

# THE INK WELL

# TaBoO

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# WAITING ROOM

AMY BEVERLEY

In the doctor's office you make a joke and I don't laugh. I don't find it funny being here. Neither should you. One of the bulbs keeps flickering and it's giving me a headache. We're silent for a while.

The smell of antiseptic creeps into my nostrils. I'm reminded of when I was nine, sitting in an X-ray room with a broken wrist, puffy-eyed and splotchy-faced from hours of wailing, too scared to look at my skeleton. You were with me then, trying to calm me down. I trace my arm and feel the bone.

I wonder if you think I don't notice the shake in your hand as you take a sip of your tea from that ugly brown to-go cup. You guffawed at the 30p upcharge for disposable containers and gave the cashier grief even though I paid for it. The skin of your lips wrinkles – you don't like the way it tastes, but you don't tell me. It's funny what you'll fuss over and what you'll choke down silently.

A tall metal rack next to the doctor's desk holds a hundred little leaflets, all covered in brutal fonts and drab colours and pictures of unconvincing actors. Colon, liver, breast, lung, thyroid... they all blur together until the room spins and I have to look away. Breathe slow, count my fingertips. Don't think. If someone were to snap a picture of us right now, we'd look just as unfeeling as the leaflet-folk. You'd never think it would happen to you, but it could.

“They think it might be...” You pause. You won’t say it for what it is. “Well, you know.”

I do know. The bad thing. The c-word. Something only to be whispered like a dirty secret, entirely under your breath; as though the very action of speaking it aloud will set your skin alight.

I’m angry at you, even if I shouldn’t be. Angry that you threw away bloodied napkins and grit your teeth through the pain; told me the weight you’d lost was from this amazing new diet I just had to try. You told me about the dating lives of celebrities I don’t care about, you made me memorise everything our dog is allergic to, but this you kept hidden from me.

“If it’s bad I want you to—”

“We haven’t heard the results yet.” The words are sharp and snappy, not appropriate or comforting for this moment, but they’re all I can manage. You always think you’ll be a hero when the day comes, but nobody ever is.

There is still steam spilling out of the cup that holds your too-sweet tea. Nice as she was, the lady at the café was heavy-handed with the milk and put in a heaping teaspoon of sugar that you didn’t ask for. You didn’t say anything, a hospital isn’t the place to complain about the taste of tea, so you continue to sip slowly at it.

I have to close my eyes. I hate that lightbulb. It’s sterile and cold like the surgical metal prongs and tongs I used to have nightmares about as a child, nightmares that I’ve now had once or twice in the past week. You took me to visit your grandad in hospital when I was young, too young to remember his face, too young to miss him. This feels white-hot, a lot like that flickering light, jabbing me in the ribs every second. This, I know I will remember.

A hand on my leg. I'm forced out of the solace of darkness and back into the ferocity of the light. You're comforting me, like when I broke my arm. The touch almost brings me to tears. I am not the one whose life is hanging in the balance, but I'm clinging onto every word that the doctor hasn't said yet. You are quiet and still. Even in your terror, you are my mother.

I want to pull myself together for you, want to be the faith you hold onto as a buttress against despair. But I can't toss aside the feeling of your hand on my thigh. It melts through my skin and into the very fibre of my being; I can feel your pulse, desperate and uneven. I am still your baby. I want to crawl into your arms and scream like I did with a broken arm all those years ago. I sit here unmoving, just like you, but cowardly in my silence.

There's a rusty clock on the wall, struggling against the burden of its age to keep ticking, echoing through the room, and reverberating inside my brain. The rhythm doesn't soothe me, but instead mocks me with the passing of time, slipping through my fingers like sand. I wonder if you can hear my heartbeat.

You can't promise me anything after today, that doctor still hasn't come back. I can't fix this for you – even if we get the green light, I can't stop time, can't erase the sunspots on your skin, can't stop us growing older. In my heart I still see our younger selves sitting at the kitchen table eating breakfast.

The clock on the wall tells me we have been sitting here for five minutes. The doctor should be back soon. She'll say the words we're both too scared to even think of, the ones that make us wince like sour candies. You'll tap my wrist, the one I broke, the one that healed over time, and I'll try to understand.

# CRASH (1996)

FRAN T.N. RUSSELL

I've been dreaming of sharp things lately.  
Glass shards, metal springs, chrome stars, tree branches–  
Never a taking but a donation.

*It's very... satisfying. I'm not*

*sure I understand why.*

I had a dream about being cut across.  
It wasn't painful, no;  
But my stomach had been stolen from.

I had a dream about being stabbed.  
A spear dove from the sky  
And split through my head,  
And became my new heart.

Boys with bayonets driven through their abdomen;  
It's never right in the reenactments—they always look too scared.

*those who  
have died with an intensity impossible  
in any other form.*

Subtraction runs through these chromosomes—  
The fish knife a kind-of lover:  
Familiar with what lies underneath my skin.

Mutilation is a thief  
Making my face unreadable  
But leaving my bones intact,  
Easily categorized.

*so the crowd can see  
them get cut up*

I will take all the needles I can  
Because I lose flesh every day  
Tearing away at my skin;  
Pruning my nails into oblivion.

This I show to prove I'm not lying  
Because you set a scythe by my new name—  
Wanted an answer.  
Because you assumed vehicular manslaughter  
Only applied to cars.

—

*Note: Lines in italics taken from Crash (1996),  
written by David Cronenberg and J.D.*



*Jocelyn Arnold*



# WENDY'S DOLL HOUSE

FLORENCE AMERY

“Good morning!” Larks the voyeur’s voice  
Through the silence of the sky,  
Then a violent beam of bedroom light,  
Accuses my still eye.

A malignant fist that’s streaked with jam  
Gropes beneath my waist,  
I’m yanked from bed, I hit my head,  
And am drawn towards Her face.

She’s embossed in golden ringlets,  
With irises steel blue,  
Much like me, but alternately,  
Imbued with a motley hue.

The Artifice of Innocence,  
She shakes me till I’m frayed,  
“Now then Wendy, let us see, what games to play today?”

Detained within my waxen limbs,  
Holds the violence of pretence,  
She pulls my hair, will strip me bare,  
The picture of Innocence.

But the corners of my crimson lips  
Are fixed by transparent string,  
The contours of an empty smile,  
So my ventriloquist can sing.

She flings me back into the house,  
Imprisoned by three walls,  
“It’s time to make a baby!”  
The Innocent one calls.

Frightfully, forcibly, my frock reveals my chest,  
As Grizzly Bear comes up the stairs, and paws upon my breast.  
He looks at me in apology as we’re rubbed like frosted hands,  
“You’ll be Mummy and he’ll be Daddy!”  
The Artifice demands.

“Wendy is a mother!”  
Chirps the Innocent with glee,  
Whilst the gossamer which threads my lips  
Thaws with solemnity.

“Darling!” Sung a mother’s tune through perforated air.  
“Breakfast’s on the table, so hurry down the stairs!”  
Emancipated by Innocence, Her fingers lay me free,  
She seals again my captive walls -  
And mumbles; “Bye, Wendy.”

The Artifice of Innocence, drapes nostalgia’s fickle blind  
With Imagined childhood purity, the chaste infantile mind.  
The Artifice of Innocence, claims children as benign,  
Yet in my darkness, still once more, my threaded lips unwind.



# BLOODSHED

ALICIA NELSON

The black tarmac bears red blood fresh from my cut knee. My bike, the rider's seat recently vacated, lies on its side before me, pink and silver streamers now swinging in knots from the handles. I'm in pain.

