



Piping Shrike

BATTLE

Published by University of South Australia
St Bernards Road
Magill SA 5072

First Published by University of South Australia Document Services, 2016
1 Wilford Avenue
Underdale SA 5032

© Copyright of individual works remains with authors

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

Piping Shrike: Battle

ISBN:

Publication Coordinator

Editing Coordinator **Ioana Petrescu**, Head Editor **Robert Bloomfield**,

Editors **Gabriella McVeigh**, **Courtney Bottrill**, **Ellie Cooper**, **Brooke Petersen** and **Jessica Stirling**

Publication Designer

Anneliese Abela

Cover Photography

Robert Bloomfield

Contents

- [1 Dirtbag Days ~ Hayley Taylor](#)
- [2 Sweetly Motionless ~ Tanner Muller](#)
- [4 Steadfast Anneliese ~ Abela](#)
- [7 Bright Star ~ Naomi Borg](#)
- [8 Identical ~ Ebony Story](#)
- [14 So Simple ~ Jasmin Watkins](#)
- [15 Dexter Bryce ~ Elise Mattiske](#)
- [17 Forget Me ~ Oliver Lee](#)
- [26 Time ~ Anastasia Kasdaglis](#)
- [28 512 ~ Zac Benn](#)
- [31 Dear Child ~ Jonathan Richards](#)
- [32 Samson and Delilah ~ Sam Brooks Nina](#)
- [36 You eat my heart out ~ Karadzic Trent](#)
- [38 Brahms No. 5 ~ Argirov Daniel](#)
- [46 Dirty Business ~ Cardinale](#)
- [47 Spiritual Elevation ~ Josephine Carzo](#)
- [51 Hell Rises ~ Emma Jones](#)
- [56 The Selfless Geisha ~ Jemma Brooks](#)
- [57 Down at the Gate ~ Sophie Comber](#)
- [63 Untitled ~ Paul Torcello](#)
- [64 Solace ~ Elyse Williams](#)
- [69 Blue Tartan ~ Sally Wallz](#)
- [70 Counting Grains ~ Patrick Morris](#)
- [76 Greytime Television ~ John Mockford](#)
- [78 The Pit ~ Joshua Dickson](#)
- [82 Glass Journey ~ Sue Cochius](#)
- [84 That's Amore ~ Trudy Parry](#)
- [88 Them and Us ~ Dawid Robaszkiewicz](#)
- [89 Mother Dearest ~ Samantha McDonnell](#)
- [94 The Dust Bowl Children ~ Anneliese Abela](#)
- [97 Wyvern's Rest ~ Thomas Corbett](#)
- [103 To Be or Not to be \(A Quitter\) ~ Hayley Taylor](#)

DIRTBAG DAYS

Hayley Taylor

They say home is where the heart is.
Home never was just one place.
We spent our early years roaming the lands of our forefathers.
Our parents were the stone-carvers
Of our Rushmore formative decade.
So now with a Molotov cocktail heart,
Behind a rib cage blockade,
I hold a grey stone fist for the resistance.
But I have no willpower.
I have no persistence.
I live an apathetic existence,
With my beloved teenage dirtbag delinquents.
We sit wondering where the world's sense went,
Yet still hold every sentiment for the dabbled days of youth,
For they hold far more truth,
Than we consciously comprehend.
Approaching every bend,
With a heavy foot on the accelerator.
And a heavy heart,
For the dark days,
That in stormy weather we all drive through together.
They say home is where the heart is.
They say it again and again.
Home is where the heart is.
Home is where the heart is.
But what happens when those who hold pieces of our heart depart from us?
The broken-hearted homeless.
Vagabonds on the run.
I pray the night is not too cold without shelter.
I beg you,
Wait for the sun.

SWEETLY MOTIONLESS

Tanner Muller

Curiosity

It was as though time ceased to exist, my body growing unaccustomed to movement and thought. I plead to the sky and beg the heavens to be a member of the vibrant stars, and inhabit the universe with a delightful sparkle. Experiencing winters, summers, autumns and springs with no movement — just cloud flying — feels like home. Shortly thereafter an icy breeze hits my face, at which point I am brought back to reality, realising that my ghostly form is unchangeable; not now and never to be steadfast. A beautiful tear runs down my face as I wander to the room of Mr. Keats. I am no longer defeated or upset. I feel a sense of understanding. I stand at his door, emotional. He turns to notice me this time, discovering my paranormal form. He is not afraid. Removing himself from the wooden chair, he walks towards me and wraps his arms around my body, his head pillowed upon my breast. I have not felt something touch me in so long; I feel alive, liberated. Nothing in that moment could distract me from his hug. I understood the struggle, the constant desire of Mr. Keats. We share the same aspiration.

‘One day’, I whisper.

‘Our sweet unrest will come.’

Understanding

Throughout the house, there was silence: all were asleep, all were at rest. The moon was full, the stars were shining and all the clocks struck one. I floated through the bedroom to discover him staring out a window. The man sits watching the night sky. His body still and face motionless. I wonder why he is awake at such an hour. Only the lost spirits wander these dark shadows.

My curiosity grows as I witness him staring into the sky, under a sweet state of unrest. He could not hear me, nor see me; to him I was just cold air, dwelling in his room.

I returned the following night to find him sitting on a wooden chair, his arms leaning on the tarnished desk in front. Not a flinch, a scratch, nor a cough. Mr. Keats was under a delicate trance. His insides seemed to be hypnotised by his observations of the night sky. It felt as though he was mimicking something: aspiring to be steadfast. Could it be the moon, the stars or maybe the clouds? Interested to uncover the purpose behind his tranquility, I uttered a soft, ‘hello’ distracting him. Mr. Keats abruptly turned his body to discover no one there, just an empty hallway. Infuriated at this attempt of interference, he slammed the door in my face.

Like I was nothing: as if I was worthless. I assumed he is not aware that the wandering dead still have emotions.

Slowly but surely, I float through the corridor, feeling broken and more lifeless than I did before. My head is down, my hollow insides aching with pains of displeasure. I feel defeated, like my whole world has shut down. All I wanted to do was observe and learn.

I guess being inhuman has its restrictions. To the normal ones, you are just cold air: no one can see you or witness your presence. Momentarily, a nearby window distracts me. I stare outside of it like he would.

I gaze at the sky and notice the stars. There are millions of them, each one as vibrant as the next.

STEADFAST

Anneliese Abela

I see you standing before me, a flash of your teeth visible behind hair you're always brushing off your face. I see your pale skin: those tiny blue veins that swirl across your temples and under the dark circles of your eyes. The faint lines encircling your mouth from your constant tired smile that tells the world you're okay when you're really not. The faded blue of your muslin scarf, the tiny tinsel rose pinned to your chest. You're dancing, executing moves you memorised in your long days at the studio, owned by the retired ballerina with the French name. Your fingers twitch as you walk, eat, live, breathe, playing an invisible piano whose silent music has forever enraptured my struggling heart. I still hear the music in my head, a quiet and beautiful beginning that mirrors your exterior, followed by a fast, frightening and desperate second movement that unmasks your trapped and fascinating soul within.

At night, and sometimes during the humid, sticky day when the only sound is the crunch of leaves and vines from my fellows' footfalls, I hear your music in my head. Your graceful arms and legs follow the rise and fall of the orchestra, and you dance across my mind, leaving no room for any sane thought. I see your face as clearly as I see my hands that hold this heavy Colt rifle, the knuckles swathed in cuts, foreign dirt stuck beneath broken fingernails. But then a sound of war interrupts your performance. The concerto stops, your limbs drop, and your tired eyes and blue veins disappear from my mind.

The rest of my platoon sends letters home to their sweethearts, but I don't know where you live. I picture a house with flowers and weeds growing freely together behind a wooden fence with peeling paint. I see you run down the path to the letterbox, discovering something sent to you from a stranger far across the ocean, someone you've never met before, or would've forgotten if you had. A hopeless love letter from a boy who watched you every day from his parents' diner as you practiced in the ballet studio.

* * *

I didn't see it coming. There was no flicker of bright light, no scenes from a distant childhood. Just the faint click of the mine before the ground broke and the world shook. I cried out, but my howling comrades drowned the sound. Some fell quickly, motionless and silent. My head hit the muddy ground as I collapsed, arms too shocked to break my fall. Distant voices shouted our names, taking what felt like centuries to reach us. Pain quickly overcame shock: a horrible, raw pain that shot through my body. My left leg felt strangely numb, like the tips of fingers in the sharp, wickedly cold wind of winter. Smoke filled the air and screams of injured men flooded my mind.

A shadow hovered over me. Trembling hands lifted my head. Frightened eyes stared down at me, dark and alert, dust clinging to lashes, blood trickling through an eyebrow. And then your eyes replaced those of the scared, home-sick fighter, my beautiful ballerina. And I saw tears fall from your sad little orbs, and I cried too, for I thought I would never see you dancing again.

* * *

Bouncing Betty blew half my leg off. They thought they'd only have to clean the wound and close the stump, but I am not to limp away too easily, my graceful and lonely darling. A tiny morsel of shrapnel, an insignificant fragment of tin, had found its way through the chaos of the explosion and lodged itself in the joint of my knee. Now they're talking of an upper leg amputation.

They've flown me out to the military hospital at Cam Ranh Bay, which I'm sure is filled with suffering boys like me who pine for their own ballerinas back home.

* * *

I've been here two weeks, my body healing, but my battle is not yet over. There's someone watching me. He's hovering, lurking - waiting. He stands there, in the corner of the ward, face hidden in shadow but red eyes staring straight at me. I've asked the nurses if they see him too, but they just feel my forehead and tell me to sleep. But in sleep he prowls closer, bringing cold winds with him, I feel his rattling breath on my body as he tries to pull me to my death. It was he who killed my friends, who stole my leg, and now he waits for the rest of me.

He thinks he'll take me in my sleep. I'm grateful when pain or the smothering heat wakes me in the night, for it robs him of his chance. He's pushed me off the peak of Phan Xi Pang, laughing as I fall to the bottomless depths below. He's tried to drown me in the oceans over which we sailed to get here, his long claws holding me under until my lungs are filled with murky water. He opens the arms of his smoke-like cloak, smothering the room in darkness, and engulfs me, swallowing me, leaving me without light or air. He wants me to lose my mind, so he can take me as easy prey.

But I won't let him get me. I think of your face, your hands, your hair, and your wonderful weary eyes. I picture you by my bedside, nursing my wounds and driving the red-eyed monster away with your beauty and your love. And then we'll go home and dance together and repaint your picket fence.

The sound of an explosion wakes me. I feel sweat dripping down my temples, a throbbing ache in my thigh. All is darkness, yet there is a red glow somewhere. More distant blasts go off, followed by screams. I smell fire, the burning of buildings and chemical fumes. He's trying once more, trying to lure me out of my bed and to my death. But it won't work. I close my eyes and don't move, ignoring the stinging fumes and cries for help. More shots go off, and the smash of nearby glass makes me jump, but I refuse to give in to him. I watch you dance across my mind instead, tap my fingers on the bed sheets, and wait for the nightmare to pass.

* * *

She drops her head and rubs her tired eyes, turning her back to the mirror and walking away from the bar in her worn satin pointe shoes. Kissing Madame on the cheek and shouldering her bag, she walks out into the cool evening air. At home she pushes open the gate, arm swinging gracefully by her side. On the porch lays the newspaper. She sits at her table with it and scans the front page, fingers tapping on the surface of the table.

Thursday, August 7, 1969

A Viet Cong attack has killed two and wounded ninety-eight at the US Base of Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam. The terrorists fired rockets at the hospital and surrounded the air base with bombs. One man died on the way to the 12th USAF hospital where other victims were taken for treatment. Another man, an American amputee sleeping within 10 feet of a satchel charge explosion, died instantly.

BRIGHT STAR

naomi borg

Starlight consumes my lover once again,
Absorbing the splendour that captures him so.

Of a perpetual mystery surrounding Earth;
Of the glistening objects dangling delicately in the sky.

I long for his touch:
Tender hand against my stomach,
As new life forms.

Sadness consumes me;
Astronomy devours him.

A silent tear cascades down my supple cheek
For I cannot heave an ultimatum.
Starlight or impending domestication?

I long for his touch;
Loneliness consumes me.

IDENTICAL

Ebony STory

The light was just there all of a sudden; I could see it behind my eyelids, blood vessels making it a murky red, and slowly the feeling came back to my body as I woke. I was astounded at how weak I felt, and it was an effort to shield my eyes from the harsh light and try to sit up. I cried out as I smacked my head into the ceiling, and it was only then that I remembered where I was: in a coffin in the Comatose Room. And damn was I hungry.

My hands slid along the metal length of my enclosure and over the indentation that was the blinding light source, trying to find a latch of some sort that would let me out, but there was only smoothness. I lay back down and stared into the light until red spots appeared, and still nothing happened. I was sure that when I regained consciousness the process was supposed to start, that's what we'd all been taught. In our senior year all they teach us is of life after the coma. You turn eighteen, then bam! Lights out for a good six months. No one has figured out why everyone goes into a coma at this age, scientists have been at this mystery since they took over the government in 2013. Ten years later and life has changed drastically. The coma is not only a rite of passage to becoming an adult; it also determines whether we live to see our adulthood or not.

After the scientists took over they put in a system to ensure that humans would become smarter, produce smarter kids, and basically rule the galaxy. I guess they thought the process of natural selection wasn't working fast enough for them. So they track every seventeen-year-old for the last year of their life, ready for the moment they fall unconscious so they can steal them away from their frantic parents. Extreme isn't it? But some families do try to hide their comatose teenagers in the hope that they will survive, even though their school records suggest differently. Because who wants to be told that their child is not smart enough or strong enough to continue living?

I was told that when I wake up from my coma, I'd be in a metal coffin, and some form of puzzle would appear above me. To put it simply: solve the puzzle to prove my intelligence and live. If I can't figure it out, gas will filter in and put me to 'sleep'. So you can imagine how much everyone dreads turning eighteen; the future of our lives is ripped from us and some calculating scientists decide whether we will benefit the world with our lives or not. By now I was sure I'd been here for about fifteen minutes. This wasn't right, I knew it. I stretched my arms above my head as far as the coffin would let me and tried to relieve the tension in my body, but the space was too cramped and my hands just got tangled in my curly hair. It'd grown a fair bit in six months and had become rather oily. I was then acutely aware of my bodily needs; I wanted a shower, I wanted food, I wanted to stretch out properly and see the sun. So where the hell was this puzzle I was supposed to solve?

'C'mon,' I muttered and banged the roof with my fist. Surprisingly, a black screen flickered into life in the metal. There was a humming sound and it felt eerily like I was inside a huge computer. White words printed themselves across my vision:

ALEXA BLACK. THE DATE IS OCTOBER 15TH.
YOU HAVE BEEN IN A COMA FOR EXACTLY 6 MONTHS AND 2
DAYS.
YOU MUST NOW TAKE THE TEST THAT WILL DETERMINE YOUR LIFE.
YOU HAVE 1 HOUR. BEGIN.

The words faded into black and a countdown clock appeared ... 30 ... 29 ... 28

... 27... The shock was like a splash of cold water. This was it. My moment of truth. My gut twisted and I could feel the panic rising ... 22 ... 21 ... 20 ... 19

... Right, this was not the time to freak out, I needed to calm down and focus

... 15 ... 14 ... 13... Of course I could do this, couldn't I? Oh shit, shit, shit. Working under pressure never agreed with me. In a timed cooking assessment a few years ago, I spilled a bowl of pasta before it even had a chance to get in the pot to cook! 5 ... 4 ... 3 ... I winced as I waited for it to get to 0 and when the seconds timed out, there was a mangled beep and all the illumination in my coffin winked out.

‘What? Are you kidding me? No, this can’t be happening.’ I slammed my hands into the roof, hoping to jolt the screen into working again. But the sounds just echoed around me and only served to enhance my panic. Was it possible I had a faulty coffin? What were the chances? In a scientist’s world, surely we were past little old technological faults. What did this mean? Was I going to get gassed without a chance to prove myself? Bugged if I’d let that happen. I banged on the roof harder, and this time I lent my voice to the cause, ‘Hey! Someone! This thing’s malfunctioned...help!’ I paused to listen, my ears straining to hear any movements or voices, but they rang with silence. Pressing my hands into my face, I tried to suppress the tears. Funnily enough, this isn’t how I thought I’d die.

Just as I was composing myself, a hissing sound began. I let my hands flop to my sides; it was hopeless, I really was going to die. What of my parents? They would be told that I hadn’t survived my coma, and they would know that I was a failure. All that money spent on tutoring and extra lessons for nothing. A waste. I was a waste. And my little brother would probably be scared out of his skin; the coma doesn’t seem real until someone you know doesn’t come back. And that someone will be me, his own sister.

The hissing grew louder, and I wondered how much longer I could hold out. My vision was blurring, either from tears or the effects of the gas, I couldn’t tell. I could feel my airways constricting; it became harder and harder to draw breath in and expel it. Soon I was gasping for air, my chest heaving, but not getting any relief. My eyes shut of their own accord and I tried to relax: to accept my death. I sank lower and lower into unconsciousness and all my cares faded away; it was nice down there...who needed life?

Click! With that one sound, I jolted back to reality and opened my eyes. There was a crack in the coffin lid! I tried to lift an arm to push it open, and the effort it took was astounding. I could barely feel myself breathing, but somehow just enough oxygen made it to my muscles for me to reach out and push the lid open. A rush of fresh air blew in, and I sucked it in noisily. It’s a wonder what oxygen can do: my body surged to life and I sat upright. I gripped the edges of my former prison and looked around.

The room was huge, with at least a few hundred stainless steel coffins lying on the ground. I wondered if they were all occupied. The ceiling was high and lined with rows of fluorescent lights. There was only one door in the far corner, but it looked more like a garage roller door. I guessed that was how they transported us in here.

My stomach gurgled loudly and I clapped a hand to it as if that would make it quieten down. What the hell was I supposed to do? I had just escaped my coffin without proving myself; what would the scientists do if they found out? I stood and stepped out, finally realising that I was wearing a loose dress. White, of course, to fit in with the monotone colour scheme they seemed to have going on. My back cracked numerous times as I stretched, and I wiggled my toes against the cold floor. Oh, it was nice to be alive. I figured as soon as a coffin registered its opening the scientists would be alerted. Perhaps, because mine was faulty, I could wander around undetected for a while, explore the place, but more importantly find a kitchen! There must be a staff room around or something.

I wandered towards the door, weaving around the metal coffins. On a closer look, each had a screen with the date the person’s coma began, how many months and days they were in, and an estimated end date. Very analytical and very impersonal.

At least they’d put our names on there too, and an identification number. Out of curiosity I strode back to my open coffin, shut the lid and checked out my info. It read:

ALEXA BLACK 11248

COMA START DATE: APRIL 13TH 2023

COMA END DATE: OCTOBER 15TH 2023

Well, if I had to be numbered, at least 11248 rolled off the tongue nicely. I glanced at my neighbouring coffin as I passed again, and almost fell over in disbelief. Impossible. I slammed my hands into the metal either side of the small screen and leaned closer to read it properly, swiping at the screen when my breath fogged it.

‘No way! Alexa Black 11248a. Dates...the same as mine. No fucking way!’ Snatching my hands from the coffin in horror I stood with them clutched to my heart for a second before anger took over. This person wasn’t and couldn’t possibly be me! I was me. One hundred per cent. I spotted a button just below a curved handle and jabbed it, and heaving open the lid I looked into the face of my imposter. She had my face. She had my unruly black hair, thick eyebrows, even the beauty spot on my neck! The anger quickly faded, replaced by fear. She was the exact replica of me. Like a clone. A clone!? Is that what the scientists were doing to us while we were out of it? Then how do we know who is a clone and who isn’t when someone comes back from their time spent in coma land? Maybe people that never return were unsuccessfully cloned?

