

UNTITLED

issue one
volume two

VOICES
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A journal for underrepresented writers.

This issue focuses on writing done during the lockdown, or as a reaction to the pandemic.

VOICES

untitled

Ollie Charles
Nicola Lampard
Co-Founders

Paul Stapleton
Design

untitledwriting.co.uk

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

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

Welcome to the first issue of Untitled: Voices. We're so pleased to be bringing two volumes of outstanding writing of underrepresented writers from around the world. Thank you to all those who submitted and trusted us with your words. This issue has been put together during the worldwide pandemic, which has seen too many lives lost, and too many voices drowned out amongst the noise of politicians and others. We really hope these volumes of works will do a little to amplify the voices of these fantastic writers.

Thanks for reading

Ollie Charles & Nicola Lampard

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Poetry

Fathoms Five

Cleo Henry

I learnt to lapdance in lockdown
Then we ate oysters

I want you subcutaneous
I want you fathoms five you sexy fucker
I want you in ten quid etsy lingerie
I want you double hulled for the pressure

I'll eat steak alone
Night's gristle in my teeth
But oysters only with you
That kind of wet only with you

My GP says I'm a filter feeder
(your dirt your brine your ooze)
My GP says enamel only lasts so long
This shake in my asscheek only so long

I hope we are dug up salt crusted
With my tongue in your ear
I hope we crumble on impact
Popcorn dust and sweatings

I threw up that night
Filthy in my pearlen walls

Juniper Helicopter

Dior J. Stephens

*sweat & musings,
tastes & slights sent
up into stratosphere
eyelashes*

*plums like
cherries & cherries
like tomahawks*

*saints clad in jocks
traps &
innumerable cloudy days*

*liquids & ooziings
& mucus & droplets
& contact & pitfalls
& masks & daggers*

*hedonism & silent charges,
fumbled promises &
squeaks that light
homes on
fire.*

*a language in itself
& of itself;
infallible still.*

*//a silence of the hum
//a silence in the humming
//a humming in the silence
//a humming in the iso*

My Childhood

Juanita Rey

Friends ask me about
my childhood
in the Dominican Republic.

I could tell them
about starry nights
down by the water,
where my brothers and I
would watch the fishing boats
come in
and the moon and stars go out.

Or how one brother
kept a black widow spider in a jar
and another could hit a baseball so far,
a baseball scout from the States
gave him a second look.
Or how I sometimes rewarded myself
with a splash of new color
in my clothing,
mostly patched in
from fabric remnants
lying about.

But that could lead
to my father's drinking
or my mother's quiet tears
or the poverty
that held us down
like a school bully
and the landlord who interrupted

quiet family gatherings
with his hand out for the rent.

So I'd just say
it was like any other childhood.
That is, only the one who lived it
has the sense to keep her mouth shut.

I Remember

Nick Maynard

I remember this -

The R 'n' B Room

2 am

We're sat

I'm wrapped around you...

and I can smell you still

fragrant - warm

soft and sweetened.

A moment I knew I had to

remember forever -

that fleeting moment that

now lasts forever in my minds eye -

2 am in Heaven,

soft and sweetened.

Do You See Me?

Nick Maynard

I catch your eye

You catch mine

I look away

In time

I look again

I see you

Do you see me?

This is a game we play

We play for free

We play for three

Him, you and me.

I see

But do you see me?

Erode with me

Nikki Dudley

I re:

mind

live

member -

- a) friends across a table / different grains
- b) impending rain / the heavy cardboard smell
- c) the hardness of glass / invisible fingerprints (most innocent)
- d) the ground beneath me / connected to mud, roots
- e) holding hands / being unseen.

I for:

get

go

gone -

- a) my mum's hands / the smell of her make up lingering
- b) night smothering day / quiet assassin
- c) unknown voices / moving in between
- d) no invisible threads / walking without trace.

Faces are sharper on screen than in memory. (((Who are you? Who's talking?

Where's your face? HEAR ME. SEE ME.

We br/e/a/k up, and down, and apart. You jump

when you talk. When you t-a-l-k YOU JUMP. A cliff crumbles with time.

Dear love,

erode with me, lie with me, crumple

in my arms

and feel

the wait of

the world.

Painted White

Oluwatayo Adewole

Vikram sits against a trench wall,
gun in hand,
foreign brown skin meets
foreign brown land
under a foreign grey sky,
smothered by smoke plumes,
he sits there,
shivering,
wondering.
Will this be the day when my luck runs out?

George opens the cover of his history book,

Mary left the ship months ago,
still doesn't feel like she's –
landed,
navigating thunderstorms,
Bright. White.
finding islands of solidarity,
shelter she knows is temporary,
she leaves,
walking to the factory,
wondering.
Will this be the day when my luck runs out?

And the pages are painted,

Abeo lays,
break room couch
becomes their makeshift bed,
in this hard-fought pause,

alone,
not swamped by the beeps and the noise,
coughs haunting the air,
they stare -
wondering.
Will this be the day when my luck runs out?

Painted white.

Woman-Radical: Feminist Lesson/Tradition in Chinese Characters

Yuan Changming

妇 : *lady* is a woman who has overthrown a mountain

好 : *wo man* spelt as one word simply means good

妙 : *young women* supporting each other are always wonderful

嫁 : to *marry* a man is for a girl to have her own family

妖 : *weird* would be a woman if she goes broken

姣 : *handsome* is a woman standing with her legs crossed

婢 : *maid* is a girl who is by nature humble

婵 : *beautiful* is she who remains single

娘 : *mother* is perforce a lady who is good and kind

To Be [Or Not to Be]

Yuan Changming

To *Be* [Or Not to Be]

Whatever or whoever you are]

To *have* [or not to have]

Whoever or whatever you may wish]

To *do* [or not to do]

Anything or nothing you would prefer, &]

To *say* [or not to say]

Nothing or anything you may intend to]

Given these four most common English verbs

We are all rendered equal as we cross

Every borderline, filling in every gap

In action as in thought [or otherwise]

VOICES
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VOICES
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VOICES

Prose

The Escape

Carola Huttman

It felt like flying. That's the best description she could think of. Or maybe it was more akin to an out-of-body experience. Standing on the very edge of the cliff she looked down. How many feet below her were those churning waves that looked like frothing beer from where she stood? And what about the sound? Perhaps best described as the hissing of witches embroiled in a violent argument. The rising wind brought with it the iodine scent of seaweed. She brushed the hair from her face, unconsciously licking her lips. She imagined the taste of Laphroaig on them, its hint of iodine never failing to remind her of her one trip to Islay, many years ago, to visit the distillery where it is made.

She shifted her weight. Just one tiny movement, less than half a step forward and she would be groundless – literally – flyyy...ing, falling, falling, falling. Would she crash into the waves and stand a minute chance of surviving – if survive is what she wanted to do? Or would the wind intercept her descent and send her smashing into the side of the cliffs, pulping her face, breaking every bone in her body? She imagined the wreck that she'd be: tumbling, rolling, bumping down the rocks. Eventually there would be a splash. Its sound echoing uncannily, like a suppressed scream, against the rocks as her body hit the water. In her mind's eye she saw the momentary displacement of the waves, before they melded again, swallowing her in their icy depths, then rising once more to join bigger waves and thunder, with renewed force, into the rocks as the wind stirred them up into a ferocious frenzy.

She had come to the island to escape. What exactly? The hysteria, the conflicting messages put out by the Government and other authorities, the fake news. Yes, that was it, she thought. She was totally aware of how serious and horrible this health crisis was, but she felt overwhelmed by it all. The constant doom-mongering, the never-ending stream of news that never reported on anything else, but the pandemic; the number of deaths that rose daily. It was too much to bear. Her thoughts were full of those sick, frightened, dying people, struggling desperately to breathe, to live. Thankfully a lot did make it to the other side and get well again, but so so many more did not. She grieved for them even though she didn't know them personally. She felt deeply for the families who had lost loved ones.

On the brink of insanity. That's how she had felt – three days ago now. She had no problem about the lockdown, only being allowed to go out for essential shopping and exercise. She walked to the shops and so got her exercise at the same time as she stocked up on supplies. As a writer she had lived a pretty reclusive sort of life for the best part of a quarter of a century. That was her excuse, if an excuse it was. She was hopeless in social situations. Book tours and signings were a torment. She would be so nervous that she'd be unable to speak. Words got stuck in her throat and all that came out of her mouth were strange croaking sounds. Oh, the embarrassment! The humiliation! The expressions of shock on the faces of the audience. Some would even gasp aloud. Eventually publishers

had stopped inviting her. Acknowledging that she was a talented writer, but that she was a liability at public appearances, they accepted that they had to do their best to promote her books without involving her. What a relief that had been. To know she would never have to stand up in front of an expectant crowd again. Never again to open her mouth and sound like a frog in pain.

But desperation can make one do unexpected things. She had been writing, turned on the radio for the lunchtime news. The daily statistics washed over her, enveloped her, submerged her into a despondency of gothic proportions. She felt a burning behind her eyes. A second later hot tears were coursing down her cheeks, plopping onto her hands as they rested on her desk as she listened. A howl of grief escaped her. In her mind she saw the clinical white walls of hospital wards, rows of stripped empty beds, dead bodies covered in white shrouds being wheeled down long gloomy corridors by faceless porters on their way to the morgue. These images played themselves over and over in her head on a constant loop – a never-ending stream of horrific visions.

Looking back later she couldn't remember doing it, but she must have done. She imagined how she would have saved her document, gone online and typed something like "uninhabited island" into a search engine. She must have found some details, someone to contact. She must have slapped together a hasty email and sent it. Had it been even remotely coherent? She didn't know, couldn't remember what she wrote.

Anyway, the next thing she could recall was leaving her flat. Quietly locking her front door, pulling the straps of her backpack over her shoulders, she padded down the stairs. She opened the door to the street, let it click shut as softly as she could. It was still very early and she didn't want to wake her neighbours. The narrow streets of her small town were silent, empty. Ancient, yet clean, unsullied by the debris of ordinary days. The air felt fresh, like newly-washed laundry. It was early April and as she began to walk to the train station she felt a sense of renewal all around her. In the gardens she

passed white, yellow and pale lilac crocuses raised their tiny faces to the golden hue of the morning sun. She stopped a moment to take a deep breath. She couldn't remember the last time she had been outside and been able to pause, breathe and take stock without being in someone's way, without the frenzied atmosphere of a normal weekday.

The hurrying crowds. The noise: revving car engines, slamming doors, the booming of muzak from passing boy racers or the inane chatter from radio stations that delivery vans tend to tune into. The screams of fractious children, the scolding voices of parents, the barking of dogs. Today there were none of these sounds. Listening carefully she could hear the twitter of birdsong from the trees in the graveyard behind the squat-towered Norman church.

She resumed her walk, crossed the empty market square. The station was deserted. A sharp whistle signalled the train's arrival was just moments away. Any second now it would come into view as it rounded the bend in the track before pulling up alongside the platform. At first she thought she was the only one in the carriage, but as she slipped into her seat she heard a sniff, followed by a yawn. Someone at the other end had just woken up. A lazy-sounding exchange of words in quiet voices. She thought she heard the words "hospital", "hectic" "worried". They must be medical staff of some kind on their way to work. Or maybe they were going home after a long and exhausting night shift. She sank down lower in her seat, hoping she wouldn't be seen.

