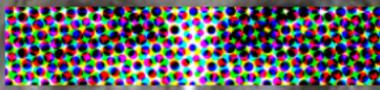


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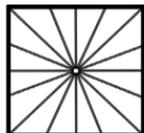
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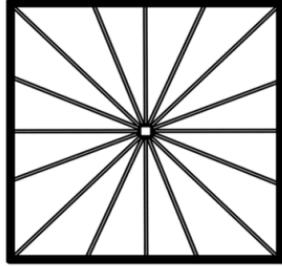
EDITION TWO

SQUARE



WHEEL

SQUARE



WHEEL

EDITION 2

EDITED BY EDWARD BOWES AND EM HAIR
TYPESETTING AND DESIGN BY EDWARD BOWES

WITH SPECIAL THANKS TO AMBER GARVEY
AND RALITSA CHORBADZHIYSKA

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NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

“Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes)”

Walt Whitman, ‘Song of Myself’, 1892

Six months after the publication of our first edition, *Together & Apart*, we are releasing our second during another lockdown in the UK—and amongst rising figures across the globe. As the distribution of vaccines begins, there is now a glimmer of hope for a return to life free from fear of COVID-19; however, there is still much work to be done to right injustices, inequality, and fears that continue to affect millions of people across the world.

Our first edition surveyed the human condition through the lens of the worldwide pandemic; feelings of loneliness and anguish, but also love, hope, and community. With *Identity & Truth* we looked to examine different facets of the human experience through the lens of cultural and individual truths and identities, chosen and imposed. We wanted to provide a space for people to explore what it means to exist—here, and now. From the quest for truth amidst rampant post-truth politics, to understanding and celebrating the diversity of our cultures and identities. Understanding the contradictions and multitudes contained in each of us.

The authors in this edition pull no punches as they investigate themselves and our world and confront truths we’ve been told. Their pieces cover a wide range of human experience with adversity, reflection, and self-discovery. Exploring themes of mental health, trauma, and societal pressures, but also highlighting healing, love, and unity, this collection is a

testament to, if nothing else, the resilience of creativity in the face of adversity.

At Square Wheel Press we are committed to finding and amplifying voices from all walks of life, and we would once again like to thank you for your continued support in our venture to share stories from writers around the world. The interest in our press has grown immensely in the previous six months, and it is all thanks to our wonderful authors and readers. We hope you enjoy *Identity & Truth*.

From the Editors,
Edward Bowes & EM Hair

MATTHEW MILLER

Matthew Miller teaches social studies, swings tennis rackets, and writes poetry—all hoping to create a home. He and his wife live beside a dilapidating orchard in Indiana, where he tries to shape dead trees into playhouses for his four boys. His poetry has been featured in *River Mouth Review*, *Club Plum Journal* and *Ekstasis Magazine*.

I AM GOD'S WHEAT AND SHALL BE GROUND BY THEIR TEETH

I *want* to be tossed in that furrowed trench
with a courage that would crack some molars.
Crushed like cumin, bitter to whatever
wild beasts lick the powder. But I doubt
there's better revenge than lingering about,
dry tassels spun across the country road.
I see rifts of white lines, the other side,
desperate for some boundary. Irksome grains
wedge in the edges, gnaw away pebbles,
absorb the rain's runoff, bump up their shoots.
Like welts. Like mosquito bites nettle a leg.
Press them with an *x* of thumb nails. Ground down,
they die without defiant *screw you* lines,
but spread in the cracks of those who survive.

DR. SARAH GUNDLE

Dr. Sarah Gundle holds a doctorate in Clinical Psychology from the Wright Institute and a master's degree in International Affairs from Columbia University. She is in private practice and teaches courses on trauma and international mental health at Mount Sinai Hospital.

THERAPEUTIC LOVE

It's almost a cliché how much is written about patients who fall in love with their therapists. But what of the therapist's love for her patient? As clinicians we rarely address how deeply our patients affect us.

When we began our work, my patient was a full-time martial arts instructor. Something drove him to therapy. He wasn't sure what. A first-generation immigrant, he was raised in an ostensibly close-knit family in a working-class neighbourhood in New Jersey. He spoke to his mother every day and lived down the street from her. He seemed engaged and open, but also unreachable. He agreed to my observations but sat with his arms crossed in the chair. I couldn't read his expressions. The approaches I often use to initially connect to my patients, from using metaphors and visuals to mindfulness strategies, fell flat. I suspected we were missing something, and I didn't know how to get there. I felt sleepy during our sessions, shifting in my chair to keep alert. I had the sense we were swimming on the surface of something deep, dark, and unwieldy.

Perhaps it was this frustration with our work that drove me to try something new. Uncharacteristically, one day I had the impulse to share a poem with him. An English minor in college, I love poetry but had never brought my worlds of poetry and therapy together. A line from the poem "A Luxury" by Yehuda Amichai, an Israeli poet, had kept coming to me in our sessions, invoking images of strewn gravestones and weathered epitaphs that stretch back into the poet's past. I sat very still waiting for his response. Something felt different in the room: an alertness that had been absent. He read the poem and asked me what it meant. "Is this about family? About choices?" He seemed puzzled.

But something changed. The poem hadn't spoken to him that day, but later he reread it. Then he bought a book of Amichai's poetry and began reading poems between training sessions. He described the bustle of people training around him in a large gym, the noise and sweat and visceral physicality of the place and how it contrasted with the inner silence he felt when reading his poems. He came in the next week and said that he now understood what I meant when I had told him weeks earlier that you can love your family but also hate them. At the time he had nodded politely but said it hadn't resonated. Now, it did. Despite all my training, traditional talk therapy didn't work with him. But poetry did. Other people's words began to carry us, like a raft, into new seas.

I brought a poem in every week and he associated to it, as if it were a dream. I looked for poems that were evocative, dark, and rich. We read Sharon Olds, Mary Oliver, Ellen Bass, Lee Rossi, and more Amichai. Consistent themes of life and death made each poem feel important and high stakes. We took turns reading the poems out loud. I was aware of my breath as I listened, in a way that felt new. At first, we didn't make any interpretations. Shyly at first, and then with more confidence, he began bringing in poems he had found himself and making connections between the poems and his inner world. Six months into our work he brought in the poem "The Perch" by Galway Kinnell.

"What does it mean to you, this poem?" I asked him.

“It’s slippery, I can’t quite reach it yet, but I know it was wrong,” he said. The room suddenly felt thick and murky. I resisted the urge to ask him to elaborate and began to read aloud a line that had struck me; a tree twisted and misshapen under the pressure of an internal conflict.

I looked up to see him hunched over.

“I didn’t want to do those things. I really didn’t want to.” We sat in charged silence, our eyes locked. Then, he began to weep. There wasn’t a language to talk about his trauma history until we discovered poetry, and then that history became the focus of our work.

The introduction of poetry changed our work entirely. For the next seven years, our sessions felt productive and alive. Little by little we did the work of untangling the impact of the incest he experienced with his mother. She had seduced him as a young child and they had sexual relations until he was a teenager. Early on he asked me, “Are you sure that’s not normal?”, about his mother’s request to have him touch her. “I’m positive,” I answered, tasting metal in my mouth as my heart raced.

One day, a year into our work, he read a poem aloud. It was beautiful: nuanced, layered and strangely familiar. I noticed the absence of an author.

“Who is this?” I asked him.

“It’s me, I wrote it.” He pointed to himself with a wide, warm smile. It’s not often that I am surprised in my work, but that moment shook me. Tears pricked my eyes. I couldn’t speak. Revelations are rarely sudden; they generally have an arc and a

momentum, and change happens incrementally. But he shocked me that day. From that day on he brought in his own poetry, and we began meeting twice a week.

Our patients know us in vulnerable ways: they sense when we feel stretched or pushed; they notice when we keep our balance and when we don't. It's intimate work. They observe how we bring levity to heaviness and watch how we tolerate the heaviness when it threatens to engulf. The fact that we can't share any details of our work with our family and friends means those closest to us never see us at our most professionally competent. Only our patients do. They might even know us at our best and most vulnerable, because the work requires our full emotional attention. There are definitely weeks in my life that my patients get that on a more consistent basis from me than my own daughters.

