

Writtle

issue three
volume three

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**A journal for
underrepresented
writers**

untitled

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Welcome to the third issue of **Untitled: Voices!** We've got a bumper selection of three volumes celebrating over seventy underrepresented writers from around the world. We received our highest number of submissions so far and we're truly touched that so many writers trusted us and gave us the honour of reading their work. 2020 and the worldwide pandemic illustrated the need to amplify and showcase all these amazing perspectives, we never want to lose a single voice amongst the melee of noise out there. So we continue on, pushing **Untitled** to do all it can do.

Thanks for joining us!

Ollie Charles & Nicola Lampard

VOICES

Poetry

Anita Clark

Finding My Voice Then
Losing It Again Or What
I Learnt At School 5

Carmina Masoliver

Tattooing The Moon 6

Christy Ku

Pass It On 8

Fatema Matin

Let's Talk About
Racism 9

James McDermott

Food For Thought 11
Stallion 12

Jane Russell

Sex With Leonard Woolf 13
"Suck It Up" - 21st
Century Sonnet 14

Julia Dudycz

The Virgin Mother 15

Len Lukowski

That's Not A Dog It's A 16

Megan Moreland

Her Name Is Revenge 17

Riccardo Belà

In And Out Of Focus:
Ten Images Of A Still-Life 18

Shani Solomons

Permission 20

Prose

Adeeba Kausar

A Long Way Home 22

Anu Pohani

Diabolic Fermentation 25

Jenny Recaldin

The Giant Of Jubilee
Road 27

Matthew Keeley

Tobey 29

Natalia Victoria Greene

Turning Heads 31

Nikki Dudley

The Night Carer 35

River Ellen MacAskill

Dreaming After Gogou 36

Sarah Lusack

To The Most Unlikely
Man To Break My Heart 37

Scott Tait

The Wild God 39

Theresa Harold

Rain Don't Go 41

Thomas Elson

Three Things 43

Thomas Morgan

Menus 44

Victory Witherkeigh

Hard Knock Life 49

Walt Meyer

The Coming Out Ring 52

Zach Murphy

437 Wilton Street
(A Brick Story) 55

Bios

Writers' Information 56

VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES
VOICES

Poetry

finding my voice then losing it again or what i learnt at school

Anita Clark

clipped vowels / sharp edges / bark my name / panic
clenches / stomach plunges / shaking legs shuffle /
creep forward / torturous / stand still / quaking

'Read,' you command.

mouth opens / closes / defeated

Agonising seconds stretch.
Sniggers from the watching crowd
escape and rise into the dense air
like fragile bubbles popped instantly
upon a withering stare.

face aflame / hostile ghouls gawp / humiliate /
desperation / stings to action / croak / abashed

Anguished words torn
stumble jumble in their
northern nakedness,
fearful at first, rushing to hide,
gain strength, momentum, melody,
tumbling all at once...
... and falling
into cold, judgemental silence.

'Stop,' you dismiss.

'Back to your place.'

Tattooing the Moon

Carmina Masoliver

after Alice Oswald's Memorial

It was always easy to imagine what it would be like,
but all those years ago, it was still a little
naive to believe you could make a campfire
last as long as stars.

Just be satisfied it was lit
and that it will come around
one day, and something will lift. The
pain will transform into a tattoo of the moon,
the sun, and more, like a solar system, no
desire to tie down the wind,
to keep it contained, in a box at
the bottom of your bed. You will let it all

go in each exhalation, each blow under
your skirt, through your newly cut fringe. An
epiphany, this is not, just life unturned,
but walking on the ceiling feels right now. Glass
broken and it's okay because, of
course, you're no longer trapped, and the air
is still about 78% nitrogen, 20% oxygen; exact
calculations unnecessary, no need for black
and white alone, find comfort in grey. Rock
made from minerals and elements show

we are carbon-based, and it is clear
we are different to stones and
we have feelings even in response
to the inanimate, and we keep moving when the world

is dying. We need something that simplifies
all the litter in each corner of the earth into
something recyclable, because the cliffs
of our country are eroding and
there are too many clefts
to fill, and all of this centres on

my own existential crisis, how many nights
I can go to bed still with so much to do, like
dying in my parents' home, choking on vomit. This
sense of nothing being enough. But the light
is still glowing, so you take this fact. It is
all we can do; occasionally talk of unspeakable
things when we grasp a glass, say it
how it is, take small steps, question, *Is
it enough?* when we know it's not, breaking
our own rules, and I want to move out

and so do my friends, but are we worthy of
wages needed to survive or is heaven
too strong a word to describe a bathtub and
enough storage space for every
book I own? I am the star
of my own sky and I openly
shoot during rush hour. Imagine he admits
he feels something, says to
me he doesn't believe in soulmates or god
or fairy tales, but this is the making
of an unknown future, the

beginning of a possible new pain, or pleasure, I shepherd
myself towards the danger and I am glad.

Pass It On

Christy Ku

To _____, who is sad;

Please select some applicable statements from the following:

- You don't have to talk. I'm sorry your sadness sits like ash in your mouth. Know that with time it will trickle out the hourglass corners of your lips and your tongue will be reborn. Your voice will come back in small sparks and we will bask in its warmth but until then, it's okay.
- You are royalty. Any hand raised near you should only be offering or helping. Crowds should part as you walk through, these ruined roads should be made straight for your feet, there should be offerings of flowers in every room you enter because you deserve it and every good thing on this earth.
- About five days into the wound healing process, your tissues begin to regrow. A new high tide will occur every twelve hours and twenty-five minutes. The Big Dipper will circle Polaris every twenty-three hours and fifty-six minutes. Your body will replace itself every seven to ten years and this too shall pass.
- There is no blame you need to carry.

You are loved and living,

From,

Let's talk about racism

Fatema Matin

Let's talk about racism shall we?
Is it just me or does it make no sense?
I mean, it's not as if we can decide what race to belong to.
I don't remember making that choice. Do you?

Imagine going to a jewellers' to shop for your eyes,
Stones of amber, topaz and turquoise,
Emerald, jade, onyx and sapphire glittering inside.
Each pair lit up with the love and warmth,
That a person chooses to send forth,
A guiding, inspiring light.

Imagine going to a haberdasher's
To shop for your skin and hair,
Rolls of fabric in all the hues of milk, cream and coffee,
Caramel, toast and toffee;
Reels of woollen and silken thread,
In ebony, auburn, golden and brunette.

Imagine going to an electronics store,
To download the languages we wish to speak,
The stories we grow up hearing,
And the songs our parents sing,
All part of the cultural package.
Our ethnic heritage brings.

Imagine going to a travel agent and making a request,
I'd like to born *here* please, with an ethnicity from *there*,
Don't we all share one world?
Don't we all have inherent worth?
Don't we all have equal dignity?

Or am I just being absurd?
Everyone is different, but isn't everybody blessed?
Let's talk about racism, shall we?
Is it just me, or does it make no sense?

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

James McDermott

age seven I knew I was different
but didn't know how I was different
I would comfort eat to make me feel less
empty when I was seventeen I knew
how I was different but I didn't
want to be different as I couldn't
control or change feelings inside I tried
to change to control my weight my outside
I ran put nothing in my body starved
age eighteen when I came out I had to
beef up to build muscle to fit in with
the scene to be seen by gay men but now
age twenty six I see myself I eat
enough I run enough I am enough

STALLION

James McDermott

trudging through norfolk fields I find
a lone horse a bag on its mouth
and I'm thirteen again
in the farmyard of the school changing rooms

a tall muscly stallion
kicks me to the floor I land on all fours
he forces my head into his gym bag
to sniff his salt sweet shorts

he snorts stamps brays trots off
to the showers I hear the slam
of locker doors and picture prisons but
it's a gate being closed

in this field I walk on thinking of that
animal I hope he was turned to glue

Sex with Leonard Woolf

Jane Russell

"Allo Len," she said. "I ain't seen you in ages!"
The not-so-young woman, though still firmly-built,
a scabby fox-fur slung about her padded shoulders,
bleached hair neatly pinned beneath the narrow-brimmed velour hat,
reached out and stroked the lapel of his worsted overcoat
with her ungloved hand. They'd met just by the cabbie's tea hut
in Russell Square. It was magic how it happened. How it always worked.
How somehow he would collide with Hilda, Beryl, Thelma
Mildred or Dot - one of the crowd - in a side street near
Holborn Station or behind the British Museum, just as he
was thinking of sex...of bodily intimacy...wanting the warmth
and pleasure, the ritual of taking off his clothes, his brogues,
waistcoat, woolen long johns, wrist-watch and socks,
laying them on the back and seat of her shabby winged chair,
anticipating passionate kisses, ejaculation....
and there she'd be....Mildred or Dot or Thelma....in the winter's dusk..
Tonight it was Beryl.

"Suck it Up" (21st century sonnet)

Jane Russell

Jew-boy, embroidered back to the Wailing Wall,
drug-eyed make-up drenched, is searching for his soul;
the hung-overed drag queen is praying for release
but is shanghaied into believing in an honourable peace

Madonna girl, in almost sunken boat, crossing the divide,
is welcomed by volunteers on the european side;
Sobbing, she sinks down, thanking her God whose renown
is barely blemished by the others He let drown

Rapper man, bluesed-out from ceaseless
weed-induced inpourings, dreams to excess
of weasel-eyed agents and the blond wives
of Porsche-owning music executives

Waking, he awaits his daemon who arrives miserably pissed,
having had all early good intentions fucking well cross-crissed

The Virgin Mother

Julia Dudycz

I've been having a lot of thoughts about childbearing recently. Specifically, how it's something that I don't really ever want to do.

If I can be promised a cherub, a Sistine Chapel angel, perched on my hip, whilst I, a desecrated rendition of the virgin mother point at something in the corner of the page.

Then maybe, then perhaps a yes. A consideration, the exception could be made.

I'd let the angel come down with a pipette and a petri dish and I'd willingly spread my legs.

But it's this selfishness, it's this private joke I have with myself every time a new pack of cigarettes declares, shouts in my face that this habit impacts fertility. I laugh and light two at a time.

If I can be promised, a child sleeping through every night, not a sound, not a weep. A child that raises itself, a scientific miracle. A Nobel Prize, one for me and a miniature too.

It's this selfishness, a need for my own to stay my own. But a deeper fear too.

A fear that the decision to get up and go might one day might not be left to me to decide, the fear that the door might not ever open again with me stood behind it.

That's not a dog it's a

Len Lukowski

wolf
cloud
devil
sea monster
wiry horse
man in dog costume
hirsute old Major
cluster of impasto brushstrokes
draught excluder
furry pencil
teddy at end of a washing cycle
miniature bear
rug on the lookout
bemused stranger
who wants to sniff you
and eat your arse

HER NAME IS REVENGE

Megan Moreland

Of wine-softened poisons

and black upon gold.

With eyes of one hundred

and fifty lies told.

Through crushed-velvet darkness

her voice will arrive,

calling “dip me in wax,

and burn me alive.”

In and Out of Focus: ten images of a still-life

Riccardo Belà

An orchid _black hairy lines_ and the _black hairy lines_ bronze plate;
some candies next to the clementine _black hairy lines_ on the plate, and _black hairy lines_
facing the orchid; a pillow, a soft blanket, black hairy lines, black hairy, black, bl ...

Grey light from the bland sky shadows the image in my eyes; too early a composition, too late
my awakening.

On a train to Cambridge, it is gam in the morning, my mind tries to recollect the memory of
that composition; it fades away in the foggy day that still, unchanged, features my early rise.

I trace my wandering thoughts from earlier today, steadily and intensely, when I finally grasp
an image: an orchid, of the phalaenopsis species, appears, standing sad on a white dry puddle.

Phalaenopsis, the orchid with the pale body, sat poorly on a wooden table, when Banksy, the
modern cupid, sent her a lover, sweet like milk chocolate and passionate like a red beating heart.

The next morning, namely and effectively a sun day, the orchid was reborn: hearty and green
her leaves, spread round like an ample silk skirt, haughty in all her thin slenderness, topped with a white
soft cambric hat, at times pink and purple; sparkling like a Renoir woman ready to charm the Parisian
neighbourhood.

A thick transparent glass vase welcomes some warm light from a crack in the sky, transforms
it through refraction, makes it green, yellow, and then pink, allows it to penetrate and softly ease onto the
dark deformed leaves of the orchid behind, soothing its rough skin like a scented balm.

On an old creaky wooden table, confused smells timidly offer their presence to the bystander:
a pungent orange citrusy scent cleanses the nostrils, followed by a rose-like flavoured one, white and
candid; then, toasted honey, perhaps maple syrup, or toffee, blossoms from behind the clementine to join
the sweet aroma of milk and cacao seeds next to the soft orchid; and one last fragrance, piquant, piercing,
precise, that of the white moss, intangible to the sight yet perceptible in that now-empty glass vase which
seems to not want to forget the lush pink flowers once bathing in there.

