That Summer by Aileen La Tourette: second prize in the Writeabridge poetry competition 2017

By Aileen La Tourette on February 20, 2018 in Poetry

That Summer

We're lucky we're not stuck in sweaty New York City
like the fathers in their summer suits are every day
and the Fresh Air Fund kids in their giveaway t-shirts
who come down in buses and never get to stay.

We're so lucky, stuck on our mothers' quiet beach
up by the bridge, stuck not being a teenager yet
when everything will change. We get luckier every day,
when we can't go to the movies and see Sandra Dee

– we already know she gets pregnant like my mother
but she's much cuter and a beach ball doesn't clip
her stomach on the beach and make her freak out
(though we don't say that yet) because of the other baby

– three days after Christmas, like the ones Herod killed
a thousand years ago. It takes a long time to get over stuff.
We stay in till our lips turn blue like his. On rainy days,
We stay in till our lips turn blue like his. On rainy days,
we read magazines at Hendershott's till we get chased.

We sneak down to First Street Beach where the teenagers
lie on dark green army blankets listening to transistors
and making out. First Street is by the boardwalk where
hamburgers sizzling on the griddles fill your mouth with spit.

The mothers wait for weekends when the men come down
to drive across the bridge to Somers Point, which isn’t dry.
Too old for dolls, we buy them anyway and then it happens,
the thing they’d lock us up in padded cells for, strapped
in padded jackets: the rubber baby dolls with plastic bottles
stuck in little holes between their stuck-together lips, they
start to twitch. Linda says: _I put her on her back and when_
_I went to get her, she was on her stomach_. We never catch them

rolling over, spitting jets of curdled milk, wetting their diapers.
(In this world there is no shit). We whisper _She soaked herself_
_right through, next thing she’ll have a rash_, mop, sigh, live
in a bubble like Revival tents down the coast where Billy Graham

gets them going for Jesus. He has nothing on us as we climb
out of the waves we’ve surfed to body temperature and walk off,
leaving the mothers smiling in the sun behind us, thinking
we’re headed wistfully to First Street, then double back, fast,

along the hot, hot concrete to the house where rubber babies wait,
– we hear their baby sobs as we get close, and start to run,
desperate to touch and change and feed and cuddle them and feel
the strange electric summer when our dolls are turning real.
–

_That Summer_ won second prize in the Writeabridge poetry competition 2017.

Aileen La Tourette has published two volumes of poetry with Headland, ‘Downward Mobility’ and ‘Touching Base’, and four novels; two with Virago, one with Ilura Press (Aust) and one with Caliband (UK). The last, ‘The Oldest Girl’ was published in 2011, the year she retired from lecturing in Creative Writing at Liverpool John Moores University.
Her poem ‘The Diving Horse’ won the Live Canon International Poetry Competition in 2016. She facilitates a lovely poetry group at Mind in Birkenhead, and in 2015 she completed a qualification as a poetry therapy practitioner. This involves bringing poems to bear on whatever/wherever people may be and seeing how they/we respond; often, not always, people write ‘back’ to the poems.

In That Dream I Became A Stain In My Own House by Connor Frew: winner of the Writeabridge poetry competition 2017

I dreamt that I was bitten by venomous snakes

The first was a cottonmouth,
In my living room

The second a black mamba,
In my parents’ bedroom

In that dream I became a stain in my own house,
A rejected organ

My parents watched crime television specials
In place of the news

In That Dream I Became A Stain In My Own House won first prize in the Writeabridge poetry competition 2017.

Connor Frew is an artist and writer currently living and working in Austin, Texas, where he is in his fifth year pursuing a BFA in Studio Art and a BA in Art History. He is a Texas Exes Forty Acres Scholar and a 2015-16 recipient of the Susan Vaughan Foundation Endowed Scholarship in Art and Art History. His works and writings have been shown at the MOM Gallery and Dude Ranch in Austin, TX; the Barrett Art Center in Poughkeepsie, NY; and at the 2016 Unnoticed Art Festival in Nijmegen, the Netherlands. Additional work has been published in anthologies by the University of Texas’ Analecta Journal and El Aleph Magazine.
Chapter 4: A Country at War

We were tired and hungry, my sister Hannah and I, as we stood waiting in Littleport Village Hall, waiting to be chosen by someone, anyone.

'Don't snivel,' Hannah said. 'No-one will take us in if they see you crying.' She pushed my hand away. 'You're too old to hold hands Abby, and anyhow your hands are always wet and sticky.'

'Operation Pied Piper', the plan for the evacuation of children from areas likely to be bombed, was in place long before World War 2 was declared. People in safe areas with spare bedrooms were urged to take in evacuees. They would be paid 10/6d a week for the first child and 8/6d for each subsequent child. Nearly a million children were evacuated on Friday September 1st, 1939. London railway stations were packed with children and whole trains were commandeered.

Parents had been given a list of clothing to pack. Girls needed 1 spare vest, 1 pair of knickers, 1 petticoat, 1 slip, 1 blouse, 1 cardigan, a coat or Mackintosh, nightwear, a comb, towel, soap, face-cloth, boots or shoes and plimsolls.

Hannah hadn't yet started at the local grammar school, Central Foundation School for Girls, so she came with me to my school, Jews Free Junior School. She carried the brown cardboard suitcase we shared. Our teachers marched us to Liverpool Street station and onto the train to Littleport. Many mothers and a few fathers came to the station with their children. Hannah and I were alone.

'You're old enough to go on your own,' my mother said. 'I've put a stamped and addressed postcard in your case for you to send me your address as soon as you're settled.'

I was seven, nearly eight and Hannah was thirteen. She wore her new school uniform and I was in my dark green skirt and jumper and my navy serge coat, the one with the collar that rubbed. Our gas masks in their square brown boxes hung on tapes around our necks and we had identity labels printed with our names and evacuee numbers tied through our buttonholes.

We waited and waited. Maybe no-one wanted to take in two sisters from the East End of London. Then, when we were beginning to dread that no-one would ever choose us, a young couple beckoned us over. The husband, a big man with a bushy red beard, lowered the tail-gate of an open-bed lorry and put in our suitcase.

'Jump in girls. The farm's only a couple of miles from here. You can sit on those potato sacks. Don't mind the straw. It's this year's and quite clean.'

We clung to the side of the lorry as he hurtled through the narrow country lanes. Empty fields stretched for miles, right up to the horizon. The harvest had been gathered in, and most of the fields were brown, though the verges were still green. Ripe purple blackberries hung from brambles at the side of the road.

They ushered us in to a large brick-built farmhouse. It was completely surrounded by fields and there were no other houses in sight. Back home in Petticoat Lane, there were tightly packed buildings wherever you looked.

We had a fried egg on toast for tea and at 7.30 they shooed us off to bed in a little attic bedroom. Horses snuffled in a nearby field and there was a herd of cows in the distance. I was scared when I heard an owl hooting. I crept closer to Hannah and pulled the blankets over my head. When dawn came, the birds woke us. It was so noisy and different.

After porridge for breakfast, they took us in their lorry back to the Village Hall. We were to spend the day there with the other evacuees from our school. The farmer and his wife were going off to a wedding.

'What's that horrible smell?' Hannah asked the farmer, as we climbed into the lorry.

'Don't worry your little head, miss. It's only Fred's piggeries.'

I hoped no-one would expect us to eat pork. Jews weren't allowed. We'd been taught that pigs were filthy animals, non-Kosher, trai̇fe: Shabbat, so we had a short service, lunch and some games. After tea, we were sent back to our billets.

One of the teachers pointed out the way.
The farm is straight along that road. They said you can’t miss it.

We trudged back to the farmhouse and knocked on the door but no-one answered. We went around the back but the back door was locked. We peeped into the kitchen but no-one was there. As the blood-red sunset gave way to night, we cowered in a corner of the porch away from the huge Alsatian that strained at his chain, trying to get at us, snapping and barking. We were terrified, alone in that vast expanse.

Finally, the farmer and his wife came home.

'Sorry we’re late. We forgot all about you.'

They gave us milk and biscuits, and sent us up to bed.

The next day the farmer’s wife said it wouldn’t work.

'We can’t be baby-sitting you every night. You’re going to have to stay with my mother. She lives in the village and she’ll take you in.'

Once again, we climbed into the back of the lorry. They didn’t talk to us or smile. We never knew their names.

Mrs Hopwood, a tiny white-haired woman, not quite as tall as Hannah, was waiting at the door of her stone cottage. She had bright blue eyes, lots of wrinkles and a big smile.

'Come in. Come in,' she said, giving Hannah and me a hug. 'I’ll show you around. My little cottage is tiny compared with the farmhouse.'

On the ground floor at the front there was a parlour. At the back, there was a kitchen and a pocket-sized garden with an outside toilet at the far end. Butterflies hovered over borders ablaze with colour. The lawn was smooth and bright green. We could smell newly cut grass.

On the first floor, there were two bedrooms. Mrs Hopwood took us into the front bedroom.

'This will be your room, my dears. I’ve no need for it now that Mr Hopwood has passed away.'

A big brass double bed, a tall mahogany wardrobe and a dressing table crowded the room. A porcelain bowl with a border of roses and a large ewer stood on the dressing table, while a matching chamber pot peeped out from under the bed. The wallpaper was pale pink and decorated with tiny roses. It was all lovely and cosy.

'We don’t have a bathroom, my dears. I still use my tin bath. We’ll have a big coal fire going in the kitchen, and you’ll be warm as toast. You can leave your things for now. Come on down and we’ll have a bite to eat.'

We had scones still warm from the oven, as much butter as we liked, strawberry jam and strong sweet tea. When we’d eaten all the scones, Mrs Hopwood wiped the crumbs and jam off my face with a damp flannel.

'There now,' she said. 'That’s better, isn’t it?'

She took us over to a large sepia photograph on the wall. There were two rows of children with a man and a woman in the centre. She pointed to the man with a long white beard.

'That’s the late Mr Hopwood, God Rest His Soul, with his hand on my shoulder, and there are all the children – had 22 and raised 19. We had to eat in shifts, we did. There was never enough room for us all to sit down at once, save at Christmas, when we all squeezed up.'

I’d never heard of anyone having that many children. *The Old Woman who lived in a Shoe*, popped into my head.

There was an old woman who lived in a shoe,

*She had so many children she didn’t know what to do:*

*She gave them some broth without any bread:*

*She whipped them all soundly and put them to bed.*

I smiled at my thoughts. Hannah dug me in the ribs.

