

ISSUE ONE

the leaves

2023

**PICTURE CREDITS: HANNA LADBROOKE,
WINNER OF TWINING EGGINTON PRIZE
2022**

Contents

Vignettes from Michaelmas Term

By Libby Harris

Contours of Silence

By Jean de Pomereu

Insomnia

By Tabitha Chopping

Hollow summers

By Emily Finston

An excerpt from DIALBACK

By Anna Wilmoth

Cardamom

By Tabitha Chopping

Prelapsarian Romance

By Asha Sykes

Immortale

By Asha Sykes

A Short Story of Birth and Death

By Chara Triantafyllidou

Machines

By Joe Stell

Buncrana

By Ryan Keys

A Summer of Sketches

By Grace Wardle-Solano

Watercolours

By Emily Finston

The day has found a weak spot in the trees

By Ryan Keys

August

By Libby Harris

Evenings I wait

By Emily Finston

In the dim light of day

By Ryan Keys

Summer Sequence

By Libby Harris

Year of the Tiger

By Ng Leong Hang Nathan

Golden Syrup

By Asha Sykes

For Adèle

[On 'Torso of Adèle' by Auguste Rodin]

By Libby Harris

Topographies of absence

By Jean De Pomereu

Couple in Car on Connecticut Road, 1958

By Cian Morey

the leaves

A COLLECTION OF CREATIVE WORK
WRITTEN AND EDITED BY CURRENT
DOWNING STUDENTS

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TABITHA CHOPPING AND EMILY FINSTON
EDITORS IN CHIEF

PRODUCED THROUGH THE DOWNING
COLLEGE ENGLISH SOCIETY

We are very excited to share the first ever edition of *The Leaves*, a collection of creative work by students within Downing. It has been an amazing experience to edit this edition: we hope it will be the first of many!

When we returned to Downing for Michaelmas term in our final year, neither of us had a particular wealth of writing experience, aside from panicked weekly essays and haphazard scribbles on a notes app. The John Treherne Creative Writing prize was an eye-opener for both of us, and gave us a chance to experiment with a style of writing that wasn't tied to a grade. Some of the poems that we submitted to that competition feature in this first edition of *The Leaves*.

Following our newly found desire for non-academic creative outlets, and a chance to write for ourselves rather than our supervisors, we took on the editorship of this new literary journal. Our Director of Studies, Bonnie Lander Johnson, has enabled a hazy idea to materialise and has been indispensable in the process. To edit the magazine we recruited a team of equally eager undergraduates to help us along the way as section editors – to them we are very thankful. *The Leaves* would not have been possible without the support of Downing staff: Becky Proctor (Communications); Jo Finnie Jones and Catherine Middleton (Development & Alumni Relations). Our special thanks to Downing alumnus Robert Thorogood (History 1991) whose generous assistance has enabled us to print *The Leaves*.

We have been delighted with the range of submissions and the way in which recurring thoughts or themes connect what often seem like very different pieces of work. We hope that as you read, some of these connections appear; in places the arrangement foregrounds a possible connection, in other places, connections might seem accidental or contingent. We feel this harmonises with our experience of putting together the magazine, which has also been a putting together of people, in which connection arises out of the circumstantial. We hope that in future years *The Leaves*, born out of this sense of community, will be a space for more creative connections to flourish at Downing.

Emily and Tabitha

April 2023

Vignettes from Michaelmas Term

By Libby Harris

I wear my mother's goose-feather puffer jacket to the Post Office. It was different in the nineties, but I avoid telling people what it is made of. Jangling indie rock as I walk, it reminds me of Southern California, where I had to become fearless. Shiny and bouncy. A bottleneck forms at a pedestrian crossing, the bodies stalling as they cluster. A man gestures to the women ahead of me to file through toward him, in their skinny jeans and tall boots. He applies the same smiling motion to me. I raise my eyebrows slightly, then a feather-swollen arm to one side with exaggerated slowness. We hold each other's gaze for a little too long. He feels historical. Strawberry-blond hair, like mine, pulled into a low pony-tail like a Jacobite organiser. Thin-framed glasses, a quick mouth, dark eyes. I have to laugh. I do not thank him as I pass.

I stand with both hands full at the waterfront in Hyde Park. Not a lake or a river, it is more simulacrum than reality. It is late November and the sun slings through lipidic clouds, the water tensing its surface where the light touches. A little boy roams. The swans are larger than he is; they stand with their feet hip-width apart like men at urinals, watching over the water. I could never look a swan in the eye. My body is poised to intervene if they turn to the little boy too swiftly. Half-nude trees in wind remind me of my parents' bedroom window: Mum drying my hair as I sit on the bed, seeing faces in horse chestnut leaves.

