



UNSWEETENED
LITERARY
JOURNAL
2020



UNSW Student Life





Acknowledgement of Country:

The UNSweetened Literary team would like to acknowledge the Bedegal and Gadigal peoples of the Eora Nation, who are the Traditional Custodians of the land upon which UNSW was built. We pay our respects to Elder's past, present and future and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and staff in the UNSW community. Sovereignty of this land was never ceded and so, where we write, read, and share always was and always will be, Aboriginal land.

Foreword

When I first imagined what I would write for this foreword in the early days of the journal, I imagined something effervescent. It would be a pastiche of the student journal – something sweet and soft – observing and teasing out the joys of writing, reading and community.

That foreword existed before the crisis of the pandemic. Before campus was empty and before UNSweetened was online. It existed in a space where writing was not easy – but it was easier than now.

I was scared that no one would submit this year. That everyone would decide that (and understandably so) they had bigger things to deal with, bigger things to mourn, bigger things to ignore until they can't anymore and bigger things to persevere through.

Nonetheless, students did submit. Through dealing, mourning, ignoring and persevering – students submitted, editors edited, designers designed and events were made and shared.

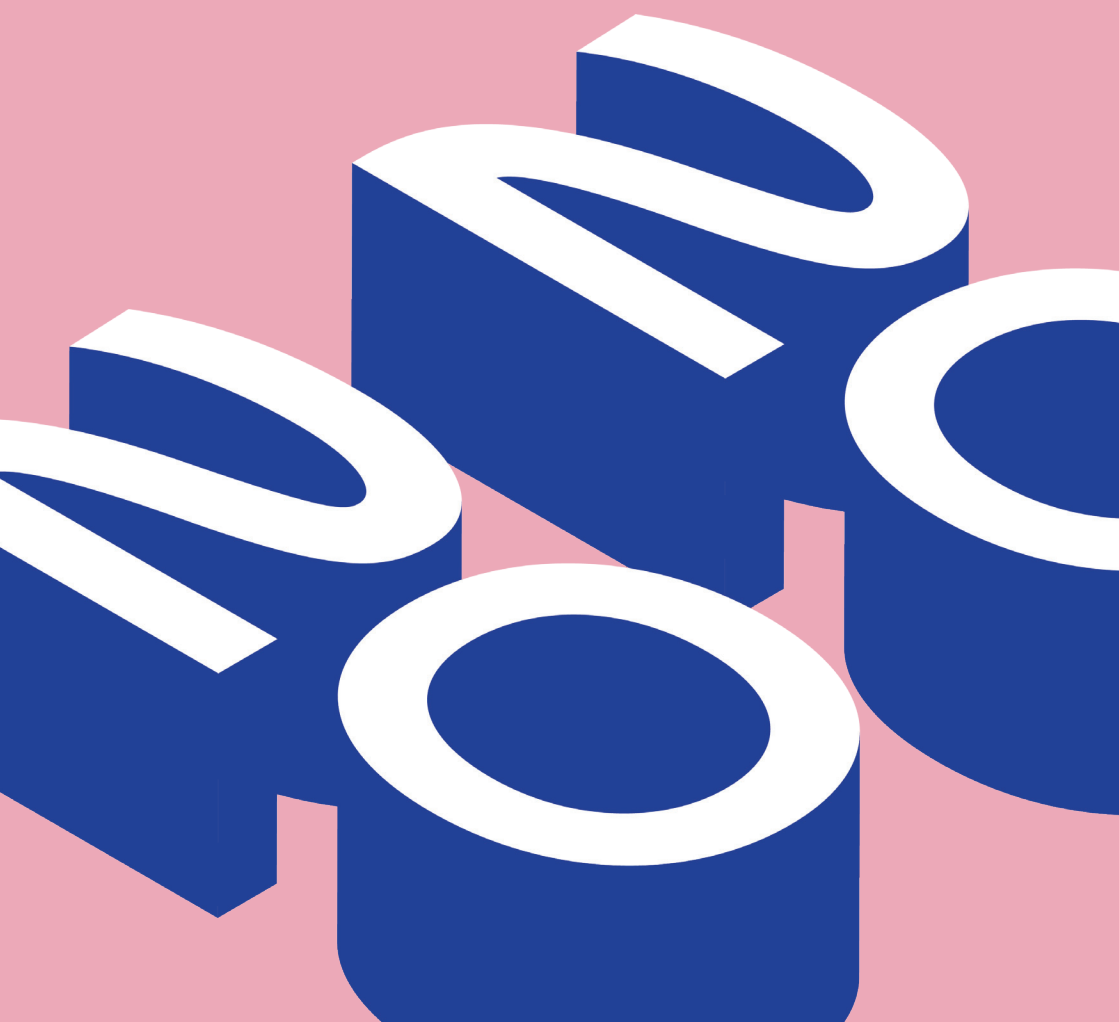
Writing and reading will persevere. It won't be effortless – it will demand effort. It won't be timeless – it will demand time. It won't be private – it will demand publicity. It will compel you to share or leave you to feel the risks of hiding (think the incognito tab and the diary under the bed).

It is a testament to our shared practice and community that this edition of UNSweetened lives and breathes. Our need for personal expression, communal reflection and connection through reading continues, not despite crisis, but existing, revealing and mourning inside of our shared crisis.

So, thank you to all the students who submitted, to the students who worked on the journal and to the students who read the journal.

Thank you for persevering.





Contents

POETS IN MY INTERROGATION ROOM	1
Howra Al Timimy	
SERENDIPITY	3
Neve Jacqueline Thomson	
HI, MY NAME IS _____	10
Vivienne Tico Salcedo	
LIMINALITY	13
Belle Campbell	
IN THE MOUTH OF THE WOLF	16
Joanna Wu	
THE TRANSIENTS IN A MOMENT OF REMEMBRANCE	23
Shichan (Celine) Yu	
SEVENTEEN	24
Cheyenne Bardos	
ANOMALY	26
Charlie Landy	
BLINDFOLDED	30
Christy Sit	
CLAY BRAIN	32
Prantik Huq	
THE HOPES WE HAVE (FOR OUR CHILDREN)	33
Kate Brown	
2 HOT 2 HANDLE	45
Billy Wolnicki	
ERASE	46
Jaimie Lee	
THE POSSUM BOX (A MAN SHUFFLES INTO MY ROOM)	53
Emma Catherine	



A PASSING THING, THIS SHADOW	57
Axel-Nathaniel Rose	
ANOREXIA	70
Franklin A. Stone	
TABLEAU VIVANT	71
Rosie Bogumil	
WHERE'S MARTIN'S PLACE?	73
Oscar Davis	
A REDEFINITION OF OPERA? LAY THOUGHTS ON SEEING PHILIP GLASS' 'AKHNATEN'	79
Stephen McCarthy	
DEAD PHARAOH RISING	85
Christen Eskander	
SUN AND SHADE	87
Shakti Srikanth	
OUR TABLE	96
Claudia Hayman	
PAVLO'S SHOP	97
George Raptis	
MIXED	101
Katherine Vicary	
JUS SANGUINIS	105
Isabella Newton	
GAWAY	112
Caoimhe Hanrahan-Lawrence	
POR POR AND I (婆婆和我)	114
Dylan Goh	

Poets in My Interrogation Room

HOWRA AL TIMIMY



"A poet dares be just so clear and no clearer... He unzips the veil from beauty, but does not remove it. A poet utterly clear is a trifle glaring." - E.B White

I began to write this piece with a clear case of writer's block. Rather than letting myself descend into insanity from staring into a blank document for hours on end, I began to clean out some of my old workbooks from my junior years of high school. Flipping through my messy handwriting and unglued worksheets, I stumbled on an old truth: I – clear as day – had loathed poetry.

I was overcome with memories of my first poetry lesson of year 7 where my dull teacher had led us to explore a poem through a stable and monotonous road that ultimately led nowhere.

He had handed a photocopied sheet of paper of a poem from a play, read it to us, and told us to highlight as he read again.

Yellow for the metaphors;

Orange for repetition;

Green for alliteration; and

Pink for all the words that rhymed.

And that was it, there were only 4

colours in a standard highlighter pack. He had then gone on to give us a line by line analysis, so specific I lost interest and never thought much of it. I hardly remember my lead pencil swivelling against this sheet of unrecycled paper. I never came to care for this poem, and shockingly the bland essay that I diligently put together on my bus ride home, felt forced and unnatural. And as a matter of fact, line by line, I hated every second of writing my response. It had no effect on me, nor did I care for it.

And, with that, Shakespeare became the first poet in my interrogation room.

I had put him and his colourful, alluring and soft words in a cold, ferric and grey cell and tortured them both.

Tell me what technique is in the quote "From ancient grudge break to new mutiny," or I'll force it out of you. You owe me a clear answer and I cannot bear the shame of failing English. With no hint of irony crossing my mind I stampeded on Wordsworth's golden daffodils and plucked the flowers off as adjectives I could highlight.

This is no way to read a poem. A poem is not one to be taken possession of and be driven into a one universal reading. In fact, this is what drains the poem and sucks out our desire to merely care.

And so, as a junior student, the word “poetry” had become a word that made me roll my eyes by reflex. I had struggled to feel the connection, see the relevance or become inspired to admire the true artistry of poetry.

We are convinced at a dangerously young age to yearn not for independent thinking, but for spoon-fed answers of techniques, context and concrete meanings that only just drive successful marks throughout schooling.

These spoon-fed answers have taught me nothing besides the staid taste and indestructible shape of a metal spoon. All too familiar, like the cold steel bars of an interrogation room. And I could not bear the throes of dragging Wilde back to Reading Gaol with the view of the small tent of blue, which the prisoners called the sky. Helpless would I fall, unable to hide beneath the shadows and corners of the interrogation room.

I don’t want to know how perfectly written a poem is nor how well it’s been praised. A poem is not perfect, not complete, nor does it have finished pieces. Words in a poem are not seamlessly put together like a jigsaw puzzle desperate for an image. So why are we forced to disassemble and deconstruct these plastic pieces in a cloistered interrogation room where we can’t access all the jigsaw pieces?

A poem will always be a mystery we cannot define, and a puzzle that will never be completed as one clear image. Through the cracks, torn pieces, and empty spaces, we flow through the painful dimensions and create our own stories. A place where we fit in. At the seams.

Serendipity

NEVE JACQUELINE THOMSON

"You know, the ancient Greeks believed that men and women were connected as one being but then were split into two by Zeus. So now we have to roam the world looking for our other half."

Eddie, a small boy who was currently sprawled across his bed playing with a Rubik's cube, looked away from his hands to the boy who sat below him. The boy who had spoken, known simply as Ted, was currently leaning against his bed and had not turned to face him from where he sat. Ted had instead chosen to speak as though he was addressing the rest of Eddie's bedroom, letting his smooth voice flow out into the empty space.

Eddie's eyes traced the array of buttons pinned across the other boy's deep navy jacket collar, showcasing various seventies punk bands and eighties new wave artists. His gaze dragged across the boy's broad shoulders up to his bleach-blonde hair that was held in spikes upon his head as a result of copious amounts of gel (and probably a little bit of glue).

"That's horrifically violent," Eddie replied, his gaze finally resting upon Ted's face.

Ted hummed in agreement, continuing to flip through the magazine he held loosely within his hands.

"And quite homophobic," Eddie continued.

Ted prepared himself to argue with his friend against homophobia within Ancient Greek society before stopping himself, shutting his mouth with a slight click of his teeth and resuming his half-hearted skimming of the magazine pages. There would always be other times

to discuss such things with his friend, but right now he simply wanted to enjoy his company. It was rare now, in their young adulthood, for them to have time just to sit and be in each other's presence.

"Do you believe in soulmates?" Ted decided to posit instead. He considered such a question to be far more light-hearted and less taxing on the mind of the boy who sat above him than any commentary on Ancient Greek society.

"I-" Eddie began, squinting his eyes. The eye squinting had been a habit of Eddie's since he was about eleven years old and it bothered his mother immensely. The woman was sure that it was causing some kind of harm to the poor boy's eyes. Ted was quite fond of his friend's behavioural exhibitions. It made understanding the boy that much easier. "Well, I'm not sure if I do," Eddie finally replied, his eyes growing once again to their wider state. "I know I definitely don't believe I once had a woman fused into me."

Ted snickered at this and nodded his head, his eyes never leaving the magazine that now rested upon his lap. "I can't say I could ever imagine you fused to a woman, Ed."

"What about you, T? Do you believe in soulmates?" Eddie asked, ignoring his comment and instead staring at the boy who refused to meet his gaze.

Did he believe in soulmates? He supposed he was just as sure as his friend on that matter, as he was not very sure at all. He definitely thought about the concept of soulmates a whole lot. How they could come to be, in both a logical and a completely illogical (but much more romantic) way.

Logically, one falls in love as a result of evolution and the need for survival. The innate drive to continue the organism's genetic code was one of the strongest urges there was. He knew this. He understood this. This made sense to him.

Yet, his life had been full of coincidences, moments of pure luck and chance that led him down roads he knew he needed to be walking upon. This was something he could not explain logically to himself and allowed his illogical-but-romantic view of soulmates to continue sitting pretty within his brain.

Ted always had a strange relationship with coincidence. He described it as walking on newly paved roads and feeling as though he had walked on them before, despite the wet concrete beneath his shoes.

As feelings of *Déjà vu* engulfed him in these situations, he pondered just how many times he had faced this particular moment. He often wondered how different his life would be had he chosen different roads. Would he still be the same person he was today had he never failed that maths exam in 8th grade? Would he still be pondering such a thing if he had never dropped out of college? Were there other universes where he had made completely different choices? And was he better or worse off in those universes?

More importantly, would he be having these thoughts had he never met Eddie?

He was sure that all of these thoughts on coincidence had their initial conception within their first meeting.

Serendipity.

The word had meant nothing to him at his time of meeting Eddie, as he had only been fifteen years old.

It had been Ted's first day at his first job. He was sitting at the service counter of the CD store just down the road from his high school, flicking through a music magazine when a boy walked into the store in the late afternoon. He was frail and timid looking as he skulked around the store, stopping every now and again to rummage through a stack of CDs. He noticed the slight hunch in the boy's back, a product of poor habits, or perhaps anxiety. His posture made him not only look but *feel* smaller.

Ted noted where the boy stopped to browse, observing the signs of the genres that loomed above the stacks of CDs. He appeared to be partial to new wave and punk. Ted had almost begun to laugh to himself at the image of this small boy being a secret punk rocker when the boy himself appeared before him, placing a few CDs on the counter and looking at Ted expectantly.

Ted reviewed the boy's choices, nodding approvingly as he placed the CDs within a plastic bag. "New Order? Good choice man, it's a sick album. I actually saw them live a few weeks ago in the city."

"Me too!" the boy replied, a smile beginning to grace his face.

"No way!" Ted rarely smiled; however, a smirk did begin to pull across his face. "The show on Saturday?"

"Yeah, actually," the boy replied again, his voice now less timid and far more curious.

Ted laughed lightly at this. "Six degrees of separation or whatever, right?" he said.

Ted handed the boy the freshly printed receipt. For a moment, they both held the receipt, an informal binding of their lives occurring before their eyes, unnoticed by the two of them.

"See you around," Ted said, as the boy gave him a curt smile and left the store. Why had he said, 'see you around'? He had never seen this boy before and there was no promise he would ever see him again. Yet, he could feel that the boy would be back, if not for him, at least for the CDs.

Following that day, the boy, who quietly introduced himself as Eddie, continued to visit the shop every afternoon on a Saturday. On each occasion, he took the time to chat with Ted, sitting behind the counter with him on a milk crate and sharing a cigarette Ted had secretly stolen from his mum that morning. When Eddie had asked if Ted's mum noticed the missing cigarettes, Ted explained that his mum smoked so much it would be impossible for her to remember how many she had the night before. Eddie was still unsure about his explanation, half expecting Ted's mum to burst into the CD store any moment and cuss the two of them out. More than that, he was afraid that if Ted's mum found out about the cigarettes, it meant Eddie's mum would find out, and he was not sure he could deal with the consequences of that.

As the boys slowly revealed their stories to each other, the string that Ted had felt between himself and Eddie on their first meeting began to reveal itself to him. The string that weaved around the two of them, connecting them from afar and pulling them close when the time felt right. A string, possibly red as Ted quite liked that colour, that had been sewn into the broken skin of themselves, tying them together. Even at the naive and simple age of fifteen, Ted felt a looming sense of the severity of this boy's presence.

As he watched the boy study the back of a 'The Cure' album, he tried to push the thoughts from his mind. Still, he felt a lingering need to posit his theory.

"I was actually born in Scotland," Ted began suddenly, speaking into the comfortable silence between the two of them. He waited for Eddie's

reply, the one that always came after Ted revealed any fact about his life. Sometimes he would reply with a simple “same”, and the matter would not be pressed further. Other times the boy would expand his reply resulting in Ted noting the similarities of Eddie’s life path to his. It had become a habit between the two of them.

As so as he often did, Eddie replied with a simple. “So was I.”

“Weird, dude. Just... weird,” Ted said, shaking his head.

“What’s weird?” Eddie asked, putting the CD in his hands down upon the counter.

“Were you born in Edinburgh?” Ted continued.

Ted watched the boy tap his foot on the ground beneath him, an anxious gesture he was sure. He was not so sure why the boy was anxious. “Yeah, I was.”

“So was I,” Ted said, his eyebrows furrowed in deep thought. “It’s just strange how similar we are. It’s weird how similar our lives have been so far. Isn’t it weird to you?”

“It’s just a coincidence,” Eddie replied, chuckling lightly at his friend’s rambling.

“Is it? Is it a coincidence that both of our mothers gave us a copy of Papillon for our thirteenth birthdays? Does that sound like an everyday, run-of-the-mill coincidence to you?” Ted spoke calmly, as he often did. Yet, Eddie could tell by the never-ending eye contact that Ted held with him that he was pleading with the boy to acknowledge these odd coincidences.

Eddie had indulged his friend in such thought experiments many times, but they never led to any success in understanding their situation. He knew their friendship was weird. It was one built entirely on chance and luck, and it seemed to be held together by a glue that he could not yet fully comprehend. He was not sure he would ever understand why he was meant to meet Ted. Despite this, he understood that he needed to walk into the CD store that day when Ted was working, the same way he knew that man needed to land on the moon or the Titanic needed to sink. It was always going to happen, whether he liked it or not.

Pushing away the weight of such a thought, Eddie instead chose to sigh and reply, "Well what do you think it is?"

"I don't know. It just sometimes feels like we're characters in a story that's already written," Ted muttered.

"That's silly," Eddie laughed, despite the line of goosebumps rising along his arm. He tried to flatten them down again with his opposite hand, running his fingers up and down his forearm.

"I don't know man, is it?" Ted asked.

"Well, I don't know, but does it matter? Can't we just say, 'wow that's a cool coincidence!' and just enjoy it as that? Do we need to understand it? Do we need to always talk about it?" Eddie rambled, his voice rising in volume.

"I guess not," Ted said, his mouth hanging open in shock at the other boy's aggression, having never witnessed it before.

Ted stopped talking about them, the two of them, after that - but he never stopped thinking about it.

He did not know why he needed to meet Eddie, nor why he needed to know him. Yet, he could feel a string binding their two lives together tightly. The string was not so tight that it would hurt to pull away, but he knew that it was impossible to break.

He was sure that he could someday walk away from his friend, never look back, and still... somehow on his walk away from him, end up staring him in the face once again.

It was as though somehow the boy was, and always had been, a part of him.

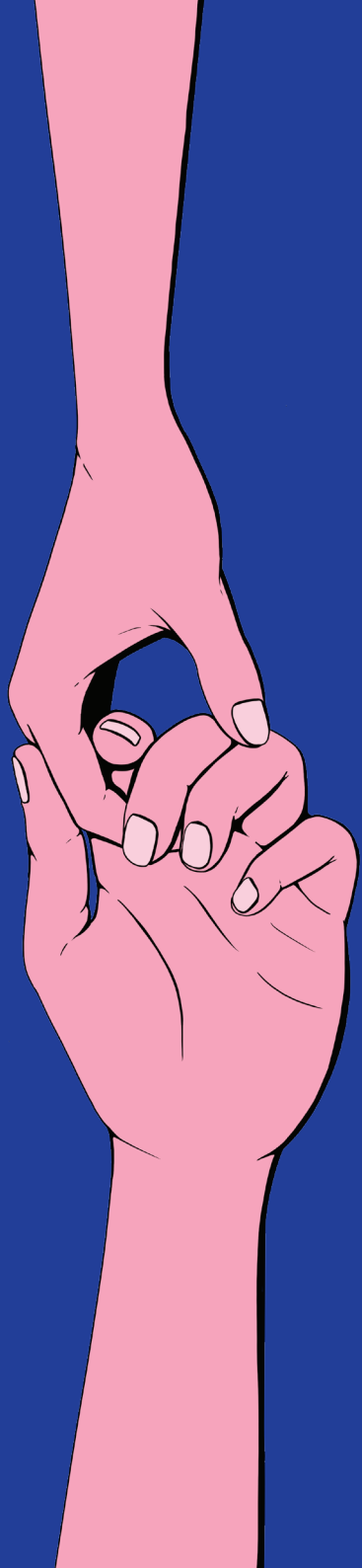
Ted felt a small, pale hand shaking his shoulder lightly. It pulled him from his memory-induced daze and back into the bedroom in which he sat. The magazine he was holding lay limp within his hands, long forgotten as he swam within the depths of his memories. He finally turned around and stared up towards his wide-eyed friend. Eddie looked down expectantly at him from where he sat on the bed. Ted noticed the shallow crow's feet that had begun to spread beneath his friend's eyes. Despite the early signs of aging (perhaps a result of Eddie's perpetual worried state), the brightness behind his eyes mirrored what he had seen the day he met the boy, the same

day he had just been mulling over in his mind. They were both older now, but he could not say they had changed that much.

"Ted? Did you hear what I asked?" Eddie questioned, "I said do you believe in soulmates?"

"I believe in serendipity," Ted responded finally, gazing into the brown eyes of the boy who sat above him. "I believe religiously in serendipity."

