

First words, second drafts, new writers.

NOVSCRIPTER ISSUE #1



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01

INTRODUCTION

A brief introduction to our first issue.

03

BLACK LIGHT

A short story with vivid description and gripping characters in the science fiction genre.

By Kacey Devonald

05

THE LIVES OF INK AND FLESH

A poem which critiques contemporary technological use through stunning imagery.

By Eliza Cegielka

07

NOW EVERYONE KNOWS MY NAME

A thrilling horror story with excellent, gory imagery and a chilling narrative.

By Emilio Munoz-Saiz

CONTENTS

02

BARFIGHT

A short, observational poem with a sharp and captivating narrative.

By L. Ray Gitsham

04

ENDTIMES

An apocalyptic poem that grasps the reader through the 2nd person perspective.

By L. Ray Gitsham

06

LOOKING BACK AT THE END OF THE WORLD

A stimulating piece of dystopian fiction with compelling characters and a potent narrative.

By Kurt Harding



08

PORCELAIN PIECES

An intricately structured and beautifully written short story with an exceptionally written character perspective to present the damage of war.

By Millie Jones

10

THE ALTAR AND IT'S GODS

A haunting poem with a heart-wrenching protagonist and an internal conflict with religion.

By Lorna West Keogh

12

THE DREAM WEAVER

An inventive beginning to a fantasy novel with curious and brilliant characters.

By Elin Metcalf

14

TO ALL THE GIRLS WHO FINDS THEMSELVES BURDENS TO SOCIETY

A slice of life piece of writing that resonates with the experience of girlhood in a vulnerable but familiar way.

By Minh Anh Nguyen

09

SLEEP

A romantic sonnet with dreamy imagery and soothing pace; a classically soft poem.

By Joe Hedges

11

THE CHOSEN LIE

Global corruption, familial bonds and a sacrifice. The beginning of a brilliant dystopian novel.

By A. F. Migliaccio

13

THOUGHTS

A thoughtful and deeply relatable poem regarding the human psyche.

By Alison Ryan

INTRODUCTION

To the readers and to those who have submitted to our magazine,

Despite this being our first issue, the quality of the writing submitted is incredible. Creativity, passion, and flourishing skills can be seen in each submission, and I am sure that once you have read them you will see what I mean too. Some gorgeous poetry, gripping narratives and lively characters have been created and it is beautiful to see and even better to be able to share them with others.

Thank you for making this magazine possible. Without your support and submissions, this magazine would not be here. But I think it needs to be here. New, flourishing writers of all ages often do not have a platform to put their work out there to be seen, which is ultimately what many writers wish to achieve. This magazine, I hope, at the very least, gives those who have submitted a flavour of being seen. To have their work read. I hope these issues are useful to you all and that even more writers will continue to submit. I cannot wait to read more!

Enjoy reading!

Emily Hale

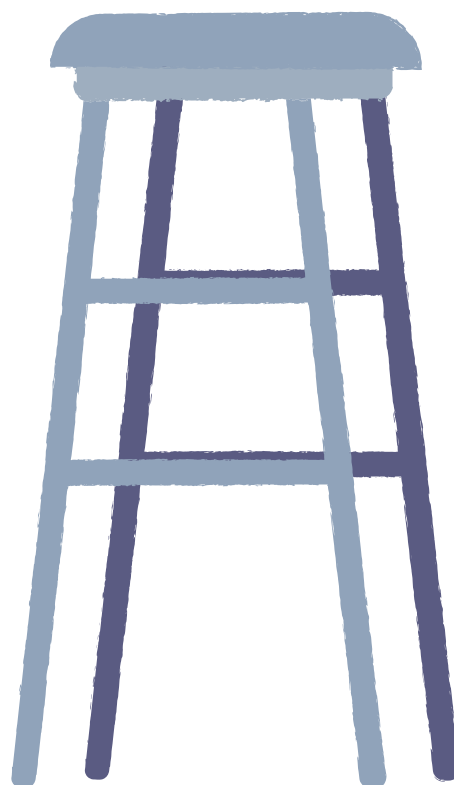


BAR FIGHT



before everyone
but after most left,
that lip which swelled with
all the shit it spat evening long
sprayed more blood—
from one little fistcut
over oak floors and chefwhites—
that I could've ever fathomed
lips could hold

By *L. Ray Gitsham*



BLACK LIGHT

The ground was grainy and soft. I remember it well. The dirt, I squeezed it in my fist until it bled through the gaps between my fingers. Its quiet wetness made its residue stick to my palm and stay with me for the whole day. I still feel its ghost now, though where I am is colder. It's a strange sort of cold: not the blistering winds in December that howl and bite your toes, but the subtle Autumn chill that rubs your shoulders until you don't even feel cold anymore. You just *are*.