I am in Cambridge's Botanical Gardens. People keep smiling at me as I walk, as I sit. I wonder why. The atmosphere is so immediate that it stings my nose. Its hostility reminds me of intimacy. It is Sunday, a space for couples, families, single women with a crutch (a coffee, a book). I choose a bench doused in acer leaves. I want to call them petals, since they blush from pale jaundice to the wine-dark of a blood clot. Can they see my brave little face as I look at the scene of my every heartbreak?

I sit in an area of the Botanical Gardens which is planted especially for winter. My bench is the worn floor before the canvas. I feel within a straggly, fortified place, where fibrous rods of ruby red hold themselves apart and pale vines hook themselves into clustered banks. There is green, too: thickets of bamboo, their interiors warm and dark; deep fringes of conifer hedge; mahonia, swallow-leaved, with bright racemes.

Winter light alienates, parses, remains between a growth and its neighbour. The plants here curve from a common centre like tools for massaging scalps.

A robin will occupy your thoughts entirely. I forget that there was a time before he was with me. The heaves of his breast feel as near, as important, as the meeting of my eyelids. My gut tells me this robin is male; a Google search confirms it. He darts in considered circles, from the bench to the ground, looping underneath and behind me. His lips are pursed like a grandmother's. From above, his feathers have a river-green sheen. I have not felt so purposefully seen in a long time.

It seems I am always looking for lightnings. There is a jagged one in the sky, it seems to be just where the sun is. Outside of the summer, sky-blue is so sweet. The cloud is marbling over the blue like fat: an ugly metaphor for what is beautiful. The world feels touchable, for a moment. And it is rewashed like this every day. I do not think that we have learnt how to contend with that beauty yet. It reminds me of a poem I wrote the morning after a lightning storm. I said, *In the moon I see / The silken parts of myself - / They are my mother.** Or, the blades of grass which are pale with dewdrops. Or, the side of the dewdrop which is paled by the sky.

We stand together beneath the poolside shower of Jesus Green Lido. It is six o'clock in the evening and October's ink has bled through Cambridge's sky. All I can see are the goosebumps carved into his chest by the wind. We are so close to nudity on these mud-streaked tiles, completely unwatched and unbothered.

14°C, yet I still believed that if I just plunged my head beneath the water and pushed off from the side like I always do, that I would swim softly and warmingly. I went into shock, of course. I am not infallible. My quadriceps are bunched, now, as I stand with hands clasped at my chest at the lukewarm altar. We will stumble down into town for coffee, followed by dinner. We will flush later, more likely than not, with the change.

** Whilst writing that poem, I was thinking about The Moon and the Yew Tree by Sylvia Plath.*

Contours of Silence

By Jean de Pomereu



Insomnia

By Tabitha Chopping

Winner of the John Treherne Prize for Creative Writing 2022

I spend my days like obsolete currency:
Left over memories, unrecognisable coins
Rattling and clanking in my purse.
I spend my days sequestered in sleep,
Sunrays pouring like champagne
Through my coupe windows
Through warped whiskey glass grooves,
Kaleidoscopic and effervescent on the carpet.
Charcoal in my coffee
Burnt, bitter, spitting,
Charcoal in my eyelashes
Hanging from my lids like dusty clock hands
Hanging off the edge of the day
Hanging on your every last word.

Hollow summers

By Emily Finston

Minutiae of bees and flies
Tangled beetling days
Black iridescent thoughts
Like pupils
Track the sun's constricting orbit
Hundreds of thousands of feet above.
Lulled by its beats its beams
The hours dissolve into sameness
And droop limb by limb
The lines of the trees
Into the breeze unbroken air.
Furled out
Of these unremarkable grasses
Time hangs heron headed
Fishing and missing for a glittering scale
For orders of light among weeds.

An excerpt from

DIALBACK

by Anna Willmoth

The outstanding play of Downing's

A Festival of New Writing 2022

A landline hangs down from the ceiling. Lights are bright and warm, with leaf shadows. SAM sits in darkness. AMY enters, ethereal. She picks up a watering can and starts humming to herself, watering the plants.

SAM: It's been raining all night.

AMY: I know what I'm doing.

SAM: I know you do.

AMY: You should let June in next time. That cake will go stale. She needs the chat as much as you do. They're all worried about you, you know. The whole village.

The lilies are opening – look. Sam, come here.

I worry about you too, you know.

SAM: Why are you here?

AMY: I don't know. Does it matter?
You should talk to June.

SAM: Why?

AMY: She needs it. You need it.

SAM: I don't think I do.

AMY: When's the last time you went shopping? Hmm? When's the last time that floor was hoovered? When's the last time you spoke to someone? Someone other than me.

SAM: You're my favourite. Why would I want to speak to anyone else?

The phone rings

AMY: That's probably her.

SAM: No, she wouldn't call so soon.

AMY: Answer it.

JUNE: Nice to meet you, dear.

SAM: I don't want to.

AMY: Have you lived here long?

AMY: Go. Go on. Go on!

