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THE WELLS STREET JOURNAL

ISSUE 20

THE WRITERS' PLAYLIST



ABOUT THE WELLS STREET JOURNAL

The Wells Street Journal, a biannual literary anthology based in London, is curated by the students of the University of Westminster's Creative and Professional Writing MA programmes. Established in 2014, the journal takes its name from the street that housed the Department of English, Linguistics, and Cultural Studies.

With contributions from writers worldwide, the primary goal of the journal is to present diverse literary works exploring a single theme from various perspectives. Emphasising principles of equality, diversity, and inclusivity, the journal not only showcases the talents of its internal writers, but also provides a platform for external contributors with a wide array of backgrounds and experiences.

The current issue, the twentieth issue and tenth in print, delves into the theme of *music*, exploring its multifaceted nature and interpretations.

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FOREWORD

In the 20th edition of the *Wells Street Journal*, we've embraced the theme of Music. We invited writers to weave narratives around songs that stir nostalgia or elicit memories of pivotal moments in their lives. These moments encompass encounters with loved ones, the experience of losing them, redefining feelings of loneliness or belonging, and other emotional journeys associated with music. The intentionally broad theme allows for diverse and creative interpretations.

Each story within this issue revolves around at least one song, adding a unique layer to the exploration of the theme. The diversity and depth of the submissions have made this edition particularly captivating.

This issue stands as a long-standing ritual, a rite of passage that binds us together. It is a reflection of the collective effort we invest — not only in enhancing our coursework but also in refining ourselves and fostering the shared love for writing that unites our community. This journal serves as a gateway to our mutual appreciation for writing, allowing us to draw inspiration from the work of our peers

Foreword

both within and beyond the course. Every writer, investing their passion and emotions into their creations, deserves to have their work read, savoured, and shared. The tradition of reading, writing, and being read finds its fulfilment in this compilation of pieces spanning across all genres.

Our heartfelt gratitude goes to the Vice Chancellor of the University of Westminster, Dr. Peter Bonfield, whose ongoing sponsorship has made the production and promotion of each issue possible. Special thanks are also extended to our mentors and course leads, Dr. Monica Germana, for her unwavering support, and Yen Ooi, for her knowledge, encouragement, and mentorship.

The theme of Music has proven to be a compelling journey to produce. We extend our appreciation to the *Wells Street Journal* team for their valuable input and to every writer who submitted their stories, showcasing brevity and vulnerability in both poetry and prose.

Effy Kousteni and Maharsh Benday
Managing Directors

PLAYLIST



“Let the music be your muse”

The following pieces are best enjoyed while listening to the tracks listed under each title, available in this playlist. They were the *inspirational* songs for each piece.

SCAN OUR SPOTIFY CODE



FLASH FICTION



WAEGUGIN-IDA.

MARILYN AMA

'People are Strange' by The Doors

“Ohmoh...Waegugin-ida!”

That familiar ritual melody. The unsolicited song your very presence demands. *You* are the muse. For some, it has been the number-one hit for years. For others, they have only just heard it. Translation is not needed. The riffs, the beat, the lyrics, the instruments...its very composition draws out different emotions from its intended audience. Loneliness, othering and rejection for some. Excitement, curiosity and belonging for others. For me, this Korean melody left me stranded in the tween. I walk past the corner shop.

There it plays again — “Oh my...It’s a foreigner!”

NON-FICTION



UMQOMBOTHI

SYLVIA AMPONSAH

'Umqombothi' by Yvonne Chaka Chaka

It was a serene dusk. Supper was quite fulfilling. I had just had “*fufu ne abenkwan*,” a traditional Ghanaian dish made from pounding together boiled cassava and plantain, which I ate with palm nut soup, prepared with crabs, snails, roasted beef, dry herrings, and love. I sat right on our veranda after the meal in the company of my grandparents and my cousin, Osaa. Adjacent to where we sat, there stood an ancient palm tree, diligently and longer than anyone could remember, which waved its leaves without resistance in the direction of the wind. According to my grandfather, the tree had been there before he built the house twenty-nine years ago, and he had made it clear to the workers that it should remain untouched.

It was an ordinary Saturday, or so it seemed, and Osaa, who was about to graduate from high school, had come to spend the weekend with us. She sat on a bench that was intentionally placed there, especially for visitors who couldn't enter our living room. Our grandparents, Mr. and

Mrs. Mensah soon joined in on our discussions and started sharing their experiences and stories- stories we had already heard a million times over.

We talked about several things: school, politics, church, and the poor educational system in the country. I was only confident to speak on such touchy subjects when I was with family. On a regular day, talking about these issues with the ordinary Ghanaian may result in losing your two front teeth, especially if you do not agree with their opinions. As we talked, Osaa played some old highlife music from her Samsung phone, “gifted” to her by my aunt who had bought a new iPhone 11. Some of the artists were dead, yet we enjoyed the nostalgic tunes, humming along and tapping our feet as we talked about personal experiences regarding the songs as they shuffled one after the other. We shared where and how we heard each song, and the reasons why we liked or did not like it. Mr. Mensah particularly did not appreciate music that had hints of profanity in it as he believed it was one of the major reasons why our generation seemed to be corrupted. My grandmother, on the other hand, was indifferent to such matters. The evening was remarkable for me, as we didn’t get to do this often as a family, knowing how the busyness of life can stretch people far apart from those they love.

Our grandfather, whom we affectionately called Old Boy occasionally, moved from the topics of the music and started sharing our childhood stories. This he started with Osaa. Some I couldn’t believe and others, no matter how many times I have been told, still embarrassed me. I did not like the fact that my childhood was being mocked. However, I laughed at Osaa too, so when it was my turn, I endured it silently. The music continued, and at some point, we were no longer paying attention to the music, as we were deeply

engrossed in our conversations until a piece of South African music began to play. I remembered that song. We all did. We could all relate to it. It was like a second Ghana anthem. Every child, every adult, every male, every female, every boy, every girl, every Christian, every Muslim, every idol worshipper knew the beat, tune, and rhythm...well, except for the lyrics, but who cared? All we knew was that it made us feel powerful and proud as Africans, more like a patriotic song. Everybody had some form of appreciation for it. It seemed that this music broke down the barriers of gender, ethnicity, religion, and anything that tends to pit Africans against one another. It was so because you could meet people of different religions and ethnicities, who on a normal day did not see eye to eye, dancing to the rhythm of this song.

“Umqombothi”, my grandmother said, smiling.

“What's that?” I asked with a curious face and leaned towards her to listen again, as the word sounded gibberish in my ears.

“That is the title of the song Osaa is playing”, she continued. Osaa and I looked at each other in surprise. We did not expect my grandmother of all people to know the title of such a song. We looked at my grandfather, expecting him to say something in her defence as he knew we had turned into doubting Thomases.

“Umqombothi means beer,” she began explaining, her voice filled with enthusiasm as she sensed our nosiness. “You know this song has been in existence for thirty-six years- older than you both,” she stretched her wrinkly index finger towards Osaa and me. “And it is about beer.”

I could neither hold my laughter nor hide my startling countenance. As old as I was, I thought that song was a song about freedom, from colonisation, from betrayal and from

the apartheid that bedevilled the nation of South Africa from the 1940s through to the 1990s.

She continued as though she had read my thoughts,

“Well, though many think it is a song of freedom, the lyrics only describe the process of making a special beer, exclusive to South Africans. It’s quite an important part of South African culture and tradition. It’s made from fermented maize and sorghum and is usually served during weddings and other special occasions. We make the same here, you know it already, and we call it *pitoo*,” she concluded in a whispering tone and with a mischievous look.

She went on to recount her personal experience with the song, sharing how she first heard it during her time at Teacher Training College. As a first-year student, she and her classmates had to perform several activities during their first week as freshers, including a choreography night.

“There were about twelve groups, and my group was the fifth. We all performed with Umqombothi as the song of choice for our year group and spent hours rehearsing the drama and dance routine to match the lyrics and rhythm of the song. I played the character of the woman making the beer.”

She continued as we were still silent, though I was busily checking out the artist already.

“Do not change your mind about what and how you feel about this music because you are right. The lyrics may talk about firewood, water, and beer but it is always about the spirit and passion behind every piece of music and this one comes with a sense of togetherness, belonging and pride in African ancestry. Umqombothi encapsulates the vibrant culture of the South African people, and its significance extends beyond just being a popular tune. It represents the

traditions and values that have been passed down from generation to generation.”

She coughed slightly and requested water. Osa and I stood up simultaneously to get it for her. Osa took the lead and smiled. I sat back on the bench.

“This song holds a special place in my heart because it took a lot of sacrifices for me to get into college, you know that story already, so I will not go into all that...”

I laughed in response. “But it was like a victory song to me. Every time I hear it, I remember that choreography dance on that night and maybe, just maybe, that was how your grandfather took notice of me.”

“What? You two met in college?”

“College?” Osa repeated my question as she came out of the kitchen with the glass of water.

“That is a story for another day, girls.”

She winked and smiled at the husband of her youth. We knew we were not going to hear that part of the story anytime soon. Her eyes became teary as she looked up to the skies. Night had taken over the day completely, and female mosquitoes were beginning to sing songs to register their presence. I am sure those eyes recalled beautiful moments of her youth that had been beautifully covered in wrinkles and grey hair.

MUSIC, SOCIAL JUSTICE, AND INCLUSION

IMOH EMMANUEL

This piece contains sexually explicit content that may be distressing or upsetting for some readers. Reader discretion is advised.

'House of Exile' by Lucky Dube

It was Bob Marley who once said, "One good thing about music, when it hits you, you feel no pain." I did not feel any pain when I was "hit" by Bob Marley's song, 'Coming in from the Cold,' one auspicious morning, years ago, while in a minibus near the Onitsha bridge in Anambra State, Nigeria. It was a rather chilly morning, and the dizzying cold did not seem to ameliorate or kowtow my anxiety as I was on the verge of losing a source of income. My job was at risk, and I was rushing to Onitsha Main Market to reconcile with my boss. Intrusive thoughts of hunger, anger, anguish, and hopelessness filled my soul as I boarded that yellow minibus. I gazed at the driver as I got into the front seat. He

was what one could describe as a manly man, fair in complexion, and looked cool in his jean top and trousers.

I sat down on the clean front seat and immediately I was attracted to the song's first verse blasting clearly from the speakers, saying: "It's you, it's you, it's you I'm talking to."

I was like, me? Then my attention intensified as the second verse resonated: "Why do you look so sad and forsaken." The verses went on:

*When one door is closed, don't you know, another
is open
Would you let the system make you kill your
brother man
No dread no*

Suddenly, I realised the artist's prophetic words were talking to my innermost being, it was as if I was hypnotised and in a trance. In that instance, I was fed with words of wisdom by a psychologist masquerading as a musician. Bob Marley's song treated my unconscious mind with musical mesmerism. My self-efficacy was so low that fateful morning, but the lyrics of the song uplifted it. The lyrics, no doubt, were soothing and reassuring and I felt tranquility settle over me. It was the trigger I needed to confront that threatening situation and escape from a debilitating mental Alcatraz that only incubates stress and depression. It was like escaping Mandela's prison and entering a new lease of life. Bob Marley, like Milton Erickson, the renowned psychologist, knew how to use musical psychotherapy to get to the roots of all the inner conflicts and traumas in my unconscious mind that were causing me restlessness and anxiety that morning. It was ironic that a nasty dread Rastaman's music and lyrics could significantly strike a chord of

emotions in my being and teach me common sense about the vicissitudes and reality of life. It resonated with the adage that says, "Never judge a book by its cover."

Even before I got to my destination that momentous morning, an inner discerning feeling told me I had seemingly lost the job which I had hinged my hopes and aspirations on, and whatever the outcome, I should accept that a door had closed and another one was going to open soon. So, I decided to expect the unexpected and paradoxically my boss was nowhere to be seen at the arranged venue for that reconciliation.

Due to the "musical healing" I experienced on the bus, I decided to pick myself up and start all over again. Inside me, I was humming Jimmy Cliff's song 'I Can See Clearly Now.' Instead of leaving Onitsha downcast and crestfallen, I found myself brimming with confidence knowing that opposition will always come my way, but I have to keep on trying until I succeed. I went forth the next day enthusiastically looking for another job.

Before my Onitsha musical epiphany, which ostensibly was reminiscent of the biblical encounter Saul had on his way to Damascus and thereafter became Paul, music to me was about listening to the tunes and dancing to the latest break dance moves. It never occurred to me that musical lyrics provide food for thought. However, my youthful imagination ran wild to lyrical compositions that made me believe that romantic love is so real. Nostalgically, I remember I had this thing for Lionel Richie's song 'Stuck on You,' Rod Stewart's 'First Cut Is the Deepest,' and Marvin Gaye's 'Sexual Healing.'

My childhood sweetheart Irene introduced me to Marvin Gaye's 'Sexual Healing.' It would be safe to say that she was insanely addicted to his song. Like, she ate, drank,

and revelled in it. And her obsession eventually caused me to lose my virginity.

The sexual aberration happened one evening when I visited her abode and her parents had travelled abroad for an event. My drop-dead beauty was seated, legs crossed, on the leather sofa while the song played in the background. Her lustful brown eyes stared steadily at me as she hummed the song's verse "I need some loving" with ruby red lips. The eyes had a clear message: let's fuck. I instantly got a hard-on with my dick struggling for space in my tight jeans but I was no Casanova, and naive as to sexual matters, hence I hesitated. An ethical side of my mind was saying with a low voice, resist her and keep your virginity until you get married. The unethical side was saying, she is yours for the taking.

As I juggled between morality and immorality, I heard the song other verses:

*Come take control, just grab a hold
Of my body and mind, soon we'll be making it,
honey*

Oooh! I just grabbed Irene and fucked the living daylight out of her. I still remember with much relish the fucking satisfaction I felt as I released my wild oats into her bean. The question now is, does music intoxicate? Yes, it does. So, the lyrics one listens to play a crucial role in the behavioural outcome. There is a linkage between music and behaviour. If the unconscious mind gets carried away, the music takes control of the senses and starts to drive your behaviour.

There are times I would just sit down and think that life and love were like how Lionel Richie and Diana Ross depicted it in their song 'Endless Love.' Like the proverbial fairy tale, a tall dark muscular handsome man meets a beautiful lady, and they fall in love and live happily after. However, I began to evaluate the concept of love as propounded in Ray Parker Jr.'s song 'I Got a Problem' and my curiosity increased when I heard Tina Turner's song, 'What's Love Got to Do with It.'

As the years rolled by, I decided to listen more intensely to the lyrics of any song that caught my fancy. It struck me that music is just a contraption that promotes the thoughts, imagination, experiences, and fantasies of the musician/artist/songwriter, as activated by their environment. Like avant-garde writers, musicians write and sing what they feel in the spur of the moment. Whether it is traditional, avant-garde, or contemporary music, there is seemingly a message each song could surreptitiously be promoting such as love, social justice, horror, societal conformity, unethical ideologies, freedom, and inclusion. For instance, when I listened to John Lennon's song 'Imagine,' I was enthralled and inspired and got the impression that he was emboldening listeners to visualise a world where peace is possible, without avarice, without borders dividing nations, and without religion. The lyrics really resonated with me because I also have a passion for driving social change.

I have since decided not to look but see music as a food that communicates a message and nourishes the soul. I am of the view that music is a kind of therapeutic medicine that cures emotional stress and depression just like it did that momentous morning in Onitsha. It provides me solace and respite for my pent-up feelings, serving as a form of liberation. This liberation could come through a song's soothing melodies and scintillating rhythms which effectively reduce

stress and anxiety. A dalliance with music diverts one's attention from upsetting thoughts and worries, assisting in breaking the cycle of negative thinking.

I am meticulously selective about my choice of songs, perhaps due to personal life experiences and an emerging passion to make a difference, and now prefer to listen to the lyrics of other freedom fighters in addition to Bob Marley. In recent years, Peter Tosh and Lucky Dube have caught my fancy. The songs of these megastars have brought me nothing but joy especially when I am emotionally traumatized. My personal growth has been so attached to the songs of Lucky Dube. His song 'House of Exile' has inspired my thoughts and encouraged activism towards social injustice in my environment. It opened my eyes to social ills and inequality in Nigeria and the world at large, making me want to fight for social justice. His song 'Different Colours' made me understand that although we are diverse and come from different cultures, we are one and are only being divided by religion and politics. Likewise, Lucky Dube preached inclusion and eradication of apartheid in South Africa in his song 'War and Crime.'

I was fortunate to watch him play live at the October 2006 'Felabration' event at the Africa Shrine, Ikeja, Lagos. It is an annual event that celebrates the iconic and legendary artist Fela. Lucky Dube came to Lagos to celebrate a freedom fighter like him. As I watched him play on that stage that unforgettable night, it was as if I was in a dream, watching my musical hero physically, doing what he knows best. The ambiance of the shrine was charged, filled to the brim with people and Indian hemp smoke, as he doles out 'Going Back to My Roots,' 'Blessed is the Hand that Giveth,' 'Guns and Roses,' 'I Have Got You, Babe,' 'No Truth in the World,' 'Crazy World,' 'It is Not Easy' and other songs I

cannot vividly remember at the moment. I got home the following morning feeling saturated with love and revelled in inspiration, hope, and grit. Yes, it is obvious I cannot play music like him, but should I not spread his kind of message through writing?

I learned that Lucky Dube passionately studied and was inspired by the music of Peter Tosh, who can best be described as a musical rebel. Initially, I did not take him seriously when I listened to his song 'Mama Africa' but someone referred me to his song 'Pick Myself Up' on a day I had some emotional stress. As I listened and distilled the content of the song, the compelling message hit me like a hurricane, propelling me to the galaxies. It is a song that describes the struggles of a hustler like me and how one needs to keep believing anytime one falls from the ladder of life's challenges. It resonated with me because I am a struggling man who is fighting to stay alive and strives to reach greater heights. Consequently, I became a huge fan and source for Peter Tosh's other songs like 'I Am Not Gonna Give It Up,' a song that aptly depicts the shamelessness of African leaders and their inability to lift Africa from her "pangolo" poverty-stricken state.

Peter Tosh's song 'Equal Rights and Justice' is another philosophical banger that sheds light on the encumbering social inequality in Jamaica and Africa. His call for justice and equal rights before peace may be the panacea for ameliorating class segregation. I think if Lucky Dube is the lighter, Peter Tosh is the fire. I believe his music has inspired social change and other musicians, not only in Jamaica, but in the world. I believe music is a social connector as it brought me and my wife together especially after we attended that Lucky Dube performance at the Africa Shrine, Ikeja. We danced together throughout the night, and

it sort of created a bond and sense of belonging between us. I am not sure about other couples, but having the same kind of mindset towards a song or music genre amplifies positive vibes and creates lasting memories.

I am so glad that music is taught in schools and used in certain professions to promote healing and well-being. For me, music evolves with time as it is enduring and continuous due to the ever-changing environment which comes with different situations, settings, and experiences. Nobody may sing about apartheid in contemporary times, but emerging crises like wars in Ukraine and Israel/Palestine could inspire songs that would act as a form of healing. The seamless change of musical genres is part of the evolution of music. However, in whatever format music is presented, it has a message and it is that message that inspires. It is that message that drives me to listen and see how it connects with my particular circumstance at any time. I think the message is the key whether it is instrumental or not. Even if it is jazz music, its rhythm has the intention to create a soothing balm for the soul that listens to it.

I really hope to make an impact on the social structure with writing like Lucky Dube has done with music.

Imoh Emmanuel Uwem

An acolyte of Voltaire,

Writes from the House of Exile.



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BEING FREE IN SOUND: BLACK UNDERGROUND MUSIC

PAULA STÄBLER

'Aftermath' by Nightmares on Wax

In a performance that tackles police brutality, the UK's immigration laws, and the resulting discrimination of Black working-class people, Zia Ahmed and Stef O'Driscoll explore how music connects a community in *Brassic FM*. After two hours of mesmerising speeches, beats that make your heart thrum, and a love story that spans continents and decades, I kept thinking about the Castlemorton Common Festival in 1992. To this day, it is Britain's biggest 'illegal rave'. A rave that prompted public outrage and the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994.

In the years of Margaret Thatcher's ministry, tensions between the police and Black communities heightened, and Black social spaces became "more contained, more militant, more dread" (Melville, p. 86). With the club culture being dominated by white crowds and white DJs, warehouse parties offered a space where boundaries were challenged. They were self-made spaces where Black communities could make their own rules, outside the limits and threats

white spaces created. In their space, the dancing (Black) body could find new ways “to make itself known,” where “rhythms reclaim[ed] their rights” (Melville, p. 89). Caspar Melville elaborates that they were “beyond the reach of spatialised forms of power, be it of the police or of competitive neighbourhood or gang affiliation” (Ibid).

In a similar act of breaking free, pirate radios provided “a vital channel for new kinds of black music” ignored by the BBC and other commercial stations (Melville, p. 108). This was also a way to promote warehouse parties and raves and their ‘secret’ locations without catching the attention of the police. As Melville observes, the riots of the early- and mid-1980s caused the police to be more careful “for fear of inciting crowd trouble” but “did not stop [...] raiding reggae sound systems” (Melville, p. 113). Although the police were wary of all big gatherings – especially those including loud music and drugs – they specifically targeted Black sound systems.

Raves were a place to escape the constrictions society – and the government – inflicted upon groups of people. Within Black spaces, there is a sense of comfort and enjoyment that cannot be achieved in spaces where Black people constantly need to be wary of their actions. They could be themselves in warehouses that were barely lit and full of bodies, getting lost in the crowd and the bass.

Thus, when the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act was passed in 1994, entering this space was much more challenging. The Act referred to “a gathering on land in the open air of 100 or more persons (whether or not trespassers) at which amplified music is played during the night”, with ‘music’ being defined as “sounds wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitions.” This responds directly to the Castlemorton Common Festi-

val, where 20,000 to 40,000 people partied in Worcestershire. In addition to sharpening the laws on music festivals, this Act gave police officers more power to take body samples and do unsupervised stop and searches.

People who were liberated by warehouse parties and raves were forced back into commercialised clubs. This is precisely what the government wanted to achieve. In his piece in *Esquire* about Black music versus the police, Jesse Bernard (2020) explains that “the lives of Black people in Britain have historically always been under surveillance and through music, expression has always been censored in a myriad of ways, in keeping with the evolution of policing.” The government did not like Black people being outside their view as that means they can become ‘dangerous’, jeopardising the ‘civilised’ public life – a belief that is still instilled today.

Ahmed and O’Driscoll’s *Brassic FM* articulates the fight for freedom and the consequent subjugation by authorities. One character, Ange, puts on an ‘illegal’ rave in the style of Castlemorton that ends up being raided, and Ange ends up in jail. Her dad, the leading DJ of Brassic FM, sends her messages and thoughts via the radio, showing her that her community stands behind her even if England does not. They also show that nothing changed between the 1990s and now.

Bernard notes that areas with mainly Black and ethnic minorities are over-policed and report a “disproportionate rate of arrests and prosecutions for minor offences.” He notes that ‘illegal’ raves were predicted to resurge due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The surveillance and increased policing measures, especially during the pandemic, threaten the entire illegal rave scene, but Black people and Black underground music will suffer the most.

Although the police are adamant about controlling what they consider to be radicalised groups – this attitude also influencing club owners who hesitate to host events for a Black audience – small sound collectives and organisations try to make their own spaces, just like the generation of the 90s did before them. Lick Events is a monthly club night for queer Black women that promotes consent and “a community of joy,” as the journalist Jasmine Lee-Zogbessou tells *Huffington Post* (2022).

