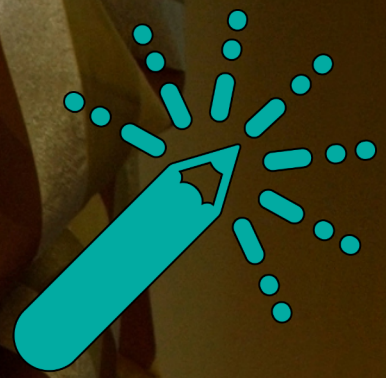


Spark Young Writers



READ ON

WRITING
WEST
MIDLANDS

Issue 22 April 2021

Take a look at the contents page for this issue, please. It's the longest contents page we've ever had and I believe it's the best, too. I look at that list and more than story plots or rhymes, I'm instead thinking of what each piece made me feel.

Sometimes they just made me laugh. Occasionally they also frightened me. But one thing that each of these rather startlingly different pieces has in common is that they are more than the words on the page. They reach out to you, sometimes with a grin to tickle you, sometimes to give you a cold scare, and most often to change you in just a little, important way.

What they also have in common, though, is that they are here. For every one of the pieces in this contents page, there are something like 1.2 other pieces that did not make it. We say this when you're submitting work but I want to underline it.

Spark Young Writers magazine is for young writers, yes, but in reality it isn't for writers at all — it is for the readers.

So when you submit to Spark Young Writers magazine and I'm the editor, I treat you the way I do any other writer commissioned for any other magazine. That does mean there is a lot of rejection, but you're a writer, rejection is normal. Rejection is so normal it's practically boring, but our aim here is that if you are rejected, you are told why and what you can do about it.

Whereas if you are accepted and you are published, know that you earned this. I still don't know any better feeling than that and I've been writing for a long time now.

William Gallagher, editor

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. It is also available to read online at www.writeonmagazine.org.

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Trapped

Saffron Kumar

She looks out of the window whilst the snow falls down gently. She feels judged by the snow as if it is telling her to stop daydreaming. Yet she keeps staring at him. The waiter across the street. How he serves plates with his smiling lips, his deep black hair as he slowly brushes it back with his hand. She just wants to touch him. To speak to him, but her insecurities and emotions trap her like she cannot move.

So instead, she watches, dreams, and thinks of what she could do if she had the confidence and the people around to hype her up. Her friends? She has them yet no one to trust. She feels alone... as if not all aspects of her life can go well at once. Something must always go wrong for something else to go right, like a constantly shifting jigsaw. Her life is a puzzle which she feels she should be able to complete but she does not know how.

Instead, she studies and studies trying to impress someone and feel something, but failure is always present in her mind no matter how well she does. The pressure of life falls and holds her down into bed. She wants to get up, but she cannot. She tried too many times to be knocked down... her energy watching her, laughing, as it waits for her to fail another day. Another week. Another year.

Many call her weird when she acts herself, but boring when she is quiet. She feels like she is a part of the jigsaw that does not fit in anywhere in her family. In her friends. In her life. She wonders if it could all just go away but is fearful.

No one understands her and no one feels her emotion, but she still sits in that same coffee shop with her laptop wondering and wondering if one day she will finally have her dream of success. This boy. Even his smile breaks the cold layer of ice the world casts on her, the warmth of his image warms her comforting the insecure energy around her like a blanket of security. Maybe she should just talk to him? Maybe... just maybe...

World of Colours

Iona Mandal

Child of colour in nursery school
learned the colours as she drooled.

Yellow sunshine, red rising sun,
blue for boys and pink for girls.

Blue for oceans, forests green,
earthy brown and chocolate skin.

Pink in health, in envy green,
black and blue in battered skin.

Black tie, black belt, sexy black
bin bags, black moors, evil black?

Black hair always beautiful,
Black rights and, Black Lives Matter too.

Red blood, red Coke, valentine
in revolution, passion, danger, crime.

Colour in game, in politics
colour card, race card, food labelling.

“Confusing world and its colours!”, I sigh,
“Lucky are those who are colour blind.”

Colour me a rainbow, colour me pride,
Mix your colours, colour your mind.

Yours Sincerely

Fanni Doroti Polgar

Dear Desire,
a small circle is better than one of wrong,
keep the loyal close – in love you will always belong.

Dear Fear,
you are as close to nature as roots of flowers,
be cautious or you shall gain power to devour.

Dear Passion,
you never appear to step out of fashion,
but promise to never blind, balance in ambition is key – take your steps in healthy rations.

Dear Necessity,
remind me should I ever forget,
you are one I could never live without; you should be priority without regret.

Dear Love,
you come and you leave, but above all remind who is true.
Promise to give warmth to the ones I love most. To you, love, this is a fundamental toast.

Dear Fate,
finally but never fatally, in the depths of despair you are one I resent.
Lecture me to live in the present as opposed to fearing your presence. Teach me to accept, even in times of grief and neglect.

Yours sincerely, me.