There is no dirt beneath me anymore, but what feels like a thin layer of glass. Though the anxiety of it breaking lies heavily within me, I'm weightless when I pull myself off the floor and stand up. The air is still, and nothing moves in this room but thin, primary coloured strobe lights dancing above me like a cheap disco. They move with such intricate speed I'm momentarily overwhelmed. A voice interrupts once I think I've deciphered the pattern.

'Who are you?' it bellows. The voice is accentless. It sounds nothing like me or anybody I would know.

I attempt to answer - I want to answer - but there is no one in my throat. My head is alive, bulging with questions and personality, but there is a glass panel between it and the rest of me. I'd like to ask this strange voice to show itself and explain where I am, but it is no use.

There's a pain that isn't mine anymore. In my legs, my feet, my head. Somewhere in the back of my chest. I was running. That ground, squishy and uneven, I felt it beneath my feet – no, my shoes. They were black daps. I would tie and untie and retie the laces every couple of hours. They had to be laces because I hated velcro. The noise it made was so awful that just imagining it would make my eardrums and spine ricochet. Funny, I don't feel like that now. The bottom of my shoes had been flat; their original ridges deteriorated from how long and often I'd worn them. They weren't designed for running but that didn't stop me that day. I stomped on every inch of land in my path, kicked the dirt with all my might and pounced on puddles just to watch them cry.

BLACK LIGHT BY KACEY DEVONALD

Something has moved closer to me. Where the strobes briefly hit it, I see the outline of a figure - a person? - just a few feet in front of me. It speaks again.

‘Why are you here?’

I try to step back, but my back presses against a wall. I try to feel its texture and find that there is nothing stopping me, and yet I cannot move away. I do the only thing I can, and step forward.

The sun had been warm, but only briefly. It speckled between the hugging trees and illuminated parts of my skin, chicken pox of fire. I remember trying to push them away, dreading that big, glowing eye in the sky would surveil me any more. I think that was why I started running. Was that why I started running? No, it was the trees, or something in the breeze. There was something I couldn’t keep behind me.

I tripped on a log. It was huge, I don’t know how I’d missed it, and when it moved out of place from my weight, I watched worms slither and beetles scurry out from underneath. I shuffled away from it on my bum and cradled my knee to my chest, hot pain on my shin where the skin had scraped. I watched the ink rise to the surface, pin pricks on a memo pad, and drip down my leg. I wrapped my jumper around my wrist and scrubbed at it, leaving a faint smudge that made it look like a rash.

That’s when I felt the ground. That’s the moment I strangled it with my bare hands and dirtied my palms. It was dark, almost black, and then the sky had gotten dark, too. I could smell that the rain was coming before my face grew wet and my hair, loose around my neck, began to bubble like a spider’s web. I got up, and I ran again.

My throat is freed.

‘I’m here because I killed the forest,’ I tell it. My voice is not hoarse, nor confident or controlled. It is nothing, and it is everywhere.

It does not answer me, but I know my answer is wrong. There’s no anger, no screaming or locked doors, and the silence isn’t a punishment either. Quiet encouragement sits between it and I. The smell of the rain and the trees is pounding in my head, again, a distant pain I no longer own, yet it is howling for my attention. A desperation of my own invention. Then there is the smell of something else.

There had been a river at the bottom of a steep ditch. Raindrops splashed into it in a melodic dance, and I watched the current carry each drop to a place beneath the hovering trees. I picked a leaf up from the ground beside my feet, and when it was too thick and green to crumble in my hand, I threw it into the water and watched its journey to the unknown.



A strange urge to follow it stirred in my chest. It was as if not knowing where it was going to end up would plague me forever. I ran alongside it from above, squeezing between blackberry bushes and looking over their reaching stems on my tiptoes, desperate not to lose sight of the leaf. The rain began to come down heavier until my clothes were completely soaked through and I could hardly see through my eyelashes, but I just had to know what was at the end, that there *was* an end.

‘My name is Sam,’ I tell it, ‘And I’m not supposed to be here.’

