

# *Catatonic Daughters*

literary magazine



issue 1



# Editor's Note

Ríbh Brownlee

*Catatonic Daughters* initially began in the very early months of 2020 while being interviewed by two poets I greatly admire for a forever-unaired podcast episode. We ended up recording the same episode twice (once in a seminar room of a Law building at our university and once at the top of a drafty staircase in a building we were probably not allowed to record a podcast in), and both recordings have been long lost. In both the original and staged recordings, I had the revelation (and then re-revelation) that all the women in my life that I loved were strange women, and that all the literature I loved was about strange women. This idea eventually morphed into the central premise for *Catatonic Daughters* after, in my second year of university, I came across the claim by the French theorist Hélène Cixous that there is “no general woman, no one typical woman”. This wasn’t really reflected in the literary canon that tended towards homogenous representations of women, and brought up the need for literature and that demonstrates women existing beyond a gender identity dictated by society, and possessing an individuality that marks them as different or distinct. Hence, *Catatonic Daughters* was formally born in an attempt to remedy that.

The first issue of *Catatonic Daughters* gives a true range of pieces about strange women. We have artwork, poetry, fiction, scripts, essays. There are pieces that derive from bodily experiences (as with Autumn Haworth’s piece, *Houseguest*, in which a stranger’s corpse appears in a man’s apartment and Ally Remy’s piece *Paresthesia* with its disappearing limbs), and pieces that depict unconventional figures, such as the non-maternal *When Mary Lost Jesus* by Abigail Eckstine and *What I Do Know* by Monica Cardenas. There are pieces with rage and violence, such as Emma Buckley’s poem *Werewolf Girl* and Ali Isaac’s autofiction *Invisible*. The COVID-19 pandemic, too, recurs throughout many of the pieces in our first issue. Not as a central theme, but as a subtle indicator of time and setting, and maybe as a reason for the strangeness that the past year-and-a-bit has highlighted or underscored or drawn out. Some domestic settings are imbued with strangeness – we see it in the slow burn of *People Like Us* by Ceci Mazzarella and the apartment living of *Friday* by Marie Little. Many of the pieces in the

first issue are concerned with experiences of neuroticism (in both its formal and informal definitions) that we can see in *Bug Spray* by Serena De Marchi. There are more pieces in our first issue than I can gush about in this Editor's Note, including some truly brilliant pieces of artwork from Lauren Foley, JW Summerisle, and Megan Russo. Judith Butler said it best when she said that the "construction of the category of women as a coherent and stable subject [may be] an unwitting regulation and reification of gender relations". *Catatonic Daughters* is not a coherent and stable magazine, and the pieces that feature in our first issue give a real range of interpretations of our theme that overall demonstrate the true complexities of the ~strange woman~. Overall, we were lucky enough to receive 258 submissions and accepted 35 pieces that we felt best captured what we envisaged *Catatonic Daughters* to be.

The guts of a pandemic, the creation of a different literary magazine (hello *The Apiary*!) and finishing my undergraduate degree later, Issue 1 of *Catatonic Daughters* is finally here. Thank you to each of our brilliant poets and writers and artists, whose work I am honoured to share with you in our first issue, and to everyone who has submitted work or shared, and supported *Catatonic Daughters*. My daughters would not be catatonic without you and I'm truly grateful to you all.

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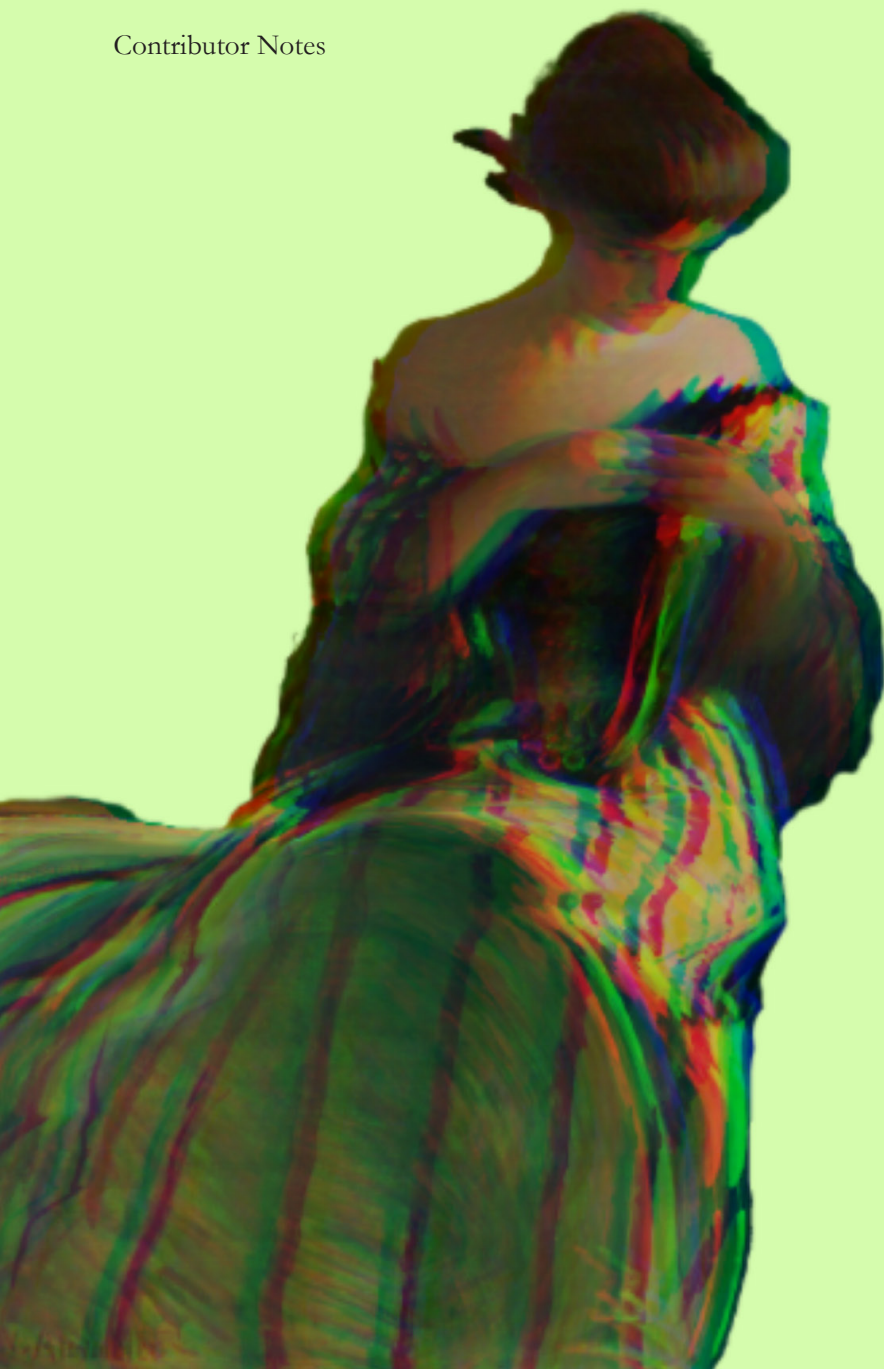
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# People Like Us

Ceci Mazzarella

She watched over his shoulder as he flicked through flattering photos on his phone, exposure high to create the required illusions of size, style and, of course, value. Each apartment was reduced to the surface of a home, presented for buyers like themselves to project their aspirational life onto the image. This bedroom, this kitchen, this garden; spaces which allowed the truest manifestations of their potential, them as they had always hoped and known themselves to be, a lifetime of failed New Year's resolutions, it all existed in the latent possibilities of those photos, ideals somehow unattainable from their current rented accommodation.

'Two bed, two bath, and check out that bay window.' Harry shoved his phone into her face, a bolt of white-blue in the darkness of their bedroom. 'I love the plants,' he said. 'I'd buy it for those alone.'

She sighed. 'It's out of our budget.' She rolled away from the screen and buried her head under the covers. 'I turned off the light for a reason,' she said. 'I want to sleep now.'

'Top end of the budget, but still feasible. Very feasible.' He was speaking to himself or perhaps to the pictures saved in his favourites list on the property app, little gold stars of approval. Like school. The thought made her queasy.

'I just want a place of our own.' He said it like an apology.

She reached back and squeezed his hand. 'Anywhere we both are is home.' She peered from the covers, disturbed by the continued rhythmic flashes as he whipped through photos with his free thumb.

'It's just one more viewing,' he said into the screen. 'You might fall in love with it.'

She grabbed the phone and chucked on the floor. The blue light glowed beneath the slats of the bed, pulsing softly. He tried to reach for it, but she held his arm and forced him to wait in silence until the light timed out. She said, 'Now go to sleep.'



She resisted checking the banking app in the morning. She knew the total of her savings, but paranoia stripped the digits from her mental balance with every sharp inhale. Breathe in, lose one hundred. Breath out, lose another two hundred. In, one hundred. Out, two hundred. Her fingers grasped at air, as if she could capture the intangibility of the numbers.

‘You ready to go?’ Harry’s call from the hallway sent her gasping.

Minus fifty, fifty, fifty. And breathe.

He popped his head through the kitchen doorway, beanie pulled over his ears, Norwich football scarf wound tight.

The yellow distracted her from her panic. ‘You’re not wearing that?’

‘I haven’t got anything else,’ he said. ‘It’s bloody freezing outside.’

She returned an approximation of his smile, a tiny burst of relief from the security of his presence. He could be cheerful about anything. The emotion matched the contours of his face, lifting the weight of his professorial beard and softening the lines around his eyes, a hint at the childlike glee inside. He had lucked out to live in this era which so suited him, with the second-hand corduroys, square glasses, and distressed trainers. His facial hair might have been fashionable, had it not been a distraction from his scalp, shaved close to maintain the pretence of choice. He blamed his recent hair loss on the stress of working from home, but she knew it was more likely a mix of genetics and natural ageing. She had caught him several times googling bald celebrities, comparing his bone structure to the faces of Bruce Willis and Patrick Stewart, apparently torn between the desire to appear macho and/or intellectual.

‘Two secs.’ She grabbed her own coat and scarf, both charity shop reclamations from a life of practiced moderation, and an olive beret he had given her one Christmas. Despite the blunt military tone, the hat had come into its own since she had started dying her hair red, initially as a hobby but now her dark roots served to measure time.

‘Come on, they’ll be waiting.’ He needed to be back in the virtual office within the hour, preferably forty-five minutes. Corporate IT wouldn’t resolve itself. He spied the laptop on the table in front of her. ‘Are you crushing dreams?’

She closed the computer.

He laughed, humouring a joke she wasn’t sure she had made. ‘Glad I’m not one of your students. Come on, mellow.’ His nickname for her more melancholic moods, another joke in which she wasn’t sure she was participating. He grinned and handed her a face mask. ‘Let’s go find a home.’

The apartment for sale was a brisk walk up the main road from their rented flat in Stepney Green, an area of London neither had known before they moved there but which suited the compromise of their work commutes, how-



ever redundant the choice now seemed. Over two streets, the houses shifted from a mix of ex-council and run-down period properties to a rise of polished new-builds, each more inorganic than the last. Harry liked a modern finish, having tired of their current flat with its temperamental heating and plumbing.

‘A fresh start is what we want,’ he said, muffled through a combination of beard and face mask, his glasses steaming. ‘None of that history nonsense.’

She shot him a look. ‘Are you trying to wind me up today?’

‘Fight back,’ he said, laughing. ‘Tell me why I’m wrong. Come on, mellow, debate me.’

‘I’m not justifying my career to you. I don’t have the energy.’

He became quiet. ‘I didn’t mean it like that.’

‘I know.’ She did know. ‘Sorry.’

He brightened, determined to keep the mood in his orbit. ‘You’ll like this place. I promise. I’m talking wooden floors, balcony, room for an office. And you can have all the bookcases you can imagine.’

She wrapped an arm around his waist. ‘Sounds perfect.’

Her proportion of the deposit was so small, she didn’t feel she had earned the right to disagree. She had been grappling with her contract at the university, amid highly strung colleagues, a system which took her for granted, and exhausted students pissed off at being little more than afterthoughts in an educational mess. She was right there beside them, another afterthought in someone else’s list of priorities, invisible by virtue of coping. Her work had become a means to an end: save up, buy a house. They had already foregone the expensive wedding, neither of them liked animals, and they had agreed to no children. What else was there to do.

‘This is it.’ His joy was palpable. ‘Look, there’s the guy. Hello!’

‘Why do estate agent’s always dress like that?’

The shoulders of the agent’s shiny blue suit puffed up as he hauled open the door to the apartment block. He waved off the previous couple who could have been herself and Harry in a parallel universe, cut from a template: female with a fitted coat and beret, male with a lumberjack shirt and beard.

The agent hustled them into the gated development. The walls rose high in unblemished yellow brick and darkened glass, shadowed by the neighbouring tower block. Railings separated the private communal gardens from a group of kids kicking a ball across concrete. One of the kids stopped the ball with his foot and stared at her through the fence. She felt his gaze long after they had passed into the development. The agent released the front door and it swung closed, containing them in a long corridor, the air thickened with central heating and the snug, insulating scent of hot plastic. Her boots fell silent on the carpet-

ed floor as they approached the lift.

The agent was talking. 'We're on the seventh floor for this one. The lease is over nine hundred years, and there's a parking space in the basement. We're expecting a lot of interest.'

'Yeah, I bet.' She was grateful for Harry's ability to subsume the small talk.

The seventh floor was styled identically to the entrance and she had *deja vu* of the institutional buildings which had defined so much of her life – college, student halls, a brief stint as a school teacher, an even briefer stint in social work, now the university which paid her salary – structures designed from a checklist of human need, each apartment a functional box built to contain a person or two for a lifetime.

Harry went straight to business. 'So, what's the history? I saw the listing had been reduced twice already.'

The agent offered an awkward chuckle. 'Times we're living in, isn't it? The owner struggled to find a new tenant, so he's selling.'

'What happened to the last tenant?' she asked.

They were both startled at her voice, the agent apparently having forgotten she was there. Harry's brow furrowed.

The agent paused and pinched the bridge of his nose, exposed where the ill-fitting mask had drooped. 'Oh, you know how it is,' he said. 'There's a lot of that going round at the moment. People getting out of London.'

They arrived at the door to 717, announced by the wrangling of keys from the agent's slim-fit trousers.

'Must be tough,' she said. Off Harry's deepened frown, she added, 'For the owner, if they're relying on the income.' They both knew that wasn't what she had meant.

'So, the property is chain free?' Harry asked, his expression lifting with the comfortable boom of his own voice.

The agent shifted aside and let them in. 'Yes, well, yeah. I'll wait outside while you get acquainted.'

'That didn't sound like a yes. What do you think happened to the tenant?' she said to Harry when they were inside and out of earshot.

His eyes lit up at the space before them and he was lost to her. 'Look at it,' he said. 'It's got everything.'

She followed him slowly as he dashed between rooms snapping photos on his phone. He had already moved from the bathroom and was clicking his flash in a store cupboard, before she had taken in the square of the first bedroom. Blank walls, polished wood, more of the same. It was a similar size and orientation to their current bedroom, and she found herself pacing towards the area where

their bed would be. She lay on the floor, imagining herself in their current flat, surrounded by their furniture, the wonky lamp and unread books on her beside. She mimed reaching over to turn off the light and closed her eyes. The floor rippled with Harry's steps in the next room. She lost track of him, the noise veiled by a faraway banging, perhaps one of the downstairs neighbours locked out. Hands folded on her chest, she breathed in the scent of the empty room, but there was a new, salty undertone in the air. Bodily, like sweat in winter frost.

'Harry?' she asked, thinking his beanie must be too tight for the heating. No wonder she could smell perspiration.

She felt a cold palm cover her hands.

'I'm just imagining,' she said. She squeezed the hand back.

Harry's voice called from the other room, 'What are you saying to me?'

Her eyes snapped open, and she rolled away across the floor. She leaned against the wall, frantic as she scanned the room. There was no one there. She was alone with the dust coiled in matted snakes around her jeans.

Harry appeared in the doorway. 'What did you say?' He saw her legs. 'Ugh, dirty in here. There's some superficial wear-and-tear. A hint of the second-hand.'

She looked at him. 'Yes, I got that impression.'

He touched her shoulder. 'You okay?' He left without waiting for the implicit 'fine' to manifest and returned to the agent in the hallway.

Unable to turn her back on the bedroom, she edged out and stood stranded in the open plan kitchen/living area. The balcony ran the length of the room, and she opened the door to step outside, away from Harry's excited chatter in the hallway, no doubt buttering up the agent for buying insights. The relief of the cold air was immediate, like a faceful of fresh water upon waking. She blinked, delirious, as if she really had been asleep. Far below, the greenery of the communal gardens did battle with the train tracks and the concrete. She breathed deep and counted two trains passing before she was ready to leave.



Harry wanted to make an offer as soon as his workday was over. They worked in opposite corners of the living room, knees almost touching in the narrow space. She watched him distract himself all afternoon, muttering dimensions and running sums on post-its.

'It'll get offers,' he kept saying. They had seen enough properties for her to know he was serious. 'We need to make a call.'

'Sure,' she said.

'It's a competitive market.' They'd had this conversation many times. 'Every-

one's looking to buy with all they saved last year.'

'Not everyone.' She thought of the statistics she trawled through every morning in the news. She thought of the redundancies in her department, shots fired at the start, before the word furlough had assimilated into common parlance.

'You know what I mean,' he said, without meeting her gaze. He was busy clicking through tabs. 'People like us.'

Three little words. Two-thirds of her immediate family were out of work, her brother in retail, her mother an administrator at the local primary school. It was only her father, a retired nurse, who was busier than ever, having returned to the frontline against all medical advice regarding his own wellbeing. Meanwhile, she and Harry were kept cosy by a swollen bank account and dreams of permanence.

'You do like it, don't you? I can see us there. It just had this feeling, like we could make it a real home, you know.'

She avoided his gaze, pretending to focus on her marking. 'It's a blank canvas. It could be anything.'

'Exactly,' he said, misunderstanding. 'What do you think? I want you to be happy.'

She didn't know how to articulate her refusal. Not of him – he grounded her anxious electricity, deflected the brewing discomfort of everyday living; she would always love Harry, wouldn't she – but a refusal of this cost beyond comprehension. Whatever decision she made, it would be reduced to a calculated risk and she felt so risky as to almost not exist, as if the invisible value above her head were trickling down, each future interest payment exchanged for another fraction of herself, until there was nothing left. Chalk it up to wear-and-tear, a hint of the second-hand. It wasn't even her money. She said, 'I'm happy if you're happy.'



He worked late in their bedroom, calls with the US office running long, laptop perched awkwardly on a bookshelf opposite where he sat at the end of the bed. She ate dinner alone in the kitchen, an embellished piece of toast which she would lie about, if asked. Easier than stomaching the that's-not-a-proper-meal conversation. She was nestled at the end of the sofa, bubbled in the warmth of a small lamp and thumbing crumbs from her plate, when the doorbell rang.

Preferring to avoid the glare of the overhead light, she shuffled into the dark hallway and picked up the receiver. 'Hello?'

No response. She thought she could hear someone breathing. She hung up

only for it to ring again, longer this time. The bedroom door opened, and Harry waved at her to answer. She gestured to the receiver, indicating she didn't need to be told.

He retreated to the corporate language of his call. 'Yes, we're on track for this quarter.'

'Hello, hello, who's there?' She didn't bother to conceal the irritation in her voice.

Still no reply. A hesitation of breath grazed the opposing speaker.

'I can't hear you,' she said and then, considering, 'Text us.' She wouldn't be provoked into opening the door to a stranger.

She was about to hang up when she heard the roll of iron hinges. Someone had opened the gate to their development. She glanced at their front door, groping blindly to fit the receiver home. Perhaps it was a neighbour's delivery. Perhaps the caller had hit the wrong flat number or had tried all the buttons in desperation for an answer. She waited, ear bent towards the echo of footsteps up the interior stairwell. Closer, closer. Silently, she crept towards the door and braced herself against the approaching footfall, eye levelled at the peephole.

The bedroom door opened behind her. 'Why is the light off?'

Harry's voice cut her concentration and when she shushed him the footsteps were gone. He flipped the light switch, stark white in the hallway.

'What are you doing?' he asked in a stage whisper, joining her by the door and pretending to listen.

'I don't think it was for us,' she said, unwilling to move away from the door just yet.

'Okay, weirdo.' He kissed her forehead, turned off the hallway light again, and disappeared through to the kitchen. He called back, 'Is there any of that takeaway left? I'm starving.'

She remained by the door, unable to take her hands away from the flaking paint. 'In the fridge.'

'There's mould in the chutney.'

'Just scrape it off.' She heard the distinct clatter of the pedal bin as he ignored her.

A shadow covered the peephole. She drew away, instinctive, as if whoever was in the corridor could see in as clearly as she could see out. She was aware of someone outside, listening. The door nudged towards her touch, as if pressed by an opposing force. She pushed back and with her free hand slid the safety chain into place. Slowly, she backed away.

She returned to the living room to find Harry reclining on the sofa. A folded tea towel protected his knees from the heat of microwaved leftovers.

He said, 'What do you want to watch? We should start a new series before we run out of things to talk about.' He moved his legs to make space for her. 'What's wrong, mellow? You're shaking.'

'I'm fine,' she said. 'I just don't like strangers at the door.'

He put aside his food and wrapped his arms around her. 'Don't be silly. It's just some stropy Deliveroo driver who got sick of waiting.'

She glanced at the window, but the curtains were already drawn to fend off the premature darkness. 'They said it's going to snow tonight.'

'There you go then,' he said, resuming his dinner. 'That would put anyone in a bad mood.' He pointed a remote control past her and browsed their streaming options, flicking through trailers and intros.

'It freaks me out,' she said. 'I don't like strangers at the door.'

The TV blared a brief dialogue between two German teenagers, before he vetoed the show, and the teenagers were replaced with squabbling Americans on a fishing trawler.

'Come on. You're not that superstitious, are you?'

'It's not that.' She wasn't sure how to explain herself. 'It's people. Real people. Like bailiffs.'

He was distracted by the latest trailer, a possible contender. He said, 'We don't have to worry about that stuff.'

'You mean people like us.'

'Right.' He clicked play.

The show began and her eyes glazed over. She turned inwards to the memories of another front door, fists banging outside, always at an 'unholy hour of the night' as her mother would say, her five-year-old self promising never to open the door to strangers, promising to stay quiet and small and wait until it passed, the bang, bang, banging. She didn't remember how her parents managed to keep the house in the end. She suspected it had something to do with her grandfather's death, her father retraining and her mother's general absence, while her older brother had made the meals and got her to school on time. The memories were like a foreign country, a place she could visit from the security of a home in a different place, so very far removed.

When Harry clicked play on the next episode, she pretended to be falling asleep, and slipped away to an early bed. She tussled in the covers, restless with active dreaming. She was drifting in and out of wakefulness, long after Harry had brushed his teeth and was snoring beside her. She thought she was asleep when the banging started.

It was abrupt. A sudden hammering which shook the flat. Cold sweat cloaked her body, and she stared at the bedroom door, propped ajar. A shaft of moon-

light sliced the hallway and glinted off the safety chain looped to the wall. Harry grumbled in his sleep and pulled the duvet closer, undisturbed by the phantom noise. She checked the clock: 3.15am. An unholy hour of the night. It came again, the bang, bang, banging.

She slid deeper beneath the covers and pulled them close over her ears. It wasn't real. She knew it couldn't be real. She nestled into the curve of Harry's back, hair tickling her nose and tried to will away the presence outside the door. It hammered harder, rocking the walls, the floor, the bedframe, and soon she couldn't distinguish the noise from the violent gasps which burst rapid from her throat.

'We're not here,' she said between staccato breaths.

A cool presence settled at her back, the same clammy touch which had grazed her at the flat viewing. With it came the realisation that it had been behind her all day, on the edge of her vision, crouching in shadows, waiting, waiting. It had followed her, slipped free from the bang, bang, banging in its own home and fled for sanctuary, but it, too, had been followed. Now, she thought it held her against the noise and she hugged herself, reaching back for it in comfort. Tight in its embrace, she wasn't sure who was anchoring whom.

'Go away.' She whispered again to the unrest outside, 'We're not here.'

She and the presence clung to each other and waited. Gradually, the banging relented. The flat returned to silence. The presence remained wrapped around her and it stretched to gently pressure her chest. She found she could breathe easily again. Lulled, she heard Harry's voice in the gloom.

'Let's do it,' he said. 'That flat is going to be our home.' He barked a snore and sleep reclaimed him.

She felt the presence tense at her back. She didn't dare turn around. In a low voice, she asked, 'Where will you go?'