A Love Letter to the Virus

Hannah Tilt

Oh clasp me in your callous arms and sing,
Of worlds where you and I may wrap our pain,
As though a gift of sight to everything,
And not the soiled sheets we two have lain.
You clutch me as I fight to find a thought,
Or whisper spiteful tricks about my mind,
We always watch the bullet birds we sought,
I stand here like a hatchling left behind.
My murderer, my drug, my all I plead,
Oh love me- I shall fly and I shall race,
Believe me when I talk of love and bleed,
How I adore the patterns that we trace,
So lull me with your steady, biting fear,
And keep me close for always: keep me near.

Short Screenplay: Gen Z

Kimaya Garg

INT. DENTIST’S OFFICE – DAY

Enter Nurse and Boy. Nurse speaks in a formal British dialect. Boy speaks in a rude, informal dialect.

NURSE: Hello, young man, are you here for your dentist’s appointment?
BOY: Can I say no?
NURSE: Well, that depends, now, doesn’t it, on the answer to my question?
BOY: I suppose so.
NURSE: So, are you here for your dentist’s appointment?
BOY: Where’s the nice nurse?
NURSE: I’m afraid I don’t who you are talking about. What is their name?
BOY: I dunno, it’s som’in like Lori. Anyway, who are you, huh?
NURSE: You mean Lorelai. Why, I should have known. You’re James, aren’t you?
BOY: How’d y’ know?
NURSE: I am covering for her. She did say you could be quite the handful. Let me check for you when your appointment is. Full name and date of birth, please.
BOY: Name’s James Reed.
NURSE: And date of birth?
BOY: I dunno.
NURSE: Your date of birth is the day, month and year you were born. It’s also the day when you celebrate your birthday each year. It sounds like I’m answering a question on a Year 2 vocabulary test.
BOY: Never heard of a birthday in m’ life.
NURSE: Well, lucky for you, you’re the only James Reed on the system. Your appointment is in 10 minutes. Why don’t you go and play with the abacus?
BOY: What now?
NURSE: That toy with the beads, over there. Why don’t you go and play with it?
BOY: Nah
NURSE: Why ever not?
BOY: Cuz it looks boring

NURSE: It’s actually quite fun. Come, I’ll show you.
BOY: This is mega boring.
NURSE: Oh, what nonsense.
BOY: It ain’t gonna be fun if you’re shouting down at me like the Trunchbull
NURSE: Well, at least he’s read a book.
BOY: Nah, I watched the movie.
NURSE: (SARCASTICALLY) Great. Why don’t you go and read one of those books over there, on that table.
BOY: What table?
NURSE: The one that looks like the giant peach from James and the Giant Peach.
BOY: The what now?
NURSE: Oh, I don’t think there’s a movie version of that.
BOY: Oh yeah there is. But where is the table?
NURSE: The one in front of you.
BOY: But this is a giant peach not a table.
NURSE: (ANNOYED) It’s a table that LOOKS like a giant peach.
BOY: So?
NURSE: Your parents are very unfortunate, I must say.
BOY: Yeah, they’re very poor. How’d y’ know?
NURSE: I didn’t. I’ve had enough of this. Sit quietly until your appointment.

[Pause]

NURSE: I SAID SIT QUIETLY NOT DANCE ON THE TABLE!
BOY: But...
NURSE: Oh for heaven’s sake!

Enter Dentist, who hands the boy a video game.

DENTIST: Here you go kid, latest version of Fortnite on here!
BOY: Sweet!
NURSE: Honestly, that’s all I had to do? Hand him a chunk of metal and he would sit there quietly while his brain developed aggressive ideas and became accustomed to late bedtime?

ENDS

Finding Certainty in Uncertainty

Laurie Archer

I don't think I'm ever going to be happy until I have an answer.

My anxious mind craves clarity and absolutes, and unanswered questions can leave me in tears like fractions of salty seas. But sometimes we have to learn to deal with change, and uncertainties, and questions that just don't seem to have answers.

Because in amongst all this change, is the clarity I've been hoping to find.

The Moon or the Sun

Samiya Basha

Is it the moon or the sun?

I don't know.

'No! It is I that has all the fun!

When the sun goes down I am a-glow!

As sun replies, 'Yes but when finally you go down I am A-GLOW!'

Who is correct?

We don't know.

The sun and moon debate,

Who will be at show!

'It is I who will show!' The moon said proudly,

'No it AIN'T!' The sun said loudly.

'I am MORE beautiful!'

'And I am MORE cheerful!'

Is it the moon or the sun?

I don't know.

'No! It is I that has all the fun!

When the sun goes down I am a-glow!

'Yes, but finally when you go down I am A-GLOW!'

