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THE REACH



A SLIPSTREAM FICTION MAGAZINE

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THE REACH

A LITERARY MAGAZINE

Issue 1

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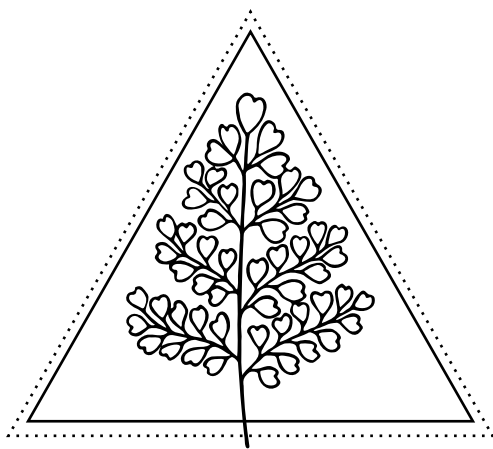
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THE GOSHAWK

JANE ANDREOLI

Thick mist curled around me as I walked steadily up the forest path. The wraiths of tree trunks faded in and out of existence as I shuffled through copper coloured mulch on the densely padded floor. Every sound was made intimate by the muffling fog.

The world was blanketed and still. Nothing was visible except in the cocoon in which I walked. Sights and sounds took on strange significance. A leaf twitched, as a dewdrop, grown fat and heavy, slid down it and dripped off the end. A spider's web, stretched between bracken fronds, sparkled with rain jewels and quivered slightly. What had made it move? The birds were subdued. Only occasional soft calls broke the listening silence.

I had walked this path many times before. I knew that a thin fringe of trees ran along the ridge of a hill. To the left of the path as you ascended, the land fell away in soft green folds, rippled with long lines by the plough, crossed through by hedgerows and narrow stone paths, and soared over by the hunting birds of the deep woods.

Sometimes in stormy weather, shrieking flocks of seagulls would rampage across the land, rising and falling to pillage the corn fields, and squabble in white hot anger against the slate grey skies. In the distance, on a clear day, you could look beyond the valley and see the silver sparkle of the sea. Now there was nothing but pearl grey, as though everything had been rubbed out by some great creator so that it could all be started again.

The sharp cry of a buzzard underlined the silence and spoke savagely of the vastness of all things.

Then there was a dark commotion overhead. invisible pigeons rustled, panicked, clattered through branches, and took flight. Something huge hovered above me, its wings cutting black edges into the misty light, and then it was gone.

For a heart-stopping moment, I was a fieldmouse cowering under a hedge. I was a vole, slipping into the long grass to shiver and be still. The moment passed, and I carried on up the hill. The mist was thinning now. I was aware of its swirling tendrils. I could see the lighter patch that was the risen sun.

As the veils quivered and evaporated, I thought I saw a tree trunk move. It was a man on the path above me. He stood looking down into the valley, which was starting to emerge from the rolling ocean of whiteness. He wore a speckled tweed coat, a white scarf, and a brown woollen hat.

I trod on a twig. The sharp snap brought his head round with a jerk. Dark eyes pierced me from above a short, jutting grey beard. I must have looked startled - maybe even afraid - because he cocked his head to one side, stretched a hand towards me and smiled.

His jauntiness, his joy in standing there watching the valley reveal itself and his pleasure in having someone to share this with, was infectious, and I smiled back. I reached the little plateau where he stood, and side by side we watched the colours in the rich valley beneath us develop like a photograph in the warming air. The mist was nearly all gone now, and white sheep stood out against their green pasture.

“I’m waiting for my lady goshawk,” he said at last. “I usually meet her here. She’ll fly up through the valley. Sometimes she’ll hunt here, and sometimes she’ll take a diversion to the trout farm”. He laughed. “She’s a greedy girl and likes an easy meal.”

“How long have you had her?” I asked.

He blinked, considering the question.

“We’ve flown together for a year or more now, maybe longer. It took a while to get to know her. I think she’s mine, but she’s tricky. Likes to keep me waiting. Wild creatures, eh? They know their own minds.”

“How do you know she will find you here? How do you know she will come back?”

“I can call to her, see? She’s fledged her chicks and wants to fly alone for a while, spread her wings, have some fun, but she’ll come back to me when I call.”

His calmness and confidence were superb. He stood there, a short, faintly ridiculous man with his carefully clipped beard and his sagging hat.

“Four chicks we’ve raised this summer. We’ve worked hard and done well. And now it’s our time again.”

The sun was fully up now, and our shadows lengthened behind us. Mine, with the rucksack, spindly legged and hunchbacked. His, with his short, flared coat, like widening wings.

We talked for a while about habitats, nesting sites, predators and prey, until the man stiffened and turned his head, listening hard. There was a pinprick of sound on the very edge of hearing. A series of short staccato notes, like Morse code. Silence. Then the series repeated itself, a little louder. A beautiful smile blossomed on his face.

“That’s her coming now. That’s my lady.”

With a wave, he was off, bounding up the path, around the curve and out of sight. I heard the bird call again and heard an answer louder and closer to land. The man must be imitating her song, to guide her to him.

Once again there was a commotion among the trees as the pigeons panicked, and the songbirds dived for cover.

Then I saw two goshawks breaking cover to swoop away down the valley. They cried joyously to each other, riding on the rising currents of air. She tumbled this way and that, wings spread in the sunlight: her sleek brown plumage shining. And there was he, with the shabby wings that looked like a speckled tweed overcoat, and a tiny brown dot that I knew to be a shapeless woollen hat.

THE SHIPWRECK

BETHANY CLAYTON

A seagull squawked loudly into the air. It swooped once and then once more. A black shadow – the form of a prehistoric pterodactyl – glided mysteriously over the clear sea water and rugged rocks. It weaved itself between the crevices of the chalky white cliff face, performing a solo dance in the sky. The seagull landed with an awkward abruptness upon an irregular metal object covered with a rash of rust. The gull squawked again.

With a black beaded eye, it scoured the cove from its stoop. The sea shimmered. Still and calm. A light summer breeze rustled a few of its feathers. The wind carried dry seaweed along the beach which scratched the clusters of rocks that lay nestled in the soft sand like fawns in the meadow grass. They bleated starchy cries of complaint. The wild wind carried another sound. A soft *pad pad* that grew louder. The seagull's obsidian stare widened in alarm as the footsteps approached.

The gull squawked loudly and departed. It flew high - Icarus into the sun. A black shadow cast four trepid explorers momentarily into a flash of darkness. Then the sun shone again. Two men bravely stood at the cliff edge. One of the men, gripped his backpack tightly, turning his knuckles to a ghostly white as he peaked over the edge. He took a cautious step backwards. At a safe distance from the perilous edge he loosened his grip on his backpack, a fleshy colour rushed back to his hands. The ghosts had left him.

The other man lifted a hand to push back his mop of dark hair that had obscured his vision. His hazelnut eyes glittered with streaks of golden flames as the sun shone brightly. Those fiery eyes glanced at the chalky white rocks below. His foot perched precariously at the land's edge. Under his grass-stained trainer soles clusters of loose earth tumbled over the edge. It rained down the cliff face with an acrobatic finesse. Within the same moment golden laughter caressed the ears of the two young men with a merry embrace. Two young women giggled as they took yet another photograph.

One of the women had buttercup yellow hair and hopped gracefully over to the other woman, who was tall, fair and had a striking resemblance to the darkest hour of night. A stark contrast to the warmth that radiated from the star that elegantly pranced over to her side. The two women peered at the camera and laughed deliciously at their photograph. Like sprites the two women had enchanted the two men. They adorned everything about them. To the earth they stood on, to the air that caressed them and to the music which appeared from their soft petal pink lips. The men called to the sprites. The woman with the buttercup yellow hair gave her hand to the grip of the man who possessed golden flames in his eyes, as he guided her closer to the cliff edge. He held her steady as if she was a china doll.

He feared that if he was to relinquish his grasp of her she would crumble into pieces of porcelain at his feet. The woman, who dismayed her delicate morality with no indifference, peered over the cliff edge. The woman exclaimed. For at the bottom of the cliff lay a large metal body covered with a rash of red rust. She had never seen a shipwreck before. The two men then suggested that they should venture down into the cove and explore the shipwreck. So, with that the trepid explores began along a path. A path formed by various wild creatures over the centuries. It was this path that the mother stout carried home a small dead mouse to her family. It was this path that juvenile rabbits ventured. It was this path that puffins occasionally came to rest.

The trail was decorated with various fauna and flora. Shade was granted by the tall branches of sea buckthorn and hawthorn plants decorated with a sprinkling of orange gems and white stars which formed a boarder along with the evergreen ferns and tall grasses. At the trail edge the earth was carpeted with the miniature pink buds of sea holly and the immaculate white buds of sea campion. As the party marched onwards and downwards a sweet salted scent dawdled at the tips of the explorer's noses. Eventually the soft earth gave way to pebbles that crunched softly under the men's trainers and the woman's sandals.

The explorers finally reached the cove below. The two men immediately ventured towards the sorrowful wreck, which rested on its side making it stand an easy seven foot tall. One man eyed it quizzically and called over to the women. Only the buttercup ventured forwards.

The man with the backpack swung the pack from his slim shoulders and threw it down onto the sand. He then rolled up the sleeves of his forest green shirt which exposed his pale forearms to the rays of the scorching sun. He patrolled around the perimeter of the wreckage. His emerald eyes examined each inch of red rust and warped metal. His scorched arms then raised cautiously towards the highest side of the wreck and clutched the weather worn metal. The man quickly gave up the endeavour of climbing the wreck as the ghosts in his knuckles cried violently as droplets of scarlet were let loose. A cry of anguish was released as the man quickly surrendered his grip of the sharp metal that had cut into the underside of his fingers.

Within the same moment that the man had abandoned his attempt to climb onto and board the shipwreck, the woman with the buttercup yellow hair and the man with a golden fire in his eyes walked hand in hand. They strolled merrily towards the edge of the shore to the point where waves gently kissed and caressed the earth. The couple enchanted by a siren's song, that was played out on seashells and kelp covered rocks, stared absently at the hazy blue horizon.

The woman who possessed the night in her veins found a large smooth boulder to perch upon. She sat still. She could feel the sun wrap its arms over her exposed shoulders and the sea breeze play with her long dark hair. As happy as she was to let the elements embrace her body, her mind, however, relented. It pondered at the shipwreck. It asked the questions; how long had the shipwreck been here? What disaster had brought it to rest in this cove?

The girl parted her petal pink lips and began to utter to the elements: -

“With those that I saw suffer: a brave vessel –

Who had, no doubt, some noble creature in her –

Dashed all to pieces! O, the cry did knock

Against my very heart – poor souls, they perished.”

