

Spark

Young Writers



Issue 24 April 2022

WRITING
WEST
MIDLANDS

Spark Young Writers Magazine

Sometimes, just for speed, I won't ask a large group of writers to actually introduce themselves, I'll ask them to write something. It will be related to whatever work we're all doing, whatever topic, but it also invariably tells you more about the writer than their reciting their name and hobbies.

We can't help but be in our own writing, there will always and invariably be something of our tone, our view of the world, our interests and obsessions. It is that way, it has to be that way, and writing would be very dull if it were solely about the words on the page.

Editing this 24th edition of Spark Young Writers' Magazine, though, I kept seeing just how much the outside world presses in on us. It wasn't in every piece and it might range from overt to very subtle, but the situation in the world and especially Ukraine, seeped into so many of the submissions we received.

It makes for an issue that is sombre, though with flashes of delighted good humour, and I think it makes for a particularly absorbing read. You'll go to the piece you wrote or where you know the writer, or just because the title grabs you - good luck resisting Petra Rihan's "I always say sorry before I kill them" - but do then read them all.

There are dark subjects in this issue, but the minds of the writers and how they examine those topics have left me with hope.

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.sparkwriters.org.

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Dear Writing

Fanni Polgar

Dear Writing,

It's strange to think that of all letters I've ever written, this is the one I've found it hardest to find words for. I found you, or should I say: we found each other, when I most needed to be found.

You took the timid, adrift, six-year-old me and taught me a new language, introduced me to a new world and with that new world, gave me dreams and a purpose. You became my escape and my outlet, during the trouble and the tidal tests; you stayed even for the brighter days and the happiness.

You, Writing, are the one passion that has never stepped out of fashion, the one dream that has never faltered, and the one thing that has never made me doubt my ability. You gave me a voice when I needed one; a voice that I could raise before I was comfortable showing my face.

You introduced me to fiction, in which, over time, I discovered my own fact.

Writing, I've grown up with you and grown more in love with you as time has gone on. You've never given up on me.

So now, in this letter, with these words that mark the page: I promise to never give up on you...

With love,

Fanni x

1,800 Seconds

Sadeen Ahmad

The clouds look heavy. Their faces look ashen. Their tears look bottled up into a grey marshmallow of false emotions. Just exactly like me.

I don't know what I did. Did I cross the line? But: there is no line. We're friends, not only that but we're best friends. I was only gone for half of an hour. I was only gone for 1,800 seconds. I was only gone for less than a twentieth of a day. Just like the clouds were gone for half of an hour, but came trudging back with their broken souls. But if you think about it, wouldn't those 1,800 seconds be enough for them to talk about my soul? They were friends before I left, but became strangers when I came back.

They talked about me while I was gone: their eyes tell the story their lips can't. Their fluttering eyelids and reddening cheeks and fiddling fingers show it all. It's called the art of secrecy. The sky above imitates my friends. The birds fluttering away and the colours of the clouds turning into darker greys and little droplets of rain falling from above. It's called the art of emotions.

I ask what happened, I ask if I did something wrong. Their lips don't move, but I can smell the tension in the air. Just like I can smell the rain coming quicker and quicker and quicker. But their voices crack in sync with the lightning above and they walk off together, hand-in-hand, huddling together like particles in chemistry. Blindly leaving me out. Me. The English, the writer, the words to their Chemistry. Our chemistry.

People say there'll be a rainbow after the storm. But the storm just turns the rainbow and the colours upside down. Just like my stomach as it lurches as my gut tells me they were my friends. Were my chemistry. My gut keeps saying were. The past tense. The tense thrown in the back. The less-used tense. My negative thoughts taste bitter in my mouth. Are my friends merely the past tense to my English, my writing, my words? The three of them are chemistry together, but there's only past tense in chemistry. It's only English. It's only me. Where those 1800 seconds enough to change them?

The thunder screams higher. My emotions drive higher. Nature's screaming with the silent screams of my soul. The clouds break loose their bottled tears and broken souls and so do I. I scream and break down onto the concrete floor. My tears and hysterical pain scream another level of hurt. The rain encapsulates my feelings and joins in what I'm suffering. The tears of the clouds hit my tongue and I can almost taste the pain like I can feel it through my cold and sodden clothes.

And now, it just hurts because I realise, I'm not as important to my friends as I thought I was.

Now I'm hurt. And the sky's hurt.

And my friends are saying goodbye to me.

