

the Creative Writing Society

Compendium



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Winter 2020

Acknowledgements

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Our gratitude goes out to all of our wonderful and talented society members whose submissions made this compendium possible.

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Editor's Welcome

Hello and welcome to our inaugural Creative Writing Society Compendium! Everything you're about to read has been written, edited and produced by members of the Creative Writing Society, and has been discussed and improved in our weekly meetings. This will be a digital, termly publication where we showcase the work of our talented, wonderful group of writers, in a collection of prose and poetry with a variety of genres and styles.

We're incredibly proud to have this ~~in your hands~~ on your screen. This has been a massive project for us and we've been delighted with the level of involvement within the society. Everyone involved has worked incredibly hard to make this happen and we'd like to thank all involved.

If you're a writer or just enjoy hearing others' writing, we'd love to see you at one of our meetings! The details are all on the next page, and if you'd be interested in getting involved with our next issue, get in touch!

President's Welcome

The Aberdeen University Creative Writing Society (AUCWS) was founded during the 1980s to offer students a platform to share, develop, read, and listen to creative pieces. Its goal is to create a welcoming place where writers can improve their work through encouragement and feedback. The society meets once a week to read out and listen to pieces of writing, followed by a post-meeting "social hour."

Now, throw away any assumptions you may have had about the AUCWS being a "stuffy poets' society"—we are a community of diverse, mischief-loving and passionate people that celebrate all kinds of writing and all kinds of writers.

This year, as we all know, has been complicated by the unfortunate circumstances of the pandemic. Nevertheless, the society has persevered, and I cannot fully express my pride and gratitude for all the extraordinary writing our devoted members have submitted over this period of time.

Welcome to students and non-students, writers and readers alike, the society has its (zoom) doors open to all. We hope you'll join us!

How to find us?

If you enjoy anything we put in this Compendium, then you might be interested in checking us out on our various platforms!

Please send any inquiries or submissions you might have to our email address at creativewriting.aberdeen@gmail.com

Under non-apocalyptic circumstances, we would meet in person, in the upper floor of **O'Neill's** Pub (9-10 Back Wynd, Aberdeen, AB10 1JN) at 7PM every Thursday. Alas, world events deny us our usual meetings—but worry not! We have a digital version in place. As of right now, we meet over **Zoom**, at **7PM every Thursday**. The link for each session is given out on our Facebook group a little while before the event starts.

Speaking of, do join our **Facebook** group: The AU Creative Writing Society Page. It's the easiest way not to miss any updates. We also have a society-wide group chat—if you want in all you have to do is ask!

We also have an **Instagram account**, and a **Discord**.

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/68588022409>

Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/au_creativewriting/

Discord: <https://discord.gg/Xe7bV8K>

E-mail: creativewriting.aberdeen@gmail.com

We sincerely hope you enjoy this publication, especially if you decide to join us because of it!

Happy Reading!

Aidan Armstrong

A Long Walk

Content Warning: Suicide

The world looks different in the dark. A short walk on the path to the pier stretches out for an eternity. The steep hills and dramatic edges turn to cold monoliths in the colour sapped night. The unsightly metal poles reaching into the sky turn to havens of light. The dark blue rivers turn to black tears in the land, pulled seaward.

The tide is high around the coast, and the world feels just a little bit smaller. I usually listen to music as I walk, but not tonight. The silence feels appropriate. It's still. The wind is low for the time of year. There's nothing to hear but the rushing water and the sound of my footsteps.

Calum is expecting to meet me at the bus stop tomorrow. If I were to disappear, he'd be the first to know. He'd probably assume I'd missed the bus. I'm unreliable. I think of Anna. We fought recently. She probably won't expect to hear from me for a few days. Probably for the best.

I pass by the staircase. At low tide it leads to the stones by the riverside. I used to walk over them instead of the road. The same journey, but it felt like more of an adventure. At this time of night, the stairs lead directly into the water. I sit for a while, and watch the currents lapping at my feet.

From the lowest stair, the rushing of the river drowns out whatever noise there could be. Cars would pass by unnoticed to me but for their lights on the water. I can see the pier from here. I'm more than halfway there. I think of the others. Calum would probably text me asking what the issue is. Failing a response, I imagine he would find the others, and they'd continue on with their day. People fall out of the loop all the time. It rarely means anything major.

I should keep walking, but I don't. I don't have all night, or maybe I do? The pier is empty. It's always empty. Sure there are cameras, but that's hardly my concern. So long as I'm alone there's no rush. I'll sit for five minutes more.

Over the river I hear a new noise. A soft metallic clang from above. The handrail. I turn to see what caused it and find a short man in a green raincoat. He faces me, one gloved hand grasping the handrail, the other stuffed into his jacket pocket. He smiles down at me, before raising his hand to wave. I wave back, hoping he won't ask many questions. He begins his descent. He reaches the second last step, and lowers himself down to sit just behind me. I say nothing. I turn back and try to focus on the river.

"Planning a wee dip?" I turn to face him again as my attention is torn from the water. I smile.

“Aye, maybe.” He gives a light laugh. There’s something comforting about that.

“You’ll catch your death in there.”

I sit in silence. He means well. I look back towards the pier as I wait. I don’t find what I expect.

There are lights on the land. Shining through the windows of that little grey building, flickering on a boat crawling on the water below. Far from the empty, isolated image in my mind. What the hell are they doing at this time of night? This isn’t... I can’t...

I turn to the man setting behind me.

He smiles down at me.

I move to the handrail, and pull myself to my feet.

I climb past him up the steps and onto the road. I begin the walk home. As I walk, a voice cries out behind me.

“Probably best. Maybe you can take a dip in the Summer.”

I don’t turn around. The streetlights have long since faded. With shaking hands I fumble for the torch on my phone, to lead me back up the path.

“Aye. Maybe in the Summer.”

A Walk by the Styx

The body lay at the side of the pavement. Its neck was nestled between a lamp post and a knee-high wall adorned with white roughcasting. Its still, soulless eyes betrayed no expression behind the thick glassy film which had encased them. Its head was slightly twisted, causing one eye to face heavenward, the other hellbound. Its fleshy tongue hung cartoonishly from its open jaws, frozen in a grotesque moment of pain or submission.

It was ignored by most who passed.

There was little reason to stop and mourn for the spent life of a seagull.

For some reason it spoke to me. It hadn't been the first body I'd seen. There had been many unpleasant mornings that had led me to a rotting sheep at the foot of a hill or the grisly 'presents' of a housecat. There was nothing particularly gruesome about it. No blood, no sign of struggle or violence. As deaths in nature go, it seemed oddly peaceful. But for some, inexplicable reason, it stayed with me.

I couldn't say for sure what had killed it. I still wonder how it had ended up in its final resting place. Had it somehow died there, comfortably placed between metal and stone? Was it moved there by some disturbed individual with time (and questionable standards of hygiene) on their hands? No theory I can form comes close to being satisfactory.

In truth, I hadn't stopped to wonder at the time. There was a question far more dominant in my mind regarding the fate of the creature.

"Is that a chip on its head?"

There it was. Bright as day, a solitary chip placed neatly on the head of the dead bird. An offering perhaps. A sign of respect from its surviving seagull brethren, for long did they toil surrounding the chippies and the supermarkets. Seeking, scavenging, sometimes hunting. They had long been a nuisance in the town. Mostly harmless throughout the day, the creatures often appeared pleasant. Atmospheric, even.

But there is evil behind the seagull's eye. An unspoken (for they cannot speak), unrivalled (for they cannot be matched), and unstoppable (for they most certainly cannot be stopped) plotting. They watch from the sky. They wait at the shoreline. They bide their time.

By most hours, they are but a detail of a quiet seaside town, but as the time comes, as the school bell rings and the doors unlock, the sky blackens beneath white wings.

Diving, scratching, pecking, snatching. Their hunger may be bounded but their appetite persists. The accursed shrieking from above signalling that one terrible truth. The hunt has begun.

Surely such creatures would leave no tribute? Surely they would feel no sympathy for their fallen brother? They would not waste but a single morsel on a corpse and yet, whoever or whatever had placed it, the chip remained. Uneaten. Unsnatched.

A silent charity. A ceremonial offering. Perhaps a final kindness. For when the seagull finally finds itself at the river Styx, Charon shall not go unpaid. No coin shall serve as a worthy obol for the bird's life (They wouldn't rest on the eyes anyway), but a chip? Ah, now that is a worthy payment for the winged wastrel. Charon shall demand his due, and the seagull may tilt his head in offering. A bony hand will reach down and receive, not take, a single pole of sliced and fried potato. The skinless fingers will place the payment gratefully behind absent lips, and with that, the seagull's passage shall be secured. No wailing, wandering soul shall it be, for when the ferryman asks, the seagull shall give, and the journey to the world beyond will at last begin.

I can only assume wings don't work in the underworld.

I can't say for sure how long the body lay there. A week. Maybe a few. Depressingly, longer than the chip.

Poisoned

We laughed
In the cigarette smoke
Parting our burning lips

We sang
By the dying embers
We tried not to notice

We cried
Under the streetlight's warmth
Ignoring the cool sting

On our final day
I held you tighter
Than ever before

Through tears I told you
Nothing would be the same

You wiped my eyes
And you lied

I can never decide whether you knew

A year later we had exchanged our final words
They weren't kind

So we laugh
And sing
And cry

We ignore the burning and the cold
We tell ourselves lies
And hope they'll come true

Sky of the Sea, Lie of the Land

Fish don't exist, this much I know.
No empty eyes watch from below,
No wat'ry birds follow the flow,
Nor do stingers wobble and glow,

Fish don't exist, this I will show

Beneath the waves sea birds don't fly
Across that big blue ocean sky
On wings and beaks they don't rely
To show the truth, oh how I try

Fish don't exist, please end the lie

The fish falsehood must be removed
By hearts and minds that must approve
To see the world of sea improved
Without the fish that swish and groove

Fish don't exist, how can I prove?