If Monet were to paint it, he most certainly would make an impression: some objects would be settled quite lightly, in a familiar space, perhaps a living room, or maybe a table porch; a diffused light would characterize the composition, perhaps that of an early morning at Chartres, in France; each and every element would be recognizable, yet diluted, almost blurry, in the liquid harmony of a moment just about captured, a moving snap-shot.

Three receptacles with distinct tangible qualities contain disparate elements, some colourful, some soft, some fragrant, some silent: air, fruit, flower, candies.

PERMISSION

Shani Solomons

Spread out across the pebbles

100 different colours

Hand spun by 200 different Indian ladies

Sacrifices of 300 silk worms to provide a sheet for her sitting.

Half pagan and half Laura Ashley, preparing her brushes whilst staring out across the ocean,

Creeping up behind her the bells and the chanting –

Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare

Before her, the rhythms and chanting of the sea –

“Here I am, here I am, dare to paint me, dare to paint me.”

She does not ask permission before dipping her brush into non-salt water

To replicate The Great Salt Water.

A circle of plastic roses surround Ganesh

As he hangs his head sadly.

Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare

The Krishna people leave. Ganesh looks up. And the tide goes out.

VOICES
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Prose

A LONG WAY FROM HOME

Adeeba Kausar

A blue draw-string bag, one pair of shoes, and a worn-out pair of black overalls are all the belongings that Elayna had left when she arrived in England. Her birthday would be the following month and she would turn sixteen years old, yet beyond the sweet sixteenth birthday parties that most girls wanted, the best thing Elayna's parents could give her was a new life. Having escaped their war-torn country and finally being given opportunities that she otherwise would never have had was something Elayna could only dream of once upon a time.

Although beginning her new life as an immigrant, would turn out to be something that Elayna could never have been prepared for.

Reality was apparent all too soon and these were dark times for Elayna and her family, uncertainty lay all around after being displaced, forcing them into the most difficult circumstances. Her mother and father grabbed any job they could whilst Elayna was left to care for her younger brother Zidane on most days. It was soon time for Elayna's first day at her new school once Elayna's family moved to the neighborhood. Elayna never wanted to start again, she felt like she was leaving a part of herself behind and beginning a new life all too soon, just when she had managed to make great friends and settled into a joyful routine, the conflict at home had taken a deadly turn, forcing all schools to shut down and many people had fled the country, including her family, it was a miracle that they

were still alive. She had always struggled in new places, being extremely reserved and shy it was a challenge for Elayna to build new relationships. Nonetheless, here she was, starting all over again. The sight of her new school alone was unforgiving, visually it seemed as though it had jumped right out of a medieval history book, with dark grey high arches and moss smeared along the corners of the entrance gate and building. It was almost comical that when she arrived on her first day it was heavily raining, she could only imagine the misery that she would be in for by the looks of it. However, her parents attempted to lift her spirit, using words of encouragement, and reminding her of all the opportunities that lay ahead, hoping to uplift Elayna's mood. Elayna sighed and proceeded to grab her draw string bag and head out of the car, as she walked up to the entrance, she looked back over her shoulder and saw her parents and younger brother in the car waving back.

RING RING. The school bell rang just as Elayna had walked into the corridor and turned the corner, she ran to the closest teacher she could find, a tall bald-headed man with circular spectacles who she found floating in the corridor. "Excuse me Sir, where do I go?" The teacher motioned to Elayna, guiding her to point to her name on the register, sign next to her name and check the classroom that she was allocated to, "Come with me dear, to class 11B". The teacher guided Elayna to her classroom and stood outside the door, "Now you go on in there, I am Mr. Bradshaw your head-master,

but Miss. Judy will be your teacher, let her know if you need anything” he smiled as he walked away. Elayna smiled back and continued to walk into the classroom.

When she entered the room, it suddenly fell silent, everyone stopped to stare. As she stood, frozen, at the front of the class, Elayna could feel eyeballs on her from all directions, the children began talking to each other in a hushed tone, then glancing back at Elayna. Miss. Judy walked towards Elayna “Hello dear, glad you’ve managed to join us” then turning to face the rest of the class she continued “We have a new student in our class, please make sure that she feels welcome”. She turned back to look at Elayna and asked “What’s your name dear?”. “My name is Elayna”, Elayna responded. “Is that Eleeeena or Aileeena?” confused by the question, Elayna again proclaimed more firmly “My name is Elayna”, “Ok lovely, well I hope I don’t butcher that name ha, take a seat dear” said Miss. Judy. Elayna felt terribly confused, she wondered what Miss. Judy meant by ‘butcher the name’, Elayna felt piercing stares as she made her way to the back of the classroom, hoping she would be less noticeable there.

Elayna tried hard not to make eye-contact with anyone, she felt extremely strange here in this strange land. No one dressed like her or even looked like her, every girl had blonde hair and blue eyes, quite the contrast to her own jet-black hair, brown eyes and bronzed complexion. She immediately began feeling very self-conscious. Some of the girls continued to stare at Elayna, looking her up and down and then whispering to one another. One of the girls turned to Elayna and asked, “Why did you move to this school?”, “My old school shutdown, it wasn’t safe anymore” said Elayna. The girl had a blank expression on her face and continued “Oh, well, nice shoes” she mumbled as she made eye-contact with a friend of hers, who burst out laughing. Elayna was bewildered, a nice comment but they seemed to be laughing, unsure of how to respond, Elayna giggled, thankfully that seemed to appease them.

Elayna’s mind began to wonder and time passed by slowly, as the day progressed, things became more and

more strange. For instance, every time she was spoken to, she noticed that people appeared confused when she spoke, as if they could not understand her. Elayna was smart and spoke English well but it didn’t sound the same as other people’s English, and people made that very clear. Almost no one had managed to say her name correctly and they continued to stare at her wherever she went. Finally, when the day was coming to an end, Elayna grabbed her bag and made her way outside the classroom, down the hallway, towards the building exit. She stared out into the playground, it was still pouring down and then it dawned on her that she would have to walk home, a thirty- minute trek in the rain since her parents would still be working at this time. Elayna was expected to arrive before her parents returned, in the meantime she would need to grab a snack for herself and her brother, Zidane who would be waiting for her at home.

Today though as it turns out, her younger brother would be waiting a long time before he heard any news of Elayna.

Elayna had almost left the school gates when she was acquainted with two students from the class that she had briefly noticed earlier in the day. One was a tall blonde female named Kim, who was far from the brightest girl in the class but had a kind presence and the other a shorter more rotund blonde female, Lizzy, who seemed to lead the pair, with Kim tailing behind her wherever she went. They instantly recognized Elayna as she stood out like a sore thumb in the crowd of students rushing home as the bell rang for dismissal. The pair asked Elayna if she would like to walk home with them. Unaware of her bearings, Elayna felt that she could do with some company, as well as possibly kindling a new friendship. She thought the girls were rather welcoming but Elayna would soon come to learn just how deceptive people could be. At first their conversations flowed and secretly Elayna was chuffed that people were paying attention to her, they seemed interested in her journey here, she somehow felt at home with these strangers, Elayna even had flashbacks to times with her old friendship circle, friends that

she had to leave behind when her family had fled. For a moment, feelings of loneliness and isolation that had followed her like a cloud since leaving home, her real home, were gone. How wrong she was.

When Elayna, Kim and Lizzy walked a few blocks away from school, they arrived at what looked like desolate marshland. Given that this was the countryside in England, Elayna had seen plenty of areas filled with grass and rivers but after the day long torrential downpour, everything appeared to be flooded, making it almost swamp- like. The girls continued walking deeper and deeper through the fields, noticing the bewildered expression on Elayna's face, Lizzy nudged her and said "RELAX, we're taking a shortcut", Elayna smiled and continued following them. By now it was already starting to get dark, winters in England made it seem like it was always night time.

It was becoming eerily quiet now as the three of them made their way through the fields, further and further away from the bustle of the neighborhood, hidden from all views. Grass came up to their knees and their feet were splashing through the mud at this point. Elayna was glad her shoes were already worn out or else they would've been ruined here. Just when Elayna was about to stop to ask how much longer it would take, Lizzy pushed Elayna from behind and she fell forward into the mud, Elayna turned around in shock "What was that for?" she yelled. The girls burst out laughing "It's just a joke, don't be such a baby" mocked Lizzy. Kim chimed in too "Yeah stop being a baby".

Elayna looked up at the two of them, she started to regret joining these girls, maybe she would have been better off getting lost on her own but Elayna managed to hold back her tears and laughed it off. "Come on, there's water up ahead, you can clean up there" said Kim. The girls continued walking, and the rain continued pouring. After a while they approached a river, almost instantly Elayna began to get chills and soon enough without warning, once again she felt a huge shove from behind but this time she landed in the river, as she fell her knee scraped a rock and blood began pouring

through, seeping through her overalls onto the rocks. Elayna was furious and exclaimed "What do you think you're doing, this isn't funny!". Elayna heard a roar of laughter from the other girls, "Alright leave her alone now" said Kim. Lizzy charged towards Elayna and with all her strength gave her one final push. Kim screamed as Elayna fell backwards into the lake, her body fully immersed underwater. "What on Earth is the matter with you Lizzy?" Kim shouted at her friend. "Ah its just abit o' fun, lighten up will ya, she'll swim back up in no time" moments passed and Elayna did not emerge from the water. "What have you done?" Kim stared on. "Me? You're the one just stood there like a statue, good for nothing", "what do we do!" Kim panicked, "Quick, run, you don't say a word to anyone, let's get out of here" whispered Lizzy.

Two weeks later a severely decomposed body was found washed up near a river-bed. The body was fished out by a local man who had joined in a search party for a missing school- girl. Forensics identified the body as belonging to fifteen year old Elayna. There was no press coverage on the girl as it was presumed, that she had run away, like other teenaged girls, she was expected to return soon. The school thought that Elayna had simply up and left to 'go back to wherever she had come from', therefore no one had bothered to follow up. Elayna never did make it to her sixteenth birthday and the irony was that her parents wondered, whether her fate would have been better off, staying in the heart of a war zone, would she have been shown more mercy there?

Diabolic Fermentation

Anu Pohani

In my nose, the lights are out, no one is home. I hover it a millimetre above a steaming coffee cup. Nothing. I bury my nose deep in the dog's fur. Though he hasn't bathed in almost six weeks, nothing. I eat a heaped teaspoon of sriracha hot sauce. There is a slight tingling, but my mouth is not ablaze. COVID induced anosmia should pass within a few weeks. I wistfully remember a time when I would have given anything for it to have been my superpower, instead of what had been bestowed. Twelve years ago, I was afflicted as suddenly with its opposite. Pregnant women are purported to have a heightened sense of smell: hyperosmia. They say there are insufficient clinical trials to prove this, and the few that were conducted are inconclusive. I maintain its truth. An evolutionary hangover, hyperosmia is the perfect aid to prevent ingesting anything poisonous to self or foetus.

Everything had been fine in Bangkok. Phuket with its sandy beaches, palm trees, blue ocean, promised to be even better. The resort was small and luxurious. Each 'room,' a standalone bungalow, separated by landscaping, with its own porch, steps descending to a swimming pool, designed as a free-form lagoon that meandered through the property. My daughter, ever a willing mermaid, dove up and down excitedly, waiting to flaunt her pool tricks. The heat and humidity had driven me inside for too long. Tempted, I put my toes in the refreshing water, ready to sink in, when an unidentified noxious smell wafted by. I reeled back inside, nauseous, closed the door tightly behind me.

I may have even pressed a towel to further seal against the assault.

This smell was pungent, putrid, rotting flesh mixed with salt and ocean, a sweet back note. I pictured bluebottle flies surrounding a corpse decomposing in the mud somewhere. The wafting breeze from the ocean seemed to blow from its origins directly to my nostrils.

Particularly strong in the mornings, I waited patiently for it to fade. At lunch, I left the room bravely, cotton scarf dangling round my neck in case I needed urgent cover. I love Thai cuisine. I would not be deterred. At a nearby café, I casually asked a waiter, 'Do you smell that? Do you know where it is coming from?' I pictured something horrid, hidden in the underbrush of beautiful landscaping.

He smiled, 'One of our specialties in this part of Phuket is fish sauce. Factory visits aren't allowed but I could arrange one if you like.' He knows. The finished product is delectable, but to a tourist, the smell, a factory by-product, is alien, maybe even offensive.

