

UNTITLED

issue one
volume one

VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES

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

VOICES

Poetry

Ali Prince	
Keep Your Dragon Low	5
Connor Orrico	
Good Vs Typical	8
Outside of Time	8
Dale Booton	
Blood	9
Erica Gillingham	
Let's Make a Baby	10
The Receiver	11
Jade Mutyora	
Essential	12
Jaqi Loye-Brown	
One Way Ticket to Lockdown	14
Laura Pearson	
Boob and Reality Check	16
Face Masks	17
Olivia Toh	
Superwoman	18
Robert Beveridge	
Alveolus	20
Echo	20

Prose

Andrew Kaye	
The Unreason of Wanting Constant Recognition (and Listening to Demis Roussos)	22
Gareth Johnson	
Emails to My Sister	25
Jonathan Pizarro	
La Frontera	29
Juliano Zaffino	
Everything Encroaching	32
Rajan Sharma	
Coronologue	35
Ramya Jegatheesan	
Words, Words, Words	37
Rhiddi Joshi	
Boredom in Lockdown... Alas! It is for the Rich	40
Shani Akilah	
Love in a Time of Corona	42
Taffi Nyawanza	
The 7 Stages of a Pandemic	45
Tallulah Harvey	
The Hayward	49
Thea Buen	
My Brother and Me	53

Bios

Writers' Information	54
----------------------	----

VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES

Poetry

Keep Your Dragon Low

Ali Prince

Avatar of metal or Jack Nicholson, truth must get out there! Ad homonym Strawman.

Emotions, outrage “called out” “pushed back” The “woke brigade” in the kitchen cabinet

“The snowflake parade” bugle blowing convoy. Here they come. Two sides of the same coin

Old left hate New left, Miranda and Susan flounced past you at Uni, you can’t forgive them

Irrational rage rages, all over the pages, IQ tests, science, intelligence gages.

My facts don’t care about feelings, embalm me, let’s build an online intellectual army

Of gym bags, a serious dark podcast mission and bath products, beard oil and high definition

Repopulate earth with black T-shirts of reason, blessed with the talent of pointing out treason

“The same people who say school dinners should be free, are the same ones paying for dinner themselves, see?!”

Opinion piece opined by empathy voids. Luke warm takes, taken by dull feckless droids

Michael Myers chases, with baseball cap faces

Nit-picking pin prickers with pin pricks and thin lips and dim wits with gym kits and coin bits and groin twitch

from dishwasher dull ditch and 4chan chat, bitch, bitch

Work outs, nootropics, clear-headed discussion. Paleo think tanks paid for by a Russian.

Gloves for your shoes, self-help the new churches. Because third-wave dogma destroyed your foot arches.

Graphs and statistics and data and studies equipment and rucksacks and Lycra and “buddies”.

Smart drugs and smart phones and smart water bottle smart shoes and smart gloves and smart bugs full throttle

Living your best life and life hacks for sad sacks with iMacs and bad backs not picked up an ice pick

or hack-sawed a forklift or lifted a coal sack or rescued a jackdaw or drank up a six pack

Pattern on to a memory of humour and mimic, try to sound friendly hijacking a gimmick.

If you can do even a little of that, it gives credence to all your factual FACTS.

Do pretend laughs the right place in the sentence. Punctuate facts with a brave un-repentance,

A copycat version of bland imitation of something like human, something like elation.

Desire charisma only for the LinkedIn, complete set of Lego like brown hair and inked skin.

Hat tip the people. A string to your bow, a plug-in a widget a gadget to throw,

An image a method to signal you must, have sexy danger and wild eyes of lust

Heroes on paper destroy the residuals the world would require to make individuals

And villains and bastards and felons and culprits the inflated egos screaming from the pulpits

Salivate over spit. Their lineage is safe now, view them through your babble and chit chat that's highbrow.

Frenzied and painful unconscious from red wine. Foolish and unkempt and stayed up past bedtime.

These god's creations who science could never. The reason eugenics would willingly sever

Play GTO your sad wife must be so bored If you wrote a poem, you'd even rhyme bored with board

Level of growth is a fat pampered baby. Reply to abuse with an instant gif of Bruce Lee

Rocks thrown through windows slapped faces bad choices bad apples raised voices Beethoven, James Joyces.

Screaming till death to avoid deathly drudges and bore ever irate IRRATIONAL grudges.

Those internet words expose ugly lack. Compensation for sedentary surfing and hack.

And loading with such Herculean physicality for secretarial typing banality

Skull on your mouse mat a tribute to iFears but from the SAFE SPACE the Death Rattle of Ideas.

Science and progress and trim all the might with your sharp little scissors of embittered spite.

Your interest in stem cells stems from your self-loathing imagining yourself, a sheep in wolf's clothing

A drop in a test tube in Frankenstein's thunder, brave and unusual instead of a blunder

They felt so you don't, antenna on stalks, raw wires pick up every atom, - you talk.

No rational, reason for Liz Taylor's hair, mathematic equation for spring in the air

An ava-tar on the self-service machine an over groomed shopper in hundred-pound jeans.

Injecting your arm with your internet hits from the safety valve balm of your mother's tech tits

Personality mining is online marauding a third-generation cassette recording.

Día de Muertos, our ungodly suitors. On day of the dead the dead dress as computers.

Pledge to be braver, but know that you won't

God, forgive them who know not what they don't.

Good vs. Typical

Connor Orrico

on good days it is amorphous
energizing sport bodywash,
mint zing toothpaste and corporate
abstractions like phoenix
or black eclipse deodorant
underneath hand cream
with a faint bouquet of
peach and all its purity

on a more typical day
it is the humbler scent
of stale unwashed sheets,
sharp saccharine breath
from energy drinks and
individually wrapped candies,
a transient veneer to mask
the musty smell of being human

Outside of Time

Connor Orrico

I have forgotten to exist today --
alas, tomorrow is here.

Blood

Dale Booton

rejected a dozen times by a jowly
nurse s/he taps a pen against the
filled in form says *you've had sex
in the last 3 months lovey* yes oral
only it didn't last long protected
that's still sex lovey but I've been
tested since then negative says *I'd
love for you to help us it is really
kind of you to want to do this but
they have precautions for a reason*
and I ask for the reason I ask why
I cannot give what I have plenty of
why a part of me won't sit mottled
in a canister why a larger part of
that part of me won't be taken
cooled held for a time it is needed
just as I sit and wait at home until I
am needed

Let's Make a Baby With Science

Erica Gillingham

We can't fuck our way to a family
so let's do the furthest thing possible
from the intimacy of our private bedroom.

Let's invite a dozen medical professionals
to ask us invasive questions with varying
degrees of empathy and bedside manner.

Let's test my veins, my blood, my uterus,
my textbook ovaries until we lose track
of our week-on-week appointments.

Let's find ourselves speechless after each shot,
not knowing how to respond to each other,
syringes empty, sharp's box lying at our feet.

Let's disrupt our work, creativity, social lives;
turn down invitations with flimsy excuses;
stay in at night because we've got injections.

Let's call the process a cycle, as if it's natural,
then I'll spend two weeks worrying about having
enough fluid in my bladder for the pregnancy test.

And when it doesn't work, think it should work,
we won't know why, may never know why,
then we'll do it all over again. And again. And again.

The Receiver

Erica Gillingham

On my commutes to the clinic, I imagine you
dear mother-to-be, on the station platforms,
gently linger on faces in the waiting rooms
as we may both do, involuntarily, one day

at the school gate, the public swimming pool,
dance classes, football matches, and birthdays,
looking for familiar signs in your child, or mine:
an interest in the oceans, a talent for writing.

Like us, mothers-to-be, for this process to work
you require the donation of a collection of cells
by an imperfect stranger, whose signature means
the radical possibility of a new life can begin.

I wonder, how many months have you waited
for the phone to ring? How often have you startled
out of day dream? How long have you hoped
for your body to be the house for a heartbeat?

Mother-to-be, I give you double helixes
with every intention of fulfilling your wish
for a child, who, I hope, is every bit as curious
about the long, loving story wound within you.

Essential

Jade Mutyora

do i owe you explanations
of why my body deserves air
and its space in this place
as much as yours over there?
why my tattoos
don't mean i lose
the right to see
my child who's being kept away?
shall i print a doctor's note to say
that when a loved one comes to stay with me
it's a life or death emergency?
can i show you the vice of chronic pain
the faulty synapses in my brain
the advice on pacing that means
'once a day' doesn't work for me?
must i tell you why staying home
does not equal staying safe
when he withholds food and empathy
and sprays spit on my face?
is the burning in my limbs
the flat tyre on my bike
the desperate urge to end my life
enough for you
to agree that i can be rescued?
should i turn myself inside out
expose the rawest parts of me
exhibit a b c
officer rich man nice lady
judge and jury?
i don't require your papers
for why you needed wine

or paint or candles or garden twine
and your whole family needs to be in the car
i don't need receipts
if i don't recognise who you are
because your essentials are different to mine

One Way Ticket to Lockdown

Jaqi Loye-Brown

Got a one way ticket to **Lockdown**
For the chocolate, toffee and pastel browns
It never runs out it lasts a lifetime

We've been chosen to repudiate
mankind's ugliest shame
To reconcile the guilt, in race-led humiliation

Generations officiate a blame end game
Self inflicted, indelible psyche punisher, it's insane
Don't they know we' be living the **Lockdown**

Crime crime crime crime
It's a shakedown and the p.o.c disproportionately cry
No justice! No peace!
From many an inner city, 'pon road, any street

Young minds, in schools, therein strategies found to
Exclude more **Lockdown** kids, than in the playground
The voiceless from marginalised backgrounds
Brushed off, ignored, why stem the resulting bloodshed poured

The systematic trap, is efficient, but they have just cause
When that's what mainstream media output and
movie biases have taught

Hey a lucky breakout, raise your stakes to represent **Lockdown**
With the gift of sport, in music or endeavours in Tinsel Town
Forget big ideas though when you're darker than a fake tan brown
Don't stray the outskirts of town, carries high risks of a gun down

Make no mistake, there're opportunities, for a BAME break
For grateful goodwill crumbs we succumb

Ever keep one foot on the ground
We temper freedoms imaginatively in **Lockdown**

If they only knew that we know
The spark of our light scares them at night
Secondary compulsions to **mask** our beauty, creativity, uplifting voice
Steal our show, our thunder, they continue to plunder
Intimidating - such is our glow, we know, how much we worry them so

There's been no vaccine to any degree in Centuries
Without tourniquet for this anti-black sickness, it's twisted
We never escape, we live and die still the **Lockdown** persisted

We neither grudge nor galvanise
We look on incredulous at the prejudiced unrelenting fear in the spite
Gatekeepers of the message, powered by hate
Fuels the hungry appetite of intolerance, that *bigoterie* **pandemic** ensues
and that's not fake, *not* news

Covid might shed a light on insidious inequality today,
Side eye suspicious gaze at 'other' like a disease
justified yesterday, unchecked, in standard practice every day

The **pathogen** path wreaks death, it won't change a thing
For those on pittance pay, no education, who have nothing
Those with much in life to lose
Scale back admire, revisit the privilege, at liberty to simply choose

Covid? Lockdown? Economic breakdown?
The threat outside like us, unjust, but it is feared like us with a hue
Hey, welcome to our life in **Lockdown**
Get in the queue, know that we have lived this, long, long, long before you.

