

# The Narrator

A painting of a woman in a dark, long-sleeved dress standing by a window in a room. The room features a round wooden table with several chairs, a dark wooden cabinet, and two windows with white lace curtains. The lighting is soft and warm, suggesting an interior scene. The woman is seen from behind, looking out the window. The overall mood is quiet and contemplative.

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*The Narrator*

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Cover image: Vilhelm Hammershøi, *Interior, Frederiksberg Allé* (1900)

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# Editorial Note

Volume 1.3 of *The Narrator* comprises a variety of pieces and we continue to be overwhelmed by the quality of the submissions.

Our critical section includes a meditation on the role of women in 21<sup>st</sup> century action films and alternative interpretations of Emily Dickinson's poetry. In addition to illustration, the creative category encompasses a dramatic monologue exploring mental illness, pieces about unrequited love and loss, nature and humanity, and traditions from South African cultures, and poetry treating the subject of hypochondria.

We would like to extend our thanks to the Literature Society for their support at Freshers' Fair and recommend all new English students join in order to benefit from fantastic events with a literary theme and other offers. We have received an exciting amount of interest from new and old students alike.

We also suggest that students submit their assessed essays to *The Journal of Undergraduate Research*, run by the English Department, which showcases exemplary work to promote peer learning.

Our next issue will be published after Christmas, for which submissions are now open, and which will be the last issue of Volume 1. We hope you enjoy reading and look forwards to submissions from first years and to welcoming them to our informal community of writers.

# Critical Writing

# *Expendable Female Role Models*

**Artemis Vergou**

I am sure many of you think action movies are nothing but a joke, something entertaining enough to kill some time on a slow Sunday night, but irreversibly inadequate to spend any amount of serious thought on. I have to admit I held the same view for a long time: I thought it was all about the same attractive, physically fit actors with little or no talent at all, starring in films with weak plots, lots of punches, explosions and predictable endings. What annoyed me most of all in these films was that female characters were underrepresented. Indeed, the research of sociologist Kathryn Gilpatrick showed that from the 157 female protagonists in action films made from 1991 to 2005, only 7% took over the situation, 58% were submissive to male characters and 30% were dead before the resolution. The recent *Expendables* movie made me change my mind, and re-think action films significantly in terms of gender representation.

I sense you think this article is beginning to be a bit of joke itself, am I right? However, please hear me out. After watching the third and most recent *Expendables* I actually thought some valuable lessons were there, perhaps something other than how to throw a good jab. More specifically, I was pleasantly surprised to see a woman chosen and included in the *Expendables* team for the first time.

Granted: many women had been in action films long before. As proven by Gilpatrick's research, most female action film stars are submissive to a male protagonist, like for example those in every James Bond movie ever produced, *Transformers* etc. Otherwise, they may be completely isolated from males, as if trying to replicate a masculine domain and always, as if by chance, doing so in provocative outfits (think of *Charlie's Angels*, *Lucy*, *Tomb Raider* and *Resident Evil*). For decades women instigating violence in films would most likely be a turn on rather than an actual threat, something perhaps metaphorical to lesbian lovemaking. Viewers have always had a sexual fascination with female action heroines rather than respect for their fighting or acting skills. Although this trend may be irreversibly in place now, I am hoping in the coming years it will erode and young girls will have a better chance of knowing about action actresses who do not need a bodyguard on their days off.

In *Expendables 3*, the character Luna was played by the undefeated women's bantamweight Mixed Martial Arts champion, Ronda Rousey. Although she may not have been to acting school, I would say she is better fitted to be in an action film than any other actress. I was happy to finally see a woman on screen who actually has some professional skill in what she presents, and that she can actually kick some behinds off-camera as well. Young girls need more contact with females practicing and using martial arts or just simply being tough on screen, because they are more prone to follow this behavioural pattern themselves, just as they are more likely to imitate this or that fashion trend. Whether we like it or not, Hollywood and the personal lives of stars are major social and behavioural influences on youths, and for girls it is mostly constituted of negative role models of vain, sex and relationship-crazed women chasing after men, money or a Chanel bag.

In real life, Bridget Jones would be the woman every other colleague hates at the office, because she's hitting on the boss. If you bumped into Carrie Bradshaw on the street, I bet you wish you could tell her it is not okay to walk around New York City in a tutu and heels. More specifically, I find that *Sex and the City* characters are caricatures of women which sadly dictate how young girls and women should be and act in real life. It is pretty obvious that Carrie is the emotional type of woman, Charlotte the romantic, Miranda the realist and Samantha the sex-crazed one. Even the way the characters dress is dictated by their 'woman-type'. Is this all women can be? More importantly, why should young women and girls think of them as role models? I would be perfectly at peace with the female stereotypes in *Sex and the City*, *Gossip Girl* and *Desperate Housewives*, but the fact that they are the only accessible ones I find quite unfair.

Ronda Rousey is the type of female role model that needs to be brought to the fore much more. Women need to be able to, or even have the option, of identifying with more than just *Sex and the City* girls or *Bridget Jones*-type characters. Women are sadly and almost exclusively represented in one end of the film spectrum and that is the cheesy, Valentine's Day-type of comedies and dramas. Both male and female viewers need to be shown that women can do more than run after men; that they can be competent, dynamic and go against the will of men on a physical level as well. I cannot say for sure that *The Expendables* and the publicity it has brought to Ronda

Rousey has marked a good start towards this goal, but I know for sure I finally enjoyed a movie with a genuinely powerful and respectful woman both on and off the set.

### Works Consulted

Bridget Jones's Diary. Dir. Sharon Maguire. Perf. Renée Zellweger, Hugh Grant, Colin Firth. Universal Pictures, 2001.

Charlie's Angels. Dir. Joseph McGinty Nichol. Perf. Cameron Diaz, Lucy Liu, Drew Barrymore. Columbia Pictures, 2000.

Cox, David. "Are Female Action Heroes Good Role Models for Young Women?" Film Blog. The Guardian, 12 Dec. 2013. Web. 20 Sept. 2014.

Desperate Housewives. Dir. Marc Cherry. Perf. Teri Hatcher, Felicity Huffman, Marcia Cross, Eva Longoria. ABC Domestic Television, 2004-2012.

The Expendables. Dir. Patrick Hughes. Perf. Sylvester Stalone, Jason Statham. Millennium Films, 2014. Film.

Gossip Girl. Dir. Josh Schwartz. Perf. Blake Lively, Leighton Meester. Warner Bros. Television, 2007-2012.

Lara Croft: Tomb Raider. Dir. Simon West. Perf. Angelina Jolie. Paramount Pictures, 2001.

Lucy. Dir. Luc Besson. Perf. Scarlett Johansson, Morgan Freeman. Europacorp., 2014.

Resident Evil. Dir. Paul Anderson. Perf. Milla Jovovich, Michelle Rodriguez. Constantin Film, 2002.

Sex and the City. Dir. Michael Patrick King. Perf. Sarah Jessica Parker, Kim Cattrall, Cynthia Nixon, Kirsten Davis,. HBO Films, 2008.

Transformers. Dir. Michael Bay. Perf. Shia LaBeouf, Tyrese, and Josh Duhamel. Paramount Pictures, 2007. DVD.

*Dashes and Dichotomy: Voices in Emily  
Dickinson's Poetry*

**Emily Willis**

I cannot live with You –  
It would be Life –  
And Life is over there –  
Behind the Shelf

The Sexton keeps the Key to –  
Putting up  
Our Life – His Porcelain –  
Like a Cup –

Discarded of the Housewife –  
Quaint – or Broke –  
A newer Sevres pleases –  
Old Ones crack –

I could not die – with You –  
For One must wait  
To shut the Other's Gaze down –  
You – could not –

And I – could I stand by  
And see You – freeze –  
Without my Right of Frost –  
Death's privilege?