If water birds the fish do be
What lies beneath our birds' own sea?
Your minds I only seek to free
To lift veil and turn the key

Why god won't you listen to me?

I tested them through icy hole
I propped above my fishing pole
For hours I wait to reach my goal
To soothe the aching of my soul

The lie of fish will take its toll

I can't explain the scaly beasts
Pulled from the sea and cooked in grease
Their breaded flesh on which we feast
The hungry bites to those deceased

Fish don't exist, the lies will cease

But blind I'm not to faces blank
You think my mind, a blunt edged shank
I need not face your judgements rank
I leave you now, and none shall thank.

Fish don't exist in vacant banks.

I see your thoughts, defensive pride
"How can the fish life be denied?"
You mock and moan, with comment snide
My passioned plea you still deride

What truths can lies of fish still hide?

I wish I knew, I tell you so
My mind it wanders to and fro
If fish be gone then where to go
Defeat my ancient, lying foe

Fish don't exist, this much I know.

Ticking Carousel

Laughter screams as nearby spirals twist and spin
Reflections of grey clouds in the slanted steel
Chains rattle and clank above in the cold wind
Metal scrapes against metal with a soft screech

The laughter cuts away without warning
Leaving silence in its wake

I don't remember the first time or the last
I don't remember much of anything then
Wooden planks rot and wither through the Winters
Metal bars rust under rain as paint peels back

The silence stretches on for years
No new voice to carry the torch

I don't remember how we met

I wasn't alone for long in my return
We sat together at the foot of the chains
I felt safe there, I couldn't leave, not just yet
Five more fabled minutes encased in absence

I'm grateful. It used to be
Where
When did
What did I

I don't remember why you left

The chains rattle in the wind
I remember where I am
The moonlight beams through coloured bars
And I know I've stayed too long

Blair Center

Dust

I scrape
Silver snow and ice
From the window
With my chisel.
I look through,
Seeking.

I look for the bag,
The hat,
The wallet
But all there is
Is a litter of symbols
And numbers.

Sighing, I tear.
The silver dust
Blows away.

Every day

The alarm clock rings
The old man yawns
The toilet flushes
The clothes basket lid claps
The shower hisses
The water splashes
The drain coughs and chokes.

The teapot whistles
The cat purrs
The bacon fat sizzles
The toothbrush swishes
The Hoover splutter swirls
The music on the muffled radio blares
The family cars which pass by rev and honk.

The skipping ropes clip the tar driveways
The retriever in the neighbour's garden barks
The streetlights buzz like fluorescent bees
The kids going home from the park call out
The bike bells ring
The bounced footballs thump on the pavements
The fire crackles.

The soap opera people in their square TV houses laugh
But he sighs; he sniffs; he sobs; he weeps.

The lonely landline telephone makes no noise;
The chair opposite him is silent.
The blinds rattle as they are drawn,
The curtain rail scrapes,
The light switch clicks. Off.
The darkness taunts and
The door closes.

Has-Been

The crumpled tin can
Caravan rests on
Sagged wheels.
The rotting carcass
Of a pride and joy
On display for all;
A one-time dream
Turfed on the rough ground.

The grass caresses
The smeared windows,
Foggy, like October holidays
To Fort William,
Or rain-dampened trips
To the seaside,
Where wind-swept picnics
With soggy sandwiches
Were enjoyed all the same.

The cosy interior
Frozen
In time; home only
To the crows, to the mice,
To the green and blue mildew
Spreading like a stain
On the curtains.
A faded magazine
Folded, crushed down
The side of the cushion.
Yesteryear's style.

The soiled steel groans,
Rain running red
Like mascara streaks
On pale cheeks.
The rough rust glazes
The whitewashed
And dirt-speckled panes,
Leaving the glass
Rose-tinted
As I turn away.

Tin hat

The moulded men gather
All in a row,
Like khaki cookie cutter men
Sculpted in the image
Of the poster they saw
On the way to the match.

In a line the pals wait,
For the starting whistle.
A kissed crucifix and
Whispered prayers.
Wet to the bone and
Heavy kit.

They hear the roar and the clapping
As they pass through the tunnel.
The whistle blows; the pals run,
Slipping from the dugout
Into the screeching mist.
They keep score differently now.

Tin soldiers struck from gold
Pushed by tin-pot leaders.
Into the face of Hell the pals charge,
Brave teeth gritting,
Tearful eyes fierce.
Wounded souls in their prime,
Fading,
Calling for *Mum* through the fog with a gasp.
Towns snuffed out by the lead and the mud.

Waltzing and Waning

She dressed in white,
he dressed in blue.
Their love was impossible,
each never knew

The touch of the other.
Cosmos kept them apart.
but they had the strongest of bonds:
the linking of two hearts.

The groom is the tide and
the moon is his bride.
Two lovers who can't meet.
Yet, find them in the peace of the night –
he dances while she plays the beat.

Alice Durand Degranges

Alone

Immortal hand, immortal eye
Immortal soul but mortal heart
My mind is flawed, mistakes I made
Will haunt me till the end of times

I want to scream, I want to shout
I want to cry until I'm dry
But all I do is sit and shift
On this shit chair inside this room

A room with sounds and moving lights
Shown on a screen and people laugh
And people turn their backs on me
I doubt that any of them care

My fingers bleed scents in my nose
Nicotine, smoke, cigarette blood
Their dust so red, and embers' ash
Have left a mark inside my skin

My teeth and tongue are infected
I did not cope with this so well
I'm lost, alone, on this island
Surrounded by music and words

The music flows inside my ears
And in my head, and in my soul
The words flow out from those fingers
My hand is rot but won't let go

This pen, this tool that hurts my heart
Keeps trying to kill me today
Should I let it, should I let go
Can I ever escape this hell?

I'm lost at sea, I lost the sea;
I lost my soul, leave me alone.

House of Aphids

Wither and die
Give me their blood
Minions of mine
Harvest them all

In R'yleh, the house of flies
The tones of life have gone silent
Inside my mind lives a monster
It waits, asleep, watching me change

Minions of mine, army of green
Wither the rose that drew my blood
And give me hers, sugary, sweet
Leave her to die, she abhors me

And swarms of wasps have come for me
Have come for us, devourers
They would stop you, I won't let them
They would eat you, I will crush them

Aphids of mine, spread to the world
Leave it to rot, bring it to ruin
R'yleh will stand tall once again
And all will bow in front of us

Fight for the queen and her queendom
Her colonies, our people
The world shall fall, they knew it would
The House of Aphids proudly stands

Of the Dark Silence that Befell Me

Eight years have passed since yesterday
This wall of death is here to stay
The storm of ice rolled in the night
Rolled on the waves upon these shores

The icy wind so dark and ill
Has brought with him a fog of death
Black from the clouds, white from the ice
Grey from the sea that's frozen now

I saw the face of death last night
Just as the day faded away
A wall of fog and flying ice
Invading a grey, snowy beach

The waves, a sick grey, rolling
As darkness fell down from the North
Among the phantom snakes of snow
Scurrying on the frozen ground

They disappeared into the sand
Just as quickly as they had formed
I tried to flee but overrun
I was trapped in this silent gloom

“Vinur, vinur, sært tú meg? Gangi, here, í tokuni.”

Ophelia

I cannot play, I cannot sing,
I cannot pick up my guitar
My hands are dry, more than my eyes
Maybe they will wither and die
I wish that I could fight for you
I wish I could still do all that
I used to do but outside blows
An evil wind over my dreams
And buries them in blood and rain
Sand will cover all as the smoke
Fills the air, far away fires
Ignite new ones, so burns the world
And all will freeze and all will die

And all my art, trapped deep inside
Will wait for someone to come by
And pick it up, it won't be me
Although none but me have the key...
I'm too tired to carry on
I'll let this flaming storm take me
Maybe I'll see the wind of glass
In between towers of iron rain
I will journey to other lands
And see it all; lying on its back
On my back

I will see Failias
And Gorias
And I will go to Valinor
And Tír na nÓg.
I will lose myself in their beauty
And my heart will sing
A tune that you will hear
If you just stand by the sea
When the green breeze blows
From wave to field
And I will be one with the stars
Look up, and I will be there,
Smiling at you

And warning you of dangers ahead.
If I go dark, don't be afraid
But look around for what went wrong
The black star marks the mistakes made
And maybe your eyes will become the diamonds at the centre of the house of worms

My hands are white
And faded now
They fall apart
It's time for me
To let myself
Fly in the wind
Like ashes blown,
Picked up,
Away
I won't be back
Look out for me
I'm withered white
But a black star
I'm your black star
Shining by not
Shining at all
A gloom, a dark spot
Just a void.

Martina Ferretti

Coming Back

The snow crunched under her feet. It was the only sound Elle could hear save for her own breath and the occasional rustling in the undergrowth that came and went like the wind.

She gripped her flashlight tighter in her hands and let out a shaky exhale as she slowly shone it over the rows and rows of trees in front of her. The long, black shadows criss-crossed and melted into each other, shifting in and out of mesmerising patterns dancing on the ground. Every couple of steps, Elle could swear she saw the villa, just in the darkness ahead, but as the light washed over those spots, the house vanished.

She pressed her lips together. She *had* to be on the right path. The display of her watch read 23:46 and she frowned. Suddenly, not coming back for five years seemed like the stupidest decision in the world. She shook her head. It had to be just a little further in the wood.

The night was still and dark, so dark. Nothing seemed to exist outside of her narrow stream of light. The sky had been cloudy all day, threatening a storm, but Elle knew she had to go. It was Rose's birthday.

