

A photograph of an aloe vera plant. The background is filled with dark green, serrated leaves. In the center, a flowering stalk rises, bearing a cluster of small, tubular flowers. The flowers are primarily red with yellowish-green tips. The word "ALOE" is printed in white, uppercase, sans-serif font across the middle of the image.

# ALOE

A literary magazine

## **Welcome to Aloe**

Aloe is a new literary magazine publishing short stories and poetry written under lockdown in the UK and Ireland

### **Why Aloe?**

Aloe plants are commonly grown indoors

Aloe plants are able to thrive in difficult conditions

Aloe plants possess soothing, healing qualities

### **Find us online**

[www.aloemagazine.org](http://www.aloemagazine.org)

@Aloe\_Mag



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**Alessa Catterall**

**Alone**

Too oft  
We act as if we were alone

Even as

The waves buoy us up  
The sun smiles on our skin  
The moon lights our eyes  
The wind strokes our hair

And the stars  
Hold steady  
Hold steady  
Blinking overhead

Unhurried  
Unworried  
Showing the way home

## **Alex Rollings**

### **Inside**

So, I can't profess to be much of an expert in the matters of humans. In fact, I don't think that humans are experts in the matters of humans, but I know a thing or two. One thing that I do know is that they are most certainly not supposed to be squatting in my home all day and night with nary a peek outside. The worst part of this is that I expect that not a single one of them has spared a thought for the real victim of this, me.

I am a spider. I am just a wee spider with a wee spider family of only 427. At least, I assume there are that many, it's not like I can count. I used to have an excellent wee life, the immense humans were gone all day, and I had the run of the place. I could skulk through the kitchen, skitter through the hallway and do some other spider-like movement in the living room. It was great.

Now they refuse to leave. Maybe there is no longer a world out there? Perhaps there is something huge outside, keeping them inside? Ironic.

I poked my head around the corner of the door, looking into the living room. I had a journey to make, an adventure and a quest, unlike anything the world had ever seen. I needed to make it to the attic. A feat like this is no small thing when titans are lumbering about like they owned the place.

I weighed up my options. I could make a dash for it, relying on the momentary shock that seems to come over the humans at the sight of a wee spider. Too risky. I darted across the floor, ducking under the couch into the darkness. I stopped. Nothing moved. I advanced again, moving to scurry along the skirting board, letting it guide me to the door. The door was closed, but that has never been an issue for a spider like me. Hah! You can take that thought with you to bed tonight!

I felt a thud behind me. I froze like a good spider should, then slowly turned. I knew what the object was, don't ask how a spider knows what a remote control is, just go with it. I knew what this meant, and sure enough, I was thrown into the light as the couch was pulled from above me and replaced by a hideous, colossal face. Its grotesque features constricted into a look of what I assumed to be disgust. I knew how this went, so I bloody legged it.

I moved as fast as my little legs could carry me, making it to the door. I flitted under a moment before something slammed into it, shaking the door in its frame. I wasted no time in starting the arduous climb up the stairs. I made my ascent slowly, stopping once or twice to listen, feeling for any vibrations that would signal pursuit. Humans are unpredictable and senseless beings at the best of times and could be ruthless in persecuting the rightful owner of this home, me.

While I was cresting the peak of a step, I spotted a lump at the top of the stairs, a hairy lump with four legs and a monstrous snout. I knew the beast well, and make

no mistake; it *was* a beast. Twice in my life, I had been cornered by the monstrous bully and subjected to a vicious, violent investigation of snuffling and nudging. I was nearly crushed last time before a human called it away, to set it upon another poor, defenceless creature no doubt. I was in no rush to relive that terrifying moment, so I attempted to give it a wide berth, though it spanned the entire width of the staircase. I looked for an alternative route, but there was none—only one option. I was going to have to crawl over it. This should not be an issue; I've only got small legs, and the monster's fur was thick.

I began my expedition into the dense undergrowth of fur, weaving between follicles and dodging random debris. I shook my head in disappointment; this creature needed a bath. There was movement up ahead. I froze and waited. Something emerged from a wall of hair, staring at me. The bloody thing had fleas too! It stalked towards me, so I bared my fangs and darted forward, forcing it back, allowing one of its comrades to appear behind me. As more and more materialized, I decided that now was probably not the time to be brave. As the ugly things closed in on me, I made a decision and sunk my fangs into the thick hide of the monster. My pitiful venom is only potent enough to kill flies, but the bite itself was enough to wake the beast. It leapt to its feet and shook vigorously. The fleas latched onto the fur, but I did no such thing and soared through the air with all the grace of, well, a spider I suppose.

I touched down on the carpeted landing and performed a roll that would put any gymnast to shame. I was almost there now, just a quick dash up the wall, and I would be home safe. I looked towards the brute, and it looked back at me, it had found its attacker. After a moment of indecision, it threw itself towards me. Once again, I ran for my life. I felt the rumbling as it grew near, no doubt its tongue was lolling out, and it had a look of murderous glee in its eyes. I hit the wall and scampered up it, blessing whoever gave me these magical legs, capable of sticking to almost anything.

The giant leapt at the wall, I raced on and prayed to whatever god would hear me. A divine being of the eight-legged variety must have been listening as the detestable creature slammed into the wall just below me and even when it hopped on its hind legs it was unable to reach me. Without fingers, it was difficult to convey my feelings towards the fiend, but I think it got the idea. I reached the ceiling and squeezed through a crack, then passed a layer of cheap insulation before emerging into the attic.

I found my web just as I had left it. If I had any energy left, I would have reviewed my grand adventure. I might have even derived some lessons regarding good and evil. Perhaps, if I was not just a spider, I might have wondered why titans were so concerned with the movements of a wee spider such as myself. Possibly, in the future, I will ponder on the frailty of life, and hell, I might even get around to theorizing about the duality of nature.



For now, I think I'll just tuck into a fly, and continue to be bloody terrifying.



**Andria Jane Cooke**

**The Cherry Tree**

Captive in my home  
alone,  
strange days roll round like stones,  
become one.

Past and future lock.

Through darkness I lie  
with the ticking clock.

In early morning light  
bare branches grow studded,  
black knots turn into buds then blossom  
as I watch.

When dusk dissolves to night  
a swollen moon glows,  
illuminating stillness,  
white petals like snow.

At daybreak I listen  
to the blackbird and dove.

I know  
every flower will die,  
disintegrate  
and fall as manna from above.

**Becky Varley–Winter****This World Sorrow**

*Well, you said you liked cornflowers, Mr Emerson was saying.*

*So, we brought you cornflowers, said George.*

They were tying garlands around the bedframes of the Miss Allens, putting cornflowers into the women's hair. I whispered the lines along with them. Dusk filtered thinly through the orange curtains as I sat, with my laptop balanced on my knees, watching waves of purple-blue move over the screen.

