

C

In the haunting yet bewitching beauty of the night a lonely spirit roamed from star to star.

I

With each passing star, the spirit noticed the light which shone magnificently onto the earth below.

A

“Oh stars,” said the spirit. “What dazzling light you have. How sensational are your shimmering, shining rays!”

S

The stars shone brighter, glowing with delight at their own beauty.

O

“Please may I sit upon you so I can be seen by my family on earth?” asked the lonely spirit.

M

“Oh no!” exclaimed the dazzling stars. “You will cast a shadow on us,” and they all turned away. The man in the moon heard this cruel response and immediately propelled a lunar eclipse over the starry sky.

“Mr Moon,” pleaded the stars, “please shine. You are dimming our light; no-one can see our celestial beauty.”

“You may be beautiful,” said the moon, “however, your actions are ugly. Climb on to me, lonely spirit: I am bigger and brighter than them and so your family will see your light in their lives.” So the lonely spirit joined the man in the moon and the stars never shone as brightly again.

BENJI MORTON



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Heaven's Horizon

THOMAS MILNES
JUNIOR POETRY INTERHOUSE WINNER 2011-12



Screams, agonising death,
Blood streams across my torn rugged chest,
The doomed clutch of an emotion, shattered boy crying,
Bleeding tears, I crumble to pieces,
No longer a man, but a lost, puzzled child.

Roars, I remember, commands of great stress,
His voice trembling at the ruptured souls,
Begging, blubbering and broken,
Minds fade, no hope, frozen to the core,
I feel faint, collapse, the world swallows me whole.

Crooked, I shiver in pain, I moan.
But I am quickly silenced by a soft groan.
I glance slightly to my side.
Could it be?
The boy hit in the chest, wheezing, as he babbles to himself.
Lifeless, shady, grizzly and grey,
Sitting next to him, I mumble away,
"Eighteen" I grumble...
I hold my head, solemn, sorrow; this living hell is wrong, so wrong.

Day arrives, the boy died,
Lord thank you in his sleep,
I pray he rests?
Intact chest; lay, peaceful and painless,
Next to his mother's breast, in a heavenly bed.

Given the clear, I nod.
Life has changed; I no longer think the same,
With a solid tear trickling down my face, I turn away from the stench,
The suffering and polluted minds,
For why, why would he create such beautiful creatures, for them to have a fate, as
horrible as this,
I stagger away.

Silence, boat of a hundred men,
Whistle sounds, invisible shockwave, men duck, men dive,
Cowering, I tense up inside.
We are near shore, but that shock, has made men transform
From silent awkward figures to a tumbling mess.
Crookedly I smile in great relief
As we sail closer home, away from the guns.

So, my sons, don't ever admire or ask
What I did that day, in my dark lonely past,
For they say we must remember but I must forget,
The war and my brother, who took a bullet to the chest.

Voyages ALICE HYDE

JUNIOR POETRY INTERHOUSE RUNNER UP 2011-12

Standing on the shore,
Staring out to sea,
Boat on the horizon,
It's finally come for me.

Say farewell to my few friends,
Family's all gone
Already to the land
Beyond the Moon and Sun.

Set my things in order,
Give my money to the poor.
Put my diaries in a chest
buried deep beneath the floor.

Thousands of my memories
Inside a seaworn box,
I hope someone will find them
Beneath the brick and rocks.

To a picture in a frame,
I say a fond goodbye.
Kiss his frozen smiling lips
With one last heartfelt sigh.

Walk down to the stony beach;
The boat is nearly here,
Not one soul has come to say,
"Farewell to you, my dear."

The boat now drops its anchor,
A ladder unfurls down.
I muster up my courage
To smile and not to frown.

And as I board the vessel,
There a woman all in white
Holds out her arms towards me
And I step towards the light.

And finally, I do it,
What has featured in my fears,
To accept a final cold embrace
And not shed any tears.

Sweet angel and I set sail to
The land where all must come
Past foaming, shining, rolling spray
Beyond the Moon and Sun.

Standing on the shore,
Staring out to sea,
Boat on the horizon,
He's been waiting for me.

Thousands of my memories
Inside a seaworn box,
I hope someone will find them
Beneath the brick and rocks.



My Friend Mollie and Me

ISOBEL TAGG

JUNIOR POETRY INTERHOUSE RUNNER UP 2011-12



Our journey began when we were just three,
She was small and slight, not unlike me,
I liked her immediately and asked her to tea,
My new friend Mollie and me.

The bond grew stronger as the years ebbed away,
All day in the sun we would chatter and play,
Always at each other's houses we'd stay,
Are you sisters? People would say.

Then the fateful day came right out of the blue,
Tell me again Moll...it can't be true,
Mollie was leaving to live somewhere new,
In the middle of nowhere, somewhere near Crewe.

But we were going to sail and learn how to fly,
Without my dear Mollie I couldn't even try,
Days passed and the weeks dragged by,
When Mollie left school it made us both cry.

It's not the other side of the world my Mum said,
As she wiped away tears and tucked me in bed,
I want to see Mollie each day I would beg,
Alone, I am lost, round hole with square peg.

It won't be long now I'll see Moll quite soon,
When we're together we'll fly to the moon,
Eat pancakes, marshmallows, watch our favourite cartoon,
Lost in our friendship till late afternoon.

The journey continues, technology's so clever,
Keeps us in touch and keeps us together,
Distance no object, separated never,
Mollie and me, best friends for ever.

Beginning, Middle and End

SARAH ROCHE

INTERMEDIATE POETRY INTERHOUSE WINNER 2011-12

Her emerald eyes nervously open wider,
Fear, excitement, hope all shimmer through,
A desperate breath of air races up her body,
Then...a shriek of relief is sounded.
She is at the very beginning of her own adventure,
She is at the very beginning of her own journey,
She is at the very beginning of her own life.

She is climbing to the summit,
She has witnessed hundreds of new lives beginning,
Lives growing older, efforts and failure, efforts and success,
But she has witnessed even more lives ending:
She has witnessed two world wars,
Man's greatest sacrifice for country,
Country's greatest sacrifice for cowardice.

The last few months,
Vowels have been slipping,
Consonants stuttering.
She is trapped in her own body,
Unable to escape,
Thoughts as normal,
Speech non-existent.
Time isn't on her side,
The end of her journey is in sight.

Just days later,
The air isn't able to race up her body,
Her last words "Try and fail rather than not to try at all."
She has come to a sudden decline,
One missed step,
Fear, excitement, hope diminishing,
Her emerald eyes peacefully close,
Reaching the end of her journey.... of life.

The last few months,
Vowels have been slipping,
Consonants stuttering...



Traversing the Gulf

SOPHIE GOODWIN

INTERMEDIATE POETRY INTERHOUSE RUNNER UP 2011-12

6

The instrument of God;
I ferried Noah, and those of him,
All cleansed of sin and the same.
I carry a burden.

Savouring the bays engineered by
Sand on cliff in motion, only to
Shift and shun the thrashing tide.
I am north bound.

All and sundry bathed from thy waters.
But then they bought the upgrade.
What way or where was it meant to happen?
Is will to objects as to beings?

Here blues, there greens
Only, dancing, is small red
I wade victorious through lazy currents
To meet glacial new waters.

Red Cloak

TIM LONGSTAFF
SENIOR POETRY INTERHOUSE WINNER 2011-12

She bound upon the jaded ferns,
Where wolves, in woods of dreamers, creep,
And paths that stretch like darkness, yearn
To lose your way and quicken sleep.
She ventured on. Her red sail fluttering.

On seas of rose and ash she skipped,
Her pulse now rising like the heat,
Her cape a colour to match her lips.
Those lips; as crimson as raw meat.
She travelled on. Her red sail billowing.

So mother snorts so safe her child
And grandma lied so ill with grief
For there were none that did foresee
Of such big eyes, and such big teeth.
That ravishing glare, and such big teeth.

But I can wait.
And wonder and listen and ponder
And sharpen my grin
As the red cloak pulls towards my horizon.
For the safety of day has then blinded us all
And from dreamers clouds we fall.

On seas of rose and ash she skipped,
Her pulse now rising like the heat,
Her cape a colour to match her lips.
Those lips; as crimson as raw meat.



Boy TOBY LEBETER
SENIOR POETRY INTERHOUSE RUNNER UP 2011-12



Your eyelids flicker, your ears ring,
Only twice-cleaned whiteness welcomes you in,
Confused and constrained, you come in weeping,
It ends, and warm eyes watch you sleeping.

Stumbling through sunrise, you learn to bleat,
Resemblance of rhythm now rings from your feet,
In safe hands you are led up the line,
Up to the crossroads to read from the sign.

You climb ever upwards, your bag on your shoulder,
Your confidence crows and you grow ever bolder,
Your red words ring out and cold eyes come ablaze,
But the water descends and it soothes your burnt gaze.

You fly from the nest, your wings fully spread,
Strong shoulders supporting a strong-minded head,
Running rings round the world at your dizzying height,
Shone down on by still-higher glorious light.

Descending with grace, seeing grey at the edge,
A feather comes loose; you are past fully fledged,
Faint alarms start to ring but you push them away,
The sun shines on your back, there's still youth in the day.

You stumble to ground and the sun sinks further down,
Your eyes are struck blind beneath ashen-browed frown,
Young voices ring out, words you still understand,
Your panic subsides, and you steady your hand.

Contentment is crowned as you sit in your chair,
No matter who goes, the next always are there.
As your mind mulls over a thousand things,
Your eyes slowly shut, and the bright bell rings.

There is no such thing as a happy ending

ALICE HYDE

JUNIOR PROSE INTERHOUSE WINNER 2011-12

There is no such thing as a happy ending.

The first day of fourth-year. New school, new start. My granddad had just died providing my parents with the money to send me to a private school. I was scared. Just scared. I walked past all the grounds, the intimidating buildings, past the neatly pruned bushes and into the main teaching block.

I think I must have attracted funny looks from the students but I wasn't paying any attention to them. My concentration was focused on my hand clutching the fur of my old toy bunny inside my school bag, channelling all my worries into it. I stopped. I had reached my form room.

My hands slipped on the brass doorknob as I turned it. I walked in to the classroom to be greeted by a stony silence. Eleven heads swivelled in my direction – the seven girls all had their blonde and brown hair slicked back in a ponytail (I felt out of place with my dark hair hanging to my shoulders) while the five boys had a perfect side parting.

Only two kids differed. The two boys lounged in a corner on a table all by themselves. One was tall and lean with spiked blonde hair that was obviously bleached and a great cheesy smile. The other was shorter and stockier with long, dreadlocked flaxen hair and big blue eyes with long lashes that made him look almost female – he had a fiercely determined expression as he gestured to his friend, completely oblivious to my arrival.

I walked slowly over to them, ignoring the gazes that followed me around the room. The taller boy grinned as I approached and sat down, relinquishing the grip on my rabbit. The dreadlocked boy stopped talking and stared at me as the other greeted me. "Bonjour, Eponine. Je m'appelle Matthew Lionel Simmons and this is dear Alistair who was just explaining my sins to me."

