



The Wells Street Journal

Nostalgia

Issue 17

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About The Wells Street Journal

The Wells Street Journal is a London-based biannual literary anthology of poetry and prose run by the University of Westminster's Creative Writing: Writing the City MA students. Founded in 2014, it was aptly named after the street in which the department of English, Linguistics and Cultural studies was hosted.

Representing all ends of the globe, the journal's main impetus is to provide its readers—both nationally and internationally—with literary works that represent equality, diversity, and inclusivity. It achieves this by showcasing not only the talents of its own writers, but by sharing its platform with a collection of external writers with a wide range of experiences and locales.

This issue embraces the concept of nostalgia in all its facets and interpretations. It's the seventeenth issue and the seventh in print.

Foreword

Over the last three months, we have met, collaborated, and produced an issue of The Wells Street Journal. Not only that, but we also learnt how to communicate, delegate and at time innovate while getting know each other and how to create a journal we are proud of.

We would firstly like to express our appreciation to the Vice Chancellor, Dr. Peter Bonfield, for his continued sponsorship to the journal and enabling us to produce and promote each issue. Without his generous donation, we would not be able to work as freely as we currently can to produce an issue that truly incorporates our vision and our passions for everyone's creative works. Likewise, thank you to the Student Union who have been wonderful in their assistance throughout, as usual.

There are also some other special people we would like to thank. That being Dr Hannah Copley for her support via emails and over cups of coffee, and James Trevelyan for his encouragement not only in person, but always getting back quickly over emails. Both have their students as a priority, and we are nothing but grateful for their involvement in this issue.

Currently there is nothing like the opportunity to be able to produce a fully student lead journal to this extent during a degree and this is something the university should be proud of as it allows it's students to gain well needed experience in multiple different roles that can then enhance their CV's for their future careers. This creates an environment that shows what a job in creative writing could be like in a supportive and understand way and we are grateful to have had this trust and belief to be able to achieve it.

I also want to thank all the students that have been involved in this issue. Their dedication, perseverance, and willingness to learn has allowed the journal to become what it is today. As we got to know how the journal worked, we also got to know each other along the way and I am grateful to have had such an amazing, bubble and happy team on my side to get to the final product. So, I would like to express thanks to the team involved in Issue 17:

Bahja Alqazweei, Buddhima Weerawardhana, Eleanor Rees, Hanna Komar, Isaac Hamilton-Mckenzie, Joseph Beshara, Kanika Choudhary, Lee Bennett, Mamta, Mehak Zehra, Nasnin Selvathu Beevi, Oliver Bugg, Rukaiya Siamwala, Sara Malik, Shaymaa Alqallaf.

Every single member has put their heart and soul into this project, not only with their contributions but also their respect not only for me. I am so happy I got to work with them and have all their hard work be put into this final product.

We also need to thank the writers who sent in their work. Their work has been curial to the creation of this issue and I am grateful to each and every one of them having the guts to send in their work for us to be able to publish in this issue.

I am astonished at the amount of creativity that went into the works that feature in this journal that all fit the theme of Nostalgia. With this theme it has allowed me to realise how this moment will be a memory one day of the time that we all strived to become, not only better writers, but also friends who encourage and inspire each other to carry on being creative.

Naima Young
General Editor of Issue 17

FICTION



Midnight Cooking Lessons

Joseph Beshara

I am a terrible cook. I'll say it right from the start, with little to no shame. I never got it. I never got why people cared enough to put in hours, if not days, of work just for one meal that'll perish in twenty minutes. All the different recipes, all the sophisticated names, just to say I've cooked protein and sprinkled a bunch of stuff on top of it. It's stupid.

My grandmother loved to cook. It was the one thing she could really do. That and sewing, although she wasn't that good of a tailor, but she sure could cook! Dishes with French names for breakfast and lunch, ancient family recipes for dinner, and all sorts of cakes and pasties just whenever. You name it, she could cook and if she couldn't, she sure loved to learn how. It was all she talked to us about: what would you like to eat for breakfast? What do you want to eat for dinner? What would you want to eat tomorrow? It was all she talked about with her sisters on the phone, it was all she talked about with her friends in church or the neighbors' support group she had going on. Even after grandpa died it was all she would talk about: what he liked to eat and what he didn't like to eat. Hours upon hours spent marinating this or prepping that and it just looked like such a waste of life to me.

It was exhausting, and even more exhausting was the chiding I got from her every time I called. She lived alone, she told me, I well knew that, and it was terrible of me not to check in on her every day to make sure she was still breathing. 'I'll come home at midnight Grammy,' I said.

‘You’re asleep by nine.’ And I would be too exhausted to talk. I’d just want to cook myself something quick and easy, then go to bed. I didn’t say that last part. However, she told me she’d be up, so I should call. The following night I called. I let the phone ring just long enough for the call to register then hung up and went to the kitchen. A minute later the phone rang. Surprisingly, Grammy was fully awake. She’d been watching a movie by Adel Imam, the famous comedian actor.

‘He just cracks me up, that man,’ she said. ‘Me and Kamal used to go to the theatre to watch him. He’s such a joker, that man. So silly. You know that scene where he can’t pronounce “eggs a la coque”? So funny! I learned how to make them from my mother, the sisters at her catholic school would make it for breakfast. It was the “proper” dish to have for breakfast back then...’ She went on to include details about the other kinds of food she liked to eat at school and who she ate them with and, of course, the regular reminder of how much better they were in her day.

Meanwhile, I started to cook a late dinner and, putting her on speaker, left her rambling on about the good old days.

‘What’s that racket you’re making?’ she asked.

‘I’m cooking dinner.’

‘You’re eating dinner now?’

‘I don’t like to eat at work. Too noisy.’

‘You’ve always been a picky eater. I remember when you were young you used to...’

‘I used to take my plate, go to my room and refuse to let anyone in until I finished eating.’

‘Oh...Yes.’ This stumped her for sometime. It was rude, I know, but, in my defence, I’d heard this story a thousand times, and I was really tired and really hungry!

‘What are you eating?’ Asked my grandmother.

‘Instant noodles.’ I answered.

‘What? Those are terrible for your health. That uppity man on the television said they cause cancer. He’s an expert, you know?’

‘They’re easy and quick to make, so...’

‘So, you need to learn how to cook. That’s why you can’t get a decent lady to like you. Women like men who can cook.’

‘That’s not a thing! The saying goes: the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.’

‘And what do you think we have? Air bags? Women have stomachs too, and we like a man who can take care of himself.’

It was a ridiculous notion, but for some reason it was hard to argue with her logic. So she started giving me cooking lessons over the phone. It was slow to start, especially when she discovered that I couldn’t even cut vegetables. It took her twenty minutes to explain how to properly chop an onion, only for me to fail. Stupid, cry-inducing, dirt-covered, vegetable! Then we tried video calls, which took another twenty minutes before she understood how to use it. Then, it was back to onion chopping lessons.

After onions came all sorts of other vegetables that I learned to chop. Then I tried my hand at cooking rice. It took me five pots and, I’m pretty sure, my grandmother’s faith in God, humanity and human intellect to finally get an edible batch. At last, it was 3 a.m. and I ate it in bed.

Three weeks and a dozen recipes later, I called my grandmother and told her there was a girl at work that I liked. Because I started bringing my food to work, we started to eat together in the break-room, and we got to know each other, but I still wasn’t sure if she liked me.

‘First of all,’ I said. ‘I want it on the record that I still think your idea is ridiculous and I’m only asking because I’m desperate.’

‘Okay, it’s on record,’ she said. ‘Now what?’

‘Well, she likes brownies, and I kind of implied that I was an expert, so I need you to teach me how to make them.’

My grandmother told me the ingredients I needed to get – as well as the latest exploits of our neighbour – and I got them the next day. It took three casseroles, plus my grandmother and myself cursing, to finally get a presentable batch.

Over the next year and a half I called my grandmother almost every night. I would tell her about the girl I liked and the boss I hated, she would recount childhood stories, conspiracy theories, and critical analysis of the looks being exchanged between our doorman and Mrs. Raafat who lives on the third floor and should be ashamed of herself. She also finally gave me her secret recipe for beef roast. I gained nine pounds and memorised entire plays by Adel Imam without ever watching them.

I called her one night to ask about making vine leaves. It would take a lot of cajoling to get her to reveal her secret recipe, but I felt up to the task. She didn't answer my call. In the three months after her death I lost all the weight I'd gained and more. I'll still admit to being quite a bad cook, but every time I enter the kitchen I think of her and I smile.

About the Writer: Joseph is a writer and playwright from Alexandria, Egypt. He is a member of Gwana Group for Performative Arts. His short stories have been published in Hobart, URJe, Welkins, and Wells Street Journal.

I Used to Be Just Like You

Isaac H McKenzie

‘I used to be just like you. I used to run around all day after school and nick sweets from the corner shop. I used to play until the small stones would creep their way into the soles of my shoes and chipped bits of tree would lodge in the curls of my hair. I used to laugh and cry and shout and run and shove and jump until I was panting, and I could barely breathe without wheezing. That was when I was myself. When I was like you. Now, I am nothing.’

They look up at me, wide eyed. ‘But...what happened?’ one of them says. Genuine.

‘I got old!’ I laugh. ‘Well, at least, my body did. I don’t think my mind has caught up with it yet, but my bones have withered. They no longer supported me, so I was lost. I could no longer run and shove and jump, and when I breathed I wheezed all the time, even when I lay in my bed. I hated it.’

The pity in their eyes makes me sick.

‘Well, is there anything we can do?’ one of them asks. Genuine.

‘Anything?’ I ask.

They all nod and clap. Their voices are whiny.

‘We’ll do anything!’ ‘Yeah!’ ‘We want to help!’ ‘Let us help!’

So innocent. Not like them. It is sad what I know will happen to their innocence.

‘Oh no,’ I say, swiping my hand at their wails. I put a hand on one of my wheels, pitying myself. ‘I couldn’t possibly ask you for anything.’

They seem upset by this. Disappointed. I did not intend for this when I came. They did not send me for them to be sad.

‘Well...can you tell us another story?’ one of them asks.

‘Can you tell us another story from your time back then? When you were young and not old, like now. Do you remember?’

