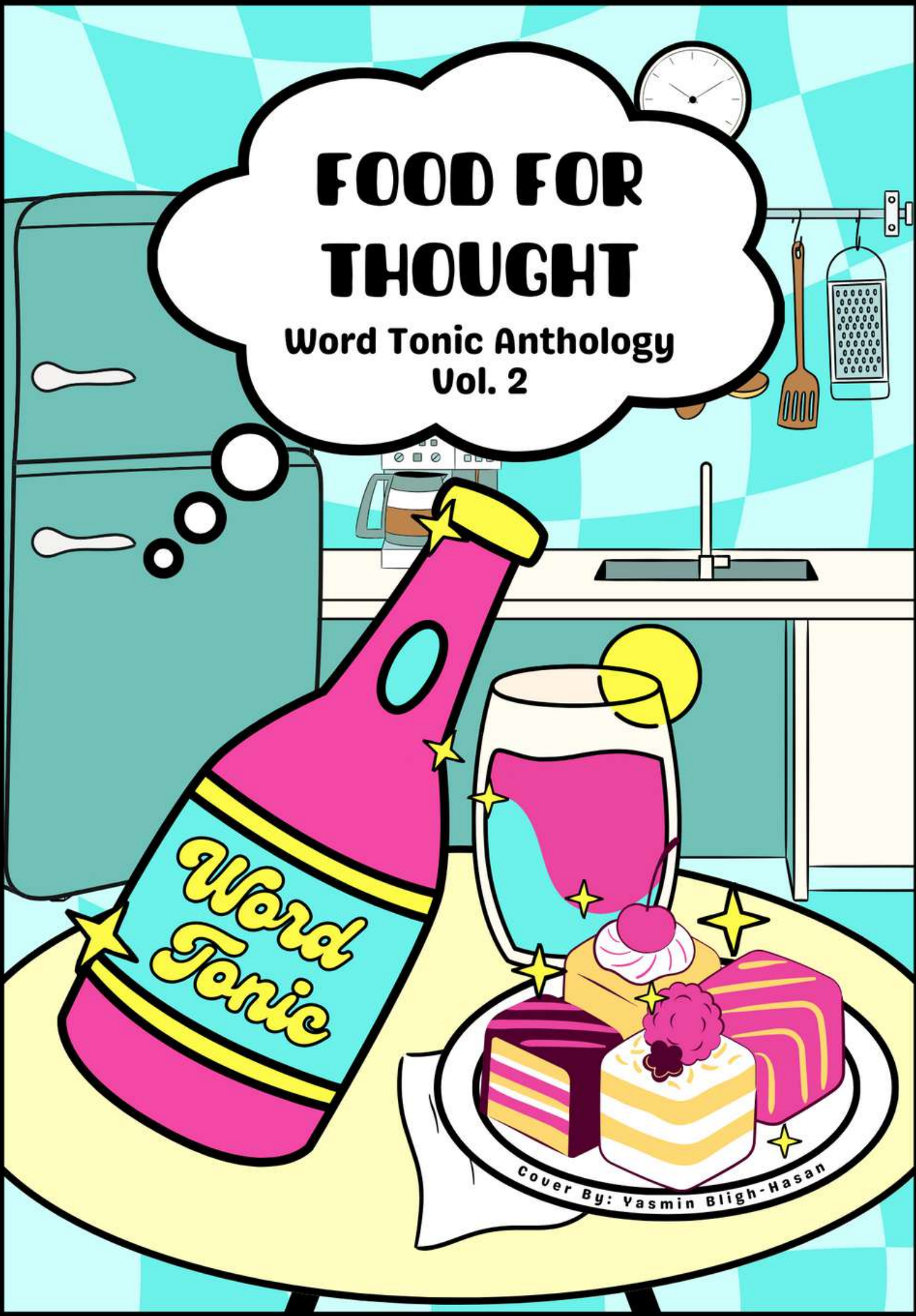
FOOD FOR THOUGHT
Word Tonic Anthology
Vol. 2
Word Tonic
Cover By: Yasmin Bligh-Hasan

Word
Tonic

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A dream come true

Preface by editor-in-chief

Roos van der Velden

Edited by: Natasha Mikietyn

When I was doing the promotion for the last WordTonic anthology, I accidently used all food-related puns… so, prepare for a doozy, since in this one it will be nothing but dream-related puns. After this edition, I'll just have to get back to being on theme, like a proper writer!

But! I'm rambling! I shouldn't be! Once again, the writers at WordTonic have put together the anthology of your wildest dreams, with poems and stories that will haunt you at night. There are even more participants than last time: A spellbinding total of fifteen writers and their accompanying editors and illustrators have banded together to present this extravaganza.

Massive kudos to all my participants who joined the second time around. Your passion is what drives me forward. And thanks to all my new participants who have decided to join!

WordTonic may be a copywriting platform, but one of the most important aspects of copywriting is being creative. And what better way to show off your creativity than by having your creative writing published in a magazine?

That, of course, also goes for the people who only came to edit and illustrate! I do secretly hope that you will all come back with your own poems and stories in the next edition…

This is yet another opportunity that comes with joining WordTonic… besides job opportunities, a great network, and a bunch of fun people to grow and learn together with!

Am I rambling on again? Tell me if I am rambling on again! I shouldn't be! Right now, you should curl up on the couch, preferably with a warm drink, and dig into all of these amazing poems and stories. We have stories soft and plump, bitter and sweet, that will move you to the land of sleep faster than the sheep from the Dream Anthology ever will! Now cuddle up and close your eyes, for your dinner dreams will come true!

A toast to juicy pears and spicy beans: Preface by WordTonic staff member Sharmin Ahmed

It's only the 2nd issue of Word Tonic's creative writing anthology and yet it feels like a different lifetime to our first. We've found our footing and groove, and we have even more submissions compared to last time. Not to mention, the sign ups for our 3rd issue all to do with New Beginnings has gotten even larger than this one and it keeps on growing.

It was a shock when Roos approached me to write the preface for this issue and I couldn't have been more ecstatic to say yes.

I gladly joined the 1st issue all to do with dreams as an editor and illustrator and for this 2nd anthology, I'm now an officially published writer with a story about mice, cheese and a sassy cat!

There are so many amazing pieces about a range of different themes and genres; we have stories about the bitterness of life to romances baked into sweet desserts — all cooked with tender love and care by the chefs who are our amazing writers. Your taste buds will be tantalised by all the amazing flavours and even the pickiest of eaters wouldn't dare scoff at the feast we're serving.

Grab your forks, knives or spoons and prepare to dig in!

But before that, let's raise our drinks and give our thanks and cheers to Roos for managing yet another fantastic anthology.

In (Bed)

Written & illustrated by: Yasmin Bligh-Hasan
Edited by: Kristy Tianner

‘Still, in the pitch black hours of night,
My sunken body imprints the edge of
my medium-firm, queen-sized, memory foam mattress.
I'm sweaty and burrito-ed by heavy, itchy, wooly blankets -
Patterned by foreign weavers' calloused fingertips
And stained with the fingerprints of the relatives who gifted them to me.

I sit unmoved, radiating in my own humidity.
The crisp air outside could never chill the Internalized Hell,
Fuelled by the voice of my mother's shame,
That inhabits me.
And her mother's. And hers.
And yours.

I'm surrounded by dozens of empty protein bar wrappers,
Scattered used-to-be piles of now-spoiled orange peels,
And week-old paper bags overflowing with takeaway boxes -
they're waging war against each other
over who's this month’s favorite.

I hear faint footsteps and chatter and whistling wind,
Carrying the music of joyous people who can eat together.
Laugh together.
Drink together.
And enjoy the warmth and comfort that food provides,
bringing them closer together -
To the sodden window of a girl-then-teen-then-woman chained to isolation,
Bound by the social consequence of being forced to carry more weight than she can bear.

More than she should have ever had to bear.

My gaze falls into the static, dark silhouette of the desk in front of me,
Barely making out the mess of accumulated papers thrown across the surface;
Old letters, ripped envelopes, half-solved mathematics, and various crumpled sketches of the glinting vase of dried flowers perched on the dark windowsill.
They all mock me through my blindness,
Like invisible stars stalking in silence my every daylight delight.

A floral smokiness gently cushions my cave-like nares.
I pan my focus to where my mahogany vanity supposedly sits;
Its existence is proven only through a single, fluid, flickering candle flame reflecting in its centre mirror.
The orange warm glow catches accents of gold buried deep in the varnished wood -
I can't help but wonder how this melting mixture of matter produces something so luminously life-like.

I'm beguiled by the beige, bubbling wax,
Boiling, dripping, and fading
into opaque darkness the further down it trails.
Entranced by this ocular spectacle,
which is now of oozing, melting cheese,
I watch as my body shifts itself off the bed.
It paces methodically towards the candle,
Still wrapped snugly under the heavy blankets dragging behind
Like the cloak of a ragged wizard who just turned 4729.

With every small step my legs buckle and weaken.
I eventually arrive at eye level with the flame,
Kneeling feebly on the hard wooden floorboards.
The sight and aroma of the heavenly cheese quickly becomes unbearable -
No, insatiable.
This is the first hors-d'œuvre that summoned itself willingly in my presence...
It would be rude to refuse such an offering, right?

The flame's warm aura toasts the tip of my nose
As I lean in curiously further.
I stare deep into its dancing configurations,
Embodying the eye of a Pyromancer.
"This flame is a deity!
Presenting this irresistible form -
So that it's light may heal me,
Its heat may enliven me,
And it's melting wax may be consumed with delight
So as to form a soft layer around my heart,
And protect it from all that wishes to ail me."

My stomach growls loud.
The fragrant cheese glistens and gleams at the base of the candle wick
Begging to be devoured.
My stomach growls again - it's coming alive.
My body suddenly expands and coagulates
Turning into a gruesome, globbery substance.
Forged from the fiery, flaming
Words that burnt me since childhood,
I am a creature - anthropomorphised, fat, and very hungry.

My gaze is still glued to the vision before me,
Even through this unspeakable, inexplicable transfiguration.
I'm sucked into the whispering crackles.
I can't take it any longer.
My teeth glide smoothly in one golden, stringy, bite -
Now enveloped in a burning coat of hardened, hallucinated greed.
My chompers ache in contrast to the frosty air,
Which swirls behind each cheesy chow,
Wondering what kind of insanity inhabits my deranged conscience.

What was my only remaining source of light
Now remains extinguished in my stomach -
Charred and churned, the ash still burning
And nothing to guide me but my sore senses.
I turn around slowly to crawl back to bed.
With strips of wax sealing over my lips,
I extend my arm out to find something to grab;
I feel nothing.
I step forward.
Nothing again.
I lift my foot to step once more -
Now I can only feel the last, slow, thumping beats of my heart.
"Deity?... Is that you?"
The wax has almost hardened entirely throughout my body.
Maybe the flame will ignite if I am reborn again,
Melt away the pain and self preservation,
So I may truly live without fear.

Da-dum. Da-dum. Da-du.....

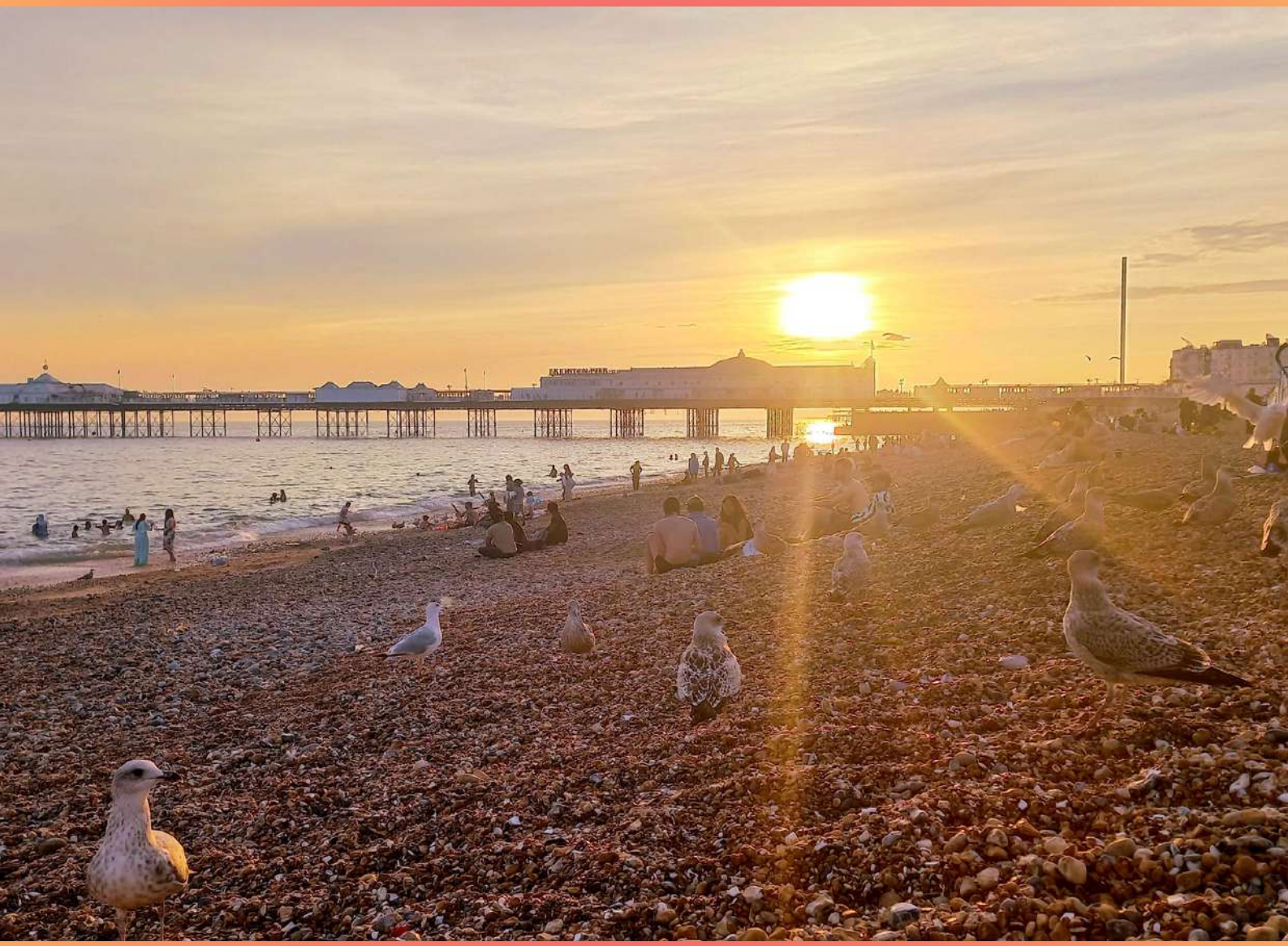
Let's not talk near the Brighton pier

Written by: Soyoon Koo
Edited by: Kristy Tianner

06/16
Sitting on the beach paralleled at flame height,
    Let’s pay our respects to Daddy Long Legs.
Plastic fork and cheap food, a nice cold beer should do the trick.
    If only the cold hadn’t crept up and seeped into our pores.