Boob and Reality Check

Laura Pearson

In lockdown, my boobs started to hurt.
I went to see a doctor in a hazmat suit.
He was a man, but you could hardly tell
(because of the suit).
He checked my boobs. He pushed. Prodded around.
Looked for signs of anything malignant. Asked questions.
He was professional
and I couldn't read anything from his hidden facial expressions.
He told me I did the right thing getting them checked
but not to worry too much –
being young is one of the positives here.
Like being young is a superpower.
Twelve days later, here I am.
I am sat in a waiting room of the Breast Unit at a hospital
waiting for a scan, during lockdown.

Face Masks

Laura Pearson

Hi and thank you for your time today.

My question (and a couple of follow ups, if I may) is regarding facemasks:

Are we supposed to wear face masks?

Where can you buy face masks?

Will the government provide face masks?

How do you make face masks?

Are face masks essential to combatting Coronavirus?

Do face masks help?

Do face masks hinder?

Is the PPE crisis over yet?

I'm confused about face masks
and it would be great if you could help.

Superwoman

Olivia Toh

"Mommy I'm hungry",
A whine across the hall.
She dashes out from the kitchen
to calm the pouting toddler
with her delicate hands
dotted fresh with cooking oil burns,
worn out from every fulfillment of appetite
of her children

Despite the lockdown,
She makes sure they never starve,
And always stay nutritious;
She makes sure the household
proceeds as usual.
No wonder there are always
Hot plates of mouth-watering dishes
Ready on the dining table;
No wonder they never seem to run out
of daily essentials.

She guides her kids to study,
Ensuring they don't neglect learning.
She keeps them in company,
Ensuring they stay healthy.
She listens to their thoughts,
Rendering none excluded.
She places their needs before hers,
Without yearning for anything in return.

Stuck at home all day
While they complain of boredom,
She's on call 24/7,
No paycheck, no emolument,
Their smiles are worth it all.

They ask her if she's tired,
"No", is always her answer
They stumble upon her,
Sprawled, exhausted,
Across the bed.
Her eyes shut
as she ventures into dreamland,
Yet a frowning countenance,
And new wrinkles gained over quarantine.

This is Superwoman,
One in each household,
Serving full time in the pandemic
and untold.
Superwoman deserves a break while on call,
For she is still human after all.

Alveolus

Robert Beveridge

sometimes the difference
between a ton of feathers
and a ton of lead is solely
the capacity of your lungs

Echo

Robert Beveridge

I
have called
her name

I
have answered

VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES

Prose

The Unreason of Wanting Constant Recognition (and Listening to Demis Roussos)

Andrew Kaye

Lying on a stone bench close to the cove, I squint as I struggle to follow the path of the birds. Somewhere beyond my mosquito-bitten and smelly feet is the Mediterranean coast, which at times smells of iodine and in recent days, charcoal.

It's a pleasant perspective, lying like this, although I have to arch my body and place my crossed hands behind my lower back to protect it from the flintiest edge. The birds' wings span the available horizon which like them is narrowed as I stare upwards and not for a second to the left or right. Sun cream mixes with tears in my eyes - not tears that flow; they're the tears that scream for an outlet but don't find one. It's May 4th 2020. I've had another argument, and what the fuck have I achieved in this period, other than to build new reserves of brittleness, new reservoirs of resentment?

As ever, I like to mark neat anniversaries. I never let one go to waste, even if it's just to curse myself. Today marks five years since I was in Rome, battling a fire at Rome airport - not literally, you understand. There was a fire. Fortunately, it didn't seem too serious. I was battling, if I can dramatize the event like this, because I'd booked the holiday close to the departure date, and a General Election had been called in the meantime. I was desperate not to be delayed and miss out casting my vote.

Ever a politics obsessive and determined to see the coalition government turfed out of power, my flight was delayed - badly. By the time I departed Rome Fiumicino

airport, I only had a matter of hours to land at Gatwick, whizz across London and cast - as I grandiosely framed it - my 'decisive' vote to get rid of the Tories.

I made it just in time, panting while my pants fell down. I flagged down a woman piling up chairs the polling station set aside for those people they call 'tellers' (the ones who sit languorously outside and nosily ask who you voted for). I voted for then Labour Leader, Ed Miliband: the awkward younger brother of more statesmanlike, but still awkward, David Miliband.

And what good did my vote do, other than to convince me we were about to embark on five years of unsatisfactory and deeply unpleasant politics and that I was on the wrong side of history? I was prepared for an all-nighter with cans of cola and three bags of sickly *Haribo*. David Dimbleby, the stalwart BBC television host of all election night broadcasts read out the projected result: the election result from hell flashed on to our screens at ten pm. It was as though the psephology experts had all snorted a line of coke. Perhaps they were all afflicted by an addiction to hard drugs. I reflected - 'did they really just project a majority government for bloody David Cameron?' I repeated the question aloud and then repeatedly posed it to my friend Rayshum in capitalized text messages. In the space of fifteen minutes, I'd unlocked my front door, settled down on my flea-ridden sofa in front of the telly, pressed the remote, released a half-stone's body weight - and learnt Britain was on the road to ruin. I think I sweated more

hearing we'd have to tolerate five more years of Michael Gove in power than the sweat I perspired on the dash back from Gatwick airport.

Sticking with anniversaries for now, twenty-five years ago this evening, I was an awkward 13-year old with a hunchback and an addiction of my own: the need for constant recognition. I don't mean validation that I was good looking, or anything like that. I wasn't. No, I wanted to be recognized for my intellect, as compensation for my hunchbacked and inadequate adolescent appearance. It was an addiction no less potent then than it is today. The difference? I've done years of work on myself and have a self-awareness and a language to explain this addiction of recognition, which makes the lingering problem all the more contemptible now that it drains me of energy today.

I visualize it and can draw mental maps of its journeys through the channels of my arteries, heart and brain. If I wanted to enter the Turner Prize, I could create a visual representation of it; perhaps a rusty carapace would suffice, consisting only of abandoned tuna cans. On other days, it has coils, or it curdles like ageing milk, this addiction of mine. It is unreason itself.

I was stepping up to the assembly hall stage to shake Anthony Giddens' hand. He was Tony Blair's favourite political philosopher (or to be more precise and rather more prosaic, for this is Blair we are talking about, his favourite sociologist). In keeping with the politics of that mid-1990s era and how tepid the political climate was, his key theory was inoffensive, propagating a 'Third Way': a compromise between Thatcher's market economics and something like Attlee's welfare state.

Anthony Giddens – I believe he's been knighted since – awarded me the bursary for Geography. *Geography*, of all things. Maybe that awoke my interest in foreign travel, or maybe I managed to get more excited than everyone else in Year 8 when Miss Tsang set us a project to graphically illustrate Tuscany and the north-south divide in Italy – all through the medium of fine art. I devised a peculiar project based on the characters

Del Boy and Rodney, from BBC sitcom, *Only Fools and Horses*. Bear in mind I attended a poncey single-sex grammar school, Queen Elizabeth Boys in High Barnet. Projects like this were positively praised.

I executed it well, much to Miss Tsang's unknowable approval (she barked at students and was never known to smile, other than when meting out punishments). It was a total surprise when the bursary awards were read out one Assembly. Fingers crossed, I was hoping to win the award for History, my preferred subject and the one I swotted up in class, to moustached Mr Oulton. When someone else was awarded that prize, I felt the silent pang of envy no one ever knew I was capable of, so quiet and seemingly innocent I was sat in my oversized blazer, sporting a ridiculous fringe.

I won what seemed very much like the consolation prize. Winning a bursary for Geography, for being able to tell one's contours from capital cities, felt as validating as being told my hunchbacked walk to collect my scroll (that's all a Bursary was) was less comic than it was during the previous afternoon's staged rehearsal.

Recognition was for me partially a question of academic prowess, but in the throes of advanced puberty, it was also something else. In front of that balmy assembly hall replete with middle class mothers in frilly lilac or rose-patterned dresses, I cared little what nods of approval I received from fifty-something adults. What could they all be thinking to themselves, I wondered as I walked towards Anthony Giddens on that elevated stage; that I must have been extraordinarily convincing depicting Del Boy and Rodney in Pisa, and not their normal abode in Peckham?

No, I wanted recognition from my peers, ideally a boy in Stapleton house called Sebastian who had square cheeks and thin lips. He was lined up somewhere behind me, buttoned up and looking handsome: at least to me, the secret gay that I was. He'd performed something on cello, if my memory serves right, by Mozart. His award was for services to music, or music, or services to a teacher – I digress.

And here I am, twenty-five years later. I nurse seething resentments and hatreds, but today's resentment has been triggered by my favourite pet hate: being rejected because my writing didn't make the grade. Entering a competition, and being told what I wrote wasn't quite what the organizer was looking for; being told my writing was forced; unnatural. These resentments of mine are scarcely understandable to people who think they know and love me. They forget I'm a Capricorn; more Hamlet or Othello, than a Mercutio, let alone a Romeo. For now, I have the deep blue sea and the wind lifting above it, which in a matter of minutes darkens so it is almost sinful, something direct from an ancient rhyme, or the Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner.

My step-mother has been at it again. I daren't refer to her actual name. I'm in a pact, with my sisters, with myself, with my father, with the heavens. Censoriousness is the best way. Put it like this, her first name begins with the Spanish letter *Jota*, which rhymes with the verb totter, which I'm prone to this past few days, after my call to Dad in London on the weekend. He's shielding, with my kidney inside. He alternates between smoothly asking me how my book is going and predicting the apocalypse. I daren't even refer to what she's done, but when I have five published books behind me and when she's eventually gone, I almost certainly will.

When this lockdown is over, will we return to London, I ask my partner? What would it change? When loved ones live in dysfunctional relationships, there's only so much you can do to help, particularly when they're incapable of helping themselves. So I rail at unreason itself, at abusive relationships, distances of thousands of miles that separate us by sea from the people we probably wouldn't be able to help even if we did cross their front porch.

I find every conceivable excuse to avoid writing my novel, (the one everyone has in their locker). I dart around my partner's questions when he asks what progress I'm making with edits to my travel memoir from South America. When I do put my head above the parapet, and share some of my writing online

– an exposing act, if there ever was one, I receive an unsolicited email from an acquaintance: “your writing is so inconsistent”. I thank him for reaching out and reassure him my writing is only meant to be read if readers are prepared to hand out compliments. We have dinner; my partner, who is smarter and kinder than I am, recommends ways I can improve my writing style. For a minute at least, I see his moving lips but don't hear his words. Recognition is a funny thing.

I rage at imagined transgressions: the ones no one can be blamed for, because no one is responsible. I'm over railing at Coronavirus. It's like railing at Lang Lang for what's happened in Wuhan – we could suddenly turn against him and his piano-playing, but it would be strange, and racist; or flagging our fists at Taylor Swift for failing to land any meaningful pop music blows on her country's Trumpian politics. We all have irrational days, and Monday 4 May 2020 has been my very worst in this period of confinement.

It ended with me listening to Abba's *Chiquitita*, updating my *Facebook* wall that I'm consumed with hate, and later a few hours spent listening to Demis Roussos's *Forever and Ever* on repeat, over a glass of watery rosé. Before going to bed, I listened to the same track but this time, not by Greek God, Demis Roussos, but by Spanish lothario, Julio Iglesias. God, when is this lockdown over again?