Just this morning, as she had packed her laptop and thrown some clothes and essentials into her backpack and got ready to leave, she had switched on the radio to hear some government official plead with listeners to stay at home and forbidding all non-essential travel. This, apparently, came after a weekend when countless campervans and mobile homes had been seen on the country's motorways, all travelling north in the belief that they would be able to hole up in some caravan park in the Scottish Highlands for a few months until the threat of the Virus had passed. Was she doing that

too? Thinking she could escape the danger of infection? No, not really. Her reason was purely mental self-preservation. To keep herself from going mad. When she reached the island, which would require a change of trains and two separate ferry journeys to get to, she wouldn't be a burden to anyone. Without access to television, phone and only an unstable wi-fi connection, she would write and hopefully even finish her current work-in-progress. Once, well over a century ago, there had been a lighthouse on the island. Automation and advances in IT had made this particular one redundant. The current owner had built a couple of holiday cottages hoping to attract writers, artists or city folk who wanted to escape the rat race for a while. But, even in ordinary circumstances, he rarely found people who wanted to spend time on a remote island with a history that told of ghouls, ghosts and witches, nor had it the convenience of reliable connectivity. When she had contacted him, Mr. Duncan had been moments away from removing the advertisement from the website she had found it on. He needed to adhere to the rules the Government had introduced, he told her. As already mentioned, she couldn't really remember, but apparently she had been very persuasive about needing to come to the island in order to get away from all the anxiety surrounding the pandemic. Eventually he had relented and had telephoned her to confirm the booking.

"As long as you get here within the next forty eight hours", he'd said. "You need to be prepared to stay for as long as restrictions are in place. You'll not be able to change your mind."

"I won't", she'd told him gratefully. "You have no idea what a relief it is to be allowed to come."

"Right you are." He said it gruffly, but she thought there was a smile in his voice.

Almost as an afterthought, he told her, "I'll arrange for the boat to bring you fortnightly supplies from the mainland. D'you think you'll manage with that?"

"Absolutely, no problem at all", she had assured him.

And so, two days after that conversation she found herself the sole inhabitant of a small island, standing on the rugged cliffs above its northern shoreline. She could still see the foundations where once the lighthouse had stood. If you had asked her Was she sad? She would answer, No. Was she happy? She would tell you she was elated. Was she scared? A little maybe. Was she going to step off those cliffs? Absolutely not, she'd say. She had a novel to finish and the peaceful environment to do it in.

Breathing in the vital sea air and relishing the feel of the wind in her long brown hair, she scrambled back off that ridge of rock above the crashing waves of the North Sea. Standing a safe distance away from the edge she paused a moment longer. She liked to imagine that, on a clear day, you could see nearly all the way to Canada. Then she continued her exploration of the island while her mind began writing the next chapter of her novel, uninterrupted by thoughts of a pandemic threatening a world that felt like a different universe from the one she was walking in.

Reflections of a Lady in Corona Time

Ellie Cooper

The siren wakes you wake at 3:15, and you can't go back to sleep. You want to go back to sleep. You want to rewrite the bad dream. You want to wake and be back in your own home where there is plenty of time, brown rice, and long deep kisses.

When the orderly comes, he rolls you down the corridor past the nurses' station. You smell the pine-scented disinfectant and begin to remember that ski vacation when you were young before the kids were born. But some old fart on the television interrupts you. He says grandparents are willing to sacrifice themselves for Wall Street.

"Ha!" you think. Nobody asked you. No one asks you much anymore.

You motion a thin, bird-like arm towards the window. You just want to sit and think, okay? You want to stare out into the morning and manicured grounds and think while your mind is still fresh.

It comes back to you--the story you wanted to write. Was it twenty, thirty--no, was it possible--forty years ago? None of this makes sense.

Your boundaries shrink with age. You water your plants with salty tears. What you miss most is energy--that desire to wake with purpose, need or desire. Now you wake for coffee, French Roast, that you hide in your cupboard from the nurses, not the half-decaf the

dieticians serve you at breakfast to keep your blood pressure down. Yet even that desire withers and is replaced by complacency, as they fill your day with bingo and park you in front of the television with endless bad news.

You think again of that novel you promised yourself you'd write when there was enough time. Now there is time but no spark. You hadn't counted on that. And what's the point, you wonder. Even if you could remember the genre--it wasn't the romance novels your lady friends hid and passed around or your son's sci-fi that abolished boredom and drudgery or the cute cozies where the guilty always paid the price--and began to write, and there was enough time, everything has been said by those better/smarter/wiser than you, hasn't it? Worst of all, you buy into this. The uniqueness that was once you has been blended into a senior smoothie and you are dismissed and dissed in two words--"okay boomer." Expendable. "Do not resuscitate" you hear some newscaster say. You are marginalized by old age and now by disease. Marginalized when you were younger, too; you just didn't know it. But now it becomes clear. Didn't you support your first husband through graduate school; didn't you take care of your second one until he passed? In youth, you sat with your knees together and your hems appropriate so no one could call you easy. You were from a time when you dressed for success and when bosses called you a secretary, you didn't mind. Or did you, you ask yourself now.

You protested, but still your children put you here. But you do like the long-carpeted corridors that remind you of a hotel, and the walls that are painted in uplifting colors of sage green and pastel yellow. What's not to like? Hard to be depressed here, right? They think you can't hear, because you're old, and they know what's best, they remind you. The only way you express your individuality is how you decorate the little shelves that are placed outside each tenant's door: American flags, the Madonna, or fall leaves in all their glory. You mark the passage of time by the disappearance of a walker outside a friend's door or the clearing of a shelf. On your shelf, you place a small painting of fish and sea horse, because it reminds you of the coolness of water and how you used to float, because you never learned to swim.

And when you wanted to marry number three, your children told you he just wanted your money. "Why can't you be content just being a Grandma?" You wish you could be content.

You sit in your chair facing the window and see the violets that creep along the steppingstones, the golden groundsel that wasn't there yesterday and the pop of red from the Turk's Cap in the distance. They bloom out of the heaviness that pervades us now. Wouldn't it be nice to be oblivious, to simply enjoy each drop of rain, each ray of sun? You are not religious but feel, no—know—there is divineness in nature that refuses to be defeated. You long for reassurance that there will be more time, another day, but it is elusive like water that slips through your arthritic fingers as you wash them repeatedly to protect yourself from the inevitable.

Another orderly tells you it is time for lunch, but you pretend not to hear. You are not hungry. You like it by the window. You take a deep cleansing breath the way you've been taught in chair yoga, but it's a little harder today. But on the exhale, you whisper softly: *still here*.

"Now Ms. Birdie, we have to eat, remember?"

You have your brake on. When you won't budge, she walks to the nurse's station shaking her head. You can

hear her talking about you in third person like you're some naughty child. And then as if your middle finger has a mind of its own—it rises. You watch in amazement. You wonder if you are finally losing it—whatever "it" is. You feel your lips purse.

A stored memory emerges surprising you like a seedling. You can just hear your Mama's shocked voice: *Birdie what's got into you? That's not what a lady does!*

In the back of your throat something happens-- a little sound that started as a giggle becomes a cough.

Bambi

Farah Halime Hope

I was in the canned goods aisle when I came across a word I'd never seen before. I tried to say it in my head first, then out loud. Cannah Leyni. Cana Liney. Can of Leeni. I liked the shape of the word and the look of the beans. White, perfectly formed capsules. Then I got distracted with the other beans, the different possibilities ahead of me. I remember scanning the aisle, the kidneys, blacks, beans with sausages, beans in red sauce, running my hand across the tins, feeling the corrugated metal and crinkled paper.

A hand reached over my shoulder. Flakey, creased. The nails manicured, deep magenta, chip on the pinky.

"Excuse me." She smiles. Then she sees my face and stops smiling.

"Sorry," I say, apologising for my face.

Her blue eyes are hidden under drooping, thin skin, darting back and forth. I know that look. She's looking for an escape. Her hand has touched a can of kidney beans but retreats fast, like a mouse. I've put her in an uncomfortable position. She wants the can but she doesn't want her limb close to my mouth. I might bite.

"Sorry," I say again. Now I'm saying sorry because I would have moved but I am too slow. Predators creep.

We part ways. I go for the Cannah Leyni beans. That's what I've decided they're called. She leaves with nothing.

I was wondering what to cook tonight, except there is no tonight. If there truly was, I'd be with the father of my son and my son. They don't like you calling the father where I have to stay, my prison and also my freedom.

I smell bad. I know this because when I raised my hand to reach for another can, further down the aisle – this one had wilting green beans pictured on the front – an acidic balloon slapped me in the face.

I'm not crying anymore. I ran out a few weeks ago. Of tears, I mean. Crying gets tiresome after a while when there is no one to watch and help them roll faster. Why bother crying if no one is watching you?

A rattling sound is making my heart go. Maybe that's what it was. No, it's a can rolling down the aisle. I must have lost my grip. I lost my grip a long time ago, and now I'm here.

There's a way for me to go back but he won't take me back. I can tell them, at my prison hideaway, that it's safe for me to go back there. They don't like women who go back to the abusers but I can just say he did it because he loved me. He did really love me.

I think I love him too.

No. More heartache.

Now I remember. My boy Elias. Elias loves green

beans. It's the only vegetable he eats. He loves green beans. It's the only vegetable he eats.

"Excuse me."

A man hands me my can from the floor.

"You dropped this."

"Sorry," I say, apologising for existing. But he is also an attractive man with a glint in his eye so I try to think of something normal to say. I decided to go with, "Where are you from?"

"Um," he says, looking over his shoulder. He's alone. He is looking at something on my face. It might be the red lipstick circles I painted and tried to rub in, replicating healthy cheeks. I forgot what I look like. I'm not who I was.

My mouth tells me I'm smiling. I tell him, "You're alone."

His mouth twists into a humourless smile. "Cool." He walks past me and I am staring at the empty aisle ahead of me. I'm wondering if I can see Elias if I call tonight. That can be my plan. I mustn't think too much of my plan right this minute because I have to get the dinner for tonight.

I avoided the toilet paper aisle because it contains the baby bottles and Pampers and squeeze apple pouches.

Elias weighed 5 lbs 12 ounces. He was not premature. But he was born early. His head was by my heart so the doctors said they needed to slice me open like a melon. I don't mind. I took the pain pills afterwards for far too long and then I found myself in a state of constant pill-taking and Elias-rocking. The father of my son loved me enough to stay with me. I know because he looked me in the eye when I cried and said, "There's no need to cry."

I told them he was an abuser because he abused my mind. He told me one thing and behaved another way. The first time he said he had a call to make. I said okay, but *we are having dinner*. Elias was in his cot. I was in my black dress with the silk. There were flowers on the table. He said it was really important. I let him know it was fine with my eyes. Always let people know you are fine with your eyes.

I think I said that out loud. A woman with a trolley pretends not to look.

"Sorry!" I patted my coat pocket, and the pretend shopping list inside it.

