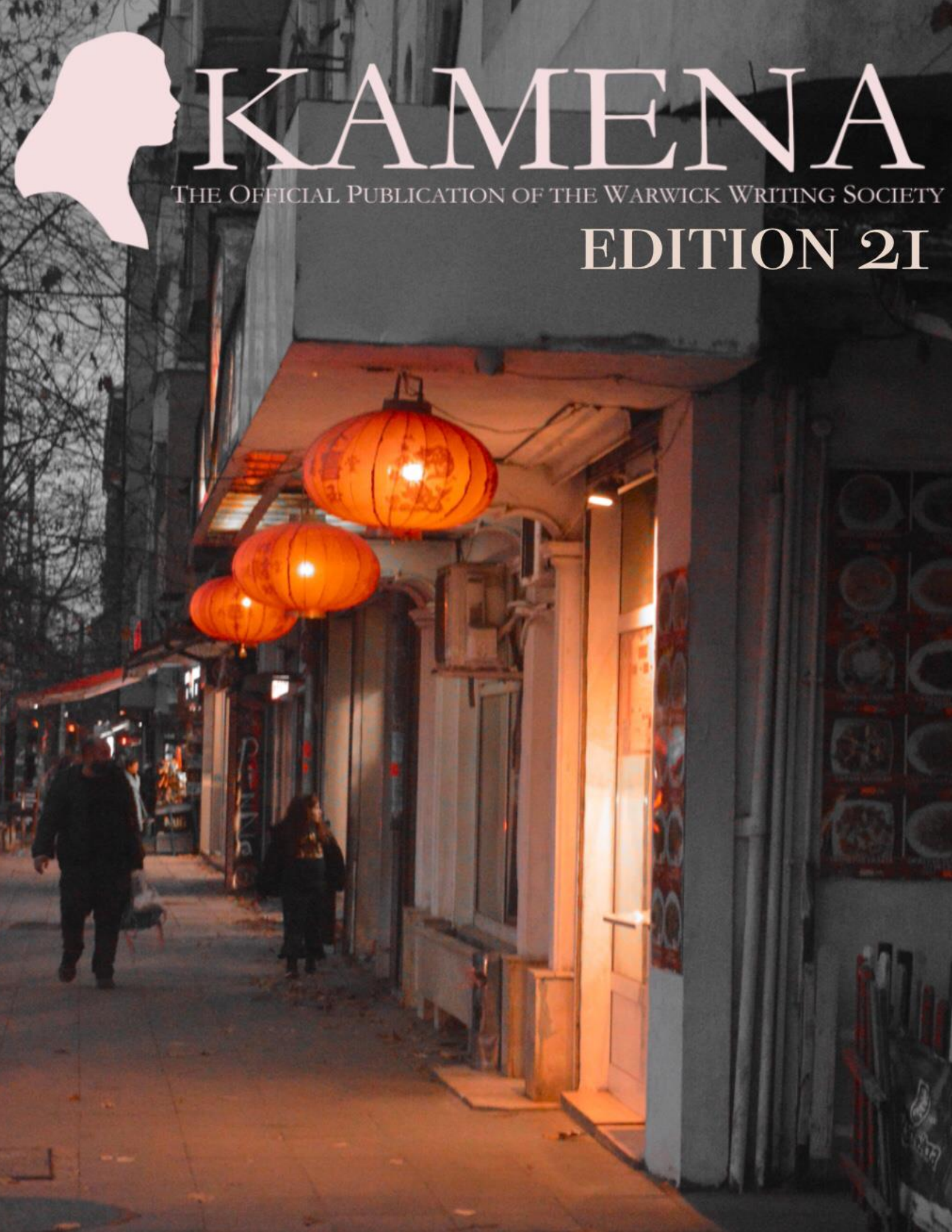




KAMENA

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE WARWICK WRITING SOCIETY

EDITION 21



Welcome to the 21st Edition of the Kamena
Magazine!

We hope you will enjoy our first edition after the summer break! We received many great submissions for this edition with a wide topic range. There is something for fiction and non-fiction lovers alike. We also received a photography submission which serves as a nice break in the middle.

We hope you enjoy the work of these amazing artists! If you're interested in submitting to future editions, check out our website and our various social medias:
<https://kamenamagazine.com>

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Fluffy
By Sarah Hutter

Fluffy as the first second the eyes open in the morning.
Fluffy as the warm sunshine peeking through the curtains.
Fluffy as the feeling of warm tea streaming through the body.
Fluffy as the fabric of the sweater while watching out of the winter window.
Fluffy as the pleasant solitude while breathing the cold fresh air.
Fluffy as the autumn forest while walking slowly up the little hill.
Fluffy as the leaves crunching when stepping on them.
Fluffy as the nearly bare trees singing songs with the cool wind passing smoothly through them.
Fluffy as the depthless calmness while sitting on the bench.
Fluffy as the infinite horizon gazing into the lands.
Fluffy as the serene silence delighting you.
Fluffy as the never-ending landscape swallowing you.
Fluffy as the non-existing concerns resulting in this peace of mind.

Writer's Note:

Sarah studies English Literature and is an exchange student from Switzerland. This poem was inspired by Giacomo Leopardi's *L'infinito*. She wrote it during the pandemic, during which she enjoyed long walks above the mountain village where she lived, and 'fluffy' was her favourite word in English.

With two parents as angels, what else could you be?

By Aleeza Maqsood

Know that you're my absolute light. An incredibly blessed and glowing person who brightens up the life of anyone lucky enough to share friendship with you. You overflow with compassion, attentiveness, empathy and vivacity. You walk through life leaving behind a trail of your sunshine. The charisma which beams from your little body is literally magnetic, and the air of warmth following you is my biggest comfort. Your spirit is sunlight. Your heart is gold. And despite darkness and hardship, your presence never dims nor tarnishes. Like a wholesome flame, you're a powerhouse. Burning so full of life which no bitter, hateful gust could extinguish.

I doubt brilliance is strictly a force of fortune or nature, hence why I have never been so certain that a person is being watched and guided by their many angels.

Happy birthday to the girl you were, the friend I have and the woman I see in you. Each of them fills me with love and pride.

Writer's Note:

Written by Aleeza Maqsood, a second-year English Literature student, this poem is wholly inspired by my best friend. As a dedication to her twentieth birthday, I have always believed the best present is the touch and feel of words.

