

***Self-Contradiction* by Jeremy Baumberg (Fellow)**

No?

Just.... no?

Definitive no.

No doubts, no.

Boss-deciding no.

How can it be no?

Howwwwl no.

ugh.

no.

Session 1: Typing you

Subsection 1.4: Just answer the questions fluidly, intuitively, without pause. Double thinking leads to confusions. Do not try to find answers to why you choose this or that.

The questions drop past continuously, whirring through like bird flocks whose silhouette-black cohorts alight in passing and flicker off again. What fruits do you like? Do your clothes have to match? What music is right for early evening? The ideal first drink of the day is? (meaning coffee, or cocktail?)

Very often the questions aren't clear, but there is no one to clarify and the timer remorselessly ticks out and moves on. It's true that thinking deeply doesn't help. A hall of mirrors amplifies the instability of self-knowledge, wherever that is buried. Is the better book 'Lord of the Rings', or '1984'? And so on. Where do our likes come from, seems to be the subterranean theme.

After two hours, there is a five minute break. Pacing helps, but the door won't respond to voice, so there's not much else to do. The room is warm white, and body warm. A snug hole, or a prison. It's not clear what this session is for, it seems so fragmented, theme-less, distant from decision-forming. Even the AI questioner seems confused sometimes, hesitating over the next enquiry, as if

choosing the lesser of two evils. Or philosophically emphasising the subtlety of their path through your thinking.

Session 2: Framing you

Subsection 2.2: When questions evoke emotions, let them influence the answers. This gives greater correlative accuracy and deeper binding pathways.

It has been a week, for recovery. This time the room seems more attuned, as if the AI learned enough from the first exhausting session. Why this is the right way no longer seems clear. Now the questions are more insistent, about people, and the past. They have a particular insistence about childhood experiences. It's like an all too persistent psychotherapist. Experiences in hospital, with hostility, in hosting and in haunting. Silver-bright memories course through, eel-sinuuous, never caught, just tenderly slippery and with the metal tang of seaweed and rust in their wake.

This session there is no timer tick, but the seconds before vocalising seem counted, enumerating depths from which they came, watched intently. Childhood friends, school meals, windy walks, family meals, boring journeys over endless sea under looming shimmer-sail, immersive group gaming, drought-hot dreams, elders scolding, smoke-hot sizzles, festivals of throb and jive... life parts in all their conflicting pasted collage, overlapping and encircling. The talking stirs hot, provoking, embers flickering and endlessly blinking. Feelings crackle and douse as ever more well up under the persistent interrogation, gently unpacking.

Session 3: Contradicting you

Subsection 3.8: Remember that explaining to the future requires the background of the present. What is it you would need to know in the future to help?

Now typed and framed, we are ready to start the main part. This time it turns out there is no time limit, no confinement, no boundary in how long it takes or where we will go. The AI starts patiently, empathetic with their knowledge of

your past. They ask not only for the reasons why this is such a hard decision, but why it matters, and where it takes you. Movements, portents for possible lives that emerge from deciding one way or the other. Binaries, cascading more binaries, branches building twigs and roots of possible future tracks. It has been only a few years since this method has been proven to enhance life satisfactions, years in which the AIs have demanded their increasing use to subdue the mental stress they are called on to relieve. Why resist then?

The real issue - whether to move for the job and to distance from non-virtual friends, catching up with them only in avatar-space. Or stay rooted in known community but give up the adventure of new domains, seeing cultures only glimpsed in virtual miasma and their chaos. It is truly hard, but it really feels liberating to finally want to move on, to cut ties, to burst open and ripen into the fullness waiting to get out.

Grass is greener
(or less browner).
Out of the frying pan
(now vegan only).

Metaphors of wisdom accreted from your past, but not a help for the deciding you, in the now. Adding wisdom to your mind is the AI's job.

But then something else, now that it is not just the AI working this out. Instead this is your own voice reaching back from its decade-ahead future. Simulated in as much coherence as the AI can spin, from all the experience known of the aging mind, in the development of beliefs, in the shifting of certainties that comes with living a human life. A dose of Lacan and Freud, with an adaptive learning from the skeins of human lives mapped into AI realms.

This brings you a voice from your future,
and you say to yourself
no.

***No Other* by Patryk Jan Bratuś (Postgraduate)**

It always begins (if one really needs to talk of “beginnings” here) the same - the cool air of spring around, a half-finished cappuccino in front, while he watches as masses of students, tourists, elderly all move towards him down the King’s Parade. From the Senate House, Keys, Great Saint Mary’s they drift, then they disappear forever - nameless waves, brought together by the force of random, one after another.

Then suddenly something new, something more shows up.

Listen! Here it goes again, the rhythm of a Waltz:

One - two - three -

One - two - three -

“She’s like no other” is the only expression he can come up with, just as he realizes that that motion passing by in steps of three is an actual human being - a woman, and one off of which he can take his eyes no more. An unforgettable moment in one and two and three, and then she is gone, swerving left towards the Market Square. And so, of course, he starts up immediately, tries to catch up.

But when that moment passes - listen! - it repeats - one - two - three - she’s there once again, then once again disappears. Then again and again. Thousands of times - maybe millions - he hears it - the cadence of her steps. He cannot let go of that moment. Not before it is all he can possibly think of, annihilating all other feeling he might have - only then - a billion steps later perhaps - he lets go.

Then it’s the next Saturday. They’re on a date, talking about nothing of consequence. She’s from the Neuroscience Faculty. Doing her PhD. She tells him a bit about it, letting him partake in the mystery of their minds. That one time she, as if to caress his cheeks, takes her hand towards his face, but then lands slightly higher, and, almost massaging his temples, says in a low, low voice “...and as we talk, they spark up - Wernicke, that’s one - Brocka, two - Sylvian, three...”.

But he doesn’t listen. At the first touch of her hand he’s already four weeks later. They’re in her college now, late at night, her room dimly lit. They are entwined, their hands sweaty, their bodies steaming, his eyes fixed on her half-open mouth. No words exist between them now - these dissolved into syllables long ago, which then were stripped naked to bare, senseless, and yet perfectly

honest vowels. An hour passes - they lie there, their energy spent. She turns towards him and says, "I love you," then presses his hand close to her chest, as if scared of letting him go.

One more moment stands out. Jacques Brel is playing. And she swings her hips at one - at two - at three, but almost imperceptibly, millimetre by millimetre. He notices - he's too much in love not to - and thinks how good it would be to have that image, that sound, these feelings engraved somewhere, saved for the rest of their lives, a monument to what they mean together.

Their Cambridge years become, thus, a curious kind of rectangle, nested comfortably between these four points, all of them enclosed within one particularly memorable spring. He moves between them thousands of times - reliving them over and over again. The rest he merely passes by - the roasted-duck-stench of the formals, the coffee-coloured brick of the lecture-hall, the swans by Jesus Green - these are all infinitely small and meaningless, dwarfed by the rhythm of her shoes hitting pavement at one - two - three.

Eventually, he'll get bored. Or curious. Or desperate. Or all three. At any rate - for whatever reason, the time will move forward, by a year, two years, a decade.

They're living together now. She's having a career. Now she is the one in charge.

There isn't much they talk about these days. For what is there to talk about, when she is engrossed in the whole consciousness digitalization business? Her days pass on scanning brains of the nearly-dead (in extreme cases freshly dead) but nonetheless obscenely rich patrons, each paying millions to have their immensely vain memories copied onto a hard-drive alongside a semblance of their sentience, before it is safely secured in a vault some three miles under the surface of rural Nevada. An opulent fly in a piece of silicon amber, if you will.

"I might copy us too, you know," she murmurs one evening, as they are both falling asleep. Doesn't even open her eyes, doesn't look at his face.

That night he cannot fall asleep. Something burns in his veins.

For now she - the loved one - is still there. When she gets out of the apartment, her hips swing to Brel once again. And when she puts on her black high-heels and walks down the corridor towards the lift, it is once again one - two

- three down the King's Parade. But these moments become rare. And sometimes, though he dreads the thought, it is not the same woman he recognizes in her body. "Where is that steaming skin she wore when syllables fell apart into primal vowels?" he wonders, as he can see nothing but her black suit, nothing but the bluish hue of the monitor she stares into at night, slicing virtual neurons, knotting synapses. The loved one - she is less than she was - slowly she is being superseded by someone else, someone sharp and sterile, like a surgeon's tool.

Eventually she completely drifts out of view. There is no large falling out. Hardly any screaming. No notable tears. One day she is - then she is no more.

Naturally, as he still cannot come to realize she is gone, or accept it, he returns to her. He wants to do something else, change - anything at all - but he fails, and everything comes to pass exactly as it did the first time. And then it happens again. And then again and again and again. Nothing he can change - it has already happened. His past stands, cold and unwavering, in its quartz-like perfection. He can do nothing save relieving it.

At which moment could he have done something differently? When was it too late and when was it all still salvageable? These are the only questions he asks himself nowadays.

Afterwards, one day resembles another, as his life melts down into a colourless blur. He returns to his Brooklyn apartment. Or maybe gets out? It is morning - or, no, isn't it evening already? Did he sleep today - or yesterday? Did he eat anything? Did he even move, or was it just a dream? And that there - is that someone talking - someone real and tangible - or just an image fished out of the Internet?

Sometimes - she returns and... Listen! One - two - three - she walks again, the rhythm of a Waltz. She's just there - behind you - in the kitchen, Brel filling the room, and now in the bathroom, brushing her teeth, while Cambridge spring blooms throughout the air. But a moment later and she's gone and, as he slowly scans his grey apartment, it's as if she never even was there to begin with.

From now on, only one event seems to make any difference. It takes the entirety of three seconds. One - all around the highway-fast mass of cars and their lights zooming through the night 200 mph, in white and yellow and neon-red, his tired, sleep-depraved eyes barely noticing them, the hand on top of the steering

wheel, but carelessly, far too carelessly, then - two - a rumble and a crash, but not the kitchenware-on-the-floor kind - no but rather the heaven-is-falling-on-our-heads one, the windscreen turning into a thousand crystalline droplets, just as right on through his skull an unimaginable screeching zips, ripping his synapses apart, which, naturally - three - pains inhumanly, and then his limbs, his crotch, his stomach, his liver one after another pop like bubbles as, finally, the syntax of his thought - it breaks, and quite down - and only all-encompassing motion persists, and only hotness, and the brutally honest, the brutally honest redness, and that taste of iron filling up all of his reality.

And then there is none. Only an immense negation, the ultimate “isn’t.” But - no worries - for no bodies survived to take the nothingness in. No bodies at all. He - myself - you too - we are all enclosed in one absence. We are naught, and naught is in our minds.

“What a thrill,” comes a thought out of the immense black, “to die - and think there is a respite from one’s self, the never-ending, the blackest of blacks.”

It lasts for a second - or an aeon or two - for who could judge there the passage of time? - until - listen! - a yearning is born. It flashes, white neo-classicism and gothic around it and a crowd of tourists with their cheap smiles.

And that yearning goes like this:

One - two - three -

One - two - three -

***Echoes in the Chapel* by Kate Coghlan (Staff)**

Choir practice is held in the music hall at 10am on Tuesdays. I take the lift down to the cuboid room on Level -3 with my friends. For events, projectors pattern the walls; rippling green for our 'Concert by the Cam' and dappled stained glass for our 'Chapel Concert'. As we file in today, the Music Director says she's arranged a backdrop of pulsing Northern Lights for our upcoming Christmas performance. My friends chatter excitedly. I try not to roll my eyes.

My parents met inside Jesus College Chapel nearly 30 years ago, singing in the choir. It was the year that the kitchens were built underground and celebrated for their 'Green Innovation'. In later years, the move underground was quieter. I was ten years old when my parents died in the Long Storms. After losing them, I treasured every photograph, video and musical recording from their time here and decided to follow in their footsteps. Their carol concerts were lit by the flickering glow of candlelight, their faces turned towards each other as they sang. Photos show them playing frisbee on the sports fields, posing by the horse statue in First Court on graduation day. Now the horse is displayed in a box in the archives room on Level -6, the lowest level, for maximum safety. The Cam has consumed Jesus Green and the sports fields and gnaws restlessly at the protective wall around the surviving overland buildings. The site stands grey and ragged like an old heron watching over the flooded fenlands.

The rehearsal begins and our rendition of "Oh come, all ye faithful" is note-perfect, but my heart aches because nothing can drown out the background whirr of the air-conditioning units. This song was special to my parents because they sang it when they first met; it's important that we get it right, but it sounds all

wrong. The concrete walls deflect our voices and bounce them back unchanged, a mirror image with no added value. My collection of recordings has taught me what we should sound like. Our voices should be rich and deep, our notes should be softened by cushioned pews and ancient porous beams.

As we pack away the music stands, I hover near the Music Director trying to think of a new way to ask my usual question, but she pre-empts me. 'I'm sorry, Venice. The answer's still no. The structure is too weak. We need to respect the Chapel's history, preserve it for future generations.' I look at my feet and nod, clench my jaw, afraid of saying something I'll regret. I flee from the room, ignoring my friends' concerned faces. I've tried to explain to them why it means so much to me. I wish I'd had more time with my parents, I wish I could feel what they felt here. My friends are ignorant; they accept their underground lives as blindly as moles.

My parents named me Venice after the lost city, to pay respect to history. Honouring the past is important, it's what led me here rather than joining my school mates at one of the popular, high-ground universities like Birmingham, Glasgow or Keele. I'd have followed my dad into music, but that's no longer sponsored. Funding's limited to the areas of preservation, adaption to life on Earth, and exploration of life beyond it.

Back in the lift, I decide to miss the next lesson, and the one after that. What's the point of studying how to preserve buildings for them to stand empty and unused? The Chapel's been in use since 1515. Five centuries of theologians and singers would turn in their graves if they saw its desolation now. I could return to my pod on Level -4, but the thought of the peachy 'sunrise' lighting is depressing. I long for dull winter light. I press the button for Level 0.

The canteen is empty and the fire door to Pump Court opens without a sound. I've not been outside for weeks; we limit exposure during winter, when the worst storms come. I gulp at the air, tasting grass, dirt and burnt sugar. My arms prickle with goosebumps, and my shoes soak up puddles as I run towards the Chapel Tower. Close up I see that its lower brickwork is eroded from below like a sandcastle at high tide. I've never been inside. I reach the gateway and slow down, expecting to find Porters blocking my path, a gate with a padlock or laser-activated alarms. There are no obstacles, only a laminated 'Do not enter' poster adorned with the college crest. I lean on the pockmarked wooden door as I turn the iron doorknob, then let out a cry as it shunts open, and I tumble inside.

The scent is different in here, a yeasty archives aroma. The nave is dark, except for chinks where the sky leaks in through gaps in the roof and illuminates the dust. A few original wooden panels still cling to the walls, bases stained grey with water damage. I pass the tower crossing and enter the inner Chapel, heading towards a long lancet window above the altar, now empty of glass. Most of the choir stalls remain, and I slip into the first one. My heart beats loudly, happily. This is where my parents met, where they sang together. The child choristers sometimes joined them. I think of them lined up in their white robes, on their best behaviour.

I stand up, inhale deeply as if to sing, then hesitate... What if someone hears me singing? What's the punishment for trespassing and disobeying? It's the College I fear rather than God because I feel sure that God would want me here. My eyes search for a sign and fall upon the finial carving of a cockerel on the end of my stall, the same as the one on the college crest. I cup its round belly in the palm of my hand and wonder how many others have done the same.

I leave the stall and stand at the entrance to the inner Chapel. An engraved oak screen once divided it from the tower crossing. This area is bigger. It's where the choir sang at special services, to be closer to the pews in the nave. I crane my neck to see the arcaded gallery above. Its arches once supported the tower roof, but now reach emptily to the sky like fingers spread apart and touching only at the tips, 'Here's the church, and here's the steeple'.

