

# Writtle

**issue three**  
**volume one**

VOICES  
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**A journal for  
underrepresented  
writers**

## untitled

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

Thanks for joining us!

**Ollie Charles & Nicola Lampard**

# VOICES

## Poetry

<b>Alexandra Nica</b> public commotion	5
<b>Arun Jeetoo</b> Dancing (2020) Some Boys Don't Play Rugby	6 7
<b>Chelsea Vincent</b> The Monster	8
<b>Elizabeth M Castillo</b> The Safest Place	9
<b>Helen Sulis Bowie</b> A::Void The Promise	10 11
<b>Jideofor Confidence</b> Mirrors	
<b>Judith Amanthis</b> The canal this winter	12
<b>Kauser Parveen</b> More than a set of keys (Grenfell) Nursing Crisis	15 16
<b>Maria Oshodi</b> I Didn't See It Coming	17
<b>Morgan Boyer</b> Tongue Traffic	20
<b>Naomi Marklew</b> Fear is a seagull	21
<b>Nicole Lee</b> Fixed Floating	22

<b>Niharika Jain</b> Home, again	23
<b>Piero Toto</b> Let No Man Put Asunder	24
<b>Roy Duffield</b> The Holey Trinity	25
<b>Rushaa Hamid</b> You Remind Me of my Memories of the Nile	26

## Prose

<b>Alex Bartlett</b> Chocolate Revenge	29
<b>Barbaros Altug</b> Scabs on the Soul	31
<b>Catriona Morton</b> Bodies of Water	39
<b>Ella Piazzi</b> Your Patroclus, always	42
<b>Georgia Cook</b> The Constancy...	46
<b>Harry F. Rey</b> Sweet Shashtahika	49
<b>Jeffrey Zable</b> In The First Place	54
<b>Judy Upton</b> Moths	55
<b>Justin David</b> Bubble	58
<b>Matthew Leather</b> Contentment	64
<b>Bios</b> Writers' Information	68

VOICES  
VOICES  
VOICES  
VOICES  
VOICES  
VOICES  
VOICES  
VOICES  
VOICES

**Poetry**

# public commotion

Alexandra Nica

god boy picks me up and shoves me in the backseat of his car, with all the magazines he forgot to pay for. an empty dose of monster rolls at my feet through the shadows. the bugs don't take a liking of my unkempt boots or my new tights anymore. they'll take me later, they must. he drives on the road as if he owns it, as if it wouldn't be a surprise if he did. his are the fields, his is the river we must crash in. he'll rip the flowers from my grave before the dirt even settles. the family tree cut you off and so the waves must cleanse you. you're a rotten apple but i'll still eat you. i'll let him drown me under a bridge, smother me with nothing but the softness of the stones. let him go home and open another can, let him stick my dying wish inside along with the red roses. god boy picks me up and shoves me in the backseat of his car. he calls it an apology, i call it a warning.

# Dancing (2020)

Arun Jeetoo

The world will open again  
And the lapis moonlight will spur  
Our lame youths  
Out of the house and into  
The clubs.

And inside,  
We will share a physical experience  
With an anonymous crowd of bodies  
In the dark:

Strobe-lighting strokes,  
Tempos pulsing,

Electric skins, rainbow-coloured auras,  
Sweat damp t-shirts,

Cold nipples, purple pills,  
Fag breath, Sambuca lips,

Shattering our vocal cords  
To every noughties pop song,

Losing ourselves in space-blue dilated pupils,  
Leaving ourselves in somebody's teeth.

Sharing a physical experience  
With an anonymous crowd of bodies  
In the dark:

Just fucking dancing.

# Some Boys Don't Play Rugby

Arun Jeetoo

and if they choose not to play, then they are christened as a fag. Some boys are not engineers. Not majorly into overrated botox milf porn stars, never listen to drill or nu-metal daily, do not have pent up rage bursting out the seams of their pretty foreheads and never quite heteronormative or any sexual orientation. Some boys are Drag royalty. Some boys die at the hands of criminal governments. Some boys find cars unapologetically boring and machines fucking confusing and video games competitively unfriendly. Some boys don't want to chug down lethal sambuca shots and graft for girls by club toilets; some boys respect sex, some boys wear a full face of makeup and lift more than 150kg dumbbells. Some boys don't have sixpacks or have dad bods. Some boys favour reading magic realism over woodwork practice and have musically dexterous hands over bricklayer labour ones and use them to express themselves rather than clench to express themselves, and some boys may be both or neither, but everyone overlooks the quiet boys and mistake their calmness for shyness, while the loud boys get what they want. Some boys flee war-torn countries and cling onto rubber dinghies across icy channels, leaving behind their past life for a resounding new one. Some boys go to therapy. Adjust to life outside rehabilitation centres and deeply fear the system that incarcerates them. Some boys are survivors of sexual assault. Some boys can't breathe. Some boys are poetry.

What about those boys?

# The Monster

Chelsea Vincent

The place the monster lives is not under your bed  
Or deep in the forest or the back of your head.  
He'd rather walk in the daylight instead.  
So you'll find him in the city - the rich side, no doubt,  
In top-floor apartments he stalks about  
Snarling and snapping and wriggling his snout.  
The perfect gentleman in the light of the day,  
Though there are many breaches with which he gets away,  
He slips into the right suit and knows just what to say.  
You might miss them at first sight,  
The claws and fur that appear at night,  
But don't you forget he's still monstrous, alright.  
Remember when he insists you and he stay late  
Or sits close on your desk or tells you you look great  
Remember, won't you, that his disguise is first-rate?  
Everyone believes him, the man at the top.  
No need to question - "do you want the job or not?  
Just do what he says, never tell him to stop".  
What big eyes he has, and sharp teeth too  
But remember this if the monster calls for you;  
Monsters never win, the girls always come through.



# The Safest Place

Elizabeth M Castillo

In the event of an earthquake,  
the safest place  
is under a table,

*(como secreto)*

or in the doorway,

*(como intruso).*

When the earth has had enough  
and throws you up, away and off  
always remember  
to sink beneath

*(como sentimiento)*

or stand between,

*(como excusa)*

and there, wait patiently  
for an excruciating end,  
or the tremors to pass.

# A::Void

Helen Sulis Bowie

To be 0 is not nothing  
To be a basis of the ancients  
And to concern the poets and the physicists  
Alike, is rather something

To be 0 is not nothing,  
And to be empty is not to lack,  
Meditative and minimalist  
Alike, is rather something

To be 0 is not nothing,  
And to find a void is an  
opportunity and opening  
Alike, it rather something

To be 0 is not nothing  
When the shape of nought  
Is a precious ring,  
A circle of life, alike

it is something

# The Promise

Helen Sulis Bowie

You better put on clean underwear,  
in case you get hit by a bus  
never one to do things by halves  
I transport myself in silk and lace  
tender and scented like fabric softener  
You hit me, like a bus, indirect  
speeding down the scenic routes, not  
wearing this for you but still you come  
at me, over height, low bridge, train  
tracks derailing, traffic  
preparedness, a boy scout's  
invitation, a girl guide's  
badge of honour and in  
the underwear I put on in  
case  
the worst happens

# Mirrors

## Jideofor Confidence

Tiredness feels like ageing,  
This time.

The last time I was 23 and felt  
Like I needed more surfaces to hold-on to.

*Isometric plunge*

Then I told them to not let go,  
Especially the one fond of waters.

Now it feels like peer pressure,  
Drinking over-priced Cristal  
Talking to literally everyone like it makes me cry,  
Making love to a woman with  
a weary tongue.

# The canal this winter

Judith Amanthis

I  
The water like black glass does not accept reflections  
because filth runs deep  
and feeds shallow rusting monsters since time  
since I've feared falling their prey  
since my little sons sank sad strings in  
for snails and see-through fish as narrow as matchsticks  
since the towpath was mauve coke  
and the embankment - get away from the edge -  
was slimy with dead diggers' limbs  
where mud slums multiplied down wind from the smoke  
so that undersides of bridges shat smuts softly and so cold  
the thin ice once killed boys sliding  
the past under black glass.

But now I like it because it isn't duckweed greener than lime  
which next summer will always smear over it,  
at forty per cent protein edible by humans and ducks  
continuing to kill reflections and feed coots.  
Ducks, coots and boats will drag deaths in their wakes,  
an empty beer can I'll throw off the thick bridge won't splash.  
Moorhens will walk on leaves the size of their fingernails,  
underneath them snails and matchstick fish will suffocate  
and coots like pumas will nest on clots of water hyacinth  
an Amazon native, d'you hear, an equatorial traveller  
- up for recycling: paper, pretty baskets, charcoal -  
killing the Congo the Volta the Lagos Lagoon breeding malaria  
which London gardens will always excrete.

This winter, ducks' chests cut glass triangles.

II

The Amazon slides wide and black  
Past meadows where dirty yellow grazers  
Raise their necks, pause, dig, eat.  
A fisher bird alights on a thin tree.  
It turns its head to profile,  
Gapes, snaps its teeth  
And drapes its wings on the air to enhance feather growth.  
Abhorring its pterodactyle descent  
Even when swimming it looks down its beak  
At its snake neck and ignores  
Teenage sail birds preening their not quite yet white  
Super luxury softest longest-ever feathers.  
Columnar cliffs strung about with ferrous muck stand by.  
On the far side of the water a grave wheezes,  
Heaves up bones and spits out a mist ball  
While I, holding my breath, walk on down stream  
To the cooing of scavengers  
Who exhume satsuma peel and popcorn  
To the screams of sea birds  
Who stare.  
Theirs are the ghosts.

# More than a set of keys (Grenfell)

Kauser Parveen

I know what I have lost  
I have lost more than I have gained  
By offering a new set of keys  
Does not eradicate  
Does not erase  
The loss  
The pain  
The common thread that binds each family  
To a community that is trying to heal  
To a community that is trying to understand  
To a community that wants answers not barriers  
To a community that is now scattered  
To a community waiting to be rehoused  
To lost friends  
To lost family  
To offer a new set of keys  
To a new home  
Cannot erase the pain  
Of the home I have lost.

# Nursing Crisis

Kauser Parveen

After 64 completed job applications  
54 rejections, no replies  
After attending 10 interviews  
Still no job  
With the same people  
Who interview me time and time again  
Every time  
A different reason  
Is provided  
To rationale this rejection  
Lack of experience  
Someone with more experience  
Not convinced you can do the job  
Lacking hospital experience  
The panel have concluded  
My face does not fit  
Despite a plethora of experience and qualifications  
I am not like them  
They are not like me  
They have applied their unconscious bias  
To justify their rationale  
Leaving me feeling perplexed.  
The real nursing crisis is within its own ranks.



# I Didn't See It Coming

Maria Oshodi

I lost my sight,

but I don't know where

I didn't see it coming

It was between the ages of 10 and 20,

Then between 2010 and 20 I did see

Patricia growing lost

But she is still here

When the world around me faded

In a premature dusk

Patricia watched me, silent, anguished,

With hands that were always ready

I didn't see it coming

Her memory, chopped up, like waves around her ankles

Sweeping fragments of her away on the tide

While I stand steadfast on the shore  
Trying to hold her hands tight in mine  
  
Sorcerer's hands that years before  
made party dresses appear  
like new friends, tumbling from  
rolls of anonymous cloth  
Perfectionist fingers snipping half a head,  
A leg, and an arm from folds,  
To reveal  
a whole chain of paper dolls.  
  
The same hands that pulled my arm through hers  
when I couldn't see the street any more.  
  
I didn't see it coming  
That those hands would forget what they once knew,  
Her mind concertinaing on itself  
a collapsed folded thing  
forcing her to fidget, fret and tear at fabric  
That her hands had once communed with  
  
I didn't see it coming  
She would one day wander around

looking for something that she can clearly see

And I would one day feel around

seeking for something that I cannot

Us, both saying,

“Where is it?”

“What did I do with it?”

“Where has it gone?”

A wave swells up

Breaks, crashes down

Scattering any return across the sand

Of my vision, and the memory of my mother

relating to the remnants, is what is left

And just a frayed guarantee

will I continue to know myself

as I now know myself to be?

For I didn't see it coming.

# Tongue Traffic

Morgan Boyer

hoop his tongue around the hook, slice it,  
and watch the half-strewn letters drop  
to the ground as the traffic shifts back  
to watching the sweat from your forehead fall  
onto the steering wheel and coming up  
with new Elvin cuss words for the person  
who cut you off on the way to the dentist

# Fear is a seagull

Naomi Marklew

try to  
nourishes you. Fear  
aerial attack, unbidden, unexpected. It's the shriek that  
descends as you get out of your car in a deserted carpark. The  
cruel eyes. The greasy feathers of a feral city-dweller.  
Familiar with this factory scene. A red-tipped  
beak, unnecessarily cruel.  
It is all noise, all  
frantic, flapping hate.  
No substance,  
j l  
u i  
s e  
t s.

Fear is a seagull. It  
defecates on you from a great height  
intentionally, remorselessly. It is out to steal your  
lunch, your peace. It pecks at your fingers as you  
protect your small joy. It desecrates whatever  
swoops down in an

# Fixed Floating

Nicole Lee

here are some things to know about me

I work in a bank like  
to count like to mark  
our swaps to market  
I was born under Taurus  
the bull hooves planted  
in earth horns down  
I have one husband two  
dogs and three children  
give me a hundred pounds  
as some form of surety  
and you'll get it back in one  
year the notes uncreased

here are some further facts to consider

my name is **DIASPORA**  
and I have no country  
and when I think of an ideal life  
or the world to come  
I am alone and I am  
walking through water  
and I leave no footprints  
the wind dries my tracks on the stone  
and if I am a bull  
I am a very little one  
and I don't mind if desert sands  
cover my bleached bone

# Home, again

Niharika Jain

**-In response to Tracey Emin's painting: Thriving on Solitude (2020)**

Naked back exposed,  
Crack exposed,  
Windows bare,  
Unclothed,  
Lie yourself languid.