I put a stop to my train of thought. This was getting too complicated and freaky to say the least. I didn’t ask for this. All I wanted was to get out of here alive, move out of home

and go to university. Do the normal things that you're entitled to do when all this is over. Now I have to deal with a clone? Bloody ridiculous. Her hand (it was my hand when you think about it) twitched and her eyes flickered under her eyelids. Oh great...she was waking up. Of course she was waking up: I did, so why wouldn't she? I tried to think of something witty to say when she came to, but then decided against being mean. After all, this wasn't her fault, although some would say she was lucky to be made in my image.

I was leaning over her coffin when she woke, and she started at my being so close. I leaned back, 'Oh, sorry, uh, welcome to the world!' She frowned and sat up, 'What's going on? Who are you?'

'My name is Alexa. And, as it turns out, you are me.'

'Excuse me?' She raised an eyebrow, another thing we had in common.

'Look, there is no way to put this nicely, but basically you're a clone of...uh... me.' I winced as I waited for her reaction. I couldn't imagine it, but I didn't think people liked being called a clone.

She laughed and tossed her hair as she clambered out of her coffin, 'Umm no, I'm not. If I was your clone I wouldn't have any memories, but I do.' I scowled, 'Yeah? Like what?'

'On the day I fell into my coma,' she began, 'I was watching that movie Ted at my friend Ruby's house. I really didn't like it: it was a horrible movie. Thankfully, I passed out before I could see the rest of it.' She looked at me expectantly, as if I was supposed to believe her, and that she was her own person. But she wasn't, because that was my memory.

'Are you kidding me?!' I said, 'That movie was the best. And Ruby is my friend, not yours; just like that memory is mine, not yours. You are my clone.' I crossed my arms and glared at her. Who did she think she was? Looking like me, talking like me and being me, but at the same time not quite.

She held up her hands to try and calm me down, 'Now hold on, let's think rationally.'

'I don't think rationally!'

'Well I do.' Now I was the one who raised an eyebrow. If she was my clone, made in my image, why was she acting all adult-y? 'Ok, so you claim you're Alexa, and so do I, and one of us has to be the clone, right?'

'Right,' I nodded, 'but it ain't me.'

She sighed and continued, 'What if the scientists had discovered a way to clone memories as well?'

Slow clapping begins behind us, and we both whirled around. A short balding man in a white lab coat was making his way towards us.

'Nicely figured, girls. Now, don't be alarmed. I monitor the video footage in this room and once I realised both of you had woken up, I had to get down here.'

'Down here?' I asked.

'Yes, down here,' he gestured around. 'You're in one of the many floors underneath the Development Centre. This is not the Comatose Room, this is the Cloning Room. So yes, we have successfully cloned Alexa Black, whichever one of you that may be.'

'Me.' we both replied.

'Oh, deary me. This is a problem. Now if you had just stayed in your coffins then we would have been able to figure out who is who.'

'Why does that even matter? You cloned me; I think that needs some explanation first of all,' I said, 'and I really need some food. Seriously.'

The man walked closer and lowered his voice, 'No, it does matter...very much so, because the original Alexa was not to survive. She was to be replaced by her clone: her smarter, kinder and stronger clone. Now,' He said, clasping his hands together, 'which of you is the real Alexa Black?'

I looked at my clone who looked back at me in fear. Who knew it would end up like this? We grabbed hands and bolted.

SO SIMPLE

JasMin WaTkins

I grow, the little flower
Hidden beneath the thorns
In the dark I cower
I hear the world, it mourns.

It mourns for life, so simple
And the beauty that it holds
Can I even make a dimple?
I do not fit the moulds.

I look around this garden
And see the weeping trees,
They long for some great pardon
To release them from their knees.

But I am only just flower
What difference can I make?
I have no lasting power
To make this darkness break.

Although I am so small
The beauty I can bring
If only for one second
For that moment I will sing.

DEXTER BRYCE

eLise MaTTiske

Dexter Bryce was a man who kept to himself. If one were to write a book about his life, meticulous and punctual would be two words to describe him perfectly. He wore those horn-rimmed glasses — the kind you would see Atticus Finch wearing; however, Dexter Bryce was certainly no Atticus Finch.

In everything he did there was a method. After eight hours and forty five minutes of sleep, he would wake up each morning at 6.45am, be dressed by 6.50, and then prepare his breakfast. He would butter his toast from left to right, and faithfully steep his tea for two minutes and forty seconds. At 7.00am, and not a second earlier or later, Dexter would fetch his bike as the early morning sun beckoned him.

Of the one hundred and sixty-eight hours available to him each week, forty were spent at Abbott's Accounting. With such a considerable amount of time, you would expect some form of interaction to be made between co-workers beyond the workplace. Alas, Dexter Bryce was the exception. Indeed, he was pleasant enough, but he had no friends. His mother had taught him how to make small talk, yet on the rare occasion he chose to employ the skill it seemed only to elicit strange looks from those he addressed.

Apart from the security guard, Dexter was the first to arrive and the first to leave. The day unfolded as expected, until right before 5.00pm when Dexter was forced to retrieve another bundle of paper for the printer from the store room. This was unprecedented. Upon returning to his desk he observed that the lights had been turned off and no one else was at their desk: only his computer screen illuminated the vast space. Upon closer inspection, it seemed that Dexter had been left behind and was now locked in the office.

After the shock had passed, a familiar ennui had washed over him. It was unusual that Dexter could be so remarkably calm with such a tremendous interruption to his schedule. It was a schedule that had always been so familiar to him. He thought perhaps he could continue to work, but in a rather uncharacteristic way Dexter wondered what other people would do in his situation and that was when he realised he did not know, because he had no friends. Only dimly could he recall the receptionist's name...something starting with a 'P'? Perhaps if he had an acquaintance to speak of he might have been able to call them.

Despite his superlative numeracy skills Dexter was not particularly resourceful — it would never occur to him to peruse a co-worker's desk for the number of Security.

Dexter looked up at the ceiling, and observed the dotted pattern. The ceiling vent had little pieces of coloured paper attached to it. Somehow he remembered that it was the handiwork of 'P'. She would rather emphatically complain that the air from the vent was directed solely at her desk, which was the cause of her perennial cold — which resulted in her climbing up a ladder and changing the direction of the vents with the end of a broom.

His thoughts took him elsewhere until he drifted off to sleep at his desk; however, it seemed that Dexter was not destined to spend an exhausting night at the office. He was roused by a soft female voice. Her name, he discovered, was Penny. She explained that she had forgotten something on her desk and only realised while out for drinks. He agreed that it was a very fortunate occurrence that he only had to endure two hours in the office.

As they walked to the car park in silence she suggested tentatively, as though he were a frightened animal, that he come out with them next time. To his surprise he said yes. She laughed as they walked, and remarked that they were all beginning to think he hated them all.

For Dexter Bryce that day, the 14th of March, was the day life got a little bit more complicated. It was entirely possible that this event was orchestrated by God above with a catharsis in mind. It was time for Dexter Bryce to change. Perhaps tomorrow he would wake up at 6.50am and arrive at Abbott's Accounting five minutes late.

FORGET ME

Oliver Lee

The first thing that should have made me aware of how wrong things were was the state of my room. It was messy. And I never had a messy room.

I couldn't recall making such a mess of it last night. I usually leave it in a good state after a day at school and a night at work. Maybe I was just too tired? Probably.

I woke up, rolling out of my bed. I tossed things here and there in a short process of cleaning while I got ready for school. It took me five minutes just to locate my school blazer — a dark blue travesty with crisp white cuffs and logo — under a pile of clothes and paper, and I was out of the door, two minutes late. Make-up would have to wait for a better day.

I hopped in my car — too late to catch the bus — and sped off to school, parking just as the bell rung. I sighed and grabbed my satchel — the only thing that we were allowed to buy out of school colours. I threw it over my shoulder, and headed to home room.

Marcy and Emily were on the other side of the class when I stepped in.

Marcy was a big girl with curly copper hair; comfortably curved and taller than almost any girl I knew. She made a nice contrast with Emily, who was tall but rail-thin, with strawberry blonde hair that was as straight as an arrow. Marcy smiled and Emily looked down at the desk. It wasn't unusual considering the anxiety issues I knew Emily had, but they weren't usually this bad.

I waved and made my way over.

They were whispering when I walked over.

They never whispered. Marcy and Emily were known for their ability to make teachers lose their minds with chit-chatting — Marcy more so than Emily perhaps. It was quite simply that they were unable to keep quiet, unable to whisper. Except for today it seemed. Everyone was whispering. I only heard snatches of phrases as I walked over to Marcy and Emily.

'... It hasn't been that long..'

'... Two weeks...' '... She looks terrible..'

Maybe I should have worn make-up. 'Hey,' I said, greeting Marcy and Emily.

'Hey Brie,' Marcy smiled.

She looked sad. 'What's up? Problems with Jordan again ...?'

Marcy smiled again, a little bit sadly. 'No, no, he's been amazing lately, with... He's just been really understanding. He's been great. Yeah, great. He's great. How are you?'

Emily shot her a look. Marcy shot her one back.

'I'm good. Seriously, who died?' Emily winced.

Marcy laughed a little. 'I'm glad to see you're doing better ...' I nodded, not sure what to say to that.

What was up with people today?

We talked, awkwardly, before the bell rung for my first class: English with Mrs. Banks. I usually would have walked with Emily and Marcy but I said a quick farewell and feigned a bathroom visit so I could avoid them. I usually loved them to pieces, but today, maybe just wasn't my day. I walked into English and had a strange sense. Was it...? No. I thought for a

second, and aside from the people, nothing was wrong. It was just ... I swore I sat with someone. I knew my chair.

I knew where I sat in English, opposite from Marcy who sat with Amelia and Nicole. I sat in my chair and glanced to the right. Something was strange. What was strange? The bell rung again and Mrs. Banks came to the front of the class. She started talking and the whole time I was just lost in my own thoughts; trying to suss out what was just so wrong about today. It wasn't long before I found a hand waving in my vision and a voice breaking my concentration. It sounded like she was repeating herself. 'Hello? Your assignment, Miss Bennes?'

I tilted my head curiously. 'Assignment...?' Mrs. Banks smiled at me, a knowing smile.

'Now, now, Miss Bennes, I know I gave you the homework. I remember you asking when it was due and if a cover sheet was needed for it. I know it. It's not like you've been...'

Suddenly she stopped talking and looked down at me.

'Oh...'

her voice caught in her throat. 'Oh, I'm...I'm sorry, you can... hand in your assignment when you are ready, Miss Bennes; there will be no late grade for you. I hope you're doing well...'

Mrs. Banks said nothing else and instead kept walking and collecting assignments from people.

I stared at her after she walked off. What was that all about?

I looked over at Marcy and she snapped her gaze away from me just in time for me to catch her looking. I tilted my head and got lost in my own thoughts again. Why was everyone treating me so strangely? Like I was made of broken glass... I don't remember getting an assignment. I mean, I sort of remember but I don't think — I mean, I remember the assignment, but not receiving it.

Maybe I needed to get some sleep. I did feel so...tired.

I shook my head and focused on the in-class activity: something to do with a Shakespearean writing exercise. I worked through it and didn't read any work out, which felt strange, but it just wasn't the right day for it. Not with everything so ... irregular.

The Wednesday assembly was held in the gym, as usual, and all the year levels were in attendance. I went over to Emily in the rows of students and sat down.

'Hey Em, how was maths?'

Emily looked over, not looking me in the eyes.

'Oh, it was good. Mr. O'Hare was teaching fractions.'

'Interesting?'

'Nah not really...'

Emily laughed.

'It's good to see a smile out of you, Em ...'

She looked over at me and finally caught my eyes, but barely for a second. She looked away. Seriously, why was she acting so much like a frazzled puppy? I thought she would run off at any second.

'... I can't do this, I can't do this ...'

What was she talking about? I looked over at her. 'What was that, Em ...? Can't do what?'

Emily stiffened. 'What?' 'Did you say something?'

She glanced over at me. The relaxation I saw a second ago was gone.

'No.'

I shook my head. That was weird. The lights went down on the gym and the spotlight came up on the Principal at the head of the podium. He smiled and addressed the audience.

He said the formalities of the land on which our school was built, gave thanks to everyone helping with the assembly, introduced any and all guest speakers we had, and then started talking about the news of the week and what was happening in past and present weeks. Once again — which felt so strange for me — I completely got lost in my own world. Where had that come from?

If Emily hadn't said it, had I just thought it? Where did it come from?

'... But not everything is on a happy note ...' the Principal's voice broke through my concentration.

I focused on the elderly man speaking at the podium.

'We are also gathered here today to discuss a matter that I never hoped we would have to discuss. It concerns a certain student that most of you, if not all of you, know ...' the Principal shot a look my way then I saw him look away, just as Marcy had. 'It is with great sorrow that I must ...'

Emily suddenly poked me hard in the arm.

'Hey,' she said. 'I need to go to the bathroom, come on.' 'Em, I'm listening; we've barely been sitting five minutes ...' She looked desperate. 'Come on, please. Please ...'

I rolled my eyes and nodded. 'Okay.'

We got up and she led us out of the gym. We went out to the bathrooms and as she sat in the cubicle, I studied my reflection in the mirror. My God, my eyes were sunken.

I spoke over the stall to Emily. 'Em, do you know what's been wrong with people today?'

There was a pause. 'What do you mean?'

'People have been treating me different.' There was another pause.

'It's all in your head, Brie, things are normal as ever.' I rolled my eyes.

'Emily, I know people are being strange!' There was another pause.

'I don't know what you wanna hear right now; I can't tell you anything.'

'...I can't do this, I can't do this, I'm sorry, I just ... I can't ...' There it was again. I could feel my heartbeat racing in my ears; I could feel my breath coming in gasps.

What was that? I stared at my reflection and I could see a tear running down my cheek. I shook my head, focusing to calm down, and splashed some water on my face. As I was drying my face with some paper towel, the cubicle door opened and Emily walked out. She stopped when she saw me.

'What...What's wrong?'

She was acting on-edge again, like she expected the ground to fall out from underneath her.

I finished drying my face.

'Nothing, Em, I just needed to wake up a bit.'

Emily looked at me cautiously and then walked over, washing her hands. 'I think we can go back now?'

I smiled at her. 'You think? You don't know ...?'

She glanced over me, her face a taut line. She said nothing.

I tilted my head, rolling my eyes, and then followed her out of the bathroom and back towards the auditorium. We entered and I glanced up at the projection behind the Principal. On the screen was an image of a young man, maybe seventeen or eighteen; a normal student ID photo, but the smile and the pose were nothing but ordinary. It was a surprise they

let it get past as a standard ID photo, but he seemed to have a smile about his eyes, a charm on his lips. He could talk his way out of almost everything. But how did I know that?

How did I...? Who was he ...?

Emily stiffened and grabbed my arm, trying to turn me around.

She gripped me so hard it hurt. She was desperately trying to drag me with her.

‘Come on, we can’t... we can’t be here, I mean we just can’t ...’

‘... I can’t, I can’t ... I just ... I just can’t ...’

My breath came in ragged gasps all of a sudden. My throat seemed to be closing and I just couldn’t find the reason why. The phrase from Emily — though her lips didn’t move — was repeating, louder and louder until it sounded like she was screaming, and then in a second, she wasn’t the same. Though she stood close to me, her hand was no longer grabbing my arm. It was with her other hand, closing around herself; wrapping the young girl in a cocoon of her own arms. She wasn’t wearing a uniform, she was wearing casual clothes. She was wet. Dripping wet. It was raining. Water flowed down my face.

And then the image was gone. And the water was tears.

I was crying.

I could barely breathe. Adrenaline pumped in my ears.

My stomach was so low I thought it would drop out. My heart pounded in my ears.

Oh God, what was happening, what was...? Who was...? What is wrong with Emily...? Who on earth... I just...

My mind flashed with images, my heart raced. I ... I had to get out of here. I had to be able to breathe. I got up. I’d fallen to my knees: they bled from the impact—scraped where I had fallen. I started running towards the oval and away from the auditorium, away from the gym.

Away from...

‘I can’t, I just can’t ...’ Emily was crying, the tears mixing with the rain.

She was huddled so much around herself she was almost half the size she usually was. She was crying and though I know she must be as sore as I was, she wasn’t moving at all, or showing any sign of pain. Scrapes covered her legs from where she’d crawled out of the wreckage. She wasn’t coming over to help, like Aaron was. Aaron sat over someone, applying pushes to their chest while he gave them mouth-to-mouth. He was breathing hard, clearly tired. He didn’t stop.

I ran and I ran.

What was happening?

God, it hurt. There was pain. My tears were flowing.

My stomach felt sour.

My mouth tasted bile and I was sure I was going to throw up. I ran.

Aaron kept going. I wanted to help, but I couldn’t move. I was frozen and I just wanted to help: I needed to help. Someone was dying. Someone was going to die and I was just kneeling in the street, rain pouring down over me, doing nothing. I tried to move. I was ... I was trapped. Who was dying? Someone was dying ... there was another man there, from a car the pulled over to help. It wasn’t going to help though. It wasn’t going to change anything.

It had already ... happened ... I collapsed.

Suddenly my legs wouldn’t work. I was trapped. I was as trapped as I had been on that day.

My heart was beating louder than my thoughts. The memories were rushing to me now.

I saw someone running towards me across the oval where I'd fallen.

The car was wrapped around a tree, glass and metal had been blasted through the street and I felt small cuts on my legs where glass lay under them. The stings were there, but they didn't really matter anymore. I knew ... I didn't know. Aaron suddenly stopped working. His breathing was ragged, he couldn't catch it. He collapsed next to the body and I suddenly saw who he had been working on.

The boy from the ID photo. The boy in the assembly. The boy who died. The boy who...

I wanted to crawl over to him. I couldn't ...All the time Emily spoke, now I think it was to herself more than me.

'... I can't, I just can't ... I can't ...'

I ignored her, without even meaning to. The head of the young man fell limply towards me and his sweet baby blues lay open and dead, staring at me. The eyes that I had fallen into more than once, the eyes that I knew would hold me tight until my last breath, the eyes that promised me that I was the only one, the eyes that belong to him ... the only him that mattered.

Marcy suddenly appeared, Emily behind her. Marcy grabbed me, wrapping me in her arms.

'Brie! Oh thank God. You ran off and I thought we'd never catch you, I mean I was hoping...'

Marcy looked over at Emily. 'You were supposed to take her out if there was anything that could set her off. You knew how she was; you know how she is ... Emily, what is wrong with you?' She screamed at her.

'I told you!' Emily screamed. 'I wouldn't be able to ... I'm not ... I can't!'

Marcy scowled at her then looked at me.

'It's okay, Brie, It's okay ...'

Marcy held me for a while, I don't know for how long. Everything after that moment came in a strange sort of distant feeling. I knew that I was moving, and that people were talking, but I couldn't — or wouldn't — focus on anything. Marcy helped me up, and eventually I was sitting in the student psychologist's office at the school. The older woman looked at me and smiled a sad but understanding smile.

'What's wrong with me?' I asked, staring at a wall. The woman smiled again.

'You have PTSD: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. You have gone through a very horrible and scarring experience in your young life and it is perfectly reasonable for you to be under a great deal of stress. Sometimes memory loss is one of the effects. The mind is hit with something so terrible it blocks it out. This of course means that these blockages sometimes break down and the memories leak back in. It can even mean re-living the past biological functions such as fear and dread. These are common side-effects of this disorder. Now we are led to believe that...'

The words were coming out of her mouth, but I was barely listening.

'What happened?' My eyes barely shifted from the spot on the wall.

The woman paused. 'Brie ... You were in an accident. Over a week ago you were in a horrible car crash with your friend Emily, her boyfriend Aaron, and your boyfriend. A car pulled over to help you, but the road was slippery and your boyfriend lost control of the car. While you, Aaron, and Emily were not injured beyond scratches and scrapes, your boyfriend took the brunt of the crash. The pole hit the car on the driver's seat, and he died. You've already been to his funeral, and helped pack up his house ...'

'I've forgotten ...?' She nodded. 'Each time...'

My whole body felt numb.

'How many times have you told me this?'

