

Writtle

issue three
volume two

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**A journal for
underrepresented
writers**

untitled

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

Thanks for joining us!

Ollie Charles & Nicola Lampard

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Poetry

The Surgeon

Alice Liefgreen

heart like a ridge and mouth
like a calcified moon hands like
rolling tires on four lane freeways days I miss
crawling through broken windows rinsed in warm
light
days I miss exhaling darkness into your
night

an ache is just a ripple on your supple skin
but a seism in my undying unseen chest
punctured are the lungs that breathe me waning
like the flowers on your wallpaper miles away
from all the places they were held miles
and miles from all the places that I
kneeled
seeking lairs beneath
devouring waves days I miss rocks kneading sharply
in dark caves heart like a ridge and
lips like the rain shadows in love
with the endless feeling of coiling skin
exposing all that is concealed

a quivering flush along the muscle beneath

sketching it, never caressing it

36 Months

AR Benjamin

I can be myself when I am with you, like keeping
The thermostat on 16 degrees because you pretend
The sun has smudged out winter like rouge blush despite
Your icicles buried deep
In the white Parka you let me borrow —
 before your mum asked you to be a signator —
The silver reflective one that toots through
My letterbox when you're here.
When my thoughts tie like off grey laces and my
White Air Force
Ones grow tired of the toothbrush always
Troubling to blot out history,
Stains on the tongue,

Would you have known?
That I would have put it on, and
Feel you writing from your bed,
 under the light you say is too bright to sleep
But too dark to read in, writing to me
As real as you hear the doors clang and bolt
When I put my hands in your pockets.

Returning to Form

Elizabeth Chadwick Pywell

In Oystermouth the dead are rising unnoticed, advertised
woodland burials rejected by the rich earth. Dull,
heavy worms mouthing shards of thoracic vertebrae
spit dirt, hawk up tasteless DNA as they shuffle through the wild
daffodils promised to the mourners, stare dolefully at
primroses, avoid being crushed by the undertaker's boots.
Below the early Spring buds - so cheerful on the brochure -
fingernails scabble roots, feel yellow sap peel past eponychium
and into the blood, get it churning. *You can juice petals,*
my grandmother said, and now she is pressing roots
into compost between metacarpals, palming them furiously,
crushing new life for herself. The ground stirs.
You can buy this soil, she told me once, and stared at it.
I imagine her reaching for the sunshine now, waiting for
my hand to hold hers. She used to keep old margarine pots,
store garden treasures in them: robin eggs, conkers,
mouse skeletons. Rigid tissue, bone. *You have to*
get it before decomposition. You can recycle anything, she said.

Doctor, Doctor Joke

Grace Carman

The doctor said you should try badminton
I say oh, should I?
The doctor said yes, it's good for you
I say oh, well maybe
The doctor said you should pay for therapy if the wait list is too long
I say I'm not sure I can
The doctor said well, you must
I say I think I'll just wait
The doctor said you know, you must put the effort in
I say it's hard to, I'm depressed
The doctor said audible sigh I will print off some affordable therapy options
I say thank you
The doctor said maybe walking if you don't like badminton
I say I walked here today
The doctor said more than that
I say I walk everywhere, I don't drive
The doctor said oh passes me a yellow sheet well keep your chin up
I say okay I stand up bye

Small Joys

Izzy Radford

The small joys of my life have mostly been:

- hiding in things I have seen before

bubble wrap yourself in films

you once decided were your favourites.

- food

to my gain or detriment but perhaps because

we can live to eat not eat to live

and there are many times when having your cake and eating it will serve you well.

- hoops

may I say if you put a hoop in your ear you are more ok than you think.

- cake mixture

- hugs

- writing

remembering you can write is almost as shocking as remembering you can read

- reading

- other people's Instagrams

as calming as a sticky asmr to some,

other people's lives are a treat in their entirely curated selves, to me.

- a nonsensical show about aliens

- an oscar acceptance speech

I weep exclaiming, 'how amazing, they're the underdog!'

when really it is Leonardo Dicaprio and he is worth around 260 million.

I am obsessed with being an underdog when everything about me is an overcat.

- music, dancing, the idea I might one day use eye cream, salt lamps, coffee

- the concrete around me

(concrete being the people I love)

mere acquaintances unknowingly bound together as my inner sanctum.

There is wild power in bringing all your people together in your head but they

don't know you have done it and they do it to all their people too.

The Comeback

Izzy Radford

mark the date!
red lip and pre-ordered cab
invite reads,

Dear (insert name of someone I was at school with),

I am formally inviting you to my comeback.

Perhaps you were not aware I ever went away.

No matter,

I am making a comeback.

Most of you are graduating,

never fear, patronising anecdotes about

why I am most likely better than you

or

How the 'real world' is tougher than you might expect sweetheart

will be served alongside kettle crisps.

You may have mistaken my low profile for failure,

Let me assure you I have never failed.

What am I coming back from then?

..

This is an invitation not a debate. Please.

This entitles you to one free glass and nibbles,

Any attempt to vere conversation to my 'weaknesses'

see

-dating life

-wild side

-thighs

Will be directed to instead

a detailed discussion of my CV and yes I am offering workshops.

I do hope you can come.

Poached

JP Seabright

we have one
egg left (correction) she has one
egg left (a question) what do we do?
(my reaction) boil, poach or fry? (an infraction)
she does not laugh - I take her hand (she's crying)
eye liner streaks (we're trying) one hundred weeks
(hope dying) it boils down to this: love smiling
late in our midday sky where the sun has begun
its descent - too late, too long, to love, and yet
we've only just met, and yet to love, too
late, too long to beget - the yolk has
already started to set

quincunx

JP Seabright

i watched
your face
dissolve
into drops of
rain

pain etched
in every
crevice
in every
corner

the days have
broken us
the days and
endless
nights

i bear my arms
to the sky
blackened barren
begging to be
taken

the days grow
longer
lighter
this is not a
blessing

Little stones

Naomi Alder

You'd volunteer to make tea in case you'd see me. For nine months, I averted my gaze.

Who knows? Who have you told?

When we moved in together, you'd often make gingerbread. The flat smelled like Christmas.

The man who delivered our sofa asked, are you sisters?

You fitted in with my friends. I was sure they liked you more than they liked me.

Your friend said I should dress 'more gay'.

At our wedding, we showed our guests how strong and how gentle love can be.

The bar staff wondered who the groom was.

We met new people when we moved away. It meant coming out again every day.

My colleague asked if I was comfortable calling you my wife.

We wanted a baby, like many other couples. But unlike many other couples, you needed surgery first.

An old lady on the ward watched me wait for you all day. Are you sisters?

After two long years, you delivered the gift of a beautiful boy. I hadn't known what it meant to be scared.

The maternity assistant changed the bloody sheets. Are you sisters?

happening

Nathan Evans

at night
my ears grow
 roots through
 mattress
 bedposts
 floors
 foundations
hear 'vermin'
 whispering
 it's going
 to happen
 it is

trees talk

Nathan Evans

together
coppices gossip
with soiled subtext
how is your Juniper?
she getting on over there?
taproot into The Global Fungal News
hear what they're doing down the Amazon?
time to stop taking in carbon
that'll show them
men

all the broken hearts

Olivia Toh



Appendix: Once Removed

Rick Dove

gutted by a katana

i once heard it said
infighting in poetry is like two drunks fighting over a telephone box

and in recovery as my fleshed-out surgeon discusses proudly
how skill *can make most traumas imperceptible over time*
if the stitches are just right invisible to the eye
to all but the brightest in the land
how *a practiced hand* *can be redemption*
there editorial spin in the evidence he is presenting
my photographer's mind sees its beauty
my anthropologists' eye knows why
as the small boy in me defiantly points his finger
recognising hubris by its signs

And once upon an anaesthetic
i am recounting backwards a story
in sigh metered high-pitched frequencies
bouncing off pristine surfaces of hospitality
finding excruciating resonance
in their mustering
in a cliché crowded neon hallway
it is the morning before my surgery
and a testimony has threaded me
tautly into resuscitated recitation
to a firebrand from Galway
full of notions
she patiently abides by *nil by mouth*
takes observations as she humours me
gutted by a katana

she repeats
it is the morning of my surgery

for i once met a man
who had several hundred sutures
in a torso patina
all over the use of a telephone box
he couldn't wait his turn
nor the ninja neither
as their addicts' logic rendering queues moot
whetted reds like palate blades
amuse bouche with a snicker snack
the tale of these skin caught train tracks
left me with no doubts
a photographer's eye had shuttered this in preservation
an anthropologist's mind had unpicked its roots
to cause and after effect bifurcations
confections to train the senses
to be recalled
whenever waiting to be fed

as Sensei Kerouac once said
Don't use the phone. People are never ready to answer it. Use poetry

Years later
dreams of it all are still putting me to sleep
because for some of us happily ever after
is having anyone answer
even if that means being *gutted by a katana*

Traditions in the Hiss of Analogue

Rick Dove

Gathering dust, a quintessence is this tome.
Reason enough, to turn pages into dreams
of infinite, quantum universes foretold,
Where the weight of us, all our future selves, behold

Angels spiral, groove on a pinhead as singing valleys,
gathering dust: A quintessence. Is this tome
evermore realistic, in scratch, and groan,
Liminal in ethereal, in its frequency
of infinite, quantum universes foretold,
Now, it's rendered flesh, in dashiki and cast bones?
Ghosts written into the code, inside the machine

Gathering. Dust; a quintessence is. This tome
record, playing long dead voices, these skipping stones,
In the still of time, making ripples, scaled symmetry
of infinite, quantum universes foretold,
Tomorrow, they say, Dad will give you stories to hold.

Ever was it so, that we kept our history,
Gathering dust, a quintessence is this tome
of infinite, quantum universes foretold.

*"No-one ever wants the job, you see, not really,
It ties you into dreams, with a half-lived life,"*
Grandma Evelyn warned, as she passed it onto me,
"Here where all things are possible, in space between -

It is vital, that you remember, you carry light,"
No-one ever wants the job, you see, not really,
Spirits falling to Empire so much of this scene,

"It is hard to not to lose yourself entirely,"

Grandma Evelyn warned, as she passed it onto me,
Here, in the spaces between, in the margins, we breathe,
To bear our standards, means many hills on which to die,

"No-one ever wants the job, you see, not really,"

Infinite, quantum universes you carry,
Gathering dust, to coalesce the very stuff of life,
Grandma Evelyn warned, as she passed it onto me
Living this role takes sacrifice, and humility,
It is *her* voice, I still hear in the white noise, not mine,
"No-one ever wants the job, you see, not really,"
Grandma Evelyn warned, as she passed

Advice for Grindr users

Simon Maddrell

Spread with vanilla offerings
Crave wide open pods
Filled with sweet seed
Delicious tongued lips.
Be careful what you wipe
Yestergay all over again.
Avoid the cheap John
Beware the tightwad
They'll turn up phoney
Artificially flavoured otter
Milked beaver anal glands
Sacs brown and sticky
The reward for munching
Barks and leaves.

Oranges

Trini Decombe

O'Hara

is not a painter

I'm

not a painter - I could be

I could be

Neruda - Matta

Matta - Neruda

words oil

I paint words

I write pictures

I'm not a painter

I could be

but

I'm not.

passed out

Trini Decombe

he
 kneels down
 the bed

 bended legs
 crossed arms
head
 falling
down

 'no' he answers
and

 'no' again

 his air

twists
into big cat

 'no' he says
 and
blonde ball
falls

 'no' he answers

grips my hand

'no' he mumbles
lies down

'no'

no answer.

VOICES
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Prose

I Love Paris

Alice Montes

“You live here now.”

The words materialise in my head from time to time. Much like: “Look what you’ve done”, it can mean either an acknowledgment of achievement, or a reprimand.

I’m walking home from the station, up the gradual incline of cobblestone streets, past the cheery array of African hairdressers and fruit shops. The ‘young’ part of my neighbourhood consists of an overfilled antique store and a hole-in-the-wall bar with cushions on wooden crates for seating. Each time I pass it, I scan it for women who might remind me of myself, I superimpose myself onto them and imagine myself with their/my friends, smoking and making them laugh.

To reach my street the road becomes a little steeper, and with loaded shopping bags cutting into both shoulders I always reach the door breathless. In the summer this street is a thoroughfare for red-faced tourists making the shuffling uphill pilgrimage to the nearby Sacre Coeur Basilica. I feel either resentful or envious watching them. Their itineraries, their expectations, the cheerful observations they must make to their travel companions.