Knife Edge

Chloe Pick

Knife in my hand, I had only one thing to do. Everyone around was shouting at me to stop, to put the knife down. But they weren't going to stop me. Looking around, all I saw were the faces of the people I hated, their faces shocked.

Over the noise and clamour of people, one person stood perfectly still, a gun in their hand. The crowd was moving in swathes, ants all trying to feebly attempt the same task. They were all going to fail.

They all knocked me down, covering me in their fear. None of them could knock the knife out of my hands, I was stuck to the one thing that could save me from them - the person standing between me and my dreams. I looked around, my head swimming, threatened by all the shouting. As though my head was underwater, I saw the one person on my side, their emotions mirroring my own.

"Do it."

They were the only one I had to listen to.

I stood up, brushing off the doubt that didn't belong to me, the wishes of people long dead. There was only one person left in this room now. I looked in the mirror with a killing calm freezing my features. I walked out of the room, confidence radiating from me. Once more, the voices exploded within me. I only heard one of them.

"Do it."

Knife in my hand, I had only one thing left to do.

After Sylvia

Iona Mandal

At St. Thomas A. Beckett Churchyard,
Heptonstall

Here I lie.
On the open heart of Jesus.
He is eutrophic to this bag of bones.
Stealing the light of a thousand moons,
so, I never cross the water.

Sunny Boston girl,
slipped under the gallows.
The grave ate me in two.
Its cold weight on my spidered ribs
like Atlas carrying the globe.

Hangman hands in dark
touch my stony brow,
the moon having left
her lofty ledge
to acquaint with my lichenized visage.

The Pennine dales engulf me,
wholly, holily.
Limestone coffin sets
my cadaver in stone,
I remain captive, of his mossed land.

Defaced, removed, tormented,
amongst cut flowers, modest wreaths
shrubs, pens, candles,
crows and magpies
hovering above.

This land speaks my poetry
in crisp tongues of the Queen,
rhoticity unadorned.
I came here because
I was the moth.

The moth who transgressed
to the bulb of belief,
I was deciduous,
that my diseased wings
would renew from frailty.

Even heaven's jailor knows me stealing,
the lull of a bee's flight,
swallowing the buzz of a thousand apian
slayers.
Stripped of all dreams,
I rest as a bee, dying from its own sting.

My Brother and Me

Uthaymin Ahmed

I am a seagull squawking at the window
when my brother tries to sleep.
I am the living room table constantly making my brother stub his toe.
I am a thorn rose making my brother prick himself.
I am a belt I always hide when my brother needs me.

I am a very nice Porsche
But when my brother saves up to buy me
the price goes up
so he can't afford me.

The Lonely Dragon

Ari Virk Nicholl

Joel heard a strange snuffling sound coming from behind some trees. He went to investigate and was astonished to find a small orange dragon with tears streaming down its face.

"Why are you crying?" asked Joel.

"Because I can't... can't... can't make any friends," it said sobbingly, whilst snorting out a hot blast of flames, which melted down a tree or two.

"Where do you live? I can see if I can help?" Joel answered, stepping away from the flames.

"Up there!" Dragon pointed to the clouds above the mountain range, then it blew another blaze of fire onto a few nooks and crannies around a box of papers.

"U...uh I've never even touched the ceiling before, even of my bunkbed, so that's not a quest for me!" But then Joel saw a burnt birthday invite. It said 'Tim, the dragon's birthday'.

"Is it your birthday? Have you run away?" Joel asked comfortingly.

"Er... Yes, because I think no one will turn up."

"But, you can't miss your own party! I'll come!" Joel gave him a big human hug. Tim suddenly grinned like a Cheshire cat.

"Oh, but my friends don't like me anymore as once, at my best friend's birthday party I sneezed. But I can't control my emotions, when I blow flames, I accidentally burnt the bunting that led to a huge pile of his birthday presents." Tim started crying.

"I used to get upset too, so my mum helped me by telling me to take deep breaths." Joel said.

Then Joel sprang up and helped Tim control his emotions by showing him how to take deep breaths, and Tim practised controlling his flame blowing.

They were ready for Tim's party. Joel soared through the sky on Tim's back, landing on the easing slope of the towering and deafening mountain of the dragons. Joel's jaw dropped as he looked up.

Up the mountain they heard a thunderous sound and saw an erupting avalanche heading their way.

Trying to fly above it, Tim's wing got caught in a rock from the blistering blizzard. They managed to escape and find shelter in a cave. Joel panicked, in fear for his newfound friend. He peered out.