Pxssy Palace is, as their website describes, “an arts platform rooted in intentional nightlife, celebrating black, indigenous and people of colour who are women, queer, intersex, trans or non-binary.” They continue: “We provide space to dance, connect and engage, whilst encouraging consent, sexual freedom, pleasure, expression and exploration of our authentic selves.” Their emphasis on ‘authentic selves’ recalls the intention of the raves in the 1980s and 90s, as they encourage their DJs to “make noise, tell stories, teach us something new and hold our emotions of joy, rage and sadness.” Their understanding of Black nightlife and systemic discrimination is made obvious by their description of themselves and ticket tiers. Their cheapest ticket is for queer women, trans and non-binary that are also Black, indigenous or People of Colour because, “as these groups are the most vulnerable within LGBTQIA+ community, this is who the party is for.” Trans or disabled BIPOC can even make use of a free taxi home service.

The subtitle for Habiba Katsha’s article in the *Huffington Post* is “We just want a space to be free.” That was true in the 90s and still is now; however, it should be given naturally and not something Black people should need to ask for. Yet, the police and government fail to address the systemic racism that haunts society, abandoning the Black

communities in their country. Having a space where one can feel safe, empowered, and genuinely themselves is an absolute necessity of the human experience that no one should be deprived of. It is an intrinsic right, and no one should be able to take it away.



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A MORN WITH BEATS

LAVI BACHCHIS

'Rafa Dafa' by Shady Mellow

Dear Diary,

There goes the alarm, echoing all the way down the hall. I know it's annoying every individual here. Waking up is a big deal, and here I am, lying supine on the bed. I am just trying hard to take my forefinger and rub my eyes to signal my brain cells, "It's time to get out of bed."

I need some motivation here. I look at the time, and it's 7 o'clock already! Need an energy booster. I pick up my phone, scroll all the way down to find Spotify, "Hit it up!" My brain is struggling to find the perfect beat for this morning vibe.

My Indie Pop playlist definitely needs something new. It's like I've memorised all of these songs, repeatedly listening to them. Here it is, the Mahakal Aarti "a renowned hymn of Lord Shiva," top of the list. It's giving me an adrenaline rush. The drums match my heartbeat, getting me to experience life to the fullest. "I am ready to take on the world!"

I grab my robe, making my way to the shower with enrapturing grooves, “one to the left, and one to the right. Yeah!”

It’s Tuesday. I guess black it is — outfit of the day. I put on my body-con crop top with chocolate brown cargos along with white sneakers. Finally, it’s time for me to ponder which shade of mascara and lip gloss will match today’s outfit. I lift up the mirror, “Ooo! I definitely look good,” pampering every bit of myself. Lashes done, liner done, and finally, lipstick done.

Ready for class.

I pick up my bag and open the pocket to check my essentials. Glasses, notepad, pencil, umbrella, and my water bottle. Not to mention, I’ve never taken out the bank cards, EVER. Phone is on me in my right pocket. I am going down the stairs, just about to open the main door. But first, “Let me select my playlist for the ride...BOOSTERS!”

Got my One Plus Bluetooth neckband, plugged in the left and just at the turn of Caledonian Road, I plug in the right one too. Now, the song is matching my mood, my heart pounding with ecstasy, with slightly curved lips, ensuring I am going to do my best today.

It’s been four minutes, and I am still walking towards the station. Little scary though, as I am completely disconnected with the exterior voices. I am wondering, “what if someone calls me out for help, what if the volume is too high, is it audible outside...” like a thousand thoughts bombard me at once. The art is to keep calm, at least on the face.

That’s the District line, I need to tap the card and run as fast as I can to hop on. Finally, I get on just in time. And the best part is, I got the seat. Now, it’s time to change and groove on some Desi Hits playlist. Since I wish to feel moti-

vated today, but not too pressurised, I close my eyes, until the name popped into my mind. This is it — ‘Cheete’ by Bintu Pabra (among the latest Haryanvi hits).

After almost thirteen minutes, I am at the Mile End station. I need to change the lines to get to Oxford Circus. This underground station looks intense. I see people talking in whispers, on the opposite platform. There’s a girl in a pink crop top, ankle-length denim, with brown boots. Her attire is fine, but I am mesmerised by her eyes. My brain is functioning ploddingly, but I just wish to watch her for a little bit more. She’s got pallid green eyes, shimmery shade, and baby pink eyeliner, starting from her eye lid, drawn in an aesthetic flower pattern till the middle of the cheek. Our eyes just met for a fraction of a second. She’s standing there still, with almost no gestures, as if with many confined stories.

My train arrives. I am trying to get in while processing my thoughts. Maybe I need something like instrumental music. Perhaps, only this can quench my curiosity of getting into the mind and unraveling her thoughts. This is usually a crowded tube. So, I just decided to stand by the pole, hoping to find at least someone like her while turning up the volume of the mesmerising Celtic music. Now, I can mentally relax by the time I reach the class.

And that’s how today’s morning routine brought me a bundle of joy, curiosities and satisfactions with every beat of the music fitting well in the scenarios, just as it is!

LIVING HELL

HENRIETA GALDUNOVA

'Hell on Earth' by VyOK

It was just another day in my amazing life when I came across 'Hell on Earth.' After hours of crying, with nothing left in me, I clicked my Spotify's "Discover Weekly" playlist. It must have been one of the worst times of my life, since that song was recommended to me. It's as if the app knew it was going to be one of the most special songs I'd ever listen to.

I must specify what type of music I like and how it usually goes for me. I focus on the sounds and melody, not the lyrics. My preferred style is techno. I like music full of life, where I can just escape in the easy flow, where all the bass kicks out any thoughts left in my brain. Also, I almost never listen to a song for more than a few days. I like to feel the music, not the words. Even if there are any lyrics, it's just empty for me. All I hear is the "untz, untz."

With this song, however, I was drawn to the lyrics. I'm not sure even today how that happened. I'm pretty sure it took me a few days to decide that I wanted to check out the

lyrics of this song. And when I did, I realised how close I felt to it and the person who wrote it. I didn't feel so alone, I could also relate to the 'Hell on Earth.' I'm pretty sure that not everyone sees this piece the same way. That's probably the magic of a human mind. This whole song made me feel like I was on a rollercoaster of emotions. From pain to infinite sadness. And, who knows, maybe it won't even be sad for others. Well, it is, at least for me.

I still remember listening to it on repeat, feeling the deep sadness. It even inspired me to write my own lyrics. Every line of the 'Hell on Earth' brings all memories and feelings back to me. I could scream my lungs out with it.

LIVING HELL

Day after day
This never ends
People betray
Mountain of dead
Good or bad? Good or bad?

Always alone
Holding the gravestone
Others afraid
I'm just asking
Is it my friend?

Waiting a bit more
Waiting and hating
Anger peaking
Empty feeling

Inside calamity
Holding it together
Last resort
Stay or leave? Stay or leave?

No hope left
Who will know
Being selfish
Others know

Sadness winning
Spark is leaving
Desperate feeling
May be staying

What is this
What can I do
How to do this
Continue

Where's the guide
What to follow
No other choice?
Leave then alone

Clown face laughing
Soul is crying
Body suffering
Mind just crying
Why do you do this?
What's the reason?

Lost in the dark
Hunter is shaking
Hunting the shadow

Demons are scary
Who are the demons?
Kids having nightmares
Who makes nightmares?
Factory of dreams
Somehow closed
Producing nightmares
At all cost

Who wins this fight?
Who is the winner?
Will we ever know
Probably the loser
Wins it all

This is not fair
The ridiculous fear
Choking me dead
Writing this phase
Purpose is gone
Driving us home
There is no hope
We are just gone

'LET IT BE'

DESPINA PARTHEMOS

'Let it Be' by The Beatles

I don't know when it first came into focus.

I wasn't there with the rest of them. I never heard it like they did. Yet the lyrics have echoed throughout my life with the rhythm of a throbbing heart.

Let it be. Let it be. Let it be.

John Lennon and Paul McCartney's subtle harmonies evoke memories of a time when everything was lost to us. This song is a remembrance of sunny days eclipsed; a reminder of how in the midst of life, we are in death. I remember those early days as an endless summer. Our creaky and crooked home was warm with the smell of candied carrots and green bean casserole. The fire was always burning, the carpet was always soft, and the family laughed together around that antiquated wooden table. She would sit at its head and smile softly.

Her name was Mary. Did she speak words of wisdom? I

don't know, but I like to believe she did. In truth, I can't remember a single word she said. But I remember her.

They decided I was too young to attend her funeral. At four years old, I watched the collection of stricken faces rush about the living room as I sat on the couch. I don't remember who stayed with me. I don't remember when they left or when they came home. All I remember is a looming darkness; a flickering, then a burst like a light going out.

'Let It Be' played at the funeral. I didn't know that then, but as I grew older, the echoes started. Like ripples in the water that never stopped, but slowly gained momentum with time. A haunting crescendo that followed and beckoned me throughout my youth.

It might have been our Mary singing — a promise to find us in the times of trouble that would follow. That was a promise I believe she would have kept if only she could. Our hour of darkness was looming, the fire was going out, and there would not be an answer. Not for many years to come.

I played the song when I needed to be reminded of something that stopped being spoken. A love that once enveloped us had split and fractured every which way after that matriarchal glue had been wiped from our foundation. Mary was the hearth to the family home. Her extinguishing had produced an ice age. Our family shivered in the cold. Then we cracked. Then shattered.

Mary didn't return to us — not in our dreams, not to stand in front of us. But I still held out for an answer. Through every divorce and remarriage, every move to a new house, new apartment, new townhome, and every dinner eaten alone in my room, I yearned for the day a light like hers might return to shine on us. *You're so much like her*, my mother would say, without actually saying it. She would hint

at it more and more as I grew older. She loved me most when she felt like some part of her mother was inside me. Some part that had skipped over herself had resurfaced again in the slightest things I did and said.

I don't remember the first time I heard 'Let It Be' as a child, but something struck me whenever I heard that familiar piano, as it was played too often by my Beatles frenzied sixth grade teacher. Something that said, *this one is ours*, but I could never reason why. And I don't remember the day I learned 'Let It Be' played at the funeral. Eventually, twenty years had passed, and I believed I was the only one who associated The Beatles classic with our family. It never played in any of our taciturn, temporary houses where we lived between quarrels and separations.

No one else remembers, I thought, no one else cares. I was the only one who mourned the people we were when Mary was still with us. And it was devastating. *Devastating to be the only one who remembers*. We had all grown further and further away from each other. We didn't speak about Mary anymore or our creaky and crooked home where the fire was always lit and the carrots were always warm. We never sat around the table. The house that had once felt alive was now empty and cold and no one had lived there for ages. Sometimes I drove past it, to watch the walls slowly cave in.

Then one day, as my mother and I sat with my sister in the sun of a downtown restaurant, my sister presented to us a black script scribbled across her wrist in permanent ink. She revealed it like a confession. And I was heartbroken.

Let it be.

My sister had brought the words to life again, more than twenty years after they were sung for us. I sat frozen in the chair. A shiver of realization washed over me.

I was *not* the only one who remembered. My mother was

wretched. A collective understanding overcame us. *So this is what it meant to you, too?*

For too many years, we fought and cried and argued, separated and moved away, but we had never confessed our great loss. Not only Mary, but the loss of us all. We could have just let it be. We might have said so. We could have held onto each other and talked and cried until we cackled. When the weight of our collected grief felt unbearable, why had we chosen to face it alone? Maybe it had been too hard to say then. But we were saying it now.

The tattoo was a turning point. ‘Let It Be’ became our own unspoken anthem of hope and remembrance. We sat at the table once more. And no matter how far each of us roamed after that day, there was always a table to return to. I learned how to make Mary’s carrots, and they have been made every year since. We would never let ourselves forget each other again.

A fundamental truth had been exposed to us at last — the love had remained. It may have been hurt, broken, and hiding, but it was always there. I laughed at the thought. And I was a little ashamed, for thinking I was the only one who remembered.

How arrogant for me to believe, I was the only one who cared.

WAITING

SHELBY RODGER

*‘Concerto en ré mineur BWV 974: II. Adagio’
by Johann Sebastian Bach and Alexandre Tharaud*

There is one thing all waiting rooms in the world have in common, and it’s that there is no time once you’re in them.

It doesn’t matter if you’re a child waiting at the doctor’s office. Or a schoolgirl waiting for your counsellor to meet with you. Or a college student waiting to get your flu shot at the campus health clinic.

Or an adult waiting for your mother’s surgery to finish at the hospital.

When you’re stuck in the waiting room, your life is paused — no point checking your phone, or the time, or the weather. Nothing you do will change where you are, where you must remain. There are no sounds except the light droning *beep beep beeps* of hospital machinery in the background.

Beep beep beep. Always tapping at your skull. I wonder which *beep beep beeps* belong to her machines.

Waiting rooms have no age requirements. If there's a colouring book open and a cascade of broken crayons sprawled out on the table, who cares if you're 23 years old? Someone else has already started on this page; you may as well pick up where they left off.

This particular waiting room feels just like the one I used to sit in almost every day after school. That was so many years ago — at the dance studio on Main Street in my charming, suffocating New England town. I wonder if the child I was then would even recognise the adult me if we ever did cross paths.

Waiting.

Waiting for my next class to start, watching the little kids learn their ballet positions and leaps and thinking to myself, *wow, I am so much older and wiser than them. I'm in middle school now.*

The children's toys in the hospital waiting room are just like the toys at the studio. Younger siblings would play with them while their parents waited for their older siblings to finish ballet class. This was the order of things.

Wednesdays were when I feared the waiting room. *Piano lessons.*

Playing the piano is what I loved more than anything else — none of my many other interests or curiosities could come close to the feeling I got when I was sitting at the piano. So why did I sometimes wait for my weekly lessons to begin with such trepidation?

The contradiction still surprises me now. I've grown bored of waiting. The *beep beep beeps* have worn me down. Time to drift into another maladaptive daydream.

Bach. Handel. More exercises, more scales.

Lessons every week in the back of the dance studio with my Armenian piano teacher, her accent thick.

Work on Handel exercises six and seven for next lesson.

Did you practise this week?

I never practised enough.

Turn to page 10 of Magdalena.

Rigidity, intensity.

Make sure you use the right finger for each note.

Perfection.

I'd known her for a long time. Her daughter was a few years older than me. She also took dance classes and was very talented. Everyone at the studio knew who she was and loved to talk about her. I loved when my teacher told me stories about her.

She had curly hair just like mine, but hated it and straightened it as much as possible every day. My teacher was worried she would burn her hair off.

Her daughter also hated the concept of "prom" and almost didn't go, but my teacher pushed her to. The next morning, she complained and said no one there knew how to dance. They didn't have any rhythm. My teacher laughed. *It's a school dance. They were having fun.*

I thought that was funny. I was only twelve years old. I enjoyed dancing like an idiot at my middle school dances, though they definitely did not hold the same reverence as a prom.

Did you decide which Bach you want to do for the recital?

Yes, Adagio in D minor.

In Magdalena book?

Yes, the adagio in the Magdalena book.

I think I liked this piece more than the others in the book because it didn't feel entirely classical. It had slow, driving chords that were beautiful to me. Back then, I loved any music that simply sounded beautiful. I miss the years

when I was too young to recognise how doleful and melancholic most music really is.

Now I'm frozen as I sit trapped in this new waiting room. I still have my headphones on. I decide to listen to it. My eyes get a bit teary.

I need to run to the bathroom. I didn't expect it to make me cry.

Why are you thinking about all of this right now?

I don't know. Distraction. I need to get away. But I don't want to step back into that waiting room. Maybe I should pace up and down the hallway.

It's autumn right now. It's been a while since I've seen trees like this – a deluge of apricot and magenta and amber and tangerine and saffron all bending together like an alluring wildfire. I haven't been home in months. I haven't *lived* at home in years. I remember staring at the autumn trees through the window during my piano lessons. It wasn't too far into the new school year. My mom had some sort of soup or stew or pot of chilli simmering on the stovetop at home, waiting for me. Maybe that's why I'm standing, shaking in the hallway and crying with Bach in my headphones. Now I'm the one waiting for her, and what do I have to offer?

The screen that tracks all the surgeries says her procedure has just finished, but the nurse hasn't come out to get us yet. Not too much longer now until I'll finally see her again.

I miss her.

Waiting, waiting, waiting.

I don't know if she's woken up yet.

POETRY



PASCHAL PRAYER

ELENI KARELIS

'Xristos Anesti' (Old Greek Orthodox Hymn)

after Sirens' Song by Romare Bearden

I wish I was a Greek siren,
so my unholy belt
would be true north
for wandering sailors.

In the cool morning air,
faces shadowed and hollow
behind a dripping candle,
I can almost have my wish.

Incantations of a language
I once wielded like armor
crash into my ears' narrow canals,
but I do not give into their call.

I find my soul once a year
in an Orthodox church
when the musky censer smoke
seeps through my nose onto my tongue.

In the pews where incense flows
like a darkened sea,
I could also rise
from the dead.

For my namesake launched
one thousand ships,
I could sink twice as many
just for the fun of it.

OBLIVION

MEL KARTAL

'Oblivion' by Jhené Aiko

the universe is constantly singing for us
all of us
down to our cells,
our atoms,
the particles which make us whole,
she sings.

this performance does not tire her,
for she has been doing it
since the beginning of time
never alone

mother earth dances to her tune
her oceans ebb and flow for us,
pulled back and forth by her moon
the wind howls at the highest of her peaks
and through the cracks in my home

my mother brushes my hair,
and the comb gets stuck
that sharp hiss of pain
is her music
coming through me

we are born singing,
and we sing when we make love
though flesh and bone,
we are her instruments

buzzing in the frozen food aisle
quiet murmurs in the waiting room
dirt crumbling beneath our feet
everything
is singing for us

i wonder what her final breath will sound like
will it be a sigh of relief?
a gentle hum before she sleeps?
is she proud of me?

when our time runs out,
what will her final song be?

THE SCAR, AN ODE TO SOLANA, THE REMIX

ANIQAHA BASHIR

'ghost in the machine' by SZA ft Phoebe Bridgers

glory to be her voice, a weapon
of solace and destruction that pried pipered
its way into the hearts of millions and
millions to love and share cherry spritz
and elegance

baton rouge harps dance its way onto
the stretched baking paper canvas
dimpled second piercings hold dear to
pink clay from the banks of
New Jersey

all the memories make the journey onto
the canvas together like Noah's Arc
messily and quickly no care for polaroid
drip snoozes or losing her siren

gesture me into the burning cut of oil
paint residue and leave me bare for
weeks on end to be in the presence
of daffodils and hydrangeas of red
and pink and let the confusion lick
away any imperfections, she is starlight,
the freckled moon child
in a sea of TVs and cassettes

DYSLEXIC DRIP

VRUCHI HARSHAD DESAI

'this is me trying' by Taylor Swift

Phase one began with a lousy look at numbers,
I picked up the wrong note.
Strange formula adding up to chaos.
I couldn't calculate the screams evolving inside me.
No signal found for weak equations like me.
Answers to fear have all gone null.

Phase two crept out the way I learnt to mumble letters,
a fragile melody sang backwards until the end runs
towards me.
High notes desired a look at fading time.
I dreamed of an epic tune too soon for the reality to murmur
out my name.
Foggy mind failed to hold trembling hands to unravel my
barren face.
Dreadful music echoed my being, an endless search party.

Phase three drowned in rewinds and callbacks of trauma,
I wished borderline shapes to define my conditions.
Radiant lines fail to mould into bold music notes.
Drenching in the stencil of perfection became a weakness.
I was so ahead of the curve, the curve became a sphere.
Destiny helped me breed a new shape of my despair.
Forging outlines of pity, my scream finally decided to hum a
legacy.

I'M COMING HOME

HÉLÈNE EZARD

'Coming Home' by Diddy by Dirty Money ft. Skylar Grey

I'm coming home

After years abroad where I've grown
From a shy seventeen-year-old
To an adult more outgoing and more bold.

A crisis of confusion and fear
Sends me home to those near and dear.
I need to get back to the place I belong,
To my family; it's been far too long

Since we were all together in one place
With no end date in mind; it's like hitting the backspace,
Playful banter with my brothers, messing about,
I ain't finished growing, no doubt.

It's the same but without the teen dismay,
Let the rain wash away all the pain of yesterday,

Let's forget the time spent away
When we cross that doorway.

Don't have to wait for them to *pick up the phone*,
Cause they're right here with me, I'm not alone,
Lot of fights, squabbles, but when push comes to shove,
I'm coming home to the family I love.

GOODBYE YESTERDAY

SIERRA GRUBER

'Yesterday' by The Beatles

Yesterday encompassed my greatest moments.
Even though it is long gone,
Now we must look to tomorrow.
I miss yesterday.
When I experienced these escapades,
I felt free.
I felt like me.

If yesterday would come back to me,
I would welcome it with open arms.
We could hold hands.
And I would never let go.
I can see why to be thankful.
All the beauty surrounding me,
The dogs barking and people talking.

I wish for everyday to be like this.
My past was great,
Now my future can shine brighter.
Goodbye yesterday.

THE MEET-CUTE

JEYA KEERTHI SOUNDARA RAJA

'Un vizhigalil' (from Darling) by Harini

On the bustling streets of London,
I spotted him for the first time
In that coffee shop so renowned,
He stood behind the counter
As a Barista with a green apron and
A name on the badge that said "Seven"
What an odd name I thought at first
His hair well-groomed and
With a smile that creased his cheeks,
He began to brew the first cup of the day.
It is a work of art I must say.
As he grinds and tamps with skill and care,
The aroma of roasted beans filled the air.
Each cup he created was a masterpiece,
A sensory experience that I wish to have every single day.
I can hear the milk steaming loud
As he expertly pours, his movements proud,
The latte art that adorns each cup,

A signature, a mark of his passion, his love.
He greets all his customers with a warm smile,
Remembering their names and preferences, all the while,
He is a master of the craft,
With every sip of the coffee he makes,
He gives everyone a chance to escape,
From the hustle and bustle of daily life.
Thus, my search for the best cup of coffee began.
There are many types of coffee.
From beans roasted dark, to those roasted light,
Some prefer it strong, some prefer it mild,
There's the classic Americano, simple and pure,
A shot of espresso, and hot water, no more.
But that's too simple to be mine.
For those who like it with milk,
He makes the cappuccino, a coffee lover's dream,
With a frothy foam and a rich brown hue,
That could easily make my mornings feel brand new.
But no! They are too airy to be mine.
Then comes the latte, creamy and smooth,
With milk steamed to perfection and a gentle taste,
A heavenly bliss made for days amiss.
But that's not my cup too.
I can see the macchiato,
A shot of espresso with a touch of milk,
A bolder flavor, for those who like it that way.
But no, not today.
And then there's the mocha,
A cup of chocolate and coffee,
A sweet and decadent treat,
Or the affogato, a shot of espresso with ice cream,
A dessert and coffee all in one, a perfect dream.
Ah! Too many options and now I'm confused.

Suddenly our eyes crossed and
He noticed that I had been struggling to make my choice;
“You want any help, Ma’am?” He asks.
“Brew me your favourite cup of coffee.” I blush
Without any tinge of hesitation.
And then after a good wait for few minutes,
Came in a white porcelain cup with grace
A flat white, my new favourite.
With a velvety texture and
A balance of flavor, a taste so mature;
Having a world in itself to dive and explore.
I took my first sip and
At that very moment,
I don't know whether
I fell in love with the brew or with the barista himself
But that's another story to write.

The End.

MELOPHOBIC
REBECCA RICHARD

'Tolerate It' by Taylor Swift

ironic how,
we forgot how the song goes.
lyrics tangled in my hair somewhere.
rhythm keeping my heart in motion,
the sound reverberating in my chest.