When Eddie said nothing in return, simply nodding his head, Ted knew that Eddie could not help but feel the same way.



Hi, my name is _____

(Content Warning: Swearing)

Viv

This is what acquaintances call me.

Vi

Some friends think 'Viv' is one letter too long.

V

My best friend called me this. It's just 'Viv' now.

Vivi

It sounds like a dog's name. My friends love using this one.

Vienna

Often followed by 'sausage' because my eldest sister thinks it's funny.

Ating

Everyone called me this as a child. It stopped when I grew up.
My other sister didn't notice.

Dumb Cunt

My brother has a weird way of showing affection.
He never called me 'Ating.'

Patak

My grandfathers called me this. Now it's just my grandfather.

Chancy

It was my alias online. I forgot how to spell the Pokémon 'Chansey.'

ChanChan

Online friends think it's cute.

Ferret

One friend thinks I'm very ferret-like. I don't know what ferrets are like.

Nine

One guy called me this and told me to figure out what it meant.
It's VIV in Roman Numerals.

Dumbass

My friend thinks very highly of me.

Bajookas

It means boobs.
I had reduction surgery so no one can call me this anymore.

Ballpen

I used to snap ballpens in half.

VIV 99

It's the plate number of my car.
People from school thought calling me this was cool.

Defender of Justice

I fought teachers over workload and deadlines.
My classmates gave me an award for it.

Nang

It means ‘older sister.’ I don’t have younger siblings.
My underclassmen called me this.

Bromie

My childhood friend is both my bro and my homie.
I am also her bro and her homie.

Beb

My nanny’s *vuh* sounds more like *buh*.

Pangga

Only my papa uses it. It means ‘beloved.’

Baby

Only my mom uses it. It means ‘baby.’

Tita Viv

‘Tita’ means aunt. I have a niece.

Tita Viv the Best Tita

I haven’t gotten my niece to call me this yet.

Vivienne

This is what you’ll find on my birth certificate.
It’s my least favourite name.

Liminality

BELLE CAMPBELL

1.

There is a smell on my body
that hovers and leaks
like the tide.

The doormat of a soul stamped in
half-prayers and open wounds;

how do I always end up back here?

I keep having dreams of parties and friends I don't know. I wake up and it feels so real that I am almost happy. Lying to strangers in my sleep. I'm fine. I'm sad. Did you met my new boyfriend? We say things like 'this is what it means to be human', and necessarily imply the rest. The exigent distance grows and grows. I am learning to un-known myself. I cut myself split myself into decipherable pieces like opening blister packs. Alive and dead at the juncture of inconsequence.

2.

I hold the sun between my fingers,
red-pink and pulsing.
Possibility bottled in that moment

somewhere

and though I am only half a person
I am feeling real today.

There is a story about healing that is linear and absolute, and then there is my cyclical labour – two steps forward, one step back.

We must always grow in one direction. I couldn't cry in public, but now I ride the bus from heartbreak to heartattack, and my fishbowl heart swells and cracks. The world is made for lovers, and I'm a lover of sorts, but not the kind you need and not the kind you asked for. I wonder if I will ever deserve it.

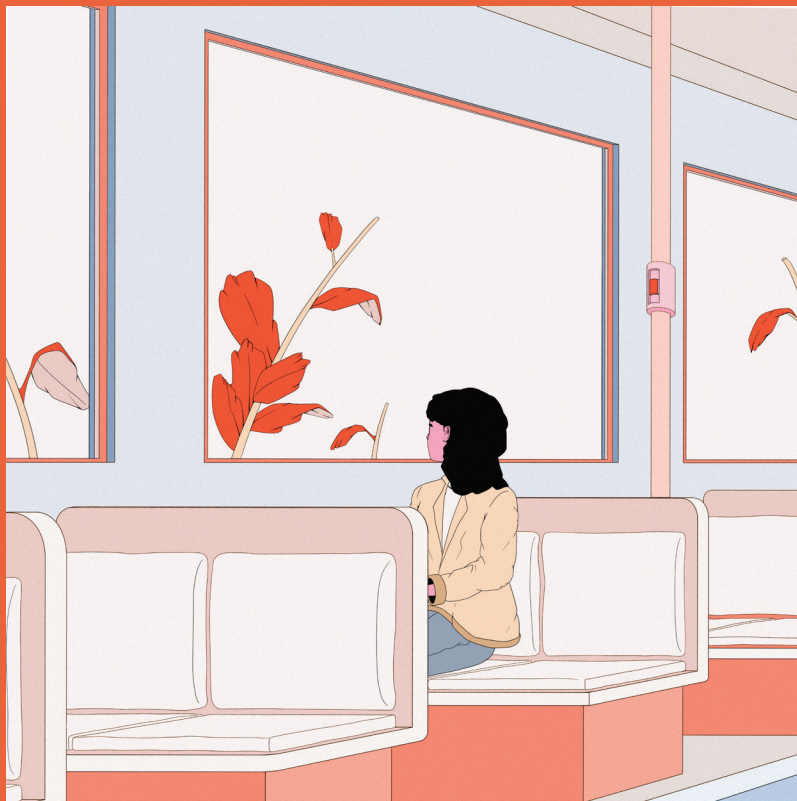
3.

All this grief
for the idea of a woman.

All these faces I've worn so well,
I'm ashamed to be anywhere
but the Delphic grey,
 irreconcilable and inhuman.

This is the colourless blood
I bleed
in the dance of masks,
and this is the shape
 of forgiveness.

Can I have another chance at life? I don't think I'm doing it right. I'm not ready to share myself, and perhaps I never will be. This is a one-way life, I suppose, and the answers are oblique. The dirty ice melts and invisible stars are born, but I cannot forgive the original sin of myself. As long as I hear their voices, I will hide from everything that makes me feel real. The limbo of hoping and hurting. Crying and searching. Take the heart I was given and make me another in the shape of the stars.



In the Mouth of the Wolf

JOANNA WU

(Content Warning: Suicide)

In bocca al lupo.

These were the parting words of Signora Bianchi prior to every exam. It translates to ‘*In the mouth of the wolf*’, an Italian idiom for good luck. Back then, I was 15 and awestruck by my teacher’s tales of growing up in Italy; how she would choke back a concoction of egg yolks and whiskey for breakfast each day and run rampant in the narrow, pebbled streets until sundown. It was my first glimpse into what existed outside of my hometown of 15,000 occupants, the endless possibilities that were out there just waiting for me to grasp. Maybe for that reason, I – now 23 – decided that Italy would provide an ideal backdrop for my medical elective. Maybe in this strange yet exciting place, I could find solace. Yes, this would be good for me.

I based myself in Orvieto, a small but striking hilltop commune perched atop a large butte made of

igneous, volcanic tuff, just ninety minutes out of Rome. It housed the *Ospedale Santa Maria*, a multidisciplinary 200-bed hospital that was to be my home for the next 6 weeks. My train pulled into the station on Tuesday evening, just as the golden orb set in the western horizon. Its light reflected off the great white cliffs, painting them reposeful hues of pastel orange and pink. Orvieto sat high and majestic above the expansive valley floor, and for miles I saw nothing but green plains dotted by small farmhouses and cypress trees. I let out a deep sigh and soaked it in. I thought, good, I hate the sea.

I had been at *Ospedale Santa Maria* for two weeks. In bed 2A lay a Spanish woman dying of right-sided heart failure. The ventricles of her heart had grown thick, futile at pumping blood, and fluid was now creeping into the delicate alveoli

of her lungs. Even lying down, she struggled for each breath, her legs swollen so significantly they threatened the seams of her cotton pants. Despite this, she remained a lively character who loved nothing else but to talk for hours on end. I began to find that those who were facing the impending fragility of their own life liked to lecture others on how they should live theirs.

"In this world, you must work hard – time is too short, you must never take tomorrow for granted!" she proclaimed with a thick accent.

I used my stethoscope to auscultate the gentle lub-dub of her failing heartbeat as she divulged this dissertation. Frankly, I didn't listen to a word of it. I'm sure she believed her speech would miraculously inspire me to abandon my life thus far and chase after my true heart's desires. To *carpe diem*! But words were just words, and when presented coyly as they were now, were just a thin veil people hid behind to rationalise selfish behaviours and dangerous impulses. At the funeral, oftentimes people didn't know what to say to me, so they resolved to giving me a pat on the back and saying "life is short" – as if those three words were somehow supposed to help acquiesce the surmounting grief within me. Life is long. You could ask anyone who was stuck in a job they hated, or was unhappy in their relationship, or had to wait in the

waiting room of a hospital to hear the fate of a loved one. I stared at the checklist sheet on my clipboard, not really seeing. Life is long with far too much pain, that never changed no matter how much I did.

"You must work hard, even if you're rich!" the woman stated with bulging eyes.

Then, looking pointedly at me, tacked on, "And you look rich."

Friday, the 18th of April. I was reminded of this date constantly, as I wrote up patient notes, ordered blood work, signed off on new prescriptions. My favourite thing to do after a long shift was to head straight to the local bar to alleviate my stresses with an *aperitivo*. Some of the other junior doctors had gone for dinner at the pizzeria, but I wasn't in the mood to make meaningless chit-chat with people I didn't care for. *Bar Montanucci* was intimate in size and paint flaked off the walls, but this added to its old-world charm.

I ordered a Campari, then a martini, then a Negroni, then an anisette. Every drink I threw back burnt my throat as it added to the confidence growing within me, which compounded to the point where I found myself approaching the man lighting a cigarette by the pool table. He was older than I was,

and his tanned skin and defined muscles indicated that he was a manual labourer of some sort. His nose was too big for his face and his ears stuck out, which gave him a goofy but sweet appearance. The important thing was that I had never seen him before, and was unlikely to see him again. I tapped him on the shoulder, and with my words beginning to slur together, I told him why today, April 18th, was so significant to me, though I'm not quite sure he understood my English. I told him how one year ago I woke up with a sister, and one year ago I went to sleep without one. His enthusiastic nodding and toothy smile confirmed my suspicion, but I didn't mind, as his hands had begun tracing the contours of my waist and his lips were tasting mine. Alternating between drags of his cigarette and more shots of limoncello, I lulled myself into a state of temporary amnesia.

I woke at 3am. The man from the bar was asleep next to me, his bare chest heaving up and down with the sound of his breath. The moon peeked through the cracks of the window shutters, emanating a gentle glow. It reflected off the white detailing of a swimming costume slung on the back of a chair. My sister loved to swim. She revelled in the feeling of being underwater, the feeling of being weightless and insignificant. She would dive fearlessly into the water and swim further and further into the unending

depth, which used to scare me, even though I was supposed to be the *older* sister. They found her body just off the cape, a lifeless skeleton washed up by the tide. I couldn't bear to enter the ocean anymore. The suicide was confirmed in a note left for our parents, but I never found a note for myself.

The stranger next to me grunted as he rolled over in his sleep. The moonlight casted shadows across his face, accentuating his ugly features, and his semblance to a monkey only struck me then. Disillusioned with alcohol, I hadn't noticed his balding hairline or protruding gut before. Seeing it now made me want to puke. I looked back at the swimming costume. A sharp pang hit my stomach, and I felt a cold wave of loneliness creep up on me, spreading like wildfire until it was all-consuming. Tears started rolling down my cheeks, though I couldn't tell you why or how. How could I be surrounded by so many family and friends who claimed to love me, and yet feel this alone? And though I was physically naked and completely vulnerable to this man, I felt *nothing*, like there existed this great hollowness within me. What was the difference between us, then, and a cold statue of two individuals frozen together in stone? I think I finally understood Epictetus when he said almost 2,000 years ago, "For because a man is alone, he is not for that reason also solitary; just as though a man is

among numbers, he is not therefore *not* solitary”.

I perked up to look at the moon again, but it escaped behind some storm clouds. When the lights go out, so do our disguises.

Have I ever truly mattered to anyone?

The hospital was a living contradiction. A lot of happy things occurred within these walls, but of course, the same walls also saw a lot of sadness; hopeful individuals being told their cancer had relapsed, diagnoses of chronic conditions that would forever change how a little girl or boy would live their life, mothers and fathers dying in front of their children. But despite the whirlwind of emotional challenges that added to the medical complexities of many, many patients, I put it all aside and faked a smile for my last patient. At that point, I was finishing an 18-hour shift following a week of being the on-call doctor, and was glad to soon be reunited with my bed. My eyelids were fighting fatigue as I entered the room. Mr Rinaldi had a hip operation two days ago and was waiting to be discharged home. However, while I was performing the check-up, he was panting like a dog, his face red with sweat dripping off his chin. I listened to his lungs, clear;

I checked his vital signs, steady; I took his temperature, normal. It didn't appear to be pneumonia, nor heart failure. Besides, it was hot that day, so I assuaged his concerns and requested the nurses move him to a cooler room before finally heading home for some much-needed rest.

My sleep was disrupted by a phone call from the senior medical consultant, only four hours later.

“I just responded to a Code Blue for Mr Rinaldi. His breathing capacity was cut in half and his skin was blue by the time I got there. He had a massive pulmonary embolism. You were the last doctor to see him.”

My heart was beating out of my chest; I couldn't speak.

The consultant continued, “You're lucky he's still alive”.

I was overcome by a mix of relief for Mr Rinaldi and disgust in myself. I was sleep-deprived, mentally exhausted, and my poor judgement had almost cost this man his life! That thought made me sick to my core. What deluded game was I playing, thinking I could be a doctor? My cheeks pricked with unpleasant heat. I was supposed to know the ins and outs of human biology, be counted on to make the right decisions. How the hell was I supposed to save people? I couldn't even keep my own sister alive.

The consultant spoke: "Hey. Word of advice? Make some friends here. You'll never make it if you think you can do everything on your own."

I nodded silently at those words as the guilt and remorse began to manifest physically as waves of nausea. After ejecting last night's dinner, I returned to bed for a few more hours of restless sleep.

Following my near-fatal mistake, the other junior doctors avoided me like I was some type of bad luck charm. One of the other girls however, Maria, was very sympathetic to me following the incident. She had offered to cover my night shift that week and confessed to me quite poignantly of the time she fatally prescribed the wrong drug dosage to a patient. I was shocked – this field was unforgiving to those who made mistakes, and to admit to it was to be accepting exile. I was grateful to know her secret though; her honesty and willingness to be vulnerable made me feel that little bit less alone. Brought together by mutual scandal, we became an unlikely duo in the hospital, supports for each other when there was no-one else.

Maria had pleaded with me for weeks now to go to the seaside with her, and I had finally, albeit reluctantly, agreed to go. As she navigated our rental car carefully

along the winding roads of the Amalfi Coast, I looked out across the expansive, blue horizon. I saw thin girls in colourful bikinis swimming lazily by the shore, sailboats stuffed with tourists travelling between ports, and wild youths cliff-jumping recklessly off tall, intimidating ledges.

"Oh, come on! You've got to come down to the beach with me! The water will be warm, and apparently it's the clearest water in the world!" Maria begged, eyes darting carefully to check between the curving road and my unconvinced expression.

I didn't feel very much like telling her of the reason behind my aversion to the beach, so I smiled meekly and said I'd think about it.

Maria ended up spending much of our trip inside our stuffy hotel room, as she had the misfortune of acquiring gastroenteritis from some rancid crayfish our first night there. By the last day of our vacation, I had exhausted all the churches, markets, and hikes Amalfi had to offer, and Maria was still showing no signs of recovery. Maria, fed-up and exhausted by debilitating fatigue and my relentless stubbornness, practically shouted at me: "Just shut up and go! We're in one of the most beautiful places in the world and I'm stuck in this tiny shoebox of a hotel room! I know you can swim, so what's stopping you?"

I was taken aback by the brusqueness of her comment, but it seemed to muster some internal motivation. Whether it was due to reluctance to talk about my sister aloud, or maybe a combination of guilt, sympathy, or even fear of Maria, I hesitantly changed into my worn-out bathing suit, checked which bus route stopped at the beach, and made my way down to the sea.

It was an exceptionally hot day. My back stuck to the leather bus seat and the air was laborious to breathe. Sweat dripped down my chest and caused my white, cotton dress to cling to my body, leaving little to imagination and inviting more lascivious male gazes than I would have liked. When I finally reached Fornillo Beach, it was overrun by eager tourists who had staked every last sunbed and left no patch of sand unoccupied. I had already turned back to return to the bus stop when a small trail entrance caught my eye. The mouth of the narrow, dirt path was barely visible, hidden by overgrown foliage. People seemed to just walk by without a second thought of where it might lead. Curious to see what views the trail had to offer, I followed the dirt path until I found myself at the place where I had seen the boys carelessly fling themselves into the water a few days earlier.

I ventured out on the large, flat rock. The cliff-edge petered out slightly before the vertical geometry dropped down into the treacherous sea below. I had a fear of heights as well as the sea, but still I crept up to the cliff-edge, as though something magnetic was drawing me onwards. The rock felt solid and grounding beneath the soles of my sandals, while the sea continued to rage violently against the rock-cliffs below me, tumultuous and reckless. As I leant forwards and peered into the swirling waters below, images of my sister immediately flooded my mind. I wondered if this was the same image she saw before she took her own life, what her last thoughts might've been before she jumped. Desperation? Regret? Somewhat unconsciously, I began to undress. The rhythmic sounds of waves crashing against the cliff-face echoed through my body and drew me deeper and deeper into the moment. I no longer felt in control of my own thoughts or being, and was overcome by this elusive spirit, a higher power to which my body belonged. My heartbeat rang through my eardrums as I bent my knees, preparing to leap into the unknown. Images of Signora Bianchi, my high-school Italian teacher, flashed through my mind. In *bocca al lupo*. I jumped.

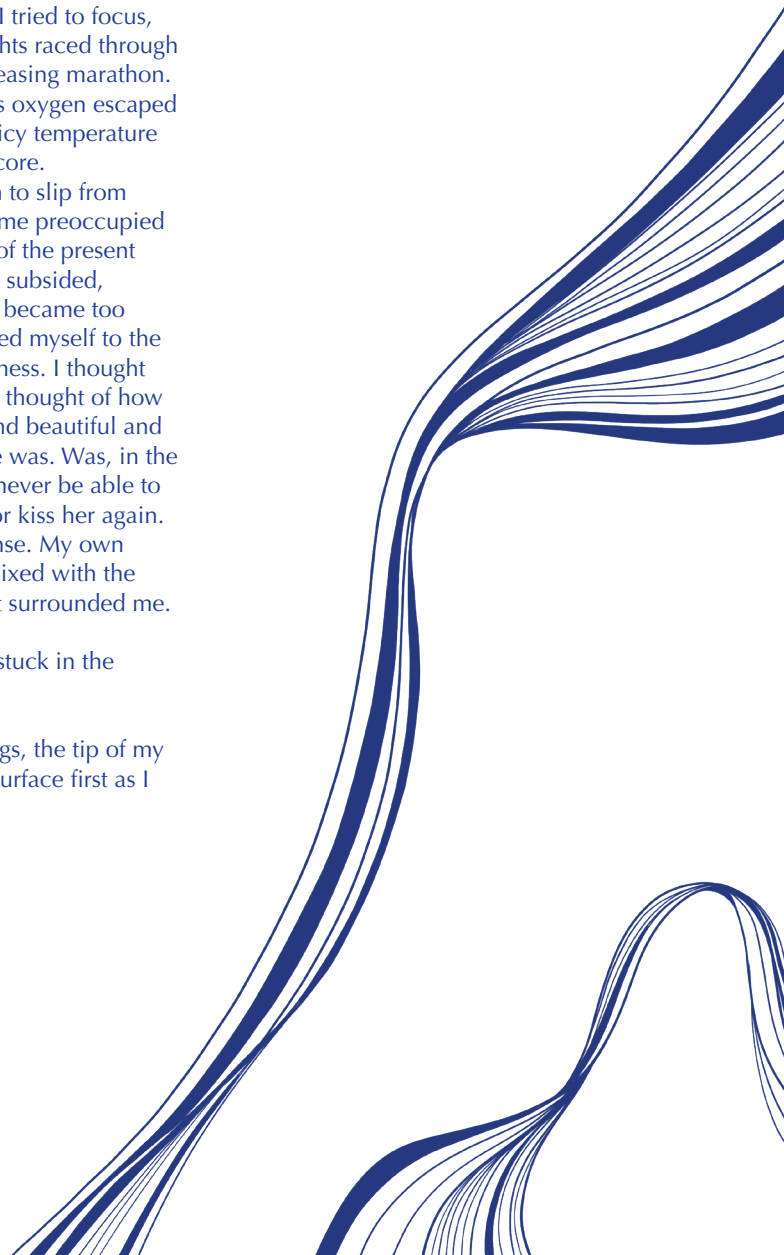
The water was numbingly cold as it attacked my body. I hadn't touched the ocean for almost 2 years and now, it engulfed me, lit me on fire

from the inside out. I felt every cell in my body turn on, alive and electric and screaming. The current pulled my body back and forth like it was nothing but a ragdoll, my eyes stinging as they were contaminated by the salty liquid. I tried to focus, but a million thoughts raced through my head in an unceasing marathon. Bubbles of precious oxygen escaped my mouth and the icy temperature now pervaded my core.

The thoughts began to slip from my mind as it became preoccupied by the grim reality of the present moment. The panic subsided, but only because it became too painful. I surrendered myself to the ubiquitous nothingness. I thought again of my sister. I thought of how loving and fierce and beautiful and kind and strong she was. Was, in the sense that I would never be able to hold her, hug her, or kiss her again. Was, in the past tense. My own warm, salty tears mixed with the biting seawater that surrounded me.

I didn't want to be stuck in the past tense.

And so I kick my legs, the tip of my nose breaking the surface first as I come up for air.



The Transient in a Moment of Remembrance

It all came back,
When their eyes were met.
Raised eyebrows
Pulled up four corners of the smiles,
And lives, again, aligned.

The tightening of the throats,
The shaking of the heads,
And escaped some heavy sighs.

The red threads of memories
Clawing up the yellowish whites,
The blurred vision peeled open the hearts,
Retrieving the most cherished times.

