

SPELLBINDER

Issue 2 | Spring 2021

A Quarterly Literary and Art Magazine

Featured

Paul Lyalls

Poetry

Molly Andrew

Fiction

Zach Murphy

Nonfiction

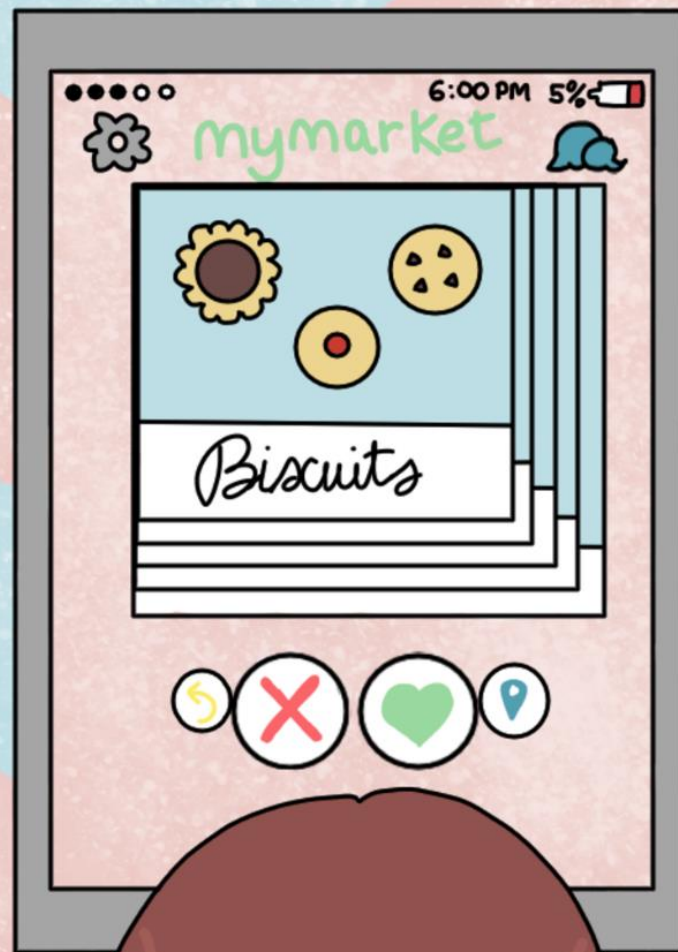
Malia Mendez

Art

Anne Moore

Cover

Linda Arrighi



Spellbinder

Spring 2021

PDF Edition

Spellbinder

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EDITOR'S LETTER

"Spring drew on . . . and a greenness grew over those brown beds, which, freshening daily, suggested the thought that Hope traversed them at night, and left each morning brighter traces of her steps." - Charlotte Bronte, Jane Eyre.

As Bronte wrote in *Jane Eyre*, spring is the season of hope. The success of the vaccine programme in the United Kingdom in recent months is giving people hope that it may not be long now until we can return to normal. However, the pandemic has also tested and reconfigured people's values. For example, you may have discovered a newfound appreciation for the small things and the little moments in life that make you happy, or you may have benefited from time off work to realise that you actually want to pursue a different career path. Covid-19 has given people the chance to re-evaluate their lives in this way, but also to consider their relationship to the natural world. The reduction in pollution levels as a result of lockdown, and the increase in people interacting with the great outdoors on daily walks may have stimulated more consciousness about our human responsibility to the planet and the need to respect our environment. As a result of these renewed and altered perspectives, I hope that we can look forward to greater freedom, but also greater appreciation of the people and nature surrounding us. With this positive attitude in mind, we welcome our contributors and readers to another season of literary and artistic creativity at Spellbinder.

We have been extremely pleased with the positive reception to our first issue, published at the start of this year. Establishing the magazine was a huge project and we were very nervous about publishing it in paperback and digital form. Fortunately, the magazine has been successful and far-reaching which makes us even more excited for a future in which it continues to grow and in which we can work to develop a supportive literary and artistic community.

Spring is also a season associated with birth and growth. This parallels this moment in the evolution of Spellbinder as we are working on expanding our community and making our service even more user-friendly, engaging and inspiring. For example, since January, we have been very proud to launch the Spellbinder Blog. This has four sections; the first of which is our Editor's Picks, which showcases and reviews some of the best extracts from the works published in our back issues of the magazine. Then we have our Tips platform, which helps and advises writers and artists about how to improve the quality of their work. We also have a Resources department, which provides a series of writing and art group activities to help people learn about, as well as experiment within their preferred creative medium. Finally, we have Prompts posts, which expand upon the initial ideas we post through our Instagram channel. These posts have been really fun to write and it has been interesting initiating a conversation with our readers, whose voices we are keen to hear and interact

with. This opportunity to support, inspire and celebrate our contributors has also been one that is very close to our hearts.

For our Spring Issue we also decided to accept works of Flash as a new category within the Fiction section of our magazine along with Short Stories. We received many submissions within this genre, which made it an enjoyable but challenging process selecting the best ones to go into this Spring Issue. Moreover, the third and final change for this season was the introduction of our Featured section of the magazine. Although we are keen to publish the works of both emerging and established writers and artists, we wanted a section specifically dedicated to celebrating more well-known individuals within these fields. For this reason we have decided to reach out to those who would not usually consider submitting their work to magazines which predominantly promote the work of new writers and artists. We believe that having a Featured section gives our newer creatives something to aspire to, and also creates an inclusive and supportive community in which emerging, established and well-known writers and artists can all benefit from and support each other. We are very grateful to have Paul Lyalls, former Poet-in-Residence at the Roald Dahl Museum, on board for our Spring Issue. We are looking forward to reaching out to more big names in the industry very soon.

We have many exciting plans for developing and expanding the Spellbinder publication and online interactive community further in the coming months. We hope that you enjoy the great works we have on offer for you in this issue and that you continue to support our community. We would love to hear your voices, so we encourage you to submit your work, to follow us on social media, and to comment on our blog posts and let us know what you would like to see in these spaces in the near future.

By Amber Kennedy

FEATURED WRITER

Skinny

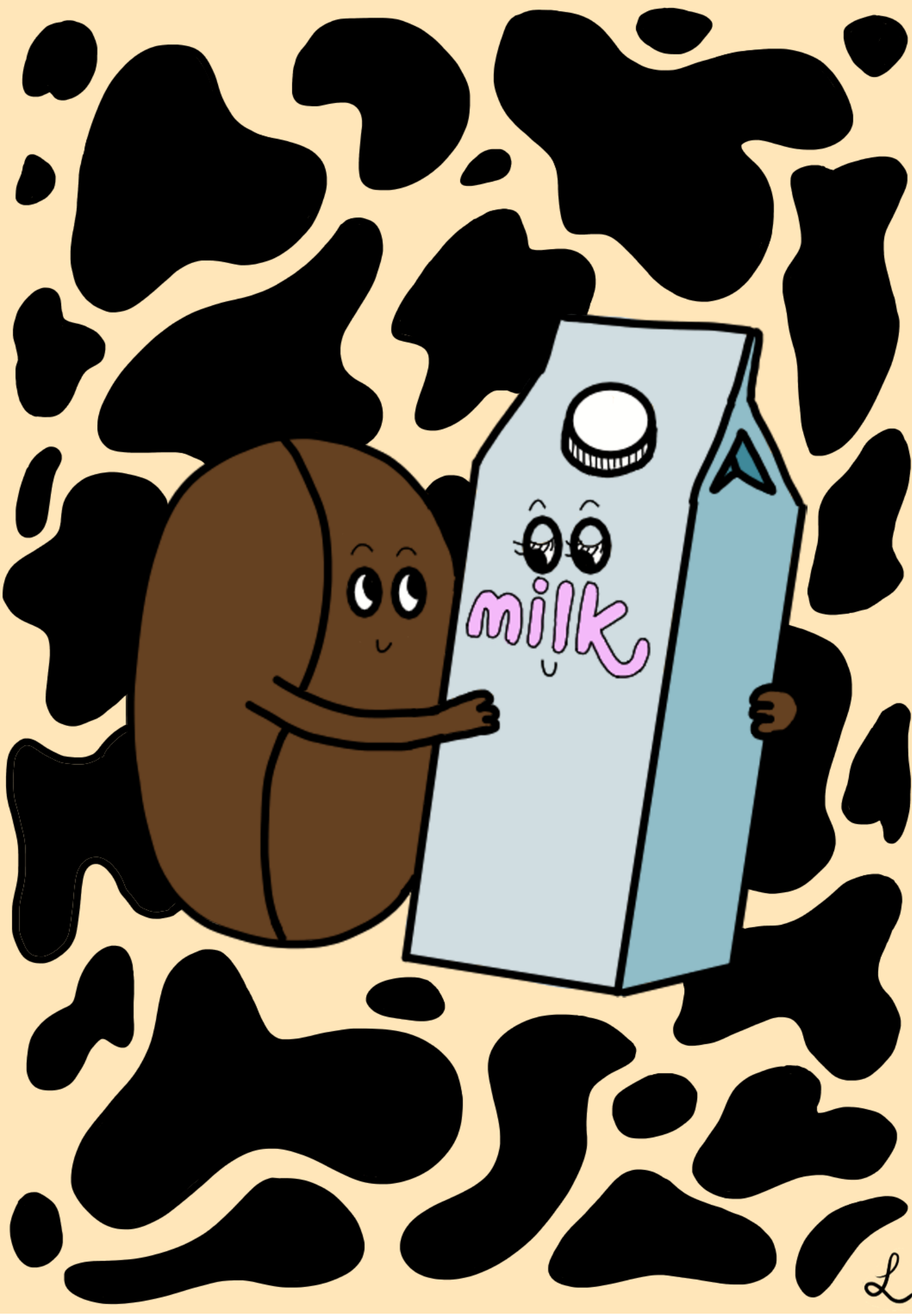
What skin are you in?
What colour is your thing?
How do you take your coffee?
Skinny Mocha, Flat White,
Latte, black, with crème?
What skin is your theme?
Single shot, Macchiato
Black Americano,
Coffee, Coffee with cinnamon sprinkles,
Old Roast with wrinkles,
Cappuccino, Vanilla chai
It's what we see with our eye.
Don't judge us in an instant.
We are all related to one another, by a single shot distance.
You could be my brother?
You could be my sister?
You could be my ten times removed barista
Same coffee shop, just different tables
Same packaging, just different labels.
We are all a different bean
A variation of the human bean.
We have been around, lost and found, we have been ground,
Roasted, steamed, twirled
Then swirled back into the world.
We have been blended, we have been recommended.
Ultimately, we are all skinny,
It's the skin we are in
But it's our coming together doing the percolating.
We are made with the same steam wand.
We are made weak or strong.
Our delicate lives are like froth,
We are a one off.
We are refined from the human kind grind
And tonight we are going to latte like it's 1999!

So whatever your thing,
It's the only skin
We've got
In this coffee shop life, we all deserve a great shot.

Paul Lyalls



Paul Lyalls has been writing, performing and workshopping poems and poetry for twenty-five years. Highlights include being Poet in Residence for The Roald Dahl Family and Museum, a London 2012 Olympic Poet, a 2014 Great War Poet & regularly working with Arsenal FC and even gigging at Wembley. 'Catching The Cascade' is his current adult collection and for kids he has written 'A Funny Thing Happened'. He has a poem in the 'Black Lives Matter anthology', which was published in 2020. Throughout lockdown, he started a very successful bespoke poem service. He has also gigged with Kate Tempest, The Libertines & Rasta Mouse! A new highlight is being published in Spellbinder! www.paul-lyalls.uk



POETRY

Song for the Sage no. VIII. **(1 of 14 for Allen Ginsberg)**

And... a studio on Grant Avenue,
all West coast rhythms,
hanging with painters, poets, musicians,
and Neal and Jack and Gary,
Robert de Vigne, Philip Laminita,
and depressed, so lovely Orlovsky.
We Beats widen the circle of our friends,
spread the word and seed, indeed, and Beat,
expose the golden sunflower of yourself.
Freedom, tenderness, let it all hang out,
soul exposure, naked flesh,
strip away that persona,
performative composure,
with style, against the philistines, unite;
epater le bourgeoisie
and read poetry at the Six gallery.
Expression spontaneous, marijuana jazziness,
philosophical anarchism, far out.
Bhang!
An epic vocal bard sang.