The block of apartments I live in blends seamlessly into the next, another white rendered façade with decorative iron balcony railings. I don’t have a pretty little balcony; my apartment is at the back of the block, through two low-ceilinged walkways and up a weathered flight of

tilled steps.

The apartment is one room, ten metres squared or so, I guess. When you sit on the futon, you can easily reach the kitchenette without straining. There’s just enough room for a foldable storage rack, in which I keep my neatly folded work clothes and spare towel. The most valuable feature is the small toilet and shower alcove. The other rear apartments have no such luxury, the residents of which are forced to use a communal bathroom. I discovered this an unfortunate way: the shared toilet is directly next door to my apartment, and the walls are thin.

The worst aspect of the apartment is the mould. One whole wall of the room is grey green and sodden, the layers are separating like cardboard. My landlord assures me she’s in the process of having it fixed, at which time my rent will increase. In the mean time I’m provided with a tiny plastic dehumidifier whose effectiveness I question but which I let rattle and splutter reassuringly through the night.

I’d found the apartment via an advert on Craigslist, after having discovered that even French Parisians struggle to find apartments in Paris without the appropriate documents. My landlord Mandy is not unlike me: she’s slightly older, maybe in her early 30’s, she’s smiling and British and her cheery assurance that she herself had previously occupied the apartment convinces me that all this is normal, doable, Parisian. I will be more like

Mandy, I decide.

I don't ask questions about the mouldy wall; I'm so relieved to have this place, this semblance of security, this small success. I feel like a teenager that's just left home; I find the perfect place to position my new kitchen utensils, I buy bright and cheap cushions to display on the sofa.

There are other English-speaking inhabitants of my block, I stand still and strain to hear the drifts of their conversations from across the courtyard as if they are exotic birds that the slightest movement will frighten away. They rent a large ground floor space and make a lot of happy noise. On a warm day I leave my one window open and they're playing music I actually know, a laconic American band I half-liked in my teens. I position my cushions so that I can lie back and protrude my feet from the window, and feel a buzz of quiet joy.

The other apartments around me are occupied by groups of males of varying ages and ethnicities. The neighbours directly next to me work until late afternoon, then come home and talk animatedly until just after the sun goes down, when I assume they go to bed. They never sound aggravated, laugh a lot, and sometimes they sing.

I work in the suburbs. The morning commute on the *Metro* starts as an unhappy grim press but after we've passed the central stations I usually get the small pleasure of a seat to myself, so I can sit there in my cheap, neat clothes and wring my hands, my brain fuddled with accumulating grey anxious thoughts.

I'm not good at my job, so I don't enjoy it. It's basic call centre work: I have to call businesses in the UK that have purchased a mail-sorting machine, and I ascertain how satisfied they are with their purchase. The problem is that the people I speak to have either no recollection of owning the machine, or have no interest in discussing it. Also, the questionnaire is embarrassingly long. The trick (which I discover from eavesdropping on my colleagues) is to charm the call-taker into staying on the line. I soon learn that I am not charming, I am

apologetic, and this is not an effective technique.

The other dozen or so people in the call centre are predominantly Spanish and are all male. They perplex me by seeming to almost enjoy their time spent in the shabby office building, lolling by the front doors and smoking a lot. The only one who bothers to speak to me is a Jamaican-born Brit, who stares at me provocatively when I'm making a call or shows me boring music videos on his smart phone. He is too handsome and has a gold tooth, and I wonder to myself how much it cost, and if he paid for it with money he earned at the call centre.

I try my best to draw the time out by procrastinating between making those hated calls. I hang up the phone slowly, laboriously click to the next screen, I check the time again. Our pace is monitored and my boss has warned me but the warnings only make me even more dour and still no better at the calls. My time here is spent with a mingled sense of panic and expectant doom. It took me more than fifty unsuccessful applications to find a job, this job.

If I'm feeling too shy to go to the fruit sellers, I buy my dinner at *Franprix*, the local mini market. My options there are limited but as my apartment kitchen only has one hot plate, my cooking efforts have been minimal. Anyway, I love French supermarket fare. I like the cold meats, and sliced cheese in flat plastic packets, and I can fill my stomach adequately for fewer than five euros. Alcohol is for sale in French supermarkets alongside milk and bottled water, like an every day necessity. You can buy a six-pack of bland beer for the price of a single beer back home in Australia; it feels like a small mercy.

Back at home, my neighbours have been watching television, and then they quieten for the evening. I might be drunk from half emptying my bottle of wine but I can't tell because I've got nobody to talk to, to test it out on. I don't have a television, I usually use my ancient complaining laptop to watch videos or look for jobs, or to carefully estimate my salary and do a precarious budget. Tonight though I'm just standing

in the middle of the room under the single light bulb, having conversations in my head.

The wine and humidity have drawn me outside. Paris is good for walking even in the evening; the whiteness of everything seems to make it perpetually lit. But I'm lost in thought and I've inadvertently wandered to Barbes, which I normally avoid due to the gauntlet of perfume and watch sellers. At this hour they've given up their peddling but the men still line the street and they edge into my path as I pass. I desperately hope I appear confident and Parisian and that none of them persist in hassling me, but I'm not sure what to do with their eye contact. Then it's fine, I see a group of African ladies bouncing their babies in front of the discount store, *Tati* and the sight of them reassures me. Still, I feel vaguely defeated now.

When I'm hammering in the code to my apartment door I'm flushed, my cheeks are plump red from the wine and exertion. I'm stumbling slightly through the dark walkway when I hear a heavy *thunk* behind me in the doorway and a voice echoes out:

"Hallo!"

A man has wedged his foot in the door. He's dark-haired, very Gallic, guesses immediately that I'm an English speaker.

"I live here," he strangely tells me, which is not true.

"Okay," I reply.

I let him ask me my name and where I'm from and again I'm vaguely offended that people instantly assume I'm not French, and that my nationality is so invariably a source of the same condescending enthusiasm. Somehow though, I'm then walking back through the front door and into unfamiliar back streets to the "very good bar" he knows nearby. I don't even have the energy to maintain the broken conversation but he works very hard to keep me walking next to him. After walking for five minutes he kisses me in the semi-darkness and

I allow it, as I can't find a strong enough reason to refuse.

When we reach the sad bar I suspect he's chosen it at random, it's like any other in Paris: tiles and wooden chairs, faded beer posters, solitary Tunisian bartender.

I am the only female but none of the occupants look at me. With his hand on my knee, my new friend tells me that his brother has an apartment that I can stay in in the Marais, very big, very nice, no problem. He'll arrange it for me, no problem, what's my phone number, no problem at all. I'm laughing, but he seems to find it endearing.

After this, the only thing my companion can think to talk about is my blonde hair and blue eyes. I drink the cloudy white *pastis* that he orders for me and hope it's improved the smell of my breath, but actually I don't care. Suddenly, I can't stand his hand, I want to go home but I can't leave without him, as I didn't memorise the walk here. It takes a long time to convince him that I want to leave, I *have* to leave, it's been nice but I'm *tired*, and eventually he begrudgingly walks me home. I have to manoeuvre myself into the doorway before him to block him from coming in the front door with me.

The next day at work an icon pops up on my out-dated computer screen, which means I have to visit my supervisors office, and that I am very deservedly fired. She gives me a few job-seeking suggestions (all of which I'd already exhausted long ago), I say goodbye to no one and walk to the *Metro* in the white Paris sunshine. On impulse, I disembark at Rue de Rivoli, walk past the polished marble designer stores and hotel entrances, past the *clochards* asleep on the large vents that draw hot or cool air up from the underground *Metro* tunnels depending on the season. Across the street and through the Jardin des Tuileries, I savour the crunch of wet white gravel under my feet. I sit beside a group of Chinese girls who are taking turns photographing each other. All three of them wear cartoonish thick boots that resemble horses hooves, and there are huge brand names emblazoned on everything. There's a Spanish family too, kids playing on the benches, probably

straight out of a visit to the Louvre. I LOVE PARIS, say
the tote bags and key rings.

There's a *Franprix* on the corner, I buy a packet of ham,
a six-pack of Stella Artois beer and a bottle of red wine.

Terminal

Anita Goveas

It's the button that makes her do it, Nandita decides afterwards. She recognised the purple shiny oval, like one of the ridiculous pills she's been taking for her ridiculous headaches, a shape she can't help but touch. Now her pixelated hands hover somewhere around her invisible lap, and she waits for her mother to find her. It's familiar and bewildering, like falling from a height into your childhood bed.

It's her first time in her mother's new office, the first time since Mother got her internet-famous Genius grant to develop her AI speech tests. Nandita had expected to see how the money had been spent; banks of screens and hard drives, lots of wires, handy wipe-clean surfaces. Not the almost empty space and peppermint coloured walls, the hanging basket of blue hydrangeas, the faint smell of chalk, the soft sage carpet. The roll-top desk in the far corner looked like the one in her mother's study, that she piled dog-eared books on, before she switched to hand-held, voice-activated screens. On the desk in this unexpectedly delicate room there was a single screen, and under the screen was the button. Nandita lifts her hand to rub at the mass of tension at the nape of her neck that she's been carrying for a while. She feels her nerves spark, her tendons tingle, but there's no muscle or skin to unknot.

They've been spending more time together than she could ever remember, usually in her mother's study. Not that her memory was solid any more, she woke up crying three days ago because she thought she'd lost an

earring nestled safely in her shell-covered jewellery box. Ruby teardrops, a gift from her father for her 16th birthday, the last one they'd shared. In her childhood, if the study door was closed her father and Nandita tiptoed round the house, communicated in exaggerated gestures, bowing to each other if they were in the same room, wiggling their fingers if they were thirsty. She missed how he'd turned their mother's ability to shut them out part of a game. Helping her mother with the questionnaires for the computer model, if a breeze ruffled the papers or the desk creaked, and Nandita would look up to a father-free void and her mother staring at her, finger tapping at her lips.

Her mother stares at her now, rubbing at the tip of her nose the way she always does when there's something to fix, stares into the void where Nandita is somehow existing. Nandita waits for her to diagnose the problem of the empty room, to start the search for her disappeared daughter. She strides forward instead, as if she's going to walk straight into the computer, and a moment later the clear screen she's been peering out of fizzes with particles. Light streams through her. It feels like she's bathing in champagne until the fizzing takes her breath.

When her father died, she was at school. In her GCSE history exam, her lungs hurt, as if someone was blasting them from the inside. A panic attack, she'd thought, the pressure of trying to achieve ten A stars become solid. Her father slept on the emerald green

sofa when she got home, pink-cheeked but clammy. Her mother stopped her screaming with a look, let her ride with them in the ambulance. Walking pneumonia, they said, that's why he'd been so tired, why his bows had become shallow. Nandita hid the last peppermint stick from the packet tucked under him on the sofa in her shell-covered jewellery box. It softened slightly in its plastic wrapper, lost its shine, then disappeared.

She'd almost said no when her mother asked to test the questionnaires, to be the control. I prefer talking to people, Nandita had said, neither of them mentioning she'd not spoken to anyone else for nine days. They'd barely been speaking since Nandita quit her job as a speech and language therapist. The timing of the request seemed dubious, when Nandita spent the blue light hours of the morning dwelling in the happier memories of cyber space, when motivation to ever take off her slippers was draining, when anything she tried to knit just unravelled. But her mother had never asked her for help before. They never asked anything of each other, their family functioned better without unnecessary discussion. Nandita had always held on to her questions. Without words stretching between them, they'd found other ways.

Her father taught her to knit when she was ten years old, and he spent a whole day tucked up on their emerald green sofa. It was after he'd coughed up blood for the first time, but she pieced that together afterwards. They'd worked with a huge ball of tobacco-scented beige wool, he showed her how the small stitches built up the pattern, and they ate their way through a whole bag of red and white striped peppermint sticks as they worked together to make a scarf for her mother, who didn't open the door.

The fizzing lessens, and there's no pressure on her body, inside or out. The feeling of air being pulled out of her was the memory of breathing, like something heavy dragging through water. The ache at the back of her neck has faded. Her mother inputs words from her hand-held screen, into this rectangular receptacle where some coded version of Nandita dwells. Test subject one,

questionnaire four. Nandita tries to focus on how she could disrupt the words strutting across her vision, to get a message across, to find a way to make her mother notice. The way they'd found to communicate through the puzzles her mother made.

