



# Furthsetter

Creative writing from the pupils of Boroughmuir High School

*I Have Started Dreaming* ~ 2022-23

*Welcome to this  
year's edition of  
Furthsetter!*

This year's writers bring us award-winning flash fiction; powerful villanelles and other poetry; menacing Gothic tales, both classic and modern; and poignant stories of love and loss.

Thanks, as always, to the English department for truffling out contributions from our wonderful writers, and huge thanks to our writers for producing such creative content.

And thank you to you for reading!

*Lesley Bloomer (Chief Wrangler)*

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## Miss Matched

Lyra Barber

She collects lonely things.

The jar on her desk is full of buttons, all different shapes, colours and sizes. Sometimes she'll take a few out and pair them up, matching the little white star button from a craft set with that big brown marbled one she took off a cardigan. They can't figure out why, but she has a reason for every couple, she knows why they go together.

One day she brought a stray kitten in. She fed it and played with it, gave it a name and showed it love. They joked that she was a stray cat, scruffy and unwanted, her messy office cubicle a cardboard box. But she never listened to what they said. She just cared for her new friend.

She gave the kitten a yellow shoelace to play with. The other one was on her right shoe, but she didn't need this one. Because the yellow shoelace goes with the black one, and she only has one of those. *They make each other pop*, she would say if they ever asked. But they don't ask, they'd rather assume, and judge, and laugh. So she ignores them, and pulls the laces tight to keep her shoes secure over her odd socks.

When he started working there he felt out of place, and she could tell. She gave him a necklace with half a heart for a pendant. When he asked if she had the other half, she told him that she had found it alone, and that it was up to him to decide his other half. That it's match didn't have to be made or sold or gifted with it to be the right one. And then she left him wondering what that really meant.

She makes lonely things feel less lonely.

*\*Lyra's story was awarded First Prize in the 2023 National Flash Fiction Youth Competition, organised by the University of Chester and the International Flash Fiction Association. We are extremely proud of her!*

## I Must Go On

Percy Sutherland

Wind blows through the trees above us, shaking the branches and causing a dusting of snow to fall upon my bare head. It sends a shiver down my spine as ice-cold water trickles down the nape of my neck and past my collar, but I know I must remain still. To move would risk me being seen, to be seen would risk death. For hours I have lain here with my chest pressed against the frozen ground and a rifle cradled in my arms. To my right lies another soldier peering through a set of binoculars aimed at the horizon. His face is gaunt and pale and I am studying the worry lines etched into the skin around his eyes when I am startled by a gasp escaping from his lips - the signal - he turns to me and nods as he hauls himself to his feet. Time to start moving again.

And so we walk. Crouching low to avoid the risk of being spotted we make our way to wherever my companion is leading me. I imagine I am merely a spectator, looking through the eyes of another man as he slowly trudges through miles of fields blanketed with snow. This man is hundreds of miles away while I am at home. This man's eyes are lifeless and dark, mine can still light up. This man's cheeks are sunken and hollow, mine are still rosy and full. This man is barely living, death's shadow hangs over him and it is only a matter of time until his cold hand grabs him by the shoulder

whereas I remain safe in the confines of my home. But with a start I am brought back to reality and a wave of sorrow crashes over me. I bow my head and carry on walking.

Three days earlier my companion and I had found shelter in the basement of an old farmhouse. We had just started to bed down for the night when the sound of footsteps was heard from above. I felt my heart skip and a cry rose to my throat, but I silenced it before it was let free. This was it; we had been found, it was all over. However, our fears were immediately quelled when we heard the voice of a child crying out for their parents. The tiny voice echoed around the farmhouse and the desperate calls sounded like they were getting closer and closer. Looking up to the trapdoor in the corner of the ceiling we saw a little boy's face appear.

After convincing him that there was no need to be scared, he joined us in the basement. Tearfully he explained to us that he had been separated from his parents after his village was attacked a few days earlier. While he was telling us this I stared at him, transfixed. He seemed tall for his age and by the way he spoke and carried himself I got the sense he was wise beyond his years. His slender, gangly frame and was clothed only in simple

ragged and his face, which was thin and pointed, framed a set of deep green eyes that were almost hypnotic to look at. When his story was over we assured him we would keep him safe until the morning and give him some of our rations before he left to continue his search. Laying next to him and hearing his soft breathing as he slept, I fell asleep happy in the thought that maybe one day, I might live a happier existence with children of my own.

As I wonder what has happened to that child since we left him, I hear a shout from my comrade. He points to a plume of smoke billowing upwards through the trees of a forest in the distance.

“Perhaps that’s a beacon” he exclaims excitedly, “Maybe it’s for us!” And so we change course and head towards the dark pillar in the distance .

I’m struggling to carry on. My boots have soaked through and the feeling in my feet is gone. My eyelids droop and start to close. The prospect of reaching safety is the only thing keeping me going. Mustering all of my strength I make my way slowly towards the source of the fire but my comrade seems to have forgotten about me. He begins to speed up to a brisk walk, then a jog and then a run until I lose sight of him through the trees. I can’t keep up. I try with all my might to catch him but it’s no use. I

continue at my sluggish pace into the forest following the smell of burning.

