

Spark

Young Writers Magazine

Featuring writing by young writers across Europe



Issue 14 May 2018



Spark Young Writers Magazine

Welcome to Spark Young Writers Magazine

This is such a special edition of Spark Young Writers Magazine and I am more pleased than ever to be able to share it with you. For this time the editing has been shared across Europe – because so has the writing.

As part of the new pan-European Read On programme, young writers were invited to submit stories, poems or articles on the theme of: “No more borders – exploring, sharing and celebrating our differences.”

Then those writers submitted their work and what had been a nice, theoretical idea became this real and tangible project. The team in Ireland produced this Creative Writing artwork above and in the pages that follow you’re going to see work by writers from there, Norway, Portugal and the UK.



As ever with Spark Young Writers Magazine, what you get to read is the finest of the work submitted. You know how often you hear editors and producers saying the standard of submission was very high? Imagine having to pick only a selection from the young writers of four nations. We could have done a completely different issue and it’s my hope that we will with more editions featuring this great writing.

I am five times older than some of the writers in this issue and for once that thought cheers me. These writers are the future of all our countries and their strength, their passion and their talent makes me know that this future is going to be a good one.

I’d like to give special thanks to Nancy Langfeldt for translating pieces for us. Also personal thanks to Portugal’s Sara Coelho: her piece in this issue mentions Fado music and I had simply never heard of it. I have now and entire albums of it have been playing in my head throughout editing this whole issue. I hope you have as good a time listening to that and reading these pieces as I have.

William Gallagher

Spark Young Writers Magazine is a publication of Writing West Midlands. We support creative writers and creative writing across the region. More information about us can be found on our website: www.writingwestmidlands.org.

This magazine features writing from children and young people aged 8 - 20 who live in the West Midlands of the UK and across Europe. It is also available to read online at www.writeonmagazine.org.

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No Borders Please!

Iona Mandal (UK)

Anonymous nursery rhymes never set bounds
Perhaps, that's how they chose to stay

The cow jumped over the moon
Again and again, without a space helmet

Little Red Riding Hood ventured into forbidden forests
Yet, no one questioned

Hansel and Gretel walked fearlessly into a strange gingerbread house
Savouring sweets from a witch without a second thought

The Gingerbread Man ran far away, over rivers and valleys
He had no fear of getting lost

Humpty Dumpty fell off the wall, we know not where
USA or Mexico?, no one felt the need to clarify

Each lived or travelled their way as they wished

If childhood created a limitless world
Defying all boundaries
Who are we to draw the lines?

Complaint Letter

Rodrigo Gonçalves (Portugal)

Dear Mr. Prejudice,

I am writing to express my displeasure about the bad impact that you are having on the whole countries of the world.

You are infecting the mind of many people that because of you are contributing to the impoverishment of the humanity. You cause the unhappiness of your victims and the emptiness in the lives of those who are contaminated. This emptiness results from the incapacity to relate with the others, the people that may have something important to express.

You are closing many doors, the doors which can open up to a whole new culture. A culture that can have important things to teach us. When you act, you prevent people from exploring new countries, new cultures, and other ideals.

You prevent individuals from enriching their knowledge, their soul and their heart.

You must stop to create frontiers between human beings. Let everyone overcome their own hurdles (borders) and discover different worlds.

They will learn and grow with the differences that they will find. I think the best way to solve this problem is to broaden our horizons and to have the ability to recognise that we are all equal and unique at the same time.

Mr Prejudice, I truly hope that you take my complaint into consideration and have the good sense to leave the humanity and never come back!

The world without you, with the entanglement of cultures, will be much better.

I look forward to never hearing from you again.

Yours sincerely,

Rodrigo Gonçalves

Love from the Other Side

Vilde Gangstø Davidsen (Norway)

He could feel the stony wall behind him as he sat down with his back against the wall. The letter felt rough between his fingers. He had been guarding his fixed route for hours already, and it was finally time for a break. The young man had already been guarding the wall for years, just like his dad and granddad before him. He had been 15 the day he first was stationed there, although he had known that was the destiny awaiting him ever since he was a little boy. It was seen as a blessing by most, a job that passed from father to son. But he saw no purpose in the wall at all.

The wall, a 10 meter tall monster built from bricks that separated Mexico from America, something it had been doing for a millennium. It had been built in the 21st century, and had made sure Mexicans and Americans had been completely isolated from each other ever since. The two ethnical groups never learnt anything about each other, nor got to ever communicate. At least that was what people thought.

He looked down at the envelope in his hand again. It was a plain envelope with only a heart drawn in the corner. They had to be discreet, if anyone else found it in the tiny hole between the bricks in the wall, they couldn't know who it belonged to. In the worst case it would lead to execution at the market place. All communication with the other side was strictly illegal.