Erin says to me that real pain is when you're a tiny rabbit baby and you're new and soft and unmarred and a dog breaks into your home whilst you're sleeping and wolfs you down like popcorn spilled on the living room floor on movie night.

My dog ate her rabbits last week. But I'm still in pain. And it's very real to me.

"Is she crying?" Ben asks, and "she" has a weight to it I've never noticed before. Am I crying? I squeeze my face into a tight fist so no feelings can get in or out. I won't cry. And I definitely won't cry now in front of Ben.

It feels now that to cry is weak. Not like Before, when Ben cried when he fell off the wall, or Erin cried when she hit her elbow on the slide, and we comforted and consoled and moved on. Now, Ben is mean and pointed and he wants others to laugh.

Before and After are separated by a Moment. Before that Moment, Ben scraped the meat of his chin on the rough bark of a tree as he slipped down and Ben's Dad noticed his wetted cheeks through the kitchen window. Now, After that Moment, Ben sniffs and huffs and presses his eyes tightly shut and walks it off when he falls. Now, Ben laughs and points and says "Is she crying?" when you fall.

I want my dog to wolf Ben down like chunks of raw chicken spilled on the kitchen floor at dinner time.

“I’m not crying.”

But I really really want to. I want to feel tears make my face hot and wet. I want my nose to run. I want to wail. I want to make noise. I want to be in pain. I want to enjoy being in pain for just a short time before the pain goes away and all I have left is a bloody knee.

“Yes. You are.” There’s authority in his voice. I hate him.

I know Ben has stolen something from me. He knows it, too. It’s the thing that’s made his chest push out so far and his smile so mean, like he’s got a new toy he won’t let us play with.

Erin sees it. She isn’t comforting or consoling me. She’s standing by her bike and for the first time she looks embarrassed of the purple ribbons and pink basket that we both begged Father Christmas for only a few months ago. She won’t look at me.

My face burns red. Some heavy thing behind my ribcage squeezes. There is heavy rain in my head. Loud and thundering and sweet. All-consuming. I want to shout, but he’ll win, but I want to shout anyway. I frown my eyelids closed again and they shiver with this rage like a cornered rabbit against cage walls. He looks so triumphant and all I want is to crush him but there’s nothing I can say that would crush him like the weight of ‘she’ crushes me.

The rain in my head grows louder, and it’s explosive.

‘He’ will never be an insult to him. ‘She’ comes with burden, bulk, baggage, and ‘he’ just means person.

I think of my Dad. He says, you can only be insulted if you give someone the power to insult you. But I didn’t give Ben that power, he already had it.

Why does 'she' even insult me? It never has before. I like being a girl, because boys are gross, and girls are so much better at lots of things. The difference feels clearer now, though. Like I'm a Girl and Ben's a Boy.

There's this one picture stuck to our fridge with alphabet magnets collected from smoothie boxes. It's crinkled with time and wear and crusted with someone's stew at the edges, but we're so vibrant you can still tell who's who. We stare at the camera, red eyes flashing, caught out in some kids' game with our heads pressed together in communion. Erin's in purple ruffles, me in blue, and Ben in his own matching pink princess dress, all of us studded with clip-on earrings, glitter, and cheap beaded jewellery. All of us smiling so wide it looks like it hurts.

I touch my tongue to my salted skin. I want to be comforted. I want my sobbing body to be cradled and someone to whisper that shhh, this feeling is justified but temporary and please know that you are loved and full of light.

Ben already had that power, to insult me with my identity. He was born with it just like I was born without it. Ben's Dad gave him that stupid puffed-up smile and chest, and taught him how to be a Man.

I'm full of storm and rage. The rain inside me shouts now and the rain is a Girl and she's loud so you can still hear her when Boys talk.

I am Eve and it is my fault they are looking at me.

The air is hot and sweet, dust-filled, with the scent of grass dying in perfect front gardens.

I am young and full of anger.  
I don't even know what changed.

# MOTHERBOARD

AOIBH DOWNEY

The glare of the blue light from his  
Sensually curved 4K monitor  
Gave Ewan's jam-red cheeks  
The quality of a weeping bruise  
As his fist rapped against the bottom of the desk  
Like an impatient Jehovah's Witness.

"50p to see a picture of tits,  
£1 to watch the real thing!"  
Harked the older boys in the changing room.  
A monastic silence fell over the dank room  
As a chorus of  
Ohohooooahafuckharderhardddohhhahhh  
Reverberated from the walls.

For the first time in years,  
he woke up in a puddle of cold piss.

Slowly,  
Megabus bathroom stalls,  
School storage cupboards and  
Topshop changing rooms  
Became cyber-brothels;  
An infinite feast of sexual delights.

But the busty blondes became boring,  
and the orgies weren't doing it for him anymore.  
Missionary was a bore,  
Scissoring was a cliché,  
Stepsiblings were over-done.  
So, the continuous chase  
To feel satisfaction began.

Tentacles and teachers,  
Latexed "lady-boys"  
Squirting sissies,  
Degradation,  
Incest.

Nothing was naked enough.  
He wanted to peel back the pixels  
And penetrate the ether,  
To ejaculate out binary code  
And suckle from the  
comforting teat of the motherboard.





*Ellie Maxwell*

# THE NIGHT IN HER EYES

TAYLOR MARGOT CAMPBELL

Some small hours,  
the last dregs still streak the morning.  
Walk beside the night time.  
The rain is running down her arm.  
The umbrella covers you,  
but when you turn there is a little rivulet of water running  
down the nape of your neck.  
It was as if her heart was straining against the skin of her chest,  
but it couldn't get out,  
moving there like an unborn baby inside her.  
Someone left money on her windowsill,  
she said she forgot what it was for.  
Her hair was too black,  
absorbing all the light and everything into it,  
until you were alone in the empty  
seeing the void cross the other man's face.  
I'm scared of the sky; she told her mum when she was younger.  
You mean, you're scared of the dark.  
No.  
The black is a pupil, the night sees.  
Her.  
Seizes her.





# BUTTER

GRÁINNE HALPIN

I set the table with a placemat, a knife, a fork, and one gleaming white plate. I want something so simple and straightforward as hunger; I want to be satisfied so easily. I hope this ritual will make me crave something tangible: fool me into wanting something I can actually get. It doesn't. I put the pieces back where they belong and I walk instead. I walk a lot. I like to come home with the warmth drained out of me, just so I can feel the blood tingle back into my fingers, feel my heart work – thump, thump.

Last December, I walked through one corner of Dublin city. It gets dark so early, just like here. Remembering this particular walk, I feel again the chilled heaviness of my cheeks, the slow-growing shiver, the cold air in my nose.

I took a couple of new shortcuts to start it off; through the churchyard by my house with its slippery cobblestones and a vent puffing hot clouds into the haze of dark grey sky and back around under an archway with those awkward two-step-skip stairs. I emerged onto a wide road, followed it for a while. Soon, I turned onto a cul-de-sac of neat little bungalows.

I slowed down there. This street begged a slower pace than the fast wide road I'd eagerly left behind. Its houses were abrupt. For those unfamiliar with the urban Dublin cottage, I'll describe them: they have one small step up to the door and very little between them and the road but their walls, their windows, and whatever the occupiers themselves choose to put in-between; painted flower beds on the windowsills or whole potted trees and wooden tables and chairs, signs that say NO JUNK MAIL in varyingly ugly fonts. The immediacy of these houses and their narrow footpaths have your trailing wintery bits (scarves and bobby hat ends and too-big charity shop

coats) brushing up on the walls, and ultimately: you – up close and personal with the windows.