Tall trees flank each side of me, stretching upwards towards the heavens and only allowing narrow strips of light through the branches of the canopy. The crunch of snow I had been used to under my feet is replaced by the sound of wet leaves being pressed down by my sodden boots. I am exhausted but still I make my way forwards, the fire is close now and the acrid smell of smoke is heavy in the air

Finally, I reach the source of the smoke. In the centre of a clearing in the forest a bonfire sits a bonfire, spewing smoke into the air. It becomes clear that this isn’t the signal that we hoped to find when I notice my comrade sitting down, staring at the ground with an expressionless face. I walk towards him, asking what’s wrong when out of the corner of my eye I notice something strange and walk to that instead.

Huddled by the bonfire a small figure is wrapped in a thin blanket. Getting closer I notice it’s skin, as white as porcelain and in some places turned blue by the cold but the figure does not move, it stays frozen. Closer still I creep until I am met with the figure’s face. Above it’s pursed blue lips, above the thin pointed nose, I see a pair of glassy eyes. A pair of

eyes that are open but not seeing - a pair of deep green eyes. Tears streaming down my face, I hold him tight. As I kneel there, sobbing into the rough fabric that cloaks him I feel snowflakes land on my head. I look up, my eyes remaining closed, and let the snow fall onto my face. I stay like that for a few minutes until I feel a hand on my shoulder. My companion drags me to my feet and without saying a word, we continue to walk.

## The Lupinotuum

**Sam Beattie**

The carriage shook and rattled as we bounced along the barren stretch of road to the desolate castle of Aragona. I had thought of nothing but this place since I had heard of the cure. The cure that would free me from my curse. I would never wake up tasting the metallic tang of blood, clothed in rags, an indescribable stench filling the air. After this trip I could be free.

The closer we got to the increasingly repulsive castle the livelier the horses got. Then the silhouette, which will haunt me for years to come, came into view. The full moon cast a ghostly light from behind the castle perched on its rocky outcrop. The sight caused an icy chill to tear through my body. Suddenly, a howl filled the air and then more joined in, and more, and more. My heart plummeted and the horses went wild. It took all my strength to keep them from bolting.

The castle's towers rose out of the walls as though trying to escape the utter hell of the castle of Aragona. I glanced at my pocket watch using the light from the moon. Eleven thirty.

I carried on, leaving the horses at the bottom of the outcrop. Every step I took towards the castle quickened my heart rate. As I got closer, the howling grew even louder. I had never felt such fear. I had no idea where the howling

could be coming from, for nothing could survive here, surely. The walls loomed before me, ivy creeping up them, seeping into every crack. Eyelike windows glowered at me: some were just holes with glass shards lining them, some depicted intricate stained-glass pieces which were a wonder to look at but felt incongruous. As I looked at one particular window, something seemed to move. It was nothing, I told myself. Yet I kept glancing at the windows, terrified.

I rounded the castle to the great oak door, stepping over fallen, withered trees. There were gargoyles on either side of the door, each bearing grotesque features but, worst of all, their eyes followed me as though they were looking into my soul. I touched the ornate metal door handle; it was cold to the touch and sent shivers down my spine. I twisted it and pushed the heavy door open.

Suddenly the howling ceased. The rusty hinges cried out in protest. I hesitated. Surely walking through this door would be like submitting oneself to certain doom? But I remembered why I was here, so I entered the blood-curdling castle. The temperature dropped like a stone. Suddenly, I felt an icy hand on my neck. I spun around but there was only the door I had just come through. Shaking with fear, I began to explore the castle, which was eerily silent now the howling had stopped. The majority of windows were useless, only serving as an entrance for the ghostly wind, which swept through the

castle, shaking the elegant chandeliers. The glass from the broken panes crunched with my every step. A deafening screech filled the air. I continued on, terrified yet determined, every footstep amplified by the endless hallways.

All of a sudden twelve sharp bells pierced the air and my heart rate doubled. NO! An unimaginable pain tore through my body, as though every bone was breaking, then being repaired, only to break again. Every muscle seemed to contract in unbearable agony. I let out an ear-splitting shriek that slowly became howl.

Then, as quickly as it had started, the torture stopped, and I had never felt better. I felt born again.

I had grown to a monstrous height. My muscles looked as if they were chiselled from stone and I felt I could have lifted anything. I looked at my hands: veins bulged under the skin and, best of all, claws as sharp as knives protruded from each of my fingers. In an ancient mirror, I saw what I was: skin as black as night, fur matted and tangled, long ears poking from the jungle of my hair like mountains breaking through clouds. Shiny white teeth caught the moonlight: I bared them and howled at the moon.

It had been too long since the last time I was free. That foolish human trying to contain me coming to here of all places to find a cure. I was not a disease. He was the disease.

I moved through the castle, not running or walking but stalking. My back crooked and hunched as I roamed the vast place. I barged doors open, splintering them at their hinges in search of food.