The presence didn't reply, only tightened its grip once more. She settled to sleep in its arms.



A cool presence settled at her back, the same clammy touch which had grazed her at the flat viewing. With it came the realisation that it had been behind her all day, on the edge of her vision, crouching in shadows, waiting. It had followed her, so free from the bang, bang, bang in its own home and away, but it, too, had now, she thought, lost the noise of herself, reaching for comfort. Tight in a wasn't sure who was whom.





# Grody, Wired

Clem Flowers

Acid undertones on every smile in town as the horns on rocket beach mingles with the sleigh bells around the mossy wishing well and a squall of gulls above shakes us loose of every idea of solitude, as if the cigarette smoke & high watt souvenir stand signs weren't hard enough to ignore and yet the faintest breeze sailing up off the reservoir is enough of a counterpunch to really send us, hand in hand, to Valhalla in our heads, loud dipshits revving disgusting 8 cylinder abominations down the main drag be dammed while we split funnel cake and plop our feet into the frigid sheet of water and we bashfully harmonized to "Hold Me Now" wafting along the shore like the aroma of a fresh pie on a cartoon windowsill off the PA system of the shoreline bar and grill right beside the Ferris wheel that just lit up for the night & perfection is actually ours for one fragile sapphic moment.

# pink and yellow skies

Beth Garrett

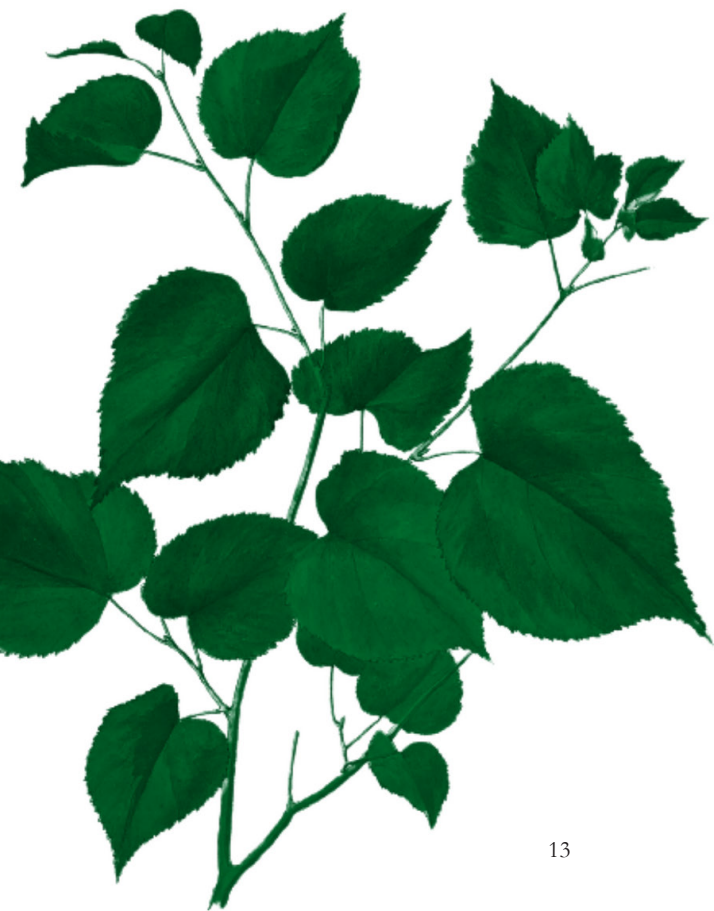
I – circular formations slide behind my eyelids and leave me dizzy, swinging like a snake in a tree. temptation comes to mind and thinking of the garden of eden, i wonder this: does it matter that it was eve? did it make any difference after all? do we really delude ourselves to believe that without eve the apple would have remained uneaten, and the world untainted by sin? i picture myself growing from a man's dissected rib, only ever a fraction of the life i was stemmed from. snipped like a cutting and grown into a potted flower. created to belong. not to nature, as i would like, but to a man. do you think that snake just told eve to eat the apple? or did he tell her more. perhaps he said the taste of the apple would fill the empty chasm in her chest where identity should lie. perhaps he said the apple could allow her to be a person in her own right. and can we blame her? for biting into knowledge? a woman who was born into ownership dared to taste power. and we stomped her into history as the villain.

II – i become tired of this space where birds can no longer fly. i want to be free. i don't want to have a body, i want to float around in space as a ghost. shame is such a human emotion. i want to bleed in technicolour. i want to be free.

III – and so i sit here eyes sombre and cold, and i stare out into the candy coloured skies. the clouds look so close i could almost taste them if it weren't for the blood in my mouth. and the green of the trees calls to me in a language i don't speak anymore. somehow i see their words echoed across the skyline. calling me home. i know it's too late. i go back inside to fight the tumbleweeds in my head. It only hurts me to remember.

IV – i look down at my hands. for a fleeting moment i hate my petite body, and i want to be a monster with spikes and huge sharp teeth. i dismiss the thought, lay down on my bed, and dream of creation. i dream of being the ocean's daughter.

fierce and strong with salt-hardened hands and strong swimmers legs. born of the sea, running to the trees who call to me. it won't happen now, but i can dream. i wake, and see the sky shouting in pastels to me and the trees echoing in muted jewel tones. i run out to them and for a split second I feel alive, but it passes. but it always passes.





**Juno** by Megan Russo

# Laura

Anna Royle

## EXT. ROAD NIGHT

LAURA is sitting on a wall by a road, holding a camera. MAX is leaning against the wall, his body tilted towards her.

Their car is parked by the roadside, the door is open with the radio playing a SONG, something like “I Got Lucky” by Elvis Presley (1962).

Max stands facing Laura. He leans in to kiss her but playfully snatches a camera from her hands.

LAURA

Hey!

MAX

Say cheese.

Max turns the camera around to take a picture of the two of them.

LAURA

That’s going to look terrible! Give it here, I’ll take a proper one of you.

She jumps down from the wall. Max passes her the camera.

MAX

Make sure to get my best side.

He poses jokingly and over-the-top, pushing his shoulders back, furrowing his brows and pouting, like a model. Laura laughs and snaps a photo.

LAURA

You don’t have a best side.

MAX

Hey!

Laura laughs.

LAURA

No! I meant both your sides are equally the best. Now be serious, I wanna get a nice one.

MAX

How's this?

He moves further back, into the road, smiling genuinely this time. Laura looks through the lens.

LAURA

Yeah, actually the street lights look really nice behind you. Move back a little more.

Max walks backwards into the road. A car speeds round the corner and slams into him. The car drives on and his body is thrown into the air, and lands on the road with such force that it makes a noise. Laura screams.

## **INT. BEDROOM DAY**

Light is slipping in from the gap between the curtains. The bedroom is messy, with labelled cardboard boxes piled high and overflowing with Max's clothes. There are photos of Max everywhere, including polaroids hanging across the mirror and door.

Laura shoots up, sitting up in bed, panting and sweating. She turns to look at a framed photo of Max and her together on her bedside table. The clock next to the photo frame reads 12.48pm. She throws back the covers, swinging her legs around so she's sitting on the side of the bed. She catches her breath before sliding her feet into her slippers.

## **INT. KITCHEN DAY**

Laura enters the kitchen and opens the cupboard, which is fully stocked with food, so much that multiple boxes of cereal fall out. She picks a box up from the floor, not bothering to pick up the others. She gets a dirty bowl from the sink, that still contains remains of yesterday's cereal. She sighs and goes to put it back in the sink, but hesitates before deciding it'll do. She pours the cereal into the dirty bowl.

She opens the fridge to get milk, revealing that the fridge is also packed full. She

pours the milk before sitting at the kitchen table and turning on the TV. She flicks through the channels, passing news and documentaries until she stops on the film, "Secret Beyond the Door" (Lang, 1947), although it looks like a romance film from the scene that's playing.

### **INT. BEDROOM DAY**

Laura is sat on her window seat, still in her nightgown, looking out onto the street below, which is lined with green trees.

She sees an old man and woman holding hands. She grabs her polaroid camera and takes a picture.

Laura snuffles as her eyes sting with tears. Before the photo has even developed she crumples it and throws it into the paper bin.

Laura walks over and opens the drawer of her bedside table, taking out pictures from the night of the accident. The same SONG from the night of the accident starts playing, and Laura continues to look at the photos before she realises it's coming from outside.

She peers out her window, seeing that the music is coming from a car parked at the house across the road. MARTIN gets out. He leaves the car running with the music still playing.

Laura watches him as he opens the car boot, getting out a cardboard box.

He opens the door to the house, setting the box in the doorway.

He heads back towards the car and looks up. He spots Laura looking at him and waves. Laura is startled at this recognition. She slowly sets down the photo she was holding, her eyes stuck to her new neighbour. She timidly raises her hand and waves back at him.

### **INT. BEDROOM DAY**

Laura wakes up, sitting up in bed, this time not panting or sweating. She throws back the covers the same as before. This time the clock reads 8:31am. She gets up and opens her curtains.

Laura sits down on her window seat and watches Martin's house. She stares contently for too long.

Finally Martin walks into view through the window. Laura's eyes widen and the

corner of her mouth twitches, teasing a smile.

Laura watches Martin leave his house and get into his car. She looks at the clock.

### **INT. BEDROOM NIGHT**

Laura is sat on her window seat with a sketchpad and a pencil when she hears Martin's car pull into the driveway. She puts the sketchpad down and watches him enter his house.

### **INT. BEDROOM NIGHT [CONT'D]**

Laura is sitting on her window seat, eating a bowl of pasta and looking out. Her bedroom is lit only by the moonlight. She watches Martin who is sat in his bedroom at his desk, typing on a computer.

Once she's finished eating, she sets her bowl on the floor and picks up her camera.

She peers through the lens and snaps a photo of him. She watches him again, but he doesn't notice and continues typing.

Laura brings the camera back up to her face and snaps another picture.

### **INT. BEDROOM DAY**

Laura watches from her window in her nightgown, seeing Martin sitting on his sofa.

She snaps a photo of him before looking at the clock, confused as she expected him to leave for work.

She looks at the calendar pinned to the wall, realising it's Saturday.

### **INT. KITCHEN DAY**

Laura enters her kitchen. She is out of her nightgown and actually dressed, her hair neater and wearing makeup.

Laura opens the cupboards and starts taking out ingredients.

### **INT. KITCHEN DAY [CONT'D]**

Laura is staring into the oven at a pie. There's flour in her hair and a red stain on her blouse. The kitchen is a mess behind her. She opens the oven and carefully lifts the pie with oven gloves, ogling at it with excitement.



### **INT. HALLWAY DAY**

Laura has her coat on and carries the pie from the kitchen. She stops to look in the mirror.

LAURA

[tuts]

She wipes the flour out of her hair before taking a deep breath and opening the front door. CAR NOISES seep into the hallway, Laura freezes from fear and is unable to step across the threshold. She is shaking so much that the pie falls from her hands.

### **FLASHBACK- EXT. ROAD NIGHT**

The car speeds around the corner and slams into Max. His body hits the road.

### **END OF FLASHBACK**

The pie CRASHES on the floor, the pie dish smashing and revealing the red insides.

### **INT. KITCHEN DAY**

Laura is sitting at her dining table, still in her coat. She's digging into the broken pie with a spoon, while reading a romance novel.

There's a KNOCK at the door. Laura is unnerved by this at first, then closes her book, her chair SCRAPING the floor as she hurriedly gets up.

Laura poorly attempts to clean up the pie, picking out the broken dish bits. There's another KNOCK. Laura, still holding the broken bits, resorts to putting them back in the middle of the pie and covering it with a tea towel.

### **INT. HALLWAY DAY**

Laura jogs into the hallway, whipping off her coat as quickly as she can, getting tangled in the arm. She opens the cupboard under the stairs and throws it in. When she reaches the mirror, she fluffs up her hair before swinging the door open, beaming. Her smile drops.

LAURA

Oh.

JANINE [OFF SCREEN]

Nice to see you too.

JANINE hustles past Laura, heaving full shopping bags with her and making her way to the kitchen.

JANINE [CONT'D]

I was passing by and thought I'd make sure you were stocked up. I won't be able to make it up for a while, I have a big deadline with wo-

JANINE [CONT'D FROM KITCHEN]

Oh wow! What's going on in here?

Laura enters the kitchen.

LAURA

I made a pie.

JANINE

What? Why?

Janine opens the cupboards and the fridge.

JANINE [CONT'D]

You haven't even made a dent in the food that I brought you last week, yet you're making pies? And quite frankly, making your kitchen even messier than usual.

Janine aggressively rearranges the cupboards, trying to make room for the new groceries.

JANINE [CONT'D]

And Mum's on at me that you haven't rang her in ages so can you please remember to give her a ring...

Laura starts to snifle, getting upset.

Janine turns back around to face Laura, her anger subsiding and her face relaxing.

JANINE [CONT'D]

Oh Honey! I didn't mean to make you upset. It's just...every time I see you it's like you're getting worse, I'm so worried about you. Please try, at least. For me.

Janine places a hand on Laura's arm.

Beat.

LAURA

I...I...made the pie to bring to my new neighbour.

JANINE

Your new neighbour?

LAURA

Yeah...a man moved in across the road.

JANINE

And you brought him round a pie?

LAURA

Yeah.

JANINE

You actually walked over and gave him it?

Laura nods.

A smile creeps onto Janine's face as she looks closer at Laura's.

JANINE

Why are you all dressed up?

LAURA

I'm not...

JANINE

Should I be buying a hat for the wedding? What's his name!?

LAURA

He's only just been here a week...it's really nothing.

JANINE

You don't just bake someone a pie out of nowhere, it's definitely something!

So how many times have you seen him?

LAURA

Well... I mean I guess I've been seeing him everyday since he moved in.

JANINE

Everyday!

LAURA

Well, not every single day

JANINE

He must really like you.

LAURA

Really?

JANINE

What's not to like? Honestly, you look beautiful, you're glowing. Did you pluck your eyebrows? Are you seeing him tonight?

LAURA [LAUGHING]

Yeah, we'll probably have dinner together.

Janine squeals.

JANINE

Oh my goodness! Do you have anything to wear? I'm free until two I could take you shoppi—

LAURA

—No, it's fine, I've got something.

JANINE

I can't believe you're finally going out.

Janine looks at Laura as if she's a child who's painted her a picture.

JANINE

I know he'll never replace Max, but you deserve to be happy, Laura. This will help you heal.

Janine puts both her hands on Laura's arms, looking her in the eyes.

JANINE [CONT'D]

This is a big step and it's okay to feel scared.

Beat.

JANINE [CONT'D]

It's like my baby sister is growing up on me all over again!

Janine pulls Laura into a hug.

### **INT. BEDROOM NIGHT**

Laura carries a candlestick and a plate with steak, potatoes, and vegetables into her dimly lit bedroom.

The table that was previously against the wall has been pulled out in front of the window. Laura sets her plate down and sits down at the chair opposite so she can look out at Martin, who is also sitting down on his sofa with his dinner.

Laura waits until Martin starts eating, and then begins to cut her steak.

### **INT. BEDROOM DAY**

The leaves on the trees outside Laura's bedroom window are brown, red and yellow. The other houses are decorated for Halloween. The bedroom is much tidier than before, with the absence of Max's boxes. The photos of Max that previously littered the room have been replaced with pictures of the neighbour, all from the angle of Laura's window, peeking in on his daily life. Even the polaroids that hung across her mirror are replaced with one's of the neighbour, despite the poor quality of the photographs as they were clearly taken from a distance.

Laura wakes up to an alarm clock that reads 6:59am. She springs up and makes her way to window seat, just in time to watch Martin rise from his bed.

He comes out of the bathroom in a towel and Laura snaps photos of him.

### **INT. KITCHEN NIGHT**

Laura is cleaning her kitchen when she looks at the clock that reads, 5:15pm. She rips off her rubber gloves and sprints upstairs just in time for Martin's car to pull up outside his house.

She gets her camera ready, and takes a picture once he steps out.

### **INT. BEDROOM DAY**

Laura is sat cross legged on her bed, searching frantically through a phone book. Her finger scans down the page until it finds its destination, then brushes across the dotted line to the number. Laura picks up the telephone on her bedside table, hooking the phone under her chin as she types the number.

Beat.

MARTIN [THROUGH THE PHONE]  
Hello?

Beat.

MARTIN [CONT'D]  
Hello?

LAURA  
Hello. Who's speaking?

MARTIN  
This is Martin, who is this?

Laura writes Martin's name in the corner of the phone book, surrounding it with a heart.

MARTIN  
Hello?

Laura slams the phone down before excitedly rushing over to the window, grabbing her camera and snapping a shot of Martin looking confused at his phone.

### **INT. BEDROOM NIGHT**

Laura walks into her bedroom carrying a bowl of pasta. She sits on her window seat and looks out at Martin's house. Martin's lights are out and his car isn't there.

Laura cranes her neck, looking up and down the street.

She goes over to the phone, quickly dialling Martin's number. It rings but no answer.

She frantically rings it again, her brow furrowed in frustration and confusion.

Still no answer, so she rings it again.

### **INT.BEDROOM NIGHT**

Laura's bed has been pulled closer to the window, making the room look shabbily uneven. The lights are off in Martin's house. Laura is sat on her bed in her nightgown, surrounded by a pool of photos of Martin. Sat in front of her is a large piece of card and glue. She's cutting out Martin's silhouette and sticking them to the card, forming a collage.

She hears a CAR DRIVE up the street and Laura instantly shoots up, grabbing her camera and sits on the window seat.

Laura watches as Martin and LISA get out of his car.

Martin lifts MATTHEW, a toddler, from the backseat, hanging him on his hip. Lisa kisses Martin on the cheek and strokes Matthew's cheek.

They head inside Martin's house.

Laura stares— dumbstruck. Her eyes well with tears. She slowly closes the curtains.

She continues to stare blankly, and then, like a bubbling volcano she finally erupts, and throws her camera across the room.

Laura screams.

She grabs the scissors from the bed and starts cutting up the photos of Martin.

Laura is so distraught and moving so quickly that she chucks the scissors across the room, and resorts to tearing the photos with her hands. Laura screams and yelps with every rip.

### **INT. BEDROOM NIGHT [CONT'D]**

Laura's bedroom is completely trashed. Her mascara is now smeared down her face and her eyes are bloodshot. She looks ghost-like in her nightgown, drowning in the pool of torn up photos.

She gets up and picks the camera from where it landed.

She sets it on a tripod before stepping back and smiling wide. The flash goes off.

### **INT. BEDROOM DUSK**

Laura is asleep on her bedroom floor. She wakes to a KNOCK at the door. She stirs awake, rising steadily.

She slowly walks downstairs, her face expressionless. She opens the door. Martin and Lisa are standing there with Matthew. All dressed up for Halloween.

MARTIN, LISA & MATTHEW  
'Trick or Treat!'

Beat.

LAURA

Hi...um...I don't...I don't know if I...if I have anything.

Beat.

MARTIN

Never worry it's all part of the fun.

Beat.

MARTIN [CONT'D]

My name's Martin by the way, and this is Lisa and our son Matthew. I can't believe we've been neighbours for this long and we haven't met yet.

LAURA

I'm Laura.

MARTIN

It's lovely to finally meet you, where're you headed tonight?

LAURA

No...nowhere.

MARTIN

We're having a little get-together, half-Halloween party, half celebrating Lisa coming home. You're more than welcome to come by. It'd be a shame to waste such a cracking costume.

Lisa laughs.

LAURA

Coming home?

MARTIN

Yeah, Lisa and this little devil were away staying with Grandma while I was busy with work. I went ahead and moved in but they're here for good now, thankfully.

Martin ruffles Matthew's hair.

LAURA

For good?



LISA  
Yep!

Beat.

MARTIN  
Long-distance was so difficult, especially with a little one.

Lisa leans into Martin, her arm hooking around his.

LAURA  
So you just got back last night?

MARTIN  
Yeah, the flight got in pretty late, I hope we didn't wake you.

LAURA [LAUGHING]  
No...not at all.

Beat.

LAURA [CONT'D]  
You...You must be tired then.

LISA  
Yeah, thankfully I was able to sle—

LAURA  
— Can I take a photo?

Beat.

LAURA [CONT'D]  
Of the three of you?

MARTIN  
Eh...we rea—

LAURA  
— that's what I do. I'm a photographer. Sorry. I probably should've said. You  
just look so...happy.

LISA  
Oh. Well okay, how kind of you.

Laura turns around, leaving them standing in the doorway as she makes her way upstairs.

LISA [CONT'D]  
How nice is that, Martin?

Lisa lifts up Matthew, rocking him on his hip. Martin pretends to steal his nose and Matthew laughs.

Laura comes back downstairs with her camera.

LAURA  
Ok. Smile.

Laura brings the camera up to her face. The family bunch together and smile wide. The flash goes off.

LAURA  
Great.

MARTIN  
Maybe you could bring it round later then?

LAURA  
Yeah.

LISA  
Well we better get going. We'll hopefully see you later. You might scare the kids, mind you!

Lisa and Martin laugh.

Once the door is closed, Laura turns to look at herself in the mirror. She doesn't react to her freakish appearance.

## **INT. BEDROOM NIGHT**

Laura is sat on the window seat with a tub of ice cream, watching people arrive at Martin and Lisa's house.

Martin opens the door to his guests and steps back to let them in.

Before he closes the door, he sees Laura at her window and waves. She waves back. Martin beckons with his hand, signalling for her to come join. Laura snif-

fles with tears in her eyes, waving her hands in rejection.

Laura closes her curtains. She moves over to the messy pile on the floor from the previous night. She begins cutting out the photos of herself, which look eerie as her smiles do not match her dishevelled appearance.

She uses tape to stick the photos of Martin back together again.

Laura is obviously doing lots of cutting and sticking but what she is creating cannot be seen.

### **INT. BEDROOM NIGHT [CONT'D]**

Laura hangs a large piece of card over her window. On it is a messy collage-style collection of photos of Martin and Laura, clumsily taped together. It is obvious that the ones of Martin were previously ripped apart, but are taped back together.

Laura lies on her bed on her back. The phone RINGS. Laura doesn't move.

The phone stops ringing and goes to answer machine.

JANINE [THROUGH THE ANSWER MACHINE]

Hi Honey. I know you said you were spending Halloween weekend with Martin, but if you can spare a moment apart from one of your hot dates, please give me a ring. I feel like I haven't heard from you in ages. Ok? I love you! And say hi to Martin for me!

Laura rolls over, reaching towards the phone on her bedside table, only for her hand to land on the framed photo next to it. It is now the photo that she took of Martin, Lisa and Matthew earlier, but a shabbily cut picture of Laura's head covers Lisa's.

Laura takes the photo and lightly kisses Martin's face, before setting it back. Laura closes her eyes, smiling very slightly.

The same SONG plays.

# Triptych

Zara Meadows

(i)

Gold-teased evening, & the absence of going home  
is sounding through the dove trees, the hum of the  
summit blotting out the spaces where they should hear  
bottlenecks blitzing & spritzing against porch steps,  
where the only collision we speak of is lips  
to fizz to tongue-spasm, belly-commotion to ahhhh;  
the only demolition is what the morning waits for us  
to remember, O my honey-dipped one, my Sunday-white bread,  
when you laughed so hard the pain  
shot out your nose, you cupped it to your face  
as if to smell the good it did you, sucked your gums  
close to commemorate those who have drowned  
in their own mouths, rubbed your thumb to the grain  
of the wall we built, with bricks beyond our reach  
& sandpaper, lots of sandpaper. Here, they can see the  
blueprints, tower blocks of craft & careful intention  
to be further than a scaffold of skin, not the hospital-grey  
of herons meandering tight to the leathered banks, not woodchip  
packed down to damp out blood & terror & the intermingled  
warbling of both, not a tape measure slicing into your smile lines,  
not dusk with its wide-eyed lungs exhaling you out of existence,  
the sun puddling in your sick, so scared of a moon that would never surface.

