow – summoning us. We felt compelled to get closer, but the jangling appeared to move. It wafted further away from the cabin and along the creek. Denny and I looked at each other in puzzlement but followed to where the road nudged the water further along from the cabin. The creek had been much disturbed by the storm. Trees and rocks were lifted and moved – trees and rocks that had not moved for some twenty-odd years.

We drove round to the other side of the creek, parked up and picked our way down to the water's edge ignoring the splashes of disturbed alligators. Showing above the chocolate swamp water like one unseeing eye, poked a headlight: the corner of a truck. It must have been dislodged from its watery tomb by the storm. Denny radioed for a team. The truck – an old flatbed – was lifted. The wind chimes faded away as we made our discovery. Neither of us imagined this. It was real.

On the floor of cab, next to the remains of Witchy Woman, lay a scattering of shells and beads and a rusty spoon and ... bones. The sticks and string had long since rotted away but the bones had rested alongside hers all these years. We finally knew what happened to the Witchy Woman. What we don't know, and never will, is how non-existent wind chimes playing in a non-existent wind led us to her grave.

Dive (Extract)

Jon Barton

Looking back, I remember everything about that day. You, poised at the edge of the pool. Testing the deep end with your toe.

The two minutes it took to resuscitate you were the longest of my life.

Mum is going to insist it was my fault. That I chose to leave, even after I promised to stay. That I abandoned you. I know you're going to hate me for what I've done and that you'll probably never trust me again. I really tried to protect you this time, to be the man you need me to be. But I don't know how to be there for you, without putting you in harm's way.

Because I am the harm.

That's why I rejected you when you came to the dock. It's the reason I may never see you again. Leaving is the only way I know how to be a father to you. The only way to keep you safe is to get as far away as possible. Because you're better off without me.

But I failed.

And, now, it's happening all over again.

*

The dead girl's eyes were yellowed at the whites and staring at the sky as if she knew what was coming.

"Pull closer," said David.

The boat came about to the corpse, already drawing off on the ebb tide, and catching the maelstrom made by the outboard engine.

David Cade extended a long pole with a large plastic loop at the end and flopped it into the water. The loop caught the corpse around the neck.

Naomi Harding watched him wrestle the dead

weight over the trim and onto the deck. A mane of flaxen hair was constricting the lifeless head, obscuring the victim's face.

David rolled the body so the dead girl lay on her back. Naomi wasn't sure she liked the way he manhandled the girl. Nevertheless, she kept quiet. There was no respect for due process in this unit. The dead, she had discovered, received no special treatment.

David studied the cadaver, shielding distracted thoughts from the look on his face. It wasn't as though he hadn't seen death before, but he was still weathering the sly fear it could have been his daughter.

The girl was tall, her long hair tendrilled on the deck. Twenties, David guessed, possibly Northern European. Her skin was cold to the touch. Mud and exposure to the elements had cast her skin a bronze colour, the acid copper stench of blood binding with the ammonia smell of blowflies drawn to the corpse.

The heatwave had left scavengers spoilt for choice that summer, as London burned under day after day of blistering blue sky. There had been no rainfall in weeks. It would take more than a breeze off the river to stir the sweltering air.

Naomi pinched at her wetsuit, her own sweat meshing it to the small of her back. She looked into the dead girl's eyes. They were milky in death and devoid of hope, as if frozen in her eyes was that last thought: she knew she was going to die.

The victim was wearing a black dress that left her shoulders and collarbone exposed, but there were no signs of a struggle. Naomi threw a glance at David, their

thoughts sympatico. It was impossible to drown an adult without leaving bruises because of their violent struggle for breath.

David looked askance, stilling a hand to light a cigarette, showing nothing of the interest that had gripped him only moments ago.

"Hazard a cause of death?" Naomi said.

David shrugged.

"No bruising. No petechiae, the hyoids look intact," Naomi continued. "No sign of ballistics, open or closed ..."

David was watching the river.

"Sergeant?"

He took a long drag of the cigarette before turning to face her.

"What do you think?" Naomi asked.

"Does it matter?"

She eyed him with the forbearance of the last three months they'd been working together, and that was saying a lot.

"Humour me."

Another long drag, before David flicked the butt so it vanished over the side. Naomi pictured the cigarette's glowing end douse the surface of the water.

"It's an overdose," he announced, barely acknowledging how mechanical the words sounded.

"How could you possibly make that call?"

"You ever seen a beam swinger in a cocktail dress?"

He sounded more inattentive than usual, more distracted than Naomi was used to. She found herself holding her breath as she reeled from his answer. Cops were known for their dark humour, but nothing had prepared her for the callousness of the marine police.

To David, it was merely a statement of fact. At forty-three, he outranked her both in age and experience, and twelve years as a police diver had shown him the dark heart of the river. The Thames attracted suicide by its nature. He knew how quickly a person could go under, pulled down as if snatched by invisible hands. Drowning was a way to disappear without trace. When David found people in the river, it followed that those people didn't want to be found.

Lex didn't want to be found last night.

David exhaled as he examined the corpse. The

sunspot had caught only for a second, in the small clear gemstone in the girl's left ear. The other earring was missing. Crouching on one knee, he could just make out the pinprick hole in her right earlobe. He noticed a blotch that stained the back of the girl's left hand. From here, it looked like a black spot or a birth mark, but he realised it was neither of those.

It was a club stamp.

David sensed the smallest glimmer of recognition in his mind, but if he could have identified the shape impressed there, he chose not to. He evicted the feeling as quickly as the thought of his teenage daughter, out there, not answering her phone.

There was something else in the dead girl's hair. David pinched a strand of hair between thumb and forefinger, leaning in to study the grit before it came away in his gloved hand.

Swarthy, like old iron; it lacked the orange hue of rust.

He studied how the dead girl's dress left her shoulders and collarbone exposed, the same way he had "studied" Lex after a night out. He wondered about the dead girl's parents and how they might react when they discovered their little girl was dead.

He found himself caught off guard as he stood, and noticed Naomi drawing level with his gaze. She was one of the few women he'd met in the Metropolitan Police who was tall enough to look him in the eye standing face-to-face.

"You told me bodies land where the river bends," she said quietly.

"Yeah. Usually they do."

"We're downriver. This area is a dead straight – why did she land here?"

Good question.

David searched the sky as if the answer might fall into his brain. He heard the trains clack through Blackfriars station and watched their shadows ride by on the water. The day was young, but that did not prevent London's skyline from heaving in the heat, parched air draping itself around him like a shroud. He felt like the world was trying to tell him something. It was a message easier to ignore in the tall shadows of the streets than out on the river, where shade was a fleeting

commodity.

David instructed the crew to zip the dead girl into a body bag before waving the all-clear to the Port Authority Watchdog. The skipper, who had found the corpse, was blowing out his cheeks, still turning over the catch like a find.

"She's young," he called out. "Must have been a wild night, eh?"

That, David decided, offered him no consolation at all.

"Let's get her back," he said.

Naomi looked over, concern forming on her face. "Shouldn't we wait?"

"What for?"

David revved the outboard engine before she could answer.

There was nothing more to say.

It was a short ride back to the pontoon. Travelling at speed, the Rib flew up a spray that doused the men in a mist.

Naomi's attention returned to the body bag at her feet.

