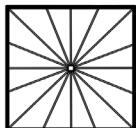


TOGETHER
&
APART

AN ANTHOLOGY

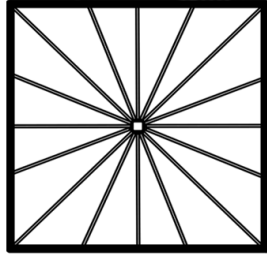
EDITION ONE

SQUARE



WHEEL

SQUARE



WHEEL

EDITION 1

EDITED, TYPESET, AND DESIGNED BY EDWARD BOWES
WITH SPECIAL THANKS TO EMMA HAIR

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NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

'Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.'

William Wordsworth, 1807

Square Wheel Press was founded in a difficult and uncertain time; the recent culture shock fuelled by the global pandemic has impacted people in profound ways. In an attempt to capture a slice of this reality, we chose the theme *Together & Apart* for the first edition of our anthology. Loss of loved ones, prolonged separation from friends and family, and near-total isolation from the outside world have been the new everyday challenges for billions of people. Simultaneously, however, reconnecting online, finding new and shared interests together, and gaining a fresh perspective on the value of our loved ones have been new everyday joys.

The collection of works in this edition showcase a wide spectrum of emotional responses to these new challenges and joys—anguish, anger, and loneliness, but also love, hope, and determination. Both the fragility and the strength of the human spirit are presented in an open and honest manner between these pages, serving as a reminder that the struggles we have been facing are universally human.

Reflecting on all that has transpired, and fully processing the scope of emotion ignited by these events, is an on-going process. As of publication, the dangers and uncertainty are still present; people's lives, livelihoods, and overall well-being are still threatened daily. There are many across the world who have yet to have a moment of tranquillity to reflect on the past months.

It is, therefore, important to create and support inclusive spaces (both physical and digital) that encourage art in all its forms, to allow for future opportunities for this vital act of self-reflection.

Thank you for supporting Square Wheel Press in this exciting new venture.

Edward Bowes
Founder & Editor

EMMA HAIR

Emma Hair is a writer and editor, currently residing in North Texas down the road from some cows. Her work has previously appeared in the 2019 UCL Publishers' Prize Anthology and Ellipsis Zine, Seven. In addition to degrees in law and literature, she also holds an MA in Publishing from UCL.

TWO SOLITUDES

(A response to Dave Heath's Dialogue with Solitude)

Under a large canvas with semi-abstract women,
a young couple sits in a city.

Fingers pressed into the hollows of his eyes,
the man's hands form a mask, obscuring his face.

Head propped on her right arm, the woman
gazes down between curtains of dark hair.

Her brows: furrowed—in concentration? boredom?
On the table before her: a book, butterflyed.

Are we this couple? Together yet apart? Or is there more—
something that escapes the camera's lens?

An upward glance between pages, a smile
unfolding, a warm hand tenderly placed

to coax eyes from beneath their shield.
An arm extended across the table, like a bridge.

ARCADIA

for H—

The time and miles between us, seemingly insurmountable
during day's harsh light, dissolve
into starlit mist.

High above a globe moon hangs, almost overflowing,
as the still-warm tide laps at our toes.

Lightheaded we lie on a bed of silken sand while
heady wisteria hangs heavy in the air.

Beneath my head, your chest
rises and retreats to the rhythm of the waves.

Moonlight makes a beacon of your face.

It draws me in, mothlike.

Saltwater, cigarettes and village wine dance on your tongue.

I take the curled ribbons of your hair between my fingers.

Our limbs intertwined are without end—

“Yours” and “mine,” no different than love and *γάπη*.

The tide tucks us in, gently rocking.

A distance from shore two great waves are building.

They roll across the sea,

wide as mountains stretching towards the stars,

gathering urgency—

the sea swelling, surging, its surface widely undulating, bringing

the two waves to crescendo

then crashing onto shore,

onto us.

For a moment, the world ceases to exist.

THE PARADOX OF CONNECTION IN THE AGE OF CONNECTIVITY

We talk, and I am aware of the distance between us.

A static, stretching through time and space.

It distorts things.

You are ten years older. The same, yet more distinguished. Lines in your forehead, an easier smile. Confident: you move through rooms without hesitation, like the self-assured strokes of your Hogarth sketches.

It is unclear if I am there, ten years older, with you.

Here, you are nineteen and next to me. Your hair is long and full of Pre-Raphaelite curls. The sun has given it an auburn hue.

I want to lean over and kiss you, but I am nearly twenty-six.

Messages received instantly give the illusion of proximity.

But on the phone your voice is tunnelled.

At the end of the call, you say “I love you” as though it were

one word,

a reflex,

the punctuation mark at the end of a sentence.

JONATHAN CHAN

Jonathan Chan is a student at the University of Cambridge. Born to a Malaysian father and Korean mother in the United States, he was raised in Singapore. He is interested in questions of identity, human expression, and the intersection of art and faith. He has recently been moved by the writing of Nam Le, Carlos Bulosan, and William Carlos Williams.

CONGREGATION

here: the offering made for
famished stomachs, chewed
before the sermon on the
tabletop, mounted on marble,
homily between our daily
op-ed. piety should come

after breakfast. we stand up
from upholstered pews, the
blessing projected to digital
ether. i withdraw, like eckhart,
to that secret place: a bedside
altar for a squirming sacrifice.

RED-EYE

by june, we saw ourselves
shaking dust from our

gowns, returning for a
single humid breath, time

and obligation compressed.
and now, the recursion, the

shaking off of adolescence,
the same walls that adumbrate

the darkness. the texture of
regress is like craters, the edge

that ends where it begins: the
haggard collapse into threaded

disarray, the ceiling, shrouded,
a colourless expanse, the pit that

draws inward, fearful to see
the precipice of daylight. but

tomorrow is a settled disruption,
swallowed unto itself, a play

on broken eye-strings, cracked.

ALANNA HIGGINSON

Alanna is a creative 'Write Mind' workshop facilitator. She explores the potential of expressive writing and relaxation exercises to improve mental health and wellbeing.

LONELINESS

You will have to excuse me if I am rambling,
struggling for words at times
you see, I am grasping at a new language -
loneliness.

Now that I have spoken the word
I can see you nervously seeking an exit,
you would sooner I rehearsed my words
on someone else.

But the words are still there
whether you choose to hear them or not.
I have been practising for some time now
empowering myself with verse
about anguish,
despair

isolation

and the torture of my mind.

Loneliness is a hidden language,
repressed by those it frightens
but loneliness is stronger and more intense
than any other language I know.

TOM STOCK

Tom Stock is a coffee and pop culture enthusiast, holder of First Class Honours in Film, Media & Culture Studies and proud Spice Boy since '96.

I WATCH AUDREY HEPBURN TO FEEL ALIVE

Poised leg on the bar, a camera might roll
Hands gracefully fall up and down to the sides
The skinny ideal that my inner feminine desires.
What an effortless class.

Beaming smile makes me feel... Something more than myself
Could all my untapped joy be inbetween those teeth and lips,
sitting patiently on her tongue waiting to escape with a laugh.
I hope it escapes.

Blackout room, black and white zoom on those eyes
Framed by thick brows, I see myself as a lost person who wants
to be together with him.
Maybe he wears a hat,
or a suit,
maybe he has a handkerchief that he pulls out to wipe my tears.
What an effortless love.

I feel unrealised, apart.
Desire for control hits, my masculine half pumps reckless reason
into my veins.
It says this is a fantasy. You are a fool who has been seduced by
beauty and you should feel less than because you are less than.
What a scolding truth.

So I press play again to make myself better.

SALMA LLEWES

Salma lives in the London Borough of Brent, Borough of Culture 2020; immersed in the humanity of the diverse community. This is Salma's first foray into literary art, having previously explored other creative mediums.

APART

“I can’t, I can’t do this anymore.”

The mortice lock snaps shut with a finality that echoes along the bare wooden boards of the narrow hallway.

It passes through the kitchen, the two half-empty mugs, the ceramic garishly bright outside but stained within.

Over the wall of memories, captured in pixels and trapped behind Perspex and stretched over canvasses; holidays, family gatherings, that barbeque. Frozen and framed into compartments.

Past the strewn cushions, the woollen throw. The decoupage side table which brought such joy and connection when they worked on it together. Found on a grass verge, abandoned. The restoration had bonded them.

Through the strands of tousled hair, down the furrowed brow and into the ears of the forsaken one. Back bent, shoulders drawn down in despair. Eyes red and swollen with tears. Eyes downcast, staring, unseeing.

Staring. And silence.

Downcast eyes that alight upon the discarded phone as it suddenly springs into life. An encrypted message, bounced from a mast on the far side of the town, destined for that one person.

Alone.

JANETTE OSTLE

Janette usually finds writing inspiration from random thoughts and observations whilst out walking. Walks have been limited during these unprecedented times; thoughts have been limitless.

NOT FLOCKING, FOLLOWING

22 March 2020

As the world panicked
and flocked
to places, same places;
ignoring warnings
they thought others would follow
so why should they follow,
they followed
to places, same places.

As the world disregarded
and flocked
I walked to a place, a usual place
'round the block
where life was found blooming
in bloom from a crack,
a crack
in a crumbling wall.

Where the world followed
not flocked
earth was found clearing,
clearing in waters
with clearing blue sky
as the sun pulled my cheek
I felt hope
for a world
that man, kind
will now follow.