A group barbecuing, drinking till middle-age,
    Alludes to our future.
Scoffing, hooting middle-age,
    Laugh lines and carelessness only deepen.
They are sat altogether too close to the rising tide,
too busy reading each other, absorbing
dropping letters, to regard the sole child that complains
about his soaked socks. Freeze works its way up to our knees, salty
in its taste and stinging in how the wind whispers our wounds back
into consciousness. Inexperienced courage stirs in, only to
flit away with travelling laughter.

The smoke twilights the uninviting beach.
We seek refuge in a spark that is friendship,
    that is but a chapter.
A chapter ablaze, fuelled by nostalgia liquor, and up in flames.
As soon as the novel flits away with travelling laughter.
Pages and pages become scraps of weathered paper
    — if that —
flung into the sea, marring the water and dissolving into the salt.



Photograph by: Soyoon Koo

I solemnly swear to burn the toast when Haley's Coment comes

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

“I don’t know how the dials work,” I said.

My eyes reflect in the plastic, silver coating of the microwave. I see my head is slightly tilted to the sound of laughter. *And anytime you feel the pain, hey Jude, refrain, Don’t carry the world upon your shoulders…* The Beatles echo in my head, my daily reminder of Jude St. Francis, another fictional character I can’t seem to let go of.

“It’ll only take a minute to –”

“Just come over here!”

I turn back to the toaster and tilt the appliance towards me for a peek.

“What number is the dial set to?”

“Five.”

“I promise there’s enough time to see the video and make it back for the toast to be ready.”

“But what if it burns? This toaster doesn’t work like others, sometimes the bread burns. Not always, but sometimes.”

“Then you’ll go back in time to stop it.”

But I won’t. There’s so much to do before I can stop it from burning. *Some infinities are bigger than others.* I don’t think anything could have prepared me for being haunted by John Green at twenty-five. I probably shouldn’t have picked up his essay collection then.

“One minute. That’s it!”

Come up to meet me, tell you I’m sorry… I’m sorry? I’m sorry. I’m sorry I don’t have a minute to spare.

I need to see her. All of them. This is when I remember them most clearly. But maybe I can? Just one minute. Five? I’m sorry. I don’t know how the dials on the toaster work. I don’t know what the numbers mean. But it's set to five, yes?

“ How long have I been standing here? A minute. Yes, a minute. And an infinity within that finite minute? Yes. I’ll beg and there will be time.

I can tend to my scraped knee when I was four. It was the right one, somehow it was always the right one.

I can tend to it again at twelve when I skinned it. Let me help her up and soothe the burning embarrassment her tears mistake for pain. Let me hide her from her friends who can’t see her, eyes forced shut from laughter. “It’s okay,” I could whisper, “It’s okay to stop running, getting there before the time is right will only hurt you.”

How relieving is it that I can’t though? How could I think of trying? Twelve. How unforgivable to not forgive myself for stumbling. So let me go back and tend to it. Let me tend to the heart suffocating behind a cage of its own.

Let me tend to my grief. I want to know her. I want her to know she will bend without breaking, and it will hurt more. How much bread for Bilbo Baggins to scrape the butter of his soul across before too much is too much?

Was I made from a broken mold…

Tend to your eyes that burn from staying up too late texting. You were only thirteen. Do it again, and don’t stop when the words run out. Let the silence echo and even then, don’t stop.

Then tend to your runny nose and dry your eyes, you have school in three hours and you haven’t slept for fear she uses the blade when you stop listening. Fourteen was too young and you were too strong.

And tend to your girl friends, you’ll split when you look away and there’s no finding your way back to each other. But try. Try and try and try, and when the disappointment crushes you, maybe try one more time? Just once more. Live with the regret of trying too hard. There’s nothing you could possibly regret about that.

And- just wait a second. I need a minute to see what she wants to show me before the toast burns. Don’t worry. I’ll be back to tend to you.

I’ll be back to remind you that it’s out of your control. I’ll explain that growth happens in many directions – too many if I’m being honest – and too far from where it all started. And maybe if I teach you that there’s nothing more you could have done, I can learn it too?

Should I just learn what the numbers on the toaster mean? Surely not. Leave it be with life's other mysteries.

I kept my promise, now it's your turn. Promise. Promise you will remind me. Remind me how you wanted to live. How did you want to love? What did you ignore to keep believing? I faced it to know better. That is my curse. Your ignorance was not bliss, it is the forgotten panacea to what came after. I learned about the Möbius strip when reading an Emily Henry book. I don't read romance books anymore – by the way – and I cannot think of a good reason for starting again. Anyway, I imagine life is like the Möbius strip. I try to get back to you but the closest I get is retrospect, and when I come back to me, I am not as I was and know not who I am beyond me.

There it is again. Our grief, arms open like an old friend, one of a handful that remains.

I'm still coming back. I want to tell you it's worth it especially when it's not. I want to tell you how much deeper we're going to feel things. In fact, we're going to feel too much. Endure it.

I tilt the toaster for a second peek, but the bread is still too lightly toasted. A breath of relief. I swear there's a One Direction song for this.

"You know what, I'll just send you the link and then you can watch it later." I hear a chair scrape across the floor and footsteps heading my way.

No. I had a minute. My minute is not finished yet. I still have five. I need you to know you don't care. You don't care for noise, spontaneity, adventure. It's not them, it's you. I don't think our brain likes that. Don't get scared when your hands shake and know you can't stop the tears, so make sure you get Mom to buy the soft tissues. The breath your anxiety steals will be returned when you hold it. It won't feel this way but you are bigger than it. I can – *oh. "It's meant to symbolise we're stronger together…"*

Blink slower, just long enough to grab hold of the hands reaching for each other. The divine intervention to have known you before meeting you, how half my soul had recognised you all those years ago. Was the sketched inscription of your purpose the failsafe for her absence? I apologise for my selfishness back then, I scattered pieces to the breeze. This tapestry is too much for me to witness. You were stronger together.

But I promise you this, I'll always look out for you, yeah, that's what I'll do.

The cotton will snag on your edges, buy the softer blend.

Stay away from structured jackets and coats, you have yet to master colouring in the lines. And they're not going to understand, don't waste your breath explaining how much heavier your eyes are than your boots, is it too late to stop you from seeing too much? When all else fails, hold onto your favourite blanket, sleep is miserable without it.
"Do you smell that?"
Green eyes and a wrinkled nose look past me and *oh.* Yes. I believe that my toast is burning. I still take every slight and failure personally. Too many question the mercy of a God who makes us feel this much, is it presumptuous to question their temporal range for fear of not feeling enough?
You can let it go
You can throw a party full of everyone you know
You can start a family who will always show you love
You don't have to be sorry for doing it on your own
"Hey, hey, my toast is almost ready."
"Ready? Smells like your toast is almost charred."
"You exaggerate."
"Your toast is burning. Stop the toaster."
"It will stop when it's finished. It's still toasting."
An exasperated sigh. "Please, your toast is burning."
A stubborn head shakes, "No. I have more time."
Another sigh. This time in acquiescence. "I indulge you too much."
"Mm, you're always offered the patience life owes you."
"You are actively burning your toast."
"I have more time."
"It's going to hurt to eat."
"Nothing a little butter can't soften and strawberry jam can't sweeten."
The sound of the toast popping up frightens us.
"If you were going to let it burn anyway, why could you not have come and watched the video with me?"
"I did not let it burn, I told you, this toaster doesn't work like others…"

“It’s just a quick Google search to figure out how those dials work.”
“It won’t happen again.”
“The toast burning?”
“No. Me not coming when you call. I solemnly swear to burn the toast when Hayley’s comet comes.”

Illustration by: Sharmin Ahmed

The taste of life

Written by: Nina Boštjančič
Edited by: Roos van der Velden

My mother used to say
life was sweet and colourful
like a strawberry galette.
But as the years have passed,
the taste of it has fled.
Then I only tasted
the bitterness of coffee beans
mixed with undiluted lemonade,
coming from unripe fruit.

As I slowly learned (*note: I'm still studying it*)
the complex craft
of brewing a potion
— Life it's called, I believe —
the taste of the coffee beans
has transformed
into a warm and creamy latte macchiato,
and the lemon's unripe taste
has ripened, folding itself
into a delightful and sunny lemon tart.

Illustration by: Eva McLean

Sickening

Written by: Susi Fennell
Edited by: Roos van der Velden

The plate in front of me
Makes my stomach feel weak
My food stares back
Jiggling, squirming jelly
Taunting me silently

Chemicals clumped together-
A sickening sensation spreads through my stomach

Hand reluctantly following its movement
I bring a spoonful to my mouth
Saliva dry, thick
Unprepared
Unwilling

The scent is deceptively invisible
And my mouth opens

The texture overrides my senses
Chewy, slimy
Invasive

Uncomfortable
Unnatural

Food breaks into particles
multiplying,
Spreading around,
Infesting,
Contaminating my tongue with a layer of gelatin

My throat closes up
I shiver, fighting not to gag
A thick slick sliding down, penetrating my layers of skin

I shudder
Unable to breathe
Wincing, squirming
Forced to focus on every moment that passes

It sits in my stomach
Like a brick tied to my tongue

Weighing my body

Continuing to infect me from inside

Illustration by: Thu Hang Pham

Rotten fruits of the sea

Written by: Nora O'Dea
Edited by: Ollie Hadgie

‘*Uaigneas an Chladaigh’* : The loneliness of the shore, feeling of ancestral spirits on the shore

My father cracks the mussels open with his yellow square fingernails rimmed in between the black shell. He pulls apart their kissing clasp with a strong gentleness, looking at them with an apologetic hunger.
‘They’re stoic creatures, rocks with guts.’ he says, the steam escaping into the cold air. ‘They are still their whole lives, then just before they’re snatched away, they snap their halves together, their one grasp at life. This could get them a ride on a fish. They can transform and live again.’
He uses one half of the shell to scoop out the meat and drops it into his mouth, then sips his white wine. ‘They died for something, Joseph; we can give them this ritual.’
He licks his fingers and looks out to the dark harbour. The sun had disappeared without ceremony an hour ago.
He likes to do things that require steps and a system, to look around him and see other people looking at him. He was always trying to push away disappointment, pushing it far away from him before it could roll downwards and crush him. At seventeen, I knew how to snip and tuck and smooth out situations so that the wrinkles of any defeat were hidden away. But like an addict, he became restless and irritable at the placidness and would dissect me to find a fault.
My mother at least could look disappointment in the eyes. She would say things like ‘*And God laughs.*’ and exhale a long ‘*Well…*’ She wasn’t as afraid as he was, she had her arms open to the bad parts, but especially the good, even more so than most, because she knew how much she needed the good parts to weigh out all of the bad she let into herself. She liked to eat. Late at night, she would sit on the stairs on her laptop while my father was in bed and order groceries. Reading from a notebook she had scribbled food in, she would hungrily jot down things like *‘lobster rolls with caviar’*,*‘shredded duck on sourdough’* ,*‘avocado chocolate mousse’, ‘mango chutney and garlic sprouts.’* She would then take out her card, squint her eyes in the dark to read the numbers and then slowly type it in.
‘Would you like anything?’ she’d ask me.

‘She wasn’t pretending that these were household necessities. She knew she was being exorbitant. She had her own money from her work as a portrait photographer. She had become popular in the last few years with high-profile people who wanted to appear artistic. The last time the doorbell rang with the groceries arriving, my father was home. He said nothing as he signed for it and emptied them into the fridge.

One evening, she had a plate of dragon rolls, crab and avocado topped with eel, in front of her. The kitchen was still a mess with the debris of dinner; red stained plates were stacked on top of the dishwasher, an open bottle of ketchup and torn tissue paper on the table. The sushi had come in a neat plastic box, which she had left turned over with its belly facing the ceiling next to her. She ate with a hurried pressure. Too frantic with her wooden chopsticks, the pink flesh slipped out between them and flopped onto the white plate. I stood at the sink, rinsing the plates, watching as tiny scraps of leftovers gathered together in the sinkhole. She ate silently.

‘Is it good?’ I asked her. She raised her hand to her mouth and nodded, closing her eyes as if now she was finally allowing herself to enjoy the taste.

‘Do you want some?’ she asked me, pushing the plate away from her. Just then, my father walked into the kitchen. He opened a cupboard and pretended to look for a mug to pick out.

‘I don’t really like sushi.’ I told her.

My father picked up a mug, ‘I think it’s disgusting,’ he said, his back was straight but facing her.

‘You like crab.’ she said.

‘I think it is disgusting that that tiny plate is worth a week of food for one family. People are struggling, you know.’

She sighed and ran her fingers through her greying hair. ‘Well, I’m not and it’s going to go bad if I don’t eat it now anyway.’

She picked up the chopsticks again and pierced into the eel that rested on top of the rice bed. I continued to rinse the dishes. I heard his footsteps move up the stairs above us slowly, like he was thinking.