The coroner, when asked to pronounce judgement upon the drowned, would deliver an open verdict. There was rarely certainty the deceased had intended to die, and suicides were not the only traffic of the Thames. But when she first set eyes on the body, bloated and broken on the surface of the water, Naomi sensed foul play. Women killed themselves in all sorts of ways, but not like this. Dead men meant suicide or an accident, or a murder. When they found dead women, it was always the latter, and rarely anything but.

Naomi had spent the last few months scouring the registers of the National Missing Persons Bureau, weighting facts and figures with David's superior knowledge of the waterways. He had generalised that women, as a rule, did not end their lives by drowning themselves in the Thames. Naomi was inclined to agree. Her mind, these days, worked like a criminology review. If years of criminal investigation had taught her anything, it was that she listened to her intuition.

In the commotion of the return journey, there came a non-descript chime. She watched David out the corner of her eye as he checked his phone, irritation crossing

his face. She didn't know him well, but they shared one thing in common: home life was off-limits.

David tied off the boat as they arrived back at the dock, and Naomi disembarked, stepping aside so a pop-up stretcher could be wheeled into position. She watched the body get sloughed heavily onto the stretcher before it was taken away, and pictured its onward journey to the forensic van parked on the street. The remains would be handed over, and the unit would rinse and repeat. Divers recovered evidence, but they did not investigate. Her job was to bring up the bodies and pass them along.

The last part of that mantra would take some getting used to.

Bus Flagging for Women in the 21st Century: an Updated Guide

JP Seabright

First, pick yourself up off the floor if that is where you find yourself. Most attackers will try to render you immobile in the first instance, by grabbing a part of your clothing or hair, and pull you to the ground.

Second, you will need to step away from your attacker. They are unlikely to simply let you go after having caught their prey. Some men may have been watching you for weeks, identifying your routes and potential vulnerabilities. Others may have spotted an opportunity quite by chance and you were simply “in the wrong place at the wrong time”. Note, that this “wrongness” of person and placement is entirely of your own doing. Something to consider next time.

Third, having re-established your free will and freedom of movement, you will need to get yourself to the nearest main road that is part of a regular bus route. This may be challenging if you don't know the area you've been attacked in. You may need to walk for a while to determine this. Ask a passer-by, if there is one, or search for this information on the Internet, should you have access to it via a smart phone and if this is still on your person. In the more likely event that your phone has been grabbed by your attacker to prevent you from calling or searching for help, then this step will be difficult. But perseverance is key. You may just need to wait by the side of the road until you happen to see a bus pass.

Fourth, be aware that bus services have been cut in many areas of the country due to ongoing reductions in the funding of public services, so unless you are already situated in a busy metropolitan area in daylight hours,

you may be waiting a long time.

Fifth, once you have spotted a bus you will need to flag it down. This is a tricky procedure that requires some skill, as in most cases bus drivers are instructed to only stop at designated bus stops. If you can find one of these your chances are greatly increased, but this will not always be the case.

Sixth, if you are fortunate enough to be situated on or near a bus route and one is passing, then the process of “flagging it down” or “hailing” a bus is thus: stick out your arm, or you may wish to use both if you've not been so injured by your attack, then wave it generously and vigorously at the bus driver. If it is dark, which is a preferred time of day for assailants to strike, then the driver may not see you. Anything you have to hand which may make you more visible can be useful. You may be tempted to stand in the road to stop the bus. This is not recommended. This kind of thoughtless action may cause a traffic incident should the bus have to stop suddenly, creating difficulties for other vehicles on the road. In a worst case scenario, the bus driver may not see you in time and you could be grievously injured. Should the first bus you see not stop, despite your best efforts, then do persevere. With any luck, another one will be along shortly.

Finally, do not be discouraged if these instructions sound challenging or complicated. With enough practice, and if the circumstances allow, this is a fail-safe way to escape your attacker and travel to a place of safety. It is a Government- and Metropolitan Police-endorsed method, which women are expected to learn.

Luckily, women are likely to get enough opportunities to practise escaping from attack or unwanted male attention throughout their lives and, as we all know, practice makes perfect.

I Saw You in a Dream

Kiah Olowu

My friend died in his sleep two months ago.

I could go into detail about how and where, and how sad I am, but that's a waste of time.

My Mum tried to get me to see a grief counsellor. Every other day (I'm sure she was timing it) she asked me to try because it would help me. I ignored her – on the one hand because I didn't want to try, and on the other because sometimes it just felt physically impossible to respond.

Last week I finally cracked and asked, "Will it bring him back?"

"Luna ..." she said, frowning.

"Then no, there's no point, but thanks for trying," I said.

She hasn't asked me again since.

I understand my parents' concern. I don't really talk to anyone. I don't go anywhere. I don't do anything. In my defence, I have tried but everything besides waking up feels futile. Still, I think I've been pretty reasonable considering the circumstances, and I think they may be overreacting now.

Yesterday, Mum read online that writing a letter to the deceased person might help me process how I've been feeling. At the time I thought it was dumb (and I still do), but nevertheless I've agreed. She needs it more than me. She needs to know that I'm not keeping everything to myself.

I'm going to write to him today, but I don't feel anything.

I'm a zombie, no life and no purpose.

*

Dear Tobi,

~~If you're reading this, it's because you're dead.~~

~~This is so stupid.~~

Sorry. I'm trying to take this seriously, but this is weird.

Why am I writing this? Well, my mum told me to write to you as if you were still here and say everything I couldn't. Just so you know, I'm really mad at you.

As you can imagine a lot's changed since you've been gone.

Last month I couldn't eat for 10 days, but now I'm getting fat. I can't blame it on you always bringing me snacks, but I can blame it on you dying. Now I eat our favourite food(s) all the time. If you knew how many 4:00 a.m. Domino's orders I've placed, I'm not sure if you'd be proud or disgusted. What else? I sleep all day and, when I'm not sleeping or binge eating, I'm crying, which is weird because you know that I rarely cry, unless I'm watching Grey's Anatomy.

I haven't been able to see Cleo and Sade since the funeral, but I think they're as okay as they can be. We all remind each other of you, so it's difficult right now. The funeral was nice. Your face was everywhere, and everyone was crying and talking about how amazing you were. You would've loved it. I, on the other hand, felt like my throat was closing every time I heard your name, so that was fun.

But enough about me, let's talk about you.

I'm just going to say it: what you did wasn't cool, Tobi. I know you loved sleeping, but not so much that you'd just not wake up. A heads up would've been nice, considering I was expecting to see you the next day. Imagine my surprise when I got a text from your brother telling me you were DEAD. Now I can never watch Parasite because you won't be able to.

I guess it's only fair not to go without you.

You were 24 years old. That's not old enough to give up. You shouldn't have given up. I know it wasn't your choice – people die in their sleep all the time – but you weren't supposed to be one of them. Now I'm thinking of all the times we made light of death and I see that the joke's on us.

I'm only upset with you because I love you and you're you were my best friend, but you're gone. Now I don't know what do with my life, but you don't have one anymore, so I guess we're even.

Anyway, I hope you're okay wherever you are, and I hope for your sake that heaven isn't real because you were very blasphemous, so you'd defo be in hell.

Lots of love,

Your traumatised friend, Luna

I look down at the page I've just finished scribbling on. The ink is smudged; I didn't realise I was crying. I shouldn't have used a felt tip.

I'm not sure if I feel any better. I either feel the same or worse. How was reliving it all supposed to be helpful?

I like to be prepared for things, and this isn't something I could have ever planned for and that makes me angry.