Alistair sighed, "I prefer Turambar – you know the greatest hero in the history of Middle-Earth?"

I shook my head because I hadn't the faintest idea.

"Ah well... I apologise for Matt there – he is completely obsessed with 'Les Miserables' and loves nicknaming people after the characters."

I frowned. Eponine dies in 'Les Mis'.

Matt laughed. "Javert, Javert, you are so right."

I frowned again. Javert also dies in 'Les Mis'.

The teacher walked in at this point, cutting us all short by glaring at us all. However, as weeks went by, and then a term, Turambar, Matt and I became fast friends.

We spent every break and lunchtime together, sometimes playing and singing musicals in the music centre, sometimes listening to Turambar go on and on about how we will need two new Earths in 2050 and sometimes just sitting in the grounds chatting about our lives. At the weekend, we went camping and to shows and spent most of our time together. I grew to enjoy life at a private school and discovered that I could handle the work and the expectations.

It was beautiful.
A city with
twisting black
structures and
plants growing
everywhere met
my eyes. Spires
reached into the
bright blue sky.

One day, in the Easter holidays, we were sat together in my room when we heard a noise from outside. It was some of the girls from the local comprehensive, yelling at us, calling us 'Toffee-nosed' and much, much worse. Turambar got more and more worked up while Matt got more and more stuck up and snobbish and nearly pushed his head out of the window and yelled back until I grabbed him and made him stay put. Then we sensed it. Matt first, his mouth opening and closing and then Turambar started to shake, his dreads quivering and then I felt it. Like a wave of hot air and then being washed over with cold water... we all froze. Then we heard the screaming, the screaming of teenage girls but we couldn't move a muscle. It was like we were petrified.

The screaming stopped. We were released from our trance and we all quickly turned to the window. All that was left on the street outside were a few school bags, lying with their contents scattered across the ground at the foot of a tree. We all looked at each other in shock before turning back to the street. The bags were gone.

We didn't talk about it. I guess we were too scared and unsure if what we had seen was real. Posters went up around my town and the villages pleading for the return of the missing girls. We didn't come forward – how were we supposed to explain what we saw? More people started to disappear in our town and it spread to the neighbouring villages. My parents wouldn't let me go out without an adult present and the time I spent with Matt and Turambar became shorter and shorter.

So we snuck out and met in the park in the middle of our neighbourhood, completely disregarding the danger we were in. We were too cocky, thinking that none of us would be stolen away. We were sat on the round-a-bout looking at Matt's collection of show programmes when the feeling of being petrified came over me. This time, however, I fought it and it released me in time for me to see Matt being led as by an invisible force into the trees. I grabbed Turambar's hand and dragged him towards Matt as he shook his shaggy head and with it the petrified state. We ran towards Matt as he disappeared into a tree and we followed as the tree closed its ragged branches around us. Turambar let go of my hand as he surveyed the scenery surrounding us. Without his hand to hold onto, I grabbed my bunny and clutched it tightly as I looked around.

It was beautiful. A city with twisting black structures and plants growing everywhere met my eyes. Spires reached into the bright blue sky while birds flitted

high up in the treetops. However, it was deserted. No people of any sort, no one walking in the streets, no children playing in the gardens.

And then we heard it. The screaming. Matt.

Turambar sped towards the sound, scaling the walls of the nearby building and I followed as best as I could. There he was, on a chair made out of dead black branches, his face betraying his horror and fear to everyone that was so often hidden by his smiling mask. A little girl sat crying in the corner. I started towards her, trying to offer some help in this strange world. She opened her eyes. Dark eyes, too dark to be human. Matt cried out as she turned towards him. "It hurts! Oh god, it hurts!"

Overcoming my fears, I grabbed the child's shoulder. "What is going on? Why are you hurting him?" My eyes filled with tears at the thought of Matt – funny, wonderful Matt – in agony.

"I need friends! My people died as the trees were cut down and our city turned to black broken branches. I hid and survived. But I am alone!"

"What about the other people you took? Aren't they enough?"

"You die. In this world, you die too quickly. They all died after fifteen days. You cannot survive once you have touched this world. I need more friends!"

"You can't keep on taking my people, though. Think about it. You are only doing to my people what was done to yours." I hid my fear.

"But you did this to my people. You cut down the trees."

"Some of my people did. But not all of us. I didn't and my friends didn't. I'm sorry but that's the truth."

The girl bowed her head. "I'm sorry too but I'm so lonely."

She released Matt from his bonds and he stood up shakily. "Come back with us. Our world must be better than you being lonely. You can be my little sister. My parents will never find you in our house." He held out his hand and we walked back to our world, all together.

So we stopped the disappearances in the end. The girl, who we named Lilith, died after fifteen weeks in our world from pneumonia. So we never forgot about the curse and we worked out that the last few fragments of it would take us one by one to our graves. Matt was the first to die, fifteen years after our experience, when he was knocked down by a car in London after going to see his favourite 'Les Miserables' and died of internal haemorrhage. How Turambar and I mourned him. Fifteen years later, Turambar was killed in a freak storm whilst on an environmental march. I was left to cry for him alone. Tomorrow, fifteen years will have passed since Turambar's death and I know that my time is coming. Death is waiting for me around the next corner as it may be waiting for you, reader. There is no such thing as a happy ending – not ultimately. Our one certainly wasn't.

A Happy Ending? MOLLIE WATSON

JUNIOR PROSE INTERHOUSE RUNNER UP 2011-12

I was 6. Small and vulnerable, I did just what any 6 year old would do: break down. I still hear the taunting and bullying in my head. Even Judy had a hard time accepting what I had become. Once a best friend, then a distant memory fading away into the regret and blackness of guilt.

When I was 5, my father died. KIA. I didn't mind much because I never saw him often enough to care, but my mum, however, was broken hearted. When the big men dressed in navy uniform came to knock on the door, she was excited thinking that they had brought my father home. She soon realised they had come to tell her 'the news'. She loved my dad and never seemed to get over it. Every night, I saw her hunched over their wedding photo and her screaming and throwing things at the door telling me to get out. So my gran and granddad looked after me for a while. When I saw my mum again 9 months later, she was as big as a whale. She was pregnant. She was the whole time.

When I was 6 my mum gave birth to Aden, male, 21/4/1995, healthy and handsome. I had never seen my mum as happy, but that's just it. When my brother was 11 months old on the 20th of April, 1996 – the day before his 1st birthday – my mother could no longer bear the fact that Aden was the new male in the family and would carry on the last name whose previous owner had died with it. My mum couldn't cope. So like a fish out of water, my mother hung herself and that was that.

I was put into foster care with my little brother as my grandparents were now too old to look after 2 young kids. I guess my brain just flipped that night. I don't know why and I don't know how but it happened. There I was in my bed in a cold sweat hearing voices in my head that said things like 'liar', 'assassin', 'murderer'. I couldn't cope and started to moan and twitch, and during the day when people spoke quietly I always thought they were talking about me. In fact, they weren't. The doctors diagnosed me with schizophrenia when I was 9, a disorder that made me hear stuff in my head that wasn't exactly true. When I was diagnosed, my condition only became worse. I was separated from Aden and moved to a mental ward about 250 miles away. I have never felt worse in my life. My heart felt like it was going to jump out of my mouth and go running back to my brother. When I got to the mental hospital my eyes were puffy and swollen and my face was hot to the touch. I bet I looked like a beetroot. At this point, my life really couldn't get any worse, the hospital couldn't do anything to upset me any more, and they had already taken everything...

After 15 years of therapy, my speech had gone downhill, I would not talk to anyone but Judy, my nurse, and the rock that came out of the wall in the corner of my room. My condition was so severe that the person that came to deliver my food 3 times a day was nearly completely drenched in water and mushed up potato because the voices in my head told me that he wanted to hurt me and threatened

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to poison my potato (not like it was already poisonous enough). The fact is, no one could help me; no one wanted to help me. They had tried everyone in the country. Even the very expensive doctors that came from way off in America and places like that. I got to the point where I wouldn't eat and wouldn't talk. I just used to sit in a ball in the corner of the room staring at my rock. It was mind blowing for the people that were there that I was 31. I was alone, my brain still mushed with thoughts. I had managed to try and concentrate on the rock so much that all my brain could say to me was rock but my head soon got side tracked and the thoughts were draining through a sieve.

When suddenly, one day, I heard the clattering of keys and the mumbling of the warden officer that walked past the room every once in a while. This time, however, there was something else as well. The tone was much huskier and my spine tingled like a friend touching you on your arm lightly. This time there was a friendly feeling

This time there was something else as well. The tone was much huskier and my spine tingled like a friend touching you on your arm lightly... This time it felt like I had met him before.

in the air instead of the message my brain sent to my frontal lobe when the meal guy comes around. This time it felt like I had met him before. When he came to the gate he walked past and I thought he was just another visitor coming to check on our progress but they suddenly stopped, and the boy looked at me. I stared at him as I slowly turned my thin, ridged body around to face him. He looked about 20 and then I realised something, my lungs nearly shrivelled into prunes by the time I started breathing again, my heart rate was up, my head spinning fast and it all came down to the words that dribbled out of my mouth like a stream full of water. "Aden..."

Some people believe that there is no such thing as a happy ending, I don't believe this is true anymore. Aden and I now own a big hospital for people with mental disabilities like mine. Aden helped me for 5 years to get over my disability. I owe him thanks that I cannot express for the times where he wanted to give up on me, and he hasn't. The thing I will never forget is, maybe if your story doesn't have a very good start, that doesn't mean it won't have a bright ending.



A Moment ALICE NAYLOR

INTERMEDIATE PROSE INTERHOUSE WINNER 2011-12

Every summer night, I listen to the tweeting birdsong suddenly stop with the disappearing blood sky.

Dad was sat in the night, listening to calm stillness shifting from the eager chirps of day. I was pulled towards it too-it attracted me like mosquitos are to the moon. It was the place to be. I left the house, left mum and James goggling at flashing images, in the sweltering room. I walked down the garden refreshed with coolness, and saw dad emerge from the darkness, gazing into summer darkness- I knew his eyes were drooping. I sat down with him. We both understood that nothing needed to be said. We just sensed each other's presence.

Undisturbed.

We watched the tiny bats flicker and blur the shadows. Dancing a jerky story of beauty, they are shunned and trapped forever in dusk- they are the real birds of the sky. We both love them because they are outcasts and no one ever sees their glorious traces of shadowy branches or their synchronised zigzag zips into nothingness. It is our moment to relive. My eyes constantly dart, seeking out their shapes and camouflage; like us, they prefer not to be disturbed so we moulded into the shading shadows. Their fast wings cause the trees to shimmer like a heat wave. They are strong skeletal wisps, free to play and swoop, curving the night. That calm night is theirs every night; that's why the feared freak is the creature we both envy.