The curtains snore,  
moonlight kisses you,  
shivers remind you  
that you have tiny, tiny hair  
on your back which  
you'll never touch, groom or trim  
let alone greet the way  
you do your bush.

It's a new ritual  
since the bleeding began;  
Mumma Moon called to  
the tides inside you,  
pulled you outside yourself.

# Let No Man Put Asunder

Piero Toto

Along the Camden canal  
ladybirds nest in the mould  
of bat caves while boats  
twerk on amused

My OnlyFans hunk  
waves to an audience  
of one grunting for  
hearts & thumbs

Under the bridge  
he picks up a tarot card  
sharded with glass cursing  
the curls in his chest  
    the pm light  
        the echo  
then zooms in for closeups  
with dead butterflies

*What's left to love?*  
hums the gravel in desperation

Let no man leave you with  
clay origami & fantasies  
moulded from dreams  
    paper moons  
with teeth that cut through & burn



# The Holy Trinity

Roy Duffield

*after Jamie Hince*

My bones,  
I suppose,  
belong to unfair England;

My mind  
I don't mind telling you  
I lost  
long ago;

My soul  
I owed  
before I even had a bank account:

So of this whole  
Unholy Trinity,  
in the end, not one  
belongs to me.

# You Remind Me of my Memories of the Nile

Rushaa Hamid

You come and go  
like the edge of the shore  
surging over rock and broken shells,  
breaching and retreating,  
walking over and over the same  
folds in the earth and  
swelling in the summer heat,  
your sigh spilling over banks  
before fading away again.

You are a spirit  
lost, unanchored to a place  
or time and steadied  
only when there is no-one  
but me to see you.

Only with pressure are you  
condensed into something  
tangible, clumped  
hastily together to sculpt a  
person from vapour.

I confess, I wish I was  
softer; all my edges are  
harsh, unforgiving, and I  
carry within myself a thousand  
weights: weights of loves  
worn thin, of promises  
broken, and in turn breaking  
apart the last inch of us.

I press you, moulded into  
something to reflect me,  
cup you in frigid palms,

and pour you over my body  
for absolution before you  
slip away once more.

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**Prose**

# Chocolate Revenge

Alex Bartlett

“Can you believe he had the nerve to come here?” Patricia glared at her father Jean-Charles and his latest conquest.

“Parading around that woman while we and mother struggle to eat. Appalling.’ Her older sister, Isabelle, spat out her disgust.

Their father couldn’t see them, as he was guided to one of the most prestigious seats in the Parisian theatre, while his daughters waited behind the curtains and their fans to perform for their meagre salary. It was barely enough to scrape by on, and to keep the slum roof above their heads and that of their ageing mother.

He had disappeared years earlier, taking everything with him of value, and re-appearing months later having re-invented himself as an elite chocolatier who catered for the richest of society. The shop had gone from strength to strength, leaving him rich and mixing with Paris’s upper class, regularly hosting lavish parties from his equally lavish apartment above the shop. But he gave his ex-wife and his daughters nothing, leaving them struggling in the slums. He’d never wanted children and had eagerly reminded them.

Rather than starve, the girls had been forced into work as showgirls.

“We should teach him a lesson,” Patricia murmured behind her feathers, a plan forming in her head.

“What are you thinking, sister?”

“It involves his greatest pride - his chocolate shop.”

By the time they’d performed and got home, Patricia had shared her plan, which Isabelle loved. They would break in and steal his money, and all his most famous truffles, and all three would escape from Paris – and poverty! With exotic masks from the theatre to disguise themselves and a skeleton key from a friendly ironmonger, it would be easy.

They waited until the street was clear, easily opening the lock. The till and truffles counter were quickly emptied, and they crept into the backroom and broke into his safe. Typical of his arrogant narcissism, his code was his birthday.

The robbery was a success! But as they were congratulating themselves and sneaking out, Patricia knocked against some pans hanging up, making them clang loudly. Within moments Jean-Charles appeared at the doorway. “What’s going on, how did you get in here?” he shouted, advancing on them angrily. “I’ll see you hung for this!”

Panicking, the girls ran at him and pushed him back, crashing him against the vat of already melted chocolate, ready for tomorrow’s customers. He got up and pushed them back, ripping Patricia’s mask from her head. “My daughter,” he yelled in surprise.

“Yes,” she said. “And this is for leaving us in poverty.” She seized one of the heavy pans from the ceiling and swung hard.

“No!” he screamed, as he lost his footing and toppled into the boiling chocolate, his cries drowned out by the chocolate engulfing him.

A few days later, the chocolate shop had been closed permanently and the Museum of Chocolate in the city centre were presented with a chocolate statue of a man marking a striking resemblance to Jean-Charles. A tribute to the missing chocolatier.

And in a quieter suburb of Lyon, two sisters and their elderly mother moved into a lovely home, and greeted their new neighbours with their delicious truffles.

# Scabs on the Soul

Barbaros Altug

## Keepsake

"I know he loved me. He never put it into words, but he made me feel loved," Rita said as she cored and sliced. Belinda and I were listening to her as we went through the photo albums she brought out. "I never really confided in my mother; she had zero tolerance for foolishness. What would I have talked about, anyway? The boys in our neighborhood? She'd been through so much I couldn't have expected her to listen to my tales of teenage heartbreak. And she was always busy running after my father's entire family."

She passed me the first plate of prepared fruit and I noticed that she was still wearing a wedding ring on her white, delicate hand. "Mother was always trying to get everybody to love her. As though she wasn't good enough to be loved for her own sake and thought she had to work extra hard to please everybody."

"When my father became an invalid, she bathed him top to toe every day, with soapy white towels. Nobody would have thought he spent the last two years of his life bedridden. Propped up against the pillows so well-groomed and freshly-scrubbed he looked as though he'd had his morning bath and returned to his bed for breakfast." When Haygunoush's husband died she was still quite young, but never considered remarrying. "That's not our way," she told the neighbors and friends trying to bring round a matchmaker the first few years. It was not until she threw a distant male relative out of

her house that they finally left her alone.

"Who are these women?" I asked, pointing to one of the pictures.

She leaned forward, took a long look, smiled, and said, "Survivors." The survivors, the rescued, the ones who married Turks, a group from the same part of Turkey. Seven women in identical dresses sat on a row of chairs in a studio. "I was too little to remember much of that place," she said. "Mother talked about it. That photo was taken before she and my father moved here." She wiped her hand with a white napkin, gently freed the photo from its decorative mounting corners and turned it over. "They all have notes on the back, in Armenian and Turkish. Antep, 1930. The women's names are written out here, one by one. Each ended up in a different place. Selma is the only one I can remember. She and her son later moved to Los Angeles." She gave me the photo to put it back in the album. At that moment, it occurred to me that I could feature Haygunoush in the piece I was working on. "Of course you have my permission," Rita said.

As she was putting six photos in a manila envelope, she added, "Each of these is a family keepsake. You will be careful, won't you?" The plan was for me to write a story inspired by the photographs that night and return them the next day after scanning them with Belinda's help. I had a good feeling about it, so much so that I was prepared to forgive Emmanuelle for her role

in my being here. Perhaps every cloud really does have a silver lining, just as Auntie Nimet used to say.

## Survivors

It was not very late when I got back to my hotel. On my desk, I spread out the photos from Haygunoush's album. They told a tale covering half a century. I flipped over the first one. *1940, my daughter's birthday, Istanbul.* Belinda's mother is sitting in front of a cake with candles among boys and girls her age. On the table next to the cake are braided rolls, a pitcher and glasses and a pile of wrapped gifts. Standing behind the children is Haygunoush, smiling. Her black hair is gathered up, except for two long curls framing her pale face.

In the second photo, Haygunoush is holding up a vinyl 45 as she poses in a spacious lobby with a genial, chubby-cheeked man and two women roughly her age. The women are all wearing white tailored two-pieces, and their hair is teased high. *1968, at the Hilton after we learned Dario Moreno was staying there. Deniz, Angel and Dario.*

The third one was of her husband in a smart suit, his greying hair neatly parted, sitting upright in a velvet chair with carved wooden arms. *Şefik Bey. 1937, our first year in Istanbul, the apartment in Pangaltı.*

I skip over the photo of the seven women in Gaziantep and come to the one of Belinda standing with her parents at what is obviously her graduation ceremony.

In the sixth and final photo, Haygunoush is standing in a living room with a group of women and children. One of the women is sitting on a chair with a newborn baby in her arms. I turn the photo over. *1938, Istanbul. Celebrating the 40th day after Orhan's birth. Aysel, Angel, Deniz, Hediye.*



## Daybreak

I woke up with the dawn. The curtains were drawn back and the room glowed yellow. I called room service and began preparing for the day.

Taking sips of my coffee, I gazed out at the bewildering, bizarre and beautiful mix of concrete and crowds that make up the chaos of Istanbul. To my right was the Atatürk Cultural Center, a black mahogany jewel box. Directly across from me were the slippery steps leading up to Gezi Park, one of the only green spots left in the center city.

I did not know it yet, but the day before I flew to Yerevan and reached a turning point in my life, Belinda and I would walk in that park together. I would learn that she and her mother had been going there since her childhood, back when Istanbul winters were freezing cold. Back when the park was blanketed in snow for days on end. Back when everyone huddled at home, leaving the streets to the shivering stray cats and dogs. Back when dimly lit trams wearily trundled along the empty city streets on winter days, rattling like wind-driven children's swings in a deserted playground. "They'd close the schools," she would say. "And even the shops. But I would still go out sometimes in secret. Istanbul was at its best on those snowy days."

Icy water seeping into her boots, certain to get a scolding when she got home in the evening, she would walk alone all the way to Taksim and the park. "Taksim Square never closed. To me, it was a street fair. The park seemed new and the marble steps used to gleam in the winter sun."

Later, when she was older, her mother would tell her that the park was built over an Armenian cemetery and that the steps were fashioned out of old tombstones. Perhaps that was the reason Rita never much liked the park. "Look," Belinda would say to me, bending over and pointing at the Armenian inscription on the step under our feet.

But none of this would happen until later. Right now, the only thing on the horizon was a bright day and a great story to write for the magazine. Or at least that was what I thought.

## **Worries**

At her office, Belinda took the photos to get them scanned and loaded. While we were waiting, I told her about the article now taking shape. I would start in the 1930s with Haygunoush's photos, explain how Turkey's Armenian population has been dwindling ever since, and end with the murder of Hrant Dink.

"You're not going to hold the whole country responsible for his death, are you?" she asked. She seemed anxious.

Holding both of her hands and looking directly into her eyes I said, "We're not the ones turning children into murderers. Don't worry, I'm trying to take a step for peace. It's a small step, but if I don't do it, who will?" She relaxed.

They brought me a disk loaded with the photos and gave the originals back to Belinda. "I need more detail from your mother," I said. "Something to flesh out the story."

Not wanting to burden a woman her age with hosting another dinner, I insisted we meet for late afternoon tea, not dinner, saying I would need the evening to finish the article.

## **A Nice, Warm Feeling**

When we met in front of the newspaper offices at four o'clock that afternoon, Belinda slipped her arm through mine as we set off along the bustling sidewalk. She stopped on occasion to point out a building or a shop that was important to her. By the time we reached her mother's, I knew where to get the freshest fish roe and the best *topik*, although homemade was always the most delicious. "I wish you'd stay longer and try my mother's," she said.

I told her I could not expect a woman that age to fuss over such a painstaking dish and thanked her again for having done so much for a complete stranger and unknown journalist like me.

This time, it was the smell of freshly baked buns that greeted us as we entered the apartment.

## News

The television was blaring the news. Belinda lowered the volume and whispered, "She's hard of hearing but she won't wear a hearing aid. She told the doctor she was too young." Then she ran over to her mother, who was coming out of the kitchen with mince and eggplant-filled buns, and kissed her on the cheek.

Over tea, Rita described her first years in Istanbul, starting with her memories of the American College for Girls. The tape recorder was running, so I was able to enjoy several buns.

The time came for us to look again at the photos I had chosen. Rita recognised the women posing with Dario Moreno. "The poor man," she said. "That might have been the last time he looked so happy." At the confused look on my face, Rita explained: "He suffered a stroke during the trip, before he could board the plane in Yeşilköy. He never made it back to Paris. My mother cried and cried when she heard." Rita had no problem remembering her own birthday party, of course, and told me where the friends who had attended it were now. One had "passed so young" the previous year, at 78. Some were living abroad with their children or relatives, in far-flung places like Lebanon and Argentina. Another one had moved in with her granddaughter in Yerevan after losing her daughter in a traffic accident in Istanbul. "The granddaughter must be about your age," Rita said. She got up and went to her bedroom, returning with a photo of a white-haired woman in her seventies and a dark-eyed, brown-skinned girl who looked to be in her twenties, like me. "Isabel," she said, pointing to the young woman. "She works at the Institute there, in Yerevan."

When we got to the last photo her face fell. She sighed. "Her only child," she said, pointing to the baby in the arms of the woman. "I don't remember everything my mother told me about her. I do know that the poor woman had a series of miscarriages over many years. Finally, she gave birth to a boy. They spoilt him terribly and sent him to all the best schools. And then, for some

reason, he turned on his mother. He was somewhere far away, in Europe, I think, and never visited. My mother said he had his heart set on becoming a diplomat, but it never happened. Then he stopped visiting or contacting his parents. They say he even changed his name. Who knows, he might not answer to Orhan anymore."