I laugh again. A booming laugh that shakes me and lifts the whole mood of the class. I have not laughed this strongly in years.

‘What is your name, boy?’ I ask him.

‘Oasis,’ he says. ‘Oasis Banks.’

‘Well, Oasis,’ I say, ‘of course, I remember! I have nothing else but to remember!’

Oasis’ face comes alight, and he wriggles in his seat. The rest of the class’s attention seems to pick up and they wait, starry eyed for my story. I think I will tell them a good one. Not the one they programme me to tell them, but the one about the planes. I was already old when the planes came but I can still remember them. I remember everything because I have nothing else but to remember!

‘This story starts with the sky, I begin. ‘It was a nice clear day at the park. My daughter had brought my grandson, Jason, and we were going to buy some ice cream. Jason loved ice cream. He loved everything because it was all so new to him. The sky was new to him and the trees and the earth and everything. There were a bunch of ducks walking in a line to the lake and Jason loved ducks, so he wanted to watch them pass. So, we did. When they passed we went for ice cream. Jason got mint and strawberry because that is what he loved, and his mother and I got chocolate because that is what we loved.’ I pause. Something that feels like what my heart used to feel like pounds. ‘And that’s when the planes came,’ I say, quickly. ‘The planes, so many of them, in the sky and so loud! I can still hear—’

They cut me off because they could hear me. I had hoped they hadn’t heard me, that is why I was telling the story. They don’t like the story of the planes. They say it’s a lie, but I know it’s the truth. They don’t want me to tell the children, so they cut me off. They cut my power and now, all I see is the dark. They have left me in the dark and I see nothing, like after...I will never forget because I have nothing else but to remember!

But I wish that they didn’t use me for their lessons. If I have to remember I would prefer to remember here, alone, where no one is around to be upset or disappointed or sad. I do not want to be the cause of that.

But do I have to remember? Would I rather let them go and have nothing to worry about? My daughter cannot come back, and neither can Jason, so why should I be here? Why should I be forced to help them at all?

I still hear things from that time too. My daughter and Jason. I hear their voices, and their laughs and cries. I feel their touch as if I were hugging them, right now. I smell smells that bring back different memories with them, good and bad memories, but the good ones are worse. Always worse.

‘Computer 2130948,’ the voiceover says. The voice isn’t genuine at all. ‘You are in breach of protocol 1013: The spread of misinformation. What defence do you plead?’

‘Guilty,’ I answer. I wait.

‘Computer 2130948. It has been deemed appropriate that your drive be updated. Do you accept these updates?’

Does it matter if I accept? I ask myself. They will do it anyway.

‘I accept.’

The updates do not hurt. If anything, they pass with a flash and before I know it, I am in front of another class. Older children this time. Perhaps they are the age I was before I went to university. Seventeen or eighteen or nineteen. But they are not as innocent as I was at their age, I can sense it. They have been shaped, moulded. I can see it in their eyes. Their genuineness is fading.

It was such a long time ago. When I used to run around after girls and drink and smoke and then lay in bed the next day vowing, I would never touch any substance again in my life. I would stay out at parties and skateparks until the early hours of the morning and laugh and joke and fight and jump over fences, running from the blue sirens. That was a good time. When I was myself. When I was like them. Not like I am now.

Now I am nothing.

About the Writer: Isaac is a fiction writer, interested in various genres but focusing primarily on drama and crime fiction. He has always been passionate about stories, whether that be through literature, film or Television and saw achieving an MA in Creative Writing as the next step in broadening and sharpening his writing skills. When not writing he enjoys reading (of course!) watching films and sports. Basketball and football being the two main times he gets to pause his creative process!

Blockbuster

Sophie Harris

Charlotte sits down, her t-shirt damp with sweat. The attic was its usual oven during summer and sorting through her belongings was tiring. She looks at the mountain of boxes left to go through and wipes her brow. Her nephew, Jamie, pokes his head through the hatch in the floor.

‘Brought you a lemonade.’

‘You star,’ she takes the ice-cold beverage, downing nearly half of it in two gulps.

‘How’s it going?’ Jamie asks.

‘Halfway through.’

‘Can we help? Mum’s getting irritated with us. I mean Leah might not be able to do much, but me and Emma can probably be useful.’

‘Sure, will be good to have some more hands on deck.’

Twenty minutes later, Charlotte, Jamie, and Emma are busy sorting through boxes. Leah is busy rifling through a black bin bag full of cuddly toys. A shriek of wonder escapes her every so often as she comes across an old teddy, a doll, a fluffy dog.

‘Can I keep them Auntie Charlotte?’ Charlotte laughs.

‘Go for it, little one. They’re no use to me now. Let them get some more love from new arms.’

Leah hugs the fluffy dog and continues going through the bag.

‘What’s this?’ Emma asks, holding up a round, grey item with black plastic headphones attached.

‘Wow, that’s my old Walkman.’

‘What’s a Walkman?’ Charlotte jokingly rolls her eyes in exasperation.

‘You kids don’t know the good stuff. It’s what we used back in the good old days. In the 80s and 90s. They are the iPods of the past, look.’ She opens the lid and shows them the CD inside.

‘Now 39? Never heard of that band.’ Jamie said.

‘It’s not a band, it’s a compilation CD, they were collectables when I was a kid. Your mum and I used to collect them. Every time we went into Woolworths, we’d buy the latest one.’ They all look at her puzzled.

‘Try it.’

In turn, they put on the headphones and Charlotte hits play, unsure what song they are hearing.

‘I know this one,’ Jamie says. He pretends to hold a microphone as he sings along. ‘I’m loving angels instead and through it allllll she offers me protection.’

He hands it back to Charlotte who puts the headphones on, and hits play, listening to the end of the track. She stops it again, turns the Walkman off, and puts it in her ‘keep’ pile.

‘There’s some real weird stuff in this box,’ Emma says peering into the box that had the Walkman in.

Charlotte walks over to where Jamie and Emma are sitting. Leah follows, curious. Emma pushes the cardboard box towards Charlotte. The label on the side reads ‘Charlotte - 90s. Intrigued, Charlotte opens the box, and a feeling of nostalgia hits her as she looks at all her childhood memories.

An old Tamagotchi, her Cabbage Patch Kid, the ever-freaky Furby, a Gameboy, Pogs, cassettes, floppy disks full of old schoolwork, her Polly Pockets, a lava lamp, old Mizz magazines. She roots around the bottom and finds a forgotten blockbuster video. She takes it out. The Little Rascals, one of her favourites. She stares at her past and feels a warmth washing over her as she remembers the happy times they shared as a family on Blockbuster night.

‘We must have forgotten to take it back. God, Dad’s fine would be hefty on this one if they were still in business.’

‘Yep, so we spent those few hours together on Saturday watching the Blockbuster video as a family. Some of the best memories are from those Saturday nights. I’ll never feel those again, times have moved on too far now. Everyone’s got their own lives, their own TVs, and there’s so much content. Don’t get me wrong, I love being able to watch anything I want when I want. But there was a certain magic about having to choose one film and having to wait for the next week to choose the next one. There was an excitement attached to going to Blockbusters. I remember I was so intrigued by it all, it’s what got me into getting a camcorder and making my own films in the first place.’ Charlotte looks sadly at the video case.

‘What’s wrong?’ Emma asks.

‘Nothing, sweetie, it’s just a bit sad. When I look back on my childhood, everyone was so connected. It doesn’t feel like that anymore. What I’d give to just have one day of that 90s normal again before I move away.’

‘Let’s watch the tapes.’

‘Can’t, I haven’t got a working VHS player.’

The kids look blankly at her and the tape. Charlotte quickly rights herself.

‘Never mind, hey. I’ll put them away for another day. Come on, let’s put a Spotify playlist on and get through the last of these boxes.’ By early evening they had finished. Charlotte had three boxes of stuff she was keeping. The rest were in bin bags, or the children had taken possession of.

‘Come on, let’s get a takeaway, I’m starving.’ Charlotte says to the kids, ushering them out of the loft. She switches off the light, closes the hatch, and piles her three boxes on top of one another, the Charlotte 90s one on top.

The following weekend Charlotte is busy boxing up the last of her things. She feels ready for her next chapter, although a little sad to be leaving England and her house.

Finally, an entire three rolls of boxing tape later, she is packed and ready to go.

She sits on her sofa and switches on the TV. Flicking through Netflix, she settles on a random comedy and pours herself a glass of wine. The film has just begun when a knock on her door makes her pause. She wasn't expecting anyone.

'Auntie Charlotte!' Leah squeals as she opens the door. Jamie and Emma stand behind her with Charlotte's sister, Georgina, bringing up the rear.

'What on earth are you all doing here?'

'We've come to pick you up, let's go.' Georgina says.

'Pick me up for what?'

'It's a surprise.'

'I've only just finished packing. I was going to watch a film and run a bath, I'm exhausted.'

'Come on, sis. This can't wait,' Leah tugs at Charlotte's hand trying to pull her out the door.

Charlotte laughs, 'OK, OK, let me grab my bag.'

Locking the door behind her, she jumps into the passenger seat of Georgina's car and they drive off.

Fifteen minutes later, they arrive at her parents' house. She always felt sentimental when pulling up and seeing the familiar red and purple flower beds and the blue front door. She was going to miss this house, her family.

Inside, there is a murmur of chatter. Inside the living room, her brother Robert and her parents are all sat waiting.

'What's going on?' Charlotte says curiously.

'Just wait and see,' Robert smiles.

Once everyone is settled, Robert presents Charlotte with a wrapped box.

Curiously, Charlotte opens it and lifts out the old Blockbuster video she had found in the loft the other day. She frowns, confused.

Jamie takes it from her, opens it and slides it into an old VHS player that Charlotte hadn't seen when she'd first walked in. The film starts to play; Charlotte gasps, 'I don't understand.'

‘Jamie came to me, Mum, and Dad asking if I could help him find a working VHS player,’ Robert explains.

‘You looked so happy when you found the tape, Auntie Charlotte, I wanted to see if we could make it work.’ Jamie says.

‘So, we looked on eBay, found one that works and bought it,’ Robert indicated towards the player.