He carefully opened the envelope and pulled out the paper inside. It was covered in her beautiful handwriting. He let his fingers follow the letters, thinking about the girl that had sat down to write it to him. It was only a few years into his duty that he had stumbled over the first letter in the wall. At the time he didn't know what to do with it, but after some thinking he had written an answer. What first had started out as a little crime had become a big one as they started to develop a secret relationship. He was in love with a girl he had never met.

He started reading the letter, slowly, to catch up every word, to remember it as well as possible before he would have to burn it. It wasn't until he came to the last line of the letter he had to stop for a second, to read it over again.

"I've heard that they've finally agreed to remove most of the wall. They'll start already next week."

The one line kept repeating itself in his head as he read it over and over again. The 1,000 years old wall was finally being removed?

He stood up quicker than ever before. He had to finish his shift, hopefully soon for the last time ever. The smile on his face kept growing for every step he took. He was finally going to meet his Juliet.

Standing on the Edge

Aoife Clifford (Ireland)

For as long as I can remember, the sea has been the only thing that calms me. When I was younger, every time I got angry or started to cry, my father would bring me to the cliff by our house and tell me to watch the waves and breathe in the sea air. We would stay like this for hours, just the two of us, lost in our own minds.

Since my dad died three years ago, I find myself on the cliff more and more often. It's as if his death triggered more things in my life to go wrong. My mind is a constant whirlwind of anxious thoughts. Standing on the cliff, I try to forget the stressful events that unfolded today.

I take one final deep breath of the sea air and turn back towards my house when I hear a crinkling sound and remember the balled-up sheet of copybook paper scrunched in my fist. Only now, looking at the whiteness of my knuckles, do I realise that I was holding the paper way too tight: like if I squeezed hard enough, it would just cease to exist. If only. I think I see a flash of white in the corner of my eye, but dismiss it as my imagination and return my focus to the page in my hand. Against my better judgement, I smooth out the sheet and take another look at the message written on it, each word like a sword, cutting me still, even though I've read them many times.

I've always been different to the other kids in my hometown. I've always been quiet and preferred the company of books to people. The slight stutter I've had since birth doesn't help my aversion to people. I've always been on the receiving end of weird looks and whispered insults, but since dad died the weird looks have become more common and people don't bother to whisper the insults anymore. Maybe it's because my stutter grew ten times worse after the funeral. Or maybe they're just bored and picking on the easiest target for entertainment. Either way, it has become almost unbearable.

I take a shaky breath and take a step towards the cliff edge. "Don't let it get to you," I heard a voice say. I whirl around. A girl with snow white hair and pale skin stands, arms wrapped around herself, facing me.

She gives a tentative smile before adding "Some people are scared of people who are different because they don't know how to handle it. But in reality, people who are different are the ones who matter the most." She takes a breath before holding a hand out to me. "Come on. I'll help you."

Borders

Tigerlily Blakeway (UK)

B is for birth, the first step into a world of division

O is for opinion on differences in people

R is for race something that we cannot change

D is for debate on someone's skin colour meaning personality traits that might not be true

E is for Earth, a place of equality

R is for rejection because you don't have the right eye colour

S is for stereotypes, a questionable thing

Why should our differences separate us? When really who wants to be the same? We shouldn't have borders based on appearance.

Just Like the Others

Sofia Durão Lopes (Portugal)

I'm going to tell a story, my story, a story that almost nobody will believe in, I think...

I'm Samantha, my parents are from Africa, but I was born here, in the U.K; I'm fourteen and I want you to realise what I've been through. It was the first day of school, and my first day here, in the new school, I must admit I was a little scared, but what kind of teen isn't, am I right?

I got in the room, and I looked at all my future classmates, nobody had the same skin colour as me, but as we are in the twenty first century I thought nobody cared about that anymore... And I was wrong.

I spent the first term being constantly mocked by everybody. I was so mad, but I thought that if I were mad they would laugh and tease me even more. So I did nothing, I just ignored all those mean words that all of them kept telling me, all the mean jokes, the fact that I have been always put apart because of my colour, and other things I don't dare to say.

As I feared, my grades started to get lower and lower. I didn't know what to do so, in a moment of pure fear, I told my mom everything. In just a tiny and quick second the weight on my shoulders disappeared, but honestly it was really hard to say how I felt, not because I was scared they would find out, not even because I knew my mom wouldn't understand, just because I wasn't sure what I felt about it, if it was sadness, anger, fear, maybe a little bit of all, maybe not.