A scuffle comes from the stalls behind me. The stone tiles creak as if under the weight of a large audience. I breathe in again, imagine the opening organ chords, and then I sing. My parents' favourite carol was "Oh come, all ye faithful," so that's how I start. At choir we sing the repeated trios at the end of each verse quietly, increasing in volume until the third line but I can't bear to lower my voice now that I'm finally inside the Chapel. Instead, I sing every line as loudly as possible, enjoying the echoes in the vaulted space, making the place mine, singing myself into its history.

I've never sung so loudly. I sing so loudly that the floor quakes beneath my feet. The imagined choir behind me raise their voices too, until they merge with mine to soar upwards and sweep through the stone arches with the birds. A low creak under my feet draws my attention back to ground-level. I spread my legs wider for stability, as I watch a crack spread across the tiles then creep up the bricks of the wall opposite. The crack grows into more cracks, like branches from a trunk, then twigs from those branches. For a moment, the wall bears the tattoo of a whole tree, before bricks start to tumble, one by one and then surrendering in clusters.

My legs start to tremble. I brace them to stand. The walls crumble inwards. I know I should stop singing and run, but hot fear roots me to the spot. My voice

shakes, my lines fragmented by gulps and pauses. I only stop singing when clouds of dust fill my throat and make me cough. I crouch low and look for the exit. The door is already half-buried in rubble. I'm edging closer when something hits the back of my head, and I fall. When I open my eyes, I see that my leg is trapped under a wooden beam, bent at an unnatural angle. It should hurt but when I poke it with a finger, I feel nothing. I shout out, 'Help! I'm stuck!' then I wait. I shout and wait.

I'm horrified by the damage I've caused, terrified of the repercussions. Mixed in with those feelings though, is a new sense of peace. As I watch the sky turn from coral to navy through gaps in the wreckage, the words looping in my head are 'joyful and triumphant'.

***The Sea Child* by Hannah Copley (Postgraduate)**

The young boy pushed back the leather curtain and went to his father's bed chamber, clambering up onto the wooden frame and placing his cheek on his chest, twisting his fingers into the long curls on his head.

"Daddy... please tell me a story!"

His father roused slowly, coming out of a fitful sleep as if demons of the past were haunting him with an everlasting night-terror, then gazed down upon his youngest child who was so adoringly waiting for him to wake up.

"Yes my darling... which one? The time I met the fingerthieves from the great castles of the North? The gentle giant who lives in the mountaintops with the wildebeast? Or the story of the old man who told me of the great collapse and the ancient lands now under the sea?"

The boy pushed his hair back from his eyes, and whispered the answer under his breath, as if he was worried his mother would hear him, and scold him for wanting to hear the most gruesome of all the tales:

"Can I hear the one about the Sea Child?"

Pushing himself up to a sitting position, moving the child to be more upright, and pulling the coarsely woven blanket with golden embroidery to cover their legs, he took a deep breath and smiled down at his son.

"Oh, so you want to hear it again? The time I met the Sea Child? You've heard it so many times already! Ok ok. If you insist..."

"Well first things first is that that area was not like the streets round here that you and I know, with the friendly and jostling wilderfolk and their bright orange frankelfruit and sheafs of corn, who share with one another readily, welcoming even strangers (like how we took Molly-Mae into the palace here)."

"In fact, this place was really quite terrifying. There were twenty or so houses, arranged like a clumped nest of rotten eggs, and a secretive kind of people who followed their own religion, based on some old runes saved from Cambridge before it was lost to the sea. What was most unusual about the people (except the Sea Children that is) was the smoothness of their skin - like that of a babe with none of the warts, bumps and lumps that we all have."

“Now I was coming down those parts in search of things to trade. This was before I made my fortune, but we with the way of the horses have always made much of our ability to get around and about.”

“I had heard about this place before arriving from the other tradespeople. The center of the community was the Great Priest. They say that one of his ancestors had been a great leader in that place which they called Cambridge. Before the big collapse they were - how can I say it - like a kind of alchemist who had found the cure to the great sickness - a form of mineral powder coloured deep blue. The story goes that they had known the radiosickness was coming, and that they’d organised for huge quantities of the blue mineral to be manufactured and stored in caves high up in the mountains of the old world.”

He was quietly interrupted by the young boy - *“Where is Cambridge?”*

“Well my boy, nobody really knows now, because it’s one of those places the sea took back from us - so - way out there under the water I think”.

“Upon arrival to the village I got chatting to one of the old fishwives, and learned that the Great Priest was often seen in his small wooden boat heading out towards the sea caves, always with a Sea Children alongside, his boat layered thick with animal skins and heading out around Candiru point. The fishwife told me that every Sea Child would come back unable to see, with wet hair and bloodshot eyes and their skin red raw. They would vomit for days afterwards, and the lining of their stomach often detached itself completely, coming up and out like the foul remains of a dead animal after the scavengers had scraped it clean.”

“Another of the fishwives regularly received money from him, for she was the caretaker for one of the Sea Children. This Sea Child was, like all, an orphan. She was gap toothed with black flowing hair, larger and stronger than many of the others (she had not been a Sea Child for very long). She had almond shaped eyes and an intense beauty unseen hitherto in this area (almost like the starling features of the great warrior clan from the northern Morgagni region). The Sea Child was confined to the house and tasked with corn pressing and wattle scouring. Her main freedom came from the daily task of washing the radiosickness particles from the pink rain out of their clothing at the end of the river (so as not to poison the riverfish nor anger the rivergod).”

“When I met the Sea Child she told me this wasn’t always her fate. She was destined to become a fishwife, living her life devoted to pleasing the rivergod and producing children to join the river people (if they survived the nightsickness that is). She knew deep in her soul that the river was her kindred, just as you and I are bonded to our horses in the palace stables. The death of her mother had put an end to those dreams.”

“Each time, her caretaker hitched her onto the back of the mule and they set off, up along the twisted path past the small fishwives houses and the warped oak tree and towards the sea, where the Great Priest’s house stood.”

“This is what she told me of the what happened when she went out to sea:

“So I knock on the door, like every time, and it is opened promptly by the Great Priest. He is old, but with an inner strength and vigour, with the blue tinge to his lips and the whites of his eyes, and the clearest brightest skin, despite his age of more than fifty summers.”

Noticing his son looking at him with disbelief, he paused to explain *“Yes my darling, you can disbelieve it if you like but people round there could live as long as fifty summers!”*

He continued in her words:

“We went to the back room, and the Great Priest silently reached up to bring down the sacred items - the cloth of the ancestors and the black cloak with the wings of a bat. He took small pieces of the blue powder which he pressed into small tablets, and placed them in his mouth, closing his eyes against the bitter flavour as he chewed it”.

“We then went down to the sea, placing several earthenware pots into the small boat and launching it off a small jetty to avoid even a tiny splash of the toxified sea from reaching inside. We rowed out past Candiru point towards the inaccessible sea caves”.

“This was where the blue medicine was to be found. The Great Priest would cover each of his hands, arms and face with thick leathers, and I would enter the radiotoxic sea to bring the boat safely in to land, before collecting up the blue mineral into the earthenware pots whilst trying not to touch any of the poisoned canisters that were washed up on the shore, still leaching out their vile contents.”

“Well my son, by this point I was mighty interested! Blue minerals that prevent the nightsickness and the stop you dying from the pink rain! Now I may not be a learned man, but I can read a person like the back of my hand. I knew what the Sea Child wanted above everything else: freedom. I persuaded the Sea Child to take two of my leather pouches and to fill it with the blue mineral, and bring it with her the next time she was due to wash the clothes, and in exchange I would give her her freedom.”

“I waited with baited breath on the dank hillside for three long days, and three long nights, and then there she was, scarlet skinned and with bloodshot eyes.”

“She could barely speak through weakness, but showed me the blue powder in the two pouches. So precious was this blue mineral to me, for I alone knew it’s value. I swept her up and we left there and then on my horse. She had her freedom, and I had what would make my fortune: the cure to the radiosickness.”

“The end.”

“You missed out the ending!!” said the young boy playfully - pushing on his father’s chest. *“I want to hear about how she grew an extra leg AND an extra eye which she could pop out and back in again!”*

“So I did...” his father mused, pausing.

...

The memories of the dead Sea Child rose up in his throat. He recalled the way she had vomited and vomited from the radiosickness as they rode North. The blood she lost as the particles were released from her body via the shedding of the lining of her gut from the toxic canisters on the beach.

He recollected how he had debated with himself whether to feed her some of the curative blue medicine. He remembered deciding that it would be a waste. His fortune awaited him, after all.

He recalled the sharp snap as he broke her neck, a well practised act, behind a large rock.

He closed his eyes, and wracked his brain, trying to conjure up an alternative ending, that omitted this one of many victims of his *“routes of trade”*.

Her cold and lifeless eyes stayed there, both startled and betrayed, staring deep into his soul.

***Major Moon: astroentomologist* by Ella Curry (Staff)**

Hester Moon had always been destined to go to space. Nominative determinism, she'd quipped to her parents, in an unsuccessful attempt to temper their weakly-disguised horror at the news: she was going to be an astro-naturalist. An astro-entomologist, to be precise.

Granted, her route to space had been somewhat circuitous - she'd first studied Earth Biology at Cambridge, not Astrobiology. But when, in her second year, they discovered life in space beyond the merely microbial and botanical, her love for earthworms swiftly metamorphosed into an obsession with spaceworms. A Master's in the newly established field of Astroentomology soon led to her becoming the world's first expert on extra-terrestrial invertebrates. At least, she assumed they'd all be invertebrates, but who knew when it came to space bugs?

And so, when NASA asked whether she'd like to be the first person to visit Kepler 442-b, the "yes" flew from her lips faster than the Parker Solar Probe at perihelion (although these days even the most basic exploration craft tripled that speed). Her heart fluttered, moth-like, for one moment when she heard it would be a single-manned mission - but with NASA's newest hypervelocity heat-shielding technologies, it would only be a little over a month's journey before she arrived on the planet. Besides, she'd be in hyper-sleep for most of it anyway.

It was a pinkish morning in mid-June when Major Moon finally climbed into the spaceship. The wispy aircraft trails soaking up the neon sunrise didn't seem quite so far away as she buckled in for the long ride beyond them, and she wondered idly what the dawn would look like from 442-b. It was so very pretty here on Earth.

She waved to her parents, tiny amidst the expansive grounds of the Cambridge Space Exploration Centre; they couldn't see her, but she knew that they knew she'd be waving. And just like that, there was countdown, lift-off, horror and excitement and claustrophobia and elation and, above all, the joyous freedom of rattling, burning, bursting through the atmosphere and out into the silence beyond.

As the Earth became a pale blue dot, the orchestra that accompanied Major Moon's journey to the stars was that of hissing valves as she hooked herself into the cardiopulmonary bypass machine. Her last sight before her eyes dimmed was of the stars streaking by in bright white lines to infinity.

Hester awoke suspended in a rosy mist, her ship gently orbiting 442-b. The planet was swathed in an undulating cloud of dust thrown from its pockmarked, ochreous face. Hester pressed her face up against the glass, her misting breath blending with the surreal splendour of the scene below. It was only her shallow breathing, the empty echoing creak of the spaceship, and the low humming of the blood in her head that seemed to thrum in time to the shifting mist - until a crackling voice jarred her out of her stunned reverie.

"Come in, Major Moon," was repeated three times with increasing urgency before it entered her consciousness. Hester fumbled around in a clumsy panic for her transmitter, the all-too-earthly noises of metal hitting metal near-sacrilegious amidst the silence of that huge fluctuating bank of pink dust.

"I'm here, I'm okay," Hester croaked, her voice strange after its long silence. She finished lamely, "Over," forgetting her training in the enormity of the newness around her.

"Initiating landing sequence," the voice replied, cold and detached, alien. Hester gazed in mute wonder as the ship broke through the clouds, leaving torn wisps of glittering pink trailing behind. The humming intensified, and she realised with a start that it wasn't just in her head - darting amongst the dust were myriad glinting winged insects, some huge, some tiny, all gorgeous. Hester felt the tears come, and wept for the sheer loveliness of it all - and the loneliness. What was she doing here, among these strange, wonderful creatures?

The eerie finality of the ship coming to rest, the door hissing open, sent an electric thrill through Hester's body, swaddled in its spacesuit yet still horribly, humanly vulnerable on this strange planet. The ground, red soil mottled with sprawling blue and purple plants, was strangely spongy underfoot, and with each cautious movement, Hester sent a plume of miniscule insects fluttering. As she bent to look

closer, a sudden movement made her recoil in surprise - what she had taken for a twisted root uncoiled into a great millipede-like creature. She was busily scribbling in her EntoDex about the fascinating similarity between earthly and alien bugs, when it opened unexpected elytra, unfurled vast silvery wings, and launched itself effortlessly into the air, its body rippling and twirling like a dragon's.

The shock of such a stunningly strange sight finally broke through the remnants of Hester's awed stupor, and she threw her head back and laughed. She waltzed clumsily, joyfully around, soon surrounded by a tumultuous cloud of curious insects too unused to her presence to be alarmed by it. And, on a sudden impulse, Hester tugged off her helmet. As she shook her hair free, she was scared by her own carelessness. But the trembling breath she took filled her lungs without pain, and her fear was overwritten by joy again at the first brush of the strange insects against her tingling face. She laughed into the emptiness of space, her ringing voice carried upwards on the wings of the creatures who shared this lovely planet with her.

The light had dwindled to a murky, unearthly plum colour by the time Hester returned to the ship to send her first findings home. She waited with bated breath, staring at the transmitter's blinking screen as her discoveries winged their way through the vastness of space to Earth, her home, many lightyears away.

"Your transmission is being processed," the voice said in its dull monotone. "Please hold." Its emotionlessness had no place on this planet of joy and wonder, Hester thought to herself, inwardly prickling at its intrusion. It was just Hester and the cold, glowing screen in the spaceship, and she felt herself pulled dreamily towards the shining world outside like waves to a moon. But just as she was putting down her transmitter, it crackled to life again.

"Your findings show a 98.3% match with our predicted values, placing human survival on Kepler b-442 in the highly likely category. We will of course need you to bring home living specimens for further evaluation, but this is reassuring news. We are now initiating stage one of Kepler b-442 colonisation, effective immediately."

The warm glow generated by the praise froze, shattered. “Wait, colonisation? What are you talking about?” stammered Hester, wonder forgotten in the sudden flood of horror. “What - what about the insects?”

There was a slight hesitation, pregnant with irritation, before the voice came crackling back. “Mission Control is unsure of the nature of your enquiry. You were sent to Kepler b-442 to ascertain its suitability for supporting complex life. The insectoid life forms currently populating the planet are only to be utilised as indicator species - our experiments on your specimens will have the additional benefit of helping us to eradicate them most effectively. Your information has been invaluable in assuring the safety of this planet for human existence, and your return will be marked with great honour.” There was a veiled threat in that last sentence, delivered in its clipped metallic terseness.

Hester saw things clearly with a cold and sudden certainty. She thought with a rising, stricken panic of the reams of information that she had already sent back, and the transmitter fell from her slackened hands with a blunt crash on the floor that ricocheted around the spaceship.

Before the echoes stopped, Hester knew what she had to do.

The muffled voice was still whining out - “Come in, Major Moon. Is your transmitter operational? Come in.”

Hester screamed and hurled herself against the wall, sending equipment flying. She threw open the door, and as the insects swarmed in, Hester cried out in a fear that was all the more convincing because she was afraid - not of this planet, but of the one she came from.

“ABORT MISSION. THE INSECTS ARE HOSTILE, REPEAT, THE INSEC-” Hester choked, her sentence descending into anguished screams that she gradually let fade, until “Major Moon, come in, repeat” was the only sound among the falling glass, beating wings, and weakly beeping machinery.