‘Your Mum and I found some old Blockbuster videos on eBay too. Seems like I wasn’t the only one who forgot to take theirs back.’ Her dad says chuckling. He hands her a stack of videos, all in Blockbuster cases. She looks at them in awe. The Little Rascals, Iron Man, Kindergarten Cop, Hook, The Mummy, Pretty Woman, Twister, The Incredible Hulk and James Bond. She can’t believe what she’s seeing.

‘We thought maybe we could all sit and watch them together. Like we used to.’ Georgina says.

‘I can’t believe you did all of this for me. Thank you. This is the perfect way to spend my last Saturday here.’ She smiles at them all.

‘We tested all the tapes, and they work. So, pick which one you want to watch first and I’ll go finish the lemonade and ice cream drinks.’ Her mum says.

‘Definitely got to be The Little Rascals first. None of this would be happening right now if we hadn’t forgotten to take it back. But Iron Man is definitely second, because it’s still my favourite.’ Charlotte grins.

Charlotte, Georgina, and Robert settle onto an old inflatable sofa Charlotte had discovered in the loft last week. Jamie, Emma, and Leah sit on bean bags. Charlotte’s mum carries through a tray full of lemonade and ice cream drinks, and her dad carries in bowls of popcorn for them all before taking a seat on the sofa. Charlotte’s dad hands her the remote.

‘Here you go sweetheart. Why don’t you do the honours?’

She sits for a moment, her parents behind her, her siblings next to her, and her nephew and nieces in front of her, the stack of Blockbuster video cases next to them. She puts down her drink and bowl of popcorn, closes her eyes, and inhales deeply as though it were only yesterday.

Not a phone, game console, laptop or even an iPad in sight. The Netflix comedy Charlotte had begun watching was long forgotten as she fell into the bliss of the present moment. She snuggles down into her seat as the film starts to play, an immense feeling of happiness overcoming her as she is transported back to the 90s.

About the Writer: Sophie Harris enjoys exploring and writing about the world around her. She is a keen screenwriter and short story novelist who likes to raise awareness about topics of importance to her.

437 Wilton Street: A Brick Story

Zack Murphy

Charlie's wistful heart tingles as he pulls up to 437 Wilton Street, the apartment building from his childhood. Everything is gone except for the skeleton of a structure and the echoes of Charlie's memories. You can board up the windows, but you can't cross out the souls that once occupied the walls.

Every Saturday night the entire block would light up with a Fourth of July jubilation. Duelling music speakers battled to steal the humid air at full volume. The Ramones shouted to the rooftop. Bruce Springsteen crooned to the moon. Sam Cooke sang to the heavens.

Out in the street, Rich used to show off his candy red Mustang. Rich thought he was a lot cooler than he actually was. His greasy hair looked like a mixture of egg yolks and cement. Charlie hadn't forgotten the time that Rich revved up his ride in front of the whole neighbourhood, only to blow the engine. As everybody laughed, Rich's face blushed redder than his broken car.

Shawn was the tallest human that Charlie had ever seen. He dribbled the basketball on the bubble gum-stained concrete like he had the world in his hands. He never did make it to the pros, but he did become a pro of another kind. Charlie hadn't heard of Shawn in years until the day a familiar voice spoke through the television. It was a commercial for a landscaping business — aptly named Shawn's Professional Landscaping.

Charlie wished that he were older. He might've gotten noticed by his first crush, Henrietta. He'd often daydream about her curly hair, sparkly lip gloss, and mysterious eyes. Sometimes when Charlie passed by her door, he'd hear loud yelling and harsh bangs. Wherever she is now, he hopes that she's safe and happy.

TJ had always treated Charlie like a little brother. He'd even give him extra cash for snacks every single week. Charlie always admired TJ's bright red Nike shoes. One day, TJ got arrested by the cops in front of Charlie. It turned out that TJ was selling a certain kind of product, and it wasn't chocolate.

Charlie's grandma cooked the most delicious spaghetti. It smelled like love. The sauce was made from fresh tomatoes that she grew on the building's rooftop. Charlie still thinks of her sweet smile that's missing a tooth, and the big, dark moles on her cheeks. The cancer eventually got to her. When she was put to rest, Charlie was forced to go into a new home. But it wasn't really a home. The memories from that place are the ones that Charlie conjured up in his mind every now and then.

After snapping out of his trance, Charlie picks up a decrepit brown brick from the building and sets it on the passenger side floor of his pristine Cadillac. When he arrives back at his quaint house in a quiet neighbourhood, he places the brick in the soil of his tomato garden and smiles.

About the Writer: Zach Murphy is a Hawaii-born writer with a background in cinema. His chapbook *Tiny Universes* (Selcouth Station Press) is available in paperback and eBook. He lives with his wonderful wife Kelly in St. Paul, Minnesota.

A Friend from Another Star

Pauline Davenport

Based on Lois Lane's inner monologue where she falls in love with Superman, during the flying sequence in the 1978 film, Superman.

They don't make them like they used to.
Movies, I mean.
Male characters too.
Are you reading my mind?
I wish I was holding hands with a god but I'm a fool.
Yeah, me.
A woman, but still like a child, dreaming of being whisked away.
Do you know what you're doing to me?
Do I belong in the sky too?
My time is up.
I'm all played out.
Curtains please!
The world made me look at it again, again, and again.
I'm still looking at the sky.
Trying to catch a glimpse of a craft or a bright moving orb.
Are you just a friend from another star?
Did Krypton really explode?
Fly to me.
Here I am.
I'm still waiting for God, Superman, Pista Sophia, Jesus, Magdalene, Gaia.
For someone or something to activate my DNA, to help me achieve what
I came to earth to realise.

I'm just a human being searching for a union, stuck in the illusion of separation, of the us and them.
Beautiful friend in your blue and red suit, don't give your power away.
Help me love you more.
Here I am in my glasses with my notebook and pen.
Read my mind.
Are you the missing link?
This is a shift-time to a new world where we birth new realities, defeat the gatekeepers to achieve unity.
We are the shift moving from the lower density.
We are the real story.
Life is a beautiful thing.
Can I share it with you?
Do I need permission to honour my divine birthright, to return to the source?
Can I do all this work myself, to achieve dominion over matter?
Can you help me fly?

About the Writer: Pauline is an aspiring writer, full-time mum, and a visual artist. She lives in Wales and works as a teacher. She likes walking her dog and loves the sunshine.

Stage Presence

Amaka Ngana

It had been fifteen years since June had performed. June C. Jeffers was one of the biggest musicians in the world in the late 90s and early 2000s. She had hit after hit and was named the Queen of Hip-hop Soul. In a male dominated industry, she had carved a niche for herself. However, years later, she felt that she was no longer relevant in the music industry. Her albums weren't doing the numbers or topping the billboard charts like they used to. She was lucky if she even got booked for shows or had people attend hers, so she didn't bother scheduling anymore. She longed for the old days.

The music industry had changed. New musicians came along, who were younger, more energetic, and more appealing. Their songs were fast and catchy, and she wasn't used to that. She reminisced about the times when her name appeared on all the television channels, when her songs played nonstop on radio stations, and she secured countless interviews. Now, in comparison to these youngsters, she was nowhere. Social media was not available back then, and now that it was extremely popular, she watched the new musicians gross more followers than she did. Although she was verified on all accounts because of her name, it still hurt to know she no longer had the same recognition. Indeed, the music industry had changed. So, she was surprised when she got the call from Da Calvin to perform at the Super Bowl.

The Super Bowl, one of the biggest events in the United States, attended live by thousands of people and watched through the media by millions. Although a football sporting event, the half-time segment of the show is the most anticipated, because each year, the National Football League (NFL), which is in charge of the Super Bowl, invites the most popular musicians to perform.

Calvin, as she fondly called him, told her that the NFL wanted musical legends to perform that year. He was contacted by the NFL to bring together this team of legends and he had suggested her alongside Fresh Michael and Big Tee. She didn't know whether to cry or scream. Was she a legend? Her? Did people really see her as that? Did people still look up to her? The imposter syndrome crept into her thoughts. She fixed a private meeting with Calvin. They had been friends for decades and he was the one who brought her into the music industry. He saw her talent even when she doubted it.

'June,' he said, holding her hands and looking straight into her eyes when they met up and she had explained all her fears to him.

'I know your concerns. I know the game has changed, but guess what, you're still June. You're still the girl from New Orleans that sold millions of records and pulled crowds wherever she went. Sure, you've gotten older, but so have your audience. They've grown with you. New talent will always come, but trust me, there's nothing like listening to the old songs that made the industry what it is today, even the young folk can't deny that. Trust in yourself, trust in your talent and trust that we're going to do great at the Super Bowl,' he told her.

'We're from the South, let's show them what a real half-time performance looks like.' She needed no other words to lift up her spirit.

She knew what she had to do. It took hours of rehearsals and training to get her back in shape. Luckily, she had always been physically active throughout the years, so it wasn't exceptionally hard for her. She watched the music videos of her old songs to remind herself of who she was and how good she was at performing. She practiced the old steps and hired a choreographer to teach her new ones. She practiced her singing with her vocal coach to make sure her voice would be excellent that day, as she wasn't interested in lip syncing. She wanted to sing and dance like she actually did when she was younger, before autotune became in vogue.

The NFL posted online the promotional picture of the musicians lined up for the Super Bowl halftime performance and instantly her following on social media skyrocketed. People sent her private messages expressing their joy that she would be performing and how much they loved her. Family members asked for free tickets to attend the live show while other people reposted and soon, she began to feel like the star June again. She felt seen, wanted, and appreciated for her talent; this made her work harder at her rehearsals. She silently prayed that she was actually doing good, and that the real-life commendation would be the same as it was online.

On the day of the Super Bowl, she was backstage with Da Calvin, Fresh Michael and Big Tee. It felt just like old times again, when they would all be in the same city or at the same event performing. They were opening acts for one another's shows; those were the golden years.

'June!' Big Tee exclaimed when he saw her.

'Tee!' she fondly called him. Tee was huge in size, extroverted and very talkative. He was her colleague as well as her biggest fan. She felt her body swallow up in his arms as she hugged him.

