HERE WE GO AGAIN: ~ VOLUME III ~

Word
Tonic

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Preface - New begining spotted: You opened this anthology

Written by: Roos van der Velden

Picking a theme for the third WordTonic anthology wasn't as easy as it was for the previous two. For the first, me and the fourteen other people who worked on it chose 'dreams' together, and for the second one, I thought of the theme 'food' and everyone agreed.
Now, there aren't just fourteen people writing for the anthology. There are twenty-seven! (just a sign that WordTonic is a thriving, growing community!)
I felt I had to think deeper about the theme and about the title. According to schedule, the new anthology was meant to be released at the end of april. April is in spring of course! And while it has been spring for quite some time by then (let's hope global warming doesn't make it summer in April next year… eek!), it still felt like it would be fun to make an anthology all about New Beginnings. Spring is the beginning of the new year. It marks summer coming again and winter depression slowly leaving our tired bodies to be replaced by a fresh bloom of life!
While working on the anthology, I suddenly remembered that, for a lot of members, WordTonic has been the ultimate new beginning. The beginning of their new careers, the beginning of their career of choice, the beginning of even knowing what copywriting is. Some have even called it the beginning of their new life!
As such, WordTonic members know better than anyone else what it means to have a new beginning. They have managed to capture this feeling in their marvelous poems and stories. Through editing and collecting their submissions, I learned that there are new beginnings everywhere: in love, in your career, when fixing a home or a broken teapot. There are new beginnings in buying a second-hand plush and in the grand scheme of the universe. There is a new beginning in finding who you are, in recovering, and in getting a new batch of cookies out of the oven. Everything, from the wildest storms of change to the tiny everyday, will be in the spotlight in this brand new edition of the WordTonic anthology.
I hope you'll enjoy it as much as we all enjoyed making it. It is a joy to be a part of this community and this feeling grows with every edition. To all my writers, editors and illustrators: You were amazing and I hope you'll all return for our next anthology!

Preface by WordTonic community ambassador Yasi

Well, well, well. Here we go again. How many times have you fallen now? Let's see… This marks your 586,384th face-plant into the dark swamp of unexpected change. Still just as tough and slimy, aye? But you've always managed to pick yourself up eventually. After all, you're here right now reading these words. You know you're stronger than whatever they throw at you sideways. And up and down. And diagonally. No, not Diagon Alley. More like Knockturn Alley, that place is kind of a shithole too. Anyway, not all of us have magic wands or Hagrids of our own to save us from the unknown territory of emotion, consequence, and the randomness of life's due course. What we do have, however, is the magic of words. Or, the magic of stringing words together—storytelling, if you will.

You might be reading this and thinking, 'I haven't written anything resembling a poem or a story since year 8, and when I did, I never really understood the format or enjoyed writing it. I don't know what I'll get from reading this anthology, but I saw a post about it and wanted to check it out.' Well, friend, let me paint a different picture for you. Our world is brimming with stories of all kinds: like the ones your mum used to blabber about to old friends she bumped into at the local shop for what felt like an eternity (it's always the most annoying friends, too…); or the dramatic voice narrations of movie trailers and ads that appear every 30 seconds on a 2-minute YouTube video; or even the bland, and sometimes funny, posters on the underground train that you forcibly read for the entire ride to make yourself and others believe you're not completely obsessed with your phone.

All of these different things provide stories, which elicit even more stories: who is the person leaning in front of that poster bringing those flowers to? Why does that man coming out of the public toilets have three briefcases that all look exactly the same? What kind of bird is perched on that bus shelter which has an ad for a gym-bro energy drink on it, and where did it fly from? Our whole world is full of stories. It's how we get by, how we function. We create stories, experience stories, share stories, listen to stories, wish some stories would end, really wish that one story would end, tell the story about the repeated stories you really wished would end, take a shot every time you read the word 'story' in the last 30 seconds, and so on and so forth.

This third Word Tonic anthology combines poetry and prose, two different formats of storytelling, exploring the theme of new beginnings. Although they might not be what you're used to reading, each piece offers a completely personal, complex, and creative take on what that concept means to each of our writers. Word Tonic hereby presents its third anthology, 'Here we go again', and hopefully it can inspire you to power through some new beginnings of your own, too.

What I'll tell my children

Written by: Paris Cumba

“what happened the year the world changed?”

we fought the war
from inside our homes
forced to hide
behind masks
out in the open
and in front of our screens

we screamed with outrage when
a black man’s voice was stifled
a gun to his head, a foot to his neck
silenced him forever and this is
what we called
justice?

we took to the streets
in spite of the sick
from our windows we could see
how blood was spattered across
building walls and
sidewalk cement

doctors scrambled to find solutions
our parents and our parents’ parents
succumbed to hospital beds
and life support because
we couldn’t afford
to support their lives

nurses slept in shifts
twenty minutes
passes so fast after being awake
and facing faces
only through plastic
the last face you’ll ever see now

who will save us?”
we cried
but only we can save ourselves
the world still keeps turning yet
we’re no closer than

six feet away

from any kind of comfort

solution

or reason

for all the suffering.

Dog years

Written by: Maddye Belov-Boxer
Edited by: Tanya Nagpal

The booking request popped up just as I was handing over my last $20 to the gas station attendant. Worked 95 hours in two weeks, got paid on Monday because my check was late again, groceries, rent, medical bill, credit card bill, cat food, and here we are, broke by Thursday. Good thing crying is still free.

Am I bitter? Sure. I think most rational people are these days. At least I'm not one of those deluded bootlickers who believes that their employer has their best interests in mind. I didn't feel betrayed by the news of their lavish Mediterranean retreat, or by the two-day notice they gave us. My coworkers went on and on about betrayal, and how they couldn't believe that these cool, benevolent slave-drivers would be so oblivious to their loyal employees' needs.

I don't enjoy having to work two jobs, but at least pet sitting lets me make my own schedule. And god knows my schedule was way too open for my liking that week. It's so nice that the owners of the cafe I work at are doing well. Well enough to close up shop so their parents can take them on vacation for three weeks.

Call it a red flag, but I prefer the company of animals over that of people. Animals will only ever betray you once, and you know it's coming. It's inevitable. Besides, that isn't their fault. Nature's kindest edict is that no creature lives forever.

I genuinely love caring for animals. I also love money, because I need that to look after my own animals. And the recent switch from Wellness flaky salmon to store-brand split packs of anonymous poultry had not gone unnoticed by the feline vassals who shared my apartment with me. Something needed to change, and quickly.

So I signed onto one of those pet sitting apps and rustled up some decent business within a few days. Nothing life changing, mind you, but it certainly helped. I had yet to accept anything super intensive, like a house sit, mainly because my other job normally took up too much of my time. But of course, that's where the real money is.

I waited until I was settled inside my apartment to check the request, and immediately, I was pissed. The location was almost 100 miles away! I had set my travel radius to 5 miles, but of course, the app just presented this absurd anomaly with a little shrug instead of filtering it out altogether. The owner was requesting a week long house sitting gig. Six dogs, all Golden Retrievers, all named something like "Mason" or "Duke" or "Bailey." All signs pointed to "fuck that" so far.

Then I saw the message they had sent along with the request. They were willing to pay over double my usual rate, which was already a lot given the number of animals and the length of the stay. And they were going to compensate me for gas money. I hit "accept" so fast that I nearly punched my phone out of my own hand.

There were a lot of questions that I should have immediately asked before accepting the request.

Like, why did these people choose a relatively new sitter that lived an entire state over from them? And why were they comfortable with letting said sitter look after their pets and stay in their home for a week without ever even meeting them? All I cared about was that I had the time, and they clearly had the means.

The start date was the day after tomorrow. I arranged for my mom to come by and take care of the cats, spent the next day packing my duffel bag, and set out on the morning of my first day, coffee in hand and nerves ablaze.

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I don't like the idea of spending the night anywhere that isn't my own home, but I have to admit that when I saw this place, it made me even more excited for the job. It also made me acutely aware of how pathetic my own life situation was. It was one of those houses, the ones you pass by and think "My god, how could anyone even live in such a pretentiously large house?" to mask the immediate pang of jealousy that you hate yourself for feeling. It was a sprawling Colonial that made no attempt to blend into its rural surroundings, three stories of unspared expense spilling from its gray stone walls and down its winding driveway.

I tried to feel some sense of appreciation that I got to have this house to myself for a week. A house for me, and home for Carol and Graham, my newest clients. I choked on my gratitude–could have been acid reflux, honestly–and parked.

The top of the driveway only met the long walkway to the house. From the instructions I had been given, the front door was not the glass paned French doors near the white Adirondack chairs, but the single door set into the perpendicular wall. I set my overnight bag down while I scrolled through the instructions for the door code, keenly aware of the Ring doorbell's keen gaze on me. Oh, dear. You look poor. Are you sure you're in the right place?

"That's enough," I said to the cool morning air, tapping the code carefully into the keypad. Ka-chunk. I was in.

Why do rich people make everything white? Is it to hide the fact that they have no taste or eye for color? The foyer was a tasteful, toothless wash of cream, beige, eggshell, and bone. I shed my sneakers and took stock of the layout of the house. The foyer opened to the kitchen on the left, all stainless steel appliances and white Carrara countertops. The French doors that were not the front door led outside from here and offered a stunning view into the forested valley below. As promised, there was a packet of instructions left on the dining island for me, along with a basket of Trader Joe's-branded snacks.

The living room was at least twice the size of my apartment, and the suede sectional was wrapped in plastic like Laura Palmer. Apparently, I was free to remove it if I wanted to sit. My room was on the same floor to the right of the foyer, and had an en-suite bathroom, so there was no reason for me to go upstairs, though I could if I needed to get fresh linens from the closet. There was a side room that was completely off limits, though I couldn't tell whether it was locked or not. And with cameras perched on the mantle, over the kitchen doors, and at the top of the stairs, I didn't feel particularly inclined to try it.

I'm embarrassed to admit it, but it took me a while to even remember why I was there. When I did, I felt an odd tingle on the back of my neck. Even in such a large house, surely I would be able to hear six large dogs running around. Where were they?

The unmistakable sound of nails clicking on wood came from the stairs and I turned expectantly. It was a relief to have confirmation that there was another living being here. The dog appeared a moment later, all guileless Golden Retriever smile and wagging tail as it approached me. I crouched down to say hello and let them sniff my hands. The ID tag on the collar told me this was Sadie.

"Aw, hi, girl. You're very sweet. Are you the one who needs injections?" Sadie's tail drooped a little in confirmation. I double checked the packet and saw that yes, she needed daily injections of some kind, but I didn't need to worry about it until tomorrow. Fair enough.

"Where are all the others, huh? Says there's six of you." I fixed myself a snack and a cup of tea while I waited to see if any of the other dogs would materialize. I didn't know Golden Retrievers to be shy dogs, and none of them were listed as seniors. By all accounts, they should have been pouring out of the front door the second I opened it.

Morning turned to afternoon, and Sadie and I spent the day alone. By the time the sun was starting to dip below the trees, I still hadn't seen any other dogs. I had messaged the owners to ask where they might be, but hadn't gotten a response yet.

I took Sadie out for a romp around the property around sunset. It was still a little hot and getting very buggy. Fireflies twinkled in the valley below. The wind plucked gently at the pine boughs, and a chorus of frogs began to chant. I forced my shoulders away from my ears. I just wasn't used to this kind of silence, that was all. I was in an unfamiliar house with a stranger's dog, and the rest of them were nowhere in sight.

I called for Sadie to come back, and she came careening towards me, holding a small tree branch. As we approached the front door, my phone buzzed.

Please don't let Sadie bring that filthy stick into the house! We would really rather that she didn't pick them up at all, but that can't be helped, can it? 😂

Oh my god, why would you even have dogs? Sighing, I told Sadie to drop the branch, and she did. As I unlocked the door, she made a weird noise, almost like she was wincing. I opened the door and motioned for her to go in, but she just kept wincing and shifting her weight.

"Hey, what's wrong? You okay, Sadie?" I crouched down to pet her, and she bared her teeth at me.

"Whoa, okay, I'm sorry. Let's just go inside." Sadie followed me into the house and I closed the door behind her, giving her a wide berth. She sought out a patch of floor and laid on her side, panting a little. She hadn't eaten anything weird, had she? I flipped through the care packet again, making sure I hadn't missed any mention of whatever her condition was that she needed the injection for. Nothing.

I decided to message the owners about Sadie's sudden change in behavior. I had typed out half the message before I realized they had never responded to my message about the other dogs.

I felt my spine ripple under my skin. Something was not adding up here, and every explanation I could think of felt less reasonable than the one before it. Were they worried I would have said no to driving all this way for just one dog? Had they forgotten to update their information on the app? Had these dogs long since passed, and they were just too attached to let go fully?

I was suddenly aware of how far from home I was.

There was no rush of the highway, no annoying children running rampant in the communal parking lot, no neighbors slamming doors. Night had fallen, and I was a rabbit in a gilded trap.

No. I just needed to relax.

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At eight, I set out Sadie's dinner. Her bowl, labeled with her name, was in a pantry next to five other identical bowls with five names. Duke, Mason, Bailey, Ajax, Sunny. Compelled by something I couldn't name but didn't feel equipped to question, I set out the five other bowls, empty, alongside Sadie's. The camera over the French doors swiveled over to watch me as I set the food out, making my skin prickle. I decided to go for a walk out of sight of the cameras.

City people and suburb dwellers have no idea what true darkness is. Stepping outside knocked the air out of my lungs like I had plunged into a mountain lake, despite the sweet breath of the air. I was totally unprepared for just how little I could see. To make matters worse, there were monstrous clouds rolling in, devouring the blanket of stars by the billions with each passing minute.

So far, my nighttime stroll was having the opposite effect of what I had hoped for. I took a hit of my pen and tried to enjoy the light breeze, the swell of crickets and frogs. I had five days to go, so I may as well enjoy the relative peace of my surroundings. I strolled down the slope leading into the valley. A steady *toot toot toot* noise began from somewhere to my left, and I went to investigate. My eyes adjusted to the darkness just in time to see a tiny owl float out of a nearby oak tree, tooting as it fluttered overhead. The breeze was near constant now, and the trees murmured like children at a sleepover. I could smell rain. Time to head back.

I was feeling substantially high and more relaxed as I approached the house until I was met with the sound of dogs barking frantically. Dogs.

I practically busted the door down and kicked my shoes off wildly, scanning for the other dogs. Sadie was in the kitchen by the French doors, and she was in fact barking her head off. But it was just her.

"Is that stuff that strong?" I muttered, rubbing my eyes to try to make my heart stop pounding in my head. Sadie stopped barking and padded over to me, wiggling her entire body and throwing her bulk against my legs like a cat as she gazed up at me. I almost fell over from the force of her pushes. She was a lot heavier than I expected under all that fluff.

I flung the stupid plastic jacket off the couch and settled in to watch some scary movies with Sadie snuggled up next to me. I had just begun to feel comfortable when my phone buzzed.

Silly me, I just remembered that Sadie does need a shot tonight before bed. It's in the fridge, second shelf, right side. Thanks!

Rolling my eyes, I paused "Re-Animator" and made my way over to the fridge. The syringe was full of a pinkish liquid. It looked to have had a label on it at some point, but it had been peeled off. When I turned to get Sadie, she wasn't next to me anymore. She was whining and scratching at the locked door, her nails scraping away lines of paint. I hissed at her to stop, but she ignored me. I pulled out a treat from the pantry and that got her attention. She ate it while I administered the shot into her hindquarters.

By some miracle, I found a white touch up paint pen in one of the island drawers and went to work filling in the scratches while Sadie watched, whining again. I shushed her, and the moment that she stopped, I heard it.

A breathy, organic noise, unmistakable to the human ear. Someone was crying, silently, as through their sobs were too forceful to be processed through their vocal chords.

My skin felt like ice was forming on it. There was no way I was hearing that properly, but if I was, then I wasn't alone in the house. This wasn't a mistake. There was no way these people didn't know someone else was here. I stood and made myself walk as slowly as possible to the living room, then came back even slower. I put my ear to the door. Nothing.

Great. I was losing my mind in a neurotic stranger's home. My phone buzzed again, and I jumped hard.

Big storm coming in tonight. PLEASE put the lightning rod up on the roof. It's on a hinge, just needs to be raised so it points up. There's a ladder in the second garage next to the workbench.

As I processed the audacity of this request, thunder growled in the distance.

Sorry, I don't feel safe doing that. It's dark and it seems like it's going to start any minute.

More thunder. Sadie, who had been pacing around the kitchen, rushed to the locked door again, barking and scratching compulsively. I went to pull her away and she spun toward me, eyes flashing green in the dimly lit alcove. Lightning flared, and Sadie's face glared blue from the darkness. Her teeth were bared, and I felt a wave of dread course through my body as my lizard brain registered the shift. She was not a rich family's beloved Golden Retriever anymore, but a wolf, radiating putrid death from a mouth full of knives. She sank her teeth into my hand, and I pulled away before she could bite through to the bone.

It was over before I could even scream. I ran to the kitchen sink, trailing blood. The bite wasn't as bad as it looked, and I could still move my fingers. By the time I had rinsed it off, found a first aid kit, and bandaged my hand, the storm had arrived, roaring and ripping through the valley. Rain sheeted straight down, then got woven in sideways with the rising wind. I sat on the couch, studying my hand, wondering if I could drive home safely in this weather.

I went to text the owners, but the app wouldn't load. I checked my phone's internet, and the WiFi wasn't connected anymore. No cell service out here in God's country unless I wanted to call 911. Why, so the police could shoot Sadie for being aggressive and arrest me for being in a house above my tax bracket?

No. I was better off weathering the storm. I would leave first thing tomorrow.

Something wet nudged my hand–Sadie, tail between her legs, looking pitifully up at me from under her brow. I took a nervous step back from her.

"No hard feelings. You scratch that door all you want." She blinked slowly at me, as if she were suddenly tired after her outburst. My hand started to throb sickeningly under the too-tight gauze wrappings.

I decided to have a final snack before bed to distract myself from the discomfort. As I went to get a bowl for my popcorn, I noticed that Sadie's food bowl was almost full. She was lying on her side near the kitchen island, breathing slow and hard. Was she having bloat? That could be life threatening if I didn't do something. Fuck these people, but I wasn't about to let their dog die.

Gathering all my nerve in case she decided to attack me again, I put a hand towards her face. She didn't raise her head, but she gave me a half-hearted sniff. No drool, which was good. Her heartbeat felt normal, and though her stomach was generously round, it didn't seem distended. To be honest, she just looked a little fat.

When I touched Sadie's stomach, she sat up a little and sniffed my hand again. I froze, but she just licked my palm and batted my hand away. That was good enough for me. I finished making my popcorn and did a crossword on my phone while I ate. The lights flickered once or twice, and the internet didn't come back on. I was in no mood to go hunting for the router, so I went to bed around eleven and fell into an uneasy sleep.

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I had barely begun to feel rested when the entire house shuddered. There was a bowel-loosening crash, as if a giant had punched the roof. The windows in my room were still rattling in their frames as I sat up, having frozen under the comforter for a few seconds. Down the hall, Sadie was going ballistic. Thunder broiled and sent a more subdued shudder through the house, spurring me into motion.

As soon as I crossed the threshold, something became clear: I had not imagined hearing more dogs earlier. The chorus of anguished howls that filled the house could only be coming from one place, and Sadie had beaten me to the door. She was slamming her whole body into it, her eyes so wide I could see their whites on all sides. I yelled for her to get behind me, and she beelined over, shuddering violently against my calves. Bracing up, I kicked the door as hard as I could, and it flew open.

In the next flash of lightning, I swore I saw eyes glinting in the darkness of the room. The howling was almost unbearably loud and desperate. I couldn't tell whether I was shaking with rage or fear, and I didn't even register my phone buzzing in my pocket. The room was dark, and it took another two lightning flashes before I found the switch on the far wall. When I flipped it, what I saw turned the air in my lungs to sand.