A tempest of Prospero’s making burdened her gaze. Pure, bright daylight diminished as monstrously pregnant clouds devoured the sky. The wind roared. The sea swelled. Titans began to battle. They spat sea salt against an unfortunate vessel that was slave to disaster. The relentless current tossed the boat violently. Its blood red hull veered up and down. With a thunderous crash it slammed down against the black waves. In anguish the vessel gave out a shrill groan. A haunting cry was cast into the storm by the crew of whom shivered in fright as they fell prey to the onslaught of waves that were as high as mountains and as black as jet that lashed against the boat.

Aboard the vessel chaos reigned. On deck men of all ages scrambled to their stations in a frantic state of lunacy. Some slipped painfully to their knees on the wet metal deck. Others were forcefully tossed about. Crashing into bulkheads or other crew members who in turn lost their footing and shrieked. Lunacy gave out a thunderous laugh as she toyed with the frightened souls that vainly struggled to not become a possession of madness. As the torment endured the crew clung onto pieces of sodden rope for dear life as they underwent another lashing from the waves.

Suddenly the vessel veered upwards, its bow pierced the pregnant clouds which burst. Artillery fire rained down from the heavens and exploded upon the men’s bodies. One man, drenched through to his weathered skin even in his long waterproof coat, hat and worn leather boots, clung firmly to the rope that lined the bulkheads. With hands the size of bear paws he used the rope to pull his large bulk towards the wheelhouse. The sea spat at him. He bared his yellow teeth and growled. He placed a gigantic hand against the metal door of the wheelhouse and pushed.

The Captain whipped his head around to the wheelhouse door, only to see a giant of a man stood like doom himself in the doorway. Bullets of rain thundered around the giant. He took a laboured step inside and with Herculean strength shut the wheelhouse door. “For Christ sake, man!” Yelled the Captain.

The Captain then turned mournfully to gaze out of the window. The treacherous waves crashed against the boat. The sky was awash with sorrowful black clouds. The old man neatened the sleeves of his navy-blue seaman’s uniform then placed his shaking hands steady on the ship’s wheel. The old man did his best to hide his fear that spread like wildfire in his mind. As Hercules looked at his Captain, he could only see a man who stood defiantly against the elements.

The Captain had always thought himself a creature of the ocean as there never was a sea that he could not conquer. Prospero's storm revealed to him his ignorance. No man could conquer the oceans. Suddenly thunder cracked. Lightening illuminated the cabin and electrified the waves. Which cast ghoulish apparitions of the Kraken's horrendous tentacles onto the boat. No longer did the rocking of the waves and the taste of salt on his old thin lips comfort him - it terrified him. He longed to be on dry steady land with the arms of his wife wrapped around him. He missed running his coarse hands through her smoke like hair that resembled the wisps that were conjured by his beloved tobacco pipe. He missed her scent. Baked bread and rosemary.

Lighting flashed and forked in the black abyss that the ship sailed into. It was then that the Captain realised that the only true love he had ever known was that for his wife. Not his precious ship or the kind and cruel sea. His aged blue eyes watered with nostalgia. His fluffy white brows knotted together in worry. With an aged leather-like hand he rubbed them apart.

Hercules' gruff voice snapped him back to the horror of reality. "Cap. She can't 'old." Hercules strode towards his Captain and in passion gripped him by the shoulders. His large sunken eyes ringed with a lattice of wrinkles translated to the Captain the vital necessity to abandon ship. The Captain received the meaning of his first mate, his worst fear revealed. His ship would be lost. The end was nigh. Suddenly the ship lurched to its side. Hercules was thrown against the far wall of the wheelhouse.

A tremendous crash echoed around the room as the first mate found himself crumpled on the floor surrounded by a variety of nautical objects. The Captain clung to the ship's wheel for dear life. With all the strength that his old bones could muster he began to turn the wheel port side. The ship was level again. The first mate rose to his feet, throwing away a bronze telescope that had been cast against the wheelhouse wall with him. Suddenly there was a crackle of thunder and an explosion of bright light that danced around the two seamen. Then the ship's electric lights went out - the ship and her crew were plunged into darkness. Prospero, the conjurer of the tempest, laughed and the waves raised higher and the wind grew wilder. "Get to the lifeboat!" The Captain ordered through thin ghostly lips.

In the maddening darkness the first mate fumbled his way over to the wheelhouse door and threw it open. Shards of salt were spat at him by the sea. They stung his cheeks turning them to the colour of holly berries. "Get ye to a lifeboat" He bellowed to the crew. Not a single soul on deck heard the woe-some cry due to thunderous winds that snatched the words away from the giant's mouth.

An ear-splitting groan emanated from the bowels of ship. She screeched and groaned in monstrous pain as the Kraken's great tentacles smashed against her hull and ripped her in two. Agonising screams of horror were let loose by the crew. Siren's hands made from dark droplets of icy sea water grabbed the crew who clutched for dear life at the ship's rigging. One terror-stricken young man yelled in shock as the water drenched rope, that he was clinging to, was whipped through his fingers that now burned.

The splash of a lifeboat was heard as it hit the obsidian waters below and floated away – empty, carrying only ghosts. The poor young man could not help the tears which flooded his pale face as he had lost all blessed hope of continual existence.

Face to face with the prospect of annihilation he sunk to his knees. He pressed his hands to his ears to block out the deafening drones of disaster that surrounded him. His burnt fingers buried themselves under his unruly mop of dripping wet dark hair. His body shuck violently with fear as he mumbled words of pray. Prospero forbade these heavenly words to be delivered to the young man’s God as the ship suddenly lurched and the poor soul was cast overboard.

Sirens swam up from the depths. Their silver fish tails carried them through the turbulent waters with grace as their dark green hair, made from kelp, danced about their beautifully sinister bodies. With webbed hands they grabbed the young man by his arms and legs. He thrashed about but to no avail as the demons of the depths dragged him deeper and deeper to their underwater lair. Until the thrashing stopped and the mortal fear he felt was to never be experienced again.

Another ear-splitting shriek could be heard as the ship – now in two parts – grated her metal belly against the rugged rocks. Waves began to carry parts of the ship and members of the crew down into the watery bottomless abys.

Terror fuelled screams haunted the remaining parts of the wreck. These anguished cries broke the Captain’s heart. He could do nothing but listen to his crew perish and allow for the icy water, that was rapidly filling the wheelhouse, to take him.

Icy hands laced around his waist. He stood – paralysed. Death’s hands were at his throat now. “Martha...” he spluttered. The smell of baked bread and rosemary kissed his cheek as the tempest took its final victim.

The ship was no more. The Kraken, satisfied with the wrath it had unleashed, sulked back to the depths. The once heavily pregnant clouds now depilated, evaporated revealing a glistening turquoise sky. Prospero had suppressed the tempest.

From the petal pink lips did the words; *“Against my very heart – poor souls, they perished”* depart.

Horrors of a phantasmal wreck burdened her eyes. An outstretched hand suddenly broke the spell. The phantoms vanished. She smiled. A smile like sweet honey. Her surroundings came slowly to light as the storm and ghostly moans of a lost crew disembarked. There was a hot orange sun that sat drooping in the clear sky. The still ocean water, that had crept silently closer to the shoreline, shimmered.

A midsummer haze was cast by the ever-sinking summer sun upon the sand, the rugged rocks and the chalky white cliff face that was now tinted with an orange hue. In this dreamy summer haze, the couple that stood by the sea, hand in hand, began to retreat to the woman who was perched upon a boulder and the kind man that held an outstretched hand towards her. The sprite-like woman perched on the boulder, took the outstretched hand and with her petal pink lips placed a kiss on the man’s parted mouth. It was a kiss that tasted of honey. As the other couple lazily wandered over to their companions, the girl with buttercups for hair took a photo of this patch of idyllic paradise and proudly showed her partner.

His eyes came alive with glittering golden flames that swirled in a hazelnut pool alighted by the evening sun as his gaze took in the photograph on his sprite's camera whose hair also now glowed as if it was made from fine golden thread. Then the two couples greeted one another heartily.

The four explorers now satisfied with their adventure among the wreck and in the peaceful cove ventured back along the cliff path. Underfoot sand transformed into loose pebbles and then those metamorphosed into soft crumbling earth. Hawthorn and sea buckthorn branches, that boarded the cliff path, greeted the men and women back with open arms. Sweet smells of the various fauna and flora mixed in with salt from the sea carried the explorers further and further out of sight until nothing could be heard apart from the soft *pad pad* of their footsteps. A large shadow raced across the sun-tinted cliff face and shimmering waves.

Icarus then fell from the sky with a loud squawk of gull. The seagull alighted with clumsy sophistication on the shipwreck's rusted bulk. A light breeze ruffled a few of its feathers. That same evening summer breeze carried dry clusters of seaweed across the rocks that bleated starchily like fawns, bleating in alarm at being found in the meadow grass. A cry from the gull echoed around the wreck's coastline crypt.

The bird then alighted into the air once more and flew high into the sky. It was a sky that was streaked with brushstrokes of; orange, pink, purples and blues as the summer sun began to sink beyond the hazy blue horizon. With a black beaded eye, the gull took one last look at the wreck, with its rash of red rust it lay defeated sinking into the soft sand. A depressing end for a mighty vessel that had once mastered the seas.

WATER ALL WAYS

INDIA-ROSE CHANNON

She scares me, she always has. She used to stand on the rocks, right where they jut out into the sea, and it would churn around her like it knew she was there. She'd put her arms up and for a split second, it would look like she was controlling the waves that pawed at her feet.

Her family came over a few years back, from Wales. No idea why they wanted to come all the way up here, where there isn't even a Body Shop and half the inhabitants are sheep, but apparently, they did. Mum made the same decision back when I was a kid, so I guess I can't talk.

The thing she likes about the island, she says whenever I complain, is the sea. There's not many places you can go on the island where you can't see water. Some of it's lochs, still and whale grey and dashed with silent birds. There's a lake they have in the main town, the peedie sea. She laughed when I first called it that. She didn't know what peedie meant and she didn't believe me until she got someone else to say it too.

If you wanna go somewhere away from water, you've got a handful of options. Mostly scrubby little valleys, not even big enough to be called valleys, where your elbows get all scratched up by heather. They used to use it for sleeping, I think, in the old buildings that scatter the island. No idea how; it's not soft or comfy, just ragged. Not the nicest plant to sit by, hunkered down in some tiny gorge. But then, why come live on an island if you don't wanna see the sea?

She loves the sea. Last summer, we spent nearly every day on the beaches, collecting shells and racing each other and swimming. I'm faster than her, way faster, but she gets this look on her face when she loses that I don't like, so I usually let her win.