A Pomegranate Tree, Tetanus and A Package of Shit - Things I May or May Not Miss From a
Bygone Time

By Dabao Jia

I often find myself better able to relate to boomers than people of my own age and generation. I find that a lot of them don't expect it, but they warm to it soon enough. It's strange in a way. I often wind up relating to people my age a lot less than the boomers.

I wasn't born here. I was born in the glorious lands of the People's Republic, in a less than well developed province. It wasn't rural, it was a small city. Although, it was small by Chinese standards, which meant that it was still a city of about one and a half million people, and far larger than most cities in the UK.

I left for Britain when I was 8 in 2007, due to the one child policy as my mother was pregnant with my younger brother. I still remember a fair portion of my life back then in the before days.

We lived in a large house with my grandmother and my aunt. It was a homely place with few luxuries. It was in many ways one of those stereotypical old Chinese houses with a large concrete courtyard in the centre of the house, the kind you'd envision a Kung Fu master practising in. The courtyard always welcomed me when I came home from school with its pomegranate tree which sometimes bore fruit.

It was always hard to find the words to describe it. On one hand, we had no flushing toilet. We used to just shit on a load of newspaper on the "toilet" floor, roll that up with a shovel, walk our shit package out of the front door, and dump it on the garbage pile, which was just below the window of my primary school. This was usually fine, so long as you weren't shitting liquid due to diarrhoea. I didn't enjoy shitting on newspapers, but 7 year old me very much did enjoy throwing literal shit at his primary school.

We also had no central heating. We heated the house and cooked our food on a little coal stove, which was never enough, but somehow our bodies adapted to it. I didn't realise this, along with how much I'd adapted out of it during my time in Britain until I went back there one winter as a teenager and started showing symptoms of hypothermia. This never happened in the years before when I was a child.

Life was undoubtedly harsh. The teachers used to smack us with a cane. We used to get yelled at a lot about how if we cut ourselves we'd die of tetanus and if we get scratched by a dog we'd die of rabies. But it was also idyllic in a way. We used to get 3 hours off in the middle of the day from school to walk home and take a long nap. We always had fresh food from the local markets which my grandmother cooked for us. We did plenty of fun things that would have health and safety up in arms today. We played a lot with firecrackers and other small explosives. I remember once managing to detonate a cigarette lighter during the lunch break in year 2, which I somehow escaped uninjured.

When I hear boomers talk about how kids and the young-uns these days are all softies, I think they're kind of right. Although, I don't think it's necessarily a bad thing. Our generation are a bunch of softies because the world has changed. The world has moved on, for better and worse. Those are begone times and begone places. My childhood home and school have now been demolished, and new buildings built on top, probably with working toilets this

time. Most of the family have moved away, moved on, and grown into different people. Both for me and the boomers, the world will never be what it once was. There is no going back for any of us. There never was any going back.

As much as my living situation is undeniably better now, I have the wonders of central heating, a working toilet and I'm no longer afraid of disease and death; I still miss that place. I still miss that courtyard with a pomegranate tree. I still get nostalgic about the Chinese food markets everytime I walk past Coventry market and smell that grimey raw meat and vegetable smell. I can see how boomers want to go back to the "good" old days. I do too in many ways. I don't understand why the past has such a pull on us. I don't understand why I still miss that place despite it being objectively, and almost literally, a shithole.

Maybe it's because we just want to go back to something that was familiar to us, even though it was a world with a lot more strife and hardship. But, for all that strife and hardship, it was our home. It might have been a shithole, but it was our shithole. It was our strife and it was our hardship, and we owned it. This world, this new world even, doesn't feel like our own. It feels a little alien.

Maybe it's also why the boomers are often a lot less bothered about things like climate change. We've seen a harsher world. We've survived it then, and we feel that whatever comes our way, we will still survive and find a way. I have no idea of course what the actual future holds, and whether we actually have what it takes to survive it.

Either way, time marches on. My time in China was pre-digital, so I have no photos left of that place. I have some very much treasured video tapes from when I went back as a teenager. But, other than that, all I have are my memories. As I spend more time at university filling my mind with knowledge, I seem to have less and less spaces for those memories. They're fading now. So, I will keep reminiscing with the random boomers I run into on the train, at the hairdressers, and anywhere where they're willing to talk. We'll muse about the old world that we used to know, whilst I try to find solace in this new world, and they prepare to march onwards to the next world.

change. My Perspective;

By Archie Baughan

words have so much meaning
people say,
but I fail to see what makes them think that
way. Before I could speak
I could
hear. Lies, a useless tale,
a whisper of weakness, a sliver of
steel. Armour is what it feels like,
protecting,
a wall that refuses to let me be affected by
words. Phrases and sentences
meant to hurt don't land,
I'm invulnerable,
like my guardian angel submerged my brain in the River
Styx. And stones and swords may hurt,
but words do not seem to do damage
to myself or
others. Say I'm insane,
for not feeling the power of words,
for listening to speeches and conversations
and not getting
emotional. Processing is something I struggle with,
it's true,
and it's so cold and alien to not be impacted
by anything that people claim that blood itself is just as important
as. It would seem,
support is not something that comes too often
without you having the nerve and realisation to ask for
help. Care and understanding
is what is promised,
but it's so easy and yet so hard to find,
so easy and still so hard to give

me. I'm a simple soul,
with no wide vocabulary
nor reasons to develop

one. Two, three, a million times,
you've tried to help with words of your own,
and something made them

special. Gifted, weird,
all words I've been called, but you,
you made them mean something,
like Prometheus making man from clay,
you gifted the words with a

fire. Burning bright,
brighter than any other 'help' I've had,
you were the guiding

torch. Lighting up the metaphorical night, that was you,
because standing with you, talking with you, being with you,
your words made me finally

see. Words can connect, and tear walls

down. Under memories there lie scars,
that words have created
but have the power to heal;
far more than medicine,
even with a skilled hand and

eye. See how we feel, how we act, how we live,
is underwritten
by the words that we consider
and hear and see
and give and take
and yell and

say. A little fact about words;
they have the power to

change. My perspective;

Writer's Note:

Each stanza works whether you include the first word - the last word of the previous sentence - or not.

Clangers Basically

By *Albert Campling*

The astra tasted of smoke and hot copper even two leagues out from Brairback.

The skiff bucked in the drifter's grey-touched slipstream like an animal twitching in its sleep. Ceirreen adjusted his grip on the rudder without taking his gaze of the distant glimmer of the port, a tighter knot of yellow sparks glowing through the darkness of Brairback's wooded slopes. Occasionally the coloured light of a firework burst somewhere above the evergreens and another wisp of smoke was woven into the drifter's trail. The festival wasn't due to start for another few hours, officially, but the denizens of Brairback seemed unable to resist the allure of pyrotechnics.