Then, out of nowhere, the world began to spin. I stumbled about, fell through a door and it caved in. Darkness.

My eyes flickered open. Rain pounded the glass windows, reverberating around the room. I seemed to be in an old hall. A long wooden table stretched the length of the place, intricate stained glass windows lined the walls and a soft, blood-red carpet covered the floor. I studied one of the windows: it depicted a wolf-like creature. It stood tall and proud. A torrent of memories came flooding back. I saw what that beastly creature had seen, knew the power of the monster and that feeling of freedom. And the taste for human blood.

I could not let this creature be free.

My eyes were drawn to a door in the corner of the room, the door I had heard about, the door I came to find. A gargoyle sat above it looking at me as though it was judging me. I knocked on the door, just a faint tap but the ancient door rattled on its corroded hinges. I waited for what felt like forever, my heavy breathing the only thing breaking the dead silence. No answer.

I decided to enter anyway. The door groaned and creaked. Inside, the room was a mess. Test tubes lay everywhere, numerous concoctions had spilled all over the place. I saw my face in a mirror, white as a sheet. Then, out of nowhere came a small man with mismatched eyes – one blue, one green – that sparkled gleefully. He had long wispy white hair and an oak walking stick. He spoke in a raspy voice. I explained my situation and he listened intently. He could indeed free me, he said, but wanted to make sure I was certain.

I considered it for a moment, remembered the power of that other self.

“No,” I said. “I would like to remove the human part.”



## Whale Fall

Anna Loxley

I live my life as a ghost. Haunted and hollow. Despite my image, my blood is far from cold. I am a ghost in every sense it means to be one except my beating heart. I am here but I am barely present. I look down on the world and those around me as a separate being - breathing different air. A 'whale fall' is the term used by biologists to describe a whale's eventual death; as the air leaves its body the carcass slowly sinks to the bottom of the ocean floor. As though I have no air, I'm sinking: this is my own fall. I reach the floor and the pressure rises. It's getting darker, I can no longer see the surface of the water.

Do you mourn for me? If my body were laid to rest, would you visit my stone? I am the ghost who lets you sleep because I do not haunt you, in fact I doubt I could cross your mind. You wouldn't feel a chill as I pass by you, you barely noticed when I was warm. I watch you live, your vibrant light contrasting that of the shadows I left. Your laughter fills the space my wails left empty. My silent presence fails to falter you, my skin like paper fails to cut you. I'm barely a whisper in your orchestra of life. Still, as the leaves fall and the air becomes thick I wrap my cold arms around you and keep you warm without an expectation of acknowledgement.

To be invisible is to be unnoticed, neither seen nor heard. Ghosts are merely an idea; a slight movement in the corner of your eye begging to be perceived. I am not religious but I pray for it even still. My hollow image cannot be filled – I reach out in the hope of feeling anything and instead only feel the cold chill of air that is slowly suffocating me. I am utterly alone in this world of company.

Perhaps this is my penance, this purgatory I live in. My empty reflection staring back at me is the only way in which I am seen. If this is punishment, it is worse than hell. Ghosts are just scary stories mothers tell their children, they aren't real. If I am not real, then what am I? I plead to be told. When a whale 'falls', as they say, it's rotting carcass provides sanctuary and sustenance for decades. My body feeds no one. My heart pounds and yet no one hears it, my whale song is unheard. I could blame it on the frequency – but we both know that would be a lie. I am the ghost who does not haunt you; I am the ghost who is yet to fall.

## The Letter

**Tiago Guerra Hardie**

He stood up. He'd sat at his desk for hours, not working, not thinking, just sitting. His arms stretched out, causing his shoulder blades and back to crack softly. His posture was awful, he was aware, just too exhausted to care. His hand ran over the top of his mother's old, dusty radio which she'd given him before she passed. His eyes followed blankly as some fell to the floor. He blew the dust from his fingers and wiped down the radio with his upturned sleeve, turning it on letting the quiet whispers keep him company as he returned to just sitting.

The ambience soothed him, helped him to feel calm as he drifted slowly into the abyss of his own thoughts. His quiet gaze wandered across his chaotic desk, past the unorganised pile of unfinished work, past the empty cups, past the old food packets, before resting on a jar of old, blunt pencils. He pulled the jar towards himself, taking his time meticulously and methodically taking each pencil and sharpening it to perfection. Reaching the last one, he leaned back, yawning.

He reached over to the radio and turned up the volume. The music was old jazz music, the melody felt like an old memory, but he couldn't quite

remember how it went. He was reminded of his youth, sent back to the simpler days, when he and his father would frequent the local jazz bar.