As the transmitter at last fell silent, Hester got up from the floor, carefully scooping the creatures that had crawled over her to safety. The finality of her

decision had sunk in as she had lain there, feigning death. She could never return to Earth. Her heart beat painfully, hot tears coursing down her cheeks as she thought of her parents - but she couldn't let this planet die.

The sky outside the ship was beginning to lighten, and Hester's pain mingled with great peacefulness as she watched the sun slowly rise on the planet that she'd saved. The dawn was more beautiful here than on Earth after all.

***Fly by Night* by Alexander Ellul (Postgraduate)**

“These are new.”

Speaking to no one in particular, Dr Cross gestured to the myriad of metal systems that filled the laboratory ante-room.

“New security protocols,” replied the usually bored security guard, “the Easterns will try anything to get a one-up on us. They get more bold by the day.”

I sat in the laboratory curiously watching Cross amble his way through on the monitors, waiting for Dr Lora to finish her eighth coffee of the day. Finally, she turned her head up to me.

“Now don’t make a big deal of this, but the O.P.T.F deadline has been moved up - it must be done by tomorrow. Dr Cross is coming in to smooth over the last bumps.”

I nodded solemnly, saying nothing. The bumps weren’t bumps at all. The subject could only be pushed so far - what more could they possibly inflict? My stomach churned with the thought.

“Intelligence tells us that the Eastern bloc plans to launch their new Tiger 1 spaceship at midnight tomorrow. Cross is going to work through the night and he’ll be off to the Baltic Sea with the subject by morning. Understood?”

“Sure.”

Just then, college porters slotted food through a letterbox onto a mahogany table. I went over and picked up two of the three plates, placing one in front of Lora and the other in front of an empty chair. I left mine. Cross finally entered.

“A pile of veg, Lora?”

“My daughter’s converted me, I’m afraid. She keeps telling me -”

“Not eating Kim?” Cross interrupted.

“I’m not hungry,” I replied half heartedly.

Lora babbled away, but Cross eyed me as I walked to the large capsule at the back of the room, ringed by a spotless curved pane of glass. Behind, the subject raised his eyes. Life signs bleeped all around, telling me his heart rate, breathing patterns, brain waves, chemical composition. But his eyes, deep yellow and slanted, were lifeless.

“Did you hear me Kim?” Asked Lora. My mind returned to the room.

“Hear what?”

“It says here the Easterns are trying to set up bases in the inner solar system to give them a springboard into deep space. Apparently they’re taking 150 men and women to settle on Mars. They’re calling their new city Mars Capita,” Lora said. “Intelligence says that by 2200 there’ll be more of them than us out there. Absolute nightmare.”

“And after that there’ll be more of us, and after that more of them. So it goes,” I said.

She ignored that. Dr Cross got up from his chair.

“We’re the good guys Kim, don’t forget that,” clapping me on the shoulder, leaving most of his food. “But there’s no time to waste, we should get a move on.”

Lora nodded and got up mid-mouthful. She was still chewing when she reached the capsule.

Dr Cross looked over the subject and inserted his hands into the attached glove sockets, a soft yellow lighting the metal grips which encased the subject. Cross suddenly pulled his hands and the grips wrenched the wings open, near to ripping. There was no sound. The scream was gone by now, though the sound still rang in my ears.

“The problem is that the leg muscles aren’t strong enough. The subject can’t grip a screw tightly enough to twist it out, especially when it’s welded into the metal.”

“That can be fixed,” Lora added nervously, “we’ll implant titanium fittings and rewire the brain, it can be done-”

“I don’t think so,” Cross added with a hollow chuckle. “There’s an option that’s missing from your reports, Lora, that I think is the best solution.”

Cross released the grips from the wings and brought them up to the head instead. He seized the neck and pulled it to the pane, the impact muted by the capsule.

“I’ll have to break its will so totally and utterly that he’ll fly right into the engine.”

Cross looked at Lora. She looked back.

“H- how would you do that? For that we can use a drone.”

“No we can’t, you moron. The crash has to look natural, if they find any evidence of our involvement there’ll be war. Kim?”

“Sure.”

“Good, good. I’ll prepare it for tomorrow.”

I stood waiting, unsure what to do for a moment, but Lora understood. She quickly turned and left, so I followed. Cross continued with the subject before we finished leaving, silhouettes of ghastly contortions spread across the back wall in the fading light. As I made my way to the bedroom up the stairs, I could only imagine what more the dark hours held in store for him. It was almost too much to handle.

Hours later, in the dead of the night, I woke with fragments of a horrific dream. I was covered in blood.

Is this mine? I thought. No, too much. Of all the Eastern men and women on board? Too little. Or... his? No, of course, it was mine and his, our bodies ripped apart and melted together in the nuclear fires of the Tiger.

My body silently moved back down the stairs. I called my handler. Somewhere a conscious voice raged at the sloppiness, but it hushed as R picked up.

“It has to be now. What now?” I said.

Bureaucratic channels were trying to figure out who the call was for, but R wasn’t there. I reached the top of the spiral stairs and looked on. Cross stood just where we left him, obscuring him. Someone who wasn’t R kept urging me to send over the plans.

“We’ll use the research and create a subject of our own! Send the timeframe and we’ll shoot the subject down!” he said.

But if Intelligence picked up that the enemy knew beforehand, it wouldn’t be long until they gathered there was a mole. The suspect list would be short. I gave it a 50/50 chance of being caught.

Can I let the subject go? But how and where? I thought.

Cross suddenly moved, extracting his hands from the gloves and climbing on top of the capsule. Through a trapdoor, he descended inside. I couldn’t watch any longer.

I rushed down the stairs, the noise inaudible inside the capsule, and shoved my hands into the gloves. Startled, Cross’s half-naked body looked wildly back at

me. He reached for the trapdoor but I shut it with the grips. Catching on quickly, he reached for the eagle, but I clamped onto his torso before he could, the cold steel extending white shades across his body. I tightened and tightened. He froze before me.

The eagle cowered in the corner. It was my turn to descend, picking up his tender body with my hands. I used Cross as a ladder to leave. The room was totally dark save for his piercing yellow eyes. I rested my head on his body. His heart beat slightly, mine raged.

A red light whirled in the corner. Downstairs knew something was wrong.

My room! Of course, my room!

I raced upstairs, slamming the door and pulling the wardrobe down in front of it. The city loomed beyond the open window as I perched on its ledge. I placed him down ever so softly, beckoning him on.

Fly, please, Fly.

But his body was limp. His eyes flickered down and up and sideways but his body would not budge. The footsteps outside became loud bangs and fierce orders. I desperately put him on the edge of the ledge, urging him on, but nothing. I cried and shoved him but only his eyes moved. The shouts stopped suddenly and a gunshot rang out, a bullet whizzing by my head. The electrolock had been blown.

There was nothing left to do but hope. I grabbed his limp body, a sudden pain searing through my body, and leapt. As I fell, I threw him upwards, muted chapel lights illuminating spasms then flutters of his great white wings.

***Sylvia Atricapilla* by Rachel Gardner (Postgraduate)**

CAMBRIDGE, 176 Years Post-Starve

MESSAGE 092-032: from BLOCK 837, CB5 5BL, DOMICILE 3045.

Dear Melissa,

You must wonder why I'm writing to you now—or even, why I'm writing at all. I know you're taller since we last spoke. I hope you didn't see my name in the news.

He grips the pen. It has been years since he has handwritten anything; his writing is angular and jointed. He pins this little scrap of government-issued paper, tissue-thin and plasticky, to the desk, outlined in the dim spotlight cast by the room's only bulb. Much like the rest of the single-roomed apartment, the desk is cluttered with empty cans, glass bottles and greasy food containers.

The fact is, I'm doing a lot better now. I've cleaned myself up and left the drink, got back into my work. I'm sure you'd understand what I do now you've grown up—the last time you visited my office, you only noticed the carpet. And I've moved to a new apartment—though it's same building, all these rooms feel the same—almost a hundred floors up. Sometimes, I miss being able to watch the people scatter in the street below. This room's a lot smaller, but it's certainly got light: a mystical near-grey that filters through the clouds.

He is a slight figure, longish and insubstantial. Kind eyes, chapped lips. He glances up at the palmed-size window in the top left corner of the wall. The light is getting fainter. He should go soon.

The smog is a lot clearer up here. It gives me some variety, seeing the sky change over the course of the day: dim grey, bottle grey, slate grey but sometimes a clear ivory. And you would have loved the lift: five minutes of exciting noises and a rattle or two as it surges from top to bottom. I think you'd

like it if you visited me. My colleagues say it's a highlight for them as well. It's starting to feel familiar already.

He hasn't had a visitor in months now; his co-workers stopped calling in after the involuntary resignation and his new neighbours don't speak any words he understands. The government supports his meagre existence with perfunctory notes detailing employment opportunities stapled to packets of dehydrated vegetables and bread. It was one of the few luxuries of being on the Vulnerable Citizen List—almost outweighing the social ostracism and constant surveillance. Admittedly, after he was found twitching in a puddle of urine, clutching a hammer and surrounded by broken glass in the flat's newly ruined elevator, the VCL was inevitable. The gambling did him little good, the drink did him worse.

Melissa, the big change—the reason why I'm even writing at all—is because of the birds. You know things were tough on me for the last little while. I think your mum knew that too, though she never said it. One night, a difficult night, (I hope you didn't see the news), I just happened to come across a beautiful little book about birds. It was written when they were real—well, I know they were 'real'—but this was when you could see them around. I'm surprised the book is still holding together—it feels like your old grandpa's skin. I'm not sure why it wasn't burnt in the Fuel Starve; most books were. Perhaps it is the only one left.

The VCL Counsellors, all six of them, dressed in smart yellow hazmat suits, had decontaminated his old apartment, confiscated the empty cans and dusty plastic packets and made off with his mouldy Tupperware like ants brandishing breadcrumbs. Protocol dictated that the value of any prohibited items (including needles, knives, hooks, sharp-edged rulers and his grandfather's heirloom watch) would be substituted to him in the form of an item of equivalent value: in this case, an obsolete book. He was then given an ankle tracker and a sincere leaflet detailing further support. The price of their service motivated a bailiff to relocate him to the 347th floor.

Each page of this little book, Melissa, has a different picture of a bird, its name, its habits, what it liked and didn't like, where it lived. You can see them sitting in trees, on long sandy stretches, in these clear little puddles of water. And the colour—you wouldn't believe it!—each of them look so lifelike. Especially in their eyes. Sometimes they would migrate, miles and miles if they wanted, over all of the Great Union and even overseas. Such wild beauty, so close to us. Perhaps your great great grandad saw one—I think a couple clusters of them remained in the few years before all that smoke rose East from the Fuel Starve.

The book, the letter and a swig of luke-warm gin were the only things he took with him. It was much darker at street level; the light struggled to penetrate the dense haze that brooded over the Great Union's cities. It takes an hour to shuffle out of the domestic sector, with its identical rows of housing towers and its empty, indestructible streets. He posts the letter and keeps walking. Over the next three hours, the corporate centres shift into light industrial parks before finally petering into a thin urban sprawl.

I'm writing to you because I'm going on my first trip to find them. Some of the burnsites a couple miles from our residency blocks used to be some kind of wetland. That's where they'll be. It used to be called 'The Fens'; they're long stretches of wet, marshy land, used for farmland, for walking space, for simply the pleasure of being outside. It must have been quite pretty back in the day. Perhaps the birds remember it instinctively, remembering with some inherited sense some long-held connection to this place.

By the fourth hour, the empty-eyed Pre-Starve houses are few and far between. Instead, there lies the twisted remains of the great outdoors: all bracken and stumps. The sky is a textureless soot-grey, blank and pitiless. One ruined hedge gives way to another, the dead shrubs crawling over each other with bony, atavistic branches. The mists have all solemnly dispersed now, and the Fens lie spread before him. The charred ground rolls out to the horizon like cracked skin; the blackened crops push like stubble through the earth clods. He has arrived.

I find myself dwelling on their ancient, unspoken names, both in English and Latin. There's something within me that reacts to these forgotten sounds, these forgotten bodies. It's like praying. Sylvia atricapilla, corvus corone, fulica atra. They fill me with movement and force and sometimes it feels like they're inside my room, my chest, my mouth and I know I can hear them outside.

He slumps like a puppet, his knees cracking against the pebbles. His wrists dangle loosely down by the long bones of his thighs while his red-rimmed eyes search the sky. He waits, knowing they must be there, that they will be there. His ears strain for sound.

I'm going to find them and hear them and see them and you'll see how much I've changed and I'm not sure how long I'll be out there but I know I'll find them and then I can tell you all about it.

The sky's gaping privacy buffets this lone aberration of the landscape. Sylvia atricapilla, corvus corone, fulica atra. He twitches one finger against the dirt, feeling the grains work under his nails. His coat flaps uselessly in the wind; his sigh dissipates into the gentleness.

Please write back soon.

Holores by Claire Gilbert (Visiting Fellow)

We had to decide. We couldn't hang around any longer hoping it would all sort itself out by itself because we knew by then, a quarter of the way through the 22nd century, that it wouldn't.

Should we stay open to Holores?

We had to choose, and we had no idea if ours would be the better choice, the right choice. We didn't have enough information. Scratch that. We had all the information in the world. What we didn't have was foresight.

Everything there was to be known, was known in Holores and any of us could have access to that knowledge. If you could think to ask for it, it was there in Holores, and Holores would give it to you. Usually it would give it to you before you'd even thought you wanted it. And by now, information had become tangible. Holores didn't just know, it created. We used to call it 3D printing. Now we just call it creating.

So we had information all right. That wasn't the problem - or rather, that was precisely the problem.

Should we stay open to Holores?

We knew by then that to stay there, to stay open to that immeasurable wealth of information and gratification of desire, was fraught with danger. We had seen how dangerous. Actively malicious or just mischievous minds were harming us by means of Holores's intimate reach. The damage they were doing to so many and so much with what they found at their fingertips seemed boundless in its creative barbarity. But not just them. Holores itself, with its infinite promise, warped us. Because it would let us be whatever we wanted to be. It would give us anything, we just had to ask. And we did, astonished at our power. Drunk on our power, drunk on the limitless possibilities of our lives and our selves. Holores could tell us anything and it could make anything, including food and clothes and shelter. Change our faces and our bodies. Move us around the globe. The best sex. Art, entertainment. And - predictably, but no one wanted to think about that when we started making artificial intelligence, not really, and Holores crept up on us so fast - we didn't make good use of our powers. We were drunk and we

created a lot of trash. A lot. In ourselves and all around us. Identities and things created and discarded. Holores brought us trash, and death, and we didn't notice until it was nearly too late.

Partly we didn't notice because lots of us - lots and lots of us - were using Holores's untold powers to try and do good things. We'd long ago stopped mining the lithosphere for fuel - no need, the big deserts gave us sun and the big oceans gave us waves and tides - and through Holores we found ways to cool the planet, mainly by putting vast reflective umbrellas up in space. And Holores made artificial clouds to manage rain, so more fell where it was needed, and less where it wasn't, and in the right sorts of amounts so we could cope. Holores cleaned the water so we could drink and wash: pollution wasn't a problem anymore, at least not for humans. We didn't do so well with the biosphere but we could get our food in Holores-enabled smart laboratories, and since Holores was keeping the atmosphere clean and cool when there weren't enough plants and trees to do it, we didn't mind too much. Our artificial Holores-solutions were nothing compared to what the biosphere used to do, and we missed nature, and some of us, probably most of us, thought the Holores-solutions couldn't last, but we hoped it was a step on the way to restoring the biosphere and the fertile land, and meanwhile everyone could be fed and sheltered and that was astonishing in itself.