Now he raises his empty glass to the waiter, a girl I recognise from my school, and points to it, giving her a weak smile. He pushes the bowl of mussels towards me.

‘Help yourself.’ The smell is fresh with death and wet with the sea.

‘Did you ever go out at sea with mum’s family?’ I ask. He stares outwards at a boat drifting by.

‘Yes, it was very short-lived. When I first met her, I had this romantic idea of changing my life around, being out at sea in the morning and coming home with a big net of dinner. Of course, I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth. I didn’t understand her world, but I wanted it. I wanted to escape what I thought was the real world.’ He shakes his head and looks at his hands, tapping the table like he has to make sure it is real. ‘But that was her real world, and she wanted to get away from it more than I fantasised about running away from mine.’

I open a mussel. ‘Did you actually go on the boats?’

‘Yes, me and your uncle, they made me lock all of the lobster cages. He laughed at me when he saw that I brought a flask onto the boat. I thought it would be like a Hemingway novel. They would have thrown me overboard if I stayed any longer.’ The waitress comes with his wine. He places his elbow on the table and gulps it. I am now the same height as him, but he feels so much bigger, like he is bending down to sit with me at the children’s table. The heaters above our heads start to buzz with a mechanical warmth.

‘It was the best for her to get away, really.’ His eyes slip off of me and towards the disappearing sea. ‘They laughed at me, but if it weren’t for me, she would never have had the luxury to start taking photographs. The first ones she took were all of them, you know.’

‘I know’, I say, ‘She showed them to me in her book. I remember those sore, cut-up hands and wet hair. I thought they were good. I felt like I was there with them.’ He smirked and nodded to himself like he had a secret joke. ‘It’s funny how that works. She had to get away from her own people to get the outside world to respect them.’ There is one mussel left on the plate; it is open, orange flesh staring up at us.

Last night, I woke up to hear boxes being dropped onto the floor and the hoover roaring with life. I came downstairs into the kitchen; outside of the windows, it was black and smothering, the white kitchen lights making his skin look sallow and his eyes old. He was emptying a box of tea into the bin. His teeth were clenched, and fingers piercing into the box.

‘Moth rice. These little fuckers lay eggs, and before you know it a generation of maggots are feasting on our cupboard.

Sorry, I know you like your tea and this is disgusting, but everything, I mean everything, has to go. I have to smoke them out. I'm like Clint Eastwood.'
He showed me the box ; a herd of white caterpillars danced manically over the teabags, too many of them to count. We dumped long-grain jasmine rice, bow pasta, all-purpose flour, gluten-free flower, and chamomile sleepy-time tea into the bin. I took the bag out and put it into the bin across the road. When I came back, he was standing with his hands in his dressing gown and leaning against the kitchen door, staring at the black window.
'I'm going to go back to bed.' I said to him. He nodded.
I don't want to bring up the maggots, although it was why we decided to come out.
'They won't reach us out here.' I said, getting out of the car. The people around us are starting to leave now. A waiter scrapes a knife against a plate to empty the leftovers off onto another one; it piles up to form a scrambled mess of colour. He is still looking at the tide.
'I think everyone wants something that's too far away from them to understand; it's what makes it a fantasy.' I say, leaning forward. 'Sometimes I wish I could select different people's lives to live for a day, like picking out a character in a video game.' He pushes his glasses up his nose, 'Would you choose me?'
'No, I live too close to you. I don't want to see how you see me.' I say.
He lets out a laugh in one grunt. 'Would you want to be me?' I continue, rubbing my fingers onto my white napkin, two brown streaks from the sauce clawing through it.
'Not for a day.' He replies quickly.
'Why is that?'
'That would be too cruel.' He looks down at his lap, then rolls up his sleeves and dips his fingers into the bowl of water; droplets splatter onto the plate of mussels. 'I would feel a day knowing of all the time I have left in the world, and then I would wake up in my old skin, feeling that length of time still on my back, but it slipped away into nothing.' He strokes the stem of his wine glass, watching the thin cloud the warmth of his fingers makes.
'People in the bronze age thought the world was over every time the sun went down.' I say.
'No, they didn't. Who told you that? If they thought that there wouldn't be a tomorrow, they wouldn't have been making bronze weapons. They weren't crazy.

We're not a stupid species.'
I shrug. 'I don't do enough with the time you think I have. And you're not supposed to say that word anymore.'
'But I'm saying that they're not.' He leans back in his chair. There is a gap in his eyes when he looks at me sometimes, a rift I couldn't understand. 'It's exactly that, you don't know what time you have. I do but only because it's already gone.'
Suddenly, he looks pathetic to me. The branded label on the cuff of his blazer is sticking out. He knows it is but would act like it's an accident if I pointed it out. He is the only one in our family who can be sad. He despises self-pity, hanging your head and biting fingernails. He is afraid of sad people.
'I mean just because one day is gone doesn't mean you have no tomorrow.' I say.
'Yes, but the tomorrows, they get smaller, you'll know what I mean when you're my age. Everything runs out eventually.'
I pick up the last mussel and drop it into my mouth, the salt viciously coats my tongue.
'Do you want something to change?' I ask.
'I have a happy life, I do. We're very lucky.' He says slowly. 'I was lucky, with the oats. I remember my dad pointing to a mountain of oats in a huge shed. He told me that this is what the country runs on every morning.'
He smiles at me, his teeth surprisingly white. 'I never worried about what I wanted to do with my life, I never had to "find myself" like people say. But I sometimes think that if I had less comfort and more freedom, I could have been bigger, or wilder or something like that...' he trails off, straightens his back and coughs into his white napkin.
'You could change something small.' I suggest, suddenly feeling guilty for the anger I felt towards him. 'You could grow out your hair or look into a new religion. I'm reading a book about the Occult, I could give it to you.'
He smiles again, smaller this time. 'I used to want to write a cookbook about oats. But everyone just gets recipes from the internet now.'
'I can help you start a page make some videos. People like that.' I rub my hands together, they're starting to get cold.
He looks up to the heaters above us, a red glare hitting his face. 'Yes, people like that kind of thing. Fast and simple.'
'Should we order dessert?' I ask.

He leans back and exhales, ‘Sure.’ He takes his wallet out of his pocket and slaps it onto the table.

It comes on a black plate, a neat trail of steam floats behind it from the kitchen to outside at our table. The couple sitting behind us turn their heads at the smell. The waiter places it between us and gives us each a fork.

‘Enjoy’ she says.

A red sauce dribbles across it, smearing itself around the plate with no restraint. My father lifts his knife and cuts it in half, a look of wearied boredom on his face. Brown lumps tumble outward, scattering softly onto the sauce. I dig my fork in and taste the chocolate; warm, comforting and impossibly rich. One bite feels like too much. My father closes his eyes after he swallows.

I look out to the shore. The white light of a boat bobs up and down in the distance like it could fall down the other side of the horizon.

Glass in a bottle

Written and edited by: Michelle Finch
Edited by: Deborah Kelty

A glass turns into a bottle,
and a bottle turns into a few.
Before you can tell what has happened,
there's nothing more you can do.

Coffee kisses

Written by: Paula Espinosa
Edited by: Roos van der Velden

I.

languid & loving:
slow mornings together
stretching out like the rest of our lives,
endlessly vast before us.

nothing but warmth surrounding us,
pulling me deeper into,
into,
into…
every moment further entangling us,
close to the point of no return.

history can't help but repeat itself,
i see past lives of us in every moment.
we've been through this before,
this kind of falling.

II.

fruit-seeking fingers,
berry juice on your lips,
tempting and tantalizing
almost as much as you.

lattes and cappuccinos
marking the moments,
caramel and vanilla,
syrupy sweet.

i tug on your hair to bring you even closer,
hoping for a lingering taste of coffee on your lips,
the most intoxicating pairing.

my love
and his coffee-sweet kiss

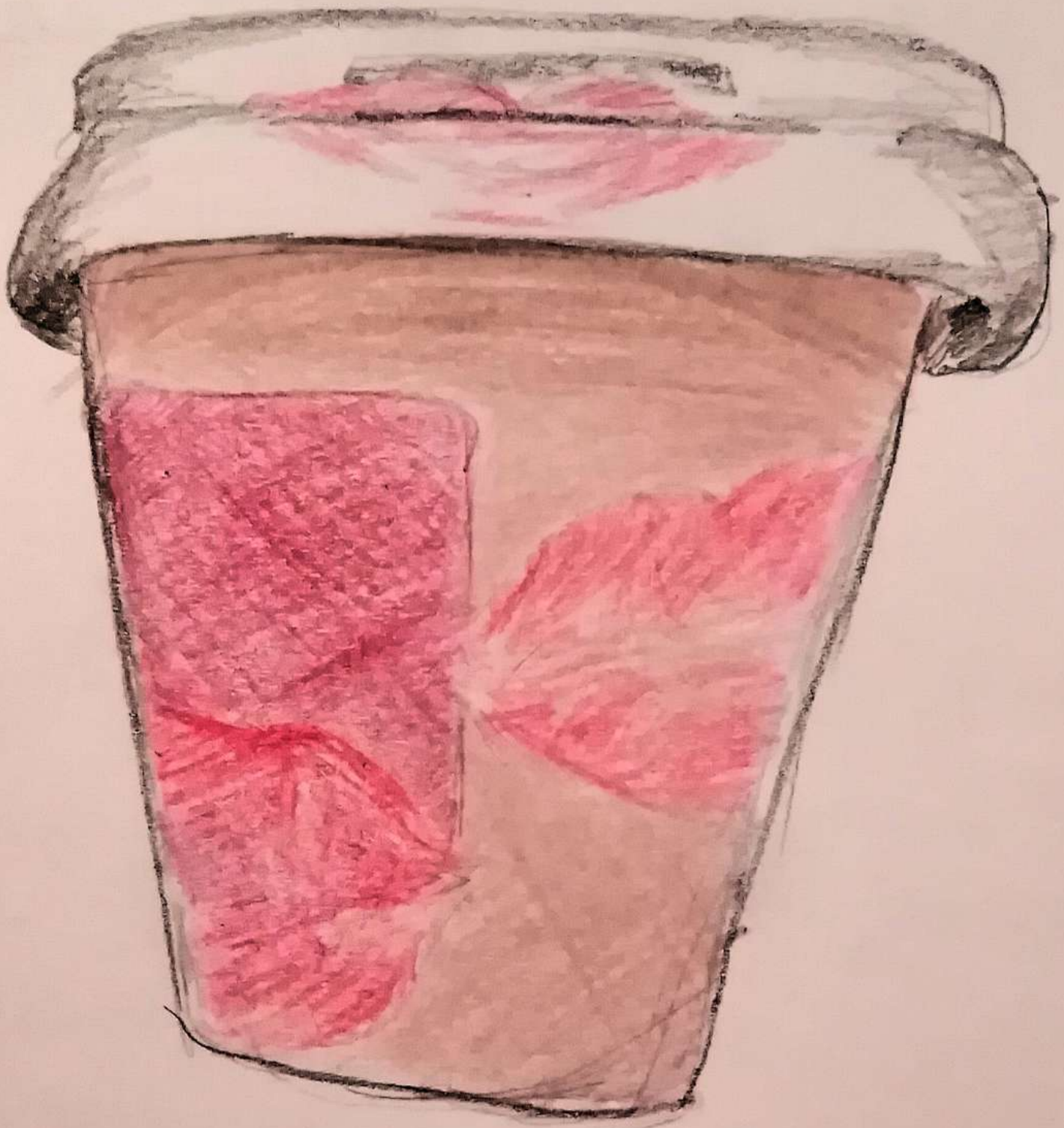


Illustration by: Sharmin Ahmed

Cheese under the moonlight

Written by: Sharmin Ahmed
Edited by: Teo Catanescu

Nights' quiet settled over the little terraced house, wherein the residence had long-since given up to slumber, deaf to the squeaks bouncing off their walls.

Three mice scurried across the passageway floorboards and onto the kitchen's blue and white linoleum tiles, cold under their pink little toes. They weaved between the towering wooden legs of the kitchen table and chairs and stopped by a pedal bin next to the kitchen counter.

The oldest and largest of the three stepped forward. He was a white mouse speckled with brown dots who carried a backpack over his shoulders. He stood on his hind legs and poked his nose into the air, wiggling his whiskers and sniffing for food. He jumped onto the smooth, metal pedal of the bin, squeaking open the lid, and leapt up. Then, he bounced off the lid rim as it opened up, seconds before it could close, and landed on the counter.

The mouse beckoned with his paws for the younger mice, his ten-year-old children, to follow. They exchanged nervous glances at each other before the more confident of the two, older by a few mere seconds, took a determined step forward and followed in her father's footsteps to perfection. Her brother, Fido, remained frozen to his paws, eight little fingers twitching with nerves. He inched up slowly, unable to control his ragged breaths, then stopped with hesitation.

"Fido," his father called out, looking down from the edge and cupping his paws around his mouth to amplify his voice. "You can do this!" Fido let out a breath and jumped, but not up to the lid. It snapped open and shut, open and shut, but Fido would not go further, only continuing to jump up and down on the pedal. He was sure it'd swallow him whole and he'd never see the light of day ever again.

"Come on, Fido!" his father shouted, paternal worry shaking his old heart, conflicting with the determination and trust he held that his son could do it.

Fido jumped again, reaching for the lid this time, but fear froze his body. He thudded to the ground. His father gasped with horror and scampered down to help his son up. Fido whimpered, but he wasn't hurt.

"Maybe we should go home," Fido's father said softly.

"But, we came all this way," Fido piped, tears welling in his eyes. He didn't want to go back empty-handed. He'd be a failure; his older siblings wouldn't let him live it down with all the teasing they'd give him. They all had stories of glory about their first scavenges and Fido didn't want to be the first who had a lousy one.

He wanted to show his family he was just as capable as everyone else.