Fermented fish sauce gives Thai cooking that special *je ne sais quoi*. Fish sauce is not unique to Thailand. All through Southeast Asia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, it is a popular condiment with infinite local variations. Closer to home, archaeologists and scholars have recorded the manufacture of a similar condiment, *garum*, in the Roman empire in the 200s BC. A bunch

of fish meets a lot of salt and ferments, covered for a while until it can be used as flavouring. What must it smell like to the normal, non-pregnant nose?

Heretofore, I had never met a local specialty I did not try. I had never forgone an opportunity to witness artisans making any traditional culinary product, especially the unexpected or exclusive. I dragged the family to vineyards in Turkey and Japan. On weekend mornings, we visited a cheese factory in the Flatiron district in Manhattan, munching on cheese curds as we watched the steel vats churn. We dare not miss a Spanish olive grove or a Caribbean rum distillery. Ordinarily, the offered excursion would have been the cherry on the sundae, but to bring my olfactory senses any closer to the source was an insurmountable barrier.

‘No thank you. Please may I have a Som Tam?’ I finally said.

The smell and I co-existed for a whole week: each morning I hid, each afternoon, I put a tentative foot out, each evening I breathed through a cotton batik scarf as we toured as best I could. Pregnancy induced hyperosmia ruined paradise.

Now, I am rifling through the pantry trying ingredient after ingredient, testing for any response. I try to awaken my snuffed senses, but I avoid the bottle of fish sauce. Though I know I won’t detect anything, my nose shudders at its memory, its ghost. It refuses to be tested against an old adversary.

The Giant Of Jubilee Road

Jenny Recaldin

Women walking home from a community swimming pool are aware that, to a degree, we look flimsy and somewhat ratesque. In February it's worse, snot hardens, hair welds itself into tight knots and your face droops to see yet more of the month's greyness - so at odds with being submerged in tepid water. This walk seems so far away from the men who, just over the hump of middle age, take out some sort of wasted youth on the water, or the childless grandmothers bobbing in the shallows.

Usually, even in company, this is a quiet walk with hollow lungs - even you and I plod away, seeping in thoughts the pool warded off. Swimming is an excellent antidote to thought - shuffling water away from the nostrils occupies the mind well enough. We walk down a road we lived on, a house we avoid. We walk past a litany of depressed corner shops, wan by foul weather. Sometimes we hum Stevie Wonder and talk without talking. But today, I snag my foot on the silence and off we go. I've realised in the hour we've not spoken how much I've been dying to tell you.

I have seen a cat that I'm certain is the ghost of my mother. I met this cat on the 10-year anniversary of her death, and it looked me in the face, something cats only do if they have something important to announce, such as hunger, thirst or that they are your dead mother. Your chlorinated, pink eyes smile at me because you understand entirely. You do not dispute the truth of the matter. This cat even followed me halfway home,

further proof that there is some unfinished business. My mother was a fan of cats, we had three over the years, brought home in various cardboard boxes, named after the ads on the newspapers inside. There are simply no two ways about this.

You wonder what the cat needed to tell me. Every moment you speak when I don't think you will is a miracle. We cast about the local streets for the beast, but I haven't seen it since. You do not say it was hit by a car, or wasn't real or that all cats look the same because these things are pointless and cruel and also false. You do not have my masculine impulse to prove people wrong; you give me breath to speak my frivolous truths. Above us, amongst the terraced houses that make up the world, someone slams a window against the noise; we have become a babble, stringing loud nonsense down Jubilee Road like bunting. You put your hand on my shoulder and my ribs nearly crack under the weight of laughter and desperately loving each breathe in this moment.

I start to shake, something in me changes. It feels as if I grew up 5 years in a moment with you and I grow a foot in a matter of seconds. I have no clue what to make of it, and the growing doesn't stop - up, up I go. My shoes are too small, then out burst my feet - purple with the effort of splitting leather. I'm really quite at a loss, as my shoulders draw level with the upstairs windows of the houses. The hem of my trousers squeezes my calves like overripe grapefruit, god the bulge is atrocious. I can see

a naked man through his upstairs window. He rushes to cover cracks and crannies with a bedsheet. I try to apologise to this apoplectic little man but I'm speechless in the face of his red-cheeked, fist-shaking outrage. I am a giant, big and lumbering.

You are still down on the pavement, blushing at my display. I'm sorry, really, I didn't mean to say all the things my body has just made very obvious. In the street of all places, I could have waited until we were home, or huddled in my bed watching some atrocious film. I could have waited until the sun was setting or it was pouring with rain that we could claim not to notice. As it is, my body just burst with love - our hair still wet from our post-lunch swim. I kneel down to try and say anything. I hear a sudden electronic wailing and know that man has alerted the police to the giant on Jubilee Road. I can't stay here can I? What is police protocol towards the abnormally large. I panic easily, you've always said; the worst possible scenario is often the first one that crosses my mind. And now, well, it feels like I've rather raised the stakes - every part of this moment seems very important right now down to your sandals. Not running shoes at all.

The problem with sirens is that you aren't meant to get used to them. They are intrusive, belching toddlers on wheels hurtling towards resolution. So I can't just look into that face that barely sees the changes. I can't just walk home with you, garbling nonsense, we can't go searching for that cat in the bins behind the sandwich shop because that bloody noise won't stop til we've run from it. You can't run in those sandals.

I scoop you up in my new fist. I'm sorry it's not the most dignified. You shout at me; I'm being irrational. As I stand that horrid man huddled in his bedspread glares and shouts down his little telephone and the blaring police car gets louder, comes closer, screams at me and drowns you out and I start to run on these new legs I don't know. I'm not wearing the bra for this at all - it wasn't what I had in mind when I got dressed. I think I can see the police car. I'm running for the hills out by the edge of town. In my clenched hand you are nestled

like a bird's tiny, beating heart. You are soft and mine and an inch from breaking.

Tobey

Matthew Keeley

It might be called stalking now. Well, even then it was stalking, but I convinced myself it was flattering rather than criminal. Wouldn't it be? Having someone follow you around, admiring you like a film star from a (very close) distance?

My Film and TV classes at university were set in a little cinema. It meant the lecturers could show us clips on the big screen and we felt niche and special, secreted away from the cold lecture theatres and vast auditoriums. Maybe our cinema bewitched me and made me see Tobey as the most handsome person I'd ever been near in real life. He belonged on that huge screen, glowing down on us with other beautiful people. I even wondered if that was why he was studying Film and TV with me. Well, not 'with me'; at the same time as me. 'With me' was wishful thinking. He was just a little taller than me and his broad shoulders made me think he swam or played rugby. He wore thick jumpers from American TV programmes and a denim jacket like he was forever on an album cover. His face was handsome; an airbrushed magazine model come to life, with short, tufty brown hair that looked soft, and big, deep blue eyes with long eyelashes that blinked in slow motion. He clenched his strong, perfect jaw and didn't open his lips much. Maybe that was another reason I liked him – he was as quiet as I was.

I'd first spotted Tobey at distances: the far end of the cinema aisle or in a seat several rows away with other students between us. As the weeks slid by, though,

I edged closer when fantasy gave me a push. I'd sit behind him, able to stare in closeup at his hair instead of listening to the lecture, or even a few spaces along from him, imagining how I might introduce myself, hoping for some partner task that would give him no choice but to turn and talk to me: the beginning of our rom-com. Some days he even arrived after me and seemed to glance around, with casual confidence of course, before sitting at the end of my row. On purpose, surely. He wanted the meet-cute too.

All of those things I'd heard about happened: my heartbeat really did pound, painfully; cold fingers kneaded my guts; I fixated on every leg cross, sigh and pencil fidget. Was his stretch a deliberate reach out to me? Did he look my way as he pulled a folder from his backpack?

But sixty minutes would flick by and he'd walk out of the cinema, without turning to speak to me or even smile. He was a blockbuster and I was a B-movie. I'd ache as if I'd said goodbye to a best friend I knew I'd never see again. And what did I know about Tobey? Not much. Other than Film and TV, I'd discovered – after following him at the end of a class one day – he also studied Sociology. That was the beginning and the end of it. I didn't even know his name. Tobey was my sobriquet for him, a cinematic homage to another of my late teenage obsessions – Tobey Maguire as Spiderman. At some point I tracked down and scoured a class list on a noticeboard for a tutorial he was in (intense hormonal

attraction really hones your resourcefulness). Through process of elimination I figured out his name was possibly Chris, but Tobey had stuck by then, scribbled in the margins of all my film lecture notes in different fonts. Something about superheroes and hidden identities felt apt anyway. And at least if he ever saw it he'd have no idea it was a tribute to him.

Obsession teased me further along. One of my best friends, Laura, was also studying Sociology. I'd rambled to her about Tobey and she'd agreed to join me in the fun, bringing me to one of her lectures. Like cat burglars we snuck into a row behind Tobey and I peered over his strong shoulders for another hour, watching his hands scribble short, boyish notes and tap out text messages under the desk. Laura watched the back of his perfect head, too, and agreed that he was handsome, but didn't invest in any night-vision goggles just yet. She had a boyfriend who she'd been seeing since we were in school and had probably been through this teenage fanaticism and fixation, whispering with friends in school corridors and watching boys in classes.

But this was a foreign film to me and each new torturous feeling a subtitle I couldn't keep up with. I'd never been allowed these indulgent thoughts before. Telling anyone in high school that I liked a boy would be unthinkable; having a boyfriend impossible. What I felt for Tobey was what my straight counterparts had felt and explored years earlier and I've realised this must happen to most queer people, especially of my generation or older. We're excluded from those rites of passage; refused a ticket at the box office. Instead, we experience these feelings belatedly. Teen romance in our twenties; emotional puberty in adult bodies. When we were adolescents we didn't giggle and carve love-hearted names on desks and write letters with Yes and No boxes to be ticked. We pushed those longings into sealed boxes and looked away and clamped our mouths shut.

After leaving school and coming out, love, and the way it's shown to us, looks different. When I was watching *The Wedding Singer*, *Friends*, *Dawson's Creek*,

and (feeling) *Clueless*, it was through a different prism from everyone else. I saw straight love and recognised it on an intellectual level. But I didn't *feel* much for it. It didn't belong to me. None of it was *for* me. It's only now I realise my straight peers were watching those films, TV programmes, adverts, posters, magazines, school plays, and Hollywood romances and seeing themselves, fantasising about being in the place of those characters, copying their expressions of love. Queer people don't do that. At least I didn't. The relationships I watched were separate from me, just another part of those films like the special effects, expensive costumes and faraway settings.

I stopped studying Film and TV after Second Year and my fixation with Tobey faded to black. I saw him again a few years later, though. I was with Laura and he was our waiter in a restaurant in Glasgow. He'd grown a beard and was still beautiful. Laura didn't recognise him and he didn't recognise me, except in a dream sequence in my imagination. where he remembered staring at my hair and hoping *I'd* sit in the same cinema row as him and look his way as I pulled my folder from my backpack. And now he had to act cool and reserved, pretending to write my order on a notepad but secretly scribbling my name in the margins in different fonts, hoping I wouldn't see. I wonder what his name for me had been.

Turning Heads

Natalia Victoria Greene

Tim recognised that it was a pretty unique sight. So he could generally find sympathy for those who stared. This woman didn't bother him more than any other. Although it was the fourth day they had coincided on *Avenida Amsterdam*. That was unusual because try as he might Tim never managed to leave the house at the same time every morning. The fact that they kept coinciding therefore suggested that they were uncannily aligned in their poor timekeeping. On the first day she had done a complete double-take and narrowly missed running her neck into a collapsed cable that was draped across the pathway like ugly, slack bunting. On the second and third day the shock was evidently subsiding to permit a more calculated curiosity; both times she deliberately slowed her jog on approach to gain observation time. Today she had appeared out of nowhere, bobbed past, and was now slowing to a walk just up ahead. Tim suspected that she was feigning exhaustion, waiting to be caught up so she could take a candid snap for the Condesa community page of weirdness.

Tim would still say that the Amsterdam circuit is the best feature of the Condesa neighbourhood. As well as being perfect for people-watching it sums up Mexico, because what you see is nearly the opposite of what you get. A surprisingly leafy circular avenue decorated with shrubs and colourful flowerbeds, it looks like a pretty pocket of calm in the midst of the city chaos. Tracing

the whole circuit however what you actually experience is an unevenly paved track sheltered by a canopy of branches obscuring frayed, low-hanging electricity cables and carved up in eight unevenly spaced places by roads carrying endless queues of traffic. Bordering the ring on both sides are two unbroken lines of cafes, restaurants and concept stores. Yet despite the cars and tail risk of electrocution Amsterdam hums permanently with the flow of bouncy joggers, trendy pets, strolling couples and families, posing bloggers, tourists, valets, mariachis, mango vendors.

