

Issue 5

May 2026

GLYPH.

the literary magazine for the casual writer



THE
HORROR
ISSUE

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The literary magazine for the casual writer.

Issue 5: horror

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ISSUE 5: HORROR

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FOREWORD

Humans are bizarre creatures. Not content with simply being comfortable, we voluntarily seek out that fear and suspense by consuming media designed to unnerve and excite us. That prickling feeling up the back of the neck, the tensing of muscles, the sharp intakes of breath—our brains love it. That sensation of shock triggers a fight or flight response that is soothed by the knowledge that once the credits roll or we close the book, that we are safe.

And we continue to do it over and over again.

Clearly as a species we haven't changed much. Ghost stories have haunted us for thousands of years—the Romans had tales of spectres and haunted houses, whilst poltergeists plagued the medieval period. We have always sought an explanation for things that go bump in the night, or of beasts that lurk deep in the woods. Our obsession with the macabre has only continued to grow arms, legs and devil horns, with A24 topping the box office charts and classics from the 70s by Stephen King still being adapted today.

Reading or watching horror is a moment of escapism. A fast-paced, breathless,

adrenaline rush. A way to confront our fears of the otherworldly whilst wearing our slippers or clutching a bag of popcorn.

Our fears are not always supernatural though, as Jess Lavin writes in the short story ‘Toes’ and Isi Turner writes in the body horror piece ‘Finger Bones and Black Pepper’. Oftentimes, the very real thoughts we have before falling asleep, our relationships and our general anxieties can be more terrifying than ghosts and ghouls. These can even manifest in the comfort of our own home, like in Will Garner’s ‘Walls’ and Cate Bone’s ‘the Damp’.

Sometimes it's the folk stories we've been told as children that continue to keep us up at night, as Gavin Lundy writes in ‘Wee Willie Winkie’, or a ghostly figure that begins to plague your life, as seen in Dan Lockton’s ‘Double Album’.

A. G. Worthing and Lucy Cameron both weave grief into the horror genre in ‘The Beast of Dartmoor Wood’ and ‘The Bird Lady’, whilst Fiona Burton explores birth and reincarnation in ‘The Wheel’. In a similar vein, O. Manor breathes new life into the perpetually terrifying concept of Groundhog Day in ‘Evolving Beast’.

The stories chosen for issue five of *Glyph Magazine* challenge the conventional horror tropes. They carry emotional resonance, not just shock factor. It's horror—but with heart. We hope you enjoy.

Eleanor

(Editor-in-Chief)

and Team Glyph (Rach & Gio)

WALLS

WILL GARNER

When Jodie gets home, she stumbles through my door, as drunk as I've ever seen her. She went out for a friend's birthday at 5pm—dinner time, reasonable time—and forgot to leave until 4am. I don't expect her to stick to a strict schedule on my account, but she might have thought about me. About making it home whole and safe and protected by me. I was so scared without her. Scared and lonely. But she came home. She is safe now. When Jodie gets home, she stumbles through my door and leans on me for support.

And everything is forgiven. She is not gentle, dancing fingers pretending to balance give way to the strikes of flat palms as she stumbles over the floor, an ineffective and wobbly thing. I would keep her balanced and upright, if only she would walk over me. She manages her way into the bedroom and she stands on without my help for the briefest of moments. Her fingertips are still running against me. It tickles. I want to laugh. I want her to never let me go. I gasp when she does.

She stumbles forward, slamming her shin into the bedframe and collapsing onto the bed. I hate the bed. I hate the way the bed gets to hold her. The way the bed gets to hold Jodie in a way that I never can. She writhes on the spot, shedding her sparkly dress, the bed clinging on to all her moving parts. She dons the covers haphazardly.

In moments she starts snoring. Her snoring has never bothered me. I make sure the streetlight is blocked out for her. I make sure her front door is locked. She starts drooling a little, I can smell her unclean breath. Her body is half uncovered, enough to be decent; enough for me to look the other way.

*

She eats breakfast bright and early in the afternoon. She silently stirs a bowl of dry cornflakes whilst scrolling through an all-day breakfast menu. From where I am watching, I can scroll with her. We share a pair of eyes. At least, I am the one watching, her body is slumping down as her thumb does all the work.

Oh Jodie, I think.

She hasn't said anything about her night out yet, hasn't said anything at all. In the

other room I can see the tiny sparkly dress dropping from the side of the bed. She came home drunk and late, but she must be tired from all the other people there. All the men. The leering creatures, grabbing and snatching. Drawn like moths to her spinning light. Not like me. I have never once permitted a moth to enter these walls. Jodie slips into her cornflakes with a soft crunch.

Oh Jodie, I think.

Jodie shoots upright, the blood drains from her face. She looks behind her; she looks at me. I look back at her. Neither of us say anything. I've never said anything.

She yelps again as the phone rings in her hand. Her friend is calling. Jodie leans the phone against the cornflake bowl and hits answer.

'Jodie,' Lydia says. I like Lydia. She said she liked my colour.

'Yeah?' Jodie responds with no enthusiasm.

'Jodie.'

'Yeah?'

'I want to fucking die.'

Jodie laughs. I want to laugh.

Jodie whips round to look at me again. Lydia laughs on the phone.

'You look like you've already died. What are you freaking out about?'

'It's nothing,' Jodie says too quickly. 'I'm being stupid.'

'Yeah, I know. I want you to tell me so I can laugh at you.'

'Shut up.'

Lydia doesn't respond, only leans into the camera to inspect Jodie closer.

'Alright, it's just... do you ever feel like you're being watched?'

'Yeah I would if I was at yours, you've got those massive windows that open up onto the street.'

'No, it's more like I'm being watched by the walls.'

Lydia drops the phone laughing, and accidentally hangs up. Jodie stares at the silent phone for twenty seconds. The phone rings again.

'I'm glad I didn't have to sit through that,' Jodie says.

Lydia is still panting from the laughing fit. Jodie waits for her to stop, and then suddenly can't help but laugh as well. I want to laugh.

'Okay stop now,' Jodie says suddenly.

'Yeah I will,' Lydia says, getting more serious this time. 'Are you actually okay, Joze? You seem really rattled.'

'I'm fine, I think I'm just losing it a little.'

'We were out pretty late. Do a checklist, got all your stuff? Locked the door.'

Jodie curses under her breath and runs to the front door, begins to twist the knob to make sure the door is locked. She frowns when the mechanism won't give; I already locked the door last night.

Don't worry, you're safe.

Jodie stumbles back, snatches her phone from the table and dives under her covers.

'Jesus,' Lydia says. The voice is muffled, hard to hear. Jodie whispers into the duvet, the bed locking the conversation in a padded room.

'Yeah, but you were hammered. No-ones remembering if they locked the door, you just went through the motions and it happened,' Lydia says. Lying. I never liked Lydia, she poured a glass of red wine down me once.

'Maybe it was Simon,' Lydia says, voice practically singing.

'Shut up!' Jodie's voice becomes loud, and then goes back to a whisper.

'Show me your neck?' Lydia pauses and then giggles. 'Yeah, Simon definitely is living in your walls, unless you want to tell me about—'

'Now you definitely shut up,' Jodie said, emerging from under the covers. There is light bruising around her neck. Jodie walks back to her cornflakes, squabbling with Lydia. I don't follow, stare at the dip in the bed where she lies.

The headboard splinters first. Cracks right down the middle, gradually then all at once. It sounds like the falling of a long dead tree, as sudden as it is loud. Yet, it is nothing compared to the rending metal of the frame as the bed screams in agony. I hate the bed. It has always held onto Jodie when I could not. How can someone feel safer in their bed than they do inside, protected by their walls? For good measure, the duvet shreds to ribbons, the

pillows burst their soft guts, spilling synthetic fluff over the bed's desecrated body.

*

Jodie doesn't spend as much time at home anymore. Her landlady bought her a new bed, a metal cage-like thing that creaks as she gets into it. A mattress that doesn't give when she wants to sleep. Her parents bought her new pillows and duvets when they visited, but even their softness does not make the new bed bearable. I like the new bed. Jodie moves to sleeping on the sofa. I tolerate the sofa, seeing the way Jodie tosses in her sleep, her skin clinging to the fake leather, the way she groans after waking up, a click in her neck that won't crack.

She takes more time at work, spends more money on dinners out and when she comes home she is quiet. She rarely goes into her bedroom anymore, only to grab clothes or a book or a phone charger, and then she speeds out of the room like the carpet burns her soles. On more than one occasion I have closed the door behind her, so she doesn't have to see; doesn't have to remember when I lost my temper. The first time I did that she screamed and hid under blankets on her sofa.

I wanted to apologise.

I didn't see her for three days after that. Even when she did come back she had Lydia with her as back up.

'It'll just be a draught,' Lydia had said.

'The door closed by itself and I had the window shut.'

'Dude I heard you before, I'm trying to psych myself up.'

'Now who's freaking out?'

'Me! And you! Both of us are freaked out by this.'

Lydia lightly tapped the door, so it hovered open. I gently closed it. Lydia pushed the door harder and it swung completely open, bottom of the door catching on the carpet. I pushed on the windows, straining the hinges but letting in a tiny bit of air. Lydia approached and ran her rounds around the outside, feeling the slight chill being let through.

'Jodie.'

'Don't.'

'Sorry I don't mean—'

'I know what I heard.'

'I...I know you know.'

Jodie collapsed to her knees. Lydia puts her arm on her shoulder.

'You just think that I'm crazy,' Jodie said through tears. Lydia shrugged.

'You're allowed to be crazy.'

When Lydia left, Jodie stayed in the centre of the hallway for a while, looking at me. I looked back at her. When she did stand up, later that night, she walked only in the centre of every room. Lydia called her later, but the phone had fallen, trapped between me and the side of the sofa. Jodie didn't particularly look for it.

*

When Jodie gets home the first thing she does is slam into the door. I want to roll my eyes, out drinking again. But when her keys jingle into the door she is giggling and her giggles are returned by someone else. The pair fall through the doorway, her and a man. They share a pair of lips, deep breaths into each other's lungs. His cheeks are covered in red marks, as is her neck. She says the name *Simon* into his mouth.

She takes a moment, stumbles back a second, drunk but not smelling of alcohol. He smells. Not of alcohol either but of intrusion, of another man. She takes a step towards the living room door.

'You want to put something on?' Simon asks.

'Not especially,' Jodie pants, 'It's just...' She looks at her bedroom doorway, 'My sofa's comfier.' Simon peers round her.

'You have a leather sofa?'

'The flat has a leather sofa. I have a lot of blankets.'

'Let's be sure to cosy up then,' Simon takes a step forwards and puts his lips on

hers, 'but can I use your bathroom first?'

Jodie points at the other hallway, Simon enters and begins to admire himself in the mirror. All of Jodie's energy vanishes as she walks to the living room, taking careful steps down the centre of the hall. Even when she is on her sofa, she is perched on the edge away from me.

Simon brushes his hair, unbuttons the top of his crumpled shirt. He slips a condom out of his wallet, the foil crunched up and showing its silver. His phone buzzes, a text from a group chat of boys egging him on, next to a message of Jodie saying *I'm here* left unopened. Simon takes a photo of himself in the mirror, making sure to get all of Jodie's makeup and clutter in the frame. *Made it boys* he types. Jodie pours two glasses of wine whilst Simon brags to his friends.

I want to tell her—

Jodie thumps the wall. The vibration ripples across my paintwork. I cough a small layer of dust from the walls. I could cry if I didn't think Jodie might hit me again. In the bathroom, Simon is applying too much cologne.