Mike knocked at the door. "Tea?"

"Okay."

He came in, looked, and shook his head. "*A Room with a View* again?"

"Don't judge me."

"How many times this week?"

"Ten. So far."

"Come back to reality. It's where everybody lives."

I wiped a hand over my tired eyes. "Don't be a Cecil."

"Which one's Cecil again?"

"The stupid one."

"The one who *wouldn't play tennis with Freddy?*"

"Yes."

"That's mean. I'm more like – what's his name. Emerson."

"George Emerson. The hero."

"Yes."

"Ha," I said.

"I have a romantic side."

"*Where?*"

He looked hurt.

"Sorry. What are you up to today?"

"Finishing my dissertation. How's yours?"

"Shhhh," I said. "Thanks for the tea. You can go now."

When the film was over, I cried. It was too good for real life. I'd never met a man who'd run through a storm for me, or even think about kissing me in a meadow of wildflowers. If I ever swam naked in a lake, it would just be cold and muddy. I was failing my degree, hardly holding down my bartending job. None of it mattered. I'd drop off the face of the earth. Into the ground we went.

My room was frayed, musty, and faced the back end of a pub. There was a rattling outside. I looked out to see a fox with its thin paws up against a toppled bin. It gazed at me with hungry amber eyes, and I wondered if it was the same vixen I heard screaming late at night. I hadn't washed for a few days. "Don't judge me," I whispered.

Mike knocked again. I pulled the door open. "What?"

"You okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Have you eaten anything?"

"I need to lose weight."

"Do you? You look like a haunted rocking horse."

"Oh, fuck you," I said, then cried again.

"...Jesus. Come with me. No arguing."

"I'm not your slave," I said, following him miserably into the kitchen. He broke eggs into a pan.

"I can't eat an egg," I said. "Not one."

He moved the eggs roughly around the pan, scrambling them, then set it down in front of me. "Ok. What's wrong?"

"Everything's pointless."

"Come on. You've got friends. A roof over your head."

"You're just making me feel worse. The world's ending. What friends."

He scooped a forkful of egg and held it towards me. "You think I do this for my enemies?"

"Just the kind of sick thing you'd do," I said, then took the fork, gently, into my mouth.

After I'd eaten, I helped him wash up. He looked serious.

"Sorry for being a bitch," I said.

"You're not. Why do you keep watching that film over and over?"

"It's perfect. Better than life."

"The book's a bit rougher," he said. "More political."

"I didn't know that you'd read the book."

"Yeah, well. I'm interested in what you like."

"Why?"

He didn't reply.

I looked at the tender nape of his neck, and shuffled my bare feet on the lino floor, growing more aware of my baggy pyjamas, my braless state.

"I'll be right back," I said.

I brushed my teeth, then eyeballed myself in the bathroom mirror. In the sickly yellow light, my face looked gaunt, with black hollows under my eyes. I showered and shaved my legs with a blunt razor, then went to my room and pulled on turquoise underwear, a soft black t-shirt and a red skirt.

When I returned to the kitchen, Mike was sitting at the table with his headphones in, listening to Radiohead, and typing steadily.

I sat opposite him. "Coffee?"

"Huh?"

"DO YOU WANT SOME COFFEE."

"Oh – okay."

The coffee brewed. I watched it swirl chaotically. Blood percolated through my skin. Mike frowned with concentration. I looked at all the buttons on his shirt.

"DO YOU WANT TO HAVE SEX?" I asked.

He swallowed with difficulty and took his headphones off.

"Do you want to have sex," I repeated. "With me."

He laughed hesitantly. "You're joking."

"I'm not."

"Megan. You don't like me like that."

"How do you know?"

"You never have."

"Do you like *me* like that?"

"That's not a fair question."

I walked around the table, leaned down and kissed him. He flushed. The air rose darkly around us, then he said "stop."

"Why?"

"You're not being serious."

"If you say so."

"You're just bored and depressed. Stop playing."

"Oh. Okay."

"I'm worried about you."

"I don't want you to worry about me. I want you to fuck me."

"That's a bad idea."

We stared each other down.

"I don't want to ruin our friendship," he said.

"Right," I said.

Right. Right.



I retreated to my room and faced the mirror. I looked like an Egon Schiele painting. "You're not even fuckable," I said to me.

I put on *A Room with a View* again and skipped to the scene in which Lucy tells Cecil she can't marry him, because she doesn't love him. Cecil sits on the stairs, crushed, quietly lacing up his shoes. I curled into a ball.

The next morning my head hurt, but I made myself get up. My dress was clean and blue. I poured cereal. Ate it. Good. I didn't know where Mike was. The flat was empty.

I decided to walk to the park. My legs felt heavy, but sparrows perched in the magnolia trees, and scrubby clouds drifted in the sky, punctured by whirring wings. Blossom covered the earth in pink and white. I lay on my back, feeling insects track over my skin, each petal landing. The clouds swirled, heralds of nothing.

I put my headphones in and listened to *Sorrow* by Life Without Buildings.

*There's only one perfect view, I thought, and that's of the sky over our heads.*

The trees rustled and waved their branches. My mind was almost still. I moved my fingers in piano patterns over my torso, spreading my hair out in the grass, wet with spring.

*I don't believe in this world sorrow, do you?* Mr Emerson said in my head.

No. Not this world sorrow. No why. No dying.

When I got back to the flat, Mike was standing at the kitchen table with a cut-glass vase in front of him, bouncing rainbows off the walls. Sun touched his eyes and hair. As he turned towards me, I saw water brimming in the vase, green stems covered in bubbles of air, and that fiery blue fanning out, every bloom of it etched in light. The vase was full of cornflowers.

**Claire Miller**

**Fading Summers**

Dusk makes a promise.  
The humming air brinks  
in pinks and blues  
giving way to orange hues  
and inking into darkness.

The temperature falls lazily  
like  
helicopter  
seeds  
keeping us cosy in light clothes.  
The midday heat still kisses our skin  
as if horizon fire had engulfed  
the swimming pool blue of noon.

Night waits quietly  
for friends to drink moonlight with  
to see in the dawn.  
We stay until the stars fade  
and the glimmer of a new day  
makes a new promise.

## Craig Lamont

### Floating

For as long as she could remember there was that feeling. She could think of no sound or colour to describe it. Sometimes she pondered where it might be coming from. The religious teachers at school had tried to describe the soul, to place it: just to the right of the heart, in the centre of the sternum. But this was too accurate. Too confident. She saw this same certainty on the news, in the mouths of politicians and bankers. People were so sure of their beliefs. Sometimes she didn't know if she believed in anything.