We'd been out in the water, like always, pretending we saw sharks or orcas to scare each other. She was good at that, making me think there really was something black and huge swimming just below our feet. I stuck my head under the water, searching the gloom for anything, but that only made the tingly feeling on my spine worse. Don't know if it's better, not seeing. There are those beaches where the water's so clear you'd be able to see whatever thing was looking up at you. No time to get away though, so what's the point of knowing?

I kept my eyes open under the water even though it hurt, but it was all just murky brown. There could've been an orca right under my wetsuit boots.

When I surfaced, she was gone, already halfway back to the beach. Shrieking, I splashed after her, the cold waves pushing me along as if the sea wanted me gone. I caught up with her at the shoreline, and grabbed her, pulling her onto the sand.

“You left me!”

She laughed, wheezing as she tried to catch her breath. “You looked so scared.”

Lunging at her, I tried to knock her down. I was faster, but she was stronger, and she had me pinned to the sand before I even knew what was going on.

I remember there was a stone pressing into my back. Something small and sharp, right between my shoulder blades. I remember it shifted a bit when I tried to wiggle away, lodging itself against my spine.

It was an easy pain, a better pain to focus on. I couldn't think about the pain between my legs when she had her fingers in me, the way her hair dripped onto my neck and my shirt. When I yelped and she put her other fingers in my mouth, I listened to the way the sound echoed, just a bit, like the sea was in pain too.

After she let me sit up and went to wash her hands in the sea, I picked up the stone. It was black and shiny wet like seal skin, and I knew it'd dull to a grey when it dried, but I put it in my pocket anyway. The whole way home, it pressed sharp against my hip, and I heard the pain instead of her.

That was summer. The stone's still on my dresser now. It did go grey, that kind of dusty grey that isn't even pretty. Not baby swan grey, or knife grey, or even sky grey. Just. Grey.

I went to the sea, back before September. It was like a goodbye, even though I knew I was going to see it again. That I'd have to. Can't exactly get away from the sea when you live on an island. I get to my dentist by boat. I sat on a rock and I told the sea what she'd done. I told the sea until the sea crept onto my rock and reached for my feet, and then I went home.

It's October now. The fifth. She's been gone a whole day. Twenty-four full hours. I counted them. It's choir tonight, so I get changed out of my school clothes and into a jumper. I'll be coming back in the dark, mum's working a late shift tonight, but that's fine. I did it a million times before she moved here, and I'll do it a million times again.

Choir is long and empty and no one asks me anything, just looks at me like...like I don't know what. Like they're wary? Like they're trying to find the best joke to make about my paint-stained jeans? They don't say anything, so I don't know. The sea wants to join the percussion, like it does every choir practice, and Mr Sinclair makes the same joke he always makes, about it being jealous of our voices. Like he's watched *The Little Mermaid* too many times. He doesn't even have a kid to watch it with.

Anyway, the sea's not jealous. It's just...there.

At the end, Mr Sinclair gets up the courage to catch my arm before I can leave. "You sure you're good walking home tonight? I can always drive you if you want."

He's driven a lot of the group home, a lot of times. When she started coming with me to practice, he stopped offering lifts to me. I already had a hand to hold on the way back.

"No, thanks," I say, and he lets me go without a word about her, even though I know he wants to ask.

The walk back from the church is all farm paths and long, fast roads. There's no traffic lights on the island, not much traffic either to be fair, so everyone drives like maniacs. That's what mum calls them, muttering to herself when we cross the road. Well, actually, she calls them 'fucking maniacs'. The farm paths are easy, even in the dark, because I know I'm not gonna see anyone else but sheep.

The road's the worst. It's got a wall on one side that's falling down, so bad it hit some kid from school on the head a few weeks back. On the other side, there's a long hedge, snarled with brambles and briars and nests of little darting birds. There's a grassy verge next to the hedge too, the safest place to walk in the dark when the cars won't see you, or don't want to see you.

She liked the hedge. She said we could hide in it, make our own nest inside the gnarled, knotted branches. I said she was insane, we'd only get our arms all ripped up, and she shrugged. "Price of freedom," she said, tugging off one of the leaves and handing it to me like it was a rose.

The road's quiet tonight. No rushing headlamps or cyclists in reflective gear struggling to get up the hill. I can hear my boots squelch in the grass. You get mud here all year round, doesn't matter how warm it gets. It's cold tonight though. Like that kind of cold that comes in from the sea. The islanders, the ones who've lived here all their lives, they call it the haar. This cold, clinging mist that sneaks inland.

I'm still in my light raincoat. I haven't zipped the fleece lining into it yet; I was hoping I could wait till November to do that. It makes me look bulky. The fabric rustles like a bag of crisps, matching the rustling of the branches to my right.

Only the rustling isn't coming from the hedge to my right. It's coming from behind me, and there's squelching too, sick, sucking noises. When I turn around, she's there. Just there, walking behind me, looking at the briars in the hedge. I don't know her face when she turns to me, but I know it's her.

She opens her lips to speak and they're all blue and cracked. I remember her putting on lip balm with just a hint of pink. It's bad to hear the dead speak. I put my hands over my ears and I keep walking.

She follows me all the way home. She's grey, like whatever normally gives her colour is broken. Every time I check behind me, she's there. I'm still faster than her, but I have this feeling that if I run, she'll run too, and I don't want to see that. I don't want to see her dead arms flopping about as she runs, her mouth sagging open, catching flies.

When I get to the gate, she stops. It's hard to tell if she's looking at me, her eyes have gone now. Crabs probably, crawling over her face, looking for the best bits of her. Inside the house, I bolt the door, even though it means I'll have to get up when mum gets back to let her in. I know mum won't see her.

All night, she's there, just standing. She doesn't try to follow mum through the gate when she gets in from her night shift. When the sun starts to glance over the hills on the other islands, she turns and walks away, back down the road. It's not a goodbye though. She'll be back. Things like her don't just go away.

~

Her parents are at the door even before the police. I hear them, banging and shouting, but when I come out onto the landing, mum shakes her head at me. She does that shooing motion that she usually uses when she's having a dinner party and she wants me out of the way.

From my bedroom, I listen to her open the door, letting in their voices like a squall. I hear my name, her name, pick up my headphones and jam them over my ears.

I don't know what they expect me to say to them. Someone must have found her. She must've washed up somewhere, all bloated and eyeless, or else why would they be here? Should I say sorry? I don't know where she is. I don't know what happened to her. I only wished for her to be dead, I didn't do it.

The sea did, after I told it what she'd done. It was wild and she was wild, and I knew she couldn't keep washing over people like she did.

I didn't even take her there. She was the one who drew me out to the beach, for another go at what we'd done in the summer. "I don't wanna be your summer girlfriend," she said, holding my hand.

I suggested going back to mine, but she shook her head. Her hair caught my cheek, stinging like sea spray. "Nah, it's better here."

She pulled me onto the sand and over the shells and seaweed from a storm. We found a dead fish there once, after a really bad storm, right next to a dead bird. Like some sort of omen. She laughed when I said that; she doesn't believe in all the stuff the old islanders talk about. Selkies and dwarfies living in stanes and the haar. The haar exists though, I don't know how she doesn't believe in it.

She was on the rocks when I let go of her hand, so I guess I did do something. Or I didn't do something. I didn't hold on. I didn't think about not holding on, it wasn't on purpose, I just couldn't hold her hand anymore. It's like when you've got sand in your sock and you just have to get it out. She was smiling at me and the waves took her. They soaked me to the bone, crashing over both of us, but when I looked up, she was the only one they'd taken.

Her parents go away, eventually, and the police too, when they're done with their questions. It happens. Kids drown. Mum comes up and sits on my bed with me. She changed the sheets, back in summer, after I bled all over them. Must've been bleeding all the way back from the beach, because my pants were crusted red-brown when I woke up. Mum didn't ask then and she doesn't ask now.

She's there again tonight. Just stands there, outside the gate like she can't come through it. I don't know what's stopping her. I don't know what she wants. Her lips are moving and I could open the window to listen, if I wanted. The sea's quiet tonight. The wind tugs at her hair like it wants her back. I wonder where she'd go if I followed her at dawn, if she'd go back to the funeral home or if she'd lead me to the sea again. I wonder if she'll have dirt in her hair, after they bury her, or if putting her in the earth will make her still, finally. I doubt it though.

AN ORDINARY BUTTON

VIKTOR KOSZO

The crows appeared one after another, always bringing another piece. Sometimes a button, sometimes scraps. I had long been watching the family who were always around the farm. I watched them in silence, and sometimes they noticed and looked at me. The little one often waved or came closer to play or chased the crows away. I don't know when I started to despise them.

The little one was cute though. She had brought me a hat a few weeks ago so I wouldn't soak in the rain. A black hat with a big rim. I'd say it matched my outfit, but it didn't matter what I got. With every piece I've worn about over the years, with every trinket brought by the crows, I felt more and more vibrant, and increasingly insensitive. I felt that my waking was coming to an end. A few more items and I'll be ready.

I'll be ready to get off the wooden pole and walk into the family house for a blood bath. Once I get down from here they can't stop me, I knew that for sure. I just had to be patient enough, which I was, given that I have nothing to do in the world. They exposed me to scare the crows out of their land, but I just seemed to scare them with my look. Except for the little girl who bravely built me from dress to dress when she had something to dispose of. Can't wait to eat her little heart out for that.

Oh look, another crow has arrived with a yellow four-hole button in its beak. It jumped over my outstretched arm to get closer to my motionless head. It leaned down under the rim of the hat to gain access to my face. It inserted the button into my previously empty black eye socket. It pushed it until the straw kept it in place. I don't know where the crow found it, but something like this had been in my other eye for a long time. I've been seeing with it since.

Something happened after it put it in. Nothing supernatural, I just felt ready. Every part of my body came under my control. It was time to get out of here. The family had recently left the fields because the weather was overcast and the sun was going down. How tragic that they are to die at the end of a working day.

As I started to step off, the crows croaked as if they were excited that their structure was working. When I started walking towards the house, they all flew up like they had finished their work here and it was time to look for another one to build somewhere else. Or I just finally really scared them, as I was originally intended to be there for.

Oh look, the little girl is kneeling in the window, watching me as I approach.

DAPHNE'S TURN

STEPHANIE PERCIVAL

Since Teddy's death, she slept on his side of the bed, so that in the morning she'd look out through the bay of the bedroom window, imagining she saw what he'd seen. She was aware of the dip in the mattress his body had moulded and thought of his head on the same pillow. It eased the ache of missing him, which tumbled like a stone inside her. Through his illness he'd described the daily changes of the cherry tree outside to her. Observed its spreading branches, the way it caught the light; its buds and blossoms through the seasons. They'd rarely closed the curtains, as they weren't overlooked at the front.