(ii)

Dear God I want // to see you but I want the real // death real // overboard  
stab wounds // true crime documentaries really check // those dental records  
someone please // identify this body I once could have // loved her with my  
eyes closed // if given the chance I // could still go blindfolded // headlong  
stare // into this pickling bruise of night and still // no doubt I would find

the beds of her nine // fingernails God don't ask // about the tenth you know  
where it went // and so do I

(iii)

Recalling the path blood took  
In your thighs before they found  
Them crushed up they broke your  
Cheekbones where my kisses once  
Fell like storms into rain barrels  
And your face was the face of the famous  
Mass graves your mother said your birth was  
Like a small devastation don't worry she waited  
After your funeral the silence rattled  
Your old dartboard she wanted to scream  
Bullseye she wanted her flesh pricked  
And I cried for her it was like she never  
Knew you or the hands of a heaven  
So far away from any flame it burns me



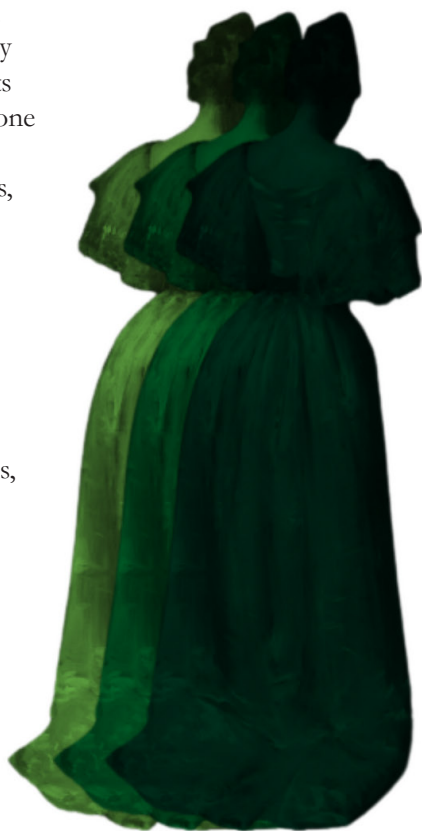
I found out recently that a road I walk down every day is where my town's workhouse used to be, and thinking about my own poverty, my estrangement from both parents, and a trip I once took to the Foundling Museum in London (where I spent most of the visit lying on an little orphan's bed in a cold room) I started to paint a portrait that is myself and not myself. I'm really interested in the weight of stories & warmth of colour. The figure rests on a pillow that is inverted, so it's still a pillow, but it's also a weight or a tombstone, something wedging the blood-tinted & hollowed face into the spiked, furred, ambiguous, abstract shapes of darkness & absence creeping in at the undefined edges of the body. The "Saint Edmund" of the title is a dark ages saint, about whom not much is known, beyond his (ineffectual, poor) kingship ended by Viking conquest. His rule was unmourned and unmissed until, at a later date, a monk on another continent spun a myth about Saint Edmund's severed head being hidden & discovered under the auspices of a wolf. I can't explain too well how much the odd story of this saint means to me, in terms of myth making, rebirth, transformation, delusion, fantasy and altered fact. In short, the painting is of my own head as that of Saint Edmund wreathed around in his bloodied cloak (or in a pool of rivulets and runs of blood), lying alone in the dark in the oppressive weight & ward of a workhouse bedroom.

**Saint Edmund and the Poor House** by JW Summerisle

# Emily

Lorelei Bacht

He mocks me meek. I write in the margin  
of books, a fish unhooked, glistening  
on photographic plates, thick white  
collars and plaids, they call  
me close, me sick, me rose, me not  
much to look at, if you should ask –  
They do all the talking. How easy to  
slide out of your own prescribed skin,  
abandon kith and kin to the mediocrity  
of everyday gospel, of politics, of pots  
and pans, of kitchen sink gossip. No-one  
has noticed my absence so far.  
I sit at Sunday roast, I sit at tin biscuits,  
I sit and observe those who talk, talk,  
talk – I make a note: an idiosyncrasy,  
a brick to build, an anecdote. Mostly,  
I calculate fingers – they believe me  
pious, limpid, not knowing the story  
of why these white hands carefully  
folded like handkerchiefs. Once, they  
were damselflies – and I had ambitions,  
a mouth for rhetoric, a morning walk  
around the hill – the sky a sudden slit,  
demanding I witness, but not forgive.



# Rose-grey fibres of summer

Angela Mckean

I want summer to bloom.

They took away my books,  
my life, the friends that I adore.  
My hands were always cold, nails bitten to the core.

But then I made my gloves.

I knitted them from fibres, soft rose-grey,  
with wooden needles, short with blunted tips.  
My key worker, her with the mammoth hips  
found them among the basket weaving shit.

She said I should be grateful.  
I am 25, I'm told.  
Summer is 1976. Lawns once green are brown.  
The grass, like me, has ceased to grow,  
crunches underfoot like snow.

Last month I managed to escape this hated place.  
Crouched low, I fled,  
keeping below their radar eyes' incessant swivelling gaze.  
Once out of range, I raised my head.

The smell of trees, the heat haze and the space  
led me straight back to those delirious days  
with Vita, with Virginia and the rest.  
We wore our hair in tousled tresses,  
drove to our country place in wind-whipped scarves  
and silken dresses.  
I heard again the scratch of pens, the talk of friends,



unfettered, free.

Then, once more, they were gone from me.

Instead, under a searing, grinning sun  
I found the alpaca, heat-struck, scared but calm,  
brown eyes sunken in its skull.  
An escapee, like me, from our respective farms.

After it had drunk all the water I had left  
it let me cull soft rose-grey fibres from its side.  
I leant against its hide and in an instant knew its scent.  
I recognised it as my own, that pent-up stink of creatures  
pushing boundaries,  
pounding lines,  
creatures driven wild, confined  
for exploitation, or convulsive therapies.

The stench of the untamed who scream  
to have a voice that's heard,  
a choice to move into the light, to dream.

This creature is my friend.

Yesterday I escaped again and brought more water, food.  
The alpaca lay there still,  
but still. And cold.

Anger seized me and I kicked it where the fleece no longer grew.  
A grunt of air flew from its mouth.  
I was so frightened, so enraged  
at the hopeless possibility of that sound,  
its spiteful, momentary lie,  
that I tore my gloves off, threw them at the sky.

I want summer to die.

# Bug Spray

Serena De Marchi

**Content warning: This story deals with depiction of mental illness.**

Abby is a normal person doing normal things in her life. For example, in the morning, before leaving the house and go about her day, there is something she needs to do. A daily ritual that cannot be deferred or postponed. It's a matter of safety.

She needs to check. She needs to check that everything is in order – the windows are closed, the lights are off, the a/c is off, the fridge door is shut, the tap is not running. She does this twice or thrice – the check. Windows (living room and bathroom): check. Lights (living room, bathroom and corridor): check. A/c: check. Fridge: check. Tap: check. She can now leave.

Why does she do it? Well, she just wants to make sure thieves won't be climbing up and breaking in through her window. Also, she doesn't want to come home and find a huge puddle of water in the kitchen because she has left the fridge door open. She wants to avoid problems.

Sometimes she needs to do an extra check. Or two.

But then she finally gets out the door. Closes it. Did she close it? Let's check. Once, twice, three times. Ok, it's closed. She goes.

Sometimes there's a bonus: after putting her keys in the inside pocket of her bag, she needs to check where she has put her keys. Oh, they're here. Since she has them in her hand, let's check if the door's locked.

Her therapist says it's a mix of control issues and a bit of anxiety that makes her perform this daily ritual. She says it can be framed within the realm of OCDs. She gives Abby exercises to do. She says she needs to write down what she feels when she does the checking. Truth be told, Abby never does this. It makes her

feel stupid (the writing not the checking), and she doesn't want that feeling staring at her from the notes of her iPhone.

Then you should do it 20 times, her therapist says. Do you feel like checking the window? Well, do it 20 times, and see how that makes you feel. She doesn't do that either, she only needs to check twice or thrice, which is a reasonable amount.

She woke up today, it's a regular Tuesday, and prepared the water boiler for coffee. She opened the window to let the air in, checked the sills and the frames and the curtains: no sign of bugs. Since she moved here she's been struggling with some kind of black flies. They're longer and bigger than the ones she knows and is used to, so she takes a picture of the one she has just killed and sends it to the landlord:

Do I have to be worried? Do they sting? I don't even know where they come from!

No worries! They're regular flies that come out during this time of year, they won't bite you.

The next day the landlord comes over and brings an insect repellent – a spray. Just for your peace of mind, he says. But she is afraid to use it. She carefully reads the instructions – they're all in Chinese so she needs to double check every word, to be sure she gets everything. She googles the name of the brand. It's international. She reads something in her own tongue. It's flammable. It's poisonous – well for the bugs for sure, but it could hurt humans too (the eyes, the respiratory tract). What happens if she breathes it? What if it penetrates through the fabrics of the curtains, the bedsheets she's going to sleep on tonight? What if she sprays it on the window frame and then her neighbor comes to his window – which is adjacent to hers – to light a cigarette and then boom?! There are so many things that could go wrong.

She pictures all the possible scenarios in which spraying an insect repellent is not only spraying an insect repellent but a tragedy with multiple possible endings. The smoker neighbor that lights up a cigarette from his balcony after she's just sprayed the inflammable gas on a near area. Or, the spray can that explodes due to overheating (it is very hot today). The apartment that goes on fire and then the whole building comes down. She knows that Taipei is prone

to earthquakes. The apartment shakes and the spray can falls violently to the floor. Another explosion, another fire (her apartment), another tragedy for the whole neighborhood.

It's nine o'clock in the morning and she's exhausted. She's watched her house burn down for at least three different reasons. Her therapist says she has a cognitive distortion known as "catastrophic thinking." In her world, every little thing she does or doesn't do will eventually lead to an actual catastrophe. Destruction, death, horror. And guess who will be left to deal with the consequences of all that? Yep, that's her. She always survives the devastation.

Instead of writing what she feels when she performs her rituals, as her therapist would want her to do, she writes the stories of the people she has killed and the buildings she destroyed with her careless behavior. She controls the destruction by writing it. She uses words to make all the worst possible scenarios come to life. When she comes home, back from work, she's relieved to find out that none of it has happened.

She needs to go to work now. She wears a mask, and sprays the bug repellent.

Light, a/c, fridge, windows, door lock: check. She gets out.

# inattentive

Bebhinn Tankard

**Content warning: Child abuse.**

*I danced in the morning when the world was begun –*

You are sat cross-legged, arse half numb from the parquet floor, watching Reverend Owen break into a snore. Drool inches down the elderly man's chin, a cooling, frothing stream watering the dusty pits and valleys of his face. They've been giving him retirement assemblies since your mother was a child here, but the message hasn't quite sunk in, and he still returns each day at eight-forty to mumble about shepherds and sheep and sin. During his sermon you tugged out a hair-ribbon, and now you've looped it around your hands in a cat's-cradle, absently fiddling to stop yourself fidgeting. When it falls from your fingers, a blue butterfly taking flight, you recall your socks.

Your school socks are knee high and white and woollen and cost *a bloody arm and a leg*. You did not choose them; you are not old enough to choose anything yet. You wonder why your mother paid such a gruesome price when the socks are unbearably itchy. Every minute or so, you remember their presence, the tag in the collar of your chequered summer dress, the scratchy fibres of the cardie Granny knitted in chunky navy with the size six needles. It's too hot for a cardie, but if you take it off you'll only lose it. Things seem to cease to exist when you put them down. *Yous just scatterbrained, me duck*, said Granny, giving your tangled head a pat last time you misplaced your sandwiches and satchel and swim kit in one afternoon. Your mother held you down and smacked the back of your thigh thrice for three lost things, right where it stung enough to forget your uniform itching. Your eyes burned, and you thought about the ducks in the allotment pond, and Danny Nichol falling in arse over tit and sending them spiraling into the air, standing up with a cloudy crown of tadpoles in his hair.

*Jesus Christ, there's no need to hit her like that, Helen* – your face still smushed into the arm of the sticky settee – *What, you'd have beat the shite out a me at her age!* – one

eye able to see the playdough you got stuck in the carpet, that nobody's found yet – *She can't help bein forgetful, that doctor said* – a smear of clay-brown in swirly flowery green – *Here you go again, tryin to tell me how to raise me own daughter!* –

You have not seen Granny in a while, so you must keep the cardie buttoned tight, even as your underarms and back dampen with sweat, the scratching of wool urging you not to forget.

With your thumb and index finger, you roll down your sock into a thick sausage around your ankle, relieved from the pinpricks of irritation at last. You admire the impressive canvas of your bony leg, splotched with smudges of gold and ash and mauve and violet. You are not good at keeping your balance; you are not good at behaving. On your other leg, the sock catches on a graze on your shin, and tears it away with fibrous canines. Red blossoms on white, a summer flower in snow, a miracle. You suck in one breath, another, another, hissing through your teeth at the pain.

*Dance, dance, wherever you may be,  
I am the Lord of the Dance said he-*

You glance up, and the Headmistress, pink with heat, catches your eye with a look of steel. You mouth the words of the hymn obediently, wondering how you're going to staunch the rivulet of blood, wondering whether Christ still bled on the dance floor with His hands full of holes. You know it's irreverent to picture Him at the children's disco, Sunday afternoon from three till five, when all the teachers' chairs stack up behind a curtain and this same hall becomes so changed with the lights turned low. Would He follow Danny Nichol like the other boys, hair done up with gel to stiff iced peaks, careening up and down at breakneck speed and skidding into their knees? *He suffers the little children to come unto Him*, said Reverend Owen, and hanging around Danny Nichol usually causes suffering. You joined in with his group before, until you were firmly taught that good little girls do not get green-grey holes in their tights, good little girls are not colourful, and good little girls do not imagine Jesus doing the YMCA. You splay your hands in the Y, on the cross; the image makes you giggle. The Headmistress glares. Reverend Owen's snore catches in the back of his throat, and he blinks himself awake in time to lead the closing prayer. You effortlessly forgive those that have trespassed against you, and consider trespassing in the allotments on your way home, gathering strawberries in greedy arms, staining them to match your legs.

Your teacher shrieks when she catches sight of you in the line back to lessons, and pulls you by the arm into the bathroom. Your hands are clammy. You watch a grotesque little creature get scolded in the mirror for its bare-leggedness, blood-smeared skin, its absent-mindedness and hair half-unplaited. It smooths its fingers over the bottom button of its unravelling cardie, over and over, enjoying the rounded certainty of the plastic. You copy it, trying to keep your face impassive, your feet planted firmly to the ground the way the adults like them to be.

*Are you listening to me?*

You have not been. You nod. The button comes away in a sudden, sharp twist, and the thing in the mirror starts to cry. Luckily, you are good at blinking back tears.





# Pac-Man Mouth

Zoe Brönte Faulkner

I learn how to bathe in  
my own blues in a gloomy  
arcade beside the beach.

I am either nauseous  
from the bright, sticky  
screens or I am sick

to the core of my  
own aching. I can't tell  
which. So I play video

games and watch the  
Pac-Men stare back  
at me with gaping

mouths. This city is  
full of ghosts, walking  
lopsided as if there are

token coins stuffed  
inside their boots.  
Addicted to the thrills,

if you tilt your head  
to the side, some  
pennies might fall out.

# Death of Touch and other side effects

Prenesa Naidoo

**Content warning:** Discussion of self harm and mental illness.

## Death of Touch

*Description:*

Green and white tic-tacs.

*Dosage:*

20mg.

*Indications:*

1. Rapid heart rate, throat closure, dizziness. Also known as panic attacks. Can occur while holding your boyfriend's hand at a charity fair when you are next in line for the Ferris Wheel.
2. Elevated mood and self-esteem followed by a slump. Also known as manic behaviour. Can present as obsessively cleaning your house for three days after which you're holding a jar of flour that crashes to the floor. Like you.
3. Slitting of wrists on a bathroom floor at midnight. Can occur five minutes into your 23rd birthday.

*Side effects:*

1. Death of touch. No sexual desire.
2. Every sound, every movement, every decision fills you with terror. e.g. a knock on your front door.

## Borderline

*Description:*

Little white mentos.

*Dosage:*

150mg.

*Indications:*

1. You feel like you are not living, or that you're too alive. Can occur when you're watching a movie one night; one moment it's pointless, the next you're researching whether it is based on a true story.
2. You feel the highest of highs and the lowest of lows. Can present when

your eyes light up while talking about your favourite book with a friend. The fall comes when the friend looks at their watch while you are speaking. The fall makes you feel unseen.

3. You are triggered by small things. e.g. peeling an apple at the sink, instead of the one long peel that you were working on, it snags and tears in two. You throw the apple into the window.

*Side effects:*

1. Agitation. Aggressively pushing your partner away as he helps you into bed.
2. Insomnia. Your eyes grow more accustomed to the dark, it feels like a warm blanket and a nightmare.
3. Confusion. Inability to recall whether you prefer being barefoot or not.

## **The Voices in your Head**

*Description:*

Yellow m&ms.

*Dosage:*

200mg.

*Indications:*

1. Delusions of grandeur. Overnight you become Cleopatra. You recall the death of your father, how you became queen at eighteen, how your twelve-year-old brother exiled you. And how you went into battle to reclaim your throne.
2. The billboard advertising American Psycho becomes a warming just for you. You sympathise with Patrick Bateman; he is just another misunderstood person. Later in bed, you change your mind. Patrick Bateman is hiding in the bush just beneath your window.
3. Hallucinations. The peace lily plant gets up and dances on the coffee table. She says her name is "Pily". You don't like it. The next day you ask your parents if they could call you by that name.

*Side effects:*

1. Catatonia. Spending hours on the branch of a tree in the backyard. You are upside down; you like the rush of blood to your head as your feet run over the rough wood.
2. Perseveration. You slip "never trust a doctor who wears green socks" into every conversation you have.

# Verbatim

Andrina Deery

Someone once told me it's bad luck to walk on a triple-drain  
(a skateboarder who tattooed me in the wrong place)  
but walking on a double can fix anything.  
Now, I can't walk in a straight line – I have to touch the doubles,  
whoever I'm with cannot touch a triple,  
and the singles – we leave those well enough alone.

I was told that being near living things has a positive influence on the self  
(by a crisis counsellor) and so I often sit in the botanic gardens, alone  
on the bench just left from the library-side entrance.  
The smell of life around me, weather-dependent temperatures  
(as opposed to the predictability of the thermostat) and not-so-distant shouting  
is supposedly 'good for the soul'.  
She also told me that, when in crisis, it is very difficult to see a way out;  
maybe that is why I wear my contact lenses and sit in the same place.

Someone (a past-teacher) once told me to try listing ten things I can see  
so that my daydream cannot carry me out the classroom window, and leave me  
to hover outside with the birds.  
Inside, as an idea, has a tendency to swallow me.  
A wall the deep white empty of February, a mirror, a birdcage,  
an old green sweet wrapper and an empty wine glass,  
a lone, newly-scuffed shoe by the made bed,  
the bed, the train-track outside, and me.  
I am still learning to list.

The internet says to chew gum, and smell lavender oil  
and smell the rain on my roof outside – to stay grounded.  
The smells tether me, prevent me from floating up on an unfinished sentence.  
If I haven't started that day with a cold shower, periodically checked in with  
myself

and used my nose then I should expect the mental barrier,  
and to be tucked away inside another thought and feeling entirely.

My father once told me, in the carpark of the drowning family business,  
that I am beautiful, intelligent, and that I matter.

He heard it on the radio, that you're meant to say that.

My mother once called me a 'cow' for putting too much gravy on my dinner  
(or was it a pig?) – I think of the two situations just as often,  
and add them to the mass of unforgettable mass of thoughts in my mind,  
curling out of my ears and around me like smoke.

But I am a warm-blooded creature.

I may move in the cold rain like a snake but more often I move toward warmth  
and cannot multitask. I do not like writing lists. Or thinking as I speak.

My memory is shot to hell. It makes things up; fills in the gaps  
(there are more of them everyday).

I do not own lavender oil. And chewing hurts my teeth,  
because my jaw is crooked, over-bitten and mis-matched.

The minty-ness stings my eyes, the wrappers end up on my floor (waiting to be  
listed).

But what is one to do, when they follow the advice of everyone around them  
and still,

still, cannot find that one nameless, shapeless thing.

# Lady Crimson

Paris Jessie

the ocean quite possibly came with her  
she poured her grains into the calling blue  
and in return split in two  
the ocean spilled its contents into  
her upper  
half

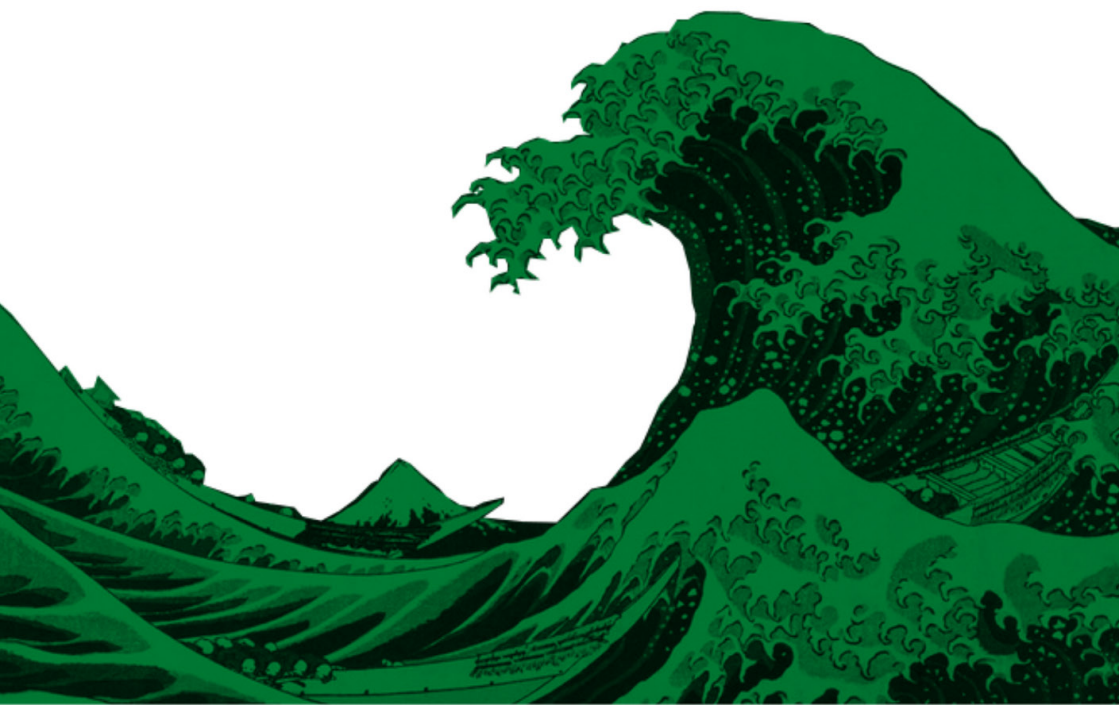
now hovering around she carries the weight  
of the sea  
even its chatter

top layer  
where the sun laminates  
she munches away as it pours in  
starving sand lacking wetness  
of tide blankets

on rests  
the the  
walls of her esophagus saltwater

there to cleanse her from voices that had never  
belonged  
something like sun  
down the ocean water sub  
merges

feeding her insides to confiding in all her senses  
things will not be silenced here with an ocean belly that  
gyrates, hearing that against  
waves crash kidney,



# necrophilia is for the immature

Syna Majumder

## **Content warning: Death.**

the job is a thankless one, and people sweep in and out, asking if the cold bodies her fingers are on are really gone. she thinks that it would all be nicer if they learnt to use their brains, saw the unmoving disrobed chests on her tables. when it is time to look at skin, they never do. she has been asked about love at parties, the sticky, physical parts of it, and it seems to consume every person in the room. why, then, is the morgue any different? do you stop aching when breath goes away, or does the pain take on a different shade—there is a long chemical shift that turns a lover's face to a widow's shroud. if all was ideal, it would happen slowly, after a life spent happily, all the kisses in the sun collected and pressed into the mental family albums. but too much of her work is blood leaking out from under taut, unfortunate skin. her interest in her job is surgical, and so is her grief. it's more about finding out what people want from gorgeous cellular decay, taking in the purpling at the base of the neck, and solving a part of the mystery. it makes her more careful, looking at the things everyone leaves behind without even realising. she'd make a great robber, but she isn't patient. she'd make a refreshing killer, but it takes work. by the end of the day, it is her and the autopsy,



and the only question that she'll never have  
an answer to: who will do this later, when  
she will be the one on the cold steel?



**Void I** by Megan Russo

# Girl Werewolf

Emma Buckley

**Content warning: Gore and violence.**

The girl-child unzips her skin at the wrists  
and wears her wolfishness  
like a wolfish party dress,  
introduces the latest boy to all her party friends:  
the dark clouds driving like frat boys over the speed limit,  
colliding with the front-teeth-after-a-fistfight horizon  
like frat boys into lamp-posts,  
the sidewalk still hot as sunburnt skin.

The empty side-streets are a hot-spot for boy-eating,  
her post-TV late-night hobby,  
cleaning up his guts with her tongue.  
The dark trees gathering in clots, the moon hanging  
like a cum-drop, or her mother's stolen pearls.  
And the girl is chewing flesh like toffee,  
rending arteries and bone marrow out back of the mall,  
The shy boy from homeroom clamped within her protruding wolf-jaw.