The class were revising for an upcoming test. She opened her Physics textbook at the page written on the board and read:

*Gravity is a force that attracts objects towards each other. The force of gravity is not very noticeable unless one of the objects – such as the Earth – has a huge mass. Gravity holds all the components of the galaxy together.*

The sound of a pencil hitting the floor. The teacher looked up from her desk, waited for the boy to pick it up, and returned to her notes.

Walking home, the rain was hard and straight, drumming the streets and the tops of cars. Most girls used umbrellas to protect their hair from the downpour while the boys ignored their hoods and let their hair run slick.

Rain dripped from the tip of her nose as she waited to cross the street.

By the time she was home the sun was setting. Looking out the window from the front room she watched the last of the rain and the dying colours in the windows across the street. The kettle clicked in the kitchen.

She made coffee and read a note on the fridge from her mother. It said she would be working late, that she would bring home a curry to make up for it. She went upstairs to run a bath with some salts to ease the cramping in her stomach. At the centre of her bed she found a box. A note lay on top of it, curled up at one edge. It read:

*I'm sorry I promised to be home for your birthday. I hope you can forgive me.*

*From my part of the world it's tomorrow, so you can open your gift from me now. I won't have a phone signal till we're out of camp. Happy fourteenth when it comes. Give mum a hug from me.*

*Love, Dad.*

She read the note over again. Her father worked for a specialist flood prevention research group in Japan. He had only been gone a year but the homecoming was delayed every time she read one of his letters.

She opened the box. A few coloured woodcuts of Mount Fuji and another, smaller box, containing a digital camera. A Fujifilm. She switched it on. A photo of her

father and his crew appeared on the display screen. They were all smiling, thumbs-up. She zoomed into his face, revealing wrinkles around his eyes.

She took the camera into her mum's bedroom, looked out the window over the tops of the houses. There was a solitary light on in the house directly across. She pointed the camera there and zoomed in as far as she could. A shape cut across the view, blurry and shaky at the edges, settling into the form of a man. The man was old, with a thin nose and a beard. He was mostly in shadow, but even from his side profile she could guess his age. She clicked the shutter but he moved. The result was disappointing. When she looked across the street again the light had gone out. Her heart pounded with the thought she had invented the whole thing. She watched for some time until the house grew cold and she remembered her bath.

In bed, she re-read the note from her father and used it as a bookmark in her Physics book. Gravity is a force that attracts objects towards each other. 'The force of gravity is not very noticeable.'

\*

The next day at school she celebrated her birthday privately, taking photos of cloud shapes. The blue sky between them was more vivid and brighter than normal. There was to be a photoshoot at the next assembly. They were asked to sign a form permitting their photo being

taken. She read the term 'I permit the use of my image' several times, remembering the old man across the street.

That night, as she waited for her mother to finish work she watched the house. A light went on after an hour but no-one appeared. She waited another hour before nodding off at the windowsill. She woke to the sound of the keys in the front door, and when she looked outside she saw it. At first she thought she was dreaming. Dozens of fireflies seemed to move in circles at the window where she had last seen the old man. As her mother's footsteps reached the bottom stair and began to climb she realised what she was looking at. She could barely make it out but there was the outline of the old man as he disentangled a knot of fairy lights. They were wrapped all around him. Their light picked out the edge of an eyebrow and the shape of a sleeve as he tried his best to get out of the fairy light web. Later, when her mother had sung her a happy birthday and given her a gift, her thoughts fell back to the old man. She knew the two events were disconnected, but it felt all the more special that she had seen this on her birthday.

\*

The sound of her knuckles on the door was underwhelming. She considered taking her chance to leave before it opened.

She met an old face pleasant with wrinkles. His eyes, blue as the sky, were searching.

Holding up the camera she quickly explained why she'd come.

He smiled as if they'd met before.

'Please, come in.' He trotted down the hall and she followed. 'I've just made tea.'

The kitchen was a bustle of sound and light. The countertops were littered with open books, none of them for cooking with. Looking round she saw a dining table and chairs.

He gestured for her to sit.

\*

She tried to keep him in mind as she grew older. She would send letters. On an overnight flight back from Japan one year she remembered his fairy lights. From the window the city sprawl seemed endless. Technically she was falling towards earth at an alarming rate. But there was still that feeling. A little flutter of something celestial passing from a distant star, nudging its way between her atoms. It was the only thing she believed in that she couldn't explain with evidence. And in those moments when life felt like a menagerie of mirrors she remembered that look in his eyes. Like they'd met in another life. The on-flight PA announced their timely descent. She closed her eyes and exhaled slowly.



**Danielle Vrublevskis****A Turn About**

Two house sparrows crashed,  
UFOs,  
onto alien concrete.  
Their wings spread, not in flight, but in:  
wrestling, pinning, striving. Their white breasts  
bared towards the sky, vulnerable as supply.  
Their territories at stake,  
they fought over weeds and takeaway boxes and the alley  
cut through to the sunlit park.

I watched them from my window. When the youngest  
unpicked himself like a poor knot,  
he flew past me to retreat and safety.



**David Brookes****Vanilla**

What are you about, really?

I'm trying to figure this out as you help him keep his ice cream from dripping down his fingers. It's a scorching day. In England, what we call a 'heatwave' is just a sunny afternoon anywhere else. And yet Victoria Park is filled with people of all ages in minimal clothing.

I won't look at them. I am looking at you. I don't want to look away—

(The angles of your face that you so hate, the freckles on your shoulders. A year ago, you shrank to a size you once said you'd never attain and didn't aspire to. The shadows in your ribs are just a place I want to cool the tip of my tongue. Whatever you are, at any time, I fetishise: when you called yourself fat I rested my cheek on your backside and gazed, unfocused, down the slalom of your bare cheeks to the slow plains of your spine, relishing the dimensionality of you, loving each hill and valley.)

—except you force me to look, because you are holding his wrist in two hands and joking that you will lick the melting vanilla cream from his knuckles if he doesn't do it first.

What are you about, with him? Why does he bring that out in you, when he is so different from me?

So I look away, across the broad expanse of green parkland. Sun belts down through a blueness that makes your eyes seem grey. You never had cold eyes until today. I loved the childlike twitch of them, how you wouldn't hold my gaze—

(Except that one time, we talked about it, remember? When what began as frantic stripping, a desperate time against your bedroom wall in the low, red light of dusk, turned into something else once we moved to the merciful softness of the mattress. We didn't slow but something changed; we both felt it, a charge; and our eyes were locked in the near-silence, just the creak of something intense and scalding for both of us.)