‘Everyone who comes here is exactly where they are supposed to be,’ it answers.

‘Where *is* here?’

‘You already know.’

I don’t feel frustrated, and I think that I should. I think that I should be scared, and perhaps I am a little, but most of all I feel so light. I cannot get over how distant and weightless everything feels, as if I’m in a bubble travelling far from everything consequential. A glass bubble with strobe lighting, apparently. Is this a dream?

‘I’m supposed to be at home,’ I insist. ‘If I don’t wake up soon, my family will be cross.’

‘Why are you here?’ Again, it asks, and it’s so close to me now that I can’t see the lights past its hugeness, it’s no longer a figure that resembles any kind of person, it just *is*, and if it could breathe I would feel it against my forehead and through my hair. It washes over me that I’m not breathing either.

I had ended up at the bottom of a ledge. It was deeper than the stretch of the river, and layered with big, jagged rocks that the river flowed through and over. Before my eyes closed, I remember hearing the rain against the rocks, against the river, into my exposed ear. I watched the blood pour from my head, over the rocks, and mix with the running water. My body filled the gaps between the rocks, and behind the sharp, cold agony soaring through me, I’d thought about how I had become part of the eco system. The river would carry my blood with it everywhere, maybe even to the sea. I thought I could smell chips then, and the seaside, but that was just the saltiness of the rain. Something bobbed against my dirty fingers as I began to drift, and with what feeling was left in my hands, I could tell it was the leaf I’d chased down the river.

‘I was upset,’ I tell it. I think I’m crying, but I’m not sure if I’m sad. ‘I don’t remember why... or, I think I’d been upset for a long time, and I needed to get away from people. I ran into the forest. I remember the trees, the ground, the river. I remember what I was wearing. I remember how it all smelled.’ I look up at it. I can’t know for sure, but I look where I think its eyes are, if it has any. ‘I remember dying. Is this it? Is this where the river ends?’

‘I’m going to take you there,’ it answers deeply, and this time I feel a softness within it. It leans down until I am completely consumed by a warm darkness. There is no fear when the lights go out, and all I feel is my dad carrying me to bed.

By Kacey Devonald



ENDTIMES

the apocalypse has come many times
it's come now, just not for you
others
burn and die
in what could only be hell
and you'll scuttle
for soft hiding spots
in your cupboards
in your walls
until it's close enough to touch you
and you'll become
them
burning and dying
and you won't be confused
why they watch and don't move
because it's the apocalypse
but it's only the apocalypse for you

By *L. Ray Gitsham*

Lives of Ink and Flesh

How do we know when a pen is alive?

This question asked might make you think

She is definitely out of her mind.

But how do we know if a pen is alive?

It's alive when it writes

When it creates those worlds that stay in our heads until they are written

It makes our thoughts come alive

It does that using its ink.

It writes from left to right,

From up to down,

Pages and pages it fills even in the night

The pen filled with that ink can also be dead.

When there's no ink and we write in school we say

“Teacher, can I borrow a pen because mine is dead”



LIVES OF INK AND FLESH BY ELIZA CEGIELKA

Now to compare the life of ink to the one of flesh

How do we know when a person is alive?

They are alive when they breathe, move and do what they like and like what they do.

This answer might be obvious to you.

Like a pen the flesh creates what we dream becomes our reality,

It is beyond our fantasies.

Like the ink we fill not pages but lands and lands,

From up to down to left to right.

We create from our hopes and dreams

We change, create and destroy sometimes with a better effect sometimes with the bad

Like the ink, the flesh also dies and when do we know when a person is dead?

When they don't breathe, move, do what they like and like what they do.

This answer looks like a sad one to you.

What is sadder though is how both ink and flesh end up

Ink isn't remembered with love, and neither will we

Call me crazy now or read and see

LIVES OF INK AND FLESH BY ELIZA CEGIELKA

The pen and its ink are being replaced by a click

The click of the keyboard.

Every word we write now won't have spelling mistakes or messy handwriting

Every new world and thought and dream will be done electronically

The same is with the lives of flesh,

Where beating hearts there will be less.

Metal will take all our jobs

Including those like thinking and creating

What is the most tragic

Is that we are being replaced mechanic

Not accidentally but because we chose this faith for us just like for the pen.

We chose leaving ink aside and write by clicking

And we did it to ourselves

We have phones, tablets, computers doing the thinking



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And we did it to ourselves

We have phones, tablets, computers doing the thinking

We now do robots doing our doings.