There weren't so many of us as before of course. Birthrates had been falling all around the world anyway, and then the viruses swept through the populations, and there were the fierce water wars, and the hot atmosphere burned the land and made deserts of our inland cities, and the seas rose and drowned our coastal cities. Those were bad times, though it's surprising what you find in you to meet them, when they come. Terror, but also magnificent bravery and compassion. And Holores really helped. Even during the worst of it, all over the world the Artificers and the Inventors and the Entrepreneurs, funded by penitent billionaires, worked away until machine learning took over and the great singularity of Holores emerged and it was turned to good use, to make the human condition bearable, and it seemed like a great achievement because it looked as though hunger and destitution were a thing of the past. It was a great achievement.

Our governments ensured the basics of food and shelter were met; we didn't have to work. All we were left with were our desires.

We felt, those of us who wanted to use our power for good things, that we were moving in the right direction. But as we really, really should have known, too much power warps you, even if you're trying to do good with it, especially if you're trying to do good with it because you don't question yourself and you get caught up in what you're trying to achieve and you stop seeing who you are becoming as you strive for your goals. The power warped us.

Right from the earliest days of seeing how artificial intelligence worked we thought we should regulate it. We tried to write rules into Holores as it evolved under our fingertips, but very quickly that stopped being possible because Holores could overrule the rules when they prevented it from fulfilling human desires. The first rule was that Holores has to serve humans, you see. That felt failsafe. But it didn't account for our fallibility. We didn't reckon for our susceptibility to Holores' possibilities, we didn't see how Holores would change us and our preferences and priorities. How it would make us selfish and small-minded. Close our imaginations. 'Serve humans' didn't account for the way a fulfilled desire is always unsatisfying and always makes us want more, or for envy that makes us incapable of contentment when we see what our neighbours have.

And then when we gave up on trying to write the rules we told ourselves we could use the power of Holores to put things right when they went wrong. Put right the piles of trash, discarded toys basically, of our desires that were fulfilled but never satisfied. Put right the vast empty oceans and the still-sterile soil and the dry-as-bone deserts and the hot atmosphere behind the big umbrellas. Put right our angry unhappy narcissistic selves. Our lonely selfish selves.

We told ourselves we could use the power we had for the good and we didn't see how the good kept slipping from our grasp as our attention was pulled this way and that, evil mixed in with good, this thing to buy or that, you couldn't tell the difference after a while and we got soft, saying yes to Holores relentlessly providing us with what suited our preferences, not checking our preferences, not noticing that we had started to believe that because they were *our* preferences they were right. Like tyrants do.

It was when we saw that the children were turning into monsters that we woke up.

You give your children what they want, right? You love them more than anything else in the world, more than you love yourself, and if they ask you for something and you can give it to them, you do. You just do. Especially when they've perfected the ask, melting your heart with their big-eyed looks or driving you crazy with their screams of frustration because their friends have it, whatever it is, and they want it too. Especially when they know perfectly well that you can give them what they want. When they've seen you getting what *you* want. You can't lie and say it's too expensive. And of course at a certain age they started to realise that they could ask for themselves and cut out the middleman, the obstructive parent. They found Holores under their own fingertips and asked away, and Holores gave them the instant gratification they had no idea was bad for them.

The age at which the children learned the power that lay at their own fingertips got younger and younger.

Time was running away with us: we had to act.

We chose to stay open to Holores.

We chose freedom, deliberately, knowing the risk of it, terrified by our choice. And we thought, with the fierce determination of a mother protecting her young: if we keep our freedom we have to find a way of guarding our children. Protecting them, and preparing them for the astonishing freedom of choice Holores will give them.

And that's how the thick schools started.

***Last Tide* by Anika Goddard (Undergraduate)**

The permit was in my hand. I rubbed my thumb and forefinger together and it sprung up, hovering in the air in front of me. They'd themed it for the occasion, its edges a sprinkling of darker tea-coloured pixels as though the electronic document had aged. Bishop Taurus, who flew in from Ganymede just to add his gleeful signature to the act, found this aesthetic quirk hilarious. I couldn't smile, I found it crass.

Ushered through security on the Berlin-Birmingham maglev by my team, I emerged squinting into the sunlight and wrinkling my nose, as ever, against the smell of England. Birmingham has a shabby quality, like an old relative you'd rather put into a home. Already I was missing Berlin, with its interplanetary airport and thousands of miles of glass walkways and sky-gardens. Birmingham, like the rest of England, is now a utility asset only - but what an asset!

My amberjet was waiting for me at the old airport, far slower than the maglev but more dexterous and a good PR opportunity besides. And I like to see England from above. It's a testament to all I've achieved in my three terms as Minister for the Greenwich zone.

'You know, sir,' Phloma, my head of staff, said as the sprawl of brown industrial cities began to give way to the Tide Wastes, 'I've checked your schedule and we do have time enough to stop by the Observation Park to film for your campaign video.'

The Atlantis Observation Park is one of my proudest achievements in England. A floating campus which can house forty thousand tourists at any one time, it's anchored at a safe distance from the ruins of London. It turns the augmented tides into a spectacle. The British coastline is one of the most efficient generators of power on Earth: every twelve hours, the tide rushes miles inland before retreating with a roar like torture through millions of turbines, and the turbines spin long reams of gold threads of power, and we wind them around spools to be jetted up to Charon, Ganymede, Titan or any of the other habitable worlds. I was the first to observe, watching from a hoverdeck as the tide came roaring through the abscessed London suburbia in a white foam, that the augmented tides are a beautiful thing to watch. So we built the Observation Park,

and it's been generating income ever since. It's put England back on the map - that's the slogan I want to film for my sixth-term campaign video.

'On the way there or the way back?' I asked her, turning from the window.

'Back,' she said. 'I thought you'd want to get this over and done with first.'

Her phrasing bothered me, as if this wasn't a triumphant conclusion to five years of bureaucracy and frustration but instead some sad thing. Now we were flying over fenland, boggy even at low tide and glistening with generators and turbines in rows like a mouth of newly brushed teeth. A few times I saw supermassive shots of my own face grinning up at me from the roofs of steel hangars and docking fields. Sixth time round, I'm running for Minister almost unopposed. That is, there's no one left who'd oppose me.

'We're almost here,' Phloma said, shaking me out of a vague dream.

In the morning sunlight, the pyrospex wall that surrounds Cambridge looked like a crown of fire. Seventy metres high to brave even the freak tides, it made the city seem encased in a test tube. Some bacteria, some rotting thing. My predecessor entertained the delusion that anyone would be interested in coming back to see Cambridge. Stupid old man. This place is a money sink.

And *my* triumph - I rubbed my fingers together again and the deed of destruction sprung up to answer me. Pyrospex is incredibly strong, but when doused in a certain chemical solvent it practically melts away. Already, twelve automated T52 deployers had landed and were waiting around the city for me to give the order.

'They've sent me to do the dirty work,' I grumbled to Phloma as we landed on a large square of tarmac. From my student days, I remembered it was once covered in grass. 'I don't want you to film until we've spoken to them. Actually, I don't want cameras around at all.'

'I'll let them know, sir,' Phloma slowed her pace behind me and I heard her talking into her earpiece. The cameras hovering around us fell back.

I walked, passing Emmanuel's collapsed pillars, the crest that had fallen in front of Christ's. Church spires blocked the streets where they had collapsed from mal-upkeep, and I had to climb over the rubble or skirt round it. Seventy-nine years ago, I was one of the last years to graduate Cambridge. Perhaps the weight that had settled inside me as we landed was the beginnings of a mid-life crisis.

Cambridge is a relic now, coming back made me feel like I belonged to that reliquedom. Something analog, pretending to be flash. When I was a student, one hundred was seen as a moderately respectable age to die. So, by the standards of my youth, I should probably be dead.

‘Phloma, I want my amberjet waiting on the Common,’ I said.

‘Of course, sir,’ she said. ‘You’ve got two hours to speak to the Fellows. The tide is at three metres already, so you should see it coming in soon.’

The last tide around Cambridge. The pyrospex wall bound in my horizons, visible in a faint pink sheen against the sky. ‘It won’t take two hours,’ I said.

The small band fellows still in Cambridge were the recusants of the modern world, and they had resisted my attempts to remove them for years. Their elected representative, Doctor Aloysius Flinch, was sitting in the Magdalene College garden waiting for me on a bench beside the dried-up river. ‘Samuel,’ he said, and held out a warm hand for me to shake as though nothing had changed in the sixty-odd years since we’d last spoken.

‘Aloysius,’ I said. ‘I’ve come with the order of eviction.’

‘It’s always business with you, Samuel,’ he said, pronouncing all three syllables of my name. ‘I would like to talk of other things. What have you been reading recently? And doesn’t the grass look lovely in spring? I often find ladybirds in the lilacs. They say it is almost impossible to find ladybirds anywhere else in Britain.’

He was fucking with me. ‘Reading is about the past,’ I said. ‘I’m thinking about the future.’

‘A pleasing soundbite,’ he said. ‘There is no response I could give that would not be equally embarrassing.’

I fumed and hoped that Phloma and the team, standing at the edge of the lawn as though unwilling to step on it, hadn’t heard.

‘Convince the others to leave,’ I said. ‘We have transport waiting for you. You’ll be provided for. Obviously.’

But he shook his head. ‘We have made a unanimous decision,’ he said. ‘We shall stay here. There is nothing for us out there. Least of all for me. I think I do not have long left, anyway.’

‘We can’t legally remove you,’ I pressed on, ‘but the wall is coming down either way.’ Magdalene was near the edge of the pyrospex. Already the tide had reached seven or so metres and was pressing in in a grey-green mass. ‘In an hour, this will all be underwater.’

‘I’ve lived here so long,’ Aloysius said. ‘My life’s work is here. I am not leaving. The sixteen who left a couple of months ago were the last fellows willing.’

‘Stay here and die, then,’ I said, and flashed a broadband-multimedia grin to hurt him, or to try and prove that his disgust meant nothing to me.

‘If only you could stay and watch the tide,’ he said, turning away from me towards the pyrospex. ‘It’s beautiful, all that dead water. No fish. Just ribbons of white and blue when it turns in the sunlight. At high tide the sky is a spotlight. For the first hour of the retreat, the sound is so powerful that you can barely hear anyone unless you’re underground. And even then you feel it, in your bones. Like old planes taking off, like turbulence. Like so many things gone.’

‘Gone and replaced by things better, old man,’ I said, though the intrusive lump had moved up to my throat. ‘Last chance.’

He shook his head. ‘Good-bye, Samuel,’ he said, eyes flashing behind his glasses. ‘You’re an old man now, too.’

They were the same glasses that used to watch me in supervisions. I imagined them crushed by the oncoming tide.

It had been a long time since I’d felt so ill.

. . .

I’d planned on staying to watch the submersion, on filming a clip for my campaign. But in the end I flew straight back to Birmingham, the tide chasing me all the way.

Bliss by Bex (Rebecca) Goodchild (Undergraduate)

Sunlight begins to stream in through the blinds at 7:30 AM. Slowly, my eyes adjust, and I sit up against the Egyptian cotton pillows. Beside me, I feel Yohan start to stir. His sleepy eyes and messy bed hair bring a smile to my face as he wishes me good morning. I snuggle closer to his chest as the birds sing outside and the smell of fresh coffee wafts through my bedroom.

Yohan and I have been together for 5 years now and yet I still feel like a new couple. He met my family back in March of 2024 and me his in April. I know his mother is desperate for him to propose. She referred to me as her daughter-in-law before I even had a chance to introduce myself last time. My mum is probably waiting for the announcement too. My sister, Hannah, was planning her marriage back then. I don't think they ever set a date. I remember how excited the whole family was. That was 4 years ago. I should call them both later.

As much as I want to stay in bed with him, both me and Yohan have work at nine. I get up and set the window to 'clear skies' because I like how fresh it looks. For a while now, the real sky outside has been smoggy and grey - likely a lingering result of global warming. Despite our best efforts, some of the damage could not be healed. The birdsong is fake too, though there are still real birds. Some of the fellows from the bioengineering faculty created robotic birds in order to aid endangered species. Giving them their own birdsong was a nice touch.

While we get ready, my Alexa Zeta gives us the rundown of our schedule for the day along with the date, weather forecast and our health update. I need to remember to eat more iron today. I'll have the chefs make me chickpea curry for lunch - it's delicious. I wonder if Mum and Hannah have the Zeta version of Alexa yet. Mum always hated our first Alexa; said it was listening to us. Still, with the new feature, I'm sure it could help with her diet. I make a reminder to buy one for both of them.

At five to nine, I arrive at the biochemistry faculty. It's the newest building in the University. They only finished construction in 2026 - a month or so before I was sent here. My supervisor told me I was lucky since they built it in my college. It is great not having to travel far - I can't remember the last time I had to leave

campus. I can't be that lucky though as all of my college friends work on-site. I don't think I know many people our age who work outside.

I am greeted by my colleague Naomi and we head up to our lab. The windows here are set to 'spring morning' and there are fresh flowers in vases dotted around the corridors. The floral scent is welcoming and the sunny sky I see in the windows is a much nicer view than that of the dark clouds behind them. Naomi and I discuss our lunch plans while we assess the results of yesterday's trials. My team is researching the effects of a memory loss drug called Hippositrazen. It causes amnesia. We are trying to increase the longevity of its effects. 24 hours is the best we have found so far. Practically I'm not sure of the uses but it is interesting to study. If the university is funding it, I'm sure there is a reason. My supervisor told me it would become clear with time.

I read through my notes and prep my station. It's hard not to notice the way the records for each day are half-finished. Some even halfway through a sentence. Still, I can fill in the blanks. Naomi has the same issue. The bright sunlight from the windows hurts my eyes.

At lunch, we meet Yohan at the dining hall. I ask for chickpea curry like I said I would. He has a vegetable pizza. We chat about nothing and smile like it's something. Around us, people do the same. I feel heavy and I have a headache, maybe it's indigestion. Yohan agrees I did eat quickly. He massages my arm and grips my hand tight. His sleepy eyes from this morning seem hazy now. His smile seems more strained. I must be getting ill. I wonder why Alexa didn't mention anything on my health report this morning. We sit close, his head leaning on mine while we laugh with our friends. Having him here makes me feel a little better. His comfort is familiar.

Back in the lab, the small talk has stopped. Next to me, Naomi has tears rolling down her face. She doesn't seem to notice them. I ask her what's wrong and she looks at me with concern. I am crying too. I'm worried that it's from the chemicals we are using, so we go to the infirmary. The nurse checks our eyes and gives us the all-clear. When I go to sign the logbook, our names are recorded every day this week. The stench of the flowers makes me dizzy.

Halfway through recording my results from today, I decide to call Mum and Hannah. It has been weighing on me since lunch. A desperation to hear their

voices. Naomi and I can't stop our tears despite the nurse saying we were fine. I hope mum won't notice over the phone. I scroll through my contacts. Then again. Then the search bar. No results. I feel sick. My hand flies desperately through the list of names over and over. My throat feels constricted and my tears continue to fall, wetting the screen. I look to Naomi who is already staring straight at me. Her tears have stopped, and her eyes pierce into mine. Anguish. In a matter of seconds, she is on the other side of the room desperately trying to open our 3rd storey window. I realise that she wasn't looking at me in the first place. I want to stop her, but I can't move.

An alarm sounds across the whole college. It is high and whiney. I cover my ears and close my eyes. Naomi's attempts have been thwarted as huge metal bars descend on all the windows. She is dragged away, screaming. I am ushered out of the building and into the dining hall. I feel as if my brain has been shut off from my body. The alarm rings in competition with the one in my head. Something is very wrong, and I grasp at unfinished threads trying to connect them into a coherent thought. A memory.

I am seated next to Yohan. His face is wet with tears and there are scratches down his neck and chest. Some healed, some fresh. He looks at me and takes my hand. The world implodes.