Emails to My Sister

Gareth Johnson

Friday 27 March

Hey hey, how's things? All okay here in Echuca. Now that all the flights have been cancelled, I'm not sure how long I'll be here - could be a while! Things seem pretty chaotic back in the UK, so it's probably not a bad result. There's clearly worse places to be stranded than Lord Court.

Mum and Dad are both fairly upbeat and are keeping me entertained. Here's a transcript of tonight's conversation at dinner:

Me: "I can't play Rummikub tonight, I've got a work call at 8 PM."

Mum: "Oh, that's a shame. Who's your call with?"

Me: "It's the travel app that I'm working on. They're calling me from London."

Mum: "Maybe they're calling to tell you that they're shutting it down?"

Me: "I hope not!" [laughing nervously, acutely aware that it's a distinct possibility]

Mum: "Do they actually pay you for this?"

Me: "Yes! This is how I pay my mortgage!" [wondering if my parents have noticed that I'm working 12 hours

a day to demonstrate to my clients how indispensable I am.]

Mum: "I don't understand that at all."

[end scene]

Tuesday 31 March

Hey there,

Everything is fine here in Echuca. We're developing a nice routine that seems to suit us all quite nicely. Breakfast at 08:30, coffee at 10:30, lunch at 13:00.

After lunch is a couple of hours of solid Netflix for Mum and Dad. The down-side of this is that I think Mum might be overdoing the Netflix binge on dark crime thrillers.

Example 1 - conversation at lunch:

Mum: "What are your plans for the afternoon?"

Me: "I've got plenty of work to get on with."

Mum: "This work that you're doing, is it legal?"

Me: "Of course it's legal! Why would you ask that?"

Mum: "It's just that you never share anything about your work with us. Perhaps you're hiding something."

Example 2 - conversation this afternoon:

Me: "How was your walk?"

Mum: "We saw a few people. They all looked very suspicious."

Thursday 2 April

Hiya,

Mum keeps saying how she's just happy that her 80th was last year and not this year. Which is totally true, it would have been a bit of a disaster if no one had been able to make it, or if everyone had got stuck here. Anyway, the 81st seems to have been appropriately celebrated.

The mood here seems to swing from being a bit rattled about how Covid-19 has upended everything, through to being a bit oblivious to what's going on.

For example, here's a transcript of the conversation at dinner tonight - after two hours of news programmes documenting the global impact of Covid-19.

Dad: "Things are still pretty desperate in Italy."

Mum: "And Spain! Jean's very worried about Manuel and Barbara."

Dad: "New York looked pretty grim as well."

Mum: "What about India! That seems desperate!"

Dad: "Yes, imagine if it got a hold there. Devastating."

Mum: "There's nothing official to say that I can't go to the shops, is there?"

Me: "What?"

Mum: "I just quite fancy a trip to the supermarket. They haven't said anything official to say that I can't go to the shops, have they?"

Me: "Is this because I bought the wrong bacon today?"

Mum: "It's not just that. I just think that I could probably go to the shops."

Friday 17 April

Day 237 of lock-down, and all is well.

I've banned Mum and Dad from watching any videos that their Lions friends send them. They're mainly conspiracy videos about how China created Covid-19 in order to take over the world. Mum admits that she's not an epidemiologist, but can't shake her gut-feeling that the government isn't telling us everything.

Dad is deliberately tormenting me with Netflix. When I try and show him how to navigate to Peaky Blinders, he looks at the remote as if it's all written in Arabic and possibly the work of the devil. When he thinks I'm not in the room, he turns on the subtitles as easy as breathing.

Mum has a new game that she's playing with Marilyn next door. Marilyn's husband had surgery, so Mum took them a chocolate Swiss roll. Today, Marilyn brought in some scones. This evening, Mum delivered off a lemon meringue pie. It's escalating quickly.

They're religiously going on a daily walk. Given that they're both struggling to walk, I suggested that they could try those Nordic Walking Sticks. They both immediately dismissed them out of hand - they're not nearly old enough for something as ridiculous as that. I've gone ahead and ordered them anyway - they should arrive on Monday.

Wednesday 22 April

Hey hey,

Things are a bit calmer here today, but we had a bit of a drama yesterday.

I'm not sure if I've mentioned this, but the barbecue hasn't been working. I'm no expert on barbecues, but there was gas coming out where it shouldn't. I've made a couple of trips to Bunnings, but haven't been able to fix it. Yesterday, Robert from over the road came over, tightened a few things, and Dad happily reported that it was fixed and ready to go. Unfortunately, when Dad fired it up to cook the dinner that night, it seems that there's still gas coming out where it shouldn't, so Mum had to take over and cook the chicken inside. She was furious. Literally, so cross she couldn't speak to anyone. Luckily, there was an extra-long episode of Masterchef that she could focus her energy on. Australian Masterchef is mad.

I have suggested that maybe it's time to think about buying a new barbecue, but Dad isn't keen. He says that this one is quite new. I've tried to determine exactly when they bought it - best guess at the moment is 20 years ago.

Good news that infection rates seem to be coming under control. I was sort of hoping that they might start talking about when international flights might become possible, but the collapse of Virgin Australia is probably complicating that a bit. Not to worry, Echuca seems like a fairly good option right now.

Thursday 23 April

Hi there,

I've suggested that maybe we could reinstate Friday fish and chips with the neighbours now that infection rates seem under control. After a bit of debate, we've

concluded that it would technically be breaking curfew, so we're going to hold off a bit longer.

Things look a bit grim in Ballarat - there was a message from Auntie Evelyn last night saying that Bernie was getting weaker and not eating. Kath and Rich have gone there today.

Tuesday 28 April

Hiya, we were able to watch Uncle Bernie's funeral today via a Facebook livestream from Ballarat cathedral. The sound wasn't great - we couldn't really hear much - but at least we got to see Evelyn and the family. There's talk of a memorial service later in the year once the travel restrictions have been lifted. Maybe I'll be able to drive Mum and Dad down to Ballarat to see Evelyn in a couple of weeks.

Friday 1 May

Hey hey, all fairly calm here.

The nordic walking poles arrived this week. They've not been a resounding success. Mum and Dad have humoured me by taking them out once. They've decided that they'll only use them when they're walking the bush track along the river. Since then, they've been going for walks into town, so they haven't needed the walking poles.

We've upgraded the Spotify account so that we can expand the range of music that can be played on the Google Home. I've showed Mum and Dad how they can request Gilbert & Sullivan and Max Boyce. Since then, we've been hearing a lot of Gilbert & Sullivan and a lot of Max Boyce. The Spotify upgrade probably wasn't one of my best ideas.

Sunday 10 May

It's Mother's Day today. Why does Australia have Mother's Day on a different date to the UK? That doesn't make any sense to me.

Mum says that there's nothing she hates more than breakfast in bed, so I wasn't sure how best to mark the occasion. I've put some Baileys in her morning coffee which seemed to cheer her up.

I wish you were here. Somehow, this would all seem more bearable if you were here.

Mum and Dad talk about you everyday. This will sound dumb, but we have that photo of you sitting on the kitchen table. I think it makes us all feel better if we can pretend a little bit that you're sitting in the kitchen with us.

I guess it's hypocritical of me, but it's times like these that I really hope that there is a Heaven of some sort. It's bullshit, but it makes me feel a little better to think that you're up there somewhere, looking down on us, laughing to yourself as we muddle through.

I miss you.

[end]

La Frontera

Jonathan Pizarro

The sun stopped you in that moment. The rays through the old tree with the withered branches, in the lane at the back of your house. Through the cracks in the wall and up the sliver of cement floor that in this country they call a back garden. The warmth made its way to you in this February afternoon when the day was just about to leave. You'd tried to plant geranios in terracotta pots to hang out of the window, and they died in last winter's frost. You asked if you could paint your house white. Brilliant white like the winding lanes that lead to the beach in Cadiz. The council refused. So, you felt a measure of light on the back of your neck while you were hanging up the washing, and it travelled down your spine and reached some part of you that truly longed for home.

You thought of the long stretch of the Paseo Marítimo in Málaga. You haven't seen it since Franco closed the border to Gibraltar in 1969. It was much easier then. Take the car out and the Guardia Civil wouldn't even look at your passport. Just a wave of their hand and you'd be up the coast on bouncy dirt roads until Málaga opened itself up on the horizon like a built-up promise. Your abuela took you to all the places she lived in as a girl. She peeled your mandarinas as you both sat on the sand. You watched the waves, pouring into the Mediterranean. You realise now that was freedom. And when the order came, and she had to choose between her two worlds before the gates shut for good, she came with you to Gibraltar. She cried when they turned the key on the lock. She never got out of bed again. Not

even for mass on Sundays, and in the afternoon when the whole town seemed to parade itself as close to la reja as they could possibly get to see family growing, living and dying on the other side.

Your husband asked you, what if they never re-open Rocio? What will we do entonces? He told you a life could not be lived in a cage, endlessly spinning around those two square kilometres and hoping the food supplies arrive on time. Hay que comer. He bought plane tickets and you packed a suitcase and here you are. Where you've been for a year. Strange grey place where it always rains. But today it was fine, and for the first time you dared to hang the sheets to dry outside.

And you're there, thinking of fresh mangoes and thick sardinas smoking on a coal grill. Of that deep burst of poniente on summer mornings when the sky cleared into an endless blue that made your eyes hurt, a thick line between it and the sea dark like red wine. And if you looked out from your house to the Estrecho, the taunt of Algeciras across the water. And further still the Rif mountains in Morocco where you'd spent every summer holiday until 1984, when he put you both on a plane to look for work and life and movement. He left you inside the house with barely a word of English, and the inexplicable fitted carpet in the bathroom, always damp, instead of the bright tiles cool on your feet in the summer. Estos guiris están locos.

With your eyes closed and the sheets in the breeze that

never smell the same here, and so they never feel clean to you. You wash and wipe and scrub and always you feel the dirt of the outside enclosing around this house, which never feels like your house. No hay balcón, no hay terraza, ni patio ni portón. Where nobody ever comes to visit or asks about your mother or calls out from the opposite house with all the news you could possibly want about births and deaths and divorces. Everyone here minds their own business and runs into their homes in the evenings to watch the soaps. You don't watch the soaps. You read the letters your family send you, over and over again, and you write to them every day until your hand cramps. You tell them that life here is good for you. That one day you went into Londres and you saw el Buckingham and squirrels in the parque. That you miss them, and you love them, but you're happy.

You open your eyes and the clouds pass and the world returns to Essex, 1985 in what they have the cara y poca vergüenza to call a back garden. With the concrete and the broken granite tiles and the wooden fence that separates you from the neighbour that almost hangs off. The wind picks up, and whistles through the gap in the fence, and through the sheets with the claveles embroidered by your abuela. And you see someone in the garden next to yours, hanging her own washing, which is not grey, and she is not grey, and there are bursts of red and green and blue and yellow in your vision of the garden beside you.