"I found something," Pepper shouted, gone from view. She reappeared by the edge and threw a long yellow string that, unbeknownst to her and Fido, was a noodle stained with bolognese sauce, something they hadn't seen before. "You guys can climb up."

"I don't know Pep—" their father began.

"I can do it!" Fido stood up and gripped his fists with resolve.

"If that's what you want…"

"Thanks, Pops." Fido stepped onto the pedal once more, with an unstable breath, and after a few moments, he leapt up and successfully gripped the noodle. He climbed up, staining his hands with the sauce, and made it to the top. The little mouse smiled with triumph as Pepper applauded him. He licked his paws to clean them and his eyes widened, delightfully surprised by the meaty tomato flavour and licked his paws more intensely. Pepper pouted with jealous eyes that Fido already had the chance to start eating.

"Well done, Fido," The kids' father said as he jumped onto the counter, the sound of the bin lid snapping behind him. Fido's lips tugged up into a proud grin. However, it was short-lived. He knew he should have been able to get up without any help, instead, he took the easy route and that made his achievement feel hollow.

Fido and Pepper followed their father to a fruit bowl below the kitchen cupboards. Their noses twitched with excitement at all the juicy, fruity scents.

"Don't get distracted," their father threw over his shoulder as he climbed the fruit. "We aren't here for these." He reached up to the cupboard doors and pulled them open. The pups stared in awe at their father's strength, something they only heard in stories; they then climbed the fruit to join him, feeling an array of different textures under their paws from smooth to waxy, pulpy and bumpy. Pepper took a sneaky bite out of an apple and her father rolled his eyes in amusement, catching the loud crunch she made. Fido and Pepper made it into the cupboard, their father helping them both up.

Once they got onto their feet, their eyes twinkled in amazement and drool dripped down their mouths at the feast before them. Never had they seen so much food before. Their father rubbed both of their heads before turning their attention back to him so he could demonstrate how to nibble a hole into the food packages and grab crumbs to put in his backpack. The pups got moving, tearing into boxes and plastic packaging, grabbing whatever they could. Time was not on their side and they had to get a move on before a human woke up and spotted them. If that happened, only horror would follow.

Before they knew it, the bag was full, and what they could not stuff in, Pepper – being the greedy little pinky she was – decided to shove it all into her cheeks as if she were a hamster and not a mouse.

The trio made their way down the fruit bowl and back to the edge of the counter where the noodle was left. Their father froze in place and shot his hand out to stop his children from walking another step.

"Not. Another. Move." He whispered through gritted teeth, his voice cracking on the last word as he held a finger to his lip. Fido peeked over the ledge to see what had his father so on edge, spotting a large bushy tail brush past the bin. A shiver ran down his back as he held his breath, and so did the rest of his family, whilst the cat curled up and closed its eyes.

His father gulped, hesitating, struggling to think. Fido had never seen his father so scared before and it only made him feel all the more terrified.

"We'll…we'll go the other way," he finally spoke, still spooked, but he had to get it together. His youngest two were here and he had to stay strong for them, had to guide them, protect them. He led them to the kitchen sink and jumped onto the window ledge behind it to get around, and his children followed.

Fido stopped to look outside. The big, white moon shone in its full glory, beckoning him towards it. Its glow was ghostly but ethereal and weirdly warm. His late grandmother used to tell him tales about how mice originally came from The Moon. Their true home. A place where no predators sought to eat them and no humans would torment them. A place where food was in abundance and mice lived for as twice as long as they did on Earth. Fido had never seen the outside world let alone The Moon before and he felt robbed that this was his first time witnessing such beauty.

"Fido," his father called, snapping him out of his trance. "I know The Moon is beautiful. I could stare out at it all night myself, but tonight is not the night." Fido nodded, taking one last longing look before following.

The trio made it all the way around the kitchen; they jumped over electrical wires and traversed the maze of colouring pencils left by the human children. Underneath the pencils, was a drawing of an object, fire blazing from its bottom as it seemed to fly to The Moon. Fido wanted to analyse it, but he could not stop. He wondered if there truly was a way to The Moon. If the mice came down to Earth then surely there was a way back up.

They made it out of the kitchen; the feline was still curled up by the bin.

"We should be safe for now," Fido's father breathed out, relaxing a little. The trio walked towards their home not too far away.

He looked over his shoulder and gave his children a pleased smile. “I think we did good today, kiddos. I’m proud of you both.” Fido and Pepper exchanged gleeful looks, trying to hold their cheer until they were in the safety of their home. Fido trailed behind, at ease, and content with himself. Sure, he wasn’t quite the master yet but he got the job done and escaped the clutches of the feline beast. A tale that can live up to everyone else's first adventure.

Fido slowed down to a stop as his nose picked up on a faint but usually pungent, earthy yet slightly milky aroma. He poked his nose in the air trying to find where it came from. *Sniff. Sniff.* Delighted bewilderment struck his eyes. If his nose wasn’t deceiving him, he was sure he smelt heaven. And, only one thing smelt like heaven.

“Cheese!” Fido scurried after the scent, leading him to the bottom of the staircase where an odd-looking contraption awaited him. He should have known better but the cheese messed with his brain and made him forgo his better judgement. He was in a state of slight craze as any mouse would be in. Cheese was a rare luxury, and there was more than one war over it in rodent history.

“Fido, no,” his father shouted, scampering after him with Pepper catching up in tow. Fido, hypnotised, reached for the piece of cheese attached to the springboard trap. “Fido! Stop! Fido! Don’t! It's a trap! Fido! **FIDOOOO!**” his father cried, his voice cracked in pained horror as an agonising lump formed in his throat. He couldn’t lose Fido. He wouldn’t allow it. Not his youngest. Not his baby. He leapt forward without a seconds thought and pushed Fido out of the way.

A loud snap pierced through the air. Pepper screamed. Fido opened his eyes, dread smacking him in the face as he looked over at his father trapped under the metal bar. He was alive but half his body was stuck. There was blood dripping down the metal bar and his father grunted in anguish.

“I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry,” Fido repeated over and over again as tears dripped down his fur. Pepper tried to push the metal bar off her father but she was too weak. “Fido, help me.” He rushed to her side and pushed but they still couldn’t lift it even an inch. They both continued, sobbing at their futility as their father tried to comfort them and provide words of encouragement.

“You two go home. It’s okay. Leave me. I’m an old man anyway.” He smiled with a breathy humourless laugh. “I love you both, and you tell everyone else I love them too.”

“No, no, no, no, no.” Pepper shook her head erratically. “I’m…I’m…I’m going to go get mum.” She hurried off home, to the hole behind a cabinet at the end of the passageway, as her father called out to her. Fido stayed behind and continued pushing.

“I’m so sorry, pops. I didn’t mean for this to happen. It all happened so fast. I wasn’t thinking straight. I made such a beginner's mistake. I should have known it was a trap.”

“It’s okay, Fido, it’s okay.” He caressed his son's head. “I know, it was a mistake. Cheese is a blessing and a curse all in one. It’s not your fault. Not your fault at all, so stop blaming yourself.”

Fido let out a cry of relief as he saw the rest of his family race down the passageway, rushing over to help him. They mustered up all the strength they could and eventually, they managed to push the metal bar up and release Fido’s father from its clutches, taking him home.

Back home, everyone huddled around their father. All but Fido, who sat watching from the darkness of a corner, ashamed of himself as his mother wrapped up his father's arms and legs in bandages.

“I don’t think you’ll be able to walk again, Maverick,” she said solemnly. Shocked and disheartened gasps erupted across the room. Maverick sucked in a stabbing breath and smiled, determined to keep a brave face for his family but he couldn’t hide the disappointment and sorrow from his eyes. Fido tucked himself into a ball, trying to hide in the shadows as his guilt gnawed on him harder.

Pepper gripped her fists in anger and stomped towards Fido. “This is all your fault Fido. Because of you, Dad will never walk again.” She tried to hold back her tears but her eyes betrayed her and the tears fell hot and fast.

“Come now, Pepper,” her father tried, “let’s not blame Fido.” Pepper crawled in under her father’s bed sheets and snuggled up against him; he wiped away her tears. As his family’s undivided attention turned back to his dad, Fido glanced at the framed drawing of The Moon that hung up on the wall of their one-room home. He wanted to see the beautiful glow of The Moon again, show everyone else so it could soothe his family’s sorrow. Oh, how he wished they could all go there right now. His father wouldn’t have been injured if they lived in their rightful home, not in this dangerous dump they have to make do with.

He snuck out, not that he had to try to go unnoticed, and went in search of the drawing he saw the human children make. If there was truly a way to The Moon, he was going to make it happen and bring his family true solace.

He peeked into the kitchen. The cat had gone. An empty feeling sank deep within his heart and the realisation that he was doing this all alone washed over him.

Illustration by Sharmin Ahmed

It made the kitchen look even bigger and intimidating than it already was and Fido was all the more susceptible to danger. Not like he could turn back now. He already made it this far all by himself and he had to see it through.

He took a shaky step forward and froze, the hairs on his back stood up as hot air, which he soon realised to be hot breaths, breathed down onto him. He slowly turned around to meet the large, round and hungry yellow eyes of the local monster wearing a large Cheshire cat-like grin, all fangs razor-sharp and on for show.

Fido attempted to run away but the feline trapped his tail under his big fuzzy paw. Fido's legs still ran making the cat's smile all the wider. He chuckled a low, gravelly, rhythmic chuckle, humoured by the little mouse's act.

"Please don't eat me," Fido cried. The cat let out a loud bellowing laugh that shook the very ground Fido stood on.

"Eat you?" the cat said, amusement singing in his tone. His voice was the soulful growl of thunder, the smoothened comfort of carnage. If Fido weren't trapped by this predator then he'd be put at ease by it. "I'm sorry but not sorry to say that my tastes are far too refined for the likes of vermin." He let go of Fido's tail and snootily held his head up high and proud "I only eat gourmet." He paused. "But…I do like to play with your type. It is fun watching you try to get away." The cat chuckled again, showing off his wide grin. Despite that, Fido stood, unafraid; he knew it was stupid, but he felt a weird sense of trust that the cat would not harm him. The cat was big with dark grey puffy fur, and only now did Fido notice the red bow tie around his neck.

"Ah, I should bless you with my name or at least what the humans would like to call me. Only felines can speak and hear our true names after all." He held out his paw. "Salem." Fido looked at it in confusion. Salem rolled his eyes. "Oh, what am I to do for some sophisticated company around here?" he sighed, "you shake it with your paw and state your name."

"Ohh. I'm Fido." He did as he was told with a sheepish smile.

"A mouse with that retched canine's name?" Salem's body recoiled in disapproval "Eugh, how disgusting...Now, tell me little Fido, what brings you out here alone?"

"I'm trying to find a way to The Moon and I saw a drawing—"

"The Moon?" the cat burst out laughing, wriggling and rolling on the floor. Fido shrunk into himself, embarrassed, his ears falling to the sides of his head. Salem came to, standing back upright, wiping a tear. "I have not had a good laugh like that in a long while."

"I'll tell you what little Fido. The humans have been to The Moon many times before in these great big machines known as rockets. The human child was playing with a toy one earlier today. Left it in the garden, she did.

Now, it'll take a lot of work and it might even be impossible, but perhaps, perhaps, you'll manage to get it working like a real one, one day." Fido's ears perked up and his eyes brightened with hope. "Come, follow me."

Salem led Fido through the backdoor catflap and into the crisp night air. Fido had never felt such a thing. It was refreshing. It made him feel alive and all the more determined. The feline tilted his head towards the end of the garden where a large apple tree stood. "You'll find what you're looking for there." He turned around and sashayed back in.

"Hey! Where are you going?" Fido asked.

Salem poked his head through the catflap. "To get my beauty sleep. It's how I get such luxurious fur." And with that, he was back inside, leaving Fido alone in a world he'd never seen before. He took a step off the tarmac and onto the grass, giggling as the blades tickled his feet. Fido scampered towards the tree the cat pointed him towards, and before he knew it, he caught a glimpse of the red rocket. He sped up, excited. He was inches away from touching the smooth plastic until he found himself scooped up into the air by the claws of an owl.

Fido screamed as the air rushed past him and the ground moved further and further away from him. "Hey! Stop! Take me back down!" Fido called out but the owl could not hear nor would she care if she could. She dropped Fido into a hollow in the apple tree and flew off. Fido rushed to the edge of the hole, calling out to her but she got smaller and smaller into the distance until she became a speck that disappeared.

He stood on the edge, prepared to jump until he looked down at the long drop below and stepped back, feeling dizzy. He bumped into a warm feathery body and turned around to find an owlet behind him. He yelped and jumped. The owlet stared at him intently with beady brown eyes and licked her beak.

"Are you my dinner?" she asked. Fido lost his voice for a second as he tried to process everything.

"No, no, no," he managed with haste, trying to steal Pepper's quick-thinking abilities for at least a moment. "I...I...erm…I'm, I'm a friend." He grinned nervously, hoping she'd buy it, and extended his hand as Salem did with him just before. "I'm Fido."

"A friend?" the chick exclaimed with glee. "I've never had one of those before." She flapped her wings in elation, bouncing up and down. "I'm Nina. What game should we play?"

"Uhh…" Fido glanced at Nina's wings."Oh, oh, do you want to fly me to The Moon?"

"Fly?" Nina drew out, her ecstatic tone morphing into gloom. She frowned, lowering her head in shame and turned around.

"Nina, what's wrong?"

“I…can’t…fly yet.” She ruffled her feathers awkwardly.

“Oh...” Fido’s ears fell to his sides once more, in guilt and disappointment and then in even more guilt for feeling disappointed.

“All the other owls my age can fly but I can’t.” She lowered her head down to Fido’s level and whispered. “Don’t tell anyone but it’s because I’m scared.” Fido rubbed Nina’s soft, feathery head. He knew how she felt. It’s how he had been feeling this entire night, his entire life.

