



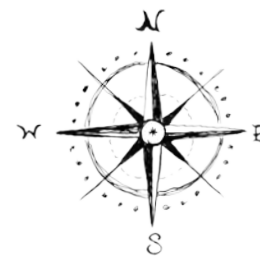
JOURNEYS



Issue 15

The Wells Street Journal
Issue 15

Journeys



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The following collection is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the named author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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ABOUT THE WELLS STREET JOURNAL

The *Wells Street Journal* is a London-based biannual literary anthology of poetry and prose run by the University of Westminster's Creative Writing: Writing the City MA students. Founded in 2014, it was aptly named after the street in which the department of English, Linguistics and Cultural studies was hosted.

Representing all ends of the globe, the journal's main impetus is to provide its readers—both nationally and internationally—with literary works that represent equality, diversity, and inclusivity. It achieves this by means of showcasing not only the talents of its own writers, but by sharing its platform with a collection of external writers with a wide range of experiences and locales.

This issue embraces the concept of Journeys in all its facets and interpretations. It is the fifteenth issue and fifth edition in print.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Over the last three months, we have not only met each other virtually for the first time, but have also managed to collaborate and produce an issue of *The Wells Street Journal* in its entirety. Not only have we been forced to rely on our (sometimes temperamental) internet connections, but also on one another, potentially more so than any other issue.

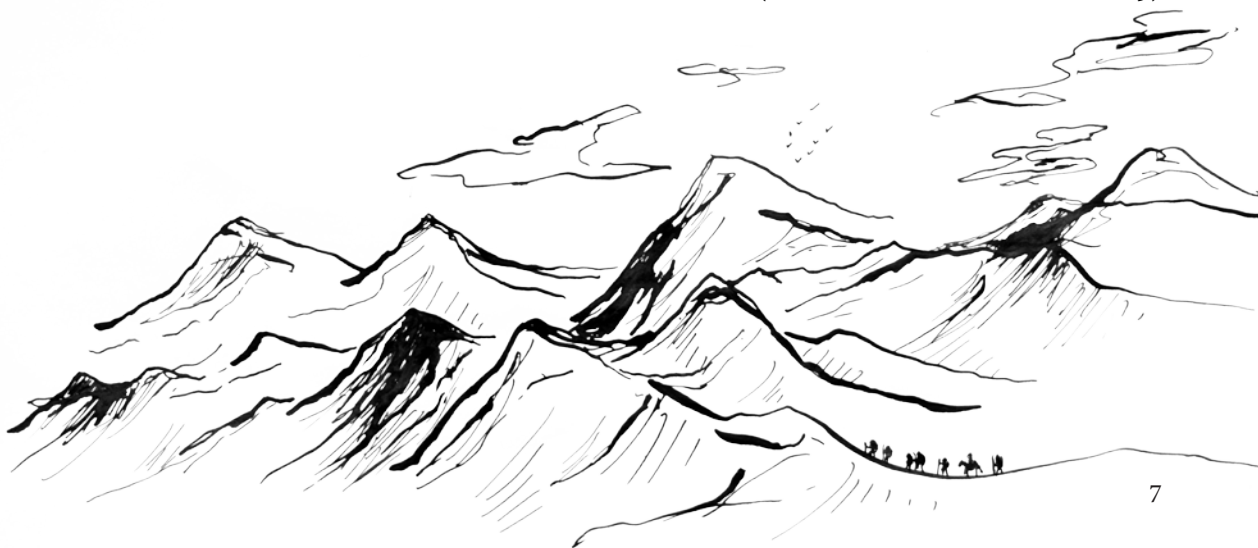
We would firstly like to express our thanks to the Vice Chancellor, Dr. Peter Bonfield, for his continued sponsorship to the journal and enabling us to produce and promote each issue. Without his generous donation, we would not be able to work as freely as we currently can to produce an issue that truly incorporates our vision.

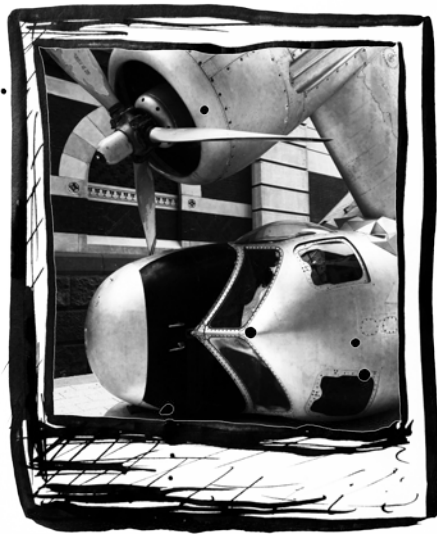
The advice from Yen Ooi has been vital, and we are all incredibly grateful for the endless support and encouragement that she provided throughout the process, and likewise, to Dr. Monica Germana for her assistance and guidance. Taking on a team who have relatively limited experience in this field must have been a daunting task in itself, but your trust and belief in us is a shining example of the wonderful tutoring team that we have come to know and respect at the University of Westminster.

Although it has by no means been an easy journey, I would personally like to thank each member of the WSJ team for working so diligently throughout the process and for taking on their roles with enthusiasm and dedication, despite the various contrasting time zones. Thank you to those who offered themselves as team leaders, including; Victoria Trentacoste (Typesetting team) Kunal Raju (Website team), Maarya Abbasi (Launch team), Zhuotong Hou (Editing team), Malyuun Ali (Marketing team), James Hayward (Design team) and Kishore Sapkota (Finance team). Other members of the teams include; Fatima Farooq (Finance and Marketing), Olivia Ecweru (Typesetting), Blerina Gjeka (Editing, Design & Typesetting) and Bahar Isik (Editing, Design and Launch). Everyone's contributions were pivotal in the creating and producing of Issue 15, and I would like to express what a privilege it has been to work with you all.

Thank you to all of the writers who were brave enough to submit your work; without you, we would have a much thinner issue to release, and it has been so insightful and interesting to collaborate with each and every writer.

CIARA BURRELL
(GENERAL EDITOR OF ISSUE 15)





FREEDOM FLIGHT

CIARA BURRELL

The city trader lands himself the aisle seat beside a woman of such ancientness he's never seen before. Her perfume seeps through the aircraft, clawing into the lungs of many, including the city trader, but he just smiles, and tosses his briefcase carelessly into the overhead locker. He might leave it there; he doesn't need it where he is going.

He throws himself into the seat, impatient for take-off. His seatbelt is on, his fingers twitch as he suddenly longs for a book—he can't recall the last time he read anything other than reports, emails, messages. He watches a flock of slick-haired men in suits identical to his own enter Business Class, without glancing behind them into Economy. Panic sets in. The city trader's white knuckles grip the arms of his seat.

What is he doing? Surely there's another way? Can he really afford to leave his life behind?

As a cold sweat threatens to show itself, a reassuring hand

covers his own; the old lady to his right tells him not to be scared, that flying is the safest way to travel. There is something in her wrinkled complexion, perhaps her soft gaze, that calms the city trader. Her light tone is reminiscent of his late mother's and, unconsciously, he finds himself taking her hand. He misses his mother immensely, although he only realises it now. He hopes she would be proud of him, not for who he was, but who he is becoming.

Finally, the ever-increasing rumbles from the belly below pave the way for take-off. It is dark now, and the city trader watches the lights of the airport drift away as they park themselves before the infinite runway, illuminated with lights that twinkle and flash. Hypnotised, he stares.

As the beast roars beneath them and the wheels start to spin, the city trader grasps his companion's hand. The breath leaves his chest and the long-lasting tension alleviates his shoulders. He feels elated, free at last of the aggressive constraints pressed upon him by the mechanical functioning of the City.

If he hadn't taken his eye off the ball for two minutes, if he'd ignored the call from the divorce lawyer, he wouldn't have been forced to watch the horror unfold as he lost the company an extortionate amount of money just a few hours earlier.

The ex-city trader lets out a little chuckle, he can't help it. Then another. It erupts from his mouth in a torrent, no longer suppressed after all these years. Passengers turn to catch a glimpse of the maniac laughing as they rocket towards the sky. He tries to stop—he really does—but he hasn't had a release like this in as long as his memory serves. His head ducks as he avoids the stares of those around him, but then he hears a sound; a wonderful, joyful sound. Slowly, he turns his head towards the woman beside him, catching her eye as she laughs along with him. Suddenly her agedness melts away, and all the ex-city trader can see is a loving young woman merely putting him at ease. She claps him on the back with one hand as she wipes

tears away with another. Gradually, passengers begin to retract their craning necks.

As the plane plateaus, the escaping city trader gratefully accepts a glass of wine. He toasts to his new friend and asks her where they are headed. She finds the island on her pocket map, and holds it up to him. Not once does she ask, or even wonder, what has brought this once-smartly dressed (now ruggedly so), briefcase-carrying banker onto her flight. She has seen it before, she knows.

As they soar over the city that had once been the sole existence in his life, she starts to tell him about the island where they will land in many hours, but is surprised when he raises a hand to stop her.

The free man smiles, lifting his glass. “Let it remain a mystery.”

CIARA always had her head stuck in a book as a child, and this hasn't changed in adulthood. As a child, she read whilst cuddling her teddy bear, but now she tends to read and write whilst nursing either a strong coffee or a G&T. *Theciaracloud@wordpress.com* and *twitter.com/The_Ciara_Cloud*.



THE LAND OF THE WONDERING

MAARYA ABBASI

Dear Reader,

This is for Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen and Syria.
Forget the division on religion or ethnicity.
Pain is still pain, it's just a matter of humanity.

I am about to tell you a story.
One of war, seeking for asylum.
Broken and poor.
A refugee, a title forced upon us.
We are in the land of the wondering.
It was brought upon us.

This is for Palestine, Sudan, Iraq, and Bhutan.
We think we've escaped all the suffering we've been through.
Little did we know, the wait game continues...

Someone has died, someone I knew.
We need to go, but we'll never know where to.
Still we are hovering and pondering.
I guess we call it the land of the wondering...

MAARYA focuses her attention on all creative aspects around her which involve photography. She is able to showcase her work on social media platforms such as her blog. Alongside photography, her work resembles genres of writing which include photojournalism, travel writing and spoken word poetry. Maarya is currently writing a romance thriller fiction novel with hopes to be published soon. *Maaryavalentina.wordpress.com* and *instagram.com/Maarya_valentina*.



HEARTS AND THUMBS

SOPHIE HARRIS

Maria stared at the computer screen; hot prickly anxiety started to spread through her body. She was teetering on the edge. All she had to do was press the little blue button and the post would be uploaded. She took a moment to breathe as her chest tightened, her mind filling with the memories of that night a year ago.

You've come a long way since then, she told herself. Just click post, it will be OK.

Maria hit the blue button and instantly saw the familiar 'just now' words appear under her picture, telling her it had now been shared with the world. Before she could change her mind and delete it, she switched her computer off. That had been an idea her counsellor had suggested for this moment. Upload it and then step away. Whatever happens, happens. It did not need to be the most important part of her day.

She somehow felt calmer. For the first time in a few years, she didn't feel the same urge to instantly check the post or keep watch to see the comments and reactions as they came in, which had only left her with a suffocating weight on her chest when she had done it. Social media had created this misery in her and her whole world had gone upside down ever since its creation.

That all-consuming desire to see how she compared. Although the self-sabotage had started long before. Her mother had always compared her to her brother, Daryl, the golden child. A theme which had followed her into her dating life. Three bad relationships later and Maria's confidence had vanished. This brought on the need for the toxic validation that social media had provided her and her rapid demise into the dark pit she had found herself.

It was a whirlpool of posts, shares, memes and photos. Anything to get a reaction. The groups being her ultimate downfall.

For every *post a selfie challenge*, she immediately took part. Refused to use an unedited photo if she was having an 'ugly day.' She would spend the next few hours, constantly checking for the hearts and thumbs.

The unforeseen issue came when the popular members received hearts, while she only got thumbs. It intensified her insecurities. It hurt her and so followed days of constant cleaning, maintenance of skin and body, particularly her face and taking photos trying to look sexy enough for hearts. Because the hearts mean you're pretty, she would tell herself. And each time she would fight the various voices from the past.

"Your brother's so smart; HE will get a scholarship."

"Are you sure you want to wear that? It's frumpy."

"I enjoy you for your body mostly."

"Daryl is such a good boy."

"Girl, you need to do something with your eyebrows, they're huge."

"Men desire you only for your body Maria."

"You look much better with makeup on."

Maria would listen to all these thoughts and get angry. Her brother ended up with a scholarship and went straight into a job, worked his way up the ladder. She now avoided any material that made her look 'frumpy'. She accepted that men only wanted her for her body, it's why she only used filtered photos and would put makeup on to take a photo even if she was sat at home in her pyjamas. She had to look good every time because for so long, men had told her that's all she was good for; sex and something pretty to look at when she was filtered and made up.