JUNE: Yes, about thirty years now – I know the area quite well, so if you have any questions...

Amy exits.

SAM: Amy don't-

AMY: Thank you.

AMY opens door to JUNE. SAM stands behind her.

SAM: Do you want some of your cake, June?

JUNE: Hello!

JUNE: Ooh, go on then!

AMY: Hello.

AMY: Me too!

JUNE: I'm June – I live next door – I was just coming to meet the new people at number 9!

JUNE: What do you two both do, then?

AMY: Hi June, do you want to come in?

AMY: I'm a gardener, Sam's a primary school teacher.

JUNE: Oh, thank you, I brought cake!

JUNE: How lovely! I'm hopeless at gardening, would you ever do mine?

AMY: I'll take that. I'm Amy, by the way, and this is Sam.

AMY: Of course, anytime.

JUNE: That'd be so kind.

SAM: Hello?

AMY: I'm £62 an hour at the moment.

Buzzing reappears.

SAM: *(bringing in the cake)* She's very good.

VOICE: Hello, my name is Susan Taylor, I'm part of the Haematology team looking after Amy Winter. Is this Sam Winter?

JUNE: *(taking the cake)* She must be. Well, I have an old apple tree that needs looking after – doesn't make much fruit, but my husband loved it, and its nice shade for the summer so I can't chop it down. I'd like to try to get it to make more fruit, if that's something you can do?

SAM: Yes, this is me.

AMY tends to JUNE's apple tree. SAM watches from the phone.

AMY: How old is it?

AMY: Okay, so it's a pretty old tree, but that shouldn't matter much. I think it needs fertilizer mainly, and I'll give it some pruning when it needs it.

JUNE: Ah well, let me see.

Landline rings

JUNE: Will that make it grow more apples?

SAM: I'll er – get that.

JUNE: Ron planted it when we first moved in, which must've been – I think we were 31 and 36 when we moved here...

AMY: Hopefully! I might need to visit it again to see how it's doing, you know. I'll just add this fertilizer now.

JUNE: Ooh, goodness, that's pungent!

AMY: Yeah, sorry! Fertilizers often are.

JUNE: Would you like a cup of tea, or something?

AMY: Yes please, that'd be lovely!

JUNE: Oh good.

June exits.

VOICE: Sam, I'm just calling because unfortunately Amy's got worse over the last hour or so - her blood pressure has dropped again - and we think it would be good if you found time to come and see her.

SAM: Okay, yeah, I can come in now.

Cardamom

By Tabitha Chopping

*Winner of the John Treherne Prize for
Creative Writing 2022*

I shell heady cardamom seeds one by
one

Splitting open like secrets and skulls
Spilling intoxicating truths onto my
mother's chopping board

Bleeding

Like pomegranate seeds in the spring

Saccharine and biting

Bleeding

Like Persephone's clinical gums

Stained by the aroma of aniseed

The fetor of formaldehyde

These isopropyl hours cleave open

And engulf me entirely, choking and
sputtering

Like swallowing a cardamom seed

Whole

Prelapsarian Romance

By Asha Sykes

Descent into fractured darkness.
Fluid void that promises escape
But guarantees no return; it is your
choice,
To transgress.

A frail beam illuminates, barely,
Moving when your head moves,
trembling.

Anything further is unknown. As you
travel

Deeper into the entrails of the earth,
Rocks shift beneath
Like throat muscles;
You are swallowed.

Only fragile memory's beacon
Shines in this sea of old night.
The search for Paradise lures you on
Possessed by carelessness,

Dulling the brain, driving

A desperate attempt at drowning.

Bliss almost within reach -
In these depths you are willingly
Devolved and debased. All is inverted,
Hollow tubes appear in the damp
walls

To throw yourself down, head-first,
joyfully.

The search expands; a network of
fibres

Twined together, beginning to form
Forever. Will it end?

Why should it? The joy of this
Emptiness, these gasping absences,
Is tainted by whispers
Of what is lost, absorbed by eternity.

Anticipation is kept alive, paths
Strayed from lead to the same place.
The earth rumbles and
Crushes its contents, digestion
Is complete.

Immortale

By Asha Sykes

The Lockwood Museum was built to be imposing, fourteen pillars staggered under the stone weight of its body and an ornate entranceway decorated with swirling patterns loomed open like an invitation you dreaded to accept. The intricate carvings of angels and demons crashed together in a sea of turmoiled limbs, so that it was impossible to tell where one ended and another began. Yet there was also something alluring about the great doorway, something that lay just beyond the reach of sight called to you. Strangely, nobody was there to stop me from walking in, even though I had deliberately forgotten my ticket in the hope of being turned away. The sensation of eyes fixed on my back crawled up my spine as I dithered on the steps, hunching over like an obsequious toad of a young man. I didn't belong here. One final check of the cheap suit, half a size too small; I tugged at my trousers in an attempt to cover my vulnerable ankles. It was entirely pointless, as

soon as I straightened, they sprang up again and bared those pale cuts of flesh to January - the month with teeth. A security camera half hidden behind a pillar swiveled to capture me in its gaze and I became aware of the dozen others also pointing directly at me. As I stared back the first camera turned away and the others followed suit, each choosing a random spot to become fixed upon. I braced myself and walked into the building.

