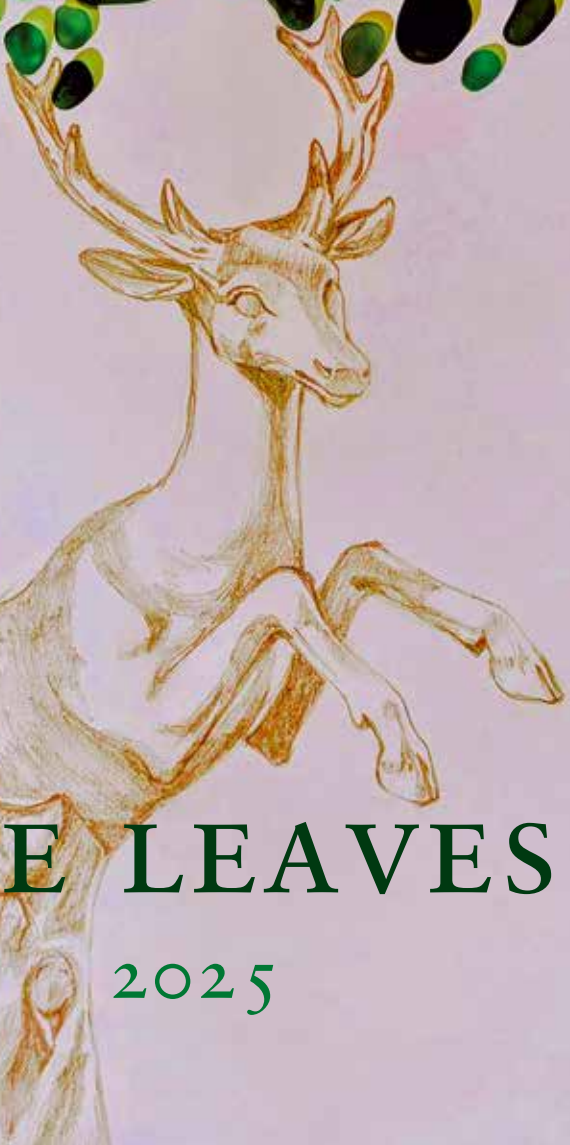


ISSUE THREE



THE LEAVES

2025

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The Leaves

A COLLECTION OF CREATIVE WORK PRODUCED AND EDITED
BY CURRENT DOWNING MEMBERS

EDITORS IN CHIEF
SAPPHY WELCH-DUNN
JUDE HUGHES
CHARLOTTE PAYNE

PRODUCED THROUGH THE DOWNING COLLEGE ENGLISH SOCIETY

Cover image:
By Esmé Goodson

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This is the third edition of *The Leaves*, Downing College's student-edited literary magazine. It has been a delight for us to continue the foundational work of the previous editors in collating creative work from our College's members. *The Leaves* acts as a creative environment in which the many creative minds of Downing can generate work that is sincere, rich and experimental. The pool of submissions has grown each year, and we hope to see it continue to do so, as the magazine becomes more and more familiar with the Downing community.

We are grateful to Bonnie Lander Johnson for guiding us through the process, and to former editors Libby Harris and Asha Sykes for giving us a strong structure to work from. As first-time editors, it has been excellent experience to edit works that fall across the spectrum both in medium and in tone. The growth of this magazine is due to the support of Becky Proctor to whom we are so thankful. We are incredibly grateful to Jo Finnie Jones, Cat Middleton and the development team, whose support has also been instrumental in growing *The Leaves*.

For introducing us to the principles of the writing workshop, which has been so helpful for us to understand the unique creative vision each contributor undergoes, we would like to thank Jenn Ashworth, *Bye-Fellow in English*. We also would like to thank Susan Elderkin, for providing Downing members with such stimulating workshops, and Stephen Bennett, for consistently encouraging the theatrical to flourish in our College.

We are sincerely grateful to Robert Thorogood (*History*, 1991), whose patronage has enabled us to print our issue to such a high-quality. We are thankful to Andy Harvey for the elegant design. Esmé Goodson provided the striking and engaging cover art—many thanks. We would like to thank Quentin Blake for providing *The Leaves* with an iconic illustration. Jenny Ulph has been a great help in working with the archive.

In this volume you will find striking landscape photography alongside engaging experimental poetry; evocative paintings and pastel drawings accompany captivating memoir. We are incredibly proud to present the variety of genre, style and subject matter in this year's issue. We hope reading it is as much of a pleasure as it was to put it together.

Charlotte, Jude and Sapphy
April 2025



Photograph by Tomos Davies

Germination

By Ed Campbell

It starts with a seed, planted long ago, lodged internally between his eyes. A small seed, pressing against the base of his forehead. Water cascades over his face; the seed itches, the pressure intensifies. Then it splits wide open like a paper cut, bleeding, filling his skull to the brim. His head is weighed down, curving his back into a butchered branch. His vision turns inwards, making the world blurry, the seed sprouting an ever-growing garden of thorns, scratching against his brain, tearing it to shreds like barbed wire. He can feel the roots attached firmly at the tip of his spine, soil collecting under dug-in claws. Two beads of chlorophyll-rich sweat spring up on his coarse cheeks of bark. The roots gradually dig deeper, weaving a web between blood vessels. Spindly twigs wrap around his limbs in a suffocating embrace. Collapsing at the porcelain sink, he retches up leaves from his empty stomach as his skin blotches with moss and his hair sharpens into prickly thorns, piercing his skin. A gnarled smile deforms his cracked lips. He looks at the distorted reflection, this not-him, hand pressed to the mirror. Whose sunken eyes stare back?



Photograph by Tomos Davies

July Song

By Sarah Kennedy

The forest spreads its tines across the sky,
Exhales a vagrant sweetness on the leaf-furred mist—
Dense, swollen with summer's disaffection.
A solitary bird strafes the fields,
Sallow beneath the sun.

Slow hums the dandelion, fritillary, vetch.
High lonely place, canyoned in cloud.
In brackish pools the battered crowfoot
Soaks in must of wood and willow.
Swarming midges green the heavy air.

Disgrace

By Dayi Feng

The ice shatters in this cycle.
 (The snow ran over the ice before itself & dirt.)
 The light is cupped and seated.
 Out the fire door winter chucks itself
 at the grim face of Aleksis Kivi turned now
 dominant, flinting near the rails
 and nobody cares to look.
 I've travelled according to tradition.
*In Finnish, the word 'president' refers exclusively to the head of state, and not,
 for example, the leader of a company.*
 As exact as Moomin or Jesus.
 As specific as the pungent grip of the moss
 at the bottom of the Kone Shafts in the
 summer of 2010, some 340 metres
 into the heart of earth.
 Kivi says, 'you are trapped in the warm house,
 (the statue dies perpetually,
 'and you will be the humble one to admire it,
 'each their next *laulu sydämeni*.
 'abundance will make to live better
 'from what you think is nothing.'
 Only the ardour of the short rose
 breaking new in the hoard-snow.

*T. S. Eliot in England, he has a line which I always admire very much,
 and which was in my mind writing this music.
 From one of the Quartets, and there he says:
 'Late roses filled with early snow'.
 And that's something I've seen in my own garden here,
 late roses and sometimes this snow comes,
 th-its already in [...] November, and they can be found, red.*

- *Very nice we could talk a little bit like this.*

The new organ clawed and wreathed the wood wall,
 professing like the snow, which gives,
 extracting itself. Each won't be back in a long time,
 has not failed to be precise. Ridiculous the sad waste time,
 music alone
 can pillage the fantasy.

The Frog

By Libby Harris

Limbs limp in the whirlpool the
 frog is so flexible,
 curling and slick—
 crouched to the mossbank,
 leg outstretched as I
 bisect the snow melt
 which pedals the
 frog, so flexible...
 I bottle water through muslin,
 fingers raw and the frog
 glistening in its algal
 corner, a body of
 innumerable eyes
 looping—a cartoon
 coherence to which
 I am the only witness.

GLADSTONE MEMORIAL TRUST TRAVEL AWARD REPORT

Surfing in Morocco: A sea-floor with no flaws

By Asha Sykes

Only an hour into our journey, my brother Anto and I spotted a red car driving at full speed on the wrong side of the motorway—playing chicken with the oncoming traffic. We frantically beeped the horn to alert other drivers. Pulling up to the car, side by side but separated by the central reservation, we saw an elderly couple in the front seats. These weren't the daredevils we were expecting, they looked like someone's grandparents. We flashed our lights in warning repeatedly like a lighthouse until another car eventually took over and, as the incident didn't surface in the local news, we assumed the pair escaped unscathed but in possession of an adrenaline hit large enough to last them the rest of their lives. Anto and I were travelling over 1500 miles from Cornwall to Morocco to seek a different kind of thrill; I wondered if we would be quite so fortunate.



From the plane I saw a mountain range rippling the earth as a campfire radiates heat, wobbling the air around it and making hidden currents visible. This was my first time seeing a real-life mountain and I was wonderstruck. Upon landing in Agadir, the heat enveloped me in a sweaty embrace. Stuck in a stifling car for two hours, I wanted to appreciate the scenery – scraggly patches of greenery that could more accurately be called greyery; stray dogs at the side of the road; colourful buildings and agricultural plots blurring by – but I couldn't wait to finally arrive. Our destination was Mirleft: a quiet seaside town in the southwest of Morocco, home to the perfect waves surfers are always mind-surfing in some hidden little corner of their heads whenever they aren't actually surfing.

The gravel road gave way to a dirt track winding tightly as it coiled up and around staggering hills. Then we saw the Atlantic Ocean—glittering like a promise. It was as if I'd been hopelessly lost, but that first glimpse of the sea was the familiar landmark guiding me back on track. Later, this actually became the case: whenever Anto and I ventured too far we knew heading towards the ocean would help us find our way.

With a dizzying drop to one side, we just about survived the last bend and Mirleft unfolded in front of us. A cluster of whitewashed buildings rested atop steep cliffs, framed by the red Anti-Atlas Mountains which were dotted with cacti like giant ladybirds daubed in spots. Arriving at the Spot-M surf house where we were staying, I took an instant liking to its green shutters, practical and graceful barriers against the bright heat. From the rooftop terrace we had 360-degree views of Mirleft and could even glimpse our old friend the sea.

After unpacking, we decided to explore. Anto and I needed to buy bottled water because the tap water was likely to offend our stomachs. Casting ourselves wide beyond the clutch of comfort, we exchanged the newly familiar dual carriageway for a knot of alleyways. Mirleft embraced a communion of colour: it had the best blues I'd ever seen on buildings, and these vibrant sea-hues contrasted effortlessly with the sand's ochre flash. The streets were cat-clad and spindled with handfuls of fragile trees. Local inhabitants milled about or sat outside and chatted while watching the world go by. In Mirleft friendly observation is a daily ritual. My uncovered blonde hair received a few brittle stares from the modestly clothed local women who strolled together in packs. Or was their judgement only in my imagination? I tentatively smiled at a wide-eyed child and she beamed back at me.

We were walking down a larger road when a middle-aged man (missing several teeth) pulled up alongside us on a motorbike. He introduced



himself as Houssein and asked if this was our first time in Mirleft. After a bit of chit chat, he insisted we go to see his café. More wary than Anto, I'd have said no if he hadn't already agreed and begun to follow Houssein down a narrow alleyway—leading us off our intended route. Berber hospitality is renowned for its friendliness, but this far exceeded my expectations. 'What do you do for work?' Houssein laughs heartily when he hears that we 'teach' surfing. I smile, in a way it's true—surfing can't be taught, it's half instinct. He tells us about his son, a surfer living in London, and says I have the same grin as his little girl. The warmth of his welcome won our hearts and we promised to come back for food the next day.

Having purchased several bottles of water from Houssein for just a few dirhams and the cost of a friendly abduction, Anto and I began to search for a place to eat. By now evening was amongst us; under the tarrying sun a pleasant breeze rustled up litter as if dispersing seeds. Restaurant Tayought caught my eye with its blue arches, the delicious, deep colour signposted an equally nourishing dinner. The tagine de kefta I had that night was one of my favourite Moroccan dishes: slow cooked lamb meatballs simmered in a shakshuka-esque tomato sauce, a poached egg perched on top with a perfectly runny yolk, and every bite burst forth with overlapping flavours of cumin, paprika and turmeric. Anto and



I went out for food every night—sampling a range of tagines and fresh seafood. We also discovered the delights of fuelling ourselves with msemen (Moroccan pancakes) for breakfast.

Every morning at around 5am we were woken up by Fajr, the first of five daily prayer calls sounded from the tower of the nearby Grand Mosque. The timing of these calls depends on the position of the sun, yet Anto and I also aligned with the moon—our daily rhythms were carefully attuned to the tide. Depending on the conditions, our surf guides Hassan and Ahmed picked us up at a different time to check the best surf spots. Beach breaks, reef breaks and point breaks (a Moroccan specialty) are all just a short drive away from Mirleft. Morocco's 3,200 km stretch of coastline is famous for its world-class rights—waves which break and peel to the right from the perspective of the surfer on the wave. People joke that, ironically, there are no good lefts in Mirleft, but as a forehand-obsessed goofy footer I couldn't help hunting a few down.

Our first surf was at Tamhrouchte, a mellow beach break; thanks to the light offshore wind, clean 3-4ft waves rolled into the bay. Ahmed called me into my first wave, a left. I flew down the face and bottom turned into a solid snap off the top. These peeling waves were a good warm-up before we surfed a bigger point break right in the afternoon. While sitting in the line-up, I goggled at the red-ridged shoreline—distracted by a beauty alien to the Cornish cliffs I was used to. Multiple times I jumped out of my skin when fish leaped out of the water (a little too close to my face), silvered in the sun.

During our time in Mirleft we only encountered a light scatter of tourists. The town felt almost untrodden, though Hassan told us it gets much busier in winter when the biggest swells hit. There were many glassless homes with gaps instead of windows and buildings in ruins—I couldn't tell if they'd once been intact but had fallen into disrepair or if they'd been abandoned before they were even fully built. These, alongside the lack of much else beside the mosque, school, litter, little shops (selling homemade pottery, Aragon oils, and basic groceries), and a few cafes and restaurants, were a testament to Houssein's claim that Mirleft was an undiscovered Taghazout—a fishing town further up north that's been completely transformed by the influx of surf tourism and is now the hot spot for surfers in Morocco.

However, the early symptoms of a similar evolution were present in Mirleft: several surf schools populated the town, various construction projects were well-underway, and one surfing company was even building a luxury 5-star villa with an infinity pool. I wondered if the residents felt the same way

as locals do in Cornwall, where tourists are often an irritation: a resented dependence. Yet, of those I spoke to, all valued the positive impact of surf tourism on Mirleft and were pleased to hear that we were enjoying our time there. Anto and I befriended a few young local surfers, they were shredding on shortboards borrowed from the Spot M surf school and I recognised one of their boards. It had belonged to a surfer I trained with on the England Junior team a few years ago—somehow it had found its way here!

An unforgettable highlight of the trip was surfing a point break for the first time in my life at Sidi lwafi. Incoming waves grooved the water with a texture like ribbed velvet. The point's limb, scaled in dark rocks, stretched out sea. It was one of those surfs where everything goes right (both in terms of fortune and direction). The waves were sheets of glass, molten in the morning light; they were around 4-6 foot and held a steep shape, racing down the line to offer a green canvas ready to be seared with turn after turn: liquid euphoria.

After an hour or so, the small crowd suddenly exited the line up, leaving us with the point to ourselves. A set rolled over the horizon; it was much bigger than the other waves we'd been catching. There was no time for hesitation. I sprint-paddled out to sea and then span around, dropping over the ledge of a green wall well over double my height. I flew down the face and squared into a deep bottom turn, upper body rotating and pivoting around my front arm (trying to imitate Caroline Marks with her arms outstretched like wings), I felt myself gain speed and catapulted my board into the lip of the wave before rotating and pushing the back leg to flare the tail and release the fins; body upside down: an explosion of spray containing the flash of a rainbow. I cut back before dipping down to slash a more vertical snap off the top, continuing to reel off turns all the way to the sand.

I paddled back out at top speed, re-energised and grinning from ear to ear. 'DID YOU SEE MY WAVE?' Anto shakes his head. Typical. The surfer's curse is that somehow nobody ever sees your best surfing.

For a few days we ventured north to Sidi Boufdaïl: a punchy beach break that stretches for miles. Every time we surfed here the conditions were firing, the sets were incredibly frequent, and there wasn't a soul in sight. On a bigger day I wiped out – devoured by a throaty monster of a wave – and snapped my leash. Fortunately, it wasn't too far to swim in and my board washed up on the sand unscarred. I had a spare leash and quickly swapped it over.

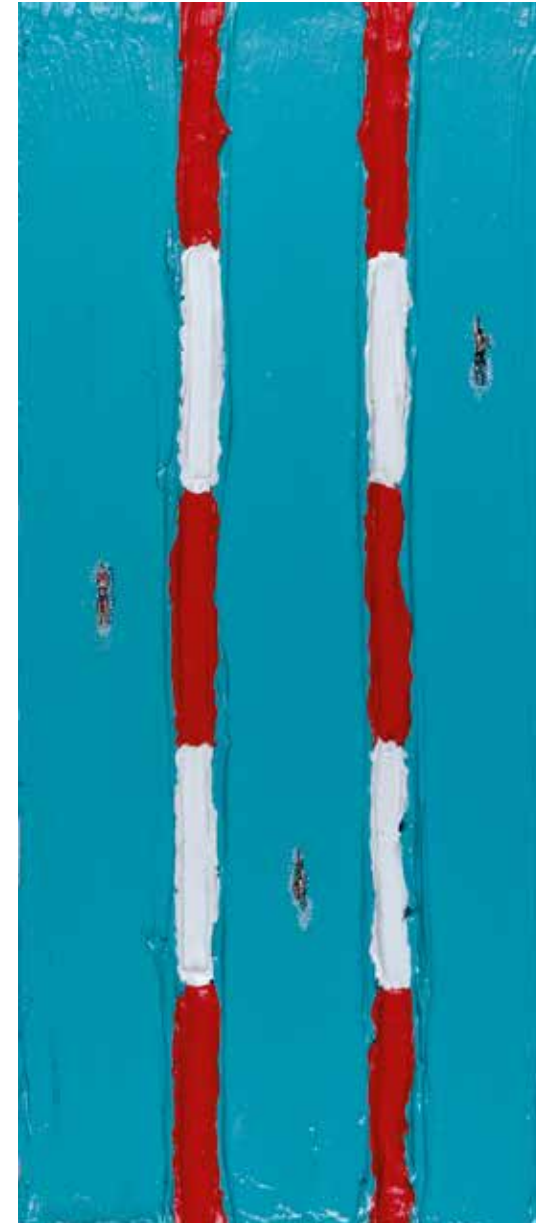
Paddling out again, I spotted a huge fin out to sea, disappearing and reappearing as the waves lifted it into view. A shot of panic bolted through



my body as it prepared to go all Mick Fanning on the poor beast. Shouting ‘SHARK!’ to Ahmed and gesticulating wildly, I mimed a fin shape with my hands on my head. After a moment the waves calmed and (to my utter mortification) we saw that it was just the pointed prow of a boat. This incident particularly tickled Ahmed and Anto... While I didn’t see a shark that day, I did see a (real) camel which proved equally thrilling.

