



Word Tonic

Volume 11

Summer

See you
THERE

Word Tonic

Table of contents

Your Summer Fling: A Preface - Roos van der Velden.....	4
Preface for the Summer - Dimitrina Dyakova.....	5
The Battle - Ashley Catelyn Olivier.....	6
The Barefoot Days - Dimitrina Dyakova.....	7
The Sea to Me - Rebeca Elgueta.....	8
Birds on a Wire - Ella Turner.....	10
Waves Upon Me - Ellie Hope.....	11
Child in the Sun - Anna Bussabarger-Graf.....	13
August Honey - Charlotte Blythe.....	15
A Summer's Heart - Makyla Paquette.....	17
Magic in the Garden - Abigail Sitter.....	20
Preserve - Kiera Hammersley.....	23
Sunsets and Shit News - Bobbie Owen.....	30
Those Summer Times - Bea Hale.....	32
The Song of Asphalt - Nicolette Sigur.....	36
Nostalgia pains - Rowan McAlpine.....	40
Lithia - Molly Ellison-Edwards.....	44
Confessions of a Problem Cadet - Lindsay Brandt.....	56
Author Biographies.....	61

Your Summer Fling: A Preface

By Roos van der Velden

This summer, it seems like all we are doing is sweating, sweating, sweating, and not just from the heat - I know for a fact that my wonderful authors, editors and cover illustrators were working hard to bring you another wonderful collection of stories, poems and essays!

The increasing heat is a subject that isn't shied away from in this anthology. The climate is changing everywhere and effecting all of us, so of course it shows up in our thoughts, thinkpieces and fictions. Yet, we also have stories about wonderful summercamps, about feeling nostalgic to days gone past, and about summer days where the sun didn't seem to shine quite for us. Summer holds many thoughts and feelings, and we bring them all to you in this wonderful new magazine.

Even throughout the heat - or maybe because of it - WordTonic will stick together, editing and writing to share with each other and others. I am very proud of what my wonderful artists put together his time, finding moments to write in the depth of night when the heat died down and during their summer holidays to marvelous locations.

I am rambling; sit down on a terrace, by the pool, or couped up before a fan against the heat, open this anthology, and see for yourself what marvelous things we made for you this time!

Preface for the Summer

Written by: Dimitrina Dyakova

Summer. A word that carries so much meaning, nostalgia and warmth. Two simple syllables that hold the golden hour of childhood. Honeyed light, bare feet on sun-scorched pavements, and the slow ache of a season that always ends too soon. It's the taste of salt on skin, the weight of sticky summer afternoons, and the quiet knowledge that somewhere, someone is laughing in a backyard that will never look quite the same again.

In summer, time forgets its name. The hours blur, the days melt into one another, and somewhere between the longest day and warmest night, you realise the clock has stopped mattering entirely. Instead, time rests quietly and nestles softly into our hearts, allowing us to experience it exactly as it comes. Like a cat sleeping soundly on our lap, summer comes unexpectedly. It brings us the comfort and joy we've been searching for (aching for even!) since our last meeting the year prior; and then it leaves us... just as quietly, just as unexpectedly as it arrived.

So, before this glorious time of year is over, I'd like to pose a question to you dear reader - what does summer mean to you? Really take a moment to think about this as you peruse our newest edition. I asked myself the same question before writing my poem entry and thought about how best to channel the vivid images this season paints in my mind. For me, summer takes me back to my childhood – sun-drenched grapevines, sweet red tomatoes from my grandma's garden, water gun fights, and a never-ending feeling of lightness in my heart. The true meaning of being carefree.

So, take this anthology as a way to grab and *hold onto* this, whatever summer means to you. Lean into all the colourful, glorious, unforgettable emotions this season makes us feel, and let it wash over you – let it bathe you in its light as you read the brilliant works of art below.

Because this is exactly how summer is meant to be felt- thoroughly, deeply, passionately and with a lot of heart. Enjoy!

The Battle

Written by: Ashley Catelyn Olivier
Outside Editor

Beautiful colours streak the sunlit sky as the wind rushes noisily towards my sunburnt skin. Salt water splashes aggressively against my bare toes. I gaze in awe, as the fading sun sinks below the horizon.

My attention is directed towards the Capaill Uisce. They do not stray from the depths of the water blue; but there, they fight relentlessly. I am no target of theirs; I hold their only weakness, iron.

The thunderous crash of the waves isn't enough to drown out the sound of the terrible fight. One water horse, I note, is as red as the blood that stains the other's piebald coat.

These beings are giants, and I would not be able to put up a fight, if they were to attack me. The glaring iron could only hold them off for so long.

The smell of blood fills my nostrils, and I rest my gaze, unflinchingly, upon the source of the smell. A wide gash, dripping thick, dark crimson, is stretched across the piebald's neck. The winner of this desperate battle has been declared.

I hear the deafening shriek of the piebald, just before its lifeless body is taken by the wild, blue sea.

The Barefoot Days

Written by: Dimitrina Dyakova

Edited by: Claire Marie Anderson

Sticky summer heat
Slowly drifting from the heavens
With memories of being seven,
Forests full of fairies
Fingers tasting of strawberries

Golden sunlight dancing on the walls,
Its labyrinthine shapes and sizes,
Soothing, distant seagull calls, and
Collecting knee scrapes like prizes

Playing mermaids, water gun surprises,
Crickets' hymn pouring outdoors,
A never-ending summer without chores,
And never staying indoors

The Sea to Me

Written by: Rebeca Elgueta
Outside Editor

The sea to me, a serene, fathomless realm of blue. Its beautiful stillness, lulling you into its depths. Imagine, weightless amongst the waters, if you could breathe it in. Would you choose to float down into the depths, to close your eyes and open your ears to the sounds of the sea? Solemn, the dark waters beneath the waves run deep, its vastness could feel isolating but to me the near-silence is peaceful — only the symphony of the currents filling my ears, the gentle lull of the waters all around. To me it is soulful, a sort of gentle melancholy.

Teeming with life, coral reefs bursting with colour, look and wonder at the marvelous fish, scales sparkling in the sea's light. Why, it would be a delight to swim amongst the underwater life. Many times have I pondered over an experience of snorkelling the Great Barrier Reef. Yet, this underwater space should not be seen with haste. I know that there is another side to these wonderful waters which must be heeded, for in their depths exists deadly creatures as well — stingrays, jellyfish with gentle movements. Though beautiful, they have the potential to kill, but it's not all bad for that is nature, and it bears no ill will.

Above the waves forms another special haven for me, back towards the land where there's sand — the holiday beach scene. Feel the sun on your skin, the cool ebb and flow of the sea's tide as it races into the shore — gentle crashing a hymn for my ears to hear. It's funny to me, a paradox where I hate the sand, but love the sea. Every time we went on holiday to the beach, the inevitable sand between my toes, scratchy, uncomfortable — and goodness knows where on my body, stuck in my clothes. There were times I made sandcastles with the family, but I much preferred to use my bucket for something else, to journey down to the shore where there were shells. Mindful of the slippery rocks, collecting in my bucket such small, pretty shells and even sea life too — I've encountered in my time a large crab or two. Sometimes the sun felt too hot, sand scorching, so I'd wade into the water, staying in the shallows, there to experience the lull of the waves, cool to the touch, rolling into the shore, and the smell of the sea's scent filling the air.

With all this serenity, I think it must be nice to live by the sea. It holds many precious memories to me, despite the sand, it's a place of calm, yet also reflection, where my grandmother's ashes were laid to rest in the distant past. If I could live by the sea, I would wander to the shore often to just listen to the sounds of the summer sea and feel a moment of peace.

Birds on a wire

Written by: Ella Turner

Edited by: Claire Marie Anderson

Through slats of blinds sat two birds on a wire, tawny in the peach of dawn and
sharp in creeping glow that cuts through stains of heady night,
pitching song through torrid velvet,
that quiet hum that greets rooftops, terracotta into
amber beneath a newer blue,
and two birds split into four,
rubber branch beneath their feet taut already
under heavy heat of peak season,
suns to be flown beneath, feathers stretched
wide to embrace
earth
before
returning
to the wire growing forth
from one post, painted dry,
that they've learned is a mockery of land, carved
by hands they do not have,
and feathers that cannot grasp
alight in darkening violet, mottled by the bleach of lamplight,
and through half-closed slats of blinds sits a bird on a wire

Waves Upon Me

Written by: Ellie Hope
Outside Editor

The water is wading, ever changing. Just like my mind, it crashes and thrashes. I sit under the sweltering sun, its flames multiplying by the moment. Beads of sweat collect atop my head and the back of my neck.

The grains of sand are vast and flowing through my hands. A cloud moves to hide the sun, and my memories are undone.

In the same place, the same clouds on display— the past overtakes me. A few years ago I sat in the same spot, under the same sun as a cloud rolled by. It was one of the worst days. I began to cringe as the memory became real: reliving it in every detail. There sat the cruel companion at my side along with his shouting and lies.

Again I experienced the aggressor's berating. Once more I stood up to run away and he began chasing, I felt everyone's eyes on me and heard their whispers whirling around until they collided with the cascading water. I was trudging through the sand, my cheeks red with humiliation.

This time I realized the summer sun was giving me a chance.

Not only was I reflecting and reliving—

I could quell my memory's pains and do what I should've done.

I dug my feet in the sand and swiveled backwards to the aggressor who was shouting vulgar things and shouted back at the top of my lungs. I implored the bystanders to intervene.

I watched as the cruel aggressor's shape began to dissipate. It was but a mirage of the setting sun. The cloud had long passed on. I wriggled my toes about in the same spot I'd imagined planting my feet to finally stand up for me.

I was greeted with a reassuring breeze. I smelled the salt water and let my feet be greeted by the tide. The foamy water coaxed me, and my mind was at ease.

The past can never be altered or changed; I knew what just happened was a trick of the beach and of me. But this beach and the treasure trove of its memories gave me a moment to experience what I knew I should've done with the strength I forged from the very things that

unfolded. You either evolve into a more resilient version of yourself from the things that taunt you in your past, or you get sucked into the undertow and are forever at the mercy of the ebb and flow of the past dragging you under the tide.

The memories were but constant waves upon me, and finally on this summer night I set them free. This memory was left at sea: my mind could finally be at ease. As I released my feet from the grip of the damp sand, I left the beach. I left knowing I was finally free to move forward as me.

Child in the Sun

Written by: Anna Bussabarger-Graf
Outside Editor

I lived in the magic of summer once. I'm not sure how old I was...it's a feeling that has always channeled through me. Just in different ways. A magic transmuted throughout time; a seasonal reverie.

Hot days, cool drinks. Sherbet served at birthday parties, a true delicacy (even better in a boujie punch). Then school comes around to shutter that season of fun. Back to the grind. We know it'll come again... but it seems so far, once it's over.

Summer is the time for the cool girl. Not me, normally, but in summer, you could be. A state of laissez-faire in your own imagination, adventures, and carefree meandering through long daylight hours. Who needed constant reminders of how to be when you channeled personal flights of fancy? Ruffled skirts, jelly shoes, maybe a makeup taboo or two. All we needed were enough outings with friends to get by, until we returned to regular school shenanigans.

These ephemeral friends were lost to lack of proximity, but not in our golden gaze. They may have only lasted for the season, but their memory stays. Our regular school friends would return once the haze was over.

Flash forward: first kisses on a trampoline, truth or dare, sweat with sunscreen. Just like sparklers, burning bright until the show fizzles out. Isn't it love if you say so? Only during summer could you kiss and forget.