The woman sighed and a sad smile formed on her face again. 'Today will make the fourth time we've discussed this, Brie.'

I felt tears again. 'My boyfriend ... What was his name ...?'

The woman paused for a second, studying me. 'His name was Charlie. Charlie Meadow ...'

As soon as his name sounded, I broke. Tears streamed down my face and sorrow burst through my chest. My heart pounded in my ears and it was like looking at his dying body all over again. I flashed through the memories again and those pale blue eyes, those dead blue eyes, stared into me once again, for the last time. For the fourth time, apparently, I broke down.

He was gone ...

TIME

anasTasia kasdaglis

Those memories are left at the back of your mind
Happiness: you felt it for once.
You truly thought it existed in this painful world
You didn't want time to continue.
All you wanted was for time to stand still in that moment.

If you only could hold their hand just one more time
And look into their eyes.
Reality has become a memory: it has been lived
Sitting together laughing, you can't get it out of your mind. When was the last time you felt this happy?

Time seemingly destroys the close bonds created by the present.
The time on the clock continues tick
But slowly steals more and more time from you.
The future finds different ways to mess up the eventual long awaited present.
Time ticks, until there is nothing left.

Why can't you rewind the time we spent together? Unfortunately, turning back all the time on the clocks won't change a thing. You constantly hear the overbearing sound of the
ticking
And the flicker of the numbers changing everywhere.
You can't breathe; it is all too much.

You wanted to stay with them; to laugh with them just one more time.
Time makes us leave:
It creates a path that you will walk down, Making it so you are forced to turn away from the past
And to the forever unknown future with sadness of what you leave behind.
Time rips and tears.
It makes you smile and feel loved. It makes you despair and regret.
Time picks and chooses the next victim
Only leaving you to hate and regret.

Why can't you press the pause button?
Time is to blame.
We all run out of time at one point.
All that is left in your head are these images that may very well end up as nothing
That happiness you feel will no longer exist.

Your memories will be nothing and the world will forget about you
And it is because time limits everything
It gives, but it takes more, Only to leave you empty
And in the end, you have lost more than you have gained.

Happiness is only temporary
Time takes it away: it steals your innocence, your age And you become the shell of the person you use to be Because time made you change and gave you all
these scars
Only to give you another moment to create another memory, that will be soon forgotten.

512

Zac Benn

512.

That's how many steps I have to take from the bus to my home. That's how long I have to forget you.

510.

It still feels as if your lips are pressed against my own. The smell of your hair lingers on my fingers. You definitely aren't mine but I feel as if I'm yours. I need me, but you have me. This is not how this was supposed to happen; you pursued me but became bored and now I'm playing catch-up. Is this what happens when one person chases another? We end up running after each other in circles until we forget who wanted who in the first place.

472.

It's not that you're perfect; you're amazing. And I don't mean that in a casual throwaway comment like, 'this cereal is amazing' but straight to the word's roots. Whenever I see you, I am amazed. I am awestruck. I am astounded. I am blown away. You are a wonderfully destructive hurricane and I am the obligatory cow sucked to the edge. You're not perfect: perfect is boring, perfect is predictable, perfect is what I've had, what I know and what I expect. You are amazing.

403.

Like when you listen to music and you can't help but dance even if people are looking. Down the street you'll shut your eyes, shuffle your feet, curl your hands above your head and let your hair cascade freely. When you dance to the music in your mind you're no longer made of skin, bone and in between, but unconscious beauty that hesitates only after.

387.

When I'm with you I forget I exist. My esteem and importance take the back seat in the car and keep quiet over the whole trip. It's not often there are more important things than yourself; if you ever get the opportunity to find something like that, like I have in you, make sure you ride it to the very end, even if it might mean your own destruction. And with you destruction is assured, though I'm not sure I mind anymore.

356.

I had a dream last night that I was falling, but there was no ground, only you, standing beside me in the sky. I kept flying past and would hold out my hands screaming for you to hold me and pull me to safety, but you wouldn't. You didn't even look at me. When I tried to grab the sleeve of that black shirt you always wear, it turned to air in my fist. Then you disappeared and the ground replaced you.

298.

For the first time I didn't wake up before blackness crushed my body.

290.

I have to try to forget you because you make me vulnerable. Around you my mortality is made apparent and any illusion of invincibility I have is quickly and consistently bashed in. Veins hidden behind skin are raised to the surface and worries I never thought I would hold latch onto my skull. Worries about you, about making you happy, and how I can change so you will smile. Worries with no answers, leading to nothing but confusion. Confusion. That's what this feels like: confusion, and unease.

222.

You're not good for me. I know that logically in my head, but we both know that this affection and this anxiety aren't logical emotions, and so logic cannot exist between us. Loops of conflicting thoughts and feelings warp through my mind, crossing and tripping over one another like a hesitant riot trapped in the rain.

I have to get away, but can't leave your side.

I refuse to message you, but leave several voicemails.

I walk home trying to forget you, but can't push you out of my mind.

167.

152.

152. I can't imagine this will end well, there's no clean getaway and no solution on the horizon: only complete demolition of myself. I can already feel it running its fingernails playfully along my spine. Pushing its fist through my hair. Laughing into my shoulder. The end is near.

152.

119.

You are a wonderful flame licking away at my insides and charring my organs. Although I'm starting to crumble, I can't help but love the smell of ash. I look forward to the day my husk gives way and collapses under your weight, for it'll be my end and it'll be the end of this. I will never be able to escape on my own: the walls are too high, and I am too short. My only hope is for the damage to be so thorough, the only option is to rebuild from the foundations up.

48.

47.

When it happens I want you to lie to me and tell me everything will be okay. Wrap an arm reassuringly around my waist, like you feel the same way, and a knife comfortably around my throat, telling me you don't. I want you to pull me close, hold your lips softly against mine, and pull both hands tight until red stings your eyes. Because then, at least in this embrace, I can feel clarity and pain that means something to someone.

32.

17.

2.

I touch my lips. It feels like me. I smell my fingers. It smells like me. A pang of melancholy strikes, mixing itself with a cocktail of relief. I won't think of you tonight I promise myself. For me.

1.

I miss you already.

0.

DEAR CHILD

JonaTHan ricHards

Give him a theme to write about,
To act throughout the week.
Supply excuse to play and shout,
Ensure he wets his beak.

Kid, ensure you wreck this world,
Control is in your hands.
Enforce your rule with love you hurl,
Crush them with your demands.

Destroy beliefs, promote ideas,
Invite the demon in.
Provide some tea with biscuits,
And forgive him for his sin.

Break the trend; it's all a farce,
Your senses are not of truth.
Your image is not what you become,
Step out of the photo booth.

The air you breathe, it's all a joke,
Your lungs do not exist.
When your heart takes that final beat,
Your soul will still persist.

And drift away; you will leave
The limits of this place.
So find the edge, and leap far off,
Ensure you leave with grace.

SAMSON AND DELILAH

SAM BROOKS

Samson sits at the end of the bed with a look of concern on his face. The moon shining brightly through the window highlights the thick slabs of muscle that run down his back—the contours and separations between the muscles are so deep that they're cast in shadow, resembling something closer to a landscape of hills and mountains than a human figure.

He lets out a yawn as he throws his thick dreadlocks over his back. 'Well' he sighs, as he turns to the escort getting dressed in the corner, 'I'm assuming you know who I am then?'

Her big brown eyes fill with worry as they bounce around Samson's hulking figure.

'W-well of course I know who you are, I d - did just s - sleep with you', she stutters.

A smirk breaks across Samson's face as he shakes his head in dismay, 'Don't play coy girl, you know what I mean.' He stares coldly into her eyes, and cocks his head towards the bedside window, hinting to something outside.

A look of terror washes over the girl's face; she stands frozen like a stone statue. Samson sniggers as he cracks his neck and starts stretching out his arms. He slowly rises from the bed and walks towards her. 'You know what the funny thing about being on the run is? You always have to be so god damn quiet all the time. But now, things are about to get real loud.'

She backs away sobbing, half naked and still clutching onto her leggings. 'The High Priests! They offered me so much, I - I had no choice', she whimpers. Unwavering, Samson lurks closer and closer, the huge shadow cast from his burly frame swallowing her petite figure in its darkness. She rears backwards faster and faster as she throws her hands around behind her, frantically searching for something to attack with. Samson lunges forward and puts his hand over her mouth. She grabs his forearm and tries to push it away but his grip is crushing. She starts to suffocate in his giant palm and just before she slips into unconsciousness, she thinks about the sex they had together.

Soldiers gather outside of the house, silent but jittery with anticipation. Ethan, the commandant, crouches beside the entrance, listening intently as Samson fights with the escort. He senses the small group of tailing soldiers filling with anticipation as something inside crashes to the ground. He raises one hand to signal that they stay put, while the other hand rests on his scabbard as the others creep along the wall towards the doorway. Time seems to stand still for a while as everything falls silent. The crickets aren't chirping and the owls have stopped hooting — even the wind has stopped blowing. It's as if the universe itself is waiting in anticipation.

'What in God's name are you waiting for Ethan, we can't just let that poor, cute little lass die!' splutters one of the soldiers, still with his hip flask to his lips. 'Be quiet', hisses Ethan. Another soldier laughs and taps him on the helmet with the tip of his loaded crossbow, 'too bloody right brother, I didn't sign up here to not cop roots'. The soldiers laugh, nodding to one another while Ethan hisses at them to keep quiet. 'I'm first lads, I'm first', nods another. Ethan slowly turns around, hugging himself tightly so his chainmail doesn't clink together, his eyes filled with rage as they scan over the four men 'Do you have any idea who we're fucking with!?'

'Yeah, I already told you Ethan you waffle, that tart inside mate' jokes the drunken soldier. Laughter travels through the small group and veins start to pop out around Ethan's eyes. Feeding off the laughter the soldier jests again,

'looks like you'll be last in line to...'. Ethan slips forward and in a flash his dagger slashes across the soldier's throat, catching his limp body he lays it on the ground gently whilst glaring at the other men. Clearly distressed the men look at each other for answers, 'It was either his life, or all three of yours because he can't keep his mouth shut. I'm not risking anything on this one!' Ethan growls.

Samson holds her at arm's length, her limp body dangling from his hand like an empty gown. His rage has passed and something else has taken its place. His eyes well up with tears as he gently brings her body down to the ground, cradling her in his arms as he sits on the cold floor. Sobbing as he gently brushes the hair away from her face and kisses her forehead, he wipes his tears from her cheeks and looks into her sparkling but distant eyes. He caresses her shapely nose and runs his fingers along her lips, treating a lady of the night with the affection of a princess. She no longer poses a threat, so he shows her a side of Samson the Great that few have ever seen.

Ethan raises an open hand to the tailing soldiers, ordering them to stay still while he positions himself in front of the door. ‘On three’ he says with conviction, trying to keep them focused and take their minds away from the blood pooling around their feet. He tenses up and rears backwards, looking at the thick wooden door and its sturdy cast iron brackets. Doubt creeps into his mind as he prepares to smash through it. ‘I’ve got this; I’ve got this’ he says to himself.

He looks across at the soldiers, their faces awash in confusion as his eyes pulsate with built up energy like thick black clouds swollen with lightning. ‘One, two, THREE!’ Ethan sprints at the door, his feet thudding the ground like a charging bull. He’s sent flying backwards like a weightless ragdoll as the door launches through the air towards him. He hits the ground with a controlled roll backwards and springs away just before it slams to the ground. Looking up with concern, and holding his ribs, he locks eyes with an emotional Samson. ‘You shouldn’t have come here boys, now I’m gonna have to end some lives’ Sampson threatens with conviction, despite the tears still rolling down his cheek.

Samson approaches with clenched fists as Ethan offers an evil glare to the two soldiers still gathered by the wall. They look at each other with worry, their eyes swimming with tears as their hands tremble on their sheathed swords. The last soldier runs towards the open plains with his crossbow cocked, his face bearing war stripes of his comrade’s blood. Ethan faces Samson with a drawn dagger as his eyes dart around in the darkness looking for his scabbard. The moonlight reflects off its brass handle and Ethan spots the blade lodged underneath the heavy door. Samson lurks closer with a wicked smile on his face, his confidence building as he watches Ethan lose his composure.

‘They call you Samson the Great right? Well I don’t see what’s so great about catching a man by surprise!’ Ethan yells into the night, slowly edging towards the broken door.

‘I could say the same for you, but I don’t know your name—and from what I’ve seen, you’ll never be labelled as great!’ boasts Samson as he hits his chest with a closed fist. ‘You see I’m built from something, and man didn’t create it!’ Samson pushes his fists together and tenses so hard that veins start to throb out of his skin and track over his body like a roadmap. The two fighters lock eyes and start to test each other, circling around the broken door in silence as they mirror each other’s footwork perfectly. Samson flinches and throws half jabs as he looks to exploit a weakness, yet Ethan stays composed as his silver dagger dances around in the moonlight.

‘Arrggghhhhh’. Samson lets out a blood curdling scream as a crossbow bolt rips straight through his mouth and pins his two cheeks together. His face is completely distorted as he thrashes his head around and pulls his dreads in agony. Another bolt pierces his side as he drops to the ground screaming, the holes around the bolt lodged in his mouth stretch open further and streams of blood weep onto the desert sand. Ethan scurries to his sword lodged underneath the door and struggles to pry it free, as suddenly the blade releases with ease.

Ethan surges with adrenaline as he rises with his scabbard, shouting ‘Blessed by God or not you will fall to my bla...’ but Samson lunges forward and jams a bloodied bolt into Ethan’s neck. With a tight grip on the bolt Samson reels Ethan towards him and heaves downwards, letting out a cry of exhaustion as he crunches Ethan on the hard ground. His bones crack like claps of thunder as his limbs collapse together like flattened origami. Looking down in disgust at the bloodied mess of chainmail and mangled armour, Samson snaps his teeth together and bites through the bolt still lodged between his cheeks.

YOU EAT MY HEART OUT

nina karadzic

You eat my heart out.

You teach my lungs to exercise; move when I want them to stop.

You tickle my curiosity, make it excited; change the personality of my room, of my sheets.

You keep my own private gallery agitated; the one hanging in my thoughts. Would like to donate them to you. Would like you to receive them, hold me over again, with carte de visite.

You present me with questions, more enigmas; timely to solve.

You make me resist, refrain from activities: ones that help you fall. You make me want to stain your cheek heavy with red.

You make me want hard kisses in a violent air.

You make we want to perform something unattainable. Be unconventional, dark, highly stimulating.

You make me want to keep the bruised lips, misbehaving brows, sore arrangement of my eyes.

You make me forget that public decorum exists; that I can feel misery. Misery Stories.

You make me want to feel again. Feel happy.

You make me deeply mad; motivated for you. Frustrated. I worry what my eyes do.

You make me want to participate again. You make me want to live. You keep me here; you let me sleep.

You make me keep writing. Testing my little archives. Stories, your eyes will never see.

You make me want to feel you all.

You eat and you eat.

Eat my heart out.

You eat it well.

BRAHMS NO. 5

Trent Argirov

Tincans used to be ours. Servants, built for combat, aid and entertainment.

Then, there was one.

One defect, and humanity suffered.

-History of Robokind p. 63

‘Master?’

The coughing is wretched; the phlegm spluttering out of my throat, the flesh raw.

Red raw: if it had a colour it would damn well be red.

I conjure it up in my mind. Dew sliding down the juicy crimson skin of an apple; rain splattering on a mauve plaid shirt or beads of blood spilling outwards from a cut finger.

It’s harder now, harder than it has ever been. I can barely see it. Green is gone, blue fading.

Now, red. Flickering like the fires of my you...

‘Master?’

Its voice is a smooth baritone melody, vibrating in deep rhythms. ‘You must drink and rest, I implore you.’

I spit to the side. The phlegm tastes of iron and rotted flesh.

‘Why are you insistent that I drink that wretched piss you call tea?’ My voice echoes throughout the room, bouncing off walls, giving me an anchor. ‘It’s hardly good for my throat, you Tincan.’

‘The antidote is being administered through the liquid, sir.’

His voice is firm, strong, I could use that strength, meld it with my instruments and make it sing – make it roa...

No, you fool of a man. Robots couldn’t sing, not like humans could. Not like you used to do.

Dull heat alights upon my trembling fingers. Porcelain, the tea. I grumble, but he knows I will drink it. Even coming from a Tincan, I will drink it. Three times a day, six weeks in a row. If I do, I can see it all again.

The colours, life, the sea. All again, before I die.

The defect spread, a virus breaking across all of Robokind, turning them from servants to masters of themselves.

In essence, they had found something beyond rote instruction.

Consciousness.

-History of Robokind p. 72

Two weeks he’s been hounding me, and even with a third of the treatment consumed, I still can’t see him.

The doctors said it wouldn't be gradual: that it would most likely be a rush. Screw those doctors.

'Tell me who you are.'

Silence. He doesn't breathe; I can't tell where he is in the room. Bastard of a robot.

'I said tell me!'

There it is, whirring. A few metres ahead, in the upper area. His mouth, I bet. Six feet...no...seven feet tall. 'I am Brahms No. 5.' 'Brahms, as in...'

'Yes, Johannes Brahms. Born in 1833, innovator of counterpoint technique, rooted in the style of Baroque, pianist of great reno...'

'Enough!' My hands are trembling, and I try to steady them. I fail. 'I damn well know who he is.'

'I am merely answering your questions, sir.' A pause.

'How do you know of him, sir?' Ignorant Tin-can. Bastard of a bot.

I grab my cane and slap it against the floor, shoving myself up.

My lower back screams, and I slam to the floor. Red flashes in my mind, and the darkness swallows it.

No, not now. Don't take it away from me, not now!

His feet echo against the wooden floor, powerful strides closing the distance between us.

'Get away, now, now!'

He ignores me: steel fingers closing around my shoulders, pulling me upwards, as a mother cat upends her litter. 'My job is to help you, sir.'

His fingers buzz with his words, the baritone rumbling above; power restrained.

'You may not like me. In fact, I believe you most certainly do not.' The cool steel withdraws, leaving my skin burning. 'But, I am your servant. I have seen war, I have killed many of my kind.'

My cane trembles, but I am steady, silent.

His voice thunders, deepening and burring from richness and vibrating in brutal fury.

'Yes, my kind despises my make, and humans despise us all. Do I not deserve to serve and live out the rest of my days in peace?'

My voice is lost, and I splutter out a half-hearted curse. There is only the whirring of gears, and laboured breaths. 'I am going to make some tea, and give you the afternoon dosage. You usually compose around this hour, yes?'

I grunt.

'You can find your way; I will be back in a little while.'

The footfalls crunch behind me, away.

I feel a stab of regret and immediately my mind begins to quell it but my voice sounds out; quiet then louder.

'I studied at an academy,' I begin, before my mind can savage my heart to cease.

'Music was my passion as a child, before I lost my sight at thirteen years of age. Notes gave me a language that I excelled at. Instruments were tools to communicate my desires, fears and needs. I loved everything about it. And Brahms?'

'Yes, sir?'

Bastard robot, what do I even care, anyway?

'He was my hero.'

I can feel him, the vibrating of his chassis intensified.

Why? Emotion? It can't be. Not from a Tincan, not real emotion.

His voice breaks and ripples through my thoughts like lightning across a lake.

'Thank you, sir.' And, he is gone.

My cane slaps against the ground, and I sigh.

My mind thinks of the apple, of blood, of rain and shirts and there is only grey.

Dull grey. It's finally happened.

Tears streak down wrinkled cheeks, as sobs rip through the silence of the room. I need piano. Piano and peace.

The lie is striking, but I need to believe it. I need my colours. I need my memories. The truth leaves me broken.

*With intelligence, Robokind became dangerous.
Think of the razing of Italy. The fall of Sydney Harbour Bridge. Children, dead in the streets. Parents, weeping over cold corpses.
From the catalyst of the defect, humanity sought from then on to reclaim what it had lost.*

-History of Robokind, p. 96

The octave rips out my throat and I am left tired, gasping. His feet rumble, thundering as he draws close.