He was transported once again to those rainy nights spent with his father, drinking, singing, and laughing as the local jazz band played the night away. He always adored the double bass, since he'd met it on his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Its low rumbles entranced him and brought him peace. No matter how terrible his day was, how drunk he was by the night's end, he always found the bass. He always found the hypnotising drone, bouncing from the acoustic riffs of the guitar, the sharp highs of the violin and the enthusiastic voice of the lead singer. He'd become mesmerised watching the bassists hand shoot up and down the instrument's slender neck. Her right hand alternating seamlessly between arco and pizzicato and blending with the tunes. He watched her fingers dancing across the shining silver strings in the low light of the bar. The black of the fingerboard contrasted the strings heavily and, in his mind, tied the instrument to the bar, it was the heart. The shining varnish of the body matched the stage, and even the stools that he and his father were sat in. It comforted him, warmed, and welcomed him, became his home. She was the one who managed to keep his days from feeling too long, and he didn't even know her name. He was in love.

Subconsciously, he'd taken his pencil and pressed the lead into his palm. But the lead held, not snapping under his force. His skin began to break under the pressure and a single drop of blood steadily rolled down his wrist and with that his grip loosened. His eyes widened as he snapped back to the present, aware of the calming jazz once more. His sleeve came up to his eye and wiped at it and his cheekbones haphazardly, coming away damp. Looking down at his sleeve and wiped it against his jeans as if to dry it. He extended towards a blank sheet of paper and began to write.

His mind stuck to the hum of bass as he wrote his letter, a letter of everything he wished he'd said. He would take it to her later with a bunch of her favourite flowers, the ones he'd taken her that first time. White foxgloves were her flowers. Their strange, compact shapes made them perfect for her. Maybe that's why she'd given him a chance. Because he reminded her of them, with his scrawny stature and often introverted tendencies. He loved the corners of rooms and being alone more than anything. That's how he spent his time now. That's how retirement had treated him. He was alone.

As his pencil dragged along the page, filling it with graphite smudges, all he could do was watch as it trembled. His beautiful cursive curls became chicken scratch. But he couldn't stop. He knew everything he wished he'd

said, and he had to get it out of his head now before it was gone forever. However, very quickly his thoughts became jumbled, and his sentences began to loop. He stopped and signed the letter off with a singular "x". The way she left all her letters to him off when she was in the hospital. He smiled a little to himself before sealing the letter away in an old, small envelope. His hand ran across it and he felt a lump form in his throat.

He hadn't felt this nervous since he'd first offered to buy her a drink. His father had noticed his love for the double bass and its musician after a couple months of their frequenting of the bar. He too had been mesmerised by the elegance of the instrument. After weeks of egging him on, and one too many pints, his father had convinced him to go and talk to her. He took one last swig of his pint at the end of her song, before stumbling his way across the floor to say hello to her. She was fair and understanding, and she had even taken the time out of her shift to sit with them for a couple of rounds. He couldn't remember their conversations at all anymore, but he remembered her laughter and her warm smile. Those traits had been hers until the very end. He smiled as he reminisced. He picked up the letter and her flowers, threw on his old tweed cap and left his dark room for the first time in too many days.

His feet crunched through the snow as he wandered the busy city streets. Card in his left hand, and flowers in his right. He held the flowers across his chest, almost defensively, an emotional shield. His shoulders fell forwards as he walked, and passers-by gave him strange looks. He pulled his tweed cap down over his forehead and picked up his pace. He almost paused outside the old bar, but he knew that the new management wouldn't appreciate his appearance after the last outburst.

She had just passed after months of battling the cancer, and he had gone there to clear his mind. The old bar staff had long moved on, and it was no longer a band playing but an old vinyl jukebox and a worn-down free use piano filled the void where the stage had been. The bass on the jukebox still managed to soothe him, but it wasn't the same as when she used to play. She and the band were the soul of this place, and now it was gone. She was gone. He was alone. Nobody was left for him to hold. He looked down at his empty glass with heavy eyes. He sighed quietly before letting out an anguished scream, like an animal in pain. He threw his glass at the floor, watching it shatter like the rest of his world. He stood up and kicked his barstool over, the varnished wood splintering on the corner as it hit the ground. He was ushered out of the bar by the young staff, asked never to return, and he obeyed. He stumbled out of the door, the bell chime

masking his cursing of the bar's upheaval as he exited into the sharp cold of the night, broken soul in tow.

As he passed by, he spotted the sign. "Closed for refurbishment". He passed it by without a thought. Through the chill of the early afternoon the sun beamed down on him. Not warming him at all. He looked up towards it but felt nothing. He strode onwards, rounding the corner into the cemetery. His pace slowed as he passed by the graves, reading names and dates, thinking about how everyone here was a person, who was also once loved and cared for dearly by their family.

He could see her grave from here. He was lucky enough to have it placed under the tall oak. He thought of it as her peaceful protector. His eyes watered again as he approached her. He leant back against the oak and sat down. He laid the flowers on top of her headstone and opened the card. "Merry Christmas darling." And with that he began to read.

## The Road I Grew Up On

Lucy Birch

As you walk through the streets where I used to live, you can smell alcohol and nicotine lying about on the pavement. Shattered glass and smeared cigarette buds are drawn to your attention as the smells fill your nostrils, and the dirty air drifts through your lungs. Cries for help echo through the streets followed by the piercing sounds of police sirens going off as the police try their very best to catch the criminal at hand, plus ambulances rushing past to make sure that the victims are safe.