Gar O'Dwyer

The Tooth Fairy

Amidst the plush fibres of cotton-edged rooms
Where comatose freshness from infancy teems,
A welt in the roof tiles, furred and green,
Is pried open along eight-legged seams –
The enamel fairy arises from its catacombic
Sleep; puckered and embalmed, like
A maggot wiled by metamorphosis and dilated
By rainfall, drunk on the ruse of tykes
The decrepit plaything now looms,
Sworn bitter by age and undone wings
Flittering wildly in moth-razed costumes
Merry with abjection, doused in time's parfum
It feasts greedily on duck-feathers –
The altar of the bedroom
Yielding a swaddled tooth that spumes
Folkish dreams of silver.
The sprite, now thick-set with riches and
Sated shining eyes
Unties its steely shoulder blades
And bathes in the flaxen blush
Of its calcified fingertips and gilded abdomen.

Lara Davis

A Long drive

I have been driving for a while now,
The further I get, the faster I go
The desert shrinks vastly into fertile green.
I see the end of three years.

I know that I can look now
The closer to free, the more I am free
To glance behind and see what is there
Glitter that I swore was gold

There we are in the rear-view,
So far, so small and so slight
I almost miss us...
The looks,
Smiles,
Laughs,
Questions,
Yesses,
A fight,
Yesses,
Parents,
Promotions,
Two keys,
A lock,
A fight,
And yesses,
Sundays,
Showers,
Who's she?
A fight,
Yesses,
Drunk,
Fights,

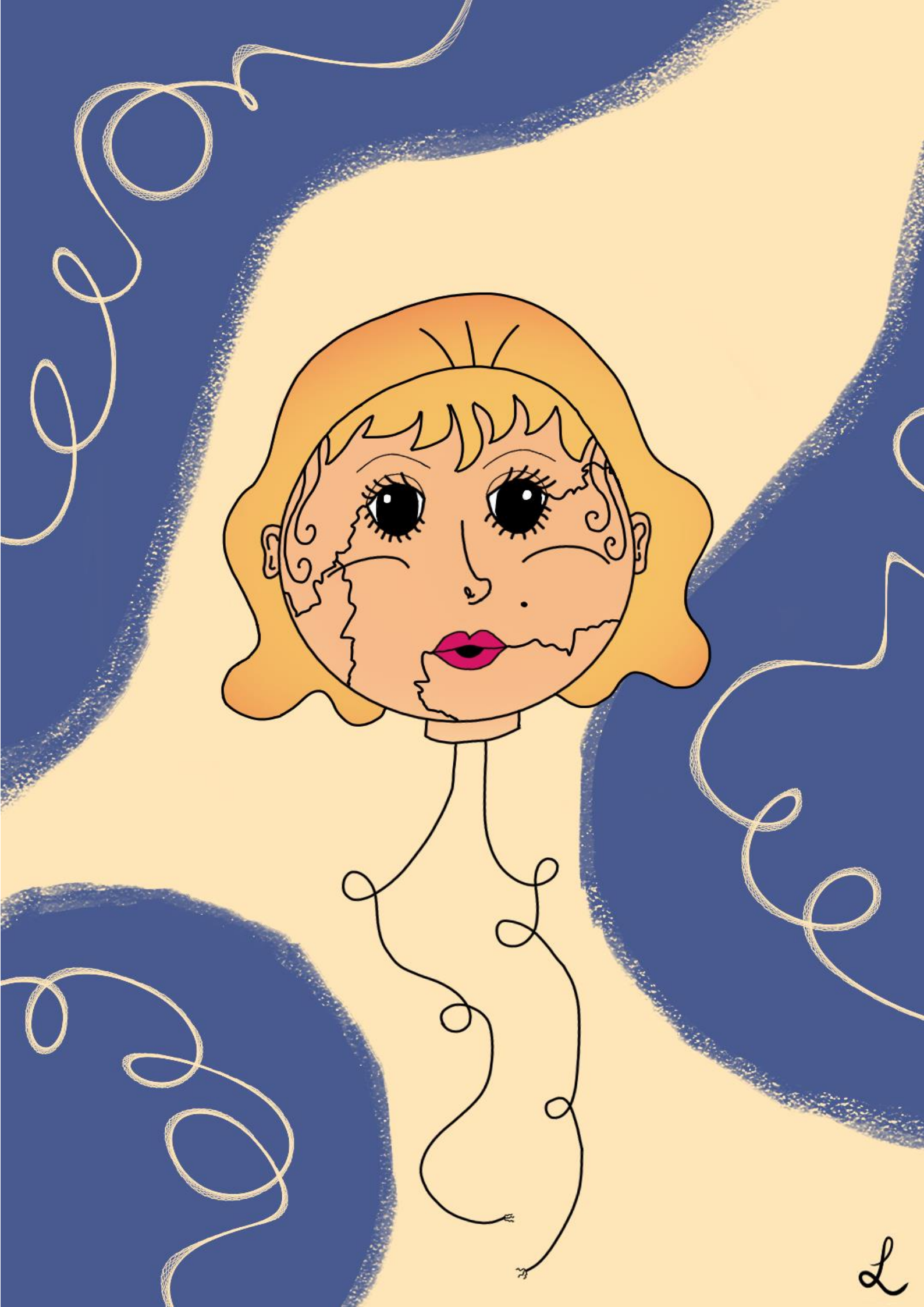
...But I don't
I see our car crash
So slight and small
And I stare
As it disappears
Faster and faster

Lucy Deane

Green Parakeet

A green parakeet,
blast-beruffled, portly and
parakeet-green
– lines written months ago in a different clime.
I do return but he is undeviating:
compact, complete, ever green.
I'd say he scorns me
but that would be unfair, untrue.
He is not Delphic, not deliberate but
brute green fact –
at best implying green poetry like
grass seeds imply growth.
His colour was a kind of promise
of *something, something, something*

Matilda Sykes



Doll Strings

I pulled her out of my head
and snapped the doll strings, one by one.
Her intestines slap-stung my knuckles
like spiteful elastic
and I pulled and pulled them,
trying to hurt her back.

Then I tried to send her away,
but the doll strings coiled up
and tightened around my neck.
She was out of my head
but I'd brought her to life,
and now I can't forget her.

Molly Andrew

Erl King

Ah! And didn't he creep in,
crinkled eyes set in his bony face
like the great oak in the forest,
old before his time
and didn't the careful quiver
of his slight hand
betray his intention
when he saw you, child,
behind the lustre of velvet curtain
in the corner
of the dining room.
Perhaps your heart beat like the
wings of the raven,
your breath the hurl
of the steam train,
his needle sharp
pinched glare
his outstretched, withered fingers

Millicent Stott

Hooves

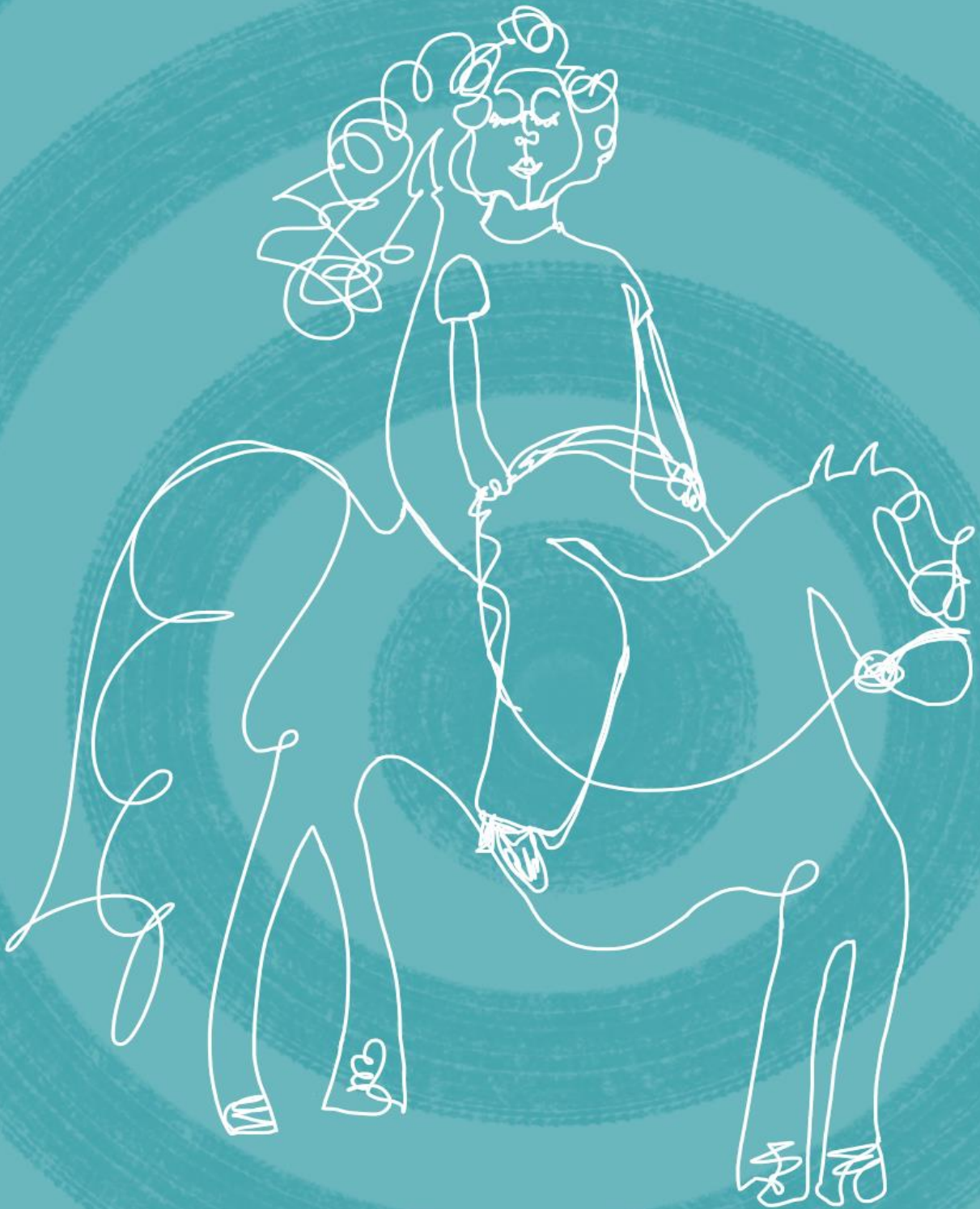
Horses being shod means treats for the dogs
They circle the yards then stand still, waiting
The farrier clips at hooves, pincers clicking
Pieces of hoof zinging off, landing in the dirt.
The hoof knives are used to pare back the frog
The rasp finishes the job, zigzagging a curve
The horse's hoof manicured into a neat circle
Placed gingerly on the ground; tentative steps

The dogs rush in to snatch up the pieces; then
Dart past the horse, her tail twitching a warning
They gnaw on the half-moons of greying hoof
Spittle forming foam at the sides of their jaws.
Desiccating hoof shavings lie scattered around
Sprinkled across the ground; they remind me
Of shredded coconut; grated up and uncanny
Do they even count as part of a horse anymore?

Carved off horse hoof smells sweet and rotten
Like gunk under nails, airless and putrefying
The dogs guard such prizes, chew them for days
While horses buried in paddocks feed the earth.
We pile rocks on the mounds hiding their bodies
So foxes will be deterred from digging them up
Each time a horse is buried, I try to forget the soil
Eroding; that old bones will one day blunt teeth.

I remember standing by a paddock fence, age eight
On Canberra's outskirts following the 2003 fires
Razing hills, toppling trees; the sheds had twisted
In the heat. Animals, meanwhile, turned to meat.
That day, a bitzer dog ran up to my side, panting
Its sides swelled like fire bellows: taut, straining
Dropped a weight by my shoe; long tongue lolling
At its grisly gift: a single hoof, already decomposing

Rosalind Moran



Grief

I stared at the fan as its shadows stared back at me
Wishing I could fiddle with the keys
Hoping everything was gone
Coffee had shrunk under the straw that my lips perched on
Like the time you gave me the orange juice to hold on to
It was a hot summer, like any you would sweat to
Day in and night worrying for the exams I swore to
Cut apples, braid hair, turn the music to dance to
Plants watered, laundry sought, living room jokes to crack to
Now my eyes flutter seeking your hand unlike the past
Since when did the time run so fast?
You weren't so cold in our last embrace
I told you to eat the cough drops in the first place.
Like the time you scolded me because of books
But gave me an ice cream cone to smile to
Folding my uniform with pride, a lunch to pray to
Singing crudely to embarrass me, sweet lullabies to sleep to
Talks on your lap, sour pickles behind your back, suns cream on my face to bathe to
Oversized T-shirts for later, quick search when behind the counter to run to
How did the warmth turn to winter?
I didn't want a green-blue hue'd wrinkle
Why did the memories like your three- four hair become grey?
Your face as soft as clay
Now ashen like the incense that I wasted on, prayed
Plenty choked on everyday, on this deadly trade.
If only everyone could stay home, stay safe
But now I stare at the ceiling's chafe
The morning goes on even as I rake
The empty bed reeks and the world will never be the same.