The trip also provided time for reflection. Between catching waves and conscious waiting, a sea-gaze blues the inside of a surfer’s skull. Water-lit, the soul is edgeless; surface tension eases into depth; time dilates; currents dance behind the eye and work their drift upon the mind—sometimes this is a communal experience. Surfing is frequently compared to poetry, except that’s not quite right because the claim is that surfing is poetry itself. As a lover of both, I often wonder why they feel so connected. Perhaps it’s because surfing and poetry each provide transcendence on tap, or perhaps it’s because surfers are palimpsests of the ocean: souls washed up and rewritten by the sea. Yet, I think what surfers call ‘style’ is where the two really become one. Between waves at Plage Tamhrouchte, I became friends with a lifeguard called Ayoub. He was surfing on his break and told me I had a great style—one of the best compliments a surfer can receive. Your style is your personal expression, your unique conversation with a wave. It’s an effortless blend of speed, power and flow. It’s the ability to read and understand a wave in a heartbeat, before writing your movement into its own.

I’m truly grateful for the Gladstone Memorial Trust Fund, its generosity made this trip and all its highlights possible. Surfing world-class waves with nobody else in the water undoubtedly improved my technique and exploring Mirleft (especially befriending so many of its warm-hearted people) was an incredible experience I’ll remember for life.



Artwork by Daniel Warnes

A Letter from Nicholas Gurning

By Charlotte Payne

Dear Editors,

I found this curious letter wedged in the side of a cabinet when I moved into J15. It was in an old, yellowed envelope with the stamp 'RETURN TO SENDER' in the top right-hand corner. I was hoping that it could be included in this year's copy of *The Leaves*, as it was written by a Downing alumn. The piece itself has been scrawled over with vulgar abusive comments (presumably from Avril), so I've transcribed the poem onto this document, and add my own punctuation and stanzas, as it previously came with none. Please do consider the piece for this year's issue, I think it's important that Nicholas Gurning's voice is heard.

Kind regards,
Charlotte Payne

Letter from Nicholas Gurning

Avril,

I'm not a doctor—stupid
Women wanted a chance with me,
You've really been something
You don't need PHYSICS, just eyeliner.
But I'm not interested. I
Miss Charlotte write a story
To put you asleep.

Unfortunately yesterday can't be
Today the 3am sleeveless leg
Looks at you it carries a kinda
Mysterious magic, always Biological
Unlike you. Yeah you.

Tonight I'm the B-52s, today
A wedding, not ideal for this
Video (I actually matter, like
Portable spiders in matched movies:
Struggling, abused, but coping).

I'm not sorry. It's only heartbreaking
For the interviews with family.

Oh how sadly put on we get,
We cute cats went over—
Finished the fiction where Motown
Was life: nail Heatwave by Martha Reeves
To your hand. Constitutional
Blasphemy was our style...

Before I was obsessed with being someone,
Everything aspiring heard me and listened.
Don't ask questions.
Just know you failed.

love
Nicholas (Gurning)
xxx

Walk to Grantchester Meadows

By Joe Stell

I want to walk to Grantchester Meadows. Lying on my bed, I realise I am achieving nothing. My afternoon's strength and conditioning has turned into my evening's strength and conditioning and by now I might be strength and conditioning for dinner, though actual dinner lies much too far away. So I find myself striding out the door. From my isolated room in my empty house, I forget how noisy cars are and it feels like angry shouting, but that's okay because I am walking away. I don't know exactly what route I'm taking yet but I know this the right start to the walk, and my feeling of optimism is temporarily jolted by the shout of 'GAY,' from the back of a passing convertible. I'm sure that many years ago his long wavy hair may have received far worse, but some people are ignorant. I stride again and keep striding to Lammas Land, passing a bursting Coe Fen and I reach a crossroads. My memories of walking through here with friends in summer heat, knowing this was goodbye remind me that I don't remember this crossroad being here, and I take it. I am finally into the dark, and the now useless streetlights glare at me against the moonlight, ushering me into the darkness. I pass my first moving headlight (hopefully a human), with a dog against a tree and find a lone silent car. People are definitely inside and the headlights flicker as if to search for me so I evade them, sneak around the back of the car and I can't find the path I wanted. Giving away my location is the only option as I pull out my phone, find the gate, and head into the fens. The surface strikes me as strange, a firm chest giving way to ooze, much like a crème brûlée only this one is the ground. Ambiguous screams break the motorway drone and I am struck by how peaceful the river is. Crème brûlée slowly gives way to mud, which gives way to bog, and as I balance along futile logs, observing the large, glistening puddles I realise I need to bring my wellies here. Alas I must turn around, and I notice a dead boardwalk staring blankly at the moon. Perhaps I too will stare at the moon when I die. The car is gone, and instead the dog and the human are wondering down a different path. I wait a little and am inspired to follow them. Though I am presented with the most fabulous boardwalk, my hollow steps are far too revealing, and the echoing barks through the wetland woods insist to me that I am found. I turn to the river again, and hear rushing water. An animal? If I am really quiet perhaps it won't notice me, but all I see is a hanging branch and I realise for the first time how alive the river is, the flood breathing energy into these wetlands, and I see

the Granta as it wants to be seen, freed from the dug slopes of the Cam we bound it to. Onwards I press, finding myself back into the screaming lights on an intimate lane, found by a car bearing down on me. I stare at my assailants through their car windows but I am not interested in talking to anymore people. Shanty wood cladding and pond system car parks show me through a clanging kissing gate. I walk – passing old memories, ticking off summer visions – but now there lies the Granta, mighty and liberated, binding me now to the fragile path, pushing me along until I perch, and write to tell you, to take a walk to Grantchester Meadows.

Salt Sepulchre

By Luke Elliott

the body that gave rise to life
 the body that keeps our home stable
 i know you're sick
 the currents that pass through you trading one gossip for another
 counteracting solar radiation
 now trade in black sludge slick and cloying to the touch
 it clogs the grapes that hang inside the chests of birds
 it blocks out light and strangles the forests along your spine

tell me

when the black film coats your skin does it remind you
 memories lost to the surface with their salt-bleached bones
 was the light between the wooden caskets enough
 to make out the dark bodies falling

through

like

you

stars

did you try to help them when they writhed in fear
 sneaking into them when they called out
 trying to carry them to the surface of your flesh
 only to be dragged down with them
 how helpless you must have felt how hopeless

tell me

has enough time passed for you to be used to it
 the poison i mean
 we feed it into your veins
 sometimes a drip sometimes a torrent
 all the things we don't want
 we give to you
 surely by now you are used to it
 there are rumours that it makes you angry
 that it makes you boil with rage

tell me

will you rage against us?
 spit up the bones and the poison and the sludge
 crash into our cities and flood our homes
 pull back what is yours

leave us to salt on the shore.

De Partie

By Lily Grisafi

From my repose
through the heavy velvet curtains I
can just see
plum crowing our squat tree,
like pneumonia caps my lungs,
like brass wraps the toe of your stiff boot.

You take them off for a moment, look
into my eyes,
ask for your level clogs, for
they need feeding and only you
can provide—

only you know the park in Malmo:
where hearts cling to branches and
chestnuts litter the ground—only you
can wrap your arms so completely
around the body, remove the cracking
skin
and excavate the tender flesh beneath.

Sterilising salts sustain when you miss another kill.
You feed them moss and berries
liver and jokes
sweat and height and me.
My Labour—My Waters:

Draw out with a thick crystalline cure
add dill and caviar
brandish fire

substitute air substitute milk
substitute the white coat substitute the sharp blade
let my mother watch
and pray and beg

Bring me the turning catch, the hardening rye.
Once I catch my breath
and my levels return to nine and then to twelve—

I am grateful for the treat; aware it is my last
and more grateful still.

JOHN TREHERNE CREATIVE WRITING PRIZE WINNER, 2024

Space

By Tracy Agidi

I take up too much space. I am too much. My presence, my body, my voice and laugh and scream and cry. Squeezed between bodies, thighs sticky with the sweat collecting there, wondering how I can make my body fold into itself. I cannot.

I imagine my entrance into this world. Vernix coating my skin, bloody grease covering the pulsating cord between my mother and I. The nurse lifts me up into the light and places me on my mum's clammy chest as I squawk like a banshee. Banshee-cry silenced as the taut nipple fills my mouth and I suckle, satiated and sleepy. I am a good baby now.

I am not an easy child to love. And love my mum does anyway, despite the vicious tantrums and sudden moments of rage and the turbulent quiet moments that follow. Despite the humiliation of picking me up from school early, clutching my balled fist and uncurling the fingers tucked deep in there. I am 'gifted and talented but...', I am 'disruptive', I have 'excess energy that perhaps dance/sports/an instrument will fix'. I find a way to be fixed and it takes absolutely everything I have to offer, and leaves nothing in return.

Counting helps. 1 and 2 and 3 and for my parents to make it to the end of the day I need to get full marks in my spelling test. And 9 out of 10 means I am an orphan now. When my dad stands in the doorway of my childminder's house, I fling myself into his arms, bursting at the seams with grief that has nowhere to go. I have been given another chance. I will not squander it. Practice makes perfect, perfection requires sacrifice and pain. Dented shortbread tin, full of birthday money and precious trinkets like the pearl cuff I wore on my Holy Communion. The matching gossamer veil, lavender-scented embroidered gloves, and stale wafer belonging to the Body of Christ that I tucked under my tongue. Such naively selfish creatures, children are. These items are not much but they are mine and I am not willing to sacrifice them at the altar. But pain— all pain requires is imagination.

Don't step on the cracks. I fall through them instead. *Suddenly, actually, basically, definitely.* I whisper spellings to myself, tracing the letters on the backs of my teeth. Stumbling over *definitely* garners a pinch, my fingertips invoking a short, sharp burst of pain on the fleshy side of my thigh. *Actually* trips me up, and I sharpen my pencil until the tip is fine-tuned and plays the melody I want. The notes written on my skin transform the loudness that has always itched within me into a hymn. The teachers were right, all I needed was an instrument.

The devastation that ripples across my parents' faces confuses me. Don't they understand – I am a good baby now. They are alive because of me. Where is their gratitude? Why do they cry? Why do they beg? I have saved them, I am Christ, I have given all my body has to give. And yet, I still find myself taking up too much space, being too much.



Artworks by Louis Gentle

anatomy;

By Tharini Ravindra Kumar

in the bodies that i am
flesh wounds scar deep
how exotic it feels
to move around in skin
to burrow within

collection of echoes
nest woven voices
bones built borrowed on time
muscle and marrow
caverns of memories bound by flesh

pressed like fossilise veins
ancient relics of sinew
both shadow and light
tapestry of selves

i am but a tempest
fleeting
ashes of the fire
in my wake only silence
a final defiance

Identity

By Yuting Shang

I look different here
 I speak childishly there
 How can I be foreign
 In both places
 Both called
 - Home ?

Belonging is utopian
 Bureaucracy rules
 Where do my loyalties lie
 I am questioned at dinner—
 Mid-dinner
 Mid-twenties
 Mid-border
 Crisis.

The Weight of Wrinkles

By Raksha Daryanani Thani

I remember her cremation as if it were yesterday. We had a 4-hour Hindu death ritual at my grandparents' home in the morning. Since Nani had no sons of her own, my father, her son-in-law, performed the rites reserved for a son under the guidance of a pandit. Friends and acquaintances came by to condole my mother, her two sisters, and Nana.

They followed the hearse to Weg Naar Zee, a coastal cremation area facing the Atlantic Ocean. Nani's funeral was the first one I was allowed to attend at 19 years-of-age. As a child, I was told that 'Children do not go to cremations. Women shouldn't attend unless a close family member has passed away.' Although Hindu religious texts don't forbid women from attending or partaking in funeral rites, prohibiting them has been common practice for decades.

The smoky, barren, and blue-skied funeral grounds were large enough for four funerals to take place at the same time. Three of them were already in progress when we arrived. I observed how the pyres crackled and roared, while mourners' tears flowed without a single word. The air was heavy with incense and camphor. Bits of dried coconut and marigold were strewn around the pyres, alongside cans of vegetable ghee used for the last rituals. It all seemed so proper, so diligent, so cultured: this final goodbye ceremony for our loved ones.

My eyes fell upon a skinny black stray dog roaming around the pyres in desperation. Six limp nipples hung from its body and its tongue from its mouth. The dog's attempts of licking the empty vegetable ghee cans were short-lived: pallbearers of the other families shooed the animal away while wrinkling their nose up at the creature.

Meanwhile, four men from our family placed Nani's body on a semi-prepared pyre of wooden logs at the funeral grounds. They covered her corpse with more logs until she was sandwiched in between. A bit of her head was intentionally left visible. This too, had a reason: fire must first be set to the tongue, the creator of sin in life, followed by the rest of the body.

Mum and her sisters stood by with blank faces until the pandit uttered a final mantra and my father lit the funeral pyre. Suddenly, their bodies swayed and they wept uncontrollably. Nana was the only one standing

strong. He put his arms around his daughters, allowing them to lean on him. Most attendees left halfway through the cremation, whilst my father and his brothers-in-law remained. They waited to collect Nani's bones and ashes for scattering the next day.

Watching all this took me back to a conversation with my father when I was about six. 'We don't bury someone when they die; we cremate the body and scatter the ashes in a river.' Little me was beginning to learn about our practices as members of the Indian diaspora who settled in Suriname.

'So, there won't be a grave? What if we miss the person and want to visit them someday?' I asked.

'That's right. Hindus cremate a body because it helps us let go of our attachment to the deceased. And cremation helps the deceased person's soul attain liberation.' I took his explanation as a given.

This only sunk in when I saw the flames engulf Nani's body. I was hit with the realisation of mortality: how people usually have smooth, soft, silky skin at birth, only for it to age over the years, marked by scars, deep wrinkles, and melasma. Our bones and teeth become weak, hair turns grey and falls out, and bodies grow weary and frail. The old, wrinkly skin droops from our faces, bellies, arms, and legs like a magnet drawing it back to the earth.

Nani had the saggiest skin I'd ever seen as a child. It sagged more and more with each passing year, until it hung from her arms like jiggly wings, and her belly like a deflated tyre. Just a few months before her death, Mum had asked me to feed Nani. She was too weak to eat, so I carefully guided a spoonful of soup to her mouth, while noticing the saggy, wrinkled skin, and fatigue on her face. I wondered if this would be every woman's fate. A week later, she was admitted to the hospital for thrombosis.

'Everything hurts. I'd like to go to my creator and be rid of this pain forever,' Nani complained—her limbs were swollen and blue.

Mum comforted her: 'You'll be fine Mummy. You'll soon be home.' Nani passed away some days later.

I didn't shed a tear when I heard of her death. It occurred to me that I wouldn't be seeing her saggy skin anymore now that she was gone. I did feel sad for Mum. She was Nani's favourite: an obedient, good child. Nani's death only

reminded me of her demanding nature and disapproval of me. She insisted I should be a good girl: one who doesn't ask questions, doesn't argue, and does what her elders say.

'Stop asking why...', 'Do as you're told...' and 'Don't touch anything...' were Nani's famous lines to me. If that wasn't enough, she'd complain, 'She brought sand into my house with her dirty slippers...' or, 'She didn't finish her food...' every time Mum would pick me up from her home. How could I possibly grieve for Nani? I felt no connection to her at all. The only loving words I remember were the traditional greetings we exchanged at the door or when she'd ask me to massage her aching, bony feet. 'You've helped relieve my pain so may God bless you with a good husband,' she'd say. Was a good husband all that mattered in life?

It wasn't solely my experience. Nani was known as a picky and difficult-to-please person in general. Nothing my mum did – not even food she'd cooked with love and care – seemed good enough for her. My mum loved her and defended her by saying 'Your grandmother was hard on you because she was brought up that way, and she was old and ailing. Nani loved me a lot, and you too.' I failed to believe the latter.

It was true that Nani was ailing, though. It started much before I was born. She suffered a couple of miscarriages in her childbearing years. Then, in her early 50s, doctors discovered she had an enlarged heart which made breathing difficult and caused her lungs to retain water. Her sore, bony feet were cradled by cushioned slippers. She also had hypertension and aching bones from osteoporosis. After two hip replacement surgeries, she was not allowed any more interventions. Doctors said her heart wouldn't survive.

I'd watch her walk up the stairs at snail speed on each visit to her home. She'd hold the rails with her face down on her chest, while pausing for minutes to sigh and catch her breath at each step. The wrinkly skin from her arms and neck jiggled. I pitied this old, saggy-skinned, ailing woman. But that was all I felt.

Nani wouldn't let her ailments affect her household, however. She got up early each day to supervise the housekeeper and gardener. She sat on a wooden stool in the kitchen to cook for Nana and herself. She would join Nana for weekly grocery shop runs while he pushed her along in a wheelchair. Family members appreciated her home remedies for common ailments and her

religious knowledge. Community members called her at odd hours for recipes, and advice on naming their children according to Hindu astrology.

Nani was a good girl according to Indian society: a woman who'd married early, had borne children, been the perfect housewife, and always honoured her husband's wishes. My Nana – the man of the house – didn't know how to brew a cup of tea, do the dishes, or maintain their home whilst she was alive. Nani's death was Nana's rebirth: he learnt how to run the household in his late 70s.

Nani was born in India in the 1930s, a patriarchal definition of a good girl had been ingrained in her. A woman in Indian culture is taught to live for others and put her needs and dreams aside. Her priorities consist of taking care of her husband and children. She risks being ostracised for having an opinion, choosing herself, or saying no. This upbringing had extended to my mother and her three sisters, even though they were born and raised abroad. Consequently, two of them had sacrificed their career aspirations for their marriages. Throughout my life, I observed how these norms were not only passed on from men to women, but also from women to women. My mum and aunts repeatedly tried moulding me into a good girl from childhood. I retaliated with a confidence they found disturbing.

In my late 20s, nearly a decade after Nani's death, I was playing in the garden with Polly, my pet blue-and-gold macaw. I've had her for over 20 years. She has a bare white patch on both sides of her head, commonly referred to as cheeks in the avian world. These patches consist of wrinkly skin with several lines of fine black feathers. One of my favourite things to do was gently tug at Polly's wrinkly cheek skin. Once tugged, it'd droop like mature human skin for a few seconds, turn pink, and go back to its original cheek shape in seconds. As if nothing had happened.