I'm Bored

Tashantie Thomas

Bored you say, bored indeed
Bored with nothing to do but to succeed
Bored in your house, yes, you're bored in your home
Bored with your family, friends or alone
Bored is a statement, bored isn't a fact
You think you're bored; I think there are words better than that

You look out your window
You stare at the sun; you look at the trees and...
"Yep, I'm done."
Stare at the wall or stare at your phone
Hating the haunting feeling of being alone
Creeping upon you, glaring you down
Silently whispering, "Who's in control now?"
More time to think, lost in your thoughts
Memories and theories all of a sort
Stories and poems, there's so much to do
Too bored, too lazy so nothing's for you

Bored you say, bored indeed
Bored with nothing to do but to succeed
Bored in your house, yes, you're bored in your home
Bored with your family, friends or alone
Bored is a statement, bored isn't a fact
You think you're bored; I think there are words better than that

Circling your house for the millionth time
"I can't believe I miss school?!"
You say in a sigh
Struggling intensely, going insane
Tears like acid, a pounding in your brain
And finally, a conclusion has been made
An agreement, not staged
We have brought this upon ourselves
This is a lesson, we ourselves have made
We hurt our earth, putting it through excruciating pain
Ruining its sea life, forests and air – straight to its brain
We're smart enough to have discovered the moon, light years and most things
around it
But treat the earth we live on less than a piece of garbage

Bored you say, bored indeed
Bored with nothing to do but to succeed
Bored in your house, yes, you're bored in your home
Bored with your family, friends or alone
Bored is a statement, bored isn't a fact
You think you're bored; I think there are words better than that

Next time you complain, just stop to think
We have ruined our earth, dipped it in black ink
So isolated, so broken
And yet we leave it to fix itself
We've ruined so many beauties
On this planet, earth's shell
People are dying, how do you feel?
Covid's taken over, it's on the winning field

Why you may ask, yes why indeed
This curse is only because of all our bad deeds
Our earth showed us tears and we turned away
And now it's trying to get back its own way

Bored you say, bored indeed
Bored with nothing to do but to succeed
Bored in your house, yes, you're bored in your home
Bored with your family, friends or alone
Bored is a statement, bored isn't a fact
You think you're bored; I think there are words better than that
Stay at home, it's the least you could do
The earth is suffering because of you
Covid's here, it's all your fault
Now everyone is living in a gigantic vault.

Trail

Zarah Alam

You, sepia-stained monolith,
All too happy to escape the pen
of history. Your absence has forced

Me to hunt you down, no paper trail
No passport, only whispers that you're
That way, round the corner, down the stairs,

Look up. This journey takes me to dark
Places, my flashlight shines shadows,
I hear you clamber behind them.
You're playing with me. You know

I cannot reach you, yet
I enlist a team to help me play
This game of dinosaur and man.

When I do find your bones,
And I promise you I will,
I hope I guess the right shade of your feathers

And the way you might have said my name.

Our Future, Lest We Forget

Scarlett Hall

Tomorrow never dies,
The sky will open wide
Please close your eyes
The end is not for you to see

The sea is churning
The sky is burning
Close your tear-soaked eyes
The end is not for you to see

The ice is dripping
Priorities flipping
The end is nigh
Close your eyes

The ground shifts
The ships did lift
Our children up to the sky.
Now the ships have gone
The earth has won.
Goodbye.
Goodbye.

Trying to Find the Missing Pieces

Annabel Herbert

It was at the age of nine that I became a detective, trying to decipher who my brother was after he got his diagnosis at six years old. I had no awareness of what a mental illness was, and I had never heard the word autism before. So when I sat there with my parents in the doctor's office and the psychologists told them that he was autistic, that his brain was different, I had no template to understand what was wrong with him. The only evidence I gathered from this was that Mum was devastated, so it was something I should probably be sad about too. I didn't notice any 'difference' at this point either, only the therapy ball and the sensory mat which became permanent fixtures in the kitchen after he started occupational therapy.

My first big step in learning about his autism was when I finally realised that the machinations Miles puts himself through every day weren't entirely normal. None of my friends had hand-washing rituals, where they would go through almost five bottles of liquid soap a week. None of my friends would throw a fit whenever they were given a glass of water in the 'incorrect glass', and none of them had the most annoying pathological need to control all situations. It was as though the difference had suddenly become so apparent that it expanded until it filled the room, it became claustrophobic, unavoidable. This is when I found that most of his habits which I had just accepted as a part of who he was, were actually a result of his autism.

Overtime, I became more and more motivated to find out who was inside this boy, and after a quick Google search, it was revealed that he had extra connections between his brain cells, a surplus of synapses, 'significantly more folding in the left parietal and temporal lobes as well as in the right frontal and temporal regions.' This would have been useful only if I was a neurologist.

Google images, however, offered me a flurry of pictures all containing blue, red, green and yellow puzzle pieces, the autism awareness symbol. I thought that it implied a mystery to be solved, something to be put together, and for a while, it became easy to understand him as one giant puzzle. Sometimes, I even went as far as thinking that the missing pieces of his puzzle had got up and left on their own adventure, following their own life, away from society. Miles just didn't fit in. However, as much as I tried to understand him through my jigsaw analogy, I was wrong. How can you understand someone, when the person you are trying to understand doesn't even know who they are themselves?

Miles's brain is a beautiful, one-of-a-kind brain. A brain that can do incredible things that my own brain can't. But most importantly, it's a brain that I have come to accept that I will never understand, but that's okay to not understand.