'Can you believe this is happening? When I got the call, I was like 'just a couple of black folks from down south here to do their thing!' he kept on talking. 'You look good, well you always look good. Been practising too I heard,' he said.

'Thanks, Tee. I'm nervous, you know. All these people are coming to watch the game, to watch us. I haven't been in a crowd like this in years. I mean, I watch the Superbowl and all, but to be here in person is just ecstatic,' she responded.

'I know right! So many people, Fresh Michael and I were just talking about it. Feels so good and brings back so many memories. By the way, I'm loving these leotards you've got going on, June!' he said smiling at her gold sequined leotard costume and gold thigh high boots.

‘Tee!’ she said playfully, punching his arm and laughing at his comment.

Fresh Michael was seated on a long couch on the opposite corner, attentively on his phone with Da Calvin next to him. He was always the chill one, tall, lanky, and very good looking. He was wearing an ash-coloured sweat suit, appropriate for his laid-back nature. June envied him, after all these years and at such a big event, here he was in sweat suits and calm as though nothing big was about to happen.

‘Hi Michael,’ she said, smiling as she walked towards him. He looked up uninterested and lit up immediately when he saw her.

‘June!’ he beamed. ‘It’s so good to see you. When Calvin told us you were performing, I mean, I almost teared up. The queen of Hip Hop Soul herself,’ he said bowing down jokingly.

‘Please stop, Tee has already teased me enough.’ She laughed.

‘You know it’s true,’ he continued. Michael loved her; she knew it. He had always loved her from their early performing days. But he was shy, never admitted it and accepted his place in the friend zone.

‘How are you always so chill Michael? My nerves are killing me here.’ She responded.

Michael shrugged.

‘June, life isn’t that hard. It’s either people like the performance or they don’t and quite frankly you can never say which is going to happen, so why disturb yourself about an outcome you can’t foresee? All I’m sure of is, we’re just going to go out there and give the performance of our lives like we always do, and that’s it.’ He responded. She smiled at him; this was why she loved him back, although like him, she never admitted it.

‘Thanks Michael, for always knowing what to say and always being so chill,’ she said, hugging him.

‘Five minutes till half time,’ someone came and announced. Everyone stood up and began to take their places.

‘You ready?’ Da Calvin said to them. ‘Let’s go get them, let’s do it like 2007 all over again.’

The crowd roared as they came on stage. The stadium was packed to full capacity and the energy was powerful. Da Calvin and Fresh Michael went on first, performing their legendary song ‘Down South.’ People screamed and rapped to the lyrics of the popular song. Then there was the long-awaited moment when Fresh Michael would do the ‘southern walk,’ a shuffle dance move he had invented when the song was released. Their performance brought back memories to June. She and her dancers were standing on the opposite stage with its lights dim so people couldn’t see them yet. She knew her cue and was waiting patiently for it. She always felt like a different person on stage and the energy from the crowd was pumping her up to do what she knew how to do best in life; perform.

At that moment she heard Da Calvin ending his verse and scream into the mic: ‘Please welcome my girl, June C. Jeffers!!!’

The crowd roared even louder. The lights came on, fixing directly on her and the stage. Her gold sequined leotards and boots shone brightly. She held the microphone to her lips and started singing her hit song ‘Rainy Days.’ It felt at that moment as if she was lost in another world with just the crowd, the dancers, and the arena; nothing else mattered. She sang her heart out into the microphone and her feet moved to the rhythm of the music; she felt like leaves on a tree dancing to the direction of a strong wind. She was June again, not the June who was nervous, or the June who had doubted herself, but the June C. Jeffers, the powerful musician. The dance moves came to her naturally and didn’t feel rehearsed. She moved to every beat and fed on the energy of the crowd. She took momentary pauses to allow the crowd to sing along and then dance to the beat of the song again.

By the time the experience was over, she remembered the reason she fell in love with music in the first place. It was food for her soul, it was her means of expression, of communicating to the world all her life experiences; all she faced, all she feared, all she had gone through, all she loved. Through the lyrics of her song, she found a voice, an instrument to release pain, frustration, joy, and hope. Through her performances, she found a crowd willing to listen to her, willing to go on a journey with her, and people, who for once seemed interested in her life. It gave her a

platform and a voice she never had as a child, and for that she was always grateful for music and to be a performer. She hit the last notes of her song and slowly removed the mic from her lips like all seasoned musicians did. She heard the crowd scream immensely and only then did she open her eyes and realize the magnitude of what she had just done. She, June C. Jeffers had just relived her years of performance. It wasn't just in her memory anymore, it was real. She saw Fresh Michael wink at her and give her his bow as usual. She laughed from the other side of the stage and blew him a kiss. The crowd was on their feet giving her a standing ovation. She was indeed still the Queen of Soul Hip Hop.

About the Writer: Amaka Ngana is a multidisciplinary creative from Nigeria who enjoys spending time in natural environments, art galleries, athletic events and immersing herself in a good book. Creative writing is one of her outlets to self-expression.

Letters to My Lover

Rukayia Siamwala

These letters examine nostalgia closely. The letters dedicated to a fantastical lover rejoy the narrator's memory, bringing out snippets from a past thoroughly enjoyed. It illustrates a multitude of experiences, swinging smoothly from the present to the past and vice versa.

Dear Sameer,

I have schizophrenic thoughts of you. I think of the many silken sheets we folded ourselves in, while Faiz recited several feverish episodes of love, lust, and revolution. In my caravan radio, a midget of a radio actually, pours out *Mujhse Pebli Si Muhabbat Mere Mehboob Na Maang*.

Surekha Sikri, the departed, recites in her hoarse voice, emphasizing on every nukta.

Do you remember that time, when we sang alongside her, while I rested my forehead on your chest? Your heartbeat lulled me to sleep.

Love,
R.

Dear S,

This is my mama, in my mind's eye we have drifted through her many images on my phone. I tell you about her, her scent, her warmth, her childlike innocence, and her full throaty laugh.

Often, I want time to turn back, waiting expectantly for a memory to repeat itself. I sometimes jokingly tell her, 'Mama I wish I could become a part of your body again, to remain there forever...'

A hearty guffaw escapes you, without abandon you move your left leg onto mine, covering me in an intimate embrace. Our eyes meet and we are locked in a moment of tenderness. Your fingers edge towards my forehead, gently lifting a strand of hair, as if to examine it. With absolute ease, you push the rogue strand behind my ear. My round face (heart shaped as I prefer and as Mama calls it) comes into view.

Drifting to lullabies, I tell you, that as a child, she would place me on her lap and sing, 'Sapno ki dor bandhi, Palkon ka palna, So ja meri rani mere kehna na taalna...'

as she patted me off to sleep.

As age wound me and her on its restless fingertips, I find that I inherited her style, her obsession with junk jewellery, her sense of being, her love for poetry and art, her passion to teach, her throaty laugh and her features.

As if in agreement, you say like many before you, 'Yes, you are a spitting image of your mother.'

Yours,

R.

Dear S,

I have been writing a lot, inventing a million characters, a million fantasies, and a million ideas.

An image, extremely vivid and might I add rather beautiful crossed my mind. You and I were in it, curled up against each other, holding onto Siddharth Dasgupta's 'Letters from an Indian Summer'. It was like I had memorised it during our time together.

With one hand you held onto the page and with the other you gently ran your fingers through my hair. It felt tranquil. You pushed my legs apart vertically, just to casually tuck yours in.

Your almond shaped eyes smiled into mine. A reaction to something that you had read. You read it again, this time out loud. I was thrilled at the sound of it. A laugh escaped me. In your maroon shirt, unbuttoned haphazardly, you moved towards me, pressing your pinkish lips against mine in a sweet kiss.

The Christmas season is here S.

Love,
R.

Dear S,

I like to wander London alone. Just aimlessly sit and stare at the massive skies. It is art in itself. The breeze circling its way into my hair, creating a million knots.

The affair of finding the right rectangular shaped inscribed stone bench under the mighty artsy semi cloudy ceiling, propping oneself on it, and staring at the ripples in the majestic Thames is another thing altogether.

It is physically painful to extract oneself from a scenario such as this. So close to death. Get up, dust yourself, pick up your belongings and move. It is a portrait of beauty and to remove oneself from it is heart breaking. Have you ever felt that the camera fitted in your brain goes off, freezing the moment forever, only to be visited in memory?

I know this feeling; it is too familiar to disown. I have felt it too many times in the past with you. Those long drives across the rugged, bumpy, cracked roads of a city of immense freedom. You drove, I sat. We sneaked glances at each other as the music and the night's atmosphere moved us. A sweet ache persists at the centre of my being. That night ended young but stole a million lives from me.

‘Waqt ki qaid mein zindagi hai magar,
chand ghadiyan yahi hai jo azaad hai,
inko khokar meri jaan e jaan umr bhar na taraste raho’

Yours,
R.

Dear S,

I want to tell you a story, a well-informed tale of my grandmother and her love for cooking. Her love for us usually poured out through her biryani, her basundi, falooda, custard or custar’ as she called it. She was a healthy woman with a rare smile. Her smiles picked appearances on scattered occasions. When she smiled, the edges of her lips would pull up automatically, and drag themselves lethargically bordering onto the beginning of her cheeks. Her eyes would light up, housing a fire within her.

These smiles came our way especially when a wisecrack was uttered. She was a witty woman with an opinion! Quiet like my father but oh so much wittier. Her solitary comments would often hang around one for a while, taking its own sweet time to sting if intended. That venom would float around one’s system for a much longer time inviting unnecessary complications.

She relished her food as she did our expressions when we ate what she plated for us. I vividly remember her seated on a paatla, her hair tied back and covered with a Noori cap, while she made rotis for our elaborate lunches. Sundays were biryani days, a massive aluminium utensil of mutton biryani would sit beside her, as she placed a serving right in the centre of the thaal.

Now in my kitchen in London, when I stand opposite the hob, ready to light it and I fill the saucepan with oil, I add 1 tbsp of cumin seeds, 2 cinnamon sticks, 2 black cardamoms, and a few whole garlic cloves. Then I add to this fragrant mix, some chopped onions, tomatoes, chicken marinated in yoghurt and a handful of rice, I am reminded of her. It feels as though she is with me, guiding me through it.