When he was a recent arrival to Mexico City Tim had been unsure about living in *La Condesa*. It was *muy padre*¹, but most expats were settling elsewhere. Mainly because of the earthquake risk. Those striking *Porfirian*² flats looking out onto the barrio's tree-lined avenues, although beautiful, would be quickly converted to rubble if recent seismic history repeated itself. In places visibly propped one on top of the other, they mimicked the slumped drunks on Amsterdam's high-set white stone benches. And those guys always woke up on the floor. At the time memories of the 2017 earthquake had been raw and post-traumatic stress rife: Tim had been in the country just two weeks when a colleague broke down over lunch as he recounted the horror of seeing tower blocks crumble "like biscuits", leaving ominous oblong clouds of smoke in their wake.

¹Mexican slang, meaning 'very cool.'

²Style of Mexican-French "fusion" architecture associated with Porfirio Diaz, who served as Mexico's president for thirty-one years until his forced resignation in 1911.

But Tim ultimately reasoned that between the exponential crime rates, the contaminants collecting in his lungs and the tapeworms setting up home in his gut, he had already converted wellbeing into a somewhat secondary concern by way of relocating to Mexico. Moving around in Condesa and the equally unstable, neighbouring Colonia Roma, acceptance of the heightened earthquake risk was like a shared badge of honour that united the district's residents in their daring, hipster ways – and probably went some way towards explaining many bold localisms: reckless use of hop-on electric scooters; flaunting expensive laptops 'dressed down' with ironic stickers (laptops worth more than most Mexicans earned in a year); the kind but rash trend of appropriating stray animals.

And Gaby loved Condesa. It boasted the city's highest concentration of yoga studios and juice bars, and the first handful of vegan *taquerias*³. Given the increasing proportion of wealthy young Mexicans settling in the area you could be confident that these apparently important features were unlikely to change. It was also where they had spent most of their time when they first started dating: both enjoyed brunching (in Condesa the options were infinite), chasing beer with mezcal in any one of Amsterdam's many bars, and strolling around Parque Mexico on a Sunday afternoon to see the dogs wearily lined up for obedience training, or to experience a salsa class *al fresco*, each in their own way: Gaby would skip across the terrace to join in, and fall seamlessly into step; Tim held back nervously, huddled under the trees with the other rhythmically challenged onlookers.

In the end they had decided after just a week of viewings on an expensive apartment with a cute balcony looking right out over the Amsterdam track. The romance of the move was unfortunately somewhat undermined by the surrounding logistics; that very wet Wednesday evening when they had to hit up what felt like all the cashpoints in a two-mile radius,

to circumvent withdrawal limits and accrue enough cash to pay three months' rent in advance to their tax-avoiding landlord. To this day Tim wondered how it was that they hadn't been robbed. But Gaby had seemed reassuringly at ease and, she being Mexican, this had helped him to moderate his usually hives-inducing anxiety. It was only later in the relationship that Tim realised the warped, misplaced basis for her composure. Gaby had grown up in a rich kid's bubble; like most of her peers her strategy for repressing her deep guilt at this was to tell herself that the other ninety-nine percent of Mexicans were content with their lot. The possibility of being brutally robbed by a fellow *chilango*⁴ for a few thousand pesos was not compatible with this idea and had therefore been dismissed, quite mechanically. Had he discovered Gaby's delusion early on Tim's time in Mexico would undoubtedly have been cut short by a heart attack. Luckily the full extent of it only dawned after Tim had already survived several months without becoming a victim of crime, by which point he had honed a solid attitude of cocky complacency.

They settled quickly in the apartment. It's beautiful terrace was well used in different ways: Gaby threw herself down on a yoga mat to soak up the afternoon sun; Tim enjoyed reading when it was dry, and in the rainy season – if he got home in time – would lean out over the balcony to watch the lightning flash across the sky, moments before it began to pour. Pibil had joined them about three months in. At the time Tim didn't understand why he was a necessary addition. Putting aside the mundane and often down-right dirty practicalities of looking after him, for Tim his presence was not a source of pleasure or enjoyment. What novel possibilities did he bring? His effect, as far as Tim was concerned, was to curtail all those beautiful small freedoms: leaving the house without having to think about when you might get back; impromptu weekends away; a solid night's sleep...These considerations did not factor for Gaby however. In her mind their life together was at best incomplete without a pet.

³Street stalls or restaurants selling "tacos": flour tortillas traditionally filled with meat (a popular Mexican snack).

⁴Slang term for a resident of Mexico City.

Within weeks their new routine was established. Tim would walk Pibil in the morning before he left for work and Gaby, who worked mostly from home, would cover the lunch and evening outings. Gaby was content, and Pibil seemed happy with his new life...but Tim was unconvinced. Having a pet was not his choice. And even if he had eventually come around to the idea, Tim would never have chosen Pibil. For the first few months he was unusually attuned to those beautiful pedigree beasts stepping their way majestically around the Amsterdam track: the huskies; the German shepherds; the Saint Bernard's. He still didn't want one, but *their* appeal was understandable. How he longed to walk something that could at least be felt on the end of the lead. Tim also noticed how reliably those big dogs drew female attention...Sometimes he couldn't help but think that Gaby's choice had been calculated to frustrate him.

Then, very gradually, the dynamic had started to shift. When things were going well for Gaby, when her business was thriving, she was like a machine. High performance spilled over into determined planning of evenings, weekends, and holidays. Through these spells the shared exhaustion, to which Gaby was oblivious, increasingly engendered an unexpected bond between Tim and his smallest flatmate. When things weren't going well for Gaby she slipped into a vicious cycle of comfort eating and obsessive exercising. In these phases she would squeeze past Tim no sooner had his key turned in the lock, to rush to an evening spin class. Pibil on the other hand always took the time to greet him. Gaby's volatility was in stark contrast to Pibil and Tim's steadiness. They became natural allies.

Meanwhile Gaby and Pibil's relationship became strained when he reached a size that exceeded official parameters, therefore converting him in Gaby's mind to "another symbol of Mexican corruption and lies." She began to worry that he might never stop growing, and in doing so force them out of the apartment she loved.

Tim thought this unlikely, but agreed to return to the pet-store for some answers.

"Hola Señor! How are you? Everything is okay, yes?"

"Hola Gus, *no*. Not really. He is still growing."

"Ah but he is still small!"

"But bigger than you said. He is nearly normal size."

"Normal? Ha ha. No, señor. Come with me, I show you something."

Gus beckoned Tim to the back of the shop and out into a yard enclosed by a concrete wall. At the bottom was a large makeshift shed. Gus crossed the patio towards it and pushed the door ajar. Inside was a loudly snoring, giant version of Pibil. It took up every square inch of floor space. Pibil reacted to the sight of his colossal relation by trembling violently in Tim's arms.

"THIS is normal size," said Gus, pointing - quite unnecessarily - at the large living thing asleep on the floor. Tim experienced the very unique shock of someone who has grown up in a city, whose interaction with animals has been limited to feeding calves in petting zoos, completely ignorant of the scale of the less endearing adult specimens, hidden from sight out back. Gus was of course right; Pibil was definitely more a bigger version of the micro-breed, than a small version of the real deal. Some swift online research confirmed this.

"We wait to take him to the country. Not one of ours. A lady was tricked."

Walking back across the yard and through the shop Tim thought about the poor animal's transfer to "the country" and the insane volume of tacos that would be produced as a result. Probably enough for a *posada*⁵.

⁵Neighbourhood party held in the run-up to Christmas.

Pibil on the other hand was at best a hearty meal for two. Thinking about it he all of a sudden felt strangely protective of the quivering little thing that was now peeing lightly but uncontrollably onto his shirt. When they were out on the street again he put Pibil down. Looking into those trusting, gently recriminatory little black eyes, he knew there and then that despite the jokes of the early days, he could never put Pibil on a plate.

The bond between them grew even stronger after Gaby left. Pretty soon it was hard to tell who enjoyed the morning routine more, Tim or Pibil. They would always head out early when the circuit was emptier; that way Pibil was spared the affront of those rowdy chihuahuas. Tim imagined it must be the smell that alerted them to his presence, as with his black body Pibil was otherwise well camouflaged in the morning darkness – well, accepting his bright green harness, and little pink feet. Those few humans who noticed would always do a tell-tale double take when they suddenly realised that the Labrador-like stature and colouring gave way to a rosy set of trotters.

The surprise and stares didn't bother him. And were to a certain extent inevitable; after all, Tim had never seen another man walking a mini pig in Mexico City. Today's jogger was still paused ahead, pretending to use her phone and standing side-on, presumably so that she was not too obvious in her staring. She was evidently wondering why they hadn't caught her up yet. Tim enjoyed the idea of her confusion. And Pibil's habit of pausing for thought in the flowerbeds was all the more endearing for having caused it. Suddenly, their eyes met. Tim had casually looked up, and in the same instant had caught her looking back for them. A few years ago he would have been embarrassed, probably annoyed. But he found himself smiling, and turned his head to indicate where Pibil had lumped himself, quite inelegantly, amongst a sea of pink and orange carnations. Following Tim's cue, she traced the perpendicular line of the lead to discover the cause of the delay. She smiled shyly, and promptly jogged on.

The Night Carer

Nikki Dudley

Not long after you died, the night carer walked in. She was wearing a long coat, a bright colour. She smiled at us all but her mouth twisted when she saw you lying in the bed.

When someone walks in on grief, it can feel like they stole it. They absorb some of it even though it wasn't theirs. Or they throw the delicate seesaw off balance and you end up falling off. With the night carer, her eyes immediately grew wet and her tears flowed into us, our faces already soaked. A few more tears only added to the collection we were building.

'I wore this coat for her,' she told us, pointing to you in the bed. As if you were still in the room to be talked about and I realised you were. There was still a delicate web between the living and the dead.

I kept expecting you to move but I'd heard the final breath. It doesn't sound like any other breath you ever hear. It's such a full stop, a sledgehammer. An avalanche of rocks closing the exit behind you.

'She said it was her favourite so I wore it especially,' she continued, sitting down next to you as if she had the right to.

No one moved. She stroked your arm so softly that it did feel like she had a right, some tenderness between you that we had never seen first-hand.

'I'm—' I started.

'I know who you are,' she interrupted. The night carer turned to all of us and said our names in turn. She'd never met us but she got all of them right, then added some details she knew about all of us.

'She talked about you all night long,' she added.

A fresh bout of tears knocked me back against the wall. I imagined you, in the dark of the night, drawing us over and over and my chest ruptured with love and the specificity of loss. I saw every particle in front of my eyes and I breathed it in.

I can't even remember that night carer's name but she is a feature whenever I think of your death.

Dreaming after Gogou

River Ellen MacAskill

At some point we have to make a decision. The decisions will begin to make themselves, it starts with a fight, it starts with being sick in your mouth at the pub. The park bench with a person on either end. Lucid dreams about touch. So I've taken notes from the meeting... Our limitations are one big guilt trip, destination nothing. Last year I took ferries in cars and on foot. This year I chase the sun from one bench to another as it sets. We missed the deadline for objections to the planning application. At some point, they have to let something into their backyard. Maybe a stray sheep lost between fields. Sun untenable. *Don't you stop me I am dreaming* of more than a meeting. A coop. Think big. A woodland. Hormones. Honesty. *Don't you stop me* public transport was public once. At some point the crusade will eat enough, or fail to evolve fast enough, or grow a conscience, or, no. I have these thoughts hundreds of times on the defensive. Old dogs aren't into new ideas. At some point we have to have a conversation. Go past the newspaper, log off, leave the house even. People are always having conversations. Listening is prayer. Listening but not for answers or decisions. Listen to me - I am who I say I am. The designated spokesperson. Standing as one thing up against another and asking about the difference. The park bench grows cold. I am paranoid when everyone leaves at once, running fast, less of us at every meeting. At some point I have to make the decision to swerve away from the pull of the black hole. It starts with knowing there is somewhere else to go, at least an idea. Rarely a physical space. Always an idea, at some point, break.

To The Most Unlikely Man To Break My Heart

Sarah Lusack

I cannot remember when we last spent time together. Living in this house now, for the first time in years, we have shared countless days and nights together, to only cross paths but rarely meet. I have suggested going for walks or watching a show together. I send you music I think you'll like. I offer to help you with your university applications or offer a listening ear if you are feeling down. Your response is always vague and open-ended: *maybe*, you say. Without shared time, and the shared language that might result from such an endeavour, our conversations have become formulaic, following a logic so definite, your answers and mine are automatic. *Morning. How are you? Okay. Did you sleep well? Yeah, fine. That's good. That's good.* This morning, we haven't exchanged any words at all.