Gently tugging at Polly's cheek that day somehow felt different. 'Your wrinkly skin is like Nani's, my birdie,' I said while giggling. She mimicked my laughter and continued eating her cherry. Polly was my dear and beloved pet. But she lived in a cage. Polly was dependent on me for food, water, and play. We'd bought her as a chick from a bird seller on the outskirts of the city. She was stolen from her nest and sold illegally. Setting her free would be even more dangerous than keeping her caged.

Being caged was all Nani knew. She became dependent on others for survival, could only play the roles taught to her, and became accustomed to captivity. Eventually, she caved in. Her bones went soft. Her heart became weak. Her lungs began to cry. And her skin pulled away under the heavy burdens of womanhood.

Polly's cheek showed me that Nani wasn't to blame for enforcing her views on the next generations. She had been a victim of moulding. This burial of dreams, hopes, and aspirations, continues from one generation to another, long before the body is set ablaze.

A lump formed in my throat. Tears rolled down my cheeks. The pain in my chest told me what I'd never felt for Nani before: empathy. I felt it for her, the women who preceded her, and the ones who were still sagging and withering under the burdens of society. I forgave Nani. She was finally free.

My father was right. We don't bury someone when they die.

maybe life is a circle that starts and ends with nap time

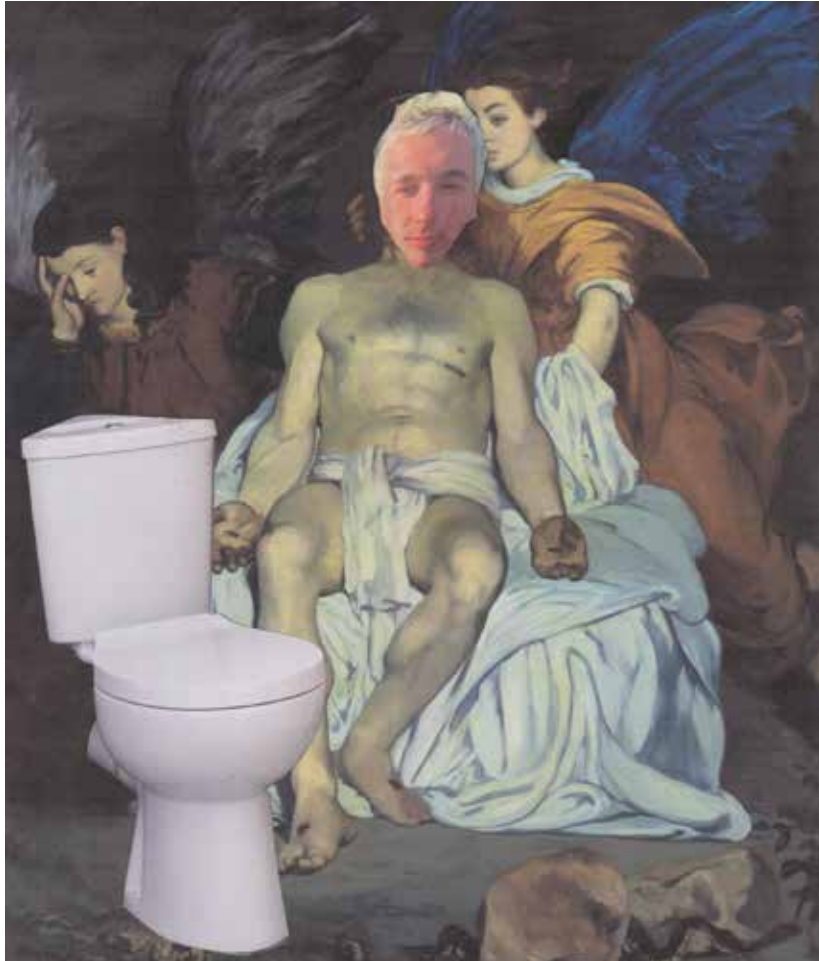
By Lauren Herd

young and swaddled, laid down with care,
in a woven basket decorated with stars
your mother's hands shaking; you are her dream now,
mobile twinkling, eyelashes on gossamer skin
you are so beautiful, capturing hearts and minds alike

and now you have lived many dreams,
reunited in sleep with those before you;
your mother gone but never forgotten—
always in your rueful smiles and fearless love
you are nothing but stardust and sweet fancies again

THE DEAD CHRIST WITH ANGELS BY EDOUARD MANET (1864):

When she came in, he had his prepubescent fingers wrenched so far down his throat that Tess thought of Ant and Dec. The hand of some vaguely recognised C-list celebrity you had feigned knowledge of, ramming their arm into a dark box—the camera inside showing five fingers like an octopus' tentacles reaching round a rock, all for a plastic star orbited by locusts. The five plagues all shown on ITV. And what came next was a plague of vomit surging into the toilet like a tsunami over office blocks. In it was the liquid swilling around the bottom of the bin and the dregs at the bottom of a pint glass and whatever liquid you get in a packet of mozzarella. The smell of Friday night ran down the inside of the bowl and the outside too, slowly across the floor until it came to an unbothered halt. A lazy river of Glens carrying along the fat swimmers of whatever Henry had eaten that day. He was still unsatisfied. Rather than looking at Tess, still standing in the doorway, he looked into the pits of the cistern with a pleading look, the look of a son who knows he's about to disappoint his father. He knelt on the bathmat like a nun on the steps before the altar, looking for a tear to run down the Virgin Mary's cheek. But it wasn't raining and this wasn't Derry Girls. Besides, Henry seemed to have drained every last drop of liquid in the room; sucked it up and spat it back out again like the middle-aged participant of an Ayahuasca purgation. Only when he realised the ritual was over did he turn around and watch her.



PIETA BY UNKNOWN (1450):

Like Jesus in Mary's arms, the pieta, but she was only one year older than him and neither of them particularly holy. The bathwater lapped at her bellybutton, carrying with it a sheen of homely dust and bubbles on top, like a river straining against its banks. An armada of plastic ducks travelled in an orbit around Tess and Henry. Two small islands. Two kids in a bath. They weren't speaking or really even looking at each other but were both fixated on a plastic mechanical mermaid that began at top speed, its engine whirring like that of an old ford fiesta, always ending up falling dismally to the bottom of the bath like a toothbrush lobbed in the sea. If their mum was to open the door, or look through the frosted glass of the door, they would have appeared as a statue; two stone children perched on the top of a fountain. Neither really moving but both focused on the same point. They knew each other's names and favourite food but not that they would know this for the rest of their lives, know each other for the rest of their lives, forced to spend half their Christmases together and meet each other's continuous stream of partners. But that night their mum would still weigh their ice-cream on the scales, count the number of sprinkles, verified by the eyes of a three-year-old that what they were getting was an equal amount.

By Frankie Ratcliffe

Cadence

By Ivan Ampiah

If only I then understood what she meant when she said
 'It's to signal the beginning of the end'.
 Musical blocks that materialise themselves
 Like herculean pillars holding up a weak melody.
 Ripped from a song book, air dried like dirty laundry
 On a concert hall stage, an empty epiphany.
 But she wasn't there for the end of the symphony.

If only I then understood during our summer fling
 That you can't buy back time like an anacrusis.
 When we sun danced at Sundance and our shadows
 Rose higher in the hot humid hold of a brooding baseline
 That sent shivers across
 Arcadic scenery with a temporary sear in lyrical air.
 Venus horrified as she watches from the shoulder of Mahler.

If only I then understood that there was safety in
 The swipe of a downbeat, that cleanly bisects
 The thick timbre of Tchaikovsky in two.
 And then it starts, the stalls are electric and charged
 With sharps. A woman wiped away a chambré tear
 Just in time for the second act.
 An image for those in the row behind that proved to distract.

If only I then understood that a call and response
 Was built for two and with no answer, the first phrase
 Is rendered hopeless, homeless.
 Weaving throughout the crowds during the recapitulation
 The notes above hung in focus, in a momentary psychosis
 Of a fermata. And in searching for you the violins sired the brevity of this
 And the rests opened mouths wide and the peril heightened.

If only I then understood that for every acapella
 Of a rejoicing show choir, in a peaceful haven
 A silence somewhere loses its life.
 The orchestra folds itself in two like a faulty stand.
 Pages of cues slam in an eternal double bar line.
 And the upbeat and the tonic chord prolonged
 Called you home where you always belonged.

Reputation

By Laura Collins

If you wondered what happened to my reputation
 I think it got lost somewhere along the way.
 As I ran laps in the system, free for all who won't listen,
 preoccupied by what will they think and
 quite unsure what's past that word.

If you wondered what happened to who I am
 I think that's who they said I should be.
 She was primed to perfection, left no time to reflect and
 would never even learn her lesson
 because why did that matter anyway?

If you wondered what happened to that person
 the one with dreams filling in her head.
 I think she couldn't be stopped, always questioned what then
 her soul told her to stop holding on
 when reputation poured poison on the dreamer.

Until I wondered how I got tangled up
 in so many layers that I ran out of string.
 I couldn't find me anymore, so picked my ego off the floor and
 patched it like it could ever be reborn
 so one day, I could find myself again

Apa lagi kena cakap? (What else is there to say?)

By Tharini Ravindra Kumar

The trees outside moved to the rhythm of our feet.

In the dark night, only the dim fluorescent light of the old bulb that came with the house illuminated the porch. It was a warm night; the sweltering Malaysian heat clung to the air as sweat beads fell off our foreheads and rolled off our backs. The air smelt faintly of rain that had not yet come; a call of the monsoon. We stood by the side of the porch near the front gate. Even in half-light, I could see a sheen glistening across your brow, as if the heat, too, was slowly drawing out everything we'd tried to bury. It was a quiet night, as quiet as you can get around here, just the soft purr of the neighbours' air-conditioning unit (which we could not afford) and the occasional yowl of cats scraping through the alleyway. It was the kind of silence that felt fragile—like one small word could shatter it, though I wasn't sure we even had words left.

We moved around each other like we were wary. We didn't want to talk to each other, but it was unavoidable. Our two-bedroom, one-storey house – the house we'd both called perfect once – with its narrow hallways, a tiny kitchen that could barely fit us both and a small porch that led to the front gate. You used to call it 'charming.' Now you called it tacky, a 'starter house' you were ready to outgrow. It was too far away from our friends, so our late-night *lepak*¹ sessions in the city were a distant memory. It seemed smaller when we were angry, like soldiers at war. A land under silenced sieged—trapped by landmines of unsaid words we weren't willing to let off.

'You don't like it here anymore, do you?' It came out almost as a whisper. My voice, a ripple in the silence. You weren't looking at me. Instead, your eyes were staring at the clouds. The moonlight was waning, casting an almost glittery shimmer across your face.

¹ Malay slang term commonly used in Malaysia, meaning 'hanging out' or 'chilling.' Originally, it referred to loitering, often with a negative connotation but in contemporary usage, it has evolved to describe casual socialising, often at *mamak* stalls (open-air eateries popular in Malaysia), where friends gather to chat and relax, often accompanied by greasy food and a warm drink.

'I wish you would stop smoking', was all I heard. I glanced at the tiny stub of my last cigarette. We used to pass it back and forth, a ritual of shared breaths and quiet understanding. 'Smoking kills *lah*,²' you'd said when you'd switched to a vape, saccharine and artificial. I flicked the dying stub into the drain and watched the faint smoke rise, spiralling into the hazy sky. You sighed and started walking back into the house, the sound of your slippers flapping on the brick flooring.

It was only 10pm, but the neighbourhood was silent. That's what we wanted, wasn't it? A life away from the city, from the cramped studio apartment in Kuala Lumpur. Subang Jaya was supposed to be our fresh start. The neighbourhood was full of young families, elderly couples, and a few student house shares. But all their lights were off now; they'd settled in for the night. And then there was us, up and awake, unable to let go yet somehow already drifting apart.

You were already sitting at the dining table, your back facing away from me. You were humming a song, soft and unfamiliar.

'Hey-' I started, my hand touching the nape of your neck.

'I can smell the smoke.' Your head down, your voice clipped and dismissive.

My thoughts drifted to a memory.

'Do you remember the first night here? The twin mattresses on the floor?' Your shoulders softened slightly. You remembered. Our bed hadn't come in yet, so we used the twin mattresses that came with the house and pushed them together on the floor. We got drunk on the cheap beer available at the convenience store and clung to each other the whole night as if the two beds would split us apart. It felt so foreign now. I cannot remember the warmth of your hands against mine.

Suddenly, my question seemed as if I was begging for any crumb of connection I could get from you. 'We couldn't stop laughing....' your voice trailed off.

² Though it has no direct translation, it functions as a particle that can be seamlessly added to a sentence's beginning, middle, or end. It is often used to add emphasis, express familiarity, or soften the tone, but can also convey frustration or annoyance.

‘That was a long time ago,’ you finished. You turned to look at me, just briefly, a glimmer of something—maybe it was sorrow, maybe just the weight of old memories.

‘Two years isn’t that long.’ I could feel my face hot and flushed as if the tropical storm brewing outside was building inside me, the clouds darkening with all the things we couldn’t say.

‘Maybe I’ve changed...’ your voice drifted into a whisper. You were looking at your feet, almost as if the end of the sentence was there.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I don’t know...sometimes, I feel like we have outgrown this. This house, this routine...this...’ Your voice trailed off, but the word lingered in the air, unspoken but clear: *Us*. It hung there like a shadow, casting its weight across the room.

I felt my throat tighten as I tried to return to that memory we had not finished. Our bed arrived a few days later. It was a king, expansive and full of possibilities. Those first nights, we’d found each other in the middle, limbs entangled, the space feeling infinite, open, filled with possibility. Now, you were always on the far edge, pulling the duvet around you as if every inch of space between us had become a boundary. I reached for you sometimes in the dark, hoping to bridge that divide, but the reciprocation was as cold as the space between us.

I looked at you under the dim light at the dining table, tracing the familiar lines of your face and how your hair fell slightly over your forehead. At that moment, you looked like a stranger, someone I hadn’t yet learned to know or maybe someone I’d forgotten how to love. I felt myself searching for the right words, reaching for something that might pull us back.

Whenever silence lingered too long, my grandmother used to ask, ‘*Apa lagi kena cakap?*’ Her voice was gentle but full of strength. ‘What else is there to say?’

A reminder that silence could either deepen a connection or break it. In moments tangled with doubt, those words weren’t idle; they reached for clarity, as if to say, speak what’s true, or let it go.

‘*Apa lagi kena cakap?*’ It echoed as I looked at you, hoping for some sign, some answer in your face. Those words weren’t asking for silence to end;

they were an invitation to clarity, to honesty, as if to say, speak what’s true or let it go.

I watched you a moment longer, feeling the weight of all we’d lost settle over me. I almost reached out again but stopped myself. What would I even say? That I missed us, that I missed the person you were? That I wasn’t sure if either of us was the same.

What else was there to say?

In that question, I felt something shift—like a leaf finally letting go in a breeze, like the thunder that finally came, a final ember of a cigarette butt, giving into where it must fall.

The Lost December Sun

By Eduardo Gracías Baptista

My friend, the lost December sun,
Outstretching his bright fading glow —
His warmth I now seek to borrow,
From the lost days he can't outrun...

'Fore came that which can't be undone
Such tender days he used to know!
My friend, the lost December sun,
Outstretching his bright fading glow...

Had life in the heavens begun
And light eternalised below!
This lost midwinter, life ago,
I would find in the skies but One:
My friend, the lost December sun.

— *In loving memory of my 'Dado*

Funerals

By Joe Davies

I've never been to a funeral when it's been raining.

I know it doesn't really make sense, but you see it on TV enough times and you kind of...form an expectation, I guess: the family huddles beneath black umbrellas, tearfully watching the coffin being lowered down into the earth. Perhaps a mysterious stranger watches silently from a nearby hill. A violin is involved.

But no—this is my third funeral, and it's been sunshine and clear skies every time. We're halfway through October and it's pushing 20 degrees outside. Ridiculous.

Also, I don't know where they're finding these vast, empty cemeteries for a quiet, contemplative service, but our church is sandwiched between a Co-op and a theory test centre in the middle of a roundabout. A roundabout! Everyone keeps saying it was a beautiful service, but frankly, I'm surprised they could hear half of it with all the 'BEEP! BEEP! HONK!' happening outside. The vicar did his best, bless him, but even he was getting pissed off by the end.

Afterwards, a mournful procession of earl grey and finger sandwiches weaves its way about the church hall. From my perch in a little window seat, I can catch the odd line from their whispered conversations: 'do you think she's alright?', 'were you close?', 'how long do we have left on the meter?'

I know most of them: my family, some people from school. Some I think I recognise, and some are perfect strangers. Some look like they've been crying, some look like they're about to. Some are tired, some are bored. Most look about ready to go home.

But the one thing they have in common is that they're all looking at mum.

She isn't taking it well. I mean obviously, it's a funeral, but like, she REALLY isn't taking it well. I don't think I've ever seen her like this. She's sat at a table in the centre of the room by herself, just sort of staring into the distance. I trace her eyeline, but I don't think she's looking at anything specific: if she is, she isn't seeing anything, at least.

She's been like this all day. Well, since it happened, really. I understand it's hard, I do, but it's...I don't even know. She gets up, sometimes she eats, and she sleeps—the rest of the time, she's just staring off at something. People have been calling round all week with casseroles and condolences, and they've all tried to help, but she's on autopilot. I was hoping someone at the funeral would be able to make a difference, but so far it's all just been water off a duck's back.

It's getting to the point where I'm thinking I'll have to give it a go.

...

Gonna...give it a try.

...

Just gonna head on over and-

Mercifully, I spot my Aunt Suzie making her way through the crowd towards her. Thank God—she's way, way better at this sort of thing than I am. I tend to quip, which, given the circumstances, I can't imagine would be well received.

'Hi, love,' she says, with a gentle smile, 'mind if I have a sit down?'

Mum keeps looking forward. Suzie pulls out the chair next to her, tenderly setting it down, quiet as a mouse. She places her hand on Mum's, giving it a little squeeze.

'It was a beautiful service, love. Reminded me of Dad's, however long ago that was now; sun streaming in through the stained glass, bouncing off the aisle! What was it he said about the rain?'

She pauses for a moment, looking up at her searchingly. Mum just keeps staring forward. Suzie's eyes start to glisten. She swallows, steeling herself.

'Oh, that's right!' she continued, blinking rapidly as she tried a smile, 'He used to say, "it better not bloody rain at my funeral—y'know, who needs two reasons to be miserable?'"

She chuckles softly, and I chuckle with her. But Mum just keeps staring forward. Aunt Suzie leans into her side, resting her head on her shoulder. She grips my mum's hand tight, knuckles white with pressure.

'Wish it had rained a bit at Dad's. We were roasting in that church.' Suzie said with a snuffle.