She plucks his vocal chords like violin strings, makes the teenage body sing.  
Her homemade playlist of 1980s house party hits thumps in her Walkman,  
sound-tracking her hitchhike to the hilltop make-out spot  
where all the kids go to smoke cigarettes and fuck  
beneath the big satellite and above the spot that used to be a record shop,  
till it burned down and was reborn as a laundromat.  
The sheets never come out clean.

The wolf-girl is content that she prayed so hard for sharp teeth,  
as the washing machines spin like the records used to do,  
and the streetlights buzz like door-to-door salesman or houseflies.

And the wolf-girl, the suburbanite,  
unpeels the captain of the football team  
like his newly stubbled boy face is a tangerine,  
wears his letterman jacket like a garter-belt  
between a bridegroom's teeth.

She howls at the moon till the dawn creeps up like a classroom hard-on,  
stalks along to the parking lot out back of the closest fast-food restaurant  
to retrieve her girl-skin,  
the line between early-night and early-morning so thin,  
it cuts the horizon like a pulled hangnail.  
In the daylight, in the girl's bathroom,  
the girl-child pukes up the whole mess of herself.  
In the twilight, like a dogfight, the wolf-girl eats everyone else.

# There Are Sweets in Apartment 5C

Shaun Byron Fitzpatrick

**Content warning: Brief mention of suicide.**

I told my brother I would not build him a gingerbread house, not this year.

“You’re too old for this,” I said. “It isn’t right, it isn’t normal.”

My brother screwed up his face, debating a tantrum. At twelve he was too old for such things, but always acted younger than his age.

“It’s the trauma,” his psychologists all said. “Give him time, he’ll get over it.”

But that was six years ago, and my brother was not better.

After it happened, we were swept up in a media circus. Reporters would ask my brother what he went through, what it was like. Tell us about the apartment, they begged. Tell us what you saw inside.

“Gumdrop doorknobs and spun sugar windows and a bed made of cake,” he’d always say. “And a beautiful lady with licorice eyes and candy corn teeth.” And they’d write that he was disturbed, poor boy, not right in the head after all that happened.

They never asked me anything. Which was strange, because I was there too, and I was older. But they didn’t ask me, so I didn’t see the point in telling them anything. I didn’t talk to reporters, and I didn’t talk to police. Instead, I let my brother tell them about our neighbor, and what happened to us inside her apartment. And all the adults would shake their heads and pat him on the back and say, I guess we’ll never know.

When our neighbor first moved in, I was eleven years old. Our father often worked late, and it was my responsibility to watch and feed my brother. Our

mother was dead, or perhaps missing, or perhaps ran away. My father was never very clear on the matter. But she wasn't here, so much of the housework fell to me. My father felt bad about it. He was a very kind man, and it wasn't his fault what happened. He took it very hard though, and a month after everything happened we found him in the bathtub, wrists draining onto the floor.

"Like strawberry syrup," my brother said.

But I am getting ahead of myself.

One afternoon I was washing the dishes when I heard a knock on our apartment door. I dragged a chair over to the door to look through the peephole, but there was no one there. I opened the door a crack, and found a small, handwritten card and Tupperware container on the welcome mat.

The card was the color of pink sherbet, with a looping gold script. "From your new neighbor in 5C," it said. "Visit any time." Inside the container was a stack of shortbread cookies. I popped one in my mouth, and it melted the instant it touched my tongue. I was just a little girl, and I was not used to decadent, beautiful things. That night, I showed my father the note, and begged him to let me visit our new neighbor. He shrugged, and said fine.

"Just take your brother along," he said.

I did not want to share this slice of beauty with my brother. I had so little to myself. But I promised anyway.

The next day I put on my best dress, a cheap red velvet scrap I had worn to Christmas the year before. It was much too warm out for velvet, but it was the only lovely thing I owned. I forced my brother to wear his nicest shirt, and looped one of my father's ties around his neck. At eleven, I could think of nothing more presentable than a tie and our holiday best.

At exactly noon, I took my brother's hand and marched him across the hall. Standing in front of apartment 5C, I softly rapped once, twice on the door. It was so faint, I couldn't imagine our neighbor would hear it. But the door flung open instantly, as though she had been standing there all morning, waiting. She smiled at us from the doorway.

“Are you my new little friends from across the hall?” she asked.

I don’t remember her being as pretty as my brother swore she was. She had very long, fair hair, and very dark eyes, and I remember blushing at the sight of her breasts, straining against the knit of the sweater she wore. I suppose those things are all considered very attractive to men, no matter how old they are. But she had the most terrible teeth, stained and jagged as fence posts in her mouth. She caught me looking, and casually covered her smile with her hand.

“Please,” she said, “won’t you come in?”

Our memories of the apartment are different, my brother’s and mine. He remembers the walls being the same creamy pink as her calling card, with velvet furniture the color of an eggplant and a big fireplace in the living room. Maybe it’s because he was young, or maybe it’s because that’s what she wanted him to see, but he remembers it like a cartoon house, all candy-coated colors and too-large details. He doesn’t remember the mildew on the top corners of the walls that made the paint look like it was dripping, or how the sofa was threadbare and ripped, the coils poking through if you sat in the wrong spot. He doesn’t remember the fire being too big and too hot, making the entire apartment feel like you were being boiled.

We do both remember that the apartment was far too large. Our own was only three rooms, a living and cooking area, our father’s room, and the tiny bedroom we shared. This apartment had rooms and staircases and hallways. It seemed bigger than our entire building. My brother told the police this, but when they looked in the apartment they swore it was just a studio. Just one small, dirty room with a mattress on the floor and a sagging couch.

And the oven, of course.

“You have good timing,” she said. “My cake just finished baking. Go sit down, I’ll bring some over.”

My brother and I sat on the couch. We were still holding hands, as though we had forgotten we were still joined. We didn’t release each other until our neighbor brought over slices of cake as large as my face, piled high with buttercream and candied flowers. My brother dug in happily, his mouth already sticky with frosting.

“Who were you baking this cake for?” I asked. “Are you expecting company?” I did not take a bite.

My neighbor smiled. “It’s always good to be prepared for guests. You’ll learn that when you’re a grown woman with your own house someday.”

My brother finished his cake, and yawned. He nestled into my shoulder, and fell asleep. My neighbor laughed.

“Men are all like that,” she said knowingly. She smiled at me with her lips closed. “Once they have something in their bellies, they’re out like a light. Doesn’t matter if they’re six or sixty-six.”

She gently pried my brother’s hand off of his plate and stood up. “Let’s let him nap,” she said to me. “Why don’t you come help me in the kitchen.”

I moved my brother’s head from my shoulder and laid him down across the couch. He didn’t even notice; he was sleeping so soundly he started to snore. I followed my neighbor into her kitchen. She was at the sink, washing dishes. Like the rest of the apartment, the kitchen was massive, with countertops that seemed to be longer than the entirety of my home. She had dozens of cabinets and drawers, and pots and pans hung from every inch of the ceiling. At the center of it all was a gleaming, wood-burning oven that looked large enough to fit a grown man inside.

“Your apartment is so big,” I said to her. “I didn’t know any of the apartments in this building were this big.”

“I have a lot of things,” my neighbor said. Her arms were soapy up to the elbows. “I’ve always been a bit of a packrat. I just can’t bear to throw anything out. So, I need to live somewhere that accommodate all my treasures. And I just can’t abide by a small kitchen. How would I ever get any of my work done?”

“Are you a chef?” I asked her.

“Something like that,” she said.

My neighbor finished washing the last dish and dried her hands.



“Would you like a tour?” she asked.

There was a decadence to her apartment that was sensual and vulgar, a decaying fairytale. She showed me her bedroom, almost completely filled by a massive bed with a gilded bedframe, piled high with velvet pillows and blankets that looked like they were made of freshly sheered sheep. I peaked in her closet, packed to the brim with silks and tulle and furs. I saw a room full of books that was bigger than the public library, and a room that just displayed her jewelry, rubies and diamonds and emeralds fit for a queen. There was a film of dust on everything, dents in the bedpost and stains on her gowns, as though she were careless with her things. This somehow made it all the more glamorous to me. Imagine, having so many precious things that you could damage them and not care.

She watched me devour her home with hungry eyes. She took me to room after room, all packed with treasures. I became dizzy from looking at so many beautiful things. Finally, she took me back to the kitchen and sat me down at the table. She made us both mugs of tea, milky and sweet from the great globs of honey she spooned into them.

She took a sip, watching me over the rim of her cup. “You could be like this, if you wanted,” she said. “You could have a home like this and all the gowns and jewels and treasures your heart desired.”

I laughed, a small, sad sound. I didn’t know what my future held, but I knew enough to know that the riches she described would play no part in it.

“You could,” my neighbor insisted. “I could help you, teach you. Would you like that?” She asked the question so casually, as though she didn’t care. But her grip on her cup tightened until I was sure it would crack.

“What could you teach me?” I asked.

Her face split into a smile, and this time she did not bother to hide her cracked and crooked teeth.

“Everything,” she said. “I will teach you everything. How to kill a man with a biscuit, or bind another to you with a caramel. How to destroy your enemies

with cake, or gain wealth with chocolates. Would you like to learn to bake your future, little one?"

I looked at her, and I was not afraid. But I also wasn't a fool.

"What would it cost," I asked, "for you to teach me all this?"

My neighbor smiled wider. She liked that I was smart enough to ask the right question.

"Is there any price you would not pay?" she asked.

I thought of my brother, asleep in the living room. I pictured his small body frail and lifeless. "I can only think of one thing," I said.

She nodded. "I wouldn't have asked for that."

My neighbor stood up and walked over to her counter, where she began pulling ingredients down from the shelves. Butter and sugar, molasses, spices, eggs. I watched her mix everything together in a bowl the size of a bathtub, until she had a ball of dough as large and dense as a small boulder. With a gasp, she heaved the dough on to the table, and began to roll it out until it was about as long as I was tall.

Panting a little, my neighbor looked at me, and then looked back down at the dough. Slowly, she began slicing it with a sharp knife. Bit by bit, she carved me into the dough. She used icing to draw my dress, gum drops for my eyes, candy corn for my teeth, licorice twists for my hair. By the time she was done, a gingerbread me laid on the table, ready to be baked. Wiping the flour from her hands, my neighbor looked at me.

"If this is what you want, we'll bake this together," she said. "And then you'll be like me, and I will teach you everything I know. But once you bake this, you'll belong to me. And when I die, everything I have will be yours, and you will teach a new girl. Do you understand?"

"I won't get to see my father, or my brother anymore," I said.

My neighbor looked sad. "No, you won't. It will be a different kind of life.

Better in some ways, worse in others. That's life."

I thought about my small life, my cramped home and my chores. I thought about what I was being offered, and what I was giving up. And I made my decision.

"Bake it," I told her.

My neighbor smiled, and opened the oven door. She lit a match, and leaned into the oven to start the fire. Suddenly my brother appeared, a determined look on his face. Using all his strength, he shoved my neighbor. She was off-balance and unprepared. She fell into the oven, and my brother slammed the door.

My neighbor banged on the door, begging to be released.

"Help me!" she screamed.

My brother looked at me, tears in his eyes.

"She was going to hurt you. She was going to take you from me," he said. "I saved you."

I looked at my brother, and then at the oven. My neighbor was still pleading to be released.

"Save me," she cried, "and I will teach you everything!"

My brother tugged at my hand, tears streaming down his face.

"Please," he said. "Let's go home."

I looked again at the oven, and then walked out of the apartment with my brother.

The fire department arrived later, when the smoke was so thick it began seeping into other apartments. It smelled, many of my neighbors said, like barbecued meat. The firemen knocked on our door to make sure we were okay. They asked if we knew who lived in 5C.

“She was a bad lady,” my brother said. “She tried to hurt us.”

When the cops arrived, my brother told them his version of the story, the one he believed. That our neighbor invited us over, and tried to harm us. That she fed him a cake that made him fall asleep, and tried to bake me alive. That it was self-defense, what he did. I don’t think the cops believed his story, but they did believe something terrible had happened to us. After all, what could drive a sweet little kid to do something like that, if something horrible hadn’t happened to him first? They told my brother he was a hero.

Like I said, they never asked me.

I take care of my brother now, for the most part. We live with our grandmother, but she’s old, and I’m responsible for most of the housework. I make sure the house is clean, and that my brother gets to school on time. I cook our meals. It’s not so different from how it used to be, when we were younger and lived in the apartment with our father.

Every year, my brother asks me to make him a gingerbread house, and he decorates it to look like our neighbor’s apartment. His psychologist said it’s a good thing, that it helps him work through his trauma. The psychologist doesn’t say this, but I know he thinks it’s the least I can do. My brother saved me, after all.

I wonder sometimes, though.

When I am doing the laundry, or washing the dishes, or making sure my brother finishes his homework, I think about what I almost did. What I would be doing now, if the gingerbread had gone into the oven instead of my neighbor. She promised jewels and silks and more power than I could possibly imagine. And my brother took that from me.

Sometimes, when he is decorating his gingerbread house, I feel him watching me. When I meet his eyes, he smiles, and there is something in it that I do not trust. He made a choice that day, and I made one, too. But I don’t know if he saved me, and I don’t know if he actually meant to. That’s an awful thought for a sister to have. But when I look at my life, and when I look at my brother, I think, if I could do it again, I would trade you for the gingerbread.

# you need to dust your trophies

Charlotte Reed

**Content warning: Gore and murder.**

*“Aw come off it. Don’t you become one of them controlling bitches, eh?”*

The phone line went dead.

The sound of high pitched buzzing the only response to her objections.

He hadn’t even waited to hear her response to that offhanded insult. She set the phone back on the receiver with a slam, running a hand through her perfect curls, messing them up. It didn’t matter, in the end, he wasn’t going to be home to see them.

Dinner with the dead animals again.

They glared at her, as if it was her that had caused the problem. Their glassy gazes full of judgement. She pulled the phone off the hook and launched it at a particularly rude mouse, knocking it off its perch to the floor. The cat shot forward, scooping it into his mouth before making a bee-line for the back door. He could have it – she wasn’t all that interested in getting a taxidermy mouse back. This just seemed to fill the rest of the animals with more judgement for her, glaring at her for her irresponsibility. She wasn’t prepared to go running out in the back garden after that stupid cat, the neighbours already thought her crazy enough. I’d heard their whispers about her.

“Leave me be!”

The animals couldn’t turn their gaze from her. They continued to stare, lifeless eyes communicating so much she wished she couldn’t understand. She turned her gaze from them then, sick of the sight of them. Of course, when she turned away from some of them, she ended up faced with another wall of foxes and owls and birds, all eyes on her.

I suppose she's used to that.

The problem with Marie, is her whole purpose was to be stared at.

She would be flaunted around, dressed up in lace and velvet and silk, bright red lipstick slathered on, hair pulled up, bunched up, ripped down, whatever the occasion called for. She would smile, laugh, throwing her head back as she raised her champagne glass to some old man who's jokes really weren't that funny. I'd know, they never made me laugh. She'd make light talk, twirling strands of hair around her finger, putting on that familiar doe-eyed look, mouth parted whenever someone said something a little too clever for Marie.

Marie wasn't stupid.

She'd gotten herself into her situation on purpose – even if I believe she thought she'd be having a better time than she actually was. She'd attended a party on a yacht, five years ago I think it was, not that my memory was all that good. Dressed in silk, the neckline hung low, she'd done what she did best and laughed, and talked, and wooed. She'd wooed herself straight into the arms of a very wealthy, very influential, very attractive man. I'd definitely know that one. All eyes in the room were on him, the way his teeth glinted in the light, eyes narrow and cunning, gliding through the crowds when he spotted his prey. Of course Marie was perfect for him – she was all soft curves next to his sharp edges. She made him seem trustworthy, her flushed cheeks making his devilish grin seem more mischievous than malicious. He noticed straight away Marie's effect; the way eyes wandered, concentration drifted, the way people began to just agree with what he said when she was around. So they entered a mutual, unspoken of course, arrangement.

That's how Marie found herself living basically alone in the manor house her and her husband shared. It was nice at first, I kept her company, she revelled in the freedom and time to herself, the money her husband didn't keep track of. She'd never had a lot of money, I knew her when she was a young girl, playing in the mud with her sticks, making 'potions' out of grass and rainwater before her mother called her in to share a bath with her brothers. Now she didn't have to worry about stitching up her hand-me-down clothes to try and make them look more like they belonged to a girl when she had a whole walk-in closet. I was jealous of that.

It got boring quickly though.

Slowly, one by one, the people she'd grown up with drifted away from her – they simply couldn't relate to her lifestyle anymore. Her parents didn't ever come to visit – her husband wouldn't let them in the house. Her former friends didn't like the way she'd changed, the way she spoke, the way she acted. She didn't need them anyway. She had me.

Everything has to end.

Her husband was around less and less. The ironic thing about the whole situation is they got on quite well – she liked spending time with him, which made it so much harder when he was away and when he was cruel to her down the phone for requesting his presence. She wasn't in love, oh god no, but she considered him a friend. I don't think he felt the same way about her.

She wandered the halls as she always did, dragging her hand through the dust on the shelves, creating patterns in the dirt. Her husband wouldn't allow any hired staff, said his house was his private business, so slowly the house itself wasted away, Marie losing her initial motivation to care for it.

After all, if the house didn't care for her, if it sat groaning while parts of her began to crumble, why should she have to care for it?

She liked the paintings mounted on the walls – old and faded, forgotten memorials from generations past. Her husband was old money after all, not that he seemed to care about his history and traditions, a lot of the paintings of his ancestors covered in drapes or faded to the point the details of their faces couldn't be recognised anymore. It seemed sad; the only evidence they'd ever lived slowly disappearing until eventually the canvas would be beyond repair. She was sure their bloodline was going to end with her and her husband too. A child would certainly liven her up, something to care for, nurture, run around the house after, a noise other than the constant *drip drip* of the pipes, maybe even laughter. There's a certain activity that needs to be done for children though, something that they'd long ago stopped doing. Her husband had to actually be home long enough to do that.

She was sure he was cheating on her.

Not that she could do anything about it. Not that she would. Lose the life of

luxury she'd gotten so used to and for what? She wasn't in love, it didn't bother her.

I think it did a bit.

Marie finished her usual round of the house and found herself back in the main viewing room, surrounded by the dead animals again. Their lifeless gazes fell on her again and she shivered. They'd always made me uncomfortable too. What her husband could possibly want with them was beyond us both, but she was under strict instructions they must all remain there.

I think her husband was odd. No wonder he was single when Marie first came across him.

The cat came pawing back into the room, clearly finished playing with the dead mouse Marie had knocked an hour ago and dropped something at Marie's feet.

"Jesus, Tabitha!"

It was a dead bird, its beady eye splattered with blood, the wooden floorboard beginning to stain red as it oozed. Tabitha seemed confused about the problem with this and skirted out the room, instantly distracted, leaving Marie to clean up after her.

I didn't envy her.

She got down on her hands and knees, face scrunched up as she moved closer and closer to the corpse. She tentatively reached her hand out towards it, and that's when it started twitching. She jerked away from it as it began to writhe, flapping its wings in an attempt to get off its back, blood spattering. It eventually turned upright and began the manic dash to the open door – limping, half flying, red drops littering the floor where it trod. She watched in awe as the crippled bird managed to escape, getting up to follow the breadcrumbs it left that led to the open patio door. It stumbled out, flapping its cracked wings in a futile effort to get off the ground and to safety. I felt a smile creep onto my face as Marie watched the bird manage to get halfway across the garden, despite its injuries. I almost laughed when, inevitably, the cat shot out and began playing with it, passing it back and forth between its paws, seemingly unaffected by the loud squawks and shrieks of terror. Marie's awe turned to horror as Tabitha struck her final blow and leapt up over the fence – probably to find some other



small animal to torment. I did laugh then, not that Marie noticed, as she stepped squinting into the overgrown garden, dragging herself towards the real corpse of the bird.

This time she didn't hesitate to fall to her knees and scoop the dead bird into her hands, blood trickling through her fingers, staining the patch of flowers beneath them both red.

A tear burst out from her eyes, and I felt bad for laughing – Marie had caught onto what this meant for her. The glassy eye of the bird seemed to stare straight at her, speaking to her with more than words.

“I'm so sorry.”

I wished then that I could put a hand on Marie's shoulder, comfort her, let her know it wasn't her fault.

Her tears began to stream, falling onto the bird as she got up and brought it inside, heading straight to her husband's workshop. She left a trail of dirty footsteps behind herself as she padded through the silent corridors, never taking her eyes off the small package laid in her hands. She opened the door with her hip, knowing full well she shouldn't even be in there. The room was dark, heavy black curtains drawn over any windows, not even a sliver of daylight getting in.

“You can rest here.”

She laid her new friend on one of the counters, still murmuring, and began dragging back the curtains to let the natural light fill up the room. Surrounding her were the remains of animals, dissected, pulled apart and put back together – long scrawny limbs on bulky bodies, mismatched eyes forced into the sockets that gave them a constant surprised look. She seemed unbothered by this, totally engrossed in her chore, gently cleaning the wings of her bird. She spent so long in a daze, disconnected from her body as she stood swaying, repeating that same gentle motion to clean the feathers. She didn't notice the room grow darker, the sun hiding from what it knew was coming.

The front door slammed.

Footsteps came down the corridor.

He was home.

*“And what the fuck do you think you’re doing?”*

Marie flinched, spinning around to come face to face with those piercing blue eyes filled with rage. It’s the first time she’d seen her husband angry, truly angry, and she pulled the bird into her chest in one protective motion, doe eyed with fear.

“I- He- I wanted him to stay.”

Her husband looked down in disgust at the dead bird in her hand, curling his mouth as he saw her blindingly white summer dress had been stained.

*“Are you insane? You can’t just find a dead bird and taxidermy it? Jesus, if I’d known you were insane I would never have married you.”*

He ripped the bird out her hands and she gave a small sob, watching helplessly as he launched it at the window. She yelped as she heard it crack against the wall and began to cry as her husband roughly barged past her, moving all of the tools he had laid out into a box.

*“Maybe you need to learn how to follow basic rules. I might have to start putting locks around the house and treating you like a child – if you’re going to act like one.”*

This was the last straw for poor Marie.

With a scream she shoved her husband, watched his eyes go wide in shock as he tumbled backwards with a yell. Realising what she had done she ran, but with nowhere to go she ended up just back in her room, panting and hunched over. Perhaps once he’d had some time to calm down she’d be forgiven – so she crawled into bed, still in her same old dress and let herself sob until she was finally pulled into a dreamless state.

When she woke the house was cold, as was her bed. Her husband was missing, obviously still angry and choosing instead to stay in one of the guest rooms scattered around the house. I knew just what she was going to do as she got out of bed, heading straight back to her husband’s workshop. She couldn’t let go of that stupid bird.

The lights were still on in the workshop, and she went straight over to her broken bird, spending time to stroke its head before she moved it. She needed to clear a space on the table, throwing the bird down with a sigh, her arms weak and shaking before she got to work.

She had stood outside the workshop night after night watching her husband without his realising, so she knew what to do. First, remove the skin – cutting a seam up the belly then loosening the skin with a knife before peeling it off. She began to sweat with the effort and the delicacy of it, sweat mixing with blood and the birds bright blue eyes staring right back at her.

“I’ll fix you, don’t worry.”

The skin needed to be tanned, salt rubbed into it, salt that stuck to her fingers, stinging the small cuts she had all over her hand, a sharp pain that kept reminding her of her existence. The hide had to be in a cool dark place, so she closed the curtains again, letting herself work in darkness, never taking a break and feeling herself getting weaker. The skin needed to be soaked then hung up to dry, stretching out under the clips and the weight of it.

“Once I’m finished everything will be better.”

It needed to be stuffed next. I was sure the fumes were getting to us both, but Marie remained unblinking, on autopilot with her work. She used up almost all her husband’s resources on this, adjusting the positioning of her bird over and over again until it was perfect, exactly like how she remembered him. She picked out a pair of eyes, not the piercing blue like her bird’s used to be, but bird’s eyes all the same. She placed them into the sockets she’d recently made empty, humming in disapproval when they turned out too small. There was no larger bird’s eyes though, so Marie just had to settle. She stitched the bird up, hands shaking as she spent hours finishing it up, back aching as she aimed for perfection.

Then it was done.

She stood back with a soft breath, admiring her work, those bird eyes that were much too small for the sockets of her husband looking back at her.