I hear or find the remnants of you more than I see you. The sweat of the bathroom after you have showered. The cocoa powder on the kitchen counter from when you made porridge. Your deep toned laughter, unrecognisable to me, that emerges from your room late at night. It was from your phone, wasn't it? That phone and those noise-cancelling headphones are where you live now. You have chosen not to live in this house or this world, with me. Recently I have noticed the way your door edges open, how your shadow fills the gap, as you wait to hear me pass before venturing out. I used to ask why you did this, joking *what do you have to hide?* You always said *nothing* and now I know this to be true. Resisting an encounter is how you render me unseen, erasing my presence from your life, if only immaterially.

Our last meeting was yesterday evening in the kitchen. I was going to make a cup of tea and a hot cross bun, a snack to hold my stomach until dinner time. The necessity of food means this is the room in which we are most likely to confront each other. Mum was already home. You had just begun cooking and the vegan recipe book I bought you for your birthday, was laid out on the page of Ackee Scramble and Smoky Aubergine Bagels. I approached you tentatively (a strategy I have come to employ from experience of your spiky moods), asking why you were cooking now, when you've been in all day, and knowing Mum has asked us to not be in the kitchen when she returns from work. Before words even treaded out of my mouth, I paused, for a beat or two, deciding whether or not to bring this to you. To 'criticise you' in your words. If I hadn't, you would have cooked and got what you wanted, Mum's plans for the evening would have been delayed, and she or I would have had to clean up whatever mess you made. The night wouldn't have ended with slammed doors and shivering frames, and I wouldn't have woken up with burning eyes and a headache.

I know I could have left it. But I've been working with my therapist on taking up space. My habit is to accommodate and, therefore, live smaller than I am. You would like for me to be small, with all the tiptoeing and contorting and bending I must do to keep you happy. I have learnt, for example, that I brush my teeth too loudly. If I am not careful, I will completely forget my shape.

Even Mum is under your rule. In her house, she avoids eating bacon because you don't like the smell. She assesses that foregoing her weekend treat of bacon and eggs is worth it, to avoid seeing your mouth shrivel and the dramatic way you pinch your nose to block out the scent while rashers fry. I've seen how you look at her, with venom, a strain I can only describe as disgust, as she files her nails. You think she doesn't notice but she does, and shrinks ever down. This is why I couldn't leave it.

*I'll only be twenty minutes, you said. It doesn't matter, is how the flames that would engulf me were ignited. Your face soured as I spoke, which I expected. You rolled your eyes, your shoulders huffed and puffed, the kitchen filled with hot air. Your body turned away, as it always does when I try to speak with you. You shut the book, declaring *there wasn't any point anymore*, implying that, once again, I had ruined your ability to live as you desired. My pleas explaining why it did matter and questioning why you had to make simple things so difficult, hit the lean, long surface of your back and boomeranged back to me. *What do I need to do to show you we exist?* I felt like I was going crazy. All I could do was scream.*

Tears and snot streamed down my face, across my cheeks, over my lips and beyond my chin. I was frozen on the spot, you stood over the sink, aggressively washing something. It was only after you finished speaking - when I realised there was nothing more I could do or be for you - that I woke and wiped my face clean. It was at that point I realised I could hear the young white woman who'd moved next door, and felt shame creep over me, knowing she would have heard my unhinged cries through the thin, terraced walls. *Tell me what I've done!! Tell me exactly what I've done that has hurt you so badly!* You said it wasn't personal, but you could not let go of the past. I am associated with our father, who you never liked and was pleased when he left. When he was in the house, I was the favourite child. I got things you didn't. My wants and needs were met more attentively than yours. Nothing I do now can change this. It's just what it is.

Who I am and who I try to be for you will never be enough. I have sat with this realisation all morning, writing to you. I could tell you all this verbally - you are only two doors away - but we exist in different realities. There is how you see it, how I see it, and how things are. I'm learning that, maybe, it is better not to speak. What words would I find anyway, now there is a cavern in my chest where you should be? I am emptied of ideas on how I might replace the sadness and resignation that fills this dark space. I know this breaking isn't final, that you will still call for me when you need me. Even for something as small as checking if you've shaved your head evenly or if you've put together a good outfit. I like you like this. Soft and freed from anger, I hold onto these moments and imagine what things could be like if this was our rhythm all the time. But I don't know how long I can be used for. You act as if you don't owe me, owe us, anything, but even in hurt there is a place for responsibility. That is if we are both committed to healing the fractures between us, and I'm not convinced that this is something you want. I've seen how late you come home from work, telling us how busy it was, how much your team needed you. I've overheard you speaking to friends, and listened to the way your voice booms off the walls and reverberates through the house. Yet when we are in the car, you beside me in the passenger seat, I must ask you once, twice, three times, if you could repeat whatever you just said. I find myself straining across the gap between the seats. There is always distance between us.

Go, be a free agent if that is what you desire. I will try to become whole again in your absence and when we return, maybe we can start anew.

I do hope you won't be away for too long.

Love always, despite it all.

THE WILD GOD

Scott Tait

I mean, look at him. With his chiselled abs and marble peccs, he could easily be mistaken for a Greek sculpture. His name's Connor Randell but for what it's worth you might as well call him Mr Gay UK. On the scene, his name carries the weight of a god and he knows it. There's a magic to him, something almost ancient that draws you in. Like the great god Pan, he mesmerizes you with those crystal blue eyes and dazzling smile. Eventually, you'll come to realise he's just a man but by then it's too late; he's already cast his spell. It's a good thing he's not straight or else he would have sired fatherless mongrels from one side of the city to the other.

Unlike Connor, I'm not much to look at with my messy hair, questionable fashion tastes and painted nails. I guess under the right lighting I'm not so bad but that's not why he chose me that night. He chose me because I was new. There's nothing else to it. I know now that I was just his latest conquest, his newest offering. I should hate him but I can't. No one can. He fucks you just the right way and then leaves. Weeks go by without a word. You try to call him but he doesn't answer and then you text the day after that but he never replies. His Instagram has already been updated. You scroll until you see yourself, amazed at how many he's had since you. I'm just one of many forgotten faces starring at a picture of that brief moment we spent together. Forever immortalised in a single drunken snapshot within his vast collection. I do feel resentful towards him but I'm addicted and I still want more. More of what I can't have. More of what's bad for

me. That's just the way things are in our world.

I was naive back then. Lost to the ecstasy of this brave new world I'd discovered for myself. Full of vibrance and liberation. Bright lights, the taste of blue WKD and Kylie Minogue to dance to until 3 am. The scent of beer and poppers lingered in the air when I left the club. Hearing the familiar grunts of a bear I curiously tiptoed towards the sound and caught a glimpse of exposed flesh amongst the shadows of a back alley. A slim twink on his knees before him ready to take holy communion. Only this is a different kind of worship – it's primitive, instinctive and intoxicating. A rush of euphoria as you feel him enter you, his hairy arms wrapped around your chest holding you close as the wind howls through the dark and laughter rings out across the soulless city.

That night he found me I was dancing alone, lost in a crowd of half-naked male nymphs thrusting against one another and me trying desperately to find my place. Then I saw Connor's eyes glowing at me from the bar. His shirt was wide open so all could see what he had to offer. We're just modern-day pagans and we can't deny our nature. We have our rituals and our temples dedicated to modern goddesses to whom we pay homage. It could be Babylon or Sodom but who could tell the difference. From Aphrodite to Beyoncé and Diana to Madonna they're just names for the same deity. The sacred feminine that resides in all of us, only the queers know how to embrace her power. That

forgotten magic flows through us as we dance under the strobe lighting. Lost to the ecstasy of temptation, of lust and desire that we won't ever deny ourselves. From the dark alleyway to the soft furnishings of his hotel room. The night tasted of maple sweets as I basked in that euphoric high. Even now when I close my eyes I see his face sometimes. That wide grin of excitement as his hand explores his prize. A wild god enjoying the spoils of the hunt. After that, I was left behind. I was nothing more than a ghost of a sacrificial virgin selected to serve his fleeting need.

I changed that night. Ever since I first met the wild god and became forever in his debt. Even here far away from the strobe lights of those magnificent heathen temples, I feel his presence. Some people think I'm going to hell but I don't believe in it. They can call me a queer and a puff. I'll call myself a faggot because I no longer carry any shame for that word. I've embraced who and what I am and I have Connor Randell to thank for that. Ever since that night when I encountered the wild god himself. Since the night I offered myself willingly to his magic.

Rain Don't Go

Theresa Harold

I'm from Hong Kong. I grew up in tiny flats and so I lived in my head a lot. My imagination was expansive. It didn't matter if you could cross my entire home in fewer than ten steps — as long as you knew how to sit still and make the space count. Sometimes I pretended I lived in a video game.

Our last flat, before Mum and I moved to England, was in a village in the New Territories. It had two narrow bedrooms, a balcony, a living room and a kitchen where cockroaches scattered every time you moved a pan. For some reason, Mum lined the open shelves with newspaper.

The bathroom had a shower next to the loo and so I suppose you'd call it a wet room now. No glass partition or shower curtain though, the water ran right on to the toilet seat. I've never understood why anyone would want a wet room as a design feature. When I was young, I *dreamed* of a bathtub.

I couldn't swim but I liked the idea of being held by water. Surrounded by it. Maybe that's why I loved rain — still do. Rain on roads, pooling in puddles and reflecting neon will always make me feel cosy and safe.

We grade rain in Hong Kong. Yellow, red, or black. The symbols sit in the top corner of the TV no matter what channel you're watching. A black rainstorm signal meant no school and no going into the office for Mum. She was a receptionist at LeaRonal in Fanling. Her job,

as far as I could tell, involved wearing a short skirt and answering the phone with 'Good morning, LeaRonal?'. I never knew what the company did, but I've just Googled it and they sold chemicals.

Seven-year-old me did not care about chemicals. I cared about the incoming typhoon and whether the Hong Kong Observatory would hoist the signal eight. Everything closes at that point. It's the Hong Kong equivalent of a snow day.

Years later, living in Norfolk, I had my first kiss on a snow day. We'd been sent home from school after lunch and I walked back to my best friend's house with her. Cushioned against the world by softly, softly falling snow, we kissed in her bedroom. Typhoons were tame compared to that.

She looked away. *Just so you know, I'm straight. Straight as a ruler.*

OK, I said, before going to the bathroom to cry.

I suspect there's something liberating about time you weren't supposed to have.

That day in Hong Kong, I waited for the signal eight. It didn't come, even as the rain lashed down and banana trees blew sideways. Water gushed through gutters, spilling over to soak my feet as we walked to the bus stop. Mum clutched an umbrella, but the angry wind

turned it inside out, snapped the spines until it looked like a skewered squid.

Minibuses driven by demon drivers. Flying ants in the air. When we got off at the stop near school, Mum bought a swiss roll from 7-Eleven for my breakfast.

Be good, she said.

I nodded and held my swiss roll in its cellophane wrapper. I wanted fried bread with jam — my record was twelve slices in one sitting. It made me feel very English, eating toast. And feeling English made me feel closer to Dad. It wasn't until we lived with him that I realised English people did not make their toast by frying bread in a wok.

That evening, when Mum picked me up from my childminder, it was still raining. But no signal eight. It was too late now anyway. It would just be inconvenient if public transport stopped and we had to persuade a taxi driver to take us to our village. They'd be annoyed and shout at Mum and they were always men and we were always just us. Our village had one line of orange street lamps leading from the shop-cum-diner to the temple. Away from that stretch, the walk home was dark and you had to watch out for open drains.

Careful, Mum would say. In Cantonese, that word literally means 'little heart'. My mother tongue is full of such phrases; I love cracking them open like etymological geodes. It's not so satisfying in English where everything either comes from Latin or Greek,

That night, we caught the minibus and bounced on vinyl seats as the driver accelerated around corners and along flooded roads. Speed limits didn't exist for these OG boy racers. Nowadays, minibuses display the speed on a screen, which does nothing apart from alarm foreign passengers. If the driver goes over the limit, it sets off a persistent high-pitched beep. I've sat through 45-minute journeys with that beep.

To keep me entertained on our way home, Mum told

a story. She often made up stories, plucking inspiration from whatever was around. My favourite were the ones about toilet cleaner blocks — yes, the plump blue tablets we'd throw into the water tank. They'd go on adventures in the sewage system and I'd listen. Even now, I find it hard not to get sentimental about Bloo.

During typhoon season, Mum told stories about the flying ants because I was scared. She made them friendly by giving them funny voices that pleaded for shelter. I could feel magnanimous then about letting them fly around our apartment.

We were nearly home. I hopped over a manhole cover, splashing my thin bare legs.

Quick, quick.

Mum fished for her keys in the dark outside our building. Nothing's taller than three storeys in the village, but the densely packed houses blocked out light. She pulled the metal sliding door and we rushed in. Echoes bounced off the tiled staircase as we raced up one flight, two flights, three. I kicked off my school shoes and peeled back socks grey with rainwater. Mum turned the key in our wooden front door and nudged it open. We were, if not home and dry, then at least home.