'Don’t be rude. What are you laughing at?'

'Nothing,' I said. 'That hurt.'

I couldn’t imagine Mrs Hopwood whipping her children or not giving them any bread.

When it was bedtime, Hannah and I snuggled up underneath the patchwork eiderdown and were soon fast asleep.

The wail of an air raid siren woke us up. We jumped out of bed, found our gas-masks and pulled them on. We were sure we were about to
The wail of an air raid siren woke us up. We jumped out of bed, found our gas-masks and pulled them on. We were sure we were about to be bombed or gassed. Maybe the Germans had already landed.

Mrs Hopwood came to check that we were OK. She stood in the doorway trying to catch her breath. She was laughing so much that tears ran down her face.

'You should see yourselves, my lovelies, looking for all the world like a couple of monsters. It's only a practice. Do take those nasty things off. I'll tuck you in and you must go straight back to sleep. You'll want to be up bright and early in the morning.'

Next day was Sunday September 3rd. Mrs Hopwood had the radio on in the kitchen and we listened to Mr Chamberlain's speech.

'I am speaking to you from the Cabinet Room at 10 Downing Street. This morning the British Ambassador in Berlin handed the German Government a final note stating that, unless we hear from them by 11 o'clock that they were prepared at once to withdraw their troops from Poland, a state of war would exist between us. I have to tell you now that no such undertaking has been received, and that consequently this country is at war with Germany.'

Mrs Hopwood put her arms around us.

'I never thought there'd be another war in my lifetime. Our war was the war to end all wars. Those Jerries. They'll never learn, but we'll beat them again like we did last time.'

The few weeks we spent with Mrs Hopwood were all sunshine. On Fridays, she gave us the money to go to the fish and chip shop on the corner for cod and chips and a bottle of Tizer. I'd never tasted Tizer before. At home, my father sometimes bought me a glass of the red, slightly sour drink, sarsaparilla, in Petticoat Lane market. It tasted like hot, sweet medicine and was supposed to be good for you. Tizer was quite different – fizzy and very sweet. It dyed your tongue bright orange.

Then it was decided that it wasn't sensible for the CFS girls billeted in Littleport and other villages to catch the bus into Ely every day. Hannah and I were to move to Ely. We would be billeted with Mr and Mrs Stonemartin and I would go to the local junior school.

Next day a slight man with a small mousey moustache drew up.

'Have you got them ready?' he asked Mrs Hopwood with a shy smile.

Hannah and I were both crying as we kissed her goodbye and got into Mr Stonemartin's small black car. A wire-haired terrier sat on the front passenger seat and we squeezed into the back.

'Must be nice people, if they have a lovely little dog like that,' Hannah whispered.

Mr Stonemartin turned around.

'She's called Jill. Mrs Stonemartin dotes on her.'

He stopped the car in front of a semi-detached 1930s house, one of a long stretch of similar houses on the outskirts of Ely.

Mrs Stonemartin, a tall thin-faced woman, opened the door. She had a bright red turban tied around her head and wore a patterned wrap-around apron.

'Welcome girls,' she said. 'Take off your shoes in the house, please, and be careful how you walk on our new stair carpet. It was only laid two weeks ago. When you're going up and down, make sure you walk on the sides to save wear.'

The stair carpet had an all over vivid floral design that clashed with the large chrysanthemums on the wallpaper. The glaring colours made me feel ill.

'I'll show you to your bedroom and you can put your things away. Mind you always clear up after yourselves and keep everything tidy. Even our lovely dog, Jill, knows not to make a mess.'

The bedroom had twin beds. I'd never slept on my own. At home, I'd been sleeping in the large double mahogany bed with Hannah after my grandmother died. What if I was scared in the night?

'Hurry up girls and fold your things nicely. Supper will be ready at six. The bathroom is along the hall. Wash your hands properly before you come down.'

By now I was starving. We'd had some paste sandwiches before we left Mrs Hopwood, but that was hours before.

We sat down at the dining table and Mrs Stonemartin brought in four plates and a dish for the dog. She ladled out some cold lumpy mashed potatoes and served each of us two tinned sardines swimming in oil. The look of them made me feel queasy. Sardines on toast sprinkled with lots of lemon juice was my favourite supper, but my mother always poured off the oil when she opened the tin.

For afters, we had cold tinned rice pudding with a tiny spoonful of jam. I was afraid I might be sick, but I managed to eat it.
We had grown to love Mrs Hopwood. She was the exact opposite of our new billet lady, Mrs Stonemartin, and her cooking had been delicious.

'It's seven o'clock. Time for you girls to go to bed. Make sure you brush your teeth and say your prayers before you get into bed. Luckily you have a nice clean carpet to kneel on. I don't suppose you have that where you come from.'

It wasn't something Jews did – kneel down to pray – but I prayed that night that we wouldn't have to stay with the Stonemartins. She was horrible, though Mr Stonemartin tried to be friendly and smiled at us when she wasn't looking.

Next evening, we had cold lumpy mashed potatoes again, this time with a small slice of pale meat that had a thick rim of fat. I hate fat. Although the Chief Rabbi said Jews were allowed to eat non-Kosher meat in wartime, I left the meat on the side of my plate.

'Your sister's eating hers. Why aren't you?'

'I'm not allowed to eat meat,' I said.

'All the more for the rest of us,' Mrs Stonemartin said, putting my meat onto her plate.

The next two months were miserable, but when the Stonemartins went away for a weekend they asked their neighbours to have us from Friday night to Sunday night. Mr and Mrs Johnson were completely different from the Stonemartins. As soon as you walked into their half of the semi-detached house you could feel how warm and friendly they were.

We had shepherd's pie for supper and golden syrup pudding with hot creamy custard for afters. It seemed too rude to ask for seconds, though I would have liked to.

'Come on girls,' Mrs Johnson said. 'Let's get you a nice warm bath and into pyjamas.'

It snowed heavily that weekend. The four of us threw snowballs and we made a huge snowman. We never had enough snow at home to make one. We wished we could stay with the Johnsons forever but on Sunday night we had to go back.

Then I did something awful. I wrote to my parents about how wonderful it had been staying with the Johnsons, and how horrible Mrs Stonemartin was, and left the letter lying on top of the chest of drawers in our bedroom.

Dear Mummy and Daddy

We had a lovely time with Mr and Mrs Johnson. It snowed and we made an enormous snowman. We gave him two pieces of coal for eyes, a carrot for his nose and two little curved sticks for his lips. He looked cold, so Mr Johnson tied a scarf around his neck and put a pipe in his mouth. We wish we could be billeted with them, but they're both teachers and they said they wouldn't be able to take us in permanently. We had to go back to the old sourpuss, Mrs Stonehearted, and her horrid food.

Love to everyone.

Yours sincerely

Abigail Waterman

When we got home after school Mrs Stonemartin was livid.

'That's all the thanks I get, after taking you in, you ungrateful child. Mrs Stonehearted indeed. You can go straight to bed. Don't even think about supper.'

I didn't mind. I hated her food and I was glad not to have to eat it.

My father came to see us two weeks before Christmas.

'Abby, you look like a skeleton. What have you been up to? Aren't you eating?'

'Please take me home, Daddy, please. I hate it here. Mrs Stone-martin is horrible. Mr Stonemartin says she likes Jill, her dog, better than him. If he's sitting in front of the gas fire she makes him move away so that Jill can get warm. He's got some shrapnel in his leg from the trenches, and it leaks nasty yellow stuff. He needs to change the bandages every few days. Mrs Stonemartin said she can't bear to see it and he must do it himself. He knows Hannah is going to be a doctor, so he lets her help him. She doesn't like children. She hates them. Hannah says she only took us in for the money.'

'You'd better come home, Abby, but you should stay here, Hannah. You need to get on with your schooling, now that you've got into grammar school.'

'I'm not staying if Abby's going,' Hannah said. 'But why can't she stay? She's just being stupid about not eating.'

'You can see the state she's in. I won't stop you coming home, if that's what you want, Hannah, but you know it's the wrong thing to do.'
On the train back to London I snuggled up to my father. Hannah ignored me and sat staring out of the window.

'I'm never, ever going to be evacuated again,' I said.

In the New Year, I went to the temporary junior school at Toynbee Hall. It was the time of the so-called Phony War. The bombing hadn't started, and children had begun to trickle back to London. Makeshift classes were set up where there were large enough rooms, but there were no grammar school places. Grammar schools were all still evacuated. As Hannah was now fourteen, she left school. My parents sent her to Pitman's College to learn shorthand and typing. She could become a secretary, like our elder sister, Rebecca. No way could she become a doctor now.

I shivered as I crossed Commercial Road. My hands were like ice. Since I came back from Ely, I couldn't seem to get warm.

'It's because you let yourself get so thin, you silly girl,' my father said. 'We'll have to fatten you up.'

My father left for work at seven in the morning so he couldn't take me to school on my first day.

'Now you've turned eight you're old enough to go on your own,' my mother said when I asked her to take me instead.

I walked up the paved path to Toynbee Hall and pushed as hard as I could, but the door wouldn't give. I knocked and a large smiling woman opened it.

'Come on in, girlie,' she said. 'Are you for the juniors?'

When I nodded, she rubbed my cold hands in her large warm ones, and took me upstairs to a room full of children. They sat at small wooden tables with separate chairs, not at all like the school desks I was used to.

The teacher standing at the front came over.

'You must be Abby Waterman. We've been expecting you. Say "Hello" to Abby, children.'

Some muttered 'Hello', while a boy near the front put his hand over the side of his mouth so the teacher couldn't see, and poked out his tongue.

'You can sit in that empty place there,' the teacher said. She pointed to a table in the middle of the room.

They were doing long multiplication and division which I had learned in Ely. I found the sums quite easy and put my hand up a couple of times with the answers.

When the bell went, I hoped it was break time so I could go to the toilet, but it was Composition.

'I want you all to write about your last birthday.'

I was in Ely for my birthday and Mrs Stonemartin was especially horrid. My father had sent me a big bar of chocolate – his ration for a month – and Mrs Stonemartin took it away. She said it was bad for children's teeth. Mr Stonemartin secretly gave me a shilling. He told me to hide it and not to tell. I bought a tiny teddy in the little shop near school and took it with me everywhere. I hid it in the pocket in my knicker leg.

I sat my teddy on the table in front of me and started to write.

'My last birthday …' I began.