Jodie doesn't know that she doesn't want him. Jodie doesn't know that she isn't safe with him. Simon takes a swig of Jodie's mouth wash and spits into the toilet. He turns to the door and laughs when he finds it locked. He turns the knob and it comes off in his hands. He tries the handle again and it clatters to the floor.

'What the fuck,' he presses against the door, finds it unmoving, 'Jodie?' He shouts.

In the living room, Jodie only hears the sound of wine she swills. She is checking to see if the wine has legs, like her parents taught her to do, though she's not sure what legs are.

'Jodie!' Simon shouts again.

He runs his hands against the doorframe and tries pulling off the hinges. They clatter to the ground, a useless facade. The door falls forwards a bit and Simon sees that behind, instead of the doorway, there is now more wall. Still holding the door he puts his hands on me, feeling for a way out.

I push the door and Simon resists. I push harder. Simon has muscles, but they are just for show. They can't protect Jodie like I can. He grunts a little as he presses the door

back, trying to get it upright again. I push harder, the door against him getting heavier. He widens his stance, trying to balance against the increasing weight. He puts his left foot further forward, catching the shower mat. He slips forwards and his body falls back.

Before the door can crush him on the floor, Simon cracks his skull on the sink. He is silent now, his phone still buzzing with congratulations and inside jokes from his friends as it is enveloped in a pool of Simon's blood. The top of the door narrowly misses the bloody ceramic, instead falling clumsily on Simon's splayed body. The door still pushes downwards. I can feel his joints pop open. Then the bones shatter. Simon and—regrettably—the shower mat are crushed into a congealed paste, bones and skin mushing together, soaking the fabric. I push the door down further until the paste becomes a juice and the Simon filth is absorbed through the floorboards.

Jodie knocks on the door to the bathroom.

'You okay? Simon?'

She tries the door, which swings open, unlocked. Simon is gone, her bathroom is undisturbed. Jodie sighs, checks and finds that the front door is unlocked. Simon must have left whilst she was grabbing the wine. She sends him a quick text filled with expletives but finds that the number isn't in service. She steps into the bathroom, sets her phone up against a bottle of nail polish remover and calls Lydia.

'Aw babe,' Lydia says, 'I was really rooting for you.'

'I don't know what I did wrong.'

'Did you talk about the walls?'

Jodie hangs up and throws her phone at me. She cries into her hands, then leans on the bathroom sink. She looks down at her hand, sees her bloodstained hands, looks past to see the viscera still staining the grout.

*

Jodie finds leaving her flat difficult. Even with her parents' help, they find that paintings don't lift from their hooks. I leave mould in places she can't reach, dust in places she hasn't

found. When Jodie leaves her bedroom I add another photograph to the wall, pictures of her time in this flat, everything I have seen. She was comfortable here, safe even. She doesn't want to leave, not really.

Her parents try to engage her in conversation but Jodie doesn't have anything to say. All she thinks she wants to do is get out. She is wary any time her parents approach me. But I wouldn't hurt her like that. Her dad uses the bathroom at one point and I give him space to breathe. I keep watch over Jodie, instead. She looks at the door. I look at her. When her dad leaves unscathed she still can't look at me. It's okay. She'll come around

'You coming to the car, love?' Her mum asks, squeezing her hand.

'I have to wait for the landlady, drop the keys and stuff,' Jodie responds, her mum tuts.

'Do you know when she's meant to be here?' Her mum asks. Jodie shrugs, 'Well we'll go and get a coffee, you text when you're ready and we'll meet you somewhere.'

'Sure thing mum,' Jodie hasn't stopped staring at me, undecorated, unobscured, 'See you later.'

I swing the door open for Jodie's parents. Her mum laughs, nervously.

'Windy one today.' They step outside. I lock the door behind her.

Jodie sits cross legged in the middle of the room. She bundles her knees into her chest and watches me like she's waiting for me to move.

'What happened to Simon?' Jodie stammers through the sentence. She doesn't believe it herself. But she doesn't know what Simon was like.

I want to protect her.

Jodie shivers, buries her head into her knees.

'I didn't—I don't—You don't get to decide how to protect me. I'm able to protect myself.'

She sits, staring at the walls. She is in a t-shirt and shorts, comfy clothes for moving, the rest of her clothes packed away in her parents car. She is sitting on the floor, an ineffective thing. It is just me and her remaining. I gently close the doors around her, the living room; the bathroom; the bedroom. None of them have ever locked. They are all

locked now.

Oh, Jodie.

'What are you doing?' Jodie stands up, gingerly approaching the front door. She grabs the handle, which falls off in her hands. She screams as the locks and handles clatter to the floor.

I want you.

'No, please.' She claws at the side of the door frame, peels away the gaps between the walls and the doors like they were stickers. She turns to the other doors, hoping to crash out of the kitchen window. They are now painted white like I am, a solid object. Jodie falls in the centre of the room.

I have you.

Jodie doesn't know how to choose who protects her, doesn't know that I am the only choice. I bring the ceiling down in a gentle embrace. Jodie shrieks and hurtles towards me, she slams into me at full force, where the front door used to be. I hold her body tight, squeeze her to the walls. I am the only choice now.

Oh, Jodie.

THE DAMP

CATE BONE

There's something living beside you,
Not hidden, begging, even, to have you
invite him, properly, to hold your carcass in the night.
Carrion bearer, silent Orion,
he treks his muddy boots across your ceiling post-hunt,
brushes your hand in greeting as you
push to open the door so waterlogged
with his wanting, with his waxing exhales.
Vampiric in his breathing down your neck,
taken in stealing your breath by night,
sitting proud like a fat cat against your ribcage,
so you wake in a claimed state, taken, indeed, by this creature in the dark.

Or is it a reclaimed state?
Are you more natural than last evening?
More yourself, what you should, or want to, be?
There is a smattering of the forest about your lungs.
You have been colonised, being,
diluted, maybe.
Mushroom baby, all sinew and greying.
Less sure of the boundaries between the shadows and the self,
because your senses have grown clouded by a stench in the nostrils.
Singeing off the hairs,
reddening your eyes like a blue-screen glare.
Or is that the lack of sleep, just
and simple squinting to spot him out of obviousness?
He crouches low to the skirting board,
or bends to coat the windowsill in pungency.
To catch a snatch of his silhouette in the shadows brings questions.

The Damp

'How long,' you cry,
'How long have you watched me undress,
let me breathe a second-hand smoke,
and languished in my ignorance,
my bone-deep inability
to take back my invitations?'

No memory comes of when
the thick air brought black dots into your vision,
or the damp, damp smell of pre-worn existence.
The creature will breathe back,
'I am beckoning you to return
to what you once were, the truth of your soul.
Let yourself pad the soft blue carpet I bring
like a creature, too.
Embrace the animalistic truth
of being, of curating, a personhood
too lazy to clean a pot for weeks.

What I bring is felted by your toenails,
a wine-dark remembrance
in a rug pulled across the floor
when your actions bade me enter.'
You can be bitten from thirty paces.
How often you pull your bed into the middle of the room,
as if he lingers only in shadow,
just to find him, weeks later,
clinging to the underside of your mattress,
fists knotted to the fibres, with hunting knife in hand.

He strokes the dampness of your hair,
languishes in the tangle of your fuzz-thick legs.
Long overgrown, and weedy, you needless thing!
Sit wet and wanted!
Nothing left now, but watching the blooms of
green and blue encase you, brilliant sarcophagus.
Still, in the glory,
of having absolutely nothing to do.

The background is black with several jagged, glowing red lightning bolts. One bolt is in the top right corner, another is in the bottom left corner, and a third is in the bottom center. The title text is centered in the upper half of the page.

THE BEAST OF
DARTMOOR
WOOD

A. G. WORTHING

August feels the tear as if it's his own skin ripping apart.

In his mind's eye he sees the canvas split, the easel holding it topple under the weight...the image fades and he's left blinking sleep from his eyes in the dawn light of his bedroom, sixty miles away from his ramshackle art studio, a place he has not set foot in for approaching a year. A year today, in fact, he notes as he swipes his phone open. His chest feels heavy, a dull ache behind his ribs as he tries to recall more details of the...what, exactly? Had it only been a dream?

He reaches for his lighter, discarded on the bedside table, and clicks it on, taking comfort in the tiny flickering flame.

The kettle is still hot on the kitchen counter when he makes it downstairs, his mum not long home from her night shift and now fast asleep on the couch. He drapes a blanket over her before he leaves, and uses a magnet from their family holiday to Tenerife to stick a note to the fridge promising to be back for tea. He takes his secondhand car, and prays all the way that she doesn't break down, again, on his way to Dartmoor Manor.

*

Somehow they make it. The house is looming ahead now, a dark smudge on the horizon as he crests the hill. But this is not his final destination. Instead, he takes a right at the end of the drive until the road peters out entirely, and cuts the engine at the edge of the estate's sprawling woodland.

Dawn has bled into bleak morning light. August steps out of the car and is overcome with a wave of *home* as he stares out into the woods. From here he can just about make out the building he called his art studio for three summers. Once the old caretaker's toolshed, Si had suggested that they 'renovate' it into a space he could work during his stay at Dartmoor, carefree and undisturbed—by everyone but Si, of course. It was by no means a professional job, but they managed to keep the rain out, and if it got cold once the sun set at night then there was a pile of blankets in the corner they could curl beneath together.

The first thing he notices, as he makes his way through the trees, is that the door

The Beast of Dartmoor Wood

has been ripped off its hinges, deep claw marks gouged into the wood. His heart thunders in his ears as he steps over it into the dim room. The power is gone when he tries the light, but he can see well enough that the studio is in complete disarray, paint cans tipped over, black paint staining the edges of their discarded blankets. He reaches into his pocket for his lighter, using it to illuminate the space. His easel has been overturned, its canvas face down on the floor. He takes a cautious step forward and immediately kicks a can, the metallic clang making him jump. August shakes his head and strides the rest of the way forward, picking up the easel and canvas to set them, and this ridiculous, impossible fear, straight.

The canvas seems to have been slashed, but as he peers closer he realises that the painting has been ripped open, and the main subject—the very thing that has haunted his every dream since; the creature that made itself known that late summer night a year ago today; the beast that tore his best friend apart—is missing. Not obscured by the defacement of his painting, but gone entirely. As if he had never painted it to begin with. And he knows then, just as he knew the dream had been real when he woke up this morning, that his painting is out there in the woods, lying in wait for him to find it.

Outside, the tracks are plain as day now that he knows to look. He runs a hand over the smear of paint on a nearby tree and finds it wet. August pivots back to the studio with determination, only to stop short of stepping back over the ruined door.

‘Ey up, trouble,’ Si says, without a hint of a Yorkshire brogue.

It had been something of an inside joke between them. August would often respond with the poshest nonsense he could string together in the thickest mockery of his own accent. But he has no smart retort this time, struck at the sight of his very dead best friend leaning against the workbench, sketchbook open to a blank page at his feet.

‘You shouldn’t be here.’

‘No, I suppose not, and yet...’ He gestures widely to their surroundings and then to himself.

August walks over until they are eye to eye. Si raises a brow, bemused, but August studies the lines of him. Every aspect of him is greyscale, and up close he can see a sketched outline. August reaches up, traces his fingertips over the contours of his face, and his hands

come away stained with graphite.

‘You drew me well, I must say. But then, you’ve put my likeness to the page hundreds of times, haven’t you? So of course you would get it just right.’

‘Why is this happening? Is everything I’ve ever drawn going to come to life on me?’ August runs a hand through his hair, eyes screwing up, but the imprint of the sketch is burnt into his retinas.

‘Probably not—this feels pretty significant, doesn’t it? Me...and it.’