The first time her mother created a puzzle for Nandita felt like eating biriyani on a week day. Word searches, transposition ciphers, acrostics. They'd use computer language or vocabulary from Nandita's physics homework, and she would revelled their overlapping words. Sometimes they'd be random words, ruby, peppermint, stitches, and her mother would watch her complete them, tapping her finger against her lips.

Helping the neighbour's son when she was seventeen led her to speech therapy. They'd struggle with his Year 8 Maths homework, her ignoring the way he usually slumped in his chair and grunted in response to her questions until the day she realised that he was embarrassed that he stammered. She'd been softer with him then, waited for him to finish his sentences, didn't thrust her own words at him, and revelled when he sat up straighter and argued with her about quadratic equations. He had solution-focused brief therapy, she hadn't known before then you could help people find their words.

Computing journals and websites had seethed with the projec. 'Solution promised to the plague of brain tumours devastating people across the UK'. As people's dependence on electronic devices had increased, so had the articles about the problems. Lack of social skills, lack of sleep, lack of attention. Tumours behind the ears and the eyes appeared, usually terminal. People smashed their voice activated Sirens and Alarums, sent them back in boxes or padded envelopes. A company that made watches you shopped with by scanning barcodes sponsored the prize, her mother developed the experiment and now had to deliver to 8 billion people.

She's not used to her mother needing help. The study had been a mythical place to her, Ayodhya or Narnia. When her mother retreated, she'd leave half-finished

crosswords for Nandita to fill or words searches torn from bumper books of puzzles. Sometimes, she'd expected hidden messages, secret clues but it seemed her mother only wanted her to find the answers. Nandita sprawled in a tickling draft, where the sash window had warped and didn't close properly. The leather of her seat was cracked along the edges, her mother sat upright cross-legged on the floor, threw words at her like spears for Nandita to respond to. Flow/ebb. Steady/volatile. Error/intention. Her mother's focus was always sharp, like stabbing airholes in plastic with knitting needles.

Today, Nandita expected to test the questions on someone, now she's successfully been the control. Someone she could soothe, who struggled with their words. Someone her mother might push the wrong way, might cause to affect the results. A mass of people had come forward to be involved in the project, some eager to diagnose their own symptoms, sometimes a friend or family member recommended they investigate a change in their memory or vision and they weren't ready to know. Headaches could be the wrong glasses prescriptions, difficulty with impulse control could be lack of sleep, memory problems could be a sign of a hectic lifestyle. She'd waited as long as she could, in the quiet room by herself, but the carpet was soft and the walls looked like peppermints, and then there was the button.

Her mother still swipes at the keyboard, letters still form on the screen. Flow/ebb. Steady/volatile. Error/intention. Like the answers from Nandita's evaluation. Her mother's face is unfurrowed, no sign of concern that her daughter who hasn't left the house for three weeks isn't where she's supposed to be. The letters at the top of the screen assemble into the information about the test subject: Subject NA, early stages frontal lobe tumour. Her mother must have started the trials on people without her help after all.

Whyever her mother had involved her; it had partly worked. Nandita remembered how much she'd loved words, the thrill she got when when someone thanked her for her knowledge. Now her world had narrowed

itself to a screen, a motherboard and a network, she wanted to leave it, get back to helping people. She could try effecting her environment again. Her mother knew the words Nandita liked to use, the way she put words together. If she could send a message through these words she's been given, her mother might be the only one who could recognise it.

More words appear. Her mother scrolls up, adding to a previous entry. Female, age 28. No significant history of illness. Her mother chose a mirror of Nandita for the first investigation. Maybe that means something, maybe it doesn't. She needs to shift from her usual pattern of trying to decipher everything her mother does, hoping for hidden information. She doesn't know how she was sucked into this place, she doesn't know how to get out but the first step must be to make someone else aware she's slipped into data and code. Can she transform these lines of type into some kind of alert, some kind of warning?

Her father taught her to knit when she was five years old, on a bristly day when the wind flowed like water. She learnt to wind yarn and pull back, curled up on the emerald green shabby velvet sofa, her feet tucked under her father's tobacco-scented beige cashmere jumper. A peppermint reward if she didn't drop a stitch. She finished three loopy tufted rows of red and white stitches that day.

She blows through imaginary, digitized lips at the letters. Her body still exists somehow, her mind feels sharper than it has for days. It's waves of particles she's sending, not puffs of air, but letters slowly shuffle. bEb/lFow. rrEor/ntentl. The person her mother has chosen to be first has reacted so much like Nandita she stops to watch the letters stream. Steady/volatile. Knit/pattern. Peppermint/father. Not reacted like Nandita, Nandita's answers, responses to a test she wasn't aware she was taking. Test Subject NA, early stages frontal lobe tumour.

She expects to be flooded with emotions. Confusion. Betrayal. Hopelessness. Her data and code write instead

a programme to process it all, to marshal her functions and execute a plan. Information surges through her now, she's in the pale, soft room watching her mother's unfurrowed face, and at any moment within herself that she chooses. Unrestrained by space, she can funnel time.

The words stream on, she steepers herself in them. Pattern/destroy. Weave/sea. Create/box. Words dripped away from her, and only her mother had noticed. And when she could have shown this to Nandita, to a doctor, to anyone, she'd captured them here for the experiment. Her mother leaves, the sky darkens, Nandita reads on. Her mother will return.

When her father died, she'd trudged home after her GCSE history exam, feeling like her lungs would burst. She'd found her father asleep curled up on their emerald green sofa, couldn't wake him up. She'd thumped on the study door until pink spread under the skin of her knuckles. The door never opened. Nandita went to the neighbour's house, they phoned an ambulance, she held her father's hand all the way in, feeling the life ebb and flow. She'd always sat knees tucked up on the floor after that, until one day the sofa disappeared.

Her mother slides back into the pale, soft room where Nandita no longer exists and turns on the terminal where she does. There are other people with her this time, but their just observers. Nandita's words cascade back onto the screen. Ebb/flow. Weave/sea. Create/box.

She smoothly switches the letters, erases the evidence of her failing brain. Weave/pattern. Create/destroy. She revels in the way her mother's brow furrows, how she rubs her nose. There's no evidence her tests function, that they detect anything. The other people fade away. Nandita lets different words play on the screen, ruby, peppermint, stitches, for long enough for recognition to surge over her mother's face, before she lets the pixels dissolve.

The terminal stays in the corner, no more tests are uploaded. When other people type reports, Nandita

savours the fizzing of the words, relishes the moments when she nudges a different thought, polishes a hanging syntax. Her mother appears every day, Nandita turns herself off, the blank screen reflecting her mother's unpenciled eyebrows, her mismatched earrings. Until, eventually, she fades from view.

Ten Seconds

Arundhati Rakshit

“Ten seconds,” they had said. When they threw me across these railway tracks in a heap. Like a lump of flesh and bones.

Ten seconds.

Bizarre, isn't it?

Before this I had never had to think of life in terms of seconds but right now, well, that is all I have. Ten bloody seconds.

My last chance at life.

Or death.

Blood smears on iron tracks. Never before have I seen these tracks so closely, in such intricate detail. I can see a firefly hovering above the grassy patches between them and feel the cold brutal sting of iron melting into me. Surprisingly enough, I cannot feel the pain between my legs or the blood all over my body. All I can sense is the mournful sigh of the wind and the grotesque darkness gaining me over with the ticking of the seconds.

A twig snaps. Perhaps, someone is walking through the forests beyond the tracks. Maybe a fox, or a hyena. Hyena's laugh sounds hysterical and shockingly humane. I first heard that when I was a child of seven. I was sleeping with my grandparents at my maternal

home when it rose. The sound of the creature laughing, in crazy bouts. I was scared out of my senses. I had clutched at my granny's saree. That was when she told me what that was. Years later, I taught that to my siblings. Stories run down through ages, through time and space. Stories that make humans laugh and cry. Stories of triumph, of glory, of tears and of joy. Would my story ever reach anyone, I wonder. Would my life ever, make a story, after all? I wonder. Do losers ever make it to flow of civilisation? Are their stories ever told? I wonder.

The wind here feels like ice. Blood and ice. I wonder what it feels to be a fish in salted ice. Dead fish. They were, at one time, living sprawling creatures after all. Is it true that every flow of emotion, every memory, every dream, every sight, smell and sound that makes us, get erased in death? Erased off the face of earth?

The cold reminds me of the familiar warmth of my mother, when I used to snuggle next to her in my childhood. Childhood. Huh. That was before things turned topsy-turvy in the world. Long before we began to speak in languages alien to each other. Long before I grew up into a young progressive woman who threw away every value held dear by her conservative outdated mother. Long before, we could no more recognize each other and long before, we drifted apart in rage and discontent. Long before I met Ali.

The chirping of the crickets is growing in the depths

of the woods. Tap. Tap. Is that the sound of a stick, prodding over the ground? A thin line traced on a sandy village path. The old woman tottered along, with slow cautious steps. Wary. Afraid. I happened to walk behind her that afternoon on my way to the fair. I maintained a respectful distance from her though. Was it respect? Eons away from that tiny obscure moment in the hall of memory, now I doubt that. Perhaps it was more of fear or repulsion. Did it repulse me because it made me feel sad and scared? Because I dreaded that, one day, I might face the same fate? Tottering along a lonely road. Of course, I did not know then, that it was not only age and a walking stick that could make humans fragile and lonely. Yes. That had been my greatest fear. Loneliness. Being left out.

When was that precise moment, when the word 'lonely' struck me with all its truth and bitterness? Was that the moment when I had accidentally fallen into the swimming pool and found myself gulping water helplessly and groping for something frantically as I sunk deeper and deeper into the endless expanse of water? Was that the moment when I had lost my mother in an overcrowded fair and felt completely lost in the throng of people all around? Or was that when I stepped out of my car one evening on my journey to a friend's house and happened to look at the ocean of dark blue above me? Or was that when I saw the bloodied corpse of Ali lying at the bustling crossroad, his eyes still fixed at me with hope and reassurance? Was that the point when I lost all hope of being alive again?

Why does that name come back to me time and again? At a time when I don't want to remember him? At a time when I have punched checkmate on life? It doesn't make sense. Of course, what does, after all? Does it make sense that the memory of the one who had wanted me to live to the fullest, is now numbing all my senses and draining me of the will and strength to get up and move? He had always been the more mature and understanding out of the two of us. He used to laugh when I told him that. His eyes twinkled with mirth when he laughed. Oh my, those killer eyes! They spoke

more than his larynx ever could.

The first day I met him, he wore a vest and a dhoti. I could not help chortling when I saw him like that at Aniketda's house. He did not pay the least attention to my silly giggle and went on arguing cogently with a friend over some controversial economic issue. I wish I could remember exactly what made him laugh that day. I wish I could remember at least the flower that was on the table in that room. Maybe it was a rose. Or maybe, a lily, or a marigold. God! I wish I could recall.

God! Did I say 'God'? Oh my, I can't help laughing at the irony! Some things stay with us forever... like... like 'God'. Oh my, why am I laughing so hard? My tummy is aching, my body is shaking... are these tears? Damn! Am I crying or laughing? I can't remember Ali's voice! It's as if Ali is fading away slowly from my brain... No I don't want to lose whatever I have left of him. I can't... No No!

Did we lose, Ali? Are we fucking losers? Ali!

What's that strange smell? The smell of hard cold metal. The same metallic smell that surged in the air whenever grandfather strike the 'kartal' together, during our evening prayers, round the handsome idol of Radha-Krishna. The same smell that rose in the air when they struck Ali with the heavy metallic rod and I felt the pungent taste on my lips. The first time I had that taste on my lips when I was a child and mom, in her burst of fury, struck me on the back with her bare hand. I was eight then. I guess. Mom had strong rough hands.

Two seconds more.

"You have beautiful eyes" Ali used to say, "And a soul-piercing gaze."

Maybe I do. Yet I wished I had paid those eyes more attention when I had looked at the mirror the last time. I trusted him blindly. Maybe I still do. For I can still

feel the depth of my eyes boring into blankness ahead, as the wheels of the train roar noisily and bang against my eardrums even from far away.

That's the whistle. The last local train.