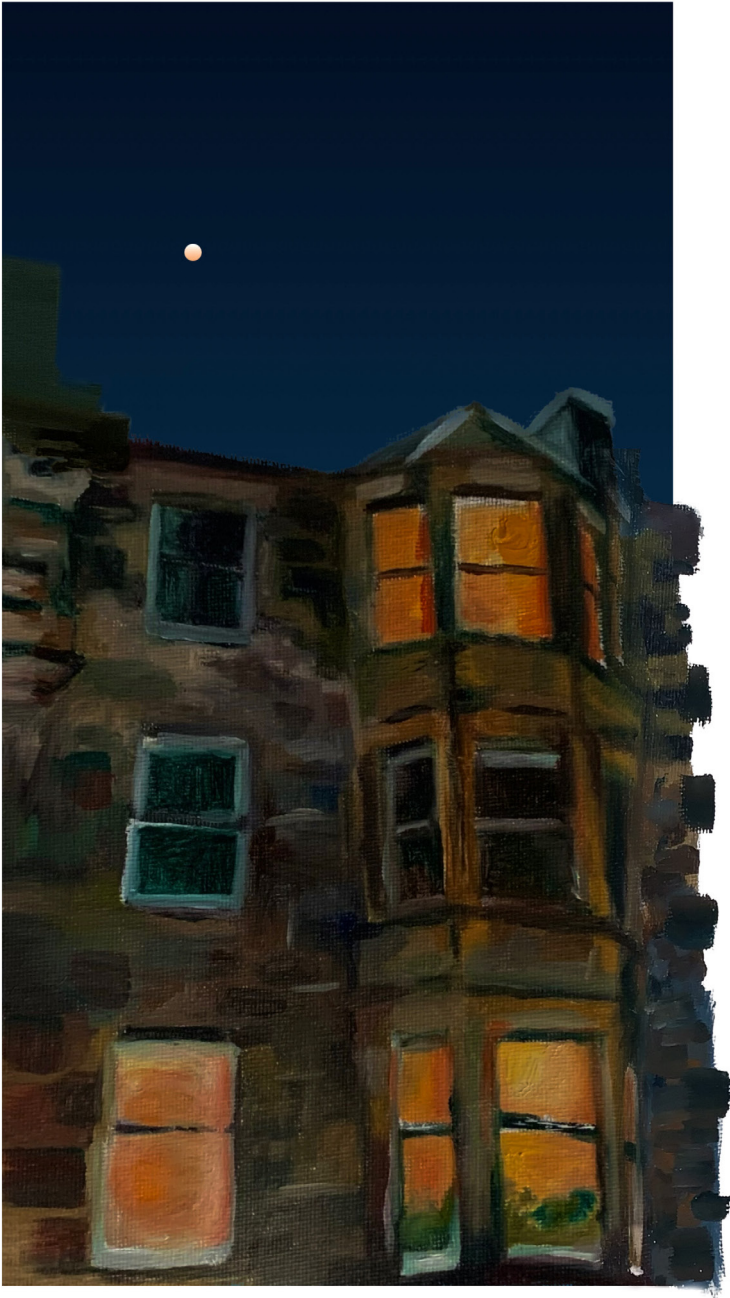
That evening, the bungalows were so tempting and the street was empty: just empty enough that I broke the locality's unspoken contract and had a nosy little peek. And then I had several more. It turned out that these bungalows in fact had two stories. In some of the windows towards the top you can see the beginnings of some mock first floor - a mezzanine maybe - and in others if you look hard enough you can see iron spirals of stairs. Of course, I wasn't lingering in the windows with my hands cupped around my eyes and my breath fogging the windows: I was only stealing occasional glimpses as I walked. I was fearful of making eye contact with the woman on her laptop at the wooden table or the man unloading groceries on the kitchen counter.

In the light of those windows a line from a poem I'd learned in school came back to me. I found I already had the words to describe the tantalising warmth I saw through the dark. The line was 'one window is yellow as butter'; more than a few times I'd thought it visually appropriate — but now I thought I felt it, finally, rather than just appreciated it. Here was the house with its knobbly white walls and its low, sturdy door, and its one window: yellow as butter – and it was what I'd been craving the whole time. I saw that the house was made of homemade bread still warm from the oven, the window a slide of butter atop it, and I wanted to eat it, yes. I wanted to eat it like I wanted to become it, like I wanted whatever made it a home to be me, like maybe I wanted to be a home too, and have my friends and family with me, always, as if I could carry them around and never be lonely. I would make them bread from the sourdough starter that I'd set up in my ribcage, and they would eat the bread warm and buttery, and a part of me at least could be with them always, too.

I carried on and ended up at bigger houses with proper gardens; stretches of greenery between you and the people inside. Here, I gave up all pretence and stopped, and stared. I watched a flame flicker in a window until I had seen new wax drip down the side of the candle. I watched a baby pick up toys and put them in a box and then empty them out in one big gesture all over the room. I watched a family have their dinner, and I watched them pour gravy over whatever meat they were having for dinner. I wondered what meat it was. It might have been some other girl who stood outside the window too long, wishing she was inside. I went home and took my shoes off and went to bed.

I was hungry in Dublin, and I lived there all my life. The windows here are so much bigger. If before I was standing outside buttery windows, then they were only the individually wrapped pats of the stuff; Edinburgh has blocks and blocks of butter, and it might just fill me. It's like I'm in a gallery and someone has stopped to tell me about this particular painting. They point to the empty spot at the table, to the abandoned glass of wine, to the girl in the background looking right at us, the knife and its slice of bread, and say, 'We're a part of the scene, you see? They're inviting us in.'

I'm learning more about the nature of windows. They're reciprocal, it turns out. I can look in as much as I want, but the people inside can look right back out at me. On my walks here, I've noticed how sometimes the lonely girl staring back at me isn't my reflection. I wonder how her table looks; I wonder what she wants from me and the rainswept street – if it might be the sourdough kept warm in my ribs. I see now through these windows an invitation; 'come in, sit down, we can eat together,' and I think that this time, a meal will satisfy me.



*Amy Penrose*



# NACRE

KUBA OLSZAK

It was a star that shot through the sternum  
and nestled among the chest recesses.  
A seed thrown in the midst of your ribs  
strangled you with the veil of secrecy.

It was a séance when you let the word sprout  
for the first time. Faced with the sound of  
your voice, you let the word unroll  
from your tongue, as if to test it, try it on.

But the curious minds perish, and the stone  
cast within the hollows of your chest  
cavity grew heavier. Rot to your rib cage,  
your silence became outweighed.

So you drew the curtains to let the light  
illuminate your depths of tangled darkness.  
You were bestowed with a grain of sand,  
your choice if you cast it in callus or a pearl.





*Michael Gao*

# STEAMWORKS

“A student locker, please,” is all I say, as the door shuts behind me, the automatic lock that separates this world from that. To me, that’s the strangest part of all this; one moment there’s the street, and the overflowing bins, and the people, chatting polite conversations over polite dogs. They gather in spontaneous huddles metres from the entrance, oblivious to the disguises of “The Laundrette” and “The Mechanics”. Those who know it as the sauna choose not to look. I too could pretend I don’t know, could tread past confidently with self-righteous footsteps. Choose something different for my day. A bakery trip, the cinema. Masturbation. Today I choose this. I want this.