With a knot in her throat, she looked around. To her left was a tree she hadn't paid much attention to at first glance. It was the old pine, bent and twisted in weird shapes. It branched out from two large trunks very close to the ground, with one growing straight and the other curving towards it in a gentle arch. All around, smaller branches grew wrapped like vines on the bigger ones. Elle had always thought the tree looked like a bow—and if she pretended to be the arrow...

She pointed the flashlight straight ahead from the tree, and there it was.

Elle took off running towards the villa. It was almost hidden by the evergreens in front of it and the ivy growing on its walls covered the off-white paint. But Elle could still see the shapes underneath the plants and snow.

The main part of the mansion was a simple, elegant building jutting out slightly in front of the two wings in the back. The entrance was marked by three tall arches, one next to the other, and the entire façade was covered in windows, made dark and murky by time.

As Elle got to the entrance, she slowed down. She looked at her watch—23:58—and sighed. The heavy door was unlocked—it always was—and, as she pushed it open, she felt herself slip into her seventeen-year-old self's shoes, reverent but not hesitant.

Inside, the silence was complete.

Elle took a deep breath and made her way into the lobby, her steps echoing in the empty mansion.

23:59. Not yet.

The old grandfather clock was still there, standing tall and imposing at the end of the dusty hall, just between the two flights of stairs—of course it would be. Who else could have touched it? A surge of irritation shot up Elle's body, but she shook her head and frowned. She hadn't been there to know.

She watched as the second hand lazily tick-tick-ticked around the quadrant until it struck twelve, and the clock sang its long, slow tolls.

Midnight of her birthday. The only hour of the year when that clock was on time.

Elle closed her eyes and counted to ten, then slowly looked around.

Nobody was there.

"Rose?" she called, in a voice so low that, if another person had been there breathing, she wouldn't have heard it herself.

But her only response was silence.

"Rose," she tried again. "It's me—Elle. It's... It's been a while." The guilt made it hard to talk, as her voice trembled and the words threatened to die in her throat.

Still looking around, she made for the left-hand staircase. "I'm coming up," she said.

Trailing up the stairs, she brushed her hand over the marble railing, leaving a white streak between the thick layers of dust on top of it. Elle coughed into her elbow as a small cloud of powder went up in the air.

Everything was exactly as she remembered it, like a photo of a childhood memory, every room intact and silent as she went through them. The nursery full of toys no one played with, the library full of books no one read, the gallery full of paintings of people no one remembered.

But still, no trace of Rose.

00:12.

"Hey," said Elle as she traced the pattern on the frieze in the corridor leading up to Rose's favourite spot, the drawing room. "I know you must be upset. I'm sorry, I really am. But..." She swallowed. "I wanted to wish you a happy birthday."

A horrible thought crossed her mind and ice settled in her stomach. What if Rose was gone? What if she'd grown tired of being alone and...?

Elle shook her head. She had to be somewhere in the house.

She didn't need to look to know where to go. She imagined walking in her own faded footprints left in the dust five years before, traversing the hallways she knew so well until she was in front of the drawing room.

Again, as she hesitated to go in, she felt like she was watching herself from outside her body—twelve, scared and curious as she explored the villa for the first time. She'd been in awe of Rose, back then, the smiling girl who knew every nook and cranny of the mansion and was so much fun to play hide-and-seek with.

In the end, just like she'd done when she was twelve, Elle knocked.

And just like then, a voice answered from inside: "Come in."

Elle sucked in a sharp breath and, after a second, pushed the door open.

The fire was lit in the hearth, small playful flames crackling in the silence of the room. Everything was just as dusty as the rest of the mansion—the armchairs, the paintings, the small tables—but Elle didn't care about any of that.

Rose didn't look up from her embroidery to greet her. She was sitting on the small couch next to the fireplace, shoes abandoned on the floor and feet tucked under her body as she worked. Her copper red hair was tied in a loose ponytail and draped over her shoulder, a splash of colour over her dark blue dress. The glow from the fire danced in front of her, creating games of light and shadow on her face that made her look older, sterner.

"Rose," said Elle, turning off her flashlight.

"Hello," she replied, still without looking at her.

"How—" She bit her lip. *How have you been?* "It's good to see you."

Rose hummed. "Fancy that," she said, dryly. She didn't add anything else for a second, so Elle opened her mouth to say something but Rose cut her off: "How long *has* it been?"

Elle winced. "Five years."

"Fascinating. You know, it gets so hard to tell, sometimes."

Elle looked down at her feet. She was still rooted in place, unable to take even a single step forward. "I'm—I'm sorry," she muttered, gaze still low.

She heard a sigh, and some shuffling. She snuck a peek. Rose had put down her embroidery and was looking straight at her. The usual warmth in her brown eyes was missing, replaced by a shadow of hurt and anger. "You've grown up," she said, slowly.

"You haven't," replied Elle, before she could stop herself.

Rose laughed bitterly. "Isn't it supposed to be what today is about?" she said. "Me growing up? I must tell you, turning eighteen gets rather dull after the third time."

Silence fell again.

Seconds seemed to trickle by like minutes.

“Rose,” said Elle, quietly. “I’m sorry. I really am. I shouldn’t—I shouldn’t have left you alone all this time.”

Rose sighed again. “Come sit,” she said simply.

Like a marionette, Elle moved without really knowing how, until she was sitting down in the armchair opposite the other girl. She could see her better now, and she was painfully aware that she was yet another thing that hadn’t changed a bit in five years. Elle thought of her now-longer hair, the glasses that she had to wear, the new stretch marks on her legs, the baby fat gone from her face. But for Rose... every detail of her was the same as it always had been.

“What happened?” asked Rose, smoothing down her dress. “Why did you stop coming by?”

Elle frowned. “My family moved away. I haven’t been back here since.” She bit her lip and looked away. She knew what question would come next.

“And why did you not tell me?” Rose’s words cut through the silence, accusatory and hurt.

Elle wanted to lie and tell her that her parents had sprung it on her, that she hadn’t sat on that knowledge for months. But after five years of solitude, Rose deserved the truth—the stupid, awful truth. “I was scared,” she said quietly. “I was afraid you’d ask me to convince my family to stay.”

Rose frowned. “You know I wouldn’t have. It wasn’t your choice—I would have understood.”

Elle lowered her gaze again. “I know, I’m—”

“At least,” continued Rose, “at least I wouldn’t have spent all this time wondering if I’d done something to upset you. Or wondering if something had happened to you.” She pinned her with a hard stare.

“Oh.” Elle’s mouth fell open and her eyes went wide. “I’m sorry.” So, so sorry.

Rose shook her head. “Stop apologising. It’s done and you can’t take it back.”

“Still...”

“Stop.” She closed her eyes, then finally cracked a small smile. “You’re back. And I don’t have to wonder anymore.”

A wave of relief washed over Elle, and she returned the smile. “Happy birthday,” she said.

Rose hummed and sunk deeper into the sofa, picking her embroidery back up. “Tell me how you’ve been.”

The words just began spilling out of Elle, like a broken dam of thoughts and stories. It was nothing exciting, just her mundane life, but finally sharing it with her best friend felt like a breath of fresh air, the first in five years.

And she was twelve, seventeen, twenty-two—it didn’t matter. What mattered was that Rose was there, listening patiently as the fire crackled away and cast its warm light on both of them, as the snow began to fall outside and the clock tick-tick-ticked the night away.

But Elle would be back the next day, and Rose would be there waiting.

Totem

We leave camp at dusk.

We're excited, walking with a spring in our step that's not usually there on regular missions—because this is not one.

It's Totem night. We've been waiting for years for this, but it's finally our turn.

The leaders called us while we were making dinner, probably the worst possible time—the fire won't keep itself alive, but I'm not going to care too much about it. We knew it was coming, to some extent, but it was still a surprise. We rush into our tents, frantically changing into our full uniforms and grabbing sleeping bags and mats.

Flashlight, folding knife, water bottle, twine, poncho...

I've got everything, it's time to go.

Only four out of the seven of us are going tonight. It's annoying—we wanted to have this experience together—but we know we can't leave the group without so many older kids this year. We used to have many more members, but times change. Tonight, it's me, Emanuele, Alessia and Alberto. Tomorrow, Matilde, Elena and the other Emanuele.

We meet with the leaders behind the communal tent. They give us our letters—to be opened later tonight—and some food. A carrot, a banana, a chocolate bar. It's not much, but we'll only be gone until dawn tomorrow.

There are four eggs on the table, and only one of them is hard-boiled. Alessia goes first and chooses the one on the far left. One of the leaders tells my partner that "In medio stat virtus," virtue lies in the middle. Emanuele decides it's a trick and picks the one on the right. Alberto takes the one on the left, leaving me with the one that was in the middle.

We take off soon after that.

My brother sees us, catches up and asks me where we're going. He's twelve, at his first *real* camp. I'm fifteen, and I've been waiting for three years. I tell Matteo it's a secret, because it's supposed to be, and he frowns at me. Ema tells him to get back to work and he looks like he wants to argue, but goes anyway.

We take to the narrow forest paths and we split when we get to the creek—Alessia and Alberto to the right, Emanuele and I to the left.

I don't know how the leaders decided on the pairs, but this feels appropriate. Ema and I were on the same squad when we were eight and just starting out, and I can't help but feel that he's a good person to partner with on this particular adventure. We hated each other back then, we're friends now. We've both grown up a lot in the past seven years.

We walk for a little while in the forest, with the last sunrays filtering through the leaves and the small rocks crackling under our boots. The place the leaders marked for us isn't very far away, but we're in no hurry to get there. I sing—I always sing when we march—and Ema acts annoyed for a minute before he joins me.

We get to the abandoned mill as I draw out the last notes of *Geordie*.