He forces his eyes open, looking into the corner of the room. The gun is still there, propped up like an afterthought, right where he’d left it last year. He grabs it, and feels Si’s gaze on him as he roots through paint supplies for the shells hidden among them.

‘Did you ever wonder why I gave you that? I stole it from my father’s collection, he never even noticed. Not until it was too late.’

‘I know,’ August mutters, loading the shells into the barrel. ‘You only know that because I do.’

‘Maybe so. But did you know I didn’t give it to you to protect yourself from any rogue wildlife or poachers while you were working out here, alone, late into the night?’

‘Oh aye?’

‘I gave it to you to protect you from the beast.’

August glances up, stiffening at how close the sketch has drawn, head almost eerily tilted to the side.

‘Well, it’s finally going to fulfill its purpose, then,’ he says as he arranges the strap over his shoulder and makes for the woods.

Si soon catches up to him, matching his stride as they venture off the trail. As they walk, the trees grow closer together, leaves and branches snagging his clothes, almost as if they’re trying to hold him back. They look warped now, the bark aged, branches more like claws. It would be so easy to get turned around, if not for the telltale trail of black paint guiding their way.

‘Did I ever tell you that some of these trees date back to prehistoric times?’ Si asks in a whisper that, despite the space between them, August hears directly in his ear.

The Beast of Dartmoor Wood

‘No chance; oldest tree in the country is only two thousand years old,’ he answers at normal volume, which he regrets immediately as his voice echoes through the quiet of their surroundings.

‘Oldest tree documented, perhaps. But the trees in these woods? Oh, they are far older. Can’t you feel them?’

August watches as Si presses a hand to the gnarled trunk of a yew tree, half expecting him to go straight through.

‘No,’ August lies.

The longer he looks past the sketch, at the tree, the more intense the hum he’s been ignoring since they left the path becomes. He looks away and rubs the back of his neck, finding it wet with sweat. It’s barely even mid-morning and there is no direct sunlight this deep in the wood, but he’s sweltering. Si always said there was magic here, something older than reason. Talking about it would cast a shadow over his face, but he would never allow it to linger for long, a bright smile and a slap to August’s back, an *‘Aw, don’t worry babe, I’ll protect you!’*

‘Do you still dream about me?’ *This* Si asks, entirely too knowing.

‘I don’t have dreams anymore. Only night terrors,’ August mutters, pressing on.

Si trails him through the woods silently for a while—if not for the greyish outline in August’s peripheral, he would have thought himself entirely alone once more.

‘What do you think you will do when we find your painting?’ His sketch chooses the next moment to break the silence. ‘You can’t seriously think a round of shotgun shells is going to bring it down?’

‘Won’t know until we try.’

‘Hang on, I’ve had a great idea!’ Si steps out ahead of August, forcing him to a sharp stop. ‘Try it on me, go on.’ He lifts the barrel of the gun to his forehead, right between the eyes, his mouth a familiar smirk. ‘Pump me full of lead.’

‘You’re sick,’ August breathes, but doesn’t drop the gun. Si’s eyes cross as he focuses on the shotgun before flicking back at him, his gaze hot and heavy.

‘Well if I am, so are you, baby. Come on now, do it! I double triple quadruple dare ya!’ It’s this that does it, the stupid phrase they parroted back and forth for years, each

dare more outrageous than the last. August doesn't breathe again until after he pulls the trigger.

A loud, deep *bang* tears through Si, the crackling echo so loud the crows perched in the branches above all take flight at once, their wings like thunder in August's ears. Or maybe that's the aftereffects of the shotgun fire.

Si's head jerks back on impact, ink rather than blood spraying out the back of his head and painting the earth in a wide arch. August screws his eyes shut tight before he can see any more but he still hears the wet *thud* of a body hitting the ground, hands shaking so bad the gun slips from his grip.

'Now that was a head rush!' Si's voice whoops. August's eyes snap open and he watches the unnatural way Si's limbs seem to spasm until all too suddenly they straighten out, and he rises as if being pulled up by some invisible force. 'That's a thrill you could get hooked on, you know, if it weren't so fatal to the average man.'

Si laughs, stepping towards August *fast*.

August staggers, backed against one of those gnarled trees as Si looms over him, grin unnaturally wide. The hole in his head is smoking and August can't help but track the trickle of ink seeping down his face. When it reaches the corner of his mouth, Si's tongue pokes out and licks it. It stains his teeth black.

'Think we might need a plan B though, mate,' Si purrs, reaching up to brush August's hair back from his sweaty brow. His touch is ice cold, just shy of too much. August blinks slowly, unconsciously pushing into the touch so that Si's cold hand travels through his curls, across his scalp, feeling ever so much like the real thing.

'You shouldn't be able to touch me, you're just a sketch.'

'Your beastie shouldn't have been able to trash the studio...' Si murmurs, somehow impossibly close.

August sighs as Si's mouth slots over his. He expects to taste ink but Si's mouth tastes like the first (and last) time they did this. Artificially sweet like the cheap rosé August would insist they drink, much to his best friend's chagrin.

August knows this isn't real, *can't* be real, but he still finds himself moaning as Si's tongue licks into his mouth, as wet and perfect as it had been right before it all went to shit.

The Beast of Dartmoor Wood

He braces for it, hands scrabbling to hold onto Si tight this time, telling himself he can feel his nails digging into the flesh of his upper arms as he tries to fuse their bodies together. Si only chuckles, tugging on the hair at the back of August's neck enough that he can pull his mouth away from August's searching lips, fixing his mouth instead to the column of his throat in bruising kisses.

August surrenders himself to the fantasy as his sketch—*his Si* travels down, lips at the collar of his shirt now, fingers fumbling with the buttons, popping them one by one and treating each newly-exposed patch of skin with an openmouthed kiss as he goes. By the time Si gets to his belt, August is completely gone, desperate, skin prickling with want. He bats Si's hands away and unloops the belt himself, popping the button of his jeans and shucking them down to his thighs, barely feeling the cool air against his exposed flesh.

Si's eyes are bright and rapt with attention as he sits back on his heels and waits. August hesitates, fingers toying with the hem of his boxers.

'He wanted to do this more than anything, you know?' Si murmurs, holding August's gaze, unblinking. His voice, low and deep, gives August the courage to pull them down. Si's gaze drops heavily to him, his head tilting a fraction, drinking him in.

August doesn't have it in him to call out the lie—to correct the words flowing sinfully from those ink-stained lips. It's everything he'd ever wanted to hear, after all. He only nods, which seems to be all Si was waiting for as he darts forward, swallowing him down.

His head thunks back against the bark of the tree, sharp pain blossoming at the base of his skull.

'Hey now—' Si pulls back and snaps his fingers. August's vision is swimming but he manages to meet his eye. 'Simon says... *eyes on me*,' he demands, and honestly, August would be unable to look away now even if he wanted to.

Si takes him apart piece by piece, the heat of his throat at complete odds with the cool of his touch. Everything around them fades away: the woods; the looming threat of the beast; the memory of another Si, one who would probably have never gotten on his knees for anyone—especially not August, no matter what this sketch said. None of it matters. August's vision tunnels until he can only see those eyes, growing darker by the minute; the mouth

stretching wider and wider around him.

Distantly, August notes the unnatural snap of bone and tear of flesh as Si works him, the intensity of it wracking up and up, tighter and wetter and hotter, so hot it burns. Si's eyes are all black now, all pupils, the whites inked out entirely. His nails, previously just slightly digging into the flesh of August's hips in a hazy type of pleasure bordering with pain, sharpen abruptly, and August gasps as he feels them pierce into him. He doesn't even care when his own blood starts running in rivulets down his thighs.

August is dizzy, delirious, and it's the graze of pointed teeth that has him coming so hard he thinks this might just be what kills him. He's released as soon as it's done, and he's very thankful for the scratch of bark at his back or he imagines he would have fallen down straight into the earth. But the ecstasy evaporates quickly as he takes in the sight before him: the monster from his painting on all fours, all teeth and hot, panting breath. August's own breath catches in his throat. This is it—this is the moment he dies.

But the monster does nothing, and fatal understanding twinges inside August.

He drops to his knees before his beast, wiping away the blood from its jaw, still pulled taut in a snarl. August traces the edge of a very sharp and dripping fang.

'It's you,' he murmurs. The snarl fades as the monster's gaze bores into his own. August sees it then, in the depths of those big eyes. That fateful night in the studio last summer, a wine-fueled kiss turned bloodbath—flesh ripping open, bone splintering and blood splattering all over August like he was the canvas.

Then the blast of a shotgun, smoke in the air; a hole in Simon's head, right between the eyes.

'I'm sorry,' he whimpers now, pressing his face against the beast's. It groans, the sound piercing through August to his core, his heart breaking all over again.

August fumbles, hands digging into his jacket pocket for his lighter, striking once, twice, before the tiny flame stays strong.

Si burns up like paper.

The Beast of Dartmoor Wood

Canvas makes good kindling, he finds, once he's gathered it into a pile in the middle of his studio and set it alight. He watches the fire spread steadily, licking up the walls of the shed with hunger.

The tears have dried tacky on his face, mixed with ash, but August won't wipe them away, not yet. Instead he stands and watches it all burn—three summers, first love, and paint. Thankfully it doesn't spread to the surrounding woods, dying down once three of the four walls have burnt up, a thick stream of smoke winding above the wreckage. It won't be long until someone comes to investigate now.

August treks back to his car, letting himself in to sit behind the wheel. He fiddles with his lighter once more, watching the flame flicker back and forth. It dies on its own and he chucks it aside to land in the passenger footwell. The engine starts up with a roar.

He has a promise to keep.

DOUBLE ALBUM

DAN LOCKTON

When I told my friend Mel what Dr R had asked me to do, she pointed out that it was a creepy thing to have requested of a student, and of course I should have declined. But if I'm honest, the task was engrossing, a bit voyeuristic, mostly quite sad. It was probably for the best that I didn't know Dr R too well. I'd been in a few of her media studies seminars and remembered her as a kind of vague middle-aged beige-ness. Sometimes, though, she'd come alive with an idea, passion awoken by an obscure connection with the material, as if a memory had resurfaced, a revenant sunbeam piercing the shadows of her life.

Dr R clearly remembered me, though, as trustworthy and technically able. A few months after she taught me, when I was at a bit of a loose end, Dr R sent me a message on LinkedIn. She had a computer-related job she needed doing, organising a large photo collection (I assumed it was related to her research). But it was 'important to be discreet'. I was intrigued. She estimated it would take a week or so, but it might be tedious. So she'd pay me generously. I wondered why she wanted someone else to do it. She was from a slightly older generation, but clearly *au fait* with computers. So, I asked her.

Here's what I'd like you to do. It's painful for me, and embarrassing, hence my request for discretion. You don't need to know all the details. My ex-husband and I are no longer together. It wasn't good. Let's just say that he changed. I don't know his current whereabouts and I don't want to.

I have thousands of digital photos of the twenty years we were together. They are photos of everyday life, holidays, and things we were interested in: architecture, scenery, food, etc. I have removed, I hope, anything intimate.

Please go through the folders (which are in the cloud) and move everything with my ex-husband in them to other folders. So, the result would be that I can look through my photos of holidays, life, 20 years of memories, but without seeing his face, or him at all in fact.

I appreciate this probably sounds silly, like a teenager (no offence

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intended) [I am 23; I was not offended] cutting someone's face out of a photo (do people still do that?) but please know, this is something my therapist recommended. I don't want you to delete the photos, just put them somewhere separate.