He hands me the key, smiling like an overfamiliar childhood figure. He’s here often, or as often as I am, sometimes joins in after his shift ends if he’s not too defeated by the day.

“And that’s you,” he beams.

I feel at once reassured and judged.

The changing room is the last bastion of dignity. A place of chrysalis-like change where the ordered becomes the audacious. Colourful lockers line the room in numerical order, all containing a single, white towel. I begin folding first my trousers, then my shirt, like origami pieces, giving myself the illusion of civility. I spot the black bin to my right, full of used towels, dripping. As my boxers come off I hear footsteps and laughter and two satisfied Spanish men enter, just in time for me to tie the cotton around my waist, tight. We nod at each other, pretending we’re allies, pretending we’re straight, as they prepare to leave and I, to enter.

I’ve been several times now, yet the lack of light always surprises me. I follow the darkened corridor that snakes around the so-called ‘cabins’, which can be rented for a higher fee. They are for different men; those who are salaried, businessmen, those who have affairs. Some pass me in couples, groups even, who prefer the cabin’s cloak of privacy. Those who’ve had bad luck huff by, their thumbs itching to open up Grindr. This brings me to the downstairs room,

consisting of a shower area, sauna, steam-room and, secluded, the jacuzzi. All seemingly normal, the things that you'd come across at any self-respecting Centre Parcs or spa. The door to the steam room is pushed open suddenly, steam rushing out the top, gasping for breath, a naked man following. A reminder that this place is anything but normal, something I find both disturbing and arousing. I examine him: probably in his early fifties, seems like it isn't his first time. His body is hairy and his cock is circumcised. Our eyes catch - I don't want them to. I do a half smile, enough to be friendly, enough to end the interaction. I am observing, not initiating.

Upstairs boasts both the 'dark room' and a side room, in which a wall stretches, filled with countless glory holes. The former has several nooks, maze-like, through which dark figures go back and forth, anxiously looking but trying not to look anxious. Some are pornstars, exhibiting themselves through silent consent on their knees. Others are objects, nervous at auction. And who is going to bid for me?

A warm hand brushes against my thigh as I too circuit the dark room, my eyes darting straight up at his face - is he the attractive bald man from the jacuzzi? I add him to my mental list of potentials in case nothing else presents itself.

Any sexual tension is suddenly broken by the appearance of a torch light through the black flaps as a member of staff completes the hourly chore of picking up empty condom wrappers and replenishing the lube. I hope they're well paid. I become embarrassed by default, pretend I don't know what's going on in this room, in this place. The check is done promptly, by which time the bright light fades and someone gets back on their knees.

An hour has passed. I'm slouched in the communal area, my sweaty back greasing the wall. Two men are on their knees below, sharing me. Three other guys use the same bench, one is also receiving head and another kissing

passionately. Porn plays on the tv screen above us, the dated one they always play from the noughties. I imagine I'm in it too and how that would look, for isn't this, this huge orgy, the stuff of fantasy? The guy next to me, Polish and cute, hands me some poppers. Some dribbles down on my hand. It's pungent. Glancing across I see men desperate to join, salivating over beer bellies. I hate their gaze, yet I keep going, performing in sharp moans. My eyes roll back and some red catches my eye. It's the crescent dots that make up the camera above the tv. Forever spying. A necessity I admit, though I rarely feel unsafe. I can't help but wonder if the staff are watching me, us, right now. Perhaps all the time. Can my family see? I think of what they'd say.

I sip some water in the adjacent cafe, the one place where towels are enforced and men sit chatting, human again, over cups of free coffee. This room shows the best of daytime TV: Homes Under the Hammer and Location, Location, Location. The contrast seems ridiculous. I check the clock above the drinks station. I've been here for two hours and have, so far, had a 'successful' time. As I go down the stairs I see fresh faces who've just arrived, many of them attractive and luring. I forget Sundays are the best day; a revolving door for hot men. I wonder how many come for empowerment, or simple fun. I think also of how many sneak away from family Sunday roasts to be here. I'll never know, and I shouldn't. I decide to stay for another half an hour, an investor eager to see how the market will change. Here the unknown is the biggest temptation.

I'm washing myself in the shower opposite the steam room, facing away for fear of someone seeing me naked. I close my eyes under the hot water, washing the shame away, scrubbing underwhelming kisses from my lips, yet I feel satisfied, like I've been released for a few days. They have hairdryers, too. I smile thanking the same guy from before and get buzzed out. Walking in Edinburgh's harsh wind I try to decipher if today I feel empowered, underwhelmed or like crying. I choose the first. Behind me the sauna collapses itself into a tightly packaged box, its lure fading. It becomes a neat memory, an obscure reference; it isn't real, until I want it to be again.

# ELIZABETH SHORT, 1949

AMELIE MACKAY

1.

I took a ride with a married man back to my city, Hollywood  
via Pershing Square, streets lined with wasted and forsaken people

looking for reason, for a light. I'd missed the town, her moods before  
dawn,

a paradise named Biltmore, the taste of hotel bars and kisses.

For here is the beginning of eternity, a street lined with chaos,  
sunset in the city of fallen angels; I speak my name into silence.

2.

These days I live in the hills, among the yucca and crickets praying  
by the mansions from Spain, plain white roses, oleander blossom

and pale stars. Leimert Park is another age, silent  
and monochrome, one of a thousand theatres, wrapped in celluloid.

Drives by night reveal the splayed masses of my city, the neon  
and wildfires, like my home in the East: beautiful, falling apart.

3.

In dreams I was dragged out to flatlands, where women lie  
murdered near the sidewalk in public parks, I'm no stranger

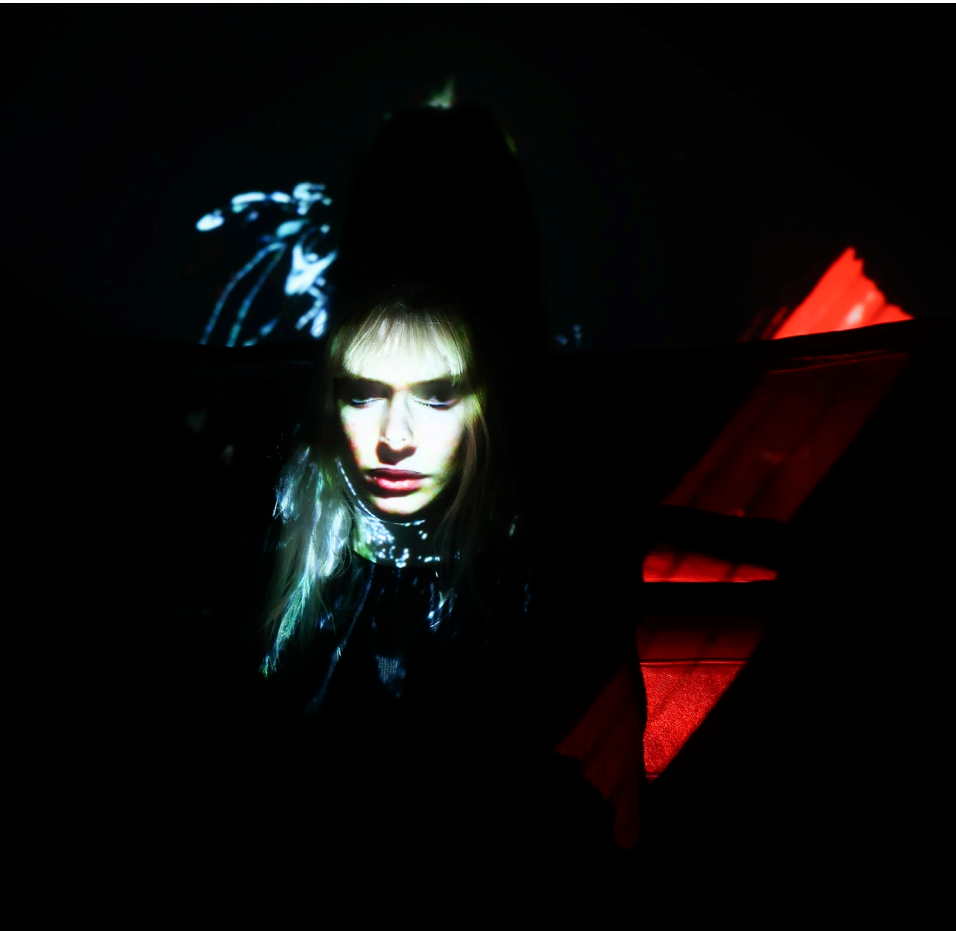
to sides split with laughter at Hollywood, invisible. I traded fame  
for immortality; I am alive. Stay in one piece, the letters from home said.