She attaches a peg to the line and turns and sees you. She says, ciao come stai? and you say, ciao hola hello? You laugh and she laughs, and she says, española? You say, no...no Gibraltar, and she looks at you and you say, Gibraltar. Rock. You make a triangle with your arms with a peak. Gibilterra! Mediterraneo! she exclaims and her voice cuts through the murk. You smell the salt in the air and the tang of olives in jars and the hiss of garlic on a pan. Sí! Sí! you reply, and point a hand towards your heart and say, Rocio. She does the same. Mina.

Mina in her green dress with tiny yellow flowers, and the small gold chain around her neck smooth and brown

like clay. Her hair up in a bun with curls loose around her ears. Her hand so delicately moving along the washing line, the coral bracelet moving up and down her wrist as she grabs wet clothes from the basket. She reaches up on her tiptoes and her heel comes out of her bright red shoe. Azafran y aceite, vino tinto, y las estrellas en una noche de verano. You think of the girls in the Caleta in the summer with new bikinis their fathers had brought them from London after a business trip. The novelty, the envy reason enough to look at them and admire, and all the while what you thought of was beneath the material. Their wet hair as they walked out of the sea, droplets running down their backs and the skin on their shoulders drying in the heat already, imprinted with salt like a new map of the world.

And you, standing here looking at Mina and feeling the same. That your unusual paleness, the frizz of your hair and the smallness of your breasts would never compare, and they would never want you. If a world existed where they would ever want you anyway. Because girls didn't do that sort of thing. Your mother told you because she knew, as mother always know. Urgent whispers to a priest and a few libras in his palm to hold your head under the font and breathe it out in prayer. Now you'd left your mother behind but anchored to her choice of man, all the desire and furious private rubbing in your bathroom with a fashion magazine would have to be enough. Sometimes, when you closed your eyes in the dark with your husband, and he found want enough to lick between your thighs, you thought of the girls on the beach and your old teachers and of women like Mina.

She turns, and you're still standing there watching her. You remember yourself and you look around for the basket of pegs you left somewhere on the floor. English? she asks, and you weigh your wrist from side to side, your palm describing the hopelessness of what you know. I am the same, she says, muy muy mal. Un poco de español, sí. This is the first time you've heard Spanish from anyone other than your husband since you arrived. Español, muy bien! you say, and point at yourself. Italiano, no and you shake your head.

She wraps her hands around herself and rubs her arms. Tea? she asks, and you say sí. She runs inside and comes out holding a cup out through the gap, leaning against it and taking a sip from her own. Hot black tea with a thick slice of limón and a flake of canela. You touch her smooth hand and hope she won't notice the roughness of your palms from your interminable cleaning. She drinks her tea and looks at you and you look back at her and say, té bueno, and she replies, grazie. With so much to ask and say and want and the tongue is prevented, you just look at her. Her bright red lipstick leaves an imprint on her cup. She has a small mole on her left cheek. Her eyes are green, lighter than they looked at a distance. Her eyebrows are thick, but arched and pencilled. You're standing here sin nada de make-up, but your intention is to memorise every detail of her face. This punctuation, this surprise to your day on a Tuesday in February in Essex in 1985.

You walk in and turn the lock on the door before you kiss him.

You finish your tea, and the taste stays on your lips. You pass the cup over, and her hand comes to reach it, but instead she places it on your cheek. You feel the instant heat of her. Her thumb running up and down just under your eye, as she looks into you and says, guapa. You lean in closer through the gap and you can smell her. The jazmín and lirio and coco. The water between her toes on a beach in Sadergna, and a summer spent in a bikini someone brought her from London. And maybe you beside her, smelling the same and feeling the same and holding her by the hand.

You hear the front door slam, and you look through the back door to your kitchen where the shadow of your husband moves in, dropping bags and chaos all over the brown fitted carpet you spent all morning trying to clean. You realise her hand is no longer on your face, and your cup is gone, and she's gone. Her door closed and only her clothes on the line, a parallel to yours.

Rocio!, he calls out to you. Rocio! La frontera, han abierto la frontera. Nos vamos. He waves the newspaper at you. The photo of your Rock, the headline you can barely read except the words *Gibraltar*, and *Destiny*. Your husband asks what you're doing outside in the dark.

Everything Encroaching

Juliano Zaffino

It seemed to us even in the early days that the animals could tell what was happening. We were in distress and retreating from the world we had conquered, afraid not of the wildlife we thought vanquished nor the greenery we tried to slash and burn but the world itself, space, the oxygen and openness we hadn't thought of twice in a long time. And they, fearless of what ailed us, fearing only us, were so certain of their strength-in-numbers, so emboldened that they could move more freely in this quiet time, graze and roam in spots formerly forgotten, live a life unchallenged by the terror of man – envied, revered.

There was, you know, a plague ravaging our country, and we were all kept inside, an endless cast of minor characters in the world's most boring and drawn-out bio-apocalypse movie, afraid that a sudden rush of air would carry death to our weak entitled little lungs. All we had was a walk, just the one each day, an hour of exercise and hopefully-fresh-air, before we shut ourselves up again to work from home, to lie on sofas with the supine resignation of a melodrama's heroine, to read a book or five, or else to pick one up, to look at its pages and feel the most acute sense of dread and hate, a panicky impulse to burn it and run, the unforgiving weight of what land you can't bring your mind to wash up on. Otherwise, there is the sometimes-benevolent glow of the television, pixels and brightness, streaming old episodes of your favourite shows interrupted by the terrible live updates, comedies punctuated with corruption, cartoons with chaos, the set and its

aggressive beam as much comfort as cancer. Cooking meals at any time, arranging bouquets already dying, virtual face-to-face with colleagues you hate, your family far away beneath a shroud, living, hopefully. All this: this uneasy vagueness, this shapelessness of all our days, for weeks at least, for longer probably, forever maybe.

But we could walk, we could bask in the glow of the sun and the smiting excellence of a clear blue sky, free to all who feared not the reaper or his cousin: prolonged breathless agony and an increased risk of stroke. For the crazy and the almost-crazy there was barely any decision to make; for us the distinction between living and not living had less and less to do with the drawing of breath, the function of the nose-down organs. To live safely would be too great a sacrifice for that thing in us which no doctor can measure, no politic police.

And of course I was in it, thick, with all the others. With my partner in particular, the only person I could bear to be around for so long, the only one who cut me so deeply everyday with the slightest word, the looking and pulling and turning away. Each day had been an exercise in the most brutal sense of religion, unrelenting blind faith and love buried alive and screaming for air beneath self-hatred and subjugation and sufferance, prostration at the feet of an unforgiving god and beautiful man I lived to worship. This was the age of isolation and, true believer, I had never felt so alive, nor so alone.

The animals had been creeping closer since the first week of our confinement. Bustling paths now empty gave false security – any given minute something new would rush on past, pairs of barn owls in broad daylight swooping by our heads, foxes grazing ankles on both sides, sometimes flocks of goslings so close I could have picked them up, could've run with them, their mothers nearby sanguine, resplendent in the sun. And, in fields we had only ever seen empty before, some deer, lazing in the fading sun, occasionally moving through brambles and dead weeds, reclining a head in the direction of people, inquisitive and indifferent in turns, black eyes shining our faces back to us, pale and afraid, mostly obscured by flimsy masks, preventative but uncertain. Maybe they were mocking us. They galloped up the hill and came to rest again as if to say: you've had your photo-op. Now leave us be.

We didn't walk that same way again, so I don't know if the deer were there for long, if they're still there now even. I know only that, for a moment at least, they were where they shouldn't have been, victorious, and nothing living could surmount the fence they lounged behind – to startle them away, to encroach on the space they had been waiting patiently for, the freedom that they finally deserved. Walking home I felt more pathetic and inert than I ever had before.

Home was a thornier pen, our tiny arena with so much dead air between landmarks.

My whole adult life, which I guess had been minor until this point, I had tried to keep a clean home, because I always associated mess around me with a mess inside me, the clutter of my mind. I would smile every time I looked at a freshly polished window, or returned from taking out the trash. It was boring, thankless, repetitive work and I hated it, but I loved the aftermath, the space and clarity, the unrivalled purity of life in those clean good moments. I had learned it, I think, from my compulsive mother, who even into her fifties was cleaning her house all frantic just moments before the hired cleaner arrived.

In those first few weeks of our mass sickness I had kept our one vase filled perpetually with flowers that seemed to wilt before I even got them in, but which stayed in that state of semi-wilting, not quite dead, but never as alive as they could've been, for preternaturally long. Maybe they had already tired of reaching for the faraway sun.

Some weeks went by. Different flowers in the same vase. Dirt and dust building up on every surface, spilled snacks, my partner's wine staining and sticking, my clothes and papers strewn about, detritus, lives unravelling, lightweight and futile.

On the day before the rest of my spectral life, I had come to terms with it all: my partner was leaving me, and soon I'd be leaving this home, broken and breaking. For now, we would go for a walk. He was silent by the door, watching impatient. I gave a quick look around our home, while it still was. Only now did I see how shabby it had all become, layers of grime on everything, boxes scattered, the table uncleaned and bits of old meals congealing. The bouquet in the vase by the window had finally died completely, given up the ghost. Nothing to do for them, I killed the lights, followed my distant star outside.

We were walking towards the riverside when we noticed three people standing apart all looking out into the river intently. The bridge was in our sightline but we were crossing anyway and, ascending, could see the object of fuss, a bobbing deer's head in the river.

"It's a fucking deer."

It was close to the edge we were walking towards, and tried once to scramble onto it, but the drop was too high that side. He'd need to go across, to where we'd come from, but I didn't know if he'd make it, didn't know how long he'd been in the water, treading and afraid. The other side would also be perilous, the residential side of the river and further, assumedly, from where the young wanderer had come.

I was as afraid of heights and bridges as the deer was of people and drowning, so I rushed across to the other side, watching his plight from solid land. I don't know what it was about the deer that made me feel such an awful, overwhelming horror, but it had crept into me like a haunting, kept my lungs tight, my eyes open. Would it make it across to the other side? And once it did, what then? I cared only for him now.

The next sixty seconds felt eternal, but he did make it and, standing on dry land again, gave a little shake and shiver, stood looking out at his audience. I noticed for the first time a man in a little garden chair near where the deer was recovering; getting up slowly, creakily, he made his way towards the sweet young creature who, turning, sensed the danger of a strange and stupid old man – back in the water, options exhausting by the minute.

I willed him to swim upriver, if he could swim against the outer reaches of the weir. The island in the middle of the river was small and thick with trees, not a permanent home for him but a waystation – he could rest there, for a while, before swimming a tiny bit more, upriver again and then across, back to the side I was now on, away from residents, but twenty metres further up, where the bank dipped and an easier emergence from the water would be possible, even without any assistance from untrustworthy humans.

He was flailing around, though, and I was getting anxious. My partner, I could tell, wanted to move on – he'd got a quick picture of the struggling deer and would share it later for views and likes and karma, and now he wanted to move on, to the next photo-op. If he'd brought his better camera maybe he'd have wanted to stay; but, I think, he would have only done so if I had wanted to go. As it goes.

On some level I must have been thinking clearly, because I had taken off my watch and thrown it on the grass at my feet, my phone too, and lastly my jacket, which I'd hardly needed anyway. It was breezy

but not unpleasantly so. The water, though, was colder, which I registered briefly, unconcerned, and then I was set on the deer in front of me, swimming towards him with the purpose of a saviour. He heard me coming first and, doubting my motives, moved away from me. Fine. I tried to steer him towards the island – even if he only got there out of fear, at least he'd be safe.