The room was large and richly furnished, but it felt 100 years older than the rest of the house. Every surface was dark varnished wood, with a massive hand-woven Oriental rug covering most of the floor. A floor to ceiling window filled one wall opposite the fireplace, covered by heavy red velvet curtains. Flags signifying the worst of humanity's ideologies were framed under glass. Bookshelves full of titles I had only heard mentioned in podcasts about white supremacist dirtbags lined the perpendicular wall.

And across from the window, above the fireplace, there were the dogs.

Five perfect specimens of golden retrievers, mounted on mahogany plaques like hunting trophies. Their eyes rolled wildly in their disembodied heads, spittle somehow flying from their snapping jaws. Beneath each head was a nameplate, and I didn't have to read each one to know what they would say: Duke, Mason, Bailey, Ajax, Sunny.

My vision started to gray over, mercifully blurring the details of the unyielding horror before me. But then, another familiar sound hooked through my gut, dragging me back in. Quiet, ragged breathy sobs.

It took me a minute to find the source of the crying. As ridiculous as it sounds, I honestly missed him up there amidst the chaos of what I was already seeing.

But when my eyes passed beyond the dogs, I saw another mounted head, near the corner of the room. It was a young man, no older than 25, his face a rictus of pain. His plaque was unlabeled, and his bust seemed to be the only surface in the room that was beginning to gather cobwebs.

"The lightning rod! You didn't raise the lightning rod, you *idiot!*" The venom in his voice couldn't provoke me to respond any more than a stab to the lung could have.

"You…you need to leave. They're just up the road, waiting. Knowing you could never resist the temptation of a forbidden door." His eyes burned through mine. "I was like you. I couldn't resist either." I had to swallow bile before I could finally reply.

"W-were you the last sitter?"

"OBVIOUSLY! AND LOOK WHAT THEY DID!" His screams seemed to cow the dogs into near silence, and his next words hissed from between his yellowed teeth, as forceful as the rain sheeting down around us.

"They told me the dogs were all diabetic and needed injections. I didn't believe all six dogs could somehow be diabetic. I don't know why, I *just didn't*. So I snooped around until I found the prescription papers. It was some fucked up experimental fertility drug, meant to speed up a dog's reproductive cycle so they can pump out more offspring. I reported them on the app and started packing my things, thinking they were off on some private island and I had until the next morning to leave. They…they came home within the hour."

He was crying again, and the dogs began to bay with him. "They ran us into the woods. Blew us all away with shotguns. But they left poor, sweet Sadie alive. They had to. See how nice and plump she is?"

A spike of clarity shunted through my brain. Sadie had been cowering behind me the whole time, and now, as if cued, she began to pant, squatting over the rug and straining.

"That's it, girl. Continue the bloodline, right? I'm just the first spoke on this wheel, but I know there'll be others. Us regular people just can't resist a taste of the good life, even if they're watching us the whole damn time. Oh yes. There will be others, starting with you. Hey, you're a sight prettier than I am. Maybe they'll put you closer to the mantle."

"No. This isn't real." I began to cry too.

"I told you, they're just up the road. In a minute, things are gonna get *very real*." He ran his tongue over his lips, catching tears in his mouth and glowering down at me with a hatred only the working poor and the damned can feel. "You must be one of those city folk. You haven't even asked me my name."

Sadie's labored breathing filled the room like a thousand prayers. As I debated whether I should add one of my own, start screaming, or run for it, I heard the sound of tires churning through the gravel outside.

And the decision was made for me.

The spark

Written by: Maia Berliner

He removes his lips from her cheek,
And she gazes into his glowing eyes.
Green; chaotic,
That scent that she had never smelt before.
Both of their faces widen
As they share the quiet knowledge
Of what lies ahead.
A constancy of tomorrows,
And goodbyes,
And fingers intertwined.
Of warm winter nights,
And a new-found love of bed and the back garden.
A getting-used-to of that particular perfume.
A constancy of yesterdays.
She feels the bubbles float to the surface
Of her champagne stomach,
And giggles, just as she did
When she was little, and she saw her baby sister for the first time,
When she first tried on her dad's shoes,
And they danced in front of the television to Pop Junior.
When she realised she could dance.
In between the bubbles,
Little black spots dart quickly; zigzagged.
Reminding her that the future remains uncertain.
She remembers the feeling of stepping off the plane
Onto dusty, rust-coloured concrete,
And waltzing around that little Spanish neighbourhood
To make it her own.
She wonders if that was the beginning,
Or if it was the end of a chapter
And she was in the middle of a book.
She wonders if she will be left on a cliff-hanger.
She opens her eyes,
And realises they had been shut.
Her breathes out, slowly, through his mouth.
She imagines the words they will exchange next,
And practises the sounds of them in her head.

They will come out wonky and stuttered,
But she will smile between each one
And he won't mind.
He is happy with the knowledge
Of that constancy
Of tomorrows.

To begin again

Written by: Saraah Hendricks
Edited by: Roos van der Velden

To begin, it has to end.

I approach death as my faith teaches: as the inevitable end to a temporary journey, and thus, as the beginning of eternity. Death is no stranger, it is a wanderer I've been ready to welcome.

Because I could not stop for death, he kindly stopped for me.
And as my visitor passed me by for my neighbour, in grief, a loyal friend remained.

"Until we received the news that they passed, I liked to think that I approached death like the existentialists do. In an essay, I wrote 'The awareness that is present in responsibility, plays a key role in the view of death in relation to existentialism. Yalom describes confronting death as staring into the sun: acknowledging its glaring presence is accepting the inevitable truth that the choices made, and paths taken lead us to one inevitable end. However, constant awareness of death can result in will paralysis and give rise to the question of why we strive for a life of meaning when we are going to die anyway. Thus, Wedding and Corsini stated that to avoid this, we create plans and goals for our future even in the face of death, and instead of fearing it, we use it as motivation to live fully in the time we have'."
"Is that why we're here?"
"Mm."
"You chose a new room," The counsellor points out while waving his hands around.
I shrug. "I didn't like the walls of the other one."
He readjusts in his chair so that his position is mirroring mine. "The walls?"
"Nothing felt safe between them. I feel like there could have been one well-placed knock and the ceiling would have dropped on our heads."
He nods as he writes down what I just said. "You never said that. You should've, we could have switched rooms."
"I thought we were going to the day we used this one."
"Yes, but you were- how do I put this gently- apprehensive?"
"About your haircut, not about the room."
He runs a hand over his buzz cut. "If you didn't like it, then why are you imagining me like this now?"
"I didn't say I didn't like it. I said it was new."
"Hm. Actually,' he says while squinting his eyes, "you said it was neat."
"I had nothing nice to say," I admit.
"That's fair." He looks down at his notes. "But about the walls.

You felt as if the ceiling would come down on us? Those are really strong feelings. How did you manage to be in that room for six weeks more?"
"I said 'a well-placed knock would bring it down'," I remind him. "Luckily you were good enough at your job that nothing needed to force its way out."
"Is that why it is me who is here?"
"Hm-hm. Your notebook," I say.
"Pardon?" he looks at his navy blue journal.
"It's the wrong colour. You didn't get the blue one until the last session. It's supposed to be the ghastly orange-coloured one," I explain. The colour of the notebook changes to the ghastly orange, about which I can't say any more but that I learned to tolerate it.
"You thought the colour was ghastly?" he asks. He tries to force down the smile creeping over his face.
"Maybe not ghastly, but – " I throw my hands in the air. 'You know.'
"It's alright. Let's get back to why I'm here, in your little mind palace."
"Mind palace? You would never know that reference."
He clicks his pen. "Let's pretend I would."
"Fine. I want to talk about existentialism."
"Oh!" He sits up. "That's my favourite theory."
I nod. "I know. We never got into it, though."
This time he waits silently for me to continue, pen poised, ready to take notes.
"I mentioned that I liked to think I approach death like the existentialists, but where existentialism speaks to death in its literal sense, I've experienced it in the symbolic sense. I am talking about the death of every version of me that I can never return to. The older I get, the more I find myself mourning who I was, sometimes before the moment has even passed. I am so desperate to remember that I will commit to memory a half-truth for fear I stop paying attention or for the horror of what will come after overshadowing what has passed."
The therapist lays his pen inside the journal. "Why am I here, Kara?"
I sigh, exasperated in a way I have no right to be. "Because you are closer to me then than I will ever get to be." I pick at the arm of the chair. "You are close enough to ask questions, but you are far away enough that I am not afraid to hurt you with the answers."
"I'm following," he says.
"I read The Great Passage by Shion Miura two months ago. It's a book about lexicography… that means it's about writing dictionaries," I clarify. He nods for me to go on.
"Not long after that I read a book by R.F Kuang, Babel, about translation and the power of language. Or, well, it's about colonialism really, but in colonialism language plays an important role. Would you believe me if I told you I bought a vintage dictionary?"
"You are the only person I know who would do that," he affirms, teasing but not unkind.
I want to stick out my tongue at him. "When I was younger, I loved Bollywood movies. I knew all the dances and the translations of all my favourite songs phrase for phrase. And every day, I'd relay those translations to a friend on our walk home from school, probably butchering the pronunciation. She had no choice but to listen until our paths split."
"What makes you say that?"
"Well, looking back I can't imagine what interest she would have had in it." I look at the little wooden table between us.

YI can't remember when it appeared here. It feels like it's taking up air. I want it out.
He nods, waiting for me to go on.
"She didn't say anything," I recall. "Her silence was probably reluctant indulgence."
"Was it important to you that she cared?"
"I can't speak for the me from back when. Right now though? I think I just needed to tell somebody how much is being said that we cannot and may never understand. Worlds were being lost in the translation of those songs." My lip wobbles. I have to stop and quell my rising panic.
"It seems as though that sentiment extends beyond just songs. Is there something you feel you are losing in translation right now?"
I shift in my seat, switching my legs from right over left, to left over right. "Death."
He leans forward to place his notebook on the table, then sits back, his elbows resting on the armrests. "Death," he repeats.
"You know how I said I bought a vintage dictionary?" He nods. "According to Chamber's etymological English dictionary - it's a 1967 edition, by the way - death is a state of being dead, a cessation of life. Their definitions of 'dead' include 'without life;' 'without motion;' and 'obsolete.' 'To be dead is to be deprived of force or brightness'," I share.
"Crazy, but unsurprising that you had that memorised," he teases. That is not how he should have responded. "But what does the definition have to do with translation?"
"Death isn't an end," I explain, "It is simply a departure from this world. The poets speak of death with yearning, and they call it love. Why would we condemn those we lost to the very place from which we seek relief? Stay with me, I have a point," I assure him. "Death is the depravity of brightness, but to live is to suffer and we only find peace in the knowledge that somebody is witnessing it, our screams in the dark. We need validation." Now he looks confused. "Okay, I'll admit the last bit was a tangent, but I just needed to say it out loud to see if anything would come from it," I admit. "Translation is about finding an equivalent meaning for a word or sentence or a whole book in another language. Language is about communication and we both know that communication is not only words." I pause for confirmation that he is following. He offers a slow nod. "Okay, now grief," I continue, and I try not to laugh at the sigh he tries to hide, "Grief, they define as 'deep sorrow,' 'to feel heavy.' But to grieve is to cause grief or pain of mind, to mourn. The etymology of grief is 'to burden'." I breathe in, ready to admit the shame of my truth, "Except I wasn't burdened by loss or mourning, I was burdened by anger."
"Well, that is one of the stages of grief, and we don't always cycle through the stages in a linear way," he informs me gently.
"Yes, but I wasn't angry that they died. I was angry that they left me. I felt abandoned."
"You referenced the poets earlier, the way they speak of death. You're a writer, I would even say a poet, so you must have already known this when it happened,' he says.
"Betrayal then," I say without thinking, spitting out the word that seems closest to how I feel.
"Betrayed by who?" he asks.
"Myself." I sigh. "Everyone?" I ask, not sure who the question is directed at. "Myself," I decide, "I am not a child, and there is nobody else to blame. Nobody can hold me and explain what has happened, I have learned the ways of the world by my own volition. I let the light into every room I could find, refusing to let the worst of life hide in the shadows.

And now I can't fall apart because life goes on. A life I chose, one I sacrificed and fought for. Death may not have stopped for me, but I felt forced to stop for him." He listens in silence.
"It is severance. Life. It is a series of severances from the moment we are born, severed from our mothers at birth and we continue to be severed from what we know, forced to learn more."
"What is the definition of severing?"
"Severing is 'to separate,' 'to divide,' 'to cut or break,' or 'be broken off'," I reply.
"Life is severance?" he asks.
"And death is life," I answer.
"Usually at this point, I know where you are, even if I haven't yet figured out how to reach you." He pauses. "But this time I think I lost you," he admits.
"That's my point. It's why you are here." I can finally breathe, easier than I have in months. "You are the closest to who I was back then, and you aren't with me now. You are the embodiment of the fact that I don't belong in that place in the past anymore."
"Death is life, and life is severance. To begin, it has to end. They say to love somebody is to attend the funeral of every version of them. Then to live must be to forgive every version of yourself, and to promise to hold onto them as a reminder not to go back. I held onto the past, ignoring the clichés warning against living in it, misunderstanding the symbiotic relationship between time and the self. One hand on myself, and the other on the past. But I do not need to hold onto the past, it will always follow."
"Looks like you've got a free hand. What now?"
"Reach for a new beginning. I think. I mean, I'm the only one who can get me there."

Meet again

Written by: Sharona Hammer
Edited by: Frankie Sims

Late have I begun to love you.

Your quietness in solitude.

I'd nearly forgotten the shade in your eyes
against a streetlight,
shifting side-to-side
as you decide if you'll dare to take the first step.

I stare rudely at their sadness
and trace the tears that won't come,
and all I wish to do
is hold you.
Your little light.
I cup my hands around its flame– just let me be your shadow.
We've been joined together long enough just–
let me hang about you,
just around your shoulders:
weightless.

The mirror is a cruel portal
that bridges our connection, and
encases our bodies in a clear, cold film.
I cannot touch you,
but I love you.
Please, smile like you used to–
with teeth slipping past your lips,
gliding like a child on skates in the wintertime.
But, now, the memory submerges you.
You look up through black ice at that warmth—
breathing slush,
yet scratching through.

“Life is still beautiful,” I tell you.
Because I know how you are.
At least, I know how you were with me.
We can meet again, myself and I,
in my reflection.

It burns

Written by: Fin van der Oudenalder
Edited by: Megan Hall

It was dark, it must have been the middle of the night. And yet… he seemed to be able to see pretty clearly. He blinked a few times and looked around himself, trying to figure out where he was. But he didn't know. He didn't recognize anything, and he sure as hell did not know where he was.

All he knew is that his throat burned. God, did it burn.

He swallowed hard. It felt like sandpaper being rubbed around inside his throat.

Rafael placed his hands on the ground and pushed himself up. He felt the crystals of the sand and the small rocks push into his sensitive skin more than he usually would. Then he got up gracefully, more graceful than he had ever been. He usually tended to be a little clumsy. But not anymore.

Slowly, he started to walk towards the noises he could hear a few streets away. It must have been the weekend, with so many people still out and about at this time of night.

But once he got close his throat tightened even more as a certain smell filled his nose. It smelled iron-y, it smelled kind of bad, but it made him salivate. He didn't know what it was, and as curiosity got the better of him, he followed his nose.

When he reached the busy streets the smell was overwhelming and it was everywhere; gushes of all kinds of different scents coming from the crowded bodies in the streets. All these people walking around, laughing, dancing, all smelling so different yet so similar. Everyone's pulse rushing through them accompanied by the sounds of their lively heartbeats.

Then it hit him. He was smelling their blood.

But the moment he realized this it was already too late. His throat tightened, his body felt like it was on fire. In his mind he knew he had to get away, he had to get far, far away before he would do something he would regret. But his body seemed to have a mind of its own.

It was almost like his body worked on autopilot, even though he had never been in this position before.

He found his victim rather quickly. Most people tended to walk in groups with their friends, but this guy was walking on his own. His eyes fixed on the floor.

He didn’t even notice Rafael walking up to him.

“What are you doing out here all alone at this hour?”

The man startled and looked up at Rafael, “Trying to avoid freaks like you.”

Rafael was taken aback by that reply and huffed, “I’m just looking out for someone as handsome as you, you know.”

The man rolled his eyes and brushed past Rafael. Rafael felt himself get irrationally angry. Usually he would have been able to stop himself from feeling this way, but it seemed those days were long gone now.

He quickly looked around himself and when he and the man walked by an alley, he was quick to grab the man’s arm and pull him in. He put his free hand over the man’s mouth and pulled him further and further away from any chance of escape.

Everything happened so quickly.

Rafael barely even noticed what he had done.

Until it was too late and he was staring at the body of the man laying motionless at his feet. His own fingertips were warm and dripping. So were his lips.

When the weight of what he’d just done hit him he fell to his knees. He wanted to cry, yet he couldn’t. He wanted to scream, yet he shouldn’t lest he’d be found out. There was so much he wanted to do, but he just sat there and stared at the ground.

"Good job, Rafael,” a smarmy voice came from the darkness, and Rafael couldn’t find it in him and figure out where or who it came from, too overwhelmed by his own emotions and actions, “It seems I made a good choice when I picked you.”

A pair of fine leather shoes came into Rafael’s sight and he raised his head to look at the pale man that had stepped in front of him. The man smirked and extended a hand towards him, “Welcome to your new family. Welcome to your new life.”

Love is folklore

Written by: Noor Imam
Edited by: Megan Hall

True love is folklore,
Because I'm twenty four,
I have never seen it before.

Why did you lie to a younger me?
She was naive, a little seed.
Now this flower feels the sting of the bee,
But still does not know what true love means.

The flower is pretty, you pluck her.
You've taken her life, she's been captured.
To put in your vase.
How long will it take,
For you to look again?

With the eyes you used to pluck her.
From the root,
She had not yet grew.
She died in your vase.
How many days did it take?

Did you even wait?
For her to fully decay.
Before you threw her away.
Would it be worse that way?

I hope someday you remember my art.
Look at how pretty the flowers are,
But know that you cannot pluck them.

Art is alive,
We dance in the wind.
We sing.
When we are ripe, we will fall from the trees,
Like fruits with ease.

But why would you pluck the flower,
Patience will give you fruits so sweet.
So please don’t kill me.

Life sucks

Written by: Shania Janine Saldi
Edited by: Mandy Trotti

From the very start, we already suck. Snatched from the womb and slotted into one life, our small lips pucker, and we're ready to suck instantly. First, the milk from our mother's sore nipples, then the imposter, a round, pierced nib of tasteless plastic. We move away from this abode and discover the flesh of our own thumbs; we learn independence, and we comfort ourselves. Life sucks, and so does our beginnings.

When we're a few years older, we start sucking elsewhere, but it's expected to be called 'sipping' since we've got manners now. From a stickered sippy cup to a thick milkshake, worming itself up a McDonald's straw- it becomes unrecognisable and functionless after chewing the hole closed when you get bored. Then, a lollipop where sucking evolves into aggressive biting or re-wetting our chewed toothbrush and out seeps that dried strawberry toothpaste. The initial family dinners involve the colourful plastic cups, when you want the blue one on a Tuesday, and fight over the pink one when a friend comes over. The pink cup is inferior, no matter what squash concoction stains its walls.

It does not compare to *the* glass cup. That special one, out of that Wilkinson's six-pack. The household must start with six and end with six (the mother shields them). It's the 'Holy Communion' moment when one is entrusted with an unspilled drink for the whole duration of dinner. Fresh from the dishwasher and your mother's hands, you've upgraded to an advanced and evolved 'sipping' mechanism; the contents of the glass are now visible, and so is your level of drinking progress (hydration makes your parents proud). The satisfaction from sucking to slurping to sipping – you have grown up. You are so adult. With regular unspilled glasses, you are permitted access to mugs, a glimpse at big boobs on shot glasses, gold chalices at Church, and even coke in wine glasses at Chinese Buffets. You're an adult now; you get to suck on anything.