—your searching eyes that seemed playfully coy were one of the things I loved, one aspect of our superficial love that was both the undercoat and the gloss on the deeper love of years.

But here's this friend of yours, who appeared beside our picnic *almost as though* he was one of the people you were texting earlier, *almost as though* he was invited despite his apparent surprise at seeing you here. Surprised with an expectant smile, like he'd been wearing it all the way over to this chance encounter with you. You, who never mentioned him before – 'I've mentioned him loads of times!' – except maybe as 'my friend', the same 'I'm just having a drink with my friend' or 'It's my friend's birthday' friend, that friend.

I sit down on the blanket, directly opposite you. I'm honestly dumbfounded. Everything he says is hilarious to you. Your diaphragm jolts with your deep belly-laugh, the one I always try to inspire in you, the one that brought us together in those early days of cautious flirting and protected glances, the delirious is-this-happening of an ill-advised office romance.

And I can hardly believe you're licking your lips. That acerbic tongue of yours, which wins so many debates. I've seen you in action, leaning over the boardroom table to lash someone with your brutal wit. Even when our interests were different, we found something in sharpness – you understood everything I said; I absorbed what you explained and knew, without the facts, what the tone of your voice meant, what you were getting at.

You cut with the scalpel and I slide down your blade into the incision like a drop of sweat.

That was the truth of us; it was the worst of ourselves being freed. In zipping open to show our flaws, we found that we had unexpectedly made ourselves vulnerable to each other. Instead of backing off, we probed. We found what was important about us. Didn't judge. Didn't cajole or change. That's how we came to it, by slicing something open and pressing the wounds together.

Your blazing passion, the nail-scrape filth of what you call your passion – it's bleeding away from me, I can feel it. Like a cup of mulled wine being drained. I'm cold,

even though there are kids here running around in their pants, even though this guy's ice cream is melting all over his hand and he laughs at your mock outrage when he says, no, he won't lick it off.

Who is this guy, anyway? We didn't have a contract, I know we didn't have a contract, we knew what this was – but who is he? I can't see inside him any more than I can see into you right now. It's like the sun bounces off your sweat-sheened skin and the glare of you makes you inaccessible.

We were so inside each other just a day ago. You knew all that I had kept hidden throughout the week, so that on Saturday I'm turned inside out by your glance – 'What's got you so down?', 'You're overthinking something again, aren't you?' You're a screwdriver under my skin, parting the surface of me from the flesh, flaying me into truthfulness. We would be raw together for days, having shed our professional guises, sluiced them away in a scalding shower together along with the casual lies of our public deception. It took you months to allow yourself to be exposed. Then, when our walls were down, we had the city to ourselves, and even besieged we could withstand anything from the safety of this unconventional – I'll say it – love.

But now, as in an *actual nightmare*, as though you've *actually forgotten I'm here*, you look him in the eye and like a tusked deity curl your extended tongue into the crevices of his creamy fist.

I don't know how you met him, how much time you spend with him, I don't know what it is about him that is such a magnet for your rare affection. He can't have what we have, he doesn't bring what you need.

This cocksure stranger, don't let this be what you want above me.



**Eithne Cullen****Triolet**

Walked by a different lake today  
in covid stillness - pale morning night  
escaping lockdown's weary workaday  
walked by a different lake today  
greylag goslings, green and fluffy, bright  
played on the path and blocked our way  
walked by a different lake today  
in covid stillness – pale morning light



**Elou Carroll****The Art of Doing Nothing**

*Do not think about*

the busy city of used plates and cups and spoons  
in the kitchen, or  
the empty streets and curtained windows  
outside.

*Do*

watch the dust rise in mounds  
on your shelves, and  
sit until the cushions have moulded around the shape  
of your not-moving.

*Do not*

visit with friends or neighbours or crowd  
on beach sand, or  
touch hands with loved ones, or  
stand close enough  
to feel the rough tongue  
of breath between.

*Do*

leave post unopened, emails  
unread, and  
laundry piled up at the end  
of your bed.



**Gareth Rees****Crowblack**

It starts with heights ... I dislike heights ... But heights are not the problem. I have always had a fear of falling ... No. Falling is not the problem. If I am falling, it is too late. I have never trusted myself not to jump. That is the problem.

I do not like birds ... No. Be more specific! I do not like birds flying. I suppose this dislike of airborne birds is linked to the heights, the falling and the jumping – but I have never connected the two until now.

Birds, when grounded, intrigue me. I like to sit on the bench in the local park and watch the birds hopping in the grass. I find rooks particularly fascinating. Black feathers, polished by the sun, like oil on water.

Twilight. I look up into the tall trees. These black silhouettes against the purple sky are dotted with nests – a rookery! – and vital with the cawing of male rooks confident in their pickup lines.

I do not think. I act. I stand up and walk over to the base of one of the tallest of the tall trees. I hug the trunk with arms and legs and start to shimmy upward.

I am aware of change. I am conscious both of progressing up the trunk of the tree and watching myself from the bench disappearing into the branches. I am witness and witnessed. I behold myself shrinking from view and feel myself shrinking.

I am deep in the branches, high up in the night. Black, like the rooks' feathers. Tired shine from the street lights. I pull myself up onto a thick, long branch and walk carefully along it like a high wire artist. I am confident.

I reach a large nest of twigs. Empty. I experience a strange sensation. I know it is meant for me. I climb in and am not surprised to find it comfortable and spacious. I fall asleep, and sleep the best sleep I have slept since last Tuesday.

I am woken by a large hook-nosed rook, perched on the rim of my nest.

I am a relic, says the rook.

I don't know what he means, or how to reply, so I just nod. The rook seems satisfied.

You must jump, he says. In our black-feathered world it is a task for infants. It is past your time.

I can't, I protest, rising to my feet and pulling myself up onto the rim of the nest to look the rook in the eyes. Hard, impenetrable, opaque, like the shell of a beetle.

You must, he says.

I move closer to the edge, look down, feel nothing.

It is dawn. There is a symphony in the branches. I smell the sky.

You fear you will jump, says the rook. *L'Appel du Vide*, the call of the void. That is what the French call it.

I do, I reply.

You will, he says. Now.

I lean forward and let myself fall.

I watch myself drop from the branches and fall, and  
the rook takes flight.



**Glenn Hubbard****Clap Hands**

*Each evening the people of Spain clap from their windows  
to pay tribute to the Spanish doctors and nurses who are  
fighting against the coronavirus.*

Evenings at eight we go  
to the window to stand and clap.  
When hands are sore we stop.  
They will not.