Blinking and blinking,
Could not stop the memories from stinging!
It still hurt when you pierce my soul,
With those same old fiery knives.

When the silence was just about to end,
She reached out her hands
To join him in the roaring tears,
And reunited with the same old friend.

SHICHAN (CELINA) YU

Seventeen

CHEYENNE BARDOS

Do I look back now
with hope or remorse?
Am I still as naïve?
Did youth take its course
through empty paddocks
and failed license tests?

If I take a break,
solemnly,
like a director would
before his dailies;

CUT TO A SWIMMING POOL IN THE NIGHT:

Warped legs and pruned finger pads
afloat like teenage lily pads
with cuts on our legs from
climbing the fence.
This was the height of it
and that's what we thought.

CUT TO A DIM KITCHEN LIGHT:

Two wobbly, naked bodies
A stomach still shy and sucked in.
Have you ever had your mother call you,
asking where you've been?
~~"I'm eating pizza, naked"~~
"I'm at Bronte's house about to go
to sleep"

CUT TO A WHITE SONATA IN FLIGHT:

CUT TO SCHOOL TIES PULLED TIGHT:

CUT TO SKIRTS AN INCH TOO HIGH:

CUT TO ALCOHOL'S FIRST BITE:

CUT TO A CHEMIST NEXT MORNING LIGHT:

Was rent due today?
Can it stay unpaid?
Can my car fill up on its own?
Am I still as naïve?
Am I just too lazy?
Did responsibility come knocking at the door?
Does she leave when ignored?
Do I decide now, or later
when the bills are heavier
and it's a nine to fiver
and the food in the sink plug
stares at me
whilst I nurse a screaming baby
with my cracked, bleeding nipple?
Will I be a cripple
with a walking stick
and a forehead full of wrinkles,
pruned and widowed?
This director's cut
doesn't know where to go.
Half of its reel is still a storyboard

FADE TO BLACK

Anomaly

CHARLIE LANDY

I don't feel like a person.

This seems like a strange sentence. Odd, equally in its meaningless and peculiarity. If I have a body – two arms, two legs, and a bunch of stuff in between – doesn't that make me a person? Or, alternatively, if I have a brain with thoughts, opinions, and ideas, then aren't I personified in that consciousness? There isn't an answer. This isn't some sort of deep philosophical pondering. Whereby every fundamental thought I had about the universe and existence is hung out to dry, translucent in the sunlight, exposed and twisting; this is more of an internal yearning for cohesion.

I am multiple identities. I am a collage of *things*, pasted down on cardboard, some of the edges peeling and others aged into one with the base. I take these things as they come and try to arrange them in ways that make sense. There are the basics. I am a musician. I love

dogs. I have small handwriting. These are non-negotiable. They are ever-present, not quite stagnant so much as they are reliable. I fall upon these when my world is swirling, tumbling, tossing its contents like a tumble-dryer. Then there are the things that change. This week I have green hair, but next week it might be purple. My favourite tea used to be raspberry-flavoured, before it was discontinued. Now, it has to be gingerbread-flavoured. I sometimes feel like my attachment to these frivolous things is slight, almost meaningless, and that it has less to do with me as a person than it does with a force of habit and ritualistic repetitions. But the more tiny things I lose, the more I feel like I have to let myself have these as a part of me. To have them taken away, without consent, feels like ripping off a fingernail. However small a fingernail may be, it is still *me*.

In context, though, all of these are somewhat easy. They're not

incongruent, or hard to place. I can think of these, and sit with them, and not frantically try and redirect my train of thought somewhere else. If I take my consciousness out, and look at these through the third person, I can piece together something that makes sense. I can go 'hey, that right there, that's a person'. If I put myself back in, I see these things as patches sewn in to conceal the gaps. Where I've tried to pull things out and shove them down and make them *less there*. Where I'm ashamed, defeated, humiliated, anxious, and something sharp in my guts tells me that to be that much is too much.

When I take a step back, though, at the core of everything, are two identities that make up almost everything. I am queer. I am autistic.

There's a funny thing that humans do, where we like to put everything in boxes. Neat, clear, stackable ones, like you find at Muji, or the market section of Ikea. We label these boxes, put each person in their own little cube, and let that label be a definition. Every person we see, we try to figure out what their label is. For a lot of people, the colour of their skin is the one and only label that matters. For many disabled people, their visual disability is where observers both stop and start. It's easy to avoid labels when they don't dictate your day to day life. It's infinitely more comfortable to shut it out, ignore

it, and claim to 'not follow politics' when the 'politics' isn't a debate about your very humanity. But none of this is okay. We know Bla(c)k, Indigenous, and People of Colour are subject to systemic racism, abuse, and violence on every conceivable level. We know that disabled people are underestimated, physically unaccommodated for and discriminated against. But for the more privileged person, the system becomes a game they can play. I have privilege, white privilege. There are parts of my life that are inherently easier because the way structural racism works benefits me in a multitude of ways. But there are still rules I never learned. I don't get to play the game.

I was never taught how to manipulate perception. Clothes, posture, accent, makeup, mannerisms. I've always wondered how people make these tools work in their favour. Is it a matter of having no identity except for what suits your needs, or are you so comfortable in a solidified sense of self that things can change on the outside, while some sort of core stays the same? I tried to learn, but it feels like neurotypical people are speaking a whole other language where they're *aware* of the expectations. Adjusting constantly: minute switches every second, ticking over and reacting to a social story I don't know the language to. When I tried to add 'Neurotypical' to my collage it refused to stick,

flaking at the corners like I used one of those old, dried-out glue sticks that no one wants to use but can't be bothered to throw out.

Every time I think I've figured out a new solution, the game changes. Need eye contact? Look at the eyebrows. Can't stim in public? Wear oversized long sleeves, so no one can see your tapping fingers and hidden fidget cubes. Need to walk 'normally'? Wear heavy platform boots and emulate the murder walk of Bucky Barnes from *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, and let people believe it's a deliberate style choice to match your all-black attire. But then it gets complicated. People want to make extended conversation, invite me to get drinks after class, or there's a group task in a tutorial. Then the pasted down layers peel all the way off and people see the chasms and gaps and the stuff I tried to hide away and suddenly I'm not one label anymore and I don't know how to explain myself. That, at least, is the one thing I'm acutely aware of. The need to justify myself. Everything, from my awkward posture to my inability to pick up on the joke to when I'm overwhelmed and can barely focus but force myself to stutter out the socially appropriate scripts I've memorised, needs to be explained. It is not enough to exist outside the game's manual.

The thing is, I very much look queer.

Maybe it has something to do with the exhilaration of no longer being forced into a uniform of bottle green skirts and feminine blouses. Maybe it doesn't. Either way, how I look puts me squarely in that Perspex tub. My hair is short. I wear a chest binder. In my high school sports uniform I was often mistaken as a young boy, and I've been asked if I'm 'a boy or a girl' too many times to count by kids at work. People my age, however, assume I'm a lesbian. It's a nice, easy identity to understand, and for the most part even the more conservative-minded are at least outwardly tolerant. There's a certain level of fear that keeps me from explaining that *I am not a girl*. I am non-binary. I use they/them pronouns. My name is not what is written on my birth certificate, or my ID, or my payslips, or my library card.

But knowing that this doesn't make sense to them makes me shove on another layer, hasty, ugly, and out of place, making less of myself.

I've come to realise that this is the same as learning neurotypical mannerisms and suppressing my autistic ones. If I can't be a normal-looking, neurotypical, straight cis law student, then I will be an odd-looking-but-cis, lesbian, neurotypical-but-anxious music student. In trying to find a middle ground between identities I've crafted an entirely new patchwork. Curating these neat squares feels

easy. I can take myself out. I can create a character in a novel that plays a role that people *recognise*. A bit quirky, but almost endearing. There are no gaps. Everything is neatly stitched together, and the facade is seamless, a narrative that people see and consume and think no more of. Identities that can be boxed and moved on from.

No one sees the underside of this quilt, this neatly stuck collage. No one sees me avoiding classmates to go message my friend about nothing, just so they'll use my name and pronouns. No one sees when I have to leave a lecture because the lights are too bright and I end up crying and biting my hand in the disabled bathroom, trying to hold off a meltdown at least until I get home. No one notices my leg bouncing in discomfort when I agree that yeah, I am a lesbian. No one thinks twice when I don't say hi back. They don't know it's because everything is too much and too loud and *I can't physically talk*. And I can't let them see it. I'm scared.

To be honest, there's times where I can't let *myself* see it. There's always been a lot of talk about whether non-binary genders are valid, and with J.K. Rowling's less-than-inclusive contribution to the conversation, it feels too volatile to throw myself into the mix. After she published an essay and her following tweets on the legitimacy of trans people, specifically autistic

people who were assigned female at birth, I spent hours on social media. Scrolling. So many people were angry, angry that these two identities could coexist in one body. Forcing myself to bear witness to this rage was weirdly compelling, having convinced myself that it was somehow my obligation to read on, regardless of how much it hurt. It felt like whatever progress I'd made in stitching these two massive fabrics of my life together was being picked apart, tweet by tweet. One can't exist without the other, but one can't exist *with* the other.

On the other hand, if we completely discard that TERF of a woman and everything she stands for, maybe there's something magical in places where identity doesn't overlap and instead floods like watercolour on wet paper. Maybe there's less to be said for shoving independent pieces together like a reject-shop Lego knockoff where nothing fits quite right, and more for just letting it be. Sit. Chill out for a little bit. My brain and physical manifestation are okay. Not amazing, not awful, but okay. Bits and pieces of all the identities swirling and tumbling and tossing. Even if there's nothing holding them together, they're all still here.

I'm all here.

Blindfolded

CHRISTY SIT

You say
 You yearn to see someone
 With a forehead of perfections
 With cheekbones that are
 Not too low for what attractiveness it has got
 Not too high for the thirst of power that Woman would
 crave for

You say
 Those red lips shall be sculpted,
 Shall be carved thick
 Thick full of vibrant emotions,
 Of musky pheromones.
 That with thickened hands but not of a labourer,
 She shall be good.
 Breathing in signs of good health
 Breathing out air that turns to papers of wealth
 Oh and a gem of good luck.

But you can't tell the forehead of a fool
For you, yourself, have created one
Only the imperfections you see
But not the sweat underneath
That brings lustre to the crown
Not the lips that speak words
that can Tear those papers into
worthless pieces.
Not the calluses on the fingertips
That can raise mountains
Not the beating heart of an eternal soul
Flaring blood with such viscosity and ferocity that melts
Deeper down than just the tip of an iceberg

And you can never read between these lines
Between the rigid grids you branded
A price tag
A masquerade
A million reasons
Tightening up the blindfold
To cover up your short-sightedness
In hopes someone
Would conform to the silhouette
You blinded yourself with.

Clay Brain

PRANTIK HUQ

muddied water
collecting,
beat
down by
The Suns
Pure be the
words that seep
through the seams
working rock
into clay

The Hopes We Have (For Our Children)

You are home, alone. Julie is buying ingredients for dinner; soup tonight. Nourishing. Cadmus is at the office, working. It's not too late in the day, you could still enjoy the hazy afternoon sun. A walk, maybe, or a swim. But you know where you are drawn, magnetically, the small yellow room around which your body revolves.

StorkOrder™. Welcome.

The gestation pod lights up at your commanding touch. A nice, neutral yellow. Warm and friendly. It was your inspiration for the colour of the walls.

Select option:

gestation update
trimester history
planning
gallery

It's a beautiful, organic shape. You feel quietly vindicated in your insistence upon quality, the *best money could buy*. It is worth it, even now. Of course, you didn't have to use the pod. Many women don't. You sink into an armchair. An update, first. As if anything has changed since this morning.

Foetus: 3 months, 3 days.

Vitals: steady

Development

There are no words here, just the "development" button in a glowing, hopeful green. *Well-chosen*, you think. Even the word "steady" sets you into a spiral of connotations. Whatever adjective they might have placed there would have been excruciating.

Development

normal
adequate
exceeds expectations?

And yet, nothing puts you quite at ease like an uncomplicated green.

Only a matter of months to go. You place a hand on your stomach; flat. Un-inflated. By this point, your mother would have been sharing the news with her loved ones, watching anxiously for signs, already claiming 'baby brain'. Poor thing. What a burden. How unsafe. The pod hums encouragingly. You shift your chair closer and tuck your legs under the egg-shaped capsule, hooking your feet around the base. Sliding down in your chair, you encircle the pod with your arms and smooth a maternal hand over the warm surface. This feels like good practice. The pod, safe, between your body and limbs.

Planning.

What a luxury, to even open this section. This world of possibility; decisions waiting to be made, tapped upon, selected and implemented in seamless efficiency. The options make you dizzy. You have not allowed yourself into

this tab until very recently. It's not good to get ahead of yourself, but now is the time to decide.

Titular Design
Emotional Design
Aesthetic Design

Always begin with the interior. It's the right way to do things.

Heritage traits: Maternal: Ombre

- 1.

family-oriented
- 2.

romantic
- 3.

purposeful
- 4.

perfectionist
- 5.

idealist

Heritage traits: Paternal: Cadmus

- 1.

charismatic
- 2.

hard-working
- 3.

stable
- 4.

leader
- 5.

confident

StorkOrder™ Foetus:

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.

Five tiny, enormous, cavernous, life-changing gaps. Reductive to the extreme. You really need the gender first. Girls who are leaders are ... bossy. Boys who are leaders are ... assertive. Romantic girls are ... compelling. Romantic boys are ... sensitive.

Okay, gender first. You think of a boy. No, a girl. Definitely a girl, for you. Cadmus won't mind, it will be something to dote on.

Plus, just think of all the names for girls. You remember the unbridled euphoria of the name design tab. Like a lolly shop for your literary mind.

Titular Design

Titular. Ti-tu-lar. Three little steps, descending into...isn't that *Lolita*? What's in a name, anyway? The perfect one will come. Your shortlist floods back to you, like a prayer:

Aaliyah (exalted, sublime)
Bahar (season of spring)
Cadence (beat, rhythm)
Danica (star of the day)
Ece (the queen)
Fallon (leader's daughter)
Gala (woman of serenity)
Hava (living and breathing)

Iesha (one who is alive)

Julie (domestic helper)

Julie?

Julie is home.

Which name - which one sits in your mouth like a pearl, a precious treasure in your cheek? To be turned over and over in secret, muttered day and night?

Julie is starting on the soup. A methodical rhythm of *chop* and *slice* underscore the life of the house. For a moment, you see a baby girl, a toddler really, tripping down the long corridor to the kitchen. Tiny fists waving in the air. She is excited about the soup.

Wait, you call out...*wait for me* – nothing. No name yet. If it won't roll off the tongue, you will just have to choose one.

You decide to help Julie with the cooking. It's hot today and she's been running around like crazy. Poor thing. You leave the pod and your fantasies in the little yellow room.

Your apartment is long and narrow – your building has you lined up against the city-side, where living spaces are only three deep. Cadmus made sure you got the view you wanted. You have friends who work, slogging away day and night. They have no use for nice things. But you, you are different. You have everything you want. You *will* have everything you want.

As you pass along the glass wall, you see the sun has sunk below the haze line already. Early, only four in the afternoon. Your mother used to say that the sun would shine all day and only disappear at night. Even then, it was replaced by a moon, like a small muted sun, and a thousand twinkling stars. Such decadence. No wonder it's over.

The soup is coming together now, developing in depth; onions, carrots and celery wrap you in nostalgia. You really do like to cook with Julie. She is ... *uncomplicated*. You remember she has two children herself, back at home, but you can't remember anything about them now, not even their names. To be honest, you're not quite sure where home is for her. Embarrassed, you decide not to ask. She asks though, about the baby. Very cheerful. It's all going well, you say, very well.

You would choose that, if you could. Her cheerfulness. Nothing is too hard

for Julie. Trait number one: cheerful. Maybe not... five feels like too few, too little a foundation to build a whole person. But, at the same time, it feels like too much. Everything will be easier when Cadmus is home. So, you tidy your mind and follow Julie's instructions.

Stir pot, Miss Ombre.

Add salt. Some more.

Taste. You like? Good.

Inside the hot broth, pieces of chicken swirl suspended in their own amniotic haven. It must be warm and safe in there. It's a small space, completely designed to carry, to nourish, to bring forth life. What if *she* isn't safe? What if she needs you, needs her...what are you exactly? *Mother* is a dry word, strong and sure; *you* are anything but sure. You need to hold her, don't you? You need to thrust your hand into this boiling pot, to scald your arms and do something, to hold her. She needs you. She needs you. Reach for her –

Cadmus is home.

The soup swirls beneath you. No baby. No scalding.

How was your day, darling?

It was...a day.

Cadmus is upset with you. It's not hard to tell. But, why? What have you done wrong? You don't have to cook, you don't clean, you have money, what else is there to fight about? Try a different approach.

I was looking in Planning today. I think I've chosen the gender. That's a good starting point, don't you think? We can build from there.

He ignores you. Julie ignores you. Standing there, in the middle of the kitchen, you feel pathetic. Fine, he doesn't need you – he doesn't even want you. Julie's husband probably felt the same way about her, when she was pregnant. It's something men just don't get.

Charismatic. Yeah, right. The Trait Evaluators at StorkOrder™ were just sucking up to their boss. That must apply to you as well. *Perfectionist.* Or, just as

easily, *anxious*. But you can't fault someone for calling you *perfect*, even in a roundabout way.

He's sitting on the couch closest to the window, a drink in his hand. Cadmus never drinks. It's too dangerous. No one can afford that, anymore. It is too easily recorded, noted on your file – a black mark against an otherwise unblemished record of favourable predispositions in a genetic mate. *Alcoholism* rears an ugly head in the corner of the room, an invisible disease passed down to unwitting, innocent babies. Born corrupted, spoiled. Does he want the baby to be sick?

What is that?

What?

Your drink.

He says it's been a long day. That this is what his father used to do, to wind down.

What his father used to do. And, what would his mother have done? Probably brought it to him on a platter, in tidy heels and a sensible dress. They had all the money in the world, back then.

There is no space for negative traits. They aren't even assigned in your StorkOrder™ Evaluation Session. When you arrived with Cadmus, you were treated like a princess.

Hey boss! Glad to have you! Let's get this lovely lady a baby!

Was that all a show? Do they give everyone such glowing assessments? You had loved the smoothness, the luxury, everything glossed over, for you. Just a signature here, a careful question there.

How important is family to you?

Sometimes Important

Very Important

Extremely Important

That one was easy. Why did they even bother asking? You had circled it, anyway, carefully underscoring *extremely* in your clearest penmanship. But you are entitled to luxury. You paid for it. StorkOrder™ has been Cadmus' baby, his obsessive working project. Now, you will have a baby, too.

So, you decide to forgive him. It is the best course of action. He has helped you, with the baby. You smooth a peace-making hand over his shoulder and he looks at you. Surprised. When was the last time you touched?

Julie is making soup for dinner. He nods and turns back to his drink.

No one wants you here. Well, that's not quite true. He does want you; Cadmus wants you. But, why bother? You don't need to.

You leave the room, retracing your steps. Stopping at the door to the yellow nursery, you hover in the threshold. It is like you can feel the energy of this room, of hope, on this side of the door. On the other, life is dry. Depleted. But here, in this room, the air is pregnant with possibility.

The armchair holds you for a long time. Outside, it is completely dark. Julie has set and cleared the table for Cadmus, bringing him a bowl without complications. Your stomach growls. Nothing in there, nothing at all. You place a hand over where your uterus might be. No way to tell, really. Women used to starve themselves to look like this. They never had the choice you have.

Julie never worries about how she looks. Her uniform is shapeless and dark, standard supply for helpers in your apartment block. You have never seen her stomach, where her babies were. How many was it? Two or three? Three kids? That's just decadent. No one you know has three children. Julie probably came to it easily. You *would* too, you protest to yourself. *But you don't have to. This is better.*

StorkOrder™. Welcome.

The pod is illuminated again, your small and shining sun.

Select option:

Gestation Update
Trimester History
Planning
Gallery

Planning.

Aesthetic Design
Emotional Design
Titular Design

Aesthetic Design.

A thousand perfect images swarm in front of your eyes and Julie is forgotten. Brown curls. Smooth blond fringes. Blue eyes like porcelain in ivory faces. Dimples, no dimples. And then, older children. Lanky. Chubby. Angular. Rounded.

Will she even look like me? Like us?

She doesn't have to.

You touch your own hair. Long and dark. Cadmus too, has dark hair and dark eyes. Beautiful olive skin. But, would blond be better? A surprise? People will say, *whose side did that come from?* Not that it works that way, anymore. But we have our vocabulary.

If it doesn't look like me, how do I know it is mine?

The pod has dimmed. Lack of use, probably. You tap the tablet sharply, waking it up. Why bother. You are in no place to be making decisions. A mother should just *know*. Our bodies had once done all of this, for us. Your own body had been written by your mother, unconsciously, fearfully, wonderfully. Everything she had eaten, you ate too. You had absorbed the very life out of her. Peanut butter sandwiches and potato chips had been the fuel for your eyes, your limbs, your intricate brain work.

It wasn't your fault, you remind yourself. Every mother gives her baby their life. Even the ones that make it. The mothers who are able to be there, to help their baby write their own body one day. But your mother wasn't there. She gave her whole life for yours. You won't forget that.

She could be perfect.

The pod's lights dim down again. Beside the gentle thrum of standard gestational procedures, the only sound is the

tap

tap

tap

of your decisive fingers on the screen. Crafting, forming, raising and lowering. Your baby will be fair, fairer than her parents. She will have large, dark eyes, framed with even darker lashes. Her proportions will be standard to begin with, right in the centre of the spectrum of slim to rotund. You select an option for later height in life; it should only activate in her teenaged years.

How is the baby...born?

It's a very simple process. You won't have to do a thing.

Your hand drifts to your stomach, again. She will not emerge, triumphant, wet and slimy, a feat of human resilience and sacrifice. Not like you did. Drenched in the life-giving blood of the mother. She will be delivered to you. She will be clean and quiet, and in all probability, a healthy pink colour. She will be a symphony of technology. Her very organs will not be organic. Is that where that word comes from?