Hail Mary? Jai Shri Ram? Allah ho Akbar? What did they want to force him say when they ambushed us? I can't recall. I can't remember anything. I am getting all muddled up in my head, as if a wheel is whirring in me. A thousand sounds, colours, scenes and tastes are churning in me all at once. I can feel the heartbeats in my head. It is drumming on and on, throbbing with everything it has and urging me to run for my life. Am I scared? Am I dreading the gruesome feeling of crushing death? Lub-dub Lub-dub – it's throbbing faster and faster. I feel the impulse to run, run and run crazily, through the woods, through the cities and towns, through the field, run like I never did. Would Ali have survived if we could run faster? If I could make him run faster with me, run like nothing else ever mattered? Would he?

I don't know.

I want to feel what that felt like when they smacked his face and broke his nose, when they struck his head and spilled blood all over the dirty road. I want to know blood. Deeply. As deeply as Ali knew.

Between The Covers Lie Imprints On A Mattress

Daniel Marques

The first bed they had owned was a single bed.

They would climb into it and snuggle close, barely fitting from head to toe. You have to make do with what you've got, He'd always say, love doesn't have a measurement, dimensions, a recommendation for size. It was a compromise they were willing to make. She was new; He was interesting.

By the birth of their first child, they had understood they would have to invest in a new bed. It made no sense all three of them sharing. There had never been a problem to begin with. They would share the single. The child would have the crib where they would gently be rocked to sleep under a canopy of moonlight and giants who'd then lie down, embrace, and share kisses which sounded like chirping crickets.

When their child had grown, they bought another single bed – the child's very own bed for their very own room.

Their second child had soon arrived unexpectedly. They'd made a decision – a no brainer actually: they'd purchased a new bed. It was a double. She'd picked it out. He'd chosen the bed clothes. Their second child would get their old single in its very own room.

At night, when the children had lain down to sleep, they would hug and kiss and then get into bed. They had discussed it earlier:

"What side do you want?" He'd asked.

"Left," She'd said.

"I'll take the right," He'd affirmed.

Their third child had shared with them for a while.

Money was hard to come by and both worked full-time. Their first child had begun decorating their room with posters, pictures, vinyl covers and leaflets. A hi-fi purchased from a carboot sale would gently play the hits of Bowie. They had no idea who Ziggy Stardust was, or if there was life on Mars, but their children were happy and healthy.

He had worked nights and She had worked days. He would come home in the early hours of the morning, before dawn's first peek, quietly tiptoe into their bedroom, take off his overalls, and delicately clamber into bed. He would look at his wife. Their child slept often between them. He'd reach over his arm to embrace them, then reconsider, leaving them to rest undisturbed, and drift off to sleep himself.

Eventually, when their third child had grown, they had already known the procedure. She'd spoke to her second child in their bedroom. The second child had scoffed and pointed at their bed. The bed was too small,

besides it had sagged and splintered. The roaring tones of Iggy and The Stooges had shredded through the wall, ruffling the collage of blu-tacked photographs. Why would anyone want to be a dog? Who wants to be a passenger?

Later, when He had come home, his breath smelling of aniseed, She had told him:

“It has sagged. It’s splintered.”

“Then throw it out!” He’d grumbled.

And that is what they did.

By the time their fourth child was born, they were sleeping in a king-size bed.

It was the least they deserved, He had told her, especially considering his new job – better, more suitable hours, as well as larger pay. They had generated enough money. Why not spring out for a king-size? It was so luxurious, so spacious. She had still worked the same morning shift. Often, she’d opt for afternoons too.

However, by the time their fourth child had grown, their first had left. Their second, then being the eldest and biggest in the house, had demanded the first’s old room. It was larger. Plus, it had a bigger bed. And the third, eager to follow in the footsteps of their sibling, had vied for the second’s room. So, the second got the first’s, the fourth got the third’s, and the third got the second’s which they’d opted to decorate with ticket stubs, film reels, and black light posters.

Soon after, their second child had left.

At nights, before going to bed, She would ask midway up the stairs:

“Are you coming up to bed?”

“In a bit,” He would say bathed in the mystic blue of the television.

The night before their third child had left, He’d come home with his fourth from football practice. He’d tousled their hair and helped them take off their muddy boots. The child had ran upstairs to change. He had looked around the living room and kitchen, holding the plastic, gold painted trophy, but She wasn’t there. He’d fetched a carrier bag, shoved in the mud-caked boots, and followed upstairs, cradling the trophy. His fourth had done as usual and tossed the boots into a corner by a stack of CDs, placed the trophy on the shelf beside all the ribbons, framed certificates, and other trophies, then switched on the TV and Playstation, kicked back and loaded up his most recent save file.

“Who’s *that*?” He had asked.

“Eurgh, Daaad. It’s Lara Croft. Tomb Raider. God, you asked me this yesterday.”

The child had continued playing the game, eyes glued to the screen.

“I...” He’d paused. “Well done today.”

“Thanks.”

His fourth had then closed the door.

He’d crept into his room. She was asleep. He had fumbled with his jeans but luckily didn’t wake her. He’d walked round the bed and carefully got in on the right-hand side as he often would. He’d watched her. She’d been laid on her side, facing him, snoring, resting slightly near the middle. He’d smiled and stretched gently to kiss her forehead. Yet, her snoring had abated. Sleepily, she’d swallowed, sighed, and then rolled over to her side of the bed.

Why not? He’d thought. The luxury, the space.

Their fourth child had long since grown up and left. She had cleared the plates with her first child who had grown up a lot too.

His first's first had sat in the living room with him, their face coated in the white light of their phone as they tapped away with a scornful furrow on their brow and earbuds in. He had watched this, hearing the low, resonant buzz of her music as the TV played in the background. He'd caught a glimpse of her phone screen: Lou Reed's Greatest Hits. He had thought the same thing when his first child would play that man: what is a satellite of love? what was the 'last great American whale'?

His first's first had noticed him peeking. He'd felt guilty. His first's first had scowled, huffed, and turned away from him. His first was in the kitchen with her mother chatting away, piling dirty dishes into a sink, reminiscing, laughing.

Later that evening, his first's first had gave him a dispassionate, obligatory hug. His first had then squeezed him tight after.

"Easy now," He'd said. "I'm fragile."

They'd both laughed.

He had retaken his seat in front of the TV and watched the living room door as they all exited to the landing.

She'd followed both of them to the front door from the pantry. She'd palmed her first child's child a ten pound's note and winked. Her first child's child had smiled and hugged her. She'd then embraced her first. Her arms had wrapped around their back, eager to coil round and round. Her child would kiss her on the cheek and say goodbye as She had her mother.

They'd both walked along the drive to the car parked outside and got in as She had watched from the porch. It revved into life. Her child had rolled down the

window and waved as they drove off. She'd stretched her arm high, lifting her shrunken, hunched frame, as she'd waved back. Her eyes had followed the car past the neighbour's parked van, then all the other cars on the road, till it was out of sight. She'd sniffled, her eyes misted, and a single tear fell – its very own.

"You coming up?" He had called.

"Shortly," She'd replied.

She had gradually hobbled up the stairs, the same as each night now, gripped tight to the railing, each weary footfall landing gently on each step.

She'd exited the toilet in her nightdress – formal, covering, archaic. She'd shuffled forwards. Light had poured out of an open door as it always would.

From his room, He'd heard the door drag across the carpet and close shut. Bed springs had creaked, cloth had scraped against cotton. The faint sound of a click was heard. In his room, it had the space to reverberate. He'd lain in the centre of his king-size bed in the dark where his imprint had been. He had glanced over at the space beside him, then rolled over to the right-hand side, stretched his arm across the mattress and closed his eyes.

Wing

Flo Au

I.

Wing has made the decision. She strokes her feathers and grins.

The new flat, sparsely furnished, is more compact than the one with her deceased parents in the same old public housing estate, just a different building. Yes, a new beginning—indeed she has already lived here for almost two years though she is always stung by the feeling of freshness and strangeness, particularly when she opens her eyes in the morning, sitting up on the edge of her mattress. The only stench of familiarity perhaps is her and herself, and the old, dilapidated furniture, and their shadows patterned on the floorboards in the afternoon sun.

There is a tiny kitchen where a person can hardly turn, and a miniature bathroom with no designated shower place—the four tiles in front of the sink and next to the toilet bowl. The bedroom is the living room and vice versa—the sofa in the daytime would be unfolded to a single bed at night. Sparrows may be small but all vital organs are there. Had it not been her parents who she used to live with in a bigger unit, she wouldn't have had the priority to move to this smaller one after they passed away two and a half years ago with a rent only enough for a washroom-size private flat outside. She feels grateful and contented except...

The problem was how she could transport the shabby, half-broken furniture to the new flat. She instantly thought of her boyfriend, a would-be husband after some more months, he said. He did finally show up in the funeral together with her representing the host. She had been worried—he only met her parents once while they were still healthy, in fact more than 10 years ago, and what added her trepidation was she hadn't met his—but did let out a sigh of relief as he promised to help and appeared punctually, standing beside her to thank the relatives who came to mourn.

“Do you need help? When will Wai come to move the furniture?” Her cousins echoed her thought.

After the funeral, she had more confidence in him. “Don't worry I will figure it out with him. You two live far away from me. Plus, you are so busy. We can handle it,” she loved the word “we”.

During these ten years, her trust in him could be best described by those curves in the stock market.

“It was fine to quit your job if you feel pressurized. You need a rest. You can look after your parents more too. It's alright.” She was comforted and showed her smile over their dinner, a soy sauce chicken and scrambled eggs with shrimps, in a famous Chinese restaurant in Causeway Bay. She paid the bill.

“My parents are busy with their own schedules though they are retired. They have no interest in meeting any of my friends.” Her eyes dimmed and her smile froze on her face. Lapsing into silence, she vacantly watched him hover his chopsticks over Chinese crispy chicken pieces, select a chicken wing, dip it in the fermented red bean curd sauce and hastily tear the chicken’s meat with his teeth from its bone. He then bragged about how good the chicken tasted and agreed that the restaurant in Tsim Sha Tsui deserved a Michelin star. She spooned some button mushrooms coated with thick black bean garlic sauce into her mouth and chewed them sluggishly. They were bland. It was his turn to foot the bill.

“We may get married a few years later. Still we can have kids. Your parents need you now. Hold on. It’s nice to come out and talk over meals. I support you.” She beamed radiantly, “eat more veggies. Don’t eat meat that much.” She gingerly placed some choy sum on top of his bowl of rice. He nodded but chopsticked a drumstick from the plate of sand ginger chicken. “This is the signature dish here. It doesn’t disappoint me. No wonder even some stars come all the way to Yuen Long to try. We can come again,” he spoke with his mouth full of meat, spittle foaming at both corners of his mouth and some spraying like shower. She chortled at his excitement and ridiculous look. She paid the bill.

“I don’t have any friends in refurbishing business or moving furniture. Plus, I need to be present in several meetings these days. I love this dish. The chicken’s meat is so tender. They steamed it just right. With the ginger and spring onion sauce, it tastes divine. You may try my dish if you want. Your rice noodles in soup doesn’t look that yummy,” he chomped nosily after his eloquent speech. His first two lines of words lodging deep in her chest, she barely touched any dishes that night.

Shortly after her last parent’s funeral, perhaps a few months later, they started to go Dutch and ordered their own meals. Hers was always a bowl of rice noodles with some veggies in fish broth while he never forgot his chicken. She furrowed her brows as she felt nauseated while gazing at those chicken pieces neatly

placed on the plate, attempting to restore its appearance decorated with coriander and rose petals on the side. She thought of her pet chick—she begged her parents to keep when she was ten—and the days she spent with it sitting in the sofa, waiting for her parents to be back home from work while cupping its soft and fluffy body on her palms, watching its ink black eyes like marbles—shimmering with trust and innocence in the light—fasten on her. She felt as if she was not the only child.

II.

Wing has made the decision. Her parents would concur if they were here.

Inside the glass cabinet lies an array of knives, on top of which a string of promotional flags printed with crimson red words and numbers, “Big Sales” or “50% off”. Ignoring the rule of social distancing, customers including her surrounded the cabinet, listening to the salesman to introduce different knives fluently—the sweat and saliva of whom wet his mask—and enthusiastically try them out one by one on a range of food and ingredients. Apart from stainless steel cleaver and fruit knife, she doesn’t know there are indeed other unknown types of knives made of ceramic and titanium. What a professional weapon! She needs to find one with a sharp blade, light weight, and more importantly, its size could fit her handbag. Checking out the price tags, even 50% off, a fruit knife costs more than a few hundred dollars. Is he worth it? A voice inside offers her a determined “no”.

