

Stourbridge Common (1250) by Oliver Scott (postgraduate)

In the remote village of Horningtoft in East Anglia, where Ealdwald had been born in the year 1236, even the seemingly noiseless had a sound. Without even having to hone your ear one could hear the whistling of the hedgerows, the chirping of even the smallest of birds and, in the summer months, the gentle buzz of the bee. On occasion, Ealdwald heard the mechanised chiming of the church bells, the wheezing of the blacksmith's bellows or the clunking of the wooden cogs in the watermill. On the whole though, his world was one of quiet and natural wonder.

Ealdwald's world was also an empty one. His village contained just 14 households and 31 villagers. He lived a healthy walk away from the next village along and so felt he always had room to stretch out and breathe. It really was the archetypal English hamlet, a little over a dozen homes surrounding a village green with a single street running through this remote but tightly knit community. Ealdwald knew not just the names of his livestock but those of everyone in the village. These were the people he had grown up with and whom he knew most intimately.

However, on reaching his fourteenth birthday in the summer of 1250, Ealdwald's narrow world view was about to change drastically. His father had demanded he accompany him on his first day trip from the village, travelling first on horseback and then via boat on the day's journey to Stourbridge Common, just outside Cambridge, for their annual

fair. Ealdwald had heard very little about the fair. His father simply had some excess textiles that he was hoping to sell.

Ealdwald heard the fair before he saw it. At first, it was hidden behind the meandering River Cam meaning his first observation of the fair was a cascading of sound from the metal windpipes (of what he could only assume was an organ) as well as the gentle tones of a rebec and the crisp tinkling of the timbrel. Beyond that, there was a cacophony of voices singing en masse alongside the instruments, with their tone occasionally pierced by the shouting and hollering of individual voices who seemed to be in intense discussion with one another.

When he eventually caught sight of the fair, Ealdwald found his bottom jaw permanently detached from his top one. He was witnessing human beings on a scale he simply had never seen before.

Unbeknownst to Ealdwald, his father had taken him to the largest trading event in 13th century England. In the forty years since its foundation by King John in 1211, the Stourbridge Fair had expanded exponentially. John had originally issued a Royal Charter, giving the Leper Chapel the opportunity to raise funds for local lepers on or around the feast of the Holy Cross in mid-September each year. Since then, the Stourbridge Fair had become far more than a humble charitable endeavour. It was the place where merchants from far and wide came to buy and sell the widest array of goods available in the land.

Once their boat had been moored, Ealdwald, his father and their fellow passengers disembarked and began venturing into the market itself. Out of season, Stourbridge Common was a relatively

unremarkable plot of land yet for two weeks in September it was utterly transformed. Ealdwald wondered through a maze of temporarily erected streets with a range of wooden booths on the outside. Traders were so desperate for the best pitch that Ealdwald was stepping over straw mattresses strewn across the floor.

Whilst it was the mass of noise that had first piqued Ealdwald's interest, as he ventured closer and closer to the inner crevices of the maze of the market, it was the smell that next caught his attention. The smell Ealdwald was most familiar with was that of faeces. His nose was a far less prissy organ than that of his urban contemporaries. His village was covered in cow dung as well as goat, sheep and pig droppings, with the sweeter smelling turds of the vegetable eating animals often pervading throughout the village on any given day. At Stourbridge, his upturned nostrils found themselves bombarded with an array of novel smells that he almost did not have the vocabulary to describe. The combination of pepper, ginger, cinnamon, clove, saffron as well as uniquely medieval gems such grains of paradise and spikenard made him wish he could bottle up a barrel load and sprinkle it over every crevice of Horningtoft to rid it of its faecal undertones.

After the sound and smells, it was the people to which Ealdwald was next drawn. He and his father were at the more working-class end of the social spectrum, dressed in their simple open tunics, their original cream shade darkened with years of work on the fields. This was what all in the village wore, bar the local priest, yet, in Stourbridge, Ealdwald was in the minority. He saw merchants speaking a language he had never heard, covered head to toe in purple

velvets. He was told they were men from the east, from an unknown land called Constantinople. As well as these men there were a group of three wealthy looking merchants, well-versed in the arts of haggling, dealing and refunding the array of goods that lay at their feet covered in soft red velvet overshirts. Despite these flashes of colour, it was a group of four men dressed in what Ealdwald could only describe as the softest, smoothest material he had ever seen with flashes of royal blue epaulettes hanging from their shoulders that caught his eye. On each of their chests they had a golden badge depicting a sprig of broom on their chest. These were clearly men of importance, even Ealdwald's cursory glance told him that. The material they were wearing was silk, produced thousands of kilometres in a land so far and so different from Ealdwald's remote village of Horningtoft. The silk had made its way to the upper echelons of English society through a complex web of trade networks known as the silk roads which knitted much of the known world together. The silk had travelled over 9,000 kilometres to Baghdad from eastern China where it was prepared and threaded through with gold, a unique touch that showed the silk was of Baghdad origin, before making its way across the Bosphorus to Constantinople then over the Dinaric Alps to Venice and up to the hansas of northern Europe in Bruges before eventually making its way to Stourbridge Common. Amongst all the finery, these four men stood out. In fact, there were whispers throughout the fair that they were from the king's household, it would explain the royal blue epaulettes and gold sprig of broom. They waded through the crowds with an air of class and superiority as they picked up fine cloth as well as iron hinges and chairs, giving the fair its first royal presence of many as

the variety of goods they picked up made their way to adorn the walls, floors and bedrooms of Henry III's favourite palace at Westminster.

Ealdwald's father gave him the good news that he had managed to easily shift their surplus textile to two merchants, Nimble-Heels and Stupid Stephen, whom his father had done extensive business with before, as their rather cordial nicknames suggested. He said he had got an unusually good price giving Ealdwald a small surplus with which to play. They wandered the tightly packed streets staring at all manners of things. He had come to a world where traders of all sorts could be found there were markets for fish, wax, spices, timber, salt, cloth, almonds, spices and iron goods. The fair had sections set aside for cheese sellers, shoemakers, ironmongers, horse dealers and traders from every possible industry.

Ealdwald thought he had explored every crevice of the market so made his way to the Duddery, the makeshift town square in the centre of the fair. In it, he found a maypole and a small crowd dancing to the music of a local band. Eadwald eventually found himself joining in, dancing and laughing with fellow youngsters who moved from strangers to friends as the evening passed. He used his little surplus to buy a small cup of mead for a young girl who he met and danced with who happened to live four villages west of him. Money well spent in his eyes, he hoped to see her at the fair next year!

As dusk turned to dark, Ealdwald's father came to remind him that their boat back to Horningtoft was about to leave. As their boat pulled further and further into the reaches of the River Cam, the bustling noise, array of colours and new smells faded into obscurity

and by late morning the next day Eadwald found himself back in familiar Horningtoft. He found himself longing to return to that fateful fair on the outskirts of Cambridge. His rural bubble having been emphatically burst by the joys that Stourbridge Fair had to offer, he was certain he would return next year.

The Knight (1300s) by Arabella Teddar (undergraduate)

Mother sends me down to the river on the day that I see him. They're all preparing the manor for the New Year's Feast, so she tells me to fetch some more water, apparently for the stew, but really I heard cook tell her she'd 'truss that little horse-loving runt up like a roast bird if he so much as comes anywhere near my kitchen', so I know she just really wants me out of the way. I decide to pass through the hall on my way out so I can look at the decorations. The minstrel and his apprentice (his name is Edward, he has red hair and freckles, and sometimes he smiles at me when I look at him while his master is performing) are practising a new poem. I don't really listen as I pass through, but I did hear one of the cleaning girls earlier say it's come all the way from a writer in the North. I don't stay too long (though Edward smiles at me again when I come in) because the air in the hall is cold and the metal handle of the bucket is also cold and I know it's only going to get colder the longer I take.

My breath mists in front of my face as soon as I get out of the manor and the biting air twinges on my skin. By Saint John, it's cold. I hurry down to the river, the frosted grass crunching softly under my feet. No one is out this early in the morning, either asleep or preparing inside for their own celebrations. When I reach the river I take a moment to appreciate the quiet. A bird flies out of the forest nearby, settles on a bare branch across the river and tweets softly. I can see fish swimming silently in the water. They must be cold. I

take a deep breath, feeling the icy air in my lungs, then exhale and watch the mist in front of my face.

A twig cracks, the bird flies away, and out of the forest comes a knight in very fine armour, sitting astride an equally fine horse, carrying a green and gold axe (perhaps the largest I have ever seen) and a shield with a five-pointed star worked on it. He takes off his helmet, letting down wavy, dark hair, and he smiles at me kindly with deep brown eyes and rosy lips.

‘Good morning,’ he says, his tone light and friendly. ‘My name is Gawain, servant and knight to King Arthur! Would you perchance know where I could find the place known as the Green Chapel?’ His voice booms, seeming almost to echo in the stillness of the crisp, winter air. ‘I am seeking a great adversary with whom I made a deal almost one year to this very day.’ I am sure the look on my face displays my confusion, as his pose falters somewhat, and, in a smaller voice, he says ‘Do you know where I could find any of the local lords? I’m beginning to run out of time.’

I flounder silently, my voice refusing to work for a few seconds, before I manage to squeeze out ‘Y-Yes, I work in the manor nearby. I-I can take you, if you like?’

A smile breaks out over his face again and he bends down to ruffle my hair ‘Thank you, that would be a great help!’ I feel strangely warm, and Gawain dismounts from his horse to walk beside me. He’s tall, and broader than most of the knights who come to the manor for tournaments. ‘Ah, I almost forgot,’ he says, ‘This is Gringolet,’ and he pulls his horse, a beautiful grey, around so I can pet him. ‘He has

been a trusted friend throughout my quest, and through many trials before it.'

'Hello Gringolet,' I say, as I stroke his nose. I've always loved horses, and Samuel, one of the grooms, says he'll take me on as an apprentice in the spring. Gringolet whickers back at me and nudges my hand with his nose.

'Ah, you're a natural with horses, clearly!' Gawain says, and I flush at the compliment. 'Now lead on—' He pauses, so I look back at him and see him looking a little sheepish, 'Good sir, forgive my lack of courtesy, but I forgot to ask you for your name.'

'It's Oliver, sir.'

'Excellent, Oliver! Now, lead on to the manor!' he says, drawing his sword and pointing it before him like I've seen Sir Arnoul do sometimes at tournaments. It usually looks a bit funny, and he puts on a different voice than the one he uses to talk to the serving girls, but when Gawain does it, it seems more comfortable, more natural.

As we walk back to the manor, I ask Gawain if he has any stories from his quest so far, and he begins to tell me about the castle he left this morning, but we don't get very far before squealing out of the forest comes a boar, blood oozing from an arrow in its side. Incensed by someone out on an early morning hunt, it goes straight for me. Gringolet squeals but doesn't bolt, while I panic. Gawain tries to pull his sword out of its scabbard but it jams, so he takes the axe attached to Gringolet (loyally still when he knows his master needs him) and beheads the boar before I can even begin to back away from it. Its head rolls slightly before coming to a stop at the base of a tree, but Gawain goes over to it, sword now free from

its scabbard, and stabs it in the eye over and over, until its face is a bloody mess. A gasp escapes me involuntarily, and he jerks to look at me, eyes wilder than I have seen them before.

‘Just wanted to make sure it was definitely dead,’ he says, smoothing the hair that had fallen in front of his face in the commotion.

‘I definitely think it is, Sir Gawain,’ I say, as he wipes his sword on the grass (though there is still a fleck of blood on his face).

I look at him closer, and realise that he seems paler than before, and greener somehow. I wonder if maybe he feels a little sick at the sight of the boar’s mangled face, but then I realise his hair is becoming a lighter shade of brown too, and his armour is beginning to lose its shine. In fact, I realise, Gawain is *fading away*. He seems to come to the same realisation as I do, as he looks down at his hands then looks at me with panicked eyes.

‘Is this some trick of the sorceress Morgan le Fay?’ he asks, ‘Or is this punishment for breaking my oath with the Lord Bertilak?’ His voice sounds quieter now, somehow muffled, and he turns away from me to stare into the distance, seeing something that I cannot, before he fades completely. All that is left is the boar’s head, the blood that seeps out of it slowly staining the frosted grass.

When I return to the manor (after having gone back to the river because I forgot my bucket), I get so tangled up in preparation for the festivities that I almost forget my encounter with the mysterious knight. It is only later, while waiting the table at the lord’s feast, that I really think about him again. Could he have been a faerie visitor? He was beautiful enough to be one, but faeries don’t usually wear

armour, according to the stories the minstrels tell. Perhaps I dreamt him up, somehow didn't realise I had fallen asleep at the river's edge, but then the boar's head wouldn't have still been there when I walked home after fetching the bucket.

I am pulled out of my pondering at the entrance of the minstrel. Edward smiles at me quickly from his side, before they launch into the telling of the their new tale:

'Lords and ladies of the court, good evening! I come to you today with a tale that has been sent to me from the North of England. It is tale of intrigue, betrayal, great mortal peril, but most of all, a tale of honour and sacrifice. Gracious listeners, I present to you the tale of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight!'

I suppose Gawain must have finished his quest after all.

[In the interest of transparency, I would like to say that this story is somewhat based on/inspired by the poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*]

Should we have stayed (1400s) by Lisa Rowe (staff)

“That’s the way, ignore the bones, they will settle in their places”.

“Excellent, heads up, don’t watch the bones, listen to them, feel them. They will speak to you in time”.

Individually, they came to my table. I tapped gently at their hardened exteriors by rising to greet them, calling them by their chosen names, smiling, genuinely smiling and happy to greet them. I loved them. Like hatchlings in the coop, my fragile flock warily broke out of their shells. I think that they rarely considered the strength it took to achieve that.

‘Fallen women’ who had been abandoned to my care, “Fallen, my arse...they were pushed”, and I was there to catch them before they smashed and were lost. To some I had been a sister, but to the more recent arrivals I was Mother, and together we discovered the familial bonds that should have been ours by birthright.

My story was known only to the elders, now risen to the Glory.

I was a secret that my Father had never meant to keep. He presented me at the Convent gate claiming that I was an orphan, pitiless and dependent. My dowry to our Lord was small but exceptional, a small casket containing Mama’s bones. I also held cards of pricked patterns, that she had taught me to read, when the libraries and the written word were held apart, in an exclusive domain, behind locked doors.

