Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival



REFLECTIONS



Writing Awards Anthology 2026

Contents

2	**Glade of Light** Alice Eaves	*Themes of trauma*
4	**The Fox** Kim Campbell	*Themes of infertility, with references to blood*
10	**Anatomy of a Mother** Rachel Munnoch	*Themes of perinatal mental health*
16	**Evergreen** Louise Allen	
18	**The Chair by the Window** Charlotte Dawn	*Themes of suicide*
22	**What Came to Mind** Alex Robb	
30	**Spectrums** Amber Heath	*Themes of neglect*
36	**Endgame Reached; Perspective Updated** Anonymous	*Themes of emotional and physical abuse*
42	**The Robin Bag** Emily Rose	*Themes of eating disorders and hospitalisation*
45	**Snarl** Hannah Marie Watson	
50	**Lost Socks** Kirstine Hughes	*Graphic description of an injury, with references to blood and surgery*
58	**Toffee and Bobo** Malcolm Millar	*Themes of body image*
68	**How To Rest** Tessa Gordziejko	
70	**About the Writers**	
72	**Getting Help and Support**	

Glade of Light

Alice Eaves

After the Manchester Arena Bombing, 22nd May 2017

In the glass-slick evening, marble echoes
and the taste of popping, red shrapnel
bounces off my tongue, tang of car keys,

copper wires, church bells. The pepper-bite
of incense gives me a headache, so strong
I can't believe it doesn't raise the dead.

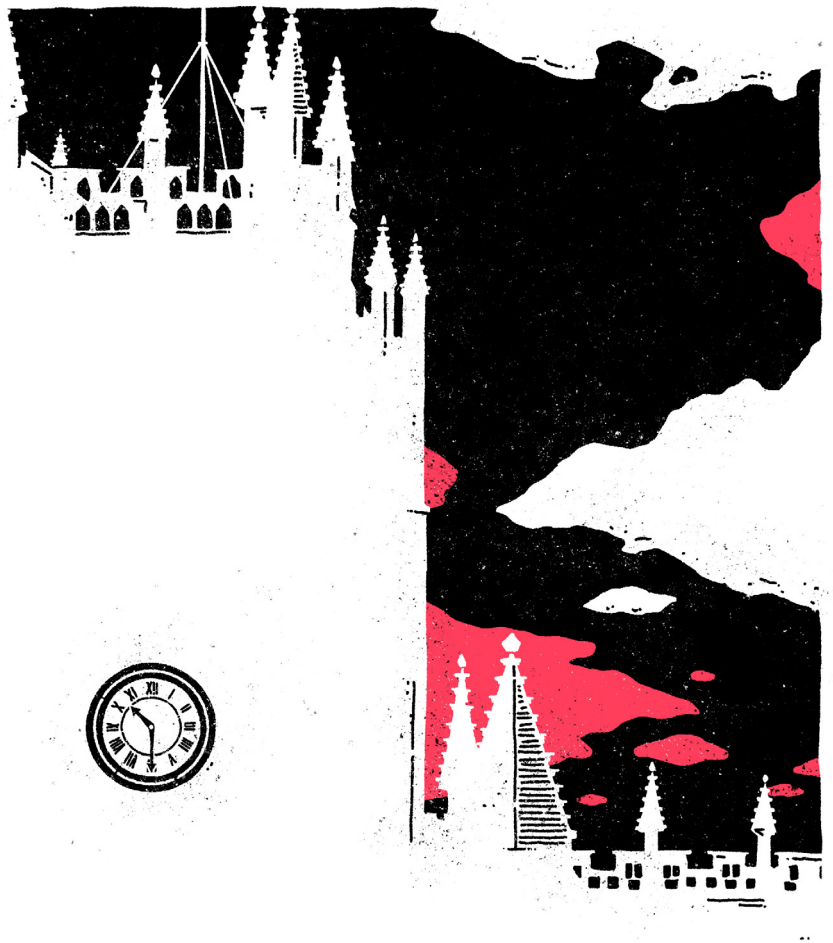
After listening to my childhood implode,
school said I could have the day off, as if
24 hours of movies and crying erased

sourness soaked into skin.
Repetition, ritual, the ding-dong-hum
of life moved on but my feet grew roots

within the concrete, grey roses, caked
in thorns. My therapist says, *it's normal
for scars to linger*, as they collect

like pinched tattoos over flesh. I stand
at the foot of Manchester Cathedral,
sunset dropping through pinnacles,

leaving fox tracks on the wet ground.
Memory moulds a fear of unseen corners,
I wash it down with wine and cigarettes.



The Fox

Kim Campbell

The first time I encountered the fox, was the night my bed turned red. It felt like a crimson river was flowing over my sheets, saturating my pyjamas and sticking to my skin. The blood was a familiar smell to me. A scent of warm copper with a subtle sweetness underneath the metallic bite. Burned sugar, like caramel left on the hob too long. I stepped from my bed and felt the warm sensation of the blood cascade down my thighs. I saw the vein like trail seep from under the hem of my trousers and trickle its way to my painted toes. I remember fearing for the beige carpet that had only been laid a few months before.

My movements startled my sleeping husband beside me. He looked at the blood and then to my passive face. I watched as his features crumpled and his tears came. He reached for my hand, but I pulled it away. I needed to escape the closing walls and breathe air that was not tainted. I pulled on my rubber boots and large overcoat and stepped outside. My wristwatch read **03:00**. I remember how still the air was. A soft mist hung over the roofs of the houses, holding a delicate moisture. The creamy moon was a smudge on the liquorice black sky, and I hated the beauty of it. *Nothing should be this picturesque, not tonight*. My short, shallow breaths expelled whisps of warm, hazy clouds that dissipated into the darkened atmosphere. The chill in the air hinted at the last few days of autumn and the start of colder ones. Days that I knew would bring darkness, isolation and the internal whispers mocking my ineptitude.

I walked with no destination. With every step I could feel the blood gathering in my boots and seeping into the soles, my bare feet slipping on the fluid and staining them red. The pain radiated in my stomach like nails dragging down my flesh and clawing at my intestines. It made me want to fold in two and lie down on the dirty pavement. To sleep with the discarded chewing gum and cigarette butts. My inadequate body laying with the rest of the rubbish.

I saw the sharp sheen of its amber eyes first as they glowed in the darkness of the shrubbery. A cool breeze rippled through the bushes and yet the fox did not flinch. Its eyes followed the movements around it with a slow and steady attention, a quiet contemplation. It stepped



out of the darkness with its black stockinged feet, slow and with methodical precision. Under the glare of the streetlight, its long body looked like it had been stitched together by embers and ash, its fur a mishmash of copper tones and shadowy grime. Patches on its side exposed bare skin underneath. Its lengthy, pointed snout had a deep gash on the tip, filled with congealed blood. Its body a road map of its journey and survival on the city streets. The brightness of its white tipped brush tail felt paradoxical to its edgy appearance. It walked closer to me, sniffing the air continuously, detecting the fresh blood still streaming from my body. It sat at my feet and looked up with inquisitive eyes, its tail curling around its paws like a plume of smoke. It held its gaze with me, and I found it safe and comforting. My shoulders came down like the collapse of scaffolding, and it did not recoil as I cried loud, angry tears into the vastness of the dark night that held us both in that moment.

The days and months that followed brought glistening trees, dusted with frost and snow and ammonia sodden plastic applicators with barren windows. Conversations with friends and family amongst the kaleidoscopic fairy lights, their heads always held at a tilt; sympathetic, yet patronising, heads bobbing with furrowed brows. Condolences whilst they gripped tighter to their precious offspring that stood beside them as if our failings would drive us to snatch children from families.

My internal alarm clock continued to ring loud at 3am, bringing sticky pyjamas and hazy memories tainted vibrant red. And so, I would walk. It would come to greet me, not every night but on the nights where it felt like it knew I wanted a companion. Always tentative at first, sniffing the frigid air for any signs of threat or danger but then my familiarity would ease its hypervigilance, and it would fall into step with my restless, pacing feet. On the rare occasion cars would pass, it would startle and scurry away, but the next night it would be back almost apologetic for its prior hasty departure. I would bring it discarded scraps from our dinners. My husband would look at me with concern and bemusement as the ziplock bag of uneaten food sat in our fridge ready for my nighttime encounter with the fox. *You aren't coping, you need to speak to someone. You spend more time with that fox than you do me*. Words thrown at me in anger and

frustration; anything to penetrate and to provoke. Gauging whether I was still there, somewhere behind my erected, solid walls.

The solitary tree outside our house brought its usual pop of fleeting pink, as the cherry blossom bloomed and created a moment suspended between earth and sky. In the faint morning light, the petals glowed with a gentle transparency, as if brightened from within. A subtle sweet fragrance suspended all around us, carried by a gentle breeze that sent pink petals to flutter high into the air like paper stars. The beauty of awakening springtime lay in contrast to silent, abundant trips to the hospital. Clinical rooms that reeked of antiseptic and bleach. Legs poised in the air, held by cold, leather stirrups. My insides on display for all to see and critique. I lay still like a piece of meat whilst others prodded, poked and stretched me open wide. Looks of perplexation and shrugs of shoulders by men in white coats and nurses who stroked my hand like a cat. *Unexplained infertility*. Options spewed at us with detachment and mechanicalness. My sense of worth all wrapped up in my body's ability to spawn.

Night times were tense. Fraught conversations with indecisiveness and complex maths calculations that lay before us on scribbled bits of paper, the priceless cost of a human being.

The fox understood. It was my friend, my confidante and my escape. Night by night it edged closer to me, taking food from my hands. The first time I touched its wiry coat, it instinctively ducked its head in apprehension. I feared that I had overstepped. Invaded its space, like how others had invaded mine. It locked eyes with me. I waited for it to flee but instead it pushed its head further into my hand and let it rest there. We sat side by side on the dewy grass, underneath the starry sky. A deep velvet canvass scattered with pins of light – hues of cool whites, soft blues and faint golds. I felt small underneath the enormity and vastness of the sky. Every thought that ruminated in my brain felt exposed and every choice that turned over carried the weight of eternity, but it felt safe to just hold it with the fox at my side. It patiently listened as I talked into the dark space.

The air warmed further with smells of freshly cut grass still bleeding green, and hedgerows exhaling their tangled perfumes of elderflower and honeysuckle. Fleeting sunshine with warm rain that clung to pavements and emitted a dark and tarry scent. Barbeques and summer weddings where I sipped on sickly mocktails and ensured that my accessorised bag was adequate to hold my Gonal-F. The waistband of my clothes cutting into the purple pin pricks that were now scattered over my stomach. *Something you want to tell us* as suspicious eyes cast over my non-alcoholic beverages. The concoction of hormones coursing through my body made me want to bite and rage at them; to spit venom and hurl glasses.

At night, the fox would place its head in my lap to the backdrop of vibrating crickets. Their chorus swelling and fading in uneven pulses, never quite in harmony. It filled the gaps between my sobs and screams of torment.

Needles, needles and needles followed by the grainy footage of my uterus. Faceless men and women scrutinised my insides and measured follicles that looked like wide gaping mouths screaming in horror. We waited patiently beside the phone for that important number. *15 embryos! No wait, 10 embryos. Sorry its 5 embryos. 2 embryos*. Deflated numbers with deflated hope. Grading the quality of what remained and already making a judgement of a life unborn. A collective prayer whispered between all in the room as the flash on the screen showed its implantation, latched to my body, clinging for dear life. The 10-day wait was agony. It came with dreaded wiping and expectations of that red river to cascade its load again. But nothing. Suddenly the plastic applicator was no longer barren, and it held one magical word.