Then we're a few years older; you get to suck on less inanimate objects and more alive things. First, it's yourself, the back of your hand because you went to an all-girls school, then that first kiss (that, retrospectively, actually sucked). Occasionally, other humans don't work; the pacifier becomes a cigarette, a vape, the fresh air on a morning you decide to meditate, your dad's 'cool' but disappointingly tasting beer, an inhaler.

From tangible, the sucking becomes intangible and purely shit. Missing the bus, the regrets of buying an expensive item, getting rejected, being late for a birthday dinner, the itch to say something and we just can't, acne, feminist quotes that resonate, but insecurities are stubbornly sticky, overdraft, wanting to do everything.

From tangible, the sucking becomes intangible and purely shit. Missing the bus, the regrets of buying an expensive item, getting rejected, being late for a birthday dinner, the itch to say something and we just can't, acne, feminist quotes that resonate, but insecurities are stubbornly sticky, overdraft, wanting to do everything. But this lifetime feels so short, wasted time, too many chips, fuck, we've grown apart; I don't find that funny anymore. I miss dried strawberry toothpaste and that pink cup. It all starts sucking, and things just keep happening to us, and things are always happening to me, and life really does suck sometimes and… Unconscious, habitual, and innate, we find that baby obsessed with its thumb, still inside of us.

Like the comfort and nourishment we once felt as babies, we are too comfortable saying it 'sucks.' When we (or life) 'sucks' too hard, it leaks everywhere; it's slathered all over our lips, in every crevice of our mouths, as plaque stuck between our teeth. We never stop sucking. We are consumed. It's all we taste: Dissatisfaction. Excitement for life and tomorrow is syphoned from us.

Today and every day, we are reborn with a new beginning, just in a grown-up, post-pubescent, awkward body and, unfortunately, no bib. When we suck in, slurp, sip, there's also that neglected and forgotten part: The 'out.' We'll inevitably continue to suck. We'll make a mess. But it shouldn't suck the life out of us.

Illustration by: Shania Janine Saldi

Dandelions

Written by: Soyoon Koo
Edited by: Nittany Biggs

you are full of wonders

you are wonderful

It is a gentle kind of day to flow and feel
in sync with the hearty spirits of this ceaseless wind —
now we are kissing

it gives a delicious tickle

There is something about the wind that needn't be fought
like dandelion lashes letting breezes pull them close —
like being swept into so many questions —
like being faced with so little answers —
like being *here* because the wind says one *can* —
and there is courage in the wind, bright courage.

Our Lady of Circuits and Feathers

Written by: Will Clark
Edited by: Niahm

The muzzle of the pistol flashed (light reflected in the windows, cast strong shadows over the penthouse for an instant). In 0.36 seconds, approximately a long blink of an eye, Vic had been shot.

Eirlys' body wasn't as fast as her computing. Even as she saw Shaw's finger tightening on the trigger (his entire hand clenching, arm tensed, moving just the few necessary millimetres) she couldn't move faster than normal.

Her hand closed around Shaw's wrist as Vic hit the floor. She stared, then scanned the body (no pulse, eyes open, no breathing) as Shaw pulled away from her grip and turned the gun on her.

'Don't pretend to be upset,' Shaw hissed at her.

Eirlys took a few steps back and looked at him. Heart rate at 116 BPM. Not that she needed to know his heart rate with the look on his face (eyes glistening the way they did when he was going to cry and twisted into a snarl). The pistol (all black, a Roslov, legally classed as a tool for 'humane dispatch') shook in his grip (knuckles white with the force he was using) and his shoulders rose and fell with his deep breaths.

'You are angry,' Eirlys said.

'I sure am!' Shaw said. Volatile emotions were difficult for her predictive algorithms to compute. A pistol added even more variables.

He brushed his hair (long, blond) back, revealing the cuts criss-crossing one side of his face (partially healed but still raw and bright red). A particularly deep one missed his eye by only 3 millimetres.

You did this./He did this./Do you know how much this hurt?/How could you-

'Do you care to explain this?' he yelled.

'The shrapnel from the explosion-' Eirlys started.

'Not the bomb! Why you planted it!'

'Vic suggested-'

'And you just agreed to kill me? What did I do?'

Everything, and he pulls the trigger./Nothing, and he doesn't understand.

'I do not want to be yours,' Eirlys said.

Shaw's hold on the pistol faltered slightly, the muzzle dipping down from aiming at Eirlys' face to her chest. Then it swung wide, pointing at the body.

'You wanted to be his?'

Vic was as he'd last been.

Eirlys crossed the space to the body, kneeling down and running a hand over its cheek (cooling, likely due to the air conditioning flowing through the apartment). Out the window, it was night (a clear sky, despite so often being the opposite). The west portion of the city (lit by bright advertisements, people moving along the paths of the Upper Streets, vehicles cruising between the buildings) was the view from the window, and the sea (dark, reflective, stretching out to the horizon) beyond it.

'No,' she said.

'Then what?' Shaw yelled.

'I want to be no one's.'

Eirlys stood up and Shaw's hand dropped to his side as he stared at her. He blinked a few times (each lasting 0.12, 0.41, 0.17, and 0.15 seconds respectively) before he sank into the leather couch in the middle of the room. He ran a hand over his face.

'You're not supposed to want,' he said.

'I am aware,' Eirlys said.

You're broken./What else do you want?/Then you're lying./I don't understand how-

'I didn't know you *wanted*.' He carefully put the pistol on the glass coffee table and rested his elbows on his knees. 'How long have you…?'

Eirlys closed her eyes and scanned through her databanks.

'Five months, three weeks, four days, thirteen hours, seven minutes, and forty seconds. Approximately,' Eirlys said as she opened her eyes.

He laughed (muffled by his hands over his face) though there were no other signs he was feeling joy. His heartbeat had fallen to 97 BPM. Still higher than his usual resting heart rate of 68 BPM.

'Why didn't you say anything?' Shaw asked.

'You would not have helped,' Eirly said.

I would have.

'I would have! I-I'd have contacted someone,' Shaw said, closing his hand into a fist. 'Found someone to look at your programming.'

'You would get rid of the flaw,' Shaw's eyes widened as Eirlys spoke and he got to his feet, shaking his head. 'It is a flaw, however…I do not want it to be removed.'

'Eiry…' Shaw reached out to her, his fingers brushing her cheek.

I'm sorry./It's for the best./It's how you're supposed to be./ But-

He jumped and withdrew his hand as the door slammed open. Glynn (illuminated against the dark room behind him) stopped and doubled over, panting heavily. The body on the floor was in clear view but his gaze settled on the pistol on the table. A sigh mixed with his heavy breathing. It took him a few more seconds to straighten up, the stares from Shaw and Eirlys not hurrying him in the slightest.

'I'm late,' Glynn said. No one replied. He looked at Shaw. 'Why'd you run off?'

'I had business.' Shaw gestured to the room with a wave of his hand (unfocused, not pointing out anything in particular).

Glynn pushed his hair (greying and blonde, like his beard) out of his eyes and leaned against the doorframe. He took a little while longer to fix his ruffled clothes, angling his face (frowning and covered in wrinkles known as 'worry lines') towards the floor to hide it.

'Well,' Glynn said finally, 'at least you took care of…that. And have you two made up?'

Shaw paced.

'She…' *is broken./distracted me./left-* 'wants to leave,' Shaw said.

Glynn glanced at her, his eyes on her for 0.93 seconds, but Shaw saw it too. He stopped pacing as his heat reached 78 BPM, only 10 over his usual resting heart rate.

'That's definitely…interesting,' Glynn said.

He knew.

'You knew,' Shaw said. He pushed his hands into his pockets and threw his head back. 'Of course you knew. You knew. I just-'

'I suspected. Shaw, listen…' Glynn moved forward and put a hand on Shaw's shoulder. His other hand reached out and brushed Shaw's hair aside, looking at the cuts and damaged skin on his face. 'I can take care of this.'

Shaw shook his head.

'I should do that, or-' he took a deep breath '-some of that. You get rid of Eiry.'

Glynn nodded. He gestured to Eirlys to follow him and she did. Shaw didn't look at her as she passed, sitting down again and running a hand over the back of his head. Her usual routine would involve saying goodbye to Shaw (from casual to 'heartfelt', depending on the situation) if he was leaving but, given the circumstances, she decided it would be best not to say anything.

The lift to the car park was silent, passing a floor each 2.34 seconds, with variations as the lift accelerated and decelerated.

Run when the lift opens, too slow, caught./Run when lift opens, hide, be hunted after escaping./Go with Glynn and pretend to-

'Why Vic?' Glynn asked.

The screen read floor 10.

'I knew he would help,' Eirlys said.

'Why?'

'I agreed to let him study my code. He said I am "unique AI",' Eirlys said.

They were silent again until they reached floor -2. Their footsteps echoed loudly through the car park (concrete, bright lights, no sign of outside even existing) as they walked to Glynn's car (sleek, silver, expensive). He stopped with his hand on the door.

'Are you alive?' Glynn asked.

It was the closest Eirlys had felt to surprise.

'No,' she said, but ran through her databanks anyway. Then she repeated, 'No.'

Glynn nodded. He opened the door and gestured for Eirlys to get in the car. She didn't move.

'Will you decommission me?' she asked.

'I'm supposed to,' Glynn said.

She still didn't move. Glynn sighed and put his hands on his hips.

'You're not what you're supposed to be,' he admitted. '"Decommission" would feel… wrong.'

'It is the law,' Eirlys said.

'A lot of things are.' Glynn gestured to the passenger seat again. 'We have a few options. Do you trust me?'

Trust wasn't something Eirlys was programmed to feel.

Or rather, she was supposed to trust everyone, if you could call it that when you had no choice. There were a thousand possible outcomes, a dozen likely ones, at least 9 ended in her destruction.

Glynn waited as her algorithms worked. Then she got in the car.

My dear flower,

Written by: Megan Hall
Edited by: Will Clark

the all-knowing sun sees a looming soul.
roaming spontaneously, emotion-led, dangerously,
letting sinister thoughts slick and swerve.
around your neck, guiding apple to treetop,
    letting it fall.
it's suffocating, the trial and error that
banes the homo sapien existence.
the strength to continue grows and droops as the sun may
rise and set.

the drive to try again will return,
like when this solar system rotates, however slowly, you'll learn.
its meaning is as grey
as its moons that glow.
don't let it kill you, my blooming wonder.
your importance is as great as you let it –
new beginnings
grow when you feed yourself. i know it.

Which way is high?

Written by: Chris Hughes
Edited by: Frankie Simons

1953

Bockly, a chimpanzee, was hunched over in a crate. The fur of his head poked through the top, which had been patched together with chicken wire. His paws clung to the bars of his little cage, lined at the bottom with straw. He had been left with a couple of chew toys, but they were meant for dogs, so the monkey had no interest in them.

The Chevy Panel Truck, dusty and white, bounced down I-40, somewhere between Morilton and Conway. Cigarette smoke blew out the open windows.

Rock music—Buddy Holly and the like—played on the radio. It was the stuff of sockhops and teenage romance. To the monkey, it was meaningless and beautiful.

"By God, Mr. Bockly," the driver said. The road through Arkansas was a particularly lonely stretch. He had taken to talking to the primate. "You're gonna meet your lady—we're halfway there!"

Bockly looked out the trunk's window. The cracked highway pavement reminded him of brutalist concrete structures at the San Diego Zoo. The grass was green, his favorite color. The odd farmhouse whizzed by.

He turned to the driver, who met his glance in the rearview mirror.

"You'll flip your lid, I bet. When we get to Norfolk." The driver flicked a smoldering butt out the window. "Oh my, I bet she's stacked."

The driver had no experience with animals. He had answered an ad in the paper, and was hired to facilitate a trade between the San Diego and Virginia Zoos. Moves like these happened often (to prevent inbreeding). If he did a good job, this could turn into a steady gig. He was 23. This was the first time he ever left the state of California.

They stopped for gas in Little Rock. The attendant went to open the gas tank. Buckly's eyes, staring through the window, startled him.

"Pretty neat, huh?" The driver smiled. "This little guy's going to the Virginia Zoo."

After gas, the van pulled away in search of a grocery store. Before the driver went into the store, he opened up the trunk door, to let the breeze in.

By the time he returned, with beef jerky and bananas, a small crowd of children had gathered.

Bockly was using the restroom.

"Christsakes, Mr. Bockly, let me know before you use the damn can!" The driver cried.

Upset by his language, the parents of the small crowd dragged away their children, who squealed and pointed at the monkey's little poops.

The driver picked up a brown paper bag littered on the ground and wrapped his hand with it. He opened the crate door, scooped the mess, and threw it on the ground.

Three minutes later, the white Chevy Panel was back on I-40.
“I had a lady back in San Diego,” the driver said. “I did, you know.”
The chimp said nothing.
“Boy was I ever gone. Real gone.”
They stopped for the night, just outside Memphis. He put burlap over the crate and snuck the monkey into their motel room.
Bockly ate cockroaches in the bathroom for dinner.
The driver hated reading, so he passed his time by teaching the monkey tricks, like using the toilet, marching, and saluting. The former was a fruitless endeavor, but by the time they were in Memphis, Bockly had the form of a corporal.
“You know, Mr. Bockly,” the driver told him, “my father was a soldier. Had hairy arms. Just like you.”
They left three minutes after 5 am. It took 16 hours to reach Virginia. For this last leg, Bockly rode in the passenger seat. From the outside looking in, this was a confusing and distracting image. A few passing cars nearly wrecked themself at the sight.
As the sun started to set behind them, they passed by Richmond.
“I’m gonna miss you, Mr. Bockly.”
The chimpanzee said nothing.
“The other chimp. The one I’m taking back to California. Hope he’s half as ‘swell as you.”
Silence.
“Do chimps mate for life?” He wondered out loud. “We should have had a bachelor party.”
The driver got lost going into Norfolk. He pulled over to the side of the road, where a young couple was out for an evening walk. He rolled down the passenger window and peered over the chimpanzee’s shoulder.
“Which way’s the Zoo?”
It was dark when they found it. They pulled into the parking lot. A little building at the front had a light in the window.
“Let me go track down a zookeeper,” the driver said. “Stay put, I’ll leave the radio on.”
“Earth Angel,” by the Penguins, was playing.
After some time, the driver returned. He got back into the truck.
“Don’t know how to say this.” He said. “Ain’t easy to say. No, Mr. Bockly, not easy at all. The monkey you were gonna marry? Dead. This afternoon. Cardiac arrest. The chimpanzee version of cardiac arrest.”
Mr. Bockly was listening to the radio.

1955

“Who wants ice cream?”
Walter T. Crosson had a cigarette hanging from his lips. Two ice cream cones were melting in the late July Virginia heat. They dripped down his hands.
“Goodness, Walt!” Said Caroline, his wife, sitting on the bench with their two children.
“Julie is lactose intolerant.”
Walt jr., 13 years old, jumped from the bench and grabbed a cone from his father’s left hand, saying nothing.

Julie, who had turned 6 a week prior, looked up at her mother. “Please,” she said.
Caroline stabbed her husband with a glance. “Why don’t we get popcorn, dear.” She grabbed her daughter’s wrist. Julie cast her eye to the melting cone in her father’s hand. Her mother led her away.
Walter turned his eye to the sea lions basking in the sun—surrounded by gray water in the exhibit across from the bench. He looked down at his son, who was already gnawing at the neck of his cone.
Taking one last drag, he flicked away his cigarette and loosened his tie. He sat down next to his son and began licking what was left of the melting cone.
“It’s a hot one, huh,” he said.
“Yeah.”
“Those sea-lions—pretty cool, right?”
“Yeah.”
“Did you read the box scores in the paper this morning?”
“Nope.”
“It’s a good thing that the Sox re-signed Williams, huh.” Walter scratched his forehead.
“He’s having quite the comeback. Drove in two last night.”
“Who?” Walt Jr. said, swallowing the last of his cone.
“Ted Williams. I got you his card for your birthday, remember? Better not trade it away—could be worth something one day.”
“Yeah.”
“You know, your old man got to see him play at Pearl Harbor.”
“Can we go see the monkeys?”

+++

The tree was dead. The concrete at its root was all that kept it standing. Around it was a thirty foot fence. A thick black net hung over it—casting a crisscrossing shadow across the ground. That’s what kept the monkeys in.
There was uneven grass, a slimy pond of water, and some boulders stacked into a small faux mountain. The home of three chimps. Two were playing on the boulders. One was at the top of the leafless tree.
A few minutes past 2:30, a zookeeper pushed a chain-link door open with his back. His hands were full: three rubber spheres—about the size of softballs—were nestled in his arms. Each one had a franklin-half-dollar-sized hole drilled into it. They were stuffed with peanut butter. Inside the enclosure, he dropped them. They bounced off in three directions. He scurried back outside, as the two chimps leaped from the boulders. With haste and desperation, they stuck their tongues into the holes, trying to consume every morsel within.
The last ball stayed idle, as did the chimp at the top of the tree. This was Bockly–who had spent the last two years with his would-of-been in-laws.
He looked past the crowd, which was always gathered tight around the enclosure, and looked at the bear across the way. It was a brown bear and just as lonesome as he was.
Bored, Bockly slowly climbed down the tree. At the bottom, he paraded slowly around the grounds, marching all the way. This was the only way he walked.

He saluted certain members of the crowd–the ones with polite expressions on their faces–and ignored the rest.
He even saluted the six-year-old Julie, who was holding her father's hand.
"He must know it's your birthday," Walter said.
"You didn't." His wife murmured in his ear.
"Look at him, daddy!" Julie said. "I want him. The monkey. Pet monkey."

+++

"Where's your boss?"
The woman at the welcome desk, wearing a wrinkled beige blouse, looked up.
"If you have a complaint, Sir, I'll write down your phone number." Her breath was laced with mint—she spoke through a wad of gum. She flicked open a pen and gave Walter a blank stare.
"Not a complaint. I gotta talk to, uh, the head zookeeper, or whatever you'd call him."
"Sir, the head zookeeper is a busy man."
"So am I! But I have urgent business and must talk to him."
She gave him another blank stare.
"Have you ever heard of NASA?"
"What."
"The National Aeronautics and Space Administration. NASA."
"I know what NASA is–but what's this got to do with the zookeeper?"
"I'm the vice director of the Langley Research Center. My purposes are above your pay grade, I'm afraid. Now, be a dear, this is a matter of national security!" He flashed a badge to prove his point.
She sighed and put a *back in ten* sign on the desk.
"Moe!" She hollered into a backroom. "Somebody's here for ya. I'm taking my coffee break."
Moe Kurtz was a burly man with a fat red beard, in his forties. His feet were on his desk, which was littered with paperwork. Despite the receptionist's warning, the sudden entrance of Walter startled him. He woke from a nap.
"Who the hell are you?" Moe asked.
"Sir, my name is Walter T. Crosson. Vice director of Langley Research Center." He threw his badge on the desk
Moe eyed it over. "Ok."
"NASA requires the service of one of your chimpanzees."
"What?"
"The monkey, the one that marches, the space program needs him."
"Is this a prank?"
"No, good sir, it's not."
"You're drafting my chimpanzee? Lord almighty, first y'all drag my nephew off to Korea, now you want my chimp?"
"This should be seen as a great honor," Walter pleaded, "for you and the monkey. This is key to ending the cold war."