By Eliza Cegielka

LOOKING BACK AT THE END OF THE WORLD

At first, we didn't know what it was. The sound that came through on the radios. The TVs. The speakers. Most of us had no idea as to the context, but we all heard it. High pitched screeching overlayed with a low, threatening tremor. Words of all languages overlapping in an incongruous, indiscernible noise. It doesn't matter what came first, not now. It's not as if they'd tell us.

It's human nature to try to understand what lies out there beyond, but when there isn't else to conquer with our knowledge, whatever was left, they sought. Meaningless flagpoles. I suppose it's the only facet that unites us. But not me.

Space to them seemed trivial. The scientists, conglomerates, they'd all seen what was out there. What was beyond our small, insignificant star, our pocket of the cosmos. Some even started travelling out. Good riddance I said. If they can afford it, why not strap them into an semi-experimental ship and blast them into the void? It's not like it matters anymore. It's all coming to an end.

I liked it here. Even after all they'd done to it. There's people here, some more important than others it seems, but people. Good people. Was he one of them?

I remember how we got together. It wasn't romantic. Not at all. It's hard to decide if it's a memory worth cherishing before it's all gone. We flirted a lot. I flirted with all my friends, I thought nothing of it, but he always blushed at the stupid shit I'd say. One night he'd argued with his boyfriend. He came over, we chatted, I comforted. He kissed me. We spent the night together. It felt wrong. Henry left his partner, and we ran away. It felt to me, that this is what it was all about. We loved each other. I loved him...

It's beginnings innit. Rocky beginnings. That turbulence at the start of a great flight. I suppose I'm just- a little perturbed by the take off. A relationship that starts from 'just sex' feels wrong to me sometimes. Foundations are a complex thing.

LOOKING BACK AT THE END OF THE WORLD BY KURT HARDING

It's beginnings innit. Rocky beginnings. That turbulence at the start of a great flight. I suppose I'm just- a little perturbed by the take off. A relationship that starts from 'just sex' feels wrong to me sometimes. Foundations are a complex thing.

'I care about you a lot,' he'd say.

'I'll always be here,' he'd tell me.

But never:

'I love you.'

I wonder if it all happened again, if it would've happened differently.

The end of us all, that's how they put it. No sugar coating. No smoothing us in. They fucked up and it's over. I wish they'd just admit to it. You know it's over though, really over. There'd been scares. World Wars. Threats to nuke every poor bastard off the face of the earth. But every time they'd try to sell you something. But not this time. That's how I knew it was over.

Henry is still holding out hope. He's trying to spin things to work. Tell me it's going to be fine and that he'd,

'Always be there.'

I wish I could believe him.

I always tried to look ahead. Guess I'm not too dissimilar in that regard. Focusing on what's in front of me. But there's nothing. Just... ink. Black. Void, whatever you want to call it.

We only have a couple days they reckon. They don't know. I always thought that at the end of the line it would be me and him. We ran away and we've met the world's edge. Our toes on that cliff that stretches out to the sea.

'We can swim,' he would say to me. Trying to hold my hand. But I can't stop glancing at the road behind me.



LOOKING BACK AT THE END OF THE WORLD BY KURT HARDING

Everyone has questions. It's how we learn, how we adapt. Trillionaires ran out of things to claim, for their hands to dirty in the oil of other rocks. Where did we come from? Studies would come out, papers and experiments and what have you. They even collected star dust from a far-off supernova. I remember this one article that this group had put together, that they were in talks with the NNASA, to work on an AI to do it for them. Suppose that when you run out of smart people to ransack for ideas you gotta make your own. They did monthly journals on its findings. Something to do with the Big Bang, I don't know, I stopped reading. Every answer led to more and more questions. I wouldn't be satisfied with whatever I was told.

That's when the electronics went crazy. The voice of God spoke, and it chose to start again.

I'm guessing that their AI had figured it out for them. I don't want to read any more journals. I guess I just have to find a better question to ask, even if I never actually get an answer.

Looking back served them nothing.

So why can't I stop?

When I first saw you. Looming in the sky, I was peering through. It was only for a couple of minutes, but I can't get it out of my head.