# Friday

Marie Little

Friday lived down the hall; he was going to save me. He knew how to change light bulbs and catch mice and what to say to Unwants at the main door. Often, I heard cussing and sometimes creaking. Rhythmical, seasick creaking that had me at once lulled, turned on and desperate. From my room to his was far enough that just music travelled, but I passed by many times to the laundry room, toilet, and the Dead Kitchen, when the slow fire door swing let a woman pass in his direction. When I thought he had a man to visit I had night-writhed more than usual, in pleasure and in the pain of heavily dreamed sleep. I had run a finger along the lowest cupboard shelf in the Dead Kitchen and licked off the dust. Everything was a new sensation that night – the taste of smoked paprika, the cold floor as I sank to it, lost in tangled thoughts, making my own rhythm, breathing shallow against the need to be loud and declaratory. The guilt of the finish, heat in my cheeks, soft skin at the top of my thighs. After, I ran my finger along the top shelf making a new channel through the dust and thought about SOCOs and DNA, and tasted opportunity.

# Ganglion

Leah Taylor

An alien sac inside my wrist, my joint  
pregnant with nerves and nervously pregnant  
and four years overdue.  
If you poked it aside, it would move for you,  
perform a little side step around my right hand.  
The doctor said this was due to the synovial fluid content  
but I believed I had a talented tumour, and I,  
its host and un-consenting dance floor, had to endure the pain  
caused by the intrusion of the stalk gripping my bone.

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When I awoke I immediately started to cry.  
The nurse said this was a common response to the anaesthetic  
but perhaps I was mourning my gelatinous friend.  
I often wonder how they disposed of that small marble cyst  
that they sliced out of me. Surely they couldn't throw it in the bin?  
Would it constitute as food waste— like unused meat in a butchers?  
I digress. I will not soon forget my funny little ganglion.  
Mostly because it has left in its wake a fat, red centipede scar.  
And because another ganglion has formed in my other wrist.

# Paresthesia

Ally Remy

## Content warning: Limb loss.

Her right arm was gone in the morning. This was not the first time nor was it a particularly rare event. Just within the last week, the arm had been gone on Tuesday and arguably Thursday. The woman knew it when she woke up, alone and sweaty, to the chaos of static, stinging. Gone may not really be the proper word; sometimes, in the right light, it showed itself, a mostly transparent thing, limp and waving. Other times, it blinked back for half a second, a few frames left in on accident, a blip in continuity. Still, most of the time the arm was there but not really there. If you forced her to describe it (she wouldn't), it was as if a child had traced the outline of an arm, the shaky blackness of its edges visible and not, chafing every surrounding atom in its attempt to flee to another realm.

"I wish you were dead," she said to the arm which she knew was not particularly interested in listening. She sighed. At least it's not both arms, she thought, recalling the "Power of Optimism" seminar that all the underperforming government employees had been ordered to attend.

She struggled into a pair of old slacks and packed her lunch, ignoring the vacuum cleaner and dirty floors and overflowing laundry basket and every other task in her small apartment rendered absurd by the simple fact that her arm was gone. Closing her eyes, she could feel it, nearly see it—<sup>1</sup>



"Can you come back please?" The woman was at her desk in the Department of Natural Resources, typing at painfully slow speeds. She tried to use her right hand as little as possible; every attempt to confirm its presence only made the arm fight harder to be absent—a stinging jolt from shoulder to fingertip. Why wouldn't it just come back for an hour or two?

"Huh?" The wiry redhead Ned stopped where he was, passing the entrance

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1 the arm, all numb and cold, wandering in a flurry of snow, disembodied and crawling with the tips of its fingers . . .

to her cubicle.

“Oh, no—I was just talking to myself,” she stammered. The other employees had barely spoken to her since the incident in the meeting room last month; people do not respond well to inquiries about whether your arm is really visible, whether, upon touching it, it feels odd or clammy, swollen or maybe even permeable.

“Is your arm still bothering you?” asked Ned.

“No,” she answered but the lie was accompanied by the sound of a gunshot and a searing pain as she could suddenly see her arm—<sup>2</sup>

The woman returned to find Ned’s ruddy face staring down at her, eyes piercing. He’s got such bad hair, she thought, even as she felt his gaze on her and liked it. When was the last time anyone looked at her so intensely? Her fingers spread themselves wide over the keyboard, showing off her very ordinary, very normal typing skills. She didn’t even have time to comprehend a new sensation—the feeling of liquid bleeding through fabric—as she gave in to the irresistible urge to type faster and faster.

“Do you mind if I eat lunch here?” Ned didn’t wait for an answer and instead sat down in the spare desk chair, spinning it. He pulled out a thermos of tomato soup as red as his hair and a tiny spoon from which he slurped, seemingly as slow as he could.

For the next hour, the pair barely spoke as Ned watched the woman with one arm gone and the woman kept typing as if she had two, fingers a blur, rows of data forming, arranging, aggregating. With each passing minute, she felt further and further away, her arm unzipping itself at the seam, pulling the thread of her neck and head with it, plummeting towards disintegration. She didn’t dare look down, but she felt the liquid running, soaking her blouse and gathering, she was sure, in a puddle, unabsorbed by the cheap office carpet.



For the next few weeks, Ned continued to appear, visiting the woman’s cubicle unannounced and, often, hungry. They talked about a few things: action movies and inexpensive food, the state’s dwindling funds, the upcoming wildfire season, the shittiness of data entry. Other times, they would just sit, or Ned would just sit and the woman would sit and type, almost maniacally, always painfully. Lunch was her most productive hour but also the time when her pain, like the tide, crept closer and closer, flowing from arm to spine, lodging between her shoulder blades.

2 broken and bleeding on some snowy forest slope, its juices leaking from a gaping wound.

Exhausted by early afternoon, she rushed away to the building's nursing room, a dim little closet complete with one rocker and two ancient gym mats. Other employees, tired women and their infants or breast-pumping machines, gathered there in shifts, smelling a little sour. The mothers never asked her why she, a woman with no baby or leaking milk, was there, sleeping; they sensed that she had something with her, something rogue and screaming and eating. Once, she woke to find a warm hand on her back, supporting her as she dreamed of—<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes, she imagined herself wherever the arm was, however far. Seeing the arm fly through the crisp, forest air, she'd shoot it down, cook it, and consume it gratefully. She'd wrangle it and staple it to her shoulder socket like Frankenstein's monster. She'd saw it off again and bury it by the grave of a child. But instead of getting rid of the pain, the static, the invisibility, the feeling of liquid spilling, all her efforts, imagined or not, only accompanied the sensations' irreversible spread.



Today, Ned was sitting closer to her than ever before, their knees nearly touching. He was doing it more and more, leaning in and whispering to her like a toddler with a secret.

"You know the biologists downstairs say there's a new disease in the pine population this year. It makes all their limbs fall off."

"What?" she turned towards him as, for the first time, Ned's speech broke the spell of endless typing.

"The new disease makes their limbs fall off. They're as naked as telephone poles. Super dangerous for wildfires, all those dead limbs littering the ground." He leaned away. "It's not really that confusing."

"No," she said, shaking her icy right foot which, following her arm, was increasingly gone, "it's not really that confusing."



It had been weeks since her right arm had come back at all. She never saw it anymore, not even in the right light. Faceless doctors used big words to say nothing: paresthesia, paresthesia. Ignore it—those feelings don't correspond to reality. They kicked her out of sanitized offices, suggesting psychiatrists. Out of

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3 finding the arm clenched tight on a live wire, static raising the hairs as they fry. The arm on a bed of dead bees, pierced through with a hundred stingers.



the corner of her eye—<sup>4</sup>

At some point, Ned started texting her, although she wasn't sure where he got her number. They would spend hours after work, sending strings of emojis and dirty jokes. The woman welcomed the distraction as her left arm, her legs, her neck became shaky like newborn calves, electric currents burning down to her toes. If she stayed in bed for a whole day or two, begging, she could coax them back to finish a few chores, but never very many before the limbs all fled, dissipating with the sound of empty static.

Unable to work, she used up all her sick days, her vacation time. Her supervisor kept calling and leaving her messages, saying he knew she'd been sleeping on the job, that she'd been performing in a steady decline for months, that he had the charts to prove it. A line plunging down down down.

Ned kept trying to ask about her issues directly. What's wrong, baby? he'd ask. I'm just sick, she would say, a bad flu. On the days she barely stood, she lay listening to audiobooks echo off her bare walls. Ned brought her some of his favorite soups, bought her groceries, lay next to her or on top of her as, though she had no energy, the woman had to find some way to repay his kindness. Still, each night in bed, at the edge of sleep, she might feel the arm—<sup>5</sup>



One morning the woman woke up with fog in her brain and nothing to eat in her house. She had asked Ned to take her card and buy groceries. He had not responded to her for three days. When she texted again, he answered right away: why are you like this? pls tell me wtf is wrong with you?

A sharp intake of breath. When she began to type, she couldn't stop:

my arm gone not really but is sometimes cant see it but feel electric liquid fire bees stinging cold its somewhere else i know it snow the forest the fire its calling I see it it sees me . .

Some sort of truth poured out of her in blocks, sounding dumber and dumber as stupid blocky text, stupid streamlined communication, fast and sleek and so empty empty empty of what it was she was trying to say. Paragraph after paragraph and she couldn't even finish the last sentence, letting it trail. She refused to let the words think they could speak for her—or this is how she rationalized it when she realized that Ned was no longer there, across from her,

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4 the arm, stitched and scabby, near the heat of a blazing fire, creeping closer and closer to the flames.

5 crawling alongside the highway, cuddling in the grass like a rabbit, racing through the brush-fire. Burning.

caring. No, she didn't have to wait hours to know that he had fled elsewhere. He was gone.

Laying back down, she felt everything, and that everything was nothing but what was old and painful and always there but not really.

Silence.

The crunching of twigs.

Startled, she looked up from her bed to find that her right arm, detached, was floating above her bed, smacking the ceiling. A ceiling which had transformed, suddenly, into a forest floor covered in the dead limbs of a thousand pines.

It's back, she thought, it's really back.

And there it was, the arm, crawling upside down and digging through the sticks, picking at each with its dirty fingernails, taking their pulses, testing for life.

Lonely, she thought, it is lonely.

With her left arm she reached towards the ceiling of pine limbs. She wanted to touch her own arm, to feel her own arm touching her, touching touch. The arm took notice, scrambling down, clutching sloppily, desperately like a nursing babe. Its hand met hers and for a moment everything was good and brighter, a circle of touch, heat and comfort joining her selves on each side.

I might not be sick anymore, she thought, foolishly.

Then, all of a sudden, her own arm, her own right arm yanked and yanked her up—<sup>6</sup>

half out—<sup>7</sup>

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6 through the ceiling of dead pine, that floor of limbs, and into the raging forest fire above. Stuck, half in,

7 Askew. Like tissue paper, she burned and crumpled into herself but did not, could not, scream. Instead, the woman fled elsewhere, into the graying chaos of static, possibly—or impossibly—gone.

I am

an

invisible

woman



# Invisible

Ali Isaac

**Content warning: Discussion of self-harm, sexual assault, violence.**

My first attempts have faded into silver smiles. Others remind me of the hard, white slash of my mother's lips, pressed into their habitual expression of displeasure. Some are pink and puckered with newness, one or two still angry red gashes. I was eighteen when I made the first cut. I trace it now with tender fingers. It was a long time ago, but the event which inspired it is still vivid, the threat still simmering under the surface of civility.

My knife is sharp. I make sure to keep it that way. It nestles in the bag on my lap, ready, just waiting, mere seconds from reach, should I need it.

I am an invisible woman; fifty years old and sitting in a taxi, a young man, drunk, manspreading his thigh up against me. I shrink against the door, but his skin creeps after mine. The stink of beer wafts all around him, like his Lynx probably did at the beginning of the night. He leans closer.

‘Didn’t see you in town tonight.’

Beyond him, his buddy rolls his eyes, leans forward and chats to the driver. Around here, taxis aren’t for private hire; in rural areas it just wouldn’t be profitable, so they operate like buses, picking up fares and dropping them off randomly. I’d left my car at Mary’s; we’d had dinner, and the bottle of Frascati had seemed like a good idea at the time. Her husband would have brought me home, but I don’t trust men offering lifts.

God knows why, but I am polite. ‘I was at a friend’s house.’

‘Ah, I know all about ‘girly nights’. Got your Ann Summers knickers in your bag?’ He paws at my bag.

‘We just had dinner.’ I turn and look out the window at the empty blackness. We have left the town, and there are no street lights. The dark presses down on the car, one body upon another, solid, oppressive, and inescapable.

He places his mouth near my ear, thinking he is speaking confidentially, but his words reverberate through the cab. ‘I like older women. They know what they want.’ A hand descends onto my knee and travels upwards. ‘I bet you know exactly what you like.’

'I do,' I say. 'And you're not it.'

I reach for my knife, but not quick enough; memory fires and catapults me back through time to another night in another car, another man's hand on my leg.



Matt, whose hand didn't stop there. Mary and I had been together that night, too, celebrating our last day of school. We'd got ready at hers, blasting music from her open bedroom window so everyone in the neighbourhood could hear how cool we were. We did each other's hair and make-up, sipping on smuggled vodka.

'Do I look too tarty in these?' I had strutted in front of the mirror, eyeing my denim hotpants and black fishnets with doubt. My mother would never let me out the house like that, but Mary's Mam wasn't quite so Victorian.

Mary was piling on her Maybelline Kissing Potion. 'You have to make the most of what you got. I got these.' She heaved up her ample bosom, revealing even more soft, rosy flesh through the deep V of her neckline. 'And legs are what you got. They're not just for walking, you know.'

Mary said my legs were like the pictures on the front of stocking packets; she was always on at me to show them off. I said she could have legs like mine if she came to Irish dancing class, but she just laughed and said she was already blessed with everything she needed. She had no shortage of admirers, but personally I wouldn't have been so content with a man who talked to my chest.



The smooth glide of the blade unfolding wakes me to the present. It steadies me. My best friend and saviour.

Buddy and the driver have heard the way the conversation turns, but they don't intervene. Maybe it's because I'm invisible. Or fair game. Maybe I should be grateful for the attention. Maybe I'm over-reacting; they're just out for the craic, that's all. The taxi roars with awkward silence, but Drunk Boy is oblivious to everything except his own need until at last I tell him to fuck off... that, apparently, is language he understands.

In the dark, miles away from civilisation, in the middle of the night, on a deserted country road, a woman alone in a car with three unfamiliar men. My heart pounds while I hang onto my knife, palm sweating.

My knife: it is a switchblade given a fairy godmother makeover, all shimmer-

ing slender lines and delicate engraving. Its titanium handle is softened with pink anodising. The blade is cast from bright stainless steel: slim, double-edged and needle-pointed. Its name: The Icicle. This knife wasn't made, it was lovingly coaxed into life by master craftsmen, a Richter-Benaitis fantasy. After my home and my car, it is the most expensive thing I own. If I could wear it as jewellery I would. But it's my secret. No one knows, not even Mary. I never go anywhere without it. And if I cut my legs with it occasionally, it is only to ensure they never again draw the kind of attention I got from Matt.



Like everyone else, Matt worked in the shipyard. We danced, we snogged, he told me I could be a model. And then I remembered I had to do a Cinderella, or my mother would ground me for a month. Bitch.

'Don't worry, I'll drive you,' Matt said, and instead of thinking he shouldn't be drinking and driving, I just felt grateful.

But he didn't drive me home. He took me to a dingy car park where a single streetlight cast a sickly orange glow in a forlorn corner; the council hadn't bothered to fix the others. Bleak red-brick tenement buildings reared upward, gazing down at us with impassive facades. The presence of the streetlight only deepened the shadows. You would think in the night the shadows would be blotted out by the dark.



The taxi has stopped, and I have no idea where we are. The wind blows in through the open car door, and I shiver. A vague belt of trees crouch over a house like giants, a deeper shade of dark, swaying and sighing. My two companions dredge their pockets. They have drunk all their money; they want to pay by card, but the taxi-driver laughs. Buddy has to go and wake someone inside for cash.

Drunk Boy turns the pale blur of his face towards me and tries to focus. 'This is your last chance,' he says. 'You coming in for coffee?' The way he emphasises the word 'coffee' makes it plain that's not what he's offering.



Matt wasn't like the boys at school, content with a ring of hickies around their necks and a quick grope. 'No' was not an option; he was entitled, a man made

superhuman by adrenaline and alcohol. And then the sick epiphany: this wasn't a fight I could win. The screams died in my throat, my body fell limp, and I withdrew to somewhere far away and outside of myself, a voyeur of my own violation.

My arms, tools that could punch, slap, rip out hair and scratch at eyes, somehow, were pinned down and helpless. My legs, that could kick and aim a knee at a man's groin, were trapped either side of him, forming a welcoming cradle. My long, lean legs, so beautiful, so admired. So useless.

Wedge beneath the weight of her assailant, the body of a girl I thought I knew wept tears of shame under a net of dirty blonde hair. She had flaunted herself, and got what she deserved. I watched, heard his animal grunts, smelled his animal sweat, but I felt nothing.

After, he lit a cigarette, took a deep drag, then offered it across to me.

I opened the car door and fell onto the tarmac. My fishnets were torn, my hotpants soiled. Blood seeped slowly through the denim, spreading like the black cloud which had settled within my skull. Tell-tale tender patches up and down my body would give way to bruises by morning. I had missed my curfew; Mam, who knew about bruises, was going to kill me.

He leaned across the empty passenger seat. 'Get in. I'll drop you home.' Like we were friends. Lovers. Like he hadn't done anything wrong. Like he'd never raped anyone.



The taxi-driver is getting impatient. 'Get Romeo here out of my cab, mate,' he says to Buddy, and revs the engine.

Tonight, somehow, I am exposed; I no longer seem invisible, and I can feel my control slipping.



In the aftermath, maternal discipline wasn't required; my incarceration was self-imposed and lasted years. I never told, because who would believe a slapper like me over a decent, responsible family man like Matt?

I dropped college and took a job on the line in the soap factory. It was shift work, so it paid quite well. I saved, and two years later, I ordered my knife. I could hear it singing in its box as the delivery man walked down the path with it and knocked on the door. That day, I made sure my thighs would never again be fit to display in public.

A husband came and went in the years between then and now. He didn't seem to mind the scars on my legs; it was those hidden beneath the surface that he couldn't handle. He ran off with the babysitter; I believe her thighs, like her mind, were smooth and unblemished. I stopped eating, just long enough that my body lost its shape. I hid behind folds of baggy jumpers and curtains of long hair. Nobody noticed. I had turned invisible. Still, I carried my knife with me.



The Icicle is singing to me. I tighten my grip and it brings me images: Matt rolling off me all those years ago, Dad drunk and violent, my ex-husband shagging the babysitter in the car before dropping her home. Mam's cold, grim lips.

And then the knife leaps out of my bag and pushes itself into his side.

It is easy. Too easy. The slight elastic resistance of his skin, then I'm in, slipping through flesh as if it is butter. I feel him flinch, hear him grunt as I bite; my first taste of male blood.

But already he is being hauled from the taxi. The knife shimmers in the moonlight, my hand clamped so hard onto the handle I am afraid it, or I, will crack. Its song blazes into a triumphant roar, then falls into contented crooning.

It is over, fleeting as a thought. How strange that something so momentous goes unnoticed.

Drunk Boy falls onto the path, groans, makes no attempt to get up. 'I'm sorry,' Buddy says to me through the open door. I just nod, and he shuts the door. He half-lifts, half-drags Drunk Boy into the house.

'Drunk as a skunk.' The driver laughs as we drive on, but I'm not listening. There should be blood. On the seat, my hand, my clothes. Sticky. Warm. The Icicle always draws blood.

'Look, sorry about all that, but no harm done, eh?' The driver is looking at me in the rear-view mirror. I smile, and his eyes slide away; I must already be fading.

'No harm done,' I murmur. I take a deep breath and run my hands over my track pants, smoothing out the wrinkles. I can't feel the scars beneath the fabric, but I know they are there. Invisible to other eyes. Like me.



# They Hate To See a Girlboss Winning: The Modern Female Monster

Caitlin Young

**Content warning: Discussion of sexual assault.**

*"Female Monsters take things as personally as they really are" Chris Klaus, I love Dick*  
*"God should have made girls lethal when he made monsters of men" – Elisabeth Hener,*  
*wishing for birds*

*"The women of mythology regularly lose their form in monstrosity." Anne Carson, Men in*  
*the off hours*

I think it is generally acceptable to put on *Gone Girl* when someone does not get the hint to get out of my flat. I also carry around the line from the last page of *Boy Parts* like a mantra "I wonder what the fuck I have to do for people to recognise me as a threat". I am part of the problem. At least that's the first step of this essay out of the way.

In the pub when a friend disagrees with me on a point I said, 'I swear to god I'm gonna gone girl you.' Seven months later at a picnic, I bond with someone I don't know when I tell her that if everything goes poorly in my life I will simply fake my death and frame whatever man I'm with because obviously if my life goes wrong it will be a man's fault. I am deeply enamoured with the narrator of *Boy Parts*, Irina, and her cool disaffected tone. She is a fetish photographer, as she uses men for her art, for her sexual appetite, for her bloodlust. I watch *Jennifer's Body* and feel my mouth hang open as Megan Fox states: "I'm not killing people – I'm killing boys".

I watch *Promising Young Woman* and find it vaguely enjoyable to bar the overwrought aesthetics and the fact that the only people Cassie actually stakes revenge on are women who were, at best, bystanders to her best friend's violent rape and, at worst, cogs in the institutions that protected the rapist. I read op-eds by people who are sick of seeing the myth of the unrecoverable victim and others reminding us the history of film is a history of male rage. The slew of op-ed narratives forgot that there is a way to create a female monster that gives us delight. This film was not that.

Female monsters are not a new phenomenon. But women who openly love

them, these stories that used to act as warnings, are. On TikTok, a trend began and was instantly dominated by women seeing themselves in Amy Dunne of *Gone Girl* and Cassie of *Promising Young Woman*. These are women who don't forgive. These are the modern female monsters.

The female monster has existed as long as the classic idea of femininity; Medusa's crown of serpents, Medea's great escape, even in some regards Antigone's autonomy. In these original monsters, we find the source code for all female monsters who followed them. The original female monsters were not idolised by women but rather were warnings to men about the effects of their mistreatment of women. Derrida warns that "Monsters cannot be announced. One cannot say: 'Here are our monsters,' without immediately turning the monsters into pets." But that is what these characters are for those who find comfort in female monsters. They are our pets. We have a longing to stroke their hair and feed them righteous male flesh. But the purity of these monsters has been tampered with by the same forces we have all found ourselves corrupted by.

Now the female monster has been commodified for a profit to allow normal women to live normal lives. Monstrosity, Chris Kraus tells us, "is the self as a machine". A modern female monster must be a profit-making machine. They also, due to the nature of the genre, exist in a world that is dominated by ideas of the carceral state. A state that makes it perfectly acceptable to hurt, or kill people who have inflicted harm. They live in worlds where to hurt people that have hurt us due to failings of the state is something that makes moral sense to us. An eye for an eye, pounds of flesh for debt. Whether the revenge plot is set in place by the 2008 crash, the failings of marital institutions, rape culture, or gender roles, the revenge is not caused by individual men's failings. The men in these texts are perpetrators of harm that should be held to account but due to the framework these stories are placed in, the only resolution that these monsters can see is ripping these men limb from limb.

These women act on their pain in extraordinary ways, driven by forces that most of consumers of this media have themselves felt – rage, grief, disappointment, obsession. For Cassie in *Promising Young Woman*, her actions are driven by a death wish, begging for someone to hurt her by constantly putting herself in harm's way using her righteous cause as a way to deflect from that. Amy Dunne in *Gone Girl* is driven by her fear of failure and a life defined by other people's obsession with her, drilled into her from a young age by having a perfect avatar that succeeded whenever Amy fell. For Irina in *Boy Parts*, she wants fame – a way to prove she was always better than the men who hurt her. And Jennifer – Jennifer wants blood after a small-time indie band (composed

of very of-the-era softboys) attempt to sacrifice her to the devil for their own fame and fortune.

Watching pain being made into something productive feeds into our new-found obsession to do something with every traumatic event we find ourselves in, to use the pain to become a better person, a more moral person, to create better art. The pain in this media is twofold. There is the pain being experienced by the female monster and the pain that she inflicts on others. The violence in this genre is cyclical, and women who consume it know these stories all too well. We can infer enough about their monsters' traumas without ever having to relive it with them. As Fiona Apple put it in an interview discussing her own rape: "It's such a fuckin' old pain that, you know, there's nothing poetic about it." Most of the catharsis in this genre doesn't stem from watching another hurt woman walk around, the catharsis comes when she takes over and begins enacting pain on others.