As it all happened so damn fast, I couldn't recognize that was racism, that my classmates were bullying me, and the simple fact of nothing being changed even after my parents spoke with the teacher, scared me, made me feel insecure and with no reason to live. My grades were so low that it was almost impossible to pass the year. To lose one year of my life, for what? The next class would do the same thing!

I didn't want to end my life but this! I just needed a reason to show them I was the same, black or white, what does that matter?!

I was holding the knife, not being sure of what to do, not sure if that was a good idea or not, when the lights of the stairs turned on, somebody was coming!

I was so scared that my parents would find out, so I tried to put the knife back on its place, but my hand slipped, and I've cut myself, a small little cut, where you could see red blood, as everyone else!

I'm not different! My blood is red too!

So, I smiled to the future near me, and I said: "I'm not different!"

Everybody has Wishes

Simão Lipscomb (Portugal)

Some people want to be lawyers, some want to be superheroes. Some people want to have all the money in the world and some people want to live forever. However, I'm sure that one of the wishes we all share – okay, not everyone, just most – as I was saying, one of the wishes that most people share is peace in the world.

I think people just don't understand how would it be to live in a world with no racism, discrimination, prejudice, no differences. When I say no differences, I mean that people can have different religions, different skin colour or different culture. We just can't treat them differently for that, because after all, we are all different from each other.

It's sad to know that in this precise moment, someone, somewhere in the world is being criticised for being different. But it's even sadder to know that no one cares.

An example of that are the refugees. Their home is destroyed, their city turns to dust, their family is killed, they are out of food for days and they sleep in the middle of the streets, aware that at any moment something can happen to them. They try to leave the country and when they finally have the luck to be accepted somewhere, which is rare, they are badly treated.

I understand that nowadays with the terrorism, the host countries don't welcome refugees that easily for safety reasons. That's why this is such a difficult subject to deal with, but we must handle this issue as fast as we can because nowadays, with the nuclear weapons, I can't imagine a good end.

Honestly and unfortunately, I don't think racism, prejudice and discrimination will ever end. It may decrease and I hope it does, but I don't think it will disappear completely. We can make an effort but if we all don't try, it won't happen and unfortunately some people are just not willing to try because they don't care. But I'm sure that if they were the ones who suffer what certain people are suffering they would change their opinion.

It's surreal that we, humans are so developed with some things and so underdeveloped with others.

As long as the colour of the skin is more important than the brightness of the eyes there will be war.

It's easier when it's science fiction

Bruna Rosa (Portugal)

There were once two souls, two who weren't meant to be together, two souls who were not meant to match, yet they did.

A human and a vampire, a human and a fairy, a human and a mer-creature... A human and a human?

This story has no need for fantasy, no need for mythical creatures to create a conflict of "they're meant to be together but they're worlds apart" because for some reason it's easier to imagine different species falling in love than it is different races. Humans are quite the funny thing.

There were once two souls, two who weren't meant to be together, two souls who were not meant to match, yet they did. These two humans feel in love the way anyone does, they shared moments, they shared laughs, they shared their hearts with each other.

A coffee shop date as they tasted each other's favourite drinks, a walk through the park taking polaroid pictures to store the memories, birthdays where they allowed each other to get to love each other intimately...

Who do you imagine? What couple come to mind? Of course, a couple comes to mind because when someone mentions love we jump to dating. A white couple, two attractive young people white individuals, whose bodies are complete. A boy and a girl, both with cute little quirks but still able to blend perfectly into the usual ideal.

What if they weren't so vanilla? What if in their coffee shop date, they shared spicy drinks to share part of their home with the other, Indian and Pakistani recipes filled with flavours and colours. A walk through the park taking polaroids of themselves exploring each other's culture, trying to understand how accessories and colours are used. Maybe they're young girls, hands tangled in each other's long hair. Maybe they're both boys, singing their lungs out to traditional music with lyrics they're still trying to fully understand.

The point is that it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter where they're from, what they were born like, what they like or who they like.

Learning to accept everyone needs to start somewhere, somewhere small, so next time you're reading a book, writing a novel, a story about love just like this one, remember: there are 8 billion people in the world and everyone's different in their own unique way. Everyone deserves their own love story.

Was it Really a Dream?

Sara Coelho (Portugal)

A few weeks ago I experienced one of the most unpredictable things that could ever happen. It was Sunday and as usual, I binge watched films, but on that particular afternoon I only saw sci-fi movies.

After watching many films where aliens, from far away galaxies, arrive on Earth to destroy everything, I went to sleep. Around 3am I jumped out of the bed due to an intense light that came from under my bed. It was one of the aliens from the movies I had watched!

As soon as I started screaming in fear, the green boy asked me: "Excuse me, but why are you so frightened?"

Scared, I replied to him: "because you're green and you have three big eyes, you're so different!"

