

ISSUE 22

STAGES

# THE WELLS STREET JOURNAL



TW  
SJ

# WELCOME.

Welcome to Issue 22 of The Wells Street Journal! We are honoured to greet you as The WSJ's first Co Editors-in-Chief. This spring, we celebrated 10 years of The WSJ and we wanted to commemorate this milestone with a new beginning. This issue, our Design Team has cultivated a contemporary design that we hope reflects our mission and will continue for years to come; our Marketing Department has renovated our social media and website to model the



ever-developing and modernising industry we are a part of. The Editing Team meticulously picked submissions to reflect the heart of our theme, and carefully edited them to become the best stories they could be. Our Launch Team has created a launch party that not only celebrates our teams' hard work, but makes a space for professionals from all over London to come together and share our love of words.

It is our hope that our successors take these ideas and changes to continue working together to create issues every term that reflect the heart of The WSJ. We cannot thank you enough for supporting us and trusting us with your work. It was an honour and a privilege.

**ELISABETH CONNELL AND NEMECHÉ BLAKE**

CO EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

# BOUT US

## THE WELLS STREET JOURNAL IS A LITERARY PUBLICATION RUN ENTIRELY BY POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER.

The WSJ was born from a desire to understand more about the industry we're passionate about, and to create a space where writers of every level of experience could find a home for their work.

For this issue, we chose our theme to be "**stages**". Regardless of age, occupation, culture, or gender, we all go through stages in life that test, push, and shape us. We have compiled a journal that reflects these stages we all face. We may all be different, but we are all very much the same.

We hope you find something new about yourself, others, and the world in these pages.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, thank you to Monica Germana and Hannah Copley for your support and guidance, and for believing in all of us time and time again.

We thank the Vice Chancellor and his office for their continued belief in the young creatives that they guide every step of the way.

We thank Blissetts for working with us to create a home for the work of many artists from all over the world.

Most important of all, we thank our writers who submit to us every issue; you are the reason we do what we do.

COVER ART: CHRISTIANE SASPORTAS

WSJ

# CONTENT

**WELCOME** 1

**ABOUT** 2

**CHAMPAGNE FOR BREAKFAST** 8

Marina Alvarez Carillo

**CHAPEL HILL** 11

Sam Christie

**COURT JESTER** 13

Alexia Bruijlants

**FOURTH WALL** 15

Hannah Soler

**INTERVAL** 17

Charlianne Sutcliffe

**MANGO** 20

Rajani Adhicari

**SOLILOQUIY** 23

Tova Larsson

**STAGES OF A GARDEN** 25

Rachel Zawadowski

**STAGE TWO** 28

Molly Corlett

# FICTION

# NON-FICTION

<b>THE ART OF JUGGLING</b> Stephanie Leigh Rose	31
<b>THE COLOURS OF A BRUISE</b> Hamish Kavanagh	35
<b>THE STAGE</b> Luwan Wang	39
<b>THE QUESTION OF A GREAT IMPORTANCE</b> Iliya Urazova	40
<b>THE HONEYMOON PHASE</b> Nemeche Blake	42

---

<b>BEING ON STAGE</b> Eugenia Sestini	45
<b>FINAL FRAME</b> Elisabeth Connell	49
<b>MATERNAL INSTINCT HAS LEFT THE STAGE</b> Rose Bates	53
<b>THE BEWITCHING STAGE</b> Kristen Britt	55
<b>ONE LOVE</b> Samantha Ellis	57
<b>REMEMBER WHEN</b> Margaret Kiernan	60
<b>WHEN ALAN CAME TO PEA</b> John Ganshaw	62



# POETRY

**ALL TOO MUCH** 65

Skylar Spratley

**DAWN AND DUSK** 67

Stanislava Tasheva

**HISTORY OF LITHUANIAN LANGUAGE** 68

Costanza Baeza Valdenegro

**I HAD** 69

Cecilia Garcia-Peñalosa

**REVOLUTION** 70

Rosie Elizabeth

**RUNNING OUT** 71

Sam Hendrian

**SET THE STAGE ON FIRE** 72

Michelle Syiemlieh

**SUBURBAN SPIRITUAL** 73

Kirby Michael Wright

**WELL-REHEARSED** 74

Lucie de Gentile

**YOU'RE MY SUMMER** 75

Kayana Facey

---

**AUTHORS' BIO** 76

**MEET THE TEAM** 82

# FICTION





BORD

LORRIDER

3-2

222

22-323

32



# CHAMPAGNE FOR BREAKFAST

CONTENT WARNING - THIS FICTIONAL SHORT STORY DISCUSSES, THOUGH INDIRECTLY, TALK OF SUICIDE AND SUICIDAL FEELINGS. PLEASE READ AT YOUR DISCRETION.

I'm craving death more than usual these days. I sense a certain extinguishment of hope. It's starting to make me feel emancipated, almost free. Five-star hotel, steak every day, lounging on the beach like lizards, as my mother would say.

On the plane back from that opulent holiday I had an eerie sense of what an adventure it would be if it suddenly lost control and plummeted to the ground. Thirty-six rows of six humans each, plus crew, falling from the sky clutching desperately at the shaking seat in front as it starts to come off its hinges, as we come off ours. Oxygen masks drop, too much chaos for anyone to put them on. The plane starts to spiral and spin, launching passengers off their chairs. I part-wish that it will knock me out before my brain can feel the decimation of my body; part-pray I will experience it all the way through till the quick engulfing of my skin and bones in roaring flames, and part-hope that I still get to roam this wonderful, foetid Earth.

— *It's the Catholic schoolgirl in me.*

In my macabre fantasy, we crash on solid ground, ideally in a lavender field somewhere in France; Aix-en-Provence, for example. Drowning in a tin shed seemed far less appealing. I would rather be blown up and tossed a great distance than share a dildo-shaped grave with other Ryanair passengers at the bottom of some plas-

tic-covered seabed. Limb from limb, head from toe.

— *Original Destination: London Stansted.*

I am terrified of my namesake, the Ocean. And though the poetic irony of being killed by that entity seemed beautiful, I preferred to pass. There are slower, more toxic and enduring ways to limit my life on cement, thank you very much. The flight crew didn't inspire much confidence either, so the probability of a crash during a turbulent journey was present. The older I get, the more present it becomes. This lack of confidence, seeing that safety net and infrastructure decay as I do, as we all eventually do. Questioning the world's possibilities as much as I have started to question my own. The routes that are now closed, the ones that will never open again. My body knows it too. My psoriasis flares up as

soon as I set foot in an airport, something the ocean had ironically healed. This annoying autoimmune disease that, just as my brain does, attacks my healthy cells. Paralysing my body as my mind wanders.



— *Remember to take your vitamin D.*  
I've been thinking a lot about ageing lately – my 20s are over. My hip, back, knees, and neck hurt. I keep checking mine and other people's heads for whites. I've started looking at successful people and wonder how old they are. I've started using collagen cream and stuff with words like 'hyaluronic acid' on them (I'm sure it's a common ingredient in skincare, but it sounds very intense). I love staying in with fairly good whiskey or wine and watching incredibly bad TV. But most of all, I see my own increasing invisibility in interactions with others, especially at airports.

We're all guilty of wanting most other people to become invisible in those tight spaces and overpriced shops. That lawless place, where champagne for breakfast and a pint before 10 a.m. are accepted practices. Time doesn't even hold the same value at an airport, and it's always happy hour somewhere. They'll tell you you'll start boarding 45 minutes before takeoff and at 10 to you're still waiting for someone to arrive and open the gate. Most passengers aren't even human, just cattle. Unless you've got the big bucks for business, executive, or platinum ego air miles, or whatever. I don't know about you, but I've got some bucks, small bucks, simply not enough bucks.

— *Here's to my 30s!*

I stare at my drooping skin, the growing lines on my face and I find myself beautiful, radiating with the loss of juvenile glow, and revel in my acquiesced wisdom. Despite the acid, the bone aches, and the obsolescence, I am proud of looking my age. Knowing what I feel on the inside is reflected on my face. I have earned my wrinkles. My laugh lines, my crow's feet, my bunions, and forehead lines carrying my stories, my happy and not-so-happy memories, growing with me until I die.





I accept the features given to me by my mothers and fathers, I accept the parts of me that were not meant to be changed. It will be my subtle rebellion against what we are expected to do.

My friends all look different now too — we believe and want different things. They have changed and so have I. Some are in the baby-making phase, others are buying houses whilst I bury my face in my purring cat's fur. I've become that lady. The one that starts telling 20-year-olds about all the ailments they can look forward to, both physical and emotional, and of the injustices of the world. When, in all honesty, I know nothing at all.

Youth casts a spell of arrogant immortality. The delusion that time is endless and without value, just like at airports. You hear about a tragedy and you have the privilege of thinking, "At least not me. Not yet". I remember those conversations with my mother and grandmother about menopause, the hot flashes, the bone aches, the intolerances. Those interactions that turn more visceral as you grow. Post-op hair and weight loss, electroshock therapy, broken bones, cancer, dementia, death. Conditions that become intimate and personal.

— *I should pay a visit to a hospital.*

This isn't the first time in my life that I have mused about dying or ageing. Many years ago, on one wintery morning, I thought about walking out in front of a bus on Battersea Bridge. I didn't consider the physical portion of dying then, and I wasn't brave or stupid enough to go through with it. Turns out the contraception pills were taking my brain on a wild ride — I didn't get pregnant though.

And I suppose it's not 'normal' for someone my age to think about dying and growing old this much. At what age do we stop hoping and dreaming about our journey in the realm of the living and turn our thoughts toward what awaits us on the other side? Perhaps it is lost loved ones we get to see once more. Perhaps it is someplace devoid of existence, just infinite darkness or infinite light. Sometimes I worry that I may even be calling it. In hindsight, it seems I have a thing for the death-by-transportation method. But I just can't help but be enticed by the uncertainty of what is or isn't to come. To experience it all in a way, with a present mind and body. To be weakened and strengthened through pain and grief and joy and pleasure.

— *There's nothing wrong with a little champagne for breakfast.*

MARINA ALVAREZ CARILLO

In our village, Chapel Hill is legendary. It is a gateway of sorts, leading out of our steep-sided valley and onto the main road heading north or south. It is how we leave and how we return. For centuries, countless feet have trudged up the hill: the miners, farmers, foresters and priests, the midwives, shopkeepers, and just about anyone else that ekes out their living in this little corner of the world. Tourists try the hill on the way to the pub from the little campsite and always arrive flushed, thirsty, and in a flurry of anoraks and latches.

You and I have walked together up and down Chapel Hill ever since you were born.

It starts at the chapel, now just a shell of a place, with its grand entrance, and high windows surrounded by low, moss-covered, dry, stone walls. Not that long ago, you could round the corner onto Chapel Hill with the pomp of a singing congregation to accompany you on the first push up the steepening slope. Now there's a silence, but for the whistle of the buzzards high overhead, or the rattle and clank of a bouncing tractor in the far fields.

I held your little hand the very first time you tried the hill and you twisted and lingered, paused and looked: a wild curious mind taking in the day. You stared up the road, seeing a mountain, with your eyes wide and your button nose dribbling. I slowed my pace and waited as you tottered. We conquered it together.

Once the first curve is behind us, the steepness becomes more noticeable. By the terrace where Nick lives, tapping on his

drums, or where Tony, a ball of pure energy who eats the hill for breakfast, rents his annexe from Cath and Phil, the edge of the chapel wall ends and the graves crouch back down out of sight as the hill winds on, the fog of breath grows thicker with effort. With every step there is a feeling of surfacing from the valley bottom; breaking through some invisible ceiling and outrunning the churchyard.

When you started school, we stumbled up there for the bus. I worried and fretted whether you'd be okay, whether you'd make friends and not be cast down by teachers or treated meanly by your fellows. You were stoic, I remember, in your oversized coat whose arms continued past your hands. Your little bag contained many treats and you wore it on your back like all the kids do. That bag bounced up and down as you hopefully bobbed, but you occasionally dawdled vulnerably and compounded my concern. I was your protector who wanted to carry you in my arms, though all I could do, I knew for certain, was to wait as you dragged yourself up there under your own steam. I didn't walk down until the bus was out of sight.

The little rivulets of water that trickle down the side of the road flow faster as we climb and then, as if to offer some little physical gift, pool slightly as the incline reduces at the modern bungalow with its utilitarian grounds. By now, you can hear the rushing of the cars, always going just a bit too fast and acting as an acoustic metaphor for our transition from peace into the modern world. Here, most of the houses have bird feeders and the nervous flitting of the passerines draws our attention away from the cliff-like loom of the road ahead that suddenly rears up again. The dark crows balance on the telephone wires and watch the small birds with what looks like disdain.

Your first fight shocked me, of course. I didn't see clearly enough that you were stronger and taller, your strides more assured. To me, you weren't ready for this

# CHAPEL HILL

# SAM CHRISTIE

,and why should you be? Why should it come to you at all, ever? As we climbed I constantly checked you were okay and that you could cope with another day at school. Did you mind seeing him again? Was he bullying you? "It's okay, dad, don't worry, I'll be okay," you replied, but you looked harassed and downcast and were beyond my reach, living in another world – your own world, in fact.

Near the top, the round mirror that sits on a post and guides out the reversing cars reflects us back in a wide angle. The image bows out and distorts and we rush into view and pass in the blink of an eye. One time, as we struggled to the point where legs start to burn, I noticed myself and you alongside me. You were formed now, a man; solid and springy. You still had time to grow, but there you were, almost my height, arms swinging, stalking, not walking. You were shoulder to shoulder with me, keeping up and smiling. I saw my own father next to you, my head ever so slightly lowered.

I don't suppose you remember the first time I asked you to slow down? I wasn't really interested in those little ferns that grow out of the grey wall with its funny cap of render. No, I needed to catch my breath. We were talking about university and you asked many questions about what it would be like. Actually, I lied when I said it would be nothing but good. I brushed the heart-ache and worry under the carpet and stuck to the basics. I couldn't imagine your leaving, and, in truth, I was thinking more about me than you. I had never before been the last duck on the beach, watching as the rest of the flock flew away in formation towards exotic lands. I stared at the ferns and panted. You waited with a head full of the future and, to you, nothing had happened but us walking the hill again.

At the very top, the road curls cruelly round with a tiny encore that spills us

out onto the pavement of the A44. Before, we would look at each other smirking, amused at this final blow, grabbing above our knees to help our fiery legs cope with those last two steps to deliverance. We'd brush ourselves down and stagger in comfort, on the flat, to our destination. Now, before your body leaves, your mind is living elsewhere. You live away, somewhere faster, more consuming and you've no time to dwell on that little bump on the corner of the road. For you, this place is altering into a memory. Perhaps you will speak about it to your new friends if you find time. Perhaps you might think of the valley before you drift off to sleep. For me, you will always be here like Chapel Hill.

Before you left, I wanted to drink with you, so we set out for the hill. We passed the huge chapel with its broken windows and rotting plaster. The gravestones sagged and slumped and something was banging in the wind. It was drizzling and it was cold; our breath puffed out like steam trains. And when we reached the bungalow, I noticed your shoulder. Your left shoulder was in front of me. I breathed deeply and pushed harder, but there it remained, possibly a foot ahead. You were charging along, light in your step and free. The tie that bound us together on our struggle up the hill was gone. We were no longer walking side by side.



# COURT JESTER

**CONTENT WARNING: THIS FICTIONAL SHORT STORY DISCUSSES, THOUGH INDIRECTLY, TALK OF SUICIDE AND SUICIDAL FEELINGS. PLEASE READ AT YOUR DISCRETION.**

I arrive at my old high school with the new mascot eyeing me down from one of the grey concrete walls. I enter the auditorium through the emergency exit - my favourite way of jumping back in time. This is the backstage entrance for the school's performing artists, which I consider myself to be. My life is my performance. Peeking through the purple velvet curtains, I notice the static chairs. They are slowly beginning to fall apart and are lined up in front of the wooden construction that is supposed to represent the stage. This school never was a fan of investing in their equipment. Broken cricket bats, desks, whiteboards; the list is endless. "We invest in our students' brains!" The old headmistress used to shout whenever one of us dared to comment on the abysmal state of our desks, which our parents paid a lot of money for. I count the grim faces that are about to give me blank stares and walk on stage to greet the audience consisting of my old classmates. They are all aware that they can't sit down until I've given them the orders to do so, as it's written down in the second chapter of our contract. I blink.