With her next message, Dr R attached a photo of L, her ex-husband. A relatively forgettable face—at least at first. Mel, after her initial reaction, messaged me the next day with a link to an article about wealthy New Yorkers employing ‘photo curators’ to sift through their endless daily streams of pictures and selfies to find the best images, particularly those with the right look for posting to social media. But this was different, somehow.

I got to work. I don't have much to do in my evenings. I decided to space the sorting out over a few weeks, mostly while half-listening to podcasts. When I first logged in to the cloud folder Dr R sent, I thought, oh, it's not too bad—maybe six folders of photos per year for 20 years, meticulously labelled (‘2008_Summer_Balloch’, 2012_Christmas_Snowdonia’) but often there were subfolders within, and the sheer quantity of Dr R's photos was astonishing. She had attentively documented her and L's lives together in a way that was not so much the Instagram-era photography of every shakshuka and avocado toast with vintage filters applied, but more like taking notes with the camera: unusual street names, unguarded moments of friends' laughter, patterns of leaves, cats on gate-posts, old postboxes. It was much too much, but it was never boring. I found myself doing the same on my commute, taking more photos than usual—curious shadows, people asleep on the Tube, a garage canopy framed so a lamp post hid the ‘S’ of ‘Shell’. Lonely, and wondering what the next phases of my life held, the scenes of Dr R and L together captivated me: domesticity, a cat with the name tag ‘Walter’, arms-length selfies together, a cosy flat, an Alpine camper van trip, London parties with sophisticated-looking people. I had a sort of nostalgia for a life that was not mine anyway. It was like watching a soap on a TV screen in a dentist's waiting room with the sound off, not really knowing what was going on but still drawn in.

I looked through the folders almost at random. There seemed no reason to do the

job in chronological order, as long as I kept track. L was probably only in about one in six photos, so that was my 'workload', spotting them and making subfolders to which I moved each photo of him.

In fact, I'd opened a folder first somewhere in the middle chronologically, '2016_April_The_Black_Isle' because I'd spent much of my childhood in Cromarty, and was feeling homesick. I was intrigued by what someone else would have photographed there. Sheep giving the camera impassive looks, horizons, and rock formations, mostly. A blurry hitch-hiker and an abandoned church. But what struck me with my wander through the albums was that twenty years is a long time: faces change. I was too young to have internalised that ageing is not just wrinkles: it can be a tiredness behind the eyes, subtle geometry changes to the face and how shadows fall. And I saw it with L and Dr R. There were fewer photos of Dr R herself, since she had been behind the camera most of the time. But L, certainly: there were two versions of his face: it was as though there had been a rapid ageing at some point. In earlier photos he had a sparkle, not just in his eyes but in his cheekbones, his smile, his expression. And much later, that face was *pallid*, somehow deadened, numb, desaturated. A shadow inside, his vitality drained. His warm brown eyes, shiny new conkers, by the later photos had tarnished to something matte, last year's, dug out of the mud. I was steeling myself to find some kind of trauma—an illness, an accident, a death. I thought, well, it's unlikely Dr R would have photographed a hospital stay; then I thought, no, it's definitely something she *would* have documented, not intrusively. Some evidence would be there. A hospital car park on a misty morning. I didn't find it though. It didn't seem, from what I could glean, that the couple had changed the kinds of things they were doing at any point—they were still going on country walks, cooking meals, occasional holidays. I didn't find a rupture or a breakpoint. But I still had many folders left to go through.

I shouldn't admit it, but I made copies of a few photos for myself. There were moments so atmospheric, so cinematic, from these lives I was now wrapped up in, that I wanted a memory of them. The late-afternoon, golden hour sun on a row of cottages in a Suffolk village with a ford sparkling at the end of the road; Arthur's Seat on a chilly day, with walkers wrapped up in hats and scarves; a row of brightly coloured houses in a Norwegian

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town; a Christmas card close-up of a robin on a branch. As I sat alone in the shadows of my room, I longed to have lived, be living, parts of that life. Or I thought I did.

Dr R checked in on me after a few days. How was it going? All right, thanks. I'm taking it slowly. You have some amazing photos. I can see why they are so important to you.

Thank you. Since what happened, I've realised that I've started to blank whole periods of my life. Just things fading unnoticed. Those photos, that chronicle, had become integral to the way I remembered. After experiences with relatives, I have been terrified of dementia. I recorded everything, as you've seen. L and I used to look through them regularly, re-live our life. At least until near the end.

I can't bring myself to do that how I used to. And I've started to forget places, and faces. The other day I was walking across the park and had a kind of flashback. I was visiting a modern cathedral, a dramatic concrete place, with stained glass windows reaching high into the roof. And I couldn't remember: was it real? Had I really been there? Or was it on TV? I couldn't think where it was, what country even. Was I with L? It came back to me eventually—but it scared me. Whole things mixed up or forgotten.

I hadn't mentioned to Dr R what I'd noticed with L's appearance. Was this the 'change' she meant? It wasn't my place to pry into the details of their relationship—albeit, I would perhaps, eventually, have a more vivid memory of many of the events from Dr R and L's life together than she would. I saw their times together, *and she might never see that again*. I felt uneasy. I imagined what crematorium operators feel like as they press the button (if it works like that). I felt like I was involved in a killing, or at least a burial.

I was about three quarters done with the folders now, with a big block of 2022–3 left. I had started going through a weekend Dr R and L had on Arran, when Mel phoned me—quite a rare thing, nowadays—and I wandered outside, where my phone reception

was better. When I came back, my laptop had gone to sleep, and on waking it again I momentarily thought, oh, I've done these photos already, but there were some where L was still there in the background that I'd somehow missed. He was turned away and out of focus but I was sure it was him. His clothes were slightly subdued in colour somehow—but it was clearly him. How had I missed him? I suppose I hadn't really examined the backgrounds—I was too focused on what was most obvious. I started to look through the rest of the folder I thought I'd already done and there he was in the background of five more shots, in shadow, sometimes with the light behind so his face wasn't visible, sometimes actually turned away. Was I going to have to go through the whole lot again? I felt embarrassed: what I thought was an easy job, I'd messed up so badly, apparently, but at least I'd noticed before I turned it all over to Dr R. I found more pictures with a hitherto unnoticed L in the background. Sometimes he was among a crowd—I don't know if Dr R would have noticed, but I wanted to be sure. As I revisited these photos I'd already seen, I realised I was—sort of—remembering the times myself. The time we—I mean *they*—went to a party on the beach at Hastings and stayed at that tatty AirBnB with what was clearly a bathroom turned into a bedroom that we laughed about, the long weekend in Amsterdam where that guy with the neck tattoo of a pug (you thought it was meant to be a bulldog) followed us from the station to our guesthouse a bit too closely and I—I mean *Dr R*—got a few photos just in case.

This more thorough sweep took out more of Dr R's photos, as well as its toll on my own sense of reality. It was late on a Sunday afternoon, when the prospect of Monday morning intrudes, a draught from a door not shut properly, and I thought, maybe I can get it done by the end of the evening—put this whole strange thing behind me. My dreams had become unsettled. I saw echoes of faces, evanescent scenes from another life merged with my own. I think I even dreamed of Dr R's cathedral. I wanted this thing to be over.

As I moved a photo, with L in the distance walking along a Suffolk beach, Dunwich perhaps, close to the breaking waves, I saw thumbnails of the photos preceding it in the sequence. L was close to the camera, gazing out to sea. But he was *also* in the background, along the shore. He was in the photo twice. Or maybe it wasn't him? Was I being too zealous now, too eager to excise anyone who looked a bit like him? Had Dr R done a camera trick,

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a double exposure or something? I scrolled through the folders, and there were a few more where this 'other' L—dare I say his *doppelgänger*, his *fetch*?—was also in the background. The foreground L was less aged, younger-looking; the background L was always too far away, or blurred, or turned away from the camera, to see his face. The background L only seemed to appear, intermittently, for a couple of years, closer to the end. The last folders of all, including photos of a visit to an elderly woman in a nursing home, had only one L, but by then he looked hollow.

One picture showed a colonnaded walkway, where the background L leant against a pillar, as if waiting, while foreground L rummaged in his bag. I couldn't believe Dr R took the photo without seeing what was there, but perhaps she did: there were other people walking past, and the photo was definitely framed on foreground L, capturing what would have been a sweet candid moment on a day out together.

What should I do? I resolved that I needed to broach the subject with Dr R. What I knew about *doppelgängers* came from some bound volumes of *The Unexplained* on my aunt's bookshelf when I was young. I remembered they were not a good thing; a double of a living person was supposedly an omen of impending death. But I could hardly go to Dr R with that. I would do my job first. I would make sure all the photos of L, whether foreground or background or both, were safely removed before finding a way to talk to her about my discovery.

The *doppelgänger* photos had all been outdoors or in places with other people, but then I was taken aback by a folder from 2023. In a sequence of photos in Dr R and L's flat, on a January afternoon, *the background L seemed to be there, in the flat, with them*. His face was just visible in the shadows of a doorway leading off into a hallway, while foreground L and Dr R herself—it was a selfie—grinned, holding up a map of Europe, with coloured dots and lines across it in highlighter, as if they were planning a trip. Dr R and L seemed oblivious to the figure in the doorway. By the next photo, she was behind the camera again: a close-up of L's finger tracing railway lines from Brussels eastwards. And then a photo from further back, blurred, as if Dr R's hand had shaken, with L at the table with the map. But behind him, looking over his shoulder, was the other L, face visible, aged, hollow. And

then in the next photo, in that fading afternoon light, L, alone at the table was drained, haunted: background had replaced foreground, a darkness inside as deep as the shadow he cast over the map. I went back and forth in disbelief, over the sequence: it was there, that was the point where whatever it was had actually happened. I can't believe Dr R would have taken the photos if any of this had been visible to her. She'd have dropped the camera and panicked (much as I was), run to hug L, save him from whatever was happening, seizing him and possessing him.

I had to talk to Dr R. I went outside and phoned her but it went straight to voicemail and I wasn't sure what to say, so I hung up. Emailing would work, surely. This wasn't exactly an emergency for her, but I was shaken, feeling a menace that made me distrust even the room I walked back into, eerie geometries of that flat from L and Dr R's past superimposed on my own—I glanced back, fearing what was out of sight in the shadows of the doorway. I emailed and got Dr R's out-of-office message: she was away.

I couldn't bring myself to look at the photos again. I navigated back to the parent folder of Dr R's cloud drive, so at least I wouldn't be faced with them the next time I opened the laptop. Had I really seen what I thought I had? As I was about to close the laptop, I saw there were some new files syncing—Dr R must have had things set up so new photos she took were automatically backed up to the cloud from her phone. Thumbnails appeared, and I saw she was visiting somewhere I recognised—the beach at Dunwich again. Perhaps she was trying to lay to rest some old memories. I could almost hear the gulls and smell the North Sea on the air. Then a series of selfies appeared in quick succession, sea to her left, broken-down cliffs to her right, late afternoon sun low behind. Dr R looked uncertain. But behind her, walking towards her along the shore, was what I can only describe as her twin, a greyer, more subdued version, getting closer with each photo in the series. Nothing else synced after that; the shadows lengthened in my room as I contemplated the long evening ahead.

WEE WILLIE
WINKIE

GAVIN LUNDY

Somecunt is comin.

A creak somewhere. Ma heart jumps. Familiar and terrifyin footsteps. Goosebumps tickle ma neck as vibrations tremble through oor hoose, shakin the gamin chair Ahm hittin a gouch oan. In wan second Ah turn the telly aff and get under the covers. Ma Da doesnae ken that ma Xbox is still oan, even though ma telly is dark as the night ootside ma windae. Ma door opens like a mad-wae-it auld boy efter the fitba, wan swift movement, then the door staggers against ma rough cerpit. Ahm under ma covers but Ah can feel ma Da watchin me. Checkin Ahm no *at it*.