He answered me in a rush saying that I was also different from him, I was white and only had two eyes, but he wasn't afraid of me because being different is good – it makes us unique.

I really felt bad after that moment, I didn't know him and I had judged him only based on prejudice. Eventually, I calmed down and he asked me how Earth was. "It's amazing," I said. "It has beautiful beaches, the weather is pleasant, the food is great... not to mention the amazing monuments and the superb music like Fado."

Quickly I found that I wasn't describing Earth but only my country, Portugal. That's the power of borders. They divide us... I mean we set foot on another continent, or country and everything is so strange to us, we can't relate with anything. Once a planet, Earth is now several different worlds because everyone lives on their own culture without embracing others.

The alien then started explaining to me how his planet was and it seemed to be so boring. It didn't have houses, or sea, and their inhabitants were clones! From hearing that I became aware of the fact that I'm really fortunate to live on Earth. We own a planet with a major diversity, where it's enough to get on a plane to be in touch with new customs, new food, different architecture and people from different ethnics.

He was talking when I suddenly heard my mother call me to go to school. But why was she awake at 3 am? Apparently, my moment with the alien was no more than a dream! It was so strange because it looked so real to me.

Well, I woke up and turned on my television. The news was the same as the other days. People want to close the borders, build walls, terrorist attacks towards the cultural minorities are happening, the refugee crisis...

My dream may not be true but the problems are real! Let's celebrate diversity and learn from each other's cultures to make this world a better place because if our planet is like a puzzle, every single one of us is a piece to make it complete.

It Takes One Second

Emma O'Neil (Ireland)

All it takes is one second... Just one second for your life to flip, for your path to be broken and your faith to come to an unexpected dead end.

The sight of the Smith & Wesson spiked an unknown fear, in me and hundreds around me. When realization hit and reality kicked in, we found ourselves lost and confused in a situation we never anticipated. The only thing worse than the presence of the gun was the expressionless façade of its master.

Nothing

Frightened faces flew past me, desperate to escape the scene. His eyes sparkled with satisfaction as they skimmed over the chaos he created. His lips curled to reveal a foul pleasure as the sound of their screams echoed through the gym.

I stood beneath the hoop, frozen. I watched the lead bullets slice through the screams, only to land on innocent bodies, many of which I recognized.

I could feel my sanity slipping away as I watched the casings fly and bodies drop.

The walls were spattered and dark crimson rivers flowed beneath me in a pattern resembling the Mississippi Basin. He turned to face me, there was no sign of recognition in his face.

Blank

When our eyes met I expected him to be reminded of everything, from the moment we met to the moment we drifted apart.

I wanted his bright blue eyes to remember me and the times we spent together. Those were good times. They were.

Before the accident, we used to dream of leaving behind our desolate neighborhood for a better life. We aimed for a lively landscape full of towering skyscrapers, a place where the city lights would surround us with their intimate glow.

We planned our future before it all changed. Before he changed. I wanted him to be reminded of what it was like before that part of him died, yet, his eyes dimmed to a deep shade of grey.

I figured, that if I stared hard enough, the guy I used to love would resurface.

I couldn't have been more wrong

Beneath his vacant visage there was darkness.

This is what the pills did to him, they crumbled his state of mind to a point beyond repair. Our

schoolmates, those who could, scattered to reveal a clear path between him and me. The only obstacle that stood between us was the rifle... and his intentions.

“Don’t”

The powerful stench of bodily fluids hung in the air around me, it was so thick, I could feel myself breathing it in, it mixing with the panic and fear accumulating inside of me. Our eyes silently scanned each other, I noticed the light catching on the scars, just barely visible beneath his long sleeve. I watched his index dancing over the trigger, my cold feet still remained frozen to the floor. For one second, his finger lightly hovered over the trigger and I saw him hesitate.

It takes one second, and in that second, you can change everything

Why

Martine Eriksen (Norway)

Why can't Catholics drink
When Jesus turned water into wine
Why are immigrants hated
When Jesus said you should treat them like your own

Why can't two men love each other
When God loves everyone.
Why is homosexuality a sin
When homosexuals are created by God

Why does God have his own house
While there are thousands on the street.
Why is the church so rich
While families starve

Why do the rich look down on the poor
When their graves will be the same size
Why is half the world starving
While the other half struggles with obesity

Why do we waste so much food
While millions starve
Why do we waste so much water
While children are thirsty

Why must girls cover themselves
While boys can go topless.
Why are men paid more
When the job is the same

Why are white and black treated differently
When they are all human
Why are Muslim labelled terrorists
When most terrorists are white.

Why do adults chose their guns
While children fall at their bullets
Why must teenagers stand up
To make the adults hear

Why must children suffer
For adults' missteps

Why?