In the blink of an eye, he saw 15 crowding dragons, Tim's friends, heading for the summit of the mountain. He screamed for help. One of the dragons soared down and others followed.

They gathered around Tim and his best friend gave him a very thin bit of orange wing "This is yours. We'll bandage it back on and help you get to your birthday party".

Tim realised the friendship from his best friend never went and learnt that he can make new friends like Joel as well.

As they carried Tim up the glittery stairs to the top, his yummy, scrummy chocolate concrete cake was brightly lit and he blew the candles out but this time without any flames!

Stranded In the Sea

Kevin Ge

A black blanket surrounded me as a stormy sky rumbled like a fierce lion. Ahead and below me it was dark. I was trapped by the world of the deep, restless sea.

Panic invaded my body, and suddenly, my legs felt weak. Towering above me, a wave came crashing down. I thrashed in the water, kicking my legs in vain. My lungs were screaming at me to breathe. I pushed against the force of the wave.

Up, up... the surface was near... free!

Gasping for breath, I floated on the surface of the water. The sea was a dark, heaving giant, choked by seaweed.

I screamed for help, but again and again no reply came.

A mouthful of seawater washed my mouth and I spat it out but the taste remained.

Out of the corner of my eye, I glimpsed a lighthouse. Safety. Hope. Ferociously kicking my legs, I swam towards the lighthouse. Somehow, I was caught in the murky water which tugged at my legs as I tried to stay afloat.

In a moment, I was sucked into its gaping mouth and pulled into the inky depths. Fear overwhelmed me and I felt my body go limp. Even the stars seemed hostile towards me as I fell unconscious.

Spluttering as I opened my eyes, I saw my sister crying and pleading me to wake up. The realisation hit me like a hammer. I had just been saved. But not by any random person.

I was saved by my sister.

The Prison Cell

Liang Zi Zhao

I stand there in utter misery,
Every day, criminals come but don't go,
They're locked behind my dirty, decaying walls.
Why was I chosen to be this?

They bang and scratch tallies into my walls,
Not knowing that I'm wincing in pain.
I plead and plead for them to stop,
But those heartless creatures take no notice.

Why wasn't I born a palace like my friend Buckingham?
Why couldn't I be cared for and polished like good old Eiffel?
Why couldn't I be famous and antique like Colosseum?
WHY WAS I THIS STUPID PRISON?

Another day of pure agony,
More officers come with offenders.
I thought, "Of course!"
Surely the officers would listen.

They didn't pay any attention,
Why was everyone in this world so rude?
Humans, such ignorant creatures.
At least, I wasn't one of them.

Suddenly, officers flood in,
Freeing and grabbing the lawbreakers.
I see from my eyes outside, another building
That looks just like me.

Hooray I yell in happiness,
I finally have some peace,
I stand there lonely but content,
I no longer suffered like before.
I'm no longer a shelter for breakers of the law.

Blue and Yellow

Abigail Higgott

Blue and yellow everywhere, violence all around
Blue and yellow everywhere, making a deafening sound.

Blue and yellow everywhere, buildings damaged badly,
Blue and yellow everywhere, everyone acting sadly.

Blue and yellow everywhere, children frightened to the bone,
Blue and yellow everywhere, many missing their home.

Blue and yellow everywhere, the bravery is unreal,
Blue and yellow everywhere, I can't describe how I feel.

Blue and yellow everywhere, but all the hope shines through.
Blue and yellow everywhere, there is something we can do.

Blue and yellow everywhere, let the whole world stand together,
Blue and yellow everywhere, we'll stand with you on your endeavour.

Blue and yellow everywhere, Ukraine, you really inspire.
Blue and yellow everywhere, together, we will climb higher.

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The Last Time I Saw Him

Sophie Nock

The last time I saw him, he was young, vibrant. Alive. It was three weeks after he passed his driving test, and he'd been going out every night, taking his new car for a spin, relishing the freedom. I usually stayed at home with his parents, though he did take me out with him sometimes.

That night, we were meant to be going to a concert together, all four of us, at the Albert Hall. It was a big, important thing, his mum's fiftieth birthday, and we were incredibly excited. And then I got ill. A terrible stomach ache, sickness, bleeding. It was unavoidable, and we couldn't get a refund on the tickets. I persuaded them to go without me, and I could tell he was worried, but I went up to bed and said I'd be fine.

I was.