EASTER SUNDAY MORNING, WIGTON

12 April 2020

As blossom laid abed, abed on winter's leaves
unwoken by the church bells, once carried on the breeze.
Belted Will watched over the silence from his walls
dandelions roared from the cracks as resilient ivy falls

over empty bridges, over empty roads, where
tulips wait by empty tracks, trainspotting with due care.
Decorative tree twigs where painted eggs are posed
sit beneath a hand-writ note on a window stating 'closed';

closed until further notice, signed off, with a 'thank you'
below a 'thank you NHS', all forever in your lieu.
Framed quotation in a window, 'good friends are like a star';
these times where we can't see them, show exactly where they are.

Belisha beacon blinked and winked, it's safe now to proceed
across his empty crossing, essential worker, his good deed.
Floral adorned fountain, our well-loved centrepiece
instructs four acts of mercy and hopes mercy will increase.

A distanced bird flies over the silence of the street
back to nest of safety, she'll wait for throstle fleet.
'My heart leaps up when I behold a rainbow in the sky'
words closed inside the library; words unreturned still fly.

Tissue papered gratitude so rightly recognise
hard, hard working workers; who were once unrecognised.
Empty church, unopened on the day it's usually packed;
closed first time in a lifetime to keep its flock intact.

Finery's not needed, comfort clothes prevail
as we grow grey together, true colours will unveil.
Above Memorial Garden, flag reminds us of a past
a past that's been endured; with washed hands, we can last.

School drive signs 'no entry', no longer just one way.
An abrupt end of era, our future's next essay.
Trees of learning tower a daffodil avenue
they all avoid my shadow, one metre timesed by two.

Pharmacy and Doctors, briefly sleep, a well-earned rest
queue markers still await them, tomorrow brings next test.
Petrol pumps, like sentries, by empty garage floor
clock my hour's exercise to place chocolate by Mam's door.

I walk home feeling grateful; still shit down Dog Shit Alley
still smoke, from factory smoke, as Mary-Annes still rally
with gadgies by our Pump and Lamp, they've stood by worse before;
still stand, still hope, still waiting for a clearer life once more.

LYDIA WIST

Lydia unearthed a passion for writing three years ago, resulting in projects united by illustration, art and design, languages, dreams, life and short story formats.

SEEN DURING LOCKDOWN

A rollercoaster exaggerated by extraordinary events. Bubbles of family units and individuals, linked together but riding their own track.

Two wild ducks in a car park, enjoying their time together. No boundaries.

Separate days: two squirrels. One living, one dead.

A socially distanced performance of *Frankenstein*. We were trying something new.

Morning yoga class on a smartphone. Socially distanced family gatherings; the same with friends. It's good to do more of that. Ghosts of winter gloves in the form of medical gloves on the ground. History repeating itself.

Wind-battered woods. Bark shards and leaves in the wrong place.

Personal dream sequence: a cancelled party. A need to leave the house on a rare trip out. Cake forgotten. Cake burnt. Guests arrive, too close together. Huge amount of anxiety. Accusations ensue.

Same day: differing priorities. Hot weather. Man dressed in black, one exception: bright red sunglasses. Star tattoo-adorned elbows. Immaculate hair completes the look. It's good to keep routines. Shirtless bulging-bellied sixty-something man riding a bike. It's good to let go. Minion t-shirt, popular slogan. A reminder not to worry. Empty words or sage advice?

Different days: same TV series. A couple's tradition.
Wooden bridge partially scorched, partially repaired.
People avoiding people enjoying the sun and fresh air.
Flowers laid at the base of a tree.
Another bridge with a hole in one side.
A free bench. A rarity that day. We sit together as a family.

Same day: Elderly man reclining on a bench, smiling. A
mirror image in dog form beside him on the ground. Signs
and symbols. Reminders from Extinction Rebellion to avoid
complacency.

A play area no one can use unless they hop the low fence.
Differing politics. But we're more alike than we admit.
Enthusiastic assistance despite limitations. History repeating
itself.
New possibilities, for now, apart. For the future, together.
A way forward for us all.

HAZEL EMMA

Hazel Emma is a straight-talking feminist poet who advocates for self-love and individualism. Her work can be found on Instagram *@classic.haze*

VOY'OH'RISM

I'm having video sex for the 4th time today
and through the phone
I watch them do with their hands
what it is that my mouth yearns to do.
We are connected
framed by 4.7 inches of glass
hidden behind the thin walls of my apartment.
But I feel like we could be touching
and I tell myself,
Almost
Almost

ONE RACE

The world held its breath.
Motionless and tranquil
Thinking as one
Feeling as one
We watched as the numbers climbed
Unforgiving, unrelentless
Mourning as one
Loving as one
We moved into a new world
A world where time was
Indefinite, Borderless
Learning as one
Evolving as one
And would it really be so bad
If we stayed like this forever?

REMEMBER THE OLD WAYS

And I am still, everything is still, the world is still
Everyone is talking about when everything returns to normal
But I can't help but think, what if I don't want that normal
What if I want a new normal?
The kind of normal where my day starts slow
Watching warm light breaking through the cracks in the curtain
Learning yoga by the window and soaking up the rays
What if I want a different kind of normal?
Sitting down by the canal watching the sun bounce off the water
Eating börek in the park with my feet in the grass at 10am kind
of normal
Listening to the chatter down the market kind of normal
What if I don't want to go back to normal?

Jumping to the sound of an alarm and searching for my phone
In my bed where I fell asleep exhausted
After another late night at my skilled office job
That I go to for £10k under the living wage
Commuting there and back
With my face in someone's unsuspecting armpit sweat
That's sometimes spiced up by a man rubbing himself on me
What if I never liked normal to begin with?
Where does that leave me now?
Nothing will be the same again they say
And I am grateful for the change
For the endless borderless time
The opportunity to redefine my normal
To be still
And I see the others
All chanting the same
We don't want to go back
We like returning to the old ways
To find a new way

THE DIVORCE

It's not enough anymore
The expensive clothes
And the hipster bars
The seasonal menus
And the stumbling home
We aren't missing any of it
Not now
Not ever

It's not okay anymore
The skilled workers
And the unskilled workers
The valued
And the unappreciated
We aren't falling for it anymore
Not now
Not ever
And it's not acceptable anymore
The Trumps
And the Borises
The profit
And not the people
Not now
Not ever

So promise me something
We will not forget
Not now
Not ever
This can't happen again
Not now
Not ever

MOTHER'S LESSONS

The earth is hard at work
She is forcing us to look inside ourselves
And we are evolving, thriving even
For what do we do when there is so much time
It's not possible to fill it with Netflix and chill
We are planting flowers for our mother
Watching the smog lift for the first time in our lifetime
We are learning names of each and every neighbour
Life is smaller now but somehow bigger
Lonelier but somehow fuller
Our hearts are bursting and our minds busy
Really busy, truly busy
We are innovators and creators
Street party starters, clap for carers chanters
Bicycle adventurers and local volunteerers
Life is better now
Now that it is smaller

SOPHIE LEAH

Sophie was born somewhere in Essex and now exotically lives in a different part of Essex. Compiling a short author bio is her worst nightmare.

GRAVEL AND WIRE

Pernicious memory swallows me whole,
Ablaze in all the times I fought with you;
The wasted breath given
To wicked incantations
When shrouded by the claws
Of a perspective-plucking wrath

All the times my heart struck heavy
Thinking of the days that you'd leave empty
Left with the ghosts of opportunity,
The reapers of regret and those
Who'd never cast the coup de grâce
And sentence remorse to the scythe

Had I the make of saintly scribe
I would write my wrongs out of our time
Burn that mocking litany
Of transgression's tyranny
And douse the inferno of internal hellfire
When the familial king leaves his shattered empire

I would cast the fickle soul in shackles
Bind it to boundless lament
And bare the familiar flagellation of self-resent
Until the cross you'd unstintingly once bore
Was cleaved, alone, wretched and sore

I would carve out my tongue
And scrawl repentance in
Black blood and shattered glass
On every wall you tended to
On every corner of your craft
Until all the Gods forgave me
When I would never forgive myself

Could never forgive myself

BOATS

Children plastered the windows with rainbows to spread the radiance of hope. Nations collectively applauded the medics on the frontline, the shielded staff and essential components who kept slick societies' gears, keeping pretence's momentum. America's versatile sweetheart curated a concert direct from luxury pads to television. Between screens co-workers conversed, lovers made promises, friends planned for hereafter. Tiny hands waved to the relatives whose laps they could no longer sit on, whilst the wave's recipients pressed their smiling faces to the glass and watched the Spring as it blossomed past. The sun's rays, once taken for granted, were met with gratitude as the indolent now savoured the excuse for exercise—one of the only allowances for venturing out was one not deemed vital in their work. Those soaked in the milk of human kindness stepped up. He'd once served the Burma campaign, now he'd become a fundraising machine. She'd channeled her eccentricity and racked up a charitable fortune clad in the costumes of friendly cartoons. They'd painted words-of-encouragement on their door to sway despondency. Some lost themselves in fiction, others honed their skills. Houses filled with the scent of fresh baking, gardens were given TLC, board games took over the table. Apartments twinkled with music, movie marathons and the silent energy of meditation. Routinely the message was broadcasted: To contain the virus it was important to lockdown, to stay at home, to stay safe.