“I’m the loser in my family,” He sighed and sat on the edge of the tree hollow, swinging his legs up and down, staring up into The Moon, even bigger and more beautiful than it looked through the kitchen window. ”I can’t jump onto a lousy counter because I get scared. All my siblings can do so much better than me. They all have so many cool stories. My eldest brother once wrestled with the dreaded broomstick a human tried to whack him with, my sister saved my mother from the old house cat and what’s my story? I fell for a stupid trap and now my pops can’t walk.” Fido sighed. “I just want to get us to The Moon so we can live a life of peace for once.”

Nina listened intently, moved by her new friend's experiences. She gripped her feathers and narrowed her eyes in determination. A new-found resolution burned in her heart. “Hop on, Fido.” Nina crouched down to make it easier for Fido to climb up.

“I thought…”

“Friends help each other out! I’ll finally learn how to fly and you’ll have the coolest story ever to tell!”

Fido smiled, letting out a small grateful giggle. “Okay, let’s do this!” With a hop and a skip, he climbed onto Nina’s back. She gripped onto the edge of the hollow with her talons, breath coming out in harsh irregular takes.

“You can do this, Nina,” Fido said.

“I can do it,” she said softly, “I can do it. I can do it.” Nina closed her eyes and shook off her nerves, Fido yelped as he held on and Nina gave him a sheepish apology. She evened out her breaths, let out a yell, jumped and…fell. Fido screamed, holding so tight he was sure he’d rip Nina’s feathers off, as the rush of air tried to pry him off.

“Nina, Nina, you have to flap. You have to flap your wings.”

“I can’t!” she cried, anxiety caging her heart and freezing her wings.

“You can! You have to! Nina!” Nina took in quick, deep breaths and mustered all she could to flap her wings. She opened her eyes and saw that she was flying in mid-air.

“Fido, I’m doing it! I’m doing it!” She laughed, a squeak to her voice. Fido sighed with relief and congratulated her, proud of his new friend. Nina flew upwards towards The Moon.

It was all that she and Fido could keep their eyes on. Every so often she'd dip back down a little, still not quite used to flying, but she could catch herself and make up for the lost distance.

"You're doing great, Nina," Fido reassured, patting her feathery back.

"Nina?" a womanly voice shouted out in the distance. Nina's head snapped around.

"Mama?" Nina called out, flapping mid-air as she searched for her mother and found her flying towards them. "Mama! Look I'm flying." An overjoyed smile curled upon Nina's mother's beak. She flew joyous circles around her daughter. She couldn't believe it.

"Would you look at that?" she exclaimed, "I never thought I'd see the day."

"It's all thanks to my friend, Fido."

"Who?" The mother owl stopped and looked around until spotting Fido on Nina's back, waving his hands enthusiastically at her. She laughed hesitantly, unsure how to feel about her daughter making friends with dinner, but nonetheless, that could bother her less now that her daughter could fly.

"Come, let's go home and celebrate." She took another incredulous glance at Fido and made a note not to eat him. "Your *friend*…" She coughed. *"*...can join us."

"Oh no, but we have to go to The Moon."

"The Moon?" She almost choked on her breath. "No, no honey you can't go there. All creatures of the sky are forbidden from The Moon. Why do you think we stay down here?"

Nina's eyes welled with tears and Fido's ears drooped to his sides. "But Mama, I promised Fido I'd take him there."

"I'm sorry, dear. I didn't make these rules." Nina's mother glanced at Fido. "Sorry, Fido. It's a long story, but we avians have long been banished for millenniums. Only the moon mice live there now and they will protect that place with their lives."

Fido's bottom lip quivered. He was so close. So close. If only Nina's mother hadn't come to stop them but if what she said were true, he wouldn't have wanted to endanger Nina's life. It had only been a short friendship but like Nina, he'd never had a friend either, and he wouldn't have wanted something bad to happen to a friend, especially his first one.

"Come, let's take you both back home." Nina's mother said softly, sympathising with the children. "Have you heard of Rockets, Fido?"

"Yes," Fido said defeatedly. "But, Salem said it might be impossible."

As the owls approached the ground, Fido was shocked to see Salem leading his family out of the cat flap down below. They all rushed towards the owls, noticing Fido, calling out his name. The owls landed and Fido hopped off, caught into the arms of his nine siblings, who helped him safely to the ground.

“What were you thinking, Fido? Going to The Moon? That’s impossible,” his mother said, rushing to pick Fido up into her arms, and hugged him.

“I just…I just wanted a place where we didn’t have to worry about food or getting hurt.” Fido began to cry on her shoulder and held her tightly. Fido spotted his father sitting atop Salem, smiling softly and earnestly at him.

“Pops,” Fido began, letting go of his mother, rushing to climb up Salem.

“Hey, hey, grip gently. My fur is delicate.” Salem huffed. Fido sat beside his father.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean for anything bad to happen to you.”

“I know you didn’t.” Fido’s father brought him into a hug and kissed the top of his head. “It would have been lovely to go to The Moon and I’m proud that you tried your hardest to find a way, Fido, but, even if we may not like it, we must do with what we have. As long as we have each other we’re going to be okay.” The rest of the family climbed atop Salem’s back, much to his annoyed protests, and cuddled in one big family hug.

Nina’s mother wiped a tear from her eye, touched by the display of familial camaraderie. She looked down at Nina tugging at her wing, eyes widening in an adorable pleading gaze. She rolled her eyes, surrendering, unable to say no to that squishable face, and hopped towards the mouse family.

“I know I said we were forbidden, but…I guess I can break some rules and take you lot to The Moon.”

“Really?” Fido piped, his eyes glistening, his lips tugging into a grin wide enough to rival Salem’s.

“Really, but I suggest you take me up on my offer quickly before I change my mind.” Fido exchanged looks with his family and with that they spent their last moments on Earth.

Nina’s mother flew the mouse family up into the night sky. She swooped and soared, the blast of air invigorating everyone. Everyone but Pepper, much to Fido’s shock, who held on for dear life. He took his twin’s hand in his and gave it a tender squeeze. She squeezed back and smiled gratefully, not letting go.

“Fido, I’m sorry for saying all of that awful stuff,” Pepper said sheepishly, letting out a cry as the mother owl increased her speed.

“It’s okay. I deserved it.”

“No, you didn’t. “ Nina shook her head ”You’re amazing, Fido.”

Fido smiled sheepishly at the comment, looking below at Nina and Salem waving up at him and he waved back. He couldn’t have done it without them.

Excitement bubbled amongst the family as The Moon grew bigger and bigger than they ever imagined it to be. They entered the vacuum of space and Fido looked back at the mystical blue of The Earth shimmering within his amazed eyes. He never knew it was so beautiful. So vast. A part of him was going to miss it. Despite everything, it *was* his home for ten mouse years of his life.

As they entered the lunar atmosphere, arrows and rocks were shot into the sky and Fido could spy mice hiding in craters and behind rocks.

"This is as far as I can go. You're going to have to jump." Nina's mother said, flapping mid-air. The family exchanged nervous looks. They were quite high up. "Don't worry you'll float down, " she added, picking up on the agitation.

They all held hands, taking the mother owl's word and jumped, and like she said; they floated. She turned around and flew back to Earth. The rocks and arrows stopped and The Moon Mice came out of hiding, the same colour as the rock they stood on. They had singular antennas poking out from the top of their heads and carried around a tranquil milky glow. Lunar dust tickled Fido's feet as he touched the ground and The Moon Mice approached carefully, watching The Earth mice in awe. They smiled and welcomed their fellow brethren with loving embraces and shared their cheese.

A cup of tea for our thoughts at 10pm greenwich mean time

Written by: Teo Catanescu
Edited by: Deborah Kelty

It's late, and you're back from:
Work-slash-school-slash-club,
And I'm pouring you a cup of tea.
From a cafetiere that's been falling apart for months,
Because I'm charming like that, and I love
Making tea for friends.

There's steam freely flowing from the top,
Matching how your breath fogged up outside.
I wonder, sometimes: What it's like…
Being so busy all the time –
Is it tiring? Is it worth it?
Does it make some part of you feel more alive?

I stare into my own mug,
(A little bit upset at all the dregs that made it down).
And I think to myself that maybe
It's bad that I'm so comfortable to
Just be here instead. Settled, like
Green tea. Stagnant. Complacent.

When did I let my dreams go cold?
Did I ever have dreams at all, or were they
Really just wishes I had to be happy?
That I pressed up overtime
Into practical, pyramid-shaped packaging
Promoting all the ways I could get the job done?

Perhaps I oversteeped the tea, come to think of it.
It's very possible *I* was oversteeped too at one point,
But it's no matter now. It's warm in here,
Fake plastic candles lighting up a dark room,
And I look up and remember that
You always needed consistency to keep you calm.

It's easy to worry too much about myself,
But you remind me why it's so difficult to be that frantic.
Sometimes, I think you're too hard to please
For regular life, always running towards things
You learn not to like
After too little time,

And I'm glad that I can't understand it much,
Honestly, but I'll let you tell me all about it.
Tell me the story over tea.
Green, to wash our minds clean.
It's the least I can do, and it's small but… *inviting*,
And something in it is like a wish come true.

For now, I'm alright. I'm more than happy not to move.
I'm happy to breathe in. I'll take a sip.
I'll bask in this
Little pocket of
Time with you.

From Pho with love

Written by: Pham Thu Hang
Edited by: Ollie Hadgie

My dear sweet Hana Pham,

I know we exchange short text messages via Instagram like…every week but this time, I want to write a letter for you, a truly long one, exactly. Don't worry, I won't ramble on for 18 pages, FRONT AND BACK, I promise.

As I sit down to write this letter, all the memories come rushing back. Do you remember when we first talked to each other? Yes, we matched on Bumble while both used finding a best friend function. As a young dude backpacking to an exotic country that was 13,814 km away, I downloaded this app with a one-and-only purpose: to find a accompany to wander around Hanoi and find the best places to eat. So the moment I saw your profile, I knew you were the one! We clicked so fast since the very first messages and eventually, I did ask you to become my tour guide in Hanoi to walk me through many backstreets and hidden alleyways in the old quarter and hitting all the food stops along the way. And because you are a Pho girl at heart, you took me to so many Pho spots that I couldn't remember them all too well. And thank you for that!

What started out as "just another Asian beef noodle" ended up being my "pho-losophy." Taking a spoon, hot broth, sliced rare beef, cilantro, basil, and chilly seasonings burst into my mouth. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses. I love the way you often evaluate the flavors of different pho restaurants by trying a spoonful of the original broth before adding any accompanying condiments. The first sip of pho broth is crucial when enjoying pho because it's the moment when the eater silently assesses whether the broth is a work of art and determines how to season it. Your perfect bowl of pho is a harmonious combination of steaming hot broth, a touch of garlic-infused vinegar, and sautéed chili.

"Don't forget to order 2 crispy golden Quẩy (fried dough sticks)!"

Your voice couldn't hide the excitement when explaining to me how Hanoians see Quẩy as a companion for Pho.

The ways to eat Quẩy also differ among different persons but your way is lightly dipping them into the rich broth and savoring them immediately after a few seconds when they have soaked up the sweet flavors of Pho. I had my own style though: order a separate bowl of phở broth, topped with pepper to dip Quẩy and I was surprised you kept calling it “weird but tasty” and couldn't stop asking me when I would open my restaurant with this creative way of enjoying Quẩy with Pho.

“Rumor has it that Pho was the treat of Vietnamese on special occasions since it was the kind of food people go for when they are BORED OF RICE, CRAVE FOR PHO” you said. This idiom came from the fact that Com (Cooked Rice) was eaten all year long, meanwhile, Pho represented something more flavorsome and adventurous. In other words, this phrase refers to having an affair. At that time, I thought that made no sense, but now, sometimes I feel I may wanna cheat on my mac-and-cheese with a hot bowl of Pho. Did I just say “hot” or should I say ‘sexy”? HAHAHA. Funny, isn’t it? You also mentioned that Pho was rarely cooked at home as the dish itself was complicated and required a lot of ingredients. Therefore, incoming bold statement: I have never had a good Pho since. I think have tried to make homemade Pho myself several times because NYC doesn’t serve Pho right and the broth is just mediocre. Recipes are all over the Internet, but if you know any tips, please share with me!
I miss Pho, and I also miss your dimpled smile, your gap between the teeth, and your all-of-the-sudden word plays when you found something hilarious like you named me Pho-tanstic boy. I miss you, my best foodie friend!

Can’t wait to see you again soon!
Peter

Dear pho-tanstic Peter,

I kept you waiting long enough, didn’t I?

Since resigning from my previous role, I have been diligently navigating the challenges of managing life. It hasn't been easy, but I am determined to make the most of this transition. However, this time of the year is perfect for enjoying a bowl of Pho Bo (beef noodles). Despite fairly moderate temperatures, Hanoi's weather feels bloody cold. Frequent freezes have joined the chilly party which makes a hot Pho become my comfort food for my hunger and my soul. Its warm broth, flavorful ingredients, and comforting aroma provide a moment of solace and rejuvenation. Whether I'm enjoying it alone or with loved ones, a bowl of pho reminds me to take a pause, savor the present, and find comfort amidst the hardships.
I still remember taking you to local pho restaurants last summer because you kept asking to try more versions of pho after tasting the first one even though it once burned your mouth.

You are always a boy with a "thousand sunshine" smile and even cook well and that's over. I still remember you made me the best Key lime pie as the returning gift for my tour guide career, which was of course showed you around Hanoi. When I was out eating something with you, I often made comparisons between the taste of a random dish and my all-about-bullshit-workplace emotions so much that everyone else definitely felt way too negative:
"This Quẩy is so crunchy that is nearly the same as when I defend myself against a toxic boss and at the end of the chat, I am the one to laugh."
"This sweet soup is perfectly mixed until you chew over some boiled beans and I don't know what's the point of putting them into which makes me feel like I wake up on Saturday and see the HR's messages calling everyone to the company for an all of the sudden company event!"
I'm glad you didn't have a normal human reaction. Instead, you even taught me some funny slang to criticize these people. I love that you joked with me!