Nor could I rise – with You –  
Because Your Face  
Would put out Jesus' –

That New Grace

Glow plain – and foreign  
On my homesick Eye –  
Except that You than He  
Shone closer by –

They'd judge Us – How –  
For You – served Heaven – You know,  
Or sought to –  
I could not –

Because You saturated Sight –  
And I had no more Eyes  
For sordid excellence  
As Paradise

And were You lost, I would be –  
Though My Name  
Rang loudest  
On the Heavenly fame –

And were You – saved –  
And I – condemned to be  
Where You were not –  
That self – were Hell to Me –

So We must meet apart –  
You there – I – here –  
With just the Door ajar  
That Oceans are – and Prayer –  
And that White Sustenance –  
Despair –

Emily Dickinson's poetry is famously resistant to interpretation. She is a prolific and accomplished poet; meaning seems to be at the tips of your fingers when it, taking on a life of its own, twists away and disappears. Dickinson summarises this herself: "wonder is not quite knowing, but not quite knowing not." I shall look more closely at the poem *I Cannot Live With You*, exploring the range of interpretations applicable, and shall conclude that the truth of Dickinson's poem seems to reside in nowhere, in a truthlessness.

*I Cannot Live With You* is traditionally thought of as expressing romantic longing for a forbidden love. Some have argued that the Master Letters reveal sorrowful longing for a married man named Thomas Higginson. Perhaps the poem could have this autobiographical connotation, particularly if an emphasis is placed on the second and final words of the first line: "cannot" and "You". "I could not die-with You-" (13) suggests that simultaneous death would be impossible but so would living alone after love is gone. This agony of division is made explicit where she says "That self- were Hell- to Me" (44).

However, the poem has a strong religious connotation; might not the "He" in the poem be attributed to God? Although we are not sure what God means to Dickinson. The sexton seems to be oppressive and imprisoning: he keeps the key which stops her from marrying her loved one. The issue of division which recurs throughout the poem could reflect how, at the time of Darwin's *Origin of the Species*, Dickinson learnt about the arguments for and against creationism at Amherst College which seems to enter into her poem:

Because Your Face  
Would put out Jesus'-  
That New Grace  
Glow plain- and foreign" (22-25)  
and  
"You- served Heaven -... Or sought to-  
I could not-" (26-28).

This suggests an internal conflict and evolving belief system.

Ruddick argues that Dickinson's poem contains complicated synaesthesia, (where an impression which would elicit a reaction in one sense elicits a reaction in others too which either unites or divides the senses). He argues some phrases appear to be synesthetic but can also be seen as ambiguous metaphors, arguing "the sophistication with which she manipulates [synesthetic images] has almost no parallel in poetry in English" (60).

Whilst this may be true, I argue it is Dickinson's manipulation of images through her use of pronouns and punctuation, which is key to unravelling meaning. "Nor could I rise- with You-/ Because Your Face/ Would put out Jesus" (21-24), can also imply the masculine connotations of religious tradition and its role in enforcing patriarchy. "That self- were Hell to Me-" (44) takes on an aggressive tone – as does the phrase "To shut the Other's gaze down-" (15), which is an active, domineering verb, suggesting an element of conquest. Who is Other? Dickinson brings issues of gender to the fore in this poem, or rather drags the reader beneath the surface to delve among them, despite Bloom's assertions to the contrary. "Behind the Shelf-" (4): the dash suggests the issue is either unnoticed or unspoken, as she has been cut off, yet it is there, though inaccessible. There are echoes of this twenty years later when Woolf uses the metaphor of the "attic room," a secret space which women need to occupy to call their own. By emphasising the word "with" in the first line, we see gender segregation as imposed by the dashes, interrogating the connotations of equality of the word "with". "We must meet apart-/ You there- I- here-" (45-6) and "I- condemned to be/ Where You were not" (42-3) physically separates male and female, whilst "White Sustenance-" (49) could connote a colourless world where women must play the virgin bride, aligning marriage with "Despair-" (50). This seems particularly relevant when compared with the poem

a solemn thing - it was -I said-

a woman- white- to be-

and wear- if God should count me fit-

her blameless mystery-

To meditate for a moment upon "mystery," I turn to Abbott, who argues poetry's primary function is as a narrative gap – "whole worlds which the writer asks

the reader to actualise or leave as possibilities” (50). Certainly, this “Door Ajar” (47) in Dickinson’s poem connotes glimpses not only of possibilities in the future for women, but other interpretations also, resisting stereotypical inscription. The dashes in the poem function as literal narrative gaps, as though some text which could allow us to fully understand the poem is missing. We do not know how much time is supposedly to have elapsed between the dash and the next phrase, or whether the dash is intended to show that the phrases are unconnected. Indeed, Crumbley says dashes in Dickinson’s poetry function as a “network of discourses interrogating culturally determined voices” (12). Not only this, but the speaker refuses any one part of themselves.

Could not the “You” and the “I” in the poem be two different sides of the same person? After all, Dickinson’s poems illuminate the paradoxical nature of existence. The pronouns “We” and “Us” always appear capitalised, emphasising the whole being as on the same level as God. This is undercut through the dashes to create different personas. “Behind the Shelf-” (4) with this reading would seem an inaccessible place, defying self-comprehension. “Old Ones crack-” (12) implies how time effects the person we are. “To shut the Other’s gaze down-” (15) then seems a battle for which persona reigns the mind. “Because You saturated Sight-” (33) gives a sense either of tunnel vision or blindness and the phrase “That self were Hell to Me” (44) would then make more sense, although we are not sure to which self she refers. The dashes also literally create this effect. The dash at the end of “And you were lost – I would be-” (37) means the next line does not necessarily refer back. I am reminded of Derrida’s famous phrase as an author, “I renounce my present life in order to make myself known,” “only a power of speech can have a father.” Dickinson shows us how the unspoken dashes on the page can function as signs: she says “a pen has so many inflections and a voice but one” (Letter 559).

Her poems can be deceptively simple, particularly when they were first published and the dashes were omitted and sections of her poetry censored. This “epistemic violence”, to borrow a phrase from Spivak, turned Dickinson into the object society perceived women to be, by belittling her poetry and disturbing its complexity, and by implying that she was ignorant of proper grammar.

Another, but by no means final, interpretation comes to mind, born from this. Dickinson introduces the phrase

though My Name

rang loudest

on the Heavenly fame- (38-40).

Kohler argues that “Emily Dickinson in her person could not be equal to Emily Dickinson in her poetry” (811). The poems seems to give voice to this disparity between ordinary life and the art created by her poetry. It is almost as if Dickinson was a vessel between original thought and the finished product, which left her not fully understanding her poetry or herself, nor if they were one and the same entity. Mediating on the nature of art, “White Sustenance” (49) could connote paper, and the need to write, whilst “Despair-” (50) can fuel good poetry, but it is a bleak sustenance. However, at the same time this interpretation is undercut by earlier verses, and by the dash at the end of the previous line, severing this continuity of thought and making us question whether the word “Despair-”(50) can be connected with “White Sustenance”(49).

All or none of these interpretations may be at work in the poem. Dickinson’s relationship with truth in her poetry, about both herself and wider issues, is perhaps best summed up in her own words:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant —

Success in Circuit lies

Too bright for our infirm Delight

The Truth's superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased

With explanation kind

The Truth must dazzle gradually

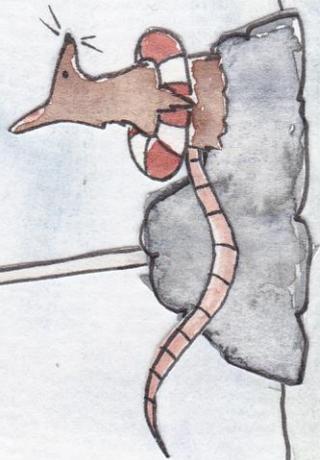
Or every man be blind —

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# Creative Writing

DEEP  
WATER



'DON'T WORRY MOUSE,' SAID WHALE  
'SOMETIMES EVEN I'M SCARED OF  
THE  
DEEP WATER'

•• Eleanor Bridger

-

## Molly Bell

You clamber  
over the  
sand,  
stumbling  
into  
every sunken  
footprint  
you surpass.

