

Christmas Bizarre

and other stories

*Spellbinding short fiction
and poetry from
The Anansi Archive Vol.I*



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Foreword

Welcome to the first volume of stories and verse from The Anansi Archive. This collection represents more than the sum of its parts. It is collectively a labour of love - sometimes more labour than love. But the pain of giving birth can sometimes be measured by the joy it brings, one embellished with pride and hope. Above all hope. That it may uncover fresh insights, evoke inner recognition and reflect our common struggles and triumphs.

Literature can raise us up. It can cast away the fog of confusion and bury doubts that march on us from every corner. It can lift the reader above all that and offer windows of clarity, guiding our way, reassuring us that we are not alone in our toils.

To each of these writers enclosed who have walked the difficult path to inception, we thank as those who recognise their triumphs. Not in starting but in finishing their journeys, their destinations being ours to harvest.

And to each reader who has taken a step into the unknown by committing to this work, we thank as those who recognise their faith. We hope that it will be rewarded in the richness of imagination and deft touches revealed before you.

We also welcome you to the world of The Anansi Archive and invite you to join our efforts to explore and support each other's writing endeavours at our website.

Dave Jordan, Editor January 2022

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Christmas Bizarre by H.B. O'Neill

All families have traditions on Christmas Day, I assume so at least. Ours has always been off to church to celebrate the birth - then to the graveyard to remember the dead - then to the pub to model festive jumpers - then back home for the Queen's Speech - then sit at the table for a huge dinner - then devour the trifle and the pudding and the After Eight Mints - then collapse on the sofa for Doctor Who and grazing from tubs of chocolates - then swap gifts - then it's time for mince pies and sherry - and then Irish Coffee and maybe a James Bond and some cheese and biscuits and perhaps more booze and then finally a crawl into bed for some Zs. All pleasant, predictable, calm and cosy enough. I certainly wasn't expecting anything different this year.

The turkey had arrived in a hessian sack from Ireland. From a farm in Leitrim to be precise. Not a farm like Bernard Mathews might run - this one was more of a traditional Irish - a few acres, a bit of livestock and a hay barn. Very organic you might say. This particular turkey had been used to having the run of the yard - eating small stones to aid his digestion, gobbling at seed-thieving chickens, strutting around nonchalantly, occasionally pecking at the cats and their kittens for sport - indeed he'd been a proud purveyor of all activities on the contented turkey spectrum. He'd had it good in every aspect - there were even five female turkeys on the farm but no other males. No one to challenge his dominance or encroach on his domain. He was as happy a fowl as ever lived. Had been since the day he'd chip, chip, chipped his way out of his mother's egg and shook himself free. Of course, he wasn't to know it wouldn't always be that way. And I imagine he wasn't best pleased when his laid-back Lovely Leitrim lifestyle ended with a quick wring of the neck behind the aforementioned hay barn. In fact, after today's events I can categorically state that was indeed the case.

Mum is maybe to blame. Partially at least - I'd always thought she'd said that Dad was a New Romancer when she'd met him. I'd imagined them smooching to the tunes of Spandau Ballet, dad wearing ruffled cuff shirts and perhaps sporting an ill-judged Flock of Seagulls haircut. It had been a pleasant, pseudo-amusing and rather harmless imagining. I'd never asked for photographic evidence as I was of the opinion that imagined embarrassment was more than enough. I didn't want too much detail to haunt me at night. All parents seem capable of embarrassing their kids but I had hoped to limit their scope. I really should have listened more carefully when Mum was trying to explain though - been receptive to what she was actually revealing. I realise that now.

We visited our dear-departed after 11 o'clock Mass. The graveyard was teeming as it always is on this day - nods and waves to the fellow once-a-yearers - a few handshakes then on to the laying of wreaths and the lighting of candles and some solemn staring at stones etched with our loved ones names. It felt, as ever, the most important and evocative event of the day.

It was only when we were down the pub that things took a turn for the surreal.

"Wow, you're drinking quick, Dad. By the way, I've been meaning to ask - why did Uncle Peter send us that turkey?"

"Well, it's twenty-five years since our first Christmas in England and he'd sent one that year. Maybe he's getting nostalgic."

"Going soft more like."

"Also, he said he'd never liked the look in the eye of that particular one. Called him a smug little so and so, pleased to get rid of him by the sound of it. Said it was time he got a replacement to head up the rafter."

"Head up the rafter?"

“That’s what a group of turkeys is called. Don’t they teach you youngsters nothing?”

“I must have missed the lesson about obscure language down on the farm. It was a bit eerie having to pluck him and behead him and de-claw him and clean out his gizzard and all that, you’d think Uncle Peter would have done that for us.”

“He probably thought it would be character-building for you – life’s not easy on a farm you know.”

“Not for the turkeys.”

“Actually, you’re wrong - I reckon they have a pretty good life on Peter’s farm. Up till the strangulation at least. And anyway, if you’re feeling generous or guilty afterwards, you can always bring them back.”

“Eh?”

“It’s easy. I used to do it all the time.”

“Hahaha. Dad’s drunk everybody! It’s official!”

“Oi! You should never mock your father. Or doubt him. Now get another round in.”

“I guess. Are you sure you want another one though? You can’t put ‘em away like you used to Dad.”

“It’s Christmas you cheeky sod. I’ll have a whiskey chaser too!”

We were all quite merry when we got back to the house. Mum and Sis were a bit giggly too - they had stayed behind to add the final touches to the table and ensure all was cooked to perfection before Her Majesty did her traditional address the nation thing. They’d emptied a bottle of prosecco in the process. The tightly-stuffed turkey was now decorated with tinsel and resplendent in the middle of the table. We sat down, pulled crackers, donned paper hats, read out familiar jokes and were fully ready for the smoked salmon starter just as soon as we’d sung along to God Save The Queen.

“Right, that’s her finished! TV off and let’s get stuck in!”

Things might have gone okay; they probably would have in fact; the first course was fine. But Cousin Dave thinks he’s far funnier than he actually is and so naturally he doesn’t know when to let a good gag go. He decided it would be amusing to continue to tease Dad about his reincarnation revelations, grabbing the chance to continually challenge him in front of a captive audience. Surely, if he wasn’t a liar, then he would flex his skills and bring the pride of place festive fowl back to life?

I was starting to feel anxious. Dad has never shirked a challenge. This was going to be embarrassing. He would have to admit it had just been the alcohol talking. He was a very good carpenter not the Dead Turkey Whisperer. He was staring hard at noisy Cousin Dave now though and a tense atmosphere had replaced the expectant buzz of the soon-to-be-fully-fed Christ is born celebrants. Dad turned his gaze to the rest of we would-be feasters and smiled confidently. Then he turned back at Dave.

“Raise the parson’s nose!” He declared ceremoniously.

“Darling...” said Mum nervously. “What are you... Darling, you’re not going to...”

But Cousin Dave was already fingering the rear flap of the tinsel-ed turkey and leering at Dad with that harsh beery challenge still bright in his eyes. A silence fell as Dad somewhat groggily got to his feet, steadied himself with one hand on the edge of the table and then, uttering a very unchristian sounding incantation, thrust the middle finger of his other hand up the dead bird’s jacksy.

Nothing happened. Everyone just stared at Dad. He shrugged and sat back down, "I'm probably rusty."

"Just as well" said Mum whilst Dave triumphantly muttered something along the lines of "Ha! I knew he was faking."

Moments later, as Mum was dishing out roast potatoes from a large Pyrex dish, what I can only describe as an unholy squawk suddenly interrupted the jollity. An anguished outcry emanating from the kitchen halted all acts of revelry. Everyone jumped. Mum dropped the dish. Cousin Dave jumped again – two hot spuds had rolled off the table onto his lap. He squealed and flapped them away. Everyone stared at each other. Then at the door. At the gap under the door to be precise. A scrawny neck was slithering its way in. Cold, mottled, veiny, trailing blood and ripped tendons but very much alive. We all jumped again when we heard a bump. Then a thump. Then another bump. Then another thump.. Then we made a mixture of unnatural noises as the head finally managed to squeeze under the door and in to the room too.

We stared at it and it stared back - all sharp beak, beady red-eyes and angered intensity. The neck righted itself. The head was now up and able to fully look around, able to accurately locate its target. Once satisfied the neck scrunched down into itself like a coiled spring, then launched toward the table. Screams now as it landed sending gravy spraying and cranberry sauce splattering onto pristine Christmas jumpers and jaw-dropped faces. In a moment it had re-attached to its basted body and let out a further anguished cry. Then immediately stretched left and right to peck at any human body part still in reach. No mercy – we were obviously all in the frame for the blame.

A sharp tap at the window came next causing further shrieks.

"Where did you cut off the claws?"

"Back garden."

"Oh dear..."

Click, click, crack, crack, crash! An opening carved in the tempered glass and the feet were in. Hock, shank, spur, claw and more trailing tendons. Tip-toeing terrors. They scrambled down the curtains, then scuttled past the brightly wrapped presents under the tree and launched themselves at their dismembered body too. Expletives from the adults now, all decorum and respect for the occasion lost as the cooked bird reassembled and started to shift.

The first movement the reformed turkey made was to raise its haunches even higher and then violently fart out its stuffing in the direction of Bubbles the cat – a sage and onion bullet that might have taken her head off had she not managed to dodge allowing the life-size inflatable Santa to take the impact and explode majestically. Bubbles immediately bolted through the cat flap, Granny clutched at her heart whilst two-year-old Jamie clapped his hands and gleefully banged his plastic spoon on the table.

The re-headed, feet-reunited turkey rose fully then. Growling not gobbling now it eyed each of us in turn.

"F... me! Uncle Peter's sent us a phoenix!" Chuckled Granddad who had been seriously ill for the last six months and was probably in many ways past caring. He seemed the least concerned to exit when the rush started.

Cousin Dave was first to the door but then jumped back following the crash of a dustbin lid toppling and then the immediate influx of feathers flooding through the letter box.

"Quick! The back door!" Cried Sis and we all followed her lead.

Dad was last out, dragging Grandad and carrying Jamie. He hurriedly slammed the door and joined the rest of us just in time - as if on cue the timed Christmas tree lights came on to highlight the hideous scenes happening inside. Shivering in the garden and pressing our noses against the patio windows, it was fascinating to see the

feathers return to their previous host – a kind of post-posthumous triumphant re-crowning, a macabre coronation that in all honesty was becoming far too horrific to fathom.

Grandad however was like a reborn himself. He was hopping from foot to foot, giggling like a six year -old and cracking gags probably only a six year-old would have laughed at.

“We should have named him – would have made it easier to negotiate our return. How about ‘Punky’? Look at the state of him!”

Much of the feathers were missing – he’d been plucked in the garden and the dustbin hadn’t coped with all of his sheddings – the wind had taken much of his coat away – the result was even more sinister – the partial re-plucking had created a dreadful zombie patchwork piece of pre-lived poultry.

He looked menacingly toward the patio and eyed us each individually again then very deliberately squatted over the bowl of still-steaming sprouts and added a grey offensive jus. That brought the loudest gasp from Auntie Babs who always bought the very best from Budgens. Mum was speechless and furious at the same time. She finally managed to shout at Dad “You promised me! You promised me you’d never... not any more... not after we had kids.... not after that mouse in Marks and Spencer!”

Dad looked very sheepish but he’d made his point I guessed. He wasn’t a bragger by nature and he had been provoked. If anyone was to blame it was Cousin Dave. And throughout all of this, part of me was feeling quite proud of Dad – there was a definite element of cool in being able to resurrect the main event during the main event.

“We should have a sing song!” Chuckled Grandad. “On the first day of Christmas my true love sent to me ... a half bald Psycho Turkey...”

Cousin Dave seemed more shocked than anyone. He had sat down with his head in his hands and was rocking from side to side muttering a repeating mantra. “Necromancer... I didn’t think... I never believed... he is a necromancer...I never thought... he couldn’t... I shouldn’t... I’m sorry...I’m sorry...”

The rest of us watched awe-struck as the born-again bird flapped from the table to the tree. It was a seven-foot pine-treated whopper from Homebase but no match for an irate undead intent on vengeful destruction. The tree toppled and took the TV with it. Dad visibly winced.

“We’ve gotta do something!” Cried mum.

“Yeah. Call the midwife! Or Ghostbusters! Or better still, an Estate Agent.” Suggested Grandad.

“What are we gonna do, son? She’ll never forgive me.” Dad whispered.

I’d never seen Dad look so morose and I never usually have the right answer to any question but I guess we all occasionally get inspiration.

“Do you remember Tyson Dad?”

“Yeah. But I don’t reckon even a heavyweight boxer would want to get involved with that thing.”

“No, Not that Tyson Dad. Where are we standing?”

“In a frozen garden without our coats watching a deranged turkey that I recklessly revived systematically destroy Christmas, our house and my marriage.”

“Yeah, all true. But where else?”

“Eh?”

“We’re stood almost exactly where she’s buried.”

“Who?”

“Tyson.”

“Tyson...Tyson! Yeah, I suppose you’re right, we are.”

“Unusual name for a miniature poodle but she earned it didn’t she Dad.”

“Not half. Feisty little thing.”

“Very feisty.”

“She was completely territorial too.,,”

“Yeah, the postman hated her.”

“Went ballistic if anyone came so near as the front gate...”

“Exactly!”

“There was never any fear of us being burgled when she was around.”

“I know!”

“Defend us and the house to the hilt.”

“I know!”

“Toughest little thing I’ve ever known.”

“Yeah. She was prepared to take on all-comers.”

“A pit bull in little lamb’s clothing.”

“Exactly! And if you remember - she used to be able to fit through the cat-flap too.”

“Yeah...yes... Yes, she did! Nice one son! Oi Dave! Dave you eejit! Quick! Get up! Get yourself together, get a shovel from the shed, get over here and get digging!”

H. B. O’Neill is a London born writer frequently inspired by the city and its myriad opportunity for comedy, pain, drama and adventure. He is a prize-winning poet, short story writer and playwright. His debut novel According to Mark is due to be published in 2022.

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John Henry's Fiddle by Norman Thomson

On Saturday mornings, unless she was volunteering a few hours at her church function, Flora Henderson stopped in at the Gibbons' red brick farm house. Each visit she brought with her a plate of warm baking, scones or oatmeal muffins. She handed the plate to Eldred Gibbons, her offering to chat in private with his invalid father, Jacob.

Once arrived, Flora insisted first on a quick Hoovering in the downstairs rooms. In the parlour she always paused before the sky blue cremation urn that held the ashes of Jacob's wife, Abigail, dead four years now.

While Flora busied herself, Jacob sat at the kitchen table, musing over a news article in Farmers' Digest. Occasionally he paused to scratch at the stump of his amputated left leg. Eldred would sit on the veranda and practice his fiddle playing. The Irish airs lifted him above the hovering shadows of weather and crop prices.

As she stored away the vacuum cleaner, Flora fastened on the beautiful musical phrases. She closed about Jacob, wished she could make him rise up whole, with two healthy legs. She saw herself helping him gather fresh eggs from the henhouse for market sale. Shortly, Eldred would summon his father and Flora onto the veranda to share a pot of tea and a bite to eat. Flora said that her sister's girl, Lillian, was coming for a visit and would enjoy hearing Eldred's dance band at the Pennyworth Hall. "Maybe you'll get to meet her wee folk."

Occasionally Eldred left Flora and Jacob to their tea and conversation and drove the Chev pickup to the family cemetery along the Towbridge side road. He struggled with the look of abandonment, and the rusty gate that swayed on broken hinges.

Four weathered limestone grave stones faced a meandering creek bordered with leaning swamp willow. He paid particular attention to the marker at the summit of the incline. When he was a toddler his father would bring him here, guide his tiny fingers over the lettering and read aloud: John Henry Gibbons, born Killimore 1821 died 1904. Beside John Henry lay his two wives and an infant daughter. Jacob always muttered his greetings to their ghosts that strolled in the creekside shadows. The little boy ran wary eyes over the hillock, and thought his father was play-frightening him.

On a hot June day Eldred was working his shovel end around a leaning grave marker when a grey Mazda sedan pulled close to the gate. The woman driver called to him. "I wonder, could you direct me? I seem to be lost."

Eldred beckoned the woman forward. In the trembling heat she seemed to shimmer along the hillside, all shiny and glittery, barely touching the ground. Her overlarge necklace flashed shamrock green. Then she stood before him, fresh faced, smiling and looking as if she had just folded her wings and settled, as a butterfly might. "I'm Lillian Cummins, and I'm looking for my auntie Flora's place. Henderson. Ninth concession road..." She brushed a strand of hair from her forehead: chestnuts in autumn ripeness, Eldred thought.

Eldred introduced himself. As he talked out directions, Lillian studied his working tools, then the grave stones. "Is part of your family buried here? Are you the caretaker?"

"Caretaker. Handyman. Sometime confidant, if the ghosts feel like talking. Days like this they're off in the woods, enjoyin' the cool." Lillian Cummins turned his comment in her mind, then surrendered to his teasing smile.

She said, "I'm stopping over for a sketching tour, farm scenes and nature subjects..." A warmth came into her voice, inviting confidentiality and trust. "Some day my work will be good enough to show in a gallery." Softly now, drawing forth Eldred's cooperation. "I'd love to make a few sketches of this place. And I promise to leave ... everyone... undisturbed."

“Come along any time. Evening light is the best, along the ridge there.” Eldred leaned against his shovel handle. “While you’re here, you might enjoy a Saturday music night out. Meet the neighbours.”

She gave a tilt of her head. “Will you be there?”

Eldred nodded. “I play fiddle with the band.” He pointed toward the upper grave stone. “The fiddle’s his. John Henry’s. He brought it from Ireland. We’ll get you tapping your toes in short order, old ballads and love songs.”

Lillian thanked Eldred again for his help. She seemed to drift away, into the diaphanous heat. Eldred watched her go. His father’s infrequent urgings tumbled in his head: “Get yourself out, find a nice girl, take your mind off the burden of your old man.”

Then he turned toward the new-cleared graves. Bantering: “Now, don’t you lot be causing mischief when she sets in here for a spell.”

The Pennyworth Hall stood near a rural crossroads, the sole reminder of a once thriving pioneer settlement. In the Great Depression Vince Pennyworth used it as a barracks for his itinerant orchard workers. With recent upgrades to the kitchen, it hosted occasional political rallies or fund raiser dinners.

Eldred played in a four piece band called Celtic Mystery that served up a mix of Scottish and Irish folk tunes. Nearby farm folk came, the elders to catch up on local news and their sons and daughters seeking a possibility of a fledgling romance. Volunteers from the Women’s Institute managed the sale of sandwiches, cakes and light drinks.

For the next two Saturday nights Eldred watched in vain for Lillian to appear at the dance. He buried his waning hope beneath a veneer of feigned nonchalance. During their breaks Mickey Stoughton their drummer pulled out a folded real estate magazine and gazed on a cluster of photos. “Here it is, boys. Ol’ Mick’s retirement dream – comfy fishing lodge, hundred miles north, rich with bass and lake trout.”

On the third Saturday after Eldred’s meeting with Lillian, when the band was halfway through The Belle from Belfast, he spotted her edging toward the beverage counter. Silver bangles on her right wrist sparkled as she tipped her Styrofoam cup toward him. His bow danced over the fiddle strings.

At the end of the set Eldred introduced Lillian to the band members. “Auntie Flora has been showing me the local sights,” she said to him. Her dark eyes glowed. “I have some sketches to show you.”

They were country scenes anyone could recognize: a Massey tractor rusting amongst weeds; a horse’s head leaning over a cedar rail fence; a farmhouse kitchen half door. Each drawing showed a sudden element of whimsy: a field scarecrow wearing polka dot overalls straddled the tractor seat; a leprechaun stretched himself between the horse’s ears, grinning around a corn cob pipe; draped over the kitchen door, a child’s apron and a curious fairy peering out of the flour speckled pocket.

Eldred chuckled at the impudent scarecrow. Would the little girl heed the fairy before she put on her apron? The sketches transported him into a Wonder-land, where elfin creatures made mischief and demanded to know your dreams.

He pointed to the leprechaun. “These little folk... do you add them as you’re working?”

She shook her head. The blue and green ceiling lights made her appear fragile and airy. “It’s easy. I draw what I see.”

“What you see?”

“As I’m drawing. This little fellow, I saw him, stretched out there as you see him now. He spoke to me... very pleasant and kind, he was.”

Eldred furrowed his brow. “Go away... he actually spoke? All right, what did he say?”

“What they always say. Follow the rainbow, over the next valley. There’s the pot of gold waiting for you.” Her mouth curled in a smile. Of remembrance, or teasing?

Several times Eldred drove them to locales that offered appealing sketching subjects. One day they followed open meadows toward a deserted farm.

A weathered barn stood amidst clumps of thistles and a rusting cultivator. They passed into a storage area strewn with hay forks, leather harness, dented milk cans. He picked up a spindle from a child’s broken chair. He imagined screams of delight as chaff-dusty children played their summer games in the hay mow.

Tell her: I’ll arrange a studio setting in the house, shall build oak shelves for your brushes and inks. Swirl of your green-gold bracelets will brighten the rooms. We’ll welcome the wee folk when they come calling...

He kicked idly at a coil of grease stained rope.

Mid-August: The band were gathered backstage when Mickey announced his purchase of his dream fishing lodge. “Mr. Friel invites me up any time to work on upgrades – and later, maybe, a friend to help out.” He would be leaving the band midweek, he said.