We accepted, but ignored the inquisitive scholars who came to worship with us. Heard their whispers through their whiskers whenever

novitiates appeared. They gossiped and giggled as we filed through Chapel in serried ranks to take our place in the nave. Our sore knees bent on stone cold floors, and heads bowed to accept the grace of our Lord with humility. They knelt on cushions and read along with the sermon, making notes in the margins to be debated later, over goblets of wine and sweet meats from the kitchen. "How ridiculous - those scholars, thinking they know the word so well that they can challenge it".

We returned to the Chapter House and held our own communion.

"That's it, listen closely, do you hear the bones now? Yes, yes, look, the pattern is appearing. Now you understand".

Our master's hadn't considered that their practiced dominion, and restricted education had taught us well. Our intelligence was no less than theirs. We could reach conclusions through the same methods of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis; but we had also been encouraged to deceive and hide our abilities. The world that they had designed, one in which they greedily battled for narrow supremacy silenced us; and as our gifts expanded, they were unnoticed. In silence and shadows we schemed. Each mother, in her own way, carefully supporting and nurturing. Within the cloister we were guarded by witches marks; and behind habits of invisibility, we toiled.

My daughters were taught to knot lace. Exquisite confections of gossamer linen threads, lighter and whiter than the wings of the Virtues. As more developed the skill, our pieces were traded, and very soon we noticed that they had started to become the prized possessions of the scholars, worn in their collars and cuffs; outward expressions of wealth and status that they no longer needed to imply.

But we were the ones becoming wealthy whilst they struggled to outshine each other. “Stupid peacocks”.

When we were evicted, because they coveted our land assets, we were not lost. We did separate, but it was time, and we were prepared. Our ascent had begun. “How? You ask. Through the language of our lace”.

Each pattern woven contained our maternal history. In time, the written texts that you kept from us, would lose importance and truth, because this is what you wanted, to argue the words of your competitors into meaningless.

But our lace, our beautiful lace, continues to move to the rhythm of the bone bobbins and the beating of our hearts, telling the stories of our past, our present and our future. There was no need for us to remain when our philosophy was now woven into the fabric of life.

Economy, patience, passion, resilience, community and care.

“Take a look at your adornments....you will see”.

Nan's Story (1600s) by Claire Gilbert (visiting fellow)

I kneel and put my hands, palms together, between the palms of Mother Abbess. My knees feel the cold floor through the rough-spun brown wool of my novice's habit.

'God bless you, my child,' says the Abbess, and bids me rise to my feet, seating herself in her chair. My head is at the same level as hers. I am thirteen and not yet grown.

'The novice mistress has told me of your wish, Nan.' Mother Abbess's face, framed by its white wimple, shows clearly that she does not think I should be here. If a novice has a question, she takes it to the novice mistress. But the novice mistress has sent me to Mother Abbess because she does not know how to answer my need.

I want to write.

Nuns do a lot of things here at Easthill Abbey, perched high up above the sea in Hastings. We pray the offices, we chant the Psalms, we tend our garden of vegetables, our orchard of pear trees, our livestock of twenty sheep, three cows, and a dozen hens. We embroider vestments for the priests who come to minister to us. Some of us, a very few of us, copy devotional texts in our scriptorium.

No nun, not here nor anywhere else in Christendom, the novice mistress has told me, writes for herself.

I write.

'How?' asks Mother Abbess. 'You have neither parchment nor pens.'

‘I write in my head, Mother. I write stories about the characters who come to our Abbey church, and about the Bible characters.

‘I am writing a longer story about the disciples’ families, Mother, and I want to write it down.’ I glance quickly at her face. It is not unkind, so I carry on.

I tell my story.

‘James and John have a younger sister, called Nan like me, who is in the boat with them, mending nets, when Jesu appears and calls them. Unseen, she follows too. And Peter has a sister, and Andrew, and so do Thaddeus and Nathaniel and all the others, and they secretly follow Jesu, and they hear and see everything their brothers do.

‘Nan can write and everyday she writes down what Jesu has done and said. The other sisters find the means for her, stealing parchment and quills and ink.

‘They hear Jesu say “love your enemies”, and “do good to those who persecute you”, and “blessed are the poor”. They talk together about how this would mean that there would be no war and that the poorest in their world would be the best looked after, and Nan writes this down so that Christians in years to come will know what Jesu said and try to live by it.

‘And the sisters see Jesu feeding thousands of people; they mingle with the crowd, hiding whenever one of their brothers appears. There really is enough food for everyone, it really is a miracle: the bread tastes as fresh as if it had been baked that morning in the monastery kitchen, and the fish is delicious, like a newly grilled catch off Hastings beach.

‘And they sit together that night, near where their brothers are with Jesu, and they argue and argue about how Jesu did it. They think that Jesu is showing the crowds how to share, and to trust that if they do share there will be enough for everyone, and that sharing makes the food taste better. And Nan writes it all down.

‘The sisters follow the disciples as they leave Galilee, and when they reach Jerusalem they see how Jesu is threatened by the religious authorities, and they talk together about how religion becomes stuck, and doesn’t recognise the stranger, and how in this time Jesu is the stranger, and Nan writes it all down so that Christians in the future can be careful about turning Jesu’s words into something rigid that excludes the stranger because the stranger might be Jesu.

‘Then Jesu goes to the Garden of Gethsemane and they watch from their hiding place as he stands amongst their brothers who are all lying down, and Jesu is saying “Could you not wait one hour with me?” And their brothers are snoring so no, they couldn’t.

‘And the sisters are clustered together in their hiding place among the trees and then suddenly Jesu is among them. And they are horrified and afraid. But then they see that he is weeping and their fear turns into compassion and love as they throw their arms around him and bid him sit, and speak words of comfort to him, and it feels very natural and right and not at all strange, that Jesu should be seated among them now, and not among their brothers. And it doesn’t even feel strange that it is they who comfort him, not he who speaks words of comfort and truth to them.

‘And Jesu asks the sisters if they will stay with him through all that he has to face. “It will not be easy,” he says, “but if I know you are there I will find strength in myself.

“I am to die,” he tells them and tears are falling from his eyes again. And Nan watches and thinks and remembers so that later she can write it all down.

‘And so when Jesu is arrested the sisters follow him, even though their brothers have all run away, follow him as he is taken to the High Priest and then to Pilate, and finally up the hill to Calvary, dragging his own cross. And they watch as the nails are driven in and hear his cries and the cross is raised up and there is agony on Jesu’s face and it is unbearable and everything in them wants to scream and run away but they have said they will stay and they do stay and they do not look away.

‘They do not look away.

‘They see where Jesu’s body is taken and they go to the tomb and keep watch there for two nights.

‘And early on Sunday morning, at the same time as Lauds is sung in the monastery, when the sisters have fallen asleep from weariness, Nan feels a touch like a breath of air on her eyelids. She blinks and opens them.

‘And there is Jesu, as bright and youthful as when Nan first saw him. And he is laughing with joy. And the others waken and jump to their feet in astonishment for Jesu is among them and dancing! And they join in, unwinding his shroud, whirling him round in a great skirling swirl of loosened grave clothes, dancing to music they hear clearly as though the angels in heaven were playing over the

whole earth, and Jesu is stamping and laughing as his naked body spins free of the clothes of death that bound him and—

‘Nan gasps and they all gasp and stop dancing and stand stock still and stare at Jesu.

‘They can see his naked body. It is the body of a woman. Jesu is a woman.

‘And at that moment he disappears.

‘The sisters cannot stop talking about what they have seen. But then other followers of Jesu, women, come to the tomb, and so the sisters quietly leave that place. Nan thinks they have seen and learned all that they need.

‘And joining a caravan for safety, they make their way back to their homes in Galilee.

‘And Nan writes everything down.

‘But no one believes her. No one believes the sisters have been with Jesu and gone to Jerusalem and passed through death with him and seen him in new life, in new life as one of them, as a woman. Their families, who knew they’d been absent, decide to remain silent and deny everything. And Nan’s mother steals Nan’s writing from her and whips her for telling lies.’

* * *

I stop speaking.

At no point has Mother Abbess interrupted me.

Now she rises from her chair. I dare to look at her but I cannot read her face.

‘Go back to the novice house,’ she says. ‘Speak to no one of this. No one. And we will not speak of it again.’

I obey, bowing and murmuring ‘Deo gracias’ before I leave, as I have been taught. I am in shock. Am I to be punished? What is to happen to me?

But I hear nothing at all. I rejoin my sister novices and, after many weeks of worrying and wondering, I let that story go and start to tell more in my head about other things and people I see. About the tree in the centre of the garth which uproots itself each night and goes on adventures. About the little girls in the family which comes to mass on Sundays who sprout wings and fly across the sea to the lands beyond, and learn a new language and grow up and have families of their own and then return to their places in church before mass has ended. About the prophet Jeremiah’s mother.

* * *

Many, many years later I become Mother Abbess myself. And I discover a chest of papers, pushed to a far dusty corner in my apartments. The Prioress tells me that the last Abbess but one, the Abbess who was Mother when I entered the monastery, had bid her successors leave it alone.

I open the chest and I look through the papers. Hidden amongst them is my story, written in the Abbess’s hand. She wrote down my story.

What will I do with it?

Now I am mature in my religious life and have learned the ways of the church and of the men who rule it, I know the answer only too well. I can do nothing with it. So, frustrated, I replace it and cover the trunk and repeat the order that it is to be left alone.

And now I am very old and another is Abbess, and Cromwell's armies have come to ransack our monastery. I see two soldiers rifle casually through the papers in the secret trunk.

As we leave, homeless women treading a new and unkind path, I see a movement in the bushes. One of the soldiers is squatting. He finishes, and I watch as he tosses away a soiled piece of parchment that he has used to wipe himself. I am too far away to see what is written on it, but somehow I know, I just know, that it is my story.

The Bear from Stourbridge Fair (1805) by Sarah Burton (staff)

Animal lovers beware, this is the tale of a bear, the bear from Stourbridge Fair.

In a dark wood, in the middle of nowhere, a great tree stood. It is important to share, when you do good, where you live without a care. It was an innocent life, free from fear and free from strife. A number of creatures made it their home, including a bear cub and its mother. He hid in its leaves while she left to roam, using the foliage as its cover. She hunted out berries and honeycomb, the cub never needed any other. They were peaceful times, the cub in his prime.

They left where they were protected, as the fish had begun to return; the salmon ran and collected, in a bright river, a little burn, down in a dell, where expected, a long memory they had to learn. They were halcyon days of plenty, the bears gathered numbering twenty.

However, it could not last, as all things must end. The die was fatefully cast when foe became friend. A wily black dog came fast round the river bend. The cub was found, by a blood hound. The cub knew not what it meant; he was happy to have a new playmate. Many happy hours were spent, together sealing this poor prey's sad fate. The dog followed the scent, for its intent master brimming with hate. When the man caught up with his pet, a trap for the mother was set.

The cub had never met a man before, he was wary but curious. His mother cautiously returned once more, she was afraid and furious.

She stood up and let out a fearsome roar, a message of threat injurious. But the man stood his ground, his target he had found. It only took one shot, between the eyes at close range. Her blood ebbed away hot, to the small cub it looked strange. He climbed down from his spot, from then on, his life did change. The crazed man raised his gun, but the cub did not run.

He lay down next to her on the forest floor, the man took his aim. The rain started falling and began to pour, the man felt no shame. The water droplets mingled spreading the gore, this was no fun game. The dog put himself in the line of fire, lifting the veil of the man's burning ire. The cub's life was saved by an unwitting foe, but he could not survive on his own. It was a bittersweet and ironic blow, the cub left all he had ever known. His days forever tinged by heavy woe, weighed down by grief dug deep in the bone. But he had the dog now by his side, without whom he would have surely died.

The hunter did not keep him very long, caught between mercy and loathing. He could not live with what he had done wrong, a bear cub was too exposing. He looked for anywhere it could belong, through many lands he went roving, before a little boy took a shine, fascinated by the young ursine.

Once again, the cub knew love from the heart, surpassing a mammalian divide. Never the two kindred friends did they part, no fancy was the spoiled boy denied. Until the bear grew too large and too smart, no more a toy, but a thing to deride. He became a pest; the household was stressed. The boy wanted him by his bed, to guard against bad dreams which come at night. It all came to a brutal head, when the cub got into a deadly fight, leaving many fish

and ducks dead, with his mighty and unwavering bite. The boy started to grow scared when the bear's sharp teeth were bared.

If you take an animal from the wild, living with humans in their world, forced to obey, driven to be mild; their true nature will be unfurled. Not a creature to be around a child, in his warm bed around him curled. They sold him to a circus travelling by and told the fearful boy a little white lie. Traded again and again on your private viewpoint depending, around about owner ten, there will be a contented ending, of sorts beyond our own ken, if you wish to be condescending. He had travelled by land and sea, poked and stroked, and "danced" for a fee.

Rocked by boats and buffeted by a howling gale, the bear just wanted it all to stop. On carts pelted by icy rain and dreadful hail, bumping over roads and a hilltop, his heart gradually darkened and began to fail, with such treatment spirits had to drop. Finally, they reached their ultimate destination: a university. He saw desolation. Ere now, he is allowed to sleep, left alone in a cage, with only his dark thoughts to keep and all-consuming rage. He lies on the floor in a heap, for all to see on stage. Someone raps on the bars to make him move, he does not even stir, nought left to prove.

A rap comes yet again, so he turns around, making his feelings plain, the man simply frowned. Sleep is easy to feign, but he stands his ground. The rap comes once more, the bear gives a roar. This does not scare the man away. The bear looks him full in the eyes. The man appears rich, blithe and gay, his manner shows it as a guise. They stare, determined come what may. From this point on,

they are allies. The tragic bear moves nearer and all will become clearer.

The bear is a fine mess and shows this sorry scene. He is in sheer distress and words are said obscene. The owner he does press, venting his angry spleen. Finally, a deal is struck and the bear changes his luck. The scents around him become an assault, cloth and fish, wax and beer, timber and spice. Do not see it as purely his own fault; it is compelling and comes at a price. A cheese cart rumbles past and one of salt, when he smells the honey, all in a trice, the bear goes mad. The man is sad.

He calls to the bear to ease its pain, telling him about Boatswain his faithful dog, how they were horribly torn in twain. It reaches the bear, through the overwhelming fog. The cruel owner did wrench the cold chain, spilling into the bear's cage some of his grog. The broken bear cowers, beaten by a coward. But then a chance of sweet release, the kind man is setting him free. He goes gladly looking for peace, he does not even try to flee. The nasal abuse starts to cease, he feels something akin to glee. They walk all the way across the grass, drawing stares from everyone they pass.