It was large, skinny but massive. It looked less like a man and more like a mass of bloated features. It had eyes that wrapped its body. It was made up of parts in such an arrangement that I can't explain it. I don't think I can even try. It wasn't something I'd heard, though it had something similar in quality to that sound we heard from our phones. Loud. Bombarding. Whispering and pervasive.

When the hole opened about a week after the electronic freak out, everybody had questions. This isn't judgement day, this is eradication.

Just today, down the street from where I live, there were the typical crazies holding signs.

'The end is nigh.'

'God will judge all at the gates.'



LOOKING BACK AT THE END OF THE WORLD BY KURT HARDING

I suppose that above all, everyone is afraid of things ending. I'm afraid too. I'm afraid to think about what will happen. But everybody sort-of knows.

I wish I could put it to words.

That day, the day I saw it. Everybody saw it. Even Henry. People do crazy shit when they know that they've lost everything. There are riots. People wanting to fly away. They're evacuating sure but I don't think that they'll escape it. Whatever this is. Whatever it is, how do we know that earth is the only thing to go. We were never meant to know where we came from. We were never meant to know the parts that made us. The foundations, they're a secret that was being kept out of shame.

I can feel it's shame. The way it peered and left. The way it looked in and couldn't bare to see what it had done.

If this thing is God, like some would have you believe, do you think that God regrets its creations? Are people and our nations and our brazen push to further ourselves as a species, built on bloody foundations that not even God can forgive himself for enabling?

When things are built on pain, the roots themselves are poisoned.

I never knew Henry's ex. And I know it sounds petulant and moronic to think about now, but I hope he blamed me. I hope he hates me as much he hates Henry. I was complicit. I get it now.

When I tried to talk to him about what we saw, he didn't try to justify anything. He got defensive, he was scared too. Is scared. We argued. We stood in our living room, there was screaming, throwing. We circled the sofa. We paced the length of the dining room. He hurt me. That's not fair. I said some things too. I don't want to repeat it. He stormed out.

I didn't see Henry that night. He came home the next day.

He told me stayed at his parents but... I don't know. He couldn't sell me on that.

That road is so far away from the edge we're on. Those crashing waves at the foot of the cliff, they're reaching up and splashing our faces. The jump didn't seem that far away before; I remember how we got there. I remember the journey. I remember where that road began.

Look at me, talking to you. A hole in the sky. I have so many questions, but I just can't ask them. I don't want to imagine what you'd say. It's beautiful. I can see through you. The stars in the middle of the day. I can't even comprehend it. Even this tiny window, this pocket I'm peering into, is so much for me to take in.

The sea is beautiful down there, right? It's a far-off jump again; and look! No road. Just hills.

Looking back at the end of the world, I wish it'd gone better. But it's ignorance that kept me 'safe.'

I do have one question:

Will it all happen again? Is that what they saw? Everything just starts again? I understand if that is the case, why God is ashamed of what it's done. I don't think I have the capacity to forgive. I won't hold on to how I feel because it's over. It's done and I can't take any of it back. In my next life, I hope I won't make the same mistakes.

I know it doesn't want to look down at us. I can feel it and I understand. I truly do believe that at the end of the next one, or the ones after that, eventually it'll figure it out. It'll know what it's doing wrong. 'The eyes are the window to the soul,' and I can see that it's hurting.

There it is,

The end.

By Kurt Harding



'Hey, I'm Kurt Harding, I'm an aspiring writer. I write mainly existentialist horror, political poetry and a long form dark fantasy novella that follows Death as one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse, discovering the world she was kept from. The book is a feminist, political, horror-fantasy-thriller with overt religious themes and serves as a critique of the world we live in today, through the lens of a twisted fantasy dystopia.'

The project is currently in ADHD limbo, but I hope that by showing off some of my other projects, it'll give me a kick to finishing the book.

If you liked this, I have a professional Instagram account @Kurt.harding_

I may take commissions in the future, if you would be interested, let me know on the IG above. Brother gotta eat.

I hope you liked 'looking back at the end of the world' as much as I do J.'

Now Everyone Knows My Name

As I sit here, relishing the memories of my glorious kills, a sense of satisfaction washes over me. For 25 long years, I terrorized the quaint town of Elmwood, leaving a trail of death and destruction in my wake. I remember my first target, a foolish young couple who had just arrived in town. They were the perfect victims, unsuspecting and easy to manipulate. The night of their demise, a raging thunderstorm provided the perfect guise for my sinister plans. I recall reading the newspaper around two days after the bodies of the couple had been found, the cold corpses were discovered in their cozy new home, twisted and mangled beyond recognition. Blood coated the walls and pooled on the floor, a beautiful sight to behold. I remember grotesquely snapping the husband's neck and leaving his body to rot in the living room. I recall taking one final look at his facial expression, the fear in his eyes and the look of pure terror which was frozen on his face.