Ema takes a look at it and goes, "Fuck no," but it's not like we have anywhere else to go. It's going to rain tonight, and we need a roof over our heads.

The mill is actually above us, but it doesn't look safe. The building is crumbling and overrun with plants—we decide not to risk it. We settle for a ruined room on the ground level, little more than a cave barely big enough to fit both of us. We lay Ema's poncho on the ground, under our mats and sleeping bags, and we hang mine at the entrance of our makeshift cabin. It's basically a hole punched in the wall, so we manage to cover most of it with no problem.

We know there are bugs all around us, but I try not to think about it too much. How I survived this long is beyond me.

Finally, we settle down and get started on the dinner. I cackle with glee as we discover I got the hard-boiled egg. Virtue *does* lie in the middle. He lets me have all of it out of indignation, and just drinks his raw. I offer my carrot as a peace token.

Stomachs relatively full, it's time to get to our letters.

We're supposed to pray and reflect on our journey these past four years and on the future, but we share a look that means "I won't tell if you don't." We both know there's something more interesting in those letters.

I slowly open mine, and the first thing I see is a beautiful drawing of a swan. The letter talks of leadership, of fierce protectiveness, curiosity and stubbornness. Swans are dangerous if messed with, and so am I. The tone is solemn but so warm, too. It's frankly terrifying and relieving at the same time to read this.

Our leaders wrote the letters. Some of them, I've known for a while, some of them I've met this year, one has been there since I was eight. That these people could see so clearly through me is something I didn't expect. It's scary, too, because I suddenly feel naked and vulnerable.

I finish the letter quickly, then read the whole thing a second time. It's barely a page long, but there's so much care and thought into these words. Right there, at the bottom, I see my new name, the one chosen for me by the Totem family.

Clever Swan.

I've been looking forward to this name since I was twelve. I can't imagine how devastating it would be to dislike my Totem name after so much anticipation. But I love it. I see myself in

the description of swans on the page, if not necessarily in some of the more positive attributes or that adjective. It's special, to be part of the Totem family, to have a name that only a few select people can ever know. It's like I'm part of something bigger, but secret and intimate at the same time. I savour this sensation, knowing it's not going to last. I like my name, and I turn to Ema to ask about his.

He isn't done yet. It turns out that, out of the seven of us, his letter is the longest at over three pages, while mine is the shortest. He keeps laughing to himself and muttering about how certain leaders must have written certain parts. I'm pretty sure I heard something about him being called a skirt-chaser, but I don't ask him about it. When he's done, we read each other's letters and we share our new names. His is *Absent-minded Ram*. He likes it, in a funny and awkward way. I think it fits.

After that, we talk.

It's just chit-chat, mindless babbling that goes on late into the night, even though we have to be back at camp by five in the morning.

At one point, he notices a giant slug on the low ceiling and we bicker over who is going to take it out—I win, because he's less squeamish than me.

We ramble about school and future plans. Neither of us shares that this is going to be our last camp.

It's only when he tells me to "Fix the poncho over the entrance, or the dark is going to get inside," that we decide to call it a night. Personally, I am more worried about boars, rain and wind, but sure, the dark is the thing that *can* and *will* get inside. I fix the damn thing anyway and we shuffle inside our sleeping bags. I set my flashlight on the ground and wish Ema goodnight, but he's already out.

It's not as uncomfortable as one would think, especially after a day of working and walking. I fall asleep quickly too, even though it's chilly outside.

The alarm comes too early for my liking. We groan as we get up, still warm and sleepy, but we know we have to go.

The flashlight is now on a ledge about thirty centimetres above the ground, and neither of us has any idea how it got there. Ema mumbles something about ghosts while we pack up, but I think my long-absent somnambulism is a more likely culprit.

We set off early in the morning, in the misty air of the dawn. We don't sing this time—everything is too still and quiet.

We get to camp first, with Alessia and Alberto only a few minutes behind us. They excitedly share their names: Alberto is *Practical Platypus*; Alessia is *Thunderous Cougar*, but she misread it as *Strawberry-like Cougar*. We realise this and correct her a couple of days later, when she signs our letters with her Totem name and a little doodle of a strawberry.

The leaders are all already awake, in full uniform as well. They give us some breakfast—biscuits and chocolate milk—before unleashing us onto the camp.

This is something else I've been looking forward to. We sneak back to our kitchens, which are nothing more than wooden structures nearby our tents, and grab pots and pans.

This is today's alarm. Usually, it would be three long whistles calling everyone to morning exercises, but today it's the four of us yelling and banging metal together to wake the poor sleeping souls. The novices—the first-years—are upset and confused, everyone else is quietly resigned, but after some grumpiness the day goes on as normal. We change back into our regular clothes and go about the usual activities. This is a bit *unusual*, actually, but we have to wait until tomorrow to finish the Totem ceremonies properly, when the other fourth-years return from their missions.

At dusk, the scene repeats itself.

Matilde, Elena and the other Emanuele get ready and disappear into the woods, the first two as a pair and the latter on a solo mission. The evening is slow. Everyone is cranky about having to do more work two nights in a row, and the campfire isn't very exciting because nothing big can happen if we're not all there.

We go to bed early, which is a relief, but we know what it's gonna be like in the morning.

They've actually never gotten me with the pots and pans. Even in my first year, with no clue as to what was going on, I was suspicious enough of some of the other kids' comments to somehow force myself awake before they came in with the noise. I still remember the disappointed face of my squad's vice leader, Sara, when she saw that I was already awake.

The morning comes, and I'm up before Matilde pokes her head inside our tent to yell her good morning. She tried.

Finally, though, we can complete the ceremonies. We change back into our full uniforms and take a string off of our trekking boots—it'll be a pain to put back in. We tie it around our foreheads, and the absolute rule is that we can't acknowledge it when people ask.

Back when I was a novice, they used to have cloths with their Totem names tied to the shoelaces, but not anymore. Sara's name was *Emotional Hawthorn*, and she explained the whole thing to me on the day it happened. I kind of wish she didn't, but what's done is done. Now it's my turn to walk around like a crazy person: in full uniform, with an unlaced boot and a shoestring tied to my head. It feels great even though I have no idea why any of this is a thing.

Anyone who isn't a first-year doesn't bother asking questions, probably because they've been told already, but my brother stares at me with wide eyes because this is weird, even for me. He comes up to ask what this Totem thing everyone keeps talking about is, and I panic for half a second. The boys are going to tell him soon enough, so I decide to have some fun

with it. I tell him he misheard it, that it's actually "Totano," and that it's a ceremony where we fourth-years eat squid for breakfast as a rite of passage.

It's a pretty weak lie, but I manage to keep a straight face and Matteo has somehow not yet figured out how much of a trickster I am, so he leaves satisfied, if justifiably weirded out.

He comes back two hours later with a scowl on his face, and I burst out laughing. Today doesn't feel real.

I chat with my friends that just came back from their missions.

Matilde tells me her new name is *Creative Dragonfly*, which is so beautiful and fitting that my face almost splits in half from smiling. Elena is *Tenacious Wombat*. She doesn't like it much, but thinks it could grow on her with time. Emanuele is *Affectionate Yak*, and he's at once embarrassed and flattered. He also tells me that he ended up finding the girls and spending the night at their mini-camp because he was afraid to be alone in the woods. I can sympathise, but I also know that next year all of them are going to have to go on solo missions. I, however, won't be there.

The day passes in a blur. We laugh, we lie to the novices, we take photos and we celebrate.

It's the last remnants of a summer that feels different from the others. Bittersweet, as I prepare to say goodbye to one of the things that was most important to child me. She would hate me for it.

But I feel okay. These memories are going to stay with me forever. The good, the bad, the weird—all these experiences have changed me in the past seven years. I would never erase them, but I need to let go.

I look at the photos and smile, because they keep the best memories alive. For a few, wonderful days, I'm part of the Totem family and, maybe, in some ways, I always will be.

Jenna Fults

CLICK

Content Warning: violence, drug addiction

I watch as the man in the grey blazer takes out a cigarette from the box in his pocket and puts it between yellowed teeth. Up goes his lighter and the flame ignites and burns a black circle into the mouth of the paper, filling the air with rings of smoke that tickle my nose. He is standing, for what reason I do not know—there are three chairs and he is one of two adults in the room; the woman is rearranging the space on the table so that all her pens align perfectly. There is a thin file sitting there; I can smell the staleness of the paper from where I sit. The cold, metal chair digs into my back and cuts lines into my palms where I grip the edges tightly.

The woman finally glances up and smiles at me. 'Hello, Anne,' she says. 'I'm Beth. Do you understand why we're here today?'

I do not. I am silent.

'I'm going to ask you a few questions about that night, is that alright?' She lifts up the outermost pen in the ordered line, clicks it. 'We can stop at any time, if it gets to be too much. Just let me know at any point if you feel overwhelmed. Okay?'

The pen clicks. The file sits there. Beth nods at the man with smoke rings in his black eyes. Still standing, he presses a button on the tape recorder. It whirs softly to life: *click click click click*.

The woman sits up straighter, tidies the pens once more. 'Alright, then. Let's start, shall we?'

She takes a deep breath and her eyes close; when they open, they are focused intently on me. The walls seem to shrink and the room feels tight—I press my back against the chair and wish I could disappear. It wouldn't be that hard, I think; I am small. Thin.

'Anne, did your father ever hit your mother?'

Face yellow and purple, staring into the mirror. I am watching. My mother angles her jaw, applies the brush. Her cheeks are rosy, now—pink like the buds my father used to give her, pink like the skin of the cherubs on my walls, pink like the sky in the morning, pink like her torn silk sheets.

'Anne, are you alright? You're pale, dear.' Beth squints at me. 'I'll be right back.'