They crunch over oysters as they leave the meadow, a village still building here for a month or so. Past the leper chapel, fearing not the death blow. At last, he has hope, feels cared for, his heart aglow. They head for town, akin to a carnival show. Neither of them knew what to do, how this would go. They were willing to give it a try, they had society to defy. The man seemed to like the baffled attention. The bear did not and stuck to his side. He liked to challenge popular convention; the bear followed in his famous stride. In

the history books he got a mention, but who told the whole truth and who lied? What is real is they found an affinity, living safe amidst the grounds of Trinity.

The bear and the man had their souls awoken, a fight on their hands in a rulebook they sketched. Dogs were not allowed; no law was yet broken. He found a way round it; a loophole was stretched. The case was answered, words were so outspoken. There was nothing to do, it might seem far-fetched. But a bear lived in a Cambridge college, exposed to all academic knowledge. He walked him on a chain by the river, staying in his room with him overnight. On his true promise he did deliver, never letting the bear out of his sight. The bear had no cause to fear or shiver, ever again, knowing only delight. After a year at Cambridge, he moved to a big estate, in the countryside, no cages, no barriers, no hate.

The bear had a home and a right to roam. He wandered the huge house and its rooms. He had space, he had friends, he had grooms! There were peacocks, eagles, cranes, badgers, foxes and no chains. He was no longer the bear from Stourbridge Fair. He had lordly airs, forever more Byron's bear.

In commemoration of the 200th anniversary of Lord Byron's death.

Of Dusty Books and Forgotten Tales (1815) by Emily Oldridge
(postgraduate)

Cambridge, Spring 1815

While the rest of the house slept, I would sit at my father's desk, reading as the candlelight flickered and illuminated the wooden bookcases lining the edge of the room. The books all waited patiently, hoping that they would be chosen next and freed from the thick dust that cloaked them. The dust always returned, there were too many books, and no one remembered to clean what the rest of the household saw as mere decoration. Pages bound together in an aesthetic fashion. And like the dust that always found its way back to the books, so did that empty feeling that I did not quite belong. A book that was not quite the right shape, or size, or colour. A book sprinkled with dust on the top shelf, difficult to see and almost impossible to reach. Forgotten. That April night, as the rain tapped lightly on the windows, I read about the heroes of ancient Greece in the greatest battle of history - the Trojan War. Eventually, the candlelight began to lose its fight. I knew that it was time to return to my bedchamber and pretend I had been sleeping there all night.

I entered the drawing room the next morning to my older sister Eliza in deep conversation with my mother. Eliza had fixed her gaze outside, not even looking at my mother as she complained.

“But mother, I have no desire to go to London. Last year, Anne spent all season spreading scandalous rumours about the lords and ladies of the ton. I want nothing to do with it.”

My mother sighed. “Eliza Ashington, we are not discussing this any further. You have a ...”

“... duty to this family. I understand that mother, truly I do, but if I marry one of those gentlemen, I believe it will bring shame on this family rather than fulfilling any such duty. Many of them do not even know how to dance, my toes were bruised for six weeks after Lady Talbot’s ball at the end of the last season”.

“Eliza, the rest of society thinks that they are more than suitable candidates so you, young lady, must smile and dance, and your toes will survive”.

Eliza looked down at her feet, probably already imagining the deep purple her toes would inevitably turn. I felt grateful that I still had a year of peace before it was my first London Season. I was not ready to navigate the chaos that was the London marriage mart. Eliza walked over to the pianoforte and began to play, her fingers dancing merrily along the keys. The upbeat melody jarred against the tension in the room.

“And Francesca,” my mother looked over at me, “there have been some slight alterations to the plans, and we will now all be leaving for the London house. There is a horrid fever circulating this town which I wish to escape.”

“Of course, mother”. While the prospect of spending the next few months among self-entitled ladies and arrogant gentlemen was quite

frankly abhorrent, I too had heard some worrying tales about the fever, so I saw little point in disagreeing.

That night I was hidden away in the library when Eliza slowly pushed open the door. I was startled to see her. When we were younger, we would meet each night whispering stories by the dying embers of the candlelight. It seems we did not only grow up but apart as well. The door creaked in protest and Eliza stepped inside. Though she did not look up as she spoke, I noticed the tears that threatened to spill down her cheeks.

“I need your help.” It was more of an order than a request. She sounded resentful that she had even been forced to admit it.

And while I had waited for her, for anyone, to need me to do something, I did not want it to be like this with her not even being able to look at me. She was not the one who decided when I played the role of sister.

“I understand that you do not wish to go to London. Believe me, I am not thrilled about being dragged there myself ...” My voice trailed off as I noticed small drops of water tumbling down to the wooden floor. I cannot recall ever seeing my sister weep, not even when father passed away two autumns ago. There was more to this than bruised toes.

“Eliza, what is the matter?” I spoke barely above a whisper as fear overwhelmed my senses. When she did not reply, I raised my voice a little louder, urgency competing with my desire to remain composed.

“Eliza, look at me.”

The tears plummeted now. "I must not".

"Of course, you may". I reached for her chin, to lift her gaze to mine. Whatever her problem may be and regardless of her lack of care for me these past few years, I wanted to look her in the eye and reassure her that we would get through this together. After all, that was what sisters were meant to be for. But when my hand met the tear-stained surface of her chin, she jerked her head away.

"Do not touch me!" Her eyes flashed with a fear so vivid that I felt compelled to take a slow step away from her. I stared at the stranger standing where my sister had been.

"I must not look at you," she whispered, "as I will turn you into stone".

I would have laughed but the foreboding filling my veins compelled me not to.

"Eliza, what is wrong?"

"Come with me." She took my hand and dragged me towards her bedchamber. It looked almost identical to mine, though what stood in the middle of the room made me instantly drop her hand. It seemed to be a statue, elegantly carved out of pure white marble, like the ones scattered around the town. At least, that was what I thought at first. When I approached it, I realised that it looked oddly familiar. However, this was not the usual image of a recognisable stranger. It had a striking resemblance to Ivy, the young maid who I am not sure I had ever heard speak, frozen in marble at the end of Eliza's bed. Why would Eliza carve a statue of Ivy? Unless ... this was not a statue at all.

“What happened?” My eyes remained fixated on Ivy, as if I was the one turned to stone.

Her lower lip trembled. “First I have to tell you that they are real.”

I could not understand what she was referring to.

“The ancient Greek gods. Poseidon, Athena, Zeus ... You have read the stories, Fran.” I stared back at her, completely at a loss of how to respond to this ridiculous declaration. Surely, she would have mentioned this to me before, but I suppose I never really asked her about last season.

“That cannot...” I stumbled over my words, “they are simply fiction, Liza”.

“No,” she said quietly, “if only they were.”

And then she told me everything. She began with how the divinities had grown bored of living up a mountain and had arrived in London last season. She turned her head away as she told me how Poseidon had taken her out to the gardens at Athena’s ball and assaulted her. My already boiled blood curdled when she told me what happened next. Rather than punishing the perpetrator, Athena decided to punish Eliza for Poseidon’s crime, visiting her last week to inflict this cruel suffering. The next morning, Ivy became Eliza’s first victim, before she knew what power her eyes possessed. She had not looked at anyone all week. When I questioned why nobody had noticed Ivy’s absence, Eliza replied that she had told the household that she had sent Ivy home to visit her mother who was suffering from the fever.

“But why would Athena punish you? What ever did you do wrong?” I moved towards her and tentatively placed my hand on her

shoulder. This made no sense, and yet Ivy remained trapped in stone in the centre of the room.

“I do not know but I cannot return to London tomorrow, I will turn the whole of society into stone!”

“It will be alright”. It was all I could think of responding, though we both knew that it was very much not true.

I stayed with her that night, lying on the floor in case she woke up and forgot to look away, but I could not sleep. Though small in stature, Ivy towered over me. I am not certain how long Eliza had been asleep when I heard footsteps on the stairs. I assumed it was one of the maids, though it was late for them to be moving around. The door opened a fraction and a figure stumbled inside. The man was quite small, and seemed weighed down by the sword he clutched in his hand. I sat upright and watched as he clumsily moved through the darkness and approached where Eliza slept. His hand trembled as he raised the sword above his head. Clinging to the shadows, I crept around the wooden frame of the bed. It was in that moment, as the darkness engulfed me, that I knew I must pick up my script and resume my role of sister. Moonlight beamed in through the window, glittering across Ivy's face, and she seemed to nod in agreement to the plan formulating in my head. I pushed her towards the intruder, who was hesitating in his decision to attack his sleeping victim. Ivy tumbled towards him and the flesh that had become marble shattered into fragments as she crashed down on him.

The noise awoke Eliza, and in the chaos we both forgot the curse that plagued her eyes. I glanced over at my sister and felt my

heart turn to stone, trapping me eternally in my act of saving her. As flesh turned to marble, my sorrow transformed to love. Sometimes it was the book tucked away on the top shelf that people needed to read the most.

Intelligent creatures (1800s) by Chanel Wagenheim Plucinski
(undergraduate)

What about us?

A little 'what about us?'

That was what started it all.

Us meaning women.

Us being a movement that could not be stopped.

This was something most of *us* had only ever dreamed of: being able to pursue education.

However, that is one of the many deeds we had always been forbidden from undertaking.

Being a woman was already a sin in itself, we were lucky to not be considered witches if we tried to speak anymore.

However, we wanted more. We craved more.

Who gave us the right to crave it so badly?

We did.

Men may have more rights than we do. They may be the one taking decisions. They are always the ones having the last word. But they are not wise.

Being a woman teaches you discipline and respect - you do not have much choice - but it also requires wittiness. Being a woman is hard - surviving as one is a lifelong struggle. One has to learn to be smart to make it through, and smart we were.

They never expected us to be - never realised we could be at our core - intelligent creatures.

They had no clue they were about to unleash a new movement - clever beasts who had been kept in cages for way too long.

As we walked through the white entrance door and set the first feet on the grass, our senses were exacerbated, so many colours for our eyes, so many smells for our nose and soon so many classes we would be drowning. The college tour continued with the visit of the library - that is the place where everything started. We were impressed by the amount of books on the shelves - more books than any of us could have ever dreamed of - we were soon consumed by the fact that a lifetime would not be enough to read every ink filled page in the room.

I looked around me - at my cohort - all those intelligent young women wearing shirts and long skirts, their heads covered with hats, bearing honest smiles - being here was already a delight. I looked around and realised how it all made sense, how we deserved to be there. As scared as we might have been, still there we were.

I turned to the scholar on my left - as we were scholars from then on - I approached her with a smile but she was the first to open up to me: 'Can you believe that we are actually allowed here?'

'I do.' I did. 'However, the fact that women can get university diplomas seems unreal.' I felt the need to add - not without a bit of excitement I could not restrain from.

'Because they cannot.' This sentence was accompanied by a laugh and delivered by the man who was giving us the tour.

'What is that supposed to mean?' I asked shyly and disturbed.

'Women cannot get awarded university degrees. You are already a part of the few lucky ones allowed to study here, you should be grateful.'

Grateful...

Grateful we were.

Women... we always had to be grateful.

Grateful we were.

Was grateful not to be associated with improving lives for ourselves, and for other women? Were we not allowed to be grateful while still working towards getting more rights? Were we not allowed to be grateful while still asking for more?

That was the catch. We were allowed there as long as we could be kept on the side, apart from men. We were given more rights but we

were not to have the same rights as men. We were allowed to exist as long as we were not a threat to men.

There was still a long way to go for us, for women. There was still so much to learn for us to be able to better ourselves. Still, we had to please men in one way or another for them to start taking us seriously. We had to rub men up the right way to make sure they would let us be. We had to make them believe they still had control over us while we would be the ones working towards improvement, we would polish up and make our way to the top.

Still, being allowed there, having the right to study, this was new, this was a step in the right direction.

We were finally allowed to enter the realm of knowledge, it was up to us to use it all properly.

A Slither in time (1800s) by Deborah Omolegan-Obe (undergraduate)

If Aunty Mary could be a word then she epitomised “apology”. A hurried ‘sorry’ when you barged into someone at the Derby races, craning your neck to get a good view of the horse you picked out to be a winner. The way us young girls used to fawn over those horses, attaching our hopes and dreams to the intangible prospect of their win. We, Eliza, and I, would tuck raw pieces of turnip under our gowns for them, we never got a chance to take them out and feed them. We’d take the turnip from mother’s vegetable pot, the concoction she asked Beatrice to make each morning with the firm belief that drinking their pureed form would maintain her youth.

But yes, Aunt Mary was an apology, a half-hearted one. You saw it in her when she sat down at the dinner table, her bottom wedged on only half of the chair, eyes timidly scanning the room. Her toes pointed towards the door and her hands pressed onto her lap, she moved them only to scoop soup shakily into her mouth. And after that her hands went straight back to where they always stayed. She had the look of someone who was being rushed, never fully at rest. And when she did muster up the courage to speak, it was always in a heavy whisper, heavy with breath, like she’d had to force the syllables out from some hidden inner chest that rarely opened. None of us particularly liked Aunt Mary back then, but we pitied her. She had never been the same since Uncle Joe deserted her, he ran off with the daughter of a bookkeeper, they left Cambridge and went North, he used “love” as his excuse.

Eliza and I spent most of our days together. Being only 16 months apart, nature mandated that we would be close, and with little more to do than studying, music, and artwork, it was up to us to make something more out of our daily routine. 3 o'clock was "garden hour", we'd pick daisies and make up songs, rhyming our names with whatever we could think of, adding a daisy to our chain if we managed to make the other laugh. At 5 o'clock during music we'd "compose", I'd sing, and Eliza played violin, this time the winner was whoever could make the other cry, we both had a soft spot for melodies.

Summers were better for both of us because we spent more time outside the estate grounds. It was in summer that we went to see the horses race, we'd make up names for each one and father would tell us who he had betted on. Often, we'd disagree with him, that was our own mark of independence, our attempt to find our own place in the world - even if such was to be found in the name of a horse. Only once did my chosen horse win, and on that day, father bought us both an ice cream from the stalls at Kings Parade. I got two scoops and Eliza got one, father said it was only right given that I had won.

I missed Eliza on days like this, especially whenever it rained. In the music room we had played our instruments to the tempo of the wind, it was only on raining days that I touched a piano, I was never any good when the sun was shining.