Finding Me

Fizra Bibi

We go down the steps of the Katara Amphitheatre, giving people nods and salaams on the way, We go past the stage where the Sufis are twirling in their white gowns, where there is an orchestra behind them belting out Arabic tunes. We reach hut-like tents that are draped in bunting of fairy lights and I give a confused look to Hassan as he nods towards Ami and Abba.

Abba is one of those men who are surprisingly gentle, but his tallness means he towers over most people. With his wide shoulders and thick neck, and with his square face, he comes across as aggressive but really, he is a gentle giant.

Ami... she is just beautiful, with a face which turned heads in whichever room she was in. She was my Disney princess whose golden-brown long hair tucked in a high bun, concealed by a loose scarf.

We say our salaams and make our way towards the centre of the tent. There is an air of concentration, heads crowded together, people sitting closely together on the floor with similar cushions to those outside. We take our seats near the front where there is a minuscule stage built. Abba brings us a tin bowl brimming with white froth, it has hints of cardamom and ginger it is warm, sweet, and refreshing, deliciously clean on the tongue. He takes his seat and tucks his feet underneath him; I mouth a thank you and he blows me a kiss.

I nudge Ami, giving her a 'what are we doing here look' and she kisses me on my forehead and whispers,

"I pulled a few strings and I requested this for you. I hope you enjoy it baby girl."

I look at her confused and then from the corner of my eye I see a group settling on the stage and they capture everyone's attention. And then it starts... they take turns to tell stories, stories of monsters, fairies, jinns, ghouls, each changing with each retelling as they mixed cultures and traditions. I have trouble keeping up because they go from Qatari dialect to English, Pashto and Urdu.

I feel like I can't speak, I can't breathe, I can only listen, because there's just something about telling a story that let's everyone's imagination run wild. I feel my eyes burning and I look over toward Ami. She has Hassan's head in her lap stroking his hair, just like when we were children, where she would tell us stories about these storytellers that transformed her into different worlds. Ami and I stare at each other, our eyes having a conversation. And now I look back to the group on the stage moving their lips and transporting everyone into an unknown world where somehow it all seems familiar.

Death's Jingle

Hamza Muhammad

The bell doth chime for you but not I.
I wait in your absence and you remain
Unaware of mine, I sleep in your absence

But you do not sleep in mine.
Ever so lightly doth the bell chime.
The jingle of tears audible to only I.
Silent gaps just as you once took yours.
I plead with you do not bid me goodbye

Sullen faces proclaim to both you and I.
Yet why is it I who remains?
Why is it you are but remains?

Still in your grave I am stilled in mine
In your wake I am woken.

The jingle of Death's hand, beard
painted white, lacquered in the colour of
death with semblances of life.

I bid you no-morrow and no-night.

Day and Night in a Life Raft Experience

Kevin Ge

Inside the life raft, it was chaotic and I felt seasick many times. The sea was churning and rumbling like a mighty lion; the sky was dismal, gloomy and depressed as if it was going to cry. The raft was being thrashed like it was a leaf in a storm swishing and swirling helplessly. I didn't know what time of the day it was, and I felt exhausted but still could not sleep because of all of the hubbub that overwhelmed me. I was frightened out of my skin, and I just sat, trembling as I prayed that I would survive this disaster.

Imagine the sky, as dark as night, grumbling, wailing and bellowing; the sea, growing ever more fearsome and the waves towering above the raft then smashing down. I swore to go on or die. Then a big wave smashed my face full on, and I staggered backwards, falling down to the raft's deck. Before I had got to my feet, another powerful wave sent me rolling like a rag doll. I tried to crawl forward but the raft jumped up and I was thrown across again. So I went on staggering, heaving, wrestling, throbbing, rolling and rocking until I finally got to the front of the raft. It felt like the waves were battling against me. I felt terribly, terribly sick and wanted to throw up badly. I swallowed one of the rations but it tasted dry in my mouth. It was going to be yet another sleepless night for me...

The storm had died away and I felt calmer, almost at peace. There were no more thundering waves, so I opened the flap and sighed in relief that I was still alive. Picture the clear, blue water, and the azure, cloudless sky. Peacefulness filled the air, and I saw small fish, swimming in the water. Then I saw a shark! Although it was a pup (a baby shark), I still panicked and squeezed my eyes shut, praying that the pup wouldn't bite the raft. After a while the shark gracefully swam away. I sighed and wondered if anyone would rescue me. Picture my raft, just bobbing on the sea and me, sitting near the flap staring out and trembling.

You are My Universe

Laurie Archer

You are all of space.
I will commit to counting
All your pretty stars.

All of our stars shine
Just a little bit brighter
When you are around.

Sometimes I just wish,
That in this dark universe,
I could be your sun.

When the Static Leaves

Lilli Davies

Feet thundering against the damp tarmac, I forced my body forward in a blind frenzy. Faster, faster, faster. The sounds of the city were far behind me now: honking horns and the buzz of people had melted down into a consistent hum of white noise that consumed my mind. Good.

A sudden spark of agony shot through my side like a razor blade, knocking the wind from my lungs as effectively as a punch to the gut. I staggered to a stop, my chest heaving in and out, in and out until after a few minutes I regained my composure. The static in my head was already fading. No. Taking one final deep inhale, I spurred myself back into motion. I had taken two steps before the blade returned, stabbing with so much force that my knees gave out and I crumpled against a nearby bench.