A thin breeze caused the glyphbands to flap at the sides of the hull as the symbol-inked loops of paper steadily turned, the craftsmanship of a scrivener in Oberwrasse on paper from a mill on the back of Sthollgei. The *Meijadeé* floated between the two yawning voids of below and above, stars spinning in their slow dance all around. For a moment, in the creaking of the hull and the long exhale of the astral wind, Ceirreen felt a pang of estrangement from the past. That craftsman was dead now, the art of their careful looping calligraphy unfamiliar to all but historians and collectors. The script was curious to those he took *Meijadeé* to for repairs where once they had remarked on the artistry of the lines.

Ceirreen watched the lights of Brairback ahead. He had been ferrying for too long.

Long, curved limbs the same colour of the darkness uncurled from the ink one after another and pushed at the astra before vanishing back into the paper.

"Master ferryman?"

His passenger's voice raised him from his melancholy. "Yes, ma'am?"

She turned slowly around to face him, the worn chitin of her snout reflecting the light of a star burning to the port side. Compound eyes watched him carefully and mandibles clacked quietly as she considered something hidden to him.

"How long have you spent out here?"

Ceirreen nodded the bulb of his head, half to himself, as he thought. The thin glasswork hummed where it rubbed his cloak.

"Sixty years odd," he said eventually. "Enough trips to fill the pages of ten thousand mundane little epics."

The old woman turned on the bench slowly, fingers gripping the wood as though she were afraid of falling into the endless void above, or the equally endless void below.

“Are you still afraid?”

Ceirreen adjusted the earthy green wool of his coat. If he had eyes, he would have blinked, two or three times, and his brows would have furrowed in confusion. “Of what?”

The passenger peered over the edge of the skiff, hesitation writ all over her rounded body. “Of falling,” she said.

“Yes,” replied Ceirreen, and was shocked by how little thought he put into the response.

“Then how do you come out here, time after time, for all those years?” Her compound eyes reflected the dim, cold light of a deepstar far below.

“Fear’s not worth as much as it thinks it does,” he said. “Takes a while to learn that, is all.”

“I’m still afraid,” the passenger said quietly, almost too quietly to hear. “I shouldn’t be, but I am.”

Ceirreen had a feeling she wasn’t just talking about the astra.

The *Meijadeé* crossed the rest of the way filled with nothing but the rhythmic swish of the ink-summoned tentacles and the rattle of the clockwork engine, the empty whistling of the astra undercutting it all with the steady threat of the emptiness.

Brairback *thrummed*.

As he pulled up to the port Ceirreen slowed the motion of the glyphbands to a crawl, the arms reducing to a fraction of their size as the *Meijadeé* squeezed through the brimming traffic near the docks. All around craft from as many drifters as he could name and some he couldn’t docked. Below him a huge ship, long and covered in railed walkways, huge horizontal paddlewheels protruding far out from the sides, groaned into place as docking chains were flung out like spiderwebs to hold it steady even as a gangway swung down from the bow, workers below hurrying to secure it down. Passengers waved from the sides at anyone and everyone, coloured handkerchiefs held in a multitude of pincers, hands, claws and manipulators. Ceirreen’s attention was abruptly snapped back to his own craft as a larger boat cut in front of him, propellers whirring and thumping at the astra. With a brief nod of apology to the passenger Ceirreen sent a stream of obscenities the way of the captain of the ship, insulting both their vessel, their crew, their skill as captain and, for good measure, their mother.

The passenger clung to the bench, cowering a little as if in anticipation of a collision. Ceirreen offered them a general gesture of reassurance.

“We’re close now,” he said, eyeing a close spot on the dock and sending the glyphbands spinning at maximum throttle in one last push before coasting straight between the vessels either side, the arms pushing against the astra at the perfect moment to bring them to a stop, the prow of the *Meijadeé* butting the wood of the dock with a soft *thump*.

Ceirreen hopped down from his perch at the stern and pushed past the passenger with a brief apology as he grabbed the coiled rope off the bow line and hopped onto the dock, feet meeting solid ground as he fastened the skiff to the mooring post. He crouched, offering a thin hand to the passenger. She stood unsteadily and Ceirreen stepped back down to help her up.

Once they were both standing on the dock, Ceirreen having finally argued down the price for mooring his boat with an official and the passenger staring up at the fireworks bursting overhead, he turned to her.

“You know Brairback?”

“Not at all,” she replied, hands shifting on her walking stick. “Not at all.” She laughed softly, eyes running up the sheer sides of the drifter, the city sprawling before them.

Ceirreen pulled the collar of his coat into shape and offered the passenger his arm.

She took it, chitin on copper. Her shawl fluttered in the wind, the chequered pattern rippling.

“The view will be good from the ridge,” he said. “It’s quieter up there. And you get a beautiful view of the city on the tram ride up.”

“You really don’t have to see me up,” the passenger said politely.

“No fret,” said Ceirreen, starting at a steady walk down the dock. “I was planning on seeing the city anyhow.”

The passenger seemed relieved.

Slowly, steadily, the city swallowed them into the shifting of its crowds.

They stuck to the edges of the streets, the crowds consisting of the perfect combination of milling tourists watching the sky, hurried locals pushing through them to see to the last preparations before the festival and the usual efficient chaos of dockworkers loading and unloading and tying up and setting loose and...

The main street up into the city was wide and winding, worming left and right as it climbed the sloped back of the drifter. The houses were tall and narrow, many old enough to have longer memories than archives, some new and

clawing for the sky, steel and wood ligaments stretching. Brick and stone and wood and coloured glass... the passenger seemed both to want to see it all and focus on every tiny detail, every little miracle the city had to offer. The air was thick with the smell of street food and dust and the tang of firework smoke, like the electric smell before a storm. The city was living in recurring fractals tonight, each person taking part in a dance they decided their own part of.

He kept a close watch on the passenger, occasionally pulling her aside as a pedestrian pushed past. Beaked and feathered people striding on many thin legs beneath dark, rough-woven cloaks pulled close by tentacles, a group of tall women bearing verdigris and moss on the copper of their limbs, lank tendrils of lichen hanging over the metal of their impassive faces. Others like him, light bulbs glowing bright in every shade from crystal white to gold.

At a break in the crowd he gestured for the passenger to cross the busy road, moving into the lull behind a vehicle carrying a load of vegetables uphill, engine puffing heavily at the steep slope. He joined the queue for the tram, or rather stood at the edge of the throng that had formed around the tramstop.