Aunt Mary would sometimes come watch us play, though she'd always keep her feet planted firmly outside the door, tilting her head ever so slightly with her eyes closed firmly. We always thought it odd

how tightly she closed her eyelids, we giggled at the thought of her sleeping whilst standing up, secretly hoping she'd fall over if she did.

I now knew what Aunt Mary was doing.

She was reminiscing, trying to find a point in time where music was a reminder of families together, where it brought smiles instead of sombre tones. I now knew this all too well, for I too often found myself with a titled head pressed against Eliza's bedroom door, eyelids pressed tight trying to catch a whiff of that slither in time where the word "sister" was taken to mean "for life".

If Aunt Mary was an apology, then I have found myself to be one too. For now, I too sit at dinner tables with legs pointed towards the door, and eyes void of interest, and hands pressed firmly on my own lap. Though unlike Aunt Mary I cannot even muster the courage to move my hands to scoop soup. And whilst no husband of mine has left me for a bookkeeper's daughter, I did have a sister who'd left me for something much worse. A type of thing that crawled into your lungs and tore them apart from inside out. The type of thing that stole your breath away. That took all your strength up to the point where you could no longer steal parsnips from vegetable pots, or remember the names of your chosen winning horse, or lick a scoop of ice cream on the way home.

Eliza died of consumption, and with my sister went a part of me too.

Dear Dorothy (early 1900s) by Bex Goodchild (undergraduate)

Eglantyne Jebb

British social activist

1876-1928

Pitter-patter of little paws. Pitter-patter in the ceiling. In the walls. Under the floorboards. Pitter-patter into the kitchen. He is looking for something to eat, poor little Rat. But poor chef too! She jumps out of her skin - what a fright. Mr Rat makes a run for it. Little paws on the tile floor. Out in the open - he just needs some food. Chef wails and takes both hands on the broom. Bang! Bang! Bang! She is striking the floor, but Mr Rat is quick. He is agile. He is prepared. Up, up, up! He runs up the broom and Chef drops it with a shriek. On the table, Mr Rat sets his pesky eyes on a chunk of bread. He hurries over and grabs it with two front paws - throws it up, high in the air and catches it in a bag tied to his back. Then, in one almighty jump, he springs to the cabinet into the safe darkness of the gap between the wall. He squeezes through the cracks, darts across floorboards and in the narrow passageways hidden from human view.

Do you remember such stories, my dear Dorothy? The stories I would tell you when we were children? What an imagination. We would talk for hours, dreaming up new worlds in hushed whispers. Giddy giggles were unsuccessfully stifled. Mother would come and tuck us in. A kiss on our forehead and a promise of pleasant dreams. Do you ever wish

we could go back to that time? My understanding of the world was so different - so small. As much as I desire for the images of the impoverished, the suffering, and the weak to leave my dreams, they cannot, and they should not. Not even a mother's kiss could fix this. Maybe for some people, such pictures can be placed at the back of the brain, or perhaps they do not *see* at all. I, however, do *see*. I see the starvation. I see the ill health. I see the misery. Am I a mad woman for wanting to help? I know you agree dear Dorothy so please do not take this as a slight on your disposition. I am just frustrated that I am not taken seriously - that I cannot help in the ways I want to. What am I doing Dorothy? Can I even ask them to take me seriously when my actions have all amounted to nothing? It rips me up inside Dorothy. My inadequacy. What use are my stories? What use are my thoughts? Just a voice in the void. My speech doesn't travel. My words drop dead at my feet.

What a peculiar thing is joy, Dorothy. Joy does not hold prejudice, and it does not care for rank or status. The wealthiest can be the most deprived and the poorest, the most bountiful when it comes to measures of joy. Only last week, I travelled from Cambridge to Bethnal Green to dance in the club with the factory girls. I tell you Dorothy, never have I seen as much joy as I saw there. How terrible are the conditions of their work, of the streets they live in yet there they are beaming. More alive than I could be, more vibrant. I was jealous. We link arms and dance up and down the small room. They are loud - shouting to one another, laughing, stamping their feet and clapping their hands. And I thought, "I belong here". The joy was contagious,

spreading like a disease, infecting me with a smile. But such extremes of joy are accompanied by other extremes. Loss, grief, fear, all of which I began to feel alongside them. All of which made my joy that much stronger, that much more defiant. The dance became a battle cry and the song a declaration of survival. Us all together, I felt at home. I felt at home but according to what is proper, according to the will of the rich, I must stay away. We are much the same people and yet these invisible lines pull us apart. Dorothy, I cannot tell you how much I resent these shackles that divide us. What is so different about you and me that distinguishes us from the factory girls? That we were born into wealth? We cannot claim that for ourselves you must understand. Just as the poor cannot claim their poverty for themselves. We are all of the same matter - from the same source. The same bud that bloomed at the beginning of the universe. The same hand of God that sculpted each and every one of us and who now pulls me to action.

There are two cities of Cambridge. Yes, two of them. One, me and you Dorothy, know very well. The other, I am only just beginning to understand. Mrs Mary Marshall sees what I see. The city of Cambridge that is forgotten. The city which is suffering. Ignored by the university, ignored by our friends and by our mentors. People live in such awful conditions and yet we carry on with our own life as if it were not happening. Dorothy, something needs to change. Mary agrees with me. Shares my vision. Shares my guilt. In what world can we ignore this? Not a world I want to be a part of. She says I must work for the COS (charity organisation society). Says I have a gift. I agree, I do

have a gift. A god given gift. I want to make a change; I need to make a change. Maybe Dorothy, just maybe, I can do so with Mary. It starts with a study. Yes, a study. Something where I can show proof. The people who are suffering. The people who are ignored. Mary and I, we can try to understand them. We can try to help. Most of all we can realise we are them, and they are us. Oh, Dorothy, is this the point where my life becomes useful? Is this the point that the guilt stops? Where we see each other as from the same cloth. The same God. Dorothy, I know you will help me, support me, my dear sister I plead. Make this useless life of mine have some purpose - some power. I am hopeful dear Dorothy. I am hopeful.

He squeezes through the cracks, darts across floorboards and in the narrow passageways hidden from human view. Away from human view and into a city. A city much as the city you and I know. The further Mr Rat runs, the more houses fill the gaps in the brick. Bridges of wood line the walls. Mr Rat climbs the wooden paths up and up towards the ceiling. At the top, there's a small door. A small door that opens onto a metropolis. A gas lamp in the centre illuminates towering structures made of books and old furniture, their shadows casting darkness on the streets of sawdust. Rats go about their lives. Atop a small wooden chair, the rats seem to be holding a meeting. One stands at a matchbox as others sit and listen. Beneath the chair is a jewellery box, each compartment a baby asleep to the melody the ballerina spins to. A rat in one corner winding the box up with all their might. By the lamp, a collection of teapots creates luxurious baths with rats relaxed and reclined in each. Mr Rat makes his way to the

chest of draws in the far corner. Past the city hall, the nursery, the bathhouses. Mr Rat reaches the top-third draw to the left. Mr Rats home. His family celebrate his arrival home and gathers around the thimble table. The bread from Mr Rat's bag is admired by all. First some for his son, his three daughters and then his wife. Mr Rat tells them he has eaten his fill. Them full is his fill.

Yours,

Eglantyne Jebb

Human Grains (1940s) by Flaminia Zane (postgraduate partner)

It would rain soon, the clouds made that clear. After all, grey sky was no stranger to the English summer. The only unfamiliar presence over that paved street appeared to be him.

He limped past the bookstore, and had to stop to rest. The doctors had warned him that the leg would bother him for a long time still. He instinctively patted his pocket, it was fine, the letter was there.

That passage bordered a church's backyard, with a twisted tombstone asking him to spare a thought for Robert Page, who died on April the 5th, 1800. Was old Robert still down there? He bet he was. Robert's family must have taken good care. A whole ceremony, people gathering, and time to bury and cry. Robert probably had died on a day when nobody else had.

The death Charles knew was different. It was one among many, no time to be surprised, no time to accept and cry. It was Ed's, a foot shattered by a grenade in a foreign land, turning him into a delirious man talking to a father he had never met. It was John's, a quick one when a bullet shut him down two miles from Dunkirk. It was Richard's, but that was another story.

They were young. Only after a lifetime did death come for Robert Page. Lucky bastard.

Watch your mouth, Charles.

Richard's voice echoed in his mind, again. That fine, elegant accent. Grammar always forefront. At first, he thought they could have never been friends. What did his rough, slurring, suburban personality have in

common with the smart Cambridge kid? But the war zone was a nation running on different laws. They had ended up bonding, smoking at the back of the camp, before the generals had decided to turn that long spring into a burning summer. Richard and he had fought their way to Dunkirk together, running as fast as they could while the Jerries were taking over France.

Watch your mouth, Charles.

Yeah, sorry chum, he thought, I meant Germans. Richard was always so damn respectful with everybody. Even with that doctor who had checked him in a rush, and told him he would make it.

Well, he hadn't. And now that letter was all that was left.

He mumbled goodbye to Mr Pages' tombstone and went on. He arrived on the main street, turned left. People were walking fast, glancing at the sky from time to time.

The door he was looking for turned out to be a narrow, peeling one. What a strange place Cambridge was. He thought people lived in old castles, sipping tea from fancy cups while talking smart talks. But this was a normal door.

An elderly man came to open. He listened silently, studying Charles from behind a thick pair of panto glasses. Then, probably deciding it was none of his business, he simply said, "First floor."

He went up, the steps cracking under his asymmetrical walking. First floor. He was finally there.

The muffled crying of a child was coming from the other side. Beneath that, the voice of a woman singing words he could not understand.

The baby was already born. Perhaps it was not a good time, he could have come back later. But when? There was a train to London that afternoon, and he wanted to catch it. But then again, things had to be done immediately that summer, even if it was the wrong time, because you could not know if at the right time you would still be there to do them, those damn things.

He knocked. Softly. Too softly. He could not hear it himself. He knocked again, stronger. The singing stopped, the child continued to scream.

He knocked again, gently. Now that his presence was clear, there was no need to force further. The child's screaming came closer and smashed right into his face when the door opened.

In front of him stood a woman, holding close to herself a wailing bundle that she rhythmically rocked. Her eyes, bright, open, surrounded by dark circles, looked at him in surprise. Her hair, tied in a braid, was longer than in the photo Richard had shown him. She was shorter than he had thought. Her face was thinner, her lips dry. But it was her.

"I am Charles," he said instinctively.

What a rude, nonsensical way to start. He suddenly felt very conscious of himself. The second-hand shirt he bought the day before was too big, the trousers were worn on the hem, the saddle shoes were too tight. He was not wearing a jacket, he had not managed to find a decent one. He was pale, and the hair combed in that way further accentuated his protruding cheekbones. He felt like a crumpled, inappropriate ghost.

But her expression changed. Her features froze, the rhythmic movement of her arms stopped, and for a few seconds, she was nothing but a statue with a wailing baby perched on top.

Charles lowered his gaze, nervous. He felt the urge to drag his limping leg down the stairs, then to the station, then onto the train, then to London, then to the barracks, then on a ship again, and then back to the front because that was the only place he belonged, out of respect for all the Eds and Johns and Richards, out of respect for the woman who now stood in front of him on a doorstep where he did not belong.

But she said, "Good morning, Charles. Please, come in." And he dragged himself inside instead.

"Will you excuse me, just for a moment? I will put the baby to sleep. Please make yourself at home."

He made a gesture as if to say not to worry, while she disappeared into the next room and closed the door behind her.

Everything was as Richard had described it. The kitchen in the corner, the coat rack, the wooden desk, the photos, the window overlooking the street. The leather armchair. When she came back, he stood there still, unable to move. Outside, rain had finally come.

"Please, make yourself comfortable, Charles. May I offer you some tea? Did you have lunch already?"

Her eyes were red, but her voice was firm.

"Yes," he lied. "Just a glass of water," he added, out of fear of being rude otherwise. His eyes followed her as she moved towards the kitchen, filled two glasses of water and brought them back.

"You know who I am?"

The grammar, Charles. The grammar.

"Richard wrote to me about you."

She already knew, it was for sure. The War Office must have sent the notification letter already. After all, more than a month had passed. He watched her move the chair from the desk, then sit down.

"Please sit here, Ms Wilson. You will be more comfortable," he said, indicating the armchair. She looked at him for a moment, and Charles knew she understood why he did not want to sit there. She moved without insisting further. He took a seat at the desk's wooden chair.

"You can call me Louise. You are just as he described you, you know? How old are you? Eighteen?"

"Nineteen. A few days ago."

"Happy birthday."

"Thank you."

Silence. He wanted to ask her about the baby, but could not get himself to. Awkwardly, he took the letter out of his pocket. It was worn and creased, but the ink was intact. He had kept it with obsessive care all along the journey, clutching it under his pillow when he was in the hospital.

"He gave it to me before ..."

Louise lightly touched the paper, as if to check it would not burn her. A photo slipped down when she opened the letter. She started reading, then immediately closed it. She placed it on her lap, and finished the sentence, ".. he died."

That was the first time, in the long conversation that would follow, that Charles felt like a coward. The second time was a minute later,

when Louise offered him a cloth handkerchief and he realized he was crying.

"God, I'm sorry."

Louise gazed at the open door of the room where the baby was sleeping.

"You're just a child."

He could not tell to whom she was referring. He made a move as if to leave.

"I won't bother you more, Ms Wilson."

"No," she said. Then, realizing she had acted too vehemently, she added, "Stay a little longer, Charles."

He sat back down, and that was the third time he felt like a coward.

"Where is he?"

"We buried him on the beach. In Dunkirk."

"He loved the sea, you know."

He nodded, unsure of what to say. He could not deal with his own pain, and did not even know where to start with hers. But she talked again.

"It must be hard for you."

"I am alive."

Silence. Charles bit his tongue.

"Can you tell me about it?"

"About the war?"

"About everything you and Richard lived through there."

She looked immensely tired, but her voice was walking straight, keeping all the suffering within out of respect for the boy in front of

her. In that moment, Charles saw in her more dignity than in any war hero history ever invented.

He thought back to Richard, keeping the mood high during the endless march under the piercing humming of the planes. When Charles' limping leg had forced him to stop, Richard had grabbed his arm and dragged him down to that beach strewn with human grains.

If you give up now, I swear to God I'll kill you.