When the pod opens, at exactly the right moment, on exactly the right day, she too will have a flat stomach. It won't even be marked, like yours, with a belly button. Superfluous thing. You have her buttons here, lit up at your touch on the tablet. These buttons mean far more than your belly ever could. These buttons, these *mechanical buttons* make her, but will not stay with her. Nothing to remind her where she is from.

Julie's children have belly buttons. Why does this thought enter your brain now? A pregnant Julie, round and glowing in a hopeful, assuring green, swims before your eyes. She cannot see you, but she's laughing. Chatting to someone, in her own language. She is happy. Her hand rests, like yours, on her belly. You reach out a hand to touch her, to touch the thing growing inside her, to reach in and see it – how does it look in there? Will she let you reach inside...?

Maybe one day, she will come into this yellow room and look at your baby and want it for herself. She will want what you have, because your baby will be beautiful and there won't be a single woman out there who *wouldn't* want her.

What a doll, you must be so happy.

I am, thank you. We are very lucky.

Should you include a little wave, a gesture to the child? One hand pressed to your heart? A ducking, humble smile of gratitude? It is good to be prepared, for moments like these.

Cadmus is calling to you. He has perfected that voice, that tone, that says at once *I'm sorry* and *I will make it up to you* and *I am in control*. He may be drawn to you, to what you can offer, but your baby will need you. One day, she will need you. You might be all she has.

Aaliyah.

Bahar.

Cadence.

Danica.

Ece.

Fallon.

Gala.

Aaliyah.

Hava.

Bahar.

Ilesha.

Cadence.

Danica.

Ece.

Fallon.

Gala.

Hava.

Ilesha.

StorkOrder™ Gestation Pod No. 1 has successfully delivered a female baby to Dr. Cadmus Ibrahim and his expectant wife, Ombre Ibrahim, on the fourth of September in the year of our Republic 2057.

Gestation Period: 9 months.

	Development
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Titular Design

JIVANTA (giver of life)	KAGAMI (mirror)	IBRAHIM
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Emotional Design

1.	leader
2.	romantic
3.	purposeful
4.	family-oriented
5.	idealist

Aesthetic Design

Length:	50 cm
Weight:	3.52 kg
Hair:	dark brown
Eyes:	dark brown
Skin:	fair complexion

The family requests your attendance and well-wishes at a birth shower at their place of residence on the eleventh of September in the year of our Republic 2057. Please confirm your attendance directly to StorkOrder™ HeadQuarters.

THIS MESSAGE HAS BEEN GENERATED AUTOMATICALLY.

2 hot 2 handle

BILLY WOLNICKI

little litty emojis fleck a cyber-map
use 2 fingers to zoom in while still
maintaining a safe distance it's devastating
just awful awful but u can keep scrolling
the screen it's not hot ur fingers don't sear
it's not like u can smell burning hair and catch
hot ash on ur tongue like a biohazard
like a dystopian snowflake like
ur swallowing someone's charred flesh
pulsing fingerprints intact still hovering
over hollow faces smeared poreless
when did we begin to accept an indiscernible horizon
as though emergency is no longer urgency
as though we've all embraced
some pentecostal death drive
and welcomed the apocalypse





Erase

JAIMIE LEE

Her train will arrive fourteen, perhaps fifteen, minutes late. There should be a small florist beneath the station, if time hasn't taken it, so I will peruse the flower arrangements as I wait in order to busy my hands and mind. Edging on the cusp of sunflower season, the stalks will be fragile and the petals parched, and I will find humour in the idea of handing over a fistful of dying flowers and crooning, "this, my dear, is what became of us." But I won't be able to call her "my dear", so I will trail from the store empty-handed, gnawing on my gums and swallowing the words down with the metallic taste of blood.

The platform will be bustling when the train finally pulls in. The first thing I will see is her hair, curly and everywhere. There will be less than there used to be, but it will still manage to escape the restraints imposed by haphazardly placed pins. She will walk with a quick tempo, but then, she always has, so I will not let myself think anything of it. The tide of commuter bodies will pull her closer. In a beige woollen overcoat, heeled boots, and a straight back, she will look taller than I remember. Or, perhaps, I will just feel smaller.

She will almost pass me by and I will wonder, for a moment, if I should let her. How long would she walk Central Station? Five minutes? Ten? How long until she'd convince herself that I was just a figment of her imagination, conjured up to relieve boredom on her flight over as she stared through the porthole at the pale blue dawn. I will consider that perhaps it would be better to keep our paths separate so we forever remain the two girls locking fingers in the backseat, sitting on their hands until they tingled so they wouldn't be caught by the rear-view mirror. But then her head will turn

westward, and she will spot me leaning against the cement wall. The toast in my belly will grow arms and fingers, prying apart the organs in my gut and squeezing my thumping heart tighter. I will rehearse my words; “hello”s and “it’s been too long”s and “missed you”s rolling around my mouth before I settle on “Mary”.

She will smile, but with a smile reserved for photographs and strangers. I won’t be sure whether to extend my hand or embrace her and I will wish that I had bought the flowers just so the decision would be made for me. I will decide on a hug, as holding her hand will seem too personal a gesture to bury under the guise of a greeting. Her skin, which used to smell of oak body wash, will now be doused in something expensive and vanilla.

We will walk to a coffee shop, perhaps the one that sits quietly behind Hyde Park. As we walk, she will speak of her flight in a voice thick as honey and smooth to the ear. The familiarity will engulf me, and the details of the story will fade away. Only later will I wonder – was the person seated beside her a man flicking through a glossy home and garden magazine, or a woman escaping into the dystopian world of some dog-eared paperback? But perhaps it will not matter, perhaps she will just be weaving empty words to mask the terrifying silence settling beneath us.

As we order tea (her) and coffee (me), I will pretend that this is our local café, the one we used to visit every Sunday. I will recall how the first sip of coffee used to glide soothingly down my throat; dry from the fan. It spun through the nights because my body burned like a furnace when she touched it, heat pulsing from her fingertips as they ran down the camel-like nodes of my spine and traced the invisible string between my hip bones. The fan went ‘round and ‘round, not tiring as we did, our lungs stealing heavy breaths as we collapsed into ourselves. But then I will remember this is not our café. The barista will not call us by name, the wooden table by the window will not be ours and the woman to my left will keep her matchstick fingers far from me.

She will unbutton her overcoat and hang it carefully over the frame of the chair. Scatters of winter light will ease across the room and catch on her blouse, a strikingly deep navy that I will almost mistake for black. I may entertain the possibility that she bought it for me, as it will hold that never-been-worn scent of clothes racked in department stores and a stiffness that only loosens in the second wash. But hope never ages well, so I will push the notion to the back of my mind where all the other wistful thoughts patiently cue in wait to come true.

"How's Melbourne?" I will ask.

She will make quick work of buttering a scone as she unceremoniously braids together the details of her life. Due dates, funerals, birthdays, meetings. She will speak of friends, ones with names I will not recognise, that she had picked up as trinkets during her travels. I may wonder how it felt to visit Kyoto without me, and if she ever thought back to the plans we whispered under candlelight as she roamed the gardens of the Imperial Palace. It won't go unnoticed that she skims over the topic of relationships.

"What about you? Down for work, yeah?" She won't look up as she asks, her eyes focused on watching the knife smooth over apricot jam as if she doesn't quite trust herself.

I will nod. "A conference on Monday."

"Still in marketing?"

Nod.

"God," she will laugh and throw up her hands. "Look at us."

I will laugh too, meeting her eyes for the first time. They will still be blue, like the bay in June when the water glistens so waders venture past the shoreline even though the chill stings their calves. I won't be sure why I'm laughing; a brittle, spluttering sound that will ring in my ears and make me shudder. Look at us, working corporate jobs we swore we would never take? Look at us, falling so easily and awkwardly into the small talk we despised? Look at us, so convincingly reprising the role of strangers? But when I go to ask what she means, her gaze will shift to the children playing on the swing-set outside and I will cast my eyes downwards to watch the oozy butter and jam fuse together over the fluffy pastry instead.

A notification will light up her phone and her eyes will narrow to interpret the message on the white-blue screen. She will flip the device over. I will wonder if she did the same when I reached out the week before. A casual message, heavily infused with a what-are-the-chances airiness. *Arlo said you were coming to stay with his sister next week. I'll be in Sydney for work. Would like to see you.* I hadn't waited for a response before looking up flights for a business conference that did not exist.

As she devours the scone, I will recall the nights I ended tipsy on white wine and nostalgia, tapping the letters of her name into a search engine. The nights when I had scrolled through the same cropped photographs of birthdays and weddings, feeling intrusive but delighted that I was privy to these breadcrumbs of her life. I usually wound up staring at an image of her

drinking a vodka soda, a leather jacket slung casually over one arm and the remnants of a coy smile haunting her lips, and was taken back to when we were in a bar together, celebrating a mutual friend that we didn't know we shared.

The bar had been busy, filled with intertwining strangers swapping their vices of whiskey and wine. Her eyes were laughing as she made conversation with unfamiliar faces, but the joke didn't quite reach the barstool where I sat alone. I was the one who had suggested we keep our distance, as my drunken hands had a tendency to get overly brazen, and I had feared that they would work their way to her hips and pull her close to me in front of the crowd. But when she left, I still thought she would look back at me, that some magnetic tug would force her to turn her head. But she didn't. She only looked forward as she slipped through the doorway, the bell ringing as the evening eclipsed her, and then she was gone.

Outside, the rain was black and gold as it fell in and out of streetlight. I stood at the entrance of the bar, wondering if I should run after her like I was in one of those 80s films she liked. But the sidewalk was slick, and I was inundated by visions of myself skidding on the concrete, shattering my skull, red pooling around my head and clotting in my hair. So I kept my tread slow, the rain seeping through my ponytail until it lay flat against my neck, and let my legs walk themselves home.

I will sigh as I think back to that night and wonder if approaching her inside would have changed our ending. We could have danced until closing time, the last two left swaying to *Cherry Wine* as the dawn broke outside. We could have laughed as her head nestled into my shoulder, at the light-hearted jokes and at ourselves – realising how foolish we were to think anyone cared enough to watch. We could have left together, and I wouldn't have feared falling, instead taking her arm to steady myself as we wandered hand-in-hand down the concrete path. But as I look up at the woman sitting in front of me, washing down her scone with a swig of tea, I will remind myself there is no point chasing what-ifs. Instead, I will absentmindedly fumble with my pocketed phone and wonder if it had been wise to tether myself to her with a digital gravity that prevented me from ever truly letting go.

"Do you want some?" She will ask, noticing how my eyes have settled on her cup and saucer. I won't let it bother me that she has forgotten I am not fond of tea.

The earl grey teapot will be almost empty and when I decline her offer, she will pour what is left into her cup. I will notice that she adds sugar to her tea now and will wonder where she picked that up and whom she picked it up from. Was it the person who sent the message? Was that person waiting for her back in Melbourne? I will wonder if she lies next to them at night, their bodies paralleled under blankets, the same way ours were on the first night she slept beside me. Wasn't that fun, fucking in the dark, her hands pressing down on my mouth so no one would hear how we felt. She called it love and I almost agreed, but hesitation caught the words on the back of my throat.

The next day, I had washed the sheets in a separate load so my roommate wouldn't smell the shame. They spun 'round and 'round, like the fan, like her warm thumbs working the skin of my palm, like my restless thoughts on the nights that followed when I would lie awake, trying to slow my breathing so that it synchronized with the rhythmic ticks of the clock. My head was giddy with black and white static, like the end of a VHS, the same question on repeat. What if my bones weren't built for this kind of love? What if they were?

"Should we walk for a bit?" I will ask. Her cup won't yet be empty, but my mind will be full.

A distant part of me will hope that she asks what I'm thinking, in the way she used to when my eyes tranced over. In those moments, she would do anything to laugh me out of my thoughts, ruining herself to steal a smile from me. But she will either no longer notice or no longer care, replying only with a "let's go."

The children who were playing in the park will be gone. The swings will be empty, a ghostly wind driving them back and forth. I will grapple for something interesting to say but my buttery thoughts will slip through my fingers. I will wonder if she remembers the last time we stood in silence of this volume, after she echoed the question "if a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?" by asking if two people can love if no one knows. The answer had sat in the corner of the room under the desk, neither of us willing to own it with our voice. The quiet lingered like a bad taste. Finally, she spoke, suggesting with a cool pressure that we shouldn't fall quietly anymore. She wanted to stop hiding what we had, but I was terrified, so I traded back her records and sweaters in order to remain in my sanctuary of secrecy.

As we stroll through the fig trees of Hyde Park, I will remember the months that followed. I will remember looking for messages in bottles of Merlot to make sense of losing her. I will remember sitting on tiles, yearning for those fingers that were so perfectly trained to smooth the edges of me. I will remember holding on to a single thought, a promise to myself that when the fear was buried, I would meet with her and make it right. But so much time will have passed since then. As I walk beside her, ready to ask if she wants to try again, it will feel like I am simply checking off an item on a to-do list.

There will be pigeons pecking at abandoned cashews on the dirt ahead, but as we approach, the flock will suddenly scatter. In a moment of jolted alarm, her hand will reach for mine, old habits resurfacing. I will hold it, perhaps for a little too long. But then the flurries of grey and white will land and reconfigure into birds and as our fingers slowly separate I will no longer be able to ignore the thought that had been accumulating at the base of my skull all morning – it was different, we were different. The warm glow that used to pulsate through me when her fingers wrapped around mine or slid down the bridge of my nose as we giggled in the darkness, a feeling I now took to be love, will be gone.

She will turn to me as if to speak, but then, perhaps unsure how to translate her thoughts into words, she will continue walking. As she swings around, the mid-morning sun will filter through the foliage and streak across her face, returning a youthful flush to her skin. It will make her appear almost exactly as she did back then. Almost. But her eyes will be heavier and her mouth will be firmer and her sighs will be deeper and, as I continue looking, it will be hard to find anything left of the person I used to know.

I may wonder, briefly, if we had grown together – perhaps in one of the many apartments overlooking the park – would the changes have been more gradual, moving at a pace my love could keep up with? I will peer up at the window of a seventh-floor studio. By that window, we could have shared everything: Morning toast, forehead kisses, stories from work as we cooked pasta under dim stove light, constantly refining how best to fit into each other's lives. But then a woman cradling a baby will appear behind the glass and I will look ahead at the footpath, sinking into the realisation that we didn't grow together, instead, we grew apart.

"Do you ever think about it?" Her words will rupture the silence. There will be several notes to her voice: Vulnerability, hope, fear. When I don't answer, she will repeat herself: "Do you ever think about us?"

My body will fold into the park bench and she will take a seat beside me. My lips will ache to tell her about the times in the supermarket when her brand of almond milk was on special, or when Joni Mitchell came on as I was showering, or when I would see a girl with braided hair in the crowd and I would think of her, and remember it all, and wish I had stayed. But I will gently remind myself that we belong to the past and there is no point pretending otherwise.

“Sometimes, but not really.”

I won't be able to read her expression. At first it may seem that her eyes are cold, like the water in the bay after someone first steps in. But then something will shift, and it will become apparent that she has been wading in that cold for far too long, leaving only a numbness creeping through her. Knowing there is nothing left to be said, someone will fumble out an excuse to leave. She and I will stand and venture our separate ways. As I aimlessly trudge south I will feel an urge to look back, but when I do she will have already disappeared into the distance, leaving me to wonder if she was ever even there.

I take a sip of white wine and reread the message I have typed. *Arlo said you were coming to stay with his sister next week. I'll be in Sydney for work. Would like to see you.* I hit erase.

The Possum Box (a man shuffles into my room)

EMMA CATHERINE

(Content Warning: Abuse, child abuse, animal death)

Silence.

Her blood spilt out across my vision. The result was pooled, and matted all over her hair, sticky and pungent. Already.

“We’ve got a possum problem.”

My mother whispered to me through the curtain. I used to sit behind it, on the windowsill, just before the sun came up, watching

my father back down the driveway and shoot off on his way to work. Work: that elusive, faraway place where all our fathers went. The hospital. The factory. The city. Talia’s father worked there, as did mine, but hers came home with rough, oiled hands, forever black under the fingernails, while my father’s were always clean. Clean, and smooth, and huge, and gentle, and when he touched me with them, when he picked me up and swung me

around, my little body would sigh and flutter with delight.

My dad. Home from the city. Home from the hospital. Home to hold us and glue together the cracks, before setting nails to the surface and driving them in with one, two, three, four five six (fucking dammit don't swear like that please in front of our little girl well shit sorry but what do you ever do around here the goddamn nail won't fucking stay put) dull thuds of a hammer.

At night, I heard the man shuffling. He'd stomp on the roof above my bed, scratch about the room, wheeze and whisper. I would lie awake, stiff, terrified. I never told anyone. It somehow got into my head, that the big man upstairs who stomped around while I tried to sleep would get me into lots of trouble if I told anyone about him. "Don't tell mummy," he rasped. "Mummy won't like to hear."

Sometimes, I wouldn't sit on the windowsill because my dad wasn't home the night before, he would stay out in the city, and he wouldn't be backing down the driveway so I couldn't watch him leave. Sometimes I'd sit on the windowsill anyway, and watch the sun come up, or the evidence of the sun coming up: the rays hitting the hills in the distance, and then the tops of the houses opposite to ours, and my dad wouldn't back down the

driveway and drive away because he wasn't home the night before.

She smoothed back my hair. "We've got a possum problem." That was the time she'd whispered it - of course, because he wasn't home the night before. That's how she knew. She told me, whispered to me, through the curtain, as I sat watching the space where my father would have backed down were he home the night before.

The night before, it was incredibly windy. That's right - I remember.

Right outside my parents' bedroom was a huge eucalyptus, its heavy, gnarled branches extending over their roof. Once, when I was older, I stood pressed against that tree with a man (or a boy?) pressed against me, on another incredibly windy night, and a huge branch snapped off and crashed down right next to us. I was fine. His shirt was torn on one side and a glistening wound emerged from beneath.

But that wasn't yet, and now I was only eleven, and I had never (never) been kissed (of course). My mum was worried, that first windy night, that the tree would fall onto her roof and crash through, and kill her, presumably, so she said she would sleep in my room instead.

"Daddy's away, little one, so he doesn't have to sleep with us as well."

In my room, which didn't have a tree close enough to kill us but did have terrifying men who shuffled and stomped and rasped and threatened me on pain of death not to tell my mum why I couldn't sleep (I was allowed to say I was tired but not too emphatically), she set up a little camping bed and turned out the lights.

They didn't come into my room that night. But they shuffled and stomped in the roof - just one of them did - along with the scrapes and thuds of the wind, hissing from time to time.

She smoothed back my hair. But no, the curtain was in the way. It was thin, and cotton, but she couldn't put her hand through it, no matter how translucent the fabric was. So no, she didn't smooth back my hair. She whispered. "We have a possum problem." The sun was coming up. The driveway was empty.

The next day (or so) my dad was home and (I suppose he found out about the possums from my mum because he'd never been into my room) (never) (I never touched her) (an absolutely absurd claim I am calm no well of course I'm upset well you're being fucking ridiculous of course I never touched our little girl) he made a possum box.

His huge, smooth hands measured and shaped the wood, tiny lines of pencil marking where to make

the incisions, a surgeon lovingly preparing his patient of wood. He sat me on his knee, put the ruler in my little hands, and guided them to the edge of the house. The possum's house. Her little room, where she could shuffle around, all night if she liked. No longer shuffling on my roof. No longer shuffling in my room.

Another windy night, a little while later, windy but not too windy which I know because my mum wasn't in my room, I heard the bang.

Her blood, spilt out across my vision, was soaked into her matted hair and seemed to dye the whole world red. Warm autumn sunlight in the cool autumn morning. So much blood, for such a tiny, frail creature. A simple fall, the box coming unfixed in a gust, the inhabitant halfway out to visit the grocer, or a lover, or her dad maybe (or my dad?), crushed, suddenly, between the stone wall and her home, her home which promptly tumbled to one side (our neighbour's) and her body to the other (ours), where she now lay, cold, her blood gathered about her like children clinging to a mother's knees just beneath her hem.

The shuffling stopped (of course). I sat on the windowsill. He backs down the driveway. No, that was earlier. He didn't back down the driveway because I never

saw him again. That's right. Maybe they mistook him for a patient in the hospital, and cut him open, and gasped with joy at that heart, so full, so loving, so amply stocked with nails to drive from one side to the other of our little cracks and breaks.

My mother whispers to me through the curtain.

Not anymore.

I smooth back my own hair. There are no possums in the roof. The box must have worked! The creature must have moved into her new home, spilling coffee, burning toast. Maybe she brings boys home and kisses them against the trees, sitting on windowsills, her mother smoothing her hair back, but not really because the curtain is in the way.

But no, it fell down. That's right. Of course. I remember now. She died, and I never saw him again, and that's why it was so quiet after that.

A Passing Thing, This Shadow

AXEL-NATHANIEL ROSE

(Content Warning: Suicide, eating disorders, referenced self-harm, referenced alcoholism, referenced cyberbullying, referenced bullying.

Alexander Wyndham (B.Sci, M.Psyc, M.Crim)
Clinical Psychologist and Senior Researcher
Shelley Forensic Medicine and Coroners Court

Dear Coroner Mulvill,

I present the following for your consideration as part of the inquiry into the death of Lucille Raaj by self-administered fatal overdose. This portfolio contains:

- A full psychological autopsy
Nine interviews in summary and in full;
A partial record of the deceased's digital communication in the three years preceding her death; and a complete medical record.
- The final autopsy findings.

As per your request, it has been established conclusively that Raaj received no treatment for her mental illness. In my professional opinion, she experienced co-morbid PDD/Dysthymia, General Anxiety, on-setting approximately three years prior to her death, and Bulimia Nervosa (purgative type), two years prior.

The archive of Raaj's digital publications and communications is too extensive to be presented in full but has been analysed thoroughly by my team. All relevant content has been presented in full. Due to the unusual and extensive nature of Raaj's online presence, an annotated glossary has been attached. Any multi-chaptered entries and extensive texts have been provided as summaries. The whole archive is available for your assessment as you require.