I notice that Sophie has done something different with her hair. She no longer hides behind her fringe and seems to have understood that trends do change. Annabelle, on the other hand, is still wearing that hideous matte purple nail polish that was never in fashion to begin with. They look at me and I can hear their thoughts, judging me one by one. Eva never gave me the time of her day when we sat together in maths class, but she does love to carefully undress me whenever I'm on stage. "Look at that pathetic excuse of a human being," I

hear Ender think, chewing on his bright green bubble gum. He still has the same smug look on his face as he did 12 years ago. He was the star on our high school football team, and never really achieved anything beyond that. It was only natural for him to take over his father's carpeting business. He wouldn't last a day in the real world in which I have to fight every day. "So, what's the status for this year?" he yells out. Something has changed in his gaze; I notice it now. He looks more worn out than last year. I guess the carpets aren't selling as well as they used to. "Have you quit that dodgy, low-paying job and found a better one? Or are your parents going to pay your rent for the rest of your miserable life?" I clear my throat and tell them: "You can all sit down now. Only questions from those who raise their hands will be answered. And I'd appreciate it if you didn't shout at me." A sea of hands goes up. I point and nod at Eva. "How is it going with that guy? What's his name? Graham? When are we going to see a picture of him?" Eva takes out her phone. Too many notifications are waiting to be answered. "If he even exists..." Ender answers for me. "He does exist, but in the end, he didn't want to put a label on it, so I ended it." I take a deep breath. "But isn't that your thing, though, Seraphina? After all, you've always hated labels." Annabelle looks down at her poorly polished hands. "The contract says that there is no room for rhetorical questions. You all know that. So, I will not be answering that question." I reply, slightly out of breath.

"Sorry, but why the fuck are we still doing this?" Sophie gets up from her chair, nearly losing her balance. "C'mon Seraphina, you're 30 fucking years old. You don't have to explain yourself to any of us. Who cares that you can't find a job and that you can't keep a guy? Ender won't leave the house without his cheap hairpiece due to his receding hairline, Eva's in massive credit card debt because of her TikTok shopping addiction, and Annabelle's

nail salon has hated her since she was 15. We're all messes in our own way, but no one ever questions us, so I really don't understand why you make us come out here every year to interrogate you." "Because these yearly meetings are celebrations of Seraphina's awful life! She was the one who wanted this so she could show off her successful life while we'd supposedly be in the gutter. And we all said yes to it because, if I'm honest, I was pretty curious to see a potential glow-up." Eva's attention is redirected to her phone. Beep. Yet another notification for yet another Sonny Angel purchase. She cannot seem to get enough of those plastic babies.

"Eva's right," I answer. The time has come for me to clean up my old ghosts. "But I didn't just bring all of you here for nothing, not just for the sake of the contract. I've come to tell you all that I'm giving myself one more year to be successful. One more year, and then I'm done." I take a deep breath. Now that I've said this out loud, I am well aware that there's no way back. "Done with what? With making us come out to this musty room where we can smell 15 years' worth of body odour?" Annabelle is trying to scratch off her nail polish. She's ready to see a new manicurist. "Done with life. If I don't build the life I truly deserve in the next year, it's over. If I do succeed, you'll see me back next year, for one final meeting." A deep silence falls over the room. For once in his life, Ender does not know what to say. He has no witty joke or insult left in him. "You're not going to do something stupid, are you? Should we call someone?" Sophie looks startled, shaking almost. Even though we were never particularly close, I knew she would always have my back. Until the very end. "Don't be so fucking stupid. You're only 30. You have a whole life ahead of you. You're healthy. Why would you even think of something like that? Do you know how selfish you sound?" Eva's cheeks have turned as red as her dress. I've never seen her this angry, not even when they introduced a smartphone ban during our time in high school.

"I understand if you don't understand my decision. There's no way for you to. None of you were as miserable as I was during our time together. When we graduated, I was adamant about my future life looking different. It had to look different since I couldn't possibly be more invisible than I was in school. The contract was going to push me to make a good life for myself. I was going to make sure that I could answer your questions without any hesitation. After all these years, we all know how that has worked out." I stare at the floor. If I do exit this world, I want these shoes to be on my feet. My mother bought them for me when I turned 21, and I've never stopped wearing them since. One thing she's done right. "Well, as I said, we're all miserable in our own way. But that doesn't mean that you should leave us. You still have time to build a good life for yourself." Sophie sits back down, out of breath and her face pale. I want her to speak at my funeral. "I know that. And as I said, I'll have one more go at building a good life. But if it doesn't happen now, I know that it will never happen. Besides, I don't see the point in ageing. I might as well leave this earth wrinkle-free." I shrug my shoulders. I knew they wouldn't understand. "She has a point there." Eva throws her hand up in defence before any of the others can take offence. "In the end, it's her decision. I guess we'll just have to wait and see if she's on stage next year." For the first time in my life, I agree with Ender. "Let's end the meeting here. See you all next year?" I walk off stage. The court jester has exited the kingdom once again but is not sure if she's coming back next year.

## ALEXIA BRUIJLANTS

# FOURTH WALL

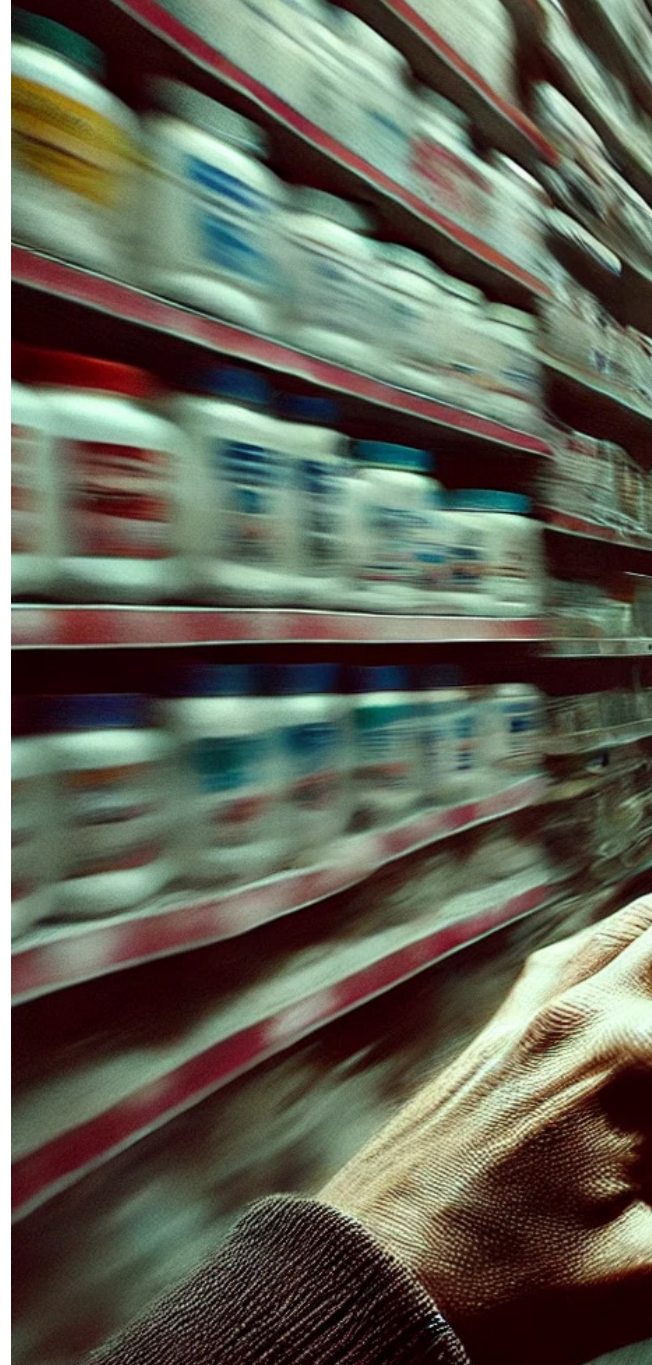
What happens when our very own fourth wall is broken? The fourth wall that protects us from the bad, the scary, and the unspeakable.

What happens when it's 9:50 on a Tuesday morning in your local, safe Boots and these social laws we put into place as a society are nowhere to be found?

Tuesdays are meant to be easy. You don't have university. You don't have obligations at all until 3:00 in the afternoon. Tuesdays are for coffee and a stroll. They're for the gym, errands, and gossip with your flatmate from the weekend before. Tuesdays are for routine.

That Tuesday wasn't. The moment the strange man's large empty bag grazed your leg you felt the curtains come up and new, unwanted lights illuminated your day in ways you didn't want.

Your stomach twisted and turned like you ate sushi that you knew was a few days too old and still took the risk to eat it anyways, but you know you hadn't eaten yet that Tuesday. Something was just off; it was wrong. You look to your right and take in the man whose bag is touching you. At a glance he looks normal enough; average height, average weight, medium length brown hair. His clothes are dishevelled, and while nothing looks wrong, it felt that way deep within. You see that he is not alone; a second man is with him. You wonder; what on Earth can they be do-



ing looking so angrily at the women's haircare section in your small neighbourhood Boots?

Before you can take in a breath or use a moment to process, they move quickly. They stick their arms to the back of each of the rows of L'Oréal, Aussie, and more and drag the dozens of bottles into their empty bags. One of which grazed you moments ago, the feel of graze still lingering on your leg.

The men are unmasked and unafraid. There is no norm in sight.



It is you alone while your flatmate fills her prescription until your fight or flight kicks in.

Unsure if they have weapons, or are dangerous to anything besides a Boots insurance policy, something deep in you tells you to move. It is the innate feeling of fight or flight that starts in your brain as a response to the situation, and travels to make you feel sick to your stomach and tense in your limbs. Do you get your flatmate? Do you make a beeline for the door?

Before you can even decide, she is there, completely unaware of what is taking place. All you know is you both must leave that store immediately. You grab her arm and tell her you'll explain later but you *have* to leave immediately. As you do so, you see a third man in your peripheral stealing the rows of deodorants, toothpastes, and more from the personal hygiene aisle.

You race out of the exit feeling more relief than any Olympian crossing the finish line of their race. You whisper, still scared, that there were men in there robbing the store. She straightens up, scared. Her face is like stone, she is nearly paralysed as you drag her along. Immediately you recognize that you pulled her curtain of the play LIFE up too early. Her fourth wall was broken along with yours.

You move together quickly in silence, processing. That is until you notice the three men follow quickly behind exiting the Boots. Everything in you tenses up, nervous they are following you. Questions circle your mind. Are they coming for us because we saw their faces? Are we to be robbed next?

Without saying a word, you walk as fast as your legs can carry you-- faster even

your way into your local coffee shop.

Everything in there is normal. Everyone there is having their regular day following rules and laws and going along with society's standards. They were all having the day you were meant to have. You feel jealous, but even more, you still feel scared. You look out the window ensuring the threat has left and you can return to safety. To your life.

As time passes logic tells you you are safe now, but everything inside feels wrong. It is something inexplicable, like your body is responding to trauma, it is still confused on if it must fight or if it had successfully flown away. You are still scared. Still nervous. Still full of wondering if it is over. Wondering what other bad things may follow. You cannot return to normal after this.

The norms, laws, and rules continue as time does. A few minutes pass, then hours, then days, yet somehow this stays with you. This natural instinct is to fight or fly when you pass your local Boots or when a bag grazes you in a store. You wonder, will I ever be able to return to normal after this?

Sometimes, when you think about it for too long, you wonder, what is normal?

**HANNAH SOLER**

# INTERVAL

The stage is set, the lights are dimmed, and curtain calls are issued. Backstage, actors navigate tight hallways and outrageous costumes in their hurry to the wings. The stage manager calls for standby over his headset, and the prop master guards her creations with a menacing eye. But it is not the opera we have come to see. The real drama takes place within the audience.

Enter Daniella, Genine, and Man 1 and 2 in formal attire.

'Balcony, row D, for Daniella,' Man 1 says, gesturing to the seats as though they are an elaborate magic trick he must present. His fiancée smiles graciously back at him. She mouths a thank you as she sits beside him, and he removes the white fur wrap from her arms. To her right, Genine gathers reams of azure silk into her lap before sitting. She runs a hand through her tight ginger curls and proclaims how hot it is to Man 2. He can only offer a long yawn, followed by two firm nods. 'Happy birthday,' Genine whispers to Daniella. I am surprised we can hear their whispers from here.

Daniella looks over to her friend and beams. Diamonds fall from her ears in thick teardrops, matching those twisted about her neck. They were an engagement present from the future groom.

The orchestra rouses from their respite, and Daniella's focus turns to the stage and the thick scarlet curtains that hang there. Latecomers sneak into their seats, with enough apologies and mortified giggles to appease the audience. There is a tapping from the front, the lights begin to dim, and Daniella cannot contain a small squeak of excitement. Genine's eyes linger on her friend before she tears her gaze away and faces front. The prelude begins.

An usher politely asks Man 2 to put away his phone. Genine catches his eye and shakes her head dumbfounded. He rolls his eyes.

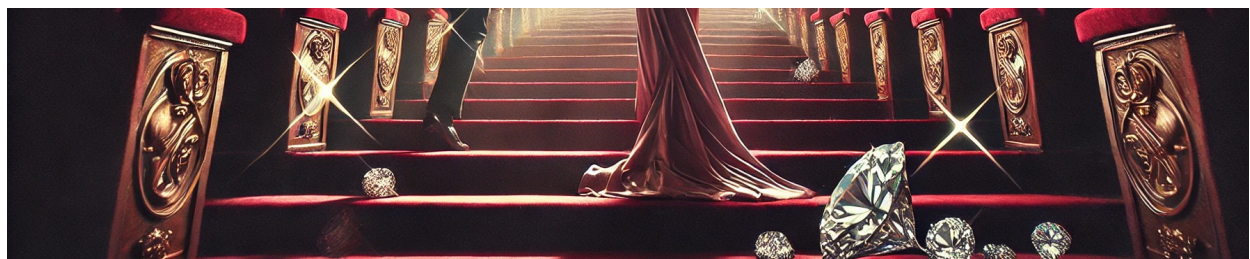
Parisian merrymakers flood the stage, kissing each other in greeting and raising flutes of champagne. A saccharine smile is fixed upon their faces as they strain to sing.

Man 1 grabs Daniella's hand, her arm suspended like a marionette's. She turns to him, with joy on her face and not in her eyes, and she watches as he kisses her knuckles. Tenderly, he rubs the diamond on her ring finger. She cannot be comfortable, but she won't pull away. His gentle touch encourages compliance.

Genine whispers something to her, and Daniella lets out a soft chuckle. Man 1 holds tighter to her hand.

They have been inching towards each other all night, and now, in the small gap between their seats, Genine's little finger wraps around Daniella's. Against her upper arm, Genine feels Daniella relax, as though all the energy entering through that ring has coursed through her body and been absorbed by their bond. Her breathing eases, and from where we sit, you can see how Daniella leans slightly away from the man on her left.

Watch how these women, throughout the first half, communicate fluently in the darkness. Careful, so careful, as to not disturb their men, the women trace each other's palms and swear vows for the present and the future. The music is heart-rending. The feel of a knuckle brushing past a thigh, or a fingertip along a wrist,





is divine.

Onstage, the lovers plunge their hands into their chests and pull out their hearts, the slick organs pulsing to the rhythm of the music. The singers hold their hearts aloft, brandishing them for the world to see, as they unleash their crescendo.

A diamond rolls from Daniella's eye and shatters against her cheekbone. The singers free the audience and return their hearts to their isolation.

The curtains are released and seek each other out. They enfold one another in a soft embrace as the audience explodes into applause. Daniella pulls her hand free from her fiancé to wipe her eyes and clap along. Mirroring her, Genine quickly does the same. Man 1 claps slowly, woodenly. Man 2 startles awake.

Daniella immediately spins to Genine, eyes wild and alight, and joyous, and Genine forgets there is anyone else in the world. 'It was fantastic, wasn't that just fantastic?'

'Indeed,' says Man 2 and he groans from the effort to remove himself from his chair. 'Most magnificent. I believe thanks are in order to your cultured fiancé.'

Daniella visibly falters for a moment as she meets his eyes. 'Of course.' Her gaze drops from the man to the floor and rises back up again to Man 1. 'Thank you.'

Man 1 smiles tightly and nods.

Man 2 sniffs and rearranges his trousers. 'I'm off to find a drink.'

'Smartest thing you've said all evening,' mumbles Genine, and Daniella laughs. Man 1 appraises them.

'When are you going to tie the knot, Genine?' he asks, dark eyes alight with trouble. 'You've made him wait more than long enough.'

Unconsciously, Genine's eyes flicker to Daniella before returning to the speaker. 'I don't want to be married.'

'Come now,' he says, with a taunting smile on his lips. 'You don't want to be left behind, do you? He won't wait forever, you know.'

'Drinks!' cries Man 2 as he approaches the seats once more. 'I got right to the front of the queue.' Atop his palm is a small black tray, on which balances four sparkling flutes of champagne. 'To the Lady of the evening.'

Smiling courteously, Daniella accepts a glass, with Genine and Man 1 following suit. They lift their glasses high, imitating the thespians and their toast from moments before.

'To Daniella,' says Genine. 'Libiamo.'

'Libiamo!' her friend repeats. She raises her glass, and a hand comes down over the top before she can take a sip.

'Not tonight,' says Man 1. 'You will not embarrass me tonight.'

Daniella stares at him in disbelief, and her cheeks turn as red as the curtains covering the stage. It is the only vibrant colour on her.

For a moment all is silent. The audience has largely vacated their seats, leaving just a few quiet stragglers with the bags. Frantic, Daniella's eyes dart out to see if anyone is watching their display. She does not turn around, and so does not see us just a few rows behind. It appears she does not breathe for a moment, head bowed while Man 1 takes a long, deep, sip from his flute.