I had to accept defeat. New York was beautiful at this time of night – all glowing lights and soft, cool breezes. As I sat here, gasping to regain my breath, little snippets of sound floated on the breeze. The faint rustle of autumn leaves. The melodious cry of a bird. The pulse of far off music...

The static was gone.

It happened so fast, faster than I could comprehend. One second I was in the doctor's office, eyes wide as he sat motionless next to me. Then I was in the hospital, smiling through hot tears as he strummed a melody on his guitar. Then I was in a plain black dress, staring at his face. His kind, cheeky face...

"Kate?" A familiar voice cleaved through my thoughts and snapped me back to my senses. A tickling on my chin sent a shiver across my shoulders, but it was only a stray tear. I was crying? Hurriedly flicking the tears away, I turned towards the voice. Eyes widening in shock, I stood to greet Matthew who was jogging slowly towards me from the other end of the path.

"How are you-?"

"Come on, Kate. Did you seriously think I didn't know where you were?" Matthew chuckled and raised his eyebrows playfully, but no smile crossed my lips. Instead of answering, I sank back down to the bench and rubbed mindlessly at my tired eyes. With a soft rustle of clothes – or was it the leaves again? – I heard Matthew edge slightly closer.

"What's wrong, Kit Kat?" His tone was gentler now, as gentle as the night air on my skin. "Do you want to talk about it?" Another rustle of clothes and I felt his weight on the bench next to me. I'm not ready.

I turned. There was nothing there. Nothing where Matthew was, should be. There were only the whispers of the wind and the crackle of dead leaves as I buried my face in my hands, tears pouring over my cheeks. I had come to the park to be alone. And here I was. Alone.

A Space Journey

Liang Zi Zhao

This poem is about an alien. This particular type of alien always flips round to show if they are happy or sad but every time one of them flips round the whole planet does as well!

I'm going to space,
Cause I'm tired of this place!
The constant spinning which makes me sick,
It makes me want to do a kick!
So that's why I'm off,
I'll find a planet in a cough.
So so long,
And I will be gone long,

Here I am in space,
Travelling at my own pace.
Suddenly I realise I'm lost,
So this was the cost!
To lose home for space,
Now I realise that I'm tangled in a lace.
I've eaten all the meat off my bone,

And now I've finished my ice cream cone!
I want to go home!
I am alone,
Nothing for company but a bone.
I miss home,
I don't even have a comb!
In space,
I'll never see another face.
But wait,
Being alone is not my fate!
For I see home,
In a few minutes time,
I won't be alone!
I'll be just fine.

Finally I'm at home,
No longer alone.
I'm never leaving again,
I've even made my own den!
Here I am no longer lost,
And I'll never leave at any cost.

There is an Island in My Head

Mei Kawagoe

There is an island in my head.
Your thyroid is the butterfly – with the broken wings and the splayed spine.
It lives in my throat. It's so alive.
Tell it to still yet it won't. Thrums at the paper of skin - the pretence of security.
But love its electric spasms, and it'll love you.

I make beautiful things.
Here, where they can't reach us. The seas will hold us.
Boneless fingers breaking for air, as they lift your body, smooth your hair.
My island is the pacemaker, tucked in beneath my little finger.
My island is home.

I visit my island.
My island visits me.
The walls shake. Hurricanes.
Summer storms that come to play.
They cradle my neck. Murmur silly things.
Unfurl your ears and eat your tears. It'll be fine, little one.

If you wanted pears, tart, soft – grotesque in their scent. Then you would come.
Still, my island and me never get lonely. We, the people, the witches in the estuary.
I festoon it with medallions, ribbons, lions.
We roar, quietly.

But not now.
Not now.
Now I am in a trolley; a cot; a bed; a hearse.
This is the first time one of the big ones run.
I mind my Ps and Qs, but I mind all of them.

There is an island in my head.
There is an island in my head.

Cover your minuscule madnesses!
Authority is the ringmaster.
I am the child.
We fight.
Wrestle with shadows. They lace up the walls, hallucinatory.
The undoing of me.

Two can't win.
At my funeral – or yours, you go first –
Will they sing?

I am the child.
I am the child.
I am the island.

The Golden Ship

Nicholas John Forbes Saunders

Crash!

Another wave collided with us and tore a hole in the side of the ship. The wind howled in fury through the thick veil of rain that surrounded the vessel. My crew were all utterly terrified and were either trying to tie themselves to the mast or praying to their gods for salvation. I tried to call out to them but could hear nothing over the raging storm. After realising that it was useless, I tried in desperation to steer us into the waves to slow our pace, yet the winds only pulled us ever closer to the eye of the storm. Then, with nothing else left to do, I looked ahead of us and saw an impossible thing.