Ceirreen always felt out of place in cities. He had grown too accustomed to the vacant gaze of the astra and the eyes of the people around him seemed to press whenever he got to port. He liked the emptiness, just him and his passengers and, when they would talk, the kind of conversation that could only be borne out of the intimate connection of shared isolation. But here... this was another kind of isolation, in the crowd. Seen but unperceived. Too much noise to be heard.

He offered a shrug and a gesture at the crowds to the passenger. She seemed frailer out here. Her snout drooped, mandibles worrying at each other.

Before long the tram arrived and the crowd piled in but Ceirreen held back, waiting for the next.

It was a touch quieter as they waited.

“Never seen such crowds,” said Ceirreen generally. “Seems the festival draws more people every year.”

“I wouldn’t know,” said the passenger. “I’ve never been.” Her snout drooped further.

“Well, you have now,” said Ceirreen, feeling that his words were a little hollow, failing to touch some shape just below the surface.

“Yes,” said the passenger, and she let go of his arm to draw her shawl closer about herself.

The tram ride up was quiet. The rattling of the car matched some unsettled feeling between the two.

The city passed by, the fireworks ramping up in intensity against the blackness of space.

The passenger spoke.

“She always wanted to go here.”

The tram rattled on, festival-goes swaying from the handrails as they watched and talked and buzzed with anticipation.

“I promised her that we would go. See the fireworks.”

Ceirreen spoke, hesitantly. “Who did you promise?”

The passenger breathed slowly, mandibles clicking. “Too late now.”

The light in Ceirreen’s head dimmed.

“I’m sorry,” he said. If there was something better he could have said it escaped him.

Her mandibles shook as she exhaled. “It’s all right.”

Outside the windows the alleys between houses revealed scenes of celebration, streamers fluttering in the wind, parades of all kinds of wondrous people, dances seen frozen in a single moment before the tram moved on, all muted by the glass.

“She would have loved meeting you.”

They had secured a seat on a bench overlooking the city below, some distance below Brairback’s peak. The rest of the crowds who had come up here had gone for the absolute zenith of the drifter, leaving them to relative quiet.

It was the first time she had spoken since the tram.

“Kind of you to say,” said Ceirreen. There was a chill up here and he had given the passenger his coat. He didn’t mind.

“Oh, she loved the idea of owning a boat. Any kind of boat, really,” said the passenger, the fluttering lights of the fireworks shining on her carapace. “She loved the astra. Just... the idea of it, that you could just keep going, and going, and going... she got a little rowboat, would bob about while I watched from the shore. Too scared of falling, I was.” She laughed weakly. “She’d always come back, though. Didn’t like leaving me alone. We’d have a picnic, watch for boats in the distance.

“But she’s not coming back. She’s gone off into the distance and I can’t follow.”

Ceirreen rested a hand on the passenger’s shoulder. “I’ll remember her,” he said. “I’ll remember you.”

“That’s all we can really do, isn’t it?” said the passenger. “Become stories that we tell each other.”

“Worse things to be,” said Ceirreen. “And for now...” he gestured before him.

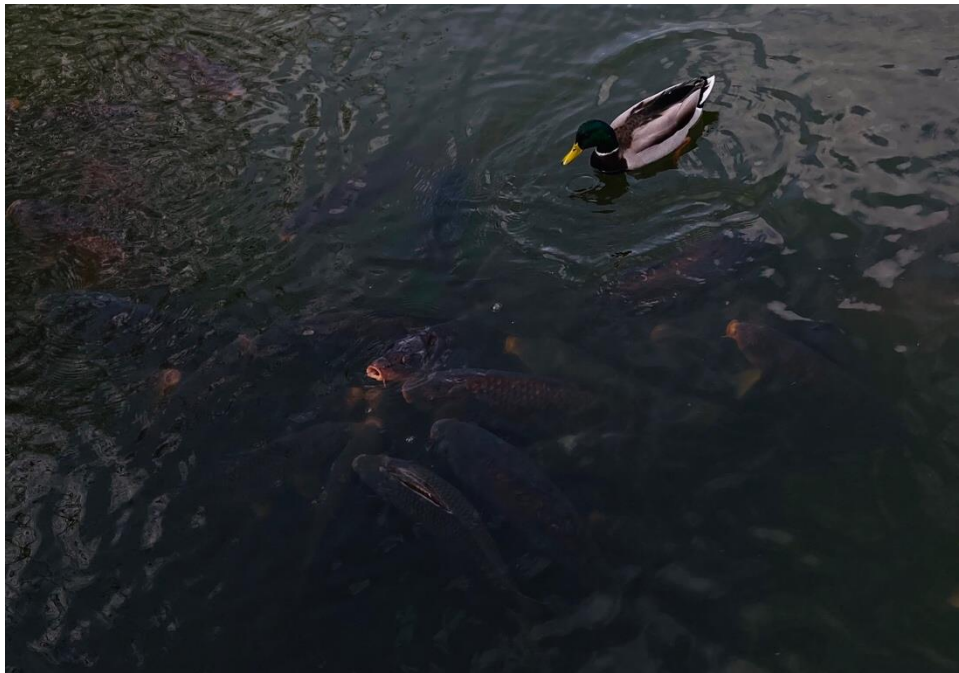
The lights bloomed over Brairback and below, in the city, people lived, and below even that the drifter swam, drawn on by the endless promise of the void. Ancient tentacles reached down, down to where the astra was thick and viscous, and pushed. Somewhere in the immensity of its mind the drifter recognised the commotion above, and remembered.