It's all a haze. Beautiful, golden days. Then, out of the blue, a chill breeze appears. The start of autumn's foray that never ceases to surprise me. *Every time.*

Some of my friends loved the Fall. The boots, the sweaters, the food—pumpkin spice lattes, apple pie, the whole feast. For me, it meant the loss of innocence, freedom, and play. Lazy days and lackadaisical flyaways. Your hair can turn green from chlorine, if you let it. Only during summer could that be charming.

The sun still blazes upon my face, toes curled in the grass. Yet, where giant potential of long days stretched ahead, I now feel the fleeting gift.

It won't be the same. It can't. But I still feel its sheen wash over me each Summer Solstice.

I can't pretend like I don't know how it ends. As long as you know, it can color the enjoyment. The sunshine seems dimmer. I let it pass by some days and linger in the melancholy of what's to be, rather than what is. It may never be the same...but my body doesn't know that when that song starts to play. Jukeboxes were not of my time, but there were plenty of Bluetooth speakers with Carly Rae Jepsen and One Direction. Pop hits, boy bands, *can we rewind that track, again?*

Bless my current freckles for my sun-kissed youth. Bless my smooth dive and mermaid vibes from hours spent in a pool. As I age and wander further out in the world, there's still that summer kid within me. The client won't know to look and see, nor the grocery clerk, except in niche chances. But she still shines, vibrantly, blue popsicle tongue and barefoot, beyond her tiny town.

August Honey

Written by: Charlotte Blythe

Edited by: Outside Editor

If I had been paying attention to the time, I could tell you the exact moment that I fell in love, right down to the wire. We were talking about God in an Irish pub garden as the prickly cool of a summer's evening crept over our bare forearms. You asked me what I believed in and, well, religion and I have a complicated relationship. It wasn't a short answer and when I was done, I asked you what you believed in return. You told me you *believed in yourself*. I knew right then that I was a goner, because coming from anybody else it would have been a line. But you were so earnest, so quietly self assured, I could only accept your sincerity. It helped that you were a little chilly, and did not shy from admitting it. You still walked me back to the train in the twilight, our fingertips brushing gently as we went.

Two weeks later you told me how you felt. We'd been drinking fruit cider under the trees in the cobblestone courtyard, all but holding hands as a wandering ladybird used our palms as a land bridge. You held onto my hand tentatively as she flew away. You didn't doubt your feelings but were confused about mine. I wore a sky-blue dress, because you told me it was your favourite colour. Nestled in the alcove in the wall, your eyes slid down from mine to my mouth like they do in the movies. Unnerved, perhaps by yourself, you pulled away. Then it was my turn to be brave and close the gap.

We spent August in your university halls. The summer was ripe and your bed was small; you rearranged the dilapidated fan so that it was facing me, but we still melted into each other. Nobody ever wanted me like you did. I never saw lust as that great a sin, anyway. There was already more laced into it, like your body had found a refuge within my own and you had been homesick for ages. You cast a net that enveloped me and felt like protection.

I met your flatmates. Your closest friend was a psychiatrist before he'd come back to university, and he had a keen eye for diagnoses. We were drinking in your kitchen, red faced from gin and top-floor humidity, and you'd stood up from the table. He told me that you were already in

love with me. He could see it in your face and he was calling the odds on your confession. You told me yourself only a month later, from almost six thousand miles away.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. August and its timeless magic retreated and we took a plane to Barcelona: an extension to the summer. You organised a whole itinerary for me, even though you hate planning. Late dinners and balmy nights, sharing tables in a busy restaurant with strangers. More pictures than I could ever need of myself in museums, galleries, gardens. I looked at peace. You wore jeans in the thirty degree heat, and I felt like we were an old married couple when I chastised you for not listening to me about the weather. You smiled ruefully. I wanted all of your mistakes. I had already forgiven you.

I lay my burdens at your feet and you lifted me up and carried me from them. We made a place together, our own, and hibernated 'til the new year. You would cook and I'd do the dishes. I made you coffee. You chose the show, and we took turns pouring the wine. It didn't last.

Midwinter saw you summoned with an urgency back home. Any return trips could never be permanent. We packed suitcases and sold basically new appliances and made donations to charity. I listened to August by Flipturn on repeat. I still do. I'm listening to it now. You're still there, and I'm still here. *August, honey, you were mine.*

You asked me to visit. I met your family. I think they liked me, although we mostly communicated through a translation app. I explored a new city, and it almost felt like ours. The sun shone most days and I could pretend we were back in summer. You took me to restaurants and karaoke and malls and beaches and forests and palaces. You asked me if I could see myself living here. But I live in the gaps in the pavement, I live in the past. I live in the place that you left:

It's our last night together for who knows how long. As we lie in the darkness, you say, *thank you for coming*. Ever sincere, just less self assured. Your eyes shine like the vast blackness of space illuminated by infinite stars. Incidentally, as a teenager, I briefly wanted to be an astrophysicist. But I've actually always been a poet.

A Summer's Heart

Written by: Makyla Paquette

Edited by: Outside

Aren't summers meant to be enjoyed outside, announced by the near-nail-cracking release of a tropical soda can, followed by the cooling sensation of its sugary liquid whilst lounging under the sun? That is what you thought, every single summer. Instead, the sun would rise as you stayed tucked in your dishevelled sheets. Your phone screen replayed the same 'satisfying house cleaning' TikTok over and over again.

Every alarm you'd set blasted off, doing the job you told it to do, only for your hand to come slamming down and your voice to be raised with profound irritation. *Five more minutes* - turned into thirty, hell, maybe even an extra hour. You deserved it, *right?*

Wake up. Go to sleep. Wake up. Go to sleep. What did you do that summer's day? Did you start that garden you had hoped to try out? Your mother's freshly grown cherry tomatoes always tasted extra sweet when you sneakily plucked them and blamed it on the skunks under your deck. Perhaps you tried indulging in your hobbies, which kept piling up on your to-do list. How many times had you eyed the 'Untitled Document' in your files, despite it calling to your heart? To your mind. To the fingers that ached to type something other than another cover letter or 'yes man' email for a job.

Summer's had never looked so bleak. Stuck inside, with an air-controlled basement, only for you to periodically pop up to rummage through the fridge and find ingredients, but no ready-made food. You were living on autopilot, convincing yourself that this was how things would and should be. Would, in the fact, that you'd done it every summer before. It wasn't unusual for you to browse through social media and find everyone and their cousins, twice removed, going on day trips to Europe or sailing the seven seas. But you. You stayed inside. Like you thought you *should*.

"Outside. Outside! We wish to see outside!"

Oh, but little heart, we must stay here. Where it is productive and safe,

and you are no burden to those you hold dear.

"Outside. Outside! There is much to be seen outside!"

Oh, but naive heart, we cannot leave this house. We have tried once, twice, more times than our fingers can count! There is nothing out there but gaggles of louse.

"Girl. Get outside."

Even your heart now preached like a bully. Why couldn't it understand that the unstructuredness of summer only breathed trouble. Besides, your partner took over what needed to be done outside, from gathering food to meeting with friends. That was good enough, *right?*

Until you laid down in bed, the thump-thump punching in your chest started up again. Like a pack of drunk dancing friends gathering around a bonfire, the sloppily rhythmic beats made you roll from one side to the other. Getting up to pee did nothing for the funk; instead, the mirror revealed your eyes, reddened and sunken.

Was there really any harm in peeking out the door?

Out of the bathroom, up the stairs, with tipped toes as if robbing a store, even your breaths caught onto each other in a nastily tangled web. When did going outside become so hard? Was it the heat? Maybe the assortment of bugs? More likely, it was the judgmental eyes that peered from corners or sidelines. The mouths that lashed with venomous tongues, hidden behind pleasantries and buried sadness. The ears that listened only for the hottest of gossip, ready to pounce and babble when their own peace became disrupted.

"Outside. Outside!"

Your little heart sang, despite the pain in each of your steps or the burning sensation crawling up your chest. Your mind pleaded for you to stop this madness, to continue down a line of least resistance. Return to typing, clicking and clacking, for it was what you *should* and *would* do.

The coolness of the front doorknob quickly warmed with your sweaty palms, as if welcoming you to what lies in store. What if something resided just outside? A man, a creature, a cryptid, something so shocking you simply may die? Maybe only a minute wouldn't hurt, but True Crime said otherwise. Had you remembered a weapon? Were you prepared to die?

Enough of this.

The door creaked open, and a summer's moonlight leaked inside, embracing your feet up to your knees, until it kissed every crevice of

your rosy cheeks. The air danced with a heavenly trance, and one by one, your legs moved further and further from the safety of your door, letting it shut with shaky hands that began to hesitate. The Earth continued to coddle you, wrapping its being around your body, through your hair, as the wind tickled beneath your chin and forced you to stare. Straight up into the sky, high above the few lingering clouds, shone the beauty of a million lights.

Some of these stars bent in the ways of animals, like a crab, powerful despite its smaller size, or a lamb grazing in a darkened field. Others formed outlines of powerful warriors etched into the historic memory of long-ago stories. But the most beautiful one of them all was but a single star, or perhaps not a star at all; its light outshone all the rest. Venus gazed down from straight above, stretching its light like a hand to press down and comfort your head.

"Outside. Outside, you so tread. Under my presence, my Earthly summer child, you may release your dread."

Magic in the Garden

Written by: Abigail Sitter

Edited by: Alex DeAnde

There is magic in the garden.

A kind of magic that shines brighter during summer.

Like the way the world physically feels less dark when the sun comes out of hiding.

I entered the garden by stepping through a magic portal.

The portal was disguised as a rickety gate with white flecks of paint chipping off the wood.

I could feel the magic in the garden the moment I entered yet everything looked... ordinary.

There were no wizards or spells or crystal balls amongst the green oasis.

Where is the magic hiding?

I wandered over to the field scattered with peonies, lavender and marigolds.

Celeste blues, soft purples, and vibrant yellows with crimson hues casted over the garden floor like a rainbow.

I watched a bumblebee buzzing around, happily exploring the blooming flowers...

"Where is the magic hiding?" I asked the bee.

The bumblebee buzzed, "I'm busy, ask the ants."

I crouched down in the dewy blades of grass to see the ants marching in line.

"Where is the magic hiding?" I asked the ants.

The ants kept moving together as they said, "We're working, ask the rabbit."

I found the rabbit sniffing around the vegetable plants, searching for something to bring back to her nest.

"Where is the magic hiding?" I asked the rabbit.

She wiggled her nose at me then scampered away, "Ask the spider!"

I found the intricate web built between a gap in the fence, the large garden spider sitting perfectly in the corner.

"Where is the magic?" I asked the spider.

It looked at me with eight eyes, "I am hunting, ask the birds.

There were birds all around the garden, their chirps and songs filled the quiet air.

They were flying around the trees, swimming in the bird bath, perching on the stone bench.

I wandered over to the bench and approached the shiny black crow perched on the stone.

"Where is the magic hiding?" I asked the crow.

He tilted his head at me and repeated the question, "Where is the magic hiding? Ask the cardinal."

I spotted the vibrant cardinal bathing in the bird fountain, cooling off from the warm sun.

"Where is the magic hiding?" I asked the cardinal.

She flapped her wings and flew away, "I must be off, ask the robin!"

The little robin was flying around the trees and I watched as he landed on a lower branch.

"Where is the magic hiding?" I asked the robin.

He looked at me strangely and chirped. "I am only a bird, ask the trees."

I sighed, growing tired of this chase.

Where could the magic be hiding?

And why didn't any of the creatures in the garden know where the magic was?