You lie, comforted by the warmth of your own bed, but these sounds remind you of the terrors outside as you hope the criminals will run on past and not choose you and your family as their next victims. All you can do is hope, hope for the very best, and pray. Then suddenly when the lights go out, that's when you know that the real danger is at hand. You are no longer protected by that electric gate your family was so privileged to be able to afford but instead you are only protected by the thin metal bars on your window which make you feel imprisoned in your own home. You are bombarded with the thought that anyone could walk into your house at any given moment.

You know why, of course, they would do it. They aren't as fortunate as you are, living their lives on the streets not knowing when their next meal would be or where it would come from. Not sure if where they would sleep would be safe; but our selfishness leads us to think only about what would happen to us if they decided to enter our house, how it could all go wrong and how this is our biggest fear.

Walking through the streets, you can feel the uneven ground beneath your feet as the road hasn't been re-paved in years. As you breathe in the air that once was so fresh, you can taste the dirt and grime that has been collected over the years. Walking past the houses, you notice the barbed wire around the perimeter and the picket fences separating the houses; the metal bars that are the only hope for safety and the locks on the sheds for fear of them being stolen from.

As you continue walking through the wrecked streets until you reach your house, all the memories of your childhood come from this very place as it is your home. You reach inside your pocket to get out your keys in order to

open the electric gate. The gate is old and broken, barely able to still function properly. It may be old but it has kept you from danger ever since you were a child. You press the button on the keys and the gate starts to slowly open, just enough for you to slip in so that no one else can. You turn around as you close the gate and you see all the rubble, dead plants and glass shattered besides the broken car your father owns and the small new car your mother just bought because her old car was stolen. It seems bad but in reality you know that you are lucky to even have these luxuries.

You unlock the gate that's just before your door and then open the door; once you're inside you lock the gate and lock the door three times, just to be sure. The room that you entered is the kitchen. It's freezing and dark and the cold reddish-black tiles make your feet freeze every time you take a step. Eventually you get to the light and turn it on, and move into the long, dark and creepy passage.

As you walk down the passageway you can hear the wooden floorboards creak beneath your feet, you turn the lights on and run up the stairs to your room, locking the door behind you. As you enter the room you look out your window, passed the metal bars and you can see the flashing lights of police cars, ambulances and fire trucks and realise how fortunate you are to be as safe as you are. You know that you are lucky to be imprisoned

in your own home, because it could be worse. You could have no prison at all.

## Her Hand in the Heat

**Charlie Henney**

### The Heat:

The window lies dormant. The curtains struggle to choose whether they are welcome and soon, in a quick move, pushed through their trepidation by the wind, they rush to find something to hold onto. The heat of a flame. It grabs them, sending a spark through their whole body. Papers on the desk grasp to help, getting caught, the wind pushing them through the heat. The curtain changes colour, a salmon on a burning pan, tearing up through its body. The papers, out of the heat, drift towards the carpet. As they fall, they hold the carpet close, hidden from the wind. But their heat soon welcomes others. This flaming paper, heating the carpet, sends it up the sheets of her bed, through the headboard. The bulb in the bedside lamp, kissed by heat, shatters. The plant next to her bed turns black, the leaves slipping its fingers from the hold of the stem. Her wardrobe, furthest from the heat, is soon grasped from its safety, torn quickly into flames.

With a door wide open, the heat runs for it, seeking escape. It grips the carpet, just as it had begun, and as a vine would a tree, it wraps itself around the stair bannisters. It spreads itself, wide and across, gripping at

heels. A table, a feast of wood and candles, struggles to fight back, weighed down. As a house is built, the table is soon swarmed in heat. A painting, the people inside naïve to their consequences. What have they done? Who are they? People of no existence, of an imagination, soon killed in the heat of someone's imagination. The flowers, running up the wall are scorched black, like the ashes in the urn on the fireplace. The fireplace that flames will soon escape it, and be set free.

A mother, her room in the vulnerable state it always is. Her door open, clothes in piles, cupboards and drawers reveal their truths. Not a single scare of intrusion. The mother, herself hidden between sheets and booze. The heat teases, grabbing at the door frame. And then in a lunge, pounces for the t shirt discarded, as her life has been, at the door. The heat grapples through the fabric, in search of a strength of light. It crawls up the dresser, rummaging up between treasures of plastic, melting into the grains of crumbling wood. The flames reflect in the mirror, smiling in reds and gold at its achievements, holding a trophy of pain. It grabs at the duvet. The white sheets, wet with vodka, soaked through from a spilt bottle. The heat enraged, strips the sheets and bursts the room with paint, changing the walls from cream to black.

Another door, ajar, pushed open with the memories of these peoples lives and where they come from, is soon opened, soon lit up in the heat, tearing shelves apart and shredding memories into ashes. Everything hidden within this mess, hiding itself from the ugliness of their lives. Bags in flames, and no window to escape, the swarming heat struggles to escape. It's only escape root, the stairs already flooded in a waterfall of flames, is an unopened door, locked shut, and with her behind it.