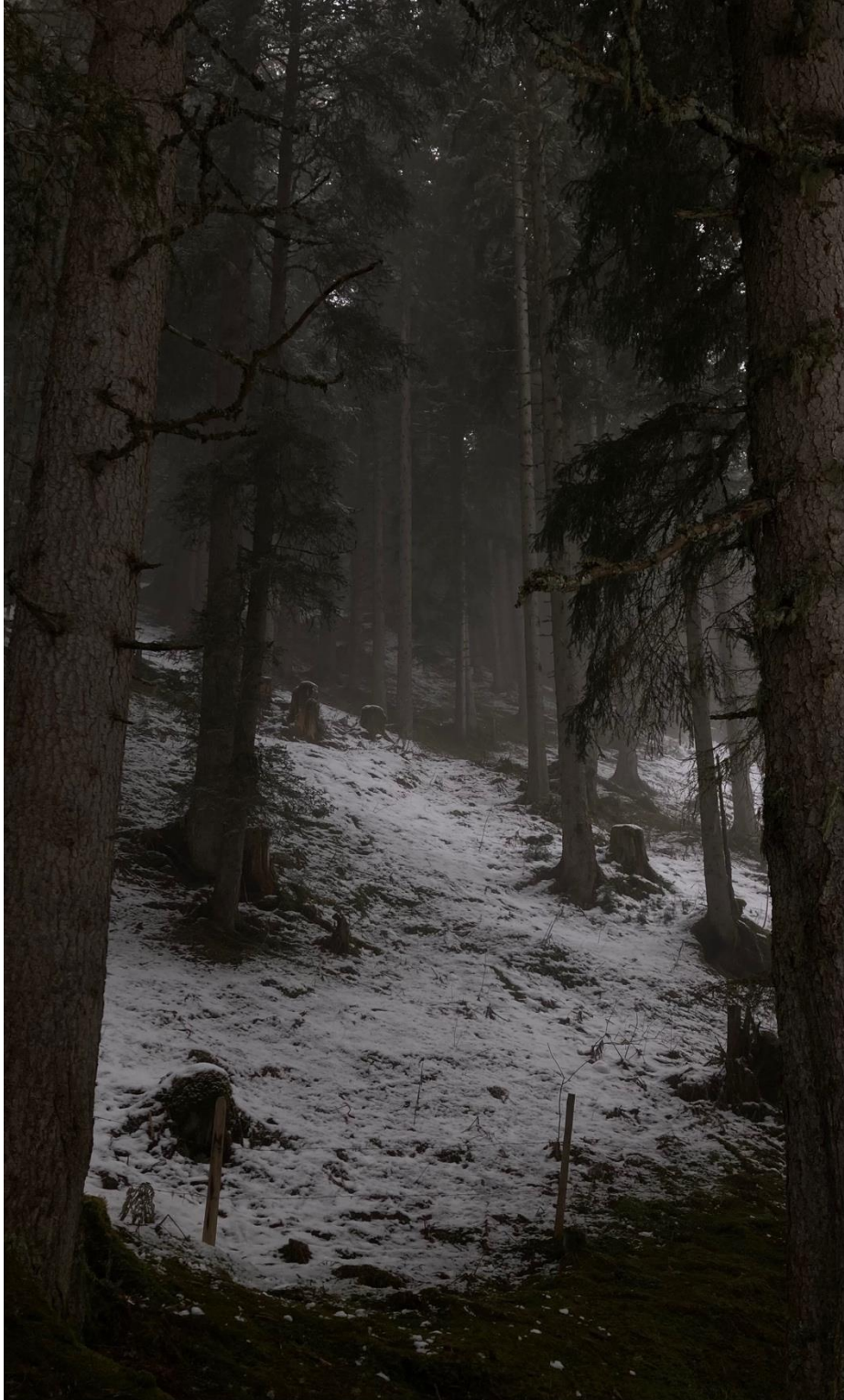
Writer’s Note:

This is a piece based on *Clangers*. Also *Samorost*. If you want greater context, watch *Clangers*. Also play *Samorost*.

Switzerland

by Fran Runnacles







Silvio Y Valeria

By Adrian Jimenez

What Silvio and Valeria most wanted was for the other to be happy, even if that happiness never develops in relationships. They've been looking, searching for that ideal partner for a long time, and with every failure, every heartbreak, every emotional crisis, they've always been there for each other.

Until Silvio left.

He was studying abroad in Germany, pursuing his dreams and enriching his knowledge with the culture of another country. Six months passed without the two seeing each other, and it was recently that Silvio returned and could visit his old friend at her apartment. Spring had just hit, after months of cold, for the first time the fresh heat that came with the breeze could flow through their hair.

They sat next to each other at the balcony as they talked.

"How are things with Marco?" Silvio asked her after a pause in the conversation.

He knew things weren't great with Valeria's recent boyfriend, and granted, Silvio didn't really like Marco, he was very... confrontational. But he still wanted him to be the person who made her happy, which is why it brought him sadness to see the look on her face.

"We broke up." The wind blew across her face. "After so many years, we just didn't love each other in the same way we used to..." She was looking at the ground, avoiding eye contact with him.

Silvio stayed lost in thought. "Okay, but it's for the better... right?"

Valeria said nothing, instead she stayed quiet while looking out the balcony with the life draining from her eyes. She tried to say something but the knot in her throat prevented her as gems of water formed in her eyes. He puts a hand in her shoulder to try and comfort her.

"Valeria..."

"Sorry, I didn't want you to see me like this."

"You shouldn't apologize for showing emotion." He's made that mistake before.

Valeria got closer and hugged him. "Ever since Marcos left..." She started to let the tears fall. "It's just been so hard... because no matter what I do... I'm just not enough for anybody..."

"You've always been enough."

But just saying it wasn't enough. It has never been enough.

“Valeria... you remember when we first met a year ago? When we were both in a new area, still unfamiliar with everything?”

“Yes...”

“I was so depressed then...I tried so hard to make friends, but I felt like I was useless for everybody. But I met you, and for some reason, you were the first person who genuinely wanted to be my friend.” He had never confessed this to her before, he was afraid she would be turned away from him if she knew how much she helped him. The knot in his throat was just as strong as hers. “You are my light Valeria... even if that’s cheesy, just don’t forget it.”

When Silvio looked in her eyes again, he saw the same gems falling from her eyes, but there was something else in her face: a smile.

The two talked and drank a while longer until they eventually had to say goodbye. Valeria hugged Silvio tightly.

“You better not go to France or wherever again.” She said playfully as Silvio felt that same light emanating from her that he first felt when meeting her for the first time. It was comforting, soothing, it made him feel like nothing else mattered.

Even after closing the door to her apartment and waiting for the elevator to arrive, Silvio’s thoughts were still consumed by her. Her smile, her tears, her light. The more he thought about her the more he could feel his heart beat faster.

“Uh oh.” He says as the elevator doors open.

Over the next few weeks, Silvio would find himself thinking about Valeria more than usual. In the year he had known her, she had not invaded his thoughts so much. The only thing he wanted to do was see her in every moment of every day, even if schoolwork and the distance between them often prevented this.

Summer came and with it, another record-breaking heatwave. But it also meant vacation, which gave Silvio the opportunity to see her more often. They had decided to meet for dinner together to take advantage of the air conditioning. Silvio had gotten there early as he often does and waited in the heat of the night as he felt a force throwing itself over him, almost toppling him over.

“I saw you in the distance and ran as fast as I could.” Valeria said as she hugged him.