But ... it's only from writing this that I realise I've felt this way for weeks, and this is the first time I've thought about Tobi without feeling like there was an anchor sitting on my chest. So maybe that is progress.

There's a light knock at my door. My mum's hopeful face peeps through before I have a chance to tell her to come in. Sometimes I wonder why she bothers knocking in the first place. Her small brown eyes are red and her usually slender face is puffy; neither of us have been sleeping well. Nevertheless, she still tries to put a smile on her face whenever she sees me.

I smile back. "You can come in, Mum."

She smiles, genuinely this time, and sits gingerly on the edge of my bed.

"Sorry," I say, trying to consolidate my laptop, pillows, papers, snacks and other miscellaneous items into a pile. I'm not proud of my newfound lifestyle, but due to the circumstances I give myself a pass, as does Mum.

She scoots backwards to sit next to me. "You did it?" she asks, her attempt at making casual conversation.

"Hm?" I say, trying to be oblivious to the obvious question. Something about attempting to talk to a dead person is a little embarrassing, and talking about the process is even worse.

She gestures to the papers on the bed. "You wrote the letter?"

"I did."

"I'm proud of you," she says, taking my hand.

"I didn't do anything," I say, avoiding her eyes.

"I'm proud of you for trying."

I finally turn and look at her. "Thank you for being here. I know I've been difficult. Sorry." I squeeze her hand. "I don't mean to be, it's just hard. Everything is just hard."

"I know," she says, her eyes glossing over. "I haven't been trying to force you into anything ... I thought therapy could help you in a way I don't know how, but you're not ready and that's okay."

"A medium might be better," I say, wiping her cheeks with the back of my hand.

She laughs. "I would've gotten you one but I know you don't believe in that stuff ... did writing the letter help?"

"A little...I still have a lot more to say, I'll probably have to write a hundred more before I accept that he's not coming back."

"That's okay, you have time ... seeing as you're a hermit now."

*

Dear Tobi,

I know I just wrote to you like 3 hours ago, but I have to write this down before I forget.

As if I wasn't angry enough with you already, you've really outdone yourself this time.

Today, during my second nap, guess who was in my dream? Yes, you figured it out: you.

Sade, Cleo and I were at a party and you walked in. Alive. With your slightly too shiny brown face (I know you think there's no such thing, but there is), your infectious grin and the bright yellow hoodie I bought you for your birthday that you claimed was too bright but always seemed to wear.

The life of the party, as always.

Really, I should have known it wasn't real because there's no party on this earth that would get me and the girls out of

the house, considering we're in mourning.

I didn't see you at first. I only realised when I heard Cleo whisper, "Oh my God."

Then I saw you sauntering towards us and I screamed. As you know, I don't believe in ghosts, but you can't argue about their existence when you see a dead person walking towards you.

I'm really pissed off remembering this.

You said, "Hey guys," so casually, as if nothing had happened.

Sade looked like she was going to be sick and asked slowly, "What the hell is happening?"

You said, "Well hi, it's good to see you too."

This led to me exploding and screaming at you, "Are you joking?" and turning to the girls to double check. "Is he fucking joking?"

Sade walked away and Cleo didn't answer me. You were standing there with a stupid surprised look on your face and had the audacity to tell us to chill. Bad move on your end.

Cleo said, "WHAT DO YOU FUCKING MEAN 'CHILL'? YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE DEAD."

We know she has a temper and blows up for unwarranted reasons, but you deserved it this time.

At this point. it was like in the movies when everyone can somehow hear an argument over the blaring music and stop to watch. I steered Cleo away from you – she probably would've punched you otherwise.

I said to you, "When you're ready to explain yourself you know where to find us."

I don't remember what else happened before or after, but when I asked you why you faked your death you said, and I quote, "I was bored. Life is so mundane. I wanted to do something different."

Typical. You can never do things like everyone else.

Anyway, I woke up livid, so thanks for that.

I'm glad it wasn't Sade who had the dream because she'd think it was a sign; she still secretly thinks you're alive.

I can't believe how real the dream felt. It was like you were really there, and even though I had to wake up and realise that it wasn't you, I'm glad I got to see you and hear your voice again even if it was just for a minute.

Even so, you had no right to do that, and if you weren't already dead, I'd kill you for this.

Kind regards (you don't deserve a 'love from' on this

occasion),

Luna

This might be working. Normally when I have a crazy dream I just go back to sleep and tell someone about it later if I remember. But this time I decided to write to someone who no longer exists. Surely that means something?

When I write to him, I don't get any looks of pity, there are no stupid questions, and most importantly no suggestions. I can live in my feelings without judgement. I don't feel pressure to think about getting back to how I used to be.

The only problem is now I feel like a mad woman for being angry at a dead person, but I'm okay with him being gone because I know I'll see him again in my dreams.

Sirens Sing the Blues: a Paramedic's Notes on Life and Death

Kimberley Bussey-Chamberlain

"Ah – ha – ha – ha – stayin' alive, stayin' alive, 9, 10 11, 12, 13 ..."

I'm not sure the British Heart Foundation appreciated the irony of the disco classic's lyrics when they chose the song for its steady, perfectly timed beat.

It's still early on in my career and breaking ribs makes me want to vomit. Focusing on the Bee Gees for those initial moments provides just enough distraction. The first eight beats is all it takes. They pop easily beneath my hands and then I can focus on the rest of my thirty count with much less risk of emptying the contents of my stomach onto my patient, who is most definitely not staying alive. They rarely do. TV shows and Vinnie Jones seem to have reassured the British public that a pat on the chest and a few lines of the Bee Gees classic brings everyone back from the brink. In fact, the numbers are fairly dire – only 10% of people suffering a cardiac arrest out of hospital survive. It's probably why the shambolic ambulance administration remembers to pass on the few thank you letters we get when we're successful. There aren't very many.

So far I've managed one successful resuscitation and that was a paedophile locked up in Wandsworth Prison. The thank you letter went straight in the bin. I used to believe in God but the job made me realise that if he exists he's as flawed and fucked up as any human, with a sense of humour sicker than a paramedic's.

Forty seconds to go, my arms are beginning to burn and I know that at the end of this shift the back of my right hand will be bruised from the effort. After my first resuscitation I was surprised to go home with aching

muscles, bruises appearing on my hands and knees as I sat in the bath, washing the experience away.

It's said that paramedics are only ever one bad job away from the end of their career – Russian Roulette, and the stakes are just as high. One in four emergency service workers has considered suicide due to stress or trauma suffered at work. An unbelievable 62% have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder such as anxiety, depression or PTSD. In fact, 22% are diagnosed with PTSD, higher than returning military personnel in the UK (17%).

Your career-ending job might come in your first week or after 25 years. The stats are confronting, but much like young people, new medics tend to think they're invincible when it comes to the job's impact on mental health. I'm lucky that I've always enjoyed strong mental health and consider myself to be pretty resilient. I'm sure there'll be the odd shit show but there will also be many exciting and enriching times to balance them.

I switch with a colleague and take over the patient's breathing whilst he continues with the compressions. It's a slick operation, like an F1 pit crew. Now we're set up, we move to continuous compressions and every six seconds I gently squeeze the bag and watch the patient's chest rise and fall.