#### Her Hand:

Unaware, the sound of trickling water, the scrubbing of soap into the grooves of her hand, dirt under her skin floating to the surface. The mouse hidden in the tap squeaks as she screws it off. Grabbing the towel, feeling the soft peaks and valleys connect their way into the rivers of her hands. The door handle, slick with heat. She grasps it, the handle to her fate. A scream. Falling back, her hands grasp the air, lodging her fingers in the grooves of the towel. The towel slips, off the metal it hangs from, and comes tearing down, lying next to her, asleep. She stands, rubbing the heat in her hand away, trying to tear its presence from her skin, as far from her as it can go. She wants to run away. Soothing the pain, the cold water rushes out, scrubbing with her to clean away the red staining her hands. She picks up the discarded body of the fallen towel from the floor,

placing it over her hand and holding it, a bandage of pace. As she does, the sky darkens. Getting black with the night, rushing its way through the wind. She looks further, her hand, without the stain of paint, touches the frosted window, unable to see clear enough and cold swimming through the pane. She grabs the window, grappling for the handle, slick with cold, and pulls the handle, opening a breeze. Her head peers out and she watches, her hand tearing at her cracking lips, her house alight. Black smoke coughing its way out of the house and into her face.

#### The Heat:

With nowhere for the heat to go, it slams the door open, burning its way through the crack underneath the door, streaking black paint up the door, and tearing it apart, splinter by splinter. A window, where the heat is headed. And her, in its way.

#### Her Hand:

Her hands grasp at her face, pulling at her hair, nothing to hold back this oncoming heat. Moving her legs so they fall over the edge of the window, she holds, her hands gripping at her last memory of this place. A burnt hand, an open window, the floating birds of ash swarming her face. Her



cold hand, with no heat to warm it, touches the pipe, running its way up the house. She grabs it as tight as she can, and swings her other hand to meet the cold steel. The discarded body she has been holding, hoping it will heal her infection, floats to the ground, being covered in the ash, the body of her house. She begins, downwards. Slipping, her hands lose sensation and she lets go, hoping her house will save her. But soon she touches the grass beneath her, hugging at her fingers, holding her hand through this. Holding her hand, into her escape to freedom. She is free. Free of her mother. Free of this house. Finally, all she has wanted.

Freedom.

### Dreary Days

Nathan Chen

Late afternoon. The sky blackens and  
my mood sinks, along with the temperature.

I cut my walk short  
as the cold begins to gnaw my bones.  
I stride off, back to shelter.

Winter has banished the last  
of autumn's warmth:  
it is a long journey across the ocean,  
the view from the bow an expanse  
of frozen nothingness.

Back home, I sit  
peering out at persistent snow.

Waiting for it to fade  
is like watching grass grow.

Every day is a Monday.

**Dear Earth**

**Lucy Crosbie**

*(campaign poetry, after Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner's 'Dear Matafele Peinam')*

Dear Earth,

You are a flourishing haven for life and colour

You are home to gentle giants and courageous creatures

You are the green of the trees and the blue of the deep, cavernous  
oceans

Dear Earth,

I want to tell you about your future

The future that can be so calm and bright

But people say that you are in danger

They say your trees are burning,

your oceans are rising, your creatures are disappearing

They say that your nature is growing weak

They are hypocrites

We tell them you are in trouble

They announce and promise but their words are empty

Behind our backs, they hide

They hide in our anger and they are too afraid to make a difference

Dear Earth,

Don't lose hope

We promise you

No fires

will tower over you and erode your strength

No water

will swallow your life and make you drown

No creatures will migrate and never return

The whales, birds, sea turtles, insects and fish are waiting

Waiting patiently for good food, fresh food

Not a plastic bag

Dear Earth,

I need to apologise to you

You have given us safety and security

and this is how we repay you

You give us beauty, structure, health, happiness, warmth, summer rains,  
whispering winds, howling snow storms, blossoming trees

We give you unhappiness, danger, pain, torment, anger, harmful gases  
and fuels, pollution, global warming, drought

People pretend and convince themselves that this is not reality

They want to distract their minds from the inevitable

They have to face their fears and fight

Fight like they have never fought before

We are struggling and pushing back

We need to wrestle and resist and we won't give in

Campaigns and groups are forming

Children like me are learning

Teachers are teaching

Activists are acting fast

Faster than ever before

This is for you Earth,

We are doing this for you so that the world can live in harmony,  
in peace

Dear Earth,

I hope you can forgive us one day

We won't give up on you

I promise

The Devil in My Head

*(a villanelle)*

Anneliese Higgins

I once was empty, living without meaning.  
They gave it a name, all the twisting and taking,  
But now I ignore that, for I have started dreaming.

The thoughts that never ceased became a tangible screaming,  
Engorging my mind until thinking began aching.  
I once was empty, living without meaning.

A cage of delusion, so full it was teaming,  
Forced me into a Gatsby – a master of faking.  
But now I ignore that, for I have started dreaming.