I'd never learned to drive. That's how my parents died, in a car crash when I was nine. I remember the flashing blue lights through the door, the aunt who was babysitting me that night collapsing into the police officer's arms.

The same happened the night of the concert.

This time, there wasn't a police officer; there was no aunt. Just a phone, ringing. I let it ring out the first time, and then it rang again, so I pushed myself from the bed and grabbed it, hissing through the pain, "yes?"

"Miss Miller?"

"Yes?" I couldn't be bothered to correct them, even though Miller was only my adopted name.

"Well, Miss Miller, I'm afraid I have some bad news. I need you to come to the hospital, now. Can you do that?"

"Yes," I said. "Yes, I can."

I found his mum's keys and got into her car. I managed to drive to the hospital. I turned on the wipers somehow and couldn't get them to turn off again, but I didn't care. I didn't lock the car when I reached the hospital.

All three of them, the Millers, my new family. All three of them, dead, died in a car crash just like my parents did.

They were putting a sheet over his face when I got there.

I drove home, remembering being in the car with him when he was practising for his driving test, him showing me what everything did. I remember smiling at him. "That's great," I said. "You'll do brilliantly. You're a great driver."

I hit my hand on the wheel. I don't look where I'm going, I get caught up staring at the red light and drive straight through, not registering what it means.

I never saw the lorry.

The last time I saw him, he was young, vibrant, alive. The next time I saw him was less than two hours later. He was dead, bloody. It hurt to look at him, to imagine the pain he'd been through.

But I didn't have to imagine, not anymore.

I took his hand when he said, "Come on, Lil. Being dead isn't so bad."

Reminiscence

William Tingley

I stand in shame, embarrassed, in disgrace
as strangers infiltrate my once strong walls,
now tattered shards.

Alas it seems my days are done,
my folk, my people lost,
just memories of old.

Who am I to blame now, for disrespect and death,
for those uttered words of woe are rolling in the grave,
but now look at me,
plagued by petty fools.

These folk who haunt me now
came forth with looks of please,
cursing me with this re-establishment.

Now I stand alone, bitter for my loss,
it dawns upon me in this moment,
that when my time comes,
I, and my folk of old, will both be reduced to legend.

Accident

Flo Sharples

I did not mean to kill him. It was an accident. It all happened so fast. In a blink of an eye, he was dead. The guilt grew inside me like a vine on a fence. My shaking pale mud-covered knees dropped to the soggy path as the tears trickled down my ice-cold face. I knew there was no saving him - he was gone. FOREVER.

It was quite the sorrow that I had just taken a life that will never be lived; stayed in me like letters engraved in a rock, but instead of the rock - my heart. It felt like the only thing I could hear was my own heartbeat. The wind took me away with its powerful strikes, but nothing could move me. My knees knocked, tears fell, I towered over the body that lay motionless below me. The trees arched over me. I picked up my unstable-self and covered the face of the body with leaves. I could not bear to look at him without wanting to end mine.

I picked the shovel off the mud-caked path and started to dig; the soil was hard, and my arms were tired, but the guilt stayed and will never leave. The only thing that was left to do was roll the figure into the ready-made hole. The murder weapon lay in front of me with blood stains splatted up the front. My eyes were dry and sore as I wiped the tears away with the back of my sleeve.

Lastly, I needed to find a stone and carve the letters in. But every time I tried, I found I could not. My hands were shaking and blistery, the blood dribbled down my arm but I could not feel the pain. I was immune. I deserved all the pain I was going through. I was the one who ruined his life, but he will never be able to ruin mine. I was hurting inside. My heart was shattered into millions of pieces. The dark shadow of the trees left me in darkness like a cape blocking out everything. It closed me in; there was no escape. I could not run from what I had done. It was a scar that was here for as long as my life.

The dark stone statue of a lady stood only a few metres away; her hair looked like it was tied back in a tight bun. She looked round and plump with a beaming smile on her face. She was wearing a neat dress with pink and yellow flowers but when words left her mouth, she sighed...

"You're a silly goose! Who buries bugs? You just stepped on it - it's not the end of the world!"

The Feather's Journey

Isla Hinton

I float down ever so swiftly from side to side, my tranquil, delicate outer vanes flicker whenever the breeze quickens. High above the alluring world I start to wonder if I am anything more than just a particular nobody, still I question if the universe itself would see me as more than just a lone nobody but an audacious somebody. Now I now hover atop the cloud unsure if it will stay at its overcast colour or if I will have to hope that my journey is not over.