The next Saturday morning Flora arrived at the Gibbons’ farmhouse to find Jacob sitting in a rocker on the veranda. Eldred was inspecting a gauze bandage over the middle finger of Jacob’s right hand. With a tug of resentment she set aside her plate of brownies. She wanted to be the one to oversee Jacob’s nicks and scratches, his bandaging and healing. Jacob turned the talk to Flora’s niece.

Flora settled herself into a wicker chair. “I should have tended her here when she was little. Might’ve saved her a lot of grief when she was growing up.”

Eldred said that Lillian seemed taken with the quiet, enthusiastic to sketch on her own somewhere.

“That independence has served her well.” Flora was silent for a time, as if pulling up distant memories. “There was no love in that household between husband and wife, where it should be when a child is present. Lillian had no friends that would come round, never went on sleepovers, no picnics at the beach like her classmates would enjoy.”

Eldred listened intently. “How did she cope with the loneliness?”

“She found her wee people. Fairies and sprites, even a few goblins. She met them in her own private places, gardens and quiet pathways. She drew them in her school notebooks – playing at hoops, talking with their pet rabbits. Lillian would tell me their names and snippets of their conversations. She loved their company. They saved her from a long fall into some black hole of her mind.” She stood up from her chair. “I want to shake out those rugs on the parlour floor.”

Eldred finished cleaning up the supper dishes. He told Jacob that Lillian wanted to sketch some views from the cemetery, he would trim around a bit while the light held. “If your ghosts go carousing, Pop, we’ll watch out for them, yes?”

He pulled his truck near to the rusty gate. Lillian was seated on a woollen blanket, facing John Henry’s stone marker. She held the open sketch book on her lap. She called a welcome to him.

Eldred lifted a sledge hammer and a spool of wire from the box of the truck. He walked along the incline toward her. "Been here long?"

"Not very. I wanted some quiet time with our residents." She examined the drawing in her book. "Do you have any family stories? John Henry, what kind of man was he?"

Eldred rested the sledge hammer. "Stubborn. Had to be to keep his family one step ahead of all the dying in the Hunger. But his fiddle gave him hope when the crops were in drought, or the kids turned sickly. Most like, it saved his spirit from ruination."

Lillian patted her leather tote bag. "I brought us a Thermos of tea. For a nightcap." She arranged the Thermos and two plastic cups beside her blanket. A breeze stirred the hillside grass.

Eldred sat beside her. The hot tea drove out the muscle fatigue from his shoulders. He should ask her now: Might she be thinking to stay here, with him? And his father. He would stress that it's not like the ol' boy would be living forever. He said, "Well, how'd it go?"

She handed the sketchbook to Eldred. John Henry's grave stone filled the left third of the page. Along the right edge hovered the spectral face of a man. Broody eyes narrowed in wistful questioning.

Eldred gaped at the apparition. "Go on. Tell me I'm imagining this. It's your... artist's fantasy. Tell me I'm right."

Lillian looked at Eldred's ashen face. "It's John Henry. Your great-grandfather. He was curious, came closer to ask what the fuss was about."

Eldred struggled to keep his composure. "Enough, now. I told you of the ghosts wandering here. But I was only joshing. They aren't real. Pop thinks so, or says he does."

"Well, John Henry is here. I've met him, and if I stayed longer, I'd bet the two wives would come peeping about."

"What do you mean, if you stayed longer?" The breeze curled along the hill, east to west: it brought the tang of pine bark and leaf mould.

Lillian poured off the dregs from her tea cup. "Mickey has invited me to join him, get a taste of wilderness living, and offer a pair of hands with his camp makeover. I'm handy with a paint brush, not so good at wallpapering." She packed the Thermos and cups in her tote bag.

"So that's it? You won't be coming back?" Eldred heard his voice as someone else's, far removed from his own.

"It will be a good move, don't you think? If I work hard I can create a few pieces for a regional gallery there." She leaned forward and cupped his head in her hands. She kissed him on the mouth. "You've been a darling in showing me around, giving me your time and patience."

Eldred looked on her sketch book, held by the animated face there. They were real, these hovering spirits, Eldred realized. They were real to Lillian because she had opened her mind to them, allowed them access to ease her solitude. Eldred had a quick, stabbing vision of his future here, his father's death and his coffin lowered into the ground and his mother's ashes beside him. He saw himself working in the heat of continuing summers, righting a skewed marker, replacing the rusted gate. It seemed a blessing to him now, that he could so honour John Henry's enduring legacy in bestowing on him, Eldred, his own gift of joyous music.

"Don't go," he said. "The farm's a going concern. You can do your painting here. We can make a gallery in the house. There's plenty of space."

Lillian studied John Henry's likeness. Then she turned to Eldred. "Will you bring your fiddle here, to play of a time?" A knowing smile, brave in its tenderness, brightened her face.

"Indeed I will. For the littl'uns, and the ghosts. Together, all of us."

He drew her into him, inhaled the scent of her warm hair. The breeze curled along the hill, slid through the rusted fencing and folded along their shoulders, firming them to the grassy knoll.

Norman Thomson lives in Ontario, Canada, where in his rec moments he reads medieval history, or riffs Beatles and blues on his Hohner harmonica. His flash and short fiction has appeared in Wellington Street Review, Agnes and True, fiftywordstories among others.

The Boot by Chris Kok

John Barnum came back to us as a boot. It dangled from Hank's mouth as he trotted into the kitchen, his tail wagging. He had that fast tread dogs have when they're up to something sketchy. In this case, he'd dug up the roses, and brought home a prize.

We had good reasons for discouraging Hank's digging. One being the pride my wife Allison took in those roses. The other being John Barnum's body, buried underneath.

Upon seeing the boot, my brother Mose and I locked eyes. We quickly made the connection between it and the dead elephant in the room. We snatched the boot away from Hank and rushed out into the storm. Among a few dug up roses, a foot stuck out of the ground. It was stripped of boot and sock, as well as flesh. The pale bone stood in sharp contrast to the black dirt.

Shouting over the storm, Mose summed up the situation with his trademark brevity and wit. "Fuck!"

"Should've put him deeper."

"Shouldn't have taken in that fucking dog."

I peered through the kitchen window. Allison had either not noticed our absence, or didn't care. "She's gonna be pissed, we dig up this bed."

"Can't leave him. Matter of time before Hank drops a fucking skull on the kitchen table."

I cursed my luck. Like Barnum, Mose and myself were casualties of circumstance. Hadn't been any hate in the killing, nor any kind of premeditation. Even so, a man had died and we were to blame. Couldn't take the problem to the authorities. Had to bury it, right then and there. Unfortunately, things like this, they don't much like staying buried. I had the boot and the bony foot to prove it.

"Whatever we do, we ain't doing it tonight. Let's cover him up. We'll keep Hank inside."

Back in the kitchen, we fed Allison some story about checking the roof. We sat down to dinner, struggling to swallow Allison's cooking, despite it being excellent as always.

John Barnum's only mistake was having ambition. It was that which made him drive his Model T the fifty miles from the highway to our farm.

He knocked on the door, young and dapper in a grey suit, crisp white shirt, and black boots. Once I'd convinced Hank to stop trying to eat his briefcase, he opened the proceedings.

"Good morning, sir, I'm John Barnum."

"Congratulations." That usually stumped them. Not John Barnum.

"Thank you. What's your name, sir?"

"I'm guessing you know."

He smiled with a confidence that didn't match his age. "Depends. Are you Adam Loughlin?"

"Depends. What do you want?"

“To be honest, sir, before anything else I’d very much like to get out of this heat and have a drink of water. I hope you’ll forgive my forwardness, but I suspect you’d prefer me sitting in your kitchen than dying on your doorstep.”

I looked at the Model T. Sitting in that hot box for over an hour, sun beating down, no water. I wasn’t surprised the kid was abandoning the usual niceties.

I let him into my kitchen and into Allison’s stash of freshly made lemonade. I was glad she was visiting her sister, and Mose was out trying to hunt down the fox that had been getting into our chickens. My reputation as a hardass wouldn’t survive the sight of this.

Barnum finished his glass and leaned back, savouring the relief. Seeing the impatient look on my face, he straightened right back up. “You know I’m here to try and sell you something. What might surprise you is, you’ll want to buy it.”

“And what might that something be?”

“Normally, this is where I’d say something glib, like ‘peace of mind’. But I’d bet you’re a man who has no use for glibness.”

I said nothing.

“I sell insurance. Anything from health to death. Covering all the bases.”

“What makes you think I don’t have any?”

“Your roof. It’s taken some damage. Had it been insured, you could have hired someone to fix it.”

“We know one end of a hammer from another. Rains come, that roof’ll hold.”

Barnum nodded. “What if, God forbid, you fall off that roof? Will your hammer mend a broken leg? Will it bring in the crops? What if it’s not your leg that breaks, but your neck? How will your wife pay the mortgage?”

Mose spoke up from the doorway. Wasn’t even noon and he was close to falling-down drunk. “I’ll take care of my sister-in-law. What family does, around here. Don’t expect a city boy to understand.”

He stumbled in and poured himself some lemonade, along with a generous helping of gin. He knocked it back in a single gulp.

“Actually, sir, I take care of my mother. She’s unwell. My father never got insurance before he passed. So I support us both.”

Mose burped. “Well, shit. Now I feel like an asshole.”

“I am a city boy. And a salesman. I’ll do anything I can to make a sale. But I don’t have any qualms about it. Folks need insurance.”

Insurance. I kept coming back to that, lying awake that stormy night, listening to loose shingles rattling in the wind. Without a body, the kid’s life insurance wouldn’t have been paid out. I imagined Mrs. Burnam, son missing, kicked out of her home, dying under a thin blanket in some state-run institution.

There’s no torture like being torn between two evils. You keep looking for reasons to pick one over the other, knowing whatever you choose, you’ll regret it.

A year on, the guilt and doubt had softened. No longer a vice on my heart, but a splinter in my skin. I'd see the roses and realize I had gone days without remembering John Barnum. The boot had brought it all back.

I didn't know Mose's feelings, although his drinking got even worse. It wouldn't have bothered me, if he wasn't also a lazy son of a bitch.

We'd taken in Mose when he lost his place to the bank. Allison and I never discussed it. Assumption was, we'd give him room and board, and he'd help out. I asked him to fix the roof a hundred times. Instead, he wasted his days drinking and generally being a nuisance.

Meanwhile, Allison and I talked less and less.

That hot morning, he got in Barnum's face, as if the kid had come for him, rather than me. "Say we buy this insurance, and then nothing happens. We get them premiums back?"

Barnum frowned. "We wouldn't make any money."

"Exactly."

Mose gave me a look as if to say, Outsmarted this kid, didn't I?

Unperturbed, Barnum continued. "I appreciate you all take care of your own. I do. But there's comfort that comes with knowing that, whatever happens, you'll be okay for money. Look. Show me around. I'll give you a number. You don't like it, I'll get in my car and you'll never see me again."

Mose was sweet to suggest he'd take care of Allison. But unless he suddenly grew a talent for hard work, I didn't see him getting far. It would be nice for Allison to know she'd be alright without me.

"I'll give you the tour. But if I say yes, it won't be to any standard deal. I don't mind a man making a profit, but there's a difference between capitalism and straight fuckery."

Barnum smiled his confident smile. "There will be no fuckery today."

Turns out there'd be quite a bit of fuckery that day. Only it wasn't on account of Barnum.

I sent Mose after the fox. Barnum and I looked at the fields, the barn, and the house. Kid even climbed up on the roof. All the while, he took notes on a little pad and asked a thousand questions about my health and my family history. I answered as well as I could, and as honestly.

Finally, I walked him to his car.

"You've built a fine life, mister Loughlin. I'd say it's worth safeguarding." He scribbled on his pad. "I'd have to okay this with my boss, of course."

"Of course."

"But I'm pretty sure I could get it down to this."

He tore off a piece of paper. I took it and read the number. It wasn't nearly as high as I'd imagined.

"This is monthly?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I—"

A shot rang out. Inside, Hank started barking. I turned to see the fox, running towards us, Mose on its tail. Mose stopped and fired. The fox kept running. Hank kept barking.

“Mose! Hold your goddamn fire!”

He shot again. The fox ran past us. Barnum, showing weakness for the first time, darted backwards.

Mose’s next bullet hit him in the leg. He went down, yelping like a kicked dog. Soon as I saw the gallons of blood rushing from his wound, I knew the bullet had severed an artery, and the kid was going to die. Nearest doctor was hours away and neither I nor Mose knew jack about dealing with this kind of thing.

He bled out in less than a minute.

Mose walked up to me, panting. “He gonna be okay?”

“Don’t think so.”

“He dead?”

I nodded. “Looks like.”

“Fuck. What now?”

I looked around, as if hoping to find the answer in the dirt or the sky. As it happens, it came strolling up the road in the shape of Allison.

None of us said a word as she looked from Barnum to me, to Mose, then at the rifle in his hands. She stepped around the growing pool of blood, knelt down and felt for a pulse. Stood up and brushed off the sand.

“Did he have it coming?”

I was aware of her voice, but the words didn’t land. I was entranced by the stark contrast between white skin and dark red blood.

“Adam.”

I looked up at her, then at Mose. He was swaying back and forth as if on a ship in rough seas. “Mose was aiming for that fox.”

“Did he get him?”

I didn’t answer. Allison looked at the car. “I suppose you’d better put that in the barn. Adam, you take it apart, then bury the pieces. This one,” she nodded her head at the body on the ground, “he’ll have to go in the ground quick. Mose, you dig a hole, clean up your own mess.”

“Shouldn’t we call someone?”

“So they can haul you off to prison? I don’t much fancy living out my days alone, Adam. Mose can go to hell for all I care, but then I reckon he’d drag you down with him.”

The night after the storm, I walked into the kitchen to see Allison sat at the table, reading. I grabbed coffee and joined her. When she reached the end of her page, she closed the book.

“What’s the matter?”

I kept my eyes on my cup. “Hank pulled something from the rose patch. A boot.”

I looked up just in time to see her shake her head. “I told Mose to dig deep.”

“I know, he—”

“Wake him up, we’ll do it now. I’ll supervise. Make sure we don’t have to bury him a third time.”

Allison sat reading as we worked. I kept quiet, compensating for Mose’s bitching and occasional vomiting. He’d wanted a drink to go with the labor, but Allison told him no.

We stopped just before the hole became too deep to climb out of. Allison put aside her book and inspected our work.

“It’ll do. Put him back, while I go grab something.”

We tossed in the body we’d laid aside. It was disturbingly light. We couldn’t have shifted it, otherwise. Our arms were spent from hours of digging.

Allison returned, and I was only half surprised to see her carrying the rifle. I’d suspected this outcome. When she told us to dig this deep, it all but confirmed it.

She called Mose’s name and when he turned, I looked away. Allison shot my brother in the face and he fell into the hole.

The shot echoed for a long while.

“I’m sorry, Adam.”

I nodded.

“Had to be done.”

I nodded again.

“You fill in the hole. I’ll be at the market, buying new rose seeds.”

She lifted the rifle onto her shoulder and walked off.

I buried my brother, along with his many mistakes.

The next day, I fixed the roof. Later that week, Allison got the fox.

The roses came in nicely. They weren’t winners, but Allison took it in stride. In general, her mood had improved, as had mine. We were talking again.

A few months later, I went into town. Got us some insurance.

Spider Woman by Bryan Thomas

Candice hated spiders and creepy-crawlies generally. She was never sure where the irrational feeling came from. For, apart from the notorious ones with poisoned bites or the scary stories of the large and frightening species in tropical forests, they seemed pretty harmless. They did not pose a threat when clearing webs in high parts of her rooms or on the balcony.

But she did feel creepy, even with the little chap who appeared in the bath, just as she started to fill it. What to do? She was panicky but scooped him up on her flannel and pushed him outside through the open window. The next day he was back.

“What are you after?” she asked him as she rescued him from the slippery sides of the enamel. This time she let him run onto the Hoya, with its glossy dark leaves that had spread up to the sitting room ceiling. It was in flower, and the heady scent was quite intoxicating.

“How’s that, Charlie?” she asked. But he was already at work dropping down from a leaf, a thread trailing from his tummy to stick to a leaf six inches below. Then he was off in a different direction building his web.

It occurred to her that she, too, was building a web to reel in her own mate who would not be a threat. Her former boyfriend had been wild and exciting – to many another girl too, as it transpired when she threw him out.

Robert had moved into the flat next door several weeks ago. Their balconies connected, and she watered her potted plants regularly. Shortly after his arrival, he came out onto his. He looked rather dishy – about thirty-five, short dark hair and wide apart grey eyes. Through the trellis, she invited him round for a coffee. He pleaded other business, and she decided not to seem too eager.

“Another time, perhaps? I’m Candice, by the way.”

“Sure,” he said. “I’d like that.” I’m Robert, Candice, that sounds American.”

“Born there, but I’ve lived in London since I did my degree.”

Over the weeks, Charlie’s web had spread, and she noticed the flies and tiny moths caught in the sticky threads. Good for you, she thought and then spotted that another two or three small spiders had joined him. They seemed competitive as they scampered about the web.

A few days later, another spider joined them. She was much larger, and Charlie, having seen off the competition, courted by massaging her back and winding sticky silken threads around her so that she couldn’t move as they made love.

She watched closely, and when they had finished, it seemed like hours later, the female struggled free of her bonds and ate him. Candice couldn’t believe it. Lovely Charlie, all that hard work web building only to be gobbled up after mating.

A couple of weeks ago, she had taken down the trellis which divided their balconies with Bob’s full approval. They now sat quite often, chatting about the day’s work and their likes and dislikes.

“What’s your day job,” he had asked.

“Horticulture. I work at Kew. I love plants but hated insects, except bees until recently, when I rescued a spider from my bath, and we have grown friendly. That is until I lost him.”

“What happened?”

“I’d rather not talk about it. I never gathered what you do.”

“Oh,” he replied, “I write pieces of analysis for theTimes. You know, trying to make sense of the news stories so that ordinary folk have a clue.”

“I love that. The reports are repeated over and over without making sense, and, as for the Headlines, which bear no resemblance to the paragraphs below....”

Robert was building his web purely by instinct, and Candice was unaware. Well almost. It transpired that they both loved old films and orchestral music.

“Brief Encounter was my first love story. You could be a modern-day Trevor Howard, you know,” she said, looking thoughtful.

“I’m much more handsome,” he chuckled, and she playfully punched his arm.

“OK, Mr Smart-Arse, what was the music?”

“Rachmaninoff’s Piano Concerto? No. 2? A question for you. Who played the leading lady in Casablanca?”

“Ingrid Bergman. Play it again, Sam. Play, As Time Goes By.”

“She looked like you.”

Candice flushed and thought, we’re not playing games anymore.

They began by going to concerts at the Barbican and had a meal at the local pub on occasion. They would part with a modest kiss on the cheek, like brother and sister.

She was out on her balcony. It was a warm sunny evening. Her bright yellow Evening Primrose enjoyed the low sunlight, and the bees were still buzzing in the purple Buddleia. But she was thinking back to Charlie’s cannibalistic end and shivering when Bob appeared.

“I was about to have a glass of wine. Fetch a glass and join me.”

“Lovely idea, but let me do the honours. Red or white?”

“Red, please, darling.”

He poured, and they clinked glasses.

“Bottom’s up. How about indulging in a Thai takeaway?”

“Good idea, save the washing up. What would you like, my dear?”

She imagined her back being caressed.

Yes, she thought. Afterwards, with the added spices and a couple of glasses of red inside him, he would taste delicious.

Bryan Thomas has always written poetry, and only took up Creative Writing when late retirement approached – to keep the little grey cells active. He has published one book of Verse and has another on the stocks. He has won several short story Competitions and appeared in several anthologies.

A Trilogy of Loss by Esme Couldrick

The carcass of her father was the first dead body Eve ever saw, although tragically it would not be her last. Eve's life could be reduced to a trilogy of lifeless bodies, her beginning, middle, and end. Sixteen years from the day she had forced her trembling fingertips to trace the thawed skin of her father's cheek, Eve would clutch to her chest the cold form of her child. The next year, it would be her own body she saw lying amidst the broken glass of a coffee table as she slipped from the world with the same silence she had entered it in.

Eve was on the edge of childhood, balancing tentatively on the precipice that connects the girl to the woman. As a self-proclaimed adult of thirteen, she felt that death was not a stranger to her. Although, he had never introduced himself, instead choosing to trail her father, so closely that she could no longer distinguish between death and a shadow. Years later, as Eve lay dying, she acknowledged the irony of her child-self conjuring an image of death as male and at that moment she decided that if men were the end, women were the beginning. At eleven Eve had whispered to her friend Katya, as they planned the details of lives neither girl would ever lead, 'my father will be dead before he walks me down the aisle'.

This had unsettled her friend, who felt there was a chasm forming where they had once been inseparable. In the self-made sanctuaries only little girls can build, they had promised they would do everything together, that they would live one life as two halves. The change was imperceptible yet, Katya could not shake the feeling that somehow Eve had abandoned her, that through this confession, Eve had progressed through the borders of childhood alone. It was not until adulthood that Katya would understand the gift Eve had given her. There is nothing sweeter than a completed childhood.