# INTERVA

'Excuse me,' Daniella says, passing her champagne to her fiancé. She stands and darts from the room. Genine stares at Man 1 with vehement hatred. While holding her gaze, he drains the glass and flings it onto the floor of row D. He drinks from Daniella's flute.

Genine passes her glass to Man 2. 'Oh, thank you, darling,' he says, but she does not respond. She is already up and making her way down the stairs.

She finds Daniella before the mirror in the women's bathroom, cleaning away grey lines which fall from her eyes and down her cheeks. When she sees Genine enter, she shakes her head and continues.

There is silence, save for Daniella's few soft snuffles.

'I can't pretend anymore,' Genine says.

Daniella does not face her, too preoccupied with her lipstick.

'Daniella, I won't play this part any longer. It's too hard. I can't go on acting like this is nothing.'

Daniella busies herself with her hair.

Frustrated, Genine walks right up to her, and, for a moment, Daniella is caught between her and the counter. They are both facing the mirror.

She looks into the glass and meets Daniella's eyes there. 'Tell me you're happy while he dresses you in these costumes and directs all you do. Tell me that this isn't real.'

They stare at each other in the mirror, gaze connected yet separate. Daniella suddenly turns and kisses Genine, and she cannot help but kiss her back.

The door suddenly creaks open, and they jump apart. Daniella offers a small smile to the older woman who walks in and enters a cubicle. Once she locks the door, Genine presses her forehead against her lover's. 'I won't act any longer,' Genine whispers.

Daniella closes her eyes. 'You won't have to.'

Processing her words, Genine pulls back, sceptical of what Daniella is promising. Daniella turns back to the mirror and checks herself before grabbing Genine's hand and walking out of the bathroom.



Genine laughs, mostly out of shock. 'What are you doing?'

'I'm leaving,' Daniella says. She drops Genine's hand and unfastens her jewellery as she storms past queues for refreshments and programmes. Genine runs a little to keep up with her.

One earring hits the floor. Another. The long, twisted string of diamonds is pulled from her neck and thrown onto the plush red carpet. His ring bounces down the stairs, and they step over it without even registering it is there.

Together, they walk offstage forever.

**CHARLIANNE SUTCLIFFE**

# MANGO

He was born in the monsoon, Nepal's rainy season, and came out face up, his eyes tiny beads of wonder. His mother's labour-induced cries were silenced under the metallic sound of the night's rain thrashing against the tin roof of their small home; the room illuminated only by a candle flame and uneven flashes of lightning. After the ordeal was over, she lay on her blood-soaked sheets, cradling her first-born child. A boy. She gently touched his forehead and tearfully prayed to the Gods, thank-

ing them for sending her a son, grateful that all her worries would be washed away along with the thunderstorms. She was only nineteen, but the pressures of village life had already begun to form calluses on her palms and cause a stiffness in her back. Her husband was only able to earn just enough to feed the two of them with the profits made from his mango farm, so having a son was a reassurance - an investment in their future.

She named him Dhan. Rejoicing in the good news, his father planted a sapling that he had

cultivated from a cutting of one of his tallest mango trees. He blessed the angular green stem and its two deep purple leaves as he blanketed its roots in the thick mud, willing it to grow tall and be fruitful. "And may my son grow just the same. May he one day relieve all of our suffering and be our provider, as I never could." Four days later, when the mango farmer's wife was considered pure enough to receive visitors, the villagers poured through her doors to extend their congratulatory well-



wishes and to offer fruit, rice, and unwarranted advice. Everyone praised her for birthing a son, acknowledging that she would be looked after in her old age, extending their prayers that he would be educated abroad and earn enough money to support his family back home.

Such as the mango tree is expected to bear luscious fruit seasonally, the villages of Nepal also preserve their expectations upon a family's first-born son from birth. Yet, when a child is moulded and confined into something he is not, rebellion is inevitable as his roots burst out of the mould, his leaves flourish and branch out into the path the sun sets for him.

Instead of wasting his time on education as his parents insisted, as a child, Dhan preferred to avoid the morning school bus by scaling to the top of his mango tree, which was much more satisfying than being in a dingy classroom all day. The tree had grown tall throughout the years and was steadily forming into the most impressive tree on the farm. There, he would nestle himself comfortably into the aged grooves of the bark, drifting in and out of sleep and watching as the sun glistened upon the yellow paddy fields that covered the landscape. When his stomach rumbled, he bit down into the sticky mangos, the juice dripping down his chin.

From his lookout, he sometimes spied on the King Cobra as its black body writhed stealthily amongst the mud and contorted its neck to watch the villagers working in the fields. The snake would only watch from afar, never getting too close to the humans, yet still observing them with curiosity. Similarly, Dhan spent his childhood days avoiding people. He preferred breathing in the freshness of the damp earth beneath the

mango tree, letting the sun blanket his skin and watching the world go by.

During his teenage years, Dhan's tree became the place where he would hide with his school friends to smoke behind their parents' backs. Then they would lay with their hands behind their necks as darkness fell, the constant buzzing sound of insects chirping around them as they lit small bonfires while singing and laughing together. This place was safe: it was here they could have conversations about school, life, the future, and their families. One night, Dhan blurted out, "I don't know if I can be who my family wants me to be." The other boys laughed. "Yes, you can, my brother," said one of them. "You're their only child. You don't have a choice."

His supposed 'choice' was something that didn't feel real to him. Dhan wasn't academic: there was no way he would be able to work his way to the top of the class and get a scholarship to study in Kathmandu, the dusty capital city. There was no way his English would be good enough to see him study somewhere like Australia, like so many other young people do. At the age of 17, all he knew was the fields and tin-roofed hut that was his home, and all he *wanted* was his home.

But as life would have it, home was not where anyone else wanted him. Three years later, his father took out a loan and Dhan secured a visa to work as a labourer in one of the Gulf countries. The dusty, unbearably humid, urbanised city he was sent to was devoid of colour. It was nothing like home. In the seven years that he remained in Qatar, he found many other of his countrymen working day in and day out on the construction projects. They too, were beaten down men: under-fed, underpaid,

and overworked. What little money they earned was spent on renting an overcrowded room and alcohol that would let them sleep at night. The remainder was sent back to Nepal. When Dhan video called his mother back home once a week, he would force himself to turn his lips into a smile, telling her that he was fine, yes, he had eaten, and asking her if she received the rupees in her bank account yet. She would bless him, update him on his family and the farm and which of the locals had gotten married or moved abroad.

It was an endless cycle. There was never enough money to be earned to even afford a flight ticket back home. Either way, the shame of returning to the village by choice with nothing to show but stress-induced grey hair, a malnourished body and empty pockets was enough to deter him from ever considering it.

One evening, he was in his room playing cards with two of the older men he shared a room with when he got a phone call from his mother. She was crying. She told him that his father had been bitten by a snake while planting rice, and the local doctor had said he wouldn't have much time to live. Dhan felt a constriction in his own stomach. He was to return home immediately.

His father died just as he landed in Kathmandu's Tribhuvan International Airport. Aside from the fourteen days of mourning, where Dhan was cloaked in white and unable to eat anything but unsalted rice and vegetables, there was no time for him to collect his thoughts and decide what he would do with his life. It was already decided for him: he would be engaged to Lakshmi - a suitable girl who would help his mother around the house and look after her when she grew old. The mango farm would

be sold to pay off his family's debts. Then, he would fly back to Qatar and resume his old life.

It wasn't marriage or even leaving home again to work in a country that didn't care whether he lived or died that got to Dhan. No. He couldn't bear to let go of the mango farm. That was the one thing that he saw in his dreams at night that warmed him. The sweet, golden orange, teardrop-shaped fruit that he hadn't tasted in so long. That tree, the one planted by his father on the day he was born, the one he still remembered climbing to gaze up at the sky like the day he was born, belonged to him.

So, he got married, and he applied to renew his visa. But he refused to give up his father's farm. The villagers protested. "You can't provide for your family as a mango farmer! Think of your mother! Think of your wife, and your unborn children!"

They were right. The cycle of poverty would only repeat itself. But at each stage of his life, that magnificent mango tree had grown alongside him. It was a part of him, rooted within his being. So, he climbed it once more with a scythe in hand. He took his own cutting, propagated it, and watched tiny white roots shoot out the end, breathing life into that small glass jar.

He waited as Lakshmi's stomach grew and waited till he heard his son's first cry. He waited until the deal was confirmed, and the money was in his bank account. He waited until his mother was safely settled with his family, far away in the Western region of Nepal where mangoes don't natively grow.

Then he took an axe, and he swung.

# SOLILOQUY

---

They all think it has to do with them.  
Specifically, with them watching. In  
awe and applauding and praising.

It has nothing to do with them.

Cue voices, echoing:  
you can pretend all you want, darling.  
But a spotlight this bright shines right  
through the humbleness, compassion,  
and humility just to come out the other  
side in the shape of an imagined pur-  
pose, the idea of a precious contribu-  
tion to society because validation is the  
ego's favorite meal, a dish best served  
well-lit and in public where everyone  
can witness its consumption.

It's true, but

it has nothing to do with them and ev-  
erything to do with the silence.  
The moment right before, when every-  
thing is still expected but yet to actu-  
ally happen.

Curtain up, lights on. Stillness.

For is it not in this numbing silence, this  
inhale, this itch, this nothing, that most  
is happening, and everyone seems to  
listen? Is it not in the place between  
that love falls apart? The place where  
hope crumbles and Schrodinger keeps  
his pets. In the realm of possibility.



I know she feels at home here. At  
peace and invisible.

And it takes all of nine minutes in  
these plush, velvet seats for me to re-  
member why I prefer to be up there. I  
do not dislike them; I simply envy the  
light. Shining brightly on its own with  
no disregard for the leaking imper-  
fections it might be illuminating.

But there is something awfully lonely  
about feeling most like yourself when  
pretending to be someone else. May-  
be we should talk about that. But  
we won't: so, there she is. Slowly dis-  
appearing in a limelight so strong it  
could turn anyone away from fearing  
the looming darkness of the wings.

I can feel it, slowly scabbing over. Pas-  
sion subdued by reality, well-mean-  
ing smiles, and worried eyes. No fear,  
it's ended.

They've seen right through me. And  
I find myself missing their judicial  
glances capable of dissecting one's  
soul.

For no place in this life has the ability  
to make you feel abundantly infinite  
while simultaneously reminding you  
of your mortality  
as that of

a stage.

---

# TOVA LARSSON

# STAGES OF A GARDEN

I used to view our relationship as a war with many battles that either one of us would win. But you helped me see it as a garden, a majestic and sparkling one that needed care as it went through a multitude of stages.

It might have started with just one flower in which we put all our energy and love. That flower abounded with rich soil, the light of the sun and water. We then experienced for the first time, some levels to it. The first stage was easy, no trust was broken nor any challenges experienced. Love was the only sentiment I felt for you, admiration quickly followed after seeing the commendable and beautiful woman that you were. I was proud to have you as my mother. I thought maybe we were on the same page.

But the further this flower grew, it became more than just a flower.

The second stage became more challenging. It became this garden now filled with other plants such as philodendrons, orchids, irises, and adansonias as well. As time went on, you had to tend to others, our garden seemed to become neglected. Our plants started to miss their nutrients to be able to grow successfully and be fulfilled, but nothing that couldn't be fixed.

Then there was the third stage; you let somebody other than ourselves on our grounds and he destroyed so easily what we had built for years. Thirsty flowers, weakened trees and broken pots were all that was left.

As I look back, I wonder if we could have quickly recovered from this and made the fourth stage easier

for ourselves. But the faith between us was now so little and many obstacles were now encountered.

You told me more than once that if you could redo your life, my siblings and I wouldn't be here. I understood that I wasn't wanted, I wasn't planned, this garden of ours started with a mishandled seed and those living walls were left between us. So why care for it? I couldn't find an answer. I became a teenage gardener who was angry, and I became careless with our greenhouse. You didn't find the strength to deal with it peacefully, but rather with harsh words and strict moves that trimmed me down. More than once, I wanted to lock the door to our piece of land and leave it as it was. Damaged.

Eventually, the fifth stage came when I grew up as an individual. I acquired more skills as a gardener, I became more patient and obtained some wisdom, so I thought I could give it a shot again. I know you tried, too. But we never were aligned on when to put effort into what was broken. Pouring water into a plant that is missing warmth and light is pointless. It felt like a waste of time when I couldn't see the beauty of the yard that I once knew.

In the sixth stage, I became a fraction of an adult, and I felt the pressure coming from you to be one. But I started to understand the type of gardener you were. I have always held you in high regard as the successful woman that you are, but I needed to start seeing you as a human who is also navigating life for the first time in this world: with your wounds and trauma that your family gave you, and difficulties as a young mom leaving her war country for the Occident as well. It made you strong, but also severe and rigid. When I cried to you fearing that I would be a failure, you didn't judge me, but encouraged and told me to believe in myself as there was no such thing as failing in life. You

said that when things don't work out all I had to do was to try again until it would and that you would be there to support me. I have always hated being vulnerable in front of you, but it was one of the only times I felt at ease after bringing you a problem. It felt like you believed in me, and it was the boost I needed to grab the gloves, spades and shovels to work on our garden and handle the next phase. We went through great amelioration in the seventh stage, great amelioration but I realised that it wasn't easy to reconstruct what we had. There are still some cracks here and there, some pots are cracked, some flowers are weaker than others, and if they're mishandled, they'll break. We have to be careful, but I do not worry. Yes, it could be better: but when I look at it, I am satisfied with where we are now. We have come a long way. I'm hoping the next storm won't destroy everything and that we have built strong enough foundations to not let our sacred place be affected again. I have faith that as long as we want to keep maintaining our garden and putting in effort, we will be fine. I am grateful today that we never abandoned it, regardless of the many failed trials that we went through. And I'm sure the next stages of our matriarch and offspring relationship will blossom to create a strong and beautiful jungle.



**RACHEL ZAWADOWSKI**



# STAGE TWO

I am standing in the centre of Stage Two, wearing silver earrings which dangle elegantly from my ears and a tasteful mid-length black dress. There is a microphone in my hand, but I am holding it so naturally that I might not be performing at all, only speaking in a composed and even voice to the person who is my audience. Then, without warning, I trip on the cord. The microphone drops to the floor so that I am forced to drop down to my knees to feel for it. When I pick myself up again and try to talk, my voice stutters and then fails. I should have an easy comment to make, a joke to reassert myself, but it does not come to me. I stare helplessly at the shadow of the seats. The silence is bare and long.

\*

I developed my notion of Stage Two in the last year of primary school. Mr Busby taught us maths twice a week that year-and twice a week- Mr Busby kicked me out of his class. I was too loud and too cheeky. I talked back. I laughed when I shouldn't. We were alphabetised and paired, boy-girl, boy-girl, and the girl with the desk and surname closest to mine behaved faultlessly at all times. Once, I whispered something to her, and she got told off for it by mistake – we were in another class; Mr Busby would never have blamed anyone other than me – and I watched her cry in front

of everyone. I would have preferred a thousand tellings-off to a single tragic tear in front of the class. I never trusted her after that.

Mr Busby hated me, personally. That was clear to me as a ten-year-old. He hated me because he was a Fun Teacher, with long hair and a sense of humour, and I did not play along. He used to play guitar for the class as a treat and get us to stand on our desks, singing old local songs. Looking back, I think he was probably quite sentimental about the songs. I did not see that as a child, or possibly I saw it and didn't care; children have little time for sentimentality, though adults like to get sentimental about them. I would sing hymns that I didn't believe in in Assembly, but I wouldn't sing on the table in maths. I questioned the set-up. I asked what the singing had to do with ratio or algebra. I talked about how much I preferred the after-school logic club, where we learnt to do magic squares. The club was a relief to me: my parents were arguing at that time and didn't always get around to agree-



ing on mundane questions, like which of them would pick me up. After a while, they started paying for me to go to an after-school club, but even then, I was often left there when the other children had gone, and the staff had started vacuuming. I asked for puzzles which I could take away at the logic club to keep me occupied.

We had no isolation unit in our primary school, and anyway, I wasn't badly behaved enough to justify treatment like that. Instead, I always got sent down to another teacher's class. Mrs Stevens had a reputation for being strict and merciless, so this was meant to be a significant punishment. But it did not work because Mrs Stevens loved me and, with equal force, hated teaching maths. Every lesson, she would set an exercise for the rest of the class and then come to the back and sit with me. There, in a discreet tone of voice, harsh enough to sound like a scolding to the rest of the class, she would teach me a different curriculum. She taught me the meaning of the word "advocacy" and explained that if I did not learn to advocate for myself, I would be doubly discriminated against: as a woman and as – she paused here, to consider the available terms – a minority. We had learnt about discrimination in Citizenship, though I had thought of it as something free-floating, unconnected to the cruel things which other children and some adult strangers said to me. Years later, I wondered whether that was her interpretation of Mr Busby: that he had discriminated against me. Then I tied myself up in knots, wondering whether it was my interpretation too.