It was a tragic story, and one I thought I could use. When I asked for the name of the mother in the photo, Rita thought about it for a moment. "All right," she finally said. "Meliha. Meliha Saraçoğlu."

## **An Apartment in Şişli**

“Later, this poor woman, Meliha...” Rita bit her lip. “She hanged herself.”

Some said it was loneliness; some said it was her estranged son; some said she had other troubles. “Her son didn’t even come to the funeral. He disappeared from the face of the earth. She left her apartment in Şişli to the foundation.” Belinda and I exchanged puzzled glances. “You know, the foundation. The hospital foundation,” Rita said. “Surp Agop,” she snapped, staring at her daughter as though to say, now do you understand?

But Belinda and I were more puzzled than before. Why would Meliha, the wife of a War of Independence veteran and former officer, bequeath her property to an Armenian charitable foundation?

## Orphan

I could tell that Belinda had never heard the story of Meliha Saraçoğlu. As her mother slowly remembered more details, we were learning about it together.

“Meliha was about the same age as my mother,” Rita began.

She took a sip of tea. “I’m calling her Meliha, but that was not her birth name, of course. Her mother named her Melanoush. It means ‘beautiful girl’. And a beautiful girl she was, too, with blue-grey eyes.” Rita turned to me and said, “That’s rare with us.”

“She was from a wealthy family, so they were among the first to be singled out by those vultures under Talat Pasha’s orders. From what we have been able to piece together, the men of the village were killed one by one. When they returned one night, and Melanoush’s mother resisted, a soldier bashed in her head with the butt of his rifle, killing her right in front of Melanoush... The other two children managed to escape, they say.

“Melanoush was all alone. What could she do? She ran into the forest. I say ‘forest,’ but there are so few trees in those parts that a cat would be hard pressed to find a hiding spot. One night, as she trembled in fear beneath a bush, starving and muddy, a soldier found her. He was a merciful Muslim. Not that that stopped him from falling in love with Melanoush at first sight. It must have been those blue eyes. He was an officer; that’s how he earned a living. He made no claims on her family’s money. Let’s get married, he said, but you have to become a Muslim and stay a Muslim for the rest of your life.

“Melanoush was desperate, alone and just a girl. She agreed. As soon as she became ‘Meliha’, her husband used his *connections* – Rita emphasized that word as she was telling the story – to change cities and identity, completely severing himself from his former life. The two of them even went on Hajj to Mecca together after he retired. “It was years before we learned any of this.

Only after she died.” Rita paused. “I mean, after she took her own life. Fate kept Melanoush from being one of the children who died along with the rest of the family.”

# Bodies of Water

Catriona Morton

The water was cold at first, as swimming pools always are. The shock of a different environment electrifying our pores. It mellowed to the in-between state, where you're not sure if a child has urinated nearby, then adjusted to the comforting nothingness I'd craved all week. Mira got in after me, close behind in her temperature adjustments. Bar a middle-aged man doing uniform laps in the cordoned off section of the pool, we were the only two bodies in there. We half-floated, feet still firmly on the tiles, avoiding eye contact in the awkward morning light. We had come there to talk about our implacable connection, about what the Saturday night prior had meant to either of us. No words had been spoken at that point, bar the timid hellos we'd mumbled in the lido lobby. We'd silently undressed next to one another in the changing room, the evening in question lain on the ground; a blurry shadow as we peeled off our underwear and threw them on the mildewed floor.

Mira waded towards me from the shallows, dipping her shoulders into the clearness that encased us. The water rippled as she moved, emanating in smooth rings as she neared me. My skin pricked with the movement; goosebumps raised in the confusion of the cold wetness and her body being so close to my own. She hadn't tied her hair up; her loose brown curls had dipped below the surface along with her shoulders, aimlessly dancing in zero gravity. The sight dredged up an uncomf and a want within me. Why hadn't she tied her hair up? Surely she wanted to avoid the harsh chemicals and unknown bacteria floating around us, the tiny particles

wanting to sanitise and destroy us. And surely she wanted to stay dry, to avoid the inconvenience of dripping hair on the bus ride home to the flat she shared with a man I despised. Yet the inconvenient mess of hair still belonged to her, surrendering in the flow of her. I'd held that hair just four days before, twisted it in my fingers as we'd kissed. I looked at her skin in the water, and then I looked at mine. Both paler and emptier than the dry land had made us seem.

'Did you ever watch *My Octopus Teacher*?' she blurted out into the almost empty pool.

I stared at her for too many moments, and replied, 'Was that the one where the guy fancies an octopus?'

'He doesn't fancy her, he loves her, becomes engorged with her and consumed by her. But yeah, that one,' Mira replied, defensively.

I sniped back, 'Sounds pretty racy to me. I just remember thinking how pissed off his wife must have been - her partner spending every day for a year out swimming around with some tiny octopus whilst their real-life continued back on dry land.'

'Well then you watched it in a very sour light. You don't have to be so cynical, you know. I thought it was beautiful. The octopus was, or is, just as real as its terrestrial counterparts. And the wife shouldn't have been angry, not that she necessarily was anyway.'

Love shouldn't have to be finite.'

'I guess you saw it in a much more profound way than I did. I just watched a man swimming around with a little fish,' I tried to joke.

'Well, octopuses aren't actually fish, they're cephalopods,' Mira concluded in her dogmatic tone. I rolled my eyes. 'Okay, sure. But why do you bring it up anyway?'

'I don't know. It reminds me of you.'

'Right...'

'I mean their relationship to-'

'...Bit of a backhanded compliment Mir'

'Would you just shut up and let me speak?'

I fell silent, the splashing of the other swimmer dripping into our new quiet.

'They become entwined. Their limbs tangle and their selves become entangled too. Even when she's scared, he searches for her and tries to get her to trust him. She gets scared, and he always keeps going back to find her. He loves her so much, and I think she loves him in her own way too. It's a pure and simple love, one that can't really be captured with *our* language. Sure, it's weird and kinda alien but that's the point - it's an indescribable love. And that's how I feel about you, about us.'

I blinked, feeling solidness rise up my throat. I tried to cough, attempting to dislodge it, but it didn't budge. Why had I come to meet her? Obviously, that was the sort of discussion we were going to have, so why did I surrender myself to it? Part of me, namely my stomach and my lungs, wanted me to run, slow motion in the harsh water, aching towards the steps as quickly as I could manage. These parts wanted to be plucked out of the pool, dragged from this moment in time to any other - to any moment on dry land away from her. But the other parts, my toes and my veins, wanted me to stay.

Despite what my evasive organs wanted to do, my hand moved to touch her, placing my fingers on her forearm. She felt alien, liquid in the liquid. She felt like home, soft and warm and quiet. Her dark hairs felt like moss. I felt my fingers beginning to prune against her smoothness. Is water thicker than air? Although my fingers touched her skin, the particles between us felt sparse and thick. I wanted to create a vacuum between us, to banish the micrometres that tried to keep us apart.

A combination of weightlessness and my adrenaline slowed her movements, her arm reaching towards mine in stop motion. She mirrored my position, touching my other forearm with her fingertips. The mirroring evoked the sensation one feels when trying to feel their own touch. No matter what angle you stroke yourself with, no matter the concentration, you can never feel the objectivity of your own touch. Were we so entwined that our touch had become indiscernible? Had her hand become my hand, my arm become her arm? We were enmeshed, like the octopus and her student (I still don't know who was supposed to be who, or whether the two were even separable identities). We held one another in this light touch for an unknowable number of moments.

We heard a splash as the middle-aged man emerged from the other side of the pool, and we broke touch in tandem; parting skin, creating a river between us. To avoid further words, I pushed myself underwater, warping my senses. The echoes of water-logged space filled my ears, my eyelids shaded my vision with flesh, my body made weightless in the emptiness. How can we feel so empty in such full space? We become the empty space, the fullness of the volume around us mocking our gaps and air pockets (messy, like our creators forgot to colour in certain parts). I forced myself upwards, my feet briefly finding stability in the sunken ground. In the air, I rubbed the poison from my eyes and blew out the water clinging to my lips. When I opened my eyes, I saw Mira had moved further down the pool. She was swimming away from me, her feet now too far from the pool floor. I watched her brown hair following her like a wet carpet. I wanted to follow her too, but instead



I stayed where I was, frozen between the elements (pesky organs).

Although metres apart, with the millions of molecules between our skins, were we still touching? There's a theory of the self called the 'future continuity' theory. It's the idea that our selves are a stable entity because of the continual linkages between our temporal existence. Maybe other separate selves are connected in a similar way; a spatial continuity, the links of atoms between us meaning that in some capacity we are always touching. Particles of oxygen and dust brushing up against one another to link everyone on this earth. I sound pretentious, I know. But even if that theory can't be extended to *everyone* (there are indeed many people I never want to touch), it can more probably be applied to me and Mira in that pool, right? Did the water hold us together even when we were apart? Did the molecules feel my blood rush too? Mira spun her body to face me, her lips curling at the sides (almost smiling). I felt my body moving before my mind comprehended the decision, felt my limbs manipulate the water. After five strokes, I arrived beside her (still almost smiling). We tread, our pulsating limbs smashing water together beneath us. We were wordless, silent in the silence, the faint lapping of water the only sound I could identify. It wasn't awkward anymore, the silence. It felt welcoming and empty, like the water we were floating within. I smiled at her, allowing the calm to overcome me, and moved my body back into a starfish, extending my legs and my arms, breathing in to make my torso buoyant.

Under, the water once more muted my hearing, the emptiness expanding again. I stared at the sky for a moment, noting the bone-shaped cloud hovering near the sun. I tensed my neck, arching my eyes to see where Mira was. She was next to me, in the same position. I returned my neck to its natural position. Felt the muscles ease. I reached out my hands and they became linked with hers, curling into one another like new leaves unfurling. We floated like that for another indiscernible number of moments. There was of course more that happened after this floating, more words

and metaphors and love and fear. But I don't want to think about those moments, don't want to accept the uncertain conclusion she brought us to. I want to stay in that memory of floating; empty and content. Supported by the water, held by one another; two bodies in one. I want to stay there: together, alone, silent, home.

# Your Patroclus, always

Ella Piazza

## 2018 – zero hour, London

Luca and I are so close I feel the heat of his body. Around us is peace and silence. The world is taking a break and has gone quiet for a minute, leaving us hanging.

It's August Bank Holiday weekend. Brits are not in England.

Right. According to my passport then I shouldn't be here either.

My hands hold the round, shiny metal rail that runs along the chest-high, glass parapet, so tight my knuckles are white, the bones pushing hard against the skin, ready to break it. Around me the tallest buildings of the City, an army of silent and ugly giants made of glass and steel, and the white dome of St Paul's, once the highest construction in London, now a touristic trap in between a Starbucks and a Sainsbury's. How many nights I spent drinking beer on its steps with my colleagues when I worked behind Paternoster Square. I wonder where they are now. I wonder if they are alive.

The sun sets and the sky is turning all shades of blue, from denim to navy, electric lighting looming at the horizon, a thousand miniature suns illuminating another night for the few of us left behind. We are collectively looking at the last summer days while holding our breaths. The first of September is the

weirdest of all creatures, an invisible clock that shifts from one season to the other. In twenty-four hours the morning sky will be a shade of blue darker than the day before, trees will drop one or two extra leaves, birds won't chirp at the usual time but a minute later.

A full, milky moon hovers over us, a single pearl in a velvet oyster shell. It will shine bright in a couple of hours, covering whatever's left in the dark with its pale rays. Luca and I used to spend hours looking at the moon and counting stars. We were teenagers and Grifata wasn't New York. Compared to Grifata, Catania was a metropolis.

"I promised," whispers Luca, his voice breaking at the last syllable. I turn my head on a stiff neck that doesn't belong to me. He's breathing through his mouth in short, ragged motions, his face is as white as the moon, making his hair look darker than it is. Wisps of grey hit his temple and dot his short beard.

We are growing up.

"What?"

"Many years ago. I promised I would always take care of you," he says, his eyes transfixed over the parapet, down the back alley that probably serves more than one loading bay.

I press my body against the thick glass, its coldness

sweeps through my dark jeans and my floral shirt. Bending my head down is an effort, like disentangling oneself from syrup. I look down. I have to. The moon echoes on the handrail, an oblong white reflection on the cold metal in between my hand and Luca's, his hands mirroring mine.

I can see her, several metres below us, no more than a yellow and orange blob on the pavement. From here she seems like a commercial recycling bin liner.

Fucking orange quilted jacket.

"It's on sale!" she shrieked, inside *TK Maxx*, making more than one head turn. Of course it was on sale. Who in his right mind would have spent £400 for a builder-orange winter jacket?

I can only guess, but I bet that half of her face is ok, an instinctive survival response. But the other half hit the floor. What's left of it must be bruised and raw. Her nose smashed for sure, blood spurted from it, like a squirt of red on a canvas, then coagulated in a puddle around her mouth and the cheek. Her teeth survived the impact, but there are a few gaps that weren't there when the party started. They flew on the dark tarmac like wedding confetti. Her bones are broken, some are misplaced or even jutting out, white needles on a seamstress' pincushion. Did she feel the wind, when her body sprinted down the side of the building? Did she see the street growing closer? Hundred metres Seventy-one. Thirty-four metres. Less than five. Did she have time to think she was going to die? Was she scared? She must have been. But was she terrified? Or was there still a pale, little hope that she could make it? When Pandora opened the box, she released all the evils in the world, but she kept hope in. Did Sayre hope a gust of wind might help? That she could survive it, with a handful of broken things and a massive headache? Was her mind clear enough to think or was she too high to understand?

Sayre is dead.

Sayre is fucking dead!

For real.

For good.

I slide my hand on the rail, covering the moon's reflection. My pinky brushes Luca's and he wraps them together.