Slowly at first, but with familiar certainty, he'd felt the last layer of warmth slip from his bones. Then that crawling apprehension—creeping in gradually like the tentative leg of a spider curling its way out from the dark, unsure if it'll

be obliterated or ignored. Promises were made to an array of deities, quickly conjured for the cause, if he'd only be spared the agony he'd long been trying to avoid. With a heavy heart and daydream's folly, he'd checked once more. Nothing. All gone. *Sorry, mate, looks like you're on ya own.* What was left of his nails gripped his palms until they tore. The quiet quivers as a moan meets the dark: a sob of anguish, mixed with frustration, laced with pain, as torture tightens her old chains. He knows sleep will not come easily anymore.

Somehow, somehow, through leniency or charitable council, he'd secured a place to reside. Doing whatever favours were asked of him, and performing whatever acts were demanded from him, had earned him just enough to maintain his fix; but now all the money he'd sweated and bled for can't grant him his reprieve. *What good's a sanctuary without the salvation?*

Prohibited from the usual travel which would cross their paths, and with all the strength that desperation brings, he had tried to get a postal deal through the usual number. A resounding: "no chance." *'Course those bastards don't wanna take any additional risk. Not when this was no more than a side hustle for 'em.* No loyal quarantined customer benefits for "unprecedented times." No access to a contact, no access to a clinic.

The wrath of denial begins to rupture his stomach. The talons of that leering albatross lodge in his gut as it clenches and tears at prey long claimed. He can feel his pulse hammering away, as if his heart were trying to muster the energy to explode. White pain pierces him and a mix of fluids stream down his face. He can feel the perspiration which freezes every pore; can feel the infighting of his cells and the scorch of sharpened sensory recognition. The weight of foreboding presses down on his chest, telling him something awful is going to happen; the scorn of depression reminds him to die; bones that glowed now

groan. He feels like he wouldn't be able to move even if he had somewhere else to be.

Under his breath he curses the know-it-alls who'd tell him it was his own fault: he chose to spike his veins and acquaint a warm seductress with his blood. He resents their ignorance; resents those who'd want to deny him bliss. His soul had long been pummelled by a self-deprecating dogma he'd been unable to silence; weakened by a past that tarnished a gloomy, sober present. Until an old acquaintance had muttered those three little words every dejected creature longs to hear—"here, try this"—and all the old affliction melted away to shape the path of circumstance he'd collapsed on. He'd bore the cross formed from the sum of all that had led him to that initial decision made in naivety and desperate discontent—before the spoon's murky solution had drowned him and fate's constellations rewrote themselves in puncture marks. *Besides, who the fuck would willingly choose this?* Writhing, burning, kicking, sickening. Limbs locking, crumbling, heavy, gone. The clock ticks by on another world's time as his mind slips away. Soon he'll be forced to remember what he's spent years trying to shut out; soon he'll be left alone with recollection and nothing to blanket his aching mind. Soon sorrow's behemoth will ravage him tenfold. But not before this first nightmare is through.

Her mother had always told her: "If you can't see yourself having his children, he isn't the man for you." Four years after fortune tied their heartstrings they'd ended up with three, whose lifelong need for exploration would later lead to each resettling in a different corner of the globe. The kids had worried about their parents being lonely so far away, then realised certain love needs only its subjects to make the world seem full enough. For fifty-three years they'd been inseparable. For fifty-three years he'd

made her forget that, with every year, she'd gotten a little older. Until one day she'd looked at her hands, as if for the first time in decades, and noticed how worn they'd become. He'd seen her looking and had taken her hand in his own to kiss it, telling her she was still as beautiful as the day they'd met. The look in his eyes had told her he was telling the truth.

As time passed, her memory had started to fade. The bronzed grandchildren who would wave from behind their parents' monitors would squeal her name, and sometimes she'd coo theirs back, other times it was more difficult. But it was okay—he still remembered them all and could help her whenever needed. He promised. Even when he'd started to get sick, she was his incentive to survive—though how could she still remember him? Did she really know who that was? Of course, she'd beamed, that was her boy! She could never forget him.

When he suddenly turned the colour of sleet Jillian immediately called an ambulance and both couple and carer had gone to the hospital. The whole ride there, she'd trembled beneath Jillian's gentle reassurance and never wavered her grip on his arm.

For a while now she had seen her friends bury their beloveds, then eventually she'd seen those same friends buried. Yet somehow, in love and in life, the two of them had lasted. That one might go anywhere without the other was never even considered. She'd never imagined spending a day away from the man whom she'd used to kiss and forget to breathe, 'till it was as if she were using his lungs as her own.

Jillian had explained that the hospital was the best place for him, and together they'd visit everyday—her eyes reigniting only when she was next to him again. Only there was she able to laugh and remember a little bit more.

Then all visitation had stopped. Restrictions had been applied to deal with the surge of infection. She had begged to be by his side but it was too risky, she'd been told. It wasn't safe, a woman of her years, to be among the ill anyway—let alone during a pandemic.

Now the future fell across a puzzling horizon. Jillian kept telling her they couldn't go to the hospital, but she didn't know why. She couldn't remember properly and he wasn't there to explain. His face would be brought up on technology she'd never understood and she felt that golden surge as her heart thawed with relief and desire and a wizened hand reached for him. Then that searing counterforce of harrowed yearning that came from not being able to touch. One day she howled until one of her children had to turn their own screen off, it was too painful.

Every day she'd dress in her best at her gradual pace, then ask Jillian when they'd be leaving—eager for her next kiss. Every day she'd begrudgingly settle for the screen, though he'd stopped saying anything, and she'd pass the hours watching him sleep. She'd watch his chest lightly rise and fall, recalling all the times she'd lain there safe, soaking in the scent of ocean salt and white cotton, listening to his heart beat just for hers. She'd gently trace his features in the cool glass, unsure of everything but her love.

The next day she'd dress and ask Jillian when they'd be leaving.

Sunken, his eyes glaze over his reflection. He wants to crush the mirror. He wants to recognise the creature stuck in it. Seventeen flights up an eighteen-storey block, the tiny room is nearing squalor. The effort to cart the body round while it tidies is too much when just getting out of bed is a labour. Today he eventually made it to the crooked table that constitutes most of

the furniture. He can hear children screaming at full capacity through the wall.

A number of balconies had been locked some months back after concrete began to rain from them. It had been an inconvenience for those keen to feel the seasons on a whim, but freedom of movement elsewhere had prevented suffocation. Until recently. After he'd left the ward he'd been implored to stick to a regimented prescription, attend his appointments with Milana and start going to work again. And for the most part, he had done. But now, weeks after businesses had been put on ice or folded entirely; weeks after isolation was insisted; weeks after doctors' surgeries and hospitals threatened to collapse from the weight of demand—now there was no semblance of routine. Now his sparse appointments had been put on hold. *Put on hold as if there were time to play with.*

The measure of peace and reassurance that had once come from Milana's office had been lost, and Milana had failed to get in touch any other way. That, or someone had overlooked the paperwork again. *And another one free falls through the system!* The meds which had landed on his doormat no longer came. The flats had always felt like they may have well been on their own island; so far removed from everything without that tenuous link to public transport. Now that many of those connections had been severed, they may as well have been on Mars.

He tries to remember the last time he'd felt much of anything. He can't remember. His eyes had stung with envy as he'd seen the lavish gardens of the rich and famous on TV: kingdoms of space to breathe in. The smoke berates his lungs but he no longer cares enough to try and cleanse them. He'd often counted the blessings of the small newsagent next door, except on the

recent days he'd been told all the cigarettes had sold out due to increased demand. Those had not been good days.

Before him, a battered journal; an ash-smearred record of awakenings. The latest scrawl declares: *everybody has mastered the game while I struggle just to stay on the board.*

For a long time he'd felt like he owed the world something. Then, no matter what he did, it was never enough. The world would punish whatever efforts he put in with another critic in his head and he'd find himself fearfully abandoning his latest pursuit before he could fail entirely. The world would bring people into his life, then drop them out of it. The world would dangle hopes within his reach, then yank them away from clumsy hands. He'd done everything and nothing and never seemed to get anything either way. Soon he'd begun to do nothing but rot. Surely the world owed him by now. Surely the world hadn't forgotten about him just yet? Another day spent wasting his eyes on the same four walls and it's hard to tell. With hands trembling, yet never hesitating, he reaches for the confidant of the old journal—yearning for a moment beyond the surroundings he does not so much dwell in as die. *If this is Hell then start the fire.* Fresh ink followed by fresh blood.

Thirteen. The fragility of youth can be made even more fragile if you know how. He knew. He'd known for four years. Four fucking years. Four eternities of Hell with nowhere to go for fear of further damnation. The threats had been enough to convince her that she would never be believed; that she'd regret telling anyone; that it was her fault anyway.

She'd long stopped saying "stop." Pretty soon it had lost as much meaning as "no" had. Her terror and disdain often kept her mute as she willed herself out of her body and past pain's captivity. A couple of times, long ago, she might have called out to God; but He never seemed to hear. Instead she'd lead her thoughts towards the galaxy, wishing she could live among the stars—before he'd bring her down to earth.

Now that the pubs had been shut, he was kept fuelled by the booze he'd deemed a necessity worth constantly venturing out for. He'd take his chances, he said, sod the lot of 'em. Somehow he managed to evade enforcement's scrutiny. Somehow he'd always managed to get away with anything.