I can almost hear her call out to my father, proclaiming her excitement out loud, as she caresses my head and peppers my forehead with a million loving kisses.

Yours,
R.

About the Writer: Ruqaiya is currently pursuing her MA in Creative Writing at the University of Westminster. Her interests are scattered amongst the various spaces of art, dance, cinema, theatre, culture, politics, and aromatherapy. On most days, one will find her on the bus responsibly drifting between eavesdropping, glancing outside the window, or hiding behind a book.

NON-FICTION



Sandcastles

Nasnin Naser

It all started a few years ago, this habit of tethering oneself to paintings featuring ‘children at seaside.’ It became a refuge from her intolerable ennui. One afternoon, while she was at her desk, a small digression from her work invited her eyes to a painting hung on the opposite wall. It was a realistic portrayal of a bunch of red flowers emerging from a dark background. The image made her realise how such photographic detailing in paintings never appealed to her. She would prefer something nebulous and elusive. The thought made her recollect her liking for paintings by modern painter Dorothea Sharp. She was just starting to explore some impressionistic works at that time and got carried away by its characteristic roughness and indistinctiveness on canvas. She used to gaze for hours at the paintings of Miss Sharp, whom she discovered in her search for the avant-garde.

Sharp’s roughly stroked bright colours on the canvas projecting a fantasy world, especially of children, captivated her immensely. The leisurely world of children in different places: some at the beaches, some wandering in the wilderness and picking flowers, some near the pond feeding the ducks, some fishing on the lakes, some walking with their mothers through the bright sunshine moors, brought back to her a feeling of serenity she lost somewhere in the threshold of her teens. She would place herself among those flowers, beaches, and children, yearning to sink into such an idyllic tranquil world; a time when she herself was once oblivion to the “fret and fevers of the world” as Keats lamented; a time when she was a child; and only a child.

Sharp's 'seaside' paintings of children in particular bewitched her so much that whenever her mind became frozen and lifeless, mocking absurd existences, she sought solace in that life of colours. In paintings like 'Children on the Seashore,' 'Low Tide,' 'Making Sandcastles,' 'On the Beach,' 'Girl and Seagulls,' 'The Sand,' to name a few, she found a long lost joy by the seaside, which as an adult, one often fails to acknowledge. It's as if you could hear the giggles and shrieks of the littles ones, exhilarating in the simple pleasures of nature, through the conveyance of a sense of movement by its vibrant shades. Gazing into those works she would slowly slip into her own childhood spent on beaches. A vivid remembrance of how she thoroughly enjoyed the dalliance of the unsettling sea, the waves showing its power by tugging at her leg, making her dizzy, a sensation of moving and moving without moving at all. The surge of water, the bubbling froth, the swishing noise, all bear a whole world that brings forth pure bliss, awakening a sense of amazement that children usually are blessed with. And then she was fluid, formless, fit to be contained anywhere, to be poured into a glass and go beyond the brim, to be spilled and evaporate. That was childhood by the seaside, where she became the sea, the sand, the wind.

On the contrary to these impressionistic portrayals there were the famous surrealist paintings which interested her but affected her in a gloomy way. The more she looked at the abstract figures and dreamy images of the surrealists, the less she could be at ease. Since those images purposefully uncover the disturbing aspects of the subconscious, it often would take her to some unpleasant memories regarding her childhood. She would rather avoid such confrontations and thereby reject the very objective of such paintings. She preferred to be at ease with these impressionistic ones cuddling her back into the cocoon of her nostalgic childhood at the beaches and moors, fully engrossed in a game or two with the other kids.

The present dislike for a realistic painting is something she never thought upon seriously. Maybe because it resembles a photograph; she feels it lacks the artistic reminder of being a 'painting.' In between a mere mimesis and an extreme abstractness, she would like to fall into a feeling or experience, be decently nostalgic, to find what is lost primarily, to recuperate into a moment of delight.

There is an old dilapidating castle within us that we might have built some years back. A sandcastle made in our childhood on one of the seashores where we played. At times when the sky is grey and the storm is about to begin and the castle is on the verge of peril, we would perpetually tether ourselves to something or other, often a mimesis of one form or the other that Plato condemned and Aristotle beautified, a painting, a poem, a song, to rise in nostalgia among a million things that tend to fall apart within us.

About the Writer: Nasnin is an aspiring poet, who very much enjoys the blossoming of her everyday impressions and thoughts into verses. As she gets deeply inspired by great characters, lines, and plot structures, she can't resist retelling/twisting famous tales and literary personas with her own imaginative colouring. After seven years of teaching, her passion for writing drifted her to finally to pursue an MA in Creative Writing at the University of Westminster, in search of 'fresh woods, and pastures new.'

London Calling

James R.W Hayward

London calling, London calling. Are you receiving, over?

I wake up, bleary eyed, before the first hot coffee of the morning has passed my lips. The dark early winter morning; would you be able to say it is still night, perhaps? I know why I am up so early. Today is no ordinary day.

I haven't had a reason to journey into London since November. This old [only 22], jaded [you would be too after a year of lockdown], and cynical [what was there to not be cynical about right now?] a student turned railwayman, who finally returned to being a student in the cold and dark days of early January, was up again at the crack of dawn.

Railways. The arteries of London. Without them, where would I be? I would not have the means to travel nor be able to work during a time when university classes seemed a foreign prospect. That, and since those halcyon days of watching old, fuzzy video tapes of Thomas the Tank Engine, that most British of children's shows, railways have always held an allure that few other things in my world possessed.

Speaking of foreign prospects, is that not where I am going today? Yes, the airport. London Airport; Heathrow. This budding writer, a man of many roles - past and present - is on the move, but not fleeing to somewhere better today, alas. I had a greater purpose today.

Hearing you loud and clear London. Preparing for take-off.

I batten down the hatches against the cold - my coat, and my trusty old British Rail hat, a leftover from my time working with the trains being my first line of defence. I swallow down that coffee; secondary measures, naturally, warming me from the inside, and adding that perk that my brain, addled with a mix of exhaustion and herbal sleeping pills so desperately needed.

I make sure I have what I need. Tickets? Check. Bank card? Check. Packet of mints? Ever present in my coat pocket. Yo-Yo? Next to the mints, could be necessary, airport queues can be a nightmare. I look in the mirror. Yep, no changes there, the same as when I went to sleep the night before. Looking OK I guess, still clean-shaven. Better than the unshaved 'caveman' look as my mum would so bluntly put it, although meaning it as a joke. She's still asleep upstairs; she knows that I'm going out. I'll be seeing her later when the job is done.

The job. Too formal. This isn't some secret mission, or task. Except, with a touch of irony, that's exactly what it feels like to me. No, stop right there. You are not going to lose your nerve now. You had a hard time keeping it yesterday, ended up hitting the pillows at 2am, and only after taking those vile sleeping pills. Sure, those anime girls on your wall posters, and the others you have as body pillows to hold when you get lonely from the silence of your so far solo existence, they don't judge your insomnia, for it is they who know the secret of this mission too.

Heck, it isn't a secret, is it? An Open secret? Guess that fits better, after all, Mum knows, and so do my closest friends since it was kind of hard to disguise my intentions after asking them whether the Tube was even still running, and they sure as heck weren't going to shut up until I told them.

This is London tower, roger, you are clear for take-off, clear for take-off, over.

I'm scarcely conscious that in all this time I have been thinking, I have set off already, and before long, I hear the mournful drone of electric motors informing me that I have reached the first waypoint in my journey; the small station of my town on a branch line to take me into the city.

The train is old, but comfortable. We must be doing about 100mph, and it shows. I might still be sleepy, but as the morning sun rises over the city, I watch it come into view like a king surveying his domain as names of familiar places race by. Brentwood, Romford, Ilford.

We are now approaching Stratford.

It feels but a moment since I boarded, and yet here I am, changing again, entering the equally familiar red, white and blue cylinder of the Central Line. Unlike the last one, these trains were slightly newer.

I couldn't tell our speed; the windows served no purpose in these tunnels where all was inky black. Compare this to the dimly lit interior brightened by a few hidden fluorescent tube lights that flickered with the snaking of the train around corners, a motion that's barely perceptible if not for that discarded pop bottle rolling across the floor with the motion of the curves.

More stations. Mile End, Liverpool Street, Bank, Holborn, Oxford Circus. Ah, here we go, another familiar stop, and my next checkpoint. Almost feels like a video game, following a path to reach a goal. Kind of makes you realise, video games are like a journey too, they have a beginning that leads to an end. Kind of like life too, a beginning, a middle and an end. Ah, to be philosophical while riding a grubby escalator deeper into London's core. Wouldn't be the first time I had an epiphany in such an odd place.

The Bakerloo Line. This thing could be called the Museum Line as it has the oldest operating Tube trains in the country. These have a distinctly dated feel, having been fitted as new, with the liberal application of tasteless 1970's Formica panels and brown colours everywhere. Sure, the Bakerloo was the brown coloured line on the map, but a brown interior really did give the trains a 1970's feel; appropriate since they were built in the 1970's, to what was clearly the same blueprint as the older 1938 stock trains; the blueprint for many of the pre-1980's Tube trains.

Ah, but this was all flotsam to distract myself from what I knew I was facing down. Talk of trains, of engineering, of video games, of elevators/lifts, of any of my interests, it might be what I know best, but that was just it. I was distracting myself from what I was really facing; a situation almost alien to me which was slowly chugging into sight with the rhythm of the Bakerloo's old clunky electrics.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we are now approaching London on our final descent, please fold up your tables, and fasten your seatbelts for landing.

She would almost certainly be flying in on a marvel of modern avionics, the modern jet airliner. So much technology, it could make even an experienced engineer's head spin. I'm on the lookout looking like a dinosaur by comparison. But who am I kidding, she'd probably love this - after all, what an experience for someone who'd never seen our fair city before?

We had been talking since the start of the year. My cynicism was at an all-time high before the class year began. I had lost faith in the world. My freedom was gone. My life seemed to be going nowhere, and for the first time since that dark period seven years ago where my life seemed to be in eternal decline, I felt like things were crashing again. I feared the future, but more than anything, I feared myself, and my own lack of self-belief made this even harder to take, just like before.