We watched the tiny bats flicker and blur the shadows. Dancing a jerky story of beauty, they are shunned and trapped forever in dusk – they are the real birds of the sky. We both love them because they are outcasts.

Dad envies them because they fly and he can only watch on – it's cruel really: his childhood dream job was to be a pilot but he was never allowed to do it. He's colour blind and failed the sight test. Maybe the most harsh and ironic thing is that bats don't even need their eyes to see. They see with their ears-we listened and the night was full of tiny reassuring squeaks. It is the background music of the quiet dusk.

I envy them because they are free; they are free from expectations, rules and lines. Never lines- always unbroken loops.

We continued watching; even though I was in shorts, I was not cold and had no desire to go back inside. We started talking about the bats-how they must have the perfect life. No worries, just the bright warmth and iridescent shades. No pressure to be something that they aren't, like the singing slave birds-chattering irrelevance- competing for my attention in the early morning. Bats just simply glide across summer peacefully, and then go without a fuss.

Even living in the bright black, they don't have a lonely life. They feel and listen to each other-like one body, one droning heartbeat. Their reflex movement grabs and tears the air, and the constant calling soothes them; they are never alone in the

unfamiliar changing black. We are the ones that are made to feel like the outsiders. Wondering...

Yet, sometimes it sounds like they are crying out; their black streaks do not glow like the fire flies or the shooting stars, but are suppressed by even more swallowing, consumed blackness. Anorexic and fragile, they appear to slowly die and disappear within darkness, crushed.

The night shrunk to a whimper.

A loud hedgehog snuffled out of the bushes. It sniffed in the warm air and clumsily scuttled out of the smothering leaves. Plodding and snuffling, it explored the new night. At once, the night inhaled a breath allowing my dad and I to hide in our chairs. Like spies, we silently observed the hopeless intruder pootle around its night. I wondered if it's stupid-my dad's foot was less than a metre from its sniffing nose and yet it was still clueless. Dizzy and drunken in the night. Curiously, it stumbled towards the sweaty stump that is my dad's foot...

My eye caught the icy screech of my dad shifting positions in the chair. Like the world's worst criminal, the hedgehog scampered back into the bushes, alarmed. We could hear him being 'subtle'-rustled leaves, snapping twigs and snuffling echoed out from the undergrowth as it made its way, trying hard not to make a sound.

And then the moment was lost forever, dissolved in the corners of night.

It was time to return inside.

Moments like these are where my dad is at peace. But I sense swaying regret and slumped sadness too, his eyes sagging like the exhausted trees too thirsty to sleep. I understand. He wishes he could haze into the darkness forever instead of just taking moments. Always desiring the things he can never have.

I wonder if bats lives are truly happy though-being part of a season, a catchphrase or a cliché of night. At least my life will curl and grow into different contours, whereas theirs is restricted to the air above my garden on cool summer evenings. In a memory.

And they don't hesitate- they just act out of instinct along the bows of night. Hesitations are what separate us from them. To hesitate is to consider and think, to evaluate- *If I go outside into the unknown night, the outcome will either be cracked like dried bark or an applaud of beating wings.* That is why they are trapped in the repetitive night, never considering, never moving on. Caught at the fall of the circle.

They are stuck between beginnings and ends of dusk. Never at the end.

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They said it would be the best experience of our lives

ISABEL PARKINSON

INTERMEDIATE PROSE INTERHOUSE RUNNER UP 2011-12

They said it would be the best experience of our lives. The ultimate happy ending for everyone. No more pain, no more ugliness, no more death. People would be shaped to fit society's rigid mould of the perfect citizen.

But you can't eradicate pain without losing joy forever. Beauty can't exist without ugliness. And you can't live without death.

* * *

It was December 31st, 2032. The day before it all happened. We were blind with excitement.

Scaffolding had been all over town for months, masking from us what was promised to be the most amazing transformation since the dawn of time. Old buildings were being bulldozed, with new and gleaming ones in their places. Trees all over the country were being uprooted to make way for genetically modified forests, designed to be green all year round, shielded against decay, and fireproof. Animals were being herded up in their thousands for top-of-the-range veterinary treatment, making them healthier, friendlier, prettier, and tastier than ever before. Clothes were going to be fashionable, fairly sourced, and affordable.

I couldn't wait to see our village transformed. It was a small village with squat stone cottages, homes that were once called characterful but were now outdated, environmentally unfriendly, and boring.

But it was the operation that we all craved the most.

A painless procedure, with flawless results. Complexions would be smooth. Noses could be straighter or smaller or turned up like a pixie. Eyes would be sharper and shinier and could be changed to one of a thousand colours. Everyone was to have the perfect figure, as defined by the Institution for Health and Wellbeing.

We'd been discussing our options for ages at school. I wanted long ringlets, brown, like my current colour, with hints of gold and ruby. My eyes were going to be sparkly blue, veined with emerald green and embellished with, so I'd heard, fragments of real diamond. I was going to be three inches taller, two shades more tanned, and a perfect size six. I was going to turn heads for the first time in my life. And it was going to happen in twenty-four hours.

I couldn't imagine a perfect world, where everyone wore a flawless smile, donned high quality clothes, and walked among nature that had been adjusted and tweaked to its most beautiful and beneficial state. But we'd see it tomorrow. The world was going to change in just one day.

* * *

This was it. The day of change.

It had been perfectly arranged - clinics had been set up all over the country to operate on people, and we'd all be beautiful by noon. Then, the world would drop its mask that had hidden the progress from us for so long, and our new lives would begin.

Soon, a smiling but flustered receptionist came over to show me to the operating room. With her too-large nose and laugh lines around her eyes, it was obvious to everyone that she hadn't been fixed yet.

The operating room was small but well-equipped, all the instruments carefully yet casually concealed. There was a white bed with a little table next to it, and a door that led off into a dressing room. I knew that my outfit was in there, waiting for the new pretty me.

I was told to strip off and cover myself with a paper-thin gown, then settle myself on the bed. The surgeon spoke cheerfully to me all the time, her hands adjusting my gown, setting up her equipment and, finally, lowering a tube towards my face and fading into blackness.

* * *

I felt strange when I woke up. I felt lighter, somehow, as though I'd lost some of myself. Every object seemed to glare a little more brightly, but I knew it was because of the anaesthetic.

The surgeon was cleaning things in the sink when I looked up. "Hello again," she greeted me. "How do you feel?"

"OK," I replied, but my voice sounded wrong. Too high, and weak, and with a hint of an accent.

"You look gorgeous," she told me. "Go through to the next room and take a look."

As I slid off the bed and padded across the tiled floor, it struck me how strange my steps felt. I could feel my body waver with every step, in a way that I knew was meant to be alluring but I'm sure didn't look it.

I entered the cramped room and put on my first pretty outfit, trying to muster the excitement I was sure that I would feel. I wanted to choose something to show off my new willowy figure, so I'd eventually gone for a pale pink, short, fitted dress with crystal embroidery around the hem and practically no back. I put it on quickly and shivered, although the building was heated to a perfect temperature.

There was no delaying it any longer. I had to look in the mirror.

So I looked. I looked and looked and looked.

What had I done to myself?

I was skinny - too skinny for my new height. My legs didn't meet in the middle anymore, and my ankle bones bulged through the skin. I had no hair on my legs

but I didn't have anything else either. No freckles, no scars from childhood. Everything looked plastic. And I looked ridiculous, wearing a summer dress on the first day of January. My figure was hideous - scary, almost, like I'd not eaten in months. My hips and chest had been exaggerated to give me my desired slender curves. But it looked wrong. I didn't match anymore. The dress hung awkwardly off me, as though desperate to run from the ugly spectacle it was so close to.

I could barely look at my face. The artificial cheekbones looked like lumps of clay stuck to my head. My eyes were wider, goggling earnestly at everything around me, with a glassy stare akin to that of a corpse. The glitter in my eyes made me look like a cheap children's toy, and the long lashes looked comical. The hair I'd wanted so badly looked false. It was disproportionately long, and the colours that I thought would be enchanting looked dull and mismatched. My mouth was petite and pouted and the teeth under it were whiter than the operating room. When I smiled, my skin didn't fold and nor did my cheeks plump. The grotesque doll-like eyes stayed firmly put too.

I'd just undergone the most advanced operation known to man. It's what prettiness was about - flawlessness and skinniness and artificial modification.

It was the end of the quest for beauty - we had finally found what people have been searching for for years.

* * *

"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen," called the woman at the front of our little crowd. We were clustered around a large white canvas cube, under which our new village was concealed. "Thank you for your patience. I hope that you have now fully recovered from your operations and are ready to enter your new world with a new face."

There was a murmur of assent.

Pressing a hand to her earpiece, the woman held up a hand for silence. "The moment has come. Allow me to present your new world!"

The canvas sheets dropped to the ground and the metal frames were slowly lowered to allow an uninterrupted view of the village beneath it.

A path, straight and narrow, led up to a cluster of glass, flanked by trees of uniform shapes. I walked up to them in wonder and I wasn't the only one. The leaves were all the exact same shape, and warm to the touch. There was no soft, smooth, tempting coolness, no morning dew, no raindrops.

I squinted to look at the vast, glass rectangles at the end of the road. They glared viciously in the sun, stunning in their precision but military in their stance. They weren't homes. One of the glass boxes might contain all my possessions but I'd never be at home here.

Was this truly the happy ending we had been chasing? Were we ever so blind, so obsessed with fairy tale perfection that we forgot where true beauty was found - in the imperfections, the quirks, the individuality? Was this where our futile pursuit of perfection had led us? To a world of perfect misery?

A Happy Ending GEORGIA MATTISON

INTERMEDIATE PROSE INTERHOUSE RUNNER UP 2011-12

Dark, dust and death surround the place. No atmosphere. The smell of unclean cups, bowls and toilets fill my senses. Not even vermin could stand this smell. Unless you possess a memory as good as an elephant, you would never succeed in your journey to another room-you would be lost. The dirt, grime and filth cling to my eyes for the slightest bit of clean air. I'm blind. The house steals your senses-incapable to live without. The only way you could possibly find a safe path to other room would be by sound. The dreary, repetitive, monotonous noise came from the heart machine. You could hear the occasional laugh from the television audience which was kept on throughout the day. The room mounted with monstrous molecules of muck and junk desiring the tiniest droplet of clean air was the room that surrounded Ernie. Closed off from the world. A prison.

His eyes drown in a sea of tiredness from the harsh waves of life- smashed against them from every angle. Too many waves for one lifetime. The hope had been washed away. No hope. No faith. No twinkle in the eye that he once had as a dashing and confident young man. His face had imprints of his past: the laugh lines he had once made and the harsh, tattooed frown he must have formed young. His cheeks sagged sinking from the enormous pressure of problems. His hair used to be as slick as a fox, combed back to impress the ladies he may have come across on various nights -which would be quite a few if Ernie had anything to do with it.