The bleak, vast clouds I knew would be the most vigorous part of my unified voyage but I have been through abhorrent conditions in my lifetime so this would be another one of those moments. Nothing but pale, creamy white puffs of clouds. After what felt like forever, I reached the end of the cloud and as I expected, rain started to drip. Ever so nonchalantly, and then a drizzle and then what felt like a thunderous outcry... and then it was all a blur. I had been in ghastly weather before, but nothing like this. One hit of one raindrop and I was done for.

I desired only one thing. To speed up. Down I drift, thinking only of the possible future if I don't hasten up. Quicker I fall... quicker and quicker and quicker until it was nearly impossible to slow down. A haze. That is the last thing I remember when that raindrop hit me. A haze. I knew this was bound to happen at some point during my life, but when it really happens it is more dire than expected. If you ask me how it happened my only answer would be "I don't know.", if you ask me how I survived my only answer would be "I don't know." It is all a distant memory and the past is the past.

I shan't mention it in future conversation but now I know that maybe this fall was for the best and helped me to realise that now I could be considered as a somebody that the world will know. A survivor. As my inner veins start to dry out my journey is back in business. While I was wet and thinking that this was my last sight of the imposing Earth, I had fluttered my way downwards and now I was only a few feet above some of the tallest trees. I might be able to make it, I might make it to the floor of Earth.

I was so used to living in the blue, susceptible sky, was I really going to be able to adapt so quick to my new adjustments. I was just below the trees as I asked myself 'Why am I doing this? Why am I going through so much strife for something I have no reason to do?' At the start, I could have told myself the answer to that... but now, I don't see a reason...

The Deceased

Amelie Baker

I slam the door shut desperately. The barrier between me and the outside world is finally closed again, until tomorrow that is. The outside world consists of people; backstabbing, egotistical, manipulative people. I wish they would all just disappear. Then, I'd be left in peace. For a little while at least. My mother knew better than asking if I wanted dinner — the answer was always no. I don't remember dozing off, only the distant music which emanated from my headphones.

I was abruptly awakened by the siren of my alarm clock, like nails on a chalkboard. The thought of another day made my teeth grind. I reached the stairs, silence. Normally, at breakfast time, having five other siblings, it's as loud as a public town protest. But nothing. No whiff of pancakes or bacon or egg. Nothing. I rushed into my parents room, elated to see if my dream had come true. As I enter their room I instantly smell death. One bullet wound each in both of their heads. Dried brown stains had oozed onto their pillows.

My first thought was a mass murder or robbery took place in the night. But why leave my room untouched? The TV and my phone was emitting only white noise. Travelling to various houses and even into central town, I found that every single person was dead — apart from me. I thought about venturing into the wilderness. Trying to hunt down people who may be alive but when I drove to the nearest communication centre, only white noise was coming out of the radios. My wish was granted.

Humans could do and be what they wanted. They were so cruel when they didn't have to be — that's why I hated them. They were killing off the planet but didn't care because they were so self-absorbed. I can be awful too sometimes, but never towards anyone else. I was treated like the earth, people took my kindness for granted. When I asked for help or wanted to be part of their conversations they turned their back on me. They disregarded my voice or opinion. That's why I hate them; for what they choose to be.

With every day that passes by, it gets more lonely and I lose hope that someone alive is out there. I can't cope with my isolated thoughts and at some points I think about ending my life, but I don't of course. I am too scared, what if I terminate the human race? What if this is a test? As humans we are insensitive and thoughtless. It is all down to me, but I don't know what to do.

After a few weeks, I realise not everyone was evil. Victims, charities, people who saved lives. A part of the human race wasn't obnoxious and it's taken a lot for me to accept that. As soon as the thought crosses my mind, I hear movement in the house. I'm not alone anymore. Or have I just woken up?

Before the War

James Crowe

Can I trust this world?
Can I see this world?
This world's secret side is bad,
Pain and suffering is how we see,
The people above know how to see,

Am I allowed to be?
Even the pinnacle of existence
Doesn't know the end.

Blood, pain, torture,
Guns, grenades, mortars,
People crying crocodile tears
Although they are the ones wanting to fight

The propaganda is air in the atmosphere.
It's like they want death
Nazi flags, soldiers bent down like old hags

Charging enemy lines
Destined for blood and cries
Can this really be?

I trusted this world,
Now I see,
It has just uncoiled
Like the serpent that it is

Could I ever see the world like I did before?
Like I did: before the war.