I could feel it
even after we disconnected the chords.

when the curtain falls,
and the ovation reminds me
of the song we sang.

i was hoping that,
the sentences would stumble back to me.
the libretto lingering in the hallway,
waiting for me when I get home.
waiting for you when you get wise.

now, i'm just waiting for the band to return.

i, as conductor

you, as conducted.

The final melody staying with you.

because music was always the thing i loved most

and i was always the thing you loved least.

now neither is true.

BEFORE HE FALLS

EVA LYNCH-COMER

'I Lost a Friend' by FINNEAS

his voice steps onto the grainy crunch
of radio static. deep timbre, simple tone.
accompanied by waves of piano.
his voice rises from the pit
of a lucid dream. the last
bits of sleep still cling to it.

his voice is a waterfall afraid
of its descent. he closes his mouth
before the sounds are done leaving,
eats stained glass windows for
breakfast, pockets nighttime in his
cheeks, so when the night and day meet
in his throat, he croons in chiaroscuro.

his voice quivers as he shudders under layers
of covers that force him closer to himself. swaddle
him in a cool pool of tears and sweat. before sleep
comes again, he hums himself a tune of lost friends,
singing their way home.

DRIFTING AWAY

JENNY BOULAS

'My Tears are Becoming a Sea' by M83

The true stars and planets
They surround him
They tell him to stay with them
They try to pull him away
From his final destination

He closes his eyes
Almost out of time
And he remembers

He remembers the time he started school
And made his first friends
He remembers the time his dad taught him how to play
soccer
And when his parents got him a cat for the Christmas of his
ninth year

He remembers when he graduated high school
And when he moved away from his family
To go to the college of his dreams
He remembers the texts from his family
Telling him to stay strong
And how proud they are for his success in college

He remembers when he first fell in love
And married the love of his life
He remembers the moment he held his baby boy for the
first time
And the moment his baby boy grew up

He remembers the moment when the love of his life died
And when he thought he'd never heal
But there was his family
Who stood by him through every minute of the pain
They stood by him when the doctor told him he had a bad
heart
And that he wouldn't live much longer

They stood by him through all the warm embraces of life
And all the shadows of life
And they're standing by him today
He opens his eyes one last time
And looks around at the stars and planets
And then lets go
He lets go of the true stars and planets
And he lets go of the life they gave him

HEART SPLIT OPEN

ELENI KARELIS

'aby Grand' by Billy Joel and Ray Charles

after mounted piano casing in King's Arms Pub, Oxford

and if I felt your calloused palms
brush against the bend of my elbow
when you asked if I wanted another pint
knowing already that I was done
as we felt the rhythm of a crowded pub
dim around our conversation
and you left several notes on the bar,
closing our tab

and if we caught the next train back
wind-chilled hands crashing together
like hammers in an old piano,
so all I could do was lean into the motion
nudge my limbs into yours,

unbutton your thrifted oxford shirt,
prop you open to study
your hitch pins and bridges

and if I had let you play music all night
'till the headboards and soundboards
fuse together as they like to do
after a certain amount of liquor,
would I still be comparing
our withered romance to an aged casing,
an old piece of wall art?

SHE FELT LIKE HOME TO ME

TRISHA BACHKANIWALA

'Something' by George and Kang Hye-in

"she felt like home to me," he wrote in his diary. a line that lingered on the pages, connecting fate's dots. while looking at me for the first time in April. then he proceeded to come every day to the cafe i worked in. eight months unfolded like a novel, each chapter a hesitant dance until November's chill caught my attention. a peculiar dance of distance, like an abandoned house succumbing to the cold winds. perhaps I was a house, overwhelmed with the echoes of the past. because nothing knew the sound of desolation and somberness like a haunted house. but you stayed. month after month, as if you were trying to craft a home in the company of someone known for a heart that echoed the chill of winter.

he chose me. loved me. cradled my darkness and then became attached to it. became my solnyshko in June, but held me tightly through each season that passed us. 'my

jaan' he whispered to me one day "i knew you were mine ever since i saw you." kissed my forehead. my hands. my lips. my heart. the shadows that hold my havoc. peeled them off layer by layer. took it in his hands and becomes the absence of my chaos. wrapped me up in his warmth. ended our day with another kiss and reassured my doubts, "you are everything i ever wanted."

that's how i knew, enemies to lovers is true in real life too.

UNBURN THE ASHES

FATIMA LATIF

The poem is printed on the next page to preserve its design.

A lonely
drop tiptoes down
my cheek thinking none
would follow,
a dagger sticks out
of my soul like an
orange's stem –
unplucked and ripe.
there is no rope to
grip, no ears to listen
from beneath the
rubbles they shout
their names, their
dreams, their doubts
I am not a number
had friends, food, and
a house, tomorrow's been
written and I'm a companion
of death in red and sorrow
in green pain in white
and misery in black
standing beside me
as earth is poured
over, there will be
eyes on you as
history judges and
scolds as our
creativity stands
and receives
a medal, as
our poets
immortalise
my will
my belief
my cries
you'll see

FICTION



TRANSCENDING LANGUAGE

RAJANI ADHIKARI

'Endless Summer' by Raveena

They spent their first and last winter together on that balcony. Her: soaking in the unfamiliar yet welcomed heat of the tropical winter sun — a world apart from the frosted granite pavements and biting British winds she had grown up with during Novembers in London. And her grandmother: bundled in metres of boldly patterned sari fabric of feisty vermilion and turquoise, who'd never left the warm embrace of her province — and therefore felt the cold.

It had been thirteen years since she last visited her father's home country. The annual summer trips had ended abruptly after her parents' untimely divorce, but she had decided now that at the age of twenty-two, she was independent enough to take the long flight alone. When she arrived, the sight of her uncle's hibiscus-lined garden brought back lost memories of childhood monsoon days spent playing with her cousins and howling together under yak wool blankets at thunder crashing through the skies. The fragrance of ripened rice fields took her by the hand like an

old friend, guiding her across the streams and through pungent buffalo sheds towards that nostalgic cottage lined with dehydrated pumpkins and corn husks. But one thing had been left out of the divorce settlements. Her happy memories were now shadowed by an overwhelming sense of silence. It had been too long. She had lost her mother tongue.

Familiarity is a strange phenomenon when one feels it in a place where the land treats them like a stranger. Though she looked like any other local from a distance, she became an alien at once when she opened her mouth to speak. Determined to be heard and to be recognised, she would flex the muscles in her mouth, attempting to recreate the tones and inflexions that resonated so clearly in her head. But she could not recognise herself in the jarring verbalisations she produced. She heard only the fragmented mimicry of a foreigner. Her borrowed tongue from abroad had never been contorted in the ways that came so naturally to the rest of her extended family, so instead, she kept it to herself.

Though she could use English to speak to most people, her grandmother was a part of the generation that had refused to learn the coloniser's language, which left her days looking like this:

8AM — She wakes up to the sound of thudding fists on her door and opens it to reveal her grandmother, who motions to her to come out and sit on the balcony. She follows the tiny woman as she hobbles down the corridor in tattered old flip-flops and places herself beside her on the bench scattered with bright orange, mandala-patterned cushions. Here, they sip on spiced milk tea, simultaneously dipping their index fingers in the glass cup's boiling liquid to flick away floating tea leaves that managed to escape the

strainer. Sadistically, she hopes to herself that the scalding tea would somehow reshape her disfigured vocal cords into ones that matched her people's so that she could discuss their similar tea-drinking habits. Instead, they wordlessly share a packet of biscuits — for the first week, it's the buttery soft shortbread she brought as a gift.

Once those are finished, they procure malty Parle-G cookies to dunk instead.

The rest of the morning is spent basking in the glow of sun rays: she sits in silence, enjoying the serenity of the mountain view, as her grandmother speaks to her in tongues — her crackled tone betraying the fragility of her deteriorating health. The cancer was back, but this time, her body wasn't responding to treatment. Her time was limited. Their time was limited.

12PM — Lunch time. They sit together in front of their copper thali plates laden with steamed rice, golden lentil soup, cumin-tossed cauliflower, creamy tomato and chilli chutney, pickled soybeans and bitter fermented greens. Most of the grandmother's portion ends up on her plate as she cannot stomach much these days, so she settles for a glass of boiled milk and picks at the rice.

After lunch, they find their way back to the balcony. They watch the world go by together, laughing at the children's petty arguments while they ride their bicycles up and down the street. Shouting and throwing sticks at cows that try to enter the garden and demolish the sprouting spinach leaves. Shooting looks at one another as the nosy neighbours pass by the house — her grandmother will try to give her the village gossip, which, of course, goes straight over her head. But it was fine — it even worked between them somehow. The granddaughter had always been more of an observer and a listener. And the grandmother could talk for

hours, even when she knew her words would dissipate immediately into the humid air. There was an unspoken, intrinsic bond between the two of them, but she still felt like the fact she couldn't respond made her a disappointment. Physically, she was there for her grandmother — but who really wanted company from the mute? She was sure she was more of a burden than anything.

2PM — They take a circular walk around the block. Her grandmother greets everyone they pass, introducing her granddaughter proudly. The granddaughter silently raises her hands together as a form of respect and notices the visible confusion on the faces as they notice her mouth has nothing to offer. She plucks an orange from a tree next door — far sweeter than those available in England — and they sit in a comfortable silence as she peels it to share with her grandmother, removing every piece of the white flesh covering the segments that they both know is edible, but neither can stand the texture. She hands her grandmother the larger half.

3PM — They return home, and her exhausted grandmother forces down her medication, acquires a pillow, and takes a nap on the balcony bench. The granddaughter shifts to the lounge for some much-needed shade and shuffles a playlist on her phone to listen to while she reads. Finding herself distracted by the clashing of words, she selects a classical music station as her daily background noise. She notices an unexpected vulnerability in the sound of the instrumental without the foreground of lyrics to protect it or to tell its listener how the song should be interpreted. In her state of entrancement, it isn't long until the hum of mosquitoes and sizzling fresh chilli in mustard oil brings her attention to the sky, fading to dusk.

7PM — She wakes her grandmother, who lies there in a

state of half-awareness. Her grandmother smiles, feigning strength at the sight of her. She motions putting her fingers to her mouth, signalling dinner time. A coarse, wrinkled hand reaches for hers, which she takes and guides down to the kitchen. Her grandmother croaks out a concerned lecture, and she faintly understands the words 'where,' 'sweater,' and 'cold.' She wants to tell her not to worry, that this 17-degree evening would be considered the perfect temperature back at home — but her lack of articulation sees her settling for a shrug instead. She'll never be able to put her grandmother's worries about her at ease, and she again is left to mourn her voice.

After eating, they return to the balcony. Her grandmother lights an incense stick, drapes one of her shawls around her granddaughter, and recites a story. She accepts the shawl with some instinctive idea of its significance and nods along, attempting to let her know she is heard. Sometimes, the story is one she has heard before in translation, so she is able to react appropriately. She giggles apologetically when it's the story of her mischievous childhood antics. Nods solemnly when it's the story of her grandfather's passing away. Often, it will be something new, and she will have no idea how to react. Her grandmother sometimes breaks into tears, and she caresses her shoulder earnestly, wishing she could provide words of comfort instead. Then she boils water for her grandmother to take her second daily helping of coloured pills with and retreats to her bedroom next door. They will wake up the following morning and repeat.

One day in December, everything changed.

As they lounged on the terrace that afternoon, a wedding procession began making their way up the street towards the nearby temple. It was a huge spectacle; the

groom was being transported to his bride atop a gold-adorned Elephant. They watched from above, captivated as the hundreds of people in the procession danced and sang in pure jubilation. Behind them, the marching band followed with their traditional instruments: resonant madal drums and folk-sounding sarangi strings, blending harmoniously to create classical renderings of customary songs. The joy that radiated from the snaking procession was infectious, and they both found themselves clapping along enthusiastically despite the fact no one could hear or see them from their lookout.

As the wedding party's sounds gradually faded, the granddaughter had an idea. She brought out her speakers and began to play lyric-less instrumental music. She played a mixture of genres: Lo-Fi, jazz, classical, and traditional folk. They closed their eyes, and together, they swayed gently at the peaceful vibrations of Lo-Fi, danced chaotically to Coltrane's trumpets, meditated to Ravi Shankar, and cried at the melancholic sounds of Beethoven. The melodies and rhythms spoke to them both without a need for vocals — emotion was being communicated in an entirely new language. One without boundaries. One that transcended words. One that could be understood by everyone, regardless of upbringing, culture, or age. There was a time when words and language separated them, but now they had no need for such trivialities. Now, they could both communicate and understand one another's feelings flawlessly.

The rest of their months together on that balcony were tangled in sound waves and vibrations. Symphonious, like the two of them. So different, yet so similar. A mirror image of each other — a reflection that is reversed, but nevertheless, the same. They were a duet.

January saw a cacophonous end to their harmony.

Distance was put between them once again, and two days after she landed at Heathrow, her uncle called her at 5AM. Her grandmother had passed away in her sleep. Though she had expected this to come, it didn't stop the gut-wrenching feeling that lingered like the echo of a cymbal. She wasn't there for her grandmother: not to perform her final rites, or to even say goodbye. Her wallowing ended when she received a video call from her cousin, stood among the crowd at the funeral, and her presence was viable in a strange, virtual way. She sat in silence, watching. Then, the dissonant cry of a conch shell being blown. The sacramental mantras, chanted in low voices. The wailing shrieks of string and percussion instruments. This music had no beauty; all she longed to hear was her grandmother's voice. Tuning it all out, unable to do anything but stare unwillingly at the scene of the body being torched on the funeral pyre, she again retreated into a state of silence.

Months passed by, and eventually, she was able to listen to music again and smile. But it would never again be *just* music to her. Its potential as a tool — a method for communication and a way of understanding without the need for words — would be a part of her forever.

Now, alongside the DNA that tied her to her roots, music flowed through her veins.

THE SKYLIGHT OF OUR ETERNITY

ALINA PUSTAI

'Get You' by Daniel Caesar and Kali Uchis

I was looking at him picking up the book. He was reading through the pages, but I could tell the words were passing through him. He wasn't concentrating. I could tell something was off. I didn't dare question him; I was afraid of the answer. I looked up to the skylight and I could see drops of rain falling rapidly on the window. A summer evening I will not forget.

"Why are you playing that song again?" he asked suddenly as 'Get You' by Daniel Caesar and Kali Uchis started playing on the speakers. His abrupt question startled me. "I like it. It... reminds me of us." I said, then suddenly regretted my words. He looked at me, but really, he was looking through me, then proceeded to ignore what I said while flipping through the pages of the book. I laid back on my bed and sighed. I knew he could hear my anger, nerves, melancholy, he could feel it, but he chose to stay blind. "Shall we do it?" he asks while turning his head towards me.

I prepared myself mentally for days, but that day, in all

of the desolation, I felt like that moment marked the perfect moment to do it. So, I swallowed the pill. I was laying back and I began to see him with the corner of my eye, moving towards me. He sighed while he laid back next to me. I looked at him, he looked back at me. And for what felt like a moment and an eternity at the same time, while closing our eyes slowly, we flew high through the rhythm of summer and music.

I felt ready, for the last time, to feel with him. I opened my eyes and saw his curly hair, his hazel eyes, the mouth that kissed me so many times, for the last time in the breeze of summer. He looked back at me. I swore at that moment, not to let him go. I could feel my heart pumping blood faster and faster, my breath heavier. He was getting closer; I could smell the lemon from his drink on his breath. It was warm, familiar. I didn't want to; I couldn't let him go. He kissed me and I saw my entire body lifting up, flying through the universe, with him close to me. We were existing in space. And the stars were getting closer, while the moon was dissolving.

"Please don't go," I said to him while I could only see his hazel eyes staring back at me. Nothing else, but his eyes. My body was starting to feel numb, while the sunset of the summer evening was carrying us through infinity. My body immobilised on the bed, my soul and everything I saw was out of this world. Just me and him, resting on the light pink ground of this new earth, with flowers growing speedily from the ground, with trees swirling and a butterfly. It landed on his chest, and I was admiring both of their shine. Loved, and full of life, I could feel them closer and closer until we merged into one. And for a second, I thought that all was forgiven and forgotten. "Mel, are you okay?" He startled me again. "I'm happy," I said. He smiled.

My dignity meant nothing to me at that time. I was full of regret. I knew what I'd done. I couldn't forgive myself so why would he forgive me? "Could you at least tell me why?" His question, so direct, so painful to hear, and so easy to expect. I could feel in his voice, for him, it was just a matter of knowing the reason, rather than finding a happy ending. I couldn't answer straight away. I looked at the skylight, it was getting darker and the rain wasn't going to stop anytime soon. The drops seemed to get bigger and bigger, splashing my face. And while the rain was pouring on me, I could hear the thunder and see the lightning in purples and blues. I felt calmness in the weather, even though I don't normally like rain. But in that moment, the sorrowful sky felt more peaceful than my soul. A guilty soul. *Why did I kiss her*; the unanswered question was playing on repeat in my head. I couldn't answer myself; how could I give him an answer?

As we kept looking at the sky, the rain seemed to stop suddenly. A rainbow from behind the darkness appeared and I saw it sparkling brightly, coming closer and closer to me until I could feel its soft embrace wrapping me with sadness and joy at the same time, seducing me with anticipation for us. *Maybe everything will be okay, maybe he'll understand, forgive me*. I was wondering if my optimism was too daring. But I didn't have any other choice other than to be hopeful. I loved him. Did he still love me?

I was moving my gaze from his hands to his chest, to his mouth, to his eyes. When I finally reached his sight, I caught him looking back at me. A smile of heartbreak, it petrified me. I could sense his disappointment. Was there a way to fix this? "Look Mel, I am crushed, but I, I can't imagine everything that we are, crashing down because of a silly mistake. I'm not saying I'm not mad, but..., let's see where it goes." I'm left speechless. I couldn't help myself and kissed him. He

kissed me back. I felt the rain drenching me at that moment. I looked up at the skylight, the darkness of the night had settled. The rain was dropping heavier; I felt it wetting my entire body. It made me feel at peace. Everything was going to work out. He was willing to forgive me. What more could I have asked for? I felt content. I knew my mistakes and I knew, even despite them, we were made to exist as one.

He was smiling, looking at me deeply. He grabbed me. "You're mine. I don't care what you think." His voice and words echoed in what felt like a thousand times in a thousand different tonalities. I felt as if I was floating, in the comfort of my bed, on a blanket of clouds we were merging. I could have done whatever he asked for. He was right. I was his. He was caressing my thighs and while pulling gently on my hair he drew me closer to him. My heavy breath under his, the sensation of lust and affection felt more intense as we were getting closer. I could feel his heart beating faster, his voice calling my name, louder. All of a sudden, in a moment of ecstatic pleasure, we gave in. And then, we just fell from the sky, holding hands, slowly landing back on my bed. From outer space to the familiarity of my room. He looked at me, I looked at him. We started giggling as the high was over, back to the unknown. Could we last forever?

S.O.S

MYA GUARDINO

'Nobody Gets Me' by SZA

June 3rd, 2023

~~*I think I'm falling in love with Issac.*~~

I'm not sure if I'm ready to be in love, but it also feels inevitable. He's too, I don't know. Just "too" my type of person.

Sometimes I get this weird feeling in my stomach when he's around. Like I've known him before or we're meeting again after time apart. ~~I wonder if he feels this way too.~~ It feels insane to be contemplating love with someone I met two weeks ago.

—Olivia



Spring was melting into summer when Olivia and Issac first met.

Their rigid routines began to bend as the semester came to a close. The sun hung in the sky longer, creating the illusion of more time in Washington D.C. To celebrate, Olivia

and her friends hosted a wine night ensuring unforgettable fun.

The two of them occupied the couch in the furthest corner from the door, deep in separate conversation. Old school *Drake* faintly thumped through the speakers while clouds of smoke settled in the air. Olivia went on about her plans to achieve everything on her bucket list as Issac introduced the topic of guilt. Those on the receiving end sat with their lips parted, nodding respectfully and swirling their wine. Eventually, the cracked leather couch was left vacant, leaving Olivia and Issac all alone.

“That list of yours — it never makes you feel guilty?” Issac pointed as if a physical list was actually in her hand, versus just floating in her mind.

With a furrowed brow and tilted head, she stared at him for a moment. “Not at all,” was all she replied.

Anticipating that exact answer, his follow up was immediately shot. “You have a list full of things you want to do—”

She corrected him. “Will do.”

“Fine, will do. Point is, you’re able to quantify all of these cool things. Some people will never get to experience even just one thing being crossed off their bucket list.” Issac sipped his wine under the same notion as a mic dropping after a profound statement.

“That sucks for them but what does that have to do with me?”

“It doesn’t make you feel bad?”

“I’ve thought about it, yes, but I won’t punish myself for enjoying life. And even if I did, that wouldn’t change their experience.”

Issac’s eyes drifted down breaking eye contact. Silence fell between them, but the roar of the room continued to rise. Olivia wasn’t ready to put down the conversation. They

had only just picked it up and tossed it back and forth to find their rhythm.

She saved the moment, spitting out her words, “Besides, you don’t even know what’s on my bucket list.”

His eyes darted up, locking in once again. Shivers trickled down Olivia’s spine, setting off every receptor in her body.

“Tell me then,” slipped from his mouth as he shortened the space between them. She felt heat rise to the tip of her ears. Any moment now her cheeks would give away her desire.

“I won’t laugh even if it’s ridiculous,” he added.

“I want to hear S.O.S performed by a live orchestra.”

He slouched into the couch, maintaining precise eye contact.

“SZA’s most recent album. That’s the next thing on my list,” she continued.

He repeated her wish, amused. “Why put things on your list that are dependent on others? What if that just isn’t ever a thing?” His responses were quick, as if he had known what she would say before she said it.

“It is a thing. They’re performing here next month.” She scrolled on her phone to pull up the ad. “Things always happen as I want them to.”

Issac smiled to himself as he sat up, moving closer. Her spine throbbed as the space between them lessened.

With an air of admiration, he simply said, “You’re weird.”

Peering into his eyes she no longer saw the boy who asked strange questions, but rather a recognized soul. Finally, another person spoke her language, or at least had access to her dictionary. She didn’t know if their connection was real or not. Either way, she was magnetised — something inside her, lived inside him too.

“So are you,” was all she managed to respond.



July 13th, 2023

I keep telling myself not to say anything. As if not admitting my feelings will make them go away. But I'm so far gone - completely fallen all the way down the hole. ~~It's bad.~~ I'm in love with him. There aren't any other words to put to it besides that.

—Olivia

P.S! He surprised me with tickets to see the live orchestra performance of S.O.S. I was going to go alone, but having him there will be so special. It's on the 28th.



Time had been moving oddly for Olivia since Issac had come around.

Her heart couldn't tell time, making the illusive naivety of her summer romance larger than life. Each moment was intense and thrilling even during the most mundane occurrences. Time's illusion caused the concert to come and go quickly, feeling that it all happened in the blink of an eye.

At the show's dismissal, hundreds of bodies swarmed the concourse raving about what treasures unfolded on stage. What was displayed as a chaotic mess of people, was actually an electrifying experience. For at that moment, they all entered each other's orbits, bouncing and bobbing in the waves of live music. Even if none of those in attendance crossed paths again, they'd forever be intertwined — Olivia and Issac included.

Nearly 23 blocks sat between the arena and Olivia's apartment, giving them ample time to debrief the magical night. They played like children, matching each other's steps and racing to the stop signs while they chatted.

"Favourite song from tonight?" He yelled down the block as she ran to keep up.