I saw a gleaming golden ship which parted the crashing waves and the howling wind. A ship that redirected lightning and left only peaceful waters in its wake. Their vessel turned from its path at the sight of us and sailed towards our hopeless selves. The storm subsided as they drew nearer, with the rain clouds thinning and the sound of the rolling thunder turning slowly more muffled the closer they sailed. The winds were all but gone after a few seconds and the waves were no stronger than ripples in a rock pool. As they pulled their vessel aside ours, I saw it in more detail than ever, its golden hull accentuated by the silver depiction of a naval battle intricately carved into the side. After a few moments of peace, they then helped us jump aboard one by one until there was only myself left. I waited for the moment when the boats were at their closest and jumped. When I was hauled aboard, my mind felt instantly lighter as if all my fear just melted away in the presence of an all-consuming calm.

After a few minutes of adjusting to the wordless silence of the craft, I finally looked around myself and the crew caught my eye. There were over fifty people who worked the ship and none of them had any scars, or scrapes or blemishes at all. There was not even any sea spray staining their clothes. They all seemed to shine with health and strength which rubbed off on those of us who had just arrived. My body became weary as we left my barnacled ship behind and I fell into the warm embrace of sleep.

I awoke lying next to the captain of the ship, and after sitting up asked.

“Who are you? And where are you headed?”

With a calm flat tone, he answered: “We are the Psychopomps, and we are going to the east to give your souls rest.”

“To give our souls rest?” I responded with some confusion.

At these words, his face turned grim and seemed to make the entire ship visibly darken. With empathy in his eyes, he spoke.

“Yes, you died in that storm and we came to save your souls from being lost to the waves.”

Alone

Ruby Crowther

After staring at it for so long I realise that your reflection will always show the truth, no matter how hard you try to change it. The girl looking back at me in the rippling river is numb... expressionless... I can put on a smile all I want but the void in her eyes never leaves.

I carefully lay back on the cold rough rocks and the stars dance across the sky. They always say that the stars shine bright because they're happy, smiling, free... But what if stars shine to hide their sorrow?

Having to watch the world keep spinning and knowing they'll never experience a life of their own, stuck in the middle of darkness with only the light that they produce to console them. I think stars are misjudged and that because they are surrounded by dusk we see them as the brightest light, but what about the stars that have lost the energy and motivation to shine? Because they don't shine we overlook them as nothing but rock.

Like when we struggle to hold onto the light inside of us, we are overlooked. So I stare at the stars with sympathy and I promise that as long as they shine, I'll put on my fake smile and continue as they do.

For I may be hurting but I'll never feel the sorrow of the stars... and I'll lay here talking with them until morning comes when the sun can take their burden.

Forever I'll continue one night at a time, alone with my reflection and the stars.

Every Child Needs

Sapphire Sandhu

Every child should be treated the same way. Every child needs a family and friends.
We need education and love. Most important thing is what everybody needs: shelter,
water and food.

We will stand together. We will step in the out of the shadows and show ourselves.
We will be in the light once again.

We are not alone!

With the Monster Around My Neck

Petra-Jane Rihan

Beep.
Beep.

Cold, icy air fills my lungs.
I FEEL the nurse's fingers on me.
But yet I don't feel anything.
The lights bright but all I see is dark.
I recognise the feeling of the illness wrapping long fingers round my wrists and
holding me hostage.
I'm in my hospital bed, I know where I am but I'm not present. I feel the hard bed and
flat pillows beneath me but I'm floating.

Beep.
Beep.
Machinery clicks and clanks and runs its engines, trying to treat me.
"She's slipping." Nurses are speaking around me but I can barely hear them.
"She's going."
Words dance around in circles above my head, I want to grab them, tell them to stop,
tell them to make sense.
A dark monster has its hands around my neck, a car I got in too long ago and now it's
driving so fast I can't jump out.
But I'm slipping.

Beep.
Beep.
Beep.

I'm holding on, god, I'm so scared. I feel the big dark monster wrapping its arms
around me and telling me,
"It's safe. I'm safe. Don't fear me. I'm good for you."

Cups clanking.
Back in time.
All the way back.
Clock turned back
It's graduation and we've thrown our hats in the air, we hold icy cold apple juice in
heavy, small glasses.
Laughter fills the air and the world seems so full of possibility.
But as I watch the moment, feel the scratchy gown on my skin, I can feel the monster
whispering in my ear,
"Let go, come to me."

Why can I feel water? I look down.
The world is blurry but I can feel my feet, standing in a running river running like an Olympic sport winner, running to win the race. The water is cold and I can hear laughing.
I see a face.
My daughter, jeans rolled up and laughing as I pull her into the river as well.
Summer, 2008, things were okay.
I wasn't at the mercy of a hospital bed, tying me down.
This, this moment all but a memory.

Over, tie, pull the hair. I plait my daughters' hair, hair that's identical to mine.
I miss her. I remember when life was simple and she lived with me and it was just us.
Then we had a fight.
She left because of something stupid I did.
I miss her.
I want her by my side.
"I'm here for you." The monster runs its claws down my arms and tries to make me trust it.