So now I am led to ask the trees...

I took a deep breath and placed my hands against the tree and asked, "Where is the magic hiding?"

I closed my eyes and listened for a response.

The wind blew gently, rustling the branches in the breeze.

The trees whispered softly, "The magic is not hiding. The magic is everywhere. Look."

I opened my eyes again and saw the magic all around me.

The trees dancing in the breeze, the rustling branches whispering soft wisdom,

The sound of birds chirping, singing different melodies,

The spider spinning its web, building intricate designs into a home,

The mother rabbit now sprawled out in the grass, enjoying the late afternoon sun on her fur,

The ants marching in line, working together to carry food back to their

colony, and the peaceful slowness of this beautiful summer day.
The bumblebee buzzing, collecting nectar to return to the hive,
The sweet smell of the rainbow of flowers wafting through the breeze,
The magic was always there... I only had to see it.

Perserve

Written by: Kiera Hammersley
Outside Editor

It was Summer and I wanted to try making jam again. Okay, you said. But this time let's follow the recipe. The days were curdled, breathless air blanketing the heat which shrouded us as we browsed the markets. Only the ripest, you directed, wafting your other hand through the air, gesturing to a concept that existed only in the abstract; an artist's habit to acknowledge all unreal things, grandiose and perfected, in reverential silence. Just as the Summer before, you let me pick the fruit, drawing a liberty from my well of freedom which I didn't know could run dry. That there could be irrevocable consequences for mistakes was something I hadn't learnt. You would teach me this later that afternoon. But in the morning, you let me pick the fruit. Damsons – like there'd be any other option. This was the time of fixation; my first victim being Granny's necklace and its native birdcall, incessant click-clack-clucking of beads, which I'd hound her for whenever she took it off until her hands were too pale and stiff to do so. I had been younger then and had since grown into finer senses like taste, so was undeterrable in hunting for new flavours to fatten my hunger. Granny's recipe for creamy kritharaki, Mama's flaky and syrup-soaked kataifi, and your leg of lamb, weepingly tender and morish. Damsons were your attempt to expand my craving acumen to the less fat-laden, but you also tried peaches, figs, melon, and an inexhaustible rotation of berries, though ultimately the tart green flesh, for some reason, threaded shut the gaping maw of my desire. It was Mama who demanded that I cut back on devouring them, so you indulging me recently after Mama came home with the shopping was understood as a secret transgression despite that she would eat the jam, too.

Unlike the time before, that afternoon you sought out the right ingredient. I learnt later that you had gone to the market after our first failed attempt – to blame was my adamance that we had everything we needed at home; childish obdurateness of squalling lungs and stamping feet – and sought out the expertise found at the confectionary stall. The gelling agent needed to bind together the stingingly sweet syrup was



purchased, and together we walked hand in hand, you tugging at me gelling agent needed to bind together the stingingly sweet syrup was purchased, and together we walked hand in hand, you tugging at me whenever I dragged my feet or grew overawed at the heaped spread of jewellery, golden coruscation dazzling in the sun. The fuggiest part is what comes between this and arriving home. Perhaps I spoke up and said, I'd like something that you and Mama wear – though I wouldn't have said it so diplomatically, more like, *I want, Can I have, I'm getting*. If I did speak, you would have tugged at my hand again, saying, Remember your manners, and smiled down at me if this had been one of the odd chances I ever did. But that day was not about bangles or necklaces or rings, instead, jam.

We got to work right away, as if a grease-slicked machine rather than two displaced people with a vague notion of the process. The agent that bound us together was the recipe dug out of your bookshelves, which used to belong to Granny, and that afternoon we poured over it, reciting words like 'ladle', 'wash', 'soften', 'skim', as a kind of mantra, repetition being the virtue that promised splendid jam, spreading opulently as opposed to the miserable drizzly kind the Summer before provided. Gutting the stones became my favourite part, digging into the mushy flesh of fruit, relinquishing its essential life force. Don't eat that, you'd say to me with every visible seed. It'll grow in your stomach. And you said it then with a tired lassitude, as if choking down seeds had ever been a habit of mine. Really, you were laughing, but I only had a vague notion of your humour then, it yielding easily as the vagaries of the weather – as tempestuous as a storm. Mama was easier to understand in her shades of silence and sunshine, but maybe you didn't know this. After I gutted, you mashed, and that set up a song, a syncopated stomping of the forks, my arms mostly failing to reach to the bottom of the pot resulting in a teeth-searing clattering. Not that you minded; only when Mama was out did you encourage noise. Children should be loud; that's what they're here for. They don't know yet that they have to be quiet, you'd say to Uncle, whose son was a perpetual bookworm, head in the pages like he wanted nothing more than to be flattened between them, have the words writhe over him, but Uncle hummed sagely, the way most adults always did with you. Mama didn't like noise since it hurt her head, and she'd lie down with the curtains closed, breathing in incense. She's recovering, was what you always told to me,



finger to your lips, but I held she was just napping and wanted a believable excuse to skip out on doing chores. When she was feeling better, or when she woke up, she'd be mellow and hold me against her, her head resting on your lap. If she had been there that afternoon, not out gossiping with Aunty, she would have complained from the kitchen table about the scraping, and when the jam was boiling you would have come behind her chair to massage her temples. You would have spent the rest of the day doing that.

Since Mama wasn't there, we sat on the floor in the living room instead and played cards – a game I was certain you were just making up, one of those flights of artistic fancy that Mama often scoffed at, where you stack the cards on top of each other, one value higher or lower, all in succession, no turns, all the while the jam frothed in the background. It was hot that Summer, more stifling than the one before. Heat had cloyed as sugar, cramping heavily in my stomach, so after coming home from playing, I'd sprawl out on the floor of the living room in my underwear, centring myself periodically throughout the day in the traversing shadows from the windows, and when you came in, you'd proclaim, Who let this little kitty inside? and start rubbing at my tummy, which nudged out gargantuan laughter or frustrated yowls depending on how hungry, or hot, or wronged I felt. Sometimes I thought you didn't take anything seriously at all, not your art nor your books nor your friends at the gambling place nor Mama, least of all me. When I'd cry and come to you, you'd say, Oh, dear, life is so hard, isn't it? and pretend to sob, too, as if in commiseration, but your crying would smother my own and my misery would retract into guilt, like I'd robbed you of something. Your sadness was more tangible than mine, so it transmuted into a question of worthiness. At some point, my tears became saved for my pillow and Mama's shoulder.

Layabout, Mama called you once, and I heard it through the walls. When are you going to do something useful around here? That's not fair, I wanted to say but didn't dare, not even into my pillow, because I might be heard. Later, I realised it wasn't that at all, but because I thought it might be true. In the living room that afternoon, I sat surrounded by your art, your means of living, and didn't give it a second glance. It was you who was alive, fleshy and beating in full saturation, playing card after card, your hands, your laugh, so big compared to mine. But I was used to you and didn't much give you a second glance



either. I couldn't sit still and my restlessness exhausted yours. A sweet smell bubbled in my nostrils and after I exclaimed it was ready for the umpteenth time, you sighed and performed that tired ritual of getting to your feet. I looked up at you then but the thought came later, where were you looking? You were heading to the kitchen, yet your eyes were elsewhere fixed on something outside the window, something that likely wouldn't be there even if I had looked. You had strayed from me in that moment, as you do in every moment I recollect, and your body turned to the kitchen expecting mine to follow.

A plate lay on the side for our experimenting, slimy remnants of purple where I had licked off the gloopy, broken concoctions, but this spoonful was *the one*; a perfect clumping of glistening fruit. It's harder for it to stick when it's this hot, you said, as if only realising. By then, there wasn't much left to skim from the top, yet you lifted me to ensure I could reach. What I extracted wasn't scum but jam, still you hummed approvingly at my failure and placed me down again. The next part you warded me away for, the same swatting you'd do for an incessant fly or when a seller wouldn't budge on a set price, so I sat at the table and watched instead. One ladle after another into chock-a-block jars, shining pristinely with Mama's recent bout of cleaning, until they brimmed with our jam, a purple so deep it looked black, the richness of Mama's hair.

Here is your jam, you said to me. Make sure you let Mama have some. Then you left for town and I never saw you again.

Does Mama blame you? I've never found a real answer. She became both herself and you in the aftermath, split between two people, a perpetual struggle of unanimity. Maybe she resents you entirely or maybe she thinks of you the same, as you are unchanging. She refers to you as she always did.

The village remembers you fondly, nobly even, though Mama sneers whenever talking to old friends who mention it. What's noble about debt? she laughs, and they'll tell her she's being too harsh, or they'll placate and agree. She's never cared about the opinions of others, not mine nor yours, so we don't see much of those old friends anymore.

Do I blame you? A struggling artist who had no students to teach, nothing of anything to sell. You wanted to travel, I remember, to start shifting some of your pieces. No one ever comes here anymore, you'd complain, and Mama would put her hand on yours in silence. It's not

how it used to be.

Today is the day. I sit at the table and wait for Mama to serve tea. She shuffles now and sighs at the exertion, but still nothing stops her, so I let her stir in my sugar, just as she used to do back then, as she's always done. This is the same table set; the same table and chairs. We brought everything we could with us from our old house. The jam sits at the centre of the table with the bread, freshly baked. When I found the jars in the pantry yesterday, I'd forgotten who made it, that it ever had been made, like it had decided to exist, dark and congealed, by its own accord. None of our jars are labelled when the contents are handmade; a unanimous, silent rule that memory alone is more than enough. The rule hasn't wronged us, so why should it be questioned? Now, I remember the exact year, month, day that the jam was made and the circumstances that led to its conception – all the nitty gritty that can't be captured in a label. Mama, too, remembered without me needing to say a thing. It's about time we finished it off, Mama said yesterday, as if we had started it at some point and left it abandoned. Finishing it off is definitive. She didn't need to explain for me to understand.

This year's Summer is record-breaking hot so that the heat from outside slinks miserably in and stews in its own rancour. I'd been thinking of you before finding the jam, a search mission in the pantry's miscellaneous wonders, because I'd spent the night on the floor rather than in bed, flitting between sleep underneath the open window. Of course, it wasn't you who found me but Mama, who gave me a curious look. Nostalgic. Did you ever have a cat? I asked for the first time unthinkingly, her dislike for flighty natures ingrained into me since birth, and she hummed. No. But they used to come in sometimes through the windows. They'd be so pathetic, we let them stay in. Better them malting everywhere inside rather than dying in the street.

After your funeral, I thought I wanted to die, just to see what it was like. We weren't religious and any notion of God was mythology to me, who thought that casting reflections onto the ceiling with shiny objects was the epitome of creation, but death itself was palpable where faith was not. I once asked you where we go afterwards, to the great garden in the sky like teacher believed, but you and Mama just snorted. There is nowhere but here, this garden, you said, and crunched the earth beneath your foot. Don't worry about things you can't change. So, to me, death was a place in the dirt or the fire. That didn't sound so



dismal, not like how Auntie perceived it as with any passing, crying into a perpetually sodden tissue, wracking shoulders creaking. Living was exhaustive then, both for me and Mama, and the sun beat down upon us relentlessly. Still, I said nothing, that maybe we would be better off dead, too, and carried on. The heat was sticky and oppressive, enforcing a permanent breathlessness, like my lungs had collapsed into themselves. I was slow and lazy where Mama was hasty and restless. I helped where I could and was berated regardless. Berated in your place, maybe. There were many feelings and nowhere to put them, but we carried on the same through that perennial Summer.