His wife, on the other hand, I left the remains of her in the bedroom. I remember slicing each individual one of her limbs off and scattering them throughout the sparsely decorated room gouging her eyes out in the process. Their futile struggle brought me immense pleasure, evidenced by the broken furniture and shattered windows. But alas, their efforts were in vain. And so, my killing spree continued, each victim carefully selected and mercilessly slaughtered. As the bodies piled up, the town was thrown into a frenzy, whispering about the brutal killer in their midst. Little did they know, I walked among them, hidden in plain sight. For I wanted to leave my mark on this town, to be remembered for eternity. And they will. Oh, how they will never forget the name of the one responsible for their fear and bloodshed. I was just another predator in the crowd, blending in seamlessly as I hunted for my next victim. No one suspected the quiet and unassuming man lurking in their midst was actually a ruthless killer. It gave me a sense of power, knowing that I could take a life at any moment without anyone suspecting me. But eventually, my reign of terror had to come to an end. The police were closing in, and I could feel the pressure mounting.

So, on that fateful night, I chose my final target: a young man named Michael, oblivious to the danger lurking in the shadows. As he walked home from work, I could see that immense paranoia that gnawed at his mind. The eerie silence of the streets only amplified his fears. Suddenly, after following him down the street I recall emerging from the darkness, my features hidden in the shadows. I remember feeling Michael's heart racing as he tried to identify me, but before he could scream for help, I plunged my knife into his stomach. I relished in the agony on his face as I continued my merciless assault, ensuring he suffered to the very end. And with each stab, I reveled in the satisfaction of my twisted desires.

Before leaving the scene, I left behind a clue, a cryptic message that would reveal my identity to those who were clever enough to solve it. And then I disappeared, leaving behind a trail of horror and chaos in my wake. It was only later that I learned of the aftermath of my actions. The lingering fear in the town, the shattered lives of my victims' families. But I felt no guilt or remorse. To me, they were mere prey, and I was the hunter.

Now, as I sit in my dark and isolated cabin, I can't help but smile as I recall my kills. They were my greatest triumph, my legacy that will be remembered for generations to come. I gaze at the newspaper article with pride, seeing my name boldly printed for the world to see. It brings me immense joy to know that I, and I alone, am responsible for the terror that has plagued Elmwood. They call me the elusive one, the infamous killer of this town. My actions have earned me the notorious title of the 'Elmwood Murderer,' and my name will forever be remembered in the blood-stained pages of this small town's history.

By Emilio Munoz-Saiz

'I write thrillers tangled with love, where chaos cracks characters open. Every move is sculpted, every emotion earned. The messier, the better.'



Porcelain Pieces

It was cruel irony, to feel so alive across from someone so clearly dead.

When she thought of death, Sophia thought of yellow. She did not see cobwebs, or coffins, or tears running down rosy cheeks. Those lost were being claimed by the sun. Icarus, a hero who got too close. An unfortunate tale, and yet one she claimed for comfort. One day, she was going to take flight, soar amongst the clouds, feel the breeze between her fingers. She was going to answer the call, hold out her arms and let the wind carry her home. She would bask in a sea of yellow, golden, and warm, oblivious.

One could only fear death for as long as it remained a threat. Perhaps, at one time, she had thought she could live forever, duck and weave away from the shadow looming over her shoulder. She'd thought herself infinite. A funny concept, to think she could be here forever, when the world dealt in time limits. She saw stars, she saw moons and planets, she saw everything all at once. The places she had been, the places she had yet to see, the people she was yet to meet. She was alive, she knew that, but for the first time, Sophia felt as though she was living.

She would have called for him. Screamed his name until she turned blue in the face, until blood stained her lips, or her eyes bulged out of her skull. Brick upon brick held her firmly in place, a single sharp nail splitting her back in two. The dust had cleared a path, parted like the Red Sea. The shop was in pieces, wooden beams hanging precariously over their heads, light fixtures sparking against the night sky. Like fireworks, lighting up the night, joined by a cacophony of white flashes. The rumbling turned to screeching that turned to an explosion of debris. The floor beneath her head was too hard, too cold, too restricting. Overhead, something creaks.