Maria was the accident child and her mother made sure she knew it. As for the girls, they picked out every flaw and it had become an obsession for Maria, focusing on every stray eyebrow hair sticking up, every extra bit of fat she could grab in her hand, every spot which appeared on her face, blemishing her. She noticed it all, so did the girls. But it was OK. All she had to do was put on makeup. She never dared post a photo with no makeup on. She would shudder at the thought of people seeing the bags under her eyes from where she stayed up all night, unable to sleep because of her racing mind. Or the spots that seemed to club together in clusters from each menstrual cycle she had. No one could see the fat she edited out. To the social media world, she was '*beautiful*,' '*stunning*,' '*hot*.' To herself, she was hideous.

It was why those hearts and those thumbs boosted her, made her feel wonderful. It didn't matter that the world didn't see the true Maria, because she got to show them the Maria she wanted to show off. The Maria that the online world approved of.

That was how Maria's life continued for months and years. A vicious cycle of filters, makeup, hearts and thumbs. The obsession

grew. She had to get as many reactions as possible. Then it changed and suddenly only receiving hearts mattered. If anyone used the thumbs, she got upset and would take a look at herself in the mirror, finding faults in her skin, wondering if she had used the wrong filter, panicking that she was no longer pretty. Her mind whirled with worry in those moments and she wished she could understand where she had gone wrong.

Then came the day when Maria hit her wall. She posted her picture, the same one that had received so many hearts before and waited just a few minutes before checking it. She remembered now on reflection, the twang of pain she had felt when she saw hearts on the other women's pictures, yet found only thumbs on hers.

They don't think I'm pretty. I'm fat, they saw my spots. I'm not beautiful like her. That's what they are saying. Shit...

And with that thought train of terror, Maria deleted her picture and cried as her heart raced. She had become so obsessed with the hearts that she had lost any confidence, any self-esteem that she had originally been clinging on to.

This was her breaking point. With her anxiety having caused her to isolate, her mind had become sicker each day. The misery followed her, only lifting fleetingly when she saw hearts appear on her posts. With confusion and a sense of loss, she downed her packet of antidepressants, washing them through with vodka straight from the bottle. Maria laid down and with a mascara tear-stained face she waited. As she slipped into an oblivion, she was so desperate to feel, her vision filled with the hearts she had become so driven to receive. With a last sob, her eyes shut.

Maria opened her eyes. The memory of that night was still painful for her mind to see. But she had come a long way since trying to end her life. She was making progress each day, her counsellor congratulating the improvement she saw in Maria since the day they first met in A&E a year ago.

With a small smile, she made a coffee and returned to the computer.

With a calmer hand and a quieter mind, she fired it back up. She saw the red box, the number eighteen. With a slight dampness prickling the back of her neck she clicked on the notifications and started reading her post.

Good morning world. This is the hardest post I will ever write and share. The rawest form of me you'll ever see.

I want to introduce you all to Maria Henderson. The real Maria Henderson. No filters to give me an edge, no makeup to hide my spots, no edits to suck in my waist. Just...me.

Let me tell you why I am writing this. I have been through a lot in my life. At the age of 32, this time last year, on a Sunday evening after a damaging social media session which caused me to suffer a breakdown of some sort, I decided to end my life. It had become too much for me inside my own mind. I had grown an unhealthy obsession with 'looking perfect.'

This had only intensified with the birth of social media.

I just want to take this moment to implore to everyone that you do not need the hearts and the thumbs to validate your beauty. They do not define who you are.

My obsession with reactions took over and the need for them grew like an infestation of mould creeping through. I became toxic to myself with the addiction to receiving validation online. I have suffered a lot. My upbringing wasn't brilliant. Constantly compared to my 'ideal' brother who could do no wrong.

Not his fault, but it's where it began for me. Then after a few bad relationships and having shitty boyfriends tell me I was too fat, had no boobs, men would only want me for my body and nothing else, blah, blah, blah...it all became too much.

When girls choose to bully you for not having the right hairstyle or a partner tells you how you look better with makeup on, it all affects the person's view of themselves and mine became distorted.

Joining groups to try and find a place to belong was my final straw. 'Post a selfie, let others rate you.' 'Post a selfie, see who likes you.' 'Post a selfie, the one with the most likes wins.' I posted my selfies and broke when receiving thumbs while others received hearts. It made me feel uglier. Something inside my head snapped that Sunday evening after participating in such a post. I had come to realise that I no longer felt validated unless I had hearts. So, I tried to end it all.

Daryl found me. I'm glad he did. With some therapy and time to sort through the noise inside my head, my therapist helped me to look at myself in the mirror and see the real Maria staring back. The one with spots, bags under my eyes, eyebrow hairs that needed plucking, the freckles dotted along my nose and the strands of hair that stick up no matter what I use to try and keep them in place. She helped me to see all this and for the first time I saw my true beauty. For once, I didn't care what people on social media thought, couldn't care less if the men of the groups gave a thumb or a heart. The words of my past which have haunted me for so long, were silenced by my own voice. The voice which stood looking at my reflection and said: Maria, I heart you!

I accepted my perfectly imperfect self. I gave myself permission to be unfiltered. I finally gave Maria Henderson the compassion to be exactly herself, as she is, raw, real and beautiful in her own little way.

I write this post, no longer needing hearts to validate who I am. For now, the world can see the real Maria Henderson. I have a place in this world regardless of what I look like. I have found the validation I suffered so much to find. The most satisfying part of this all, is that I found it inside of me.

So, world, hello, I am Maria Henderson and from now on my life shall be in its rawest form. Hearts and thumbs no longer define me.

I am Maria Henderson and I am proud of who I am.

As Maria reached the end and came to the familiar process of looking at the reactions, she noticed all hearts, no thumbs. She had posted her raw truth. Her journey of finding herself in its most brutal and vivid form. Posted her first photo with no filters, no edits, no makeup or lies. She had shown her true self and there was not one thumb in sight.

SOPHIE HARRIS is a fond writer of short stories, film & TV scripts and novels. She has a keen desire for exploring her surroundings and creating stories to reflect on the world we live in and to bring awareness to topics she is passionate about.



NO JOURNEY TAKES ME AWAY
NO MATTER HOW FAR I GO, I AM STILL HERE.

ZHUOTONG HOU

February 25th
Beijing

In several days I am heading to my dream land; a destination to which I am fleeing from my home, a destination where I can inhale the air of freedom. I am going to embrace a new life, meet interesting people, and enjoy what this vivid world can offer. I am hurtling headfirst towards my dream.

So, why am I crying?

Three days ago I decided to leave home earlier than expected to stay with my cousin before moving on to the UK. My decision was prompted after a heated quarrel with my mom, who never misses a single opportunity to manipulate me.

“You should put on more layers. It is cold here.”

“I am already an adult who is totally able to take care of herself. I will if I really feel cold. And now I DON’T NEED TO!” I tried my best to cover my impatient voice.

“Take this. You will feel cold in a minute.”

My body began to tremble as a surge of fury flowed up towards my head. Tears fell down onto my cheeks like knotted string, leaving my mom at a loss for words.

“What right do you have to judge my feelings? Am I only an object to you? Or am I your pet? In your eyes I might be!” I shouted, stomping into my room, and slammed the door.

Shortly after, I heard my mum cry. We did not speak for the rest of the day.

Such misunderstandings between us have existed for as long as I can remember, and they fueled my desire to leave. I wanted to escape from the claw that sculpted my decisions, forbidding my participation in my own life. Mum condemned me for acting against filial duty, which could be translated into a desire for absolute obedience to parents. This is the crushing burden that we Chinese bear as soon as we open our eyes.

Instinctively I always tried lifting the weight from myself but the guilt of such an imagined betrayal followed me everywhere. Drowned in hot water, I tried to grasp at every buoy that floated me away from her. I felt instant relief justifying myself, laying all the fault at the feet of my mum. The less contact with her, the more peaceful my mind became. However, this solution never achieved the effect I anticipated because deep down I knew it was not her fault. She is also a victim of the time, the environment, and the society where hierarchy *devours* people.

If a family dispute is a reflection, behind the mirror lies my real concern—*hierarchy*, or to put it more specifically, the disregard for humanity through class worship where humans are trained to

act uniformly and are prevented from expressing their individuality. The most important thing is to fit into your social roles: a daughter, a student, an employee and so on... One must appear to behave.

Little space is left for discussion on the complexity of humanity. Albeit subtly, this unspoken tide pervades every corner of the country—in a primary school class where children are ordered to put their hands behind their back in order to sit to attention under their teacher's power, in a propaganda post where the encouragement to sacrifice oneself for the greater good is behind the president's smiling face, in an online forum where dissenters are silenced in order to create a positive yet passive online environment, and in a home where a girl painfully fights with her mother in an effort to make her understand that she is conscious of her own feelings.

Fed up with this imitation of life, I am embarking on my journey to a free land and I have no intention of coming back for good.

Yet I am crying.

I have told myself again and again that the physical escape from my mum, from this country, would give me the independence and freedom I have been craving, but still I cannot stop questioning myself.

Is this the right choice to make?

My decision was supposed to remove my burdens but I feel them weighing me down. I realised I am deeply caught—as society expects, I am defying my mum's emotions by denying my inseparable tie with her and sticking her to the responsibility as a mother. I know why I am crying and I cannot bear what I am doing. The voice inside me reminds me that I will henceforth be a sinner.

No matter how far the journey takes me, I will never manage to leave where I come from. I can never be liberated from my heart, from how my homeland has shaped me. The guilt is embedded in

my soul.

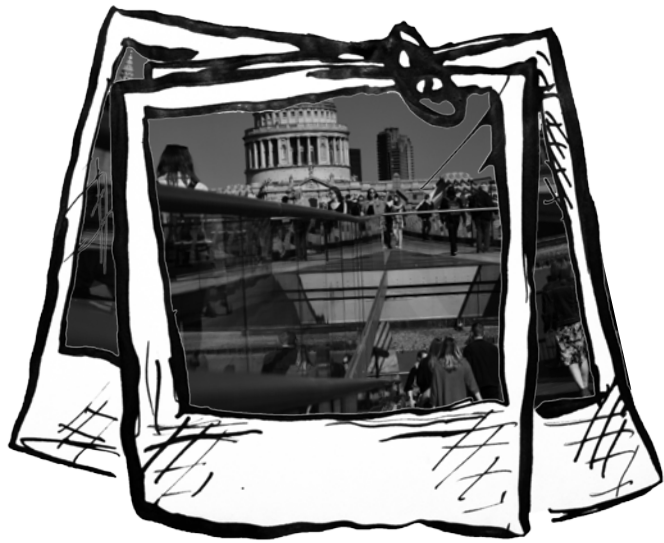
I wrote to James, a friend waiting for me in the UK.

"I don't want to betray my homeland. What if my homeland never allows me to be a human with free feelings?"

"Then it's hardly betrayal. To be ignorant and blind to the issue, that would be a greater betrayal," he replied.

I might need to learn to live with this.

ZHUOTONG HOU: English has helped her to shake off her second nature, one that is shared by most Chinese people—never publicly talking about sensitive issues. That's why she fell in love with English creative writing. houzhuotong.wordpress.com, [instagram.com/asmallsargassosea](https://www.instagram.com/asmallsargassosea) and twitter.com/HZhuotong.



KEEP WALKING

ASHRIAH AKAKPO

‘That’s right, keep on walking,’ she said, smiling as she passed, while the knot in my stomach I prayed wouldn’t last. I’ve been walking on this road for as long as I can remember. And this journey, this winter, it feels somewhat like December. But so silently I wander, past the burning trees, wanting, watching, waiting, frantically asking myself not to be afraid. But the voices inside my head – I’m fearful will soon be right. I take a breath and keep on moving – trekking down this long, stone-cold road.

I stop to quench my thirst, not doing what I’m told. Before me runs a tunnel, just a quarter of a mile away. I fiddle a bit, with my thoughts, trying to keep them at bay. But still, I wonder if she’s watching me, although she has at last left, but inside I feel uneasy, like I’m running out of breath. Flashes run past me, humming and crackling. I try to walk through them, I try to ignore these chains.

The tunnel approaches, and the flashes are still, as I follow the path within, holding on to my will. I listen for instructions, ‘where do I go?’ I hear nothing but the buzz from a bumblebee and an unfamiliar echo.

I start to drift, my legs collapse, almost stiff. My heart races as if standing on the edge of a cliff. I gasp for air, tugging at my shirt, begging whoever is listening, ‘please don’t let it hurt’. I knew I deserved it, left alone once again, in an unfamiliar place – where this echo was my only friend.

‘Hello?’ I whisper, breathlessly as before, thinking this time I’d get an answer, not knowing. Not sure. Perhaps it’d be different, maybe not as strange. And just maybe I would let this memory in, without fear of its range. I hobble, trying to bend, but again I get no answer, the echo is my only friend.