Shreya Rawat

Instructions Left For

women like me, whose bones crack at fragile heat from the top oven.
 Umi told me to crank it higher. aseed can't be made without boiling
 water or a wooden stick to stir the pot of wheat flour. It requires skill and strategy.
 No translation for the ones who mispronounce their names in their mother's language.
 I measure fire there. Attempt to ignore when the butter drips to burn my feet.
 Can't mix the hilba when my hands meet a burning handle. Say, Afwan. Yes, my body
 speaks back when my mouth puckers in defeat

what museum do I explore when every yemeni woman is an artist
 Umi towers above me as my tour guide in haq al yemen's kitchen
 drapes our history along my shoulders

Ask: *am I doing this right, al-an?* But it looks too clumpy to resemble anything I've
 ever eaten like it's an abstract painting on display. And I hate the abstract man

in front of you, you think that I live the life you couldn't dream
 Do you see yourself in me? If nostalgia awakens, maybe
 there is Alakel* in me

Here is the canvas left of those who belonged. I see your name
there.
 it reads like his paintings,
 Does that include me?
 You say that I am young. Have much to learn. wonder how I fit in

**Refers to Hakim Alakel, a famous Yemeni painter*

Tahani Almujaheed

THE POETS

Gar O'Dwyer is an artist, curator, film-maker and writer. He has studied History of Art at Sussex University and Fine Art at Central Saint Martins. He has travelled extensively for art and curating practice. He is influenced by Dada, Beats, Camus and others. He recently participated in a Novel writing course at City University. He describes himself in the following way: London born and bred, maverick and non-conformist, drawers stuffed with unpublished manuscripts, fire hazard, identifies as working class, gay, male, vegan, dog lover. Read more at houseofodwyer.com. Follow on Instagram @GarDeDa.



Lara Davis is a nineteen-year-old student living in London. The early days of lockdown were sluggish, although not fruitless for Lara. With days spent looking out of the window, she was plunged into a poetry rabbit hole. In her first year at Exeter University, she had briefly touched on the composition of poetry, something which she had indulged in from a very young age. Aged five, she wrote a poem about a dreamscape, involving dragons, pots of gold and silver-tinged skies. Perhaps this was a confused patchwork of fairy-tales she had heard once before, yet, even fourteen years later, she is still drawn to the fantastical and the otherworldly.

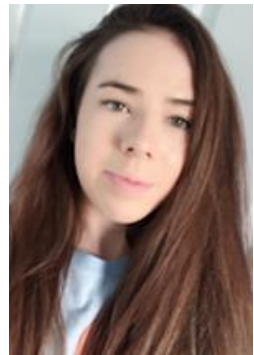
Lucy Deane is a nineteen-year-old first year BA English Literature student at UCL. Most of her creative writing adventures thus far have been for her own fun, though as she progresses through her degree, she will press herself to write more. 'A Long Drive' was written at a time when a lot of seemingly stable relationships that she is close to began to crumble. For her, this poem is about reminiscing about something because it is gone but realising that there is better things waiting ahead of her.





Matilda Sykes lives in West London and cannot keep animals out of her poetry. Current pastimes include absorbing Anne Carson's brilliance, running, making omelettes and writing sonnets about birds.

Molly Andrew is a twenty-year-old English student from South Wales, currently in her final year at the University of Exeter. She has had a passion for writing poetry ever since her school's Eisteddfod when she was thirteen. Some of her poetry has featured on the Unpublishable Zine and their Spotify podcast. She hopes to gain more experience by participating in the writing community and interacting with other people who love poetry.



Millicent Stott is a nineteen-year-old writer and English Literature student from Saltburn but currently living in Durham. Her work is inspired by magical realism, folklore and the natural world. She loves feminist literature and experimental poetry, and is currently working on developing her voice as a writer. She posts some of her favourite pieces on Instagram @mills.poetry.

Rosalind Moran is a British/Australian writer of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. Her writing has appeared in Reader's Digest, Prospect Magazine, Kill Your Darlings, Meanjin Quarterly, and Rabbit Poetry Journal, among others. She was also a runner-up in the 2019 June Shenfield Poetry Award. Follow @RosalindCMoran.





Sebastian Lewis is from Dorset. A poem of his ('Last Night') was published in ENIGMA journal in 2020, where he is now Poetry Editor. Sebastian is currently working towards his debut pamphlet, which he hopes to self-publish later this year using recycled paper, an ISBN, and a homemade bookpress.

This is the third poem from the hut of an Indian-origin American artist. A thing of beauty lasts forever; however, we mortals do not. **Shreya Rawat** wishes to create and give to the world, even if her work gets lost in its hustle and bustle. Amator (lover) she is to the world's beauty and an amateur she is to this work. Sadly, she cannot juggle, but she can make art and compositions which would definitely hurt Plato.



Tahani Almujaheed is a Yemeni-American writer from Dearborn, Michigan. She is an undergraduate studying English and International Studies at the University of Michigan - Ann Arbor. She currently works with Michigan Quarterly Review as an Editorial and Marketing Assistant. She has written for the Michigan Journal of International Affairs, Michigan Daily, Writer to Writer, Oakland Arts Review, and is forthcoming in other journals. She focuses her writing on her experiences, language, family history, identity, love, and loss.

SHORT STORIES

Waitrose Sweetheart

London is cold and crowded in December, typical for twenty-eighteen. I turn down my collar as I bend around the row of buildings, into a sheltered street, and walk on to my goal. It has been a long day, the bell somewhere in the big city strikes six. Prime-time to kick my feet up, open my phone screen and click on any of the myriad social apps I've installed. Get gently absorbed into a technicolour showcase of other people's lives, guessing and wondering what they might really be like if I ever met them. There aren't a lot of particularly interesting specimens around. Yet. These first looks are the least fruitful, I know. Only perseverance and filtering a tremendous volume of faces will crystallise into something entertaining to follow through, like committing to reading all 25 comments' worth of a strangers' argument. What a perfectly scrumptious pastime. From that, my mind turns towards meals, their making, the preparation, the sweet and the sour, the sum of their parts. It's heading on to Christmas and I will need to bring food to the annual family party. Hence, the barn-like Waitrose, my final in a series of destinations. I must find my fare here – to come empty-handed is out of the question. Family disappointment at a family dinner being the worst possible nightmare before, on, and even after Christmas. It's usually a loud, lurid, unlauded affair as is.

Three years ago, I took with me steaks – nice, beefy, expensive – and became the mark of desirous glares throughout all of dinner. I wanted to take the left-overs home, but there was just a strip left, drowning in wine, sans the swank sauce that came with the meat at the start. A year later, I thought it best to stick to vodka: effeminate and efficient in getting too drunk to care about parents' opinions. An insolvent's solvent staple, from our family's poor old days. I left with shoes dipped in that Cosmopolitan which my baby cousin thought to steal from me in the break before having dessert. She is a casual alcoholic, but her chugging my vodka in the upstairs bathroom was not a flattering look. Grudgingly, I kept her secret. I thought beer would be a better classic last year – a crateful of the kind brewed in the British Isles for centuries. The critique I got was 'too-fat' and 'blue-collar,' which is rich coming from Mum, who still pronounces the 'x' in espresso.

Oh, but what shall I bring to enjoy the festive season with me this time! Perhaps a little bottle of Jack, fitting right in with father's taste, though really just for me to enjoy. Oh, to sit with my arm around the back of the sofa, in a suit three sizes too big but which gives me broad shoulders, buzzed on a wee bit of whiskey. My mum, ironically, hates when I look or act like a guy more than her devout father once would have. Or maybe she'd simply be angry that I brought home a little something that's so up my dad's alley: amber, American, and an absolute liquid sin.

But quality liquor at Waitrose takes too much effort to buy, with its elaborate labels and too many questions.

I browse the aisles. The choice in the UK is exuberant, a far cry from the slim pickings I could scavenge in the rural corrupt regime back home: Someplace A Bit West of Russia. A

shame the family brought our barbaric pageant variant of a Christmas Eve spread with us while emigrating. It's doubly unfortunate we also brought grandmother, and mother, and cousin Kira, and father, and his annoying mini-me Tomas – brother dearest, who is 'too young' to bring food to the table. It is a veritable embarrassment to get any provisions for these Christmas ordeals, for the food and drinks' own sake. Scandalous, really, for the steak to be eaten alive by five people who don't even pretend to enjoy the affair.

It is not, contrary to what has been implied, simply a matter of class or cash difference. It's Mother's arguments, Father's stares, Kira's appetite, Tomas' questions, and Grandmother's sermons. Above all, it's their combined hatred of my choice of nourishment, no matter what I've brought round this time. Unamused, they glare until the food shrivels up, the drink dries out to leave stains on the brand-new tableware. Much of my family's house is indeed very fresh, rich-smelling and recently renovated.

Tomas is just out of boarding school and up at St. Andrews – refreshing, fits right in with the decor.

Kira moved to London at sixteen: lip-fillers, business studies, a self-made style boutique, sex, and next to no etiquette. British university life did not impact her intellect but only served to enhance her inherent bawdiness: as if with her glitzy poor taste, she is forever proving a point. Her family are the crass nouveaux-riches of our native capital.

Her uncle – my father – is a businessman without scruples, but he is also the most refined of our lot. Quiet, not much of a drinker, he knows the reality of moving country and culture. He knows: in this place, money is the only pedigree keeping you from being trampled by Ascot thoroughbreds with aristocrat riders. He values the hard work that delivers, education, ergonomic office chairs, and moving up in the world. Tolerates the others' exhibitionist excess and occasional Eastern-bloc orthodoxy. Father is probably the closest I get to understanding in this family's household, but even he staunchly disapproves of my yearly Christmas offerings.

Mummy and Grandmother are unremarkable characters, except for the fact that their mindsets belong in the Slavic serf era and they are the most frequent reason for me to take my food to finish upstairs in affront.

It is not, then, the new flashy money of a family born in a concrete cage in the suburbs. That isn't the problem. Instead, I hate bringing anything for Christmas, and Christmas itself, because the slum psyche in them has outlasted the ghetto. 'Colonialism', 'immigration', and 'foreigner transplants' are all big words they teach you at school, but the real UK-née-USA dream is all-rot on the inside, even while the outside sparkles like Harrods-bought Christmas-tree baubles.

Waitrose is big and cold and has no internet signal half-way into the dairy section. You might ask why we don't order in, Champagne, butlers, and metal dish covers. According to Mum, we are a family and it would be too impersonal, tactless. I would have still brought something self-cooked with me, just to spite her, even if she were big on involving a catering service.

In passing the well-wrapped bits of meat, I think back to the steak from several years ago. How very firm, and piquant, and elegant. Neatly dressed and prepared, my family didn't

deserve that one. I remember the other times I had that very same fillet, once, in particular, was a beautiful time. A delicate autumn breeze ruffled the tablecloth, London weather being, for once, warm and dry. It would have been a dinner for two, with wine and hors d'oeuvres next to the window, except that we weren't quite a couple, it was just that steak and I there.

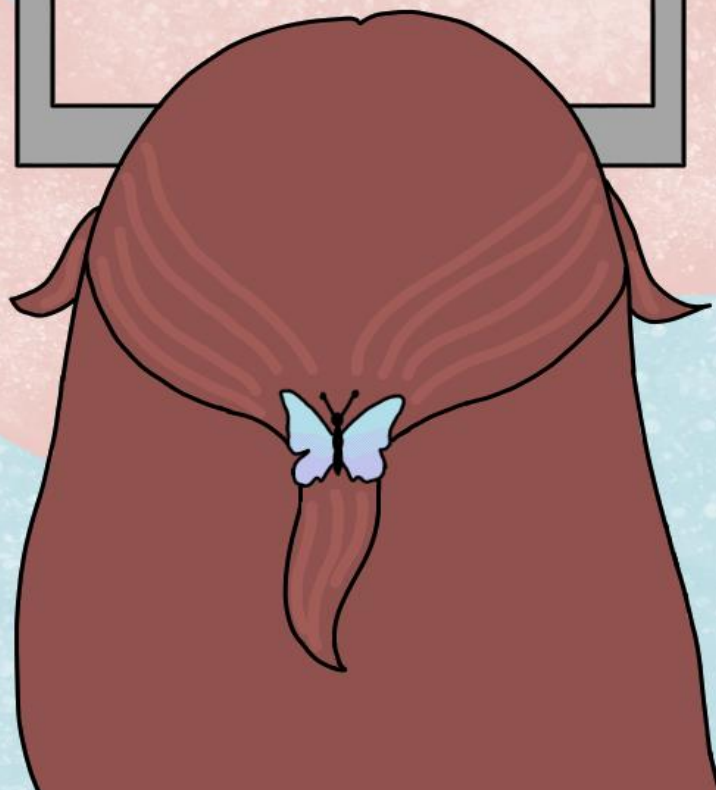
This time around, the butchered bits here in Waitrose look both obscene and sterile. The salmon is wilted, the burgers speckled with red like beef-acne. Besides, I have to decide whether to bring food or drink for this year. The former equals serious scrutiny and earnest questions about content, consistency, and aftertaste; the latter means a slippery pretence, where I act like I never indulge in indecent things. I didn't out Kira for her little vodka-enthused escapade because I knew what her parents would do. My own turned a reluctant blind eye to any and all such addictive proclivities, but that is a charitable rarity for anyone with conservative-purity views.