Being a paramedic is the best job in the world. It's tough and sometimes you have to save the life of a paedophile, but I can't think of anything more rewarding or exhilarating. We're the gatekeepers to the Emergency Departments. Adapting and developing our skills to meet the increasingly relentless demands of

our booming population, we're the chameleons of the NHS. Jack of all trades, masters of cardiac arrests. We deliver babies in Ubers, help nans manage the stairs, talk those in crises down from the ledge, restart hearts and deliver the dying on blue lights and sirens. What more could you want from a career?

"You know it's alright, it's okay, I'll live to see another day." Another cracker from the CPR song that keeps on giving. Time of death: 04:27.

*

One of the things I find myself most nervous about during my first placement is using the radio. If you accidentally hit the wrong button, the entire service can have a laugh at your expense. I feel like I'll need another degree to work it out and I keep messing up the phonetic alphabet. It's like learning another language. My mentor is determined I should take control of all radio communication during my placement. She tells me that once I've got this under my belt I'll be glad I've learnt it first before taking up headspace with more advanced clinical skills. So here I am, trying to tell control that we're en route to the job they've just pinged down and asking if fire and police have also been dispatched.

"Er, hello red base," I say nervously. "This is um ..." I can't remember my call sign for the shift and look at my mentor in panic. She whispers the code to me and I repeat on the radio, "This is sierra five thirty."

"Sierra five thirty, go ahead."

"Just letting you know we're en route to that job now. Can you confirm if the police and fire brigade have also been dispatched?"

"No problem, sierra five thirty. Can confirm they are both en route and should arrive shortly. Anything else?"

"No that's it, thank you. Kilo um ..." I can't think what the phonetic alphabet word is for my surname which I'm supposed to sign off with. It's not coming to me and I can't catch my mentor's eye. I decide to just make it up "Kilo Bugs Bunny out". The shame and embarrassment is clear in my now fuchsia cheeks.

"Red base out," chuckles the voice at the other end.

Just then the radio buzzes and I hear, "Hello, rookie!" Oh crap, I realise I'd pressed the wrong button, so my ridiculous phonetic replacement went out to the whole service. I'm mortified, but my mentor howls with

laughter.

She's just about stopped laughing when we arrive at the mangled wreckage of a car versus motorbike. I curse training school. In every drill we've ever run the mannequin has either been naked or wearing a '90s-style tracksuit with conveniently placed zippers. I'm hacking away at a motorcyclist's leathers with my "tough cuts" (they're more like blunt Crayola scissors), making no progress. I feel my cheeks burn, thankful we're working in the darkness of night, a flickering street lamp the only thing threatening to give me away. I've barely exposed a mangled ankle when one of the other paramedics turns to me to offer sage advice. "Fucking cut and fucking rip those trousers off – NOW! You're not a fucking seamstress!" It does the trick. I go from 0-60 in a couple of seconds and the patient is in his boxers on the pavement in no time, freezing his nuts off (which he's lucky to still have).

In the ambulance service there's a lot of superstition, mainly around the "Q word". Uttering the word "quiet" on a shift is sure to bring chaos. This morning we've had a relatively easy start to the shift and we've managed to make a pitstop at Pret to grab a sandwich and hot coffee. The sun is shining and we sit outside the ambulance for a few stolen minutes, a rare treat. I casually remark how nice it is to finally have a quiet shift. My mentor shoots daggers at me. "Never say the Q word." I laugh it off, holding my hands up, promising not to say it again.

As we walk out the door, our radios vibrate. A quick glance shows a RED 1. This is our highest category and means the patient is dying or dead. "Shit!" we say in unison as we drop the coffees and run. Our patient is just four years old. He isn't breathing and his parents are performing CPR. Any cardiac arrest is upsetting but a young child is particularly upsetting.

One car sits blocking the clear lane ahead, in front of a red light. Every second counts and pure rage bubbles up inside me. My heart breaks as I snap open the locker that holds the sealed paediatric life support bag. The bag contains all of our regular resuscitation tools but in tiny, doll-like sizes. I pull out my pocket book and begin my drug calculations.

We arrive at the apartment and find the mother performing CPR, the father sobbing beside her. Our

patient looks tiny in a Spider-Man outfit, even smaller once I set to work removing it. The boy has a terminal illness, but his death was not yet expected. He looks angelic and until I've removed his Spider-Man outfit there's nothing that suggests he's unwell. It's his small distended belly that gives us a clue once the outfit is off. His skin is tracing paper thin, the purple network of blood vessels visible just beneath it. The family is visiting London as part of his "bucket list". They tell me his name is Eli and his brother is racing back to the apartment, having popped out for coffee. He has a DNAR in place but his parents want us to keep him with us until his brother gets back to say goodbye.

We understand the importance of this for all of them and switch off the invasive beeping of our machines. I perform the gentlest of compressions on Eli's tiny chest so as not to inflict unnecessary damage. It's not doing anything for him but the gesture of this performance is worth everything to his parents. By now there are a further three paramedics on the scene and four police officers. They nod their respects, having been filled in on what is happening, and wait quietly in the hall as we continue our performance. I take in the decorated apartment. Usually my focus on a resus doesn't allow me to take in my surroundings but today I'm able to look around between useless compressions, allowing myself to lose count. Balloons, streamers, a spider piñata and posters of Spider-Man. Eli's character comes to life surrounded by all of his favourite things, making it even harder. He was watching the movie as they got ready for the day ahead. He'd been happy and excited and then he'd gone quiet and slumped. Today was due to be another day of sightseeing and adventures; instead, it would be the worst day of their lives.

We hear the sound of speeding feet heading towards us and Eli's teenage brother bursts through the door. He runs towards his parents and little brother, tears flowing, asking what's happened. Gently, his parents explain that this is it. They urge their son to join them on the floor next to Eli, hold his hands and say a final goodbye. I can hardly breathe. Their world is shattering and their bravery is unbelievable. They tell Eli they love him, are proud of him and everything he has faced so admirably. They will love him forever and hope he is no

longer in any pain. They tell him they'll be waiting to embrace him again and apologise they couldn't protect him from this. They give him final kisses and brace themselves for what comes next.

We tell the family we're going to stop now and announce his time of death. At 2:34 p.m. on this beautiful sunny day that was filled with such promise, Eli's short life comes to an end. I can hear only sobs and the struggle for breath as waves of grief hit each family member. His brother throws himself across the small body begging us not to stop. His mother gently pries him off and tells him to be brave for his little brother, so he knows it's okay to leave them.

We quietly walk out so the family can grieve in private. We bear witness to the tragedy but the aftermath is sacred and should not be ours.

Words are People

Megha Nayar

Words are people. Even before they begin to exist for meaning, they make you feel things.

Heard this one – “paraphernalia”? It is a lot more than just miscellaneous nothings. It exists to tease your imagination. The word escapes your lips at first syllable, having caressed the insides of your mouth, and lingers like a sensation on your tongue for the rest of the day. If it were a human, paraphernalia would smell of cologne. It would be an immaculate dresser and a great kisser. It would do a great job of matching clothes and shoes. It would pose for pictures and pout in front of the Eiffel Tower.

Words have character. Whether or not you know them, they create motion pictures in your head. “Succulent” is one such – a nubile woman wrapped in silk, a verbal embodiment of the female form. If you say the word like I do, with the emphasized “cu” and the lusty “l”, you’ll be treated to happy goosebumps. Succulence is a feast for all the senses.