Bullets

Sophie Nock

"It was a disaster. I didn't know what to do." The yellow blanket is scratchy around her shoulders, the scratched plastic surface of the table cold to the touch. "He had a son," Mr Smith said.

He was looking round the school, wanting to see if it was suitable.

Everyone else is at the hospital; she's the only one who came here. "That's what he told Mr Smith." She's cold, the blanket not helping.

Maybe she's in shock.

"What was his name? Did Mr Smith say?"

"No, he didn't. I don't know anything." Only that there were gunshots. Gunshots and screams.

"Come on. You must know something."

"Where are my friends?" There were sirens and ambulances, and she hasn't seen any of them since.

"They're at the hospital. Will you talk to me? Tell me what happened?"

"There was a gun." His face went cold and dark, like the barrel, in that instant between him reaching into his backpack and starting to fire. "He pulled the trigger and spun in a circle. Spray and pray. I think he was just trying to hurt as many of us as possible." His eyes, gone cruel and unkind. "Why would he want to do that?"

"I don't know. I really don't know."

A few hours later, and her parents are there. They've flown back from the conference to be with her, and her mother mutters prayers in a quiet, desperate voice. They are prayers of thanks, only she doesn't know what there is to be thankful for.

The police officer comes back in, looking weary. "I'm afraid I have some bad news."

"Who is it?" there was blood all over the floor, there's still some on her where it splashed as the bullets tore through her friends. "Who's dead?"

"Sit down, please."

"No," her parents force her into the plastic chair of the police station waiting room. "Just tell me." The gun, sweeping round the room. No targets, just a room full of people and a crowd of bullets fired from the gun of an unknown killer. "Which one?"

The bullets, ripping through the air like the screams that accompanied them.

The bullets, ripping through flesh with no care for bones and organs.

The bullets, fired by a madman.

The bullets, piercing hearts and arteries.

The bullets, killing her friends.

She is numb when he answers:

“They’re all dead,” says the officer. All of them.

When Shall I Begin Mourning

Iha Kishore

When shall I begin my mourning?
When the house's bricks quiver at the shaking ground,
When the baby withers in her mother's womb,
When childrens' eyes crease with knowledge,
When man's eyes crease with ignorance,
When men lose all strength,
When their edges soften into mud,
Then I shall begin my mourning.

When shall my tears nourish the ground?
When blood congeals on the streets,
When water will not quench my longing,
When husbands disappear,
When the country spits bullets,
When epiphanies join aristocrats,
When bound is the soil to my feet,
My tears shall nourish the ground.

When will the sun return?
When man moves his head towards the shade,
When a child burns her hands,
When a woman cuts her feet,
When glass is embedded in their hearts,
When scars embellish their faces,
When voices are forever strained,
When ears are forever ringing,
When mouths are forever bleeding,
When eyes are forever seeing,
When we are forever moving,
The sun will return, dim to experience.
Our questions will no longer be answers.

My Insidious State of Mind

Laurie Archer

I'm in a mansion
One room for every thought that
Makes my head ache
I climb the staircase and boards
crack underneath me
falling away so I cannot descend

I'm stuck in this permanent
stage of change.
The windows are dirty
But there's sunlight outside
I try to open them up but
I can't find the key
It's at the bottom of the staircase

And so I continue to climb
until I'm out on the roof and
trees with no leaves
creak underneath me

I think they were alive once
But all I can see is grey branches
stuck in a state of remembrance.

Unlocking the Lockdown

Adarsh Madhan

Staying at home
Not allowed to freely roam
Makes me want to moan
Because I'm alone

Being at one place
Feels like a never-ending race
Barely remembering
My loved ones' face

Like the soaring birds
I can only wish to be
Cause no one can imagine to be
As unleashed and carefree

Missing the raindrops and the
gush of the sea
Honking of buses and cars
chasing behind me
The hustle and bustle of people
on the street
Rushing to school before I was late

Laughing with my friends
Giggling with glee
Sitting with a book under a tree
I just wish to be free

Although Lockdown
Has always made me frown
There are some things
That don't make me feel so down

Pollution has decreased
Mother Nature released
Although we aren't flourishing
The earth is nourishing

Though we are in the perils
of this situation
I've managed to meet
adventure requirements
Saying hi to my friends in
a virtual environment
Even to my Grandparents
who are in retirement

Surfing the internet
Or researching the planet
Experimenting with new hobbies
And feeding my doggy

Old board games like carrom and chess
Have been revived from
the dusty cupboards
And with my family more time is spent
More than I would usually bother

I am certain that this world will return
As from our many mistakes we learn
That "every cloud has a silver lining"
Soon this world will be rid of whining

I always say sorry before I kill them

Petra Rihan

I always say sorry before I kill them. I always say sorry to them before I pick them up into my arms and carry them over the crashing waves of the dark night.