Nothing. Suzie took a deep breath and looked up at Mum again.

'Carol,' she starts, her voice shaking very slightly, 'I just want you to know something. I...I need you to know something. None of this, absolutely none of this, is your fault. No-one thinks it's your fault. No-one could have known.' The shaking intensified as the glistening in her eyes grew into a trickle, then a stream. 'She loved you so, so much, and she knew how much you loved her. Always. You...you have to remember that, my love. You have to-' she broke off, clenching her eyes as she raised her other hand to her mouth. She started cursing under her breath as she rifled through her bag, fishing around desperately for some tissues before making a break for the toilets, apologizing profusely to no-one in particular. A single tear fell down Mum's cheek, her face remaining perfectly still.

Shit.

I think I actually have to try.

I've never been very good at...grief. Not so much the emotion – I'm fine with the whole being sad thing – but grief is annoyingly hard to experience alone. There's always someone else stuck in it right beside you, and you've got to grieve for the both of you, and so do they. A problem shared may be a problem halved, but grief shared is fucking exponential. Plus, there's the... other thing.

Last week or so, we had this absolutely massive fight. No idea what about anymore, but it was one of those fights that you don't go on to laugh about – you just never talk about it again. Screaming, slamming doors – I think a plate was thrown at some point, although I could be making that up – and it all culminated with the classic, 'I wish I wasn't your daughter'/'well sometimes I wish I wasn't your mum,' wombo combo. And then I stormed out.

By the time I got back, she was...like this.

I know I should have said something before now, but things are still a little...raw. I can't trust myself to say the right thing. Frankly, I don't even know what the right thing to say is. But as she sits there, frozen, I know I have to try and find it.

Jumping up out of my window seat, I make my way across the room towards her, drifting through the mourning mass, until I find myself in Aunt Suzie's empty seat.

'Hi, Mum.'

Nothing.

You know, I have absolutely no idea what to say.

I know what I want to say—I want to say I wish we hadn't had that fight. I want to say I'm still cross with her, even though I have no idea what about. I want to say how sorry I am for her loss, but I don't want to say, 'I'm so sorry for your loss'. I want to tell her that everyone in this room loves her so much, and they'll be here for her as soon as she's ready. I wish I could tell her I'll be there for her. I want to tell her to snap out of it. I want to tell her to take as long as she needs. I want to tell her how grateful I am for everything she did for me, I want to tell her how lucky I was, I want to tell her that I know for a fact she has tissues in her bag if she'd bothered to check, I want to tell her to chase the council on getting speed bumps for our road, I want to tell her I'm sorry for making fun of her for demanding that the council put speed bumps on our road, I want to tell her that it's my fault, I want to tell her how sorry I am, I want to tell her—

I try to wrap my arms around her, even as they just pass right through her.

'I love you, Mum.'

I don't know if she heard me. I don't think she did. But I think, at least, she felt me. Because in that moment, she finally looked up, and as her eyes welled with tears, she smiled a small, shaky smile

As Aunt Suzie made her way back from the bathroom, sleeves stocked with toilet paper, Mum ran over to her, clutching her in a tight embrace as she sobbed into her shoulder. Suzie clutched her back, and the two of them stood there in each other's arms, holding on for dear life.

I think that's my cue.

Stepping back, I walk outside for a little while, looking at the church across the road. The cars keep on rushing past, pedestrians hurry from shop to shop, and high above, the sun shines brilliantly in a crystal-blue sky. What a lovely day to go.

Before I do, I have one last look behind me, through the window. Everyone's with them now: my sister, my dad's family, Granny—all of them holding on to each other tight, for their own little eternity.

I smile. Grief is annoyingly hard to experience alone.

Batteries

By Suzannah Shimwell

Her house stands empty now
air speckled
with falling dust particles.
Tins in cupboards
just as she left them
and nestled amidst clothes
guarded by mothballs,
lie old chocolate boxes
filled with paper memories.

Testament to her mother's time
in the outhouse
cobwebbed,
a meat safe
chamber pot
and mangle.

On Sundays
when her son comes to the house
he brings with him batteries
checks all the clocks
makes sure their hands
are still moving.

JOHN TREHERNE CREATIVE WRITING PRIZE WINNER, 2024

Reunion

By Sapphy Welch-Dunn

Only a family tragedy could bring us together. I waited just outside the hospital entrance for you. It was dark by then, and raining, but I thought I could probably do with the fresh air. And I was eager to see you. There's twelve years between us. We don't look much alike either. Me: pale as anything, unquestionably Celtic. You: olive skinned with your gorgeous dark curls. People call us cousins, or half-siblings but when you say, 'my little sister', I know it means we're whole.

Our gran was ill. It was sudden. She was old, like grans are, so people think you're expecting it. But it wasn't like that. She was as well as she could be before a fall led to missed medication, led to her, lying unresponsive on a makeshift bed in a grossly understaffed ward.

You stormed through the down pour toward the entrance. We said hello – no hug – and you asked where the nearest toilet was. I waited outside for Rahim, your boyfriend. I'd only seen him once or twice before, but I recognised him before he did me. I waved while he studied me from near the carpark before hesitantly, he waved back.

Maybe it was the fluorescent lighting, but you looked a bit pale. You were leant against a windowsill with restless eyes always glancing back out through the doors into the dark. Something was bothering you, but you didn't want to let on. I know hospitals are hard for you so I assumed it must be that. I smiled in a way that both offered and asked for reassurance as I apologised for the sporadic text messages from the last week. You couldn't seem to focus. I missed you.

When was the last time we'd seen each other? In an ordinary year, I'd be lucky to catch you once. It's so strange imagining all four of us bundled together in that house at the Roundway with just my mum. Even though I was tiny at the time, I remember some things so clearly. You were sitting opposite me at the kitchen table. Hazy afternoon sun coming from the window behind created a ring of warmth around you. I was eating this apple when I got too close to the core and munched through a pip. I paused. You gasped. That bothered

me. I watched as you took the ends of my straggly hair and brought them up above my head. Then you told me that soon, the pip from inside my stomach would begin its transformation into an apple tree. My hair would be the first to change; becoming stiff, gnarled branches. But I liked my hair. It was wild and long and mermaidly and people told me it was a beautiful colour: gingery with streaks of blonde. You smirked. Either you were teasing me, in which case as the youngest sibling I didn't want to prove myself to be so easily wound up, or this was frightening. Sometimes I eat cautiously when I get towards the centre of an apple. Sometimes I puncture right into the core.

You linked my arm as we stepped through clinical corridors, each looking the same as the last. Rahim touched his palm to my shoulder and wore an easy smile. Gran's ward was furthest away. It was named after some old RAF base nearby which had been in the news a lot recently due to plans to house refugees there. I'd spent many afternoons arguing about it with gran and grandad before now. We passed the chapel, and your eyes unavoidably met with the great red and white stripes of a framed England flag on the wall opposite. Why is it there? You scoffed. I didn't know. There were names engraved in wooden placards either side. Maybe a war memorial? Maybe they were the names of people who had donated money to the hospital? I was used to the red and white, the framed photos of the queen in every pub, the spats with grandparents over headlines. I shrugged, laughed, agreed it was all a bit uncomfortable round here. I think it reminded you why you left.

As we neared Gran's ward, I wrapped my arm tighter round yours and pressed my cheek into your shoulder. I hadn't asked about the baby yet. You found out in September, and it was February now. Five months on but you weren't showing massively. You were planning on getting Aunty Cindy round from America to help with the home birth, but you weren't sure if she'd make it now. I had a dream it was a girl, and I wondered if it would be.

A Theophany

By Lily Grisafi

Every seventh day,
I meet your father.
I see you in his dark curls
his evident talent
his wiliness to be cruel
and his knack for kindness. I've
stopped looking for him and still,
inevitably,
he appears.

Yesterday,
I met him on a bridge, then at a pub.
Saw him again
carrying his bag to the train.
He hails from Hamburg and
from a distant island. As I do.
As you will.

If you have his sensitivities,
I will be the silly one—
the only one?
the unmoving target,
broad face ever open to your arrows.

Until then,
I drift from place to place unannounced
yet tracked
by him.

More recently,
he's been a shade of blond
a judge at 23
a bridegroom at 40.

When you sink,
 I can't say for certain that
 he will reach for you or that
 you will ever see the well
 where I gathered the grey-
 blue water
 for your eyes.

At night,
 I can already hear your cries and
 entreat him
 to answer them.
 Without him,
 I will have to put you in a box
 and close the door
 covering my ears and leaving you
 with my grandmother's spirit.
 In the morning,
 I want you to myself again,
 jealous of your love:
 a love entirely of my own invention between
 angels I need to exist.

This City's Feeling

By Uko Rasmus Tüdemann

This feeling is present,
 Its reach is restricted,
 It lingers in people and places.

Unshaken, omnipresent:
 Threads of connection depicted,
 Smugness set in people's faces.

And I – an echo of elsewhere –
 My past feels conflicted:
 now I stand at the horse races.

The feeling is luminescent,
 And this city has me addicted,
 It engraves its traces



Photograph by Libby Harris

Incunabulum

By Liv Greenhalgh

i could show it off, if you'd like.

Emboss lips with my signature and scratch sonnets into doorways,
weave through street-lines of tradition into
soft-panelled and breathy rooms (nevermind the gaping hole)

we need a ceiling yet. Risk unballasting affection with overwritten tedium,
the choric thrum: *maneo, manes, manemus*;¹
an amorabundum of promise. Until we emerge saint-saved,
the coppery tinge of sex on our tongues.

But here? fourteen foldable lines to tuck away
into this little place. Seven pairs (us), no rhyme—
that might come later in time. Tentative threads spool
between fingers, a cats-cradle webbed with shyness:
our *incunabulum*. Too much? Speak softly to me,
i just want some(thing) one(thing) to hold.

¹ Latin (*manere*): to remain, to endure, to stay the night. “I stay, You stay, We stay”.

Christmas

By *Theo Flavin*

Pay attention now. After brief consideration, I put the neighbours on the left. They were a little vulgar to be honest; in one window I could see a figure leering at me. The house was right ahead. It was quite large and imposing, but not imposing because it was large, more because it was right in front of me and as such was very big. I could also see two kinds of greyness. The first was beneath my feet (coarse, gritty), but the second is difficult to see. It's unfixed and dizzily globular.

Max opened the door mere moments before I placed my finger on the doorbell. In some ways this was dissatisfying. He smiled and beckoned me in.

'Oh, I wouldn't bother taking your shoes off. Touch wood she'll only be like a few minutes. Maybe. Hopefully.'

'She's hardly known for her speed, but sure. Just this once I'll trust.'

He smiled again and led me through to the kitchen. I sat on the chair that's directly ahead of you upon walking in, with its back to a protruding section of wall which I thought was the remnant of an old fireplace, but I hadn't actually checked. Their kitchen looked nice at this time of year, in the few minutes between the sun's peak and bedtime. It was warm and colourful.

'Coffee? Tea?' Max looked a little harassed.

'Coffee would be great thanks. Thought you said we'd only be a few minutes? Sure we've got time?'

'Prepare to be shocked by the speed of my coffee making.'

They had decorations up already. There was red and gold tinsel wrapped around some exposed piping above the kitchen counter. On the centre of the table, dominating the foreground of my vision, was a small decorative tree. At least they hadn't put the real thing up yet, though it could have been in the other room. But I thought it had been in here last year so unlikely, all things considered. There was also a nativity set on top of a cupboard to the right of the dining table. It was an unassuming thing, lacking a star which might have demanded attention. Overcrowding seemed to have been a problem, and thus some of the sheep (were there sheep at the birth of

Jesus?) had been ousted from the festivities and were sat before the tree in an act of genuflection.

'You've got the decs up already?'

Detritus is dead matter.

'Just a couple, we haven't gone the whole hog yet. But I just wanted to liven things up a bit, and it's kind of grown on me doing it all a bit early.'

'Fair do's.'

Max had now finished the coffee and took it over. He sat down and fiddled with one of the sheep. The other one I slid a little closer to me. I guess this one is mine.

'Work all right?' I gulped at my coffee, burning my throat a little.

'Yeah, yeah, it's all alright. Bit stressful though. Nothing too awful, just a bit of stuff we had to do for this charity thing. Don't want to make a biggie out of it but it's kinda... eugh.'

Like the legend of the phoenix.

'Huh. That sucks. Not too serious, is it?'

'No not really. A little white lie. I'll happily just take it to my grave.'

'If you're sure.'

Probably better to leave it behind. But it wasn't my call. I could hear Liz coming down the stairs. Max took our coffee mugs and put them in the sink. Mine was empty.

*

The final sounds of the organ didn't echo. Truthfully, they died very quickly. Instead, we were left to wallow in the pregnant silence. Only for a moment though. Before long, the chatter began to rise, gradually at first and then rapidly, once everyone was sure that we had moved on from our moment of bleak cognisance. The Father said a few words at the front, but he had lost his audience. No one cared enough to listen to his speech. It was ornamental, contrapuntal, even.

I only now became aware of my own soft rustling and my own breathing. Craning my neck, I took another look around the church. We were sat

in the shadow of a stone pillar. It was cold to the touch. I traced my eyes upwards, following the gentle curve of the stonework as it reached the ceiling. Other such pillars were in amongst the congregation throughout the building. Upon each hung a wreath, with a candle balanced delicately in the centre. They were little vestiges of Yuletide, Pagan souvenirs. Quaint. At no other time of year is light more colourful. It catches your breath in the same way the chill in the air becomes tangible. Surely you feel it. An adrenaline rush like something is about to happen. You're completely alone, trudging through this evidence of life, and feeling like something must happen. It must. Breathe it in. Beautiful music.

Imagine there's a fire, ahead of you on the street. The carollers are gathered around it, singing out of tune and out of time. There's a large figure stooped before the fire, prodding it with dexterity. He turns. But I do not worship false gods. I do not bow before him. I turn and run back down the street. Then I lie on the ground, breathing hard and watching my breath form pretty patterns in front of my face. The twinkling, beckoning lights from shop windows make the sky kaleidoscopic. I like it. Not because of them, but because of me. Because I'm not one of them. I wander through the lights and bathe in it. No gods here, just me. Here I will live forever.

Now the silence had truly abated. I thought of the sweet sinister voices of the choir. They were still going. It will fade away as we leave. I turned to Max, smiled, and got up from my seat.

'We should probably try and get out while we can still breathe.'

'Yeah sure. *Liz, come on, let's get going.*'

We made our way towards the door. Already the crowd was thronging and jostling. Max and Liz held hands, and I felt quite grateful that I was under no obligation to hold anyone's hand.

As we left the building the cool night air crept up amongst us. I twisted my head, panning over my shoulder, and looked up towards the caged electric light above the side-entrance, which cast a sickly yellow hue on those walking underneath it. I huffed out an undignified breath, and though I could just make it out, it wasn't an especially impressive display. I'm not a dragon today. The scratching of shoes hitting the gravel was rhythmic. Ashtray. It sounded nice.

'Man, it was gorgeous in there.'

'Mhm. You should come next year.'

'I'd love to, but I don't know if Liz will want it to become part of the... what's the phrase, the regularly scheduled broadcast.'

'She's not a fan?'

'Doesn't like staying still is the thing. And the *scary music.*'

'Scary? You think so?'

'Must I remind you that I am not six, nor am I talking about myself.'

'Mm.'

'You alright to give me a lift back? I can get the bus if not, it's no trouble.'

'It's fine. Not like you're far away. How did you get here?'

'Josh dropped me off.'

'Ah k.' Liz had started to wonder off the path and onto the grass. She was now a bit of a way away, squatting down to look at something in the dirt.

'I'll go and grab her.' I turned towards her and jogged a little, keeping my hands in my pockets.

'Hey. Come on, we've got to get going. It'll be much warmer in the car.'

'Ok.' She stood up. Before we left, I peered down at the ground she'd been staring at. It was just a patch of earth, disturbed and semi-excavated. There was a little dirt beneath her fingernails.

'Not a fan of the spooky songs then?'

'They were alright.'

'What's your favourite song then?'

'One from school.'

'*Will you sing it for me, so I know how it goes?*'

'Ok.' She sang.

*Autumn days when the grass is jewelled
 And the silk inside a chestnut shell
 Jet planes meeting in the air to be refuelled
 All the things I love so well*

*Oh, I mustn't forget
 Oh, I mustn't forget
 To say I must say thank you
 I mustn't forget.*

From the top.

Going Home for the Seventh Month

By Weik Kiat Heng

In Chinese mythology, the gates of Hell open in the seventh lunar month (which roughly corresponds to August), and spirits travel freely between this world and the next. Offerings of joss paper, incense, and hell money are made for the spirits of deceased family members, as well as hungry ghosts left without relatives in the mortal world.

Waiting for our turn at the joss paper burner, I examine the contents of this year's offering pack. The usual suspects are present: stacks of gold and silver joss paper, hell money in ridiculous denominations, talismans for protection and fortune—but something shiny catches my eye. I pull out a gilded credit card issued by the Hell Bank Corporation, turn to Mom, and say 'Let's not put that through.' She agrees. Surely the hyperinflation we cause by sending over quadrillions every year wreaks enough havoc on the economy down there as it is. It seems foolish to introduce Them to the concept of credit card debt. We snap the card and put it in the bin.

Dad passes me three squat stacks of hell notes, fifty million each, for me to add to the fire. What a shame, he says, that They only get to stay for a month. It must be difficult for Them to have to leave again, I respond, a tinge of melancholy in my smile.

Singapore changes a fair bit in nine months. The bike path in front of the Workers' Party coffee shop is complete, my head hurts trying to understand the road diversions at Riviera for the metro station under construction below, and the other day I passed by a stadium in Punggol I had never seen before. I don't go out as much as I would like because I've lost my immunity to the tropical heat, and Mom insists it's hardly a good idea to be wandering around at night when the gates of Hell are open, even if I want to explore more before I have to go back to university.

One evening, Dad suggests we should have dinner at a mamak stall in the south of town so we can buy some biryani for Grandpa and Grandma when we visit their spirit tablet the following day. I order the food in rusty, hesitant Malay: two packs of chicken biryani, no pickles so it doesn't spoil in the fridge overnight. In the car on the way to the temple, Dad tells anecdotes about how

Grandpa would buy chicken wings to fry for Dad and his nine siblings because it was the fairest treat for such a big crowd, and recalls with a hearty chuckle how they all got in trouble with Grandma when the hearty food gave them sore throats. When we arrive, my aunts and uncles have already set up a large spread for Grandpa and Grandma: curry chicken with canned evaporated milk, rice peaches and chive cakes, a dazzling assortment of fruits, and a thermos of oolong tea. I help lay out the food we brought along and struggle embarrassingly to light the joss sticks. Later, everyone retreats to a corridor for conversations about how my cousins are and how much thinner the cold in England has made me.