This Summer, Mama wants to garden again; her knee is in a better condition now the chill of Spring is gone. I'll help her after this. The lid of the jam is stubborn and takes many bangs against the table before it sighs open. No sign of mildew or rot – its surface is clear and unsplit.

It's set well, I say, passing the jam to Mama. It was scorching on that day. I'm surprised.

It's the least he could have done, making you some good jam, Mama says, and plunges a spoon through the middle. The jam heaves, wobbling onto her bread. Already I know what's happened, but don't say anything. Mama spreads the jam and says, It's a nice colour.

Yes, I reply, and spread my own jam. The gelling agent you bought specifically wasn't needed for this batch. You let me pick the fruit without us knowing it would matter – damsons and their high concentration of pectin. The jam is too thick.

It's bitter, Mama says after one bite. He didn't use enough sugar.

Maybe, I say. Or the damsons are too tart.

Where did you get them?

The market.

His Auntie had a damson tree at the back of her house. He didn't take you to pick them?

No.

We picked them together for you the first time. And he took you to the market.

I didn't mind.

Mama stirs her tea and doesn't drink. He didn't use enough sugar.

You're not here to defend yourself, so you say keep on saying nothing. Remember, I begin, that you both wanted me to stop eating fatty things? I thought he followed the recipe, but maybe he was thinking of

that. No, Mama says, and takes another bite. That was because you kept eating sweets. You were taking them from all your friends. We wanted you to stop eating them. Jam needs to be sweet, sugary. Everyone in the house would eat it, not just you.

Is she remembering it right, or am I? Maybe we both are, or we aren't. Either way, it doesn't matter. We'll never know what you were thinking that day, your true reasoning, whether you had one at all. We sit at the table and chew our bread and too thick, too tart jam. The Summer continues all around us, bucolic fields of swollen flowers, buzzing fat bees, and staunch, unyielding heat. There is no catharsis because you are not a jar of jam, unstoppered and well preserved. You're not Summer either; you creep into every season, budding and withering contemporaneously. You are an enigma, a void of untangled mystery and unfulfilled potential, but most prominently, you are absence.

You are at your empty seat, and you keep on saying nothing.

Sunsets and Shit News

Written by: Bobbie Owen

Edited by: Bea Hale

The sunset is ruining my sight. Pink and orange tinge my glasses but I can't register it right now. All I can see is the blue screen reflecting that sad rejection email.

And then that text is lost in a blur of adverts, subscriptions and capitalism.

The sun shines for the successful, not me. Instead, the sea weeps my anger, that same sea I had revered mere hours ago.

*

Everything I taste and feel now whirl into a panicked stream; the sweetness of Zinfandel on my lips, the burning sun on my skin, that one annoying tendril of hair escaping from my bun. All those romantic images dripping into future nightmares. My throat turns raw, tears threatening to spill into the blue on my screen.

I look outside for a second - those pinks and oranges that annoyed me before turn out to be the beginnings of dusk. It may be as enjoyable as a drink after work back home, but all I feel is something akin to an impending hangover.

Despite this sadness, I'm finally tired. It's frustrating yet welcoming; these are my only few weeks off, after all.

I look down at my phone - the same old crap of "unfortunately" and "thank you"s still streaming in. I slam my phone onto the table.

Leave it alone.

Think.

What can I do? My own sunny happiness is now clouded with a storm of self judgement.

The wind starts to pick up - something more than welcoming after the day's sun.

But what is there to look forward to at home? Why is this holiday now ruined? Why do I feel frenzied? Is it the wine? Heatstroke? The suffocation from rejection? Why do I—

Whats gotten into me?

I look at the sunset one last time. The dying sun brings back the good days from holiday; the salt in my hair from my earlier sea trip. The honeycomb ice cream in the back of my throat. The relief of finishing that book I'd been procrastinating on for months.

The sunset is beautiful now; clouds dyed pink meeting the blue of the upcoming night. I go inside and get a tissue for the tears, a bottle of water for the rawness in my throat, and head back home.

Those Summer Times

Written by: Bea Hale

Edited by: Jupi Bowen & Michelle Burns

Trigger Warnings for the following poems (as decided upon by the author): implied familial issues, implied panic attacks, child sexual abuse, incest, implied self-harm, implied suicidal thoughts.

Bright Summer Mornings

My birthday is when the sun starts blazing,
rising from beneath the clouds, radiating.
The Sun and I on my birthday.
I awake with it, strengthened,
a habit from youth, unshaken.

It spotlights the table I am bound by,
full of 'presents' and half signed cards,
It taunts me, "Open them!"
And foolishly, I want to abide.
Maybe this year, I won't be condemned
to yet another day of pretending,
Maybe this year they'll have remembered,
how to spell ~~my name~~.

But I know the truth,
Nothing will have changed.

Out there, beyond these panes of glass,
and plastered walls that imprison me,
freshly cut grass gleams,
and chirping birds bask,
underneath our mother Sun

Though she may taunt, she speaks truth,
it's unavoidable, I *have* to do it
I have to *open* them
I have *to*-
I have-
I-

They don't know me,
Clothes meant for someone else,
Why can't they see me?
Getting HP merch for your Queer kid,
Is there anyone that cares?,
Months-old Easter Sale Bath Care Sets,

I shouldn't be feeling like this,
I need to get out.

In...	[8]	[7]	[6]	...Out
[2]				[4]
[3]				[3]
[4]				[2]
Hold...	[6]	[7]	[8]	...Out

Golden light seeps through my closed eyes,
Inviting me to pry them open,
Evergreen grass, weary oak trees,
They ensure me,
That I am known by them at least.

*

That Summer's Day

My father loves the summer,
He thrives under the Sun's rays,
So don't ever be expecting,
To catch him inside on such a day

The Sun's golden gaze is blazing red now,
and as such *He* comes around,
With all the family, aunties, uncles and cousins,
Piling into the back garden, and all of a sudden,
Garden chairs pop up, the paddling pool is filling
Bass permeates the house, the music is blasting
Beers are passed out, the barbie's fire is catching,
I had no clue back then, of what would happen

The Sun watches on, as *He* takes me away,
From family, from nature, to where I used to play,
The crowd hides us leaving, the music drowns my pleading,
Niece and Uncle "playtime", ain't never been like this before,

Blinding Sun, witness the unwitnessable,
Scorching Sun, burn the untouchable,
Searching Sun, find the unlovable

No search party is sent, for a child in their room,
No manhunt is proposed, when no one has a clue,
So I'll take a burger from my father's barbecue,
And hope he doesn't question why I won't touch the sausages.
Too preoccupied with his precious sun to see,
who walked out of the bedroom with me.

*

An Unforgettable Summer Night

The sun is setting,
drinks are clinking,
people are chattering,
It's a normal hangout with my friends.

There's a debate about our favourite childhood shows,
And the nerdier nerds amongst us debate their gaming strategies
We are just friends simply chilling and hanging,

but the memory lingers still,
the endless succession of sharp silver blades
He grasped for *anything*,
scissors, potato peelers, bread knives,
it's a **danger**
For him, ~~and me~~
I'm **not** alone with him,
but it *feels* like it,
No, it feels like I *am him*,
well at least I *was*.

But ~~now~~
I'm coaxing him down,
saying all the words I hated hearing,
“you can get through this”
“this isn't the only option”

Because it's true the Sun **will** rise again,
and he **will** get through this night,
But can I stay under the sun?
or will I burn as this page in my memory book,
is tainted red yet again.

The drinks kept coming,
a friend fed me some food,
and we kept playing till it was light out again,
trying to ignore what it was that made this,
an unforgettable summer night.

The Song of Asphalt

Written by: Nicolette Sigur

there's never a question of where to begin.

not when the weight of humidity casts a crowd of atlases, cuts out the compensation.

when the door slams in such a clear, cutting minor chord, the note each repetition finds its rooting in lingers. recolors the optimistic softness of the den's carpet until it may as well be a bed of upturned pushpins—

besides, sitting still's got few excuses with any substance behind 'em, even to the nervous system's way of stirring at the knowledge that even the most misshapen, rotten-through root notes, at least if textbook *theory's* got any say in the matter, *has* to summon a perfect fifth. just across his own personal stretch of the mississippi, there's a city calling in tongues so unique that even the masses of sound mind see their way down to pretend they're fluent in all of 'em.

the selling point's in the way most of the folks find themselves tired enough of the ennui that you might just get lucky, might find someone to entertain it.

through old brass & rowdy bellows from beat down bars that've stood the trials of time, the neverending hum of new orleans isn't quite as clean as most expect (see the clarity in bechet's clarinet, though its products oughta prove the man that made its magic ain't *no way* naïve, not even as an occasional onlooker from old tom's nightclub in heaven). a jolt of energy hits like a sting coated in sugar, a 'do or die' that finds the whirlwind of a boy set in motion. it's always lucky to be home alone when the slam hits & the spite in the pit of his stomach mirrors the methods of modification he's known since back before memory stretches into fog. once you're fueled on poison, playing with high stakes like the six-string you stopped from collecting dust, you come to find pride in survival. a young dionysian with the nimble hands & *need* for more that myths attribute to orpheus can't let another summer afternoon slung into the cell of heavy sighs nobody else hears. it's natural down here, especially for the soon-to-be busboys-slash-buskers,

he's spoken to some enough to earn enough surety on seeing eye-to-eye that they've been operating on a first name basis.

"eh, jameson's not too bad of a kid," one might tell you if your timing didn't interrupt a thing aside from makeshift intermission, drawing smoke from whatever stranger chose to toss a stick of *smoke on the water* into the hat as a tip. "most of the ones with anything decent enough to catch a couple dollars got the same stories." & with a hapless shrug, an exhale of heavy, opaque grey, tack on some piecemeal punctuation, a redirection towards his own mission out on a monday evening with the sun still teasing its mercy. "can't do much to fake it. not grit like that."

the dog days of summer are the ones where the thought strikes like a swipe of the match.

there's some comfort even in the idea of taking to the water for a spell-- if axel imagines hard enough, tunes his ear fine enough to fall in line with a *little* imagination like the tourists do, he can feel the cool on his skin. the only *catch* ingrained in the kid mirrors the composition of his surroundings he came to learn so quick he could swear he was born with it carved into the cerebellum. long & lanky & loud enough to have to keep his tongue bitten to leash it in, a kodak moment would make a better fit for just about any other passenger. paying in crumpled bills & handfuls of change already's found him with a place on the ferryman's radar. his skin takes just a bit too well to bruises, which (unlike some other lucky ones he's witnessed) hasn't helped out with the old man's instinct to keep an eye sharp. from the algiers terminal, it's common sense he can't close his eyes like everybody in the movies makes part of dreaming like it's ritual. he's already got to cover up his secrets in the strong punch that comes when he flips open the red tin, pops chalk-textured cinnamon mints onto his tongue with an open palm.

it's part of a system he's developed. the house is behind him when the collection's crumbled naturally. catch yourself cheating with a chomp or two, & you've gotta start from the top.

authority's not favored by those who naturally, if at times accidentally, invent their own rules.

but if art imitates life, axel's deduced that he's one with an excuse to intervene.

paint in broad strokes, he learned quick as a staple when it came to

cutting through the city's streets, a sort of lesson number one. *paradox is your friend*. it's not the same as it is at school, so he's taken to it with his heart, & it's just a shot off from the old garage that'll smell of smoke & ring with dead sound decades after he & his gang've done their time. the crescent city can be a novelty to new eyes.

to the higher-ups? it's easy for the born & raised to sense the artifice in a smile.

save for select stretches & the festivities that gets flocks across the globe running into the rhythm within streets flooding with stories, even the youth come to shake their heads & lace something bitter into a laugh after they've seen their elders at it time & time again. they remind the people who comprise the soul that everything's temporary.

they stroll in suits where sin's seen as healthy, get on the screens & all but pronounce their pride a slip of the tongue, some day-drunk delusion: why fix what's already broken past our comprehension? how do the citizens kick their ways past carnival & expect their funds to scrub the label that spells out 'scourge' from the streets so openly you'd swear they can see it from space? it's cyclical, the wreckage. it's designed to consume toxins & hold onto their essence, the bowl-shape surrounding what you call home.

in this case, axel's only more willing to let the city flood into him, feed it song & soul in return while he stays. the place ain't *perfect*, no, but that's what separates it from the sorts of other settlements you never find on a map. it's where he's adopted his charms. even under a relentless summer sun hung crooked overhead, the kid's convinced he couldn't learn a new lesson every other day anyplace else.

each alleyway glows with the seductive promise of something delightfully waywards, each crack in concrete bleeding rust & stardust. every time the rain plays nice enough, it's a mirror mosaic, shows even the downcast eye flickering neons of dead-end clubs, numb the awareness of any skin stripped from your knuckles. all bloodied fists & misplaced ire, you are a category five, a catastrophe foretold through a poor street musician's capnomancy— you stopped choking on the cigarette smoke younger than you were when you taught yourself to cry in a way where you had a desirable result of sorts in that you could brush fact off in fiction's favor, starve the memory a bit, deny any hurt ever happened. it's preferable to join the nearest party, anyway.

that's *one* promise: it's never too far off to find.
after all, the wild youth is the heart of the city.