Using the raw medium of poetry as a vehicle made me have to reveal more than I usually do. At the beginning of treatment when my patient witnessed my emotion it was with surprise. "Sarah, why is your voice trembling?" I explained that I was moved. Poetry demands honesty. Without ever knowing many concrete details of my life, he came to know me very well.

What does it mean to feel love during therapeutic work? There were no professional lines crossed, our work was boundaried and safe, but it also felt like a wildly different version of therapy. Freud once defined therapy as a "cure through love" and love did play a central role in our transition to the platform of poetry. The pull and invisible thread between us had to do with feeling emotionally seen and understood. But there's more than that. Real love always involves bravery and our relationship felt alive because courage played a central role. I had to throw out most of what I was trained to do; he had to trust me that he was safe. It

took immense courage for him to start writing poetry because it forced him to reckon with the sexual abuse he suffered; it took courage for me to break out of my known lane. The last line of the first poem I shared by Amichai is about how hard it is to negotiate the distances between the different parts of ourselves. I recently returned to that poem and realised that was the theme of our work: being brave enough to make new connections. Those connections also involved significant loss, as he got in touch with his anger and began to limit contact with his family.

Therapy is about breaking out of negative, frozen cycles. Effective treatment is built on the premise that you extend the therapy relationship's challenges to one's relationships outside of the consulting room. It's supposed to be that way for the patient, but what felt so significant about our relationship was how much we both benefitted. Our relationship changed me. The challenges in our work together made me question other patterns in my life and in my practice that had grown stale. Being up close to his process of reinventing a life with meaning, purpose, and intention made me ask myself in what ways I was getting in my own way of creating that. As clinicians, we ask so much of our patients, but I had stopped asking much of myself. Our work forced me to ask myself hard questions, like the role that fear played in my decision making. I'm certain that my decision to have another child at the age of 45, something that I had wanted but not been brave enough to do, was a result of the soul searching our work engendered in me. Galway Kinnell rounds off "The Perch" by finally braving to look at the tree itself rather than the view to the horizon. Our work enabled us to look internally at our own trees.

During the years we worked together my patient became a published poet. He earned an MFA in poetry from a prestigious program and began writing a book. He scaled back his martial

arts practice and separated from his family. Our work ended recently; we both agreed it had reached a natural close. It was an unusual goodbye in that it felt more meaningful and complete than sad. I feel immense gratitude towards him, and pride in our work, but neither of those things quite capture the depth of my feelings for him.

Only the word love does.

CEINWEN E CARIAD HAYDON

Ceinwen lives in Newcastle upon Tyne, UK, and writes short stories and poetry. She has been widely published in web magazines and in print anthologies. She holds an MA in Creative Writing (Newcastle University, 2017). She is a Pushcart and Forward Prize nominee (2019). She believes everyone's voice counts.

TÀCHARAN¹

I, alien bairn,
scorched my mother's outstretched arms,
frayed holes where love should be.

After birth, she lay prone, forlorn.
Her bloodied body tired, her mind denied
the truth. She hated me.

Over months
Hail Mary's rained down,
lashed soft upon my fontanelle.

Her shrivelled milk ducts,
dried-up motherhood,
painful and pernicious
held us dread-fast. Despair
slopped in voids behind our eyes,

doomed our days. Our common bond,
a dreich² gloaming.
She did not want a real baby
 me.

1 tàcharan - Scots Gaelic - changeling

2 dreich – Scottish - dreary - bleak

TOM BARLOW

Tom Barlow is an Ohio writer whose work has appeared in journals including *The Stoneboat Literary Journal*, *Ekphrastic Review*, *Voicemail Poetry*, *Hobart*, *Tenemos*, *Redivider*, *Harbinger Asylum*, *Heron Clan*, *The Remington Review*, *Your Daily Poem*, and many more.

See more at tombarlowauthor.com.

FAITH

When I read poems referring to the Bible, I
wonder how I would have dealt with forty

hungry days in the desert and what exactly
Satan would tempt me with. A downtown address

and five percent body fat? For me, faith is
a lighthouse beacon that continues to wheedle me

every time it swings around. I doubt it will stop,
though, even if I were to wave my hands like a

grand inquisitor; I must feed it faith before it will
return the favour, but I have none in my pocket.

I have faith in my partner, in the people who
overflow my life, in gravity; I have none for

superstition. But Lord how I envy those who do
on those days when the bone man is skulking

around one I love and the air is so still
I am afraid to breathe.

KATIE MEEGAN

Born in Canada, Katie Meegan was raised in Kells, Co. Meath before attaining a BA in English Studies from Trinity College Dublin. She has an MA in Publishing and works in publishing. She lives in London with her partner.

SMILE MORE

It was on the third day of the twenty-fifth year of my meagre existence, that I saw him for the first time. It was not the first time being hungover had led me to question my sanity. I woke up with last night's mascara gluing my eyes shut. It was an autumn day, drizzling, grey, the kind of bitter cold that lingered in your bones and dampened between your toes. I was combing my hair in the window and sipping occasionally from a cup of black coffee. This morning, as with others before it, I would often passively regard the comings and goings of the tube station, just for a minute or two, before returning to the perennial noise and agitated comfort of my phone. The Circle line would disappear and reappear intermittently. I had a nice vantage point from my tiny, grimy window to the slated roof, a slice of track valleyed by blackened brick walls before my view was cut off by an ASOS billboard. I did not mind the noise, it was a welcome distraction from my own thoughts.

It was then I saw him, half-lit in the cold of morning. He was weathered, wearing a tattered coat that might have been black once. The man had his back to me, but I could make out the grey wisps of beard over hunched shoulders. Not a TFL worker, that was clear, but he stood on the tracks with a quiet calm that seemed to come, much like himself, from nowhere. What a fascinating anomaly, I thought, putting my hand on my chin and leaning into the crusty glass. How did you get there? No high-vis, no discernible purpose. He just stood in the rain, lifting his arms skywards. It was calming watching him, this tattered figure of zen. Fascinating enough to forget where he stood. My reverie was broken by the beeping of doors sliding shut, a lurch of an engine. The Circle line roared into view with a terrible certainty, not even acknowledging a bump. It sped, a

mass of red and white, and was gone. He was gone. My heart dropped. With shaking hands I dialled 999. The operator calmly asked me to explain what had happened. There was a man, then the train came, then he was gone. She patched me through to the station. My flat overlooks the line, there was a man, on the tracks, now he's gone. The station controller shouted at someone else to check where I had described. There was nothing. They rewound the CCTV footage. There had never been anyone. I was given a terse message about wasting rail workers' time. I hung up the phone and took the bus to work that day with a sick feeling in my mouth.

I had moved to London because I had been told that that was what I wanted to do. I was told that my life would be a series of exciting opportunities and intelligent conversations with mysterious strangers in classy lofts. By the age of twenty-five, my career had stalled in a cul-de-sac of sky-scrapers. My line manager was a middle-aged man called Tom who cycled in from Essex each day. He referred to his wife as “the ball and chain”, had recently installed Velux windows, and owned at least five Michael McIntyre DVDs. At the Christmas party, he drunkenly tried to engage me in a conversation about Brexit and the follies of today's youth. I excused myself to use the bathroom and ordered a large glass of white wine with a tequila shot from the open bar. That night I had pokey, if enthusiastic, sex with Kevin from the accounts department, which had led to a friends-with-benefits situation that I was content with. I made good money for my age and situation, but I was too worried to spend it on anything major, squirrelling what little I had left at the end of the month into savings accounts. After seeing it in a magazine, I started calling them my “get the fuck out” funds. What I was getting the fuck out of or where I was going was still a mystery to me as I no longer had any clear goals or ambitions. My uni friend called it an existential malaise, BuzzFeed articles called it a quarter-life crisis, WebMD diagnosed me with

burnout, my mother suggested that I take more walks. I rented a studio apartment in an area that was cool before I was born. The fashionable folk had aged and reproduced, valuing schools and latte art over dive bars and recreational drugs. It wasn't on trend but it was fine, an easy commute. I wasn't unhappy per se, I just didn't feel anything anymore. It was fine, it was grey. I did not smile very much.