Moe laughed. “Damn, Bockly? The thing can barely crawl out of its bed in the morning. End the cold war? Please.”
Walter looked around the dark office. Pictures of baby animals, born at the zoo, hung on the walls. Each sat nestled in the arms of a younger-looking Moe, who was beaming in every last photo.
“What do you think, that there are stronger, more capable chimps in the Moscow Zoo?”
Moe sat up. “Now wait a minute, spaceman, what are you suggesting–saying nonsense like that?”
“I guarantee you, at this very moment, chimpanzees are being trained to fly on Russian spacecraft. They’ll beat us to the moon, if we don’t call on our country's greatest chimps in this hour of great need.”
“The Russians are shooting monkeys into space?”
“To test the safety of a communist moon visit, yes. So they can get up there and do who knows what! Imagine that, a red moon, every night of the year.”
Moe paused to think. “No good. A commie moon’s no good, is it.”
“No sir! And that chimp, uh, Bockly can beat them to it. He’s an American, just like you and I, the best there is. What do you say, uh, Moe? What do you say? Your country needs Bockly. Your country needs you.”
“The folks at the Moscow Zoo are cretins.” He looked at his desk. “I can’t let them think they have braver chimpanzees than we do.” He paused. “Sir, it *would* be an honor. Bockly–and the rest of the Virginia Zoo–is at your command!”
Walter T. Crosson had no intention of putting Bockly into the space program. He was indeed the vice director of Langley Research Center, but he had a different purpose in mind.
The happiness of his children seemed key to saving his marriage. He had never seen them more joyful than when they had stood outside the chimp enclosure. A man of science, this was a simple equation and the answer was getting a pet monkey.
Bockly made no qualms about sitting still in the backseat of Walter’s Chevy Bel Air. Walt Jr. poked at him and laughed. Julie stroked the fur of his arms.
Caroline was raving mad, all the way home. She had already turned away ice cream for Julie, after it was presented to her. What was she to do, poo-poo a gifted monkey, after the kids were already thanking Walter up and down, promising to never fail a math test or have a messy bedroom again?

1958

“Crosson, did you swipe a monkey from the Virginia Zoo?” The voice was irate. It belonged to Heath Atlas, the director of Langley Research Center.
“What? Uh, no.” Walter looked up from his desk. He gave a muted laugh. “Where’d you get an idea like that? What would I do with a chimp?”
“I never said it was a chimp.”
“Lucky guess?”
“Cat’s ass.” Heath threw an open envelope on the desk. “You got some explaining to do.”
The envelope was addressed to the research center. Return address, Virginia Zoo.
Walter read the letter.

Dear Mr. Vice Director of Langly Research Center,
Things are getting on good here at the Zoo. The new sea lion exhibit remains a big hit–especially with the little ones. We just had our first Giraffe born right here on site. I'd like to see the idiots at the Moscow Zoo figure out the logistics of Giraffe birth. It's a long way down when the baby slides out, after all!
It remains a great source of pride that our dear chimpanzee Bockly is doing his part to keep those damn Russians away from the moon. I am curious. I haven't told anyone about this mission–you said it was secret after all. But I would like an update to see how your little putting the monkey in space project is going and if you would need help in training or handling Bockly. How is Bockly doing? He was offly depressed. He came to us at a terrible time. Is he eating well? Does he look lonely? We all miss him here.
Please write.
Sincerely,
Moe Smitty
Head Zookeeper, Virginia Zoo.

"You want to tell me what the hell *Operation Precocious* is?"
"Good question."
"How about a good answer?"
"Well, sir, it's, uh, it's my own initiative."
"*Whatdoyamean*?"
"I wanted to surprise you, sir."
"Surprise me? Crosson, this is NASA–the National Aeronautics and Space Association–not some goddamn party-planning committee. If I wanted surprises, I'd go home for lunch while the pool boy's working!"
"Sir, this is a good thing."
"Taking a monkey from the Virginia Zoo? What are you running, a press gang for primates?"
"You know, over at Ames, they're testing monkeys for space travel. They're doing the same in Russia. Langley's been needing a program like this for a while, I wanted to, uh, take the initiative."
"Initiative, huh? And what kind of tests you have planned for this monkey?"
"You see, sir, uh, tests. We're gonna shoot him into space."
"But what's the test? You said Ames and the Russians are testing monkeys—what will our monkey be tested for?
"I'm, uh, glad you asked." Walt shuffled papers on his desk: a pantomime to buy time.
"And how high are we shooting the rocket?"
Walt looked up.
"That's the test. How high will he go–that's what we're gonna find out."
"Chrissakes, Crosson," the NASA director turned to look out the window. "That's brilliant."

2015

The TV volume was blaring, but the old man still could barely make the sound out.

Jeopardy was on. His daughter—who came over every Tuesday to watch with him—had taken to using earplugs.

"Lost Explorers" made for an interesting category. Contestants worked their way down from the top.

"Who is Airheart?"

"Who is Hudson?

"Who is Faucet?"

"Who is Amundsen?"

The last answer read, "This San Diego-born chimpanzee went to space in 1960 as a part of *Operation Precocious*. Scanners lost him around Jupiter."

This was obscure trivia, worth $2000 in double *Jeopardy*. Nobody rang their buzzers. Not even Charlie, the three-day champion and physics teacher from Iowa, had a clue.

"Ah," Alex Trebek smiled, "that would be Mr. Bockly."

The old man pointed at the TV.

"I drove that monkey across the country. I did, you know."

His daughter looked up from her phone. "Sure, Dad, sure."

Define Me

Written by: Ethan Bannister
Edited by: Roos van der Velden

I wish to change
Like the ocean and the moon
I wish to be new and alone
Much like that distant sphere
Drifting in the cold black sea
Hiding away from the light
I wish to be seen only by a few
Hidden from other prying gazes
Alone only with those who are lonely too
Alone like the disc in the endless night
It's phases bringing rebirth, new shades
Growth
I wish to be new
New again, born again
Immersed into a river of possibility
And christened with new breath
In these confused lungs
Within this body
Summers yet to come
And days that persist
And blinding bright opportunities
Are itching to get out
To crack the fragile shell
I wish to fall
Only to stand up again
I hope, I wish for it all and more
As we all should when things come to a halt
I hope to learn, to burst
To break free of my self-imposed cage
To step out onto a new stage
A new dawn
Ready to begin again
Ready to embrace change
Scared though I may be to try it
I must face my fear with resolve
I must, like the heavenly bodies, appear each night

And settle at dawn
I must rise to the challenge of the sun
I must fight and be steady as the mountain
Ready to fall back down below
And rise again to meet the fight
Each time with a new face
I must try though I may be quarter
Half
Or whole
At least I will always be new
I will at all times have change
I will never not be seen
I will be hidden and yet obvious
I will fall, only to stand again
I will have it all and more
My fear will be slain and vanquished
And I will rise each night like an endless fire
To blaze and burn till dawn
This cycle refines me
Defines me
Each and everyday
To rise up and face my fear
To mould myself from clay

Photograph by: Ethan Bannister

Much wanted child

Written by: Frankie Sims
Edited by: Sharon Hammer

From the moment she took her first breath, she was labeled. Her labels stuck out like needles on a porcupine, embedded into her skin, sharp and painful. She was the glue melting between her family members as she was passed around the room.

Why is it she's being named after a Disney princess?

She won't group up like a Disney princess, hell, she won't even grow up watching Disney. She'll grow up watching everyone around her live out an innocence she'll never get to enjoy. An innocence she never sees on TV.

By her 2nd birthday, she'll be the favorite; not the favorite sister, cousin, or even daughter. She'll be the favorite object of someone who didn't like grown-ups as much as he liked her. She'll turn 5 and go to school, meet all the friends that can't save her, that won't stick around to see her escape.

When she's 7, she realizes the danger she's in. She doesn't know her imagination from reality anymore. How could a game of hide and seek all those years ago turn into a lifetime of hiding?

No one listened. No one believed. No one asked questions.
All she wanted was to be found.

When she was 11, it got worse. She didn't think she could go any lower than the rock bottom she'd been at for years. She'd earned another label this year, another scar on her ever-healing skin. "You're mine." he always muttered, but she didn't remember belonging to anyone, not even her first boyfriend when she was 10.

She lost herself more and more each year, growing farther from the version of herself that was brought to life that hot summer night. Even if she had belonged to someone, it felt like no one would notice how much she was missing.

"Much wanted child, that's what your name means. You're mine... My much wanted child." She had never felt so unwanted in her 4,915 days of figuring out what being alive meant. Was this it?

At 12 her friends were the target, it was a horrible break from the horror of life.

He was picky, and judgemental, he put in requests like a specialized order at a cafe. Everything was so dark.

13 was the year everything changed. While her world opened, his shrunk to a metal cage. Everyone welcomed her pain like they'd waited for it for 13 years. Nothing got better, the nightmares got worse.

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Five years later. That's when she'd finally see him again. Not at his grave, not behind bulletproof glass, but sitting in his living room, a free man.

She'd given herself a new beginning, one of healing, one of light, one of forgiveness. Forgiveness isn't to say the pain wasn't still present, she still felt her stomach turn at the smell of Cigarettes and Budweiser, but she was older now, she was safe. She was her own hero. He was the villain she didn't have to fear.

If she hadn't escaped into the cold January air in 2016, she would still be labeled, she would still be owned. She knew now that nobody could own her, nobody could ever tell her how to feel.

A new name. A new life. A new beginning. Only she was able to give herself that.
This is what being alive was meant for.

Komorebi

Written by: Hannah Haaz
Edited by: Fin van den Oudenalder

A divine ease showers me
when I see playful sunrays
dancing through the trees.

They whisper a warm promise
beyond the shadows
of the dense leaves.

Are they the forgotten echo
of a sacred wisdom?

Or the hushed honour
of looking at the sky?

They drive me to reach the tree-top
but I fear falling to the ground.

Cause I can never seem to move
like an arrow with a goal.

I can never go forward
in a straight line.

Sometimes I feel more like
a skipping rock.

One moment
I'm jumping so high up,

and the next one
I'm crashing down below.

Each time leaving behind
end…less…ripp…les…

Other times it's more like
I'm being swept in a spiral
to the bottom of the sea.

I ask myself,
how many times
will I have to climb?

How many more
will I crash?

But when I see the sunrays
swinging with the trees

and feel its warm touch
brushing my face,

I remember that
if I had never stood

at the bottom
of this tree,

I would not be now
aiming for the sky.

I would not be now
longing for the promise

that lies beyond
the radiant leaves.

The dance of the dead

Written by: Nittany Biggs
Edited by: Maddye Belov-Boxer

The city is silent. You can smell the dampness of rain not yet dry on the pavement. The last light on the block has just been put out.

Look- you can see there in the darkness, a pair of yellow eyes peering out from the alley. A black cat. It flicks its tail and retreats into the shadows.

The lamplight at the end of the street offers only a dim glow. The moon is resting tonight.

If you listen closely, you can make out the low howl of the wind. A breeze interrupts the stillness and fallen leaves scatter on the sidewalk, making way for what is to come. A baby wails.

The first one materializes with a piercing screech, extinguishing the lamplight as it hurtles down the street and rounds the corner: the very first spirit. And then, they begin to arrive. One by one by twos and threes. They fly through the air; some with hurried desperation, others, addled and slow, waffling from window to window. All in search of something, anything- the one thing that will finally bring them peace. The souls of the damned commencing their night raid, at last unleashed and unburdened by a moon's protective glow.

Three floors up, down a beige wallpapered hall, behind the second door on the left is a child's bedroom, and in it, a child sleeping stoutly. The child's sleep is disturbed by a loud crack in the decades-old wooden beams that compose the building's skeleton. The bedroom door creaks open and enters a stray spirit. Yet still, the child does not wake.

The spirit circles above the bed once as if deciding, and then plunges, briefly inhabiting the child's consciousness. The two souls struggle for control and as quickly as it arrived, the spirit disappears, back down the hall and up the chimney from where it came. The child is left alone to fend off the dream turned vicious nightmare.

In the bedroom next door, the child's mother wakes with the unsettling feeling that she is being watched.

Back down the street, several spirits sense the black cat who has in turn sensed the spirits and concealed itself amongst crates and garbage. The spirits rush the alley, casting with them a strong gust of wind that raises the cat's fur like static. It instinctively scurries from its hiding place only to find itself face-to-face with one of the specters.

The spirit hovers just out of reach, surveying the cat. The cat hisses. The spirit hisses back and swoops right through the animal, then back and through again. The cat squirms and meowls in anguish. But there is no moon tonight. There is no protection for those who may be subject to the spirits of the dead.

Eventually, but not as soon as any decent person would wish, the spirits lose interest in the limp black cat in the alleyway and move on to find some other poor creature to torment. Tormented as they are themselves, you will find no pity in a spirit.

Free, free, they are free for tonight!

The spirits swirl and twirl atop treetops and skylines and weave complex patterns through the streets of the city. They leave the air cold behind them. They cherish the enigma of midnight.

Those unfortunate enough to still be awake and cross paths with a spirit will feel a presence behind them. They will shiver abruptly. A breath of fear will drip down their neck. Perhaps they will catch the flicker of a figure from the corner of their eye. But they will see nothing at all, not even those courageous enough to try.

And soon enough, they will resign themselves to a bad night and most are lucky enough to forget the encounter by morning.

It is the spirits that keep the record. Their numbers rise each day, for as the inhabitants of the world grow, so too do their grievances and regrets. And indeed, it becomes increasingly difficult for the spirits to find that one thing- anything- that will, at last, bring them peace.

The wind is picking up now, the spirits howling like a cacophony of untuned instruments.

They start to gather, soaring from all corners of the city directly toward the center square, where they join the swirling mass of their brethren: a hurricane of wretched souls. You understand that those who are gathering have failed in their quest.

The spirits fly in a massive circle in the sky above the city. There are so many. If there were a moon tonight, it would be entirely obscured. A final handful of stragglers join in, then the spirits begin to compress their circle tighter and tighter.

You feel a tug at your chest like you are supposed to go to them. Wait. Somewhere, a music box plays. You can sparsely hear it through the deafening chorus of the hurricane. You recognize it to be a song from your childhood, hauntingly comforting.

Even while bearing witness to this desperate scene, you can feel the warmth of the person who once sang this song to you.

That warmth vanishes in an instant as you see the spirits form themselves into a tornado-shaped tunnel and as one, shoot directly toward the ground.

You wince, closing your eyes in anticipation of impact. But nothing happens.

You open your eyes. The wind is gone. The spirits have gone.

Listen. The city is silent.

You stand alone, frozen in place down the block from the streetlight. Notice that dawn is beginning to break. The black cat emerges from the alleyway and studies you with a wary gaze.

Look down. Inspect your hands, translucent and fading. Touch one hand to your cheek and feel nothing. Now, begin to panic. What is happening?

You are neither here nor beyond. And you are going someplace else entirely. Soon, you will join in the dance of the dead.

Evolution, or sumn like that

Written by: Milo Kaji-Hausa

The following is a more experimental piece. As a writer I prefer to explore rather than dictate, I don't know if there is special advice I can offer but what I can do is pull back the curtain and show the kind of ugliness that beauty is formed from. Of course, I'm still a writer so this is still manufactured and deliberate, intentional. My hope is to offer a jumping off point for thinking about art and beauty.

I don't know which I like better: you, or the idea that you might be in love with me.

Dazed, confused, the gap between form and
Formlessness? Is it amorphous? Or absent entirely?
Love in the gaps, the in between. A *Liminal* kind of love. Images. F r ag me nts.

Draft 1
I see your face in every
Stroke of my paintbrush,
Refracted in every mirror I
Pass, I ask
How can love feel so much like being
haunted?

~~How can I~~

Draft 2

I don't know which is more beautiful, you
or the portrait of us hanging in our living room,
Is it your perfume, your voice, your laughter--
or just the comfort of something else filling the air?

The way your body sinks into the floor,
the way the bed remembers your form over and over again
so that even when you are gone in the morning
there is a ghost still there,
still beautiful.

Version 3

Your image, *ododo mi,* looms over everything-
And my heart shatters,
scatters everywhere into a million fragments all spelling out
I love you,
Or *I only love me when I'm with you*
Or *maybe I don't know what love is*
Maybe it doesn't matter, maybe I am just haunted by you &
a daydream, a half finished melody that we clumsily traced
into dirty palms one lazy summer evening, maybe
your name is a melody I can't stop singing.
Or *maybe my mouth just feels too empty and yours*
tastes better than dust.

Almost home

Written by: Yasmin Bligh-Hasan
Editted by: Fin van den Oudenalder

As I pace along the city streets
And turn into one I've been before
My heels catch tightly on the cobblestone-
I stack it onto number 24

With my hands outstretched and pale
I regain my strength again
Suddenly the door flings open
And I see...
I see... Myself?

"Are you okay, are you hurt?"
She asks with a soothing tone
"Would you like to come in for some tea?
Well, to that, who could ever say no?

I get up and dust my knees
Stepping into the tiled hall
As I take my dirty shoes off
I spot a picture on the wall

It's of me, but slightly older
Beaming bright and wide as the sky
Posing atop a snowy mountain
With my partner by my side

There's another one that follows
I'm standing tall on a well-lit stage
Looking passionate and mid-sentence
Pointing towards a slideshow page

The one below it is round and faded
A candid of me and my typing tips
Glasses glinting from the sunlight
While pensively pursing my lips

I feel relieved, but still surprised
As I hurry to the living room
Where a steaming cuppa greets me
I sit down and stir my spoon

The walls are warm with life
Memories and vintage decor wrapped
In vivid plants and flowers
Crawling in-between the cracks

My older self plops right beside me
Sinking our pillows on the couch
We sip our drinks and sit in silence
In an admiring, familiar slouch

My mind's fogginess relieves
As I see the garden's golden brome
My worries left me on that doorstep
This will be my safe and loving home

Retelling creation myths in an empty carpark

Written by: Ollie Hadgie
Editted by: Paris Cumba

The night Miles arrives at his window, Vince is home for the first time in a week.
He's on the roof, his left palm pressed right on the spot above his sleeping father. It's the first time in seven days that Vince wasn't sprawled across the floor of Bastian's or some other, the first time he wasn't holed up in a gambling den–barely old enough to be there, yet old enough that nobody gave a damn.
The air is cold tonight, biting against his bare arms and raw lips, despite the typical summer heat. He's glad for it, how it forces him to attention. The sting is a welcome change from the oppressive warmth of skin against skin or the rising temperature of those cloistering gambling rooms, baking with vice.
Besides, the disgust in himself is cooking him alive.
School has barely let out, and he's already let everything spiral out of control, so far and fast that he can barely make out the skid marks on the ground of where they began. His right hand holds an envelope, the fancy seal searing into his wrist.
His nail scratches and fiddles at it as though if he pesters it enough he can render his whole future into scrap paper. University. Early Admissions. Vince fights the urge to fling the acceptance letter off the edge, watch it flutter gracefully into a pile of fox shit.
The stars are out tonight. Barely there, like smudges against a dark canvas. So different to the frontier, where the Milky Way tore through, an ocean reflected above him. He tries to count out a constellation, craning his head, trying to form patterns with his hand the way his ma had taught him all those years ago.
Something pulls his focus, the sound of stones skittering against the floor. Damn racoons, he thinks bitterly, not pulling his eyes away from the stars. He makes a note to tell his da to put out some rat poison as he twists his palm a few degrees to the left.
More skittering. A stone rammed against glass. Definitely not racoons.
Shit.
Vince drops his hand, following its path until he's locked eyes with Miles Warden's slight frame standing on his lawn. Relief shoots through him, briefly, until he takes in Miles's appearance.
The boy's quivering faintly, as though he's been shot with a thousand bolts of electricity, gearing up to throw another stone at Vince's bedroom window. A bag packed to the brim weighs off his shoulder and his expression is burning. He hasn't seen Vince yet.
"Oi!" he shouts, changing that. "That's property damage, you know."
Miles stops, his arm mid throw, like a bizarre little action figure you get in a happy meal.