School had been a haven. While many of her peers had yearned to get away from it, she'd run towards its doors and stayed there as long as she could: hiding among the semblance of afterschool activities or offering to help those whose lessons required extra hours. Some days she would insist she'd been playing sport, though no one had ever questioned her lack of kit. People had their own business to worry about. It was the same business which had kept them from asking too much about the bruises on her face; which had made them content with whatever she didn't tell them.

When the news came that all schools would be closed until further notice, she had taken herself off to her room and cried out every tear her soul contained. All it had taken had been one bad day. One bad day when her mother hadn't been around and she'd been within his grasp instead. Then it just became how things were. Though maybe it wouldn't be so bad now. Maybe her mother would finally rescue them both from the brutish regime that had long been endured.

Beneath the sheets she hides. Willing their refuge to hold, just once. A creak, a snuffle, the weight in the air of another presence. She forces her body not to tremble. Willing it to look like it's asleep. It's a tactic she's tried before. Still, any moment now he'll yank the covers back and—he yanks the covers back. As her sobs grow louder so too does the volume of the radio downstairs. Eventually a political address drowns her out—bar one last thud, then nothing.

“As the nation sets to enter yet another week of lockdown, it’s important to comfort oneself with the knowledge that we are all in this together. We are all in the same boat.”

KATIE MEEGAN

From the north-east of Ireland, Katie was the winner of the 2019 UCL Publisher's Prize. She has studied at Trinity College Dublin and UCL. She works in publishing and lives in London.

THE WAKE

For a brief moment Grainne considered not going inside, turning the car around and driving straight back to London. From the top of the gravel drive her childhood home unfolded beneath her, green on grey. Her father's work shed with its door ajar looked like he had just stepped out for tea. Her house looked out of place; the endless fields scarred by the careless dropping of a child's doll house. The grey of the afternoon sky was beginning to gather and darken, shadows enclosing the four walls. A light switched on in the kitchen window. Crunching along the gravel, she felt the pressure behind her eyes and the heat prickling at the bottom of her skull as she forced herself to breathe; in-two-three, out-two-three, using all her will power to unblur the monkey puzzle tree before her. Her mother was framed in the reflection of the front room window, shoulders stooped as if winded as she stared into space. Even though Grainne knew Mother could hear her, she didn't move at the sound of the car door shutting.

He was in the good living room. When Grainne mustered up the courage to touch him, he felt like stone. She turned away in disgust whenever an aunt would bend over the coffin to kiss his head. Between condolence-givers and well-wishers she counted the visible dust mites on the beige velvet curtain. She mused that she could have replaced herself with a robot, a Grief-o-nator 3000, which shakes hands, accepts big-bosomed hugs, thank you for coming, yes it is an awful shame, it was all very sudden thank god, the way he would have wanted it.

The kitchen was packed out, reminding Grainne of a birthday party with too many plus ones. The matronly neighbours were commanding the kitchen with the force of embattled

war generals, pouring tea and forcing sandwiches into hands as if their own lives depended on it. As if the front room was catching. She would have preferred to be in the trenches with them, firing butter onto bread and topping up half-empty cups. Instead she watched from what seemed like far away, surprised at how near and monotone her voice was. Thank you for coming, awful shame, I don't know when I'll be back to London yet, very sudden, the way he would've wanted it.

She saw him come in the back door, easy to spot, a head and shoulder above the rest. It seemed wrong seeing him in the kitchen, like a graffiti cartoon over a masterpiece, garish and distracting. He politely shouldered his way through the crowd.

“Hey, it's good to see you. I'm so sorry about your Dad.”

“Thanks, it's good to see you, too.”

“At least it was very sudden...”

The way he would've wanted it. A pause, she could feel him fumbling for the right words, a trait that had so endeared her to him back then.

“Do you want a cup of tea?”

“Nah, I'm grand thanks, I just stopped by for a bit on my way back from work.”

It was then she noticed his slacks and sweater, the trousers were close to the navy of their old school uniforms. It made him seem like he had never left sixth year. His teenage self had just blurred around the edges, softening and thickening into this current iteration. The pit in Grainne's stomach curled even tighter.

“You still in the business park?”

“Yeah customer service, it’s not a bad gig really, if you don’t mind the crazies.” The corner of his lip turned up in a half smile. “How’s London?”

“Fine, work’s really busy but they’ve given me a good bit of time off. I can work from home for a few weeks as well if I need to.”

“That’s good of them.”

“Yeah.”

A pause. Grainne cast her eyes around the room, half-hoping someone would interrupt.

“I remember,” he began, looking at the floor, “our debs. I was terrified that he was going to give me one of those big speeches or threaten me with a gun. Instead, he just told me that you were a live wire, and that you could handle the gun yourself.”

She snorted, “Yeah I remember that.”

“That was just like your dad wasn’t it?” He paused. “He was so proud of you.”

Looking at him now, she could still see him as a teenager, leaning against the wall of a shop that had since changed its name, school tie askew and schoolbag in hand. She wished she’d had a camera to capture him forever. They did have pictures together, smiling uncomfortably at the debs, sweaty selfies from the nightclub. But not like that moment, when he was lost in his own thoughts, oblivious to the world.

Today, she wondered if she would want to capture how his jaw had softened or the shadows gathered under his eyes. It was wrong, it was so wrong. He belonged to a different time, a different place, a different version of herself that laughed without hesitation.

She excused herself for the bathroom, making vague assertions that he help himself to a slice of cake. She clutched the basin as the room turned and collapsed in on itself. He had had her young heart once, it was too tough and scarred now, to have any more space for him.

She needed to find her mother. There were duties to execute.

Grainne kept reminding herself to look at flights. Days would pass and she would slip back into her childhood bed with the faint note of surprise that another day had gone without her reregistering her open-ended ticket. At night, when she did eventually fall asleep, she dreamed that her Clapham apartment was dismantling itself piece by piece into a swirling vortex, and when the blackness would envelop her, she would awake with a scream lodged in her throat. Weeks passed in an exhausted fog; her limbs felt heavy as she watched her mother for cracks. Sometimes she would find her paused at the top of the stairs or in the threshold of a room, as if trying to remember where she'd lost something. Grainne would watch as she shook her head and continued to hold the rhythm of the house together as if its heartbeat were her own. They didn't talk about him, the past, or the future; only what errands needed to be done or which neighbours had visited. Their only diplomat was buried under a fresh pile of earth. Without him, words were loaded and dropped on the floor, phrases suspended in mid-air at odd angles. It wasn't long before they stopped talking completely.

Grainne filled the hours on her work Mac. Firing off quarterly reports, getting lost in the white world of the screen, ignoring the thought that this was where she'd spent countless hours studying for exams. She could excuse herself when assorted aunts and neighbours would drop in unannounced, sadness in their eyes and batches of buns or dinners in their hands. They talked about the weather, the GAA, local births; never the reason they were there. She would gather her Macbook and retreat to her room, clutching the silver casing to her chest.

It was a weekend morning and Grainne watched the light seep in through the bedroom curtains. It was, to her mild disgust, going to be a nice day. The birds were singing. It seemed cruel that spring was creeping in; she half-remembered a poem she had read about stopping everything. She was contemplating showering when her mother pushed her door open while knocking, a habit that had infuriated her in her youth. Mother's silhouette cast around the room, checking if she was asleep, as she had checked before, for years. The creak in her door frame echoed with sick days, nightmares, and Christmas mornings. As usual, Mother spoke first.

"Do you want a cup of tea, love?"

"Sure," Grainne said, waiting until she left to get out of bed, dress and go downstairs. Before entering the kitchen she paused to arrange her face.

Mother was already there, looking out the kitchen window. The farm cat had caught a field mouse, it lay disembowelled on the gravel, its innards a shocking red. Grainne poured water into the kettle and clicked it onto its base. It was new, she noticed for the first time.

Weary, Grainne placed the mismatched mugs on the dashed counter. She opened the fridge and grabbed the milk, skirting her hand around the left-over wake potato salad. It was definitely gone off at this stage, but neither of them had the heart to throw it away. She briefly wondered how many jars of mayo went into that Pyrex bowl. She had been steadily gaining weight thanks to a combination of buttery mashed potatoes and fairy cakes. She considered going for a jog but balked at the commitment. The kettle finished as she reached for the Lyons. She pushed the heavy silence off her chest.

“Got an email from work yesterday.” She poured, steam arising from the kettle. “They want to know when I’ll be back in the office.”

She was nearly afraid to look at her mother; she had broken the unspoken rule of grief, of acknowledging any time not in the present.

“And what did you tell them?”

“Well I’ve got the open-ended ticket so in the next week or so.”

She slid the sugar bowl between them, like an offering or a curse. Her mother nodded as if the further emptying of her home was expected.

“The house will sure be lonely with ya gone.”

“I’ll ring you every day.” A nod, an understanding that a hurried 5-minute call would no longer be enough. They sipped, the grandfather clock stabbing the silence. The conversation side-stepped and ducked, focusing its attention on the new baby her cousin in town had just had, they were going to give the child his middle name, as a mark of respect.

“The O’Reillys have their bungalow up for sale down by the shop. She was in your year wasn’t she? What’s her name, Laura?” Grainne nodded in agreement.

“Lovely little house, nice bit of land, close to the motorway.”