Eve's father had died of sadness. She would always attest he was the saddest man she had ever known. A man pulled to the grave- or crematorium in his case, by a sadness so like an ocean that it turned to fluid on his lungs, and he died alone, choking on the taste of his sorrow. Throughout her life, Eve would try to stay afloat in that same ocean, finding that if she closed her eyes, the way it enveloped her felt remarkably like her father's touch. It was through the waters of sadness that they were bonded. His name was Robert and despite the resentment, she felt for him and his incurable sadness, maturing from thirteen-year-old adulthood into actual adulthood had cultivated a craving so ineffable, that naming a child for him was the only language that could ever begin to convey her longing.

So, in the autumn of 2001, Eve bore a new Robert into the world- one she prayed would inherit no more than the name. Upon bringing the small Robert home from the hospital Eve was plagued by dreams of that same ocean that had swept away her father. Each night she would awake with such panic, she was sure its waters were filling her lungs. Her mother had warned of the disturbance that followed birth and insisted the 'blues' would subside in the coming weeks. Eve knew different. Her small apartment had been invaded by a presence beyond that of the baby that commanded the cot in the corner of her room. Where a new mother would have smiled down at her nursing infant, inhaling the scent of milk and satisfaction, Eve found herself gagging. The child smelt putrid, a scent so reminiscent of her dead father that she held him only out of necessity and never maternal adoration. Where she should have felt love, she could only muster repulsion and with this, she felt herself crawling deeper inside herself. Eve was alone with her baby and alone in her experience of motherhood and in this state of isolation she determined that in naming the child for her father, she had resurrected something that she was not yet ready to face.

The psychologist her mother arranged an appointment with had deduced that the crux of Eve's puerperal affliction was rooted in her inability to address the past. Through the emotional negligence of her mother and the disordered personality of her father, Eve had developed an unconscious aversion to the condition of childhood, a state of being she was prematurely ripped from. Where other mothers were warmed by their baby's innocence, Eve saw only the many painful ways this would one day be corrupted. She was prescribed Valium to calm her nerves and told to return the following week. Upon arriving home, she poured the little bottle down the toilet and relished the silence of a life without her baby. Her mother had visited unannounced the week before, and finding her grandson flushed and wailing in what looked to be a two-day-old nappy, she had bundled him up and taken him home with her. Robert was now on formula and despite the painful swell of her lactating breasts, she could not help but be glad of one less intimacy she would have to endure with her child. Eve had never seen her mother's eyes filled with such accusation and as she stared back, silently begging her to take the baby for good, she felt this was what it meant to know shame. A daughter can only know how far she has fallen from the way it emanates from the eyes of her mother.

Robert would be returning in three days, Eve's mother had called to tell her this morning, her words laced with unspoken command. Had Eve seemed distraught by the prospect of losing her son, she knew her mother would've kept him, but she had sensed her apathy, and Eve couldn't help but wonder if she relished condemning Eve the way she felt her children had condemned her. Despite the advice of the Doctor, Eve felt the way to cure the sickness her baby evoked was to rename him. As such baby Robert became baby Bobby and three days later, when he was returned to their small apartment and found himself alone with his mother once more, the newly named Bobby no longer wailed and banged his curled-up fists against Eve's stiff body, and Eve could no longer detect the scent of decay that had previously clung to her baby's soft skin. In its place she found he smelt of soap and milk.

While she would never voice it, Eve secretly thought that in the renaming, her child had been reborn. The baby was no longer a pervading force, repugnant in the memories and more disturbingly, the man he invoked. However, this led Eve to the revelation that if Bobby had been born again, then the changing of the child's name condemned her father to die a second time. She was alone bar the gurgling infant in the corner of the room and allowed herself to ruminate on the sadness of this exorcism of sorts, for was it better to have a father presenting himself through the medium of your new-born son than to have no father at all? Eve thought this would be a question she would ask her son, for his world was as fatherless as her own.

Death was her beginning, middle and end. She was thirteen when she saw her father's body but it was in this moment that she felt she had been truly born. Life before felt like some far off dream, she had sleepwalked through childhood and now she was awake. The death of Bobby was her middle. Unlike with her father, she had not predicted this loss. Perhaps she had been so desperate not to drown in the ocean of sadness, clinging on for the sake of her child, that she had not noticed how its waters had reached his cot in the corner of the room. She had not noticed as, much like her father, her baby had silently choked on sorrow. Eve could never determine whose sorrow had killed him, was it his or was it her own? Can mother and child have distinct sorrows, or does the umbilical cord bond them in sadness? Some days Eve felt that it was her own rotting womb that had poisoned her son, where she should have offered him the nutrients to live, she had fed him only grief. Others, she pondered whether Bobby had looked upon his unravelling mother and decided if this was what life was he never wanted to grow up, had she frightened him so with her sadness that he would prefer eternal infancy than ever be like her. On those dark nights, when her baby had finally quietened, realising the futility of his tears and learning to sooth himself, had she asked death to take her son? Had she wordlessly prayed that the silence would never end. Eve couldn't remember and the thought sickened her.

In the days after his birth, Bobby had wailed so loudly she felt like her ears would bleed. His tiny lungs filled with such power and indignation. His every mighty roar felt like an accusation. It was inconceivable that it would be these lungs that would fail him. Eve had loved her son with an innate kind of ferocity that frightened her and when he was gone she felt hollow. She felt she had been carved open and the seeds of her essence ripped from her. Her love was entangled with a guilt that made her stomach lurch and empty itself whenever

anyone expressed their condolences for how could anyone pity a grieving mother who had loved and hated her child in equal parts.

Bobby's father was the only man Eve had ever come close to loving, and as such she knew that she couldn't keep him. Later he would discover he had a child by the woman he had never forgotten. Eve had turned up on his doorstep while his new wife slept, and in a slurring ramble of words, she gave him the gift of knowledge, violently extricating him from a life of simplicity. There was a cruelty to this gift, a cruelty conceived in the more malignant parts of Eve, the parts of her that despite her ardent independence could not bear the burden of grief alone. Edward was ordained to the status of a father on that dark December night. Through the parting of Eve's lips and the venom that poured out, he learned of and then lost the only child he would ever sire. How could he not hate her?

Edward was good. Eve was not. According to her mother, their relationship could be reduced to this dichotomy. According to Eve's mother, she would find no other as willing to tolerate the ferocity of her temper and the mutability of her mind. Eve had once thought the same, that Edward was good, perhaps even too good. Edward felt superior in the belief in his goodness and as such the selfless acts of service he rendered to Eve when in the company of others, instead became a stick with which to beat her. And beat her he did. There is a certain kind of violence to a beating without touch. A violence Eve knew all too well. Edward hit her only once. Pulled her to the ground, cradling her head like a mother would a new baby as he slammed her into the glass, his hot breath assaulting her flushed cheeks. The feel of his callused fingertips coiled in her matted hair was almost tender. Eve had been hit once by every man in her life. It had started with her father, he hit her once, and then died. And it finished with Edward, he hit her once, and then she died. There were other men who filled the middle of her life, they too had hit her once but Eve could not even muster enough feeling to name them. She often pondered whether it was only once because circumstance had prevented a second time or whether it was only ever once because these men were not naturally violent. Perhaps there was something specific about her that cultivated something dark in men who had never hit a woman before and would never hit one again.

Eve died on her 30th birthday. Crimson seeped from her temple, congealing on the calico carpet in stains that were reminiscent of the day she had peeled back her cotton underwear, finding confirmation of what she had suspected for years. That she was now a woman. As she lay dying, she felt a clarity she had never known before, her mother was wrong. There is no such thing as a good man and a bad woman. We are all formed in the grey of a mother's womb. All men can hit, even the good ones and better to look violence in the eye than allow it to startle you. She wished she could tell her mother this but death was stealing her voice.

Edward hadn't meant to kill Eve. For a time afterward, people talked of the man who cracked the skull of his former lover, and Edward was torn from the pedestal in which we place good men. Edward was good and now he is bad, but Eve knew different. As his tears trickled onto her cheeks like droplets of rain, as his chapped lips kissed her forehead in a silent apology, Eve knew that like all men, he too danced in that grey. With this knowledge Eve found her peace, finally surrendering to the waves she had struggled against her whole life, allowing them to pull her under as her body went stiff and her pulse stopped. Her trilogy of loss was completed and she smiled as her arms wrapped around a small bundle, a heartbeat fluttering against her chest and a tiny fist curling around her finger. This time all she felt was love.

Jenny Clay by Kai Double

It was the early hours before Jenny finally got the chance to head down into her basement. She would have come much sooner but tonight had been hectic to say the least. Her cousins had come over to celebrate an engagement and the snacks, booze and stories had flown for hours. It wasn't like Jenny didn't get along with her cousins because they were the only family, she had that were around her age. Usually, she would be the one pouring the drinks and stoking the rumour volley with her prodding poker like questions of 'What next?' all night long. Though these last few months, Jenny had found herself ensnared by a most mesmerising distraction.

As she thundered down the steps, the darkness only grew. But it was a comforting darkness, not an isolating one. Jenny had spent so much time down here lately she had made the place her own, no longer an alien addition to her cosy cottage. Flicking on the red lamp the place hummed with illumination. Julietta's eyes instantly shot towards her desk...good...it was still there.

To be honest, it was ridiculous to think her laptop could have disappeared without her knowledge, but she had been so captivated, so obsessed with it that such a worry had always wormed its way into her head, permanently. She practically bounded into her chair, feeling the odd sense of security the battered light blue swivel chair brought washing over her. She was in familiar territory now...

As her eyes lit up in response to the bright screen, Jenny felt an immediate pang of guilt sucker-punch her stomach. The message had been sitting there, unanswered for hours. Frantically, she hammered her keyboard in response. A sincere apology, a greeting and then a question. You promised me tonight would be the night you showed me? She watched the message sit on her screen with tension building in her heart. Had she blown her chance? In need of distraction, she found herself glaring at her avatar. Anything to quell the bubbling worry that she might never hear from them again.

The name Julietta Clay sat above her meticulously crafted avatar. A pseudo name she had composed when she first signed up for this massively multiplayer game. It was a name taken from old cartoons she remembered as a child, specifically drawing from the ruthlessly cool, effortlessly awesome femme-fatale villainess's she idolized growing up.

After what felt like a lifetime her laptop chimed. Her heart stopped. She could barely even bring herself to read the message, despite how badly her brain screamed at her to. Finally, Jenny cast her electric blue eyes to her inbox.

I would never mislead you Julietta...are you ready? ☺

Julietta's heart thumped in her throat. The game's language flashed up and she devoured, deciphered, it quicker than ever before. She should have known Hawke wouldn't be mad at her. Hawke, or HAWKE, as she knew him better, had always been patient with her. The two had formed a strong bond ever since he had helped her get to grips with the mechanics of this game. There had been a lot of fumbling and failed missions when she first started but under Hawke's guidance, she had transformed into a strong, independent player in her own right and the two had stayed close friends ever since, learning more and more about each other as Jenny whiled away the night's questing with Hawke at her side.

Hawke had always seemed so interested in Jenny's life, which was something she found unnerving at first, but it had developed further than that. Jenny had begun to learn that Hawke didn't really seem that knowledgeable about, well anything normal really! Whenever she mentioned anything completely benign to her, like coffee machines or cinema tickets, Hawke had seemed completely perplexed! So much so that Jenny had taken it upon herself to teach, to help Hawke along with learning English! He always seemed so proud of himself whenever he could talk to her in English and in return, Hawke had taught Jenny the various runes, ciphers, and incredibly unique alphabetic structure of the game world.

Jenny wouldn't admit it, but she had a strong affection for Hawke. They were both the same age, that was the first thing she had made sure of, he had shown her his game ID and she had run it through a dedicated online translation engine, way before she could read... anything at all! She had since really thrown herself into the game world and found herself living Julietta's life more and more fluently. The two were inseparable now. Hawke would always tell her how Julietta Clay inspired individuality, chaotic good and strength. Then, she would blush behind the screen. He would use words like "free" and "spirit" in English to describe how she carried herself. And to be honest, Jenny felt at her most untethered whenever she could slip into the red curls and lizard-like armour of her level sixty-two ice witch.

Still, Jenny the human's mind was racing at just what Hawke had up his sleeve. He had been more impassioned than she had ever seen him before when he promised her the chance at new adventure. Jenny agreed without hesitation, fully sucked into the world of the game, wanting to spend more time with Hawke. Her fingers nervously drummed on the edge of her laptop as she awaited what he had been so excited to reveal to her...

I can't wait to meet you!

Hawke's profile performed a full three-hundred-and-sixty-degree spin, an emote designed to convey joy and.... anticipation.

Suddenly, her fingers started to ache. It was a strange sensation. It took her brain a few seconds to register it but when she did, it was more like a tingle than an ache. The sensation made its way up her fingers and into her hand. It began to quickly shoot up into her wrist, her arms and then, her whole midriff! It felt as though someone was trying to fit her whole body into an email! She couldn't yell out, the feeling, the perplexing taste of static had begun to fill her mouth and scrape between her teeth!

Jenny looked down, unable to focus her eyes anywhere at all! She instantly wished she hadn't. What she saw would have most certainly made her cry out in distress, if she were able! Her fingers were being sucked into the USB port of her laptop! They, well they certainly weren't solid anymore! Jenny tried to frantically flail her other arm, she tried to kick her legs, she tried to do anything at all! Nothing responded! She could only watch in stomach-churning terror as her entire body, right arm first, was turned to a wavy mirage and sucked into her laptop! A few swivels of her desk chair the only evidence that anybody at all had been there.

Jenny felt herself falling. Both slow and fast, feeling heavy and light all at once. It was only after a few moments, and quite a painful thud, that she could open her eyes again. She could see the sky, bluer than ever, and white wispy clouds that drifted peacefully. But Jenny felt anything other than peaceful at the moment, she felt as though she had been hit by a train! Her face ached terribly; her legs felt like a new-born calf's and her brain felt like it has smacked the inside of her skull several times over!

Groaning and rolling over, Jenny raised a hand to her blurry eyes, and instantly they shot open. On her wrist, a heavy band of twisted snakes! A heavy band of twisted snakes that looked...suspiciously like the item Julietta snatched from the jaws of defeat that one time. She raised her hand to her head and was greeted by the shoulder length bob of Julietta, not the long platinum blonde mess she was used to. Her feet felt like they were in boots, not slippers as well. Julietta Clay wore boots, big silvery knee length ones...

Are you okay Julietta?

That voice. Jenny felt like it was familiar, yet totally strange. She tried her best to focus on where it was coming from and the source began to come into view, resembling more of a person than the shadowy blob it had a few seconds ago. The figure had scruffy snow-white hair, that she could definitely tell. Instantly, Jenny knew who this was. But that wasn't possible. How could he be here?

"Hawke...?" came her raspy yet distinct voice. A voice that wasn't hers. Julietta's voice, rich in sarcasm and bravado in everything she said.

Of course, it's me.

The figure above her cocked his head, confused at such a question. Why was Julietta acting so strange.

Kai Double, a final year creative writing student, loves to manipulate the known into the totally peculiar. Kai, a huge gaming nerd, also enjoys working alongside voice actors in order to produce audio slices in his spare time

The Day That Isaac Went Missing by Jack Clark

You were 10, when we first met. I could tell you were nervous. You had just moved primary schools due to your mum changing jobs. You sat next to me because our surnames were close together in the alphabet. It wasn't long until I was writing your name on to the invitation to my birthday party.

You were 11. I was scared going from primary school to high school but knowing you made things easier. We were in different form groups and I could see you had made friends on the first day and I hadn't. But you were always so funny, they had to like you. We would meet up during breaktime to plot our misdeeds and pranks, but I never would have let you put glue in her bag if it had meant we would be stuck together in after school detention!

You were 12. We only had art class and P.E. together now. I was always scared of Michael at school. I hated playing out in the field at lunchtime in case he would come say something horrible or hurt me - I couldn't imagine spending more years in high school. That day he tried to steal my maths homework but I ran away, I knew he'd be trying to look for me. I didn't know you were his friend and when he came up to me and called me that word, you stuck up for me and said I was your friend. He didn't seem to bother me anymore after that.

You were 13. You had a weekly allowance off of your parents and would always share it with me. We would go to the newsagent and buy as much sweets as we could fit in our pockets. If I didn't want to go home for dinner, you'd offer to buy us fish and chips. But I never wanted to go home, you always had the latest video game console, computer or speakers – you'd always find time to play my favourite songs if we jammed. You had a phone before me and would call up our friends for them to come and hang out too. We would always laugh at the time we were chased through the orchards and the farmer fired his shotgun into the air to scare us, we felt invincible on our adventures.

You were 14. You gave me my first ever beer that summer, I hated it so much so you decided to sneak downstairs to steal a fruit cider from your dad, knowing I had a sweet tooth. That night we were so euphoric, we walked out into the fields and lay under the stars, we spoke about everything that night – giddy by our whole lives ahead of us and all the things we wanted to do and the places we could see. You wanted to become a detective; maybe because of all the movies you watched. We coughed and spluttered trying to smoke that cigarette together, before swearing neither of us would ever smoke again.

You were 15. I never really understood what you meant when you said your dad had an illness, he always looked perfectly fine to me. I didn't realise how much this affected you. You would always smile. You took time off of school and started painting. Your art project was breath-taking and I was so proud when you got it marked – you were so talented. I still have that painting you did of me as a joke.

You were 16. I had never been to a party so you got me invited to your sister's party, where I met her. I had never seen a girl so beautiful and neither had you. I was proud by the fact I had won her over you – to me it just seemed like a game like we used to play and I was victorious. I didn't mean to upset you like that; I was selfish. You used to sit by yourself during lunchtime when we used to eat, but you were never not allowed to sit with us. We still hadn't spoken and I knew that you hated me. I was secretly happy that we still had English class together, you wouldn't even look me in the eye – but I caught you laughing at my impression of Hamlet.

You were 17. I saw you next to the bike shed, smoking a cigarette and wearing a long sleeve t-shirt. I smiled at you and you smiled back. But we had nothing to say. I was busy with my A-levels and you were no longer in my life. I wish I'd told you about my university application and about the new music I was listening to – but I didn't.

You were only 18 when you went missing.

I remember I was riding the bus home from school; the road was obscured with autumn leaves.

There were police cars outside your house, their blue lights spun what seemed to be an ocean from where I stood. I didn't go home yet I didn't quite belong there. I've known you my whole life Isaac. I don't know why this happened to you. You were never in the way.

I was so proud of your sister when she spoke at your vigil when your mother couldn't, she was always shy but stood there, stoic she said:

“I love you,

You didn't deserve this,

You were a talented and beautiful boy,

I am so proud to have been your sister and the journey we have been on I will always treasure,

until we meet again my brother,

you will not be forgotten.”

There's certainly a quiet hue upon the village these days and I seldom see your family anymore – not now. It's simply too painful. I hope you're peaceful in rest Isaac, I do.

As for me? Well, I am now ready to move to the city, to start a new chapter in my life – to find meaning in every second and in the time in between. To find flowers under fallen leaves.

Personal Best by Warren Tang

Saturday morning 8am. Decent weather conditions at last, so today is the day.

Sitting on the steps at the front door, she puts on her expensive new running trainers. She had definitely earned the right to wear them.

Running had been a much unexpected release for the once adamant non-runner. It gave her a chance to get away from it all, to clear her head.

It was only meant to be something for her to undertake to lose the pounds she gained from comfort eating. The self-pitying munchie sessions had caught up with her, but thankfully she now had a new healthier kind of addiction.

She stands up and presses the balls of her feet into the soles of her new purchase, which had emblazoned on the box as specially layered with 'Super Foam'(Copyright TM), just to mould her feet in a bit before setting off in her new shoes.

While she does her customary stretches, she contemplates the big task ahead, her first 5km. And to think, she couldn't even run the length of herself a mere three months ago. The celebrity social media 'before and after' posts, which invaded her smartphone screen daily had brainwashed her, and she pursued the well proven online beginners running regimen with a barely recognisable vigour.

Feeling very nervous, she programmes her running watch up to the 5km distance, the very first time that she has ever gone that far in her settings. It's actually further than the distance between her place and her best friend's flat, and she is based out of the town centre. Her mind boggles, but if she stops to think about it anymore, she will talk herself out of it.

She waits for the countdown to initiate....3, 2, 1, and she heads off.

First KM

Confident start. Nice steady pace. Breathing good. Feeling strong, feeling great....

Online dating, she was told, was the way to go. Her best friends had met their new beaus and were extremely happy so why not her? Cue Stephanie, diving in clumsily with two feet. Very typically Stephanie. There were inevitably a few false starts. Colin (not over his ex), James (attractive but a really bad kisser), Lee (mummy's boy), Mel (keeps disappearing and hard to contact, possibly married) and Tarquin (well, enough said). But, just when her patience was about to run out, along came Mark, handsome, intelligent, oozing charm.

Their first date was perfect. The rest of the world did not exist for the both of them and time just flew by in that local coffee shop. The apple pie they shared was especially delicious. Their second date had gone unbelievably well too, proving that their first date was no fluke. Nor did he even 'try it on' with her during these first two dates. Do gentlemen really still exist? Wonders never cease! Stephanie's faith in men was being restored. An early key test had been passed. Maybe, just maybe, there was a potentially bright future for them both....

Second KM

Going surprising very well. Pace looks quick. Still strong and on course for a very good, much better than expected, personal best time...

This truly was a whirlwind romance. Everything felt so effortless. With every date they were falling more and more for each other. He knew she was the one when he discovered that she preferred salted popcorn too. She was already sweet enough you see, just like him coincidentally.