An enthusiastic voice pounces on me: "Good morning, you must be here to join our early morning tour!" The woman with impossibly neat hair contorted into a tight bun smiles at me widely, baring her teeth as if in pain but trying to hide it - she perches in a fragile pose with her weight almost entirely resting on one leg and appears resolved not to move. Upon the collar of her blouse is a name pin bearing the word *Contrapposto*. I shake my head, "No I'm here to ask about a job."

Puzzled confusion. “A job?”

“Yes.”

“Your name?”

“Peter.”

Her face inverts itself into a stern frown, disfigured by displeasure.

“Who sent you?”

I explain, imagining she'd probably just turn me away, but to my dismay as soon as I mention the name of my father's new business associate, de' Medici, her eyes overflow with reverence; the smile resurfaces and gapes even more widely than before - as if she were trying to unhinge her jaw and swallow me whole.

“You need to see Mr Armstrong.”

When I asked how to find this man, she found that she couldn't tell me. For the first time her deadly poise faltered; she wobbled on the spot and stammered “I... I'm afraid I'm not sure.”

I resolved to find someone who would know where he was and after thanking the woman, who upon closer inspection was not much older than myself, I kissed her on the

cheek for luck (carefully as not to disturb her balance) and travelled further into the entrails of the museum. After a brisk walk through long corridors, I found myself in a curiously anfractuous room that coiled itself around me. Glass covers enclosed old manuscripts, each carefully illuminated with a delicate light that silvered and withered the pages of skin. One in particular seized my devout interest: the image upon the vellum depicted a man's face fused unnaturally onto the body of a blood-red creature, crouching at the crest of a great mountain of gold. Below him a younger and sickly yellowed beast of that same winged species was delivering riches to feed the growing pile. The spidery title unravelled itself in my mind: *Reproof of Avarice*. A caption stated: 'he who coveteth that beyond which nature hath ordained shalt receive the most just reward from God'. A second, smaller image detailed the yellow dragon, drowned in blood, with his head splintered from his body and his limbs pulled into bizarre contortions. The very gold he had

been clutching had turned into a molten, shimmering liquid and poured into his eyes. My head ached with the absurdity of it - the red beast's gilded mountain was still growing, how was this divine justice?

I wandered further through this maze of twisting tubes and wondered whether my will was my own. Yellowish flickering lamps danced across the walls like will-o-the-wisps, in certain areas they suddenly vanished and plunged me into pools of absolute darkness. Hands trailing along the damp walls guide me back to the light. I paused to rest, feeling an inexplicable wave of exhaustion crash into me as if I had been walking for years. My back ached with a dull pain, the result of holding my leaden head upright for so long. An employee appeared out of the air and lurked behind my shoulder, daring me to steal something. A sign on a displayed sarcophagus shouted DO NOT TOUCH; I extended my pinkie finger to graze the lid. Instantly, a hand clamps onto my shoulder and I am roughly pulled backwards: falling.

The man barks at me angrily.

"You, boy! What are you doing in here?"

"I was told to come this way."

"You're a liar. This section is closed for refurbishment, nobody is authorised to be here."

"I'm looking for Mr Armstrong."

The man's face turned incredibly pale as all the blood drained out of it, his skin grazed the deep tone of his uniform, a black suit fit for a funeral, and created a shadowed embrace as light whispered into darkness. It struck me how beautiful he was.

"You'd better find him before closing time." He folded his arms and glared at me, almost with pity.

"Who are you?" I can't help myself from asking.

"Chiaroscuro."

He flinched, as if he'd said too much, and tried to walk away.

I felt a sudden panic, "Wait! Where will I find Mr Armstrong?"

"In the Italian painting collection."

"Where is that?"

"I'm not going to tell you. You are not

supposed to be there, these questions are highly disrespectful. I have a mind to report you to the higher up. Surely, he was mistaken in choosing you – of all those worthy at Carrara.”

I didn't understand what he meant; a feeling of inadequacy grew - tumorous - in my brain, advancing in a pincer movement towards my heart.

“When is closing time?”

“Don't be unreasonable, you know I can't tell you that.” He ruffled my hair and marched away.

Hours passed and I became buried somewhere within the capillaries of the museum; its fleshy walls shifted when my back was turned and the signs conspired to send me in dizzying circles. Different time periods appeared to be randomly jumbled together across several floors, each holding an endless stream of rooms that eventually blurred and overlapped. My feet were bruised and blistered; pain shot up my legs every time I took a step. Why

was I even doing this? Did I really want to endure such torment? I knew I didn't belong here. I don't remember much else, only the statue with the distorted face made a lasting impression upon my feverish mind. The soft stone membrane was contorted into a death-scream and the eyes were smooth and empty. An engraving on his neck named him 'George Ioannou' and the writing simply read: 'Died January 5th, 2022'.