My favourite aisle in the supermarket is not canned goods. It's the spices and baking ingredients. I wasn't a good baker. I never followed the recipes and I hated the requirement for more than one egg. Such a waste. But cakes need eggs, half a dozen if you're making a cloudless, flourless chocolate tart to wow your guests at a dinner party.

Elias told me he wanted me to be happy with him when we baked. He said "are you happy with me?" a few times a day. No, I was heartbroken.

"Oh damn it to hell", I said out loud again as I dropped a bag of flour on the linoleum, sending a plume up into the air.

"Bambi?"

I didn't recognize her, but she knows me. I'm puzzled and pleased.

My name is Shelley now. It is my real name. But I was Bambi before. It belongs to someone else. She was a gazelle.

I am covered in white flour dust.

She smiles but only for three seconds, grimaces for ten. Her eyes settle somewhere above my head, then at

something under my chin.

“Do you need a hand?” she asked.

A man in uniform and spotted skin arrives with a broom and limp hands. He sweeps lazily as I talk to the woman with her daughter. Same age as Elias. Tall for her age or maybe I don't know what children look like at this age anymore.

My hand reaches forward because somewhere inside me I convince myself that touching her little girl is like touching him.

She watches my hand, frowns and curls her upper lip ever so slightly with disgust.

I inspect my hand that is before me, outstretched, exhausted and grey. It says, *I'm tired.*

The woman is familiar and alien. Where do I know her from?

“Gosh, I mean,” she says. “I mean, Henny must have been only five?” I watch her place a protective arm on her child. “And Eli...It's been so long since we've seen you.”

Eli. His father calls him that. He called me names, too.

Her smile is fading fast. I think she will ask me what I want her to ask me. “You've got something—”

I have swatted her hand away too hard because there is a slapping sound and her daughter is horrified and laughing at the feeling of being horrified. “Sorry,” I say, lying.

“Well, we really have to get going.” She has a big dinner to make. Lots of guests, she says. “*Urgh, it's so stressful.*” She is laughing and I am laughing, too. The girl is staring at my feet. My shoes aren't pretty anymore. But they only had party shoes in the box. It's not my fault they're red and glittery with a hole in the toe.

They finally leave and I still don't remember who they are. But they know me and my Elias. Green beans, Cannah Leyni. I have lost track again. I have lost the cans. My hands are empty. I have to start from the beginning or maybe it would be better to skip food today. There's a lot of people in the supermarket and the acid smell on my body is beginning to overwhelm me.

The security guards eye me as I leave. They think I have stolen something, making faces as they search me. They don't realise they smell too. Cigarettes. I gave up smoking when I left.

They found the cans inside my coat. It is my Burberry trench but the belt was taken from me and there is a tear in the armpit. It is too hot to wear when outside there is sun and hope and childhood.

My memory is not what it was.

“Sorry,” I say.

“We're going to have to call the police.” one of them says.

“You keep them.”

“That's not how it works.”

“I don't want to go to prison.”

I am trying to cry but it's all dried up and I imagine prison might be a nice change of scenery.

The first man is nudging the arm of the second man but addresses me. “Dunno, you might get 20 years for this.” They are howling and their teeth remind me of territorial monkeys.

The men have stopped laughing and they're frowning now. They are calling me names as I walk away.

“Crazy bitch.”

They have let me walk out because they realise I am already imprisoned.

I know the way back but everything looks different. Images from five years ago are merging with the street in front of me. Elias is pushing the trolley. I have a hand on the trolley to steer it the right way, but I'm looking at my phone. He is not strong enough to control it. I have bought a lot of food and wine and quilted toilet roll because we have a lot of people that will arrive imminently to eat and drink and shit. One of them will destroy my life. I already suspected, didn't I? All those stupid calls. Whore. No, that's wrong. I destroyed my own life. Elias is telling me about a boy at school. I am not really listening because I'm wondering about the whore. They won't fuck in our house will they.

The ambulance came and they told me I was a bad mother. They didn't really say it, they just said it with their eyes. I didn't see him lose control. The trolley was too heavy. They wrapped him up tight, my Elias boy.

Notes On Working From Home

Jade Mitchell

This morning, I took a walk and noticed how all of the trees were bare, despite the light. I spend my days looking at pictures of salt flats, marshland sunsets. Places only captured for their beauty. The numbers keep adding up. I try not to watch them. When I am done, I keep walking. Every river edge feels the same, even if the ground beneath my feet is different, more solid. Even the waves are fighting back. Meanwhile, my friends turn time over and over in their hands. They stand behind checkout tills, or sit quietly in distant rooms. I imagine holding all of their bodies when this is over. Sunlight washing over skin. The grandest of symphonies. But not yet. There is so much time. An extra minute spent in the shower. A kiss lingering on a bare shoulder. The boys across the road are laughing like nothing is wrong, and for a moment, I allow it.

Purple Velvet Scrunchie

Jasmin Perry

‘Why don’t you try making something? You could do some macramé?’ mum asks.

I flop down on the sofa and tuck my legs underneath me. I don’t want to do macramé. I don’t want to be in the house. Over the last week, it has shrunk and shrunk until it feels like a Perspex tank filled to the brim with water. I am gasping for air.

‘I know, why don’t you do a video call quiz with your friends?’

I look up at her, incredulous. Her eyebrows are knitted together in concern which feels more smothering than comforting. She senses my frustration and drops the worried parent look.

‘I’d be the same, June. I’m only trying to help. Look, after work today we can go for a walk or something.’ She says it like a question and her eyes linger on me for a second, trying to figure out what my answer will be. Then her gaze flits down to her watch and she jumps up. ‘I’ve got to go. Think about it. Love you,’ she says, kissing my forehead. ‘Be good, Benji,’ she shouts upstairs before scurrying out of the front door.

I lie back on the sofa. The house is silent. I extract my phone from my pocket and tap on another article about the virus. The paywall barrier informs me this is the 57th article I’ve read on their website so far this month. It is only the 5th of April. I ignore the plea for donations

and scroll down, scanning the text for standout figures. Deaths. Hospital admissions. I only notice I am shaking when I can no longer keep my phone still enough to read the words.

‘Benji?’ I yell, pushing myself off the sofa in a bid to break the spell of my anxiety. Distraction. That’s what the therapist said. Has it ever worked? No. Will I keep trying? Clearly.

I walk upstairs and into the room Benji and I share. We have a screen that separates it into two, but it’s not the same as a wall. I look over to Benji’s side. He has his headphones on and is staring intently at his TV. Or, as mum would say, he is ‘plugged in’ to his Xbox. There’s no point trying to talk to him. I lower myself down on my bed and stare at the A-Level revision mind-maps that are blu-tacked to my wall. Part of me wants to take them down, as I won’t be sitting my exams anymore, but I decide to leave them up. Might as well try to make things feel more normal.

After an hour of trying to read, without much success, I hear the sound of the front door opening.

‘It’s only me,’ mum shouts.

By the time I get downstairs, she has collapsed in a heap on the sofa, still wearing her jacket.

‘What happened?’ I ask, perching on the arm of the sofa.

'Claire let me go. The whole business is near enough shutting down apparently. Can't exactly run events right now, I guess. Don't know why she couldn't have called though. Waste of a commute.' She clutches her head in her hands. 'She said she'll hire me again when she can, but that doesn't really help.'

I hug my knees to my chest. 'Will we be okay?' I ask. My throat feels tight.

Mum shrugs her jacket off, as if her body has now adjusted to the icy shock of the news.

'We'd have been fine if it wasn't for the car last month. I had to use the emergency fund to replace the cambelt. We'll get benefits -'

'But they'll take forever to come through,' I say, finishing her sentence.

She purses her lips. 'There's loads of stuff going in the supermarkets, but my back would never cope.'

I know what she is asking me, without her needing to say the words. My mouth is dry.

'I just can't do it. I just can't.' I feel tears stinging my eyes. The words feel like an excuse, like I'm being overdramatic. But the thought of spending eight hours trapped inside a supermarket, with the coughs and sneezes of a whole town's worth of shoppers, makes me feel like the room has been emptied of oxygen.

'Not even for a couple of days? That's all we'd need.'

I shake my head. I can't.

I set up the sewing machine on the dining table and turn it on at the wall. The needle jolts into position. Will this work? I grab the closest piece of fabric and line it up in the machine. It is an offcut of purple velvet that was left over from my GCSE textiles project. My brain is buzzing. I already feel like this will be a waste of time. I have decided to make scrunchies to sell, in the hopes

of making enough money for our food shop at the end of the week. It isn't sewing them which is the problem. I can do that. But my mind has already skipped ahead. At some point I'm going to have to try and sell them. That involves telling people.

I know I can just make a quick Facebook post and share it in some of the local groups, but people I know from sixth form might see it. Might see me, begging for money.

I lower the foot on the sewing machine, clamping the material in place. As I press my foot down on the pedal, the needle starts to move, stabbing into the fabric. I focus on the clicking sound of the machine and push my thoughts from my head.

That night, I make twenty-five scrunchies. Mum pokes her head around the door at twelve to say she is going to bed. I carry on. I don't feel heavy with tiredness yet, and I can't bear the thought of lying in bed, listening to the rest of the house sleeping, while I'm still wide awake.

'How many have you had now?'

Mum is talking about scrunchie orders. This is the second time today she has asked me. 'Still two,' I say, examining the contents of the fridge. Both orders were from Katie. I feel nauseous at the thought of my friend indirectly paying for our shopping.

I didn't post anything on Facebook in the end. I wrote out a post in our local group, with some pictures of the scrunchies I'd taken using mum as a model, but I couldn't work up the courage to press the blue button that would make my words public. So, it wasn't really surprising that I hadn't had many orders. It still made me feel a bit embarrassed though. Somewhere in my subconscious, I'd been secretly hoping the scrunchies would be an overnight success. Self-promotion would be easier if I already had a track record.

'Maybe I should apply for that job,' mum says. She

fills a glass with water and takes a sip.

‘The receptionist one in the care home?’ I ask.

‘It could be alright,’ she says. I know she wouldn’t have any problem doing it. She’d probably quite enjoy having a reason to get out of the house every day. It had only been two days since she’d lost her job and she was already getting restless.

I was the problem. I was the one who had begged her not to apply for anything, unless she could work from home. I couldn’t cope with the thought of her picking up the virus. I’d be paralysed with anxiety until she got home each day, until I could quiz her about whether anyone had coughed in her vicinity. It wouldn’t be good for either of us.

I shake my head and try to communicate what I’m feeling with my eyes. I can’t find the words. I feel guilty but adamant at the same time.

Mum leans back against the kitchen counter. ‘Well, I don’t know what to say then.’

Benji runs into the room. His headphones are still around his neck, so it’s obvious he’s not coming for a chat.

‘What’s for lunch?’ he asks.

Mum looks at me before she replies.

‘We’ve not got a lot in.’ I can see her running through the contents of the cupboards in her mind. ‘I think there’s some sausage rolls in the freezer. How about that?’

Benji shrugs and runs back upstairs to his game.

‘Okay fine,’ I say, before she has chance to speak. ‘I’ll try and sell some more.’