Grainne didn’t answer, gripping the cup handle tighter, thinking of her Clapham place falling Ikea piece by Ikea piece into the black hole. Her mother’s eyes were searching, thinly concealing her plea. She was grasping, knowing that Grainne’s plane ticket would be one way, out of choice. Grainne forced herself to take a sip of tea to quell her rising nausea.

“They’re having an open house, might be a nice change of scene.”

“I was thinking I’d stay in and answer a few emails.”

“Alright so,” she paused. “Surely you’d be alright to take a break, though. You’re always on that computer.”

This was a game they played, see who could come closest to the edge without jumping off. Grainne suppressed a sigh.

“Sure, we’ll pop up for half an hour.”

The tea started to taste sour in her mouth, but she raised it to her lips with a sense of duty. The sodden residue of leaves seemed to form her future and she wasn’t sure if she liked it. No, she was going back. Soon.

The house was on the edge of town. Just at the end of where the paths gave up. It was a bit of a fixer-upper, the smell of old

people and dated 1970s décor. Family pictures lined the mantel pieces and hallways. Communion, birthdays, weddings, all fading around the edges. The bathroom had a railing installed and the shelves were lined with Old Spice soap and half-empty bottles of prescription paracetamol. The armchair sat between the window and the television, the garden was big, lined with evergreen hedges and brick patios with grass shooting through. From the armchair, Grainne could see that it would be much easier to watch the garden than the television.

“A lovely family home,” the estate agent gestured. “A great investment and so close to the new bypass it only takes an hour to get you into the city. Ideal for a young professional such as yourself.” Grainne didn’t bother to correct him, that she already had her life, she didn’t need this fixer upper.

“Where’s the owners?”

“She’s in a nursing home I believe. The kids live abroad, Canada is it? Or Australia? Sure they have kids and all out there. The poor woman couldn’t bear to live alone after her husband passed, God rest his soul.”

The corners of Mother’s mouth tightened. Next to the estate agent in his brisk suit, she seemed very small and fragile.

While Mother chatted to the estate agent about the new shopping centre planned for the edge of town (she had previously told her that she thought it was an awful monstrosity altogether, but now she seemed to match the agent’s enthusiasm for the project), Grainne slipped out into the garden. There was a monkey puzzle tree. She studied its dangerous leaves, remembering all the footballs and kites that got lodged in their own one. She never understood the aesthetic appeal of them,

they seemed counterintuitive to a family home. Yet another sign, she mused inwardly, that she doesn't belong here.

Taking a moment to check her phone, she was surprised to see that he had messaged her on Facebook. Then again, he hadn't had her number in years.

Hi. Mam mentioned that you're still around town, when you heading back? Wanna go for a drink or a coffee or something?

She wondered what they'd talk about. If they had anything in common apart from the cosmos dictating that they were born into the same townland. If they would talk about the past, if they would laugh and agree their younger selves were 'eejits' and if only they'd known what they know now. She wondered if she'd flick her hair and order another round.

She closed her phone and turned back inside.

As dusk gathered around their gates, Grainne walked back down the drive. Her solitary lane walk had proved unsuccessful in producing tears, so she sat cramped by the stream until her joints ached from the cold. Thinking and feeling nothing.

The pink sky seemed to turn the house into a purple grey colour as the night lurked in the shadows. The scene had been so familiar that every little change seemed to be wrong, unfamiliar, like a crack in a Monet or a missed note in a familiar song.

She could see Mother through the window. In the unnatural light she seemed grey around the edges, like a porcelain doll that could fall at any moment. She wondered about her mother, her sacrifices seen and unseen, what dreams she had that had yellowed and faded with time. From a distance, Grainne tried to

see her mother as not her mother, but as a fellow scarred woman whose choices had brought her into this backwater town. Missing a husband, missing a father. Two women, one outside on a cold hill, the other in a house of ghosts. Both inexplicably woven into an invisible web of love and loyalty so fragile a single careless gesture could obliterate it. Careers, families, legacies that could crumble or stand against small declarations of independence. Grainne could her feel her hands shaking as tears started to drip from her chin to the floor. All those hours, all those years, building, building, for what? To end up right back where she started? The house, the lands, her DNA all lay in her bones, no matter how far away she went.

She felt the weight of the unanswered text in her pocket. She remembered the faded pictures of someone else's life and thought of the woman in the nursing home, vegetate and plaid waiting for the ultimatum. She saw the shadow of her father come out of his shed wiping his hands on his overalls. He nodded at her, his eyes knowing.

She made her decision.

MEGAN WALDEN

Megan Walden is a twenty-two-year-old graduate creative writer with a pen in her left hand and so much left to say.

A SAFE PLACE

With shaking fingers, I peel back the heavy sheets that weigh down on my chest. After a broken night of worried sleep and dreams of an uncertain future, it feels as though I did not rest at all. It seems impossible to rest, when my mind is full of fear for my pregnant sister-in-law. On a day that should be the happiest of their lives, she will be frightened and alone; apart from the masked comfort of surgical strangers bringing her first child into the world, whilst my brother watches helplessly from behind a screen. How long it will be, I wonder, until I can hold that baby for the first time. I worry for my mother whose face I now know only as a pixelated image from poor connection; whose only company is a grumpy Persian cat and my graduation photo hanging on the wall. I worry for my dear grandparents who are confined to the campervan on their driveway, terrified to exist in the home they built together whilst others live there too, occasionally plucking up the courage to venture round the garden where I grew up.

My grip tightens on the soft fabric of a small ragdoll who lies limp on my bedside table, dirty and held together by her final threads. Knowing I'm far too old for cuddly toys, I swing my heavy legs off the side of the bed, curling my back forwards and pressing my forehead hard against my knees. I push her small frame to my face to inhale the final scents of home. With sleepy eyes squeezed shut, I am reluctant to face this empty house alone, again. I'm trying so hard to keep out the ghosts of every summer I've ever known, when being close to my family was something I avoided in sticky heat.

A cool breeze dances across my cheeks and, when my eyes eventually open, I'm no longer in my bedroom and it's a very different day. The warm sun hits the skin of a body much younger than mine and pours across garden patio slabs, which blush their humble pink. I stretch out my arms to see hands much smaller than mine, and clasped in my right hand is a ragdoll that's much newer than the one from moments before; clean and soaked only with the tears of a child who had begged her mother not to wash her favourite doll.

One hesitant foot in front of the other, my now much smaller feet, which are housed in the most offensive sparkly pink shoes, begin to venture into the familiar garden, leading the way as if by instinct. Onwards past the red telephone box that is full of the most incredible toys I've ever seen; huge, great big forks and a matching giant spoon which Nan calls a spade and always tells me I'm not to play with. To be quite honest, I'm not too sure I could lift it anyway.

It's not long before I can hear the familiar crunch of leaves beneath my feet that always seem to cover this end of the garden, no matter what season it is. If you were to look up, you wouldn't be able to see the sky anymore. Enormous trees bend over from either side to meet in the middle as if protecting its visitors from direct sunlight. I stop for a minute to enjoy the pool of shade that keeps the heat at bay, at the foot of an old oak tree. This is where the fairies live, or so I've been told. I've never actually seen one but I think maybe they're shy. The clucking of excited hens soon fill the air and so I trot over to where they're kept, just beneath the treehouse. I often ask them if they've seen the fairies before, or if they only come out at bed time but they always just cluck at me, the browns and blacks of their feathers all merging into one panicked cluster and their beady eyes searching my little person for any scraps of food. I look at them, cross, and think maybe I never see the fairies because

they're much too noisy. Still, with my free hand, I delve into the pocket of my denim dungarees and grab hold of some raisins, I'd stuffed them in there earlier in the event of pirate invasion or an uninvited troll that would drive us all into the treehouse. Who knows how long we'd have to stay in there hiding if that were to happen! I look up at it, sat above the coop, its green foundations swaying gently in the summer breeze. I'm not too sure it would hold Grandad, I think. Maybe I'll fix that tomorrow.

For now, I throw my raisins to the hens who cluck in delight and promptly fight each other in a scramble over some dried-up grapes. It's getting a bit late for trolls and pirates now, so I reckon we're safe for another day, I say to them. In the distance, the soft hum of a lawnmower sends me skipping back down the garden past the telephone box. I slow my pace as I approach the old lamppost, a warm orange light coming from the top even though the sun hasn't quite gone to sleep yet. Our garden used to be a street, I'd say to the postman one day, who I'd greet at the door when he came strolling up the drive to deliver our letters. That's why we have lots of funny things, I'd say, because our garden was built right on top of it. I look from the lamppost to the flowerbed, and the old little frog who is sat in amongst the flowers and I wonder why he never moves. What a boring life it must be, sitting among the flowers, day in and day out, watching over the garden like our small protector.

And that's when I see him. At the very end of the garden, where I know to find him, with his top off and his big belly out, little drips of sweat framing his face in concentration. He's pushing his lawnmower, that same old frown on his face. His hair is shorter than it was when I saw him this morning, before I set off looking for fairies, so I guess Nan must have cut it today. She's always complaining that he looks scruffy, to which he sticks his tongue out at her when her back is turned and ruffles his white hair. That always makes me giggle. Smells of cut grass

compete against the delicious smells coming from the kitchen; there are china plates out on the table over on the patio where I started, so dinner must be almost ready and my stomach rumbles in agreement. We always eat outside together on warm summer nights like this. I run over to where they lay and stand by the door, peering in through its little window. She's bent over the oven, singing to herself, the same song she always does; something about it being time to say goodbye. She sings over and over, and I think it's sad, but Grandad says it's her favourite even though she can't sing opera. I laugh again but I don't really know what opera is. I just hope she isn't sad. We'll always be together.