And he did get there, before long; I saw him in the distance standing on the water's edge, so I swam towards him, deaf to my partner, the bemused onlookers with their phones out. As I landed on the shore I saw him dash away further into the thicket, the tall greening trees, becoming invisible. I wasn't thinking anymore, didn't care for anything but that young deer, alone and afraid, lost in the middle of a national crisis. So I moved towards him, searching for him, wanting to find him. And I lost hours in there, in the trees shifting from brown to green to dark shades I couldn't even categorise as the sun changed, the voice of my partner growing fainter until silent, the sky and everything else gone and foreign, until it was twilight, and the deer was still somewhere just out of reach, avoiding me, avoiding the help I wanted so badly to give him, a calm embrace and a guiding hand: this way, to the river, to the family you've forgotten, the ecosystem that will love and protect you. I slipped a little, watched my footing. Looking up there he was, finally still and before me, looking right at me, wondering. I didn't dare move closer but stood there. I looked around and realised they were all there, that I was surrounded on all sides by deer big and small, his family, and other creatures too, birds of all colours, rodents, varmints, felines, canines, an ark's worth, marooned here with us, all around me and I, the centre of the island, looking out at the circle of them, encroaching, still. The deer I'd followed was gone.

Coronologue

Rajan Sharma (and William Shakespeare)

To isolate, or not self-isolate,
That is no question: Whether 'tis nobler
In the mind to remain inside for the
Well-being of our friends and our neighbours,
Or set aside all public health advice
And by ignoring, harm them? So stay -- and sleep,
Some more; and by a sleep to say we slow
The virus and the thousand daily shocks
The NHS will face: 'tis a consequence
Devoutly to be wished. To stay, to sleep;
To sleep, perchance to dream -- *ah, there's the rub* --
Imagine! What dreams may come, before we
Once more throw open our strong-bolted doors!
Now is time to pause. Consider,
The virtue of lockdown to prolong life:
For heavy is the head that bears the crown
Of blind Covid's indiscriminate shafts,
The shortness of breath, the unceasing cough,
The blazing fever, the enflamed throat,
Even diverse gut-churning effusions,
While some show no symptoms at all; why then
Risk transmission through avoidable travel
When you could read, or write, or pass the time
With a binged box-set? Why do frontline forces
Toil and sweat with limited resource
But that the love of life beyond contagion,
Th'unseen ferryman speeding our way t'wards
Th'undiscovered country, resolves their will,
To raise high their shields in this hour of need
Above and beyond the call of duty?
Thus conscience does make heroes of us all;

And thus the native blue of isolation
Is dappled o'er by thoughts of brighter days,
And these shaded paths we now distant tread
Shall lead us back to Nature's favour, and
Into each other's embrace once more

Words, Words, Words

Ramya Jegatheesan

You are dreaming that you are shouting, you are shouting at your students, you are shouting at your students because they won't listen to you, and control is leaking out of your hands like sand. You are shouting even though you have never shouted at them in real life, you are shouting even though you have had this dream again and again and each time you are shouting, shouting at your students.

The alarm rings and you snooze it, but you know your tricks too well, so you've set a ten-minute snooze so it rings six times in an hour before you finally sit up. You turn the alarm off and the news starts playing even though you don't really want to hear the news, not this early, not when you've just woken up and you wonder what the hell you were playing at when you programmed your phone to play the news when you turn off the alarm.

You wash your face but you've been watching too many skincare videos in isolation because there is nothing else to do and because you thought it would be subversively feminist to look your best when no-one can see you so now when you wash your face, you imagine someone watching you, judging you, as you wash your face with the same facewash you've used for a decade:

I like to use a really mild facewash, something that isn't stripping, and I've really enjoyed using this facewash. It's affordable and it doesn't leave my skin feeling tight and I always have at least 2 lying around the house

somewhere because I like it so much. I wash my face without applying too much pressure, just a gentle touch – I always say touch your own face like you'd touch a lover's, be gentle, don't drag, don't redden, don't squash. Then I wash it off with lukewarm water and I –

You've barely woken up but the treadmill inside your head is already going, with skincare video backing tracks and lists to do and things to say and be on top of always. You come down the stairs and you hear your mother dropping a plate, you hear your father yell watch it, watch where you step, not there, there are shards there, careful, watch your feet, we can't go to A&E for this. You wonder whether moving back home to keep an eye on your parents during quarantine was the best idea because suddenly they are keeping eyes on you and you don't know how to feel about that. The brush sweeps, the bin lid swings, the water runs, and you make yourself breakfast and you realise you're running out of cereal and that you would actually kill for bread and wonder when's best to do a shop and maybe you'll Google it, see when it's quietest at Tesco but then everyone would be doing that too so the quietest time will be the busiest time so maybe you should avoid that time altogether – or maybe just put jam on some crackers. Your father is watching something very loud on his phone, something with yelling and fake fighting noises and the noises slap you harder than they do the actors and you wish that he would just get the hearing aids he needs even whilst you understand why he won't. But his videos are just so bloody loud, you can hear it upstairs, it seeps up

through the ceiling, through the floorboards, through your bed, through the sheets and into you but then you think about your dad wearing hearing aids and you shake your head to throw the image out because he is your dad, not an old man, and you don't bring it up.

You join the first Zoom meeting of the day and you're not even being paid for this one because you're a volunteer but talking about one basic issue leads to ten people having seventeen different conversations, until the conversation is a ball of yarn a cat's been at and you want desperately to sort out the threads by telling everyone to shut the fuck up and answer the one question that was asked, the one question, answer it and don't talk about anything unrelated, how the hell did we go from disinfection wipes to arts funding in one leap, answer the question, say something relevant or shut the fuck up, but you can't say this because you're the youngest one there and you're a woman and you're brown so everything that comes out your mouth has to be measured even if one old white man is rambling about lottery funding when the issue on the Zoom table is patron safety.

The Zoom call ends even though nothing useful has been said in the 90 minutes it took and you look through Twitter real quick but everyone is shouting and the world is a dumpster fire and *who the hell is allowing healthcare providers to die while saving people's lives? Who let that happen? This is when Great Britain died, when doctors and nurses couldn't get PPE, this is when 'Great' Britain died, when people died like it was a third world country, how can* - Everyone on Twitter is screaming about something but then you see a tweet about another free talk, and that will be good, it'll be good to keep yourself busy, keep yourself occupied, sign up for some talks, so you put them into your calendar and then you put into your calendar also all the free plays online and the speeches online and the courses online, all the free things online that you should take advantage of and be grateful for and you should watch every single day to take advantage of; you should listen to all the words that come out, the words that come out, take it in, hold it in, keep it in your head, listen to all the words that

come out but you don't want to, you're tired already and it's not even 4pm and you can't really be arsed to listen to all the talks, watch the streams, join the meetings, follow the writing course, do the workouts, make the bread, whip the coffee, paint the thing -

You leave the house for the first time in four weeks. You never realised the irises had come out. It makes you unfathomably sad.

You play music but all you can hear is *stay away stay away stay away*. You come home, a package arrives, you open it with gloves on, you rub everything down with 140 proof rum, you leave it out to dry, you've just washed bottles of sun cream and flea repellent and you wonder what the fuck you're doing. You check your diary. It would have been your open mic. Maybe you should have done that online.

You join your weekly Zoom call with your friends, and you love them and miss them, and they seem even further away as you watch them in their homes on rectangles on your screen. They have done nothing, and you have done nothing, but you still speak, voices layering on top of each other as lags and interruptions weave your words together. A friend is having a hard time, you message her privately afterwards, dredging words, any words, any words that might help and you funnel it into inelegant shapes towards her but she'll understand because she doesn't need grammar to understand that you love her and that you're trying.

You go to the kitchen for food, just food because there are no meals anymore because what is time and what is hunger, there is only something to do and the need to self-soothe. Your dad is reading out corona news, corona information, corona conspiracy theories-

Losing your sense of smell is a symptom, China already has a blueprint of the virus RNA, they've got the virus under control, that's suspicious, they must have had something to do with it, you have to stand 6 ft away from each other, if you drink spicy soup it'll kill the virus, I should drink more brandy, it'll kill the virus, isn't it good that I stocked up on

freezer food, you told me off, you said I shouldn't stockpile but look, we didn't have to leave the house for weeks now, China already has a vaccine, that's why there aren't cases in Cuba...

You want to tell your father to shut up, to talk about anything else, anything else in the world but you know people have different ways of coping and this is his, this and washing his hands every hour and hosing down the pavement in the garden with Fairy liquid every evening. The cat is in your mum's lap. You take a photo. Your mum looks old. She never looked this old before. You don't show her the photo. You make a sandwich.

You try to sit out in the garden and be like your cat and just watch the world but you can hear the music and screeches of your neighbours three doors down, you can hear the bass of their songs and their children jumping up and down on their trampoline and half of you is very jealous because you wish you had a trampoline and the other half is hoping there is a mesh around it because if the girls fall off, well A&E have other things to worry about right now. You give up on being mindful in the garden. Your cat is better at it than you are.

You watch some theatre online but it's not fun when you can't dress up for it and can't wait for the curtains to rise and can't feel the excitement rise in your throat in collaboration. You watch some YouTube videos but they're all terrible but you watch them anyway and you scroll through Instagram and wonder where everyone is finding time to be productive because it's already midnight and you're in bed but you can hear your neighbour's music still going.

You listen to an audiobook but the words spoken in their RP accent is not quietening the words spoken in your head. It is noisy noisy noisy up there and all around you for that matter, too. You think about opening a book but you don't want to, you can't, you can't bear anymore words which is a right irony because you have bookshelves up against three walls and it's like you've insulated yourself with cladding of old paper and every kind of word, cocooned yourself within three decades of reading only for you now not

to open a single cover, turn a single page, because the words are too bright and too loud. The only things in your head are words and you are tired of them but if they go, there will be nothing, just you and the reality of the situation everyone is in so you take the words over the silence even though you hate them both and you just want the company without the conversation. But you are not depressed, you are not sad, you are just existing, which is a mercy in itself but the audiobook is still playing and you are holding dialogue in your head, what you would say if someone is sexist to you, what you would say if someone is racist to you, how you would be kind, how you would succeed, how you have shored these fragments against your ruins, how you are propped up from the inside by words words words and its pressures, how it's holding you together and breaking you apart, and how everything is so loud right now.

Once you could hold a conversation by holding someone's hand.

You wonder why it's louder in isolation. You fall asleep and you dream of silence. But it is unbearable, so you fill it with talk.

You wonder why it's louder in isolation.

Boredom in Lockdown... Alas! It is for the Rich

Riddhi Joshi

With continuous lockdown extensions (at least in India) and graded exit the only option to ensure containment COVID-19, social media is flooded with how to keep the boredom at bay that has set in. There has been an upsurge in new-hobby-developers around the world lately as evident from WhatsApp statuses and Instagram stories dominated by different dishes & drinks, some even unheard of. Now an engineer is also a cook, a fitness freak and a tutor.

In response to this demand, there has been a supply of 'lockdown special' recipes involving 2-3 ingredients, blogs educating about how to do hard core workouts at home, study for next academic year online and keep your immunity high with vitamin C intakes and others. All this is done to break the monotony in our lives and keep us healthy and fit.