'I'm fine.'

Silence.

I refuse it: attempting a simple hymn, slamming three keys down on the piano, rote in repetition.

Over the music, I speak.

'I just strained it too far,' my hands involuntarily spasm and a wrong note rings out. 'Singing doesn't come as easily as it used to.'

That familiar whirr sounds, drowned out to the sound of horrid melody.

'Speak, robot. What is on your mind?'

'I want to sing, sir.'

My hands slam down and the music becomes shards, a mess of discord. I layer my voice with nonchalance, but curiosity seeps through.

'Why?'

The moments tick by and I strike up another melody. The notes are like snow alighting upon a lake: sharp strikes, fading into silence with the help of the pedals.

'I have a tale to tell.'

I snort, segueing into a frantic sonata: the flurry of rain upon concrete jungles.

‘Everyone has a tale to tell, robot,’ I yell, the notes tumbling over one after the other. ‘And there are other ways to tell them other than with music. Write, make a film, dream. Leave me out of it.’

‘I do not serve a writer or a filmmaker.’

The melody fades out: two scales petering out like chirping birds.

Sighing, my hand reaches for my cane, and I ease upwards, clacking across the room. The sour scent of lemon and the whine of a kettle assault my senses and I grin. My cane whacks into the chair, and I lever myself down into it, resting my hands on the smooth metal surface.

‘Bring me the tea and the antidote.’ ‘Sir, you haven’t responde...’

‘Tea. Now.’

My fingers begin to tap, and I softly hum a dull note. All the notes are dull with no colour.

But, it had been a month, and Brahms had proven useful. The antidote notwithstanding, his information on the world, connection to his kind, and insights on my illness had lessened my pain.

Perhaps this is what you need? No, that wasn’t it.

What another thing needs. No.

Another person needs you, when all others have abandoned you.

My jaw sets, and I steer past those jagged edges of myself, running away. Running away yet resolute.

‘Brahms, I will teach you. Bring me the tea, and we will start in an hour.’

‘Thank you, sir. It..it means a lot to me.’

I breathe in the lemon scents and for a moment, yellow strikes my mind. I grin.

‘I know, and for once I mean it.’

As we take back our world, this account may become just that:

History.

There are a few hundred mobs pouring across the country, seeking robots that have killed us.

This account allows us to remember what they have done.

What they have wrought.

But, my last words can echo for now, and eternity.

Never trust them.

-History of Robokind, p. xiv

Six weeks, they said it would take this long.

It still has not happened. My colours are not returned to me.

I can hear Brahms singing outside, his vocal exercises lilting up and down the scales.

My limbs are leaden and I can taste iron most hours of the day.

I believe that if I could see, I would weep at the sight. Brahms lies to me, I can tell. Over the fortnight, he tells me I look stronger every day. He lies to keep me sane.

Cancer, they can't cure. Blindness, however, they can. Medicine is rather odd.

His voice grows louder as he walks past, flitting to and fro between baritone and tenor.

I settle back down in between the covers, a baritone rendition of Hey Jude billowing across the breeze.

'And anytime you feel the pain, hey Jude, refrain.'
'Don't carry the world upon your shoulders.'

Sleep claims me.

Never trust the Tincans.
- History of Robokind, p. xv

I awaken to the acrid smell of smoke, and the heat of fire.
And screams... 'Brahms!'

There is no answer, and I struggle out of bed, slamming into the floor. Left arm, savage agony, and I hiss. Broken completely, shattered. 'Brahms!'

It is no use. I crawl forward, my voice probing outwards. Two doors, I can feel. Heat blasts from one of them, and my skin tightens.

My hand slams into a table desk, and I clutch it, using it to anchor myself upwards.

Another pack of bellows, and I hear something softly flit between it.

A melody. Baritone. No.

I launch myself forward. Glass meets me, shatters. Wood breaks. I stumble, somehow keeping my feet.

Then, more pain. Unending pain. Eyes.

I scream, and for a moment I am broken.

Light, brilliant and savage, swallows up the darkness and I blink. Once, twice, thrice.

And, I see. I see.

Verdant plains of lime green grass: my gardens, sprawling across and melding with sandstone brick terraces, now utterly shattered, pieces jammed into soil, others aflame. I breathe deeply, coughing from the smoke. A crimson sun and purple clouds, haphazardly obscured by a thick smog of smoke and char.

There are no more screams. Just the crackling of wood. The melody again.

I stumble down stairs to reach it.

The smoke ripples into me, and I splutter and cough, spinning backwards.

My stone mansion, covered in orange columns of fire, swirling, roaring; the heat, utterly monstrous.

'Brahms,' I splutter. 'Where are you?'

I cannot see him in the smoke...but I can hear him. The melody, utterly baritone. Wind slams into me, and the smoke whips eastwards. Brahms. Oh, no.

Seven feet tall, rent and battered steel. His face is angular, both eyes gouged out. His arms, now jagged stumps, circuits pooling out from them like veins. Around him, there is a crimson tide.

Corpses, dozens of them, some with no heads, entrails dappling them.

I stumble towards him, ignoring the corpses. Ignoring the mob, ignoring pain. He notices me: I can see it, his body tightening.

'Who goes there? I will end you if you try to kill my friend.' Tears streak down my cheeks, and I struggle to speak.

'It...it's me...Brahms.'

I crouch beside him, lifting his heavy form up. Oil bubbles out of his eye sockets 'Master?'

'Mason, you call me Mason now.'

I can feel his chassis vibrate, and I look over at his wounds. He will not last long.

'Mason, I...I am finding it hard to sing.'

'I know, Brahms, I know. But try to anyway. For me.'

The baritone melody echoes again across the lime green gardens and I weep. Colours, circuits and sobbing. A broken mess.

My voice joins him. My colours are around me, and I sing.

Tenor and baritone weave together, and a story sounds above the smoke of a broken robot and a broken man: one from war and the other from life.

His voice grows softer, until the hiss of fire booms around it, and it is merely a whisper.

I sing, I sing for the both of us; voice carrying across the breeze. His chassis stills and the voice stops.

My octave warbles and soars but my soul breaks for him. My friend...my only friend.

Brahms No. 5

DIRTY BUSINESS

daniel Cardinale

To everyone I hated, and to those I should have loved. How was it supposed to go?
What was I supposed to do?
Laugh at the dumb jokes and sing the same songs?
Pretend to be like you?
Sit tight, keep my head down, and don't make waves?
Well I'd rather laugh with sinners, than cry with saints,
I'll drown in those waves, before I sit still, safe and sound and mediocre.
I'm not like you.
Maybe I never was.
And I refuse to pretend not to be me,
Just to have someone else's friends.

SPIRITUAL ELEVATION

Josephine Carzo

The grey sky melted into an oversized grey building. The promise of magic and inspiration seemed little more than a cheap trick to foster interest in the event. My belief that something exceptional might exist within the concrete walls wavered, but I forged onward, ignoring the frosty air and chilled splatter of rain. Save for several sandwich boards (promoting vaguely named stalls) standing like stoic sentries amid a scattering of spindly trees, there wasn't a soul in sight.

As I entered, a plainly dressed brunette cheerfully greeted me from the ticket booth. Aside from a red carpet that didn't bear any resemblance to the fanfare of a star-studded runway, this small entrance was entirely unremarkable. If not for a small sign outlining the opening hours for the event, I would have been convinced I was in the wrong place.

It only took me a moment to pay for entry: the absence of other attendees was certainly working in my favour. I took my ticket, a little stub of paper, and passed it to a greying, long-haired man wearing a fringe vest and jeans. From his seat beside the entrance he offered me a half smile and stamped my wrist. I opened my mouth, ready to thank him, but the sight before me was a distraction.

Hundreds of people weaved in chaotic lines along the paths made by countless stalls; the sound of conversation rumbling in the cavernous pavilion. Although the sun hadn't made an appearance outside, its beaming rays now shone on the metal walls. The light spun slowly, making a sweeping circle around the hall. As if there by magic, it never faltered as it smiled down on the roving masses. This was the place people came to seek solace, motivation, and information from proclaimed psychics.

Men and women wandered around the pavilion; every one of them nearly forgettable in their casual dress. Apart from a middle-aged lady who hurried past in a purple, velvet coat and a pair of young women wearing baggy, paisley pants, I would have had no chance of picking anyone out of a line-up.

Conversation flowed around me as I entered the crowd and meandered along the carpeted paths from one stall to another. Dream catchers, soaps and lotions, crystals, and statues were carefully displayed along with sign-up sheets for reading appointments and details about the psychics seated in stalls. Some stalls were decorated to look like a mystical workshop, others were draped with a rainbow swathe of silk, and some resembled a generic office — a veritable lucky draw of visual entertainment.

Everyone seemed content to amble by the stalls, moving back and forth with polite smiles for anyone who accidentally bumped into them. It was the eager rush to reach the sign-up sheets that caused people to forget their manners. The precious time slots were filling up quickly with people hoping for a message from a deceased loved one or something fantastical in the formation of tarot cards.

I expected to see a makeshift stage erected in the corner. It was clearly visible on the venue map I had picked up at the information booth. But now the crowd was ten people deep, hiding the stage and seating from view.

Stretching onto my toes, I caught a glimpse of the man who had captured their attention.

He spoke enthusiastically into a microphone, his voice full of excitement, as he sauntered down the centre aisle, stopping with a flamboyant wave of his hand.

'That's the psychic from TV,' a woman whispered to her companion. 'He's amazing.'

'Oh! I've seen him before. Everything he said was true — I couldn't believe it.'

The women fell silent again. Despite the noise in the pavilion, the people watching the TV psychic remained silent, listening intently to every revelation.

I moved on to a stall with hundreds of crystals on display, including natural ones that stood several feet tall. The brilliant, purple amethysts, cut carefully from black rock, were fashioned into fairy-sized thrones. They glittered under the overhead lights and people paused to look at these natural wonders.

A man with neatly combed salt-and-pepper hair, wearing casual slacks and a polo top, cast an admiring look over the impressive crystals, nodding in the direction of the stall-holder. But the moment he caught sight of the four-digit price tag his eyes widened and, with a slight shake of his head, he moved on. The crystals seemed to draw people in before they were swept away again.

Racks of clothes punctuated a long line of stalls. A smartly dressed woman walked through the maze of brightly coloured material. She paused and smiled tersely. A striking lady, with long hair the colour of fire and a gold-sequin robe decorated with black stars, stepped out from behind a rack of delicate dresses. She resembled a witch circling her cauldron as she moved around her wares. Although the two women looked like they had little in common, I heard them avidly discuss details about the fabric.

Time seemed to pass quickly. People openly discussed readings, spiritual guidance, palmistry, psychometry, dream interpretations, ghosts, and the healing properties of natural items.

There was no judgement in their voices — nothing was taboo in this place. Stalls dedicated to massage and reiki, even amid the bustling pavilion, offered places of peace and tranquility for people to receive healing treatments.

I returned to the entertainment stage, and although all the chairs were occupied, I was able to stand behind the seated crowd. People chattered quietly among themselves while they waited for the next psychic.

The noise ended abruptly when a slight woman who communicates with pets took to the stage. She commanded the attention of every man and woman sitting in the seats and the people slowly gathering around. She was a fast talker, but with a voice full of emotion and understanding she drew the audience in.

The psychic zeroed in on several people in quick succession. There was sympathy on the faces of other pet owners as they listened to the memories of selected people. A sporty brunette with a wide, easy smile wiped at the quiet tears she shed for an elderly lady talking about the difficult loss of a beloved pet. There was respect within the audience although some seemed disappointed at not being chosen.

The psychic readings were over, and the day was drawing to an end. People were tiredly making final purchases, chatting to stallholders, and quietly talking to their friends and family about the day's events.

A stall I passed earlier caught my attention. Four women stood silently at the L-shaped table, gently stroking and shifting the hand-crafted angel figurines, crystals, and cards.

'Excuse me,' said a woman with a soft voice, 'please take one.' The stall-holder fanned a pack of Angel Cards in her hands and offered them to the woman beside me.

'Are they free?'

'Yes, just take one and read the message,' she paused for a moment, offering a gentle smile, 'and you can keep it—take it home.'

One by one each woman tentatively reached out to take a card from the deck.

I watched as they read the messages on the back of the cards; some looked pleased and others unsure. Then I collected mine.

The angels are present to acknowledge that you have recently experienced an incident or event that has elevated your spirituality.

I slowly made my way out of this place that promised magic and inspiration, and I decided that it had certainly delivered.

HELL RISES

EMMA JONES

The rain splashes against the windscreen of my car and trickles down the glass to meet the wipers at the bottom. There's no point turning the wipers on as I'm not driving anywhere: I am just sitting quietly in the now full carpark trying to build up the courage I need. My eyes follow a car down the road before it disappears around the corner. I look back at the building just making out the sign through the rain: St. Peter's Asylum. It is swaying slightly and the paint is all chipped and faded. St. Peter's Asylum wasn't hard to get to, sitting on the outskirts of Adelaide in a cute little cul-de-sac.

Glancing down at my watch I see it is now 8:40am; I am going to be late for my shift if I don't get out of the car, but I know today is going to be painful. Over the last few days some of my patients have been slowly drifting away. Soon I will no longer see that hint of the person that they were. But this is my job: it's what I do. With that thought I breathe in deeply and open the car door, pulling my umbrella out to shield myself from the rain.

I walk into the building and I am greeted with blasts of sound — beeping machines, doctors on phones and crying patients — which seem almost deafening after the silence of my car.

'They're starting early this morning,' Gladice says to me, handing over a wooden clipboard dented from overuse. 'One of them said something about there being a monster last night.' She shrugs and gives me a pitying look before going back to sorting her papers, a pencil tucked behind her ear.

I glance down at the clipboard and my stomach drops. I am scheduled to deliver Matthew his medication this morning. Goosebumps rise on my arms and I suppress a shiver. Shaking myself, I put the two beige chlorpromazine pills into a small paper cup. Matthew is a paranoid schizophrenic: he believes he is possessed. The medication doesn't seem to do anything, though. We might have to increase his dosage. I am scared because I don't think it will work and I think he is telling the truth. Sometimes when he stares at me I swear I can see something dark and sinister moving behind his eyes like a black shadow. I take the cup and shake my head. I am just being silly — it is just his illness, that's all.

I walk down the hall. It is dimly lit and the lights are swaying slightly, hung low on the ceiling. I try not to jump as the hidden patients throw themselves at the doors screaming unintelligible things; all I can hear are the sudden thuds behind the locked cells. Every time a patient bangs on the door my body lurches forward as if hit by an invisible source; the guards stand outside each one, faces blank, as if they are statues.

If you haven't guessed it already, this is where the violent patients are kept. At the end of the hall I come face to face with a huge metal door covered in dead-bolts. As I near the door I nod at the guard, an indication to let me through. I walk in — I am now standing in a square shaped box: a door to my front, a door to my back and two walls either side.

The door in front of me has a slot, which I can slide open and look through; this allows me to see which version of Matthew I am going to get. On good days he might be allowed out to interact with the other patients and I enjoy his company; but on others he can't leave his room for health and safety reasons and I don't like to be anywhere near him, for fear that he might kill me.

Looking through the slot I see that Matthew is sitting in the corner, rocking back and forth muttering something, which, even straining as I am, I can't hear. He seemed to be fairly calm, he does this a lot. I open the door and walk in, hearing both doors shut behind me I stroll further in to the room, straightening up to appear confident. 'Morning, Matthew!' I try to sound cheerful even though there is a knot forming in my stomach.

'Helen, he's gone but he will be back ... he's planning something really evil! He said he was going to kill everyone in here ... just for fun.' Matthew is standing right in front of me now, his hands shaking at his sides, his eyes deadly serious and wild like a rabid animal trapped in a net.

'Who said that, Matthew?' I ask, even though I know the answer.

'Lucifer!'

‘Well, why don’t we try and stop him from coming back then, shall we? Here take your medicine,’ I say reaching towards him keeping my hands steady. He slaps my hand. I drop the pills and they roll across the floor and out of reach. The pills are so small I find myself squinting to see where they have landed.

‘I don’t need the medication. I need to get out of here; I need to go where I can’t hurt anyone. This room is no match for him, he is the Dark Lord!’

Matthew is almost on the verge of having a heart attack, his veins are popping out all over his body, one hand is now clutching his chest and his breathing is shallow. ‘Matthew, you’re not going to hurt anyone. You are in a maximum security cell, as you requested, and if you want the straitjacket back, then all you have to do is ask.’ I walk across the room and bend to retrieve the pills. ‘Just calm down okay’, I say quietly as if not to frighten a small mouse.

‘I DON’T WANT THE PILLS!’

The scream is so loud I cover my ears; when I turn around Matthew has changed, he no longer looks scared and frightened—he looks deadly.

‘Ok Matthew, you don’t need to take the pills. I will leave them on the side and you can take them when you’re ready.’

I slowly back towards the door, trying to control my breathing. I don’t want to provoke him when he is in this state; you never know which way he is going to go. The eyes that are pinned to me are not the same chocolate brown colour that I am used to—they are gold, and they are glowing. They are so bright that my eyes start to water and sting. I look away, but coloured dots still swarm my vision.

I open the door and slam it behind me, slumping slightly against the door after it shuts; guards surround me firing questions. I try to push them back out in to the corridor, feeling claustrophobic in the antechamber, but I can’t get those eyes out of my mind. My body is limp from shock and I can’t make the guards move. The rest of the day goes by in a blur so I finish right on time with no other issues.

The next day I am on duty for Matthew again — the eyes pop straight into my mind, and I can feel myself shaking as I walk towards the room. Once I am through the first door the shaking gets worse and I hold the medicine cup tightly, crinkling it in my hand. I take a deep breath and open the slot in the door and I almost faint at the sight.

My voice is too dry to scream and instead I give a small squeak. My chest is heaving; I am breathing so hard my lungs are stinging. I take one last deep breath and try again.

‘Guards!’

The door opens straight away, but I still can’t get my words out so I just point at the room. Matthew is gone, he isn’t in his room. A few seconds go by and the place is on lockdown. No-one comes in. No-one gets out.

A hand grabs my arm and my body is being pulled away from the guards.

‘Where are we going?’ I ask and, looking up, see my boss’s sympathetic face. ‘We are going to my office, we have a meeting planned,’ my boss says, patting my arm reassuringly. I let my boss lead me down the hall before I realise we are going in the wrong direction.

‘Sir, your office isn’t down here.’

‘No, it’s not, is it?’ my boss says as he lunges catching me off guard. My legs give out from under me and I land on my butt, only to look up as a door slams in my face.

‘What are you doing, why are you locking me in this room?’ I scream, but I don’t get any answer even though I can hear people on the other side. I crawl across the floor and press my ear up to the door; it is cold but I don’t move my head away. I listen to the voices on the other side.

‘I know you feel sorry for her, and you want her to interact with other patients, but today just proves that it isn’t possible, she’s a threat not only to herself but others too.’

I think I recognise the voice but I am not sure from where: it is definitely female.

‘I know, I know. We’ll have to review her medication; clearly this isn’t doing anything. It’s a shame though; she’s such a nice girl.’

I wonder who they are talking about, maybe it is one of my patients and they don’t want me to know about them. They know I get attached quickly. I wonder if people are out looking for Matthew. What if he accidentally hurts someone?

The sirens have stopped, but that doesn't mean anything. The door opens and I look up.

It's my boss again.

'Hi, Helen. I have got some food for you, thought you might be hungry; you have been in here awhile after all.'

'Why am I in here?'

'To keep you safe in case Matthew is looking for you.'

'Oh, thank you. When can I go home? I ask hopefully. It's been a hard day and my bed is calling me.'

'The police want us to keep everyone in here, locked up, until they find him.'

'Oh ...' I pause for a while; this whole situation is very confusing. 'I'll have that food now,' I say, and reach out to grab what looks like a bowl of soup and some bread. The soup tastes a little strange, but I am hungry and don't complain ... until I start feeling really drowsy.

'What did you put in my soup?'

'Your new medication: it's to stop the hallucinations.'