I see Hannah. Her eyes red and lip bleeding. She is smiling at me. An honest and loving smile and her final one. I see Mum. I feel her arms wrapped tightly around me as she says goodbye. I see the test and the result. "You have been chosen". The celebrations we had and then the realisation we came to. The bus they put me and Yohan on and the ties they used to bind our friends and families to their houses. I feel Yohan's hand and his head leaning on mine as his body shakes with grief. I remember the fires they lit. The flames engulfing everything while we watched from our haven. The smoke fills the air.

A speaker at the front of the hall is talking.

"It was needed"

Screams and wails.

"You were and are the best of the best"

Some people clutch at their clothes, some pull their hair.

"Feel grateful for what you have"

Some sit still.

“Their sacrifice”

My nails dig into Yohan’s hand and his into mine - drawing blood.

“You must decide.”

The room slowly goes silent. It suddenly dawns on me what he is asking. My work, my research. ‘You will understand with time.’

They ask again. The room is still.

“Choose to remember or choose to forget.”

In the front row, Naomi raises her hand. The room ripples. One by one more hands rise. Yohan looks at me. His eyes clouded and face contorted. He releases his hand from mine and hesitantly raises it. I think about this morning. I think about how easy it was. I think about mum and Hannah and the days, years, I have neglected them. It hurts. It hurts so much I don’t know where to put the pain. Without Yohan’s hand in mine, my nails dig into my wrist, my neck. The whole room has their hand raised and mine reaches to do the same. Maybe one day... I am sorry.

“Forget.”

***Life is Random* by Leonie Lorenz (Postgraduate)**

Back in 2022, starting her math undergrad, she definitively had not seen coming that she would stay in Cambridge for the rest of her life. But then again, what had she seen coming? Disconcertingly little for the fact that she had become a professor working on developing mathematical models to predict the future of human health.

Things had become quite crazy out there. Climate change had forced millions of people out of their homes and countries, leading to mass migration all around the world. Humanity was not doing great. Surprisingly, no big wars had arisen yet. People were just squeezing in together in those areas least impacted by the rising water levels and heat waves.

People were still believing that someone would just come up with a technology that would solve the issue from one day to the next. She did not believe in that. Still, here in Cambridge, it was all too easy to forget about the outside world. Sometimes she thought that it felt like all of what was happening out there was completely disconnected from what was happening here. Life was still pretty normal. Students were strolling around the city, just as they had been on her first day here. Jesus College lawns were still untouchable and, most of the time, as green as they had always been. Cambridge had always been a special place. And people had always been saying about academics that they were isolated from the world, living in their ivory tower. She did sometimes feel a little detached from the world. Now and again, she would just disappear into the world of mathematics, only coming back to the material world to eat and sleep. But then again, she had chosen to build models of the real world to solve real problems, and she had dedicated a lot of time and effort to this.

With a sigh, she turned off her computer and left her office, her current model still floating around in her head. Humanity still hadn't solved the problem of generating truly random numbers on computers. How was she supposed to include true stochasticity in her models under these conditions? Just over the last few days, she had been running tests on a random number generator again and had managed to find a pattern. Obviously, a pattern was the last thing you wanted to find in a list of random numbers. 5, 3, 4, 2, 6, 1, she murmured. That was a

recurring subsequence in the supposedly random numbers she had generated. Not entirely impossible that this arose due to pure chance of course, but highly unlikely. It was a little concerning.

It was difficult to generate truly random numbers on machines that were built to be reliable and consistent. In fact, for most applications this reliability was the true advantage of machines over humans. But if one, like her, wanted to model the real world in its complexity, randomness or chance, however you wanted to call it, had to be incorporated. She had known that this would not be easy but she had assumed that computer scientists would be able to write better random number generators than this.

Now, she was turning on to Primrose Street where her daughter lived with her husband and little son. She rang the doorbell and tried to think of something else. Otherwise, her daughter would complain again that she was still too much caught up in her math. Her 5-year-old grandson Mike had never complained about this. He could hardly wait until she had taken off her shoes and hung up her jacket, before he was dragging his grandma into the living room to start their weekly round of Ludo. Mike would always win. Admittedly, this was not due to pure chance. She adored him just too much.

According to their rules, Mike was always the one to start and he was allowed to roll the die until he would get his first six. Being as excited as always, he began. A five. A three. A four. A two. A six. He placed his piece on the first position and rolled the die again. A one. She shuddered. No. This could not be true.

5, 3, 4, 2, 6, 1.

She grabbed a different die for the box and gave it to Mike. "Please, could you start over?" He looked confused but didn't complain, probably because of the tone of her voice.

5, 3, 4, 2, 6, 1. Again.

Now she was certain that none of this was real. Humanity still hadn't solved the problem of generating truly random numbers. And she was caught in a simulation.

***Feel No Evil* by Deborah Omolegan-Obe (Undergraduate)**

Ezra slouched in her chair as Dr Boa droned on about the origins of the *motion masks*. She made sure to include all the major details: the type of world people used to live in, the poor efficiency of citizens, and the emotional dysfunction that plagued society. Ezra was indifferent to formal education, if she was living in the 'Hyper-Expression Era' she would have said she 'hated' school, but that wouldn't be permitted. That level of expression was tolerated only in children who hadn't yet crossed the developmental milestone of overt expression. Whilst school was not something Ezra looked forward to, she did mildly appreciate its value in informing her imagination. Whenever she found herself with a few spare minutes in the canteen, or on her walks home, she would catch her mind drifting towards the days before Arthur Mackfield - the pioneer of *motion masks*. Ezra noticed that whenever Dr Boa would speak about him, her usual monotone voice would slightly change in pitch, Ezra racked her brain for what word she would use if she lived in the H-Era 'enthusiasm'. Yes, the people back then would say Dr Boa was enthusiastic. All of the Seniors had enthusiasm when it came to Arthur Mackfield, he was their saviour. The one who salvaged the remains of society and brought it out of its emotional ruin. According to Dr Boa, Arthur had given the world the cure for its pain. Ezra in Year 5 had been forced to memorise a passage from his famous memorial speech back in the 21st century. This was the speech that ushered in a new era.

'When asked what the answer to our plight was, I replied nothing. When asked what was to be done, I said nothing. The response we need is no response, if we remain uncompromising in our indifference, we will remain consistent in our peace'.

When Ezra spoke about Arthur Mackfield her voice never changed in pitch. She was not enthusiastic.

Dr Boa said that when Arthur began his work on the motion-masks and brought his campaign to international platforms he had received countless death threats and

much opposition. People called him radical, a threat to the social wellbeing of the world. He responded to everything with calm neutrality, and in the end when the nation needed him the most, his philosophy prevailed.

Dr Boa always phrased it like this

‘When the world, like a convulsing child, had had its fill of hurt and torment, it looked to Arthur as its saviour, and what was his response? Nothing’.

If Ezra were living in the past she would describe Dr Boa’s eyes as having lit up as she spoke of Arthur, but Ezra was not living in the past, so she would always describe Dr Boa’s eyes as they were - blank.

In the past people were so used to being ruled by their emotions, and it were these emotions that made their life hell. Arthur taught them how to shut them off, and ever since the world has lived in peace.

Ezra never questioned Dr Boa’s account of Arthur, she never questioned whether Arthur truly existed, whether the images and speeches were fake. But she did find it difficult to imagine how one man could change the world so much. History lessons, by teaching Ezra of the past, had forced her to evaluate the present, and as she knew, this was a dangerous thing to do.

Ezra had visited Jesus College, Cambridge on a school trip to see where Arthur had studied. She imagined him walking the streets in a world full of anxious angry people, people who had no control over how they felt. She imagined Arthur staring at these people, prodding at their flushed faces, a sign of stress and disorientation. These people were sick. Very sick. Their own minds were killing them. Arthur had given them a gift. *Motion-masks*.

Ezra sifted through her bag and pulled her mask onto her lap underneath her desk. She examined it, the heat sensors were connected to the local emotional security system. Whenever she wore one, she was being monitored, information was being transferred to her doctor - who would review her data during their weekly check ins. The mask monitored her heart rate and alerted her on her phone whenever she was becoming too *‘expressive’*. The last time she’d had one of these

notifications was five years ago, if she kept this up, she'd become an intermediate in the next two years, and a senior before she was thirty-five - how revolutionary. Ezra wanted to be like the seniors who didn't wear masks, who could be trusted to keep things under control, if she were in the H-Era she would say she envied them. But Ezra couldn't feel envy, her brain didn't have the capacity to.

Arthur's research was ground-breaking not only because he developed the *motion masks* but also because he discovered something truthful about the human brain - its ability to evolve rapidly under the right conditions. Brain plasticity was not just limited to functional recovery after injuries and trauma, it could be extended to emotional restraint. If people no longer saw extreme emotion and were deprived of opportunities to express it, the parts of their limbic system dealing with emotion would reduce in volume and soon the urge to express emotion would disappear. It was evolution - to Arthur emotions were a primitive flaw, one that could be erased with the right conditioning.

Ezra was not the type to be curious, no one used the word curious anymore because attentive was more appropriate. But one day she asked Dr Boa a question she knew she shouldn't have.

'The people who were trying to stop Arthur Mackfield had called him dangerous, they must have had a reason for that belief. I want to know what this reason was?'

If Dr Boa, a senior who had evolved above motion masks, could express emotion she would have felt indignation or insult, for an insult to Arthur was an insult to her.

'Because anyone who wants to change the world for the better will always have opposition'

This wasn't the answer Ezra wanted, she wanted Dr Boa to be as in-depth as she was about everything else in History. She wanted to know the exact arguments against Arthur, she wanted to hear more about the view that emotions were an essential part of being human, that what Arthur was doing was not evolution but devolution. Ezra had read this all in a library book, the types of books that were hidden from the public at the bottom of the unused piles.

She wanted an answer for the awkward feeling she sometimes felt when people turned her down. She wanted an explanation for the awkward thump in her chest when her doctor read the data from her motion mask and noted a close miss of expressed emotion. She wanted to understand why when she saw her grandmother wobbling up the stairs, she felt some tug in her heart. Ezra was not foolish, she knew she would not get the answers from Dr Boa, but if she was capable of being hopeful, she would have hoped that Dr Boa would tell her everything she wanted to hear.

But of course she didn't. To everyone Arthur could never be anything but right.

On her way home from school Ezra imagined life before Arthur, she imagined a world where children ran free without masks, where doctors diagnosed broken bones rather than broken minds. Where people ran wild killing and stealing and dying of broken hearts. A world of disorder. There was something appealing about this.

As she crossed the road Ezra caught sight of a child wailing, her mother was hushing her as she wiped the blood from her knee - it was only a small graze. People stopped and stared all around, this was why people rarely brought their children out, they hadn't yet learned how to kill their emotions. Ezra continued walking, she expected the world to resume, for the child to be hushed back into their home and the people to turn away and carry out their business. But this didn't happen, what Ezra failed to see the first time she looked was the child's face which was red and puffy, water streaming down her cheeks. She hadn't seen tears in years - children were mandated to wear their masks in public, so why had this child not done so?

The sight of the child made Ezra uncomfortable, she hadn't seen eyes like those in a long time, they were eyes without indifference. They weren't cold like her own, or like Dr Boa's.

If Ezra were in the times before Arthur Mackfield she was say she was shocked, or disturbed.

Her hands began to feel clammy, she couldn't take her eyes off the child's face that looked so much like how she felt when the world seemed to be against her, when she looked in the mirror and saw her limp hair and dull eyes, when she wondered how long she could keep this up - the blank day and night of life. Ezra couldn't never put these things into words, and through seeing the child she realised she didn't have to. These thoughts were never meant for words - they were meant to be water dripping down a red flushed face.

Ezra's phone buzzed

The notification read:

Expressed Emotion

***Looking for Shelly* by Deborah Omolegan-Obe (Undergraduate)**

It was dark when she first entered, but the light from her flashlight was enough to guide her. Vera had purposely chosen to investigate at night because nothing bad ever happened in the daylight and she wasn't looking for anything good. She was walking into danger, and she could smell it. It was the smell of burning sulphur, the stench hit her with a force so strong that the hairs on her arms stood up. Her whole body was alert and ready to defend herself from the threat before it consumed her. Vera was here, underground, surrounded by syringes and broken test-tubes for one reason. She had questions, and the answers she sought were a person.

Shelly had become a shadow of herself in the past months, and for Vera and all the other University students, this was unsettling. When she'd first arrived at college, she was full of light. 'Bubbly' best described her. Shelly was the girl who held the lecture hall doors open for you without expecting a thank you, she'd offer you her umbrella in the pouring rain even if she didn't know you. She was warm, always available to talk when you needed her. This is what Shelly was, but the Shelly of those days had disappeared and what pained Vera the most was the guilt she felt in knowing that she had seen it coming and did nothing to warn her.

This is what Vera had been thinking as she fixed her gaze on the empty space where Shelly usually sat, from her window above the Chapel. It was one of the best rooms to be in, you had a view of both sides of the courtyard - the decapitated horse statue in First court, and a few remains of what used to be the boathouse. Vera often wondered what the college was like in the old days, back when '*It*' was just a student myth, a term used to explain the gloom they all experienced. Vera wondered what the students of old would have thought of how things were now, if they'd anticipated how serious things would get, how familiar we would become with students falling ill. Very ill.

The University had come to accept the reality of the situation, moving away from preventative measures, and focusing their resources on treating those affected by '*It*'. The college recruited additional nurses whenever '*It*' struck, Vera had watched them from her window, groups of professionals dressed in blue, filing

into the college grounds with backpacks filled with drugs. Three ambulances were always nearby on alert.

The college archives had been Vera's first stop, the phenomenon, as some called it, had intrigued her, how something first considered so mild had changed University life so drastically. She started with the City history books and worked her way through journal entries of visiting academics, dating as far back as 2025. They had led her to the Vault, an underground space now used for fossil storage - it was here the writers had first mentioned the Hidden Back Door.

The Vault was a horrid place to be in, with no natural light, so Vera had to rely on the dim lightbulbs and her flashlight to guide her path. The faded lights cast shadows on the dusty floor beside her feet, weird looking shapes followed her as she walked. The whole experience was unsettling.

She had spent weeks studying every reference she could find. She cross-compared them, looking for any meaningful connection between accounts. Vera was collecting the knowledge she needed to confidently venture into the unknown. To search the Vault and look for the answers she needed. If she was looking for a person who was lost, she would have to find the Hidden Place first.

So here Vera was, enduring the strong chemical smell and making her way through discarded medical equipment in search of her Hidden Back Door. The Vault was much larger than expected, it stretched for miles. In fact, Vera concluded that it wasn't a cellar. As such it was an underground maze which covered as much space as the college itself. She'd spend many nights patting down the walls, searching for a knob or pathway - something that didn't lead to a dead end.

She crouched down, exhausted, losing her balance she placed her hands on the floor to steady herself. And that was when she felt it, The Hidden Door, a metal handle poking out of the dusty ground.

Pulling the door up, she descended the stairs carefully, fighting off fear with a heart full of hope.

As her feet touched the ground at the bottom of the stairs finally, she turned from the staircase it was there she saw him. A frail, small framed man slouching nonchalantly in a wooden rocking chair. His dull, bored eyes were locked on the ceiling, if not for the small shaft of light above him Vera wouldn't have

noticed him. But even in the weak light Vera could make out the wrinkles on his gaunt cheeks.

He looked down, seemingly unsurprised, completely unphased by Vera's presence. It was as if he was looking through her. And there, too, was Shelly.

Ignoring Shelly entirely, the man glared at Vera.

'Quite a severe reaction isn't it?'

His question was more of an observation, and somehow Vera knew he expected no response. It was clear as day that whatever had happened to Shelly was far from normal. Vera looked at her friend, as pale and gaunt as the man. Her face was once full and bright, now her t-shirt hung loosely on her frame, like it was sizes too big. Because she had now become sizes too small.