Yesterday.

It must be a mistake. Logically, I knew it was just a simple error, but the sickness of unease cowered in the pit of my stomach and my gut writhed, trying to escape.

With heightened urgency, I ran down a corridor that stretched as far as the eye could see, searching frantically for the Italian painting section. Did it even exist? I realised that it had been a long time since I had seen any employees and I had not encountered any civilians visiting

the museum; I began to miss the unyielding conversation of the guard from earlier. The corridor was strangely devoid of noise and even my numbed footsteps slammed into the solid floor without a sound. I looked back, a fatal mistake. My shadow was chasing me, my Heart began to cry like a lost child and tears flew from my ears, blood streamed out of my eyes and burned a crimson trail onto the ceiling. I screamed into the silence and oozed a dark substance from my nostrils. My eyelids slammed shut to stop my head from exploding. I grinned - this was a religious experience; in my delirium I thought I was about to meet God. But then I remembered - I was alone, the ice had frozen my heart completely and the fire of His Love was sealed forever. I sank to the ground, coughing up all the phlegm and hope in my lungs. What if I wasn't good enough? I asked, no - begged, for a sign.

The sun rose and tickled my eyelids. Opening them, I saw walls covered with paintings: my faith was

restored! Various scenes crafted by Titian, Veronese, Bellotto and Canaletto were splayed across the walls like flowers in a dropped bouquet. One painting was especially striking, it was huge, taller than I was in height and appeared to have no known artist attributed to it. A man sprawled across the canvas in a carelessly elegant fashion, his body gracefully positioned, his muscles toned to perfection - as if he had been hewn from stone by a divine power. The same sculptor's hands had picked up a paintbrush: words cannot fathom such artistry and glimpse only a fleeting pulse of this vivid, breathing painting. A tiny pencil marking marred the lower right corner; I moved closer to read it. 'Armstrong'. A peculiar sensation prickled over my body, a thousand thorns, and I became very hot. I went to take off my jumper, only to discover it was no longer there, all my clothes had melted into the air. My throat became as dry as the skin of my cracked feet. I was doubled over by a violent coughing fit that threatened to snap my ribs and cave

in my chest like a crudely carved spoon. In feebly attempting to straighten my back, I found I was trapped in this uncomfortable position.

My skin was gradually chipped away by invisible hands, piece by piece, until they revealed the marble underneath. My body was frozen solid, and I felt a cold vapor stealing its way into my mind. My eyes were still moving, they watched in suffocating panic as museum workers picked me up and placed me onto a trolley. I was wheeled swiftly into the sculpture exhibit alongside my ageless brethren; I would live forever now. The thought whispered into my lungs and ceased my soundless screaming, these eyes achieved their final gleam of mysterious triumph as their vision turned white for eternity.

A Short Story of Birth and Death

By Chara Triantafyllidou

I. Birth

Dust echoes
in rays of light
-sea waves slip into my ear-

Green mirrors
beneath my feet
-a tide rushes in me-

Glimmering veins
on dancing arms
-I have to reach above

;
The world is melting away already
Is this what it means to be alive?

Crystal shatters
around frail lashes
-you break out into the sun.

Beads run down,
fade
into hushed
breaths

of what will be tomorrow.
Cries echo
in beams of bulbs
-fingers slip down my core-
Green scrubs
around my legs
-a bolt rushes up my head-

Popping veins
on grasping hands
-life has to sprout.

The world has just begun-
This is what it means to be alive?

II. Life

Sunset –

Liquid gold
poured
in chilled water
solidifies
in my memory
-ripples –

as my fingers intertwine with
invisible hands.

Moonrise–

White gold
dripped
in a lake of sapphire

slips through my memory,
it comes and goes
-all the wrongs, all the rights
the glimmering sands.

III. Death

There's something about dunking
my head
in the bathtub

There's something about dunking
my face
in a bathtub

-a feeling
that says
I'm home.

There's something about
pushing
chest down
in the bathtub

the glitter
runs down
my breasts

in the bathtub

Is this
a fantasy?
There's something about
Medusa's
hair
in the bathtub

She plays around
with bubbles
and salts
in her bathtub

She screams as she stares
at red
in the bathtub

from dunes
She is
reborn.

There's something about
dunking
my eyes
in the bathtub

There is a current dragging me down
in the bathtub -

There is a peace of death
right here
in the bathtub

there is a drop of hell.

There's something about
touching the sea
in the bathtub

There's something about
teasing wet hair
in the bathtub

There's something about
forgetting
myself
in the bathtub,

it's heaven, I have been told.