Nine months of anxiety, stress and pacing. The fox would nuzzle into my rounded stomach, and its calmness would transcend and still my racing heart. I needed to see it for that fix of serenity. As thoughts raced in my mind about lack of movements felt within my belly and dreams of that red river, it sat by my side and drained them all from my mind. It watched with patient, soft eyes as my tears fell onto its copper head. Walking became difficult at times and my heart ached for nights where I couldn't sit with my friend. Sometimes it

never came either and the days that followed would be anxiety filled, catastrophic thoughts rolling around my head of its demise. And then it was there, appearing with its graceful movements and gentle demeanour. And we would sit together.

***

Tonight, the clock beside my bed glows **03:00** as I look to the soft bundle in my arms. His eyes are half-closed, lashes heavy, mouth slack in a milky daze. I bundle him into the baby carrier strapped to my body, feeling the warm presence of him close to my chest. Our hearts in a syncopated rhythm. I slip out into the cool night with my bag of discarded food. The streetlights above hum faintly, casting long, lonely shadows. The world feels slower, softer and wrapped in a velvety silence. A small nervous flutter ripples through my stomach, like tiny wings brushing from the inside. *What will it think? Is it still even here?*

I stand at our usual patch. I hear the familiar sound of its paws brushing through the grass and I exhale gently as it finally emerges. We sit on the damp grass. It nuzzles and sniffs the rounded bundle at my chest, curious and unsure. Its head tilts slightly to the right and its ears prick upwards.

"Fox, I would like you to meet our new son. His name is Fox."

The fox just stares, its eyes glistening and shimmering in the moonlight. It bows its head and then turns around, walking back into the darkened bushes. Gone. I hold my breath until I see the bushes disturb and rustle. I watch as the fox reappears. It is holding a small furry bundle in its mouth; it sways lightly as the fox slips through the grass and the shadow. She places the kit at my side, and I see that it is still, its fur turned to dull brown, drained of colour and life. She lays it at my side and places her head in my lap, nuzzling into the precious life I am holding. I gently stroke her head as she releases intermittent painful cries. She sits with my contentment, and I sit with her raw anguish, bound together by the pain of our journeys.

Anatomy of a Mother

Rachel Munnoch

It's been thirty-eight weeks, and I barely recognise myself in the mirror.

I turn sideways and stare at the silhouette with a mixture of horror and disbelief. My stomach juts so far from my body it feels grafted on—an enormous swollen sac dragging the rest of me behind it like an afterthought. My spine bows backward to compensate, vertebrae grinding beneath the strain.

And that's just for starters.

My hips click when I walk. My knees crack audibly beneath the shifting burden of all this new weight. Some mornings I wake convinced my skeleton rearranged itself in the night.

The pain is neverending.

"Lumbar lordosis," the doctor informs me. "All perfectly normal."

Perfectly normal.

Isn't it comforting to know the sensation of your body slowly warping itself out of shape is medically sanctioned?

"You're positively glowing!" they say.

Glowing. There are several words I'd use to describe my current state. Glowing is not one of them.

Swollen? Definitely.

"It's because of the blood," the doctor explains matter-of-factly.

And there's so much blood now—thirty to fifty percent more than before. Enough to sustain the little life growing inside me. Enough that I can feel it pulsing through my extremities: heavy, wet, relentless.

My veins rise beneath my skin in dark branching cords. Heat radiates from me ceaselessly. My fingers puff around my wedding ring. My feet have spread wider at the ends of my legs, softer and alien-looking.

The baby moves constantly now.

Slow turns. Deliberate shifts. An elbow presses outward hard enough to deform my stomach completely, stretching the skin into impossible shapes. I watch with horror-struck fascination as sharp little fingernails drag themselves along the inner wall of my abdomen, as though trying to claw its way out.

My body no longer feels inhabited.

It feels occupied.

You wanted this, I remind myself.

I did. I still do.

Then why do I feel trapped inside my own skin?

Sometimes I imagine my stomach splitting open.

Not dramatically. Not all at once. Just a tiny tear at first near my navel, like overstressed fabric. Then another. Thin seams unzipping under pressure while blood and viscera spill out down my swollen legs.

I try to shake the thought away, but it always returns, circling back like unclaimed luggage on a conveyor belt. Rituals are the only thing that prevent this terrible thought from becoming a reality—my only remaining illusion of control.

I wash every grocery item in scalding, soapy water before putting it away. I scratch circles into the palm of my hand because if I stop halfway through, something terrible will happen.

Rinse and repeat. Rinse and repeat.

Great. I've lost control of my mind as well as my body.

Is that perfectly normal too?

"Aren't you excited?" they ask.

"Of course," I lie.

Sleep becomes impossible. I exist in fragments between exhaustion and panic. My body no longer beats to natural rhythms. Every organ inside me has been displaced, compressed, and repurposed for someone else's survival.

And all the while, I can't breathe.

I wake in the middle of the night gasping for air because there isn't enough room inside of me to breathe anymore. My uterus has swollen to the size of a watermelon, forcing my diaphragm upward so my lungs can never fully expand. Every breath feels stolen through clenched ribs. Acid burns the back of my throat because my stomach has been compressed into the wrong shape. Food sits inside me for hours like rotting matter. My abdominal muscles separate down the middle to make room for growth, leaving my core weak and distorted.

Growth.

Such an innocent word for something so invasive.

The rituals worsen.

I count every step before climbing them. Wash my hands until the skin cracks across my knuckles. Check the locks six times before bed because odd numbers feel unsafe.

Unsafe means vulnerable.

Vulnerable means something terrible could happen to the baby.

Or because of the baby.

The thoughts arrive uninvited.

What if she's dead in there?

What if she isn't?

My body and mind have become strangers to me. I no longer recognise the thing I've become.

When the birth finally comes, the relief is short-lived.

People speak about labour as though triumph waits on the other side of it. A crescendo. A release. But when it finally happens—when my body is torn open to let her through—I feel only absence.

One moment she is inside me. A part of me. Consuming me.

The next, she isn't.

And I am left behind.

They place her on my chest while doctors stitch parts of me back together beneath a bloodstained sheet. My husband cries. Everyone smiles. Congratulates me as though I've crossed some holy threshold into womanhood instead of surviving a controlled catastrophe.

"She's beautiful," he whispers.

She is.

That makes it worse.

I want to love her without fear. I want to hold her without imagining all the ways a body can break. I want to sleep without jolting awake to make sure she's still breathing.

But my brain no longer understands how to stop searching for danger. Even after the pregnancy is over, my body and mind behave as though it still belongs to something else.

“OCD, PTSD and PPD,” the doctor informed me a few weeks after the birth. “It’s very common.”

That doesn’t stop me from feeling like a failure.

Five years later, I am mostly in control of my mind, if not my bladder.

She is thriving. I am improving.

The skin on my stomach hangs loose and unfamiliar, mapped with white stretch marks that look less like scars than fractures. My hips remain wider. My feet larger. My wedding ring no longer fits over the swollen ridge of my knuckle. When I cough or laugh too hard, something deep in my pelvis aches with a quiet mechanical wrongness, as though the architecture of me shifted permanently during the process and never settled back into place.

Funny how nobody warns you creation can feel this traumatic. Even *traumatic* feels too clinical for what happened to me—too neat, too survivable-sounding. Pregnancy hollowed me out and remade me simultaneously, body and mind reshaped around an absence that still echoes years later.

“Healing takes time,” they assure me.

But healing implies restoration.

“That’s just called being a mother,” they say in an accusatory tone.

As though becoming and losing are not sometimes the same thing.

We speak of motherhood almost exclusively in terms of creation, though so much of it feels like erosion. A slow shedding of one self to make room for another.

A metamorphosis.

It’s been five years, and I am still changing.



evergreen
Louise Allen

your daughter is born in the spring;
you call her lily or iris or poppy.
she is sunshine
because you are soil,
or you are soil
because she is sunshine.
maybe you really had gone crazy,
except the wind chimes got swept up in your baby's breath too.

she's all rosy cheeks,
especially when she's teething,
and she teethes in the winter.
save those tears for a drought, little one
for there will be daisy chains in the summer.
yes, pinky promise
and thumbs green.

she loves lavender,
so you bottle it up for her birthday
and paint her bedroom purple.
she loves you, so you will be happy forever!
so long as she has air in her lungs,
and dandelions sprout from the earth.

that lanky boy who has been scaling your trellis,
finally knocks your door with a fistful of peonies.
how pleased you are that your ivy was not trampled in vain,
when they announce they are to marry!
gold bands and champagne toasts
and two lips a seal.
it's only hayfever –
that's the last story you tell her
before she tosses her bouquet of forget-me-nots.

and soon her tummy blooms with springs to come,
a precious seed guarded by ribs YOU built.
and though your leaves are shrivelled
and your petals faded,
you have anchored your roots.
so when your stem is clipped,
when you are placed on the mantle of a higher power,
your daughter writes a note in the local paper that says,
"family flowers only please."



The Chair by the Window

Charlotte Dawn

In the small Highland town, the sea always sounded closer in winter.

Not louder exactly—just nearer, as if the North Sea had moved in overnight and was sitting just beyond the houses, waiting. It was the kind of place where everyone knew the weather before they opened the curtains, and everyone knew when something had gone wrong before it was ever spoken aloud.

Mairi noticed the chair first.

It was in the classroom by the window, the one where the light came in sideways on pale afternoons. The chair had always been his—though it still stood in its place, as if waiting for him to return after break.

No one said his name at first. Not properly. Not after the news.

Teachers learned to speak around absence. Pupils learned to look a t the desk, then away again, as if eye contact might make it more real.

Mairi had taught long enough to recognise the shift that came after. It wasn't loud. It wasn't dramatic. It was quieter than that. A soft rearranging of the room's balance, like air settling after a door has closed.

He had been one of the boys who laughed easily. The kind who could be both present and elsewhere at the same time, always half-facing the corridor, the window, the idea of somewhere different. He played football on muddy pitches after school. He helped carry kit without being asked. He said "aye" more than he said anything else meaningful, as if agreeing was safer than explaining.

Then, slowly, he began to arrive in class like someone stepping in from a different weather system.

A bit quieter. A bit further back in his chair. A bit harder to catch

at the end of the day when Mairi asked the usual questions—You alright? Everything okay at home?

He always nodded.

Most of them did.

The Highlands had a way of making distance feel normal. Miles between houses. Miles between bus stops. Miles between how you felt and how you were expected to behave.

People liked to say it was peaceful here. And it was, in a way. The hills did not rush you. The lochs did not argue back. The sky could hold a whole day without changing its mind.

But peace and isolation could look the same from a distance.

After it happened, the town folded in on itself.

There were flowers outside the school gate. Messages written in ink that ran slightly in the rain. Parents standing in awkward clusters, unsure where to put their hands. Boys who didn't know what to do with their anger, so they turned it into silence instead.

Mairi found herself thinking about the chair more than she expected. Not as a symbol at first. Just as a physical thing. Wood and metal and habit. A place where someone used to sit and now didn't.

In the staffroom, someone said, "You never really know, do you?"

And someone else answered, "No. You don't."

But that wasn't quite true.

It wasn't that no one ever knew. It was that knowing often came too late, or in fragments too small to hold onto at the time.

There had been signs, she thought later. Not dramatic ones. Not the kind people imagined when they spoke about warning signals. Just

small changes. A withdrawal that could have been tiredness. A smile that arrived a second too late. A young person learning how to be invisible in plain sight.

The town carried on, because that is what towns do.