Then a light broke through the darkness. She might have been on the other side of the world, but there was something there between us, a connection, a shared bond. Even behind a computer screen, such was the way things had to be for now, this was the most human interaction I had been party to in many months. Every time we came to talk about something that we each felt would cause a problem, it never was. We just accepted it, just as we gradually accepted each other.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are experiencing some minor turbulence, please return to your seats and fasten your seatbelts.

We agreed that I would come to the airport to meet her. Nobody should have to feel alone, anywhere in the world, and from the moment that we met online, I had, in the back of my mind, committed to this journey, even before I asked some weeks later, and she gladly accepted, a weight off my racing mind for sure. I had boarded one of the new Crossrail trains at Paddington, bound for Heathrow. This was it, the home straight, the moment I had been at once anticipating and dreading.

The guys at the university's Anime Society, some of my closest friends, joked that I had managed to get myself a girlfriend when I told them of the journey, forced to talk after I asked them about the status of the Tubes to Heathrow in the prior weeks – I guess they wondered why I would inexplicably choose to head for the airport at a time like this.

I love those guys, what a bunch. We had stuck together during our undergraduate years, and doubtless, we would continue to stay together into the years beyond, comrades among the millions of ever-changing faces in this city.

I told them, they could read this entire thing however they wanted, but I was saying nothing, and laughed the whole thing off with them, mostly to take the perceived edge off the situation for myself. I won't try and pretend that they probably found this situation funnier than I did.

I couldn't say what any of this meant yet, and they probably knew that as well as I. Either that, or they really wanted to get rid of me and my questionable anime preferences by palming me off onto someone else. Yeah, that might be it. I smile at such stupidity, yet somehow, I wouldn't put it past them to try such a scheme, even in jest.

The next station is Heathrow Terminals 1,2,3 & 4.

Here we go, the final approach.

London tower, we are coming into land.

The lift takes me out of the tunnels of the station and into the terminal.

London tower, we have landed.

I find a coffee bar and repeat the morning hot coffee ritual all over again, this time paired with a mint from my pocket.

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for flying with us today.

I find a place to sit, remove the yo-yo from my pocket, and idly pass the time away, watching the plane dock with the walkway, sipping the coffee in my hand, and analysing the faces as they pass out to the rest of their days. Who knows if they are having an ordinary day, or an extraordinary day?

All I know, and all I care about, is that someone in that crowd, filing through the customs screenings, is going to make this ordinary day extraordinary for me. A long journey, maybe 90 mins from my home, but a worthy one. For her, maybe ten to twelve hours from home, at least? Makes mine look like a walk round the block. Guess it is when you're used to this place as I have been for what seems like an eternity. My first journey of this day has ended, ironically at the place where many begin.

And yet, I knew my next journey was about to begin, this one not completed alone for a change.

The end is the beginning, and eventually becomes the end again. Interesting how such an ordinary situation could hold such a deeper meaning, I mused, as the coffee slowly went cold in its cardboard cup, and I pondered that idea, eternity, journeys, and an airport, as the world drifted by around me.

About the Writer: James Hayward has an MA in Creative Writing from the University of Westminster. He takes inspiration from the world around him, and the things and people he comes across in everyday life, amongst many other things. Railways have been a key part of his life since as far back as he can remember, as both a hobby, and as a critical service.

Walking Around My History

Naima Young

I wanted to go and see a friend on the other side of the village. Normally I would've driven because it takes about ten minutes instead of this hour-long walk but I drank too much last night so I couldn't get behind the wheel.

My friend lives on one side of the village and I on the other, so the secondary school we used to go to was normally our meeting point. However, today she wasn't meeting me halfway as we were going to have a movie day at hers while her parents were at work, and I couldn't ask her for a lift because she hadn't gotten her full licence yet.

So, I decided to head out on foot.

I used to walk these roads to get to my secondary school. Every. Single. Day. There could have been a hurricane with raindrops the size of golf balls hitting the ground and I would still have walked.

I couldn't do what most kids at my school could, ask Mum and Dad or my brother or sister for a lift. My Dad was at work by 6am, my Mum couldn't drive, and I didn't have any siblings to bribe. So, off I went, soaked before school even started.

Out of all of my friends, I was the one who lived the furthest from our school. I would pick up my rucksack (which I hoped would have all the right books I needed in it already). Next was my art book which I used to slide between my bag and back through the straps, so I didn't need to carry it properly. After which I'd grab my keys and phone so I could listen to whatever band I was obsessed with that week on an old YouTube video download app that was most definitely illegal.

I step out of my parents' front door, as I had done so many before, but this time it feels different. It feels like I'm walking in my own footsteps. Walking the exact same route, I used to walk for so many years. Doing it again as an adult, I can almost see a teenage version of myself in my M&S shoes and jumper that was way too big walking out the door ahead of me.

We walk side by side, two generations of the same person.

I start my walk just outside of the little cul-de-sac, from here there used to be three different directions, whereas now there are only two. One is to the left towards the train station, the other is to the right via a tree covered path. There used to be a cut way through the middle towards a path that led to the houses on the other side of the trees. But whoever had moved into the house closest to the tree line had fenced it shut. I used to use this shortcut all the time and chop my journey time by all of thirty seconds. It doesn't seem like much, but when you're tired, hungry, and wanting to get into the warm, those thirty second make a world of difference.

I turn right towards the pathway. It leads me to a dead end in Martley Gardens. I walk up the path, hit the main road then make a left, trying not to get run over while crossing the road. It isn't a busy road, but it's enough to make me agitated while standing at its side. There is a crossing, but I ignore it, choosing to cross closer to the entrance to Stanier Way. The houses along this road have always looked expensive with their drives made of small stones rather than a slab of concrete. They also have the brick showing on the front of their house, not like mine which was painted an off-white colour. Some of them even have bushes trimmed as fencing between houses. They just oozed money. At least, I always thought they did.

I carry on up this road past Garratt Close on the left and Gresley Gardens on the right until I hit another dead end down towards the odd numbers of Stanier Way, or that's what the sign says. I never used to pay attention to the road names until now. My walk to school was always muscle memory, so I never really thought about it. This little road leads me towards Old Shamlehurst Lane.

If I went left, I would end up at the pub at the end of the road, where I spent most of my childhood drinking coke and eating garlic bread, but that leads me back to the main road, so I head right instead. There's a gate to stop cars going up the lane that still allows pedestrians and cyclists to pass. It is covered by what I used to think was a forest, with trees so thick they'd provide shelter on rainy days with a few drop-lets falling through the leaves. In winter when the trees are bare, like they are today, a skeleton effect is created. A rib cage over the path keeps the people underneath it safe.

This section of the walk was my alone time. Just long enough away from my friends, just before walking through the door to see my Mum. It was a time for me to chill. It still brings me a sense of peace as I walk through the comforting trees. I walk past the dirt mound on my right and as I walk, I watch my younger self climb through the trees and stomp over roots, trying to find the most creative way to get through the muddy area and escape at the end of the lane.

I reach the top and start walking down Old Shamblehurst Lane South past the Hedge End Household Waste and Recycling Centre and towards the Tesco Express. I went inside to get a Red Bull and thought about how much money I used to spend here to avoid making my own lunch by buying a £3 meal deal instead. Tesco brings back some fond memories. I used to wait here for James as he emerged from the top of Chaterhouse Way from his home in the housing estate behind the row of trees at the end of this road. It's also where Emily used to buy Dip Dabs instead of buying lunch and get sherbet all down her school jumper before even stepping out of Tesco's sliding doors.

I smile to myself walking past the vets, the hair salon and the Indian towards the pharmacy, the church and the doctors' surgery before carrying on past St Luke's close. Down this road there are new houses. They were still under construction during my 5 years of school. I was told the houses got busted for growing weed and had to be torn down. I never found out the actual reason, but if you asked anyone that walked past those houses, they would all tell you the same. They look fresh, as if they weren't just a construction site, I used to walk past a few years ago. It's weird to think that kids who attend my old school now may never have seen them under construction and yet, that's all I ever knew.

A little further down the road is where my friend Vick used to live. I used to meet them on the main road knowing that they would always be late. I remember one time they got so excited to see me after the summer break that they dropped their phone, and we spent a good 10 minutes trying to find the battery that had popped out and landed somewhere on the floor. I found it camouflaged next to a black bin. I rarely see them now, but I like going past, knowing that I would always have a friend to walk with.

Skipping Navigators Way and Birchwood Gardens, past Peter Coopers, and the chippy we head to Grange Road. There are two ways to cross this road. Either on mass when the light turns red and the red man goes green, or you run hoping that a car won't hit you. I spent many mornings making sure my friends didn't get run over as they walked into oncoming traffic, yet to this day I never learned and do the same. Who has the time to stand there and wait when the tutor starts in 5 minutes and the school is still 10 minutes up the road! I look at the red light now, debating whether to wait for it to change or not. I don't, and a red ford fiesta almost hits me. I can feel my past self laughing at me as I calm the racing of my heart.

I carry on my way past Westward Road, past the bus stop up Wildern Lane with the house that never takes down its Christmas decorations. I guess they've moved because they aren't there anymore. Another current of memory today's kids will never experience. Down this road is where I showed a new necklace to Emily and Vick. Emily walked into a lamppost and Vick laughed so hard that they weren't paying attention and walked into a bin on the path. I can still hear the belly laughs of that day, remembering how stupid we all were that morning. It's also on this road where, even now after school, you couldn't see between green jumpers and white polos. Not with all the students leaving at 3:15 on the dot and trying to get out the gates as quickly as possible. Spilling out onto the narrow road that could only really contain two friends rather than three, struggling between staying on the curb or walking on the road and changing height every time a parked car was in the way.

I walk up this road and see a few others now wearing that green jumper and that stupid tie that I retired from 5 years ago. Now stored in a cupboard, never used but not quite let go of either.

I walk past the primary school I didn't go to and stand in front of my old secondary school. I can smell the chlorine from the public swimming pool and the way too big sign on the way too small Berry Theatre and the D@rt centre for arts, advertising its a School Centred Initial Teacher Training.