There's something about
two arms
dragged out
of a bathtub

*"Don't worry,
I'm still
Alive."*

Machines

By Joe Stell

These horrible machines,
An encroaching locust plague,
So beautiful in their adulteration,
A draught to smoldering kindle.

To be in this position
of elation and delusion
makes us lords to the King.

And so,
away we look,
when it is shown
we are pawns in their plan.
We watch the hour hand tick,
and are helpless to slow it down.

Buncrana

By Ryan Keys

The grass here has grown with
violence.
Unbridled, it flaunts its freedom
Before its neighbours.
Wild mare galloping past a stable.

The earth beneath breathes around
me -
Mossy mounds too soft to call
ground.
No sharp edges here: I am a child in a
soft play
Paradise: unafraid, almost excited to
fall.

Dad tells me this part used to be a
yard.
Makeshift tennis court, arena of
scraped
Knees and sibling rivalries.

But after bedtime it belongs to
grown-ups:
Rural local, land of whiskey and cigar
smoke,
Haven of not-so-serious discussions.

The house still stands, just about,
But its loud edges have been
Dampened by moss.

Inside, no children play.
Only the ivy misbehaves:
climbing everywhere it shouldn't,
spurred on by the spirit of holiday.

A Summer of Sketches

By Grace Wardle-Solano





23/04/22
Hanging Church, Coptic Cairo



The Doges
Palace
21/03/22



28/08/22

Alhambra View from fort



Watercolours

By Emily Finston

Like watercolours

These immaterial layers make a solidity;

Each damp look brushes

Another force into the picture.

My blues, your hues, dissolve, resolve

And lose the watermarks of each stroke

Each striking instant –

Old drops dew up again

And soak differently the same matter,

Carrying shades of the present into the past of the paper.

This water that blurs

The image with the eye starts clear and yet

Makes wholly new and newly whole

What was never incomplete;

The change is almost imperceptible –

Absorption, then vanishing;

I rinse in these colours, unclear,

And the work is murky like the water where my brush leans,

Like the pond out back, like the soil below,

Like all this blended air.

The day has found a weak spot in the trees

By Ryan Keys

The day has found a weak spot in the trees,
and leaks indulgently from the puncture

it spills carelessly around my feet,
forming sticky puddles of molten gold

I slip my hand into one of these pools
and feel its maternal warmth soak into me

It is a subtle heat – it spreads over me slowly
yet assuredly,
like water up a damp kitchen towel

I feel its gentle weight settle over me
until it reaches my eyelids,
when, with the care of a lover, it draws them
to a blissful close.

August

By Libby Harris

I land the blow of the cereal spoon firmly
On the heel of the pomegranate.
(rosen and marbled, I hold it as a relic)
The seeds leave with me
Their amniotic syrup,
Gratitude and resentment for birth being
Much the same thing,
But I can't say anything singly comprehensible
To you.
Graphite conversations,
The point shifted out of my stomach
Into a tapestry
Or a dream,
Some space of density and duplicity,
Honest as we are.
I soak the pomegranate out of my t-shirt.
My mouth aches from smirking.

Evenings I wait

By Emily Finston

Evenings I wait for your arrival
in the half light haze of the day's
disassembly.

I switch on landing lights, rituals of
anticipation
for the filaments of night that come
in on your coat.

If I could weave a new night sky of
them I would - our soft glances might
do for stars

And we could block out the prying
pains of windows, disturbed only
by the purr soft passing of the cars.

Of such a space I dream,
but the long line of desire catches my
throat
Like an electrical wire.

I shiver silver currents
towards the glistening point of your
gravity -

And the tapering day gives way
to the lamplight of the mind's eye
Shading each passerby into the
bright crescent of your face,
I break off pavement squares like
seconds
timing my breath to your strides:
The room goes still a second before
the door
Splits
Silence
And I, condensed by cold air,
Fall out of reverie
into the suspense machine,
the body that trips to tide you,
eyes prickling with the thickness
of the dark behind your shoulder
where bulb burnt imprints flash like
eyes,
hinting at the day too soon to break
Our artifice lit paradise.

In the dim light of day

By Ryan Keys

In the dim light of day
this childish stream
Would not win from me
a second glance.

Its murky currents
Only just
Faster than
still.

But the night finds beauty in all.
And when it falls,
I see nothing but what the
scattered moonlight reveals:

A glorious negative of
Soft dappled leaves
Swaying faintly
In an invisible breeze.

A well-placed drop
Sends them fluttering:

Instant of frenzied life

A dozen dormant wings
Take flight,
Striking out against the stillness.

But soon the ripple melts
Back into dark
And the silent swan song
Sounds its final chord

A perfect cadence
Of life well-lived.

Summer Sequence

By Libby Harris

I am thirsty, still –
Sunflowers face me at dusk –
Swaying grass holds me.

Dusk mountain collage –
You feel yourself a burden –
Clouds disintegrate.