Sending our love, we like to think  
we can be heard although we know we can't.  
We like to think we shan't forget  
once normal life returns, won't

allow the stuff of days to  
block the way to memory,  
to dull the sense of gratitude  
and blur the recollection

of how we heard some harmony  
in that chaotic clapping, of how  
we wove a shawl of sound  
to wrap around their shoulders.

**Ian Inglis****Dog**

I wanted him to live forever. But he couldn't and he didn't. I called him for his afternoon walk, and when he didn't come trotting through the house to the front door I went looking for him. He was in the garden, lying in a pool of sunlight. I knelt beside him and stroked his neck. Old age, a heart attack, a stroke – there was no way of knowing. I stayed with him for an hour or so, and then fetched a spade and dug a deep hole in the loose earth. I arranged his body as evenly as I could, tossed the soil over him, and smoothed it down with my hands. Then I locked the door behind me and followed the route of our planned walk alone.

The grief I felt was quite different from the feelings when my mother had died, and this, I think, is a reflection of the life she had led. In my experience, the unhappiness in a person's life invariably outweighs the happiness. How did Hardy put it? 'Happiness is but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain.' Broadly speaking, I think he was right. The brief moments of unexpected joy to which we cling cannot compensate for seventy, eighty years of disappointments, betrayals and regrets. But his life wasn't like that: all he knew was love, unconditional love, given and received in equal measure. You may say he was a fortunate dog, to have no experienced no cruelty or neglect in his fifteen years. Perhaps. But I know that as the recipient of his trust, his affection and his companionship, it was I who was the more fortunate.

And of course he was still with me. Still in the house, his scent on my clothes, his hair on the furniture; still in the garden, never more than a few yards away when I was weeding the flowerbeds or sitting in the sun; still waiting for me to reach for his bowl in the morning, his lead in the afternoon. And sometimes, his presence was more substantial: the vague sensation of something brushing past my leg, a muted noise from the foot of the stairs, a closed door unexpectedly pushed open – all these added to the knowledge that I was being watched, guarded, protected.

People said to me, 'You gave him a good life.' Then they would ask, 'Will you get another dog?' I think initially their concern was genuine. But as the weeks passed, I glimpsed other questions in their eyes: 'Hasn't he got over it yet? It was only a dog, for heaven's sake. He needs to pull himself together.' I took to driving out to the coast or to the countryside, and repeating the long walks we had done together. Or I would sit in my armchair and, reaching down to the spot where he would lie at my feet, I would ruffle his fur. Now and again, I fancied I heard a little growl of pleasure. Whenever I left the house I would say goodbye to him; when I returned, I would call out to him. One weekend, I planted a flowering shrub – a purple wisteria – over his grave. When the weather allowed, I would sit in the garden and think of the minerals in his body helping to nourish its growth.

In all other respects, my life continued much as it always had. I went to work, I went out with my friends to

the theatre, to the cinema, to pubs and restaurants, I read, I ran, I cycled. I felt no need to explain my emotions, nor did I fully understand them. I did not expect or seek sympathy; in that sense, my sorrow was self-contained. I did not try to contrast my loss with the losses of others, and I resisted the temptation to rank it alongside other episodes in my life. His death did not leave, as I have heard some say, a void in my life. If pressed, I might compare it with the experience of reading a novel or watching a film or returning home from a holiday: balancing the pleasure of their lasting memories against the sadness that comes with their end. Except that this novel, this film, this holiday had lasted for fifteen years.

'It was his time,' friends say to me. 'There was nothing more you could do. At least, he died in peace, at home, in a place he loved.' I think they are trying to comfort me, to reassure me, to excuse me of any responsibility I may feel for his death. But I don't reply. What would I say? 'Thank you'? 'Yes, you're right'? They mean well, but in attempting to insert themselves into our lives, they are uninvited guests, trespassing on our privacy.

So, I sit in the garden and re-read the book, re-watch the movie, recall the holiday. And when I do, I sense that I'm not alone. Sometimes I come across passages I've forgotten, sometimes I see things from a different perspective. The ending, the conclusion is always the same, but that I know it in advance doesn't spoil my enjoyment. If anything, it brings a subtle recognition of the certainty of our lives together – friends, collaborators, fellow travellers,

remembering the past, negotiating the present, anticipating the future. I see you look at me curiously, hesitantly, and ask why I do these things, why I choose to spend so much of my time in this way. Isn't it obvious? I wanted him to live forever.





**Jared Pearce**

**Just before the quarantine**

we went to the zoo, with you  
on the other side of the planet.  
The tiger paced his walls,  
his foot pads scored the clay  
earth raw, and we saw the young  
rhino trudge beside her mother,  
her father sliced away from her  
by a steel gate, and the seals  
bobbed the concrete toward  
the stream, the macaques cut  
into gangs, the elands locked  
their spiraled horns.

The dromedary,  
whose tilting humps swayed on  
each step, and the giraffes pulled  
into the barn, had eyes soft  
as yogurt, deep like chocolate, ready  
in their black-and-white vision  
to trample fences and pens,  
borders, moats, and sheets of glass.

**Jenny Rowe****Outside the hive**

Daffodils pucker beside the path they diligently lined.  
The bright-eyed frills survey the empty ways and judge  
next year to take more ground.

Blossom cracks out loud and proud, their neon light a  
summer sign  
That tempts the pale, distracted faces who peek from  
panes or rush between two places.

Rapeseed roused to fill the fields, an unsettled stink to  
stolid stomachs passing by  
A sickness spread like swarms of flies, chasing down and  
striking right between the eyes.

The insects rise from winter slumber (called too soon by  
clap of thunder)  
To see the human colony - which once upon a time was  
free - chained to mother earth's decree.

Shield! Sustain!  
Deploy the task force!  
Herald the humble worker bee!  
A hive of earnest activity, as nature runs its course.

**Jenny Rowe**

**Screen baby**

The day we put old friends on hold  
We said hello to you.  
Joining dot to dot per inch  
Of pixel-soft skin  
We asked:  
Where's the bigger picture?

Then your alarm bell tone cut through the chatter  
Conserved in broadband data package.  
Every yawn, frown and whimper  
A frog in the throat, a cat's got my tongue  
Building a bond that's not even begun.

Every film a sequence of stills - just out of sync -  
The angle too narrow to capture  
The wide-eyed gaze I'm yet to catch.

Rewind and replay - no more to see -  
Just the echo of a voice I'm yet to hear  
Pulsing love through the longing drum of my ear.

I assemble you from scratch:  
The puzzle with transparent pieces.

And in vivid dreams  
I press fast forward  
To where you're safe and sound

Freed from the screen  
Unlocked in our arms  
Snug, serene.