However, this is only one side of the picture depicting those who have secured jobs, working from home and their financial life quite unaffected. The other picture displays people migrating in large numbers to reach their hometowns, businesses being shut down, daily wage laborers dying every day of hunger. Yes, dying of hunger! It is because the road to ration shops is pretty long and congested at the end of which awaits the corrupt people more than the grains at fair price.

Lockdown has thus pushed larger population in penury than boredom. It has given rise to a bipolar world but this time led by affluents and underclass rather than US

and USSR. It could be seen from the following instances:

While toddlers feel relieved at the thought of their schools being shut down for a few months and being spared from the routine task of crying and moping around the house to ditch school, there is another set of children who are now forced to leave their schools. They will have to take some casual work and become "partners in survival" of their parents.

While there is one woman trying different dishes on demand of her children and learning something new, there is another woman trying hard to manage the ration effectively so as to make sure enough is left for another month. For the latter, making dalagona coffee or choco-lava cake for her family means forceful fasting for next two days.

While one person has befriended his couch and coffee to keep him going in 'working hours' at home, another, most likely to be a small businessman is constantly running his mind over starting a whole new venture favorable to current times so that some steady income may come in hand to keep his family alive.

Lakhs of soon-to-be graduates stares at their uncertain future as companies put a moratorium to placements (no wonder the competition in government exams will be much higher this year at all levels).

An even larger number of students who were initially all

set to start their college life, are now in sheer dilemma- Which college and professional course to join? - A choice now guided by their financial constraints apart from their abilities and passion.

While one family watches Ramayana-a television show started especially to entertain the people at home in India, another run their minds to arrange for loans, find new business and cut out the extra expenditure in a way that harms neither health nor pride. For them there is no time to relax. Boredom, Alas! It is for the rich. Let them enjoy.

Love in a Time of Corona

Shani Akilah

We met in the days of coronavirus, when the whole world was forced to slow down. With more down time and increased screen time, I had more hours in the day for the dating apps. During the first few weeks of lockdown, I redownloaded Hinge and spent an excessive amount of time on the app, responding to guys' prompts, and updating my profile with more flattering pictures taken in the summer; when the lighting was good and my make up on fleek. Michael moved to me first commenting on my prompt that read:

My mantra is..Don't forget to enjoy the journey too.

He said: I 100% live by this. You can't be so caught up in reaching the end goal that you let the present pass you by.

I scrolled through his profile. He had a nice face, body and seemed to say things of substance. His feed included no videos of bumping weights in the gym, which I found deeply cringey and nothing was written to suggest misogynistic tendencies. 32. 5'11. Christian. London. Moderate political views. I decided to give him a chance.

We were only a few days into our conversation when he asked me for my number. We were sending endless messages in the in-app chat function and WhatsApp offered more variety: replying to individual messages, voicenotes, and sending media. I thought it was a smooth move. He was coming with energy but not in

a way that was off putting or weird. I felt his vibe and he seemed funny. So I gave him my number.

That night he called me on the phone. I missed it initially, because my book club was having our first ever meeting over Zoom, but I called him back a few hours later. We were on the phone till the early hours, speaking about our love for travel, work, our dreams and aspirations, family and everything in between. Only a few weeks had passed and he went from sending me good morning texts, to calling me before I logged onto my laptop for work at 9.30am. My bestie who was well versed in guys who did the most and guys who were absolute bottom barrel, said that was elite behaviour for the talking stage. I agreed. I enjoyed speaking to him. It was nice to have a personal person. After so long, it was refreshing to have someone who checked in to see how you were doing and to see if your ongoing back ache had prevented you from sleeping through the night. Or to ask how you were feeling about having yet another virtual team meeting, where your manager insisted that everyone switch on their video camera. Or who, just before your weekly scheduled after work drinks on a Thursday, (which were just as mentally exhausting as the real thing), would drop you a quick text saying to have a gin and tonic on him, Grinning Squinting Face emoji! He always made me laugh. Despite only knowing him for a few weeks and never actually seeing him in person, I started to develop feelings. I told myself that we were just talking and that it wasn't that deep. But I wasn't speaking to anyone else so it was exclusive.

If not for quarantine, we would have definitely been on a date by now, maybe even a few. I would have been able to see if his face really was that flawless as the pictures suggested and if he was actually 5'11, or if he had added a few extra inches onto his height. I would have been able to see him smile with his eyes and would have been able to evaluate how he treated waiters in bars.

When he announced on a late night call, he had the sickle cell trait too, I should have cut it off. The next day, I went to Twitter to ask for advice. *'What do you do when you're talking to someone who has the sickle cell trait (SCT) too?'* The replies came flooding in as expected: *cut it off from early sis, it's hard but don't do it girl, it's not worth taking the risk for your future children.*

For most of my life I had watched my younger sister Shalom go in and out of hospital because of sickle cell. I saw first hand, her repeated visits to the same four walls that became a second home for her. She had back pain and chest infections which left her hospitalised for days, often weeks. When she was young, I don't think she realised the severity of it all, as she had fun playing in the light sensor room with some of the other children and because of her bright personality, became a favourite among the ward nurses. When Shalom was 7, she ran over to me in the playground and asked why it was that her classmates decided that she would be the 'monster' in the game they had made up. I didn't know how to tell her that it was because of the yellow in her eyes, which looked like jaundice. In Year 6, Shalom brought home the permission slip for her the leaving residential trip to Swanage and Mum said she couldn't go, fearful that she would have a crisis. Shalom was deeply upset and screamed back that it wasn't fair that she had sickle cell and why was it that Jason and I didn't. She ran up into her room and cried. That night, I heard my parents arguing. Dad had said that Mum was overreaching and that she was mollycoddling Shalom, which later down the line would backfire. The conversation came to an abrupt end when Mum shot back that she was being the responsible parent, unlike him who 20 years ago had lied about his blood type. When Shalom's skin complexion changed to a much

deeper shade at the beginning of secondary school, a result of the hydroxycarbamide she was on to help her body produce healthy blood cells, I felt utterly helpless. One night, she entered my room sobbing, that the Year 9s had been laughing at her skin in the canteen. She drenched my t-shirt in tears, exclaiming that she wanted to be light-skinned or even just brown-skinned like her friends. I tried my best to be a big sister, and affirm her. I told her always that she was beautiful - fearfully and wonderfully made and I thought I had helped. But a few days later I saw an empty packet of makari - skin lightening cream in the bathroom bin. I felt my stomach sink.

When corona hit and the letter came through from the NHS that Shalom was in the high risk category and was to self-isolate, not leaving the house for 12 weeks, my mum and her church WhatsApp group prayed and fasted for her protection every Tuesday. They would break their fast with a prayer session that consisted of Aunty Bola, shouting from the top of her lungs the entirety of Psalms 91, with particular emphasis on the verse that read 'thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you'. The 45 minute intercession always ended with a succession of Amens in deep Yoruba accents and the grace: 'may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and evermore'.

I more than anyone believed in the power of prayer but also felt the need to be deeply practical. So when Shalom, 3 weeks into lockdown came to my room mask and disposable gloves in hand, exclaiming that she had had enough and wanted to take a walk to our local corner shop to get a Twix Extra, I protested that she couldn't. I had seen endless posts on social media of friends of friends who had lost loved ones to this deadly virus and each everytime my heart sank thinking about the vulnerability of my best friend. I reiterated that the government's advice was to stay at home, especially for someone like herself. She went into her room and cried, more out of frustration more than anything. I ordered her a box of Twix that evening from Amazon,

that contained 20 bars of the chocolate for £35. I rationalised that it was a small price to pay if it meant keeping Shalom safe. When the package arrived 3 days later, addressed to her with a note that said 'I know this is hard, but I love you and want you to stay safe. This will be over soon mwahh', she came into my room with a smile on her face, box in hand and we spent the whole night in bed; watching the first season of Ozark that everyone on Twitter was heralding as the best thing on Netflix.

To cut Michael off was hard. We spoke about it, the implications of both having SCT and what the reality would be for our children if we were to get married. It all seemed very serious so we kinda just avoided the subject. It had taken me years to let someone in after experiencing a breakup that left me feeling so broken. My girls and I always joked (although it became more serious as we got older), that it was so difficult at the other side of 25 to find a black man, who loved God, who was doing well for himself and wasn't a misogynistic dickhead. The gene pool was already so small and to take guys out of that group who had the SCT made the already miniscule pool even smaller. Here was a man, at my beck and call, everything I wanted in a guy who wanted to love me and wanted to build a life with me. And I was to let that go just because of something that may not even happen? Our children, if we had children, would have a 25% percentage chance of having the sickle cell disease. A figure that was actually low I rationalised to myself. And anyway, we could pray right? My mother and her army of Nigerian Aunties from the University of WhatsApp were prayer warriors. We would be that couple that beat the odds right?

The 7 Stages of a Pandemic

Taffi Nyawanza

1. The ignore stage

In the entire block in which we live, only MaMoyo owns a television. She lives in number 20, two doors down the corridor from us. She is a wide-dimensional woman with two sons working in Botswana and a husband that no one has ever seen. She likes to adopt a superior air with us as if owning a television adds years to anyone's life.

'That irritating pig of a minister was on TV again last night,' she says when we meet. 'Do you know what she said?'

We do not know what the pig of a minister, or any minister for that matter, said on television seeing as we do not own televisions and we tell her so but MaMoyo stretches the time out and tugs at her greasy weave. Her weave is a disgrace but we never say so. Not to her face anyway. MaMoyo is as irritating as the minister herself. And just as fat.

'She said this thing has been sent by God to punish white people. She said we have our own African diseases.'

'She is mad and she waffles,' Sheba of number 11 chips in.

'Is it any wonder God has not given her any children?' asks MaMoyo.

'But she has children,' Sheba protests.

'Have you seen them with your own two eyes? That witch has no children. She sacrificed them to get power,' MaMoyo says, her voice shrill with conviction.

'She has children,' Sheba insists. 'My husband's youngest brother has a friend who knows them.'

'Anyway, she is a mad witch,' I chip in. We all agree the minister is a mad witch.

We tie on our colourful chitenges and make our way to the markets near the main bus terminus where you can get tomatoes by the gallon and vegetables by the sack.

It is useful to live near the bus terminus.

2. The rumours stage

A week has passed. Although we do not own a television or radio, we know the whole country is on edge. News arrives on our doorstep as efficiently as if we have paid a subscription for it.

'Mai matwins, have you heard what they are saying on television?' MaMoyo asks when I get to the door to answer her lockdown-breaking knock. 'A big man's son has died in town from this thing. A big man!'

Her cheeks puff and her eyes pop and the words explode out of her when she says 'a big man'.

'It is no joke, this thing. It will finish us all. They say even Papa Prophet refused to go there to pray', she heaves up her shoulders and folds her arms across her ample bosom in that posture the women here reserve for a calamity. Sheba comes out of number 11 and joins in the conversation as the people here join conversations; right by its throat as if she started it herself.

'Big men don't wait to die with us here MaMoyo, no! They fly to Singapore, China, India,' she says, pointing at different parts of the roof, doing that thing that people who have never travelled to faraway places do of imagining such places to be somewhere above.