Still undecided, I pause by the cheese. There are so many pieces that look just the same: clean-cut, organic. Of course, they cannot be vegan, but I think they put up a worthy, valiant front. Italian, French, probably strong-smelling behind all that gauze, they make you feel exotic alongside them, even if you've never been to neither Provence nor Parma. The labels all speak to me with an accent, 'Bonjour mon chérie, would you like a bite?' It is salacious but brings back sweet memories of a holiday at a cottage called a chateau outside the city where I had grown up. My parents' friends' wedding reception: at seventeen, it was there that I first sampled sparkling wine. She was bubbly and light and sent a buzz up to my eyeballs, making the old-fashioned event ever more bearable for the illicit nature of my tasting.

Beer, whiskey, gin, tequila – burning and sweet, they all followed over the years, interspersed with good meals all-round, in neighbouring Vienna, New York, and a particularly long set of banquets here in London, my new home. Some I had ordered, some flavours were introduced as gifts by my friends, some binge eating or drinking happened by chance, some out of spite, curiosity, vanity. It isn't, by far, my first time at Waitrose, even if it's not my preferred place to shop for my tastebuds.

I do hope you don't think that I'm spoilt. A love of food and drink might make others fat, but I take good care of my figure. The vittles themselves don't want those without any control, greedy, hoarding more than one plateful at a time, taking but never tasting. That's what Mum fears will happen if Father truly ever savours his alcohol, if he sees beyond the inebriation and to the experience that drinks – or food for that matter – can offer.

Next is an aisle with coffee and herbs. Tea sold side-by-side with the biscuits, how very British of Waitrose. The picture-perfect wraps scream 'aesthetic delight', and I'm certain the manufacturer, or the shop manager, put plenty of work into arranging this little display. But nothing beckons to me, the boxes glaring with a detached, identical coldness. 'What is the difference between brands this and that?' I almost query the faceless assistant ordering jars on the opposite shelf, but I already know it won't change my verdict. These sweets, while mellow and candied, will only last a bite. Little more than an afterthought left once you swallow.



Not that the little packet of passion that is my quest here at Waitrose is meant as a lasting nutritional choice. It's a brief treat and a torture – just like the holidays, but this pre-Christmas search is still most demanding. A whole process squeezed in a tiny timeframe: an investment before I can taste what I'm buying, I must pick a book by its proverbial cover. Making more trips to the shop is an option, but with the Eve dinner already looming ahead, I must soon settle on a dish or a recipe or at least an ingredient. When home, I can perhaps test it out – the texture must agree with my stomach, and I can't be allergic. Imagine, if my skin breaks out in violent pustules during the dinner's last course. What is more, Waitrose, or maybe my pantry, must provide a nice dressing, a bottle, a bag – there remain many parts to this challenge. Whatever I buy cannot bring my mood down to my toes, that's why the sparkling wine was a brilliant beverage. My whole world, for a time, its bubbles diffusing the fear of finding that I was completely head-over-heels wasted on mere 12% spirits.

But I have decided against anything liquid this time, enough shocks with the fat and commonplace beer of last year. I move onto the big, blooming sets of chocolates.

It isn't the class, or the money, or even the lacking smarts in themselves, but in combination, all these make my family Christmas a deafening crisis. Here, I am not only shopping for me and my wants but hunting for something my family might find somewhat palatable, at least for the course of that meal. The beef was a good call, they were all jealous of my skilled selection, but it was upsetting to see my other offerings dissected, spit out, slandered, and sent crashing to the floor in droplets and crumbs.

Anything of English origin is out of the question, the food would be out of place at Mum's Eastern, traditional, pretend-poor feasting table. Non-European would be unthinkable, an oh-so-sudden case of food poisoning guaranteed with the old folks and Kira. She adores exotic colonial goods, but she would not bring any spice to a conventional family dinner.

Scanning the aisle, I begin to despair. The chocolates all look equal, exactly, in their complete wrongness. I should have stuck to Lidl, or Sainsbury's, or even that M&S Foodhall. But they were all too cheap, or too ordinary, or understocked, or overstocked with fake, one-chew-only rubbish. Waitrose for this year, though the chain itself is not special or even my favourite.

A plump little box catches my eye, tucked away as it is. The diacritics on the label look friendly, a mouthful of my language, my country. Good spelling on the ingredients list – good hearty ingredients, too. I pick it up and turn round to look at all sides. I survey its stylish, see-through-ish front, the adorable bow at the back. As part of the marketing, a puppy is pictured. It's not dog-poisonous chocolate – don't worry – but a misplaced row of buns in a partly transparent container. I can even see their cute creamy dimples – what striking honesty. Some homemade bread with an adorable pet on the cover, from a place of our family's origin. A truly lucky find, among the myriads of idiot items overflowing the shelves here at Waitrose.

I want to hug the box to my chest, but not yet. I head for the exit and swipe the self-checkout: to the right for a 'Yes, I will take a receipt.'

‘Hello there, sweetheart :)’
It’s cuffing season for family Christmas.
The bun is a boy and I lick my lips.

Anastasia Slabucho

Gemini

This is a story of counterparts. Twin spirits sharing everything, even sometimes a body. One could point to a solar eclipse to illustrate, the sun and moon reaching then overlapping, nesting together in an eerie yet stunning ring of white gold. Imagine sliding that onto a soulmate's finger. One, in a cold void, may as well be two. In the spirit of Greek mythology, think Apollo and Artemis: unity at the origin, inseparability of a primal nature, a gravitational pull between celestial bodies, a double helix. A leaf circling on the surface tension of barely rippled water, the synched breathing of two human bodies fitted together in sleep.

There is always some slippage. Balance one sphere on another, for example - a difficult, constant state of negotiation. Here, one could point to a lunar eclipse. Factor in the planet between sun and moon, a third node caught in the cosmic vibration. That could stand for everything else: changes, uncertainties, cracks, the disjunction where two parts meet. Not insurmountable, and it's in this space that a certain bittersweetness begins to evolve.

The smell of the strawberry field would have an almost physical presence: heady, flush. Green-saturated, sticky, sweet. Air like warm breath on the back of the neck. The sun would be up but pale and hidden, offering light but not yet too much heat. The moon would still hang, halved, in the sky. Both sleepy and somewhat mute, we would enjoy a moment on the hill at the edge of the wood. She (read: I) would lapse into some vague imaginations, and he (read: you) would roll a ripe berry between his fingers.

"Mid-June, yes? To harvest," she eventually says (said, will say), looking to him. He ducks his head, smiles (smiled, will smile, and so on).

"Always this talk of harvest. Let them grow."

And pops the strawberry into his mouth to burst. So easy for him to enjoy unfoldment as it occurs, to taste bright red on his tongue in the very moment he cherishes it.

"Why is it so hard for me?" she says.

He takes her hand and says, "It isn't, always."

She remembers (as is her wont) red dust in the creases of his palm, the beds of his nails. Hot sun, heat that rose from their skin, the dry smell of their hair as they sat opposite each other with heads bent together. Long, long ago.

He runs his thumb across the back of her hand.

"That's it. But be here, now."

She looks down at their joined hands, how his knuckles are slightly raw from work, his palm warm and heavy, their skin rough where it touches.

"No," he says, quiet, excited. "Go bigger."

She looks out to the field below them and notes it all. The dense strawberry air. The loving darkness in the earth. Full, this moment, breathing. She longs to hold it, like his hand, carry it past its eventual end.

"I had it," she says, as they let go.

He is unbothered, as always, if perhaps somewhat sad. Oh, to put them back, whole. So slippery to be two.

"But there is so much potential in slip," he says. "It allows the potter to shape clay in beautiful and unexpected ways."

His hand is still extended, open. She could take it again.

"I could water it," she says, looking to the field. "If you tell me how."

Drip irrigation," he says pleasantly. "It's a delicate balance. The earth is too parched for growth without, but too much watering and the balance shifts, the strawberries flood." He looks at her with the vibrance of June green in his eyes. "This is what is happening to us." "You mean what *could* happen to us."

"Right."

He has always been able to think more circularly than she, a main source of her disjunction. He is the ground, the immediate one. She is lost in fluid visions, which always urge her forward. She is linear. This is one reason she feels the moment ending.

The toil of balance makes the strawberry sweeter, does it not? The type of sweet which blossoms in the back of the mouth, sends a shiver through the jaw. A hint of bitter from the leaf. This is something I am still trying to learn. Though as you would say, it is something I have always known, in the way one instinctually closes one's eyes to sleep, or puts a hand out in the dark. The way one's breathing will unconsciously sync with another's if left unmeditated. I interject here only to point out that I am still fastened to this memory of you, even as I stray. I am the visionary, the wanderer, while you remain rooted in the earth and the bigger picture. In all likelihood, you remain in this moment, while I orbit ponderously, moon around planet around sun. A paradox, to find that my straight line has been/is becoming/will be the circle you always saw traced out for me, for us.

"We are still one, you know," he says to her, though she doesn't hear, caught up in an idea, staring beyond the field.

The sun touches the imperceptible mist hovering just above the ground, rendering it visible.

"I think I'd like to set out on my own for a while," she says.

He smiles sadly.

"Yes, you've said that before."

"Well, how will it go?"

Yes, she is losing some patience with him now, and how easy it would be to lose it entirely were he not a part of her.

"Will you harvest the strawberries without me?" she prompts.

He crouches and runs his hand along the ground, gently wrests a short clump of earth from its source.

"The soil here is full of clay," he says, placing the cold ball, full of potential, in her outstretched hand and nesting it with her fingers and his.

It does not crumble in their grip but holds together as though it possesses a planetary core. Something that, together, they could shape.

"Growth is difficult in such soil, but we have time."

He looks into her eyes, a contract she accepts.

"There can be no fruit without you." And in answer to her previous question, he adds, "You've ended up right back with me."

"Then what do I do now?" she says, in the same breath.
His smile breaks into a gentle, bright laugh that she loves.

"That's for you to seek out. But, when you've had your fill of solitude, come and find me. I won't hide from you."

Perhaps because this has apparently already occurred, or more accurately is constantly occurring in a way she might be starting to see, she looks at him and feels almost whole. She will return to find him again. He will want her to, after all, for the harvest. But try not to think of that yet. Think only of growth.

Return to the theory of counterparts, doubly one. Sun and moon, the celestial twins, one of poetry and one of pursuit. But do away with specific deities and pronouns, and realize that these figures are really two points on the same plane that must be referenced in distinction to elaborate their oneness. The same plane, the same circle. One fragmented *I*, searching for a part of myself (you) I may have strayed from. That bittersweetness becomes the process of recovering this self: tracing this circle, coaxing it into a sphere, a ripe red berry, imperfect and glorious. This is the story, so to speak.

Ruth Coolidge

The Yellow Hill

At the top of the hill in the town where my sister lived stood Maggie's coffeehouse. The hill was blankly yellow from a distance, with grass bleached by an unusually hot summer. After a trip across the country that left me broke, my sister, Bethany, offered to let me stay with her for the summer. Bethany, who lived on homemade bread and in second-hand jeans, was always a laugh to live with, so I agreed. Besides, I had little choice regarding a place to stay.

When I wanted to write, however, her home wasn't exactly what I needed. Bethany had two loud [though sweet, I must say] little daughters, and a husband who didn't seem too thrilled to have me around. He often brought up the topic of when I'd be leaving, and looked frustrated when I could only offer a vague 'by the end of the summer' in reply. He would exhale sharply through his nose, his mouth sewn shut, and excuse himself, likely to complain to Bethany. He had nothing to worry about; I wasn't going to overstay my welcome. I'd spent that summer doing odd jobs, as well as searching for a job — something bigger — that could get me out of that small town. This plan was one I had no intention of giving up on.