I gasp.
Cold, icy air in my lungs.
The white lights are back, I feel the flat pillow and hard back of the familiar hospital bed.
I smell the smell of sharp, fake fruity cleaning spray.
I see the nurses around me.
Beep.
Beep.
And for once, I see the monster. It's given up. It's leaving.
The arms loosen its grip and the hands let go around my neck.
"She's back." The nurses say.
Beep.
Beep.
Beep.

2021: A Rough Start

Sadeen Ahmad

Every day, I got up with a smile. But now, that smile is turned upside down. I stare outside the window: wondering, yet yearning to run free once this is over. The seasons fade in and out like soft lullabies, their transitions are slow, but never faltering. From blooming flowers, to the hot, aromatic air, then to the crisp, fresh autumn breeze full to the brim with ever-changing colours and finally to the hot chocolate and bitter wind that is silenced with the crackling of a hot fire. I have lived through those, but wish to embrace and fulfil them with liberty. The liberty to foster plants, soak in the sun and dip into a pool, crunch leaves and throw them gleefully into the air and eat a turkey with the ones I love the most.

Yet right now, my eyes sting and my head drums at a million times an hour, whilst reluctantly looking at a screen and forcing a smile when scolded, only to be seen paying attention. Every drop of free time that I get, I collapse onto my bed and close my eyes just remembering that in another minute is maths. My most dreaded subject and dreaded teacher. At the end of a school day, when my mother asks how the day went after her continual meetings, I say that I'm fine. But deep within is a monster running wild inside of me. It's drained, fed up and restricted to let loose and enjoy life as we were always told to do.

I run at a chance to sleep because then is the only moment that I can be with myself. Not with any screens, questions, maths and siblings. You may expect me to drop to sleep, but I stay awake and cry till I cannot cry anymore. I want to be engulfed in my tears and bawl loudly; but those around me shouldn't hear me. I stay up late and curse my life – and math. Cry like I haven't cried before. Because the next morning will be the exact same.

This, this life is heart-breaking for me. It was only then my mother opened the door. She saw my tear-stricken face and said she heard everything I whispered to myself. She said sorry an infinite number of times. It was only then I cried tears of joy: knowing that someone knew, knew all the pain inside of me, eased the weight burdened on my shoulders.

The next day I smiled. And I can promise you, that smile wasn't turned upside down again.

The Chocolate Theft Mystery

Araf Rahman

It was Chocolate Week in Happyville and the 200th anniversary of when chocolates were invented in 1820. Everyone was so excited for the special festival in Happyville Park, taking place on Sunday. Especially two friends, James and Simon, who were friends since Playgroup and are both 12. They couldn't wait for the festival, especially because they so loved chocolate.

It was Sunday, the last day of the week and the festival. Almost everyone from Happyville attended it. People were selling chocolate ice-cream, chocolate brownies, chocolate cakes, chocolate milkshakes, and more. Jake and Simon were eating the Chocolate Ice-Cream. They brought Jake's dog, Marty. He's a Border Collie and has powerful sense of smell.

Also, to end the great, fun festival, there would soon be chocolate spraying on everyone from the chocolate fountain. People were deliberately putting chocolate on their faces in readiness, and children were playing with chocolate guns like they do with water pistols.

It was an hour later and now it was time for the chocolate spray from the fountain. The host of the festival said a few words thanking people for attending the festival and talking about the invention of chocolate. Then he pulled the curtains down and then... the whole fountain was gone! Somebody had stolen it. Everyone looked shocked and people starting asking questions.

Jake and Simon wanted to find the thief, they liked solving mysteries. But then Simon instantly knew the suspect, Mr Sweet-Thief. He was a vicious fox who couldn't resist sweets. Whenever he spotted them, he would take it instantly. If it was in someone's pocket then he will pick-pocket it from them. He stole a lollypop from a baby once, while he was about to eat it. He had a heart like stone and only cared about sweets.

Simon knew where he lived. Baddy's Alley. It was about eight miles from Happyville. So, the boys and Marty strolled through part of the city and entered Baddy's Alley. Simon (who had already researched Mr Sweet-Thief) knew his address, 68 Divers Street. They then noticed the number 68 on a chocolate brown door with sweets around the sides. Jake pressed the doorbell and Mr Sweet-Thief answered, looking pale.

The boys and Marty entered the house. They expected it to be full of sweets, but there was no sign of them. When Jake was about to ask Mr Sweet-Thief if he had stolen the fountain, Marty suddenly barked. He ran to a door and tried to open it. Mr Sweet-Thief looked frightened. Simon helped Marty open the door and then... all the sweets were in there, including the fountain full of chocolate. Jake and Simon were cross but not surprised that he stole it. Jake then asked Simon to call the police. Mr Sweet-Thief was about to run away but Marty barked at him and made him sit down.

About 10 minutes later, the police arrived. They handcuffed Mr Sweet-Thief, took the fountain and thanked the boys for finding the fountain. The police drove the boys and Marty back to the festival. When the host spotted the fountain, he put it in a big box

so that the chocolate didn't drop. The host was relieved and thanked the boys and of course Marty for returning the fountain. The police decided to reward them by them getting free chocolate for as long as they wanted. Everybody cheered. But for Mr Sweet-Thief, he had to clean up all the chocolate on the floor after the spray, as his punishment.