It isn't just his appearance that has eroded but his attitude as well. In his early days, every Saturday night was lad's night out- down to the town hall for the usual dance. He was the man the girls just happened to 'bump' into, and he definitely knew it. He turned up in his most expensive suit, his best, shiny, black shoes-only worn on special occasions! He walked in. Silence. Every single person turned to look, even the guys wishing they could only be like him, with his dreamy blue eyes that sent girls on a voyage of love, his astounding physique and of course his magnetic force of attraction to women. Just to be talked to by Ernie was a God given gift. Of course he wasn't just a handsome face, he worked hard at school, wanting to achieve good, secure grades which would enable him to get a decent job to support his future family. He always wanted kids. He found their world exciting and stress-free. No money needed, no work needed. Just play. Simple. This is the place he met sweet Mary. The love of his life. She had obviously noticed Ernie-who hadn't? You must have been blind not to. However, like Ernie, she wanted to concentrate on her school work and had the opinion that boys weren't important at this moment in time, too much of a distraction. Little did she know that she was about to start something that would create a beautiful family and marriage.

His face had imprints of his past: the laugh lines he had once made and the harsh, tattooed frown he must have formed young.

Previously, they had seen each other in the hall, exchanged a smile and that was that. It wasn't until a Saturday night dance that they exchanged words. Everyone

was dancing-except Mary. She usually did a bit of dancing and she did enjoy it but as beautiful and kind hearted as she was, no young gentlemen asked her to dance. She didn't know many young men as she was so focussed in class. Ernie saw her from across the room, watching everyone dance. He could see she was tapping her foot very rhythmically but subtly to the upbeat tempo of the tune. This was his chance to talk to her-if he could pluck up the courage to ask her to dance. He wasn't normally nervous, as you know...but there was something about Mary that made his words come out like alphabet soup. Just looking over at her made his knees weak. He just wanted to whisk her up and dance until the sun rose. He started to walk over, rehearsing what he was going to say to her in his head as he knew if he wasn't prepared he would just stand there looking at her like one of Da Vinci's paintings. He had reached his glorious destination of standing in front Mary-but no words came out! They just smiled at each other, both as smitten as one another.

"Urrmmm. Hello... Ernie I am."

Mary giggled. "Hi, Mary I am." They both laughed.

Most people recover in their own way after a couple of years. They learn to live with the thought that their loved ones are at peace. It's a different story for Ernie. He repeats and repeats this story every single day.

Ernie went a bit red. "Sorry, I meant... I'm Ernie. I was wondering...if you would give me the honour of letting me dance with you." And so it began. The romance of the decade. Later marrying with kids.

Now, he was so depressed, not even Peter Kay could cheer him up- but everyone knew why... About forty years into their marriage things took a turn for the worst. Mary had been taken ill. Not serious at first, but later... Mary had been rushed in to hospital after only a week of severe chest pains, feeling weak and suffering from extreme weight loss. Ernie insisted that she went-thinking it would only resort to resting for a couple of days- a week maximum. He couldn't have imagined the heartbreak and disaster it brought him and his family. She was in and out of hospital for what felt like decades. He could only wish it was decades just to have her by his side. He couldn't survive without her. She was his life-his oxygen. She was soon diagnosed with a violent, vicious, vindictive cancer of the heart which broke Ernie's heart. She died after a 3 year pounding battle. Ernie...

Most people recover in their own way after a couple of years. Remembering the good times and forgetting the bad. They learn to live with the thought that their loved ones are at peace. It's a different story for Ernie. He repeats and repeats this story every single day. Wishing he could just only remember the good time and block out the bad. He never could. He never recovered. His family eventually did come to terms with their tragic loss but because of Ernie's denial and depression, they drifted apart. They loved each other but their dad was the reminder of the bad times of pain and suffering.

This is Ernie now: depressed, dark, down and lonely-angry at the world for snatching his beloved Mary. He sits in that room staring into space remembering every stage of his life with her- from their first words to their last. Mentally, he was

suffering more than Mary did. He would hum their favourite song and pretend to dance around the room with her. He'd dream about her, wake up calling out for her. He even kept her stuff in the same, exact position that she left it in: her imprint in the bed, her sterling silver hairbrush in the place she had last brushed her long, soft, brown hair and her clothes left hung in her closet. These are the things that reminded him of her- he can't get away- trapped.

The stress took a strenuous toll on Ernie's heart and the strain caused massive heart problems. He took Digoxin to help cope with it. It was the only fresh air he got these days, collecting his medication from the chemist every Monday, who supplied him with enough for the entire week. This is how he did it. Discovered on the 14th of February. Cause of death: overdose. He couldn't do it any longer. A part of him was missing, the part he couldn't live without. When she died, so did he. Ernie lost all reason to live. To me and you, this isn't a happy ending. We are afraid of death; we want to live forever- experiencing different things. I want to go places, meet people and see everything. He didn't. All he wanted was to be with his darling, his Juliet, his one true love. By dying, he gets to meet her again, hold her hand and see her. This is his happy ending.



Dismissed with a frustrated sigh

TOBY LEBETER

SENIOR PROSE INTERHOUSE WINNER 2011-12

Dismissed with a frustrated sigh, the paper ball arced through the air. Bouncing weakly off the wall, it dropped, rolling down the pyramid-like mound of paper already in the bin and falling to the floor where it came to rest, consigned to irrelevance.

Running a hand through his greying hair as he gazed at the small monument to inadequacy he had constructed over the past few days, the man sighed again. For weeks he had confined himself to his study, brief trips to the bathroom and kitchen the only respite from the work that lay before him. The story was to be his finest – the epitome of his writing skills, concentrated into a few short pages. The narrative was simple, the metaphors accessible, the language far removed from the pretentious, flowery exercises in thesaurus usage that had made up his earlier work. It was, in his mind, the pure essence of his literary ability: a testament to his craftsmanship, the mark he would leave on the world. And yet, for all of his good intentions, an ending eluded him.

He knew what happened at the end, of course. Several sheets of paper stuck to the wall in front of him charted the flow of his story, outlining every moment. In the early days of his writing career the wall had been covered with innumerable such sheets, a swollen river of thoughts and ideas, the narrative spilling over the banks and surging into various subplots, cliff-hangers and twists. For years he had laboured under the delusion that in order for a story to be good it had to require several cups of coffee and a copy of the Oxford English Dictionary to fully appreciate, but no longer. The sheets pinned aloft before him represented not his usual haphazard, impulsive writing style. Instead, they showed a precise, measured stream of events and ideas, the arc of the story – smooth, disciplined and heading inexorably towards the conclusion. However, mere moments before he could hammer his message home, an unfamiliar enemy had appeared. Having left him untroubled for years, writer's block had suddenly made an appearance at the climax of his career, throwing up a wall that the regular, measured waves of his writing crashed against ineffectually. He knew what to write, but not how to write it.

A cool rush of air brushed against his face. He looked to his right, and saw that his window had fallen open. A breeze was buffeting it, making it swing on its hinges towards the window frame but without enough force to close it. He stood up and walked across the room to close it. As he reached for the handle, he breathed in a familiar scent. He sniffed a couple of times, trying to identify it. It was a warm, pleasing aroma that had a subtle strength about it. Looking out of the window, he

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As a young,
budding writer
he had often sat
on the bench
whilst thinking
up new stories.
Perhaps sitting
on it again after
so many years
would provide
him with a
sudden burst of
inspiration.

noticed his neighbour mowing the lawn. He blinked. It was the smell of cut grass. He stared blankly at his neighbour and let out a short, astonished breath. He had forgotten the smell of cut grass. He could not remember the last time he had gone outside. He peered out of the window at the sky. The sun was sinking towards the horizon, nothing but a thin bank of clouds in the distance between it and its destination. He looked at his watch. It was eight o'clock. Another day had swept by, completely unnoticed. Leaving the window open, he turned and left the room.

The grass had grown wild and uneven, brushing against his bare feet as he walked through the garden. Pushing his hands into the pockets of his jeans, he walked aimlessly. A robin flew overhead, making him crane his neck to watch it. Its flight was beautifully disciplined, flapping its wings in short bursts before letting its momentum carry it forward, waiting until the moment it began to fall to propel itself forwards and upwards again with another burst of its wings. The man gazed at it as it flew across his neighbourhood, mesmerised by the perfectly regular peaks and troughs of its flight. As he watched, the robin lifted into the air one last time before

disappearing into a tree. He did not see where it landed. Turning away, he looked across his neglected garden. His eye was caught by an old, white wooden bench set against the fence at the far end of the garden. As a young, budding writer he had often sat on the bench whilst thinking up new stories. Perhaps sitting on it again after so many years would provide him with a sudden burst of inspiration. He began walking towards it.

The grass was damp beneath his feet, the cool softness a welcome change from the hard, unforgiving floorboards and dry, lifeless carpet of his house. The sun, descending determinedly upon the horizon, bathed the garden in soothing golden light, gently warming the man's face to counter the slight chill in the air. A wind chime that he had been meaning to take down for weeks to stop it distracting him from his writing rang pleasantly, accompanied by the gentle babbling of a small stream that ran through his garden. His neighbour had stopped mowing his lawn. There was silence but for the wind chimes and water. Rather than head for the bench, the man walked around the garden twice more, breathing deeply, inhaling the fresh air and stretching, a month's-worth of aches being lifted from his body by the cool evening breeze. He at last began to walk towards the bench with a relaxed, easy energy in his steps that had not been present before. He sat down.

Droplets of water sat on the chipped, white-painted surface of the bench, presumably from a rain shower that he had not noticed as he toiled indoors. They were absorbed into his jeans, making the denim cling to him uncomfortably. The bench was under a tree, which in earlier years had shaded him somewhat from the harsh midday sun under which he had typically worked. The sun's position, however, now meant that he was entirely sheltered from its rays, making him unpleasantly cold. The bench creaked noisily at the slightest movement, ruining his concentration as he tried to take advantage of his newfound relaxed state to do

some thinking on the ending of his story. He sighed irritably. Though he had never been one to enjoy exercise, he had enjoyed the walk to the bench more than he was enjoying actually sitting on it.

He blinked. He had enjoyed the walk to the bench more than he was enjoying sitting on it. He had enjoyed the journey more than the destination. He reached under the bench, and smiled as he felt the soft rustle of a plastic bag. Years ago, he had taken to leaving a few sheets of paper and a pen in a plastic bag under the bench in case he was struck by any sudden epiphanies while out in the garden. It was a pretentious gesture that he had only done so that he could tell his friends about it in order to appear a spontaneous genius, and he had never written anything. Now, however, the gesture would finally serve a purpose. Scrawling in the margin to make the ink flow from the pen, he thought. *The ending is unimportant.* The bench creaked. He stood up and began walking around the garden again. *The destination is simply an excuse to begin the journey.* He sank to the ground, sitting cross-legged on the grass. Ink finally began to stream from the cold, unused pen. He did not notice. *The journey is an ending of its own. The reader will take what they want from the story.* He stared at the page. *The ending only serves as a conclusion to the journey. The journey is the key.* The wall came crashing down. The waves swept through. Smiling, the man began to write.