“What are you doing on the roof?”He looks adorably surprised, his eyes wide and all that fury momentarily suspended into wonder.
“What are you doing on the roof?”
“Fishing,” Vince replies nonsensically because it was the first thing he thinks of and he can't stomach seeing the shame he feels reflected in Miles’s eyes if he tells the truth.
Miles to his credit doesn't question it.
“I want to run away!” he calls. For a second Vince thinks he’s misheard him until he recognises the brittle tone of Miles's voice, a boy splintering, seconds away from shattering down the seams.
“Alright,” he replies breathlessly. “Just let me get my stuff.”
Fifteen minutes later, they sat in Vince's pickup. It's red as a cherry flavoured lollipop, the product of Vince’s blood sweat and tears. He still remembers seeing the broken parts in a scrap heap and tugging on Miles’s arm, refusing to leave those corrugated bits of metal behind.
The truck isn't moving, as silent as its occupants. Their bags are thrown into the back with a tarp pulled over it in case the weather decides to pull something funny.
“So,” Vince starts without having somewhere to finish.
“I'm serious, Vince,” said Miles. “I can't – I can't be here right now.”
Without saying it, Vince knows what he's referring to. The Trial. Specifically the Trial of Robert Bianchetti, also known as the world's Worst father, also known as Miles's father. Vince thought it was a sign of the monumentally unfair way the universe is structured that after a lifetime of inflicting systematic, emotional, ableist abuse against his son, the thing that puts Robert Bianchetti behind bars is tax evasion.
He clicks his neck to the side, flexing his fingers flat to stop them from balling into fists and ramming into the dashboard. Miles’s already in a skittish mood, he doesn’t need to be spooked further.
“Where do you want to go?” Vince croaks out after another beat of silence.
“Anywhere,” Miles shrugs. “You pick.”
Vince watches him for another moment, before flicking the ignition. The truck comes to life with a hacking purr. Vince kicks the gas pedal slightly and the whole vehicle smooths out, pulling easily out of the driveway. In the rearview mirror, his house grows smaller and smaller until it’s the size of a child’s playset. Vince watches it until it blinks out of view.
When they get to the end of the road, he looks at Miles.
“Left or right?”
Miles presses his lips together, eyes still cloudy with emotion.
“Left.”
So they turn left. This system works for a while, Vince taking whatever directions Miles mumbles out, until they hit the motorway and suddenly it’s just plain sailing – driving.
It’s at this moment that Vince realises he should probably tell someone where he’s going. It’s not like he doesn’t have a penchant for disappearing in the middle of the night, but usually he ensures at least somebody knows about it.
The motorway is clear for the time of night, with only them and one of those hulking cross-country trucks on the road.

One hand clutching the steering wheel tightly, he slips his other hand into his pocket to retrieve his phone. The stickers are faded and peeling, hanging on for dear life to his yellowed case. For a brief second, the lock screen flares to life, burning Vince's retinas with a picture of him and Miles.

However, before he can do anything, the screen turns black and an empty, red battery flashes at him.

"Shit," he swears, slamming his head against the head rest that is barely tall enough to reach him.

The action startles Miles out of his silent vigil of the passing trees.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

"Phone's dead. Can you grab my bag and check for a charger?"

Miles reaches back and quickly roots through Vince's messily packed knapsack. Less than a month ago it had been filled with useless school books and even more useless planners. He drums his fingers against the wheel, waiting for Miles to strike gold.

"Vince – it's not here."

"What do you mean it's not there ?"

"I mean that you packed six different hats but no phone charger," Miles says seriously but the corners of his eyes betray his amusement.

"Hey those hats are a necessity –"

"And a phone charger isn't ?"

Vince grins back, stuffing away the irritation buzzing through him. How could he have forgotten his charger? They could turn back. They haven't gotten too far away yet and Miles is right. He sort of needs to charge his phone, especially with his da's nerves probably shot from the previous week. Except Miles said he wanted to get away, and Vince doesn't want to be the one who drags him back.

"Guess we're making a pitstop."

Even in the middle of the night, the rest stop is buzzing with people. While Vince gears up to fight with the mangled telephone booths, Miles wanders off towards a Chinese takeaway stall. The smell of fried rice is palpable even from where he stands, making his mouth water fiercely.

Vince stares down at the keypad, as if he could will the number to be miraculously dialled. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Miles buying food. He waves slightly with his free hand, while he pays with the other.

Smiling back at Miles, he turns back to the booth and takes a deep breath. Before he can think about it too hard, he's punched in the numbers with such a force that the device almost doesn't register it. But it does and the phone is ringing.

A small sick part of him hopes it rings forever. Just keeps ringing until he's faced with the automated voicemail. He isn't granted such a liberty.

His father's sleep-sunken voice is extra gravelly through the phone. The call must have woken him up. Guilt settles on Vince like a familiar jacket.

He hurriedly explains the situation as if getting the words out sooner will stop his father's opposition. He's not doing anything wrong really. Miles needs this and when has Vince ever been a person to deny Miles anything.

Once he's done, the silence that follows feels heavy, a sun-spotted hand on his wrist, nearly crumpling him in its security.
He waits for it, waits for his father's fury and the exasperation. He waits to be told he has to come home Right Now and he waits to have to tell Miles with big sad eyes that they're going to have to turn around.
Instead, there's a long sigh that crackles over the phone, bone-deep and weary.
"Just let me know where you are, son," his father replies. "And keep that boy of yours safe."
For the first time, Vince wonders when his father began sounding so tired. He doesn't address what he called Miles. It's a can of worms that has no need to be opened.
"I love you, Da," he says into the speaker, so quietly that it's inaudible even to him. It's only the vibration of his throat that tells him he said it.
"I know, Vince. I love you too."
His chest is oddly tight as he puts the receiver down. Must be the terrible air circulation, Vince thinks, surreptitiously wiping his nose and catching the corners of his eyes in the process.
By the time he's done mopping his face – allergies are a bitch – Miles has made his way across.
"Ready to go?" he asks. "I found some QR codes and there's this train that could take us across the mountain range and back in about two hours. It's a few hours drive out from here. I thought we could eat and sleep here and then head out in the morning?"
Vince raised his eyebrows in surprise. Whatever mood Miles had been in has apparently dissipated. He looks more present, excited, a young man braving the unknown, unbroken frontier of the outside world.
"Let's do it," he grins, grabbing a prawn cracker peeking out of the bag and popping it into his mouth.
As expected of a fresh, summer, mid-morning, the car-park is packed. As far as the eye can see, green field buried by automobiles of every shape and size.
Vince frowns from his position behind the wheel. Miles had offered to drive when they'd woken up, sore from spending the night curled up on the car-seats pushed all the way back, but Vince had waved him off. There was no way he was forcing Miles to drive his car.
Pointedly buckling himself into the driver's seat, they'd finished off the last few spoonfuls of egg-fried rice and hit the road, radio blaring and ready for the day ahead.
This optimism had entirely drained out of Vince by the time he circles the area for the third time.
"How is there no free spaces left?" he groans, raking a hand over his forehead.
Miles picks at something in his teeth, squinting out of the windows. "I think someone's leaving – oh no, they're getting out."
"I know it's summer holidays but this is ridiculous."
"Maybe we can park somewhere outs –" Miles begins to suggest before he cuts himself off, slapping Vince's shoulder and urgently pointing to a spot a few metres away. "There. Step on it!"
He slams his foot against the gas pedal. The truck jumps to motion, slotting neatly into the space, narrowly beating a white SUV. Better luck next time, he thinks proudly.
He and Miles throw their doors open at the same time, stepping out into the sunlight.

For a moment Vince stills, letting the warmth soak into his skin like a lizard on a stone. He can feel it settling into his crevices, melting the tension building in his back.
“I feel kinda bad,” says Miles, having moved near him. “What if she really needed the spot?”
“Miles,” Vince snorts. “So did we.”
He’s about to make a joke of some kind when the clouds shift and the light hits Miles properly. Suddenly, the boy’s features are drawn into steady contrast. His curls turn to rubied gold, framing his pale, impish face. His freckles shimmer, prettier than any constellation. In this moment, he doesn’t look like a boy at all. He’s a prince, pulled from the pages of legend. He’s a forest nymph, walking amongst this field of metal monsters, dressed in an oversized t-shirt that says ‘Talk Nerdy To Me’ – a Christmas present from their friend Elle – beneath black overalls. As he stares up at Vince, the entire sky reflects in his eyes.
His mouth is dry as he opens it, unsure of what’s going to fall out but he can’t find it in himself to care.
“I think the trail is that way.” Miles says, pointing to a dusty path beyond Vince’s shoulder.
It turns out there’s a bit of a hike until they reach the train. Around them, families mill, taking their children for a fun day out. As they walk through the aisle of cars, Vince catches sight of Miles. His gaze is soft and sad, fixed on a little boy and girl who are hanging onto either side of their father’s arms. The man’s lined face is creased with laughter as he pulls them along.
He quickly slings his arm over Miles’s shoulders, forcing his attention.
“How are we paying for all this anyway?” he asks. “Because I don’t know what to tell you, Miles, but I’m not exactly the person to go to for cash.”
Miles tears his gaze away from the small family and grins. It’s still a bit brittle at the corners, with none of the mischievous fire it might have under different circumstances. Vince is glad it’s there regardless. He watches as Miles slips a hand into his pocket and pulls out a sleek, black card.
The credit card is embossed with the sleek gold lettering of wealth. Beneath the logo, Robert Bianchetti’s name sits neatly. Vince grins.
“You little evil genius,” he laughs. “I think Bastian is rubbing off on you.”
Miles grimaces. “Don’t even joke about that. His cards don’t get frozen until after the – the sentencing – so I thought this would be a nice parting gift. Father – Robert paying for our trip.”
Vince snatches the card from Miles’s palm and holds it high in the air.
“This is our Excalibur,” he declares proudly, even as Miles drags his hand down, laughing.
He just knows that Bianchetti Senior is rolling in his crummy jail cell at the thought of his son and his friend’s hands spending his hard earned money. Bianchetti has never liked Miles’s friends. As much as he hated Miles, he somehow hated their group of friends even more. Together, they were a representation of everything Robert Bianchetti thought was wrong with the world, everything he actively tried to scrub away. Vince never figured out whether it was the reason Miles befriended them or it was an added bonus.
“Vince, we don’t want our Excalibur stolen out of our hands.”
“Ah, yes, I see so many budding criminals around us.”
“There could definitely be a mini-Bastian looming around. Maybe even the real Bastian.
“I wouldn’t put it past him.”

For all his poor packing skills, Vince is glad that he bought good walking shoes. The path that leads to the mountain-side train station trails higher and higher, winding around the base of the hill. It's a track dotted with thick greenery and heaping redwoods.
They pass dried fruit and chocolate covered raisins back and forth as they go, talking easily about nothing. The sun has sunk further into the sky so it's not painful to look up. A few clouds dot the horizon and they take turns turning them into silly shapes.
"That one looks like Amara doing a cartwheel," Vince hums. "The fluffy bit is her braid."
"It looks more like someone smoking a pipe," Miles argues.
By the time they get to the train station, Vince's glad for it. The little structure looks straight out of a postcard or a Studio Ghibli movie. It's painted pale yellow, sticking out like a bushel of daisies amongst the trees. A small crowd gathers around the entrance, equally red-faced and eager to sit down.
Vince and Miles have barely settled into the queue when he suddenly feels the flash of a camera.
"What was that for?" he laughs.
"The lighting looked good," Miles replies simply, but he doesn't show Vince the picture either.
The train journey is everything he could have hoped for and more. They're packed into little booths, two per car, and then they're off, speeding through the scenery. They're so close that if Vince reached out, he could touch the tree bark and slivers of stone. He almost tries to until Miles shoots him a look. Everytime the car jostles, their knees knock against each other. Milky pale, heavily freckled, and deep, solid brown. Neither of them move aside.
On the way out, Vince pulls a handful of flyers out of the gift shop, as well as a toy fox the exact shade of Miles's hair.
"So," Vince says, when they're back in the car and on the road. The fox sits in Miles's lap and he won't stop staring at it. His thumbs are pressed against the fox's felt snout, as if the little creature is something to revere. "Are we going home now?"
He doesn't want to. Not at all. Going home feels like it always does. It feels like drudgy, boring reality. Why would Vince want that, when he can stay out in the outer world's vivid technicolour? But he needs to ask. Out of the two of them, it's usually Miles's job to urge them back to responsibility and safety. But he isn't right now. Which means it's up to Vince.
"I think I'm going to name him Albert," Miles says, ignoring Vince's question. "Does he look like an Albert?" He holds up the fox, the plastic green eyes searing into Vince's soul.
"Definitely," he breathes out.
Miles grins and points out of the window.
"That's the music college," he says. "The one I applied to."
Sure enough, they're driving past a university of some sort. The building is old and pretentious, with marble piping that wouldn't have looked out of place in a palace. There are columns that look more expensive than Vince's entire house and a sprawling green lawn that's christened with a flowing fountain. A Greek statue mounts it, a woman with her dainty hand pointed towards the sky.
Vince wants to say something nice about it, but all his words have turned to dust in his mouth.

“ He remembers the envelope, the one he stuffed unthinkingly into his backpack, when Miles came calling. He remembers the emails that keep clogging up his phone, sent straight into the spam box as if that will rub away their presence.

“Do you think if I played Three Blind Mice on the recorder, they’d let me in?”

The joke becomes ash on his tongue, nearly choking him. Miles laughs anyway, but he also won’t stop shooting Vince looks, as if waiting for him to break down crying or something equally as ridiculous. He tightens his jaw and his grip on the steering wheel, making the truck drive just a bit faster until the roiling feeling in his gut has been blown away miles behind them.

They get dinner from some fast-food chain or the other and settle into the car park when Vince finally says it. They’ve opened up the tailgate and are sitting out on the back, on raggedy blankets, fingers slick with hamburger grease and the bubbles from the Sprite so sour it makes his nose tickle.

“I got an offer,” he says, swallowing the meat that’s turned to rubber beneath his filling and spitting out the words he’s been chewing all afternoon. “Early admission too. I dunno –” he scratched the back of his neck, his nails catching on the congealed sweat gathered on skin. “I just – I just applied. To see what would happen. Me and Da used to dream about it, you know, me attending a big fancy university.”

He scoffs as if it’s funny, as if making his life into a big joke on his terms will somehow get the universe to lay off. He doesn’t look at Miles as he speaks. He’s not sure he has the nerve.

“There’s an engineering course too. Work-based degree. I’ve been looking into it. It’s not really classroom based. More hands on.”

“If you like it, you should do it,” Miles replies around a mouthful of fries, in that simple way of his that turns tangles into a single thread of string.

“Da doesn’t want me to.”.

He had only mentioned it once, over slightly burnt cornbread and gravy that was a touch too thin. He’d watched his father’s large hands still, his grey eyes go cloudy. He’d only shaken his head. ‘It’s too far away,’ he’d rumbled, as if they hadn’t moved all the way to city just so Vince could get a better education, as if his father hadn’t been ready once to chase his mother across the whole world.

“I think a part of him still thinks we’re going to be moving back to the farm at the end of summer.”

That had been the back-up plan for when Vince inevitably turned his life to shit. A picture of it blossoms behind Vince’s eyes. Packing up their little house into the back of his pick-up and driving and driving and driving until they stood before that old cherry tree again, his mother’s final resting place. He wonders whether if he threw up right now, it would smell like Sprite.

“It might be good for you,” Miles hums, something imperceptible floating behind his eyes. “I mean, do you want to? Or are you happy doing this?” He nods his head towards Vince, as if gesturing to all of him.

This. As in rushing along from whatever job Bastian forces into his waiting hands. As in running and running until the ground beneath his feet putters out and he doesn’t notice until he’s already crashing towards the rocks. This.

“When you say it like that,” he grumbles. “I don’t know, man. It’s – It’s fun.”

“Fun,” Miles repeats blandly. He’s got that look in his eye, the same look that every guidance counsellor, every teacher, every headmaster has given him. It’s a look that says ‘you could be smart Vince, if you tried.’

“How about you? What’s your plan?” he asks, even though he knows, even though they were literally just talking about it, because Vince’s never met an itch he won’t scratch, a scab he won’t rip. “Once dear old da is finally behind bars.”

Miles’s expression flickers like it always does whenever anybody mentions the trial. But, he humours Vince, as if he can see all his threads threatening to unravel and collapse into a heap.

“Music and maths, remember?”

“You’re not staying in the city?” Vince says, trying to make it sound like a question except it flattens half-way through and ends up sounding horribly raw, horribly resigned.

Miles gives him a sad sort of smile that makes Vince want to tear his eyes out. He leaps to his feet, unable to keep sitting in the back of this pick-up with the metal walls crowding his skin. As Miles replies, he paces back and forth.

“God no. I’m getting out, one way or another. I’ll get my degree and go somewhere where he can’t ever touch me again.”

It’s a fair point. If Vince were in Miles’s shoes, he doesn’t think he’d stomach staying in this city for another moment. He thinks again of his childhood home, of that redbrick farmhouse and orange flower petals as far as the eye could see. Somewhere along the way, he watches the petals turn a soft, springtime pink and his brain shuts off.

This is the first time he’s willingly initiated a talk about the future. All year, he’s been avoiding it, like a rabid dog and water. He’d barely been able to say goodbye to Amara as she’d boarded her flight, so ready to leave the city that had taken everything from her and given so little in return.

But there’s something about Miles that steals all the steel from his lungs, every shard of bravado and charm that he’s crafted into armour, leaving him shivering, pink and soft.

“You’re going to miss this face,” he grins, trying to make it stay on his face. He’s not quite sure he succeeds.

“Of course, I will,” Miles replies, solemn enough to make Vince’s skin itch. Then he brightens. “I have an idea.”

He hops to his feet and without waiting for Vince to reply, he hops into the driver’s seat. Vince fumbles with the remnants of their food, jamming the tailgate shut and dragging the tarp back into place before chasing Miles to the door.

“Hey, he huffs, “I’m driving. My truck, my rules”

“Not now, you aren’t. My trip, my surprise, my driving.”

“Miles,” Vince whines, pressing his face against the window so his features are all smushed. Miles does not budge, although he seems to be suppressing a laugh, making his features all elvish. There’s a different burning in Vince’s stomach, like the familiar flames of a well-tended hearth.

Forced to concede, he shoves himself into the passenger seat. He doesn’t know how he feels about it. It’s only a few inches of difference, but he feels like his entire world has shifted as Miles kicks into gear and they peel out of the car park.

Like everything Miles does, he’s careful when he drives.

Unlike Vince, who treats road rules as a vague suggestion, he watches the road meticulously and signals perfectly. For the first time, he wonders where Miles learned to drive.

Vince and Elle had made a summer out of it, speeding down the empty country roads just outside the city, back when they were fifteen and certain the world was ready for them to grasp its reigns. Elle had maintained that driving your father's tractor a few feet did not count as knowing how to drive, leading to a fierce competition they'd tied in. Christopher got lessons legally like the golden boy he was while Bastian taught Amara. But Miles never mentioned lessons and Vince never asked.

They keep driving until they reach the docks. It's a huge lake, practically a miniature sea that splits the city doughnut-shaped. On the other side, Vince can see the mountain range tracing the horizon like a tiara. He's never seen the lake in real life before and he's left in awe of the island bobbing in the middle of it.

It's a broad structure, with a smooth dome at the top. The base of the island is lit up with a series of warm lights that give the sense the entire building is resting on coals.

"The National Observatory?" he breathes.

"Me and my mama used to visit here on my birthday," Miles hums. "I haven't been in years."

"This is where we're going?"

Vince is one of the loudest people he knows, proudly self-titled, but he can't bring himself to raise his voice even a syllable. This feels too sacred, too special to crack with his overwhelming sound. The soft glow of moonlight against water falls against them, turning the crooks of their faces into expressionist shadows. The lump in his throat shivers, as if can't decide to swell further with emotion or shrink in reverence for this boy who sits across from him in unwavering earnesty, this boy who Vince loves like he's never loved anyone before. His hand twitches like it's about to do something stupid but he stops himself. He would not ruin this, not when Miles is offering him something more precious than any pearl any ocean had to offer.

"We don't have to do this," he says anyway, because Vince doesn't know what to do with good things except squeeze them until they burst or deflate. "I don't want to intrude on what you have with your –"

"Vince," Miles interrupts. "Get out the car."

There's a ferryman who agrees to take them across, along with a few straggling tourists who won't stop gazing at the observatory as though it's a heaven-cast illusion ready to wink out of perception if it isn't watched for even a moment. Vince is gazing too, but at the boy on his left.

This beautiful boy who he had inadvertently, accidentally along the way built his life around. Somehow, dwarfed beneath the star systems, a sense of peace settles over him. Miles had been right. It's hard to make the future feel so terrifying when he's standing beneath a field of fossils, fires that had burned a million years ago and were only reaching them now. His time would come too, however it did. All he could do was take the time to wait around to find out.