In Ely, you had to wait until the mid-morning break to go to the toilet, but I had no idea whether that would be soon or not. I carried on writing for a bit, but I got really upset thinking about Ely and Mrs Stonemartin and everything. I squeezed my legs together, ever so hard, but it was no use. A warm trickle ran down my leg onto the floor.

'Please Miss,' said the boy who'd stuck out his tongue at me. 'The new girl's done a wee-wee.'

Everyone turned round to look and some of them giggled. I wanted to disappear.

The teacher put her arm around my shoulders.

'Don't worry, my dear. Sally can take you to the nurse. She'll find you some nice dry underwear. It's hard – your first day at school.'

The worst thing was going home afterwards. I knew if I told, I'd get a slap for disgracing myself, so I slipped into the girls' toilet and put my wet knickers back on and stuffed the school knickers into my coat pocket. I'd give them back next day.

When I got home I sat down very carefully so the wet part didn't soak my skirt. There was a space under our bed, so I spread my knickers
We were playing tag during morning break when some of the big girls came over and started lifting our skirts. I ran away fast as I could, straight into the corner of a brick wall. For a moment, I couldn’t understand what had happened. The other girls in my class gathered round me.

‘Your forehead’s all bloody,’ said Sally, who had taken me to get dry knickers. ‘Better go and see nurse.’

I got out my handkerchief and dabbed at my head.

‘It’s nothing,’ I said.

I didn’t want to make a fuss and get sent home, but all afternoon my head hurt. I was wearing the new brown leather gloves my father had bought me. As I walked home I took off my right glove and held it over my forehead. That way no-one could see the blood and ask me about it.

By the time I climbed up to our tenement on the third floor, I felt sick and dizzy. I just about got in before I was sick. Luckily, I made it as far as the kitchen sink.

‘What have you been up to?’ my mother asked.

I was used to being told off, or even slapped, for falling over. I pulled my hair over the sore place on my forehead.

‘It’s nothing,’ I said, but she lifted my fringe.

‘Been playing rough games again, have you? How many times have I told you to be careful?’

Soon I was sick again and very dizzy indeed. My father had come home by then.

‘You poor wounded soldier,’ he said. ‘We’d better get the doctor.’

Dr Wilson asked me what had happened. I told him we’d been playing tag and I’d tried to get away from the big girls trying to lift my skirt.

‘I’ve told her so many times to be careful. She shouldn’t play with the big girls,’ my mother said.

She didn’t understand. They broke into our games and chased us. She wouldn’t listen.

‘Abby’s got a bit of a concussion,’ Dr Wilson said. ‘Keep her off for a couple of days. If she gets worse call me again.’

I didn’t get worse, and I went back to school two days later. I made up my mind that if I hurt myself I would never tell my mother. It was no use expecting her to kiss it make it better, maybe my father, and maybe Hannah, but never her.

Maybe she wasn’t my real mother. Maybe I was adopted or I was a changeling like in the stories.
Skin by Alexandra Viets

By Alexandra Viets on January 24, 2018 in Articles

Ah, Maman! There are your alligator and crocodile shoes, lined up outside the wardrobe.

Once in a while, when my mother was in the mood, she showed me the difference in skins, running her expert finger over the striations of black and brown, streaks of zigzagging pattern and the tiny squares of leathery crocodile and alligator skins on her shoes. Skins that must have come by the truckload, tough hides carved away from the bodies of India’s river reptiles.

Anytime of day, I could peer through my pink curtains in our New Delhi house and see my mother’s crocodile and alligator shoes, placed on the concrete floor next to her wardrobe. Lying in my bed, I spent hours in this pursuit, bathed by the bright sunlight that flooded the hallway and filtered through my curtains. I wondered if this was the way crocodiles bathed.

On more occasions than I can count, my mother took me to the cramped and airless crocodile shop deep inside New Delhi’s Khan Market where the shoes originated and where a Mr. Farid, the shop’s jaunty young shoemaker, was an alligator and crocodile expert.

‘Ferra-ga-mo,’ my mother would say slowly and with emphasis to Mr. Farid, showing him a photograph from the NYT or the latest Italian fashion magazine.

‘Sal-Va-Tore FerraGamo,’ she would repeat again with a perfect Italian accent. Then Mr. Farid would study the photo closely, eyes boring in, fingers moving deftly in the air as if to show my mother he could mimic the shoe’s elegant structure in his mind.

‘Madam…’ he would concede as he finished his mental drawing, nodding generously to my beautiful mother, whose presence in the shop always caused something of a stir. Like clockwork, a young boy would appear out of nowhere with a tray of steaming chai and offer one to my mother. Dressed in one of her freshly ironed salwar kameez, my mother wore large black sunglasses, pushed back to hold her auburn hair.

‘Madam must bring her friends also,’ Mr. Farid would skillfully encourage at just the right moment with a wave of his head.

During these sessions, I sat at the back of Mr. Farid’s shop in what must have been the only chair. It was made of a heavy wood, mahogany perhaps, a seat of wicker that sunk precipitously low in the middle from years of wear. The shop had a large black fan on the counter and was rank with the smell of glue and raw leather. Once or twice I saw an elderly man pressed into a corner of the wall as he knelt for prayer.

In my chair, to pass the time, I watched shavings of light from the shuttered window illuminate specs of dust that rose from the floor like armies, as the fan made its slow but steady rotation. A metallic creak signaled the return journey as the fan gradually pointed its breeze to where I was sitting. Then I stared at the large slabs of tawny coloured leather piled in the corner, raw hide on one side and reptile skin on the other.

It seemed to me I sat for hours, watching the dust rise and fall, sitting so long that the chair patterns eventually imprinted themselves on the flesh of my thighs, leaving small reddish marks of repeating octagonal shapes that I could still see when I returned home. Only occasionally would my mother glance back at me, her face flush with pleasure as she held up a piece of alligator or crocodile, the skins taut and gleaming, a swatch of blackish-brown with a psychedelic reptile design, as shiny as if they had been recently polished by Mr. Farid himself.

More than once, when I ventured to ask where the crocodiles for her shoes came from, my mother rolled her eyes and shrugged nonchalantly, as if crocodiles or alligators were hardly a concern. There were farms, she said. She had even seen one in Mahabalipuram. Crocodile attacks of villagers in India were rampant, she added, I had only to open the newspaper to read about it.

Seeing my quiet dismay, she would cry out, ‘Oh my goodness, they’re only crocodiles!’ Then, to make a point, she would wave her hand in front of her nose, ‘and what about that chicken of yours,’ reminding me of my love affair with a baby chick I hatched from an incubator, keeping it in my room until the stench became so unbearable that the (then) large chicken was dispatched to a ‘farm’.

My mother also recalled the many afternoons I spent creating a homeless shelter for a group of stray dogs at a nearby construction site, an activity which had ended badly, being bitten and suffering through a series of rabies shots in my stomach. Then my mother lifted back her head in mock exhaustion and signaled to the pile of skins lying across Mr. Farid’s counter, as if, at the least, all this exposure to reptiles might toughen me up.

After what seemed like hours in the crocodile shop, my mother would grab my hand and out we would go into the sun-soaked smells of the street; air drenched with the sweetly-sour scent of rotting food, the faint but unmistakable mix of faeces from the drains and nullahs along the way and frying onions. As I turned to try and find the origin of the onions, I could not. It was lunch, being prepared in a tiny room above the street; air drenched with the sweetly-sour scent of rotting food, the faint but unmistakable mix of faeces from the drains and nullahs along the way and frying onions. As I tried to turn and find the origin of the onions, I could not. It was lunch, being prepared in a tiny room above us, on a street corner, in a cart – somewhere nearby.

Effusiveness came when the crocodile shoes were delivered a few weeks later in a wonderfully elaborate package and placed outside the wardrobe, ready for my mother to wear. As I peered out at her through my pink curtains, she beckoned for me to come and see.

‘Look!’ she cried out, as she lifted a bare leg with a crocodile shoe at the end, tossing her head of hair and ‘modeling’ for me, parading down the hallway. ‘This is haute couture! Yves St. Laurent, Salvatore Ferragamo.’
How could I not be intoxicated by this mother? Yet, part of me yearned for a mother who was accent-less and American, a mother who knew about things like peanut-butter sandwiches. A mother with a family in Ohio or Minnesota who would send nice packages to the grandchildren.

'This is what the women of Paris and Rome are wearing,' she exclaimed, puckering her lips. 'Just look in the magazines!' she shouted happily, coming closer to make sure I heard through the glass window that separated my bedroom from the hallway where she stood.

Perhaps it was then, as she turned away, lost in the reverie of her new shoes, that I began to understand a little how my mother was in pursuit of the unparalleled beauty she saw reflected in those magazines, as if she were herself reaching into the darkness of that shoe shop and like the shoemaker, hammering and cutting and pasting onto herself an image of glamour and happiness, the same way Mr. Farid was constructing her crocodile shoes.

If there was any further hint about the role of shoes in her life, that came years later when my mother's feet began to hurt and the language of illness hinted at meanings far beyond a sore heel or a bunion rubbing against the instep of a shoe. Her feet required soaks and salt baths, lotions that promised to take away foot soreness, stockings to shore up painful veins and to decrease swelling. More and more, her legs needed to be propped up, as if gravity itself, the immense weight of life, were pulling her down. Her feet and legs became the subject of much discussion; they were worried over, tended to, her bunions filed down aggressively with an emery board, as if her feet and its offshoots contained bundles of memory that were pushing outwards. Her feet elicited acute sighs of pain, sometimes searing, which seemed, at the time, disproportional to any obvious cause.

Yet all too soon, within the next decade of my life, when I was in my twenties, the elegant alligator and crocodile shoes had suddenly become something of the past. Relics, they were relegated to the back of her wardrobe, deemed no longer useable. My mother, a Cinderella searching for her glass slipper in the shop of Mr. Farida, found that the shoe and its accompanying story of transformation was no longer a fit as the war began to seep through her body in ways that could not be contained. When I asked after the shoes, my mother shrugged, as if she had forgotten and could not understand my persistence in asking.

Over the years, thinking back, there may have been reference to a 'walk,' or a 'march,' those words said in a certain way, a different tone, the way I had often heard phrases and fragments, a lexicon that slipped out unseen, a vocabulary I had collected, stored away, and puzzled over, but if there was, I had now long forgotten. In the years of my mother's decline from cancer, I had tended to her legs, washing and wrapping the black cancerous wounds that had sprung from her body like a fourteenth century plague, unimaginable to me and to her. Oh, how far away the days of Mr. Farid's Crocodile shop seemed! The mother who had insisted on having her feet adorned in nothing less than haute couture, hand-made shoes from samples of Ferragamo and Bally, now could only wear the softest canvas shoes, Mary Jane's, shoes that barely pressed against her tender skin.