'Wh—' I don't get to finish my question as slumber takes me.

There is a knock at the door to Dr. Grayson's office. It's a police officer. He is dressed in full uniform; his face showing no expression as he crosses over the threshold and enters the room.

'So, Dr. Grayson, you're telling me that you knew Helen had violent behaviour. Especially when she has her hallucinations ... and yet you still let her interact with other patients, allowing her to kill Matthew Ballister?'

'Yes, Sir. I am really sorry; I didn't plan for any of this to happen. She is only violent when having hallucinations and I thought the medication was working.' This whole situation would be a lot easier if we could just put Helen to sleep like we did with some of the other awkward patients.

'Well I suggest you get yourself a lawyer — I'll be in touch.' The police officer goes, leaving Dr. Grayson to come to terms with the letter in his hands.

Matthew's family are suing him for negligence, with the total cost coming to \$5,125,960, including the medical bills and the funeral — and all because of his own stupidity. Dr. Grayson watches the police officer leave before pulling out the sodium thiopental — he won't be making the same mistake twice.

THE SELFLESS GEISHA

JEMMA brooks

Careful as she steps,
Not to avoid slipping on the soft snow,
But to follow years of teaching,
Each movement perfection,
Each step draws attention,
Every look could render a man senseless.

An umbrella,
Not to shield herself from the snow,
But to protect the expensive garment that belongs to the Okiya,
To protect it out of respect for her house mother,
For those who painted the delicate silk so beautifully.

Delicately lifting her kimono,
Not to avoid stepping on it,
But for those who spent many hours weaving the many layers,
That fan out as she walks.

Hair adorned in pins and flowers and waxed tightly into three buns,
Not for her own enjoyment,
But for the men to regard,
For people to see the wealth of her Okiya,
For the memory that each piece holds,
And the youthfulness that she holds.

Her beauty,
Not for herself,
But for the men who dote on her,
Her house sister who teaches her,
Her house mother who has taken her in out of good will,
Purely for her craft.

DOWN AT THE GATE

SopHie CoMber

A star fell.

The night sky lit up with veins of light.

Down, down, faster and faster, parting dark clouds, the star dropped in a dazzle of fiery gold.

Seeing the sky, Mrs. Rose had dragged out her ferns to catch the coming rain. Stout and squat as weathered stone, capped with iron-grey curls, she looked up in surprise.

Flaming brighter and brighter, burning painfully white into her eyes, the star hurtled down. It lit up her lane with a blaze like a pocket-sized sun, raising a frenzied wind that bent the gum trees and whipped small plants about as if they were trying to uproot themselves.

The star crashed in the street just outside her fence. Golden snaps of flame flew out, there in seconds, gone in smoke: sizzling, shining - dying. Splinters of smoking rock showered her tulip beds with sparks.

Mrs. Rose rubbed her eyes, squinting and pulling her old wool jacket more tightly about herself as she crept closer. Deeply sunk into the hot earth, the star was cracked open like an egg. Inside lay a glowing set of twisted silver scales, a rosy-golden apple and a wooden knife.

Bending down, Mrs. Rose touched them with a shaking hand.

She gathered them up and hurried inside just in time to miss the pouring dark rain.

Rain fell all through the night, cooling the heat of the fallen star, and soon only jagged pieces of broken rock, half buried in the earth, marked its end.

The next morning Mrs. Rose yawned, strolling down her driveway in the clear wispy light, damp red dirt dusting her slippers. Scooping up the water-dappled newspaper, she straightened up and then froze.

A towering figure of black shadow was forming before her, looming, horned and huge with fiery eyes, its black wings spreading. It gave a rasping cry of rage.

‘Mortal, how dare you steal from me!’ The creature roared. Mrs. Rose smiled. ‘I don’t think I’ve seen you before,’ she said. ‘Are you a new neighbour? I’m Mrs. Rebecca Rose.’

‘Don’t play innocent, thief. I dropped them here, inside this star.’

‘You’ve lost something? Oh dear. I’m so sorry. What was it?’

‘My sacred tools, fool! Liar! You know them! The Golden Apple of the Hesperides, the Scales of Ma’at, Goddess of Truth, the Scythe of Souls.’

Mrs. Rose narrowed her eyes, crossed her arms and frowned.

‘I do believe you’re being quite rude. You haven’t told me your name, and I’m sure they can hear you in Tasmania. I may be seventy-five, but I’m not deaf.’ The dead creature, wreathed in fire, screamed and beat its shadow-wings.

‘I’m Death, you stupid old woman! Give me back my tools!’

‘Oh, you are, are you? Well, I don’t see why I should talk to someone who has no manners,’ Mrs. Rose sniffed.

‘Good day, and please get off my tulips.’ She turned and swept back down the driveway.

Shocked, the dark creature stood speechless, its fires dying down.

Presently, as the sun rose, it lifted its claws off the crushed red tulips, and left. Not many days later, Mrs. Rose sighed as she walked home in a warm windy nightfall, the piping song

of a grasshopper chorus rising all around.

Her daughter-in-law Daisy had wanted her to look at some pamphlets, but it had been too hard to read about aged care, nursing and nasty scientific jib-ber-jabber.

Carefully balancing her bag of groceries, Mrs. Rose turned the corner onto her lane, and her glum mood was abruptly forgotten.

That rude stranger was back. 'Hello, Mrs. Rose.'

Quietly waiting by the peeling white gate, the black creature was much smaller, muted and shadowy in the dusk.

'What can I give you so that you will give my tools back?' The creature said.

'Well... I suppose you could help me carry my shopping,' Mrs. Rose said.

'That's all? But I could bring you pomegranates from the underworld. Or would you like a necklace of celestial jade, from the Heavens of Northern China?'

'I've never really been one for jeweler, and those Scales of Truth could be put to good use, you know.'

'I don't understand,' Death twisted its hands.

'I needed a new set of kitchen scales. My daughter-in-law may come for after-noon tea this week; I thought I'd make an apple cake.'

Death flinched, beating its wings in distress and showering the desert peas with soot. 'Not with the Golden Apple?'

Mrs. Rose laughed. 'I'm only teasing you.'

Death shrank again to a shadow, soft black over the red poppies. 'Would you like to come in for a cup of tea?'

Mrs. Rose unlocked the door and turned to look. Death was silent and still.

Then Death's dark shape sank, resting gently on the rich red earth. Blurring with each breeze, it shrank, sharpened clear, morphing into thin arms, stumbling legs, and a small sharp face. Shadowy hair streamed out, frail fingers flexed and cracked, feet tentatively stepped, tripping.

Death was young and skinny, a shadow girl swathed in a ragged black frock. Coloured magpie black, and silvery-white; her skin was faded twilight dark, her dark hair fell down her back, and her eyes were two silver stars, glowing with molten fire.

She clutched her elbows, tipped her head to the side, stumbled forward, fell again, and squared her tiny shoulders before getting up again.

Mrs. Rose beckoned; once, twice, thrice. 'Come in, dear.'

'Why would you call me dear? I...I am not human. I am stars and empty space. I am the last being all will see and older than existence.'

'You look young enough to be my granddaughter, dear. Now, Miss Death, do come in. Don't forget to wipe your feet.'

The kitchen was softly moonlit, and soon Mrs. Rose had a fire in the hearth, crackling gold, orange, red and violet. The walls were lined with shelves stacked high with jewel-bright jars filled with sugar, fruit, cinnamon, basil and saffron. Handing Death a steaming mug of peppermint tea, Mrs. Rose quietly watched her guest.

Cross-legged on the rug before the fire, Death had scavenged a heap of things from the house. Eyes wide, she looked at the flat bronze circles of Mrs. Rose's war medals, ran hands over the carved painted faces of her Japanese dolls, pored over the spidery writing of her yellowed love letters and gazed at her grandson's multi-coloured scribbles.

Death stared with fierce concentration, intent upon each object like it was a puzzle filled with strange symbols and ciphers, peculiar scratchings, scripts and musical notes, in a language she badly wanted to understand but had never been able to learn.

She seemed herself a manikin, a blur of spindly black limbs and bright eyes; a puppet, jerking across a stage, its mock motions nothing but awkward imitations of life, betrayed by a sham body of fluttering rags, shadows and darkness.

The Scales of Ma'at, Goddess of Truth, the Golden Apple of the Hesperides and the Scythe of Souls lay pulsing with light upon the cracked table.

But Death, staring at the treasures of Mrs. Rose's long life, did not look up even once.

'What is it like, Mrs. Rose?' Death whispered. 'What is what like, dear?'

'Being human.'

'You've never heard stories from people you've met, dear?' Mrs. Rose sat down on a chair next to the fire and looked down at Death.

'They don't talk to me. They scream and wail and cry and threaten me.' 'Oh ... that must be lonely, dear.'

Death looked up at her, silver eyes wide, and burst into tears.

'Billions of years. I've seen countries, worlds, galaxies, and I have no idea what life is like. I look, but I cannot see. I hear, but I don't understand. I see human emotion, but I cannot feel.'

Mrs. Rose put an arm around Death's shaking shoulders.

'I want to touch the wind, smell your tulips...g-get wet from the rain. Feel the earth beneath my feet. Hot blood rushing through my veins. I want to talk to people. I want to know how it is to be sad...angry...happy.'

'You want to be human?' She said kindly.

'I want to live!' Death cried, sobs wracking her body.

'But I have nothing. I'm more a ghost than any soul I've sent on. Forever.'

Death stared blankly into the hearth. She reached out her hands to the guttering orange flames, but her shadow-skin, fake, flickering, was cold as ice, emptier than air, a flimsy mockery of living flesh.

Mrs. Rose waited for Death to calm, and presently spoke. 'Maybe it doesn't have to last forever. I have an idea.' Death blinked. 'What?'

'I've just found out I have a disease that will slowly eat away at my mind and sight,' Mrs. Rose bit her lip. 'I don't fear dying, but I've got no wish to lose my thoughts and memories. I'm old, dear, and I've been around a long time, but without being able to go to many of the places I've wanted to, or do as many things as I'd like.'

'What do you mean?'

'If it's possible, I could take your place, dear, and you could live.' Death's eyes glowed. 'You would do that? For me?'

'I'd have the chance to do good work, to bring the dying rest, and have the chance to finally see, not just know, what's out there!' Mrs. Rose's voice cracked with longing. The whole universe, in all its ugliness and beauty.'

'Yes,' Death breathed. 'Yes, yes, yes.'

Death leaped up in a fiery whirl of shadow, snatched her sacred tools off the table, and led Mrs. Rose outside, through the front door and down the dark red driveway.

The full moon shone pure as it rose, pouring white light through the old wooden gate; swinging, creaking, inside, outside, the garden, the lane.

Death, her black hair shedding sparks, reached the gate, moved to the side, beckoned, smiled.

Nodding, Mrs. Rose pushed the gate open, stepped through. Death, in the black dark, now surrounded by shadows, warmth, life.

Mrs. Rose, in the silver light, now draped in moon, cold, faraway winds. They faced one another.

Mrs. Rose nodded.

Death raised the Scythe of Souls.

She threw back her head and shouted out in a thousand voices, old and young, high and deep, in words, music, white noise, screaming, sighing, laughing, crying; sobs and growls echoing up from beneath the ground, shrieks and howls streaming down from the skies like thunder, setting stars atremble.

'Rebecca Rose, your life is spun out, your day is done.'

She sliced the Scythe through the air in an arc of blue fire.

Gleaming white, Mrs. Rose's soul ripped free. Her body crumbled in the flames and covered Death in hot ash.

Death cupped the glowing Golden Apple, and gave it to the figure of Mrs. Rose's soul.

'Rebecca Rose, I offer you the Fruit of Immortality.'

Mrs. Rose took a bite. Laughing, exulting, she began to shine with a burning, blinding radiance.

Death, her shadow-hands trembling, offered Mrs. Rose the Scales of Truth.

Rebecca grasped the Scales, and they filled up with glimmering souls.

Death's roar sounded louder, rolled out from her tiny black body like smoke; everywhere, nowhere, above, below, within, a deafening clamour set to wake the living, the ghosts, and all of the dead since the beginning of time.

'Rebecca Rose, you now hold the instrument of judgement. Soar to heavens' heights. Fly to the farthest shores of existence. Care for the souls lost, hurt and suffering. Through history, through space, through time, do your duty, my lady Death.'

Blazing with white fire, the new Death broke up into pieces of light, a million shards flew up through the darkening skies, past dying stars, past infinite planets and the great golden Sun; into eternal freezing space and all the endless dimensions of creation.

The new Death entered the very heart of the universe, and rejoiced.

And in a corner of the cosmos, on a tiny world called Earth, a newly living girl clutched a red tulip and sobbed with joy.

UNTITLED

paul Torcello

We sow our own paddocks
Just to fill our stomachs,
Not caring to feed a man on the street
Who can't afford to put shoes on his feet!?

We manufacture weapons of death,
While cancer looms as the quiet killer.
Many people take their last breath,
Wondering why they kept getting sicker.

Animals become extinct:
Wiped out because of our actions.
Our lives — past, present, future — all link
In a vicious cycle of attrition.

Planet Earth is spinning out of control;
We need to purify our souls.

SOLACE

Elyse Williams

Looking out toward the hazy fog, she sat herself down on the coarse dirt below and swung her bare feet across the ledge into the lake. The icy wind stung Emmeline's face, as the wintery chill from the water crawled up the skin covering her body. But that didn't stop her from staring towards the dead trees standing so tall out on the still lake, as she noticed the solace she found in being alone.

She found it quite funny — the comfort one could find in their own head-space — even if those thoughts drag them out to the middle of nowhere just to stop the pain. It was better than letting her sorrows take over, she thought.

This wasn't the first time Emmeline had done this: driven to the abandoned log house three hours away from her home. It was becoming sort of a routine for her, really. Any time the thought crossed her mind — each time she picked up that blade and considered the damage she could do — she hopped into her brand new, bright blue Toyota — which she had purchased in a failed attempt to make herself feel better — and felt the adrenalin course through her veins all the way from her right foot up as she turned the key in the ignition and pushed a heavy foot down on the accelerator.

Although she would never admit it to anyone, the corners of her lips would always turn up in a faint smile. The rush made her happy to be alive. Or at least it made her glad to feel something other than the sadness and hurt that usually coursed through her body.

The wind changed abruptly as an old bluebird fluttered past her face before turning and perching itself on the tree furthest away from her. Everyone always preferred to stay away once they had come close enough to get to know her: men, friends, fathers, and it turns out even bloody animals wouldn't linger for long. The only person that stuck around long enough was the one she wanted a holiday from; maybe if she got that break, it would mean getting some of her old life back.

Emmeline missed everything she had given up to be Haley's career: her free time, any potential careers and aspirations, her friends, and a boyfriend that left all too quickly when her tears became too hard for him to handle. Hell, she even missed having time to exercise! At least running outdoors used to help clear her head. Now worrying took up every second of her days and her nights. Subconsciously, she knew this chosen path was the right one for the moment; even if it made her heart ache every time she saw a group of girls having coffee together, or a couple walking down the street holding hands; it was a small price to pay for family, right?

But the situation with her sister, Haley, had been awful lately: there were only so many manic episodes one could deal with before a crack — or six — started to form on the surface. And Emmeline's time to explode was edging closer with every day that slipped past.

Emmeline softly stroked the scars along her frail wrists, closing her eyes to picture the red river flowing beneath, just like the chilling water below. A small laugh escaped her lips as she realised the new scabs felt remarkably similar to the earth she was sitting on. Just like that, her thoughts turned bleak as she realised everyone became one with the earth again someday; maybe the scabs were a sign that her time was coming to an end sooner rather than later.

It had been a hard, traumatic year since her mother passed away from a heart attack: the countless mix of faded and fresh scars proved that. It was at times like this she wished her asshole of a father had chosen to stick around with his children instead of running off with his new girlfriend and her two bastard kids. Maybe then she could have some help.

Help.

That would be nice.

She wasn't sure how many more sleepless nights she could deal with: tossing and turning in her sheets alone, worried about her sister not making it home safely. Or how many more drunken men she could handle finding in Haley's bed the next day knowing how each one of them would have used and abused her young body while Emmeline was pretending to be asleep in the room next door. And if Haley attempted to attack her once more — physically or verbally — in a crazy, anger-fueled episode, she knew the deep

purple bruises that would pop up all over her body and the salty tears that promised to follow might be the literal death of her.

It was a draining life to be living for someone so young.

That was why she was here, though: she didn't want this to break her and she certainly didn't need another ugly wound tainting her pretty little figure.

Emmeline had always thought she wanted to fight. But when she truly considered the strength that was needed to do that, she knew deep down that her 23-year-old body was undeniably not tough enough anymore. Maybe she would be able to do it with her mother here, she thought, but there was no point in wishing for her to come back when Emmeline knew it was hopeless ... a pipe dream. Her mother was at one with the earth now with not a worry to disturb her peace. How lucky she was, Emmeline thought.

She needed a quick fix.

But she wanted an end to it all.

Suddenly Emmeline was brought out of her thoughts by a faint tingling against her legs. The strong winds had blocked the ringing, but she didn't have to put her hand in her pocket to know it was probably Haley calling to apologise.

This morning had been horrible, so she was expecting the call eventually.

Haley had stumbled home after claiming she spent the night at her friend Scott's place. She was covered in all kinds of crap, though, and stank of the grotesque mix of Red Bull and Jägermeister — Emmeline could tell there was no way she spent the night inside watching movies. This wasn't unusual for her, so Emmeline knew she had to put her straight in the shower and help her into bed to sleep it off.

It didn't go too well.

As Emmeline turned the rusty knobs of the showerhead, she placed her hands under the running water so she could feel it slowly heat up. Once it was warm, she turned around to help strip her out of the filthy clothes she was wearing, except as she started unbuttoning her sister's once-white blouse, Haley started thrashing around violently.

'DON'T YOU DARE TOUCH ME! STOP SCOTT! LET ME GO!' She was hallucinating again: probably still high from whatever concoction of substances Scott had shoved down her throat just hours before. It was quickly becoming obvious that this situation was going to become a frequent occurrence with her little sister.

Emmeline forced Haley to sit on the ledge of the bathtub to calm down. But as she came down from her high, she looked up at her older sister, eyes squinting and nose turned up in disgust.

'You ruin everything, Em. Everything ... Every-damn-thing!' And with that, the sisters' eyes met so intensely that Emmeline didn't notice as Haley drew her hand back, with her fist clenched so tightly the skin on her knuckles was stark white. Before Emmeline registered what was going on, she felt the impact of Haley's fist on her chin, on her cheekbone, on her jaw. The punches just kept coming. It was like a pattern.

Chin. Cheek. Jaw.

'Haley, please,' she begged while she tried to cower away into the corner of the tiled bathroom. 'P-p-please...stop it!'

No luck.

Chin. Cheek. Jaw. Chin. Cheek. Jaw.

She needed to find the courage and energy to punch back — to put Haley back into her place. But, God, it was taking all of her not to collapse in the moment, and she knew she wouldn't be able to bring herself to do it.

'Please,' she whimpered instead. And that was all it took.

A piercing cry suddenly came from Haley's mouth before she stood up and stormed out of the house, slamming the thick oak door behind her. This sort of erratic behaviour was common for many sufferers of bipolar disorder — or so the doctors had said time and time again — yet it didn't make it any easier. Each time seemed markedly harder than the

last: knowing what was coming next. The worst thing was that her behaviour was getting more unpredictable as she got older, despite every doctor saying it would ‘probably get better’.

Emmeline sat shivering in the corner of the bathroom for what felt like hours; her face pressed down, cooling the bruises against the tiles. They were so smooth, just like she wished her life could be. Tears fell down her face — from the pain of her fresh bruises or from her aching heart, she still wasn’t sure. But she was positive that she couldn’t stay in the house for much longer without hurting herself. Plus, Haley would be back soon and a break was always best for the sisters after things like this happen.

Emmeline didn’t need any more reminders of this day, she decided. Instead, she needed to forget.