Fragile fugitive,  
stumble on.

here  
I await you.  
on this  
line;  
the furthest  
extension  
of your  
chains.

the bones of  
this beach  
will tear  
your frail  
skin.

so just lie,  
humble  
at my  
feet,

expel  
imposturous  
sand with  
jealous tongue.

cling to the  
curvature of

an ankle,  
encircle every  
toe.

a brief  
embrace  
beneath an  
ashen captor.

salt shadow,  
scent of moist sand.

# *Rhapsody for a Convinced Hypochondriac*

**Marta Donati**

Monsieur Martin lived in Paris,  
had a house and a cat  
and multiple postcards  
because Monsieur Martin  
did not visit places  
but places went to him,  
and thanks a lot.

Monsieur Martin had a looking glass,  
intact, without fail  
and a veil of superstition filled  
his favourite place.

The place was the bathroom, in case  
you haven't guessed where  
Monsieur Martin used to spend  
most of the hours of his day.

Monsieur Martin had a job  
in an office (Rue de la Santé),  
filled with people (such a restless nasty mob),  
noise, cups of coffee and useless poise.

Monsieur Martin loathed his colleagues.  
Leagues of boring men  
Healthy, rich and powerful dads.

"What a pain!" said  
Monsieur Martin one day  
To his cat, Loulou.  
He did not talk about  
His wretched job  
But, poor thing, with a sob  
He massaged his leg.

Was it not different in shape  
today, Loulou? It looked  
black, or perhaps a vague  
shade of white? Maybe not.  
Green, indeed, was his complexion.  
Green his leg as well,  
he could tell from his face  
in the looking glass.  
“I will run to the doctor, Loulou,  
with great rush!” said Monsieur Martin,  
while a flush of red  
coloured his cheeks.  
“Doctor, I think I have something  
really bad,” he said.  
“My leg turned white, or maybe a little  
red. Pardon, green, I meant.  
I think I might be in serious  
Danger of death.”  
The doctor (Rue de Maladie)  
sent him home with an irritated look  
and a warning that he should  
stay there for a long time.  
He was going to lose no leg.  
“That’s fine,” thought Monsieur Martin  
“I was a little worried, but again  
it might have been a trick of the light.”  
“Hey,” said one of his colleagues  
the next day in Rue de la Santé,  
“You look a little pale, it seems.”  
“Do you really think so?” Monsieur Martin replied.  
“I may, you know, be ill, as usual.  
Yesterday, my leg turned green,  
It’s not unusual,”  
“The doctor said it’s serious,” he murmured.

“I’ll pray, but I’ll say goodbye today.  
We don’t even know if we’ll be here  
tomorrow.”  
Alas, poor Monsieur Martin, what a fright!  
But he didn’t die.  
It must have been another trick  
Of the light.  
You see, Monsieur Martin had freckles, yes.  
Sometimes, when he had time to pass,  
he observed his nose  
in the looking glass.  
A curvy, small, apparently innocent  
little thing, he thought  
that probably hides unknown threats  
under its confusing appearance, and there’s more.  
It seemed to him that one  
of his freckles had become  
bigger and bigger, you know?  
Now, in the looking glass, he could see  
things clearly, crystal clear,  
and his heart filled with cold fear.  
“Surely it’s something serious,” he said to  
Loulou, who sat on the floor, wondering  
what she had to do.  
“See? This little dot here, on my nose  
will spread and kill me in no time  
if we don’t find out the cause.”  
What then? He ran to the doctor,  
fast, in Rue de Maladie, leaving  
the looking glass to Loulou.  
“Doctor, I have a terrible illness of the skin!  
Do you see me? I’m too thin  
to be totally healthy, honestly.”  
The doctor said nothing, but

with an exasperated touch  
led him towards the door  
and shouted “Bye.”  
“What, doctor, do you want me to die?”  
Monsieur Martin was very sad.  
Depressed, he spent the night  
hiding under the bed, afraid of  
the looking glass.  
He phoned work the next morning,  
announced his illness, without knowing  
its causes or its outcomes, to be honest.  
He was convinced,  
but after a while (a week or so, in which  
he didn’t die)  
he thought that, for God’s sake,  
sometimes it’s good  
that illnesses are fake.  
At least, he found some good excuses  
finally  
to skip his job.  
“So nice to be an hypochondriac,” he said  
to himself, lying on his bed, “and that  
Is a quality of mine!” he thought.  
He never felt so fine  
thanks to an illness  
in his entire life.

# *Fragments*

**Christopher Donoghue**

See them.

Think they're so clever, but I see them, hear them. Filthy lips spewing endless lies.

They say things, words, think I can't hear them, but I listen, always, always listening.

The silence. Speaks to me. Tells me things.

Light bulbs are bright, until you break them.

Others don't see silence, they don't see *him*.

No.

Comes to me when I scream. Feel its words in my chest. Tried to find them, but the others stopped me.

Where my shoes? Did they eat them too?

The creatures, keep me company, they like me, they like me. Like me. They taste of sadness. Crunchy.

Silver fish swim softly through a serene stream. Lies. *They* make me say it. All lies.

Saw them fall once. Life dripped all over the stairs. The others pointed at me. Came and stabbed me with their daggers. Curfew came early.

Faces in the night. Look through me. Can't reach them.

She sings to me sometimes. Her words are not lies. I know her, but they won't let me know her, so I forget.

The others know my name, refuse to tell me. They open their mouths and lie to me. But I know, I know.

Why won't they tell me?

Do they know? How could they? No, not possible, is it?

Shake the tree and leaves will fall.

See others. Staring. Think we're strange. They're the strange ones, not us, no no no, not us.

Wire walls.

Gave me new coat. Warm. Like it. Always hugging ourself, but can't open doors anymore.

My window is broken. Can't see through now. Same thing all the time. Concrete.

Bed. I like bed. Soft. Won't let me have sheets. Don't know why. I like bed.

Need new clothes. Wear same thing all day, every day, all day. Don't even like blue. I take them off, but they put them back on every time. Says it's rude. They're jealous.

I had a friend once. Miranda. Gone now though. Don't know where. I still write her letters. Hope she likes them. I miss Miranda.

Need a shower, smell really bad. Is it us, or is it neighbour again?

Used to have nice neighbours, dead ones. Saw one jump out of window. Didn't go very far. Their new scarf got caught. They just looked at me. I waved. They didn't wave back.

Got new neighbour now. Very loud. Shouts a lot. Something about aliens. How ridiculous.

Met an alien once. Said they were a doctor, but I knew. Stuck things in me. Hurt.

Doctors don't hurt people. Make them better. That why I know he was an alien.

Only aliens do things like that.

And crazy people.

But never met one of those.

Don't get to eat out much anymore. Far too busy.

People to see. Places to go.

Don't get to do much of that either. Too busy.

Busy, always busy.

That's what she used to say. Never had time for her, she said. Always working.

Got time now. But not got her.

Went for a walk. Can't go very far. Still like walking though.

Went to my favourite tree. I like that tree. Called Leopold. They're German.

When wind blows, they tell me secrets. Things about the *others*. Makes me laugh.

Told me story once. Story about their brother. Can't remember brother's name.

Said when they were younger, they met a talking horse. After long discussions, horse ate Leopold and brother. In horse's belly they met others like them. Like them, but not like them. Different, but the same. Introduced each other and talked to pass time. New belly friends were not from same place as Leopold and brother. They from France. Spent long time in horse's belly. More and more new friends arrived all the time. Got very crowded. After long time, horse's belly started to rumble. One by one, new belly friends started disappearing. Then Leopold was taken away from the rest. Wasn't long and then Leopold came shooting out of horse's arse. Landed on the ground and they've been here ever since. Never saw brother again.

Good story, but was sad ending. Don't like sad endings. Like Leopold though.