'And how do you suppose they will fly there this time, ey Sheba? Will you fly them yourself in your winnowing basket? Haven't you heard that all aeroplanes are parked at the airport like kombis?'

'That one I will not believe until I see it with my own eyes', Sheba claps her hands once and hoots. 'It is a lie; those thieves will fly wherever they want and no one can stop them, even Blair.'

'You don't know anything Sheba, that is why you think Blair is still there when he died a long time ago,' MaMoyo retorts. I want to correct her and say 'but Blair is alive' but I bite my tongue. Ignorance is bliss with this lot.

Gibson of number 6D arrives. We hear him before we see him because his breathing is like that. He is big. Every adult here is big from bad food but Gibbo is really big even by the standards of big. He grunts up the stairs and shouts before he looms into sight. He reeks of something; it seems to breathe out of his skin and hang above him like the evening sacrifice. His eyes have the bulge of a hyper-thyroid.

'Eh, stay inside today ma matwins, Sheba, MaMoyo. Tell everyone. *Kunze kwashata*. They are beating people

like stray dogs. I ran all the way from Siyaso'.

My brain refuses to picture Gibbo in running mode.

'But how can we stay inside without food; they want us to starve, eh? Me, they will have to kill me, I'm going to the terminus rank today,' she says 'nxaa' and tugs at her greasy weave.

We all know that her sons send her food and that she is not going anywhere but this is what you do here; when others sit down in the dust and shed tears, you summon your own and join them even when your eyes are dry.

I gaze down, out of the window, across the wasteland where a wind has gathered up enough fine dust to create whirlpools which it hurls into the windbreak of the jujubes.

3. The fear stage

Many things have happened. It seems black people are now dying after all. This thing seems to have found a way to penetrate our armour of melanin. Chai!

We wait and sit and listen and wait some more. The mealie meal is depleting like the sands of time. Other people are panicking and hoarding essentials. We cannot afford to hoard so we just panic.

'What are we waiting to see?' the twins ask in unison. They have been asking the same question since this thing started. They make even me jump, the twins, with their thin, eczematous faces and their mirror speeches, like echoes in a cave.

4. The superstition stage

So we get back inside and fill the longueurs with talk. The little one has dozed off but the twins demand that I tell them the story of the chongololos before they go to bed. I readily agree.

'Children can smell fear, even if they have no idea what is going on, so tell them our folk stories,' is what my grandmother taught me those many years ago in the village. So I tell them to sit. They shift and cross their tiny legs on the floor and cup their chins with both hands and look up at me, who am now a griot.

'Once upon a time,' I say. 'In a patch of Zambezia overhung by ancient Mopane trees, lived a colony of chongololos. There was Zongololo who was the longest of all the chongololos. Dingalolo was the fastest chongololo on land. Manololo was the blackest of them all. Then there was Chamalolo who was the plumpest because he only ate tomatillos. Tampololo was the loudest and assumed, as all loud beings assume, that he was the cleverest chongololo who ever lived. Then there was Bamalolo and Shampololo, twins who never agreed on anything. If the mopane tree dropped a succulent leaf and one said, 'hmm yum', the other was sure to say 'ew, yuk!' They simply never agreed.'

I look at the twins meaningfully.

One day, the chongololos quarrelled. It was a very fierce quarrel. A chongololo from another colony had come into their midst. I say 'chongololo' only because he had the same segmented body. The same million and one legs. The same habit of rolling himself into a ball at the slightest irritation. And the same tiny head and big jaw lip. But he was white. He was different. He was a foreigner.

'Oh, isn't he so beautiful?' said one twin.

'But anyone can see he is ugly. What chongololo was ever so white? Ew!' said the other twin.

So began the quarrel which would divide the whole colony, about what to do with a foreigner.'

The twins look at each other. The story is broadly the same but it always changes to slip in a lesson, a rebuke, or to incorporate the events around us. Tonight, I have to address the fear of fear. Of the new unknown.

Later that night, after the story is told and the moral teased out and the sparse meal eaten and the dishes washed in yesterday's water, I cover their heads with a blanket over a bowl of steaming water in which I have boiled herbs given to me by MaMoyo.

'They will never catch it with this; it kills all germs. Do this every night; sickness stalks by night as you well know,' she admonished when she gave me the concoction; little sachets of greasy, khaki paper, twisted at the top. 'This one is for the little one. Rub her fontanel with it.'

5. The selfishness stage

After the children have gone behind the thick curtain that demarcates their sleeping quarters, we adults talk of heavier matters, of the police and their swift batons and how last week they shoved street vendors and their vegetables into the dust and burnt their stalls.

'Like the snake which bites what it does not eat', says the father of my children. He is usually a mute until liquor quickens his tongue.

I imagine the police riding away in their hoopty trucks, packed in like sardines even though they are the ones who have been saying we are not to get too close to each other. Well, they are the government and the rules do not apply to them. They can shoot you if they like and no ngozi will come to their families.

I cradle my growing belly and listen to its growl of hunger.

6. The blaming stage

It is Sheba who finds Gibson slumped over in the corridor and raises the alarm. I run. Sheba runs. MaMoyo runs. It is a mid-week evening so the boys in number 19F should be in. They will know what to do. They call the MP. He comes with someone with a camera phone so that his intervention can be recorded

live on Facebook.

Afterwards, Gibson is carted off, floppy and breathing like a dog. We gather outside, grateful for fresh air.

'There is no medicine in the hospitals', MaMoyo says, her arms across her breasts.

'The government should stop anyone from the diaspora coming in,' Sheba chips in.

'It's coming from China. Our Vice-President was there for his check-ups,' MaMoyo chips in. 'When he returned, he came in with a horde of Chinese doctors. It was on television.'

'Were they isolated on arrival?' I ask her.

'How do you isolate a big man? This is their country to do with as they please.'

7. The unexpected heroism stage

'That wretched pig of a minister was on television.' Mamoyo says when we meet again.

'Again?' I ask.

'Again. Guess what she was doing?'

'Was she saying our black skin is...'

'She was accepting a donation from the British. Medicine, masks, food for the poor,' she says.

'But didn't she say this thing was God's way of punishing white people. Now she is accepting their gifts?' Sheba asks.

'We all know where all that food will end up,' MaMoyo says and spits.

Later that night, there is a knock at our door. It's the two brothers from 19F.

'We brought these for you,' they say. At their feet are all sorts of provisions; mealie meal, meat, soap, biscuits, cooking oil.

'The boys want to help the people.'

I stoop, my eyes welling with gratitude.

'What boys?' I ask when I straighten up, but it is too late. The brothers have gone.

MaMoyo comes by the next morning.

'Guess what was on the television?' she tugs at her weave. 'The minister's office was broken into yesterday. All the groceries donated by the British have been stolen.'

We hoot with laughter.

The Hayward

Tallulah Harvey

I look at a photograph by Peter Hujar. My eyes trace over the arch of her back; a nude in the style of *Rokeby Venus* but without the mirror and without a head, which was buried deep into her chest. Disfiguring her. No, giving her anonymity.

Then I see something tucked between her thighs – only a hint – and I kick myself for misgendering. This is not a woman. I kick myself again for such a heteronormative train of thought: this could be someone identifying as female, I of all people should know that, should not jump so blinkeredly from one binary to the next. And then I cut myself some slack, knowing the language I speak doesn't really have the words to express gender fluidity.

She smiles at me, watching the motors of my brain whirl away mechanically. Maniac-like. Manic. It's a real wide toothy grin and it distracts me from my thoughts, just to breath her in. I pick up her fingers, walk towards her, drawn magnetically, but before my lips reach her mouth, I stop. I remember we are in a gallery. I remember we are in a space that posits consent, and half-kissing-half-fucking snogs in that kind of space were not consensual. I mentally slap myself out of the downward spiral to horniness I was beginning to skip, and return myself to my previous thoughts.

'It's a man you know? Well, not a man, I don't know what he/she identifies as – or perhaps they? – but isn't it amazing?'

'Isn't what amazing?' she says, looking a little overwhelmed.

'Sorry...' *I turn to face her, place my hand on her cheek, 'the form of someone assigned male at birth, I feel like I'm making more sense now, that's good.* 'Photographs like the image we have of "woman"; *I use hand quotations here for emphasis, 'that actually what we deem as feminine beauty in art, film, literature, fashion is actually not uniquely female, that it is the angle and positioning of the body and not the body itself which is "feminine"; more air quotations, 'I guess it just makes me feel a bit better.'*

She stares at me. I stare back, lost in the roundness of her glasses. Sandy, almost colourless, eyelashes blinking against the lens.

'Feel better about what?'

I watch her face crease in tender concern.

'You know,'

'I don't-'

'Having such a womanly body when I don't identify as-'

'Oh.'

'Yeah,' I say.

She pulls me to her, my face resting on her bare shoulders, inhaling her freckles. She takes my hand and we walk onto the next series of photographs, this time of drag kings.

'Isn't this such a great exhibition?'

I nod in response. We both silently add, in perfect imaginary unison, *isn't it nice to be in a public space and not feel abnormal, to be in an establish and renown art gallery and feel represented?*

We walk upstairs and into a space of erotic art, as if the exhibition was taunting me. As if this space knew my desire, knew that I had not slept with a woman for a long long while now, knew that I had never managed to succeed in winning a woman who would let me hold her hand in public.

I think she knows too. She looks at me, and taunts me with a knowing smile. Her smile says *I know this is hard for you, I know you want me, but you don't get to have me until you can prove yourself trustworthy.*

We look at erect penises and silk gloves, bondage and multiple limbed sex goddesses. We look at collages of legs and double exposed tantric sex. All the time I have an invisible bona growing inch after inch until I worry I will knock over the sculptures with it. At one point I even think she can see it as her eyes trace from my midriff to about a metre in front of me, but I think maybe she was looking at the cute girl walking up the stairs behind me.

'Have you-' she begins.

I can see the mechanics of her brain working now. Not so erratic as mine, which resembles a rat stuck in a spherical wheel. Instead hers is methodical. I can see through the fleshiness of her skin and through the dense bone that protects her precious innards and watch as she collects various objects from various draws and lays them carefully down one by one with scientific precision. All the while my rat races onwards.

'Been with many girls before me?' she finishes.

'It depends what you mean by "been with"' I reply.

'Oh.'

'I've had sex with a few. If that's what you mean? Not recently, and I've not done much, so I wouldn't call myself "experienced". It still terrifies the shit out of me. Though of course it, the thought of... with you... that excites me too. It mainly excites me. But not in a creepy way. I meant in a nice way.'

I'm not quite sure how my attempt to help her out has been received but I make myself stop talking – knowing from experience that this is the safest response.

'No, that's not really what I meant. I meant more, have you dated many girls?'

'I've tried.'

'You're looking for something more casual then?'

'No, no, not like that. It wasn't because I didn't want it. They didn't want to date me,' *I worry that this might make her suspect they had a valid reason for not wanting to date me, and add* 'they were closeted or maybe they were just straight and liked the attention or maybe they thought experimentation was cool. Honestly, I thought perhaps that's all my feelings were. I didn't work out I was gay until I was twenty-four. I'd fallen in love with women, had sex with women, and still I thought I was straight. I mean now I'm like, "shit you're hella gay, why did you ever think you were straight?" but back then... well you know how it is.'

I can tell from her face that she knows exactly how it is.