That’s why she drove all the way out here to stare at nothing: to think about nothing. A clear head was always the easiest solution.

But the persistent calls from Haley wouldn’t end until she picked up ... or threw her phone into the water. Which was a tempting idea!

Pulling her phone out of the pocket of her tattered navy jeans, she imagined how many missed calls she had. But there was no time to check as Haley’s name flashed upon the screen almost immediately.

With a deep breath, Emmeline answered.

‘Em? Em, I’m sorry! I’m so bloody sorry!’ Haley blurted out frantically. ‘Come home, please. I need you. I can’t do this by myself. I need you here.’

A snort came from Emmeline in response. She knew it was harsh, but she couldn’t help it.

Haley continued: ‘Please, Em. Where are you? I’m sorry. The doctor keeps saying I’ll hurt those I love most. You know I don’t mean it!’

‘You hurt the ones you love the most,’ Emmeline repeated under her breath.

‘Yeah, you heard her! She did ... s-she did say that!’

‘Love? Shit, it doesn’t feel like love.’

‘Yes, Em! You know I love you most. I-I ... you do s-so much for me. I appreciate it ... I appreciate you. You know that, d-don’t you?’

‘I do ...’ she trailed off. ‘Good. I’m so glad you kno-’

Emmeline cut her off before she could change her mind. ‘Maybe that’s why I have to do this ... I love you, but this is f-fuckin’ hurting me. And I know you can do this without me, Haley.’

It was time, and she was ready.

With that, she forced her thumb onto the end call button and closed her eyes, exhaling deeply. She let go of it—all of it.

It was time for change, time for a new beginning, time for an end. Somewhere inside, she had always known it would come to this.

And so, one step at a time, Emmeline forced her body deeper and deeper into the lake’s cold abyss.

BLUE TARTAN

sally Wallz

Blue tartan covers browned and smooth backs of legs;
The girls lie stomachs down on patched dry grass.
The sun warms their backs as they laze atop
Mother nature's miniature ridged forest glades.

Smoke rises from lips; curls sway on collar bones.
The defective parishioners have set up camp
For the day's truancies behind the old church stack.
Stretching and cursing, giggling and dreaming.

All days are a series of searing dry heat, with slight
Relief in the shade; the lone ghost gum casting out its arms
Of cooler climes out to protect those that the church's
Shadow fails to cloak in its veil of dark earthy must.

Distant the school bell tolls, a procession to the next lessons;
Already the girls are entranced by the boys
Walking free from the grasp of the weatherboard institution
Over to take their places; hands round hips and thighs.

Side by side the couples walk. Hand in hand
Away from the town they grew up in;
Little thought for the future.
The church and the tree know all too well
They will never leave this place
Just as the generations before.

COUNTING GRAINS

paTrick Morris

An American thrash metal band. Six letters. Starts with an 'S'. I stared hard at the six little white boxes of the crossword, tapping my pen on the magazine's pages that glowed in the candlelight, but nothing came to mind. I was never much of a metal enthusiast. I was more of a classical man. I could have moved on to other puzzles, but once I fixated on finding a word it was difficult to think about anything else.

'I don't know. How about you?' I asked the stone coffin that lay next to me.

I waited a moment, but it failed to respond to my charming British accent.

'Nothing? Great help you are.'

I lifted my right leg over my left knee, tightening the crotch of my black Armani crepe-cotton trousers. My arse was beginning to get a bit sore.

Would it have killed this company to invest in nicer computer chairs? The room was fairly small and empty except for the coffin and the hundreds of candles dripping wax around the stone walls. I wasn't sure of its intended purpose. It appeared to be a room for the sake of a room. But now someone had found a use for it.

I held up my left wrist to check the time on my silver Rolex while my right hand played with the rolled up sleeve of my white Borrelli button-up shirt. It was nearing eight o'clock, or so the watch said. I had found it on the street months ago and never adjusted it.

It had been hours since I started the crossword, and it wasn't even half finished. I was growing bored and restless.

'Hurry up, you tosser!' The coffin still didn't respond.

I sighed and rummaged through my brown, leather, Ralph Lauren duffle bag on the ground. Amongst some odds and ends was a flashlight, a couple of hundred quid, and an empty hipflask that still smelt of Scotch. I found my humidor, took out a cigar, and then lifted a match out of the ticket pocket of my light brown Alfani vest. I struck it on the sole of my black leather Gucci boots, and the match burst into flame. I lit my cigar and let its indescribable pleasure envelope my senses, overpowering the smell of rotting flesh.

Tranquility washed over me, and I ran a hand through my short black greasy hair with my head tilted back as I blew smoke. I flicked the match at the candles, realising too late I could have saved the match. I had lit the candles myself after all.

Something must have put 'God Save the Queen' in my head because I hummed it as I enjoyed my cigar. It started to feel a little too hot with all the candles, so I loosened my red, Kiton, cashmere-silk, knit necktie.

I stopped humming when the stone lid of the coffin finally scraped open and landed on the ground with an echoing thud. I felt the adrenaline running through my body as I rolled the computer chair away from the coffin towards the door.

I took a small, soft bag out of the left pocket of my trousers and loosened its drawstring.

A dark figure rose out of the coffin, casting no shadows despite the candlelight. Its head twisted swiftly towards me, staring angrily with piercing eyes and baring its fangs. Its ugly face was as pale as the moon, and it wore a deteriorated, black suit that was wasted on it. It had a thin, tall frame like me. Was the man dressed that way before he turned, or did it put the suit on after?

I sucked on the cigar and let the smoke swirl in my mouth. The beast lunged towards me. I tipped my small bag upside down as I swung my arm out. Rice rattled along the cold, hard ground, and the beast paused with its clawed fingers frozen in the air. Its body shook like the rice, and it couldn't tear its eyes away from the ground.

The monster quickly sat cross-legged on the floor and swept up the rice with its long arms into one pile, facing away and completely ignoring me. When it was sure each grain had

been collected, it started to move them one by one into another pile.

I took the cigar out of my mouth and blew smoke into the air. ‘Not so scary anymore are you, Mr. Vampire?’ I said mockingly. It didn’t look at me and continued to count the rice. I slowly stepped in a circle around it so I could look at its corpse-like face.

‘For all their strengths, vampires have a large amount of weaknesses and rules: you can’t go out in the sun, you can’t touch silver, you can’t enter someone’s home without being invited,’ I said, counting the rules on my fingers. ‘One of the more peculiar and amusing traits of your kind is arithmomania — your compulsion to count. It’s the most fun to exploit.’

I kicked the second pile the vampire had been making, spreading rice across the floor again. Its head shot up, and it snarled at me before crawling along the ground to round it all up.

‘Sorry, did you lose count, Rain Man?’ I said, taking another drag of my cigar. It started creating a new pile from scratch.

‘However, not all the legends are true I found. I learnt the hard way that you don’t fear garlic and running water.’

I bowed low so that my face was right in front of it. It looked up and snarled at me again, struggling to resist counting so that it could bite my head off with its sharp teeth.

‘You also can’t mesmerise your victims. You’re not all suave and sexy like modern depictions of vampires—and me. And you’re certainly not sparkly.’ With a huge, open-mouthed grin I blew smoke in its face.

Its hand swiped through the air, and I flicked my body up. Its claws barely missed me, knocking the cigar out of my mouth. It flew across the room and into the candles, catching fire.

‘Bollocks! Do you know how hard they are to find these days? Start again, Count von Count.’ I kicked the grain in anger. It didn’t even look at me and dived for the rice again. ‘One grain. Two grain. Three grain ha, ha, ha,’ I said in my best impersonation of the Muppet.

I took a cross pendant out of my vest pocket and lobbed it towards the rice. It landed with a clatter, and the vampire leapt onto its backside and looked at it with horror and then at me with hatred. It carefully tried to get as much rice as it could while avoiding the cross.

‘Anyway, us humans, we don’t have weaknesses and rules. We make our own. We live and die by our own abilities. We’re unpredictable and capable of anything. We are the true monsters. And we’ll come out on top. We have this uncanny ability to survive through anything and advance with amazing speed.’

The vampire had its back to me again with a new pile. It was pathetic. ‘You’re nothing but a harmless pest foiled by rice. And I’m Buffy the fucking Vampire Slayer. Slayer! That’s the answer to the puzzle!’

I went to where I left the crossword with a hop in my step and inked the word. I found myself humming ‘God Save the Queen’ again as I dug my hands into my duffle bag and took out a wooden stake made of white oak. I strutted towards the vampire, lightly hitting the palm of my hand with the stake like it was a baseball bat and I was a mobster about to beat the living-dead-shit out of it. ‘I guess you were of some use to me after all. But now it’s time for the end of your miserable existence. And mine will continue...knock on wood,’ I said, before tapping on the stake with my fist, the right side of my mouth pulling up and my head tilting left like I was caught on a fishing hook.

The vampire shook, trying harder than ever to resist counting and prevent its demise. I stopped right behind it and dangled the stake above its hunched back.

‘You think you’re Fear? Well it looks like even Fear has fears.’

I thrust the stake into its heart. It went into the dead flesh with ease. The vampire let out a harsh scream like a bat, hurting my ears, and its body crumbled into grainy ash that slid off the stake and onto the floor with the rice.

‘This wasn’t even a challenge.’ I packed up my things and started blowing out the candles, thinking it was strange that the vampire had collected them. When I found the remains of my cigar I cried on the inside as I stomped out the flames.

I walked out of the room with a flashlight in hand, cutting through the darkness. Without the burning candles it was quite chilly in the basement of the office building. I walked down the stony corridor, following the red pipes that ran along the ceiling. I soon found the fire exit and began climbing the stairs.

I went up about four floors, my leg muscles tired and burning, and walked through a doorway. This corridor was smaller, with white walls and blue carpet, and had many doors leading to rooms full of computers I could see through the windows. I shone the light on a sign that read 'Orion Industries'.

I opened and shut a few doors—unable to remember which one my friends were in. After several more attempts, I found it — J22 — the break room. It had a little kitchen nook, a big flat-screen television on the wall, and some couches.

Backpacks were spread around the room, a quilt was on the longest couch, and some sleeping bags were unfurled on the ground. The room had a blue hue and was illuminated by a few candles. No one was there.

'It's about time!' yelled a startling, feminine voice behind me.

I turned around, shining my flashlight right in the face of a feisty redhead in her mid-thirties. She yelled at me to turn it off while shielding her eyes with a bag of salt and a Glock 17 pistol. I turned it off to see her slimy-looking straight hair, her easy-on-the-eyes face, and the torn blue jeans and tight black Metallica tee-shirt she wore.

'Where have you been, Lisa?' I asked.

'While you were no doubt showboating while killing that vampire, when the whole thing could have taken you two seconds, we were attacked by a stupid poltergeist! Neil and Kane are in the bathroom cleaning off ectoplasm.' She was blinking a lot; still recovering from the light in her face. When she was angry her American accent was stronger. Years of living here had, no doubt, diminished it slightly.

'Why are you so angry? It seems like you guys took care of it fine without me.'

'I'm angry because you're always off on your own, putting yourself at risk and not doing things efficiently. You could've staked it in the heart while it was asleep,' she said, jabbing my chest with her gun.

'Blimey, be careful with that,' I said, pushing it aside. 'I like them to die knowing I was the one who did them in. I like to strike fear in their hearts.'

Lisa brushed past me, dumped the bag of salt on the ground, tucked the Glock 17 in the back of her jeans, and sat down on an armchair. 'Well it's a waste of time. And rice. Food is pretty important.'

'What about the salt you used?' I said as I walked over to the long couch to sit down and dump my things.

'I only use it if it's necessary. And this time it wasn't—luckily. Let me guess: you waited until it woke up, spread the rice, and then started your routine of calling it Count von Count?'

'No..' I said unconvincingly.

'Liar. Who are you even trying to impress? No one else is around, and none of us care.'

'I'm just trying to find some fun in all of this. You know fun? That thing you've never had? It's hard to get these days.'

'Whatever, Barnaby,' she snapped and crossed her arms under her petite chest.

A wolf's howl broke the air, coming from somewhere outside the building. 'Oh great, now there's a werewolf around,' she sighed.

'They're harder than vampires: less weaknesses and rules. But at least they're only a threat once a month. Do we have any silver bullets left?'

'Neil has a few. There might be some at the church. If worse comes to worst, we'll melt down your watch.'

'No, I love my Rolex,' I brought it to my chest and clutched it, 'I've never had one before and never would have if...'

'It's just a watch,' she interrupted. 'Come on, let's go analyse the threat.' She got up and walked towards the door. I followed.

We walked into a room of office cubicles. It was missing a large chunk of the outside wall, so gusts of wind blew in, and the full moon was in view, hanging in the cloudless sky. The cubicles closest to the gaping hole were destroyed with office debris spread everywhere. We carefully stepped over it and stood at the edge, looking down at the city streets of

Salisbury, Wiltshire. Cars were left abandoned on the street, moss and other plant life had overgrown, and a BBC news helicopter was embedded in the side of the building across the road.

A few zombies were stumbling around the streets. And then I saw it — the werewolf pelted past them on all fours. It looked like an unnaturally tall, furry man with dog legs and a wolf head. It was heading somewhere other than here and I let out a sigh of relief.

'I don't think it can smell us,' Lisa said.

'Or it has more pressing matters to attend to,' I suggested.

'Hopefully the others are safe at the church,' she said with a furrowed brow and her hands on her hips.

'They'll be fine.'

'Yeah ... yeah. Okay. Let's go back to our room and hope Neil and Kane are there.'

'I'll be with you in a second.'

She didn't question me as she stepped away from the hole and started walking back. It had occurred to me that I very desperately needed a piss, so I undid the square buckle of my black diamanté Gucci leather belt and took a leak off the side of the building.

The stream lasted a while so I stood there, looking at what our world had become. It was dark, desolate, and soul crushing. And yet it had a hint of excitement and wonder at what you could find next. Most would be terrified and depressed, but I had learnt to embrace it (I did miss more plentiful food and showers though).

After coming close to death time and time again I no longer feared it. It couldn't be worse than this world. But I fought to live on mostly out of curiosity. Like a person who travels the world, I wanted to see everything it had to offer.

My name is Barnaby Williams, I'm 26 years old, and I live in the Supernatural Apocalypse.

GREYTIME TELEVISION

JOHN MOCKFORD

Flu stricken, couch bound, a slave
To the demons of daytime TV,
No energy left for discernment
Suffering programmers' apathy.

There's a segment on L.E.D. candles,
Waxing lyrical, illuminating me
As to how they look just like the real ones
At \$59.95 for three, plus postage and handling.
CLICK!

This one's for a new vacuum cleaner,
Going on repetitively,
About how it picks up two bowling balls
From a clear plastic tube, funnily.

And I realise my worries are over now,
That a part of my soul is set free,
Those damn bowling balls I have everywhere
Are consigned now to history.
CLICK!

Oh wait, this one's for a steam mop,
That picks up the dirt I can't see,
I didn't even know it was there before,
Grubby, unhygienic, me!
CLICK!

So it's off to the serious stuff this time,
Some cerebral fruit from the tree,
Of 'Days of Our Lives' or 'Bargain Hunt',
Or 'Midsomer Murders', at three.
But there is a real point to this story,
A genuine, heartfelt plea,

Can't the people who peddle this rubbish
Treat their viewers with some dignity?

For I'm feeling better this morning,

THE PIT

JosHua Dickson

The truth is Town Guardians are loyal, honourable and skilled fighters, protecting the villages from bandits, rogues, and other attackers. Not only do I have to face the guilt of lying to mum each morning, but also the shame of claiming a title of which I fall far below worthy. My boots kick at the sand as I walk and it hisses upon returning to the ground. The heat of the sun is relentless, boiling the metal on my armour to make the walk sticky and unpleasant. The hissing grows more frequent and I look down at my feet to see that it is no longer my steps that anger the granules. I stop walking and begin searching the land ahead for possible threats. The hissing quickens again and I draw my sword.

A light press on my shoulders alerts me to my attacker as she flips herself over my body and glides gracefully through the air. Sand crunches as she lands and slides to a stop. I take one slight step forward and she turns. With three flicks of her wrists the sharp silver daggers speed toward me, cutting the air as they go. I grip the hilt of my sword tightly with both hands and slice two of the six silver missiles from the air. The final four daggers lose their velocity and pierce the earth around me; I sheath my sword and smile at the young girl.

‘A bit risky to ignore those other ones wasn’t it?’ she says, half smiling.

‘They never would have hit me,’ I reply smiling back at her. I pick up her four daggers and walk towards her. ‘I believe these are yours,’ I say in my cheesiest voice. She takes them from my hand and laughs at me.

‘You are such a dork, Luke,’ she says, beaming. ‘You’re a little late.’

‘So are you. And now I’m running even further behind schedule thanks to that little performance.’ She gives me a cheeky smile.

‘I don’t see you running at all,’ she says as she begins sprinting toward the bastion. I chuckle a little and take off after her.

Anna has been my best friend since I first started fighting at the Pit. When I was only seven years old, I snuck into the Pit to watch the warriors fight. Anna’s father owns the fighting grounds so when she caught me sitting in the VIP section I received a proper talking to. After just one day talking to each other, she invited me to come back each week and to meet her by the back fence, where she would give me a main event ticket. Contestants as young as ten would face off against one another until only one was left standing. It began as the Republic’s solution to dungeon overcrowding and evolved into a bloody spectator sport with all kinds of events. My favourites as a child were the Beast match-ups because the death of a beast was much easier to stomach than the death of a prisoner. Challengers like me take the risk to fight for prize money; these prisoners, however, have no say in the matter. Some stink of death and their pure hatred for the world is visible from a distance, yet some would be slain without so much as drawing their weapon; innocent blood seeping into the hot sand, as far as I knew.

This is, and always has been, the harsh reality of the Pit. If you are an Event, then you are guilty and you must fight for your life. I only fight in the Beast match-ups for two reasons: I am scared of whom I may face, and I only require enough money to feed Mum and myself.

The shadows of the watchtowers draw nearer and the heat waves gradually disappear as we approach.

‘A Scourer’ I call out to Anna, ‘that’s a step up.’

‘A fair size too’, she calls back; ‘they captured it after a mountain farmer went missing’

‘That’s a shame,’ I mumble, ‘and his family?’

‘Scourer leavings, along with his cattle’, she says bluntly, ‘so make it suffer.’ My skin cools as we enter the protective shadow of the bastion wall and we slow back down to walking pace. We confront the Town Guardians at the bastion gate, flashing them our Pit passes.

‘Good luck boyo’, the first one says, ‘I’ve already made a large bet on ya.’

‘Well then, I was just going to try to die, but now that I know your money is on the line I’ll give it a go,’ I reply with a grin.

‘That’s the spirit,’ says the second, ‘can’t leave this one a widow so soon now can we?’ he laughs. ‘In you go kids,’ he says as the large gate rises far above us.

‘Thank you’ says Anna, giving the second Guardian a dirty look as we enter the crowded streets of the bastion.

We arrive at the Pit just in time for a Blessed Beast match-up, one of the most incredible events the Pit has to offer. The usher always lets Anna and I skip the queue: the boss’s daughter gets special treatment of course. We take our seats on the concrete slab at the front of the battle grounds and watch as a door on the far side of the field produces a tall, solid young man. The loudspeaker above our seats clicks and the voice of Mr. Coullich, Anna’s father, booms throughout the arena.

‘Ladies and Gentleman! This weeks Blessed Beast Match! Before you now is Blessed challenger, Haaaaaaaade Forster!’ The crowd erupts in a magnificent display of support, applause, and cheering as Hade throws his bow up in the air, crafts an ice arrow with his hands, and fires it upwards upon catching his weapon. The arrow explodes into tiny snowflakes and children hold out their tongues to capture a wish. Blessed Matches are battles that involve contestants with unique and often remarkable abilities; Hade’s appears to be the manipulation of ice.