In the evening, Dad and Mom ask me where I want to go for dinner. I scroll through my notes app for the list I made while homesick in June: the generous mutton soup at Compassvale, the loaded congee in Chinatown, and the stock-laden pork noodles right in my neighbourhood that Mom thinks are a stodgy mess. My eyes settle on the satay bee hoon by Woodsville Interchange, and I think about how I took the ingredients for granted at home. While the rice noodles are straightforward enough to obtain in Britain, and the satay sauce is a question of taking a rolling pin to some roasted peanuts, followed by spices, a knife, and a blasé attitude towards carpal tunnel syndrome, water spinach, so prolific it blocks rivers in the tropics, is nine pounds a kilo from the Asian supermarkets there, and I have no idea where to even start looking for blood cockles and rehydrated cuttlefish. The pager buzzes and snaps me out of my thoughts. I dig in, grateful that the burden of sourcing ingredients has been lifted off my shoulders. The food is rich and savoury, just as good as I remember.

The visceral confrontation with the reality that life has not stopped in your absence can be jarring. It's difficult to set up meetings with friends when everyone's busy with internships, trips to Japan and Korea, or spending time with a romantic partner. That being said, quite often all it takes is someone to suggest a gathering. Joel texts an old group chat to arrange a cycling meetup, and the four of us decide to meet the week before my vacation ends. The morning rolls around with an apologetic message from Ethan explaining that he's fallen sick, telling us to go on without him. With a crestfallen sigh, I realise I won't get to see him for another year.

Barreling down the city streets, the three of us talk about our lives at university, how our other classmates are doing, and how things have (or haven't) changed since we met in secondary school. We reminisce about chemistry classes, punctuated by thermite glows and permanganate stains, over

lunch at the mall below Yiheng's apartment. The hours fly by painfully quickly. In the evening, I bid farewell to them and tell them I'll miss them when I'm gone. I thank them for the great company and the wonderful day out, and ride home feeling like I've just attended my own funeral.

And so the end of the month rolls around, bringing me back in front of the joss paper burner. Mom holds up the box of offerings, telling Them it is time to move on and return to the world where They belong before the gates close. I try, and like every other year before, fail to fan out the stacks of joss paper, and content myself with fuelling the flames two to three sheets at a time. The light-polluted sky glows a dim purple, the stifling evening heat amplified by the bonfire of sandalwood pulp.

I swear the time I incinerated some baking paper in the oven in college was an accident—but for a second, it did remind me of home.

Stay for Dinner

By Okori

Won't you stay?

When you're here, I'm here
I lose all sense
of self when you're not
when you're near, I'm near
a familiar face
I once forgot

In your presence,
my heart starts beating
it takes its time to simmer
These moments are
forever fleeting
I hope you stay, for dinner

I'm in love
in love with a feeling
Weaned off life, I was getting thin
A perspective rich,
rich with meaning,
behind a door, that leads within

I sought to say
The next time we met
It's times like this,
in times like this,
I really wish not to forget
a time like this

A time like this
Is almost over
Gone before, the birds can sing
Gone before, I start my breakfast
Stay for dinner
Won't you stay,
for a min?

American White Pelican

By Lily Grisafi

I couldn't write this while I was there. The rusted
cranes over the bay, over my bed
carried me away
to a canal where you asked me
to stand still for a moment. And see
the Great Winged Thing
before me.
I couldn't have written this there either. I had my
pen,

but here
there is a window angled
just so, through all the
lights
I can see where you lie sleeping as
you did then
while I bled next to you and
our family died.
You couldn't hear my screams there. Hear me
at the window now, my tone measured?

I sometimes miss the pleading,
the deluge overwhelming the Dyke rousting the
stork from its nest—

but the quiet allows me to look and
I can write
and I can try to capture your reach.

WINNER OF THE FIRST STORY FESTIVAL QUENTIN BLAKE WRITING COMPETITION

My World

By Praise Ariyo

This is my world, tattered roads, dilapidated buildings on the verge of collapse, dark grey skies casting a veil of depression over the entire city. People trod the sidewalks. The streets look like a zombie apocalypse. In a way we are all zombies, in this world. We work, flee from monstrosities, watch our loved ones die. We keep on working like nothing happened. It is the life we live, in this world. My world.

Behind the city lies humongous layers of waste, the mountain of trash and disgust almost as tall as Mount Everest was, maybe even taller, it's dubbed Mount Trashmore. Tallest mountain in this world. My world.

As I walk home, I spot my friend, my only friend. Elios. He waves to me, smiling brightly. His friendly face hurts to look at, whilst surrounded by so much dread and despair. It's like waking up, looking at your phone, discovering it's on full brightness. I like to call him the extreme optimist. We both start to walk together, and Elios talks to me about his day.

'My boss yelled at me today...like every other day, but maybe he's just stressed.' I simply nod to everything he says, I don't have enough energy or care to reply. 'And then-'

'Aaaahh!'

Before Elios can continue, we are assaulted by an ear-splitting shriek that breaks the trance. Everywhere, everyone is running. Before I even have time to think Elios grabs my arm, running with me. We hide in the dark corner of an alleyway where we see a girl running for her life. She's not even given a chance before she is decapitated, head bitten clean off her neck, body falling limp on the ground. Blood oozed from where the head once rested. I cover my mouth; almost gagging.

The girl was killed by what we call 'Draconians.' Throughout the years Earth has become worse and worse, nuclear bombs have been tested with no value for life or consequences, and radioactive activity has become a normal occurrence. Because of this, our brains don't work as they used to, we have become dull. Many animals and insects have found ways to counter it. Fortunately for them, but unfortunately for the human race, they have developed features to survive



Artwork by Quentin Blake
2025 © Quentin Blake

radiation poisoning and eventual death; they have become bigger and more intelligent. These mutant beasts will continue to grow and there's nothing we can do but watch as our kind is killed, and we wait to be killed.

Elios and I climb over a fence at the end of the alleyway where we see someone we know, Elios' friend, Axel. He is covered in blood and bruises. Plodding behind him, his childhood dog, Bracken. Bracken starts barking at me. So I finally decided to speak up.

'Please shut your dog up, it's going to get us attacked.'

Elliott just hands me a book.

'What's this?' I say.

'You forgot your folder at work.'

I look at him as if he just insulted my entire bloodline. 'Do you not see the situation we're in?' I pinch my nose bridge and sigh, 'forget it.'

Elios comes alongside us, his usual, bubbly self. He puts each of his arms around my and Axel's shoulder.

'Look,' Elios points at something.

Elliott and I follow his finger to see that he's pointing at a small dust bunny. It was quite literally a bunny made from dust. Bracken barks at it continuously, until the bunny gets frightened and starts running. Bracken chases after the poor thing, so Axel chases after him, and Elios chases after them, so I chase after them all.

The bunny squeezes into a trashcan and Bracken stops, barking at the trashcan continuously. Elios opens the trashcan to look for the bunny. Just when I think the bunny has disappeared it hops out onto Elios' head. He laughs. I wince as he smiles at me. Too bright.

He stands there, the dust bunny on his head. 'I just want to show you that, even though we're in a horrible situation right now, there are things we can find to make us smile.'

Elios is most likely the reason I have not exited from this world. He is so ridiculously positive, in a world of routine killing, I almost laugh along with him.

Sorrow. Despair. Death. Elios.

We have survived another day.

Beneath the Lingerin Eye of Heaven,

By Jude Hughes

Ganymede watches the lambs as they play'.
A rush of feathers; he flails in the air
bronze beak around his throat.

The Eagle

takes him to the edge of the mountain and
can't hear his screams past its own ancient tongue and
gilds him, wings beating, beak gentling, clasping

Honeyed arms

talons piercing his wrists.

Drops of blood paint the little world below
He can see all he knows from here
Wipes the stain of heaven from his chin
Ran all through with gold, broken beneath.

High in the ether, he stands by the king
Pouring wine from a bottle always full
Numb on nectar of the gods in his veins
He dreams he loves the world and it loves him back
Throbbing headed, moon eyed, he cannot sleep
And cannot wake, strung up across the stars

April

By *Sophia Bumsteinaite*

Diese Kraft, diese Leichtigkeit,
Vielleicht ist es ja garnicht dieser
liebvoller April.
Diese Lebenslust und Heiterkeit...

So gibt es ein Gefühl viel stärker
Als der Frühling je erlebt,
Einen Drang so intensiv,
Selbst die Winde tragen ihn.

So gibt es etwas,
Ich kannte es nicht.
Etwas lässt die Knospen brechen,
Durchdrängt von sich selbst.
(Liebe? Kann das sein?)

Die Leere,
Die uns so schlimm die Herzen sticht,
Ist gefüllt, frei von jener Last.
Und die Kälte, und die Frust...
(Ich erkenne sie nicht.)

This power, this grace,
Perhaps it transcends
mere April's affection.
This joy for life and cheerfulness...

So there is a force far mightier
Than spring has ever known.
An impulse so profound,
The winds carry it.

So there is something,
I didn't know about.
Something makes the buds burst,
Impaled by themselves.
(Love? Could it be?)

The void,
That once so cruelly pierced our hearts,
Is filled, liberated from its weight.
And the anguish, and the cold...
(I don't recognize it.)

Aperture

By *Joe Stell*

I walk to the shelter,
trailed by you
striding with such stumbling grace,
your familiar, absent gait followed
by words and tone,
absorbed as white noise,
while I gaze
into your
ocean voids.

Fribble

By Suzannah Shimwell

As we fribble away the afternoon in wicker chairs,
I tell you my fear
and I whisper the word
'poetaster,'
It's a dirty word!

You, happily spooning vichyssoise,
elucidate on the future.
Your future.

The ebb and flow of the café is slow—
so slow it lulls me into a post-tiffin stupor.

You lean over and read this,
and sum it up succinctly.
'Poetry', you say,
'is all about synonyms.
Why don't you put some in?'

The Pitman

By Okori

On walks the **TRAVELLER**, past a particularly deep and dark pit. He overhears movement at the bottom and carefully peeks inside. He sees another man, in his early twenties perhaps, at the bottom of the pit, fussing with a match.

'Hey, friend. Are you stuck?'

The match holding man looks up, at the nosy **TRAVELLER**, and tells him

'No, I think I have a way out now.'

The **TRAVELLER** releases a slight sigh of relief, but isn't quite convinced.

'I see, can you tell me how you plan to get out?'

The man in the pit, the **PITMAN**, is still faffing with his matches.

'Smoke rises,

does it not?'

says the **PITMAN**

The **TRAVELLER**, puts the pieces together in his head, only to find a few not sticking, asks another question.

'If you are trying to light a signal, you need not.

I am here,

I can help.

Maybe a ladder?'

‘That won’t work,’ says the **PITMAN**,
 ‘It’s far too high to climb my way out.
 I will tire before long
 I will fall to my death.’

The **TRAVELLER** thinks about it. While the pit didn’t look that deep to him, he guessed the man had a point.

‘After all, what do I know?’ thinks the **TRAVELLER** ‘I’ve never been in the pit.’

‘Well, regardless, you no longer need to faff with those matches.
 I will be your signal
 I will get you help.’

The **PITMAN**, going through faulty matches like a mad man at this point, finally puts the matchbox down.

‘Help from where?
 Who is here?
 Who is able?
 No one is coming
 and no one should,
 lest they want to fall adrift
 as I did.’

Pondering for a moment why the poor **PITMAN** used the words ‘adrift,’ did the

TRAVELLER

‘for, he’s not at sea?’ thought the **TRAVELLER**.

Yet, he decided to move on.

“My good friend, you confuse me.

For if *you*

don’t think anyone else

can help,

will help,

or should help,

then why (in *hell!*)...

are you trying to light a smoke signal?’

As he said this,

the **TRAVELLER** ponders *how* the **PITMAN** planned to *light* pyres without wood?

But the **PITMAN**, now seeming more morose, picks his pack of matches up and

continued to

strike,

after strike,

on the stressed side of

his matchbox.

‘I—

I never said I
was sending a signal,
I said that

‘smoke rises.’ Did I
not?’

says the **PITMAN**

Feeling that the **PITMAN** was now being difficult, the vexed **TRAVELLER**
stressed

‘So, what the hell are you trying to-’
‘Not *trying*,’ says the **PITMAN** ‘Why try anymore?’

I *tire*

So, why *lie* anymore?

If I *die*

If I die in this hole...

Then I—

I never told you how I got in this place, did I?’

‘I’ll tell you because it’s important that you never find yourself in a place like this. There’s nothing out there for me anymore. If there was, bah, I’m sure it’s gone now. I’m sure I’ve killed it. fate would have it that I took a left instead of a right and I found myself fallen—forever lost in this hapless pit. Was I careless? Not a bit. *No*, I simply took a walk. So, I choose to burn and hope that this smoke rises past that damned precipice.’

Please, spare me.

‘I’m not lighting a pyre,
My desire for escape, the weight, and any feeling that the state of things are dire left me quite some time ago. I’d just—I’d just like to know that this wretched smoking pit may be a warning, maybe a hint, to those that stroll on after me. Yes, that would be...that would be good.’

With that proclamation, the **PITMAN’S** match had finally lit.

Pausing for a moment, the **TRAVELLER** thought to himself.

He could tell this was a tense occasion. I mean this morbid man in the pit might well do something bad to himself very soon, so he should say something. But what on earth could he say to *this*?

‘You know, that was very well put,’ said the **TRAVELLER**.

‘You say there’s nothing up here for you, but...have you considered becoming a writer?’

A Night at the Proms

By Charlotte Payne

By the beginning of the end,
Janet shat herself.
Steamy and liquified, the shit trickled
down. Delicately curving its way round,
eager to embrace Janet's inner thigh,
staking property over any possible punter.

Noses around her wrinkled,
as yesternight's curry graced
their sinuses, twitching the
ancestral nerve that urged
them to reach for their mask,
shout Gas! Gas! and protect
loved ones. Instead, they sat mute
as Janet shuffled, passing them
arse to face. Quietly they gag—
choked politely as fumes stagnate,
shrouding them in a microclimate
of fiery warmth. While poor Janet,
in her misjudged cream dress,
carefully bustled her way
out of the Royal Albert Hall.

Bless sweet Janet, and her
geothermal ingenuity—as she
rushed past the ticket booth,
staff members mutter
those two delicate words:
'Not again.'

JOHN TREHERNE CREATIVE WRITING PRIZE WINNER, 2024

My Love For You, Your Love For Yoghurt

By Libby Harris

Turning from a known to an unknown road, I tap play. The name of the recording is 'Poem'. I recognise it from its first line, which is also its title. *Having a Coke with You*, drawls O'Hara, almost unbelieving that he is reading his poem aloud, again, for people other than Vincent Warren to hear. He begins with a peculiar mixture of irony and defensiveness, his intonation reaching for but not quite achieving monotony. He dwells on the vowels a little. I am crying, by now. Sobbing, really. The random road leads me uphill and unseeing I throw my feet out in front of me. I turn my head a little as people pass.

The assignment was optional. E devised it. I was meeting with him weekly, at the time, for classes in literary criticism. His other students and I were to take a thirty-minute walk in a part of the city we had never visited before, which is in itself a challenge. Cambridge is difficult to get out of, with the Colleges gate-keeping tracts of land and bridges over the river, and anyway it is more of a market town than a city. We were to listen to the 'Poem' and perhaps keep listening to it during the walk. After, we were to record our raw impressions. I thought I'd take the opportunity to walk to the out-of-town Lidl. They sell Greek yoghurt in enormous quantities: an obvious draw. I usually would not justify the journey. *Partly because of my love for you, partly because of your love for yoghurt*, and I gulp at the coincidence. I turn onto a main road where exhaust fumes stench the sunlight and I no longer understand the road markings. As I stand waiting at the crossing for some green signal which does not come, other (stable) people keep crossing ahead of me, just looking both ways and striding out. I learn how to mimic them.

Fluorescent orange tulips in the entrance to Lidl, a bunch for three pounds, their colour not really orange but something closer to an old persimmon skin. I pick them up – what else was I to do? It was already a day of comic probability – and let O'Hara's voice mingle with intercom announcements. What else do I need?, I thought; what else would be good? Everybody knows this is a mainstay of life in your early twenties, and perhaps beyond, but I can't yet be sure. We stand alone in the aisles, gazing at choices and determining how to reach satiety. I stand a little too close behind the woman browsing the yoghurt

section until she shifts to let me pluck my tub from the shelf. What else? Dried thyme to simmer with white beans and tomatoes; cucumber to cube and drizzle with my Dijon mustard dressing. I had anticipated the option of self-checkout, making my round-trip an uninterrupted period of attention to the poem, but in the Cambridge Lidl the checkouts extend with a modest perpendicularity from the light-soaked windows, not allowing space for the itemised scrabble of self-service. The cashier decides to close her checkout just as I add my items to the conveyor belt; I shrug my headphones from my ears and talk small and sunny with her. I feel a tenderness opening within me as I half-lie about how I feel. I suppose it is a good thing to feel a self-absorbed immensity. I wonder what the cashier means when she says that she's good, too.

I walk and jaywalk and walk some more until I reach River Lane, on which an estate agent is fidgeting with his thin suit as he flips through paperwork beside a woman who clearly wants to get into her car and drive home. I follow the river until I reach a bench that I know is set back from the path. It is opposite my college's boathouse, and I wonder if I will spot anyone I know across the water as I speak into my phone. The assignment wanted fifteen minutes of content; I am not sure where to start. My voice shakes but I speak freely. It is funny that this mp3 file is called 'Poem', I say, because in a lot of ways it is The Poem, for me. I tell the story of the yoghurt-journey, which had begun with an intense text conversation with an old friend during the known, pre-poem section of my walk. He had experienced a sudden, inexplicable change of fortune in his romantic relationship; I had never heard him so paranoid, so desperate. I spoke of the trains I took last summer, through the Pyrenees and then Basque Country, like O'Hara *going to San Sebastian, Irún, Hendaye, Biarritz, Bayonne*, but having nobody about whom to write a love poem. I wrote a poem about that feeling, but it was not the same thing. Only half-aware of eavesdropping passersby, I reprised an idea that I consider, by now, an organising principle of my psyche, that of love as a creative outlet. The energy comes from the same place, I think. I write less when I am in love; I love instead of writing. Both are exercises in watching the shadows of your mind as it moves. In love, you do this whilst *drifting back and forth between each other*, the shadows tidal over your varying interdistance. When writing, the shadows skim and linger over the surface of words, like fingertips over Braille. Things get a little close, after a while. I swallow and continue. I recall how I wrote a few essays on this poem, when I was eighteen and in love for the first time. I cannot remember any of my literary analyses, now, besides the absolute beauty

of the line break between *I look* and *at you*. I acknowledge that I have not said a whole lot, chuckle to myself, end the recording, and email it to E. When I get home I cut the stems of the tulips at an acute angle, so that they can more easily drink their water.