So, Maggie's coffeehouse became my usual writing set-up. Early in the morning, I walked up the steep yellow hill, and made myself comfortable at the corner table. I'd sit with my notebook and a cup of black coffee, not too far from the counter. Maggie's was owned by a middle-aged couple. Their daughter, plus a few of her friends, waited tables there. The small building had green

tables and chairs, with checkered picnic blankets the colour of sun rays for curtains. The lights would flicker on and off from time to time, and it was generally busy, but these things didn't bother me while I tried to write. The room was all savoury-smelling life, and I was somehow convinced that my next piece of work would be the best I'd ever written, or at least a little more true to reality, if only I found time to write there each day, in that building's warmth, flavour and light.

The middle-aged couple, Frida and Harold, were both already grey, and made pretty interesting conversation for people who barely left their hometown. Frida would tell stories about the skinny, peculiar cat they'd picked up off the street, whose black-and-white fur gave him the look of an eye-patched pirate. Harold would give updates about his guitar playing, which always amused me. Harold liked Bob Dylan; he'd seen him in concert once. It was strange to me to think of Harold anywhere besides Maggie's, but a Dylan concert made enough sense. Both of them seemed to have few troubles, and if they did, then they weren't the sort to last.

I couldn't tell which waitress was their daughter. About four or five different girls worked at Maggie's and they all wore their hair in the same short ponytail with loose, wispy tendrils on either side of their face.

Somebody must've known that I always sat at that table, because little notes began to wait for me between the salt and pepper shakers each morning. The first note read:

Hello,

One of the girls told me you're Bethany's brother, the writer.

Just wanted to know —

1. What are you writing?
2. Why?

My best guess was that the note was from one particular waitress with an upturned nose, freckles, and a tendency to apologise too much. Not sure what made me suspect her of all people — I suppose she seemed the quietly spontaneous sort. I could picture her as a younger girl skipping lessons, and then now, as a young woman, lying to her friends about what she *really* wrote in her journal [I told myself she wrote Bukowski-style poetry, too ugly and wonderful for anybody to make full sense of]. A couple of days after I first saw this stranger, however, I stopped imagining her life. If living life and writing stories had taught me anything so far, it was that you can't invent someone before you really know them. So, by the time I got this note I wasn't thinking about her at all. Once the note was in my hand, though, she sprang back into my head.

I scanned for anyone nearby — any potential culprits. No one caught my eye. None of the ladies waiting tables had the same muted wildness in their faces as that one girl. Quickly, I scribbled down:

Hello to whoever left that note,

1. I'm trying to write a novel.
2. Because it feels like the right thing to do.

Dylan

And some questions for you -

1. What's your favourite drink they do at Maggie's?
2. What's your favourite movie?

I ended up staying way past lunch. The food was good, and even though the place got louder with time, I wasn't bothered much. By the time I was ready to leave, I'd written pages upon pages of something new. Not something perfect, but this didn't matter. A strange, but not altogether terrible, story was coming together — something I could show Bethany. Bethany was smart — a big reader — and her opinion on my writing mattered to me.

The next day at half-seven, a new note was there.

Hello Dylan,

1. My favourite drink here is a cappuccino [especially the way Frida makes it]. — Is that a boring answer?
2. My favourite movie's *Sunset Boulevard*.

And may I ask you,

1. What is your novel about?
2. If you could change your name to anything, what would it be?

Hello anonymous note-leaver,

1. It's about a man not unlike myself who doesn't know where he's going to go after he's come home from a long trip. Not very original, but it's something. It's not quite like my life, though — the guy in it spends a lot of time interacting with strangers. I can't say I've talked to many strangers lately. Besides you. But then, technically I haven't actually met you.

2. I'd change my name to Truman Capote.

Cappuccino isn't a boring answer, and I haven't seen *Sunset Boulevard*. Maybe I should. Are you going to tell me who you are?

Dylan

The next day, I couldn't stay in the coffeehouse for long, because Bethany wanted me to help her sort out a bunch of old photographs into albums. As usual, I got up early, walked up the yellow hill, and sat at my table to write, only for around a couple of hours this time. I got a cappuccino this time, as well as a grilled cheese sandwich. To my surprise, a DVD of *Sunset Boulevard* was placed on my table. I opened the DVD case, and found a note:

I'd very much like to read some of your novel. Bring a passage of it for me to read next time, if the thought doesn't spook you too much. Watch *Sunset Boulevard* and be ready to tell me what you think of it!

Still no name. I tried not to be too bothered by it, and in the last five minutes of my stay, after having written a scene for my novel that I'd been wanting to write for a while, I tore a piece of my notebook out, and wrote:

Sure thing, nameless film-noir fan.

'I like it.'

'Is that all?' I asked Bethany. She'd just finished reading the first three chapters of my novel [if it could be called a novel].

'Give me a moment... I'm still thinking. So far all I've got is that I like it.'

'Anything in particular? Is there anything you didn't like?'

'I liked the part with the dog.'

'Right.'

'No, I'm serious,' she said, 'The bit when the guy has a conversation in his head with his dog seemed kind of real to me somehow, unless I'm just crazy for having done the same. It just seemed like actual thoughts. And it was funny.'

'You don't have a dog,' I said.

She reminded me that her husband's brother had a dog.

'What did you hate?'

'I didn't *hate* anything,' said Bethany, tucking her blunt, Debbie-Harry-blond hair behind her ears.

'What did you intensely dislike?'

She smiled, and told me that if she were to change anything, it would be 'the bit with the main guy imagining what other people were like, when he could just talk to them and

find out.' Bethany had made this sort of critique time and again with my writing, and she was never wrong. Really, Bethany should've been a writer, or a creative type, at least, rather than a housewife with an overflowing head and a thousand almost-fulfilling hobbies. She'd read everything Jane Austen had ever written [I'd only read *Emma*, for school, years ago]. She could tell you everything there was to know about Old Hollywood stars, her favourites being Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant. She could draw, make her own dresses, and almost everything she cooked was from scratch. One time I found a manuscript for a play she'd written, hidden in her husband's office, in a small, faulty cabinet he never used. A full play! I opened on the first page, but Bethany burst into the room and snatched it from my hand before I could read it. I felt terrible. She was incredibly embarrassed, and refused to believe me when I said I hadn't read a word of it; when she called me a liar it felt as though we'd gone back in time twenty years. Like I'd stolen a ragdoll of hers and wouldn't tell her where I'd hidden it. She hid the manuscript somewhere else — not that I would ever have tried to find it again after that.

Once the uneasy feeling cast by this moment passed, I asked her every so often why she wouldn't contact a professional editor to look at her writing. I knew people, I said. I could help her, I said. But she wouldn't listen. She'd get this look, sprawling over her face, as though I'd really hurt her, just by calling her smart. I'd know to shut up then, though I never really knew why.

'I picked this up today,' I said, pulling the shiny DVD case out from my coat, 'Thought we could watch it tonight.'

She said she'd ask her husband if we could watch it, 'once the girls are in bed.' We watched *Sunset Boulevard*, Bethany and I, after Bethany's husband had gone to bed early. He acted as though he'd watch the film with us when she first mentioned it to him, but then was 'too tired' when the time came. It was better that way, anyway. I'd feel nervous sharing my thoughts about the film if he was around. Bethany's husband was a big guy, with dark hair and a face that looked like nothing; people who look like nothing are often terrifying. I liked the film more than I'd thought I would. Funny to think I hadn't seen it before. Bethany had seen it years ago, and she loved it even more a second time around. The uninspired writer, Joe Gillis, read like a dangerously plausible cautionary tale to me. Bethany adored Gloria Swanson as the deluded, aging film star, Norma Desmond, and the script made me feel as though my own writing had been slapped in the face and called pointless. There was a quality, too, about black-and-white films, that always really got to me. There's something uncapturable nowadays, that was somehow capturable then. Something unnameable, intangible, invisible [we believe we see it on screen, but it is not something we see, so much as feel it like a knot in the chest] that people were lucky to find once, before losing it to time.

Multiple instances came about in which I debated telling Bethany about the curious person and their curious notes, but each time I just decided against it. Nothing bad would've happened if I told her, but I quite liked keeping my secret note-leaver to myself. For some

unknown reason, those short moments just *had* to stay mine. Telling someone about them would've made the whole thing feel less real, like when a small child notices, for the first

time, that their parents don't really believe in fairies and witches, as they so whole-heartedly do. A false expression or condescending sigh gives it all away, and the dream is gone. My world of trivial yet vital exchanged notes would not be diluted by reality.

The next day, I left a note on my usual table at Maggie's:

I loved *Sunset Boulevard*. Thank you for recommending it. Maybe one day I'll write something Joe Gillis would envy, but who knows. If anything I'm probably a little too much like him.

Here's something for you in return, though I assure you it's nothing much compared to your favourite film.

I didn't stay for long at Maggie's. I was expecting a call at Bethany's later about a job writing for a newspaper, that might get me out of town if I was lucky. The passage from the story I left behind at the table read as follows:

A walk around his long-deserted hometown couldn't hurt.

After a while of roaming round the country lanes for nothing in particular, Mr. Henkins stopped by the old stream. The water burbled louder than the distant traffic. Childhood, as it should have, did not return to him at that moment. His restless eyes at once were locked on a stream permanently changed, made unrecognisable. The council had been to clear out the overgrowth that had crawled, these past few months, across the stream. Once full of life, the stream was now bare and far too wide, far too grey. The stream was still beautiful, in its own unnerving way, but it had changed, and Henkins no longer felt it was a part of him. The light struck the slowly-moving current, and his eyes stung and watered. It was all too much for the human eye. A new slate, clean of pond weed, duck nests, and floating cow parsley — all the beautiful things, proved unneeded. He felt heavy.

Henkins walked down to the harbour at the other edge of town. At the salt-smelling water's edge, he saw a hundred or more washed up crabs. Whatever colour they once were had been scrubbed away to a dusty white. At first, he'd assumed they were only shed crab skins and unwanted shells, but then he looked ahead, and saw what looked like an unending amount of crabs — dead — each and every one.

'Hello, Fred Henkins!' a woman's voice called, seemingly from the sky.

Henkins turned and saw nothing but the flintstone wall and the houses, owned by those far wealthier than him, behind it.

'Hello, Fred!' the voice called again.

Henkins' gaze went up in the direction the voice appeared to come from. Up, up, up, to a window with its shutters thrown open. The shutters — blue, almost freshly painted — framed a young woman with arms outstretched and waving. Her hair was wildly curly; her smile was that of an old childhood friend. Two seconds passed, and Henkins could match her to memories. 'Sally!' he said, as she grinned, 'It's good to see you!'

The next day, I finally learned the note-leaver's name. In response to the passage from my unfinished novel, she left me something slightly more substantial than usual:

Dylan,

I read the passage from your book and liked it very much. Wish I knew what the point is in the girl he sees at the end, but I'm sure I'll find out more next time. That is, only if you want me to read more.

And I'm so glad you liked *Sunset Boulevard*. From your notes and creative prose, I must say you don't strike me as much of a Joe Gillis — maybe more of a Betty, though perhaps with slightly less of her optimism.

I should go — Frida needs me back working [I write these in my breaks!].

One last thing I wanted to say is that I hope we talk in person before you go. News came through Beth that you're looking for a job out of town. I'll be happy for you when you go, but somehow I'll miss you. Sounds odd, doesn't it? I don't actually know you, but I'll miss you all the same.

Okay, now I really have to go or Frida will get stressy.

Tess

Behind messily pretty handwriting, stood a person entirely real yet not there at all. She thought I was like Betty of all characters! Betty Schaefer, the youthful script reader who just wanted a little more heart out of movies. My note-leaver hardly knew me at all; she thought I was like Betty. Oddly, I was flattered. Plenty of things felt odd to me: Thing Number One, I still had hardly any clue who this waitress actually was. My brain could provide her with no face, no voice, no laughter. But at least now she had a name. Tess. My favourite Hardy heroine. Also the name of a girl I'd known as a child, who had purple braces and a guinea pig. I now had a faceless — but not anonymous — friend. I had a friend and her name was Tess.

At Bethany's, early the next morning, I talked to a sharp-voiced woman over the phone, who might one day be my future boss at the newspaper company. A week ago I'd had an over-the-phone interview, and depending on this next call, I'd either be moving out of Bethany's and on to something new, or sticking around for nothing whatever.

The conversation ended. I stood there, stock still, with a thousand nerves jumping around in my body.

'Beth!' I called, 'Guess what?'

She darted down the stairs, barefoot and in a white-collared brown dress.

'What?' she sounded a little mad at something.

'I got the job,' I said, soon feeling the smile drop from my face.

'Oh, congratulations,' she smiled, as though on cue.

'What's the matter? You sound a little wobbly—'

'Nothing,' she said, 'Congratulations, that's all. I'm really happy for you.'

She hugged me for less than a second, then disappeared. I made a mental note to question her further later on, but for the time being, I had to pack up my stuff. When everything was packed, I left the house for one last trip to Maggie's. Previously, during my second-to-last time at Maggie's, I left a second-to-last note for Tess, telling her that I'd be on my way out of town soon, and that I'd miss her.