Unlike me, Mrs Stevens knew how to advocate for herself. She printed copies of complaints that she had sent to various institutions and companies and presented them to me. I was meant to learn from the wording, which was formal and

precise and uncompromising, and from the process set out in them. Most of her complaints started at Stage One, which a single manager considered. When she was unhappy with that lone manager's response (which she always was), she escalated it to Stage Two. I could see that Mrs Stevens took great pleasure in Stage Two, which gave her an audience beyond a single team. The people involved in Stage Two were different in different places, she explained. Sometimes, it was a higher-up manager. Sometimes, it was a person called an Investigating Officer. I recognised the tone in which she said *Investigating Officer*. It was a tone which my mum used in arguments with my dad, particularly when she said *that woman*. I was in the school play that year, and we alternated between two rooms. There was a drama room with no stage, only a linoleum floor and blue stacked chairs, and there was the big school hall where we would perform the show. I imagined Stage One as the drama room and Stage Two as the hall. These days, I am too distant from my ten-year-old mind to know whether I really thought that it worked that way – whether I believed that there was a physical stage somewhere where Mrs Stevens performed all of those complaints. But the image stuck with me. When I was kicked out of my friendship group in the first year of secondary school, I reached for Stage Two to rehearse my grievances. In Year Nine, I practised arguing that I should be allowed to make GCSE choices, which disrupted the timetable to reduce the advantage that a child at a private school would have over me. In sixth form, I worked out how to persuade my dad that his new wife was wrong when she said that I'd been raised badly, that I was spoiled and lazy and just like my mum.

I admitted my system only once as an undergraduate. I was speaking to a professor

who clearly resented being lumped with pastoral responsibilities, and I told her about it because her face and mannerisms reminded me of Mrs Stevens. I knew at once that I had made a mistake.

“The reality is that many people won’t listen to you,” she said, in the hard, telling-it-like-it-is voice which she was known for, “no matter how persuasive your argument. Because of who you are.”

\*

I am still standing there, in the middle of the stage, but I am no longer sure who I am speaking to. It might be the man who told me the other day, *Don't quote my own words back to me. Do you realise how crazy you sound when you do that?* Or it might be the boss who recently mused, midway through an event about diversity in our industry, *Well, you're trying to get noticed in a very competitive field, I don't know that you can blame racism.*

For all these years, I realise, I have been looking at Stage Two as if I am my own audience. I have been watching and admiring myself, and assuming that because I see it that way, the real people in the seats must feel the same. That is the trick I learnt from Mrs Stevens, whose complaints – I must have known this, I must have realised – never got her anywhere. I enter into my own body on the stage, which I now feel to be tense, agitated, not at all composed. For the first time, I look out from the stage. There is nobody in the audience.

## MOLLY CORLETT

# THE ART OF JUGGLING





The stage is sparse, just a chair and a table with a water bottle and a script. A woman stands in the center. She's trying to act professional, but her mind is elsewhere. She speaks quickly, like someone whose to-do list never shrinks, only expands. Her tone alternates between frantic, heartfelt, and biting humor.

**MOM**

Hi, hi, hi! Sorry, I'm late. I know. Childcare...of course. *Of course.* You try to sneak out of the house, like a ninja. Like...an actual ninja. Stealth mode. But then you hear this small voice behind you, like a horror movie. "Mommy, where are you going? Mom, why don't you love me? Mommy, are you going to die?" Wait...WHAT?! And suddenly you're explaining existential concepts like "auditioning" to a three-year-old who just spent ten minutes eating a crayon.

So, here I am. *Breathing.* Ready with my energy ball. On the ball.

(Pause. Waits for laugh. When none comes, she takes a breath like she's calming herself)

You need me to do a monologue, yes? Something serious, yes, got it, yes. Okay, yes, I have something...Can I take this?

(A phone is ringing. She takes it from her back pocket).

Okay, so no. Yeah. No phones. Right, totally understand, totally professional environment. I'll just let my husband know I can't take this call.

(Takes the call quickly, hushed and frantic mumbling into phone. She is not happy as clearly frustrated with the person on the other line).

We'll just ignore the fact that my toddler is *actively* playing arts curator with an open container of yogurt as we speak, naked, because my husband couldn't find the fingerpaints or pants apparently, and why can't I just be home to straighten everything out!? But sure. Let's do art!

(She shakes herself out, stands up tall, and closes her eyes dramatically for a moment. She begins a Shakespearean monologue, overacting a bit at first).

"Come, you spirits

That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,

And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full

Of direst cruelty!"

(She stops abruptly, and looks around like she's just remembered something).

Wait, did you say you wanted contemporary? Or Shakespeare?

No, wait, you want *me*, right? You don't want me pretending I've had time to study Lady Macbeth while I was cleaning up goldfish crackers. No, you want to see the raw talent. The passion. You want me to deliver something *real*—but not, like, “real-life-as-a-mom” real, because if that's the case, my monologue would just be me listing grocery items while trying to find socks or my sanity in a toy box. VERY...method.

(She lets out a nervous laugh, and runs her hands through her hair).

Sorry, sorry. I just—what's the phrase? “Controlled chaos”?

Yeah. My life is that. Except without the controlled part. Have you ever tried to rehearse for an audition while someone repeatedly slaps you in the face with a plushy insisting you be the baddie while they be the goodie? No? Okay, well, it's great for building focus. Like, laser focus. Who knew being an actor would involve so much...dodging?

(She dramatically mimes dodging a stuffed animal.)

I'm sorry—what did you ask? How do I balance it all? Oh, yeah, sure, balance! Ha! It's like this magical word people love to throw around. Like, “Oh, you're a mom *and* an artist?

How do you balance that?” And I want to say, “Oh, super easy.

First, I hire a full-time nanny, then I summon a personal chef, and, of course, my husband does half the housework without me having to ask!”

(Beat, sarcastically).

Because *that* happens.

No, seriously. Balance. I've read about it. Like some women apparently *schedule* time for themselves? Like, they actually *schedule* a time to sit and read or take a bath. Meanwhile, the only thing I'm scheduling is play date time, and doctor visit time, and I'm so glad my in-laws live a full state away.

(She takes a swig of water, as if to punctuate her life choices).

But, you know, you make sacrifices. Like, who needs sleep, right? I can survive on coffee and kitten tears! Why not? And let's not forget the artistry of motherhood — because every morning is a performance piece where I act like I'm *not* losing my mind while getting my child into pants. Pants! The simplest of garments, yet the most impossible to negotiate with a tiny dictator contortionist.

(Suddenly, she drops back into the Shakespearean monologue, seamlessly, over-dramatizing every word).

“Look like th' innocent flower,

But be the serpent under 't.”

(She breaks character just as abruptly).

Because, really, that's what it is, right? A losing match. I'm losing at the mom thing, the acting thing, the keeping-up-with-

basic-hygiene thing. My stinky kiddo smells better than I do on most days, and that's because his bath time is non-negotiable.

But for me? I have to *schedule* a shower, and even then, I'm lucky if I get five minutes before someone's banging on the door like, "MOMMY! MOMMY! I HAVE TO TELL YOU SOMETHING REALLY IMPORTANT! MOMMY!!!"

(She stops, takes a breath like she's trying to calm herself down).

You know, I love acting. I do. I love the way it feels when you're on stage and it's just...magic. It's the one time where all the noise in my head quiets down. The million things on my to-do list? Gone. The endless laundry pile? Vanished. The fact that I haven't had a real adult conversation in...what day is it? That doesn't matter, because for those few minutes, I get to be someone else. Someone who isn't constantly wiping snot from noses or poop from asses.

I've also mastered the art of the *dramatic* pause. Like, when you hear that sudden silence and you know...something's gone wrong. Silence is never good. Silence means trouble. Silence means someone is probably drawing on the walls with ketchup

again. And don't even get me started on tantrums. I can time those things like I'm doing a scene study. I see the buildup, the conflict, the tension—and then...release. Usually in the form of screaming because I dared to give my child the *wrong* blue cup.

(She pulls out the phone again, glances at it, then sheepishly puts it back away).

Right, I know, no phones! But just for the record, if I don't answer this text in the next two minutes, there's a real chance my living room will look like an episode of *Survivor*.

(She pauses, and looks at the imaginary casting directors).

Do you want to know why I'm still doing this? Why I'm here? Why I keep trying to act, even though my life is...well, this? It's because I want my kid to see me doing something I love. I want him to see that it's okay to chase after your dreams, even if you're tired, even if you've got yogurt in your hair, even if it's hard. Especially when it's hard.

(She takes a breath, as if to steady herself. This moment is sincere, no humor).

I want him to know that art is messy, and so is life. And that's okay. That's...beautiful, even.

(She glances at the directors, and smiles softly).

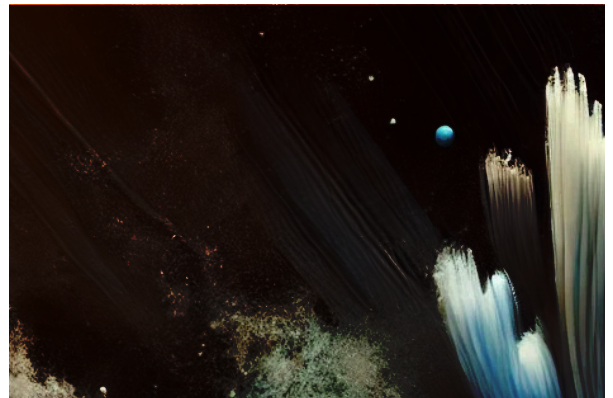
But mostly, I'm doing this because...let's face it, it's the only time I get to wear pants without an elastic waistband.

(She steps forward, taking her final stance, ready for whatever comes next).

Ok, so shall I start again?

**STEPHANIE LEIGH ROSE**

# THE COLOURS OF A BRUISE



**White:**

A forearm, an elbow, and a shoulder take turns pressing my head against the floor. My teeth compress against my own gums. I taste iron and hear a squeak that suddenly puts me back in primary school again. I'm a prepubescent up against the mercy of a postpubescent. Only the bully on top of me designed the bridge I commute over each morning and chairs the Greenwich Village Chess Society meetings every other fortnight.

An unlikely window of space liberates my neck. I sit up and draw in enough breath to register an upward inclined, "Sorry!" before a knee embeds stars in my eye socket.

"Our belt system works in stages," says the man with mutilated ears who just dismissed our class. He gestures to my waistline, "White, blue, purple, brown, then black."

"Sounds like you're describing the colours my eye is about to turn!" I grin and remove the cold flannel from my fresh bruising.

His chuckle is contrived. "That'll happen less as you improve. White belt is the most violent stage in some ways because people are still learning to use their bodies."

I unfold the sweaty bundle of material with deliberate lethargy as I place it in the kitchen's washing machine. My Grandpop's eyebrows rise. He's too stubborn to wear his glasses in the house, but I know if he didn't clock the Black Triangle stamped on that outfit, he definitely noticed my rouged eye. I shower without exchanging a word with him.

My *gi* dominates the clotheshorse like an unaddressed trophy all evening. I know my Grandpop is thinking "Kimono." I know he's tracking his years of Judo and has already concluded this will last less than the trial period. He thought the same about business school.

The guy might have the face of a Johnny Cash song. But it's as readable as a Pepa Pig picture book.

**Blue:**

I never felt the pleasure of the game "mercy" as a child. I was always the nail, never the mallet. Now I have less disdain for the boogeymen of my childhood. Part of me understands now. To greet the ex-rugby league player on his first day with a grin. Knowing I'm about to watch his preconceptions about physics fall away under my body. To pull on his arm and feel the tap—his call for mercy. We've all got a touch of sadism in us given the correct packaging.

The marketers will tell you it's a humbling sport—and sure, I still take my bitter medicine from the higher belts with a grimace—but for me, it's been the opposite.

I walk the Brooklyn streets with my chest puffed twice as wide. They've noticed it at work as well, down at the stock exchange I'm thriving from *opening bell* till the markets close. There's talk of promotions. I've got digits in my account that snort at talk.

My Grandpop and I are closer than we've ever been. He produced his old Judo black belt after my blue turned up. That ancient thing is so faded it's almost white again. I love to watch his mitt-like hands flit through photo albums from his competition days. He never spoke a single word of his dreams while grandma was alive—shit, we might have said four words a night to each other before I threw that *gi* in the washer. But last Thursday he confessed that he always thought he'd open his own gym one day. I guess the bodega took precedence somewhere along the line.

I'll never say the line, "I always thought." I think and I know exactly where I'm headed. They say it takes ten years to earn a black belt—I'm getting mine in five, and one day I'll start my own gym as a nod to the old boss. One that's a bit cleaner, one that doesn't keep giving me all these skin infections. I'm sick of plucking pus-filled hairs from my thighs after training.

**Purple:**

My ears have been spared the mangled, cauliflower texture that my black belt professor wears with pride, but this sport has left other marks on my body. A penny-sized scar now stamps the inside of my thigh. That's a reminder of the six weeks I spent at Mount Sinai.

What started as an infected hair follicle, burrowed a finger-length hole into my thigh and sent my ward doctors into hushed tones. Terms like "antibiotic resistant" and "exponential spread" became unwelcome visitors in our daily updates. I cheated amputation. So much for a black belt within five years though. I couldn't train for eighteen months after that. That's almost long enough to reconsider whether colliding with air-headed twenty-year-olds is worth it any more.

I won't pretend that period was all gloom, however. Some heart complications planted my Grandpop in the next ward for almost my entire stint. It was great fun telling him about my new company, the side investments and of course, the girls!

I'll tell you, it's a lot easier to ask a young sweetie if she wants to come back to your place when you're talking about a loft you own rather than the dinky apartment above your Grandpop's bodega!

Pop loved that. That got him reminiscing about things that in most settings would have you gripping the fabric of your armchair for it to stop!

Who ever thought I'd be here?

It's humbling. To think I owe most of it to that dorky engineer and his misplaced knee on my first day!

**Brown:**

Most people who look down at their brown belt for the first time say something like, "I don't deserve this." Imposter syndrome, I guess? Building it up into some big thing. Remembering what the brown belts used to be able to do to you when you first started.

I deserve mine. I deserved it two years ago.

Professor Barboza thinks I've got an attitude problem though, and a commitment problem to match.

Trust me, I wish I had more time to train. But my life as a day trader doesn't always harmonise with a civilian's schedule, and let's be real, this is about money not attendance.

Sure, I missed a couple of my membership payments, but I've also been here for nine years! My skill on the mat is part of what you're selling. No discount for that?

I know what he's thinking though. Sees my suit, sees my Merc. Thinks I'm stiffing him. Clearly not familiar with the term liquidity, are you veggie ears? I had a deal go sour. It happens. You can't be in this game for any amount of time without it happening.

Now that I'm out on my own, I've got to hustle for both time and money.

I'm not on my own in all senses mind you. Turns out one of those honeys who came back to the loft decided she wanted to stay.

We've got a date set in Bali for a beach wedding. I'm holding my Grandpops invite until I hear back from him on the deal I pitched.

He's all conservative about risk, I get it. But the guy owns the land his bodega is on. One underwrite, that's all he needs to do. Passive as Professor Barboza when he decides it's time for one of his students to teach the class on one of his hung over days!

We'll see. Not holding my breath. He's getting scratchy in his old age.

**Black:**

I always assumed my pop would be the one to tie my black belt for me. He'd turn up in his old Judo Kimono, *his* black belt on. He'd bow, and we'd share a nice teary moment.

For a stretch there, mainly when he had his heart scare, I was worried he wouldn't be around to see this day. He predicted that himself, actually.

"I worked my whole life for this business, and with one coked-up trade, you've ruined me! You've killed me, son. You've killed me!"

I didn't kill the old drama queen though. He's alive and well. I hear he moved in with some rich widow up in Ohio. I hear he's secured a lease on an old Judo dojo. Seems to be doing alright. I thought about texting him a photo of the belt, but I know he doesn't know how to work a phone. It's better just to leave it.

I got my first black eye since the day I walked into the smell of sweat and vinegar. Full circle, ay?

It came courtesy of the wife. She saw a picture on my phone. One of a pair of pants without any belt keeping them up. I spent next month's membership getting them all framed. They'll look so good on the wall. White, blue, purple, brown. I'm renting now so I can't put nails into the wall. But one day. I'll get back there. Funny to think they're just strips of fabric. But they've made me so much more than I was.

# HAMISH KAVANAGH



# THE STAGE



**A new play is beginning. They put a blue bed in the centre of the wood floor and roll it towards the audience. When the red curtain opens, a young actor comes to the stage and starts his monologue.**

**The blue and white lights come from the top of the stage, they interweave and project onto the actor's pyjamas. The wood floor creaks when he stamps his bare left foot.**

I can feel the tremble, breath, even the heartbeat. Sometimes they lie on top of me, act as though they are dead. Their sweat and tears drop onto my body, and I taste the salt.

I don't mind that they place everything on me. A broom. Wooden box. Painting. As long as I can hold their weight. The stairs are always there, one with my flesh. My favourite prop is the piano, it only has simple white and black colours but is full of magic. When they put their fingers on it, I hear a beautiful melody. It flows from the piano and wraps me up, lingers with me. I vibrate slightly to the rhythm of the music. When they turn on the lights, behind the curtains, I am like a canvas, letting the shadows of a coat rack, a chair and a lamp paint on my blankness.