I prop my phone up against a plant pot in the garden and switch the camera to video mode. I’ve written

a poem about how I feel, about our situation, about the virus, and I’m going to film it. It was Benji’s idea. ‘People love artsy stuff like that,’ he’d said, before returning to our room.

The words had flowed onto the page without me needing to think too much. It wasn’t perfect, but it would do. My therapist would have been proud. After all, it was the first time in months that I’d done something without overthinking.

I swallow my nerves and brush my hair out of my face, before pressing the red button. I look down at the folded piece of paper and I read. Even though my heart races and I stumble over some of my words, I carry on until I have finished the poem. Without watching the video back, I attach it to my draft post from last night and upload it. Then I put my phone down and run away from it, as if it is a bomb that might explode at any second. Adrenalin is rushing through me and I hate it. I feel too jittery, too on edge, too untethered. I look up at the sky and force myself to focus on the drifting clouds. The sun is so bright that it makes me squint, but I watch the clouds anyway.

My fizzing thoughts settle, like the foam on the top of a glass of lemonade gradually disappearing. After a few minutes, my mind is clear enough that I can hear the birds and the sound of the breeze.

Half an hour later, I pluck up the courage to check my phone. I have more Facebook notifications than I have done since I started secondary school, and everyone went through a phase of tagging each other in dozens of random photos. I tap on my post. 209 likes and 35 comments. I scroll through them.

Carl Jenson: We’re a house full of boys so no use for scrunchies, but we do have an extra bag of pasta and some milk we can drop round today for you

Abi Speller: So sorry to hear you’re struggling! But I love the scrunchies. Have ordered three for my girls xxx

Debbie Clark: I'm going to Asda today, let me know what you need, and I'll pick up a few things for you 😊

John Weeks: The food bank on the locking road is open

Elise Taylor: Have ordered x

Relief surges through me.

'Mum,' I shout, wandering back into the house. She looks up from the TV and turns the volume down. I sit down next to her and show her my phone. 'We're going to be okay,' I say, and the truth in my words feels more important than anything else I have ever said.

The Search

Jeffrey Zable

When I tested positive for chronic depression I subsequently tried to find the person who gave it me, as my doctor informed me that I had contracted it from a chronically depressed person, and that only by giving some of it back to them would I be able to diminish my condition.

So, I chose one of the busiest areas of the city to start my search.

Stopping the first person who looked a bit depressed, I said, "Excuse me, have you ever been depressed?"

Smiling amiably he responded, "Why would I ever be depressed! The world is a wonderful place. I learned early on that life is what you make it. If you haven't learned that, you're screwed."

"Okay," I responded and went on to the next person, and the next, and the next, each of whom said pretty much the same thing. It wasn't until late in the day that I found someone who admitted to having had some of the same symptoms that I described, but not on an ongoing basis. "I was depressed for part of a day back in 2007," she answered. "I can't remember the exact date but it happened when my parakeet named Chacha somehow escaped from his cage while my mother was knitting. Supposedly, he flew straight into the wall and then hit the ground, dead as a doornail. Faced with having to bury him, I felt so sad that I thought I'd never again enjoy watching a rerun of "Friends."

"I hear you!" I answered. And then I told her what my doctor had said; that only if I could find the person who gave it to me and return some of the malady, would I ever be able to diminish my own.

"Looking at me with what I perceived as an expression of sympathy, she said, "Well, good luck with your search. I hope you find the answer. . ."

Day after day I continue my search, but so far I haven't encountered a single person who's admitted to being depressed except on rare occasions, and never for more than a short period of time. . .

Signed, Sealed, Delivered

Judy Upton

It's surprisingly easy to obtain cardboard. You can find loads outside shops on the night before their bin collections. You can quickly build up quite a haul. You do need to be picky though – be careful with the type and quality. You want the strong, thick stuff – and ideally a box that has been used to deliver a large item like a freezer or a chest of drawers. You can make a large enough box out of several smaller ones of course, but if you do that, then you'll need to make sure you allow a very generous overlap at all the joins. The joins are always going to be the weakest part.

I'm the first in my family to go to university. When I checked it all out online I couldn't believe how exciting it was going to be! All those multi-levelled libraries, state-of-the-art lecture theatres, leisure and study spaces with their own coffee shops... In the photos and videos everyone seemed to be strolling around, laughing and smiling – without a care in the world.

My school was nothing like that. It was the kind of place where if you laughed, or even dared force a timid smile, someone would ask you what your problem was. Or more likely still, kick you in the teeth. I'm not saying I was singled out or anything. Others had it far worse with bullying and that, than me. I quickly learned to be invisible basically. University was definitely not going to be like that. Here people would actually want to meet me, be my friend and hear what I had to say. Or so I thought...

In Freshers' week people gave me flyers for every kind of hobby or activity. I was invited to join sports teams, political groups, choirs and drama clubs. I went along to just about everything – sitting there while people who were far more confident and interesting than me spoke and were listened to. I didn't mind though. I was dazzled to be among all these ideas and opinions.

It was a couple of weeks into the term before I really noticed it. The fact no one had noticed me. By then the invitations had started to dry up. I saw and heard people heading off out to this and that, and occasionally I'd still go to a bar or a coffee shop. But when I did, I'd always somehow find myself on the very edge of the crowd, forcing a smile and trying not to look too lonely and desperate.

They make parcel tape in several different strengths, widths and lengths. It's actually rather overwhelming, having to make your choice. Also, for me at any rate it was hard to estimate how much I actually needed. Previously, I'd imagined parcel tape just came in that shiny brown colour, but you can buy a clear one too, and – my choice – a white one with the word 'Fragile' written on it in red. Not just because of how I was feeling obviously...

My family just don't understand how I feel. They're all so proud of me. Both my sisters told me I was so lucky to be going to uni and not into low paid jobs like them. Getting a degree in environmental science was a great

way to escape my hometown, with its zero hour shift work with zero prospects. But I had friends back there. This term has been even harder than last. If anything, I've felt even more homesick. I almost didn't return after going home for Christmas. But I knew they'd be disappointed, Mum and Dad.

Then this whole covid crisis happened and suddenly the university said they were planning to close for the duration. We were all told to go home. Unlike most people I was relieved. Fine, I thought. I'll just go back to my parents and watch the live-streamed lectures and upload my essays. For me that might work better than actually being here. At the very least it might give me some time to get my head together.

If Dad hadn't had to give up driving, I knew he'd have driven straight down here to get me. Mum has a car, but she's currently busy making grocery deliveries to those who can't get out. The first thing I did, after checking that trains were still running was to look up the price of the fare home. I knew it would be expensive, as I wouldn't be buying the ticket in advance, but I was still completely shocked at how much it cost. It's a figure that's larger than my current bank balance. I heard my fellow students leaving and watched them packing their wheeled cases and boxes into waiting cars. And I didn't know what to do.

That night I sat at my window in the now eerily quiet accommodation block, watching the traffic racing by below. I looked online at car-sharing sites but there was nothing that would take me where I needed to go. But then as I sat there watching the vehicles streaming past, I noticed something. There were still loads white vans from courier companies collecting and delivering parcels. A while back I'd overheard a guy on my course explaining how he sells his old text books, CDs, DVDS and even clothes online, parcelling them up in boxes for a courier to collect, postage free. The address of one of these wholesalers who will buy your old stuff is on an industrial estate a few streets from my family's house. That's when I came up with the idea. Is it possible to post yourself? I looked online.

In the early 20th century, a man called W. Reginald Bray posted himself. He became famous for it. The reason he did it apparently was just to test the Royal Mail. He took himself to his local post office, in Forest Hill South London, along with the correct postage and address label.

With my plan of using a courier, all I needed to do, I hoped, was make my reinforced box and cut into it, lots of large air holes. Then I could call the company, climb in through the little door I'd left, before sealing myself inside. If the courier did find me, and decide to charge me for the journey, I'd be home by then anyway. I could borrow the money off my parents. With a bit of luck.

So now my box is built and I'm ready. The most worrying thing now is trying to estimate how long I'm going to have to stay inside it. I think I might need to sit here for up to three hours, so that's what I've been practising for. I've room to make a few small stretches, just so I don't get cramp. I have to sit hugging my knees though for most of the time. I've a cushion, three bottles of water, a pack of sandwiches, a torch and a pair of scissors. The scissors will be needed to get out when I arrive of course. And give me the option of making extra air holes, should I feel I need them. So now it all systems go basically. Wish me luck!

So this is what happened, right? I carried the box down into the hallway of my block, climbed inside and waited. I'd already booked the slot for the parcel pick up, so that's all there was left to do. Unfortunately I hadn't realised that a pick up slot just vaguely meant any time on a particular morning or afternoon. I sat in my box for over an hour.

I was just debating whether I could risk getting out for a quick loo break, when I heard someone coming down the stairs. I thought everyone else had already gone home. I peered out the nearest air hole. A young woman with curly blue hair was descending, a bulging bag-for-life on each arm and her hands clasped around

a hamster cage. She sat down near the bottom of the steps and started checking her phone. I recognised her then as someone I've previously passed in the hallway or foyer. I hoped that whoever she was waiting for, with all her packed up belongings, would hurry up and collect her.

Staying completely motionless and silent was an extra stress I certainly didn't need.

That's when it happened. I tried and failed to stifle a sneeze. It burst out and it was loud - incredibly so - or maybe that was just the surrounding cardboard making a kind of echo chamber? So I sneezed, and my block-mate screamed. Looking through an air hole I could see her fearful eyes staring at my box. She stood up then and warily moved towards me. I didn't know what to do. I just froze.

"I know someone's in there," she said, voice a little unsteady. "Um, are you okay?" She walked around the box, still staying nervously at a slight distance. "Can you understand me? Do you speak English?" It occurred to me then, that possibly she thought I was somehow a captive in the box, or an illegal migrant, being trafficked. She took out her phone again and looking very serious and concerned started to dial a number. Who was she calling? The police?

"It's alright," I said. "I'll come out."

Karly recognised me as a neighbour as soon as I emerged and started laughing. At that point she thought it was some kind of prank. And she simply couldn't believe it, when I admitted what I'd been trying to do. Karly made the point that even if my box was collected, I might very well end up in a locked-down van or depot, rather than getting home. At that point of course we'd no idea how strict or not restrictions on working and travelling might get.

She told me her brother was driving down from Dundee to collect her and take her back there. When I said where I was trying to reach, she said that dropping

me off in my hometown wouldn't be a big detour for them. They'd be happy to do it. Plus it would be nice to have someone to chat to on the way, as brother tended to be a bit on the quiet side. "Go and collect some things together. Jake'll be here in a minute." Karly grinned and gestured to my box. "And you might just want to drop that off at recycling bin, before we go." I smiled too then.

While we were chatting, I heard Karly's hamster rustling about in his bedding. She said his name was Gus. She'd bought him as company for herself, as she'd found being away from home for the first time a little bit scary "I just feel sometimes that I'm too weird... too out there for other people to relate to," she said.

"Weird? You're not the one who was trying to post herself," I reminded her. She laughed at that. "Yeah, fair point, Flo, but I think it's great to do things differently..."

"To think outside the box?" I teased. We were both laughing now. Then she spotted a car passing by slowly and jumped up. "That's Jake - looking for somewhere to park, probably. Can you wait here a sec with Gus?"