Standing, she leaves the room, and the door screams shut behind her. Then it is silent, dragging on into the dark, damp nothing there is nothing but the *whish* of air-conditioned

breeze and *click click click click*. The light is dim and casts the room in a spectrum of black and white, aside from the cigarette—it burns red, now—the man flicks ashes to the floor.

Beth returns with a glass in her hand, which she sets in front of me before sitting herself. The pens are rearranged for a third time, and she clicks the one she has in her hand. 'We'll continue, if that's alright?' she says, and clears her throat. 'Did your father ever react violently toward you or your mother?'

The disturbed water in the glass undulates back and forth, crashing against the sides and leaving bubbly froth in its wake. Some has spilled from the ridges, wetting the table

the table cracks down the middle. Glasses are knocked over and shatter on tile. Blood running down skin, red red red. I cower behind the couch, I am waiting. They always go away, these fits. It will be over soon.

A cold hand covers mine; I flinch.

'It's okay, Anne, I know this is hard. Let's move on. Do you know what these are, dear?' From beneath the table she pulls out a clear, unlabelled jar, the little red pills within it rattling against each other. The water has gone still, and I say nothing.

He is holding the jar and he shakes it and they're rattling, rattling like the tail of a snake, a warning. And now she's screaming, hitting the wall and plaster sprays and now the table, she hits the table and the wood splits. The jar falls from his hand, opening mid-air—one by one the pills click, click, click, click against the floor

'Anne, please, this is very important. Can you tell me what they are?' Beth removes her hand from mine, which I'm grateful for. She leans forward, bringing her voice down to a whisper that quivers in my ear. 'Were they your father's, Anne? Did he get...angry when he didn't take his pills?'

and he picks them up but now she's hitting him and she's screaming that she wants the pills. She crams them in her mouth and she walks towards me and she wants to hit me again but she has a mouthful of pills her eyes are red and big she wants to hit me

'Okay. That's okay, Anne. You don't have to answer. I know this is hard,' Beth repeats, but she draws out another item from beneath the table. I shudder. 'Do you recognise this?' she asks.

the knife glints sharply it glints in the light and I shrink back, back into the corner of my mind and the pills are in his hand and they fall from his hand and on the floor and the knife the knife is out and glinting and it strikes but it misses it hits the wall but then it goes again the pills are everywhere

'Anne? Do you recognise it? Did your father hit your mother with this?'

everywhere like drops of blood on the floor she's on the floor now I'm on the floor and I'm touching her face and her face is red with blood is everywhere, everywhere and the pills are on the floor and in her mouth

'No,' I cry. 'Stop it. No, NO!'

'Anne, what's wrong? Who are you talking to?'

there are hands on my face and my father saying give it to me give it but I don't want to I don't want to give it to him but I give the knife to him and

click click click click I shrink into the hollowed back of the chair and then my head is in my hands. The cigarette smoke burns my nostrils and my eyes and there are hands on my face I tear at my face, ripping skin, hair—

'Anne—Anne!'

The man is standing, standing there and smoking his cigarette *and she is lying there, lying there still with my pills in her mouth and it's all my fault she's lying there and it's my fault my fault, my fault. My face is yellow and purple and I look in the mirror and the mark of death is upon her upon me I need my pills I don't have my pills it's my fault she's dead she's dead and now my father with the knife he asks for the knife and I give it and he's saying it'll be alright Anne don't worry Anne I love you Anne it will be alright*

click, click, click—

Last Words

It is a beautiful day for a funeral, I think. It is a bitter thought.

I had expected black billows of cloud above, umbrellas spinning beneath like little dark moons. I had expected chest-clutching sobs and pretend tears, women sniffing delicately into squares of decorative cloth. I had expected stiff, tailored tuxes and dresses purling wraithlike amongst the gravestones, and here I stand wearing a rumpled T-shirt with the words *Saturday Night Slam* written in bold, Sans Serif font.

The sun joins in rebellion, simmering the stench of an early Spring: the earthy sting of recent rain, the floral musk of anemones, a pit of dark, damp soil. The coffin is lined with a procession of yellow carnations. My aunt had wanted pink ones, I remember—what a bloody outcry that had been.

Gathered in a half-circle around the pit is a huddled mass—heads bent, eyes dry, faces impassive, as the pastor finishes his sermon. I glance at my watch, an antique with the wrong initials etched into the leather band. *Is it time, yet?* The hands are moving so slowly I wonder if it is broken.

On a turn of wind, the fragranced smoke of candles spreads thickly through the groove; it fills my nostrils, steals my breath. I choke. *Good, I think, as wetness blurs my vision. It'll look like I'm crying.* And I ask myself: How can a human being, so full of organs pumping life through a labyrinthian network of veins, feel so empty?

"I'm so sorry for your loss, dear."

"Thank you."

I am stuck in a cosmos, people like planets rotating around me as though I am the sun at their centre. As though I can hold them all together by the sheer gravity of my grief.

"My deepest condolences."

"Thank you." I am a broken record, a radio without tune. A hundred static years pass by.

"He was a wonderful man," says a distant relative.

"He was," I lie.

"He lived an incredible life," says another.

"He did," I agree.

"I'm sure you were very close," says a young woman with a red ribbon tied in her hair. There: a flicker of recognition, a name that hangs on the faded edges of memory. But now I am staring at the yellow-rimmed horizon, eyes narrowed against the light.

“We were,” I say. It’s only half a lie. *We were family once, we were happy once, we were alive once.* We are only alive once.

The woman smiles, wipes an oval tear from her eye, and touches my shoulder very gently. “I’m here if you need anything. Anything,” she adds, and I’m sure she thinks she means it. Muscle memory pulls my mouth into a mechanical smile; it must be convincing, because her own grows wider. I turn, greet the next lonely soul.

I remind myself to breathe, too: *In, out, in, out,* with each thrum of my pulse. How does that expression go? Death is harder on the living? I sigh, check my watch. *Tick, tock, tick, tock,* says the clock.

Tick. I vanish from the present, a spiral ride of what-ifs, maybes, could haves—*no.* No time for hypotheticals, I remind myself. And still...

If only I’d known—

It’s too late.

If only he’d said—

Would it matter?

If only I’d asked—

Why didn’t you?

If only I could—

But you can’t.

If only I had—

But you didn’t.

Tock.

The sun evaporates wine into water; damp heat plasters cheap polyester-cotton to my chest and I itch with feverish sweat. I feel flesh sagging on muscle, melting off bone; I am a dead man walking, shrivelling, withering away. Yes, there—I can feel it, reaching; life is the sluggish march of our bodies digging themselves to the foot of the grave.

I glance at my watch; the spindly hands laugh at me. *Is it time, yet?*

If only we’d had more time.

“Hey.” My sister’s presence is a shadow beside me, its eyes pale and lips pressed together, strands of dull hair swept loose from a bun. “How are you doing?”

I make a face, and she nods. “Yeh. Me too.”

“The last time I saw him,” I begin to say, and the words stick in my chest. To speak is like pulling tar from my throat. *In, out, in—*

“The last time I saw him, I told him to go to hell.” *Out.*

“Oh,” she says, softly. Then, “You didn’t know – I mean, how could you? He didn’t tell anyone. Heck, not even mama knew.”

My eyes roll up to the sky, where clouds have begun to corral the sun. “That’s not my point. It doesn’t matter, see? His sickness, it doesn’t even matter. Thing is, he asked if I would forgive him—not if I *could*, even—and I said no. I said, go straight to hell.”

There is a sudden silence, invading the gap that words cannot fill.

“Hindsight is 2020, isn’t that what he always used to say?” I chuckle. “But damn, did he pick a bad time to start making sense.”

She nods again. Gives me a sympathetic half-smile. “He always did love his clichés and melodramatic, Hollywood endings.” She pauses, takes an exaggerated look around. There’s a small, ludicrous shine in her eye. “He would have hated this.”

“And here I thought funerals were for the living.” I shut my eyes, and the day disappears. I blink out of existence; the stillness is my coffin, the guilt, my grave. I can hear the stagnant hands of the heirloom wristwatch tick, tick, ticking behind glass. *Is it time, yet?*

Alastair Fyfe

235 Men

Two leagues, two leagues,
Two leagues downward,
All in the valley of Death
Fell the two-thirty-five.
“Forward, without delay!
Fly for the guns!” he said.
Into the valley of Death
Fell the two-thirty-five.

*Are we going yet? I thought today was the twothirtynine no no they go on Thursday god
imagine having to go on a thursday at least we get this done on monday*

Two-thirty-five, take them in all for all,
We shall not look upon their like again.
(for they will soon be deemed too weak to serve)

Patriots all, the two-thirty-five,
ready to make their mark.

murderer
poisoner

lover

The clock strikes twelve as hand in hand they stand,
and the little boys are torn apar

The Dancers

Flutter, blink,
and the first movement.

Feint, step;
no, it is not time.

Lunge, rose,
and the second movement.

Twitch, still,
and the crowd sighs.

Home is but a Memory

A sickly bird careens through the halls of a long-forgotten manor, one never named, having failed to come of age. He lights on a smile, but the smile lacks flavour, and he flutters away into the dark. The halls wind on in paltry perpetuity, six-seven there with the doors locked away, the key in the eighth, now lost to touch.

A feeble stairway, younger at the foot, reaches past a cloudless floor, but the bird turns away, having seen the five who live up there, with their equal rooms and misplaced patterns. The sickly bird offers a chirp with no echo, and follows that which returns to him, a quaint eulogy in the third wing. A silence approaches, and he watches it pass, for there is little to be said to one with such peculiar manners. The web he greets, for it has always been cordial, even when the light lapped at its strange-scented locks.