Sincerely,

Alex

GLOSSARY

TERM	DEFINITIONS
FANDOM:	A grouping of fans of a particular media who engage with the original texts and partake in its exegesis, analysis, and critique, often creating new works around the pre-existing story-world.
FANFICTION/ FANFIC/FIC:	Pieces of creative writing featuring characters from pre-existing media. Raaj wrote fanfiction extensively under the pseudonym 'legolassleftbuttcheek' on Tumblr and fanfiction website 'archiveofourown'. Her writing amassed a following of 3000 people. She wrote upwards of eighty works, ranging from short stories to series of e-books.
LORD OF THE RINGS/LOTR:	The Lord of the Rings franchise, including novels, films, and the life of author JRR Tolkien.
NOT FOR ME NFM:	A novel-length fanfiction written by Raaj; her most popular work, amassing over 10,000 views. She was criticised and praised for it in great quantities. She received harassment for her portrayal of homosexuality and recovery from supernatural trauma. She posted the final instalment within the hour before her death. ¹ Its premise was the protagonist recovering from a suicide attempt, including topics of addiction, self-harm, and homosexual relationships.
PRO-ANOREXIA/ PRO ANA/ THINSPO:	Online content made to inspire and advance eating disordered behaviour in others, including encouraging starvation, over-exercising, physical and chemical purging, and self-harm. Raaj did not create such content but followed it.
TUMBLR:	A 'microblogging' website where Raaj engaged with over 5000 'followers' under the pseudonym 'legolassleftbuttcheek'. She frequently posted details of her personal life, especially her homosexuality and mental illness, and about her areas of interest. She did not engage with people she knew offline on Tumblr.

¹ Confirmed.

BMI at death: 18.6 <22kg lost in 18mths prior, ~16kg within 6mths prior.
Overdose cocktail incl. OTC laxatives and stolen prescription emetics.
Throat trauma evidences repeated purging; stomach empty; bowels empty – rectum inflamed by self-administered enema within 2hrs before death.

Suicide note of Lucille Raaj

Posted to legolassleftbuttcheek.tumblr.com at 13-09-19, 2047. Archived 15-09-19, 0842. Post removed from web at parents' request 16-09-19, 0915.

legolassleftbuttcheek: bye everyone

nice knowing you

bye everyone

nice knowing you

i'll see you in the next life²

still round the corner there may wait a new road or a

secret gate

and though i oft have passed them by a day will come at

*last when*³

shall take the hidden paths that run west of the moon,

east of the sun

249 notes



249 notes

legolassleftbuttcheek posted this

manyofnin
whatever's going on it'll be okay, i'm here to talk whenever you need xx

enacraf
as if. not falling for it again bb.

maxwisegamgee
LU PLEASE DON'T DO IT

maxwisegamgee
PLEASE PICK UP YOUR PHONE

fairiesand
everyone who's worried about her don't stress she's done this twice before. she's always been fine

hmay
please don't hurt yourself!! you're an amazing writer and so many people love you so much

i-incarnate
guys she posted the last chapter of NFM I think she's actually going to do it

maxwisegamgee
LUCILLE PLEASE DON'T DO IT I LOVE YOU AND THINGS WILL GET BETTER PLEASE DON'T DO IT

maxwisegamgee
LUCILLE PLEASE PICK UP YOUR PHONE

ladylolalill
[@maxwisegamgee](#) maxi it's all going to be okay, you've got to stay calm

- ² Concept of reincarnation?
Self-proclaimed 'angry atheist'.
Mother: non-practising Syrian Christian Father: ex-Muslim.
- ³ 'again' - ref. to threatened suicide 3 and 6 mths. prior.

Profile: Maxine Jennifer Hart

‘Maxi’/‘maxwisegamgee’/‘maxiwrites’

A fifteen year old US girl who Raaj befriended on Tumblr aged 14. They considered one another best friends, despite not having met in person, and were in contact almost every day for two years preceding Raaj’s death. They used pseudonyms for six months then exchanged legal names, phone numbers etc.

Hart’s parents were aware of and condoned the girls’ friendship, including paying for international phone calls to facilitate their friendship. Raaj’s parents thought that Hart attended the same school as her and were not aware of how close they were. There is no evidence of romantic or sexual intent between Hart and Raaj, despite both identifying as being attracted to women. Hart was the first person Raaj ‘came out of the closet’ to in 2017, both aged 13, Hart having already outed herself as bisexual. She has been in clinical treatment for depression and anxiety since 2016. She was briefly hospitalised with non-suicidal self-injury in late 2017. She sent photographs of her wound dressings then healing wounds to Raaj, which in interview she called, ‘the stupidest, most selfish thing I ever did’.⁴ There is no evidence of her encouraging Raaj’s bulimia or self-harm.

Hart has been compliant and useful in investigations. Her parents allowed one fifteen minute interview without their presence, in which Hart presented no additional information. She was not aware of Raaj’s suicide plan.

Her parents have kept her under suicide watch for six weeks since Raaj’s death.

⁴ LR saved photos to her computer. No parallel self-injury apparent. Reliable. No phone calls or untraceable contact occurred in four wks. prior.

Text conv. between deceased (left) and mother, Emilia S. Raaj (right) 18 mths. prior to death

the teachers made us get weighed in front of the whole class in PDHPE

Why is your phone on?

it's lunchtime and I've done all my homework

What was your BMI?

27. so I'm in between overweight and obese everybody laughed at me. MacCullen⁵ said that I'm going to die of heart disease

Im sure MRS MacCullen didn't say that. If you start going on bike rides again you'll lose weight

she did say it!

She did not say you Lucille Raaj are going to die of heart disease.

It's unpleasant that she used you as an example but what she said is true. Your father and I have been worried about your weight.⁶ You haven't paid attention. When you get home we can make a meal plan and exercise regime⁷

she did and Zack⁸ pretended to try to push me down the stairs but said I was too fat for him to move me.

Teenage boys are bullies by nature.

He probably likes you

I trust you aren't responding because you've turned your phone off and are on your way to class. If you are ignoring me then you are in BIG trouble.

⁵ Mrs. Susan MacCullen PDHPE teacher. Expressed regret at LR's death but did not know her well. Was not aware of eating disorder (see pg.43)

⁶ LR overweight since ~12 yrs age.

⁷ Not completed. Eating disorder onset ~2 wks later.

⁸ Zack Chow, 15yrs, high distress at her death.

Admitted bullying. See pg. 45

Facebook conv. between deceased and M. Hart ('MH') 4hrs later:

LR: i'm gonna kms and my school will probably have a celebration that at least i'll no longer be rotund when i'm cremated lol

MH: no!!

MH: no no no!!

MH: 1st of all

MH: love you always. love you no matter what. idc if you weigh 100 pounds or 100 kilograms you're the most beautiful person in the world, and anyone who doesn't see that is a fool

MH: 2nd of all

LR: love you too

LR: thank you

MH: you know that nobody's worth is determined by their weight or their appearance. you fight for that acknowledgement every day.⁹ you NEED to acknowledge it for yourself. your life is worth so so so so much more than anything about your body

MH: and whatever douchebag student says otherwise is rotten inside

LR: it was the teachers AND the students

LR: and THEN my parents

MH: oh lu :(

MH: i'm so sorry

MH: what happened?

LR: idk if this happens in the US but in health classes we all get weighed and our BMI gets shouted out in front of the whole class¹⁰

MH: that sometimes happens here but it's not always

LR: and it turns out i'm not just chubby any more i'm actually fat

LR: and one of the teachers said i'm gonna die of heart disease

LR: so I was going to go down to the library and cry and write the next chapter of NFM

LR: when that arsehole zack i told you about who wrote dyke on all of my school books¹¹ waited until i was about to go down stairs and grabbed me and pretended to push me but then started groaning and yelled out 'she's too fat i can't move her'

LR: and when I finally managed to make him let me go he deliberately fell over and shouted that I used gravity against him and I had an unfair advantage

⁹ On-line.

¹⁰ Every~6mths when sport season changes.

¹¹ 2 mths. prior.

MH: oh FUCK HIM

LR: so I went and cried in the bathroom like a nerd and texted my mum and she said that if I just got off the computer and started going on bike rides again none of it would've even happened in the first place

LR: 'gee thanks ma I really appreciate your care and concern, feel super supported by you to stop comfort eating and so inspired i'm going to become an olympian!!'

LR: and then she said zack only bullies me because he likes me like WHAT THE FUCK boys are only bullies if they want to stick their tongue in your mouth it's not just that they're nasty, entitled, and cruel???

LR: god sorry how was your day

MH: don't apologise!

MH: clearly a better day than yours

MH: i've decided I need to get **SWOL**¹² so i can carry you to mordor and throw all homophobes into the flames

LR: MAXI you're savage
but seriously how was your day? **[cont.]**

maxwisegamgee

...

Update on Lucille, AKA legolassleftbuttcheek

(trigger warning: suicide, police)

hi everyone. this is the hardest thing i've ever had to write. i need to confirm that on friday night (australian) lucille killed herself. i found out the next day from her parents because i was the last person she'd texted. a full investigation by a coroner (a post-death investigator) has started to figure out what happened and why she did it and why no-one stopped her. i've been advised that the police will need to talk to me but because i'm a

¹² Muscular?

minor and i'm american they need to get lots of paperwork and stuff, but i'm talking to her parents. the police may want to talk to some of you¹³ but idk how they'll be able to get like legal right to. but i beg you to please cooperate if you are contacted to help in the investigation and make it as easy as possible for her family, who made many mistakes but are good people and deserve to grieve their daughter in peace. please don't post about this, start drama or try to find lu's family.

i've closed her asks here as i was the executor of her accounts. when we set that up¹⁴ it was just a cute thing about loving each other and each others' writing. i never thought i'd have to use it.

please remember who she was: a fifteen year old girl with a whole life she won't be able to live. an extraordinarily gifted writer. a believer in human rights above all else. an infinitely kind, compassionate, and attentive friend, who made time for anyone who needed it, listened to everyone's stories without judgement or self-interest. a proud lesbian of colour who every time she came out of the closet did it for someone else, for them to feel safe, even though she never felt safe. she was excited to get just a little older so she could come out to everyone¹⁵ and fall in love and get married and live out her days loving her wife. one of the most devoted fans of the lord of the rings ever not because of the violence or the adventure or the triumphs, but because of the absolute love and faith that the characters put in one another, because of the passion for beauty and nature and song. she wrote out of love, always taking the fandom's wants and needs into account and never asking for anything from anyone, helped foster a fandom because she wanted more people to feel as touched and loving and inspired as she was. her writing saved people's lives and she should be remembered for that above all else. the last thing she did¹⁶ was post the final chapter of 'not for me' a novel not just of extraordinary skill and poetry and passion but of the persevering and transformative power of love. it didn't matter what kind of love. to her love was the only magic in the world. that is who lucille was.

and remember that she was a victim of abuse. not 'bullying.' 'bullying' can be ignored. she was abused offline everyday and recently more and more abused online too.¹⁷ it wasn't being lesbian that killed her.¹⁸ it was the way she was treated for it. it wasn't that she wrote about hard things like mental illness, sexual violence and marginalised identities. it was the way she was treated for it.

i want to tell everyone who ever abused her in any way to remember that you helped kill this girl. that you should carry your shame with you for the rest of your life, atone for what you did every minute of every day and that it still won't be enough to make up for her life. but that's not what she would want me to say. she'd want me to remind you to always be kind to yourself and to others. to pursue goodness even when you can't see it, no matter how hard it is. so i beg you please do that for her.

i'm going offline for a few weeks at least. if you want to reach out to me and i trust you you'll already have my contact details.

vale my dearest lucille. i will love you for every moment of my life and i hope one day even if i never see you i will know you again. there is a place called 'heaven' where the good here unfinished is completed; and where the stories unwritten and the hopes unfulfilled are continued. we may laugh together yet.¹⁹

2342 notes



■ ¹³ Her assumption?

■ ¹⁴ 2yrs prior to death; no suicidal ideation evident in correspondence.

■ ¹⁵ Parents suspected homosexuality; disapproved but attempted to hide that. No explicit harassment or condemnation evident.

■ ¹⁶ Confirmed.

■ ¹⁷ Standard online harassment; mid-range severity. No threats of violence or doxxing.

■ ¹⁸ Contradictory reports:

School counsellor correlates constant bullying Teachers noted some bullying.

Peers admitted to verbal and social harassment (see Zack Chow + Sarah Parker pg. 45-48).

Parents unaware of any physical harassment vyt knew she was 'teased'.

Five reported instances of bullying went ignored by staff, one led to inquiry of no impact.

■ ¹⁹ Tolkien quote.

1st statement of Adrith J. Raaj, father of Lucille Raaj
Original copy held Shelley Police Station. Copied 21-09-19.

Shelley Police Station

14-09-19 09:42-11:22²⁰

In the matter of: Suspected suicide

Witnessed: Constable Basira Jones

*Note: Witness was not speaking clearly. Full sentences have been made from what he said. Audio recording available.

Emilia and I got home from dinner at about 09:30 [PM]. We go out on Fridays once a month. We used to have Emilia's mother²¹ watch Lucille, but she – Meena – said Lu was ready to be left alone when she was 12, so we left her, once a month. Please can I see my wife? [Response: As soon as your statement is over.]

We came inside and I told Emilia to be quiet because Lucille might've been asleep. But we could hear she had her audiobook playing in her room.

[Q: Where is her room?] Upstairs from the front door. We took our shoes off and made tea in the kitchen. Then I said something like... like 'she'll be listening to that audiobook 'til she dies'. [Subject cried without speech for two minutes.] And Emilia told me it was our fault. [Q: That..?] That she'd be listening to it. Because we started reading it to her when she was a baby. [Subject cried without speech for one minute.] And I said 'I'm going to check on her'. Emilia said 'she doesn't need her daddy tucking her in to get to sleep at night' and I said 'but I might need to tuck her in to get to sleep.' I went upstairs and knocked on Lu's door. I said her name. She didn't answer, so I opened it. She had her reading light on her pillow. I thought she was asleep. [Q: Was it closed, locked..?] It was closed. It doesn't have a lock. I thought she was asleep. I thought she was just asleep. She looked like she was asleep.

[Subject cried without speech for one minute.²² Q: Then what happened?] Her blanket was only half on her, so I went to pull it up, to tuck her in. And I touched her cheek. And she was... she was stiff. And she was so cold. I yelled for her to wake up and I tried to make her breathe. [Q: How?] CPR. But it wasn't working. I told Emilia to call an ambulance. [Q: Where was Emilia?] Just outside the door. She came up when I started yelling. The paramedics – on the phone – told us to look at her whole body, for any marks, while they were on their way. There was nothing. Emilia tried doing CPR, too, and I put on the heater and wrapped her up and tried to get her warm.

[Q: What happened next?] Emilia turned off the audiobook when we heard the sirens. She ran downstairs to open the door.

[Q: And what did you do?] I stayed with her.

[Q: With Lucille?] Yes, I stayed with her.

²⁰ ~12 hrs postmortem. Very soon why?

²¹ Meena Joel pg. 30

²² Excessive and improper prompting.

Not For Me (not if it's you) by legolassleftbuttcheek

Chapter 30

for everyone who has thanked me for helping them stop self harming or challenging their addiction or helping heal their trauma, this fic is for you – and while i thank you for your kindness and taking the time to contact me, please please know that your strength, your bravery, your recovery, are from yourselves and yourselves alone – you are extraordinary people, and i hope that your lives are as beautiful, peaceful and happy as you deserve. thank you for staying alive. thank you for fighting for yourself. thank you for believing in recovery. thank you for believing in kindness. you inspire me every day, and i hold every single one of you in my heart.

thank you with all that i am to maxi, who not only edited every chapter except the first and last, but made me who i am today. i owe you my everything. i love you and will love you forever. your integrity and passion change the world every day. you are my east and west and my north and south.

and thank you to my parents, for giving me the life i've had. but especially for reading the lord of the rings to me every day as a child. It was the best gift in the world.

love always.

yours,

lucille (legolassleftbuttcheek)

Frodo²³ stood in the doorway, staring not to the dawn, to the East, but to the West, where the White Downs and the Great Road were just beginning to glow golden-green. The mist of the night and the glistening dew met the sunrise as if whispering of a lake: remembering a different world, where water filled the Shire, when the leaves and flowers were as bright as they always would be, but as coral; as seaweed twisting through layers not of earth but of water, of fish flitting as bright and jubilant as the bees did carrying their nectar.

The sun was too bright for Frodo. But it seemed to cast water, cool and clean, over his face, through his eyes, through his chest. His lungs felt clear. Mount Mordor and the taste of his blood was gone.

Sam was careful not to startle him; he made his steps far heavier than they naturally fell, louder still as he drew near. He did not speak as he put his arm around Frodo's waist. They held each other as they had always held each other, as statues held history and trees that grew intertwined, as lovers and friends and souls joined through time. Frodo's hand on Sam's wrists. Their cheeks together. Their knees, still weak from the Journey, knocking against one another.

Something about the cold of the sunlight, something about it always seeming blue, made Frodo's scars seem older and further away. No longer the deep pink of just-hidden blood, no longer harsh lines framing the neck of his shirt and the cuffs of his sleeves. Just skin. Skin like any other skin.

Sam, too, was looking away from the East. The rising sun was too bright for them. The chill of the dawn no longer worried them. It was nothing like the cold they had known. But still, they stayed close, the warmth they had was shared.

Frodo had begun to cry. Not the violent wracking sobs, not the terror of the Ring upon him, but the quiet fall of sun-showers. Sam lifted Frodo's hand to his lips, pressed to his knuckles.

"Are you okay?" he asked, in a whisper.

Frodo was silent, for a time, seeing the West continue its renewal from the dark. He thought on the question, on its whole, for a time. "Yes," he said. He smiled. And that was enough.

²³ Michael – No need to read this, but thought it might interest you. I remember you mentioned you liked Lord of the Rings. Not quite how Tolkien imagined it, I think.

(Content Warning: Eating disorder)

There's this presence in my body and my mind.
An omnipresent host,
controlling actions,
thoughts,
an endless well
of inhuman feats.

And resistance isn't a choice.
There is no opting in or out.
Such as in an email subscription.
No exceptions to the rules.
It took up shop one day,
The Fat Controller

literally controlling
the fat on my body.
Creating a prison within an ever-shrinking space,
a world that is not of my own making,
yet is mine.

By a twist of the knife I've ended up here
somehow...
With my permission slip revoked,
relegated to the sidelines.

My *self* plunged into a place with no windows;
the edges sewn shut
And my mind riddled with the mission to quell life,
if not to extinguish it.

And so, *The Fat Controller* holds his post,
as he has for the past twelve years.
Outliving efforts to unseat him
Forever ready to take what he deems rightfully his;
my body
my mind
and the possibility
of a peaceful life.

Anorexia

FRANKLIN A. STONE

Tableau Vivant

ROSIE BOGUMIL

(Content Warning: Mental illness)

Sadness has a certain scent to it,
invisible to the ignorant.
If it were a candle, then
the flame would be an act of self-denial,
pronouncing itself only
as hurt
or lonely
or heartbroken.

I am no artist;
I choose to work
with words over oils
but allow me to paint you
a most vivid picture:

dirty dish castles topple
beer bottles and bowls
chipped and weary victims
which lie forgotten
wearing last month's pasta

overflowing ashtrays
sprinkle flakes on dirty sheets
tossed amongst clean comrades
sheets soaked with body musk,
with blood from sharpened sins

sour milk
soft carrots
soggy cheese
stale everything
and someone else's happiness
waft from the broken fridge
to the catatonic body
in the bedroom
waiting to be spoon fed
the next dose of emotional regression

"ONE capsule TWICE daily"
"THREE in the morning"
"TWO tablets pro re nata"

losing yourself is found
in bottles far too small for alcohol

HIGH RISK; WEEKLY PICKUP.

the closest thing to toothpaste
is those tablets.
tasting faintly of mint
they stick to the sides
of the throat like the kind of clag
used by kindergarteners to immortalise
the latest craft project
or poorly repair the tears
in the only family photograph
where we all smiled,
a picture that tastes like salt
from the tears which coursed
and were caught along
os lamina papyracea

Imagine: a divine being designs
a grooved bone to prevent
humans drowning in their own tears.

Can you smell it yet?

Where's Martin's Place?

OSCAR DAVIS

On June 24th 2017, there was a massacre in the middle of Martin Place.

I saw the whole thing, although I'm still not sure what I saw. There were no bullet casings or craters or shotgun pellet pocked walls, not a trace that anything remotely out of the ordinary had happened. But I can still feel a fissure in the concrete whenever I walk by where it all happened.

I think I'll feel it as long as I live, although if I'm perfectly honest I struggle to remember all the details. The previous night I was hunched next to the heater, punching another post-breakup pity bong, when my phone vibrated.

It was a text from my friend Alice (who I was a bit sweet on) asking for my help with something very early the next morning. In the limited constellation of my life back then, Alice was a planet. I'd been pulled into their orbit through uni, and I ended up getting involved with a not-for-profit tutoring service they created. Despite the fact that at 5'2 they could be comfortably stowed in a carry-on, Alice towered in my imagination: a blur of hot pink pom-pom earrings and organisational prowess and black leather and incessant action. Their laughter swept you up among cumuli.

Me, I was more a self-absorbed stoner with back problems, and so out of celestial admiration I would've rocked up had they invited me to a recruitment drive for the Peshmerga. I set my alarm for two hours later and stared at the ceiling blankly, trying in vain to imagine what could be in store.

I arrived at 4am to find the city deserted, dead neon and pavement bled by the street cleaner. Winds tore across the wet concrete, every exposed pore meat-hooked by the cold. I clasped my balls with blue granite hands and wondered what the fuck I was doing there. I met up with Alice outside St James station. We hugged briefly and walked briskly to Martin Place where it was all going down.

Unknown to me, a war had been waged in Sydney.