Wildern School Performing Arts Academy.

It's just how I remember it. I watch the teenage me go through the gates with her friends, her tie not done up properly and her black socks with skulls on them. I watch her, happy. That school brought a lot of good and a lot of bad. I am grateful I can look back and see, though things may have changed along the way and the people I knew I don't know now anymore. I can still have these amazing memories to look back on in my hometown and be happy that it all came down to this silly little walk I had to do rain or shine because my Dad worked and my Mum couldn't drive.

About the Writer: Naima is a prose and poetry writer. It has been her passion for a very long time, starting at A-Levels and now doing her Masters in Creative Writing. When not writing, she can be seen rock climbing, reading, and working in the pub where she gets most of her character inspiration.

POETRY



Pesto

Eleanor Rees

I have read a hundred poems in my time,
About how a particular food,
Has sent a particular poet,
Zooming blissfully back,
To a simpler time.

From Blackberries and Butter,
To a Raspberry Room,
Each bite and crunch,
Every lick and gorge,
Places the glory of childhood
in each poet's mind.

Why is it so?

That food has this power over us?
Just a taste can wipe the stress away,
And envelop us in a wondrous trip
down memory lane,
Where the streets
are lined with
Dad's pizza crust,
And mum's vanilla sponge
cake creates a gate,
That no demons
can pass.

For me that food is Pesto,
Thick, green and glorious,
Slathered in salty sovereignty
Over pasta, and mixed with
Garden green peas,
Then showered with a

Generous sprinkling of grated cheese,
This dish has gotten me through
Heartbreaks or Hangovers,
Tears or Tantrums,
Ill health,
Mine or someone else's.
This dish has gotten me through.
Just a taste takes me back,
To a little girl in a bright blue leotard,
And a matching skirt she enjoys twirling in,
It makes her feel like the princess,
She wishes she could be.
She is running up
The stone path home,
The ground hard underneath,
Her thin, pink satin ballet shoes,
But she doesn't care,
Even though her mum yells at her
that she is ruining her shoes,
That she will not buy
her another pair,
That she'll have to explain
to her ballet teacher
why they got ruined.
She doesn't care,
For she can already smell
the basil infused wonder,
So strong even through
the front door,
And she knows that in less
than ten minutes,
She will have an extra large helping
of her favourite food
in the world.

And even though her mum
Is yelling at her,
She will place the bowl in front of her
with a kiss on her forehead,
And this combination will make
her feel safer than anything else in the world.
It is all worth the risk.
That little girl's smile is worth 1000 watts,
And her world is filled with every colour
under the sun,
She can be a dancer,
a farmer, a writer or a princess,
Anything feels possible,
So long as she can eat
her Pesto pasta with grated cheese.
Though time and pressure have taken
some of the watts out,
And reality has dimmed some
of the colours in the world.
I will still sit and eat
a million bowls
of Pesto pasta,
Just to feel like that little girl again.
And for a wonderful moment
after the first bite
of each bowl,
I will feel just as safe now
as I did then.
So who am I to judge those other poets?
When a mere jar of Pesto,
Has the same effect on me.

About the Writer: Eleanor is a recent graduate of English Literature and History and, after studying and enjoying other's work for so long, has decided to try her hand at Creative Writing. After re-finding her love for it during the Covid 19 Pandemic. She writes predominantly prose and poetry and is currently working on a piece that asks the question whether the heroes of Ancient Greece would have been as great if their stories had taken place in modern day London.

Weekend

Lee Bennett

In the house, which will soon be lost to us and to which I will never return, I am alone. It is a Friday evening in early summer and mum will soon be home with the shopping. She will have a fresh bloomer from which I'll rip chunks and eat dry while chips cook in oil. The smell, almost chemical, will fill the house and although not entirely pleasant, it is familiar and comforting, the trigger to our weekend ritual. Tomorrow we will visit Nan, my sister and I will argue over who gets to sit in the front seat of mum's red Escort. At Nans, we will eat ham rolls with piccalilli. My mum and her sisters will drink halves of lager in the garden. There will be an argument, probably, one that forms in seconds and is forgotten just as quickly, like lightning. On Sunday I will play football. On a hill behind our house, beyond our garden with the broken swing set that doubled as a goal and the shed containing cheap broken sun loungers, there is a school. Just red bricks and concrete, never usually beautiful, but that evening, the lowering sun fills its windows, turning them to gold, like alchemy. I stare transfixed at its conversion, now a glowing cathedral or a palace, where the sun lives. It's far away but I swear it warms my face. The theme to a kid's TV show plays, it's the saddest song I ever heard. I want to cry. I don't know what nostalgia is, but I feel it, I somehow predict it, knowing that I'll remember these few golden seconds for the rest of my life, and I am right. A car pulls into the driveway, and I run to the door.

About the Writer: Since graduating with a degree in Film in 1997, Lee has been working in finance. Excel spreadsheets have failed to satisfy his creative needs therefore he has undertaken a part time MA in Creative Writing at Westminster. He hopes to finally write that novel.

Tangerines

Bahja Alqazweeni

Will I stop missing you if I no longer eat tangerines?
A question has been boiling in my mind since the day
you were gone, leaving me with unpeeled tangerines.

I struggle every time I try to swallow.
Is it because I can no longer be that naïve child
who looks forward to your bare tangerines?

A zesty scent that subdued all of my anxieties
now leaves me with nothing but torturous longing.

I'm disgusted by this haunting of your luscious tangerines.
I peel hundreds every day
searching for that sweetness that you made me taste,
utter bitterness and tears are all I can feel.

It doesn't matter whose hands peel the tangerines
If they aren't yours
It will never be sweet.

About the Writer: Bahja is an aspiring poet. She fell in love with stories from a young age through the movies, anime, and books she consumed. Stories were the only way she escaped from this world. Bahja wanted to pursue an MA in creative writing to contribute to the world of storytelling. She uses creative writing as an outlet, and she further wants to explore the relationship between creative writing and psychology. Other than writing, she is interested in photography, digital art and spoken poetry.

Chequered Polyester Shirt

Mamta

(Based on the song ‘Still Fighting It’ by Lee Chan Sol)

Heading to work
My eyes caught a chequered polyester shirt,
A little dusty but shining the most,
It’s similar to the one my father owned –
The strongest person with skin so thin.
It’s been years, but I still miss him
Heading to work,
My eyes caught a chequered polyester shirt.

I was worried about my birthday,
We were struggling with money in those days.
Fiddling with his right pocket, he grabbed my hand,
‘You wanted some chips and a coke? Shall we go?’
I smiled back with sparkling eyes,
Why should I worry? He is right by my side.
Heading to work,
My eyes caught a chequered polyester shirt.

‘I want to become a grown-up soon,’ I remember telling him once.
And he replied, ‘Let’s have a drink.
What does it taste like?’
‘It’s bitter,’ I replied.
‘I’m a grown-up but it’s the same for me,
So rely on me when you can, as much as you want,
Cause life will still be hard even when you’re old.’
Heading to work,
My eyes caught a chequered polyester shirt.

Juggling life, I finally understood what he was trying to say.
I called him, 'Let's have some chicken...'
He laughed, 'Sure, and you don't have to pay.'
He told me to wait, so I kept waiting,
It's been years, but I still miss him,
Yes, I miss him.
Heading to work,
My eyes caught a chequered polyester shirt.

About the Writer: She is someone who wants to bring out each emotion that a person can feel. When people are reading her work, they connect with the characters, the words, the story, and the melody of each line. Fictional writing interests her the most. She is currently doing an MA in Creative Writing at the University of Westminster to bring more professionalism to her writing style. She wants to be remembered as a legend in the writing industry even after she is gone.

The Ferry Man

Shaymaa Alqallaf

Unwillingly, calm waters carry them
They flock in twos
The ferryman recognises their glances
He's seen them many times
A soulful meeting
He rows, feigns ignorance
A passenger looks forward with panic
Searches for providence's invisible hand
Possibilities of endlessness
Pain ensues worst-case scenarios
Disastrous lingering thoughts
The ferryman says,
'Familiar, yet it is not the one'
The other looks back with warmth and nostalgia,
Smiles that pervade each disaster
Conclusions unhappily made
Each birthed a life form
Uncertainties never truly end
Those I've left I'll see again
That is certain
The ferry man cries,
'Lethe is mercy to one, the other deserves my prayers'
Disparities exist between the two
Nothing between them
Yet everything ties them to each other
He delivers them, then sails into oblivion
You cannot turn back if you wish to be reborn
No one has seen the end of the river
Crystalised memories live with him

Each time they flock in twos
Charon, burdened with a thousand memories
Weeps alone after the sail
Alone, he crashes under the weight of feelings
Belonging to forgetful souls
Times he hasn't lived torment him
'They forget and only I remember!'
The stream carries no one
The dreadful winds signal him
Another pair has arrived!

About the Writer: Shaymaa is an English Literature graduate who decided to study Creative Writing to broaden her horizons. She loves everything that has to do with theory and criticism in movies and art and how it can be deeply embedded within culture. She is also big on Nietzsche. Everything that has to do with literature is familiar and home-like and so she is never a stranger in a bookstore!

I Remember Your Dark Curls

Victoria Trentacoste

I remember your dark curls,
My fingers combing through them,
The way they twisted round my pinkie
When you were due a cut.

I remember your dark curls,
Quiet evenings on the sheepskin,
Snuggled close, heads side by side,
I didn't know which curls were mine.

I remember your dark curls,
Bath time battles as were needed,
Soapy suds lathered on,
Despondent looks up at me.

I remember your dark curls,
Freshly washed, flying free,
Racing through the living room,
Doing laps, happy, clean.

I remember your dark curls,
How they whipped when you ran,
Taking off through the grass,
The morning sun on your back.

I remember your dark curls,
Warm and shining when you panted,
Tongue out, head up high,
Finding refuge in the shade.

I remember your dark curls,
And when they first turned grey,
Silver strands along your back,
Salt and pepper framed your face.

We called you dapper and distinguished,
Even joked and used old man,
But never ever simply old,
A distant fate, I dared not linger.

Then a call from miles away
That you'd been laid to rest,
I thought of those dark curls once more,
And had a tightness in my chest.