Three Things

Thomas Elson

This morning, after the Sheriff and two state investigators left his office carrying boxes, the man did not return home - instead, he drove to a neighboring town and bought three things:

Dancing shoes.

A hamburger.

A shotgun.

The dancing shoes he delivered to his daughter whom he would never see again.

The hamburger he ate so he could think straight while he made his decision.

And the shotgun he will use in nine and a half hours - when he sits alone in an abandoned shack behind a line of trees in another state - and places it in his mouth.

Menus

Thomas Morgan

All of us are sitting around the dining room table – the same table that we used to eat at when we were growing up. It’s the first time in a long time that my four sisters and I have been at the house together.

Going around the table from left to right, there’s my eldest sister, Katie; then there’s Tasha; then there’s Samantha; then there’s my twin sister, Laura; and of course, there’s me. The only two chairs around the table that are free belonged to our parents. They got divorced a long time ago. Our mother remarried and moved to France with her new husband, Peter, while our father stayed here in our childhood home, which he left to the five of us in his will.

We all know what we’re doing here; the time has come to decide what’s to become of the house we grew up in – a house that has been in our family for generations.

“I say we sell it and split the money five-ways,” says Katie. “Then we all get something.”

Katie has always been the leader of the pack because she’s the oldest. But I think it’s a role that she would have taken up regardless of her age. She’s always had this overprotective instinct in her. I remember getting into a fight once when I was at school. This kid, Nathan, beat me up. The next day, Katie walked to school with me. She beat the crap out of Nathan. He didn’t come near me again.

Katie is a natural redhead, which makes her the odd one out in the family. I think our grandfather had red hair, but he died in a car accident a couple of weeks before Katie was born. My father never really talked about him.

“I think we should keep it,” says Tasha. “I think I might like to live here one day.”

I knew she was going to say that – we all did. Tasha married a man she’s too good for. I think she was scared that if she waited too long to find the right man, she never would – she was scared that if she left it too long, no-one would want her, and she’d end up alone like our father.

“Why do you get to live here?” says Samantha. “What makes *you* so special?”

Tasha and Samantha have been at each other’s throats since day one. They clash because they’re so similar, yet, they’re both too stubborn to admit it. They even look the same: blonde hair, big blue eyes, dark eyebrows.

Samantha’s been a little tense ever since her husband left her for another woman. It happened out of the blue. We were all surprised to hear that a man we had come to know and love had left our sister with two children to be with someone who was still at college – for someone who was, for all intents and purposes, still just

a child herself.

"I deserve it," says Tasha. "I lived here with Dad when he looked after Nan. I helped him out. You know I did."

Our nan had Parkinson's disease. My father didn't have enough money to put her in a specialist care home, so she had to move into the house with him. I was living in New Zealand at the time. My father would write me letters, telling me all about it. I would have helped him out if I could. But I was still finding my feet and trying to figure everything out in my own life.

I wasn't able to see my nan before she died, but I managed to make it back in time for the funeral. It was the only time I ever saw my father in tears.

"What's that got to do with anything?" says Samantha. "I could use this house just as much as you."

It doesn't usually take long before Tasha and Samantha disagree about something. And it doesn't usually take long before Laura chimes in to try and resolve their disagreement.

"What does Mum think about all of this?" says Laura.

Laura has always tried to play the peacemaker in our house. But it rarely ends well for her. Then I have to get involved and stick up for her. As twins, we've always had each other's backs. It's like there's this unspoken agreement between us – we just know when it's time to speak up and defend one another.

"Mum's not involved in any of this," says Tasha. "This is between *us*."

"Yeah," says Samantha. "If they were still together, this house would be hers now."

But they weren't, so this doesn't concern her."

I was eleven or twelve when my parents got divorced. I wasn't sure what had happened between

them. I just figured that they'd fallen out of love.

"What do you know about it?" says Katie. "It was hard for Mum, what with Dad's drinking."

"Come on," says Tasha. "He didn't drink *that* much."

"Don't even go there," says Katie. "You were too young to know what was going on. I loved Dad, but I know how he treated Mum when he drank. So don't talk about it like you know what you're saying because you don't. You don't have any of the facts here."

Don't act as if you do."

Perhaps this is the reason why we don't get together all that much.

It all goes quiet between us for a brief moment. But the silence is soon interrupted when my girlfriend Stacey comes down the stairs. She was up in our old room, gathering up some things that we'd left behind. Stacey and I lived here with my father for a while until I got back on my feet. We moved to a small flat shortly before he passed away. The place isn't much, but it's ours.

"Stace, what do you think about all of this?" says Laura. She's doing it again, God love her.

Stacey knows the score. She can see what's going on between us. "I don't want to get involved in any of this," she says. "But I don't think Mick would like it if he knew that you were fighting over the house."

"We're not fighting," says Tasha. "We're just having a discussion. A debate."

"Well," says Stacey, "whatever it is you're doing, it's too much for me." Then she looks over at me and says, "It looks like this might take a while. I'll see you back at home."

"All right," I say to her.

She puts her hand on my shoulder. Then she leans over and kisses me on the cheek. I can smell her perfume. "See you later," she says. "Love you."

"Bye," I say. "Love you, too."

Then she leaves the house, and all of my sisters stare at me for a moment.

"What?" I say.

"Hold onto that one, Craig," says Samantha. "I mean it. She's good for you." "I know," I say. "I will."

"I think Dad loved her, too," says Tasha. "You could tell that he was happy for you." There's another moment of silence between us. Then Katie looks at me and says, "Craig, what do you think about all of this? What do you think we should do here?"

For the first time since we all sat down at the table, one of my sisters is asking me what I think about the whole situation. It's always been this way. "I'm not sure," I say to her. "But I don't think we should sell it. Dad left it to us. I think he wanted us to keep it in the family. That's just my opinion."

"Craig's right," says Laura.

"Surprise, surprise," says Samantha.

"Oh, shut up," I say to Samantha. God, she makes me so angry sometimes. I can't stand it. "This house is special to us. Were any of you born here? No," I say, "I don't think you were. So don't have a go at us for being sentimental."

"I forgot you two were born here," Tasha says to Laura and me. "God, if these walls could talk."

This feels like the start of something.

"Do you remember when Dad found that family of squirrels up in the loft?" says Laura.

We all smile at the thought of this. We haven't really spoken about our father since the funeral. I guess before now, nothing needed to be said.

Katie laughs. "He was so scared," she says. "But Mum made him get rid of them. She said it was them or her."

"How did he do it?" says Samantha. "I mean, how did he manage to get rid of them?" "In the end, I think he called someone in to take care of it," says Katie. "But he told Mum that he did it by himself. I think she knew, though."

I forgot all about that story. There are a lot of things that have gone on in this house over the past thirty-five years or so.

"Do you remember the time Craig fell down the stairs and had to be taken to A&E?" says Tasha.

The girls all laugh at me – even Laura laughs at my expense. Although we've always had each other's backs, she does have a tendency to side with my sisters every once in a while.

"Why do you always have to bring that up?" I say. "Because it was funny," says Tasha.

"It wasn't funny at the time," says Katie. "But it's funny now!"

They all laugh at me again. God, it's hard being the only boy in a family of girls. "Can we change the subject?" I say. "I mean, can we get back to the reason we're here?"

"Okay," says Samantha. "Don't cry about it."

"Shut up," I say to my sister. I just want to go home and be with Stacey. But something's keeping us here. This is taking a lot longer than it needs to. I think we all know that.

"Maybe it's best if we keep the house," says Katie.

“So much has happened to all of us here. It would be wrong to sell it.”

We all nod in agreement. It looks like we’re finally getting somewhere. “The question is,” says Katie. “What shall we do with it?”

We all think about it for a moment. Then Tasha says, “Let’s order a pizza.” “No, let’s order a Chinese,” says Samantha.

They can’t even agree on what food we should get.

“We could get both,” says Laura. “Are there any menus?”

“Dad kept them all in a drawer,” I say. “I think I might know where they are.”

I get up and find some old takeaway menus. For some reason, my father kept hold of all the menus that came through the door, even though he never ordered anything from them himself. I think he liked knowing that they were there for him if he needed them. Maybe he knew that this was going to happen, and he kept them in that drawer for the five of us.

“What pizzas are we going to get?” I say. “Let’s get one each,” says Laura.

“I want pepperoni,” says Katie.

“I want ham and pineapple,” says Tasha.

“I just want cheese and tomato,” says Laura.

“What about a Chinese?” says Samantha. “I could go for some spring rolls,” I say.

“And some crispy duck pancakes,” says Laura.

We each decide on what we want from the various takeaways in the local area. Katie phones up the Chinese restaurant, while Tasha phones the pizza place. The rest

of us set out knives, forks, and plates on the dining room table.

In the time it’s taken for the food to arrive, plus the time it’s taken to eat and tidy everything up, the five of us are still no closer to a decision about what we’re going to do about the house. It’s almost as if we’ve finished talking about it, even though we’re not even close to coming up with an answer.

We’ve moved into the living room now. There are no designated seats in here – it’s basically just a free for all. It’s always been this way. But no matter what happens, I always seem to end up sitting cross-legged on the floor while my sisters get to sit on the comfy fabric sofas. No wonder I’ve got problems with my back.

Then, almost out of nowhere, Laura announces that she has an idea. “Why don’t we just take it in turns?” she says. None of us know what she’s talking about.

“Why don’t we take what in turns?” says Tasha.

“Living here,” says Laura. “We could each have it for two months of the year.” “What about the two months of the year that are left over?” says Samantha.

“We just start the cycle again,” says Laura.

“I don’t want to live here,” I say. “I’m happy where I am. Besides, I lived here for too long.”

I’ve always felt guilty about having to move back in with my father at thirty. But I think he liked having people in the house – it made it feel like a home again.

“I don’t want it, either,” says Katie. “I don’t want the hassle of moving in and out every couple of months. I’ve got my own house, my own life.”

“Maybe you’re right,” says Laura. “It was just an idea. And when it comes down to it, I suppose I don’t want it, either.” Then she looks at Tasha and Samantha. “What about you two?” she says. “You could share it. There’s

plenty of room.”

Katie and I both laugh at this. “It’d be like The Odd Couple,” I say.

“I don’t know,” says Samantha. “We could always just rent it out and share the money. How does that sound?”

“I’m not sure I want a bunch of strangers in the house,” says Katie. “Plus, it’s a lot of hassle.”

“I agree,” I say.

“All right then,” says Laura. “So it looks like Tasha and Samantha sharing the house is the best option then?”

Tasha and Samantha look at each other.

“I mean, I suppose it could work,” says Tasha. “Yeah, maybe...” says Samantha.

I think this might be the last of it, and I can finally go home and be with Stacey. Then

Katie says, “Do you remember when those new neighbours moved in, and their cat came in and hid underneath the dining room table?”

All of my sisters laugh. I think I finally understand why my father decided to leave the house to the five of us. He was a clever man – I’ll give him that.

We carry on talking – we carry on late into the night until the sun comes up, and we hear the sound of the morning newspaper hit the hardwood floor.

Hard Knock Life

Victory Witherkeigh

“I can’t keep apologizing for existing. That is one choice I did not get to make in all this... I did not get to choose that I’d be born to you as much as you did not pick me.”

My voice cracks as I say those words into my cellphone to my mother. There’s an overwhelmingly heavy silence that follows. Here I am, twenty-eight years old, a grown woman still trying to tell her mother why she should accept her daughter. On paper, I want to argue that I had done everything she and my father had asked for. I was the valedictorian of my junior high and graduated in the top 5 of my class in high school. I finished high school without getting pregnant, using drugs, or hanging out with the wrong crew. They accepted me into the number one public university in the world. I graduated in the four years given to me without an unwanted pregnancy or a drug problem either. Unlike most of my millennial peers, I also started off my post-college career with a real unicorn of a situation, a full-time job with benefits.

But that had not been enough.

Even with a diploma, my first job out of college was with a non-profit organization. “You make nothing - how do you intend to live off of this,” they said. I studied public health through college, a major they thought was a waste of time and their resources. “You waste your time saving this world,” they said, “You should focus on money, not this bleeding heart crap...” Year after year, nothing I did would garner the only thing I wanted - to hear them tell me they were proud. That they had not

meant it when they called me a mistake.

As academically smart as I was, it took me many years to understand that I was chasing an impossible goal. Years of counseling, mistakes, depression, and anxiety made me realize by apologizing for my existence, I stated that my family was better off with me dead.

“If that is the way you feel, you know the rules of this household. No one is making you be a part of this family. If you don’t like the way we see you, you will not be welcome back,” my mother replied.