He was already wounded, but he had never complained. His calm bordered on a divine mystery, and Charles had taken it on faith. It was Richard, an older, protective brother. The angel God - or Britain - had gifted him to go through that hell of a spring.

Now Louise was making him confront the reality. Richard must have packed his pain into the narrow space that war, a long list of anonymous sorrows, had allotted him - and held it tight there, just as she was doing now. There was no God in all that. It was only the deepest humanity that the war did not defeat, even though Richard and Louise had already lost.

"It's a long story."

"I have time."

Having time was a feeling he had forgotten. He felt a sudden calm wash over him. He smiled.

And he began.

Trapped in Takehara (1945) by Serena Warwick-Yamamoto (undergraduate)

“How have you been coping?” Dr Ichimura asked, opening up a new page in his small, orange notebook.

Coping. Miya hated the word. It was like an itch she couldn't scratch; a nagging *prod* on her brain which she could never bat away.

“I am fine,” she replied. There was something about Dr Ichimura's face which unsettled her. Small and beady eyes behind thick, perfectly oval glasses. An unevenly shaved beard with small flecks of grey all scattered across his jaw in a disorderly fashion.

“Fine,” he nodded, looking back down at his notepad. He flicked to the page before, then back again. “Are you eating?”

Miya's smile wavered. “Yes.”

“Eating well?”

Her teeth gritted. “Well enough.”

He nodded again, then shut the notebook, placing it face down on the table. He drew in a long breath through his nose and sat forehead in his seat, looking solemnly into Miya's eyes. It made her want to recoil and crawl away, fast.

“How is your heart?”

Her smile dropped away, barely leaving even a shadow of politeness. “My *heart?*”

“Your mother told me your heart is broken,” Dr Ichimura explained. He tapped his pen against his chest. “Would you like to talk about it?”

Miya realised what it was that bothered her so much. He spoke without opening his teeth. His lips moved, sort of, but he talked entirely through his teeth.

She was not going to talk to her mother's neighbour's peculiar younger brother about the death of her husband. She didn't need a doctor's note to know that she was utterly and irreparably broken.

An hour later she was back in her mother's house, listening to her mother mumble about the rain. Something about it being good for the grasshoppers in the garden, but she wasn't sure that this made any sense. Miya had a wobble when opened the window and was hit square in the face by the smell of grass outside after the rain passed. Daichi loved this smell. He sang her songs about it. *When the grass is blessed by rain, it makes our pain all go away!* She fought back a jagged lump in her throat, staring unblinkingly into the back garden. His memory hadn't plagued her today. It was a wobble, but nothing more.

And then she was back at home. Her home. She placed the *harusame* salad her mother had made her on the kitchen counter and pushed it against the wall. Dr Ichimura's beady eyes flashed in her mind: *"Are you eating?"*

And then she was here, again, sitting on the edge of the bed they had shared, holding the same letter she had read every single day for 136 days. Miya ran her fingers over the postage stamp, feeling where Daichi may have pressed his fingers against the envelope. It was so carefully placed; perfectly parallel to both edges of the card. Her fingers traced around each of the stamp's four corners,

tracking the creases along the top of the envelope to where her name was scrawled on the front, each character drawn almost melodically in his large, calligraphic handwriting. She could hear how her name sounded in his voice, and it danced through her mind like a song she had almost forgotten. It was soft, even in her inner ear. The room felt warmer.

She turned the envelope over and peeled it open, carefully, along the same rips she had created the first time. The letter was exactly as she had left it. Crumpled, creased, and squeezed carelessly back into its envelope. Now, she lay it flat on the table, ironing out the lines with her fingers. The words took shape, and she began to read with new eyes.

My darling Miya,

Kanako says "hello!" She wanted that to be the first thing I tell you.

The very first thing! I said to her: 'ah, first I must tell my wife that I love her, and I miss her, but then I can tell her that you say hello.'

But she said no! 'You must tell her first!'

She has grown up very quickly. Koichi told me that until recently, she was taking extra classes after school to improve her writing skills and she's quite a talented singer, too! She asked so many things about you. She was so upset that you couldn't be here, but I promised her that next time we will come here together. So - surprise! We will be coming to Takehara again!

How are you, Miya? I miss you terribly.

Miya looked up to the ceiling. Her throat made it impossible to swallow. Her eyes fell shut as the words circled round and round in her head. Two tears leaked out and slid down her hollowed cheeks.

Deep breath.

Through glassy eyes she looked back down at the page, finding where she had left off.

It's hauntingly quiet here. The shops are empty. Schools are closed. Kanako is attending a different school to her usual one because it's closer to home. They have air raid warnings every single day, she says, but I have never heard one because I've been helping my father build the bunker with his colleagues in Takehara. Someone told me a few days ago that the end of the world is coming and I think they're right.

Miya stopped again, the corners of her heart cracking to pieces. She had to skip over the next two paragraphs. Daichi spoke so highly of the bunker. The meticulous attention to detail he had poured into the process of layering sheets of iron all corrugated but in different patterns and directions. He was so proud of it that it lifted from the page and had, 139 days before, filled Miya with immeasurable hope and relief.

And yet the same question hovered in the back of her mind, like an itch she couldn't scratch; a prod which she couldn't bat away: *why did he never make it to the bunker?*

For the final paragraph Daichi reminded Miya of how much he loved her, as though he needed to tell her again. *I will love you*

forever, and even more after that. If I spent my lifetime with you it would still never be enough.

With all my love and for the rest of time,

Your Daichi .

Signed, dated and stamped. *Hiroshima, 31st July 1945.*

Exquisite (1950s) by Chanel Wagenheim Plucinski (undergraduate)

Part I - A Christmas Formal

'Aren't we supposed to know it all?'

'And infinitely more?'

Amanda took a last sip with a smirk, responding to questions with more questions was a Cambridge custom one grew rapidly fond of, and if you could also put in some intellectual references, it was even better.

'This is the reason we got here in the first place, isn't it?'

She did not answer but she let out a laugh. It all felt like an act, she felt she did not know a thing. And since she had started college it had only gotten worse. Students were not supposed to know everything, afterall she was supposed to be learning, that was what college was for, but everyday she was confronted with students who seemed to already know everything. She thought it was a common experience, something every scholar went through, some even called it imposter syndrome. She thought that was something everyone experienced. She really believed that, but then she met Amanda - that A-student whose confidence was as high as her ponytail. Coming to Cambridge, Alice knew she would be surrounded by overachieving students who could actually pull all-nighters while still volunteering and taking part in school plays. However, when she applied she just wanted to please her parents, when she applied she was sure she would not get an offer, when she applied she never planned on actually studying here. Yet here she was, two years later, eating pudding at a Christmas formal with Amanda.

Mini mince pies were put on the table, getting Alice out of her own head.

'Sorry... What were you saying?'

Amanda told her it was unimportant before suggesting they headed out to the Iris. She stood up while Alice's attention got caught by one of the paintings exposed on the back wall of the hall.

'Amanda, was that painting always there?'

'Which one?'

'The one on the left.'

'I guess so... Why?'

'I feel like I have never seen this one before, this is weird, isn't it?'

'You know what is weird? The fact that most of them are men portraits, as if we weren't in a women's college...'

'You are not wrong... Still... something feels off.'

'You might just need a drink.'

Alice was not able to explain it but she felt drawn to this painting. Most students, including Amanda, had already left but she would catch up. She got closer to the painting until she finally reached the point where she could check every single detail. It had nothing that distinctive about it, yet it felt unique in a disturbing way. Someone called Alice's name from outside the room. The girl turned her back to the painting. She was ready to leave, however the painting was not ready to let her go. As she started walking off, something grasped her wrist. Turning around, she was not able to see anything but felt the grasp becoming tighter. She did not get a chance to call anyone before being dragged closer and closer.

Part II - Alice through the painting

She opened her eyes, still feeling a bit dizzy.

She was in her room: 'I had the strangest dream.'

She went to her bathroom and splashed cold water on her face. As she was not able to find her phone, she just grabbed her bag and walked to Amanda's door. The girl did not answer, she was probably already on her way. Alice walked to the porters' lodge to check her mail. However, the pidge she got at the beginning of the year was not there. She thought she was still hallucinating, and took the time to meticulously look at the different labels. Not only was she not able to find her name, but she did not recognise the name of any of her cohort. As she was probably already running late, she decided she would come back later.

Walking out of Newnham, she could not shake the feeling that something was off. As she started crossing the road, she realised something was wrong. She had no clue how this was even possible: while the lecture site was still there the day before, somehow it had become a construction site overnight. The building was not even there at all, as if it had been demolished and thrown away in the matter of a few hours, while a new one was under construction.

'Sorry?'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'What is happening?'

'We are building the new site for the university ma'am.'

'The new...'

She did not have time to ask further questions, the worker left, getting back to work.

'Curiouser and curiouser.' Talking to herself was a habit Alice never quite grew out of.

She walked back to her room, deciding she should try to make sense of everything that happened that morning.

She started a list entitled 'Things that do not make sense'. That was and had always been her way of coping: making lists, writing things down, giving names and titles to concepts and feelings. After all she was a humanities major.

Therefore, she started a list:

- Amanda not in her room
- The pigeon hole labels
- The construction work going on on the lecture site

She questioned if anything else had seemed peculiar which she could have added to her list. After a few minutes of reflection, staring at the page, she added two other elements, now the list read:

- Amanda not in her room
- The pigeon hole labels
- The construction work going on on the lecture site
- People's clothes in the street
- The new porters

She stared at the list for a moment, it led nowhere. She decided to go to the kitchen to grab a cup of tea, tea always helped. What was her surprise when she opened her designated cupboard in the shared kitchen and could not find her favorite mug nor her tea bags, not even the snacks she had bought the day before. She proceeded to open the fridge, once again being faced with a few products but nothing that belonged to her. Next to the fridge was a copy of Varsity, one of her mates must have picked the new issue of the newspaper from the lodge. She had a glimpse at the first few pages: an article by Sylvia Plath, written when she was a student there, some vintage ads and film pictures... Nothing interesting, it just confirmed people's ongoing love for the vintage aesthetic. Alice put the issue back on the countertop and looked around, every item seemed out of place. And even more peculiar, there was a blue fridge instead of the gray one, the toaster looked funny as well.

A bit disturbed, she ran to her room and added what had just happened to her list. With no tea to ease her mind or warm her up, she just felt defeated. At the same time, a student who looked to be in her twenties, walked by her window. Usually this would not get Alice's attention, being on ground level she was used to people passing by, however, that student with her short hair and vintage skirt looked oddly familiar as well as totally out of this world. Without a second thought, Alice left the dorm looking for the young woman. She was a few steps ahead walking out of college. Alice followed her until the woman took a turn in a narrowed alley where, despite being only a few feet ahead, she was out of sight. Alice was met with a dead end, again.

On top of that, she was starting to feel hungry.

Back in the kitchen, she looked for something to eat but as she had expected there was not one single thing that belonged to her anymore. She looked on the different shelves, surely there was something she could eat and replace later. That is when she saw a bowl of figs, or rather a huge bowl with two figs in it. She took both in her hands, as if weighing them out, before going for the bigger one. The first bite was exquisite. She put down the other fig on the table and sat to eat the rest of the one she picked out. Taking the last bite, she was interrupted by noises coming from outside. Out of curiosity, and probably a bit of boredom, Alice left the dorm again.

There was the same young woman, in front of the door, her back turned to Alice. She did not know what to do, however she felt that woman was the answer.

‘Sorry to bother...’ She started shyly but, before she could form a proper sentence, they both heard a strident noise. That was when the woman started to run. Alice tried to follow, she felt she had to get to the bottom of this, to understand what was happening that day. She was not the fastest runner, still she tried. She felt she went too far when she did not feel the grass or ground under her feet anymore. It was a dead end. She was falling.

Part III - An Appearance

She swears she was falling a second ago so why was she opening her eyes in the halls? What was she to make of these contradictions?

Amanda gave her hand to help her stand up.

‘Hi there, I thought we lost you.’

‘What exactly happened?’

‘I think you passed out. I thought you were following, turns out you were still here, a student called for help.’ Her last words were followed by a hand gesture pointing to a young woman who revealed a timid smile.

Alice did not get how that happened, had she been dreaming it all?

‘The Iris might not be the greatest idea to end the night... I say we grab a cup of tea in the kitchen and you rest.’

Alice nodded, she felt thirsty and did fancy tea.

The two students left the halls and walked to their dorm. While Alice sat down, Amanda grabbed two cups from the cupboard along with tea bags before boiling water.

‘How are you feeling?’ She asked Alice, sitting down.

‘A bit dizzy, my head hurts.’ She explained.

‘Understandable. I suggest we take our cups upstairs and you call for an early night.’

The kettle stopped whistling, the water was hot.

Alice stood up, her friend was a few steps ahead, carrying the cups.

‘Wait!’

‘What is it?’

‘Was this here before?’

Amanda looked where Alice was pointing out.

‘The fig?’

‘The half-eaten fig. Is it yours? Did you eat it?’

‘No... I am actually sad you don’t remember I do not like figs.’

'Whose is it then?'

'No clue. Izzy? I mean if it is not yours, nor mine... Anyway, we should head up... You know figs always remind me of that writer... the one who wrote *The Bell Jar!*'

'Plath?'

'Exactly. Wasn't she a student here as well? Like in the 50s or something...'

Alice was not listening anymore, she was focused on the fig half-eaten left on the table.

The Darker The Skin, The Deeper The Bruises are Buried (1950s) by Sam Misan (undergraduate)

It was at one of the usual BBC watering-holes that I encountered a young student poet named Edward Kamau Brathwaite. Freshly plucked out of Pembroke College Cambridge, where he attended on a Barbados Island Scholarship, he had made his way onto the fledgling Caribbean Voices Radio show spearheaded by Henry Swanzy. Swanzy was a gangly Irish fellow who took a curious interest in the West Indies. It was not unlike him, or many of the folks that frequented the same studios, to attempt to shape matters that ought not to concern them in their own image. His patronage was, however, unmistakably generative. Brathwaite mentioned one of his poems was to be recited on the programme that evening. I was sure to tune in. I believe the poem touched a certain aspect buried within. The other Jews that attended Jesus College in my time, significant in number, to be sure, aspired to a certain veneer. A mastery of a language not ours. A performed plumage of ponce. We were rather good at it, I suppose. There were aesthetic advantages. But Brathwaite's unabashed rejection of these presuppositions was awfully novel. Transfixed, I requested lunch with the boy. Over lunch, we exchanged academic interests. My enquiry into Hans Christian Anderson's formulation of the mermaid myth piqued his aquatic poetic inclinations. He invited me to speak at a dinner in Pembroke uniting literary academics around the topic of the aquatic imaginary. I warmly accepted and embraced the opportunity to take the old college bicycle about my old haunts before the dinner. The Cam

had burst the stiff upper lip of its banks as it did most winters. It comforted me.