He didn't appear the next morning, nor the next. I continued going to work via bus and on Friday evening I ate greasy pizza in front of a Netflix documentary on flat-earthers. How nice it would be, I mused while dipping a crust into garlic sauce, to just fall off the edge of the earth. How nice it would be to believe in something. I went the weekend without seeing him. I went to Westfield and wandered around the shops touching clothes and stopping for bland butter chicken and Diet Cokes. On Saturday night I considered texting Booty Call Kevin despite the UTI he gave me last time. I needn't have bothered, as at 11.05pm he texted me, "You up? x". I replied the affirmative and he arrived within the hour, giving me enough time to shave my armpits and hide my dirty laundry and empty ice cream tubs. He brought a bottle of red wine and some cans of Tesco lager. He always made an effort to shower beforehand which I appreciated. He had a haircut that was popular with teenagers and addressed people as "fam" and "bruv", despite being raised in a small town somewhere in the Midlands. His cheeks were raspy, and I found myself making grocery shopping lists in my head. By the time he pushed my underwear that I had put on not five minutes previously to the side, I had a full meal plan for the next two weeks sorted. If I hadn't had an earth-shattering orgasm in the length of an Arctic Monkeys song he would get frustrated. As if my clit were some kind of car engine that wouldn't start. He responded by rubbing harder and harder, reminiscent of an outdated Xbox controller. It was desperate and it put me off completely but I could never fake it. That would be un-feminist

of me. I would moan to put his dick in me when I grew tired of the game. Once he finished he never seemed to remember the task that he had started in the first place. Afterwards we lay in my bed, feigning interest in each other as people. We chatted nonsensically. “You know when I met you I thought that you were a bit of a bitch,” he laughed. I shrugged and said, “Most people do.” I requested him an Uber. I didn’t want him there while I slept, even less when I woke up.

On Sunday I went to boozy brunch with a uni friend and her acquaintances who talked in exclamation marks and expressions of disbelief. There was no point telling them about the railway man who had disturbed my thoughts. It wasn’t appropriate mimosa conversation. I smiled and bantered and contributed to conversations on Primark and work politics. I was tired, but then again, I was tired all the time. I left as soon as I could to return home to the safety of my lumpy couch and laptop pre-loaded with Netflix. Despite all common sense, I decided to walk home. It was late autumn and the nights were creeping in and encircling my mind. The leaves lay like massacred slugs. When I crossed the Thames it was inky black and reflected the lights of the apartment complexes and office towers that lined the banks. I didn’t trust myself to stop and look in. The depths call to me, like a heroin addict and their dealer. I tried to remember the last time I had laughed and really, really meant it. I got home and climbed straight into bed despite it only being 6pm. I slept until Monday morning, blurry-eyed and cotton mouthed, fixed myself a cup of tea and returned to the window for my daily vigil. That day, I was rewarded. He stood again on the tracks, his back turned to me. I held my breath as he raised one tattered arm to shoulder height, then the other and hopped from one track to the next. He switched from one foot to another in a child-like manner, balancing along the steel beam. A familiar rattle began in my bones, and he crossed his worn-out shoes and slowly, ever so slowly, turned anti-clockwise.

A shoulder, an outline of a face, a bulbous nose, and just as I could start to see his face, the Circle line howled past, and he was gone. When I finally caught my breath, I realised my hands were shaking.

I started to wonder whether I was going mad or whether I was seeing ghosts, *Sixth Sense* style. I would force myself to actually look at the homeless people on Oxford Street, in case he was among their uncounted numbers. I wondered who he was, and what he had in store for me, and why he had chosen me in the first place, if he had chosen me at all. Every morning, I waited at the window, being late for work most days. A week passed, it didn't work so I changed tactics. I would awake early and busy myself with things that didn't need doing—chopping fruit, folding laundry, making elaborate cups of coffee—hoping that my industry might trigger a reappearance. Nothing. I spent my quiet hours in work Googling “ghosts of the Underground” and images of abandoned stations. Then I wondered why me, why did he choose to keep coming back to me? And then, in my waking hours in the middle of the night, why did I want to see him again so badly? Why did I want to join him on the tracks? I made a resolve and took the next week off.

I told them I had the flu. I could tell my boss was pissed and didn't believe me, but I didn't care. I screened calls from my mother and ignored texts from friends, pushing the beaten-up leather sofa right up to the window to create my vantage point. Each day I awoke in the early hours and sat, alert and anxious, on the edge of the sofa, as the day lightened by increments and the entrance to the station got slowly busier, turning from tired faces in barista uniforms and jumpsuits to two-pieced suits and stilettos to eventually uneven school ties and shouts of joviality. Then the morning passed the point of my recognition, the light and station morphed into an iteration I had not seen before: yoga legging-clad mums with buggies, old men with

shopping trollies, college kids clutching cheap coffee. I stayed at my lookout until midday when I would admit defeat and leave the house for a Gregg. I streamed old sitcoms and drifted in and out of sleep. Some days I would get too antsy and take a walk around the block and past the station. Its cavernous mouth and turnstiles like teeth looming. I crossed the road in order not to be sucked in, worried its metallic tongue would taste me and want more. I made a plan. The fourth morning I awoke at 5am and was unable to drift off so I dressed and wrapped myself in blankets, curling up at the window. The single-pane glass had frosted overnight and the impenetrable darkness of the winter night still lingered. The station was just reopening. I could see the lights flickering on in the main hall and platforms. I yawned and stretched, and out of the corner of my eye I could see movement. And there he was. Tattered, joyful, skipping from one rail to another. Free. I grabbed my keys and my Oyster card and pushed out the door. I kept my head down against the elements and scurried into the teeth of the station, tapping, pushing through the barriers and scurrying down the stairs. He was still there. I couldn't believe it. From this angle I could see the patches on his coat, the greyness of the bristles of his beard. There was no one else on the platform. I shouted, hey. He didn't turn around. I shouted again and he started running, deftly hopping across the rails. Without thinking, I followed him, clambering across the gate that read "Personnel Only, Entry Forbidden". I was on the tracks picking my way from sleeper to sleeper, following him. I was out of breath as I called out again and again. Please turn, please look at me. Why, all I want to know is why. Suddenly he stopped, waited a moment, and turned. He grinned, his mouth filled with black rotting teeth and his eyes bloodshot. In a croaking guttural voice, he barely spoke above a whisper:

"You need to smile more."

And that's when the train hit me.

DANIEL CLARK

Daniel Clark is a writer and linguist. His words have most recently appeared in *Star 82 Review*, *The Crank*, and *Serotonin*. He tweets from @dang_clark.

ERUDITION

I skim its grimy pages, old ink
sticking to ink-soaked
fingers beneath an ink-splashed sky.

The pages offer up their secrets
and I panic
as I breathe
in worthwhile knowledge I'm not
worthy of knowing.

I drink ink,
suck words off the page
like a vacuum
pulling
at socks.

I tell myself the obvious:
they're only words
they're not true
they weren't written for me.

Z.R. GHANI

Z.R. Ghani is a poet from North London, UK. She works as an Editorial Assistant for Dorling Kindersley, and has a BA in Creative Writing from Bath Spa University. Ghani's poems have been published in *Magma Poetry*, *Black Bough Poetry*, and *The Willowherb Review*.

THE ART OF CLOYING

A book can be loved to death and not die.
Look at how this one refuses to close. Place the weight
of the world on it and it may stop demanding attention.

And if you choose to settle within it—this book
I once read, but isn't mine—with the same intimacy
as seeing the painless birth of sunrise for the first time,
you'll find the smudge of fingertips where a cryptic
word struck a chord and grew familiar. Pen lines preserve
inspirations not to be forgotten. That's telling of love:
what was spotless became a kneaded bed of the curious.

If the cover is missing, then it has shaken its burden;
it's dearer than gold. It's known the caress of eyes
and wants more. Suppose you, not knowing this,
were to tape it back and suffocate the perceived disgrace?
Isn't "love" tousled in the word novel?

My sisters used to wrap their books in decorative paper
recycled from bygone weddings. Inside were curated
words of warning, warding off eyes behind the filigree.
I tore in with my shoes on and drew morbid faces.
I loved every page as they did—but a little differently.

The first book I knew and ever kissed was a Quran,
I peered at the words, but could not seize them,
so I untied the embroidered cloth with clean hands;
the dizzying calligraphy lay under my eyes—bold—
like the gates of *Jannah* prohibiting girls who don't listen...
My tongue wrestled to weave sense amid my shattered selves;
my instincts grappled with Estella, Miss Sharp, Miss Eyre,
when I'd rummage their pages with laughter, tears, prayer.