She knew he was the one when her mum had given her mythical seal of approval, something which none of her previous boyfriends ever had. Such an earth-shattering development was an extremely good omen indeed.

Christmas was around the corner and he had promised her a 'special' gift. Even with the advance notice, she couldn't hold back her joyous tears and shocked surprise when he went down on one knee at the Christmas family gathering. The only thing that could match the brightness of the sparkles of the big diamond rock was her wide beaming smile.

It was much more than the special deluxe edition 'Dirty Dancing' DVD box set she had hoped she would find in her stocking. That present, as it turned out, appeared in the second gift bag Mark produced from behind his back. She couldn't love him anymore if she tried.

They got married on Valentine's Day and they moved into their new plush, West End property, with the big bay window that she had always dreamed of, all before the clocks even had a chance to change in March....

Third KM

After such a positive and confident start, she was really starting to feel it now. Foolhardy? Perhaps. Maybe she had set off with too much bravado, way too fast, maybe she should have held back a bit and not have been so reckless. Over-eagerness was a trait that she always had and could never control...

Things started to turn sour after their idyllic Easter honeymoon fortnight in Mauritius. It was all very subtle at first, small suggestions and requests which actually had ulterior motives. He persuaded her to stop going out, she missed her Sunday roasts at her mum's and the late-night Prosecco fueled gossip sessions with Charlotte and Valerie. He was gradually controlling every minute detail of her life, even down to the TV programmes she watched. No more 'The Real Housewives' for her. She had initially dismissed such things as minor infringements on her life, but love can make you blind you see and the undertones would become more and more sinister. She had become his substitute mother and he returned her numerous favors with a complete lack of respect. For all intents and purposes, she was a prisoner. He was never around at night neither, Stephanie having no clue what he was up to while out. Little Joe and Becky were born later within two years of each other. She had hoped that their little steps and their sweet little laughs would salvage something of what they had enjoyed in the past, how wrong she was. He had convinced her also that her place was at home looking after the kids and that she could rely on him for money with his real estate sales job. She had loved her well paid journalist job too, one she had worked very hard for years to attain. She barely saw a penny from the supposed enormous amounts of commission he earned...

Fourth KM

Every step is a real struggle now. Torture. She feels that she is about to hit 'The Wall' that all runners talk about, and regrets even having set off in the first place. The idea of snuggling under the covers for a cosy weekend lie in seems very appealing now.

The simple natural process of breathing requires such effort as she places one heavy leaden foot in front of the other. It's kind of like a suffocation...

Mark had become unbearable to be with. All her best intentions and efforts were rendered futile, dismissed by his disgusting disrespectful behaviour to her. Always, he would lose his temper for the slightest thing.

The menacing cloak of threat always hung thick in the air whenever he was around her.

The Friday night steak that he routinely demanded from her was never done in the way he liked it, and it always ended up crashing down to the oft scrubbed clean floor.

His other false accusations toward her were nothing more than a gas lighting smokescreen for his own infidelity which, as it turned out later, happened to be numerous and often. She should've reacted more at the times when

he would creep into bed smelling of cheap perfume, but she refused the confrontations, and all the potential nasty repercussions.

He then started to lash out at Joe and Becky. They were way too young to hear such language let alone understand it. Their inconsolable wails and endless tears were too much for Stephanie to suffer.

There was that one night Mark stood over the kids with an open palm, something which he hadn't done before. The infants crying which he had caused in the first place, had grated on his jagged mind. Stephanie intervened, just as he was about to swing, standing defiantly between him and the kids, her beautiful big blue eyes this time showed a steely hue which he had never seen.

'Just you try it!'

Fifth KM

She bravely persists. She has gone through the worst. She is still running and she is determined to complete the distance. She has suffered much worse in recent times and survived. The end of her ordeal was in sight. She is too far gone to quit now. To do so would mean that the negative forces have won, that could never happen...

She took off in a moonlight flit with the kids during one of Mark's disappearing acts. She knew it was a major risk. She had no assets to her name, Mark had ensured that, making it hard for her to escape, but she had to go, she just had to. The wellbeing of the kids, their all-round safety and the preservation of her fragile sanity demanded it. Leaving him was tough not because she cared for him or loved him, that ship had long sailed, but because she didn't have any entitlement to the family home, no car, no job and she had to protect the kids.

The atom bomb exploded the morning after when he drunkenly stumbled back to the empty flat.

No note had been left, that was the least he deserved.

Mark eventually tracked her down.

'How dare she??!!'

He made her life extremely difficult thereafter - hounding her, stalking her, verbally abusing her, trying to use the courts to take the kids off her.

The human instinct is to fight and survive when threatened, Stephanie had had her epiphany and remembered, importantly, 'I'm a human too'.

She stayed strong, resolute and battled through. Her mum took her in until she found somewhere of her own.

After a lengthy process, the courts, thankfully saw sense and sided with her. A counter court case to stop him from hassling her also found in her favour.

FINISH LINE

The distance reader on the running watch seemed agonisingly stuck for ages at 4.98km, but finally it flashed up, 5km!

Job done!

Stephanie staggers to a stop, gasping for every nourishing sliver of air she can.

She collapses to the ground and lies flat on the pavement.

She is shattered but justifiably jubilant.

She never thought she could ever get here.

The emotion at her barely believable effort overcomes her. Her own Mount Everest climbed. The tears further wetted her already sweat drenched, bright red face.

The time is way under her pre-run assigned target of 40 minutes too.

After a few minutes of recovery, she phones her mum to tell her the good news.

‘The rumours of my demise are completely unfounded!’ she shouted delightedly, while still a little out of breath.

During this tough process of rebuilding her life, running helped her in ways that she could have never imagined.

It was the first thing that had belonged to her for what felt like an eternity.

Running was she, and she was running.

It allowed her to achieve and to succeed, to build up her badly broken self-esteem and self-respect from the ground in rubble.

She had completed a 5k run creating a new personal best and now, she was the best person she could be.

This is, and always was, all she had to be.

She no longer had to apologise for her existence.

She was always good enough, no matter what anyone else said.

Warren Tang has been writing for 10 years, specialising in the Flash Fiction format. He was twice winner of The Cazart Flash Fiction competition, as well as shortlisting in other writing competitions such as The Word Hut Flash Fiction Contest and the Fusilli 200 Word Flash Fiction Competition.'

Pumpkin by Rosie Arcane

Jerry returned from the kitchen armed with another beer and sat back down at the computer.

A message pinged on his phone. It was from his friend Dylan: alrite man halloween party at mine next sat so better wear a costume! am goin as thor haha & am doing a pumpkin competition so be at mine for half 7. A sense of irritation came over Jerry and not just because of the atrocious spelling and lack of punctuation or grammar. He sighed and responded: Can't wait.

Jerry chewed on his bottom lip and immediately contemplated what to talk about at the party. His promotion would certainly impress, or the new car, his side business, or that time he met Stephen Hawking. The most important question in Jerry's mind however, was whether all these success stories would help him hook up.

While Dylan could flaunt his chiseled jaw and six pack to charm the pants off any woman in his vicinity, Jerry would try flexing his most impressive muscle: his brain. Unfortunately, this usually resulted in some form of riled rejection, often laced with the words "dickhead" or "pompous twat".

After a few more beers and endless scrolling Jerry was shocked to discover it was three am. He sighed and rubbed his eyes. As they readjusted an ad popped up on his screen.

Before he clicked on the little "x" to close it, he paused. The image in the box caught his attention. In his slightly fuzzy state he decided to read what it said and so opened it. The most enchanting woman he'd ever seen looked at him through the screen with eyes he felt pierce his soul.

Her eyes were a deep brown, so dark they almost blended with her pupils. Jet black hair flowed down her lower back and her skin was so ghostly pale it made her eyes look like two spiralling black holes. It was impossible to guess her age as the perfection of her face was very dubious. She was holding up a bottle of orange liquid, reminiscent of those cheesy old TV ads with models looking overly excited about completely mundane products.

The ad read, in tacky bright blue font: Do you have a craving for love or just seeking a little intimacy? Are you tired of all the rejection? Whether you're lonely or just feeling a little empty inside, let APATITE make your desires a reality. Drink just one bottle of APATITE's magic orange squash and you'll never feel empty again . . . in fact, it'll light a fire in you that you never knew was there.

Jerry laughed and scrolled down as it continued.

Drink this delectable liquid straight out the bottle and within a few hours all your insecurities will be replaced with the ability to go out there and find love once and for all. It'll not only give you confidence in social situations but finally allow others to see your true potential. One bottle is all it takes, so order now for only £69.99.

After he'd read the description Jerry leaned back in his chair to study the woman closer. A black corset dress barely held in her breasts and her sleek legs, wrapped in fishnet tights, were propped up on deadly black stiletto heels. Jerry took note of the studded leather choker gripping her neck and felt a flush spread across his cheeks. Her eye makeup and nails were painted in blue shades and her lips a deep purple which, against the white of her skin, looked like a separate entity floating in front of her face. The ensemble looked almost cartoonish and reminded him of the old horror icons he'd watched growing up like Elvira, Vampira and Morticia Addams.

He knew the ad must be a joke or a scam. However, he didn't close it. A familiar trigger of curiosity gripped him and as he searched for clues his eyes were drawn to the top of the page where the company's domain name would normally be. There wasn't one. He frowned. "What the hell? That makes no sense." It wasn't like a

webpage at all, it had opened like a single document containing nothing but the picture, the text and an “order now” box on the right.

He scrolled further and noticed a disclaimer at the very bottom of the page, this time in bold red font: Follow the instructions provided here and with your order to the letter. Apatite’s magic orange squash must not be mixed with anything as, contrary to the name, it’s not a diluting drink. It must be consumed straight from the bottle upon delivery. Don’t even pour it into a glass. Apatite cannot be held accountable for anyone who doesn’t adhere to the instructions.

Jerry scoffed and necked the rest of his beer. He guessed the drink was probably some sort of caffeinated placebo but in his intoxication he was intrigued. Something about it touched a nerve with him. The woman’s gaze through the screen caused a tingle in his fingertips and he hovered the mouse over the “order now” box. “Fuck it, can’t do any harm,” he slurred and clicked the button.

The package arrived the following Friday. Jerry smiled and took it over to the coffee table. It was in a blue coloured box with a small handwritten label. He tore it open and pulled out a bottle carefully secured in bubble wrap. He unwrapped it and noticed it had no label. It was just a glass bottle full of bright orange liquid that looked almost luminescent. He raised his eyebrows and rifled through the box. He found a little handwritten card inside which read: Apatite’s magic orange squash. Drink straight from the bottle upon delivery, do NOT pour into a glass or dilute with water. Enjoy, pumpkin. Love Apatite.

He thought back to the absurd ad and shook his head. He went through to the kitchen and put the bottle in the fridge.

Dylan came over later with a crate of beer.

“I’m not drinking tonight,” Jerry declared. “I’d rather wait until tomorrow.”

“Yeah, because you’re a lightweight,” Dylan quipped.

“No, it’s just that I want to keep my wits about me, you know, be in top form,” Jerry looked at the floor sheepishly.

“Oh, I get it,” Dylan grinned and winked at him. “His eyes lit up. “I know, I’ll help you out, like your wingman, I could—”

“No way. Just forget it. Can you get me some juice or something? I gotta piss.”

When Jerry returned from the bathroom Dylan handed him a glass of orange juice. “What kinda fancy pants shop do you go to?” he quipped and planted himself on the couch.

Jerry frowned. “Huh? What you on about?”

Dylan ignored him and started to recount his recent liaison with a girl he’d met at work. “So, she came into the shop a few times and we started hanging out. Telling you man, she’s really cool. She’s gonna be there tomorrow so be nice alright, I think this one might go somewhere.”

“Yeah sure, you say that every time,” Jerry smirked.

“Well, whatever. At least I’m getting some,” Dylan flicked a bottle top at Jerry’s head.

Jerry forced a laugh and gave him the middle finger.

As the night wore on Jerry started to feel tingly all over and his head pounded. Once Dylan had left he swung the door shut, forgetting to lock it, and stumbled to bed. He had barely settled down beneath the covers when he fell into a deep sleep.

Jerry's eyes shot open and he stared at the ceiling for a few minutes. Something wasn't right. He slowly turned his head to check the time and through hazy eyes could just make out that it was exactly three am.

He shuffled to the edge of the bed and then stopped, unsure of his next move. He had to think carefully before swinging his legs round onto the floor. He dragged himself to the bathroom and slammed on the light. He swore loudly as the brightness temporarily blinded him. He scrunched his eyes shut and then blinked a couple of times to adjust to the new surroundings.

As he looked in the mirror his brain took a minute to register the sight. When it finally did he gasped and his heart hammered in his chest. He squinted and leaned in closer. "No, no, that can't . . . what the fuck?" he tried to yell, but the "fuck" tailed off to a squeaky whimper. He stared at his reflection and cried out. His skin was orange.

Slowly, he brought a hand up to his face but paused before actually touching his skin. He shook his head in disbelief at what he was seeing. Finally, he pressed his hand down against his cheek and this time he managed to scream. His skin was hardening. It pulsed and started to curve out as vertical grooves formed, causing a rigid bumpiness. "Holy shit, what is happening?" Jerry shrieked manically over and over until his vocal cords gave up. He hesitantly lowered his head to check the rest of his body.

He was only in his boxers so could already see the orange colour now covered his chest and torso and was spreading to his legs. This wasn't a fake tan disaster orange, this was a bright, vibrant orange. It looked like someone was peeling off his skin to reveal a new one underneath. He gently touched his stomach and his skin — if it even was still skin — was cold. He felt sick as he watched this change happen right in front of his eyes. It had now reached his feet and his whole body was solidifying into rigid grooves like his face. He tried to drop to his knees but his legs hardened and kicked out from underneath him. He landed on his back with a thud. He lay flat and locked, unable to produce tears despite the agony. He could no longer make any noise, nothing.

With his body now an orange, rigid and bumpy monstrosity he could only wait. What happened next was the most painful. Suddenly his arms and legs began to retract, becoming shorter and shorter. His limbs started shrinking faster and he could feel all his muscles, tendons, ligaments and bones squeezing and pulling inward. When they were almost gone, just tiny stumps, his neck began to widen and shorten. It was at this point Jerry would've closed his eyes if he could, because he knew it meant his torture was finally over.

The next night, on Halloween, Jerry's front door swung open. A figure with slender legs in fishnet tights, propped up on black stiletto heels glided in. The visitor moved purposefully through the flat and stopped just outside the bathroom. "Oh my, what happened here, pumpkin?" Apatite asked jokingly. She made a tsk-tsk sound and wagged a finger at the large pumpkin on the floor, a sad face carved into its hollow head.

She bent down and picked it up. "What a shame this is indeed. I had my concerns about you, Jerry." She shook her head. "You really need to be careful ordering things on the Internet late at night. I'm not very technologically adept, as you may have gathered from my ad," she grimaced, "but, fortunately I don't need to be. I see what I need to, so my ads always reach people in the desired way." She leaned against the bathroom wall and brought the pumpkin closer to her face. "I take a great interest in my customers and make sure to provide clear and precise instructions with my products." She gave the pumpkin a gentle kiss. "Well, never mind eh? Let's get you to that party."

A gorgeous young man opened the door and took a step back, his eyes wide. He was dressed in a Thor outfit. "Eh, hi," he said with a quizzical look on his face.

"Hi, Dylan I presume? I'm a friend of Jerry's," Apatite smiled at him broadly.

"Yeah, I'm Dylan. You know Jerry, huh?" He took a swig of his beer. "How'd that happen then?"

"Oh, we met online."

"I see." His eyes scanned her up and down and then he shrugged. "He never mentioned you but that's cool. Where is he?"

"Oh, don't worry, he'll be here, and I think he'll really steal the show. Just wait until you see him." Apatite adjusted the pumpkin in her hands. "This beauty is quite heavy, may I come in?"

"Yeah, sorry, of course," he stood aside to let her in.

Dylan announced she was just in time for the judging of the pumpkins. Apatite placed her pumpkin on the table and it immediately caught people's attention.

"It's huge, where'd you get it?" somebody asked.

"Yeah, I've never seen one like that before," another added.

"It looks so sad. Like, I know you carved a sad face in it but it actually looks . . . sad," a girl in a witch costume commented. She sidled closer to Apatite and nudged her. "We're twinning, but your outfit is way better, you look like an actual witch," she chuckled.

Apatite just offered a polite smile.

Once everyone had voted, although quite haphazardly, Apatite's pumpkin was announced as the winner. Everyone cheered and Dylan placed a homemade first prize ribbon next to it. Some people leaned in to take a closer look and take photos. The excitement eventually died down as people returned to the party, leaving Apatite alone at the table. She leaned over and looked into the pumpkin's glowing eyes. "I guess it all worked out in the end. They love you, Jerry. You're the best. The brightest. Just like you always wanted, pumpkin." She laughed and turned around to find Dylan standing right behind her.

"Eh, so do you know when Jerry will be here?" he asked. "It's not like him to be late."

"No idea, sweetheart. Maybe something came up," Apatite sighed and placed a hand on his muscular shoulder, giving it a little squeeze. "Don't you worry though, I'm sure he's here . . . in spirit," she smirked.

Dylan frowned and then shrugged in response, taking a swig of beer.

"Well, enjoy the rest of your party. I'm afraid I can't stay." Apatite made her way through the crowd towards the door.

Dylan followed her. "Aw, why not? We're going to play 'Pin the fangs on Dracula' in a little bit."

"That sounds like great fun but it really is time for me to go." She grabbed the door handle.

"Hold on, you forgot your pumpkin."

Apatite glanced at the table and then back to Dylan. "I tell you what, you can keep it."

"Really?" He grinned. "Thanks, that's so nice of you."

"And, here's an idea, you could make pumpkin pie. It's delicious."

Dylan pondered the idea for a second. "Huh, good idea."

Apatite cackled and slipped out the door. The chilly Halloween air bit at her skin as the revelry of the party and other nearby festivities faded behind her.

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Bright Moon Over Lover's Bridge by Randal Eldon Greene

The moon looks fuller, brighter when he's kissing girls down by the bridge—the one out on the far country road, seldom used, surrounded by miles and miles of farm field, but with a copse of trees on either side of the bridge, on both side of the river, affording ample privacy when needed. A place to spread a blanket, toss down a beer, toss off some clothes, with the nearest building being an abandoned church where a red Chevy Lumina sits rusting with no tires, no plates, no history. And sometimes, in the midst of making love, he thinks that he can hear the occasional clang of an old brass bell if the wind is blowing strong enough and in the right direction—and it is as if it, the moon, were a spotlight made to illuminate him: Anthony. He is Anthony, not Tony, not anything other than his true name and it—that “it” is his choosing to be known in his full, naked name—is a reflection of all he is: height, strength, confidence. He is not square-jawed, a jock running the expanse of the sports arena; he is a man of youth though, a handsome face, tan, dark brown hair, eyes that eat the light in and give it back in semi-sweet drops. And it is here he brings them—the girls from the school, lily, twigg, shy, but even the shiest wear lacy panties with swirls and hearts and sweet, silly words. Frequently the underwear is beribboned, a wrapping around their sex, a wrapping they long for him to tear off, open up. Their desire is for his desire to touch, taste, admire, try it on—and it's here where he waits for her now.

Waxing gibbous, quarter moon, waning half, full, even harvest all double in brightness when he has her—whoever—in his arms and his eyes are closed and her eyes are closed and then they are unclosed, observing in that celestial light the nude figures of each other. Brighter and fuller. And he closes his eyes now, listening. Only wind, a light wind, the water. She will be driving there. Her car smells like peppermint, her body like a foreign spice. She is special for many reasons, and because she is special she is the only one Anthony loves, has ever loved.

He met her in detention. What had he done? Oh yes, skipped out on gym class after roll call to study up for an algebra test. He went to that place he finds it is usually safe by the biology lab where they dissect things for the sake of learning about science. But it was not safe; he was caught—caught studying. Poor thing.

She took pity on him.

She had not had him in detention before.

She had not had him in any class ever.

She teaches French and Spanish.

She is also a Speech and Debate coach.

She is young and pretty and ten years older than Anthony.

#

When did their whispers lead to kisses? *Come by after school. I'll help you write that book report.* Her mouth was full of lipstick—it stuck to his clothes, those clothes which luckily did not show in daylight—and her eyes were full of adoration. Who could blame her? Always a polite boy. *Thank you, Ms. Coke. That will really, really help me out.* And who could blame him? Look at her; she is beautiful. A beauty just this side of sophisticated. A beauty to make her lonely—no worthy man on those gravel roads, not even on the main paved streets of those three or four blink-and-you'll-miss-it towns that are the biggest population centers around from which she can select a mate. *Bumpkins. They're bumpkins, Anthony. You're so bright. So bright. You fucking outshine everyone.* He knows when to kiss, how to kiss, and never asks permission—just does it. He did it. She kissed back, her tongue tasting his teeth.

They make it work—or rather he makes it work—because he already knows how to meet in secret. Sure, all the girls before know about the bridge, but it's his place and they've no delusions; they know they'd find him there nude, aroused underneath the glowing moon, ready to use himself to eclipse another beautiful girl. *You're my*

first real woman. And who does she have to hide from? No shotgun toting father, no alcoholic husband, no jealous ex, and even the neighbours are too busy at their TVs to be nosy about the odd hours of her departures and the early morning returns in the dark. She has her extracurricular coaching and an afternoon phone call to her mother, and that's it.

It's good. **Do you like that?**

I do. But she frets.