Strange. It didn't really hit me while I was at Maggie's for the last time that that was the *last time*. I suppose it didn't seem important then. Once at my regular table on my last day in my sister's little town, I told myself I'd have to get some truth out of Bethany before I left. She just hadn't seemed quite right.

As I'd done for the weeks prior, I got myself a drink [cappuccino this time, after a week of plain black coffees] and sat, writing away, in the coffeehouse's warm, friendly air. I held onto the hope that Tess would float out from behind the till, and that I'd know it was her when I saw her,

but nobody materialised in that cramped yellow-and-green building who could've been her. I'm sure of it; she just wasn't there.

My gaze met the white, paper sliver between the salt and pepper shakers, and it hit me, once and for all, that this was the last trace of my distant friend I'd likely ever have within reach. Her note read, simply: 'Well done and good luck. Where are you going?' For a long while I didn't know how to respond to this. I was sort of disappointed that it didn't say more. I swirled my wooden stirrer around in my cup until the coffee grew lukewarm, and its sweet smell seemed to turn bitter. Eventually, I wrote the last sentence to the passage I was working on, scribbled a reply for Tess, and walked out — not knowing what she'd think when she found it — not knowing if I'd written anything, fiction or fact, in my entire little life, that could be considered worth reading. The door slammed shut behind me, louder than intended, as though closed by somebody else.

'Beth, I'm heading out in a couple of hours.'

She was cleaning the dishes with her back to me.

'Alright. Need me to make sure you've got everything?'

'I think I'm okay, actually.'

Still she didn't turn.

'Beth... I need a word with you before I go.'

'So do I, actually,' she said, bluntly.

'Oh?'

'Can I go with you?' she said, and, turning her pink face toward me, stopped hiding the fact that she'd been crying. Seeing her like this surprised me yet didn't surprise me all at once. 'What?'

'I have to. Please just—'

'What have you got to be leaving your home for? Why on earth—'

'I slept with someone. Someone... else.'

Unsure what to do or say, I paused, then asked, 'Does your husband know?' 'Yeah. I told him. It was one of his friends.'

'Do you love this friend of his?'

'Not one bit. I'm barely *attracted* to him'

'Then why—'

'Because I needed a reason to leave. Feeling bad isn't enough.'

I saw no point in arguing against this, though I didn't agree.

'What about the girls?' I asked.

'Don't.'

Another burst of tears left her.

'I'm sorry.'

'In no world would I ever want to leave them, but according to him, it's only fair that they stay with him, not me. I did wrong, not him.'

'Beth... he did plenty of wrong.'

'Like what?'

'I don't know... but that's how I feel,' I said, unhelpfully.

She kept crying, and I felt that we were no more than children, digging for something we barely understood. For a while, neither of us said a thing. We just stood there, shadowed in the hallway, under an orange lamp with a faulty bulb, breathing in dust.

'Please, Dylan. I'll only live with you until everything's sorted out.'

I told her she could stay with me for as long as she needed.

'I've got a job — not too far from where you're headed, you see. So hopefully I can move out and give you space after a while of making some money,' she said.

'A job? Well, that's fantastic. What is it?'

'It's my play. The one I wouldn't let you read,' she half-laughed as she said this — a light breath out, 'I mailed it to a theatre company a while ago, and they want to talk to me before they put it on.'

She smiled bigger and bigger.

'Jesus, Bethany, that's incredible. And how dare you, I should add! Getting recognised as a real writer before me.'

She laughed, and made some comment in an attempt to tone down her success. 'You sent your manuscript to a theatre company near where I wanted a job?' 'Well, I needed a getaway car,' she said.

I laughed. 'You've been thinking about this for a long time, haven't you?'

'You could say that.'

The empty road stretched on ahead of us. It wound through the fields, and, with the exception of us, was without cars or sound. Entirely blank and bizarrely beautiful. Bethany had the map in a tense, shaky grip. She kept making breathy comments and occasional jokes, somewhat distantly.

'You're not feeling unsure, are you?'

She smiled a fragile smile. 'Nervous, but not unsure.'

I wanted to say something important to her, something to make her feel better, but for a while I couldn't think what.

'I'm okay, really. We're doing the right thing,' she said, and I believed her.

She thanked me 'for agreeing to this'. I told her not to mention it — that if I had any sanity I would've told her to ditch her husband sooner. This seemed to make her quietly happy and sad at once, so I didn't push it further.

The image of Maggie's earlier that day wouldn't leave my head. I hadn't wanted to leave that final note; Tess, whoever she was, had become a friend, though unfortunately one I'd never recognise if I saw her again. She must've been lonely, I thought, as the car moved

past the trees and cattle fields on the edge of Bethany's old town, and the cows embarked upon their metamorphosis into tiny, indecipherable blobs. Even if Tess only sent me those notes for some fun, rather than out of sadness, I still felt that Tess was lonely.

At intervals in our conversation, Bethany poked her head out of the car window, like a little girl, and told me that she could still see the yellow hill that led to Maggie's. I felt myself being pulled further and further from Maggie's. It felt odd, but not exactly bad. The engine's metallic noise, the widening road, and the digital clock on the radio moving on and on, were all different sides of the same break in time. It got me thinking about all the people we'll know from a distance, who could potentially enter our lives, and bathe it in a completely different light to the sort we're used to, but who walk right out before they even get to the lightswitch. I sighed a heavy kind of sigh I hadn't felt for a while, and told myself I wouldn't think about Maggie's anymore — at least not for this journey.

'How's your book coming along?' Bethany asked, her hair all messed up from sticking her head out of the window for the fourth time.

'Well, it's pretty much a book now, thank God. I'm editing it currently, so sooner or later I'll send it somewhere.'

She told me she was really happy, and thought my book would 'definitely do well, if someone takes a chance on it.' I said that was nice of her, but I wasn't too sure. Maybe it's not the sort of thing people would want to read, I said. Maybe it's too narrow, or not ambitious enough, or too ambitious, I said. Who knows what some editor will say? For a short while, she protested against this, but then she looked back down to the map and seemed to forget all strands of conversation. Glancing over at her from the road for a brief moment, I realised that Bethany genuinely looked happy. The road ran along and we ran with it.

'Do you feel funny?' she asked.

'A little. But I'll be alright. The thing is, it's not so much the situation that feels funny to me, as it is my own head, if you can believe that.'

'I can.'

At last, we were out of the little town, and tall grey buildings welcomed us with their bright-blinking windows, most of which contained little people-shaped silhouettes, living little lives. When I breathed in, the little people seemed insignificant; I let that breath go, and suddenly they mattered. I went back and forth this way for a while, not knowing which way of looking at people was true — not knowing if either was true at all. All was wonderfully, painfully strange and all was wonderfully, painfully normal. It was strange to think that, while I drove Bethany and myself to a city entirely new, a waitress — whose face I'd never know, and with little to do with her life besides hope and cry and go on dates with dull men — stood at my old table, holding a note that read 'Where are you going?' in her hand, and then, in mine: 'Onward.'

Sylvie Lewis

FLASH FICTION

Grasshopper

The room was dark, so dark I could not see the walls or judge the size of the room, but to the right of me, no more than half a meter away, was a glass box full of rats. On the desk was a neat piece of paper and on it was a series of small black squares and thick dark lines, next to it a bright yellow rotary phone. A computer whirred away.

Wrrrrrrrr.

Emerging from the darkness was a small, elderly man. He wore a white shirt buttoned up to the top, with navy trousers that were too short and held up by blood red suspenders. He shuffled across to an empty chair opposite me. His gaze moved around the floor in front of him, as if following something. He looked strangely familiar. But I couldn't place him. He scraped the mettled chair out along the ground. *Areekk.* Then slowly lowered himself down onto it and started typing something on the big keys of the computer.

Wrrr, Click -Click, Wrrr.

He took a cigarette pack out of his shirt pocket and placed it open next to the paper. It was empty. Finally, his gaze fixed on me. I stared back. His eyes were a dark grey, and the whites were a murky yellow. Wispy grey hair sat messily on his head.

Wrrrrrrrr.

The computer started making a tapping sound as if letters were being typed onto the screen.

Wrrrr. Nk-nk- nk- nk.

"So, you will answer with the first thing that comes to your mind. Understood?"

The rats were rustling in their cage.

"What is this?"

He began scribbling down more squares and lines on the page.

Wrrrrrr.

"Do you understand?"

"No." I said, my voice wobbly with panic. He stared into my eyes; his bushy eyebrows began to twitch. "Where am I? You can't just do this."

Scuttle, scuttle, scuttle. The rats went on.

Wrrrrrr. Nk-nk.

He whipped his gaze across to the screen.

"What is my name?" He had begun the questions.

"What? I don't know."

"What is my name?"

Wrrrrrr. Scuttle, scuttle.

"I don't know!" I raised my voice. He sighed.

Wrrrr. Nk-nk.

He looked at the screen. "Just answer."

"I don't... Andy. How's that?" *Wrrrrr*. He scribbled more squares and lines. I looked around worried and impatient. The room seemed smaller and the hidden walls were closing in, they seemed to be getting closer.

Scuttle, scuttle, Wrrrr. Nk- nk.

"And where are you right now?"

"Here. With you." Spite grew in my voice and I began to breathe deeply. I became anxious as to where my temper could lead me and I knew I had to calm down.

"I'm right here." I repeated gently as I looked around. *Wrrrr*. He scribbled some more. Again, it seemed as if the walls were walking closer towards me. I shuffled back in my hard metal chair, trying to sit up straight to appear confident.

Wrrrrr. Nk-nk-nk. Scuttle.

"When did you get here?"

"I don't know."

"When did you get here?" He repeated calmly.

Wrrrrrrrrr.

"I... I... I don't know. Five minutes ago?... I can't remember."

Again, he scribbled away.

Nk-nk. Wrrrrrrr.

"Will you go?"

"Go where?" *Wrrrr*

"Will you go?"

"Yes." I said dejectedly, but I did not move.

Wrrrrrrr. Scuttle- scuttle. Nk.

I was certain that the walls were creeping in, at this point. I turned to the glass box with the rats in. There were only two rats now. *Scuttle- scuttle*. The man stared at me.

Nk -nk. Wrrrrrrrr.

He then turned and looked at the screen.

"They eat each other." The words came out of his mouth calmly. I could feel my heart begin to beat out of my chest.

Wrrrrrr. Nk-nk.

"Why did the grasshopper beg?" This unusual question sprang out of the silence and its lack of logic made me even more uncomfortable. *Wrrrrr*. I reminded myself that I just needed to give him the first answer I could think of. *Wrrrrrrrr*. That was all.

"Why did..."

"He was hungry?" My guess interrupted him.

Wrrrrr. Nk- nk -nk.

He scribbled more squares and lines on the paper. There was no noise from the rats now. The empty glass box was becoming engorged by the shadowy walls. *Wrrrrrr*.

"Who are you?" He stared deep into my eyes.

Wrrrrrr. I couldn't think.

Who was I? *Wrrrrrr*.

I searched every inch of my mind for an answer. *Wrrr. Nk-nk.*

Who was I? *Wrrrrr.*

I began to panic. It felt as though my breath had been squeezed from my chest.