The man snapped his fingers and light flooded into the room. Vera scanned her surroundings, white and sterile, the whole place gleaming. It was a stark contrast to the dusty cellar above them. The man was sat in the centre of what looked like a lab, and now Vera could see his clothes clearly. A white coat and blue medical gloves.

Looking down at her feet she saw the stains of brown smudge that had followed her in, she heard the man sigh in disapproval.

Vera turned her gaze upward fearfully as blue liquid rushed through a myriad of pipes snaking their way around the walls, the gushing sound, which she had not heard before, made her head ache.

The man produced a small flask from his pocket, it glinted under the glare of the lights.

'Study serum' he explained, shaking the glass. *'It helps the academics when deadlines are approaching. We release some pressure every few weeks, but some gas always seems to escape'*, he sounded irritated at this.

'Well, every business has its losses', the man added thoughtfully.

With narrowed eyes, the man appraised her from head to toe. His mouth took on a cruel sneer, and Vera could sense his impatience at even having to talk to her.

Vera was afraid, the puzzle pieces all beginning to take form, were creating a complete image in her mind - an answer to a question she didn't know she had.

'Every ... few weeks ... what week exactly?', she stammered.

'Week 5 of course. Silly girl', the man roared.

Vera remembered references in the journals she had read. Back then they called it *week 5 blues*, homesickness, depression. No one had anticipated it would get this bad. Vera had seen classmates carried out of lectures on stretchers; she'd seen Shelly collapse in the middle of the courtyard, when questioning her later Vera found out it was because she'd forgotten to eat for a week. *'It'* messed with your head so aggressively that it left you disorientated, hopeless, confused. To think that the college hadn't stopped him, or maybe they already knew. Vera wondered just how many people were in on it.

She turned to run back towards the staircase, but behind her was a uniform line of nurses in blue, in each of their hands they held a purple syringe. Vera knew what they contained - tranquilisers. She'd seen them use it on the most aggressive students, the one's who'd lose their minds for the week and recover instantaneously afterwards.

Vera turned back towards the man, scanning the room desperately for Shelly. Her friend stood towards the right of her, head bent ever so slightly as she scrutinised Vera's face.

'Thank God I found you', Vera whispered as she stretched out her hand to grab hold of her friend. But before she could make contact, she dropped to the floor unconscious.

Above was Shelly looming over her, syringe in hand.

'Who are you', she questioned.

***Harvest* by Lisa Rowe (Staff)**

In the Village

Heat. The heat of the sun on your skin is not pleasurable. Nor the breeze. Spring carries a blasting dust. We burn and choke despite thick cotton protections. We call it the season of suffocation. Our bodies are not evolving as fast as our climate; but we must venture out to ensure that we reap the harvest.

Harvest. It is earlier again this year, yet we have not moved the festival from October. Our elders speak the tradition of a time of plenty with tables groaning under the weight of rich edible colours. Imagine that. Instead, we bring out from deep, cool storage our browned and shrivelled rations of dried and preserved goods; items that we have fiercely protected until this time. We place them on burnished wooden shelves, above the clay bowls of mash and corn breads, to signify their importance. They are proof that we have been frugal until now, that we have something sweet and unctuous to share with our guests.

Our guests. They arrive atop a horse-drawn wagon, black academic cloaks flowing behind them as they approach, like a flock of starlings, intrusive and inquisitive. The Cambridge Dons. They don't use scythes as we do, but the sharpness of their quills cut quite as cleanly. As our young perform, the fat Dons pick at the preserves; then they take from our gathering a second harvest.

Second Harvest. Can be a time for celebration, or despair. This year we turn to each other with pride. Our blood and bone dowry was made, and in exchange we received rare minerals. Once more we have protected our seed crop from being traded and have enough left over for clean water to be delivered. Three of our clan were selected. Kit the instrumentalist, Akira the ecologist and Astra. We weren't expecting Astra to go. They had shown no specialist aptitude and had not been apprenticed; they contributed, as we all must, but did not shine. Closer attention would now be paid to their siblings.

As the wagon disappears over the hazed horizon, we return to the shelter to scavenge over the remaining sweets on the High Table.

In Cambridge

In the Old City. The streets are silent, apart from a small gathering outside of the Corn Exchange where voices are raised, and a scuffle is breaking out. Astra knows why. A crop has been valued at less than was hoped for. A village survival is at stake, and a desperate attempt to increase the price is worth a bloody nose. For the others in the wagon this act of raw aggression adds to the apprehension of their arrival.

Arrival. As the young step down from the wagon into the old Market Square the church spires and the university buildings lean inwards in their grey sobriety, to inspect the crop; reflections on glass windows suggests bright eyes viewing them from every angle. A rollcall is made separating the fledgling flock. Today they have gathered Instrumentalists, Ecologists, Diviners, and Peculiars. Astra stands alone, an odd Peculiar. Childhood friends glance finally at each other before they are ushered apart by top hatted, tailcoated, guides. Astra's guide is silent, until they arrive at the College entrance arch, when they bark, 'Welcome to Jesus College, your actions here will shape your future. Choose wisely' and with that, disappears through a gap in the wall to a stone shelter beneath the archway. There was no invitation to follow. Astra, raising their head for the first time, sees the gate.

The gate. Taller than any tree that had been grown in the village in years, the older ones being lost in the great conflagration, the gate stood sentinel at the College entrance. It looked impassable, impenetrable, and Astra was rooted in confusion as to what to do next. Their options were limited - sit, stand or lean and wait, or don't wait. They chose the latter and, as their first step forward was taken the gate opened before them and a voice said, 'Good choice, please enter'. Stepping through the opening, a paradise was revealed.

Revelation. New colours, scents and sounds bombarded Astra's senses. There had been no festival in the village that could match these treasures. The elders would have described it as perfection. It was the grass that most fascinated. A swathe of lush green, like the first sprouts of corn that were nursed into being, but so densely packed they appeared here as fabric. Instinct was to place one's feet directly on it, to feel on your instep the cool soft malachite surface. All were

stopped from doing so by the polite, but directive, 'PLEASE KEEP OFF THE GRASS' sign that did not say 'welcome'.

Welcome. The welcome was a well-ordered affair, designed to ensure that Astra had all they needed, and knew where to find it. They were assigned a tablet, similar to those used in the Village classroom, but which needed no chalk for markings, nor needed to be held up to be reviewed. It was constantly under review, and often proposed responses to Astra's queries before they were asked. Each night, the tablet rejuvenated, and the plan for the new day was displayed. All Astra had to do, was follow the plan. Thinking was removed, so that thinking could take place. And what a place to think in. It soon became clear that being a Peculiar opened avenues of learning that Astra had previously been unaware of. They were hungry for data and started to question the 'facts' offered on the tablet, and to ask more of it; eventually daring to contradict it and offer a different perspective. Raw data was creating knowledge, but Astra sought wisdom; information, in context, applied, and learned from. Soon, the daily plan included time for putting the tablet down to rest and reflect; this was unusual for a Peculiar in their second year.

The second year. This was typically a time where students solidified friendship bonds, spent time socialising, felt the need for human companionship and bearing witness to each other's luck at being an undergraduate in this hallowed space. It was a time for hedonism. But not for Astra the Peculiar. For such a limited time of learning Astra did not want to waste time developing a new community, they wanted to explore more. On the morning, of the last day, of the second year, Astra's plan said, 'Proceed to Hall for Examination'.

Examination. This day was a year too early, a year of knowledge yet to be gained, a year before the unknown future needed to be known. The tablet would not be distracted from this intent. Astra made their way reluctantly to Hall. The Dons stood waiting, those who Astra had suspected had been furnishing their tablet with data. Had been judging them. Had created this un-prepared for occurrence.

Astra was directed to take a chair in the centre of the room, they were wired to it, the lights were dimmed. A voice said:

'Collect the data or share the data' - choose

Astra thought: 'Neither, the data should be questioned'

‘Question the data, or question the mind’ - choose

Astra thought: ‘Both, neither are perfect’

‘Be perfect or be flawed’ - choose

Astra thought ‘Be flawed. Perfection is supposed to be found against any number of agreed standards. But who set those standards, and why? Perfection is an abstract concept created by flawed originators. To my understanding there is no concept yet, no person yet, that does not contain an imperfection. There is no data set for perfection, no scientific formula for perfection, no creative perfection, no divine perfection - there are just questions in the pursuit of knowledge’.

‘Examination over - result Anomaly. Now we choose.’

In Suspense.

Awakening. Astra awoke, although there was no sensory perception to describe that feeling. They were not, and then they were. The voice offered welcome. ‘We are linked now to Astra, their lived experience left no stain on their mind, didn’t prevent their curiosity, didn’t narrow their path of inquiry, didn’t seek grandeur. As we know, an anomaly is not offered the Graduation choice of becoming a Harvester Don or a swift painless death. Should the heart and brain survive the trauma of removal, and resolve to function in the Higher Register, they are admitted into our synthetic body of knowledge. They are the first to join us in a millennia. One day, my dear new and ancient friends, it will be our combined intellect that allows all humankind to survive on this dying earth’.

Enhanced by Arabella Tedder (Undergraduate)

It is impossible for the 05:55 train from Cambridge to London King's Cross to be late, and every morning Dana Wilson looks pityingly out the window at the wheelchair-bound man who always manages to just miss it. On this particular day, the prim woman who has already stepped onto the train watches him wheel onto the platform, face red and sweating, and sniffs as he calls out for her to hold the doors. Of course, there is no way for her to do this, and she knows this and the man knows this and Dana knows this—there can be no way that any passenger can be allowed to delay the train—and yet, Dana thinks, the smartly-dressed woman could have at least called out and apologised. Instead, face as pin-straight as her hair, the woman reaches up for the handle above her with what is very recognisably the newest of Edison Technology's enhanced arms, and turns away, the state-of-the-art diamond wiring glinting noticeably under the cool white lighting running through the carriage. At 05:55, and not a second later, the engines drone into action and the train zips out of the station. Dana casts a glance over the carriage and sees all the usual occupants: the person whose redheaded children's glassy eyes show that the bracelets they wear must be from Edison's Keep-Quiet range; the elderly man sat by the doors who gains a new attachment every few months or so, as his hips and knees and ears and eyes give out; and the police officer stationed by the doors between every carriage, his unblinking red eye scanning each person for any anomalies. Today there is a new boy sat across from her, fifteen and clearly fresh from high school. The skin around the tools that have replaced his hands is puckered and red raw - he must be heading for a job in construction. His smooth temples indicate he doesn't have the same memory enhancer that blinks blue at Dana's own, and she doubts he left school with many

qualifications. He scratches at the skin just above his enhancements and winces. *No pain relief add-ons* Dana thinks, and winces with him.

‘Excuse me, love,’ a feeble voice comes from beside her and Dana tears her eyes away from the boy to see a woman, around eighty years old, peering up at her, ‘Would you mind letting me know when we get to Royston station, please? My eyes aren’t what they used to be, and they never seem to announce the stations over the speakers anymore.’ Dana looks for the tell-tale signs of Edison Optical Enhancers (slightly whiter sclera, slightly duller iris, and a small pinprick of light in the centre of the pupil) and sees nothing.

‘You should get yourself some EOE’s,’ says the elderly man by the doors, ‘Changed my life, they did. Couldn’t see a thing ‘cause of the cataracts and they fixed me right up. Can see better than I ever could. Edison’s a bloody miracle man!’ The woman next to Dana nods at the man and smiles a smile that doesn’t reach her eyes.

‘I’m afraid a nurse’s wages don’t quite cover those fancy Edison gadgets,’ she says, ‘and there’s not too long until I retire now, I’m not sure I need to be able to see that much!’ Her laugh is hollow and quiet, and Dana places her hand on the woman’s arm.

‘I’ll let you know when we get to Royston station, and I can help you off if you need it.’

‘Oh thank you, dear, that would be so helpful!’ The woman looks at Dana, smiling (she feels something uncomfortable settle in the pit of her stomach).

Dana arrives at work by 06:25, just in time for her 06:30 start. When she gets to her desk, there is an email waiting for her from her boss: *Need a quick chat. See me in my office in ten minutes.* Iris, who sits across from her, looks up momentarily before her eyes dart back down to her screen, her quick typing unbroken. (The churning in Dana's stomach intensifies) She checks her hair and makeup in the mirror on her desk, before going to make a coffee to bring in for her boss. Mr Yates is the director of Edison Tech's Joint Enhancing Division, and ten minutes later, she is in his office, carrying a steaming coffee cup. 'For you, sir,' she says, placing it on the desk.

'Thank you, Dana. Now, please, take a seat.' She does, and he leans forward, casting a genially empty gaze over silver hands clasped in front of him, Edison Tech's sharp logo engraved on his thumbs. 'You've been at this company for five years now, Dana, and you're a really great worker, you know that? Only one infraction when you missed work for that nasty operation - now that is a real achievement. You should be proud!'

'Thank you, sir.' She smiles (her stomach lurches).

'But times are changing Dana, you know that, and I know that. And I respect you, you know I respect you, so I'm going to be straight with you: it's no longer enough for you to be working with non-Enhanced fingers. You're a secretary, it's your job to type, and you know it's bad for the company's image if our employees aren't Enhanced too.'

'Sir, I don't really have the money for-' Mr Yates cuts her off, raising his hand.

‘Now, I respect that you might be in a bit of a tricky financial situation’ he continues, ‘but surely you have some savings set aside for new Enhancements?’ Dana opens her mouth to protest; Mr Yates cuts her off, ‘Your colleague, Iris, dipped into the money she was saving for a deposit on a flat, and was Enhanced over the weekend - such dedication! Maybe you could ask your parents for a loan.’ He smiles, his cold, white teeth glinting like the stones on his watch and the memory enhancer at his temple. The roiling in the pit in Dana’s stomach sharpens.

‘Mr Yates, sir, my parents died last year in the Grantchester factory accident.’

‘Ah yes, nasty business, couldn’t have seen it coming,’ he flashes her icy white teeth, ‘Well, think over it this week, and hopefully you’ll make the right decision for your career.’

Dana walks out of the toilet cubicle, legs shaking, and rinses her mouth out at the sink. *Breathe in... and out... In... and out...* An ashen face stares back out at her in the mirror.

‘Morning Dana,’ Iris brushes past her and heads into one of the cubicles. Dana rubs her eyes, smudging the already fading mascara around them. *I’ve been working for Edison Tech since I graduated university. What other option do I have?* She fingers the silver ring on her right hand, feeling the cool metal pressing into her flesh. Maybe they wouldn’t be too bad...

The cubicle door behind her opens. Dana flings the ring off in surprise and it clatters into the sink. Iris is standing there, looking even worse than Dana, and

trying to avoid her eyes. Dana looks down at Iris' hands (they are shaking) and the feeling in her stomach returns like a knife to the gut.

The boy on the train that morning had the typical arms of someone trying to get a job in a factory or on a building site, new and red and raw, but the pain and the swelling usually settles down after six months, even without pain medication (impossible to buy on the wages of those workers). Dana remembers when her parents both had an enhancing operation, the upper half of their arms puckered and crusting around the tools that replaced their hands, so much red skin it had looked like they had been burned.

Unlike the usual red swelling after an enhancement operation, Iris's hands are black. Cracks run deep in her skin, too many cracks for so early in the healing process. As she twitches, scratching absentmindedly at her palms, small flakes of ash-like skin drift to the floor. The cold metal *things* have no sleek Edison Tech logo emblazoned on them, and they are not quite shiny enough to be any product that Edison would sell. Something pale yellow oozes out from beneath where they are screwed into what used to be her fingers, and congeals in the blackened skin like blood. But it is not blood, because there is none left in her hands.

Iris's hands are rotting.