"Easy," she announced while huffing and puffing. "Nobody Get's Me." She slowed to a jog as she approached the stop sign. "Yours?"

"Good answer. Open Arms."

"I find it interesting how depressing some of these songs are, but then you hear the instrumental and it sounds like baby angels made it or something," she continued as they walked. "Like, in Nobody Gets Me, right — she's saying how misunderstood she is by everyone except the person she loves, who she now can't have. Paired with literally the most beautiful instrumental on the album."

He didn't respond immediately, but instead picked up her hand to hold in his. There was a silent exchange of smiles before the conversation continued.

"You find that depressing?" was all Issac said. Her brow furrowed the same way it did when they first met.

"Of course I do. How lonely would it feel to know the only person who truly gets you is someone you can't have?"

"Pretty lonely, I guess."

"Pretty? Extremely! That's like you and I not being able to hang out anymore." She giggled her way through the sentence feeling moisture in her palms.

"Tonight meant a lot to me," Olivia said, and they approached her front door. "Really, it was perfect. So, thank you for taking me."

She reached for her keys, unaware of his blank expression.

“Hey, um—” His voice cracked as the words slipped from his mouth. “I probably should’ve said this a while ago.”



August 1st, 2023

I keep replaying it all, wondering how this could've happened. How I could've fallen so deeply for someone so wrong. I wish I could turn back time - take it all back. All of it.

He had a girlfriend the entire time. ~~I hate him.~~

—Olivia

MY SKY FULL OF STARS

M. E. WILSON

'A Sky Full of Stars' by Coldplay

It was late June when you started to disappear. Late in the evening when the sun would still stream in through my thick white curtains, I would daydream about stargazing with you that night in May. You had been so happy then, your cheeks flushed pink with ebullience. Your eyes lit up at the sight of the twinkling stars. However, I only ever looked at *my* star, you. That night had been cold, yet your hand was warm in mine until the morning. And, when the shadows of the evening began to crawl up the sides of the trees, you sang to me.

“Lila, have I ever told you what my favorite song is?” You asked, your dark curls falling against my shoulder as we watched the moon through the lens of our telescope.

“No, but I’m sure I’d love it.”

“It’s called...no. I can’t just tell. I’m going to sing it, is that okay?”

I nodded and listened in awe as your angelic voice flooded the empty clearing. *Cause you’re a sky, you’re a sky,*

*full of stars...*The forest seemed to tremble in your presence. When you opened your mouth, the whole world stopped and listened. *I'm gonna give you my heart...* Is it possible that the stars themselves heard your voice? Glowed brighter at the sounds that you revealed to it, and me, in secret? For the universe went silent when you sang. It listened, and it swelled with pride and love and joy. I listened, and I fell in love thousands of times over again.

Clearly, you were meant to sing. It's no wonder the theater found out about your talent, about how you could bend and twist just about any sentence into a heartfelt soliloquy. I've seen your performance, and you are an angel up on that stage. But I can't help but feel the emptiness of the red leather seats beside me where you used to be. Do you remember watching our first play together? I'm sure you no longer do. You've got a new play to star in, and it's not with me.

Now, I sit upon my yellow patterned quilt and relive my memories through nostalgic eyes. Before your first Broadway audition, I had no doubt that you were the one. You were my everything, my world, my universe. And now? Now, the woods outside my window seem to hum with unease, seem to sing a song of pain and heartache. For they and I alike are craving to hear your voice speak to us and us alone, and our hearts ache to see your face again. If only I could see you without your headshot being pasted in a shiny glossed playbill.

A bird, blue-winged and chubby, flies up to my windowsill. It pecks the glass, seeming urgent in its manners. With no result, it stares at me with its head askew.

"Where did he go?" It seems to ask.

"I don't know, little birdie." I murmur absent-mindedly.

It is the truth, whether I choose to admit it or not. Ever

since that day, you've drifted further away. Now you wander in the hall, your once sparkling chocolate brown eyes dimmer than they were before. Do you see me? Do you remember the magic that you can bestow upon me, upon those willows in the forest? Do you know how your song, your tender voice, worms its way through my mind each and every day?

No. I know the answer as soon as I let myself drift back to those questions. He doesn't see me because I am just a face in the audience. He won't remember the magic he once had because he has forgotten how to make magic of his own. And he certainly doesn't know, or care, about what lyrics remain in my head. How could he think back to a silly song he sang to me when he sings to audiences bigger than my entire school?

I would like to think that you could, that you do care about me the way you did on that spring night. Maybe, somewhere, you are sitting on your bed daydreaming about what could have been if you hadn't chosen the life you did. Are you watching the earth spin, wondering about and yearning for the same things I yearn for? *Perhaps, I think defeatedly, you still love me.*

Days and nights go by, and my mind will not still, will not allow me to let go of you. I cling to memories of you like a baby to its mother. I'd like to think that I am stubborn, that your love is nothing more than a snow day; easily melted away. But despite how constantly I lie to myself, I know that these words are not true. No, I don't let go because I know that I will not survive myself if I do.

The bird bangs on my window once more and coos at me begrudgingly. Its beady black eyes glower at me, judging me from afar.

"It's true, birdie. It's true."

I only receive an annoyed squawk in return. It does not understand me, just as nobody does. The only one who could ever comprehend my form of madness was you. You and your music.

And I don't care, go on and tear me apart.

Those lyrics resonate more by the day. You; your words, your mind, your heart...I am so desperately in love that I am being torn apart. I am mourning your absence so that I am not myself, I can't be myself. I never was myself unless I was with you.

And I don't care if you do.

I've *let* myself be torn apart. I've *let* myself fall for you so deeply that I cannot get up again. It was my own doing, yet I cannot afford to pay for the consequences.

The sun is setting behind the trees now, dying away as the day comes to an end. My bird friend flutters away in a scurry, returning home to its nest for the night. It takes off so easily, moves on so quickly. I wish I too could simply flap my wings and fly away. If only it were that easy.

I close the curtains over my window, and my room plummets into darkness. Not a light is to be found.

Such a heavenly view.

Heavenly view. If only I could reach that view once more. Oh, my love, you truly were a sky full of stars. But why, now that you shine so bright, can I not seem to see you anymore?

THE PRINCESS'S GIFT

SARAH KAMIL

'Your Song' by Aaron Tveit

Once upon a time, in a land of rolling hills and grand castles, there lived a princess named Eliza. She ruled her kingdom by her father's side, with fairness and love, and she was adored by her subjects for her unwavering loyalty to their kingdom. But hidden beneath her royal robes and golden crown was a secret — a love she held for a humble peasant boy named Edward.

Edward was the son of the village baker. His family was poorer than the mice in the bakery. The princess had passed by his family's bakery one fine day, and she had immediately admired his kindness and devotion to his work. Edward, too, felt a special love for the princess, seeing her gentle and caring heart. As time passed, their love grew stronger and stronger.

Their love, however, was forbidden, for it was said that the princess could only marry someone of noble blood. Edward and the Princess kept their love hidden, for fear of what might happen. Every day the King and Queen would

bring a new prospect for the princess, and she would reject them for reasons that grew more and more senseless each time. Her greatest fear was that one day the King would insist upon marriage — and marriage to anyone who was not Edward was unthinkable. So, Edward and Eliza lived their days in fear, seeing each other in secret.

One day, a great announcement came from the palace. The old King Richard, having run out of eligible suitors who could capture his daughter's interest, had decided to hold a competition for her hand. "The prince who can provide our beloved princess with the most precious gift," the royal servants proclaimed, "will be the one to win the princess's hand."

The kingdom rejoiced, for it had been a long while since there had been such a celebration. Nobles and royals everywhere, having heard of the princess's beauty, set to work buying the most lavish and expensive gifts their kingdoms could afford. Edward too, heard the news, and his heart sank. He would have done anything to win his beloved Eliza's hand, but his family was so poor they could barely afford their daily bread, let alone a present that could stand against those of kings and princes.

Still, he went to the town centre to watch the competition. The royal family were seated on their thrones, ready to watch the princes present their offerings to the king. Edward remained disguised in the crowd, unable to bear the sight of Eliza's beautiful, yet miserable face.

One by one, the nobles of different kingdoms presented their gifts to the king. Each prince had a better offering than the one before, and soon the town square was filled with the most beautiful gold ornaments, exotic animals, fresh fruit and fragrances, and more luxuries than the town had ever seen before. And yet, even as the pile of wealth grew at her

feet, the princess only seemed to grow sadder and more despondent.

As the last prince presented his gift, a crown made of metals so precious they seemed almost to glow in the sunlight, the crowd echoed with applause. Surely this offering at least would be enough to please the princess! Amidst the cheers, the king took to his feet. It was time for the princess to choose her husband.

The crowd exploded with joy, but the princess was a picture of misery. She looked over the line of eager men in front of him and shook her head. She wanted none of them.

The king shook with anger, "I have given you too much freedom!" he shouted, "and now *I* will choose for you."

Edward could not bear it anymore. He slipped out of the crowd, determined to be beside his love. Out of desperation, he began to sing.

*I don't have much money, but, oh, if I did
I'd buy a big house where we both could live
I know it's not much, but it's the best I can do
My gift is my song
And this one's for you*

Even through his disguise, the princess immediately recognized her lover's voice, as sweet and as simple as the birdsong. Smiling for the first time, she stepped off the throne and joined his song, even as her father raged and stormed behind her.

*You can tell everybody this is your song
It may be quite simple but now that it's done
I hope you don't mind
I hope you don't mind*

That I put down in words

How wonderful life is while you're in the world

The princess and Edward embraced, overjoyed that they no longer had to hide their love from the world. There were shocked whispers from the crowd, who recognized the boy as not a nobleman, but a simple peasant. The princess turned to her father, the king.

“I love Edward,” she said simply. “His song is a better gift to me than all the gold and gems in the world.”

Saying this, she laid her crown at her father’s feet and left, following Edward. The crowds gasped and pointed, but neither Edward nor Eliza cared. They had each other, and they needed nothing more. Their joyous song rang through the hills of the kingdom as they ran into their new life together.

Come what may, come what may

I will love you until my dying day

Forever afterward, the kingdom mourned the loss of their beloved princess, but the story of the queen who gave up her throne for love became a timeless legend, reminding all that love, even in the face of tradition, could conquer all. And after all, is not the sweetest sacrifice the one made for love?

THE MUSIC WE MADE

EJIKEME IGWE

*'Egedege-Larry Gaga' by Theresa Onuorah
featuring Flavour, Phyno and Pete Edochie*

The sound started with humans, then came instruments like wood and metals. Soon we learned the noise made by animals in the way that it could be a useful melody. We learned to play the mixture of human and animal sounds. We learned the quietness of water and the stillness that complemented the longing souls. We combined these aggregates of beings and things in a unique never-ending chorus of sounds and beats and noise and stillness because we wanted something that's never been heard. Something marketable and enjoyable. They become memorable in our designed edifices and games and feasts to honour our dead and heroes.

It started with small single sounds, beats, drums, and silence.

The never-ending echoes that push their way into ears, bodies, and feet. Slowly but steadily the nudging sound came and awaked the souls of the city and villages until the

life thereof permeated the fabrics of darkness under their feet. Visitors walked the streets at night smelling the freshness of the sound. Villagers sat on stools outside, forgetting the tradition of watching stars. Among them, even in the city, the properly adored gowns and caps were but a veneration of the madness within and of the madness they played outside. They cultivated it from within just like a farmer tending to the crops.

It was not a full moon yet. But we gathered around the fireworks, under the big trees. It was just the beginning of the play, the dances, and the crafty works our hands had on the strings and cymbals. As hands beat the drums and feet stamped on the floor, men drank and ate. The souls of men and women opened to the endless match making of singing hips, and giggles of happiness, and smiles of adoration or charms and coys. The fabrics of anticipation and feelings are weaved by these gentle birds rising gradually to a crescendo not wanting to stop.

But not for Okesi who held the metal in his hand even though the music is beating in flavours of pain and regret. He could only see what was on his mind, the things he imagined were clear and demanding. He listened to the music the soul yearned for. He had played it many times in his mind and watched every contour of the strings when it vibrated. He felt every contour of his being telling him he could get away with it. The strong arm was of a man who had no practice. It pointed straight at the other. Okesi was laser-focused, staring at a man who may have had done him harm. The man's child walked in to see his father against the wall facing a stranger. Okesi's arm was painting a different music. Every child understood the sound of that metal and the music of melancholy it left in its wake. The door behind the child closed and made a song of its own. It broke the

silence. It pushed its way into the tensed songs of the moment. It also compelled Okesi's fear. His tears dropped and the perspiration under his dressing drenched him. He blinked again and squeezed the Iron. It stopped all music for that moment. On realising the end of these key notes, he panicked.

"This is real and eternal. This music does change everything I fear in me," he whispered. But before ending it all he asked, "What is this fearful music in my heart?"

Fear is its own music. We hear it in our own ways and play its demands like a woman summoning her lover to the acts of bodily worship. Sometimes, when the music called fear is played it is tense, captivating, and provocative but it mostly imprisons us into a world of silence and calmness. Once a day we may have played the music called fear or it may have played us, when we see strangers on a lonely road, or when a white woman crosses the road because two black boys are advancing towards her. Fear is music, a different music. Okesi needed this kind of music to survive.

"Music is food and wine but like the latter it has led many to an unhappy ending, many a few to happy endings and quite a few to glorious endings." This was Okesi's revelation on the day that his whole life flashed before his eyes.

Music is the heart and endearing form of her love only when he can dance. She prances the stage, raises her hips, swings her hand and his nature awakens. His man rose up like a hawk who saw its first chick after a fast. This happened because something deep was calling, her eyes spoke the silent strings of music. Dazzled as she is with her songs, the music playing within is not what is heard by others. She knows it and he knows that they were both speaking to each other in forms of arts and passion. The

dance in steps, beats, and motions although speechless was an art of learning, desiring, figuring each other out.

When the feeling of wanting, desiring, and craving left, she wrote a long letter that he had taken what she had not freely given. What happened on the dance floor was courted in public space by this stranger that only understands her songs. It was only playing in her heart at the time. As soon as it stopped, she realised she had been spoken for and the street is unforgiven for this nature she had just expressed. This wanting inside her gives her the freedom of playing her music her own way.

Men ought to be careful in the music women make with their fancy hips, lips, and eyes. The uncle high up, in blue clothes, took him up and read out the riot acts. It rang and played the major notes of fear, shame, and guilt. In his rights, he danced here and there, spoke his whole truth for freedom songs.

“Never again,” the man said, “But nature is the music that plays us all. But those who watch us all are even eager for the new concept we make.”

We make music in special ways and the earth hears us. At night, just outside the house, in a faraway sky, dotting on the heavens, the stars hear us just like we hear ourselves. They eavesdrop on our feast of songs and attend to the fellowship of our gods even if the echoes reach them. There is something in them that desires what we offer. Perhaps, the echoes of our harmony drives them so crazy that they crave for what they cannot have. On the day they were created or made it was fashioned. It has instruments of pipes and drums and keys of various shapes and designs.

We make songs and they listen.

11 MINUTES AND 25 SECONDS OF MUSIC

MIA BELL

'Idea 15' by Gibran Alcocer

I keep a notes folder entitled “Beautiful Thoughts.” It’s becoming a rather long list of short ideas. Sometimes they’re about my own life, sometimes characters I’ve created, sometimes *I* don’t even know what they’re about. But every so often, for inspiration, I go back to this long list of ideas. I don’t always find them, but perhaps their beauty is just that they’re always there. I find that there are fewer and fewer things that are ‘always there.’

Today, looking over the list, I realised that nobody knows about it. There is no evidence of this inventory except for the locked folder in the notes app. I’m the only one who’s ever seen this list, the only person who will see it in its entirety. I remember when I wrote almost every single item. But I feel like I need someone to know a little bit about it. It’ll be our secret, as long as you promise not to tell. We can lock it up in the folders in our minds.

Track 1: *If you want to hurt a spider, you cut off all of its legs but leave its head intact. That way its mind knows that nothing*

can save it. I wrote this on a hot summer day at Lehigh University. It was the day after my birthday. My parents and sister were walking around the school, trying to decide if it was worth my sister committing four years of her life to. It wasn't. I was reading a new book, the last in a series, and the most terrible betrayal had been revealed. This betrayal gutted one of the characters so deeply that they spun off into some netherworld of their mind. They would never be the same again, and they *knew* it. They were forced to watch their own torture bubble and boil and eventually overflow, all while being right in front of them the entire time, just under their nose. Obviously, this is a completely fictional world, but I read recently that fiction is not a separate world, but a way of understanding the one around us. It is an escape, maybe, but not from reality. From our own lives.

I believe I've seen this spider before. I believe that we are all that spider at some point. Whether it be the drifting apart of you and your best friend, a breakup that never really comes to an end because you're forced to see them relentlessly, or the diminishing of a passion that was once your only devotion. We watch these things happen and are powerless to stop them, instead letting the impending doom watch over us. Even though it's not the end, it *feels* that way.

But I think the beautiful thing about spiders is that there are always more of them. You find them in the dark corners of your room, or the back of your shed, or the underside of a boulder. There is always another chance.

Whenever I recall the memory of writing this, a certain song plays in my head, one that I added to my liked songs two days before. 'The Woods,' by Hollow Coves is that other chance in lyrical form. My favorite line: "Is there a way back? Nobody knows. And we leave it all behind." We skip to the next song on our playlist. We find another spider.

Track 2: *Icarus fell, but he flew, too.* Is failure so terrifying that it stops us from doing things?

People will tell you that you can only fail if you quit. But I've found that in moments where I am scared to make a mistake, hearing that does nothing aside from forcing me to look at the person like they're crazy. In those moments, when my brain isn't thinking rationally, they *are* crazy, and you couldn't convince me otherwise. I don't find the statement comforting when I *am* thinking rationally if I don't find it comforting when I'm thinking irrationally.

But goodness, why are all of us so focused on the negative, anyway? Why is it always that Medusa turned people to stone and not that she fell in love? Why is it always that Prometheus was devoured alive and not that he sought to be a savior? Why is it always that Icarus plunged but not that he soared?

I know this isn't an easy switch to make. I struggle with it now, and I probably will all my life. But I think I'd rather struggle than give in. I've been trying to not be so afraid of failure, even if that means I have to transfer my fear onto the journey itself. Instead of asking myself what will happen if I fail, I've been asking myself what will happen if I'm not the same, or if I can't do something anymore, or if I don't get the exact outcome I want. "I remember when you told me you were afraid to die." ('Icarus & Apollo,' Ripto) But I'm not asking myself what will happen if I don't survive. I know I'll survive, one way or the other. My wings may be tattered or torn, blood seeping from my wounds, but I will survive. (Track 2.5: *I refuse to deprive the world of my words.*)

Track 3: *You have lipstick on your cheek.* I confess that this one actually went into a piece I was working on. I thought of it on the way to volleyball practice and wrote it down so that I wouldn't forget it. The piece is quite a long one, so I won't

bore you with all the details. But this line, oh, how I love this line. It's spoken from one best friend (we'll call him Alexander for the present) to the other (named Maxon for our purposes). Alexander is hiding a relationship from nearly everyone in his life, save for Maxon and the girl that is like a sister to the both of them (Addison). They need her almost as much as they need each other. The piece is mainly about Alexander trying to decide whether this relationship is worth wrecking his life, but on the side, it is well known that the characters Addison and Maxon are *something* to each other. Something more than just friends. But it is Maxon who delivers this line to Alexander when Addison kisses him at a party. They both know Alexander is the one she really wants. But Alexander smiles and replies, "And you have it on your neck" because he knows that Maxon is lost without his found family. Eventually, unable to keep his head above the pressure, Alexander abandons his tiny rebellion and proposes to Addison. They both know it's a false betrothal.

It's a bit of a sad story. Heartbreak is woven through it from the exposition. But I think it is a story that is filled with real, raw joy, even as it ends with no one getting what they truly desire. Anything that ends terribly must begin beautifully.

To me, this line is an acknowledgement of something that has never been spoken before, something that will never be stated any more directly. It says more than it seems. It's not a mere observation.

The heart is a fickle thing, I've learned. It wants things it shouldn't and ignores things it should see. But without it, all emotion, deep or surface level, would be entirely lost. A story may turn out to be sad, but anyone with a brain should see that the story is not *just* sad. Nothing is 'just' anything.

Maybe that's what's so beautiful about the bittersweet. It reminds us that we are capable of a great complexity, one that we often forget about. I love this line so much — I spent hours upon hours searching for the right song. I went through all 759 of my liked songs with no success. I think I've figured out why, though, and you can tell me if it's dumb, or you can just think it or tell your friends. Though I'd much prefer to believe the opposite, not all of life is words. No, rather, not all of life can be put *into* words.

I think I have a little bit of synesthesia in me. I associate things with other things that don't go together the same way in other people's minds. I work best when I listen to wordless music and rely on lyrics to get me pumped up or calm me down. When I write, when I imagine, when I dream, the soundtrack is purely orchestral. One of my favorite contemporary artists, Gibran Alcocer, designs songs that he calls "ideas." His best one, in my opinion, is 'Idea 10,' but the one I believe goes with this line is 'Idea 15.' There's something about its ebb and flow, its rise and fall, its swell and shrink. It embodies Maxon and Alexander's friendship, the fights, the dreams, the loss. It *feels* like them.

Track 4: "What, so now it's love?" "It was always love." I think that books give us the wrong idea of what love is. They show us secrets and give us rose-tinted glasses to look at them through. We think of love and we picture these people who will do anything for us, and stop at nothing to keep us safe. That may be true, but books tell us that all we need to do is stand out on the street and wait for the perfect person to bump into us. So infrequently does that happen that we can consider ourselves out of luck. We don't have time to go searching for love, we have school to attend and bills to pay and, by golly, so many places to be! Perfect people don't find us, we have to go looking for them. But how can we? Our

lives are not built around finding love, finding love is built around our lives. A side quest that we don't always make it to the end of.

And yet.

Where would we be without this love? This fairy-tale, Disney-coded, walking-too-close-to-the-edge love is necessary. If all else is lost, if everything fails, there is still something to work toward. Something to read about. Something to write about. I've found that I often get bored of writing if there's no romance in my story. What if love doesn't even have to be a person? What if love is a dream, or a job, or a mindset? Our lives may not be centered around the search for love, but what if love is our lives?

It was always love. "If you told me that you loved me and asked me for a kiss, well, I'd at least have to think about it." (*—I'd have to think about it* by Leith Ross) There is something about real and true love that keeps us coming back. That perfect person, or job, or dream, or mindset might not exist, but if we love it, we return to it, time and time again.

I'd love to leave you with more, but there's an ad up next that none of us need to hear. I hope that these 11 minutes and 25 seconds have not been a waste of your time, because I feel that this short playlist is my heart, cut out of my chest and gutted for all the world to see. I can assure you that this playlist is something that will always be there. You may think that is either its beauty or its crime, but nevertheless, it is always here. I find that there are fewer and fewer things that are 'always there.'

HOAX

GABRIELLA MARCUS

'Hoax' by Taylor Swift

People are always telling me to open up more, to be more trusting, more affectionate. That it's not good to be alone; that you're better off when you have someone beside you. Someone you can always turn to; someone to count on, someone to *trust*.

They're lucky they don't know the rhyme to my reason.