Words are what they do to you when you say them. I love “devastating”. It sounds urgent, important. It’s the sort of thing that will break a window to get in. When you think devastation, you think splintered glass, gone to a million pieces. You think a butchered limb, a stillborn baby, a gruesome murder. It’s the sort of word that jolts you out of passivity and sets your comfort zone on fire.

My favourite words are those that sound exactly as they mean. They, like me, are straightforward people.

Try saying “hideous” with a low growl. Doesn’t it reek of contempt? It is bad manners to call someone

hideous, but when you fall for someone with an ugly heart, you should be allowed to throw at them a 96-page A4-sized notebook with nothing but the word “hideous” scrawled line upon line, each “hideous” flanking the next. It would be profane, but profanity can be cathartic for the broken.

Then there is “tremulous”, which comes with a slightly muted energy. In its ebbs and tides, I smell the ocean. It is the sort of thing that reaches out for your poise and rattles it, but stops short of turning it upside-down. Say the word repeatedly and you will sway your way to the shore – un-capsized, thankfully, just slightly shaken.

Speaking of which, “bouleversement”, a sensuous French creation, is all about upheaval. Say the word aloud, listen to it with a keen ear – does it not stir turbulence in all your senses?

Words are human. Just like people, they’re noticed for appearance but remembered for action. Just like people, they can hurt and heal, balm and bleed.

Some of them are black – black like ash from the death of your closest. Words that slaughter your self-worth. Words that drag you out into the middle of the sea, then vanish without leaving you a lifeboat.

He had some such words for me.

I thought I loved you. Hasty move, perhaps. You may leave. But, look, don’t cry. It’s me. My headspace has changed. You’re still awesome.

Words, all of these. Mincing, deafening, crushing words. Hideous but honest, with no ambiguity to hope for. You wouldn’t do a double take – you know this

is no paraphernalia. This is devastation, a complete bouleversement of your life as you know it. Was I tremulous? I was. For long nights afterward, I couldn't write. I forgot what the succulence of wordsmithery felt like.

Those words, they would ring all night in my head. There was emphasis on some syllables, voids in between others. I hated their gall. I hated *them* more than what they stood for.

Over time, though, they slowly dissipated – the words as well as the feelings. The dead pen came back alive, because it now had stories to tell. My stint with coupledom had ended. Solitude is always productive. Solitude is fodder for a writer's mind in a way that happy co-existence can never be.

You're not the one. I wish I'd known earlier. I have no explanation for why not.

Those were words I have now come to be grateful for. They were authentic, even if cruel. They helped me break off, then take off.

Words of truth are the sort of people who will put character over charade. They're not peach or lavender – they're a dull brown, and they make no effort to dress up. You might be tempted to give them a coat of paint, to make them easier on your aching heart. Resist those urges, but. Take them for who they are. Let them poke and pinch and hurt and burn. Allow them to announce your flaws and your failures. Let them lead you, because they make the best roadmaps.

I love words when they're their naked selves, served without varnish. I might petition the government, asking them to reward their candour.

Ghost Stories

Shehrazade Zafar-Arif

The graveyard was full of ghosts. Ali had taken to collecting their stories as a way to pass the time.

There was a spindly, faceless figure seen lurking by the war memorial who had become a bit of a favourite, and a whistling jogger who would vanish jumping over the algae-strewn pond. There were stories of wandering graves that disappeared from one spot and reappeared in another, and of visitors getting lost and stumbling into parts of the graveyard they had never seen before.

People brought him these sightings the same way they dropped change in the donations box, and Ali recorded them in the notebook which now balanced on his knees, its pages coming loose from the spiral binding. It had started as a hobby and morphed into a habit and was now almost an addendum to his job description.

It was a good day for ghosts: mist hung low and milky over the treetops, dousing the graveyard in sepia tones – enough to turn a low-hanging branch or oddly shaped bush into a spectral figure. Ali sat on his favourite bench, next to the sign warning visitors not to feed the foxes, packing loose tobacco into a strip of rolling paper, listening to the latest ghost story.

“It was a woman,” the young man said, flushed with the exhilaration of a brush with the supernatural. “In a white dress – like a wedding dress. I called out to her, but she just walked away.”

“She’s not a ghost,” Ali said, and the young man’s shoulders slumped at the rejection of his offering. Ali lit his cigarette as the would-be ghost hunter walked away. The sun was starting to slip away and visitors waved

to him as they left through the main gate. Cigarette clenched between his teeth, knees creaking, he got up to do one last check before locking up for the night.

The graveyard was a labyrinth, but twenty years as groundskeeper had left Ali with a reliable blueprint embedded in his memory, and he could pick out the hidden dirt paths that snaked off into the shrubbery. The undergrowth grew wild and restless, swallowing up some of the older graves whose stones had cracked and toppled over, so that you ended up stepping on them by accident. Tombstones jutted out of the expulsion of nature, some polished and gleaming, others greyed and chipped as rotten teeth.

Twigs snagged on his ponytail as Ali checked that the bins had been emptied and made a note of the fallen trees that needed removing. The greenery quivered with the aftershocks of this morning’s drizzle, droplets sliding off to shatter against his scalp. On evenings like this, everything smelled crisp and green. But sometimes, Ali thought he could catch a whiff of rot in the air, or other times the sugary scent of roses, which always reminded him of his mother’s funeral.

It seemed morbid, almost, that he had wound up working in a graveyard, when it was her death that had unravelled his life, making him drop out of university in the middle of his degree. He had hopped aimlessly from odd job to odd job, working as a cashier in a supermarket, a bartender, a cleaner – until he’d realised that the job he would be happiest in was one where the only people he had to interact with were dead.

This was his favourite time of day, when the

visitors were clearing out and silence wrapped around the graveyard like a mourning shroud. The shapes of buildings on the street outside looked apocalyptically distorted through the criss-cross pattern of branches. There were certain spots where the trees made it impossible to see the city at all and it felt like you were in the wilderness, until the distant grumble of the train swelled up to remind you that the city persisted.

Ali picked his way through the undergrowth, his feet sinking into the foamy ground and mud squeezing through the holes in his shoes, keeping his eyes peeled for litter. A sequin glinted against the foliage, from a dress that would have swept carelessly over the grass, catching dirt in the once pristine lace. She wasn't a ghost, though she may as well have been – she visited her husband's grave monthly, always wearing a white dress, like the graveyard's own Miss Havisham.

The sky was a heady purple and the graveyard had emptied out, except for a boy in school uniform using a fallen tombstone as a desk for his homework, and a group of teenagers gathered in the clearing where tree stumps stood in a circle like seats in an amphitheatre. Their laughter cut through the evening quiet, the sweet-sour smell of weed hanging in a cloud around them.

Ali always left the side gate open for stragglers, though he wondered what home had to be like if you chose to spend your evenings in a graveyard. This place tended to attract the odd ones, like it was sending out a homing beacon for lost souls, living and dead. To his bemusement, they seemed drawn to him as well. He had, reluctantly, become entrenched in the legends surrounding the supposedly haunted graveyard.

"Alright, boss?" one of the teenagers called out, not even bothering to hide the joint they were passing around. He saluted Ali with his beer can.

"If I see any cans lying around tomorrow morning, I'll be digging a fresh grave just for you."

"Legend!" Their hoots and laughter followed him as he disappeared down one of the narrow paths hidden by thorny bushes, the kind that could ensnare you if you didn't know exactly where to step.