The shop opened at the usual time. The buses still ran, though sparsely. The football pitch filled again on Saturdays. Even grief, here, had to work around timetables.

But something had changed in the spaces between things.

Mairi started to notice the other chairs.

Not just in her classroom, but everywhere. In cafés where young people sat in pairs but spoke in fragments. On buses where headphones built invisible walls. At the edge of playgrounds where someone always stood slightly apart, pretending not to want to be included.

She began to ask questions differently.

Not “Are you okay?” said quickly, already halfway out the door.

But something that lingered.

Something that gave the answer time to catch up.

Because she had learned, in the hardest way, that silence is not empty.

It is full of things people do not know how to say.

The chair by the window stayed there.

At first, they left it out of habit. Then out of uncertainty. Then, eventually, because removing it felt like pretending nothing had happened.

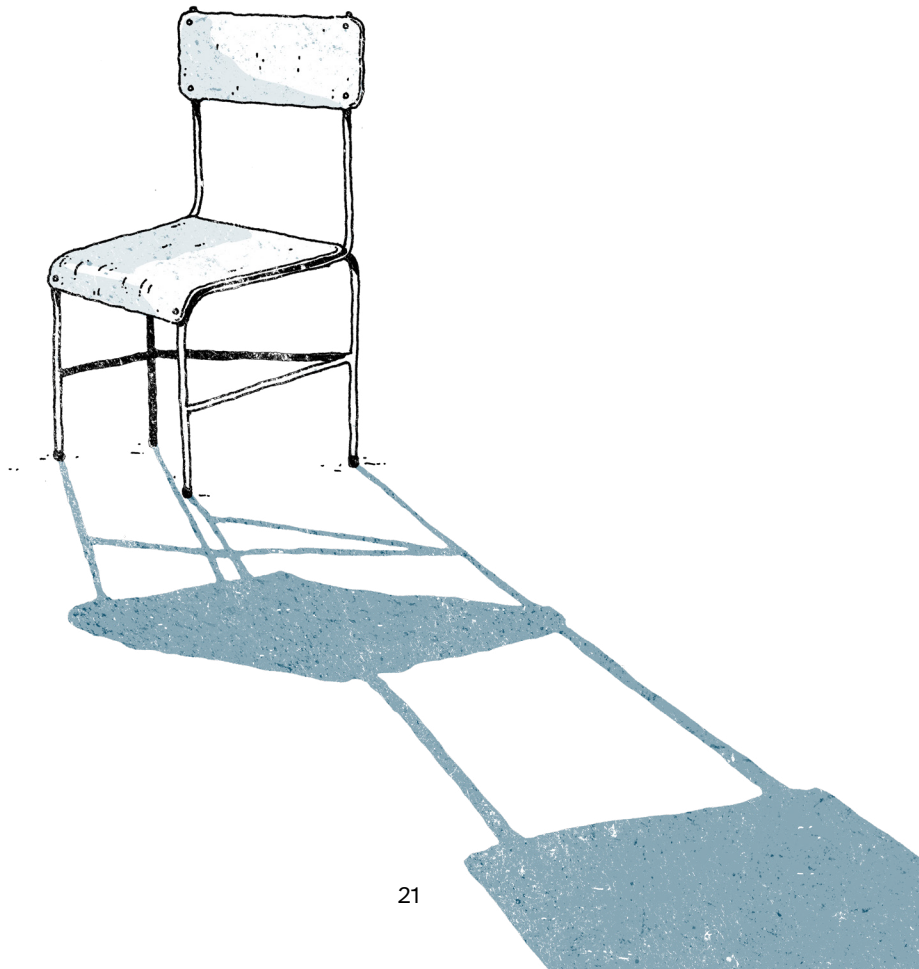
And nothing had happened was not true.

One afternoon, months later, Mairi watched another pupil pause beside it. Just for a moment. Not sitting. Not speaking. Just noticing.

Then he moved on.

But he did not look away quite as quickly as he once might have.

And in a place where distance can feel like everything, even that felt like something small holding back the silence.



What Came to Mind

Alex Robb

I was looking for happiness in all the wrong places, like the here and now.

I realised this while I was walking to the loos on the office's second floor. People were sitting at their desks and looking at their laptops the way you might look at someone on a first date, and this only made me feel worse inside.

No one was in the loo when I walked in, and I thanked all the gods that might or might not exist. I wanted to kiss their big, looming faces and have their beards hang over me like vast landscapes of cloud. Then I cried in a cubicle.

The cubicle did funny things to the sound of my crying. It gave it a kind of echoing quality, which made it sound almost distant, like I was listening to a voicemail of someone crying. Someone who cried with such conviction that it made a kind of crackling noise on the voicemail, like human vinyl hiss or whatever.

This only made me cry harder for some reason. I'm not a hundred percent sure why. Maybe for the same reason a baby cries when they hear another baby crying, but I don't really know about all that.

It's a good thing I was sitting on the loo, because I nearly shat myself when I heard the toilet flush in the cubicle next to me. I couldn't tell you how long someone had been there, or how they managed to sneak into the room without me knowing.

Hey, a voice said. It wasn't a voice I recognised.

I didn't say anything at first. I thought if I was silent for long enough maybe they'd think the crying was some kind of auditory hallucination or whatever. Their guilty conscience or something.

Hey, the voice said again. Are you alright?

All good, I said. Don't worry about me.

No?

Nah. All good on my end.

There was a moment of silence. Then the voice said, I dunno, mate. You don't sound too good.



The voice was coming from the stall next door. I looked at the thin partition separating us, and I felt a bit like I was in a confession booth, assuming they still have those around.

Well, I said, maybe not too good. But it's alright. I'll be alright.

How do you know?

What?

The voice repeated itself: How do you know?

Another silence. I looked at the locked cubicle door. It was funny how you could tell you were in an office loo just from the fact it was so pristine. No messages had been written or sprayed onto it. Nothing had been etched there with a penknife. It was no pub loo. No stall covered in scrawled odes to all those things that inspire yearning and despair in men, like football and politics and the names of women. Even their own elusive names.

The noise I made was something like: Hmm.

Is that you saying you don't know?

I guess. But you always end up being alright in the end, don't you? Alright enough, I mean.

Not always.

No?

Nope, the voice said. Not always.

It seemed a heavy thing to say, and I felt its heaviness enter the room like a cat plopping itself down on your lap with a sudden need for love.

Well, I said, maybe not then, I guess.

So, the voice said. What's up?

It's funny how you can hear a question like that a hundred times a day, but then you can also go years without anyone saying it just like this. Without anyone really actually wanting to know.

I didn't say anything, so there was another silence.

Mate, the voice said. What's up?

Another pause. Then I told him God's honest truth.

I don't know, I said. I just don't really know, you know?

You don't know why you're crying in the office toilets?

No, I said. Not really, I guess.

Not even a little?

I don't think so.

You can't reflect a little and find one, or maybe even two or three factors that might have prompted all of this?

I thought about it. No, I said again.

Really?

Like, I can think about things in my life that aren't – that aren't optimal, you know? But I don't know if they're all that much connected with this. Whatever this is.

The crying, you mean?

If that's what you want to call it.

It's the word I know it by.

But anyway, I said, I'm not like all that certain they're that connected, you know? Like in that cause and effect kind of way. Whatever's suboptimal about my life and this, I mean.

Not at all?

Not really. It's not like I was thinking about any of that stuff just now or whatever. I don't think I was thinking much about anything to be

honest with you.

You weren't thinking about anything?

No, I said. I don't think so.

Now there was silence on his end, and I wondered what he was doing in his stall. If he was like sitting down on the toilet lid or if he was just standing up or whatever.

You know, he said, I'm getting the impression you don't want to talk about the so-called suboptimal stuff in your life. Is that right?

Yeah, I said. Probably.

So what are you gonna tell me then? He asked.

What?

Well you're gonna have to tell me something.

Am I?

Well yeah. I can hardly walk out of here without knowing anything about you. Not after all this.

You can't?

You really expect me to go back out there and just get on with my emails and spreadsheets after this whole palaver? After all I've gotten out of you is that in your entire life, in your whole entire life, is that not everything is absolutely optimal. Like what?

I hesitated.

Well, I said. What do you want to know?

I don't know. Anything. Whatever comes to mind.

What comes to mind?

Yeah, the voice said. What comes to mind when I say, what comes to mind?

It surprised me how quickly a thought did come to mind when he said that.

I don't know, I said. It's not very relevant or all that exciting.

Go on.

Well, I don't know why, but what came to mind was – was the first time I went to the football. Like as a kid and stuff.

That's good, the voice said. Go on.

You sure?

Shoot.

Well, I started. Then I stopped.

Come on, mate. Spit it out.

Alright, I said. It's just nothing out of the ordinary really happened, you know? Like it's all pretty basic. But anyway, if you're dying to know, I guess it started with us getting the train into Manchester. Just Dad and me, I mean. But I don't remember that all too well, to be honest. What I do remember is the walk from the station to the stadium. We kept passing all these brown road signs pointing the way to SportCity, so I asked my Dad what that was, because I thought SportCity was literally a whole other city, you know? Not just like an area which had been built for the Commonwealth Games and whatever.

Yeah, the voice said.

So there was that, I said, and I also think it was the first time I ever

saw the police. At least on such a large scale, you know? They were surrounding this pub we went past, and the police were like filming all these fans on camcorders, like were shooting home movies or something. Like they were recording footage for *You've Been Framed*. And I remember the police horses too! I remember thinking they were huge, like mutant horses or something, and I remember seeing their shit going all the way down the road to the stadium, just shit after shit after shit. That made me laugh. Even made Dad laugh too when I pointed it out.

Could you see the stadium by then?

Yeah, we could see it. We saw it on the train, actually, now that I think about it, so I guess I do remember part of the journey there. It's crazy the first time you see a big stadium like that. I couldn't imagine being sat inside it, you know? It looked like a fortress or something, just the size of it, how metallic it was and whatever. And then, like less than an hour later, we were sitting inside it, weren't we? Dad and me: me eating the chips he got me, him flicking through the match day programme. I still have that somewhere. It had a picture of Shaun Wright-Phillips on the front. You remember him?

And the game? The voice asked. How was the game?

Not that great. We lost two-nil. It was to United as well. But I didn't really care too much about that. I was already obsessed by then. It was the singing that started it off, I think. When we first headed out into the stands and there were all these men singing and chanting and stuff, and they were waving scarves over their heads and what have you. Obviously that's all normal, I know that now, but I'd never seen anything like that as a kid, you know? I'd never seen men act that way.

No?

I shook my head, and I only realised afterwards that he couldn't see me doing that.

And I was always asking Dad to take me to games after that. I'd

ask him all the time, and he would take me pretty much whenever he could. It wasn't super often, but he did his best. And it was funny going to games with him, because it was the first time I saw him as more than a dad. Like, it was the first time I realised he was just a guy, if you know what I mean? That he was just like everyone else there. And it's a weird thing to feel when you first feel it. When you first realise your parents are just people. When you're like seven or eight years old or whatever. Although I dunno if that makes sense.

Yes, the voice said. That makes sense.

But yeah, I said. That's what came to mind anyway. Is that good enough for you?

Yep, the voice said. That's good. But you should think about it some more. Just by yourself.

Think about it?

Yes, he said. You should think about why it was the first thing that came to mind.

Then I heard him unlock the door and head out of his cubicle. I could hear him washing his hands and using the hand dryer. I heard the main loo door open and close next, and after a few seconds of silence I knew he was gone. Gone just like that.