I stumble lower to the ground, my vision failing, the breeze crushing my lungs - I clench my fists as I begin to strain, the pain taming. I crawl, my knees bloody and poor. I need to get out, to find – a door.

It’s loosening its grip, this feeling. This memory. But still I quietly slip. I close my eyes, lying still, now lower than I feel. A blink, and for a moment, I slow down as if nothing has happened.

I walk, and I walk. ‘Sorry. Start again.’

ASHRIAH is a Creative Writing and English Literature Graduate. She is an impassioned, free thinker who only aspires to change the world one syllable at a time. She is a singer/songwriter, does some graphic design and volunteer with a charity to create an impact. ashyakakpo.com and [instagram.com/ashyakakpo](https://www.instagram.com/ashyakakpo).



LIFE

AMAKA NGANA

I was born on a rainy Sunday night. My siblings say my mother had just finished preparing dinner when she went into labour. She had a quick delivery, giving birth to me only thirty minutes after her first contraction. 'She's so tiny,' my mother said to my father when she saw me after I was cleaned up and presented to her by the nurses. 'But she has your beautiful face,' my father responded. My mother decided to name me 'Ijeoma', a traditional Igbo Nigerian name meaning 'Have a good journey'.

The beginning of my life was indeed good. I was born into a middle-class family. My parents worked for the government as civil servants and provided the basic things my siblings and I needed. There was a lot of happiness and laughter in my family. My mother was the jovial one, who told stories and entertained my

siblings and I. Her sole interest was her children's well-being and she was ready to fight anyone who made them upset or even looked disapprovingly at them.

My father was introverted and strict. He provided the necessary balance, helped with assignments, and ensured the children excelled in academics. My mother often told stories of her pleasant early life and chastised my father for constantly telling us about his difficult life. Regardless, they blended well, with my mother being all fun and my father being all discipline.

However, the strain that financial problems brought to my family was evident from a young age. I realised early enough that my father always had a problem disbursing money. Losing his father at a young age, he faced poverty and struggled to make ends meet to cater for himself and his mother, who was plagued with health problems. Money did not come by easily for him and he wanted us to understand the importance of working hard to earn money and living moderately.

My mother, on the other hand, was from a wealthy background and grew up in abundance. This made her frustrated with my father's constant need for moderation in contrast to her love for the finer things of life. She was always gorgeously dressed and her salary went to the acquisition of one stylish suit after another. My father didn't care much for looks but was more interested in making sure we had the necessary textbooks recommended by the schools we attended. Reminiscing on my parents' behavior, I understand now how different they were and how important it is to understand a person's background in order to grasp their behaviour.

My father grew in the ranks in civil service and became a director of the organization he worked with. His remuneration increased and we were able to amass more possessions as the years went by. My mother's wardrobe increased and an official

car was given to the family. Life seemed easy and beautiful. I felt particularly privileged because I was born at a time when things were getting better. While I was at the university, I had the best clothes in class, moved with the most popular cliques and attended the biggest social events. I was the rich girl in class and everyone respected me.

I was using the latest phone model and purchased different expensive weaves. I didn't care much for grades anymore. All I cared for was the social status I gained.

My celebrity status came crashing the day my father was retrenched. My family had not made adequate plans for the move and we fell into a financial crisis. Money became tight and hard to come by, so my mother had to stop buying her new clothes. She never believed my family would have to survive on her salary.

This brought numerous quarrels between her and my father. My siblings and I had not attained financial independence, being in a country that didn't allow minors to have legal jobs. It felt like a bad dream I just couldn't wake up from. Subsequently, the house was repossessed as it belonged to the government.

My social status diminished and my friends disappeared. I was no longer anticipated at parties and social gatherings. I became a normal student in class and I couldn't keep up with trends. I began to understand my father and his advocacy for frugal spending growing up. I finally understood what he meant by being an indigent student.

My realisation was accompanied with a desire to have done things differently. I wished I had listened to my father and kept a low profile. I wished I had listened to him when he talked about the importance of education and good grades. I regretted not being wiser.

I almost resented my mother but couldn't when I discovered her true life story.

She had indeed come from a wealthy family but this was short lived as she also lost her primary caretaker when she was very young. Unable to continue with payment for her education, she dropped out of school and was almost married off to a rich man until the timely intervention of a good Samaritan who decided to take up the responsibility of paying her fees to ensure she completed her education.

I realised that her flashy lifestyle was a compensation for all she didn't have growing up. Her insistence on my father spoiling us with money was to make sure we didn't suffer the way she did, and to have a better life. I understood that in this life, two people could have the same experience but handle it in completely different ways and that this affects their perception of life.

While my father had chosen the path of discipline to cope with trauma, my mother had chosen the path of enjoyment to overcome and push her pain away. Both had their advantages and very clear limitations.

I finally understood the name my mother had given me at birth, Ijeoma—have a good journey. She knew that life would be full of experiences; good and bad, but her desire for me was to successfully navigate both events. Success is in the journey and not in the destination.



AMAKA NGANA is a creative writer who loves reading and aspires to become an accomplished author and scriptwriter. She hopes to use her writing platform to inspire others and create positive impact in the world. Her interests include artworks, sports, videography, going to the beach and being in natural environments.



LONDON CALLING

JAMES R.W HAYWARD

London calling, London calling. Are you receiving, over?

I wake up, bleary-eyed, before the first smoking hot coffee of the morning has passed my lips. The dark of an early winter morning; would you be able to say it is still night, perhaps? I know why I am up so early. Today is no ordinary day.

I had not had cause to journey into London since November. This old [only 22], jaded [you would be too after a year of lockdown], and cynical [what was there not to be cynical about right now?] student, turned railwayman, who finally returned to being a student in the cold and dark days of early January, was up again at the crack of dawn.

Railways: The arteries of London. Without them, where would I be? I would not have the means to travel and wouldn't have had means to work for a time when university classes seemed a foreign

prospect. That, and since those halcyon days of watching old, fuzzy video tapes of Thomas the Tank Engine, that most British of children's shows, railways had held an allure, which few other things in my world possessed.

Speaking of foreign prospects, is that not where I am going today? Yes, the airport. London Airport; Heathrow to most. This budding writer, a man of many roles past and present, is on the move, but not fleeing to somewhere better today, alas. I have bigger purposes today.

Hearing you loud and clear London. Preparing for take-off.

I batten down the hatches against the cold, my coat, and my trusty old British Rail hat, a leftover from my time working with the trains being my first line of defence. I swallow down the coffee. Secondary measures, naturally, warming me from the inside, and adding that perk that my brain addled with a mix of exhaustion and herbal sleeping pills so desperately needed.

I make sure I have what I need. Tickets? Check. Bank card? Check. Packet of mints? Ever present in my coat pocket. Yo-Yo? Next to the mints; Could be necessary, airport queues can be a nightmare. I look in the mirror. Yep, no changes there, the same as when I went to sleep the night before. Looking OK, I guess, still clean-shaven. Better than the unshaved 'caveman' look, as my mum would so bluntly put it, although meaning it as a joke. She's still asleep upstairs; She knows I'm going out. I'll be seeing her later when the job is done.

The job. Too formal. This isn't some secret mission, or task. Except, with a touch of irony, that's exactly what it feels like to me. No, stop right there. You are not going to lose your nerve now. You had a hard time keeping it yesterday, ended up hitting the pillows at 2am, and only after taking those disgusting-tasting sleeping pills.

Sure, those anime girls on your wall posters, and the others

you have as body pillows to hold when you get lonely from the silence of your, so far solo existence.

They don't judge your insomnia, for it is they who know the secret of this mission too.

Heck, it isn't a secret, is it? Open secret? Guess that fits better, Mum knows, and so do my closest friends, since it was kind of hard to disguise my intentions after asking them whether the Tube was even still running, and they sure as heck would not shut up until I told them.

This is London tower, roger, you are clear for take-off, clear for take-off, over.

I'm scarcely conscious that in all this time I have been thinking, I have set off already, and before long, I hear the mournful drone of electric motors informing me that I have reached the first waypoint in my journey; the small station of my town, on a branch line, to take me into the city.

The train is old, but comfortable. We must be doing about 100mph, and it shows. I might still be sleepy, but as the morning sun rises over the city, I watch it come into view like a king surveying his domain as names of places familiar race by: Brentwood, Romford, Ilford.

'We are now approaching Stratford.'

It feels but a moment since I boarded, and yet here I am, changing again, entering the equally familiar red, white and blue cylinder of the Central Line. Unlike the last one, these trains were slightly newer.

I couldn't tell our speed, the windows served no purpose in these tunnels, where all was inky-black, compared to the dimly lit interior brightened by a few hidden fluorescent tube lights that flickered with the snaking of the train around corners.

Those same corners were barely perceptible if not for that discarded pop bottle rolling across the floor with the motion of the curves.

More stations. Mile End, Liverpool Street, Bank, Holborn, Oxford Circus. Ah, here we go, another familiar stop, and my next checkpoint. Almost feels like a video game, following a path to reach a goal. Kind of makes you realise, video games are like a journey too, they have a beginning, that leads to an end. Kind of like life too, a beginning, a middle and an end. Ah, to be philosophical while riding a grubby escalator deeper into London's core, if only to reach an even older train. Wouldn't be the first time I had an epiphany in such an odd place.

The Bakerloo Line. This thing could be called the Museum Line, as it's now got the oldest operating Tube trains in the country. These have a distinctly dated feel, having been fitted as-new with the liberal application of tasteless 1970s Formica panels and brown colours everywhere.

Sure, the Bakerloo was the brown coloured line on the map, but a brown interior really did give the trains a 1970's feel; appropriate since they were built in the 1970s, to what was clearly the same blueprint as the older 1938 stock trains; the blueprint for many of the pre-1980s Tube trains.

Ah, but this was all flotsam to distract myself from what I knew I was facing down. Talk of trains, of engineering, of video games, of elevators/lifts, of my interests.

It might be what I know best, but that was just it. I was distracted from what I was really facing; A situation almost alien to me, which was slowly chugging into sight with the rhythm of the Bakerloo's old clunky electrics.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we are now approaching London on our final descent, please fold up your tables, and fasten your seatbelts for landing.

My new colleague, she would almost certainly be flying in on a marvel of modern avionics, the modern jet airliner. So much technology, it could make even an experienced engineer's head spin. Makes this old clunker look like a dinosaur by comparison. But who am I kidding, she'd probably love this, after all, what an experience for someone who'd never seen our fair city before?

We had been talking since the start of the year. My cynicism was at an all-time high before the class year began. I had lost faith in the world. My freedom was gone, my life seemed to be going nowhere, and for the first time after that dark period seven years ago where my life seemed to be in eternal decline, I felt like things were crashing again. I feared the future, but more than anything, I feared myself, and my own lack of self-belief made this even harder to take, just like before.

Then a light broke through the darkness. She might have been on the other side of the world, but there was something there between us, a connection, a shared bond. Even behind a computer screen, such was the way things had to be for now.

This was the most human interaction I had been party to in many months. Every time we came to talk of something that we each felt would cause a problem, it never was, we just accepted it, as we gradually accepted each other.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are experiencing some minor turbulence, please return to your seats.

We agreed I would come to the airport to meet her. Nobody should have to feel alone, anywhere in the world, and from that moment we met online, I had, in the back of my mind, committed to doing this journey, even before I asked some weeks later.

She gladly accepted, a weight off my racing mind for sure. I had boarded one of the new Crossrail trains at Paddington, bound for Heathrow. This was it, the home straight, the moment I had been

at once anticipating and dreading.

The guys at the uni's Anime Society, some of my closest friends, joked that I had managed to get myself a girlfriend when I told them of the journey, forced to talk after I asked them, all London residents, about the status of the Tubes to Heathrow in the prior weeks.

I guess they rightly wondered why I would, inexplicably choose to head for the airport at a time like this.

I love those guys, what a bunch. We had stuck together over those three years of my Bachelor's degree, and doubtless we would continue to stay together into the years beyond. We were eternal comrades among the millions of ever-changing faces in this city.

I told them, they could read this entire thing however they wanted, but I was saying nothing.

I laughed the whole thing off with them, mostly to take the perceived edge off the situation for myself.

I won't try and pretend that they probably found this situation funnier than I did at the moment.

I couldn't say what any of this meant yet, and they probably knew that as well as I. Either that, or they really want to get rid of me and my questionable anime preferences, by palming me off onto someone else. Yeah, that might be it. I smile at how stupid such an idea could be, yet somehow I wouldn't put it past them to try such a scheme, even in jest.

'The next station is Heathrow Terminals 1,2,3 & 4.'

Here we go, the final approach.

'London tower, we are coming in to land.'

The lift takes me out of the tunnels of the station and into the terminal.

'London tower, we have landed.'

I find a coffee bar and repeat the morning ritual of a smoking hot coffee all over again, this time paired with a mint from my pocket.

'Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for flying with us today.'

I find a place to sit, remove the yo-yo from my pocket, and idly pass the time away, watching the plane dock with the walkway, sipping the coffee in my hand, and analysing the faces as they pass out to the rest of their days. Who knows if they are having an ordinary day, or an extraordinary day?

All I know, and all I care is that someone in that crowd, filing through the customs screenings, is going to make this ordinary day extraordinary.

A long journey, maybe 90 minutes from my home, but a worthy one. For her, maybe 10, 12 hours from home, at least? Makes mine look like a walk round the block. Guess it is, when you're used to this place, as I have been for what seems like an eternity. My first journey of this day has ended, ironically, at the place where many begin.

The end is the beginning and eventually becomes the end again. Interesting how such an ordinary situation could hold such a deeper meaning, I mused, as the coffee slowly went cold in its cardboard cup, and I pondered that idea, eternity, journeys, and an airport, as the world drifted by around me.

And yet, I knew my next journey was about to begin, this one not completed alone, for a change. This one could be long, or short, who was to say? But it had to begin somewhere, and here is where it chose.

JAMES HAYWARD is a current MA student in Creative Writing at the University of Westminster, and a member of the WSJ team. He takes inspiration from the world around him, and the things and people he comes across in everyday life, amongst many other things. Railways have been a key part of his life since as far back as he can remember, as both a hobby, and as a critical service. *instagram.com/jrhayward*.



A NEW ABODE

KUNAL RAJU

My country's cut in two,
By stout men of ruddy visage we never knew.
A new home awaits,
But beastly fiends prowl the road,
We must escape them; we must make haste.

The August sun is a fireball,
We trod the uncharted path, without food, without water,
Drained to the last sweat, about to fall.
Still, we persist, for if we trail behind, the beasts may devour us,
We disregard the calluses on our feet, filled with blood and pus.

The Day fades into Night,
We walk, we walk and we walk,
But there's no end in sight.

A perpetual ordeal it seems,
The ghoulish face of death screams.

History took a new course,
The day we let the so-called civilised rule us by force.
Now they've divided us: pitted one brother against another,
We forget we were born from the womb of the same mother.

A horrendous journey finally draws to a close,
We reach our destination: a garden full of thorns, but no rose.
The jubilant proudly celebrate their victory,
These new homes are built on graves, some will forever remain a
mystery...

In 1947, two new nations were born: India and Pakistan. The division sparked one of the biggest mass migrations ever recorded in history. Around 14 million people are thought to have abandoned their homes, according to an article published by *The Washington Post*. Hindus and Sikhs fled to India, and Muslims made their way to Pakistan. The exodus was a bloodbath, as people from both faiths committed unspeakable atrocities against each other. This poem is an attempt to immortalize the hardship and toil faced by those in search of *A New Abode*.

KUNAL has worked as a writer for two years in Mumbai, India. His area of interest includes English Literature, Modern History and Sports Science. Besides writing, he enjoys reading, taking photographs, bike rides... and going to the gym too! kunalraju.home.blog and [instagram.com/ kunalraju18](https://www.instagram.com/kunalraju18).



THE LIST MAKER

MAX MULGREW

Every particle of light had been swallowed by clouds, roof slates, stone walls and heavy green shutters. The generator had stopped for the night. I was 11 years old and alone in a black room of iron bedsteads, horsehair mattresses and scratchy woollen blankets. I woke up needing the toilet and was terrified of the naked wooden floor. When the lights were on, I caught sight of silverfish and scuttling cockroaches. Now I imagined a mass of insects being crushed under my feet as I felt my way along the wall to the stairs and down to the door. When I got outside, I could hear waves beating the rocks in the cove. I detected a melancholy hint of dawn as I relieved myself on to the turf. I ignored the blowback caused by the wind from the sea.

This was Brittany in 1964 and I was on a backpacking trip with my footloose mother. We had arrived on Île de Batz in a storm. The only accommodation was in the *auberge de jeunesse* and we

were the sole guests. Rural France then was a country of quirky cars, trains that picked up farmers in fields, labourers wearing *bleu de travail*, squat toilets and garlic. Pigs roamed in the woods and children collected snails along drainage ditches. I loved it.

When I was eighteen, I hitchhiked to Greece. It was a list-maker's dream. I went through Belgium, Luxembourg, West Germany, Austria, Yugoslavia and Italy. I became a species of twitcher, a tick obsessive, checking off countries, islands, mountains over the years. I like lists; they help to bring closure when they are completed and they help to bring sleep. Try mentally listing all fifty US states alphabetically as you lie in bed and you will be drifting off in Maine. Compile a list of rivers, one for each letter of the alphabet, and you will be getting zeds long before the Zambezi. Yet a compulsion to visit every country in Europe, then list them in my mind, was starting to keep me awake. How could I get to all the newly independent nations that emerged from the break-ups of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and the Eastern Bloc? How do you even define Europe?

I watched TV as the results of the June 2016 Brexit referendum came in from Sunderland to Bridgend, Boston to Sandwell. I had been blithely crossing borders in the European Union for years. Suddenly the UK had voted to leave. I lay in bed and started listing the 27 countries that would remain in the EU. I did not fall asleep; instead I remembered cycling in Amsterdam, cross-country skiing in Sweden, taking lakeside saunas in Finland, canyoneering in Spain, finding Heidegger's hideaway in the Black Forest and Tito's hideaway in Croatia. Despite the smug reminiscences, I was surprised at how many of the EU's twenty-seven other countries I had not been to and stayed in – the Baltic states, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia and tiny Malta. Now I had a simple list to

complete. My trips would have to start and end at airports near home and fit in with days off from my job, which involved three long shifts a week. I became expert at finding cheap and convenient flights, inexpensive places to stay and the best public transport deals. My deadline was the ever-shifting Brexit deadline. The Coronavirus pandemic was still in the future.

The challenge started with a £25 one-way flight to Bucharest and little idea how to get home again. I walked in 40°C heat to see Ceausescu's palace—the vast government building established before the former leader was shot dead. I had a cold beer from a kiosk in a park and ate grilled pork with salad in the old town. I took a train to the countryside to walk in forested hills before returning to the capital. That night I found a flight back to the UK from Sofia. That would enable me to tick off another country and get home for £30. The locomotive looked as though it had been hit by shrapnel, the compartments were sweltering and the windows barely opened. The train creaked slowly out of Bucharest at the start of the thirteen-hour journey. We crept through vast fields of corn, wheat and sunflowers.

Just north of the Danube we stopped in the last village in Romania. Officials boarded the train and collected everyone's passports and identity cards. Across an orchard I could see a road checkpoint. Queues of lorries and cars backed up. We were about to leave one EU nation and enter another, but this was definitely a hard border. Eventually passports were returned and the train rattled across a bridge over the river. At the first station on the other side it squealed to a halt and Bulgarian border officials came to take our documents again. I finished off my bottled water as we waited in the boiling heat for another thirty minutes.

It made me recall other cross-border journeys – having to leave a train to walk across “no-man's land” between Malaysia and Thailand, facing a US immigration interrogation after a flight to

Pittsburgh, being stopped at gunpoint north of the Irish border by an army patrol during The Troubles, and being told “no” when I tried to join a Finnish boat trip into Russia.

I got a one-way ticket, this time to Lithuania, and nearly missed the connecting flight in Brussels. I sprinted through the airport thinking, “I do not want a night in Brussels. I've done that before.” I got on the plane just as they were about to close the doors. My list was critical - it was Vilnius or bust. I had a meal sitting cross-legged in a vegan “yoga restaurant”, explored the old city, wandered around grand squares and boulevards, and then visited Vilnius's self-declared independent republic of Užupis, a hippy quarter where part of the constitution states “People have the right to be happy.” There was no problem at the Užupis border.

There was a cheap seat on a flight to Tallinn and I left Vilnius airport on a small turboprop with half a dozen other passengers. It was winter, but the sun was shining. We crossed the Estonian border and entered a blinding snowstorm. The propellers whipped the flakes into a frenzy as the plane lurched towards my next destination. A tram was waiting at the airport doors ready to push through the drifts on its way into the city. Miniature snow ploughs were clearing the pavements as I marched down towards the harbour. Children wearing hats, mitts and boots were playing outside a school. I looked out across the frozen Baltic Sea towards Helsinki in the EU's northernmost state.

As I arrived at work after days off between shifts, colleagues asked, “Where have you been this time?” “Riga. It's a brilliant place.” “Just to Prague.” “In a Budapest bathhouse.” Eventually they stopped asking. I ate cheesy *halušky* in Bratislava, in Valetta I joined government workers buying *pastizzi*, and in Krakow my *pierogi* were filled with cabbage and wild mushrooms. Another day, another dumpling.

Now I was about to complete my list. The final tick. On my teenage hitchhiking trip to Greece, I had slept in forests, on parched scrubland where shepherds and their flocks passed in the night, on beaches, next to roads, and on a bench in the grounds of Ljubljana castle. Slovenia was then part of Yugoslavia – I felt it needed a fresh visit as an EU member state. Number twenty-seven.

Triglav is a fierce rocky peak in the Julian Alps and the highest mountain in the country. All true Slovenes must climb Triglav, I was told. I joined them, as a true European, and every hiker greeted me with a friendly *dobro dan*. Hundreds of people equipped with helmets and safety harnesses were making for the top. It was an arduous trek and most climbers overnight in mountain huts such as Planika, 2,400 metres above sea level. I did not know whether it was the altitude or the beer being drunk during the evening that caused the men and women in the dormitory to snore so loudly, but it made me feel wistful about the quiet of that Breton hostel on Île-de-Batz. I needed to get up in the night, although this time there were no cockroaches to worry about. I crept outside. There was a chemical toilet away from the building across jagged rocks. I had nothing on my feet so I decided to take a risk with the chilly wind howling round the mountain. The moon lit up the crags and pinnacles. I could see climbers' headlamps on the ridge leading to the summit. I was in love with Europe.

MAX MULGREW is a journalist now focusing on creative writing. *The List Maker* charts his need to visit every European Union state before Brexit.



JOURNEY

KISHORE SAPKOTA

Heading my way towards the town for the first time.
With birds chirping and thinking prose of rhyme.
Wearing an old coolie hat and leather boots,
Tottering foot on mud and tangled grass roots,
Nothing in my backpack but new dreams thrive,
Wish I could get a job and live-on life.
I will get a roof to stay and food to eat.

Many thoughts popping in my mind,
I hope god will make this journey very kind.
My mother back home thinks I would get more struggles,
but I am sure I will handle all those troubles.
No one in the town, nobody to care, nothing there.
Hopefully, I will get shelter and food to eat somewhere.

Flickering images of mother's woven tray and her stoneware.
Reciting a beautiful poem out of nowhere.
Flowing with the misty sky seeing a clearing course,
Flying birds from the blue making its prose.
Walking on cobbled streets thinking about my mother,
Always pestering, "what would she do about being a loner?"
Wish I could get shelter and food to eat somewhere.

My affinity towards my vernacular hut.
Place where I was born and used to make my own little pot.
My mother's gundruk and barley bread,
And her hand-knitting, woolen thread.
Those pebble trivets and river stone planters.
All these things made me think it was a blunder?
Thinking of my mother again, how would she do everything there?
Wish I could get shelter and food to eat somewhere.

With teary-eyes, heavy heart, and will in the mind,
Moving with a hope and hankering to find,
There is a question back in my heart,
Will going to the town help problems to sort?
Should I go back or move ahead with my target?
Only the future holds the answer of my kismet.
Hopefully, I will get shelter to stay and food to eat.

Front foot says get going and another can't abide its fate,
Should I go back to my mother or move ahead?
If I return, I could get all those days back and my mother's love,
But if I move ahead, I have got to find a new white dove.
Glimmering memories of my mother and her cheek pat.
Should I go back and go farming wearing the same old coolie hat?
I will have food to eat and a roof to stay.

KISHORE SAPKOTA is aspiring to be an accomplished filmmaker.
nisonsap.wixsite.com/kishoresapkota9972 and *facebook.com/shore.sapkota*.



CZECH YOURSELF

VICTORIA TRENTACOSTE

Half delirious I made my way out into the dark streets once more. He had said it was just at the corner, or was it across the street? My body trembled inside my coat. In part it was because I definitely hadn't packed accordingly for the weather, but also because I really didn't feel wholly safe.

Eventually I landed in some sort of pub. Or at least, I had to have as next I remember I was standing at a bar while a very unamused looking Czech woman stared at me. There was a menu in my hand and I was trying to make out what it said. Realizing that even with the English translation I still wouldn't know what I was ordering, I pointed at some sort of pie on the counter. The woman dished me up a slice and made her way to another customer.

Can't really remember if I was sitting or standing as I scarfed it down, let alone what it tasted like. My mind had become a blur and I was still trying to make sense of everything.