Spent long time with favourite tree this time. Was there long enough to see sun die. Was very pretty. Got very cold then though. Couldn't see where to go either. Almost walked into Leopold on way back to room.

Surprised no one came to find me. Usually do when I been gone too long. Maybe they don't care anymore?

Did I do something bad?

Don't like it when people mad at me.

Better be good for a while. Maybe they forgive me then.

Who's Miranda?

My room nice. Not great, but nice.

Favourite part is my chair. Very comfortable. Like to sit and pretend I'm not here.

That's only pretend though.

What I do most of time in chair is talk to shadows.

Very interesting things they are. Tell me all kind of silly things.

Others come in and see me talking to shadows and think I'm strange.

I tell them they being very rude, ignoring all the shadows, but they don't listen.

Tried introducing them to shadows once, didn't work. Their loss, not mine.

Shadows are my friend. Always.

Chicken for dinner. Think it was chicken? Can never tell. Always tastes same. Most of time looks same too. All boring, no colour, no fun.

Miss the food I used to eat. That was fun, colourful, not boring.

Used to eat all kinds of animals. Can't remember most of them.

My favourite was cow.

She used to like deer, with potatoes and gravy. She used to make such good food.

The food here nothing like hers.

Cook here really bad. Probably don't know how to boil eggs. Useless.

Food time can be noisy. People everywhere.

Don't like going to food time. Don't like people.

Have to make lines to get crap called *food*. Sit in the corner away from everything. Quieter there.

Get in, get out, quick as possible. Back to room. Nice, quiet, room. Back to chair.  
Favourite chair.

Others come sometimes. Take me to cold room. Cold chair, cold table, cold. Not like my room.

Make me sit on uncomfortable chair while they talk. Think they talking to me. Don't pay much attention most of time.

Don't like going alone so take some shadows too. Make me feel better. Have someone to talk to.

Sometimes they make me listen. Make me answer. Write things down on paper. Can't see what they write. Ask them to show me. Say it's not important. If not important, why write it down?

Always lying to me. Think something going on.

Sometimes they ask about her. Then I listen. Don't always know what to say. But still listen.

Want me to remember. But cant. Don't know how. Don't want to.

Give me things, makes me remember. Don't like it, hurts.

Nice sometimes though. Let's me see her face again.

Long pretty red hair. Wavy like the sea.

Not been to beach in long time.

Her skin so pale, but so perfect. Like Fine china.

Used to have china dinner set. Don't know where it went. Will have to find some day.

Eye's blue like sky. No. Bluer than sky. Like sapphires. Yes.

Ring! Always used to wear ring on finger. Gold and sapphire ring, was her favourite. Lost now.

Her smile. Miss her smile. Had such nice smile.

Makes me sad when I forget. Say this time I won't, but forget that I forgot and then lose her again.

Always forgetting things. Not even memories want to be my friend. Got other friends though.

What I forget? Can't remember what was talking about? Probably not important.

Went to painting class again. Like painting. Relaxing. Can escape boring place for while. Can go wherever I paint.

Not very good, so don't go very far. The colours nice though. Feel more alive looking at colours on things than do sat in boring white room.

Tried taking colours to boring white room. Wouldn't let me. Made me go back to boring room early.

Didn't mind really. Got to go back to favourite chair and talk to friends again.

Letter came back. Was another one I sent to her. Said "Return to Sender" on front.

No wonder they not getting to her. Whoever "*Sender*" is, it not her. Why they being given to *Sender*, not her?

Knew something was going on. Now they stealing my letters too. Just want to talk to her again.

Asked shadow friends what to do. They no help though. Just want talk about silly things.

Had nice conversation with one about cheese though. Didn't know shadows liked cheese so much.

This one's favourite cheese come from goats.

Apparently, long time ago, they used to go to forest where they come from and jump on first goat they saw. Used to ride it through forest slapping its arse and tapping its horns until it stopped, stood up on two legs and started talking. Then, they would ask for some of its cheese. Reluctantly the goat agreed every time, just to get shadow to go away.

Seemed like lot of effort to get some cheese. Worth it through apparently. Very tasty.

Shadows are funny sometimes. That's why I like them. They not boring like others.

Don't know why I'm here. Never known. One day, was just here.

Thought about it a lot. Tried remember how I got here.

Sometimes see pictures of walking in front gate. Images of her on other side of gate, just staring.

Don't know if pictures in head real or imagined. If they even me at all?

Ask others about it. Why I here? How I get here?

Others say I here to keep me safe. Safe from what? From who?

From her?

No no no. That not true. Can't be. Can it?

No no no, of course not. She is nice, caring, pretty. She wouldn't want hurt me. Would she?

No no no. Must be another explanation.

Maybe I did something bad? Maybe I here to keep her safe from me? What did I do?

That can't be true. Wouldn't hurt her. Miss her. Would never hurt her. Never. Would I?

No no no, I wouldn't.

Must be another answer. One they not tell me. Why they lie to me? Knew something going on. They keep lying to me. They hiding something. But what?

Need find out. Where to look?

When they write things on papers when ask me things, they put paper in thin books. See lots of others carrying thin books around all time.

There is room though, where others go in with thin books but come out with nothing. That room must be where they keep all answers, secrets, things we not supposed to know.

How to get in there though? It got special number lock on door. Don't know numbers.

Even if did, wouldn't know what to look for. Must be lots of books in room, don't know which one mine.

Need think of something.

Asked shadows if they know special numbers or what need look for in room, but they just dance around room and talk about cats.

Normally would sit and listen to shadows stories and talk to shadows, but need to get in room and find truth.

Went to Ivan, he like me, person trapped here by others. Ivan notices things some people don't normally see. Pays attention to little things. Things like numbers. Things like special number for door to truth room.

Ivan one of few people here that actually like, most are strange and weird, but Ivan nice enough. Better than others for sure.

Was lucky. Ivan did know special numbers. Saw others push buttons on the door and then door open. Ivan memorised buttons. Made him feel better. Thought if numbers opened one door, maybe could open others, but never got to test theory.

Six eight zero three. Special numbers to room of truth.

Need make plan fast. Don't want to forget numbers, forget plan, forget everything.

Need know truth.

Went to favourite tree again to think. Things seem much clearer in head under tree.

While sitting, saw eight legged creature crawling on floor. There a person who very scared of thing with lots of legs. Really easily scared. Scream for hours if even hear talk about one.

Gave me idea. Take eight legged creature to scared person and use to distract other.  
Might work. Might not. Could only try.

Managed to catch “legs”, what I named it, in hands. Ran back to room and waited for food time.

Time comes, go to food room like normal, but don’t get food. Sit and wait for scared person to get theirs.

See them on other side of room, already eating food.

Check if “legs” alright and go over to scared person and drop “legs” on top of food.

Walked quickly away from them.

Doesn’t take them long to find “legs”. Plan worked perfectly.

Starts screaming really loud and throwing things all over. Made other people start screaming too. Worked better than thought.

Others appear from all over. Take chance to go to special door. Maybe all others will be distracted enough not to notice me. Only chance, have to take it.

Get to special door and look at buttons. What was numbers? No no no, can’t forget, no, not now!

No no, got it, six, eight, zero, three.

Door makes noise and opens. Did it, did it, made it into truth room. Now to find answers.

Room full of big grey blocks with handles. Paper all over room. Messy.

Waste no time. Start pulling on handles and find lots and lots of thin books. All have names.

Ivan, James, Kevin, Laura, Miranda. Miranda. Know that name. That *her* name!

Why her name on thin book? She not here, she gone.

Grab book and open it. Start reading words on paper.

“Miranda Fielding, AgeL 34, Patient #3579, Diagnosis: Unknown.”

Keep reading. Don't understand most of words, sound too complicated, but few things in there I recognise.

On papers in book are questions and answers that others had asked *me*, but why they in Miranda's book?