“Then I guess I say that I don’t want to live that way anymore,” I whisper, exhaling a breath I did not remember holding.

Click. My mother hangs up the phone. I’m left staring at a dark screen on my smartphone.

The following week I received papers in the mail. It’s a notice from their attorney, requesting I formally relinquish any rights to any inheritance I would have received from them. It disowns me, orphans me from that moment on. I am no part of their family.

I signed and mailed them back the same day.

I sat quietly on one of the plush sofas watching TV, willing myself to breathe in and breathe out and start the process to get my PTSD under control. A dull

pain has started in my temples this morning and the sensation of the oncoming migraine makes its presence known.

I'm a child of an emotionally, physically and verbally abusive household. This conflict took place from Christmas Eve, when they last threw me out of the house, and ended just after New Year's Day with the papers from their attorneys seven years ago. It riddled the holidays with vivid, haunting memories of fear, isolation, anger, and disappointment. And each year, as the season approaches, the ebb and flow of memories often clouds my mind. It always appears there are two approaches I have: I can try to fake my way through the birthdays, Christmases, Thanksgivings, trudging through each day with a fake smile and lying through various questions. The festivities seem to inspire people to ask EVERYTHING about favorite memories for the season. Everyone wants to know what gifts they hope to receive or food they look forward to eating or what plans you have. I've lost track of the number of lies I've had to come up with to fit in with coworkers, friends, even acquaintances I'm thrown together with. Faking the cheer for someone like me means having to pull double the effort to keep up the facade.

On average in a year, I have to skirt my awkward and vulnerable situation by telling new friends that I don't fly home because of budgetary constraints or timing with work. I am still truly and unequivocally disowned from my immediate family. My emergency contacts for work and the gym are all friends. When I needed rides or someone to help me, I found myself forced to wait until it was convenient for people to help. No longer was there this collective of people with any obligation to come running to my rescue. I once called a person I considered a friend when I had a chemical burn in my eye, begging them to come and help me because I couldn't see. Their response was they were out with friends at a concert but they'd call to see if their mom could come?! I sat in blindness for almost an hour before their mom could come and drive me to the hospital.

The thing with family is when they're yours, few

people want to or know how to include an outsider into the festivities. There are plenty of quips out there with notions about the sense of home and belonging tying directly to family. The few years I've had where someone invited me to celebrate something at their "home" was always a double-edged sword. On the one hand, I had somewhere to converse with a meal provided. On the other, the interactions were mostly stilted and unnatural. The family members would inevitably ask why I was at their function instead of my own. There was this unspoken feeling in the air that they could not truly relax and be themselves since I was there, as I was now an audience. Inevitably, I'd get the signal that I should start heading out so their festivities could get going or I'd drink enough to get a place on the couch, uncomfortable and overstaying my welcome by the next morning.

My other approach has been to embrace the full meaning of a Holiday scrooge. I avoided all shopping areas for most of the year. I only used streaming services to avoid any movies or music I didn't wish to hear. I'd walk away from conversations involving any family talk. No decorations, no parties, no socializing. I'd plan meals delivered to my door or only use drive thru service to buy food. I'd let all my anger and darkness swarm around me. I'd sign up for work shifts during the holiday weeks so I'd be alone, often working the day of Thanksgiving, Easter, Mother's Day, Father's Day, birthdays, Christmas or New Year's Eve. If my offices were closed I'd be one of two to three people who'd show up at the gym and pass the time until the crowds came in. If it was exceptionally bad and I couldn't muster myself out of bed, I'd just cocoon myself, flip the phone down, and will the hours to pass as cycles of anxiety and PTSD ran through my system - unsure if suicidal ideation would win or not by the end of the night.

This is what I remember about these festivities as a child. I dreaded the fact that I was stuck in my house with my relatives and my parents for days with no reprieve. They might as well have been the same day as the same thing happened. My parents would have been yelling at myself or each other all morning and

I'd have spent most of the time schooling my features to disassociate as much as possible. Disassociate if the yelling grew too loud, if someone got so angry that I'd get grabbed or chased or hit, or most likely just berated for being useless and a waste of space. Isolated and lonely, being spoken around as if I was beneath them, Always not enough. It never mattered that I was there, as more than half the time, I'd disappear into the back room of the restaurant or person's house, hide and read or talk to myself until it was time to go. My go-to-spot seemed to be at my grandmother's house. My aunt had a piano with a small alcove created from resting against the wall. I was the only one who was small enough and flexible enough to contort my way into the alcove to hide. I had books, a Walkman, and snacks to pass the time - the safety of being able to disappear but also the knowledge that I was a throwaway child.

When the schools had us write letters to "Santa," or talk about the Easter bunny or birthday gifts, I wanted so badly for that magic to be true. Even though my family didn't give presents and Santa didn't come to our house, I still at some point remember the hope of hearing that fairy tale that you could make a wish to someone and if you were good, they could grant it. For a child in my situation, the wish was always the same - please get me out of here. Please make this stop. Please save me. But everyone perpetrating that lie never thinks about those kids; how it feels when that doesn't happen. What message that fairy tale sends - well I guess I wasn't good enough? Maybe they are right and I am a waste of life? I've been told that the tradition is to give kids the sense of wonder and magic, but what kind of magic is that?

The question my counselor would ask is what do I really want in a home, a family? The best I can ever say I've felt since they have disowned me is when I have a little peace. Peace knowing that I don't enjoy the terms 'home' or 'family' but I have enough years under me to know where to avoid the heaviest of it. Peace because I am not in that house anymore with those people. Peace in the thought even if I am alone in my bed for 24hrs on any of those given days, I'm still a step up from the alcove of the piano. Peace in the ability to disconnect

from whatever Hallmark made up family goals I'll never meet and cuddle with an animal.

I've traveled to locations to ignore my lack of home or family some years or worked through the entire season. I don't know if I'll really know when I feel at home or with family as I try to redefine those expectations for myself. What would be lovely would be if I could have an honest conversation with someone about this - preferably over a pour of whiskey? To just say that I am an adult orphan without the condescending and belittling remarks about how I'm old enough to be over that or unentitled to feel that way because it might make others uncomfortable. To have another come crawl down into the dark with me and sit for a while over drinks. I know they can't relate or make it better - but to just have someone listen, chink their glass to mine, and cheers without pity or sympathy or fear in their eyes over what I've just revealed.

There's also the knowledge that there are kids who are in the same situation I was in. I wish I could tell them that there is a future home you'll build that will wipe away all the pain and heartache you've felt waiting for the hours to pass. That sometime when you become 18, the disappointment whittles away and you find that you can fill each day with happiness. But those kids and I know that those pretty words can't hide the truth - that for this period we are navigating as best we can. The biggest hope I can give them is, at some point, there will be a choice on how you move forward. And that right there may be the best gift a person like myself can expect regarding 'home' - a chance to exercise my ability to choose what that is.

The Coming Out Ring

Walt Meyer

Every year since my friend Bill committed suicide, his mother and I had exchanged Christmas cards. And I am one of those people who do holiday letters. As I have drifted apart from college friends, those annual missives are the only updates I get or give to them and some others in my life, including Bill's mother. In the holiday letter of 1997, I had announced to the world that after years of hiding the truth even from myself, I had finally come to terms with being gay.

I had just moved to be closer to the gay neighborhood of San Diego from where I had been living in northern San Diego County, in Carlsbad. The house that I was now renting was on the hill above the Stadium where the 1998 Super Bowl would be held, close enough to hear the blimp engines and we'd be able to walk out to my front porch to see the Blue Angels flyover and watch the fireworks show. I decided to throw a Super Bowl/house warming/*coming out* party.

When I packed for the move from Carlsbad to San Diego, I had vowed I would really weed things out. If I was never going to read that book or wear that shirt again, I'd donate it. Bags of clothes went to charity and boxes of books went to the Library.

The Friday before Super Bowl Sunday I still had lots of unpacking to do to and I had promised myself that every single box would be emptied so I'd have Saturday free for party prep. I had about 15 boxes to go and was slicing into them, quickly dispatching whatever

I found to the appropriate shelf, closet, or cabinet. Then it happened.

I slit open a box that I moved to Carlsbad and from Carlsbad without having ever opened. It had stayed for years out of sight up above my car on the joists of the garage. I knew I was never going to wear the clothes that were in it or read the books or look at the photos hidden in it. In it were all of the things that reminded me of Bill. Photos of the trips we had taken together, music cassettes, books, clothes, and gifts he had given me over the years of our friendship. Shortly after Bill's death, unable to deal with my guilt and sadness, I had sealed all remembrances of him away and I had no intention of opening that box either before or after the move.

Suicide is different. I have lost close friends to cancer and felt terrible, but I never felt guilty. I can't cure cancer. I couldn't have done anything to prevent the car accidents that claimed other friends' lives. But suicide, rightly or wrongly, feels preventable. If I had listened better, if I had been a better friend, maybe it wouldn't have happened. Bill's suicide haunted me so badly that I couldn't bear to think about him without it causing days of depression.

I opened that box and on top was a bicycling jersey Bill had given me. It made my heart sink. I hadn't planned to deal with this box now or ever, but in my haste to finish unpacking, I had attacked the box without reading

the magic marker warning on the top. Shit. I didn't have time to deal with this. But the jersey wouldn't release my stare. I had way too much to do and couldn't spend time fixating on a stupid shirt. I should just re-seal the box and get back to work. Then I remembered my self-imposed dictum to get rid of anything I would never wear again. But I couldn't throw it out. It was one of my last tangible reminders of Bill. A reminder I couldn't bring myself to even look at, let alone wear, so I should just donate it. But I couldn't give it away. I should just seal the box and deal with another time. But I had to deal with it sometime. I should just throw it out. And so it went, my wheels spinning in the same circle as I faced what I had avoided for years. I also thought of the absurdity of keeping a cycling jersey—my knees were too shot to ride more than a few miles anyway. My days of riding centuries were over; that was something else Bill and I had in common, our knees had curtailed our serious cycling.

I got tired of standing over the box, but still couldn't let go of the dilemma. I carried the shirt to the living room and held it as I sat and stared at it and replayed the options in my head. Donate it. I can't. Wear it. I can't. Only to dismiss them all and start over again. After at least an hour, maybe two, I grew tired of my stupid indecision. I needed to go pick up my mail from my P.O. box before they closed and I hadn't put a shirt on yet that day, so I just decided, screw it. It's just a shirt. Put it on and go get the mail.

In that day's mail was a package slip. I stood in line and gave it to the clerk who retrieved a padded envelope just slightly too large to fit in the mailbox. On it was Bill's mother's return address. A month earlier, I had already received my once-a-year communication from her—a card with the usual short note, something to the effect of, "I hope you're doing well" so I hadn't expected anything.

With great curiosity, I opened the envelope. In it was a gold ring. I recognized it immediately as Bill's. He treasured that ring and had worn it for years. It had been made for him by his great-uncle, a dentist

in England who used scraps of dental gold in wax molds to make jewelry of his own designs. After Bill's great-uncle's death, the ring meant even more to him as a daily reminder of the man who had been his surrogate grandfather. Bill and I had that in common, also—we each had a special great-uncle who took the place of the grandfathers we both lacked.

After one trip to England to visit his mother's family, Bill came back heartbroken. He said he had been helping his mother's brother work in the garden and in the course of the digging and planting apparently the ring had slipped off his wet and slimy finger. He didn't notice it was gone until they were done and he was washing his hands. They went back the garden and raked and dug and searched. They even borrowed a metal detector, but to no avail. Bill had lost the last piece of his great-uncle and there was no way to replace it.

In the package with Bill's ring was a handwritten note from his mother. She said her brother had been working in his garden and found the ring. He thought she should have it. She received the ring the same day she got my coming out letter and she knew I had to have the ring. She said she was giving it to me by proxy for Bill and that she was happy that I had finally found the self-acceptance that Bill never had. Suddenly everything fell into place. The real reason Bill had killed himself.

I sat in the car and cried until I calmed down enough to drive home. It also seemed beyond coincidence that for the first time since Bill had died, I was wearing a shirt he had given me while I was holding his ring.

Bill's death had always been a scab for me. Not an open wound, but a barely-healed scab over a wound I was afraid to go anywhere near for fear of causing damage too deep to handle. I had a hard time ever remembering the good times with Bill since the ending was so horrible and my guilt so overwhelming that I shut out thinking about him at all. With the ring, I felt like he had forgiven me (if there was ever anything to forgive) and I knew I could finally start to think of him

without immediately going to the bad places.

When I got home, I called a friend of Bill's in L.A. and asked how soon I could see him. Monday, the day after the Super Bowl, I drove to L.A. to have dinner with him. He and Bill had gone to high school together and lived together in Belgium for almost a year when they were trying to break into the ranks of professional track cyclists. I figured if anyone knew if Bill was secretly gay, he would. He said that even in high school, Bill's friends had assured him that it was okay to come out. He'd still be their friend, and it would be okay. But Bill always vehemently denied being gay.