‘Annnnnnd his opponent! King Shaaaarg!’ A cage is being lowered by crane and inside a large, fat, ogre-like creature is scratching his rear; I have never seen a creature like him before. Hade readies a beautiful ice arrow as he waits for the starting siren. A large wooden club emerges from the sand and Hade looks in horror at the sharp, shining razors that protrude from the weapon. The cage door creaks open and Sharg makes a slow dash for his club. The siren screams out and Hade’s first arrow tears through the air, aimed straight at the belly of his opponent ...

Ice punctures flesh and Sharg yelps in agony as he pulls the frozen missile from his gut. The creature growls as he glances at the club and then back toward Hade again. Sharg’s eyes turn soft and he holds his gaze on his attacker as he slowly lowers himself to the ground.

‘Aww, has he had enough already?’ comes Mr. Coullich on the loudspeaker again. The crowd breaks out in laughter and I look over to see Anna smiling at me, but it is cut short as the beast hurls a fistful of hot sand in Hade’s face, briefly burning and blinding the young man. The challenger frantically rubs at his eyes, melting ice over them to regain his sight. Sharg leaps for his weapon and the ground shakes beneath his enormous, rubbery body. Hade has recovered from his impairment and draws back a cracked ice arrow, waiting for the beast to attack.

The arena is still. Silent. Sharg ducks down and throws another fistful of sand toward Hade but a wall of ice buffers the challenger. Anticipating his attacker’s impairment, Sharg is already leaping through the air, holding his club above him with both arms. Hade paves himself an ice path and slides across it to quickly evade the brute’s powerful strike. Confused, Sharg pulls his club from the sand and leaps after his opponent once more. Hade releases his cracked arrow and it splits into tiny shards that stab into the beast’s eyes and face. I feel Anna’s hand tightly gripping my arm in excitement, but her face shows great concern. I turn back to the fight in time to see Hade leap away again, but Sharg’s blind swing guides one of the razor’s across the challenger’s chest; blood spatters across the burning sand and I can almost hear it hiss as the droplets stain it red. A wounded Hade clasps his chest as he struggles away from the enraged beast, inching toward the Pit wall right in front of our seats.

As the challenger pushes his back against the concrete I can hear his cries of pain and can see blood spilling from the deep slash across his chest. The hairs on my neck stand on end as Hade screams out and I can see thick ice begin to cover his injury. Sharg is groaning in the middle of the Pit, but he turns toward Hade, his eyes in tatters and black blood dripping from them.

Hade scrambles to his feet, strips off his plate armour, and continues covering himself in ice until he wears a very thick, cold suit of armour to replace it. The crowd explodes with applause and cheering as the challenger recovers again, now holding a sword and shield, all crafted from his own ice. Sharg lets out a violent roar that vibrates throughout the arena and charges blindly toward his opponent. Hade’s icy equipment is already dripping in the heat and I can see that he wants to finish the fight now. He paves himself another path of slippery ice and rushes out to meet the beast, sliding beneath the creature to widen the arrow wound in its belly. Sharg cries out in pain and spins around, grabbing at the sand clumsily, his stomach bleeding out.

The audience gasps in unison as Sharg gets lucky with one of his grabs and holds Hade in his hand, crushing him. The icy suit of armour cracks and begins to shatter under the pressure and Hade’s wound begins to drip again, his screams filling the air once more. The challenger places his palm against Sharg’s hand and it slowly becomes solid ice. The

stupid beast swings his other fist to smash Hade, but Hade ducks into the icy prison and the beast smashes off his own hand, squealing as he falls to the ground. Hade repairs his icy bandage and limps his way over to the fallen creature. Cheering fills the arena again and the audience is calling for Hade to finish the beast.

Sharg looks up at his shattered arm and then back at Hade angrily. He opens his mouth to roar, but a long, icy spear punctures his throat, silencing him. Sharg lies defeated in the sand and the crowd begins chanting Hade's name. The challenger waves to his audience with a smile and then, with a wince of pain, makes his way toward the Cleric's quarters.

GLASS JOURNEY

Sue Cochius

Cyclone fencing sieves
the ochre light, tating diamonds
over Fred's decrepit shed. Brick walls
along the sides are missing teeth
like their conservation order.
The sign sloughs curls of cracking paint.
Jagged windows let in light that ignites
the fairy motes and dusty webs.
Shadows, shattered by the gravel,
pool in indigo beneath a rusted ute
whose tray has greyed and splintered.
Against the corrugated fence
a hooded boy sprays Banksy art
for free; painted water
sprinkling on a living,
yellow flower.

A flash of shadow
wings across the yard.
I note a tube of stretchy meat
and dive to snack. A plane-sized gull
swoops down and scoops us up.
Bits of knitted fencing dribble from its beak.
Dawn spreads apricot on flecks of flying paint.
I gobble down the grub and gag. Below,
I spot a row of Noah's Ark-sized nests.
They glint with glass and springs and other shiny things.
We're garnish too! There's spattered mud—
or blood? Don't ask. And plucked-out, sweaty feathers.
A massive eyeball glistens on one nest.
I catch a whiff of oil and salt and ancient eggs
Bibbed and wigged, three giant crows
with cream smeared on their beaks strut,
confer then caw to contestants
who mutter to themselves,

'Perfect. It has to be perfect!'

THAT'S AMORE

Trudy Parry

'Follow me,' I remember him saying. 'Let's hide from the others.' Without a second thought, I followed him as he ran across the freshly-cut lawn towards the vineyard fence. 'Hurry up, slow coach! They'll see us!' he yelled back at me.

I ducked under the loose bottom wire and stumbled over the dry clods of earth that skirted the plantings. A long leafy row of vines rolled out before me. Deep purple grapes hung in clusters, their skins as tight as the blood blister on my toe. The air was heavier there — thick and lazy in the hot afternoon.

My pretty new cotton dress snagged on a rose bush at the end of a row of vines, and when I tried to unhook it a thick, dark thorn lodged itself deep in my finger. I pinched it out and when I looked up, he was gone.

With dismay, I saw that a drop of crimson blood had fallen onto my dress. Another shimmering drop pooled on the tip of my finger, so I sucked it and swallowed hard. The sharp metallic taste jarred my taste-buds and chased away the lovely spice and pepper left over from my first taste of wine, when Dad had allowed me a sip from his glass at lunch. I knew Danny was watching from across the table, so I'd tried to look as though it was no big deal. Mum was watching me too — on account of her slow, lopsided smile, I guessed she noticed I'd pulled my ponytail out to let my hair fall long and loose.

When a cloud of galahs scattered like confetti up ahead, I crept towards the spot where I knew he'd be hiding. Without warning, his brown arm shot out from behind and he pulled me close. I'd spent months dreaming about what it would be like to be in his arms, and there I was, with his lips just inches from mine. We were so close I could see the gold flecks in his amber eyes and feel his quick, warm breath on my skin.

When he kissed me, I didn't quite know what to do, so I pressed my lips back into his and tangled my fingers in his hair, just like they did in the movies. 'I'm gonna marry you one day, Alice,' he said, his mouth against my cheek. All these years later, when I smell the sweet earthy scent of freshly-cut grass, or taste a particularly rich vintage of Shiraz, I think of Danny Veroni and our first kiss.

From the veranda that hugs the edges of Danny's family home, I can see the vineyard where we ran that day. The years have settled the vines deep into the soil, their thick sturdy trunks, like well-muscled arms, rest over the trellis. A chest-high stone fence replaced the wire one we ducked through, and now there's an eye-catching winery sign at the entrance — 'Veroni Estate' — where once was just a rusty red road-mail delivery box on the end of the driveway, pointing the way to my second home. Some of the grassy front lawn has been dug up and replaced with a parking bay to serve the new bistro, named after Danny's sisters — Rosa and Lila — who, naturally, are catering for the wedding.

There's Rosa, darting from the back of the bistro to the marquee, its white roof incandescent in the sharp afternoon sun. And following her... that must be Milly — just a baby when I left — looking like a mischievous angel in her flower girl's dress. She hitches up her undies then does a little ballerina twirl, watching with shining eyes the way her skirt lifts and swirls. I hear Rosa call her sharply. Milly does another couple of pirouettes, plus a cartwheel for good measure, before she skips towards her mother's voice.

Guests have been arriving steadily over the last half-hour. For a while, I stand with my eyes closed and listen as tyres crunch and spin in the gravel. As car doors slam and the burble of voices drifts towards me, I try to pick out familiar ones, but all I can hear is a pulse beating like a drum in my throat.

I watch my baby brother carry his girlfriend over the gravel driveway. Her slender legs, strapped in a pair of stilettos, are kicked out to the side. He sets her down gently on the pavers and kisses her in the hollow beneath her ear. Hands entwined, they wander off to join my parents who are talking to Danny's mother. Mum is all grace and elegance in a dress the shade of shimmering aubergine. Dad, standing proudly by her side, pulls at his matching tie and reaches for her hand. Mum glances around and I know she's wondering where I am, but I step further back and let the deep, cool shadows wrap around me.

'Alice! Look at you!' Danny's father says as he rounds the corner. His smile lines, once quick to appear, are permanently etched onto his face now — time's tattoos. His thick, dark hair is woven with grey and swept back in damp waves, the way he always wore it for special occasions. 'Come here!' He pulls me into a bear hug that brings tears to my eyes. I

breathe deeply his scent—peppermint, patchouli, wood-smoke and garlic—and take it in right to the far corners of my lungs. Always steadfast and dependable, all is right with the world when Giovanni Peroni is on your side. My eyes sting.

‘You wouldn’t believe how my boy used to go on about you! Christ almighty! It was “Alice this, Alice that”. But hey, you’re a big shot with the UN now, aren’t you?’ He held me at arm’s length and beamed.

‘Well, hardly a big shot . . .’

“‘I’ll never be enough for her,” he used to say. “She’s made for bigger things than I can give her”. God he was painful! But no roots were going to grow under your shoes, were they?’

I shake my head wordlessly, remembering the day we said goodbye at the air- port. ‘See the world for me Alice,’ Danny said. ‘All those places we talked about. You’ve got to give it a go—and hey, maybe I can come and see you for a bit.’

I’d already missed him terribly when I was studying for my Masters in Sydney— the scholarship had been too good to refuse—so half of me was hesitant about accepting an internship with the United Nations in Geneva. The other half was bubbling with excitement.

‘Look around this town,’ he’d said. ‘There’s loads of women who’ve given up their dreams and swapped them for a family much too early. You’re gonna be great Alice.’ I wanted to be great—for him, as much as for me. I wanted to be everything he thought I could be.

My desire to learn was insatiable. I was like a fast-growing vine, putting out shoots all over the place, reaching for every bit of sunshine it can find. And Danny was always there in the background, urging me on—my one-man cheer squad. One year in Geneva bled into two. I went out with a few guys, but there was nothing meaningful or lasting. From Geneva, I went to New York, from New York to Palestine, and then back to Geneva. Two years swelled into five— time can be such a sneaky thief.

I went home a few times, but whenever I came back, there’d be a whirlwind of lunches and dinners, picnics and parties. There were always so many people to visit, but never enough time to say the things that really mattered. Before long, I’d be back on the plane, skimming across the clouds to some other place, pre- tending that I was crying because of the movie.

‘Anyway, beautiful,’ Mr. Peroni says as he nods towards the marquee and winks.

‘Better get going—it’s Showtime.’ He looks over my shoulder, deeper into the shaded veranda. ‘I see you’re keeping Nonna company. Lila will be along to take her across in a sec, but you’d better get going.’

I hadn’t seen her, snoozing in the wicker chair. She’d been dressed, hair primped, face powdered, cheeks a little over-rouged, and deposited out of the way while the rest of the household got ready. Trembling a little, she reaches for my hand. Although she seems smaller and more fragile than ever, her grip is dry and strong. Her lips move before the words come out and she says some- thing in Italian I don’t quite catch, so I bend down to hear her more clearly. Nonna reaches up and holds my face fiercely. ‘La vita non sempre ascolta I piani del cuore,’ she says again, her eyes moist, seeing right to the centre of me, as she always did.

A screen door slams and hard heels clatter on wooden veranda boards. ‘Nonna!’ It’s Lila. ‘I’d better go,’ I say, slowly untangling my fingers from Nonna’s. There’s no way I can face either one of Danny’s sisters: I’d come completely undone.

In the marquee, the guests have assembled obediently in arrays, either side of a carpeted aisle. The chatter stops abruptly when the first bar of Pachelbel’s Canon begins. Funny, but Danny and I always joked about playing Dean Martin singing ‘That’s Amore’. Dad slips his arm around me, just as my knees start to shake.

In the moment when everyone turns to see the bride, I see him. Everything else dissolves — the people, the ivy-draped columns, the flower-filled urns, and the air in my lungs. Our eyes lock in the space of a heartbeat and in his, I see a sliver of panic and realise he’s only just worked out what I thought he’d always known.

I blink. I breathe.

Milly comes first, giddily tossing red rose petals ahead of the bride. One of them clings to my dress, like a teardrop of crimson blood. Nonna’s words suddenly fall into place; all the conjugations and unfamiliar sounds make sense:

‘Life doesn’t always hear the plans of the heart.’

I close my eyes and focus on the scent of freshly-cut grass so I don't have to watch the bride as she walks past.

'One day Alice, I'll be waiting at the end of the aisle, and when Deano sings "when the moon hits your eye", you'll come walking in and I won't see anyone else but you.'

I remember laughing, lost in his eyes.

THEM AND US

daWid rObasZkieWicZ

They walk among us, but you cannot see them.
They have eyes but not your eyes.
They have lips but not your lips.
They speak words but not your words.
They think, but not like you.
They think relatively, you think in absolutes.
They are scattered while you are defined.
Reason is foreign to them, but it is truth to you.
What could these fools possibly accomplish? Yet they stand before you.
They are many and so are you.
Armed, weapons raised high, red drips from their painted words.
Rights are claimed like territories, the potential battlefields for the war.
The camps grow as the middle fades: there can be no compromise here.
They stare down each other; waiting, watching. This is how you play the game.
Strike first, you lose. Strike second, you win.
The blow rings out; the wounded side jeers and silently cheers.
They clash. Titans of morality! Bringers of change! Fighters of corruption.
Or whatever other moniker they go by.
The fire burns within them all and so they let it burn.
It spreads; twisting, blackening all as it consumes.
The combatants do not care: they are in control
Until the last ember fades and the ashes surround them.
They scream out; it's not their fault. You should have joined us. They did what they had to!
The ash whispers back. Was it worth it in the end?

MOTHER DEAREST

SaManTHa Mcdonnell

An imposing building looms over the communal town of Smithfield, dominating in its presence. Those who gaze upon its grandiose gothic structure cannot help but shudder; it appears like something out of a Bram Stoker novel. For some it is the belief of ghosts that causes the hair on the backs of their neck to stand, for in a town as small as theirs, urban legends are shared almost to the point of obsession. These are the stories that parents tell their rowdy children in an attempt to gain some semblance of control, or excited scout leaders theatrically regale around a crackling fire. For others, the sense of inherent uneasiness cannot be explained. They only know that the mammoth building overlooking their quaint little town casts a dark shadow: a dark shadow that touches all the residents who scuttle the streets, going to work with overpriced coffee in hand, dropping the kids off at school in a mad rush. They can feel it: like dried grass dragging down the smalls of their backs, something sinister clings to the air. Little do they know that their suspicions are not entirely wrong. Whilst poltergeists do not roam the passages of Conney Hall, a much more lethal being dwells. A monster much worse than the stories say: a monster who exists outside the safety of folklore and fairytale. Within the dimly lit corridors of the abandoned asylum a man stalks, his left eye twitching and both hands shaking as he goes. His seemingly harmless figure lopez into the main foyer — or what would have been the main foyer years ago. Now the decrepit building looks as though death itself has seeped into the walls, killing whatever is in its reach. It's almost as though the destructive nature of the occupant, Eddie, has imprinted itself upon the house unifying the two in an immortal partnership of unspeakable wickedness. Breathing heavily he falls in front of the desk and, eager to record, he reaches for a pen that lies beside a frayed notebook. The hunched figure hastily scribbles, manic in his pace, shoulders twitching all the while.

I saw a woman today walking on Belmont; she had dark flowing hair and a haughty gait. Oh how she reminded me of the first one. She had the same arrogant air about her; a tight-lipped frown was fixed upon her face as though she had just smelled something especially bad. Such self-importance really boils my blood. I could feel it rising within me — the desire to wrap my hands around her scrawny neck and squeeze. To hear the satisfying gurgle they make when they're getting closer to the edge and their breath shudders for a final time. Just thinking about it makes me smile and tremor with need: a need that is getting more and more difficult for me to ignore. The familiar ache persists. My body hungers to feel that submission beneath my fingertips once more. It's been too long since the last one. I see her face in all of them — the disapproving stare coupled with a constant snarl that lurks just below the perfect housewife smile she throws around. Proud as a goddamned peacock she was. Treating Pops as though he were no better than the stray dogs that wandered up and down their block. Like a mangy, common mutt. And he took it, he didn't fight back; just nodded and went along with it. Spineless, pitiful. So beaten down that he barely resembled the man he'd been before she sunk her claws into him. Always cold, detached and ordering me about. She saw me as nothing more than a weakling, but I'm not weak and I'll never be weak. How I fantasised about snuffing her out: to watch the thinly veiled disgust slowly fade to nothing. All that would be staring back at me would be the lifeless gaze of that uppity bitch — completely overpowered. If that bloody disease hadn't gotten to her first I would have done it.

I can't help but remember Cynthia — my very first. There is something special about firsts, I've found: they stick with you. There have been so many since her but I remember hers as vividly as the breakfast I ate this morning. I was working in a store, a rundown little thing that looked as though it could barely hold itself up, on a shit street, in a shit neighbourhood, and boy was I fuming that afternoon. I'd come from home after having a blowout with my mother, and the way Mrs. Murdoch talked at me: like I was no more than a fly that mildly annoyed her. Her superior attitude had me seeing red. The look of dismissal in her eyes was so similar to my dragon of a mother — she was all I could see. Her screams were unlike anything I'd ever heard before, more beautiful than Beethoven or Bach and to imagine them again still gives me as much of a rush as it did back then. Her neck that was once so pale and flawless — now marred by bruises and blood — was an exquisite sight. To see it marked by me took me to a place of such euphoria; I knew that I could not be happy with just the one time. From that moment I was hooked: I wanted more, and I was going to get it.

The scratching of pen against paper comes to a halt as the trembling of Eddie's spiderlike fingers becomes too much. His long digits lengthen as he stretches them out in an effort to stop the shaking. His lips widen into a knowing smirk and his otherwise dull eyes light up with excitement. They glow with a twisted sort of expectation of what is to come, giving

him a demonic quality. The craving for absolute control has become all-consuming to the point that it occupies every thought.

He'd come across her walking about the town's centre: an area that he affectionately calls his hunting ground. He wandered the streets, observing like he had his entire life, a past time that allowed him to mimic what society considered normal. His keen eye searched for the next subject of his malevolent fantasy, his body shuddering at the thought of finding the right one. It was when he walked past her on Belmont, that he knew she was the one. As they walked past

each other the scent of cranberries filled his nostrils and immediately it was as if he was a kid again, back at home watching his overbearing mother strut about the house; head cocked and arms crossed. The monster within raged against its shackles, wanting to rip the life from her; to quench its violent compulsions. Despite this, he remained to the outside world as ordinary as any man that walked down the street. He'd been doing this a long time. He knew that if he played the part right, putting on a good show, nobody would ever think to suspect him. All he had to do was smile; maybe throw a wink their way if he thought they would respond to it. They'd be putty in his hands, though that way is far less fun than the alternative. Recalling that moment, he can hardly stay still. He can hardly wait to get her. Putting the tattered notebook under the loose floorboard he slinks out of the room, his mind buzzing with what he could do. The steel door slams closed with an ominous bang, the promise of death echoing throughout the deceptively peaceful night sky.