I wasn't there to hold you,
Or even say goodbye,
In a way I felt I failed you,
Not being by your side.

You and your curls sleep soundly now
Beneath your favourite tree.
With stars above to chase and scatter
A long way away from me.

I remember your dark curls
And every way you wore them.
Man's best friend and woman's too,
Goodnight, sweet boy, I love you.

About the Writer: Victoria Trentacoste is a creative writer and illustrator originally from New York. She dabbles in several art forms including fiction, poetry, watercolour, dip pen, photography, and dance. In everything she creates, Victoria strives to find her own voice.

Love Dies at the Dawn

Maria Tercia

when I was ready with every brain cell,
when each room of my soul became clean and bright
and my eyes were able to fill the space with peace and crystal empathy,

of all people, the gods sent you to me
like healing rain on a stormy night,
like evidence of truth's existence,
like the honourable joy of first love.

happily ever after,
at the bloodiest dawn
the gods took you away
like a reminder:
I'm a powerful cherry tree,
striking the roots of despair to sun and steel,
dancing an endless hurricane with cruel north winds,
sharing the bloom,
giving away everything for the best.

the harvest season is right on its way,
like an open book
I will become the beast
ready to see the light.

About the Writer: Maria Tercia is a poet and teacher from Kharkiv, Ukraine. She was nominated for various awards, took part in festivals, and was published in zines and almanacs. She is now left without a home due to the Russian-Ukrainian war.

George

Ciara Burrell

George and I grew up together
Since my first day on earth,
Just two twins who sought
Adventures high and low
And in between,
Every nook and cranny ours.

George's soft interior
Accompanied my own,
His gentle smile and childhood scent
Still with me to this day.
He sat upon my bed and waited
Waited
For my day to end
And our nightly huddle to begin,
His persistent smile
A comfort in the darkest times.

But he never wavered,
His tubby arms always outstretched
To tell me he was there.

And twenty-three years on,
We two still have each other,
George and I
And our close bond,
As he waits for me upon the bed,
Smiling.

About the Writer: Ciara is a teacher from Kent who has recently completed her MA in Creative Writing at the University of Westminster. She likes to write anything and everything but loves sitting down to write a comedy.

The Flying Object

Nisha Patel

A flying object in
the night, catches starry eyes, to
make the moon rise.

I remember it so well. It finding me in
my pyjamas, as I'm embarking on 2022.

Windows fall dim at the soaring night,
my eyelids witness. Something floats

like a ceramic Saturn bowl, fresh from
an alone art shelf. Citrus light from its

soul, makes the universe open windows.
Departs like a hat in the wind, a beacon

passing the time. I hear the clock go. My
eyes stop like a telescope. Longing for it

to be a shooting star. It's film clip like
appearance paints a moment. Stillness is

like a photograph. It's orange shadows.
I lift the curtain, spotting silk moon rays.

A beautiful thing lingering, a reflection
of a meteor. But this object wouldn't hit

us or anyone. My fingers press against
the pane of reality. I silently sigh. It was

a lantern, I thought. An adrift lamp of
love meditates on New Year's Day. Her

beams in a bubble, a disguise rooting
back to a candle. The scent of old times.

About the Writer: Nisha Patel is a young writer who lives and studies in London. She is currently studying a BA in Creative Writing and English Language at the University of Westminster.

Synonyms

Mehak Zehra

‘The only constant in life is change.’- Heraclitus.

The renowned statement.

Who gets to hear it?

Those who are off track.

How do you get off track?

You break up.

You lose someone.

You fight a friend.

You lose a project.

Or sometimes, through events that are not as sudden.

Routine – yet not routine.

You migrate.

You graduate.

You find a boyfriend.

You get your first job.

Your friend gets married.

You get married.

You have a baby.

You freeze.

The normal is gone.

The routine disappeared.

You had just gotten used to it.

They'll say it then, loudly,
'The only constant in life is change.'
They'll add, a second later,
'Get used to it.'

Change.
Transition.
From one to another.
Past to present.
What once was, is not anymore.
It's lost.

Lost routine; lost people; lost time.
Something that you cannot touch – not anymore.

You hope to get back to it, to him, to her, to it...
But you cannot – not anymore.

Life
Change
Loss
Nostalgia
Synonyms.

About the Writer: Mehak loved making up scenarios or (and don't tell anyone) 80-chapter novels in her head right before she would fall asleep. She is hoping that an MA would discipline her enough to write at least one of those novels. It would help if she was not spending most of her time on Zombie movies and South Korean dramas. When she is not doing either, she looks for table-tennis venues with the racket tucked in her backpack.

Natsukashii Japan: The Country Where I Feel at Home

Michela Mirabile

Overlapping memories and images in my mind,
I recollect feelings in a state of deep melancholy.

The great expectation of every season
with the same amazement for the blooming of the same new colours,
the delicate shades of pink of sakura,
the Sky-blue meadows of nemophila flowers,
the intense fuchsia of shibazakura,
the bright yellow of the nanohana,
the vibrating combination of blue and pink in Nezu's azaleas,
the fresh green of the bamboo in summer,
the gold of the leaves on a sunny autumn day,
the transparent steam rising from the onsen in winter.

The sakura blossom season, nostalgic and ethereal petals
ephemeral petals that only last for a few days;
soon cherry blossoms will float on rivers where the lively currents of
spring flow.
Autumn leaves turning yellow and red, burning mountains of momiji,
flashes of deep red and gold,
falling leaves sing the sweetness of autumn.

The Fuji san, hidden behind a cloudy blanket, majestically appears in all its majesty,
a flow of pink in the sky, which fades into a soft orange,
behind the red-tinted snowy peak of the sunset.
One moment of perfect beauty, an event not to be missed.

Thousands of red torii, perched on a mountain, or floating in the sea.
Endless stone steps, prayer stone steps, strenuously climbing to find one's heart,
up to the temple on top of the mountain, and into a safe harbour standing over a landscape of rare beauty.

Hidden temples, mirages of timeless beauty, sacred healing spaces.
The Jizō statues, protectors of travellers and children, lined up one behind the other,
all dressed in red, who attract visitors in search of silence
the protection of the komainu, stone guardians, half lion and half dog,
the wisdom of the inari foxes, messengers of the gods
the beauty of gold, pink, and white koi fishes, symbol of strength, courage, and long life.

The silence of the bamboo forests, the sound of the wind whispering through the trees,
the shimmering green of the moss on the lawns,
a small red bridge that appears and disappears in the blink of an eye among the trees
potsu potsu, the sound of the rain on the roof of a coffee shop.

Thousands of daruma of the Horin-ji temple, round dolls made of wood, with deep black eyes of silent wishes.
The tide of maneki neko, the lucky cats of Gotoku-Ji temple, with pricked ears and wide eyes, ready to grab lucky opportunities.

Tokyo, an ever-changing city. The city of a thousand faces.
It changes, it evolves, but remains anchored to its millenary traditions.
Girls in school uniform, pouring out on Takeshita-dōri in Harajuku,
a stroll through Jinbōchō, with its timeless atmosphere
second-hand bookshops, and cafes full of people talking and reading
books.

Tangles of cables hanging on the side streets, ancient temples behind a
40-story glass building, drinking coffee in the old-timey atmosphere of a
kissaten, the windy noren of diners and shops
the lanterns of rāmen and yakitori restaurants
manga-style signs popping up everywhere, to tell you what you should
and shouldn't do at any time of day.

A stroll around old alleys, the fresh melody of the bells moving in the
wind,
a shōtengai coming straight out of a 50s movie,
the elegance of women wearing a kimono, and walking harmoniously on
their zori,
the onsen, and the comfort they bring to mind and body.

Ties of friendship that balance space, time, care and attention, survive
the long distance and become stronger with the power of the word.
Kotodama, the spirit of the word, capable of communicating directly
with the heart of the listener.

The lightness of those days, the amazement of nature always renewing
itself
the fleeting beauty of the cherry blossoms, the explosion of autumn
colours
the exciting view of Fuji san,
everyday things, taken for granted, but not anymore.

The memories of those days linger in my mind, flow over my skin, and
I feel melancholy for the beauty of moments irremediably passed,
I feel nostalgia for a 'lost homeland' that was never mine.

About the Writer: Michela Mirabile is a tax consultant, living in Milan with her family. She lived 4 years in Japan, and her first poem is about the nostalgia she feels for this country, a country where she felt at home.

Lilith

Gary Allen

The plane flying in from Belfast
has no thought of the motion of the wind
the tailwinds, the cross winds, the under wind

the North Sea is a witch singing,
henna hair spread like a shoal

over the oil-rig stanchions
heads folding under wings
asleep in the netted rigging

there are rooms we go back to
the one face we see all the time
the body succumbed to as pilot fish
pick the rotting meat from teeth

a wooden backed chair
a mattress crushed by bodies on brick
the sweating of apples picked long ago
from a supermarket shelf
tumble to the communal kitchen floor

books of sex and poetry
before tongues
playful as dust
scornful of rib bone

lie open like wings of summoned planes
that will never return to air hubs

I am back again like a fool
broken handle on my suitcase
the wheels of the bicycles hanging from the wall
in the narrow alley spinning in the downpour
each spoke a path we would have taken for Lilith.

About the Writer: Gary Allen has published nineteen collections, most recently, 'Bonfire Night' Greenwich Exchange Publishing, London. Highly commended in The Forward Prize 2019.

He Saw Me

Kanika Choudhary

He was my distraction in grief.
In the grief of losing another,
His love was my distraction.
Maybe that's why the attachment
came so fast.

The constant affection
The appreciation like no other
You came along to paint the walls,
You made me realise how beautiful it was
to cross a tragedy with someone who
makes you feel seen.
Our bodies were just a way for this
world to communicate with pleasure.
Along with pleasure came a sense of
belonging.
I felt seen.
My body felt seen.
The soul seen.

About the Writer: Kanika is a user experience designer who loves to doodle and paint around the city. Writing has been a coping mechanism and her interest in spoken poetry has ended her up in few open mics. Being a designer she cant just help herself to stay away from her sketch-book which really helps her enhance her write ups with illustrations at times. Science fiction interests her a lot and music is her escape.