To create a female monster, you have to deviate from the usual homogeneous, heterosexual drive that female characters are often endowed with. This deviation does not mean these characters do not have the same chance of falling flat as their rom-com counterparts, but instead, these deviations mean there has to be more than a 'get-him-back'/'find-someone-to-love-me' issue at play. The two, rom-coms and female revenge, are different sides of the same coin. One is the modern fairy tale that tells us that amidst all our alienation and isolation there is good company, and the other proves Anne Carson's statement that it is a treacherous thing to live beyond your myth.

When you live beyond your myth, the stakes are immediately raised. This isn't to say these pieces of work should be consumed as straightforward feminists texts, If you did, you would end up with some shit feminist theory. You would end up with the feminism that gave us the 'gaslight, gatekeeper, girlboss' meme. This kind of girlboss feminism is solely concerned with helping individual women reach the top of their career ladder through their performance of hyper-femininity (a move painted as anti-assimilation against the corporate dude-bro workplace) with capitalist goals. There is no place in this form of feminism for any sort of emancipation, liberation or radical change. It is a feminism about affecting an individual's circumstances, not that of a community. If you need to, you could read these stories as a bad parable for those who don't seek to fix their past damage.

But I don't come to these stories for theory: I go to them because I want to see women who are burned, burning or will burn. These stories present how these women were not cared for enough by their community and demonstrates the fundamental cracks that bring us to this point. In the creation of these

women and often the presentation of those who are supposed to love her unconditionally, parents, spouses, friends and see how often they do not believe the circumstances of the woman they love. In being a spectator of the story we can believe her and love her, and understand where her actions are coming from.

For Amy Dunne in *Gone Girl*, her husband's choice to move them back to Missouri to care for his dying mother, making Amy a housewife, begins her spiral into being 'one of those wives'. Amy is a woman with degrees in psychology from major Ivy Leagues, raised by perfect psychologist parents who immortalised her through – Amazing Amy. It's Amy's ambition that drives the story. When your husband drains you for what you are and starts fucking younger women the usual response – the average response – would be to get a divorce. But Amazing Amy doesn't get a divorce. Amazing Amy and her Bland Groom could never have irreparable differences so Real Amy sets out on a mission of monstration. Monstration is a typically Russian phenomenon, usually classified as performance art, in which something that is not real is protested. Amy sets the entire US media on an act of monstration, as she performs what the US media machine fetishes the most – the dead, white, female, pregnant victim.

In the newest contribution to this canon, *Promising Young Woman*, Cassie is on a path of revenge – not for an act committed directly against her, but for the sexual assault of her best friend Nina. On the surface, Cassie avenging Nina reads as an allegory for how widespread the trauma that even one act of violence can cause. However, Cassie fulfils every stereotype of the early twenties male that when you tell him you've been assaulted when they tell you "I'll fucking kill the guy that did that to you". They often don't realise that when you're working towards your recovery you're past the point of violence against your assaulter being comforting. Cassie takes this common threat of abstract male violence as an attempt to comfort and puts a distinctly feminine call to action to it. She fakes being blackout drunk at bars, waiting for men to prey on her and take her home before she can chastise them and make them think about what they've done. After running into ex-classmate Ryan, played by Bo Burnham, Cassie is set on a more direct course of action to avenge Nina's death.

The faltering politics of *Promising Young Woman* feel as if they're disguised by the hyperfeminine and rather literal aesthetics of the film. Once we get into the real revenge of the film, we see Cassie furthering the gendered violence that was inflicted on Nina by inflicting the most brutal psychological violence on women, whereas the men Cassie stakes revenge on are thrown into turmoil by something distinctly external to Cassie. While Cassie targets the individuals who were a part of what happened to Nina, two women and one now incredibly

guilt-filled man, she is ultimately killed by Nina's rapist. But in Cassie's death, and her post-mortem plan of revenge, it's shown that Cassie's crusade was never about Nina. It was about Cassie being the one left behind with all the pain and nowhere to put it down.

I grew up during an era of 'girls help girls' feminism – which looking back on it, was a deflection from any real critique of neo-liberal white feminism and paved the way to the girlboss feminism. When I turn to revenge media, I'm looking for something that offers me female rage and then shows me the utilisation of it. Often these stories take abstract institutions and put them as a figure-head in one male individual. In *Jennifer's Body*, it's a douchebag played by Adam Brody who embodies the paedophilic abuse that ran rampant in the pop-punk scene who is killed by the same weapon he used to turn Jennifer into a demon. In *Gone Girl*, Amy traps Nick into marriage, thus removing his autonomy in the same way he removed hers. It feels wrong, it feels grey, but ultimately it satisfies a bloodlust. In *Promising Young Woman*, Cassie is crushed under the weight of rape culture rather than the newfound control over their lives or revenge her counterparts receive.

The majority of theory surrounding female monsters is contingent on female sexuality being the defining factor of feminine revenge. But at their core, stories of female monsters are stories of the cycle of trauma. Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma tells us we have to heal the wound to stop the screaming. These are the stories of the women sick of their own screams. The female monster is perpetually stuck in the social situation that has hurt her and has taught her this cycle of harm. What the world forces us to go through would make a monster out of anyone, so is it really a surprise that some of us are drawn to self-righteous women, bent and breaking laws and stepping on other people to redistribute the pain they have felt. And while the critics have weight behind their complaints of these stories crowding out the possibility of depictions of healing in the media, in the narrow scope of the genre, and the carceral nature of the stories, maybe they just hate to see a girlboss winning.



**Void II** by Megan Russo

# Upwardly Mobile

Maeve O'Lynn

I went for an interview with a marketing company fourteen years ago. Wet behind the ears, fresh out of university, I thought maybe marketing was something a person might plausibly do with an English degree and a huge student loan and no real idea what to do about either of those immovable realities.

They asked me to bring a photograph of myself to talk about. It didn't really occur to me to question this request and being a pre-smart phone era, I then had to find a printed picture in which I wasn't being too boring to render me utterly undistinguished but also not behaving like the 22-year-old literary flâneuse I was either, drinking to abandon, smeared with eyeliner and draped in vintage clothing.

This narrowed my choice significantly.

I opted for a picture taken at a festival, Oxegen 2004 maybe or Electric Picnic 2006. I have only just arrived at whatever event this is, so I'm still in what I hope a prospective employer will consider to be a reasonable state. I'm in a field, pitching a cheap tent, badly. I have a fringe, a style which has never and, I fear, will never be at all flattering to my face. I wear a sleeveless dark purple vest from Topshop. Around me there is grass, the edges of other equally poorly pitched tents, a foreboding slate grey sky. I look happy, I think, maybe a little uncertain, though at twenty-two maybe those two emotions are one and the same thing. My cheeks are flushed, my grin is toothy, unselfconscious. I can't remember who took the photo – a friend I was with, my boyfriend at the time, maybe.

What this picture does offer, I come to realise, is an inoffensively blank canvas onto which can be projected any number of things. I am interviewed by the marketing company in their office with the sliding red Perspex walls, pool tables and PlayStation situated in an old building in the Gasworks, a site once considered unsuitable for most uses, due to contamination. The panel like the photograph. It's enough to get me a second, stilted interview at a tapas bar. What

one of the paternalistic but determinedly hip men interviewing me seems to have decided is that I am fun, I am adaptable, a team player, someone who went away for university but who has come back to her hometown, someone who is just delighted to be “back with the girls”. He wants me to have a safe, trusted inner circle of exclusively female friends that I have yearned to be back with in my years away from home. He wants us to be homogenous, upwardly mobile, hardworking, quietly ambitious, unified with some type of purpose. There are, it should be said, no girls in this photograph, except for me.

I don't know why he seems so invested in this, why he wants this for me, what this would reveal about me as a prospective employee, what statement this would make about his brand.

I don't know what it says about me that these assumptions he makes are not true.



# A Slip of The Tongue

Fran Fernández Arce

A morphological happenstance turned  
into a new sense. She slips  
her tongues, slits their throats, slinks away  
and beyond the edges  
of this page. Pure orthographic carelessness.

And she blames you, by the way. Or at least  
your inability to follow her trains of thought,  
such thorn-filled trails, these tranquil  
misdirections of words. She brandishes a  
sword of absolute miscommunication.  
Not out of malice, of course.  
Or maybe a tiny bit of malice.

Like a tipsy blip  
in the chemistry of her transplanted, multiplied,  
doubled-up brains. She wants you to know,  
knock twice on her chest, unknot these tangled  
pieces of text; it is all a sample of semantic  
selfishness, of excluding

you  
from the rest.

# My Inner Child Has a Scottish Accent

Camille Lewis

Two little words from the lined mouth of my therapist  
I can't help it: instinctively, I cringe.  
Inner child.

Open my mouth wide – say ahhh – listen hard for a timid voice.  
A grating smokers cough, a mouthful of ash. A slight slur?  
Ah eat what you eat, ya wee cow!

She bounces on and off my organs, on and off, giggling  
From lung to liver, a slide down my intestines  
I don't broach the topic of rent arrears.

I imagined a doll of a girl, a Matilda with a ribbon  
Alice who never become tall.  
I could plait her strands; teach her to suck her finger after applying lipstick.

Petulance.  
Ahm nae fuckin' going out there, she says flatly.

Ah can hear what it's like from in here.

# When Mary Lost Jesus

Abigail Eckstine

In her eyes is ecstasy – the kind of Saint Teresa Jesus  
Maybe she's been getting high or maybe she just hasn't had enough to eat today  
Or maybe it's just how dark this soulnight is  
Between global warming and the possible tornado watch  
We keep sitting out on the porch  
Crossing the lines between masturbating and religious ecstasy  
Mamma Mary is a whore –  
Is a whorehouse –  
A penitentiary for all my bad girl problems  
Mary sits beside me, dangling her legs through the fire escape and telling me  
About the time she was pregnant  
She says if god exists thank him  
Thank him that I never carried that child  
Lord knows I would never be able to give him a good life  
Lord knows I'm too young for that kind of shit  
I tell her I know what she means  
That I've wanted a kid since I was a kid with too big red boots for rainy days  
But lord knows  
I have a wheelhouse of problems  
A brain that just won't keep quiet  
A mouth that just won't voice my needs  
I've got a child of a brain and I paddle it daily  
What would I do with a child tugging at my legs?  
Lord just knows  
I would be a fucking awful mother these days.

# What I Do Know

Monica Cardenas

Josie was just about to sit in her recliner, her toast pooled with butter and raspberry jelly, coffee in hand, when there was a knock. Three quick raps. She looked first to the television, but saw only a mattress commercial – a woman sleeping peacefully in a softly lit room. Wouldn't it be nice, to sleep that soundly?

She put down her cup and stepped forward, pushing the yellow curtains aside so she could see through the double pane glass. There was a woman there, a man stood slightly behind her. She removed her knit hat to reveal a mass of dark unruly curls. Josie's used to bounce like that, before her hair went grey and wiry. The man had a salt and pepper beard and a very soft-looking matching swoop on his head.

There wasn't one thing in particular that told Josie the woman was nervous. She just knew it.

Josie tightened her robe and opened the door. "Can I help you?"

"Hi," the woman said, her voice familiar. She scratched her chin, quickly with a snatch of her hand. It was familiar, too. Smallish with big knuckles and fingernails that barely covered the beds, a little neater than they used to be.

Josie took a step back, not to admit her daughter and the man. But just to steady herself. Eleanor didn't take the movement as a welcoming gesture. She remained planted on the stoop, between the two boxwoods Don had dug in just after the lockdown, when the nurseries reopened. Josie had teased him for being the first one there. "Eleanor. What are you doing here?"

"Well, um, this is my husband, Mark, and we're visiting so I could show him where I grew up, and, well..." She cleared her throat. "I'm sorry it's so early. It's just that this is a road trip and we only arrived last night and we're leaving today, so..."

Already she was making excuses. "So you just decided to drop in."

"I'm sorry. If you want me to go, that's fine."

Of course it would be fine. It's my house, Josie thought. She wasn't obligated to let anyone in. Especially not before nine a.m.

Mark stepped forward and put out his hand. "It's nice to meet you."

Josie hesitated but didn't want to be rude. She took it. "I'm sure you've heard

nothing about me, right?” She paused as his hand pulled away. “Or lots of awful things.”

Mark laughed good-naturedly. “I’ve heard a lot about how good your cooking is.”

Was he asking her to cook him breakfast? Or just kissing her ass?

“Eleanor makes your lasagne,” he said, “and your fried courgettes. She always says it’s not quite right but I think it’s all amazing.”

“What the hell’s a courgette?”

“It’s zucchini,” Eleanor said. “They call them courgettes in England.”

“You live there, in London?”

“Yeah, we do.” Eleanor glanced at Mark, then at her shoes. Grey suede booties.

Josie sighed. “You want some coffee? We could sit on the patio.” She pointed around the side of the house, then thought of her toast getting cold. Oh well. She’d make some more when they left.

“That sounds great,” Mark said. “You’ve got a lovely view.”

Everyone said that, but it had been a while since someone new visited. The expansive view was the only reason Don picked this plot of land. It was why they built the house from the ground up, to have the perfect scene through their bedroom window, out over the patio. The Susquehanna River lazily flowed less than a mile away, through a wide swath of empty land. The Poconos loomed beyond, golden waves of corn fields lapping the green mountains. Most people wouldn’t bother skiing on them – they were too small to be exciting – but if you lived here, it was convenient. Josie used to take Eleanor snow tubing there.

A flash of Eleanor in her puffy green snow suit, those tiny goggles she insisted on wearing, even when they went inside for hot chocolate.

“My husband built this house,” Josie said. “We’d only been here a year before he passed away.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Mark said.

Eleanor said nothing about Don, but then she probably thought it unnecessary since she had sent her condolences in that generic sympathy card. And those flowers, an enormous bouquet of white calla lilies. Josie had told all the funeral guests they were from Don’s old college roommate who lived in Japan. She had made it up entirely, marveling at how easily the lie formed on her lips.

Josie and Mark stepped onto the patio, Eleanor trailing behind. Had she become one of those women who silently followed their husbands? Was that why they lived in England? Josie hadn’t raised her to be dependent, to need a man.

There were already four chairs on the patio. The two Adirondack chairs – Josie’s and Don’s – were always there. Josie had opened two folding chairs the

other night when Steve and Marg came over with their daughter.

She gestured to the chairs. "How do you take your coffee?"

"With milk please," Mark said.

"Just black. Do you need a hand?" Eleanor was standing beside a folding chair, not yet committing to it.

"No, I'll manage," Josie said. "Sit."

She went inside and washed her hands – a new habit she couldn't shake. She only realized it was happening when she was halfway through lathering up and at that point there was no going back anyway. The nurse who treated Don had showed her how to really scrub between her fingers, and never to forget her thumbs. A lot of good that had done. In the end it was only the nurse with him, anyway.

She pulled two mugs from the cupboard. Nice ones, from the set her aunt had given them as a wedding gift. They each featured a different type of butterfly. Don liked butterflies. These two had a dull firetip and a mangrove skipper. She guessed at how much milk Mark might like, a splash and then a little bit more, Brits liked their tea strong but she wasn't sure about coffee. Had Eleanor always had her coffee black? Josie couldn't even remember her drinking coffee. She must have picked up the habit in college. Or later.

She considered taking out the tin of Christmas cookies Marg had brought over, but it was probably too early for cookies. She carried both mugs in one hand and collected her own cup from the living room on her way back outside. Luckily it wasn't too cold, because she wasn't prepared for company, the couch still frumpy with her pillow and comforter.

Mark jumped up to open the sliding door for her, his ring glaring on his finger. He was a plain man, the type who must feel uncomfortable wearing jewelry. When had they met? When had they gotten married? Josie never expected to be invited to Eleanor's wedding, whenever it happened, if it ever happened. She had made it a point not to even think about it. Part of surviving was not imagining all the things she didn't know about Eleanor's life. If she had wanted Josie to know things, she would have called again, or visited, or even wrote. But Eleanor had done none of those things in more than a decade. Before their last argument, she would always call, always be sure to make amends. Eleanor couldn't abide conflict. But then she found a way, apparently. Those desperate voice messages trailed off and she just gave up.

Josie put the mugs down on the little tempered glass tabletop and took a seat, counting. Two decades. It had been two. Her feet were warm in her slippers, the grey flannel ones her sister sent for Christmas, just last week. Don's chair remained empty.

“So, how was your holiday? I take it you were at your dad’s?”

“Yeah, we came over for Christmas. It’s Mark’s first one in the states. I’ve spent the last couple years in England.”

“I bet your family missed you,” Josie said to Mark.

He made a wave with his hand and smiled. “I don’t think they mind.”

He was not easily rattled. Maybe Eleanor married him because of this. The only boyfriend of Eleanor’s that Josie remembered was Larry, and they had dated in high school. He was married now to that blonde woman who worked in real estate and they had no children. Eleanor wouldn’t either, at this point, assuming she didn’t already. Josie let her eyes skim over Eleanor’s body. Her bulky jacket hid her shape; it was difficult to tell if her waist had spread in the way Josie’s had after pregnancy. Eleanor’s legs remained slim, her ankles showing in the gap between her jeans and shoes.

“We’ll see Mark’s family when we get back,” Eleanor said. “His parents’ll visit us for Mark’s birthday. It’s next week.”

“Oh a Christmas birthday. I always felt bad for people like that. Do you get combined gifts?”

He laughed, a sort of clipped unironic ho-ho-ho that startled Josie. “Sometimes. But I think they’re just far enough apart that everyone feels they have to give me two presents.”

“How was your holiday?” Eleanor sipped her coffee and her face relaxed. She seemed to actually like it black. Josie knew that feeling, the first sip of caffeine in the morning that seemed to melt away all the tension in her body.

“It was very nice,” Josie said. “Thank you for asking.” She didn’t want to offer any details, things that Eleanor would read into. Josie had been alone but it had been by choice. She went to see her sister in Florida for Thanksgiving and it seemed silly to travel again. Plus she didn’t want to leave her cat a second time. Noelle had a tendency to get depressed when Josie left for more than a few hours. It was sweet.

“So when did you get married?”

“In September,” Eleanor said. “It was very small, at this church where Mark’s parents got married in the middle of nowhere.” She cleared her throat again.

“Allergies?” Josie said.

“Yeah, I didn’t expect it to be an issue in the winter but it is.”

“Yep. It’s always something around here. I think it’s the moldy leaves. Gets me, too. I have some medicine if you want it?”

“Well, she’s been complaining about her allergies all week,” Mark said. “A sneezing machine.” He smiled at Eleanor, looking like he might clap her on the back, congratulate her for breathing.

“That would be great, if you don’t mind,” Eleanor said.

Josie went back into the house, down the little hallway that led to the bathroom. She passed her bedroom and glanced over the bed, the dresser, the empty jewelry box that had been her mother’s. It was progress. The door had remained closed until last week, and she hadn’t been in the bed since Don died. Preserving it was silly, she knew, but she couldn’t help it. He was there – he had been there, and a line had been blurred such that some part of her thought he could just as easily return if only she let things be.

She rummaged through the medicine cabinet. How many times in her life had she given Eleanor medicine? For allergies, nearly every day for years. For ear infections and strep throat. Eleanor had hated that pink antibiotic, made such a fuss over drinking it. Josie used to have to promise her a treat for taking her medicine, a glass of chocolate milk or a popsicle.

But now Eleanor would probably want to see the pill bottle for herself. Josie carried it outside.

When she was little and had a headache, Eleanor would ask for a head hug, and Josie would squeeze her daughter’s head tight against her body. Eleanor’s would go limp and she would say, that feels soo much better. How do you do that, mom?

Josie crossed the patio and tried to look into Eleanor’s eyes as she handed the bottle over, but they were lowered, her lashes bare, her lips dry.

“Oh, do you need some water?” Josie paused before she sat back down. It had been so long but was so familiar, the hesitation to sit, the anticipation of the things needed by anyone but herself.

“Nah. They’re little. Plus I have the coffee.” Eleanor tilted a pill into her hand. “One?”

Josie nodded at her daughter, a small sputter of satisfaction at being trusted with the dosage. She expected to see the same face Eleanor would make when she had to take the pink stuff, like she was drinking gasoline.

But she swallowed the pill quickly, like it was nothing. “How’s Aunt Nancy?”

“Oh she’s fine,” Josie said. “You know Shawna had twins?”

“Yeah, I heard. How old are they now?”

She heard, from who? Maybe the same person who told her where Josie lives now, or that Don had died. Anyway Eleanor never sent any congratulations to her cousin. Just kept tabs on her, apparently, with no intention of ever making contact.

“They’re in the terrible twos. But my sister loves being a grandma,” Josie said. “And I’m a pretty good great aunt. Those babies are spoiled rotten.”

“I’m sure. You’ve always been a sucker for babies.”



Josie raised her eyebrows.

Eleanor leaned forward. "Do you remember you used to tell me that when I had children you would take them for the first three years and then I could have them back?"

That was ridiculous. "I never said that."

"You did!" Eleanor laughed, the tiniest creases appearing on the outside corners of her eyes. She was so loud now, that meekness from earlier lifted off her and slipped away like those butterflies Don used to follow around the flowerbeds. It was easy for her, laughter.

"I used to think, why would I let you have my babies? Why wouldn't I want them? But now I get it." Eleanor sat back in her chair and rested the mug on her knee. "I mean, I don't have any babies, but I could definitely see the appeal of letting someone else handle those first years. It looks exhausting."

"It is." Josie sipped her coffee. It needed a top up. She put the cup on the patio, next to her feet. At least she hadn't been missing out on grandchildren, too. "I did always think three was the hardest age. Maybe I did say that."

Eleanor nodded, a creep of surprise across her face. She used to complain that Josie never admitted to being wrong.

Mark looked back and forth between them.

"My dad does butterfly audits in his back garden," he said, gesturing to his mug. It still looked very full. Maybe she had added too much milk.

"Don did the same," Josie said to him. She sighed, a compulsion to be polite overtaking her. "So, Mark, what do you do?"

"I'm an illustrator, mostly graphic novels."

"Oh, like comic books? Don's son used to love them. Batman was the only thing he'd read for a long time. Not like this one" – she jerked her head toward Eleanor – "always with her head in some massive doorstopper."

"Well I can attest nothing has changed," Mark said, smirking.

Eleanor smiled at him and there was Josie's little girl again, her trusting gaze. Don's son was twelve by the time Josie met him; he'd never looked at her that way. But neither did Eleanor, now.

"You know why three is the critical age?" Josie said, not waiting for a reply. "Up until then, they need you. But then they get more independent. They don't want to know what you think anymore. Everything you do is wrong, even though you're only trying to protect them."

Eleanor nodded and her face turned somber. Josie seized on a new wave of satisfaction.

"And then once they realize you're human, that you can get things wrong sometimes, or you have feelings and weaknesses, suddenly you're useless." Jo-

sie picked up her cold coffee and tried not to wince as she swallowed. “Why is it that mothers need to be invincible? You can’t be a mother – have the love and empathy – and be invincible at the same time. Those things just don’t go together.”

“Kind of like superheroes,” Mark said. “The hero’s greatest weakness is always love, huh?”

He sounded like he was having a friendly conversation. What version of events had her daughter given him?

Eleanor was staring at her lap, then looked up, into the sky, before saying, “I guess those things tend to be mutually exclusive. Power and love. You have to sacrifice one for the other.”

Josie shrugged. “What I do know is that loving someone forces you to give up control.”

Finally Eleanor locked her eyes on Josie, waiting. But what for? Her face was expectant, hopeful.

Josie forced another gulp of her coffee, and Eleanor looked away, stared down at the patio.

Mark leaned forward, put his elbows on his knees. “We all want to feel in control of our lives, don’t we?”

“That we do,” Josie said.

Eleanor looked up again, someplace past Josie, past the house. “I guess we shouldn’t keep you.” There was a slight tremble in her jaw. Maybe she was shivering. But then she stood up, her chair scraping against the patio and leaving a grey streak near the left front leg. She held her own cup and Mark’s in her hand. “Would you like me to take these in?”

“Just leave them.”



The four chairs sat in a loose circle on the smooth, white patio. From inside, Josie gazed through the doors, her breath fogging the glass.

When she was little – five or six – Eleanor struggled to draw hearts, mostly because she tried it as one continuous thing, never lifting her pencil from the paper. When Josie showed her how to draw one side at a time there was no stopping her. They were everywhere. On all the notebooks in the house, on the memo pad by the phone, on her miniature easel and the inside covers of all her coloring books. In paint, in pen, in pencil, in the fogged glass of the car.

And on rainy days Josie would find them glowing on the windows of her station wagon, two halves, almost touching.



**Woman on Blue** by Lauren Foley

# All the Flowers

Cassia Gaden Gilmartin

It hurts when Aisling plucks the hair from under my brow. For a second my eyes close a little tighter; I feel the lines around them clench into deeper furrows, the way they'll look when I'm old.