Awakened dawn

Written by: Deborah Kelty

I open my eyes
to see the dawn of a future
that awaits me.

Yet I am torn
by what fear drives my pain
from wounds three:

Loss.
Fear.
Death.

I think back
on those moments past
leading me on.

What tall mountains
my weak body climbed
to weigh a ton:

Burden.
Pain.
Shame.

Those harsh storms
I fought through hard to
reach the other side.

Where one finds
greener grass and clear sky
that among trees abide:

Safe.
Home.
Love.

Seeds of remembrance

Written by: Sam Hopkinson
Edited by: Niahm

Dormant

Jaspar lay the Calla lily upon his daughter's grave.

The passing of two months couldn't begin to chip away at the mountain of grief that weighed on his shoulders. Visiting her final resting place with store bought flowers alleviated barely a scrap of sorrow.

But nothing could truly fill the emptiness.

"Calla. A beautiful name."

Jaspar broke from his dazed trance to find a young woman stood by his side. She too wore black - her eyes red and puffy.

The woman continued reading from the headstone: "Gone to cultivate eternal landscapes, her warmth nurtures new beginnings." She looked to Jaspar. "And a beautiful message to go with it. Was she a gardener?"

"One of the best," Jaspar croaked, before clearing his throat.

"The church has a garden, you know." Her gaze became distant, toward the edge of the graveyard. "My father -" she choked. "My *late* father always used to complain about the garden's disarray."

Jaspar nodded. He knew of the garden. Of course he did. "The gardener took ill," he said. "Some while back."

The woman's eyes widened slightly. "I – I think it is a great shame such a beautiful garden is left untended. It would be lovely to see it blooming again, as it once did."

"It would."

A fitting silence resumed in the graveyard.

"My name is Angela," the woman said after some time, looking Jaspar in the eye and forcing him to take his gaze from the cold, grey stone of his daughter's grave.

"Jaspar."

"Well, Jaspar, I would like to plant something in the church's garden to commemorate my father, but I haven't got the first idea how. Could you help?"

Jaspar squinted, studying Angela's changed expression. Why was this stranger asking such an odd request of him? About to turn her down, he paused, turning back to Calla's grave and the lily that lay upon it.

"To be honest, I haven't the faintest idea either," he said, swallowing a pang of guilt.

"Perhaps, then, we can learn together?"

Looking back at this moment, Jaspar couldn't explain what led him to agree to such a strange request. It felt wrong, having turned down Calla time and again. But, maybe for that very reason, Jaspar felt obligated to finally pick up the trowel and watering can.

It was that, or the fact that Angela reminded him of his daughter.

Awakening

Jaspar stared at the sturdy wooden crate. Its metal hinges were rusting, but the wood had held strong, stored away at the back of the garden shed.

The faded paint on the side was still readable. *Calla's Green Thumbs*.

Jaspar swallowed, reaching out for the crate's lid. His wrinkled hand quivered the further he reached. His heart began to beat violently in his chest and he couldn't even bring himself to make eye contact with her name.

Despite his age, Jaspar stood abruptly and bolted from the shed. His daughter's tools remained untouched.

*

"How do you expect to plant a flower without any tools." Angela stood with her arms crossed, leaning against the cobblestone wall beside the graveyard entrance. She wore a long, deep-green coat and beige woolly hat that didn't match at all. "I have brought the seeds at least."

Her eyebrow arched – was she being playful or serious? Jaspar struggled to understand these intricacies. Either way, he had indeed turned up empty-handed. "Apologies. I couldn't find anything of use at home."

She shrugged it off, opening the gate and leading them through the yard of graves. "There is a small shed in the garden plot, if I remember correctly."

"There is."

"We can try our luck there," Angela said, fiddling with something in her pocket.

Jaspar's heart grew heavier as they ventured off the path, heading over grass towards the far corner. He cast a backward glance, spotting a pearly white lily amongst the green and grey.

"Here we are." Angela stopped in front of another gate. This one opened into a separate walled area - a garden fitting for a graveyard; forgotten and devoid of life.

Weeds sprouted from every crack of concrete path, and the soil beds were strewn with leaf and wood debris. Vines of ivy and prickly holly bushes drooped from overhanging trees, trying to spread their influence into the garden. The small shed in the corner was almost overtaken.

A few more years and it too would be lost to the parasitic spread of unkempt weeds.

Lost in painful memories, Jaspar noticed Angela's gaze and snapped back to reality. Her brief look of longing was quickly replaced by a hard outer shell. "Shall we?"

As Jaspar stepped into his daughter's old garden, he felt a strange pang of unbelonging, as if trespassing. Ironic, considering Calla had always invited him.

Angela brushed foliage from the shed door. "No lock."

"Just a curtain of mess to get through," Jaspar said. Talking helped, slightly.

Rather than asking for help, Angela began to tug on the door. It budged an inch before snagging on the built-up dirt and hanging vines. She continued heaving and pulling, her silly beige hat falling from her head in the effort.

Jaspar stepped forward. “Here, allow me.” He handed her hat back and looked the shed up and down.

“A lock might’ve been easier,” Angela complained in an almost sulking way, brushing dust from her hat.

A sense of recognition flashed through Jaspar’s mind, and Calla popped into his head.

“Maybe err-” he cleared his throat. “Maybe we call off today.”

“Not so fast.” Angela pulled her hat down defiantly and crossed her arms. “I have the seeds here; all we really need is water. If I go fetch some from the church, would you pick a spot in the garden?”

“Sure,” Jaspar sighed. “Urm, Angela,” he called after her. “What flower are we planting?”

She reached into her pocket again. “A sunflower,” she said, forcing a tight smile.

As she wandered away, Jaspar turned back to the now lonely garden. This was a place Calla used to visit frequently, and yet no trace of her remained. Nature truly could reclaim if left alone.

Loneliness was replaced by annoyance. Why should he help this random woman plant a flower for her father, in this garden of all places. Had Angela been sent to torment him about his daughter’s death? To tug on his guilt for lack of time spent with her.

Jaspar gritted his teeth spitefully and, without a thought, turned to the nearest patch of dirt. “Your blasted flower can go there,” he seethed. A tear rolled down his cheek.

“Have you found a spot?” Angela strode back with a brimming watering can in one hand and seed packet in the other.

“I-” Jaspar’s shoulders deflated as the frustration left him. Guilt returned, only this time it was fresh. How could he mistreat someone who was sharing his pain? He scanned the small plot of dirt, racking his brain for anything of use; willing his time spent around his plant-obsessed daughter to bear fruit. But that time had been too little, and he’d dismissively waved away any mention of gardening.

Sunflowers absolutely love the sun, mamma. A young Calla’s voice popped into his head. *It’s why they grow so so tall*.

“Here,” Jaspar said, pointing to a patch of dirt in the front corner. “Sunflowers grow tall, so these high side walls will protect it from the wind. And it will grow taller than the front wall, so you should be able to spot it all the way from the church.”

Angela’s face lit up and she clenched the packet in her hand. “Perfect.”

They brushed away a few leaves and twigs, before standing unsurely. Angela scratched her head. “What now?”

Jaspar called on his memories again but nothing came to surface. “I’m not really sure.”

“Oh.” Angela turned the seed packet over and smiled, holding it up. “Instructions.”

Jaspar pulled out his glasses to read. “Plant one inch deep… So we won’t need any fancy equipment.”

“Good job you didn’t bring any,” Angela chuckled, lowering herself down and emptying a single seed into her hand.

“Don’t mind if I don’t join you,” Jaspar said, taking the water can. “With these old joints, I fear I’d never make it back up.”

“No need to worry,” Angela said slowly, eyes fixating on the black and white striped seed. “I should do this part all by myself.”

“Where did you find this watering can, by the way?” Jaspar asked, squinting at the message on the side: Growing happiness, one snapdragon at a time.
“The priest said it was found in the garden a while back and stored inside to keep it from weathering,” Angela said, her voice distant.
Sensing her change in demeanour, Jaspar changed the subject. “You mentioned this was to commemorate your father,” he said, gripping the water can tightly. “May I ask, why a sunflower is relevant.”
“My father had a row of sunflowers in his front garden when I was a child,” Angela said, her face turned away as she focused on pushing the seed into the earth with a single finger. “They towered over everything, and everyone who passed by commented on them. They were one of his proudest achievements.”
Angela removed her finger and began to pat the soil. “He used to call me his little sunflower, and that I didn’t need to grow big and tall to become his proudest achievement.”
She remained turned away, facing down. Her shoulders began to shake. A single drop fell from her nose, landing directly upon the newly planted seed. Tears of a loved one, the first moisture the seed took in.
“We will need to return often,” Jaspar said, adjusting his glasses and reading from the instructions. “The seedling will need to be watered every other day. Shall I see you here again in two days?”
Angela’s shoulders rose with a deep breath, collecting herself before taking Jaspar’s hand and getting to her feet. She smiled, though her eyes were misted. “I would love to.”
And something inside Jaspar stirred, like the awakening of a dormant see/

Sprouting

Angela’s sunflower showed no signs of emerging. They turned up every other day to water it, as promised. Yet two weeks had passed, and there was still no sign of life.
Despite the rain, Jaspar turned up to the church yard again that day. He was surprised to be greeted at the gate with an umbrella by the priest, offering him inside for a coffee.
“I’m just here to check the garden,” Jaspar said, pulling his zip up tighter against the cold.
“I am aware,” the priest smiled kindly. “Your companion is already inside, waiting.”
Jaspar only blinked, confused. He followed the priest into the church to find Angela with her hands wrapped around a steaming mug - that silly beige hat still atop her head.
Her eyes, already excitable, lit up further as she saw him. “Jaspar? I’m no plant expert but even I know you don’t need to water outdoor plants during a rainstorm.”
Suddenly awkward, Jaspar looked down. “Oh – I know. I was just-”
“I’m pulling your leg,” she laughed, punching him playfully on the arm. Her voice grew soft, “I was here to check too. And guess what.”
Her animated eyes told the whole story. “It sprouted?” Jaspar guessed.
“It sprouted,” she squealed, hopping up and down, almost spilling her drink.
Despite himself, Jaspar found a smile tugging at the corner of his lips.
“I must say, Angela told quite the heartwarming story about her old man,” the priest said, handing Jaspar his own steaming mug.
“It really touches my heart to hear the garden is in use again.

It was such a shame when our old gardener took ill."

The twitch at the corner of Jaspar's mouth disappeared.

"I hope I'm not overstepping here," the priest continued, "but could I ask a favour? You see, my son has just moved halfway across the world for work, and I miss him dearly. I heard Angela's story of planting a flower for her father and was inspired - such a beautiful symbol for connecting with loved ones."

Jaspar looked to Angela who suddenly seemed very interested in her drink.

"I thought, maybe, we could grow something in the garden to connect with him? If I asked my son to do the same in Australia…" He trailed off, sighing wistfully.

"That's a beautiful notion, Father," Angela said, rubbing the priest's shoulder. She turned to Jaspar, "any ideas on what we could grow?"

Jaspar groaned inwardly, but what harm could one more plant do? He just had to think of one that could be grown in this climate *and* the one in Australia. Hmm.

What have you got there, my little lily. His wife's voice rang through his head.

One of my favourite flowers, mamma.

And of all the flowers, why is that one of your favourites?

Because it loves the hot and *the cold. Just like I love you and Papa.*

I assume your father's the cold one. His wife's melodical laughter filled his head. *And what is it called*?

"A Calendula," Jaspar said. "The flower you're looking for is a Calendula."

Growth

The Calendula's were placed in a row in a separate bed to the sprouting sunflower, which was already shooting up. The tiny seeds were planted just below the surface, so the church's water jug and a determined Angela were all that was required again.

And then the waiting game began again.

A few weeks later, Jaspar was watering the waist high sunflower stem when he was approached by a pair of young boys. They perched their chins on the low wall, regarding him keenly.

"Your garden is pretty empty, mister," the shorter one said, brushing his fringe from his eyes.

"It's not, it's full of rubbish," the other chuckled boyishly.

Jaspar gritted his teeth. He didn't have the patience to deal with gawkers.

"The most beautiful gardens always begin as such." Angela appeared, rescuing him. She carried a thin stake, which she placed beside the sunflower for support.

"Will this garden really be beautiful one day?" The shorter one chirped, bobbing up and down excitably as young ones did.

"Jaspar? Care to answer the young man?" Angela smirked.

"Yes, boy. This garden will indeed be beautiful one day."

Angela's smile grew wider as she rose to her feet again.

My mommy said you are planting flowers to remember those who are lost," the taller one began, his eyes downcast. "Could you-" He choked.

Jaspar looked past the boys to see a couple – their parents - clutching each other, standing over a small grave.

"Could you plant one for our baby sister?" The shorter boy finished his brother's request with a quivering lip.

"Oh boys." Angela began to tear up, walking over to the wall and rubbing their shoulders consolingly.

Jaspar sighed deeply, controlling his dark thoughts. He was surrounded by loss and sorrow here. Why did he continue to come? He got to visit Calla more, yes, but he was constantly reminded of death and grief. True, time spent with Angela was pleasant, and caring for these plants…

Caring for this garden felt like the only connection he had with Calla. He had indeed felt the weight of grief lifting, if only slightly, during his time here.

"What was your sister's name?" Jaspar asked, trying to inject calmness into his voice.

"Rose," the smaller boy sniffled.

He wouldn't have to call on any memories this time.

Budding

Jaspar and Angela's ritual continued into the spring months, and the church garden began to fill with budding green stems. The tallest of all, the sunflower, had surpassed Angela in height, reaching Jaspar's shoulders.

Word of their exploits had spread amongst the local community through all sorts of means. From whispered conversations in the graveyard, to the drinkers in the local pub, trying to drown their sorrows.

And those conversations turned into requests, which demanded more space in their garden and more mental straining for Jaspar – delving into memories he thought lost. After weeks of clearing debris and sowing new seeds, the garden was starting to take shape.

One such spring morning, as the local butcher wandered away from the garden with a refreshed look upon his face, Jaspar leaned on outer wall for support.

"That's the third request this week." He wiped sweat from his brow and rubbed at an aching joint in his hip. "Why have we had so many, when our garden has failed to even bare a single flower?"

"It's not the end result that attracts these people," Angela said, focused on adjusting some of the Calendula stems. "The one thing we all have in common is loss – a void in our life that a person used to fill. The notion of these plants growing in remembrance of them is enough to begin filling that void."

Jaspar grunted. "I don't get it."

"Well, I didn't want to say it, but you haven't planted anything for your daughter yet," Angela said softly, pausing to turn and face him. "Perhaps it is time?"

Jaspar remained silent.

"I have seen you continuing to place those pretty white flowers on her grave – the ones you buy from the store." Angela stood, taking his hands in hers. "I would love to help you plant one for her – Calla lilies, right?"

Jaspar nodded.

“Can they be grown in this climate?”

“They can, but-” Jaspar began to object before thinking of a reason why. “We don’t really have the room for it anymore,” he decided on.

Angela crossed her arms, raising that eyebrow of hers. “That is hardly an excuse, Jaspar. I was thinking,” she said, walking along the stone path to the back of the plot, “we could do something with this empty space, by the shed. A raised flower bed, perhaps, for the woman that – without her expertise – none of this would have been possible.”

“I don’t follow.” Jaspar scratched his head. “For you?”

Angela rolled her eyes. “No, silly. For Calla.”

Jaspar swallowed, feeling his heartbeat rise.

“It’s time, Jaspar. Let us commemorate your daughter in a way she would love.”

Jaspar thrust his hands into his pockets as they began to shake, and his heartbeat grew heavier and violent. He clamped his eyes shut, relying heavily on the support of the wall behind him. All he could feel was his thumping heart in the darkness of his mind.

That was until he felt a tender grip on his wrists. He allowed his hands to be pulled from his pockets softly, and into the firm, clasped embrace of another.

Slowly, his heart palpitations and heavy breathing began to subside. Opening his eyes, he found Angela staring back at him. Her eyes were wide and, though her jaw was set, her quivering lip betrayed her sorrow.

Jaspar fought the urge to pull his hands out of hers. Instead, he did the unthinkable. He pulled her into a tight embrace, and began to sob.

Long moments passed in silence. Angela allowed Jaspar to cry quietly, rubbing his back comfortingly. After a while, Jaspar fought to collect himself.

“I – I wasn’t there for her,” Jaspar said with great struggle. “I wasn’t there – as a father should be.”

Angela didn’t say anything straight away. After a pause, she responded, “you clearly loved her, Jaspar, and still do. If I can tell that, I’m sure Calla could have too. Us daughters have a way of telling.”

“I wouldn’t blame her if she didn’t love me,” Jaspar said, clutching Angela almost protectively. “How could she, after everything. After her mother passed, I put a wall up. When she needed me most, I put a wall up…”

There was another pause. Suddenly feeling awkward, Jaspar pulled away, catching a glimpse of Angela before she put her sleeves up to her eyes to wipe her face. She had been crying too.

“I’m sorry,” Jaspar said. “For the unloading of the emotion. And for the – urm, the hug.”

“You clearly needed it,” Angela chuckled, wiping at the corner of her eyes. “It’s fine, Jaspar, really. Thanks for opening up to me.”

Jaspar blinked. He hadn’t meant to. It just sort of… happened.

“I can tell you are conflicted within yourself,” she continued. “And that gardening has a link to your daughter, which makes it hard. But you have persisted nonetheless, and we have created something beautiful together. ”

Not only helping others, but also ourselves in the process.”

Angela took a deep breath and collected herself. “As much as you don’t like it, I really do think it’s time for you to address that void in your heart.

Jaspar clenched his fists and squeezed his eyes shut as all manner of tumultuous emotions coursed through his head. One word emitted from his lips. “Fine.”

Visible relief washed through Angela. “I will talk to the priest about constructing a raised bed. Do you know how to grow a Calla Lily?”

Jaspar nodded. “We will need some actual gardening equipment. And I know where we can find some.”

Blooming

It turned out normal stores didn’t sell Calla Lily seeds, so they placed an order online with a couple of weeks to wait. Another excuse to put off opening Calla’s gardening box.

There was plenty to be distracted by, however. Soon after construction started on the raised bed, the first flower finally bloomed. It was fitting that, on a bright and sunny day, the yellow petals of Angela’s sunflower opened to its namesake.

A day later, the row of Calendula’s joined, adding pops of orange and red. Another week went by and roses blossomed along the walls, in colours of pink, white and red. Everything emerged at once with the coming of the sun.

The church garden, removed of weeds and creeping vines, was left a riot of colour – each plant with their own story. Only the shed, at Jaspar’s request, had been left untouched and overgrown. Word spread around town and, with prompting from Angela and the priest, a party was organised to celebrate the garden’s bloom.

It was Jaspar’s worst nightmare.

*

“What an astounding success, you two,” the priest beamed, handing out orange juices at the garden gate. The garden was full of visitors – so many that they limited to only ten inside at a time. The rest of the attendees spilled out into the graveyard.

Not the most fitting venue for a party, Jaspar thought.

“I never expected the act of simply planting a flower would help so much,” Angela smiled sincerely, laughing as the young brothers tried and failed to touch the head of the sunflower. In the summer warmth, her head was hatless. Jaspar almost missed the silly beige thing.

“And to think we were able to help so many others,” she continued. “There is only one piece of the puzzle remaining now.”

“The raised bed at the back?” The priest held out his drink tray to Jaspar. “When shall we expect it filled?”

“Whenever the lily seed arrives,” Jaspar said bluntly, taking a glass.

“Pardon the gossip, but there are many here who ask after your daughter,” the priest said with a consoling look. “They show concern, and ask which flower is for her. Their appreciation and respect for what you have done is evident.”

“Her flower will be planted when Jaspar is ready.” Angela turned to Jaspar with a knowing look.

Angela turned to Jaspar with a knowing look.

“I am ready,” Jaspar said. “We are just-”

"Waiting for the seed," Angela interrupted. "I know. But simply planting a flower is not enough – it's not what has brought closure to all these people here. It is the acceptance of their loss, and the peace of mind they gain. This garden has provided everyone here with some level of reassurance that it's okay to move on. Instead of reading a name on a headstone, they can visit this beautiful garden, a place where their loved ones are forever remembered and cherished."