We dined in the dark wooded Christopher Smart Room. Kamau sat among the other two island scholars to my left: Agwe Etienne and Lindo Belfield. They spoke of mutual interests, histories, textures, childhoods by the sea, currents in their lives and how they coalesced. It struck me that my Nubian lineage traced similar exotic shores yet I knew none of their histories. I didn't understand everything. They dipped in and out of French, Spanish and English. They were multilingual which meant they had an expansive vocabulary and combined words in ways native speakers often never considered. These foreign words still painted a picture, more vivid in my mind than if I had known their meaning. I fell back on the sounds rather like a child and allowed my imagination to take effect. Di-a-spora, éph-ém-ère, déma-gogue, Tous-saint, cata-clysmé. Each syllable swung open pockets of imagination. Di-a-spora sounded to me like spores dispersing through the air. I enjoyed the rhythms of their conversation as I dined; The sway of conflicting cadences on far-flung tongues; Kamau's sweet savouring of Ohs and Ahs; Agw'é's cooing Oos and gentle rolling Rs. So, when Agw'é stopped speaking for some seconds of silence, relishing the moment, I noticed the cradle song had paused. I looked up at Kamau sipping as Agw'é took him in with an envelope smile. Craning to interject:

I couldn't help earwiggling on your conversation, did I hear dear Kamau mention you were a painter?

That's right. He tells me you are a fine writer yourself'

Terribly kind, that Kamau. That doesn't happen to be your work up there beside the portrait of Christopher Smart himself, does it?

You omitted the temporary easel it is displayed on but yes, this is my work.'

Agwé and I wandered through Pembroke's gardens and came to sit on the benches by the rockery. Looming over us stood a great green banana tree.

This was freshly implanted, you know? he said.

I didn't!

Oh yes, an impropriety if ever there was one'

Why is that?, I said

She is an invasive species. Letters were sent, stubborn and steadfast, to be sure. So, they came to a compromise. The tree would take over if they did not keep cutting it down so this is what they did. Do. This is what they do'

Now why would they do that? It's a tremendous beast of a bush. A marvel, really. It ought to be lauded'

We had one like this next to my home growing up. My Mama tended to it religiously. You like the mermaids myth, Mr Jacobi? Kamau mentioned. I have one for you.'

Oh, please'

'I didn't notice as a kid, but my Mama's skin was alive with colour. Nothing was like it. So dark, the darkest of all of us, that the colours hid beneath the surface. As she grew older and spent less time baking in the sun, it was as if she became lit from within. Pools of purple and deep magenta appeared along her skin, collecting along her left hip, dotting down the side of her legs. They would shift in

shape and hue every now and then, like the shot of red in the fellows' cheeks when they learned of the banana tree. Deep magenta would redden then bleed into a charred aubergine. Mama was a chameleon. I said that to her once. One morning she came into the kitchen, her pools had yellowed, only retaining stipples of my favourite of her purples.

"Mama is a chameleon", I said.

My little sisters laughed.

Outstretching her colourful arms like a courtly dove about to take off:

"You are speaking of Mami Wata's magic? Mami blessed your Mama!".

Mami is Mami Wata, also called La Sirene, Goddess, Soul of The Swell, Mermaid, Hypnotizer, Sea's Great Incisor. She was fluid like the waters, constantly shifting form'

Agwé took a deep inhale; his eyes up to the sky; lips bouncing with a beat of joy.

Every scale of her tail

Told in tales and colours forming trails,

Trails that lined the fabric of the sails,

Soaring the seas thanks to the calming breeze

That only she could create with such ease."

He buoyed me.

'She left the room for the grass outside and that was the last of it, until one of my sisters asked of her pools again.

"Mami kissed your mama with colour and let her magic settle in my skin."

"Mami" or "La Sirene" was always roped in somehow with new flourishes each time. Papa started making up conflicting stories and it became a sort of game of give and take between them. I could see the play: the toying tune of their talk, but my sisters clung to every word. Papa, with a proud smirk, would paint a picture of La Sirene overflowing with jealousy for Mama's light skin. She wanted Papa for herself. So she stained her skin to make it undesirable to touch: Like yellow-bellied sea snakes have bright colours of warning. A force of malice, La Sirene designed her charm so that the stains could be covered only by darkening the skin in the sun. A spiteful touch since women around us were less desirable if they had darker skin. At least that was what all the beaming beauty billboards preached. Just before my sisters could suck their teeth at him, Papa would explain that La Sirene couldn't be as powerful and sharp as her legends sung, because Mama is only more beautiful for it. Time gave these memories two takeaways: that my parents loved each other fiercely and that black skin bruises blend. The darker the skin, the deeper the bruises are buried.'

'So the purple in your painting...'

'Mama's most beautiful bruise'

'How did she get them?'

'I didn't know until she passed'

I wet my lips to ask how long it had been, but he seemed to answer before I could speak.

'Eight years ago. Few words left Papa's lips at the wake and his brow never unscrewed until the last of the foreign footsteps passed through our door. I was good at the small talk, playing a part came easy. Not my father. He was the most tender man, tender as Mama's skin. But he had troubles, rages, in his sleep. They would lie in bed and in deep sleep, something from within him would build like swell to surge and crash over her like wind on rock. Night would possess him with storms of violence. His body beat against my Mama. When it started, he wouldn't let himself sleep. We had only two small beds, barely any space. She promised him it was okay, that his touch before bed made the rawness insignificant. Some nights he was still: he knew there was a calm within him. But other nights were punctuated with bellowing rasps. Mama never made a sound. Now I think of Mama as she was when I was a boy and every night before bed she would dip in the water. To find her "trankil" she would say. After nights of forcing his eyes open, refusing to return to bed, he realised, as my mother had long before, that he had to come to live with hurting the woman he loved every night. In the mornings, Papa wouldn't know how he had been in rest. He was in the dark until Mama's skin first started to ripen. Mama never told him herself how he would hurt her. It was only as she grew older and they willed us wealthier and she spent less time in the sun, that the pools of colour started to catch his lazy eye. Her hush kept him in black waters about how he would harm her. She bore his pain to relish his touch and guard his bliss. I call my Mama, Mami now.

Enraptured, I pulled out my notepad and wrote down Agw'és words:

The darker the skin, the deeper the bruises are buried. What a brilliant title for a novel.

I realised Henry Swanzy and I had more in common than I originally thought.

Too Soon Made Glad (1950s/60s) by Rachel Gardner (undergraduate)

Kettle's House was established in Cambridge by Jim Ede in 1956.

That's my last painting on the wall, there, snuck between Joan Miro's 'Tic Tic' and Barbara Hepworth's 'Three Personages'. I don't blame you for not noticing it. It's small—I've never been accused of grandness, admittedly—but to my mind, perfectly lifelike. Jim had always tried to pair our paintings with little objects, which he placed, in an artful manner that bordered on carelessness, around the rooms themselves. Miro's yellow dot hung above a single, plated, wax lemon. Hepworth's 'Three Personages' was positioned opposite a pair of wedding rings, interlinked. It took Jim a long time to work out what to pair with my painting, perhaps because the thing was so damnably difficult to interpret. If he had asked me, I would have told him that I was trying to capture the way silk shimmers under water, pierced with shafts of light and twirled out of shape by the eddies. There's no label underneath it—Jim always insisted no labels—so it never got the explanation it deserved. Perhaps that's why I'm writing now.

We had all heard of the great Jim Ede long before he set up Kettle's House. I had met him first at the Tate, where he had been a curator, and a damned good one at that. It was he who introduced me to Maria, a sculptor (or should I say sylph?) only three years my junior. When I next held her gaze, it was over Jim's dining room table—as artists and alumni, we had been invited to see the Kettle's House collection with our own eyes. The table was packed with all sorts, men

and women from all over the continent and even, dare I say, one from Scotland. We helped ourselves to big bowls of stew with wedges of bread, throwing around audacious theories and pointed fingers. I had an appetite for drink in those days, I'll say. That night, however, my first with Maria, I was distracted. Her lips were shaped in the most precise bow, curved at each end and raised in the middle. It was impish, charming. I kept my own eyes fixed on them throughout the night and traced their pattern on my leg underneath the table. Tired with the heckling conversation that had long since turned from earnest discussion into snobbish showmanship, Maria finished her soup and rose to leave—and as she went, she took the air right out of the room with her.

Jim had originally only invited us to visit, but we stayed to paint. As long as Maria would stay, so would I. We often found ourselves by the Cam, tucked into nooks along the river edge where our conversation would only bother the ducks. She had first used that spot to pray. She said she always felt closer to God by the water because the trickling music of the stream always brought with it the reassurance of a reply. Most afternoons, she would gaze into the water, grey eyes clouded by strands of shimmering, golden hair, and her lips would murmur missives to a God far beyond my reach. As she prayed, eyes open and hands twirling the grass beside her ankles, I would sketch. My notebook back then was littered with fragments of her: the arch of her nose, her mud-rimmed fingernails. In those moments, time had truly suspended itself. She teased me (that smile again) that she had become my muse—and I had no reply.

Of course, nothing of *that* sort ever happened between us. I couldn't bring myself to sully her with romance—in fact, I truly believed

that if anything unbecoming or vulgar came out of her mouth, I would have had to cast myself into the river or leave the city forever. Jim tried to talk to me once, actually, saying something about 'expectations' and 'self-restraint', and I could see what the old boy was getting at, but it never concerned me: Maria would never stoop and, for my part, I would never give her cause to.

A month or so later, while I was sharing breakfast with Jim in the walled garden, I met Isaac Montgomery. A painter from London, he also attempted oil landscapes, like me, although with a greenness that bordered on inexperience. Isaac had arranged to stay with Jim to paint the Fens, it appeared, and would be taking the room next to mine. As he settled down to breakfast with us, he pulled out his sketchbook and flipped through a few drawings of the sights he had encountered already on his trip from Grandchester. The usual scribblings of punters, cowslips and dragonflies affronted us. He turned the page once more and alighted on a semi-drawn portrait of a woman's face. It was only half finished, he assured us, as he had only had time to capture the eyes and the smile. The face's eyes were grey, and her lips were like a bow, impishly curled at each corner.

I flushed. The likeness was unmistakable. Maria, courting with others? Breathlessly encouraging the impositions of other men's pens? I inquired politely where he had drawn such a striking sketch of the girl. 'In a nook by the river, old chap', he replied gayly. I excused myself, quickly. If Maria were at the river, dandling herself in the same spot where I had, on many an occasion, sat and gazed at her, I would not bear it. I would take it as a sign of her infidelity. There would be no talking to her— for to even raise with her such an assumption would

sully her. It would be like asking a flower to bend its pliant stem and bury its petals in the muck. And I could not make her stoop. I hurried through the willows towards our spot.

There she was. She was dressed in blue silk, the colour of cornflowers, which skirted over her shoulders and tented slightly over her bent knees. Her head was turned, grey eyes cast out over the water. Her lips moved, lightly, in prayer. I was taken up once again with the faithful simplicity of her expression, her gentle frown, her hand combing the water. It was almost enough to make me forget Montgomery, cast myself down at her feet and beg forgiveness for something I wasn't sure I had the courage to do. Almost.

When I arrived back at the House, I found Montgomery again and complimented him on the exactness of his drawing—how much it looked like the real thing! He blinked a little and smiled hesitantly. 'I don't believe you've met my wife, Isabella, have you? She's visiting for the weekend to spend time with her sister Maria', he chirped. 'I've been told they look awfully similar—although I've never seen her sister, so I couldn't say for sure. You're looking awfully pale—why do you ask?'

Of course, I was on the train when the news broke. Maria had been found in the Cam, weighed down by her dress and pulled by the currents away from the slippery banks. I've been told that Jim paired my painting—my last to be displayed at Kettle's House—with a vase of blue cornflowers. When they let me out, I'll make sure to visit.

Ladies' Night (1950s) by Molly Becker (staff)

Two women stood outside Great St Mary's, rubbing their hands together and stomping their feet to stay warm on the chilly February night. After months of planning, there was nothing to do now but wait.

Lillian was the one to finally break the silence, asking the only question that mattered.

“Do you think they got it?”

Footsteps sounded on the cobblestones, and they got their answer.

Three hours earlier, Florence had filed into the candlelit Hall alongside her host for the evening, a lecturer in history at Jesus College. She had only been speaking with him for a half hour as they sipped port before dinner, but they had already covered the unseasonably cold weather, guesses about the dinner menu, and a discussion about the man's aunt, who was recovering from a short but severe illness in Lincoln, before circling back to the weather. Florence could already tell that this was going to be a long evening.

Florence had been to four Ladies' Nights around Cambridge since her marriage three years ago, all arranged by her husband. Mark had met Florence in a bookshop, her nose buried in a biography of naturalist Mary Anning. By the time the time they had reached Florence's doorstep after a long walk discussing Anning's contributions

to natural science, Mark had fallen in love with Florence's mind, and she had fallen in love with him for it.

Mark loved to arrange these Ladies' Night invitations for Florence, imagining that she was having the conversations he knew she craved about art, history, and science. In reality, she and her hosts rarely discussed anything more intellectual than which Cambridge building she found most beautiful.

Tonight, though, this was finally to her advantage. "The College's silver is just so beautiful," she said to her companion, widening her eyes as she looked up at him. "I would love to know more about it." The Fellow sagged with relief. He had been at a loss for what to discuss with his friend's young wife, but as a passionate keeper of the College's history, this was solid ground. As he launched into a history of the College silver, past and present—a topic he thought could safely take them through the first course and perhaps, if he was lucky, into the second—Florence tucked into her meal, satisfied that she would get the answer she needed.

'This course is sole "bonne femme," which means "in the manner of a good housewife,"' the Fellow seated next to her smugly explained to Alice.

"How interesting," Alice, a lecturer in French at Somerville College, Oxford, responded, her tone as polite as possible under the circumstances. She knew that the other women had been most concerned that Alice's part of the plan, but they needn't have worried—

Alice already felt like she had plenty to pick a fight about at this meal.