THE MAD ONES

When I was young, before I learned
to use the poison arrow,
my father warned me of the mad ones in the glade,
and marked my photograph red with *urucum*,
so no one could steal my soul.

The elders chanted about the mad ones
scything entire villages in one swoop.
Now I know the song.

It's never quiet in the forest
just as it's never quiet in the mind.

We hunt for nothing but the mad ones.
They leave behind consequences:
dry stumps and stinking cavities,
a spillage of frantic insects,
and fatten their trucks with our past,
the blissful dreams of our ancestors,
hacked to the bone, chattering in the smoke—

Above me a macaw skims a pool of sky,
where the trees brought shade,
and sends me a scarlet feather.

When the trees breathe, we breathe.
For each tree that is massacred, or burned
my soul sheds a leaf. How many more
until I am swept away for the unfamiliar
to take my place, until I discover my own sacred,
emerald tales blinking their last in the fire?

T.S.J. HARLING

T.S.J. Harling has been published in *Twisted Sister Lit Mag*, *Storgy*, *Queen Mob's Tea House* and *X R A Y*, among others. T.S.J. Harling is currently studying for a Critical & Creative Writing PhD at the Royal Holloway, University of London, on the "New Woman" in *Dracula*.

THE SHADOW

There is another self of mine, who haunts my every step. I am always pretending to everyone else that she is not there, like a ghost only I can see. We are in a constant dance; I am desperate to keep two steps ahead, to waltz into some other ballroom. To outrun her.

She and I were once one, and I don't know when it was that we split into two distinct beings. Part of it was when she said yes, and then yes again, to the crack and coke that did the rounds in my/our late teens, and carried on saying yes, while I said no. She was too scared of debt to go to university. She stayed working at a bar, and then went full time, and got by on enough to buy drinks for the evening, and not much else. She was never intellectually, creatively, or romantically fulfilled. And the bitterness was overwhelming. I wonder sometimes if she still has all of her own teeth. I know that she would never have gotten enough money together to purchase the dentistry I did to fix the childhood damage to my smile. I wonder sometimes, how bad it really got for her, what depths she plummeted to. I'm still so frightened of those depths. My fear of her dictates my every move.

I can never be insulated enough from her, my parallel self, myself-that-never-was, myself-that-still-could-be. There is not enough money I can earn, not enough cultural capital I can hoard, to protect me from her and her depths. Sometimes, she feels so close to me it is as if she is in the other room, waiting. She feels as real as my own reflection in the mirror, a me that isn't me, with dark circles under her eyes, either chubbier or frighteningly thin. I know she looks far, far older than I do now. Whatever life she has been living, I know that Covid would have broken her.

It wouldn't take much, for our lives to converge again. A bad breakup, a death in the family, a lost job. I am never really safe from her. I cannot take any risks, or she will soon have her hands around my neck. Maybe the drugs would be different, prescription pills instead of stuff from the street. To begin with, anyway. But then, I have not yet gotten enough financial stability to make any mistakes. One month of missed rent. Perhaps that is all it would take to put me in a tailspin, straight into her clutches.

There is nothing anyone else can say, or do, to keep me from her. All I can do is keep dancing, keep running, keep earning, keep working towards a more middle-class life, one with slightly more room for error. I think I will only truly be able to put her to bed on my own death bed. Only then I will be able to say that I made it out of there alive.

DW MCKINNEY

DW McKinney is a Black American writer living in Nevada. She writes about life and graphic novels for *CNMN Mag* and she is the Senior Nonfiction Columns Editor at *Raising Mothers*. Her work has been featured in *JMWW Journal*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *[PANK] Magazine*, and *TAYO Literary Magazine*, among others. Say hello at dwmckinney.com or on Twitter/Instagram @thedwmckinney.

LIKE THAT

“If your lil’ friends jump off a cliff, would you jump too?” My father’s meaty fist pressed into the dinner table as he leaned forward. One wrong sound, a slowness to speak, and he’d pounce.

Would I jump? The question mingled with the grotesqueries chattering among my thoughts. Things I never dared speak aloud because, in my family, we didn’t talk about what made us sick in the head. But we did talk about what made us sick in the body all day long. Would I jump? Because my father had asked the question, my corrupted mind believed that he had sensed the urge to jump inside me. A death wish. A suicidal tendency. I must have said or done something to make him ask this, but I couldn’t remember what that must have been as I peered into my plate of cold spaghetti to avoid his gaze. Would I jump? The desire itched where his words had nestled in the back of my mind. I wasn’t ready to say “yes”. I wasn’t ready to be snatched across the slick wood of the dinner table and have my father’s hands squeeze obedience into me.

“No, sir,” I said.

“Yeah, you bet not. We ain’t raise you like that.” My father’s eyes stared a deep, penetrating violence that hung around my neck. “I bet not catch you actin’ *like that*.”

Sometimes *like that* meant like white people but most times it meant acting ghetto. *Like that* was a recklessness not saved for the type of Black folks we were supposed to be. But I acted *like that* once I left our home and disappeared into the caverns of

the Sherwood apartment complex with my friends. Most kids our age played Ding Dong Ditch. In the Sherwood, we called it Nigga Knockin'. Just a whole crowd of us niggas running around the apartment buildings, banging on and kicking the doors of white folks and strangers and people who scared us. I acted *like that* in Kmart, too. I muttered caution to my friends when the security guard followed us from the garden centre and into the main store. I stood watch while my friends took care of their own business in the entertainment centre behind me. Back in the Sherwood, my empty hands picked at my jeans while their hands worked the cellophane off their new CDs. In those moments, I wondered if I could act all the way *like that*, if I could act like them.

If my friends stole, could I steal too? The question burrowed underneath my skin and tunnelled upward. It fuelled my wayward thoughts.

Could I steal? It was a matter of coolness then. If I wanted to be like the girls whose bedroom floors were littered with cellophane, I had to. Could I steal? It would've been better if I could talk about my mind the way folks in our family talked about our bodies. I might have taken these thoughts to them instead of to the Food 4 Less with my mother. Could I steal? On an afternoon when the impulse had overtaken me, I pushed our grocery basket to the exit with one hand. The other cupped the candy tin jangling in my right pocket—*Just. Like. That.*

KAYLEIGH MAI HINSLEY

Kayleigh Mai Hinsley is a writer and photographer based in the South West. She recently graduated from the University of Leeds, where she studied Criminal Justice and Criminology. She once played the back end of a snake in a school play.

STOP.

I have learned
to dread the question
Where are you from?
you see, for me
the answer is too long

the quick truth, apparently
is not easily believed
an answer of Devon
somehow can't be real

it is met with a scoff
a raise of the brow
a hesitant *No, but...*
and a *Where were you born?*

now I must match your nervous joviality
to satisfy your misplaced curiosity
that comes without sensitivity
as you survey me

I could jump right in
but I want to draw it out
just to show that I know
exactly where this is heading
and why

so I reply
Surrey
and again this is the truth
but it's not enough for you

it sparks a flicker of confusion
not the answer you expected
and I know that you won't stop
until you get it

the next step in your quest
is to ask *What about your parents?*
I'm sorry to disappoint you
but they were born here too

so it's awkward now for you
for me it's always been
but it's only now you babble
I'm not racist, just curious
I asked because you look exotic

and there it is
you've just admitted it
you're not asking for place of birth
you're asking for place of colour;
the thing that explains
the colour of my skin

I laugh just to break the tension
spell out my ethnicity in percentages
throw a curve ball just to see...
genetically, I'm mostly Irish actually

but do I owe it to you?
that explanation?
to act unoffended?
to smooth over tension?

they say that's just the way it is
the way it has to be
but I'm not so sure
anymore

stop.

ROSANN TUNG

Rosann Tung began writing creative nonfiction after a career conducting research and advocacy for racial justice in public education. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in the *Boston Globe*, *HerStry*, and in the Main Street Rag anthology, *A Tether to this World*. She serves as a reader for *Solstice Literary Magazine*.