"We're nearly there now." The mattress creaks as she edges towards me on the bed, leaning in for the most delicate work. She's on the underside of my eyebrow now, the middle part where the arch is supposed to happen. When the tweezers reach my skin again, I don't let myself flinch.

"Raise your brows."

I raise them like I'm feigning surprise, but with my eyes closed. She plucks a stray hair, and then the bed sighs as she leans back to inspect her work.

"And you're done."

I blink and she's there, sitting across from me on the bed, her own brows perfectly arched and filled in though she's been nowhere today but school. Mine never look like that—they're thick and straight, no arch, like two dead slugs. Today she said she'd fix them for me. My makeup is lined up at the ready on the dresser behind her. Foundation and contour kit, eye palettes, old tub of glitter that I don't intend to use. On my bed, the sheet has come loose to expose a corner of the creaky mattress. I've had that pink sheet on there for months, with the purple duvet set Mum bought me to match the lilac of the walls. It's time I changed them.

Aisling changed her bed yesterday, before her boyfriend Conor came over, replacing a pile of cream and flower patterns with a blue duvet and black sheet. She said it needed to be black.

She's at the dresser by the time I've uncrossed my legs. Tossing the glitter away into my makeup bag, tossing some other things in there too. "What do you want to look like?" she asks.

I glance at my outfit first: a green bandage dress with a frill in the front that hides my tummy, slung across the chair in the corner for now. I stand up to examine myself in the mirror on the wardrobe door. The big eyes, the pinkish tweezed arches.

"Just hot," I tell her.



Every time Dad mowed the grass when we were kids, we ran to save the daisies from the lawnmower. The shed where he kept it was hidden at the side of the house, so when we were playing in the back garden we'd hear it before we saw it. The tap and whir as it started, then the purr of the engine. Sometimes we'd give up on the flowers out front, where he started, as being a hopeless cause, but we had to pick the rest. Aisling, older by two years, would tell me where to go. I took the patch of garden she gave me and managed to clear it every time, piling the plucked daisies on the patio or in flowerbeds.

"Hurry up!" she'd yell. "He'll be here soon."

When I picked too many too fast I'd end up crushing them in my fist, throwing a mush of bent stems together on the pile. With my hands overflowing I'd just barely get the job done.



"Let's go with this, this and this." Standing in front of me with a makeup brush in hand, she points the brush in turn at three shades in a palette I've barely used. The last one's a shimmering gold.

"Yeah, those look good."

I sit on the bed again and close my eyes so she can dab on primer. Her thumb rubs across each eye, hard enough to make light and dark flash about behind my closed lids. After that she starts with the base shade, a pinkish tone like ground-up skin.

"Has Conor texted back?" I ask, while she rubs the brush against the eye-shadow to gather powder.

"Not yet." She holds up the brush. "Close your eyes."

I close them.

She brushes the shadow on in long sweeps, all the way up to where she plucked the hair from. "He said he'd be out with his parents for dinner tonight."

"Today's his actual birthday, isn't it?"

"Yeah." There's a rustling sound as she rummages through the bag for another brush, a pressure again as she applies the next colour. "I posted on his Facebook earlier."

"He should at least get in touch and say hi or something." I stop, because I don't know what to claim he should be saying besides hi, and hi on its own sounds stupid. Maybe I just don't trust him. He was late to pick her up last

week, the day she took her first driving lesson, when he'd promised to take her out for dinner. She'd chosen earrings and a matching necklace to wear for him, and waited an hour before he texted to say he was parked down the road.

"He'll be busy."

"I guess." I blink, close my eyes again. She's on the gold now.

Yesterday morning, she asked me to go sleep over at a friend's house. She wanted to let Conor spend the night while Mum and Dad were still away. She'd bought a card, and got wine from a friend who had ID, and she was going to give him sex as a birthday present. She was going to give it, I thought, not the way you give a holiday or a secret or anything else to share together, but the way you give a card or wine, or something in patterned paper to be unwrapped.

He was on our couch when I came back in the door this morning. His hair was the same bleached blonde as that guy in Wezz who ranked me and my friends by the size of our boobs.

"Hi," I said.

He raised a hand as if to wave, then dropped it again and went back to scrolling something on his phone.

I heard the key in the bathroom door, and Aisling came out. Her hair was tousled. She was wearing the Minnie Mouse pyjamas I bought her last Christmas. "Oh, hey," she said, and to Conor: "This is Abby."

"Hey," he said.

When he'd left, she came into my room and sat on the foot of the bed. "I didn't bleed on the sheet," she told me.

I pulled the duvet up around me. "He still seems like a prick."

"You're the expert are you?" She smiled and hugged her knees. "He gave me head for ages first, and when we were done he asked how it was for me."

"He didn't have much to say to me though." I looked her in the eye. Last night's makeup, smudged around her eyes, made them smoulder.

"He didn't want to use a condom, because he wouldn't be able to feel me properly. I made him, though."

I gave up and smiled back at her, wondering whether it hurt.



When I twirled a daisy between my fingers I could make the petals spin like a tiny white fan. Afterwards, I'd turn it over and spin it upside down. I liked to stare into the damp of the broken end, the invisible severed networks of vessels—xylem and phloem, the Junior Cert in my head tells me now. We thought of the flowers with the longest stems as the eldest, curling over like old ladies

with bent backs.

I suppose they lasted longer in our piles than they would have under the lawnmower. Dad used to pay us to clean it for him when he was finished, a euro each if we did a good job, but I can't remember quite how its blades worked. What way, exactly, would it have sliced them up? I picture yellow dust, slivers of petals like snow.

Maybe we just wanted to be the ones who did the plucking.



“Wait a sec.” She walks over to the dresser, opens the top drawer and rifles through it. There’s still a familiarity in the way she goes through my things. Back when we shared this room, she used to keep her makeup in that drawer too. “Who’s going to the party?” she asks.

“Just people from school.”

“Any lads?”

“Well yeah.”

Not finding what she’s looking for, she disappears down the hall. I think of that song we learned in primary school, the one about flowers and war. Girls pick the flowers, it said, and then meet boys and marry them. The boys die as soldiers and the flowers grow again on their graves. *Where have all the flowers gone*, the song asked. *Long time passing. Where have all the flowers gone? Long time ago.*

She comes back, liquid liner in hand. “Anyone in particular?”

She always thinks there’s someone in particular. There’s not: there’s something too much for me in the way the boys and girls from school act together. Kissing hard at parties, as if they might crawl inside one another, then wiping their mouths before they return to the crowd. One girl says she’s had sex already. She’s tall, with gold hair like a lion’s mane that’s always catching the sun.

Aisling’s up on the bed again, perched in front of me, before I can get out an answer. “Stay really still,” she tells me.

I try not to let my eyelids flicker. She paints a line across each lid, flaring out to the sides. Cat eyes.

We learned that song together in the same classroom, each of us part of a tiny class group that only took up one table. During maths—my class still adding and subtracting, hers on long division—we were too far apart for passing notes, but would turn and grin at each other.

The lyrics are replaying in my head as she finishes my makeup. She does thick concealer to hide the dark circles under my eyes, then foundation and contour. She blends everything, her hand on my shoulder while she presses hard with

the brush.

When she's done, I get up to look in the wardrobe mirror. My hair's still wild, my body hidden under school uniform, but my face belongs to someone else. I blink, and cat eyes blink back at me.

"Go get changed," Aisling says.



In the bathroom, I pull my tummy in while I pull up the dress, and try to pretend everything won't bulge again the minute I stop holding it in. The fabric ends just before my knees, and I curse the red mark on my shin where I cut myself shaving. I could wear tights, but no one does that. The sheen of them would stand out.

I feel something tighten in my belly, hope I'm not about to start bleeding that way too. My periods have never been regular and I've never been able to guess when they're coming. I wonder how I'll know I'm not pregnant a few years from now, whether I'll always be worrying.

"When does this thing start?" Aisling calls through the door.

"I'll be out in a sec."

*Long time passing. Long time ago.* The same lines over and over, until I'm back in that shared classroom. Mum had bought me new shoes the day before we learned the song, branded runners that she thought would look cool. The left one scraped my heel the whole time we were singing. It was little more than an itch at first, but every time no one was looking I slid a finger down the back of my sock to scratch at the place where it would cut me later. One time my finger caught on a bit of flayed skin. I flinched, and my finger came away bloody.



She's in her coat when I come out of the bathroom. She picks up a hairbrush that's been sitting on the radiator, smiles and hands it to me. I brush my hair in front of the bathroom mirror, but can't think of anything I want to do with it, so I leave it hanging flat against my shoulders.

"You ready?" she asks. "I'll come with you. There's some things I want to pick up in Spar."

It surprises me to realise the shops will be open; I was thinking of it as later in the night. When we step outside, me still buttoning my coat, it feels late. It's dark and there's a wind that has the trees waving. I look up and see clouds, all shades of purple like bruises, trailing across the sky.



“What time was it Mum and Dad get back?” she asks as we turn out of our driveway onto the street.

“Not until the afternoon,” I say. “Don’t worry about the tidying tonight.”

“No, that’s grand.” She’s not looking at me. Her eyes keep sliding past mine, to rest on our neighbours’ gardens as we pass them by. I realise I’ve hit a growth spurt. A few more inches and I’ll be looking at her face to face. “Do you really not like Conor?” she asks me.

“What?”

“Like, do you really think he’s a bad guy?” She glances over at me, just once. The streetlights make her face look paler.

“He doesn’t pay you any attention.”

“It wasn’t his first time last night, you know. He’s been patient with me.”

“I know,” I say, though I don’t know anything really. I let out the breath I’ve been holding, and remember what Dad said about fixing up the garden. “We should cut the grass tomorrow.”

She just keeps walking, hands in her pockets for warmth, while with every rise and dip in the road I think how she won’t be able to catch herself if she falls. We’ve reached the long road that leads to the bus stop and the Spar.

“Right, yeah,” she says. “Sorry I can’t do lifts just yet.”

“It’s grand. The bus goes right to Meaghan’s house.”

When I get there, the party will already have been going for a couple of hours. I’ll have to drink fast to catch up. They’ll be playing Never Have I Ever, maybe, and I’ll drink for some things I haven’t done as well as the ones I have, just to make people wonder. People will like the dress and I’ll find things to compliment in return.

Later, when everyone’s doing their own thing, I’ll find a boy to hang out with. One of the shy ones, maybe; I’ll like it better if he’s shy, I think. I’ll ask him if he wants a drink and he’ll top me up from someone else’s bottle of vodka. There won’t be much mixer left, so I’ll empty the last splash of Coke into my glass and it won’t take long to drink. I’ll put my hand over his and hold it until he leads me into a corner somewhere. We’ll kiss and I’ll guide his hand up my top to cup my breast. When he reaches my nipple, he’ll pinch it lightly between finger and thumb.

# Houseguest

Autumn James Haworth

Tom stood staring at the body on his living room floor. He couldn't be sure how it got there. Taking a sip of his tea, he thought that maybe he should phone the police, but it was too early in the morning to have to deal with that kind of thing. The body lying in the middle of the living room was already enough to deal with. Talking to the police just meant questions that there was no way he could answer. He kicked the body a little to see if there was a reaction. Nothing. Fuck. Life would be nice if things were simple, but no. A body just had to be lying there on the floor. His toast popped out of the toaster in the kitchen. This was a pleasant change as the smell of toast was far nicer than the smell in the living room. It didn't completely overpower the body, but it was a new smell and it was pleasant. He took another look at the body and decided that it was probably okay to leave it there while he went to put jam on his toast. As he got to the kitchen door, he heard a groan. He figured it was probably just his gut. It was early, and he hadn't eaten his breakfast yet. As he took another step into the kitchen he heard:

"You couldn't possibly help me up, could you?"

"What?" said Tom, turning back into the living room.

"Would it be possible for you to help me to my feet?" Tom stared at the body again, and this time, it was sat up looking groggy. It smiled politely at him. This was rather disconcerting, but somewhat appreciated.

"Y—yeah, sure." He put his mug of tea on the table next to his sofa. He put out his hand and helped the body up, though he was reluctant to do so. It was cold. It was a corpse, or at least that's what Tom thought before it started talking, so why wouldn't it be cold? He tried to figure out how impolite it would be to light some scented candles. Tom had never known what a corpse smelled like, but he figured that this was it. He listened to enough true crime podcasts to know that people seem to just know what dead bodies smell like. He held back the urge to gag. Maybe it was out of politeness, but he wasn't so sure why he'd be polite to the dead body in the living room. He was still holding the body's hand after he'd helped it up. His hand was going numb from the coldness of the body's touch, so he went back over to the table to fetch his cup of tea. Its

sudden warmth left his hands felling a little tingly. Taking a sip of his tea felt like a comfort. Its sweetness was something nice to think about rather than whatever was stood in the middle of his living room. Tom looked at the woman in his living room. He should probably start calling her a woman now that she was up and walking.

“I’m Florence, by the way.”

“Huh? Oh, I’m Tom. Nice to meet you, I suppose. Exactly how did you get into my apartment?”

“Five minutes ago, I was face down on your floor with no life in me. Trust me, Tom, I’d love the answer to that question too.” Tom supposed that was probably a reasonable response. It also confirmed that what he’d walked in on that morning was, in fact, a corpse. That would explain the smell and the cold.

“I don’t suppose you’ve got some heating you can put on, do you? It’s rather chilly in here.” Florence had a permanently polite smile across her face. Tom thought that it was probably rigor mortis that hadn’t gone away yet. He also wasn’t sure that putting the central heating up would help with the temperature problems that Florence was facing, but Tom was more than happy to oblige. As he walked over to the thermostat, Tom told Florence that she’s more than welcome to take a seat on the sofa and offered her a cup of tea. Tom was wondering how long it would take to get the smell out of the sofa after Florence was done sitting there, but there was no way that he could just let Florence stand about. Her bones were probably aching. Florence had declined the offer of tea but had sat down. Looking over at the animated corpse on his sofa, Tom tried to figure anything out about what he saw. It wasn’t exactly easy to look past the obvious. ‘Don’t say zombie. Don’t say zombie. Don’t say zombie,’ were the only thoughts circling in his head. He had to focus. Her dress looked nice, if a little scuffed, but that was to be expected; he didn’t actually know how long she’d been dead for. While it had only been five minutes for her, what’s time to the dead? She looked pretty intact though; she still had hair and skin, and she was almost regular people colour even if she was a little blue. Her accent seemed quite posh for someone sat in a tiny apartment on the outskirts of Manchester. Though maybe she’d been a businesswoman and had been living in the city centre. Plenty of people like that lived in the city centre, so that wouldn’t be so unusual, he supposed. Besides, she was at least a good 20–30 years older than him, so that could as easily explain the accent as anything else.

“You’re staring, young man.”

“I—yeah. I’m sorry. I’m just a little confused at this whole thing.”

“I’m hardly any more enlightened than yourself. I wish that I was. Trust me, dear boy, I didn’t exactly expect to have my lights go out one second, and wake

up in a stranger's living room the next." Tom sat on the sofa beside Florence and tried to remain polite about the smell. He figured that his smile probably looked plastered on, but he thought that was better than he put on a nice smile than to appear physically repulsed. He felt like he had to make a good impression on this woman, even if he wasn't sure why. Both of them sat facing each other on the sofa, and Tom could only deduce that Florence was feeling as awkward, because neither of them seemed to find anything to say.

"Do you mind if I ask, you know, how it happened?" Tom asked, feeling a little uncomfortable about it but feeling like it was better than no conversation whatsoever.

"How what happened, my boy? I've already told you that I don't know how I got here."

"No, I mean before that. How did you, you know, pass? If that isn't too rude of a question of course."

"Oh, that. I can't say that I remember it all too well. I just know that at some point in late November, I was stood at the top of my stairs, and the next thing I knew, I was here in your lovely home."

"I'm sorry. That's, wow, that's awful."

"It is, my boy. That it is."

After hearing this, Tom felt worse, and far more awkward. It would have been easier if he just hadn't asked because he realised that Florence not knowing how she died clearly hurt her. It wasn't exactly like life had prepared him for this kind of situation. He generally knew what to talk about with strangers but the people he'd met in his life were usually, well, people, and not animated corpses that had suddenly appeared in his living room one morning. Tom remembered that his toast had popped out earlier and he was trying to figure out if it would have been rude to go and prepare and eat it. Almost definitely. Maybe if he offered Florence some toast, then that would make things better. Though, come to think of it, would Florence even need to eat? She appeared living but, Tom couldn't even be sure if she were technically alive.

"Would you like some toast?" Tom blurted out.

"Oh, well, that would be lovely. Not sure how that works now, but I suppose it could be fun finding out."

While Tom was in the kitchen preparing Florence's toast and eating his own, he considered trying to contact someone. Though he couldn't be sure how that would go down with anybody. How was he supposed to explain the situation in his living room? It's not like it was simply a case of a break-in or someone who was just lost. Well, he supposed that Florence was lost, but not in a way that he could deal with. He took a sip of his tea. It was cold. Of course, it was cold. His

tea was cold, his toast was cold, and the living corpse in his living room was cold as ice. He supposed that he'd have to get to the bottom of this in some way or another. He was startled by the toast popping out beside him. That was it then. He'd prepare this toast, feed the corpse, and then he'd find out why the hell that corpse ended up there in the first place.

# Vivian

Brittney Uecker

“How did you lose your virginity?” I asked Vivian one day freshman year while we were splayed out on the grass in Washington Square Park, licking frozen yogurt off the back of plastic spoons. It was an unseasonably warm day for March, the sun teasing at spring despite the chill of still-damp grass beneath us.

The thought had come to me suddenly and out of nowhere, and then gnawed at me for days. I rarely kept things like this from Vivian, always speaking exactly what was on my mind to her without concern about how it was going to be received — a direct, unfiltered conduit from my mind to my mouth. It was obvious that it had happened at some point since we’d got to college — at this point, sex was as habitual to us both as anything else — but we had never talked about it, and friends like us didn’t have secrets.

Vivian laughed and dug for a raspberry in her cup.

“Sophomore year.”

My mind did a flip trying to work out the timeline.

“Sophomore year? Like, of high school?”

She looked at her frozen yogurt, focused on extracting the raspberry. “Yeah, Nathan from the track team, night after he won the state meet.”

I tried to remember Nathan — gangly, sandy blond, I think he sat behind me in American History. I hadn’t spoken more than a few words to him through all of high school. It didn’t seem possible that Vivian had been with the same person.

“Wait — how? Nathan? Why didn’t I know this?”

Vivian finally found the coveted raspberry and popped it into her mouth. I could see it’s bright, crimson juices spill between her teeth and stain her lips as her frozen yogurt melted against the heat of her tongue. She shrugged.

“He must have given me a ride home or something. I don’t really remember. I mean, I always thought he was cute. It wasn’t a big deal or anything.”

My chocolate frozen yogurt suddenly tasted sour in my mouth.

“Not a big deal? What are you talking about? That’s a huge deal! You had a crush on Nathan all year, I remember that.”

Vivian smirked, like she was recalling a pleasant but distant memory. “Yeah,

he was pretty hot, huh?”

I couldn't believe she was being so casual about this, and I couldn't believe that it was nearly four years ago. At that time, sophomore year, Vivian and I were nearly inseparable. On the rare occasions that we were apart — her at a track meet or me spending a weekend away with my parents — we texted constantly, calling each other night like lovers to recount every miniscule detail of our days apart. If something like this could slip through the cracks, either accidentally lost or very intentionally brushed over, what other details had I missed out on? What else was Vivian keeping from me?



Vivian and I both started freshman year at NYU the fall before this revelation. Neither of us had ever been to a college party before, but she conjured up the invite at some point during our hall orientation. As our RA rambled on about quiet hours and shower etiquette and if you see something, say something, Vivian passed whispers and raised eyebrows with the other girls from our hall. By the time we got back to our room, our plans for the evening were set.

Vivian also conjured up an enormous, glittery bottle of blueberry vodka. When I asked her how she was able to get it, she acted like it was no big deal, that she simply walked into the supermarket and bought it like it was toilet paper or candy. I didn't question it. I also didn't question when she handed me a plastic cup filled with liquor, a splash of Gatorade from the vending machine giving it a slightly blue tinge. It tasted awful, chemical and biting and wrong. My gut kicked it back up into my throat and I coughed, spraying blue all over our dorm room floor.

“Hey hey hey,” Vivian said calmly, a hand immediately on my back. “You okay?”

Anyone else would have egged me on, ridiculed my inexperience and encouraged me by shoving even more booze down my throat, but Vivian was gentle, concerned.

“That's fucking disgusting,” I choked out.

Vivian laughed. “It's okay, babe. I'm sure they'll have something better at the party.”

The party was at an apartment on the other side of campus. We passed a cigarette back and forth as we clicked across the green in our heels, shivering in tiny dresses. If anyone were to look at us, they would see two girls walking side by side, assured and confident, two girls who knew the lay of the land. But this was a fallacy, because it was I who followed Vivian. She held enough magic

for the two of us, and without her we had none. Without her there was no me, because we were only we.

Up six flights of stairs and down a brightly lit hallway, the pounding thump of music leaked from beneath a door offset on its hinges, indicative of the entire building melting in on itself. A few stragglers dotted the hall, their eyes resting on our leggy figures for a second too long. Vivian didn't seem to notice, or if she did, she didn't care, and we pressed through the door into the apartment.

An assault of noise besieged us as we entered, overlapping voices fighting for purchase against the indecipherable lyrics being pumped through the speakers. Bodies squished against each other, more people than I had ever seen concentrated in such a space at once, filling every inch of the apartment. No one noticed us as we walked in, just two more bodies to add to the heap. I recognized no one, none of the girls from orientation, and wondered how exactly Vivian had found this place.

"Let's go find some beer," she said as she grabbed my hand and began to pull me through the crowd. The heat of so many humans caused condensation to drip from the walls. The smell of sweat was overwhelming. I pulled my elbows in close and dipped my shoulders but inevitably bumped into strangers as I tried to keep up with Vivian. I avoided their eyes, keeping my focus on the V of her bare back in her tiny dress, the dips of brown flesh as she maneuvered us through the room.

She led me out a sliding glass door at the back of the apartment and onto a balcony that was only slightly less crowded. The keg sat in a bucket of what was once ice but was now just cloudy water. Vivian pulled two plastic cups from a bag next to it and began to manipulate the contraption with ease. I watched her pump and flick and fill, tipping the cups at a precise angle to minimize the foam, though I had no idea about this technique. She handed me one.

"How do you know how to do that?" I asked.

She sipped. A cloud of white foam clung to her lip and her tongue flashed pink to remove it.

"I don't know, I just do," she answered dismissively, her attention elsewhere. I let my eyes follow hers.

Everyone appeared obviously older than us, and I wondered whether this infantilization was real or just a result of my insecurity. I immediately categorized them based on their appearances, making split-second, knee-jerk assumptions. Behind the keg, two hipster poet-types in thick-rimmed glasses were deeply engaged in a conversation that left them stone-faced, eyebrows pressed together in concentration. To their right, a couple of punky-looking girls with harshly-colored hair and tattoos peeking out of their clothing sloshed beer out of



their cups as they laughed. In the opposite corner were two men, a tall lanky blond with milky skin and a sharp beard, and a darker man with large brown eyes and a head of curly black hair. They seemed the least intimidating of the group.

Vivian pinched the sensitive skin under my arm and nodded towards them. I followed her. Their conversation trailed off and their eyes landed on us as we came closer. I wondered what instantaneous assumptions they were making, which categorical box they set us in, and I hoped mine was the same as Vivian's.

"Hey, ladies," said the blond as we approached. He had small flake-like teeth and thin lips. I didn't find him attractive at all — something about that smile felt weak and hinted at a penchant for overcompensating confidence.

Vivian smiled and leaned back against the railing, making herself look sexy and powerful and effortless. This was intentional, this instant command of the situation through her body language.

"You boys having fun?" she asked. I tried to track the sound of her voice, the formula of pitch and cadence that equaled flirtatious.

The blond shrugged and held up his cup. "Free beer. Can't complain, right?"

I sipped my own and felt the thump of my heart in my chest.

"You guys go to NYU?" she asked.

"Pratt," said the blond. "Grad school for architecture. My boy, Daveed," — he motioned to the curly-haired guy — "Ph. D. in bullshit."

The curly-haired guy smiled shyly. "He means philosophy," he corrected. "And I'm only a first year. Can't claim that title quite yet."

I prickled with nerves. We were freshmen. We were in way over our heads. I tried to telepathically communicate this fear to Vivian, but she wasn't responding, just plumping her lips and taking in both of the men.

"So you're Daveed —" She looked at the philosophy guy, then averted her eyes to the blond. "And you're?"

"Will."