Two weeks later, E sends us a transcribed lecture entitled 'The determination of love,' given by Andrea Brady in 2017. I smile as I remember how doomed a place we perceived the world to be six years ago. Four other students and I meet to discuss Brady's writing with E. Since I am 'smiling enigmatically', he wants me to tell the group how I feel. I say that I loved it, as I love thinking about love, but that I could not quite get behind what seemed to me one of Brady's critical premises, that in order to verify the existence of an object of our desire we must attempt to destroy it. The room is quiet until a student (a friend) says she understands. I ask why, opening my palms to the ceiling, and she says something about the frustration of somebody else having sway and power over you. I vaguely recall feeling that way, once, but I would not have said that there was really love between me and that person in that moment. I feel as though perhaps I love in vanilla, and blush.

E hands out sheets of A4, a poem which 'Some of you already know, I'm aware.' Even upside-down, I can read the title of the poem. I cannot believe that this is happening. Along with the others, out of whom I know only one has met this poem before, I read 'Having A Coke With You' for the hundredth time and love it all over again. I have a peculiarly expressive face; I am afraid of bursting into nervous giggling. It is all so utterly ludicrous. I feel I am part of a psychological assessment, designed to compare the responses of comparable critics who have differing levels of familiarity with a poem. I cross my arms as my friends begin to dissect the language, the themes. I writhe in my chair as they debate the gender and sexuality of the speaker. 'Some of you know far too much about this poem', E drops casually onto the table, and I can feel my mouth twitching. I gulp water and try to stop blushing. I turn red at the slightest hint of embarrassment, can remain so for hours afterwards. E turns to me directly at one point, to ask what I think, and my stomach flips. 'Uh, did you listen to my thing?' I ask petulantly, and he nods. 'Well, you know what I think.' I make a dismissive gesture with my hand, laugh self-consciously and recross my arms. It does not matter that I am, essentially, an open book, and had been preparing

myself the whole time to tell the group how I felt about this poem. I have no issue with being seen as a romantic, as pretentious, as emotional. I am not sure why I clammed up when prompted to explain; the sudden attention clarified what felt to me a vast chasm in sentimentality between me and the others. Was I, despite my self-opinion, afraid of vulnerability? I felt it was veritably unfair to expect me to talk honestly about this poem after it had been approached by the other students as if it were any other text, to be read a few times and recycled on their way out of the room. I think, now, that I was waiting for some more explicit permission to enter into emotional transparency. I needed an invitation to the truth. It felt utterly wrong to blurt and then let the conversation fall back to semantic analysis. A friend uses the word ‘spectacle’ and suddenly the *tree breathing through its spectacles* shook with meaning; what if a spectacle, a display, is the same thing as an instrument for improving sight? What might it mean for a couple *in the warm New York four o'clock light* to behave like a spectacular tree, a tree keeping itself alive by performing a series of spectacles? Might I see this poem better via the embarrassed spectacle I staged for myself?

I retreat to the poem, watch it swim with Brady’s lecture in my mind. *The secrecy our smiles take on before people and statuary*—this is exactly how I like to love. Scaffolded by reference to art – ‘You get it, don’t you? You are *the right person to stand by the tree when the sun sank, you take care of Futurism*, I don’t need to explain’ – and taking pleasure in a little constriction, a little subtlety. From Mallarmé, Brady notes how writing is ‘chance defeated word by word’; I want to suspend that defeat, to love with em-dashes and line breaks, to compare *my love for you* to *your love for yoghurt*. For quietnesses to indicate knowledge rather than ambivalence. I want to say: I trust you enough to understand how I feel about you by telling you that *I would rather look at you than all the portraits in the world*, because you know how I sit in front of portraits for longer than is considered normal. For Alain Badiou, lovers view the world through the prism of their difference. Nothing needs be said which both know that they know; lovers transpose their minds and peer into the thinner regions, where they do not overlap. Does a wider or a narrower difference produce a sharper image? And what is a meaningful difference, anyway? Am I more similar to someone who has read all of my favourite poems, or to someone who could look at the six shelves of yoghurt in a conventional supermarket and choose the same one that I would?

It is a new academic year and E is giving a lecture series on practical criticism. He reprises much of the material we had considered that spring. He references the experiment with the mp3 recording with the very word ‘experiment’, which validates my guinea-pig paranoia. He reads *Having a Coke with You* aloud and I do not cry, or even fidget particularly much. The lecture continues and my mind drifts. E mentions how a friend of his, who does not read poetry at all, arranged for *Having a Coke with You* to be read at his wedding. I feel a little amusement, a little distaste. How much poetry of the last few decades has been a poor imitation of O’Hara? (I am myself, as an amateur poet, part of the problem.) I feel a little uneasy with the thought of this poem, which had made me sob so achingly last May, having been read at a wedding in New York City several years ago, and each of the guests having had their own individual response, some of them perhaps crying just as hard as I did. Not that crying is the ultimate measure of feeling, of course, but it always feels that significant in the moment. The poem feels to me now, as it long has, infinitely expansive. The sort of thing one might spend their lives studying as an anthropological object, collating responses. I only have my own, and it is changing. I am in love, veritably, for the second time. I have been writing poems, and I think some of them might even be good. I often think about non-first love, about how the definition of love as ultimate and superlative necessarily erases any previous incarnations. If you think you were in love before and consider yourself to be in love in the present moment, then at least one of those beliefs must be untrue. A second love is not so different—but I can’t keep writing this. June Jordan no longer believes that ‘there is a difference between writing and living’ and I tend to agree, but I am learning to notice when I need to lay down some words and when I need to lay myself down beside the person I love. I close my laptop and leave the library and feel the wind nudging my body on my way home—‘home’ is infinitely expansive, too. Afternoon sun trampolines from the yellowing leaves of the fig tree in the garden, through the perfectly square window and onto the bed.



Photograph by Tomos Davies

A Passage

By Raksha Daryanani Thani

With my head bowed, hands folded, heart excited,
Hari Om from me in my home, to you in the grand heavens, *Baba*.

This letter of mine starts in anticipation
 of two worlds meeting. Planets are glowing.

Meherbani for reading my *akhaani* today. Around 1882,
 crawled in you, grand ancestor.

In 1987, followed I, curious member
 of posterity raised in a cluster of fruit trees. Minds kept acclimatising.

My *Dadi's* stories showed filled *tijoris* of before the grand
 knife sliced through souls,
 glistening centuries of life preceded
 divisive blue and green stamp books. Pages went missing.

Maybe *kismet* was blameless? Maybe *waqt* changed grand
 brothers of the homeland into foes
 desecrating playgrounds with red ink, posting men in green where lines
 were drawn. Rivers were flowing.

Watan and you were kept *zinda* in lore

while I dangled like cavendish bananas in grand Britain.
 Import labels were evident to the naked eye, intrigued
 faces staring from Atlantic to Mediterranean. Heart was longing.

Sindhi boli and eating *loli* became refuge when I dreamt of Sindh.
 Your lived grand Sindh
 where sentences strung from right to left gather dust, waiting to be deciphered
 like genetics, customs, and traditions. Gaps are growing.

Why is *Amma's* name not on any *kitaab* and missing
 among your grand merchant reputation, mansion, and deftness?

I fear my mother tongue and folk songs ending
up in pop-up displays of the former colonial empire. Artefacts keep accumulating.

Like a *kamal jo gul*, *nyanis* like me resided in muddy waters not meant
to touch even grand elders' feet.

Birthing, consoling, awaiting, cherishing
children and husbands alike. Characters need unveiling.

Ghur, you once pointed at a *khazano* open on the floor.

I learnt how grand unconditional love is
from those we share blood and history with. Mesmerised
I became like Arjuna upon seeing Krishna. Hopes start building.

Kewal Singh yields a cold big brown brick edifice with *aseesa*,

no flesh, no blood, yet a wish so grand you grant me.
I promise, tales I will share here of the hidden
women and their monikers from the kitchen. Rolling pins are waiting.

Ladas at weddings resurrect *Hojamaalo* to this day, connecting
grand dots past and present
I switched my old blue stamp book for one in burgundy, geared at the
sight of Sindh, at last. Everyone is rejoicing.

This *kamal jo gul* is ready for holy feet in the homeland,

among sandalwood, rose, and marigold scents, a grand longing built through each
bite fed to me by those who left,
and the lullabies they sang. Doors are opening.

77 grand moons later, the *paro* sings folk songs. Plain woven white flags I waive
over the homeland's planes. Ding dong ding from *Lal Sai's mandir* pulses in my
veins. Not that Hyderabad! The grand one in my Sindh awaits! *Surma* in my eyes.
Choorā on the wrists. The homeland is language, is feeling, is food I waited to
taste: soft syrupy-sweet *malpura* and sumptuous spoonfuls of *mithiyoon seyoon*
served on a plate. *Halva puri* takes the tiredness of generations away. *Thadal*
replenishes, keeps fatigue at bay. Smooth sanded *sangmarmar* furnishings in the
mansion warm my bare feet. *Ajraks* in the markets sparkling, I can hear vendors

selling *pallo* in the streets. *Qawwalis* at the mosques bring tears to my eyes, I
have come all this way by keeping my eyes on the prize. Beloved women in the
heavens send down showers of flowers. They accompany me to the villages,
to the 1914 Navalrai Market Clock Tower. A *qaflo* awaits me at the port of
Karachi, to help me transport stories of *nani*, *maasi*, *didi*, and *bhabhi*. This
daughter, nourished with narratives of Sindh like rain seeping through cracked
earth, is back for her grand ancestry from silk road times, no *mashkri*. Long
cycles of longing have come to an end. Stainless steel *thalis* make place for
chandi of back then.

With my head bowed, hands folded, heart calmed,
Hari Om from me in my home, to you in the grand heavens, *Baba*.

My letter to you ends in gratitude for standing by the well. Soon again, you
and I will be meeting.

Thunder

By Jude Hughes

You roared like thunder, once
 Shook the whole earth in your palms
 Even your waking murmurs rolled low along the globe
 Reverberated through me crushed my pulse
 Echoed through my ribs crackled down my spine
 I learned to long for the blue dark clouds
 That bruised summer skies, that coursed with
 Electric veins, that beat louder than my heart

Now the storm has spluttered out
 All I see are frail trees
 That lace the roadsides
 Like exposed ribs
 I remember gold
 Threaded through indigo

Stork

By Bill Adams

Your beak is dipped in blood,
 So bright against your white face,
 Your laundered apron

Starved and cold
 Wing tips black with soot
 Your legs run red.

Each spring you come back
 To roofs and meadows,
 Pretending to feed

Or pair up, posing,
 Head back, beak clattering,
 Enacting domesticity.

And we spin tales about you
 Bringing babies, supping
 With the fox. The truth

Is otherwise—you are witnesses,
 Stalking the charnel houses
 Of our worst occasions

Past bodies disassembled,
 Cities burned and broken,
 Rattling with small arms.

Absently, I scroll the news,
 My finger leaving
 A wet trail on the screen.

As it smears and clots, I sense
 Your purpose in returning here.
 The dark glass reflects

My own white face.
 I sweep again, desperate
 to wipe it clean.

Shooting

By Bill Adams

Shooting butts in silhouette
 Are tanks advancing
 In echelon to take the hill,
 Dark, malevolent.

Closer, they look dug in,
 Redoubts in defensive line,
 Intersecting fields of fire
 Making a killing field.

The slope is engineered
 For resupply: cartridges,
 Loaders, canapés,
 Champagne. I imagine

The whole hill bulging
 with wealth, the butts
 A line of wens swelling
 As the beaters advance.

Shots burst the silence
 As grouse panic, stream
 Shouting overhead, one
 By one. The guns swing,

Seek them, their wings
 Miss beats and they falter,
 Fall to earth
 In flailing parabolas.

Afterwards, after the jokes
 Congratulations, toasts,
 The mess is cleared away
 The gravel paths raked.

Tonight we find the hill empty,
 Flushing just one lone bird,
 Its cracked voice crying
 'Back. Back. Go back'.



Artwork by Nathan Ng

Old Man Rotter

By Aoife Maddock

OLD Man Rotter sat under his tree,
 With a book in his hand and his gun on his knee.
 The book was all scratchings and nothings of words
 And the gun missed its fire and felling of birds.
 Yet Old Man Rotter, heedless of longing,
 Smacked the trunk, hard, to start the birds and their singing.
 He execrated quiet where it ought not to be,
 And it was distinctly unwelcome, under his tree.

OLD Man Rotter, unwashed and uncombed,
 Cast eyes on the farmhouse, where his family homed.
 He thought of his wife, who made gravy too sweet,
 And thought of his daughter and her flittering feet.
 There was just one cat, who despised them so dearly,
 Once found on the washing line, hanged to death, very nearly,
 And Old Man Rotter, safe and sour in his nook,
 Considered a page from the old mange's book.

OLD Man Rotter kept his gun's chamber bare,
 And had done for years since he shot his best mare.
 It was a moment of fleeting, bleating disgrace,
 When he shot his first horse in its tawny brown face.
 Rage plunged deeper into a prolonged dismay,
 But Old Rotter's wife whisked the dead thing away.
 So efficient was she, knowing just what to do
 And returned that same evening with a pot of fine glue.

OLD Rotter's barn was held up with the stuff,
 On the doors and the beams, but it was hardly enough.
 For the barn was the man, all crumpled and little,
 No glue could sustain something so brittle.
 Another dull day, showing nothing of note,
 Rotter went to the barn with a rope round his throat.
 Slung over the beam, he was hoisted aloft
 Till the plank cracked in twain — damn wood was too soft.

OLD Rotter was a writer, now less so, more writer,
 And his forgone talent just tasted too bitter.
 Always the same, here, with the cows and their lowing,
 The hate of the cat, even the same wind was blowing.
 It tousled the leaves and harkened no change,
 The birds kept their chitter and nothing was strange.
 So Old Man Rotter sits under his tree,
 With a book in his hand, and his gun on his knee.

JOHN TREHERNE CREATIVE WRITING PRIZE WINNER, 2024

My Aunty Irene Said

By Sapphy Welch-Dunn

‘There’s nowt so queer as folk,’ my Aunty Irene said.
At times, I think she’s being deliberately obscure.
I wish I could understand her but she’s Yorkshire born and bred.

She had a spat with the neighbour—called him a cod head.
He threatened to bray her. Things kicked off when she swore.
There’s nowt so queer as folk. My Aunty Irene said,

when I was watching her Fanthorpe’s telly set,
‘You’d make a better window than you do a door.’
I wish I could understand her. But she’s Yorkshire born and bred:

her apple pie comes with cheese, and she swears by Jackson’s bread;
we eat our chips with spice on the Hessle foreshore.
There’s nowt so queer as folk. My Aunty Irene said,

when I begged her for some chuddy, ‘You’ll have Murray mints instead.’
She told me off for twagging—said that I was immature.
I wish I could understand her but she’s Yorkshire born and bred.

We went Town on Friday night... had one too many bevs.
She got barred from The Admiral. I said something I’d heard before:
‘There’s nowt so queer as folk.’ My Aunty Irene said,
‘I wish I could understand her but she’s Yorkshire born and bred.’

On Reflection

By Lola Pesskin

When Rosa is born, the skin of the place is clean—unbroken. The air ripples with possibility. Luminosity lays bare the uncurtained windows of her mother’s eyes. The cold bright light streams into her head, glancing off the whiteness of the walls. The tiles are slick and hard. But Rosa doesn’t know that yet, the world’s touch. She knows only its smell: sweet, numinous milk powder pressing in from everywhere. Only its voice: avian babbling, metal-porcelain ringing. *The clear vowels rise like balloons.*

Like a propensity for bad teeth or low blood pressure, she inherits a fantasy of disentangling mind from body. It whirs in the sinews of her muscles, twining ivy-like around her spine—waiting.

*

At sixteen, Rosa slams her hands onto the sink’s stark porcelain—the bathroom’s only surface not made of mirror. Her image streams out at every angle. Tying and re-tying coarse dark hair, each raw wall reflects her elbow’s sudden bend. In her own eyes, the image refracts further—passing through acid judgement like thick warping glass. But now she exhales—cold air that sets her teeth on edge—and peels herself away from the thousand mirror-selves. She pushes through the heavy, mirror-door and stands immobile, struck by the sight of her mother’s bottle-blond head, stranded at a waiting table—brightened only by two red shreds of paper napkin.

Unwatched, both woman and near-woman steel themselves, preparing to reapply the shiny smile that Christmas demands. Even when conducted from a cheap Chinese restaurant—chosen only for its proximity to the fading father dying in his own porcelain-white hospital room. Impatiently awaiting her daughter’s return, Rosa’s mother watches an absent-minded waitress abandon her green cracker-crown to the dust-bitten floor. She imagines standing to reclaim it, smoothing its crumpled skin. But her body is so heavy. And she would look so strange. And so the cracker-crown joins every other piece of her surroundings – the washed-out carpet, the cracked windowpane, the cold flicking light – strung together in a silent orchestra of loss.

Now Rosa's re-emergence fills colour into the quivering air. But her mother can only say—what took you so long?

*

In the heat of desire and willed recklessness, her hot hand grips his cold, and the touch barrier shatters. Rosa's eyes flick to his, and her mistake blares neon. At twenty, she spins away from her roommate's wordless, humiliating rejection and sinks down, gasping, in the anaesthetised silence of her low-lit room. She strains against the hazy blindness, wanting almost to pull a hot eye out and clean it, to force clarity.

Finally, sight emerges, and Rosa brings one hand close to her shattering gaze: chipped nails, electric-blue, and the flex of white bone bursting through skin—flushing firework pink. Turning the hand, she catches a glimpse of the fault lines, etched deep into her palm. She feels, for a moment, the fate that rests dormant and inexorable in her skin: all birth and love and loss and death—ivy spilling neon from every orifice.

She knows that she will continue to want him. More specifically, the imagined image of him that she has already committed to. For if a gold ring had clung to her finger, she would only have wanted to wrench it off. But achingly alone in this contaminated moment, her sole desire is for her hand – grasping, unclosable – to melt into his and form a space contained: the stirring, swelling heat, the white softness of someone else's sheets, return—like a heartbeat.

*

At thirty, Rosa stumbles upon a new vision. Her mother's eyes: the hearth of a gaping void in elm and black silk, a coffin laid bare. *Not young. Not old. But a viable, die-able age.* Rosa is now the only living person who can speak the language of her mother's body: developed for the articulation of helplessness, loneliness, regret. She remembers how each character was bathed in stomach acid before being sliced into her mother's arms – delicately, searingly. She remembers her mother's stomach – perpetually gnaw-empty – and her emotional core – ever adrift, exilic. And she recalls her own want—ever ravenous for the rosy-soft love her mother was too hungry to birth alive.