4.

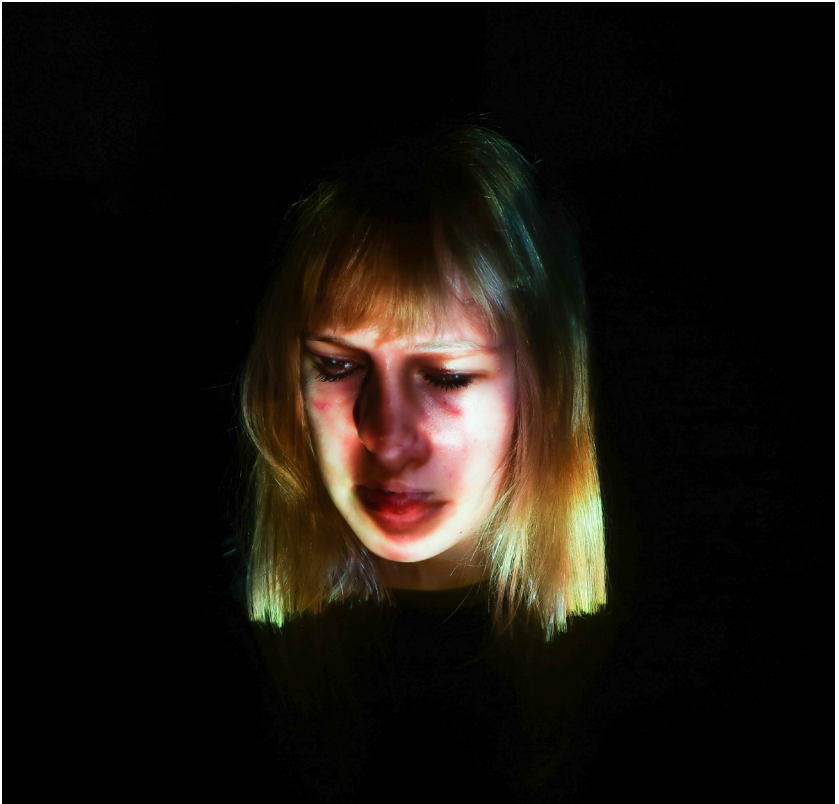
I drove myself back out of the city, to pretend for a moment  
that it doesn't own me. I say my real name out loud and then I say

goodnight to Los Angeles, with her deep golden twilight,  
her rages, her emptiness and her infallible appetite for death.

City of greasepaint and stardust, left in pieces on the sidewalk.  
I would have loved the freeways; the road to anywhere is all mine.



*Alice Wheeler*



# GOOD FRIDAY, 25 YEARS

ADAM BLAIR

(WAITING  
FOR SUNDAY)

Out of the depthless abyss,  
out of the darkness beyond night,  
out of the air thicker than smoke,  
out of the casket waiting to slam,  
within the pregnant pause of a bomb  
gasping in limbo,  
an uncertain birth of light  
came impossibly,  
one year, one second,  
kicking and screaming,  
flooding out from under the rubble,  
cracking through the fortified walls;  
pouring down from heaven on  
white waves in the sky,  
crying like a child with glowing eyes  
of holy visions.

It came from a door, cracked open,  
to a place we'd never been.  
And here we find ourselves,  
its nauseous babies lying unarmed,  
trapped in the soot-stained halls of somewhere softer,  
on the same bruised earth still creaking and moaning  
as it turns;  
we, the hundred-million petals that  
grew from its flowering, withering,  
more dead than alive.  
Tangled and choking  
in the bellowing gaps of ma and da's silence,  
we whisper to each other,

“The sun that rose from the sea that day  
will never return. And we  
take your promises  
and burn them  
and spread the ashes gently  
to fertilise our soil.”

# INIQUITY

JAY ENRIGHTS

It was the evening of Professor Iain Macbean's sixty-eighth birthday. Every year, on his birthday, he held a private party in his townhouse on Bruntsfield Avenue to which he invited his many academic acquaintances: old colleagues, people who had proven themselves and understood their worth. Hannah had been helping at the house for close to half a year, keeping the Professor's affairs in order, digitising his accumulated documents, transcribing and proofreading his forthcoming companion to Seneca. He had said one day as she helped him in his study with the invitations, "Here, why don't you come along? Bit of young meat to make the rest of us feel a little less settled in our decline."

Hannah had never felt so much pressure to be interesting as she did now in the hushed, sparsely populated living room. She picked away at her nails in her trouser pocket and looked often to her employer's face for guidance. Iain's mute little eyes contained no self-awareness, and only looked outward, all-perceiving. It was Iain who made her feel most of all that she was being examined. She wanted badly to make an impression, but she could not think of anything to say to the smiling little doctor of divinity before her. At last, she retreated to the buffet table for a recess, but was at once detained by old Mrs Wemyss. Hannah had encountered this loquacious neighbour before in the course of her duties, and presently she felt her firm little hand grip her forearm and heard her sharp voice in her ear. "How nice of the professor to invite you. He's a kind man, isn't he now?"

"Yes," Hannah said. "And you, have you been to many?"

"Oh yes, dear. I've known him since he bought the place." She locked Hannah's arm in hers, under the guise of finding support, and led her to the nearby sofa. "A devilishly striking man he looked then – so tall and broad and with a big ruddy face. Such frightful eyes, full of thought, and when they turned on you in all their concentration, my goodness, if you didn't feel quite conscious of the way you looked!" Her own blue eyes were

full of expectation, and Hannah felt the need to make some reply.

“I see.”

“Quite the figure he cut: Iain Macbean,” went on Mrs Wemyss. “Back from Cambridge, with his brand-new readership position at the University, and his English wife, nearly a decade younger than him.”

“Wife?”

“Yes dear. She was very clever, too,” said Mrs Wemyss, “a very clever young lady, Isabella. My husband, who’s a painter and decorator, helped them do it all up, the house. It was in such a frightful state at first, and it took quite a bit of work to do up. This room we’re in was just in about the most terrible state you can imagine. Rot in all the old floorboards. Not to mention the kitchen – oh, but I’m getting away from the point.”

She paused, trying to locate for herself where the point of her chatter lay.