I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to head out straight away in case he was watching who came out of the loos. So I sat there a bit longer and wiped my face with toilet paper. I had no idea what I looked like, or how I sounded to the guy, but I tried not to think too hard about that. I just thought about going to the football with Dad. Thought about how much I missed that, and how much I missed him. And when I cried a little more it didn't sound so far away – it sounded more like listening to my own heartbeat using a stethoscope or something.

Then I headed out of the loos and went straight back to my desk.

Spectrums

Amber Heath

The hospitals were never painted brightly. Councils don't like bold colours for some reason. The walls are always an off-colour. Off-pink, off-blue, off-green. Off-white is popular. Perhaps they were all bright at some point, and it's just the decades of wear and tear that make them off.

When I think of my earliest childhood, that's what I see. Off-colour walls, harsh overhead lighting, lifts with lots of buttons for playing with. The smell of bacteria-killing cleaners, covering the scent of human decline.

We were always alone in those corridors. We couldn't run around in the wards of course, we wouldn't want to disturb anyone, especially at that time of night. But the corridors were alright. The staff had bigger things to worry about than two unaccompanied children. And it's not like we were scared, or upset. We were quiet, self-occupied. We were used to being alone. Mum and Dad had bigger things to worry about than two unaccompanied children.

We watched each other. That's why there were two of us in the first place. We'd spend all day outside, when not in the hospital. We would wander around overgrown gardens or play on the mown grassy field outside the council estate. The walls there were off-colours too, in much poorer nick. Large chips of paint picked away, revealing the colourless concrete beneath. We would climb up crumbling walls and onto forest green wheely bins. I climbed a telephone pole once. I remember seeing so far, all the way past the baked red bricks of the buildings and out towards a blue, blue sky.

We weren't the only ones. There was a girl in the next flat over who had only one hand and one of those big Barbie hairdresser heads. I remember neon pink and artificial blonde over a scraped up smile. There was a boy from the estate who had a Gameboy Colour with a Pokémon Red cartridge and a scar across his forehead. There were teenagers, with skateboards and scooters and rollerblades in vibrant '90s patterns, that would sometimes let us try them. Dad point blank refused to buy us any of those things.



There were other grownups too. The old woman in the flat across the close from us was wonderful. She'd give us yellow boiled sweets if we sat and listened to her talk. The lady up the stairs had a wee black sausage dog that would knock me over in excitement, trying to lick my face. There was a very young girl with a very young son who would give us deep purple flavoured drinks when we played with him. Dad sat us down once and very sternly told us not to accept things from others and not to bother her so often, but we didn't listen, and it's not like he could stop us anyway.

Dad was always the one who told us not to do things, or said no to things we wanted. Mum was more vague. About everything. She'd always say 'maybe'. Sometimes she was less responsive. A hum. A nod. Sometimes she wouldn't respond at all, no matter how I called for her. I'd tell her the house was on fire to get an answer. It didn't always work. When she looked at me, with her milky blue eyes, I was never certain she was using them to actually see me.

We called it 'going spacey'. We never got a better explanation than that. It meant that sometimes Mum would start talking oddly. Like she couldn't open or close her mouth properly. She couldn't speak very well. She couldn't understand what you were asking for. She wouldn't remember what you said. It was like she was wrapped in a blurry mist that she had to struggle through to reach the real world outside. She couldn't do much of anything, beyond lying in bed. She spent a lot of time in bed, among beige bedsheets that got darker and grimier over time.

We always knew that when Mum went spacey it meant we needed to go away and leave her alone. Mum was ill. Mum was spacey. And it meant that we couldn't expect too much of her, not like the other Mums. If Mum was late picking us up that was because Mum was spacey. If Mum couldn't do fun things for us it was because Mum was ill. If Mum didn't take us to school it was because Mum was in bed, and it wasn't far anyway, we could do it ourselves. We didn't need her. We could do anything together.

But there were two years between my brother and I, and two years is a yawning chasm when you're a child.

So I'd go to school alone, in a dirty blue cardigan, a stained white polo, and a crumpled black skirt. And I was great at it. I learned to read while still in nursery. I liked the contrast of bold black text on clean white pages. It was as natural as breathing to me, and it made everything else so much easier too.

The teachers loved me for it. A joy in class. A mind like a sponge. A little shy. Not much of a talker. Few friends. Likes her comfort space, doesn't like breaking out of routines. But an excellent student, very easy to deal with.

My brother wasn't great. He struggled with words more, couldn't make them focus. The teachers didn't like that, and said it was his fault. He preferred physical things, like building spaceships out of multicoloured Lego blocks. He could complete puzzles faster and win games better than I could. But those things weren't quiet, weren't easy, didn't get him the praise I got. He would get into more fights in the playground. He was harder.

He was sent to the hospital by a couple of boys once when I was six. The school told Mum and Dad he slipped on an orange peel. There was no one to take me home, so they gave me printer paper and a neon pink highlighter, and sat me outside the headteachers office alone. I tried writing out all the numbers I knew to see how far I could get before someone came for me. I got to one hundred million. The walls of the school were off-colour as well. It seeps into everything in the real world.

There was nothing off about the colours on the TV. Presented in Brilliant Technicolour, a marvel of technological innovation. My brother used to build castles out of our mountain of VHS tape boxes. I could recite my favourite shows word for word. The characters were smart, and funny, and they had lots of friends they could rely on. Illness was a plot device, easily dismissed or fixed by the end of the film. Things would be sad for a time, but eventually it would end just as brightly as it had begun.

Mum didn't care what we watched. If she had an opinion she never told us. Dad didn't like our films, but he never disparaged them. He

never told us we were wrong about our likes and dislikes. He listened to our opinions seriously.

But he preferred police procedurals. *Poirot*, *Midsummer Murders*, *A Touch of Frost*, *Inspector Morse*. Dour men in suits looking very serious while talking about gruesome events. Women lying on floors with fake orangey blood covering them. Palettes of bleak blues, granite greys, muddy greens, cloudy skies.

Dad didn't believe in lying to children. If I had a question it got answered. About animals. About war. About medicine. About how babies were made. About the colour of the sky. About trains. About violence. About yellow warning signs.

Dad said ignorance was dangerous. If we were ignorant children, we might pick up his cigarettes, so he told us why cigarettes were bad. If we didn't know what his pills did, we might try to take them, so he told us what they were, and why they were dangerous.

Dad didn't believe in sheltering children either. We were both intelligent, and if something was too much for us, we could always leave, he said. We didn't. We watched a lot of things together. Science fiction. Horror. True crime. War documentaries. Christmas shows. The news. Disaster films. Monster movies. Thrillers. Swearing and sex and drugs and rock n roll. My world was shaped entirely by what my father liked – and by Walt Disney.

We watched *The Time Machine* when I was eight. He pointed out to the skill it took to create the time lapse of the sun moving across the changing sky, and the dresses on the mannequins getting shorter. Another form of animation. He explained the cultural context of the bomb shelters and air raid sirens, how they adapted the book to reflect the then-modern fear of nuclear devastation. The metaphor of the degenerate but clever Morlocks in their real, earthy tones, and the pure, innocent but fatally stupid Elois in their pastels and with their books made of dust.

My Dad's eyes changed colours like the sky in that film, quickly but vividly. Sometimes they were blue and clear like mine. Sometimes they were a nutty brown like my brother's. A lot of the time they were

a grey-green of his own. They were always dark. Often glassy. But for all my father's faults, I never had to lie to get him to look at me.

We couldn't explain what was wrong with Mum, but with Dad it was simple. Everything was wrong.

He couldn't breathe properly. His heart was weak. His legs didn't work. His back was bent. His blood sugar was unstable. Diabetic neuropathy. Osteoporosis. Cardiomyopathy. Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. The end result of 40 years of hard living. We knew exactly what was wrong and what the consequences were. Next to his chair he had a bag of chalky white pills he took every single day.

He couldn't leave the house alone, so we always had to be with him. Sometimes he couldn't leave the house at all, in bed with Mum, so we had to go out for them. Food shopping, picking up prescriptions, depositing money at the bank. Making tea, changing light bulbs, cleaning up. We called them errands. Kids run errands all the time, right? It's not like anyone else could do them.

Doctors, nurses, teachers, shop assistants, pharmacists … they were busy. They had jobs to do. More important and urgent things to mind. And we were fine. There was nothing wrong with us. A child as smart as that one didn't need any checking up on. And boys will be boys, they get into trouble all the time.

We weren't upset, we weren't acting any differently to how we'd always acted. We weren't black and blue. If anything we were better than those louder, angrier children they had to deal with. The ones that bled red, that shouted blue, the black sheep of society that grew up with us in those council coloured estates and schools and hospitals.

We were different. We were wonderful. Polite and well-tempered. We knew how to act. How to be present and helpful, or absent and quiet. We smiled, we did our work, we followed instruction. We were so mature for our age.

No one needs to care about an off-colour child.

Endgame Reached; Perspective Updated

Anonymous

The words "*primary five*" should hold no deeper meaning than new topics learnt and perhaps increased chores at home. Life should not change forever at nine years old, and certainly not by accident.

Snapshot jotters were my primary school's version of parents' evening – a week of work compiled into one book, taken home on Friday to show your parents. It was a simple, sweet sentiment to share school life with family, not something to be feared, not something to shrink from, and definitely not something that should cause a child who barely spoke to her teacher to approach her almost in tears to ask not to take it home. That day every small scribble seemed magnified, as if the paper itself knew of what was to come.

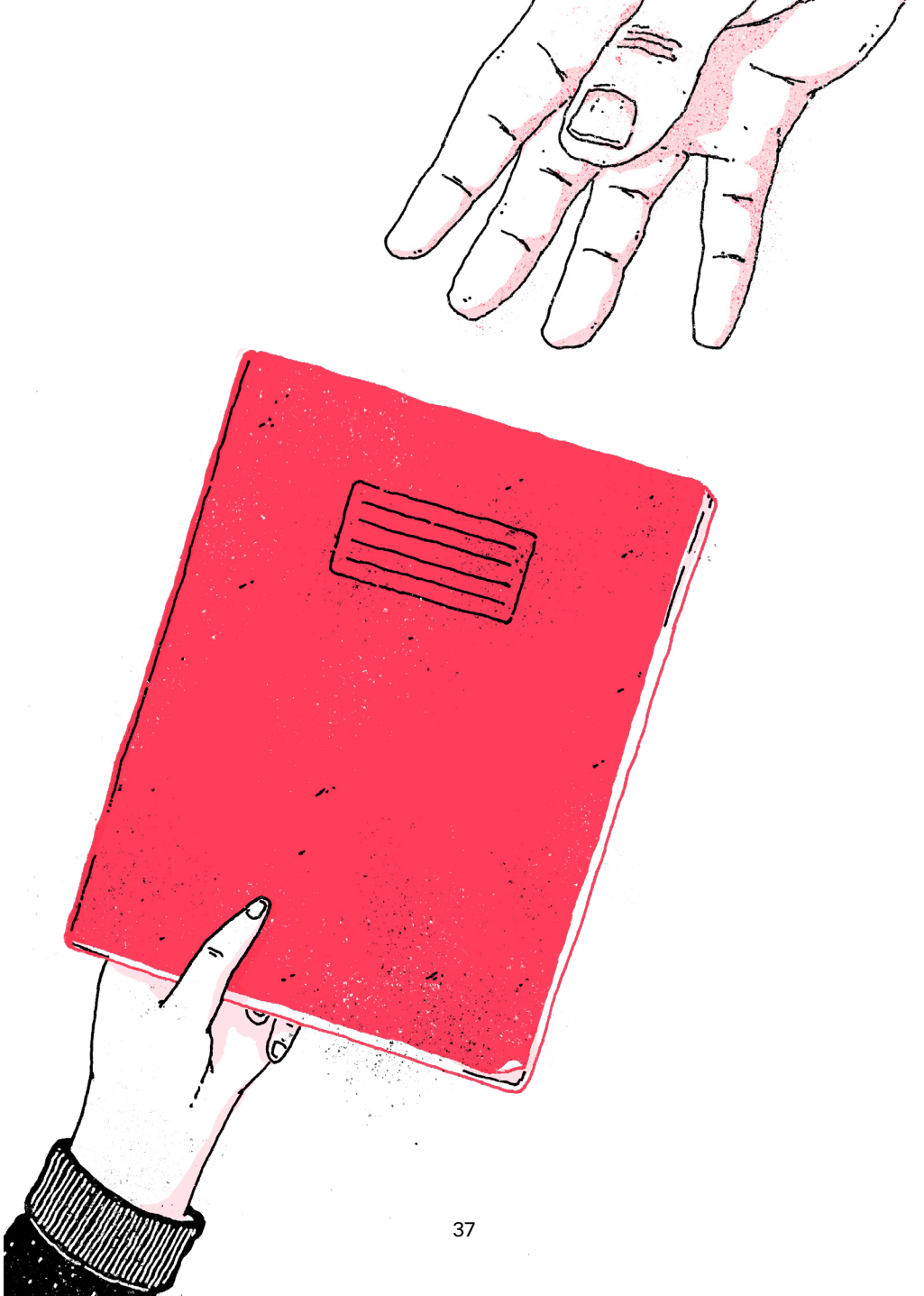
As cliché as it sounds, I remember it like a dream. Even then, I think a part of me was watching rather than living.