This war was characteristic of modern combat in that neither side really understood what the other was fighting for. For the aggrieved it was a passionate, desperate campaign against a lifetime of subjugation, against a system of reality which spat *on*, sneered *at*, but rarely spoke *to* their existence.

For the aggressors, their actions were neither oppressive nor war-like. Rather, they were the harsh but necessary enforcement of the same laws which apply to everyone in equal measures. An enforcement of a system of reality which creates, maintains and reproduces their sense of self and position in society. Cloaked in Lendlease hi-vis vests and hard-hats, wielding a letter with a CITY OF SYDNEY letterhead, reinforced by council workers with genni hoses and dump trucks, flanked by stone-faced cops, the aggressors' *raison d'être* was *"the reasonable comfort and convenience of other users of Martin Place"*.

For the last six months the comfort and convenience of Martin Place's 'other' users had been rudely disrupted, by the presence of a large, self-organised community of rough sleepers. The camp was nestled under an awning

incidentally created by the scaffolding of a \$300 million Lendlease construction project, which jutted out over the sidewalk opposite the Reserve Bank. This community hosted a 24/7 kitchen which used donated goods to serve hundreds of meals a day. The camp had been largely created by two people, Donna Bartlett and Lanz Priestly. Over time they established a library, a clothing exchange and an informal employment agency. Rough sleepers could leave their possessions there safely while they went to appointments or job interviews, there was a first aid kit for basic injuries and a supply of Narcan (naloxone) in case of overdoses. For many residents this was the only space in the city they felt safe- a large part of the demographic were women (the fastest growing group experiencing homelessness in Australia is women over 55), who routinely faced harassment and the threat of assault sleeping elsewhere. On rainy nights over 50 people would sleep there, on mattresses, bunk beds, in swags and rags and blankets, playing cards or the battered piano someone had dragged in; together.

I learnt all this as I helped tear it down.

Alice had lived on the streets themselves for a while and was involved in lots of activism. They learned from friends that the City of Sydney, after conducting several raids on the Martin Place community over the preceding months, intended to destroy the site the next day at dawn. A flurry of communication overnight led to about 15 people gathered at the street kitchen the next morning, stamping their feet in the cold. Someone handed me a Styrofoam cup of hot chocolate which I nursed gratefully. It was a motley crew: Alice and I, some other young uni students (predominantly women), some guy in a full-on Fidel Castro outfit who seemed ready for anything, directed by Lanz and Donna. The plan was (to me) hazy. We were to try and delay the move-on process as long as possible, to obstruct and obfuscate, while journalists would hopefully come and draw attention to what was going on. I was sceptical, but also wildly out of my depth so I kept my mouth shut.

At dawn the first trucks began accumulating at the top of the **FLASHPOINT**. They assembled in even rows, militarily precise, with huge empty trays waiting to be filled with

matted blankets and

piano keys and

piss-stained mattresses and

pillows and

forgotten trackies and

chalk dust and

couches and

mandarin peels and

court documents and

love letters and

tenderly used pallets and

nylon guitar strings and

plastic cutlery and

locks of hair and

foil medical packaging and

all the other artefacts and detritus found in a home without walls.

For the next few uneasy hours the aggressors marshalled their forces, swelling in size at the top of the hill, the sun's rays casting long mechanical shadows as it rose behind their backs.

At 9am a City of Sydney representative brusquely handed out a letter to the camp's residents.

"The accumulation of items in Martin Place, including a barbecue, gas bottles, tents, food and other items has been determined to be a public nuisance as it materially affects the reasonable comfort and convenience of other users of Martin Place."

The trucks moved in.

Anything unclaimed was swallowed up and spat back up in some distant lightly air-conditioned City of Sydney depot. Everyone who'd called the camp home was directed to a hastily erected pavilion at the top of Martin Place, manned by FACS (Family and Community Services) forced smiles offering a few nights crisis accommodation in a motel. Us in the resistance ended up just helping the camp residents move their belongings out from under the scaffolding and across the plaza while council workers hosed out any remnant memories into the gutters.

I found myself crying uncontrollably.

The City of Sydney letter glaringly omitted any reference to the beautiful, resilient people who'd made their home in Martin Place. The mattresses, piano keys and plastic cutlery outweighed the humans who used them. It rendered them immaterial. I couldn't fathom how the government could be so callous, so wilfully ignorant to the genius of the self-organised camp community, how they could drive them from the only thing that *had* worked into the arms of a system which evidently *hadn't*.

Lanz, Donna, the residents though? They didn't bat an eye. Sure, they were upset - Lanz barked orders, furiously trying to preserve what little he could, while Donna sat sadly on a mound of possessions, focused at the centre of everything.

But it was just another battle for them.

Ultimately, the camp morphed into 'Tent City', which was cleared out again a few months down the line. Lendlease boarded up the space under their scaffolding and the development was finished last year. Alice and I haven't spoken in two years. Further down the hill there's a statue commemorating ANZAC troops who died in WW1, but nothing in remembrance of what was massacred 100 metres up the hill.

We forget what is not written.

A Redefinition of Opera? Lay Thoughts on Seeing Philip Glass' Akhnaten

STEPHEN MCCARTHY

The following piece was inspired by a viewing of a live telecast from the first run at the Metropolitan Opera in New York of Philip Glass' opera, Akhnaten. The performance was originally televised live on the 23rd of November 2019. It was reissued for free via the Metropolitan Opera's website for one day on the 20th of June 2020, and viewed by the author the following day. All information and references, unless otherwise stated, are derived from this performance and the accompanying commentary and interviews. It is available from the Metropolitan Opera's archives.

Introduction to the Work

Akhnaten, which was composed in 1984, centres on the ascension and overthrow of the eponymous Egyptian emperor, with a final commentary in the form of a history lesson in current times. The subject matter is itself typical of the form, as the lives of rulers often provide good scope for operatic adaptation. However, its treatment by the composer, Philip Glass, who uses highly repetitive structures and unusual voice and instrumental combinations, and the director, Phelim McDermott, who adds a juggling troupe to reinforce what is happening on stage and in the pit, combine to create an interesting and unusual production of this opera, however not one without its problems.

Minimalism in the Opera

As the musical score of the opera is constructed from minimalist principles, this has impacted a myriad of aspects within the work. Most notable among these is the libretto¹, written by the composer in association with Shalom Goldman, Robert Israel, Richard Riddell and Jerome Robbins. Normally in minimalist operas, the music is built around small groups of notes which are repeated continuously over long periods, and the libretto similarly uses repetition to reinforce both the words and the musical manipulation going on. However in *Akhnaten*, much of the repetition is based on singing monosyllables like ‘Aa’ or ‘Ma’, lending an almost instrumental quality to this style of writing, which is most prominent when Akhnaten throws out the old religion. Yet even more distinguishing is the fact that only Akhnaten’s prayer to the sun is sung in English. These recitations (spoken passages declaimed according to the score notated by Glass) are carried out by the ghost of Amenhotep III, who towards the end switches guises to become a history teacher from modern times. Each of these recitations, especially the first (the incantation for his own funeral) and the third (Akhenaten’s decree of a new city), hinge on the repetition of phrases. Notable examples include, ‘Open are the double doors of the horizon’, and ‘we will not build it in the north ... we will not build it in the east’ as he decrees where he will build – or not build – the city.

Apart from the libretto, the minimalist processes of the music also have radical repercussions for the opera’s staging. Since much longer periods of no singing go on, but these orchestral passages must be filled by much slower pace than would be expected of an opera from the standard repertory.

¹ The text of an opera.

This means that not only are there far longer episodes where there is no singing going on, but these orchestral passages must be filled by much slower action on stage. This requires concentration on the part of the audience to remain engaged with the work. As such, it is understandable if some interpret the “action” as monotonous and find it difficult to remain focused on the unfolding opera.

While actively following the opera may prove to be a challenge, there are some aids; the story is inherently dramatic, a fact aided by its historicity. It should also be noted that the three acts are subdivided into scenes, each of which have titles to help propel forward the action and orientate the audience as to what is actually happening. Yet, even with these forms in place, the work is still in danger of “dragging”, especially in less dramatically progressive scenes such as the Epilogue. However, despite this, *Akhnaten* belongs to only a handful of minimalist operas whose use of recitation as a tool to link scenes and articulate the thoughts of characters is nonetheless unique and begs for further exploration.

Juggling

The idea of incorporating juggling in this production of *Akhnaten* was that of the director, Phelim McDermott, who saw the similarities between the action of juggling and the repetitive nature of Glass’ musical constructions. Glass was in favour of the idea and the inclusion of the troupe of jugglers, who play prominent roles in each act (including mirroring the work of the reciter, Amenhotep III) reinforcing the way the composer develops his musical material. One of the greatest claims to *Akhnaten’s* uniqueness is the use of the juggling troupe to perform the dramatic role normally ascribed to choruses. As touched on previously, examples of these include depictions of Akhnaten’s overthrow of the old religion and his construction of the new city to the sun god Aten. In the former, the jugglers use pinions, forming an arc in front of the stage as the High Priest of Amon, the General Horemhab and Nefertiti’s father Aye (a trio emblematic of the old religion) are surrounded. As Akhnaten joins the jugglers, they adopt miming patterns suggestive of the firing of arrows. However, in the latter case, the ghost of Amenhotep III (after he recites Akhnaten’s declaration of the construction of the new city) joins the jugglers as a line is formed and the jugglers move up and down the stage, emblematic of the building process. As the jugglers move offstage one by one, they return with larger balls until there is eventually only one very large juggling ball on stage being supported by all of the jugglers. This single juggling ball representative of the sun becomes the focus of Akhnaten’s prayer at the end of the second act.

One of the most powerful uses of the juggling troupe is the culmination of the opera, in which Akhnaten is overthrown by his father-in-law Aye, the General Horemhab and the High Priest of Amon. As the three rebels enter, the troupe takes on the role of the crowd; at the point of Akhnaten's death, the juggling balls are left to fall to the ground. The jugglers retrieve them, only to let them fall again. As they exit and the modern history lesson takes place on the upper levels of the stage, a group of students imitate juggling while the teacher speaks – without the success of the troupe. Finally, when the spirits of Akhnaten, Nefertiti, and Queen Tye return in the Epilogue, the jugglers are left crawling across stage, occasionally flicking the dropped balls as they move slowly across. Thus, not only do the jugglers mirror the action of the stage, they also provide another layer of commentary on the action, particularly in the different treatments in the opera proper (in ancient Egypt) and the history lesson. While in the former it is at times almost a weapon of overthrow, in contemporary times it becomes a source of amusement and distraction from events of the past. This represents a major development in the operatic sphere, as it opens up a whole range of possibilities for modes of expression that have historically been restricted to the realm of the chorus. McDermott retains the chorus while adding the juggling troupe, giving Glass' opera the best of both worlds.

Voice Types and Instruments

There are two major differences between *Akhnaten* and the standard repertoire with regards to instrumentation, both of which work in tandem. The first is the casting of the title role as a countertenor², while the second relates to the orchestration. The countertenor voice is normally not regarded as a 'natural' male voice type (these being the tenor, baritone and bass), and is not produced by ordinary vocalisation. The ensembles - including Akhnaten, his wife Nefertiti and his mother Tye - consist of three voices no more than an octave apart, but very different in timbre.³ Tye, as the dramatic soprano sits the highest, and the role is particularly demanding, leaving little opportunity for the voice to relax on stage. Nefertiti is however a mezzo-soprano whose range roughly corresponds to that of her countertenor husband. This has implications for the work itself, especially in the longest duet in which the two declare their steadfast love for each other after

² The countertenor is a male voice type whose range roughly corresponds to the lowest female voice type.

³ Timbre, or tone colour, is the perceived sound quality of a musical sound, note or tone. Essentially, it is the property which allows us to tell different instruments apart like for example a trumpet from a violin.

Akhnaten has discarded the old belief systems. Particularly prominent in this duet is a high repeated unison E₅⁴ (relatively easy for mezzos but at the top of the countertenor range) from both Akhnaten and Nefertiti. The female voice is natural and thus lends itself to a wider vibrato than the male countertenor voice, resulting in slight differences in pitch frequency between the two notes. The fact that they are so close together heightens their difference to the listener's ear, and the sounds are perceived as almost discordant.

The second major difference between Akhnaten and the standard repertoire is the instrumentation, particularly the fact that the orchestra does not feature any violins. In a standard opera orchestra (like the standard symphony orchestra) there is a large body of violins normally split into 'first' and 'second' consisting of approximately twelve and ten players each. In *Akhnaten*, the string section is comprised solely of violas, cellos and double basses. The origins of this scoring lie in the size of the orchestra pit available for the premiere, in which Glass decided to remove the violins in the interest of space, as opposed to any real musical decision. And yet, the removal of the violins and the prominence of the countertenor voice both contribute to a less powerful overall sound. This is emphasised when considering the upper registers of the ensemble as a whole, as it impacts decisions made in orchestration (deciding which instruments play, or which voices sing, to what music).

One such example is the use of a solo trombone that accompanies Amenhotep III's spoken proclamation of love between Akhnaten and Nefertiti. Apparent spaces exist in this trombone line which seem to suggest that the part has not been split over two instruments (and the spaces are the soloist's breaths). This is also the only instance in the piece where a solo trombone appears representing honest love. Yet, there is no room to appreciate that fact. While it is true that this is the only open declaration of love by Akhnaten and Nefertiti, and that the solo trombone only plays here, that is not enough to link the two and find a dramatic element within the music. This is due to the fact that the canvas Glass is working on is based solely on repetitive, arguably a-melodic structures. As such, the dramatic power of this choice of orchestration is not equal to a well-defined melody with a character that is easily identifiable and unique. Thus, the uncertainty created, combined with the fact that the solo trombone passage is very short, nullify any apparent dramatic meaning in the orchestration. The same is true for the final appearance of the spirits, accompanied by staccato muted brass;

⁴ A major tenth above middle C, roughly 660Hz.

this is their only appearance, and the non-standard approach to thematic ideas, in this case coupled with the fact that they appear so late in the work, primarily leave a sense of incongruity.

Final Thoughts

It is difficult to foretell whether *Akhnaten* adds anything new to the operatic repertoire given how much each of the artistic decisions resulting in this production have stemmed from the construction of the music.

As such, it may be difficult to translate some of these techniques – the juggling troupe, the instrumentation, the orchestration – into musical styles outside of minimalism. *Akhnaten* is nonetheless a score and an opera that invites revisiting and will likely profit from not just further performances, but possibly even further productions. Like many recent operas, it asks interesting questions of what opera actually means to people. *Akhnaten* is a chance for newcomers to the form to have many of their assumptions, stereotypes and prejudices questioned, and a chance for seasoned operagoers to think more critically about what actually constitutes one of the most celebrated forms of Western cultural expression.

Dead Pharaoh Rising

CHRISTEN ESKANDER

I am
some ancient bones unearthed,
grumbling and groaning.

You find me
laid in a cot, pink blood drained
a sand full of centuries ago:

the brown flesh
a revered thing, a pretty mystery —
tell me a tale of worth, vendor:

for the gallery my skin adorns,
for the disease my skin devours.

O history maker, in your image I am made:
a nose pinched, a name cinched.

These sockets see all —
your drool made to drip
by the dust of my dogged image,

by the ribs teething on ribbons
of sterile, museum-bought light.

The spectacle, the pageant.
Audience: watch your mummified terror

Sun and Shade (Veyyulum Nizhalum)

(Content Warning: Miscarriage)

Faisal stood in front of Veda Graham.¹ It was smaller than he remembered, less endearing. A carpet of moss had begun to creep down from the terrace, like shadows escaping the harsh Carnatic sun. Birds had taken refuge on the windowsills of level four and fired droppings like defensive bullets onto pestering children.

The deep humming of the taxi's engine stirred Faisal from his lull,

... or was it jet lag,

... or severe guilt.

Faisal fingered his pocket for a cigarette. He desperately needed a smoke. He had rediscovered his love for beedis on the layover in Mumbai. The trick was to inhale the fibrous strain three times before exhaling. For fifty rupees a pop, inhaling the fumes from a car's exhaust could deliver a deeper choke. Faisal thought about dropping the cigarette and letting the embers ignite the rubbish: silver foil Lay's packets, plastic bags and yesterday's newspaper. When he was younger, the footpath would be littered with beedi stubs. Common sense stopped him. Dusk had an unassuming way about her. Some days an afternoon wind would whip through the city and hurl dirt before it, smacking into windscreens and punishing cyclists who didn't wear helmets. Other days, the sun burned through the haze and a shimmering mist of dust, pollution and everything in between would settle onto the streets below a fairy floss sky.

¹ The House of Knowledge, aptly named, was a block of apartments. Formerly, the Estate had belonged to the East India Secretariat, whose sardonic laugh had been drowned out by the optimism for New India.

Conscious that he had been dreaming of cigarettes and fairy floss, Faisal turned to pay the taxi driver. Sad but not surprised that his whole life fitted into one suitcase, he opened the door. The main foyer had the scent of being vacant. An 'out of order' sign hung from the rusted handle of the metal elevator. Generations of spiders had grown accustomed to the stationary lift, now in its twentieth year of non-service. To the left, a withered money plant hung bare across the entrance of 101. A pair of adult slippers and infant's – barely size zero – had been flung carelessly off the shoe rack. These were the things Faisal noticed: busy family, too occupied by their child to organise their shoes. These were the things he missed: happy family, happy in their mess.

With each progressive level, the apartments became larger. There were only two on level four, *his* and *hers*. How disconcerting, he thought: Two people, He and She, not Them. Faisal was under no illusion that his return would be a happy one. Not the unburdened happiness, the reckless love and ripened mangoes that defined his youth. It's strange how memories of death often consume memories of life. And so many unanswered questions follow: Had they done everything they could? Was it his fault? When would the Hurt stop? He wanted to leave Loss at the door; to give Loss one impassioned "*fuck you!*"

He gulped, stole one last look at 401 and turned the key.

The floorboards let out a sigh with each step, as if to reject Faisal and his emotional baggage. Someone had taken down the photographs in the hallway; jaundice outlines were the only evidence that a family had once occupied this space. Faisal closed his eyes and allowed the particles of dust, mixed with mildew and the scent of yesterday's meal to seep through his skin. To his left, pati's² day bed remained propped against the far-east window. Every day at 11 o'clock Faisal would bring her sugary tea and glucose biscuits; she had vowed to beat high blood pressure before it beat her. Glucose biscuits were her small joys, that and complaining of the soulless Hindi that had replaced the mellifluous TAMIL of her romantic youth: "*Kadavale*³!!! *The traffic here, the people, the SMELL, no culture!* *AIYOOO*," as she pointed hysterically to the market.

The Coffee House across from the market, which had been there since the days of the Revolution, seemed a world away. The poor would gather

² Grandmother.

³ Oh God.

to glimpse the elites in their oozing-gold jewels and raw silk saris. The elites would gather to compare the hefts of their wallets and boast of their salacious rendezvous with *"that actor in that film."* In between the endless gossip, there came the more pleasant aroma of new stories – *"100 crore shaadi"⁴ and a 9-tier wedding cake!"* *"A writer? Log kya kahenge?"⁵* *"Let's just go na, fuck this place! We'll go abroad; no parents, just you and me"* – whose smells were all mixed up with those of filter coffee and vade.

Faisal remembered the way she smelt; he remembered that at first, it had repulsed him. Ambica Hair Oil had quickly amassed a following of young, glistening hopefuls in the South. Oily was the new modern, and to be modern was to join the cosmopolitan rat race. In 2004, Qantas had begun non-stop flights to India. The all-too-round and pink-faced CEO clapped his hands together and bowed in respect – Namaste – as he unveiled his spick new airbus, fortuitously placed next to an advertisement for Ambica: *'It's your time to shine.'*

The first time Faisal spoke to Apoorva, she was leaving milk tokens for the doodh wallah.⁶ A white cloth had unravelled itself from her thick and unruly hair, revealing what they joked was 'pagan ink' on the nape of her neck. The second time he spoke to her, she had attracted a following of rabid strays. Cold, sticky Vanilla Magic oozed through the gaps in her fingers and dripped onto the wet noses of hungry pups. Their blind mother, a hopelessly malnourished dog, head slightly cocked, watched on with opaque green eyes.

And so it went ...

The last time they met, he told her to run away with him. They could catch the non-stop flight to Australia. *"Let's just go na, fuck this place! We'll go abroad; no parents, just you and me."*

Maharaja's peanuts, the recipe was simple enough: roasted peanuts, chopped red onion, salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chilli and tomatoes. Faisal's mother had sworn this concoction was the cure for pregnancy pains.

⁴ AUD20.6 million wedding

⁵ "What will they think?"

⁶ Milk man.

Faisal sliced the final green chilli ... *"SHIT!"* Intense heat seared through the raw wound. He reached for the nearest cloth, tattered like everything else in this house. After putting what could be salvaged of his dinner into a bowl, Faisal walked into the living room. He imagined Apoorva sitting on the couch; feet up, hands resting on the mound of her belly. She wouldn't flinch, her eyes fixated on the television. Soon, five p.m had become a routine: peanuts, *Deal or No Deal* and Andrew O'Keefe. Faisal was just background noise, the intruder on his wife's love-affair with that gora.⁷ Every day the shouting got louder: *"Not briefcase seven!...Two in six chance!...No deal, NO DEAL,"* as she used a pillow to muffle her screams.

Their first years in Australia consisted of attending dinner parties and hosting now and then, with Mr. Malhotra, Mrs. and Mr. Singh, the Khans, and Tina Mehra (not to be mistaken with Mrs. Mehra, of course). These occasions were a melting pot of Indians: expats, NRIs⁸, tourists and empty-nesters; suddenly they seemed to be the most important people in the world. Faisal and Apoorva were a story of intrigue; rebellious lovers who had discarded their families and faith for freedom. Most commonly the women wanted to know: *"... but he didn't force you na?"* And the men: *"A Hindu girl? Reminds me of my first crush Momina / Leila / Farida,"* as they swished (and downed) their reminiscences with glasses of Johnny Walker.

Then Apoorva became a curator and Faisal began his doctorate.