My only one —

I had a best friend when I was younger. We were the definition of two peas in a pod; we were rarely seen without each other. Wherever I'd go, she'd be; wherever she'd be, I'd go. We told each other everything, from the latest gossip to our deepest, darkest secrets - things I would have never told anyone else. There was one time, back in middle school, when this boy I used to like had been making fun of me in class. He and his friends were throwing pens at my head and whispering and laughing as they did it; I tried my best to

ignore it and not burst into tears right then and there - I wanted to crawl in a hole and stay there forever. And then she got up from her seat next to me, marched over to the boys' table, and yelled at them until they stopped their harassments. I was so incredibly grateful at that moment for her, and I thought to myself, *Who needs a guy when you have a good friend?* It was relieving to know I had a friend who looked out for me no matter what, who always had my back. We were like family, and I never would've imagined it any other way. I didn't *want* to imagine it any other way.

But Fate wanted it another way.

My kingdom come undone —

I learned, the hard way, that people can change. People can change a lot. She did. Maybe she was always like that, I don't know. Maybe I was too desperate to have something, *someone* to hold onto, that I became blind to any flaws that were evidently there. Maybe I was just too naive, too innocent, too young to have my heart broken like that, in one, single moment — when I realized everything we'd had was gone. It was the winter dance freshman year, my first dance ever. I was just going with a bunch of friends, but I was extremely excited nonetheless. I spent hours getting ready for a night I'd imagined would be one of the most fun I'd ever experienced...but it ended up being just the opposite of that. The group of friends I thought I was a part of ended up getting ready all together — without inviting me. I tried to shake it off, but what was really bothering me was that I knew it had been her decision, as the ringleader she always demanded to be. She didn't talk to me the entire night — she didn't even do so much as look at me. All I could think was, *How did we come to this?*

How did we break so easily?

My broken drum —

Emptiness rang out in my ears as I stood outside of school, defeated and alone, watching as they all went home together, at the end of the dance, walking in the harsh cold of the winter — and no one there beside me. Ignored, disdained, shunned too many times; I knew it was time to move on from this, this hoax of a friendship. It had tricked me into staying with it time and time again, but I was done with the tricks. Done being blinded and fooled; I deserved better than facades and fake niceties.

If she was over me, if she was jealous of my other friends, if she had just decided to hate me, whatever the case — pretending to be my friend until I figured out her ulterior intentions... She could've pushed me off the cliff, but instead drove me to do it myself.

Was it more fun that way?

You have beaten my heart —

Sometimes it's nice to live at the edge of a cliff; let the lies deceive you for a little while longer and try to forget the betrayal. Sometimes it's nice to pretend everything's okay, that things are just like how they used to be, when we were younger and innocent and free of the burdens of reality. But then at some point you're forced to look over the edge again and stare down at the only way out. The hoax haunts you, calling your name, begging you to retreat to it. You can't go back to it, but you can't bring yourself to end it all, so you run. You run down a rabbit hole of ignorance and fear, hiding forever...

Stood on the cliffside, screaming, "Give me a reason!"

I ran from the hoax. I lived in hiding. But I also ran from the cliff; I was too afraid to abandon those years of my life, too afraid to move on. I still had the tiniest shrivel of hope that I could magically change everything; I still had faith in us. So I followed that faith out of the rabbit hole and tried to see if things could go back to normal, if we could return to our carefree youth...

Your faithless love's the only hoax I believe in —

But that youth was gone. The friendship had passed over its time, and my faith in her was killed with a painful haste. So, I finally met the bottom of the cliff with countless grief and wounds and scars, some that may never heal or go away, some that will, with time. I said goodbye to the hoax, goodbye to the pain of duplicity...goodbye to what once had been a friend. I mourned our death and the people we used to be, the innocence I used to thrive in and the childhood I once had. But now...I'm free. No more lies, no more deceit and betrayal - just the truth that came out of it. The truth does hurt, sometimes, for the haunting echoes of the past may never leave you, and the scars will always remain. But so will the truth, and that's what matters. Because only you know what's true.

The hoax can't fool you any longer once you accept the truth.

*Don't want no other shade of blue, but you;
No other sadness in the world would do.*

Because the truth is real.

MUSIC OF THE SPHERES

KITI MISHA

'Children of Ommissiah' by David Guillame

The music of the spheres rang throughout existence and broke the silence of a tomblike void. Only the brave and the truly valiant could hear the life-bringing melody of the cosmos spreading in a slow ripple throughout the firmament. The discordant hidden melody of life cascaded from the heavenly dome imbuing every creature worthy of this boon with a vital spark of existence. Every night, its cascade of stardust renewed the ancient contract with life. Every night, all lifeforms were again baptised in the cardinal wellspring of existence. The stars granted life, and in return they got to witness all what made humans into the precious and yet frail beings that they were. Love, envy, joy, hate, and above all their need to create beauty. The faraway stars, and the godly beings residing in the magnificence of what orbited in the heavenly domain, doted on these last additions to the spiritual realms as any zealous parent does with their progeny.

The light was a beacon of peace, a call to calmness, a promise of unity and ceasing of pain. And this night it tried to reach

another lost soul caught in the timeworn cosmic struggle antecedent to all mortal life.

In the eternal void of the primordial dark, a soul was called forth. First, there was a pull, tugging on his very being, his essence. The being who couldn't remember anything of what he was or who he might be, swirled incessantly surrounded by a deep dark — an abyss so vast that its gloomy endless shadows made the witching-hour seem like it radiated light. The surrounding void was bit by bit, memory by memory, dismantling what little was left of him. His sense of self, worldly attachments, down to each and every single atom, his skin and muscle and bones, everything was reduced to the smallest particle. Pain blinded his thinking, all the totality of what made the nameless warrior a human, alive. This assault on his senses was followed by the draining of every lingering trace of any earthly perceptions.

The stifling endless dark was slowly circling tighter and tighter around this stricken soul. Obscured faces, given away by their glowing blue-white eyes, peered through a gargantuan mound erected on the lost and forgotten skeletal remains of a lost majestic civilisation. If the many had succumbed, how could a lone broken soul survive?

His eyes hurt from a blistering series of images of what he knew were and couldn't be true. Assaulted by a vortex of words and images, he succumbed to their incessant barrage.

*All is covered in dismal lugubrious dusk.
I feel weightless, unbound by any chains,
Bodily or mentally free in the all-surrounding
eventide,
Free in my lightless tomb, I ask myself:
"Where am I?"*

“Who am I?”

“When will my torment end?”

When all hope was lost, a blast of purifying, raw, primal energy roamed through every particle of his being. A current of pure life force which surged through all that was his, leaving the warrior uncertain of where he began or ended, all dimming in a flickering echo of loss. A sense of freedom was slowly flickering in his very essence, in that part which clung to what he guessed was his tortured remnant of a soul. He was intrigued by this persistent urge to cling to life, and curiosity made him chase the fear away and pursue this mysterious call.

A visitor in the strangest of dreams, he swam in an endless bewildering mystification. A world unknown yet strangely familiar. Nothing made sense, apart from an intense persistent feeling in his very core telling him to hold on at all costs, to whatever he could grasp. He felt a pull from every direction. One force was trying its utmost to undo him, while another offered a glimmer of light which lit in him a flickering hope. And as he was unmade, there was one thing that seemed to bring him back. An impression, a belonging, to something that he could no longer remember, but that whispered promises of hope.

Slowly, ever so slowly, it released a part of him that he wasn't aware he still possessed. A phantom vestige resonated deep inside him. What felt like a forgotten memory that was or might not have been his reverberated within his spirit adding power to his growing form. An echo of what might have been his very essence slowly flickered to life.

The byways of incessant agony dripped tortuously bit by bit, deeper and deeper, in a bundle of agonising awareness

that had started awakening an inner image of what he might have been, and possibly still was. Spinning in a harrowing whirlwind of terrorising hope, for the first time in what seemed like many eternities — countless, impossible iterations of forever. He tried to push down the mutilating pain inundating his being by concentrating on this strange force which felt so strongly of life and hope.

They say hope is the last to die, in many ways it's what makes a human what he is. The unbearable screams of sentience, the delirious terror of a timed lifespan, an existence built on the colossal piles of corpses, is what surmises the sad, agonising, life of mortals. But only suffering can make one aware of beauty. Only anguish and torment can spark the flame of existence that burns the brightest for a race where every second counts. Cursed with being sentient of our finitude, we live in a purgatory of loving and losing what's dearest. But it is this fear of being deprived of this flimsy spark of life that imbues mortality with a passion that surpasses any immortal.

The bright echo awoke a dire need for what seemed to elude his reasoning and remembrance.

The push to hope and the need to cling to life felt strange to one who had forgotten he had ever lived. A compulsion from within resonated throughout his half-formed self, telling him to fight with all he had. His flicker of being, the sole bastion of reason in an ocean of primordial nothingness. A silent command issued from the unknown presence imbued in him an intrinsic instinct of survival:

*“A warrior never concedes... not even to the sweet
lure of eternal bliss.”*

It almost felt like his outer reality was being remade as

his inner world expanded. Every addition to his being was mirrored by the dark releasing some of its hold on what surrounded him. The warrior, even emptied as he was, felt a spark of light and hope pull him back. What lived beyond knowledge fuelled the last element that remained of what had been him. Light loves all its children, and even from the cosmic tomb where sacrifice has cast them. Light will always guide the worthy.

This kind and benevolent feeling sparked in his lost self, a sense of belonging, of home, hearth, warmth and safety. A melodic voice casts away the dark and all could be heard is their glorious song:

“Life is pain, and I see in its shadow the death of billions. But pain is life, and to become a protector of it you need to see existence twist itself inside out.”

The voice resonated again in the void:

“Your doubts must be washed in fire and reforged in faith. You must not mimic life but champion it in order to find the path out of here. We were born in the dark before we knew the light of the sun, so you must battle your way from the temptation of letting go and joining the blissful void, but instead see the truth that shadows your back and announces your fate.

“Emerge from darkness stronger still, exorcise weakness and embrace faith.

“Search for the secret song that will open the hidden door; only the desperate pleading of dying life can glance past infinity and find

deliverance. If you let pain overcome your soul, you will be entombed in the rancid tyranny of the primordial dark, a discordant remnant of a Life-song twisted in eternity, always out of harmony.

“Your pain is the only constant in this labyrinth of night, until you learn to let go of what was and accept your new role you won’t regain your humanity. Hear the faint song that will pave your way out of these regions of sorrow and woeful shades - where neither light nor life can ever dwell.”

In utter darkness this mesmerising phantasmagorical declamation discharged his fear and brought forth the end of the existential terror that screamed from all that was him.

He felt stuck in place, slowly being sucked in from under his feet while the rest of him grasped for hold of any anchor that would free him from this agony. The terror of sinking, disappearing, of his heartbeat mirroring the frantic screams coming out of him. The terror of being but not knowing why or where or how.

Petrified but feeling like he’s travelling eternity. All is too much, he is too little. His being is made and unmade at the speed of light. What’s left is only a vague ghost of consciousness tearing through the pain, screaming for release, grasping for understanding, for the nothingness to end, for reality to stop spinning, for anything but this agonising torture.

Then a memory resurfaces:

Hell is where who you are meets all the possibilities of a wasted existence.

*Where are you?
What...are...you?
Where...are... you?*

Echoed a thought in the infinite dark that engulfed him.

Ever so slowly, he regained a sense of how the thoughts and pain, and terror were actually part of him. He couldn't remember much of his past, or why he was here, but a spark of discernment cascaded over each segment of his being, reawakening a partial fragmented memory sequence, restoring the foundations of a broken self.

Spiralling into a vortex of memories past, present and never his. He witnessed all as an outsider, words and images stuck in him against his will.

Perturbing visions of today's and tomorrow's, probably of all the days and all the morrows. A whispered command of faith, valour, and courage was pressed on his soul. Tempest and thunder, luminescent fulmination and discharge were the heralds of his tomorrow.

He felt a spark of light taking possession of his soul, giving him hope, making him hold on. As he was unmade, there was one thing that seemed to pull him back. A feeling, a belonging, to something that he now couldn't remember, but even unknowing and defragmented, the light whispers of hope made him choose this warm remnant of a life far gone as the foundation of himself.

Overwhelmed, he collapsed on unknown ground, a strange island that somehow floated alone where all else was void. Unsure, but lacking the ability to know fear, he felt that so much was lost. The desecration and defamation that followed him here. What was lost, what it meant, escaped him. He noticed a long stalk climbing from the ground behind him and disappearing in the clouds above. He felt a

presence, a voice in the wind, insisting he tried to grasp every trace of what was stolen and lost.

But then a song broke through the enchantment and the familiar veil of warmth condensed in a beautiful form. The larger than life, resplendent apparition leaned down pulling the broken warrior in a fatherly embrace, singing a song of long-lost wonder and fearless faith. Light personified resonated through creation chasing away all traces of lingering darkness and its insipid invitations.

Down and ahead a dark stone followed another until a path formed to where a spring materialised.

*Tonight, you will wonder, tomorrow you will
wake up in a world of wonder.*

Blackness slowly departed the broken reality.
Golden light outlined a bridge of new shapes
that painted themselves into existence.
Shrouding the darkness away from aggregate
homogeneity.

They broke eternity,
And claimed the realm of immortality.
A pilgrimage of impossible outcomes,
Broke the boundaries between the inner
sanctum and the outer nave.

In the dark and on an instant,
They went forward,
escaping extinction.

Meanwhile the warning of the Light
resonates through its creation.

The mind escapes leaving the body animated
by animal instincts,
A thought that is forever,
Drags through eternity,

Breaches between worlds,
Announcing the birth of Light's chosen ones.
Demi-gods tasked to battle the dark.
Delineating the victories of Light over Dark.
Their humanhood extinguished to give life a
 new hope.
Blackness fell through the broken reality,
Golden light outlined the newcomer,
As a new shape painted itself into existence,
Shrouding the darkness away
They broke eternity,
And claimed the realm of immortality as the
 last bastion for helping humanity.

A DANCE WITH A STRANGER

BY AMIRA MOHAMED

'The Four Seasons — Summer in G Minor'

by Antonio Vivaldi

Georgiana Beaumont lounged in front of her gilded vanity, inspecting herself in the mirror with a frown as she adjusted her pearl and amethyst-encrusted necklace. It was the evening of the annual debutante ball, and more importantly, her debut into London's high society. She had spent months preparing for the event, commissioning a custom-made dress with fabrics imported all the way from India, and was now draped in a gown of pale, gauzy pink fabric. Delicate flowers were embroidered on the bodice and slits ran down the long, elegant sleeves to reveal her slender arms, adorned with bracelets of gold and mother of pearl. She had smirked at herself in satisfaction when she first tried it on, convinced she would look every part a rose incarnate. However, now, she couldn't help but feel like something was missing. It was imperative that she looked perfect tonight; all eyes would be on her, especially...

She pulled herself out of her train of thought abruptly.

She would not allow herself to become distracted thinking about *him*, not today of all days. With a sigh, she made her way to her dresser and pulled out a hairpiece adorned with pale sapphires and fixed it into her hair. Turning back to the mirror and smoothing the folds of her dress, she forced a smile at her reflection.

Perfect.



Lord Alexander Radcliffe surveyed the ballroom with distaste as debutantes and gentlemen alike danced around him. He had always hated balls, believing them to be a thorough waste of his time. His mother had forced him to attend this evening, prattling on about eligible young ladies and potential marriage prospects until he resigned himself to, as always, do as she bid (if only to keep her quiet). Of course, there was the hope of seeing a certain lady which had led him to give in to her request a bit more easily than usual, although he did not dare admit this to himself.

His thoughts were interrupted as he finally laid eyes on Lady Beatrice walking into the ballroom, looking particularly lovely in a dress of pale blue silk. Her gaze met his and she shot him a look of rueful apology as her newly betrothed, Lord Richard Oakley, appeared beside her and took her arm. Alexander looked away abruptly, ignoring the ache in his chest. Perhaps it was a mistake to come tonight.

Eager for a distraction, he scanned the crowd, his eyes falling upon a young debutante standing alone in the corner of the room. She was pretty, her hair swept up in a crown of sapphires which contrasted nicely with her pale pink gown. *She'll do*, he thought. Although he had little desire for any other woman except for the one who had ripped his heart

from his chest the month prior, he knew his mother was watching on from across the room, and he had to at least pretend to look like he was making an attempt at courting. With a resigned sigh, he made his way towards the girl.



Despite the music and the grandeur, the ball had turned out to be a dull disappointment, filled with even duller suitors who implored upon her for attention like a pack of whining puppies. Georgiana had just managed to prise herself away from the clutches of Lord Stanton- who had been rambling for what felt like hours about his collection of antique steel knives- to fetch herself a glass of wine from the banquet table. She downed the smooth golden liquid greedily, praying that it would provide a pleasant enough haze to allow the ball to become at least somewhat tolerable, lest she be tempted to slip out early. Even more disappointingly, Richard had not even glanced her way the entire evening, his gaze never straying from his newly betrothed. *He's probably on his best behaviour, with all the Mamas in attendance tonight*, she thought. She was unsure why she allowed his continued disregard to bother her so much. After all, in just one evening she had gathered a flock of dozens upon dozens of suitors, all of them begging desperately for a mere crumb of her attention. And yet she couldn't help but think about the way he had smiled down at her that night in the gardens. Perhaps it was for the best, if anyone found out about what had occurred between them, she would be ruined. She knew it was best to stay away, and yet she couldn't help but glance longingly at him. He was devastatingly handsome; even from across the room, she could make out his wide, baby-blue

eyes framed by golden curls. She hated how much she wanted him.

She reached out to pour herself another glass of wine, downing it in one go.

“Careful there,” came a dryly amused voice from behind her. “You’ll soon be the talk of the evening if you’re not careful. It’s unbecoming for a young lady to drink so much.”

Irritation stirred up inside of her. She forced a tight, polite smile on her face as she turned around to face whatever old and dull Lord or Duke had approached to bother her now.

“I can assure you Sir, I have complete control—”

She broke off abruptly as she surveyed who towered before her. Curly dark hair, tanned skin, and a tall, muscular build... It was only Lord Alexander Radcliffe, London’s most sought-after bachelor, and the city’s most infamous rake. He grinned at her deviously, dark eyes sparkling with amusement.

“Are you sure about that, Lady? You seem almost at a loss for words,” he dropped his voice to a conspiratorial whisper, “Although perhaps that is just because of my presence.”

Georgiana snorted. *What an arrogant man.*

“Certainly not,” she replied wryly.

Alexander’s grin faltered slightly, as if he were used to young ladies falling at his heels and was puzzled as to why she wasn’t doing the same. Still, unperturbed, he took her gloved hand in his and brushed a kiss across her knuckles.

“Lord Alexander Radcliffe. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss...?”

“Miss Georgiana Beaumont, my lord.” She bobbed a reluctant courtesy, as was only polite.

“Please do tell me, lovely Miss Beaumont, what despi-

cable rake has driven you to engage in such shockingly unladylike behaviour?" His voice was ripe with amusement as he gestured to the empty wine glass in her hand.

Georgiana stiffened. The last thing she needed was him, of all people, prying into her business.

"I am afraid I must bid you goodnight, my lord," she said coldly, making her way to leave.

"Miss Beaumont, wait!" Alexander said, his glistening amusement fading, fingers wrapping around her wrists to hold her in place, "I apologise for my poor jest. I did not mean to question your honour. Stay. Please, do not leave on my account."

She hesitated before smirking up at him, an idea forming in her mind. If Richard would not look at her, then she had no choice but to force his attention. And the lord currently standing in front of her may just prove useful.

"Well..." she said, drawing out her words as if she were doing him a sizable favour, "I suppose I could stay, although I would expect some entertainment to be provided for my amusement in return." She dropped her voice to a mock whisper. "I am sorry to say that this ball is dreadfully dull."

Alexander laughed. "Very well, Miss Beaumont," he said, bowing with mock gallantry, "I promise to be your personal jester and master of revels for the remainder of the evening. Your every wish is my command."

She couldn't help the surprised giggle that escaped her.

"Very well, my first wish is a simple one," she declared, her voice rising to a spirited octave. "You must dance with me until I tire."

He smiled. "Miss Beaumont, it would be my pleasure."



They danced together for what may have been minutes or hours, Georgiana could not be sure.

The room whirled passed in a haze as they spun together over and over, the music rising in her ears triumphantly and the courtiers around them fading into nothing more than a blur of colour. Georgiana had always loved dancing. She loved the feeling of the music wrapping around her, pouring through her ears and into her soul. They continued to dance as the octave rose higher and higher, their pace quickening in time to the rhythm of the violins and pianoforte that echoed throughout the ballroom. The orchestra was playing 'The Four Seasons' by Vivaldi, Georgiana's favourite.

"This has been my favourite composition ever since I was a child," Alexander murmured in her ear as he spun her over his arm, his hand resting gently but firmly on her waist.

She met his eyes in surprise.

"Mine too."

Alexander smiled at her softly with curiosity in his eyes, as though she was a puzzle he was trying to solve. Georgiana told herself it was only the wine that stirred the warm, rosy feeling within her. It was as if the world around her had become a bit softer since they started dancing.

"They are all staring at us," she informed him as the music came to a stop. Breathless, they surveyed the dozens of pairs of eyes that were fixated on them shamelessly.

"Yes, they are," Alexander agreed, not sounding as if he cared in the slightest.

Georgiana scanned the crowd again until her eyes rested on Richard, who was looking on with furious eyes and a face like thunder. She couldn't help the feeling of smug satisfaction that rose up in her.

Alexander followed her gaze with a frown, before letting out an incredulous laugh. "*Lord Richard Oakley?*"

He did not hide the contempt in his voice as he spat out the name like it was poison.

Georgiana turned around to face him. "What?" she said sharply, her satisfaction rapidly dissolving into panic.

"Oakley. He is the rake that led you to drink your sorrows away this evening."

"He is not a rake—"

"So, I am right?" Alexander stared at her, his voice grave and face unreadable.

Georgiana averted her eyes and said nothing. She was furious for giving herself away. *What if he tells someone?*

"My lord," she began pleadingly, "Please do not speak of this to anyone—"

"He is engaged, you know."

"Engaged is not the same thing as married—"

Georgiana paused suddenly. The strain in Alexander's voice gave him away. Not to mention the way his gaze lingered for just a moment too long on the plain, brown-haired woman standing arm in arm with Richard.

"You are in love with his betrothed," she breathed, a new plan forming rapidly as the realisation flooded her mind.

"I know not of what you speak," Alexander denied, although his stiff tone suggested otherwise.

Georgiana ignored his words, gripping his arm tightly. "I have an idea for my second wish. And it is one where we both end up with what we want."

Alexander looked at her warily.

"Look at their faces," she continued, gesturing subtly towards Richard and his betrothed. "If one dance has the power to make them this furious, imagine what else we could achieve."

“Miss Beaumont, I do not understand—”

“I want you to propose to me.”

“Miss Beaumont...” Alexander was looking at her as if she had lost her mind.

“I am not mad,” she hissed. “I said propose, not *marry*. We will only stay betrothed for long enough to drive Richard and his dear fiancé so insane with jealousy that they cancel their own engagement.”

Alexander smiled slowly as understanding dawned on his face. “It might just work.”

“Oh, it will absolutely work. I am sure of it.”

“Very well then. Your wish is my command.” He grinned at her deviously. “Miss Georgiana Beaumont, will you marry me?”

UNVEILING ATAP

MAGDALENE ARZIKI BAHAGO

'Man of Your Word' by Maverick City

I became one of the most famous writers on the planet; highly placed and well-recognised globally. My books were elegantly displayed on the bookshelves of every bookstore.

I was the Queen of fiction. I brought Biblical Historical stories to the real world, making them relatable to real-life situations. This not only made Bible stories desirable and fun, but it also created a deep longing in the hearts of my readers to connect with divinity.

When I translate real-life experiences into a story, people assume that it was one of those non-existing characters and places I always wrote about. They could hardly tell if the book in their hand was real or fictional. This is because the stories were usually too real to be true.