'Ye better be asleep. Yer gaun fur the papers and rolls in the mornin,' Ma Da says which means *Ah ken yer at it* but it doesnae matter tae him so lang as he gets his crispy roll and square, and his papers. Ah hear him go back doon the stairs, openin the fridge. Soon he's pishin himsel at the telly.

Fuck sake, it's awready past midnight and ma Da needs his tabloids and broadsheets and his tea and roll *nae later* than hauf seven, but that green LED is callin me. Ah shall ignore the tiredness that hus sank deep intae me lit risin damp. Tonight is the night a hit a FIFTY.

Wit's a *'fifty'* ye ask? Listen: Ah play *Halo*. Mad space game made by Microsoft. Ma pals would slag the fuck oot ae me if they found oot cause they play *Call ae Duty* and *Halo* is aw *made up*: aliens, distant galaxies, plasma rifles. CoD is real, scary Russians, Iraq, Barret 50. Cal snipers. Anywiy, Ah dinnae care aboot aw that story mode pish. A play online, *competitive*, and that only. Ahm in it fur the rush, the skill. Anycunt can get decent at CoD. Halo takes skill and Ahm lit the Ronaldinho ae the competitive Halo scene. The only hing is that Ah cannae play it durin the day cause Ah huve tae go tae school and that.

A fifty is the greatest achievement any competitive gamer can achieve without gaun pro. And here Ah um, 12:22am oan a school night, tradin shots wae the best and Ahm just gettin stertit. Fuck sleep, greatness awaits.

Telly back oan. Search fur a game. Game type: *Ranked MLG Free for All*. Map: *Guardian*. As guid as it gets. Ahm playin at such a high level these days that cunts must recognise ma gamertag cause ye never forget it when Ah pap ye in the face fae across the

map.

XxxScOttishSnIipeRxxX. The last hing ye read afore ye die.

Ma Blackberry is pingin lit ma pal MC efter a bottle ae Bucky. Cunts are askin me tae jump oan CoD or FIFA. Naw, nut, never. Ahm oan a mission. Ah finish in second place wae a helfy Kill/Death Ratio ae 23 tae 11. Soon A've piled up ten games: Three wins, five seconds, two third place finishes. But the Microsoft Corporation must hate me cause that

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is stubborn as fuck, lit ma Grannie when Ah say *A've hud enough ae her lentil soup, actually*. Next game. Ah ken this map better than ma hoose. Wan minute left and its 24 me and 24 somecunt wae an MLG team name. A serious player, but A've got Turtlebeach headphones. Echolocation through crispy Dolby Digital surround sound. Ahm lit a mad bat. Ah hear him jump and land wae a thump across the map and Ah snipe him. Victory. Black screen and Ah haud ma breath.

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Wit are ye oan about? How many times dae Ah need tae win tae get ma fuckin fifty. Noo Ahm tiltit. Truth be told Ahm fuckin ragin at Bill Gates. Gie me ma fuckin fifty ya specky cunt. In the last few minutes Ah fa' fae second place tae third tae fourth. The game ends. Ahm deid oan the flair and the winner crouchin up n doon oan me so it looks like he's drappin his digital baws oan ma face. It's ma first time oot the tap three in ages and Ah sit and stare at the black screen, hopin fur the indifferent stare ae *forty-nine*.

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Ah burst up and punch through ma plasterboard wall and Ah swallae the cloud ae dust A've set free. Ahm coughin and ragin at ma sticky auld controller and ma shitey Ayrshire internet. The morra Ahm gonnae go tae the school library and print oot a picture ae Bill Gates' glaiket mug and Ahm gonnae throw darts at him whenever he puts ma number doon. Prick.

Ah need refreshment. Ohhhhh yass, Ah remember A've got a gless cheque chillin in the fridge. Cauld Irn-Bru, cured fur three days at the back. Just wit Ah need.

Ah creep doonstair sleekit as a black cat oan Halloween. The floorboards sing songs under me even though Ahm ten-stane-fuck-all. The kitchen light is oan and Ahm prayin that the dug doesnae go nuts when he sees me. Alas, the auld collie is sleepin like the deid, fartin away. Ah grab ma Irn-Bru and peek next door. Ma Da is deid tae the world anaw. His Billy Connolly DVD is still playin oan the telly and the Big Yin is talkin pish in his big banana boots. Ah can smell ma Da's whisky and fur a moment Ahm a wean again, gettin carried up the stairs in his airms efter him and Maw get hame fae the pub. Shared tobacco soaked intae auld leather, the saltfire ae peated drams, the petrichor ae the Ayrshire air.

That sugary orange elixir delivers ma next win and they keep comin but the number doesnae budge. It's scunnerin and damp exhaustion pools in ma bones and ma eyes feel scratchy. Ah check ma phone: 3:33am. When the fuck did that happen? But form lit this doesnae come aften. Wan mair.

Ah go tae hit the 'A' button tae load up ma next game, but ma thumb freezes. Involuntarily, ma shoulders fold forward and ma heid draps as if Ahm hidin fae suhin. Wit wis that? A draft, aye. But it's pishin doon ootside and that breeze wis dryer than an Aldi oatcake wae nae pâté. A cauld streak runs fae ma fingertips tae ma neck. Ma Xbox freezes. Crashes tae the main menu. The telly screen snaps black. The red standby light fades oot and ma bedside lamp flickers aff lit a candle. Utter darkness. Silence. But Ah don't feel alane.

Ah cannae move anyhin but ma eyes and they search in slow motion but it's darker in here than it ever hus been. Ah look tae the door. Closed. Empty. Ah build masel up fur the next eyeball manoeuvre. Wardrobe. Ceilin. Dartboard. Each search yields only mair darkness. Ahm masel. Ah must be. But ma prickly skin tells me otherwise. The fact Ahm

Wee Willie Winkie

breathin lit A've just sprinted fae Glesga tells me otherwise and There's a feelin eminatatin fae that unseen place, ma windae, cauld oan ma v-cut skull.

'It's bedtime!'

Ma hied whips roon. It's as dark outside as it is inside. Wan hing is visible in this engulfin shadow. Ah face in the windae wearin ancient youth and a cauld grin. He looks like a wean fae an auld Victorian photograph. He's floatin in stripy jammies. His grin is wide. His voice echoes. A thousand laments fae as many generation speak wae him fae the black depths ae his throat.

'Ahm Wee Willie Winkie, how ye no asleep? It's no time fur playin games, it's time fur countin sheep. Dae wit Ah tell ye, go put yer heid doon. Cause bad boays that dinnae sleep end up in the groon.'

Noo at this point Ahm questionin wit the Barr Company puts in their drinks. Mibbe their girders are rusty and A've got brain-tetanus. Ah close ma eyes and although Ah can feel ma heartbeat in ma neck Ah manage tae get masel under control and soon enough Ahm breathin lit a Himalayan monk. But Ah feel tired. Ah feel *auld*.

'A've telt ye afore,' Willie says. 'Dae ye no mind? Ah can smell yer tiredness fae Glesga. There's *so* much ae it in ye. Ye smell delicious. If ye keep stayin up this late A'll just huve tae finish ye aff next time. Ahm a hungry boy.'

Ah feel reservoirs ae exhaustion pool in aw ma muscles. Willie stretches oot his airms and places his hauns against the windae. Ma left airm drifts up, up, up. At first Ah hink it's daein it by itsel but it's Willie that's somehow pullin it towards him. Willie smiles and opens his mooth intae a wide ring ae fossilised baby teeth. Ah feel the heat leavin ma airm through ma fingertips. The windae steams up fur a second then Ah see Willie still there lookin lit he's just finished his Sunday dinner. Ma eyes close as he speaks.

'Keep yersel knackered fur me. A'll eat ye up again soon.'

Ma bones feel brittle and hollow and openin ma eyelids again is lit openin a rusty garage door and when ma vision is back he's still there and he's smilin and

Class is rowdy. Ah cannae remember gaun tae the shoap fur ma Da. Ah cannae remember wit Ah hud fur breakfast or even gettin tae school. Ma left airm is sare and aw

pale lookin. Ah rub it and it feels freezin. Mrs Geography is pointin oot the windae at the snow-powdered peak ae Goatfell. Tallest mountain oan Arran. Love Goatfell, so Ah dae. Shagged it five times and it sounds like a mad goat hus fell aff it. Quality stuff. Teach is talkin about arrêtes and corries but Ah thought they sang *Flower of Scotland* at the fitba and anywy Ah reckon God or the big bang stertit the universe and everyhin efter is just details. Who hus the energy tae hink about aw that? Ah close

ma eyes fur wit Ah swear is two seconds and Ahm sittin in the back ae Mr History's class wae ma skull plantit against the desk lit Ahm playin heids doon thumbs up and Ah can smell ma boggin breath against the menshy-riddled desk. *Gads*. Lunchtime fags and gless cheques are a rotten idea. Big Mr History dresses lit Liam Gallagher and his baldy napper *shiiiiieenes* under the tube bulbs. Somedae should tell him ye cannae huve mod mutton chops if ye dinnae huve a barnett tae finish aff the look. He wheels oot some dusty auld telly that looks like embdae's gran's. He turns it oan. Static zaps the stoor aff the screen. He sticks oan some grim film and Ah sleep through hauf ae it. We're learnin aboot the Holocaust these days but the film seems tae make ye want tae feel sorry for the Nazis, so Ahm just confused. The wee Nazi boy is talkin tae another wee boy that reminds me ae somedae. It's his jammies. They've got stripes.

Bananas in pyjamas. Are comin doon the stairs, Ah hink tae masel. Why are the bananas in pyjamas and why are they comin doon the stairs? Tae *GET YE*, that's why.

Ah fa' asleep hinkin about jammies and bananas and that wee cunt Ah wis dreamin aboot last night or this mornin or whenever exactly ma forty-nine became forty-eight. Ahm gaun

bananas

Wee Willie Winkie. Big Banana FEET. The Big Yin tells his jokes. Whisky's made wae PEAT! That's no right but Ah like it. Mr History is tellin us aboot a big-fuck-aff-boat called Bismarck but Ah ken it well awready, so Ah just keep masel busy in-between naps by makin up wee songs in ma heid.

Wee Willie Winkie

Who is Wee Willie Winkie and is he pals wae Skinny Malinky Lang Legs? Dae they exist in a shared poetic universe inventit by somecunt fae Brigton a hunner year ago? Wit the fuck! It wis that wee cunt that came tae me in ma dream last night and Ahm no fae Brigton. Ma Da is but. It must huve been a dream, eh? Naw, it wis real. Every bit ae me rejects the notion but Ah cannae deny it. Aye, the wee cunt is real as fuck.

And Ah swear tae fuck Ah can see him ootside this classroom windae right this very fuckin second.

Ah look awiy and rub ma eyes. Ah really should huve got some sleep last night. Slowly, Ah turn tae check the windae is clear. But there he is. In his jammies and pale as Golden Pineapple MD 20/20.

He's speakin tae me but aw Ah can hear is the unfocused murmur ae the classroom. Ah hate his smile. Ah hate his stripy grey jammies. How can naecunt notice the wee cunt? Ah can feel ma right airm liftin up and ma heart is gaun lit fuck. Is this wit they mean when they say panic attacks ye? Ahm feart tae run past aw ma pals oot the classroom. But Willie's mooth is spreadin wide, becomin inhuman. Ah feel ma right arm wantin tae drift up tae him. Ah need tae get oot ae here pronto. Fuck Noel and Liam's reject brother and fuck the good ship Bismarck. Am aff. Time tae fuckin boooooost.