Boat

Theresa O' Sullivan (Ireland)

I jerk awake as a wave crashes against Boat; its damp, mouldy walls creak as if they're about to cave in. My stomach sinks as I remember where I am. I search the crowded floor; my little sister leans against a woman with a tired, sunken face. She has grown fond of Ola; I suspect she's missing her own son. I still recall the sickening screams the day he died, too young and frail for such brutal conditions. I glance around at the other faces, all thinner and darker after months on Boat.

My sister used to curl up to mother like that; mother's warm brown eyes always melted my worries. She gave up so much so we could travel on Boat to safe foreign lands. I think of my cheeky brother, who dreamed of becoming a nurse. His dreams crushed by the war. My strict yet kind Pa. Where they are now?

I squint to see Boat clearer. The only light is through holes in the roof. The smell, rotten and stale, hits the back of my throat. This thick air has grown familiar. I check my delicate hands; my long slim fingers are grimy and cracked, my nails bitten and filthy. I wonder how my neglected hair and face look. I haven't seen my reflection in months. I remember hours spent gazing in the mirror back home before the war. Trying to perfect my makeup or get my hijab to sit perfectly. I lean back as a sudden sadness comes over me. Tears stream down my grimy face. I imagine Boat crumbling into nothing, just black – a hole of infinite sadness. I hate Boat, yet I feel attached all the same.

Sudden shouting rings out above us, followed by muffled footsteps. We move towards the noise. My stomach rumbles and moans. A horrific smell rises as everyone shifts. Panic sets in. I must get to my sister, but there are too many bodies pushing against me. It's hard to breath. 'Ola' I call desperately, but my voice is hoarse and drowned out. 'Ola' I'm forced to depend on the strange woman.

I continue pushing, catching the occasional glimpse of Ola's purple hijab. A radiant light shines at the other end of Boat. Stranger white figures yank bodies up in twos and threes. I watch as Ola is lifted. My mind races. Are they throwing us off? Is Boat sinking? Weakened, I doubt I can stand much longer.

Eventually, a strong figure heaves me up. I'm blinded by the bright daylight and collapse at the top. On my hands and knees I inhale the fresh sea air. As my eyes adjust, a huge ship comes into focus. I finally reach my sister. When we embrace, she is small and warm. My heart fills with love.

That night, the moon and stars light the sky. I focus on the calming ripples in the water. Finally, I feel hope in the pit of my stomach. Our journey has only just begun.

Immortal Enemies

Aliya Waseem (UK)

No matter what world I was residing in, he managed to appear. All I had done was go out for a morning stroll and there he was again.

Walking down the park path, I watched as the children played games and spent quality time with each other. Turning my head away from the children, I continued on my way, the thought of the hopefulness of the children and their faith that these friendships would last forever, remained in my mind, long after I had left them. I sighed, with the knowledge that only the strongest bonds lasted till adulthood.

There were very few people walking down the path today. I did not mind that much as it gave me time to enjoy the scenery and clear my earlier thoughts. As I was walking, I noticed a small flower blooming in an area of grass where no other flowers grew. Strange. I picked up the soft flower as a gift for my younger sister – she loves them very much – and carried on walking. Closing my eyes and lifting the flower to my nose, I inhaled the entrancing scent. It gave me a sense of serenity. I no longer took into account my surroundings, but I wish that I had. I bumped my shoulder against another – the impact quickly brought me back to reality. I was about to apologise to the person when I saw their face. It was not something that I was ready for.

I didn't want to see him. Not now or ever. I need to somehow escape from this awful predicament. Feigning ignorance towards his presence, I hurriedly shuffled past him in an attempt to get away. Unfortunately, it was to no avail. I felt a hand grip my shoulder, I tried to yank it back but the grip was too tight. The hand forcefully turned me around so that I was face-to-face with the person. His face bore a smirk that I knew all too well and, seeing his face again, I felt as though I could recognise him as if we had never gone our separate ways all those years ago. I was quickly awoken from my thoughts when he spoke.

“Hello, it's been a long time.”

“I'd say that it hasn't been nearly enough time since the last time we 'accidentally' bumped into each other. Maybe there is some part of you that just doesn't want to let me go. Or is that so untrue that you must give me that ugly face?”

His expression changed from shock to one of distaste. He probably didn't appreciate my comment, considering he is the reason that we are so bitter towards each other. If he had not been such an egotistical jerk, then we may be in a different place to where we are today.

He took his hand back and shoved me out of the way to continue on his path. A petal flew from my flower and landed on his shoulder. I watched him walk away.