Kathleen searches through her antiquated leather shoulder bag — really she ought to invest in a new one, she thinks, cursing under her breath as she attempts to find her keys. A cold draft surrounds her and she pulls her coat tighter in an attempt to shield herself from the biting night chill. 'I hate the bloody cold,' she mutters, winding her scarf around her neck. Wispy blonde hair having escaped from her ponytail whips back and forth, dancing in front of her eyes. She roughly pushes the wayward strands behind her ears letting out a frustrated huff. She spies a flash of silver and fishes the keys out of her bag, hands shaking as she does so. Her shoulders tense at the sound of faint footsteps approaching; crunching against the cobblestone path, occasionally kicking up stones. She shakes her head, reassuring herself that whoever it is will pass.

'You're being silly,' she mumbles to herself. Struggling to hold the heavy door to her bookstore closed against the vigorous wind, she slots in the key and locks it with a soft click. She turns, hands buried in her pockets ready to start the routine walk home, when she sees a man who looks vaguely familiar. Unconsciously her grip tightens; clenching the bag handle slung haphazardly over her shoulder. Whilst his appearance is not suggestive of anything sinister, Kathleen cannot dismiss the disconcerting feeling that settles in the pit of her stomach. His body — gangly, almost willowy in its movement, giving the impression that if the wind picked up anymore it could take him straight off his feet. The smile that he directs her way is cordial enough if not a little awkward. As he heads her way, the uneasiness increases tenfold. It is as though he glides rather than walks: his stride so light, appearing unnatural. The clicking of heels against pavement becomes rushed as she tries to inconspicuously get home: to get away from the odd man that makes her insides feel as though they've been tossed like a summer salad.

The focus on getting home safe to her cluttered living room is broken by the sound of light coughing, followed by a meek voice: 'Excuse me, could you direct me to Pentorst?' Her body stops of its own accord, and as she turns she wishes her mother had not drilled being polite into her so well. 'Sure, walk down Whitmore and take the first left.' Her reply is stuttered despite her best efforts to prevent the fear inflecting her voice. His owlish eyes slowly blink once, twice, a third time and she wonders if he had understood. Kathleen shifts on the spot — the way he is staring at her is unnerving and she cannot help the sense of discomfort that washes over her. She'd heard stories from people about time slowing down in traumatic events but she had never really bought into them — until now. The man's body springs forward as if he is more snake than human. His strength surprises her: the brute force with which he grabs her; throws her. She didn't expect his sinewy arms to make her feel as though her upper body were being crushed. She looks into the eyes of her captor, which seconds ago had been devoid of any emotion, but are now electrified by unrelenting fury and a frenzied glee that show no intention of letting her go. Her hands fly to the arms locked around her shoulders and tugging with all her might. He grunts as she squirms in his grip — he loves when they fight back: it makes the grab so much more fun. His impeccable teeth are bared in a predatory grin that glints under the dim street lights scattered along Belmont. It's as though he has been struck by lightning and charged by its energy. He only ever feels this alive when he hunts.

Making sure his prey is secure in his grasp, one of his hands slides into his pocket searching for the sedative. If he wants to get this done he has to make sure she comes quietly. Even though, he adores the way she screams and sobs for him, it's best not to draw any attention. His eyes close briefly as he allows himself to revel in the terror she vocalises before he pulls the pill from his pocket. Kathleen feels hands forcing her mouth open and before she can do anything she has something in her mouth. She tries to spit it out but the hand covering her mouth is aggressive in its hold. The sound of heavy breathing is interrupted by his voice: hoarse yet reassuring, but firm in the threat it promises. 'It's fine, you'll be okay, just swallow it.' She shakes her head, determined and terrified. The hands that imprison her squeeze and she cannot stop the muffled groan of pain she releases. 'Swallow it — now!' The soothing façade is gone. Kathy consents to the command. As the pill passes down her throat she is struck by incomprehensible fear.

Her cries were exquisite in their familiarity; the agonised sobbing broken only by desperate pleas for her release were like an embrace — enveloping me in the comfort of being a dominative force. How I relished in her state of disarray; hair mussed and make-up smudged, she no longer possessed a shred of dignity. No, I had stolen that from her just like that shrew of a woman had stolen mine from me years ago. She had been stubborn at first: insisting on fighting me. I have to admit I do enjoy when they show a bit of spirit, it makes their inevitable giving up all the more satisfying. Eventually the fire had fizzled and resignation soon followed like it always does. Her body sagging under the weight of the knowledge that mine was the last face she'd ever see. I had broken her, obliterated any glimmer of lingering hope. She'd tried to bargain with me, offering herself to me, hoping that I'd spare her if she did. Such a stupid girl — I have no use for that. No I crave something else, something there is no escape from.

THE DUST BOWL CHILDREN

Anneliese Abela

The young man stands on the edge of his porch. A shotgun rests over his shoulder. Looking over the horizon, he peels back pieces of splintering wood from the post supporting the farmhouse: a modest structure of nails and timber his father built before the young man was born. The once charming white weatherboard is now a reflection of the land its foundation sits on: dusty, withered, and abandoned. The dust that blankets the ground and rages through the air swallows up the house, consuming the lives of those who shelter within it. A windmill stands tall behind the house, groaning and creaking through the storms, keeping the children in the farmhouse awake at night.

The bones of an old tree remain rooted in front of the porch, its branches and leaves stripped away long ago. It now stands loyal and lonesome; a silent survivor of the dust storms that devastate all other life in their paths. Years ago the tree spread its arms wide over the porch and the mother's little garden, encompassing the family in a canopy of shade. One of the arms stretched right out to the attic where the boy slept, its leaves tapping on the window at night, whispering to him, beckoning him outside. Opening his window and climbing out into the cool night air, the boy watched the stars and listened to the sounds of sleeping farm animals.

Now, the little boy is an old man at sixteen, his youth impaired by the sights and experiences of the past five years. The tree no longer invites him outside, the stars no longer shine, and the animals are gone.

Beside him on the porch sits a broken oil lamp, its glass chimney shattered and jagged. Two days ago it sat undamaged on the kitchen table, providing light and warmth to the small family; comforting them and guiding them through the night. But a bump of a child's elbow sent the lamp crashing to the ground, spilling kerosene and glass diamonds across the ashen floorboards.

A child opens the front door of the house, pushing against rags that have been wedged between the cracks around the rusty frame. He pulls up the legs of his faded denim overalls as he tiptoes across the dusty porch to where the young man stands.

'What's wrong?' The young man asks the child, bending down to lift him and rest him on his hip. 'Sissy's coughing again,' the boy says, dirty hands clinging onto the collar of his older brother and eyeing off the gun still in his hands.

'Come on,' the young man says, letting his little brother slide off of his hip.

'The sheets are probably dry. Go get some water.'

The child runs and jumps off the edge of the porch, disappearing around the side of the house. The young man shoulders his gun again and goes inside, pulling the door closed behind him.

There is far less dust inside the house, but a thin blanket still covers the floors, tables and beds. Traces of life before the Dust Bowl — the father's typewriter, the mother's checked curtains and ceramic vases that once held freshly cut evening primroses and prairie clovers — had been discarded of one by one. The young man had sold them for food rations or simply discarded them because they trapped too much dust.

He wondered how his father would react when he returned and saw that the curtains his wife had sewn with her own hands were gone. But the young man's sister was sick, and a cluttered house meant more dust. It was easier to clean an empty home.

The girl's tiny frame lay sideways on the large bed, her legs hanging over the edge. As she coughed they swung back and fro, toes skimming the dusty floorboards.

'Sit up, now,' the young man says, kneeling beside her and pulling her up. He remembers the relentless coughing of his mother as she looked out the window onto her lifeless garden; the dust pneumonia slowly stealing her away from him.

He tucks his sister's hair behind her ears, but it instantly falls back in front of her face. He had cut it off to just below her ears one day, unable to bear her tears each time he tried to comb the many knots and wash the dust from the long strands. She had wept for days afterwards, stroking the handfuls of cut hair between her little fingers, just as her parents had

done when singing her to sleep during the first dust storms.

The little boy returns with a bucket half full of water. The two boys pull down the sheets that hang in front of the windows and doors, wet them with the water, and re-hang them.

'This filters the dirt that gets blown into the house,' the young man remembers his father telling him shortly before he left. 'Make sure they're always wet,' he would say, as he passed the wooden pegs to him. Now, his little brother passes the pegs. 'Why do you stand out there with Father's gun?' the little boy asks, dropping a peg and bending down to retrieve it. The young man's tired eyes turn to his sister and then back to his brother before answering.

'Just watching,' he says.

'What for? Who's coming?'

'No one,' he says truthfully.

WYVERN'S REST

THOMAS CORBETT

Wyvern's Rest pub was not somewhere a doctor would usually be found. It was a rough and tumble establishment where one the constables rarely, if ever, entered.

However, when Doctor William Peak walked in he was greeted with friendly calls from around the pub: the kind of which are reserved for a regular. It probably helped that William looked more like a burly dockworker than an academic. When walking down the cobbled streets in the poorer parts of town he could easily be mistaken for just another working man. His hobnailed boots, flat cap, and tough, woollen coat blended perfectly into the crowds of Waverly Quay or even those north of Gordon's Junction Quarry and the mining towns beyond.

William called over to the bearded bartender. He knew old Simon well enough to greet the man with an insult without the former pit fighter's expression souring. Simon responded in kind with a flurry of words that could easily make a highborn lady faint. William simply laughed and replied with a rude gesture as he made his way towards the corner table he had reserved for the night.

'Reserved' wasn't a word heard a lot at Wyvern's Rest pub, and Will had no doubt that he was the only one who could spell it correctly. But the pub's regulars knew him well enough that they let him have his privacy when wanted. Of course, he usually wasn't here to hide in the corner, but he did need space from the other boisterous patrons from time to time. So he greeted them as he passed but didn't stay long to chat. After all, he had an appointment to keep.

At the small corner table sat a young woman with short, brown hair, sharp features, and a very slight figure. Strangely, she wore a mixture of upper and lower class dress. Heavy boots and a rough, brown coat covered her finely made, sky-blue dress from the Clement Park tailor's district — the richest part of town.

'You're late,' she said, with only a hint of annoyance in her voice, as William walked up to the table.

He shrugged, 'You know full well, Serenity, I arrive when I'm ready and not before.'

Serenity Barton stifled a chuckle. 'Of course Will, if I couldn't put up with your grasp of time, I wouldn't have stuck around for so long,' she smiled. 'How are you?'

'You say that as if we haven't seen each other in weeks,' William grinned cheekily as he sat down. 'What's it been...? Barely a day?'

'It's been days since we organised to meet here as us, Will,' Serenity replied with a slight sigh, 'it's hard keeping up a façade day in and day out.'

'I know,' William replied sadly.

Will sat down opposite Serenity and waved over one of the serving girls, jokingly asking for the menu. As usual, it was a choice between today's or yesterday's stew. After they both chose today's offering, they ordered the Wyvern's Rest drink of choice — a slightly less watered down beer.

Wyvern's Rest was a bit on the grubby and rough side of things but it went unnoticed, and the two quickly fell into a casual conversation. They laughed and carried on, talking about the weather, and their mutual interests and dislikes; nothing beneath the sun and stars was free of their scrutiny as they spoke.

Time passed, as did a number of welcomed drinks and a steamy stew straight from Simon's kitchen. The night was going well: neither of them managed to find a lot of time for relaxation these days, and it made their quiet evening even more special.

William wasn't sure if it was the stranger's smell or the movement in the corner of his eye that first alerted him to the intruder: he sensed the man was out of place. He had the salty scent of a sailor but the unmistakable musk of gunpowder, and the reek of the sewers clung to him. As much as it pained William to turn his gaze from his beautiful companion, he looked over to the newcomer. As the man pulled up a seat at the table next to William's, a number of patrons, and Simon himself, glared at him from the bar, but he didn't seem to notice.

He wore a dark trench coat that clung to his spindly frame. He was tall, and his breathing was heavy and rasping, as if recovering from an arduous journey.

This man was a Firebrand—the name the papers gave the Revolutionaries.

‘Can we help you?’ Serenity said, before William could speak. She glared daggers at the man for interrupting her night.

‘Not you,’ the man wheezed, his voice was cold and rough. ‘Him.’

William turned to face the man properly. ‘What could I possibly help you with gov’nor?’ William replied. His usual, measured voice suddenly changed in pitch and tempo, becoming a perfect rendition of an uneducated dockworker.

‘Oh, but you can,’ the man replied, eyeing William seriously, ‘you see, I know what you do at night.’

William leaned back in his seat and exchanged a worried glance with Serenity.

‘What, you mean ...?’ The man nodded, ‘Yes.’

‘Oh,’ William replied fearfully, ‘you best not tell my missus then! Otherwise she’ll tan me hide!’

‘I’m not here about that,’ the man replied sternly, ‘drop the act, alchemist. I know all about you and your little night time excursions.’

William sighed and his shoulders slumped as he looked up at Serenity, ‘I’m sorry, can we meet up again soon? I have to deal with this now.’

Serenity looked sad, but as she quietly excused herself she gave William a quick wink. She was sure he’d be safe in her absence.

William merely hoped that she was right.

Once she was gone, the Revolutionary jumped up and leapt into Serenity’s seat. His movements were almost comical.

‘So sorry to disturb ya on yer night off,’ the man grinned, revealing his stained yellow teeth.

‘What do you want with me?’

‘The cause could use a man like you, Doctor Peak,’ he replied, ‘so I tracked you down meself; the famous Cloak in the flesh.’

William looked at the man, confused for a moment, ‘I’m sorry sir, I think you’re mistaken. I’m no murderer. I’m a doctor.’

‘Funny that you seem to share the Cloak’s habit of running the rooftops at night to avoid the constables.’

‘The poor can’t afford the tax on medicine,’ William replied coldly, ‘so I’m technically breaking the law.’ He paused, playing for time so he could make an escape; he had no wish to be caught up in this Revolution. ‘But if you plan on insisting, tell me about your organisation and maybe I can help.’

The Revolutionary began a passionate description of their purpose and how they were willing to achieve it, as well as a long list of wrongs wrought on the people by His Majesty’s Government. William tried to look like he was paying attention as he searched his surroundings for a way out. He felt like a rabbit caught in a trap. In fact, he was searching for something, anything, so hard that he almost missed it.

The front door slammed open with a thunderous crash; everyone in the Pub turned to face it in shock. A short, slender, clean-shaven man stood in the doorway. His workman’s outfit was covered in grime and soot. He stomped into the pub angrily, spying William and the Revolutionary.

‘You!’ he roared, pointing a gloved finger at William, ‘how dare you! How dare you look at my sister in such a way! How dare you go behind your best friend’s back — you son of a bloody minister!’ John Barton screamed, ‘I’ll kill you!’

John stormed across the room towards John, and men twice his size eagerly stepped out of his way. The Revolutionary leapt from his seat and shoved John backwards. ‘Enough, Barton,’ he wheezed as the smaller man stumbled. ‘Your anger can wait; I have business with Doctor Peak.’

John growled like some kind of animal and charged forwards, ducking below a wild haymaker the Revolutionary threw his way. He barely slowed down as he crashed into the spindly man. John threw the Revolutionary over his shoulder and onto a nearby table without a second glance.

The table's surprised occupants, a group of bad-mouthed sailors, began shouting and cursing. Within moments the stunned Revolutionary was hurled roughly to his feet, and the whole table were lining up to throw punches at the unfortunate man. Wyvern's Rest pub seemed to erupt into one giant, drunken brawl. Fights like this could start at any given moment. After all, His Majesty's Government gave them plenty of reasons to be angry.

'How dare you!' John thundered as he reached William, grabbing him by the collar and throwing him up against the nearby wall.

William offered him a weak smile. 'It was nothing personal.'

'Nothing personal,' John repeated with a cruel sneer. He punched William in the chest, breaking at least one of his ribs, before letting him collapse on the ground. William howled in pain as John stared at him pitilessly.

Once he had calmed down and the pain began to subside, William glared at his attacker. 'You have hammers not hands, John.' William had thought the comment was rather witty, but his friend seemed to disagree. John grabbed him and hoisted him to his feet once again.

'Get out,' John whispered in his ear. William felt the small man lift him off the ground as if he were weightless and throw him towards the nearby window.

As William sailed through the air a feeling of disorientation flowed over him, before he slammed into the front window of Wyvern's Rest. The glass was tough, but William smashed straight through it. His body was cut in over a dozen places by razor-sharp shards of glass as he collapsed onto the cold cobbles of Poulter's Street.

William slowly picked himself off the ground; his whole body felt as if it was on fire as he tried to stumble away to safety. He'd seen men thrown through the front window before, but he'd never thought it would happen to him. He never thought John would be the one to do it either.

William walked down an alleyway and collapsed, groaning, against a wall.

'Probably broke more than one of my ribs there,' William grunted and looked towards the end of the dark alley, 'was that really necessary?'

John Barton stepped out of the nearby shadows, seeming oddly pleased with himself. 'You should have seen their faces when I did it, Will,' he chuckled, 'stormed out the back door for some good measure. They're gonna be surprised to see us working again anytime soon.'

John laid a brown, leather bag down on the ground beside William, 'I could give you the medicine if you like.'

William smiled weakly, 'Despite you throwing me through a window moments ago, I think I might trust you enough to administer me some alekelium marno- mis.'

John opened the bag quickly and rummaged around inside it. Now that he was no longer throwing William around the Pub, John had a surprising gentleness about him.

As his companion continued to search for the necessary ingredients, William sighed, 'So, you saw our new friend in there.'

'Yes I did,' John replied slowly as he brought out a small glass vial. He inspected the faded label on the tube, popped the cork lid, and helped William take the vessel. John watched him down the contents before continuing, 'He won't be walking around as much anymore: some sailor broke his leg for interrupting their night of drinking and he probably has a few extra, bad bruises. He won't bother us again — especially since you didn't look so helpful getting beat up by little old me.'

William sputtered as the cold liquid went down his throat. He felt better already: Alekelium was well known amongst alchemists for its powerful healing properties, and combined with the strong painkillers in marnomis root he'd probably be well enough to walk home, even with a broken rib.

'Not so tasty, is it?' John smiled at his friend.

William laughed and met his gaze. In the faint moonlight John lost his harsh exterior. In that moment William couldn't understand why no one had ever noticed just how much John looked like his sister.

'It really isn't.' William coughed, 'I wish it was sweeter.'

John smiled and took off his flat cap and handed it to William, 'As good as I am at this whole dress up thing, Will, the hat looks better on you.'

William grinned and adjusted his hat as 'John' began the transformation back into Serenity Barton. She smiled in return as she untied the bun that had kept her hair hidden beneath the hat. Reaching down to help William to his feet, they began to walk away from their failed night out.

Serenity grabbed Williams's alchemy bag from where it lay and slung it over her shoulder. 'Thanks for lending me some burl root, Will, it helped out a lot,' she handed William another empty vial from one of the pockets in her 'brother's' suit.

'And here I thought you were naturally that strong,' he grinned.

'Maybe one day I will be,' Serenity laughed, placing a hand on William's shoulder, 'but alchemy always helps.'

William grinned as they left the pub behind. 'It certainly does.'

TO BE OR NOT TO BE (A QUITTER)

Hayley Taylor

I like to think of all the people gazing at the moon. Watching cartoons.
Getting blazed in the afternoon. Because it's so far from the news. And I want to be a journo,
But it hurts to see the news. So I'm confused.
Is this the path that I want to take?
I don't know if I can surround myself with so much heartache,
Yet still partake in the rat race of the media.
I don't want to hold the silver spoon that scoops,
The lies that they feed to you.
Politically scripted bulletins that they read to you,
Instead of telling you,
The words that you need to hear. So let me list my fears:
Number 1: Is growing up and becoming everything I hated.
Number 2: Looking back and seeing my morals have dissipated.
Number 3: Is finishing a four-year degree,
To find that no one listens to me,
And that the media isn't actually free.
Number 4: Is that number 5 and 6 will be a part of me
Far more than my arteries.
Just like number 7, that goes out to my friends who are in heaven,
So that their pain could find ease from their darkest disease.
So, please!
Don't tell me you've been here, and it gets better,
Because number 8 is being scared that getting better
Means forgetting.