When I wrote 'Lady, Break Out,' I stated that it was my story; that I wasn't ashamed to own up to the rejections and betrayals I had received as a young lady who was trying so hard to break through the shell and the chains that bind. I was on the move to change the narrative and become an

asset to my generation and the world at large. But you know, whether these stories were fabricated or not, the imagery, expressions, and language used would always give an admirably succinct account or tale of a selected character. I soon became a sought-after, highly paid author.

“Call me an Author extraordinaire, if you like.” (blushing)

I was a fluent and passionate speaker. Funnily, I didn't have an accent despite having lived in Nigeria almost all my life. People could only guess that I was Nigerian because, in a world-class conference that focused on insecurity and how it can be curbed, I was one of the keynote speakers representing my country. I spoke passionately and was very specific in my speech, citing events and their dates of occurrences as though I were there.

“Well, I witnessed some. I've been around for quite some decades you know.” (winks)

I could tell when to 'break the ice' while I'm giving a speech whether in an informal or formal setting. In breaking the ice I could introduce a game, other times I'd have my audience split into smaller circles of maybe three or four, depending on the general number, and have them interact among themselves. I would usually tell jokes because they not only relax the atmosphere, they also enable me to connect easily with my audience. This has been my greatest tool since becoming a public speaker.

I had made a name for myself, established my small press, and lived out my dreams. I thought to myself “which other way can I influence people?” Then I thought about the Female Gender and came up with an idea.

As part of giving back to the community and helping the girl child, I started a summer camp for young ladies of ages 20 and 25. We called it Break the Shell. People always looked forward to the event and we usually record a high number

in attendance. I made sure to stick to the vision of raising young females who will live life positively; think ahead and make choices based on their personal beliefs and goals, connect with their God-given purposes, and consequently turn the tide for other women.

As part of the activity in each camp, we have at least two major fun activities in between sessions. The idea behind these activities is mainly to have a lively, interactive, and responsive audience from the beginning of the event to the end.

The last edition of Break the Shell introduced participants to an aspect of art so powerful, yet unidentified; so soothing, yet under-utilised. During the second fun activity, I introduced a new activity; it had never been done in any of our camps, but there was nothing wrong with trying something new, right? I gave the participants this acronym ATAP and told them to find the right word for each letter. The surprise and shock that took over their faces made me permit them to ask Google, Microsoft Bing, Ecosia, and other search engines. I knew that none of their search results was going to be correct, but I let them try.

“You could try it too” (smiling)

I encouraged everyone who wanted to share their findings to talk. Nobody got the meaning of ATAP right. Nobody knew what it meant but me. With rapt attention and absolute silence, all eyes were on me because they were curious to know what the strange word meant. Getting the undivided attention of an audience is the highlight of every event I attend. When I got this, I had the media team display on the screen the song from which the acronym ATAP came and it read:

All things are possible (ATAP)

When we believe

Old chains are breakable.

When we receive

Yahweh

Everyone sat in open-mouthed amazement as I unravelled 'ATAP.' I taught them the song and had them sing it to themselves and then to each other.

Earlier during the discussion, just before we got to this fun activity, I made the participants write their aspirations on a piece of paper and how they'd bring them to reality. I was moved with compassion as I went through what they had written.

Most words spoke fear.

Some hearts spoke of a lack of confidence.

Others spoke uncertainty.

Other interactions I had with their words spoke low self-esteem.

Then, I remembered a song by Maverick City. I heard it when I was afraid and unsure of my future. I had written down my ambitions and was excited about what I wrote but beneath the excitement lay fear. I was afraid because I didn't have the capacity to turn my ambitions into reality. So, I was caught in the web of uncertainty and low self-image. I sulked in these for days until a ray of hope pepped into my heart like the rising sun trying to find its way into a dark room.

I heard this music playing from my kid sister's phone for the first time. Besides the beautiful rhythm and the voices, I was drawn by its lyrics. Because the part of the song that expressed faith didn't contain many words, I easily learned it, pondering on the words 'ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE.' To the one who has faith. To the one who hopes. To the one who is not daunted by his or her current situation. To the one who believes in Yahweh. From then on, fear, lack of

confidence, and uncertainty were swallowed up by this Art, music. As I pondered on the words of this beautiful song, I concluded that *'impossibility is nothing to the one who believes.'*

I loved the atmosphere this music had created already. The reflections, the joy, and tranquillity that accompanied it were surreal.

Again, I got to recreate the same atmosphere at Break The Shell summer Camp. While the music played, I saw faith coming alive. I saw hopes being restored. Confidence is taken back and fears are crushed. The joyful expressions on the faces of these young ones gave me a sense of fulfilment. This would be the second time that I had seen music have such a powerful effect on people. First, it was me, the writer, and then, the group of young ladies.

My sister heard me mumbling the words "ATAP All Things Are Possible" with a broad smile on my face then she tapped me.

"Oh! This was all a dream?!" I queried.

"Not to worry. Everything you dreamt about is possible to happen. You can become an Author extraordinaire. You can become an excellent Public Speaker. You can have that platform where you desire to give back to the community. All I need you to do is to flow with the spirit of that music you played in your dream: ATAP. All things are possible when we believe."

APARTMENT OF THE HOLY

NEL HERCHE

'The Song Remains the Same — Remaster' by Led Zeppelin

The apartment Mandy shared with the bassist was off La Cienega in West Hollywood. I remembered this through a beer-induced haze as we followed her band from their show to the bars on Sunset. We tumbled into the car with the others. I felt detached from the action, like an observer watching the film blur past.

After strapping ourselves in for the ride to her apartment, the car settled into a murky silence. I could hear my partner Tony breathing as amber shadows filled the space, the inadequate light barely revealing him in the backseat of the car with each passing street lamp. On the other side, my leg pressed into the bassist's nubbed and worn corduroy pants despite an effort to lean away from the unfamiliarity of his body. I reached for and failed to grasp Tony's hand somewhere in the shadows between us.

It must have been Mandy driving. I squinted at the sudden piercing fluorescent light as we pulled into the long, low carport. I regretted not making more of a fuss when

Tony blurted out, he wanted to tag along to the afterparty. I mouthed *I want to go home* in his direction, but he had already turned his face towards the car door and gripped the handle. The back of his hair was a mussed crop circle and his dark blue blazer wrinkled. He slid from the seat without a backward glance, while I hastily dragged myself across the resistant pleather.

Mandy was up ahead of us, walking past the arched stucco doorways lining the outside hallway. She should have been stumbling from the drinks and the weed, but her boots tramped solidly forward. Despite the chill air, she seemed oblivious to the breeze whipping the ivory silk of a slip masquerading as a dress. I stepped silently to the rhythm of her stomping feet, tiptoeing politely past the darkened windows. Theirs was the last door, and she dug with both hands into the satchel draped over her arm. We could all hear the rattle of keys, but it took a while for her to fish them out. The key made a complicated sound as she inserted it into the lock, an old-fashioned sort of clicking so different from my alarm company's multi-digit code entry. The door swung open as a portal in a fantasy land, except this one only revealed an under-furnished living room.

Mandy called over her shoulder, "Well y'all, come on in," too loudly, as if her words still needed to bite through the roar of voices from earlier that night. The tinny sound echoed around the empty room. A large standing lamp projected a bright triangle above it in one corner. The only other light came from the branches of a thinly foliated pink aluminium tree wrapped with tiny white bulbs. It flashed haphazardly — its too-long cord stretching across to reach the receptacle. It was all reminiscent of rooms I had outgrown ages ago, having already paid our dues with Salvation Army chairs and particle board bookshelves from

Craigslist. I inspected a familiar-looking hanging tapestry by the doorway en route to the only available place to sit.

Tony and I lowered ourselves onto the futon. We slid towards the angled back, propelled by the extreme slope of the cushion. Knees at eye level, we sat like children, hands folded neatly in our laps, mere inches from the ground and fighting the urge to stand. I scanned the room for the way to the kitchen, trusting Roy would be reentering with beverages.

But there he was, chatting up the bassist in the corner. As my eyes adjusted to the uneven light, it became clear that their faces were closer than would be comfortable in a normal conversation. As I zeroed in on their upper bodies, I could discern Roy's long fingers gripping the bass player's jacket. Both of them were about the same height and they were leaning into one another. I couldn't bring into focus the outline of their individual shapes and instead blurred the edges of where one ended and the other began. I was hypnotised by the puzzle of their bodies interlocking in such an intricate pattern that I could not untangle them. It was not until the bassist opened his eyes that I became aware of the fact that I was gawking at the two of them with the focus of my entire being.

Before I looked away in shame at my blatant voyeurism, I saw the back of Roy's head furiously rotating with the effort of what I could now guess was a kiss. The bassist let his eyes fall closed and pulled them both into the shadowed corridor. A door softly clicked shut.

Tony and I looked at our knees. I squeezed my hands together more prayerfully and wished that I could be transported to my bed.

"Y'all can crash here if you want," Mandy had taken off

her boots and threw herself onto a cushion across the coffee table from us.

No less desirable words have ever been uttered. I pasted a smile on my face.

“Thanks, Amanda,” twisting my arm to look at an imaginary watch. “We should really look into getting an Uber.”

“Call me Mandy.” It wasn’t a suggestion.

“Okay.” I had started to dig around in my own purse to find my phone. “Mandy.”

“Music!” In one fluid movement, Mandy popped up from the cushion and skipped over to a small console table. She flipped through the shelf of vinyls, pausing every few to consider and then continuing to flick them aside, her fingers moving across the covers like they would plucking the strings of an instrument. I continued to stammer something about it being late and so much to do tomorrow when Mandy found the album she had been looking for. I looked over to Tony for support, but he was now leaning away from me and had apparently dozed off.

“I wanna see if you can guess,” she insisted, the lilt of her southern twang drawing out the vowels in a melodic, if not slightly annoying, way. It made me wonder if her accent was really this strong, or if the booze and pot, or believing it to be some complimentary affectation, increased its strength. She hugged the album dramatically to her chest.

I steeled myself for the now lengthened visit. A couple of songs, we could request the Uber, and then, *look at that—where did the time go?*

“Come on, guess,” Mandy pressed me.

I glanced at the familiar red sunset peeking out from under her armpit and up to her eager face. She looked at me like a little kid trying to impress the friend of her older

sibling. With a feigned uncertainty I tossed out, “Zeppelin's Houses of the Holy?”

Her mouth dropped open.

I shrugged, leaning back into the cushions. Mandy turned, abruptly pulling the vinyl from the sleeve. I hadn't listened to the album for a while, maybe since college, probably not since I had my own crappy futon. But I *did* want to listen to it at Mandy's. Instead of sensibly surrendering to sleep that night, I let myself drift between the chords and float off into a real crazy dream.

The End

FOUNDATIONS OF SURVIVAL

SOPHIE HARRIS

'The Foundations of Decay' by My Chemical Romance

Phoebe traced the lined scar that lay across her jawline as she walked along the street. She was still bewildered that a ring could cause such damage, or perhaps it was the force of the hand wearing the ring when it had made contact. She was still slightly in shock at what she had done. Leaving Rick, running away like she had. Even thinking about him caused her to glance over her shoulder, scared he had found her somehow. She knew she was one of the lucky ones to have escaped, to still be alive. That didn't mean she felt safe yet. She feared there would never be enough distance between her and Rick for her to feel completely relaxed. She continued to walk, quickening her pace. She thought back to the past week, the lead-up to her escape to this unfamiliar freedom.

It had been a wet and dreary spring day when My Chemical Romance's new song, 'The Foundations of Decay', had been played on the radio while Rick and Phoebe had been driving home from food shopping. Phoebe, hiding

behind one too many layers, wearing a vacant expression, Rick being dark and moody. As soon as she heard Gerard Way's vocals start, she turned her head slightly to put her ear nearer to the speaker. Snippets of the lyrics reached her:

*But fate had left its scars upon his face
With all the damage they had done
We lay in the foundations of decay
And we would all build towers of our own
Only to watch the roots corrode
You must fix your heart
When the storm, it gains and the sky, it rains
Let it flood, let it flood, let it wash away
Yes, it comforts me much more
To lay in the foundations of decay
Get. Up*

The song finished and Phoebe had remained silent, her mind wild with thoughts the song had evoked. My Chemical Romance had always been her favourite band, but she couldn't remember the last time she had listened to them. In fact, she couldn't remember the last time she'd been allowed to listen to any music she liked. She had thought of her situation, the pain, the scars, the trauma, and she had glanced at Rick, seeing him for the first time, noticing just how ugly of a man he was.

She had turned back to the window, her heart pacing. She wasn't sure what was happening, and she was terrified, not just of the man sitting next to her and any repercussions her thoughts and feelings would have if she let them show, but also of the intense internal reaction that the song had seemed to ignite within her. She felt a sense of power, and in her mind, she saw flashes of a phoenix rising from ashes of

a raging fire as the lyrics looped inside her head. She'd had an overwhelming desire to flee, to jump out of the moving car and run. There'd been a tiny flicker of a voice in her that told her to stop, breathe and think this through properly. She didn't know how she was going to do it, but she knew that she would escape from Rick. My Chemical Romance had got her through her teenage years, when she was bullied at school, while she was dealing with her mental health, they'd been there. And then she'd met Rick and everything she had ever known, her whole being had disappeared. Nothing was hers anymore, not her choices, not her body, not even her mind. She had fallen into a monster's control and lost herself, utterly powerless.

Until that song...

Once again, 'My Chemical Romance' had reached out a hand for her to grab onto. They were ready to pull her free from the living hell she was barely surviving in. They were calling to the deepest buried ember of herself, telling her to get up and get out. To remember who she was.

She used to sing. She used to write and draw. She used to go for walks with her camera and write poems and stories, using her photos as inspiration. She wasn't sure when she had stopped doing all those things, but she'd realised she hadn't done them in a long time. Since before Rick. She couldn't remember the last time she had listened to music for the simple pleasure of it, or the last time she'd got up and danced to anything. She wasn't sure who she was any more, but there was a tiny part of her inner self pleading with her to listen and get away from the monster beside her.

Rick had pulled up to the driveway and, reluctantly, Phoebe had followed him into the house, the air around her constricting in on top of her. Every fibre of her body was protesting with each step she took, electrifying her. She had

never felt so scared. She was worried her body was going to give her away. She had fought to control her behaviour. She'd imagined a switch in her mind which she flicked off. She could feel everything once she was out. Right now she had to pretend, had to play along with his expectations of her. She closed the front door on the rain, which was coming down heavier now.

In the end, it had taken Phoebe six days before she found an opportunity to escape. Rick had received an unexpected call from work and had gone into the office. Phoebe hadn't wasted time. With fresh wounds inflicted the day before cementing her decision and the lyrics of the song floating in her brain, she had flung her few possessions into a holdall. She had grabbed the basic phone she'd secretly bought when he'd sent her to get groceries two days before, taken some cash from the tin he kept in the home office and with a sense of dread, sweat prickling out of every pore, she had opened the front door. She had walked down the driveway, looked both ways, checking for Rick, and when she saw it was clear, she had run. She had gone to the bus station and paid with the cash to get on a bus that would take her the furthest away from him. She had no sense of where she was going, she just felt an intense rush of relief that the bus was moving out of the town.

With every mile the bus had taken away from Rick, Phoebe's breaths had become a little easier. As she'd watched the fields and towns rush past, her mind had wandered back to that day in the car when she had first heard 'The Foundations of Decay' and she cried. My Chemical Romance had saved her life, again. She had laid her head back against the seat and let the memory of their music send her into a light sleep as the bus moved her further from the danger she had escaped.

She had gone to a hotel first, paying for everything with cash, as it was the safest option. Phoebe had managed to remember the phone number of an old friend, Jessica, who had gone to MCR gigs with her back when they were teenagers. She had rung the number while still on the bus. Jessica had picked up after three rings. It had been as though no time had passed when she answered. Phoebe had briefly explained what had happened and Jessica instantly invited her to her home without a second thought.

It felt as though weeks had passed since Phoebe had been sat on that bus but she had only been at Jessica's for two days now. She had travelled from one end of the country to the other to find safety. Jessica had given her money, clothes, food, a bedroom, and told her to stay as long as she needed. She had also given her a list of women's aid organisations for Phoebe to contact. And when Phoebe had sat with Jessica the evening she'd arrived, she told her about Rick and how My Chemical Romance helped her to finally leave. Jessica had said nothing. She just stroked Phoebe's arm, got up and turned on her record player. Within seconds, the first album of My Chemical Romance, 'I Brought You My Bullets, You Brought Me Your Love', had begun to play. Phoebe had wept, except this time, Jessica gently held her while the tears fell.

A car horn suddenly blared, snapping Phoebe back to her present with a start. She looked around, worried at how long she'd been lost in her thoughts. She hated being out in the open, but she'd needed some toiletries. She quickened her pace again and then ran the last few yards to Jessica's house, unlocking the front door hastily, and then closing and locking it behind her with heightened breath. Phoebe stood against the door, panting. One day she'd be able to leave the house and come back again without the panic

attacks she hoped. Once she was calm and her body had stopped shaking, she made herself a cup of tea and retreated to her bedroom. She put on the My Chemical Romance playlist Jessica had made for her the previous evening.

In her own company, listening to their music, she felt some of the fog start to lift. It felt as though they had a song for every emotion she was experiencing. It was as if they had lived in the darkness alongside her without her even realising. Every album, every song, reminded her of parts of herself she had lost or forgotten. As she sat in the wake of Rick's destruction to her body, mind, and soul, she finally felt a flicker of calm, a sense of some peace. My Chemical Romance had found her and given her the sanctuary she so desperately craved. They had given her the chance to get her life back. Now she could begin down the long path to healing and slowly piecing herself back together.

THE HEART OF THE BAND

ALEXIE DIAKITE

'Misty' by Sarah Vaughan

I had expected my shoes to stick to the floor, and when they didn't, well, it was a happy surprise to say the least.

When Marissa mentioned that I'd be meeting her friend at a club I had mentally prepared myself for dark chaotic rooms with flashing lights, beer slicked bars, the incessant pounding of EDM made for those who needed to be guided by hand to find the beat, and for my shoes to stick to whatever mysterious liquid was coating the floor.

What I wasn't prepared for, was a small room at the back of a respectable pub. The lights were dim for ambience with candles positioned at each table. The room was a mix of maroon vinyl and dark woods with a clean bar to the right and a kitchen somewhere, with a very talented chef based on the cosy gravy covered dishes I could see from my place near the entrance. What pulled and held my focus, though, was the band playing on stage. It was small, nothing like a concert stage, with a band that just managed to fit a pianist with a full-size piano, a standing bassist, an electric guitarist,

a drummer, and a lead singer shaking an egg shaker in time to the music. They were huddled together but seemed comfortable enough.

“Good evening,” said a voice. “Can I help you?”

A couple of feet in front of me was a podium where the hostess waited patiently for me to step forward, effectively pulling my attention from the band.

I walked up to the podium.

“Sorry, I have a reservation under the name Marissa Jones.”

She glanced down at the tablet, a grin sneaking its way onto her face.

“Ah, yes I see it here,” she said, trying to hide her smile as she pulled out two menus. “Right this way.”

I followed the hostess through the club, confused by her amused reaction, although, knowing Marissa, she probably made a whole deal about this date when she made the reservation. Yes, it was my first time on a blind date, but it wasn't my first time going on a date altogether. Most (well, all) of my dates came from dating apps. Ideally, I would have a few dates sprinkled in from people I had met in real life, but there's something so reassuring about asking someone out that you already know is interested in you. I told this to Marissa, but she assured me vehemently that her friend was interested.

“Here you are,” the hostess said, interrupting my thoughts. She placed me at a table near the stage. Marissa's friend wasn't here yet, which I didn't mind. I was a couple minutes late myself.

I knew very little about Marissa's friend. All I had was a name and a handful of pictures she had shown me last time I was at her flat. Isaac had shoulder length brown hair, glasses, and apparently wore a lot of plaid. He was kind,

artsy, and the youngest of three siblings. Marissa refused to tell me anything more.

“I don’t want to sway you. It’s better if you just make up your own mind about him.” I had raised an eyebrow at her when she said that. Since when had she cared about influencing my thoughts? Marissa was sweet and a wonderful friend, but she was never afraid to share her opinions. With anybody.

I looked down at my phone. Isaac was now ten minutes late. Marissa had given him my number, but I had no new messages. I scanned the room looking for the waiter, so I could flag him down. I wouldn’t order food or drinks just yet, but some water couldn’t hurt, right?

A few minutes later I cradled a glass of tap water in my hands as I leaned in to watch the band as they started a new song. They played the kind of music I associated with adult dinner parties and slow elevators: jazz. I was not overly fond of it and never gave it a second thought when I heard it. When I did hear it, every song sounded exactly like the last. But tonight, here in person...it was a different experience.

It was much livelier than any jazz music I had heard before. Each musician was enraptured by their instrument, seeming to follow the rhythm of their fellow players rather than the sheets of music in front of them. They worked well together, complimenting each other and anticipating their needs. The notes seemed to settle on the air, easing the tension from the audience, and pulling them into the performance like a spell.

I was mesmerised by the performance, living vicariously through the musicians. The lead singer swayed, closing her eyes every now and then as her voice laid out the main melody. The electrical guitarist echoed her song and together they formed the voice of the band. The bassist sat

in the back, unassuming, leaning into his instrument as he plucked the strings, his hands adding deep notes setting the bare bones of the piece. The pianist's hands moved delicately, seeming to barely touch the keys as she created a stream of never-ending trills, adding in her own flair. She was the brain on stage, sending signals down the line, and each instrument seemed to follow her lead.

They each got their moment to shine. No words or looks passed between them, but they each seemed to know when it was their turn. They would let the music overtake them, a solo erupting from their body without hesitation or a glance at their sheet music. It was improvised but sounded like they'd rehearsed it a hundred times.

I was surprised at how much they pulled me in. How much they made me care. I felt like I knew these people on stage now that I had heard them play. How come more people didn't know about this place? Yes, all the tables were full, but there was still standing room. How was this place not filled to the brim? How could I have ever been so indifferent to jazz?

It was the drummer's turn for a solo. He had waited patiently, keeping the band on time with his steady beat. He had kept them moving, kept their music alive, pulsing like a heart. But when it was his turn, the beat became erratic. He let loose, giving away everything that he had. His hair was buzzed close to the scalp and he wore a white t-shirt, but even so, sweat beaded at his temple. Drops flew as he whipped back and forth, his sticks hitting the drums confidently, making the music swell to a crescendo. His eyes locked on mine. It was only for a second, but I felt whatever it was that was driving him. It was like he held lightning and he needed a way to release it. And he did. Out of his body into his sticks and then his drums.

I started to sweat, feeling the same wildness as the music began to climb and climb and climb and finally...release. The heart began to pump normally again and faded to the background as the rest of the band came back to life. They finished their song and their set to the sound of applause and the occasional hoots and hollers. They smiled amongst each other as they removed their items, preparing the stage for the next band to take their place.

Broken from the spell, I looked around, realising that I was still alone. I checked my phone again, but still nothing. I might have been disappointed at another time, but I strangely felt fine. I had been filled with such light that the smallest flicker of darkness was not enough to put it out. I looked around for the waiter, deciding to stay to hear the next band and finally order some food, when I caught the drummer's eye.

He smiled widely, heading my way as he pulled on a long-sleeved plaid shirt over his t-shirt.

"Riley?" he said, coming to a stop at my table.

I stared up dumb-founded. How did he know my name?

"Yes?"

"I'm Isaac," he said, taking a seat next to me. "It's nice to finally meet you. Marissa's told me so much about you."