NAMES LEFT BEHIND

Our daughter Ai Zhen (藹真) hates her name. “It makes me stick out.” “No one pronounces it right.” “Every time I meet someone, it’s work.” She hasn’t reported anyone making fun of her name. But she believes it is just one more strike against her fitting in, a strange name along with her almond eyes and the fact that her crushes always choose skinny White girls.

In response to teachers, coaches, and friends butchering her name, she mispronounces her own name when she introduces herself to mirror how people usually say it. She’s embarrassed about her name, and I’m embarrassed to have a daughter who is so self-loathing.

Me: What did you just call yourself?

藹真: Eye Zzzhhen (rhymes with “why ten?”)

Me: But if you say it that way, it doesn’t mean what it means, it’s just nonsense! It hurts my ears!

藹真: I don’t care, it’s my name, I can say it how I want.

“How she wants” is to not make waves, to not call attention to her Chinese-ness, to go with the flow.

At a sleepaway writers’ workshop in high school, she introduced herself as Kayla, but because the roster listed Ai Zhen, she kept having to explain why the two different names. When she went to college, I braced myself for her to begin a new life in a new state with a new name. I was curious what name she would choose, but I would not let myself ask her, for fear she would think I condoned the name change.

Since my own college years, I approach each return trip to Raleigh with dread, duty, and love, in that order. Geographical distance has been my cure/antidote for craving a connection my mother could never give me and for avoiding questions for which I did not have answers, like “When are you going to be done with your degree?” and “Why don’t you have a boyfriend?”

But that spring, a heady anticipation added to the mix. Soon I would be matched with a baby girl from China. I needed my parents’ help. My new daughter would have an Anglo name, but I wanted her to have a Chinese one, too. I was taking her from her birth country to Boston. The least I could do was give her a name from that homeland, which was also my parents’ homeland, but not mine.

By the time a child is adopted, she might already have had two names: the one her birth mother/family gave her, one we would never know, and the one the orphanage gave her, her official name on government documents. My daughter’s orphanage name was He Dong Xing (Winter Apricot) because she was found on a cold day at the Apricot Flower Police Station in the city of He Fei. Now I planned to give her two more names, one Anglo and one Chinese.

I have two names, and so do almost all my American-born friends whose parents immigrated from East Asia. Our parents picked random Anglo names at some point in their journeys and used those names rather than the names they grew up with. That way, conversation wouldn’t halt every time they introduced themselves. What they did not know was that even with Anglo names, we would always be othered.

Using websites listing baby names and their meanings, I had already chosen Kaya, which means older or wiser sister in Hopi. Due to China's One Child Policy, my daughter was likely to be an older sister in her birth family. But I couldn't Google in Chinese to find a Chinese name.

Chinese family naming follows a strict convention by generation and birth order. All children of males in a certain generation share not only the surname but also the next character, which often comes from a poem or poetic phrase. The third and final character is the one that is unique. So I'm 董嘉安 and my brother is 董嘉森.

However, I was a daughter without a husband adopting a daughter, rendering the patrilineal naming convention irrelevant. Far from the Boston home where I would raise her, in my parents' cluttered living room adorned with traditional calligraphy, Kandinsky and Klee prints, and unruly orchids in plastic pots, my dad and I paired nature words like "mountain," "forest," or "sun" with our surname 董, which means understanding. I scanned beautiful landscapes in my mind and asked my dad for the Chinese words to what I saw. None of the combinations with 董 sounded just right. We needed a change of strategy for such a high stakes decision.

In protest of my choice to become a single mom at 37 through adoption, my mother boycotted this naming exercise. Undaunted, I muted the TV in the kitchen, where she presided over a table full of pill bottles, paper towels torn into quarters, a ball of rubber bands, and mugs with tea leaves on their fourth soak. Parking myself in one of the rolling office chairs that she preferred over proper dining chairs, I dared my mom to support me in naming her future grandchild, "So Mom, who were some of your favourite relatives when you were a kid?"

As if expecting the question, she replied, “My aunt, Wang Ai Zhen.”

“Why? What did you like about her?” She had never mentioned this distant relative before.

“She drove me to school after my mom died.”

I felt hopeful that my mother had presented a rare nugget about her early life before she became a suburban mom simultaneously living the American dream and longing for something more.

“How was her driving you to school memorable?”

“She talked to me in the car.” I felt a rare tinge of empathy, that an adult merely talking to her nine-year-old self would make such a lasting impression. Perhaps I could coax more from her, more story, more love. “Do you remember what you talked about?”

“I don’t remember.”

How sad that the person who showed my mother kindness when she was a child was not her parent. The youngest at five years old in 1941, my mother was cared for by reluctant relatives, while her own mother fled Shanghai and brought only two of five siblings to the safety of Western China to escape the Japanese Occupation. Her father was exiled from China during this time due to his leadership of the Democratic Socialist third party during the civil war. When my mother was nine, her mother died in childbirth. These multiple abandonments left a psychic wound, one whose scar tissue robbed her of the ability to love or be loved, to fully engage in being a wife and mother. Only this aunt stood out as noticing her enough to talk to her. Another piece of the puzzle of my mother’s unresolved hunger for love

snapped into place. Just as I was about to become a mother.

After we discussed the meaning of Ai Zhen (藹真)—藹 means caring, and 真 means genuine – I knew this would be my new daughter’s Chinese name. In my unending quest to connect with and please my mother, I hoped she felt honoured to have her one and only grandchild named after her favourite aunt.

When I returned home, I announced to my partner-to-be (who would become her father) both the Chinese and (Native) American names I had chosen. Puzzled, he widened his steel blue eyes in disbelief, “Why would you give her two names?” In that moment, I realised that he might not ever have encountered the double-name phenomenon before.

I gave him the short answer, “Because I have two names.”

“Really? I didn’t know you had another name. What’s your Chinese name?”

“董嘉安. 董 means understanding. 嘉 means good or fine. 安 means peace.”

“Who calls you that?”

“No one.” Not even my parents had ever used the name. At home they called me 妹妹. Little sister.

“Why not give her one name? She’s Chinese, so why wouldn’t you give her one Chinese name?” So logical, if you aren’t an immigrant.

My retort was instant. “Because then she’d be cursed to a life of a mispronounced name! Kids in school will make fun of her.” I flashed back to the hallway choruses of “tung tang ching chong wing ling,” “chink!” and to the crowded bar where an angry drinker once spat, “Why don’t you go back to where you came from?”

“That doesn’t have to be the case. She could teach people how to pronounce her name.” He cited studies showing children are able to pronounce new words with more ease and accuracy than adults. A little voice in my head reminded me that a Chinese name would be problematic in any school that didn’t have other Asian kids. Being an optimist, my partner wanted to believe that kindergarteners, teachers, and later, people she dated, would be as confident and intentional as he would be. He probably imagined the playground conversations would go like this:

New friend: “Aye? Aye Tung? Aye Zzhhen Tung?”

藹真, unfazed: “That’s me. But it’s 藹真.”

New friend: “Oh, sorry, how do you pronounce your name?”

藹真: “No problem, thanks for asking! Phonetically, it’s I then J-U-N. The I is low and the Jun is high. I Jun.”

New friend: “Aye Jun.”

藹真: “I Jun. It means caring and genuine.”

New friend: “I Jun?”

藹真, still cheerful: “That’s right, with the accent on the Jun.”

My coping mechanisms growing up Chinese in the South were to think bullies were ignorant and didn’t know better, to laugh it off, to pretend it didn’t happen, and to never make eye contact with the perpetrators. I wanted my future daughter to fit in, to avoid that imagined conversation, to not even need strategies to counter bullies.

I ignored my inner voice and hoped that in the thirty-five intervening years between my childhood and hers, Americans had evolved. Reacting to my own loss of name and identity, I gave her one Chinese name. Our daughter's name is 董藹真, but she says it incorrectly on purpose because she doesn't want to make waves. However, she no longer plans to change her name.

I was wrong about Americans evolving. White men mocking Asian names made the national news at least twice this fall. Three Republican leaders purposely mispronounced then Vice Presidential running mate Kamala Harris' first name¹ at public events and on the news. Kamala Harris responded that names are “precious and sacred” parts of one's identity, and that their remarks reflected on their maturity. Then, the Chair of the Boston School Committee made fun of Asian and Black names² during public testimony, when he thought he had muted his Zoom audio. He resigned within 12 hours.