Also, says Miranda lives in room number 53, but that my room. Miranda don't live in my room, I live in my room, with shadows, but no Miranda.

Keep reading more and more things that I remember. Things I said to others, things they said to me, but why those things in Miranda's book?

Don't know what to do. Know I'm not Miranda. Can't be. I'm here and Miranda gone, she gone.

Know I'm not her, I'm... I'm... Who am I?

Why don't I know?

I should know. I'm me, always have been.

Why don't I know?

I'm, I'm...No, can't be, no no no, not possible.

I can't be her, can't be, no.

I went away, she went away, she, not me, no.

Not her, me, I'm not her, she's not me, can't be.

But.

What if I am her?

What if she never went away?

What if she's not gone?

What if I forgot I'm her?

What if all the words are true and I am Miranda?

Don't know. Don't know. Don't know.

Miranda...

Gone.

Not Gone.

Here.

With me.

Was me.

Is me.

Me.

Miranda...

# *Memeza*

**Tarah Farrer**

They had imprisoned us in a tiny room in the village centre, among the other young girls.

No one knew where we were going – only that they wanted to avoid the bad men with their gritty spears. I could imagine a spear like that making a piercing screech as it cut through innocent flesh, like grating iron against copper.

I looked down at my own copper bracelet. Only royalty of our tribe were allowed to wear this type of jewellery. I always found it incredible that tribal Kings would see copper as a symbol of power, when it was so easily bent and broken.

And discoloured.

I looked around the stinking, packed room. Fear was almost toxic, making the prisoners sweat even more, and the lack of windows made standing the heat even harder.

I looked at girls who had to be around my age, maybe twenty. Older sisters were clutching younger ones to their chest, cooing sweet words. Trying to be brave. Trying to grow years in minutes.

Where was my great family now? Who was I but alone? I had never felt so weak or so far from home.

No one asked questions, so no one could answer mine. Every now and again I'd catch one of the girls looking at me warily, as if I was still that unapproachable princess. What a lie, I was wearing the same rags as them.

“Mamma?!” I shouted into the crowd. I knew it was useless, but I had to check. “Mamma!” I screamed, hoping the walls were thin. Hoping the adults would rush in and hug me and tell me they had one and it was all over.

“Mamma!” A voice answered me across the hall. A much younger girl, her cheeks so swollen from beatings that they squashed what would have been beautiful eyes into slits no bigger than almonds.

Then others joined in. “Mamma! Mamma!” They shouted, completely out of unison. Like a cry to the heavens. Some screamed and some sobbed, the wailing so loud it was deafening. Crying wasn’t making any of us feel better.

Some people would think this shouting would unite us. I could wallow in self pity with other girls now, after all.

Instead I slumped further into the walls, bringing my knees up. I simply watched the anarchy unfold.

There was no point of ‘memeza’ – of shouting.

It was just me and my God now.

# *A Big Event*

**James Fellows**

“You wouldn’t mind giving it a read, would you?” Jason asked anxiously.

“No I don’t mind at all,” Robert replied smiling. “I’d be happy to.”

“Thanks.” Said Jason.

He picked up the sheets of A4 paper from his desk.

“It’s not finished yet, I just wanted you to tell me if it makes sense and everything, that’s all.”

He leant over and handed the pages to Robert, then sat back in his swivelling office chair.

Robert tapped the paper straight on his lap and started reading from the first page.

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*The barbed-wire fence runs along the edge of an overgrown field. The wooden posts are old and rotten. They blow back and forth in the wind, pulling at the rusty barbed-wire. Tufts of sheep’s wool hang in odd places on the fence and swing rigid, like stiff triangles of bunting. The rusty squeak of the fence can be heard from far off, it tickles the air and grows louder when the wind blows stronger.*

*The grass is combed flat by the wind. A million green spears point toward a white house at the foot of the field. Walking up from the house, against the direction of the wind and grass, is a young boy and his dog.*

*The boy’s hair is a dark shade of ginger, like copper wire. His face is pale apart from the light freckle clusters on each of his cheeks. He wears a baggy grey hoody and a pair of old jeans. The dog walking beside him is a classic black and*

*white border collie. Hyperactive and twitchy, it loves running through the field, chasing the pheasants that spring up wildly from the grass.*

*As they walk together, the boy strikes the fence with a thick ruler-length stick and metal clangs roll up the field. The dog gazes at the stick with anticipated eyes, eyes that beg the boy to throw it. The boy looks down at the dog and tauntingly waves the stick in its face. It waggles like a metronome needle and the dog's head follows it. The boy holds the stick loosely at one end and lobs it toward the middle of the field. It somersaults away and the dog bolts after it; shoulders hunched and nose thrust forward.*

*The dog sails through the grass until it finds the stick. It picks it up, rushes back to the boy and offers it up to him. The boy picks the stick from the dog's mouth, it is warm and moist with drool.*

*The boy's name is Jason, and the dog's name is Sam. They are two young farmers on their land. They saunter through the field together, heading towards its centre. Jason lifts his knees up high, so he can traverse the tall grass and Sam follows closely behind him. They'll be out in the field until it gets dark, or at least until mum shouts Jason in for dinner.*

*They walk through the grass until they approach a deep patch of nettles. Jason steams straight through them, fiercely swiping at their zigzagged heads with his shins. Sam knows better than to follow him, she walks around the nettles, keeping well clear of their caustic sting. She was stung on the paw when she was a pup and Jason had rubbed a dock leaf over it until her foot was a light pea green. She links up with Jason on the other side of the nettles and they carry on walking.*

*Jason sees a plastic bathtub in the centre of the field. His dad had dug it into the ground and used it as a water trough for the sheep. Once over, there were rams*

*and ewes gathered around it, supping up dirty-green water. But the sheep had been sold months ago and Jason's dad had drained the trough.*

*When Jason nears the tub he throws the stick back towards the barbed-wire fence for Sam. While she disappears, he jumps inside the bathtub. Its warm, sheltered from the wind, a cosy white incubator. He stares up at the noiseless sky above him. It's thick with a cream of overcast cloud that moves along almost unnoticeably. He looks down at the edge of the bathtub. A thin skin of algae runs around the rim. It grows darker toward the tub's bottom and at the plughole it is a solid army green. Jason stares at the plughole for a few moments, then closes his eyes. He prays that he'll never have to leave the farm.*

*He hides in the tub while Sam hunts for the stick. She finds it, picks it up and turns around expecting to see Jason, but he isn't there. Her eyes fold into worry and she scans the field looking for him. She trots back toward the bathtub, confused and concerned. The stick falls from her mouth and she starts barking.*

*She barks as loud as she can. Hoping that Jason will hear. After her third or fourth cry she sees a grey blob sprout up from the bathtub. She pauses and the blob disappears back down. She bounds over and pokes her head over the rim of the tub and finds Jason crouching down inside. She jumps away and celebrates her victory by spinning around in wild circles. Jason hops out of the bath and scratches her roughly on the head, telling her how "clever" she is. He turns round and starts running away from her toward the bottom corner of the field. She clicks into sheepdog mode and chases after him, nibbling at his heels as he runs.*

*They run to the iron gate in the corner of the field. The ground near the gate has been tightly compacted into a dense dirt-concrete by tractor tyres. Jason runs toward the red plough that has been dumped next to the gate. He jumps onto the steel girder that supports the plough blades and balances along it. Sam watches him as he tip toes from one end to the other.*

*He jumps off and lands on the ground with a safe thud. A voice calls his name from the farmhouse. He stops, listens, then runs toward it. He climbs over the*

*metal gate, Sam slides through a gap between the gate and the ground and they both speed toward the house. Jason's eyes water in the wind.*

*He rushes through the door, he feels hot and drained. He walks to the kitchen and sees his mum standing by the cooker. Steel saucepan lids bubble gently on the hob.*

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Robert smiled at the last sentence. He placed the page on his lap and looked across the small dorm room. Jason leant forward in anticipation.

“So what do you think?” He asked.