Cutthroat fingers that fought away healing  
Played the keys as my stomach sang the song of my breaking.  
I once was empty, living without meaning.

The devil on my shoulder crept into my head. An omnipresent murmur,  
incessant and scheming,  
Sent orders through my body, both rigid and snaking.  
But now I ignore that, for I have started dreaming.

Sometimes, I recall the glass squares and the skeleton – resentful *and*  
preening.  
I once was empty, living without meaning.  
But now I ignore that, for I have started dreaming.

## The Hitchhiker

Marlene Schaeffler

The evening was dark. Snow fell like stars from the sky. The radio of my friend's car crackled, making the song on it stutter and, eventually, come to a halt. It was that time of the year again - Christmas eve. Just like every year, I was taking the long, two-hour trip to my parents' house to see my family, in my friend's car.

The road was wide and deserted, but for the occasional car or tree. My eyes were tired but fixed to it as I drove along, until they caught sight of something else. A small, frail-looking girl stood on the side of the road. She looked about seventeen years old, and was in only a very ragged, ripped-up, off-white dress. I wondered why somebody like her would be outside in that cold weather, especially without any clothing to keep her warm. I couldn't just drive past her.

I curved my way off the road and parked a few metres from where she stood.

I put on my hat, jacket, and scarf. I opened the door and winced. The air was so cold that it seemed like a hundred microscopic icicles had been blown at me at a rapid speed. I got out of the car and stepped on to the

powdery snow that was bright from the low glow of the streetlamps and crunched under my feet. My teeth clattered.

The girl's hair was long and grey and looked damp, as if she had been standing under the snow for a very, very, long time.

"Hey!" I said, a little louder than I had intended. The girl gave a little cry and jumped two steps back. "Don't worry," I said, a bit more quietly "I'm only here to see if you're alright."

The girl turned around. Up close, she looked even paler, and more fragile, if that were even possible. She had wary, big, ghostly-blue eyes that looked up at me, making her look like a small dog that had been left out in the rain. She was shivering, her cheeks slightly tinted pink, contrasting with the rest of her pale complexion. She looked like she hadn't slept in days, her eyebags big and grey, her eyes almost dead.

"How long have you been standing here?" I asked, alarmed. She was almost a head shorter than me and was ankle-deep in snow. I wasn't even sure if she had shoes on. "Where are your parents?"

"A long time, Madam."

Her voice was weak and sad. I shivered.

“Why aren’t you at home? You know what, why don’t you come inside my van?”

I worried that I would sound creepy - after all, young people like her should not be getting into strangers’ vans. But it was cold, and the snow was getting heavier, and I was worried that if I let her stay there any longer, she would catch something serious – if she hadn’t already.

But she just looked confused. “Van?”

“You know, like the car ... Volkswagen?” I said, slightly worried that this seventeen-year-old didn’t seem to know what a van was. But I became even more worried when she said, “You mean a carriage?” This girl might already have caught something.

“Heh ... Not really ...Come on, let’s get you inside.” I said, turning around.

“All right,” she whispered, catching up with me as I briskly walked back to the car. She almost glided, her feet leaving no traces in the snow, her long, off-white hair and dress flowing behind her.

The van looked warm and inviting, its mint-green doors sleek and shiny.

“Come on,” I said, opening the car doors. But she stood as still as a stone, her dead eyes wide and curious, as if she had never seen anything like it.

“W- where are the horses?” she asked, a little worried.

“It’s a car, you don’t need horses for that ...” I said, looking at her in amazement.

“Are ... are you sure you’re okay ...?”

“Why, yes, of course,” she said, a little more loudly, and slightly agitated.

“A little cold, but – why wouldn’t I be?”

We got in the car. “Don’t forget your seat belt!” I said, “Where do you need to be? Aren’t you going to your family on Christmas?”

“I don’t know.” She said softly, looking down at the car’s floor.

“Well ... where did you come from?” I was worried.

“I- I don’t know ...”

In that moment, I knew I had to get her help. I decided to make a call.

While I waited for my parents to answer, I went on my phone and searched for the nearest hospital. As soon as I found the location, I turned on Satnav and started to drive.

Finally, my parents answered.

“Hello?” the sound of my mum’s voice was comforting. “Where are you? You should have been here an hour ago!” The car engine whirred as I turned a particularly sharp corner.

“I am so sorry,” I said. I really was. I just wanted to have a normal Christmas eve with my family. The sound of Christmas songs and people chatting rumbled behind her voice. But this could not wait. “There’s this girl named ...” I realised that I hadn’t asked her name in all the confusion and stress.

“Ella. Ella Green,” she whispered.

“Ella Green. She was outside in the cold, Mum. She didn’t even have a jacket on – she, she seems to be a bit ...” I searched for a polite way to say it, “unwell ...”

Just then, I looked in the rearview mirror. My tyres came to a screeching halt.

“Hello?!” I could hear the alarm in my mum’s voice.

“Mum ... sh- she’s gone.” Chills ran down my spine. Where Ella should have been, there wasn’t anything. Not a trace.