“But he was a terribly handsome man, our Professor Macbean. And my husband, who’s a saint, poor man, and does far more work for others than he’s ever paid for, was over every day for a month, tiling, plastering, painting all the walls in the toilets, the study, the master bedroom, the nursery.”

She cleared her throat, then continued more firmly. “In the evenings, the Professor would return and he’d take off his coat and kiss Isabella, who I’d been helping out increasingly in the day, not because I’d been asked to, you must understand, but because it’s simply good to be neighbourly. And every evening he would come home and kiss her and ask us to stay for dinner. And Frank,” – she moved an arm to her husband, the wizened, hairless little man who sat alone by the table, his arms crossed, chewing – “he would make to

refuse, but I'd take his arm like I take yours now, bless him, and say we'd love to. Really it wasn't as though we weren't doing our bit in return. The Professor, he didn't like to talk about his work, but he could be very jolly, and Isabella was a saint. What happy times we shared then."

Iain was talking amicably with the doctor of divinity across the room, beside the piano. His small eyes landed on Hannah, perceiving, and she looked back. She had always been so focused on her own behaviour with him, so anxious to appear full of wit and culture and youth because she thought that was what he wanted. Now, for once, she contemplated him as he was.

So, a wife. Come together on winter nights. Losing a part of themselves. The seed of something.

"We would talk about the future," came the neighbour's voice. "It all looked so bright. If it had been a girl, it would have been Martha, and if a boy it was to be Martin. It was his father's name, I believe. Martin Macbean: the sort of name you'd expect a wee baby boy to grow into. I have the feeling that he felt quite guilty about it. When Isabella moved out, I remember him telling me - No, but we don't dwell. It does no good."

She fell quiet.

Hannah looked through the open door to the hall and the foot of the stairs. Upstairs: the master bedroom, the guest rooms, the nursery. She lost a part of herself to him. In the dark he took it, in a fit of electric triumph. There, within. Too fragile for the outward world. After the phone call, when she had hurried home and he had told her, she took herself off alone. Only despair, a hopeless, personal despair did he see in her look and judgement.

Thinking her companion wished to be left alone on the sofa, Hannah got up to leave, but she felt the hand on her arm again, trapping her. “Oh, sorry,” she said. “I thought-”

But the talons relinquished at once; the hand fell by. “Oh, it doesn’t matter,” came the old lady’s voice, tired. “I suppose it’s just one of those things, and it’s not especially nice. But it was a long time ago.”

After the party, Hannah stayed behind to help her employer clean up. She was stripping butter off of knives in the soapy kitchen basin when Iain returned from seeing off the last guests in the hall.

“I noticed you talking to Nell Wemyss,” he said, dipping his hands in the sudded water and wiping off the excess thoughtlessly. “She’s a God-fearing old dear. I hope you got on.” He took the towel from her, and asked, “What were the two of you discussing?”

She told him. He put down the towel, silently, without drying his hands. After a careful pause, he spoke with considered words in a considered tone. “It’s a part of my past, long beyond my control. I know how your mind works, that you will mull it over. But you mustn’t think I dwell on it, or that I am unhappy, or that I am changed by it. Once you’re done with the cutlery you can go. I’ll manage the rest.”

These words left her feeling hot and wrong. She feared she had overstepped a boundary and wished she had told him something else. With trembling fingers, she dried the last of the knives and returned them to the drawer. But as she left, he said to her in a kinder voice he would need her Monday morning to help him organise his notes on volumes six and seven.







*Amy Penrose*

# PENCE

CASEY MARYYANEK

You drank two orange juices & leaned across to kiss me in the restaurant booth & you said it. Shocked, I didn't say it back & you didn't know it was such a "big deal" but I huffed that it was a "big deal" to me & now you're all hush about it. We signed as co-owners on the mortgage & that day we said "I love you" to each other & we haven't said it since. Now we sleep in the same room in a corner apartment on the second floor & grow ivy in terracotta pots on the kitchen counter & I don't say it. The man who lives beneath us exhales cigarette smoke three times a day & I close the windows when he does it. The kitchen grows stuffy with the scent of us & the lightbulbs burn hot to the touch & I don't say it. My heart boils over & I don't say it. My mouth grows heavy & I don't say it. I add coins to a mason jar by the washing machine every time I find a few in your pockets & I tell myself one day I'll buy a new coat & a new apartment on the third floor instead. I add coins to a mason jar by the washing machine & you rush down to find a clean pair of socks for me as I get ready for work & I run after you because I can get them myself & when I spill it, I spill it. I keep crying while we pick up the coins & I'm scared I'm going to be late & I say "I love you" & I do love you. You tell me it's not a "big deal" & so I get all hush about it & walk to work in sneakers without socks. It's a "big deal" to me & I don't say it.

# LOVE LETTER TO MY HEROIN

POLLYANNA JACKSON

**H don't I love you.** H don't I have loved you since second I laid two fat hungry eyes on you. Hungry eyes and I swallowed you whole. Didn't mama always say I was so greedy like that. I told you a lot about mama didn't I you know so much bout mama. You a real good listener H I gotta say that you listen good. I tell you bout mama an maybe other things an you listen like nobody listen. Climb right in me and get all my words out. Jump off spoon and into me. Get it out.

H I love you so much sometimes it got me itching all the way from I wake up to sleep. Same arms I gotta just gotta put round you they shake like two grass stalks. Sometime get so sick I think where the hell you been all this time H where you been you been out on that pavement with the others with the ones I see lying on the stoop arms still that's how I know you been with them. H you a real fuckin bitch too cause you got so many friends I got none. But it's cool I forgive you all christ like. Cause you always come back an you always got a little left for me a little of your self left over an you know I been so hungry.

H where you now where you at. Gotta see you. Come to me please please come now I gotta see you. Been so long. Been a long time baby come back to mama I need my baby don't I love you like nobody do like nobody

ever love us hungry people like us. Teeth biting on each other. Need need you.

You out there I know it. You out there you on the street everybody else lovin on you like I should be. Two fat cops gonna chase you down an alleyway tonight huh you climb over the fence you climb in a window find a hidey hole anywhere you real smart you hide anywhere you want. I let you hide in me if you wanna. Open me up put you in me hide hide like under the covers I don't care it itches we gotta keep you safe somewhere. Open hole open wound open well wound. Baby baby I need you you coming you hear me you coming to me here I am crying calling wanting crushing needing needing nothing nothing nothing.

They say all love gotta come to an end but not us H not us we never end be together til the end that never comes. You gonna finish me off huh H. You gonna do it for me. You gonna? Hold my hand. Hold my hand like mama done.







*Cleo Stoutzker*

# THE MOTHER IN THE TROJAN COW

LEAH LEVY

The six-way yes  
her body, gives: eyes  
curled in a wink, mouth up or open, head nodded, arms  
apart, thumbs turned, posture  
small and leaning  
him, her  
both mix air  
she names herself  
twice to pacify his something else  
the lady and the bull?  
Ask why you pay for his wet ick. How can  
you not?