Both times, the next morning's news and videos triggered a cascade of thoughts.

¹ Seema Mehta, 'When a Senate colleague mocked Kamala Harris' name, so many people winced with recognition', *Los Angeles Times*, 26 October 2020; <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2020-10-26/kamala-harris-name>

² Danny McDonald, James Vaznis, Felicia Gans, 'Boston School Committee chair resigns after 'hurtful and wrong' comments in public hearing', *Boston Globe*, 22 October 2020; <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/10/22/metro/boston-city-councilors-call-resignation-school-committee-chair-after-appearing-mock-names-during-public-meeting/>

What?!
Eye roll
I can't believe it
I completely believe it
They're just ignorant; it's not their fault; maybe their parents
didn't teach them right
I feel bad for him; maybe he shouldn't lose his job over one
mistake

My partner voiced that last thought over breakfast. He felt charitable because the Chair had in the same meeting presided over a historic vote towards racial equity, and I snapped at him (even though I had gone down that same rabbit hole).

“How can you say that? If you make fun of people's names, you don't respect those people!” I said.

I wondered whether, before having a partner of colour, he would have had similar thoughts. “I mean, *you* don't think those things in your head and just know better than to say them, do you?” He admitted that he probably did as a child. I wondered how many of my own acquaintances think ethnic names are fair game for derision.

My Chinese name is 董嘉安, but no one has ever called me that. My other name is Rosann Mae Tung. Mispronunciation is not a problem with Rosann. I'm sure I would have been taunted even more in grade school if I had gone by 嘉安. Even today, my race still elicits negative attention. As I came within earshot of a passerby in my town centre, he started singing the 1980s song “Turning Japanese” while trying to make eye contact. Another one leered at me in a hotel elevator and asked, “Where are *you* from?”

My mother's name is 张敦复, but no one has ever called her that. Her childhood nickname was 小满, which means Little Full, because as the fifth child, she filled the hand. She says this nickname makes her feel unwanted. Especially since her older sister's nickname is 小爱, which means Little Love.

We don't know how she got her Anglo name, which is June. Perhaps after her mother died, her Western-educated fourth aunt in Shanghai suggested the name. Perhaps when she was sent to board at a middle school in Macau, because most of the students were Portuguese and British expats, the nuns thought an Anglo name would make it easier for the almost orphan from China. Perhaps, when she landed in 美国 from Macau on a steamship, the immigration officer asked her for an English name. She picked May, for the spring month and also because it means beautiful. Mei Mei (妹妹) means little sister, which she is. The immigration officer might have asked her, "How about June? Too many of you pick May."

She says she likes June because it is easier than telling people how to pronounce and spell 敦复.

Three generations of women, at least nine names, identities both Chinese and American. Our abandoned Chinese names carried family tradition and meaning. Our Anglo names of unknown origin and questionable meaning are comfortable for English speakers to use. I seek to reclaim identity lost through immigration and the drive to assimilate. While I wanted my daughter's name to be precious and sacred, my understanding, caring, and genuine 董藹真 wishes I had given her a name that would grant her belonging.

KENNETH POBO

Kenneth Pobo is the author of twenty-one chapbooks and nine full-length collections. Recent books include *Bend of Quiet* (Blue Light Press), *Loplop in a Red City* (Circling Rivers), and *Uneven Steven* (Assure Press). *Opening* is forthcoming from Rectos Y Versos Editions.

For the past thirty-plus years he taught at Widener University and retired in 2020.

CHANGE ME

In high school a girl who sat next to me
in American History tried to convert me
to Mormonism. We argued about Jesus.
That got boring. We drank Orange Crush
by the pond near school.
Twice.

My college roommate tried to convert me
to be straight. I said I wasn't.
He said yes, you are. That got boring.
We liked cafeteria brownies.
And movie night. He loved Godard.
I wept over Bette Davis in *Now Voyager*.

When I worked as a busboy,
another busboy said he was destined
for success. I'd still be a busboy while
he ran a bank, a guy with a mahogany desk.
I'd have gravy spills on my shirt
A greasy tray in my hand.

PAM R. JOHNSON DAVIS

Pam R. Johnson Davis is a Chicago, USA-based poet and author. Her work is rooted in lived experience—in Blackness, womanhood, grieving, healing, and hope. Her work has previously appeared in online journals, including *The Poetry and Me Daily* and *The Lakefront Historian*. Her new poetry collection, *Seasons (I'll Be Seeing You)*, debuted at number one on Amazon and won the Best Urban Poetry Book Award at American Book Fest. You can find more on her website: unapologeticallypam.blogspot.com.

OVER THERE.

where is that place
where inspiration meets means

i ain't neva found it in the hood
i think i did one time
but 12 came and took it away

so where do i go to find that place
where trouble don't last always

where i can proudly declare
i'm is woman
i'm is Black
i'm is human

without getting shot for carrying
a bag of skittles in my hand
or sleeping in my bed
after a long day's work

where is that place
where the students i teach
don't come 'round here in a body bag
where funerals ain't the norm
and legacy is a living legend
instead of stories told outside on porches
over dice games and forty ounces

where is that place
where inspiration meets means
i think i'm on my way there
i'm gon' make it there
i'm gon' make it there

S. MCKIERNAN

S. McKiernan: practicing writer, professional overthinker, soon to be published in *Analogies* and *Allegories Literary Magazine*.

THIS IS NOT ART

Metaphors are for those who desire expression
Comparisons to unlit candles and the clouds on a rainy day
mean nothing to me now
(Although I'm not sure how important they seemed last week)
The wings of a bird and the heart that hope rests in seem nonsensical
I will not calculate syllables or count commas on fingers and toes
I've run out of figurative digits (if I ever had any)
I have no patience for the sound a trumpet makes in the morning
Or the saxophone at night
No need for the sun and the moon
And the hidden stars in between

Nothing is real
Nothing was real
And nothing will be real

Why bother with extenuating descriptions and bothersome paragraphs
Indent after indent
Eet after eet
What good does it do
How should I know what to say when I feel
I am barely a person let alone one with something to say
I am not an artist
This is not art
Although somehow
I still find that rather unfortunate

ROOTS

Her mother was the clouds, her father the roots in the ground.
One day when a thick fog washed over the forest, she was left in its wake.
Never an infant, the girl knew more of the world and its disappointments
Than the average flower.
While they wilted in the slightest frost
She excelled in the cold
Thrived in the heat
Danced in hurricanes.
She loved her home in the woods and her friends in the earth and sky.
As she got older her father grew prouder.
She would lie in the grass next to the tallest aspen tree in the world
And ask him every question that could come to mind.

“And how do I find myself?”
She asked one day.

“You go looking,”
He said back.

“Just leave and never come back?”

“No, you leave and you learn, then maybe you come back.
Then you learn some more. You leave and come back.
Leave again, come for another visit
Maybe even to stay that time,
And you keep living until you feel the most you—
That’s where you stay.”

“But what’s the point of all that work just to waste away one day?”

She knew of waste.
She knew of death.
She knew of abandonment, of course.
She knew one day she would die
While her mother and father lived another hundred years
And a hundred more after that
Maybe even a hundred more after that too.
She would be gone.

But he knew better.
“Well maybe that’s the day you’ll truly be with all of us
Then we can waste away as a family.
Plant your roots dear girl
And you won’t want to look back.”

MARY SHERIDAN

Mary Sheridan is a retired psychotherapist, former video/filmmaker and erstwhile traveller. She used to write a regular column in an award-winning regional subsidiary of *The New York Times*. She now directs a non-profit organization serving families of adults with neurological impairments. Mary lives on California's Central Coast.

THE DISAPPEARANCE

Endless days and the shadows they cast summoned me to another place, another time, when I'd driven a narrow, twisty road through a tunnel of towering evergreens toward Hurricane Ridge in Olympic National Park. Sun, filtered through thinning fog, endowed the scene with an other-worldly glimmer. Darkness in a series of concrete tunnels presented the illusion of passing through a portal to another realm. The trees thinned, and the road opened to views of the Strait of San Juan de Fuca. A thin band of fog separated the blue of the sky from the blue of the strait. Glacier-topped ridges rose above the road and ushered me into a parking lot at the top of the world.