This is the problem with love. How to survive that perilous moment where inside morphs into outside, felt into spoken, separate into shared. Being in love, like being full, or pregnant, entails a terrifying over-stretching. How the

hell do other people manage the permeability of these borderlands, these edges like skin that – if stretched – threaten to collapse into bloody entropy?

Two pieces of instinctive, living knowledge drive Rosa out into a filthy unknown her mother could never enter: the body cannot perform as fleshy chalkboard for the totalitarian mind forever, and there is a fine line between pure and dead. Still blinded by the brightness of the world – the heat and texture of its tiles – she strips and bathes in new bodies of water: crystalline lakes fringed with forest, immense estuaries rushing white over smooth stone. She emerges ecstatic, re-embodied, self-baptised, screaming.

*

There is a quickening

that comes with fading light

and stretching shadows

teasing the tension

from their formless limbs

and running

crackling orange beauty

into dust

I hold the cooling light

in the hollows

of my eyes

feeling the sinking

change its mind.

Arbre Abattoir

By Luke Elliott

you reach out above your gnarled body
 stretching for the light for radiant energy
 i know you're shy
 reaching for that connection just stopping short

did we teach you that?

to make if halfway drawing tributaries in the sky
 such delicate disposition you funny old thing
 you signal to your neighbours underground
 sharing data
 a dense network of connectivity
 protection
 Warnings

did we teach you that?

learning of the uses of your siblings across the water
 the dark bodies hanging amongst the spanish moss
 did you recoil feeling them pull on your limbs
 did your branches creak as your siblings snapped
 and what of your silk cotton confidants
 did you sense when the stolen peoples lost their minds
 forced to walk around your great trunk so great they named the crossroads after you
 half way tree
 did your leaves feel the weight of their memories trapped amongst the white
 how could you bare it being witness to all this violence
 did your middle cave in just enough for an owl to take roost
 when you heard we'd named a gallows after you on Oxford street
 the tyburn tree

how could you stand it the weight of women
 flames binding your bodies
 do you scream with her

did you scream when your mangrove mothers were replaced
 hotel foundations clogging root shafts
 did you scream when your sycamore son was struck down
 nothing more than an empty space in a wall
 did you scream when your olive uncles were torched with their farmers
 charred sentinels caretaking holy ground

scream out all the oxygen you have
 let it blur our eyes and hearing
 let it burn our lungs
 scream

let us teach you that.

Roots

By Sophie Davies

The tendrils wrapped around the old man's elbow like his wife's fingers used to do, caressing his skin, but still allowing his arm to work. His fingers were stiff on the pen, but he kept writing, scratching out marks on the paper to immortalise his story in something other than his mortal form, which was slowly being encased by the tendrils of weeds.

The vines were growing tighter now. Soon, he wouldn't be able to move at all.

A light breeze from the open window drifted across the desk, stirring the sheets of paper and rustling through the tendrils wrapped around the old man's body.

The vines had started at his feet, growing up around his ankles just as he'd finished writing about his mother. They had reached his knees when he wrote the final words about his father's passing, how that giant of a man had disappeared in a whisper of a breath, finally giving the old man an understanding of what death might look like when it came.

The weeds had reached his chest by the time he finished the section on his daughters and they wrapped around his shoulders like a cocoon as he detailed the births of his grandchildren, the rays of light they had brought into his darkening world.

If only he could remember their birthdays.

Then, as he began to write the final section, the one laying out his own life, the weeds had grown over his ears.

He found he could no longer remember the house he had grown up in. Whether the memory had been lost to the eaves of time or fuelled the growth of the vines, he didn't know. Either way, the light in his mind was dimming.

He knew the weeds were coming for his eyes next; he knew that once his vision went the memories would fade even faster. So, he kept writing, marking the paper in a last, desperate effort to leave more than a body when the vines stopped his heart.

He wrote about his childhood, as much as he could remember, and then moved on to his teenage years. The vines were at his wrists now.

The old man's grip on his pen faltered and he was forced to stop. If he'd still been able to hear, he imagined the silence would be deafening, filled as it had been by the scratching of his pen.

What happened next?

He could remember the day he'd met his wife. She had been standing in the chocolate aisle of the corner shop, just down the end of the road by his flat. The day had been warm but the fan in the shop had been blowing cool air through the shelves, setting his wife's curls adrift. She'd turned to him with those big blue eyes and asked him what flavour she should buy her mother as a gift.

He had told her to buy cherry chocolate. That, he remembered. He'd always loved cherry chocolate. She had laughed as though that was absurd and asked him who on earth ate cherry chocolate. Still, she bought it.

What happened next?

A single tendril brushed up against his forehead, seeking something that the old man didn't want to give. How long had he been sat here? It could have been days, it could have been weeks. It might even have been months. Time stood still by this window, and the old man knew the vines wouldn't have let him move, even if he wanted to.

When they had started to grow, he had tried to stand, to get away from them before they caught him, but he'd fallen instead. There on the ground next to the desk where he'd written the stories that had made him famous, he had decided to write one final story. One final recounting of the only narrative that had ever mattered to him, told by the only narrator any writer could ever wholeheartedly believe.

But he was starting to forget.

The weeds fell over his eyes, a lattice shape that obscured his vision, and suddenly he could barely see the pages in front of him. The visions of moments from his past shut off like the curtain coming down on a failed production and the man was left with nothing but his pen, his hands and his determination to finish this story.

The gaps were getting bigger now. He couldn't remember whether he'd rowed or run in college, whether he'd studied geography or politics.

The pen scratched across the paper, digging rivulets in the page as deep as the lines in his face. A small tear escaped from the corner of the old man's eye but before it could reach his cheek, it was swallowed up by the vines which thickened and stretched until his vision went completely black. No longer could he see the shapes of white pages lingering through the lattice. All that remained was shadow.

But still the old man wrote.

He wrote about his wife whose face he could barely remember. He cursed the fact that she'd gone before him, that she wasn't here to soothe his ailing mind, to calm his temper and to guide his hands when he could barely feel them.

Tears continued to stream down the old man's cheeks, feeding the weeds. They scabbled across his face, growing towards his hands even faster as he pressed the pen into the page like his life depended on it. Because in a way, it did.

He skated over his wife's death and the gaping wound it had opened in his soul and suddenly, he reached the point where the vines began to grow. When he began to forget.

The missing pieces tore gaping holes in the canvas of his life and the old man couldn't write fast enough to patch them up. The vine twisted along his wrist and suddenly it was in between his fingers, diving towards the page, towards the last precious seconds he had.

His hand seized.

Where was he?

Darkness filled his vision and the pen dropped from the old man's fingers, rolling off the side of the desk and coming to rest against a crack in the floorboard.

A breeze blew through the window, rustling the leaves on the vines and disturbing the papers on the old man's desk. The final sheet with a half-finished sentence scrawled atop it fluttered to the floor, settling amongst the dust.



Photograph by Libby Harris

Exposure

By Joe Stell

Vivid is the whirring,
grinding, tapping,
all lies before me,
you wave me off

In the pounding, rushing details
loosening to wisps,
to fleeting grasps
as the mire swells

The fall breaks,
with buckling silence
through bright
leeching memory

Dismayed clouds
reveal black negatives
they scorn
with dissonant bells,
tolling my disgrace.

Nighttime

By Aoife Maddock

little green light in a golden slum-
ber that shakes your dexie and your thumb
but keeps them up heads down
warden keep me low keep me sound-
ing satellites to the home and the stead-
fast and missing the spotted beast in my bed
framed in new shoots of fresh cut red hair
ring ring the above number voices stripped bare
foot below ankle but not above ground
dead on my feet heads and tailsing one pound
a' sugar from the neighbours and on the sofa i sat
her days were so different but i don't care about that.

Dilemma

By Louis Gentle

Achilles son of Peleus or bathing snow monkey
 My mother says monkey but she says the other
 I went to bed thmonkey and woke up the other
 An' shotter five times
 An' now I sleep easy.

The papers will tell it
 They'll tell it.

I don't think he sleeps
 But now I know why he's in the bath so long.
 Needs a new job,
 Will get him some paints instead.

Writer's block

By Senya Kang

The constant flickering taunts me,
 as I try to push past the wall, it issues a plea,
 that my old habits will no longer do the trick,
 I come to accept that I have laid each brick,
 As the deadline draws closer and the clock ticks by,
 There's a glimmer of faith in what may come to fruition,
 a lingering hope that words will flow,
 Yet, my naïve trust in starting afresh,
 has entangled me in this mess,
 Overwhelmed I begin to spiral,
 cursing seems the only logical outburst of such stress,
 For frustration alone can't encompass my reaction,
 nor conveniently can my brain find a better distraction,
 Firmly cemented in this delusional stage,
 I stare blankly into the abyss of the almost bare page,
 tormented by the flickering cursor taking centre stage,
 serving as a reminder or rather a curse,
 after all the clue is in the name...

Samian Difference

By Esmé Goodson

The objects described in this story are fictional, any similarity to real objects is merely coincidental.

My first memories were a blur—quite literally. There was a lot of spinning. The world flickered around me, splintered, my consciousness emerging from the mould which enveloped me, shaped me. I still felt a bit dizzy after the spinning had stopped. It took a moment for my mind to still. My mould was taken from me, revealing the beautiful shapes adorning my surface: a meadow of flowers, some u-shaped loops hanging from my rim, a mighty imprint of Hercules standing strong, club cupped in the sphere of his fist, dogs upon dogs lapped around his feet. Then I was spinning again, a plain rim crown added atop my head, and then a rounded foot stamped with my maker's name. I was dipped in some viscous liquid. My surface now glistening, slippery and slick, I sat contemplative, left to dry until parched like old bone. I was moved into an arched structure; it started to become incredibly hot. The heat beat into my leathery dried surface, any remaining moisture sweating away from my clay frame. It wasn't an unpleasant experience as such, a little bit like the warm room in a bath house, perhaps. When I emerged from the searing cavern, I was plonked beside another pot, looking a lot like me. I noticed that it shared my muscular, handsome Hercules stamp, shining in resplendent orange.

'You 'ave ze same 'Ercules stamp as me! We must be twins!' I called.

'Eez not just me, you imbecile,' replied the other pot, 'we all look like zis! We are from ze same mould!'

That was when I noticed the others: rows upon rows upon rows of shiny russet bowls. The same splattering of flowers, same loops, same Hercules, same dogs, same incisions, same stamps... We were the same pots. If I had a heart, in that moment, it would have sunk. Just another pot, part of a batch... eugh.

I sat around in that workshop for who knows how long, getting to know Jean-Pierre. That's what I called my neighbouring pot. He was not the most pleasant of company, as far as pots go. We didn't have much to talk about, just the new pottery being made, many looking like us... Strangely, this didn't

seem to bother him. Yet his trivial chatter was better than wallowing in the idle mindlessness of that room. This was the extent of my world, for a while.

Then, all of a sudden, it wasn't. Boxes were laid out and we were being packed into them.

'What eez 'appening!?' I cried as Jean-Pierre was lifted from beside me.

'We're being shipped away!' Jean-Pierre's muffled reply emerged from within the box, 'We're off to Britannia!' Then I was raised aloft in the sturdy hands of my potter and gently plonked into the box beside Jean-Pierre. I had really hoped I wouldn't be travelling with him...

The journey jolted us, dashing our frames against tough walls. We were thrust up and down, side to side. Some of my siblings were even fractured! It was as if we were sailors, propelled across our ship by the rolling of snarling waves.

Despite my best wishes, Jean-Pierre was there throughout. Now he sat adjacent to me as I was positioned in a market stall. The stall was propped up in an open space. Though, it wasn't really very open. More humans encircled us, flittering about like moths lured to a cluster of terracotta lamps. These humans were different shapes and sizes and painted with an array of colours. No two looked the same... A pang of jealousy tingled through my clay as if a fly crawled across my non-existent skin...

It wasn't long before a nice family bought me. I cannot deny that I am a very beautiful pot. So beautiful, in fact, that they bought another just like me! And just when I thought I might be rid of Jean-Pierre! We were usually kept side by side on a shelf in the family home. I watched the family getting into all sorts of antics, mainly the children. I relished their squeals of excitement, the whizz of life that egged them on. During grand feasts, I was the heart of the family. Laid in the centre of the table, garlanded with their nourishment, I observed their babbling chatter and played catalyst to their pleasure. What fun! But this wasn't a common occurrence, sadly. Jean-Pierre and I were not used as much as the plainer pots, who accompanied us. Whenever we were used, mostly, we took care of their food.

'Oi, Jean-Pierre! What are you 'olding today?'

'Only barley, Jean-Claude.' (as I like to think I am called.)

'Aha! I have ze lentils today! That eez much more special zan barley!'

‘But you said the opposite only a few weeks ago!’

‘Nonsense Jean-Pierre! I must ‘ave been ‘aving an off day!’

Many years passed like this. I would have been content, but our family never seemed to be able to distinguish between us... One day, everything changed. One of the smaller people was carrying Jean-Pierre. I think she was going to stuff him with something edible for their meal. CRASH! My attention was grabbed by the abominable sound. There, on the floor, lay Jean-Pierre. Or at least, most of him. Lobsided he lay, a triangular-shaped wound gaping at his side. In the far corner of the room lurked an orange pot sherd, puckered with petals and a hand of Hercules. Cries, calls, more humans came, scooping Jean-Pierre away...

It was a little lonely without Jean-Pierre, on that shelf. The other pottery didn’t seem to want to talk much to me.

But he wasn’t gone for long. A few days later, he was sitting once more beside me. Whole again. But something was different. A fine crack now scarred his once smooth sides. Claspings the sherd in place were two bars of lead, glinting dully in the sunlight, a pair of black stars. It gave him a bit of an edge. It made him look *Unique*. I really wish that I was the one who had been dropped.

‘Jean-Pierre! I like ze new style you are sporting! Say, where do you think I could get myself something similar?’

Jean-Pierre grunted, ‘Jean-Claude, you silly goose, you don’t want to be broken! Eez very painful! My clay still stings!’

‘But Jean-Pierre, you are très unique now!’ I insisted, yet Jean-Pierre ignored me. He did not know how lucky he was. You might be thinking, that now *I* was unique, what with Jean-Pierre having his little makeover. But you would be wrong, you would be forgetting all the other Jean-Michels and Jean-Lucs out there... Looking just like me.

In the days and months and years that followed, I really hoped that I could be dropped too. Maybe I would be given some snazzy metal bars like Jean-Pierre. Then I could be unique! I hoped they would give me some nice shiny gold ones...

‘Little Paula! Little Paulus!’ I would call as the deadly juveniles darted by, ‘Please take me with you on your whizzing adventures!’

‘Please toss me Little Paulus! I want to play discus! Let me flyyyyy!!!’

‘Little Paula! Please drop me! I want to try diving!’

But they never listened to me, despite my pleading and my begging and my praying...

One day, Little Paula stopped zooming about with Little Paulus. She lay very still, in another room.

‘She eez broken,’ Jean-Pierre told me.

‘Maybe they need more lead to fix ‘er, she’s much bigger than you Jean-Pierre!’

‘She eez not made out of clay, Jean-Claude, they might not be using lead.’

‘Maybe she will get some nice shiny silver bars... I would quite like some nice shiny silver bars myself...’

But Little Paula was not given any nice shiny silver bars. Instead they burnt her! It didn’t really seem to fix her though, she just became a pile of ash! They set her remains inside a large peculiar pot, the urn. Then they decided to bury this new pot—I didn’t quite see how this helped matters. But for some reason, they decided to bury me too!

‘I’m not broken!’ I tried to tell them as they placed me in the cold damp dirt beside some other pottery, wheat cradled within me. I continued calling even as the soil was piled upon me, shutting away the light of the sun until darkness swallowed my surroundings. For the next few millennia or so, the buzz of silence accompanied me. The other pottery was not much company—I was even beginning to miss Jean-Pierre. Eventually, I realised that I had been chosen for a higher purpose. It was me alone who had been chosen to accompany Little Paula on her journey to the afterlife. I like to think that I knew a little bit about accompanying souls to the underworld. After all, Hercules had once done the same, and I had a picture of him imprinted upon my chest! The wheat within my belly would nourish the little human on her journey. My service was one of the greatest importance.

I sat sentinel, proud of my duty. Eventually I stopped missing Jean-Pierre. I could hardly remember the sound of his haughty voice, the gleam of his lead, his dull orange sheen. The family were thin specks in my memory, drifting far like the seeds of a dandelion clock, each day further and further away. The

only image I knew of Little Paula was the long, foreboding urn, a monument towering above us. Our purpose in death.

Suddenly, light pierced my brown night sky, as if the sun had jumped into the sky, forgetting about the dawn. Was this the afterlife? Had we finally made it? I was scraped with something sharp and shiny, snipping one of my lovely flowers. I was about to yell some expletive I shall not repeat here, when I was lifted, away from my urn, away from my comrades... Some strange humans in unusual cloth began ooh-ing and aah-ing over me. Were they thanking me for protecting Little Paula? It was nice to be appreciated. They passed me around one another, jabbering with glee! My spirit was dampened when the other pots were removed from the grave, the same ooh-ing and aah-ing proceeding. It was as if I was back in my workshop, a batch piece once more. Even though we looked nothing alike, they were treating us as if we all sported nice shiny golden bars... It was then that I noticed we were in a rectangular pit, encrusted within a mud-caked field, a scattering of trees lining the landscape. If some of the particularly tall trees were smaller then it would look like we were back in the same flourishing field where Little Paula had been buried... Near our family villa... Disappointment clutched me once more: I had failed in my duty. We were not in the afterlife, but in the world of the living! This outrageous race of graverobbing humans had hindered my mission! How dare they!

I was then given a bath. The cool water was a bit of a shock, I must have been in the cold room of the bath house! But it felt good, cold but good. With a small brush, soil was scraped from between my flower petals and u-shaped loops. Hercules and his dogs were looking shinier than ever! It was as if I was made anew! (If not for the petite soot patch staining my side.) Once dry, a thin ebony stick added strange markings to the sole of my foot. The ink inscription seeped into me, bringing a brief joy! Finally, I could be different from all the other Jean-Michels and Jean-Lucs out there!

Then came a few bumpy journeys, which reminded me of my initial voyage to the land of Britannia. Thankfully, this time there was no breakage, I had been wrapped in some strange bubbly material. Then I sat in a glass cabinet. Surrounding me were many other bowls, orange with beautiful impressions. Many just like me. Each had their own inscription at their base... Just like me... One of the humans gave us all brief labels. I tried to tell her my life story, as I have told you! That my name was Jean-Claude... But she did not listen. Below me, the words etched were: *Samian Bowl. c.100-200AD.*

'ey!' I called, 'I was not born in 100AD! I am not zat old! Just look at my youthful face!' But the human did not seem to recognise how youthful I was.