I looked old before. The curtain was rust-red as though someone had sprinkled it with dust. Then they changed it to a new red curtain. Now, when the white lights shine on it, it looks like a rose with dewdrops or a red velvet jewellery box with sparkling diamonds inside. I am proud to have it as a part of me.

The leather shoes rub me, the hard knees hit me, the soft face touches me, the pointed cane jabs me, the hemline strokes me -- I like it when the dress with layers of ruffles ripples over me.

Sometimes, before and after a performance, they sit down and talk. They can be tense or relaxed, putting their calloused palms on me. I can feel their temperature, which makes me shake and creak gently under their palms. And I, I bring different sweet and poignant dreams to drive them crazy, let them laugh or cry.

**LUWAN WANG**



# THE QUESTION OF A GREAT IMPORTANCE



Once upon a time in the Grand Library of Existence, five eternal forces of the human story gathered: Action, Background, Climax, Development, and Ending. Each believed they held the key to shaping human life, and so, a debate began to determine who was truly the most important.

Action, being the oldest among them, spoke first. His voice was calming yet powerful. "Without me, nothing happens! I ignite movement; I spur decisions. Every adventure, every choice, begins with my push. Imagine life without action – it would be stagnant, a river that never flows." The words echoed throughout the library like a hurricane landing on the bookshelves and imprinting in the books.

The moment of silence was interrupted by Background who smiled patiently, watching Action's boldness. "But you can't act in a void," she countered, her voice soft like a breeze. "It is I who give context, who paints the world where everything takes place. Without me, there is no setting, no experience, no meaning to movement. I create a world that breathes life into every story." Everyone seemed to reluctantly nod while Action turned away, hiding his smoggy face in his hood.

Development stepped in, got up from the golden sofa and spread his arms around. "You two may start the

story, but it is I who makes it grow. I am the moment of learning, the arcs of change. Without me, there is no growth, no progress and characters stay flat and inexperienced. I help them grow; I build the journey, piece by piece.” The voice, silent like an ocean before a storm, bumped into the walls and fell on books, making them slightly move. The wind burst into the library and blew the dust off the bookshelves, revealing its titles.

It was Climax’s turn to speak, vibrant and intense, eyes gleaming with importance. “Progress is crucial, sure. But everything, and I mean everything, builds up to me. I am the moment of truth, the heartbeat of every life story. The turning point when everything changes. What is life without a pivotal moment? Forgettable and boring!” like poisonous arrows, his words cut everyone deeply in the core and started arguments among them, with only one listening to the last sibling’s words.

“Silence!”, shouted Action with irritation in his voice before turning with a warm smile to the last speaker, Ending. “You all miss one thing,” she said. She was covered with a big black coat, so even her face was hidden, and only the voice, whispering and metallic, made its way out. “Every story, every life, needs closure. Without me, there is no resolution. I am the reason that everyone’s lives have any meaning, and as a result, I offer peace for everyone who seeks for it. I am the lesson, the final word!” The last words came out with the gasp and made everyone silent for a moment.

After a while, with no certain answer

and believing in their own importance, the beings left the library one by one, leaving behind disheveled books while the wind on the shelves burned out candles. With the last being closing the door, the candle lit up in the center, illuminating the entire library. A weary old storyteller stepped forward from the shadows with eyes like an abyss and brighter than an eternal flame. He took a book from the shelf and softly wiped away the dust on it, showing the front, a young girl who was trying to find her way in life while making questionable decisions. The smile touched his lips as he knew the truth of the “Great Importance” which was hidden from other beings.

**ILIYA URAZOVA**

# THE HONEYMOON PHASE

“So, when you talk about me to your friends, what do you introduce me as?” I asked curiously. We were both lying in bed, one month into dating and minutes after finishing...well...finishing. I laid on his bear-coated chest and wondered how bad my makeup looked now. There was no way my eyeliner was still a sharp edged knife after the exercise we just had.

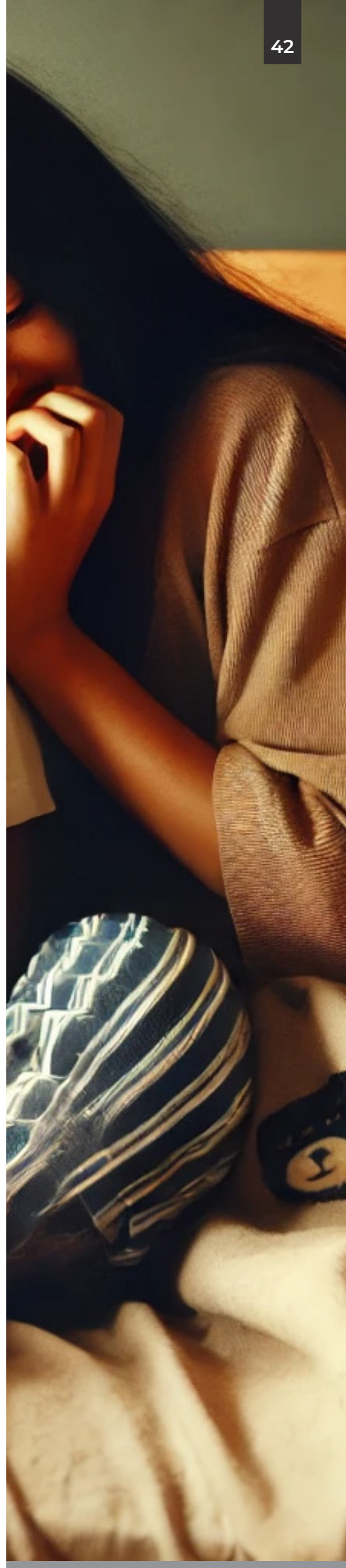
“I introduce you as Nemeche.” He answered honestly, barely turning away from the Italian meme on his phone. He laughed at his screen, and I wondered ‘Could it really be that funny?’ He had just finished telling me how comfortable he was just lying with me naked. The girls he dated in the past always made him feel like going into hibernation whenever they finished having sex, but he enjoyed talking to me about the sports games I honestly didn’t care about and showing me short clips of Andrew Schulz’s new comedy special unclad.

I was starting to be comfortable with him, too. Seven dates later and I could say it was honestly progressing nicely. He had seen how I’ve always taken one too many photos, impulsively buying a light purple bubble gun, crying twice, and my makeup-free, cheetah spotted face.

I repeat. He has seen me without makeup.

“No. I mean, what do you introduce me AS?” I insisted.

I froze. I had let my thoughts run free after he said he was comfortable. My mind was a hamster on a wheel; constantly running with no destination. I wondered if he had already introduced me to his friends because he was comfortable. I wondered, what did they think about me? Would they



want to see me again? When will I be ready to introduce him to my friends? What will they think of him? What do I say when they meet? “Hey. Here’s the guy I’ve been sleeping with.” Would he be offended if I introduced him as my friend? It was all innocent. I swear! I didn’t mean to ask him the very cliché, girly-girl, slightly insecure question of “What

Are  
We?”

“So, we’re going to play that game?” he asked, interrupting my spiraling.

“Nooo! Forget I said anything. Don’t answer that.” I rolled out of his arms and grabbed my pillow to my lap and started to slowly rock back and forth. I wanted to go into hibernation now.

“But I -” He pressed on.

“No!”

“Will you-”

“Don’t!”

“Let me-”

“I’m asking you to forget I said anything. Oh my gosh. I’m going to throw up. I can’t believe I just said that.” He laughed and tried to pull me back into his arms. “It’s okay,” he insisted. But it was not okay. I didn’t want to ask him that question. At least not yet. I prided myself on not being a stereotypical girl, and with one move, that was all thrown out the window. I didn’t want to worry about where we were going. I wasn’t concerned. I was intent on ‘going with the flow.’ But, I was also scared of what his response would be. Everything was going beautifully, and now I ruined it. He was going to leave my apartment and then I would never hear from him again. I heard enough stories from friends who ventured out too far in the “What are we?” territories and had my own experiences to confirm this was indeed true. ‘Well, it was fun while it lasted,’ I thought to myself. “I promise you; I didn’t mean for it to come out that way. I was just curious

what your friends thought I was to you.” I tried to salvage whatever was probably left of us.

“I tell them you’re my girl.” I closed my eyes and tried to remember the sound of that statement. The intonation, the tone, every pause between each word. I’m his girl? I hid my face in the pillow to hide the cheesy, shit-eating grin on my face.

“But right now, we are just dating and getting to know each other. Is that okay?”

I nodded into the pillow, not caring if he saw me. It was okay.



**NEMEICHE BLAKE**

# NON-FICTION



# BEING ON STAGE



# 40

Is it just a number? Would the excitement I felt about my son turning 10 be multiplied by 4? Mmm. As my birthday approached, friends would say, "It's gonna be alright," like I was about to have a colonoscopy. Nobody was rushing to throw confetti. Is it because we're now officially middle-aged? When you're 30, you can still do 20-something stuff, like go to bed late and not feel like you have a hangover from hell the next day because you slept less than 8 hours.

Once I turned 40 in 2021, I felt something break inside of me – like standing on a stage, looking at the audience and forgetting all my lines.

I started acting when I was 13, after a breakdown, one of those teenage moments when you feel pressured from every angle, and a school counsellor suggested I do something fun on the weekends. At acting school, I found my place in the world, where everything made sense. I spent the following 12 years improving my craft, all the

way to university. But by then my life involved moving from country to country and I didn't make room for that central part of me.

In 2011, I inched towards the theatre again and spent a year at The Theatres Trust, where I designed their resource center, creating a library with unique categories centered around theatre. In 2022, I took up singing lessons, and a year later I signed up for musical theatre classes. Over the past 43 years, the theatre has brought me a sense of purpose and connection, and I decided to interview people who share my love for the stage.

At The Theatres Trust I met **Kate**, a cultural enthusiast who always enjoyed being in the audience or helping backstage more than performing. She has vivid memories of attending shows as a child, and took her degree in Architecture to the Trust, where her love for theatre grew. "Each theatre has its own character... the theatre is a place where people interact, where they go to forget." She now takes dance lessons and feels that performance can be freeing, through "purposeful movement and self-expression... you shed a layer you didn't

even know you had."

1st March 2022 – first day singing lessons. Anxious and eager, I was ready for something new. It didn't matter that I'd never sing on Broadway, I was just thrilled to learn.

**Florencia**, my singing teacher, trained in Argentina. We meet online weekly despite the ocean and 10,000 kilometres between us. For Florencia, who holds a degree in performance,



the stage is a healing place. "It helps us express certain emotions or live vicariously through a character, it helps us feel identified, to see someone else's point of view," which helps actors become more empathetic.

"Going onstage is a unique experience that combines happiness and pressure – you feel the joy of showcasing the result of your hard work over months coupled with anxiety." As soon as she steps on the stage, the anxiety melts away and she enjoys

the performance. Some lessons from the stage include teamwork and improvising, because the theatre is a communal space and also a place to practice flexibility – life on and off stage never follows the script perfectly.

Performers need the support of loved ones, she says, because to grow as an artist you need your own audience that you know will be there for you. Mutual support from other cast members is also crucial – complementing each other and helping each other out becomes a healing and learning experience too.

Through singing lessons, I found out that I could actually improve my singing, dispelling the myth that good singers were born with the skill. But was singing enough?

I went online and searched: "theatre class London", and BAM! I bumped into Stage and the City (SATC) and joined in September 2023 what I thought was a regular musical theatre class. Instead, I found out on Day 1 that we'd be performing at a charity showcase in 12 weeks. I met Tabea and Jasmin, newcomers too, and Shalini, who'd been attending for three years.

**Tabea**, a passionate musical-goer and performer, grew up in Switzerland watching Disney classics (especially Aladdin and Hercules), and as a pre-teen fell in love with Glee. She took singing and dance classes separately (hip-hop, street dance, jazz), and loved being transported to a different world when performing. “There’s something powerful about being somebody else. It’s magical.”

After watching *The Lion King* at 15 she felt compelled to watch every show that came to Basel, but there weren’t many. She made up for it on every trip to London, and moved here in 2020, “to the heart of musicals”. Like me, she wanted to start performing again and combine dance and singing, but had a lot of self-doubt and was nervous when she signed up and compared herself to other people. Unlike previous bad experiences where she felt left behind, at SATC she felt very welcome. Now that she’s reconnected with the stage, she’s not ready to let go: “There’s the energy from the audience... The moment right before you go onstage I forget everything for a second and I go on, and it all comes back with the adrenaline.” She lights up when she talks about it. It’s almost like the stage is a fountain of life we’re all drinking from as we perform. The feedback from the audience makes it all worth it.

**Jasmin** still experiences that nervous feeling before going onstage despite 25 years of performing and dancing at venues such as Kensington Olympia and Jamsil Stadium in Korea. A 31-year-old Londoner, Jasmin worked in Korea as a model and dancer and represented the UK at the K-pop World Festival (2013).

When she was six, she saw Shakira performing “Whenever, Wherever” and

thought, “I wanna do that!” Her mum signed her up for dance lessons (tap, ballet) and she remembers her first performance: she was nervous but as soon as she started dancing, she felt this energy and felt it was the right place to be. At 16, she started a K-pop dance team with some friends, 9034K, and acknowledges that if she can achieve great things onstage, “What’s stopping me from doing anything amazing continuing on?” Nothing can stop someone once they lean onto that confidence. “The cheers from the crowd give you an extra spirit boost and you feed off their energy and they feed off yours...it brings people together. There’s a spiritual thing.”

**Shalini** always wanted to be an actress, and did some work as a TV extra, but then leaned into her passion for humanitarian work. But she always wanted to do something theatrical – she’s always felt the need to entertain and perform, she enjoys lighting up a room and making it erupt with laughter. In 2020, she signed up for SATC, and while she knew she wasn’t the best singer or dancer, she wanted to do it for herself and be on that stage for the showcase. She loved the thrill of the show and all the backstage moments bonding with castmates, and called the experience “addictive”.

**Anna**, the founder of SATC (part of the Anna Fiorentini Performing Arts School), identified as a shy teenager and is grateful to the stage for helping her come out of her shell. Anna was cast as the Ugly Duckling at the age of six and knew she wanted to be an actress. She was so passionate about pursuing an acting career and attending drama school that she fundraised to pay her fees; and later started her business from the ground up to bring drama workshops to others. In her twenties, nothing would get in the way



of her acting career, whereas now, in her fifties, her school is “her baby” and finds it very rewarding. She sees her school’s impact on children, who grow in confidence and self-esteem; while adult students say it helps with anxiety and isolation too, forming a small community of performers.

One day I was catching up with **Sada**, whose son attends school with mine, when we realized she had attended Anna’s school on a scholarship as a teenager, and twenty years later still feels the impact: “I’m comfortable speaking up for myself, talking in front of people.”

Drama was a form of escape, to express herself in ways she wasn’t allowed to as a young African girl growing up in a strict household. When she was gifted the opportunity of being someone else, she grabbed it with both hands and enjoyed embodying somebody else’s life even for a little bit. “And the energy you get from the crowd is addictive,” she says, remembering her showcase at the Hackney Empire.

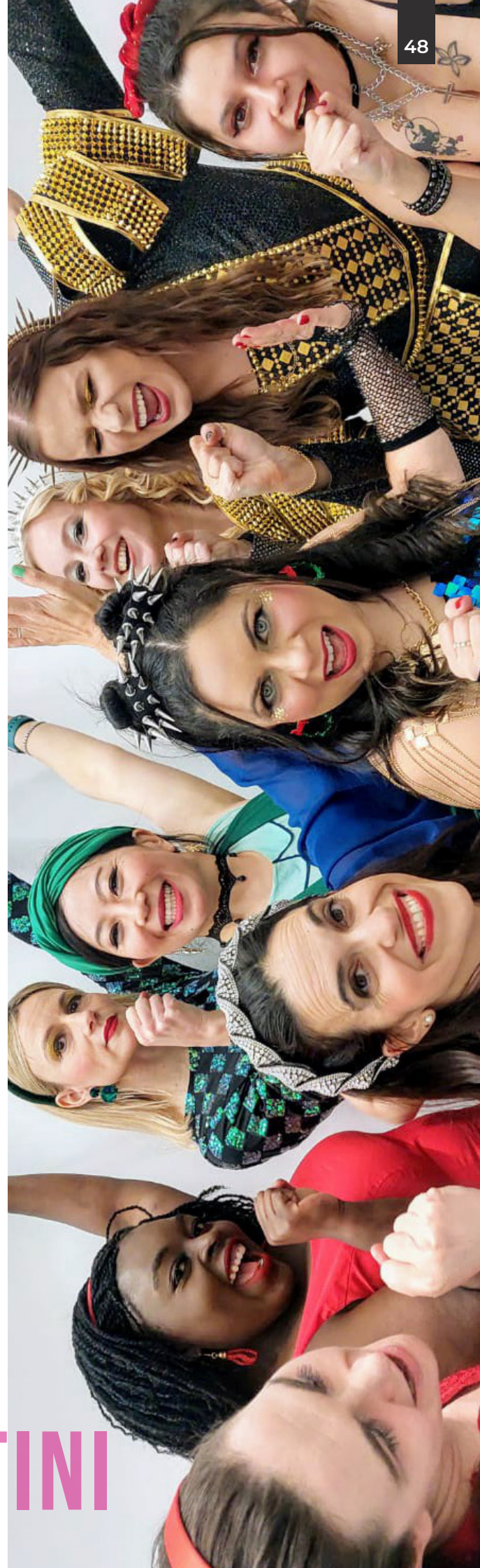
She did an online acting course for a term recently, but her busy life meant she had to discontinue it, though she would love to explore more scriptwriting and directing.