'Same. Well not the having sex with women bit. I've only had sex with one other woman, and that was nice, but she was kinda annoying once we sobered up...'

A smile flickered as she says this, and then her face

becomes solemn.

'But that was like a year ago. I knew, I think, for years before that but I never really was able to voice it. Like when you get a song caught in the back of your head but you can't quite hear the lyrics so you can't google the song to find out what it is. You're so close to remembering what it's called but you can't quite get it. You know? Just like that?'

I nod.

'I had boyfriends, a fair few, and they were nice. We had sex and that was nice too. But only ever... well nice. I never felt- '

I reach out and squeeze her hand, a gesture that means *I understand, you don't have to say it if you don't want to.*

'With them, I never felt the way you make me feel. When I look at you, when you kiss me, it feels... it feels really fucking good.'

I want to sing. I want to leap up and push over sculptures and high five strangers. I want to take all my clothes off and run around in circles prancing. I want to scale the building and scream from the rooftop that I am so getting laid tonight. Thankfully, I do none of these things. I walk closer to her, put my mouth to her ear and whisper inside her skull.

'You make me feel the same way.'

I almost add *I love you*, but I lock that thought inside a draw in my brain. Likely, I'll wait three or four months and then unlock it. Somehow, I already knew I would unlock that particular draw – and it wasn't just because she was the first woman who was likely to have sex with me in a year. At least I hope not.

'Do you think we are odd for coming out as gay much later in life?' I ask as we walk away from the erotic art and towards a floor-to-ceiling glittering mural.

'I don't know if twenty-four is "much later in life"? I mean how do you think I feel? I came out when I was thirty!'

'You're thirty now?'

'Well, pretty much when I was thirty.'

'So that's a yes?'

'I don't know. I can't imagine coming out any sooner? The time was the time. I came out when I came out.'

'Maybe it's better? No teenage angst? We know who we are and what we like? It feels calmer?'

'Plus you've already moved away from home so your parents can't kick you out when you come out to them?'

'Exactly!'

We laugh, even though this is a pretty sad thought, and are quickly sobered by the next series of pieces. We pause in front of a photograph of a butch with a terrifyingly large strap on.

'She looks like my ex-girlfriend,' she says.

'I thought you said you haven't dated anyone before? "ex-girlfriend" doesn't sound like "one-night stand". At least not how I define it.'

'She wasn't a one-night stand.'

'So you were lying?'

'I never fucked her. I was in love with her, and she broke my heart. She didn't like me back, I wasn't... enough of...'

I breath out a long deep sigh but I don't feel any relief.

'Do you still love her?' I ask, instantly regretting it.

'I don't know,' is her response.

I think I hear the sound of my heart shattering.

'When I cut my hair short,' she continues. 'She told me I looked ugly. *Girls* shouldn't have short hair she said.'

'But that's complete bollocks. Did she have long hair?'

'No, but *she's not a girl*, that's how she put it. She told me I don't dress pretty, that I should buy mascara and shave my legs and shit.'

'Fuck her,' I said.

She nods.

'I like your hair how it is.'

'So do I.'

I look at my feet. Not sure what to say or do. Ex-girlfriends was probably not a good second date topic.

'You know, I like you a lot. You make me feel good. She,' she gestures at the photograph, 'never did, and I don't want her. I want you. I really want you.'

And there it is. I feel my heart reabsorb its own fragments like a sea sponge reforming itself after a scientist has stuck it in a blender. I sidle up to her and place an arm around her shoulders. Her body is taut, resistant at first, and then she relaxes into me, placing her head on my shoulder.

I kiss her, probably irresponsibly, probably in a way that is disrespectful to this space, probably in a way I will regret later when I realise I might have triggered asexuals or sexual abuse survivors or bisexuals-dating-men-and-who-are-insecure-about-being-seen-as-heteronormative-when-they-are-not. In the moment, I ignore all this just to feel her tongue in my mouth, just to remind her that I like the way she dresses and the way she cuts her hair: not femme or butch, somewhere in this beautiful vibrant in between, this there-isn't-only-two-types-of-lesbian haven she inhabits.

I look at her. She looks at me. We both look at each other, communicating through our eyeballs, sending signals explaining everything that we are thinking and feeling right now, right now in this moment.

'Do you want to keep looking around?' I ask.

'I kind of just want to go home.'

'Oh, ok.'

I fail at hiding the disappointment in my voice.

'Would you like to come with me?' she asks.

I smile, widely.

'That sounds nice.'

The invisible bona in my pants stirs.

My Brother and Me

Thea Buen

It's been a while since he put pencil on paper. His focus is stronger than the silence in the crowded room, the only time he doesn't care about other people. He hunches over his notepad, bad posture like me.

Unlike him, I give up halfway when trying to sketch. I want a meaningful talk between us. He shifts uncomfortably as if reading my mind. I whisper inside jokes, trying to make him laugh.

Mumbles scatter, footsteps urging me on. People stand in his way. When they clear, the portrait stares back, memories come to view. He laughs. Maybe next time.

Bios

Ali Prince *She/Her*

Keep Your Dragon Low

Ali Prince grew up in South-East London and works as a receptionist, transcriber and volunteer animal carer. She has a novel on Amazon called *Digital Scum* and an anthology of short stories, essays and poems named *Gristle to the Mill*.

🐦 @alishaprince

🌐 tinyurl.com/ALIPRINCE-COM

Andrew Kaye *He/Him*

The Unreason of Wanting Constant Recognition (and Listening to Demis Roussos)

Andrew is a freelance teacher, writer and coach who is a self-confessed genealogy geek. Gay and Jewish, he is keen to tell the stories of people with hidden voices.

🐦 @JKaye82

📷 @reflect_reset_no_regrets

🌐 andrewkaufman.co.uk

Connor Orrico *He/Him*

Good vs Typical / Outside of Time

Connor Orrico is a medical student and amateur field recordist interested in global health, mental health, and how we make meaning from the stories of person and place we share with each other, themes which are explored through his words in *Headline Poetry Press*, *Dreich*, and *Detritus*, as well as his sounds at *Bivouac Recording*.

🐦 @connororrico

Dale Booton *He/Him*

Blood

Dale Booton is a twenty-five year old poet from Birmingham. His poetry has been published by Verve and by Young Poets Network.

Erica Gillingham *She/Her*

Let's Make a Baby With Science / The Receiver

Erica Gillingham is a queer poet and writer living in London, England, via Northern California. She is a bookseller at Gay's the Word Bookshop and Books Editor for DIVA Magazine.

🐦 @ericareadsqueer

📷 @ericareadsqueer

Gareth Johnson *He/Him*

Emails to My Sister

Gareth lives in London but was visiting family in Australia when the pandemic hit and borders were closed. At the time of writing, Gareth is trying to figure out how to get back to London.

🐦 @GTVlondon

Jade Mutyora *She/Her*

Essential

Jade Mutyora is a writer of British and Zimbabwean heritage. She is currently working on her first novel, *Soaring*, a coming of age story about mental health, being queer, navigating two distinct families and cultures, and birdwatching.

🐦 @JadeMutyora

📧 @jademutyorawriter

Jaqi Loye-Brown *Black Female*

One Way Ticket to Lockdown

London (Nth Kensington) based, Jaqi Loye-Brown, an emerging writer, of Caribbean heritage, with three indie published chick lit/fiction novellas (MT-Ink.co.uk) under her brand, PortobelloNovella.com is currently self employed, delivering image-led social media for SMEs.

Originally, having grown up in deprived, 1970's Birmingham, her background spans across TV, Music, spokenword, some published articles, all rich sources of inspiration, that continues to influence the versatility of her writing.

🌐 /JaqiLoyeBrownAuthor

🐦 @PortoNovella

📧 @PortoNovella

📺 YouTube.com/PortobelloNovella

Jonathan Pizarro *He/Him*

La Frontera

Jonathan Pizarro is a Queer Gibraltar writer exiled in London. Preoccupied by language, borders, and monsters.

🐦 @JSPZRO

Juliano Zaffino *He/Him*

Everything Encroaching

Juliano Zaffino is a writer and reader, and runs the online literary community YourShelf. His debut poetry collection, *All Those Bodies And They're Moving*, was published earlier this year.

🐦 @jayzaff

📧 @jayzaff

Laura Pearson *She/Her*

Boob and Reality Check / Face Masks

Laura Pearson is a poet and writer from the North West of England. She is currently looking for a home for her first poetry collection. She previously studied English at The University of Liverpool. She is a proud northerner, feminist and overthinker.

🐦 @LauraPearson01

Olivia Toh *She/Her*

Superwoman

Hello! I'm Olivia from Malaysia. I am 15 years old. I've enjoyed modern poetry ever since elementary school. I read and write them during my free time. Other than that, I also have a passion for brush lettering!

📧 @zhihuitoh

Rajan Sharma *He/Him*

Coronologue

Rajan is a London-based actor, writer and theatre-maker, touring internationally as writer-performer of lyrical narrative poem *The Mariner's Song* (WINNER - Theatre Weekly Award at Perth FringeWorld 2020, Australia; also featuring amongst the 10-Must-See Spoken Word Shows and Three-to-See Poetic Shows at Edinburgh Fringe 2019)

🐦 @sharmaRJN

Ramya Jegatheesan *She/Her*

Words, Words, Words

Ramya Jegatheesan was born to Sri Lankan Tamil parents and lives in North West London. She works as an English tutor and she is a trustee of North Harrow Community Library; she's currently working on her first novel at Curtis Brown Creative.

🐦 @RamyaAndTheWord

📍 @ramyajay19

Rhiddi Joshi *She/Her*

Boredom in Lockdown...Alas! It is for the Rich

Riddhi Joshi is a high schooler at St. Angela Sophia School, India. She is a political science enthusiast and loves to critically analyse the world issues at hand.

Robert Beveridge *He/Him*

Alveolus / Echo

Robert Beveridge makes noise (xterminal.bandcamp.com) and writes poetry in Akron, OH. Recent/upcoming appearances in Red Coyote Review, Deep South Magazine, and Aromatica Poetica, among others.

Shani Akilah *She/Her*

Love in a Time of Corona

Shani Akilah is a Black-British writer from South London of Caribbean heritage. Her work explores themes of diaspora, identity and belonging.

🐦 @_shaniakilah

📍 @_shaniakilah

Taffi Nyawanza *He/Him*

The 7 Stages of a Pandemic

Taffi Nyawanza is a Zimbabwean writer who lives in the UK. His short fiction has been published in Afritondo and the National Flash Fiction and he is working on his debut collection of short stories with the Exiled Writers Ink programme.

🐦 @tnyawanza

Tallulah Harvey *They/Them*

The Hayward

Tallulah is a non-binary writer currently working on their debut novel as well as producing a collection of queer eco-feminist short stories, and their screenplay *I Don't Miss Her* (2019) is currently in post-production. *The Hayward* was inspired by the Kiss My Gender exhibition 2019.

🐦 @sexyvegblog

Thea Buen *She/Her*

My Brother and Me

British-Filipino-American Thea Buen is originally from California and lives in London. Her writing typically focuses on nostalgia, identity, immigration, and mental health. She's currently working on her first novel, *Sleep the Clock Around*.

🐦 @theabuen

📍 @thea.buen

UNITED.

VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES

issue one
volume one
june 2020