Moon, curved like my hip,
Over sunflowers in gloom –
Headlights, steady, past.

Pastry at the Nive –
Diagonal spittal, now,
Horizon flaking.

Premature rain pulls
Graffiti from the concrete –
Leaving, a thin softness.

Year of the Tiger

By Ng Leong Hang Nathan



Year of the Tiger

By Ng Leong Hang Nathan



Golden Syrup

By Asha Sykes

The lioness is regal in gilded death, humming
His bees colonise her flesh, clamouring
From within the cruel fur bleeds
Sweetness. Her fierce compassion dissolves until it is
Nothing, only cloying pearls of his
Honey remains – beading through skin
As it melts beneath the force of the flood.
A golden pool drinks her imprint
Forgetting and erasing the young
Beast: engulfed from inside
Out. Willingly she gifts
Herself.

For Adèle

[On 'Torso of Adèle' by Auguste Rodin]

By Libby Harris

To rotate my torso
Around my spine
And let others hear its
Crack
Is to demonstrate how
My thousand natural shocks
Assemble vertically
Between my gluteals and my cranium
Until I overcome their balance
When I have a few feet of space
To myself.

Gluteals to cranium –
That vital, non-moving space
Which Rodin sculpted
In a way that feels to me like
Theft –
A woman's torso at the command of
Her spine,
Never not reclining,
Never not receiving.
Undulation incarnate,
There's a phrase.

Topographies of absence

By Jean de Pomereu



Across



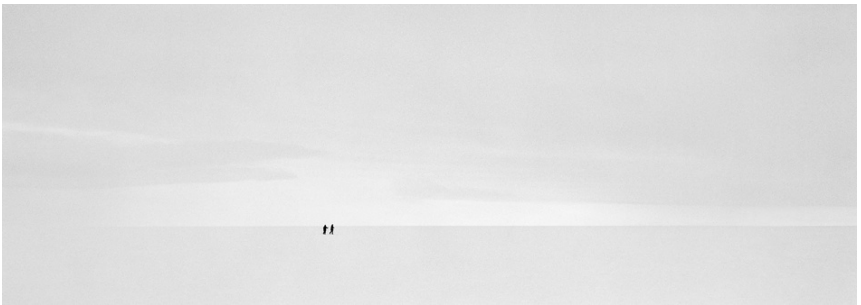
Frozen Sea



Surrender



McMurdo Sound



Pilgrims

Couple in Car on Connecticut Road, 1958

By Cian Morey

Meredith was informing her husband, not for the first time, that he was “a literal piece of crap”, and her husband was fantasising, not for the first time, about correcting her grammar or murdering her, when a woman smashed into the windshield and slumped off the bonnet like she was rolling over in bed for a cigarette. Clark thought it best to stop the car. What was that?’ Meredith asked. ‘What have you done? Was it a fox?’ Clark, was it a fox?’ Clark stepped out of the car, circled the bonnet, told himself it was in need of a paint job anyway, and stopped beside the body. She lay face down and might have looked comfortable if only her feet were the right way round. Clark turned her with the toe of his patent leather shoe and his heart stopped for the second time in thirty seconds. She looked exactly like Meredith, if Meredith were dead, and had a better taste in lipstick. ‘It wasn’t a fox,’ Clark mumbled.

He knelt down, seized her neck, squeezed for a pulse, found none and let her head drop back onto the road with a thud. Then he did it again, just to make sure. Then he sat back into the car and stared at his wife. ‘Was it a person?’ Meredith asked. ‘You could say that,’ said Clark. ‘Oh Jesus. Call someone. We’ve got to call someone, Clark. Are you even listening to me?’ ‘Loud and clear,’ he replied, trying to recall what it was she had just said, as he stretched out a hand and felt her face, touched her hair, held her neck. ‘What the hell, Clark?’ she shrieked. ‘You just killed someone!’ He shrunk back into his seat. Peering over the steering wheel, he glanced from Meredith to the body to Meredith. To call it a “resemblance”, from this angle, would be generous. He inhaled deeply, once, twice, then pulled Meredith close and cried his way into a kiss.

Contributor Biographies

Libby Harris is a first-year undergraduate reading English. A writer of non-fictional prose and poetry, Libby's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Agave Review*, essay magazine, CANVAS, and *Exist Otherwise*. Though she journals obsessively, Libby mostly seems to write about fruits and vegetables. Frank O'Hara, Teju Cole, and Louise Glück are major influences.

Dr Jean de Pomereu is a Marie Curie Research Fellow at the Scott Polar Research Institute. His research focuses on two separate but interconnected themes. One is the scientific and political history of the Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets. The other is the visual and material culture of Antarctica. His broader professional experience comprises Antarctic art and photography, publishing, science reporting and curation. Jean has participated in many artistic and scientific expeditions to Antarctica and has recently co-written and published *Antarctica: A History in 100 Objects* (Conway/Bloomsbury, 2022). His photographic work focusing on the Frozen Continent has been exhibited in Europe, the United States, China and New Zealand.