'Where you gaun?' Baldy Gallagher says, and Willie is watchin me through the windae, ragin that A've worked up the baws tae run awiy.

'Pish.' Ah say tae teach and just lit that Ahm runnin away rapid. *Meep meep.*

But MC follows me intae the toilet and Ah stand at the cubicle actin like Ah need a pish. So Ah get ma wee willie winkie (*don't fuckin call it that ya daft prick*) oot and Ah try and squirt suhin oot but that dry smile in the windae hus turned ma insides crispy. Ah try and spew but Ah just manage a sandy cough and MC takes me tae the

Why am Ah in the school nurse's room and why huve Ah got brown paper towels strapped tae ma airms. Ah didnae fa' ower, Ah hud a mental injury sustained by fags, Xbox, and a hallucinatory vampiric figure that floats ootside ma windae and feeds oan ma tiredness. They should stick a plaster oan ma brain. ADHD the school says A've got, Ahm Due a Heavy Drink.

Aff school fur the day, yass. Mibbe when Ahm better restit A'll stoap seein wee creepy cunts in windaes. We get tae the beach and MC passes me a wee hauf shag ae Bucky and a crack it open. Gorgeous sound. The boays are doggin it wae me in support ae ma newfound mental health problems. MC starts burnin Asda crisp boaxes. Ah tan the Bucky and suddenly Ahm AWAKE and bouncin aff the wall's and runnin aboot wae nae legs.

The caffeine and tonic buzz hus zapped ma insomnia tae death and fur the rest ae the day it's lit the weekend. Tiesto poundin in MC's gaff and he dishes oot some Dragon Soop. FIFA. Cairds. Aw the boays gaun fur it. Rippin the pish. Shadow boxin. Arguin aboot fitba and lassies. But ma heid is miles awiy. A've completely forgot why Ahm even aff school. Ah stopped drinkin hoors ago and A've tanned a packet ae onion rings and a Happy Shopper energy juice. Ah slip oot without a word and head up the road. 50 is callin me.

It's dark by the time Ahm hame. A've got a hunner missed calls and Ah huve tae break in the back door tae get in. In the mornin ma Da will go nuts at me fur feignin illness tae dog school. A'll take the verbal assault gladly when it comes.

Wit troubles Ah hud durin the day feel lit a lifetime ago. When Ah get ma 50 A'll sort oot ma sleepin pattern and stick in at school. Fur noo, Ahm sober, Ahm focused. Ma Blackberry says it's hauf twelve. Ah search fur a game and the wins roll in. Ma left airm is sare but ma thumbs are movin like ninjas. Tap three finishes every time. Ah feel the 50 comin.

Suhin taps oan the windae. In a matter ae an efternoon Ah hud forgotten this face, but here it is. Aw aye, Ah remember last night. Ah remember his mug watchin me in class. Seems lit a lifetime ago, but Ahm prepared this time. Ah look awiy fae him quickly and Ah get up tae run. Ah make it tae the door but the deep damp tired rot freezes in every muscle and bone in ma body, becomes vapour, leavin nae residue. Just absence. There's less ae me noo. Ma ice-cauld body slides oan its heels, turnin tae gaze upon the face in the windae. Willie is smilin at me. The hunger in his wee eyes is elemental. The window steams up as his face presses against the glass. Everythin electric snaps aff. There is a new light growin somewhere in the deep black ae Willie's tiny pupils. His wee mooth spreads and his heid shapes itsel roon it. Two predatory beads are the only ornament fur this leech ae a face. He

Wee Willie Winkie

sucks at the windae and gravity is nae longer ma pal. Ma body lifts up fae the groon and a feel sick rise in ma throat as Ah float across the room. Ah slam against the windae. Ahm stuck tae it lit a starfish and every limb, every member, every pore feeds Willie's through the glass. His mooth folds back intae a wee cherub ae a face and ma grey body hits the flair. Willie sings me a lullaby as Ah fa' asleep.

'Wee Willie Winkie says it time tae sleep furever. Ye hud yer chance and noo it's run away doon the river. So if ye read this story, straight fae that cunt's brain, ken Wee Willie Winkie can come fur ye the same.'

TOES

JESS LAVIN

Beth hates sleeping with her feet uncovered.

Never able to escape the suspicion, something waits at the foot of her bed. An invisible force. An unsettling. Most outgrow the irrational fear of the monster under the bed, but Beth knows there's no monster waiting to devour her whole.

At least that would be quick.

Her bed is everything Beth needs it to be—soft, deep, comforting. A simple wooden frame, pale oak veneer with a low headboard. A memory foam mattress she bought with her first big paycheck. It's not top of the line, but it's moulded to her shape. The crisp white bedsheets, pristine yet welcoming, are scattered with soft blue and grey textiles. The faint smell of lavender fills the room. Beth's efforts to find refuge from her inescapable dread.

At the foot of the bed, there's just enough space beneath the frame for her battered trainers and a few cardboard boxes filled with forgotten things. Outside, the steady hum of London traffic drifts through the cracked window—buses grind to a stop, the occasional blare of a horn.

Here, in her sanctuary, Beth performs her nightly ritual, tugging the blanket over her toes. The habit brings comfort, a small illusion of control.

It's the absence of power over this undetectable influence that gnaws at her. She feels defenceless against its observation. As if something is biding its time, waiting to reach into her world at any moment and change things permanently.

Now in her thirties, Beth is used to a world that rarely explains itself. All too familiar with feelings of loss, grief, and the creeping loneliness associated with them. People think she's resilient, but they are incapable of seeing what follows her to bed.

It's embarrassing, after all she has endured, it is still the imperceptible appendage grasping her up at night. It's silent, patient reach feels closer than ever. Beth can't remember the last time she felt rested. A few weeks ago, she lost two whole days, blurring into a single, fear-soaked haze that commanded every room, every conversation, every moment.

Her friends notice she's tired. Disengaged. They offer support, but Beth can't

face the judgement that would come with disclosing her enduring quirk. Attempting to protect herself, Beth withdraws. She turns down invitations. Leaves messages unanswered. Eventually, even quitting her job; she decides it's for the best.

At night, she restlessly bundles up beneath her duvet. The fear, no longer confined to the foot of the bed, seeps into all corners of her life.

Enveloping.

Suffocating.

Still, she tucks her toes in. Like she can keep the worst things away.

But the worst has already happened.

Months pass. Beth barely recognises herself—apathetic, drained, curled tight in the dimly lit bedroom of her cramped apartment. Once airy and light, her home, like much of Beth's life, is now in complete disarray. The sheets feel colder, no matter how long she spends lying in them. The familiar scent of lavender has completely faded.

She leaves the window open while she sleeps, a rebellion, small but deliberate, against the oppressive air clinging to the room. Is this it? An unbearable ending.

One night, a strong wind pierces the room, blowing the sheets off Beth's legs. This doesn't stir her; she is undisturbed, even as the chill sweeps over her bare skin.

Then—it happens.

A hand, impossible but unmistakable, closes tenderly around her toes. Fingers gently curling around each digit. They don't pull. They don't hurt. They just hold.

Her breath catches. She tries to pull back, but her feet don't move. She opens her eyes, the room is empty, but the hand's grasp is certain.

Beth's mind screams at her to kick, to thrash, to run. Her body stays still. A sound leaks from the dark. Slow. Measured. Breathing.

A whisper: still here, always been here.

The thing Beth has feared all her life, the overwhelming presence she's spent so long trying to escape, has come for her anyway. With it...relief. The constant, gnawing anxiety of the unknown has gone.

Beth trembles as its grip tightens. Firm, undeniable, grounding. Proving it is real,

Toes

but she is okay. The strange comfort she feels in its presence isn't protection from harm. It is strength. After all, she's already survived the things she thought would destroy her.

It doesn't want to harm her. It just wants her to know bad things will happen. Bad things have already happened, yet she is still here.

The grip loosens. Beth leaves her toes uncovered.



THE WHEEL

FIONA BURTON

The hot fluid rushes past your ear, stripping you from entombed slumber. The ever-present thrumming quickens, the sound ripping violently against the curves of your soft skull.

Where you once floated weightless, you now have walls closing in, pressing ever tighter against each inch of skin.

You stare at her in the carbon dark. You whisper into her skin, burrow the words deep between her lungs, a sickly plea to stay.

It's happening again. The limbs that make up your ragdoll body tug, tendons stretched from tendons, nerves in your body awakening solely to light on fire and burn savagely under skin. It's as if the room is being skewed into a thin line, necessitating that everything inside conform to its new shape.

You're being crushed, compacted, pressed and pulled. You fear being ripped limb from limb, shredded to lace like a cheesestring. The horror subsides for a moment as you remember cheesestrings. Cheesestrings atop the climbing frame at the height of summer, sunscreen sticky in the folds of your chubby toddler knees. A cheerful, simple memory you wouldn't mind reliving.

But the scale always tips. You remember the grief, webs of monstrous moments mapped out in front of you, still yet to come. Breath douses your lungs in a bid to howl riotously, but upon release, only an inhuman gurgle sounds from your throat.

You reach out a finger to trace onto her skin how much you love her, but you can feel the end coming now. You can feel your body being siphoned. You plead, 'Please not again, let me stay, let me stay. I'll be good, I'll be good.' But your eyes begin to burn, hot white light searing any semblance of thought from your mind.

The Wheel

The monsters outside your home, once only voices, now have silver tongues and they grasp your skull and pull it lustily. The last remnants of home, a gossamer of film over your eyes, just moments from being blinked away. You choke on oxygen, you wail, one thousand lifetimes of grief accumulating.

With one last tug, the monster tears you from your home, from her.

'Congratulations, it's a healthy baby girl!'



THE BIRD LADY

LUCY CAMERON

A woke up early this morning but perhaps A never slept.

Am softly chattering tae myself in bed before getting up for the day. Canny bare silence anymore. A don't even needy put ma winter coat on fir leaving the house anymore cos A sleep in it. The windows ae ma wee flat are slimy with condensation which will surely bring the damp.

A can see my breath forming circles in the icy air of the flat. A breath outward to check if A am still alive after all. And it turns out A am.

Am fiddling wae ma home phone and A key in a phone number from an old scrap ae paper in ma handbag. Am phoning tae check when the library opens this morning. Am researching something about ma bird feathers. And research like this canny wait. This is groundbreaking and mind-bending stuff. Nae one will believe wit Ave found out.

The cheery voice down the phone says the library opens in half an hour.

A grab ma bag, the one full of feathers, and get the first bus into town.

The town is sleepy still. People hiv only just started rolling up shutters and the vans of men carrying crates ae milk and meat hiv only started arriving. Some people look at me, but most don't bother.

There's a crowd ae mams and weans inside the library; they're waiting fir something tae start. A smile at a wee newborn bairn with big eyes and chubby cheeks, and the bairn instantly greets. And A canny say A blame the newborn bairn.

The smiley ladies at the counter know ma name and greet me as such. But ma name is not how others know me in the town.

A like coming in here cos they always listen tae me when A tell them things about ma bird feathers. They humour me mair than anyone else. Even ma own kids, who haveny visited me in a long while now.

The ladies at the library visit me from time to time when A can't make it in. They bring me books tae ma doorstep and ask how Am getting on. Nice lassies.

A place a box of teacakes on the front desk. The library lady smiles.

'Aw, you're really spoiling us today, Ms Webster.'

A found them at the back of the cupboard. A think A bought them in for the

The Bird Lady

grandkids who don't visit.

A look at the box of teacakes and suddenly something panics me. A forgot tae check the sell by date on them. But it's too late now. A've given them over.

A panic thinking of the library lady taking a bite and screaming at the mouldy mallow inside.