She shaves her vagina for him. Changed her perfume to something younger, sexier. She thinks she's too old for him. **Don't cry, Jenny.** She is too old for him. **You need to remember to call me Ms. Coke. She sobs. I will, Jenny. In school, Jenny.**

Anthony is waiting at the bridge for her and she is late. He loves her, but she's late.

Does she love him? She doesn't know. An occurrence repeated too often: pacing her bedroom, no socks or shoes, usually in a dress—her school-day attire of choice—debating with herself, arguing both sides aloud. If only she could give him a flower, command him to pluck the petals and tell her how she feels, she would. It is obvious—overly obvious—that she desires him, his sweet and strong body. He plays bass guitar in the school jazz band. He roofs houses with his dad.

His father doesn't lock the door, doesn't notice his sneaking out or sneaking back in late. Anthony is a good kid. A good, handsome boy.

She's a bad woman; she knows it. **You're going straight to fucking hell, Jenny.** She tells herself this often enough that there's a truth to it somewhere, at least either in the middle or on the outer crust of things. But, here she is, locking the clasp of a little necklace with her long fingers, finding the black tights without the run in them. She had been wishing for his graduation—still another season must come and pass before then—as a solution to her evil, but now she cannot stand the thought of his leaving. An image of him plays in her mind: he is capped and gowned, walking away with a diploma in his hand, surrounded by family, by friends, and she is stuck on the other side of the auditorium, unable to move. He is not looking at her.

She hopes constantly she won't have to kill herself. She's been aware of that possibility since he kissed her. Since she never said stop.

Anthony is waiting for her, and the moon is on hold.

Does he know where this is going? Does he care? If she desires him then he desires her more. **I want you. I need you.** He got her out there and then he gave up the other girls. Anthony didn't even keep one for show. No more messages spelling his intentions out. He tossed the elaborate handwritten notes with a place and a time and a "Yes" and "No" checkbox—a throwback to his grade school days, a thing he sometimes did, a thing too cute to check "No" to. The girls adored it. Died for it. He always had one on hand—just filled in her name and a time. It was a tactic. A tactic that always worked.

He didn't use it on Jenny. She doesn't know about his notes. He's ashamed of their childishness. But it's now in the past. Abandoned. He's abandoned himself to her. Does she know it?

Anthony.

Jenny?

How long can we keep this up?

I'm not tired yet.

You know that's not what I mean.

She decides not to kill herself—not tonight, not while he's waiting for her on the bridge under the moon where his undressed body always looks the best—and she leaves late to meet him. They've been doing it three months and it's starting to get cold, but he insists on being out there instead of in her big SUV.

There's room.

But you can't see the moon.

And he can't see the moon. A cloud has crossed in front of it. But then her headlights—he knows them, square and yellow—appear. He waits.

The moon will come out.

It does.

It does just when she steps out of her car and onto the bridge.

She is dressed for a date, a dinner, a very special occasion, not for a country road rendezvous. The moon is brighter, fuller even though they haven't yet kissed. She is approaching, cupping her belly in her two hands and daring him to quit—even just for a second—holding her body in his gaze.

Randal Eldon Greene is the author of Descriptions of Heaven, a lyrical novella about a linguist, a lake monster, and the looming shadow of death. He interviews fellow writers for "Hello, Author" at helloauthor.substack.com. Links to all of his social media and publications can be found at authorgreene.com.

The Momismo Deal by Joe Novara

After circling downtown Palermo for twenty minutes we finally squeezed into a spot that required perching our passenger-side wheels up on a narrow sidewalk to allow room for traffic. Clothes lines spanned narrow streets between five-story tenements shading us with wife-beater undershirts and wide-load panties as we hoofed the last couple of blocks to Nino's.

Nino was my cousin Gianfranco's friend from university and his wife had just birthed their first child, a son. What luck. Something to celebrate. Not much else had gone Nino's way since graduating from architecture school in Bologna.

On Easter break from my 'semester abroad' in Florence, I got the backstory from Gianfranco on our ride up from Trapani. Seems, Nino had returned to his home town to offer his services only to find most of the architectural demand ran to cookie-cutter apartment buildings constructed by 'connected' developers which Nino wasn't. His career never got off the ground. Poor guy had to settle for helping a buddy with green grocer sales at rotating market days around the city while he resumed a languishing courtship with his pre-university girlfriend, Mariella. Between biological clocks and insistent parents, they finally married and, good news, little Massimo was the result. Bad news, they had to live with his parents in the bowels of the city.

When we got to his building, I almost reached for a holy water font it felt so much like a church—the gray marble floor worn from centuries of traffic, the cool damp and muffled street noise. But instead of the smells of beeswax and incense, I got smacked with the tenement fug of dirty socks and composting garbage with a whiff of garlic and basil. I breathed through my mouth as we mounted the stone steps, staying on the worn groove in the center and gingerly fingering the sticky, wrought-iron banister on the way to the fifth-floor landing.

If I let my imagination run, I could pretend we were in a medieval palazzo...which it sort of was, come to find out, when Nino ushered us into a regal, high ceilinged bedroom where his wife was propped up in a four-poster letto matrimoniale. Probably the same bed where it all started nine months ago. Mariella's post-partum trousseau was a study in white—a bookend to her wedding day. And there she was, hair just so, chin up—queen for a day.

Nino was a blue-beard, cleft-chinned, handsome man. His wife rather ordinary. I was puzzled by the mismatch until I recalled the cliché that Italian men married plain women so the home front would be secure while they played the field. But, as I looked at Mariella, there was no denying she was striking, in a glowing way. She seemed to say, 'I worked hard to get to this moment—waiting for Nino to finish school, carrying this baby all those months. And now look, I made a son for my husband, for my family, for all of us. Aren't I something? And now all I have to do is spend all my time raising this beautiful boy. That's my job.'

That's when the gramma swooped in to burp the baby and hold him in the crook of her arm for all to see. Next, she made a grand production of changing his barely dampened diaper and pausing for a dramatic moment to give one and all a good look at the fresh, new, family jewels nesting there. From our station behind the cookies and brandy table, I watched Nino's father glory in his grandson's endowment—a worthy link in the family line. On cue, we all toasted the new parents with a cin-cin.

As I brought my glass down, a young woman entered the room carrying a basket of plump purple figs. She hunched her shoulders, "Scusi," she whispered as if afraid to be intruding. She glanced quickly at Nino then to Mariella. "Posso?" she asked, seeking permission to approach Mariella. "

"Si, si. Grazie," Mariella's mother said, accepting the fruit and setting it on the table next to the bed. Mariella nodded in thanks.

"La mia collega," Nino announced to all. While she leaned over to peek at his baby, cooing in appreciation, I tried to picture her stacking pyramids of oranges with him. Pretty. She was truly attractive despite her plain-Jane clothes and hair done in a traditional, ageless bun. Why did I have the feeling that she had deliberately dressed-

down for the occasion? Her porcelain complexion colored slightly as she walked toward Nino and us. She accepted a cookie from Nino's dad and demurely munched it with arms crossed under her fulsome chest.

In the sudden gap in conversation, I could feel tension in the room. Something was going down. Mariella pretended to be smoothing lacey covers but was studying the woman. Nino was deliberately acting casual and disinterested—too much so. From where I stood, I watched the woman finish her cookie, nod politely to Mariella, walk behind Nino on the way to the door and slide her fingers below his shoulder blades. Nino's father caught it too. His face gleamed with the same smile he had for his grandson. Mariella noticed the 'that's my boy' grin.

Once the door closed behind Nino's friend, Mariella tossed a towel over the figs and shoved the basket to the back of the table. Then, all the while staring at Nino, she gathered her son, held him to her chest, and chin high, glared at her husband. People think Italians are loud and talkative, but they can also say a lot without uttering a word. And what I heard Mariella saying at that moment was, 'There is room in this marriage for shared affection. If you insist on caring for another woman, I won't object as long as you don't embarrass me—us. But I can share my affection too. And Massimo here, is going to get every bit that I'm denied. Deal?'

At the time, I remember thinking that when I completed my studies and started my counseling practice, Mariella in that marriage bed would be my icon for an array of family dysfunction that I'd tab—momismo. So, you can imagine my surprise, some thirty-five years later, when Gianfranco emailed me that Massimo was coming to Chicago with his wife and might I want to show them around. Massimo. My last memory of him was a bare butt in the air. Now, he was going to be attending a conference on Urban Planning and had an afternoon off before his flight back in the morning. Interesting. A chance to validate my smothering-mothering theories. Not that I hadn't treated enough effects of that dynamic over the years. Still, there might be an interesting wrinkle to be discovered. I hadn't published in a while.

I waited for Massimo and spouse in the Ritz Carlton lobby. I had no idea what he would look like as a grown man. But, when a couple dressed like a GQ cover stepped out of the elevator, I knew we had contact. Massimo had his father's cleft chin and elegant, tall frame wrapped in a form-hugging, blue serge suit, slick tan shoes and carefully mussed black hair. His wife was every bit his equal in good looks and style—so much for plain-wife cuckold insurance. She was short, or rather, short-waisted, over toned legs which made you think, grounded—a sports car versus a willowy model. Her mauve business suit with cerulean-blue silk blouse and matching pumps were set off by cascading auburn hair. Together they projected a striking look...what Italians would call, *bella figura*.

I stood and called out, "Ciao, ragazzi." It took a moment to register my greeting and decide who I must be, before Massimo hurried over with open arms and a welcoming grin. I broke out of the crushing abbraccio to offer my hand to the woman. She had a firm grip and held my eye for a two-count appraisal. "Gianna Palmeri," she finally said. Why did I think—politician or real estate agent? She must have decided I was all right and indulged me with a beaming grin. I liked this couple and looked forward to an enjoyable afternoon and evening together.

Planning for the afternoon and evening, I turned down their suggestion of dinner out and instead offered a homemade, traditional American meal. They gratefully accepted and were eager to fill the afternoon exploring the Miracle Mile and strolling along North Beach. Massimo dipped a finger in Lake Michigan and asked if he could drink it, so used, as he was, to the salty Mediterranean. Both were fascinated by a resale record store and bought enough LPs to need another suitcase for the flight home.

Dinner was a success. Ellie, hit it off with Gianna who spoke adequate English. Actually, their command of the English language was far better than my catch-phrase Italian. So, we babbled along with compare-and-contrast of life here and abroad. But as the meal progressed, Gianna became less and less animated. Over brownies and ice cream, Ellie noticed that our guest was slightly flushed and glassy-eyed. "Are you okay, dear?" she asked.

Before she could answer, Ellie had her palm on Gianna's forehead. "She's got a fever." While we were registering the implications for lodging and travel, Ellie disappeared and returned shaking an old-fashioned, glass thermometer.

"No, no. Fa niente," Gianna objected, palms out, before clenching her mouth shut.

"Don't be silly. We need to know how bad this is. Now open your mouth," she demanded while opening her own mouth as if demonstrating to a child.

Gianna dropped her jaw, as much in surprise as compliance, and Ellie shoved the thermometer under her tongue. I finished my dessert before the ice cream melted, Massimo following my lead.

"102," Ellie announced. "You're going straight to bed."

"But, we have our room..." Massimo began.

"So do we. Our daughter Lorie's queen-sized bed is all made-up and ready to go. Besides, who's going to take care of her in a hotel...room service?"

"My things..." Gianna faltered.

"For now, you can use one of my nightgowns and I'll get you snuggled in."

"They have a flight in the morning," I explained.

Ellie lowered her chin, "This lady is not going on any eight-hour flight with this kind of fever. So, forget that, Rich. Let's give her some aspirin and a good night's sleep and see in the morning. We're only a half hour from O'Hare and can drop them off if she's feeling better. In the meantime, you and Massimo can get their luggage and check out."

I looked at Massimo who raised his eyebrows and waggled his hand in a classic, 'mamma Mia' gesture. I took it as praise for Ellie's take-charge moves. On our way out the door, we watched our in-your-face politician being meekly and gratefully lead to the downstairs bedroom like a sick child, complete with rounded shoulders and 'poor me' sniffles.

Massimo and I shared a comfortable silence as we cruised down the Dan Ryan. Finally, he chuckled and remarked, "Your wife. She is a mother, no?"

"Oh, yeah," I replied. "And sometimes I know to get out of her way."

Massimo patted my knee in recognition. "Si, si...lasciala stare."

"Yeah, give them room," I muttered. We were connecting, Massimo and me.

I circled the block while he went to their room, packed their things and checked out. On the way back, we stopped for a beer at Maro's, my go-to pub. Nice place. Not a lot of noise. Just a few regulars and a ball game over the bar. You could talk there. So, we talked. Or rather I pumped him.

"How do Gianna and Mariella get along?"

"It's okay, now. At first, Gianna had to learn my mother's favorite food for me. But we are busy. Don't cook much at home." He flicked his hand in a 'what-can-you-do' gesture. "I eat my mother's food all my life now we go once a month for Sunday dinner." He rocks with a suppressed chuckle. "That satisfies my nostalgia for home cooking."

"That's it?" I asked, "just food?"

He smiled sheepishly, “Well, there was underwear too. My mother told Gianna to buy my socks and shorts at a certain store. We laughed when we got home.”

“I’m curious,” I continued. “You seem so well-adjusted.”

“Why should I not be?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I have my own theories about Italian men and their overweening mothers.” Massimo, circled his beer glass in the condensation puddle on the table. Perhaps I had gone too far.

He looked up, curiosity mixed with a little challenge in his eyes. “You are terapist, no? Tell me what you think about the Italian mothers.”

I saw no reason to hold back. “I think women, in this case Italian women, but it doesn’t matter, they come from all nationalities, who are stuck in a strong patriarchal society have few outlets for self-expression and opportunities for career development. Consequently, they focus all their creative energy and aspirations onto their children.”

“That is bad?”

“Let’s just say that I’ve seen consequences for the sons of these kinds of mothers.” Massimo, head turned askance, looked back at me through challenging eyes, wondering where I was going next. “In some cases, the boy becomes a man used to being coddled, doesn’t leave home until his thirties and marries a woman who will be a surrogate mother to him.”

“Or?” Massimo asked.

“Or, in order to free himself from her, he gets cruel toward her with a kind of love/hate and acts out with multiple sex partners.”

“That is what you think with Italian men? Maybe some yes. Maybe you are thinking about the time when I was a baby. We aren’t all the same toward women. Men have to give space. Take a chance.”

I nodded my head, concurring. “But then, you can get hurt.”

Massimo studied my face, reading me, as though I had revealed a pain. Well, what if I had. A counselor has to unload sometimes, too. And if not to a guy he hasn’t seen in years and probably never will again, who can he confide in?

“Accadere,” he acknowledged.

“Yeah, shit happens. Both ways.”

He tipped his glass toward me. We clinked. The kid is wise for his age. We had one more beer. He got into peanuts and throwing the shells on the floor. Then we drove home in silent companionship.

Next morning, Gianna still had a mild fever but was definitely on the mend so Massimo arranged for a late afternoon flight. After breakfast, Ellie and Gianna sat in our glassed-in porch and looked out on the extensive garden Ellie maintained. A cup of tea in one hand and a gardening magazine from a chair-high stack in the other, Gianna listened to Ellie carrying on about her hot house and her seedlings and favorite plants and how best to graft roses.

I went to my office for twenty minutes. When I came back, I paused outside the door when I heard Ellie holding forth in an aggrieved tone. I felt like a counselor-in-training observing a session behind a one-way window. Only in this case, I was the subject of the discussion.

“So, I’ve been working with plants all my life. Ever since I was a kid helping my grandma put coffee grounds around rose bushes...”

“That is good for them?”

“Uh-huh. It acts like compost, amends the soil.”

“And they wake-up from all the coffee,” Gianna giggled at her joke. She was feeling better.

Ellie went on. “I worked in a plant nursery during high school and later worked full time once Lorie and Tom were in school. I love plants and even got my master gardener certificate.”

“Eh, Bravo!” Gianna said.

“Yeah, but in the middle of all that, Rich, has to butt in.”

“I don’t understand, butt in.”

Ellie sighed. “Look. Flowers and gardening is my thing. I can share. He helps me with the heavy stuff like the compost pit.”

“Compost?...non capisco.”

“Doesn’t matter, what I’m getting at, is he has to compete with me. He just can’t let me have my own thing. Somehow, he needs to show me up, that he can do better than me. I studied hard to get my Master Gardener’s certificate and I volunteer at the Chicago Botanical Gardens. But what does he do? He goes and gets a degree in landscape design.”

Well, this is strange, to be the third party to your own dissection. I’m torn between wanting to barge in and defend myself and hearing the rest of Ellie’s complaint.

There is a pause before Gianna begins, “So, this is like the mother...she takes care of the children and cooks the food and washes clothes and the father, he goes to the work. But then, the father, he tries to do the mother’s work?”

I want to clarify that this goes beyond traditional roles and division of labour. But Ellie beats me to it. “No. this is more than that. Uhm, let me use an example. I know. Say your mother does something really well. Not just the usual mother stuff. Say, she is really good at making pastries.”

“My mother, yes, everyone love her cannoli and biscotti.”

“Exactly. So, what if your father starts making cannoli too and his own kind of biscotti?”

I wait for Gianna’s response. “That’s what butt in mean.”

“Yep,” Ellie says, “you got it. Look, you’ve got a couple of hours, why don’t you just rest. I’ll call you for lunch. Something light. Grilled cheese and chicken soup maybe?”

“Grazie.”

Well, damn. I go back to my office. Check emails. Receivables. Over lunch, Gianna looks fully recovered, if a little wan. I wonder if it’s my imagination that she catches my eye more than once. A kind of critical appraisal...or re-appraisal.

A former corporate trainer and writing instructor, Joe Novara and his wife live in Kalamazoo, Michigan, USA. Writings include novels, novellas, short stories, a memoir and various poems, and articles. They are available at: <https://freefloatingstories.wordpress.com/>

At the Picture House by Ellie-May Harvey

The film was described as Kafkaesque although to begin with he could not see why. A flickering white light cast dancing shadows across red velvet seats stained with fizzy drinks and other dark sticky substances. He sat in the middle, of his row and of the aisles, a direct centre or a beating heart of the perfectly square room. Whilst others sat munching and crunching on either side he remained still, he was here to observe rather than to enjoy. The film was written and directed by a newcomer. Someone who had been described as obsessed with realism but tortured by the allure of the mysterious and supernatural which wandered into his art with an unrestrained gait. He had never held the interest of others with the true-to-life, he preferred the strange and uncanny and his true desire was for works which escaped from his own world and into an unknown.

The film opened onto a shot of a forest drenched in snow, each branch encased into an icy tomb which was only broken up by the silhouette of jagged and broken turrets looming over the landscape. He thought it looked a bit like the holiday home of a friend he had once visited but on closer inspection he realised his mistake. The camera panned down and the sound of heavy panting crackled out of the speakers as the title character appeared. A face splayed on billboards across the land filled the screen with her milky white countenance and full dark lips stretched open as wide as her deep-set eyes. She continued to run leaving footprints in the white abyss which reflected off the pairs of glowing red eyes which tracked her from the trees.

The careful silence of the hall was suddenly shattered by a low buzzing. His and 40 other heads raised in annoyance and hunger to the insect which taunted them until it flew too close to one toothy mouth and was snatched up by one long-wet tongue. 41 heads returned to the screen.

A banging on a door with thin white hands was met with a sinister creak and a slow opening as the cinema doors parted and a figure rushed into their seat. In the black and white projection the heroine was creeping down a dusty corridor guarded by suits of armour which, did they? In what must have been a trick of the dark, their rusted heads appeared to follow her embroidered satin slippers which had remained strangely untouched by the thick snow. A bat flitting over their heads was met with distracted swatting by clawed hands as all members except him leant forward, even the munching of some indiscernible food by his neighbour slowed then died.

A shadow had appeared. A clocked villain who snuck forward as she remained distracted by her own stealth. There was a collective intake of breath as its long fingers reached out, he let out a sigh which was met with glares from yellow eyes. A scream seemed to erupt from all eight corners of the room but was actually contained to the two wizened speakers and the glares snapped back as her face, contorted with terror filled the screen.

She ran, their eyes and a pair of long toed boots pursued. Up spiralling staircases, through secret doors in forests of leather-bound books and down to the deepest, dampest, darkest dungeon where she finally stopped before one final door with one large keyhole. Whipping around she hugged the dark oak frame as she faced down the creature who with every step elongated until its head brushed the ceiling and its arms stretched out into a gross contortion of a hug. As it rose she kept her stance until her head was so far craned backwards her knees gave way and she crumpled to the floor.

A stretched smile ruptured the darkness that coated the rest of its face, that was mirrored in the grins of its viewers, as it reached spindly fingers into its cape and withdrew an iron key wrought with faces of pain and fear. With one hand now firmly grasped around her neck it inserted the key into the door and the room was illuminated with light which had been unknown to it for centuries. Its grin only spread as she twisted and fought, never accepting her fate until with a casual shove she disappeared through.

A moment of pure white which gradually faded into a technicolour rainbow of beige and salmon that sent the audience hissing back into their seats, it was only him whose eyes lightened and whose wide grin exposed long teeth which reflected the hues.

She was stuck. In a kitchen complete with rubber gloves, a state-of-the-art fridge and a husband reading the morning newspaper. The fear which had previously marred her face eroded into a petrifying hysteria as she banged on the painted white door. The viewers crumpled in on themselves, someone in front of him squealed and buried their head under their cloak. Breathless she collapsed to the floor, panicked eyes like an animal fixed on the man who was now peering at her over the top of his paper. Their eyes met and as she bared her teeth in a snarl, he offered a weak smile.