The day started out fine. I had left from Edinburgh airport without a hitch. In preparation for visiting Prague, I had printed out maps and directions to my hostel, reviewing them several times during the flight. The hostel had provided various options for transport and, being a savvy little traveller now, I'd decided on the airport bus and short walk through a park to the tram. Affordable and easy. I even had the currency pre-counted and at the ready. I just hadn't counted on missing the last bus.

My stomach pain was placated a bit now that I'd eaten something. The tips of my toes tingled as feeling slowly returned to them. I looked down. Sneakers. Why had I chosen to wear sneakers?

The woman behind the bar returned and inquired if there was anything else I wanted. Regretting that I sounded cheap, I told her there wasn't and paid my tab.

Before leaving I took a better look around the pub. The wallpaper was yellowed and the tables proudly decorated with water stains. Guests who seemed to be regulars laughed heartily as full pints splashed onto the ground. It seemed an interesting place and maybe I'd have stayed longer, but between the rather late hour and questionably sober gentleman beginning to smile at me from the corner, I thought it was probably time to head back to the hostel.

As I returned to the street I tried to reorient myself. It was challenging to recognize newly found landmarks when my surroundings were so ill-lit. My initial arrival at the hostel that evening had been a bit of a challenge and so navigating my way to it once more wasn't without effort.

When I had landed at Prague airport just a few hours before I'd been brimming with confidence. That feeling had quickly dissipated when I watched the last airport bus depart without me and I had to

ashamedly return to the taxis who I'd smugly dismissed when I first passed them. Of course, this shouldn't have been that surprising given that it was after eleven at night. Clinging onto the last dregs of my travel prowess, I had thought it clever to ask to be dropped off in the park noted in my directions where I could pick up the tram. For me, that seemed sensible. It was closer than the hostel so therefore cheaper and I had planned to take the bus to the tram anyway. As the taxi drove I'd studied the directions once more: *Go right through the park and take tram number 5, 9 or 26 two stops.* On my map the park was a large space of green on which I'd marked the path to the tram stop. But when the cabby pulled over and I looked up instead of the park I'd expected to see I found myself on the side of a six-lane highway. Being rather too efficient, the cab driver hoisted my bag out and sped-off leaving me, mouth ajar, staring into a dark void as cars flew past. *Right.* So now I was standing somewhere I didn't know in a city I'd never been with no concept of which way to go. My only option was to flag down yet another taxi and bite the bullet of paying for the fare. After haggling the price with a dubious driver, I was, hopefully, headed to my hostel. We pulled up to the address which turned out to be an iron gate on a dead-end road. The driver, who spent the entire trip eerily eyeing me up in his rear-view mirror, suddenly sounded genuinely concerned. He asked if this was correct and if I was okay and, after a moment debating whether or not to remain with the creepy cabby or venture into the dungeon-like street, I tossed him the cash and hopped out.

Having successfully navigated my way out of the pub, I was now once again standing in front of that massive gate. This time I had a key and was able to enter, which was a bit different to my experience when I'd first arrived.

Earlier I had skulked in the archway a minute or two while I made sure the taxi had departed. Then I'd buzzed the number next

to the questionable paper label saying 'Hostel Lipa.' It didn't look very promising. But, the reviews had been mostly positive so I still hoped for the best. After two more buzzes a man finally answered and told me to come to the second floor. The latch clicked and I made my way inside. The gate opened into a square courtyard that was basically a sheet of ice. I slid my feet against the ground, trying not to completely eat it, and gradually got over to the staircase in the corner. At the second floor I saw a door with a, thankfully, more official looking label for Hostel Lipa. Knocking twice to no answer I began to grow concerned. I was already not feeling great after the late flight and long night trying to get here. Suddenly I'd heard shuffled footsteps and a man came scampering down from the floor above. He ran the hostel and had been the one I'd been coordinating with. We entered the door as he explained that he lived just one floor above and used this space for the hostel. He showed me around, pointing out the bathrooms, shower rooms, and kitchen, until we finally arrived at a bedroom. Inside there were three beds and a table in one corner. He told me I could pick any of the beds I liked and then proceeded to give me some information about the area. He was incredibly hospitable but could tell I was starting to wane. That's when he suggested the pub for a bite to eat. Thanking him, and somewhat grasping the directions, I dropped my bags and left.

Coming back to the hostel I couldn't shake an uneasy feeling. As I got myself ready for bed, I was becoming more aware that I was very, very alone. The kitchen was quiet and the bathroom void of any sign of life. While I wasn't an expert, I knew enough to see an empty hostel as suspect.

I climbed into bed and pulled out my phone. At least there was Wi-Fi. I sent a message to a friend back home telling him that if I was never heard from again, come to this address. Then I sent a seemingly innocuous note to my mom telling her I'd landed and

loved her and my family very, very much.

Back in Edinburgh I had listened to a “Horrible Histories” recording on a hop-on-hop-off bus that told the story of two men who opened a hostel and killed their guests to sell their bodies to science. Of course, I had now determined this to be my fate. I hated it. I didn’t even like science that much.

With this thought in my head it was almost impossible to get to sleep. I checked about six times that the door was locked and decided that clutching my belongings close to my chest was the best thing to do. In my mind that would deter someone from stealing my wallet and passport. In desperate need of some comfort and consolations, I played Christian music on my phone and quietly trembled while waiting for morning to break.

When the sun finally did wake me up, I’d almost forgotten where I was and why my passport was imprinting itself on my face. Then I heard voices. They weren’t speaking English and were somewhat hushed. Slowly I crept out of bed and made my way to the door, avoiding the numerous creaking floorboards. Peering through the very old keyhole I could just make out the broad shoulders of a large man and the painted red nails of a woman. They were sitting at the table in the kitchen and, I imagined, plotting how they would peel my skin like the woman was peeling the orange in her hands.

My jaw locked and I felt my heartbeat pulsing on the side of my neck. It was now or never. Time to meet my fate, donate my body to science, and hope death came swiftly. I unlocked the door and it squeaked open. Before me were two curious sets of eyes and surprisingly pleasant faces. Not quite the ruthless killers I’d painted in my mind.

The couple introduced themselves. They were visiting from Germany and had chosen that time of year as they knew tourists were fewer and prices more affordable. Apparently the hostel owner

enjoyed placing travellers in their own individual rooms when he was able, and with my late arrival the night before all my fellow hostel stayers had already been in bed.

The couple was beyond lovely and I felt a bit guilty for mentally labelling them as murderers. I got ready for my day and just before I bid the Germans *tschüss* they recommended a few places for me to explore.

The city in daylight was, unsurprisingly, vibrant and welcoming. There was even a skip in my step. Of course, I still had to tread carefully as my sneakers had about as much traction as a pair of banana peels. As I made my way to the city centre I passed the park that I’d lost the night before. I looked up and saw the highway running above the east side of it. I shook my head. *Classic.*



VICTORIA TRENTACOSTE is a longtime lover of the arts. Her creative outlets include writing, illustration, photography, and dance. Her work experiences and travel adventures provide much of her inspiration and often find their way into her stories. Victoria strives to find her own voice in everything she writes and creates. thinkcreatewrite.com and [instagram.com/thinkcreatewrite](https://www.instagram.com/thinkcreatewrite).



TRAVEL NURSING

MOLLY MCCANN

A travel nurse I chose to be
From New York to California,
Twice I made the trip across
The country that's home to me.

The plan was to see the entire country,
Different states and hone my craft,
Find best practice and a new place to live,
Perhaps a new home at that.

In New York City I started my quest,
Not far from home at first,
The bustle, the noise, the endless access,
I loved how little rest.

Across I flew to Pomona,
A city run-down but not torn.
Not the best, but not the worst,
Care that was given.

But living with loved ones
Was not what I thought,
Different lives
We chose to lead,

But more self-trusting,
More self-aware,
I realized
I could be.

From Pomona,
A drive up north,
To a city called Paradise
For some,

Next stop was Napa,
A beautiful place,
But lacking in the use
I longed.

It was a better hospital than the last
But my talents were not used,
Not given work, nor critical care,
My gifts not harvested to their best.

As a traveller I was quickly learning
That critical care was not guaranteed,
Placement on other units was a norm
A practice that left me peeved.

A trialing time it was for me
To be in this suffocating place,
The first time I ever felt alone
But only a temporary space.

For knowledge and skill left untapped
Fall victim to neglect,
And when a purpose is not fed
Its beholder feels withered and scorned.

Back home to New York I flew
And back into the city I loved.
A different spot further northwest
But with the same great fun.

Critical care both left and right
Even the dream of a rapid response role one day.
My intelligence, my talents, finally put to use
In the way they deserve to be.

I was challenged, I loved every moment,
A new learning experience each day.
Why would I leave this place again,
Perhaps this is the spot for me?

But working too long without a break
Can only cause burn out.
I did burn out, the day before the
First case of this pandemic hit.

I took a month off to recharge myself
And so I missed the rise.
Slight guilt I felt for not being up front,
But giving poor care would not be wise.

So I was ready to head back
The week of the peak,
And the peak
It definitely was.

Never before have I seen anything like this
No words to adequately describe,
All I can say is we made it through
And stronger on the other side.

No way to treat this virus and no clear direction
So death was thus the norm,
Care decisions that left me uncomfortable
But protected more of us from falling victim.

Even though so many are gone,
This invisible enemy has nothing on us.
I cannot imagine a better frontline
And I am honored to be one of them.

I knew I found the place I wanted to stay
How ironic so close to home.
I thought for sure I'd end up in a different land
Funny how the journey winds 'round.

But a stall in hiring postponed my stay
So back west I went once more,
Only a short time in a coastal place
Called Santa Barbara.

A wonderful stay, and great care,
But I missed the mindset of New York.
What can I say, a slower pace
Is not what makes me tick.

So back I came to the place I love,
And setting roots for now,
Perhaps I will travel again as a nurse,
In future time will tell.

But for now grounding down feels right,
In a place I know I love,
Where my talents are appreciated
And my lifestyle can thrive alongside

People who seem to walk like me
And strive for dreams unblocked,
A city full of motivation
And perseverance untouched.

So I will stay in the city I love
And one day I will travel again,
To places far, and wide, and vast
To see, to learn from, to shine.

But if there is one thing I have learned
Throughout this journey thus far,
You don't really need to go far at all
To find a whole new world to explore.

"These Paradises are inside of me,"¹
That I now know,
I will ground down for now
Until doors open more.

For the mind is not a scary place
But a cornucopia with bounties full.
Just take a look inside one day
And you'll see the light that glows.

The world is blind to beautiful things
They know not what they miss,
It's their loss to regret
The moments they let slip past.

MOLLY McCANN is an ICU Nurse from New York and decided to
write a poem about her recent journey working as a travel nurse.

¹Quote adapted from a meditation teaching first heard through social media



THE SHORE WE ABANDONED

BAHAR IŞIK

She has loved the sea since she was a child. They were sailing in the open sea. Her father always took her fishing. On days like these she was always too excited to sleep. For this reason, her mother was angry at her father for telling her the day before that they were going fishing. He couldn't stand to wait to make his daughter happy, so told her early. Their excitement was still fresh although they had been sailing and fishing for many years. For her, it was the most fascinating thing in her life to look at the endless sea in front of her.

The clean, cool air, the wind gently caressed her hair as her boat moved away from the shore. Looking at the horizon and thinking about other places waiting to be discovered, feeling free like a bird, and more importantly, feeling the desire and belief that you can do anything in the depths of your heart. Sharing all these beauties with someone who you love and trust the most, makes it much more unique. Believe me, it is something different. Because deep down you

know with this person all these beauties will never leave, and all these things will never become things that you hate, that evoke negative feelings.

It was fun to throw the fishhook and wait for the fish to get caught and listen to the stories of her father while they were waiting. Her father somehow found a new story to tell every time. How he knew so many stories, she never understood. Stories about shores reached out to the end of the shining sea. There are trees, buildings, people who go to sea and face all kinds of surprises and adventures. She listened to all this with great curiosity and asked a lot of questions. One day, when her father finished telling such a story, she said to him with great enthusiasm, "Dad, one day I want to explore all this and go on great adventures."

She couldn't understand the look on her father's face at the time. Her father's look was emotional and a little upset. He looked at her then he said, "Go ahead my darling, but don't forget in the end you must turn back where you belong."

She looked at her father surprised and confused, "But Dad, why should I return? There are plenty of places I need to see, and why should I turn back to somewhere I know very well? You always said that all these journeys that we experience make us savants and teach us a lot of things about life."

Her father paused. Then he just said, "You are right my darling, I said that. Yes, you should definitely do all these things."

She remembered when they returned home with fish in their hands, knowing that her mother would cook them deliciously. After all, that feeling of freedom and being away from the shore, knowing that a warm smile, hug, home will welcome her was an indescribably beautiful feeling. Maybe that was her favourite part, but she figured it out too late. At the end of that day, she remembered this and so decided to explore different places.