People fear me.

Some want me.

I know what it is like to truly be alone. I am ageless. I have been here from the beginning of time. I have been here since the world blossomed from a mere seed. I have watched as years tick by, as the sun rises and falls, as sunsets melt into the ground, as moonlight runs through the sky like veins.

I have seen all the fires, I know all the secrets.

I always say sorry to them before I kill them, even if I know what they've done. I know their secrets. I know their worries. I know every little thing about them. What they regret.

What they don't regret.

What they think about themselves.

I kill them and then I take them, whatever is beyond the dark night, the crashing waves. I don't know what is beyond. That is not for me to know. My only job is to kill.

I've seen blood splattered against train tracks.

I've seen bodies floating idly in the sea, small, insignificant, once a life, now I have seen the machines.

The ones I like to take the most are the ones who lay in their bed at home, surrounded by family, no clock ticking down the time until their body goes limp and their soul enters my arms.

I have seen your secrets.

I know you.

I will, one day, kill you too, and I will take you.

I am the one you fear. I am the one watching. I am the ticking time, the stopwatch, the clock on the wall.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

I am the monster under your bed.

I am the shadow that follows.

I am your worst nightmare.

I am the thing that will wrap my bony fingers around your neck, and take you.

I am a riddle.

I am a secret.

I am a whisper.

I am cold. I am tired. I never sleep. I do not breathe. One day you will lie limp in my arms, and you too, will be cold. You will have run out of time. You will have regrets. You will have secrets you have never told anyone. You will realise that your life was a speck of dust, you will realise all your anxiety and sorrows were never once important. You were one in a hundred. One in a thousand. One a million, billion, trillion, and you were unimportant.

You may weep. You may scream.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

I am the dark night without a light to help you see.

I am sorry.

I am always sorry.

I've taken children. Mothers. Fathers.

I've held them in my arms, and sung to babies to help them sleep.

I take them across the sea.

To whatever is beyond.

I am death.

The Last Apple

Eva Maltby

The woman lifted the apple from the ground in evident dismay. Half rotten, oozing something sticky and yellow from the underbelly. There was a furious silence, a slow walk back up to the house and then a rupture of evil from the mouth of a hellhound that echoed down the path, past the boulders and pebbles, over the stream and right back to the orchard where it all began. The last apple was gone, rotten to the seeds and wrinkled more than Grandfather on a Sunday afternoon. The last apple, the last gold coin, the last crunch, pie, slice, crumble, tart, snack, juice - the last apple.

But despite this, the orchard, for all its chaos causing, sat peacefully in the last of the September sun. The branches occasionally dropping the last of their pearly garments to make themselves brown socks to stand in on the grass. The trunks, the bustling highways of ants and other insects, strong and forever in the soil, giving comfort to the boy who lay against one there in the late rays of the day. The boy spent most of his time in the legion of leaves, far away from his mother's cries and father's eyes and the discomfort he felt when he was near them.

The boy had known about the last apple before his mother. He had known about the last apple before the first apple. He had known about the last apple for his whole entire life, for every apple that fell on every day of every year, for all the time that he was able to look at and be in and feel the orchard, he had known about the last apple. There was a lot of thinking done about what would happen after the last apple fell, most of it done in the presence of the last apple itself or in the orchard somewhere, for it was a vast and plentiful field of trees.

In the east corner of the orchard was the boy's library. A sun filled covert of heaving shelves and tumbling stacks of worded trees. Hung over branches, suspended overhead were lanterns filled with candles that were lit when night rose. The boy himself was fair-haired, tall and slender but not unhealthy in form. His eyes, grey at birth, soon became the colour of the sky he looked upon each day. With those eyes he learnt to practice the art of secrecy.

With those eyes he read every word he could find and then some. His library was a smugglers' cave, filled with things that were not his. Every book was stolen, every pen was nicked, every piece of paper taken from its rightful and honest owner and used by the boy on the problem of the last apple.

The Fragments He Left Behind

Jeya Sandhar

Paint encased the canvases around me, each stroke bleeding into the next. Layers of a lonely, deep black drifted throughout each artwork, subtly linking them together.