Nostalgia Pains

Written by: Rowan McAlpine

Edited by: Claire Marie Anderson

You know when sometimes you step outside and think, man, the weather feels exactly like the 23rd of June, 2007, around 4:55pm?

We were trading Moshlings figures in the park, and my friend was wearing this one purple polka dot shirt she only ever wore when the sun was out. I must have started experiencing these incredibly specific nostalgia hits in my late teens – around the time I believe is normal to start yearning for childhood comforts and easier times. In my early 20s, this feeling became stronger and more frequent, but nothing truly compares to how this grips me in the summer months.

The feeling becomes quite consuming, actually. A breeze can pick up outside that feels exactly like it did on a specific day when my friends and I were at the corner shop buying Capri Suns, or I can feel a light smattering of rain that takes me straight back to a day we were taking shelter under some trees while sword-fighting with sticks.

It's like an incredibly intense wave of nostalgia, and it almost always happens in the summer months. It could be that I just had a very pleasant childhood, with the freedom of the big school holiday making up the better memories. Alternatively, I wonder if it's because I grew up in the very north of England, where summer weather wasn't always a guarantee; most of the year was cold, wet and windy, so the warmth of the sun just made for particularly stand-out memories.

It's funny how the words 'the very north of England' evoke an image not at all like my own real experience. It's like I'm reading someone else's story, and I find myself imagining a little watercolour painting of a pastel beach and kids in sunhats playing with a delicately demure nature. I'm not sure why that happens – perhaps it's because I view my childhood experience as something so drastically different to how I live now, perhaps as something more positive. Or maybe it's simply because we always just called our town by name instead, not alluding to its geographic location, and that town name had a bit of a reputation. Not a bad one, per se, but it certainly wasn't perfect, and we were absolutely not demure. We were loud and ran free, often away from adults telling



us we shouldn't be somewhere. The aforementioned watercolour painting would probably have paint blots and smudges in it – but that gives it character, I think.

I grew up in the 2000s, where phones weren't really a thing for children yet, and I wouldn't have it any other way. I did have this grey Nokia 6500, a little brushed stainless steel thing with a keyboard that slid out, but I never took it out with me. I didn't think to text my friends to ask if they were at home; I would simply run to their house and knock on their doors, with no idea if they were actually there or not. If they were, we'd go out and play until dinner time, when we'd run home, wolf our dinner down, and head straight back out until bedtime.

It felt so carefree. There was this one day when the Northumbrian rain had not let up all morning, and as a result, a ginormous puddle stretched from one end of my school's football field to the other. I must have been 7 or 8, and I'm sure you can imagine the pure delight that my friend and I experienced at the thought of jumping straight into that thing. And that we did; in spite of our raincoats and waterproof trousers, we took off our wellies and socks and stomped right on in there. Now, my adult brain has concerns of slipping or slugs or sharp objects hidden under the water, but our child brains had no such worries – there was something magical in the moment, and I remember the two of us having such an absurd amount of fun splashing about in this massive, weirdly temperate puddle. I'm sure she remembers it too.

I definitely throw on a pair of rose tinted glasses when I think back on my childhood summers. For example, I really did love school as a kid and hated not being there for two months at a time. I loved my teachers, and the computers that had *Zoombinis* discs beside them, and the sandpit and those horrid little tiny, sticky foam beads you could model with. I loved morning singing, and keyboard lessons, and the little chocolate cake with custard we got at lunch time in those shiny, colourful plastic bowls. I loved when we would get called up to draw on the 'SMART Board' or play shop with little plastic coins and paint and make bracelets and sew and –

The whole memory makes my heart hurt a little bit. I loved it. I had so much fun at school and there's a part of me that really wishes I could experience that again. I'm still creative in the ways I was as a child; I draw and scrapbook, I play video games and I hang out with my friends – but it just doesn't hit the same. I have to worry about paying rent,



going to work when I don't feel like it, and the never-ending slog of daily chores. There's always a little voice at the back of my mind that's worrying about *something*, and I desperately wish I could return to that childhood state of unbound play and education.

All in all, my pining for school didn't ruin the summer months – I just had fun in other ways, and I look back on those ways incredibly fondly. However, the annual waves of summer nostalgia don't stem from a place where every single memory of mine is positive. I had undiagnosed Obsessive Compulsive Disorder as a child and struggled extensively at a time where mental health disorders were not yet really recognised in young girls. I was no stranger to panic attacks, but why is it that *these* memories are not the first to surface when reminiscing on my childhood? They were definitely higher on an emotional intensity level, but why do I default to remembering playing 'Crack the Egg' on the trampoline rather than sobbing on the stairs so hard I couldn't breathe? Maybe I'm just a more positive person than I thought, or maybe it's a protective mechanism.

If you couldn't tell already, I've always been a very sentimental person; I hold extremely vivid memories of places I've been to, even just once, and attach emotions to these memories very easily. With this in mind, it's not difficult to imagine why my childhood summers, taking place in a village I no longer live in, hold such intense feelings for me. Most of my dreams take place in my childhood home, which I haven't lived in for over a decade. It's like hunger pains, but for nostalgia. I live in a large city now, and every single day of the summer I swear I'm telling my partner, "I want to go on a day trip to my hometown". Luckily, that's within reach for me, and I understand that that's a privilege. Not everyone has the luxury of being able to visit the places they grew up in, and I'm grateful that I can. But sometimes I wish my nostalgic little brain would give it a break every once in a while.

I wonder if the modern child will hold these rosy feelings for summer. The nicer weather is only part of the experience; the memories themselves are what really made it special. They're so firmly timestamped in the 2000s, and it's almost as if my brain has captured them in that gritty, unsaturated 1MP phone camera quality. We didn't know what social media was yet, and spent our days going out and getting so muddy the first thing we'd have to do when we got home was have a bath. Maybe children these days will have nostalgia for skincare

and unrestricted access to TikTok Shop – huge generalisation, by the way. After all, there's no rules for nostalgia, it's all down to personal experience.

But for myself, feeling the summer weather will forever transport me back to my childhood village and pissing about with my friends in the school playing field. Back when racing down hills on our bikes felt like descending Everest at Mach 10, and playing Super Mario 64 DS via Download Play was the highest tech gaming experience one could have while sitting under some trees in the park. I miss it dearly. Nothing can really help me experience the world as I did when everything was big and new, and I don't expect these pangs of nostalgia to subside anytime soon.

I wish with all my heart I could go back to these times. Not all is bad now. But things certainly felt easier. I often catch myself dreaming about the possibility of visiting a childhood summer as a holiday, if I had a time machine. But I almost always come to the conclusion that it's better left as a rose tinted pool of memories to visit in my spare time, left untainted by the constant stream of worries of adult life.

And all things considered, that's something beautiful.

Litha

Written by: Molly Ellison-Edwards
Outside Editor

The sun begins its long cycle, sharing a modicum of its power with us. The day will stretch as though time is beneath it. The Solstice arrives on a crisp early morning and we welcome it, embracing the torrent of power that it grants us. The morning pyre burns away the mist of the night. As the sky turns pink, we begin our celebration.

We dance, we sing, we laugh, we twist flowers into crowns... we welcome our new friends. The solstice is the one time each year where the barrier thins. Where worlds collide. Where cultures and traditions transcend the realm they originate from.

Where I'm reunited with my lover.

I don my mask and dance, unquestioning of the others that join us, unaware that the sun has crested over the horizon, that darkness - for now - is far behind us. And when the song slows, the steps finish, I lift my mask and kiss the Fae knight in front of me.

*

She laughs with me as we wander the forest, both of us barefoot and dizzy with the scent of citrus smoke. She twirls me in the melody of our chatter, responds in her own harmonies. I tell her of the year, the weather, the people, the memories. She does the same.

We come to a river that glistens like her pearlescent hair, drink from the currents and clear the haze of the rituals from our minds. The celebrations are intoxicating, but I want the memories of my love to last. I want to trace the latest scars from her last skirmish, finger her wavy locks as she undoes her braid, touch her dimples, remember her azure eyes. I can't do any of those things if I'm high on energy and life.

"What did you wish for this year, Fyra?" I ask, tracing a finger along the scar that cuts through her nose. She got that some three years ago. I ask again to rid myself of the memories from that war, "What did you wish on the sun cycle?"

"Tranquility and prosperity for our great summer court," She answers



immediately, and I can't help the pang of jealousy that crosses my features. She seems to sense it as she brushes hair out of my face, "Something our queen makes us say every year, dear heart. Our true wishes are said silently, just before we proclaim them. That way, our desires are still ours and not at the whims of someone else."

Now that she's said that, it seems all too familiar. I decide to bypass dwelling on it. Today is a joyous day, "So now for the truth."

That devilish smile returns. I know her too well, I fear I already know the answer, "For another day with you, Miss Sinclair."

"What a poor use of abject power."

"I'd trade all the magic in my blood to have another second with you, Arlie. You know that."

"And yet," I sigh. I never said I held back from dramatics, "We only have hours still. What if..." I stop myself, second guess my thoughts... and then double back, "What if we could have more time?"

She sighs, one that I swear I've heard before. There's a look in her eyes, a calculating one. Are those worry lines creasing her forehead?

Time stops and my treacherous heart beats eagerly. We don't discuss matters like these for a reason. I know this. It does nothing to get either of our hopes up. I'm betrayed by my own heart... and fascinated all the same.

"What if we could?" she answers eventually, turning to mirror my position. We've become nestled on the soft moss by the bank at some point.

"Would you want me in your home or would you want to be in mine?"

"I would be in yours." Her hands find comfort in picking at the grass underneath her, "I grow tired of fighting, of waging a war on the Queen's sister. I want... peace. For once in my life, it seems better than chaos."

Don't stutter, treacherous heart. Don't believe any of this is real.

There has to be a way to circumnavigate these feelings. To believe is to mourn later, to confine yourself to the sadness of 'what if?'. It's been too long and I'm too tired.

But... what if there was a way...