Silvio had chosen a new place that had opened up not far from their university, it was chillier than they expected but the music was relaxing, and it felt fancy. In the time he spent with her, Silvio felt so loved and appreciated. She would listen to him, laugh with him, drink with him. For an hour and a half, they talked about anxieties with the upcoming school year, the films they had been seeing lately and eventually, relationships. Silvio still had no luck meeting anybody he felt a genuine connection with, for a variety of reasons.

“Okay, but enough about me.” Silvio said. “What about you, have you met anyone interesting lately?”

Valeria smiled and avoided his eyesight for a moment.

“Well... I've been talking a lot to Victor lately.”

“Oh yeah, I remember him.” Silvio was vaguely aware of Victor. He maybe saw him like once or twice, he got the impression Victor didn't like him all that much. Never answering his questions or wanting to chat at all. “He seemed like a nice guy.” Silvio noted.

“Yeah, things between the two of us has actually escalated a bit in the past two weeks.” Silvio started to disassociate. “We're not official or anything yet but... I don't know... he's pretty much everything I look for in a relationship.”

Silvio took a moment to answer as he was intensely staring at the wine glass in his hands, seeing it wave back and forth and lightly spill in his hand. He still wasn't completely used to the smell of alcohol and how it reeked.

“Silvio?”

“Yeah, I'm fine.” He was not. “So, what's so great about this guy?”

“He gives me love, attention, cuddles.” She had a smile plastered across her face. “Honestly, he might even be a candidate for the man I wanna marry.”

“Isn't marriage a little far off?”

“I mean yeah, but what do you want me to do Silvio, I can't control how I feel.”

Silvio couldn't control how he felt either. But he knew this situation was inevitable. There were surely more people out there that could make Valeria happier than he could. If she trusted him then Victor was surely a good option, even if Silvio didn't fully understand. For a moment he imagined them together, with Valeria smiling from corner to corner, and to him, that's all that mattered. But there was still a feeling of heartache inside.

They kept talking for a few hours after that, but Silvio kept dissociating and had to force a smile wherever he could. He wanted to spend more time with her, but he knew that it might be better to just go home. When they both left, they nearly had a heat stroke from the outside that served as the perfect excuse for Silvio to call it a night early. He would make sure to see her again soon, but for now, he needed time for himself.

Autumn came, and with it, college.

To celebrate surviving the first week of classes, the two went clubbing for this first time in a year with some of their mutual friends. This includes Victor.

The queue for drinks was massive at the first bar Silvio stopped in with one of his friends, 45 minutes later he finally had a drink in his hands only to look across the packed room to see Valeria standing in a corner. He started walking towards her only for his vision to slowly expand in the sea of people to see Victor standing over her. She had her arms around him, they danced slowly, unlike the rest of the room. Silvio stared at them, he didn't know if he was happy or not. He should be. He should feel nothing but joy on seeing his friend find someone. But as he stared, he put his hand up to his eyes and when he looked at it, it had tears.

“Oh.”

He didn't have the right to feel the way he does. Him and Valeria never had anything like that. Yet still those feelings persisted, and still his heart seized to exist when he saw Valeria and Victor touch lips for the first time. Every breath he took hurt, every sigh cut blood. Silvio had become a shell.

The snow of winter had started to fall as exam season began. This would be the last semester the two would spend together. After this was graduation, which meant they would likely go their separate ways. Silvio was feeling unbearable melancholy.

Just before the final week of exams, the two took a walk around campus with puffy coats and fluffy scarfs to talk one last time. He loved conversing with her, even though he knew she would never know how he feels. Even though he'll never be with her. Even though soon things will change.

"How are things with Victor?" He asked as Valeria saddened.

"It didn't work out." Silvio hated hearing her like that. "I learned that that he was with another woman. Asshole."

Silvio didn't know how to respond. "So, you're not with him?"

"I'm not going to be with someone who makes me feel like I'm not enough. You taught me that."

He felt a drastic change inside of him. Maybe this would be this could be the opportunity to finally tell her how he feels, for her to reject him, and him to go on with his life. But he felt like he couldn't do that to her after what she'd gone through. Is it better to stay quiet or get it out his chest?

The conversation went on as the more he talked with her the more he realized how he felt. How his heart ran. How he felt nothing but happiness.

He loved her. He loved her more than anything.

"Well, I got class." She said as they came to a stop. "I'll see you later Silvio." She hugged him and began to walk away as she started to disappear into the snow and the ice inside Silvio's heart grew colder.

"Valeria, wait!" He yelled out and ran after her.

"What's wrong?"

"Valeria..." His heart felt like it was beating out of his chest. "I love you."

"Yeah, I love you too."

"No, Valeria... I'm... in love with you."

Her eyes widened.

"Silvio..." Her throat was frozen as she starts to chuckle. "You know what I'm going to say, right?"

He starts to chuckle with her. “Of course.” He feels as Valeria puts her hand to his cheek.

“Silvio... you’re my best friend.” He had tears in his eyes. “I have so much trust and love for you. I love you...” She took a moment to collect her thoughts. “But not like that...”

Weirdly enough, a sense of relief washed over him. Hearing those words gave him closure. He finally had an answer even if his heart was still broken.

“Thank you for being my friend Valeria.” He says in between tears.

She removes her hand from his face and begins to walk in the opposite direction as Silvio does the same. Her heart was racing from knowing her friend felt that way, the person that was there for her when it most mattered, the person who she trusts more than anyone.

She cared about him deeply.

“Silvio!” She yells out as Silvio turns back towards her just in time for her to throw herself at him and have her lips meet his. It lasted for just a moment, but it was the most comfortable and safe either of them felt in a long time.

They separate.

“I love you, Valeria.”

“I love you Silvio, you’re my best friend.”

By Arty Smolinski Smolinska

At night, I dream of a person I have never met.
They have no face, nor name
but I know them as I know myself.
They have no story -
A blank sheet labelled 'ambitions'
and no goals of their own.
No purpose.
(A purposeless person with a purposeless life)

Their laugh is like wind chimes,
or maybe like sparklers in autumn
or the sound of TV static
on warm summer evenings.
Truthfully, I have no memory of them.
Thoughts of them are soaked in sepia,
overexposed
and covered in roses.

Sometimes I feel as though I am chasing a ghost;
the imprint of someone
left behind in tattered sweaters
and swaying swing sets.
Even then, ghosts have pasts.
They do not.