"Marissa..." She knew. She knew that he'd be here playing. Suddenly the hostess' coy smile made sense. "Was this her idea, or yours?" I asked, still trying to catch up.

"It might have been a group effort." He smiled bashfully as he wiped his forehead. He had cut his hair and he must have been wearing contacts, which is probably why I hadn't recognized him. "Well, it was mostly my idea. But you know Marissa, she would have told you everything before you even had a chance to meet me."

"True," I said, smiling softly.

“And I might have been worried that you’d think I was boring.”

“Why would I think that?” I asked, genuinely curious. After watching him play, the last word I would describe him as was boring.

He tilted his head towards the stage as a new band prepared to start.

“I know not everyone likes jazz. I get it, it’s not everyone’s thing, but I hoped that if you heard us play, then maybe...”

He chuckled, and I laughed along with him.

“You were right. Not that I’d think you were boring,” I said, quickly. “Just that, before tonight, I might have said jazz was boring, if you had asked me about it. Now, though, it’s like a whole other world. And I definitely wouldn’t say it was boring.”

“I’m glad,” he said looking relieved. “And if it makes you feel better, I told her to hold off on telling me about you. I’d like to find out for myself.”

I felt my face warm but smiled all the same.

“So, Riley, what do you do for a living?”

“Well, it’s a long story.”

“I’ve got time,” he said, grinning widely. “Why don’t you tell me over food and drinks?”

“Sounds good to me,” I said, easing myself into my chair.

He raised a hand.

“Waiter?”

I WILL WAIT
AMELIE FLAGLER

'I Will Wait' by Mumford & Sons

*"... Now I'll be bold
As well as strong
And use my head alongside my heart"*

Connor's eyes were shining with excitement. He stood by me on the playground, rocking back and forth with the natural adrenaline all ten-year-old boys seem to have. He was almost entirely covered in mud.

"Just... a... minute..." I finished tying the shoelaces on my pink Sketchers. My pudgy little fingers weren't the most useful for knot tying; they slid as I fiddled with its strings.

"I'm coming!" I sprang off the ground and burst towards the Moon Slide. Barely turning around, I yelled behind me, "Last one there is a rotten egg!"

Connor chased me, our excited giggles carrying through the air. I tripped my way through the mulch and almost fell face-first, twice.

It was a cold fall this year. Chilly wind bit at my ears and

auburn leaves crunched under my feet. Pretty soon, our days of outdoor frolicking would transfer to indoor recess. Although the warmth of our classroom was great, I was going to miss the feel of tree bark and chalk on concrete.

After what seemed like an eternity, we were there: the Moon Slide. The single greatest piece of playground equipment in all of history. It was vibrant red and blue, twisting around itself like spiral macaroni. Not only was it almost a million feet high — the height of the moon — it was so big, so tall, and so scary, only the sixth graders had ever gone down it before. That was until today.

I gulped.

Connor yelled to a group of kids across the playground: “GUYS, WE’RE GOING DOWN THE MOON SLIDE!”

Whispers rose from the four-foot crowd. A kickball rolled down the pavement as my classmates ran toward us. Their small voices sounded loud in the silent air.

“Is he really gonna do it?”

“There’s no way...”

“He’s only in the fifth grade...”

I looked up at Connor and pulled on the hem of his Spider-Man sweatshirt. “Are you sure about this?” I looked up, and the ginormous shadow of the Moon Slide glared down on me. “Connor...”

“Trust me, Belle. We’ve got this. We just gotta be brave. Like... umm... Superman!” he said in a deep voice, and I laughed.

Together we climbed up to the top of the slide. Each step was scarier than the last, and my heart started racing. At this point, the kids were chanting.

“CONNOR!”

“BELLE!”

“CONNOR!”

“BELLE!”

Once we reached the tippity top, he looked over to me.
“Are you ready?”

I cleared my throat with a sudden rush of bravery. “I’m ready.”

He grabbed my hand. “1... 2... 3!”

And with a kick of our feet, we were off.



“I will wait for you.”

*... But I'll kneel down
Wait for now
And I'll kneel down
Know my ground”*

Connor met my gaze, his eyes wide with emotion.

He was still bent down on one knee, a burgundy velveteen case perched in his hands. The sun sparkled off the ring, making its silver shimmer just as brightly as the sparkling diamond. I’m pretty sure he was shaking.

I could feel myself choking up. “I am so sorry. It isn’t you, I promise. It’s just the timing, and I’m not sure I’m ready—”

“Shh.” He gave me a warm yet hesitant smile. “No apologies. We’re still in our twenties, and the amount of pressure you’re under with the business and your college schedule... I should have waited.” I started to interject, but Connor stopped me. “I’m not going anywhere, Belle. I’ll be here when you’re ready. I promise.”

I nodded and bit my lip. I opened my mouth to speak, but couldn’t find the right words. I opened up my arms to him.

He grabbed me and pulled me close, squeezing me tight and holding me against his chest. The smell of hair gel proved he spent a lot of time preparing for this.

“How about a little walk?”

“Mhm.” I nodded.

We set off silently down the trail, careful not to squish any of the flowers blooming in pavement cracks. I was acutely aware of a black-capped chickadee chirping in the tree beside us.

Eventually, he reached into his pocket and dug out a pair of earbuds. He popped one into his ear and pressed the other to my palm, gesturing for me to put it in. As soon as I did, the music started.

“Well I came home...”



“I will wait for you.”

*“Like a stone
And I fell heavy into your arms
These days of dust
Which we’ve known
Will blow away with this new sun”*

Connor looked at me, tears glistening in his eyes. His voice cracked with each word. I placed my hand against his burning forehead, wrinkles creased into his ninety-year old skin. The fever was getting worse, just as they said it would.

I studied his face; the graying hair and comforting eyes and warming smile. I couldn’t process any of it. I wouldn’t. To me, he was still the muddy little boy on the playground.

“Wait for me? What do you mean?”

“Heaven, Belle.” He coughed. “With the pearly white clouds, and the fresh green meadows, and the dandelions, roses, and buttercups. I’ll be waiting for you there.” A salty drop dripped down his cheekbone, sliding over his chin. “Come here.”

I leaned in close, my face hovering inches above his. He reached up a shaking hand, brought me towards him, and pressed a soft kiss against the top of my head. His lips were ice cold. “I love you.”

I collapsed on top of him. “I love you too.”

We stayed like that for a while. He traced the silver band on my finger, and my dry skin, and the veins that criss-crossed along my wrist. Way too soon, the motion stopped. The rising and falling of his chest began to dissipate.

“Belle?” he said, his voice just a whisper now. “I will wait for you.”

He squeezed my hand one more time, and then went to the place where the waiting began. The place seemed so close around the corner, yet so far away, and so unreachable.

I let out a sob and kissed him. His words hung in the air. “I will wait for you.”

MEMORABILIA

NUPUR LAKHE

'Our House' by Graham Nash

I have trapped age in little bottles: coloured, fragrant, and tasteful. The murky-looking, tangy but leaning towards sour, with a piquant scent, is my 20s. The unicorn-coloured bottle is my childhood: sickeningly sweet, fruity scented. My 30s are musky with a grey palate. Rose-scented and a lighter shade of grey with little sparkles, tasting like a Pinot Grigio on a summer afternoon, are my 40s and so on. Sitting in this elder care foster home, I sometimes pick out a bottle and try to wander into those memories by uncorking it, days when my brain fails to recognise or recall any. I started doing this when I was diagnosed with the first signs of Dementia. They became a way to pause in time and rest. Through these bottles, I experience the famous Proustian 'tea and madeleines' juncture: the instant I open the bottle from my childhood, a candied smell fills the room, reminding me of the fairs and circuses I visited sitting on my father's shoulder. My little brother is sleeping in a pram, which my mother pushed. However, it is my 40s that I often love going

back to. Again and again. Every week. It takes me back to my house. Our house. But today, this paucity hurts.

It is a Sunday, and Graham Nash's song 'Our House' plays in the background. Jacob is a collector, and his vinyl records mean the most to him. I am not allowed to touch them or the gramophone. He brews coffee and makes eggs in the kitchen while I move around our house, watering the indoor plants with my small watering can. Occasionally, he falls into a cadence where he sings along, taking the note a notch higher, turning the eggs on the pan. In the front yard, I settle with my book and wait for Jacob to join me. From where I sit, I can watch him through the big window that overlooks our living room and kitchen space. I can see him assembling the food on a tray. As I try to find my bearings with the book, my gaze turns to the rose bushes that require some pruning. A sweet fragrance spreads in the morning air. Jacob sets the table, and we drift into conversation and silence. The silence filled with Nash's distant voice:

*Our house is a very very very fine house
With two cats in the yard
Life used to be so hard
Now everything is easy cause of you
And our... la la la la...*

He steps out of the house to get some wine for the evening. And as I wait and pass the hour, the song stops. The record spins on its turntable with a garish sound. I do nothing about it. An hour changes into hours, but there is no sign of Jacob.

I wake up with a jolt as the 40s memory bottle slips from my hand and shatters on the floor. I must have been dreaming, I suppose. A switch trips in my mind, like an On/Off

button. My brain feels like a clean slate. I see the remnants of the bottle - little sparkles strewn over the floor and a bizarre smell that is a mix of white wine and rose flowers. What happened?

And what happened on that Sunday five years ago?

I sit crouched on my bed, looking at the sparkles so it would come to me; this memory in my mind that now ebbs and flows.

Our Sundays would always be the same, and yet there are a hundred different memory threads attached to them. Unspooling them is like sitting with a picture album in your lap, going through each detail again. We spent 20 years with our rose bushes, on the front patio reading, having wine, and listening to vinyl albums: a routine we had formed together in our home. A sync. A rhythm.

On one such Sunday, Jacob didn't wake up to put the record on. And whilst I was making a call to the Emergency centre of the neighbourhood hospital, I saw the remnants of the night before; his open notebook, a moka pot on his desk, his pencil inside the book he was reading, and the vinyl record still rotating on the peg, like a lingering talk we couldn't finish. It is an image I have come to associate with his death. It seemed analogous to the fulfilling life he lived. If only he had taught me to use his Gramophone, my grieving circle would be complete.

I collect the shards of my memories off the floor and head out from my room to call a housekeeper to clean it when I hear a strumming guitar. A youthful boy is playing the Graham Nash song.

*I'll light the fire
You place the flowers in the vase
That you brought today*

Tears run down as I grapple with my memories for the umpteenth time today. And probably for the last. Five years ago today: a Sunday like never before.

'Our House' plays, and before I realise I am humming along just like Jacob would.

My coloured bottles now sit on the fireplace mantle like pretty adornments. I pass them without picking them up. I uncork them, but the scents are just those without a picture.

Like a song that reaches its end, the vinyl spins on the turntable nevertheless, silent; the mind feels empty, like a vacated house.

THE LAST NOTE

NAGMA CHOWDHARY

The following material may be harmful or traumatising for some members of the audience. Some readers may find it disturbing. Reader discretion is advised.

‘Someone You Loved’ by Lewis Capaldi

My strings are finally broken and I have lost all my picks!

I go back to the day when I used to wake up to your freshly baked buns and that dripping butter that brought a smile to my face. The only thing I have now is a deserted soul with unpaid bills and seven failed albums. Dear Mimi, I wonder why I failed in this life race. I failed my wife. I failed my little princess. I failed in my career; like the broken base. I still remember my first hit, when you shouted from the audience and were my biggest fan. Dear Mimi, take me back to the day when we celebrated my first label and cheered for more success. When my feelings were happy but now my feelings are not necessarily sad but just empty

too. My hands tremble and my feet shiver as I write this letter sitting on a mountain cliff on the same bench where you and father bought me when I was a kid.

Dear Mimi, I remember our last dinner on Christmas Eve two years ago. You tried to break me but I pushed you away. I am sorry Mimi. I wish I hugged you a little longer, while I didn't hug you at all. Today, as I pour my heart out to you one last time Mimi, I apologise for those sleepless nights I gave you, for those aggressive fights I gave you, for those mental drives I gave you and for those ungrateful wives I gave you.

I failed myself as a musician when I met Crystal. I still remember the day I was blown away by its heavenly colours. You told me my heaven was hell and that I would face it when I Grew wise. I apologise Mimi, as I never thought that this would kill my soul. I'll lose my child and outgrow the love of my wife. I apologise for hitting that journalist and taking trolls negatively. I also apologise for following Satan when God was just standing there for me with His open arms. I stopped thinking precisely and my mind went numb. I left myself muddled as crystals took over my life. I wonder how those days and months went by when I lost time and nothing came by.

Promise me Mimi, you will bake those buns for my princess and make her into the same artist you made me. My monthly allowance for father-daughter bonding isn't enough to get her spark to shine. Promise me Mimi, that you will teach her to make those pumpkin pies we bake every Christmas. Promise me you will keep all of our traditions alive.

I am a little tired, Mimi, so I should go back to sleep just like the old time. You brush my hair and sing me a lullaby. You know why I am writing this letter as nothing is going to

get better. I cannot lie to you as I bid my final goodbye. Your Mickey loves you, just as he did 20 years back and now he needs to rest without looking in your eye.

I will always be alive with you in my debut album 'One Life Baby.'

Your loving son,
Mick AKA Mickey.

FOREVER YOUNG

TONI BRENNAN

'Forever Young' by Bob Dylan

Martin,

This is my fourth attempt at writing this message so you can take it with you. Two earlier drafts sit scrunched up on the table and one just missed the wastepaper basket. When we all return to London, in due course, I am not going to stand up in a church and make a speech at the service. I wouldn't be able to utter a word, I'd just stand there, fighting back tears, with all eyes on me — no way! So this will have to do instead. But you know this already because you know me too well. You are a leader — lead guitar, lead vocals, lead it all. I am just the quiet bass player - a walking cliché, I know — Dr Nerd, remember? Your nickname for me, bestowed the very day we met, on holiday in Portugal — you staying in Albufeira and me visiting for the day from a town twenty minutes east. It was a warm sunset, a winter day; I was getting antsy and thinking about getting back. I did not

have a car and I wasn't sure about public transport. I heard music, a busker playing and singing Bob Dylan's 'Forever Young'; I followed the sound and saw the busker sitting under an archway, lost in the music. People walked by — it was a strategic position — and occasionally some change would land on the picnic blanket he was sitting on. There wasn't an overt attempt to ask for money — no box or cup or open guitar case, and very few passers-by would hang around long enough to listen properly. Like me, you were sort of hovering around, not too close, so as not to disturb the busker — taking in the song, the sunset, the moment. You spoke first — in English — chin vaguely angled in my direction; you seemed eager to let me know that you too sang and played the guitar. I said that I, too, played the guitar. Then came the even more amazing coincidence — wouldn't you know it, lol — we both lived in London, precisely three-quarters of a mile apart, on opposite sides of a roundabout that, I joked, made your neighbourhood deepest suburbia bordering on leafy area, and mine an edgy, buzzing urban 'hood with a London postcode, no less.

"My father introduced me to Dylan," you said. "The majority of our peers don't have Dylan on their radar at all, or if they do, it is to dismiss him as 'old hat' — same with checking out parents' record collections or recommendations."

"That's a very bigoted view," I stated.

"Totally — like the notion that you must rebel against your parents. I was raised by hippies at heart. OK, my father may well work in insurance, but if you see past that — it's a job — it was my dad who bought me my first guitar and taught me my initial chords."

As we talked, we were moving towards the sea and away

from the busker, who had restarted the song from the beginning. “Repertoire needs building up,” you observed with a hearty laugh.

“Can you play this song?” I asked.

“Sure. However, I would not play it in D as this guy does.”

I pointed out that Dylan has played it in different versions and different keys; that on *Planet Waves* it appears in two versions — slow and fast. I was on a roll: “I am pretty sure that at least the slow and more popular version was played in D on the record.”

“Hey, who needs Google? Dr Nerd here knows everything! I’m Martin, by the way, and, for the record — pun intended — I play the song in C.”

The serendipity that led to our meeting and the start of our friendship, that little exchange, your efforts five minutes later to find someone in your group of friends who could give me a lift to where I was staying... All this will be with me forever. That was the start of our band, too — well, technically, not until we were back in London and Faisal and Tom joined us. Fast forward to now, I’ve lost count of all the times we have played *Forever Young* — in C and D, fast and slow — and many other songs, including several half-decent songs of our own. Martin, I must thank you for (sort of) bullying me(!) into switching to bass guitar. “Guitar Town ain’t big enough for the both of us,” you said, only half joking, and now I can say it: your rendition of the theme from *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* accompanying this statement was rubbish, the vocals, or should I say beatboxing, the worst ever, so very unlike you — but I got the message and did not mind. I found my calling playing the bass guitar, so, everything considered, I owe you; if nothing else,

because you saw that I could do it well before I even entertained the idea. Three years down the line, you almost couldn't coax me back into playing guitar. Be careful what you wish for, I guess. Anyway, all part of the rich tapestry of music for me, starting as I did as the quiet bespectacled kid with too many library cards disappearing into books or practice for Wednesday afternoon flute lessons, back when this was a way of getting to understand who my father was. As you know, he died when I was a toddler, and all I had were some photos, some videos and a gleaming flute locked in a display cabinet that I wasn't allowed to touch.

Our friendship — everything that followed that chance encounter in Albufeira — is flashing before me as I write this - a zoetrope of words, images, anecdotes spinning in my mind — “down the foggy ruins of time.” No, no, I won't even try — *you* are the one with a Dylan lyric for every occasion. Case in point: a snapshot of you pacing a hotel lobby bar after we split from our first manager — the fur was flying that day! — spitting, “Businessmen, they drink my wine... none of them along the line know what any of this is worth,” while also channelling Jimi Hendrix.

And now, fast forward to this — the accident, the police, the doctors, the formalities. We accompanied your father on almost every grim errand — in a succession of countless waiting rooms with institutional pale green walls and grey plastic chairs nailed to the floor — weird what you pay attention to in challenging times. The police were kind and respectful; some officers spoke English; Tom, who speaks Spanish, helped with the forms. They have also reached your mother and her husband, and they are flying in from Kathmandu via Madrid.

I curse the day we accepted these gigs here on the island

— the gigs that are not even official gigs, but an... ahem... informal arrangement — thank you, Brexit.

“Let’s make a holiday of it,” you said.

“Bus driver’s holiday,” said Tom, “after hibernating in a recording studio for weeks, with more studio time booked for when we come back.”

“Which proves that we need a change of scene.”

And off we went...We were on the cusp of something great; the hard work paid off and suddenly everything fell into place. Just ten days after becoming our manager, Terry announced that several record companies were engaged in a bidding war — her exact words —over our demo.

“Record companies? Do they still exist?” piped up Faisal from behind his drum kit. That cracked us up. Only last week, and already evaporated into some irretrievable past.

Martin, I just don’t get it. I know that you had rented the motorbike, and did not think much of it - you had one in London. But why leave the hotel that early in the morning, practically at dawn? Yes, sure the scenery, the light for your photographs... No one knows what happened. The police hypothesized just a lack of familiarity with the terrain and said that sadly tourists are often caught out by the hairpin bends, and the volcanic, uneven soil — in other words, all the things that make the views spectacular. An officer told your father that just three months ago they had a similar accident involving someone from the Netherlands, where it’s flat all over.

Martin, do you remember when I told you that it would take me twenty minutes to go around the roundabout that separates our neighbourhoods? I get off my bicycle and cross using all the pedestrian crossings...

I said, “Street cred be damned, I can’t afford to die before writing something truly revolutionary!”

And you raised your hand to initiate a high five and said, “I second that! Can’t afford to check out before having written my very own *Bringing It All Back Home!*”

So, what happened? I know you loved — no, *love* — life. I can’t bring myself to speak of you in the past. They ruled out a collision; there were no obvious marks at the point where your bike went off the road, no over-the-legal limit blood alcohol content, and the rental company’s safety logs were exemplary. No third-party involvement, no suspicious circumstances. The case can be closed. A momentary lapse of attention perhaps due to sleep deprivation has been suggested as a possible explanation. No one will ever know — perhaps not even you. I, for one, want to hold on to the thought that you did not have time to know — I don’t want to think of frightened eyes opening wide, terrifying seconds played out in slow motion, from realization to impact. This beyond horrible scenario unfolds over and over in a video loop inside my head, like being at Macy Recording Studios — shouting into the intercom, “No!” at the top of my lungs and then throwing myself against the glass walls of the booth imploring the engineer to please, please make it stop. There are moments, flashes when an antidote to this comes through, and I imagine you riding away, doing something you liked, your expensive reflex camera at the ready in your bag, and then seamlessly, with no pain, you are somewhere at the same time peaceful and exciting, somewhere like Mr. Tambourine Man’s magic swirling ship.

Martin, I hope you are happy and inspired there, at one with music and poetry and, above all, “far from the twisted reach of crazy sorrow.” Now you are floating in absolutes, far above the pettiness of our everyday, predictable lives — you will always burn bright, forever young. The album will come out as scheduled, thereby sharing your talent with the

world, but without you, the band is no more. Watch us love, fight, pay tax, stumble, make mistakes, strive, coast, and perhaps grow old. Whatever happens, I know that I can pick up my guitar /bass/piano/flute and call out to you/connect with you... I am an old hand at this, using music to connect across the divide... I'll make sure you know who's calling — the one and only “Dr. Nerd.”

THE DRIFT
SHANE CHASE

'Secrecy Is Incredibly Important To The Both of Them'
by Yves Tumor

At some point, I realised he was poised as if ready to yell or to tell us something, and then he did. The roughed-up man in the back of the bar teetered and began to scream, cursing the song playing through the speakers. The rhythm of some phobia moving him. You have to assume he wouldn't have been able to speak his feelings; anyway, no one was listening, he had sat alone all night. A bruise scattered under his eye, though as a memory, I see it was a birthmark. And really, I tried to match the music—the vocal particularity—to his figure and place the scratchy flight of tune from upbeat guitar, with his squat rotund appearance. He sported dickies work pants, a tattered black t-shirt, his outfit spotted by white paint. A short haircut and round, fulfilled belly. I remember his hands were large and callused which is how I imagined his heart. The late-night talker on a tear, though only to familiar faces. A guy whose clothing, weathered eyes, and age led me to make my assumptions of class, a

faint Brooklyn accent spiking his vowels, in which I never could register a parting of joy and anger, annoyed excitement at voicing his distaste, for the music. His shouting was so furious yet expressing some pleasure in nuisance.

The pleasure of expressing nuisance, a desire to connect over annoyance or physical confrontation because sound is sculptural, it physically fills the air.

His shouting grew louder, “Turn Off This *Fucking* Noise, before I do!” until the bartender had to get his manager, balled fist turning white, and “It’s people like you; it is people Like You, man!” A few other staff came over, a flurry of shouting, someone saying calm down, calm down over and over; urging him to leave but first pay his tab. He tossed some dollar bills on the floor, expressions of dissatisfaction with service but acknowledgment of debts. Then he went out of the building, into the dense night. The night was dark back then, you had to have a heads-up.

I saw your eyes differ, alert in fear, harbouring a shame for your fear of this lumbering man with whom we had so little in common save for our excitement by the song being played. Though for us, it meant the world.

The musician was an enigma, a man whose Wikipedia page told us less than the obscure music — itself a mere spoon reflection of our own emotions projected through the sonic pulse of his immaculate queer vocals. The page claimed he was born in Knoxville, Tennessee and we clicked the hyperlink to look at the washed-out city where my cousins live in the rubble of the South. Where, years earlier, I escaped terminal boredom, “dull republican surroundings” was a phrase there on the page and I noted it. He claimed to now live in Turin, Italy. To harbor fugitive monks that escaped a burning temple outside of LA. To have been involved with gangs and once robbed a bank,

clutched the 9mm pistol drawn in several B&E's in the tri-state area and some say it was used in the assassination attempt of some well-named rapper, whose government we cannot disclose.