"She lost it when I got her evicted. She promised I would pay for it, but up to now I considered it an empty threat," I say, my voice not faltering once, my mind never clearer. "Tonight she came around, found out where I was through social media. She shouted and she was offensive. When we tried to calm her down she downed both our cocktails and threw the glasses over the rail. Then she stepped on top of a table, but it was too high, she lost her balance and fell over."

Luca turns to face me. I squeeze his hand.

"I promised too," I state, looking at him straight in the eyes. The tension on his face is replaced by cautious relief. The corner of his lips twitch. "Is that clear?"

He nods.

A gust of wind ruffles the pages of a book someone forgot on a nearby table, rustling them; they sound like quick-fire shots from a machine-gun.

My bike sounded like that, when we left Uncle Toni's shack to go for dinner.

Who comes to a place like this to read a book, anyway?

I step back until my buttocks hit the wall. Not a big distance, since there's only enough space for a line of four square tables with two seats each and a narrow passage to allow customers through. Luca's eyes are shining black seeps in the middle of his face, his thick lips drained of any colour. I stretch my hand and offer it

to him.

“We’ll jump together,” I say.

Luca raises his arm and accepts my offer, his hand shaking as I take it in mine. He smiles, timid, tears trembling at the corner of his eyes. I take a deep breath, feeling like I am emerging from deep waters. Air never burnt so much. I hold it in, close my eyes and then scream from the top of my lungs.

Time resumes.

The few customers inside the bar ooze out into the dying day, gathering in the small space along the balustrade, squeezing in every possible gap in between the wall and the tables. Despite the inconspicuous number they seem a lot more in that small space. It’s a cacophony of voices, instructions, comforting words, clinking of glasses, ringing of phones, footsteps. There are sirens in the distance, cars right below us and the high-pitched *bip bip bip* that signals a pedestrian’s green light.

In this mess, Luca hugs me tight and I bury my face in his chest, frantic, where I cry all my tears in one go.

“Are you ok? What’s happening?” asks a short guy with fashionable sandy hair and a tan. He rushes towards us, looking left and right. He’s not the same guy that served us a few hours ago, who had skinny limbs, white face and crew cut hair. Business might be lingering, but it’s still a Saturday night.

“S-Sayre’s d-dead” I sniffle, peeling my face off Luca’s chest. There are three dark stains on his grey t-shirt.

“Who’s Sayre?” he asks in a confused German accent. He looks around, his head bouncing left and right. Others do the same, bemused, nervous. They want to know. There’s nothing to know. Not here.

I wipe my nose with the back of my hand, twice, then point at the parapet with the same hand. I need

a manicure. White spots on my nails are a tell-tale sign of my lack of vitamins. If it wasn’t for her bravado, I would have been eating properly in the last months.

*Focus.*

I grasp Luca’s waist to anchor myself, the mix of fear and exhilaration threatening to blow me off my feet. No drug has ever given me this rush, never. Luca pulls me so close I brush against his groin; we hug as two kids lost in the woods at night. His back shakes because of his hiccupping. I try and squeeze some more tears out of my eyes. Incapable of doing it, I fake a collapse. Luca holds me even closer, supporting my weight. I bury my face in his t-shirt again, inebriated by his perfume in the dark.

Hugo Boss. I love it on him.

“Have a sit,” says someone. Is it German boy? No. The accent is different.

“Yes. Come, Cisco. Let’s sit you down.”

Cisco. Not Scott. Never Scott. Luca has never got used to Scott.

Because Scott was a big, phony fuck. It’s time for his last performance before curtain call.

I drag my feet, trip on them and have to get hold of Luca’s arm. I sit at a nearby table, Luca beside me, our chairs so close we could use only one. Sirens are getting closer and louder. I can’t hear the *bip bip bip* of the pedestrian crossing anymore. I pat my pockets for a tissue that I know I don’t have. There are no napkin dispensers on the tables, so I am forced to wipe my nose with my hand again. Then I have three people offering paper tissues and blue roll.

“Thanks. Thank you so much,” I say, blindly. A gust of wind blows the paper away, making it roll in a corner of the terrace. The pages of the book rustle.

That fucking book.

It's on the table beside mine so I grab it, to satisfy my curiosity, still wondering who can read a book in place like this.

If this is a joke, I can tell it's not funny.

Millions of books in the world and I end up with the one that started everything. Das Symposium by Plato. In German, though, instead of Italian.

*"Ecco dunque, io lo dichiaro, Eros è tra gli dei il più antico e il più degno, ha i maggiori titoli per guidare l'uomo sulla via della virtù e della felicità, sia in vita che nel regno dell'aldilà,"*  
I recite in a low voice. It comes out. I repeated it so many times that I still remember it.

It means: that's why I say Love is the most ancient of the gods, the most honoured and the most effective in enabling human beings to acquire courage and happiness, both in life and death.

"Phaedrus speech?" whispers Luca in dismay. Something's wrong with his face. I flip the book to show him the cover.

"Oh, that's mine," sandy hair says. "I must have forgotten it when I took my break."

Luca surrounds my waist, his head bobbing on my shoulder, his breath hot and itchy against my neck, now wet from his tears. I stroke his back with long, slow movements, from his nape all the way down the small of his back, amazed. I've never seen Luca cry so much.

"Georg," calls a faceless voice.

"I'll be back," says sandy hair. Georg. Nice name.

Luca is calmer, enough to sniffle one last time and face me. He looks at me in the dim light of dusk. His skin is dry and so are his eyes and his nose.

It takes me a second to realise the bastard is laughing his fucking ass off.

# The Constancy Of Soggy Tuna Sandwiches

Georgia Cook

It was past its sell-by date; it had to be past its sell-by-date. No tuna sandwich in the history of sandwiches – and that included suspicious train-station kiosk tuna sandwiches – had looked, smelt, or (she gave the pack a hesitant squeeze) yes, *felt* like that within its sell-by date. It was the last sandwich in the cabinet. It was always the last sandwich left in the cabinet. That was how you knew.

It crinkled as she picked it up, leaking a film of watery mayonnaise through the little plastic window.

“Give it ten minutes and I’ll be restocking.” The girl behind the register gave her an apologetic smile. “Sorry, we’ve been totally rammed this afternoon.”

She realised she’d been standing, staring, sandwich in hand, for nearly five minutes. “No, it’s okay,” she said. “It’s actually exactly what I wanted.”

The girl gave her a bemused look, but rang up the purchase. “Will there be anything else?”

She thought briefly about buying a newspaper, maybe a coffee; toyed with the idea of simply staying in here all afternoon and missing her train. Then she smiled, shook her head and slipped the sandwich into her bag.

What had begun as a light drizzle on the way to the station was now a full-throttle downpour. People scurried across the platform, fumbling umbrellas and sodden suitcases, huddling under the slim shelter of the station overhang. She stood in the doorway a moment, watching the rain splatter the tracks, feeling the coffee-scented warmth of the little station kiosk prickle the back of her neck, then she stepped out into the rain.

The sandwich sat in her bag, unopened, as she waited for her train. There was an odd weight to it; like a guilty secret, or a strange, slightly squashy talisman. She felt, for the first time in months, that maybe she could breathe. That the awful weight of expectation had lifted, if only for a moment. Surrounded by miserable, shivering people, she had found a travelling companion.

The train arrived ten minutes late, dispersing a stream of new commuters out into the rain. She fought her way inside, walking quickly, head down to avoid unnecessary conversation, found a seat next to the window and sat down.

Rain drummed against the roof overhead. The brightly coloured blurs of people still hurrying across the platform seemed rendered now in cotton wool; like something out of a dream. A million miles away.

By degrees, they pulled away from the station, began to move past looming skyscrapers and red brick estates, picking up speed. Street lamps punctuated the gloom, highlighting pedestrians and cars on the streets below; buses and zebra crossings, railway arches littered with graffiti.

All of London, awash.

*And here I am*, she thought, sitting back. *Going Home*.

God.

How long could you procrastinate a train journey? Dithering over tickets, labouring over stations and taxis, staring for hours at the train app, willing the times to change, praying for an unexpected cancellation of all services.

Hoping, just until tomorrow, just until next week, that maybe you could put it all off.

She hadn't packed much. In a daze, she'd found herself throwing odd bits and pieces into a large canvas beach bag – errant tops, bras, a single shoe.

Sometimes she'd stop, just for a moment, and all that hot, crushing tightness would come flooding back, and she'd find herself curled on her bedroom floor, sobbing into a mismatched sock.

There'd been too much to do in those first few days: forms to sign, people to call: a life quietly transformed into paperwork. And then Arrangements, so many Arrangements. It had been a relief, almost, to work herself into exhaustion; to let herself forget, in the landslide of mourning, that she would have to go home at some point. Not *home*-home – which was a tiny flat in Clapham, South London, containing just herself-- but *Home*. Shatter the final illusion that things were still

exactly as they had always been. The entitled certainty there would always be a long, long rope fixed around her waist, trailing back to someone who had been there from the beginning. The Eternal Constant.

“If there's anything that can be relied upon in this life,” her father had said, once, as she sulked on a rainy train ride back from Brighton beach, “it's the unreliability of the weather.”

He'd been full of funny little phrases like that. And he'd been wrong.

*Nothing*, she thought bitterly. *Nothing could be relied upon*.

*Nothing ever stayed as it should*.

She was crying less now. Or rather, was crying less suddenly – had ceased to startle herself with the sudden punch of her own grief. Strangers' faces had stopped popping out of crowds: a certain nose, a certain haircut, the gleam of an eye – familiarity in an unfamiliar face – causing her to fall apart in the middle of the street.

She didn't know if this was better or worse. If this was *coping*.

The rain was coming down harder now, turning the world beyond the window into a dirge of greys and blacks. The sharp grey highrises of London had given way to sodden fields and loamy woodland, rushing past on either side of the track. Increasingly familiar.

Nobody spoke about the *mundanity* of grief. That at the end of the day it was something you simply had

to carry around with you. Admission to a club nobody ever mentioned, and which nobody truly left.

Fumbling in her bag, she found the kiosk sandwich. It had slipped to the bottom, past forgotten train tickets and ancient gum. It crinkled as she picked it up, twice as dented as it had been before.

They'd eaten sandwiches that day – that rain-drenched day so many years ago, riding back from a disappointing outing to the beach. Her father had left their picnic basket on the bus and, in a desperate attempt to salvage the situation, had purchased them both soggy tuna sandwiches and cartons of orange juice from the little kiosk at the station. They'd together sat under the awning, eating their makeshift lunches and watching the rain pour down, while they waited for their train.

Just them. All alone in the rain-splattered world. It had been the worst thing she'd ever eaten, and it had been wonderful.

Not the same train, of course, and not the same station. Certainly not the same sandwich. But there had been something ... almost fortuitous in finding it here. A tiny jab of comfort, as if she'd been granted the luxury of plunging her hand into the past and drawing out something – *anything*.

And she'd found a sandwich.

The grief overwhelmed her then, sitting alone in her cramped little seat. She felt the air hitch in her throat, felt the terrible tumbling of gasping little breaths. That terrible gut-punch unfairness of it all.

*How dare* things change. *How dare* the world shift so suddenly without consulting her. *How dare it*.

*How dare he be gone.*

Without quite realising what she was doing, she ripped open the package and took a bite. The bread was soggy and faintly chemical. The tuna came as it was – without garnish, not even the customary wilted salad leaf. It clumped in her mouth, strange and half-solid, but wonderfully familiar. She closed her eyes and sat back, cocooned in the first true moment of calm she'd felt in months.

The rain hammered against the windows, the wind howled past the carriages, rattling the trees and darkening the sky, but inside was warm and safe and ordinary.

God, *bliss*.

Life, she decided, could never be relied upon. Landscapes changed – grew bigger or smaller, depending on the person you'd been when you last saw them – the weather refused to do what was expected of it. People moved on, sometimes for good. Nobody remained as they were forever.

And her father had been partially right: the only thing a person could rely upon, at the end of the day, was the unreliability of the weather, the sudden comfort of unexpected memories and a soggy tuna sandwich from the train station kiosk.



# Sweet Shashtahika

Harry F. Rey

Jerusalem, 1967

“Mom!” Asaf called out as they climbed the path to the garden. “Mom, I’ve got *yaprach*.” He held the pot while Omar walked behind him. It was the least Asaf could do to take it for him. During the ten-minute ride from the *shuk* to Katamon, Omar had gripped the pot precariously between his legs while Asaf held onto him tighter than he’d ever gripped a man. With each breathless dart between a close-knit pair of cars, Asaf took the opportunity to squeeze a little harder.

“Hello there,” Riki called from the garden as they entered through the gate. She sat in a plastic chair, her ample body poking through all the slats, with her pudgy feet soaking in a bucket of water and aluminum strips folded into her hair.

“Where is everyone?” Asaf asked while Riki, ever the curious one, peered up like a meerkat to see who he’d brought home.

“Yardena went home to change. But Nechama is inside doing Simcha and your mom’s hair.”

As if waiting for her name to be called, Simcha emerged out of the darkness of the house, an unlit cigarette between her lips and even more foil folded into her hair.

“Uh huh,” she said, taking the lighter from Riki and

glancing over the boys one at a time. She spoke like nothing surprised her. There was no new information to Simcha. Only what she already knew, and what she needed to be reminded of. Nothing else in the world was worth knowing.

“Your mom’s waiting on the vine leaves, Asaf,” Simcha said, heaving herself into a plastic chair opposite Riki and placing one foot in the small bucket between Riki’s. There was no room for a fourth foot. Asaf was ready to head straight inside without saying a word about Omar, if these two were willing to ignore him.

“*Merheba*,” Omar said from behind him, greeting the sisters in perfect Kurdish.