I have not dreamt of them when I have been warm.
It is the nights when I am cold
that conversations with them resurface.
After family gatherings full of Jane Does,
or meetings with familiar strangers,
ice spreads in the cavity where my heart used to be.
Hollowed.

I dream of star-crossed lovers
and secrets dipped in silver;
I dream of poets
and their senseless ballads.

When I close my eyes, I see a cottage on a hill
or an unruly apartment in a nowhere city
or a brightly coloured house.
It is where they reside,
a home of their own making,
one that cannot be travelled to.

When I close my eyes, I see portraits.
I see their face in every one.
But I don't. But I do.
They look like you.
(They look like my thought of you).

At night, I dream of a person I have never met.
At dawn, these dreams slip away
into the tucked corners of my pillows
until I am ready to dream again.

Writer's Note:

Arty (he/him) is pretty much just some guy. He likes sci-fi and fantasy. This is the first poem he had written for himself, outside of a school-related project or contest. He never really liked writing poetry until he was hit by the urge to write one last year in September. There wasn't one clear inspiration for this poem. There don't tend to be, with his poems, as he finds they're usually born of feelings more than anything. He had written this poem during a state of melancholy. Only a month later, he accepted that he was on the aromantic spectrum.

Emma

By *Émilie Van Ex (Coelmont)*

The tree was arching over me, hiding the sun and giving me a break from its insufferable heat. I was sweating and no matter how I tossed and turned, the hill under me laid uncomfortably. The grass was poking at my bare neck. The clouds were mocking me, never lingering between the sun and I. Always going around it. The wind disappeared and the tree went back to its static position. The sun pierced my eyes, and I swore. My heavy, scarred arm put itself on my eyes. Tears glide down my cheeks. It was summer, it was warm, and I was extremely depressed.

Annoyed at the sun and at the stupid grass, I pushed myself up. Stars appeared before my eyes but I ignored them. They would disappear, anyway. And I would faint if they did not. What difference would it make? I did not wait for the stars to fade and started to march down the hill. I kicked a rock out of my way. Stupid rock.

The further I walked, the more people I crossed. At the exit of the park, I turned right. I did not look where I was nor where I was heading to. The pavement was moving underneath my feet. Left foot up, right foot up, left foot up, ... The pavement stopped and white stripes marked the road before me. Other feet joined mine. Then they walked again. But my feet stayed. Other feet joined mine. I walked with them. But they were so fast. Were they in a hurry? Whither, though?

On the other side of the road stood an emptied shop. I recalled that it had been a bakery once. When did it close? Considering the amount of piled up dust, it must have been a while already. I glanced up, catching the reflection of the shop window. The girl staring back was dressed in oversized clothes which made her look even skinnier. Her cheeks were almost as hollow as her eyes. A swirl of smoke was rising from between her fingertips. When did I light this cigarette? I looked at my cigarette. Then I stared at the hand holding it. Was that bony thing even mine? I studied it intensely, and I stopped when I was too exhausted from focusing so much.

I was strolling through the centre of the city. Its cobblestones were covered with cigarette butts and white petals. Hm. A church must've been nearby. A cigarette butt slipped from my fingers. I did not remember smoking it, but I did notice the nauseating high I could nowadays only find in cigarettes and drugs.

My phone was buzzing. I let it buzz. It stopped. It buzzed again. I halted and took it out of my pocket to see who was calling me. Mum. I put my phone back. I walked again. The ground was sloping up. I trudged onto the old bridge. The blaring noise of crashing water enclosed me. I glanced to my left. The river seemed wider than I remembered it to be. I stopped and leaned over the green iron railing. That thought appeared again. I considered it for a mere minute or two, shrugged and walked towards the other end of the bridge, following the grey pavement. The horrible noise of the river shrunk until it was completely gone. It was finally quiet again.

White stripes on the ground. Green light. I wanted to cross but my legs did not move. Come on. The light turned red. I started crossing the avenue. The silent world exploded. The sound of cars passing and honking was faint but unmistakably real. The cars driving in front of me and behind me and next to me looked like coloured flashes of light. I kept walking, unaware of where the cars were and how they had to manoeuvre around me, and I not once stopped staring in front of me, into nothingness.

Ring-a-Ring-o'-Ring-Road

by Izzy Shackleton

The bridge besides my apartment,
Is anything but dark,
But in the night with nothing but,
The shadows on my arms,
And the lights of the Ring Road shining,
There are more tatters hiding,
But why should I fear such beasts,
When statistics are my shield
And a house key, my sword?
If forth comes a murderous feast,
I have an Armoury pointed forward.

But then, at the corner off the bridge,
A car prowls along besides me,
I flag it's engine in my mind to track it,
See some headlights,
And tag it.
Maybe they won't call me a faggot.
Maybe tonight I'll be fine.
The driver becomes a target,
Of my enemy-enemy mine,
Anxiety sent in overdrive.

I draw up my shield—
A coat to cover my legs—
So he won't see the curve,
Of a flat screwdriver head.
And if he makes a turn towards me,

Of malice or carnage or mistake,
Come to me and the pavement spawn,
And reap out all the rape.

The four wheels, legs, dive up besides,
And sidle up against the curb.
Are you stopping there for tonight, mate?
Or are you just disturbed.

And out comes a shade from the driver-side door.
A ghoul without a face.
Time to pick up the pace.
"Hey", he shouts after me,
"Not today," I whisper. "Not today."
He follows with eyes and teeth galore
And says;
"Have you got a cigarette, mate?"
I don't smoke; I'm not your mate.
"Not today," I simply say.
And he climbs in his car and drives away.

At least that's the narrow path I see,
Within the folds of anxiety,
Between the safety of the nothing as the car drives on past,
And the pushing and the shoving against pavement glass,
Tell me, girlie;
Where are you friends tonight?
Are they inside the doorway light?
Or have they left you on the pavestones,
Praying, just hoping,
To have made no more gravestones.

The car is gone into the middle distance,
And my keys jangle in with little resistance,

And inside I can breathe and throw out the sick,
Until the key falls from my hands, sweat-slick.

Writer's Note:

There's something difficult to define about listless anxiety - it is anxiety of the unknown, borne from maybes that have never occurred, and yet haunt us still. Scenarios that are statistics to some, and lived experience to others. The prospect of night is equally as complex. Night-time is a warm blanket that muffles all the doldrum of life; simultaneously, it holds an infinitesimal menagerie of dangers, both imagined and, sometimes, real. All this is to say, this piece was an attempt at capturing the constant weight Izzy hefts whenever she's outside and alone, especially come night-time.