Sundays were the quietest days when she'd lie in bed for longer, listening. The piping of a blackbird's song, the whinny of a horse, breeze stirring the cherry tree. The froth of pink blossom was long gone, the leaves starting to change from green to deep red. It would not be long before they fell.

On Sundays, there wasn't agitation of rush hour cars, and traffic on the bypass was more hum than roar.

Village children weren't chattering as they made their way to the bus stop for school. Even the family who'd recently moved next door weren't yet up. Teenage arguments and pounding music hadn't begun to penetrate the party wall.

Yes, in some ways she liked Sundays best.

As she made her breakfast; two slices of toast and marmalade, tea poured from a pot into a china cup, the sun came out. A wedge of light lit the patio area so she loaded a tray and took her meal outside. The back garden had been neglected. She should mow the lawn one last time before the winter. However, it seemed a shame. The grass was long but brightened by shaggy golden dandelions. They were a cheerful flower and she could never resist blowing the clocks they left, reminding her of childhood days, when life had been simple.

The autumnal damp intensified the garden aroma, the elders and old roses mingled with something else; the scent of change.

She and Teddy had often talked about planting a tree, but could never agree on what to choose; there were so many options for a small garden. Across the fence was a mighty oak tree which they loved. It was always a topic of conversation when they'd sat in the garden, never failing to amaze with its perpetual cycle of change.

She returned to the kitchen, switched on the radio before washing up. Pushing her sleeves up she noticed a brown scab on her forearm. It was the size and shape of her thumb print. She put her finger on it, feeling its roughness. It reminded her of a knot in wood. It didn't hurt or irritate. She didn't think any more about it, as her attention was taken up by a politician making a statement on a radio programme. "Oh, don't be ridiculous!" she shouted. The radio panel ignored her outburst.

"You agree with me, don't you Teddy?" She looked at his photo sitting on the window sill, smiling at her. She'd given up worrying about talking to Teddy. Knew she wasn't going mad. Of course, Teddy hadn't always agreed with her, he liked to play the devil's advocate.

Sunday was a day for a little housekeeping, watching a film in the afternoon, a hand or two of patience and an early bath before bed. As she dried herself, she noticed other brown scabs on her legs and stomach. Perhaps she should make an appointment with a doctor.

Every week day she walked to the country park, taking a route through the streets of the village. They'd moved here when first married, fifty years ago. It hadn't changed much. Some new front doors and double glazing, an extension or conservatory. There was still a corner shop. It was a mini supermarket now. The young cashiers were polite, but didn't talk much, unlike Mrs Brown in the old days.

She liked the familiarity of the walk, the one that had been their daily ritual when Teddy was alive.

Going through the metal gates into the park, she decided on which route to take, clockwise or anticlockwise, and started a circuit to the lake at the top. The trees were smouldering into yellow and amber. Spent horse chestnut husks littered the ground. She looked for a shining brown conker but there were none left today. If she'd found one, she'd have picked it up, smoothed it in her fingers then left it by the willow at the far side of the lake. That's where she sat. On Teddy's bench; the metal plaque winking in the sunshine.

They'd started to come here in the early days of their marriage. Making plans. Imagining bringing a family for picnics, teaching them the names of the trees and plants. But children hadn't come.

She looked up at the willow tree, that rose beside her. Leaves which last week had been silvery, were now glinting gold in the slant of sunshine through its boughs. Its trunk reached out bending into the water, trailing its leaves to make dimples in the surface. Whispering as it moved. On one of its branches, there was an oval mark, so like an eye; she could never curb the feeling that it was watching her. This was where she had sprinkled Teddy's ashes.

She reached to pat the tree trunk, and noticed another crusty brown scab on the back of her hand. She remembered Teddy stroking her skin, could almost sense his touch. "Like alabaster," he'd murmured.

As soon as she got home, she phoned the doctor's surgery.

The receptionist said, "The doctor is only seeing urgent cases at the moment. Is it urgent?"

"No, but..."

"Can you take a photo on your phone, send it in?"

"I don't have a mobile."

"What about a friend, a son, daughter?"

"No, there's nobody."

"Well, I could suggest a video call on a computer, but not to worry."

She was going to say, she might be able to do a video call on her PC, given a bit of time to work it out.

But the receptionist was already saying, "Phone again if the symptoms deteriorate." And the line beeped her dismissal.

The following week after a bath, she noticed her toenails had turned a strange colour, yellowed, thick and horny. They didn't hurt though, as long as she didn't put on shoes or slippers. She took to walking in the house barefoot, amused by the tik-tak-tik sound of her nails against the tiles. She did a tap dance to a song on the radio and laughed. She hadn't danced for such a long time. Teddy had loved to jive with her, spinning her around until she was dizzy, her long auburn hair swirling in a cloud. Though her hair was grey now, when she closed her eyes it felt the same, brushing through the air.

In the mornings she started to find it more difficult to climb out of bed, her joints were stiff and aching. Her skin continued to scab in bigger areas of brown so it was no longer supple.

As she washed up her breakfast crockery, her arms began to cramp.

Tomorrow, she'd have to phone the doctor's again.

The Sunday chat show was in full swing when she switched the radio on. People were chuntering about the news and what should be done. She tried to speak, say "Rubbish, rubbish, what are you talking about?" but the sound was merely a croak. Her throat felt rough and rusty. She tried another sentence but she could only whisper. She wouldn't be able to speak to the doctor's receptionist unless her throat eased before tomorrow morning.

She made a cup of lemon tea with honey to take outside. Perhaps it would relieve her throat and the sunlight might help her skin.

She shuffled to the back door. Then sat and sipped her tea. A great tit called from the fence and chirruped, 'Do it, Do it,' as if encouraging her to walk further.

Easing herself up out of the chair, she hobbled down the garden. The branches of elder and leylandii hedging swayed like a welcoming wave. Brambles and swathes of ivy reached out long shoots as if trying to embrace her.

A tightening in her chest that she hadn't even been aware of relaxed as she soaked up the scent and sounds around her. Her lungs moved in steady, rhythmic motion. Her breaths deep, absorbing the garden essence. She liked the sound each exhalation made; it reminded her of the whisper of the willow tree.

On the lawn, the grass came up to her ankles, she knocked dandelion clocks and their down floated like ash.

When she paused, it seemed quite natural that her rooty nails wriggled down in to the earth. She laughed because the soil tickled as her toes bedded in.

Though her feet were fixed she found she could sway, dancing with the breeze. Her hair thickening into twigs, twisted about her.

As it got darker, she felt no impulse to move back to the house. She watched as

the full Harvest moon made her limbs glow silver.

The next day it rained but she was well protected with her crusty bark, the drops danced on her. Pattering a tune which was soothing, reminding her of the way Teddy's heart beat in rhythm with hers when they'd made love. Refreshing; healing.

She closed her eyes and felt them begin to seal. This made her anxious, as she wanted to be able to see. But though her vision altered, perception of light and movement remained.

Time appeared to matter less, without the need to wake and sleep. She was centred and content. Although she couldn't speak, she gradually became aware of networking. It began as a tremble in her roots, as if electric wiring had connected. Words weren't spoken but she was sure the question, "Are you alright?" was asked by the oak in the next garden. She responded, "Yes," by a mechanism she didn't understand. Thus, in time she was introduced to other local trees. Had many a long conversation.

It might have been spring when she received a message from a willow in the country park.

SHE SELLS SEASHELLS

LIAM A SPINAGE

I often saw her plying her wares. She would walk along the seafront, as bright and breezy as the weather and the weekend crowds drawn down from the capital by the new railway.

Until, one day, I didn't.

There were rumours she had succumbed to an illness, though as the town's foremost physician I found this remarkably hard to believe. The partaking of regular sea air and seawater had been a well recognised tonic here since the days of Dr. Russell's patent medicines.

Her wheelbarrow still stood on the promenade, though it was starkly empty of wares. I wondered what might have caused her to abandon it. While I feared for her safety, others feared for my sanity, I had stopped promenading and started patrolling. I stopped passers by and, armed only with a frayed photograph, began asking questions.

"Excuse me, have you seen this girl?"

The answer was most often a firm shake of the head accompanied by an associated melancholy which seemed to ask me a question back:

"Why this one? With the tide of humanity ebbing and flowing from the capital to the beaches and back, what was particular about this one person?"

Sometimes that was asked of me and sometimes I asked it of myself. I continued my practice, dispensing proprietary medicines of the sort Russell would have been proud of. Occasionally, when I ventured to the shore for more seawater, I lingered overlong and stared out, standing at that sacred time between the day and the night at that sacred place between the land and the sea. I had made a good living from it, I didn't deny that. I took those precious life-giving waters and used them to make a real change in the world. Yet there was always something fearful about those waters even when they were placid. When they were full of fury, they might devour the whole town without a second thought.

I looked back to those fishing boats still moored at the hard scabble above the high tide mark and something struck me.

They would know.

I'd spent so much time asking tourists that I'd neglected those that knew too well how fickle a mistress the sea might be and here they were, huddled around a little fire on the beach to keep warm. Time has not been kind to our ever-dwindling fleet, the wind and water had not been kind to their pock-marked and weatherbeaten faces. Still, I was familiar to them after a fashion and was in sore need of company who might understand.

There was a shift in their temperament as I approached them. I thought for a moment there might be violence. My mind shuddered at the fate of our seashell seller and whether they had a part in it. Was I about to talk to friend or foe? There seemed no way to find out but to ask.

The fisherfolk were fortified with concoctions stronger than I had ever prepared and many of them were reeling drunk. Still, they listened to my impassioned entreaties and let me finish before they replied.

"Aye, we know her." One stood, a man rougher and older than his companions. Grey flecked his beard, rum flecked his lips. He seemed unsteady on his feet, though I daresay I would be equally unsteady bobbing up and down in his little fishing boat. "Tho' we aint seen her in these parts for near a month. Strange little thing.. She kept 'erself to 'erself, took no boat but ne'er came back on an evening with aught less than a full haul. Many's a time we wondered where her spot was, but she never did tell. No, sir, she never did tell. Reckon as she'll come back?"

I replied in the negative and between us we allowed ourselves a moment which we both spent avoiding the impropriety of shedding a tear. Thanking them for their time and their honesty, I withdrew and made my way back along the beach, lost in thought as the stones crunched beneath my feet and the waves lapped softly in the distance.

At that juncture, I heard her voice calling. I swear till this day it was her voice I heard, so help me God, and I'll never forget the words she spoke.

"I can't take any more."