The Secret

Ina Ross (Ireland)

I crunch on my too-dry toast. Nan and Granddad are heavy sleepers so no need to worry about waking them. The morning sun spills into the once-dark kitchen. I'm usually still in bed when Nan gets up to feed the cats, but I couldn't sleep.

Nan's footsteps skip down the stairs. She's always so happy in the morning, unlike Granddad, who you should avoid at all costs before he's had his coffee. Opposites attract I suppose.

"Up early again, kitten? You ok?" she chirps as she strolls into the kitchen.

"Morning Nan, I fed the cats for you," I answer, trying to avoid the question and failing miserably. She can always tell when something's up. I haven't fed the cats since before Mum and Dad left.

They left when I was four. Nan told me they couldn't take care of me, that they were good people, but I've gone past the point of worrying about them anymore. I'm happy with Nan and Granddad – well, we'll see about that after today.

She clicks on the kettle then sits beside me. I fiddle nervously with my bracelet. She puts her arm around me and I snuggle into her, breathing in her scent just like when I was young.

"Got anything you want to talk about, kitten?" she says softly, petting my head.

Our shared love for cats is how I got the nickname. We would lie on the couch, curled up into each other, and chat about all the cats we'd own. She would pet my head and call me her 'favourite little kitten'.

I know I can talk to her about anything. I take a deep breath.

"I met someone, Nan," I murmur, eyes locked on the floor. No turning back now.

"Ah, and what's the lucky boy's name?" she replies, still rubbing my head. Just say it, I think to myself, it's now or never.

"Jess, Nan, her name is Jess," I whisper. She stops rubbing my head and gets up to make the coffee. She puts three mugs down onto the table and sits back down beside me. She exhales, and turns to me.

"Look at me, kitty," she says.

I turn to look at her, the nerves welling up inside me.

She smiles gently, putting them at ease. "That's what been bothering you? You were afraid to tell me you had a girlfriend? I love you no matter what, you know that right? When do we get to meet her?" She smiles through it all.

A wave of relief washes over me. She doesn't care. She still loves me. The happiness bubbles in my stomach. I throw my arms over her and squeeze her as tight as I can.

"I love you too, Nan." I cry, failing to hold the tears back. All the worry and fear finally subsides.

As we prepare for Granddad to come bounding downstairs, moaning and groaning about anything and everything, Nan hums a little song. I feel closer to her than ever before.

Dear Olivia

Nikita Olsen (Norway)

Dear Olivia

I just can't stop thinking about you. About the summer we spent together, which felt far too short. The nights we spent on the beach under the open sky. I'm still thinking about how it felt to hold your hand for the first time, and how it felt when I finally let you kiss me. I still haven't told anyone about what happened between us.

Dear Olivia,

I'm afraid. The terror of what other people will think is unbearable. It is so constant and huge that I no longer know what to do with myself. I wish you were here with me now. Strawberry and vanilla. That's what you smelled of last time I met you. Every time I go into the makeup shop I look for your perfume. It's a cliché, I know, but it's all I have left of you. So you'll just have to put up with the fact that I'm a hopeless romantic.

Dear Olivia,

My life has collapsed. Ruined. It's all your fault. Everyone knows about us now. What I am. Why did you have to come and mess everything up? I was happy with who I was before you appeared. Now my friends don't want to speak to me. My parents can't look me in the eye any more. I'm living in shame because of you. You changed me without asking for permission. I hate you.

Dear Olivia,

I'm so sorry about my last letter. I could never hate you. To be honest you are the only one keeping me going these days. You're like a mountain I can steady myself on. It's still hard. I'm trying not to think too much about you and me, but focus on school instead. My only wish is for a little understanding and for other people to just look out for themselves and let me live in peace.

Dear Olivia,

It happened again today. The looks, whispers and judgements. Same old thing. People look at me as if I'm from another planet. An alien maybe, definitely not human. I'm pretty sure I would get fewer looks if I were an alien. Sometimes I wish I was. I could leave on a spaceship for another planet. I would take you with me so we could at last be together without all this attention. That would be something, wouldn't it? How does Mars sound?

Dear Kristine,

Thank you for all the letters. I understand you. You must never be ashamed of who you are and who you chose to love. Love is love. That's something some people have trouble understanding. You are not alone and I will always be there for you. I know it's hard right now, but you mustn't let anyone break you. You are the most fantastic girl I've ever met. The world should realise that there is space for difference. Differences are important because they make us all unique, but also alike.

The Happiest Smile Ever Seen

Isabel Ott (Norway)

'...And you have to promise us you'll avoid the dangerous slopes.'

'We promise,' I said.

'We trust you.'

'I'll take care of him.'

They drove off and left us behind, alone. It had taken a long time for them to put their trust in me. I knew my friend well enough to know how he was feeling, what he liked and how to communicate with him. He was ready and I was too.