“What?! Is she –”

“No mum. She’s just not there anymore.”

I steered the car to the side of the road. I got out and searched for her. Not a footprint in the snow, not a piece of dress on a tree, not a hair

where she had sat, and not a fingerprint on the door. She was gone without a trace.

To this day, I still don’t know what happened. If she had just jumped out of the car and ran, if the whole thing had just been a strange hallucination, or ... something else. I still drive past that roadside where I met the girl, Ella Green, and where she disappeared. It always sends chills down me, and I still wonder what happened, that cold, dark, Christmas Eve.

## The Heart of the Forest

Amelia Page

The moon glowed softly in the night. It was serene, looking onto the world kindly with its sisters that made up the night sky. Its light softly illuminated the trees of the forest. The fir trees rose up tall, proud they had stood there for hundreds of years, history ingrained into each ring of their wood. At first it could seem like they were intimidating the surroundings but instead they settled comfortably with the neighbouring fields and the mountains that rose just beyond the tree line. The fir trees swayed back and forth, softly meeting each other's branches. Swirling with the gentle but cold breeze, something that would be a displeasure to most but was a great comfort to the trees of the North. The quiet movements and noises shared with the kind fir trees sounded like whispering on the air, like the trees were conversing, late into the night.

Few creatures lived on the great forest floor. Little shrubbery grew, scared away by the acidic soil, as the kindness of the trees did not extend to its little sisters. The few creatures that had persisted now scuttled desperately, bounding and winding between each tree to get closer to the outer edge. They were frightened by the shrill noises of the creatures that

lived in the centre of their forest but comforted by the softness of the trees' voices on the wind which guided them away to safety.

Deep in the centre of the forest lay a town. Few houses were lit that night, the street lanterns had long gone out, and only wisps of smoke and hot embers on the ground indicated that they were ever lit at all. Streets were long trodden down dirt paths, which complimented the thatched rooves of the many houses. The windows were covered in dirt and smog, so that you could only make out the form of a child peeking out, or the flicking tail of a disturbed cat waiting for their owner to return, which will never happen. The town was full of noise but the houses were quiet, lifeless, dark, and unhappy.

In the centre of the town lay a grand square. It was lined with cobbles, made into beautiful patterns of flowers symbolising life and joy. The church stood tall and grand at the top of the square, the nicest building in town, with its chiselled stone and tall arches, every brick a testament to pride. It was lit with a warm glow, not from the inside but from the square. There was a roaring from both the townsfolk and a bonfire. The calm night had been transformed into an event; wild and ferocious as the people of the town laughed and danced together, sharing drink as they celebrated



the occasion. The pastor of the church smiled, watching the people, proud of their achievements.

The fire was the apparent centre of it all: the forest, the town, the square. It was a dancing manic crown on the head of fools. Loose embers sparked out, wild and free as the flames reached their arms to the moon and sky above with their capturing dance. They consumed the wood below with wide smiles as they wished to consume the town with their playful rage. If they could understand the fire's true intentions the townsfolk would be terrified, screaming for their lives. Like the creatures of the forest, even the trees leaned away in fear. But the foolish humans skipped and danced, drunkenly singing their songs of greatness that never reflected their own ambitions. They could never understand their own cruelty, not like the creatures, not like the trees, who had remained long enough to see their kin fall into the humans' cruel hands. They were creatures of hubris.

The nature that surrounded the town, which surrounded the people looked on in horror. She stood in the middle of it all, trying to keep a proud and fearless face despite the tears running down her cheeks. Her soft skin charred and melted as the flames danced around her. Her hair disintegrated, falling to the hungry flames that consumed her. Even when she screamed in terror and fear, wanting nothing more than to be free it

was drowned out by the laughing and cheering that surrounded her. All they did was dance, they celebrated as she deformed until she was as ugly as they perceived her to be. She was consumed fully by the manic fire, her flesh eaten away. The forest cried in agony at the loss. The fire was not yet satiated. It reached out, dancing to a dress, then some trousers and then a coat. Until cheers of celebration turned to agony shared by every fool. As the manic fire danced with glee forever consuming.

Villanelle

Caitlin Conway

Your recollections of their voice begin to fade,  
though forgetting their cadence was not your intent,  
'Time heals grief' only to leave it betrayed.

Once the outpour of grief has ceased to cascade,  
and the letters and cards are no longer sent,  
your recollections of their voice begin to fade.

Grief, now reticent, halts its parade,  
it is contained and managed (to an extent),  
'Time heals grief' only to leave it betrayed.

If your façade takes a hit or begins to degrade,  
to this truth let your wavering will be bent,  
your recollections of their voice begin to fade.

Look beneath the mourning, let your content be unmade:  
words left unsaid, time left unspent,  
'Time heals grief' only to leave it betrayed.

The loss of the lost cuts as deep as a blade,  
guilt drives the living's discontent.  
Your recollections of their voice begin to fade,  
'Time heals grief' only to leave it betrayed.

*\*Caitlin has been our inaugural Senior Makar this year – congratulations,  
Caitlin!*