I walked up to my teacher and asked if I could leave the jotter at school for the weekend, explaining that it had not gone well the last time. What I believed to be an innocent request carried a weight I did not understand. That question would uproot my life as I knew it. This simple question held greater consequences than simply taking the jotter home and enduring what it brought.

As the class settled after another lively lunch break, a voice called for me from the door.

I remember turning towards the unfamiliar woman standing there, confused as to why a teacher I did not recognise wanted to speak to me. Assuming it was merely a message from another teacher, I followed her into the quiet corridor. She held a small white envelope labelled *confidential* and removed a sheet of paper filled with questions I could not quite make out.

She began simply.



“What is your morning routine?”
“What is your favourite part of the day?”
“Who picks you up from school?”

I remained confused, but answered honestly.

“Nothing special.”
“Lunch and break time probably.”
“My dad, usually.”

Gradually, however, the questions became more specific.

“Do you get into trouble at home?”
“Does mum or dad yell?”
“Has anyone ever hit you?”

I began to sweat, suddenly feeling my own pulse.

“Sometimes.”
“If I’m bad.”
“I don’t know,” I replied, my voice shrinking more with each response.

“Am I in trouble?” I questioned, trembling slightly.

Noticing my unease, the woman gently placed her hand on my shoulder and softly asked me, *“Do you feel safe at home?”*

I gave no answer, my body tense, afraid that anything I said might only deepen whatever trouble I was already in.

It felt as though someone was chasing me with a silent question to which they already knew the answer, simply needing me to confirm it. I grew quiet and restless, fidgeting as she scanned her sheet carefully.

Clearing her throat, she asked her final question.

“You told your teacher you didn’t want to take your jotter home this week. Why was that?”

“I didn’t want to get in trouble,” I mumbled, a sense of unease creeping through me. *“Dad doesn’t like my handwriting, and I can’t spell well.”*

She looked at me with confusion, as though I had spoken nonsense.

“You said something different to your teacher.”

“I just told her a story,” I said, hesitating, but regaining more confidence. *“An example.”*

“What story?”

She stood patiently, with an expression I couldn’t quite read, while I tried to explain, slowly recounting the last time I had taken a snapshot jotter home.

To me, the memory was unremarkable. I had walked home, handed my jotter to my father, and waited while he examined my work before setting the homework he gave me each afternoon. As usual, he was dissatisfied, my handwriting too messy, my spelling inconsistent, my creative writing below his standards, and anything less than perfect in mathematics was unacceptable. His voice rose in familiar criticism, spitting insults I had long learnt to ignore.

But this time was different. There was a sharper intensity in his anger, a deliberate cruelty in his words. They seemed designed to wound rather than reprimand.

For the first time, they felt chosen.

For the first time in a long while, I resisted. I yelled at him to stop and pushed him away with all the strength a nine-year-old could muster. Of course, he did not move.

I looked up and saw more raw anger than I had ever seen before. I turned and ran towards my room, slipping on the stairs as heavy footsteps closed in behind me.

I knew what was coming. I ran anyway.

Somewhere between the stairs and the door, I disappeared, my mind on pause, as if I was watching a cut scene in a game. The little character could not fight and, as the looming door of its room marked the end of its desperate sprint; it soon could not run. The character shook, unable to hide as the banging on the door it kept its body pressed against grew too furious, too powerful and too manic for it to keep out any longer.

As the force of anger exploded into the room, what followed was sudden and precise. In a flash the character was in the air, a small timid body held aloft by a singular gripping hand. The intent felt less to injure than to terrify, to force obedience through fear.

When the screaming finally slowed and the character fell to the ground, dropped, the only thing visible on its face other than involuntary tears, was indifference.

At the time, I had no language for what was happening. I only knew the rules of the world I lived in.

At nine years old, fear was something I had learnt not to question; it had become distorted by childhood innocence and lack of understanding, allowing the most distressing situations to blur and melt into something strangely ordinary.

At the time, I believed I had done something wrong. I couldn't understand that the woman's questions weren't accusing but attempts at protecting. Only years later did I understand what followed: the meetings, the quiet conversations behind closed doors, the unfamiliar adults who spoke gently and listened carefully like we were exchanging secrets, and why the animosity between my father and I became quiet, almost secret, shared through sharp looks and seemingly innocent comments rather than a scream or blow.

This chapter of life is over, yet there remains a strange absence of relief. When fear becomes known as routine, its later absence doesn't equate to mental freedom. Although I recognise the threat is no longer one, the emotional relaxation that might be expected never fully settled. Even now echoes of the fear exist in unexpected moments. A slammed door, a sudden noise, a raised hand and for a fraction of a second the character is back, then the room returns and I remember where I am.

But in truth, the character remains frozen in that room, while I have moved beyond it.

Time doesn't erase experiences; it alters our relationship with them. With maturity came the ability to interpret what childhood could only endure, and what once existed as fear was dulled, replaced with growth and understanding.

My perspective changes but my identity does not, and I remain a separate person from the character who lived the events. Something observed rather than lived.

The character remains within the moment, while the person steps past.

The Robin Bag

Emily Rose

Flowers grabbed walking to the train
Spring to summer, approaching autumn.
Blossom, wild garlic, blue bells and ox-eye daisies.
Today the meadowsweet leaves traces of white stars.

A cormorant dries it's black, black wings. **Craigendoran**

The Christmas Robin bag has its own seat
Carrying clothes
To my youngest daughter
Sharing the same name as the bird.

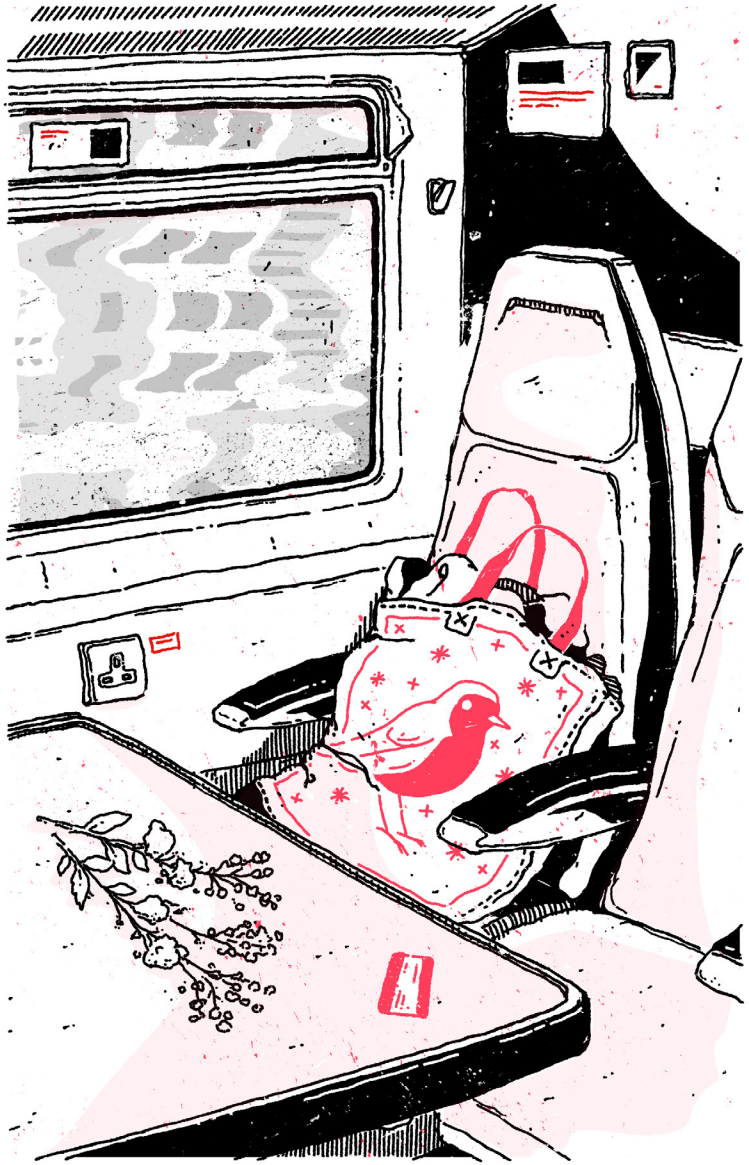
Swatches of green, gold and mustard,
peppered with resting flocks. **Cardross**

With 428 pages
'Anorexia and Other Eating Disorders'
Weighs the bag down and
Flattens the clothes.

A tunnel of moss, in touching range, damp sponge
cushions in shades of khaki. **Dalreoch**

Inside the cover hides a
Sketch, study, or outline on a blank postcard
Drawn daily on my knee and delivered to be
opened each night, 'To Bob.'

Towering flats striped orange and grey. Pixels of



blue Saltire flags. **Dumbarton Station**

Today's postcard is
a pen sketch of a baby Robin
Who visited the garden this morning.
Both intent on busying ourselves and eyeing each other up.

The ribs of wooden boats cut through silver. **Dalmuir**

Letters for Robyn from relatives
Stories of squirrels, seals, birthdays and shopping
Life lines from Essex and Sussex
Read and hidden inside a locked cupboard.

Graffiti winks through branches. **Hyndland**

My little black book with a
Pen wedged inside, secured with an elastic band.
Scribbles of
Weights, plans, frustrations, information,
dates, hopes and names.

Snatches of sky. **Partick Station**

Stand 1 at the bus station, the number 77. Shops,
Tunnel, Motorway, Shops, **Hospital**. Lift up to **Ward 4**.

Sitting I displace the blankets
Meticulously tucked around **her bed**.
The robin bag sits between us
Meadowsweet scatters onto NHS blue.