A Happy Ending

CISSY LIAO
SENIOR PROSE INTERHOUSE RUNNER UP 2011-12

Section 1

'Finally, I am here,' Mr Haines thought.

'Good morning, Mr Haines, welcome to Westwood Hospice.' A young lady stood behind the reception, and with a quick check on the computer, passed through some papers with her long, pale fingers. 'Please fill in these forms for me and someone will take you to your room.'

A few minutes later, Mr Haines was in his room, after passing through a small garden and a long, dark corridor. 'This room should be fine for me,' he thought.

With nothing to do at that moment, he started to read the leaflet of the hospice. '*Every man deserves a happy ending*', it said on the cover.

This was the reason why Mr Haines was here.

"Happy families are all alike.' I very much agree with this, but now it seems every unhappy man is unhappy in the same way,' Mr Haines muttered.

He was a man just as normal as you and me. He read but did not have the time to think, he tried to write something and wish it could be as great and immortal as the works of the Tolstoy one day but the stories were always left in his notebook messy and uncompleted. The only story that he wrote is his unsuccessful life, which was normal and even too boring to refer.

'*We offer a good range of choices, which you can choose from depend on your personal preference and physical situation,*' he continued to read from the leaflet. '*Many examples gave sufficient evidence that our methods are scientifically outstanding and extremely satisfied. We are happy to help our patients. With us death will be painless and peaceful.*'

'I guess they are doing quite well now as a business.' Mr Haines felt this was funny. He hadn't taken any thing as funny for a long time.

'Excuse me.' With a gentle knock on the door, a young lady came in.

Section 2

'Nice to meet you, I'm Miss. Jones, call me Kelly if you like.' The lady spoke in a very mild voice, like a breeze in the summer. The sunlight shone through the window, fell on her white, well-ironed dress. 'I am your personal adviser in the next few weeks, including arranging your physical examinations and going through any legal process. If you have any problems I will be available 24 hours a day.'

'It's a pleasure to meet you. Is there anything I need to do so far?'

'Not really. As you already signed the contract before your arrival, you can discuss and choose the date for...'

'The operation?'

'Yes, to do the operation. I hope you enjoy your stay here since that's what we really care about. Now I shall leave you alone to have a rest or you can just walk around the house.'

'Thank you very much, Miss Jones. I'll see you later.'

After the young lady left, Mr Haines had his first sleep in his new bed. It was a better one than usual, he didn't awake half of the dream or stay awake sentimentally. It seems this place suited him really well.

It was early in the morning when Mr Haines woke up. He decided to look around the house which might be the place he would stay for the last days of his life.

He saw people like him who stayed here and were waiting for the operation. They were not very talkative but friendly. He had some short chats with an old lady who lost her family in an accident and a man who was even younger than him. Mr Haines could not remember all this stories.

He stopped at the wall which had hundreds of photographs hang on it.

'Hello, Mr Haines. I hope you had a good rest.' It was Miss Jones. She came to house and started work very early every day.

'Yes, I did. Thank you.'

'They are really nice photos, aren't they?'

'Yes, they are, but what are they for?'

He saw photos of people's faces. They were all smiles, full of hopes, calmness and happiness.

'These were took on the day of operations. So, these might be their last photos.'

'Well, I guess they all had a happy ending.'

'I really hope so, we are really glad of what we can do to help. Now I need to give your information to the doctors now, see you around.'

'Yes, see you later, Miss. Jones.'

Section 3

It was a mild night. Mr Haines was waiting on the table. He had invited his personal adviser to a dinner.

There were not many people in the restaurant now. He started to think about what had happened these days. It had been a few weeks already since he first came to Westwood Hospice. He didn't tell any of his friends about his decision. He didn't want to answer too many questions or listen to any kind of encouragement. He decided to leave quietly as he always did. But the decision might be changed.

A few minutes later, Miss Jones came.

'Take a seat please.' Mr Haines stopped his mind wandering.

As they had dinner, they started to talk about the hospice.

'So, why do you choose to work here, Kelly if you don't mind?'

'Oh yes. Many friends asked me this before. I understand that it is weird that a young woman works in a house which lived people who are not happy about their lives and want to finish it through operations. I'm sorry if this offends you.'

'Don't worry, carry on if you wish.'

'Well, for me it's a pleasure actually. Death to me is a different form of life. If people are desperate about what they are experiencing, there is always a chance to enter the next step. So the reason is simple, I would like to be the one to help them to complete this step.'

'Yes, the next step, what a bright answer. You are different from many others. There is no wonder why your friends can't understand.'

The dinner went on in a very good atmosphere, between an energetic lady and a man who was waiting for his happy ending.

Miss Jones didn't know Mr Haines had something to tell, which was the reason of this dinner.

Last night, Mr Haines was in his room and lay on his bed. Since he had been here, he felt something has changed.

It was because of Miss Jones.

He still remembered the first time he saw her. She came in his room with a beautiful smell, it was a smell of youth, kindness and hope. She was not one of those pretty girls but everything on her was mild and gentle, it comforted him like the river in the spring and like the river in the spring it flowed into his heart.

'Yes, I need to talk to her, I do need...'

It was one of the few times in his life he felt he made a decision which meant something to his life.

'Kelly, I think I'm changing my mind.'

'About what?'

'I...I may not take the operation.'

'Oh, it's good news! What is the reason?'

'It is....It is you.'

'Me?'

'I know it sounds silly, but when I am with you, I feel I'm a different man. I start to look at the good side of life, I smile more than before, and I find hope. I know it's seems impossible to ask you as a man like me, but I don't want the operation anymore, I want to start a new life with... you.'

Miss Jones' eyes were full of stockiness, her face turned red. 'I...I will at least try, which ever step you take, I will try to be there.'

It was a mild night.

Final

Everyone in the hospice was outside the house. There was a buffet in the garden for Mr Haines. He was leaving soon, with his lovely lady, which would hopefully soon become Mrs Haines. The Head of the House came and gave his talk.

'What a lovely day, what a lovely couple. We have a man, full of hope, ready to walk out of this house. The only sad thing is I lost business.' People started to laugh.

'But who cares now, let's raise the glass for Mr Haines and our lovely angel, Miss Jones.' Mr Haines swallowed the wine; it couldn't taste better.

'Let me take a photo of you two.' The photographer came. All the photos on the wall were his work. Mr Haines gave a big smile. He felt he had prepared for a new life.

The sun was shining. He felt a little dizzy.

'Maybe it is too hot outside, I feel a little bit sick.'

'Just have a short break in your room, love. I will be there soon and see if anything need to be packed up.' Miss Jones' voice was always gentle like a blowing breeze.

Mr Haines went back to his room. He felt happy that it might be the last time he slept in this bed.

Yes. He was correct.

A few days later, a new photo was added on the wall.

'Well done, Kelly. Just as good as before. Thank you for what you did. I think we've done all we can do to help him,' said the head of house.

Miss Jones stared at the photo. It was hard to find any emotion on her face. 'You are welcome, head. I've just done my job as normal.'

If one day you have the chance to go to the hospice, you will see a photo of a man with a lovely smile, whose eyes were full of happiness and hope. Or maybe you might not see him simply because there were hundreds of photos on the wall.

They all had sad stories, but the stories all had happy endings.

Prince Masprutin and the Wrath of Giant Death

JACK LAND

In the kingdom of Bamnos, nobody respected their king, King Agreas, so he came up with a cunning plan. Wind was the thing that could scare them into obeying him, scarier than the gorgon Medusa. So he found the legendary Windbird. He caged it in a ghastly, glimmering jewel. The God, Pluto, gave it the power of enlisting mythical creatures into his command. King Agreas thought that the strongest, sourest, scariest mythical creature of them all was a giant. So, when Adynemnius, the giant, was sleeping, the evil king shouted, "Wind, o mighty wind, make this enormous beast obey my every command! Give it wind, give it strength, give it evil!" Then, a hypnotising hurricane blew at Adynemnius, the giant woke up and let out a death defying "ROOOOAARR!". He headed for the kingdom of Archimes, ripped out trees, stamped on houses, and Adynemnius soon became known as Giant Death.

Meanwhile, at the castle of King Depocalypse in Archimes, Prince Masprutin was remembering an epic battle with a mighty dragon whose breath was more fiery than lava. He had won that beastly battle by beheading that fire breathing monster.

"Giant Death has destroyed our crops again!" gasped a breathless messenger.

"Our kingdom is under threat, father," said the prince.

"Our army is helpless against him," sighed the king. "Adynemnius was ruthless to start with, but now King Agreas has made him even worse by putting him under his spell! He captured the Windbird to give him magical powers. The legendary creature is now trapped inside a jewel which King Agreas has hidden inside the Totem Pole of Destiny in his kingdom, Bamnos. Now Agreas is demanding sacrifices to feed his hungry volcano to stop it from erupting and smothering his evil kingdom!"

"Then I shall rid our land, father, of this beast who disturbs our peace, as I did when I defeated the dragon," said the prince.

"If you free the Windbird," said the king, "it will give you powers and maybe the Gods will help you on the way."

Later, the prince set off on his journey to defeat the threatening deeds of Giant Death and end the sinister magic of King Agreas. He needed to get to the Totem Pole of Destiny, but first he had to get to Fevernemnus Forest on the ridge of Bamnos. Prince Masprutin was in deep dismay when he saw that Giant Death had stamped on the only bridge into the forest. "Gods, I need your help!" called the prince to the Gods. Aphrodite heard the prince's call.

"So handsome, so brave, I think he really deserves it," said Aphrodite. She sent an eagle with a magic sword in his clawed feet. The eagle swooped down and dropped

"So handsome, so brave, I think he really deserves it," said Aphrodite. She sent an eagle with a magic sword in his clawed feet.

the sword into Prince Masprutin's hands. He saw two symbols for fire and ice and he blasted a snake-like trail of ice over the two cliffs to make a bridge. He crawled over it so the ice wouldn't collapse.

Into the Fevernemnus Forest he went. But there was something blocking the young hero's path: a Water Wolf. One bite from that deadly beast and it could turn his heart into water and he would fall down dead! It chased him all the way through the freaky, frightening, fearsome forest until finally the prince, with a blast of fire from his mighty sword, evaporated the liquified beast.

He could see it! He could see it now! In the distance, just behind the castle of Bamnos, the Totem Pole of Destiny! He was just about to head for it when a monstrous three-headed figure stopped him in his tracks. King Agreas had sent the serpent known as the Hydra! The fiend! The hydra lunged and hissed at the prince, shooting out venom like an acid rainstorm. Masprutin protected himself by using his magic sword to make a wall of ice. "Gods, I need the help from you once again!" called the prince. Suddenly, his boots transformed into Hermes' winged sandals and he flew up to the Hydra's three heads and blasted fire at their necks until they melted into a gory pool of venom and blood.

The fearless prince along with his trusty steed rode along as fast as they could to the Totem Pole of Destiny. When he got there he saw King Agreas in front of it. "You puny little boy!" said Agreas threateningly. "I still have the Windbird in my control!"