And then, at the corridor's close, the bird reaches his mind's promise. Four sticks lie at the foot of the nest, and over he hops, leaving a ragged feather upon each one. One more hop, with a whispered flutter, and he finds himself at the lip of the memory. The sickly bird looks down, and meets an eye, just one, in the constant froth. Where is your fellow, he asks, the one who kept the feathers in line? He waits, and he listens, then he drinks from the eye.

His beak crumbles into a leer, and the sickly bird laughs. He flutters once, into the sun, and cavorts as he drops from the wing.

Idyll

Two rows of houses,
perfectly opposed.

Spotless grass before each one,
emerald carpets in summer's fall.

A table in the middle of the street,
a single parchment upon it.

One by one, perfect people
leave their perfect houses.

One by one, these perfect people
walk over to the altar.

A single glance, and they return home,
a curious smile on their faces.

Then, two emerge at once,
and converge at the epicentre.

A scuffle breaks out,
and the men are carried away.

Sawdust

A delicate puppet show sits on the corner,
paper clip people confined by their lines;
the crier,
the hawker,
the paper boy too,
their exquisite wares so fragile at birth.

Roll up, roll up,
and remember the change:
tonight they perform.
So detailed in their little boxes,
tiny stamps with facsimile faces.
I wonder which of them are first class.

Abi Love

Harvest Mouse

The mouse scurried into the cornfield. For days he had journeyed through the barren countryside with barely so much as a juicy berry to gorge on. As the months got colder, the little mouse found it harder to find sustenance, but finally he had reached paradise. The utopian corn fields. His salvation from starvation. His beady eyes searched for predators, but the rows of corn were a maze, a beautiful canopy of golden strands overhead. This was a feast for one, beckoning him. So he ate. He ate enough for a lifetime of hibernation – and in a state of pure euphoria, the mouse collapsed amongst the heavenly field of corn. Not even the increasing, metallic hum in the distance was enough to stir this mouse from his food coma. In ignorant bliss, the little mouse dreamt of strawberries as the combine harvester razed closer through the fields.

The Manor House

Would it be so bad if I stayed? Since the day I gazed upon you, I knew my death would be worth living. My time in this ruined manor house meant nothing for centuries until you came along. No aristocrat, noble, spoilt child or landlord could surpass my wonder for the modern Princess who inherited this house. It was one last cruel joke from Fate, who watched me squirm for five years in your divine presence.

Years of solitude and loneliness prisoned me within these drab walls. Its grandeur is long gone. Believe me, centuries ago it was once a marvel in the countryside, decorated with lush, silk red curtains and rugs which hugged the cold stone floor. It was what you deserved. I look at it now, and the golden paint has peeled, the brass handles have turned green, and the staircase squeaks so loud I wake you from your slumber. Dare I say, this manor is a bit like me, well past its prime. Yet, the first day you walked through those doors you called it quaint. I thought that was sweet of you, but you will never know.

You tend to stop counting the birthday candles after you've been dead for over one hundred years. The centuries start to pass like days. I couldn't tell you how long this dungeon had been abandoned before you arrived, and yet, I remember the day more vividly than my own death. You had your whole life ahead of you when graced me with your presence, and I was so happy you brought a loving family with you to keep you company. Though, that doesn't stop me from wishing it was our life to live. Every floating bed sheet, misplaced perfume bottle and shadow down the hallway was conquered by your loving husband. I wished it was you. Please know that I don't blame you for this, I wouldn't have dared venture through these hallways alone with a ghostly apparition such as myself.

I may never be able to hold you, but my heart still pangs when you stare through me. When my attempts at companionship are received by anyone but you. You stare right through me, but I like to think you are looking at my soul. Yet, I'm just not a part of your life as much as I long to be.

You deserve better than my haunting, but would it be so bad if I stayed a little longer? I already know the answer. You're scared of me, I know. That one truth hurts me more than you could ever imagine. You don't need any of my tricks or treats anymore, and you certainly don't need white bedsheets following you through the dusty hallways. It's time to go, as much as it pains me. You're expecting, and haunted houses are no place for a child to grow up. So, I'll hang up those fresh bed sheets, fold them neatly and let you sleep peacefully for now on. After all, it's only through my own self-indulgence that I let this continue for so long. It was selfish, but they were the best five years of my being – however long that may be.

I will no longer be the ghost in your dreams, causing you to toss and turn and hug your partner for comfort. I will no longer be your friend when you didn't realise you had a friend. I will be the ghost with no home. I take comfort in knowing that one day we will meet, and I will greet you like an old friend but not for many years to come, before you fall asleep for one last time on those white bed sheets.

Ask Vestergaard

The God in the Machine

Through means quite outside of her immediate comprehension, Karen came into the possession of an oil lamp. It was old – or, more likely, had been made to look old by an unscrupulous dealer of antiquities: its bronze had tarnished a sickly green, and the probably-not-silver foliage that filigreed the bulbous body had in turn aged into a dull gold. The tapered spout was crusted over, as was the rim of the bowl, having long lost its lid. Karen imagined that the lid had probably been capped by a large ruby, and, even though she knew she was being silly, was mildly miffed at its absence. Nevertheless, she fancied the lamp could make a delightful centrepiece for her tea set. She didn't have matching cups, but, surely, with a pot like that, no one would really pay attention to such trifles.

She resolved to polish the lamp-now-pot, for it truly was a drab little thing, but by the time she found a suitable cloth and filled a small dish with a blend of baking soda and lime, she realised that she was late, and had to leave. Disappointed, she muttered something under her breath about not ever having any time to chillax, shoved the lamp-now-pot into the dishwasher, began the cycle, and left the house.

She returned half a minute later, snatched her car keys from the sideboard, and left again.

Karen always scheduled her days so that she didn't have to be in the house while the washer was running. She was surprised any of her dishes ever survived the ordeal intact, considering the violence of the machine's methods. Sometimes, it was almost as if the thing was speaking – or, rather, *screaming* – amidst the throes of its toil.

This is what the dishwasher said that day:

It coughed politely to alert any in earshot of the commencement of its monologue, its cross-shaped spray arms wheezing weak jets of water from their sediment-scabbed spouts, and then –

“Hello?”

Already the rusted plumbing had begun to shudder, and the streams grew louder as they grew hotter, choking out tendrils of flaky red water. And then the washer began to accompany its words with gesticulation, each rotation of the sputtering spray-arms sounding their laps with a lurch, the machine rocking back and forth, back and forth on its unlevelled legs, jangling the forks in their basket, the plates rowed in their racks, the oil lamp, writhing and alive with the roiling steam.

“Is anybody there? It's... getting wet in here.”

The jets were gushing at full capacity, now. Cataracts of red-brown water sluiced down the sides of upside-down glasses and mugs, but the little tarnished oil lamp hadn't been flipped, and soon filled up to the brim, and then beyond the brim in perpetual overflow.

"Hello? *Hello?* Please! I – I can't breathe. Can you hear me? Somebody?"

The dishwasher was rumbling from side to side, slowly sliding out of its nook between the sink and the sideboard with the force of its rattling.

"Please. Listen to me, I – I can give you anything. Anything you want. Please, let me out of here. I can't breathe. *I can't breathe!*"

The voice was one with the clanging of cutlery and the burbling of pipes. And the voice was entirely its own.

"What do you want? Wealth? Health? Company? Just ask, and they will be yours. I can give you a towering temple tiled in gold, minarets crenelated with eggs that hatch peacocks, feathered in priceless jewels. I can turn you into the fastest runner ever to run; can give you breath that can be held from surface to seafloor and back again; can... can give you ninety-course feasts more dazzling than any you have yet beheld! And better tasting! Ones that add not a stone of weight to a body that I can render perfect. Anything. Anything!"

The voice bubbled dully, as if submerged, and, despite its desperation, grew quieter and quieter in the cacophony of the machine.

"A lover, perhaps, who attends to your every desire? One who understands you like none other, with the strength to scale a mountain with you on their back, and a gentleness to bask you in warmth as you lie together on the summit, arm in arm, hand in hand? More than one lover, then? I can give you ten! A hundred! A thousand! All the same, all perfect, or perhaps you would prefer them different? Every one a different height, of different skin, with a different smile and sense of inner self? Ten thousand. Ten thousand, or one, or more, or none – perhaps you seek tranquillity in solitude? Just ask, just ask, anything, anything!"

In the steaming bowels of the dishwasher, the spoons and forks and knives slotted messily in the basket began to shift, began to twist and dance and interlock silver fingers that faded into the colour of flesh, opened eyes and mouths and took their first breaths of the wet, hot air. Some were human, humans of every creed and identity, and some were beasts of wing and gill and hoof.

"I am ancient and all-powerful. Nothing can withstand my influence. I can make you a God amongst Men, immortal and more beautiful than the blaze of a neutron star. I beheld the dawn of your kind – what would you like to know? Every dead language, every lost culture, every coal and cinder and flake of ash of every burnt library is at my fingertips. Just ask. Ask for anything. *Please, just – just let me out of here!*"

The glasses and mugs metamorphosed into a great city of brass, gleaming in sunlight and starlight in tandem, with spires that pierced the infinite skies that hung just under the revolving spray-arms as they brought iridescent rains, each droplet blooming into a rhododendron bush for the dancing chain of humans and beasts to glide across on fleet feet. The oil lamp, frothing with detergent-scummed water, sat slick and alone amidst the splendour.

“Or perhaps you wish my death?” came the voice softly.

The thrashing of the dishwasher toppled the glimmering city, then, crushing Man and beast and rhododendron alike. Water flushed out of the drains, and then hot air blasted the glasses, the mugs, the swaying, silver cutlery. The soap-greied pond that filled the lamp rippled in the gusts.

And then the machine was silent.

The kitchen door swung open, then, and in came Karen. Her son wriggled through the mother-blocked doorway, discarding his backpack on the tiles and bounding out into the hall, the tie of his uniform lapping at his armpit as he flew.