Izzy is a Linguistics with Japanese finalist, study-abroad returnee, and should really seek to fix her sleep schedule (a task she finds Sisyphean in nature).

I always cry at weddings

By Erin Lewis

Gaudy, fluorescent lights flood the room and occasionally beam onto my face before swanning after its next target. I neck down the last drink on the table, whether it was mine or not was irrelevant- no one else was touching it. I can always regret it later. The drone of cheesy 90s pop music blasts across the dancefloor as the bride drunkenly sways around her friends. Beyond familial connections, the two of us have never really been close. It doesn't help that the groom is a complete stranger who spent most of the reception in the bathroom with the best man.

After getting up from my seat, strategically placed in the far-left corner of the room, strewn with confetti and half-finished meals, I drag my body over towards the bar. It's packed - an array of brazen grandmas and teenagers all ordering overpriced drinks off a man in a black t-shirt that's just a little bit too tight. He's too occupied to serve me so after a few moments of waiting impatiently I walk away. The temptation of my third watered-down Margherita tonight is not enough to convince me to keep wasting the hours away with these people. In the hierarchy containing us, I wonder how often my position is considered - it's been hours since someone asked me a question. Upon this revelation drifting to the forefronts of my mind I begin to wander towards the car park - pushing past relatives swaying drunkenly to the music or sitting around discussing their latest pitiful achievement with an undeserved air of superiority. Each person has plastered on their own smiles and affectations, keeping to the necessary scripts with an accuracy that I'm not fully able to mimic.

The hotel reception, located just off from the ballroom where the actual reception is in, is mostly empty except for the receptionist, the reverberations of the music and a stray overly passionate couple fumbling around, probably searching for a condom. Not wanting to appear like a voyeur I opt to leave and move towards the car park which was likely to be barren of any forms of life, merely ageing Honda's or Ford Focus's or electric cars that are just a bit too polished. Outside, a chill hangs in the night air causing me to yank at the edges of my pale H&M cardigan, dragging them across my chest in a futile but vaguely noble attempt to conserve the suffocating heat from inside. The adoption of this action is one I'm familiar with and possibly one of the only things I've ever been vaguely successful at doing. I scuff my heels against the tarmac - it will probably ruin the soles of the shoes but I'm not planning on wearing them again, so a few scuff marks don't really bother me. I pull a cigarette out of my purse and light it, longing for the tobacco to rush towards my lungs. At that moment smoke encases me and all the voices fade away.

"Can I have one?"

The baritone voice emerged from an outline of a man standing nearby on my right. He's too enshrouded by the darkness to make out any feasible details but soon after introducing himself I was bombarded by the pungent smell of his Dior cologne causing me to cough as I responded curtly.

"What?"

"I said can I have a cigarette? I normally have my own, but it seemed crass to bring them to an event like this. So are you going to give me one or not?"

I glare at him before reaching into my purse, and pull out the battered packet of Marlboro Reds before pulling one out and extending it towards him, leaving three in my packet. After he snatches the lighter from my hand he proceeds to take the cigarette with a deftness between his fingers. As he lights it and inhales, I drink in the features of him that I can pierce through the dark: the bend in his arm, the small ring of fire around his mouth, how he stands. His arm slowly drops down to his side.

"So... bride or groom?"

"Oh... bride."

"Cool. I'm here for the groom - went to school together but we haven't really seen each other for years. Was almost hoping he wouldn't invite me. Personally, I can't stand weddings. There's this sense that the future of this couple leans at them and all of us are forced to watch them sign it away as the wedding bells ring. It's like we're being made complicit - if they end up unhappy or dead or despondent then we were witnesses to it, we let them sign off on it and didn't object."

"Yeah, sure."

Is it socially acceptable to ask this guy if he's on drugs? It's probably the most logical reason why he's babbling at me like he's just discovered that the concept of marriage is bad and that it is of the utmost importance to tell some random person about this revelation. But where would the conversation go from there as it's likely that asking would make me look worse than I do already? It's easier to let him keep waxing on in some faux intellectual manner about this. It's a shallow topic to gravitate towards and bears no relevance to me. These thoughts snag in my mind and keep on running over and over. Like a stuck vinyl record the same disembodied few seconds of music ...small scales and chords are blasted again and again to the point of torment. A single tear escapes my eye, lands on my cigarette, and creates a small hissing sound.

"You alright?"

I realise that I hadn't been paying attention to him for a while, so he had probably moved on to rambling about something else - the Russian civil war or postmodern philosophy or something else equally as pretentious. To convince him I was still paying attention it would probably be wise to utter a response.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Uh ...I always cry at weddings."

"Oh okay."

He takes his final drag and drops the cigarette before stomping it out under his business-like shoes that I think cost more than everything I'm wearing.

"Well thanks for the smoke, and the delightful conversation. But I must head back inside - care to join me?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

I hesitate for a moment. His insufferable nature aside, the offer of an acquaintance is tempting but ultimately futile and crushed before it begins to infect me.

"Yeah I am. Probably going to head home anyway."

"Fine by me. Bye then."

He turns on his heels and leaves, strolling back to the reception causing me to return to my former state. I stand still for a while, taking in the previous conversation before beginning to walk through the car park. The rattle of my breath is the only thing that breaks the silence - quietly gaining momentum as I fixate on the middle distance. Tears bubble up, blurring the dark cars and occasional tree that lies ahead. Then there arises a faint rustling on the ground, causing me to briefly snap out of my daze and notice it in the weak moonlight. A wedding balloon, half-deflated and dirty.

Writer's Note:

Erin Lewis is a second-year English literature student who has an interest in exploring desire and dehumanisation in their work. This, loosely autobiographical, short story discusses isolation, mental health, love, friendship and the irritation that comes from spending time at big family events you don't really want to be at. They also wrote this story a while ago so if it's terrible, they promise they've written better things since then.

The Speaker

By Naxin

In the mountains
In the streams
The wind is too cold here
The moonlight scorching
It burns her skin
She stands up high
She holds up the javelin
With shaking hands

The pine trees piece the sky
Sharp against the fog
The eagle shrieks
To silence her words
She holds up the javelin
Against the scorching light

The wind is too cold
Yet the candles still bright
The moonlight cools
It turns into snow
She throws the javelin
It pieces the eagle's heart
The ice freeze her
As she fall into the streams

Her heart burns away
It burns her shackles
It melts the ice
She holds up the javelin
She aims it high

Writer's Note:

The author's name is Naxin, a MSc Statistics student. He just wrote this after listening to some songs, the meaning is up for interpretation. 😊

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