On the way back home, she strolls by a park to photograph a flock of pigeons pecking crusts and crumbs showered even on the slate gray asphalt; a few sparrows perching on some branches, avidly awaiting their dive after the pigeons to the pool of emerald green; further up in the azure blue canvas, an eagle drawing circles in its flight. There is still time. She has already prepared her outfit at home. A usual one. A mindless and careless person like him can’t find any clues. Though they dine out

twice a week—less frequently than before as he first explains it is due to social unrest and then Covid—in classy Chinese restaurants renowned for their poultry dishes, he hasn't realized that she has been shrinking lately. Maybe because of menopause, she guesses. Her period stopped several months ago and now she is barren. It may be normal for a fifty-year-old woman to become shorter and smaller. What is more eerie is not her size but clusters of mixed chestnut-brown and pearly white feathers growing on her body. This may be another symptom of menopause, she thinks. Such a casual thought strikes her. Yet, what is most baffling, even to herself, is she has developed a liking towards these feathers...

She grins. Resting on a bench, she is engrossed in the scene of birds. A lull settles in, summoning the soothing warm feeling of her pet chick in her hands. She instinctively caresses her feathers beneath her shirt around her tummy. She has always sought solace from watching birds since her parents had to stay at home with difficulty moving around and one of them even had problem in sitting up but wore diapers all day. When they took their afternoon naps—around 30-minute long after she blended food into puree and served them to eat, massaged and exercised their limbs and changed a diaper for her mum and so on and on, she sat near the windows, usually in time to catch a hawk or a crow soaring, flapping its wings in the air. She habitually browses information and photos of birds online. She wishes she could live next to Mai Po where she can watch ardeids, plovers, sandpipers and coots more closely.

III.

Wing has made the decision. It must be tonight.

In front of them place Chinese-style chicken casserole and braised phoenix claws in abalone sauce for him while for her, the usual rice noodles. He briskly picks a chicken claw, bites off its toes and joints, noisily sucks its skin and sauce and spits out bones with no meat attached. "Perfect!" Watching him, she frowns, a sickening sensation surging steadily from her stomach. She turns her gaze to other tables for distraction. Through the transparent plastic shields, she can still see other diners clearly—all of them are chatting vigorously while enjoying their meals. Some diners who have already put their masks back—obviously after their meals, they appeared to treasure their talk, not showing any signals to leave—are gesturing exuberantly and eyeing others exuberantly. Morosely, she glances back at him, whose ratty eyes dart across his food—scooping rice into his mouth, gulping down spoons of abalone sauce, chewing chicken parts and mumbling praises over the dishes in between through his gapped teeth with his spittle and food scraps—without offering her any attention. She puts down her chopsticks, excuses herself and clutches her handbag to leave the table.

It's time. She turns. Draw out the fruit knife she brought from home, conceal it with her handbag, rush to the back of him and stab and stab and stab, deep into his bones which are so hard that almost break her knife and cause her some trouble to pull it out and give another jab. She is amused by his petrified look as if he were choked by the chicken bones. He is indeed. He is sucking another phoenix claw. Probably, the bones slide down to his throat and muffle his cries. She wants to laugh. Blood gushing out from his wounds like a fountain, staining the tablecloth, splashing to her plain rice noodles and other dishes, and soaking his mask on the table. He slumps with a loud thud, which alerts other diners to flash pictures on the scene fanatically, applauding with screams...

She doesn't return. She hurls the blood-spotted knife and phone to the rubbish bin outside the restaurant. She is starving. She has some fruit salad at home

which she accidentally cut herself while making it this afternoon. She made it! She twitters in a thrill, winging and hopping her way.

Her cousins come with the police to force her apartment door after two week's loss of communication. No sooner have they knocked down the door than they shield their eyes from the bright light. Nobody is in the flat, merely shadows of furniture left. The windows are wide open, welcoming the air and sunlight to flood in. What catches their eyes is a solitary sandpiper glittering in gold roosting on the windowsill: she tilts her head languidly, squints at their pale faces lazily, elegantly comb her feathers with her beak, nimbly, gracefully flutters her wings, then flies straight to the sun before their awe-stricken faces...

Metamorphosis

Madeline McEwen

Due to the pandemic, I have yet to emerge from my cocoon. Everything is precisely the same, but at the same time, totally different, which is so unfair.

If I were alone, which I am not, I would stamp my feet, ball my fists, and shout expletives, but I won't because I might be mistaken for a Karen.

First up, it is only fair to list some of my many privileges: white, English speaking, cisgender female, old, and I've had time [and money] to listen to audiobooks on these subjects while I perform my chores.

Why, therefore, do I have anything at all to complain about?

Let me give you some background information and context.

Like many parents of a certain age, we—me and my spouse—should be enjoying empty nest syndrome. But, we're not because the birdies, not dissimilar to cuckoos, have migrated home. All three of them.

To be honest, I'm glad my daughter returned unwillingly from Canada, primarily because she is both female and smaller than me. Whereas her two younger brothers are much larger than me, and they're male. Therefore, if you divide the household on sex alone, we women are outnumbered. I'm pretty sure there are many households with similar inequities, but that's not

the reason I'm complaining.

No, the reason I'm complaining is because until recently, [note pandemic reference above] I was a stay-at-home mom.

How can I be a stay-at-home mom if they all left home, you ask?

Because I lied. The boys never left home or moved out. They've remained in situ for the duration. Moreover, even if the virus fairy god-mother waved her magic wand and coronavirus ended this afternoon, my sons still wouldn't run away to enjoy the freedoms of youth.

Let me explain. They are autistic. Does that help? Probably not. Perhaps an example might prove enlightening. Something current, like the pandemic. How has the pandemic affected them?

My sons, we'll call them A and B to maintain their anonymity, miss their friends. They both enjoy close relationships with a narrow but solid group of similarly minded people. They use a variety of communication methods to keep in touch, have virtual hang-outs, and maintain healthy, if somewhat loud, friendships.

The pandemic means they will never have to leave the house again. Practically, apart from the only virtual friendships issue, they fell asleep one day and woke up to the dawn of heaven on earth: no visits, no trips,

no holidays, and most important of all, no people. It is people, other people, the supposedly normal people, who make their lives unbearable. Without them, the normals, life is sweet.

The majority of social norms, appropriate attire, table manners, small talk, social greetings and interactions, have all been swept away. As a result, A and B could not be happier.

Technically, in the realm of Special Education, this is referred to as regression. Eventually, they will have to relearn all those emerging, fragile skills of independent living they mastered last year, such as using public transportation.

But if I take my blinkers off, I don't see regression from where I'm sitting.

I see two happily contented individuals experiencing far less stress, anxiety, and depression. They can be themselves all day, and all night, but I'm fighting against the flip-over into nocturnalism. [Nocturnalism is a neologism – a newly coined word or expression which given time may become commonplace.]

I've digressed again, but I've given you context.

Here's my real complaint.

They have their schedules: online classes, daily tasks otherwise known as "living skills," and functional routines known as "self-care," which include but are not limited to things like exiting your bed, washing, dressing, and fuel consumption. The latter often proves optional.

Oh, and one more contextual nugget may help. Most autistic people struggle with transitions. Are you familiar with transitions? If not, here is a primer definition: every time you stop doing one thing and start doing something else, that is a transition.

I'll let that settle for a moment.

Think about your average day. Can you guess how many transitions you make? I can't, and I've tried.

An example may help. How about cleaning your teeth? How many transitions? No, too complicated. Let's try something more straightforward and also relevant during a pandemic. Hand washing. How many steps? Close your eyes, mime the actions and give me a number.

What did you get? Five? Six? No, sorry about that, but you're wrong. Conservatively, there are twelve. If you don't believe me, look online in images. Type in PECS [Picture Exchange Communication System] and, "wash hands" and it is the first picture you see. What is not in those images is the knowledge that each step is also a transition, which means twelve-plus opportunities to get stuck on one step of the sequence because you can't transition to the next. And yes, our household's water consumption, [taps left on running tepid water] is higher than most.

Routines, doing the same things in the same way at the same time with no possibility of any deviations, creates a harmonious existence. Tiny increments of change and growth may be suggested or introduced but not without fair warning. Yes, you are right; repetition and boredom, from now until I'm pushing up the daisies, is the only secure route to independence.

But that's not my complaint either.

I'm complaining about the In-Home Support Services [IHSS] who provide my family with a counsellor to do the things I do with my sons for a specified number of hours a week. Having someone new in their lives is a bonus for me, obviously, but it also exposes them to another trusted adult.

Unfortunately, I was unable to locate this person. I had to choose him or her from a book the size of a telephone directory, contact them independently, conduct an interview, test their suitability, and then employ.

Such a feat became impossible with the arrival of the pandemic, although that's not their fault. In fact, IHSS reminded me of the solution which I had initially refused. IHSS would pay me to be their carer. [Carer is another neologism.]

Why shun the chance of paid employment? Because the higher goal is to introduce, encourage, and advance a new relationship with a different person, someone who is unknown, and to whom they are not related. That goal is the Golden Goose, if not the egg, and just as unobtainable.

Hence, I continue to do what I have always done, but now I am paid, or rather I will be paid in the future, when I find time to complete all the paperwork. Hooray for me.

I see you're still struggling to spot the complaint while I heap praise and thank you's upon the IHSS.

It is my change of status. Nearly a year ago, I used to be an unpaid stay-at-home mom. Now I am a paid, part-time employee. I am different, but I am the same. No one, including me, can see any discernible alteration. I have changed from egg, to caterpillar, to glorious moth, but I'm still encased in my cocoon. Nobody can see my metamorphosis into the fully formed being I have become.

That truth, my invisibility, mutated a couple of weeks ago with the arrival of an email and prompted this complaint. The email, ethereal words on a page, informed me that as the carer to my sons, I am now a designated essential worker. Who knew?

Somehow, reading this new fact, a fact about me of which I was previously unaware, caused my cocoon to crack. Since then, I've printed out that email, three copies. I shall frame one of them—no, not really.

But if you have any doubt about the psychological power of the written word, I'm here to say you'd better believe it. Is that a complaint? Yes, I insist that

you and everyone you know send a letter or email to someone. Inform and enlighten that person of a fact they may have forgotten about themselves. Identify the essential carers in your life and remind them of their indispensable status in your eyes. And if you don't comply with my request, then I'll have something else to complain about.

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Lost Pearls

Ola Mustapha

Unlike the foreigners I met in Japan who were trying to find themselves, I'd travelled six thousand miles from London to lose a bit of myself. This was the scar tissue left behind by Mama discovering a receipt in Baba's shirt pocket one Friday while he was hanging out at the mosque with his mates, leaving her to hang out the washing. Date: February 14. Diners: 2. Amount: £67.56 (incl. coupon @ 30%).

Two years of slamming doors, dishes crashing into the sink, my little brother wetting the bed and my little sister going round punching people at school. That was the most I could take before I started planning my escape. When I finished my degree in business studies — the drab suitor my parents had pushed me towards instead of my love-match of English literature — I did a TEFL course, and then I applied for a job teaching English in Japan.

'No daughter of mine is leaving home until the day she gets married!' said the meal-deal Casanova, clicking his *subha* beads on fast-forward. 'You'll stay here, madam, and sleep in your own bed. Don't think you're English just because you were born in this cesspit of a country! You want to move to the other side of the world and carry on like these English girls do, these cheap, easy women? Japan, she says! What's there for you in Japan?'

The floorboards upstairs were creaking. We both knew Mama was in bed with the covers over her head

and the kids were crouched by the staircase, listening. I looked at him just long enough to let the threat sink in.

'Go then,' he mumbled, for some reason pointing at the higgledy pile of umbrellas in the hall, as if he wanted me to transport myself to Japan Mary Poppins style. 'Do what you want and let's see how it ruins you!'

Two months later, I stood in a softly lit bar in a little town in the middle of nowhere called Nodagawa, talking baby Japanese to Yumiko, a woman I'd just met. She nodded encouragingly at every word that came out like a difficult bowel movement.

'First time wine drink me,' I said. 'Reddy wine no drink. Me make ...'