“Timothy! Take your bag into your room! *TIMOTHY!*”

“I don’t need it, mum!” The boy’s voice might as well have been a thousand years away already.

“Doesn’t matter! It belongs in your room, not the kitchen! Where am I supposed to put it, huh? On my head?”

No response.

Karen groaned, rubbing her eyes and leaning against the fridge for a moment before tiredly proclaiming that mommy deserved a freaking – oh, the kid’s out of earshot: make that a *fucking* – cup of tea. Rubbing her hands in anticipation, she flicked on the half-full kettle, then clicked open the dishwasher, coughing as the trapped steam was released. Upon picking up the oil lamp, it immediately emptied itself onto her hand, scalding her. It was all she could do to stop herself from hurling it across the room there and then.

Snatching a dishcloth from a door handle, she began to rub the lamp, and rub, and rub, and rub until it was entirely dry, muttering all the while about the uselessness of dishwashers. It was still a thoroughly ugly little thing – she was pained to see that it may have even tarnished more.

In went a bag of Earl Grey – she cursed herself for not popping into the shop to pick up something a little fancier for her new pot’s debut – and in went the boiling water. She poured the liquid into a “World’s Best Dad” mug and raised it to her lips.

“*Mo-o-o-o-o-om! I need my bag!*”

Karen burnt her tongue.

“What did I tell you?”

“Can you bring it, please?”

“Get it yourself!”

“Pleeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeease!”

Karen sighed, putting down her cup and rubbing her stinging tongue upon the roof of her mouth. “Your wish is my command,” she muttered sarcastically, and then picked up the bag.

Nøkken



Nøkken (1904)
by Theodor Kittelsen

*Where by the marishes
Boo-meth the bittern,
Nickar the soulless One
Sits with his ghittern.
Sits inconsolable,
Friendless and foeless,
Wailing his destiny,
Nickar the soulless*

– from ‘Nickar the Soulless’, by Sebastian Evans

The nøkk is hungry.

He sits cross-legged on the bed of a brook, amongst redds aflame with black-eyed trout eggs that seem to boil in the subaqueous breeze. Bathed in their orange glow, he sits and strums his gut-strung gittern; sits and strums with a pink-painted toenail plectrum, waiting for his magical, musical lure to catch.

Yolk-yoked alevins and trout fry flit around the nøkk like flies, zipping between the gittern's undulating strings and in and out of its sound-hole rosette.

Each note rises, bound in a bubble, to breach the surface with a pop! that lets loose its music into the open air where the fairies flutter beneath the moon. One entrapped note pops, not with the twanging of a string, but with a sound like a croaking toad; another pops with the booming of a bittern. He strums again, and up wobbles his music, up and up until – pop!: a crying loon. Pop!: a squeaking otter. Pop!: a young woman humming in the night. These bubbles burble their notes in rapid succession, a melody of sounds just odd enough to ignite the curiosity of unwise travellers.

Pop!: the woman stops humming, and begins to scream.

Pop-pop-pop!: 'I'm the Emperor's daughter!' she cries, 'Please, I can give you anything!'

Pop!: her screaming cuts out with a terrible splash.

The nøkk listens intently: listens for cries of alarm, for footsteps raking through the brush, for someone to dive into the water to save the falsified damsel. But there is nothing. His baits whisper and chuckle and wail upon the bank, with none to hear. Friendless and foeless, the nøkk sits alone, playing his forlorn music for nobody.

Lampreys writhe between his toes and through his lank and weed-crowned hair. Some have slithered up his scummy scales and fastened themselves to his earlobes, his nose, his nipples, his knees, and there they suckle and grow corpulent. The nøkk pays them no heed – he may be starving, but there is no need for them to starve with him. He stares up at the eddying world of air above. His massive, lamp-like eyes cast silver beams that are, when glanced at from the brook's surface, indistinguishable from the moon mirrored upon it. He plays his music, and watches another flurry of bubbles ascend and disintegrate.

Pop!: a splash; a gasp of breath.

Pop!: 'Help!'

Pop-pop-pop!: 'I can't swim!'

The moon wavers on the water as if drunk from faerie revelry, its luminescence decking the drab gravel on the brookbed with the garb of pearls for the occasion. Those pebbles who are hidden from the white light by the obscuring shadows of the pines or the bobbing, backlit lily pads are left to look on, naked and grey in the dark. The faeriefolk themselves dapple the

moon's reflection with their own: fizzing daubs of red, yellow and green flutter to and fro and bejewel the stones and trout-eggs as they go.

Pop!: hoarse, choked coughing.

Pop!: 'P-please!'

Pop!: '*Someone?!*'

Every so often, one of the tiny trout fry will catch sight of the motley merriment above, and will hang, swaying in the current, enchanted by the faerie lights. Wishing. Wishing it was as beautiful as they are. It will sway and stare for a time, and then flit closer and closer and closer still, until it breaches the surface, breathless.

And then it will be gone.

With a soft pop, one of the faeries will pluck it from the brook and drag it, gagging, to join the dance.

When the fairies are done with the fry, they drop them back into the water, transformed, wishes granted:

Pop!: a gold ring plunks into the brook, the iridescent opal set into its curve flickering as it sinks. It perches on a bedded rib, slipping down the bone as if it were a finger.

Pop!: a filigreed locket descends through a bustle of bubbles; the silhouetted profile portrait of a bonneted lady sinks into the eye-socket of a weed-tongued skull.

Pop!: a fully grown rainbow trout, fat with roe, lands with a splash, and flaps its fins about confusedly before instinctually darting to the gravel to dredge up a redd, the multi-coloured scales like sequins on its sides twinkling in the cloud of agitated muck.

The nøkk sighs and drops his gittern. It falls slowly, rocking like a crib in the current and spilling a swarm of alevins. One alevin smacks against a string, sending a tiny note trembling up into the night. Pop!: 'Anyone?'

Another hungry night. He considers transforming into a white stallion, or perhaps a woman, and displaying himself on the bank, using his own body as bait. But he shakes his head – there is no one to be baited.

The nøkk slithers along the redds on his slimy, grumbling belly, bulbous eyes darting upwards whenever the faeries return a stolen child. He scoops the transformed trinkets up in his green-brown hands: this keeps the redds free of clutter, and sometimes he can use the baubles as lures, slipping diamonds onto lilies to glitter and wink seductively. Pop!: a butterfly entombed in amber falls into the brook. Pop!: a prosthetic eye, quartz sclera veined in ruby. Pop! Pop! Pop!

And pop:

Down drops the most beautiful fish he has ever seen. Its fins stretch out like bright plumes: now red, now blue, now black with golden spots. Its body is thin and long and silver, and its tail, rather than splitting into two feathery fins, is curved and sharp and glints in the myriad lights of the brook.

He looks behind him, at the burrowing trout-mother, and then back at the flower-like newcomer. He never eats the fish whose brook he shares, but this one is different. It is too beautiful for this place, more gemstone than living creature. And he is hungry – so very hungry. He swims up to the faerie-touched fish. It does not move. It just hangs there in the water, glimmering curiously. He opens his froglike mouth wide. Still it hangs, swaying.

He bites, and his screams whirl to the surface in a storm of bubbles.

Pop. Pop. Pop-pop-pop.

A force rips him twisting through the water by his searing lower lip. Great brown clouds of mud explode in his wake as he is dragged across the gravel, hundreds upon hundreds of trout eggs pop-pop-popping with his violent thrashing. All around him dart the fry and the alevins, a tempest of life that disperses into the dark crannies of the brook and vanishes.

And then he is in open air, wailing and flailing and bleeding, bleeding all over the churning lily pads. It is dark except for the moon, and for the blink-strobed light of the nøkk's lamp-like eyes.

The faeries are gone.

'I got one!' comes a voice. 'I got one!'

The nøkk writhes in the muck of the brookbank, long, webbed fingers desperately clawing at his lip to remove the hook.

'My God, it's huge!'

He lets out a terrible scream, his amphibian skin bubbling and boiling as he wriggles in agony. The lampreys fall from his flesh as he transforms, as he shifts from shape to shape in his paroxysms of pain. He becomes a great white stallion, rearing and squealing, loosing arcs of blood into its waterweedy mane as it swings its head. The horse falls down into the mud and snaps a knee, and then its broken leg sprouts toes and its hairs fall out and its muzzle flattens and she is a woman, naked and haggard and bloody yet beautiful despite her terror. Impossibly, enchantingly beautiful. Her spasming legs tangle together and grow wet and scaly, becoming a tail, a mermaid's tail, and then the scales ripple up and up, over her back and her shoulders, slicing off her hair. She sprouts fins and is a fish, a massive, monstrous rainbow trout that gags and gapes and flaps around, flaps back towards the brook, but the angler yanks his rod and the string grows taut and the hook heaves the fish back to land, choking.

And then the fisherman smacks it over the head with his baton, and the nøkk goes still.

A few hours after the men have carried it off, the faeries come back out to dance. Up comes a trout fry, and another, and another, and each one is snatched away one after the other, returned to the waters more beautiful than before. Pop! Pop! Pop!

The gittern sits quiet in the silver brook.

Steelbirth

Every pulley cable in every machine in the gym was taut with anticipation. The chest press stood stoic and still, the mill dared not tread, the dumbbells stared from their racks in mute stupidity, and the elliptical machine, in its silence, could have been omitted from the gathering altogether to no noticeable effect.

All of them were waiting.

The only sound in the room came from two massive men, huffing and puffing on the rubber flooring, one cradling the other in his bulging arms, crooning encouragement to his companion. 'You're doing so good!' the man – Trent – said, grinning, eyes brimming with joyous tears. 'Come on, just a little bit more. Breathe in – yes! Breathe out – excellent! You're perfect, bro. In! ... out! ... in! ...out! Now push! *Puuuush!*'

Titus, the man in his arms, shook his head, looking wretched. 'I can't do it, bro. It's too much. I'm not strong enough!'