After the fountain was put up, everybody counted down to the great chocolate spray. Then the chocolate was sprayed and everyone opened their mouths to eat the chocolate. After about 40 minutes, everybody went home, while Mr Sweet-Thief was still cleaning up. The police were keeping an eye on him so he couldn't run away. Mr Sweet-Thief won't be stealing again any time soon.

Glass Eyes

Alessia Stokoe

The sky was a sea of smoke, as black as coal and as dark as a bottomless well. Violent blasts of rain accompanied the eerie black clouds that shadowed the towering manor ahead. It stood on a jagged hill of rock as if it had always been there, proudly displaying its misshapen features to anyone who looked upon it.

The once-prized manor had been in disrepair since anyone could remember. Nobody knew if it had once earned admiring stares, or what purpose it had served, and nobody ever ventured close enough to care. There were rumours about that place. Rumours that weren't entirely made up.

Humming quietly to herself, the young girl fingered her lace nightgown with sweaty palms. Cassie had climbed a set of ornate stairs which were twisted into a perfect spiral, like a child's slinky toy pulled from each end.

Now she stood in a narrow room whose oak floors were bathed in the flicker of yellow from the candelabras that hung on the walls.

As she surveyed the room, Cassie instantly found what she had been searching for. Her stuffed toy kitten was propped up against a broken mullioned window, its fur damp from the rain.

She didn't know how it had got there but decided not to question it. Eagerly, the girl lifted the kitten to her face and inhaled its faint scent of home: she couldn't go anywhere without it. But there was something wrong...

Cassie smothered a gasp. The kitten was missing its eyes. She stared down at the stuffing springing out of the two holes where its beautiful blue glass eyes used to be. She shoved the kitten into her nightgown pocket and fiercely rubbed her own eyes like she was checking they were still there. "I should never have come here," she berated herself, retreating to the door.

A cold shiver relentlessly weaved its way down Cassie's spine as she tugged on the handle, but the door remained stubbornly in place. Her eyes frantically scanned the room and landed on the window beckoning to her in the corner.

Shakily, she hobbled over to the window and peered out. The wind whistled tauntingly through the shattered glass and caused goosebumps to erupt over Cassie's bare neck.

She swung one leg out of the window and cried out in pain as the glass snagged her skin, cutting it open.

"Don't. Move."

Cassie jolted, and craned her head around to look at who had spoken. An old, cadaverous woman, her hair falling around her like strings of rotting straw, was leaning against the wall opposite the door. Cassie watched, horrified, as the woman's

eyes rolled back into her head and fell out into her outstretched hand. "Looking for these?" she snarled. Two glistening glass eyes sat in her palm, and the young girl realised that they were her kitten's. "I don't approve of intruders." The woman leaned forward. Cassie couldn't move; she was the fly in the web.

She should never have gone there.

How to Get Through Heartbreak

Danielle Grimley

First, it's going to be numbness. Absolute solitary confinement within your own mind. It's not like you won't acknowledge anything, you will. You just won't care. The numbness will be addictive, more so than that of drugs or alcohol, it will be unlike any addiction you could ever experience. Your bones will be numb. Your limbs will be numb. Your heart, your lungs, your throat, everything will be numb. And it will be a reprieve, so enjoy this while it lasts — but not too much. It'll be the only break you'll be getting for a while.

Then the emotions will hit. They will flood your deserted veins with warmth. Too warm. Scalding. The pain, the anger, the loneliness. It will wash over you like a tidal wave, burying you within the shipwreck of your own body. You will wish for the numbness to come back, as you scream into pillow after pillow, working out a rotation cycle once each one becomes too wet. Your pain will be immense, your anger will be more so, but your loneliness... Oh baby, that will kill you if you give it the chance, so don't.

When the brunt of the emotion has passed, you will seep into the pores of anger, eventually reaching a need for revenge. Don't lash out. Hold onto your sanity, even if just by a single thread, and breathe. Let the pain slip away, let the world slip away. Lie in bed — but not for too long. Watch TV — but not for too long. Eat all the food you want — but not too much.

Don't let depression get its grip on you. Push it away. Be stubborn. Turn your nose up at it and laugh. You are better than this.

It won't be long until the cravings kick in. You'll see arms and lips in a new light, longing for the warmth of a body that isn't yours, and that's okay. You might indulge a little too much on Ben and Jerry's ice-cream in a last-ditch effort to numb your skin, and that's okay. Grab your teddy bear, hold it tight, whisper your feelings into its ear. It will listen, more so than the cold inching its way back into your bones. Don't act on the desire for touch. Not right now. You're not ready.

You're going to be a mess for days, weeks, maybe even months. You will go through the five stages of grief daily, and Ben and Jerry's might as well offer you a membership. Learn your methods of coping like you'd learn the alphabet, you're going to need them more than once to drag yourself back from the brink of breaking. You're going to have to fight yourself a lot and eventually, maybe even as we speak, you will begin wishing love didn't exist. But know that I'm here and I love you. And no amount of wishing it gone, will truly make it gone.

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