This ritual bathing took place in the back rooms of a Bed and Breakfast in Virginia, where my mother was living during a renovation that was being done on our house. It was to be yet another holding spot in a lifetime of temporary homes. There was my mother, perched on the hills of the Virginia countryside, a place to which she had no real affiliation but absorbed, breathing in its history and landscape, with the same fierce determination that she had become accustomed to doing her entire life.

Mike, a young black man from the nearby town, became my mother's close friend during this period and her way forward. A local hire, Mike came regularly to cut the grass and clean the pool for the owner of the B&B. Mike was as tall and strong as my mother was now frail. Over the first few weeks, my mother began to talk endlessly about Mike, his family, his struggles to get his high school diploma, the history that Mike represented—a history of overcoming slavery in a nearby town where a settlement of tiny slave houses still existed less than a mile away. My mother threw herself into Mike's past and present, gaining strength from his stories, taking him on as a student, suggesting material to read, plying him with clippings from the newspaper, finding courses for him to take. She regaled Mike with stories of her travels and her refugee past like Schererezade, the stories masking and transforming the reality at hand. They spent hours together, my mother and Mike, their shadows crossing in the garden under the hot sun, these two great bodies of history comingling as my mother let Mike gather her in his arms.

'Man,' Mike would say to me, shaking his head in amazement.

Later on, they shared meals together, Mike bringing home-cooked food for my mother to taste and music to listen to. A few times he bundled her into the front seat of his car, taking extreme care, as if she were a broken bird, and driving her a few miles down the road to see where he had come from and to meet some of his family. I remember seeing my mother's hand on one of these trips, the once beautiful almond hand, now thin and spindly, grasping the window frame as she gingerly eased herself into the car seat. It occurred to me more than once how ironic it would be if Mike knew more about my mother's life than any of us. Yet, the intimate friendship forged that spring was an echo of encounters with outsiders that had come before; the Polish Count in Tanzania, Abdul Haq, the jeweler in India, Cornelia Boursan, the obstetrician in Romania. It was as if these people were a protected landmass, a horizon shimmering in the distance. As if she recognised qualities in each of them that allowed her to reveal something of herself. It was a reaching out and roping in of solitude followed by something that was deeply human and regenerative, an exchange that had survival as its guide.

As I watched my mother with Mike, I sometimes wondered if I was seeing glimpses of Maria Przytula, the young Polish girl before the war, the girl with carrot-colored hair whose youth had been eviscerated by the events of 1939. I wondered if childhood was seeping in. For in these bracketed moments with Mike, there was an undeniable shift in posture, a release from the tightly calibrated grip of the past, as if the molecules of air had regrouped. Maybe in the face of life-threatening illness, my mother allowed herself the luxury of an abandon that was unashamedly girlish.
I wondered, too, how much Mike understood that this tremendous outpouring of emotion and experience expressed on his behalf was one of my mother’s final works, an effort to instill her life experience in him, to affect him, and ultimately to transport him.

Through those months, we tried to ignore the sores, we talked over them, covering them with soft cloths and in the warm, spring-almost-summer air, it seemed possible to do. The Polonia trees were about to bloom, there were frogs starting to croak in the ponds and the weeping willows were unfurling, bending down alongside the windows. And here, in the back of this B&B, where sometimes people arrived to stay and sometimes they didn’t, my mother fought her cancer. Buckets of warm water as I sponged, gently, water filled with ointments and oils, trying to ease her sores and cracking skin, skin that had become like the crocodile and alligator hides she once coveted. Several times a week, an ambulance from the local hospital would arrive at the back door and I would climb in after my mother, the two of us together, as the vehicle hurtled down the road towards radiation treatments.

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Alexandra Anastasia Viets is a writer/screenwriter and journalist whose work focuses on women and dislocation. Her first feature-length screenplay, *Cotton Mary*, was produced by Merchant Ivory. Her most recent screenplay is an adaptation of the award-winning novel, “Ask Me No Questions,” about a Bangladeshi family fleeing NYC post 9/11. Awarded a fellowship by the National Endowment for Humanities in South Asian history and art, she has taught creative writing workshops in India and the Middle East, focusing on personal biography. She is currently working on a memoir entitled, *Maryna. After the War*, about her mother’s role in the Polish Underground Army.

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‘Daw’ In The Snow by Alan Remfry

By Alan Remfry on January 22, 2018 in Poetry

‘Daw’ In The Snow

A bird fell to earth.
Black crack in the snow.
Moving sharp. Moving slow.
Beating out a sky torn track.

It is still, like cold air.
Coddled under a tree, hiding in a shallow scrape, of its own making.

Black folds white, folds back.
Pressed to the earth.
Waiting. Ice feather forms.
Once seized. Helpless.

It protests, slight shivers.
Opens a silvered beak,
rasps in harsh protest,
rattles its black tongue.

Confined in a bird sized space.
Wingtips brush the very edge.
A large brown box,
of our own making.

We tend to this stranger.
Stale bread and warm water,
may sustain it.
 Alone, in the garden shed.

A night of edgy bird sleep.
Inside that silence space,
twinned with darkness.
In our ‘Daw’ dreams, it does exist.

An urgent phone call.
We make arrangements.
The weather clears. A Van arrives,
for the brown box with the bird in it.

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Alan Remfry lives in Durham. He writes crime novels, short stories, plays and poetry for adults and children. Presently, he is working on drafting a series of children’s fantasy novels, while researching background ideas for new plays and scripts. He enjoys going to the cinema, baroque music and hill walking. Daw in The Snow was shortlisted for the Wasafiri New Writing Prize 2016 in the Poetry category.
Prior to opening Bandi’s *The Accusation*, I was already filled with immense curiosity and presentiment, the weight of the author’s precarious position pressing heavily upon me. Written in North Korea between 1989 and 1995 during the Kim Il-sung era by a writer who draws from his perspective as a worker, the original handwritten manuscript is a vital artefact of the Republic’s hidden history. Unable to publish under his own name, Bandi is a pseudonym meaning ‘firefly’, which aptly symbolises both illumination and fragility: the act of revealing ordinary acts of life that are required by North Korean law to remain in darkness, puts the writer in a very dangerous position. Smuggled out of North Korea and into China, and subsequently published in South Korea, these seven stories are now available in English, a valuable and rare volume of samizdat literature that is both bitingly humorous and achingly tragic.

The tensions of North Korea’s political situation are transmitted onto every page of the volume. First-hand narratives, intimate diaries, and official declarations detail the ways in which ordinary life is controlled and transformed by the power of the Great Leader and his government. The theme of accusation runs throughout, leaving no household, no family, and no individual unexamined. In ‘City of Spectres’, Pyongyang readies for the National Day celebrations, a marvel of organisational acumen that tallies with the publicly broadcast face of North Korea that is associated with lavish shows of military prowess and mass unity. Central protagonist Gyeong-hee, mother of a two-year old son, lives in an apartment facing Kim Il-sung Square, overlooking two huge portraits of Karl Marx and Kim Il-sung, and is accused of ‘neglecting to educate [her] son in the proper revolutionary principles’. In an exquisitely funny chain of episodes that unfold during the festival preparations, it is revealed that due to a rash threat made to keep her son quiet the boy has mistakenly conflated Marx, Kim Il-sung and the fairy tale monster Eobi, who comes for bad children. Every time he sees either of these giant portraits, there is a risk that he will cry out ‘Eobi’, be overheard, and thus reveal the supposed anti–Communist sentiment of his parents. The ridiculousness of the situation escalates as the mother adds contraband curtains to their apartment, which is in plain view at the epicentre of the celebrations, in an attempt to obscure the view of the portraits from the boy.

Similarly characters in other stories are punished or sent mad by the accusations levelled at them: failure to chop down a tree, share food, cultivate crops amidst unprecedented storms, sleep with persons high up in the Communist Party, travel with the correct papers, or weep uncontrollably at the death of the Great Leader all result in extreme penalties. As well as the black humour, which darkly satirises the whims and obsessions of the leadership to exert complete control and to never lose face, the stories are remarkable in their daring outpourings of emotion. In contrast to the regimented and obsequious mass that will turn on a traitor in seconds, each tale reveals the rich emotions, and the gutsy rebelliousness within individuals. The palpable tension generated under the conditions of the regime is exacerbated as the private grief, anger, and violence erupt in thrilling and heart wrenching ways. A man who has believed all his life that the elm tree outside his house symbolises hope and abundance for all his hard work, explodes in a rage, facing officials with an axe and flinging a glass ashtray at his wife. Insults are hurled, betrayal and cruel disappointment abound, real tears are shed and uncontrollable sobs verge on the hysterical.

The wittiest reflection on the performative aspect of North Korean life comes in the form of a young factory worker, Kyeong-hun, who has a very enlightened view of living without freedom. Accused of crimes against the Party – clrowning around, drinking alcohol, and flirting – he defends himself, claiming that while working as a border sentry, his brain ‘had been rotted by the South Korean puppets’ anti-Communist broadcasts that parrot ideas of ‘freedom’. However, it becomes clear in his defence statement that this worker is cleverly using the drills and stage rehearsals required of him as a member of the community to parody the system and use the idea of ‘stage truth’ to make his comrades laugh. The reader is left to unravel the layers of performance required of the townsfolk in order to fake ‘real’ emotion for the Party. Laughter is also a key component to ‘Pandemonium’, where folklore provides the framing device for an encounter with Kim Il-sung that combines magic with oppression, in which a demon uses laughing magic on his slaves to conceal their pain. As well as theatre and marching drills, Bandi’s stories also ruminate on the role of journalism, propaganda, and food production within the Republic. The reader becomes enamished in the intricate twists and turns of the characters as they struggle to remain invisible and undetected in their fallibility. Some of these situations are truly nail-bitingly tense.