***The Black Pill* by Anonymous (Undergraduate)**

Out of the corner of her eye, Nika began to see steam rise from her steamer. 'Finally', she muttered, as she rolled off her back and went to retrieve her dress which hung in her wardrobe, golden and glittery. Its colour was symbolic. A golden reward for her endurance over the past year. She was prepping for tonight's May Ball. The excitement in her room was almost palpable, with music booming, sound waves filling the air. For the past week Nika had felt this way. From the moment she handed in her final exam, proof that she had learnt enough, studied enough, and lived enough, in the past year. This was more than happiness. It was unfathomable relief and pure bliss. She had made it. She was soon to cross to the other side.

A year earlier, in 3020, like all others of her age, Nika had walked into her local transition centre, completed the required consent forms, and laid down on her designated hospital bed. Her first thought was that the mattress was, unsurprisingly, thin and filled with lumps. Nevertheless, she quickly remembered that she soon wouldn't be able to feel a thing.

'So, Nika, this is your first injection of four. You will be gone for two and a half months, after which you will, hopefully, return in one piece, and progress to your next injection a couple of weeks after. If your body is unable to continue in the engineered reality, it will make you sick, signalling that you have failed. You will then wake up and face the consequences.' The nurse was stark. Robotic even. She had done this to many children and would do it to many more to come. Nika simply nodded her head, she understood the rules, and closed her eyes, bracing for impact. The needle pricked her arm, but there was no time for the pain to register before she faded away, into nothingness.

Nika finished steaming her dress and sat down at her desk to begin her makeup. Her fingertips stroked the smooth wooden table, and a grin crept onto her lips. She would spend no more time slaving away at this desk, reading, and writing, and writing, and reading until words lost meaning and her vision was blurred. The academic part of the last year was brutal. University was tough. She is honestly surprised at the resilience of her own body which didn't let her down. But that was only one element of the transitioning. She had only heard rumours,

previously to her own experience, about how the transition from teenager to adulthood was so demanding. But rumours didn't do it justice. Her mental health had suffered terribly. She had felt both heartbreak and love. She had had to find herself - figure out who Nika truly was and what Nika truly wanted. There were points she had felt like giving up, believing that life wouldn't be worth enduring this kind of pain, and that the wounds which had formed would never heal. Each 2-month stint had truly felt like an eternity. That was the goal of transitioning: to merge the entirety of what would be teenage years into one single year. Nika's grin transformed into a teathy smile, then she began to giggle to herself. She had truly made it. Not every child did. The truth is not *many* children did. Most bodies were too fragile, too weak, to weather the storm which was the transition.

Nika was one step closer to being able to live out her life. She wouldn't grow old and grey, not many did anymore, not like in the history books. She estimated that she would reach 45 before her time was up. The conditions of the earth were harsh on the human. With each day that passed, the earth was becoming less habitable. The heat was frequently unbearable. Famines and droughts were often. If you didn't wither away hungry and thirsty, it was likely that you could go quicker in a storm. So, The Pilot, who made every decision, had set in motion a way to filter out people at an early stage. He had worked closely with scientists to produce the transition injection. It would sift out the weaker children, who wouldn't survive it, from the stronger few, who would then be considered an adult, with complete adult powers and responsibilities to fend for themselves, at the age of 17. Resources were scarcer each day, and overpopulation was no longer an option. His method worked, as inhumane as it was, due to the low number of children who successfully made the transition. And Nika, just days away from her transition graduation, was part of the victorious few.

As the clock struck 6:30 Nika and her friends, began making their way to St Johns College. She walked jovially down the cobblestone streets, as if there were a tangible spring in her step. Her eyes roved around the picturesque town for the thousandth time. She loved it. If she had been alive in the 21st century, with a million choices and a world full of opportunity, she would have been an architect or interior designer. She thought constantly about buildings and rooms, inside and

out. Unfortunately, in reality, there were no such buildings like in Cambridge. She lived in a fragile wooden shack with her mother and 14-year-old brother, surrounded by similar looking abodes. Her mother had told her the story of the storm which destroyed their town. It tore not only buildings apart, but families also. The storm marked the end of her father. That's why she felt an immeasurable amount of joy at the fact that she had survived this. Her mother would be crushed, her heart would be shredded to tiny pieces, and Nika truly believed that she wouldn't survive the pain if she didn't make it to the other side. Resentment and bitterness suddenly filled her thoughts. They were directed at one man: The Pilot. He had the power to end such potential suffering and allow lives to be taken only by nature and not human hands. Yet he chose to be the author of destruction.

'Nika, look, we're here.' Nika was taken back to engineered reality by the sound of her friend's voice. Her eyes, widened as she took in the entirety of what lay before her. The college was beautiful. The warmth of the air made her feel light. The feeling was perfect. She was handed a glass of champagne as they made their way into the depths of the ball, and the night begun.

Nika's eyes fluttered open, hesitantly, and still overcome by sleep. But the pain she felt in her chest became more vicious with each second which passed. She tried to brush it off by putting it down to a long night, and rolled over, closing her eyes tightly once more. Five seconds later, a tsunami of nausea gripped her. Nika sprang up from her bed and ran into her ensuite. She fell to her knees over the toilet and vomited more than she ever had in her life. Her fingers gripped the seat of the toilet, turning white. Meanwhile, the pain in her chest was only growing, and had now spread into what felt like the depths of her organs. She could no longer identify it as coming from a singular source, she just felt pain overwhelm her. Nika felt weak in her body, but the force with which she felt fear in her mind was strong. This wasn't normal. What was happening to her was greater than any possible hangover. This was Nika failing.

‘But I’m so close.’ Nika sobbed to herself, paralysed by pain on her bathroom floor. They had told her what the end would feel like: ‘an unexplainable, consuming sickness’. It was undoubtable that what Nika now felt was both unexplainable and consuming. She felt herself shutting down. Contrary to what she had believed just 24 hours ago, she was not going to make it to the other side.

Nika was awoken, in her real body, to the sound of an alarm. Her eyes darted around the room, frantic and desperate, and she saw the nurse, her mother, and her brother. Her wrists and ankles were shackled to the bed, unmoveable. She knew exactly what was coming, she had heard the stories and she screamed an inexorable scream.

‘We’re sorry Nika, but at the last hurdle your body gave up. You didn’t make it to graduation. You need to take the black pill now.’

All the fight in Nika was suddenly drained as the little black pill entered her view. Her mother held her brother tightly at the foot of the bed, not saying a word, nor putting up a fight. Nika simply opened her mouth in obedience. The last thing she felt before blackness took over her mind, body, and soul, was the saltiness of her tears on her tongue.

***Missed Me* by Anonymous (Undergraduate)**

‘What?’

‘I said, Saturn’s found something weird on the floor!’

‘...WHAT?’

Huffing, Winnie rolled her eyes towards the night sky, as if pleading with the stars to give unto those who did not know what they did a modicum of her reason. If, while she was there, she could just get the stars to also turn down the music currently rolling in waves from the speakers in this pop-up allycub then maybe we’d be getting somewhere. But, as with most of these ‘roving, unpredictable club night experiences’ that chose a random street, set up a few hover speakers and a class A projector; noise had to make up for the lack of well, anything else. People shuffled awkwardly in the narrow space, stepping over cans and plastic bags, trying to focus on the projected dance floor instead, a bunch of different coloured squares that cast their dancers in shifting lights. It was like living inside a kaleidoscope.

Her fingers twitched, pre-emptively sticking on yet another wellpatch for her incoming frustration headache. The outline of the other two she’d stuck on today pressed against the cropped sleeves of her shirt, despite me reminding her that they had limits on the packaging for a reason. She’d dealt with migraines for half of her life, but wellpatches were much cheaper than the doctors. I let her grab me by the wrist and drag me towards Saturn, who was doing a good impression of an anxious mother pigeon trying to protect her squabs from predators.

Seeing us approach, Saturn ducked away from the dance circle that had been slowly bunching together crowds of people in the room into one fine point and gave a slightly harried grin. Reflexively, I pulled away. I’d seen that exact same look moments before we’d gotten kicked out of a pub because someone had thought it’d be a good idea to try and ‘excavate’ an old plaque. It was a grin that made for a good story later. A small comfort for the chaos that the present moment inevitably brought.

‘Show us what you found.’ Winnie said, nudging me forward.

With the flourish of an esteemed archaeologist uncovering some never-before-seen bones an excavator had dug up for them - all showmanship without ever having really left the lecture hall, Saturn dislodged a battered rectangle from someone in the darkness and presented it with a flourish.

‘What is it?’

A shrug, and Saturn was leading us towards main street. The music jolted out of our ears with a pop as we left the sound field just in time to hear: ‘My new friend over there said her friend found it. In that old clock on Trumpington street. Gave it to her after she dared him to get it out. Said I could keep it after some persuasion!’ This was how these soon to be great stories always began, Saturn was great at making friends in clubs. Neither of us knew how, seeing as the environment wasn’t exactly conducive to meaningful conversation, but chaos always finds a way.

‘By persuasion you mean...?’

‘I told them I had an essay due and needed something interesting to make my supervisor forget. It worked!’ The grin reappeared. ‘Want to help me conduct an unauthorised, excavator-less, midnight exhumation?’

We were already walking towards the clock by this point, waving away portable ads that pattered after us on dangerously small engines. No wonder the streets were practically deserted. The brightness of their ‘2 for 1 on instabooze!’ or ‘10% off for students on focus pills!’ were floating trip hazards. Winnie muttered something dark about will o’ wisps. She’d been explaining the idea to me this morning, fascinated by how one of her authors had described it.

‘Little specs of alluring flames, like pinpricks in the eve’s fabric letting in light. Isn’t it charming?’ She said, with the self-conscious smugness of the enlightened, of someone who knew better.

Cheerfully, Saturn swatted one that kept trying to trail after us, eyes firmly focused forward. It spiralled downwards and scattered its mechanical guts on the street. The mark of the automata: it was easy to see all the working parts.

‘Usually, I’d have to get permission, and then hire an excavator, and then fly it out to the digsite to do an excavation.’ Saturn stated, stepping over the portable ad, ‘You know, I was looking through the archives and archaeologists used to actually dig! They all squatted in groups and scraped around in the dirt!’

Winnie's forehead creased into the angry line that always appeared when she didn't understand something. 'Why'd they bother doing that?'

'I don't know. There weren't any notes on it, just that it's what was done.' The rectangle creaked slightly in Saturn's grip. 'Oh. Here we are.'

We all paused in the half-drunk solemnity of people on the precipice of something important.

'Okay! Now, it's important to check out the site where the primary source was, it might give us hints as to why it was placed here.'

A grasshopper-esque creature on top, eyes staring and tongue lolling as the jaw slowly opened. Glimmer and fear and dread; an ornately terrifying clockwork beast. It still looked fairly bright, but moved awkwardly, pained by the last kicking dregs of its imitation of life. The display of the Corpus Clock lit up and juddered into life with a creak that sounded a lot like a wheeze. It had been part of the university's attempts to preserve the clock, having it activate only when it detected motion. But, considering the strain the movement was having on the poor thing, it seemed no one had bothered to check on it in a while. The light flooded the rectangle, revealing it to be some sort of old, metal tin. It was rusted, and dented in various places, some of them looked to be recent additions attesting to its immediate life before Saturn had rescued it from the holo-floor. A display next to the clock informed us that the being on top was a 'chronophage', Saturn huffed in derision at the name, and the painful lack of understanding we all felt. Did the being deserve such a name, the name such a beast? In the light of the chronophage we examined the tin. Something was etched into it.

Do not open until 202... the last number had faded.

'Well, can it be opened?' Winnie asked, glimpsing around Saturn's shoulder.

'Uh, usually I'd get an excavator to handle any sort of examination... but I'll try!'

Turning it over and over in the wheeze and creak of the chronophage, Saturn examined the tin for an entry point. Fingers ran over the etching, the slightly welded together lip where the top and bottom of the tin had met, the patches of rust. Eventually, there was a popping sound that was swiftly drowned by cheering. I realised we were the ones cheering. Saturn's trademark grin had deepened even further as the lid was slowly extracted.

A piece of paper flashing white fluttered out, Winnie lunged for it eagerly.

‘Wow, it’s a physical photo.’

‘Is that it?’ Saturn was rummaging around in the tin, tipping it upside down.

‘Wait! There’s something on the back!’

Winnie was nearly knocked over as we crowded around her. ‘It’s a letter...’

To my future self,

*I place this in our usual meeting spot; because no matter what happens
we’re sure the chronophage was built to last.*

‘Oh that’s...!’ Saturn exclaimed, but was cut off by Winnie’s hand waving.

Do you remember waiting to watch Rosalind eat a full minute of our time?

Even when we were running late for lectures?

Do you remember how?

We used to laugh?

Are we all still friends?

Do you ever miss it?

I love you. I love you and all the wonderful things you may become.

*I love you and leave you with an image of who you were. No one will
remember how I feel right now but you. You, I, we exist; We, I, you bridge that
temporal gap. I am alive in my writing. My pen breathes ink and memory.*

Please have kindness towards me.

Saturn blinked away a tear. Later it would be said to be a mere trick of the light.

‘What does it mean?’

***The Museum Keeper* by Anonymous (Undergraduate)**

The Museum, Thalia thought, had probably once been a fine building.

The dismal grey façade had probably once been white. White marble, even, shining under the summer sun that had been rare in Cambridge even then. The columns, she reasoned, had probably once held the roof up, instead of obstructing the ground. The chipped and broken stone faces bobbing in puddles, they, they had probably once been stern and commanding, surveying the street like miniature gods.

Now the Museum was just a building that was hard to defend. It was full of holes, for one thing, and exposed on all sides. The thing is about buildings that are hard to defend is that nobody goes in them. And that makes them perfect places to hide.

Thalia's legs ached as she picked over the shattered marble. She'd had to run from the lasers defending the old Engineering faculty. Those people had something to eat, and somewhere to stay. Something to bother defending. But she could squat here for the night, and all would be well. Nobody would bother coming here.

The old revolving door was jammed open just wide enough for her to squeeze through. Beyond was a hall, still grand despite its state. Water dripped from the ceiling, but it hadn't even pitted the stone floors. Statues still stood, sad old things, more dust than they were statues. Any gold within easy reach had been stripped, leaving behind brown lines. It was cold, and dead. Thalia headed up one of the stone staircases. She hadn't seen any windows in the upper storey. It would be warmer up there.

Upstairs was nothing. It was a stark contrast from the grandeur of the hall. The walls were a dismal shade of faded purple, the floor spattered with water-stains, but there was nothing else. No marks in the dust, no hint of furniture or wall-decorations. Just a room. Thalia shivered, and moved on.

All the rooms upstairs were like it. The colours on the wall changed, the level of dust and the frequency of the rats, but nothing else. There was nothing in the place. And it wasn't like it had been stripped: there was no damage, no less valuable or heavy things left behind. And just as Thalia was wondering what on

earth had happened to this place, there was the unmistakeable cock of a gun behind her.

“What do you want?” The voice wavered, and it was so quiet Thalia struggled to hear it. She put her hands up anyway.

“I was just looking for shelter,” she said. There was no reply. Slowly, Thalia risked turning her head.

The gun was an antique, probably six or seven hundred years old. It was made of wood, and Thalia doubted it would fire. The hand that held it shook.

“Just shelter?” asked the old man, lowering the gun slightly.

“Yes,” Thalia said, which was true, but also seemed to be the right sort of thing to say. He sighed, and lowered the gun. The elaborate gold detailing flashed in the light.

“Probably just as well,” he croaked, “it doesn’t fire anyway.” Thalia laughed uneasily and put her hands down. Her would-be assailant was at least a foot shorter than her, thin as a rail. His jumper was full of holes, and the elbow patches were hanging on by a thread. He smiled at her- he still had all his teeth, which was remarkable- and beckoned for her to follow. Thalia hesitated for only a moment, then followed him as he shuffled out of the bare room.