'It's okay, bro!' Trent replied, 'I'm right here! I'm spotting you, bro. All you gotta do is push, and then push harder.'

'I... I can't.'

'Bro. Look at me.'

Titus looked at him.

Trent gently ran his fingers along Titus' brawny arm. It was an arm that had, once upon a time, picked up a heavy object and put it down – and then done so again several hundred thousand times more. The rolling hills of his musculature rippled as if with summer wheat, bronzed and glinting like a Grecian urn, surface resplendent with the figure of golden Herakles. The bulging veins that curlicued his flesh were like Hera's coiling serpents, twisting in a fleshy crib; they were like the nine winding throats of the hydra.

'You see these arms? These pecs? Those glorious glutes? Look at those and tell me you're not strong enough. I believe in you, bro. All you gotta do is believe in yourself. Embrace your inner god, bro. Embrace him. Yeah?'

'Yeah, bro.'

‘That’s what I’m talkin’ about. Now push, bro! *Puuuush!*’

‘*Hnnnnnnnnnnnnng!*’ Titus let out a thin wheeze of exertion. Every perfect muscle in his perfect body stood out like a juice vesicle in some humanoid grapefruit, and his scrunched-up visage reddened and shuddered dramatically, streams of sweat dribbling down the abyssal cleft in his chin. Trent grabbed Titus’ hand tightly, stroking and kissing his forehead, breathing with him and coaxing him to push, push, push. His thick fingers went white in Titus’ desperate, demigodly grasp.

‘*Puuuuush!*’

‘*Hnnnnnnnnnnnnng!*’

‘*Puuuuuuush!*’

‘*Hnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnng!*’

‘*Push-push-push-puuuuuuuuush!*’

‘*HNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNG! HOOH-HOOH-HOOH-HOOH! HNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNG!*’

Suddenly, the twin protrusions of Titus’ calves began to deflate, followed by his massive thighs, his glorious glutes, the bubble-wrap rack of his abdominals. His legs were left scrawny and twiggish, his belly as skinny as a teen’s.

Trent gasped, and then let loose a giggle of joy. ‘Bro! You’re doing it, bro! I can see it! It’s coming! It’s coming! You’re doin’ so good, bro, you’re doin’ so good! Just a little farther! *Puuush!*’

But Titus could go no further. He gagged in abject agony, and his body went limp. Immediately, the muscles of his legs and abdomen swelled up once again, restoring him to his former glory.

‘I can’t do it, bro,’ he moaned pitifully, heaving for air and shaking from exhaustion. The sweat-sodden floor squelched under his burly back. ‘It’s too hard. I’m too weak, man. *I’m too weak!*’ He began to sob in pain and self-loathing. ‘I’m nothin’ but a... but a... nothin’ but a *wimp.*’

‘Bro. You’re a king, man. You’re a god. But most of all, you’re my *bro*, bro! And I know my bro. Let nobody say I don’t know my bro! I know you, and I know you can do this. It’s hard – I know it’s hard. I’ve been there. Hell, you’ve been there. And you’ve triumphed before! You know why? Because you’re a champion, bro! And being a champion is tough, but it’s worth it, because the pain you feel today is the pride and love that you’ll feel tomorrow.’

Titus bit his lower lip. ‘I love you, bro.’

‘Bro. I love you too.’

‘I can do this.’

'You can do this.'

'I can *do* this!'

'You can *do* this!'

'Yeah!'

'Yeah! Uh. What are you waitin' for?'

Titus lifted a hand to Trent's lips. 'I'm waitin' for you to tell me to 'push'. I want your voice to be the first voice it hears.'

Trent grinned, and then lowered his lips to Titus' and gave the love of his life a sweaty, salty kiss. His breath was made monstrous by energy drinks. 'Alright, bro. Now push, bro! *PUUUUSH!*'

'HNNNNNNG!'

'*PUUUUUUUUSH!*'

'*HNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNG!*'

'*PUUUUUUU- Bro! BRO! I see it bro! Just a little more!*'

'*HNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNG!*'

Once again, the muscles on Titus' legs sank in on themselves, gradually vanishing without a trace. His Heraklean body deflated by degrees, leaving in its wake the scrawny form of a man who had never lifted a kettle, much less a kettlebell. For a time, he looked absurd, with each leg a bony spaghetti beneath a body of hulking bulk, thick veins throbbing with blood and testosterone and electrolytes. And then the rest of his sinew was sucked away as if through a funnel. His abs sizzled out of existence like pats of butter on a pan, his pectorals flattened, his arms were left as smooth and flat as ceramic.

Something started to push its way out of his body.

Trent gingerly cradled the protuberance, gently teasing it out of his lover. The caul of plastic pre-packaging ruptured, spilling amniotic lubricants and mink oil over his fingers. And then the room filled with a metallic squealing. With a swift and delicate bite, Trent snapped off the umbilical cable.

Titus' eyes fluttered open. 'What is it? Can I see it?' His voice was choked – choked in pain, but also choked in brimming ecstasy and yearning and love, love, love.

Trent lifted the massive child up with both hands and brought it over to his skinny lover, crooning at it, and occasionally darting Titus an overjoyed, tearful look. 'It's a bench press,' he whispered proudly.

Titus' eyes went wide. 'A – a bench press?' He reached out with trembling hands, and Trent eased the folded piece of equipment into his arms. Titus ran a gentle hand across its leather upholstery, across its cool steel legs. And then he began to sob, soft, gleeful, tired, loving, pained, demigodly, utterly enchanted sobs. Trent wrapped his arms around him, tickling the newborn's little rubber ferrules. He, too, began to cry, and buried his head into his lover's neck.

Every exercise machine in the gym made its grinding, wobbling way towards the miracle, wanting to behold their new sibling.

'Hello, little bro,' Titus said to his baby. 'Welcome to the world.'

Meet the Committee!

Jenna Fults (President)

I'm a fourth-year student studying English and *gasp* Creative Writing. I joined this society in the hopes that I would find some like-minded individuals and perhaps share a piece or two of prose (my preferred writing medium). What I found was so much more—a place to foster my passion, the confidence to finally share my writing, and some of the most amazing friends in all my time at university. As this is my third year in AUCWS, I've watched the society go through several periods of change, evolving and adapting to the circumstances of the world. I am grateful for the chance to step into the role of President for this year and to watch the society regrow after a period of hardship and persist through tough times. It's only fortified my opinion that this group is more than just a university society—we are a community of talented writers and wonderful friends supporting each other through life and the university experience.

Alastair Fyfe (Vice President)

I've been a member of the Creative Writing Society for three years now, and I'm currently studying for a Master's in English Literature. The society has helped improve my writing so much, and I've made some great friends over the last few years, even if it hurts to admit that to them. I mostly write poetry or scripts, and the advice I've been given by this beautiful bunch of people (and Jenna) has helped me in so many ways – I don't know how I'd have got through my dissertation without them. I will argue for hours over anything, the more ridiculous the better (just ask Martina) and half of what I write is borderline incomprehensible. I am widely regarded as the most beloved member of the society, and a recent poll voted me the most important member of the committee*.

*Evidence cannot be provided, as this poll was conducted privately and may or may not have actually happened.

Alice Durand Degranges (Secretary)

I'm a Master's student (for the second time around!). After indulging in my passion and doing Creative Writing last year, I'm now doing a Master's in Ecology and Conservation. If I had technically joined the society back in spring 2019 (before actually doing my MLitt), during the Master's degree I thought it was a bit silly of me to be at both and... didn't go! So depending on how you see it I've been part of the society a couple months or over a year and a half!

But there's just something about the people here and the atmosphere... so when I heard AUCWS needed people to fill committee roles, I was more than happy to be part of that new adventure. And even though I don't submit much, I love hearing all of your stories and I'm very proud of what we've been building so far, especially in those difficult times!

Aidan Armstrong (Treasurer)

I first joined the society in Freshers' week of first year. After two years of promising to submit next week and never doing so, I've somehow found myself as the committee's current treasurer. Now, in my third year studying English with Creative Writing, I'm determined to make up for lost time in submitting as much work as I can. I tell people that I write fantasy, though I've yet to offer any evidence other than late night discussions over worldbuilding and tropes. I also insist that poetry isn't my thing despite poems making up more than half of my submissions to this compendium. Apparently Alastair's submission habits are rubbing off on me (It'll happen to you too Marty). Over my time at the society I've been welcomed (or at least tolerated) by a warm and relaxed atmosphere, and made more than a few warm and relaxed friends (God that was sappy). Now, I've finally come out of my shell and find myself constantly looking forward to the Thursday nights, when I offer tales of dead birds or poems of self pity.

Martina Ferretti (Social Secretary)

I'm a third-year English with Creative Writing student, who finally said "no" to the safe career choice of staying in STEM and decided to pursue her dream of being a novelist who doesn't just dabble in, well, *transformative works*. So far, the Society is what has helped me the most with honing my skills. Every time I submit a piece (prose, *always prose*, and I shan't be corrupted), I always leave the meeting having received praise, constructive criticism and feedback from people from all walks of life, and the society is an incredible source of inspiration for me as well. In under three years of being part of the AUCWS, I have gone from a scared introvert hiding in the corner at meetings and submitting anonymously to a less scared introvert who is still, admittedly, not extraordinarily prolific, but who is much more confident about her work and skills. And I'm the Social Secretary too! How weird is that? All this, thanks to the amazing community I found here.

I am super excited to close out our first Compendium and hope you had a wonderful time! We'd be delighted to see you at any of our meetings (info way above, on page 6), and make sure to tune in for the next edition of the Creative Writing Society Compendium!

A.U.
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writing