Robert stretched his back and spread his arms out by his sides.

“I really like it.” He said.

Jason relaxed back in his chair and breathed a sigh of relief. He'd managed to stay completely silent while Robert was reading.

“Not a lot happens though,” Robert said, as he handed the pages back.

“Yeah I know” Jason said quickly.

“That's how I wanted it.”

He took the pages from Robert and rearranged them back into order. He set them down on his desk and picked up a mug of tea.

“*Oh-kay*” Robert crescendoed.

“*I see what you mean. Realism, yeah?*”

Jason took a drink of lukewarm tea and looked at Robert.

“You're sure you liked it?” He asked.

“Yeah of *course* I like it.” Robert said reassuringly.

A tense pause rested between them.

“Like, you know, its just, not what *I* normally read.” Robert said.

“I think the present tense is... different, so I find it hard to follow.”

“Mm..” Jason nodded.

“But I like the description, and the characters and everything.”

Robert pulled his iPhone out of his pocket and replied to a text that he'd received while he'd been reading the story. Jason looked at him and thought about the comments; he turned his head and gazed out of his third floor window.

Damp autumn leaves were glued to the pavement. A blackbird hopped round the grass searching for twigs. Two girls were walking down a path, cuddling piles of books to their chests. Their scarves waved as they chatted to each other. Jason watched them until they disappeared round a corner. He gulped down the last mouthful of tea from his mug and turned back to Robert.

"Do you think I should add more drama?" He asked.

"I was going to, but I couldn't think of anything. Maybe the dog gets hurt or something like that, you know?"

Robert didn't answer.

"Maybe I need a break from it."

"That's a good idea," said Robert.

"You need something to give it more direction. Like a big event or something. Take a break, then have another go."

He didn't look up from his phone at all.

Jason nodded his head and stared out of the window. He thought to himself.

*What happens next?*

# *The Confession*

**Emily Gardner**

“I love you.”

If I could, would I go back and snatch those words out of the air before they reached his face? Is it true that if I had, everything would have carried on as it was before? No, no no, I am sure of that. Too many things had happened, too much had been set in motion for anything other than the truth. We faced each other in perfect symmetry. I searched his face for that look, the one that he always gave her, for a glint of confirmation in his wonderful eyes. For a second, half caught in the sun, half hidden by the shadows of the leaves above, I thought I caught a smile.

I held out my hands to him, but his were suddenly balled into fists, and I cried out in shock and pain as one of them struck me on the nose. He started weeping, and I hung back, one hand still held out to him, the other cradling the sharp sting in my nose that his blow had left behind. He stepped away from me slowly, shaking his head in disbelief, mouth torn into grotesque shapes of hurtful things which he never said. I stumbled over words as he stumbled back across the ground. My confession lay between us on the ground, bloodied by his sudden betrayal.

I was only going to warn him, that’s what I told myself. But warn him about what? Warn him that she was a liar and a cheat, that she would only let him down, that she didn’t and wouldn’t love him? Did I really believe that? Was I really trying to do what was best? Yes. Yes. Yes. I know that better than anyone. She has taken everything from me with her beauty and her laughter, and it was time that he knew, before she took him too. I wanted him to understand that it should have been me, me and him, just like it was before.

I don’t want to think about her, my sister, but the freckled child that she was slips through the cracks in my memory. She was mesmerising, even then. I can remember fields in France, her crushing through the snails which clung to the grass with bare feet, me failing to keep up. She turned around and laughed at me, golden

hair dazzled in sunlight. Then she was gone again, and I lumbered after her; faithful, kind, ugly Anna. She kissed and teased me at the end, brushed through the knots in my mousy hair with her tiny fingers.

“It was only a game!” she said.

My heart is breaking, and its ashes leave my mouth in a stream of sobs and apologies. I want to explain, but my time is up, so instead I shout nothings, I beg, I crawl on my knees. He was the only thing that I ever truly wanted, and he is disgusted by me. He always was. How stupid of me to think that I could rob her of her final victory.

He turns and walks away from me. The sudden wind howls with her silent laughter. But I will chase the sunlight no more.

# *Khala Ama*

**Noor Hemani**

They're all sitting on the bed, six women, sitting, kneeling, reclining, with the duvet twisted between them. Odd pillows and cushions are strewn, laid on and folded. The mismatched bed linen combines with the women's cotton shalwaar kameez' to create a haberdashery's pride of colour and pattern. Shabnam, Khadija and Sadaff, middle aged sisters and sister-in-law, sit together with their respective daughters, Miriam, Aleena and Shahida who are between the ages of fifteen and thirty.

The conversation in Shabnam's sparse and worn home, atop the double bed she usually shares with her husband, had started somewhat hesitantly. Back home, in their Aunt's house in Pakistan, the women had been closer just by virtue of the social dynamics they lived in. Here, in England, where they live apart, and where it is more normal to raise their respective families independently rather than together, the sisters rarely get the chance to spend time with one another. Their daughters, though having visited their motherland occasionally, are unused to this sort of gathering occurring with older family rather than friends of their own age. Miriam, just turned fifteen, struggles with her baggy shalwaar and gets a sympathetic smile from Shahida who is thirty, and unlike her younger cousins, is much more comfortable in South Asian dress.

There is a subtle sense of excitement that the daughters can feel emanating from their mothers, and it piques their curiosity enough to aid the conversation, helping the flow by speaking as best they can in Urdu, and engaging in small talk and discussing the wedding today. The mothers are smiling tentatively, all feeling some warm, safe energy tingling just underneath their skin that causes Khadija to shift and fidget with her dupatta. There is fear also, that makes the conversation halting at times, all three sisters recalling the days in their youth, back home, when to sit together like this, and laugh and dance and talk late into the night after they'd seen to the household chores, was what made the day worth it. But it used to come so easily,

and now they are afraid because what have they become if they cannot talk easily with their own sisters? What would their Aunt, Khala Ama, think?

Shabnam is the eldest by a couple of years and reclines against the headboard. Her daughter, Miriam, lays her head on her mother's knees in order to disguise her discomfort. Her Urdu is unsteady and she has to listen carefully to keep track of the conversation. Her mother, now carding her fingers through Miriam's hair, is a woman of large proportions: full bodied and curvy, with big hands, a circular face, wide eyes and a large nose and rough, sun-scarred skin. She will never be attractive - and neither has she ever been, but it is impossible not to like the sight of her. She smiles fondly as Khadija, her sister, and Sadaff, their sister-in-law, snark at one another in delight.

"You looked beautiful today, Sadaff," Khadija remarks casually from her reclined position at the end of the bed, propped up on one elbow. "But I'm sure I saw you wear that suit two years ago at Anjum's wedding." Aleena, Khadija's daughter, stares at her mother in mortification.

"Thank you," Sadaff says in an amicable tone, but with eyes narrowed at her mock adversary across from her, sensing a trap, "and what can I say? I don't believe in flinging money about without need." She gives Khadija a once over, eyes lingering teasingly over the clothes that are so obviously new.

"I thought it was," Khadija smirks, "I'm surprised it still fits. Did you have to open the seams?"

The room is alight with giggles, nervous on the part of the daughters, and unrestrained from Shabnam, for whom that feeling of energy has *bloomed*, and she remembers what it feels like to be at home with her family. Despite her loud laughter and her outward appearance, Shabnam exudes an air of calm but strong love. She has no need for the furious, enthusiastic energy that most describe their loves of any kind to be, to Shabnam, love has always been a gentle curl of warmth that she wraps around those she knows. Even when she fell in love with her husband after seven

years of marriage which she'd had no choice in, she'd been conscious of her slow, comfortable descent, and, praying in gratitude, she'd thought *at last!*

It is this confidence in her loving soul that convinces the younger women that all is well, and they begin to enjoy themselves.

“It fits well actually, just as it always has - but I'm surprised your sari didn't rip as you sat there tonight eating like a horse!” Sadaff smiles victoriously as the onlookers laugh unabashedly loudly. Khadija snorts and soon joins in. It has been a long time since these two women, so close in their youth, have had the opportunity to snark at someone without causing offence.