“Ooh-ah!” Riki said, shuffling on the chair with excitement. “*Merheba. Ez kefxwesh bûm!*”

“Pleased to meet you as well,” Omar responded. Asaf’s stomach twisted with anxiety at the small talk. As if he’d brought home a new kitten, a frail bird; something delicate which might flap away at the wrong touch. And his aunts with their great clunking hands and sharp tongues could spear any animal, even one as robustly handsome as Omar.

Simcha only grunted a greeting, and that was enough. He beckoned Omar to come inside the house, as Riki’s wandering eyes followed them inside. Nechama was rinsing out a bucket in the bathroom, so they had

no one to avoid, or to be a buffer, between his mom in the kitchen. The way was littered with the smell of frying dough and sugar. Asaf glanced back at Omar, who followed him with a smile. Those wide, leading lips made him more nervous than anything else.

“Mom, I brought *yaprach*.”

Her back was turned to them both, focused on the frying pan and the sizzling sandwich of sugary dough. She'd heard him, but waited for another few moments for the dough to crackle into a golden brown. She whipped a tea towel off the stack on the counter, revealing a pile of the thick, crisp fried envelopes like a magician. She lifted the finished one onto the top of the wobbling stack. Looking at the pot, her reaction was as visceral as Asaf's.

“*Merheba*,” Omar said with the same, sharp tone one *should* use to address an adult, but Asaf never had.

“*Merheba*,” his mom responded, rubbing the oil off her hands with another tea towel and returning the same formality an adult used to address a strange person whom their child has brought home and seems overly familiar with despite the parent never having met nor heard of them before.

“Ah, *shashtahika*,” Omar said, glancing at the stack of fried dough pockets.

“You know *shashtahika*?” asked his mom, her face cracking into a wide smile.

“Of course Omar knows, Mom. He's from Zakho.”

“Really? Very good, I like to hear.” That gave her licence to lift the lid of the pot. “Amazing, it looks perfect.” She prodded the rolled leaves as Asaf had done before, coming to the same conclusion. “Absolutely perfect. Meat?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Very nice.”

“My mom had a lot extra. We have a wedding tonight, she made too much, of course. And Asaf said he needed.”

“There were no leaves in the *shuk*,” Asaf added, intrigued by Omar's move to make their relationship seem solid and long-lasting. That in itself lit the pot up in a shimmer of authenticity. Asaf knew how his mom's mind worked. If he'd gone to the trouble of bringing it home, that meant *he* believed it would pass her test. It must be trustworthy, because in her house, there was no getting it wrong. A mistake in the realm of food was an affront to everything it meant to be Kurdish. He might as well spit on the grave of his grandparents. Suddenly Asaf hoped his own decision to trust this Omar, wherever this non-Jewish Kurd had come from, would not be akin to spitting on a grave.

“Give me half an hour,” his Mom said, pulling her drawers open for another pot, “and I'll transfer the *yaprach* and give you the pot back, with some *shashtahika* to thank your mom.”

“There's no need,” Omar said, “keep the pot.”

“Not at all. Half an hour. Here.” She took a fresh *shashtahika* from the pile, wrapped it in a kitchen towel and handed it to Asaf. “Go take a walk and eat that, come back in half an hour and you can take the pot home to your mom, Omar.”

“Shula!” Nechama called from the bathroom. “Time for your hair.”

“Go,” she said, hushing them out of the kitchen, “it's too crowded in here as it is. Go for a walk.”

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Asaf led Omar up the hill behind his house towards the park. He held the hot *shashtahika*, stealing every glance back at Omar that he could. Wherever this boy had come from, if he didn't know the way, then he didn't show it.

"Have you been here?" Asaf asked as they climbed the last few steps between the leaning trees into the small park nestled into the hill. The far end of the park was exposed and open, displaying the vista of a valley where in winter, mist swept in from the east like ships docking in a port of clouds, obscuring the scarred and jagged turrets and wire ripping the port from its sea.

"I don't think so."

Omar stopped talking as the tree shade of the staircase opened into the grassy knoll. And there in the middle, in the heart of the park, was an old, rusted tank. Its turret pointed straight out towards the valley and Jordan beyond. A couple of kids ran around the tracts, kicking a ball off the rusted armour.

"I take it you haven't been to the Tank Park before, then," Asaf said with a smile that Omar returned, albeit with a bit of a nervous shrug. The place was the focal point of Katamon. Everyone in south west Jerusalem – from the German colony to Rehavia – knew the Tank Park. Even though the relic of the 1948 war was hidden by surrounding trees and the high wall of the San Simon monastery on the top side.

"Come," Asaf said with a smile as the two shrieking children were joined by a third and fourth playing in the grass, "I know a better place."

Omar dutifully followed him across the park, the tank following their movements like the Mona Lisa.

"Can we go in here?" Omar asked nervously, stopping at the black gate of the monastery as Asaf lifted up the latch.

"Why not? The monks are never here, or if they are,

they don't care."

Asaf held the gate open for Omar as he ducked under the stone archway with its Greek carvings, even though it was tall and he wasn't particularly. Asaf understood the feeling. The carved Christian symbols on the stone arch always made him nervous as well. Asaf closed the gate to the oasis, and silence seemed to fall upon them. A large grassy garden surrounded by well-tended flower beds was closed in on three sides by the thick stone wall separating the church grounds from the park, and on the fourth side by the brick of the monastery with no windows and no discernible entrance, at least from this angle.

"This is nice," Omar said as they sat down on the grass, alone under the blue sky and bright sun with only the breeze for company. At this height above Jerusalem, the wind carried a welcome chill which rushed through Omar's clothes. It pillowed his shirt in and out, offering hints of dark skin slipping away underneath.

Peeling his eyes away, Asaf undid the kitchen towel and tore the *shashtahika* in half, digging into his half with gusto.

"Do you like *shashtahika*?" Asaf asked, getting the sense he should have asked before.

"Of course, I love it." Still hesitant, Omar tore off a small corner and nibbled it. Asaf watched closely as he chewed, as if sussing out this stranger's Kurdish credentials. He was leaning on the grass with someone whom he knew so little about, but felt so familiar from a depth he did not know of before. Like there was a magnet buried inside his chest edging him closer towards this Omar. Finally, Omar took a proper bite.

"It's so good!"

"You look surprised."

"I've just ... never had a Jewish one."

"It's all Kurdish, isn't it the same?"

"Yeah ... I guess you're right."

A silence swept in with the breeze, bending the trees towards an unknown will. So many questions galloped through his mind like gazelles. All about Omar. How did his skin feel, or his hair? What was his smell; that scent Asaf had to have more of and so dangerously narrowed the gap between them in the grass? He watched Omar eat: casually, slowly, looking at the dough breaking in his hands, and nowhere else. Asaf feared that all he wanted was to get back to the house and take home his clean pot. That the trees and the breeze and the soft afternoon sun starting to sink beneath the monastery walls were all lies. A false God; as out of place in his mind as a church on a Jerusalem hill.

"Are you from the north?" Asaf asked. Because that was the only other place he could think of in Israel where Arabs lived. "Or from Yafo?" Remembering the existence of the mainly Arab port town just south of Tel Aviv. Omar shook his head at both, pulling his own shards of grass from the ground. Anxious chunks balled up in his hand. The breeze tumbled between them, flapping dead grass and lifting the scent into the air. The gust disturbed the silence and Asaf leaned ever closer, as if trying to hear the whispers from Omar's lips.

"Where did you say?" Asaf said, knowing fine well he'd said nothing.

Omar finally let the grass fall, the wind still billowing it around. He lifted his eyes to Asaf's and sighed like a great secret was about to be imparted.

"I'm from Jerusalem ... from the other side." Omar let the words fall upon them with a deep, deceitful stare.

"How did you get through the gate?"

"I've got a pass. My dad works for the Jordanian government so I can cross on official business."

"Is this official business?"

Omar smiled. He grinned from ear to ear, actually, pulling up a tuft of grass to avoid the coming giggles. Nothing was particularly funny, but Asaf couldn't help but laugh either, even just at the absurdity of it all, and it infected Omar too. Omar shook his head in response to the question.

"No, delivering *yaprach* isn't official business."

"It could be if we were in Zakho."

"Yeah, that's true."

"I've never met a Muslim before," Asaf said when their laughter had settled like the breeze.

"And I've never met a Jew."

Asaf was keenly aware how low he was on the ground compared to Omar. Practically beneath him as he sat up straight; dark, hairy legs peeking out of his trousers. From this angle on the ground, almost flat out, Asaf could peek between the gaps of Omar's shirt buttons. He watched his chest, dark skin and black hair webbed on a slight frame, breathe and move at its own pace like the earth around the sun. Or the moon around the stars. He wanted to get closer, to take in more of the skin and the scent and the smell of Omar. How could he get closer?

"You're louder than I thought ... I think," Omar said, gazing downwards upon Asaf. "Hot blooded, warm ... cute."

"Cute?" Asaf asked, surprised.

"Yeah, cute. Like ... attractive. Handsome." Omar sucked in a deep, wobbling breath. "Sexy."

The word dropped out of the sky and splattered onto Asaf like the storm at the end of the world, or the beginning of a new one. He knew the word, knew

what it meant, but had never experienced the concept himself. No one had ever called him sexy before, not in the abstract or the analogue. Not in any hidden part of his imagination.

“What do you think about us Muslims?”

Asaf stared up at Omar’s face painted against the blue sky. The dark sand of his chest and bones of his shoulder beamed warm and hot despite the growing chill of the coming night. The silence of their surroundings was nothing compared to the thumping of Asaf’s heart and he could see it through the gaps of Omar’s shirt as well. Omar sucked in a breath or two and let it out in sharp, jagged edges. But it was Omar’s eyes, his eyes told the story. The brown, the white, the black, the eyelashes long and sweeping like a painted Egyptian. Was he coming closer, or was the world throwing them together?

“Also ... sexy.” The whisper escaped from Asaf’s lips like a bird set free before disappearing into the vast sky. Liberated and free. A hand touched an arm, a hand touched a knee. The magnet grew stronger, drawing the great wings to the pole, telling the ducks where to fly, the geese how to land. The earth spun upon magnets and here on the green grass of a Jerusalem hill, the magnets spun together, the right sides clicked. Omar leant down as Asaf leaned up. A hand on his heart, a hand on his knee. Closer to his throat, closer to his thigh. Closer together, for there was no other direction in which to go. So close, their lips touched and the world faded to meaningless silence as the two boys stole a kiss under the peace of the monastery walls.

# In The First Place

Jeffrey Zable

Yesterday I encountered a neighbour who I felt sure had given me the evil eye, but to make him think that I didn't notice, I waved to him. And as soon as he turned, I made the sign of the cross.

Upon entering my home, I called a few of my neighbors, warning them about this guy, expressing that I felt he could be a danger to all of us.

Each was very much in agreement; that they had suspicions about him all along and that if one had any personal problems, they could likely be attributed to him.

Thanking them for their understanding and support, it wasn't long before some very unpleasant events happened to me. First, I found my favorite goldfish floating on top of the water, eyes bulging out of his head.

Then my TV went completely dead only a couple of days after the warranty had expired. And not long after that, I spilled a pot of boiling water onto the floor, a few drops of which landed on my bare feet, leaving burn marks and pain for several days.

With this last incident, I called up the same neighbors and told them that it was imperative that we rid the neighborhood of this guy. To which everyone agreed, as they too had been having some very negative experiences that led straight to this person.

So we met at my house and made a plan that we felt sure would get rid of him for good, and as a result, re-stabilise our lives.

Carefully breaking into his house, we caught him completely off guard, tied him up and took him to a wooded area from which we felt certain he'd never find his way back.

Things improved dramatically after that, with no serious incidents, until one of the neighbors who had been a part of our group, gave me what I perceived as the evil eye. This was soon confirmed because within a couple of days I experienced some stressful events similar in magnitude to those previously described.

Calling the same neighbors, minus this particular woman, we all agreed that there was always something not right about her.

We soon proceeded as before, leaving the woman even deeper in the woods than the previous guy.

After that, there were no serious incidents for a while, but eventually we had to get rid of others to feel safe and maintain some semblance of peace.

As of today, every house in the neighborhood is now vacant with the exception of my own, which is okay by me because I never really cared for any of my neighbours in the first place.

# Moths

Judy Upton

The letter arrived this morning. I need to find £2,000 to extend my work visa or leave the UK. £2,000! I'm a cleaner on the minimum wage. I work nights mopping hospital floors, risking my life to save others. It's enough to make anyone weep.

I've a second cleaning job too, working in the house of a very important woman. I think I'd better refer to her as Mrs X – well, you'll see why. I'd really hoped she'd be able to put me on the furlough scheme so I'd still have some money coming in from my second job. She's always saying how pleased she is with my work, so I thought she'd probably do it.

I was disinfecting the handrail of a hospital staircase, when my phoned pinged with a message. Mrs X has sacked me. She's not prepared to pay twenty percent of my wages while I cannot come to her house.

Mrs X is a millionaire with a six-bedroom mansion in a very smart part of London. She's an adviser to the government, I think. Something to do with trade. I can't remember her exact job title but you see her on the TV sometimes. Still, having to pay only 20 % of the £8.72 an hour earned by her cleaner is something she doesn't seem willing to consider. She hints in her email that she might need cleaning services resumed at a later date, but doesn't make it entirely clear if it's me she'll take back on or if she'll hire somebody else. I wish I hadn't confided in her about my NHS job. I wonder if the fact I'm working in a hospital has made her keener to be rid

of me. Is she afraid I'll bring the virus into her house? If she'd told me that, at least I'd know. But she's given me no reason at all. It's just 'I'm having to let you go'. 'Let me go' – even the words make it sound like she's doing me a favour.