The stage is as complex as human nature. While the theatre is a place where we can escape reality, I never feel freer and more like myself when I’m onstage, and I am grateful I was able to return in my forties.

Once I turned 40 in 2021, I felt something break inside of me – like standing on a stage, looking at the audience and forgetting all my lines.

I started acting when I was 13, after a breakdown, one of those teenage moments when you feel pressured from every angle, and a school counsellor suggested I do something fun on the weekends.

# EUGENIA SESTINI



# FINAL FRAME



I've found that things end in life very similarly to the way they do in the last shot of a film; that is to say, things rarely sweep perfectly into symmetry. Explanations aren't often given, neither are resolutions. Just like films, moments more often simply end. This makes the most sense, even to me.

The shift from life to memory is subtle, and though it happens every second, we always seem surprised by it, by the fact that we can no longer touch or revisit what was once ours, except in remembrance.

For the five of us, this shift occurred in the middle of many moments. It was much like the feeling you'd get when submerging yourself underwater and expecting to break the surface, realising that you'd missed a lot in just those few seconds. Except when we'd come up for air, everything was just as we left it.

I could feel these shifts occurring at the exact moments that they passed from the "now" into the "then." Before Tori moved to Utrecht, before Grace moved to Miami, before Abby moved to Oklahoma, before Karlie moved to Manhattan, and before I moved to London, I felt them slipping away from me. I watched as their bodies became more real to my memory than to my senses: my eyes, my ears, my skin. It was then that I realised that to eventually have the memory of something is far better than to have forgotten it or to never have had it at all.

Some of the best moments were over bottles of wine, as they tend to be. In Matera, in Haarlem, at home. Perhaps the first time I noticed the shift, however, was at Karlie's townhouse. She, Grace, and I all nervously sat in the

living room, not quite sure of how to act around one another yet. The dynamic we'd soon build among us waited on the sidelines, watching. You know that feeling when you're with people for the first time outside of wherever you met them: work, school, the cereal aisle in the grocery store? The lack of the comfort that a common environment provides is like a rug yanked out from under your feet; it reminds you that you don't know anything about what's going to happen, and there is nothing you can do to control whatever is coming.

I remember there was a touch of uncertainty present, holding all of us back an almost unnoticeable amount; imperceptible as it may have been, it was sturdy and unmovable. There was a silence you would never have heard unless you truly focused, and really knew how to listen; it rested between the splinters of wood in the floorboards we walked on; it was a part of the air the three of us were breathing in. Though we were speaking and laughing and the house was filled with it, silence moved in our chairs as we fidgeted in them; it crawled around on my tongue as I wondered what to say to a new friend.

The perspective that memory gives us has led me to recognise this feeling as one that exists only before you know what your life is about to become: that feeling you can only put your finger on once the moment is long past.

It happened again as we walked through the ruins in Rome, a different silence among us, a knowing one; a silence that does not need to ask questions or fear the discomfort

that is attached to that lack of comfort. It happened all of these times and more: the five of us watching the clock at work turn to 04:00, not feeling the least bit tired as we talked about absolutely nothing important, things I will never forget, things I have based my religion on. The summer chats we'd have on the porch as the sun went down at 9 pm and the salt had long since dried on our skin; later sitting under the stars, listening to the crickets chirping still and feeling the sweltering heat even though the sun had gone to rest many hours ago.

I think, truly, it was most surreal when we drank mezcal out of teacups at strangers' houses, danced for no reason other than the dance itself, played cards, and rode roller coasters more than we probably had in our childhood. Yes, it happened during our impulsive trips, our impulsive everything; our plans that gave up trying to be followed as the conversation took over, re-routing our course.

All of these things brought us here to the end. Now I'm finding I can't remember – when were the last times?

When I said I was never coming back home, I meant it. There was never any coming back to this. As I packed my books and candles and notes away, I knew I would find them again in one year, two, maybe even five, and see myself already looking back on this time, this period where all I did was live. I'll be back here one day, but I'll never go back, not there; not that couch, that courtyard, that bar, and those people and *this*, this "now". It will be frozen in time – and one day, it will not even be that. But it will matter, always, because it mattered to us.

We mattered to each other here, we

matter to each other now – and that's all that matters, anyway.

Every moment between us is infinite, recurring forever. Every laugh and tear and idea lives on in the same way that Oliver pulled Elio up off the bed and didn't let go of his hand afterward. Our moments live on in the lingering touch of lovers: the uncertainty between two people who don't know if the other feels the same. The moments of assurance between two who reach absentmindedly for their partner's hand in a moment of need, of joy, of celebration, of mundanity. I realise now that we can only look back at these things once they're past, *because* they've passed. We see all of our lives as they were when we were with each other, and we didn't quite realise that not only were we living – we were doing it together. Only once we started to live apart did we see it.

We think that, naively and egotistically, we are not victims to time, that things will always live on forever, that we will hold onto people and places always, and nothing will ever change. How prideful! How idiotic and vain!

In those special hours of the morning when everything is quiet, all other life slumbers and we are left truly alone, everything else falls away. A part of me may always rest there.

One thing I know for sure is that life happens in the lingering. In a touch, a glance, a word. It's in the halfhearted, submissive, and disbelieving but genuine attempts all the same, pushing for one last time. When nothing can be recreated we are glad because it means what

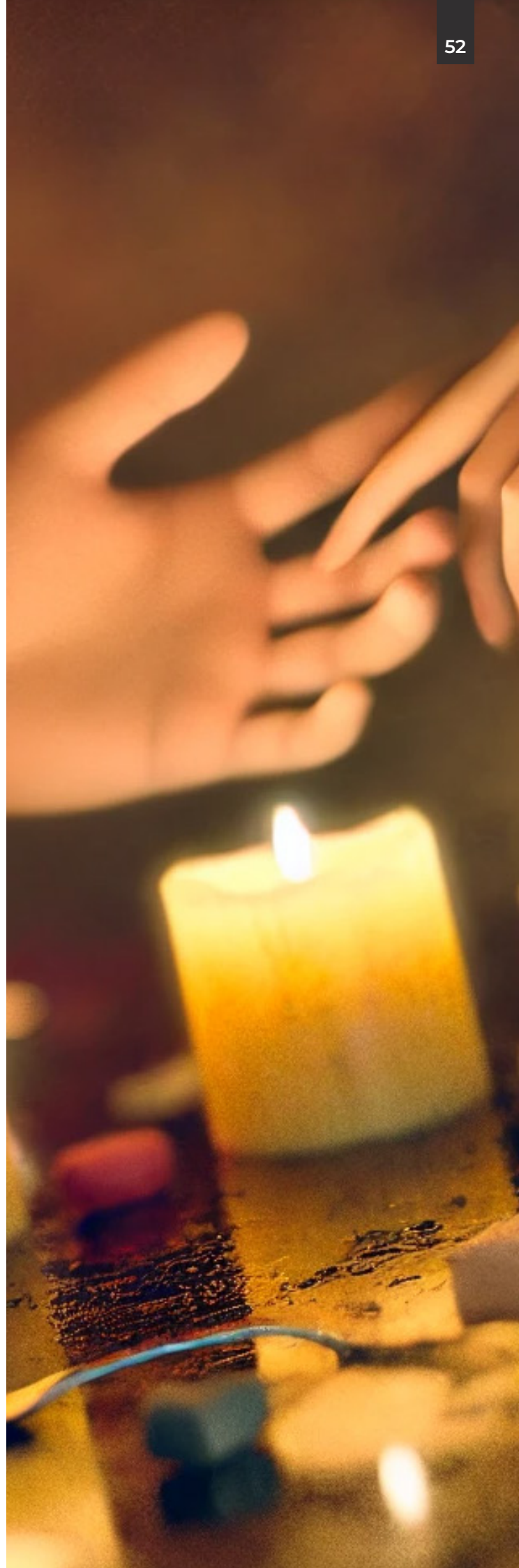
we lived, the moments we made were unintentional and real; they stemmed from us, from whatever happened when this group of people would come together.

What I remember most is the silence and warmth on my cheeks and closing my eyes. Closing them and breathing once. Twice. Three times.

In through your nose out your mouth in through your nose.

I remember coming home to a place where everyone knows – they just know. A place where everything is violence and longing and knowledge. A place that tells us, “I see through you. I see in you. Say nothing, please don’t say anything at all. Stay here with me. Stay in this moment, don’t move, don’t breathe unless it’s in sync with my breaths. Don’t blink because every second counts and this won’t last one more, two more,”

**ELISABETH CONNELL**



# MATERNAL INSTINCT HAS LEFT

When I tell people I've never wanted children, they usually reply in one of two ways. They either say, "Oh, you'll change your mind." or "Is it for health reasons?" The first response frustrates me and the second makes me curious. I wonder why people assume that if I don't want children, it's likely due to health issues. It is in fact not for health reasons. I'm not interested in children because I feel I don't have a strong maternal instinct. Once I inform people of this, their next response can tend to be "Did something happen for you to not want them? Where does that lack of maternal instinct come from?"

In my unprofessional opinion, I believe it doesn't have to come from anywhere. I feel that some people are simply more maternal than others and I don't think it needs to be boiled down to something tragic or a specific event. However, this topic recently had me thinking, "What if there was an event within my past, or childhood, where any innate maternal instinct I could have had disappeared?" A moment from my childhood comes to mind.

When I was five years old, I was in year 1 at a Catholic primary school within the London suburb of Twickenham. At this school, the teachers made sure religion was a part of our everyday life. This included five prayers a day and regular mass at the church next door to the school building.

So, it came as no surprise that every December, the school produced

a nativity play where the Year 1 class would perform. Parents ramped up with excitement each year, hoping their child would get one of the most fabulous parts possible; an Angel, one of the three Kings, or Joseph. Another one of the most sought-after parts was Mary. The child that received the honour of playing Mary was always adorned in a light blue dress, with matching blue material over their head to portray the most holy-looking being. And during my time in the Year 1 class, I somehow bagged the part.

I vaguely remember being given a doll that was intended to be the baby Jesus in the play, and not having any lines. My job was to stand there and look as peaceful and holy as could be. From what I've been told, I stood fairly still throughout the performance, whilst my mother whipped out the camera and snapped a ridiculous number of photos of me playing the silent but starring role.

As the famous nativity scene was happening, with haystacks and kings and angels gathered on stage, I was holding the baby Jesus doll in my arms as the other children said their lines. Murmurs came from the crowd over how wonderful we all did, and the festive spirit was indeed in the air. The teachers were proud of their

work and looked lovingly at all of us up on our stage.

What happened next, I don't remember myself, but it has been told throughout my childhood and adulthood al-

# THE STAGE

most every Christmas by my mother. When exiting the stage in order for the last scene of the play to continue, I let the baby Jesus out from my arms and held the doll by its foot whilst looking nothing but unbearably disinterested. I then dragged the poor doll across the stage as I left for all the crowd to see, not having a care in the world about it representing the incarnation of God himself.

Maybe it was because I was just a five-year-old, maybe I was just bored. Or maybe it was a sign from above that not only did I not care about this doll, but I didn't care about babies or children either in that moment. Maybe it showed that I would rather be doing anything else than doting on a child or carrying it in my arms. In that moment, I was focused on other things: what was for dinner and when play would end. I had to exit the stage. I was The Virgin Mary. I had places to be. Taking care of a fictional baby Jesus was not on my priority list that night.

So no, I don't think there was an event where my maternal instinct faded, nor do I believe there was a time when I had it. But if I did, I think that my dramatic exit, dragging the baby Jesus off of a stage, would have been the moment that any maternal instinct I had, left.

ROSE BATES



# THE BEWITCHING STAGE



Like many people, my first time on stage was a recital. It was ballet and all I really remember was that the choreography involved school desks. The second time I was on stage, however, a spell was cast and my life was changed.

I was eight. I was cast as a mouse in a professional production of *The Nutcracker* ballet. I was desperately enchanted by both ballet and my ballet teacher, and I was so proud to even be a tiny part of something so big. Even the dress rehearsal was magical.

The lead-up to the show was stressful. Ever

the anxious child, I worried I would forget the choreography, or something would go wrong with my costume. And that tiny, little rodent costume suited me so well. I was small for my age with large, deep brown eyes. The costume had big grey ears, little grey gloves with felt claws, and a long, thin tail. We even got to wear black ballet slippers. This was wonderful because we had only been allowed to wear traditional pink ballet slippers before.

My mum helped me get ready for the performance. She did my hair and makeup, and it was not an easy job. My antsy little body and

thin, straight hair gave her an extra challenge that many of the other mothers didn't have. We showed up early because neither of us liked to be rushed or late. She would brush and gel and brush and spray my hair, both of us willing it to stay in place for the two hours it needed to. It was pulled so tightly I could wiggle my little ballerina bun with my face, but I didn't dare try it on purpose for fear that a pin would slip out and the whole process would have to start again.

Once we were waiting in the wing for our little mouse entrance, the other little mice and I excitedly (and silently),





played with the Rat King. We were opposite the group of toy soldiers who were just a couple of years older than us and had just finished playing with the children in the party scene a few minutes earlier. I looked up to those girls, wistful to be them one day soon.

We took the stage in a little column, each of us holding the waist of the mouse ahead and snaked our way mischievously around the stage. We danced, and the Christmas tree grew, and the Rat King came on stage. We fought the soldiers in tidy, straight rows and lost the battle, scampering away in defeat. We ran back to the dressing room and celebrated how well we'd done. We changed into our little girl clothes and rushed quietly back to the auditorium to watch the rest of the performance.

I was enthralled by the talent and the spectacle. Being backstage and knowing how the magic was made only made it more fascinating to me. I had seen the sets from all sides and seen the stage with and without lights. I had seen the professionals in their warm-up outfits and they had been just as spellbinding as they were on stage. I adored all the things that make a theatrical performance what it is. As they sing in *Annie Get Your Gun*, I delighted in “the costumes, the scenery, the makeup, the props” and I found my true self in that place (even if I didn't know it yet).

Since then, I've sought out the stage over and over again. I've been a musician. I've performed in musicals. I've been a member of a dance collective. I've improvised comedies, dramas, and musicals. I've painted sets and made props. I have sung and danced and acted like a fool on stage at almost any opportunity. Once upon a time, I was bewitched by ballet shoes and artificial snow and that enchantment with the stage still hasn't faded.

**KRISTEN BRITT**

# ONE LOVE

I made two resolutions last year: I would get divorced, and I would learn how to play tennis. I had an idea of which would be easier. But my ideas, like my marriage, were prone to misleading me. To become an average tennis player requires concentration and consistency. An impressive backhand demands swift trunk rotation, command of your racket, and a certain degree of grace. A serve is an art of its own, or so I'm told.

To get divorced in Canada, as it turns out, is pretty straightforward. You need only the desire. After that, it's just pain and paperwork. Since my husband and I had few shared assets, it was as simple as printing a few documents from the internet and filing them at my local courthouse. The transaction is cash only, like a nail salon. You leave with a receipt and instructions to call the number at the bottom in six weeks to confirm that you're now alone for life.

After our separation, I moved to London and rented a flat next to Holland Park. I found the phone number for my tennis instructor from a banner that was draped around the court like a veil. My call was answered after a single ring by a man named Barnaby and a lesson was arranged for the following Sunday afternoon.

Barnaby shuffled around the court sporting ill-fitting, cream, tearaway pants which swallowed his ankles whole and a whistle around his neck

that was, presumably, for show. After each rally, he made me pick up the balls one by one and drop them in a wire basket he slung across his hip like a holster. He asked me frequently about my dating life. When he wasn't asking me intrusive questions about my dating life, he was telling me about the grandiose qualities of his wine cellar and the impressive value of antiques in the home he shared with his mother. I assumed they also shared monogrammed terry cloth robes and maybe even a toothbrush. When he wasn't telling me about home life with his mother, he was trying to set me up on blind dates with his other divorced clients. "You should meet Spencer," he'd said mid-rally. "He lost everything in his split and is keen on Canadian women."

Occasionally, he taught me tennis.

The previous December, my husband and I had nightly strained conversations at our dining room table while families passed by our window, picking up *Christmas trees*, from the lot that had been erected next to our home. The sign read Christmas Trees but to my swollen eyes it just screamed, "You're failing."

By January, I had come to a decision: I would leave my marriage, and then, as swiftly as possible, the country.