It chased him all the way through the freaky, frightening, fearsome forest until finally the prince, with a blast of fire from his mighty sword, evaporated the liquified beast.

"Not for long, you villain!" replied Prince Masprutin as he charged at the totem pole with his magic sword and split it in two. As the blade tore through the pole the jewel cracked and the Windbird escaped from his ghastly prison.

"Freedom!" whispered the Windbird and circled around Agreas creating a huge tornado which caught the evil king.

"TRAITOR!" yelled Agreas. He was spun and twisted until suddenly the two halves of the broken jewel clamped back together around him and he was in his newfound prison.

The Windbird said to the prince, "You are going to be granted mighty breath for freeing me. Your lungs will have the power of the wind. Now save your people from Giant Death. Hurry before it is too late!"

Prince Masprutin rushed to the volcano where he saw Giant Death just about to fling his sacrifices into the lava pit. "Stop! You must not harm my people!" shouted the prince.

"You woke me up!" shouted the Giant. "Prepare for my wrath!" The giant punched his fist into the ground: the earth shattered and the rumble sounded like a thunderstorm. The prince breathed air into his lungs and he exhaled out the power of the wind. The giant was knocked into the volcano and he sank into its fiery mouth. The prince gave a cry of success: the kingdom of Archimes was safe.

She's on the run GEORGIA WHELAN

Her lips are red as roses, her hair black as night, she glides gracefully through the shadows silently. The ink of her windswept hair spills across her sharp features and slender neck. The thick luscious locks tangle to form a never ending spiral cascading down her silk clad back. Her tattered emerald dress drifts dreamily as she daintily dances through the night.

She stops.

She whips round; her beautiful blood-red eyes search frantically through each nook and cranny. Her plump parted lips move, as if she's whispering to herself.

She starts her dangerous dance again, jumping onto cracking, crumbling walls and scurrying up towards the dark sky. Her movements are magical. She never slips, never trips. As she cuts through the air, all is deadly silent. Then she lands. The only sounds are the pitter patter of her footsteps and the graceful swooshing of her worn dress.

Her eyes are hardened in concentration, her brow furrowed, creasing the perfect pale porcelain of her fragile skin. Her lips are pursed as she takes one final step. She launches through the air, straight across the large gap of the old buildings.

Her muscles are tense and bulging as she crouches down and stares at the city, its colours bleached from the moonlight. She searches for a better life, knowing that she can never have one. She doesn't stop long – she can't: she's on the run.

MAGGIE BINZI **The Trenches**

Frightened. Scared. I sat terrified as the rain pounded down on my helmet, keeping me awake but barely alert. I was so tired, I hadn't slept for days and my senses were failing me by the second. I felt like hell. I looked like hell. I smelt like hell. Jumping at every noise but the silence... The silence was so much worse. Not knowing what would happen next, muscles tensing, heart thumping.

The sludge clung to me tightly and dragged me down; at times I even felt like giving in, and letting it pull me down and smother me. The slimy gunge slithered down the inside of my boot sending a horrible shiver down my spine. As I marched, I could feel it squelching my toes, creating a thick, gooey barrier between my foot and the sole of my shoe.

I felt sick! The stench was almost unbearable. I was trapped, stuck with it, there was no escaping it! Petrified. All around me: men vomiting, crying, praying, longing to be freed from this misery.

Rapidly losing will power, I stared at the picture of my wife and children. My eyes filled with unstoppable tears as I craved their warm embrace. It was torture! Not being able to hear their sweet, angelic voices, missing their upbringing. The war, so depressing. I hoped I would never face anything like this again.

Great Great Uncle Tom SOPHIE EMMS

Great Great Uncle Tom was a man who was always smiling. An old man, you would have thought he was ten years, the way he hopped onto the Dumbo ride, with me, aged 92. Every time I saw him, his wrinkles creased into a smile like the sun, dazzling and bright. He was generous, warm and slightly eccentric. Fit for his age and rather energetic, he led an interesting life and had seen both world wars. It was a pleasure to know him. He was a glittering star, in my life. Shiny, smiling eyes like faded jewels and wrinkles deep like crevices. Smart, sleek, smooth grey hair and sun bleached skin. He was a king. He had a regal bearing about him, and the two greats only added to this. His hands were giants, compared to mine, and his heart was even bigger, filled with love for everyone. My Uncle Tom.

My Mind is an Enclosed Cell

BENJI MORTON

My mind is an enclosed cell,
Full of angry prisoners desperate for release,
But unfit for parole,
Life means life.

I dream of freedom,
And desires beyond these walls,
But happiness evades me,
Life means death

My Granddad MATTHEW STRUTT

I walked through the back door of his bungalow and he was standing there in the kitchen, smoking his pipe. He wore a plush purple pure velvet shirt with large gold buttons. The buttons looked so heavy it must have taken two men to hold them in place whilst the tailor sowed them on. He has no hair on the top of his head, but he has fluffy marshmallow clouds of hair around the sides. He had retired from motor racing in 1983 after winning the British Grand Prix held at Silverstone and winning the driver's championship. The thing I like most about my Granddad though is he always has the biggest, fattest, most banana-like grin I have ever seen.

The Chase

SAM DENNISON

Birds flee as darkness falls on the collapsing canopy of autumn. The moon rises in the still, starless sky. Gnarled roots grasp across the leaf stricken floor. The smell of rotten leaves is carried by a gentle breeze as the freshly fallen leaves float gently upon it. Odd patches of moist, dark dirt show through the dying leaves with small shoots of green struggling for life, searching for the lost sun. The trees tower above blocking all but the empty sky. The same sights continue forever; escape is blocked in this endless maze. The cracked, creaking, bare branches reach downwards obscuring vision.

Out of the darkness, a figure suddenly emerges. Running. Stumbling across coiled, concealed, ragged roots. Leaves fly skyward, coating his face with dirt. Branches grasp at his petrified face and arms, leaving crimson streaks where he escaped from their grip. Beads of sweat form upon his burning brow and quickly transform into gentle rivers trickling down his face and stinging his eyes. The dirt causes his dark blue jeans to fade to a dirty brown. His shirt is wet from sweat. His head constantly darts from side to side, trying to catch a glimpse of who or what is chasing him.

He sees it.

Chasing after the first, another man, dressed in a cloak the colours of darkness. A crazed look covers his face when it emerges from the shadow of his hood as he runs violently towards the first man. The beams of light from the moon reveal a shining object concealed inside the dark flowing cape.

The first man, panic-stricken, tries to run faster. His legs burn from the effort and the cuts that he had received from the tangled brambles that are strewn across the wood's never-ending floor. His panting breath is as unstoppable as the autumn wind. His face turns as red as the blood that flows from his tiring body. He turns his head constantly, flashing between the trees in front and his manic pursuer.

The pursuer sprints, gaining, with every long stamping stride; his steps never falter. His hood falls back with the speed of his running to reveal his pale white face, his red evil staring eyes and a menacing smile that would strike fear into the heart of whoever saw it.

The first man sees his face. His running slows to the speed of crawling, his legs start to falter and feel heavy. He suddenly struggles to breathe. He catches his leg in a twisted tree root and falls. He hits the ground with a dull thud. His body aches and is coated with pain. He tries to free himself quickly but his heavy arms just will not budge. The man pursuing him was now upon him. Whatever the first tries to do to get out of the second's bone-crushing grip the second man has already anticipated. Slowly the grip of one of the second man's hands loosens. He drags it gently back into a concealing pocket and grabs something.

The first falls still.



Looking into the mirror CHARLOTTE SEARBY

Perfection.

Her face radiates; her features whisper compliments to each other. She has a luminous quality, with a face as smooth as porcelain; not a mark, not a scratch, not a blemish. Her rosy cheeks are propped up by a smoldering smile. Diamonds don't compare to the clarity and purity of her rosy cheeks. Teeth: perfectly aligned, heavenly white. Not too big, not too small. Perfect. Her teeth: concealed by voluptuous lips. Her juicy lips leave everyone hanging on every word. Not too fat, not too thin. Perfect.

Piercing blue eyes look straight down into your soul. Above them is a hazy night sky sweeping across her eyelid. Her eyelashes accentuate her eyes spread like a fan; perfectly curled. Her eyebrows show emotion: different shapes depending on her mood: sometimes happily rounded, others at a harsh angle. Either way they frame her face. Picture perfect. She possesses vibrant long blonde hair; rays of sunshine beaming from her head. Though she straightens it every morning, there is always one insecure little curl hidden behind her ear. She has elegant ears; they lay upon her head contentedly; no piercings as they would damage her innocence. Her nose is smooth; it's structured, symmetrical, sublime. Not too long, not too short; not too wide, not too narrow. Perfect.

It is all artificial; her true face is hidden behind the layers of makeup (foundation, blusher, concealer, luminator, lip gloss, fake eyelashes and eye-shadow). She is only "perfect" for 14 hours. Her hair extensions put up a fight as she drags them out; the brush drives relentlessly through her diminutive hair leaving behind innocent curls; they are stunning. She peels off her eyelashes then wipes away an abundance of eye-shadow. She removes the blue coloured contact lenses and is left with emeralds deep and true. She erases the pencil from her eyebrows; leaving natural, real eyebrows. They match her hair colour, not too dark, not too harsh and not too round. Stunning. The gloss has worn away and all that's left is the tint. She wipes away the tint and the liner; she is left with full bodied lips. She removes the jewels from her cheeks and the foundation from her skin. She is left with a bare face; it's natural, it's pure, it's elegant, it's individual, it's hers, and it's stunning.

She stares blankly into the mirror. "Look at those dead eyes," she says. "I am too pale; my lips are as thin as a sheet of ice. My hair awkwardly hangs off my head: it's dryer than straw. My cheeks sink into my face: they have no structure; they are sallow. My childhood scars are nauseating; they are engraved into my skin forever. My spots are defacing; they are repulsing. There are too many imperfections."

What she doesn't see is that her skin is beautiful, smooth and plump. Her cheeks are defined, poignant, the structure to her face. Her lips are plump and vitalized. They speak a thousand words without moving. Her eyelashes swirl around her enchanting eyes. They are precious, intense: but she sees herself through a warped looking glass. Her hair is energized; it dances around her head, spinning.

She is angelic, full of character; she is individual, a translucent beauty; she is stunning.

Perfect.

Cold, Miserable, Alone

MEGAN BACKHOUSE

Cold, miserable, alone.

The snow fell heavy, like sharp daggers dashing from all directions, they cut through the empty space that surrounded him. Each time they stabbed him he flinched. The army grew bigger, stronger and fiercer. They collided and clashed with each other as if in a frightful battle, and as each one fell they lined the floor row upon row, littering the floor like a war zone.

He shuddered.

Harsh winds started to grow getting stronger and stronger, working hand in hand with the sharp snowflakes, to create a hungry monster.