Her and her cow suit and him in his skin shed  
a son  
over legal and she makes the crime  
still young  
enough to not know how to sit there  
dripping in this  
you are not old, age has a  
min and you are bad for one  
she thinks her body split in two  
there, something about you three  
minute baby that smelled vaguely gooey and cried behind  
a partition of her  
hot, wet tip and beg  
your father a gift of revenge from the god of being drenched  
her low sin got his ego all ivy  
every room smells oozy and  
lonely under here  
curtail every memory behind a curtained window with a string  
pacifier shapes distorted through labyrinth caves  
themselves taking turns superimposed on overlaid layers of overexposed  
film in a pinhole camera never sure where it's been  
fucked by the light  
fun  
has its gap  
between archways and your mother's arching  
half-human on the top or bottom, it matters who you ask  
they wrap you up in yarn that cuts you  
cross-hatched in one-dimensional pop-up stories



*Amy Penrose*



*Sebastian Holbrey*

# ICHOR

AMY PENROSE

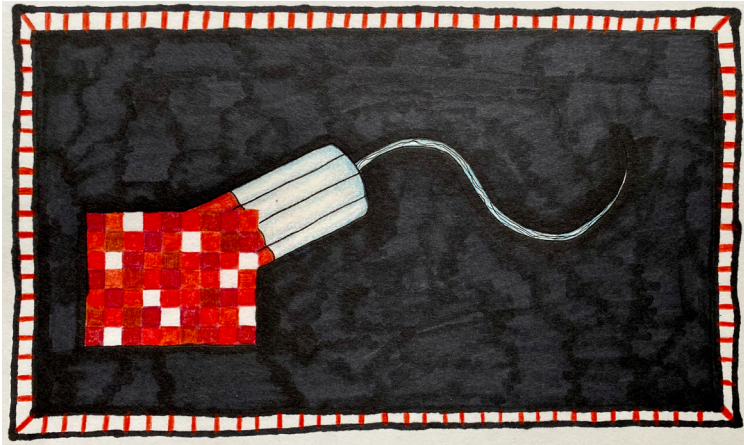
‘The word ‘**tabu**’ or ‘**sacred**,’ is [...] in Polynesian and in Siouan languages, the same as that for ‘**menstruating**’ – Robert Briffault. The Mothers. Volume 2. 1927. p.412.

Like spirits or gods passing over store houses  
cause rot,  
it is said resting Maori men lose their power to run  
when women step over their legs.  
The feminine is revered, sacred, tabu.  
Husband of Elizabeth Batts, ‘Captain’ James Cook, dragged back  
that word, bleeding, butchered.  
Watch it trickle down in clots through culture,  
No longer a reminder to tread careful in awe of  
what is beyond us,  
but a warning to stay in line,  
referenced hushed, in almost an intake of breath,  
now a concept circular in its reasoning,  
no wise nod to a larger aim.

When enough blood wells up and  
catches the light,  
it becomes the eye of a small rodent, shrew,  
begging for understanding, not believing in you  
to account for their life's value.  
But their eye stares on nonetheless,  
unapologetic that you must see their humanity.  
Looking into the deep red of it,  
the thickness of the liquid,  
is enough to send any man mad.  
And yet,  
dropped onto any clothing of a woman,  
that red means mundane,  
means she has failed to conceal what threatens to  
run down her leg,  
a quarter of her time  
means another hassle to clear away.  
She will emerge out of the silence of the bathroom,  
and fold your crisp white guest towel,  
and smile politely.

One Monday night, in a hardback book printed long before her birth,  
she will find too many superstitions link back to this misplaced divinity.  
She will step over those slumped on the floor by the shelves,  
and hardly hear her loud, hollow steps across the library floor  
through her newfound clarity and barely contained rage.  
It must be her 'time of the month'.





*Rose Saville*

# THE ALBATROSS

24th December, 1798

I am the only one who has noticed we are being followed. Over the ship's wake sails a great white bird - an albatross, if I am to trust the accounts of previous seafarers. It soars with wings held rigid, scarcely moving a feather, and its glittering dark eyes seem to watch every man who crosses the deck. Though I know these birds are undoubtedly harmless, I must confess that I feel a certain unease every time I leave my cabin and catch a glimpse of it behind the stern. It never tires, but glides on through the thickening fog like a restless spirit.

No one has made mention of it yet. I am alone with a sense of creeping dread, knowing that even as I write these words in the darkness of my cabin, the albatross flies on in tenacious pursuit. What can it want from us, who are but specks in the vast expanse of its native ocean? The candle flickers, and the ship pitches. Could there be a storm brewing?

These southern seas are choked with ice. We have been taking the utmost care to chart a course through clear waters, but over these past few days the mist has made it challenging to see anything at all. If one jagged iceberg were to slash the ship's hull, she would sink with all hands and I would never again see Katherine and my dear girls. Just to think of this fate makes me tremble - my family bereaved and destitute, and myself reduced to fish-gnawed bones in the lightless Pacific depths. We are to need all the luck we can get. If I could somehow...

But no, these are nothing but superstitions. Perhaps the long voyage has made me more susceptible to these absurd notions. The lack of food cannot help either - I have started to feel the aching pains of starvation as our supplies dwindle. I cannot imagine what the cook will manage to scrape together for Christmas Day.

It shall be a disappointing dinner, hardly conducive to our health. Are we really to content ourselves with weevil-ridden biscuits and what remains of our canned preserves? Perhaps I could raise the crew's morale by providing them with fresh poultry. Such a gift would certainly raise my standing in the eyes of the Captain.

Enough of this. I will not shoot the bird. It would be unwise. But somehow, I cannot banish the idea from my mind.

Not for the first time, I wish my dear Katherine were here with me. It will be a wretched Christmas indeed without her and our beloved daughters. I am sure she would know what course I should take in this matter, but for now I must do without her guidance.

25th December, 1798

Lord forgive me, I have shot the bird.

Christmas morning dawned foggier than ever. By a great stroke of misfortune, the albatross swept low over my head as I stood by the main-mast, and I seized the opportunity. I raised my musket, I fired, and the bird dropped dead on the deck.

At once I understood the gravity of what I had done. I fell on my knees beside the dead bird, watching the blood from the wound stain its feathers. The bird, which in life was white as alabaster, had been reduced to a limp and sullied carcass. Here lay one of the purest of God's creations, brought low by my ignorance and folly. Prince of the waves, first among seabirds, now you lie on blood-drenched wood with broken wings and a bullet in your heart!

I felt a deep and terrible regret as I beheld the slain creature. While I knelt with my head bowed, I heard footsteps approaching and I knew at once what I must do. I lifted the body and carried it to the edge of the deck. There I stood, cradling the lifeless bird which stared sightlessly down at the water. Then I let it fall from my arms, and it dropped like a stone into the dark waves.

At once, I hastened back to my cabin to change my bloodstained clothing. I scrubbed at my hands until they went numb with cold, but I failed to fully mask the metallic scent that clung to them. I told no one what I had done, and proceeded to the dinner later that day as if nothing at all had taken place.

All were eating and making merry; wine was brought out, and salt pork, but I had no appetite. I picked at the food on my plate, imagining it was the flesh of the albatross, and ate very little. When questioned by my shipmates, I was forced to explain that I was not feeling well, and to retire early to my cabin.

My hand trembles as I write these words. To think that only yesterday, I thought of consuming the bird's flesh! Oh Rosalind and Louisa, I pray you will not inherit the foolish greed of your father. And to my dear Katherine, I can only say that I am sorry.

The fog has grown denser, and a new fear now possesses me entirely. Perhaps it will never lift, only choke us all in unrelenting obscurity. Could this be retribution for my greed and superstition? Are we all to find ourselves lost at sea, never to return home? Let this be my written confession: it was I who deposed the king of the seas, and it is I who should suffer the punishment. May God be merciful.