Cue jazz-hands, the new international symbol for 'drunk', and everything else in the abyss where words should've been. Now I knew how Mama felt each time she opened her mouth in English to be met with blank expressions. Even after twenty-five years in London, the words seemed to curdle on her tongue like rancid milk.

Putting me out of my misery, Yumiko switched to English: 'Yes,' she said. 'It's my first time to go to a wine-tasting event too. Red wine is very strong. Who did you come with?'

'Them,' I said, nodding at the beaming, clear-

complexioned white couple across the bar.

Like me, they were teachers in the neighbouring prefecture. A male and a female: Alex and Chris, Chris and Alex. Hard to remember who was who when they only ever called each other 'Heyyy'. They were Canadian. His and hers hiking boots, baggy lumberjack shirts. Married at the age of twenty-two. Christians of the kind born holding a tambourine. But never mind: they had a car and they were generous with their rides.

'Where did you learn such good English?' I said to Yumiko, wiping the sweat off my forehead. Even in September, I was a melting waxwork in Japan.

'In England.'

Sussex, some town I'd never heard of. We talked about homestay families and language school, cricket and warm beer, mists and mellow fruitfulness and all the other Englands I didn't know, apart from in the old programmes on ITV 3.

'Oh yeah,' I said, nodding until my head felt like it was about to roll off. 'Yes, that's right.'

Making up for yawning when she'd said, 'Who do you think is more handsome? Prince William or Prince Harry?'

#

Yumiko made her excuses and left. I found myself sitting in a row at the bar with the Canadians, who fixed me with the beatific smiles of those who haven't lost their religion. God, they smelt good: the kind of cleanliness that comes from a place soap and water can't reach.

Someone hit play on the sound system, and old-school trip-hop floated into the bar. 'I love this song!' I said. 'Roads ...'

'Yeah, by Tortoisehead, right?' said the male Canadian. He always sounded as if he was speaking to a classroom. I laughed, thinking he was joking, and then realised he was being serious. 'Portishead,' I said, but I must've mumbled because he said, projecting from the diaphragm, 'What was that?'

More wine arrived, hot this time. I drank it in three swigs.

'All year round,' said the male Canadian. 'Huh. Only in Japan.'

Massaged by the mulled wine and dreamy beats, my knots began to loosen. Normally, when foreigners said things like 'only in Japan', it made me want to say 'your culture is a freak-show to other people too.' It made me want to tell them that my parents could never understand why anyone would go camping, for example, because why would you choose to sleep in a tent unless you were a Bedouin or a refugee? That Mama had once asked me why English people had to be drunk to do something as natural as dancing (and that I'd nodded and smiled, unable to tell her that I drank alcohol too, and that I couldn't dance unless I was drunk either, because I was English in that way). I never did say those things, though: I didn't want to look like I was making a big deal out of being a different kind of gaijin, or to give anyone the hump by saying 'your culture' instead of 'our culture.'

'Don't you think that when you live abroad, you feel like you're always on holiday?' said the female Canadian, cupping her palm to her cheek as she turned to face me, pinpricks of light dancing on her honey-coloured hair. 'Because, in a way, nothing feels totally real?'

'Yes!' I said, distracted by a drop of wine glistening on the bar-top and by the fact that she'd said 'holiday' instead of 'vacation', as I would've expected from a North American. 'That's so true!'

I thought of the glittering sky in Tokyo the night I'd landed at Narita Airport; how it had left a vapour trail

across my heart in a way nothing real or permanent could ever do. If my parents hadn't realised they were on holiday when they'd arrived in England from Algeria, that was because they were travellers of a different sort: immigrants, not expats.

The female reached out for her glass, her arm grazing mine. 'Your skin's so soft!' I said, stroking it.

'Thank you, so is yours,' she said, touching me back lightly.

How long had it been since that, in any meaningful way? Months or was it decades. Sex in the toilet at the Pizza Express in Soho before I left for Japan, just before I went home for a final Ramadan breakfast at the house of horrors, running upstairs to brush my teeth before anyone could smell the food on my breath. Not with some random — with a guy I'd been seeing on and off for three years at university. Secretly, of course. 'One for the road!' I'd said, laughing breathlessly as we got dressed again, and then felt like a murderer when I saw he was crying.

Another foreigner came over and slid into the barstool on my right. A shortish, slight man with brown skin and tight curly hair. Older than me and the Canadians. We struck up a conversation in English as the Canadians looked on, exchanging coded glances that niggled in my peripheral vision. A real double-act. It made me want to be part of a double-act too. The man had an accent I knew, but I kept quiet about it. I wasn't sure yet that I wanted him to know that I knew.

'You want to go and sit over there?' he said, pointing at a red velvet sofa in the darkest corner of the bar. 'Mahmoud,' he said once we were squished together. He laughed at the dried wine stuck to my lips. 'Lipstick,' he said, trailing his fingers across my mouth for a second. Hands didn't linger on me in Japan. Right then, I wanted to grab someone's fleeting touch and pin it to me. Anyone's would do.

'Where are you from?' I said, taking the plunge.

'Morocco.'

'I knew it!'

Not just any old Moroccan: he was Moroccan Jewish. An Arab Jew, a Jewish Arab, a once normal oxymoron. An endangered species.

'*Sugoi!*' I said, like I'd heard Japanese people say about nothing much. Amazing.

'What's your name?' he said.

'Nesrine. Susu with my family — they're Algerian. Nessie in England. I don't know yet what I'll end up being over here.'

He smiled and put his arm round me. 'I'll tell you my Hebrew name,' he said. 'I'll say some things for you in Hebrew.'

His eyes were almost black, familiar and familial. Why didn't I know that Hebrew could sound like this, like a lovelier, more loving sibling of Arabic? That's how he spoke it to me anyway. 'Thirty-seven,' he said, when I asked. I was twenty-one.

'I've got another name too,' I said. 'My mum calls me *ya luli*'. My pearl.

'*Ya luli!*' he said, inhaling the words like a smoker who'd been waiting too long and breathing them back at me.

A key turned in a lock, and I was a child again, at my grandparents' flat in Algiers, enveloped by the smell of dark wood and jasmine and hot, sleepy afternoons. Listening to Mama and her sisters as they sat in the living room keeping the shutters closed to block out the heat, murmuring in the corner while geckos made kissing sounds from behind the grandfather clock that seemed to tick slower than any clock in England.

'... And I said to him, "Aren't you going to come and

see her in the hospital?” and he said, “I’m afraid she might die,” and I said, “Are you scared of death?”...

‘... He said he doesn’t want to ... what can I do?’

‘... Never mind, *hbibt*, it’s your fate, what can you do ...’

Why did they do it, this gloating, secretive gossiping in dark rooms? Why couldn’t they be like men, shouting in the open air, getting angry in broad daylight, saying what they really meant? I didn’t realise then that men can shout about things they don’t really mean, keeping the real things quiet and festering.

So close, the Moroccan man’s breath, it sounded like the sea in my ear.

‘I miss home,’ he said. Oh, so did I, so did I, in this bar in Nodagawa with this man from North Africa I missed home so much, England or Algeria or wherever it was, if it was.

‘Yo! Whatcha up to?’ The Canadian male slammed himself onto the sofa next to me, grinning, holding his hand out to the Moroccan man.

‘Haha, just chatting.’

Oh, go bash your tambourine somewhere else.

So where were we? Cigarettes and chewing gum, that combination that always did something to me. Fencing with tongues. His hand up here, my hand down there, both of us gasping at the contact. A flip in my stomach at the sound of his gasp.

‘I can feel your heart,’ he said in Arabic.

‘I don’t have a heart,’ I said in Year 7 French, being someone else. And then for no particular reason I said, pulling away, ‘Are you married?’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I have a wife and four children in

Morocco.’

‘Oh.’

A wife, eh? A wife and four children. Won’t somebody think of the children? Not me, I don’t wanna think about the little Kinder Surprises. Won’t somebody think of wifey? Yes yes, let him do the thinking, him with his cigarettes and mint in my mouth, the taste of home, the taste of something or other, the echo of his fingers on my skin, let him think of his wife and children. Pulling my arm next to his, stroking it with his other hand.

‘Same,’ he said, sorrowfully, as if the skin colour we shared was a blight on our lives.

Talk to me in Arabic, in Hebrew, in French, in Japanese, read me the story of your life and mine, and he did, and then in English he said, ‘Will you come with me to the car park?’

#

My arm round his waist, his hand on my arse, we lurched to the door, humidity hitting my lungs as it opened. A cicada orchestra swelled in my ears, a soundtrack to someone else’s life. Don’t ask what kind of car he had, medium-sized, dark.

‘Does this seat go back?’

‘Yes, push it like that.’

‘Have you got, have you got a ... you know?’

‘No, I don’t ...’ Arms spread in regret. ‘There’s a convenience store ...’

‘No it’s okay, don’t worry, I’ll sort it out later.’

Backwards in the passenger seat I drove, his arms

pinned back across the headrest like Christ on the cross, this father of four. Thin, sad face, off inside himself, not in me.

'Where are you?' I said in Arabic, but what I really meant was 'Who are you?'

All done? Untangle, unstick, good thing I was wearing a skirt, no tights. Went to kiss his belly, bumped my head on his elbow.

'Ouch!'

'Sorry sorry are you okay?'

'Yes yes, gotta go.'

Dropping or flinging the business card he'd given me on the floor as I hurried back to the Canadians, to the safety of their marriage, their religion, their baggy clothes and hiking boots.

And then we were in the car driving home. What was the name of that look in the Canadian male's eyes in the rear-view mirror, me crumpled in the back like dirty laundry, giving the world a view of my rear? Oh, it was called contempt wasn't it, or was it amusement?

'Total sleezeball ...,' I heard him say. 'Hitting on every woman in the bar ... the others all told him to get lost.'

The female whispered something: '... state of dishabille ...'

Disahillbilly, a punchline to a joke that didn't exist. Moonlit paddy fields, so many shadows, why did I say I'd sort it out? This was Japan, I couldn't sort things out, I was a child at everyone's mercy like Mama was in England. Wifey in Morocco. Really needed a piss. What would Mama think of her *luli* now? Wifey in Morocco. What would Mama think of her pearl with someone else's pearls dripping down her legs?

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Threads in Her Hair

Sarah Oluwatomi Michaels

Her face radiated against her mother's thigh as her hair was tugged in an unholy game of tug of war. Ifede knew she could not voice her pain too many times—complaining once already—because she knew the only result would be her mother's disappointment.

Sometimes she felt insulted by her mother's nonchalant response: "*Endure*," she scolded shortly, "beauty is pain." *Well, I'd rather be ugly*, Ifede thought to herself.

"Pass me that thread," her mother ordered.

Ifede leaned over to where her grandmother was crouched near her on the cold floor of their round mud hut. The African threads tangled between her fingers like a web casted by a small spider living inside of her hands. She looked deeply into Ifede's eyes as if pleading something Ifede could not yet understand.

Her grandmother had schizophrenia. When the doctor diagnosed her he said it was best that she stayed at home around familiar faces—it was just Ifede, her mother Esther, and her grandmother Nana. *A strong female-led household*, the doctor said. Esther liked that. Nana heard voices in her head but barely used her own; when she spoke it was as if something or *someone* was speaking through her. Ifede sometimes wondered if her grandmother was some sort of medium.

"Don't waste my time, Ifede. Do you not have work

early this morning. A lady should never be late."

Her mother impatiently pulled the end of one of the threads Ifede had managed to retrieve from her grandmother. The thread circled around her neck and she felt the thin material sharply graze her delicate skin. As if she felt it herself, Nana grabbed her neck and screamed; her mouth wide open in unison with her eyes; her tongue visible, dry and absent of colour.

Like every other Saturday, Ifede and her mother woke up at five in the morning to wash Ifede's thick, kinky curls and use African thread to stretch them as a means of styling. "*Irun Kiko*—the Yoruba name for the ancient threading style Esther repeatedly reminded her daughter of—is how the *most graceful* Yoruba women carry their hair." Ifede rolled her eyes as her mother began the performance she had been rehearsing for the past sixteen years. Knowing she had little to no escape, her mother used this time to give Ifede life lessons—about how to be a 'proper' lady—she never remembered asking for. Her performance was undoubtedly accompanied by a choir of screeching roosters outside, and the pungent smell of burning tomato stew which Ifede hated smelling in the ungodly hours of the morning.