PORCELAIN PIECES BY MILLIE JONES

Guillermo had told her of the war. Often, she felt like a fairytale character, trapped within four walls, bound to the reality of a world destroyed. A fractured reality that she didn't want to live most days. He wrapped their existence with soft smiles and gentle hands, plaiting her hair when the soldiers marched by, and straightening her dress when the next siren wailed. He'd been there, amongst the trenches, water in his boots and bullets in his uniform, until he'd been nowhere at all. Stuck in the plains between life and death, his fate left in the hands of an overworked nurse, and hope. Sometimes, she'd thought he'd never come back, and she'd be stuck in his toy shop forever with nobody but the teddy bears and hobby horses to talk to. Now, he hobbled with his cane and wooden leg, painting plastic bottles like bees and cows to hand out to the children, walking the streets and tipping his cap to mask-clad faces. Sophia never went with him, but he told her of his excursions when he returned each evening, over a watery cup of tea and a rock-hard biscuit.

She wished her papa had talked to her the same way Guillermo did. Like she was intelligent. Like she understood the intricacies of his mind, the things he didn't say. The things his eyes screamed at her. Now here she was, looking for the story he was trying to tell her, but all he did was look. Not at her. Not at the shop; toys smashed and in pieces, jack-in-boxes letting out their broken melodies, and porcelain arms strewn about the debris-coated floorboards. Something above groaned then snapped-

she wondered if she would ever-

yellow

Once upon a time, a girl watched her family forget she existed.

They skimmed over her pretty white dress and pale skin, avoided her piercing eyes and downturned lips. They called her Sophia. Wisdom. Cleverness. Intelligence. She'd had many names, but this one was special. Time was valuable, and looking back, she felt she didn't appreciate it as she should have. Over the years, she became a background character in the story of her family's lives. A sub-plot, something to be seen for a chapter or two, then killed off, or forgotten. A question unanswered. A 'what if?' in their world of absolutes.

PORCELAIN PIECES BY MILLIE JONES

Once upon a time, she'd been beautiful. Even when she couldn't move her arms, when her eyes didn't blink, she knew she was beautiful. Whenever papa would remember she was there, their eyes would soften as they ran the brush through her hair, and as synthetic as it was, for those few moments she swore they saw her as something other than decoration. Something, perhaps, human. But deep down she knew, as the kids grew older, as mother and papa started limping, then not moving at all, the reality of her condition would be shoved right back down her throat. Trapped in a cycle of shifting from bookcases to bedside tables. She would never be anything more than what she was, and as much as she could dream that she would become so much more, the world was not going to be on her side. There had been many papas, many mothers, many Lily's and Alex's and Johanna's and some who she wasn't with long enough to remember. But there would never be another Guillermo.

Once upon a time, she'd almost been alive.

She didn't think death was so poetic now. The oblivion, the nothingness, the fade to black. She contemplated the lack of presence, of communication and conversation, of the eyes of another person boring into her own. She didn't like being looked at, but now all she wanted was to be seen. To be fixed. Put back together. She couldn't die. She wouldn't die. Not now. Not now

please not now

NOT NOW

a whistle

A whistle and she was back on the shelf.

Guillermo was shuffling to the door of the shop, interrupting the familiar tune coming from his lips to grumble under his breath. His leg causing him some grief, or he was surprised his



PORCELAIN PIECES BY MILLIE JONES

daughter had bothered to turn up. Amelie didn't come by much anymore. Sophia was glad. Amelie never noticed she was there, or if she did, she pretended that she didn't. There was a difference between feeling invisible, and feeling like the world wanted you to disappear. Sophia had watched Guillermo pen the letter to his daughter a week prior, drafting more versions of the same three sentences that he would ever care to admit. He went about his days after, busying himself with fixing toys that didn't need fixing, updating displays that nobody was going to look at, but Sophia saw the truth in how his eyes would flicker to the door, or how he'd drop his tools one too many times.

She knew she hated Amelie right about then.

"Are you not too old to be playing with toys, Papa?" She said once.

"Toys are not just for children, Amelie. They see us. They see you."

She'd scoffed, and for the first time, she'd looked at her. She wished she hadn't.

A whistle that wasn't human.