Eventually, the graveyard emptied out and Ali was alone with just the chatter of birdsong and the mice scuttling in the undergrowth. He was refilling the food

bowls he left out for the foxes when he saw it. Sitting on one of the overturned tombstones, looking like an offering to a forgotten god, lay a book. Perplexed, Ali picked it up. It was a collection of Keats' poems, its cover mottled by dew, its pages sticky and discoloured.

Further down, like a breadcrumb trail, he found another book resting on another grave. Soon his arms were too heavy with books to carry any more. There didn't seem to be any pattern to them – a fat *Complete Works of Shakespeare*, a hardback *Great Expectations*, a slim volume of Omar Khayyam's poetry, a book in what looked like Japanese, even a children's picture book.

Cold crawled down his spine. The graveyard was full of oddities, and he'd learned to ignore them for the sake of his own sanity. If he questioned every peculiar noise or unexplainable sight, he would never get anything done. It was easier to treat the encounters as stories to be recorded and then put away. Only stories.

So he set aside the unease and replaced it with a more familiar and comfortable emotion: indignation, that someone was littering in his graveyard, even if it was only books. But why books?

He stepped on a bedraggled *Wuthering Heights* on one of the hidden graves. He had never read it, but it had been his mother's favourite book. It even looked like the copy she'd owned, with a lonely Heathcliff walking across the gloomy, wind-tossed moor. Of course, hers would have been sold or given away when his father and sisters had packed up her belongings. Ali had been too lost in a whirlwind of grief and alcohol to help out or stake his claim on any of her things. But what were things when the person who'd breathed life into them was gone? His fingers, trembling slightly, tightened around the forlorn-looking book.

As the air filled with the warbling cries of foxes, Ali stayed late, plucking books out of the ground like he was weeding a garden. He couldn't say why the sight of them bothered him so much, or why removing them felt like grave-robbing, but he didn't stop until he had gathered them all.

Reluctantly, he added the strange occurrence of the bibliophile ghost to his notebook. Ali didn't believe in ghosts, but he did believe in sadness. Places weren't haunted. People were. This was a strange place, and it

drew even stranger people. No wonder they saw ghosts everywhere.

He left the books in a pile by the donation box, but, after a moment's hesitation, took *Wuthering Heights* home for himself.

Disorderly in Conduct

Sossity Chiricuzio

I'm the kind of witch who goes stiff at the mention of "This is how we do this". Who almost never plans magic but finds myself in the middle of pressing my blood-tipped finger into the hot wax scooped from a candle burning all day in memory of badass ancestors, shaping it into a thick-armed, thick-bodied ward for my door. Instinct, not planning. Liquid molecules and free radicals. Lightning.

I was carrying around an enormous boulder of grief in my chest and didn't know how to put it down. My dead brother, my sorrow, colliding inside my ribcage until my breath was shallow and my vision was narrow and I didn't know how to put it down. I found myself threading slender needles through the skin of my chest, encircling the pain with pain. Opening pathways for the despair.

I found myself choosing threads of color. Red for his passionate loyalty, blue for the water we loved, green for the last bowl we smoked together, laughing at our persistent insistence on survival. Yellow for the high desert sun, no longer shining on his ragged hair. Black for divinity. Everything and nothing. Gleaming starry night and all the unnamed spaces between.

I wrapped those threads around the needles and each other, a web of all the ways I loved him, and all the ways I'd lost him. Wrapping and wrapping and sobbing and rocking and remembering. I found myself hollowed out, but like a canyon, not a crater. I untangled my chest, wrapped the threads around a desert rose. Gave it a place on my altar, forever.

I set wards with blood and spit and the words that

come to me, through me, in that moment. I befriend the crows and seed my garden with feverfew and elecampane and roses. Put blue glass in the windows and rocks near the doors. I talk to the moon and the crows and the roses. I talk to the dogwood, arching over me with gentle strength. Lifting me up with roots sunk deep and wide.

I imagine myself so small the waves of lemon balm, spilling over and across the yard, become ocean deep. An expanse to shift my perceptions to being the mote I am. Stardust and desert sand and salt crystals. Drops of water huddled together for warmth. Any meaning or magic I find has actually found me. Pulled together by electrical impulses and familiarity.

I respect the directions and the elements. I respect the tools. I respect those that have come before. I do not want to do it "this way". I cannot. I become an observer, unable to see the atom or the transformation. My magic is under my skin, flowing and flowering in my gut. My hands hear at a higher frequency than my eyes or a book could capture. I embrace the gifts they bring me.

My rituals are naked bodies in the night. Feasts of hedonism and laughter. Femme gazes, long and tender. My rituals are often overdressed. My rituals can get rowdy, or go completely unseen. My rituals are broke and a little bit feral. They sometimes drink the finger water, or use the wrong knife. They prefer it that way. My rituals sometimes – but not always – play nicely with others.

I tried for years to make my magic "right". To find the rules and follow them. Frustrated and distrusting

myself. I had to learn to let that go. To tune out the ego and the everybody else. To trust the flow of energy, to hold it gently, and let myself be held. The universe is full of magic; none of it belongs to me. I can only make an open space inside myself and meet the magic there.

A Beautiful Life on the Fringes

Zahirra Dayal

My ancestors' umbilical cords were buried thousands of miles away from the place I was born. We were newcomers, our roots still burrowing through top soil.

Ma, my paternal grandmother, nourished my formative years with her food, stories and spirituality. She was part of the second wave of immigrants, called Passenger Indians, who left India for Africa in the late 19th century in search of prosperity. Ma married after her thirteenth birthday and before her first period, boarding a steamship which carried her to a new continent. The newly-weds docked in Portuguese East Africa (now Mozambique) and then trekked inland, arriving in a landlocked region north of the Limpopo River. The area was called Southern Rhodesia, after its namesake Cecil John Rhodes.

Despite their treacherous trail to Africa, my grandparents didn't receive a hero's welcome. As more and more Indians trickled in to Southern Rhodesia, white business owners resented their presence. They placed restrictions on the number of Indian arrivals and withheld trading licences in the centre of the capital, Salisbury – now Harare. The Indian businessmen from Gujarat in India squeezed out a living in the crowded downtown area. To this day, this part of town has an explosion of Indian-owned businesses.

My grandfather opened a general dealer store in downtown Salisbury. His one-stop shop sold a mishmash of products: blankets, costume jewellery, fabric, plastic toys, sandals, scarves, shirts and sweets. In the years that followed, my grandparents had eight children and a litter of seventeen grandchildren.

I loved my days with Ma. Every afternoon after school I followed her around the garden like a shadow as she inspected her beds of coriander, green and red chillies and tomatoes. I skipped under the canopy of avocado and mango trees that spilled their fruit all over the backyard.

Ma had a close cluster of neighbourhood friends who dropped by unannounced throughout the day. The women wore shalwar kameezes like Ma did, with matching chiffon scarves hung loosely over their heads. They planted themselves on the beige sofas in the lounge and spat words out across the room. Because they all spoke at once, the words tripped over and crashed into each other, never reaching their intended destinations. The air thickened with buried resentments and a collective nostalgia for India.

Long, heavy sighs were the cue for steaming masala tea to be served.

I would help Ma carry out the trays of tea, cardamom biscuits, sweet laddoos and barfee from the kitchen. I offered the treats with a heavy platter precariously balanced in my little hands.

"No, no, no," the women said at first, waving me away with their bangled wrists.