Now Karly's coming back in, and she's with a guy who looks like a shorter version of herself, though he has fair rather than blue hair. "Jake this is Flo. - Come on, grab your bags, girl, we're going home!"

Twelve Weeks' Rest

JY Saville

I'm sat in the manager's office waiting for her to be bothered with me. Even with the chair pushed right back from the desk I don't think I'm two metres away but she doesn't seem fussed.

"Now," Melissa says when she's good and ready, "I understand you've got a letter recommending you stay at home for twelve weeks."

She says it like she's disappointed in me, which she probably is. A loyal employee would tell the government to stick its shielding programme and carry on working. She holds her hand out.

"Can I see it, please?"

I wonder when she last washed her hands but I give her it anyway. She reads it and I'm surprised she doesn't hold it up to the light to check for watermarks, but what does a genuine letter look like? She knows all about the cocktail of underlying health problems that have got me marked down as particularly vulnerable to this virus – she's moaned about the time off for hospital appointments often enough – and she can't argue with the conclusion that I need to be shoved in a bunker for the foreseeable. Though I can tell she's itching to.

"Right, well Karen, you'll have been made aware of the government compensation schemes for those who can't work at the moment. Obviously you've forfeit your Covid-19 bonus –"

"What do you mean, 'obviously'?"

"You've only worked during two weeks of the crisis."

"Risking serious illness." Stuck in a warehouse with three hundred other people, run ragged picking other folks' shopping for minimum wage.

"The bonus will be paid in full at the end of the crisis period so I'm afraid you won't qualify. Now, if I can just speak with Amanda alongside you for a moment then you can go home."

"Mandy's shift finishes in half an hour, I'll wait around till she's done."

Mandy's fifty-one but she's still my little sister.

"Oh no, straight home. We wouldn't want to be seen to be detaining you."

So she's admitting it's all about the look of the thing. Couldn't care less about me. Key workers my ample backside.

Our Mandy comes in, fiddling with her ponytail. Madam doesn't ask her to sit down and Mandy doesn't take the initiative so she's hovering in my peripheral vision for five minutes while we go through more box-ticking.

"Now, I understand you live in the same house." Melissa smiles and her shoulders unstiffen. "Like in *Birds of a Feather*."

She doesn't look old enough to remember *Birds of a Feather*. It must have resurfaced, like selfish individuality and dungarees.

"Aye, like *Birds of a Feather* if it was set in a one-bedroom terrace in Pudsey," Mandy pipes up.

I want to pinch her leg to shut her up but I can't reach and it's probably against the social-distancing rules.

"One bedroom?"

Madam's nose wrinkles like one of us just farted and I can see unpleasant cogs whirring.

"It's a big bedroom," I say, shooting our Mandy a look over my shoulder. "We have us beds as far apart as they'll go, there must be at least two metres between them."

When I bought that house after Dad died I had a double bed, plenty of space, and solitude. Then Mandy's short-lived marriage to a postman from Birkenshaw fell apart, and we were back to sharing a room again like we had when we were kids. What was I supposed to do? Poor kid had nowhere else to go.

"Well," says Melissa, "you can't share a room at the moment otherwise there's no benefit to you being absent. One of you will have to move out."

"I'll check into a hotel shall I?"

The daft cow takes it as a serious proposition and says, "I'm not sure any are open for normal business, are they?"

She lives in one of the detached houses up near the golf course, a bathroom for every bedroom and they don't call it an estate, it's an exclusive new development. I'm half-expecting her to suggest I move to our cottage in

the country.

"There must be someone in your family with a spare room you could stay in."

Does she think we share for the fun of it? That I like Mandy playing space invaders on her phone while I'm trying to get to sleep, and leaving her socks all over the floor? When I cottoned on that Mandy was a permanent fixture we looked for a two-bedroomed place but we'd have had to move to a rougher neighbourhood. We chose inconvenience over anxiety, back then, and the years ran away with us. Maybe it's time we had another look, but that doesn't help us now.

"No," I say.

"There's only us two," adds Mandy. "Anyway, you're not supposed to go to other people's houses, are you?"

"One of you will have to sleep on the sofa then," says Melissa. Then she brightens up, you can practically see the lightbulb go on above her glossy hair. "You could use the bedroom in shifts, that might be fun. Amanda will be up and out before three, most mornings. Karen, you could sleep three till eleven perhaps."

"Perhaps," I say, and shoot Mandy another look. Her mouth runs away with her if you don't watch her. I've read the government guidelines and I know it only says you've to encourage your partner to sleep in a different bed where possible, so I doubt it matters that I'm sleeping eight feet away from Mandy but I don't want to get into an argument with management over it.

"And of course," says Melissa, "you'll have to use different rooms during the day."

"It's just the one room downstairs," I say. "Front door opens straight into it, and there's a little kitchen off the back. I wouldn't swear there's enough room to sit on the worktop and I doubt it'd be comfortable. But we do have a small cellar, I could sit down there while Mandy's in the house."

"If that works, great. It'll give you a change of scenery, too."

I don't know why I waste my sarcasm on her.

Half an hour later I'm parked two streets away, listening to the Pet Shop Boys and watching Mandy walking away from work in my wing mirror.

"You'll have to park further away," Mandy says when we set off. "Steven walks down here and you know what he's like for sucking up to her."

Melissa's parting shot was that, naturally, if I was seen outside the house during the next twelve weeks I would be fired.

"We're allowing you to be away from work to protect yourself," she said. "It's not a holiday. We can't be made to look like fools. You do see, don't you?"

What I see is our Mandy, who never learnt to drive and who I don't want mingling with the public any more than she can help. It's a five minute drive and I'm stopping her getting a bus home and a taxi to work every day.

"You don't know who's been in a taxi, do you?" says Mandy as we pull up in our street. "I'd never be happy I'd used enough alcohol handwash. I'll have to make sure I keep to the two-metre rule at work from now on, an' all," she says. "Bugger the pick-rate, I've to keep you safe."

"Right, our kid," I say when I've made us both a cuppa and we're sat at opposite ends of the room. "We'll have to take turns eating at the table, if your knees touch it can't count as social-distancing, can it? So you can eat from a tray on the settee tonight."

She tuts but she's not going to contradict me. I'm the one that's read the guidance so whatever I say goes.

"And you'll have to let me have first shower, and then you have to clean the bathroom when you've done,"

I say. I wonder how far I can push it, if I can make her do the vacuuming for twelve weeks, but I settle for adding, "Including the toilet."

She rolls her eyes but she nods. We're all set.

Next morning I'm up at quarter past two as normal. We're going to have to start getting up earlier though because now she can't nip in for her contact lenses while I'm cleaning my teeth, or measure out cornflakes hip to hip with me while I'm filling the kettle. She uses my towel without thinking when she washes her hands and that's another delay while I dig out a clean one.

"Hurry up, I'll be late," she says, hopping around by the front door, pulling her trainers on.

There's no traffic until we're within spitting distance of the industrial estate, then I turn down a side street and take a roundabout route till I'm parked as close as I dare to our warehouse, closer than Mandy's comfortable with. I can't take her into the car park where everyone else gets dropped off but I don't like leaving her to walk further than she has to, at this time of night.

"Get gone," she says, "Before anyone sees you."

"I'll watch till you're out of sight. There's nobody around."

And there isn't, neither of us can see anyone moving. Until she's taken three steps from the car and Steven materialises from the shadows of the ginnel over the road.

I slide down in my seat and bang my knee. The seat-belt's throttling me and my heart's hammering. I hear him greet Mandy but I can't hear them moving away.

"Your Karen'll be looking forward to having a lie-in, I dare say," he says, and thank the Lord it sounds like he's turning away.

“Oh aye,” says Mandy, fainter as she walks on. “It’ll do her the world of good, this. Twelve weeks’ total rest.”

You have no idea, love, I want to say, none at all.

The next few mornings I take Mandy’s advice and drop her further away, and she texts me to say she’s safe inside before she switches her phone off for her shift. It’s picking her up that’s more of a problem. I move further into residential streets day by day and settle on a cul de sac by the end of the week. Nobody’s going to drive past me and as far as I know we don’t work with anyone who lives down here. There’s a green footpath sign at the end but after a few days I haven’t seen anyone use the path.

As we slide to the end of week two we’re doing fine. Knackered, getting on each other’s wicks, but fine. I roll up to the cul de sac ten minutes after her shift’s due to end, most days she picks up a bit of shopping before she leaves, then we head home for me to carry on getting bored out of my skull. She fills me in on all the gossip and back-biting while we drive.

She’s left her Westlife CD in the car so Thursday dinnertime I’m listening to that, leaning on the window and staring into space when the passenger door opens. I straighten up and turn to ask if she managed to get any soap but it’s not Mandy who’s leaning in.

“Oy! Get back!” I snap. “That’s not even a metre. And take your hands off my car.”

Melissa stays where she is, breathing maliciously into my space, sweating in her jogging gear.

“You don’t appear to care,” she says. “This isn’t isolation.”

“Not now you’re invading, no. But Mandy being on a bus for twenty minutes doesn’t protect me, does it?”

“That’s not the point,” she says. “I did warn you I’d have to fire you. You should have followed the rules. How hard can it be?”

I swallow and my chest starts to feel squashed like it did last June when I was kept in overnight for observation.

Fairy Tale

Nathan Evans

This should be the busiest time, City lines blurred by motion. But its long streets—on which the sun makes short shadows of tall buildings—pan on and on without interruption. Silence rains on its windowpanes, puddles on its pavements. Only a solitary footstep splashes up as—face masked, hands gloved—a man hurries homeward with groceries. And, from one of his windows, Phaeton watches.

He has two. One with a fixed view – the apartments opposite, the street below, some sky above, some trees in a row. The other offers multiple views from across the City. Shocking images. And shocking statistics. Sound-tracked by shocked experts. How many it has taken. How quickly it is advancing. How long before life might be back in motion.

It seems a dream to Phaeton: that time when they could share their air with other human beings. And in the City of Perpetual Motion there are many, many beings, constantly moving. Or they had been. Now it's just women who keep things going – rushing to work in the morning, rushing home in the evening. In between, the City sits dormant. And men sit home in fear of contagion.

The first case was a tragedy, a morbid curiosity. The City Corporation had sent one of their men—and all men they had been—to explore the woodlands beyond their fortifications. He returned with stories of wondrous resources, plans for how to exploit them to keep their

City in motion. And with a strange sallowness of skin, of which no one thought anything. He'd simply caught some sunshine.

But—like paper left out too long—his complexion kept yellowing, body desiccating. No draught was deep enough for him. No potion could rehydrate him. He died the husk of a man. Though City Consultants weren't actually certain if he was dead or merely dormant, so they kept what remained of him—this mysterious cocoon-man—under observation. And the City went on moving.

Then there came another one – with skin like parchment and a thirst there was no quenching. Then more of them – drying and dying, or becoming dormant. All lined up for observation, sallow and shrunken. All, when living, had been men.

City Citizens began panicking. Rumours were flying about this new and terrifying cocoon-contagion. Had it come from the woodlands? How come it was so catching? And why had it only come for men?