I whirled round, stumbling a little - I thoroughly admit this was out of fright and in no part due to the modicum of rum of which I had recently partaken - and tried to find a place for that melody of melancholy.

Nothing.

My senses reeling now from more than liquor, I tried to still the rapid beating of my heart.

“I can’t take any more.”

Again that plaintive cry. Again I tried to find the source and could only conclude it came from the ocean itself. I stepped forward with more bravado than I would have credited myself. I must know the answer to this mystery. Heavens, she might be injured! Was this the cry of a maiden in distress? Or the last gasp of a desperate suicide?

Before I knew it, I stood at the very edge of the water, waves breaking around my feet, and called out her name.

Silence.

I tried again. What I heard call back frightens me still to this day.

“And neither can you.”

A great wave washed over me, drenching me in more brine than I sold in a week. I ran.

That voice was not hers. I would never hear her voice again, I know that now, unless I succumbed to the same call which had taken her.

The ocean knows.

It knows who has taken from it and it exacts a price for that taking. A reckoning of sorts. It giveth forth, but it also taketh away.

The following morning I hung a ‘closed’ sign over the door of my business and took the railway to the capital. Never again would I set foot on the shore.

SYLVIA

JENNY BROWN

Sylvia lives in an abandoned glass house with a pipe organ and a pot-bellied stove. It's hard to see through the mildewed windows and steamy roof, but she likes it that way. At night, the eerie off-key organ makes up tunes as wind whistles through; its rusty pipes blow out smoke signals and songs that fall on the ears of goats.

She's gathered and washed leftover rags from the old silent house deep in the forest and stitched them into a beige kaleidoscope of bunting that strains to be a curtain. Polished pots and pans are strung up by strings of ivy, like glittering bronze ornaments on a year-round Christmas tree.

For as long as she could remember, Sylvia had listened to her old friend Alfred - who once lived in the glass house - play his eerie tunes. She would go outside on the balcony of her old house before it became silent and listen for hours. The music seemed to come from so far away, yet she could see the shiny glass roof and the flapping yellow flag on top, poking just above the trees. She watched the smoke signals billowing out, floating like clouds as the goats munched their oats.

Sometimes they paused to listen too, while the smoke signals melted into their fur like misty blankets.

'Listen, mother,' Sylvia would say when her mother came to fetch her for dinner. 'Isn't it beautiful?'

'What is?' her mother would snap, her lips pressing into a disapproving line.

'That music. It sounds like water. Like underwater wind chimes. Or a sunken cathedral.'

'You're hearing things again, girl. Stop dreaming. There is no music. Or any glass house,' she'd say, and yank her by the arm back inside.

Everyone Sylvia once knew left the old silent house long ago, although how long ago she can't remember. Her mother used to tell her to get out of the house and not come home until it got dark. Sylvia started leaving it later and later just to test, until one day she decided not to come home at all. Instead she went to live in the glass house with Alfred. She dreamed they'd one day come looking for her, but they never did. And one day, they just vanished. Sylvia sobbed on Alfred's shoulder. 'I will never leave you,' he promised.

Alfred taught her how to tend plants, catch rainwater, and how to read music. But most special of all, he taught her the intricacies of the magical pipe organ. He told her how it would transport her to a better place through music, but only if she composed her own songs. But Alfred was an old man and he couldn't stay with her forever. After he passed away when Sylvia was barely a teenager, she was on her own completely. She cried for a year. His ghost came back and kept her company.

Ten years have gone by, and she still lives in the glass house by herself. Covering her tiny frame is her only dress of dirty ivory linen with pale blue lace that dangles from the hem. Her wheat-coloured hair is tied into a ponytail with shiny green twine from a coil she uses for her plants. She has all of Alfred's sheet music and still plays his songs. Though his ghost still whispers to her every day, 'Write your own songs,' she tries, but something always gets in the way.

For the last three weeks, she has sat trying to compose by the cauldron of whistling leeks and wild hare each night, waiting for the familiar soft rap on the pane at nine o'clock. How she longs to hear that rap and jumps when she hears a similar sound any time of night, only to feel her heart sink when she realises it was probably a mole smacking blindly into the glass.

Sure enough, at nine-o'clock she hears that rap, and though she is expecting Luca – her only friend - her pulse still beats a quicker staccato. She tries not to run to the door. He has brought her fresh rosemary wrapped in a tea cloth of faded cottage prints. His brown skin glows beneath his white shirt and his curly dark hair, which sits like tiny springs over his high forehead, has fine drops of rain scattered throughout. It reminds her of dew drops on a spider's web and she wants to smooth her fingers over each drop, leaving a silvery trail. The flecks of gold in his eyes that she usually sees sparkle in the candlelight seem dull tonight, and though it's she who usually struggles to meet his eyes, tonight it's him, who only glances her way and pecks her on the cheek. He gives more attention to Isaac, her grey tabby.

He bends to pick him up and Isaac strains to rub his face under Luca's smooth dark beard and then settles into the crook of his arm. Sylvia looks upon Isaac with a stab of hate. She has been waiting for Luca's bear-like embrace all day, re-living how safe her wispy frame feels crushed against his large, round belly and hulking frame. How she feels like a delicate doll when he picks her up and carries her effortlessly around the room, planting kisses all over her face. Loves how this makes her forget everything.

But tonight, for some reason, she doesn't exist. And this makes her heart thunder, as she fears she will start remembering things again.

Luca drops Isaac and busies himself arranging the rosemary on the table. Sylvia feels like a ghost in the room. An unwanted intruder in his space. His back is turned to her, as if his turning away will make her disappear. *He's willing me to evaporate*, she thinks. She reaches out and places her hand on his back, feeling the damp of the cotton from the rain and the warmth of his skin beneath. She inhales the woody outdoor smell of his shirt and the rosemary he is arranging. Then she reaches both arms around his waist and waits for him to turn and embrace her like he usually does, but he continues arranging the rosemary. His coldness paralyses her. She is afraid to speak. When she does find her voice, she hears how tentative it is, how strained.

'I'm so looking forward to hearing your new song,' she says as brightly as she can. 'Have you finished it yet?'

'No,' he says. His back is still turned. 'Well, almost.'

'Let's play before we eat.' She gets out the hurdy gurdy from the shelf by her bed.

'Well, alright, but Sylvia—'

'We'll talk afterwards. Please,' she says.

Sylvia hands him the hurdy gurdy. He settles it onto his lap. Sylvia sits down at the pipe organ waiting to accompany him, but he just sits fiddling with the tuning pegs. The silence hovers over them, pierced occasionally by the sound of water dripping from the ceiling and landing in a pot at the foot of her bed.

'Luca. You'd better tell me,' she says. 'Is it bad?' She doesn't want his answer. Wants this moment to freeze. The moment before. The familiar ache is already starting in the back of her throat. She wraps her arms around herself and her nails dig into her shoulders.

'Sylvia,' he says, putting the hurdy gurdy down onto the mossy floor. She tries diving into his eyes but an iceberg blocks her way. 'You were at my window last night. I saw you watching. I know it was you,' he says. She feels his irritation. 'It was a ghost,' she says, immediately.

'There are no ghosts,' he replies.
'There's ghosts all around you. They're watching you as much as I am,' she says.
'So, you've been watching me?' he replies, angry now.

'No, I – I wasn't watching you. I wasn't watching you sleep with her,' she says.

She bows her head and makes knots in her dress. She wishes she could swallow that last sentence. Why did she say it out loud? How stupid could she be? *Now there's no turning back. Now it's all going to be different*, she thinks. *Like the last time.*

'I can't do this anymore,' says Luca. 'You know she's unwell. I can't leave her.'

'You don't love me then?'

'Love you? Sylvia, darling, we've known each other three weeks.'

'What does that matter?'

Luca sighs. 'I have to take her to London. I've decided. She needs better treatment.'

'Call me darling again,' she says, coming to sit on the bench beside him, her shaky fingers trying to unbutton his shirt.

'Don't do that,' he says, and gently pushes her away. She sees the look of disgust in his eyes. This makes her shrink further. She is mute. *He isn't ever going to carry me around like a doll again.*

Her grief starts silently at first, deep in her belly, an aching ball wrenching from her core. As she sobs, she waits for his hulking embrace, but she only feels a pat on her arm. He gets up. She swallows the ball in her throat. 'Don't go,' she whispers.

'I'm sorry. I know it hurts. You'll be okay. You'll meet another—'

'Don't tell me that,' she says, her jaw clenched. She looks up into his cold stare.

'This is easy for you,' she says. 'To let me go.'

'It's not easy,' he replies, still with a trace of irritation. 'I have to take care of her. I can't take care of two people, Sylvia, it's just too much for me. You need to start taking care of yourself.'

When haven't I been? she thinks, but in this moment, she is mute. She doesn't watch him leave. Just hears the clack of the door latch gently closing with care. Imagines his relief as he walks down the black forest path. Back to his wife, sleeping warmly in their bed. Oblivious to the thunderstorm that's been gathering and which now fully assaults the forest.

Sylvia wonders why it can't be she who is sick.

She sinks to the floor, feels the damp of the moss seep through her dress. Isaac tiptoes over to her. Rubs his face on her knees. She ignores him. She sits still, listening to the rain drip rapidly into the bowl at the base of her bed: drip, drip, drip, until it overflows.

~

Sylvia wakes up in the early hours to the smell of rosemary. She is curled up on the mossy floor and Isaac is laying on her head. At some point the storm has unlatched the door and as she moves Isaac's tail from her eyes, she sees Wesley, her favourite goat, has found his way inside and is munching on the moss. As she reaches to pets his coarse grey fur, the memory of the night before punches her in the stomach again. I'll never see him again. I'll be alone forever. She goes over to the table of rosemary. Wonders if he had been carefully choosing words that would least break her heart. Or not chosen carefully at all. She picks up a strand of the dried twig and smells it. She doubles over and wraps her arms around her body. She comes face to face with the deeply concerned eyes of Wesley. 'Time to write your own songs,' he says. 'You know it's time. You should have done it before. You could have avoided all of this.'

Wesley walks away, his bell clanging. Sylvia reaches out and pops a handful of valerian pills into her mouth from the nightstand. She drifts off to sleep with the sound of rain tapping in her ears. The roof has sprung a leak over the organ now, but she doesn't have the will to cover it. It taps on the high C note and it bleeds into her dreams of rain water so heavy it seeps under the glass house, filling it higher and higher like a swimming pool.