Snarl

Hannah Marie Watson

When I sit back down at my desk after my usual morning chat with Lily I can't untwist the knot in my stomach. It had started to tangle after she poked fun at me because I yawned while stirring sugar into my tea. It didn't happen because she teased me, it was funny, honestly, because it's only 10:30 in the morning. I told her why I was yawning, that it was because I got up extra early this morning to clean the floors, and that the reason I had to get up extra early to clean the floors is because there's a plumber coming at 10:45 to check a leak under the kitchen sink, and he'll be on the floor so obviously it needs to be clean.

I don't know why there's a leak under the kitchen sink either, by the way. I don't think I put anything down there that shouldn't go down the drain, but then again sometimes I'm just so tired that I'm not paying all that much attention to what swirls round and slips down there.

Anyway. The knot started to twist and tighten when I thought about cleaning the kitchen floor. I didn't tell Peter that I cleaned the floor this morning and I should have, so that he would stop the dog from licking the floor and ingesting all those horrible chemicals. I mean, I'm sure that one time I ate my dinner off a soapy fork and it ruined my belly that night, so God knows what floor cleaner would do to a tiny little belly like that.

I unlock my phone and send Peter a text. Just a little one. Nonchalant, I'm not that worried. The dog was probably in her crate for the plumber coming anyway. But just in case.

"Hey," I say in the text. "Maybe keep the dog off the floor for a bit, I mopped this morning. :)."

The smiley face is so he knows I'm not too worried. I'm not freaking out about it.

The knot loosens. I turn back to my laptop and scroll through my

unread emails, scanning the one at the top that's an out of office for a colleague off sick. I heard someone mention that when I was making my tea, they had said she suspects food poisoning.

Poisoning.

Peter still hasn't answered the text. He might be talking to the plumber. Or the dog is throwing up. I search up how long it takes for a dog to start being sick after ingesting poison, and the answers are mixed.

I should call. Just to check.

I hear his smile before he speaks. He's always glad to hear from me. "Hey, what's up?"

"Is the dog okay?"

"Yeah she's fine! Napping right now, I think."

Sleepiness wasn't in the early poisoning symptoms. That's good. I think.

"Did you see my text?"

"Yes, sorry, only a second before you called."

"Sorry if I sound silly."

"Not at all, thanks for letting me know to stop her licking, you know what she's like," he laughs. He doesn't think it's silly.

"Do you think it's serious? Are you sure she didn't lick the floor already?"

I hear him sigh. He does it away from the phone, in the hopes that I don't pick up on it, but I do. "No, not serious. I promise. I'd tell you if she seemed off and I would also call the vet. But she is okay."

He's right. Of course he's right. The dog is fine. He can see the dog, and he says she is fine.

The dog is fine. She has not ingested any cleaning chemicals today.

"Okay. Thanks. I love you."

"I love you too. Have a good day!"

The knot is still tight. It's worse now, I think.

Peter is going to worry about me now. He knows I'm having a Moment. He has so much work to do today, he told me all about it last night. And now, because of my Moment, it will be harder. That's so unfair. I wish I hadn't called. He would have replied to my text and never known how tight the knot was. I should have left him alone.

I turn to Lily, who sits beside me even though we also take our breaks together.

"Remember we were talking about that guy who kept calling his ex because she wouldn't answer his text. She had to change her number, in the end."

Lily raises an eyebrow. "Yeah I remember. It was awful."

"Where is the line?"

"What?"

"Like … the line. Calling someone because they don't answer your text. When is it harassment?"

"Are you alright?" Lily is whispering now, and she scoots her chair closer to me. "Is something going on with Peter? You can tell me anything."

Oh my God. She thinks I'm talking about him.

Fuck.

“No! No it’s me! I’m just so annoying honestly I thought maybe the dog might be sick so I texted him about it and he didn’t answer right away so I called …”

Lily frowns. “Is she okay, the dog?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay,” Lily says, slowly. “Then it just sounds like you were worried.”

“I suppose.”

Peter is waiting for me on the couch when I get home that evening, dog in hand. He holds her out to me as I close the door behind me. It makes me smile, despite the knot that still resides in the pits of my stomach, rock hard now.

“I thought you’d want to see her straight away, since you were so worried today.”

I’m tempted to claim that I wasn’t worried, not really. I can’t bring myself to lie. I never can. Instead, I nod, and collapse beside them both on the couch, and immediately my cheeks are wet with happy, healthy puppy slobber. I begin to sob.

“I’m sorry for worrying you. And ruining your day. And not giving you time to answer my text.”

“You didn’t do any of those things. Well, I was a bit concerned about you, but that’s all. You are thinking too much though,” he replies.

“I know.”

“Shall we try and stop thinking for today?”

I nod, tears still streaming. The knot is loosening, though.

For the night it stays that way, and I revel in the relief.

Eventually though, I begin to cower again, from the fear of the knot returning. It will return. I know that.

I set my jaw in determination and hope, that next time, I will be able to keep it from tangling me all up inside it.



Lost Socks

Kirstine Hughes



Jesus. Suffering. Fuck.

There she is.

Aye, there you are, Kal.

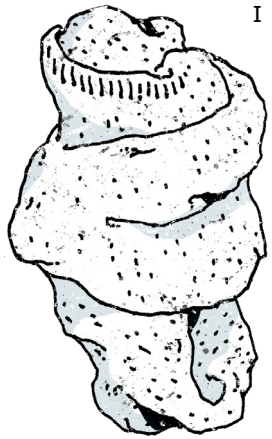
I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror.

Fucking deadbeat.

Good God.

What happened to me?

Creative. Bubbly. Sparkly.



I had been called some of these things before, but I didn't see any of them in the husk of a woman looking back at me now.

Crumbling. Blobbing. Shabby.

Dripping folds of skin over the sagging elastic of my old Primark pyjamas.

Stained housecoat reeking of stale tobacco and knock-off perfume.

I watch myself sorting the washing, muddling the socks.

It used to drive him daft that I would lose all the socks.

There was never a complete pair to be found.

Can't do anything right.



No wonder he left.

I run my scraggy thumbnails, flecked with chipping black polish, along the fraying folds of washed out towels.

Then I put down the washing and lift the bottle of gin.

Empty.

Fuck.

I take it outside to throw it in the glass bin, but there's barely any room left to fit it in.

I light up a roll up and blow white smoke into the stars.

The Silence. Ringing like tinnitus ... always there.

Better silence, than the slamming of doors, I suppose.

Then the bin rattles obnoxiously, exposing me, as I drag it down the path for the bin men coming in the morning. At least I remembered this week.

Cold seeped through the mossy slabs into my bare feet. I savoured the shock of the cold against my heels.

I feel the weight of shadowy eyes from every window, and hear the cloudy roll of a car in the distance.

Did I pay the milkman? I wonder if there is enough left in the account.

***

“Honestly … I just wanted to wrap my car around a tree rather than come here today,” I had told Pamela, my boss, that morning after a particularly excruciating personal development exercise. Personal development! What’s the bloody point in developing personally to then go on and cold call pensioners all day. Her vacant eyes just flickered under the garish, obnoxious strip lights, and stared straight through me. I knew she was staring towards the clock on the grey panelled office wall. She didn’t have time for my breakdown. There was paperwork to be done. Boxes to be ticked.

When it was time to clock out, I silently left the building. No one looked up from their screens.

When I arrived home, the kids didn’t look up from their screens either. They shuffled past me glued to their phones, almost straight through me. Just another obstacle on their path to the next notification.

Sometimes you can spread yourself so thin, you become invisible. You become a ghost in your own life.

Haunted day and night.

That dream. I had it again last night.

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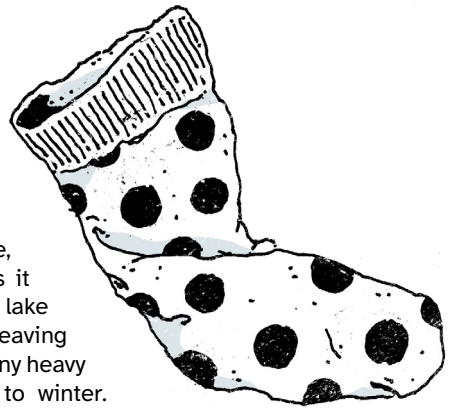
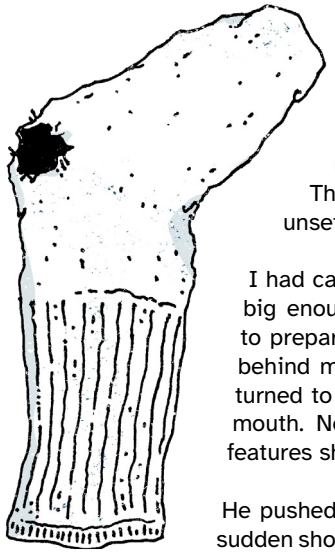


The only sound for miles was a low whistling breeze that skipped across the sheet of ice, and the slow creaking moans as it breathed in and out. It made the lake sound alive, like an old woman heaving and sighing with the weight of many heavy years she had carried through to winter.



I had only ever seen a blue like this once before – a pale glacial azure that reflected the sky in its accepting stillness. The quiet chaos of his eyes mirrored the ice’s unsettling beauty.

I had carved a hole in the ice to go for a dip – just big enough to get myself in and out. I was about to prepare my safety line, when a sudden presence behind me made me freeze. A familiar presence. I turned to see a faceless face. No eyes. No nose. No mouth. Nothing but stretched skin over where the features should have been. But I recognised him.

He pushed me into the water and under the ice. The sudden shock of the cold. The rush of ice water flooding into the space around my very organs, sucking the last breath of warm air from my lungs.

But I felt wrapped in a calmness. I felt everything and nothing all at once. A sudden sheath of cotton peace wrapped me into the womb, a cradle. Safe and still …

***

“Mum! Where’s my school socks?” Shrillness snatched me from the cradle, and back to the symphony of morning chaos.

Kettle on. Cereal running out. Find lost socks. Finish homework. Washing on.

Ironing done. Tea stewed. Lunches packed. Water bottles filled. Aspirin. Shower. Referee. Kettle on. Going to be late. Again. Telly blaring. Lorraine Kelly gushing over some pop star – saying how brave he was to talk about his mental health in his new book. The washing machine whirring, sloshing, thundering. Pot of water boiling on the stove for some eggs.

Extractor fan. Doors slam. Kids leave for school.

No kisses, just a “BYE MUM” thrown over their shoulders.

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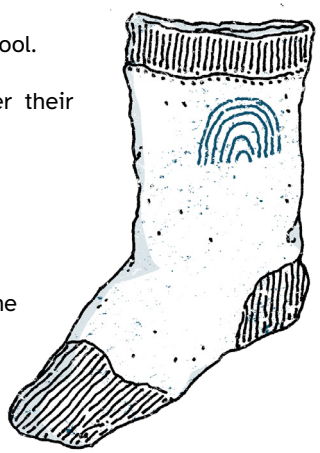


I gulped down my cold tea in front of the kitchen window, and amongst the noise of my morning, I could still hear the honking of geese close by. I watched as they swooped and flapped, cutting across the sky, all working together – in synergy. Their white bodies gleaming against the sky. I picked up a knife to take the stone out of an avocado, transfixed and not taking my eyes off of these geese in flight.

SWOOP! The geese glided.

The knife glided. As if through warm butter – straight through the stone, through the avocado … and then right through my hand. Right through it. I just stared. I stared at the knife sticking out from the other side of my hand.

“Oh …” was all I said out loud.