A lush floral scent summoned me to an adjacent meadow where deer grazed, and a riot of wildflowers called out news of summer to ice-capped peaks. The chilly wind tasted like a different season than the one I'd left below. Behind me, the murmur of other visitors rose as a chorus.

Lupines and larkspur and daisies and flowers I can't name weren't just waving in the wind; they were waving at me, inviting me into their sea of blues and yellows and whites and reds. I stepped into the meadow.

Imperceptibly at first, and then undeniably, the flowers surrendered their separate shapes to the field. The photorealism of the scene I'd entered began to break apart. Each particle shimmered and shimmied as the landscape diffused into a masterpiece of pointillism. In the same seamless motion, my sense as an individual self dissolved. The cold, the wind, the

cradle of mountains, the chit-chat, the everything going on around me, and the *me* experiencing it, all relinquished our boundaries to an ocean of vibration, an undulating aliveness, a oneness that swallowed ego into itself.

Like a fish that doesn't know it lives in water, I'm usually unaware of the expanse of air I inhabit, that I depend on for my next breath. In this liminal moment, I understood that the air I breathed also breathed me.

Excitement bordering on panic is the last thing I remember before some deeper wisdom whispered it was ok to let go, to allow what was already happening, to happen. I fell into a vastness outside my normal perception, and I have no recollection of what happened there.

The sun was slipping below the ridges above me by the time the spaces within the atoms of my being started to shrink back into their familiar form. The molecules of my body were condensing into a recognisable shape, the cells of my skin congealing into the separate container, the known constellation I recognised as *me*.

An impression of warmth and stature, of an unfamiliar presence beside me, accompanied the return of my senses. I turned to see a deer standing close enough to touch. He waited for me to walk alongside him on a trail through some woods. We stopped at the edge of the ridge. The sun had begun its journey back to the underworld and was tossing flares of scarlet and gold over its shoulder against the darkening sky.

Black shapes emerged, shadows in the borrowed light of the rising moon. I stood alone on the ridge. The night had turned too cold for any further stillness. I looked for a way back to the parking area and saw a path I trusted would show me the way.

My car stood in the otherwise empty lot, looking like a useless heap of metal. How could I drive? I wasn't put back together enough to navigate the steep, narrow, winding road with its multiple switchbacks down to the highway, to retrace the route that had been so easy to follow on the way up. I had no way of knowing if I ever would be put back together. There was nothing to do but hold the uncertainty about what would become of me, what had become of me.

I sat, and waited, for a long time.

Something in me eventually gave the nod: "Yes, now," and I drove with much more care than the person formerly known as *me* had ever driven.

Much like the road to Hurricane Ridge, few roads we travel in life are drawn in a straight line. In an alpine meadow at Olympic National Park, the most intense experience of aliveness obliterated any sense of self as an individual entity. A portal in nature opened, and I was allowed to travel across an ineffable border to that far country where the living have neither passport, visa, nor the right coin to travel. Earlier notions about the duality of life and death decomposed. I had been offered a brief glimpse of eternity.

It now seems as natural as breathing to me that, just like my body will go back to the dust from which it came, to nourish wildflowers living out their short burst of summer, so my conscious sense of *I* will go back to the boundless ocean of consciousness from which it fell.

I don't know if I am right, if this is true. I only know my experience among the wildflowers and wildlife on Hurricane Ridge began a process, a redefining of immortality, that's taken many years to mature and settle into a foundation that now comforts and supports me in my living.

LEO KENT

Leo is an Editorial Director at a comms agency who has been writing poetry in fits and starts for a while. It is only in the last year or so that he has begun to take the matter more seriously. His greatest poetry accolade to date is reaching the finals of his primary school poetry recital competition. He was beaten by the son of a teacher, which he's absolutely fine about.

ALTAI MOUNTAINS

I do not have a globe to spin
and stop dead with a blind finger. Instead I
start in space, clicking towards a land
entirely unconcerned with me.
Touching down in the Altai Mountains,
I ascend a valley—the river bending
with suspicious perfection, pine trees bunching and thinning
along its bank of delicate grass,
a place pondering its own lack of recognition.
Here I will set up a temporary camp, spending
my days surviving the nights,
the nights preparing my days.
The minor fears, packed and shipped separately,
will arrive on the morning I no longer consider the view, looking
to the sky only for portents of nuisance weather. This will be the
day to leave in search of another somewhere, in a line of endless
fresh starts and forgetting.

JAY FRASER

Jay Fraser is a poet from Lincolnshire in the UK.

He draws inspiration from anarchist politics, post-structuralist philosophy, horror movies, and the North Sea. Currently writing on industrial music and necromancy, his work is published or upcoming in *Organise!*, *The Tide Rises*, *Versification*, and others.

He's on Twitter @JayFraser1.

OVERHEAD, SPIRALLING

The vulture flies over arid lands;
Warmth floods under his opened wings,
Lifts him higher; the throbbing
Sun parades across opened feathers and
Rolls down the shining eye, cascading
Like molten summer.

Beneath his soaring, hissed words and
Quiet unease judge his body and
Curse his blackened shadow; the very
Earth over which he hangs, blighted—

Yet for the spiralling soul no word
Penetrates the vastness of space between
The heavens and the dirt: he is untouched,
And magnificent.

VALENTINA LINARDI

Valentina Linardi (she/her) holds a degree in Linguistic and Cultural Mediation from University of Milan. She's usually busy studying new languages, reading, or oversharing about everything and more on her website valentinalinardi.com.

FEVER

I read an article that says
depressed people use I too often.
I read the first word again and wonder.
They say crazy people don't know they're crazy.
I say if I don't take my temperature
I don't have a fever.
Words appear in the air
right in front of me.
I refuse to read them.

MARIE PEEBLES

Marie Peebles holds master's degrees in Literature and Library Science from the University of North Texas.

Currently they reside in Texas, where they can be found working at their library job and contemplating humanness. This is their first publication. You can find more of their work forthcoming in *Halfway Down the Stairs*.

FANTASY GIRL

Dancing in the cold room
eyelids heavy

focusing on the sounds, the taste
of thick, foamy beer; the feeling
of you beyond yourself—

you were craving newness
lightness and sensuality

not the kind that leaves you
doubtful
and aching
but the kind that stimulates you

to write again
to create again
delectable fantasies, connect again
with the infinite spirit

of your imagination, the spontaneity
of your youth, your playfulness
your favourite form
of you

KEVIN Ó HÉANNA

Kevin Ó hÉanna is a short story writer from Dublin. He holds a master's degree in Postcolonial and World Literatures from the University of St Andrews, having previously studied at Trinity College Dublin. He has been published in *The Irish Times*, *Inklight* and in an anthology in conjunction with *Fighting Words*. He was selected as the Dublin Book Festival young writer delegate in 2019.

FAKING TOWN TOGETHER

There were two people, and they had both returned to their town after being away for a number of years. They had lived in big cities doing interesting things, but now they were back where they had started. Returned from the big escape, trying to figure out what to do next, all while they were still relatively young. During this time, they decided to download a dating app, as something to ease the boredom and shitness. There was nothing new about this app; they had used it sporadically before. Just for a bit of fun, see what might come out of it, never any high expectations though. This time it was different. It felt changed—the bit of fun wasn't there. The novelty of it was gone. Instead, there was now a bit of desperation. They were back, and it was all very different. They were in a place where they knew most of the people, and it was all a bit claustrophobic. The only highlights were a cinema, a small shopping centre, a few schools and the one nightclub still hanging on. There were, of course, plenty of people who had stayed on, and they weren't all really miserable. In fact, there were some couples around their age who had been together since school, and now they had kids. Stuff like this scared them. They didn't want to hang around town too long. It was just temporary while they figured things out, a little in-between period was all it was.

They felt embarrassed setting up their profiles, having to make themselves look unique by adding cool photos—many from their travels in the big cities—putting down some sort of bio, even though many didn't even do that. The bio was quite hard to do, because it started off very serious, which might've come off a bit weird, so then they tried to put in something

sarcastic, but that came off as a bit mean. Finally, they just put in something jokey—not a joke, but something just a bit light-hearted and not too serious.