Your dream is to become a cultural chef, who learns about different cuisines of other countries, upgrades the recipes, and opens a little restaurant for yourself.

You said it shouldn't be too big because you can't take control of the quality and you love to chit-chat with customers while cooking instead of creating a hustle and bustle kitchen with tons of unknowns. I know you can do it. You are the most talented human being.

Your business model doesn't sound appealing regarding investment, but it sounds really cool to me and I guess so much more to other people. Have you watched the Midnight Diner series on Netflix? Your business idea reminds me of that show a lot. So if you have free time, please give it a try to get more inspiration.

I ain't a good cook but I know all the ingredients, so I made this Pho-inspired playlist including all the songs with the same name as Pho's ingredients. You better try your best to recreate Pho at home and show it to me. I can't wait to see how it turns out. You can also jam along to these incredibly unami songs while making Pho for your family.

Please come back to Hanoi soon. I bet you don't want to miss the supreme taste of pho in winter. Urggg, so fuckin goooooood!

I love you, bro!

Illustration by: Sharmin Ahmed

How to spell home

Written by: Ollie Hadgie
Edited by: Roos van der Velden

I cannot spell home
the letters don't fit and the syllables feel clumsy when I speak
but I know it all the same

my mother never let us go hungry
of all the curses she folded into blessings
it sat not among them
clucking for our attention

instead it drifted as a phantom
a faint pressure against a page
that could become a gaping wound on throbbing skin

like a child stood against the cliff's edge
imagining his body dashed against the rocks
we held hunger in one palm
while the other pushed up and helped swallow

I cannot spell home
the letters don't fit and the syllables feel clumsy when I speak
but I can feel it all the same

hissing garlic as it hits the oil
orange spices bolder than the sun
mouths too full to speak yet they
echo so loudly nonetheless

The 7 seeds

Written by: Maria Margarida
Edited by: Kristy Tianner

I had it. Right there.

No one was looking. I was alone in the garden. Although it was hardly a garden, claimed entirely by blackened trees and bushes drier than the desert's sand. In the absence of better words, I'll call it a garden.

The Dead Garden.

In the midst of the ash and the death, there it was. A pomegranate tree. Living, no, surviving. Its leaves were as dark as everything surrounding it, but the fruit it bore was bright red. It gleamed in the darkness, drawing me in.

It was the only living thing across these lands. I have spent hours looking at it through my bedroom window. The vivid red conjured thoughts of blood.

Perhaps they were grown from the blood of the innocents who crossed this Kingdom too soon. My hands certainly gained a murderous look after I picked one and cracked it open.

I had been fasting for almost three months. Even a Goddess like me could feel her body weakening. Though I couldn't die, I certainly was praying for a way out of that wretched place. Suicide had crossed my mind a million times, but my mother kept visiting my dreams, giving me the strength to endure another day of torture.

But on that particular day, it wasn't my mother on my mind.

On that moonless night, I caught the pale guard sleeping at my bedroom door and made my escape. I was being held captive by Hades, the infernal king. He kidnapped me himself with the intent to forcibly marry me. Fortunately, I knew the Laws of Gods. He couldn't marry me without mine and my parents' consent.

I knew my mother would never stand by this.

That night, I had a chance to run away and I took it.

I was finally free of that stoned, grey Palace. I knew there was a door in the garden that led outside, to the gates of Hell if I could follow a sinuous road that crossed the Village of the Dead without being noticed. And, of course, without touching the Waters.

All I had to do was run through the garden and cover myself well under my black cloak. But I was weak. I hadn't eaten in what seemed like forever, and my body was betraying me.

I couldn't eat, I know I couldn't. But if no one saw me, maybe I could get away with eating just a few pomegranate seeds. Just enough to fuel the journey ahead of me.

I kneeled on the floor. The cracked pomegranate was so tempting… With a quick look around, I picked one seed and quickly put it in my mouth.

An explosion of bittersweet juice got me teared up. I grabbed another one, and another, and another. The fruit was heavenly, something I could barely remember feeling. How did a land filled with ugliness create something so beautiful?

Afraid of getting discovered, I got up and ate three more seeds before hiding the pomegranate under my cloak. No one would ever know what I'd done if I left Hell before dawn.

I ran to the high walls, blindly searching for the metal door. My heart was speeding in my chest, and I could hear my shallow breath like it was a scream in the middle of the silent night.

At last, I touched the thick metal doors. I grabbed the handle and quickly opened the doors. It creaked loud, and a lantern with a blue, bright flame was lit up.

"Who's there?" - a male voice was heard in the night. When I left the Palace, the guards were changing shifts, but now they were ready to attack if needed and focused on their duty.

I didn't waste more time being cautious. I ran through the thin dirt path down the hill, hoping I could get to the Village before they realized I was the one in the dark.

I overheard horses and shouts of men behind me. I was close to the end of the hill, and I knew I had a chance of hiding in the alleys of the Village if I was strong enough to get there.

I quickly grasped for air. My naked feet were burning from the poison ivy I had stepped on.

The sulfuric air made it hard to breathe, and my thin, weakened body was starting to fail me. Tears started falling down my cheeks, hot against the cold skin.

I hadn't stopped running, no matter how hard my body begged for a break.

I was now in front of a thin river, and the hill was behind me. I had to be very cautious. If I touched the Dead Waters, I'd be forever lost in the sea of agonizing souls. It was just a stream, but it was more dangerous than the ivy I had stepped on that was now turning my feet black.

I carefully crossed the thin streamlet, and as I looked behind me, I noticed how the lights were approaching me. I had to be fast; otherwise, they would catch me and imprison me again.

Or much worse, if the gardener noticed the lack of a pomegranate I'd be doomed to marry Hades, that bastard, and live forever in that cursed place.

Gaining courage, I started running again towards the Village. I could see small houses becoming visible on the outskirts but the horse hooves hitting the ground were getting louder and louder.

"Pardon me, dear Mother, my pillar of peace. Help me and please forgive me." - I murmured, in despair.

They were too close, and I still had the pomegranate with me. I had to get rid of it and fast.

Finally, I reached the alley leading to the inner city streets. The Village of the Dead was now right in front of me. I couldn't give up; I had to keep going.

I hid in one of the tortuous streets. I still had some advantage; nobody knew I was gone, only the Palace guards. If I kept my head low and my cloak tight, I could maybe cross the Village before they could catch me.

I discreetly let what was left of the pomegranate slide out of my hand. It ended up in such a dark corner, that no one would ever find it.

I looked around for any sign of the top of the ridiculous bronze statue that stood in the main square. I'd been there before, in one of Hades' failed attempts at courtship. Showing me his Kingdom didn't provoke any feelings within me other than the desire to escape.

If I could get there, I would find the way home. I remembered the path to Olympus.

The once silent Village was now starting to wake up. It was almost dawn, and with all the noise the guards were making, everyone was looking out the window to know what the fuss was about.

I kept walking as fast as I could, even though the blackness of my feet had gone up to my knees. The poison was burning my veins, and the pain was becoming excruciating.

"In here! She's in here!" I looked up to see a pale woman with greasy, thin black hair in a piece of rag, screaming at the top of her lungs shaking one blue-flamed torch in a window.

My once pure, loving heart was now filled with hate. I took a second to take a good look at her face and look her in the eyes. I would remember her and would come back for revenge.

I wasn't able to run anymore. I was trying as hard as I could, but my legs were becoming slower and slower. Almost ready to give up, I finally found the main square. The chalky paved stone floors were cold beneath my feet. I had no idea how I got there, but there it was: the giant, bronze, pompous Hades statue in the middle of the square.

Refusing to quit, I started running again. Across the damned square, there was a street that could lead me home.

My feet were ice cold, and every step felt like needles poking my soles. The poison made my blood hard as stone, and my skin was rotting. I was crying compulsively. At least, as compulsively as you can when you're running for your life.

I heard the horses and the men screaming behind me.

They had found me.

I was almost there.

So, so close…

The morning breeze was gently stroking my face. The sun doesn't shine in Hell; there's always fog that keeps away the bright light. But the skies turn white. And the white skies were already awaking, finally saying goodbye to the darkness of the night. The misty streets had no secrets now: everyone could see me.

The street was just one step away. I never got to cross it. I felt a large calloused hand grip the back of my cloak and yank me upwards. Just as quickly as I was lifted, I fell down again with a force. The air was knocked out of my lungs, and I thought I was going to die.

After a few rapid breaths, I realized what had happened. I was now laying across the body of the horse. I could feel the guard's pommel digging into my side. Tears were quietly falling down my face as I stared at the sky and tried to breathe.

"How did she get here? Look at her feet!" - The rude man kept commenting on my body with his peers while he tied me down, first like I was an object, then like I was the devil itself.

"We will go down for this." Underneath his anger was a tremor of fear. They both hated and feared me. No one was able to survive the poisonous Ivy, let alone run and walk all those miles.

While the troops regrouped to take me back to the Palace, I saw a golden shine in the sky. I blinked twice, to make sure I wasn't hallucinating. Maybe I was… After all, I was supposed to be dead after the Ivy's poison.

My heart skipped a beat when I realized what the shine was.

"Hermes! Hermes!" - The messenger of the Gods was here. I started shouting with the strength I had left, crying like a baby again.

He came closer, firstly curious, then appalled. Upon seeing Hermes, the guards pushed the horses to gallop towards the Palace. I was Hades' dirty little secret, and no one outside Hell should have known about me. "Persephone?"

"Tell my mother! Tell my mother!" - I kept shouting the same, hoping he would hear me in the midst of all the noise the men and horses were making. We were moving fast, so fast Hermes himself couldn't fly alongside us.

Without any more tears to shed and a renovated sense of hope in my heart, I felt my lids becoming heavy and everything went dark.

I woke up later that day in my bedroom. My body hurt badly, and when I tried to move, I noticed I had both legs wrapped in bandages together. I couldn't run away now, not even to the bathroom.

"Don't move; you need to rest." - Hades was sitting across the room, hiding in the dark. I pretended he hadn't scared me and sat up to face him, with a daring look in my eyes.

"What are you doing here?"

"I was worried about you," he said as he got up and walked over to me. He sat gently on my bed, trying to avoid my aching feet. "What you did was foolish."

"Foolish?" My burning anger was visible on my face, but he didn't seem to notice. "Foolish was you kidnapping me. Let me go! This madness has been going on for far too long."

"I must. Your mother is coming with Zeus. I must let you go." A flicker of sadness crossed his stony expression. It passed in a millisecond. If you blinked, you would've missed it.

Meanwhile, my heart was burning with the good news: I was finally going home.

"I love you, Persephone."

"You're sick." We stared into each other's eyes for what seemed like an eternity. He was clearly hurting, but all I could feel was anger and disgust.

My mother burst into the room, breaking our connection. She wailed in pain when she saw me, tears running down her face. I was sick, had lost a lot of weight, and my previously vibrant skin now looked dead and pale due to the lack of sun and food. She ran towards me, hugged me crying, cursed Hades, and threw him death stares only a mother could.

She took my face in her hands, kissed my forehead, and my cheeks rapidly. Zeus came in and looked down at his brother, still sitting on the bed.

"Hello, brother." Zeus smirked.

The old hate towards his brother overcame the pain he was feeling about losing his beloved. He cleared his throat, and stood up, putting on a serious, unreadable face—the King's face, as I'd later come to call it.

"Hello, Zeus."

"I like what you've done with the place. It's not as funereal as I expected."

"How nice of you to find the time to visit our parents."

Zeus' smirk faltered slightly. "You know why I'm here."

They stared into each other's eyes, noses wrinkled, mouths tight.

I stopped listening then. My mother was trying to lift me and loosen the bandages, so I could walk. I hadn't been able to say a word yet. I was in too much shock, and I could barely believe I was finally going home.

"You will pay for this." My mother bellowed, pointing one delicate finger towards Hades with unbridled rage. Hades said nothing, but a slight smirk fell upon the corner of his lips. After all, she was Demeter. A Goddess capable of great harm, just not in Hell.

When I was finally up on my feet, a deformed servant burst into the room. "My King!", he urgently yelped.

His tiny little legs stopped abruptly at the sight of four deities in that cramped cell. At first, his eyes opened in surprise but he quickly adjusted his features upon making eye contact with Zeus.

"King Zeus!" After two clumsy and awkward bows, he ran to his Master. Hades leaned down to allow the servant to whisper in his ear. His expression slowly changed as he listened.

Zeus had sat on the chair, watching them with a flicker of amusement, internally judging Hell's routines and inhabitants.

I didn't care to find out what he was saying. The Hell drama didn't interest me at all and my legs were starting to swell. I gently pulled my mother's white, silk sleeve and gestured to her that we leave.

She gave me a curt nod and wrapped her arm around my waist to help me walk to the door. We made it no more than seven steps before I felt the air shift.

"Stop!" Hades commanded, with a little, evil trace of a smile. "Persephone, do you know the rules of Hell?"

My mother stopped in her tracks. Her back stiffened. I looked up from my poisoned feet towards her face. Our eyes met and she closed hers slowly as she sighed in exasperation. She took one look at him over her shoulder and after analyzing the smile on his face, assisted me in turning slowly to face him.

"Yes, why?" My voice was dry and empty of emotion.

"Well, I was just informed you ate a pomegranate from my Garden. If you know the laws, you know what this means…" Zeus and my mother looked at me with doubt.

"She didn't eat anything. She wouldn't!" My mother said, becoming defensive over me once more. Her grip tightened around me. Her nails dug into my skin but I ignored it.

Zeus was alerted to the shift in the air and stood up straight. His demeanor became serious and he threw a worried look at his sister, who had an animalistic glaze in her eyes. He knew how dangerous she could be and he didn't want to disturb the delicate balance on which he had built his throne.

"Oh, but she did. Seven pomegranate seeds, to be exact." Hades then took the damned pomegranate out of his pocket smiling and showed it to everyone. There they were, the seven holes where the seeds used to be.

"It's impossible! You're lying!" Demeter shrieked.