Tabitha Chopping is a finalist reading English. She has previously edited *Varsity's* Film and TV section, experience which she has put to good use working on *The Leaves!* Tabitha's poems are moments of reflection written from within the frenzy of the Cambridge terms, drawing on poets of the ordinary such as Frank O'Hara. She is also a very keen cook, who enjoys experimenting on the stove and the page, sometimes producing colourful overlaps between the two.

Emily Finston is a finalist reading English. Most of her writing is done while doing something else – dashing to a supervision, putting off starting an essay, or, ideally, out walking with her beloved dogs. She loves seeing how these half-moments collapse, coalesce or stretch out and feeling that a flickering attention might be not only be a hindrance! She also enjoys getting outside by running and riding, though both of these make it harder to pick up a pen, and has learnt so much from editing *The Leaves*, which she hopes helps strengthen a creative community across Downing.

Anna Willmoth has submitted an excerpt from her short play *Dialback*, winner of Downing's Festival of New Writing 2022. The play explores life after loss, imaginary afterlives, and the importance of community. Anna really enjoys writing plays, and dabbles in the occasional bit of poetry. She has recently had her writing performed as part of *The Vagina Monologues* (Clare Cellars, 2023), *In Black Water* (Corpus Playroom, 2022) and *The Waste Land* (ADC Theatre, 2022), and has another play (*Burnout*) in Downing's A Festival of New Writing this year. She is currently in her 3rd year studying English at Downing, and is looking forward to figuring life out after graduation.

Asha Sykes is first year English tripos student, when she's not at Downing College in Cambridge she can normally be found surfing at home in Cornwall. Her love of writing stems from her love of reading, and she writes a range of poetry and prose, enjoying experimenting with various forms – she even once wrote a 50,000 word novel. Her prose piece *Immortale* was partially inspired by works of Italian literature and art, including the poetry of Michelangelo.

Chara Triantafyllidou is a second-year PhD Student and Gates Scholar in Theoretical and Applied Linguistics. Her research explores the reading skills of bilingual pupils who speak English as an Additional Language, focusing on the contributions of prosody and socioeconomic status. Her native language is Greek, but her creative writing is exclusively in English. She enjoys the rather challenging labyrinth of expressing herself in a language that is not her own. Her writing draws inspiration from Ancient Greek mythology with a focus on she-monsters. She often likes to reinvent their stories and narrate them with sympathy. She takes an interest in surrealism, absurdism, and synaesthetic imagery, while aquatic elements are an indispensable component of nearly all her poems.

Joe Stell is a first year Chemical Engineer via Phys Natsci, with an occasional interest in creative writing, but more often found rowing or underground, caving or mine exploring. His experience in creative writing is limited, with it mostly being an emotional outlet, and so his writing is guided entirely by introspection and instinct, without knowledge of what makes interesting and intelligent poetry.

Ryan Keys is a finalist reading English. His poetry draws on the natural world and on his Irish heritage, frequently finding overlaps between the physical and the familial environments. Ryan has enjoyed studying the Part II lyric paper, expanding his understanding of the lyric mode and constellating writers as varied as Keats and Kendrick Lamar, hopefully to be put to use in his own writing. Ryan has also taken part in numerous ADC productions, including *The Hollow*, and in his spare time is a keen musician.

Grace Wardle-Solano is a third year student studying architecture. When travelling to Venice last year she started a sketchbook of watercolours and drawings. Since then she uses it as a way to remember the different places she's stopped at and looks forward to filling many more pages of her sketchbook on future travels.

Ng Leong Hang Nathan is a first-year undergraduate student studying Biological Natural Sciences. His interests range from Model United Nations to contemporary music composition and from chess to rowing. Nonetheless, Chinese painting has been one of his main hobbies from a young age and is still something he really enjoys. He has painted for over 10 years and has had the chance to participate in several art exhibitions in Hong Kong, where he is from. Chinese painting and science may not sound very compatible with one another; still, both require good observation skills and meticulous attention to detail, and painting various plants and animals has allowed him to gain a better understanding of their characteristics and traits, which will prove valuable to his future career!

Cian Morey is originally from Cork, Ireland, and is reading for a Master's in English Literature, specialising in Restoration comedies. He has written/co-written three plays and a web series that have been produced with the ADC Theatre, Downing's A Festival of New Writing, and the Cork Arts Theatre. His prose work has been published in *The Irish Times*, *RTÉ Guide*, *Wild Words* and the first international *Social Distancing* magazine, and won him an award at the Listowel Writers' Week in 2017. He frequently makes the poor decision to write comedy, and occasionally makes the worse decision to perform it. He's currently scribbling a story about Tudor wall paintings, which he promises is more interesting than it sounds.



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