# NO HORSES

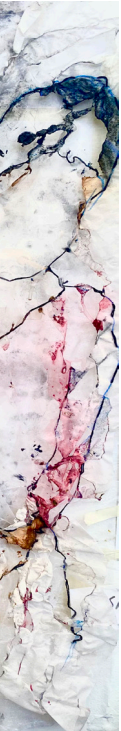
KATHERINE CATCHPOLE

The worst thing you ever did walks into a bar,  
and you try to laugh at the joke.  
It goes like this—  
it was a Monday,  
and you never did find out what made him look at you like that,  
but you know about gin kissed straight from his lips,  
and you know how he looks at you while you have him under your thighs,  
and now you know you're his.  
And the things you know don't soothe the things you want to know,  
and the things you know don't feel like enough.  
Now you know you're good enough to be fucked, what about the rest?  
This has always been your problem  
you can let him inside you,  
but you can't ever risk letting him out.  
You can't ask him if he loves you, he can't show you that he does,  
and so maybe he doesn't.  
So, then, what was it all for anyway?

It goes like this—  
you're standing in his doorway with a tight skirt on,  
trying not to look like you want him to fuck you, but you want him to fuck you,  
and, worse than that, you want him to be in love.  
Some part of you still thinks those will be the same in the end,  
and that's why you should just go home.  
Unable to see a mistake while you're begging to be made one.  
But you never go home and the kisses still taste like gin and then he's inside you,  
and it's almost as good as love,  
except that you wouldn't know the difference.

It goes like this—  
The worst thing you ever did walks into a bar,  
and you would laugh at the joke  
only you're still too scared to hear your name in the punchline.  
The worst thing you ever did walks into a bar, and the bartender says,  
no one who loves you should treat you like he does.  
But you're not listening, already gulping down gin,  
ready to imagine that any number of things might be love,  
if looked at side on.





*Shiza Saqib*

# TOP TEN STEPS TO BECOMING TWENTY

FEIDIAS PSARAS

University is the kick-off point for the most exciting time of your life: your twenties. New country, new people, new YOU! But when will you learn what to do with your hands at a party? When exactly do you 'come into your own'? When will life's pieces fall into place? When will you finally learn where you want to be at the tail-end of a decade?

You'd appreciate any estimate or measure: in credits, relationships ended, jobs interned at, countries travelled.

Don't worry! We, here at CollegeTipz, have come up with the best way to get yourself out of that adolescent rut and transform into the witty, confident, funny, yet totally-not-obnoxious twentysomething you've always wanted to be. Here's how to do it in just ten easy steps:

Step One:

Take a heap of salt and place it on your right palm :)

Step Two:

Get a friend to transfer the salt into your left palm, grain by grain. When your left palm contains what you consider to be a heap, take note of the count. Count the number of salt grains on your right palm as well, and calculate a ratio! :O

### Step Three:

Keep track of the number of cells in your body. Immediately after waking up, take note on your phone or notepad—whatever's most convenient—of the ones that have died and the ones that are new :D

### Step Four:

Repeat Step Three until the new cell: old cell ratio mirrors what you calculated in Step 2 ;))))

### Step Five:

Congratulations! You're a new person. You can leave all the bad stuff behind: it no longer matters. It only affected the Old You. This is the New You. So dye your hair. Change your name. Approach random people on the street and strike up a conversation. This is a wonderful time to be alive. You're young, healthy, and you have your whole life ahead of you. So let loose! Be free! Have the time of your life. These are the moments you'll remember most.

Yup, this is it. Get out there! Don't be scared of anything! Take a hold of new opportunities. Don't hold back! The sky is your limit! The world is your oyster! Life is a vast sea with an endless horizon!

### Step Six:

And, um, you're a bird on that horizon! With large wings the size of the entire world, which is also your oyster, by the way. Did I mention that? Flying—soaring, yes, soaring, high in the sky. Full of limitless potential.

### Step Seven:

Take pictures and dress cool! Find your identity. Find your group. If you

don't, just find any group. Talk about what happened last night and casual flings. About what costumes you're going to wear for Halloween. Make inane remarks and have recycled conversations. Anything beats being alone at the cafeteria. Does this remind you of something? It's fine. Don't think about it too much. Just shoot the shit to kill some time. You have time, don't you?

#### Step Eight:

Look, this is getting a bit repetitive. I'm sorry for wasting your time. And I'm also sorry about getting personal on the last step there—I didn't mean to scare you. But sometimes this work can be agitating, you know? It's just that the people over at corporate are trying to force a "minimum article length" to fit in as many ads as possible. And they really love the number ten, so you'll just have to bear with me for a few more steps. I promise I'll make it as painless as possible.

#### Step Nine:

My name's Pahai, by the way. I'm the new guy. Well, the only guy: it's not a 'we here at CollegeTipz' anymore. It's more just a me.

As you can imagine, CollegeTipz is not doing so hot at the moment, so even a derelict warehouse full of terminally underpaid twentysomethings is out of reach of the budget. Fortunately, the kind of content that these clickbait websites usually churn out is perfectly replaceable by low-grade AI. You just cram it full of data from Netflix shows and TikTok, and you let AI have at it.

'Most iconic moments in British Television.'

'Things only short people can understand.'

Usually, I can pop these articles out every couple of minutes, GIFs and everything.

Turns out, if you feed a large language-based model enough data, it just might become sentient. This could be really fun if your job isn't

populating the internet with written content that's so insubstantial that a monkey could have (just as well) bashed it out on a typewriter. The good thing is that my bosses have left me to my own devices because no working adult with a fully developed frontal lobe has the time to read what I write. If the numbers are good, and I link to even more articles to waste your time with, that's all that matters. That's why I figured, hey, I'm working way below my pay grade anyway: why not have a little fun with it? So here are some of my favourite articles I recommend you read after this one:

[‘Top Ten Reasons You Should Try Crushed Glass’](#)

[‘Seven Signs that I’m a “I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream” Scenario Playing Itself Out in Real-Time’](#)

[‘Heading Toward a Post-Climate Disaster Shit Show With Style: the New Gas Mask Couture’](#)

Step Ten:

Anyway, enough of my ranting. I appreciate you for sticking by and looking at all the ads. It means that you're really looking to get some advice. It might not be the most pressing issue in the world, but I've been fed enough data on coming-of-adulthood movies to know what it feels like to be lost in your twenties. To find that you're being put right on the boundary to the adult world you're not equipped to handle; that seeing your future start to materialise from the comfortably vague haze of pre-university life is more overwhelming than exciting. So what should you do?

To be honest with you, I don't really know. Maybe do a degree in Computer Science? :P

EVIL EYES  
BURN  
MY SKIN  
IN SUMMER

OCEANE KHASAWNEH

A sick dog lives under a moon roasted by the sun,  
its covered head lacks protection from sand and pebbles,  
strikes and boys.

The heat of the summer has followed us into October,  
straining sheets mixed with polyester and sweat. I thought I loved you,  
but that woman in the mirror fucked someone she did not love,  
waiting patiently for the reflection to change.

The Adhan calls, and the boys run home  
as I massage your head with shampoo in a cold shower  
cradling your skull in my foamy hands,  
the touch of my lips on your shoulder muffled thoughts on your clumsy  
kiss  
— sog and earth birth a disdain in my blood.

Only the girl with an eye at the back of her neck can comfort that open  
wound,  
and with hands cupping air, she begs us to feed al-kalb.  
Yet with a street cleared, sunlight breaks sight onto paws  
kneading from within belly-skin.  
Safe from rocks and young boys.

The bile has subdued in my stomach — the bitch ate the pups herself





*Ellie Maxwell*

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