When she was old enough to go, her mother and father, even

this place that she loved so much, were no longer enough. So, she went, wandered, saw, and lived. As much as her parents wanted her back, she didn't. She still thought something was missing. She kept searching, kept exploring. Down the road her expectations were sometimes met, sometimes failed. Sometimes she cried, sometimes she laughed with all her heart. But she knew that nothing was as she expected. She escaped from facing this reality for a very long time. Every time she was disappointed, every time she cried and laughed, she realized that life had always been like this. Nothing more, nothing less. The places to visit, to explore, would never end. As much as she wanted to, she couldn't discover it all. She decided to go back to her hometown. On the way back, she felt she was doing something wrong. However, her feelings disappeared when she saw her home and the places where she grew up. She and her father went to the seaside and sailed. Her father was happy again.

Then she turned to her father and said, "Dad, do you remember once you told me that you must turn back to where you belong?"

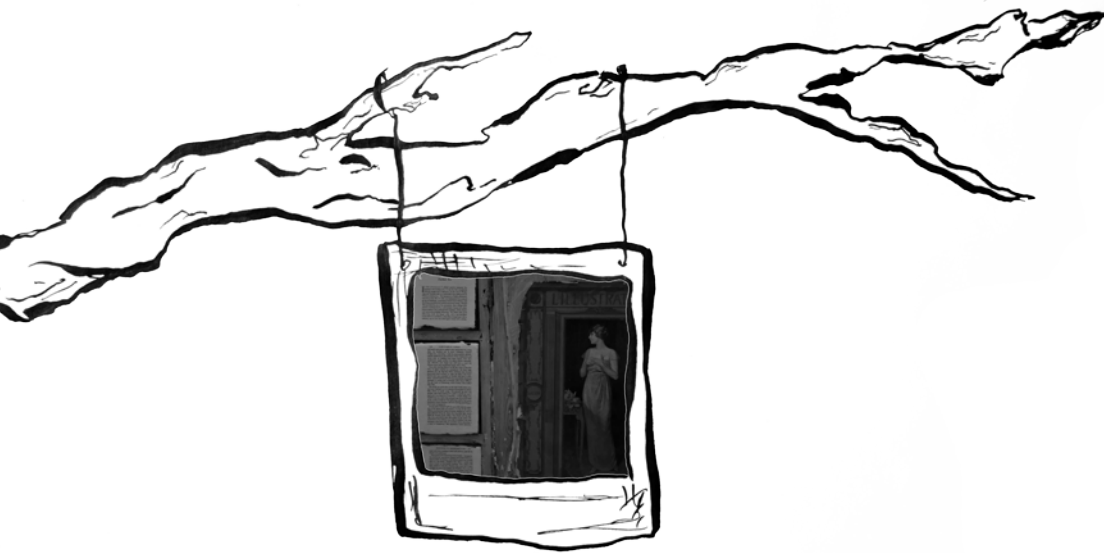
Her father nodded his head.

"Now I understand what you meant. I'm tired, dad. I thought I should always find a new destination and purpose to go on with. But I didn't like what I found there. I felt sad, I felt happy. Some people upset me, and I upset some people. Dishearteningly, I lost that enthusiasm I had when I was that little girl. In the end, I stopped swimming in the opposite direction of a fast-flowing river, and I left myself in its flow. I've changed a lot. But I realized that every adventure you took me to was secretly teaching me that. Despite the shore we abandoned, the sail we sailed, the new stories you told, the sea that seems endless, and my desire to explore, the comfort only came in knowing that I would always return to my warm home. The desire to go again was all a journey. All this was life... Life was all a journey. It took my whole life to know all this, but I realized that now with this knowledge, the

void in me is gone."



BAHAR studied cinema and television in her own country, and worked as a video editor, assistant director. However, she always loved to read books and create stories. Currently, she is writing short film stories, and trying to develop her writing skills.



LONG-DISTANCE, LEAVE-TAKEN

JOEL FERGUSON

I am on the 24 *Ouest*
and as always there's some time
to kill, bicyclists taking their leisure
in the October rain, in the diamond lane.

You don't like when I text
mid-morning (or anytime) pissed
about the Kowloon-style, flophouse AirBNB
I wait in through this particular
month of grad school,
the board with nails

sticking out of it that nearly hit me
in the face this morning when another semi-
transient rube tried to move his luggage, sent

a whole Jenga'd superstructure of ad hoc rooms
flying onto me, lying on my tatami mattress
by the head. So instead

someday you might see this poem,
when I return home, upon waking
late on a Sunday, godless and naked,
the cats coming and going, kneading
our bellies and crying for breakfast,
nothing but an idle life before us.

JOEL ROBERT FERGUSON is a Canadian poet of working-class settler origins living in Winnipeg, Treaty 1 Territory. He is a recent recipient of an MA in English Literature from Concordia University in Montreal, and his first book, *The Lost Cafeteria*, was published in 2020 by Signature Editions.



THE TRAIN NOW APPROACHING PLATFORM 2 ...

BRIAN HARRISON

Quarter past three they said in the paper. The 14.27 out o' Manchester. Should be 'ere by now, it's nearly twenty-five past. Lots o' people 'ere for a Tuesday. If it were market day yer might expect it, but it's a Tuesday. They mus' be all 'ere for the same reason: Ricky Higgins.

That's probably Linda Metcalf over there, she were the lass with the crush on him. She's kept 'er looks has Linda, if it's 'er. An' Carol someone, 'er friend, that might be 'er too, but it's 'ard to say. Oh, it's been a long time, Ricky, since yer last set foot in this place. Or should we call yer Richard now? That was the name on the posters. **RICHARD MORLEY**, in big block letters. Morley? It's where yer mam were from in't it? Yer can't kid us! Bet it were one o' them Shaftesbury Avenue types, an agent or summat who thought yer needed a fancier name than Ricky Higgins

Makin' that film were a big deal for us back then, an' theres

bin nothin' like it since. Put this place on the map for a short while. Brought a bit o' money in too. Not from the big names, nah, they were just bussed in for the big scenes. It were the film crew, buyin' ciggies and papers from the corner shops, filling the pubs at evening opening time after it got too dark for shootin'. After the filmin' were over, yer said yer were goin' to London for a bit. Post-sync or summat. But next thing, evenin' paper 'ad photos of yer at the Cannes Film Festival mixin' with all the nobs on the Riviera. Then Hollywood and the Oscars. And never e'en a postcard!

Ah, Ricky. I bet yer saw some sights. A mansion in Beverley Hills they said. But do yer still remember that drama club on Thursday nights? Sixty year ago it were. A musty ol' church hall wi' chairs stacked down either side – but there was a stage. Yer'd prance about doin' yer impressions.

The best bit for me back then were hangin' round the chippie wi' the lasses when it were over, Linda and Carol among them. But yer were really into the whole actin' thing. Goin' on about that Lee Strasburg and gettin' all moody like Brando an' Newman. If we'd guessed any of us would make something of it, we'd've guessed it'd be you. Mrs Dawson was stickler though. D'yer remember her? Gave us a good drilling in all the basics, an' a bit more. I did a few years mysel' in Todmorden Players an' met the wife there. But there was never enough time to do it proper, with work an' kids an' all.

The lads at school were rude about yer dancin' class on a Friday, but they 'adn't seen *Billy Elliot* then 'ad they? Well, none of us 'ad. A bit o' tap dancin' was bad enough but when yer had yer mam buy yer ballet pumps they didn't half take the mickey. But mates didn't mind. And we were yer mates weren't we Ricky? I hope yer remembered that.

It's gone 'alf past. The platform indicator says delayed twenty minutes an' due at twenty-five to. No civic reception? No blue plaque to be unveiled? Movies don't seem t'be big anymore, it's just tv series

now. The kids still go like we did, but it's all *Batman* an' super-heroes these days. Special effects an' loud music. Too loud for us old 'uns. An' it's not "art." Back then we knew it was "art," even if it were all that kitchen-sink stuff. It were in black and white for starters so it meant it were "art." That Tom Courtney, he were classy. An' Laurence Harvey. Albert Finney. Rita Tushingham. Julie Christie. An' Richard Morley. Ricky Higgins from Canal Street Secondary Modern. Who'da thought it?

Did yer ever go courtin' wi' Julie Christie, I wonder? We saw the photos in paper of you comin' out a' that restaurant after she broke up wi' Terry Stamp. But you were always photod comin' out a' posh hotels or restaurants wi' posh lasses, all elegant. Not being thrown out drunk like O'Toole or Olly Reed.

I don't know how long yer might be stayin', or even where yer'll be stayin'. Places round here ain't what yer'll be used to nowadays. But me granddaughter works at infirmary and said – all hush-hush like – that the oncology department has a private room prepared for their out-patient treatments, so I reckon that's why you've come back. It's why yer comin' home.

'Ere it comes. Not the limousine arrival we might 'ave expected once upon a time. There's a few still sittin' – must be waitin' for the train to Manchester – but there's a dozen or so others getting' ready for this one. 'Ave any of 'em got tickets? Or are they all waitin' for Ricky? I'm not goin' ter hang around. I just need a chance ter slip 'im this ol' envelope wi' my address on it, an' tell 'im that 'is bike's in our shed if 'e wants to call round and collect it. Maybe I'll get a chance ter see him for a drink when all the fuss has died down. It's bin a long road back.

BRIAN HARRISON: After spending too many years writing for other people, Brian now writes for himself. He was in the first year of Westminster's MA Creative Writing (Writing the City) course and is pleased to see the programme flourish with the regular publication of *WSJ*. Brian has been published in *South Bank Poetry*, previous editions of *Capital Letters* and *WSJ*, various anthologies of short stories, curates a London-centric blog, *SouthofWatford.org*, and contributes to blogs such as *Binge.co.in*, *SuddenCardiacArrestUK.org* and *WritingHerts.com*.



KATHLEEN

TOM DRUKER

Kathleen taps as she walks, as she taps, as she walks, with a scrape and a clang, feeling textures with her hand, as she passes by buildings and static but ever-moving walls to living mazes. She swings and swings and swings horizontally, with a whip and a cut, chopping into the unknown like a cane through reeds or thick, long grass, with the muted movement of rehearsal and experience.

She waits for
the clack,
the noise and
the feeling running along the plastic and into her arm;
the connection to the vertical hazards that emerge, both
sudden and stationary, the air reconstituting itself into newborn and
ancient monoliths.

The speakers of Kathleen's phone are pressed tightly to her ear, announcing instructions of distance and direction.

"Walk ten yards," says the disembodied voice.

Each statement, a collection of single words and common phrases woven and constructed by algorithmic judgement and shorn of the natural patterns of organic diction.

Like: the low lilt of a reserved question or shy request.

Or: the distorted breaking upper and lower register of pronounced disagreement, joy and profanity.

The disembodied voice jumps and jerks in jarring microtonal shifts of information. A hollow imitation of life, constructed from the preserved articulations of a voice artist from New Zealand. A lukewarm authoritarian, accidentally recruited by well-meaning but unrequested assistance, as it always was. The correction abandoned when ham-fisted limitations were finally accepted, the voice was kept by Kathleen, because the voice grew a name and a face.

Susanne, a woman in her early 50s who had recently spent a lot of money on a haircut. Highlights and a fringe that might be too bold if she were less confident. But Susanne was never wrong, apart from when she had not been updated. And that was hardly her fault.

Susanne speaks to Kathleen more than anyone else she knows.

"Turn left in five yards," says Susanne.

Feet to yards, counted, years ago.

Counted and listed, like a children's chant.

A poppyseed

A line

A barleycorn

A digit

A finger

And an inch

A nail

A palm

A hand

A shaftment
 And then you have a link
 A span
 A foot
 A yard
 An ell
 A fathom
 A rod (or a perch, or a pole)
 A chain
 A furlong, also a stade
 And that
 Is how
 A mile is made

Now nothing but instinctive calculations, the needless anxiety over inaccuracy remedied by Susanne herself.

Kathleen proves her aptitude and autonomy every moment she is awake. She proves it with every journey, every footfall, every commute, every trip from her desk to the bathroom and back without tripping or bumping into furniture or door frames.

She proves it with every compliment on her appearance, her sartorial choices guided only through tactile consideration and curated advice. Yet still, she was expected to answer questions.

Do you hear better than normal?

Can you feel more when you touch?

Do you see with your hands?

Are you seeing anyone? Ha, ha! I mean...

Would you like to meet my friend?

He's really nice. And he's in a wheelchair so I think

you'll get on.

"Walk ten yards," says Susanne.

For two spans and a poppyseed, Kathleen's velvet skirt trails

through the pool of rapidly drying lager, deliberately emptied onto the floor outside an Eritrean cafe by Jane, who drinks there in the morning when the shutters are closed. With a staccato report of laughter, Jane empties her tin in bitter retort to a request to move. She is met in turn with pursuit by broom and harsh words, seconds before Kathleen passes.