Apoorva became Anna; relatable, but always *that* object of fascination. Clients loved that her skin dripped melanin and honey. They commented on her collarbones that winged out from the base of her neck. Her Otherness gave them a misplaced sense of authority on Indian culture and art, all within the confines of a Leichardt gallery.

Faisal buried himself in his thesis. He was familiar with Tagore⁹; they had studied his poetry in school. He enjoyed how the alliteration slipped off his tongue and landed firmly on the centre of the page: *"Freedom from Fear is the Freedom."*¹⁰ He admired the ease at which Tagore's narrative transitioned between fiction and fact, when there may otherwise have been a warring of

⁷ White man

⁸ Non-resident Indian

⁹ India's foremost literary symbol, Rabindranath Tagore (1861 –1941) was a breath of fresh air. His work angered Colonial loyalists, and simultaneously enlivened revolutionary agitators. Today his poetry is remembered for its elegant prose and humanist messaging.

¹⁰ *Freedom*, Rabindranath Tagore

disciplines. Mostly, Faisal felt nostalgia. He had scribbled on the back of a notepad:

Veda Graham
Glucose biscuits

He longed to understand how literature could summon such feelings. He longed to conquer it.

With the help of friends, they moved into a two-bedroom weatherboard near Ashfield. Faisal remembered Apoorva walking through the empty rooms, tapping her fingers on the doors and caressing the imperfections on the walls. She seemed enthralled by what she saw; he wasn't sure they were seeing the same things. They sat together at the bay windows that looked out at their new suburb. He asked Apoorva if he could smoke. *"Of course, it's our home now."* She made no further attempts at conversation and appeared at ease with the silence. Faisal liked to imagine that she was thinking about their life; no doubt, she would ask him to quit smoking when the kids came. He could teach them to ride bikes and patch-up their knees when speed got the better of them. She would teach them to cook, to eat with their hands and blow twice before putting hot kheer into their mouths. *Who would teach them about India? About love Lost and love Gained?* When evening came, they stood together by the back door. The retreating sun had cast a comforting glow over the garden. Apoorva rested her head on Faisal's shoulder, and in that moment he knew they would figure it out.

A week later, their neighbour – a small wiry-haired grandmother called Rosetta – gifted them a jacaranda sapling. Jacarandas, she said, were hardy shrubs that required *"watering twice a day, and plenty of sun."* Apoorva took to nurturing the sapling, fussing, feeding it ... until it almost drowned in its own wet soil. When they discovered the plant wheezing for its final breaths, Faisal held his inconsolable wife in his arms.

Suddenly, a small wiry head appeared over the back fence. Faisal struggled to recall Rosetta's exact words, but he swore it sounded a lot like *"Mamma mia!"*

The Coffee House possessed all the grandeur of colonial architecture meets post-independence hullabaloo. Faisal sat in the far corner, waiting to catch the eye of disinterested staff. How delicious, he thought. From his seat he yielded the power of objective study and could pass the hours in silent

observation; not a word spoken, that *wasn't* needed.

A barely groomed, barely pubescent waiter finally approached.

"What are today's specials?" He drew a long breath, then:

"Vegetablestewvegetablecurrychickencurrychickenpulao..." Faisal sighed; his ancestors would certainly be turning in their graves.

At the next table two old men – Friends? Brothers? Last-Chance-Reconcilers? – appeared to be meeting under the pretence of solving past conflicts.

On cue, the older, more verbose of the two erupted with laughter. As he did, stained dentures came tumbling out; its owner reacting by hurriedly gobbling them up. The other, feeling claustrophobic and embarrassed signalled for the bill. *"I don't think this is working. Meeting like this was a mistake."* Faisal perked up. A 'lovers' tiff that sounded familiar.

"When we were young ..."

"People change."

"But the past, doesn't that count for something?"

The younger, more reserved of the two pondered: *"Not as much as you would hope. The present changes the past, Hari."*

The Last-Chance-Reconcilers shook hands one last time. Not a word spoken, that *wasn't* needed. Faisal could appreciate the intimacy of the handshake – the self-conscious effort, the immediate impact, the chain of bioelectric and chemical changes that relaxed both men. *Perhaps this unspoken language, this distance could keep their feelings unchanged.*

Faisal ordered another gin and tonic. Across the room, a young couple – barely twenty – played cat and mouse, oblivious of their surrounds. First, they measured their hands, intertwining ten fingers in an awkward embrace. Soon he was examining

her arm,

every

tiny

hair follicle up until her elbow.

Then her jaw, neck, legs weaving in-and-out in a sloppy dance.

"Kiss me," he mouthed. *"Not in public,"* she scolded – half terrified, half delirious. A waiter who had innocently interrupted, inadvertently caused an ellipsis ... just enough time for the girl to decide. Slowly, she closed her eyes and leaned forward to match the mould of his lips to hers.

Faisal downed his drink as the pangs of jealousy coursed through him. He admired their youthful rashness; he wished he still had it in him. He thought of the last time he had visited the Coffee House, Apoorva and him. Whilst his mother *"loved him very much, and thought Apoorva a nice girl, their union was wrong in the eyes of the caliphate."* Apoorva's father, who was by now predisposed to cursing whenever Faisal's name was mentioned, told Apoorva to: *"leave him, or suffer the same fate as her mother!"* So they sat in the Coffee House, measuring, remembering:

the distance between their eyebrows,

the length of their lashes,

the moles on their cheeks,

the plumpness of their lips ...

... in case it was the last time they met.

He had thought about Tagore, about his ruminations on love and freedom – really, they were the same thing. *"Love does not claim possession, but gives freedom."* Faisal had taken her left hand in his and with the other, tucked loose strands of hair behind her ear. *Ambica Oil*, he grinned. And like that, it was all so clear. They would catch the non-stop flight to Australia.

Not long after, Faisal was back at work. Apoorva, alone in the weatherboard house, suffering from exhaustion worse than labour, cried the whole day. She cried in the shower, pressing her head against the cold glass frame. She cried in the kitchen as she cut chicken and roasted masala over the stove. She cried when she called Faisal's mobile and it went to voicemail.

Faisal – at university – turned his phone off. He hadn't summoned the courage to face her; in all honesty, he hadn't even tried. He had never

been good at confrontation, he found avoiding problems caused less anxiety. *What was left to say? He knew she blamed him.* Faisal had been invited to deliver the keynote address at an All India Conference in Melbourne. His mentor, an ancient relic of the History Department, told him he had made *"Tagore cool again"* – that was all the assurance he needed. An hour in, he received a phone call from the hospital: *"Apoorva had gone into premature labour. Their neighbour – a small wiry-haired grandmother – brought her in. They did everything they could. The condition was rare: intrauterine hypoxia the nurse recited – a respiratory disorder. They were very sorry."* When Faisal returned to Sydney, Apoorva was asleep. The obstetrician held his hand and smiled, in a way that only doctors were practised in.

The Five Steps of Reconciliation, a guide handed to bereaved parents became a doorstop. Faisal mastered avoidance; they both did. Most days he was gone before Apoorva woke up. On the commute to work, he wondered whether she would still roll onto his pillow and sprawl across the bed like an octopus laying claim to her throne. Though nowadays she was thorough in marking her side of the bed. In the evenings before exhibitions, Apoorva told him *"not to wait up."* She would fret over every inch of her appearance, staining her waterline with the darkest kajal to divert attention away from her puffy eyes.

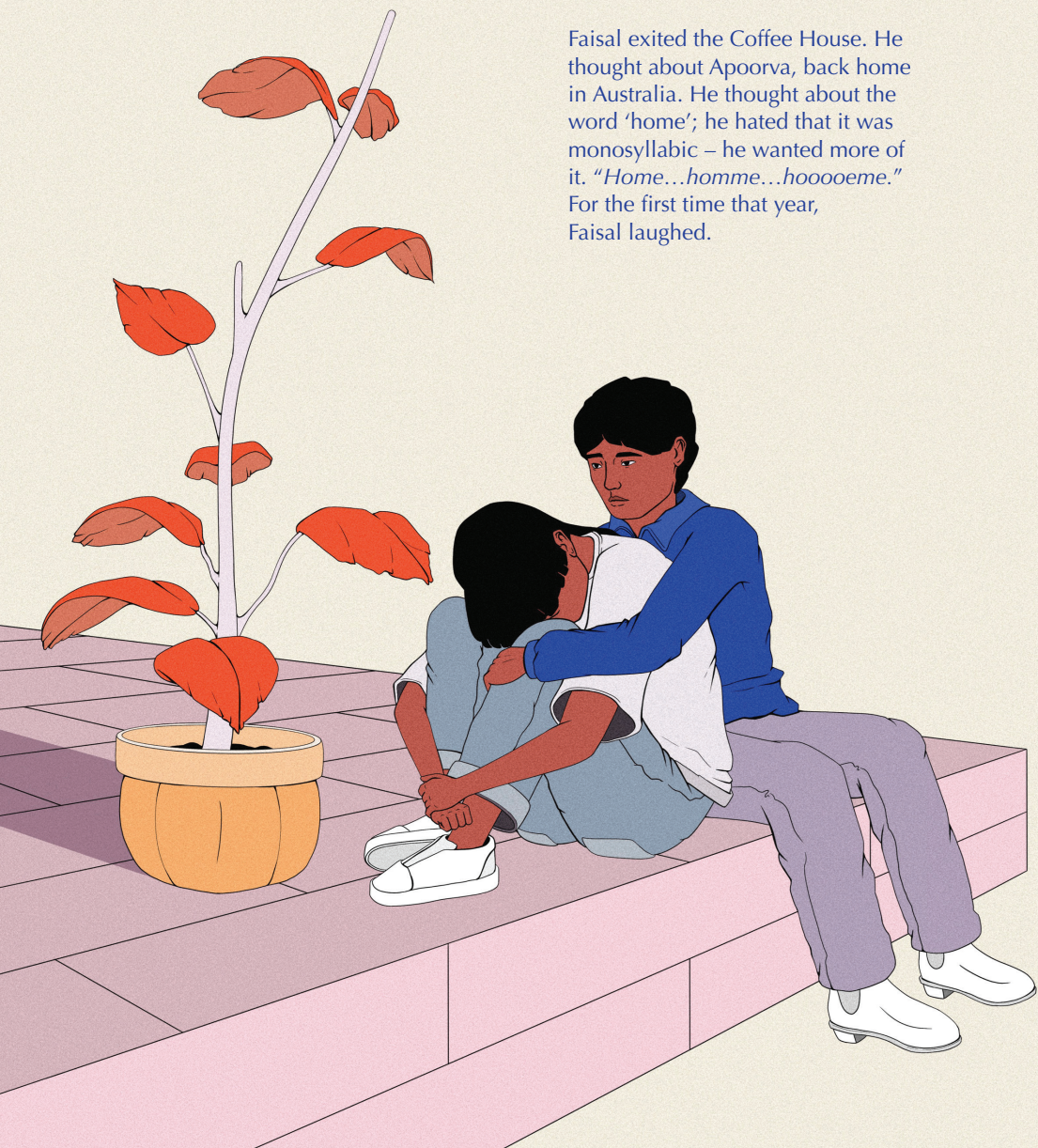
It was a warm evening with little breeze and a broken yellow moon sat low on the horizon. Faisal opened the front door, letting the strap of his leather satchel slip from his shoulders and drop onto the hallway floor. He walked through the living room, kitchen ... daal was simmering on the stove. A creak, groan and snap could be heard from the yard. Apoorva, with a mattock in hand, hacked at the jacaranda. Her eyes were delirious with pain and questioning – *how could a plant survive, but not her child?* Her screams were tortured and laboured. A yellow juice ran freely from the shrub's wounds and bled down her arms. *"I HATE THIS FUCKING TREE!! I don't need it!"* Faisal ran to her, freeing the mattock from her grasp. Apoorva collapsed to the ground. *"He couldn't breathe Faisal; I couldn't save him,"* she sobbed.

Then they sat for a while, separated by the experience of her labour but joined by a story. And the memory of their son. A breeze had begun to separate the mangled twigs from the shrub, and the broken yellow moon had risen far into the sky.

Faisal looked at Apoorva, he studied the creases beneath her eyes, the remnants of lipstick on the outer perimeter of her mouth. Slowly, he kissed

her neck and made his way up to her jaw. She quivered under his touch. Feeling their way to the bedroom, they giggled like teenagers as they tore their clothes off and made love with a desperation they had forgotten. She clung to his back, digging her nails into the arches. Then she wept: "I'm sorry, Faisal."

Faisal exited the Coffee House. He thought about Apoorva, back home in Australia. He thought about the word 'home'; he hated that it was monosyllabic – he wanted more of it. "*Home...homme...hooooeme.*" For the first time that year, Faisal laughed.



Our Table

Each night
we gather around our table,
baptised by nicks and burns
with sharp, elbowed edges,
with sanded-over seams
and wonky grains
and pulsing veins.

Each night
we gather around our table,
worn by the day's small exhaustions.
We gather
to bear witness to truths
that can't be eaten alone.
We gather
to worship the divinity
of ordinary,
and in doing so,
be undone
by offerings of care,
nagging and bitter learning.

Each night
we gather around our table,
swearing love and hate
by heaven and darker places,
buffeted and bolstered
by laughter
and inarticulate anger,
measured out in held breaths
and table dents.

We gather,
holding fast to what exists
in the raw and desperate regions
of long-standing love,
the home of eating, drinking
and indecent confession
as we believe in maybe,
grace and family.

Each night
we gather around our table,
to live in each other's
shelter and shadow.
We gather,
to feel out the corners of ourselves,
where we end,
where we begin.

CLAUDIA HAYMAN

Pavlo's Shop

GEORGE RAPTIS

There would be no customers that night despite having installed a bigger and better neon sign. Pavlo had fixed it that very morning. He opened the shop early, drove the usual route from home, and cradled the box with the sign in his lap. When he arrived, he carefully fixed the sign to the inside of the front window. There in big bold letters it shone: FREE DRINK w/ GYRO.

It could glow green and blue. It could flash or fade into and out of brightness. Pavlo's sign could do it all. It shone much brighter than the other signs, the ones that hung in the kebab shops that lined the street. It was (undoubtedly) the best sign Pavlo could have chosen for his business. The very hum of it pleased Pavlo. It would do good things for his business. The customers would notice the shop again. It was Pavlo at his best.

Yet no one had walked in since opening. Pavlo checked the clock above the fryers. 8:30PM.

"Andreas?"

His son did not reply. The TV blared on top of the drinks fridge, a repeat of a football grand final in '92.

"Andreas, what's wrong with everybody tonight?"

His son slowly walked out from the back room, mouth full, wiping the crumbs away with his forearm. He silently passed his dad, pulled out a chair and sat before the TV. Pavlo knew that his son hated working Fridays. But Pavlo needed help at the shop. Pavlo wanted the best for his business.

Andreas slouched in his chair, glowing green from the sign shining in the shop window. He noticed that his dad had removed the browning icon of the Virgin Mary that had long been stuck to the window. There its sticky outline could be seen through the neon bars of the sign. Pavlo really believed in his new sign.

Andreas' sneakers stuck to the floor he should have mopped 2 hours ago. What time was it? 8:31PM. Shit. Time moved slowly in the shop. There was always too much time. Time spat out of the fryers and spilled over boiling pots. It pooled on the floor and slid up the brown-tiled walls. There was so much time that it could have been boxed up and served as an item on the menu (add garlic sauce for an extra \$1). Andreas did not want to spend another minute in the shop, but he knew better. Andreas would inherit the kebab shop from his father.

"Andreas, would you help me with this?"

Pavlo was reaching for a box filled with takeaway containers. He was getting old, not as quick as he used to be. When he first opened the shop he ran it from midday well into the early morning. Pavlo had vigour back then (and more hair on his head). He knew what honest work was. Pavlo cleaned up after drunks vomited the kebab he had just made for them. He patched up windows after the shop had been broken into. He even missed out on Andreas' 18th birthday to keep the shop open on a Saturday night. Pavlo knew what hard work was. He was an honest worker. Pavlo only wanted the best for his business.

Andreas finally got up from his chair to help his dad. He slowly walked around the counter. He pulled out the box his dad was reaching for, bits of dust falling onto his apron. The box had sat there for some time. Andreas thought the box was probably older than he was. Everything about the place irritated him. The fogged-up display cabinets that never quite cleared, the droning sound of the fridges, the grease stains that would not budge on the countertop. The place had turned to shit. He thought it was probably the worst kebab shop on the street. Andreas would inherit this kebab shop.

He rounded the counter again and returned to the football match. Andreas bounced his knee, waiting to speak up. This was his usual routine every Friday night; wait until 9, ask to go home early. Andreas even counted himself in. One bounce, two bounce, thr-

"Should we close up early dad?"

Pavlo pretended not to hear his son. Admittedly, the TV was playing quite loudly in the shop. Closing the shop early? Pavlo had never closed the shop early, not in its 25 years of running.

"Dad? You're tired. No one is coming tonight."

Pavlo was confused. Why did his son always give in that easy? His son did not know what it meant to work hard. To build up a business. To do honest work. To clean the frying oil, to re-stock the fridge, to smile at customers, to empty the bins, to get mugged in the back alley, to run out of pitas, to burn fingers, to wait out a long night and do it all again the next morning and – no.

No, the shop would *not* close early. At least not now, not tonight, not with the new sign.

"Dad - "

Pavlo slammed the counter. Andreas turned his head. The box filled with plastic containers now spilled out onto the floor. Pavlo let the plastic river run to his feet.

"We *won't* close early."

Pavlo had never spoken to his son in this way. He loved his son. He cared about his son. But he also cared about his business. Pavlo loved his business.

"It's almost 9 Dad, can I at least go home?"

Pavlo checked the clock above the fryers. 8:55PM. They would just have to wait.

"You're staying here Andreas; we wait another hour. They haven't seen us yet."

Andreas yanked his apron, pulled it over his head, and threw it across the counter. Pavlo stood still.

"You've lost it dad. They haven't seen us in fucking years, what's a sign going to do about it?" His voice shook the display cabinets. The old shop might have crumbled at the sound of such a voice.

“Andreas you’re staying here - ”

Pavlo watched his son walk away from him. Andreas flung open the door. He swung it wide open on its old hinges. The front window shook. Andreas looked back at Pavlo. Andreas was angry. The sign teetered against the glass. Pavlo noticed it – careful! – no. Pavlo gave his son a pleading look – don’t do it. Andreas was angry. Raged! This fucking place was –

Andreas slammed the door, a loud clap. All was silent.

Pavlo watched the neon sign slowly tip. It left the edge of the window. There it toppled. It toppled towards the sticky floor. It cracked and fissured as it met its end.

Pavlo stood still.

Jagged mess; electricity sparked, green-fluid oozed. Neon ran in the cracks in the tiles. It ran fast, in every direction, under the countertop, over the floor, mixing with the plastic containers at Pavlo’s feet.

Pavlo looked outside to see if Andreas was there. To see if he had seen what he did. It was dark outside. Andreas was gone. Pavlo slowly walked around the counter to see the wreck. Neon words turned to sharp barbs in a pool of its own glowing mess. Pavlo needed to sit down. He felt dizzy. Sick. Pavlo had loved the sign. The sign would have done good for his business.

Instead, he grabbed the handle of a mop. Half-leaning on the handle, he slushed the broken glass and green fluid in figure 8’s, back and forth, back and forth across the brown tiles, the green tint never quite fading with each stroke.

Tears welled in his eyes. But Pavlo knew better. He held back the tears. Cheer up Pavlo. Pavlo would buy a new sign tomorrow. A bigger one, a better one. The customers would notice him! It’s okay, Pavlo. The new sign would be the best sign he could have chosen for his business. It would outshine every other shop on the street. The new sign would do good for his business. Pavlo only wanted the best for his business.

Mixed

KATHERINE VICARY

Am I enough?

For them?

Every New Years, I spend the day with family. My Mum's side. It's loud, full of food, and full of people. I see familiar faces, my aunts, uncles and cousins. They stay for the full day, from lunch to well after dinner. Laughing, talking, eating, the food is never ending. I see not-so-familiar faces, a collection of relatives I only know by appearance. They come every year for thirty minutes and I wish them a 'Happy New Year!' as they do the rounds. I'd bet the blood we share would amount to no more than a drop, too weak to justify the forced smiles and awkward conversations I have to endure. I don't try to ask how we are related, not anymore, choosing rather to smile as they walk past.

As a kid, I hid away, with a handful of my closest cousins in the shadows of a spare bedroom. We tucked ourselves away from the rest of the house, playing on our Nintendo DS', being happily anti-social. In part because we were kids and in part because we didn't know how to behave around so many relatives. There were too many people outside that room. Too many names I couldn't remember, too many relatives I couldn't identify. As I get older, I find myself leaving that room more and more. The same handful of cousins and I now sit in the living room, the heart of the house. We are the first to see people arrive, the first to greet them with awkward smiles and a chorus of 'Happy New Years!'. Whenever lunch was called a feeling of excitement would fill the house as we all filtered into the backyard. Plates of homemade food, two tables long sat in the centre of the backyard, a mini buffet. Grandma's meatballs, my aunties pastries, anything you could ask for, even the occasional bucket of KFC. A recent, unconventional addition but one loved by us all. I am always called out for my plate's lack of variety and lack of vegetables. Whilst there are familiar dishes, there are so many I don't know, so many I'm afraid to try.

As time passes, we try to continue traditions. If you're family, you show up, even if you can only for ten minutes.

Red envelopes are seen in the background, handed from adults to children, aunts and uncles to nieces and nephews and distant family to everyone they pass. For the immediate family it's slightly different, we carve out time for the envelopes. It goes by age, first the grandparents take their seat and each grandkid, by family group, come forward to receive their share. Despite the mother tongue of 'Hakka' not being passed down to everyone, we all have to speak it to receive our envelopes. A tradition which brings a sense of unity despite the various languages spoken in the family. With the older generations speaking mostly 'Hakka' and younger generations speaking mostly English, this carved out time was special. The non-Chinese speaking cousins and I will sometimes find ourselves surrounded by relatives speaking Chinese. This is all well and good until you hear your name appear in conversation. Your English name. The word is jarring, it sticks out amongst the Chinese. A feeling of dread overcomes me every single time this happens.