The plan was simple. He would stay in our West Coast modern townhome with our chocolate lab and Pottery Barn glassware. I would take a small sum of Canadian money and build an entirely new life against the headwind of the British pound. He didn't like this trade. Didn't want me to go. And on many of the nights that passed between that decision and my flight to Heathrow, at around two or three in the morning, I didn't want to go either. I wanted to crawl into the warm, worn spot in the mattress next to him in the guestroom where he had taken up residence. I wanted to cup his handsome face with the Roman jawline and crinkly eyes in my hands and say, "Okay. I'll stay." But I never did. I moved my former life into a storage unit and boarded the red-eye on a blue Tuesday afternoon.

Tennis begins with a serve, which Barnaby was reluctant to teach me. He preferred drills that involved having me run around tiny pylons and execute repetitive forehand motions instead of drills that might result in tangible skills I could employ on social occasions, which, I think, was more than half the reason I had wanted to learn tennis.

In London, posh people were always playing tennis, strutting to and from coffee shops in their "whites," their rackets slung casually like vintage Celine purses from their elbows. I hated these people, but also wanted to be invited to their parties and laugh at their obvious jokes. I begged Barnaby

to teach me how to serve, and by the tenth lesson, he finally acquiesced.

A beginner learns to serve by holding the ball in their left palm and tossing the ball upwards, as their right arm assumes a perfectly straight position. Simultaneously rotate your torso and racket forward, returning both hands to your sides with enough momentum and accuracy for the centre of the racket to hit the ball *smack* at the top of its arc downwards, catapulting it down sharply towards the ankles of your opponent on the opposite side of the net.

I missed a lot of serves.

Late in the summer, the sun was getting weak in the knees, and I flew back to Canada to finalise my divorce. Shortly before my flight, I received an email of instructions from my soon-to-be ex-husband. He had found time to pen this email ahead of a three-week vacation in Greece with his new girlfriend. Impressive.

He had originally introduced her to me as his "friend." During this getaway however, he began referring to her as his "girl," as if they were passing their time not in Greece, but in *Grease*, and she now wore a leather jacket monogrammed with his initials. What he outlined in the email was essentially a *Dummies Guide to Divorce*. Hardly necessary but not surprising. He was tactical where I was dreamy. Unhurried where I was hungry. Economical where I was excessive. His quick and cheerful guide to a cheap divorce was on brand for him.

I could have felt indignant, but instead, I felt deserving. In a way, I wel-

comed the karma of being hunched over a claustrophobic clerk's desk filing the paperwork, while he sipped ouzo on a rooftop in Santorini with *his girl*. All year I had the feeling I should be punished, and the Supreme Court of Canada was more than prepared to deliver.

One of the civil servants had a card taped to the plexiglass that featured an illustrated Baby Yoda holding a balloon that said, "Yoda Only One for Me." Survival so often involves looking away from the carnage the world throws right in front of your face.

*Stamp, stamp, staple*, and just like that, my husband became my ex-husband. Like his friend became his girl.

To learn backhand, chop the racket and grip the handle with both hands. Employ your full strength for the release. You'll need both hands because going backwards is an unnatural endeavour requiring not a small amount of energy, but sometimes the only direction forward is back.

When I started dating again, I fell backwards. Back to dating apps. Back to the jungle of sexual competition that has gotten so harrowing, filtered. Full of air and fuckboys. I expected ease and got friction.

I thought it would all get better after the final wire was cut, but I learned that to be divorced before thirty, and maybe at any age, is to be lulled by the sound of the laundry machine on Thursday evening. It's to settle shyly into the third plated setting at a dinner party with the couple friends with whom you used to be a foursome,

placed in the middle of their relationship like a bookmark. Pain and the absence of, well, everything. It's learning your ex is with someone new and everyone loves her. She's better for him than you were, like vitamin A. She understands him, like his mother. Your framed wedding photos have been replaced with something less sepia-toned, and your accounts have been unfollowed on social media. Even LinkedIn.

"You'll regret it at least once," I heard on a podcast. I disagree. I think you'll regret it twice.

I started seeing someone new in the summertime who took me to Wimbledon. It was everything Page Six had painted it to be. It pulsed with *eat-your-heart-out-Eton energy* and everyone was there. Even Hugh Grant, sunning himself in the Royal Box like a Roman grape. I bought a crinkly white linen suit for the occasion and pulled my hair into a slick pony like my mother had suggested. I wasn't fluent in tennis jargon, but I pretended to be.

My date taught me the word "love." Love is used in the beginning of the game when the sweat is just hitting the turf. Love means zero. Nil. Nothing. The absence of a point. A blank slate of a beginning where anyone could win or lose. One-love marks the first rupture. The first sign that a victor is making themselves known.

Interesting, I thought. I ordered another Pimm's. I squeezed his knee. I straightened my blazer.



# REMEMBER WHEN

## ELEGY TO A SISTER, MARCH 2021

You were big then- I was small- things were different. Caped raincoat on your strong Raleigh bike, you rode the miles to convent school; you recited Shakespeare aloud, as you liked to do. Latin verbs, words like *Veneri*, *Veneris*, *Venere*, floated in that centred room of our warm house, the stage all yours. We floated out on those sounds, travelled far away.

Clearings in the forest, I remember when we spent time together there, in spring and summer. My memory calls me to look closely, speak to my grief, a subspace of loss. I push at fractals: those never-ending patterns of pain, they are pulling me down. I see the spent wood sorrel, we had sucked those; I see footprints, they say we

were there.

That day long ago, Mother tasked you to shampoo my hair, in your rush to get to town, you burned my scalp. The boy you were going to meet was on your mind.

Yes, I cried enough to have you scolded, that made you cross, and my burn soothed.

A day in June 'sixty-three, when a President came to town, you left. I remember how you sat beside the stove, waited nervously for the hackney driver, you with one shoe on the stove-plate. You wore that dirndl skirt with matchstick animal print, it was like a Lowry goodbye. You left.

Stout cut stone walls seemed to close in, to weep. You could be back in time





for autumn class, you said then.  
 You didn't answer that convent bell,  
 your sabbatical became a life lived at  
 Swiss Cottage with red buses and pil-  
 lar-boxes where you posted letters for  
 a while, told me all about the Parks,  
 wonderful and wide.  
 You stopped asking about streams  
 and trees, little places. Soon there  
 weren't any words.  
 I had become the big girl, I rushed to  
 breach gaps, I was a warrior to exac-  
 titude.  
 Decades later, you returned. Now we  
 did not know the measure of our-  
 selves. There is no you and I, just Her.  
 You are there, I am elsewhere. Time  
 and attention migrate, don't hold  
 on, the emotions hefted around. Our  
 points of view have shifted.  
 But not our love of beauty, in nature  
 too. It is our bridge. We love shingle  
 shifting sand with sounds. Flowers

in season, lake vistas, orange setting  
 suns, snowdrops in spring, Monet's  
 Gardens at Giverny, on the banks of  
 the Seine.  
 On a cold March day, in covid 'twenty-  
 one, raindrops mix with tears as we  
 watch the people fileout to say good-  
 bye. No touching, but spaces-apart.  
 They try to keep their candles dry, stop  
 them from blowing out, they shelter  
 them in their palms. I walk out to the  
 steps of your final resting place. You  
 are riding high in that purring hearse.  
 We have arrived at that bitter-sweet  
 goodbye. Like homing swallows, or  
 some salmon against the river flow,

**MARGARET KIERNAN**

# WHEN ALAN CAME TO PEA

If my memory serves me correctly, it was another hot Cambodian mid-December day when Alan sauntered into the Pea, such “a” large stature was gracing our hotel, both physically and in the aura. Before he even uttered a word, his presence was known. His personality was larger than his burly frame. A distinguished gentleman with a deep baritone voice, borrowing a distinct British accent, a voice you could listen to for hours on end and before his stay at the hotel came to a close, we did just that. Alan’s reservation was made by very good friends of mine and based on what they had shared with me, I was like a little boy waiting for a favorite uncle to arrive at our doorstep. I would not be disappointed in my expectations. My only regret is that he only stayed with us for three weeks. When he did leave, I was hoping either his flight would be cancelled or he would decide on his own to spend the rest of the winter with us. Who wants to go back to England, the damp and the cold in January?

We wasted no time in getting acquainted and, what a pleasure it was to see him float down the stairs every morning, always with a notebook and an iPad in hand. He would sit at a table, first, enjoying his breakfast, then spending the next couple of hours at work. His fingers were in proportion to the rest of his body, yet so nimble and quick. Like a pair

of dancers on the ballroom floor, his fingers moved across the keyboard gracefully. Now and again, you would hear him chuckle, obviously pleased with what he was writing. He would share his creation with a smile from ear to ear, the pantomime he was writing for a Spring performance in Brighton. His persona lit up the room and he was an immediate star celebrity with the entire team and fellow guests. Always joyous with just the right amount of mischievous twinkle in his eye.

We discovered that we could set the clocks by his arrival for happy hour, never late to the bar to start the evening with the cocktail of the day. During his time with us, he consumed every cocktail on the menu and quite a few that weren’t. He always made it back for the last call, and with a little prodding, he would be entertaining us with that rich baritone voice. Not only could he sing up a storm, but he could dance and keep up with our resident circus performers. He was no slouch in the amount of alcohol that could be consumed, nor in his dance moves. I remember one impromptu evening, when due to the malfunctioning of a tuk-tuk, a group of us ended up at a house in the countryside, drinking beer, eating water buffalo, singing karaoke, and dancing. Of course, Sopee and Sothee, two young strapping, muscular men, without an ounce of fat between them and trained circus performers from Phare the Cambodian Circus, the Canadian National Circus, and Cirque du Soleil, were demonstrating their dancing and acrobatic agility. The rest of us were staring in amazement with our mouths wide open, captivated by each move. These younger men were a fraction of Alan’s large yet agile frame. It took Alan a glance and a quick observa-



tion of their choreography before he joined in. Sliding and moving, shaking and grooving, I still swear that his feet never touched the ground, but just glided like an angel hovering above it. This was just the beginning of what turned out to be a long and eventful evening. From this countryside dance party, we departed in our tuk-tuks and headed to our next stop; “Home Cocktail,” a bar most frequented by Khmer, where the party would continue well past midnight. We drank, ate dried squid, and participated in numerous drinking games. The brothers were known throughout the land for their various drinking games, whether a dice game, a spin the wheel, or just an interlocking of arms and chugging a drink till the glass was empty.

The party carried on even after we returned to the Pea. With beers and cocktails in hand, it was the perfect time to create our pantomime, and that is exactly what we did. Alan became our writer, choreographer, and director. It didn't matter that it was 2 am, the creative juices were vociferously yelling from our pores, and we could not waste this moment of utter brilliance. There we were poolside, re-enacting a scene from “Chicago,” one two three splits, dance, cartwheel, writing a show on our stage, selecting songs for the show, and planning a schedule to train: it went on and on. Of course, that would have been it for most people, but not for Alan and the rest of this impromptu troupe. The first rehearsal began a few hours later as we performed our circus theatrics for guests in the hotel. This was a couple of days after Christmas and barring any change of plans, Alan would be leaving on New Year's Eve.

How fast these few weeks passed by. The Pea was energetic and vibrant, but with Alan on the premises, the voltage ramped up 100-fold. Soon we were planning for him to return in the Spring so we could bring our pantomime to life. Sadly, we all know what came about in the early days of 2020, and any future performance would be placed on hold. What we thought would be a brief disruption lasted for years and unfortunately, the Pea did not. For many of us at the hotel, memories were made during those few weeks when Alan graced us with his presence. Memories brought smiles to many faces for years to come. With some luck and good fortune, the curtain will rise and that pantomime will break the horizon and see the dawn with Alan, the brothers, and the entire cast reunited again. The stage is awaiting our theatrical return.





# POETRY



# ALL TOO MUCH SKYLA

the radiant glow that  
shines in your eyes  
is too bright for this stage  
please dim your light  
so the crowd does not go blind

fireworks are meant  
for special occasions  
but they ignite with your presence  
save the theatrics  
the show has only just begun

the music that dances off your lips  
has a rhythm too fast  
slow down child  
these people like a steady beat  
give the audience what they want

people did not sign up  
to do a tap dance  
with your company  
quiet your steps  
so others can dance beside you

just because you stand  
center stage does not mean  
you are special  
even main characters  
are meant to be relatable

you simply talk too fast  
and say too much  
the volume of your words does not  
match  
this script  
should not be yours to read



# UCH AR SPRATLEY



you are all too much for the stage  
 you are too loud  
 too hyper  
 and the world cannot handle your  
 wrath  
 for the world shouldn't have to

*calm down*  
 she stands up from the audience  
 speaks to me  
*fix yourself*  
 those words on her lips  
 twirl and tangle themselves  
 around my brain

*but i did fix myself*  
 i mumble back  
*i spent years quieting myself*  
 now more confident  
*and i will never disservice myself*  
 so that you  
 she points to the audience  
*will feel more comfortable*  
 ever  
 again.



# DAWN AND DUSK

## STANISLAVA TASHEVA

A little girl, yellow dress,  
A garden, summer evening.  
Songs and dandelion chains,  
Games and lots of swinging.

Youngsters, sun and secret plans,  
Flowers, sea and braided hair,  
A sweet kiss and a romance  
Love and figs smell in the air.

Quick goodbyes, then college dorms,  
A suitcase, dreams of glitter,  
Work promotions, dinner dates,  
First home and mortgage bitter.

Altar and a long white dress,  
Fireflies, champagne and laughter.  
Rings, vows, candles, prayers for  
A happy ever after.

A rocking chair, autumn gold,  
Old lady, little toddlers,  
Photographs of life itself,  
Pure happiness and wonder.

# HISTORY OF LITHUANIAN LANGUAGE

*I. By the Nemunas the first word was uttered...*  
 They came from far away and found their place.  
 The Nemunas flows with noisy vigour.  
 Everything needs a name, a sign to remember.  
 Under the sun, they uttered the very first word.

*II...and was written down...*  
 A language is revealed to the world.  
 It leaves its mark through pages and books.  
 A small community introduces itself.  
 Its heritage will be remembered.

*III...to show the world...*  
 The linguist works hard, a wise man on his chair.  
 This language is like another one from far away.  
 It carries the roots, the seeds of everything,  
 the origins of our daily labels.

*IV...that a language...*  
 An empire imposes its own language.  
 The local words are banned  
 but poetry is free as a bird and spreads  
 its wings to carry the spirit of a nation.

*V...is always worth learning.*  
 An old language rejuvenates when a learner  
 starts the journey through words and phrases.  
 The language that carries the roots of all things  
 invites us to dream of Vilnius.

CONSTANZA  
 BAEZA VALDENEGRO

# I HAD

**I had** first of all, a little baby sister to feel  
 wiser. I made friends at school not to  
 sit alone. I read and read so I could share  
 experiences. I kissed a boy because I was  
 scared of others. I taught econ in order to  
 learn more things. I married since I needed  
 a witness to my life. I bore children so as  
 to finally accept that I didn't have all  
 the answers.

CECILIA GARCÍA-PEÑALOSA

# WELL-REHEARSED

My mouth is full of chewed paper  
The words no longer make sense  
But have changed my jaw's colour  
I am scared that I will only be young  
Once

That from now on, I will be on a  
Losing streak  
That everyone will shrivel and die  
That I will only exist in a passenger  
Seat

That I will learn to expect little  
And hope for less  
That I will leave little surprises for  
Myself, I will become well rehearsed

That days will blur into piles of  
Laundry and responsibilities  
To unknowing and uncaring faces  
That I will forget myself  
And be impatient with the world  
For not giving me a portion of  
Happiness

That I will be nursing a broken heart  
That my lips will not discover  
Any new pleasure  
And that this heaviness will linger  
Like smoke in my hair

**LUCIE DE GENTILE**

# RUNNING OUT

Running out  
For a quart of milk  
That will soon be a gallon  
According to her manifestation  
plan.

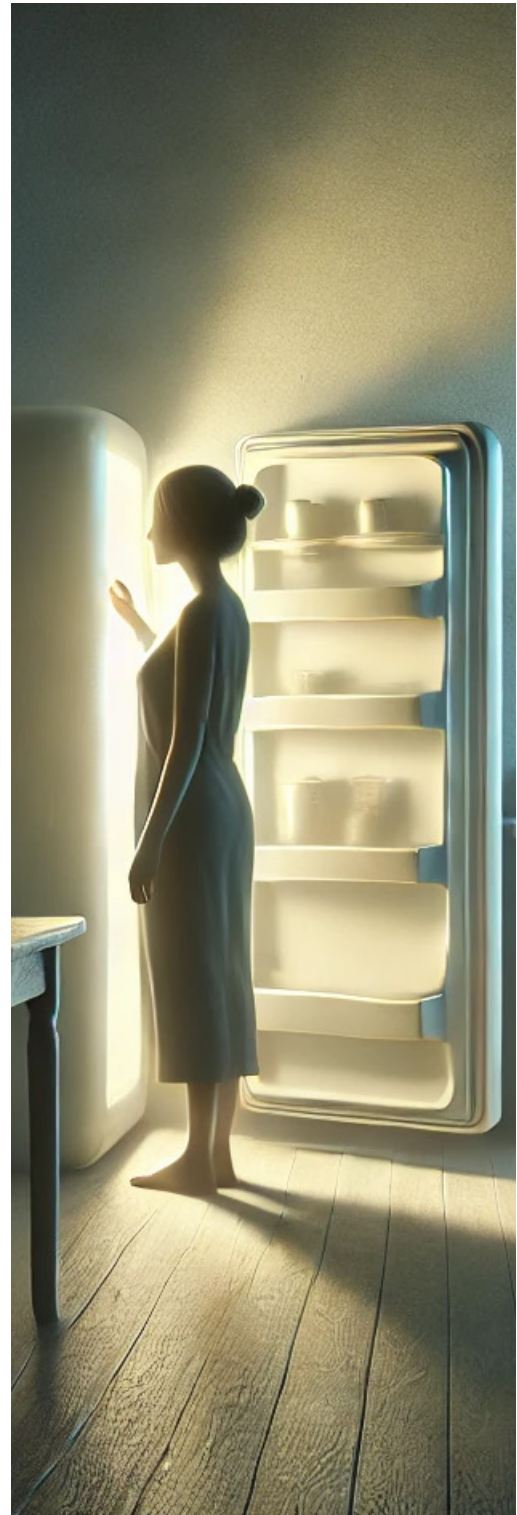
Tries not to look at eggs  
Lest she break down in front of the  
soccer moms  
Whose organic bananas  
Take up more cart space than nec-  
essary.