Then came the day when they started properly using the app, and they felt very hesitant and doubtful about it all, so they had a few drinks first. After a while, when they felt calm and warm, they dived into the app. They started swiping around and they saw a lot of familiar faces as well as some new ones. On their location settings, they reckoned they were doing the same as others. Covering the town itself, the outskirts going into the sticks, and then going just far enough to reach some of the smaller towns and villages. It was basically the catchment area in which people would make the journey to go to the local nightclub. The age range, too, they thought would be like most; young and young-ish. It was a lot of college students, which felt weird, as well as people with proper grownup jobs like accountants and secretaries, which didn't seem very interesting. After a night of swiping, they both thought it was all a bit bleak, and even though they had matched with a few people, they knew they were never going to reach out to them.

The next night, after a few drinks, they went swiping again. Trying to be more hopeful and open, but maybe it wasn't the best of ideas. Maybe wait until they could be back in one of the big cities, though that might be a good while. That night ended up being the same really, endless swiping, matching with a few people, knowing full well they wouldn't message them. It was only the next morning that one of them did reach out.

When they had first matched, the boy had noticed that they both liked the same musician. In fact, the girl had a photo of herself at one of the musician's concerts in the big city she was living in at the time. This is how the ball got rolling more or less. At first, the boy sent a stupid meme and regretted that.

But straight after, he sent a message regarding the musician and how he genuinely admired that musician and that he saw her play live in the big city he was living in. The girl replied making a sarcastic comment about the meme and then said yes, that musician was really good, and that she too had seen her play live. The musician was the type where you couldn't really say what genre she was. She used a lot of instruments and samples and it was a very atmospheric type of music, which sounded real nice when played in small trendy clubs in big cities.

The boy and the girl talked about the cities they had lived in, and all the places they had visited, and all the interesting people they had met. They talked about their town too, how shit it was and how they both were only going to be there temporarily until they figured out what they would do next. They also noted that it was kind of funny that they had never bumped into each other before. But it also kind of made sense since they had gone to different schools and as soon as they finished school they had gone to college and neither of them had really been back to the town since. But still, they had probably passed each other loads of times on the main street, or in the shopping centre, or in one of the pubs at Christmas time. They both agreed that this was very likely, even though they didn't recognise each other through their photos.

After they got sick of talking about how shit their town was, they returned to talking about the other places they had been. The girl had worked as an English language teacher for most of these years and been to a lot of faraway cities where English teachers were needed. The boy had worked all sorts of jobs. As a tour guide, a dishwasher, a courier, a doorman, a labourer, a telemarketer—whatever he could get his hands on. They agreed that their jobs didn't really matter. They didn't pay well, but it was enough to afford cheap rent and have enough left over to go out drinking and do other fun things. Neither of them had done

anything really with their college degrees—it was just something to have. Nor had they ever gotten a proper grownup job, though they weren't sure what such a job would be for them. They reckoned it might look like returning home after getting all the travelling out of their systems and finding work in their town or one of the other bigger towns. The job would be one of those jobs for life, that have a good pension and all those other perks. The choice was usually between something in the civil service or in one of the banks. They both agreed though that this all sounded terribly outdated and that a job for life didn't exist anymore and that having a proper job didn't really matter because everything was so temporary, and you were expected to be always changing career and reinventing yourself because that's what was trendy nowadays.

The to and fro chatting between the boy and girl went on for a few days, usually in the evening after they had a few drinks. They were both stuck in their parent's homes which was far from ideal and a bit unpleasant, so they waited until their parents went to bed before they started messaging each other. After a few more days of chatting, the girl sent her phone number because it was far too awkward to have a proper conversation on the app. The thing was though, they never talked about meeting or going on a date. For some reason it felt a bit too much—going on a date in their shitty town? Where would they go? Sure, there were plenty of pubs, but they'd probably get spotted by some old schoolmate asking how long they'd been back and what they were doing and a long list of other questions. They could also go for a walk in the park, or along the riverbank, which were genuinely nice, but they were always full of teenagers drinking who loved shouting and throwing cans at passers-by.

It was decided then that they would have long calls every second night. Both went somewhere where no one would annoy them. The boy went out to his shed and the girl went into her utility

room. It was very weird for them to hear each other's voices, even though they were the kind they expected to hear. They still had the lilt of their region, but it had been heavily watered down by their travels. They had long meandering conversations. More than just about their travels, but about growing up too. How many times their lives must've intersected when they were younger; the same teenage disco, the same shopping centre, even the same abandoned house where everyone got their first shift. They also connected with each other on social media. They had a few mutuals of course, the usual well-known faces from back in the day. Although they had already stalked each other on these profiles and had seen most of the photos and posts, it now felt more comfortable to do so. They could take their time going through these profiles, and even ask a few questions about a particular photo or post the next day during one of their long calls.

The question of actually meeting up kept being brushed to the side. Neither of them really mentioned anything about it, but it was at the back of both of their minds. They were really enjoying these chats, but it felt a bit uncomfortable or weird to take it any further. They kept mentioning to each other that this stay at home was only temporary. They would be back in a big new city in no time. They just had to get their shit together first. The girl was much more adamant on leaving. With her English teaching job, she had plenty of opportunities. She could get back in touch with the teaching company at any time and find a new position in a brand-new city. For the boy, it was a bit harder. He never had a proper job really; he just did whatever he could. His CV was all over the place. He mentioned to the girl that he might go back to college and do a master's. He knew that one of the cities he used to live in had cheap master's programmes. He could go there and have a part-time job on the side. The girl asked him what he wanted to do it in, and he said maybe philosophy or film, or something like that. She asked him would

he actually get a proper job out of that, and he said probably not, but he didn't know what else to do. He was a bit annoyed at this interrogation and he asked the girl what about her English teaching job? She wasn't like a proper teacher; she was hired by a questionable company and didn't get paid that much. How long could she keep doing that? She said that she could go back and do a master's, but it would be a useful master's because she could become a secondary school teacher. He asked would this mean she'd have to stay in the country, and she said yes, she wouldn't be able to go off living in big cities again, but she said by then she'd be fine with it. The boy kept picking at this argument, saying wouldn't she like to keep travelling and living in big cities? Wouldn't it be really hard to be a teacher back home and have a normal life and have to get up early every morning? She said what else could she do? That's just the way it is.

A few days went by and neither of them got back in touch. They didn't need to. They went about their own ways, making their own plans. They barely ventured out of their houses. Obviously, they didn't fancy bumping into each other, but also, the town... Why bother heading in? Just chilling at home, sleeping in, watching daytime tv, putting the washing out, watching cars go by on the main road and having a few drinks in the evening. More days went by and neither of them bothered ringing. The girl was now looking at anywhere that would take her on as soon as possible for a teaching job. The boy started looking at master's programmes, but he had missed the deadline for most of the ones he was interested in, so he would probably have to wait another year. It looked like the boy would be staying in the town for the next few months, maybe go on the dole or work in one of the pubs where his friend was a manager. The girl had already sent out a good few applications and she even had some video interviews lined up. It would be a matter of weeks before she was out of the country. They had both deleted the dating app. But they still followed each other on social media.

The boy did end up getting a job in his friend's pub, working weekends for the time being. The girl kept a low profile, staying out of town as much as possible. The only time that she did appear was right before she left again, and she went to the pub with a few friends to have a little send-off. That's where they saw each other. She avoided him for most of the night, getting drinks from the other barman. The boy felt stuck in himself, not really sure what to do in this situation. He kept staring over every now and again, but the girl refused to look. It wasn't long before the girl and her friends moved onto another pub, probably heading onto the nightclub, and then after that she would be gone to her new city. Meanwhile, the boy was stuck in his pub, waiting for his chance to leave.

HELEN SULIS BOWIE

Helen Bowie is a writer, performer and charity worker based in London. Her work has featured in *Queerlings*, *Versification*, and *Beir Bua Journal* among others. Helen has one cat and several bafflingly strong opinions about highly trivial matters. You can find her on Twitter @helensulis.

AN ODE TO A SOUTH LONDON CHICKEN CHAIN

Shared lipstick
Messages on mirrors
Underage
Underdressed
Understimulated
Screaming rows
With boys at Morley's
Like chickens
Our wings clipped
Our brains fried
Devoured drunk
And then discarded
Was it typical
Teenage girl shit
Or latent desires?

Mmm...
It tastes better