**Joe McGuire****Eyes**

I miss eyes. Two blue eyes, in particular. Blue eyes that look into my grey eyes and smile, crinkle round the edges. Blue eyes across the border, a two-hour train journey or a motorway away. Eyes I often wait two weeks to see for two days and now haven't seen since the second Sunday of March. Blue eyes, with the voice. Calming, soft, sweet with the lilt. The one that helps in 'times like these.' When everything seems so distant, so out of reach, endless. Eyes like a Cornish shore.

We'll go again one day.



**Lauren Aspery****Same time again next week**

Our friendship went digital long before *this*  
whatever *this* is

last night we called to talk about the usual things  
exchanging our ritual hellos, how are yous, what you up  
tos  
until things took a turn –

infestations of slugs crept into the  
conversation,  
crawling across kitchen floors and sliding  
under bedroom doors

you had perpetual palpitations trying to  
catch a spider  
as big as your fist  
while I dreamt of daddy long-legs dancing  
inside Mum's sleeping bag

*"Same time again next week?"*

Same time again next week.

**Lauren Aspery****Google search results: Lemon Top\***

yellow tops for women mustard, lemon and ochre  
yellow bardot and cold shoulder tops  
yellow tops, t-shirts and blouses  
ladies short sleeve and long tops – yellow  
lemon women's shirt for sale  
yellow crop tops and going out tops  
plus size colours – yellow in tops  
men's short sleeve lemon  
lemon embellished chiffon top  
lemon tote bag  
buy yellow t-shirt  
v-neck top lemon green  
fashion women lemon printed casual blouse

*\*Lemon Top (n): a cone filled with whipped dairy ice cream topped with a swirl of lemon sorbet, originating somewhere along the coast of North East England*

**Meghan Malachi****Still Life of a Woman in a Chair**

The pointed woman sits because there is nothing left to do. To her side, a lampshade, crinkled and painted a dull tan that matches the wall far too closely. She hangs her head in exhaustion or worry or perhaps she is praying. For the laundry to dry, for the winds to pick up. For the hunch in her back to point itself towards the moon again. A pair of bull horns meet as a cusp, right where her collar bone belongs. And the uneven shadow covers her thin arms gently as a veil and paints her into a mosaic. A tight, sloppy bun pulls at her roots, and I wonder if she can feel the air. Her scalp is shy, like slow light. It is a map that wants you to see that everything hides behind something. But what I—and by I, I mean you—see first is the face of her stomach. Three flabs of skin perfectly rolled into themselves. It all hangs. The long, skinny straps of her red bra affirm her off white and underslung breasts. It's easy to think the supine bottle that rolls towards the wall, the electrical outlet, is of her doing, to assume the green-rusted chalice that sits at the edge of the table is empty. Or full. It's easy to wonder how many times the pool of wood has found itself compromised this way and why the pleats of the lampshade are beginning to resemble a fun skirt. The apron of tedium which once sat on her lap, neatly and full of rage, has found its way to the ground. Her bare legs shine, glazed with sweat, and you've already forgotten how angular she is. You wish you could give her the time she deserves. Oh, but that beautiful, dull lampshade.



**Nicole Pearson****Petrichor**

The rain is starting. It is coming down fast and hard, not the way I had imagined. The first droplets sizzle as they land on the scorched earth, immediately turning to steam. Soon though the ground is saturated and people make their way onto the street. Tentatively at first, as though they think the rain might be a mirage, but once they feel it cool their leathered skin, they throw their heads back, laughing, mouths wide open, trying to catch droplets. The atmosphere is electric. Neighbours, who have not seen each other in months, lean across fences to shake hands and slap each other on the back. Some children have already managed to dig out their long forgotten wellies and they splash in the rivers of mud that run down the road. Other children have ignored shoes altogether. Dogs are barking again, a sound I did not realise I had missed. There is still no bird song. Maybe the rain has come too late for them.



**Ravichandra P Chittampalli**

**The Tea Shop in the Mountains**

The tea shop in the mountains  
Has nothing romantic about it,  
Except the kettle and the stove  
That never dies all summer.  
But when we sit down on the stone  
That serves for a chair at the tea shop  
I find the meadow, the tarn and the magpie  
All jostling for space in your brown eyes,  
When tender turns the afternoon.  
The little boy serving pakora and tea  
Stops your ski stick from rolling off  
While asking in civil tones if you care for more.  
Between our legs stretched out in front  
There is a rush of sky spill as it shatters  
And the primulas all blue kiss your boots.  
I then stand and stretch my hands up,  
Grab the truant sun all orange and dewy,  
Halve it with my Swiss knife and squeeze.  
The day gently trickles down my throat  
As the inseparable Castor and Pollux drag  
Their tired legs up the hill, tarry and smile.  
I see you then lift your head while your  
Hair slowly spreads into the night.  
The old man then on his strong legs stands  
To prime the petromax with practiced ease.

# Regina G Beach NHS, a blackout poem

© W G  
I  
D

a special group be a lifesaver. join  
of people

it's easy as you can see you  
know

people can give they don't you're good  
you start giving  
And when you do, how easy.

you'll act a  
nation join give fix  
can Search for a future

point visit You can make  
call

hope

sincerely, sincerely,

Direct

inform answer questions, just

[Redacted]



Give

**Sadbh Kellett****Afterlife**

Life got stuck in Tara Street Station;  
The platform bathed in mid-April sun,  
The shadowy cold patches almost a  
Sweet relief from the golden glare  
In spring pools dotted between the  
Old tracks coming from Connolly.

I look forward towards Pearse Street  
And the glimpses I will catch of  
Students slipping out of Hamilton,  
Your figure in fencing gear,  
Lunging in and out of the slight  
Sliver of the Sports Hall window.

Anything beyond that is a haze  
A jumble of names that I don't  
Really need to know when life  
Lies between the islands of  
Tara and Pearse Street Stations.  
If only I had known this then.

**Sadbh Kellett****Car Troubles**

You're driving me home  
At a snail's pace,  
Unwilling to trust the fresh blanket  
Of snow and what it conceals  
From your bruised eye.

I turn up the heat in the hope  
That you will mistake me for  
the sun - capable of  
melting even black ice.

You let me play lullabies  
Of far-too-early Christmas carols  
That secretly sign - you're safe,  
With me, you're safe -

We drive your car to its NCT -  
While we wait, you point out  
the minute marks they'll miss  
- No physical repairs needed.

We side-trip to IKEA  
Discussing domestic daydreams  
Of the troubles of assembling  
and reassembling furniture -

We sit in your car outside my house

And your healing mouth says -  
I'm not ready,  
I'm sorry, I'm not ready.