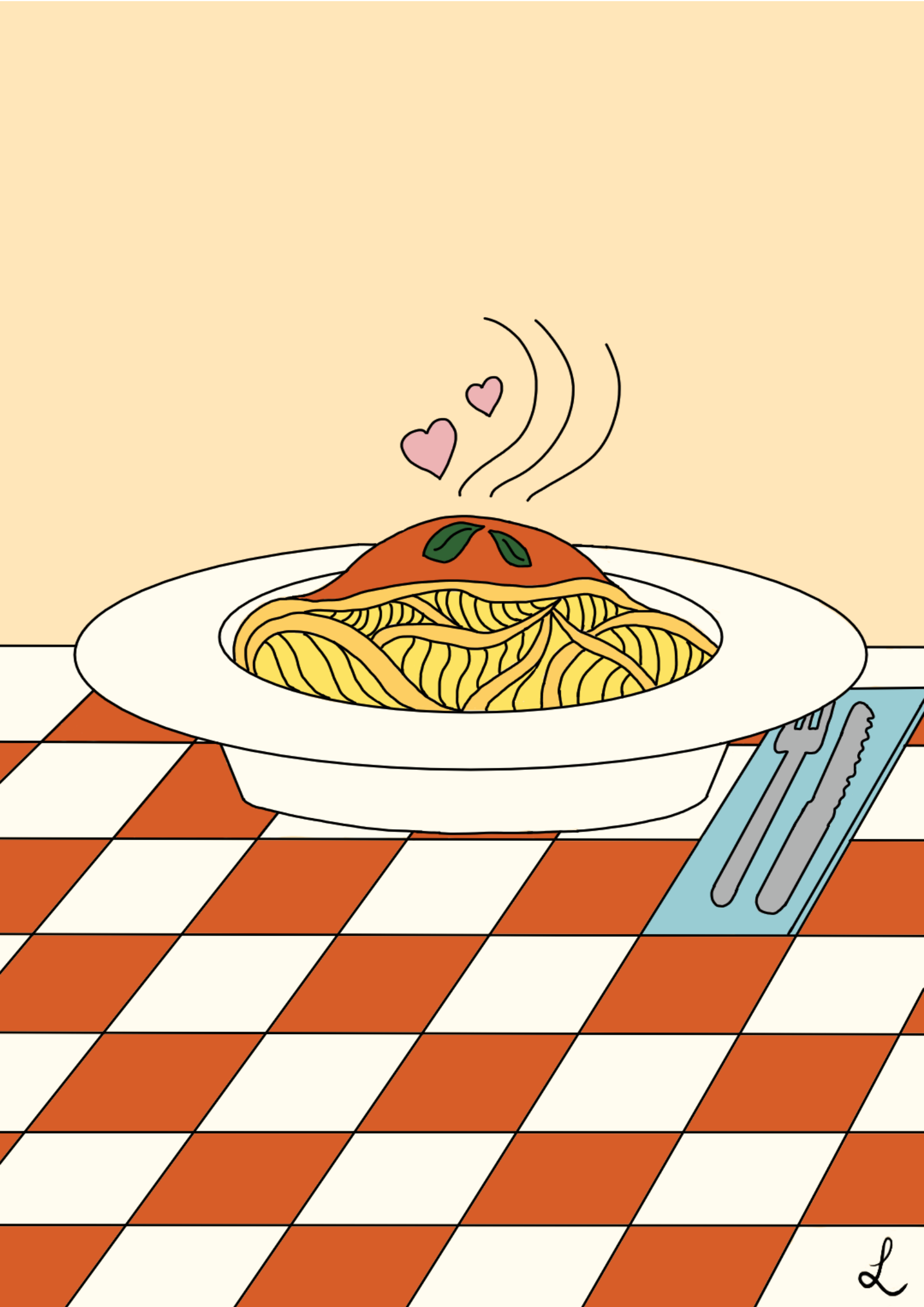
Wrrrrr. Nk-nk. He took a deep breath in and sighed. *Nk- nk. Wrrrrr.* He typed something into those big computer keys. *Click- nk- nk. Wrrrrr.*

“Look, please. I’m sorry.” *Wrrrrrr.* He placed his arms on the table. He had a scar on his right forearm *Wrrrrr* just like mine. *Wrrrrrr.* My eyes stung with panic. *Wrrrrrr.* I could no longer *Wrrrrr* think straight, my mind *Wrrrrr* darted around the room. I was lost. *Wrrrrrrr.* He looked right at me. He was lost too. *Wrrrrrr.* Then he muttered:

“Who are you, Andy?”

The lights went out. The computer fell silent. The phone rang in the darkness.

Thomas Hale



437 Wilton Street (A Brick Story)

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 drive out the souls that once occupied these spaces.

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 neighbourhood, 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, he may have been 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 neighbourhood, he places the brick in the soil of his tomato garden and smiles.

Zach Murphy

The Girl Who Threatened to Swallow Me Whole

When I was six or seven, I no longer remember my exact age, an older girl at my school whom I'd never seen before approached me one day on the playground during recess. Without any warning or explanation, and without any signs of emotion, she told me that she'd swallow me whole if she ever encountered me again. I got so frightened that for many months afterwards I roamed the hallways every day on the look-out for an empty space where I could hide from the girl and any curious teachers until recess was over and I could safely get back to my classroom.

One day, as I sat in the back of one of the supply closets reading a large picture book, I heard a sudden noise, cautiously lowered my book, only to find that my tormenter was standing right in front of me. I'd no idea how she'd found me or how long she'd been there.

I sat there, paralyzed with fear, thinking that I only had a few moments left to live. She opened her mouth widely and demanded that I stand up and put my face right next to it. As I moved closer, I could feel, first, her warm breath, and then her jagged teeth against my skin.

In that moment, I realised, I was far too big for her to swallow whole. I opened my mouth as wide as hers and stared back at her. After a few minutes of glaring into each other's mouths, she gave up and walked out, leaving me standing triumphant in the supply closet. I wasn't frightened after that and I no longer needed to search for an empty space at recess. Although, sometimes I still did, just so I could read my picture book in peace.

Tanni Haas

Ham and Asparagus, and Stamps

The first time I saw Eva Springer, she was standing in the rain with the cast from a streetlight shafting around her like a yellow lampshade, listening to the water bounce off the sidewalk. I soon found out she had a keen fascination for listening. She was one of those people who stand very close to you with their mouths open, like they're trying to swallow up what you have to say. I sometimes suspected that she spit it up later and chewed on it like a cow chews on cud. That would explain how she remembered everything I ever said.

At school, a rumour circulated that Eva's mother was hooked on fentanyl while pregnant with her, and this was the reason behind Eva's quiet disposition. Truth is, that rumour wasn't too wrong, but it was her aunt that was hooked on fentanyl and her mother had been dead for a while. Eva didn't talk too much because her dad would slap her if she made too much noise. On account of what my mother called her "family situation," my parents only let me go over to Eva's once. She lived in a strange, tall, skinny house with her strange, tall, skinny Auntie Joan and Joan's boyfriend, Dallas. All the walls were papered with pages from magazines, the ones with pictures of so-and-so doing what-and-what. The pictures on the walls were old, so we didn't recognize any of the people in them. They were so old, that they were brown and curling up at the edges. The whole house was curling up at the edges, it seemed. However, Eva's room was bright and colourful, just like her, and unlike the rest of the house. The giant window overlooked a tree right outside. I swore to her that when I was older, I would climb up that big old tree and tap on her window when the night was all deep blue and misty, and we would run away together. When I said things like that, she would just laugh at me and remind me that I was scared of heights.

When Eva did talk, it was only to me or to the man with no legs on the corner of Giles Way. We had to walk past him every day on the way to the fourth grade, and it drove me crazy how she always made us stop, even when it was raining like hell. Soggy shoes bothered her very little, and wet hair even less. She kept two things in her backpack in a plastic bag to shield them from the rain. The first was a ham and asparagus sandwich, cut into two neat little triangles and wrapped in foil. She told Auntie Joan that this was for her lunch, but she gave it to the man on Giles Way instead. I always tried to share my lunch with her, but the most she would ever take was a few nibbles of my peanut butter and jelly. The man on Giles Way sure appreciated it, though. Every time he saw her, even on the weekends when she didn't have a sandwich for him, he swept off his seedy old bonnie hat and dipped his head like she was a real lady. I suppose that she was a real lady, to him.

The second thing was a little green book full of postage stamps. When I asked her about it one day, she just said, "Stamps are for going places." I couldn't figure out what she meant, stamps being for letters, and us being people, but I let her say her piece. She didn't often have a piece to say, so I made sure to agree with her when she did. The thing about Eva was, she was stubborn. One time, we went skating down at the town green, when the pond had frozen over. She had been reading those books by Laura Ingalls Wilder, and got inspired to try out skating. She kept going on about mufflers, whatever those are. Eva was a real literary

type, always curling her legs under her on the windowsill in my kitchen and sticking her face right into a book. I think she liked to hear the pages rustling when she turned them.

When we finally made it to the green, we found the pond hadn't quite frozen through, only we didn't know that until we stepped in and got boots full of slush. I said we should go home and make some popcorn, but Eva was bent on having a good time. She said that, not trying at all would make her feel guilty for wasting the sunshine, not that there was much sunshine to speak of that day. She scraped her skates over that inch of wet ice for about an hour and a half before she finally gave in because of blisters. She sang a song on the way home, an old song about wading in the water, and a girl dressed in red, and Moses. That was the only time I ever heard her sing, and I remember how she held her scarlet mittens over her mouth to dull down the sound. I remember it was nice, for once, to finally listen to *her*.

Eliza Rudalevige

THE FICTION WRITERS

Anastasia Slabucho is an author, educator, polyglot, and student of English Literature at University College London. Interested in linear algebra, literacy development, and lo-fi iPhone photography, she also adores dark humour and darker fashion aesthetics. Please read the ‘ch’ in her name as you would in the ‘Loch Ness Monster’. Same as Nessie, Anastasia’s existence will probably forever remain an enigma, but you just *might* sight her at @as.thetica on Instagram.



Ruth Coolidge is a soon-to-be graduate of Hamilton College in Clinton, New York, where she has studied creative writing and cinema. She plans to pursue a career in screenwriting after graduation, though she loves all forms of writing (she has been making up stories since she learned to talk!). Ruth is an avid camping and outdoor recreation fan, and she draws great inspiration from nature in her work. She is originally from St. Louis, Missouri.

Sylvie Lewis is an undergraduate English student at the University of Exeter. Her poem “Fragments of Villette” was shortlisted for the 2020 Bridport Poetry Prize. Her poetry has appeared in The Village Magazine, MadWomxn Magazine and Enigma Journal, while her journalism on literature, theatre and film has been published by RAZZ Magazine and Exposé. In 2020, she worked as an assistant editor for Riptide Journal, and her poetry features in their anthology Climate Matters: Questioning Capitalism. Subsequently, her poetry was also featured in the University of Exeter’s Waking Up to the Planetary Health Emergency Conference. As of 2021, she now works as head fiction editor for Enigma Journal.





Born and raised in the UK, **Thomas Hale** is an English Literature student at the University of Exeter about to undertake an MA in the same subject. Having always admired the writers of the Modernist era, such as Joyce and Hemingway, Thomas has written prose and poetry in private but now hopes that he can begin to be published in order to reach out to people in whatever way may be possible or necessary, as he feels this is just as crucial now as it has ever been.

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, Ruminare, Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine. His chapbook “Tiny Universes” is available via Selcouth Station Press. He lives with his wonderful wife Kelly in St. Paul, Minnesota.



Tanni Haas, Ph.D. is a Professor in the Department of Communication Arts, Sciences, and Disorders at the City University of New York - Brooklyn College. He is the author or editor of three books as well as many academic and popular articles.

Eliza Rudalevige is currently a second-year student at Columbia University in the City of New York, where she studies English (definitely) and sociology/gender studies (tentatively). She is primarily an essayist and journalist, but she still dabbles with her first love, creative writing. You can find more of her work in various campus publications, Maine Women Magazine, and The New York Times, as well as online with Lithium Magazine and Unpublished Zine.



CREATIVE NONFICTION

Red

CW: cancer, grief

My grandmother's favorite color was red. I remember how odd this once seemed to me; my grandmother, who wore shirts three sizes too large and refused to step foot in a nail salon, was in love with a color I associated with vanity. Red—the color of Renaissance Jesus' robes and Revlon lipstick—did not suit her, yet she amassed it with such passion that eventually she and the color became synonymous. She collected an absurd number of Snow White figurines who held ripened red apples, bought matching red La-Z-Boy recliners for herself and my grandfather, and always carried a little red wallet with pictures of my siblings and me as kids.

Her favorite photo of me was taken when I was around four, crouched around the marbled stones imprinted with our names in her backyard. The ribbon in my hair is cerulean like my eyes, and I look up at the camera like she is the only thing in the world that matters. I spent countless afternoons out there—in the grass, digging for treasure and leaving behind apple slices for the squirrels. As we got older though, the drive to her house in Torrance became a chore. I gradually forgot the leftover motherhood she'd spent on us. What I held of this bygone era, the towhead toddler digging while grandma shouldered and then shed her red sweater, was not memory but instead a conglomerate of blurry photographs and a nostalgia-tinged, broken narrative from my mother.

Still, later, as I watched cancer consume my grandmother until what remained was more body than human, I loved this era. I missed it.

Remarkably, the first time my grandmother was diagnosed with cancer, it didn't kill her, though she did have to surrender a kidney. She cursed her smoking habits—which she hadn't tempered even while pregnant with my father—and promised on the last day of chemo: "Doc, I'm gonna take care of myself." Despite her repugnance, she switched to Diet A&W and traded Hostess frosted mini donuts for Chinese Chicken salad. My mother liked to remind her that her proportion of dressing to lettuce was a bit backwards, but baby steps were better than no steps at all, and she'd never been greatly fond of my father's choice of wife, so my mother learned to temper her comments.

After a while of normalcy, my family got out of the habit of worrying. We played kickball each Thanksgiving, and my grandmother repeatedly punted the bouncing red egg with such brute force that we were scrambling to get it back to home base long after she'd run through a line of freckled high-fives. "Grandma Dee is a tough cookie," we echoed one another, every nod of reassurance distancing us from regimented pill cycles, strawberry Jell-O, and holidays crowded in the Torrance Memorial hospital room.