I've always been on time, always been professional and I take pride in my work. I'm actually qualified to teach, but all I've been able to get here at the moment are cleaning jobs. Without me, moths would've destroyed all of Mrs X's antique Turkish rugs. I spotted the first signs in her study last winter and dealt with the problem then and there. Over the years I've certainly saved her far more money than she's had to pay me.

So now I'm mopping angry. That's what Therese calls it. She could tell by the way I'm working tonight that I'm still very upset about Mrs X. I explained I'd always felt Mrs X respected me. We'd drink tea together and chat. She would ask me about myself and my life and family back home. I wouldn't go as far as to say we're friends, but when she speaks to me she's always respectful, meets my eyes, smiles at me. She's never ordered me about and always says please and thank you. I've worked in other large houses, for other rich English people, and they've behaved like they think I'm worthless, invisible. Mrs X isn't like that ... That's why this hurts.

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After taking my anger out on the floor, and talking to

There, I feel calmer and more hopeful. I might make a detour on my way home tonight, to pass Mrs X's. It's in St. John's Wood and only means getting off the bus a couple of stops early. When I catch the bus, I'm probably the most relaxed person on board. For other people on their way to or from work, this is the riskiest part of their day. When you wash down wards, travelling is probably quite a bit safer than that. At the hospital, I wear a mask, gloves and apron, but despite our pleas the cleaners don't get to have full PPE. We work for a private firm, we're not NHS workers. Before Covid, we were an ever-changing group of people, hailing from every continent. You only just got to know someone and then they went back home or moved on to a better job.

For the moment, though, there's no way back home for most of us and no chance of a better job. But we all feel a sense of pride doing what we do. By destroying the virus where it settles on surfaces we are part of the war against it, the same as the doctors and nurses. We're key workers – saving lives – and that feels good. It doesn't make the fear go away, but at least when I'm at work it's a shared fear. The time when it's harder, that's when I get home. I close the door and I'm alone. That's when I look in the mirror – and I find the woman in me has vanished. I see instead a scared little girl looking back.

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I walk around the block three times before I dare walk up to Mrs X's door. Her house is a detached one, opposite the canal, standing proud in a mature garden with a weeping willow tree. The windows have wooden shutters and the front door has a brass lion doorknocker and a video-entry system. I intend to stand back by the gate and speak to my employer at a very safe distance. I am just going to state my case simply and with dignity. All I need is to be furloughed. I'm not asking for a full wage to do nothing. When this crisis is over I'm willing to put in extra hours for free to make up for what I cost her now.

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Mrs X doesn't answer the door. She doesn't appear to be in. Perhaps she's at an important meeting or briefing. Maybe she's shopping. Sometimes I'd buy her groceries for her, even though it was not officially part of my job. I'd put food in the oven and refill the coffee machine too. I'd water the plants when she was away, and air the rooms before she returned. I suppose I was more housekeeper than cleaner.

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When I get in after a hospital shift I tend to put the TV on and search for a bit of comedy or a music programme. Today I caught the end of news show where they discuss the day's events. Mrs X was on it, giving some kind of advice for businesses during the lockdown. I've seen her on TV before, and she does tend to talk sense. This time, though, I couldn't concentrate on anything she was saying. Like all the people being interviewed nowadays, she was self-filming on her webcam from home. Only I'd swear that the painting behind her was not in her London home. I've dusted the frames of all her artwork and I've never seen that one. Perhaps she has been re-arranging things, or bought a new picture. But as she talked on, I realised that she doesn't have a burgundy-coloured wall like that in any room of her house. She doesn't have built-in bookcases either and I'd have noticed that shiny green vase in the shape of a wave if I'd seen it before. In the few weeks since I've last visited, could she have changed her wall colour and lots of her furnishings?

But I know the answer to that question already. Mrs X is not in her London home. And I probably know that home better than she does. I can be completely certain that Mrs X is at another location. I know it. She is now somewhere she has travelled to during lockdown. She has gone to her second home, even though that is currently not allowed. So it turns out that Mrs X is like all the others. Those people who tell us all we must do one thing and then they do something else themselves. I didn't think she was this type of person. I thought she was like me: honest.



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“Oh no - cleaning angry again,” said Therese, when she saw my furious mopping. That’s when the whole story tumbled out. How I have to obey unfair rules like paying to extend my visa, while I’m working to help the NHS. How my private employer has let me go, when she could’ve furloughed me so I still received some money. And how that employer, Mrs X, has broken the lockdown rules we’re all keeping, saving lives. Mrs X doesn’t care about the relatives I see sobbing outside the hospital or the covered bodies being wheeled away. There are people on ventilators and people drawing their last, rasping breath because people like Mrs X have broken the rules. Therese told me to sit down. She said I was breathing hard and she was afraid I might have a heart attack. At least we’re in a hospital, I joked. But I wasn’t going to sit until our job was done. The corridor had to be clean and safe for everyone to walk along.

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“You’ve got her email address. You should let her know, you know.” Therese and I were walking towards the bus stop.

“Blackmail her you mean?” I was shocked that she could think of such a thing.

“You don’t have to go as far as to ask her for money ...”

“I certainly am not doing that!”

“You could simply ask her to keep you on, Nadine. And just drop in the fact that you know she’s staying at a second home into the email.”

“No. I’m not doing that. It isn’t honest.”

“Oh and is what she’s done honest?”

Therese had a point it’s true, but I’m too stubborn and proud to sink to Mrs X’s level. I always try to be a good

person, a moral person. Threatening to tell tales isn’t something I’d feel comfortable doing. I need to be able to live with myself. Just because someone else behaves badly, that doesn’t mean you should do the same.

“Well go to the newspapers then. Or the TV people.” Therese was not giving up.

I shook my head. “I’m not doing it Therese. I’m not.”

“You wouldn’t have to give your name. You could tip them off anonymously.”

That’s when I put out my hand to flag down our bus, but it swished on by, already carrying as many socially distanced passengers as it was allowed. It meant we would have to wait, but the driver was doing the right thing by obeying the rules. Keeping people safe.

“Look, I’m not discussing it anymore,” I said to Therese.

“Honestly, Nadine, you sound like the Prime Minister,” she snapped back. “And you know it’s not right, letting rich, privileged people break every rule. If you won’t call someone about your Mrs X then I just might! I might Tweet the news people or even the police when I get home. I won’t mention you of course. I’ll tell them they’ll have to investigate for themselves. I bet they’ll do it too.”

I shrugged. I’d had enough of the whole thing. If Therese wanted to tell the world, and get my former employer in trouble, well what did it matter to me? I’d never see Mrs X again, apart from in the papers or on the TV. She’d probably already forgotten me and I was going to forget her too. Besides, I’ve more urgent things to worry about. I need to chase up my claim for Universal Credit and try to find another non-domestic cleaning job before my visa expires.

# Bubble

Justin David

Ron sighs regret into the Kent swimming pool sky. He's flipping a sizzling burger, scorched slightly on one side. He's thinking about sex again.

'Not like that Ron,' Sylvia says, even sharper than usual, grabbing the barbecue tongs from him.

Karen, blonde and unfettered, approaches from across the lawn with a bottle, weaving her way through party guests: mainly young dads with footballers' haircuts and three-quarter length combats, and their glamorous wives, each imitating primetime television hosts. They're all standing on the lawn with glasses of fizz, not one of them over forty-five, exchanging notes about motors and celebrity gossip. The young kids are playing with balloons.

When Ron refocuses on Karen, even from this distance he can see a smudge of ketchup on her blouse. She's now disentangling herself from one of the men, flirting playfully with her. She's a lovely daughter-in-law but she's a dirty cat, filthy laugh. They lock eyes. Ron nods at her and taps the spot on his own shirt where the ketchup would be. Karen inspects herself while she walks. As she reaches Ron and Sylvia at the barbecue she throws her eyes up. 'How did you spot that from way over here?' She laughs and wipes the blot of red with a bit of kitchen towel.

'That's my Ron. Sees every detail,' Sylvia says. 'He's like the Hubble telescope.' Sylvia flips burgers and

shunts her husband along the griddle. 'If only he were as good with a pair of tongs.'

Ron looks at Karen for sympathy. She winks and says, 'Looks like you have everything under control, Sylvia.'

'Somebody's got to do it.' Sylvia's hunching her back again, as if she's still carrying it all – the weight of the last year. But they're through it now. Ron reaches for her and his hand touches her mottle-tanned arm exposed from her black, embroidered camisole. She flicks her Rita Hayworth hair and for a moment he remembers them being teenagers, running through spring.

'Look at us three standing like witches round a fire. It's like that play that Shakespeare wrote,' Karen says. 'What was it? Hamlet?'

'*Macbeth*,' Ron says.

'That's it! Only you're not supposed to say it, are you? Cursed. Hubble-bubble,' Karen says, lifting the bottle to Sylvia.

Sylvia pushes Karen away with the flat of her hand. 'No. Not for me. I'm teetotal today.' Ron looks at Sylvia who flares her eyes, pantomime fashion. 'What? We've got to show a united front –'

'Anyone would think *you're* the one with the

problem,' Ron says and turns from her. 'Great party, Karen. Is Darren enjoying himself?'

Karen glances around at her guests with an air of nonchalance. 'They seem to be having a nice time. And you know Darren. He's over there, boring all the blokes with the details of the new bike he bought himself for his birthday. I've tried plying him with more booze, but he's so moderate. Which reminds me, I must refresh my glass. I'll tell him to come over and give you a hand.' Through the house, distantly, the doorbell rings. 'Ooo, that'll probably be your other son, one minute.' Karen dashes off.

Sylvia nudges Ron. 'I suppose he'll have *her* with him, won't he?'

'I suppose.'

'I just hope he's taken his medication. That's all we need, him kicking off in front of Darren's friends.'

'Give me those tongs.' Ron flips burgers and looks around the lawn at all the guests talking. Two blokes in t-shirts, one red, one black, near the barbecue, haven't stopped grumbling about 'operation stack' since they arrived. Ron knows all about it. It's that oh-so-terrible procedure used by the police to park cargo lorries on the motorway which has been preventing them all from getting to work.

'Bloody migrants, causing havoc with the Channel Tunnel. Right inconvenience,' Black t-shirt says, glancing over at Ron.

'Refugees,' Ron says. 'Be thankful you're not in Syria having your toenails pulled out by the root.'

'Any chance of a burger mate?' Red t-shirt says.

Further away, a woman in a lemon summer dress sneezes. 'Oh, do excuse me. Terrible hay fever,' she says in a loud voice. Recovering, she lifts a prawn vol-au-vent being offered from a china plate, held by a woman in

a backless halter-neck who Ron has many times thought of fucking. 'I do love Karen's conservatory,' she says, as Ron tilts his head to get a better look at her tits. 'Perfect for occasions like this.'

'It's terribly over-looked though, isn't it?' The other woman speaks through a half-eaten vol-au-vent – a little bit of pastry crumb stuck to her bottom lip. 'Like a goldfish bowl. I'd hate it. Everyone seeing in. Everyone knowing your business.'

Ron watches. The other woman in the halter-neck has obviously seen the crumb but says nothing. 'We were thinking of extending but my husband says we should spend the money on holidays. I was thinking of Egypt or maybe Sharm El-Sheikh.'

'Isn't Sharm El-Sheikh part of –'

'Right bloody mess,' Red t-shirt says. He glances over at Sylvia, as if to draw her in. 'And this is just the start of it, love. Wait until they all start arriving here.'

'Don't you think we can make room?' Ron says.

'Stop it, Ron,' Sylvia says. 'We don't talk politics.'

Ron feels himself blush a little. Sylvia stares at him over the barbecue and the atmosphere cools despite the coals. 'Don't we?' Ron says.

'Who knows who's amongst them?' Red t-shirt says. 'Bloody extremists. It's a time bomb, let me tell you.'

When Karen returns she's holding an unopened bottle of champagne in one hand and a bottle of red in the other. 'Guess who I found on the doorstep.' Behind her are Gav and Tanya. 'Look at them. One week in the Canaries and already lightly browned.'

Whilst they were away, it was a week-long white-knuckle ride for Sylv. Ron had tried to distract her from her worst fears with trips to the seaside. Gav nods to them all. 'No holidays booked, Karen?' he says, without

making eye contact.

'Not until the little one stops crying all through the night.'

Gav smiles, still looking at the ground. 'Where is she then?'

'The ladies in the conservatory are taking turns,' Karen says.

Sylvia moves forward and kisses Gav on the cheek before retreating back to her place at the barbecue.

'Cooee!' comes a voice over the garden gate. Ron can just discern the top curls of a familiar grey bouffant.

Then the birthday boy himself appears from inside the house, wearing a cook's apron. 'That'll be Auntie Maureen,' Darren says, raising his eyebrows. 'Better let her in.' In moments he's shepherding her across the garden, Maureen expertly carrying a tray of fatty finger food.

'This is my contribution,' Maureen says. 'Someone relieve me.'

'Help the aged,' Ron says. 'Quick! Find her a stool.'

'Ron Sullivan,' Maureen barks. 'I'm not afraid to take you on, you old bastard.'

Darren sets Maureen's tray down on a picnic table next to Ron's carton of juice. 'Good to have you back in the land of the living.' He turns and slaps Gav on the shoulder. 'I thought we'd lost you there for a minute.'

'Thanks,' Gav says and shakes Darren's hand. 'Can't get rid of me that easily.'

Ron pictures Gav as a podgy baby in old photographs – perfect and untouched. Look at him now – fresh typographic tattoo creeping up his forearm. *To Young To Die*. Ron painfully notes the incorrect spelling of an

epithet associated with James Dean. That'll be difficult to address.