When Alice had left Cambridge in 1936, almost twenty years earlier, she had no intention of ever going back. Cambridge had given her an education, for which she was grudgingly grateful, but she could never forgive the feeling that she wasn't fully welcome, simply because she hadn't been born a man. She didn't understand how Jean, her best friend since their days at Girton, could bring herself to stay. But, as Alice herself well knew, Jean had always seen the best in places, and in people.

After almost twenty years of friendship, Alice was fairly sure she knew Jean better than anyone. But even she was shocked when Jean had told her about her idea over coffee on a rainy afternoon in Oxford. Alice knew Jean had raised money for New Hall before, ten years ago when she had published *A Cambridge Scrapbook* and donated the proceeds to support the small new foundation for women's education in Cambridge. But this new plan was bold, dangerous, and would raise much more money than the proceeds of *A Cambridge Scrapbook* ever could. How could Alice say no?

As the waiters circled the table, collecting the plates, Alice felt Florence's arm brush hers and a note fall into her lap. Glancing down and reading the hastily scrawled directions, Alice smiled and turned to the Fellow next to her, ready to do her part.

Lillian was fully aware that her role at these meals was to be the entertainment, and she was happy to oblige.

Not that Alice hadn't provided enough of a show already, storming gracefully out of the Hall after an increasingly loud and contentious argument with the Fellow seated next to her (about French etymology, Lillian thought, although she wasn't sure on the details). It was a shame Alice had chosen the academic path—she would have thrived on the stage.

But it was Lillian's job this evening to be the star. When Jean had come to her with her hairbrained scheme, she had agreed simply for the sake of recapturing the feelings that being on the stage had given her. You weren't exactly the centre of anyone's attention as the mistress of a Cambridge boarding house, and she desperately missed having the chance to shine.

Over the last few weeks of planning for this evening, though, Lillian had developed a strange sense of tenderness and responsibility towards Florence, Jean, and even Alice. Lillian had always wanted to be an actress and she had been lucky enough to live out that dream. If this would help the next generation achieve their own dreams, of education and equality, she would give the performance of her life.

Lillian cleared her throat, revelling in the feeling of all eyes turning towards her.

Jean watched as Lillian enchanted the table with tale after tale of her life on the stage, knowing that this evening was already in the process

of becoming quite the tale of its own. Even if they didn't pull off the plan, Cambridge would be talking about this Ladies' Night, and Alice's dramatics, for months. Jean would have felt bad about tarnishing her friend's reputation if she didn't know Alice had loved every second of it.

Alice found Cambridge stifling, but Jean loved her life teaching history at Girton to students who reminded her of herself and Alice twenty years ago, bursting with life and yearning for knowledge. Most days, she could almost convince herself that the disparity between her students' experience and what the men at other Colleges were given didn't bother her.

But the founding of New Hall in 1954 had sparked a passion for change that she could no longer ignore. She had done her part with *A Cambridge Scrapbook*, but it wasn't enough. When Jean had heard that they were finally fundraising to build the new College, she began to plan.

It all came down to this final step, and to her. Jean knew she wasn't enchantingly pretty, like Florence, or bold and outspoken, like Alice, and she definitely wasn't the star of the show, like Lillian. But blending into the background was a talent, too.

Her host, a Fellow in English, was laughing loudly, focused on Lillian. Excusing herself quietly, Jean got up from the table and slipped out of the Hall to find her best friend. Nobody noticed she was gone.

The wooden chest was clearly heavy; it made a reassuring thunk as Jean and Alice set it down in the middle of the empty street in front of Florence and Lillian. All four held their breath as she bent down and opened the lid.

Over 100 years old and polished to a shine even though it was no longer regularly used, the Jesus College pensioners' tables silver gleamed up at them from the wooden chest.

"Well," said Jean, looking up at her co-conspirators. "I think that will fund a few buildings, don't you?"

Audrey Hepburn's Coat (1963) by Anika Goddard (undergraduate)

One

But I am quite content as I am, because no one has any expectations of me anymore, and I get to go to lectures, when the mood strikes me. No one looks at me, only gliding past me, stopping to take photos of the *vista*. In the summer I am paler, barely existent really, and in the winter I am so bold that breath mists around, not through, me. I think I've done well; time isn't the easiest thing to beat. But it does confine me to place; if I move too far from the river, a shivery cold overtakes me.

Two

It's the second of February, but the weather shows no sign of improvement. There is ice creeping inwards from the lead outlines of our windows. In one corner of my latticed bedroom window, a pane is missing. We've stuffed it with a rag until College gets something done about it, but with Lent Term now in full swing, they're too busy helping incompetent undergraduates to bother trekking out to our house in Newnham village. At least, that's what Father says, grumbling under his air-misting breath as he slices his eggs into six before heading into College in the mornings.

On schooldays, I cook eggs and toast for us both, and for Ben too. I cut Ben's toast into soldiers for dipping, and we use the set of

bright shiny egg-cups given to Father and Mother on their wedding-day by someone who assumed there would soon be four of us eating from the breakfast-table. The green egg-cup, green the colour of mould and slime, has never been used. A little pool of dust has collected in its basin where it stands on the cabinet.

I have a new red coat, a Christmas luxury. I wanted one pink, like Audrey Hepburn wears, but red is close enough. Father said I looked like Jackie Kennedy, but I wanted Audrey Hepburn. Mama would have known. And I got my skates. The Cam has been frozen for months - or it feels like months. They call it the Big Freeze, and at school we're warned to always wear gloves if we go out on the ice, in case we fall. Hands frozen to skates, frozen to the glassy surface of the river. Tommy McGee said to me,

Ada, if you skate too late your fingers'll freeze,
frostbite'll come at'cha,
and they'll have to snip your fingers off after.
One, two, three.

Here he made snipping motions at my mittened hands in the playground. But I'm thirteen, and too old to believe this anymore.

What's on the table, the oak-veneered table? Only bills college will take care of if we're lucky, and a brochure for an Independent MP candidate who wants YOUR vote. There'll be an election coming up this year, says Father, and the other fellows who like to come round and smoke cigarettes in the kitchen until the ceiling is misty. I'm very worried about how much Father smokes. Mama used to be too. He says the Nanny State is trying to intervene in his private ways. They want to ban cigarettes, or do something with advertising. Harold

Macmillan, who has been Prime Minister half my life but who, according to Father, will not last the year, says there is no danger at all in it. That is maybe why Father likes him so much. Who, I asked Father one evening, is the “they” who want to ban everything, if it’s not our Prime Minister? Father muttered something about the Establishment into his moustache. He is always muttering into his tobacco-smelling, grey-at-the-edges moustache.

I pull the door shut behind me. It won’t close. I do it again, extra hard. It shuts with a bang, the wood swollen. Being as it’s Saturday, I can enjoy myself. My skates are in my hand and I’m headed for the Cam.

Bright doors, new and old paint marking out richer and poorer colleges. Our college is poorer, I think. My friend Sandra’s father works at Trinity. Their house has no missing window-panes.

I could call in on Sandra on the way, I think, and see whether she wants to skate. I could call in on Debbie, or Jane, or Ann, but the names have become a list. If I call in on these friends, who have lately been treating me nicely but as if I have some odd disease, I will have to see the faces of their mothers. The eyes swimming with something I don’t like, lips poised around questions like ‘And how are you all holding up?’ and ‘And how is your father managing?’ So I walk by Sandra’s blue door.

There is no

Strange look given me by the ice. Ice is my favourite in cobwebs that hang from the old gas lamps.

Ice makes spidery stiff ribbons out of these floaty things, geometric like Father's diagrams.

I find these diagrams on the back of napkins, backs of bills which stack up. As though some formula, written in blunt pencil and too perplexing even for undergraduate eyes, might solve the mystery of the unpaid hot-water man. Or else bring back something far greater.

Einstein gave us the Atom Bomb, Father said sometimes with a sort of eye-twinkle. You don't remember it, you don't know what things were like before our Nuclear Age. Every Age gives us a new challenge for Science, Ada. You're named after a very clever young lady. Some people even say she invented the Computer. Now our challenge is to beat the Soviets to the Moon. But if anyone asks you what your Papa does, tell them he's looking into the age ahead.

O look at the numbers, Ada, he said. One day we'll use them to beat time, go backwards, forwards, through.

Often there were no numbers, only signs. Many letters. Spelling at school confused me at first, when I was younger, because I thought letters belonged always to mathematical equations. I thought the words in our storybooks, the

CAT SAT ON THE MAT

would be equivalent to something else. But no. They were just themselves. And lately the twinkle in Father's eye has settled into something grimmer. Time and the numbers are no longer a sort of

friendly adversary. I feel that he and they are now deadly enemies. The pencil marks on bills are darker and blunter when I see them, and smudged with something more than a hand.

The bells are tolling the hour in Queen's College chapel where I reach the river. They ring through the quiet like pickaxes striking the air. The students are still sleeping. Get thee to Girton, Father likes to say to me. Or better; by the time you turn eighteen, Ada, maybe the grand old colleges will be letting women in. He laughs at this, as though the idea amuses him. It's an unthreatening idea. I look at the Elizabethan wood panelling just visible across the Mathematical Bridge in Queen's Old Court. I imagine crossing it with books in hand on my way to a supervision. I see the women at Newnham sometimes doing the same thing. It's because of one of them, a student about my height with curled blonde hair, a beret and a friendly smile, that I first decided I wanted a coat like Audrey Hepburn. She has one, only it's bottle-green. I see her often on my way to school. I think she's late to lectures a lot.

Enough of thinking. Onto the ice, crunching, stumbling, not-at-all-smooth.

Zing and pop like the special American soda cans we get in summer now.

The tooth-shivering cold of an ice-cream float.

White silvered lines criss-crossing the blades of the skates, like those frozen spider webs hanging off the lamps.

Lamps that give off no heat, only yellow light.

Now, though, the light is grey, piercing grey as a pair of eyes as I follow the curve of the river round the Backs.

One day soon there will be cows on King's meadow again. Mama liked the cows. I for one am scared of them.

I imagine a vast palace of ice to disappear into. Tunnels, ice waterfalls, slides into the blue depths of things. Punts are frozen in odd angles along the banks of Trinity. I don't think they'll survive the winter.

In places the ice is almost translucent. Perhaps it is warming up, after all.

Oh!

An almighty sound, and a lurch downwards.

The gravity of the skates.

--There must, I think all in a rush, be a formula for this.

Space Songs for Ikeya-Seki (1965) by April Egan (undergraduate)

I.

We followed the star. To Malcolm street, and further on, history hovered in flame, welcomed back to the sky. Uncomfortable to look at, uncomfortable to walk under. Did you know, Newnham College came under siege, once? How long since they were out there, with their pitchforks, effigies, *eggs*? Oh, a hundred years, you say. Probably fifty. Maybe an hour. It doesn't matter, you say, it's long gone now. The sky is full of fast clouds, the evening clunking in. We stand outside St Edmund's delicate red frame, and watch the wind chase it all down the hill. There's a ballroom on Market Square, another on Castle Hill, screaming with old brick and new light, a shabby Bethlehem. Here, the sound of it all picks up your scent and pursues, A mouthful of ivory teeth chasing through a thick night, howling at the window for what they see, but cannot touch, cannot even understand the want for. I push the pillow over my ears, I pin the curtains back with textbooks. It's thin and high and imploring. It's just some stupid abandoned star, warbling on.

II.

Michaelmas shrugs itself over me, a great coat of sleet across the recent past. I wake in the darkness to the choir, snow tending to heavy, twisted prints. The world waits for birth. I am motionless on the

student carpet. You pick up my head and read me the news. The comet has fallen over Japan. Hanging is out, for the time being. Separating your eyelashes one by one with a pin, 7300 teachers in training, gone wayward, or biding their time with philosophical pursuits, balancing glasses on the edges of tables and cutting their own fringes with sewing scissors. I can hear them. I can hear the hairpins falling to the ground. It's Friday night. The singing is lying at my feet, standing sentry at my door. Winter drives us beneath our blankets, curled like clefs at the fireside. Festivity is time-sharp, and full of cheery threat. We could go out and see it all. You say:

don't you know they don't ever take them down? They just turn them off, and nobody ever notices.

I feel the thumping of the air, the lifting of lungs, rough and gossamer. Snowflakes borne back along the river, the clouds heavy with themselves. Five silver points lay brittle at the foot of the stairs, fallen from their drunken perching. When I lie on your back, I can see the spot the painter missed, and the shoddily-covered crack of a long-gone boot. It makes me feel tiny, as tiny and as silly as the silver dusting the hallway. It's stuck all over your coat. A fairy, I tease, a sweet wingéd critter. You say, shut up with that, I've got stuff to do. I picture your glittering tail over the neatness of the lawn. A bedazzled, grumpy phoenix hovering in the doorway, scattering asbestos sparks. *That can't be fantastic for the birds.* It doesn't matter, you say, brushing yourself down into the night.

It doesn't matter, it's just an old star. I have so much to do.

///.

Then, against all hope, it's sunny. I show you shiny pictures in the panelled rooms. Gently-bragging hands holding a pouting face, resting needlessly upon a Bible, caught in an act of confidence. Under your raised brow, he looks black and white and far away from now. He wore a bow-tie and didn't brush his hair a hundred years ago. Suddenly, the room is cringing with tenderness. It seems there was nothing but the present then, as poised on a lit fuse as it is still, the simplest path. He said that music was the stuff of life. Silence is a breath's distance from the next song. *Don't Put It Down*, someone sings. You say, he couldn't be right, the young song-genius, because the poets were wrong. Hope is the thing with claws, dragging you backwards into the darkness. Don't you know, you say? Don't you listen to a thing I say? I watch the needle find its groove. I hear the light rushing from the sky.

Nothing is real. We are made of very old carbon that fell out of the sky, and you're worrying about a supervision?

I wonder if you knew that we turned up with the young prince, the cameras, the politely turned faces. Flashes like explosions, subtle as a storm. I tried to make you a crown. My glue-gnarled hand tenses in its pocket. I still haven't picked up the plastic gems, a sharp constellation littered across their cheap stained sky. I wish I could

make like you could, like you don't. Carbon hands, I think, and flint. A grain of sand is an embryonic pearl, or the microcosm of a cathedral halo. Right now, I want to tell you that I think you are brilliant. The sun behind you lights you up like a manuscript, arcane evidence of erasings, bored sketches of arrows and lemons, and love. Don't put it down. I swear, I could be good enough for all this beauty, all these footsteps I can hear, right now, falling further and further, the still-warm seats, these idle hands, and the effigies they yet remember pulling from the pyres. There's words for children who wake up staring into space. Wooden dolls. Glass bowl children. Indelibly beautiful, without question. There are words, new words, new songs.