"William." She rolled the word around like candy on her tongue. It was clear that of the two, he appealed to her more. This would prove, as we got older, to be quite the convenience for us — our opposing tastes in men, never stepping on each other's toes.

"And you?" asked Daveed, addressing both of us but looking at me.

"Vivian," she piped up. "This is Bianca."

"Bee," I corrected her.

Daveed smiled out one side of his mouth, pulling his cheek into the dip of a dimple. He lifted his drink to his lips and watched me over the edge of the cup as he sipped. I felt a tingle rush through my body, thrilled at seeing that I had

his attention. I sensed the same shyness in him that I felt, the apprehension of not wanting to scramble over a moment and ruin it.

When Vivian and I were young, boys had always been peripheral. There was attraction, curiosity, hopeless crushes, but none of the rapidity and soul-crushing emotional whiplash of allowing them to maintain the forefront of our attention. Vivian and I existed in a world where we were our own focus, our own entertainment, our own lovers only in the sense of our adoration and devotion to each other as friends. We didn't need the distraction of boys. Dating would be a wedge between us. Neither of us could have something that the other one couldn't — this wasn't a conscious axiom, just an unspoken ethereal understanding. The threat of our friendship souring over something as temporary and asinine as a boy wasn't worth the pleasure of answering the call of our blooming sexuality.

But that night at the party, something was different. As Vivian navigated this interaction, seamlessly steering the conversation and attention of these men without any obvious effort or struggle, it was something I had never seen before, this skill set that she had somehow obtained while I hadn't. I was too confused to be jealous, worrying what else I had missed, what other necessary competencies I lacked.

We wandered through all the trivial talking points of an exchange amongst strangers. Vivian did most of the talking, but as my beer slowly disappeared, I became more spongy and bold and interjected myself into the conversation where appropriate. I elicited a couple laughs from the boys, a fewing approving nods from Vivian, both of which made my heart swell with pride.

I watched Daveed with a careful eye between words. He was cute, but in a way that needed a little convincing and the lubrication of booze. His soft mocha skin was accented by a carefully manicured goatee and deep dimples that made me melt. His lips stretched into an easy smile, framing gleaming teeth and a deep, sharp voice that made me think of caramel sauce or an Exacto knife.

As he watched me on the balcony, I felt on display, penetrated, like he was seeing some honesty inside of me that I was supposed to be hiding. I thought it would be scary, but my fear dulled, morphing to a sort of self-satisfaction, an inoculation of power as I began to realize that I was the one in command. Daveed was merely a creature at the mercy of his sex drive, and that made me the provider with the authority to grant or deny his satisfaction. Of course, I would also realize in the near-future that this was a naive and dangerous assumption, that I was in control of nothing and that a man could easily overtake any control I thought I had. But that night, I was too green and bemused to assume the worst in people.

At one point, William produced a bottle of liquor unidentifiable to my untrained eye and we all took pulls. It was harsh like the vodka and piney, like a garden carrot dipped in rubbing alcohol. The interaction became more effortless and less defined, the edges fuzzy and subjects seamlessly flowing from one to the other. We moved from the balcony to the living room, where we squished together on a futon. With my body pressed up against Daveed's, I was further intoxicated by his scent, piney and acerbic like the booze with a blanket of cologne that reminded me of my father. Some pop song came on the stereo and Vivian and I began to dance in the middle of the living room, pulling the boys up from the futon and encouraging them to dance with us. My body moved on its own accord in ways I didn't know it could move. I watched my arms flail out of the corner of my vision like they were someone else's, drunken phantom limbs.

Daveed may have been apprehensive about dancing with me, but he obliged regardless. I pressed my ass against him, felt his large hands on the flesh of my side, heard the distant 'whoop!' of voices in the room encouraging me. I turned to face him, pressed my hips into his, so close to him that his scent became my own, and felt the distinctive hard edge of his groin growing against me as we continued to dance. When his mouth found its way to mine, it was large and overwhelming, as warm and wet as a bathtub. I let myself sink into it, a welcomed drowning.

We were in an Uber before I knew how we got there, flying into the city lights. The dark shape of Vivian and William moved together in the shadows of the backseat, the quiet moaning and wet smacking sounds of kissing. Daveed and I soon contributed our own notes to the symphony, mouths and hands wandering with unspoken invitations, all of it new. The scratch of his stubbly neck against my lips, the flick of his fingertips against the edge of my underwear, the manifestation of things I had only imagined when my own hands pulsed against my body beneath the sheets of my solitary bed. I thought momentarily of the Uber driver, their voyeuristic eyes watching this shameless animalism in the rearview mirror, but it didn't stop me.

In an apartment next, just a momentary flash of a dim, cluttered room, the clink of a bottle cap hitting a countertop, the fuzzy feeling of carbonation against my tongue. More music, like it was being transmitted through the walls themselves, punk or jazz or something loud and pointed. Daveed's fingers intertwined in mine, pulling me down the hall towards a bedroom. A last look at Vivian as she danced around the room, her laughs mixing with Will's, her eyes sending a message of warning and a nod of approval all in a single gaze. "You can do this," her gaze said. "Be careful, but fucking go for it."

I had never had sex before, and in my drunkenness I considered telling Daveed this, but didn't. I searched the depths of my fragmented memories for what I was supposed to do, images from movies and porn that I could imitate, but thankfully Daveed took the reins, shifting my body to where it was supposed to be, forming it into the shapes it was supposed to be in. He maneuvered us with smoothness and experience, a clear and nearby familiarity. I liked his weight on top of me, skin I hadn't felt before in places I'd never felt it. It was quick, happening and then suddenly not, a sharp pain and odd fullness and then Daveed rolling off of me and into the slice of moonlight streaming in through the window.

"That was nice," he said breathlessly, looking at me through the shadows.

"Yeah," I falsely agreed, my own breathlessness a farce. I hadn't even come close to orgasm.

When he pulled the condom off and slid off the bed to throw it away in the bathroom, I breathed a sigh of relief — virginity: check — and fell asleep immediately, slipping into the dark weightlessness of drunken sleep.



I awoke to the warmth of a hand on my cheek and the tickle of fingers sliding through my hair.

"Bee," a soft voice whispered. "Wake up, babe."

My eyes were crusted together with mucus and old makeup and opened up stubbornly. Through the darkness, I made out the silhouette of Vivian's curls.

"Fuck," I whispered. "I'm awake, I'm awake." It took me a few moments to place myself in the context of this unfamiliar environment. I felt the surprise of my nakedness beneath the sheets, the unusual firmness of a mattress that wasn't mine, Daveed's heavy arm draped over me and sticking to my skin with a sheen of sweat. Fragments of the night began to float back to me in blurry, unsettling pieces.

"What time is it?" I murmured as I pushed myself up off the lumpy pillows that smelled like Daveed.

"Fuck if I know. Four or five?" said Vivian. "We gotta go. Get dressed. I'm gonna go look for our shoes."

I slid out from under Daveed's arm and felt around in the darkness for my clothes. I slid the dress over my body but gave up on trying to find my underwear in the sea of the bed. I had the brief urge to kiss Daveed on the cheek or leave my number on his bedside table like they did in the movies, some token of thanks or indicator of continuation. The surprise of my underwear swimming

somewhere in his sheets would have to do.

Vivian and I left the apartment quietly and entered the severe brightness of the hallway. My legs were jelly-like and unstable, my still-drunk head wobbly on my shoulders and pulsing with an incessant, dull ache.

“Where are we even? How far is it back to campus?” I asked.

Vivian had her phone out and was trying to establish our location. She looked a thousand times better than how I felt.

“Williamsburg. We’ll have to take the G line back, but there’s a stop on the next block.”

The idea of walking any length in my current state, let alone stirring my velocity on a subway, made my stomach turn and my muscles hurt, but we had no choice. Apparently staying over until morning wasn’t an option, and I took Vivian’s word for it. Like last night, somehow she seemed to know how this whole one-night-stand thing went, what the appropriate behaviors associated with this ritual were, and I guess sleeping off the hangover in a stranger’s bed wasn’t part of that equation.

The streets were disorientingly quiet at this hour. An imagined line of sunlight seemed to swell just beneath the horizon. We didn’t say much until we were on the subway, thankfully empty this early.

“So,” Vivian began. She was hunched in the seat across from me, while I laid across the seats trying not to puke and not giving a shit about how many germs teemed on their surface. “Quite a night, huh?”

I emitted an emotionless groan. “Yeah, I’ll say.”

“So...” she lingered, then paused and smiled at me conspiratorially.

“So what?”

“Did you do it?”

It was impossible to focus on anything concrete. I felt like a marshmallow encased by an eggshell. “Do what?”

“David. Davis. Daniel?”

“Daveed.”

“Daveed, right. So did you? Did you fuck him?”

It sounded so hard and severe in those terms, eliciting the same flinching gut-punch as the word cunt or cock. I thought about Daveed, the unassuming kindness I wanted to paint over him in my memory, though I had no idea if that was an accurate representation at all. It suddenly occurred to me, the reality that I had just had sex with a stranger, lost my virginity to a man I’d never see again, and I felt a dark wave wash over me.

“Yeah, of course I did.”

I said it because it was what Vivian would say, how she would say it. She

would fuck a stranger and not concern herself with whether she would see him again. She'd take it for what it was. She would own it. Vivian would do these things.

"Did you?" I asked, praying she would have a similar answer.

She shrugged. "Nah. We had a few more drinks and made out for a little bit, but I just wasn't into it." She said it casually, with a nonchalance that was unfathomable.

My heart dropped through my chest like a stone.

"Wait — you guys didn't have sex?"

"Nope."

I wanted to throw up. Suddenly I wanted to throw myself in front of the train, so stupidly naive that I had let this all happen to me, so rash, so impulsive. I thought that was what I was supposed to do. It wasn't that I didn't want to, that he had forced himself onto me unwillingly, but I had no idea that it had been a choice.

More than that, I had wandered into an uncharted territory between Vivian and I, sex an unbreeched frontier for both of us. I had stepped into the unknown without bringing her with me, and now this was something we no longer shared, a way in which we were no longer equal. This was something I didn't want to have first. I didn't want to navigate this alone. Like tapping a keg and finding a party and putting on eyeliner correctly, I needed Vivian to be my guide. I was overcome with anxiety that I didn't have her blueprint for this, and more so that she didn't seem to care.

Did you sleep in his bed or on the couch? I wanted to ask. Who fell asleep first? Did he say goodnight? Did you have to say that you weren't going to have sex or was it just understood? I wanted to ask her a million questions, establish all the details that didn't matter, just to give her back the upperhand, but it was all too much, so I remained silent. She didn't offer up more.

Before long, Vivian nudged me awake again, having been lulled back to sleep by the movement of the subway, and we emerged into the aching glow of the sunrise, trudged across the dewey grass of the campus green, and slept curled together in my dorm room bed until afternoon.



That night was the first of many, the jumping-off point into the thrashing ocean of our college years — a blurred collage of parties and men and booze, lack of sleep and flailing spontaneity. Come the weekend, come nightfall, Vivian always 'knew a place'. We'd find ourselves in dorm rooms and apartments and

walk-ups, on someone's roof or crammed into a tiny living room, neighborhoods we'd never heard of and parts of the city we were warned about. Always, it was Vivian at the helm, navigating logistics and procuring enough booze to get us there buzzed and maintain our collective state of drunkenness over the weekend. It was magical, a skill I had never seen her utilize until now, but I never questioned it.

After Daveed, a string of forgettable men followed, their names and faces and touches interchangeable and underwhelming. Every time we went out, the routine was the same — I'd scan the room, select whatever attractive-enough guy was closest at hand, and land eyes on him. "That one," I'd say, and will him to look my way. A drink or a dance or a tiresome, repeated conversation would turn into a kiss. It never took much to get a boy into bed, whether his or mine or whoever's was most accessible at the time — I'd even fucked guys in Vivian's bed, which somehow made me feel strangely closer to her, another milestone in our friendship. It didn't matter who it was, just someone to check the mark, to fulfill the ritual, something for Vivian and I to talk about the next day over hangover pizza and warm leftover beer.

There was a level of confidence that I gained from all of it, from proving to myself that I was capable of enticing a man. It gave me a sense of power that I was the one in control, that I could choose, even though I always made the same choice. I never had any illusions of longevity with these men. These were clearly one-night-stands, which in a way was my own insurance policy — even if I was an embarrassment, a total drunken shitshow, as I was more often than not, I wouldn't have to see them again. The moment would die the second I left their bed, be forgotten as soon as I set eye on the next guy I wanted to fuck.

Still, there was always that split second when I woke up next to someone. I would watch them sleeping peacefully, see the barely perceptible flutter of their nostrils as they breathed, their delicately parted lips and the soft curves of cheekbones, all their nuances and imperfections, and I would be reminded that this was a human, a worthy, fragile individual no different than myself. I'd wonder for the briefest moment, could this guy be my boyfriend? Could I love him? But then the moment would pass. I'd get dressed, stumble back to my dorm, and wait for my vulnerability to rearden.

This time solidified mine and Vivian's respective roles in our relationship, the styles our personalities would take with them into adulthood. Vivian was the captain of our ship, the leader, fearless and all-knowing and assured. I trusted that not only would she always find us a place to go, but that she would protect me. She would let me go wild, as she did in equal measure, but it was like there was a string tied around my finger that tethered us together, and regardless of

how far that line stretched, we could always follow it back to each other. We never showed up anywhere without the other, and even when our paths diverged into the beds of separate men, we were always the first person we would talk to in the morning, never more than a phone call or a text message away.

On the surface, we appeared the same — enthusiastic party girls, an identical wildness, the same tiny glittery dresses and smeared lipstick and vodka breath. But underneath, we were a different texture. Vivian was made of solid steel, gutsy and unflappable. She was sure of herself, even in her riotous craziness, even when she was drunk beyond logic and the fool of the scene, she owned it. In our next-day rehashings of even the craziest parties, she never shriveled in shame or wore the pallor of regret. She never blamed inebriation or other people for her misgivings. These were choices she made. They belonged to her, nearly treasured.

But where Vivian was deliberate, measured, methodical, I was a wildfire — consuming, consuming, consuming. Given an inch, I would easily and greedily take a mile. I always took it too far, saw the line of my limits and willingly leaped over it, and was subsequently submerged in regret. After a night of doing unthinkable things to my liver and lungs, after having forgettable sex with faceless men, the guilt would swallow me whole. It left me drained, spent, running on fumes, wondering if I could possibly make it to the weekend, through the semester, to graduation. I was being eaten alive by the fear that I was sullyng my potential, that I was throwing it all away. Vivian, on the other hand, saw potential as a fallacy — either you were or you weren't, you had or you didn't.

You were alive or you were dead.

If she could do it, I could do it. Vivian was enough to carry us both.



# Contributor Notes

**Abigail Eckstine** (they/she) is a 25-year-old queer writer of novels, poetry, a parent-to-be and the founder of Cauldron Anthology. Most recently they have been published in Pussy Magazine and Moonchild Magazine. You can find them on twitter @whimsywriter3.

Recently published in The Stinging Fly, Sonder, and Paper Lanterns, **Ali Isaac** (she/her) has been awarded a Literature Bursary from the Arts Council of Ireland for her current WIP, a creative non-fiction project entitled ‘Imperfect Bodies’, which she is working on with the Penguin Write Now 2020 mentorship programme. In 2020, she was awarded a writing mentorship by Words Ireland and the Arts Council of Ireland, in which she worked under the guidance of author, Sara Baume.

**Ally Remy** (she/they) is a disabled/chronically ill undergraduate studying Creative Writing at Western Washington University. She enjoys fiction that challenges common interpretations of reality. You can find her on Twitter @Ally\_Remy.

**Andrina Deery** (she/her) is a 21-year-old graduate in English with Creative Writing from Queen’s University Belfast. She usually writes poetry that is a little dark, weird or strange. Her poem, Verbatim, is a personal poem, written about the effect that other (often well-meaning) people’s words have on her, and the quirks she has developed because the words really do stick with her.

**Angela Mckean** has written poetry all her life, since she was six, and is now branching out into flash fiction and short stories as well. Angela has travelled a lot over 7 decades, and sometimes loses sight of where she belongs. Writing grounds her and seems to help her find out who she is. She is particularly interested in representing uncertainty, ambiguity – liminal experiences and emotions.

**Anna Royle** (she/her) is an English with Creative Writing student at Queen’s University Belfast. She is passionate about telling female-led stories via script or

prose, with a particular interest in horror and psychological thrillers.

**Autumn James Haworth** (he/him) is a new trans writer of short stories. Autumn tends to write about growing up, falling in love, and unusual adventures. While this does not appear in all of his work, his experience as a trans and bi man can be seen scattered into his work.

**Bebhinn Tankard** (she/they) recently finished her undergraduate degree in Politics, Philosophy and Economics. She writes bleak prose for magazines and more cheerful radio drama scripts for her podcasting company, Knöves Storytelling.

**Beth Garrett** (she/her) is a Northern Irish poet whose writing often explores her identity as a queer woman. She loves to use imagery to express the emotions that can be hard to put into words directly, especially using nature. Some of her previous work has been featured in the online zine Inkstay, and in Queen's Writer's Society magazine The Apiary.

**Brittney Uecker** (she/her) is a librarian, writer, mother, and Scorpio living in rural Montana. She is inspired by the nuances of relationships and characters that can't get out of their own way. As a true Scorpio, she is drawn to the dark underbelly of everything and strives to reveal to the world. She is @bonesandbeer on Twitter and Instagram.

**Caitlin Young** (she/her) is performing the concept of being a writer – poorly.

**Cassia Gaden Gilmartin** (she/her) is a Dublin-based fiction writer and one of two founding editors behind the environmentalist literary magazine Channel. Her recent short fiction has been published by Banshee, Transnational Queer Underground and Eunoia Review, and she is currently working on a first novel.

**Ceci Mazarella** (she/her) lives in London, writing prose alongside her development work in film and TV. She writes stories that find warmth in the strange and, despite some darkness, remain playful and hopeful. A little haunting, a little humorous.

**Charlotte Reed** (she/her) is a student at Queen's University Belfast, originally from Washington in England. While she does study Chemistry, she's still heavily involved in the writing society at her uni, being a member of the committee as Public Relations Officer. She writes usually about the twisted interpretations of

normal situations and has previously been published with Inertia Teens in their first issue: Feelings.

**Clem Flowers** (they/them) is a soft spoken southern transplant living in spitting distance of some mountains in Utah. Maker of a fine omelet, but scrambled egg game needs some fine tuning. Nb & bi, they live in a cozy apartment with their wonderful wife & sweet calico kitty. They can be found on Twitter at @hand\_springs777.

**Emma Buckley** (she/her) is a Northern Irish writer studying English with Creative Writing at Queen's University Belfast. Her work tends to focus on the strange middle-ground between horror and romance, the product of combining a slasher movie with a rom-com. Her poetry can be found, or is forthcoming in, in *The Honest Ulsterman*, *The Apiary*, *Superfroot* and *Overground Underground*.

**Fran Fernández Arce** (she/her) is a Chilean poet currently living in Suffolk, England. She loves reading and writing poetry about art, language, and the weather and birds she can spot outside my window.

**JW Summerisle** (they/them) lives in the English East Midlands. They took up painting in April 2021, having previously been published as a poet in various journals. They may sometimes be found on Twitter at @jw\_Summerisle.

**Lauren Foley** (she/her) is Irish/Australian and bisexual. She has Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (SLE) and is disabled. Lauren was awarded a Next Generation Artist's Award in Literature from the Arts Council of Ireland. Credits include: *Overland*, Award Winning Australian Writing, *Lighthouse*, *No Alibis*, *Head of Zeus* and *gorse*. Her debut short story collection—*Polluted Sex*—is forthcoming from Influx Press in 2022.

**Leah Taylor** (she/her) is a poet from Belfast currently studying the Poetry Masters of Arts in the Seamus Heaney Centre at Queen's University. Her writing doesn't tend to stick to any specific themes but she has an interest in amplifying mundane details of the human experience, including her own past and present experiences and those of her peers. As a queer working class woman born just prior to the Good Friday Agreement, she is presently focussing her poetry a lot more on the idea of the modern ceasefire generation; how their experiences differ from those before them and how *The Troubles'* legacy lives on in spite of the promised 'change' that her generation was believed to bring to Northern

Ireland. Her work has previously appeared in the online magazine The Jumble and in online exhibitions by the Northern Ireland Mental Health Arts Festival.

**Lorelei Bacht** (she/they) is currently running out of ways to define herself, and would like to reside in a tranquil, quiet form of uncertainty for a while. Her recent work has appeared and/or is forthcoming in *Anti-Heroine Chic*, *Visitant*, *The Wondrous Real*, *PROEM*, *SWWIM*, *The Inflectionist Review*, *Hecate*, and elsewhere. She is also on Instagram: @lorelei.bacht.writer and on Twitter: @bachtlorelei.

**Maeve O'Lynn** was shortlisted for the 2021 Society of Authors' Awards and won the 2019 TU Short Story Prize at Red Line Book Festival, Dublin. She has published short fiction and poetry in journals such as *The Stinging Fly*, *Banshee*, and *The Tangerine*.

**Marie Little** (she/her) lives near fields with her family and writes in the shed. She writes poetry/flash and tries to get creative outside of her comfort zone. Marie has work featured or forthcoming in: *Sledgehammer*, *Five Minutes*, *Anti-Heroine Chic*, *Re-Side*, *Ink Sweat and Tears*, *Cool Rock Repository*, *Free Flash Fiction*, *Gastropoda*, *The Cannon's Mouth* and *The Birdseed*. She is on Twitter @jamsaucer.

**Megan Russo** (she/her) is a writer and designer residing in Austin, TX with her husband and their two pugs. Megan is active in the tabletop rpg community and is currently working on her first, solo-player rpg zine. Check out more of her work at [meganrusso.com](http://meganrusso.com).

**Monica Cardenas** (she/her) is from Washington, D.C., and will earn her PhD in Creative Writing next year from Royal Holloway, University of London. Her research explores the intersection of maternity and female bodily autonomy, with a focus on the representation of non-maternal women in literature. Her own writing centers on women who do not desire children, and reveals the many painful repercussions of both cultural and legal enforcement of motherhood. Her unpublished novel *The Marriage Amendment* was longlisted in the Lucy Cavendish College Fiction Prize and runner-up in the Borough Press open submission competition..

**Paris Jessie** (she/her) is a black, queer California based poet/writer and EMT. She writes both poetry and nonfiction, with a hint of fiction. Much of her writing focuses on mental health experiences, healing and black/LGBTQ+

identity. You can find more of her work at [iamparisjessie.com](http://iamparisjessie.com).

**Prenesa Naidoo** (she/her) is a popcorn fiend, who has just graduated with her MA in Creative Writing. She is currently turning her thesis (a collection of short stories) into a manuscript. You will always find a notebook, several pens, a half-read novel, and a moonstone tucked into her bag. Her background in Law and Psychology is reflected in her writing, tending to touch on politics and landscapes which stretch beyond the mind. The spaces between pages are where she feels, heals, explores, loves, hides, dreams, and becomes. She also believes that nothing can capture a reader's attention more than a lived experience. Her work has been published in *Odd Magazine*.

**Serena De Marchi** (she/her) is an academic researcher of Chinese and Sinophone literatures. She was born in a small Italian town and currently resides in Taipei. She has many – albeit fleeting – passions. The most recent one is birdwatching. English is not her mother tongue and this is her first piece of fiction.

**Shaun Byron Fitzpatrick** (she/her) lives in Philadelphia with her husband and black cat. Her fiction has appeared in *Maudlin House*, *Ellipsis Zine*, *New Gothic Review*, and *Coffin Bell Journal*, among others. You can find her on Instagram at [@shaunyfitz](https://www.instagram.com/shaunyfitz).

**Syna Majumder** (she/they) is a high schooler from India who loves to write about road trips, bass lines, and horror and love intertwining. Her work has been published in the *Daily Drunk Mag*, and is forthcoming in the *Cathartic Lit Mag*, *Paper Crane Journal*, and *Juven Press*. You can find them [@fuzz\\_pedals](https://www.instagram.com/fuzz_pedals) on Instagram.

**Zara Meadows** (they/them) is an emerging poet from Belfast in Ireland. They are one of the Foyle Young Poets for 2020 and they were commended in the Tower Poetry competition of the same year. Zara's work can be found in *The Honest Ulsterman* and the *Irish Times*, and it is forthcoming in *Banshee*. Their Twitter is [@zmameadows](https://twitter.com/zmameadows).

**Zoe Brönte Faulkner** (she/her) has just finished a degree in English with Creative Writing at Queen's University. She has been writing poems since her early teenage years, and over time it has become the most cathartic coping mechanism for her, and also a very freeing mode of self-expression.

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