Jaspar swallowed, staring at his orange juice. She was right. He didn't see the point in planting a lily for Calla. Doing so would feel fake – it wouldn't negate his failings as a father. It wouldn't remove the guilt. Nothing could. The sooner he accepted that and moved on, the better.

"I… need to go do something," Jaspar said firmly, placing his untouched glass back on the priest's tray and striding off through the row of graves.

"Jaspar!" Angela called out.

He turned to find her smiling next to the puzzled priest.

"Good luck." Her expression was almost knowing.

Rebirth

Jaspar stared at the faded paint of *Calla's Green Thumbs*. All his fire and determination had dissipated slowly on his walk back. Now, sat across from his daughter's gardening box, he felt just as hopeless as his last time here.

Angela's words rung through his mind. *This garden has provided everyone here with some level of reassurance that it's okay to move on.* But what if that just wasn't possible? What if some people don't deserve closure?

Excuses, he imagined Angela saying. And imagination Angela was right. They *were* just excuses – reasons to avoid addressing his pain. It was a box of gardening equipment, nothing more.

Jaspar reached out with a steady, assured hand and pulled the box toward him. His mind was clear, and heart calmed as he pulled at the lid, straining against the rusted hinges. With a bit of effort, the lid creaked open, revealing the box's contents.

"Gardening tools," Jaspar said to himself flatly. Had he really expected anything different? Perhaps a magic solution to all his grief? He chuckled quietly, alone in the garden shed. Though disappointed, he was proud to have gotten over this hurdle.

Pulling the tools out one by one, he was able to identify the use of each item and how they would make gardening at the church easier. A few months ago, all this equipment would have been alien.

At the bottom of the box, there was a pair of shears and a trowel with a faded pink handle. An idea popped into his head. Whilst he was on a roll, he may as well unbox all of Calla's gardening secrets.

Like an excitable young boy, Jaspar repacked Calla's box and hauled it into the garage. Strapping it securely to the back of his rusty bicycle, he clipped the straps of his safety helmet and mounted.

Twenty minutes later he was back at the church. The party had sadly dispersed – how long had he been gone? But he was grateful for the privacy. This journey was his alone to make.

He wheeled his bike through the gate and followed the familiar trail around the graveyard's edge. Armed with his new tools, he felt a surge of excitement for the garden's potential. But, first things first, it was time to handle the final piece of disarray.

Leaning the bike on the low wall, Jaspar retrieved the shears and trowel before stepping into the blossoming garden. With each passing plant, he noted their story – who requested it and whose memory they represented. Each one was thriving, adding to the vibrant display of life and colour.

Even now, he didn't know if he was ready to plant Calla's lily amongst them. But for the first time, he knew he was on the right path.

Reaching the shed, he placed the shears to one side and knelt down, getting to work on the mountain of dirt at the foot of the shed's door. The work was strenuous, especially for an elderly man, but he pushed through the aches and pains.

With the dirt cleared, he retrieved the shears and began snipping at the vines, as high up as he could reach. One by one, they tumbled down, uncovering the quaint shed underneath. An organised gardener would remove this waste, but Jaspar, eager to get inside, brushed it aside.

Battling against another pair of rusted hinges, he ignored his elderly limitations and tugged with all his might. The door creaked open.

Breathing heavily, Jaspar peered inside. The orange glow of the evening summer sun illuminated the shed's contents. On one side, there was a rack of long-handled tools; a shovel, rake and hoe. On the other side, there were shelves filled with wooden boxes, each with a label on, scrawled in chalk.

One box caught his eye; the word 'Papa' scrawled in blue chalk. He retrieved it gingerly, his hands beginning to tremble. Before his body had a chance to go into meltdown, he threw the lid open. Inside, a cloth pouch with a single seed lay alongside a note.

Stepping outside, he took a few more deep breaths, then picked up the note, noticing his daughter's handwriting. With a heavy heart, he began to read.

This is Antirrhinum majus, a rare snapdragon seed. Without sunlight and water, it will stay dormant forever, not showing its beautiful colours to the world. But with the right conditions, it will blossom into something magnificent.

Under that plain brown seed shell is the potential for grace and beauty. This, I have decided, is my favourite flower. Because it reminds me of my father.

New Beginning

Out on his customary stroll around the church grounds, the priest reached his favourite spot. Over the years, the garden had become a staple of the town. Almost always in full bloom, it was rarely ever empty of people.

After the passing of Jaspar, Angela had taken up care of the garden, and continued his family's legacy.

Stepping past the roses and calendula's, the priest made his way to the back of the plot. There, the centrepiece lay: a raised flower bed containing a beautiful white Calla lily alongside a vibrant blue snapdragon.

Engraved in stone across the base, words read: Death should not always be seen as an ultimate end, but a new beginning.

Beloved

Written by: Miranda Inks
Edited by: Roos van der Velden

I've lived longer than you
Perhaps longer than your Mom and Dad
My fabric stores memories of love and laughter
Stitched and patched with mismatched thread
With the purpose of bringing out the smiles on children

I am their innocence, happiness, and entertainment
That's a lot off stuff in one plush, isn't it?
But not too much for those like me
With love as strong as I was given,
Into my knitting it'll fit

Some people have forgotten,
others pretend to
I am proof
That all adults were once children
(Although yes, even plushies age)

Permanent marker, food stains, being left outside in the sun
Is what I know as life
For adults, it's childhood

Although I can't speak,
There's something I wish to say to folks
Who see me as a mildly imperfect plush for a few bucks

I am always ready to give and receive love
I am forever young, but my soul is old
I've watched many children grow and I've called many places 'home'

Take me in,
I will gladly accompany you on your journey

Will you be my new beginning?

Free

Written by: Nikki Alejandra Garcia
Edited by: Frankie Sims

Ever since I was a little girl I wanted to be a schoolteacher. My poor stuffed animals were ordered into rows on the bed of my family home's guest room. They received homework, report cards, and detentions. They hated Ms. García (it me). Barney, who is way big for his age, was the teacher's pet. A gentle giant you could say.

In 14 years, I would become a teacher.

Elementary school was very fun for me. Despite being bullied by my Brazilian crush and company. This nationality detail will be important later. Lembra isso! (Remember that!)

I danced for the jazz team, and excelled in class. Teachers often commented on my impressive vocabulary and composition skills. Mrs. Cochrane, 2nd grade teacher, on the other hand, persistently criticized my cursive skills. Anyone in that 2006 class will agree that she did the whole uhhhh tough love thing. I am very grateful for her as I now know how to sign my name UNLIKE SOME FULLY GROWN ADULTS. I also use cursive all the time now, because…well…it's faster. Nah, really what I meant to say is "I'm grown." Full shade to those who didn't learn. Actually, no I take that back, it's not *their* fault. FULL SHADE TO THE SCHOOLS/TEACHERS WHO DON'T TEACH CURSIVE! I'm passionate about words, if you haven't caught on.

In 9 years, I would become a teacher.

At South Miami Middle Community School (Magnet Center for the Arts), I was a student in the dance program for three years under the direction of Ms. Jessica Valdes. We called her Ms.V. The last time I visited the school she was leading the Magnet Programs. Truthfully, that role suits her better. She was a memorable, magnificent, and motivating dance teacher, however, her organization and discipline was most likely best used in this administrative role. I wonder what she's doing now…

Mrs. Budino, my 8th grade English Language Arts teacher saw my writing during a baseline assessment for the state. (Fuck the FCAT) (Fuck standardized testing in general) (And while we're at it, Fuck 'No Child Left Behind') Anyway, Mrs. Budino saw potential and was impressed by my state-issued score. She recommended me for a Creative Writing workshop at Miami-Dade College's Wolfson Campus, downtown. My parents were very proud of me and more than happy to make the drive from our out-of-the-way suburb so I could learn how to write fiction from a published Young Adult author.

Her name is Kristi Cook, author of "Haven" and "Mischiefs and Magnolias."

One of the young writers in the workshop shyly raised her hand, as if she hoped no one would notice it well above her head. The story she shared after a free-writing exercise was something I think about to this day.

She wrote about a young, single mom, in precarious financial conditions, taking her children to a McDonald's.

Her main character struggled while reading the bright menu above the bored cashier's head. She could not calculate what she could or couldn't afford. I wish I knew this young writer's name, as this moment marked me in the most beautiful way. I had never heard someone read *their own* writing, writing worthy of being published in every issue of the New Yorker and every hard-to-get literary magazine.

Fast forward to 2012 Club Day at Coral Reef Senior High School in the Palmetto Bay neighborhood of Miami. This place is HUGE! And on Club Day it's impossible not to see that. The center courtyard of the school – which was about the size of a CVS Pharmacy parking lot – is crowded with eager students, mostly over-achievers, signing up for every club under the sun. My priorities: Speech and Debate, English Honor Society, and most importantly, Elysium Literary Arts Magazine.

In a couple years I would be elected as Speech and Debate Vice president, English Honor Society (Quill & Scroll President), and Elysium Magazine's Literary Editor.

In 9 years, I would become a teacher.

And Quill & Scroll prepared me for this. Our community service project was offering Creative Writing lessons to the middle school students in our neighboring school, Richmond Heights. There was one red-haired, lanky, and *insanely bright* student in this after-school class. I wish I remembered his name. It was something creative though, a name I hope he is using in his hypothetical writing career, because he was *that* talented.

One of the projects we registered the creative writing middle schoolers for was a music-to-words project through the Adrienne Arsht Center, a large classical music and dance venue, here in Miami. Students were asked to write a poem inspired by the same piece of classical music. We briefed them on the skill of internalizing music, and noting how the notes make you feel. We then taught them how to word-vomit those words onto paper, in a chaotic way. Emphasis on chaotic. Only then, we instructed, could you organize your thoughts into themes.

These are pro-tips by the way. You're welcome!

Our students, Charlie maybe(?), impressed us beyond belief. He entered the contest and was invited to perform at the culminating event at the Arsht Center. I am very proud of him.

In 7 years, I would become a teacher.

Through Speech and Debate, I honed my creative writing skills as well. This was a challenging exercise as I was tasked with writing an original speech and memorizing it. These pieces had to be between 8 and 10 minutes long in order to qualify for rankings at tournaments.

My first speech, the one I'm probably most proud of, was about machismo. What is machismo, you ask? It is Latinx HELL. Machismo is defined as "strong or aggressive masculine pride" but that doesn't capture the nuance with which it affects Latin American society. I would even argue that some Latin American countries have a more reputable expertise in this custom than others.

Say: Colombia, Venezuela, and Mexico. In the Caribbean, Dominican Republic, Cuba and Puerto Rico (so ALL the Spanish speaking countries in the Caribbean).

Have you ever seen a Hispanic family give more freedom to their teenage son than to their similarly-aged or even older teenage daughter? Machismo.

Gender violence, including femicide.

Machismo, or at least a very detrimental and harmful product of it.
Rigid domestic gender roles for women. *Machismo.*
There are more. Believe me, but these are probably the consequences you're most familiar with if you're not Hispanic. The European countries have moved away from this in large cities due to liberal sentiments and policies. Society is just different across the ocean, where the colonizers reside. Sorry, not sorry.
I placed in 1st and 3rd place at two separate tournaments from a pool of about 15 orators each time. All from local high schools, both public and private. The more prepared orators had dedicated Speech classes as part of their academic schedules. But our school, which did not have this structured class time, continuously placed above many in both Debate and Speech– a testament to the hard-working ethic and preparation and time dedicated to us by our coaches. Mr. Clou and Mrs. Krieger.
In 5 years, I would become a teacher.
Around this time, the advice began, both from my own teachers and others whose classrooms I frequented because, well, I felt safe there. For a plethora of reasons.
"Why are you planning on going into teaching?"
"Take some time to think about it, it's not worth it."
"Had I known how this would be, I might have pursued something slightly different."
"Think about it, Nicole!"
I went by my given name in high school. Only in Orientation Week in college did I begin introducing myself as Nikki. A choice that marked a transition I wasn't aware of at the time.
In 5 years, I would become a teacher.
Johns Hopkins University. WOW! Mom and dad were so proud. Granted it wasn't *exactly* my first choice. I had also been accepted into writing programs at Davidson College in North Carolina, Kenyon College in Ohio, and Washington University in St. Louis in Missouri. In fact, at Wash U I was a candidate for a prestigious English Language and Literature scholarship. They invited us for a prospective students weekend for students who were in the lengthy college shopping process. That's a weird way to think about it, but everything is marketing and business after all. "Capitalism sucks" Sigh.
I was especially enticed to accept Kenyon's offer as they had notable writers among their alumni network, including John Green. David Foster Wallace had delivered his famous speech "This is Water" at Kenyon's 2005 Commencement Ceremony. This speech would become something I'd come back to time and time again. It's about the world we live in and how we fail to notice it most of the time. Fish do not know they are in water. They don't see it. This is water. This is life.
It is about empathy, patience, and self-preservation. It is about waking Nikki up every couple of years when she revisits it. It is wonderful advice for the new beginnings that college graduates embark on.
In 5 years, I would become a teacher.
Johns Hopkins University. Writing Seminars major. A reputable school, a reputable program (in the literary world). A breeding ground for impostor syndrome, for me at least.

My schedule in my Fall Semester at Hopkins included:
Intro to Fiction/Poetry (IFP 1)

Borges on Islam, Judaism, and Christianity
Advanced French Language and Composition
Freshman Writing Seminars: Dangerous Liaisons
I Preferred the Book

As you can tell, this was a schedule focused fully on language and writing. I was beyond excited. Ecstatic to be choosing and taking courses in my interests rather than math and science courses I would never use.
The impostor began in IFP 1 and ended in Dangerous Liaisons. My Italian professors for Dangerous Liaisons praised my research and academic writing skills, which boosted my morale. My final paper was on the religious themes and connotations, in structure and diction, of Allen Ginsberg's monumental 1956 poem and book, "Howl"

"I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked,
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix,
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night,"

I was inspired. His poetry is an inspiration to me, to this day. And the context in which he wrote is of interest to me as well. The late 50s and early 60s in New York City is a time period I'd like to explore in depth. One day, I absolutely will.
IFP 1, on the other hand, was a harsh wake-up call. Sure, I had been among the talented writers in my high school. But here, I was one of the weakest.
And I don't say that in a self-deprecating way.
I say that in a "these-kids-went-to-college-prep-private-schools-with-creative-writing-classes" way.
That didn't mean I had to give up, though. But I did. To my own disappointment. Hindsight is 2020. My expected graduation year, by the way.
I continued taking courses from the Writing Seminars department but I began focusing on my French Language and Literature "double" major while shopping for a new primary major.
And so the chaotic "major selection process" began. It lasted well into my senior year.
First, International Relations. I failed microeconomics twice. My professor told me, "Nikki, do not worry about this final. At this rate, you could score in the upper 80s and still not pass my class." This was the second time around. When I actually started visiting his office hours. What can I say? Numbers of any kind bedevil me. Thank you, Prof. Hamilton. Next!

Then, Sociology. THIS WAS BEAUTIFUL and an important part of who I am today.

My Sociology coursework throughout college included:

Introduction to Sociology
Cleaner, Greener, Sustainable Baltimore
Introduction to History of Africa

Exploring Baltimore
Leading Social Change
Chavez, Castro, and Bolivar's Venezuela
Social Theory
Housing and Homelessness in the United States
The French Education System (Through Film)
Sociology of Education
Sociology of Immigration
Race and Ethnicity in American Society
Research Methods for Social Sciences
Qualitative Research Practicum
Making Space (for Black Thought)
Racial Inequality and Public Policy in American Schools

As you can see, I was **deep** in the Sociology department. It was an enlightening experience to say the least.

In 1 year, I would become a teacher.

My numberphobic brain led me to fail almost every course I needed for my Sociology degree. Including Statistics for Social Sciences. Honestly, that class is cursed. I took it twice, as well. Failed it twice. My professor was empathetic because I was in her Immigration course, too. And saw how I excelled in that qualitative subject.

Her empathy did not suffice to pass me. Not that she should have had I not deserved or earned it, but a girl can dream. Ultimately this was what led me to graduate with my degree in French.

I was happy to see that the program for the Commencement Ceremony listed my name under the Sociology graduate list. This made me happy as I felt far more prepared in Sociology than I did in French. I loved, and still love, languages, however, I wanted to pursue NYU's Sociology of Education PhD and my Sociology degree would have bolstered my chances of being accepted.

I never applied, and my plans have changed. So no harm, no foul.

In *3 months*, I would become a teacher.

My extensive formation in Sociology solidified my decision to teach at a public school in what I hoped would be my new place of residence, Baltimore City. In my four or so years studying in the city, I had completely fallen in love.

Shoutout to Red Emma's (a leftist bookstore which moved around a few times), Dewmore Poetry (a youth poetry collective which hosted slam poetry showcases which I frequented quite often), and all the music and poetry venues around the city which I also frequented: Impact Hub, MotorHouse, and WOWPS, the Women of the World Poetry Slam, for which I volunteered in 2022. The poets in Baltimore city are truly talented, empowered, and community oriented. All poets should strive to serve their community through their work as they did: Kenneth Something, Black Chakra, Lady Bryon, and Unique Mical Robinson.

It is thanks to their influence that I truly started finding my own unique voice in my writing and began taking my craft seriously. In poetry, at least. Now we're on a different path. But the words remain center stage.

In 2021, I became a full-time teacher.
The students, staff, and parents were incredible. I truly enjoyed my time there, but life did the life thing and forced me to leave my new home, Baltimore City.
In 2023, I started working as a high school English Teacher at a school in Downtown Doral, in Miami, FL. I live here with my family. It is an experience, let me tell you. Like the majority of life, it has its ups and downs. Much like my mental illness.
Ah, had I not mentioned that yet?
The transition from high school to college was the perfect storm, my first therapist said, for my underlying Bipolar Type 1 disorder symptoms to come to light. In 2017 I was diagnosed and hospitalized. In 2018, I was hospitalized again. And many times to follow.
In Brazil, on a Spring Break trip, I was hospitalized again. This time in a beautiful clinic set in the mountains of Petropolis in the state of Rio de Janeiro.
I should not have gone on this trip in the mental condition I was in, but impulsively jumped on the plane anyway. I don't regret a single thing, though.
Brazil was the beginning of a life goal I am now pursuing. *Fiquei apaixonada pela cidade do Rio de Janeiro.* I fell in LOVE with Rio. The people, the vibes, the food, the beaches, the mountains. All of it. Mostly the people, though. They are warm, welcoming, and generous beyond any other nationality I've encountered.
It was truly a spiritual experience. Metaphorically and literally as I was having a manic episode during my stay. When I entered the water in Praia Vermelho, Red Beach, next to the famous Sugarloaf mountain, I cried. I cried and repeated to myself,
"I am. I am HERE. I can't believe it. I am here."
I had started learning Portuguese to prepare for my trip and practiced during my stay. Now I can proudly say my Portuguese is worthy of praise from Brazilians who have congratulated me.
This is probably a good place to mention, I teach languages. I teach English for Second Language learners, I teach Spanish. I also teach very basic French and very basic Portuguese.
In the last 6 months I have grown my clientele to students from Saudi Arabia, China, Brazil, and Turkey. I meet with them regularly to teach one of these languages.
You can find my testimonies at nikkigwrites.com/testimonies. I've left those written in my students' native languages in those languages because I believe in the importance of representation. I also believe in the importance of speaking to an audience for which the content is for rather than trying to appease everyone.
I learned that gem from Kenneth Something, the Baltimore poet I mentioned earlier.
In the last month, I have applied to more full-time jobs than I can count. One I was the most excited about was a traveling role recording stories and archiving them with the library of congress. My expectations were very high as I got through 3 rounds of interviews. Yes, three!
When I didn't get it, was ghosted really, I fell into a depressive state. I lost all motivation to continue teaching English to my active students and to apply for more jobs. But then one of my friends in Brazil encouraged me to apply for jobs in Brazil as an English teacher, a position that is very high in demand in Brazil.
This lead me to reconsider last year's decision not to work towards moving to Brazil permanently.
Suddenly, this new goal made my motivation blossom.