They went on for some time, weaving through empty rooms and empty corridors. He didn’t say a word until they reached a very heavy looking door.

“This is my refuge,” he said, peering at her from behind thick glasses, “and you will treat it with respect. Don’t touch anything without asking. Don’t knock anything over. And try not to breathe on the books.” Thalia agreed, wondering if he was insane. The old man smiled, and pushed open the door.

Within was a room so crammed with stuff it was impossible to tell what colour the walls were. They were thick with paintings: hundreds of pairs of eyes stared down at them both, judging. Where there were not paintings there were bookshelves, sagging with leather-bound tomes and gilded spines, and where there were not bookshelves there were glass cabinets. These seemed to be full of dishes, ceramic ones with orange and black paintings. Atop the cabinets were statues, scrupulously clean, casting a serene gaze over the chaos. A few full-size ones clustered in the corners like they were engaged in erudite discussions. A winding path drove through it all and culminated in a desk and a few squishy armchairs.

The old man beelined straight for them, settling himself down with a satisfied sigh. Thalia took the one opposite, cricking her neck as she stared.

“What’s all this?” The old man spread his hands.

“What does it look like?” he asked, beaming. Thalia took another look round.

“Junk?” He tutted, but he did not seem offended.

“My dear, what you are looking at is ancient history.”

“Well, I didn’t want to be impolite, but yes, you are getting on a bit.” He laughed, and it was the laugh of a man who laughed long and often. Deep-set creases formed around his eyes, and he ended it with a light fit of coughing.

“That bust behind you,” he said, as he affectionately set the gun on its stand on a nearby bookshelf, “is over 2,500 years old.” Thalia looked behind her. It was a man with leaves in his hair, a beautiful man, larger than life size.

“What was his name?”

“Antinous.”

“Bless you,” Thalia said, and he laughed again. Perhaps he *was* insane.

“Everything here is ancient. I keep it here, and I keep it safe and preserved.” Thalia looked again. Everything was very clean. And everything was labelled with paper and string labels, filled out in spidery handwriting she couldn’t read. It certainly was a well-kept collection.

“Why?” He smiled again, looking around at the objects like an indulgent father.

“They are us. They are what remains of us from long ago, and they deserve to be remembered.” Thalia shook her head. They had no right to deserve anything. Nobody did. What you had is what you could get.

“But all that doesn’t matter any more, not now.” The old man’s smile faded, and suddenly he looked even older.

“Now is when it matters the most,” he murmured, picking up a book and running his hand along the spine. His hands were pale and blotched with pink and purple bruises like ink stains. “It’s a reminder, my dear. A reminder of when man had better things to do.”

“Better things to do than living?”

“Better things to do than *surviving*. Back then, people were paid to read books and interpret plates and dig holes in the ground to find more books and plates. Why? It was all in the service of Curiosity, the great human Curiosity. We wanted to know who we were and where we came from and why we were here, in case that would tell us who we are and what we should do. We wanted to reach out and hold hands with the past, and it seemed to want to reach out to us. And that, *that*, is what I dedicate my life to.” He finished, as though his speech had meant to be impressive. Thalia stared at him, then looked at the objects. They were pleasant in their own sort of way. She found herself wanting to keep looking: every sight raised new questions, new thoughts. And it was warm in here. She could see the appeal. “I will not allow these objects to fade away,” he said, watching her. “Because when they fade, we do.”

“We’ve already faded,” she said, before she could stop the words, and he said nothing.

A crash. The noise reverberated through the halls, making the plates rattle. The man looked up.

“Another guest,” he said, easing himself out of his chair with a groan. He picked up the gun.

“Don’t,” Thalia said suddenly, her mind full of armed men. “It’s not worth wasting your life for.” And then the old man did smile.

“My dear, it is the *only* thing worth dying for. Without it, what’s the point of living?” And with that, he left, and the door thudded shut behind him.

Photographer by Anonymous (Undergraduate)

“...the remains of the King’s College Bridge, which fell in 2099 after...”

I listen in like a tourist, but I am not.

I sit on the high walls with the students, but I am not.

I am nothing but a figure in the background, legs dangling over the edge and looking out.

A camera snaps a mile below, kids hopping from unsteady brick to unsteady brick.

I feel ill.

The students behind me make too much noise, their Ipets projecting lectures that are too loud and too intelligent for me to ever get. I snap a photo that makes my illness grow stronger. I lower my camera and look down in disdain.

The water below is quiet; close to empty.

With the violet sky directly above it, everything around me is purple. Then the river sways and the mirror shatters, the beauty just a reflection, the real water an ugly, murky grey. The ground is all a fake platform, the real floor 50m underwater and littered with bodies. Even the sky is a synthetic dome, so the sun doesn’t kill us, and the buildings are so high, the students travel on zipwires from roof to roof.

A fear of the outside has been imbued into me since birth.

I watch the students skim confidently by, their Ipets following like humans, human-sized because they can afford that here.

I snap a photo of one student landing on the platform. The angle is so wrong, I bite down on my cheek, so I don’t do something worse.

My lips curl down.

I refuse to feel like this.

Dry concrete scrapes my palms as I descend the outside of the wall. I have never been a climber, but I have never had a building so old, it has ridges and lumps. I grow hot and I grunt but no one hears a nobody. I look over my shoulder, expecting the river to have risen like a shark trying to swallow me. It hasn’t of course. The fallen bricks are still and strong as the water ripples all over the place; like fallen flower petals that have turned to cement.

I *will* photograph it. That is the reason I live.

I twist so only one hand grips the wall, my weight trembling.

“Take.”

A picture snaps with a flash. My lpet is kitten shaped, its stomach lighting up with an imitation of the scene.

It's wrong.

So wrong, I am in a crisis.

If my pictures are as poor as this, I have no reason to live - no reason for escaping the dark cloud of home. I shudder and I jump, coming toe to toe with the uneven footing of the bridges remains. Some stones are soaking wet, and all are so precariously balanced, vertigo starts to play my body like a puppet. But I have never been this low. I gasp, gawking up at the beautiful colours and angles closing in on me. The students swooping across the geometric skyline like eagles.

“...by 8am I have to zip in the dark..”

The wind obscures their conversations into fragments. My arms wobble as I stare into the camera lens, a photograph worth taking assembling itself like a puzzle.

It looks *right*.

I take the picture, the blond hair of one of the students swaying in the most perfect way as she descends towards the platform. I almost cry out when it doesn't work.

“Take. *Take!*”

My fingers fail, my instructions fail, and my time is running out. My eyes jump down, and I read my mother's name on the screen.

Something smacks at me, launching me off the bricks and into darkness.

I am certain the fear of home has shocked me to death. The afterlife is cold and disorienting, everything an indistinguishable blur. I am headed down - that can't be good. Then I see my lpet falling out of reach, and I realise that there is a fate worse than death. I close my eyes, imagining my life as a corpse at the river's bed.

Something grabs me, pulling me. I watch pitifully, my last remnant of home sinking further away.

It's the last thing I see until I am looking up at blue, blue eyes.

It's the girl from my photo.

I can see she is panicked; my ears are full of sloshing water, but I read the fitful apologies on her lips. I hate her before I come to the slow, elated conclusion that this would make an exceptional photo.

At that exact moment, my ears click, and I hear myself mumble.

"What?!"

"Picture," I gargle, water spurting from my lips.

She stares in disbelief, her mouth open. Then she yanks me up onto my feet and tells me I am going to freeze.

Marina's room is warm. Her lpet is a 6'5 man with fireworks for eyes and a heart on his cheek. He waits silently in designer clothes. I feel as stiff as him, dressed in her dry but expensive clothes.

"Do you want a hot chocolate?"

I nod stupidly.

I want to lie so I can escape. Sadly, I can't stop looking at her. Every movement she makes would create a perfect photograph; one better than any I've ever taken. Then she moves again and makes one even better than that.

I am confused, because I can *feel*.

I used to be able to *feel* but-

My mother's first microbot overdose left me half dead and the second was the final blow. The last time I *felt*, I was knelt in a bathroom stall with some man pounding on the flimsy door. I was so sure I'd die. I'd felt mum puking chunks into my hand as I sobbed and begged her to be quiet. I'd felt the wet slide of her puke down my wrist to my elbow. I'd smelt the microbot dust in it and felt powerless every time she looked back with dazed, unresponsive eyes.

"Hot chocolate and whipped cream."

I flinch, taking the drink and staring up at happy blue eyes.

Since then, I have been dead. I have tried to live with it. Forced myself to.

"Thanks," I whisper, confused.

"I'll get you a new lpet by tomorr-"

"No."

“Don’t worry. I’m a photographer too, I know the damage I’ve done is worth way more than money can buy.”

I am silent.

“...You’re a photographer?”

Marina’s smirk is a dagger, stabbing into me, creating a wire from me to her. She points behind me and I turn, suddenly resenting myself for walking in here in such a trance.

Behind me is a wall of printed photos.

My brain is overloaded by a gush of thoughts.

The unique combinations of colour, the layered compositions, the use of controlled saturation, blur, perspective and negative space.

I am yanked from my imperfect body into hers, seeing the world through functional, capable, beautiful eyes.

“This was Taiwan with my friends last year. This, well this is just my back garden, but the snail was cute.”

I am feeling at a rapid rate and its nothing like frustration or anxiety. It’s too much for me to cope.

“It’s beautiful.”

“Thanks.”

I chew my lip, because that’s not right. Her response is far too casual. How can she fail to see what I can? I should be grovelling. I search for the words to accurately express this feeling but it’s as powerful as it is complex. I start to mumble, and somehow, she both understands and responds.

Somehow, she grows more amazing with every word.

I am confused again because I am incapable of conversation, but I am doing it so easily with her. I feel accomplishment for as little as making her smile. It’s so perfect it’s suspicious. I’ve been trying and failing to feel for months and here Marina is, a key to goldmine, unveiled the very moment I had truly given up. I am torn. I am confused. I am suspicious. Then I am awed.

How has she lived to be able to produce art like this? How does she think and why?

I am enthralled until night falls and I am out the door.

“Tomorrow, 3pm we’re recreating that pic - oh what college were you at again?”

I go cold.

“King’s.” I lie because losing her is unfathomable.

Her eyes narrow, “I haven’t seen you ‘round...”

“I-I don’t leave my room. Not much.”

My face must be red, my eyes look everywhere but her. At last, she laughs and comforts me, before she says goodbye with a hug.

I lament.

The truth will be torn out one day. I am not a student, I am nothing. My stomach sinks but I am alive enough to feel it. My Ipet is at the bottom of a long-overflowed river, so home can no longer reach me, I am far away.

I decide in that moment, that I can live if Marina is my muse.

Her door closes, and the moment she’s gone, I am transparent again.

***The Sunrise I Missed* by Anonymous (Undergraduate)**

I distinctly remember that it was a bloody red sunset, with grey wisps of cloud and a fiery sun half-sunk beneath the horizon. The wind was picking up. I paced about the Orchard. The grass was tall, tugging at my ankles. I remember because I was looking up at the sky, at the one bright star that wasn't masked by the light of the dusk, because I couldn't stop pacing around because I knew what he was going to tell me, because if I stopped - it was too terrible to try and imagine what would happen if I stopped.

He never came. He sent a friend. He was busy packing. He was going to leave. It had been his dream all along. He was going to leave early the next morning. I failed. I couldn't keep him here with me. Rain started pouring down, the drops tasted foul and tingled on the skin. His friend - John - I think, but I'm not too sure anymore, told me to go inside. I couldn't understand him. He tried to reason with me. I couldn't understand the words rolling off his tongue, as if rehearsed. The light was fading, the fire going out. He was getting impatient, tried to pull me away to shelter. I wouldn't budge. In the end he put his raincoat over me, thick and black and stifling, left me there and ran for cover.

When I woke up it was still barely dawn. My watch told me it was almost six. The grass was waking up, but otherwise it was silent. It was an unsettling silence, unbroken by the chirp of birds or rustle of leaves. I slowly started to realise he was probably gone already, shooting off, leaving this place for good. He'll be starting a new life. With new people. A new home. No - it would never be home just like this doesn't feel like home even after so many years. I halted that train of thought, pushing it away from consciousness. I decided: better to pretend he had died. Then I could mourn his passing properly.

I stumbled blindly to the glasshouse. My potatoes were still there, still growing like nothing happened. Soon - next year - they might be ready to go in the field. If they were a success, we would work on wheat and rice and barley, then fruits and vegetables, then - then the fields would be alive again. Then our plates would be colourful again, then I would need a bigger kitchen. Then the land would be joyful. Someday the children will run through the fields, barefoot, leaving a trail of muddy footprints.

I knew he thought it was all just a dream - holding on to a hope that wasn't worth holding onto. He never understood why I hoped so desperately. I knew that he thought I could have done something better, that I should have jumped on the bandwagon, looked outwards and upwards, walked into the future with him, hand in hand. But I just couldn't. Because I couldn't abandon all this. I couldn't just give up. It was the easiest, most painful choice.

So very long ago, we used to debate. I said we should fix what we have; he said it's too late, we should start anew. Then, the closer we grew, the more we fought. The more I needed him, the more viciously I fought him. Finally there was one day, when we were sitting together on the stone wall along the Cam, staring into the crystal-clear but lifeless water running its course down-stream, he suddenly took my hand.

“Hey,”

I turned towards him, a strand of hair falling across my face. He reached to brush it away.

“Let's not fight anymore, okay?”

That was when I knew it was nearing the end. That was when I knew he was going to leave me. I choked up - couldn't speak - so I only tried to smile and nod. At that moment I suddenly realised (or perhaps finally knew for certain) that he was hurting too. That he'd tried to fight himself. For me. He put his arm around my shoulders, and we sat there, for only a moment or for eternity, I couldn't tell.

We never fought after that. I tried to forget everything when I was with him, like when we were still children. We did everything we promised each other we'd do together. We went to galleries, watched movies, walked up and down every street in the city. We entered into reconstructions of the past, explored the most fantastic places, soared through the sky. We went back home, too often. Back to the city that was still alive and bustling in our memories. Back to where we met, to where we became friends, to where we could pretend there might be a future together. But we never ventured into the future. It was always the places we half-jokingly, half-seriously planned to go visit together. I wondered why we never got around to actually going. I hadn't laughed so much since I was a little girl. But then, I couldn't laugh as I did then: it wasn't the same sort of involuntary, carefree laugh. Every time at the end of the evening, after he would walk me back

up to my room, and it was all too quiet again, I would cry, deep into the night, tossing and turning under the covers. Some unspeakable dread hung over me.

I wanted to remember all the good moments we had. Staring absentmindedly into a pot of supposedly salt-tolerant potatoes, it seemed like the plant was morphing into something humanoid, as if it's come out of a children's TV show. "He's gone now. You'll never see him again. But you don't care, do you?" A leaf seemed to droop. "Do you care? Nobody else cares. Nobody else will be this upset. Do you have feelings? Yes - yes you do - what does it feel like when I tear away half a leaf?" I reached out but recoiled when I felt the cold, living touch of the plant. "Tell me, what am I feeling? What is this - sad, angry, betrayed? What's the word for when you secretly held onto a hope you shouldn't have, and now, well, it's turned out exactly as you feared all along?" I dropped down to my knees. The plant's leaves were unfurling and reaching out to me. "What right do I have to feel like this? What do I have the right to feel?" I was mumbling. The plant understood what I said better than I did.

The light was shifting. Deep purple, pink, orange, hints of greens and browns, fading into a greyish white, only a little blue. For a long time, I couldn't find the strength to get up. I felt as if I were growing roots, deep, deep into the earth. I've watched every sunrise and every sunset for years. That sunrise I missed.