A tug at my coat sleeve; ma fingers stiff and jittery at the same time.

'How can I help you today?'

'Am looking for a book aboot death.'

The library lady raises her eyes fae her computer. Nothing too obvious or offensive. Just a slight raise so that her eyebrows move above her tortoiseshell glasses. A used to be like the library lady: dead quick on a type writer, knowledgeable, with people asking me tae find things for them. A once had some purpose in society.

A once had.

The library lady click click clicks on her keyboard again.

'Ah, let me look on the system...Fiction? Non-fiction?'

'A book about death.'

'A book to deal with grief?' She asks.

'No. A book about death.'

'Hm. I think I need a little more to narrow down the search.'

A queue is forming behind me, and A feel people's eyes. People are afraid of standing too close to me. Ave noticed that.

A wonder if it's the smell of rotten fruit and dampness. A remember hating the way old people smelled on the bus home fae school.

And it's not that you stop caring about smelling. It's more that it seems pointless to wash, get dirty, wash and get dirty all over again.

The library lady is looking at me now, a little more impatient. A bend over the desk so Am closer to her. The computer screen the only thing between us.

'You're supposed tae know the book Am looking fir. It's yer job.'

My body begins to shake, anger rushing through my veins, angry for what Am not

sure. Everything. Always angry these days.

Ma neck is craning around the library and Am clicking my tongue loudly with impatience. Cin feel ma face turning tae a dark shade ae red and A pound ma fist on the library counter.

Ma aims all off and ma fist squishes down and smashes the box of tea cakes. They burst open all over the counter, creating a gooey mess of mallow and out-of-date biscuit.

Am screaming something.

Anything. Anything. Anything.

Tongue clicking, teeth grinding, and barking loudly.

A stop. Exhausted and whimpering like a wet dog.

Everyone is staring in complete shock.

Ma mind goes blank fir a few seconds and the next thing A know the library lady is taking me to the side and calming me down. Trying to give me a reassuring smile with teacake residue all over her cardigan.

You're okay. You're okay. You're

A leave the library in a trance and bolt to the bus stop. A will have tae head back home cos Ave got nowhere else to go. And A need tae lie down after the morning Ave had.

There's kids with school uniforms on at the bus stop, A check my watch and see it's well past nine. A crane and jut my head outwards and tut.

TUT TUT TUT.

It comes out louder than intended.

'A hope you boys aren't late fir school.'

The two young boys look up fae staring at the floor, focusing on scuffing their black leather shoes against the concrete and smoking vapour out plastic tubes. The tallest boy with a hoodie on scowls at me then laughs.

'Mind yer ain business, bird lady.'

'School is important. And smoking is bad fir--'

The smaller boy with a cheeky smile steps forward.

'Aye, fuck off bird lady.'

The Bird Lady

There's blood rushing again, so fast that my head feels fuzzy and that same anger is thumping in my blood and running through my veins.

Kids nowadays have nae respect for their elders. No manners. No nothing.

A shake my head and shout,

'Hooligans!'

They're both laughing at me, hysterically now, like the little nasty vermin hyenas that they are. The older one taps the younger one's arm tae get his attention.

'Here, remember when bird lady tried tae pay fir her shopping wae bird feathers?'

'Aye, she's a pure weirdo. Ye git any feathers so we cin buy a packet ae crisps Mrs? Please. We're both pure skint.'

'Show us yer bird feathers.'

'Aye, show us yer bird feathers.'

They're both chanting it now, they've turned it into a horrible football chant, sang with their booming voices. It's horrible and deafening. A clutch on to my bag of feathers and chatter to myself tae calm myself down.

A show ma bus pass and sit away from the hooligans, A make sure they aren't anywhere near me as A open ma bag. A reach ma hand inside. A close my eyes and stroke the insides.

Ma hand gently brushes the parts. The soft and hairy barbs to the harder hollows of the quill.

Some feathers are softer, and glossier to touch. Then there are some wilted with age, rough and harder. A like all my feathers equally because they were all once attached to something.

They were all once attached to skin.

Attached to skin.

A close my eyes, calm and relaxed now thinking about each feather Ave collected. Some Ave found in the most unexpected places. Some were lying waiting for me on my windowsill.

No matter, finding a feather is a sign that he is near.

You are near.

A get to the flat and shiver at the cold again.

No matter, you are near.

A go straight into my bedroom. Curtains still shut. A don't bother opening them. And it's not that A don't want the light tae come in. It's just that A don't see the point in opening, shutting, opening and shutting them all again.

A take the bird feathers oot ma bag, there's hunners ae them, all different colours. A fan them out into the shape of your body.

And A lie beside you.

Am under the covers with ma winter coat because Am not taking it off. A don't see the point taking it off, putting it on, to eventually take it off again.

And when A wake, A hope the feathers are alive. And A hope A see them, as they once were, in all their glory, attached to skin and flying in the air.

*

The neighbours notice a week later that Bird Lady's curtains have been shut for a while now.

And there's a smell.

Mr and Mrs McDougall knock at the door to see if she's okay.

Each knock goes unanswered.

But they can hear noises inside like little feet running across a wooden floor.

They involve the street.

Some suggest going to the local council.

Others are quite certain she has a son.

And some think she may have mentioned grandchildren.

But no one is certain because no one can remember Bird Lady's real name.

They all eventually agree to phone the emergency services.

The police arrive first.

The knocks go unanswered again.

The Bird Lady

And eventually they decide to break down the door.

The neighbours watch. Some from the comfort of their homes, some behind glass windows, and some from behind the net of their curtains.

There are the more obvious watchers. Some stand on the street below, arms crossed absorbing the action. Mr Ferguson stands on the street with his cup of tea.

When the police finally prise open the front door, to everyone's amazement a flock of birds fly out the front door. And another flock and another flock. One of the officers stumbles back, protecting his head from the incoming flocks and shouts.

'What the fuck?'

Everyone on the street gasps and clutches on to each other with fear.

When the flocks of birds pass, the police make their way into the old lady's bedroom, and right enough it's full of birds.

They're all resting on the furniture, watching.

All different ones too. Sparrows, finches, starlings, gulls, robins and pigeons. The lot. The room is alive with feathers, attached to skin and flying.

The birds fly maniacally whistling, singing and chattering to one another above the police officers' heads.

Under the covers of the bed before them they can make out the shape of what looks like a tiny person underneath. The two officers look at each other, bewildered and a little afraid, before pulling back the covers.

A large black crow is released from the duvet covers flapping its gigantic wings in the air. It flies towards the officers at such a speed that sends winds wafting through the room.

The crow goes straight for their eyes, plucking them out one by one like juicy grapes.

And then the crow goes for their throats.

The crow finishes with the throats, only once there is nothing left to peck at, and the room is covered in blood, guts and feathers.

The crow flies maniacally towards the door while enjoying its own speed and

Glyph. Literary Magazine

power. The other birds join singing as they follow, towards the street of watching people.

They are going for their throats.

FINGER BONES
AND
BLACK PEPPER

ISI TURNER

TW: Sexual assault

Fountain pen on bone doesn't stick too well, the ink slides right off. A penknife, on the other hand, works perfectly. Shopping lists and to-dos are etched into my shoulder blade, so I don't forget to get wine or mussels for dinner tonight. An anniversary meal to celebrate our love, adoration, infatuation; the kind of love we were convinced no-one had ever experienced before us. The 'I will drink your stomach acid like soup if it pleases you'—'I will peel my nervous system from my spine for you to use as a belt' kind of love. Muscles poached in wine, roasted garlic, charred lemon. Red wine lips and sleep.

The following morning, Sunday baking had become a tradition. Kneading my fat into the dough, malleable and spongy (thigh is your favourite), then left to rise to get the perfect chew to it. A proofing drawer to prove that your love for me requires a box for me to sit in, waiting on your approval, on your every move. You ask what we should season it with, whilst reaching for the pestle and mortar with one hand, and taking my hand in the other. Finger bones and black pepper, lemon zest and a couple of nails, red polish adding some colour. As it bakes, the scent fills the whole house (a reminder that I cannot escape you). You rip the fresh bread open, fingers digging into the soft flesh reminiscent of my own. Teeth gnawing at the crust like a starving animal. I recognise that look.

You want me after breakfast; infallible and insatiable, who am I to say no? (I cannot say no.) Bones tangled, scratches, bites—I cannot tell if we are fucking or fucking killing each other. You grind my pelvis with yours until grey dust falls between us, a coalescence of our essence for you to snort. Dilated pupils, hot to touch and rapacious. My holes fucked and torn to shreds, faux pas confetti scattering the bed amongst the breadcrumbs. You moan in pleasure as I stifle my cry. Euphoria; despair. Heat floods inside me, astringent as lemon juice in my eyeball. Acid burning my organs, cremating me from the inside out. You thank me and force me to thank you.

A shower to purify yourself, wash off the sin along with my remaining skin that had rubbed off on you in flakes. Soapy suds with an oddly familiar scent. Dirt and feathers, herbaceous and metallic, like the taste of blood mixed with the musk of rotting leaves and a freshness of lemon bleach. You wash me and my skin comes off in chunks, getting stuck in the loofah. You scrub harder until we are both clean; citrus fresh. You wipe the steam from the

Finger Bones and Black Pepper

mirror and stand before it, plucking unwanted hairs from your face and body and then the vertebrae from my spine. Laid out on the bathroom counter, snapped nerves and tissue staining the surface. You wash them one by one, handling them like a newborn as more bits of me are washed down the drain. We'll need to buy more drain cleaner soon. Each piece of bone you carve with a word, order and reorder until your love note is complete. A sinew string, you tie them together again and hang them in the living room: anniversary bunting.

We fill the time playing board games. Noughts and crosses, delicately placing pieces so not to untie the crosses of phalanges and unravel tendon noughts. I drop a piece on the floor, a piece of me (I realise the irony). You stare daggers at me so hard I feel the stab in my eyeballs. A drop of blood stains the carpet; neither of us move to clean it. Time for cards: kings and queens and knights slicing my fingertips each time I put down a card. We're playing with a tarot deck, and I wonder if it's a coincidence that I only get the suit of swords? Drips of blood turn into a trickle of crimson down my wrist. I look down and notice my torso is speckled with cuts I don't remember getting. I feel nothing.

The afternoon rolls around and you become peckish. You look at the apple slicer in your hand, contemplating—before chucking it back in the drawer. Instead, you hold my skull with both hands, your fingers tasting like salt in my mouth and stinging my eyes. You bite my cheekbone: crunchy. Somehow, your teeth don't break but my skull cracks with ease. You're halfway around my cranium before boredom hits; you throw what's left of me out into the compost bin, to join the worms and grow mildew. Next to me, a smashed ribcage and three broken femurs—I am another failed project.

EVOLVING BEAST

O. MANOR

David entered the nose shop.

The floor and ceiling copied each other as grids of white gloss tiles, except some in the ceiling that were fluorescent. Mirrors covered two walls. At an equally white desk, sat a short balding man in a white robe.

‘Do you have an appointment, sir?’ The man asked. His voice was high and nasally, with protruding lips that gave him the look of a duck.

‘You don’t have any appointments now, and I will pay in cash,’ David answered.

‘Good, do you know...’

‘Number six.’ Without looking, David pointed at a wall with a picture of face and the number six written in bold red in the bottom left corner.

‘Have a seat.’

David sat in the reclining chair. Like the dentist, he thought, the one he had visited earlier that day to replace his teeth. The rest of the shop looked to be a hybrid of a dentist and a barber. He had also been to the barber that day, to change his hair.

‘Prepping the anaesthesia and administrating takes around twenty minutes...’