“Huh! It would take more than my eating. That seams in that blouse are sewn so well nothing could tear them! The stitching is the best I've seen in years - tailors don't have pride in their work like they used to.” Khadija's voice becomes stronger as she complains, and takes on a shrill tone. Aleena, who has suffered this complaint more times that she cares to remember, finds her phone and sets about ignoring the conversation around her.

“And the prices are awful too,” Shabnam sighs,

“The price!” Khadija exclaims, and, sensing her impending kick into this conversation, Aleena shifts uncomfortably. “Talk about the price! This one -” she gestures to Aleena, “spent £170 on a *single suit*, that she promised to wear for Eid as well as the shaadi, but instead went and bought *two more* when she decided it was too uncomfortable!”

“What?” Sadaff gasps, Shabnam echoing her shock.

“Baji!” Khadija cries, addressing Shabnam. Everything about Khadija is dramatic, from her loud voice, to her expansive gestures, and the way that she slaps her thigh whenever she laughs. Despite Khala Ama's repeated efforts to teach her differently, to make her act respectably, Khadija makes no attempt to quieten herself. She has the passion of a monsoon, both positive and negative, but little, if any,

sensitivity - though she feels genuine remorse if she truly upsets someone. “Baji, I don’t know. She just spends and spends!”

“Hang on,” Aleena interjects loudly, glaring at her mother and ignoring the smirks from everyone else, who are always entertained by the mother-daughter arguments now that they’re used to them. “I thought it was perfect! But it was so uncomfortable the first time I wore it at a party I couldn’t wear it again! And I got taken in by the saleswomen!”

“*Lo Bhai!*” Khadija sighs, still frustrated, “if your Khala Ama heard of this, she’d straighten you out.”

Shabnam and Sadaff chuckle at the mention of their Aunt, who in Pakistan had taken care of them while their mothers had worked exhausting hours to make money for food. Sadaff, though married into the family, had been distantly related and closely situated when they lived back home, and so was left in the woman’s care just the same. Khala Ama has been dead for twenty years but her memory is fresh in their minds, and sometimes, rather than their mothers, it is she who they can remember giving them the wisdom they would grow to use every day.

“The awful one?” Miriam asks, lifting her head and looking at her mother. Khala Ama is a regularly mentioned in the family - though usually when they’ve done something wrong. Shabnam taps her lightly on her shoulder in rebuke but her daughter is unconcerned by this.

“Don’t say things like that. She was a good woman.”

“Hhaaa! She would walk into a room, and if you were doing wrong you’d stop straight away to look at her. We couldn’t eat out of the pans or gossip about someone with her around, and the moment you started to she’d appear - I swear she could tell what you were thinking just by looking at you. Do you remember?” Khadija asks, her voice animated and emphasising words as though she were telling a story to children.

“How could we forget?” Sadaff laughs. “One look - *one glare* - and you felt punished and completely ashamed! Even the oldest men in the house! Although she punished *us* properly.” The women guffaw and the girls follow suit, but Shahida less so. Her mother is happier now, but Shahida knows she has never been a stranger to cruelty. After marriage her husband had taken his turn to show her unkindness that she didn’t deserve, and in Pakistan no one had tried to stop him.

“She would make you stand and would say, ‘Stand still as I turn your skin seven times,’ and she would!” The daughters’ mirth dies and their faces are disbelieving, still loosely holding onto grins which are now a little queasy. “She would pinch your skin,” Khadija is reenacting the actions with the air in front of her, seizing a large part of imaginary skin between her thumb and forefinger, “and *twist* seven times, using both hands so she never lost grip. She’d do it to your arm and sometimes your thigh!” The women are laughing harder now but their daughters are shifting uncomfortably. “We used to cry ourselves to sleep those nights,” Khadija tells them, her tone more hushed despite her smile. She looks somehow proud and amused, possibly at the disturbed looks of the daughters.

“Khala, didn’t anyone stop her?” Shahida asks.

“Stop her? No.”

Shabnam sits up and straightens her kameez which has gotten twisted. “No one would have thought to stop her, Khala Ama was well respected in the family - no one would dare. And besides, she took care of us much better than others might have,” she explains as though it makes sense. She silences Miriam’s protests with a gentle smile. “Where else could we have gone? Our mothers worked hard for hours on end, and Khala Ama was the only one who would take us in. She taught us how to cook and clean and sew. We were safe because of her, no one dared to mess with us, and our reputations and dignity were never in question - everyone knew that Khala Ama wouldn’t allow for anything to happen to us.”

“And she got free labour out of it,” Aleena gripes.

“And we got food, and shelter and clothes - no matter how poor we were. It was hard for us, yes, but she loved us too in her own way. Enough to share her home with us.” Sadaff’s voice is soft and soothing, but the girls find it incongruous with what she’s discussing. Khadija sighs, realising that they won’t understand - *can’t* understand.

“Well who would we complain to anyway?” She asks them, her matter-of-fact tone striking them as too flippant even after all these years. “Our mothers worked and couldn’t come home until late. And if we told them, we’d have to confess our wrongdoings - and our mothers would have cried if they knew we’d been hurt. And we didn’t want that, so we stayed quiet.”

There’s a pause in the room as the occupants process this to mixed degrees of success, but the sisters feel closer than ever.

Suddenly, Sadaff giggles. “Can you imagine if we told our mothers now? Or if we’d brought her over here?”

The women fall about laughing.

“They’d arrest her in minutes!”

“Throw away the key!”

Shabnam smiles. “She’d be ruling the jail in days,” she says quietly.

# *Apples to Apples*

**Cherelle Johannes**

I still remember my days as a young sapling, and the pale blue eggshell of the pot I was born in. A hairline crack crept down one side. Worn white daisies decorated the inside, several in the chain worn completely into faint lines of soft green. They were the only neighbours I had in my first weeks of life, sitting alone on the sill above the sink, watching my stronger cousins outside, already bare to the elements. I like to wonder what happened to those painted daisies, and what other stories they saw before my birth. But what happened to those old daisies is a tale that I cannot tell.

I remember best the careful fingers of the humans who nurtured me as a sprout. He had soft brown eyes the colour of loam, and a kind, wrinkled face. He would smile and sing when he fed me; the sweetest sound. She was rougher, with a habit of prodding my stem, sometimes soaking my soil a little too thoroughly. Still, I flourished under their combined care. When my roots began to press too insistently against the edges of my pot, she took great care in finding me a home. The hole for me to root myself in was dug in the very centre of the garden, with a wide berth between me and my—what seemed to me at the time—much larger, leafier cousins. I had been planted at a perfect time. I became accustomed to the bright green Spring of gentle winds and mild sunlight, with she from the house a regular visitor, still sprinkling water on me for good measure, caressing my waxy leaves and praying for me to grow big and strong. Then came the dear Summer, with heat and flowers bursting open all around; insects buzzing, the humans seated on blankets nearby. Cradling dewy-glassed beverages, they laughed. I grew more insistently than ever. I grew through the great rains that stubbornly continued their assault like an unwanted and overenthusiastic visitor. I resisted the tugging of other sprouts, and one season of great thirst.

Many Summers passed into the soft oranges and browns of Autumn, and I encountered the anger of fire for the first time. A violent storm passed as the leaves had turned, a storm with no rain, only root-trembling crashes and thunderous flashes of light. Small faces peered through the house-glasses, eyes wide with fear. I

stretched and groaned at the tearing wind. One of these lights strayed from the sky to collide with a swathe of sun-dried branches over the human-made barrier. I could only sense the trickles of smoke at first, putrefying the air, but soon enough the flames latched onto the crisp leaves of my sleepy sister. Searing, crackling heat filled the air and I watched my sister burn to ashes. The humans scuttled and cried as their barrier met its destruction in fiery tongues, too brittle and dead to resist. But it was too late for my sweet sister. Life must always return to the earth one way or another. Her remains swirled and settled and made new shoots rise greenly come Spring. New humans came and went. The scent of change hung in the air. I missed my daisy-pot.