Still in my right hand is my little ragdoll, who came everywhere with me today, as she does every day; my dearest companion. I put her to my nose, and take a deep breath, inhaling her smell which comforts me. Opening my eyes, I'm back in the bedroom, alone in my much bigger body and left with the harsh reality that life as we know it has changed so much since then. The plates are gone and I can't hear the hum of the lawnmower or unmistakable clucking of hens. I take the doll away from my face and look at her in my hands; worn but so very loved. There's a small, knowing smile stitched onto her dirty face and I can't help but look away to spite the hot sting of tears on my face. Wiping them away, I get out of bed, pausing only to feel the soft carpet tickling at my feet for the first time today.

I put my little companion back beside the bed and pick up my phone, wondering who to call first. That's when I see him, as the illumination of my screen in the morning light presents to me a photo image that was sent in the early hours, whilst the world was sleeping. I click eagerly to enlarge the image which is filled with freshly clean, pink skin and a face that is crumpled into concentrated sleep. Studying his tiny fingers and toes, it seems almost impossible that my clumsy big brother could bring

something so delicate into the world. Unaware of the pandemic he was born into, I say a quiet prayer that this tiny baby will only ever have to learn about it through textbooks in history classes at school, years from now.

Staring at him still, my mind fills with all the things that we will do, instead of the things that we could be doing. The sudden shift of perspective reminds me that this loneliness is temporary. Finally, I allow myself to smile for the first time in however long it has been.

“One day, when we can all be together again, I’ll show you round a very special garden,” I whisper to him, almost convinced that he can hear me. “And when the sun gets low and our tummies start rumbling, we’ll follow the sound of singing to the family table where now, there’s a space for you too.”

SOPHIE BUCHAILLARD

Sophie Buchaillard is a Franco-British literary fiction writer and broadcaster whose writing explores otherness in all its forms. She is a contributor to the Wales Arts Review and co-hosts Writers on Reading, a literary programme on Penarth Sounds with the author Jonathan Macho.

MURANÓW'S KEY

Through the keyhole, I distinguish white glass tables arranged in small alcoves, each delineated by crescent-shaped banquettes in black leatherette. A man is seated alone with his coffee, his face dry like a date; wrinkled and sweet. A younger man has joined him. Someone he doesn't know.

"They took your son," I hear him say. "They might let him go. For a price, you understand?"

I press both hands against my mouth to catch a scream. I am not to be heard. Over the visitor's shoulder, the old man has thrown an involuntary glimpse in my direction. A split-second passes before he regains his composure. I can tell from the way the visitor's shoulders lean forward that he caught that look. Have I given myself away?

The old man stiffens like an oak. He draws an object out of his pocket, shielding it under the table. A key. The way he holds it, knuckles white from the strain, I know he is contemplating what to do next. The boy is not due back yet, there is still time. The old man fiddles with the yellow star on his lapel. He has to make the visitor leave. The way he is shuffling in his seat, the visitor knows it too. Dressed in the grey felted coat of the police volunteers the square shoulders of the uniform are instantly recognisable. He ought to be wearing a yellow star too, but he is turned so I cannot see. Men like him hide in plain sight, serving the government of others. Broad-shouldered men. Well-fed whilst we are starving. Thieves. He keeps checking over his shoulder, in my direction. Growing bolder. Looking for a safe.

As he does, I see the soulless gaze of a man who has witnessed human horror and failed to act. There are four hundred thousand of us in the Ghetto. A handful of them help guard our 3.4-kilometre square prison. They have been told to move half of us over the next few days. Our boy overheard. He said to hide until his return. But the old man is proud. Hiding is for women, he told me, before locking the door.

I wait, more rat than human, for our boy to return. I stare at the grey shoulders, through the keyhole. The men speak in muted tones, such that I cannot hear. My mind drifts into darkness. I remember holding my boy at birth, tending to his grazed knees, helping him learn his spelling. I remember his laughter, most of all. My sunshine. Outside, I hear a ruffle. I blink to regain focus. Through the hole, the visitor looks elongated. He is stood up, muttering something. Alarm spreads across the old man's face. As he turns to take a step towards the safe, the old man strikes, pulling all his weight into his assailant. They both stumble against the banquette, losing their footing and crashing into the glass table. The shattering sound resonates into the empty shop. Unable to restrain the unearthly scream that fills the walls, I fall backward into the dark.

I regain my senses, crawl towards the one ray of light, pull myself towards the keyhole. A deafening silence greets my effort. The old man is on the floor, crowned in shards of white glass; strangely peaceful in death. His blood has tainted the tiles where we once danced, where our boy took his first steps. I wipe the tears blurring my vision and look again. The daylight wains through the front door. The boots of the military can be heard from outside. I must flee. I look for a sign of the key. The shroud of my skirt pulls me down, hems heavy with the jewels set to buy our freedom. The key is gone, lodged in the wound it inflicted to protect the safe. This safe. My grave.

TOGETHER, YET APART

A social scientist on BBC Radio 4 is telling the interviewer about the strange Robin-Hood-tax-in-reverse created by the lockdown. People who worked precarious jobs in restaurants, cafés and shops are finding themselves out of work, without purpose, penniless. By contrast, their former patrons, cooped up in their large semi-detached houses, surrounded by lush green gardens, are saving money, whilst *working from home*.

When I think of Robin Hood, I remember a trip to the Yorkshire Dales twenty years ago. A walk in the country, a picnic by the waterfall where Robin Hood Prince of Thieves was filmed, where Kevin Costner battled Brian Blessed in ice cold water. What would I do for such a walk now? To yomp all day in the hills of Wales, to climb to the top of Twmpa – Lord Hereford’s Knob. To stop in a field and munch on a pork pie, take a bite of an apple, slow my pace enough to forage for blackcurrants, end the day in a country pub; boots off, toes cooling in a nearby river.

After ten years of austerity, the Government is now borrowing in the billions. Emergency packages. Furloughing. Mothballing the economy. As if someone had pressed pause on the streaming of our lives. As if after the toilet break, making sure to wash our hands at least twenty seconds, the programme could resume. As if. Uninterrupted. I close my eyes and I imagine the empty streets, the large department stores, abandoned. Printed signs on whitened glass windows. Lèche-vitrine is out. No money kept inside. The image has the eeriness of a Spaghetti Western set, tumbling weed and all. A monument to our past. Already gone.

Forecasting is bleak. Better to focus on the present. To live in the confine of our homes, surrounded but alone. I think of John Donne:

*No man is an island,
Entire of itself
Every man is a piece of the continent
A part of the main.*

And so, we have become. A piece of a global whole. Doing our bit. To save the NHS. Save lives. STAY AT HOME. The slogan of a new era. Neat. Single-purposed. In technicolour. Hammered again and again, every day at 5pm.

Humans are social creatures I hear you say. Designed to congregate. And so communities emerge, remote missions. Facebook. Twitter. WhatsApp. Instagram. Strava. Zoom. We share. We share. We share. Feeding algorithms; being robbed of much that was once considered personal. Data-enriched Communities™. Robin Hood 2.0? A necessary evil? Fraught with invisible dangers yet oozing with possibilities. To connect takes a leap of faith into the digital unknown, trusting the ether with our thoughts, habits, and cute puppy pictures.

New behaviours, and we move society on. Modern working practices adopted. 'WFH' into common parlance. Individuals making time to walk, run, cycle. Families re-discovering each other. Generations cross, speaking, swapping photos, baking. A renewed sense of respect and gratitude for what we have, for those who brave the danger on behalf of us all. Key workers. Some of the least paid and recognised people in society. Maybe that is another type of Robin-Hood-Tax. Robbing respect from the financier, the bankers, the footballers, those who neither make nor help. Giving gratitude to those who support and serve, one rainbow at a time.

Yesterday, I saw *Anthocharis cardamines*; the Orange-Tip butterfly. White-winged with a brush of marmalade on each end. A Monarch butterfly also, *Danaus plexippus*; the feline coat of a tiger, speckled. Small messengers letting us know that air quality has improved. Air traffic down ninety percent, car batteries flattening on the drive while we explore on foot. All around our home, the fields grow buoyant with new life. Chains of daisies compete with clouds of dandelions, whilst bluebells, nettles, and wild garlic frame our path. It gives me hope. A bird and a wood. Robin Hood, fighting for greater equality.

That's on a good day. My reality though is a shared flat, occupied by Husband, Small Child, Teenager number one and Teenager number two, Dog. A year ago, I dumped paid employment, not for the life of an outlaw, but for the dream of a poet. Each day, I fed my loved ones, kissed them farewell, walked them to the bus stop, then returned to my new conquered kingdom, alone. Happy. There I read, thought, researched, took notes, answered e-mails. At midday, I stopped to take Dog for a walk, to fill myself with fresh air, to give space for the ideas of the morning to percolate. An hour we wandered, Dog and I, rain or shine, observing the passers-by, stopping at a local coffee house to sip the atmosphere and sample others' conversations. Satiated, I returned to my lonesome castle to craft kingdoms and erect characters, to the sound of a harpsicord or a violin. I cultivated social isolation, preferring my own company, to create.