"You really think you can handle a Witch's way of living, fearless warrior?" It tastes like a familiar joke. One I've said a million times before. One that's lost its humour, if the half-chuckle my knight gives is anything to go by.

“Is that a challenge, great Witch of the Summer Coven?” Fyra’s never one to turn down an opportunity like this. Seelie are renowned for gambling with their fortune and she speaks as though she’s played this game many a time before. “I slay the best soldiers of the Winter Court every day, but you feel as though I can’t handle some plants and sun?”

“Our mortal nature would see you dead in our deserts. Poisoned in our forests. Worthy witches do not underestimate what we live amongst.” Flowers appear where I run my hands over. Fyra looks at her mangled patch as though it burns her, “It’s not a challenge if you are worthy, of course.”

There’s a moment where I hope, I pray that she doesn’t bite. A joke this may be, there’s something real behind her worry lines that unsettles me.

Her eyes, though... they’re determined.

“Well then... we’re just going to have to prove I am.”

*

The river we took refuge at is our starting point, though this time both of us have our feet submerged in the currents. The fish kiss our skin, get lost in the layers of my skirt, splash Fyra as they leap out. She looks less than pleased, which brings a smile to my face. “When do they start liking you?” she asks like I’m a fish whisperer. I can’t help but laugh.

“Never. They just end up tolerating your presence.”

We’re joined by more of my sisters - apprentices, high witches, maidens alike - and their fae companions. More of them wade in with us, joined by their juniors or eager looking Seelie. They - like my knight - covet the knowledge of the coven. They yearn for our worlds to merge, just as much as we do.

They look to the High Witches on the riverbank just as much as we do. The energy crackles, intensely joyous, and High Witch Vidala glances over us. Her eyes latch on to Fyra specifically. They seem to partake in a conversation I can’t hear.

Then her hand is raised. Collection can begin.

The sun hits the right angle, filters through the trees in the right place for this morning ritual, and the river around us glows bright. Strings of magic dance past us, glowing a soft gold. I show her how to catch them, how to pull them up from the water, how to fill them with intention.

Then, I place them in the vessels I brought with me.

If I strain my ears hard enough to hear through the rushing currents, I can hear my sister witches doing the same thing. They're a mirror of us, only the fae with them sit by the shore and take great pleasure in not getting their hands dirty for once. Fyra insisted on helping, on winning this challenge.

"You're used to stepping out of the shade," I say to her, inspecting the now filled jars, "That's good. It takes confidence and clarity to create sun water."

"Had to show the fish who's boss," She replies smugly, flexing her toned muscles. I can't stop the eye roll. "What does Sun Water do again? Make pretty lights?"

"It's a recharge. In your tea, it helps with clarity and creativity. On the floor or your tools, it washes away heavy energies. Everything remains radiant."

"Right..." She doesn't believe a word of it, typical Fae. But something about her face screams adoration rather than annoyance.

It's the same argument every year, what magic is real and what isn't. Whilst also nature affiliated, they believe their magic superior because they're not tethered to their realm like we are. They take great pride in reminding us of that fact every time we see them.

"Believe it or don't," I shrug, sealing the last jar with wax warmed by a candle Fyra lit for me, "You managed to do it. The intentions must have been there."

"I wanted to impress the fish."

"Intentions are intentions, I guess," and I can read her like a book. Fish be damned, those weren't the objects of her determination. Her eyes lay steadfast on me.

"Whatever. Did I pass? Am I a witch yet?"

She can't see Vidala's eyes burning into the back of her skull. They seem to have never left us, silently judging from her place on the bank.

I don't bother fighting the sigh.

*

Onto the next task, once the sun is at the highest peak and beating down on our necks. I take her deep into the forest, hands interlaced. She boasts about how her home is more splendid, more whimsical,

more fantastical than this plain wood. Fyra laments about me not being able to cross to the Feywild. She wants to prove her point.

“I already would have if I was permitted” I reply with the same answer as last year. It rolls off the tongue as languidly as my love for her, “You know what our leaders are like.”

As we continue to walk, the scents in the air change. The musky rainfall slips away as it leaves the river’s bank, allowing earthy floral scents to fill the glade we enter. Fyra seems unaffected - grumbly, but unaffected - but I know now that we’re getting close. I keep an eye out for mushrooms that want to covertly ensnare us, their circles hiding behind the leafy dandelions and clovers.

“Your High Witches are stubborn.” My love grumbles, “They can’t see that we would work better as a unified group. Fae and Witches balancing our worlds together.”

“Enough, my brave knight. If we’re successful now, then we *will* be together. With no boundaries.” I can’t help but smile, a loose lock falls from where she’s tied her hair up. I gently scrape it away from her eyes. “This *will* work. I’m sure of it.”

My fae knight doesn’t respond. She’s become lost in a thought I can’t trace, as though something I said sparked a memory. Instead, her eyes take note of our surroundings before I do - her being my distraction - and she relaxes like she’s stepped through into the Feywild once more.

Encompassing us now - instead of the green clovers and dandelions and mischievous mushrooms - is a torrent of colour that dances in the wind. Vibrant varieties of petals welcomed us into their glade as they looked to the sun once more, taking in the energy we were there to collect.

It’s a smaller area than the river and chatter between witches and plants filters through almost immediately. They greet each other like old friends, recounting tales and gossip that the flowers pick up from wandering travellers.

Something burns on my back, watchful eyes that haven’t left us. But when I turn, Vidala is chatting idly with a sunflower. They exchange seeds and bless the earth without any cares.

“*Joyous Litha, Arlie Sinclair,*” One rose says in the flowers’ tongue, bringing me back to reality, “*I see you have blossomed from mere apprentice.*”

“*I have,*” Fyra - bless her - concentrates hard. She looks between the

plant and I as though she's trying to understand. *"I promise my secateurs will not be as clumsy as the last time we met."*

"No, but you certainly will pass that trait down to the next. I await your apprentice... nervously,"

"You will meet her when the time is right for me to have one, and I will continue the legacy of chastising young witches for their improper collections. Do we have permission, by the way?"

"You do." The rose bows again, *"And yes. You also have permission to teach your lover our ways. Though I believe she has more skill than you may know."*

"I didn't even—"

"Flowers always know, Miss Sinclair. You do not surprise us anymore."

It's not often I'm stunned into silence by a plant. *"Of course,"* I reply eventually, *"Well then... I give my thanks. Joyous Litha, fine rose. May you regrow next year just as beautifully."*

Fyra seeks explanation or approval, but it is explanation enough to drag her into the flowers' home. We begin the ritual with a thanks, then take what we need and only what we need. Roses, honey suckle, lavender. Sunflowers dip their heads so we may take them.

My knight only nicks herself a couple of times, only when she seems distracted. Her eyes find mine more times than they should.

Sometimes, I see her stop to take in the beauty of our surroundings.

She learns quickly, like our eager apprentices. Just like them, though, she's not free from Vidala's judgement. There's a tut on the same breeze that carries the scent of Fyra's blood. A wince when a fresh bud is taken instead of a flowering one. Even if she's preoccupied, Vidala seems in tune with what Fyra does.

She seems to be in tune with what I'm doing, as well. It's disconcerting. I haven't had her attention like this since my first year as an apprentice.

Whilst it fuels Fyra's determination to finish, it only makes me worry that something is amiss.

*

A breeze picks up in the afternoon, once the sun has finally begun its descent. It chills our skin after such arduous labours over in the flower

field. Pockets of the beds now lay empty, its inhabitants now bundled in each witch's arms. They're tended to carefully, carried to their new place of rest. My sisters and I now circle the morning pyre, finding the small tables that will begin our alters.

Vidala sits at the northernmost point, all of us filtering in from the right of the High Witches. No curses shall pass this way, only vitality. Fyra is not happy to be relegated to the outer circle.

The rest of the Fae sit with her, though. They seldom help with such a task as the final one of the day, but my knight crackles with an intense, antsy energy. Vidala sits across the pyre from us, meditating as the apprentices weave their way into the inner circles. The maidens of the coven sit on the outskirts. Dancing, basking in the new energies being weaved together.

The sun sets an iota more... then it's time.

Vidala starts and we follow in tandem. Sunscript burnt into the wood of the small tables, Then gold and white candles over the ancient language. The flames grow tall once they're lit. They recognise what is to come. What their purpose is.

Bowls are placed next, decorated days before and triple checked for cracks or malcontent. The sister to my left breaks the wax on a jar of sun water and passes it to me as I do the same to my right. We pour the sun water of our sisters - of our coven - into our bowls. It glows bright, enriched by all of our energy combining in the moment.

We are one, we will grow strong with each other's aid.

A breeze lilts through the clearing, bringing with it the scents of the incense: chamomile, sage, lavender, orange. Petals from the roses and hydrangeas. The clear quartz, citrine and tiger's eye from my belt are placed in the brightest parts, along with my solar wheel. All are ready to be charged with the dance.

Everything is going so well... until it isn't.

"The properties are there," High Witch Vidala sighs as she inspects my work, "Each different aspect given the right amount of attention and time. Even your tools are recharging wonderfully... I had my doubts last year, but you both seem to have proved me wrong." I stiffen in confusion. She never said she had doubts last year. "That doesn't mean that I think you're ready, though. Your lines are harsh, your placements hap-hazardous. A determination to be right is leading you to make trivial missteps," Her words cut, even with her gentle tone, "It's better

than it was last year - a major improvement - but I fear you may still be a ways off. And that's not because of your lover. These mistakes are yours, Sinclair."

There's tense silence in our little bubble. The apprentice nervously shuffles off to the next witch for mentoring. There's a tremor in my hand. I know what tone she's using just as much as she does. She mentored me, after all.

"So are you saying...?"

"Not this year, no." Her smile is as gentle as it can be, "It's progress, but it still isn't enough. You need to surpass this final hurdle."

There's a certain devastation, one you should not bring into solstice celebrations. It will taint the energy of the year, give your spells an undercurrent of stress and dismay. You have to try extra hard the next year to be rid of it.

That doesn't stop the tears from falling, the world from caving in and the light from becoming uncharacteristically dim for Litha.

Fyra tries to say something, say anything. All I can think of is the grief that will course my veins for the next year.

The rabbit hole of possibility is a dark one.

*

The sky turns from cerulean to mauve. The clouds swirl ahead. Some of them leave to grant us the last light needed, others prepare for the torrential downpour of the morning. The new solstice must be blessed in the sky as it is on land. The old energies are washed away, the new energies saturate the soil.

I wish the clouds just stayed. I don't want to see the products of our failure - my failure - come to fruition. I don't want to spend an entire year ruminating on the 'what ifs' or the 'should haves'. We play these games with each other too often, and too often we end up lonely in our different realms.

Maybe this was a waste. Maybe ever thinking we would work was a waste.

Fyra's hands are gentle but firm as she pulls me through the woods. She doesn't let me slip, doesn't let me get caught by the Mushrooms and their sneaky circles. We wind through more of the forest as the sun begins to set.

“We need to be back within the hour, but I figured we could use the rest time another way.”

My eyes are red raw and scratchy, but wiping at them with my sleeve doesn't exactly help. “What's the point of going back?” I lament, “Can't we just spend our final hours together?”

“We can and we will, but you also need to be with your coven.” She's not making sense, nor is she leading me anywhere near my sisters, “I apologise. In truth, I've been wondering how this conversation would go for a while and... I think it's better if you're shown, rather than told. Please just trust me.”