This effortless escalation, another part of the ever-building and evaporating waves, the constantly regenerating sea of noise that washes around and over Kathleen, who registers the lager smell amongst worse. All familiar and routine encounters on her commute. It does not slow her stride.

"In four yards turn right."

Kathleen hears the excited crackle of school children occasionally breaking into jagged and unkind shapes. She feels the brush of polyester uniform against her arm and inadvertently becomes a momentary cast member, a cameo in their unending drama.

She feels her stick connecting with legs.

She hears a muttered apology.

And then chastisement,
and mimicry.

Kathleen stops for a moment, to make sure they have all passed by.

Adjusting the phone, testing with her stick, Kathleen resumes her journey to the bus stop, knowing she is nearby, knowing the turning she needs to take. On to the main road, always busy at times approaching nine and departing half three.

"You have completed the first part of your journey. 172 Bus in 2 minutes."

Kathleen anticipates groups of people. Their usual projected anxieties. Their need to force assistance. She edges closer to the side of the pavement in anticipation of them all, and the arrival of her

bus. Kathleen's stick taps a heavy, unexpected weight.

Her first thought is a bin, but her probing foot confirms the pavement's edge, which would place it in the road. The clicking of an idling diesel engine, the gritty heat and smell of working metal confirms a vehicle. She can feel the weight of it in the air.

Kathleen taps and finds the space behind the front wheel to try and locate the driver doors. But it feels wrong. Sounds wrong. The engine is an unfamiliar pitch and more often than not the buses would be running on electric as they collect and deliver passengers.

There are gaps where there should be paneling or chassis, offering no resistance to her stick.

The size of the wheel seems monstrous.

"Hello?"

And Kathleen realises what is happening.

"Hello Madame?"

As she's trying to listen to the wise voice of Susanne.

"Can I help you?"

But someone keeps talking.

"Excuse me! Hello!"

Kathleen is trying to listen to Susanne but the voice gets louder talking in broken English.

"Hello! Hello Madame! Please, hello!"

Kathleen is trying to listen to Susanne; **"What bus are you trying to get?"** but the unfamiliar voice persists.

"Hello? Please, hello!" Along with a hand, a gentle touch on her arm,

uninvited and

unwanted and

assuming,

but frequent

and expected, she still wants to hit it away, to make it never

touch her again.

"Hello madame, do you need help? Which bus are you waiting for?" The unfamiliar voice says and then, **"Can I help? Are you ok?"**

"I think she's ok," says another voice, this time thankfully local and familiar, but still unwanted, Kathleen tries to ignore the babble of the living sea. She waits for it to pass, for the reaching wave to break, but the first voice returns. The unfamiliar one.

Kathleen can hear him talking, saying, **"Someone should do something, it isn't fair for her to live like this."**

She tries to ignore the growing discussion about her, the two voices, and more, all unfamiliar and accented. Kathleen can feel the words tugging on her like the pulling and cutting of anaesthetised skin under surgery. Numb and removed and painless, but all the more grotesque and sickening for it. The nonconsensual words.

"Can't they do something to help her?"

Kathleen continues as usual, tuning the discussion into the white noise of traffic and people and occasional animals and construction and building work and choral discord of the city. The hands return. The unfamiliar hands clasp Kathleen's shoulder and she tenses again,

"Madame can I help? Please can I help you?"

Kathleen speaks in a far lower volume than the screeching of schoolchildren or the aggressive release of hydraulics. Quieter than the passing waterfowl that fly in formation overhead, loudly punctuating mammalian chatter and mechanical dirge. Kathleen speaks just loud enough to be heard.

"If you don't leave me alone, I'll have you deported."

The hands freeze, before recoiling. The voice falls silent and retreats into the sea.

"172 Bus in 0 minutes," says Susanne.

Kathleen readies her Freedom Pass, and the doors of the bus

open for her to board.

TOM DRUKER is a writer from South East London. He lives on the bank of the Quaggy with a rambunctious cat named Itzhak and a bad knee. *tomdruker.com*



CLOUD ON THE STARBOARD BOW

LORELEI BACHT

A slow wind rises. Old sails fill.
The peaceful sky begins
To roll along the beach - by boat,
We may find a way out.

Wind blows harder, boat picks up speed,
Takes off into the waves.
With sailor's feet, smug gin tonic,
We leave landlock behind.

At large, space in liquid, expands
To the seams of the sky.
The boat rolls on, faster, faster,
We think we are rock stars,

Then find ourselves in the middle
Of a shoal of children.
“It’s bad for us,” he jokes, but helps
The children climb aboard.

Pirate family, we sail on
Until we come across
A troubling sight: “What is this cloud?
It is shaped just like me.”

Dad looks away. He pulls the rope
And says: “It’s Emily.
Everybody thinks she’s lovely.”
Mislaide, mother retreats.

Explosions. It is a war zone,
Thunder of pickaxes,
Smokey men in their overcoats
Take the boat to pieces.

Upside down hull as a shelter,
There is time to ponder—
And decide that storms should not end
The journey still to make.

Look, we could build another boat
With those planks. I can stitch
My handkerchiefs, my old dresses
To make a brand-new sail.

Hard work, a pinch of salt, magic,
Soul of a flying fish.
He hangs the sails up one morning,
It is not quite the same,

But it will do.
The boat glides on,
And we begin to breathe
Again. This time, knowing that fear
Is in on the voyage.

LORELEI BACHT is a European poet relearning to live and write in
the last throes of her thirties. *instagram.com/the.cheated.wife.writes*
and *instagram.com/lorelei.bacht.writer*.



LIFE HAS NO MORE TIME

PS ELLIS

Loosely based on Evliya Çelebi's (1611-1682) *'Book of Travel'* with references to the Ottoman Princess, Ismihan Kaya (1633-1659) and her husband Melek, an Ottoman statesman.

17th Century, Turkey

Lured into a mystical net and trapped like a common fish, I fell completely in love with her. She moved with the grace of a dancer, someone who knows the beat of a drum, and the lilt of a flute. She had the presence of a princess, and people gazed at her when she walked by. Every time I saw her, I heard an enchanting echo of bells, which vibrated in the air like an invisible suggestion, enticing me towards her. Eager to meet this beauty, I stepped where her feet had touched the ground, but whether she was protecting her vanity, or I was love-struck, I always lost her.

One morning, I decided to track her as a hunter would an animal. I was intrigued to find out whom her family were, but it was not long before she knew I was behind her. She led me out of our citadel, past the farmers with their goats and chickens, beyond the last few trees and shrubs. Then out into an unfamiliar terrain with wild dogs, where sometimes I would lose sight of her, and then she would reappear further ahead.

We continued like this until the sun was high in the sky, and I saw a community of tents. It was then that a most dreadful feeling came over me, as if I had suddenly received bad news. I pushed the feeling down and pressed onwards. There was a guard positioned outside the biggest tent. He beckoned. I looked around for her, but her absence only made me curious. When I arrived at the tent, he pulled open the curtains to the interior where he took off his shoes, and indicated to me to do the same. We walked through a second curtained doorway and into a larger inner chamber. I gazed at the colours and varieties of woven rugs on the floor. The man gestured to me to sit down. He sat opposite, regarding me carefully.

Suddenly, I overheard a soft tinkle of bells, like the ones that jingled when I saw my beloved, and an incredibly tall person entered. This person was the most feminine looking man I had ever seen, for although he wore a man's attire, he had no beard nor stubble, but held himself with poise; his shoulders back as if he had ridden many a horse. He breathed heavily from wide nostrils, and I found myself at odds with his physical presence. My mind spun, as I tried to work out what it was that confused me. I could imagine this man playing musical instruments, narrating tales, wallowing in a trance dance and, commanding an army.

"As Salaam alaykum," the person greeted me, with a female voice.

"Wa Alaykum as salaam," I replied.

"I am a woman," she smiled with one side of her mouth,

like a woman who had spent a long time in the company of men as an equal. "You however, are an enigma," she said, stepping closer to me. "You are a seer. You have second sight and yet, *I can see* you had no teacher. No initiation. You are not a woman, or you wear a clever disguise." She turned away from me, and without looking back commanded, "Strip."

The man who had been lounging on cushions, stood up with a surprising alertness. Outnumbered, I was not ashamed to remove my outer garments, but I did not like being instructed by a female. Was it usual in tribes, such as these, to have matriarchs? I began to wonder what her skills were, because to be in a position of power, the woman must have proved her worth. Surely, she was the enigma and not me. I thought of all the times in my life, when in the presence of a woman, I would have hastily loosened my clothing, depending on the urgency, but this was no such moment.

She began to mock me, "A man like you is used to getting his own way, but not however, being told to do so by the more receptive gender."

I untied my sash, and dropped it at my feet. I looked at the guard who was presiding over me. Why did I have to prove my manhood? Had they never come across a man with inner vision? The guard made a small tilt of his head, to remind me that I should continue undressing. Next, I removed my kaftan. The woman, who had not offered her name or title, did not look in my direction until I dropped my last garment. Then she made a movement with her hand that made me think of a salmon in water waiting to jump, which indicated that I should dress - quickly.

Once fully clothed, she stepped towards me, but this time I felt more uncomfortable than standing naked in front of strangers. I tried to level my eyes to hers. She stood close to me. I could smell sandalwood, and feel her particular presence. I felt as if she was looking into my soul. I wondered if she could see my future. The

more time I spent with her, the more I disliked her, for she was foreign in her temperament. I could feel her breath on my nose, but surprisingly, this was not unpleasant. I wondered about her parentage.

"The wisdom is passed down the female line. From the maternal side to the daughter. There are no exceptions. And yet, here you are," she said.

She studied me for a while longer. I stood mute, as if my tongue had been cut out. She shivered, but did not step back as though challenged, yet unafraid.

"A Jinn . . . I see."

As if awoken from a daydream I spoke, "No! You don't see *anything*. I have no demon inside me."

"You are cursed, but Sahar wouldn't have brought you here, unless you were useful."

"Who?"

"You are a seer! Ah-ha! She enchanted you. Of course."

There was a lengthy silence between us, as things slowly slotted into place like a geometric pattern in my mind. The mysterious woman, the way she walked, the gentle, and alluring tinkling of bells . . .

The nomadic woman, for I am not privy to her name, has prophesied of Ismihan Kaya, the pious Ottoman princess, sharing her wealth with the poor, and I am to find out why. . .

I am to spy on her husband, Melek. I am not in the line of prophecies, they do not interest me, but I am interested in gold.

Thus, it is that I awake to find myself hanging upside down in a tree by my ankles. No, I am not to be executed. I already have been. They caught me spying in the palace, and made me jump off a cliff. This was no ordinary cliff edge, with a simple drop, which would have

procured a much-preferred sudden death. At the bottom was a gully with cold-water rapids awaiting me, and rocks as jagged as bear traps.

The Sultan's guards with breath like latrines, told me to invoke the name of the Lord, but I wasn't ready to meet my slayer. With my hands tied in front of me in a mockery of prayer, and my feet tied tighter than an old woman's mouth, two of the guards with smiles like stray dogs made me jump. I fell fast, like a boulder on its way to join its soul mate of rock. Branches snapped, belted and slapped at my intrusion as I whipped past leaves, and small branches before skewering my limbs, tied in knots made of coarse rope, on larger, more aged parts of a tree. The blows to my back, neck and head rendered me into an unconscious state, all be it - blissful. How long I dangled there, a floppy ragdoll of precarious means, I do not know, but I awoke to the mocking sound of bird song.

My torso is twisted and a twig has pierced my face. I dared not look around me for fear, of how much further I have to fall. There and then, I weep for forgiveness and for mercy from whom - I am not sure, and then in desperation, my prayers become poignant.

Please Allah, be merciful.

In return, I hear a wind that ricochets the leaves like the teasing tongue of a lover who has no intention other than to taunt.

God. All Merciful. Perfectly Just. Forgive me!

My arm is wedged at an awkward angle between a branch and the trunk of the tree. Pain wrenches at my stomach, and makes me retch. There is a fire burning in my back where it is twisted. The pain and the fire volley in my body, until my mind slides into unconsciousness.

A hawk wakes me with a sharp *kee-ahh, kee-ahh*. This bird signifies my spirit's departure, and the arrival of death. The pain is so acute, that my torso contracts on its own, and my core lurches with

huge involuntary spasms. Now, I fear the death that will meet me, for I do not know my own body; it does not take commands from me. The contractions make me wretch as my abdominals release a huge spasm, my arm is torn from its trap, and I fall vertically through more branches. By some cruel means, I flip around and land on the ground unceremoniously as my ankles receive my full weight.

As my soul departs, a vast assimilation of Light, of consciousness, enters me. Everything in the universe exists and exits, simultaneously. This is a journey into the unknown, and I am ready for whatever it has to offer. Feeling as though I float on my back, I see a darkness overhead sprinkled with stars and comets. Time here is eternal, because nothing matters any more. Prayers, corrections and praises are defunct. I wonder if I can stay like this forever: I have never felt so safe, so wonderful; this is the opiate that I searched for— no woman, or smoke, nor drink has ever felt this good.