The volume as a whole presents a wide-ranging emotional and psychological portrait of North Korea over a time-span that is made to seem curiously modern. Not only do readers understand that the political situation is little changed in the twenty-first century, with one leader merely replaced by another male family member, but the way in which the perspective is shared is refreshingly nuanced. Gender roles and relations are more fluid, with traditional aspects of marriage, labour and domesticity pitted against the individual responsibilities of living inside the Republic. Class and power determine the patterns of sexual harassment, childcare, and privilege in non-expected ways for a Western reader. Ideas are focalised through first person, third person, epistolary, and para-textual narrative segments. Bandi’s energetic and whip-smart prose nudges into the cracks and corners that may be seeing light in English for the first time.
left feeling cold, frostbitten and chafed by the elements and the lack of warmth, and raw from the cumulative affect generated in these tales of struggle and epic sacrifice. In the twenty-first century, we can readily read what Kim Jong-il thought about cinema, consume news from the region filtered through layers and layers of spin, worry about North Korea’s nuclear agenda, and wonder at how and why North Korean athletes will attend the Winter Olympic Games held in South Korea in 2018. Bandi’s wonderful stories create the underworld from which this is all possible. They tell of ordinary yet extraordinary people, who, above everything can laugh for real.

The Accusation: Forbidden Stories from Inside North Korea by Bandi

Felicity Gee is lecturer in World Cinema at the University of Exeter. She is the author of the forthcoming monograph Magic Realism: The Avant-Garde in Exile (Routledge, 2018), and has published on Luis Buñuel, Surrealism and avant-garde film, Japanese and Korean film, and affect theory. Most recently, she was awarded a British Academy grant to conduct archival research in Cuba, on the interdisciplinary work of Alejo Carpentier. Felicity’s research straddles film, art history and literary studies, and her current projects investigate the collaborative work of modernist writers and artists that takes place across and between media.

SmartDog by Maria Hummer

're bought you something,' Duncan said, 'but you can’t love it.'

'Why not?' I asked.

'That’s the rule,' he said, and he lifted a blanket off his surprise for me, a little mechanical dog. Its tail and ears were furry but the legs were metallic and its torso was smooth white plastic. Its laser-point eyes flashed green and blue, and a rubber tongue lolled out of its open grin. The tongue brushed my hand and I recoiled.

'Does it have a name?' I asked.

Duncan leafed through a mini instructions booklet. 'We can call him whatever we want,' he said. 'The default name is Spot, but it looks pretty easy to change.'

Its ears pricked up at the name Spot. I touched them. The dog pawed my finger gently and a little plastic nail caught my skin.

'So it’s a he?' I asked.

More flipping through pages. 'That’s the default setting,' Duncan said. 'If you want a girl, though, we can change it. Just press that button there for three seconds, then release, and then hold for another three seconds.'

The button Duncan spoke of was where the creature’s genitals would have been. My hand hesitated over the spot.

'Never mind,' I said. 'Nature doesn’t let you choose.'

'We’re not talking about nature,' Duncan said. 'It’s like asking what colour phone you want. Should it be Spot the boy, or Spot the girl?'

'Boy,' I said. 'And I’d like to call him Serge.'

'After the musician?'

'After nothing. I like the name Serge.'

'Whatever darling wants,' Duncan said, thumbing a sequence of buttons on the dog’s belly. 'Serge,' he said in the dog’s ear. He looked at me. 'Now you.'

'What?'
'So it recognises both of our voices,' he said. 'Just touch here and say Serge.'

I did. Then Duncan went across the room. 'Here, Serge,' he called, and Serge let out a little bark, almost convincing except for the rasp of binary code in his voice. He ran stiffly, as if woken from a nap, into Duncan's arms.

*

Duncan tried to keep our home filled with living things. He bought me lilies, daffodils, blood roses, strange tropical flowers with petals like feverish tongues. He arranged them in painted vases and old pickle jars, trimming the bottoms of the stems and topping up the tap water with plant food. He brought home sacks of bright oranges, crisp apples and green pomelos and put them in a glass bowl so we could see the colours. He diligently watered our many potted greens, their names long forgotten. He remembered to buy bags of bird seed when we were running low. He brought me little pictures of hedgehogs.

These gifts were presented with a whiff of apology. My acceptance of them was an agreement to forgive. I welcomed life into my home not like a mother, but like an aunt.

One day Duncan wanted to throw away some old flowers – still alive in their cloudy water but admittedly starting to stink – and I wouldn’t let him.

'There’s still a bit of life in them,' I insisted. The petals, though wrinkled, retained their colour.

He was quiet and I thought I had won the flowers an extra day in our flat, but when I returned from buying hand soap ('Kills 99.9% of Bacteria!' its label bragged) I found the vase empty, scrubbed clean and left drying on the dish rack.

The flowers were in the bottom of the bin, wet coffee grounds and tea bags already dropped on top.

Duncan couldn’t understand my fury. We went back and forth for ages, with him repeating that they were just flowers and me trying to explain this need I felt to tend a living thing that would last longer than four days on the kitchen counter.

'Do you want me to go out, buy some new ones?' he asked. 'I think the florist is still open.'

'No,' I said. 'That’s not the point.'

He checked the time on his phone. He did this during fights sometimes, and it drove me mad – but before I could say anything, pick a whole new argument, he said, 'I think I know what to do.'

*

Duncan wanted Serge to sleep in our bedroom. I said, 'does he even need to sleep?'

'It’s what a real dog would do,' said Duncan.

'I thought real dogs sleep in kennels,' I said.

'Not my dog,' said Duncan.

We plugged Serge into the socket at the foot of the bed using a thin cord that attached to its neck. 'So cute,' said Duncan. 'Just like a leash.' We both patted the thing goodnight and climbed into bed.

Duncan was gone instantly, breathing nasally into his pillow, but I couldn’t sleep. I lay there listening to a strange sound coming from the floor, like a whisper.

I climbed out in my bare feet to check on Serge. The sound came from him, a gentle fan in his body to keep the inner hardware cool. I touched his back and his legs shifted, a programmed response. His body was warm to the touch.

*
In the morning I unplugged Serge and he followed me with wagging tail to the kitchen. He watched as I poured grapefruit juice and dropped bread in the toaster. His eyes glowed an anxious yellow and he shifted from paw to paw.

'Duncan,' I called, 'are we supposed to feed it?'

'It's a machine,' came his response from the bedroom.

'It wants something,' I said.

'So scratch its head,' he said. 'Throw a ball. I don't know.'

The thing let out a chalky yip and nudged my shin with its nose. My toast popped up. I buttered and ate it, trying my best to ignore the whimpering machine.

'You don't need anything,' I reminded it. 'What's the problem?'

I bit my toast. Crumbs scattered to the floor. Serge's eyes flashed and he lapped up the stray crumbs with his rubber tongue.

The mail slot in the front door creaked open and shut. Serge ran away to bark at it. On the floor, where his tongue had been lapping, was what looked like a patch of wet. I bent and touched it. It didn't feel like saliva. It was a trick, a sleight of programming. But, still, there were no toast crumbs to be found. Where were they now? In his little computer belly?

I reported this mystery to Kate, my cubicle-mate at work. She looked at me, eyes wide beneath heavy cat-eye swooshes.

'Duncan got you one of those?' she said. 'Why? They're creepy.'

'He's cute,' I said. 'It's nice to have the company.'

'It's not company,' said Kate. 'It's weird.'

Her mobile phone on the desk flashed and she picked it up, swiftly, like you would a crying baby. She tapped the screen with a fingertip and was gone.

I stopped at a grocery store on the way home and bought chicken for dinner and ripe plums for the fruit bowl. I came home, arms full of rustling plastic, slipped off my shoes in the doorway, and stepped square into a warm puddle on the floor.

I ran to grab a paper towel, the last one on the damn roll. The brown cardboard tube sat there, naked and pointless. A mild odour met my nose as I sopped up the mess. It reminded me of urine, but not quite. Sort of like green tea.

Serge trotted in from the bedroom. He put his paws on my legs and tickled my face with his tongue. 'Did you do this?' I asked, pointing at the puddle. Serge's tail tucked between his legs and his eyes turned an embarrassed mauve.

The instruction book said nothing about licking up crumbs or pissing on floors. It only contained vague promises to provide a realistic experience of having a pet. I checked online forums to see if anyone had a problem with their SmartDog peeing on the floor, but all I could find was someone whose dog's battery had leaked.

I coaxed Serge over and opened his tummy to check for leaks. None that I could see. I popped out the battery to check behind. Serge's eyes went dull and his limbs froze. No problems. I stuck the battery back in and for a second he remained still – my heart did a quick, panicked pump – but then he came back to life and started chasing his own tail.

*

At dinner some of Duncan's chicken fell on the floor and he called Serge to clean it up.

'He doesn't have a stomach,' I said.

'He cleaned up your crumbs,' he said. 'Maybe he's got a food disposal function. You know, to be realistic.' He called Serge again but Serge didn't come.

'Is he switched on?' asked Duncan.

'Of course he's switched on,' I said. 'What's the point of having the thing if we're just going to switch it off and on?'

'I don't know,' said Duncan. 'I just figured sometimes you might not have it switched on. You know, to save on battery.'

I left my dinner to check on Serge. I found him in the bedroom, making a nest of dirty socks. He picked them up in his plastic teeth and placed them in the warmest corner of our room, right beside the radiator.
placed them in the warmest corner of our room, right beside the radiator.

'Serge,' I said. He ignored me and curled up in his pile of limp old socks.

'The computer must be malfunctioning,' I said to Duncan. 'He's not recognizing his name.'

Duncan followed me to the bedroom and we took turns calling Serge's name. No reaction. I called the company's help line. They kept me on hold for twenty minutes and I imagined the thousands of other SmartDog owners, each holding a phone to their ear, listening to hold music. Were their dogs identical to mine? Had anyone else chosen the same name? Were they worried about their creature like it was a real pet, or did they approach the situation with objectivity, like the owner of a blender that had stopped working?

When an agent finally picked up and I explained the issue with Serge, I was asked to check that the battery hadn't been accidentally dislodged.

'Oh,' I said. 'I took the battery out earlier today. But I put it right back in.' Then I was told it doesn't matter how quickly I replace the battery – removing it for just a moment resets the dog.

'But what if I have to take it out again?' I asked.

I was told I shouldn't ever remove the battery myself, except in an emergency. But when I tried to find out what sort of emergency, they wouldn't say.

'Rare cases,' I was told. 'You won't have to worry about it. Just call again if you have any questions. We'll advise you.'

I didn't like that the dog had a reset function. It seemed unfair – like Duncan throwing away flowers before they were properly dead. We had to program his name all over again, and he'd forgotten where we kept his box of toys. When I took him to the back garden to play fetch I faked throwing the ball and Serge chased after it, whereas just yesterday he had learned to wait for it to leave my hand first. But other things – the way he curled in my lap while Duncan and I watched TV, or napping in his favorite corner – didn't need to be taught. They were just Serge.