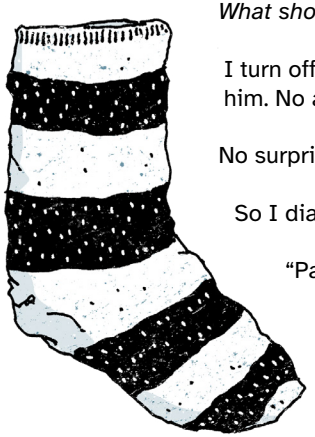
I was certain that the world was still moving around me, but I couldn’t be sure.

Even though I was alone in my kitchen, I looked around to see if anyone else had been witness. The noise of the morning fell away somewhere. I pulled the knife back out.

The blood. It seemed like it would never stop, as it sprayed over the counter and wall. It poured onto the floor. It dripped and ran down my

arm and plopped on my boots. I ran to the sink and ran it under water but I knew it was more than a graze. Circling the kitchen tiles, my eyes darting around frantically. I grabbed a dish towel and wrapped it tightly around my hand. I notice the tip of my finger is numb. The blood seeps through the cloth.

Who do I phone? What should I do? Who do I phone? What should I do?



I turn off the stove, and I pick up my phone and call him. No answer.

No surprise.

So I dialled work.

“Pamela? I … I won’t be in today. I’m sorry. I’ve had an accident and I’m on the way to A&E.”

“OK Kal, can I expect you back tomorrow? This is your fourth absence this year, so I am afraid we’ll have to schedule some time in for a review. See where we can support you …”

I cut her off, smearing the button on my mobile with a bloody fingerprint. I decided there and then that I wouldn’t be seeing Pamela again.

***

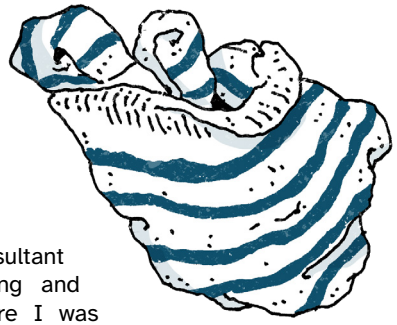
The throbbing in my hand was a dull roar against the practising orchestra of beeps and blips emanating from behind the blue nylon curtains separating each room. I was imagining who the people were behind each one. What was their story? How did they end up in this

place? What will happen to me? Will I ever hold a paintbrush again?

He still hadn't returned my call.

The kids were going to see their friends after school anyway.

I hoped I would be home first to clean away the blood.



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X-rays, tetanus, salt bath. Consultant after consultant, all humming and hawing over my hand, before I was referred to plastics.

"Well, it looks like you were lucky, Miss Gallagher," the surgeon said. "It looks as though you have severed a nerve, but missed the other one running into your middle finger. Had you cut that one too, then there would be no cardiovascular activity running in your finger and it would be dead."

Dead?

"We've got space to get you into surgery tonight. You've been really lucky. But this is still a serious hand trauma, and we need to investigate it right away."

I was asked to change into a goonie that flapped open to expose my bare arse if I swivelled, along with some long ugly surgical socks. At least they matched. I was helped onto the bed and wheeled off down the corridor. The fluorescent lights burned into my eyes, and reminded me of being in the back of my Dad's car as a child half asleep and watching the street lights flick by, through the window.

"Have you got someone at home to look after you after all of this?" a nurse asked, as I was wheeled into the operating theatre.

"No!" I sobbed. Shocked by my own reaction. Gasping. Chasing the next breath, just as they put the icy fluid into my veins and the mask over my face.

Faceless. Icy. Sleep.

I swam up to the surface, broke through the ice and blinked into the white light of the recovery ward.



***

It took a while, but the light began to change. I noticed it reflecting back at me from my mirror.

I looked at my bandaged hand and winced a little. It was part of my story now. 'MUM?!' my son shouted from the kitchen.

'Yeah? What do you need, love?' I replied.

'Nothing. Just – I've got the kettle on. Do you want a cup of tea?'

I smiled in the mirror.

Then I noticed something behind me through the reflection. My old sketchbook! Perched on the edge of my bookcase, as if ready to jump.

I reached for it, saved it, and ran my bandaged fingers slowly across the spine.

My socks matched.

Toffee and Bobo

Malcolm Millar

When noon comes brightly, there is a reflection on the rippling surface of Union Canal as clear as a mirror. In it, Toffee sees a little upright doggie with a fishing rod and a blue knapsack. It sends a pang through his woolly stomach. He does not stop to look. He leaves home early and he goes home late. Sometimes he notices his reflection, and it stings his fresh stitches and his new stuffing. It swells in his chest. It hurts.

***

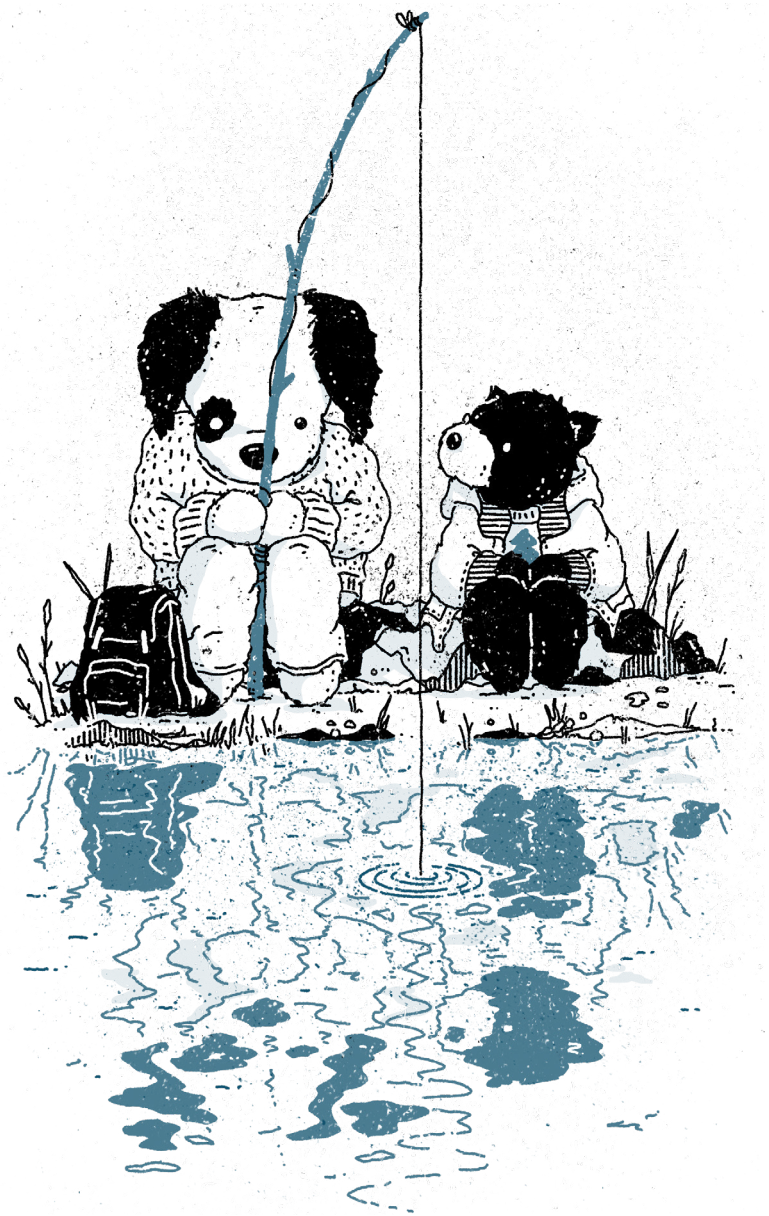
The summer is so bright that sunshine peers through the blinds every morning. Toffee stirs and his knitted heart thrums like a hummingbird. It draws him out of the big bed. Beside him, Bobo yawns and licks his dark lips. Toffee scurries off the bed, climbs on to the bedside table, leaps onto the curtain, steps on to the wooden windowsill. He pulls the cords gently and sunlight falls onto the little blue bear's face and makes him wrinkle his button nose. His dinnerplate eyes stay firmly closed.

"It's a beautiful day, Bobo."

"That's okay. I'm sleepy."

"You're wasting the day."

"That's okay. Don't worry, buddy."



Toffee feels a twinge inside his stomach. That twinge wants him to ball up his wee paws and extend his flicky ears. Bobo is gently snoring amongst the endless duvet and sheets and cushions and pillows of the humans' nest. Toffee looks to the gang sleeping in a huddle atop the teal footstool in the corner of the room. Floppy-eared Buckwheat, a donkey too wary for the woods. Moonshine, the only fox too delicate for dirt stains. Lara the Capybara, too cautious of trips and falls with her little legs. Penelope Piglet too new for the adventure.

Toffee scoffs. He widens the open window and climbs down the drainpipe, alone.

Squirrels ruck in the forest canopy above Toffee's head. One of them watches him from a branch. He salutes then digs out his little tin box and finds his rod, his tackle, his tiny lines. Birds above and around him sing from their chests. A flutter scatters leaves. A crow lands on a thick, mossy branch in front of Toffee.

"Morning, Toffee! Would you like to see my new nest?"

"Maybe another time, Russell."

"Why are you in always in such a hurry, Toffee?"

"I have to seize the day. Carpe diem!"

"Eh? The carp do what?"

Toffee makes his way through the forest, following the shade down the hill. When he reaches the fence at the edge of the fields, he hears a whinny from the paddock. Clopping hooves grow louder, and a shadow with a long mane falls across him.

"Hi there, Toffee! Bring any sugar lumps today?"

"Sorry, Neighleen. Not this time. I was just passing."

"You're always in such a hurry these days, Toffee."

"Of course! The clock is ticking!"

"What is a clock?"

The long reeds and the wild grasses on the canal bank are so much taller than Toffee, like they're reaching for the big blue sky. Ferns and wild flowers burst out in clusters, beside thick, long leaves springing like woodless palm trees. He nestles on a stone under a bush among the chirruping insects and endless birdsong, shaded from the pounding sun. There is a drone and thump of a distant, passing canal boat, and the smell of grass cuttings on the slight breeze. Toffee tosses his line and taps his foot quickly. The line twitches. He reels it in and plucks a tiny, silver fish from the silicone hook.

"Hi," it squeaks.

"Hello, Mr Gudgeon. You're a lucky one today."

"Toffee look great. You get younger?"

"I just had an operation, Mr Gudgeon. Go get busy now. Live life to the fullest!"

Toffee throws the minnow back in. It plops and whips away. In his stomach, Toffee feels a plughole draining dregs of warm bathwater. He sighs long and loud.

***

On the teal footstool, the gang are gathered in a circle. They nibble Pringle crumbs and flakes of chocolate and sit on an empty Frustration board, surrounding its popping bubble dice. Bobo presses the bubble and the die inside jump. The gang applaud softly.

“Have you all done nothing today?” Toffee asks.

“We was foraging,” Buckwheat says. His floppy ears twitch. “Yum yum.”

“I had to go fishing by myself. Bobo.”

“I don’t understand,” says Bobo. “I thought I didn’t have to do what I don’t want to.”

“You’re supposed to be my buddy. Besides, being lazy makes you sad.”

“Okay, buddy. I’ll come fishing with you tomorrow.”

“Grumpers grump,” Moonshine mutters.

***

Sunshine tickles the woodland canopy and pokes through with golden pillars of light. Toffee trots quickly through the undergrowth, and Bobo stumbles after him. He trips and the racket sends worried birds flapping high and wide.

“Come on!” Toffee says. “We’re already late!”

“Are you okay, Toffee? You don’t normally shout.”

“I’m not shouting!”

Toffee scoffs and marches away down the forest track. It is getting towards noon.