I asked why he thought Bill was gay and he ran through a list of stereotypical gay interests including liking Morrissey, Lucy, and Marilyn Monroe. The way he dressed and held his cigarette. I had noticed some of those things, but attributed the mannerism to being half English and spending so much time in Europe. (There is the old joke: Is he gay? No, just European.) The friend also said he wondered about my friendship with Bill and how quickly Bill and I became friends when we started working together and Bill at times saying things about me that crossed the line from friendship to crush.

The talk helped me understand so much. In my mind I replayed many of the moments I'd had with Bill and they made so much more sense now.

Once I sorted out the flood of emotions, I wrote to his mother and told her that far more than his ring, she given me back Bill. I know Bill is still with me. He is a part of me and I can enjoy the good memories without having to dwell on the bad. I cried for days when he died, but had been afraid to since; afraid to start again for fear I'd never stop. I finally let out what I had kept inside. It put one more piece of my old unhappy life behind me, to be even happier out of the closet.

I was able to unpack the rest of the box of Bill's stuff. Wear those shirts again. Look at photos of him, have on display some of the other gifts he had given me.

I sent Bill's mother her annual Christmas card about three years ago and a few days later got an email from a real estate agent in Pasadena. He said he was sorry to inform me that Bill's mother had died. He said in addition to selling the house for the family in England, he had been asked to check mail and follow up on things that required it. His mother never got over the death of her only son so at least now she was at peace.

My eyes are moist and I am wearing his ring as I type this, and although still weirded out by the coincidence of the timing, but there has to be a message here: if I ever needed a final endorsement that I was doing the right thing by choosing to be happy for the first time in my life, Bill's ring was certainly it.

I have had so many people ask about the ring over the years. Sometimes just holding out my credit card to pay in a store, the clerk has grabbed my hand and wanted to look at the ring. Some seemed to sense there is some magic to it and asked if it had a story. Once at a drug store, I started telling the story to the clerk and then I realized a line was forming at the register and I apologized and stepped aside and everyone in the line said, "No, this is good. Go on. Finish the story. Please continue."

437 Wilton Street (A Brick Story)

Zach Murphy

Charlie's wistful heart tingles as he pulls up to 437 Wilton Street, the apartment building from his childhood. Everything is gone but the skeleton of a structure and the echoes of Charlie's memories. You can board up the windows, but you can't cross out the souls that once occupied the walls.

Every Saturday night, the entire block would light up with a Fourth of July jubilation. Dueling music speakers battled to steal the humid air at full volume. The Ramones shouted to the rooftop. Bruce Springsteen crooned to the moon. And Sam Cooke sang to the heavens.

Out in the street, Rich used to show off his candy red Mustang. Rich thought he was a lot cooler than he actually was. His hair grease looked like a mixture of egg yolks and cement. Charlie hasn't forgotten the time that Rich revved up his ride in front of the whole neighborhood, only to blow the engine. As everybody laughed, Rich's face blushed redder than his broken car.

Shawn was the tallest human that Charlie had ever seen. He dribbled the basketball on the bubblegum-stained concrete like he had the world in his hands. He never did make it to the pros, though. But he did become a pro of another kind. Charlie hadn't heard about Shawn in years until the day a familiar voice spoke through the television. It was a commercial for a landscaping business — aptly named Shawn's Professional Landscaping.

Charlie wished that he were older. Then, maybe he might've gotten noticed by his first crush, Henrietta. He'd often daydream about her curly hair, sparkly lip gloss, and mysterious eyes. Sometimes when Charlie passed by her door, he'd hear loud yelling and harsh bangs. Wherever she is now, he hopes that she's safe and happy.

TJ always treated Charlie like a little brother. He'd even give him extra cash for snacks every single week. Charlie always admired TJ's bright red Nike shoes. One day, TJ got arrested by the cops in front of Charlie's very own eyes. It turned out that TJ was selling a certain kind of product, and it wasn't chocolates.

Charlie's grandma cooked the most delicious spaghetti. It smelled like love. The sauce was made from fresh tomatoes that she grew on the building's rooftop. Charlie still thinks of her sweet smile with the missing front tooth, and the big, dark moles on her cheeks. The cancer eventually got to her. When she was put to rest, Charlie was forced to go into a new home. But it wasn't really a home. The memories from that place are the ones that Charlie permanently boarded up in his mind.

After snapping out of his trance, Charlie picks up a decrepit brown brick from the building and sets it on the passenger side floor of his pristine Cadillac. When he arrives back at his quaint house in a quiet neighborhood, he places the brick in the soil of his tomato garden and smiles.

Bios

Anita Clark

Finding My Voice then Losing it Again or What I Learnt at School

Anita Clark writes about her working-class roots. She 'lost' her voice many years ago in a stone-grey Yorkshire school and has only recently begun to find it again.

Carmina Masoliver

Tattooing the Moon

Carmina Masoliver is a London poet, founder of She Grrrows and has been sharing her poetry on both the page and stage for over a decade, and her latest book 'Circles' is published by Burning Eye Books (2019). She has featured at nights and festivals including Latitude, Bestival and Lovebox.

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Christy Ku

Pass It On

Christy Ku is a poet, performer and facilitator. She is an alumna of the Barbican Young Poets, Making Lemonade, National Youth Theatre and New Earth Academy. Christy has worked on various poetry commissions with organisations such as the BBC, Apples & Snakes and the Barbican. She is the founder of BESEA Poets.

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@@kukadoodles

Fatema Matin

Let's Talk About Racism

Fatema Matin is a British-Bangaldeshi unpublished writer- want to be published author- from Birmingham. She currently works as a school librarian which is the perfect job her because she gets to combine her passion for reading, writing and her enthusiasm for working with young people.

James McDermott

Food For Thought / Stallion

James McDermott is a queer writer based in East Anglia. His poetry collection Manatomy is published by Burning Eye. James's poems have been published in The Gay and Lesbian Review, The Cardiff Review, Popshot Quarterly, Confluence and Dawntreader. James was shortlisted for Outspoken's Performance Poetry Prize 2020 and Commended in The Winchester Poetry Prize 2020.

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Jane Russell

Sex With Leonard Woolf /

"Suck it Up" - 21st Century Sonnet

Jane Russell was named by her mother after the screen idol. In a civil partnership with a female Sri Lankan sculptor for many years, she still thinks of herself as bisexual. She dislikes identity politics and loathes imperialism of any colour. She supports radical climate change activism.

Julia Dudycz

The Virgin Mother

Julia Dudycz is a Polish writer and artist based in West Yorkshire. Her visual and written work, both fictional and not, are influenced by the personal and lived experience and are used as a method of understanding and processing.

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Len Lukowski

That's Not A Dog It's A

Len Lukowski is a writer and performer living in Glasgow. He writes short stories, poetry, fiction, memoir and lyrics. His debut pamphlet 'The Bare Thing' will be published in 2022 by Broken Sleep Books.

@JurassicLen

Megan Moreland

Her Name Is Revenge

Megan Moreland is an 18-year-old-student and proud Welshwoman. She has a love of fiction and a passion for using writing to explore and better understand challenging topics like grief and mental illness.

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Riccardo Belà

In and Out of Focus: Ten Images of a Atili-Life

Riccardo is an architect and aspiring lecturer who first discovered a passion for creative writing aged ten. He has continued to explore the art of writing as a form of architecture and has a keen interest in utilizing creative writing to push the boundaries of scholarly narrative. He is now completing a second Master's degree in History of Architecture.

Shani Solomons

Permission

Shani has had four novels and one short story published and has also written scripts for Universal Studios and various radio stations. She also wrote the lyrics and music for an album of songs, 'Making Ripples' which was professionally recorded and produced in a studio.

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Adeeba Kausar

A Long Way Home

Adeeba is a 26 year old student from the UK. Being the child of parents that had migrated from Kashmir, Adeeba has dedicated her life to healing and transforming the lives of others, through her writing and studies she aims to connect with audiences worldwide and bring out the best in those she encounters along her journey.

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Anu Pohani

Diabolic Fermentation

Anu lives in London with her family and Alfie, the Tibetan terrier. Her essays and short stories have appeared in Entropy, Off Menu Press, and Fudoki. She is currently working on her first novel.

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Jenny Recaldin

The Giant of Jubilee Road

Jenny has been writing short fiction and scripts since high school and during her time at Exeter University wrote about anything from the Black Death to spoof Cosmo articles. Her writing tends to lean towards the absurd and draws often on legends and folklore, transposed into suburban settings.

Matthew Keeley

Tobey

Matthew is a writer and teacher living in Glasgow. His debut sci-fi novel, *Turning the Hourglass*, was published in 2019 and his new coming-of-age novel, *The Stone in My Pocket*, was published by The Conrad Press in March 2021.

Natalia Victoria Greene

Turning Heads

Natalia is from the UK but recently returned from a stint living in Mexico City. She enjoys writing in her spare time, reviving memories of Mexico and other travels. Prior to living in Mexico Natalia experienced relative fame blogging about her darkly comic experiences as a frontline police officer. She lives in South London with her partner and has got through the pandemic by running, playing piano, and dreaming of foreign travel.

Nikki Dudley

The Night Carer

Nikki is managing editor of *streetcake* magazine and also runs the *streetcake* writing prize and *MumWrite*. She has a chapbook and collection with KFS. She is the winner of the Virginia Prize 2020 and her second novel, *Volta* will be published in 2021.

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River Ellen MacAskill

Dreaming After Gogou

River Ellen MacAskill (b. 1994) is based in Glasgow. They co-founded the Writers 4 Utopia queer sci-fi collective; wrote 'A9', a novella in *Hometown Tales: Highlands & Hebrides* (W&N, 2018); self-published the *Slow Down* per-zine series and the novel *Coasting*. Their pamphlet *Virility at Home* is forthcoming in 2021.

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Sarah Lusack

To The Most Unlikely Man To Break My Heart

Sarah Lusack is a British-Gambian writer and actress. She mostly writes essays and poetry. Sarah is currently studying for an MA in Creative and Critical Writing at Birkbeck.

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Scott Tait

The Wild God

Scott Aaron Tait (he/they) is a gay autistic writer with a Fine Art MFA from Newcastle University. His writing has been featured in *The Write Launch*, *Odd Magazine* and is forthcoming in *Pastel Pastoral*. In 2016 his work was shortlisted for Theatre Cloud's *Tell a Tale Prize*. He is co-editor of *Queerlings*, an online literary magazine of queer writing which seeks to uplift LGBTQIA+ writers. Between meltdowns, they collect things, mostly books, and drink copious amounts of coffee.

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Theresa Harold

Rain Don't Go

Born in Hong Kong, freelance journalist Theresa Harold has written for numerous publications including *The Independent*, *The Telegraph*, and *Lonely Planet*. She's currently writing her first book – a memoir. Working title: *Frog Soup*.

Thomas Elson

Three Things

Thomas Elson's short stories, poetry, and flash fiction have been published in numerous venues such as Calliope, The Cabinet of Heed, Ellipsis, Pinyon, Inlandia, Lunaris, New Ulster, Lampeter, Selkie, and Adelaide. He divides his time between Northern California and Western Kansas.

Thomas Morgan

Menus

Thomas Morgan is a writer from Worthing in West Sussex. He's been published in Dream Catcher Magazine, STORGY, Bandit Fiction, Nymphs, and Truffle Magazine.

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Victory Witherkeigh

Hard Knock Life

Victory Witherkeigh is a female Filipino author and has been a finalist for Killer Nashville's 2020 Claymore Award, an Honoree for Cinnamon Press's 2020 Literature Award, and Wingless Dreamer's 2020 Overcoming Fear Short Story award. Her work has appeared in both online and print literary magazines and genre fiction.

Walt Meyer

The Coming Out Ring

Walter G. Meyer is the co- or ghost-writer of six nonfiction books and the critically-acclaimed, award-winning, Amazon-bestselling gay-themed novel Rounding Third. His articles have appeared in dozens of magazines and newspapers including Out and Advocate. He is the co-author of a widely-produced stage play GAM₃RS.

Zach Murphy

437 Wilton Street (A Brick Story)

Zach Murphy is a Hawaii-born writer with a background in cinema. His stories appear in Reed Magazine, Ginosko Literary Journal, The Coachella Review, Mystery Tribune, Yellow Medicine Review, Ellipsis Zine, Drunk Monkeys, Wilderness House Literary Review, and Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine. His forthcoming chapbook "Tiny Universes" (Selcouth Station Press) is due out in Spring 2021. He lives with his wonderful wife Kelly in St. Paul, Minnesota.

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