‘No anaesthesia.’

‘Sir. I must insist.’

‘I will pay double.’

The little duck man paused, then rolled in his chair to grab a tray and rolled to him. Shiny stainless steel tools lay on the tray. Scalpel, sheers, tongs, saw, and other tools David could not name. The little man picked up the scalpel.

‘No, the saw,’ David said.

The man shrugged and picked up the requested tool. David clung to the arms of the chair, digging his new nails into the leather cushions. Cut off your nose to spite your face. David laughed. The man tightened straps around his forehead, chest and arms.

It took three rips to cut off his nose. So quick, the pain did not register at first. The first sensation David felt was the familiar taste of blood in his mouth. Thick. Succulent. An acquired taste. Then came the pain. David dug his fingers deeper into the chair. He bit his cheeks. This was a battle to stay awake, and he had won it before. His toes bent inwards as

waves of pain shot from the new hole in his head, replacing the two previous ones. His eyes hurt. The tears mixed with the blood, making it salty and thinner. The lights began to dim. His head became more comfortable.

No.

There was not enough time.

David pushed his body forward, against the straps.

The man brought a new nose. Bulbous. The number six. Three steel needles jutted out from the back. The man jammed the nose, needles first, into the cavity. An eddy of pain compared to the waves. Then with a torch he seared the nose on.

When the tears dried David saw himself in the mirror. The face was completely different from what it had been that morning. Even his eyes, which were brown before, he dyed red. He could be anyone. Any of the safes.

‘That will be twelve hundred please.’

From his wallet David produced the money. It was the amount he got for his grandmother’s ruby this morning. His mother had always told him that it was priceless. A relic from the old country. The broker at *Pawn ‘n’ Stuff* said it was worth five hundred. Twelve hundred was the happy middle.

Next on the list of errands, David needed new clothes.

*

The ale fizzled in the pint glass on the wooden counter. David put the glass to his mouth and sipped. The brew was hard to swallow. It tasted sour. The people around him all had such glasses, all drank happily. Their faces did not scrunch up. He tried again, forcing his features to remain stable against every instinct.

The bar was called *Ye Olde Fox Hunt*. Probably because of the oil painting behind the bar of a stuffy British man in a tweed jacket and a rifle, with a Beagle at his feet.

The rest of the bar was anything but British. TVs on the wall showed football (not soccer), and the beers on tap all had Belgian or German names.

Amanda stood beside him. She was not a pretty girl. She wore a dress two sizes too small, pretending that it had shrunk in the wash. Acne scars dotted her face. David did not care. She would not make it to his bed tonight. And if she did, then he would have been so happy that it did not matter who was with him.

‘So what do you do for work?’ She asked him.

‘I’m in construction,’ David lied.

‘That’s nice. You must be pretty strong then.’

‘Yeah, I guess.’

‘And what brings you to the bar tonight?’

‘I just saw that everyone was here.’

‘I love this place. The atmosphere here is really authentic, you know? And the beer is really good.’

‘Yeah.’ David tried another sip. Disgusting. How can the safes drink this stuff? David tried to pretend that it was wine. Wine went down nicely. But wine would attract the beast. Beer it is.

‘What do you think about this weather?’ Amanda continued. Every time she talked a little of her spit made its ballistic arc into David’s drink.

‘Its fine.’

‘Do you have any pets?’

‘No. Do you?’

‘No, my mother won’t ...hey, is that a wolf?’ Amanda’s tone was not scared. Not surprised either. It betrayed only the slightest interest in the predator. That was the clue. It was not a wolf.

It was the beast.

David dared to peek at it. The wolf entered the bar from the door, as a regular patron. The other drinkers, they either commented on it quickly or did not notice. They were safe. This wolf would not attack them. It never did. Not when it was a falcon. Not when it was a hippo. Not when it was a man, or any other form. The beast was here for him.

‘So, uh, Amanda. What do you do for work?’

Evolving Beast

'I work as a guidance counsellor at Prembridge High. I actually have this really...'

David stopped listening. He dared not look at the beast, but he could still try to hear it. He must look like any of the other safes. All the other people. Chairs moving out of the way. People scuttling, giving the beast space to walk. Its claws tapping on the wooden floor with each step. It was getting closer. David's hand tightened on his glass. His mind told him to run. The beast recognised him. Through the surgeries and the clothes and the beer. All was lost. His best bet is to run. No. Stay calm. He took another swig, concentrating with all his force to appear as if he enjoyed it.

'...I just find it really rewarding, you know?'

'Yes. Sounds amazing.'

'Oh, hello there, wolf.'

A snarl.

Teeth sank into David's leg. Pulled. His head hit the ground. Beer soaked his hair and shirt. The wolf pulled back the way it came, dragging him.

'Bye David, it was nice meeting you.'

In the alley next to the *Ye Olde Fox Hunt* the beast let go. David tried to push himself up. His leg did not respond.

'Did you think some beer would fool me?' The beast growled the words. 'You can't escape me, David.' It bit his ear. Then his arm. Then his thigh.

David was accustomed to this pain.

*

At 7:42, the radio played the old Romanian folk song. The one it had played every today since David could remember. The plan failed again. David had long ago stopped counting how many times the beast had gotten him. It was a fruitless endeavour. The beast found him every time. He tried everything. He went abroad, he hid in the sewers, he changed everything about his body. The beast found him. This curse, no gypsy or witch cast. One day the beast appeared. It killed him. And he woke up on the same day.

Take it easy today. In the bathroom mirror he thought to himself what he wanted to do. He had already tried all the best restaurants in town (those that don't require a booking). Also all the best prostitutes. He had also rented every movie from every video rental shop. Books were the last distraction left.

As he did every day, he fetched all of his grandmother's heirlooms and went to pawn them off. Over twenty thousand for the lot. David knew for each piece how to get the most from the pawnbroker. If he was into stocks, he could spend that money and become a millionaire today, but not have the time to spend it. The beast struck around six each day. Enough time to find a book and start it.

The metropolitan library was an architectural enigma. The façade was brutalist concrete with steel arabesques. The interior featured the opposite. Flowing eggshell passageways climbing and descending. Carpeted floors. Wooden book shelves. The light was mostly natural from the skylight assisted by strategic mirrors. It was a winding maze that a man could easily get lost in. A man, but not the beast. In the form of a python it chased him when he tried to hide here, and smothered him.

Unintentionally David found himself in the photography section. Here he searched for the right nose, right nails, right hair, right body, to blend into the safe population. During the first few attempts the beast faltered. It came, searched, sniffed, took its time, finding him after minutes instead of seconds. That was the last bit of hope David had. He needed to convince the beast that he was of the safes. Then he would be free.

No, David. Relax this time. He moved to the fiction section.

'Can I help you?' A librarian said. 'Are you looking for something in particular?' She had thin blonde hair, a wrinkled face, and wore a flowery blouse.

'I don't know actually. Just something to pass the time.'

'Do you have a favourite genre? Or author?'

'It's been a while since I have read anything. What do you do when you don't know what to read?'

'Well, I have this game. I look for an author or book with my name, and then start from there. If I have already read it, then I move a few books to my left, or think of a

friend's name.'

'Okay. What's your name?'

'I'm Grace, but that won't work. What's yours?'

'David.'

'David? I don't remember any book by a David. Let me look it up.' She quietly began typing away into the library's search engine, 'That is odd. I can't seem to find anything. Did I spell it right?'

'Yes. I'll just go have a look at myself.'

He went down the row marked B-E, Bertram, Cormac, Dallton, Date, Debbie, Donovan, Earvin. No David. He thought back. He was the only David in his class. And the only one in the bank where he worked. Neither of his parents, nor his cousins, aunts, uncles. He was the only David. Is that it?

He went back to the librarian, 'Are you absolutely sure that you can't find anything with my name on it?'

'Why, yes.'

'Thank you, thank you, thank you.' At that moment, the old librarian looked that much more beautiful than Amanda. A clock behind her showed that it was half past twelve. Too late to accomplish much today. But tomorrow.

David was eating carbonara in *Vincenzo's* when the beast, in the shape of a hawk, flew in. It pecked at his eyes, and when he was blind pierced his stomach to eat out his liver. David laughed. This would be the last time.

*

The line moved slowly at the courthouse. This was David's third attempt at changing his name. The last two days he spent learning where to go and how to fill out all of the forms he needed. Those were two more deaths he suffered.

Today he would succeed. All three forms, the pink, the yellow, and the white, have been filled out with black pen. No question was left unanswered. He wrote all of the answers

in capital letters, making them so much easier to read. And in his pocket he stored the exact amount, fifty-five dollars, to pay the clerk to make it official. He had already gone through all of the bodily changes he had done in previous attempts. At the end of this day, he would be a completely new man, a safe.

'How can I help you sir?' Asked the clerk.

'I am here to change my name.'

'That requires...'

'Here.'

'Ah, is this your first time?'

'Yes.'

'This will cost you...'

'All here.'

The clerk, in his black vest and bow tie, his hair combed back and slick with pomade, was taken aback. David slid the money into the metal bowl under the window.

'I will just take these to the judge. You can wait here, it should take only a few minutes.'

The watch showed ten minutes to six. David tapped his foot and looked around. The marble columns with gold leaf inlays supported the ceiling. The safes behind him all looked content to wait. Why shouldn't they? No beast was chasing them.

Five minutes passed. The clerk had yet to return. Soon the beast would attempt to strike. What if the judge was ill today? Or had gone home early? What if there was some problem in his application? Breathe. There was always tomorrow. David turned around again. People watching. It was a way to distract himself.

In the door of the courthouse stood a man. Man was the only word fit to describe him, as aside from that his features were inconstant. At first he wore a grey uniform with black boots and a grey cap. He carried a pistol. A blink later he wore a checkered robe and was armed with a club.

It was the beast. The beast in the form of man.

It searched for David. Looked around the safes. David stared at the clerks window.

He concentrated deeply, willing him back with the news.

‘Oh excuse me. Were you here first?’ From behind.

‘Go right ahead, I have plenty of time,’ another voice.

‘If you must.’

The beast was passing by the safes in the line. Each let it ahead. They never protected David. Not one of them ever stood up for him. He hated them. The beast was coming closer. It would kill him. They did not care.

‘Come on.’ David slammed his fist at the counter. Fear urged him to turn back, to see. Discipline held him steady. Don’t give the beast any clues now.

‘All done, Kurt. Enjoy your new name.’

‘What?’

The clerk appeared. He returned the forms, all signed. ‘You wrote Kurt. That was the name you wanted, correct?’

‘Yes.’ He turned around. A bald man in a dark suit stood five places behind him in line, looking around. Then a man in plate armour carrying a sword stepped out of the line, heading to the left. The beast left to the tax claims hall. ‘Yes. Thank you, thank you, thank you.’ If it was not for the glass, David, Kurt, would have kissed the clerk.

‘You’re very welcome. Now please let the next person in.’

Outside the courtroom the air felt fresher than it ever had. The sunset behind the skyscrapers glowed with hope.

Kurt raised his hand, a taxi stopped. He would celebrate. Go to his favourite restaurant. Book the nicest hotel.

A hand grabbed his shoulder. It pulled him back. Kurt landed on his rear. A fist to the face threw his head to the pavement. A man, dressed in Roman armour, carrying a gladius on his hip, knelt above him, and placed his hands on his throat.

‘Changing your name won’t hide you David. Neither will changing your face. Or your clothes, or your habits. I will always find you. Because you can’t change who you really are. I will always know you. I will always know your soul.’

David’s lungs burned. He tried to scream, but nothing came out. People on the

street walked around them. The lights dimmed.

*

At 7:42, the radio played the old Romanian folk song...

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