I don't tell you anything. I look down at your handwriting.

I watch the time pass, and I wait for the permission of the dark to think of the singing.

IV.

Quiet, can you hear Friday approaching? I might see a tapestry woven in the crosshatch of Silver Street, a kind face and a yellow rose. Try not to bay, to cry, to rejoice. If you're very lucky, the song has words. He sings:

in the town where I was born. In the town, where I was born.

Her hand poised to turn him, held high, an offer of shelter. The hopeless genius holds his hand quietly over his eyes, I remember. The

faintest glimmer of an open curtain, the flood of horizontal light.
Crouched beneath it in the dark, holding the sill. Her yellow dress is
a torch, twirling to comet-glimpses up silent, siegeless Newnham Hill,
until next friday. The ice is picking itself up from the ground. I've
taken off a thermal. I've left you a cup of tea, just outside. Could you
see it, if I were to hold your head still? Quiet, can you hear the
wishes falling to earth?

V.

Then, somehow, happiness came up through the ground. I know warm
winters bring armours of wisteria. There are no sieges now, I know,
just bright purple immortality, ecstatic, terrible. Easter softens us all
over again. Jesus wood, undemolished but for a dream. Saved. Still, I
want to remember if there were mountains here, once. Look, there are
owls in the broken tree-hollows, and their strong arms in the roof of
the dining hall. Can you hear the earthworms outliving the magnificent
falcons? The Christmas grit glowing in the spring soil? When asphalt
turns sparkly, do you remember? Can you hear the draughty singing,
now that peace is waiting, like a friend who still waves once you've
turned the corner?

They say, at last, they're planting gardens. There is luck in the world
again, glinting, freckling the eaves. Peace at last, Grantchester in song.
Touch the sunlight, look out the windows. Forget to look for real
revolution here - there is little chance in these scowl-shaped stones,

rejecting newness with every crooked step. *Keep Off The Grass*. The chapels, flat with angels, cowled by stars.

Mill Pond, if you just ask, slips her green coat down a shoulder, winks, shudders like a tail disappearing downstream. The river wanders about as light as ash, its breath turning the leaves lazily, like pages of a half-read book. Temperance's soprano soars over us and buries itself deep in the cool, sweet earth. You left your scarf on my bed, still warm. I remember paper stacks. I remember that I got enough sleep. I remember the sound of yesterday. I remember the shoes. I remember the clatter as the wind cut the ballroom's shabby sign down. I remember the leaves, and the glitter of the asphalt. The new decade is rising like incense over the heat.

VI.

I remember being afraid, and smiling.

VII.

On the last day, it rained. The even cobbles drowned, and the strange shoots thrived. Your hand over your eyes, standing up straight against the sky. Lush and arid with what fens remember: the Gonville faces, the immortal shape of a man's nose and the way his hair fell into his eyes the morning the sculptor knocked. Trinity's shadow falling the same, ignorant of centuries. Newton's apple halved with a friend and a princess in her windy Girtonian tower, watching the ripe red trees

burst. The queen's pet alchemist laying wood upon water and drawing up earth. And before even that, before ink and before preservation, the Wake braced vengefully atop a flowered hill, fletched and twisted and borne up by the wind, cloaked in summer shadows, waiting on the same soil, watching the same sky. I can hear them:

Wait for me. Wait for me, sing for me. Look for me. I'm here, I'm here, I'm here.

Running, Running, Running Away (1976) by Reese Robinson

(undergraduate)

“Muma, is it over yet?”

My panic filled the room like toxic gas, choking me as I emerged as but a silent whisper. They had stolen my voice. With their gunshots, they had left me *fi' dead*.

“Soon done, my child, soon done,” Muma uttered with a steely look to the door. She knew she would have to spring into action sooner or later. Beyond our haven, Dada was wailing. Strangled moans that, even amid devastation and darkness, painted the night with lyricism. My father’s war cry were the premature beginnings of something beyond my imagination. December 3rd 1976- the night that changed the trajectory of a sweet island nation but also of my life.

In the weeks to come, dusk settled over disaster. But it was too late. My father shouted at Muma, pushing her away and became a recluse in the studio humming repetitive tunes to melancholy Ska rhythms. It was a coping mechanism for the immense pressure on Dada, anyone could see that. Initially, he refused to run because he didn’t want to leave the desperate population. But the countless prying eyes, gregarious headlines and Seaga and Manley’s political rallies were overwhelming. Our destiny was decided, our flight was booked. I was to fly to London with Dada and part ways to a boarding school in a city nearby.

Dada's forlorn face glared back at me. Below, an accusing headline read: 'Don't worry about a thing? Bob abandons a nation'. Despite my feet standing on Cambridge's cobbled pavements, my mind was far away. It was hearing the tropical buzz of Jamaican paradise, the raucous of the 'jancrows' and the hustle and bustle of market day with Muma. I missed her more than words could conjure. A pang of guilt rose to my throat, but I refused to let my feelings awash. Instead, I furrowed my brow sympathetically and continued trudging through the snow. Flurries of icicles dusted my leather boots and made it slippery underfoot. Thank goodness for the velvet-collared Shetland coat, the grey felt hat and the woollen tights; I'd never experienced such bitter weather and I silently thanked the uppity lady in the Uniform shop for equipping me so adequately.

My days were spent gliding around in this trance. I had no care for this country and nor did it for me. The girls in my house despised me, my teachers looked at me pitifully and it wouldn't stop damn snowing! At night, I'd curl up and transport myself back home to the warm embrace of Muma and Dada. But when the winter sun rose and accosted me through the bay window, I was reminded of just how alone I was. My roommate had moved her bed away from me. As she'd scraped the bed across the floor, thinking she'd been subtle, her gaze met mine. With a smirk and defiant toss of her auburn ringlets that enraged me, I knew I'd met my enemy in the flesh. Heiress to 'Potts' Flowers', Miss Carlotta Potts was a spiteful, spoilt, and snooty girl. She sauntered around the school as if she owned it, religiously

reminding people of how her family's business who had once supplied bouquets to the Royal Family.

"For Princess Anne's wedding actually," she'd scoff, as she sashayed down the school halls.

I'll never forget that night when she moved her bed. I vowed that I'd 'tek revenge pon her' in our next Games lesson. Evidently hailing from Jamaica, I'd fancied myself a decent all-round athlete, but Miss Carlotta Potts was awfully good at that peculiar sport, hockey. My plan failed miserably. She'd ran circles around me and a hockey ball to the eye had me concussed in the infirmary overnight with a magenta and midnight black eyelid.

But among all the weeds, came a flower that blossomed. My first love...

Reality Checkpoint (1990s and more) by Sarah Burton (staff)

When she returned to the world, she was left feeling less alive somehow, until she was forced to stop. Cursing the final straw in a hard first day back at work, she leans her bike against the lamp post while she fiddles with the chain, just above the dinky door. But she doesn't notice, lost in being annoyed at herself. After all that time in lockdown, she should have taken better care of her bicycle and it's proving her point. The light from the lamp is enough to see her hands getting muckier by the moment. She knows she should go straight home; it's been a late one. But she can't bring herself to; she's had more than enough of that house over the last few months. Her parents will pepper her with questions. They aren't ready to venture out yet. She draws the task out, giving herself the thinking time she hasn't allowed herself recently. She's a single woman in her thirties still living in her childhood home. But she can't move out until she earns more money. Being a lifeguard has suited her up until now and she gets to indulge in nostalgia working at Parkside Pool where she learned to swim, eating Caramac bought from the vending machine. Lifeguarding is more of a vocation than a job. But is it for her anymore? Looking up, she laughs wryly as she realises she's at a literal crossroads. She has to move on, but first she has to fix this bike.

Getting back to it, she catches a fleeting glimpse out of the corner of her eye of fog on the horizon rolling in, or is it smoke? Walking out of it comes a man, who stops and waits on the other

side of the lamp post. He glances at his watch and ruefully smirks. A woman arrives from the direction she's come from and greets him with a lingering kiss on the lips. Unconsciously, the young woman draws her denim jacket around her, hiding the t-shirt that barely covers her belly button. He appears nervous, slicking back his floppy hair and shrugging his shoulders in his black bomber jacket, steeling himself to say something. She tugs on his plaid shirt playfully, turning off the Walkman attached to the belt of her bootcut jeans. She smiles up at him, but he frowns.

"Michelle, you're late again."

Michelle's smile falters. "How long were you waiting?"

"Not long, but I deliberately turned up late because I knew you would be."

Michelle tries to keep it light with a grin, "you know me so well."

He doesn't respond. "Well, if I'm always late then isn't it a sign that we need to change when we meet? I do have further to come you know. You're only at Emma. I have to come from the other side of the railway bridge." Michelle's raised voice catches her attention. "It was horrible working in the shop today."

"Working in a dusty electronics store will do that to you."

"No, it's not that. I love that part. I got this Walkman working like new, didn't I? It's the customers; they treat me like I know nothing. You know I don't want to work at Cambridge Resale all my life. I'd love to be closer to the city centre like you, but I don't have the luxury of parents who bankroll me. What are you going to do? Your only goal was to get to Cambridge. Now what?"

He looks suitably chastened and brings something out of his pocket. Her eyes widen as she takes in the decorated cassette tape, what a flashback. "You made me a mix tape!" Michelle's smile brightens her entire face, banishing any annoyance. Michelle eagerly puts it in her Walkman, hands him one of her earphones and they walk off, heads together due to the cable binding them and hands in each other's back pocket. She can hear the strains of The Universal by blur as they go. She's paying attention now. What is this fog, in August? Her bike is fixed and as she picks it up, she notices that the dinky door isn't there and Reality Checkpoint is written in Tipp-ex.

Rattled, she gets on her bike and cycles off in the direction the young couple has gone. After a minute or so, she hasn't caught up with them and this fog is unnerving her. "Hello, is there anybody there?" Turning around, she can see the light of the lamp post like a beacon. She decides to go back and use the markings on the lamp post to work out which path to take. Getting off her bike to walk as her legs are inexplicably wobbly, she comes across two men in uniform. They are larking around and seem drunk. Just her luck. Their lips are moving, but she can't hear them. Shaking her head, the sound tunes in like an old radio, static at first. They have American accents and looking closer, she can see eagles above their breast pockets. As she nears the lamp post, she stops and stares.

Surrounding it is an empty wooden bandstand, but there is a sense of people milling around. The men are laughing now and have passed her to climb up the lamp post. It looks different as there is only one light. It starts bending and they leap off, falling as it breaks. She hurries up, wheeling her bike. That's when the policemen rush in and

she's relieved; seeing the lamp post broken upset her. More policemen arrive, but they look different to the others: some are in white helmets and the others in red caps. They start arguing, each clutching one of the Americans. She hears the word "snowdrop", but it gets lost in the jumble of raised voices as the men get carted off.

The world sways and she almost drops her bicycle. It seems a long time ago since she left the swimming pool all of a sudden. Footsteps approach through the fog and she hurriedly moves round the lamp post away from them, though it's difficult to tell when the sound is so muffled. A group of men arrive, wearing suits, bow ties and tall hats. A few are holding canes. The lamp post is shiny and new. Her heart skips as she sees it in one piece again. She never knew she was so attached to it, or maybe it's because it's her only constant right now, whenever now is. She tunes in to their voices, or is it their voices tune in? They're discussing a ceremony and seem to be checking the post is central to the new paths. As they move on, the fog gets thicker making her cough. She forces herself to take shallower breaths, which is easy as she can feel panic clasp at her throat. Sound only comes through in waves as time slips past.

That's when the soldiers arrive, wearing round helmets, what look like skirts and carrying sharp sticks. The lamp post is no longer there and mounds of earth lie in its place, stretching into the fog. Her legs feel leaden as she trips trying to keep out of their way. She shuts her eyes to quell the dizziness, while her mind is spiralling. The pressure builds inside her and it bursts out, "enough!"

A man stops in his tracks and asks her gently if she's okay as he takes out his ear buds. The moment she opens her eyes,

everything is back to normal. The fog has gone, the lamp post is back and the golden letters spelling out Reality Checkpoint are glinting in the light. Her voice is hoarse as she tells him she's just finished fixing her bike, leaning it above the dinky door once more. She takes him in, playing Pink Floyd on his phone. She compliments him on his music taste; being from Cambridge, she appreciates the connection. Reluctantly, she shuffles in her pocket and pulls out her mask. He has her at an advantage, having seen her whole face. She can just see his kind eyes. He moved here to study at Anglia Ruskin and the history of the place has really captivated him. Like, did she know that there were English Civil War defences right where they're standing? The world tilts again and she steadies herself against the lamp post, hands resting on the dolphin, or is it a fish? She asks him, he doesn't know. Does she know the theories behind Reality Checkpoint? "No, but was it damaged during the war...?"

"On VJ Day, that's when they gave it four lamps. It acts as dead centre of Parker's Piece helping people navigate the paths, but it also symbolises the University "bubble" (that word has different meaning now) where it meets the real world. That doesn't work since the other university in Cambridge came along. The final theory is it's a point where you check how drunk you are as you're about to pass the police station, a kind of Checkpoint Charlie." She looks blank, so he starts telling her about the Berlin Wall. That's when she stops him, asking if he's doing a history degree. He grins and apologises.

"Never apologise for being a geek, for being passionate about something." She tells him she's amazed she doesn't know any of this, even though she was born here.

He says that's why. "People want to learn about their adopted hometown, but take for granted where they have lived their whole life."

"I feel I'm looking at the world with fresh eyes, thank you." She's seeing things differently after being stuck at home for so long. "I've been comfortably numb."

She looks a little lost, but he smiles widely at her Pink Floyd reference; cultural references create instant kinship like nothing else. "As they have said, "Don't adjust your mind. Your dream may be gone, reality is at fault."

Smiling back, "that's a bit presumptuous."

He shrugs, "hasn't everyone's dreams been affected by what we have all been through?" He wants to take her hand and lead her away to talk some more, but social distancing.

Not wanting to go home yet, mirroring his mind, she invites him to walk with her, talking song lyrics, governmental idiocy and setting the world to rights, helped by the knowledge of the past, embracing the present and hopeful for the future. One of the lamp post's lights flickers farewell as they leave.