'Awww. He looks well.' Maureen glances over at her sister. 'Doesn't he look well, Sylv?' she says, even though to Ron, he looks bloody awful – skin still a little yellow, eyes bloodshot as if he's been crying.

Maureen doesn't get any smaller. Still eating a full English every day. She's like an over-stuffed pillowcase squeezed into a knitted cardie despite it being the height of summer. 'Last time I saw you, there were tubes coming out of you.' Maureen pinches Gav's arm as she squeezes past him to get closer to the meat. 'You gave us all quite a scare, young man. Do that again and I'll get the doctors to take your pancreas out and feed it to the birds. Bloody little bugger.'

Ron sees it all – the man hugs, the backslapping, the wet lipstick kisses, Sylvia hanging back pretending to watch the sausages and Tanya, looking out of place, hovering nervously next to Gav and his distended stomach. Her long curtain of hair and a mask of make-up conceal her inner feelings. She eyes Sylvia, atop heels sinking into the turf.

'Alright Son.' Ron hands them both a glass of fruit juice. Gav takes his. Ron notices an arc of perspiration on his forehead.

'Not for me,' Tanya says. 'Karen's getting me a drink.'

There's a loud pop as Karen releases the cork from the bottle and it shoots into the air. Everyone cheers. Karen moves towards her in-laws. 'Come on then, hold up your glasses.'

Ron shakes his head and looks in Gav's direction.

'Not even a drop, just to toast?' Karen asks.

'Orange juice for me, Karen. I'm trying to cut down,' he says. He piles up two burgers and two giant hot dogs slathered in mustard on a plate for Maureen, with

plenty of onions, just how she likes them. He holds out the plate to her, now that she's standing between him and his wife. She looks almost embarrassed to take it, purses her lips and then decisively snatches it from him.

'Hound!' she says, loudly, before shoving the end of a sausage into her mouth. She readjusts her glasses. 'It must be hard for him. Gav, I mean,' Maureen says, lowering her voice to a whisper. 'To not have a drink.'

'I'm really proud of him,' Sylvia replies. 'He's lucky to be alive. Doctor said the pancreatic cyst has shrunk now.'

'Still, all those months at the hospital, I can see it's taken its toll on you.'

'He must never have another drink. Doctors say it will kill him,' Sylvia speaks quietly. 'So don't even think of offering him one.'

Ron nudges Maureen. 'Stop whispering in corners, both of you. Can't you just act normal? It's meant to be a birthday party. Not a bloody wake.' He plates up a hot dog for Sylvia and hands it to her.

'Hot dog? I don't eat hot dogs. How long have you been my husband?'

'He's forgotten he was your husband more than once or twice,' Maureen says.

Sylvia blushes. 'We don't talk about that either, Maureen.'

Maureen marks the air in front of Ron with a sharpened fingernail. 'He won't forget again, will you love? Ron Sullivan, handsome once, but now gone to seed.'

Ron sighs. He looks at Karen and raises his voice. 'Did you get that ketchup out?'

'Ruined now,' she says, pointing to the indelible

tomato on her blouse. 'Good for the bin.'

'Some stains just don't come out,' Ron says.

Karen pours a glass of fizz. 'This is for Darren,' she says. She hands it to him and leaves the champagne and the red wine on the picnic table next to the barbecue. She grabs a fork, clinks her glass, raises it and gestures to everyone around her. 'Right, you lot, please join me in wishing Darren a very happy birthday.'

'Happy birthday, Darren,' they all chant parrot-fashion.

'And happy birthday from me, to the best husband in the world.' She slaps him on the arse. Then they look into each other's eyes and he kisses her on the lips. Someone wolf-whistles. 'Right, as you were. Maureen, Sylv, come on, upstairs you pair. I want your opinion on the nursery.'

The three women move towards the house, Maureen wiggling fat little fingers at people she recognises as she goes.

'Dad, why don't you have a break?' Darren says. 'Me and Gav can guard the barbecue for a bit.'

Ron takes his leave. To his disappointment, the woman in the halter-neck is heading for the garden gate, waving goodbye to friends. Tanya has drifted off alone, marooned in the centre of the lawn, where she's sipping her champagne. No one is talking to her, so he pads over.

'Hello stranger,' he says.

Tanya smiles tepidly. 'Did you get notice to leave or have you gone AWOL?'

'I think they just wanted to chew the fat. Must be the first time Darren has seen him since ... It's nice to see you, Tanya.'

She clutches her glass in both hands and holds it close to her chest. Her spiderlike lashes are clogged with mascara. She touches a wet tear duct with a fingertip. 'Don't try to suck up to me, Ron.'

'Hang on a minute.'

Tanya pulls dark sunglasses out of her purse and slides them on. 'You're a lovely man, Ron. You were always kind to me. But the others... Why would you not let me see Gav while he was in hospital?'

Ron takes a breath, steps closer to her. 'It was nothing personal.'

'Nothing personal?' Tanya takes a step back. 'Gav and I had been together for six years. Six years!'

'But you'd split up. You weren't there. He spiralled downward and then - '

'We love each other, Ron. I could have just been there. Touched his face. Kissed him. Let him know I was there. But you just cut me out. You know how humiliating it was to be told by the hospital I couldn't see him?'

'Sylvia thought it was best.'

Tanya looks hollow, violated. 'But not a phone call? No explanation? Nothing. It was cruel.'

'It was touch and go. We had to think of Gav's best interests.'

'What about my best interests? Have you thought about what all of this has been doing to me?'

'Sylv just thought - '

' - I hate her.'

'It was hard for us, too. Hard for us to know what to do. Sitting by his bedside every day and night for

months, wondering if he would ever come out of the coma, wondering if I'd ever speak to him again.' Ron sighs.

'Who was the first person he called? When he woke up, eh?'

'This is a mess, isn't it?' Ron says.

Tanya bites her lip. 'You all think it's my fault.'

'Gav is old enough to make his own mistakes.'

'Sylvia doesn't seem to think so. She thinks I'm a bad influence.'

'Yes, well, she's a very difficult creature. I'd be the first to admit.' He looks down into his orange juice. He could murder a beer. 'So you're back together?'

'We're going on another holiday.'

'Again? You've only just got back. Where to this time?'

'Rome. Gav is going to propose. Then I'll be his next of kin and you won't be able to keep me out of the hospital.'

Hospital? Not again. He couldn't take that.

When he looks at her, he knows. 'So how much is he drinking these days, Tanya?' He stares at her. 'Did he have a drink before he came here?' Even from behind those glasses, like the windows of a black limousine, he knows she's staring back. Ron feels himself begin to tremble and he looks over to where Darren and Gav are both laughing together. Laughing like two men who have had a few drinks. Perhaps even three pints each ... And a whiskey chaser. 'Three bottles a night then?' Ron pictures Gav, slumped over, naked, holding a wine glass, a debris of bottles in that little wooden sauna in his bedroom - where they had found him on Christmas day, before they called an ambulance.

They'd redecorated his house. Ron remembers everything – the trips to B&Q, the paint, the wallpaper, the bathroom plumbing, laying that wood flooring that had damn near given him another hernia. Made it liveable again after lovesick Gav had wrecked it, turned it into a squat. Sylvia, recovering from cancer, had worked herself into the ground to make it nice for when he returned home. They'd paid all his bills. Kept everything going. Read to him in bed, the way they had when he was a little boy.

Ron starts walking back, one hand clenched into a fist, the other clawing his orange juice.

'Wait!' he hears Tanya's voice behind him.

The women are coming back across the lawn now. Sylvia is petting the baby in Karen's arms. They are all laughing, except for Maureen, whose red-painted gash of a mouth is open, full of pork pie.

Sylvia sees Ron and calls, 'Hello Grandad.'

He reaches the picnic table near the barbecue and jabs the corkscrew into the bottle of red. Cheap Côtes du Rhône. That'll do.

'Are you okay, Dad?' Darren asks. 'You look a bit –'

Ron pours a large glass, hands shaking. He spills some of it, a deep pink wound, onto the tablecloth. He fills it right up to the brim.

'Ron?' Sylvia's not laughing anymore. 'Ron, I thought we agreed.'

Maureen is laughing. 'That's a large one, Ron. Even by your standards.'

He turns to Gav and holds out the drink. Gav looks startled, hunted almost.

Darren steps forward. 'Dad, what are you doing? You know he can't –'

Ron takes Gav's hand and presses it around the wine glass.

'What are you doing, Ron?' Sylvia is shrieking behind him, only steps from the barbecue. On the griddle is some fresh meat, charred a little at the edges, in need of turning.

'Like a drink, don't you Son?' Ron says, numbly.

Sylvia is crying. 'No.'

Ron gives his hand a little push. 'Go on then.'

# Contentment

Matthew Leather

The spike pierced the aluminium carcass of the ignorantly discarded beer can. The hiking stick was rarely used for its intended purpose as he often found himself cleaning up the area around his cabin with it. In the past fortnight the local teens had spent multiple nights partying and acting with a blatant disregard for his personal space and the environment altogether. He laughed as he impaled another can, *'Saku - couldn't they get some nicer lagers?'*

David Wilmott had left the corporate rat race of sales in England in favour of a more relaxed and serene life in Estonia. His father had grown up there and he only visited once when he was younger, and after a messy divorce and no kids anchoring him to England he uprooted his life and bought a small shack cabin in a village called Nõmmeveski in Harju County. As part of the Laheema National Park, the area often welcomed a number of tourists, but the terrain wasn't for the faint of heart and for the most part David's daily walks to the waterfall on the Valgejõgi River were his, and his alone.

The nights usually passed quickly and David spent them staring up into the sky watching the stars and the clouds pass overhead. The lunar light was delicately shining through the Scots pines and finding its way to David's face as he reclined in his chair and closed his eyes. He felt at peace. In that moment he forgot all of previous woes and visualised himself gently ambling along the Valgejõgi River in his small wooden boat, with a book and a fishing rod. The light breeze whistled

through the trees and the wind offered up a citrusy scent. David breathed it in. The only noises he could hear now were the cracklings of the tinder from his log burner. The smoke was spiralling out the chimney and drifting through the woods towards the coast. The smoke from the log burner was easily distinguished and David could sense an alien mixture creeping into his nostrils. The cigarette smoke was drifting in from where he collected the cans the previous evenings. They were back. He might not have been a local, and his father might not have been from this part of Estonia, but this was his home now and it was his slice of silent existence. He placed his hands on the arms of his chair and pushed himself up. He reached his hiking sticks and took to walking through the evening in hunt of these miscreants.

The campfire was lightly ablaze and the four teenagers were rounded together on felled trees with a case of the same Saku lager within arm's reach. They were laughing and passing around a single joint. It didn't take David long to make it to their hangout spot. The ground was soft underneath his feet, but he was able to stay as silent as possible. He stepped slowly forward and brushed the pines away from his face. The rustling noise was heard by one of the two females in the group and she pointed directly to David. He committed to walking out into the open and spoke to the teens.

"Hello." David offered the first words as the four teenagers reeled and clutched at their belongings.



““What do you want?” asked the female who had heard David initially, clutching at her cardigan.

“I am not here to break up your fun or your party, or in fact whatever this is. I am just asking that you clean your mess. I will provide you with bags and will dispose of them myself, Aitäh.”

One of the girls picked up a can and handed it to David, but it was swatted from her hand before he could get it. “Yeah, whatever, old man.” The largest of the four flicked his half-smoked rollie towards David and the ember drifted towards the fallen pines.

David promptly stepped on the cigarette, extinguishing the spark. “I am not here to argue or fight. I am just asking that you clean up the mess please.” He picked the can up from the floor and dropped it into the bag.

“We don’t do what you tell us.” The boy then laughed and spoke to his other male companion and uttered something in Estonian. David wasn’t as proficient at the language as he had hoped, but understood enough to get by and he recognised the curse words just used. He also heard two names: Artjom and Kaspar.

“Look, it’s late and the girls are clearly cold.” David pointed towards the two girls who had adopted a huddled position together with an oversized cardigan acting as a duvet. “I’m going to leave these here for you and I will come and collect them in the morning. Good night.” He dropped a roll of bin bags by one of the logs they were sitting on and started back towards his cabin, with more Estonian expletives being mumbled behind him. He wasn’t expecting a clean site when he returned.

\*

David managed to get some rest regardless of the noise continuing for a further three hours after he left. He was unoptimistic about the state the impromptu camp site would be in and when he made it there his lack of optimism was proven warranted. The bin bags

he provided had all been shredded and strewn along the floor, tied around trees or pierced onto branches. All the beer cans were crumpled and slung into an unorderly pile in the middle of the tree-stump seats, along with countless cigarette stubs. He needed more supplies to clean the site and took an early morning stroll towards one of the local villages, Vatku, where he’d befriended a few of the locals. It was in these times when he appreciated the literacy level in Estonia: most people could speak multiple languages, with English being the most common.

He stabbed his hiking sticks into the ground and used them for leverage to push forward, his feet struggling to gain purchase on the dampened ground. He enjoyed the walk through the forest amongst the pines, spruce and aspen. He admired the colourful bark and the vibrancy of their leaves. He could hear the trickling of the Valgejogi in the distance and turned off towards the village. The previous treks had begun to etch out a pathway. Although he still had to wrestle with some uneven terrain, he wasn’t continually swatting branches away from his face.

When he made it to more solid ground, he stomped his feet to loosen the claggy mud from his boots before entering the store.

“Good morning, Maksim.”

“Good morning, David, back so soon?” Maksim replied as he struggled to stack the upper shelf in his store.

“I need more bin bags. The youngsters have left even more of their mark this time.”

“Again?” Maksim stopped what he was doing and grabbed another roll for David. “What did they do?”