Ma would insist. "Take, bhai, take, take." They would decline. The ritual would repeat itself for an eternity before handfuls were grabbed and gobbled down, leaving empty platters every time. The women spoke in Urdu or Gujarati to Ma and commuted to English only when they paused to address me or talk about me in the third person.

“You ok?” they asked, with sour words dipped in honey and eyes that dragged over me from head to toe. Before I could reply, the commentary would commence. “She very big now, little chubby, nah?” and a murmur would flow around the room. The stares pierced my skin and pairs of eyes lingered on my curly hair. “She very brown like the mother, nah?”

“What kind brush can you use for this hair?”

When I was little, I hid behind Ma’s round frame on the sofa to avoid being studied like a specimen under a microscope: a product of a marriage not arranged. Following their close scrutiny, the visitors offered their advice with magnanimity.

“Put lemon juice on her skin. It will take out the dark dark. Make it like my daughter’s skin, fair fair like milk,” said Ma’s next-door neighbour, doubling her adjectives for amplitude. “Put five six drops coconut oil and rub. Make her hair nice and soft. Fix this kind of bad hair fast fast.”

I inherited my dark brown complexion and frizzy hair from my mother’s side. Her family is considered mixed or Coloured: with a bit of Indian, a splash of African and a hint of Welsh. My parents met at the only high school in the capital for brown teenagers. The white schools were off limits at the time, so the Indians from Ridgeview and Belvedere went to school with the Coloureds from Arcadia, Ardbennie and Braeside across the tracks.

*

Otherness followed me to South Africa, where I was an anomaly once again at university.

“You speak the Queen’s English and think you’re white, don’t you?” my peers asked. “Do you think you’re too special to speak Afrikaans?”

No amount of explanation of the languages spoken in Zimbabwe nor the history of British colonialism was enough to satisfy their hunger to pin me down. I didn’t fit into their notions of brownness. They called me a makwerekwere: the neologism used for foreigners in South Africa.

After graduation, I applied for a UK working holiday visa for citizens of the Commonwealth. When I arrived at Heathrow, the immigration officials tossed my little green book aside and interrogated me about the purpose

of my visit. They released me hours later, into the place where I would carve out a home.

Ten years later, when I became a British citizen, I had to relinquish the green book and attend a ceremony to make me British.

Now, every time I travel to Zimbabwe, my British passport is stamped with a limited stay visa. I am an outsider in the place I was born, stripped of my citizenship.

I am an outsider here in the UK, too. As an English teacher in London, I still find myself justifying my eligibility to teach a language that doesn’t belong to me – apparently.

A predictable conversation plays out each time with a brand new class. First, there’s that infamous and loaded question: “Where are you from?”

“I’m from Zimbabwe.” I then have to point out the tiny, kettle-shaped country in Southern Africa on a map. You’d be surprised how many people don’t know where Zimbabwe is, or only recognise it when a certain geriatric dictator is mentioned.

With the geographical location of my birthplace clear in their minds, my job is not yet done. “But English is my first language because Zimbabwe was a colony of Britain until 1980. All of my education was in English; it’s one of the three main national languages there.”

“But you’re brown and look like you are from India?” they say, their curiosity deepened. I’ve created more questions than I’ve answered.

I say, “My paternal grandparents were born in India.” Then, “But I’ve never been to India.”

“But you speak an Indian language, no?”

“No, I only speak English. It’s my first language.”

“What about an African language?”

“No.”

A thick silence ensues while unconvinced eyes scrutinise my body language for any hint I may be lying or hiding my true identity.

I have always been on the periphery: an outsider, an observer. It will probably take many more years to undo all of my embedded complexes. But, I have made huge leaps forward in embracing the tapestry of my mixed heritage. I’ve found delight in the fringes I inhabit.

*I'd rather be an outsider
and dance in the margins than
be fixed to a centre which doesn't adapt or bend.
I'd rather be immersed in my multiplicity,
than be painted with a single hue.
I'd rather gaze at the world from different vantage points,
than cling to a singular point of view.
I'd rather luxuriate in the wide open spaces of never
fitting in,
than squeeze myself into baskets with immovable labels.*

Bios

Cheryl Caesar

Ob / scene

lived in Paris, Tuscany and Sligo for 25 years. She teaches writing at Michigan State University. She publishes poetry worldwide and gives readings locally. Her chapbook of protest poetry, *Flatman*, is available from Amazon. A recent Lansing/Chicago anthology, *Words Across the Water*, features her poems and artwork.

Elizabeth Gibson

The Road from Hebden Bridge

Elizabeth Gibson is a Manchester poet. She has won a Northern Writers' Award, and her work has appeared in *404 Ink*, *Atrium*, *Confingo*, *Lighthouse*, *Popshot* and *Queerlings*. She has been commissioned by Manchester Literature Festival, *Beatfreaks* and *Dibby Theatre*. She was awarded an Arts Council England DYCP grant in 2021.

🐦 @Grizonne

@ Grizonne

Ella Walsworth-Bell

It Starts with Birth

Ella Walsworth-Bell works in Cornwall as a speech therapist for the NHS. She cares for her 13-year-old autistic son, who hasn't attended school since the pandemic due to overwhelming anxiety. She writes openly about parenting.

🐦 @BellWalsworth

@ ellawbell

Julie Dickinson

Export Me

Julie Dickinson is a researcher, writer, tutor, artist and therapist. She has spent most of her life advocating for animals, alongside human rights and the planet itself. She lives in Northumberland and can be found wandering the hills, scribbling and sketching, often under the watchful gaze of other animals.

🐦 @writers_accord

@ writers.accord

Katrina Crespin

Reminding

Katrina Kaye is a writer and educator living in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She is seeking an audience for her ever-growing surplus of poetic meanderings. She hoards her published writing on her website: ironandsulfur.com. She is grateful to anyone who reads her work and is in awe of those willing to share it.

Lee Campbell

Head Boy

Recent and future publications of Lee's poetry include *Queerlings*, *Otherwise*, *Sometimes*, *The Revolution is Small*, *Disarm Hate x Poetry by Nymphs & Thugs* and *Powders Press*. He runs a monthly experimental performance poetry night, *POW! Play on Words!*, in south London.

🐦 @leejccampbell

@ leejccampbell

Liba Ravindran

Process

Liba Ravindran is a 30-year-old published poet of Sri Lankan Tamil heritage, born in Norway and presently living in Southgate, north London. He has been writing for five years, with a breadth of material spanning poetry, essays, short stories and a play.

@libaravindran

Lucy Goodwill

Structural Integrity

Lucy Goodwill is a disabled writer, artist and educator based in London. Her writing focuses on subjects such as creativity, chronic illness and mental health and has been featured in publications such as 404 Ink, Dear Damsels and Drawn Poorly Zine. She is currently working on a poetry collection and writing her first novel.

🐦 @lucygoodwill

@lucy.goodwill

Mahima Kaur

Mourning

A Sisyphean learner who uses words to weave narratives, Mahima is in a constant pursuit of meaning through the mediums of art, literature and languages. Her works have appeared across journals, magazines and an anthology published by an independent publisher in London. She also writes for an arts collective in the UK. The restlessness of her spirit is evident in her works, where she always leaves a distinctive voice that flows fearlessly.