Male Citizens began retreating, only venturing to work in the morning and home in the evening. Phaeton had been among them: he's twenty-two, too young to die now. But some—*die young stay pretty*—had stayed out to party. And soon they were dying in such volume there was no more room for observation. Weeks and months had passed with no change to those wizened

cocoon-men, so the Consultants concluded they were dead, not dormant. The Coroners gave orders to ditch them outside the City's battlements.

To contain the contagion, funerals became frowned-on. Men were advised to work from home. But, even in incarceration, the City kept in motion: there were messages and messages that needed replies and calls that needed answering. Phaeton was able—through his worldwide-window—to stay connected to other men at home. For a while, it was novel. Life seemed to settle.

Then Citizens started spotting them: fluttering about town, hanging on tree limbs. Almost human but be-winged. Some called them *Bugs*. *Fairies* was what stuck. Phaeton hadn't believed it until he saw one. Not through his worldwide-window: he knew they could fake those views. But through his window-on-the-world.

There it was one day, in the branches of the closest tree: body tiny but two outsize appendages, like a butterfly's, sprouting between shoulder blades. Just sat there: no need to be anywhere, do anything. Wings flapping, iridescent in the sunshine. *It's probably drying them*. That's what the worldwide-window had told him. *After hatching they flap their wings to dry them, pump blood to them*.

At first, the worldwide-window had been aglow with theories on what they were, where they'd come from. Then the Corporation made an announcement: the cocoons were opening. They'd been right all along: those men were not dead but dormant and, in a ditch encircling their defences—useless against wings—were returning to life, transformed.

And what a transformation. Citizens looked out for lost loved ones, struggled to see some semblance of proudly active men in the indolent creatures above them—day and night preening, partying, piss-taking. *How dare they do nothing! In the City of Perpetual Motion!* But even more shocking than inaction was the breeding.

Wings dry, that first fairy in Phaeton's tree had wasted

no time in pumping another body part. Its manner might be feminine, but it was quite clearly masculine. They were all, quite clearly, masculine. Including the second fairy, who joined the first on his tree limb. And, right in broad daylight, began playing with him.

Citizens were scandalised. Mothers covered children's eyes, dragged them away from the obscenity. *How dare they! In our trees!* Phaeton, though, had drawn closer to his window. It was the closest he'd come to any action in some time. He was pretty sure his fairy saw him. And that his look said *want to join?*

The fairies were joined by more every day, their numbers increasing exponentially until there was a colourful colony swarming above the City. Wherever they were found gathering, the Constabulary would threaten to arrest them. But those bug-boys just laughed, buzzed off: no one would spoil their fabulousness.

The Councillors decreed there must be no more *homometaboly*: no more of their men must become fairies. Men should stay home: cook, care for children, go out once a week to do the shopping. But still the City must keep moving, so women took over everything. And everything became, some argued, better run.

A young single man, the novelty of self-isolation had soon worn thin for Phaeton. It might be okay if you had someone at home, but he's not had human contact in he forgets how long. No sensation unplanned from another's hand. Just his own, up and down. He's scoured the worldwide-window for stimulation. Then scoured it again. That self-pleasuring—according to expert opinion—boosts the immune system is small consolation for boredom. His depression digs in.

That night he dreams he's out in the open and she's pushing him. *Go on!* He's on a bike wobbling into a green unknown. *Peddle or you'll fall!* He peddles, still falls. The ground gives beneath him. Down and down. He can't stop his feet or wheels turning. His brakes aren't working or no one has shown him how to use them and he's about to hit the ditch at the bottom, screaming

and screaming with no sound... When he wakes with her still clear in his ear. *Useless, you are. Can't ride a bike without stabilisers.*

He can't get back to sleep then, starts pacing. Around and around his apartment, thinking. *If I don't do something soon then...* Until his window-on-the-world lightens. And there he is, as every morning—the fairy—looking like he's been up all night partying. Spotting Phaeton, he starts waving. And for the first time, Phaeton waves back at him. He decides it's time to go shopping.

'Hey handsome,' the fairy calls down as—with gloved hands—Phaeton locks the door behind him. 'Come up and see me some time,' the fairy is calling as—bags in hand—Phaeton opens it again. And it's tempting—even when shopping they can have no interaction—to pull off the mask and chat back at him. But it wouldn't do for other men to see such a thing. They'd be at their windows, watching.

Back before his worldwide-window, one view leads to another and Phaeton explores some of the more remote theories out there. *They're getting it deliberately! Having pupation-parties! Fairies sow their seed in men and then it eats away at them!* These fancies seem far-fetched to Phaeton, but experts remain uncertain how the contagion keeps on spreading.

That night he dreams he's cycling again. Down and down. About to hit bottom, he lifts his hands from handlebars to eyes and instead of crashing, flies. Looking down, he sees his bike ditched on the ground, his mum pointing up at him. *I knew it! He's one of them!*

He wakes, sheets messy. It's dawn already. He looks out the window for his fairy. Gone. *Probably breeding,* thinks Phaeton. But next day he's not there again. *Probably dead then.* They never lived long. Their cadavers could be seen all over town. But never littered long: the women had organised an incineration team. Paper-thin, they went up in seconds.

In the absence of his fairy, Phaeton is even more

lonely, seeks company through his worldwide-window. He gets talking to a vellum-skinned gentleman who invites him to a party he's planning. 'What sort of a party?' asks Phaeton.

'Have you heard of pupation?'

Phaeton declines. *It is true then.* But it eats at his mind. Does he want to live a caterpillar, sequestered in a glass jar? Or does he want to join the bug-boys, die a butterfly? He's changing his mind about changing his body. Imagines skin papering, wings pullulating. And it's so good to become something other than this present reduction, to be unlocked again.

He opens his worldwide-window, closes it, opens it up. Drafts a message, deletes it, redrafts. As soon as he sends it, he's regretful, can barely contain his arousal. The man gets back with details.

In the days following, Phaeton is still thinking *I might, I might not.* But on Saturday night, masked and gloved, he leaves his apartment after dark. Hurries into the City Cab that pulls up.

It isn't a cab, of course: male citizens found using transportation for anything other than essential expeditions are fined, imprisoned. It's a fake, driver in on it. 'Alright, mate.' His windows are blacked. 'Your blindfold's on the seat.' The inhibition of vision had been a condition of acceptance: the host also had to protect himself from repercussions. 'The mask and gloves can go, though – won't need them where you're heading.' Another stipulation had been the underwear he sits sweating in—for what seems the longest time—nothing but a long winter coat to cover them. 'You have reached your destination.' The anticipation is almost overwhelming as he's led into the warm spring evening.

As he hears the door closing, blindfold and coat are removed from him. The first thing he sees is the candelabra burning, flames downlighting the gathering. To be in the same space as other men again, to be breathing the same oxygen is exhilarating. Some

guys have complexions already papering. Some are still moist-skinned, like Phaeton: nervously nodding, uncertain what's coming, enjoying the camaraderie of transgression. Everyone is drinking. The host explains, 'It's nectar.' More parched in the flesh than he'd appeared window-viewed, he is the heaviest drinker.

Phaeton has never tasted anything like it. So sweet he can but sip, with a floral finish. As it starts to take effect, his senses get louder. Background music blooms to the fore. He becomes aware of his own odour. And that of the others. Everyone wears only underwear. Everyone is on the dancefloor. He joins them there, has no cares: the present is all that matters. Just to be there with the others, who are not others: they're all in this together. He is in them, and they in him. None of them end, none begin.

Then a ripple spreads among them: *the fairies are coming*. Phaeton and the fresh-skins are at centre of its circle and open. The candles are burning above them; wings are fluttering. Soon they would be as butterflies.

And soon they would die.

Take Hold

Polis Loizou

The part of him I know best is the back of his head. When we're in bed and I'm the one spooning him, even though he's taller, bigger, and I long to be warmed against his chest. Instead I gaze at his nape. The thick hair climbing up it like a flame. I put my fingers in it. I feel his skull but I can never get inside. His paralysed body is tense, in a state of fight-or-flight, even in sleep. Every once in a while he makes little whining noises. Sometimes he says 'no', or 'the man'.

'What man?' I whisper, but he only trembles.

And after I've finally drifted off, he'll sit up, holding the blue sheets to him, ears pricked like a dog's. As if he's heard an intruder. But he doesn't go to check. He does no more than turn his head towards me. Just enough for me to see his fear.

He does this in the day as well. In the kitchen, peeling carrots, chopping mushrooms. As the sauce bubbles in the pan he'll hear something beyond it, sense something other than the heat of the hob, and turn to the window. I look, expecting a man to be standing there. Like in the movies he watches. Look up to see a dead face, a ragged bit of fleshy bunting. A ghost in the bathroom mirror as you wipe it with your palm. But of course there's only trees, and the courtyard of our halls. We're two floors up, nobody could be in the window.

If I ask him what's wrong he looks caught, then smiles. 'Nothing.'

'Did you hear something?'

'No...?'

Why would he be afraid? What of? Man like him, rack of meat. With his muscles from the rowing team, with his height, so tall he ducks his head no matter how big the door. Besides, he gorges on those films. Horror from the '80s, man's stomach turned to VCR, heads exploding. 1970s, gaudy blood and subtitles, rivulets over lesbian tits. Black-and-white slow-moving zombies. Frantic modern ones. He streams them, buys them, hunts them down from private sellers. Schlock, cult, classic, night after night, eyes glued to the screen. I don't like them, they're either stupid or creepy or boring, but I want to be sitting there with him. My head on his lap, his heavy arm on my nothing frame. I look up and watch the underside of his chin as he chews. The marks where he's cut himself shaving. My handsome man.

And yet he never takes a photo. Not a single selfie, as far as I know. On the rare occasion I've pulled him into one, over brunch, on the canal, beneath an oak in Forest Fields, he's ruined it by moving as I click. All I'm left with is me, toothy-happy, and him a blur of skin and mouth.

'Oh well,' he says, and adjusts his baseball cap. 'At least you look good.'

Me, me.

The pictures I take, my lonely selfies, my body on 'its journey'. Me at the gym lifting puny weights, vest hanging where others' stretch. The DMs I get, middle-aged men who speak in filth emoji. They want me to call them Daddy. And when my handsome man's head is turned, I send them what they want. They send me theirs, though I never ask or want or like them. We're exposed in our exchange, these perfect strangers and I. For a moment there's a thrill, and then a sadness. My handsome man, his golden head turned. How full and empty he is at once; a woods, an abandoned building.

Back when we were new, I asked him outright: 'Do you believe in souls?'

'That isn't very scientific,' was his response. But he grinned.

'And is that all we are? Bodies?'

'What else?'

And his eyes emitted a different light as he finished his pint. He didn't hold my gaze. I remembered that he had no friends – at least, none I'd seen him with – so I thought nothing of it. Big shy man. But time's gone by and nothing's changed. He looks at me for a couple of seconds and then, as if he's already stepped too far, he turns away. Those eyes, whose light should cover me, should cover everyone, recede into the shadow of his baseball cap.