Tears started running down my face. I weakly grabbed her hand. Her nails were starting to hurt, and she needed to hear me.

"It's true, mother. I didn't eat anything else, but I was so weak yesterday that I had to. Otherwise, I would never have gotten to the Village."

She hugged me fiercely while I burst into tears.

"No! You won't take my baby."

She turned her desperate face towards Zeus with green pleading eyes.

"Zeus, there must be something you can do!"

He shook his head slightly and started to formulate words.

"She's your daughter too!"

"Demeter, I…"

"I won't grow another seed or grain until she's back home. Your beloved humans can die of starvation like my beloved daughter almost did."

"But Demeter, you can't…" Zeus' eyes widened at the mention of the possibility of destruction of his creations. He stepped forward with both arms extended in an attempt to reason with her.

"Watch me!" She roared while hugging me strongly.

Zeus took a wary step back and huffed a sigh. He sat on the chair once again and interlocked his palms in front of his face. He looked at both me and my mother at the door and Hades in front of him, standing tall, pale, and proud.

His eyes traveled between him and us. He sighed again and scratched his head, thinking about what to do.

"Demeter, I understand. You want your daughter back. But she did eat Hell's food, so, according to the law, she has to stay here."

My mother opened her mouth to interrupt him when he met her eyes with an intense, dangerous glare. Her mouth quickly closed and she lowered her gaze.

"Since both of you aren't ready to let her go, I suggest a compromise. As you both know," he took a moment to look into the eyes of both, "in a compromise, no one is truly happy with the result." Silence. The King was speaking and no one would dare to even take a breath, besides Hades.

"However, considering the difficult situation we're in, I think it's the only option. Demeter, you get to have Persephone for six months of the year. She can now return home, and you can stop the curses you've cast on mankind. Hades, you'll have Persephone here, in Hell, during the other 6 months. You'll have our blessing for the wedding, and she'll be Queen of Hell and sit next to you."

"Absolutely not!" My mother shouted.

"Demeter, this is my final decision." With a threatening look in his eyes, everyone in the room knew the decision was made.

And that is how I became Queen of Hell.

I got trapped in the underworld because of seven small pomegranate seeds.

People who say details don't matter clearly don't know what they're talking about.

Illustration by: Sharmin Ahmed

Consumed

Written by: Tsunami Ross
Edited by: Paula Espinosa

Who does your word feed?
Fuel your spirit?
Hold your tears?

Are you nourished in your consumption or a distraction from your void?

What does it mean to be filled?
Knowing that big empty is no longer in danger of swallowing you whole?

Dying the flowers pink from their naked white
A waste of good sense, says my mother
Wondering if she means me or the version of herself time swallowed up and spit out
Unsatisfied with the aftertaste of despair and resentment

I can’t remember the last time I ate a meal,
Slowly savoring each flavor, satiated, satisfied
Most meals now feel hurried, frantic,
in an anguished rush to see, feel, be what ‘s next
Forgetting the beauty that came before our destructive consumption

What does it mean to be satisfied, fulfilled by what you’ve chosen to
occupy the endless plate of time?
Munching on the hors d'oeuvres, snacks you mindlessly toss down your hatch
When your main course comes you realize there's no space left
But on and on you eat and eat and

What?
What comes next?

The purge of inconsistency
Hating yourself, the taste of the decisions you make, the menu of limited options-
but too afraid to try a new space,
a different place and colors, shapes and experiences
in the form of sensations and combinations strange sounding, unfamiliar?

A story written before your time that plays out in an unseen story line,
choose your adventure but it's already happened-
You can't be sure,
but you know it's there, waiting for you to see.

Keep yourself on the flavor train, darling.
Follow your nose to the delicious sensory experiences and find
sensual satisfaction in your short life.
The process needs no explanations,
just the pure enjoyment of where you are and that which comes with it

Food for thought:
Feed your spirit with truth and inscrutable transparency, and you'll find great ease in being free

Devil's Cabbage

Written by: Natasha Mikietyn
Edited by: Soyoon Koo

Well Mr. Mune, sir, my neighbour of five years, had gotten into the habit of blasting his radio every morning around 5am when he got up for work. We lived in one of those new neighbourhoods with identical, thin walled small houses, so the noise never failed to wake me up. And Mr. Mune knew this, sir. He also knew that I didn't get off work until late into the night, around 11pm, and that to wake me up so early was essentially to be depriving me of rest. Now, I had tried to confront Mr. Mune about this, but I was always met with much hostility. In fact, I got quite afraid when one morning, after I had gone to ask him for a millionth time to turn it down, he said to me with a blank, expressionless face: One of these days you will not wake up to hear my music.

After that I was not going around to Mr. Mune's no more, no sir, but that only seemed to provoke him further. I would start receiving these weird texts, like he was mocking and threatening me at the same time. And then one day his tone changed completely. Suddenly, he wanted to invite me over for dinner. Go to a neighbourhood event with him. He even invited me to his nephew's birthday! I didn't go to any of these things, but his change of heart was so big he even stopped with the 5am music torture. I finally managed to get some rest in. I thought maybe life could be normal again. But then…

Well, sir, morning coffee in hand, meticulously traced eyeliner, keys dangling from perfectly manicured fingers. That's how the cabbage found me.

Right there, outside my front door. I almost trampled it in my hurry to exit. I was making good time. Maybe I'd have even reached work early, for once. And I needed that, sir, Mr. Mune wasn't the only person to have a grudge against me. You see, the sleep deprivation had started affecting all areas of my life; I was sleeping in, arriving to work late, sleeping on the job. As a surveillance operator, this really isn't ideal, despite what films will make you think about us. I had reached the last straw, and now that I was getting enough sleep again I thought I could fix it. Sure I could probably have just found another job somewhere. But I had no savings, no degree, and although I wasn't exactly rolling it, I was getting paid way above my pay grade at this place, and I couldn't afford to lose that.

But the second my boot made contact with the soft lump I shrieked, jumping back, spilling my scalding beverage all down myself, screaming at the burn. I fell backwards, hitting the base of my spine against the wooden floor. And all the time, the cabbage stood motionless, soulless, observing.

I stared at it, wide-eyed. It's just a cabbage. It's just a cabbage. Shut up. Shut up! I shook my head real hard, closed my eyes, and opened them again. The cabbage was still there. Unfazed. I told myself it was nothing, just a pile of wannabe lettuce. I got up, shut the door, and went to change into some clean jeans. The coffee had properly burnt me, but I didn't have time to deal with it. I cringed as I dragged the fabric over the fresh wound. I stomped back out. This time, no coffee, but makeup and nails still intact. I got a notification on my phone, and saw the time. I still had 30 minutes before my shift started, and it only took me 20 minutes to drive there. Everything was fine, I was still going to make it, this was just a little setback, nothing major, no sir. I opened the door. Somehow, through the pain, I had practically forgotten about the vegetable. But it was still there. And now, it was dented with my boot's imprint. It made it look cross, like it was frowning. I slammed the door shut.

For some reason, I could just not bring myself to move past it. I stood there for ages, staring at the door handle, mustering every ounce of courage inside of me. I checked my phone again. Time was starting to sink away. Ten minutes. Fifteen minutes. My stomach sank, that horrible gut twisting feeling of anxiety. I had to go out, I had to get to work. Then my boss texted me. And I knew then, that I wasn't going to make it. In the moment, sir, the acceptance of this fact relaxed me. But that only lasted a second or so, before I again felt the overpowering nervous drive to get to where I had to be. I took a step forward, then another, and peered through the keyhole. Obviously, I didn't see anything. The cabbage was too short. The perfect spy. I could feel its presence, though, pulsating through the barrier. Its bitter magenta leaves swirling poisonously. And how had it ended up there, anyway? Who puts a cabbage on someone's doorstep? It was too specific. Of course my mind darted to Mr. Mune, after all it was sort of his fault that I was even in this situation to begin with, but his recent streak of niceness didn't sit with the action. Was it bugged? Was it a bomb?

I leapt back another pace the minute those thoughts entered my mind. The devil was in that cabbage. It wanted me trapped. But what could I do? I could kick it away, like a football. What was the vegetable going to do? Roll back? Was I willing to take that risk? Yes. Yes I was. I was desperate, sir. Desperate. I checked my phone, and saw in horror that I now had only 5 minutes to make it. Everything around me felt like it was falling, I can't handle when people are mad at me. I was so scared of the text I would be receiving after these 5 minutes had dried up. In a moment of craziness, I swung the door back open, yelling at the top of my lungs, leg stretched out, ready to do its thing. But one of the leaves twitched. And that was enough to send me right back to square one.

At that point, I was getting quite frustrated. The twitch, what was that? Was it alone? Was there something inside it? It's not like I'd never seen a cabbage before. I'd seen plenty - and eaten - plenty. My mum is German, sauerkraut is basically my middle name. Was this why? Was it the cabbage visiting me from hell, seeking revenge? Maybe its kid or sister or something was in my house, and it wanted them back. So I did the logical thing: I went to my kitchen and maniacally dragged everything out of every single cupboard, bowl, crevice. I gathered anything that remotely looked like it contained cabbage. When I had accumulated everything, I ran to the door, opened it, and threw it all down, showering the sadistic creature with its, I suppose, now dead relatives. Do cabbages die when they're pickled? Well, regardless, it didn't feel appeased. Some strands of sauerkraut hung from the top of it in strings, and a slice of carrot had lodged itself on its front, so that it now resembled an elderly goblin with a single, piercing, glowing orange eye.

I slammed the door shut. One of the hinges buckled. I thought, no, please no. Not the only thing separating me from… *that.* But it wobbled at my touch, and I could see that it wouldn't last another slam. My next one would be my last. I was going to have to brace myself. I walked backwards towards the kitchen, keeping my eyes glued to the point of entry. It wasn't going to get me, no sir. I remembered that episode of *Doctor Who*, with the angel statues. Beautiful, still creatures. And then, the moment you turned around, they turned into shrieking devils and ate you alive. No sir no sir, that was not going to be me. My phone buzzed. My five minutes were up. So was my job.

Photograph by: Natasha Mikietyn

I slowly pulled the utensils drawer open and slid out my kitchen knife. It was a recent purchase, still sharp. I thanked myself internally. I must have known, somehow, that I was going to need it soon. Tiptoeing, I advanced stealthily, like a ninja, weapon held high above my head, ready to pounce. And that's when I heard it. First, a rustle. The loud clack clack of something heavy, a low, husky grumble. This was it. It was transforming. I knew it. No sir no sir, I was not going to be its victim. My heart was beating fast, adrenaline dilating my pupils, making me feel like I had the pulse of lightning buzzing through my veins.

Then it happened.

The door handle, slowly, so slowly, started to move down. I held my breath, sir. I was almost curious. How would the devil look? Then, it all happened so fast, I must admit I don't fully remember every detail. He entered and I didn't think. I went for it. I really went for it. You have to understand, it was a matter of life and death, there was no playing around here!

And so, well, you see, that's how I ended up stabbing Mr. Mune. It was an honest mistake. I'm sorry your honour, sir, and it won't happen again. I truly am sorry, you must believe me. But can I go now? My boss said if I come on time today she might give me a final chance and I need to buy myself a new front door.

The courtroom fell silent. The judge stared, speechless, at the accused. Somewhere at the back, laughter erupted, but it was quickly hushed.

And that's when she saw it. Like a magnet, it had followed her here, and now seemed to be mocking her desperate seeming explanation. Right at the end of the row of benches, the little purple mass, peering malevolently. The devil's cabbage.

Feed

Written by: Zoe McGarrick
Edited by: Paula Espinosa

Rip the bones from this carcass,
Sip the wine that flows freely,
Lick the juice from the ribs that
Crack open at your fingertips;

These veins a spiderweb to shine
As the moon casts its shadow on you.

Take my eyes in your own
And eat this scream-silent tongue;
Let my body sing on in you.
Come, feed on a soul half-lived
And breathe me into the stars,
To smoke and swirl to the clouds
That watch you in awe
And there: let me shine-

Illustration by: Nina Boštjančič

Author bios

Roos van der Velden, Editor-in-chief

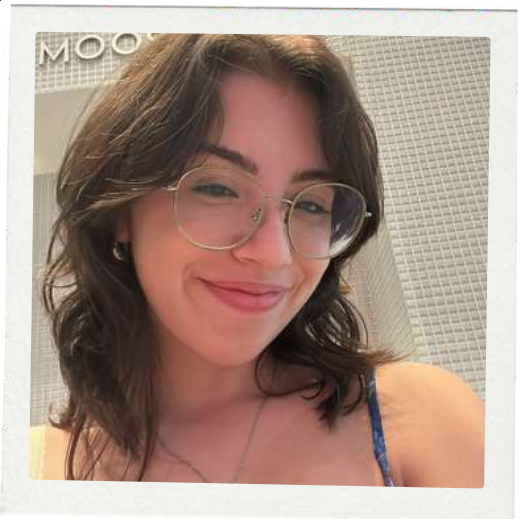
Roos van der Velden (2003) is a young writer from the Netherlands. Besides studying film- and literary sciences at Leiden University, trying to do small copy jobs and writing creatively, she is now the editor-in-chief of WordTonics' very own magazine! For this issue, she couldn't write herself, but she hopes that you enjoyed these stories so much that you'll come back for more next time.

Sharmin Ahmed, Writer & illustrator

Sharmin is the connoisseur of chaotic cuteness and whom you'll often find burrito-wrapped in her duvet. She has a lifelong interest in writing and storytelling, and she loves anything cute and fluffy, enjoys speculative fiction, watches cartoons and cosy shows and runs her own website and blog called Starlight Dreams where you can find updates about her writing career and her musings about anything and everything: https://starlightdreams1.wordpress.com/

Michelle Finch, Writer

Michelle is a writer from Watford. She has been writing from a young age and has always been a massive bookworm. Soon she has plans to publish some of her works but for now just posts her creations on Instagram, @samsbra1n. She is also a massive cat lady and will rant about her babies for at least 20 minutes at any given moment.