The pipe organ uproots and begins to float, and her bed is lifted up towards the ceiling. Mildew comes unglued and floats in the water and she runs her fingers over the panes on the way up, smelling mold and rust. Down below, plants are floating up to meet her. The bed hits the roof, the roof explodes, and glass fragments hail around her, dropping like shards of ice into the water. Her bed then plummets as the water drains out again, racing faster, like a rollercoaster, until it smacks down onto the sodden moss. She jolts awake. Wesley is still fast asleep and Isaac is sitting on top of his fat belly, rising and falling with Wesley's breath. The rain is pouring in through several holes in the roof now, tapping out wild mad tunes on the pipe organ.

Darkness is all around her and the moon peers nosily in through the roof. She must have slept for a good twelve hours. Just as she is sweeping the last embers of her dream away, a brilliant flash pierces the air above her head. A tinkling sound comes from above, then the sound of groaning iron, and a loud crash as a tree comes smashing down. It lands straight across the foot of the bed, sending Sylvia sliding down and coming face to face with the terrified eyes of Wesley and Isaac. Rain pelts in from the ceiling, drenching Sylvia's head. The pipe organ is stuck on a chilling discord in G.

~

Every trip Sylvia made back to the old silent house in the woods had always been brief and always in bright daylight. The giant pillars loom over her in the moonlight, cracked and mildewed, and the stairs are a heap of crumbled concrete. She holds a lantern up. The front façade seems to leer at her. She opens the door and smells old leather and rotting wood. There is a ghost of her, running up the stairs. Black eyes peer over the top bannister.

Inside the front lobby sits a pile of wood. She grabs an armful and walks to the study, avoiding looking at the grim-faced ancestors who scowl from dusty gold frames. She builds a fire in the grate and settles onto the matted sheepskin rug. In the corner to her left is an old writing desk.

It is unlocked. She could have easily looked in there many times before. She goes over and picks up some heavily creased paper and a yellowed envelope. The return address on the envelope says *Dr. Matthews*.

She sits down by the fire and picks up the pile of notes. There are dozens of them. One by one she starts opening them. They are all a variation of the same message. All in her own handwriting:

Come and play with me in the glass house

It reads. The next one says:

I'm in the glass house, if you want to find me

The next:

Shall I come home at 6:00 for dinner? Is

Alfred welcome?

The one that hit her hardest is:

I hope you are happy with me.

Please come and

play with me at the glass house. I am tired of hiding.

She swallows down the knot in her throat. She imagines her mother with pursed lips and black satin dress skimming through these notes with disinterest, then handing the letters to her father, who, with a brief glance and a sigh, hands them back to her mother. Lastly, she opens the doctor's note. There are technical terms Sylvia doesn't understand. Something about Melancholia. The last line reads:

Despite all this, Sylvia has a great deal of talent and imagination. Here's hoping you take interest in this child.

If only they had checked the glass house, she thinks. How easy it was for them to let me go.

For the first time, she feels a collusion with the house, like it is sighing along with her. Its walls feel like a bear hug. It had witnessed; it knew all along, but it couldn't say anything before. She lays down by the fire, its snapping embers hissing and lulling her into a sound sleep.

In her dream she is seated at the pipe organ. Suddenly, an intense warmth engulfs her as she plays. The music is soaring through her body. Her hands are dancing over the keys, a melody so enchanting and entirely of her own creation. She is in a new place called Barton. Morris dancers are on the green and dogs are chasing seagulls. A campsite is filled with round caravans.

In the centre there are logs circling a fire and a cauldron of simmering leeks and wild hare. Sounds of bells, strumming ukuleles, and concertinas fill the air. Women of all ages are laughing, wearing stripy trousers, flowing robes, and multi-coloured shirts.

She is awoken by the chirp of a wren who is building a nest on the mantle. Sylvia feels her fingers tapping against her thigh; the melody she fully composed in her sleep. She jumps up, and with a racing heart, runs back to the glass house. She tiptoes carefully over the broken glass, hops over the fallen tree, and sits at the pipe organ. She begins to play. The pipes respond in joy, as if they've been waiting forever for her touch. Smoke signals burst out in regular rhythms and she can hear the goat bells outside dancing in time with the music. Alfred places a warm hand on her shoulder as she plays. Never in her life has she felt so deeply connected to the earth. For the next three months, she fills notebook after notebook with songs. She makes a new home in the old silent house, which is no longer silent but filled with the sounds of her compositions. She has moved the pipe organ to the study, and for the first time in years, the pipes and wood start to dry out. But Barton is calling her and she knows it will be time to leave again soon.

~

The glass house is now a relic, although still glorious looking, with its Victorian wrought iron structure barely holding itself together, like an old elegant ballet teacher. Sylvia lifts Isaac into the caravan and hoists Wesley in. Isaac settles onto Wesley's fat stomach and they perch themselves in the front window. Sylvia packs a few treasures including her favourite plants, her beige bunting, and some extra jars of leek and wild hare soup. The pipe organ is at the back on wheels.

She goes in for one final look around the glass house. The sun is shining on the white tea cloth at the far table. The rosemary is still laid out, miraculously dried and arranged neatly in rows. She gathers them into a bunch and threads a piece of green twine around it, making a neat bow. She smells it. A wince of pain is still there, although it's now more of a dull ache. Alfred is picking through the remains of the damaged plants. She waves goodbye and he blows her a kiss. 'I'll come and visit you soon,' he tells her.

Sylvia steps outside and attaches her three-wheeler bike to the caravan. As she does, she hears the faint sound of music drifting closer. A hurdy gurdy? She squints up into the direct sun for a minute, but a shadow appears, blocking it. Her heart skips a beat. Luca is standing there in a pale blue linen shirt. He is smiling.

'Sylvia,' he says. He steps towards her. Brushes her cheek with his hand. 'Darling,' he says. He leans in to kiss her, but she places a hand on his chest.

'What are you doing here? Where's your wife?' she asks.

'London. Once she recovered, she wanted nothing more to do with me.'

'Oh. That's sad.'

'Sylvia—'

'I'm sorry, Luca, but it's time for me to leave. I have a new home.'

'A new home?' he said.

'Yes. Barton.'

'Barton? Where's that?'

'I don't know exactly. I know it's by the sea. But Alfred gave me directions.'

She hands him the bunch of rosemary and kisses him on the cheek. She picks up the last box, which is filled with sheets of music, and packs it into the caravan. She hops on her three-wheeler bike and starts pedaling, leaving Luca staring after her, holding the rosemary.

As she reaches the edge of the forest, she glances back. The final skeleton of the glass house collapses and then completely disappears, leaving only the yellow flag sitting on the bright green mossy floor. The pipe organ shoots a few smoke signals out, and launches into one of Sylvia's tunes.

THE HIDDEN LIBRARIES OF DOCTOR DANCER

DAVID JOHN GRIFFIN

Mausoleum Park is a neglected public space. It could have once boasted colonnades and lawn terraces, a windmill, tea rooms, and hemmed by grand private houses with sweeping terraces and exquisite lawns. Or so we are led to believe by the few local history books which have recorded the origination and eventual passing of the park and its attendant houses.

One fact that cannot be known for sure is the origin of the name. Many theories have been put forward as to why the area was a park at all, and the true meaning of the word Mausoleum. The majority of professional knowledge and opinions of its mysterious history tend to agree there was never such an edifice built on those acres; and if there had been, it was destroyed without any historical record.

To a degree this is not surprising because a terrace of those marvellous old Victorian houses, described as having turrets, wings and ornate tiling, also vanished overnight. Let me underline here, I'm not meaning in any literary sense but in a literal sense: one day they were there, the next, not; just empty space, not even basements left behind or foundations of any sort.

The Windrock Borough Council tried their best for a few years to keep it clear of overgrowth; the rougher elements of society seemed to congregate amongst the network of muddy pathways between the trees. A friend of mine told me a while ago that there were dens hidden somewhere for those thieves and murderers although I take that with a pinch of salt.

So it has become a park again over the past couple of years, with large areas cleared with just meadow left, wooden walkways and stream bridges built where needed, and the Clocktower Tea Rooms open again for business. The area is popular, mainly in the spring and summer months, attracting families out for the day for a bit of fresh air, dog walkers, kite flyers, metal detectors, and botanists like myself.

It has become an all-encompassing hobby of mine of late, especially as I recently moved into a terraced house not even half a mile away from the park. It's easy, on my days off, to cycle there and ramble through the woods in search of interesting plant specimens, especially found near the ponds and streams – the damp and humid places. It was while cycling in one of those particularly dense areas, not far from the clearing where the vanished houses used to stand, that I discovered a book. It was lodged in a tree, approximately fifteen feet up. The find certainly looked intriguing and I was keen to retrieve it from its grasping branches.

I ascertained that even by standing on the saddle of my bicycle, there wasn't any way to start a climb into the tree. But then, finding a decent stick at least five feet long, I managed to balance on the saddle after all, with the bicycle leaning on that thick trunk of a tree. By hugging the tree and reaching up with the stick I was able to knock the strange find to the ground.

Upon opening the book's hardback cover I found the pages to be blank and inset was an ornate door key; at least, I assumed it was for a door. I placed the find in my jacket pocket, mounted my bicycle, and headed for the track which leads to the area of the vanished houses.

To my astonishment – and I mean utter astonishment – there was the row of Victorian houses, their tons of weight definitely planted on the earth where they used to be before simply vanishing.

The house in the middle had wrought iron railings and consisted of three stories, six windows on each storey. A flight of concrete steps led to a pair of ornately carved double doors, one of which opened quickly. A man dressed in a smart but antiquated suit immediately beckoned to me.

This solid phantom of a man spoke with a cultured and deep voice, 'Welcome to the libraries of Doctor Dancer.'

I spoke the first thought which came to mind.

'Are you a guide?'

'Indeed, I am not,' he replied. 'You shall be your own guide.'

And with that said he held out a slim hand. I leant my bicycle against the railings and mounted the steps. I went to shake his hand though I didn't know why I should; and he retracted it and I did likewise, feeling puzzled. Not only for the stranger's retraction but for the reason I had felt compelled to shake the hand in the first place.

Again, he extended an arm, but this time with his pale palm turned upwards. 'I'm not understanding,' I remember remarking.

But then it dawned on me, perhaps this unusual man wanted the key I had found in the tree.

I searched in my jacket pocket and retrieved the key, placing it into the man's palm with a sort of reverence as though it were part of some esoteric ritual.

The moment I did so, the other side of the door opened and a young man, staring wildly at me, stood swaying on the top step.

'Sorry,' he muttered before running down the steps before running towards my bicycle leaning against the railings. He looked familiar.

I was distracted by the besuited gentleman going back inside the house as he said, 'This way.'

After a moment of hesitation, I followed.

Silence then. Utter and complete silence. The man was nowhere to be seen.

I found myself in a large hallway with a huge, sweeping staircase in the middle leading to the next floor, though at the top was a brick wall. All surfaces, apart from the stairs and brick wall, and a door to the left and the ornately-designed floor tiles, were covered in mirrors.