*

We invited some people over. I brewed a big pot of coffee and served it with homemade pumpkin bread. We sat in the living room where the blue sky came in fresh and strong, making us squint.

I called Serge and he delighted everyone by running from hand to outstretched hand, nuzzling their fingers while speakers in his nose generated a sniffing sound. One of the ladies, Claire, had just finished a slice of bread and her fingertips were sweet and greasy. Serge licked her hand.

'Does he actually smell it?' she asked, amazed.

'It's an illusion,' said Ian. 'It's a machine designed to make you believe it smells and eats and loves and shits.'

'It doesn't do all those things,' I said. 'That's one of the perks highlighted in the ad. There's no shit. It's a shitless dog.'

'Then why am I picking up turds every morning in the yard?' asked Duncan.

'What?' I said.

'It's weird,' he said. 'They must be from foxes or something, but I swear since we got this SmartDog there's been more shit in our yard every day.'

'Maybe foxes are attracted to its smell,' suggested Claire.

'There shouldn't be any smell,' I said.

'How do you know?' asked Duncan. 'The instruction book hardly says anything at all.'

Serge ran away and returned with a tennis ball in its mouth. We took turns throwing the ball and watching Serge bring it back, until conversation moved to gossip and Serge was ignored. He dropped the ball at Ian's feet, wanting to fetch some more. He yipped. Ian did nothing. So Serge stuck his nose in Ian's crotch and inhaled deeply. Then he started humping Ian's leg.

Everyone laughed except for Ian. 'Very funny,' he scowled as he nudged Serge down.

'I didn't teach it that,' I said.

'Probably some programmer's joke,' said Duncan.
'Probably some programmer's joke,' said Duncan.

'Duncan stood and reached for Serge. 'Come on, you,' he said, gathering the dog in his arms.

'Where are you taking him?' I asked.

'Just giving everybody a break,' he said.

'I'll keep him in my lap,' I said. 'He won't bother anybody.'

'Actually,' said Claire, 'the grinding of his joints is giving me a headache.'

'He'll be alright in our room,' said Duncan, looking at me.

'I know,' I said.

'Say bye-bye, Serge,' said Duncan, waving Serge's paw at the group. Serge barked and everybody laughed. 'Good boy,' said Duncan, and he left the room.

'He is cute,' said Claire apologetically. 'Just, only for five minutes.'

'I understand,' I said. But to me the rest of the afternoon felt bruised by his absence.

The next evening Duncan and I were cleaning after dinner when Serge started whining at the front door.

'What does it want?' said Duncan. Serge scratched the door imploringly.

'I think he wants to go for a walk,' I said.

'It doesn’t need to go for a walk.'

'Yeah, but if he were a real dog, he would. Let’s take him.'

'We don’t have a leash.'

'He’ll be fine. I don’t think he can run very fast.'

We got our jackets and opened the front door. Serge took off like a shot, barking at something we couldn’t see. I tensed, ready to chase him, but he halted at the end of the road to wait for us, ears and tail erect.

Serge led the way. He went from tree to tree with his nose to the ground. Duncan and I followed, watching Serge nervously at first and then relaxing into normal conversation. We commented on houses as we passed, each one much the same but with small differences – venetian blinds on the windows, or curtains; toys on a shelf, or ceramic elephants; The Matrix playing on TV, or the local news. I stopped to admire someone’s kitchen through their side windows, all clean with clay jars labelled ‘sugar’ and ‘flour’ and an ice dispenser in the black polished fridge.

'That’s the sort of kitchen I want,' I told Duncan, and I beckoned for him to join me. But he didn’t. He remained standing near the street curb, looking one way and then another.

That’s when I realised Serge was nowhere to be seen.

We called his name. We listened for mechanical footsteps or barks. Nothing.

'Do you think he can find his way home?' I asked.

'I hope so,' said Duncan. 'Shit. That thing was expensive.'

We split up. We shouted his name up and down the neighbourhood. I checked weedy alleys, garbage cans, other people’s lawns. Duncan’s voice drifted to me through cracks between houses. I imagined people looking down on us from their first-floor bedrooms, stepping away from folding clean laundry to see what the fuss was about. They would probably think we had lost a real dog.

I heard distant barking – real barking – followed by a voice shouting ‘no.’ Duncan’s voice.

I ran around the next corner and found Duncan near the gate to the neighbourhood park. There was mud on his jeans and something cradled
I ran around the next corner and found Duncan near the gate to the neighborhood park. There was mud on his jeans and something cradled in his arms. It gave a computerised hiccup – possibly an attempt at a whimper.

'Serge,' I cried.

He looked up, feebly, at the sound of his name. His eyes were dull. One ear had been torn off, leaving behind a cluster of exposed wires. The other ear drooped in canine melancholy.

Duncan passed him to my outstretched arms. I cradled him close.

'What happened?' I asked.

'Someone’s Jack Russell,' fumed Duncan. 'I got a picture on my phone.' He showed me. It was blurry.

'Where did it go?'

'Into the park. Maybe the owner’s there.'

We peered through the gate. There was no movement in the park except for a rush of birds heading for their roosting tree. They perched nightly in its dead branches and screamed at the abandoning sun.

I walked Serge home while Duncan searched for the Jack Russell’s owner. Serge quivered delicately against my chest. I held him close, warming him against my heart.

Back home, Serge limped to his favourite corner and curled up. I knelt to check his limbs. A few scratches, and one of his legs now overextended. When I tried to bend it back he gave a yelp as if in pain, so I stopped and just stroked his remaining ear until Duncan came home.

*

The next day at work I told the tale of the Jack Russell Terrier as my colleagues and I stirred our morning cups of instant coffee. Then they took turns with their own stories of pets being attacked.

‘Misty’s tail was crooked for the rest of her life,’ said Kate.

‘Oscar refuses to walk down that street again,’ said Claire.

We all basked in the shared horror and misery of pet owners, until Ian ruined it by saying, ‘at least Serge has a warranty,’ to which everyone laughed, and I was instantly excluded.

*

When I got home Duncan was packing Serge into a box.

‘The goddamn warranty doesn’t cover replacement parts,’ he said. ‘Only a complete replacement dog. Isn’t that ridiculous?’

‘We have to replace Serge?’ I said.

‘It’ll be the same model,’ Duncan said. ‘We just have to wait a couple of weeks.’

‘It’s only an ear,’ I said. ‘He can live with one ear.’

‘He walks funny too,’ said Duncan. ‘Makes noises. Listen. Don’t turn him on, okay? Something’s wrong.’

In the box Serge’s eyes were dark. His legs were tucked around his body in strange angles.

‘Can’t I say goodbye?’ I asked.

‘To what?’ said Duncan. He tore a long strip of duct tape, making a terrible sound, like ripping skin. He slapped down the box lids and taped them shut.
I slept badly that night. The sealed box sat in Serge's favourite corner, and I couldn't sleep for wondering what the next dog would be like – if it would play the same games as Serge, if it would like that corner too. I wondered if we would call it Serge. It wouldn't be wrong to, but I knew somehow I couldn't. I would have to think of a whole new name.

I sat up sometime around dawn and pulled on a bathrobe. I looked at the box. It made me feel spooked, like the box was looking back.

'Duncan,' I said. He didn't move.

I slipped out of bed and took the box to the kitchen.

I wiggled a fingernail under the tape and pried it up. I folded back the box lid and took out Serge, white packing peanuts skittering to the floor. I propped the dog in my lap and opened his belly with my thumb. No battery. I searched the surface of Duncan's desk and found the battery under a pile of unopened bills. I pressed it into Serge's belly and his eyes lit up green.

'Serge,' I cooed, cradling his squirming limbs.

He tossed his head, trying to get free, and nosed me hard in the chin. I set him down and he ran circles on the kitchen floor, yapping at full volume.

I tried to shush him but he ignored me and ran for the back door. He stood on his hind legs and scraped lines into the wood finish with furious paws.

'No,' I said in a scolding voice.

And he turned and growled at me. His eyes flashed red.

Everything stopped. The room shrank and I held my breath in the infinite moment that my dog growled at me and I stood there in my slippers.

Serge moved first. He charged at me. He opened his mouth of teeth – teeth! Who gave him teeth? – ready to snap shut on me.

It was a survival reaction. It wasn't something I thought about. All I saw were those teeth. I drew my leg back and kicked him hard.

His body was flimsy, light as an action figure. He flew into the door and landed on the tiled kitchen floor.

Somewhere between my foot and the floor Serge went from being a threat to being something Duncan had paid for. I heard his voice in my head ('Shit, that thing was expensive'). I felt a jolt in my heart of fear and failed responsibility, a feeling I got whenever I dropped my phone and worried for the fragile screen.

But Serge did not shatter. He did something worse. He started to cry.

Huge, tragic whimpers to break your heart. I watched him wail on his back, legs pedaling in the air. Someone had done this to him, made him capable of such sorrow. Someone had done this to me.

I knelt beside his fallen body. I reached between his upright limbs and opened the battery hatch.

His watery blue eyes met mine one last time before the light went out, and all was still.

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Maria Hummer was born in Toledo, Ohio. She has lived and worked around the world in Seoul, St. Louis, Budapest and Bratislava, and she is currently based in London. Her short stories have appeared in publications such as Best of Ohio Short Stories, Passages North, Emry's Journal, and more. She is also the writer of prize-winning short films "He Took His Skin Off For Me" and "Dinner and a Movie." Her most recent film, based on her short story "The Director," is currently in post-production. At present Maria is completing her first novel, a speculative fiction love story. She tweets @mariahum
Don't Panic I’m Islamic book review by Dzifa Benson

In the film Flying Blind, a white woman, Frankie, who works as an aeronautical engineer designing drones for the Ministry of Defence begins an affair with a much younger Algerian refugee. After she is detained by the security services and told that her lover is a “person of interest” she discovers that he has looked at Islamic fundamentalist websites on his computer, is an illegal immigrant and has suspicious scars on his body. She suspects that he is involved in a terrorism plot and her father even goes as far as to ask her, “Do you think it wise to have an Arab boyfriend given the nature of your work?” In the end, Frankie comes to realise that her (and the viewer’s) readiness to misread evidence and assume a threat simply because her boyfriend inadvertently fits the profile of an Arabic threat comes at a great cost. The film is instructive of the paranoias that exist in western societies about Arabic and Islamic peoples – more than any other religion, Islam is made to carry more than its fair share of stereotypical freight – and illustrates why a book like Don’t Panic, I’m Islamic: Words and Pictures on How to Stop Worrying and Learn to Love the Alien Next Door, to give it its full title, is necessary.