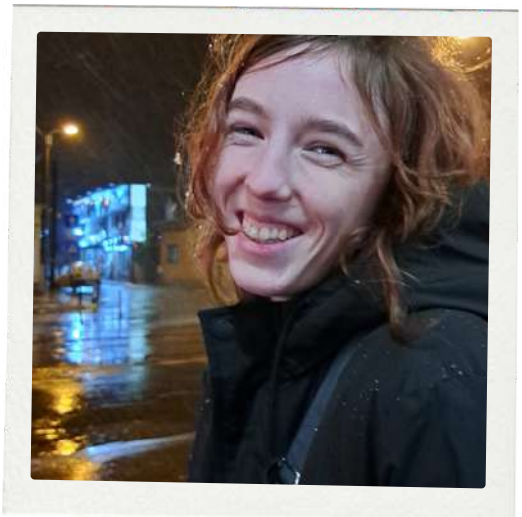


Paula Espinosa, writer & editor

Paula Espinosa is a bilingual Mexican-American creative currently in her third year of undergraduate, where she is double majoring in Theatre and English with a minor in Music. She is interested in musical theatre, costume design, poetry, jazz performance, and is an avid reader. She's a current member of Word Tonic and a working copywriter with all the spare time she boasts of.

Zoe McGarrick, writer

Zoe McGarrick is a writer of all things creepy and atmospheric. She studied English Literature at Oxford Brookes and published *The Painter's Wife* in 2022. She currently lives in Oxford, England, and has just published a poetry collection *Winter*. in December 2023, as well as short stories that can be read for free on Substack, and is currently struggling to write the next novel. You can find more of her writings through her Instagram and TikTok accounts both on @authorzoemcgarrick.

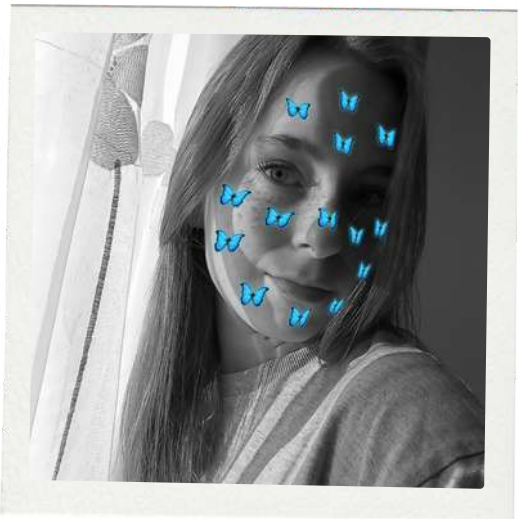


Susi Fennell, writer

Susi Fennell is a writer and creator for all types of content, currently focusing on copywriting and video editing. She enjoys bringing ideas to life through storytelling and visual designs, and aims to share her work with other creatives.

Teo Catanescu, writer

Teo Catanescu (they/he) finally got to graduate after studying English Literature at the University of York, and aside from their 9-to-5 they're an occasional writer, mostly illustrator, and enjoyer of those weird in-between moments at night when you don't quite want to sleep yet. He can currently be found via his art handle @arteolier, where he featured in *The Hysteria Collective* and *Flower Shop Zine*.

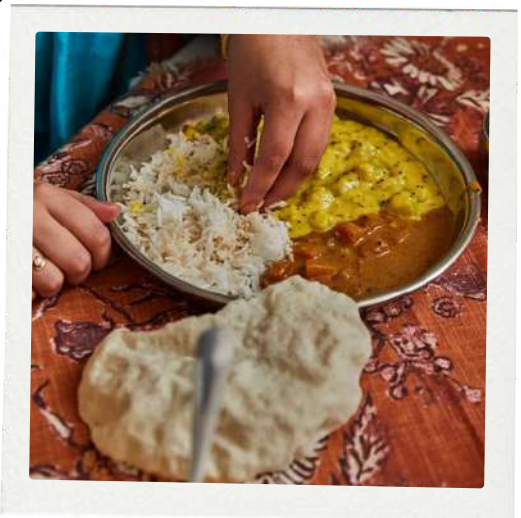


Nina Boštjančič, writer & illustrator

Nina is mainly a student, but in her spare time she writes poems and sometimes stories. She has an Instagram account, *@poetry_by_nb,* where she shares her poetry and thoughts on various themes. Someday she wants to publish a novel, which she is currently working on. But that's not all. Books, biology and astronomy are also some of her passions.

Soyoon Koo, writer & editor

Soyoon Koo is a student of English Literature 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 while working through poetry, essays, and Word Tonic.

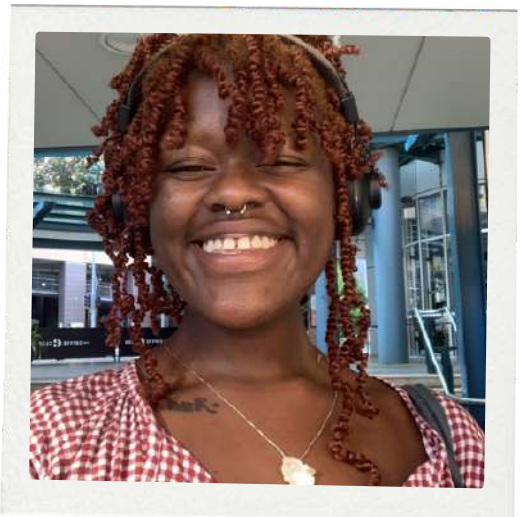


Ollie Hadgie, writer, editor & illustrator

Ollie (he/they) is an A-Level student in London who wishes to go on 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.

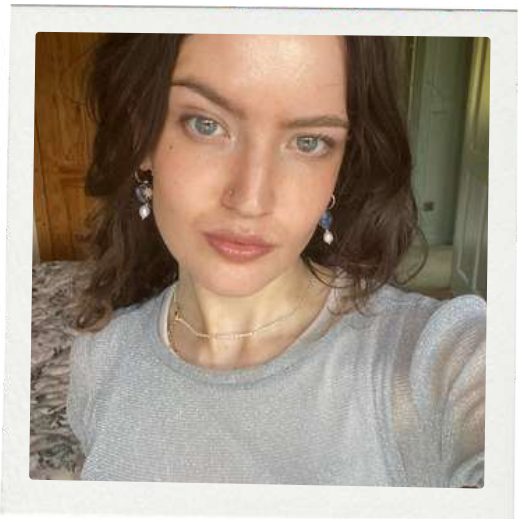
Natasha Mikietyn, writer

Natasha Mikietyn is a quadrilingual writer, and just as confused about her nationality as you are. A graduate of English Literature with Spanish and Screenwriting, she loves spending her spare time reading, writing, playing music and composing songs (which can be found on her soundcloud: @Nootski) and adding new languages to her repertoire.



Tsunami Ross, writer

Tsunamii is a career creative, international traveler and self declared icon with a dream to be that rich socialite auntie who seems to be unemployed but is always shopping and traveling. After joining Wordtonic, Tsunamii has found home within a community of equally unhinged Gen-Z creatives, and is glad to be creating a career in writing with such a powerful mission.



Nora O'Dea, writer

Nora is a young writer from Ireland, now living in London. She likes to write about people in their natural and sometimes awful state. She has had a short satirical piece, *Dozing,* published in Polyesterzine in September 2023 and continues to write short stories.

Margarida Madeira, writer

Margarida started telling stories even before she could walk. Reading books and writing in her diary soon became her favorite hobbies.
She started her own business in sales when she was 19 but after a few years she realized what she really loved was writing. Combining both the sales knowledge and her creative side, she started copywriting at 23 and never looked back. When she's not working or writing something she's usually reading, watching Netflix as a good Gen-Z specimen or a good ol' Disney movie, eating sushi or daydreaming about her next trip.

Thu Hang Pham, writer & illustrator

Pham Thu Hang is a Vietnamese who's in love with Pho and longing for a love story full of flavors (she has never had a lover since birth, she is an Aquarius girl, and if you know, you know). She is an introvert who seems to be lousy on social, oversharing a lot about books, movies, idols, music, copywriting, and other types of art forms she dwells into by accidents. Her dream is to become a Creative Director one day even though she's still struggling to take baby first steps into the Advertising Industry.

Saraah Hendricks, writer

I am a South African student with a BA in Social Science and completed my Honours degree in Social Science majoring in Psychology. I joined Word Tonic to learn copywriting so that I may work as a freelance copywriter as a creative outlet, alongside pursuing a career within the field of Psychology.

Yasmin Hasan-Bligh, writer, illustrator & cover artist

Yasmin (Yasi) is a 22 year old copywriter and artist based in SE London. She is currently interning part time with a French education brand as well as being part of Word Tonic since July 2023 - running the neurospicy chat and creating the WT yearbook & covers for these poetry anthologies! Yasi has always loved creative writing, poetry, and reading all sorts - particularly gothic literature and is obsessed with romantic and war poetry. She wrote her poem In (Bed) - (Bed) being an abbreviation of 'Binge Eating Disorder', to portray her own feelings and experiences with the disorder in a more creative and fictional way.

Kristy Tianner, editor

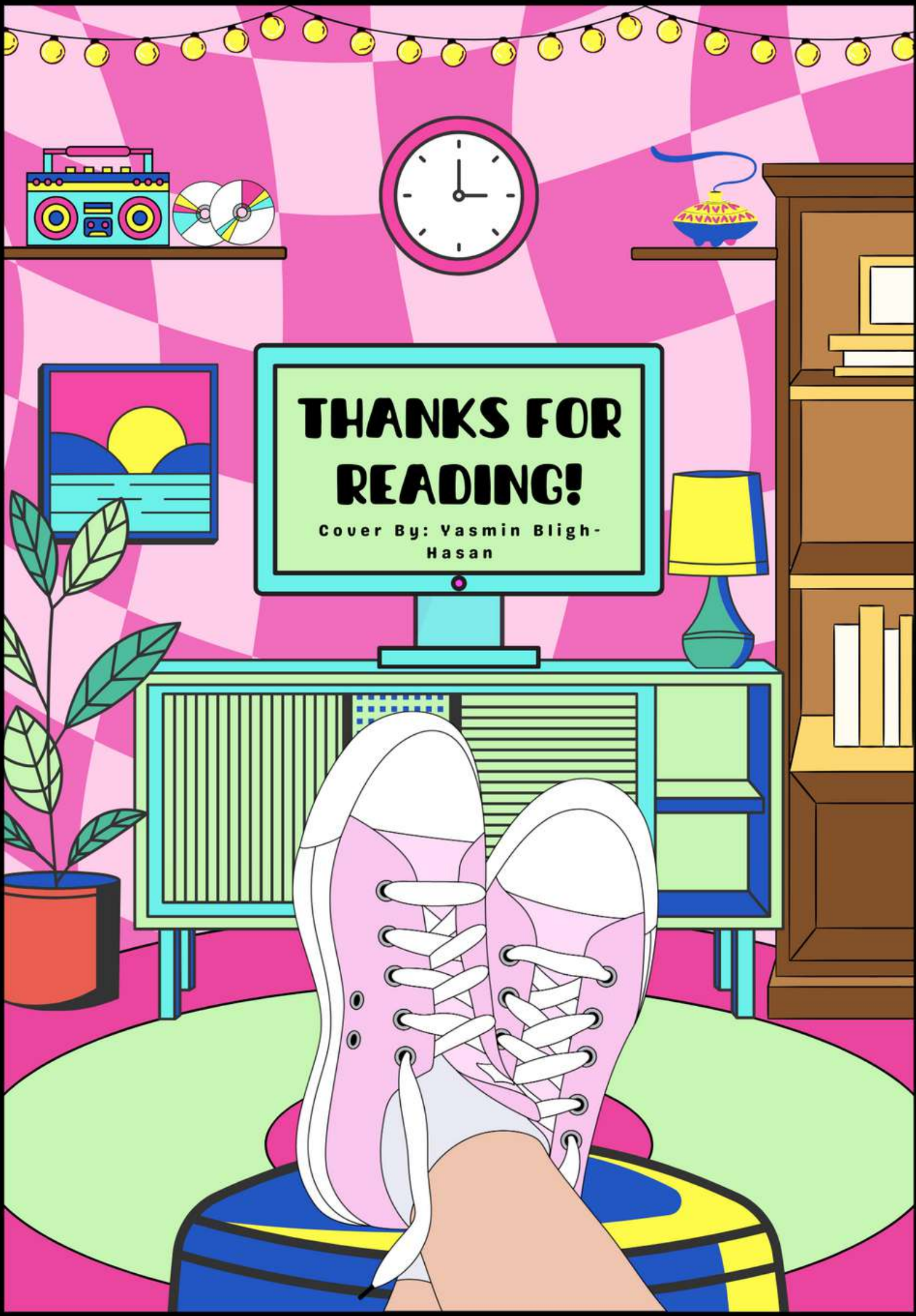
Kirsty is a young writer and editor based in Dublin, Ireland. She adores reading all kinds of literature and experiencing different worlds and bodies of thought. She aims to develop in copywriting, editing and writing her own book series in the future.

Deborah Kelty, editor

Abiding at a coastal town in North Wales with her family and guinea pigs for company, Deborah Kelty immerses herself into writing imaginative tales inspired from Celtic folklore, ancient myths, and more. A new member of Word Tonic, she has 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. Her hobbies consist of videography, graphic design, blogging, drawing, reading or binging films/TV shows, or exploring the nearby countryside. You can find her portfolio and socials via the link at debzykwriter.carrd.co.

Eva McLean, illustrator

Eva McLean (she/her) is an MLitt graduate from UofG. Eva is enchanted by the overlap between visual art and creative writing. Illustrations of hers are published with the University of Glasgow's *Centre for Fantasy and the Fantastic*. She is a writer, illustrator, and occasional researcher as she has presented material on the digital humanities and eco humanities at several conferences. She can be found through her art handle @evamcleanarts.


THANKS FOR READING!
Cover By: Yasmin Bligh-Hasan