Trojan warriors knock every night  
But she's had her fair share of fun  
So she leaves them on the welcome  
mat  
Till they count to ten and walk away.

Took down her grandmother's  
grandfather clock  
In an earnest attempt at indiffer-  
ence  
Yet can't escape the oval-shaped  
sound  
Ticking away every hour.

Best friends from preschool  
Are busy with kindergarten  
Then trips to the biergarten  
To keep divorce delayed.

Which leaves her alone with the  
freezer  
Pondering a pint of ice cream  
And how fast it might thaw in the  
microwave  
If she runs out of patience.



**SAM HENDRIAN**



# SET THE STAGE ON FIRE

You are a flame,  
bright and essential

Your presence when you step onto the stage is similar to a stone in my shoe  
difficult to ignore  
forcing my attention

No matter how many times I see you step onto that platform  
I will always be in awe

Of the way your hair shines like honey in the bright light  
I can see the streaks of gold

Of the way your muscles move when commanded by your steps

Of the way your scent encloses my senses  
rows away

Of the way your voice breaks out of confinement

Of the way your eyes shine like a stroke of light  
against the richness of its earthy brown

Of the way your smile makes me smile

You set the stage on fire  
You set my soul on fire

**MICHELLE SYIEMLIH**

# SUBURBAN SPIRITUAL



Someone plays "Amazing Grace"  
On a xylophone.  
Reverbs from the bombings  
Add percussion.

Unexpected heat drives many in-  
doors,  
Even the crazy flying twin garage  
flags.  
Shadows hidden in showers  
Become familiar ghosts.

I avoid repairs involving  
Electricity and water.  
"Good news!" I call out to neighbors  
And wait for their cringing.

Many are allergic to celebration  
Despite cracking half-smiles  
And fake joy noddings.  
Husbands pass weight on to wives.

Kids blast each other  
With various calibres of water.  
The young beg parents  
For electric bikes and pizza.

I am sans heirs, an oven man  
Crackling in my hot fat.  
Boomers perk with mail truck rumbles  
And red-light flashes.

Most hope the jerk on the corner  
Croaks before morning coffee.  
Elders learn to hate in drip-drip fashion  
Enduring waves of barking,

Bouncing balls and chainsaws.  
Stroller wheels grind cement and asphalt.  
A blower groans scattering cut grass.  
Women without men

Get even with cats and dogs.  
The widow next door  
Strings barista lights on her patio cover  
For parties that will never come.

**KIRBY MICHAEL WRIGHT**

# REVOLUTION

January 20th  
 Two days before my birthday  
 A 20-year transition had started  
*The last time this happened was at the time of the French Revolution*  
 the Guru had said

A universal push  
 Towards Parisian women with dark nipples  
 In bed under war  
 Under flags that are not mine

*Only Aquarius and Pisces souls choose this pat*  
 Guru, please  
 And I cried on camera  
 Saying goodbye to  
 my Leo

Her fingers around my ankles  
 Venus told me it wasn't love  
 Inside ribbons curling their tails  
 My voice in 2044

Telling me  
 to trust  
 my next 20 years and all those shifts

*To push out words, tap\_tap\_tap and write poetry and beat in warrior paint so I can convince those stars that I  
 make my own fate, to learn\_to love\_ to feel\_*

*and*

*- seriously -*

*not chase girls for the fantasy of it all*

*so finally*  
 I can  
 write myself in  
 revolution

*so finally*  
 I can  
 rewrite myself

## ROSIE ELIZABETH

# YOU'RE MY SUMMER

Winter is always the saddest season  
Colourless sky, mist of rain covering my vision  
Your voice in my mind, your blue eyes are now  
my sky  
My source of warmth comes from your touch,  
your orange hair is my sun  
Your smile, my warm comforting summer breeze  
Winter was always the saddest season  
Until you became my summer

**KAYANA FACEY**

# AUTHORS' BIO



## ALEXIA BRUIJLANTS

13

Alexia is a Belgian writer and freelance journalist passionate about storytelling who holds a BA in Marketing with a specialization in Communication from the University College of Ghent. She finds her inspiration in everyday encounters and in cinema. She discovered her passion for screenwriting after taking a short course at MetFilm school in London, where she wrote multiple screenplays. Alexia is pursuing an MA in Creative Writing at the University of Westminster.

## CECILIA GARCIA-PENALOSA

69

Cecilia was born in Spain, lived for many years in the UK, and is currently professor of economics at the University of Aix-Marseille, in southern France. Fluent in Spanish, English, French and Italian, she needs literature and languages to escape, from time to time, from the “dismal science”.

## CONSTANZA BAEZA VALDENEGRO

68

Constanza Baeza Valdenegro was born in 1985. She lives in the Chilean countryside. She likes languages, flavoured tea and learning new things every day.

## C. T. SUTCLIFFE

17

C. T. Sutcliffe is a prose writer from the East Midlands who is passionate about nature and good banana bread. She has previously been published in *Panorama: The Journal of Travel, Place, and Nature*. As well as writing short stories and novels, she loves hiking, board games and reading.

## DR SAM CHRISTIE

11

Sam Christie is a writer from Mid Wales who has been longlisted for the Bridport Prize 2021, was second in the Writers' and Artists' Short Story Award 2022 and was third place in the New Welsh Writers' Award 2023. He has published prose and poetry in the UK and the US.

## ELISABETH CONNELL

49

Originally from the United States, Elisabeth moved to London at the start of 2024 to further her career as a writer. Though she has a deep love for words in any form, she is most suited to writing nonfiction and editing fiction and nonfiction alike. Elisabeth holds a BA in English Literature and soon will have an MA in Professional Writing. She aspires to work as an editor and help people understand and express themselves with the best words possible.

## EUGENIA SESTINI

45

Eugenia has worked and studied in Argentina, the US, France and England, and currently lives in London, where she works as a teacher and proofreader. She is a member of the Chartered Institute of Editing and Proofreading (CIEP) and is interested in cultural identity, gender studies and family stories. In her spare time, she makes the most of London's theatre scene. Her writing can be found at [www.eugeniasestini.com](http://www.eugeniasestini.com) and Instagram @write.with.eugenia

## HAMISH KAVANAGH

35

Hamish is a writer from New Zealand, but based in London. He was a finalist in the NYC midnight short fiction competition and the Bridport Prize. He recently completed a full-length literary/dystopian novel which he is currently seeking representation for.

## HANNAH SOLER

15

Hannah is an American writer living in London. Her work focuses on examining the human experience through an often melancholic lens. Primarily writing literary fiction, Hannah focuses on sharing life experiences from travelling to writing about the deep feelings of grief and anxiety.

## ILIYA URAZOVA

40

Iliya is an aspiring writer who loves writing fictional stories, novels, and haiku. Born and raised in Kazakhstan, she completed her undergraduate as an English Teacher in North Cyprus. She is also a certified bookworm and has a genuine love for cosy libraries and books of all kinds.

## JOHN GANSHAW

62

John retired to follow his dream of owning a hotel in Southeast Asia after 31 years in banking. This led to many new experiences enabling him to see the world through a different lens, leading him to write his story through essays, poetry, and a yet unpublished memoir. John's work has appeared in Dreich Magazine, Story Sanctum, Post Roe Alternatives, Fleas on the Dog, Ambidextrous Bloodhound, Free the Verse, eMerge, Unapologetic, and Sucarnochee Review among others. Nothing is as it seems, and experiences are meant to shape us, not define us. Life has hope, truth and adventure, all leading to stories that must be written and told.

## KAYANA FACEY

75

Kayana is a fiction writer with a BA in Creative Writing and English Literature from the University Of Roehampton. Currently studying for an MA in Professional Writing at the University Of Westminster, she has a huge love for books and films, and is an aspiring copyeditor. Her focus of writing is psychological thrillers.

## KIRBY MICHAEL WRIGHT

73

Kirby Michael Wright was born and raised in Hawaii. He lives near the track in San Diego with his wife Darcy and a cat named Gatsby.

## KRISTEN BRITT

55

Kristen is a writer and performer with a BFA in Dance Education and an MS in Communications who has completed multiple improv comedy training programmes. She has written long and short-form content for businesses and her creative writing explores cities, nature, and the strangeness of life. Instagram: @kristenbritt\_writes

## LUCIE DE GENTILE

70

Lucie de Gentile is a recent University of Oxford graduate and is the recent winner of the 2024 University of Oxford, University College Poetry Prize. Her poetry has been published in the Oxford Blue, Hypaethral Magazine, Roots and their branches, Original Sin and How2bBad. She is also a practicing visual artist whose work has been exhibited in a gallery in Milan.

## LUWAN WANG

39

Luwan is a Chinese writer living in London. She's completed an MA in Creative Writing at the University of Westminster. She prefers writing fiction and wants to learn more about scriptwriting in the future.

## MARGARET KIERNAN

60

Margaret is an Irish author; she writes prose and poetry and is widely published in both. She has been nominated three times for The Best of The Net Award. Her background is in Public Policy and Advocacy. She is also a painter who uses watercolor, acrylics, and other media in her work.

## MARINA ALVAREZ CARRILLO

8

Marina is an aspiring author working in poetry, flash fiction and sci-fi genres. She is inspired by authors like Clarice Lispector, Rosa Montero and others. In her works she explores the dualities of human existence, femininity and how it can influence a better world. She's currently working on a compilation of poems and short stories.

## MICHELLE SYIEMLIH

72

Michelle is a freelance writer specialising in creative, feature and content writing, copywriting and investigative journalism. A lawyer who followed her heart to become a writer, she holds degrees in Law, Business, and Marketing. She is pursuing an MA in Professional Writing at the University of Westminster. Michelle has transformed her lifelong love for reading into a writing career. With a heart for storytell-



ing and a mind for the truth in the details, she is dedicated to honing her craft and finding the right words. Michelle indulges in her love for music and the joy of slowly making her way through her favourite authors' backlist — an adventure of its own.

## **MOLLY CORLETT**

**27**

Molly lives in London and works in children's services. She is interested in history, memory, mixed-race identity, public services, and how family relationships shape people's expectations for themselves. She is currently working on a novel.

## **NEMECHE BLAKE**

**42**

Nemeche is a poet and fiction writer pursuing an MA in Creative Writing at the University of Westminster. When she's not writing at home in the countryside, you can find her overanalyzing anime, people-watching at cafes, or baking a carrot cake.

## **RACHEL ZAWADOWSKI**

**25**

Rachel has been writing for almost a decade: she started at fourteen when she fell in love with the art of writing and conveying stories. Born and mostly raised in Belgium, she is from Malian and Congolese descent. Living a part of her late adolescence in West Africa helped shape the writer she is today. She mostly writes literary fiction but wants to explore the raw and real dynamics of her relationship with her mother.

## **RAJANI ADHIKARI**

**20**

Rajani Adhikari holds an MA in Professional Writing. She writes poetry and literary fiction that draws attention to issues such as identity, culture and the human experience.

## **ROSE BATES**

**53**

Rose is a freelance creative writer and copywriter, studying for her MA in Creative Writing. She is from London and grew up inspired by comedic and fantasy writing. In 2024, she continues to build her client base and portfolio.

## **ROSIE ELIZABETH**

**74**

Rosie Elizabeth is a poet based in Palma de Mallorca, Spain. Originally from the UK, she studied English Literature at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, a UNESCO City of Literature. She is the creator of Hey Heart Poetry, a spoken word event on the island and has recently finished her first collection. Her poetry has appeared in BarBar Literary Magazine, Sunday Mornings at the River, Snowflake Magazine and on BBC Upload. Follow her work @rosie\_epoetry.

## SAM HENDRIAN

71

Sam Hendrian is a Los Angeles-based filmmaker and poet striving to foster empathy through art. You can find his work on Instagram at @samhendrian143.

## SAMANTHA ELLIS

57

Samantha is Head of Words for Here Design in London, England. Previous to this, she founded an award-winning, North American digital marketing agency in 2014. Her work with the agency and the development of an international women's mentorship program awarded her a place on BC Business' list of 30 under 30 Entrepreneurs in 2019.

A creative writer by trade, she's published non-fiction essays for Rotaro, The Werk, and Beyond Words Literary Magazine. She is a passionate advocate for the power of voice in branding and has written on the subject in publications like Creative Boom.

## SKYLAR SPRATLEY

65

Skylar is a writer from Toronto, with a BA in Psychology and Child/Family Studies from the University of Guelph, Canada. After spending the past two years travelling through Europe, she is now a Creative Writing MA student in London. She is a poet and auto-fiction writer who aims to look at the concepts of relationships, mental health, and healing.

Instagram: @skypoetryy

## STANISLAVA TASHEVA

67

Originally from Bulgaria, she has written for a local newspaper and won a number of writing competitions. She continued her higher education in London where she was a writer for Huron University's magazine and later completed the Writers' and Artists' Yearbook Write Your Children Book course. She recently moved to Scotland where she works at Perth Art Gallery and Perth Museum.

## STEPHANIE LEIGH ROSE

31

Stephanie Leigh Rose is an actor, director and writer who splits her time between London and New York. She has appeared in numerous stage plays, films, and commercials. Currently, she is working on short plays and one-acts for women.

## TOVA LARSSON

23

Tova grew up in Lund (a small city in southern Sweden), and now lives in London, where she is pursuing an MA in Creative Writing. She holds a BA in Creative Writing and has a background in theatre. Storytelling is her biggest passion, and she is working on completing her first novel.

Instagram: @tovamlarsson

# MEET THE TEAM



## EDITORS IN CHIEF

---

Elisabeth Connell

Nemeche Blake

## EDITING DEPARTMENT

---

### LEADS

Eugenia Sestini

Kayana Facey

Michelle Syiemlieh

### EDITORS

Iliya Urazova

Tova Larsson

Daniel Cuhen

Rachel Zawadowski (second department: Launch)

Kristen Britt (second department: Design)

Morghan Swaim (second department: Launch)

Alexia Bruijlants (first department: Marketing)

Skylar Spratley (first department: Marketing)

## LAUNCH DEPARTMENT

---

### LEAD

Hannah Soler

### TEAM

Rose Bates

Ozgur Hassan

Ansa Javiad

Ijeoma Jacinta Ugwu

Sebastian Ingham

Rachel Zawadowski (first department: Editing)

Morghan Swaim (first department: Editing)

## MARKETING DEPARTMENT

---

### LEAD

Zarina Isakhodjaeva

### TEAM

Sarah Tooke

Alexia Bruijlants (second department: Editing)

Skylar Spratley (second department: Editing)

Roberta Shavenko (first department: Design)

## DESIGN DEPARTMENT

---

### LEAD

Roberta Shavenko

### TEAM

Kristen Britt (first department: Editing)

Tova Larsson (first department: Editing)

Zarina Isakhodjaeva (first department: Marketing)

# THANK YOU

**THE WELLS STREET JOURNAL IS A LITERARY  
PUBLICATION RUN ENTIRELY BY  
POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS AT THE UNIVER-  
SITY OF WESTMINSTER.**

Our theme for issue 22 is “**stages**”. Regardless of age, occupation, culture, or gender, we all go through stages in life that test, push, and shape us. We have compiled a journal that reflects these stages we all face.

We hope you find something new about yourself, others, and the world in these pages.

**“I ACCEPT THE PARTS OF ME THAT WERE NOT MEANT TO BE CHANGED. IT WILL BE MY SUBTLE REBELLION AGAINST WHAT WE ARE EXPECTED TO DO.”**

*From The art of Juggling, p. 31*

**“I WANT HIM TO KNOW THAT ART IS MESSY, AND SO IS LIFE.”**

*From Champagne for breakfast, p. 8*

**“SURVIVAL SO OFTEN INVOLVES LOOKING AWAY FROM THE CARNAGE THE WORLD THROWS RIGHT IN FRONT OF YOUR FACE”**

*From One love, p. 57*