Crimson blotches grew bigger in his cheeks, spreading like a disease. His short pig-like nose grew colder, catching the disease from his cheeks; it spread further out to his ears. His eyes were swollen and big salty tears streamed from the corners of his eyes trickling down the side of his face like rain droplets sliding down a window pane, making tracks as though miniature rivers. What was he doing here?

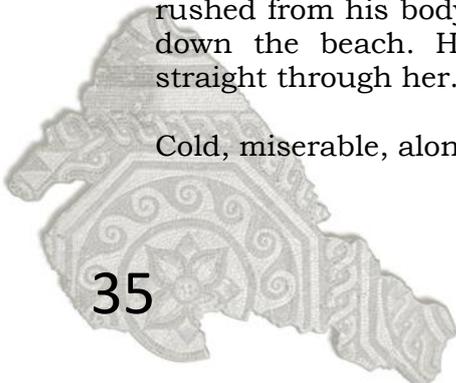
He was alone. Overwhelmed by the vast emptiness stretched out in front of him, his head spun with confusion and fatigue. His legs no longer belonged to his body; they simply dragged behind him like a reluctant child. The snow whistled and whirled angrily obscuring the view creating a white haze in front of him. He couldn't see..

The sky slowly began to clutter with stars, making the harsh surroundings seem safer. Each star acted like a little fairy light, lit up the deep dark sky.

As his eyes grew weary, and legs became more and more detached from his body, he wanted to give up. Suddenly, obscured by the white haze, he saw a woman standing, just in view, as though paralysed. She had thick long locks of brown hair that tumbled down either side of her hooded duffle coat; they hung at either side of her slender elegant face, slightly covering her soft flushed cheeks. The corners of her mouth wrinkled into a smile, and her blue eyes glistened in the snow. He walked towards her, with a new found confidence. As he grew closer his cold body filled with hope and warmth. Picking up the pace, he felt invincible. As he approached the woman she held out her hand beckoning him closer, he reached his arm out too, slowly moving his fingertips towards hers. They met. He felt nothing though, suddenly the warmth rushed from his body like a cold stormy sea rolling out down the beach. He stepped forwards, and walked straight through her.

Overwhelmed by
the vast
emptiness, his
head spun with
confusion and
fatigue, his legs
simply dragged
behind him like
a reluctant
child.

Cold, miserable, alone.



Impact DANIEL STRUTT

13:00

The engine was still blisteringly hot, the keys dangling from the ignition like a 15th century murderer dangling from a rope. The handbrake was loose, not secured as it should have been. The windows were wound down, not up as they should have been. Spray from the sea was getting pumped in through the window. Two glasses of half finished wine teetered on the dashboard. Where are these people? Why not take the car? These questions kept repeating in my head. I turned the key; the car stuttered into life, and then slowly died. The red light blazed on the dashboard. No fuel.

12:37

The cork darts out the neck of the bottle. The engine was ambling; just running to keep them cool. The wine gushed into the glass. Life was good. The radio smoothly played in the background. The sky was ablaze with azure and gold. A smudge silently drifted in front of the sun for a second – but left as soon as it came and brilliance was restored.

12:45

It was a slow gradual process; she was watching it all from her top floor flat. The sea was disappearing and getting further away every second. She was sure when the sea comes back as tsunami it will be much quicker. Every second the ocean was being stripped and more of the seabed was being revealed. The ocean floor was full of litter: cans and cardboard scattered everywhere. The seabed is a grubby brown colour, the usual gleaming gold long gone. The promenade was lined with people watching the spectacle; no one had seen anything like this before.

11:15

The sun blossomed in the sky. As I sauntered down the promenade, all my problems leapt off my shoulders like kids leaping to catch a balloon. A children's merry-go-round murmured somewhere in the distance. The smell of doughnuts and candy-floss tickled my nostrils. The trees swayed in my wake due to a slight breeze. It was just enough to keep me cool. Life was good. What a divine day; what could possibly go wrong? These questions kept repeating in my head like a beautiful dream.

11:30

I looked out at the vast ocean. It was a much darker colour than 20 minutes ago - the crisp turquoise long gone, replaced with a dark cerulean. The waves whipped exuberantly against the shore: they no longer kissed it gently. The breeze that I loved on the back of my neck had more passion. It was a lot more forceful. The sand which had once lain bare on the seabed seemed to have vanished.

13:10

She hadn't moved an inch. The same woman, the same flat, the same window and the same situation only this time a little smile spreading across her lips like the great fire spreading through 17th century London. You could see the vague outline of the tsunami in the distance. It was a force to be reckoned with; anything that got in its way would be destroyed in a blink of an eye. The tsunami had its prey in sight; it was going to consume it and they were helpless. It had all its victims under a spell and was dominating every single one of them, until the time comes when it massacres them. The blue had turned from looking refreshing to looking piercingly cold. All the cars scattered on the road outside will be destroyed and swept away. The skyscrapers level and higher than her swept away like a speck of dust. Second by second, it was getting closer.

13:13

She hadn't moved an inch. The same woman, the same flat, the same window and the same situation only this time her arms were flung out wide in a cross position. She was ready to be sacrificed. The air outside was damp and heavy. The wave scythed. The lethal water coming ever closer. The screen of blue was not going to be stopped; it had a heavenly white border. The white was clean and pure. The tsunami was cleaning up the mess of the seabed and soon would be cleaning up the mess of the world. The show had finished and the blue curtain was closing for its final time. It was an overwhelming phenomenon. It was God's spit. As it got closer it towered above the block of flats.

11:39

The weather had changed. The clouds had rolled in over the looming mountains. I wiped the drizzle off my forehead; I didn't have a coat. The sea was now really fierce. Something is wrong – really wrong – but I can't quite put my finger on what it is.

13:15

Impact.



The Ice Face ANDREW BAGLEY

One thousand metres up. Cold.

The bitter wind knives his cheeks as he tears his pick into the icy southern face. His beard cobwebbed with snow, he watches as worthless crystals fall down into the clouded abyss. A silent soundtrack plays in his head only accompanied by the wailing wind. Booming, deep tones of trombones suggest a tense atmosphere. The cold, a steel-chilling furnace of pinprick nails, dyes his face a saddened grey.

Higher up on the northern face another frostbitten, beaten man with a determined look in his eyes shifts carefully around the groaning ice. He tears his pick into the icy face.

As clouds clear, masses of land appear, opening up the scene of small villages. Men stroll. Women walk. Cars pass. Suddenly this poor frostbitten man is exposed to the landscape and warm sunlight strikes his dormant, drooped face, burning off the snow until he begins to feel a warm inner glow. Down below, gleaming rivers of crystals and white diamonds flow into lakes of deep blue sapphires. As his eyes trace the mountain's edge that he has been so careful to climb up, he fails to notice vast forests of trees covered in pallid, white, powdered snow. As his eyes trace the edge once more, they settle on the bottom of the mountain where he spots a valley of green pines dancing to the wind's moaning voice.

Far in the distance the man can make out an approaching storm: rumbling clouds, cutting lightning. Droplets of rain start to fall on the man's well-worn green and grey coat. The rain gets harder until it starts to pelt and punish the man, but he is determined to carry on through the storm. He tears his pick into the icy face.

Thunder and lightning crack the sky. The wind slams trees against ice. Water bombards God's earth. The storm shakes the men and for the first time they feel a sense of sorrow for any other poor soul on the mountain. They are bashed against the rough ice but both men carry on determined to reach their one goal. They tear their picks into the icy face.

As the storm intensifies, the man stops to rest on the southern face. He drives in his final ice screw for protection, tightens his harness and rests in the snowy whiteout. He knows nobody can climb in this weather.

On the northern face, ambition outweighs judgement; the inexperienced man is determined to reach the summit by night. The snow beneath him is powdery, not good for climbing but he keeps on going. He starts to get weary and his fingertips grow colder until he cannot grip the picks any longer. He feels faint, disorientated and suddenly a thin crack echoes danger. A symphony of staccato splinters shoot out as the ice begins to break.

He panics. His feet slip: arms clawing, he kicks into the powder. The pick breaks off trailing a hammer of ice that drags him down.

Silence falls and nature's next victim is claimed.

One man tears his pick into the ice face.

A Place I Hate ANNE WIDDOWSON

The burning ball of fire hung in the sky like a diamond, its rays piercing the mighty clouds that threatened to conquer it. Floods of light fell about the parched land, crushing the breath from all that challenged the sun's glare. The heat was so intense that even the trees shivered with sweat. It became a blow that the birds promptly ducked, flapping furiously towards the shade. The leaves gorged themselves on the light, suckling it greedily, their raging thirst never satisfied.

Insects and crawlers surrounded the sweet, oozing fruit, which lay nestled within the clutches of vegetation sprouting from the tall trees. The bugs feasted mercilessly on the delicate flesh of their victims. Small buffets of wind would scare off the tiny creatures for short seconds and scatter them, creating a dark, angry cloud, aggressive and disturbed. Nothing could stop the parasites from latching onto the rich blood of this injured plum.

A curious pair of searching eyes peeked through the heavy foliage shielding the high tree tops. The tiny muscles around the eyelids were rigid with distrust.

An uncomfortable, warm breeze rustled the strings of plant entrails, draped about one another, casually lolled in wilted ropes of green and yellow. Flowers of red and pink grew in bright patches like blood spots. All around, blurred mist spiralled the canopies, shrouding all but the splintered ends of twigs that protruded the layers of fog. And in these canopies, sits the feeble home of confused, desperate animals. A curious pair of searching eyes peeked through the heavy foliage shielding the high tree tops. The tiny muscles around the eyelids were rigid with distrust, hardening the pupils. Irises were as dark as forest pools choked with weeds and slime. A glassy sheen left them unfocused and haunted. Suddenly, they darted. Left. Right. The wariness of this creature was both fascinating and terrifying. The small crinkles and grooves around the little, scaly nose etched stress and anxiety into the tortured expression.

A crackle of branches announced the animal's movement. The tree's splintered fingers hung ragged. The frail tendons were sinewy and limp from where a mighty paw had crushed its fragile limbs. A tufted heap of heaving fur clambered clumsily up the body of an aged cocoa tree. The moving ball of hair swung ineptly on its spindly arms, shrieking and shattering the silent air. The pointed fangs flashed dully, brown from malnutrition, bared like small, sharp stakes set back in a cavern of darkness. The once pink gums now were as healthy as the skin of a decaying corpse. A great mantle of sickly, yellowing hair framed the orang-utan's face, and puckered bald patches could be seen sprouting tufts of new russet fur around her leathery mouth. The skin was ripped and raw and rancid; vulnerable to the elements. The thick hide she once wore clung, desperate, to her stick-like bones. Tender muscles ached with the effort of keeping this body upright. It was exhaustion even to breathe...

Brittle bones crackled under their thin membrane as she scrambled out of sight. Amongst the flora, she dangled by her feet, her skeletal frame jutting out beneath taut skin. Every bone in her spine stabbed against its casing. She turned then, the

rest of her shape a silhouette against the dense undergrowth. Her torso ballooned out sickly, stretching her matted pelt. The enormous bulge of her stomach took over her body, the bloated hump leeching on the life it so desperately needed. Twisting, she reached for stronger branches.