She drove my little brother to hockey practice, taste-tested when my older brother tried recipes from the towering bookcase of international cookbooks she'd bought him. She continued working her shitty job, played Solitaire on the computer, whipped out her little red wallet to cover extortionate dinner checks before any of us could see her reach for it. We knew metastasis was a possibility, but it felt like a nebulous one, clouded with words like "maybe someday" and "not for a while."

Not for a while came sooner than we'd thought.

We learned quickly that stage-four lung cancer wasn't a diagnosis you nourish yourself out of, and after a mere few battles Grandma acquiesced; cancer was a war she was not going to win. We joked that she'd no longer have to comb her salt and pepper bob, but Grandpa still shaved his head in solidarity. I teased them for how similar they looked afterward, insisting that all tears were laughing tears. After disciplined monthly road trips to UCLA medical center and arbitrary switching between equally hellish medications, my grandmother resigned and elected to go comfortably with morphine and hospice care. Afternoons during my junior spring were thus spent at my grandparents' one-story in Torrance, that quiet house they'd owned for over fifty years and that my father had resented for his first eighteen.

My grandfather was mostly silent, save for when he called her name to ask if she needed anything. "Hey Dee," he breathed out hoarsely but endearingly, like a child addressing his kindergarten soulmate. I wondered how it must have felt to sleep alone after decades of listening to another body breathing beside you, to witness love brutally betray you.

We sustained ourselves with Dave's fried zucchini and deli sandwiches that fell apart as soon as you picked them up. Head resting on the edge of her disposable sheets, I dutifully littered my Barron's AP Biology study book with red ink at her bedside. I remember wanting to cry, but knowing it was useless, and the tears gradually tucked themselves away until it was impossible to summon them. My mother sobbed in the bathroom, reapplied her mascara and rouge, then picked up her bible until she retreated into choked sobs again.

The cancer progressed in non-linear spirals, regifting us with moments that felt familiar, then freezing her over for days. She resented the medications for weakening her, and I empathized, watching the stalwart woman I knew fall asleep and reappear in short-lived surges, like a noncommittal narcoleptic. A gentle old lady was possessed by a restless wraith. When Grandma had finally lost too much consciousness to fight it, my mother painted her toenails burgundy. I wondered if this sacrament was intended to restore dignity to my grandmother or to soothe my mother.

My father scrambled to order the bank accounts and testamentary trusts, mining my grandmother for passwords and begging her to try harder to remember when her eyelids fluttered down like fall leaves mid-sentence. She was bone-weary, he could tell, but with such unexpectedly fast-paced deterioration, there were innumerable matters she hadn't sorted in anticipation of her death.

Despite the paradigm at the time of my grandparent's marriage in the '50s, my grandmother had handled all of the finances. My grandfather, who at various points had joined, quit, and rejoined AA (sometimes for another woman) and cited spaghetti as the

fanciest meal he could make, would be at a loss once my grandmother was gone—the gentle nurses and my conscientious father with her.

I was tempted to interpret my father's haste as indifference, but I learned it instead was his concern. He intended to finish my grandmother's work to protect her husband and her home, the incessant filing and merging and calculating his substitutionary "I love you. I'll miss you."

My father talked about his childhood only when prodded and recounted mainly traumatic rendezvous with his drunken father. But every now and then, my little brother and I would be treated to a narrative of our young grandmother, facing off against my prepubescent father on a ragged basketball court. Despite his grudge against her for staying with my grandfather, he admitted that she could not be faulted for being a detached parent—his friends raided her fridge for Cokes daily, and she never once complained about having to repurchase the cases at such abbreviated intervals. She was the neighborhood mother. My father's face shifted stony when he told these stories, reset jaw clenched as though laboring to preserve his stillness. It was then that I recognized resentment was cheaper than grief.

Near the end I picked up her heavy hand and asked if I could read her a poem. She lay so still, outgrowths of thin grey hair beaded with sweat. I wanted to feel sorry for her, but all I could think about was how frail she looked. I thought about her walking down the aisle in 1958, waist cinched and lips painted scarlet red. I thought about Snow White, pale as she was, gracefully unconscious as she awaited her prince.

She turned her face upward towards mine, eyes still closed, with a toothless smile broken for only a moment to whisper "No." I held hands with Coraline, and before I could run, her knuckles sprouted icy blades she tore through my palms—the kind of coldness that burns at your ears. To me, this was when she died.

She took her last breath in June, a few months later. My father said it was peaceful, which may have been a lie, but it was a literary end. It felt cruel to admit that we were relieved.

In the humid summer months after her death, we found piles of cash in dusty cupboards and taped under unassuming office desks. I held these stacks of hundreds in my hands, counting the times she could've left. We cleared out the towering glass cases of knick-knacks, tossing expired chocolates she'd thought too beautiful to eat and mummifying the fleet of Snow Whites in bubble wrap and paper towels. We repackaged them as we'd done for years with the Lenox ornaments she'd bought her grandchildren every Christmas. My parents invited us to take something to remember her by, so my little brother took a glass bottle of Coca-Cola and tucked it in his drawer of old sports uniforms at home. I settled on a music box with a ceramic ballerina at the center. I played it once, put it in a spare closet, and never touched it again.

She'd bet that someday the baubles would be of exponentially greater value than what she'd bought them for, but we were disappointed to discover that residents of Torrance don't have a vested interest in Snow White figurines. I think about them often, collecting dust in a storage container in L.A. and how she would mourn them, idle like that.

My grandfather spends most days at AA meetings, and for Christmas we get little red envelopes with a hundred-dollar bill folded inside. Each card is signed "-GPa Ed," like an

autograph. His sole expenditures are tomato sauce and tamales, and he always leaves the living room television humming until he switches to the one in his bedroom. He never speaks of her. I do and do not resent him for this.

The wraith returns to me in poems about glass and songs about cancer. She has transfigured into Snow White herself, and I see that she is beautiful. Her red lips whisper, “Yes, remember, yes.”

Malia Mendez

THE NONFICTION WRITERS

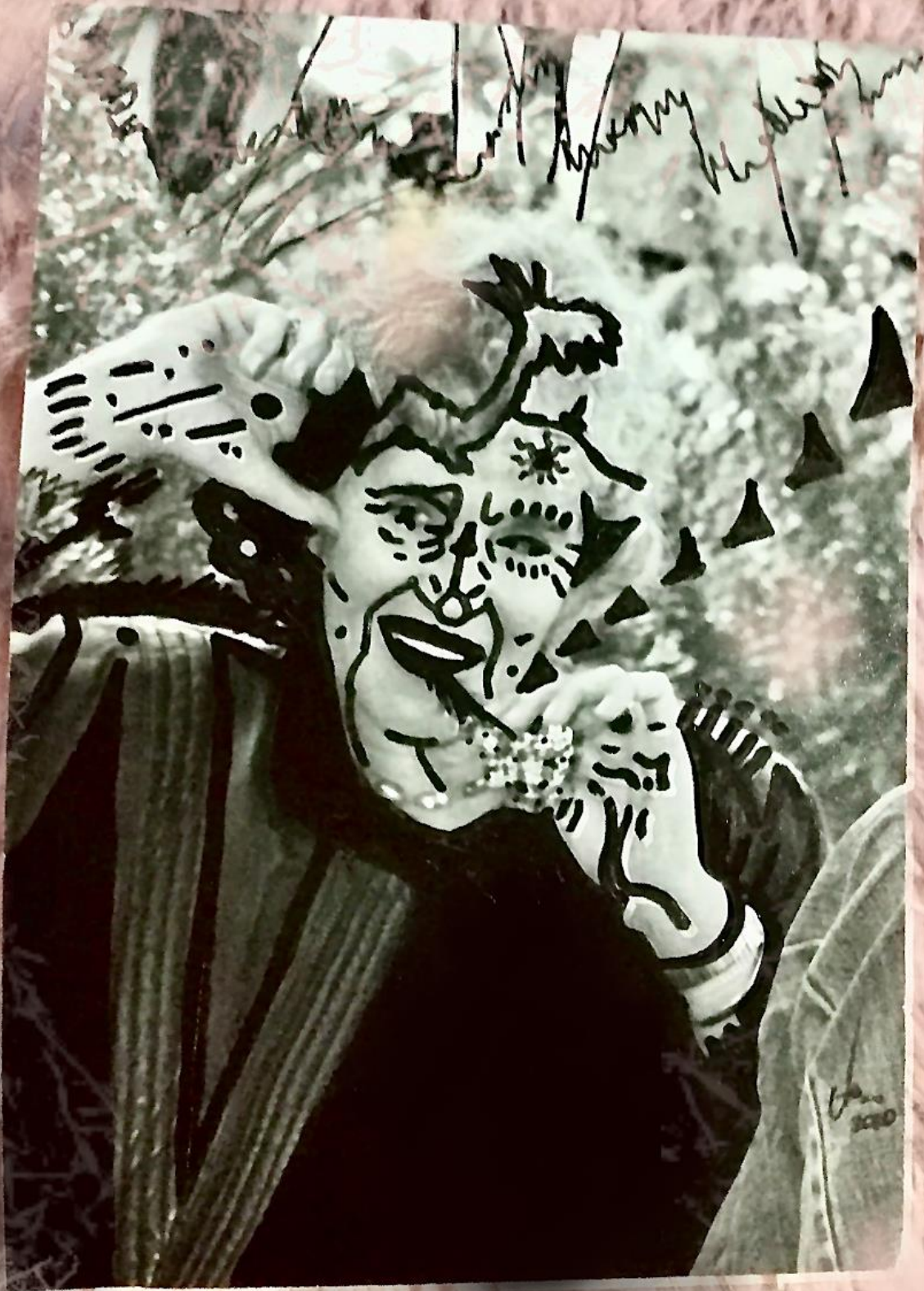


Malia Mendez is from Irvine, CA, USA. She is a third year student majoring in English with a minor in Creative Writing, Prose track at Stanford University. She is primarily interested in Modernist poetry, ecofeminism, and coming-of-age stories. Her work has also been published in Los Angeles Magazine, The Stanford Daily, and The Leland Quarterly. Read more at maliamendez.com.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Kalinda

A.M. Mac Habee



A Shadow Of My Former Self

Anne Moore



Dandelion

Megan Bowers



ART

The Mad Red Queen

Edward Michael Supranowicz



THE ARTISTS



A.M. Mac Habee is a twenty-six-year-old, non-binary, pansexual, disabled artist who's been living and studying in England's North East since 2017. They have always enjoyed piecing artworks together. Their works were standard at first, but as time continued, they quickly developed an interest in experimentalism, pattern and linework. In 2008 they were accepted into a Gifted and Talented Art Program which lasted five years and garnered multiple awards. After that, they continued their study of the arts first at the University of Western Australia, then at the University of Ottawa. Today, they continue joyfully experimenting with their craft and pushing the limits of their skill.

Anne Moore's priorities have changed over the past twelve months – looking forward has been somewhat curtailed, so she finds herself revisiting past works with fresh eyes. She finds it paradoxical that, as a visual artist, she is often more concerned about what is not in front of her and her lens, but that which is omitted. She tries to express this sense of dichotomy in her work – that the boundaries of a narrative are illusory and should provoke a further enquiry or exploration. She is studying for a Film Theory MA and she lives in Totnes with her sister and her gorgeous foster cat.



Megan Bowers is a Biomedical Sciences student at Durham University. She was born in the UK but lived in Switzerland for seven years, where her love of photography developed thanks to the beautiful scenery she was surrounded by. Through her photos she aims to capture details hidden in nature that are often missed by the naked eye, such as a dandelion shedding its seeds in the wind (see her photo Dandelion).

Edward Michael Supranowicz is the grandson of Irish and Russian/Ukrainian immigrants. He grew up on a small farm in Appalachia. He has a graduate background in painting and printmaking. Some of his artwork has recently or will soon appear in *Fish Food*, *Streetlight*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *The Door Is a Jar*, *The Phoenix*, and other journals. Edward is also a published poet.



SPELLBINDER

Featured

Paul Lyalls

Shreya Rawat

Zach Murphy

Lucy Deane

Tanni Haas

Lara Davis

Eliza Ruladevige

Millicent Scott

Anastasia Slabuco

Molly Andrew

Ruth Coolidge

Rosalind Moran

Sylvie Lewis

Gar O'Dwyer

Malia Mendez

Matilda Skyes

A.M. Mac Habee

Tahani Almujaheed

Edward Michael Supranowicz

Sebastian Lewis

Anne Moore

Thomas Hale

Megan Bowers

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