It was a gorgeous winter's day. The sun had transformed greyness into beauty. The mountain smiled at us. People stared, today as well. It makes me so angry. He's not retarded or stupid. He's an incredibly kind, intelligent and funny person. Even if I'd never heard his voice he was one of my closest friends.

I stood up and gathered all the equipment. He was sitting in a Tessier Sit-Ski with two black handles and a wide ski in the middle. A warm cover was wrapped round his legs and he was strapped in with a belt.

When we got off the gondola, the anger returned. I put my own skis on and moved well behind the carriage. Through sign language, I showed him our route towards the family slope.

He pointed in another direction, towards the downhill run. They trust me, more than anyone else. All the same, I knew he deserved better than skiing slopes crowded with people. People who stared. He deserved to experience. He deserved to discover, like all of us. He was brave. I smiled at him.

'Don't tell anybody,' I said, in our shared language.

One gentle push of the Sit-Ski and we started to slide away from safety towards the unknown. From greyness into beauty?

The sun shone on the mountain tops and the snow glittered in the light. The sky was deep blue dotted with white. The snow flew around like powder. It was like skiing on clouds. We were weightless. Nothing could stop us. All that existed was happiness, sunshine and snow.

We forgot all the people who stared at us. Forgot illness and anger. For a single moment we were just two teenagers in a whirlwind of snow. He lifted both his arms up high. The hillside became steadily steeper and our speed increased. Suddenly the ground left our skis behind. We flew up towards the heavens. Weightless and free.

Then gravity hit us like a fist in the stomach.

Everything before my eyes was white. The sun and happiness had escaped. Illness and anger returned. I could feel how the mountain stared at me.

His head flopped sideways, lifeless. Panic gripped me, I held my breath. I could never forgive myself. Slowly I looked into those light green eyes. They smiled the happiest smile ever seen.

On Edge

Rudolf Muller (Norway)

It was a cold night. An aspect that had not been given much thought. His hands were slowly going numb on the damp edge of the handrail. Jayce was trying not to give impact too much thought, wondering if it would feel like falling in a dream, where you wake up in bed with a jolt.

Lost in his own world, waiting for the right moment, the faint sound of footsteps pulled him out of his trance. In turning he could see someone walking in his direction. It took a bit for him to recognize the figure as someone from school. He didn't exactly know him, but everybody knew him as the blind guy. The cane was a giveaway.

Now would have been a good time to let go, but he was curious. He didn't move a muscle, instead watching the young man, anticipating him to pass without any disturbance.

"Hey, excuse me, could I borrow your phone?"

Jayce stared perplexedly at the guy who had stopped maybe five steps short of him. His neck was strained in an effort to keep his eyes on him.

The dark eyed boy tapped his white cane on the ground. "You know I'm blind, not deaf. I can hear you breathing."

It took another moment for Jayce to collect himself. "Well yea, sure I guess." His voice hurt his ears.

"Oh, I think I know you." His dark eyes seemed to light up. "You spoke at school assembly about starting a group for queer kids."

"Ahm, yea."

His attention flickered away, he looked down and tried to make out any kind of shape in the darkness. How far would be far enough?

"I remember because I was going to join." He shifted a bit on his feet. "Anyways, what's your name? I'm afraid I don't recall."

"It's Jayce." A few seconds were spent wondering what that guy would think if his conversation partner suddenly disappeared.

"Right! I'm Salim, nice to meet you. Jayce is a cool name."

Jayce held back a bitter taste in his mouth. "Yea, chose it myself."

"Wow, did your parents let you choose your own name? That's pretty rad!"

He caught a glimpse of a bright grin on Salim's face.

“It’s because I’m trans.”

“Oh, cool, never would have guessed.” Salim shook off his words with such ease as though he had merely mentioned the weather.

“Anyways, my phone died, and I need to call my dad to pick me up. Mind giving me yours? I’m sure he can drive you home too.”

“Right.” He carefully started to fish in his pocket for the phone. “Here.” he reached out and held it in Salim’s direction.

A few seconds passed in silence.

Then Salim raised his voice. “You do know what blind means.”

“Oh, right.”

He slid the phone back into his pocket and slowly turned on the thin ledge. Hands shaking, he climbed over the rail back onto the sidewalk. “Okay, what number should I call?”

No More Borders

Maisy Mansell-Warren (UK)

Explosion of life,
culture,
colour and
opportunities.
Many ways to expand horizons,
stopper hatred
and grow beauty.
Fire in our hearts, our minds, our souls.
Unexpected,
yet familiar
Surprising,
yet recognisable.
Energy, youth, ideas,
entertaining Mother Nature with more
and more
beauty each day.
Natural links,
cultural bonds,
organic friendship.
The focus of all corners, all to the burning
core. Internal joy.
Power for good,

strength for tenderness,
a spiritual mass of bodies,
all leaning
towards the same
though different
magic.
Danger in nurturing
others.
Pain in healing
friends.
But a burning, fighting
desire
to love.