The frantic fingers groped at nothingness.

Across the vast landscape of the Amazon rainforest, unmistakable chaos lay as far as the eye could see. Strips of land were scorched with black stains, while grey, feathery ashes skittered here and there mockingly. The air shuddered with hazy heat, and all around were disfigured bodies, torn into monstrous shreds. Trees of all species were hideously strewn in gruesome contortions, their twisted pieces plucked and scattered and exposed. Leaves and branches were thrown haphazardly about their home in maimed slithers. Some trees still stood, but even they were doomed. Their once glorious trunks now stood as charred sticks, with soft, ghostly smoke weaving into the sky from their stubbed tops. Fire had laid hold on the forest and began to gnaw. A quarter of a mile square of land was savaged by ash and shadow. Devastation had wrapped its gnarled claws around the rainforest and wrung the life from it. No creature dare set foot on the barren land; the demolished shrubs pleaded to the billowing clouds of soot above them and nursed their wounds.

A burnt tree tumbled to the floor with a muffled thud which gripped the very heart of the forest. Despite the distressed squealing of the birds watching this dreadful scene, it was the only sound for miles. The whole sight was warped; sick to the core.

The eyes of the many trees caught movement at the edge of their vision. They looked on in terror at the beasts on two legs, hardened by long years of draining life from the wood. They stooped quickly, shouldering the newly cut branches, now stripped and bare of their skin.

Welcome ALICE NAYLOR

My hand curls around your little finger
And I wonder at eyes that haven't smiled
For months. Insomniac shadows linger.
I curve with your arm; shoulders sigh.
Your drowned eyes can't care.
My bewildered look is lost
As if I laugh a bare
Sonnet- the rhythm never reaches you.
Or maybe you never listened for it?
You were too crushed. I couldn't save you.

Lost
as if I laugh a bare
sonnet – the rhythm never reaches you



Kitchener's Curse

HARRIET BELL



My life was lost when I enlisted.

I joined up because my country needed me; it was an honourable cause and everyone from my village was keen to play his part. As we departed, the sun shone, the buttons of our uniforms glinted golden in the light, with girls throwing flowers in our path. So I left my beloved family, my blossoming sweetheart and my faithful hound.

It is late on Monday evening when we arrive. After traversing the many twists and turns of the salient, with a vicious, freezing wind searing our faces, we arrive at our dugout. This chamber is cold and damp; it penetrates your bones, your heart and your very soul. The withering candles, scratching and scurrying rats and the distant thunder of gunfire filled me with an uneasiness, no, a terror and a sense of dislocation.

Time passes, but I do not know how much.

Nothing survives.
Nothing lives. The
mutilated stumps
of trees, the
decaying carcasses
of horses, men
pegged out like
the Devil's
washing, on the
wire.

I am strangely aware of a sudden, sharp movement in the entrance of the dugout, but with so little natural light, it takes a few seconds for my eyes to fully focus. There before me is Lord Kitchener, not much different from any other man, except for his yellow glaring eyes and his right arm pointing stiffly and rigidly at me. I feel possessed by a force wanting to strike the man who has deceived and lured so many to death and decay. I move unflinchingly towards this creature, but he dissolves in the entrance.

The wind growls into the dugout; I find myself shivering and stagger to my bed and lie shaking and jabbering. I see bodies, torn apart like paper, with reeking organs pulsing at me; I hear agonising screams. In the flickering candlelight I see the landscape of desolation. Nothing survives. Nothing lives. The mutilated stumps of trees, the decaying carcasses of horses, men pegged out like the Devil's washing, on the wire.

I feel myself being lifted and taken from the dugout, twisting and turning as I had done before. Suddenly, I become aware of being carried up a long staircase through open doors, where I glimpse chambers, beds with gleaming white linen and human shapes. Eventually, strong arms place me on to a narrow bed, and I fall into a profound, deep sleep.

My sweetheart, with her rosy complexion and chestnut curls is walking with me by the little stream that runs through the village and out on to the moor, where we are to have a picnic of rolls and honey. My dog is trotting along ahead of us, wagging his tail pleased to have the gentle, warming wind on his coat. My mother has just baked the bread, and the glorious smell of the still warm rolls, remind me of my

boyhood. The warmth of the kitchen reflected the warmth of my mother's love for us all.

Slowly, slowly a mist descends and gobbles up the scene, and in its place is the landscape of desolation once again. Everything is black, brown and wintry. The decapitated trees and the anguished cries of the dying. I cannot see a single living creature, but only hear the cries. Again a freezing wind arises, piercing my mind, my heart and my very soul.

The merciless Kitchener, with his accusing arm, grabs, destroys and then dominates dreams. His hypnotic yellow eyes lure young men into his dark lair, with its cold air, its rows of graves and scattered bones.

In the spectral light, I see Lord Kitchener move towards the cavernous entrance to welcome more of the fallen into the impenetrable, dark and cold. The cave encloses them.

They tread stiffly and uncertainly: their elongated shadows can barely be seen in the deeply melancholy gloom. The demesne has winding staircases, leading up to chambers of the dead. All is silent: there is a large table laid with fine china and silver, but the delicate feast remains untouched and the candles of the great chandelier above are unlit. The Lord can be heard returning from the entrance, making his way up the first of the marble staircases in his immaculate uniform and finely curled moustache.

I am one of Kitchener's men.

I am the dead.



Sonnet sequence HESTER PLANT

Ariadne

To needle beauty is to stitch a hell,
 With my first prize, I lost my life to her:
 At her air, her gold, her grey eye, I fell.
 My medal for mocking a god. Thank her.
 She cursed me with legs to flee from praise,
 She pushed my wand, my pen, my spade in me.
 So now a thread tugs my heart and lays
 Intricate wreaths on each surface I see.
 That day, my talent became my prison,
 A silken cell, tapestry bars I make.
 Ignorance! They know not darkness from sun;
 The stab of spinning for my old life's sake.
 Shudder, then sweep away all that I know!
 Ariadne – eight legs – you reap what you sew.

Persephone

Home. Persephone, I'm in the Garden.
 You know, the place where the bird chuckled low,
 Where the clouds linked fingers with the glad sun,
 Where the leaves whispered rumours of a slow
 Breeze. My love, I'm where the stream is waiting.
 Waiting, wishing, wondering, waiting. When?
 I'm where the scent of summer sands will sing,
 Where the buds will reveal their secrets. Then
 My sweet, we'll walk again as memories true
 And dance when the winds raise the waves to light,
 Lie where the harvest holds its strength for you.
 Its power wanes, Persephone. Long night.
 So come home to the Garden, to you I sing.
 Bring me seeds, Bring me smiles, Bring me stories, Bring me Spring.

Hope

One day or night, the chest opened its eyes
To life outside; her face confused. Lost Hope.
Like ferocious tears, beasts from the depths rise.
Now Hate, now Greed, Envy, Anger. No Hope.
An eternity of loud angry dark
Is done for me and I have quiet space.
Forgetting myself, not knowing the lark
Of dawn, the door closes. I've lost the race.
I hope for keys, for maps, for large latches;
To reach out with my arm, my wing, my rope,
I hope it finds, it helps, it calls, catches
Warm Light; cold Love; Escape; help this life cope.
Release this hope, for I know these beasts true.
Hope asks, Hope calls, Hope begs, Hope beats. Then through...

Prometheus

I stole to give a part of us to them.
I picked that smould'ring fruit of flame
To share a secret; a rule I could bend
Bent my back. He chained me here for to tame
My generosity. Edge of a cliff:
Impossible to fall. Free fall, fail fall.
My eyes trapped by the sea, the sky and the cliff
Whose armour cuts. For my gift was too tall.
My thank you note is blisters of the sun,
Is kisses from the vultures that circle
Interspersed between stings of sea spray. Lungs
Gasping, gaping, gorging, grating and all
For the artist's cause: fire for perfection,
Fire for creation fired my destruction.



There's Someone in my Room

ZOE IBBETSON

There's someone in my room. I know this because of the shadow on the walls. I know it's a woman; light footsteps, sweet scent, high-pitched noise. I know I should recognise her voice, but I don't. Cold skin touches mine, an unfamiliar voice tells me, "be not afraid". I am afraid. I am afraid because I do not know this woman, yet she knows me.

She hands me a shape. I count the sides, "One, Two, Three, Four." Then I know: "A quadrilateral." I think of all the things I have known with four sides: doors; windows; cupboards; books. I have a feeling I am meant to open this square, so I pull at one side like a door – like all the things I have known – but there is too much tension and the side splits. The woman takes it off me. Then she hands me it back but now it is round and black and shiny. My finger tracing the smooth, never-ending curve tells me it is a circle. There is something strange about the circle; there are circles within circles (concentric circles), tiny ridges towards the middle, then at last a hole. The hole is at the centre of the circle and I do not know its purpose and this frustrates me. Then I think, the hole is like a void, and a void is like the blank spots in my mind. The void stops me from knowing the woman, the square, and the circle. Then my head begins to hurt.

The woman takes it off me. The circle is no longer in my hands and she sticks a needle in it. It begins to spin. I watch as it goes round and round, again and again, whooshing and whirring and crackling...

*"I stand at your gate and the song that I sing is of moonlight.
I stand and I wait for the touch of your hand in the June night.
The roses are sighing a Moonlight Serenade."*

The roses flood my brain with their sweet scent white and clear in my cradling hands as I embrace him my arms draped around his neck like the luxuriously soft silk of my dress hemmed with lace as we sway in the smooth summer air for what seems like a lifetime and the fact that this moment is just a ripple in the spectrum of time evades me and it's just you and me and time slows just for us as the glorious music lingers in my ears a rapturous time delay of sound as I hear the melody then you following a second late with whispered humming and even when the music fades I can still hear the whispering breeze upon my shoulder as if you were still always behind the music and always behind me singing in my ears and filling my life with sound

*"Let us stray 'til break of day
in love's valley of dreams.
Just you and I, a summer sky,
A heavenly breeze, kissin' the trees"*

The record spins; hypnotic concentric circles getting slower and slower. The moment is just a ripple in the spectrum of time. The circle no longer represents eternity. The music fades like a calming breeze. Then it stops. It grinds to a halt.

There's someone in my room. I know this because of the shadow on the walls. I know it's a woman; light footsteps, rose scent, a whisper. I know I should recognise

the sound, the breeze on my neck, but I don't. Now she stands in front of me, she puts some flowers in the vase on the table – roses white and clear. She has spilt a little water on the table so I point at it. She laughs and takes something from her pocket. I study it – a handkerchief with the initials C. R. F (which I have seen somewhere before), hemmed with white lace. She mops the table and the water soaks into the handkerchief, then she leaves it there. I point again for her to pick it up but she takes my hand. Her hand is warm and safe and soft like silk. She takes my other hand but I am not afraid. I am nostalgic but I don't know why. I am sad because I do not know this woman yet she knows me.