“Well, I managed to speak with them yesterday and politely asked them to clean up their mess.” David pulled out his wallet and dropped a ten euro note onto the side. Maksim waved his hand to say no payment

was needed.

“Thank you, Maksim.” David placed the roll into his backpack.

“You’re welcome.”

“I honestly don’t mind them being there. I just don’t want to be cleaning up after them. I left them the bags last night and told them I would collect them this morning, but it would appear that the two boys of the group weren’t happy with my request.”

“Do you know who they were?”

“I only heard two names: Artojm and Kaspar.”

“Ahh, I know them. They are brothers and have always had a bad reputation and can sometimes be a serious nuisance. Perhaps I could have a word with their father? He will certainly not be happy.”

“Like I said I don’t mind them. I don’t want them getting into trouble for this, just a word from somebody who has a bit of authority might be good.” David started out of the store. “Have a good day, Maksim, and thanks again.”

\*

The mess didn’t take long to clear. When David had finished, he carried the three packed bin liners back to his cabin and sat on his chair to rest. The Sunday morning chill was beginning to lift as the sun pushed its way through the branches. He leaned back and listened. He could hear the birds chirping above, a joyful tune that seemed to only be sung on the weekends. It was as if they knew.

As the temperature continued to rise through to the evening, the natural green canopy above him held in the warmth. David set up the cooking tray with three strips of grey partridge he had marinated. The fire was still rumbling and didn’t take long to stoke up to a full

blaze with the dried twigs and leaves scooped up from around his cabin. He heard the rustling of branches and the cracking of twigs underfoot before he saw the two boys from last night.

“Hey, old man, you enjoy cleaning the mess again last night?” They were stomping closer now, their faces screwed in a snarled expression and both with significant bruises on their faces. The older of the two, Artojm, had a cut along his cheekbone.

“Not particularly, no.” David saw their faces and figured Maksim had told their father and that he had been displeased. He understood their anger and had faced unruly teens before back in England and always dealt with them in a calm, easing manner. “I would appreciate it if you didn’t leave it like that again.”

“Well, you decided to bring our father into this and look what it got me.” Artojm pointed towards his face.

“I can see that, but I didn’t want anything bad to come of it.” David flipped the partridge and stoked the fire some more. “I am sorry that happened.”

“You will be.” Artojm gestured towards the roaring fire. “Those can be dangerous, don’t you think?”

David stood up and walked towards the two. He was not afraid of conflict and his keenness did not go unnoticed by those he went for. “Are you threatening me?” he said as he got a few steps away from the brothers.

“Not at all, old man. Not at all.” The pair only took a half step backwards.

“Then I suggest you leave. Now.”

For once the boys listened to David and walked away, albeit laughing as they threw another beer can on the floor. David returned to his food and cursed as he noticed one side was charred. He prised the three strips off the tray and tucked in. He was set in for the night

now. Although he didn't feel like the threat was fully legitimate, he still thought leaving his cabin was a risk.

\*

He awoke with a shiver the next morning and pulled the cover back over himself. The fire had seemingly been extinguished by the evenings draught and the bitter chill left David feeling lethargic. He had no plans for the day, but felt a requirement to use his muscles more than to boil a kettle or chop some wood. He decided that a casual row and fish would be just the thing he needed. He picked up his book and stuffed it into his rucksack. His fishing supplies were all stored tidily in one of his storage chests and as he emptied them, he felt a buzz of excitement. This was his stretch of nothingness. He could live out the rest of his days in complete contentment and bask in the tranquillity. The sun had faded away behind clouds and the dim lighting offered little to no guidance. There was a swampy feel to the dense air that slowly filled his lungs. He could only imagine how good it was going to feel breathing in his first gulp of fresh air when drifting along the Valgejōgi.

He loosened the rope from the dock loop and gently nudged the boat off the verge, letting the water lap along its edge and pull it in. He threw in his gear and hopped in with a synchronised ease that wasn't exactly befitting a man his age. The boat began its ascension up river to his favourite spot for catching trout and the odd salmon. He needed to push hard against the prevailing wind and could already feel his shoulder beginning to burn after a mere five minutes. As he made it to a small cut in on the river bed, shielded away from the wind, he allowed the boat to lightly rock to and fro to a rest.

The fishing rod stayed enclosed in his mass of gear as he plucked his book out. He laid back in the boat, letting the ripples move him effortlessly into a slumber. The sleep was needed.

His hat slipped down his brow and awoke him. His nostrils were assaulted by the smell of burning.

He rigidly sat upright and saw the plume of smoke billowing into the sky. It was coming from the direction of his home. He frantically grabbed at his oars and began to push himself away from the resting bed in the river. There was nowhere else in the forest the smoke could be coming from and his world was tearing apart; every stroke brought a new thought of emptiness to his soul. This couldn't be happening, he thought, as the boat crashed into the dock verge. He jumped out and started his sprint towards home.

When he saw it, he fell to his knees. His cabin was burning and he was helpless. The firemen had made it there quickly enough and were desperately trying to stop the spread of the flames. All David could do now was stare, watch and pray.

# Bios

## Alexandra Nica

### public commotion

Alexa Nica is, primarily, a 15-year-old student residing in the UK and an occasional poet with a love for contemporary fiction books, podcasts and desolate country roads.

## Arun Jeetoo

### Dancing (2020) / Some Boys Don't Play Rugby

Arun Jeetoo is a 24-year-old English teacher from London. His words appear in The London Reader, a Black Lives Matter anthology and The Best New British and Irish Poets 2021-2023 Anthology. His debut pamphlet I Want to Be the One You Think About at Night was published by Waterloo Press (2020).

🐦 @G2poetry

📍 @G2poetry

## Chelsea Vincent

### The Monster

Chelsea Vincent is a writer and performer from Cornwall. She writes for both the stage and the page, and is the author of 'The Year of Tall Tales' blog, and 'The Golden Penguin' with Above Bounds Theatre Collective.

🐦 @clouvincent

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## Elizabeth M Castillo

### The Safest Place

Elizabeth M Castillo is a British-Mauritian poet, writer and language teacher. Her work centres on themes of motherhood, womanhood, race, ethnicity, love, language and mental health. She has words in, or upcoming in, Selcouth Station Press, Pollux Journal, Authylem Magazine, Fevers of the Mind Press and Melbourne Culture Corner, among others.

🐦 @EMCWritesPoetry

📍 @EMCWritesPoetry

## Helen Sulis Bowie

### A::Void / The Promise

Helen Bowie is a writer, performer and charity worker based in London. Their poetry has featured in Beir Bua, Full House Literary and How2BBad among others. Helen has one cat, one Pushcart Prize nomination and several bafflingly strong opinions on extremely trivial matters.

🐦 @helensulis

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## Jideofor Confidence

### Mirrors

Jideofor Confidence is a queer Nigerian Mop-head. She slaves away at an 8-5 job and barely makes time for fun. She lives in a minimalist apartment with an imaginary cat and does not own a TV.

🐦 @dencety

## Judith Amanthis

### The canal this winter

Judith Amanthis's short fiction has been in UK online and print literary magazines. Black Lives Matter, Poems for a New World, November 2020, published her poem Oware. Her journalism has appeared in Ghanaian, South African and UK publications. Victorina Press published her novel *Dirt Clean* (250 copies) in November 2019.

## Kauser Parveen

### More than a set of keys (Grenfell) / Nursing Crisis

Kauser is a female writer who writes about what she has seen, lived and experienced through the eyes of herself and others.

## Maria Oshodi

### I Didn't See It Coming

Maria Oshodi is a writer, arts consultant and the Artistic Director of Extant, the leading performance company of visually impaired artists in the UK. Her current independent project, *A Trail of 2 Cities*, is a reflection on London and Los Angeles by two blind African heritage artists.

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## Morgan Boyer

### Tongue Traffic

Morgan Boyer is the author of *The Serotonin Cradle* (Finishing Line Press, 2018) and a graduate of Carlow University. Boyer has been featured in *Kallisto Gaia Press*, *Thirty West Publishing House*, *Oyez Review*, *Pennsylvania English* and *Voices from the Attic*. Boyer is a neurodivergent bisexual woman who resides in Pittsburgh, PA.

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## Naomi Marklew

### Fear is a seagull

Naomi Marklew writes poems, fiction and creative non-fiction based in the North East of England. Her recent work has featured in *Amethyst Review*, *-algia*, *Selcouth Station*, *Second Chance Lit* and *Streetcake Magazine*.

🐦 @NaomiMarklew

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## Nicole Lee

### Fixed Floating

Nicole Lee was born in Kuala Lumpur and educated at Malvern and Oxford. She has worked as a banker in London and Hong Kong and now lives in Wandsworth, works in Kew and writes poetry. She has been published in various journals and long-listed in the National Poetry Competition.

🐦 @NicoleL10697708

## Niharika Jain

### Home, again

Niharika is a writer and bookworm. She misses visiting arts venues and libraries. Her reading target for 2021 is 100 (she managed 93 books in 2020). Niharika cares about amplifying marginalised voices. A trustee of the Vagina Museum, she hosts their monthly book club: *Cliterature*. She is a HarperCollins Author Academy graduate.

🐦 @niharikahopes

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## Piero Toto

### Let No Man Put Asunder

Piero Toto is an Italian translator, translation lecturer and bilingual poet from London. He is the author of papers on queer language and translation pedagogy. His poetry in English currently appears in *Queerlings*, *harana poetry* and *Seek Poetry*. His debut Italian poetry pamphlet, *tempo 4/4*, is out with *Transeuropa Edizioni*.

🐦 @tradutoto

@poetotter

## Roy Duffield

### The Holy Trinity

Roy Duffield is a working-class writer and the art editor at Anti-Heroin Chic. He's performed at the Beat Poetry Festival in Barcelona, won the 2021 Robert Allen Micropoem Contest and has words in the likes of *Into the Void* (Saboteur Best Magazine, 2018), *Ink Sac* (Cephalopress) and *The Dawntreader* (Ted Slade Award).

🐦 @drinktraveller

📍 @drinking\_traveller

## Rushaa Hamid

### You Remind Me of my Memories of the Nile

Rushaa Louise Hamid is a socio-political researcher and writer living in East London. Her work centres on identity tensions in the modern world, and draws from her Sudanese and British heritage and upbringing straddled between the two countries.

🐦 @thesecondrussia

🌐 [rushaahamid.com](http://rushaahamid.com)

## Alex Bartlett

### Chocolate Revenge

Alex wanted to write since childhood, but got sidetracked by adult things like football, beer and the requirement for a roof over his head to prevent rain-related dilution of the aforementioned beer. Now the roof is in place, he has more time for creating stories and pinning them to paper.

## Barbaros Altug

### Scabs on the Soul

Barbaros Altug is a Turkish author living in Berlin. He was a columnist at Ahmet Altan's *Taraf* daily. His first novel, *we're fine here*, about Gezi revolts in Istanbul will be turned into a movie in Germany. He was given a grant by Hrant Dink Foundation for his second novel, *Scabs on the Soul*, on Armenian genocide.

🐦 @barbarosaltug

🌐 [barbarosaltug.de](http://barbarosaltug.de)

## Catriona Morton

### Bodies of Water

Catriona Morton (she/they) is a British-Irish writer working with themes of trauma, disability and queerness. Her work has been featured by the BBC, *Dazed* and *The Guardian*. She's written a creative non-fiction book on the embodied realities of being a survivor in rape culture (out with *Trapeze in Summer* 2021).

🐦 @tacriona

📍 @tacriona

## Ella Piazzi

### Your Patroclus, always

A thirty-something Italian girl who moved to London with a big dream and no idea of how to make it real. Write, get depressed, drink, sleep, repeat.

🐦 @Ella\_piazzi

📍 @ella\_piazzi

🌐 [lesinadaptes.com](http://lesinadaptes.com)

## Georgia Cook

### The Constancy...

Georgia Cook is an illustrator and writer from London. She is the winner of the LISP 2020 Flash Fiction Prize and has been shortlisted for the Bridport Prize, Staunch Book Prize and Reflex Fiction Award, among others.

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## Harry F. Rey

### Sweet Shashtahika

Harry F. Rey is a Jerusalem-based Glaswegian author and lover of gay-themed stories with a powerful punch. His works include the queer space opera series *The Galactic Captains*, the royal thriller series *The Line of Succession*, and the Leeds-based gay rom-com *All The Lovers*.

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## Jeffrey Zable

### In The First Place

Jeffrey Zable is a teacher and conga drummer who plays Afro-Cuban folkloric music for dance classes and rumbas around the San Francisco Bay Area. His poetry, fiction and non-fiction have appeared in many literary magazines and anthologies.

Recent writing in Former People, Ariel Chart, Boston Literary Magazine, Pensive Stories, Beatnik Cowboy, Corvus, Tigershark, The Nonconformist, Misery Tourism, Uppagus and many others.

## Judy Upton

### Moths


Judy is a working-class playwright with plays produced by The Royal Court, The National Theatre and BBC Radio 4. Her first novel, What Maisie Didn't Know, is published by Wrecking Ball Press in 2021.

## Justin David

### Bubble

Justin David is co-founder of the indie publishing outfit [inkandescent.co.uk](http://inkandescent.co.uk) and co-editor of MAINSTREAM: an anthology of stories from the edges. He is the author of two novellas, Kissing the Lizard and The Pharmacist, and a collection of short stories, Tales of the Suburbs. His photography features in the book Threads, a poetry and photography collaboration with his partner, Nathan Evans.

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 @Justin\_Writer

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 [justindavid.co.uk](http://justindavid.co.uk)

## Matthew Leather

### Contentment

Matthew is 28 years old and has been writing since he was 18. He has co-authored a novel (unpublished) and has taken part in multiple campfire stories on many themes and across multiple genres. He spends the majority of his time with his partner and dog.

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