When isolating socially became the norm, I lost that space. Instead of a bus stop, I now magic a daily mutation of the kitchen from classroom to canteen, arts studio to baking station, back to the dinner table, in time for tea. The lounge has become multimedia HQ, where Husband's Skype meetings compete with online gaming, and where the children hallucinate YouTube videos at break time, instead of reading a book. Everywhere is

noise. Dog has retreated. You can find him either under the bed or on the balcony. He tolerated me there before, since I mostly sat in my spot, bar the odd tea break synonymous with biscuit. Our daily adventure has been altered to accommodate exercise for the children, a spot of essential shopping, weaving in and out of absent traffic and crossing roads to avoid other pedestrians, toddlers on scooters and the occasional runner.

Some days, I feel like screaming. The rest of the time, I am grumpy, at best. It is hard to see this social isolation as anything other than an invasion of my creative kingdom. I wish I could tell you this is a lifetime opportunity to bond with the children. In truth, it feels more like a struggle. The carrying of a burden. We are all together, yet we are apart. Husband has morphed into a fleeting ghost, emerging for coffee in between Skype calls. Small Child is feral from the lack of exercise. Teenager one and Teenager two miss their friends, doh!

After a few weeks, it finally happened. I lost track of time. I no longer care if it is Tuesday or Sunday. It doesn't matter anymore, since they are all the same. Hours punctuated with internal milestones. The start of the 'virtual' school day. Bellies grumbling at twelve. A mandatory walk followed by imposed arts and craft in the afternoon, interrupted by the daily news update at five p.m. Our world has shrunk from weeks and months to the tick tock of passing hours. A sort of mandatory routine to hold on to. Because the specialists said so. In situations of confinement, routine is what keeps people going. But my routine as a writer has been violated. I tried to fight back, holding on to my words, my coffee, my silence. Failing, every time. Falling into an ever-swelling anger. Grieving. Pushing everyone away.

Acceptance. Only in my head does the creative process require silence, and coffee. At its core, it is about observation,

percolation, transcription. There is a lot that is different about our life in isolation. New behaviours to observe and analyse, new worlds to create. I started to look again. I noticed the importance of a daily run to keep Husband sane; the sight of all three children working together in the light of the kitchen window, despite the seven years between them. I realised the dog is treating us like a pack, biting my ear to get me out of bed, refusing to take a walk unless we all go. Together. Yesterday, Small Child wrote a letter to his grandmother, pen and paper. Last Saturday, we made our own pizzas and took them to the car park at the back, where we ate them, cross-legged on the tarmac, quizzing each other about the perfect holiday. We have decided to go camping when this is all over—when.

Life carries on. And even though at times we infuriate each other, maybe we have become closer. Husband keeps dreaming of swimming pools. Driving, diving, drying in the sunshine. I dream of silence. Of climbing a tree in the rain. We could be accused of becoming insular. Un seul air. My French mother, alone in Paris, where she has been on lockdown for much longer than us, with her goings out heavily regulated. We never had much to say to each other, Mum and I. Yet we speak daily now. Old friends have been in touch. Sporadic voices in the dark, like shining fireflies, surprising me. A strange phenomenon by which we are closer to those from whom we are apart. At first, I believed in this strange irony, that I was growing further away from those with whom I shared an island. This 'I' land.

Kahlil Gibran said it best.

*Sing and dance together and be joyous
but let each one of you be alone
Even as the strings of a lute are alone
though they quiver with the same music.
[...]*

*And stand together yet not too near together
For the pillars of the temple stand apart
And the oak tree and the cypress grow
not in each other's shadow.*

Before COVID-19, I stood together and apart from my family, in time. Now, we stand together and apart in space. It is up to me to tidy the shelves and make room in the cupboards of my invented kingdom, so everyone has a space to be themselves, in-between joining in as a family.

JONATHAN MACHO

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NEVER TOUCH

Settling in for another day. Hard to know what to expect. Things have been changing; you've noticed that. Can't be sure how it's going to play out, but you've got to set it aside and watch. What will be, will be. One way or another.

I visit the House of Ages once a day. I look up and everyone's smiling. That was something people did when pictures were taken apparently. Mandatory happiness for those who made sure we could never enjoy what they had.

Even today, I can't let it pass. Apologizing to Urn and our driver, I leave them under the sun shield and march in. I see dust in the daggers of light that cut through as the door opens, lost again as it slides shut. The recycled air doesn't even filter out the ash anymore, not completely. Maybe I'm their only visitor these days. Good.

There's no time to linger, so I make it quick.

'I hope there is a hell,' I tell them. 'You can burn down there while we burn up here.'

There's no reply. I leave them to it.

Catherine visits the House of Ages every day. She loves to look up at the smiling faces of the people who came before. When she sees a smile, she can't help but smile back. They're her weakness, that's for sure.

She made her excuses to Earnest, then skipped up the steps and into the open space. It was cool inside, the air gently scented,

like summer berries. The shine always took her breath away. She would have to pass her compliments to the caretakers again. It was lovely to see the past so carefully maintained. It was all on them, after all.

Not wanting to keep anyone waiting, she tried to take in as much of the room as possible before completing her little ritual. She knew it was silly, and it was not like she expected a reply, but she found a sense of comfort in it.

‘Great job, guys,’ she said, beaming, before hurrying back to her friend.

I duck under the ‘shield and we head for the Hwb. They’d left the engine running; a waste that would’ve earned the Driver a grounding any other day. It’s a short journey, though, and I have too much on my mind. My mouth is so dry, but even now, I don’t want to risk the ration. My weapon’s heavy in its holster. There’s nothing to hear but the engines and shallow breathing. Nothing to see but blackened hills under the blackened sky through the window. Everyone always says it’s getting hotter, but it can’t get much hotter than this. If we’re right, none of that will matter soon anyway.

Catherine enjoyed the long walk to the Hwb. She knew it would be faster by mag-car but surroundings as lovely as these deserved to be drunk in at a leisurely pace. The green stretched on before her, playing with the blue in the distance; she’d have followed it forever if she could. Her hands traced the greenery, petals tickling fingertips, and she shouted hellos to anyone and anything that cared to listen. They all did. A picnic would be just the thing. She’d suggest it to their guests. As far as she was concerned, nothing in the world mattered more than appreciating the simple joys. After all, you never knew when you’d have the time.

'How long do we have?' I ask as we enter to no one in particular.

'Good to go in five,' comes a voice from the back. I should know his name by now, but outside of Urn, I barely say two words to anyone anymore.

'Colin!' Catherine hugged him as soon as she was over the threshold. 'How's Nicola and the kids?' Before he could breathe enough to answer, she'd found another target. 'Melanie! You're looking amazing! Have you done something with...?' Earnest cleared his throat. That's why she loved Earnest, always keeping her on point. She'd have to hug him for that later. 'And what time do we have?'

'Five,' Colin wheezed, still recovering post-hug. Catherine gave him a thumbs up.

'Cat. A word.' I follow Urn to a corner, somewhere we can't be overheard. He's looking tired. His beard catches in his vest and his automatic hasn't left his hands since this morning. He could go off any minute. His being so tense worries me; one wrong move could ruin everything. But he should be here today. I owe him this.

'Catherine, dear, may I?' Catherine grinned as Earnest gestured to the corner, serious as ever. Always so polite, to the point of silliness. Like she would ever miss an opportunity to get his advice. It wasn't like he ever missed an opportunity to give it, but still. If your biggest problem was knowing too darn much, then you were one of the lucky ones.

'We need a bigger incursion force.'

'We need bigger balloons.'

I wince. I was worried it would be this again. 'Look, Urn, I appreciate you want to do this properly, but fitting the five of us took this long. We can't hold it off any longer.'

She rolled her eyes. She was worried it would be that again. 'Come on, Earnest, I appreciate you want to do this properly, but everyone's been working hard all day. We can't hold them up any longer.'

Urn's eyes lock onto mine, a fixed point in a mess of twitches. 'I've... We've lost too much. Charging in when there's no guarantee what we'll be facing is suicide. You know I'm right.'

'You're always right Urn,' I say. 'You were right when you told me time's running out. Remember that? You were right when you told me this was our best option'. I watch his face the whole time. Nothing. 'That's why you're here. That's why I'm dragging you through with me. Because you're right. But staying is pretty much suicide too.'

If I get through, he doesn't give it away. After a moment, I turn and bark to the room: 'After the first wave, how long until you can send the next five through?'

'Uh, if all goes as planned? Five minutes, give or take.'

I turn back. Urn nods, his grip white on the stock. 'Five for five. I can work with that.'

Earnest looked crestfallen. 'I'm not trying to do them down. I just want everything to be the best it can be. You know that.'

'And that's why we love you, buddy!' Catherine decided it was about time for that hug. 'Look, you're gonna be here to welcome them. I'm gonna be here. All these guys are. That's what'll matter. Open arms beat balloons any day. And besides, those are

already pretty impressive balloons.’ She turned and hollered to the room in general. ‘Hey, how many balloons is that?’

‘Uh, approximately? We found five bunches of five, I think.’ She turned back. Earnest nods. Serious, even now. ‘Five of five... I can work with that.’

We head back to the gate. I still can't get my head around it. No matter what angle I try, the thing keeps its curve, like a scratch on a lens. I try not to give it much thought.

Catherine wandered back over to the... Thing. She tried not to puzzle much over what it actually was, and instead appreciated how amazing it was that it was there at all. The curve of it took her breath away.