The weekend of exhibitions was over. I'd just finished placing the paintings back into the studio, but I couldn't avert my gaze from the beauty of one in particular. Its beauty that mirrors him.

I couldn't stop the sad smile from breaking out, my hands from reaching towards my painting. I couldn't stop the tears as the memories weaved in and out of the canvas before me, until returning to where they belonged... returning to me.

The painted eyes bore against my skin as I edged closer, stroking the edges of the canvas. Every detail was almost too intricate, accurately reflecting the hours poured into making sure each line was perfect. But there was one detail I was forced to overlook, forced to warp - his face. Around the deep-set, amber eyes, black seeped into the peach hues... distorting every other feature that I should've added... that I wanted to add.

My thoughts left the studio as I was pulled into a trance - but that painting never left my view. Each slight angle was permanently etched into my mind so that I would never forget it. Beneath my closed eyelids, almost-forgotten memories fluttered. It was as if I was reaching out, trying to catch a butterfly that was being lightly thrown round by the wind... and when I caught it?

I was gone. Whisked away by the curiosity of my own mind, whisked back into the past, the past when he still loved me.

I remembered how he would return from work - his engine softly whirring outside as if giving me the cue to run out and greet him. I will never forget the joy that flooded me when I could finally stop missing him... when I could hold him in my arms.

I remembered how he would stroke my hair - pale, refreshingly cold fingers gently dragging against each strand before they reached my temples. I will never forget how he made me feel calm, made me forget the troubles, and only focus on his touch.

I remembered the smell of Aventus that would fold over me like a warm embrace whenever he drew near - the perfume lingering against every item he touched. I will never forget the unwavering smile that would grow as his scent swished towards me whenever I fell asleep against his jacket.

But... I could never remember his face - those memories could never be completed. For years I've tried to remember even just the curvature of his jaw... but my struggle was futile; every feature lay just out of reach.

When my painting is gone and shipped off to the buyer, I'll stop trying to remember his face. I'll accept that these broken memories cannot be wholly fixed in my lifetime. But I won't mind hanging on to the fragments that they have left behind.

The Symphony Of Death

Florence Bradbury

Dappled light streamed through the rippled bleak water. A persistent ringing ran round my left ear, the other completely silent - most likely deaf from the icy plunge. My heart was pounding like a metronome to the music of my fear. Under the depths of despair, I hollowed and screamed, though it was all in vain, for water rushed down my throat. Choking and struggling for a breath, I kicked my legs suddenly in hope to slip off the gripping tangled weeds and battle to catch a breath. Yet they only clutched tighter! It was as though they had a mind of their own, although everything was so faint and vague. I had given up on reality making sense; I could have sworn I just saw a dagger sink down.

Everything around me was spinning and flurrying; trying to find my feet, I panicked but managed to land a trembling foot on something solid - probably the bed of the sandy trench...

Pausing for a second, my heart dropped. A sharp piercing pain shot through my spasmed foot like a bullet sending reoccurring, sickening, sharp, staccato agony through every inch of my tense frenetic body. Sinking to the desolate depths I clutched my severely stabbed foot. The murky water grew clouded of red, the siren in my ear grew to a forte, the pounding in my head crescendoed. As I thumped on to the sandy bed of weeds, a tornado of lily stems tightly wrapping around my irritated neck, I closed my heavy blood-shot eyes as my whole life flashed before me.

Blinding bright vision sparked memories in my head; the joyous laughter of a babbling baby; the pure harmonic sound of a sweet, soft nightingale's call; the warming legato of a bubbling brook, all these heavenly sounds a heavenly gift to this dark depressing despairing hope-draining life.

A new hallucination projected in my head, it was a reminiscence of... me. The figures were blurred and vague... but... I know it was me. I was sitting round a laughter-filled table, a young slight girl chanting my name. I couldn't hear, but I know it was my name... something about this felt familiar, like a relative whom you have never met yet you feel a deep connection formed from nothing but a mutual respect.

The next scene unveiled to be a memory which I couldn't quite interpret... It seemed to be room filled with people... ahh, a concert, the communication of the musical dominium.

Though through none of these recollections revealed who I was, how I had got here or what I had done to deserve such a cruel and unforgiving coda?

Transforming back to the world's sadistic ruthless reality, I could not tell if I was crying, knowing that not a lone soul would discover me here. I drew my last wistful smile of hope, sighed my last breath of humanity, hummed my last memory of melody. Letting despair swallow me whole, I knew that my life would always remain an unfinished symphony.

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