There are many things that are remarkable about this timely and subversive book, but easily the most remarkable thing about it is how many major award-winning artists and writers the reader has never heard of before contribute to it. If such writers and artists had been white and feted just as much, would they be more visible to a wider readership? It’s debatable. Here are artists, writers, journalists, comedians, activists, filmmakers and the odd drag-queen whose work is part of the public collection of the British Museum (Chant Avedissian whose art graces the cover of the book); has won BAFTAs (Omar Hamdi); is frequently published in The Guardian (Arwa Mahdawi); and has been on the BBC 100 Women list (Bahia Shehab). It underlines that something is really lacking in the myopic way that westerners regard Arabic people if the most recognisable name on the list of contributors to such a book is that of the British Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, who is distinctly not Arabic or Islamic. Notwithstanding her very apposite and impactful contribution in the poem ‘Comprehensive’, the reader has to wonder if she has been included precisely because of the pulling power of her name.

This resolutely secular and somewhat uneven anthology, commissioned by London-based Saqi Books in response to the US travel ban and composed of a multifarious collection of short fiction, memoirs, poems and artworks, opens with a couple of insouciantly provocative essays. Arwa Mahdawi teaches “how to distinguish an acceptable Arab from a terrorist in 6 easy steps” and what Arabic words you should not be alarmed by while Karl Sharro walks the reader through The Joys of Applying for a US Visa. Who knew falafel could be so contentious?

Laugh out loud quotable lines set the tone – “Do you feel yourself to be more Libyan, or more homosexual, Sir?” which is continued in a cartoon by Chris Riddell lampooning Donald Trump and Theresa May while other artworks juxtapose unexpected elements. Hassan Hajjaj’s Kesh Angels photographs combine women wearing Nike embossed burkas, bestriding Harley Davidson motorcycles within a frame ringed by Lego. Chaza Charafeddine’s Divine Comedy series mixes photographic portraits of men wearing Carmen Miranda style headdresses with1940s Egyptian, Indian, Afghani and Iranian popular portrayals of mythological beings. Tammam Azzam uses graphic art in From Syria with Love to create visual composites of the conflict in Syria in which the walls of a bombed out building are bedecked with the aces and deuces of playing cards or a posse of Andy Warhol style Elvises guard another bombed out building. This kind of art is so infrequently given a platform that the reader wishes the book had space for a lot more.

Don’t Panic, I’m Islamic’s great strength is that the writing is indeed, to quote the endorsement from Brian Eno on the bright and inviting front cover, “bursting with creativity, wit and intelligence.” The even greater strength is that it curated its content from an international cross-section of the Arabic diaspora. Stories, memoirs, articles and artworks come from places as diverse as UK, US, Libya, Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Morocco, Turkey and France. But by far the greatest strength is the insight it provides into the traumas, crises of identities, the micro-aggressions, the anger, hurt, fear and the constant sense of threat that blights day to day lives of Muslim and Arabic people around the world because of the ‘war on terror’. A Guardian reader from Surrey, also a biologist at Harvard University suffers a psychotic breakdown in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 when he witnesses such things as vehicles bearing slogans like “All Muslims must die now!” A father trains his children into semi-paranoia for the ‘new America’ after the Trump travel ban. A young Arab-American woman studying in France...
his children into semi-paranoia for the 'new America' after the Trump travel ban. A young Arab-American woman studying in France becomes dislocated when her classmates assure her she is white. This book further subverts stereotypes by highlighting the cultural and geographical hybridity of many Islamic identities. Negin Farsad describes this phenomenon: "I'm a Third Thing – Islam doesn't explain me, Iranian poetry doesn't explain me, and apple pie doesn't explain me." She is a composite of all of those things but yet feels strangely alienated from all of them.

The book isn't without its flaws. The unevenness in the balance between the amount of art, journalism, stories and poetry gives the impression of a scattergun approach in the commissioning of the contributions. Further, some of the contributions are conspicuous by how unsuited they seem to be for this anthology. While all the other pieces grapple with the nuances of being Islamic in a world that chooses to vilify Muslims and Arab people, Alex Wheatle's 'Shade-ism', about the consequences of a wife's jealous rage following her husband's affair leaves this reader scratching her head as to why it was included because neither of its two characters appear to be Muslim or Arab and the story sheds no light on what it means to be either of these two things in the 21st century. On balance though, Don't Panic I'm Islamic is a very strong start to what I hope will become a strong and very visible series of anthologies of art, wit and critical thinking.

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Suggest a Book – Reader Generated List

We asked Wasafiri readers to suggest books to add to the English Literature curriculum. Here are the 40 suggestions we received in the order that they were submitted:

Closure: Contemporary Black British Short Stories (anthology)
The Hungry Tide by Amitav Ghosh
Kintu by Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi
The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy
Blindness by Jose Saramago
Minty Alley by CLR James
Disgrace by J. M. Coetzee
Our Sister Killjoy by Ama Ata Aidoo
Homegoing by Yaa Gyasi
Sea of Poppies by Amitav Ghosh
The Lonely Londoners by Sam Selvon
The Friends by Rosa Guy
White Teeth by Zadie Smith
The Palace of Illusions by Chitra Banerjee Divakurni
The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born by Ayi Kwei Armah
Fritz told me once, 'Be the sea so that you may receive their polluted streams but not become impure.'

At Elysians, a secure psychiatric unit for adolescents, our days began by lining up for a tiny paper cup. Mine held 600mg of lithium; pink pills with a metallic taste that gave the edges of my thoughts a down-feather softness. As we waited for the councillors to give us our prescriptions and check under our tongues, I bitched along with my fellow inpatients. I grumbled and complained, but the truth of it was being an inpatient was the summer camp kids like me never get. I happily did as I was told and played all their therapy games. When the unit was decorated with curses, screams or thrown chairs, my hands would shake with memory, the sum total of the inheritance from my father, but the bruises were no longer mine. Except once.

Lillee was permanently locked in the time-out room and could never be left alone. Veteran inpatients traded Lillee stories like baseball cards, and after I was there for a week I got my own, a rookie all-star one.

I was padding past the time-out room when its door exploded open. Lillee slammed her square body into mine and sent me bouncing off the wall. Counsellor Andy was on the floor. He'd torn her hospital gown trying to stop her and the dark loaf of her right breast hung out. She...
Counsellor Andy was on the floor. He'd torn her hospital gown trying to stop her and the dark loaf of her right breast hung out. She wheeled around and stared murder at Counsellor Andy then opened her mouth like a sword swallower and stabbed at the back of her throat with a toothbrush. She stabbed. She stabbed again. A fountain of vomit and blood erupted. Counsellor Andy tackled her and wrestled with her slippery limbs as Lillee thumped her fists against his chest and cheek.

The first time I met Fritz was later that day, a skeleton with a fading blue mohawk hung over one eye. He was sitting cross-legged and whispering at the seam of Lillee's door. The freshly mopped spot of her suicide attempt was marked by a "Caution: Slippery When Wet" sign.

'Do we have group?' he asked.

I nodded, and we walked to the day room, sitting across from each other as everyone took turns doing daily personal inventories: how we felt, what we wanted to accomplish in our therapy sessions and our positive words for the day.

My word was 'enthuse'.

While a bulimic named Carol spoke, an acid casualty, Redneck Ian, took out his glass eye and stuck it in his mouth. Fritz and I were the only ones to notice, and we traded smiles. Ian parted his lips, and the eye moved toward Carol as she told us how she hated it when people said, 'but you're so beautiful'. The glass pupil surveyed the rest of the group. I tittered and its gaze snapped to me.

'Sh, Carol is sharing now. You had your turn,' Counsellor Kate admonished. Fritz giggled, and the eye watched him.

'Oh my God!' Carol screamed.

'ian! Counsellor Kate yelled.

The eye spun in its mouth-socket then disappeared and he gulped. The midschooler named Tracey, who always cried in her AA meetings, squealed.

'Ma'am, I swallowed my eye,' Ian said.

Counsellor Kate stood up, panicked.

'Just kidding,' he said and spit it into his hand.

'ian! You are going to apologize to Carol for this interruption,' Counsellor Kate said.

'Ma'am, I was just giving it a wash. My eye gets right dirty. It's all the porn.' All of us laughed except Counsellor Kate who led Ian away, lecturing him about the sacredness of the group circle.

'I don't think this should interrupt our therapy session, do you?' Fritz said. 'My positive word for today is "Papadopoulos".' He pointed at me – 'Enthuse,' – and then at himself: 'Papadopoulos.'

In the real world, you don't know what you are and you sure aren't going to figure out anyone else. When you are inpatient, it's easy to get to know another person. The doctors and nurses and other inpatients define you. You trade diagnoses with handshakes. Prescription lists are your business cards. The disease they give you becomes your identity: Bulimic Carol, Alcoholic Tracey, Bipolar Me. In the real world, you never have the comfort of all your 'because of's spelled out for you.

Fritz was inpatient because of drugs, because he fell in love with an older man named Jerry who did drugs. But, Fritz didn't believe in their definitions and their 'because of's; he had a different explanation for what we were.

'To give birth to a dancing star, you must have chaos.'

I never asked Fritz what he meant, because it sounded true enough. True enough was what I needed.

Fritz was a couple years older than me and he knew about the things I wanted to know: Church of the SubGenius, G.G. Allin and the Murder Junkies, the anarchist cookbook. Everything important to a fifteen-year-old who longed to be anything other than the weird kid at the back of the class. His room was across from mine and we spent our evenings sitting in our doorways, chewing his nicotine gum and talking until lights out.

'What was all that yelling about today? I heard you. Don't take it out on your grandma,' he said. Fritz's minty nicotine talks did more for me than the pink pills or Counsellor Andy's nine-to-five concern.

'I know,' I said.

'You bottle up everything, play hard like nothing hurts you, pretend your crazy-shit parents didn't fuck you up. You take on all this guilt until you explode. She's trying to help you, your grandma. How many times have you been in time-out this week?'