I nod. Someone reroutes the power and the curve buzzes to life. I smell ozone, feel a fizz on my tongue. The noise that churns up within it fills the space, like papers tearing or fire crackling, but the thing itself remains unchanged. I make sure Urn and his men are at my back, then walk forward and step into the fresh air.

Cat shielded her eyes, blinking furiously. She couldn't remember the world ever being this bright. She heard sharp intakes of breath all around her, then sharp cracks, too loud, too much on top of everything else. ‘On me!’ she cried above the noise.

‘Hey, now! Don't panic!’

That voice... What the hell...?

‘I'm so sorry, I can't even imagine what it must be like, and then we go and party popper all over...!’

She knew that voice. It was nauseating, that feeling you get listening to yourself on playback, like you're somebody else. She didn't know how anyone could be so sickly saccharine, let alone...

'Wait a minute... 'Is that...? Are you...? Me?'

Things just got complicated.

Cat's eyes had just about adjusted, but it felt like nothing could ground her completely. The room was the same, but different. The roof was as high, the walls as far apart, but there were open windows letting in light and air; light caught on surfaces cleaner than Cat could ever have imagined. It changed the whole palette; everything was shaded wrong, tinged wrong, mishandled, like a toddler's colouring book. The air was off, clean and crisp. Her body overcompensated, gulping it down, like it couldn't last. Where was the ash? It was throwing her.

And she couldn't afford that, not now. She was in unknown territory. Nothing was more important than keeping her people safe. It didn't matter how sweet the other her sounded, or how bright and cheery everything seemed or how many... Balloons? Were those balloons?

'Oh wow! It's so lovely to meet you!' Cat wilted under Catherine's beaming face. She didn't like having this much happiness aimed at her. Worse, Catherine didn't seem to mind having so many guns pointed back. 'Where are my manners? Welcome travellers, to the Hwb!'

Cat set aside that they called it the Hwb too, set everything aside for a second and tried to take *her* in. She wore a sleeveless dress, loose and bright, a summer dress, must be. Her hair was long and untied, a potential handicap, but it suited her. She didn't

have a scar on her forehead, or on her arm. She defaulted to a smile. Cat hadn't seen one on that face, her face since...

'I understand you must have had a terrible time getting here...'
Cat saw the concern on her face, on all their faces, all familiar but wrong and far too concerned. 'I'm just so pleased you made it. We could hardly believe it when the notes started coming but we followed your instructions and now...'

'No you don't.'

It was the first time she'd spoken in the new world. She would have to get used to it. Her hoarse voice sounded wrong there.

'...Pardon?'

'You don't understand what we had to do to get here.' Cat wasn't lowering her gun. Her men weren't either. Their doubles were starting to look nervous. All of them but Catherine. 'You don't understand.'

This is not good.

'I'd like to try to,' Catherine said.

'Yeah, sure, you could try,' Cat spat, angrier than she thought she would be. 'Oh, I'm sure you'd enjoy that. A little bit of mess, of drama in this perfect world of yours.' You're just like them, she thought, picturing those abandoned smiling faces behind the dusty glass. 'How'd it stay so bright here, huh? You just found a work around? Easy, I bet. So damn easy.' She didn't know what she was saying. 'In this stupid parallel Earth of yours, that we -'

'That's wrong, actually.'

This is REALLY not good.

Catherine, Cat, everyone turned to look at Earnest. ‘This isn’t a parallel world. Or, I suppose, we do not live on parallel Earths. Technically.’

The sheer redundancy of the words coming from that familiar face cut Cat’s anger off at the source. She nearly laughed. And then she heard the hiss from behind her and remembered who was standing there.

‘Who’s that? Is that...?’ Urn stepped forward, gun raised, eyes unblinking. ‘Is that me?’

‘My word...’ was all Earnest managed.

Cat knew she needed to get ahead of this. ‘Hey, we knew this was a possibility. Right, Urn? The Brains all said so. We could never have been sure but now, now I have to put up with that mug twice over.’ He didn’t respond, didn’t look at her. This was a mistake. Debts be damned, she shouldn’t have brought him. ‘Guns down, everyone.’ She lowered hers, and most of the men followed her. All of them except Urn.

No, no, no. It was never supposed to be this way.

‘Is she here too?’ he asked, taking another step forward. To his credit, Earnest didn’t flinch. They were broken reflections, squinting at each other, trying to figure out the original.

Catherine, frowning for the first time, said: ‘Do you mean...? I’m here.’ She looked at Cat, completely trusting despite her outburst. ‘Is he alright?’

Cat’s voice was low, like she was worried she’d startle him. ‘No,’ was all she said.

‘Is she here too?’ he repeated.

You’ve let it go too far.

‘Tell me. Is she still with you?’

Completely oblivious, Earnest held out a hand and Urn seized it. His gun fell to his chest as he jabbed a finger at the golden ring that mirrored his own.

Now they know, they’re going to know it all.

Whatever happens next is all on you.

Finally, Earnest understood.

‘Oh yes,’ he said. ‘I’m so sorry. Yes. She’s fine. She’s safe, here, with me.’

Urn’s face was unreadable.

‘Is your Melissa coming too?’

Urn screamed. An alarm went off. Five more armed men stepped through the curve. Not unexpected but in that moment... Cat and Catherine tried to be heard over the commotion.

You need to get in there. You need to fix this.

NOW.

A sudden voice, louder than all the rest, cut through the noise.

‘Please stop! It was never meant to be like this!’

An unassuming man stumbled into the room from an impossible direction, his back to the wall. Nobody knew how to react. Neither side could place him. He wasn't messy enough for the newcomers, nor clean enough for the locals. He was scruffy, if anything, and that was far too tame.

'Who are you supposed to be?' Catherine and Cat asked at the same time.

'I created you,' the man said. 'All of you. I made your worlds.'

'Start making sense, quickly,' Cat snapped.

'Look, where I come from, it's not in the best of shape,' the man said.

'I'm so sorry,' Catherine said.

'You don't look too worse off,' Cat said.

'Our climate is changing,' the man continued. 'Politics descending into lunacy. Division is stoked by the people who have far too much at the expense of people who have nothing at all. Overpopulation leads to deforestation leads to mass extinction. The world is ending and it's all going to be our fault.'

Cat had a flash of the Hall of Ages. Her grip on her weapon tightened.

'We were getting more divided every day. I was alone and... I – I couldn't cope anymore, with the stress, the fear of not knowing. I tried everything to help but found nothing to stop it all. So, I created this... process, I guess. A way of creating Earths like mine, with the subtlest of variations. Artificial futures, built up around each other like nesting dolls.'

‘I love those,’ Catherine said, but her smile was gone.

The man ignored her. ‘I thought it might give me peace to know all the ways things could be, years from now, decades from now. But each possibility led to more possibilities, the smallest changes causing such profound, titanic effects. There were too many realities to keep up with, too many outcomes to cope with.’ His voice wavered as he scanned the disbelieving faces all trained on him. ‘I did not know you could find each other. You weren’t meant to know.’

‘Hold up, hold up.’ Cat was pointing her gun at him now. Some of her men followed suit. ‘You’re telling me you had the ability to make worlds, to create anything, and instead of fixing your screwed up Earth, you just screwed up a bunch more?’

The man blinked. ‘Well. When you put it like that...’

Cat flicked off the safety. ‘You ended my world!’

‘But I saved hers!’ he said, pointing at Catherine. ‘Surely that balances it all –’

The gunfire was sudden and final. There were screams from both sides. Urn stood stock-still, automatic raised, barrel smoking.

‘You killed Melissa,’ he said, before turning around and walking back *through the curve*.

‘Urn, mate? What’s going on? Where’s Cat?!’ I ignore the cries of the men around me, the questions, the accusations. The gun is heavy in my hands, the barrel still smoking. Pushing through the entrance, I sit on the steps and take a slow, hard breath of burnt air.

Earnest joins me. I don't know how he got there. He looks up into the black sky. 'I told you we weren't parallel Earths. Parallels can't cross each other. They never touch. Not ever.'

I don't know what to say.

The man was gone. There was nothing Catherine could do. That didn't mean she had to like it.

'Did you see where he came through?' She looked up. It was Cat, running her hands over the far wall, the wall that the man had somehow stumbled through. Catherine could see her fingers stop at the bullet holes the one who looked like Earnest had made. They were lucky she was so forgiving.

'You know that's not how it works,' she said in reply, joining herself at the wall. 'We focused the curve, sure, but it was never just a door.'

'You're right... We had to feel our way through.' Cat turned to her. She was frowning. There's a shock. 'I'm sorry about this. About... I shouldn't have brought him.'

'No,' Catherine said simply. 'You shouldn't have.'

'This is not the place for us.' Cat turned towards the curve, still crackling, where her men had come from and her friend had returned. 'And there's no going back. Not when there are other worlds that could end up burning.'

'Alright then. Let's do this'.

Cat blinked. 'You're coming too?'

‘You heard the man. His world is a mess. They need help. It may wind up like mine or it may wind up like yours. I figure we should give it an even shot.’

A small smile crept across Cat’s face. The first in a long time. ‘I hope you’re right.’

‘We’re not so different. Ask them.’ Catherine nodded behind them. People on both sides were crying, hugging, trying to figure out everything they had heard and seen. ‘At the end of the day, all everyone wants is a bit of peace.’

Cat looked so tired when she looked back at her. ‘Finally. We agree.’

They both found the spot, that new curve. Together they pushed and **fell through**.