“Look, I know it’s short notice and I know how much you hate it but it’s my boss’s dinner and you know how much I need that promotion.” He put down the paper and leaned across the table at her, unknowing or uncaring of how she shrank away. A moment passed and in the silence she gathered her courage to launch a glob of spit across the room, the husband sighed and rose to his feet. Taking a few steps across he paused for a second before carefully planting a kiss on her cheek.

“Wear something pretty.”

And then he disappeared out the door, leaving her to her imprisonment as the screen faded to black.

It was only when the lights came back on in the theatre that the audience let out a breath they didn’t know they had been holding. Embarrassed smiles and shoving of friends masked their previous terror as they made their way to the exit. He was one of the last to leave. Turning his collar up against the howling gale and rain of the evening as he glanced up and down the twisted street for his coach. A black cat rubbing itself against his feet momentarily stole his attention before four black horses pulled up against the pavement and, with an almost supernatural speed, a top hat wearing driver leapt down to open the door. Taking care not to trap his horns on the entrance he ducked down into the black satin seats and allowed himself a momentary recollection which spawned a shiver of excitement and fear before being swept off into the dark and stormy night.

Swipe Right on the Afterlife by Melissa Maize

“What’s wrong? Is everything OK?” Rhona whispered.

“No, definitely not. I do not have a single shred of clothing to wear.”

“Oh my God.”

“I know,” Aisling agreed, glad Rhona was grasping the direness of the situation. “I mean, I considered the blue dress, the one that’s backless to distract from my complete lack of cleavage, but I thought that might look like I’m trying too hard. Then, I decided on my denim jumpsuit, you know, the one that makes me look like I actually know how to change a tire? Anyway, I realized that if things did get a little frisky, that thing requires an advanced engineering degree to unzip-“

“I told you to only call me at work if there was an emergency!” Rhona said, exasperated.

“This IS an emergency! I’m about to meet a man who very well might be my future husband, I can’t go dressed as if I’ve just hired a babysitter for my eight cats!” Aisling cried.

“I’m hanging up now.”

“Rhona, I swear- “Aisling was cut off as the line went dead. She cursed Rhona for abandoning her in the middle of her existential wardrobe crisis.

Half an hour later, clad in a simple black dress that she decided was classic, she rushed out the door. After meeting on one of the many soul-crushing dating apps Aisling had signed up for, she and Jack had been messaging for a little over a week. Unlike many of the “Sup?”s she had gotten, Jack’s messages were witty and thoughtful, and he didn’t make her wait several agonizing hours before replying. He taught History at a secondary school, had a dog named Bowie and a fondness for Seinfeld GIFs.

She power walked from the train station to the restaurant and could no longer feel her pinky toe, but at least she was on time. Jack had picked the place, a Mexican dive called The Last Stand. He had lived in LA for several years and said it was the only place in London with tacos half as good and margarita’s twice as strong.

The waiter took Aisling to their table and she spent five minutes composing a light-hearted text to Jack, letting him know she had arrived. Painfully aware of her solitude she began to examine the menu like a sacred text.

Half an hour later, she had finished her drink and memorized the starters, but still hadn’t heard anything from Jack. She told herself not to panic, there was probably a good reason why he wasn’t there yet. The waiter came by to refill her water and she felt her cheeks color with shame. She was certain they were all looking at her with pity, the sad single woman at a table for two. Sensing the threat of tears, she quickly threw some money on the table and bolted out of the restaurant. Back in the safety of her apartment, surrounded by rejected outfits optimistically strewn across her floor, she finally gave into the tears.

The following evening Aisling was debriefing Rhona on the mysterious case of the disappearing date.

“What a WANKER.” Rhona said, slamming her wine glass on the table forcefully.

“Yeah, well, that’s dating nowadays. Someone seems perfect online and then they leave you weeping into your complimentary tortilla chips.” She sighed and took a generous sip of her drink.

“Well, at least you know what he’s really like now, and you never have to speak to him again.”

Aisling avoided her gaze.

“Oh God Ais, you didn’t message him again, did you?” Rhona asked.

“I just want to know what happened! I want some kind of explanation for why he vanished like that. I know it sounds crazy, I know I hardly know him, but it just doesn’t seem like him. We were exchanging memes, for Christ’s sake!”

Rhona put a sympathetic hand on her shoulder. “I know this sounds harsh, and it probably isn’t what you want to hear right now, but this guy is a dick. He left you waiting for forty-five minutes without so much as a flimsy train-delay excuse. He doesn’t deserve you, so I think you should move on.”

“Ouch.”

“As Lizzo would say, “Truth Hurts.” Luckily, I know the cure for all heartbreak.”

Aisling forced a smile. “What’s that?”

“Tequila.”

Several shots later, after confessing their undying love for each other over kebabs, Aisling parted ways with Rhona and stumbled home. In the comfort of her bed, in spite of every self-help article telling her not to, she clicked on Jack’s Instagram profile. Scrolling through his photos, she noticed some new comments on his recent posts.

“We miss you Jack.”

“Can’t believe he’s gone.”

“RIP.”

Frantically, Aisling typed his name into Google. Her heartbeat slowed as she clicked on a news article, published only a couple of hours ago.

MOTORCYCLE CRASH CLAIMS YOUNG TEACHER’S LIFE.

It had happened only a few blocks from where they were supposed to have their first date.

“Aisling? You OK?” Her boss, Mira, was staring at her, concerned.

“Sorry” Aisling shook her head. “What were you saying?”

“Here, why don’t you take lunch? We can pick this up once you’re back.” Mira said sympathetically.

“Thanks.” She had been distracted for the last couple weeks, constantly finding her thoughts wandering back to Jack. Even though she had barely known him, hadn’t even met him, she felt herself missing what might have been.

After aimlessly wandering for a few blocks she found herself standing outside The Last Stand. It was quieter during the day, but still eerily familiar. Aisling kept thinking about the last time she had been there, the initial hope that bled into humiliation. She began to wish he had stood her up. He might still be alive.

In the restaurant bathroom she splashed water on her face to calm the swell of emotions inside her. As she looked into the mirror her breath caught- standing behind her, was Jack.

“Don’t freak out” he said.

“WHAT THE FU-“

“Shh!” Jack tried urgently to quiet her.

“Oh my God, I’m having a breakdown. I’ve gone full 2007 Britney Spears.” Aisling groaned.

“You’re not having a breakdown.”

“Oh, very reassuring, coming from a dead man!”

Jack smiled. “I knew we would have gotten along.”

“I need to call the police. Or my therapist. Wait, did you fake your death? Are you on the run from the law or something?”

“Nope, I’m really dead” Jack assured her.

“So you’re a-“

“Ghost.” Jack nodded.

“Oh God, I can’t breathe.”

“Me either.”

“This isn’t funny!” Aisling went to punch him on the shoulder, but her hand went through him. She shook her hand in disbelief as a cold wave swept through her body.

“What, how, what?” She stuttered.

“Look, I don’t know about this stuff either, most of my knowledge of apparitions comes from The Sixth Sense. But I do know a few things. I can’t leave this restaurant, otherwise I kind of disappear, for a while. Also, no one can see me- except you. I’ve had quite a bit of time to think about this. Most ghosts are stuck on Earth because of unfinished business, right?”

Aisling managed a nod.

“I think that’s you. Our date. I think that’s my unfinished business.” Jack said softly.

Aisling stared at him. He looked just like his photos. Still, there was something not quite right, like she was viewing him through a pane of glass.

“I know I stood you up last time, but I think I had a pretty good excuse.”

She smiled. “Fine. But you’re buying.”

They agreed to meet after the restaurant was closed, so Aisling wouldn’t draw too much attention talking to an empty chair. He knew the staff rarely locked the back door so it would be easy for her to sneak in.

The place was quiet when she got there, so different from its usual packed scene of Londoners reveling in their post-work freedom and tequila. Jack was waiting for her at a table, he stood when he saw her.

“You look great.”

“Thanks.” Aisling had opted not to wear the dress she was planning on that night, instead she went for the brightest thing she owned, a 60s-style yellow cocktail dress.

“Um, I would pull the chair out for you, but...” He swiped his hand seamlessly through the solid back of the chair. “Also, there are no waiters. Or food.”

“That’s OK. Just show me where the booze is.”

After stealing the bar’s fanciest tequila bottle, they settled down across from each other.

“So, um, tell me about yourself. Your likes, dislikes.” Aisling took a swig from the bottle.

“Let’s see. Likes, dogs. Dislikes... motorcycles.”

Aisling laughed so hard she choked on her tequila. “This is all an elaborate ruse to get out of paying for dinner, isn’t it?”

He smiled. “Am I that transparent?”

As Aisling worked her way through the better part of the tequila bottle, they discovered they had a lot more in common than what was on their profiles. The date became one of those rare occasions when someone you’ve just met seems instantly familiar. Both of them shared a view of the world that was reluctantly optimistic, they pretended to like pretentious indie rock albums but mostly listened to the cheesy pop music of their childhoods, they had both tried, and failed, to go vegan. Jack had gotten into teaching because he hadn’t known what to do after he graduated, but accidentally fell in love with it.

“Especially the Summer holidays.”

“I thought about going into teaching” Aisling admitted. “But then I fell in love with something else.”

“What?”

“Money.”

Jack laughed and Aisling felt a warm glow of pride. “No, actually I sort of stumbled into my job too. I started off as an Intern because they promised us free clothes, then I guess kind of like you, I got really into it. Finding vintage clothes, discovering these hidden gems, matching them with customers. It’s kind of like bringing history back to life.”

“I know what you mean. People thought it was kind of weird, or pointless, studying History. Maybe it was nostalgic, but I loved it, all those stories are like little threads, and if you follow them, they lead you here. One day, I want to-“

He stopped. Aisling watched his face fall as he remembered that “one day” didn’t exist for him anymore, that there were no days past tonight.

“You OK?” she asked softly.

“Yeah. It’s weird, I don’t feel dead. Being stuck here in whatever this is, this limbo, it feels like I’m on some sort of paranormal vacation that will just end, and I can get back to my normal life.”

“I wish that were true.” Aisling knew it was selfish, but she couldn’t help thinking about how unfair this all was, getting to spend time with this incredible man, only to know that the only thing they could share in their future was grief.

“So” Jack cleared his throat. “Would I have made it to the second date?”

“Eh, I don’t know, this conversation feels a little dead.” He laughed and they were both grateful for the change in subject.

“So, you have a brother, is he-“

“Alive?”

Aisling rolled her eyes. “I was going to say single.”

“Sadly not, he’s the proud father of a baby who looks strikingly like Bruce Willis” Jack informed her.

“My sister’s got twins and unfortunately she doesn’t find my Shining references too amusing.” Aisling poured the last of the tequila into her glass, wondering how long she could make it last.

“Do you want kids?” he asked her.

“Yeah, I think so. Right now I just want a- a teammate, you know? Like that person you can make eye contact with at a dinner party and you both know it’s time to get the fuck out of there, or you can rant to about your boss or your mum and you know they won’t judge you because they do the exact same thing with you. I don’t know, does that make any sense?”

She looked up at him and stopped talking suddenly. He was fading, his outline no longer solid, the color of his eyes, his skin, his hair, becoming less vibrant.

“What’s happening?” she asked, trying to keep the panic out of her voice.

“I think I’m, um, going.”

“So that’s it?” she cried.

“I think so.” Jack stood up. “For what it’s worth, I had a great time.”

“So did I.”

“I’ll put in a good word for you upstairs” he assured her.

Aisling squeezed her eyes shut, fighting tears. “Jack, I-“

When she opened her eyes, he was gone.

The sun woke her, a rare sight in London October. Aisling could see it fighting stubbornly against the threatening clouds. Although her mood was better suited for staying in bed, she decided to make the most of it and head to Hampstead Heath.

She wasn’t the only one with that idea, the grass was dotted with brave people sunbathing and families enjoying picnics. Aisling closed her eyes, savoring the sun on her skin, when suddenly she felt something wet on her leg. Looking down, she saw a small brown terrier licking her.

“Bowie, leave the nice lady alone!” An exasperated man cried, pushing his stroller over to them. “Sorry about that.”

Aisling bent down to stroke Bowie’s scruffy head. “It’s fine.”

“I’m new to the whole dog thing” he explained apologetically.

“It’s easy, just play some Ziggy Stardust and he’ll come running.”

The man laughed and she saw his eyes crinkled in the same way Jack’s did.

“Cute baby” she said, gazing into the stroller.

“Thanks, he’s just been cast in the next Die Hard.”

Aisling smiled and gave Bowie a final scratch, reluctantly turning to leave.

“Have a nice day” he said, clipping Bowie’s leash back on.

“You too.” She watched them walk away and turned to face the sun.

Melissa Maize is a writer based in Hong Kong and author of several short stories and screenplays. When she's not writing (or suffering from writer's block), she's watching sci-fi films, reading and cooking.

The Wrath of Progress by Shivaji K. Moitra

Ram Sagar had been driving his colourfully decorated carriage through the picturesque country roads ever since he had been a young man and he was thoroughly content with his laid back life.

There was no dearth of passengers who alighted from the trains that trundled up to the small riverside railway station Shankara and limbered up towards the rows of horse-drawn carriages which took them to their respective villages dotting the banks of the mighty Narmada.

The hilly terrain interspersed with lush green fields of mustard and corn irrigated by the inexhaustible foaming white waters of the great river offered a treat to the eyes and a comfortable life for the ten thousand humble people living mostly on agriculture.

While reclining on his couch and waiting for the three passenger trains that halted briefly at the small station everyday, he often glanced over the pages of the newspapers that arrived a day late.

He was aware of the developments sweeping the nation. Most of the news though didn't really excite him since those proved incomprehensible to his simple and barely literate mind. But quite a few stirred him up and made him wonder at the future of the country even as some others caught his imagination. Among those was the news that the government had begun work on building the great dam over the river Narmada. It said that the dam when complete would not only help irrigate large swathes of parched lands but also produce enough hydroelectric power for some ten thousand villages and half a dozen cities. That seemed a welcome development and he didn't find anything alarming in the project.

However, a couple of years later, one winter morning Ram Sagar squirmed in his seat when his fellow carriage drivers told him something that unsettled him. The news over radio and television revealed to the public that the monster project when ready could drown some sixty villages in the vicinity of the dam and even the railway station of Shankara.

Ram Sagar though wasn't afraid. He believed that the colossus project wouldn't be ready in his lifetime given the usual slothful progress of any government project and bureaucratic torpor. But he was wrong.

As the winter progressed and a pleasant chill kissed the evening air, monstrous machines with grotesque arms and claws and their helmeted masters arrived from nowhere on goods trains and set up tents close to the railway station.

In the following days, the drivers and workers climbed upon the machines and embarked upon their jobs at multiple locations along the course of the river flowing not far from Ram Sagar's village Chuk-chuk.

With terrifying noise and ruthless efficiency they mowed down the forests, gnawed at the earth like demons and flattened down the ravines.

Thereafter, huge blasts that shook the earth could be heard from the hills some twenty kilometers away as the construction workers ripped the hills to build roads and embankments. The frightening pace of their work multiplied the furrows in Ram Sagar's brow and made him wary of the great turmoil waiting to devour the entire

neighbourhood and displace the villagers like him. He knew that progress often rolled forward over the chests of the meek and the weak and the prospect of losing his home and livelihood in the near future really scared him.

In just four years since the work on the project began, the fast changing landscape cast ominous shadows upon some fifty riverine villages around Shankara. The hillocks and ravines began to disappear under tons of mud and rocks and the pastures and rolling glades where their cattle grazed and the children played earlier turned into the construction company's dumping grounds for the mountains of stone chips, sand, cement and other material. Moreover, the gigantic concrete pillars and fortifications built upon the river diverted its flow into a gorge and created a large and deep lake that could spill over during the monsoon rains and drown vast swathes of the sugarcane, wheat and maize fields.

As concerns mounted among the villagers about the future of their agricultural lands and their very existence, they got united under the banner of various social activists to voice their concerns and demands.

But neither their local government nor the state government seemed eager to listen to their apprehensions and grievances. Soon numerous protests began to be staged by the villagers faced with their imminent displacement. But the local administration deemed their protests as anti-establishment and against the government policies for development of the state. So the desperate villagers turned violent and vent their anger at the contractors and the local government by blocking the railway line and the roads and torching the heavy machinery and equipments owned by the construction company. The government retaliated by firing teargas shells and even bullets at the agitators.

Ram Sagar watched in horror as regular conflicts between the protestors and police replaced the peace and tranquility that reigned supreme across the district until just a few years ago.

Soon rights activists, lawyers and politicians descended upon the place in hordes. And trailing them arrived the media people with their cameras, lights and bizarre gadgets. They all professed their support for the agitating villagers and promised to highlight their plights and concerns before the country and the entire world. But they also brought with them the dangerous elements of the modern urban society. The timber mafia, the poachers, the cheaters and the human traffickers came in batches and in various disguises to fish in the troubled waters.

However, in spite of the protests, marches, meetings and violent conflicts over the project, the construction work proceeded at its own pace.

Months elapsed, seasons changed and years chased one another as time continued its eternal journey. But the ground realities did not change for the better. In fact, the concrete walls and embankments rose higher and higher at a fast pace and the buttresses, sluice gates and spill ways gradually became prominent.

One rainy afternoon, as Ram crouched in a corner of the platform, the Station Master strolled up to him and asked, "Did you visit the dam site recently?"

Ram Sagar cast a dismal glance at the Station Master and shook his head.

Nearing his forties, the Station Master was a jovial and affable person. He sat down beside Ram Sagar and said, "Yesterday I went there along with our senior officers. It's a spectacular sight. Fed by the rains, the fuming river is pouring into the mighty dam with such a deafening noise and the water level is rising fast."

"How soon are we going to drown?" Ram Sagar enquired sombrely.

The Station Master looked at Ram Sagar gravely and asked, "Don't you know that the countdown has begun?"

Ram Sagar responded with a long sad sigh.

"The trains will chug into this station for the last time on the last day of this month. They're going to relocate it some 30 kilometres to the north," he intoned.

Ram Sagar gazed mournfully at the Station Master's dispassionate face and asked, "Sir, where do you think you're going to be transferred?"

"My order has already come; I have been working at remote locations for quite a while. Now I shall be returning to my home district," the Station Master replied with a smile on his lips.

Ram Sagar resigned himself to his fate and continued to drive his passengers to their destinations until the last train that arrived into the station.

However, driven by a strange nostalgia, he would put the harness on his horse and fasten it to his carriage as usual and drive up to the abandoned station like a ghost once or twice a week. It had been a daily ritual for him for decades which he found very hard to discard so abruptly. Having arrived at the derelict station he would climb upon the deserted platform and jump down on the rusty tracks and gaze as far as the rails appeared in view. But he could see no moving object anywhere over it. He sat down on the rails and wept like a child. Yet, except for perhaps those stray cows and goats wandering merrily across the unguarded platform, there was not a soul to take notice of his dismay.

A few months later, a police van with a loudspeaker mounted on its bonnet drove into the villages surrounding the derelict station. They also came to Chuk-Chuk and announced, "This is an important announcement. Villagers, please listen carefully. The sluice gates of the dam will drop down very soon and the water level of the dam will rise to its full capacity. All the villages within a radius of five kilometres of the dam may gradually drown as a consequence and you too are going to drown like rats if you do not leave this place quickly along with your belongings and your cattle and shift towards the high grounds in the north or west within a week."

The poor villagers realized they had finally lost the unequal battle with the authorities for justice and survival. So they quietly but reluctantly left their homes and farmlands behind and moved out of their villages with their meagre belongings and their cattle in a procession of bullock carts.

In the end, only the very old, the crippled and the insane were left behind. But Ram Sagar was the lone exception. He decided to stay back, because the cascading river, the gorges cut in the marble rocks, the ravines, the dense jungles, the meandering dusty streets and the wooden bridges, everything had been an inseparable part of his life since his childhood. He felt he could not adapt to a different means of livelihood, an entirely alien lifestyle and survive among unfamiliar people at some distant and unknown place in the sunset years of his life. In any case, he knew he had no duties to perform, no obligations to keep and no pressing need to stay alive. After all, he was unmarried and alone.

On the designated day, a serpentine convoy of hooting cars with flashing lights arrived and the Chief Minister descended upon the awe-inspiring Site Office of the Project along with his cronies, bureaucrats and a host of media people.

After a brief ceremony, watched upon by only the bureaucrats, the police, the state and district level political leaders and the media, the CM pressed a green button inside the large Machine Room and the huge sluice gates slid down and shut tight.

As millions of cusecs of foaming water continued to flow into the reservoir at a tremendous speed, the swirling waters began to rise with a peculiar rumble. Within days, the rising water drowned the clumps of trees, open grounds, slopes, glades, gullies and the farming lands situated within the massive parapet walls and the hills.

The rising water engulfed one village after another as it surged ferociously to submerge 40000 hectares of forest and arable land.

When the water entered his house and floated his wooden cot, Ram Sagar harnessed both his horses and jumped on to his carriage and tugged at the reins. The horses broke into a trot and then galloped along the street steadily climbing up towards the erstwhile station. But the rapidly swirling waters chased them all the while. It ruthlessly drowned anything and everything that came on its way and surged ahead. Its rumble frightened the horses so much that they struggled to break free from their harnesses and threatened to overturn the dangerously swaying carriage.