I could hardly believe he was interested in me. He didn't balk at my hand on his arm, and I'd thought myself lucky. We'd all guessed him to be straight. But one of the good straights. The allies. The gentlemen. And what a gentle man, blushing at the drunk girls trying to snog him in clubs. Saying *Cheers, love* to the older cashiers.

These days I think: is he even gay?

It's me, it's me. I've hijacked him. Caught him in my trap, to use against his will. He won't even look at my body. I don't lift the weights he lifts, I don't run the Ks he runs.

I repulse myself. Methodically. I'll face a mirror and curl a thumb and index finger round my wrist. I'll wipe my ribs and collarbone as if to expose a horror behind the mist in glass. *Twink*, I hear in my head. *Skinny bitch*. I look around but there's no-one there. The hairs on my neck stand on end, as if a bigger man is breathing on them.

And I laugh at myself, because I want the cliché. I want to be the submissive one, the bottom. I want him to take control and be the toxic masc one, huge and warm and covering me. I want him to be the cool boys at school, shirts open in the breeze, kicking footballs in the sun, like them, their energy, their swinging manliness, but wanting me, wanting me bent over a kitchen counter instead of over the toilet bowl, holding my head down, calling me names, punching my guts.

But he's a child. A boy swapped with a man, running frightened and alone inside that mansion of flesh.

'Do you believe in ghosts?' I asked him, as the credits rolled on some Netflix trash.

'Ghosts aren't real,' he said.

But it was the way he said it that I think about: as if it was a quote. The way he says he loves me.

He'll never tell me what it is. Whoever he's looking for, listening for. He just carries on looking, over his shoulder, to the window, behind the cars, through the trees, in any reflective surface.

In bed at night he tells only his dreaming mind, and whimpers. He's dead asleep and I'm wide awake. Watching. I hold his trembling body and wonder if he'll sleepwalk, or lash out, strangle me, wet himself, fall down the stairwell. I hold him to— what? Keep it in? Keep in his fear, his sadness, his ache? What good does hugging do? How can he feel secure when I'm afraid? When he doesn't feel safe even with me?

I move slowly, quietly. I take my phone from my

bedside table. I switch to the front-facing camera, for selfies, and I hold it in front of his face. My breath cuts out. My heartbeat flatlines. Trembling, my fingers click. I can't put the flash on. The light will wake him, he'll get mad and he'll finally leave me.

Maybe I should. Maybe he should. Scare him the fuck away. Scare me the fuck to earth.

Of course the photo comes out black. Nothing but a host of shadow pixels, the depth of the darkness. I can't look into it too long, or I'll freak myself out. Then where will I be?

A Video Call for Eels

Ruby Martin

I think of you
Buried in sand, slowly forgetting who we are

The aquarium asked us to call
How do you call a group of eels
Do you ask an eel how its day went or how an eel feels

I could tell you how my day was
How I baked bread and by bread
I mean a rock hard enough to knock you dead

I could tell you that
I am still using my language learning app everyday
But solely for the handsome man who pops out to say
"I'm single" or do you fancy a drink
I am still not fluent in French though
Or better yet, gone for that drink
Ah bon? Mais oui, je suis très, **très celibataire**

I could tell you that
I am still doing the Joe Wicks workout
But solely for the handsome man on a beautiful American beach
Who makes me feel like I'm somewhere else
Someone else

I could tell you that
I sit in my bed and listen to the wind through the trees
And capture fragments of stories
People tell when no one else is listening

Where dogs go on adventures and your mother warns you against
drinking in the street

Oh! What a treat
To be in your world, not mine
Just for a moment until you float away again and I am once again confined

I think of you in your glass cages
Slowly forgetting who we are somehow

I didn't get why eels would need a video call
but I do now

Am I the Asshole?

Ruby Martin

My (27F) not quite boyfriend (29M) is acting weird.

It started with a toothbrush.

We have only been going out for a couple of weeks, but the other day I noticed my electric toothbrush kept dying on me. This kept happening and I'll be honest, it's leaving me in a real state of dental hygiene blue balls. He wouldn't admit he was using it until I rightly pointed out the beard hair I had found on the brush to which he said to "stop being anal unless it was in the fun way".

A couple of weeks in, he basically treats my flat as if it is his, and has somehow managed to fill it up with all his stuff. He keeps trying to initiate sex but I don't think we're quite ready for that, especially as he keeps saying he wants to "finally inhabit me". I at first thought this was gross but am worried maybe I'm the one being too frigid?

He also insists on cooking all the time, but puts his weird seasoning on everything, which just gives me diarrhoea. I wouldn't mind if it was in any way reciprocal (not the diarrhoea) but he never lets me stay around his – in fact, I'm not even sure he has an apartment at this point. Let me get this straight, I have no problems if he is homeless, I just wish he would tell me.

However something feels off.

The final straw was once when I came home early, I thought I could hear him talking to somebody so I snuck upstairs. He seemed to be in the bathroom talking to someone but I could see his mobile was still on the bed. The door was open just a crack and I saw him looking into the mirror. It seems like he was talking to himself but he was putting on weird voices. I couldn't make out all of what he was saying but I heard snippets:

“There’s no point in waiting”

“You must claim her flesh”

“It is time for the great Body Sn-!”

“All Hail Great Lord Zeepus”

Not sure what it means but I think I also saw his eyes change colour like one of those cheap disco balls you get. I’m probably wrong but what do you think I should do? I really like him but should I break it off? Or see if I can make it work?

Yours truly,

Lost in Space

AN UPDATE

Hey everyone, it’s me, the F27 with the weird boyfriend who used all my stuff and spoke in voices with the disco lights coming out of his eyes. Now I read a lot of your comments and I appreciate all your advice, although I must say you love caps lock that’s for sure. Now I didn’t dump him or call the police like a lot of you said, but I figured I’d try to at least talk to him about it.

Now, I started by just saying we should establish boundaries and spend less time together, to which he replied:

“I can’t believe I’ve put in this much time for you to reject me! Normally the slow and steady approach always works for the engulfing!”

I told him he had a very funny idea of slow and steady, and that I wasn’t going to be engulfed by just any man who turns up, whatever that meant. I presumed it was a metaphor for moving in, but after that he just screamed “fuck it” and “prepare for your flesh vessel to be consumed for the great lord Zeepus”. He dived in for my face, which, let’s be honest, is very inappropriate. You can’t just scream at your girlfriend and expect a kiss straight after. However he did reach for my throat, which may have been some sort of kink thing in retrospect, but I panicked and went for the pair of craft scissors I keep in my bag (after all you never know when you’ll have a sewing emergency!) and maybe... stabbed him a little bit.

Now I don’t condone violence and obviously don’t want to take stabbing

men as a hobby. Most men I've met are perfectly lovely and generally don't warrant a stabbing. On the other hand, this particular stabbing did him a favour. I pulled the scissors out whilst we were both screaming, but instead of the usual blood, a weird neon worm flew out of him. I think it tried to say something to me but in the sheer panic I stomped it into the ground until there was nothing left but a neon stain on the carpet.

It does turn out that the neon worm was also stopping the blood escaping so we did have to call an ambulance. He was okay, although he had no memory of what happened or even who I was. We talked a bit in the ambulance but I'm going to be completely honest here.

I'm not sure I'm into him anymore.

Turns out we had far less in common than I thought. There wasn't anything *that wrong* with his personality when he had the weird worm thing, he just didn't understand boundaries. I did have a nice chat with the paramedic in the ambulance though and we're going for dinner this Friday.

Wish me luck guys!

Unfashioned Creatures

Shehrazade Zafar-Arif

You need a hobby, her brother said.

The night they'd announced the lockdown, before all the pubs and restaurants shut, the two of them had gone to their local, which was cheerfully, irreverently packed. Guiltily, they had a pint each, and joked about how this was probably their last chance.

The next day, silence descended on the city, so that she could hear the birds every morning when she woke up, chirping defiantly in the absence of traffic and children playing and crowds rushing into the station.

They lived in a council estate overlooking a park, and usually when she stepped out onto the shared terrace to have her morning coffee, the bustle of civilisation would greet her like a glaring reminder that humanity persisted. These days, the terrace was empty, except for the grocery bags left outside doors. Soon it would become normal, and her neighbours would emerge, masked and bored, and it would feel like nothing had changed at all.

The days bled into each other, until it stopped being a seven-day week and became a one hundred and sixty eight hour day, punctuated by dutiful intervals for sleep and sporadically spaced meals.

She started waking up convinced she was hot and feverish, or that her chest was tight with the beginnings of an infection. But her temperature was normal and

she would feel relief, and then disappointment, because it seemed like anything would be better than this droning monotony with only her thoughts for company, and then guilt.

She had been let go from her waitressing job, but her brother was still working and could support them both. He was a computer programmer and spent all day in his room, coding and playing video games and smoking weed, leaving her alone. He had always been content with his lot in life, her brother, unbothered by the restlessness that seeped through her like a fever.

"You need a hobby," he told her, when he found her in front of the TV with bleary eyes, watching the death toll rise with a mix of dread and anticipation, like a countdown clock in reverse.

Hobbies were for people with the capacity and self-discipline to commit to something. She could scarcely finish a book. Meditation made her sleepy and baking made her anxious. The only thing she seemed good for was scrolling aimlessly through social media, living vicariously through other people's witticisms and achievements and quirky quarantine stories: a perfect row of cupcakes, a draft of a novel completed.

It was a Facebook ad that caught her eye, a discount on knitting materials during the quarantine. *Stay home with me - and knit*, the chirpy caption read.

When she ordered the knitting needles and set of yarn, her brother laughed and said she was turning into a crazy cat lady.

She had never really been good at anything. It took her several days to get the hang of knitting, but once she did, it seemed to come naturally. The rest of the world faded into a comfortingly meaningless blur as all her focus narrowed down to the click of needle over needle and the loop of yarn. An endless, perfect rhythm. She could look up and find that an hour had passed or that the sun had gone down while she was knitting, and yet she wouldn't feel that anxious flutter in her chest that she was somehow wasting time. Because at the end of it she would hold in her hands something tangible and real.

She started out making scarves. Scarves were easy - they flowed like colourful waterfalls from her needles, pinks and greys and reds, purples and blues and whites dancing under her fingers. She was surprised and delighted. They were beautiful, and *she* had made them. It was the closest thing to magic she could fathom, pure creation spinning from her fingertips. She understood now why witches in old stories were always weaving on a loom or stitching beautiful maidens' lips shut.

She presented her brother with a scarf on his birthday, which they celebrated with a Colin the Caterpillar cake and a bottle of gin. He was bemused but pleased. She had thought of him while knitting it, blending in grey for the ash he dropped from his cigarette while he was deep in thought and electric blue for the garish sunglasses he wore when he went out to pick up from the dealers, dutifully in masks, hanging around outside the station.

"Damn, you're actually decent," he said. "Maybe we could make some money off this, eh?"

She moved onto hats next, and marvelled at the shapes that came to life in her hands. Next were socks and gloves, first misshapen and mutated, then perfect in their symmetry. She discarded the ugly ones, but then

felt sorry for them and rushed downstairs to retrieve them from the bin where they sat despondent, crying out for their mother.