He claimed to be the most beautiful man alive and to live for nothing; the force that renovates the world. Somehow that proved to us his shocking monument to freedom in emptiness, since we agreed *nothing* should be an event rather than a vacancy — me coming from my violent blank spot on the globe and you from

I went outside for a cigarette after the guy bounced from the bar and you followed me a little while after, though when you got there I was already stomping out my cigarette end. The song had stopped, and another came on. Same musician on the speakers, same you, in the same leather jacket; same me, slightly cold in my sweatshirt worn for fashion's sake, not utility.

“Can I bum one?” you asked, and I replied by opening the packet and extending my hand.

“You know, there’s no reason a guy like that wouldn’t be into some post-punk type music, off-rip?” You lit up and puffed, the flame beckoning light on your face and the shadow played like a flashlight under the chin, I spooked for a moment and then returned to normal.

“I don’t know, I guess it’s just different strokes for different folks. The guy seemed like he had made up his mind.”

“But, if he gave an album a chance!” Those days you frequently went on this rant.

“He would’ve done the work, not just followed breadcrumbs of the richest parts of artists’ history, you know? Like he would’ve trucked through the album and at least he would’ve seen what aspects he really couldn’t stand and

what might be worth some consideration. I don't know if that makes sense."

"It does, if you can bear the music at all," I said, half-laughing, half-serious.

"Shut up, you know what I mean."

"I know, I get it. There was a lot of music I wasn't into until—"

You cut me off. "Until you listened to it."

"Until I heard it... Until I really let it seep in and gave it a chance. For example, my mom was always playing these 80s bangers I couldn't stand until I wasn't at the house anymore and then I missed those songs, and I went back to them. I put them on, and I loved the campy sound I was experiencing again, by choice."

You blew smoke out of your nose in a little poof and tossed the end of the cigarette. Nodded. Touched me on the shoulder and stared into my eyes for a moment. The seconds were like a spell, and then you were casting a spell: you were speaking to me and saying words with spellings that I couldn't render because they were lost to me, and that was part of the beauty of it — to lose what was there, to not try to capture it and press the unfamiliar flower into the book, but to let it cycle, let it fall and decompose and redescribe love in my mind as a memory, as a hue of love. And then there were flowers falling from the trees as the wind passed over us, over our corner of the city. And the whirls of ginkgo came down too, you kissed me, and a glimmer of something unlike harmony but more like melody, a ripple, ran through my spine. Biting my bottom lip tenderly, I wanted more, to be closer; and as the train passed beneath our feet, the cigarette on your breath was suddenly sexy. The smell of cigarettes and gin turned me on. That feeling of sandpaper on your tongue. I recall it but

usually can't remember the sense of touch, like how I hardly remember smells until they're present, or presented in little bottles of perfume like the one you were wearing. I like to think of memories as liquids inside little glass bottles, bottles in the form of feelings. The memories curve to fill the shape of the glass feelings and they change when the glass sometimes melts under pressure. As temporary as flowers falling through air.

Much later, when I was walking down the road in winter, not far from where you now live, I heard the song again coming out of a car. The traffic had been backed up which was and wasn't strange to me. The sound of the guitar cutting through the traffic led to two guys sitting in a van which the music was coming from. They looked like construction workers, one was smoking, the one on the passenger side with his feet up, both nodding their heads to the song. It caused me to get a little dizzy as my senses grew stiff around the noxious fumes from the cars, visibly disappearing. It spoke to me perfectly, of you, in my thoughts. Though, no you weren't really on my mind until you were and I was crying a little, or I felt like crying but hadn't allowed myself to let it flow, ripple. And it was like a huge valley suddenly crowded me, not far from where the music first hit my ears; I turned down a side street and had to take a moment, on a half-broken office chair next to a dumpster. Where I sat down and let it ring out, like a powerful season snapping into play, an out-of-season hurricane. I cried for a while, shaking. It wasn't pretty.

A street junkie passed by me and looked forlorn into my eyes, and I felt bad for judging this as a measure of how low I was and how out of touch I'd become. The enduring pain of love, and onwardness colliding. I wanted to go on, but you were haunting me in the music. As I was seated now, as if to

tell it; the story. Harboured this shame for the right to be afraid to be alone, as the drug-addled woman came up to me and asked me if I was alright. I tried to project myself into the future I imagined where I might be alright, I said, *no, I'm doing great. I'm doing fine. Can we talk? It can be about whatever.*

“FOR ADAM—”

EFFY KOUSTENI

‘Open Arms’ by SZA and Travis Scott

When you do your best, hell, that’s all you can do.

You and me and anybody else.

- ‘Open Arms,’ Sza, Travis Scott

For Adam—

In an endless spat of who is right, I draw a circle and put us in the middle of it. You talk about angels and God, and I’m slowly becoming more of a ghost than a woman. I hope this finds you while you can still see me. I hope this finds you less tired than last Sunday and more patient with me. Death around every corner calls me by my full government name, but I’m busy rolling us cigarettes. You look out of place, as if you already know, as if you’ve already heard, as if you’ve already been taught all the characters — as if you have been preparing for something greater. I stare, listen, and object. Front line soldier, it feels criminal to be this

certain when the world has been created according to one thousand theories.

This is a confession of character. He has placed between us affection and mercy, and in the distance between us, there's a trail of gasoline — and 01:00 am is a match. I'm cross-legged on my bed recycling sorrow and doing cross-words that spell *earth*, *man*, and *soil*. I dreamt you into reality, alive and fully conscious, designed to pull out all the stops. If everything happens for a reason, tell me why every conversation leaves me at a loss for words and puts you on a pedestal. I want to be inconvenienced by you. Tell me everything I've ever known is a lie, and there's a space amidst this worldwide cataclysm where we can settle. It feels like I need the quiet; it feels like I need the prayers. Deserted roads and neglected pavements, speech patterns that confuse me. Pray for me. I am in truly great need of any good that you might send down to me.

A house is not a home until you bleed in it. You defend all mothers, fathers, daughters, and sons damned under universal ruination. An eye for an eye, and a truth for a truth. I wonder about your childhood, and if you've ever had an argument with your dad about smoking, or if your mum finds you as stubborn as I do when we don't share opinions. I wonder if cruelty is something one inherits or learns and if apathy is a symptom of habit. Stay with me; we are right in the middle of a circle, witnessing buildings collapse in a hopeless state of inability. You hold your fists up into some kind of apology and then draw the devil in a white mask and boxing gloves. We are all trying to be holy while the world burns. Grade-A sinners confessing to genocide and massacre.

You are good— you are good. I hope one day your arms are
open open open.

I hope this finds you screaming at the top of your lungs.

I hope this finds you with your hands
open open open,
palms facing the ceiling, brave for me.

Tell me about the days when your body feels nothing like a body, Adam; when it feels like a place where soldiers lay down arms and forget to come back for them. Tell me what it's like holding yourself at the barrel of someone else's gun before they pull the trigger, or what you intend to do with all these hand-me-down war relics when the fighting is over. Tell me how love never did you any favours. It's beautiful getting to know you and well worth the effort. Tell me about the softness you carried on your shoulders when you left your hometown and said goodbye to life as you'd known it. How you get lost in every city you're visiting, and how nervous you get about the locals finding out. Tell me about Palestine. When you travelled through Israel, twenty security men locked you in a room and never let you out of the airport. I wonder whether you prioritised anger over fear, and if you have ever wished to be somebody else even for a moment. Tell me how you want to save the world and about every single thing you cannot figure out. Tell me about all the temples you burnt and rebuilt, and how nobody has ever thanked you for a hard day's work. I might never see you again and I have questions.

Accuracy by volume. If we keep falling for every weary, spellbinding character, one of them is bound to love us back. Accuracy by volume. They have levelled cities that

way. That's how you handle machine guns, and atom bombs, and you and me. Reporting live from the warzone, the level of precision or correctness, and how closely the calculated or measured volume aligns with the actual or expected volume. For you, I trust. A willing accomplice you are forever guiding. I wear devotion as a head covering that extends to my wrists and ankles. My beliefs against ownership dive deep somewhere in the eastern Mediterranean. I'm not great at geography, but I've still marked all the places you've been and plan to go on the map.

Half the world away. I've known you are leaving since you reminded me kindness often comes with an umbrella over your head while it's pouring, or with lasagna recipes, cinnamon, and brave vocabulary. Ghost towns aren't for beating hearts. It has all been reduced to brick and stone and we are trying to make it to the surface. We list war crimes and I pay attention to the way you clench your jaw every two seconds. I count and hate it. The lines fall flat. It always leads to mourning, the knowing — the noticing. When you leave — do it loudly. Deafeningly, violently. Slam the door so it can never be yanked open again. Fucking shout, because I'm stubborn and will try to remove it off its hinges. Scream my name repeatedly like a protest song against colonialism. And I will send you a thank you note.

This is our story stated in one sentence. This is where I explore my grand strategy for the narrative. I wish it could only be about everything I like; you driving while I turn on the radio. This is where I wonder how this could change my life. This is a short story, only ever that unless we become epic.

There's this deeply rooted embarrassment to confess anything so, I hope this finds you asleep. We are too young to carry heavy hearts in silence, so I rip mine out and hand

it to you like some kind of offering. You call my bed a crime scene; crimson pillowcases and messy covers, fairy lights that imagine divine and blur your vision until you call them unholy. I offend you when I touch you — burn your skin, insult your body — you are fighting Satan, putting the brakes on desire and temptation. Ceasefire. I hope this finds you crying for the third time in your life. Commit the crime. Ceasefire. Ceasefire now. Happiness comes with a cost and I'm not ready to pay the price, but I'll owe you. If you want to fight, I'm going to bet on you a whole fee and place warmth under your ego. I will romanticise split knuckles and bruised ribs until it becomes real. And then, I will get worried, and write about you like a myth.

The narrative is being controlled and the narrators captive. Let me turn reality into something more comprehensible, more easily digestible. Let's pass history back and forth and I'll introduce you to the women I was at nineteen and twenty-two. That's if you want me to be better, or more alive. A million apologies to myself. Soon you will disappear, and I will be thinking of calling but our time zones will be different. Who would risk waking you up, or interrupting your training? You see, nothing is accurate; even words spill and trip over. They pout, protest, and plead. In this context, only fear can take shelter. In this context, occupation is a crime. Each chain shattered is a verse of freedom sung for the pure—

And all of the children, they are going to tell God
everything. They will talk about death, destruction, and
slaughter. Failing countries, bombings, and
blood baths. Demolition and gun murders
masked by fireworks. And you and me, and how
you are changing your whole life in November.

*Out of fear of getting political, they won't let me write about war
so I turned it into a love story.*

This is a thank you note

This is a thank you note

Credits to Adam

The atheist defends herself. I have shared beds with wolves and other forceful alphas. I have thrived on chaos by engraving loyalty on my tombstone. Full moon can turn man into monster. I witnessed you change form into something hostile, foreign, and distant. Still, I left clean clothes on the doorstep and put my leftovers on a silver plate. My mercies never came to an end while your cruelty bit my arms until I had no way of giving. You committed crimes in the name of God, and prioritised undefined faith over palpability. Blame my judgement or the bad lighting in the kitchen, but I praised you as someone worthy. I'm putting on an honest face and anathematise you for following the coward's way out. My kindness is unappreciated, and my affection is a sin in your religion that condemns me ungodly. You see, sometimes I meet men and sometimes I meet writing prompts.

You left loudly. With you, there was a crash. Driving headfirst into the unknown, you cut the engine and it all went quiet. You wanted to pay me back for the cigarettes I gave you, but I only wanted to know who taught you love was transactional. You hit the brakes and drove right into the wall. With you, there was a crash, and then everything turned church silent. I contemplated heaven and hell until you stood up unscathed and all-right. You walked away, and

I buried my grief six feet under, or perhaps I'm still digging. Your name still sounds a lot like a punishment. When somebody calls it, I choke on nostalgia. It hits me like a whiplash, a bolt from the blue, a sudden thud. Locked in for life. I'm becoming cliché and I hate it. I just really wanted the happy ending and honeymoon in Cuba. You behaved like acid was dripping off my fingertips and treated my love like some kind of black magic. Burn me at the stake or I can become my own funeral pyre. You can spread rumours and accusations, but truth is, I was never something sinister.

I used to look up and hope He was sensitive about me. I have won but mostly lost, and I have loved but mostly been misunderstood. You see, I am all types of tired and used to love being a too-tight collar. I watch the news, all about bombings and global annihilation, and conclude He is sensitive about no one. We are handed weapons because our only chance at survival is our own shooting skills — and sometimes I want to turn it on myself — because then I don't have to aim far. You see, Adam, I don't know where to begin, or what I'm made for. I spat out all this dirt in my mouth only to fall face-down on the ground again. Love is earthly and muddy and profane. It's preparing us for greater battles with inevitable losses of allies and comrades. I'm a romantic communist, so expect nothing but justice and fairness.

I load the revolver, close the cylinder, wrap my hands around it, and aim, pulling the hammer back twice. This is a thank you note because you left loudly as I asked you to.

MEET OUR AUTHORS

Rajani Adhikari

Rajani Adhikari, a postgraduate student studying Professional Writing, has a background in history and English literature. Her writing focuses mostly on diasporic identities and culture.

Marilyn Ama

Marilyn Ama is a current student at the University of Westminster pursuing a master's in Professional Writing. Her love for languages took her far east to study for four years in South Korea. She achieved her undergraduate degree in Korean Language and Literature, graduating top of the class. She is passionate about incorporating authentic experiences in her fictional writing and seeks to fine-tune these skills during her postgraduate career. She looks forward to engaging in translation and editorial work in writing and hopes to publish her own books.

Sylvia Amponsah

Sylvia Afia Amanimaa Amponsah is a native of Ghana, West Africa, and a graduate of the University of Education, Winneba, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Twi Education. Following her undergraduate studies, she taught Twi language for two years at the AngloGold Ashanti school in Obuasi, Ghana. In recognition of her academic achievements, Sylvia received the prestigious British Council GREAT Scholarship in 2023, which enabled her to pursue her postgraduate degree in MA Creative Writing at the University of Westminster, where she is currently enrolled.

Lavi Bachchis

Lavi Bachchis is a multifaceted professional with editing, research, and business writing expertise. She's currently studying for an MA in Creative Writing at the University of Westminster in London and is committed to honing her fiction voice. Lavi is a passionate storyteller exploring the creative writing field with the goal of being a full-time writer. Beyond merely becoming successful, she sees herself leading a life of serenity in nature, being totally devoted to her craft, and creating fascinating narratives that really connect with people.

Magdalene Arziki Bahago

Hi there! My name is Magdalene Arziki Bahago from Nigeria. I'm a Professional Writing (MA) student here at the University of Westminster. I'm a Content Creator, a Writer, and an Author of two published books. I do well with realistic fiction, as most of my writing inspirations come from

real-life experiences. I love to tell stories about events, places I have visited, and the culture of such places. I'm glad to have a spot in the *Wells Street Journal* publication.

Aniqah Bashir

Bashir is an artist in every sense of the word. Her poetry focuses on her lived experiences, art, culture, emotions, and language and has been previously published by *Thawra Mag*. She is heavily influenced by dreamscapes and music and the way they manipulate the mind, reflecting her as an individual.

Mia Bell

My name is Mia Bell. I'm a 14-year-old aspiring author in Raleigh, NC. When the pandemic hit, I decided I would write a thousand words a day. I've been writing (almost) every day since and have drafted several novels that I am currently in the process of editing. When I am not working on my novels, I fill notebooks with short stories. My dream is to make an impact on people through my writing.

Jenny Boulas

Hi! My name is Jenny Boulas, and I am a sophomore at Cardinal Gibbons High School. I found my passion for writing towards the end of my freshman year. Some of the things I love are playing the violin, especially at morning masses at school, and listening to music. I also love meeting new people and making new friends.

Toni Brennan

The author of a few obscure (in every sense) short stories and poems, currently writing a novel and masquerading as an academic, Toni Brennan (who can be reached at: red_robin_31@outlook.com) has a lifelong obsession with words and more interests (including various forays into music and the visual arts) than it is sane - or should even be legal! – to hold (*nihil humani a me alienum puto*).

Shane Chase

Shane Chase grew up in Southwest Florida, US and now lives and works in London, UK, where he received his BA in Creative Writing from the University of Westminster. He is interested in writing as an attempt to ask unending questions in language capacious enough to hold many voices at once. Shane has published poems in *new{words}press* and *Clepsydra Literary and Art Magazine*.

Nagma Chowdhary

“The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of it” is the manifesting mantra that Nagma follows as a passionate writer. Having been a filmmaker for five years, she has now become a writer trying to make her visions a reality.

Alexie Diakite

Alexie is an aspiring writer who enjoys writing children’s books and young adult fantasy novels. She strives to share immersive and diverse stories with children, hoping they will fall in love with stories as much as she did growing up.

Alexie holds a BA in Biology with a minor in Creative Writing from Hamilton College and a Master's Degree in Stem Cell Biology from Sorbonne Université.

Hélène Ezard

Hélène Ezard completed her MA in International Liaison and Communication at the University of Westminster. She enjoys writing novels, short stories, and poems.

Henrieta Galdunova

I would like to say that I'm just a person, just like anyone else. I want to pursue a future career in writing to fulfil my kiddo dreams. I always loved fantasy and fiction. However, I'm still open to any other type of writing. I try to get better at writing by doing it every day. For this piece, I'm sharing a part of my older work. Thank you.

Sierra Gruber

Hi! My name is Sierra Gruber. I'm a sophomore at Cardinal Gibbons High School in Raleigh, North Carolina. During Covid-19, I started writing short stories and poems, and my love for it has grown since then. Furthermore, I like hanging out with my friends, rock climbing, doing aerial silks, and playing with my dog.

Mya Guardino

Mya Guardino is a fiction writer enamored with the devastatingly beautiful experience of love. Inspired by its complexities, her stories encapsulate the various ways love

presents in our lives. From the warmth of friendship to the icy challenges of heartbreak - her stories are sure to pull at your heartstrings.

Sophie Harris

Sophie is a published author who also writes for screen and is currently writing her first novel. She takes her life experiences and the world around her to inspire her plots, characters, and themes. She enjoys spending her spare time with family, friends and indulging in her hobbies, as well as working on her new writing business venture.

Vruchi Harshad

Vruchi Desai published her first poetry book, entitled *The Art Of Drowning*, in the midst of her writing journey. She aspires to be an ascribed poet someday.

Nel Herche

Nel Herche is a writer from the U.S. and currently resides in London. She has an MS in Education and an MA in English Literature and is currently part of the MA Creative Writing program at the University of Westminster. Follow on [instagram.com/nelherche](https://www.instagram.com/nelherche) and read more at nelherche.com.

Ejikeme Igwe

Ejikeme is an author and creative fiction writer. Implausible is his first book, and his interest is mainly in these

genres: crime, historical fiction, historical fantasy, thrillers, and drama.

Sarah Kamil

Sarah Kamil likes cats and writing (and possibly writing about cats). She wants to write things that make people laugh and distract them from the worrying mess that is the world around them, and her dream is to write the next *Crazy Rich Asians*. She also has a crippling addiction to books and theatre.

Eleni Karelis

Hailing from the hills of Hazard, Kentucky, Eleni Karelis grew up with a fascination with the tradition of Appalachian storytelling. As a poet, she is particularly interested in the intersection of nature and the human body and the social power that poetry can hold. She received her BA with Honors in English at the University of Kentucky in May 2023 and is currently working towards her MA in Creative Writing at the University of Westminster in London, England.

Mel Kartal

Mel Kartal is a creative who loves loud music and visceral writing. They write as they feel. They feel as they write. To reach the hearts of others is their drive.

Effy Kousteni

Effy Kousteni is a postmodern writer with a passion for

creating stories representative of our culture, society, and political environment. Aside from writing, Effy is a devotee of vinyl records and backgammon, and can often be found at the airport running to catch her flight to Athens for another game.

Nupur Lakhe

Nupur is a writer with her nose buried in a book. She is a mum and a creature of the mundane. She enjoys book criticism and photography.

Eva Lynch-Comer

Eva Lynch-Comer is a pushcart prize nominated poet currently pursuing her MFA in creative writing at Hollins University. She is the author of the chapbook, *Sonder*, which she wrote during her residency with the “Writer by Bus” program in Roanoke, Virginia. You can find more of Eva’s work at www.evalynchcomer.com and on Instagram @evalynch321

Gabriella Marcus

Gabi Marcus is a sophomore in high school located in North Carolina, USA. She has been writing since she was a little girl, and it is now a steady hobby of hers that she would like to explore more and possibly pursue a career in. So far, she has had some of her works featured in school literary magazines and is a part of numerous writing-related organizations there as well.

Kiti Misha

Treader of the thin line where worlds collide - between fantasy and reality, past and present, light and dark. Writer and avid enthusiast of nature and mythology who hopes to give a voice to all the small creatures of the world that go unnoticed and unseen in modernity. An avid birdwatcher and occasional painter in a perennial quest to bring magic back to the world.

Amira Mohamed

I am Amira Mohamed, a postgraduate student currently studying MA in Professional Writing at the University of Westminster. I am also a content creator on TikTok with a platform focusing on hyper-feminine fashion and lifestyle. I have a background in Fashion Management and hope to combine my love of both fashion and writing to strive for a career in fashion journalism. I also enjoy writing creatively in my spare time and have a passion for Regency-era novels.

Despina Parthemos

Despina Parthemos is a practiced non-fiction writer with a passion for environmental and conservation journalism. She has written for fashion blogs and magazines, public shows and events, and non-profit platforms. Originally from New York, she relocated to London in hopes of finding new inspiration to experiment with different genres. She is currently pursuing her MA in Professional Writing.

Alina Pustai

I'm a student, passionate writer, wife, and 'mother' to my

little cockapoo, Jazzy. Writing has always been an escape for me, and since starting this course, I believe I have discovered more layers of my capabilities when it comes to sharing my thoughts on paper. Incorporating music in my writing became essential in expressing my vision. I want to create discussions and encourage people to look at life from a different perspective.

Jeya Keerthi Soundara Raja

Keerthi is a minimalist, a full-time writer, and a part-time doctor. Her debut book is a historical fiction titled *732 miles*. She is always available to have good philosophical discussions, and her favourite artists are Pradeep Kumar and A.R. Rahman!

Rebecca Richard

Rebecca Richard is a graduate student from Philadelphia! She loves writing and looks forward to sharing her future work with you.

Shelby Rodger

Shelby Rodger is an American writer from New Hampshire. She holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts in film and theatre from Syracuse University and previously lived in upstate New York for five years. She now lives in London, pursuing a master's degree in writing from the University of Westminster. In her spare time, she loves to read, cook delicious Greek food, play the piano (when there's one available), and go for long walks along the canal. Her favourite season is autumn, if you couldn't already tell.

Paula Stähler

Paula Stähler is a German writer living in London. With interests in politics, art, and love, her writing is often inspired by anger and tenderness. Previous publications can be found in *Honeyfire Literature Magazine* and *GoldDust Magazine*.

Imoh Uwem

Imoh Uwem is a Creative writer currently living in the House of Exile.

M. E. Wilson

M.E. Wilson lives in North Carolina, USA, with her parents and the feisty clan of deer that lives outside her home. She is a freshman at Cardinal Gibbons High School and has been working on creative writing since the 6th grade when COVID-19 inspired her to start expanding her horizons. Additionally, she is an avid musician, playing piano, percussion, and occasionally even the organ. She is so excited to share her work with you!

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