When Ram Sagar reached the wooden bridge above a stream flowing down from the hills, he pulled the reins. Then he patted and kissed his horses for the last time and set them free.

As the horses bolted up the hillside, he waited for the inevitable like a resolute soldier. Soon the rising water encircled him.

Standing alone on the bridge in waist-deep water, he gazed wistfully at the swirling sea of water all around. Then turning his eyes towards the setting sun, he folded his hands to pray for the last time.

None but the crimson sky and the old priest of the Shiva temple perched atop the hill were the only witnesses to Ram Sagar's heart-rending final moments.

FLASH-FICTION

Gavin's Thing by Susannah Cherry

'Morning my lovelies. Gather here for the goss. Bring me coffee. Have you all witnessed saddo of the day? With that thing on his head?'

'What thing?'

'Who?'

'Kevin. Keith? Begins with K definitely. I think. Doesn't matter. He's not, you know. He's only come into work in this helmet thing on his head.'

'Like, why?'

'Who is he?'

'Accounts, I think. Or IT. No clue. He's not, you know. I mean, he's not like someone you say hi to or anything. But today, peeps, he's sporting a whopping helmet.'

'Oh, this I have to see.'

'Follow me.'

'Goss gather! Helmet updates here! Won't take it off, apparently. HR had words. He says – get this – it protects his energies.'

'Hah. Wow.'

'Who is he again?'

'Kevin. IT.'

'No, Gavin. Definitely Gavin. Remember him at the party? He's wallpaper all night then ten to twelve, elbows on the dance floor. Wouldn't stop. Bouncers had to haul him out. Pretty cool, actually. Sort of.'

'Oh him! You said he was sad.'

'I thought he was cool.'

'You said he was desperate.'

'He's cool. He does his own thing. Doesn't care.'

'K. So...what? Is he coming to pizza night?'

'I don't know. Have you asked him?'

'Hi Gavin!'

‘Yo Gav!’

‘Morning, Gav. What a night, eh?’

‘Did he say hi to you?’

‘Not really. Maybe caught my eye.’

‘I think he smiled at me.’

‘He doesn’t even look wasted. After last night. I can’t move.’

‘It’s the helmet. The energy.’

‘Did he let you try it? You tried it didn’t you?’

‘It. Yeah. It...yeah.’

‘Gather for goss. Apparently, he’s in with HR again today.’

‘Oh, they’re not going to ban the helmet? I’ll stand with him.’

‘I’ll helmet up myself.’

‘Shall we...?’

‘Hey Gav – good luck.’

‘Yeah, good luck in there, mate.’

‘Go Gav!’

‘Head of Division?’

‘Head of European Division.’

‘Nein? Avec helmet?’

‘Si.’

‘Bloody hell.’

‘They say it lends distinction. It’s like a company thing. He’ll get us noticed. Shows we’re edgy. Bit open. Bit out there. Conference in Prague. Gav in his helmet. Not going to forget him, are they? If they talk about him, they talk about us.’

‘It’s a clear brand booster.’

‘Go, Gav.’

‘Was it fun last night?’

‘OK-ish. Gavin never showed.’

‘Aw!’

‘Better offer, apparently.’

‘What, company yacht?’

‘The same. Party till dawn.’

‘No way.’

‘So way.’

‘Our Gav?’

‘Hmm. Less of the our.’

‘Morning, Gavin, sir.

‘Coffee, sir?’

‘Congratulations on the take-over, sir.’

‘What a coup!’

‘A word, sir? Of course.’

‘Gather round, everyone. Helmets off, please. Yes, off. Leave them in the crate by the door. Health and safety update. Applicable to all departments. Actionable immediately. Helmets are banned on the premises and off within working hours. They are distracting, cumbersome and counter to company profile, globally. Dictate from Sir Gavin. Yes, you heard right. If you want to keep your job.’

Susannah Cherry lives near London and writes short fiction. Recent works have appeared in Short Edition's story dispensers on Paris Metro and won the HG Wells Prize 2021. Her collection, Hot Kitchen Snow, won the Scott Prize and is available on Amazon.

Virginia Woolf's Reflection by Frances Valdes

I pause on the bridge where she stood, mesmerised, thinking of her last thoughts. Paralysed by the possibilities. The darkness of the world fed her illness, but the river ended her life. Its beauty couldn't ease her pain.

I long to enjoy the river's beauty, but can only think of her. Did the German bombers fly over the river on their way to sow fear in her City? Did they feed the voices in her head? Why do I think of a woman I only know through words; whose life is so different from mine? Why don't I see the light glint in the water, the fish dart in the reeds? Why do I not hear the birds, and admire the beauty of the hills? Why am I looking for her?

The Ouse; so sustaining, so fatal. It flows through fields, between Downs, under bridges, to the chalk cliffs. It nourishes crops. It supplies the brewery upstream, and the harbour downstream. It employs, and feeds. It's a playground for hobby sailors, fishermen, and walkers. It brings life to those it touches, but took her life.

There is a disturbance in the water and a face mask floats under the bridge. I watch as it is carried downstream, between the hills, through the fields, to the sea. The river's course is unaffected by the mask, as it was impervious to the distant bombs.

My reflection briefly surfaces then disappears. I imagine her lying on the riverbed below. My darkness is blackened by a world nearly 80 years older. My chest tightens as I realise my daily bathe in nature is soon to finish. My world is falling apart. I have felt this way before, but now I have a reason to be anxious. Now, my irrational mind has rational fears.

I don't hear the voices she heard. I don't hear the bombs falling. My world has not been devastated by war between people. I am afraid because of another kind of battle. I am falling in a different world. A world where I can't hug, where I can't work, where I can't meet with people who care about me. My exercise brings me to the bridge over the Ouse, and I can't stop thinking of her, wondering if the water salved her pain.

The river did not deviate when Virginia took her last breath, when the blood in her veins slowed, when her heart stopped. Its course did not vary when her life was surrendered, neither will it be altered when my life is over. Some days this reassures me. Some days it fills me with despair.

Doomsayer by R.F. Marazas

An annual event: on a day in October Cooley came to Setonsville with his message. The old man rode his rickety bicycle down from the hills above Axton, pedaled onto the shoulder of Route 59 eastbound a half-mile to the turnaround bus stop at the Axton College entrance, padlocked his bike to the guardrail, and boarded the bus for the two-mile trip through Axton to Setonsville. No one remembered Cooley coming to town any other time.

This year there was doubt about the event, as October came and days passed without Cooley appearing. The Axton County Chronicle reported the event for years, one front-page column, although editor Hal Coffey knew nothing more about Cooley than anyone else in town. This year one-line blurbs graced the front page every morning: Where's Cooley This Year? Anyone Seen Cooley? Is Cooley Coming?

On the last day, he stumbled off the bus and blinked in the noon sunlight. Cooley wore army fatigues and combat boots. His full gray beard covered what could have been a handsome face, and his gray hair under the fatigue cap was pulled back in a ponytail that hung down past his shoulder blades. From one oversized jacket pocket, he pulled a flask, uncapped it, and took a long drink. Under Cooley's left arm was a rectangular slab of planking crudely hand-printed and nailed to a weathered picket fence post. This year the sign again read: THE END IS COMING.

Cooley hoisted his sign and stepped off the sidewalk and strolled down the middle of Center Street through Setonsville's business district. Lunchtime traffic slowed or drove around him. People stopped and stared and waved as if watching a parade. Down the street, the mayor and his aides started to enter the Forest Hotel for lunch in the lounge, but the mayor turned and laughed at Cooley marching.

Cooley raised his sign high and shook it at the sky in defiance. The crowd roared. A chill breeze swept down the street. Dark clouds roiled up to blot the sun and swallow the town. Crowd noise became a collective gasp as waves of wind blasted through and stripped last leaves from trees, flinging them like buckshot. Cooley shouted as the wind tore the sign from his grasp and hurled it down Center Street. An explosive rumble boomed and the sky split open. Nickel-sized hail rained down, pockmarking car roofs and hoods and gouging chips in windows. Traffic stopped and the crowd scattered and dived into storefront alcoves. The mayor and his aides wedged into the hotel doorway. Cooley danced and laughed.

The end of the world lasted five minutes. Black clouds wisped away and the sun broke through and quiet descended so quickly it hurt ears. People emerged from their hideaways. The mayor mock-wiped his brow. "Wow Cooley, you came close this year, thanks for holding off so the kids can go trick-or-treating tonight." Everyone howled laughter. Cooley stuck his tongue out and shook his fist. "You just wait 'til next year!"

R.F. Marazas is the author of several published stories including The Toast Family's Magic Radio, Pelham's Saturday Morning Frolics, The Duck, and Beyond My Window. He has been writing creative fiction for 60 years and lives in Belvidere in the USA. He loves to write about slightly odd situations.

In Soup by Hannah Retallick

Cream of tomato, at that restaurant we frequented in the beginning, by the water's edge in Stratford Upon Avon. You remember, don't you?

Celery, what a mistake that was on the happiest day of our lives – sewage water, according to your mother, and she was quite right, of course.

Parsnip, dead of winter, a kind friend bringing us help consisting of thick warm sweetness, with a hint of pepper to cut through your sleep deprivation and strange moods.

Creamy mushroom and truffle, made anxiously to impress me, as though I needed impressing or another reason to return at night. I always did, didn't I?

Carrot and coriander, when I arrived home early to prove it with a sliced finger and salty stock powder. You rocked him back and forth at the table, perhaps wondering even then whether I was trustworthy. Your helpful friend had never received a second glance from me, had she, and yet all you would eat was a steaming bowl of paranoia.

Happy now?

Bocelli and stilton, the first week.

Winter vegetables, the second week.

Chicken, the third week, because they're meant to heal, chicken and time. Not sure it's working, to be honest – which I always have been, haven't I? But what about you? You hid it all and stole my son.

This stuff's nauseating. I get up, throw the chicken soup into the sink, and watch until it drains away: our lives, our family and your cold, gazpacho heart.

Hannah Retallick is from Anglesey, North Wales. She was home educated and then studied Creative Writing with the Open University. She was shortlisted in the Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival, the Cambridge Short Story Prize, the Bedford International Writing Competition, and the Fish Publishing Short Story Prize.
<https://www.hannahretallick.co.uk/>

He Kept Walking by Raveena Weerabahu

He trudged down the rank corridor as he made his way past the strangers with vacant eyes – a ghost in the night.

A child's eyes, full of fragile innocence met his before returning to the model train in hand. He wouldn't know yet how heroes could be villains with painted masks and how dreams were the musings of the naïve.

He kept walking.

The world around him in sharper focus – his sense seemingly having their last hurrah. Yet it took him a moment to comprehend the gummy smile of the young boy who held the door as he stepped past. His mother graced him with a tired smile before disappearing into the stale warmth of the building ahead.

He kept walking.

His eyes on the crossing ahead he was startled by the gloved hand that found its way into his.

“I’ll help mister!” the young voice insisted as he was marched safely in bemused puzzlement over and across the icy street before his little companion dashed across to help the next unsteady soul.

He kept walking.

Plodding slowly through an alien city on familiar roads to the station that had stood the test of time. A young couple hurrying past seemed to hesitate as he passed by. “It’s cold out grandpa... take this”, the young girl endearingly intoned wrapping a scarf around his neck before rejoining her partner and hurrying on.

He kept walking.

Onto the rickety platform and down to the tracks he went – the faint rumble at his feet. His eyes saw not the train but the memory of a smile; his hand felt the imprint of a little gloved hand, and his ears rang with a stranger’s endearment. He hadn’t been invisible today.

And so he kept walking.

This time with a smile.

Raveena Weerabahu is a student of architecture from Sri Lanka who dabbles in creative writing as a pastime. In an academic environment where writing takes the forms of reports, essays and reviews she endeavours to experiment with creative writing inspired by her moods, musings or conversations that spark her interests.

Strangers by Rachael Fagan

She slides into the room silently, eyes darting to every corner, scrutinising every inch of space. The large, golden pools gulping in her surroundings, shivering.

I speak in rainbow tones I do not feel. Those eyes stare into my soul, questioning my intent, my integrity. I meet her gaze. If I look away, I’ll lose her. My overwhelming desire to chew on my nails passes, something I hate that I always do when I’m nervous.

Her long fingers grasp the lace of her stained hoodie, twisting, raising it to her mouth, chewing. The flash of a quick smile, but her eyes don’t comply. She is gauging me, testing and prodding to discover my intent.

We sit. She, perched opposite as if ready for flight, me conscious of any body language that might signify defence. The other woman in the room sits slightly apart, calm and serene.

“Can you tell me something about yourself?” I ask softly, the woman’s strange words washing over the noise outside as I speak. My heartbeat loud in my ears, competing.

Gazing down at her feet, speechless, twirling the wet lace between long fingers. Why would she trust me? I reach slowly into the bag at my feet, pulling out the grimy arm of a stuffed bear. I hold it out towards her. The movement is shockingly fast, aggressive almost, desperate. She wrenches it from my grasp and grabs it to her, hiding it away from view, scowling through tears. I don’t even know her name.

My hand over my heart, "I'm Janet." I say quietly. Waves of words over mine again.

Eyelashes flutter, her gaze towards me once more. "Anya."

The flash of a smile again, her eyes conspiring. Involuntarily, I return the gesture.

As Anya stands, a small scrap of material falls delicately from the folds of her hood. The interpreter leads her away, her gaze on me unbroken until the door is closed.

As I reach for the scrap my heart breaks. The smallest piece of yellow rubber from the boat. Should the price of freedom be so high?

Rachael Fagan has been a Primary School Teacher for 26 years and has always been an avid reader. She lives in Leeds. This is her first work ever submitted for a public audience.

El Jay by Angela Huskisson

El Jay fusses with his pet parrot while Mrs S fumes, 'He loves that bird more than he's ever loved me,' she mutters under her breath so that El Jay can't quite catch at her words.

Then she says audibly, 'Why did you name him after that scout in Wagon Train?'

El Jay seems to be in a good mood which makes a change, but he's not really listening, 'He's not that noisy,' he muses.

Mrs S does a double take, 'Not Rawhide, I said Wagon Train.' And she nearly adds 'Numbskull' but thinks better of it knowing El Jay like she does.

'After Flint whatisname, not Rowdy thingy.'

El Jay is thoughtful for a moment and he thinks he rather likes the name Rowdy. It would sum up the parrot a treat. 'You'll have to call the next one that,' replies Mrs S as if reading his mind, which isn't difficult.

'Next one?' barks El Jay. 'I'll be gone long before me parrot what with me leg and all.'

'You won't get far on that. Where are you thinking of going anyways?'

El Jay starts to get that far away look in his eyes, misty, moist as he glimpses at his past and a land of lost opportunity. 'It's too late,' he snaps.

'Now don't you go wandering,' says his wife.

But he knows he's already there and he feels the sun on his face hot and strong. He knows he was a blaggard and some say a fraud, but he also knew he was one of a singular kind; the type where they always broke the mould. He'd read the tabloids, he knew what they'd said. In the past (another country) he'd had his pride but he still held his head up high. He doesn't go out much these days. Sometimes he's maudlin and it drags him down past the gutter and into the deepest of caves which blocks itself up after him. And then he wakes from his reverie, thrashing about, unable to breathe, trapped in the dark with only his treasure for company. Sometimes it's just not worth thinking about. The last words in the press simply stated: L.J. Silver- tarnished.

Yes, his name was tarnished alright and often he felt very lost at sea. Lost and wandering with his prosthetic standing sentinel against the wall and always just out of reach; thank you Mrs S.

Of course in reality they've been looking for him for years, thinking he might have died and then a whiff of evidence hinting at something else. Mrs S chivvies him back into the present with a cup of beef tea. 'Drink this,' she orders.

'I need my strength,' he says and winks at her imagining that he's peeking under her skirt and they're both back in their teens once again. El Jay's got a good imagination.

'No more wandering,' she scolds as El Jay sips his tea and imagines it as rum. 'Those were the days,' he mumbles to himself.

'What?'

'Mary,' he replies. 'I said those were the days.' They sigh in unison.

He glances at the impotent leg propped against the wall. Sometimes he imagines that if he could reach it he'd hit her over the head with it, but he's been cautioned once already; nearly killed her the last time. She continues to cover for him and now people just know him as El Jay, that's enough. She prattles on and ignores him. He thinks the parrot has more sense and in that instant he knows he has to make his escape. Now where's Jim Lad when you need him?

Where's the mobile? Mrs S keeps it locked away as she doesn't go in much for modern technology, she thinks it's dangerous and anyway it could interfere with his pacemaker. She watched a programme on the telly when she was flicking about searching for the shopping channel. After all El-Jay could go up in a puff of smoke, poof, just like that. That thought suddenly reminds her of Tommy Cooper and she always liked him; she thinks El-Jay is a bit like him, but without the legs. She thinks Tommy Cooper probably had good legs and at least he had two of them. And El-Jay is thinking, there's always carrier parrot as he gives the bird a furtive sidelong glance and Captain F shivers, drops a feather and squawks.

'He's moulting again,' says Mrs S as she sidles up to the bird making him feel even more uncomfortable; she gives him the evil eye. It's the one that says I should've put you in the pot, years ago. But instead she says, 'He's going bald.'

'Leave him alone,' growls El-Jay. 'He doesn't like you, he's never liked you. And I've told you before don't come between me and my bird, we goes back a long way does me and Captain F.'

And in her books F doesn't always stand for Flint.

'Just popping out for a mo,' she says and gives him one of her funny looks; it's a look which says she doesn't trust him. He gives her one of his lop- sided smiles as a form of brazen appeasement.

'I won't be long. Now you stays there and don't go wandering off.'

As if.

'And don't let the fire go out.'

He waits for her imminent departure which takes an age as she fusses and fumbles about, long, slow and laborious. 'Back in a mo,' she repeats brightly. And El Jay knows exactly how long one of her 'mo's' can be; long enough he thinks. He beckons to Captain Flint who flies to his shoulder and rests his head on El Jay's chest like a badge. El Jay whispers something into his ear as if he is imparting a piece of his knowledge tight within the text; inserting a chip of his soul deep inside the bird's small head. Then he gives Captain Flint a gentle nudge, dusting him off like a crumb and away the bird glides towards the window; he glances back for a split second over a curve of cobalt and they eyeball each other like two old souls. Something special has just passed between them. Captain F tweaks at the catch and sets himself free. El Jay slowly lets out his breath. He's been waiting for this moment for a long, long time...

When Mrs S returns an uncanny silence greets her as well as a chill breeze, the weather is turning, the days are growing shorter; night has suddenly arrived. She notices the open window and immediately scolds El Jay; the fire is also gone as is the parrot. She feels relief flood through her, 'About time,' she grumbles knowing that the old bird had long outstayed his welcome, if ever there was one from her. El Jay is slumped awkwardly in his chair with a rare sweet expression writ upon his features; she daren't disturb him or there'll be hell to play, he doesn't sleep well these days. Let sleeping sea dogs lie, she thinks and pads softly around him, but sensing that all is not well she draws her face towards his and then glances his cheek with a finger and beneath it his skin is quite cold.

'I told you not to go wandering,' she says.

Captain Flint feels the sun full on his face after being asleep on the wing for some time. When he looks down he knows his radar isn't mistaken as the island gleams beneath him, just as he remembers. He catches a thermal and circles and then he plummets down towards the earth carrying El Jay's spirit home with him one last time.

And Mrs S is just left wondering.

Angela has been writing for ever. From Anglo Indian origins she now lives in beautiful Devon. She has had several small-online publications and is currently Literary Editor for Shorts magazine. One novel is complete but she really prefers short stories and reading loads. Life is good.

Seeing the Rainbow by Chase D. Cartwright

You can't see color when you're first born. The rods and cones in your eyes haven't developed enough yet. At first, it's just blackness. Then a bright white light. Then it's gray blurry shapes.

It's madness and confusion. You need to earn the colors. You're left to piece the world together into something that makes sense. One by one those colors appear from an impossible paintbrush in inconceivable shades. The world becomes illuminated in a million ways over and over. The shades and hues change into something more vibrant and deeper and take on forms unlike you've ever seen before.

Then in your old age you think you see the whole rainbow in all its vibrancies and beauty. It's like a poem that you're only permitted to see, but never fully understand. All you know is that it means something. You think of all those colors you earned and then you close your eyes thinking of all the ones you didn't. Then in the end, rumor has it you go back to that white light and maybe that blackness. Although, the end of a rainbow is never fully visible, is it?

Chase Cartwright lives in Milwaukee, WI with his wife and their two angels (i.e. their cats). He works at a psychiatric hospital. He likes cooking, listening to punk rock, and catching every episode of Jeopardy he can. Occasionally, he will find time to pursue his dreams and write stories.

The Old Trampoline by Alex Bestwick

Christ, would you look at the garden. Totally waterlogged; the drainage always has been horrendous. And the old trampoline, them legs are at least three inch deep in water. Look, you can see the rust flaking off from here.

Remember lugging the great thing out from the shed every summer? Took all afternoon to set up, and kids hardly seemed bothered for five minutes. You about did your back in that last year, and then it were 'we're not little kids anymore.' Wouldn't even go on it. Lord, we felt old. Watching them grow made us old. They stole our best years, and what thanks did we get?

It was sort of nice, wasn't it, afterwards, to watch them rot for a change? But you were right, of course. Not safe leaving them out in the open, not with her next door hanging around, nosy bugger. Best to keep them out of the way.