**Sarah Evans**

**Garden City**

City life is in lockdown,  
stores and cafes tightly closed,  
shoppers snaking in two-metre-apart  
queues for loo rolls, pasta, flour.  
I pace dead streets,  
passing others at a measured distance,  
their eyes down,  
expressions masked,  
my chapped-clean hands thrust deep  
into out-of-danger pockets.

Back home, my garden remains open  
to the hop and chirp of courting birds,  
the come and go of squirrels  
and neighbourly cats.  
Bulbs burst forth  
from spring-thawed soil and  
weed seeds drift in unhindered,  
insects buzz and swarm,  
life remaining wild and disrespectful  
of manmade rules.

**Simon Daley**

**Hanging by a thread**

Where have you gone little red lint?  
You were right there on day 1,  
I waved you off with polish squish,  
but expected you back by now.  
On day 3 I tried to find you again,  
not day 2, that would just be silly.  
There were other things to do then  
things that filled day 2 right up.  
Perhaps I was a little rag hasty  
back in the heady days of day 1.  
Day 4 became a bit of boxset blur.  
Freezer defrosting melted day 5.  
It was my Mum's you know,  
that porcelain lady you imbued  
with a splash of alien colour.  
Alarmingly red on duck egg blue.  
You slipped my mind for a bit  
when I ventured in to the uncharted  
territory of repositied reliquary  
in the cupboard under the stairs.  
Now, that cupboard is conquered.  
My quest begins again in earnest,  
to see if you are here with me still.  
I fear you are gone; I am all alone.



**Skye Wilson****A list of things I found when lockdown started and I emptied my bag**

Perfume from the advert with that actress dancing through sheets of floating chiffon / a thermos with a little porridge left / phone chargers / poems scribbled down to skeletons with dark ink / an inhaler / ibuprofen / train tickets stretching over months / chapstick / lip balm / lipstick I rarely wear / the keys to my best friend's flat / pens / tampons / an injection swab / my favourite necklace / three contact lenses / two pairs of headphones / one purse, identical to my mum's / keys with a bottle opener and a hammer, small but sharp / another inhaler (my good one) / paracetamol / an expensive laptop in a case that peels like ancient tape / a half-full pack of gleaming silver sertraline / an empty hot pink packet of rigevedon / an almost-finished notebook, pocked with ink / a new one, gleaming with possibility / my waterbottle, nearly full / an empty pack of plasters / an envelope sealed with wax / bus tickets / hand sanitizer / a hair tie wrapped only around dust /

## **Sophie King**

### **We Will Be Replanted In Our Time**

I haven't had a garden for years. This apartment is smaller than the last, and although the light is better, none of my indoor plants have thrived.

Apart from the aloe.

When I was talking to him about all the outdoor spaces he has access to -- garden, allotment, yard -- I felt a yearning for greenness. I liked the greenness of my old apartment. The green view over fields, green hills, the bright leaves of my rescue orchid and rescue basil. The way they thrived as the red kites and jackdaws framed the view.

As I yearned for stalk and soil, I told him about my aloe. I told him that it was the only plant that survived the move. Talked about its growth spurt, and how its roots were wrapped so tightly around the inside of the pot that they were peeking through the soil. It was in that conversation that I knew I needed to do something, to help it. I couldn't sit back and let it suffer.

My cupboard was full of larger plots. The one for the basil, or the old ginseng that died two apartments' back. When I wriggled my aloe free from its container I photographed the mad tangle of roots and I sent it to him.

He told me that he agreed it had outgrown its old home. I filled the largest pot with soil -- soil from his garden, soil which had nurtured my rescue basil for an entire year -- and dug a little well for it. I let my aloe nestle

down into its new crumbly home. Patted some soil down around it.

There was something in the tangle of overgrown roots curled around the inside of the pot that felt all too familiar to me. I, too, feel constrained. This one bedroom apartment is too small to be the sole container for my entire life. My living room is not one single room now, but three: office, gym, art studio. It takes a lot of planning to wedge the exercise bike in the right corner, or keep my paints where I can reach them and yet have them invisible throughout the next round of Skyping.

Of course, I don't dare wish to be replanted. I've been replanted five times in the last two-and-a-half years. Like an indoor plant that can be picked up and transplanted at any time, all of my moves have been random events that I have had no control over. Not even the slightest. It doesn't matter how small this apartment feels right now, I hardly dare say it is too small. I'm afraid to say I wish for a garden, allotment, or yard of my own. I wouldn't dare let the Universe think me unhappy, lest it fling me out into the darkness once again.

The last apartment was my dream home. The last apartment was where I felt such a flood of relief to sign a two-year tenancy, to feel a breath of hope and freedom among the deer and greenness. I unfurled amongst a sense of security: the hope and freedom of friendly neighbours, who always knew what was going on with everyone else.

Did I lose faith in its perfection? Did a fleeting thought cross my mind that there was a fine line between community, and claustrophobia? Did those attractive high ceilings leave me shivering, as the heat escaped as fast as my bank balance did? Did I, perhaps, invite what happened on that cold afternoon, that heartbreaking phone call? Out of the blue, my landlord had decided to sell. After only five months. Five months and two days, two days beyond the minimum term before a no-fault eviction is allowed. Five months and two days, tearing up all of my plans for two secure years.

I couldn't afford to buy that dream apartment, and the person who could did so right before Christmas. The holidays would've been a scramble of chaos even without the pressure to find a new place to live, and with the added stress of a new, serious, -- and at the time, potentially life-threatening -- illness? Well.

All of that led me here, to my small brick-built apartment. Here, at the end of a cul-de-sac with views of a car park and an hour-plus commute to work. Here, where the chaos of an unexpected move took almost a month to disentangle. But then, finally! March! The promise of spring! Illness and chaos subsiding, I allowed tendrils of root to snake their ways up bridal paths, out into the nearby woods. I let seeds of attention germinate in the gaps between library and coffee shop, art gallery and gym. March! Finally, a time to relax.

For a week or two, at least.

Quarantine! What a strange beast! What a way to get to know a new apartment, deeply and intimately. What a way to practise delayed gratification in getting to know a gorgeous new town on the outskirts of a much-loved city filled with the arts and culture I was looking forward to. Quiet bars, wild swimming, galleries I could approach for representation!

I used to tell him that maybe Loki was in love with me. Or out to get me for some reason. I've stopped saying that now, just in case. I don't think I'd dare complain about anything here. I repotted the aloe because it deserves more space. It deserves to extend those roots, wriggle down into dark soil. But I don't; I can cope.