Mollie Russell

July 2015: New Horizons Upskirts Pluto

The Supermarket Night Shift Toasts the Pandemic

Mollie Russell cannot be stopped by silver bullets or religious iconography. She is an autistic writer living in South Wales, who has previously published work with Strix, The Emma Press, Stone of Madness Press and Lucent Dreaming. She often writes about family, feminism and Frankenstein.

🐦 @SpookySyntax

Neil Benad

Demon's Theme

Inventory

Neil started writing over three years ago, when he relocated to Bournemouth to seek recovery from long-term addiction. He joined the Outsiders Project, who have supported his creativity, and since then has had his work featured in public toilets throughout Britain. He is a closet dreamer.

Nikita Sena

poor bichaud

What I We Meant to Say (for Mercy Baguma)

Nikita Sena is a researcher and writer from south-east London, by way of Accra. She's interested in everyday actions and relationships as starting points of resistance against structural oppression and violence. Nikita sleeps too much and justifies this through the importance of dreaming for building new, radical futures.

@dede.koko

Rick Dove

Tsundoku Takotsubo

Rick Dove is a progressive poet who blends traditional and spoken-word styles to interrogate ongoing injustices in society. He has been published in an eclectic mix of publications, including The Morning Star, Cipher Press, The Guardian Online and Untitled: Voices. Rick is the current UK National Poetry Slam Champion.

🐦 @multistable

@rickdove

Rikki Santer

City Pool Swimming Lesson

Rikki's work has appeared in various publications, including Ms., Poetry East, Slab, Slipstream, [PANK], Crab Orchard Review, RHINO, Grimm, Hotel Amerika and The Main Street Rag. He's received honours including five Pushcart and three Ohioana Book Award nominations, as well as a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities. His tenth collection, How to Board a Moving Ship, has just been released by Lily Poetry Review Books.

Samantha Moe

silence

Sam Moe is a queer writer of fiction, non-fiction and poetry. She is pursuing a PhD in creative writing at Illinois State University. Her work has appeared in Overheard Lit Mag and Cypress Press. In June 2021, she received an Author Fellowship from a residency at Martha's Vineyard Institute of Creative Writing.

🐦 @SamAnneMoe

@ PensivePanini

Serge Neptune

Rescue

The Day After

Serge Neptune has been called “the little merman of British poetry”. His first pamphlet, *These Queer Merboys*, was published with Broken Sleep. His work has appeared in *Magma*, *Fourteen Poems*, *Finished Creatures*, *Lighthouse*, *Banshee*, *Brittle Star* and is forthcoming in the *Queer Life*, *Queer Love* anthology.

🐦 @mermanpoet

@ mermanpoet

Spencer Wood

Adventive Species

Spencer is a Leeds-based writer and teacher currently undertaking an MA in Creative Writing and Critical Life at the University of Leeds. His work can be found in *Modern Queer Poets* by Pilot Press.

🐦 @spenceriwood

@ spenceriwood

Cathleen Davies

Waves

Cathleen Davies is a writer from East Yorkshire, England, currently completing her PhD at the University of East Anglia. Her work has appeared in a number of magazines and anthologies, including publications by *oddball* magazine, *Muswell Press* and *Weasel Press*. She also co-runs *Aloka*, a magazine for non-native English speakers.

Gary Mooney

Bad Cakes

Gary has recently completed an MA in creative writing. He is currently working on a novel in collaboration with his dead father, which has its challenges. His story *Telling Stories about Funny Thing* was included in the Comma Press collection *Fifty Yards Out* from Firm Ground.

🐦 @GaryMoonAge

Iqbal Hussain

The Dead of the Night

Iqbal has short stories in two upcoming anthologies – *All Her Tomorrows*, for the City of Stories Home project run by Spread the Word, and *The Long Journey Home*, for the Lancashire Stories project run by Lancashire Libraries. Iqbal is an alumnus of the HarperCollins Author Academy 2021. He is one of fifteen emerging writers to feature in the *Mainstream* anthology by Inkandescent, published in July 2021. Iqbal is currently editing his first novel, *Northern Boy*.

🐦 @ihussainwriter

Jacqueline Harvey

The Witchy Woman

Jackie has published an eclectic story/poem collection, *ever know ... and other stories*, and a historical novel, *A Resolute Child*. Currently she is working on another collection, including *The Witchy Woman*, together with *An Enigmatic Woman*, a prequel to *A Resolute Child*. She lives in Eastbourne.

Jon Barton

Dive (Extract)

Jon Barton is a London-based screenwriter with ten years' experience as a dramatist, writing continuing drama for the BBC, and new work for young people. His work has been produced onscreen and onstage at major London venues, including The Old Vic and the Almeida. His current screenplay, *Femur*, is under option at Northern Ireland Screen. Jon works as a copywriter, but also edits for The Literary Consultancy, and teaches screenwriting for City Academy Ltd, The Princes Trust and Iconic Steps. His novel, *Dive*, was acquired by Joffe Books for a three-book deal. The first in the series will publish in Summer 2022.

🐦 @jnbarton

JP Seabright

Bus Flagging for Women in the 21st Century: an Updated Guide

JP Seabright is a queer writer who has had poetry, prose and experimental work published in various places. Forthcoming pamphlet publications in late 2021/early 2022 are from Beir Bua Press, Lupercalia Press and Nine Pens Press. More of their work can be found at jpseabright.com.

🐦 @errormessage

Kiah Olowu

I Saw You in a Dream

Kiah Olowu is a recent English Literature graduate with interests in music, literature and TV. She primarily writes fiction about how dreams and sleep affect us in our unconscious and waking states.

Kimberley Bussey-Chamberlain

Sirens Sing the Blues: a Paramedic's Notes on Life and Death

Kim is an ex-paramedic currently taking a baby break. While raising her babies, she decided to write a book about the other time in her life when she was permanently tired, covered in bodily fluids and responsible for keeping the human in front of her alive.

🐦 @KimBusseyChamb1

@ KimBravoCharlie

Megha Nayar

Words are People

Megha Nayar is a communications consultant and fiction writer from India. She was longlisted for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize 2020, and one of her stories was showcased at India's prestigious Kala Ghoda Arts Festival 2021. She is currently a mentee-in-training on the British Council's Write Beyond Borders programme. Her work has appeared in several lit mags.

🐦 @meghasnatter

Shehrazade Zafar-Arif

Ghost Stories

Shehrazade Zafar-Arif (she/her) grew up in Karachi, Pakistan, and moved to London to study literature and theatre. She has previously been published in *Untitled: Voices*, *Feels Zine* and *FEED Lit Mag*.

🐦 @ShehrazadeZafar

Sossity Chircuzio

Disorderly in Conduct

Sossity Chircuzio (she/they) is a fat femme outlaw poet, a working class crip storyteller. A Lambda Fellow and CNF Editor for *Gertrude*, they are the author of *Honey & Vinegar: Recipe for an Outlaw*, and found in places like *The Rumpus*, *Stirring*, *Salty*, *Pulp*, *Rogue Agent* and *Rooted in Rights*.

🐦 @SossityWrites

@ SossityWrites

Zahirra Dayal

A Beautiful Life on the Fringes

Zahirra is a language teacher and writer living in London. She has also lived in Zimbabwe, South Africa and The United Arab Emirates and draws from those diverse experiences in her writing. Her stories can be found in *Fahmidan Journal*, *Ayaskala*, *Small Leaf Press*, *Opia* and *Melbourne Culture Corner*.

🐦 @ZahirraD

@ zahirrawrites

United

VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES

issue four
april 2022