Ifede felt herself shrink while her hair stretched as her mother pulled and pulled, whirling the thin thread tightly around each coil on her head. Ifede winced and held her head. Her fingers traced the lines of exposed

scalp and coconut oil ran after them.

“Stand up. Let me see you.” Ifede rose before her mother and sunk her toes deep into the purple wooly rug underneath her. “Beautiful little lady. You must tell yourself that first and *believe* it, so that no wicked man can belittle you.”

“Yes, mother.”

“You have no business with a man at your age anyhow. Go to work and come straight home.”

Sometimes Ifede’s mother was so cold towards her it was difficult to tell whether she loved her because she wanted to or because she had to. Esther left the hut without saying goodbye. Ifede kissed her grandmother who was staring blankly out of the window at nothing in particular. “Stand in the ocean next to her.” Nana whispered as she stared down at her hands; numerous threads weaved through her fingers like Cat’s Cradle. Ifede smiled and was suddenly aware of her increasing rubatosis. She secretly loved her grandmother more than her mother, because at least her grandmother never spoke back.

Ifede always spent the little time she had to herself before work in solitude. She raced the light breeze through the grass, down to the calabash trees which stood above her in protection. She rolled the fallen fruit underneath her feet, feeling the wake of Nature. The yawning sun kissed her with fuzzy pecks that made her dark skin itch. The moments to herself were fleeting so she made use of every second. She rolled down the grassy hills, down to where the grass became grains of golden sand. She laughed as the lightness of day carried her down towards the glittering ocean where she chased the violet-backed Starling that fluttered above her making its own way down to the turquoise abyssal, the smell of coconut lingered after her. Ifede knew she was different. Not many girls her age would understand what it means to befriend the animals that

kept her company with their song, and the ocean which told her enchanted stories. Something connected her to this place, and every morning Ifede felt it becoming her abitory that only herself and her grandmother could understand.

In the distance Ifede heard the sound of a thousand men in prayer. She hurriedly made her way to the top of the hill where the man she worked for lived.

“The housegirl is here, sir,” the gatekeeper called over the radio.

Two wide black gates automatically opened to display an elegant mansion with five cars parked alongside it. *Excessive much*, Ifede thought every time she arrived for work. Before her father had left her and her mother, he had managed to secure her this job with his “connections”. Ifede believed this was his way of preparing them for his abandonment. “*Useless* man,” Ifede’s mother would hiss occasionally. Unlike her father, the man she worked for was one of the most respected men in Yorubaland. No one knew his real name so everyone called him *Boss*. Ifede understood why: he carried himself like money depended on him rather than the other way around, his height spoke before him, his voice was gentle but firm, and when Ifede was in his presence she would always feel a wet sensation between her thighs.

“Hi Ifede.” His wife often greeted her with a friendly but distant smile as if she was threatened somehow. “I need you in the library later today. My *husband* will be in there so work around him. I need it spotless.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Ifede made her way through the endless mountain of books, all shapes and sizes. The library was so enormous that she only noticed she was not alone five minutes later when she felt a presence behind her.

"Ifede." She turned around at the sound of her name. "Love is here."

"Hello, Boss," she replied, bowing down to show respect.

"Your hair looks beautiful," he said reaching out to touch the hair Ifede's mother had spent hours mastering. He tugged on the threads and Ifede felt a part of it loosen under his touch. She smiled nervously but had no intention of telling him to stop.

He told her the shelves that needed tending to and like magic she made her way through them; dusting and humming away to herself, and in a matter of three hours she was done. She walked over to where Boss sat with his legs crossed, a copy of *Daylight Nigeria's* newspaper spread before his face. Ifede lightly coughed and he got up at once to inspect the work she had completed.

He ran his fingers along the shelves. "Spotless. Well done, Ifede." He turned around to trace his fingers down her arm like one of his library shelves. Like dust, gentle goosebumps rose off her skin as her body pulsed with a foreign feeling. Ifede was used to sharing her space with no one so she invited him in for a change. A book with a purple-outlined hardcover fell down before her—wide open—as the bookstands shook from the rapid movements.

Boss left quickly and silently while she stayed behind to catch her breath; it was racing faster than she could run herself. Ifede placed a hand in her hair and found a coil had freed itself. A thread was missing but she dismissed it and left the library. Through the open gates the lucent moonlight lit Ifede's footsteps; as she made her way home she felt a sense of freedom, weightless and bright despite the heavy darkness of her mother's rage waiting for her at home. Her feet followed the pace of her mind as she imagined the dramatic performance her mother had prepared. She had never been home this late before.

...

Two Saturdays later Ifede was sat on the floor of her hut between her mother's thighs again. The floor was a place she had constantly found herself recently. Her mother's lecturing was not any compliment to the dizziness she felt and the burning smell of tomatoes became yet another nuisance she despised. As if the closeness between Ifede and her mother generated telepathy power, she asked, "What is the matter with you, Ifede?" Not knowing what was wrong herself, she stayed silent and shook her head. Ifede passed the threads to her mother and her mother began to pull and twist her head in too many directions at once.

"You must only concern yourself with your work."

Ifede looked up to her grandmother who was standing above her. Nana had a look on her face which Ifede had not seen before. It was as if she kept a secret no one else knew about and so she grinned; her lips twisted and her head tilted to an angle as she carefully crouched down, one knee at a time. Ifede smelt the saltiness of her breath, like she had swallowed the ocean. Nana placed her warm wrinkled hands on Ifede's bare stomach below her frilly bellytop and laughed with something resembling a screech.

"*Twins!*" She roared throwing her hands in the air and stretching her fingers wide like sun rays swelling out of her palms.

Ifede's palms remained shut as sweat collected between her balled fists. Ifede was not angry, for there was no space left in her body for anything but fear. She felt her mother lose her grip of the handful of threads. Esther was a woman of many words but this time she said few.

"Leave."

Ifede felt the pull of the ocean. She gravitated towards the only place that did not make her feel alone. She laid her back against the humming sand, warm tears painting her cheeks as she replayed the last moments at home in her head: Nana's divine omniscience of the

unborn Twins, and her mother turning her back on her in disappointment, banishing her presence from home. She finally opened her eyes and looked up to the blushing sky where she mapped out her future. *The Unknown*. Feelings of regret made the ink run as she wrote out what would become of her children. She feared that her unkind childhood would follow them—Boss certainly would not claim to be their father—and hated herself for it but she knew why she did not fight to stay. Being awake was becoming unbearably painful and so she drifted off into a deep sleep as the soothing ocean waves coated her feet.

The roundness of the Sun slotted her circular form into the crescent-shaped Moon. They danced around as one and giggled innocently. The sound of happy children playing echoed in Ifede's head and nine hundred and ninety-nine birds with purple feathers flew out of a broken cage. A very old woman who resembled her grandmother smiled down at her; beautiful, withered, strong. She was laced in purple Iro and pointed her curved staff in Ifede's direction. The staff was carved from palm fronds and decorated with cowrie shells. Black threads spread themselves out before her to spell "*Free*".

Ifede was woken by the bitter winds that hit her skin and made her shiver. The winds carried the whispered wisdom of her revelations. She lurched up suddenly, sweet hints of coconut teased her sensitive nose. While sitting down she was able to stand on a firm understanding of where she belonged and what needed to be done. Already loosening, she continued to unravel the threads from her dark brown curls; they made lacey traces in the sand behind her. The heavy winds piggybacked the bundle of threads up through the calabash trees, down through the narrow paths of Lagos and away from the ocean. Ifede's heart widened with the freedoms and resistance she was now exposed to.

Her dream revealed to her what her grandmother had always spoken of, like a puzzle falling into place at last. It was the goddess Nana Buluku—speaking

through Nana—the creator of the Universe had told Ifede that she had the noble duty of carrying the Twins. The female god of the Sun, Lisa, and the male god of the Moon, Mawu, had been reborn. Ifede clutched her stomach with pride and cried. Her hair formed a crown across her head and royalty shun through her loose coils and the wind danced with her as she realised she was chosen.

Cabbage White

Tamsin Partington

Heather hated butterflies. Their unpredictable fluttering and creepy, furred bodies made her shudder. Earlier today another one had flown into the conservatory whilst she was curled up on the settee reading. Heather had dumped her book, losing her page, and bolted for the door. Mum came in tutting and cooed over it for a full five minutes, gushing about Dad looking down on them and sending a messenger. Then she got all teary. But Mum also hated moths, which seemed a flat-out contradiction, in Heather's opinion.

'White wings don't make it any less of a moth, mum, they're both Lepidoptera,' Heather called from behind the closed glass doors.

'They're leopard-what? Don't be daft. It's a butterfly, not a moth! It *could* be your dad for all we know.' Even though she was twelve and didn't know a great deal, Heather surmised that reincarnation was an unlikely, if not ridiculous concept. People's theoretical souls didn't just reappear inside insects.

Heather didn't have many memories of her dad; he'd been deployed more often than he'd been at home throughout her life. But she did have one that stuck out more than any other.

It's summer. Too hot and Dad is taking them somewhere in the car. Which makes this day all the more sticky and uncomfortable.

'Are you looking forward to the park, Heather bear?' Dad asks. She doesn't know what to say to him. All she can think about is that her bare legs in their pink Gap shorts are sticking uncomfortably to the leather in the back seat. Besides, she doesn't ever know what to say to Dad. He's just a concept to her. Mum talks about him a lot and she reads aloud his letters to her. Heather imagines a cheerful little stick-figure dad made up of all the scrawling loops of his handwriting, waving at her from thin, lined paper. This real dad doesn't seem like the same person at all with his shaved head and his frown that makes it so you can't see his dark eyes properly. So, Heather murmurs a 'yes' and goes back to lifting each leg in turn off the seat.

'You could sound a little more enthusiastic,' he says. Heather bares her teeth in an exaggerated smile at his dark eyes in the rear-view mirror. He mutters under his breath and doesn't look back at her again.

At the park there are a lot of kids and parents and teenagers. Dad starts to get huffy and Mum starts talking in that voice she used once when the neighbour's dog got out and cornered them on their front step; all nasally and soft.

'Should we go into the Butterfly House? You'd like that wouldn't you Heather?' Mum's smile is too bright and Dad shrugs, pulling out his phone and turning away from them. So, Heather nods, although she knows she's not that great with flapping things. Heather likes slow animals like sloths and snails. It seems to be what Mum wants and Heather knows when she misbehaves that Dad becomes a 'loose cannon'

(something that Gran said to Mum just last week). Even if she's not sure exactly what a 'loose cannon' is, Heather grasps the gist of what Gran is talking about. Adults never think she understands them, but she's six, not stupid.

The Butterfly House is hot, damp and deserted. Heather understands why; she can barely breathe in here. They stop to look at the boards, where Heather recoils and Dad pockets his phone, chuckling at her. On them, behind glass dripping with condensation, are hundreds of corpses. Dead butterflies pinned to boards with little squiggly words underneath, but not any that Heather can read. She recognises some of the letters, but that's it. Mum starts brightly pointing out the different species to Heather. Dad gets his phone out again. Once she gets over the hundreds of dead bodies, Heather is fascinated. She decides she's quite enjoying the Butterfly House if it means they can just look at the dead ones.

'Come on, Anna, it's bloody sweltering in here.' Dad snaps, moving away from the boards. Heather is quite sad to be leaving but she knows better than to argue. They go through plastic flaps and take a few steps to cross a little bridge.

Suddenly there are a thousand little whispers of wings overhead and something darts so quickly past Heather's face that she lets out a little shriek. Mum and Dad laugh, but then three more brightly coloured things flutter near her head, one brushing her cheek and she screams louder. Dad looks cross, Mum shushes her. But she's tense and ready now for more and she's ducking and closing her eyes and running blindly for the glowing green EXIT sign. She trips, falls, bangs her knee on a rock and the butterflies are fluttering above and her knee is bleeding and Dad is yelling about never bringing them anywhere again and Mum is ignoring her tearful pleas for help because she's frantically asking Dad to stop yelling.

Heather crouches, one arm clutching her bleeding knee and the other thrown over her face. All she can imagine is those papery things, insidious wings tangling in her hair and accidentally flying up her nose and in her ears and then fluttering angrily inside her head where they couldn't find the way out, getting stuck forever. Dad is yanking her up roughly now and dragging her by the arm and she's crying,

but not too loud because she can see Dad's face and she knows that look.