My reflection each side went on to infinity.

'Hello,' I called out. I walked over to the door on the left and tried it but it was locked. A dream state within reality I considered then, especially as the chandelier descended behind me with a grating of its chain, and when it was at eye-level, there was another small book within its pendants, identical to the one I had found in the woods; and inside an identical key. I retrieved it and tried it in the door. It fitted. I unlocked the door and opened it, stepping through to a large room. Ornate coving ran along three sides. A mottled ceiling above and flock wallpaper on two of the walls. The third wall was panelled. Dark oak or possibly mahogany, some of the panels scratched. And the fourth wall was covered with bookcases, holding antique books, their spines gold impressed and chiselled.

I took one of the volumes from its shelf and opened it. The pages were blank. As were any of the other books I chose to extract and inspect.

For a moment, sense returned and I felt I must leave the silent room. I opened the door through which I had come in, back into the hallway. At least, I would have naturally assumed it would take me back there. Instead, I stepped into an identical room to the one I had left behind. Except there were bookcases on two sides and the room could be seen to be even larger.

Compelled again to inspect these books, though this time with multicoloured spines – I found they could not be opened, each book made solid as if carved from glued paper. How many more times did I go through that same door to identical rooms, each room becoming larger than the next? How many times did I look at the books on the bookcase shelves in each? I can't recall.

Though I do remember the volumes in some of the rooms: projections of books, books made from stale cake, those volumes with the inside text printed upside down, those in a language like nothing on earth, those with cryptic symbols, enigmatic diagrams; books in one room each with its own fragrance; tiny books, books more than ten feet high on only one shelf, reaching to the ceiling; books made from candle wax, powdered horses' hooves and other exotic materials like rare metals and alloys.

I entered the final room, for I knew this to be the last one. Looking back to the door I saw it had disappeared and there weren't any bookcases in the room, just four walls, half-panelled, and papered with flock wallpaper, and a spiral staircase at one side of it. I trod up the staircase with trepidation in my step hoping there might be a way of escape above. At the top of the staircase, I found a casement window overlooking the edge of Mausoleum Park. On the windowsill lay another book with a key shape cut out inside. I placed the door key there. Through some impulse, I opened the window with the idea I could climb out but realised I was on the second floor.

I was in a dream state. My instinct told me to throw the book with the key inside through the open window as hard as I was able. It flew across to the trees at the Mausoleum Park perimeter and lodged in a tree.

I stood for a while looking at the scene framed by the casement window as if it were a painting, then trod back down the spiral staircase to the empty room again. Though this time, the staircase continued through the floor to a room below, identical to the first room I had visited, the one with the antique volumes held on their dark wood shelves. I hurriedly pulled the door open and walked back into the mirrored hallway.

The besuited gentleman stood with his back to the brick wall at the top of the staircase before gently padding down the carpeted stairs.

I watched with a type of fascination, as if he moved within a dream. He walked in a formal fashion to the double doors and opened the right hand one. While in conversation with someone on the doorstep, I took the opportunity to escape, flinging open the left hand door.

Had my experience been no more than a circus or fairground illusion, without meaning; or were there hidden deeper metaphysical traits yet to be uncovered from their influence on my mind? In a way it didn't matter as I yelled to the new visitor, 'Sorry,' and rushed down the granite steps and over to my bike still leaning against the railings.

JONGLEUR

ANDREW DARLINGTON

Weak. Hating the weakness. But too weak to fight it.

It all ends this way. Something. Then nothing. Light. Then darkness. No bombs. No fire. No radioactive fall-out. Just this head so pierced with morning it howls like a siren.

There's a riot outside. Best stay indoors. The tube is besieged. The heat in oppressive.

Dry for two months. I cultivate my moustache until it tapers into two upturned tips. Clipping away stray grey strands. Feeling so proud of my abstinence. Then comes the beguiling invite, Joséphine lures me into the trendy 'Vineyard' Soho bar. One vodkatini? One drink won't hurt. I'm strong enough. I can moderate. I can resist. Just one. But, tobogganing down that relentless slope, that single empty glass replicates itself on arithmetic principles, two, then four... and more.

'You seem different today' she says.

'I operate through a number of alternate personas.'

'So which persona are you operating as today?'

'I lose track. We can choose whatever masks you'd prefer.'

She blurs around the edges. Her voice does disreputable things to my metabolism. We're talking about the Holy Fool. That the only way to deal with the truth of reality is through mocking absurdity. Are you sure you want to go with 'absurdity'? Yes, I've been here before. I know this stuff. Life's taken a bit of a lurch. It assails me deep in the depths of delirium tremens. There's an imitation-jade Laughing Buddha in the alcove corner. It derides our pretensions. There are many here among us, who feel that life is but a joke.

Morris Dancers have the Fool who mocks and provokes, taunting as he interacts with the watchers. Debunking all dignity and seriousness. That's his role. He has an inflated pig's bladder on a stick that he uses to hit people, in order to annoy and amuse them.

The Pierrot is the buffoon, the trusting butt of teasing pranks. A white ghost-face mime caught on society's edge, reflecting its cruel conundrums. 'No' she says, 'it's not like that, you're confusing it with that Stephen King character down in the storm-drains.'

'Not so. I come from the DNA of mediums, mystics and persecuted Espers. That's E-S-P, extra-sensory perception. Down the ages we were burned as witches. Tortured and executed as heretics.' I tell her this. Then hesitate. 'That's where the visions come from.'

Her eyes narrow, as though she's trying to detect the joke. 'For real...?'
I lift my glass in a gesture that salutes our random thrown-together togetherness. 'I drink to forget.'
'I have to ask, what is it you're trying to forget?'

I mesh my fingers across my forehead in an intense imitation of an Aleister Crowley photo I once saw. 'The visions. It dampens the visions.' It's not personal. It's just programming.

Her eyes are luminous with laughter. How can I not drink to the shimmering liquid lustre of her eyes, the softness of her cheeks, the warm beauty of her breasts? Her hand rests in my groin, her fingers tracing shapes. I'm trapped, hauled in by ancient biological imperatives. Weak. Too weak to fight the sensual intoxication. Feeling strangely unsettled. I've been such a night owl so long I've got moonburn and dark-drugged eyes.

We'd met cute. A crazy familiarity, as though she was someone I'd already met, or was someone I was yet to meet. She'd briefly been a Reality Star. Her smile was her fortune. With Caradoc, Coppélia and Pendrake on the road of time-dreams. This life now is her post-reality. She still imagines there are 'The Only Way Is...' hovercams following her, and she'll pause to pose a pout. Every now and then someone somewhere will stream her episodes and she feels a little ripple.

There'd been that did-she didn't-she blowjob moment which briefly glowed in social media posts. That was so cool.

As we walk, traffic inside the city congestion pay-zone is gridlocked. Tempers fray. One irate driver bursts up out of his Hybrid and begins harassing a Subaru that's hung attempting to turn right across his path. He scrambles out defensively. The Hybrid lands the first blow on his pouchy-face. Subaru staggers back holding his bloodied jaw, but comes back fighting. I can't believe the pent-up animal expression disfiguring his face. As though all the frustrations and pain of the world is manifest in that other hapless human he's intent of tearing apart. His teeth are bared fangs. The curl of his fingers are claws. The Hybrid bites and spits, kicks and claws. Others, intent on intervening, assume opposing sides, and they're attacking each other too until the street is a mêlée of mutual destruction. This is a city ripe with promises, and all of them frittered away on someone else.

We duck out, until here I am, lurching by her side, so we end up at her Pelham Court basement apartment. Despising myself again. Her abstract art adorns the walls, dripping off the frames. I tweak my moustache. I'm probably wondering why I'm here. I make dreadful company.

Then the black fluid of sleep. It's the waking up part that I resent. I wake up several hours later, half-past dead, sheets knotted at my feet, to find I've pissed the bed. I lie on the wet patch so she won't notice. If she notices the ammonia-stink she's too tactful to mention it. I feel wrecked.

'Did we?' I manage, rubbing gummed-shut eyelids.

She laughs, not unkindly. 'We might have, but you were too lost in the arms of Dionysus.'

'So I'm interpreting that as a 'no'?'

She pauses. So perfect that I'd gleefully lick the sweat-pearls from the naked curve of her chocolate spine. Black lace on sweat. 'You were yelling crazy stuff about medieval Jesters in the court of Charlemagne. Maybe you do get visions? Maybe you are howling-at-the-moon crazy?'

I'm a very private being. Better at taking people apart than fixing people whole again. She showers and dresses. She makes up her face in the mirror. She works in the city.

Cassavetes & Stone. 'Will you still be here when I get back?'

'The streets are dangerous' I offer. 'Do you gotta go?'

'The looters and wreckers want take-away hi-def contraptions. They won't bother me.'

I nod. Not trusting my voice yet.

No toothbrush. So I use hers. Tasting her mouth. After I've brushed my teeth I feel almost human. Not quite, but almost. I bung the soiled sheet in the washer, try to figure out the settings. Then just key it at random. It plays an annoying plinky-plonk tune, then starts surging. I place a fan-heater blowing warm air to dry out the mattress, and upturn it downside up. The TV is on as I wait. I no longer understand TV-ads. They're like ambiguous movies that leave you wondering what product they're even pushing? No actual physical commodity. A system. An app. A download. Nothing you can hold in your hand. Nothing tangible. Nothing from the real Intangibles Inc.

She's taken the tube. She's left her car-keys hung on the hook by the door. I lift them. Balance them in the palm of my hand. And scarf them into my jacket pocket. I can be a ruthless bastard at times. Can't go south of the river. It's under quarantine. There are armed checkpoints on the bridges, and the tubes don't run there. But I have a schedule, an appointment that must be fulfilled. The world hangs in the balance. Or at least... this world, the one I happen to be inhabiting.

I don't deserve this. I'm not a bad guy... well, good-bad, but not evil. In the overpopulation crisis the world would benefit from my non-existence. In the environmental despoliation climate-disaster caused by overconsumption human biomass, I'd be better absent. Been down so long it looks like up to me. Like a Bukowski joke. Weak. Hating the weakness. But too weak to fight it. Stepping outside, there's a military presence on the street corner. There's the vague aroma of electrical fire, burning plastics, motes that float on superheated air. A suicide terrorist attack has taken out several Mayfair blocks. The police are using tazers and teargas on the Eco-Anarchists who occupy Trafalgar Square, projecting virtual giants higher than Nelson's column. Animations. Crying children. Migrant pattern-flows. A thousand eyes without a blink or a flicker between them.