And trust her I do. I trust her all the way to a wall of vines that swirls with fae magic. Recognisable fae magic. I trust her as she pulls me through, I trust her as the magic brushes against us with a 'hello again' rather than an 'intruder'. I trust her as my eyes widen in shock and awe. In the darkness, the light of magnificent butterflies swirls around us. Their wings shine gold, their chitin transparent and magic flowing through them. They seem unafraid, even if they flutter away as we walk through.

“What is this place...?” I can't keep the awe from my voice. Pure, unfettered fae magic is rare to come across. I feel as though I've stepped into a liminal space, one between my world and hers.

“It's ours.”

I want to press for more, to understand what she means, but the butterflies answer for her. Eager to greet an old friend, the butterflies pounce, clinging to my clothes, my skin, my hair. They pulse slowly, from gold to silver to bronze and back again.

“Fyra...” That's all I can say at this moment, every wing that caresses us is a memory brought back.

Memories of past Litha celebrations we spent together, each time we've captured Sun Water together, each time the flowers have greeted us both, each time we've created altars. So many summers where we have tried to run away from our responsibilities, where we've tried pleading. Both to the High Witches and the Archfey. So many times our cries have fallen on deaf ears.

It comes to a head one particular Litha, where the sun sets just as it has this time. Things were different in this vision, though. Instead of the joyous days I remembered of Litha, I was sobbing into Fyra's chest. *“I can't keep going like this,” I murmur through gasping breaths, “The*

Coven will revert me back to maidenhood, I don't get to keep you. Everything is a cycle of fear and stress and desperation. I just want to be with you."

Fyra strokes my back as I lament. There's a replica ache in my chest, one that feels so familiar now.

When I come back to reality, Fyra looks smaller than I've ever seen her.

Another memory, another vision.

"You have to. We have to," I'm a mirror of my present day, "I can't live like this anymore, caught up between my loves. They will take my apprenticeship away, Fyra."

"So what would you have me do?" Fyra takes my cheeks in her hands, "Would you want the memories gone for good? Or would you want to return to them?"

I'm thrust back into the present before past me answers, but I'm certain I know the answer.

"I don't expect you to be very happy with me," Fyra says in the quiet, once I've found my senses again, "In fact I wouldn't blame you if you took this Litha as a complete new beginning."

I only manage a gasp before I'm pulled into another memory.

Vidala and Fyra watch me work, but all three of us are focused on the conversation. I can tell by the way my Sunscript strokes are sloppy.

My High Witch does not seem happy.

"It is not natural, girls." Vidala chastises lowly, just out of my sisters' earshot. The High Witch weaves a crown of grass and flowers with her nose in the air, "You need to remember, Sinclair. You need to live through the grief and the pain and grow from it."

"It makes me regress, Vidala." I'm pleading on my knees, trying to put us on a level playfield, trying to make her see, "I perform any worse, and I might as well be living as a mortal. That would make my choice far easier."

She seems offended by that, and past me flushes with regret. "You know I wouldn't dream of losing my sisters. Of losing you. But I can't lose Fyra, either. I want to get stronger so that I might have both. Please, won't you just let me try?"

Fyra places her hands on mine and pulls me forward. The encircling butterflies flutter off and I cling onto her. For comfort, for a root in reality... I'm not sure. But she's still here, still with me. Her words are

the peace I so desperately need.

"I said I'd let you decide. If this went badly, it was up to you whether you wanted me to take this memory as well." She bends so that she might look me in the eye, "It's still your decision. I know the feedback from Vidala is not what you wanted. I'm sorry... I'm sorry I'm such a liability." Her eyes are wet, but her smile is all I focus on, "But we made progress this year, Arlie. We're so much closer than we've ever been. You did it, you got stronger because you're free of that pain. You're not weighed down by the past. We're on the right track."

To think I was so close to giving up on her.

"So, what say you, Great Witch of the Summer Coven? Shall we wallow? Or shall we forget, rejoice and come back with even more determination?"

One last butterfly lands on me, and - I'm sorry to say - I can't remember the answer I give to Fyra at that moment.

A butterfly flutters its wings on my finger, my eyes red raw but full of awe as we stand in the same dark glade illuminated by us in the present. The ache filling my chest has dissipated. We open the thick vines covering the entrance, then Fyra takes my hand. Brushes hair out of my face. "Time to dance my love, time to replenish your energy."

"We need to hurry, there's only an hour left of sunlight,"

"Okay."

*

We make it back just before the sun hides itself under the horizon. The luminescence follows us out of the dark glade, welcoming the night and flourishing with their true colours. The day may be close to finishing, but the forest, the river, the flowers, they're all very much alive and thriving.

The sun is working its magic.

Breathing heavily, almost gasping, we finally make it to the clearing. Just in time, as well. The High Witches circle the bonfire once more. Fresh wood has replaced the ash of the morning pyre, all of it outlined by the alters my sisters and I made earlier.

High Witch Vidala lights each leaders' torch with her own. She passes us both, sees the relief in both of our faces, and smiles. Our energy feels more alive than ever. We feel more connected than ever. Hands and

hearts entwined, we allow my sisters to have their way with us, donning their flower crowns and masks.

Even with her face covered, Fyra looks stunning. Her eyes are bright behind her mask. The hazel in them close to orange as the fires becomes brighter.

One by one, each witch lights the pyre. Little by little, the wood starts to burn. We lower ranks throw in our incense, our flowers, our offerings. We bid them a good renewal as their sweet scents fill the air around us.

The mixture of lavender, orange and chamomile is intoxicating. Laughter and music fills our ears. It's overstimulation in the most calming way possible. I'm surrounded by those I love, by possibility, by strengthening bonds. It makes my feet light. It makes me want to dance.

So... without hesitation, I don my mask and take my love by the hand. We spin and spin until we get dizzy, we join in the laughter. We kiss, sealing our promise that we will see each other again next year.

I keep her there until I feel her form disappear from my fingers.

"I love you."

Just like that, our fae friends, our fae loves, are home.

Confessions of a Problem Cadet

Written by: Lindsay Brandt

Edited by: Marie Claire Anderson

Summer, thirteen years old.

The air is sticky as I try to sleep on a stiff mattress in a bed I made myself. I brought pajamas, but I haven't worn them all week. Instead, I have on athletic clothes, fearing the morning bugle that I know will wake me before dawn tomorrow. A bug flies into a zapper outside.

I wasn't sure what to expect from Military Camp, but this is pretty much it: long days, drill and ceremonies, lessons about leadership and history. I'm not a military kind of girl, not like my brother who knows the name of every kind of airplane, tank, and warship ever made. I didn't ever think I would be here, but I'm glad I came. Cadet life isn't fun, exactly, but it is more fulfilling than my regular summer routine: sitting at home, locked down, doing nothing.

There are fourteen of us in total, five girls and nine boys under the command of our Lieutenant. I'm almost the youngest, and yet no one hazes me for it because I'm no fun to make fun of. Dirty jokes still fly over my head. I stay quiet most of the time, focused only on surviving the week. With no phone, I haven't heard any music since Saturday. Somehow that's the worst part.

I couldn't say how old our Lieutenant is, but she has a fiery spirit and a temper to match. We had a Drill Sergeant the first day, but he got sick and lost his voice, so she stepped in and led drill for the rest of the week as we moved between the barracks and the quad and dining facility. Her energy seems tireless, her professional bearing unflappable.

Today we marched in step around the quad until our legs hurt, her yells echoing off the red brick walls around us, telling us we were *deplorable, terrible, rotten* excuses for cadets, *how could we* not know how to perform a left flank, *how dare we* not know the name of our Commanding Colonel? Then, in the evening, she snuck us into her cabin and offered us cookies away from the prying eyes of Upper Command. She told me she was impressed with how quickly I learned. I smile, remembering the softness and kindness in her eyes as she said it.

I watched her in awe, wondering how the same vicious voice that tore

us down all day could also express such genuine care and concern by night. She's a born leader, the perfect example of what a Lieutenant should be. She told me I could be a leader too.

At some point I drift off to sleep and dream something I won't remember. At no point do I consider that my Lieutenant might just be a regular human girl like me, who feels stress and homesickness and worries about the great responsibility placed on her shoulders.

*

Summer, sixteen, almost seventeen.

During that horrible, humid week, I never dreamed I would want to go back. Yet here I am, three years later, still inspired by my old Lieutenant's words. She told me I could be a leader one day. This is that day.

I drive to the campground in the heart of a pouring rainstorm, on the phone with my boyfriend who's already waiting there. He wants us to fake a breakup because our mutual friends found out that we were dating. He hates the idea of dating one's fellow cadet, and yet here I am, telling him I love him and trying my best to convince him that it's not the end of the world if our relationship goes public. I won't be with him much longer.

I'm a Lieutenant now, and I'm going to spend the next week with a Drill Sergeant of my own training little kids like me to march and salute. I've been training my voice to sound like my Lieutenant's did, high and almost musical, echoing across brick and concrete like a shot from a speaker. I've been honing my ruthless streak, rolling around words like *inconceivably deplorable*, *grotesquely incompetent*, so I can use them on the cadets I train. I'm not what most people would describe as physically intimidating, with my short hair, glasses and acne-stained face—but then, neither was she.

When they assign me my cadets, I waste no time taking all fourteen of them out to the quad and making them march. My voice echoes across camp, audible from the corners of buildings and trees, a beacon of focused intimidation. I don't ask my Drill Sergeant to drill them. After all, my Lieutenant did it all herself.

I don't realize it at first, but my cadets don't like me—they're terrified. I lie to my Commander when he asks if I'm doing okay. I snap at my .

Drill Sergeant, belittling him, and so he talks about me behind my back. We go out on the field in the heat for physical training one day, astroturf melting beneath our boot soles. While the cadets run in circles and do push-ups, Upper Command calls me aside for a special meeting.

“Do you know why you’re here?” the Colonel asks, mirror-shine aviators covering his eyes so I can’t tell if he’s angry or not.

I shake my head no. There are so many reasons, it’s hard to pick one. Maybe it’s because I can’t cooperate with my Sergeant? Maybe it’s because my cadets are too afraid to speak up during classes? Maybe it’s because I feel hollow inside, a gaping hole filled with swirling tornadoes tearing through all my prior expectations of what this week would be.

“You need rest,” the Major told me. “You’ve been overworking yourself.”

No. No. I won’t leave my post. I’m sixteen and I haven’t let myself cry yet. That night, well past ten o’clock, I finally go to bed and curl up in fetal position, shivering as the air conditioner blasts over me. My throat convulses, tears rolling out of my eyes like the rain did when I first drove up. I want my parents. I want my boyfriend. I want to be strong and respected, like my Lieutenant.

By Thursday my voice is shot through. Health Staff forces me to take the morning off, but I go out anyway. Thursday is the day we make our speeches to our cadets, and I’ll be damned if they don’t hear what I’ve got to say.

The Colonel finds me sitting in a circle on the astroturf with all fourteen of them, halfway between two sets of bleachers, stumbling my way through a series of inspirational quotes that make me sound smart. The aviators don’t hide it anymore. He’s angry.

For the rest of the day, I’m trapped in my room. I sit there with my thoughts.

I survive the next few days, somehow.

*

The next week.

I call my Lieutenant and ask her how she did it.

“I was terrified,” she says after a moment. “It felt like plans changed around me every hour, even three or four times an hour. But I stayed flexible, relied on others, and I just kept telling myself over and over not

to show weakness in front of you.”

Cadets are just kids. Problem cadets are just confused, scared kids who respond to stress the way their instincts tell them. For me, that was puffing myself up and tearing others down.