Play the Game

Samantha Richards (Ireland)

I don't know what I'm running towards but it has to be better than what I'm leaving behind. I shudder at the thought of the gloomy room. I can still remember the shadows that lurked in the darkness. I don't remember anything about my life before the room but hopefully I'll figure it out soon. I think back to how this all started, how I'd woken up to see a darkened hole in the wall that had never been there before.

The winding passage of stone walls envelope me, but I notice a light peeking out. I make my feet hit the ground harder and push me further. As I near the end I can hear a voice. I can't understand what it's saying but it doesn't sound happy. Soon enough, I manage to push a large stone out of my way and emerge into a bright room.

A figure in bright clothes greets me. The figure approaches me slowly. Once my eyes travel past the illuminating clothes, the opposite of my plain grey ones, I notice the figure morph into a man with long hair, covering his shoulders in bright blonde locks. He looks like an angel, if an angel looked depressed. "Oh thank god, someone's here to kill me," he grumbles.

"Pardon?" I gasp, my voice squeaky with nerves. His blue eyes look me up and down, as if he can't help but take in everything about me. Although I am doing the same, so I am in no position to judge. I look around and there are lots of paintings on the walls. They're all bright and colourful, filled with myriad shades of yellow and blue. One painting catches my eye and as I move closer I realise it's not a painting at all but a photograph. A photo of me; I recognise the brown locks that fall to my waist and my lanky legs.

The man comes up behind me. "It's the only beautiful thing in this room, the darkness, the look of misery the girl has on her face, it's pure, it's twisted."

I stare at him. I frown slightly. "It's horrible, nothing's happy, it's all doom and gloom," I sigh.

I jump as a loud voice booms through the walls, echoing. "Welcome, players one and two. I see you have been acquainted. For the past six months, I have been running a torture machine. Throwing you into a room with your worst nightmares. Now, you must survive against all the other teams." I shudder as I feel the vibrations of the voice go through me. I can't help but let out a soft whimper.

"Good luck."

The voice then fades out and the walls around us begin to move, they shift to reveal four other passages, leading into darkness.

I then realise something, this was always a game. A game between light and dark, and now we have to work together.

The Allaji

Gurpal Sahota (UK)

The waves splashed against the hull of the boat as it crept its way through the Mediterranean Sea. The stars that filled the dark blanket of the night's sky bounced off the murky water, creating a never-ending firmament that encapsulated the land. We were all standing and crammed together, many of us towards the edge of the boat, as it was so full, and we all held on tight to some thin wire and hope, as it was the only thing many of us had left.

We had all heard stories of this malevolent sea, how it was like a monster, swallowing up our brothers and sisters and spitting them back out onto the shores and beaches of Europe. But nothing compared with the horrors of our homeland.

The relentless bombing, artillery strikes and gunfire had been engraved into our brains, poisoning our minds and slowly becoming a part of us. Many of us had lived in Halab or in English, Aleppo, but were forced to seek refuge after many of our homes and families were ripped apart like a simple stitch being pulled into two, by powerful, god-like hands. That's what we were fleeing. Something so controlling and deadly that god was the closest thing to it.

Then, an old woman, with striking emerald-green eyes, shouted in my mother tongue, "kanuu aminin!"; Making everyone turn around. It was stunning. Beautiful in fact. She had just said that we were safe. We all gazed upon Europe's shores, thunderstruck . All stunned into silence by knowing that safety, and hope were within our grasp.

Suddenly, a colossal wave slammed into the side of the boat, sending us up into the icy, bitter air and making the boat capsize. I crashed violently into the water, my head disappearing into the depths for a moment and then re-emerging, soaked. I turned in the water frantically, searching for people, for my brothers and sisters, for my homeland, for hope. But I was greeted with nobody, silence and despair.

Swimming, I grabbed onto the blue hull of the boat, scratching the blue paint off as I tried to claw my way up out of the unforgiving water. I tried screaming for help, but only muffled sobs came out, alongside my tears. There I was, so close to hope, but closer to death. All I wanted, all we wanted was hope and safety, and this ocean had crushed that, just like the tanks that rolled over my homeland.

So, as I lay there, on top of this sinking boat, close to certain death, I wondered why we had been dehumanised, demonised and persecuted. Not only by Europe, but also by the world. Closing my eyes, I thought of my homeland on a bright sunny day, drenched in sunlight and happiness and wondered what we had done to deserve this fate.

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