She wasn't sure when the voices had started. She sometimes spoke to herself as she knitted, a way to fill up the silence. When they'd started answering back, she was more relieved than afraid. It had been so long since she'd heard another voice besides her brother's. She went out less and less. The outside world felt too big and unprotected compared to the solid, box-like security of their walls. Sometimes she forgot it still existed.

Soon a kingdom of knitwear surrounded her: graceful scarves and bobbing hats and crawling gloves and a sad lumpy sweater and a perfect throw blanket. But she was growing bored of them. They felt unreal and lacking.

She watched YouTube tutorials and knitted herself a little cat out of grey yarn. She gave it a pink nose and lopsided black eyes and even whiskers on one side of its face before she gave up. It took half the night and finally she collapsed into an exhausted sleep.

"Jesus, where have you been?" her brother asked offhandedly, as she stumbled into the kitchen where he was burning toast. "What is *that*?"

She looked down and saw the cat by her ankle - but she hadn't carried it out. It had the right shape and movement for a cat, but there was a ragged quality to its fur, and the lopsided eyes were unblinking and sightless.

"Is that a cat?" Her brother sounded almost afraid. Could he see it moving too?

She picked it up and it purred in her arms. Its purr sounded like static on the radio.

The cat followed her around persistently, pawing at the bathroom door when she was showering, and meowing pitifully to wake her up each morning. She wasn't sure what it wanted. It couldn't eat and when she threw

a ball of yarn for it, it just stared at her blankly, as though it wasn't quite sure how to be a cat.

In the end, she knitted companions for it - a rabbit with drooping ears, a mouse that could barely walk, a bear that growled feebly. That seemed to satisfy it. Perhaps it had just been lonely.

Her brother knocked at her door one night and found her on the floor, surrounded by waves of coloured yarn like a mermaid perched on a rock on the open sea.

He hesitated in the doorway, taking in the mess of the room, and the knitted animals hobbling unsteadily between the makeshift city of wool. "Are you okay?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" she asked, her eyes fixed on the flicking motion of her needles.

"I just - haven't seen you in a while. Why don't you come downstairs and we can watch TV? Classic *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* is on."

She considered for a moment. Her animals looked at her pleadingly, but she did miss her brother. "Okay."

She got up, and the yarn clung to her clothes, loose threads roping around her wrists like colourful vines, catching in the holes of her jumper, tangling in her hair. She followed him downstairs, the colours trailing behind her like tentacles, and he kept throwing nervous looks behind him, as if making sure she was still there.

They settled down in front of the TV, and as Chris Tarrant began flirting with a female contestant, she picked up her needles. Her hands felt strange without them.

"I'm worried about you," her brother said gruffly.

"I'm fine," she said blankly. She had never been better, in fact. Didn't he see she was happy? No, she supposed they hadn't seen each other in a while. He almost looked like a stranger to her, his features fuzzy and faded like the cat's. Or maybe she had forgotten what people looked

like. She didn't watch the news anymore. Reality had become a dull background hum.

"Post-corona advertising," he joked, as an advert came on, showing a family attempting to cook together over Zoom.

She didn't laugh, feeling suddenly sick with nervousness at his presence. She made an excuse and left as soon as she could, sinking back into the safety of her room.

But soon, the old familiar loneliness returned, beating underneath her skin like a living thing. The knitted animals began to look garish and artificial, like parodies of living things. She wanted more. She wanted something living and real that would love her, something that would fill the gnawing hole that loneliness had carved within her soul.

The neighbour's baby woke her with its crying one night and for a few minutes she lay there listening, her heart beating in tandem with its wails, comforted by the distant sweet sound. As she spilled back into sleep, she convinced herself that it was her baby, calling out for the mother that was its sole source of comfort. When she woke, it was with an ache.

She didn't need a pattern for this. She knitted its small, round body, and the little face, and a mouth open in a silent wail. She went to sleep with the baby curled in her arms, and sure enough, woke the next morning to a mewling cry.

Her brother pounded on her door. "What's that sound?"

She ignored him. The baby kept crying. She had created it to be constantly crying, to always be needing her. She cradled it to her breast. It was cold. Cold and unloving and craving love.

They followed her around, an army of knitted creations, barricading her in her room behind a wall of yarn, crawling into the bath with her and drowning themselves. Her fingers were stiff and aching with the

effort of knitting more and more of them, but now she found herself disgusted with her creations. They would suffocate her, and no one would come when she called for help, because the world was empty now.

Dreamily, she made her way around her room, pouring gasoline over the writhing, whimpering creatures, leaving a trail of it around her room. Then she lit a match and flung it into her kingdom.

She stood outside her door, listening to the flames crackling, to the cries that rose up from within. They were begging her to save them, wailing in pain as threads were unravelled and wool was eaten away. The baby's screams were loudest of all.

The fire alarm began shrieking. Her brother's door burst open.

"Is that a fire? Get back -"

He was dragging her away, his phone held to his ear. The howls beat inside her head like a second heartbeat. She had created them. Her children were dying.

She tore free of him. The doorknob burned her hand, a blaze that shot straight to her heart like an accusation. She screamed, but her brother was stronger and he half-carried her out the door, swearing as she kicked and struggled.

They stood outside under a sky that was bright and clear and free of pollution, neighbours poking their heads out of windows to exclaim and stare. She could see the fire dancing in her bedroom window, hear the screams of her creations mixing with the hiss of flames. A fire engine siren wailed in the background. Her brother's grip was tight on her arm, as if he was afraid she would run back in and commit herself to burning with them.

The next morning, the government announced an extension to the lockdown.

Bios

Carola Huttmann *She/Her*

The Escape

Carola Huttmann is a writer and book reviewer. Her creative inspiration is drawn from the richness of stories, history and traditions which imbue the Orkney Islands with their vibrancy and charm. They have been her home since 1995.

🐦 @CarolaHuttmann

🌐 carolahuttmann.blogspot.com

Cleo Henry *She/Her*

Fathoms Five

Cleo Henry is a writer and researcher based in London. She is particularly interested in queerness, radical kinship and the apocalypse. She has been published by Burning House Press, Angry Old Man Magazine and Otoliths.

🐦 @CleoHenry19

📧 @cleo.p.henry

Dior J. Stephens *He/Him*

Juniper Helicopter

Dior J. Stephens is a pure pisces and, occasionally, a poet. He is the author of *oo1*, and *CANNON!*, both with Ghost City Press.

🐦 @dolphinneptune

📧 dolphinphotos

Ellie Cooper *She/Her*

Reflections of a Lady in Corona Time

Ellie Cooper is a native Texan who lives and writes short stories in Austin. Ellie has been published in the Rio Review, Mused Literary, 2 Elizabeths and the Devil's Press 2019 Halloween Anthology.

Farah Halime Hope *She/Her*

Bambi

Farah Halime Hope is a British Palestinian fiction writer working on her first novel. Previously, she was a foreign correspondent in New York and the Middle East reporting for the Financial Times and New York Times.

Jade Mitchell *She/Her*

Notes on Working from Home

Jade Mitchell is a poet and performer based in Glasgow, and an assistant editor for Up The Staircase Quarterly. She earned her BA in Creative Writing, Journalism and English at the University of Strathclyde, and has featured in numerous literary magazines, including Inside The Bell Jar and Beech Street Review.

📧 /jmitchellpoetry

🐦 @mitchelljade

📧 @jmitchellpoetry

Jasmin Perry *She/Her*

Purple Velvet Scrunchie

Jasmin is from Weston-super-Mare and recently completed her Creative Writing MA at Bath Spa University. She was listed as one of Rife Magazine's 24 Most Influential Bristolians Under 24 in 2019 after starting Weston Writers Nights and was published in the RSPB Back from the Brink anthology.

Jeffrey Zable *He/Him*

The Search

Jeffrey Zable is a teacher, writer, and conga drummer/percussionist who plays Afro-Cuban folkloric music for dance classes and Rumbas. He's published poetry, fiction, and non-fiction in small press magazines and anthologies.

Juanita Rey *She/Her*

My Childhood

Juanita Rey is a Dominican poet who has been in the USA for five years. Her work has been published in Pennsylvania English, Opiate Journal, Petrichor Machine and Porter Gulch Review.

Judy Upton *She/Her*

Signed, Sealed, Delivered

Judy is an award-winning, working-class writer with plays produced by the Royal Court, Birmingham Rep, BBC Radio 4 etc. Her novella *Maisie & Mrs Webster* is published by W&N.

🌐 judy.ukwriters.net

JY Saville *She/Her*

Twelve Week's Rest

JY Saville lives and writes in northern England, and made it onto the first stage of the Penguin Random House WriteNow scheme in 2017.

🐦 @JYSaville

🌐 thousandmonkeys.wordpress.com

Nathan Evans *He/Him*

Fairy Tale

Nathan is a writer, director & performer whose work in film/theatre has been funded by the Arts Council, toured by the British Council, archived by the British Film Institute and broadcast on Channel 4. His first poetry collection was long-listed for the Polari First Book Prize; his second is published by Inkandescent. This is his first published short story.

🐦 @nathanevansarts

📷 @nathanevansarts

Nick Maynard *He/Him*

I Remember / Do You See Me?

Nick was born and brought up in the North of England and originally trained as an actor at Manchester Met. before becoming a writer.

🌐 nickmaynarduk.wordpress.com

Nikki Dudley *She/Her*

Erode With Me

Nikki Dudley is managing editor of streetcake magazine and also runs the streetcake prize. She is the leader of the MumWrite programme. She has published a novel and a collection out with Knives Forks and Spoons.

🐦 @nikkidudley20

🌐 nikkidudleywriter.com

Oluwatayo Adewole *They/He*

Painted White

Tayo is a writer, poet and frequent nerd from London. They're interested in how art interacts with and challenges society.

🐦 @naijaprince21

📷 @tayowrites

Polis Loizou *He/Him*

Take Hold

Polis Loizou is a multidisciplinary storyteller who draws on history, social politics, folklore and 'queerness' in all its forms. His debut novel, *Disbanded Kingdom*, was published in 2018 and was long-listed for the Polari First Book Prize.

🐦 @PolisLoizou

📷 @polistakespics

Ruby Martin *She/Her*

A Video Call for Eels / Am I the Arsehole?

Ruby Martin is a writer, storyteller and comedian with a penchant for the surreal. Think the Mighty Boosh meets Jane Austen and other acts of literary sacrilege.

🐦 @rubytallahart

📷 @rubymartinart

Shehrazade Zafar-Arif *She/Her*

Unfashioned Creatures

Shehrazade is an aspiring writer who grew up in Karachi, Pakistan and moved to London to study English Literature and Shakespeare Studies. She has previously written for Urban Times, the King's Alumni Blog, and the British Council Voices magazine.

🐦 @ShehrazadeZafar

🌐 clippings.me/szafar

Yuan Changming *He/Him*

Woman-Radical: Feminist Lesson/Tradition in Chinese Characters / To Be [Or Not to Be

Yuan Changming edits Poetry Pacific with Allen Yuan in Vancouver. Credits include ten Pushcart nominations, Jodi Stutz Award in Poetry & publications in Best of the Best Canadian Poetry (2008-17) & BestNewPoemsOnline, among 1,689 others worldwide.

🌐 poetrypacific.blogspot.ca

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VOICES
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