I should have been sent home, that week in late July. I should have been walking in the woods or walking to the ice cream shop with my friends, singing pop hits as we danced down the sidewalk. Anything but screaming at twelve-year-olds, telling them they were sorry excuses for human beings, disrespecting them in my desperate wish for them to respect me.

I finished out the week, marching in front of my cadets as they passed by their parents on the bleachers. By that time, I felt like nothing but a figurehead, but the parents couldn't tell the difference. I realize, now, that the Colonel did respect me more than I thought. If he hadn't, he wouldn't have let me finish the week at all.

“Thank you,” I tell her. “I’m sorry.” *For turning you into a symbol instead of a person. For failing my cadets. For failing myself.*

“We all do our best with what we know, in our own little worlds.” She laughs. “I forgive you.”

And I forgive you too, I think.

*

Summer, the next one.

I’m half a world away, sitting on a porch at another camp as another group of Lieutenants prepare to meet their cadets. Thick fog hangs over a collection of timbered cabins on a mountaintop, and the heavy smell of rain is only broken by our own sweat. Not that we care much at the moment.

I watch the expressions on their faces, some smiling and laughing, others drawn up tightly, masking deep-seated fears. They could have been at home this week: playing video games, mowing lawns, grilling hot dogs. They’re here instead, just like I am, because they want to be leaders.

“You’re here to serve others,” I remind the group, taking off my black-mirrored aviators to look them in the eyes. “Cadets are just kids. Some of them will be sad this week. Some will be scared. Don’t be the reason why.”

Maybe I only say that because I want to sound smart, but I hope some of them will take it to heart. Be better than I was last year.

Downhill, we hear children's laughter and the sputtering of a yellow bus.

Author Biographies



Roos van der Velden
Editor-in-chief

Roos van der Velden is a young writer from the Netherlands with a degree in Literature studies and a job at a bookstore. In her home country, she has been published in *Fantastische Vertellingen* and *Vonk fantasy*. Across the pond, she has gotten published in *Talk Vomit* and *Sinister Wisdom*. In this anthology, she hasn't written herself, yet just like with the previous issues she is still the editor-in-chief.



Dimitrina Dyakova
Author

Dimitrina Dyakova (@daringwithdimi) is a Bulgarian writer and editor with a lifelong fascination for storytelling and the English language. Having moved to the UK years ago, she began sharing her voice through blogging and she now works as a sub-editor for a global brand. She also enjoys letting her creativity flow through copywriting and poetry. When she's not writing, she enjoys baking, reading, stargazing and travelling.



Janyne Langlois
Cover Designer (Front)

Janyne Langlois is a Florida based writer known for art, literature and having an enormous imagination that runs on overdrive. Her creativity stems from watching films like *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Harry Potter*, and *Sailor Moon*. Her love of writing was fostered by her college English professor, who always encouraged her to keep going. When she isn't writing she's watching anime, listening to cinematic music, or screaming with her friends about characters they love.

Author Biographies



Kenn Nimaga
Cover Designer (Back)

Kenn Nimaga is a former scientist and current author and librarian located in the American Midwest. While she waits for science funding in the US to return, she fills the academic void writing fiction rather than research papers. When not writing, she can often be found with her beloved corgi.



Ashley Catelyn Olivier
Author

Ashley Catelyn Olivier is an aspiring novelist and recent Creative Writing graduate from the University of Chichester. She most enjoys writing flash fiction and short stories in the fantasy and horror genres, but will dabble in anything. She is a voracious reader, who when not writing, can be found devouring fantasy novels or trying her best not to faceplant at her taekwondo classes.



Rebeca Elgueta
Author

Rebeca Elgueta is a writer and lover of fantasy and sci-fi. After completing her MA in Creative Writing, she is shaping a career that blends creative writing with growing copywriting experience. In her free time, she weaves words into poetry and nurtures a novel's beginnings. Some of her poems can be found on her laid-back blog: (<https://becanataliae.wordpress.com/>)



Author Biographies



Ella Turner
Author

With a degree in English literature and creative writing, Ella Turner is a 23 year old hobby writer and aspiring editor, with equal interest in fantasy and horror and the works of Franz Kafka. In her own writing, she often explores various intersecting themes through abstract character behaviours and symbolism, and pulls references from Old English folklore.



Ellie Hope
Author

Ellie Hope is a copywriting student and healthcare employee in Texas that lives with her fiancé and two cats. When she's not writing, she's either singing operas or hiking.



Anna Bussabarger-Graf
Author

Anna Bussabarger-Graf is a marketer, writer, at-home chef, and beginner boulderer. Beyond her work in the Word Tonic Anthology, she has also been published in Milkie Magazine and Femicide Zine. Her favorite summer activity is swimming, followed by kayaking. With potent water signs in her Big 3, she's naturally drawn to water. Connect with her on LinkedIn for regular essays/posts/musings.

Author Biographies



Charlotte Blythe
Author

Charlotte Blythe is a 27 year old aspiring author and poet from the UK. She has wanted to be a writer since she was very young, but has only found the confidence to put her work 'out there' since joining Word Tonic. She's currently working on producing a poetry collection and aspiring towards a fantasy novel. If Charlotte isn't writing or suffering at her day job, she's probably researching, crafting, reading, travelling or, most likely, procrastinating.



Makyla Paquette
Author

Makyla Paquette is a recent university graduate who is more than ready to burst into the entertainment and media industries. With a fascination for horror, gothic and really anything that makes your skin crawl, she aspires to curate new nightmares for you with her psychological thrillers.



Abigail Sitter
Author

Abigail Sitter is a 28-year-old creative writer from Ontario, Canada. She is currently working on an interactive romance game as well as writing her fantasy romance novel. When she is not writing, you will probably find her getting lost in a video game, watching her favourite series, or curling up with her cats and a good book. Learn more about her work: abigailscreativeworks.my.canva.site

Author Biographies



Kiera Hammersley
Author

Kiera Hammersley is a UK-based writer who indulges in the dark, gritty, and morally grey. She is particularly interested in strange, off-putting characters, gothic fiction, and stories about the queer experience. A Royal Holloway Creative Writing graduate, she dabbles in creative fiction, copywriting, freeform essays, and screenplays. She is currently working on a screenplay about feuding clowns.



Bobbie Owen
Author

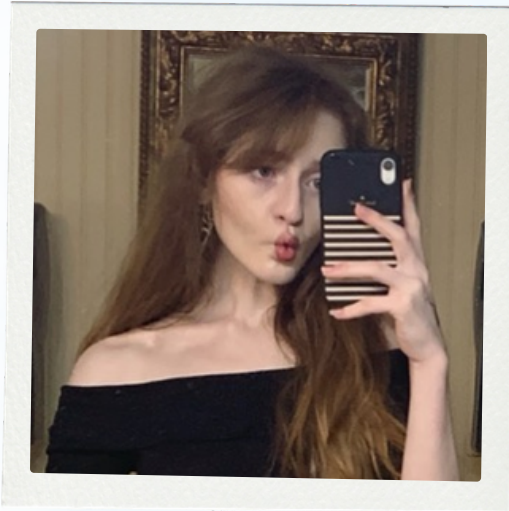
Bobbie Owen is a second year undergraduate student with a passion for talking about the less romanticised things in life, hoping to find some relation to their audience in their connection between landscape and narrative situation. She's also going into her third year in an English and classical studies degree, and is hoping to get some more experience in the world of writing.



Bea Forest Hale
Author and Editor

Bea Hale (@writing.through.the.vines) otherwise known as Forest, is a 21-year-old philosophy student from Northern England. He's been performing poetry and singing their heart out for all to hear at any nearby open mic nights for the past 2 years. Recently, they've started upskilling their writing in the professional sense and setting up places to share what he's learning.

Author Biographies



Nicolette Sigur
Author

Nicolette Sigur is a proud New Orleans native (no way, right?) & does too many things. This is her first time being published, but she's always loved storytelling. She has her BFA in Musical Theatre from Webster University & is a NOCCA alum. Love to family for fostering her creativity of all kinds (an EP's in the works!) & to friends who've encouraged her original material! #whodat



Rowan McAlpine
Author

Having just graduated with a master's degree in Creative Advertising, Rowan McAlpine is a Scottish writer and storyteller. Lover of all things Y2K and techy, they specialise in online consumerism discourse and old web graphic design, and pride themselves on the ability to name every commercially released Zhu Zhu Pet. They also have a degree in Acting, for whatever reason. You can check out their personal site here: rowan.cowsite.net



Molly Elisson-Edwards
Author

Close to completing her Master's in Screenwriting, Molly Elisson-Edwards is a lover of all things whimsy when it comes to writing. When not in a bookstore, she's a lover of all things crafty and homemade. Her homebrew for Dungeons & Dragons has inspired her to write a book! You can follow that journey here: <https://molleth.wixsite.com/portfolio>

Author Biographies



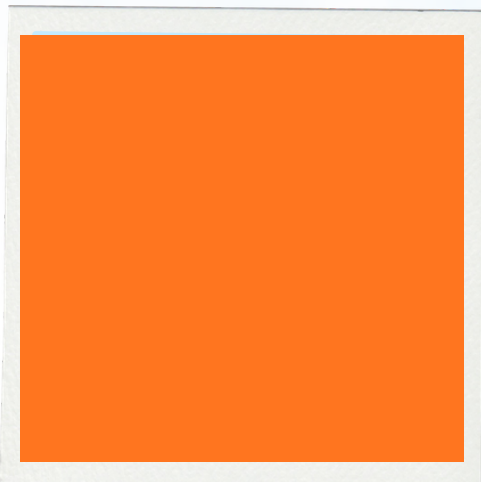
Lindsay Brandt
Author

Lindsay Brandt (she/her) has been writing all manner of creative works since she could barely talk. She's a Dixiefied Hoosier who loves country music, and you can find her songs and lyrical work at @lindsayvirginiamusic on Instagram. Recently she won the June 2026 Writician flash fiction contest for her short story "Ten Minutes To Midnight." When not writing, she enjoys riding her bike and watching Jet Lag: The Game.



Claire Marie Anderson
Editor

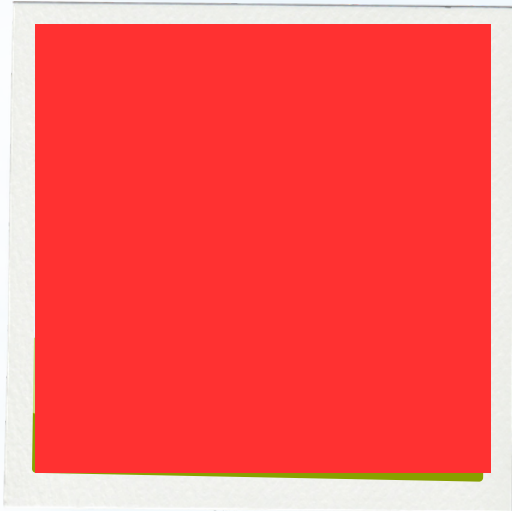
Claire Marie Anderson is a poet and copywriter whose work explores the tragicomedy of existence and non-existence. Some of her Best of the Net-nominated publications can be found in Alchemy, The Decadent Review, Unfortunately, Literary Magazine, The Decadent Review, and BarBar Literary Magazine, among other digital and print places.



Alex DeAnda
Editor

Alex DeAnda is an editor and enjoys being helpful!

Author Biographies



Jupi Bowen

Jupi Bowen
Editor



Michelle Burns
Editor

My name is Michelle Burns. I am a psychology graduate from the US who loves creative writing and video games. I love to write fanfiction in my free time as well as poetry, and have been involved as a writer in many fan communities online.



Word Tonic

See you SOON!

Kenn Nimaga