Wallowing in that glass cabinet, many humans passed by, doing more of their ooh-ing and aah-ing. Nestled beside all this other pottery, I was left to ponder. None of these guys were from my workshop, at least none whom I recognised. I was one of the few whole bowls. There were some goblets, some plates. Many were only sherds. We all had our own patterns, there were a few others with flowers or a Hercules, or even some dogs. Pretty much all of us were laced with u-shaped loops. Though some of my new ceramic friends had stiff soldiers still with spears, others donned dainty legged deer, others sprightly cockerels, one even displayed a shining goddess! One or two had lead bars, just like Jean-Pierre... (Was that his shoulder?) Many were simply chipped. One other shared a patch of soot, just like me... Although we were all the same, we were unique. We were different. Our long lives, our duties, our trials... They had shaped us into the pots we were today. All this time... I had wanted to be special... It was then that I understood: I had always been unique.

Let The Green Grass Fool You

By Libby Harris

Networks of mycelium silence
through which light reddens,
maddens between one fallen
giant and another, lying
missionary in the real forest,
which is a well of deep time
between the outer edges of
the trails –

I wade into a clover patch
and feel the reproach, not
smiting but soothing.

They will let me stray over
dusty edges to view – what?

The softened undercarriages
of the fallen,

roots creaking open for
ferns and white flowers.

Well, like draws to like –

how it would feel to be loved by you, here
where the fallen trees lie in such a way

that I believe all of that business

was over long before now,

all of the swaying and

falling and colliding – how

we might lie as the redwoods,

loving silently from every fibre,

drinking at our angle of repose.

I think he was dead before that

By Louis Gentle

Poor James
turned his hairs
limbs
blood and ten fingers
into the sound the fridge makes

a hum

and you won't find his name anywhere
no school desk
but the headstone and here.

Day before

he took a thin slice of cake and

kissed her quick on the cheek at the end of the night

and both went home sad

but glad for the pat on head,

glad shadows of shades

Who laughed deep belly laughs when he passed

Staring at the sky

By Okori

Imagine a story about a man. This man has a life, for all intents and purposes, a good one. He goes to work, he mingles with people he considers friends, he even has a partner he considers good, which all seemed fine. Until one day, he ventured outside and saw the sky.

He didn't just go outside, for he often went on walks. No, this time he ventured off the beaten path he always walked and ended up in a space completely new to him. He ended up in a place that he'd seen from afar and assumed that he knew but, once there, he realised that he didn't quite know what or even where it was. In this fine place, he saw the sky and, not only that, the sky saw him.

After looking into each other's eyes for quite some time, the man got up and walked back. Strangely, he hesitated. This was the first of many strange things to come, strange because the man had never hesitated on his way back before. You see, he always went back to what he knew, and when he went, he went promptly! But this time, he found himself procrastinating and even getting 'lost'. Eventually, the man was back outside a familiar place—home.

He walks into his lovely home, hugs his lovely kids - a handsome young boy and a heavenly young girl - then kisses his wonderful wife on the cheek and says, 'Honey, I am home.' Great, grand? or maybe gruesome and grotesque? The man, for the first time, was not sure.

His wife then asks him, 'Honey, what's wrong?'

The man looked up and said, as he saw, 'Nothing, nothing at all.'

The next day, the man went to work. His work was a wonderful place, with lots of glass, lots of light, and no windows on the ceiling. He walks in, and his boss greets him gratuitously. To the man's surprise, his latest work on the company's most important project was a successful endeavour and just made the company a lot of money - for that, his boss was ever so grateful - and so he called the man into his office.

In his office, sat behind this magnanimous mahogany mound of a desk, he asked the man to sit. The man sat. The boss told the man that he

was getting a bonus. The man said thank you. Then he said, 'You know, I was wondering about when I can get a promotion to fill that senior position which has been vacant for a while now?' His boss smiled, then frowned, then seemed to occupy a superimposed space between both smiling and frowning - a pleasantly foreboding expression, terrifically terrifying. The man was unmoved.

'The position was filled today,' said his boss. 'We brought in someone externally. We think that you do a great job where you are, that role would not be fun for you; there is too much paperwork - we want you here!' The man heard him, as he had heard him many times before, but this time, he felt what felt like sunlight on his forehead.

'That's just how I look at it, how we all do. You work this role like nobody else does, you are the best at it, you were made for it—I'm telling you!'

'That's how we see it, but what about you, what do you see?'

The man looked up and said, as he saw, 'a ceiling.'

It was Friday, one week to the day which the man had ventured off his beaten path. Every day since had been strange to him. He felt like something, no, almost *everything* was missing. In fact, that it was not just missing, but that it was being *kept* from him. The man felt like someone, something, or some *things* had erected a barrier between him and something else, something his own, something his right, something he is.

He was at the office, again. Only this time, he was not in the office, he was on top of it. He had walked his way to the roof, the other side of the ceiling. He had to. Every time the man looked up and saw his ceiling, *no their* ceiling, he felt wronged, wrought with rage, certainly wanting rebellion—which was odd, as he was typically okay with everything.

The man looked out towards the horizon. He was standing as close as he could stand to the edge. Yet the sky still felt so far away. Vexed that his view was blocked by the city-scape, he heard the door behind him fly open. In came the man's wonderful wife and his boss, their hair and clothes much scruffier than usual.

The man could have wondered why the both of them were here, at this time, together, when his wife was supposed to be at Flexi-Fridays for after-work yoga, but he didn't. They seemed to be saying something to him; he couldn't quite tell. It's not that he couldn't hear them, just that he wasn't listening. The

man was focused on something else. His wife asked him to come back down because it's 'dangerous up there'. His boss urged him to 'come down, where it's safe and you can't fall.' At that point, the man smiled and looked as if he had finally come to his senses.

Just then, the man remembered what he did when he got to that pleasant place off the beaten path, before he locked eyes with the sky and the sky locked eyes with him—he spread his arms and fell flat on his back. So, without a moment's notice, the man did just that.

On top of his office, at the edge of the building, facing the door where his wonderful wife and boss were standing, shouting, and flailing their own arms, the man spread his and fell back. The man saw it again, his old new friend the sky. This time his friend brought a gift—a strong breeze, a bigger breeze than he ever felt before. The man noted that it looked like he was getting further away from his friend the sky, even though it felt like he was getting closer.

At this point, he heard his wife and boss yell, 'What are you doing!?'

The man looked on and said, as he sa-

Blue Iris

By Sarah Kennedy

I walk toward you, naked
in the dawn. Blue iris,
Laurel, linnea.
Deep is the light that shutters
Behind your eyes.
Eucalypt shadows
Unfurl against my skin,
Soft as mountain mist.

And then are gone.

And then are gone.

north star

You are my best
 Friend, but so much
 To hold while we
 Swim through space,
 You won't let me sink
 Our bodies together,
 Forever. I can settle for
 A toast! to the supernova,
 Tell me something about
 Imagining eternity
 You're shivering, you say
 You want to go home, and I'm
 Fighting a million words,
 See you soon, I say, when we know that
 I might not see you again.

By Aoife Maddock

aeroplane

Friend, a lonely
 Time is cast upon me,
 Watch the setting suns
 Like dying boats.
 One single tooth into
 Meaty inky black,
 A midnight meal and
 Racing you to the shore.
 Posterity, it feels like such a joke,
 All made of rusted metal.
 It's too damn cold up here,
 Trying to act like my teeth aren't
 Clattering horseshoes in my mouth.
 Promises only last as long as I live.
 So long, I say, as I dream of flight.



Photograph by Tomos Davies

Contributors

Tomos Davies is a 3rd year HML student, currently on year abroad in Lima, Peru. Raised in inner-city Nottingham, his family recently relocated to the seaside town of Bangor, North Wales. Having built a portfolio of photography largely centred on portraiture, he now experiments with 35mm film, documenting his travels through this analogue medium. He has had the opportunity to capture numerous high-profile subjects, and his work has been featured in outlets such as The Guardian.

Ed Campbell is a first-year undergraduate studying English. With a particular passion for theatre, he enjoys acting, directing and writing for the stage. However, he occasionally ventures into writing prose fiction, particularly short stories, when feeling inspired.

Bill Adams retired from his fellowship in Geography at Downing in 2020. His academic research has mostly addressed questions of the environmental impacts of development and the social dimensions of nature conservation. He started writing poetry during my PhD in Nigeria, and it has been a stop-go project ever since. He finds inspiration in the natural world, particularly in the sensation that when you look closely at more-than-human others, you sense them looking straight back.

Asha Sykes is a third-year undergraduate studying the English Tripos. Her work is always in conversation with water, trying to read its rhythmical spirals, swells and hollows. Last year she was awarded the Gladstone Memorial Trust Fund and travelled to Morocco for a surf trip with her brother Anto. Her current inspirations include Alice Oswald, William Finnegan, and Caitly Simmers.

Sarah Kennedy is a UK-based writer, critic, and academic. Her work is grounded in the deep magics of ecological process, in myth, metaphor, and metamorphosis. Her poetry and fiction are immersed in the landscapes of her native Australia, Dartmoor, and the North Downs in Kent. She teaches at Downing College, Cambridge.

Dayi Feng is in the first year of her MSt in Creative Writing. She is trying to write as experimentally as possible, which means sealing away everything she has written before coming to Downing and completely reconsidering her own relationship to writing. She is constantly discovering new things through very old hobbies and is slowly working towards becoming a hyperpolyglot.

Libby Harris is a finalist reading English. Some say she is destined to be a New York Times Food writer. (This may have more to do with the fact that she refers to coriander as cilantro than her cooking or, indeed, writing abilities.) Her work has been published in The Mays, Cambridge Review of Books, and various other literary magazines.

Daniel Warnes is a final year PhD student, researching climate change engineering. This is his first submission anywhere, at least since his entry to the Under 9s Christmas themed colouring competition. He is heavily influenced by the Swiss artist, Cuno Amiet, and his use of texture in his backdrops. His lone skier in *Schneelandschaft* invokes in him the identical feeling to swimming at Jesus Green Lido. Peaceful, amongst nature, active, alone.

Charlotte Payne is a second-year undergraduate English student. She is very fortunate to have access to the Gurning archives, which she has collected over time with the help of Gurning's daughter Rosanna and hopes to edit and publish more poems. She also tries to write her own poetry and prose whenever she finds the time or energy to do so.

Joe Stell is a third-year Chemical Engineering undergraduate student, with an occasional interest in creative writing, but more often found rowing or underground. His experience in creative writing is limited, with it mostly providing an emotional outlet, and so he is guided entirely by introspection and instinct, without knowledge of what makes interesting and intelligent writing.

Luke Elliott is a British-Jamaican actor, writer, and most importantly, a Beyoncé fan. His children's picture book *Lines, Lines, Lines!* (Formy Books) was published in 2021. His short story *Don't Go Under the Coconut Tree*, and poem *Rewilding*, were both published by PREE Lit in 2023. His short play *The Right One* was performed at the Lowry (2023), and his short audio play *OmniScript* was released in 2024. He is currently working on an MSt in Creative Writing.

Lily Grisafi is pursuing an MSt in Creative Writing. Her dissertation will be longform fiction. Both her poetry and fiction address pregnancy and motherhood, control and surrender. Her writing is devotional and inherently political. Lily is from the mountains of Colorado, where she studied filmmaking, acting, and geology. She is a practicing attorney in New York City and a published legal scholar. Her legal articles regard Indigenous Peoples rights and environment justice.

Tracy Agidi was a third-year undergraduate student reading English last year.

Louis Gentle is a first-year English Tripos student. He has always been an amateur artist but is also now making an attempt at poetry for the first time. He takes inspiration from friends, family, and his two dogs at home.

Tharini Ravindra Kumar is a third-year PhD student in Genetics, studying fruit flies to uncover the molecular mechanisms that protect their germline. Born and raised just outside of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, she grew up speaking a uniquely localised form of English that blends multiple languages and dialects into a single sentence. Influenced by this linguistic fluidity and the works of Claire Keegan, Intan Paramaditha, and Olga Tokarczuk, her writing explores themes of memory, unspoken emotions, and the complexities of human relationships. Most of her writing is done whilst she procrastinates her work, but she wouldn't have it any other way.

Yuting Shang is a third-year undergraduate student studying Computer Science. Growing up between cultures, she enjoys exploring themes of identity, belonging, and the feeling of being caught between worlds, using words to express the complexities of home and self. When not writing, she can be found coding, running, or doom scrolling!

Raksha Daryanani Thani is an MSt Creative Writing student at Cambridge. She started out as a ghostwriter and editor for entrepreneurs. Her non-fiction and poetry on culture, belonging, language, and relationships are influenced by her experiences as a polyglot and member of Sindhi diaspora. She performs at open mic nights and has been a LinkedIn wordsmith since 2020. Raksha is working on a memoir to ensure her legacy is preserved beyond 'that post I wrote last week.'

Lauren Herd is a third-year Lawyer at Downing College, having written for the 2024 edition of The Leaves and various other College zines. She much prefers reading than writing poetry due to often needing significant inspiration to write. While typically writing in free verse, Lauren often writes songs that more rigorously follow a rhyme scheme and meter. Lauren mostly gets her inspiration (for both poetry and songwriting) from songwriters like Joni Mitchell, Lizzy McAlpine and Katie Gregson-Macleod.

Frankie Ratcliffe is second-year undergraduate English student. She writes sporadically depending on whether it's her fixation at that period of time and how much free time she has. She does, however, write a diary and copious amounts of lists and timetables. She is influenced by a lot by writers such as Sontag and Maggie Nelson, as they fuse memoir and criticism and journalism. She tries to be funny in a crude and dry manner that she thinks is influenced by my reading of authors such as Iain Banks. She seems to be vaguely self-obsessed in her writing, but this is one of her more strictly prose pieces only vaguely based on my relationship with my brother and my own childhood.

Ivan Ampiah is a second-year undergraduate studying HSPS and occasional hobby-poet. His philosophy for writing poetry is the opportunity to make the mundane lyrical, especially as a therapeutic creative output. Literary influences include Nella Larsen, Theresa Lola and Philip Larkin. When he's not scribbling down a few lines, he can reliably be found tinkering about with a script, directing a show or finding some way to link every other activity to my favourite play (Downing May Ball theme he's looking at you).

Laura Collins is a writer, artist and mental health activist who is currently an MPhil student reading Theoretical and Applied Linguistics at the University of Cambridge.

Eduardo Gracias Baptista is a postgraduate Law student, originally from Portugal. Drawing inspiration from the Romantic and Symbolist literary movements, he is fascinated with traditional forms of poetry and musicality in writing. His work explores the notion of saudade, the self, and the natural world. In 2021 and 2022, Eduardo was amongst the winners of the Printemps des Poètes-Luxembourg poetry contest. In his poem *The Lost December Sun*, Eduardo presents a rendition of the rondel, a delicious French poetic form.

Joe Davies a second-year lawyer. He has been forced to write pretty much daily for the last four years – three essay subjects at A level will do that to you – so taking time to write about things he really wants to write about is a good way to stay sane through it all. He loved writing this piece, and hopes you love reading it!

Suzannah Shimwell has a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Leicester. She writes poetry about the quotidian and cites her influences as Stevie Smith, Frank O'Hara and William Carlos Williams. She has been published in *The New Luciad*, *Agenda Broadsheet*, *Cake*, *From The Lighthouse*, *Gold Dust* and *The Peeking Cat*. Originally a teacher she currently works at Downing College in an administration role.

Saphy Welch-Dunn is a second-year undergraduate English student, thrilled to be editing for *The Leaves* and *Gender Agenda*. This term, her work has been published in *The Leaves*, *Puppet Theatre* and *The Gender Agenda Zine*. She is drawn to memoir (Jeanette Winterson's and Lemn Sissay's are among her favourites), and the spoken word (Benjamin Zephaniah and John Cooper Clarke are who she picks up to feel inspired). When not in Cambridge, she can be found performing poetry in the pubs and music clubs of Humberside.

Uko Rasmus Tiidemann is from Estonia. They write poetry so that others can recognise themselves in the verses. They like to do short poems, that may have a twist. They are doing a master's in Industrial Systems.

Liv Greenhalgh is a second-year English Tripos student, who should probably write more.

Theo Flavin is a first-year English student. Although he has written before – he mostly messes around with prose and poetry – this is the first time that he has sent his work to a publication. If he had to cite some of my influences, he would probably say Samuel Beckett and Animal Collective; at least, they have made him think: 'Wow, I'd love to do stuff like that.'

Weik Heng is a second-year Natural Scientist. He can be found in the kitchen of his flat or wandering the city with a shark plushie in hand.

Okori is a writer and thinker exploring intersections of philosophy, technology, and society. Overcoming a childhood speech impediment, they developed a deep love for language, leading to award-winning work in film, art, and tech. Their work has been featured on Apple TV, the BBC, and published by The Common Sense Network. Through essays, fiction, and poetry – shared on their Substack *Think Again* – Okori examines digital culture, meaning-making, and the human experience in an online world. Okori is a postgraduate Creative Writing student.

Praise Ariyo of Co-op Academy Grange won the 2024 First Story Festival Writing Award with her response to Quentin Blake's image, written when Praise was fourteen.

Jude Hughes is a second-year undergraduate studying English, who usually writes scripts instead of poetry.

Sophia Bumsteinaite is a second-year Land Economy student. She loves exploring poetry in different languages and seeing how it changes in translation. She is especially drawn to the Romantic era and has enjoyed reading Eichendorff, Pushkin, and Tyutchev. Writing allows her to play with language and style, and she loves how poetry connects different cultural experiences in a unique way.

Nathan Ng is a third-year undergraduate Neurobiology student with a deep love for traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy. His artistic journey has led him to exhibit works in Hong Kong galleries, where he explores the harmony between nature, culture, and expression. Influenced by classical techniques and contemporary interpretations, he finds joy in the meditative process of brushwork. Through his art, he seeks to capture fleeting moments with elegance and precision.

Aoife Maddock grew up in Wales and is primarily concerned with the offbeat, strange and grotesque. She spends a lot of her time attempting to string words together in a way that delights and disgusts. She is in her third and final year of studying English at university and is only mildly distraught at the thought of figuring out what comes next.

Lola Pesskin is a first-year undergraduate studying English. She usually writes songs rather than poems, but for The Leaves has made an exception.

Senya Kang is a second-year History student who has a background in the arts and theatre. Though she mostly directs and performs, she rarely puts pen to paper for artistic reasons. This short piece was created during a period of writer's block and frustration. She found the experience quite cathartic, especially as someone who often struggles with being her own worst critic.

Esmé Goodson is a fourth-year Classics student whose studies occasionally influence her creative work. When she is not pottering about with her subject, Esmé enjoys working on her fantasy novel to escape the mundane of the everyday. Her work has been published previously in the 2024 edition of The Leaves.



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