At the canal bank, Bobo stops to gaze at the shining surface of the water. A smile slowly grows across his round face. He waves a paw at his reflection. Toffee grabs him and pulls him away by the sleeve of his yellow raincoat.

“What’s the matter, Toffee?”

“I know what I look like, I don’t need to see myself. Let’s go. Let’s go further down.”

“You’re always in such a hurry these days, Toffee.

“Shut up, Bobo.”

“That’s not very nice, buddy. Are you scared of looking at the water? It isn’t like Toffee to be scared of something.”

“I’m not scared! I just don’t like it.

“But why not?”

“It just hurts. Nobody likes things that hurt.”

Bobo shrugs. He offers a faint, half-smile.

“It’s okay to feel bad feelings,” he says.

“No, it’s not!”

Birds flee the canal banks. The grasses and reeds twitch and shake as stoats and mice scatter. The water ripples at the flight of frogs and newts. Bobo’s little round eyes well. In his own chest, Toffee feels a tight, cold grip. A window opening and icy gales blowing in.

“Sorry,” he says quietly. “Let’s just fish.”

He sits on the canal bank and Bobo sits beside him, paws in his lap, looking at the reeds sticking out the water. Toffee feels him there, like he is pulsing, an itch in his paw.

“I can be a really bad doggie sometimes.”

“Toffee isn’t a bad doggie, buddy.”

“Good doggies don’t shout at their besties.”

“Yes, they do. And good doggies say sorry, like you did.”

“It feels worse when I upset you.”

“Sometimes you can’t help it.”

“But I think I can help it, Bobo. Deep down. I think I – I might have a problem.”

“Maybe if you look at yourself in the water, you can find out what’s wrong. Maybe if you slow down and look, you’ll give your big heart a chance to catch up with your big brain.”

Toffee sees himself in the water. The same old black patch of fur around his glinting, shining eye. The same old curly, stiff ears like a nineties, centre-parted fringe. The same old big snoot and little mouth. Ruffled, light-brown fur. His body is full, big, stuffed. He looks so much younger now, hench and jacked. New and powerful.

He whimpers and covers his eyes and cowers. Bobo wraps an arm around him.

“What’s wrong, buddy?”

“I don’t like it, Bobo. I don’t like the way it makes me feel.”

“Is it because Toffee looks different since your operation?”

“No.”

“Is it because Toffee doesn’t like having new stuffing?”

“No.”

“Is it because it reminds Toffee of being scared?”

It reminds him. Withered, broken, lying on the human bed. Squashed and flat and ancient, old and done. Sun hitting his wincing face and his wheezing chest. Half-dreaming of a scurry he can no longer do. Bobo feeding him a cashew, his frown so heavy. Waiting for the big drive in the big car to the big city and the redbrick toy hospital.

Toffee buries his little face into Bobo’s chest.

“I’m so sorry, Bobo. I was so horrible to you. You’re a great buddy, you didn’t deserve for me to shout at you. I just get so angry now, and so scared. I don’t like how it feels.”

“I understand. When I was first new, I didn’t have a buddy. I was in a big scary, shiny metal place. Then I was in a bag, then the bag was in a box, then the box was in another bag. Toffee was my first buddy. Sometimes when I wake up, I forget and I get scared. Then I remember where I am and that I don’t have to worry anymore. Maybe I can be a bit lazy, but it’s just because I’m slowing it all down, buddy. That makes me feel nicer, when it’s slower.”

Toffee nods. He sits up and looks into the water. In its brilliant glean, he sees the dark shadow of his own head and Bobo’s little triangular ears.

“Sometimes I don’t like the way things make me feel.”

“Like remembering the toy hospital? It must be very scary having an operation.”

“It is. But I feel this bad feeling in my tummy. Like when I see myself in the canal. Or when I slow down too much. I don’t know what that is. I don’t like seeing myself. I used to like seeing myself and what I was doing.”

“I remember the first time Toffee wants us to go through the big forest, I am very scared and I don’t want to go. I pretend to be asleep, then I pretend to have a sore tummy. But Toffee tells me I have to try it, and I do. Maybe this is like that. Maybe Toffee has to try it. My buddy Toffee is so strong and adventurous that he can do anything. Maybe Toffee has to slow down. Maybe he has to look at the water.”

Toffee stares at his reflection in the surface of Union Canal. The same face, the same ears, the same snoot, a fisherman’s jumper and green jogging bottoms. A hefty, bulging physique like a hero’s statue. The fine new stitching under his armpit, barely visible. He closes his eyes and sees himself withered, frail, squashed from twenty-five years of life. He lets out a long breath and feels the pang in his stomach. He lets it grow inside him like the roots of a tree growing. Tears escape his eyes and make him sniffle. He looks at Bobo sat on the canal bank, at his little tummy poking out from under his Christmas jumper.

“See, buddy?” he says. “It’s not so bad feeling things.”

Toffee sits down and sees himself. He sees getting old, and days passing by unresolved, incomplete. He looks at himself withering and Bobo withering next to him. He sees himself sobbing over a sore foot, startled at an angry dog’s barks, his own lost and wild eyes in the dark of night. Scared in a clanking old factory, scared in a bargain bin, scared in a closed drawer. Then he sees a fun doggie. An adventurer, a fellow with wanderlust. A good buddy.

Toffee and Bobo sit together on the canal bank until it grows dark, when Toffee stands.

“Come on, Bobo. Let’s go home.”

***

Sunshine flickers through the blinds. Toffee stirs and his big heart races in his chest like a hamster wheel. Beside him, Bobo awakes.

“You wanna go fishing, buddy?” he asks.

“Na, not today. Don’t worry, buddy. Go back to sleep.”

How to Rest
Tessa Gordziejko

Make it an undoing, this time of rest.
Make it not a time, but a space.
Do not make it. Unmake it.
Don't think of it as 'it'
but a presence.
Do not make
rules.

Lie or sit
with birdsong of your choosing
in grass which might be untamed, alive with flowers
or upholstered with moss and chamomile. Tell your limbs
to unfurl to become daisies or buttercups, dandelions or vetch,
your ribs melt as liquid to earth. Dilate, and let the sky accompany you.

Or run into the green wood, ears purring with dappled sounds ordained
by the asymmetry of species. Let the wood sorrel
quench your thirst, the stippled light make
a bed of earth and bark for you to be
here, now, lost and alive
and breathing
and resting.



About the Writers

Alice Eaves
Alice Eaves is a neurodivergent writer and researcher from Blackpool. She is Editor of translated poetry collection 'Tiny Flames: Voices from Ukraine', featured on BBC Scotland, and winner of the Writing East Midlands Solstice Prize for Nature Writing. Her debut novella 'Golden Mile' was published in 2026 by Radical Bookshop. She lives in Edinburgh where she is a PhD Candidate in Creative Writing at the University of Edinburgh.

Kim Campbell
Kim Campbell is a Clinical Psychologist working in the NHS. She began writing in early 2025 after enrolling in creative writing classes; pursuing a long-held passion she finally decided to explore. Her debut fiction piece 'Skin' was shortlisted in 2025 at the Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival (SMHAF). This is Kim's first venture into non-fiction writing.

Rachel Munnoch
Rachel Munnoch is an award-winning, Glasgow-based writer whose work has featured on television, streaming services and print publications both nationally and internationally. Her professional interests include screenwriting, speculative fiction, experiential non-fiction and media production.

Charlotte Dawn
Charlotte Dawn is a poet, writer, and storyteller living in the Scottish Highlands. An adopted Highlander, she draws inspiration from nature, folklore, family, and the human experience. Her writing explores grief, resilience, healing, and hope, finding poetry in the quiet moments, wild landscapes, and stories that connect us.

Alex Robb
Alex Robb is based in Glasgow and primarily writes short fiction. He is currently working on putting together his first collection of short stories dealing with post-industrial cities, representations of history, and the power and limits of conversation.

Amber Heath
Amber Heath was born in Paisley before moving to Blairgowrie, Perthshire aged eight. She moved to Edinburgh at seventeen to study English and Film, and hasn't left since. She was diagnosed as an adult with autism by the NHS and aspires to someday have an NHS ADHD diagnosis as well.

Hannah Marie Watson
Originally from Glasgow, Hannah Marie Watson studied Linguistics at the University of Edinburgh and graduated in 2026. She has been writing since childhood, and loves to write stories which focus on character, in particular highlighting the differences between internal and external perceptions of self. Hannah is also passionate about language and is currently learning Gàidhlig.

Kirstine Hughes
Kirstine Hughes is an artist, writer, mental health support worker, creative facilitator and Mum. She holds a BA in Creative Writing and is studying for an MA in Participatory Arts. A passionate advocate for arts in health, she believes creative expression supports mental wellbeing.

Malcolm Millar
Malcolm Millar is an author of novels and short stories across a wide range of genres and styles, ranging from detective satire to psychological character study to apocalyptic horror. He lives in Falkirk with his muse/wife and his child/dog.

Tessa Gordziejko
Tessa is a writer and theatre-maker living in Dumfries & Galloway. She's performed poetry at events across the UK, including with A Firm of Poets, for the Climate Psychology Alliance, No Bounds Festival and Loud Poets. Her poetry and stories have appeared in publications including The North, Michael Terrence Anthology, The Mass.

Please note that some writers have chosen not to provide further information.

About the Illustrator

David Galletly
David Galletly is an illustrator and graphic designer. His clients include Begg x Co, Innis & Gunn, NHS, Pringle 1815, Glasgow Film, WIRED, and The Hollywood Reporter. Alongside client work, David exhibits in the UK and overseas. David is also the Art Director for Lost Map Records, an independent record label based on the Isle of Eigg.

After 8 years of living and working in Glasgow, David returned to Stirling, his hometown, where he built his studio in the Creative Stirling hub.

Getting Help and Support

If you have been affected by any of the pieces in this collection, it can help to talk to someone about how you are feeling.

If you are concerned that you are developing a mental health problem you should seek the advice and support of your GP.

If you are thinking about ending your life, please call 999 (UK) or go to A&E and ask for the contact of the nearest crisis resolution team. These are teams of mental health care professionals who work with people in severe distress.

To access free, confidential help and support by phone or online, you can try the following services:

- Call Samaritans on 116 123 at any time of the day or night. Or email jo@samaritans.org
- Call Breathing Space on 0800 83 85 87 (Monday-Thursday 6pm-2am, Friday-Monday 6pm-6am). Or visit their website at breathingspace.scot
- Message SHOUT to 85258 for 24/7 text support on your mobile.
- If you are a child or young person, you can contact Childline about anything. You can call for free or chat to a counsellor in a safe space online. Call 0800 1111 or visit childline.org.uk
- The Hub of Hope is the UK's largest and most comprehensive directory of community mental health services, so you can find help when you need it, wherever you are. Download the app or visit hubofhope.co.uk

You can find more information and specialist support services at mentalhealth.org.uk/get-help.

Reflections

In 2026, the Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival celebrates its 20th year. It's an opportunity to recognise two decades of mental health and creativity while looking at where we are now and where we might go next.

Writing, at its heart, is always an act of reflection. Inspired by the theme Reflections, this collection brings together fiction, poetry and creative nonfiction from writers across Scotland, offering fresh perspectives, personal insights and imaginative responses to mental health.

Each work was selected from the Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival's annual writing competition, which is free to enter and attracts hundreds of entries every year.

Find out more about the Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival, led by the Mental Health Foundation, at **mhfestival.com.**

SCOTTISH MENTAL HEALTH ARTS FESTIVAL

MENTAL HEALTH FOUNDATION

CREATIVE SCOTLAND

ALBA | CHRUTHACHAIL