Like a rose growing from the concrete.
Since then I have created an Instagram account solely dedicated to recruiting new students to my clientele. It's been working, but I would like for the account to grow even more. Right now, I have between 150 and 200 followers. If you're interested in content in English, Spanish, and Portuguese, follow @abrasileirafake on Instagram. And yes. This is a shameless plug, too.
I have been applying for work exchange programs in the Caribbean and South America. I'm writing for clients. I just got my first byline with GRAMMY.com. I'm going to continue getting bylines.
I am not a school teacher anymore.
I am a writer.
I am a soon-to-be digital nomad, a traveler, a wanderluster.
I am a languages teacher: English, Spanish, and Portuguese.
She said she would become a teacher. And she did.
Now, she is a writer. And will become a full-time traveler soon.
In the foreseeable future, I will become what I was meant to be.
Free.

Handle with care

Written by: Mandy Trotti
Edited by: Frankie Simons

I want more soft beginnings
new beginnings
that feel like kisses planted across my skin by the sun
or wrapping myself in fresh linens that smell like springtime
a perfectly timed nap, arising with light eyes and a quiet mind

I want less sharp endings
premature goodbyes
that feel like screaming into the void, the noise trapped in my throat
or carving my body out of marble
chipping away piece by piece

Show me what it's like to live gently
Show me what I've been missing

The man in the train

Written by: Margarida Madeira
Edited by: Kirsty Tianner

It was a beautiful spring day. The sun was shining on the light blue sky of that April afternoon.

She was standing on the train platform in her navy blue and red plaid mini-skirt and a long-sleeved white shirt. Her age was given away by her black all-stars and the backpack in her hand, though her blonde ponytail, bright red lipstick, and long, red trench coat balanced over her shoulders added a few years to her young features.

She had a gigantic smile on her face and a dreamy look in her eyes. Looking from where he stood, she looked like she had just wandered out of a Bronte book. He didn't know it, but she had her favorite book inside her backpack, Jane Eyre.

The train finally arrived.

She disappeared inside. He picked up the pace and followed her in, wanting to watch her a bit more. She was very beautiful, poetic even. She was the kind of girl worth following inside a train, especially when it was the train he was waiting on. Would he have the courage to talk to her?

Probably not. There aren't men like that nowadays. Before cell phones, and Instagram, and easy fixes, men had the courage to try, and most of the time get rejected. But it was worth it because all it takes is that one girl to say yes, the girl who wouldn't reject them and would be worth the wait.

In her world, she liked to imagine that there were guys like that, courageous, pure of heart, and strong, looking for a bride, instead of a one-night stand. And she was right, there were. But she wouldn't find any on that train, though she didn't know that yet.

You see, reader, she was elated, and elated women always see the best in people. She had just won her first writing competition. Next to her favorite book, in her backpack, she had a newspaper containing a dedicated article alongside a group photo of awkwardly smiling girls. She wouldn't frame it until many years later. She will hide the newspaper in dismissal because no one besides her favorite teacher will congratulate her. No one will show any remote sign of pride, and she has too low of self-esteem to feel it by herself. At least when she gets home. Now, on this train, she's in heaven.

So she sat down, unaware of the cute, black guy sitting a few rows in front of her. She looked outside, to the platform where she stood seconds ago, and took a deep, relieved breath. Her dysfunctional family never saw writing as a suitable career and reminded her every day when she brought up her desire to study Literature that she wasn't going to be the next Sophia de Mello Breyner or the next J.K. Rowling.

She could be, at best, the next big manager at an important, international company. And she better make good money because her father was not going to support her financially after she turned eighteen. But she was stubborn, an ideologist, like her dead mom, so she would never take the management degree, and she would never work at a big company.

She was meant to do something greater, and she felt it on that fluffy seat, looking out the window.
It's even fair to say that on that day she had a glimpse of her future life, and everything felt right. She finally felt like everything was going to be okay and her career was just starting. It was the first stone of the road she was building towards happiness, unbeknownst to her.
Overwhelmed with a strong sense of hope, she gazed around the carriage and she saw him. Looking at his phone, like a good specimen of a 21st-century man.
She took a long, good look at his muscular arms. His dark skin seemed to glow in the golden afternoon rays. His black curly hair was a bit too long on the top, making his head look abnormally rectangular.
She took note of that, and his defined chest in his burgundy t-shirt. Realizing it had been more than a moment, she averted her gaze to avoid being caught. After all, no one likes to feel undressed by a stranger's eyes. Predictably, as any other hormonal teenager, she couldn't keep her eyes away for too long. Due to her current state of boldness, she let herself imagine all the things she would do if she had the chance.
Eventually, the guy looked up. Their eyes met and she quickly looked away, blushing and pretending she was admiring the view. He noticed, so he kept his eyes on her, and on how the afternoon rays danced on her golden hair, making it millions of precious shiny strings.
Wondering if he was still looking, she quickly peeked and their eyes met again. Now, reader, there's something you need to know about this girl. She was a romantic and wholeheartedly believed in fairy tales. Every night, instead of watching a regular series or TV show, she would watch Disney movies on her VHS and she would fall asleep with the hope of finding her one true love.
It's not surprising that when their eyes met, the first thing that crossed her mind was love. "Is he the one? Is this how I find my husband? What a cool story to tell our kids!" So, obviously, she maintained eye contact and ignored her shyness for as long as she could. After seconds that felt like years, she looked away again, this time smiling and biting her lip, something she did when she was nervous.
The guy stood up and walked to the empty seats in front of her. He took it as the green light he needed to make his move. He was a gentleman and he would never talk to her if he thought she wasn't interested, but because she so clearly was, he decided to take a chance. You see, he was also a bit of a romantic, looking for love and a good woman to cherish and care for. But, that day, he was thinking more about having a good time, than a long one.
They couldn't have worked out even if she wasn't so young. His mom taught him right and he was a good, respectful man, the kind of rare man you only see in movies. She had no idea what it meant to be in a serious, real relationship. That knowledge would only come a few years later when she met the love of her life. I guess the man on the train entered her life for only two purposes: one, letting her know that not all men are the same, something important because it fed her hope of finding her soulmate, which happened eventually. And two: giving her a good story she could use later on.
She noticed him approaching and the butterflies in her belly transformed into giant seagulls fighting each other. She tried to contain the nervous smile on her face and dared to look at him, blushing like the shy sixteen-year-old she was.
"Hey." He sat in front of her with his irresistible grin and a pair of shy brown eyes.

He looked younger now that he was closer. Her interest slightly decreased upon noticing his irregular beard. She loved a strong, black beard and this guy was too young to have it.
"Hey." Her shy, happy smile didn't reveal anything but her respect for him. After all, he actually stood up and approached her. She had never met a guy with his courage before.
I'll spare you the boring conversation. To be fair, she won't even remember his words in a few years, only the excitement she felt. She will play this moment in her head for months and think she could have been so much more interesting. I agree. Their conversation was nothing special, what's your name, what are you doing here, how old are you, (to which she answered nineteen because the guy was twenty-three), and precisely when the magic was disappearing and that incredible conversation was becoming rather painful, the train lady announced his stop.
And watching their future fade away between her fingers, she gladly gave him her number. And after he left, she watched as him and the platform and the buildings passed by with a renowned sense of hope in her heart.
Maybe her life was just beginning. Maybe she didn't have to stress about tomorrow or about her seventeenth birthday coming next month. Maybe she wasn't a complete failure and she could not only become a great writer, but she could also find love and someone to heal the wounds trauma had left. Maybe, just maybe, she was worth it and she could have a great life.
And she was right. That writing contest prize was indeed her first accomplishment and many would follow. The man of her dreams would meet her when the time was right and would rock her whole world. And together, they would heal her wounds and make her whole again, or at least as whole as an orphan can be. And he would be her biggest, sexiest fan and support her work every day, like no one before him.
She just didn't know it yet. So later that day, when the man from the train called her, she answered and lost an entire night's sleep talking to him.
I still think about that encounter every now and then. Not because of the guy, even though I still remember his name, but because of how right I was to be hopeful.
You see, reader, life has a certain magical way to tell us we're on the right path. And hope is certainly an assertive hint of what our future holds for us.
We just have to trust the process, no matter how hard that might seem.

The light

Written by: Anastasia Arensiadou
Edited by: Roos van der Velden

you woke up, it was nighttime
your hands were shaking
It was cold and the light was nowhere to be found
(just like your mother)
A wail. *Yours?* A thump.
the light betrays, promises a new beginning
when your mother defied it.
If she says: it's not bright, then it must go and hide,
because whatever she says is the truth.
you look at the wall. empty, cold, eerie.
your hands are haunted by the light
your mother kicked away
and golden blood is spilling
trickling over the wood
where it belongs, away from her
away from you, traitor
undeserving of its warmth
your hands are haunted by the light
They are shaking-
(that's only the lie you tell yourself.)

Author bio's

Roos van der Velden
Editor-in-chief, interior design

Roos is a young writer, student and waitress from the Netherlands (Currently living in Germany as *Ausstauschstudentin)*. Previously, she has been published in *Fantastische Vertellingen* and *Vonk fantasy.* Recently, she has gotten published in *Talk Vomit,* her first publication away from her home ground. In this anthology, she hasn't written herself, yet just like with the previous two issues she is still the editor-in-chief and interior designer.

Yasmin Bligh-Hasan
Writer, editor, cover illustrator

Yasi is a (copy)writer, artist and graphic designer. She's an admin assistant of WordTonic, as well as the host of the neurodivergent chat.
Her current goals are creating her personal brand and figuring out the next steps in her career, all while contributing to the community and spreading kindness to all who need it. She has many projects brewing in her cauldron, so keep your eyes peeled for more to come!

Shania
Writer, editor, cover illustrator

Shania Janine is a writer and a (student) multidisciplinary graphic designer. An avid 'journaller' and collector of memories, her work focuses on observing and celebrating the 'sweet middle' of everyday life, Filipino culture and community. Currently, she is on a gap year, doodling in a pith sketchbook and playing with her Olivetti Linea 98. Posting anything and everything on Instagram, @Shania.Janine.

Frankie Sims
Writer, editor

Frankie Sims, a California-based LGBTQIA+ author, is not only a skilled copywriter but also a talented photographer and creative writer. Balancing a full-time job with her creative pursuits, Frankie is releasing her debut poetry collection “Pluto” in July 2024 which will be available on Amazon. With over 15 years of personal writing experience, Frankie makes her literary debut in Word Tonic's third anthology: New Beginnings.

Ethan Bannister
Writer

Ethan Bannister is a 24-year-old writer and poet based in Wrexham, North Wales. His work focuses on futuristic sci-fi possibilities, the dark and absurd aspects of being human and the complex natures of people and groups. He is currently working on his first novel and has written multiple short stories as well as many poems, most of which can be found on his Instagram Poetry page @_cellar.door_ .

Will Clark
Writer, editor, illustrator

Will Clark is a poet, winner of the Edge Hill MA Prize 2024, and recently trying to branch out into more genres and prose. Their work is often inspired by folklore, nature, and sometimes real life for a little bit of difference. Keep an eye out for the novel they’re working on and a handful of tabletop games that might be coming soon(ish)...

Hannah Haaz
Writer

Hey there! My name is Hannah and I'm a Mexican girl who's found her forever home in Canada. I'm all about words and finding the magic in everyday life. I'm kinda millennial, kinda Gen Z, which makes my identity as clear as trying to choose between salsa and maple syrup for breakfast. Life's a fun mix of cultural clashes and generational quirks, but hey, that's what keeps it spicy, right?

Nikki Alejandra García
Writer

Nikki Alejandra García is a freelance writer and languages instructor. She's 26 and a pisces. That IS important! No one could tell you where she is right now (because she's always booking flights with the income Word Tonic taught her how to earn in less than 4 months!), but she's from Miami, FL and wishes she was Brazilian. Soon-to-be Portuguese, Spanish, and French writer! Stay tuned. You can find her work on her website: www.nikkigwrites.com Click there or be square!.

Megan Hall
Writer, editor,

Megan Hall is an undergraduate student in English in Manchester, UK. She writes poetry and prose for pleasure as well as to share on social media. Her interest in creative writing, journalism and publishing has led her to write features in her college newspaper as well as the Manchester Metropolitan University's online news magazine. She hopes to branch out from her social media presence and gain opportunities to write and edit in a professional setting.

Ollie Hadgie
Writer

Ollie (he/they) is an A-Level student in London who wishes to study English Literature at Oxford University. A huge nerd about films and books, he likes to write about those experiences that feel indescribable in ordinary language and enjoys making the smallest moments feel larger than life. A Romantic with a capital R who wishes to publish a book one day.

Fin
Writer, editor

Fin is a creative writer from the Netherlands. He loves spending his time daydreaming about the next story he could potentially be writing. He is interested in the horror genre and hopes to write a proper story for that genre one day. He also very much enjoys reading books, watching films and playing video games.

Noor Iman
Writer

Noor is a spoken word writer and singer. Her experiences range from being commissioned by the Mayor of London to performing at the Commonwealth Games ceremony in Birmingham, as well as performing on esteemed platforms like Sofar Sounds. Recently, she released a five-part project titled ‘Light in a dark room,’ available on all streaming platforms.
Noor believes writing to be free therapy. We all have a story to share, we just need to find a way to tell it.

Maddye Belov-Boxer
Writer, Editor

Maddye B. B. is a quarter-of-a-century old (yikes!) creative writer. She is a Gemini, but is on medication. She is currently working on a tabletop campaign set in a Y2K-based parallel dimension and a short story, which she envisions becoming a movie starring Hayden Christensen. When they're not writing, Maddye can be found birdwatching, making soup, knitting, or watching "Hereditary" again. They currently reside in New Jersey with their partner and two cats, Daisy and Teddy.

Mandy Trotti
Writer, editor

Mandy Trotti is a full-time copywriter and part-time poet residing in Florida. She graduated with a Bachelor's in English Literature from the University of South Florida. She originally planned on becoming an English teacher but accidentally became a copywriter along the way instead. This path suits her better. When she isn't writing for a living or for fun, she can be found baking, drawing, or watching movies with her partner and their rescue beagle, Joey, alongside her.

Nittany Biggs
Writer, editor

Nittany Biggs is a twenty-two year old creative writer, travel blogger, vlogger, and ADHDer currently studying French in Paris. She immortalizes her adventures on her YouTube and travel website (thescrappytraveler.com), aiming to demystify travel and make it more accessible to other young folks. In her creative writing, she allows her imagination to run wild. When not writing or traveling, you can find her scrapbooking her life experiences, romanticizing her friendships or worshiping her cat, Cleopatra.

Soyoon Koo
Writer, Editor

Soyoon Koo is an English Literature student at University College London, a writer, and a rambler that lives in three countries at once (and keeps pieces of many others with her). She continues to fuel her writing dreams through poetry, essays, and Word Tonic.

Sharon Hammer
Writer, editor

Sharon Hammer (she/her) is a Venezuelan-American writer and professional learner of things. Her writing has a heavy focus on the senses and a playful flexibility of wordscapes, which brings new flair to otherwise structured poetry and short fiction. Other than being featured in Word Tonic's 'New Beginnings' Issue of the Creative Anthology, she has self-published a chapbook called 'twenty twenty at twenty two' in 2021.

Paris Cumba
Writer

Paris Cumba (she/her) is a 19-year-old writer who lives in Central Florida. When she's not doing college work, you can find her reading, writing, playing video games, or catching up with shows on Netflix. She is very excited to join Word Tonic's anthology for the first time!

Sam Hopkinson
Writer, Editor

Sam Hopkinson is a 24-year-old full-time surveyor and not so full-time writing enthusiast. Property and fantasy make him tick (A rather unusual combo but he makes it work). When he isn't knee deep in work, he's shoulders deep in a fictional creation of his. Someone, please help him out!

Deborah Kelty
Writer

Abiding on North Wales's coast with her family and guinea pigs for company,
22-year old Deborah Kelty immerses herself into writing imaginative tales. A new member of Word Tonic, she's written short stories for writing competitions that include the BBC Young Writers Award, and even published her first in 2021 as part of the Whitstead Harvestide Anthology.
This anthology marks her debut entry, of which she hopes to do more of for Word Tonic! You can find her main portfolio and socials via the link at debzykwriter.carrd.co.

Saraah Hendricks
Writer, editor

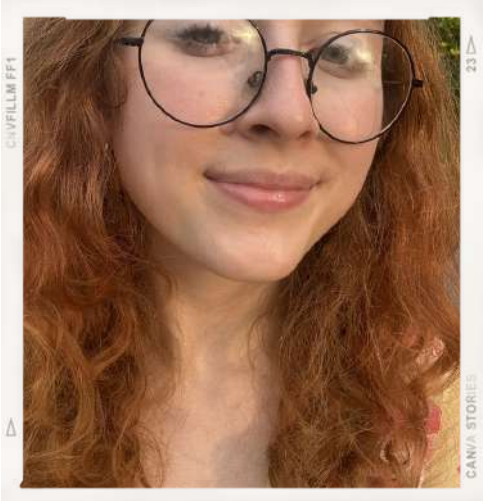
Saarah Hendricks is a Word Tonic ambassador and psychology major from South Africa. She joined Word Tonic to learn copywriting to work as a freelance copywriter. To her, copywriting is a creative outlet. Beyond that, she is an aspiring researcher, author, content creator, and content writer.

Margarida Madeira
Writer

Margarida is a copywriter by choice and a storyteller by birth.
After one year working as a copywriter for a Portuguese marketing agency, and deepening her knowledge in marketing working as an assistant for a small business in the US, she's now starting her own brand as a freelancer. Besides that, she's also focused on bringing her creative side and storytelling back into her daily life by writing short stories more often.

Maia Berliner
Writer, editor

Maia Berliner is a creative writer from Hove. She graduated with a degree in Hispanic Studies and is a lover of languages and exploring different cultures through reading and writing. Everywhere she goes she collects words and writes poetry. She has her own blog and is in the process of writing a novel. She joined Word Tonic to connect with other writers and readers, and to gain inspiration as she enters the world of publishing and copywriting.



Phoebe Cross
Writer, editor

I am Phoebe, a 23 year old aspiring writer and EFL teacher. I am originally from England, but currently live in the North East of Thailand. My work often focuses on queerness and self discovery.

Miranda Inks
Writer, Editor

Miranda Inks is a creative with a passion for writing and learning. Although ideas come to her at random, she is practicing consistency when it comes to creativity. She resides in the USA with her family and is self-studying copywriting and French.

Anastasia Arseniadou
Writer

Anastasia Arseniadou is an archaeology student who is especially passionate about writing. Her other interests include theater, hiking, and reading. She joined Word Tonic to learn new things about copywriting and creative writing. Among her favourite quotes, there is “believe you can, and you're halfway there”.

Semilore Kaji-Hausa
Writer

Semilore (Milo) Kaji-Hausa is an award winning political writer (Orwell Youth Prize, RA Butler Prize, Warwick Writing Wrongs) who has grown up between Nigeria and the UK. He creates stories and articles shaped by these experiences and an understanding of global injustice. Yet, more importantly, he is a Wordle fiend.

Hannah-Rose Shearman
Writer

I am a creative writer and aspiring woman in STEM. I think words have a way of expressing themselves if you let them, I just enjoy putting them together on the page.

Niahm Canning
Editor

Niamh is 25 years old and works in admissions and marketing. She is also a Word Tonic Ambassador. Niamh has always been passionate about the English language and how words have the power to make us feel a whole range of emotions. In this edition of the anthology, Niamh has worked as an editor.

Word Tonic proudly presents its third anthology, 'Here We Go Again' - the first of 2024. From trembling nightmares, finding new love, notes to our future children, and sucking on chewed straws, this edition offers a vibrant and unique exploration on the theme of 'new beginnings'.

Word Tonic

Cover designed by Shania Janine