The customary deep sleep of Winter came and I awoke refreshed for a new season of childish giggles, tiny squeaky wheels, open doors and the astringent stink of paint as my human of that time sat in a chair, smearing colours on canvas with a brush. Crude imitations of blossoms materialised on the white sheet, incomparable to the beauty of my cousins, who bloomed prettily around me; delicate, beautiful and breakable. I was more plain and more powerful, growing strong above them. I once almost recognised myself in the paint, though I was missing the whorls, dips, cracks and twigs; the sparks that make a living thing grow. An odd shape appeared in the grass one morning, which the humans entered one night, lighting a fire nearby and whispering excited tales to one another. A few leaves dropped and I recall rustling at them in fear. They paid no heed, but the next day the shape was gone. The danger had passed.

My cousins eventually settled in the shade of my leaves and white flowers that swelled with pink. Bees and other friendly creatures swarmed to see me and my family. Once, two human sprouts stood beneath my branches to declare their love for each other. A wobbly heart was etched into my bark. *CM for WJ*. I remembered them, but they did not return. I wonder if they remember me, or if I am just a memory of a moment once filled with love.

The human home was soon filled with children, crying and laughing and singing and playing in the grass, occasionally flattening a cousin with small, clumsy roots. Once, a sting from a cautious bee sent an energetic sprout hastening indoors, shrieking. The mother only laughed and tended her sprout with kisses. Love is the

best healer, but accidents happen. I remember the morning a hole was dug, severing my cousins from the family in lieu of an ugly mound in the earth. I looked on in confusion, my branches heavy with budding fruits. Panic tasted bitter. The humans scuttled about, sprouts roughly tended and crying as a sound, a piercing inorganic scream, filled the air. Into the little hole they fled. I waited. Not a breeze touched my branches, but my roots spread far and felt the earth tremble at impact like the enraged stomping of titans. The sky fell down in a fiery blaze along the treetops.

My dear fruits were taken from me, every one, by the humans. With ladders and shears I was plucked bare without a bud to spare. The sirens and screams echoed on, the horizon roaring and shuddering with every thunderous attack of fire and death. Sweet songs of feathered friends were rendered mute by the deafening chorus of ruin. Each morning new cries at static-filled announcements resonated home to home, hanging in the air like poison gas. I did nothing. I could do nothing.

And so, I remember looking on, helplessly, as the home of my humans was obliterated in a searing explosion of bricks, dust and flame. The siren that came too late shrieked uselessly against the sound of my humans' home crumbling around me. My cousins perished, ripped up and discarded under rocks and rubble. My former arrogance at being the strongest was mocked in the face of man-made fire; a simple melody overshadowed by the overwhelming refrain of war. The impact smashed me sideways and launched my broken limbs aside as though I were no more powerful or steadfast than a human rag doll.

Leaning I remained, bowed into submission by the powers unleashed upon me and my family. My roots could not— would not— be moved furthermore. The land recovered, after more distant destruction had run its course and the tears of the earth had dried up. I did not, however. My branches could no longer bear flowers nor fruit, so traumatised by the assault was I. The grounds where my humans had laughed and bathed in sunshine soon grew tall and proud once again; seeds were planted and new cousins lifted their soft, rosy, innocent heads. Another barrier was built around us. The sprouts began to play again, running shrieking circles around my trunk and hanging off of my lower branches, faces ruddy and dusty. They traced the old love heart and wondered aloud who *CM* and *WJ* were. If only I could tell them.

I overheard the parents one cool starlit evening, remembering that time when the sky fell down and jolted the roots of the very earth. They reminisced the stifling in their underground boxes and waiting for the fire to end. Hiding from the devastation while I looked on in despair. I remember a question.

“The old apple tree looks rather decrepit and bent. Probably hit by a bomb. Is it worth keeping it in the garden?”

# *Hemma*

**Sam Kaufman**

I am not one of them. I was not raised  
overlooking shiftless landscapes  
heeding little, fearing less, having gazed  
few times upon the penumbras  
who, with languid gestures, mould what we see.  
Instead I, ill-fitting, flounder,  
yet am enveloped willingly  
where kindness does not seek to shirk  
those who flit in, exist and start to fade.  
From this distance, it seems,  
I hold a light to the already visible  
and find them, still, and always present.

# *Blue*

**Lauren Maggs**

I never saw a man with such blue eyes  
blue blue eyes that can only see backwards  
see backwards and long for yesterday's blaze  
yesterday's blaze dampens, dims, darkened, dies

he rattles a ring around his finger  
the finger which always points to the o'clock  
it ticks and taps and tocks non-stop and on  
and on, he tries to stall, stay, stop, linger

each new day's first brief breath he tastes alone  
empty bed, mute rain, cold morning, mourning  
her, who returns with every thin beat  
and fills him with the loss of love flown

# *I Used to be Afraid of the Dark*

Leonora O'Hanlon

## **I used to be afraid of the dark.**

It used to haunt my sleep.

The heaviness of it would layer on top of me, pressing against my tired body.

I would think that I could taste the thick, liquid smoke of its blackness as I breathed.

And I would panic that it would drag me with it into the silence of the night and suffocate my vision until I was as blind as it was.

I would lay scrunched in my cocoon of bed covers and focus my muscles into a deep frown that would seal my eyes tight from the brutality of a blank darkness.

And I would hold my breath, hoping sleep would silently steal my consciousness so I could escape the terror of the night.

I couldn't help but listen, listen for the sound of it,  
waiting there.

And I could hear it.

The darkness.

I would hear the gentle crackle of its static.

As if it moved.

As if it moved...

Quick intake of breath...

And then listen...

Check with my ears where it was...

The humming static of the dark would grow, slowly, as if its breath was getting heavier, getting closer to my ears, to my body, to the quiet drum of my own pulse.

The silence would beat with the breath of the dark, and I was trapped, listening under the cloak of it.

So I would lay there and wait, paralysed by the obesity of the weight of the dark.

These were the nights of my childhood.

I thought that it only came for me, everyone else slipped so effortlessly into sleep without the fear of the darkness taking them.

But it would wait for me,

when I was alone,

when the light had gone,

when the silence thickened.

And I was stifled by its fog. The night was poisoned by the departure of light and I was afraid of its doom.

Sometimes, as I lay cocooned in my bed I heard it whisper and I would pull the covers tighter to muffle the sound.

The whisper of the dark would play with the tips of the hairs on my body, as if I were its prey. It would run a finger down my arm so that the fear would rise with my blood to the surface of my flesh.

These were the nights of my childhood.

I was afraid of the dark.

It became my cruel master and I would shudder under its presence.

I couldn't look upon its face, I would only allow the bottom of my lips to the tops of my lids free from the covers. My eyes sealed shut, so I couldn't see it move about my room.

As I lay sealed within my cocoon however, the dark brushed against my lips.

I felt its static shudder across my mouth and a tremble flew through my body until I gasped with the shock of it.

I accidentally breathed it in.

Eyes shot open,  
and I thought it had me.

The anger at losing my secret battle with the night tremored through my joints and I sat, bolted up.

I remained motionless for a while and stared directly into the blank blindness of the night.

I watched the fear I had kept wrapped around my body dance along the outline of my skin as if separate from me. I let it reach tentatively towards the boundaries of the dark room.

And I closed my eyes.

Nothing changed.

The same blackness.

I had lost myself within the darkness.

So I began to imagine myself.

I pictured myself stretching a hand into the blackness of my vision and I watched as I grasped the night between the tips of my fingers.

I stared as I pulled it firmly from the sky and draped its starry embroidery around my naked frame.

I wrapped myself in the dark so that it became my protector and I wore its cape as I walked back to bed.

My gait was confident from the fear I had draped myself with.

**I used to be afraid of the dark.**