Truth is, I am in love with this space. My little brick apartment with its car park views. The streetlights all go off at midnight, I can gaze at the stars from my bedroom window. My west-facing kitchen frames perfect sunsets above other people's lovely gardens. My upstairs neighbour feeds birds from the balcony, I hear them flutter and chirrup at dawn.

Yes, it was the aloe that found a way to thrive here. It grew, grew strong, when nothing else did. It kept on growing even when there was nowhere to grow to, and instead of withering it formed a new life. It learned to make the most of every scrap of space available. I can do the same.

There's a bit of space left in the bedroom, after all.

And in the kitchen, and the hall.

## **Sophie McNaughton**

### **Juniper Bay and the Fincloyne**

Every full moon, the pod of Fincloyne selkies would let the tide wash them ashore.

The plump creatures with skin of silk would leave grooves in the sand. When the vast sky over Juniper Bay was saturated in inky blue darkness, the selkies would finally shed their coats. They would gather on the shore in their human form and sing against the fizzing black waves, glinting swords of silver in the moonlight.

Many in the small fishing village of Juniper Bay would hush to hear them. Children would huddle at windows in breathy silence, trying in vain to understand the old tongue. Widows would stand on their doorsteps, crying into lit candles.

They would gaze at the water-kissed creatures, their flowing black hair baubled with droplets that shimmered like frogspawn. But Abhainn, a local fisherman with hair of algae and seaweed, slicked with slime, watched only one selkie. She was affectionately named by the villagers as Rowan.

One night, as the selkies finished their ethereal song, they started to slip back into their coats.

Abhainn watched from the shadows of the Dead Woods and watched Rowan kneel to pick up the gem he had placed on the beach earlier that night. As the rest of

her pod waded into the sea, Rowan examined the gem. Her coat lay forgotten behind her.

From the trees, Abhainn emerged and moved towards the shore. Rowan moved the precious stone around in her palm, not realising the rest of her pod was gone.

In soft and silent motion, Abhainn reached the beach rocks and stepped across to Rowan's coat. Between his thumb and forefinger, he lifted the glossy skin, bundled it into his arms and slipped back into darkness.

He scuttled home where he locked the coat in his chest. He planned to toss the key into the sea when he got back to the shore and take Rowan away, forcing her to stay with him in her human form for the rest of her life. But when Abhainn got back to the beach, Rowan was gone yet the air hung heavy with her cries.

The next morning, Abhainn woke to the sound of shrill screams. Clambering out of bed, he went to his window to see the villagers huddled on the beach consoling a crying couple. Abhainn quickly dressed and rushed to the shore. When he got there, a villager told him that Blaine, the only son of Daileass Barrie, the leader of the Finclayne, had been lured into the water by the selkies and drowned at the break of dawn.

Daileass' wife Iona was hunched on all fours in the sand, shrieking into the sea.

'My darling boy,' she cried. 'He would never hurt a soul! Why would they take him?'

The villagers pulled Iona up from the sand. She went limp in their arms, her howls reduced to a lifeless whine.

Abhainn watched with gaping eyes, unable to move or speak.

'Why would the selkies do this?' one villager said. 'We've lived peacefully alongside each other for centuries. There must be some sort of mistake.'

'It was no mistake,' the spawwife said.

The crowd hushed and heads turned to her.

'It was revenge,' she said.

'What?' Dailess asked. 'My son would never have done a thing to those creatures!'

'No, he wouldn't,' the spawwife said. She stepped forward, towards Abhainn. 'But someone did wrong them and poor Blaine, his hair tinged with emerald, was mistaken for someone else.'

Everyone's eyes turned to Abhainn and, for a moment, even the sea was silent until the spawwife divulged what he had done.

Iona rose from her slump and hurtled towards Abhainn. She clawed his head and slapped his face in rapid



lashings before the villagers pulled her away. Abhainn stood shaking, flushed and stung with scratches.

Daileass, standing tall with arms like thick logs, punched Abhainn in the teeth. Mouthfuls of fresh blood flew through the air and splattered across the sand. Abhainn crumbled to the ground. Trampling over him, Daileass started marching towards Abhainn's house.

When they got there, he kicked the door down and looked around in a frenzy until he found an axe. In the corner next to the fire sat the chest.

Daileass started wielding the axe and tore chunks out of the chest. After several swings and grunts, he finally cracked it open and pulled out the selkie skin.

He cradled the delicate skin in his arms and a tear slid down his cheek.

When Daileass got back to the shore, he smoothed the coat out over a rock like he was laying a babe to sleep. He turned back to Abhainn, still lying on the ground, and grabbed his arm to pull him up. He started shoving him down the shore towards his boat.

The villagers followed in a panic, asking Daileass what he was planning to do. He threw Abhainn into his boat. Abhainn still couldn't speak.

Daileass looked to Iona who was standing at the head of the villagers. She simply nodded, her eyes filled

with venom. Daileass returned the nod, pushed the boat out and tossed himself in.

The villagers cried after him but he rowed out into the waves. Abhainn stared back at the villagers in terror.

That night, Daileass returned alone in the gloaming, rowing his boat through fog back to Juniper Bay. Iona was waiting for him and he fell into her arms on the beach.

Some say that Daileass drowned Abhainn with his bare hands that night. Some say he threw him off the edge of the world. But others believe something much worse, that Abhainn was taken to the Black Isle, a lump barely visible in the distance. A cursed island with foul, fermented air, surrounded by oil instead of seawater.

As for Rowan, she was never found. But some elders say they still see her ghost standing at the lip of the waves, veiled in wispy grey, hand-in-hand with Blaine.

**Sven Kretzschmar**

**Promise of blue**

*(after Anne McMaster)*

Dawn over country fields and silence  
by the river. Early bird song flows

like the water before me. A softness  
to the air, an old tree waits

patiently for spring, a moment  
without time. I hear daybreak, stand

between red haulms, smile alone  
and down the tools brought to manage

this damp soil made for potatoes.  
Silhouetted branches stretch, still dark,

against sky and day, light  
composition of cirrostratus.

To stand on this land. To be  
of it. Morning fire burns

its way up into an endless  
promise of blue. To wait for it here.

**Tereza Chanaki****Please, If You Ever Write About Me**

Write about me like I was worth knowing.  
Like my stories and dreams are worth remembering.  
Like my name will be brought up in a nostalgic tone of  
comfort.

Write about me like you did not regret meeting me.  
Like our fights did not blur the laughs and the pleasure.  
Like my cooking used to cure all pain or doubt.

Write about me like you loved me.  
Like we were young and hopeful.  
Like we broke the pattern of dull past feet dragging lovers.

Write about me like I was real.



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