Can you keep a secret? The worlds fucked-up. I'm fucked-up. There's a certain complementary symmetry to that. Is there a way of measuring time in hell? Maybe it's in my blood. I come from a long line of crazy visionaries. Gaian elementals. Earth-spirits. How long have my periods of madness endured? I've been ill. Or comatose. I've had horrible dreams. But it's over now. My head is clearing. How many times have I committed suicide over the last five-hundred years? I kill, and am killed. That's the way of it. Staying dead, in the head. Memories drench down on me. My life has been one long unregulated slide into dissolution.

Outside the Mall there's a huge cut-out promotional 'Ronald McDonald'. The clown. The joker. The jongleur. But of course, it's not exactly that way. I'm not essentially a violent person. But sometimes direct action becomes necessary.

Sinister figures in the Mall watch me from the corners of narrowed eyes as I slurp my mocha in the fast-food alcove. They've hooked themselves into my wifi, peeking out from my mobile screen. Blossoms scowl at me from window displays, they skulk along beside me glowering on the other side of the storefront glass, stalking me. See what I did there? Plants 'stalking' me?

Joséphine messages me, 'UOK?' I don't respond. Not yet. Wait. Work this through. She bought me the mobile. I no longer want new, not when my old is still perfectly serviceable. I sit drumming my fingers for a moment or so, in acute sulk overload. I bite the inside of my mouth until it bleeds, and as it heals my tongue worries at the wound, tracing the shapes of old scars. My heart sludges dully. She messages again. 'Office closed at Cassavetes & Stone. Power Down. Pick me up?'

It would be simpler to be able to say that I've made a decision in sound mind and sobriety and am determined to abide by it. I've tried to dismiss my qualms in just such a manner, but I'm ever-conscious that it is the easy way around the problem. I drift on indecision. Why not?

Before I realise it, without even making up my mind, I'm saying 'Greetings, most lustworthy,' and moving aside for her, she slides in beside me, and the way she fondles the steering wheel has the hair in my groin standing on end. Caught up in the temporary dazzle of love. I key the coordinates into the route-finder. When she drives we glide like silk. She's all motor and smooth suspension. How would this episode have played on 'The Only Way Is...'? Not well. The A3 through to Kingston-upon-Thames is clear. There's a pall of smoke boiling the sky over the city behind us playing spectrum-games with the sun.

Some people mistakenly assume this to be a human city. Not so. A population of rats infest the sewers and storm-drains. Ants, woodlice and cockroaches lurk beneath the floorboards, in the spaces between every wall, in the trash and garbage in the streets. A secret ecology of spiders, mites and silverfish. In the dereliction to come they will emerge and take their rightful place. And those of us who inhabit the indeterminacy between species. Those of us who feed on anarchy and disorder. Mr Doom and Mr Gloom are lurking just around the corner. Kylie Minotaur is streaming on the car wifi. There's a bored military checkpoint on the M25 sliproad.

He glances across our ID as though he's caught between can't be arsed, or if it might be amusing to harass us some. He carries a sten-gun.

'Is your journey necessary? You know movement is restricted.'

'The very fate of civilisation could depend on my journey' I tell him.

'Can't you simply Zoom it from home?'

'No. It's geographically specific, to do with Ley-forces and confluence lines of natural energies.'

He flashes a bored grin. Real dazzlers those teeth, as he waves us through. What an orthodontist this boy must have.

She pulls at her lower lip with her teeth.

'You're a real piece of work, you know that?'

We drive north, following route instructions, along the long black smear of the M6 as far as Cumbria. I'm an anthropologist. I study humans. A presence is settling across the land, mischievous and disruptive. A resurrecting collection of gruesome old nightmares. A bad dream, slow to wake but relentless. There's a balance. Where some people see ghosts or angels, I see balance. I know it's familiar smell. That's my tragedy. I've learned to live with it.

I don't need anyone's authorisation. I'm tired of doing things about things. There's balance. And it's tipped too far. The universe tends towards chaos. That is its natural state. The reckoning is long overdue. When the world uptilts and all the improbable nightmares that lurk beneath get to crawl out. That's when we come out to feed. My being here is part of that malign unsettling effect. If other species are to survive, if biodiversity is to persist, there must be a culling. Something inside my chest in the neighbourhood of the heart seems to twist in a rapid spiral, then ties itself into a tight knot. Don't push me, I might just push back. Loki was the Nordic Trickster god. When pretensions become exaggerated, he's there to puncture them. The custard pie splattering the pompous face. Pulling down the pants of dignity. The previous century endured two global festivals of mass death, followed by a Cold War of superpower proxy conflicts. And yet, despite wars, plagues and pandemics, humans advance and multiply. Rational control extends and settles across every continent. I'm like some teenage girl frightening myself with shadows.

A sharp left fork off the Keswick Road, into the Hotel car-park. As if we are ancient mariners who glimpse land after years of featureless watery wanderings.

The reception desk has our advance booking. The room is clean and spacious, with views across the grounds as far as the golf-course. She says 'hey look, the shower cubicle is big enough for two.' It seems only appropriate to put her contention to the test, and the slight body-cramping beneath the hot-water cascade only adds to the pleasure. We dry each other off with big white hotel towels, then lie sprawled across the bed feasting on each other with mouths, lips, tongues and genitals in delectable configurations.

From the paved hotel patio where drinkers sit in small clusters, the lake is an expanse of frozen glass beneath the endless sky. The upturned optics behind the bar look so very inviting. But I must keep a clear head. If only for today. So tea is brought to our table on a silver tray. China cups are filled, sugar crystals are stirred in, spoons placed back on saucers, walnut scones are sliced open, buttered, and devoured. Conversation meanders. It's a shame. There's something inside me that regrets this. I like cities, microwaves, iPads, TwitBook, diesel fumes, sticky sweet wrappers, Netflix and Reality TV. I honestly do. But it's all going to burn. It's time to return to the more natural balance of ancient lines of force.

Joséphine is charmed. She's a grounded person. Nothing has reality other than what she can hear and taste and feel and see. She wants to go down to the lake. I glance at my watch. I have time. The meeting is not scheduled for an hour yet. When I must make my report, add my weight of opinion to the judgement. The path takes us down to the right. There are daffodils and crocuses lining the way. To the left the slope banks steeply to where it rises into a line of trees. She dances ahead of me, turning and vamping as though the 'The Only Way Is...' hovercams are still watching her. As we get closer to the water's edge there's an upturned row-boat hauled up onto the shore and left to decay into a tangle of briars and thistles. She gets me to pose sitting on the peeling timber and photos me with her phone. Of course, I won't be there when she blue-tooths the picture.

A wash of ripples on white stones. A spattering of duck-crap, a flotilla of ducks that bob like coloured toys on the undulation. A little way along the shore there's a wooden jetty on stilts, for the hire of small boats. Day-fishing. Pleasure trips around the lake. We stroll. And this is where everything shifts. This is where it all changes. As I walk I was considering.

There's no point on a woman's anatomy that you can caress and fondle without it also taking on sensual erotic aspects... which is a wonderful thing when you think about it. And I do think about it. Not quite sure how that relates. But it sounds like poetry to me.

She stoops. She points. In the water, a little distance out on the slight swell, there's a bee. The bee is drowning. It sculls around in tight desperate circles, barely breaking the water's surface. An agitation of motion. Wet wings flutter against the drag. Does it know about imminent death? Does it fear, or is its distress just a nerve response to hazard? Is its life flashing before its faceted eyes in its final moments of awareness? The safe memories of a blobby egg. Squirming blind into larvae. Into the warm secure slumber of pupa.

Then pulsing and throbbing free from hexagon ranks in massed rows. To glide, blown on the colours of breeze. To waggle-dance and pollinate, drunk on rich pollen intoxication. All the wonders of bee-life. Then... flitting too close to the ripples. One of a billion small insignificant deaths. It all ends this way. Something.

Then nothing. Light. Then darkness.
Joséphine scurries back to where the row-boat
is upturned in a wilderness of weed.

She selects, and snaps off a length of briar that
punctures her finger in an oozing drip of
blood. She stoops back down by the stony
shore, reaches out, extends the severed briar
tendrils to where the bee is drowning. At first
there's a kind of mutual repulsion set up, the
bee spins away. So she scoops in beneath it.
Lifts it. Its legs flex in around the strand,
grasping it. She lifts it. The briar drips and
down-curls, but the bee hangs on.

She moves it carefully. Across and down.
Places the bee safely on the grass beside a
spray of dandelion. She watches it. Legs with
threadlike hairs thrash in the air. Gauze wings
batter, the better to dry.

She raises her punctured finger to her lips and
sucks a bead of bright blood. Her stigmata.
We both watch the rescued bee. It isn't aware
of its rescue. Only that it is no longer in
hazard. There's no thought that some vast
godlike being paused its life for a moment, in
order to reach out its merciful hand, and pluck
it from the shadow of extinction. It won't
return to the hive to spread the wonderful
gospel of salvation. It will simply dry. And fly.
Life resumed.

She stands up and grins at me. I'm an
anthropologist. An Elemental. The Jongleur. I
study humans. But once in a while their
behaviour still startles me. And I become
overwhelmed.

Tonight I must add my decision to the
judgement. This one act has revised my
verdict. Perhaps this species is capable of a
greater salvation?

A pause of ten more years. No more than that.
I will gift them ten more years. Life resumed.

CONTRIBUTORS

Jane Andreoli says “the modern world shields us from the cycle of life and death, and the mysteries involved.” Her short stories seek to explore those mysteries, stepping cautiously into a natural world, where we are not always in control, and where boundaries are blurred.

Bethany Clayton is a writer from West Yorkshire. She has been previously published by the on-line Leeds based magazine Breaking Glass. Her love for writing bloomed when she studied English Literature and Creative Writing and York St John University.

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Viktor Koszo is a writer and artist. He was born in Hungary, and collected Stephen King books in primary school. He is currently working on a dark fantasy Viking novel.

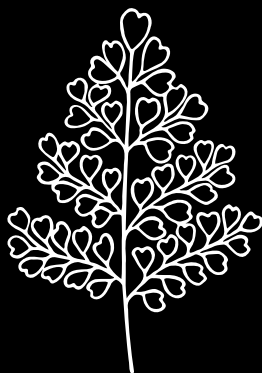
Stephanie Percival has been writing short stories, poems, novels and a novella since 2004 when she was shortlisted for a national competition. She has been short-listed, long-listed and won several writing competitions.

Liam A Spinage is a former philosophy student, former archaeology educator and former police clerk who spends most of his spare time on the beach gazing up at the sky and across the sea while his imagination runs riot.

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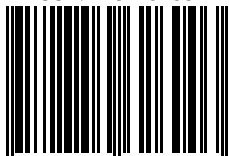
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