My 'because of's went like this. I lived with my grandma because of my parents. Mom in prison. Dad dead. All my 'because of's I got from them. That's just the start. I mean, I'm a child, I get stuff from the government. Society, the government. Fritz's from Child Welfare. You can imagine what it's like.'
them. That's what I was told. I was faultless, they said, and maybe they were right. Visits from Child Welfare officers were because I'd seen beer-bellied cops break our coffee table by throwing my mom onto it. Child Welfare then categorized me 'at risk', because I was in the car when dad died by wrapping our silver 88 around a bridge abutment. I didn't die, because the car had a small hole in the backseat floor. I used to get down there to drop super bouncy balls through it and watch them mortar out from underneath, raining rubber terror on the cars behind. Previous times, it had been worthwhile weathering dad's slaps and punches guided by the rear view mirror. When we hit the bridge, I bounced super ball style between the seats. Dad flew an impossible distance through the front window.

In the months after the funeral, I sat beside sweet, half-blind Grandma. We watched soaps and ate bologna mustard sandwiches that she had cut into triangles. It was peaceful and calm and safe, but my brain craved the chaos I was used to. At night, after Grandma went to bed, I went out to make my own chaos. My dancing star was a stolen hydraulic excavator and church vandalism.

Fritz and I were playing Slap Hand in the hallway. His hands, long and eloquent, rested lightly on top of mine. Counsellor Andy came up to us and seemed pissed off.

'Fritz, Lillee is asking for you.'

'Can I go in or did you strap her down?'

Counsellor Andy gave him a look like he should know the answer to that and continued down the hall.

Fritz took my hand and led me to Lillee's door. We sat cross-legged before it. Fritz leaned close to the seam. 'Lillee?'

A moan, achingly slow, an infectious sadness with it, came from under the heavy door. A sniffle. She was crying.

'You are forest, Lillee, and a night of dark trees. Those who are not afraid of you, they will find roses under your cypresses.'

'Fritz?' Lillee's voice asked.

'I'm right here. Go to sleep. I'm watching over you.'

I opened my mouth. Fritz put his finger to his lips.

'What happens to her when you leave?' I whispered. Fritz had seven days left. 'I'll be out a week after you. We should hang out.'

Fritz nodded, but he shushed me again.

The next day we were at the day-room window, waving manically at the pedestrians below; if they waved back, we licked the window and pretended to masturbate. It didn't take long for Counsellor Kate to stop our game, but, instead of calling us both into her office as usual, she told Fritz to follow her. We didn't see each other for the rest of the day. After dinner, I sat in my doorway waiting until lights out, but he never came out of his room.

I cornered him the next morning.

'I need to talk to you. Meet me in the day room.'

'I'm late for my appointment with Doctor What's-his-face. You should talk to Kate.'

In a world that consisted of locked rooms, two hallways, a nurse's station, a day room and a yard with a high fence, it was difficult to avoid a person. Fritz managed to avoid me very well until his discharge day. When he tried to say good-bye, I told him to fuck off.

After he left, I moped around for a few days, which earned me an increase in dosage.

'Hey, hey, boy,' Lillee's voice called from the time-out room.

Two crescents of eye-white appeared in the slit window.

'Hey, hey, boy. Fritz love you.'

'Lillee, please get away from the window,' a voice said from within the room. The crescents disappeared.

'Fuck you, fuck you, motherfucker,' Lillee said.

Fritz called me months after my discharge. My days still started with pink pills and tasting copper, but I had grown accustomed to the real world of Grandma kindness and bologna mustard sandwiches cut into triangles. I had enrolled in an alternative high school where they let you smoke and had classes like 'non-violent coping skills'.

'What's up?' he asked.

'Nothing.' I snapped. not sure if I was anery or hurt.
I'm sorry I was such an asshole, but they made it a condition of my discharge that I didn't talk to you. They were worried about "the nature of our relationship." He said the last part in a mock-clinical tone. 'Do you want to hang out?'

'Don't you live in Georgetown?' I asked.

'No. I'm sharing an apartment with this guy Jerry.'

'Jerry?' In the real world, it was easy to forget all the secrets you'd laid out like garage-sale bric-a-brac for every inpatient to pick over.

I rode my bike to the address he gave me. The apartment complex was tangled up in pine trees like a broken kite. Fallen red needles crunched under my tires and released their waxy scent.

In front of Fritz's apartment, a dusty black kitten complained. I rubbed its head and felt the soft fur and the tiny skull beneath. The cat disappeared inside and a skinny man dressed in nursing scrubs opened the door. His frizzy hair made him look like a red-headed Q-tip wearing glasses.

'Yes?' the Q-tip said, looking at me with curiosity.

'Is Fritz home?'

Q-tip rolled his eyes and said, 'In back. Careful, he's on the rag today.'

I stood before the hall and wondered which of the two doors was Fritz's room. The Q-tip stood behind me and held my shoulders. I tensed under his touch and fought the urge to jerk away.

He steered me by the shoulders and said, 'This one. The one on the right's the guest room. Tell him I'm late shift tonight.' The Q-tip patted my back, then disappeared. Fritz opened his door.

'Was that him leaving?'

'Was that Jerry?' I asked. Awkwardness settled between us. He gave me a hug; I hugged him back. He was warm; I was cold. He smelled of cigarettes.

'Look at you, little punk rocker.' He pulled at the forelock of my mohawk.

'Why'd you diss me inside?'

'I told you. They made it a condition of my discharge. I was worried about -- I didn't -- I don't know.'

'Forget it. What's that?' I pointed to a bowl of goop that looked like royal-blue oatmeal.

'Homemade hair dye. I was just about to do my own. You want try it?'

'Grandma is still getting used to this.' I rubbed the shaved sides of my head.

'How is your grandma?'

'She's good. Still old, but good.'

'How about an earring?' Fritz picked up a gold tack from beside the bowl of hair dye. 'It's a piercing stud. It's supposed to go into a gun, but we can just jab it in.'

We sat next to each other on the couch in the living room, watching cartoons and drinking beer. My ear was hot and I kept touching the earring. We giggled at each other in our shower caps with the blue glop steaming beneath. The kitten hopped into my lap and mewed until I petted it.

'Lillee turns eighteen today,' Fritz said.

I raised my beer. 'Happy Birthday to Lillee.'

'That means they can send her to State hospital. She's better off dead.'

'I'm sorry.'

The front door unlocked.
'Honey, I'm home,' Jerry sung. He raised a six-pack of beer. 'Hello again,' he said to me.

Jerry sat on the floor between us. He cracked a beer and offered one to me. I held up my unfinished bottle to say no thanks. Fritz slammed his and took the can. We watched more cartoons and drank more beers. Fritz drank fast and had most of the six-pack. Was he angry at me or Jerry?

Jerry took out a cigar box from underneath the couch. From it he took rolling papers, weed and a little black rubber ball wrapped in cellophane.

'Jerry, no,' Fritz said.

We smoked. Fritz too, and the world washed through me in calming waves. I sunk deep into the sofa. I scared myself thinking how much I preferred feeling like this.

Somehow I was in Fritz's huge bed. I heard him in the hallway hiss, 'Stay out of our room.' He closed the door and lay down on the floor.

'Good night Fritz,' I mumbled.

In the middle of a dream I heard the door open. I felt warmth on my foot and a tug at my blanket. I woke up but stayed motionless, afraid to open my eyes and see Jerry over me. Something moved along my leg, touched my knee, then my thigh. I held my breath. I felt its weight on the inside of my thighs, pushing them apart. I bolted up and threw the blanket off. The kitten shot into the air, hissing, and fled the room.

'Why's the door open?' Fritz asked angrily.

'I don't know. Cat?'

'You scared the shit out of me.' Fritz shut the door and locked it. 'Go to sleep.'

The next day I was examining my new earring in the mirror, trying to decide if it was off-centre or not. Grandma had talked to me a dozen times that morning but never noticed it, the new hair colour or that I had spent the night away from home. I cut through the forest behind her house to the gas station with the payphone and called Fritz.

'Can I come over?' I asked.

'I don't think that's a good idea.'

'What do you mean?'

'I think you should forget about me. It was cool meeting you. We had a great time inside, but the real world is – you know – different.'

'Real world? Are you ditching me again?'

'No. It's not that. I just don't want you—'

I slammed the phone down. I ran through the forest back to Grandma's house until my breath came in painful heaves. As I stepped onto the porch, I ran my hands across the shaved sides of my head and felt the earring. The fake gold irritated my skin.

I pulled it out and chucked it into the bushes and stepped into the house.

Grandma was on the couch.

'You hungry?'

'No thank you,' I said, taking my place beside her.

'Janice just told Mark she's pregnant and it's not his,' she said, pointing out the characters with the little hook of her grandma finger.

I heard a slow, heavy drip. I listened to its calming sound. I thought of faucets, of melting icicles, of trickling streams flowing into pure seas.

'What's happened to you? You're hurt.' Her voice full of worry.

From the corner of my eye, I saw a candle-wax stain of red on my shoulder. I touched my ear, and my hand came away bloody.

'Silly boy,' she said and groaned herself up off the couch. She shuffled to the bathroom medicine cabinet trailing words: 'It's okay. Don't cry. We'll get you fixed up. Ain't nothing that won't heal.'
Writing My Own History. February 12, 2017

February 12, 2017 - amandascialdone. The black ink stained the white, blank piece of paper. The letters that make up the words bleed through the paper, leaving behind a trial of dripped, black ink, and words that may have gone unsaid. And, after spending two semesters at Auburn University, I was beginning to become disenchanted by a dream that I had put in place for myself when I was barely able to formulate paragraphs, or sentences. I sat in lecture halls that made me feel smaller than the stain of ink left in the form of a period on my paper, and felt myself starting to lose faith that I would go anywhere past the walls that enclosed the library. Living carefree at home is the greatest shortcut— My house is the world’s greatest magic power spot, that being the case both my house and I were summoned to another world by some guys who were aiming for it. However, I’ve been living in this place for many years and my body is, apparently, abnormally overflowing with magic. Due to some unforeseen circumstances by those guys who summoned me, they quickly ran away. I can accept that I want to read certain cliches from the asian market. Transported to another world, over powered characters, I’m fine with those. It’s just the half assed writing that bugs me. First of all, the character comes to the realization that he’s in another world way too quickly.

Jarred McGinnis was the creative director for Moby-Dick Unabridged, a four-day immersive multimedia reading of Herman Melville’s masterpiece at the Southbank Centre, involving hundreds of participants.

His short fiction has been commissioned for BBC Radio 4 and appeared in respected journals in the UK, Canada, USA and Ireland. Most recently he has had stories shortlisted for the Galley Beggar Story Prize, Royal Academy Pin Drop Short Story Award and the Wasafiri New Writing Award. He is an Associate Writer for Spread the Word, a Mentor for the Word Factory and Writer-in-Residence for First Story.

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