Ahead, a grey mass tumbles towards me. I think it resembles water pouring forth from a huge jug. As the mass lollops from one side to the other, I notice it is dense in some areas, and transparent in others. It dives towards me in a direct movement, I feel my spirit quiver, and I watch helpless as the mass advances. Snake-like heads come towards me. I find myself wishing that the Light had stayed – for I no longer want to be floating in the unknown. The profusion of grey matter envelops me. Tails and heads try to enter my mouth. Unable to fight them off with my arms, I feel myself caught in a struggle whereby I know that no matter how long this commotion continues, I have to endure its rapture, and resist the substance for as long as my soul can hold out.

A chemical energy increases upon my soul, and I begin to feel a weight. Suddenly, I know that the thing is making me into a solid, and if it succeeds, I will come back to the pain that I endured in life.

The next time I awaken, I see Sahar. My heart tears with more pain than I feel elsewhere. Surely, it is not possible to feel this much for one person.

“Beloved,” I cry.

And in that out breath, I give up.

PAULINE completed her MA in Creative Writing 2020. She is an aspiring writer, artist and mum.



A PLANE LANDS AS THE NIGHT CALLS

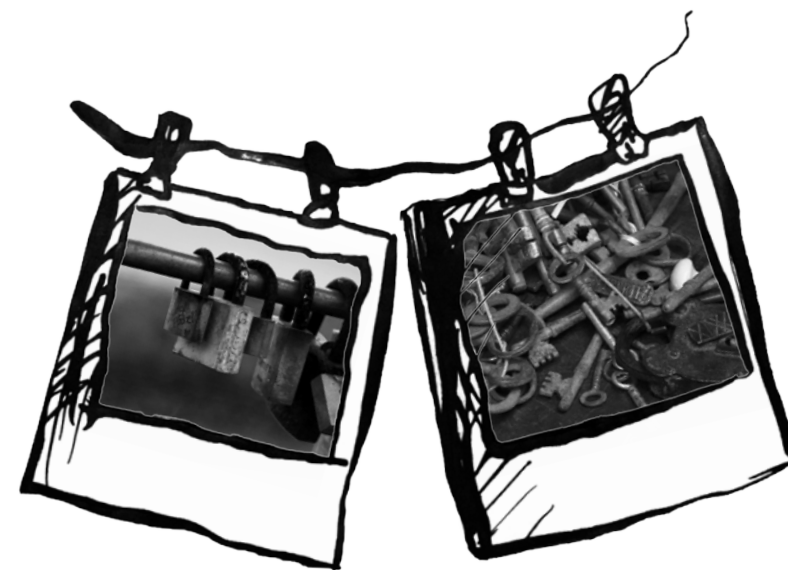
MARK MILLICENT

A barking dog yelps as the first star appears.
A bat glides by as he dives and veers,
clicking and sounding as the sun is now gone.
The soft pollen smells of the dry, warm evening,
the fragrance of the oncoming night.
People eat their dinners, their TVs burning bright.
Shouts across the water
the louder call of geese,
always the cicadas and crickets
and the world at peace with itself.
This all is my universe.
I can see you, he said through a hole in the clouds
looking down as I look up.

Photo ©victoriatrentacoste

A plane flies over and we watch
Its approach to LAX.
It dips a wing and banks to the left,
flies inland then turns around
towards the ocean and lands into the wind.
It will spill out its crew and passengers
Into the sunken arrivals
on the first floor, departures below.
There is a restaurant at the end of the runway
called the Proud Bird. It has several
old aircrafts dotted around its grounds.
Not far from them is Thai Dishes,
a great Thai restaurant if you are hungry after your journey.
Then the overpass of the 105 Freeway crossing the 405.
I used to live near there.

MARK MILLICENT is a UK writer and illustrator based in the USA. He works in the advertising and film world of Los Angeles living in the Santa Monica Mountains at present. [instagram.com/markmillicent](https://www.instagram.com/markmillicent).



LAST TRAIN TO MORDEN

SIMON KEWIN

Veena worked nights on the Northern Line, reading *next station* announcements to the passengers on the tube.

The next station is Angel. This is a Northern Line train to Morden. Please mind the gap.

The skill was in reproducing precisely the same tone each time, the same pleasantly enounced set of syllables. She prided herself on it. Of course, the travellers out there on the London underground thought it was a machine talking. They would have been horrified to learn a human had to read out the same list over and over, twelve-hour shifts at a time. But machines were expensive, prone to breaking down, and minimum-wage migrants from warmer lands in the south were cheap and plentiful.

It was skilled work, but dull. Still, it was a step up. She'd started out working the lifts in a Swindon multi-story car park. Her first job in England; watching flashing blobs on a computer screen

and wondering where the *green and pleasant land* was. She'd had a strictly limited repertoire of phrases to communicate there. *Going up, going down, six floors* and a *mind the doors*. Not much scope for variation. She'd lasted a month.

Now, she cast an expert eye over the scratched display board in front of her. The entire Northern Line was set out in black lines, little bulbs lighting up in sequence to indicate the locations of the trains from Edgware and High Barnet in the north to Morden in the south. On the tube, at least, you got the roll-call of exotic place names.

Burnt Oak ... Golders Green ... Highgate ... Tooting Bec ... Elephant and Castle ...

She'd loved the sounds of them at first, the shape of them in her mouth. They'd sounded like the words of some incantation or a nonsense lullaby she might sing to her child. Now, she kept her sanity by deviating from her script. It was a dangerous game. Somewhere, she'd been assured, someone sitting in another little room monitored her words. They could be listening-in at any time. And instant dismissal would most likely mean instant deportation. Still, she couldn't resist. Life was to be enjoyed. An adventure. She knew their announcements were fuzzy and hard to hear out there on the trains. At one in the morning most passengers would be too sleepy or drunk to notice her little ad-libs.

This is the last train to Morden. We all have to reach the end of the line one day. Please try to make the most of your journey there.

Or,

This is a Northern Line train to Morden. It's the end of the day and you're heading south. At the end of the day, I think we're all heading south aren't we?

Or,

This is the Morden train. Try changing to a different line and heading somewhere else instead. You never know where you might end up.

She limited herself to once, twice a week, loving the thrill of it, imagining the passengers out there shaking puzzled heads and thinking they must have misheard.

But that night, the knock on the door of her cramped, drab room deep in the warren of Warren Street station made her gasp mid-announcement. Her heart lurched within her chest as someone pushed her door open...

William stared out of the dark window of the rattling, jolting tube train. He could see only himself and the people around him reflected in the glass, all studiously avoiding one another's eyes. Five years now he'd been making this journey up and down the black line on the tube map. An hour and a half into London in the morning, an hour and a quarter home again in the evening. On a good day.

Here he was, making his own way in the world. He'd loved it, at first, felt so grown-up, so independent. Now he felt trapped. Days of writing his own reports and reading reports written by others. His little two-room flat in the evening, everything always exactly as he'd left it. A thirty-year mortgage kept him on the straight and narrow. God, he was such a cliché. Sometimes he stayed in town and drank himself senseless with his workmates. Sometimes he didn't. On the way home he would look at the other commuters – thirty, forty, fifty years old – and wonder if that would be him one day, still making the same journey. Counting down the stops to Morden.

On occasion, the prospect alarmed him so much he wanted to leap from his seat, shout with rage, hurl himself from the moving train and race off laughing through the tunnels to escape. But, of course, the thought was ridiculous, and he never did.

... but it wasn't her supervisor, wasn't anyone she recognized. The man standing there looked hesitant rather than angry. She switched the microphone to mute.

"Hello? May I help you?" She kept her tone calm, measured, as if she were still following her script.

"It is you," said the man. "Making the announcements on the trains. It is, isn't it?"

"What makes you say that?"

"I recognize your voice."

"How did you get in here?"

He shrugged. "I just asked enough people 'till someone told me where you were. I *knew* you weren't a machine."

She looked away, glancing at her board. A train was approaching Archway but she had a moment. "You aren't supposed to be able to tell me from a machine," she said. "That's the whole point."

"Oh, you're very good, don't get me wrong. Only I heard what you said. About *changing lines*. No one else noticed, but I had to come and find you."

"Why?"

"To ask you two questions."

She held up her hand to stop him while she switched the microphone to the Archway train and made the announcement. When she finished, she turned back to him.

"Why?" she said again.

"Because you sounded like you knew where you were going. Because I liked your voice. Because you made me laugh."

"Two questions, then, no more. Go on."

She saw him pause for a moment. What was the English phrase? *Plucking up courage*.

"Okay, right, here goes. I'm hoping you answer *yes* to at least one of them. First question: will you marry me? And, failing that, second question: will you maybe come out for a drink?"

His smile hovered somewhere between roguish and terrified. Mostly terrified.

"What is your name?" she asked.

"William. Will."

Her mother had always said one could judge someone by their eyes. His were gentle, she thought, the eyes of a kind man. She couldn't help glancing over the rest of him, at things her mother had not told her about. She liked what she saw there, too.

She looked back to the board filling the wall of her cramped, drab room. A train heading south approached Kentish Town. She decided to ignore it. Maybe it was time the people on it found their own way. Maybe it was time for a stop of her own.

"Meet me on the southbound platform in ten minutes," she said. "We can take the train together. For the drink I mean, not the other."

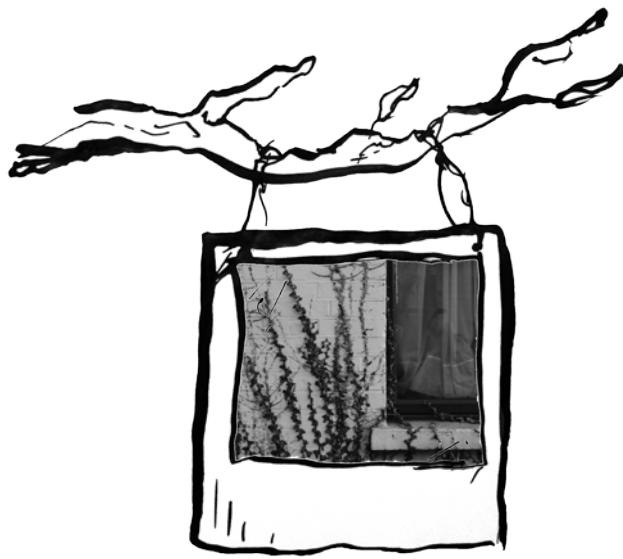
She saw him hesitate for a moment. "No," he said. "Not the northern line. Let's take a different train. Or a bus. Or just walk somewhere. Anywhere. Let's *go* and see where we end up."

She smiled at him, nodded in appreciation.

"Yes," she said. "I think I'd like that."



SIMON KEWIN is the author of over 100 published short and flash stories. His works have appeared in *Analog*, *Nature*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Abyss and Apex* and many more. He is also the author of a growing number of novels. He lives deep in the English countryside. Find him at simonkewin.co.uk.



WELLS STREET JUNIOR

VOICES OF THE FUTURE

SARAH KETEB

It all happened that day, the day when I decided to run away from home. I decided to as I'd had enough, more than enough. All I had been doing was working, doing chores and babysitting my younger siblings. I never had time to sit down and relax.

I woke up, packed my bag before anyone could stop me. I didn't plan where I was headed so I hurried as far as I could away from home. It was a cold, windy day and I didn't have enough layers on to keep me warm, but still I didn't stop.

I carried on with my journey thinking about what Ma would think when she found out I had escaped, however that didn't matter to me as much as I ran further away.

I was just happy to be away from the madness.

After a while, my legs started to pain terribly, so badly that I thought I would have to sit down. I didn't though.

I had arrived at a forest. A dark, spooky forest. The whistling breeze swiped at my face, so cold that my cheeks went numb. The leaves crunched with every step I took, trees glared down and the darkness laughed at me.

Then I heard something...

The sky had hit ink black, I couldn't see further than the leaves just ahead of me. I was too petrified to walk forward. The sound of the leaves munching had gotten louder and louder, closer and closer.

I didn't know what to do. I tried to run, but I tripped on a root and felt something cold quickly wrap itself around my legs. I reached out to grab on to something, anything, as I started being dragged backwards into a dark hole. I screamed for Ma, knowing she couldn't hear me.

I turned my head to see who or what was taking me, but all I could make out was a pair of shining, evil eyes. All of the moonlight had disappeared: I was stuck with this mysterious creature...

SARAH KETEB is a 10 year old, aspiring author. She gets inspired by various pieces she reads, especially *Seaglass* by Eloise Williams and *The House On Hawthorn Road* by Megan Wynne. Sarah writes for children and teenagers and hopes that her readers are able to relate real feelings to her work.



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