No use bothering putting the trampoline down after that, was there? Even all these years later, I still feel a little younger looking at it. Yes, the old thing makes a fine gravestone. Just fine.

Alex Bestwick loves all things horror. He is from Derbyshire and currently working on an anthology of horror based on folklore and legend of the county, as well as studying for his MA in Creative Writing and Publishing.

In the Summoning of Beasts by J.P. Relph

After the harrowing end to celebrations, they threw me into the Hall's cell. I scared them. I scare them all.

Earlier

Autumn's bounty is celebrated in Bone Hall. A building of historical power, erected around the skeleton of the last Beast who fell. Once the land was salted with bones: people fashioned them into everything - including weapons.

An immense arcing ribcage, weather-polished to a milk-sheen, strains against the roof. A reminder of what Nature creates – and Man must destroy. Nobody strays beyond the homestead, where Hemlock trees hulk and every plant brings death. Where one surviving Beast slumbers beneath mounds of wolfsbane and belladonna that run with fire-ants. Dormant. Waiting.

Tables of pumpkin and squash, every variety, snaked through the Hall. The people milled around. Everyone, including my parents, avoided me, clutched their bone talismans. Since the first incident in Spring, I've learned it happened when I was threatened or hurt. But I control that now.

Summoning is old magic, believed to have died with the beasts. A sorcerous union with Nature, considered gratuitous now. Man now believes all the glorious flora and fauna are theirs to take. Since birth I'd felt otherwise - It's why I was chosen.

In the Hall's autumnal glow, the mass rejection conflagrated in my head – my grinding teeth the flint sparking it. Energy pulsed, flowed from me into the soil floor, reaching down and through.

Summoning.

Initially, the people in stunned silence, brushed at the pumpkins, shuffled feet. Then the orange-gold-purple display tumbled, darkened. Beetles shrouded everything, washed walls in iridescent waves. Their chitinous purpose scattered the screaming crowd so I stood alone in a jewelled sea. Joined with every bustling body, my eyes saw all. Until a man slithered behind me, brought oblivion with a bone club.

Kneeling in the cell, I join with Nature. Driving energy further, beyond the edge of cultivated land. Beyond the Hemlock bulwark. To forest dwellers and crepuscular birds. Wolves driven into the trees by hunters. I intuit the smells of guano, wood-violets, sour ant secretions. Further still and then she is there. Filling me with righteous anger and vengeful need. Stirring in her fecund bed; all bunched muscle and intention, she feels me – knows my purpose. Heavy-lidded eyes open: pumpkin-orange, hungry as fire. In the shadowy cell, my eyes blaze too.

JP Relph is a working-class Cumbrian writer who is mostly hindered by four cats and aided by considerable tea. A forensic science degree, passion for microbes, bugs and botany, and a determination to make people laugh, motivate her writing. Words in The Fantastic Other, HISSAC 2021, Sledgehammer and Splonk.

Twitter - @RelphJp

Quiet by Henry G Lewis

My legs burned as I sprinted forward. My breath pushing out my me, my lungs aching from overuse.

'Keep Going!'

My mind yelled with gusto at the rest of my body.

Like a general of an army, refusing to surrender.

I saw my goal and dived.

My face grated against the concrete like cheese as I clawed manically at the pavement until I was fully under the jeep I had driven to get to this wretched place.

I lay on the ground, rocks stabbing into my chest, stomach and hands.

I gulped in air and my legs thanked me with tears in their eyes, as if I was the messiah for allowing them this rest.

The trees behind me begin to rustle with movement.

Step.

Step.

A sniff and then a growl that sends shards of ice coursing through my entire body. My legs quiet their cheering, my lungs halt all movement, the general stops shouting and simply begins praying.

Closer and closer the beast gets.

I dare not move an inch.

Even from here I can smell the blood on its maw, I can feel the hunger in its eye.

Step.

Step.

It's coming up alongside the car now.

I don't look, I don't see, but I know.

I know that just as I know that my best friend is dead.

His blood staining the beasts jaw at this very moment.

It sniffs again.

Tears streams down my face.

My life flashes before my eyes. Most of it was a good life but I wanted more, I begged for more.

Pleading with the universe, as the monster began circling the area, for more time. Time to fall in love, time to mourn my best friend.

As I lay in the dirt beneath my disgustingly dirty jeep, as my life hung in the balance all I could think was that I hoped I could stay alive enough to go to my best friends funeral.

As time passes by however, my lungs begins to betray me.

The brutal beating they took on the sprint here made them feeble.

My body begins to betray my mind and the creature howls.

All thoughts silence.

All prayers disregarded.

There is nothing but me and the creature.

Alone in this car park.

My life or its meal.

My lungs refuse to get co-operate.

They can't take it anymore.

The general however refused to let them destroy everything we had all worked for.

It commanded a slow quiet breath.

So I opened my mouth and slowly but surely allowed air to flow out of me and back into me. With as little noise as possible.

The tiniest indication that we were here, the beast would feast on us.

Small breaths.

In and out.

In and out.

In-

But, my lungs got too greedy.

They had asked for too much.

Demanded too much.

As I took a breath in, jaws clamped over my foot.

The final thing my lungs could do was allow me to scream.

Seated Affection by Christina Collins

It is the last thing in the room, and I am struggling to walk out and leave it.

“We can’t keep it, Dad. Apart from us not having the room, it really is an eyesore.” I run my hands over the frayed armrests, and I sag into the cushion that no longer offers any support. The floral pattern long faded to a murky beige has worn patches where the stuffing is fighting its way out, trying to escape the years of confinement.

I rocked our babies sitting here, swaddled in blankets, safe and sound. The milky stains are still prominent, the odour lingers, despite the attempts to remove them.

The stories I have read to grandchildren perched on my lap, their very own Jackanory. My own reading chair, where I devoured crime and thrillers, the coffee rings still evident on the arms.

With my twisted leg in plaster, it was my prop. My anchorage as I stood.

When I lost my wife it became my comfort. As grief raged within me, I sat here, tossing memories that wilted my resolve. And when grief turned to anger, my fingers tugged at the loose fibres, demanding answers that no one could give. The holes created still remain, another mark in its existence.

As the years unfold I reminisce and chuckle now, not cry. We’ve been through a lot, this chair and I. But today I have to say goodbye. I know no one understands my strong yearning for something materialistic, but to me, you are a book, the chapters denoting my life, the blurb is now the ending.

I watch as it is lifted and thrown callously into a van, on its way to its sad eternal home. A landfill adorned with unfamiliar objects and foreign surroundings.

I move in with my daughter, I’m told I can no longer cope. I’m not sure I can, without my companion.

As I am shown my new ground floor room, with its compact en suite, I see a shape shroud with an old sheet, positioned in front of the bay window that looks out over the garden.

My daughter smiles, and pulls off the cover, revealing my chair, upholstered in a smart blue and burgundy stripe, its cushions plump and firm.

“You didn’t think I would get rid of the old thing,” she says.

She leaves me to unpack, but all I want to do is savour this moment. I lower myself down, using the arms as support as my arthritic knees creak, and I fit right on in there, as I have always done.

I rest my head on the winged back, the memories overtaking my thoughts, and I smile.

As a familiar comfort folds around me, my eyes close and my forever resting place encases me in a calm and peaceful silence.

Christina Collins lives in Wales, UK and started writing short stories last year during some time off work. She has had publications with various women’s magazines and has been shortlisted for several fiction competitions. She recently won the Glittery Literary short fiction competition. She is currently working on writing her fourth pocket novel.

POETRY
Ragnarök by Abi Turner

Or perhaps oblivion - Is that the case?
My hollowed bottle, your wilted trace
and Summer begins, marked by the embers
Of the Sunday sun, eaten by December's
Teeth - who licks the sky, in a purple parade
An ephemeral beauty, a temporary shade
The clouds drip down, June's ashes fly away
I vacate my mind, I choose not to stay
And my remedial drink, slams shut the door
To the chance of those memories, washing ashore
Ah! This terrestrial body is beginning to concede
I sit on our mountain, I leak, I bleed
And I wonder
Do you think of that night? From way back, from before?
Our rain soaked hair - car crash splendour
I lied for you, I deceived the man
I'd do it once more, and time (and time) again
Am I the fool? Was it you? Was it me?
Your wrought iron heart, guarded too carefully
And so I accept what I cannot save,
What I cannot hold, what I cannot brave
And yet
When the stars explode into the vacuous chasm
The moon stolen; the sun vanished
When chaos ensues and fires rage
Eating our homes, the trees, these plains
When
Fire and ice collide in hell

And us, shades of nothing in asphodel
Dante's inferno / Hades flame
It's you I'll turn to, it's you I'll blame
Because that's what this is,
That's what it's been
Pandemonium
Cacophony
The age of eighteen
I'd welcome the apocalypse over this lack
I'd welcome Ragnarök - you'd might come back
If doomsday descends, perhaps you'd scan
For my eyes in the crowds, my heart in your hands
I would rather oblivion, because missing you is
the end of the world, the end of what is.

Abi Turner is a young writer from Auckland, New Zealand and has recently had a short story published in the 2021 ReDraft anthology series "One of the Wild Kids". An avid reader, she particularly enjoys the works of Joan Didion, Patti Smith, Charles Bukowski and Sylvia Plath. Abi plans on continuing writing in the future in the hopes of one day publishing a novel or poetry collection.

Hope by Jessica Bath

Hope is a feather fallen from wings
Standing tall as one voice sings
Rising against the heavy storms we each face
Keeping the faith in your hearts good grace
Ready to challenge the unjust ways
Brave against them and those each coming day
Hope is but a gentle whispering
A star in the night sky that is always glistening
Hope is the crack of dawn through the darkest of hours

Thousands of seeds planted blooming in flowers

Hope is the deep-rooted trees standing so strong and tall

Hope belongs to all those who are fighting the fool

It's that inner spark that purges the soul

Ignites us when this world is taking its toll

Hope is where the crownless become king of kings

Where a flightless bird regains his wings

Jessica loves exploring her mind's philosophical creative flows and channelling it into her writing on her broad outlook on life. She has written a poetry book and six children's books.

Dreamy Poetry and Barney and the Enchanted Pendulum (The Pendulum Quests) are available on Amazon

The Black Sabbath of Carbons by Kathy Tierney

London on a December morning, 1952;

a windless husk

of sulphurous yellow-black smog

slung from street to street:

makes a pea souper.

The capital snaps to a standstill.

The inversions are many:

a five-day blindness closes

off the large swing of the day,

people stumble

unable to see entire scenes,

just corners.

Cattle at the Smithfield Show repeatedly suffocate,

and an audience at the Sadler's Wells
are smothered by smog
streaming into the auditorium;
adding another unexpected Act to La Traviata.

The absence of precise sequences,
sprawl out the logarithms
pumping the neatly folded efficiency of the city:
people loot, get away with it, faces and bodies
covered by thick fog, no-one sees who they are.
Women feel their way along the hedgerows
as not to get lost, clean clothes slandered by soot.
Buses and planes stop as the city
becomes monological with smog:
polyphonic pauses across five days,
stop every daily ritual.

And on the sixth day,
the black Sabbath of carbons
lifts from the city;
in swamping capitals
one word: SIGNIFICANCE.

Kathy Tierney is a writer who has won seven literary awards, has published in various literary journals and anthologies, has an associate degree of creative writing from Southern Cross University and a bachelor of creative writing with distinction from Deakin University. Her novel The Social Prophet was recently published.

The Heart's a Chicken by Clara Giuliani

And, Dear, I'll have you know,
The heart's a chicken,
(And there's no need to laugh).

The fluttering,
The strictly one-side vision,
The easy fright,
The chance, red-combed ferocity sometimes...

But most of all the running
Blindly
In front of speeding, shiny things,
The mess of tarmac, feathers, cooling blood.

So please, Dear,
(No, don't laugh!)
Keep an eye out, will you,
In case my clucking heart
Should freak into your headlights.

Resurrection of the Foolish by Sahara-Love Campbell

My ceaseless need to be profound makes a ghoul out of me.

This sickness I have, this unrelenting virus.
It pushes me to brilliance.
But I am deficient in glory.

The doctors have diagnosed me with mediocrity and I'm convinced this is a chronic illness.

I am close to my end I believe.

And still,

My ceaseless need to be profound makes a ghoul out of me.

When I am surrounded by enigmas, I feel as though I'm already dead- rotting in the slick sludge of my own average intellect.

Trapped.

These bones are hollow.

They are not filled with anything ingenious.

Rigor Mortis has set in.

And still,

My ceaseless need to be profound makes a ghoul out of me.

It kills me and then revives me.

Each Time more desperate for the world's approval.

Or perhaps the world's envy.

I should have been great!

The murder weapon, my disease, is simply my failure to be recognised.

I am forgotten.

I am the only mourner.

There is no funeral.

And still,

My ceaseless need to be profound makes a ghoul out of me.

There it is again, the praise of my fellow man.

Roused by the promise of success.

My heart beats once more.

It pumps poisoned blood around this already decaying body.

Once again, I resemble that of a living creature.

And still,

My ceaseless need to be profound makes a ghoul out of me.

I am too much of a fool to die.

So, I am no longer a being of life.

Blistered skin,

Soulless eyes.

My brain, I fear, has dissolved into nothingness.

I am still sick with this illness, this unrelenting virus.

And so,

My ceaseless need to be profound has made a ghoul out of me.

Sahara-Love Campbell has been writing fiction for as long as she can remember, but she has only recently started writing poetry. One of her favourite poets is Mahmoud Darwish. Resurrection of the Foolish is Sahara-Love Campbell's first published poem

Dressy Bessie by Elaine Rockett

Dressy Bessy (I spelt her Bessie)

When I wrote about her

(which I did as well as draw)

Designed to help

(she had zips, ties and a buckle)

Was my favourite doll

(I loved her)

My doll of dubious provenance

was not an it, she was a her...

(I loved her)

She had beautiful ginger hair

With a kiss curl at the front

her head was made of felt

Her brains fell out!

(as she was cuddled so much)

My mum bought felt

(stitched her a new head)

On Filey beach, having a paddle with my dad

A wave came in, higher than expected

She went swim swim!

My dad (my hero) caught her

She dried off in a Butlin's chalet

I gave her a picture family

A mum named Bettina

Girls with kiss curls

Twin boys, curly hair

Bettina was pregnant

'A sausage machine,' my mum said

'You can't have kids so close together!'

Under the stairs, in my parent's house

Nearly 40 years ago

(I still love you, I still miss you)

It's been sold

(so I was told)

If that's the case, she ended up on a skip

Oh! That can of worms!

I'm crying for everything now

(I love you all)

Elaine Rockett is a writer who reviews books. She documents her domestic travels on her blog; link:-

<http://elainerockett.blogspot.com/>

She has written several short stories and has also published her first novel, entitled The Reject's Club- a modern family saga. She recently completed her MA in Creative Writing.

Are You Really a Human? by Shreyash Mukherjee

I don't know why they didn't allow me to breathe (George Floyd),

I don't know why they harassed me & no one was to defeat (Joseph),

I was kicked out because of my bipolar disorder (Gary Davis),

I am a victim of debt bondage, sadly I am a brick kiln worker (Puspal),

Although being a man I cried as something was not proper,

World would laugh at me so I sobbed in a corner,

Why don't you hear me cry, am I not your father??

I was taken from Darjeeling to Delhi to become a prostitute (Tina),

I was tortured and hanged to death by the dowry institute (Rashika),

They slit my throat as they didn't want me to shout (Anita Cobby),

They assaulted and set me on fire without a single doubt (Oksana),

My fault was to demand a life without any fear,

I am not just a story to be shared on twitter,

Now why you all are silent, am I not your mother??

When jihad and my love were exiled to an eclipse (Shahin),

When I was sexually abused only at the age of six (Lokesh),

When I was declared undesirable because I was a jew (Hitler),

When I was murdered when tried to break the colour taboo (Timoli),

Was there really my mistake, I always wonder,

I finally believed there was no god but only a monster,

Why don't you stand beside me, am I not your brother??
Who put the iron rod in my genitals after molesting me (Jyoti),
Who dislocated the neck of a three month old me (Afreen),
Who threw acid on the face of a to be military doctor (Preeti Rathi),
Who raped me 400 times by trapping me in a locker (Junko Furuta),
I shouted, I pleaded with eyes full of tear,
But I was not surprised that there was no one to hear,
Why you feel ashamed to help me, am I not your sister??
Today when the relations are taking their last breath,
Today when the humanity is kicked and paralysed to death,
My soul knocks and inquires what is your resolution?
Or is your heart and mind still in a delusion,
Then smile and ask yourself are you really a human?
Then smile and ask yourself are you really a human??

Shreyash Mukherjee is the author of several published poetries and articles including Being alone, Postmortem of Farm Bill, Something is Missing and many more. He has been writing creative fiction for about 3 years now and lives in Uttar Pradesh (India). He loves to write about each and every thing which he observes.

Heaven or Hell by Amita S. Gurao

I hold the born still
In my arms,
As I hear a mother's cry shrill.
I weep and wonder as I ask myself:
Where was the not yet sinned?
Where was the not yet virtue?
Where the never born was sent?
Heaven or hell.

Amita S. Gurao is an aspiring writer from India. She has been writing since she was thirteen years old. She loves to write about history and mythology.

An Argument by Tom Fender

Can we talk about today's slaughter?

Things can't be done just for you.

There's too much blood in the water.

This river's so red, is it fit for your daughter?

Shut up, old man. It still holds its blue.

Can we talk about today's slaughter?

I wonder what false truths you've taught her.

Enough of this. There's nothing you can do.

There's too much blood in the water.

Your eyes: all I see is malicious laughter.

Comedy, is that what you think? A skewed view.

Can we talk about today's slaughter?

No more. It's time, you lewd marauder.

Wait, we need order; can't you see that's true?

There's too much blood in the water.

Intentions are clear now: to change, to alter.

Stand against; we are here to subdue.

Can we fight about today's slaughter?

Because there's too much blood in the water.

Little Boy's Pain by S.G. Harvey

"It's cold!" called Jack from the top of the stairs,
But no one answered, is anyone there?
"I'm sorry," Mum whispers alone in the dark,
How had her life gotten so stark?
"Go to bed Jack!" she shouts as the tears start to fall,
But there's no one to help her, no one at all.
"I love you," Jack whispers, he doesn't want to shout,
He'll tell her tomorrow of that there's no doubt.
He walks to his bedroom there isn't a door,
The carpet is threadbare, no warmth there at all.
There's frost on the window, it's inside and out,
No way of keeping that nasty cold out.
He dreams of the summer, it'll be warmer then,
Playing in the park, building a den.
He jumps into bed thinking what can he do,
But he's only seven, his sister is two.
They had beans for dinner just for a treat,
But Jack is still hungry, never enough to eat.
Why can't they see him, do they know he's alive?
Why won't they help him, give him a chance to thrive?
They sit at their table's, with plenty to eat,
Keeping the down trodden under their feet.
They want for nothing, have they no shame,
Why don't they see this little boys pain?
He might save the planet, no one knows yet,
He could be a lawyer, plumber or vet.
Thank heavens for Marcus an example to all,
Hopefully others will answer his call.

S G Harvey is the author of, The Wand Tree, Book of Magic. He enjoys all kinds of writing, when he can find the time at his family home in Devon, UK

Red Tram by Vyacheslav Konoval Ivanovych

Visible track in the valley,
which stretches between trees like an alley.
Red tram running on the track,
No crimson and yellow leaves around,
What is do I lack?

The red tram is in a hurry,
it's late in the yard,
my mommy is in worry,
Here emotions are always hard.

Whistle and noise in the tram,
the driver looks like wants to fail the exam.
People are tired, bowed their heads,
Their dreams of a warm blanket on the beds.

Vyacheslav Konoval is a Ukrainian poet. He adores writing about nature, impressions and people. The significant work of the author is devoted to acute social problems, such as overcoming poverty, ecology issues, the relationship of people with the government, etc. No wonder he has the nickname 'Fair Man'.

First Love by Martha Tuohy

Can't eat.
Can't sleep.
Heart shriveled up like a burst balloon.
Deflated.
Lifeless.
Reaching for air but every particle floats straight out.

Hope is teasing me.

Guilt is consuming me.

Hurt. Pain. Shame.

Emotions dancing on the landmines within my veins.

How will I escape it?

The ache of your love.

A love that still burns inside of me.

Reminding me of what could have been.

The love I destroyed.

My first love.

The wind whines distantly but it is the friction of hot rubber donuts
spun out like eights in the folding of meringue, froth incorporated
it is a desert night in the amber light
forest where phosphorus hums

In the dew jewelled wood, a tiny orange dot swells lightly
and the alveoli of a boy pulsate like tiny slow hearts without love
delivering blood bubbles of magic to sizzle the banal
out:

The boy stubs the roach in damp concrete
It spits quiet envy
eyed by the other young hungry lungs
He teeters on a kerb in the novelty stoned fervour

atop the chancel in the peer cathedral

Pocketed nodge Eucharist

redolent of Morocco via promised land
but industrial soap bar, plastic infused

Mars twinkles red in the corner of the high sky
like the fabled wound in the side of Christ
like another lit end
to the night

Head Out Sabbath by Shane Healy

The wind whines distantly but it is the friction of hot rubber donuts
spun out like eights in the folding of meringue, froth incorporated
it is a desert night in the amber light
forest where phosphorus hums

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