Suddenly, it's photo time. Everyone is called as we try to squeeze each face into the one frame. There are about ten different cameras, one from each family. I never see these photos until later, once I'm back at home. My dad, brothers and I always stand out. My dad is the obvious outlier, his features are very different. It's little things, facial

features, the shape of his eyebrows, the tone of his skin. Small aspects which mark our differences. My brothers and I also stand out but not as much. Our features are different too. Less apparent but still there. My eldest brother blends in the most, my second eldest brother and I are clearly mixed. We share some similar features but not enough. I wish I did.

Am I enough?

For them?

Every Christmas, I spend the day with family. My Dad's side. It's loud, full of food and contains just the immediate family. Every face is familiar, there's just a handle of uncles, one aunt and two cousins. They stay for the full day, from lunch to well after dinner. I know each face, each name, each personality and they know mine. As a kid, I couldn't hide myself away, there weren't enough people. So, I just stayed quiet. I was the 'shy one'. I kept to myself, laughing when appropriate and talking when asked. Everyone is gathered in the one room, there's snacks, finger food and light conversation here and there. We divide into pairs or threes to have conversations, discussing jobs, life and travel. I sit on the edge of these groups, listening in but never talking. I don't know what I'd say. As I get older, I find myself getting out of that more and more. I make jokes to be laughed at, I start

conversations and help before I'm asked.

As time passes, we try to continue traditions. If you're family, you show up, even if you can only stay for ten minutes. We stopped exchanging gifts a few years ago, no one knew what to buy each other apart from socks and underwear. Our one tradition is having lunch together. If you're late for lunch, you can expect to be met with choice words from everyone. Especially my Aunt. The table is lined with ham, pork, prawns and salads. Every year there's a new salad. Christmas crackers line the table and you're required to wear your paper hat the whole time. We are each designated a seat around the table. Your following conversations all depend on where you're sat, who you're sat next to. It can range from lively to slightly awkward. The star of the show is always dessert. The Christmas pavlova. Each year it is made by my Aunt, full of whipped cream and topped with various fruits. After five minutes it will have vanished, plate completely wiped clean by our greedy hands and rumbling stomachs.

Suddenly, it's photo time. Everyone is called as we try to squeeze each face into the one frame. There are around three camera's taking photos, one from each family. I never see these photos until later, once I'm back at home. My mum, brothers and I always stand out. My

mum is the obvious outlier, her features are very different. It's little things, facial features, the shape of her eyes, the tone of her skin. Small aspects which mark our differences. My brothers and I also stand out but not as much. Our features are different too. My eldest brother stands out the most, my second eldest brother and I are clearly mixed. All the features that blended us with mum's side now, make us stand out. Set us apart. We still share similar features but not enough. I wish I did.

Am I enough?

For everyone?

"Mixed babies are the most gorgeous."

"How did your parents meet?"

"You are so lucky, you belong to TWO cultures."

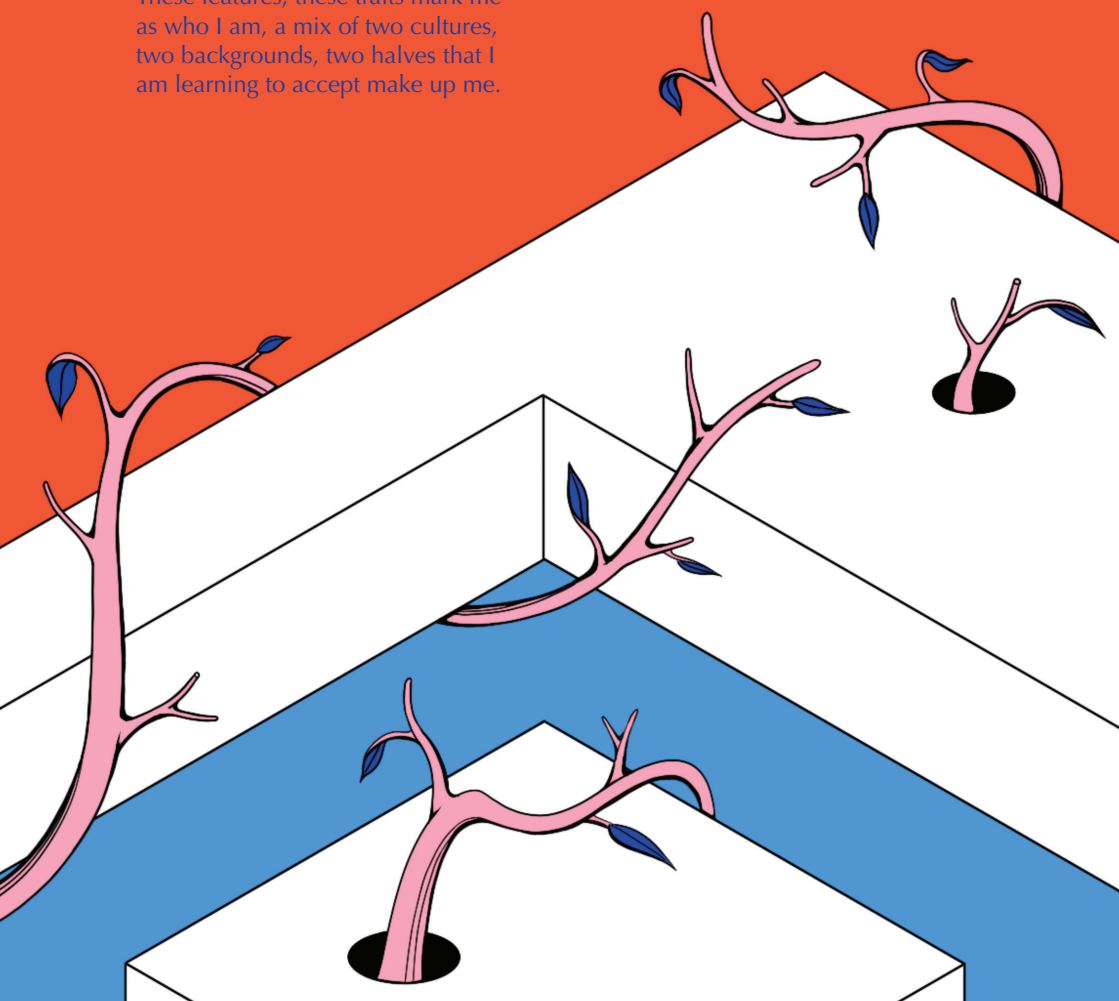
Everyone with a mixed background has heard these phrases.

However, there's something these people never understand. I am a part of two cultures but belong to neither. I walk the line between two lives but can never fully fall into either. No matter how hard I try, I will never be enough for either culture. In both experience and appearance, I'm not white enough for one side and not Asian enough for the other.

Am I enough?

For me?

Since I was younger, I wished I was born as one or the other but I'm not. I am a mix of both. My skin is tan, not as tan as my mums and not as pale as my dad's. I have my dad's eyebrows and my mum's hair. My eyes are a mix of both. I can speak English but not Chinese. I smother Western food in tomato sauce and Asian food in soy sauce. These features, these traits mark me as who I am, a mix of two cultures, two backgrounds, two halves that I am learning to accept make up me.



Jus Sanguinis

Jus Soli - (Latin) the right to citizenship from the nation one is born in.

"Why did you leave Dublin?" Alice asks. There is a set ritual when visiting her grandmother. Tea, biscuits, all taken in the garden. Discussions of churches or sovereignty are strictly prohibited. A magpie wallows in the distance whilst Alice sets the crockery down.

"Quick, salute it, or Mr Magpie won't give you any luck." Her grandmother won't be distracted by the question and instead gives the bird a three-finger salute. "They're God's postmen, Alice, it's rude to ignore them."

"It would, just...you know, be good to know why. I was wondering. That's all." The question remains unanswered as her grandmother reaches for her tea.

"Kilmainham Gaol, the Book of Kells, and I want to meet my great aunt in Dublin, too." Alice is leaning against the wicker chair, trying to avoid the sweltering heat. It has been an oppressive summer this year, too hot to move, smoke a constant, and the ever – present paranoia of the bushfires finally becoming uncontrollable. Her family has long since retired to the pool, languidly lying across inflatables, enjoying the reprieve the water provides.

An Aunt turns her head to face her, champagne in hand, hair fanned out against the inflatable swan's neck, "You do know that Aunt Roisin died six months ago, right?"

Based on the animated activity across the backyard pool, the family apparently did not know. Alice gazed at her cousin, auburn plaits dripping as she cannonballs into the pool, oblivious to the news. Dublin, Alice thinks, amongst the cacophony of shouts and smell of smoke, feels like a faraway dream.

The towel drips with pool water, but Alice's mother is determined to have dry hair. She stands beside Alice, who is trying to fix her hairclip. The Christmas lunch can be deemed a success, no one screamed or stormed out, and no hairline fractures between siblings were torn asunder.

"They are an odd family, you would think someone in Ireland would tell us she had died," Alice says.

Her mother shrugs. "That's the Connors, they've always been like that. What happens in Ireland only concerns us if we ask."

"Do you think they'd still want to meet me?" Alice departs in eight days and she feels as though she is stuck on a rollercoaster about to take off. Her mother looks over to her and pushes a red curl off Alice's eyes. "You look enough like them; they probably won't realise you're not even Irish."

Nationalism - (English) the support of one's own nation's interests to the exclusion of others. In the Irish context for example, this manifests in the support of an independent Ireland or reunification with the North.

"Are you from the right Ireland or the wrong Ireland?"

Alice doesn't know what to say. It is her first night at the new church, a chance she has taken on this group of strangers. The question is from her bible study leader. Dear God, she thinks.

"Matthew, I don't think the Irish like their country referred to in that way." The pastor has stepped in, much to Alice's relief.

"Still, which part are you from?" Matthew stares, but Alice still doesn't know how to respond.

"The wrong or right Ireland?" Her father looks into his beer bottle, aghast.

"Exactly!" Alice exclaims. "How do you answer that? Well, I could try: Half my family is from the North, but the part I'm closer to is from the South, and that's how I have citizenship, but we aren't Catholic..." she sighs, lost for words. The wrong or right Ireland.

"You know what you should have said." He looks at her, the beer put down. "Those are fighting words, mate, and you should consider whether you are prepared to bear the consequences before you say them." It is the closest her father has ever come to anything remotely nationalistic, and once more, Alice is at a loss for words after being chastised by him.

Her family never dared to touch it; nationalism was far too dangerous a weapon in Ireland. It entailed too many identities that didn't make sense, 'isms' and justifications. Were you part of the passivist tradition or the violent one? Did you abhor the use of violence in the Troubles yet think it was justified in the War of Independence? For the Anglo-Irish Treaty or against it? God, Alice was exhausted just thinking about it, let alone what constituted the wrong or right Ireland.

The sky is heavy with grey. The Liffey is but a muddy river, hardly worthy of all the poems on it, and it appears to Alice that Joyce was fair in his description of Dublin. A stagnant city. Not quite the fairyland of books and pukas her grandmother had described. Her cousins, who had immediately offered Alice cups of tea upon cups of tea, had agreed – she needed to get out of the city if she wanted to see Ireland properly. Alice pushed her scarf off her ears to take the phone call.

Her parents are content, that is a relief, she experienced a lot of guilt when leaving for a year-long trip to figure out who she was, when it was a question her parents had been content not to ask. But all is well, her brother is doing fine in school, the dog misses her, and the fires have ceased.

"Dad, it was Ash Wednesday. Everyone had the cross on the forehead. At first, I thought some boys had just gotten into a fight, but literally everyone was marked with one. I'm not exaggerating." Alice pushes past tourists, determined to reach Easons.

"Well I told you they were Catholic over there." Her dad is chuckling, she

can hear it reverberating through the phone.

"But not everyone, Dad, you didn't tell me everyone was Catholic." She reaches Easons and inhales the familiar smell of books.

"Yeah, don't you get it yet? To be Irish is to be Catholic." Her dad pauses, "I always wondered if that was why your grandmother was upset, not that I disagreed with her church's doctrine, but more so that I'd rejected what it was to be Irish."

Alice holds one book absent-mindedly. She can add that question to the list of things she should have asked her grandmother; she always told Alice she looked Irish, but of course there was no mention of the religion stuff. Did her faith disqualify her?

Humanae Vitae - (Latin) a Papal declaration in 1968, that prohibited the use of contraception and upheld the sanctity of life doctrine.

It is the second time Alice cried in a public space that day. The first was at the General Post Office, before a photograph of a young Eamon de Valera surrounded by British soldiers, but she had not expected to cry here, at the Irish Emigration Museum.

"We were treated like slaves, never paid. You would go to the laundry thinking it was a school. But it wasn't. The nuns were terrible, they hated us." She sits before a video, the woman's face blown up on the screen, her gaze unmoving.

It is different to have read about these places in books than to be confronted by a survivor of them. Ireland's history had always been a source of pride for Alice, she is proud to say she was from the country where people had fought and died for the right to rule themselves. But it was far harder to say she was from the country where girls had been treated as blights upon their communities, to be locked away and worked and worked until they were forgotten. No, that history was a terrible burden to bear.

The woman's question haunts Alice for the rest of the week. "Who would do that to a child?"

Was her grandmother happy? The girl in the photograph looks at her, white veil on, rosary beads clasped in hand. It makes sense that Alice's only photograph of her grandmother as a child is from her First Holy Communion. She looks too serious, but they need something from her childhood to show at her wake.

"That was probably a year or so before her mother died." Alice's mother looks over her shoulder. "Poor Maureen. She had to leave school after that, help raise her brothers." Her mother shakes her head. "You know why a woman would die of the cold at thirty-two?" Alice shakes her head, finding out about her family before her grandmother came to Australia has been a near impossible task over the years. "When you've had six children with no break in between. You'd be exhausted too."

Alice looks through the photographs on the table. Finding out snippets of stories about her grandmother is not the same as having her here beside her, holding out cups of tea, but it is better than the complete absence of her. Behind the photograph of her grandmother at her First Holy Communion, there is another one of her in Dublin. Again, at a church, her grandmother holding her niece, this time a different girl dressed in communion white.

"Ah, your grandmother had to leave Ireland after that. She couldn't raise her sibling's children, too." Her mother nods grimly at that. "Better she come to Sydney and take the heat, having her own children rather than stay."

There are so many confusing threads in her grandmother's life that Alice cannot untangle the stories told as a comfort to a child from the truth. Her grandmother left to avoid being forced to raise her sibling's children. Of course, the burden of the oldest girl in the family. A magpie warbles outside and Alice is taken back to the time she sat beside her grandmother in the garden, a cup of tea held in two small hands.

"Why did you leave your home?" Alice looks up to her.

Her grandmother is briefly distracted, watching as the magpie pecks at his biscuit offering. Her arm rests around Alice, and she squeezes her tight. Giggles escape Alice. "Why, there just weren't enough men in Ireland for me."

Looking at the photographs now, her grandmother sombrely dressed in grey against the Irish sky, Alice can understand why her grandmother would speak humour rather than the truth.

Unionism - (English)the support of the union between Ireland and Britain, seen for example in organisations such as the Orange Order.

"My granddad used to cheer when they announced a British soldier had been killed. He hated them." A classmate, Niamh, whispers to her, as the lecturer goes through the slides detailing the use of British troops in Northern Ireland.

Alice sits tense, her hands gripping the lecture desk. It had been a phone call home that had brought it to light, and brief resentment went through Alice. Her mother, despite knowing she was heading to Ireland, had waited for some unknown reason to tell her: Her grandfather, on her mother's side, the more distant side of the family; not from Dublin but from Belfast, had served in the British army, and had been posted to Northern Ireland. His tank was later bombed by the IRA. Why Alice had to be twenty to know this, she does not know. It was much easier when either side of her family were delineated as the Green or Orange people, as her grandmother Maureen put it when she was a child. Orange or green, they sounded like nothing more than characters in a children's book.

Her lecturer flicks to the next slide. A group of British soldiers stand in front of a barricade in Derry, one clasping the Union Jack. She scans the rank frantically, only briefly relaxing when she confirms that her grandfather isn't amongst them. The funny thing with stress is that it conjures absurd situations that could never occur: Her lecturer showing a photograph of her grandfather in uniform, her classmates realising that they are related, what would happen next, still unimagined.

Taking a course on Northern Ireland's history had been to learn, to try to somehow sew together what it meant to be Anglo-Irish. Her family in Australia had no answer, except that topics of religion and self-determination were not to occur. No one wanted to figure out how a Protestant had citizenship for the Republic yet not the North. It didn't make sense; it was far too complicated. Alice was alone, aimlessly wandering in circles, accepted neither in the Republic or North, not sure whether she wanted to be part of either.

"Here they are, the bloody Prods." Alice groans, head in hands, as her lecturer flicks to a slide of the Orangemen, fervent Unionists who demonstrated their support to Britain by marching through Catholic neighbourhoods to commemorate a battle in 1690. Her lecturer has reassured her that it made sense, to a degree.

Her classmate, Niamh from Derry, tuts. The Orangemen always put her in a particularly vile mood. On the first day of class, Niamh had explained to Alice that most of her family had been in the IRA and she would like to see reunification in her lifetime. She is yet to catch on that Alice is actually a 'Prod'. Alice had hence always called herself Australian first and foremost, careful not to mention any links to British soldiers in Belfast. Best that she doesn't realise, Alice doesn't expect Niamh will take it well at all.

Jus Sanguinis - (Latin) citizenship that is a right by virtue of ancestry, literal meaning, right of blood.

The magpie sings to its partner as it hops from branch to branch on the gumtree. Compared to the Irish variant, they are joyfully in song, content in their nestbuilding. The birds had been so silent in Dublin, mimicking Alice's temperament, no boisterous noise from them or her.

Alice gives the magpies a salute with one hand, her other holding the tea cup, watching on as her cousin, only six, plays with her dolls. Her auburn hair sits in neatly braided plaits, held by hairclips with kitten faces. The girl fiddles with one, trying to pull it out. She succeeds and asks, "Will you stay here, Alice?"

Alice sips her tea, trying to assemble a response. "Of course, this is home. But I did love visiting where Grandma was from. I'll have to take you over one day." Her cousin nods seriously, a bargain struck. It is good to be back home, Alice thinks, despite the scalding weather. In Sydney, no one is confused by the contradictions of the Anglo-Irish Protestant woman: Her identity, ill-stitched by fate and lineage. She does not need to silently weigh her words, consider their historic implications and who she is saying she is by using this noun or that. There is no burden here for her to carry; here, she can just be Alice, Maureen's Granddaughter and greeter of birds.

"Quick salute it, too." Her cousin looks over, and Alice points to the magpie, who stares down at them, its eyes proud and expectant. "Didn't Grandma tell you they are God's Postman?" The little girl raises her palm in a wave and the magpie bows, before it is in flight once more.

Gaway

CAOIMHE HANRAHAN-LAWRENCE

It took me two weeks to get home.
 Three months before my birth
 A car shattered forty percent of my father's bones
 And tore five muscles in my mother's abdomen
 That were supposed to evict me from her body.
 When her waters broke,
 The aunties drove her over speedbumps for six hours
 Because something that makes cars slow down
 Is supposed to make babies speed up.
 Even before I had taken my first breath,
 I loved my mother so much
 That I did not want to leave.
 At six pm
 On the feast of the Assumption
 In the year that Yothu Yindi released their fourth studio album,
 The doctor had to cut me out
 Because before I had even taken my first breath,
 I knew that good homes were difficult things to find.
 I slept alone for the next two nights
 Because my mother could not hold my weight in her arms
 And my father's wheelchair
 Could not fit in the room with my crib.
 I felt distance
 From the second I was born.

It takes me an hour to get home.
 Five station staff, two lifts, three wheelchair ramps.
 My body is a burden
 That Sydney Trains has not yet learnt how to carry.
 My house is downhill from the train station
 And sometimes I take my hands off my wheels
 And freefall.
 I like that I can move
 Without using a single muscle.
 I like forgetting that I have a body.
 When I reach my front door,
 My partner will be on the couch
 And I'll find the space between their ribs
 That I have taught myself to fit into.
 I will creep between their bones
 And let them hold my weight.

It takes me five hours to get home.
I kiss my partner goodbye at the station,
And hope that I will have the same seat as before.
I do not look out my window
As the bus stop-starts down Parramatta road.
When I reach my destination,
My grandmother waves at me so hard
That I think she might start flying.
When I hold her I remember
What it is like to feel family in your arms
And under your feet
And in your lungs.
The street lamps barely cut through the darkness,
But as I stand at the platform
I can see the whole town in perfect clarity.

It would take me two hundred and thirty years to get home.
I would know my land
As well as I know my own face, my own hands, my own feet.
My uncles will ask me
Dhaga, dhaganhu ngurambang?
And I will say, in the language my grandmother never learned,
“I was born of the three rivers.”

Two hundred and thirty years ago
The ghosts of my ancestors would be at peace.
I would know whose blood
Fed the earth I stood upon.
I would not hear the last gasp of Windradyne
With every southerly breeze.
Two hundred and thirty years ago,
It would take me no time at all
To get home.

Translations

“Gaway” is Wiradjuri for “Come here”
“Dhaganhu ngurambang?” is Wiradjuri for “Where is your country?”

Por Por and I (婆婆和我)

DYLAN GOH

From weekly dinners with sixteen people,
To separation by law, fear and language.

It's a five minute drive.

Sunday morning,
Get in car and drive to Por Por's¹ place.
Stop and walk to the closed gate.
Crouch and pick up the plastic bag,
Weighted by blue tupperware and a bottle of jie soi²

I replace the bag with mum's cake in a takeaway box.
Goong Goong³ watches from inside.
Waves from inside.
I nod,
And I leave.

One bite,
And I'm back in Por Por's kitchen.

¹ Grandma (婆婆)

² Sugarcane water (蔗水) – the product of cutting down sugarcane, removing dead leaves, peeling the outer skin with a knife, scrubbing off the powder, boiling for three hours, and adding Chinese almonds, carrot and rock sugar.

³ Grandpa (公公)



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