Heather shuddered and stopped thinking about the Butterfly Horror House of Nightmares and peeked through the glass doors. The butterfly had landed on the lampshade and was flexing its translucent wings menacingly, threatening to take off again on its erratic flight path. It had black dots on each wing that Heather could swear were an extra set of eyes, watching her. She waited for Mum to get bored of her 'winged messenger' from Dad and then went in search of her net.

The stupid thing was crashing repeatedly into the grubby glass roof panels when she came back. Catching it took Heather twenty minutes. It was a stubborn one, darting away as soon as the net came close, almost as if it was aware of its human predator. But it was a stupid insect, that was all. Heather hopped nimbly from the armchair to the settee, both wary of getting too close to the flapping menace and needing the height to swing her net effectively. Mum was absorbed in a tearful phone call to Aunty Kath, so she didn't notice when Heather finally tipped the creature into a Tupperware tub, snapped on the lid, and carried it upstairs.

Sometimes she closed the little air-lock switch and let them die from lack of oxygen in the Tupperware, especially if they were particularly sprightly and she feared they would get away from her. If they had a broken wing or otherwise couldn't get away, she would extract them from the tub using her stolen kitchen tongs and pin them carefully to the cork board that she kept in the back of her wardrobe. They rarely struggled and seemed far less terrifying with their flapping wings pinned in place. Mum kept a handy stash of drawing pins in all colours and sizes in the dresser drawer.

The white butterfly was a fighter. As she switched on her laptop, intending to research which species it was, its panicked noise inside its plastic prison made Heather's skin prickle. She shook the box violently and the butterfly flopped sideways, twitched twice, and went still. Heather placed the box down carefully.

As she typed her password the butterfly became infuriated again. This time Heather opened her desk drawer and dropped the box inside so she wouldn't have to listen to its angry descent into death.

She discovered that the Cabbage White was considered a pest in some countries. So, really, she was doing the world a favour in removing one. Upon reading that they laid their eggs on cabbages, she made a note to pull up the cabbages in Mum's veg patch and make it look like rabbits ate them.

Once she had made sure it was almost dead, Heather used the tongs to extract the butterfly, not wanting to take any chances with this one. It fluttered its wings twice as Heather tried to pin it down and she almost dropped it. Driving a pin through where she assumed its head would be soon stilled it though. It lay flat to the cork, still and quiet, its ugly brown body exposed and on show in a particularly stark contrast to its brilliant white wings. Heather shuddered.

She took one of the rolls of colourful electrical tape (red, blue or green – she chose green), that she'd pinched from Dad's old toolbox and cut a strip small enough to cover over the insect's body, top to bottom. Once that was done, she felt more comfortable. Now Heather could appreciate the beauty of the wings, the bright white and the contrasting black spots. She marvelled at the wonder of Mother Nature, with her ability to create all things bright and beautiful. Heather sang a line from the hymn they made her sing at school as she worked, skewering the wings flat with several of the mis-matched pins. Now she looked closer, she could see a faint hue of blue green around the matching black dots. No wonder it had looked like eyes. When she heard the tell-tale creak of Mum's foot on the bottom stair, Heather whisked her board off the desk. The cork graveyard was slid home to its secret spot in the wardrobe. The Tupperware tub was knocked back into the desk drawer.

'Heather, I'm going out. I won't be back for tea. There's a peanut butter and jam butty in the fridge, okay?' Mum still sounded like she was still crying so Heather stayed

where she was. The bottom stair creaked again as she moved off it.

'That butterfly must have gotten out again, so you can come downstairs. I've closed the conservatory windows,' Mum called, her voice fading towards the front door. Heather shouted her thanks. The front door thumped shut a moment later and the house grew quiet and still. Heather liked it that way. She pulled her board out once again to double check that no wings were twitching defiantly against her carefully placed pins. Satisfied, she closed the wardrobe with a thud and cheerfully went back downstairs in search of the lost page of her book and the promised sandwich.

Latchkey Holder

Thea Buen

The train arrives as the sun is waking. Having barely slept, I'm still overcome with elation and energy. Walking out of the station, cigarette smoke and coffee aroma clears my foggy brain. A cool breeze introduces autumn as I cling onto my thin jumper.

I'm finally here.

While waiting for a taxi, directions to the hostel on a napkin in hand, I go over what to say to the driver. Comment dit t'on... I used to get excited whenever those Muzzy commercials appeared. I perfected my accent daily by reading out loud the French translation of the car's manual. I even defied my parents when I decided to take French and not the more useful Spanish in high school. "I want to visit Paris one day," I explained to them. When a friend said that his aunt used to live in Paris, I was instantly jealous. He meant Perris, California.

I mumble in English as the taxi driver opens the back door, perplexed by my handwritten map.

As a latchkey kid, opening the door to an empty house after school was my first taste of freedom. My imagination overflowed with boundless vitality. As key holders, we gave ourselves permission to dream without fear nor consequences. During those uneventful, hot summer days, my air-conditioned house was a haven to watch Lucy, Ricky, Ethel, and Fred finally make it to France. They brought French culture to my living room,

but I yearned for more. Counting down the days until I was "old enough" seemed infinite. Daily life was boring but the future looked bright.

I'm still here.

The driver doesn't go. He motions me to get out. An older, sophisticated lady steps inside my taxi. As they drive away, the sun peeks from the clouds to say, "bienvenue à Paris." I grumble, "je t'encule."

Bios

Alice Liefgreen

The Surgeon

Alice (she/her) is an Italian-American queer cognitive scientist and poet who is currently completing her PhD in the UK. Her work appears in Polari Press's anthology 'Creating in Crisis', Queerlings Magazine, Opia Magazine and is forthcoming elsewhere.

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AR Benjamin

36 Months

AR Benjamin is a London based writer-poet of auto-fiction, fiction and non-fiction experimenting with intersectionality, philosophy and socio-political spatial identity with thought-provoking works. Their work has been published by those including the Cabinet Office (2020) and the Ministry of Justice (2019). With experience in playwriting, they have also worked with the Chaucer Foundation on projects promoting socio-mobility and mental health for disadvantaged and vulnerable young people.

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Elizabeth Chadwick Pywell

Returning to Form

Elizabeth Chadwick Pywell is a poet from York, North Yorkshire. She is soon to be published in 14 Poems and has recently been published in The Selkie and Impossible Archetype among other journals. Her first collection, 'Unknown,' is being published this year.

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Grace Carman

Doctor, Doctor Joke

Grace Carman is a queer writer and bookseller based in Norwich. Their work has been featured in Popshot magazine, the journal Lumpen and Just Snails?! zine.

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Izzy Radford

Small Joys / The Comeback

Izzy Radford is a 20 year old emerging writer and creative from Surrey. She was selected as a 'New Creative' and commissioned by BBC Arts to write and voice her own audio piece, 'The Making of an Education' and also writes educational articles and poetry. She works in TV Development.

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JP Seabright

Poached / quincunx

JP Seabright is a queer writer living in London. Their work can be found in Babel Tower Notice Board, Fugitives & Futurists, Full House, Untitled: Voices and elsewhere.

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Naomi Alder

Little stones

Naomi Alder is a writer based in Nottingham, where she is completing an MA in Creative Writing and working in public sector communications. Her work has been published by The Fiction Pool, Nottingham Poetry Exchange and BBC Radio Nottingham.

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Nathan Evans

happening / trees talk

Nathan's poetry has been published by Dead Ink and Manchester Metropolitan University. His collection, Threads, was long-listed for the Polari First Book Prize, his second collection CNUT is published by Inkandescent. In 2020 he was long-listed for the Live Canon Poetry Competition. Several of his stories have been published in Untitled: Voices.

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Olivia Toh

all the broken hearts

Olivia Toh is a high school student from Malaysia. She is featured in the book "Resilient Youth: Emotional Wellbeing in the Wake of the Covid-19 Global Pandemic" as a youth contributor and Issue 1 & 2 of Untitled: Voices. Outside of school, she enjoys brush lettering, poetry and dancing.

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📷 @kingdomof_quotes

Rick Dove

Appendix: Once Removed /

Traditions in the Hiss of Analogue

Rick Dove is a London-based progressive poet whose work blends ancient and modern themes, exploring both societal and personal change, and how these forces interact as we grow. Describing his debut full collection "Tales From the Other Box", Joelle Taylor said 'If explosions could be gentle, this book is one. Fusing a lyricism founded in beauty and a rage bitten back for decades, this is a startling and important new work from Rick Dove.' - Tales From The Other Box was published by Burning Eye Books in August 2020.

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🌐 rickdove.co.uk

Simon Maddrell

Advice for Grindr users

Simon Maddrell was born in the Isle of Man in 1965. After 20 years in London, he moved to Brighton in 2020. Simon writes as a queer Manx man, thriving with HIV. His debut chapbook is Throatbone (UnCollected Press, July 2020). His second pamphlet is Queerfella (The Rialto, Dec. 2020).

📘 /simonmaddrellpoetry

🐦 @QueerManxPoet

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Trini Decombe

Oranges / passed out

Trini Decombe is a Chilean/British poet. Her poetry was widely published between 2007-2014. She has recently started to submit again and her most recent poems can be found in Poem Atlas. She plays with language and form and is yet to master the world of social media. She co-founded and edits streetcake magazine.

Alice Montes

I Love Paris

Alice Montes is an Australian writer who has previously worked in freelance and ghost writing but is currently embarking on a career in fiction. She has lived in Australia, Britain and Germany but currently resides in Normandy, France. Her love of fiction is matched only by an interest in competitive fencing and a minor obsession with swords.

Anita Goveas

Terminal

Anita Goveas is British-Asian, London-based, and fuelled by strong coffee and paneer jalfrezi. She's on the editorial team at Flashback Fiction and an editor at Mythic Picnic's Twitter zine. Her debut flash collection, 'Families and other natural disasters', is available from Reflex Press.

🐦 @coffeeandpaneer

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Arundhati Rakshit

Ten Seconds

Arundhati Rakshit, 22, is currently a resident of Kolkata, India. She has been an active contributor to a students' supplement, Voices, from 2014-17. Her poems have been published at 'The Academy of the Heart and Mind'. Her writings mostly explore human life.

🌐 iceandblood.blogspot.com

Daniel Marques

Between The Covers Lie Imprints On A Mattress

Daniel Santos Marques is an English Literature and Creative Writing graduate who likes strange stories, late nights by the River Thames and feels like his life is sometimes a bad Lonely Hearts column. He's currently working on a short story compendium and his debut novel.

Flo Au

Wing

Flo Au's works are published in a number of literary journals. Her work was nominated for Best Small Fictions 2019, Best of the Net 2019 and Pushcart Prize 2019. She has also just been informed that her poem was commended in Norman Nicholson Lockdown Poetry Competition 2020.

Madeline McEwen

Metamorphosis

Madeline McEwen (she/her) has enjoyed publication in a variety of different outlets both online and in traditional print. She has numerous short stories and a few stand-alone novelettes. Her latest short story, Stepping On Snakes, appears in the Me Too Anthology edited by Elizabeth Zelvin published by Level Best Books, and Benevolent Dictatorship published in Low Down Dirty Vote Volume II edited by Mysti Berry.

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Ola Mustapha

Lost Pearls

Ola Mustapha is from London, where she works as an editor of research reports. She has had short stories published in Aesthetica, The Galway Review and Quince Magazine.

Sarah Oluwatomi Michaels

Threads in Her Hair

Sarah is a recent graduate from the University of Warwick. She graduated with a First Class degree class in Sociology with a specialism in Race and Global Politics. Sarah spends her free time exploring her passions as hobbies: writing stories, poetry and songs, singing, reading fiction and nonfiction books. Writing is something that comes naturally to Sarah, so having a career in writing is something Sarah sees as a bonus.

🐦 @saresLDN

Tamsin Partington

Cabbage White

Tamsin is a working-class short story writer, cat-wrangler, and child-tamer from Lancashire, with a BA and a master's degree in creative writing. She won the Edge Hill Short Story prize for Masters Students in 2019 and has had several other stories published online since.

Thea Buen

Latchkey Holder

Thea Buen is a California native living in London, UK. Her work primarily focuses on identity, immigration, nostalgia and mental health. She's been published in Nymphs Publications and Overachiever Magazine as well as performed at Stay-at-Home! Fringe Literary Festival and BBC's Upload Festival. She's currently working on her first novel, Sleep the Clock Around.

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