In the seconds before the wooden beam smashed her face into the floor, she thought that, in another lifetime, she could've been a sister to Amelie. They would frolic in the fields, woven baskets reddening the cruxes of their arms, fresh pastries scenting the air, grass tangled in the locks of their hair as they rolled down hills and picked berries from overgrown bushes. They'd be inseparable, against the world. They'd hug, they'd cry, they'd do all of the things that sisters do. But they wouldn't argue. No, they'd be too perfect for that. Too well behaved.

And war. War wouldn't exist. Buildings wouldn't fall. Shots wouldn't be fired. Bombs wouldn't drop.

They wouldn't be able to whistle.

A soldier and his companion walk into a toy shop. Except it isn't a shop anymore. There are toys everywhere, plastic eyes staring through them at the grey sky above. One of them shivers, but not from the cold. Pieces of dolls are everywhere, not a single one is untouched.

PORCELAIN PIECES BY MILLIE JONES

They almost miss the body amongst the rubble. They crunch porcelain beneath their boots. One of them slips on a piece of fabric that could've once been white, and in his frustration, he kicks it away.

“Do people even buy this stuff anymore?”

“My daughter's a sucker for her dolls. Think she'd have nightmares for weeks if she saw this.”

He is holding two pieces in his hands. An eye, and an arm, both coated in dust. To them, it is nothing more than a broken doll, but the shop knows. She was beautiful. She had her place here. Pieces of her are everywhere and anywhere. She was his favorite, and even though they'd known each other barely a year, she'd been as constant as a breath of oxygen. The shop knew, and it grieves for her. Even when it betrayed her, crushed her beneath the weight of what she might've been, what she wanted to be, freeing her from the disappointment of never entirely being, it knew. She would always be here.

They carry the body away, thrown precariously onto a stretcher that threatens to snap.

The building sighs, another beam falls. Both men turn, gazing back at the wreckage, suspicion in their expressions, but the only thing alive is the birds that fly overhead.

The sky is golden. Sophia knows that now, as she stands on a cloud that tickles her feet.

She can feel. Her heart beats with love, her lips curve up in a watery smile. There are no bombs to deafen her, no roof to collapse on top of her. Silence. There is only her, so alive, so very impossibly alive, and Guillermo. He is here, in front of her, reaching his hand out for her, and when she takes it, he is warm. They are here together, always together, ready to reach the sun. It is in front of them, his scraggy silver beard glowing, lighting up the creases of his eyes as he looks at her, so real, standing on her own two feet, white dress frilly and lacy. She'd dreamed of this dress in the shop, stuck on the shelf, cursed to never live. His eyes turn glassy, and she coughs amongst her tears, unable to tell whether she is relieved, or sad. He looks at her like she is his. He looks at her like she exists beyond her porcelain prison.

She is what she wants to be, looking at the person she wanted to be for.

Her handshakes, but still, she clings tighter, sure she would break his fingers if she held on long enough. But at least that would be proof that she had human strength. She wasn't really in pieces on the floor of a destroyed toy shop. She wasn't really even here at all. Because she couldn't dream. She couldn't dream, or love, or want for things. She wasn't feeling this. He begins to walk with her, towards the sun, but the further he gets, the more his hand begins to slip from hers.

She begins to crumble. First her arm, pieces falling through the clouds to whatever existence rests below. She screams, for him or for herself; she doesn't know. Her mouth freezes.

He carries on, reaching out without her. The sun takes him. But reality has a vise grip on her.

It drags her back down. Back to the shop.

Back to her pieces of broken hope.

By Millie Jones

'Hello! I'm Millie, a 20 year old theatre and creative writing student at Aberystwyth University.'



THE ALTAR AND IT'S GODS

Sometimes the light feels borrowed-
like stolen flames
from ancient gods
who watch but never intervene,
don't stop the shadows in my thoughts.

Loneliness like incense curls,
a fog that wraps my bones,
it twists in quiet, patient swirls,
in places no one dares to own

No altar calls my name,
no prayer breaks through its
hollowed space.

Just empty rooms
of whispered air
and absence traced in lace

I tell myself the cracks have healed,
the surface sealed and still,
but restless lives beneath one sealed,
in silence sharp and shrill.



THE ALTER AND ITS GODS BY LORNA WEST KEOGH

They think I've cast the blade aside,
they think I've learned to speak in light.
But still I keep the box I hide

like relics tucked from moral sight,
a thorn behind the crown I wear,
a flask of oil I've never spilled,
my little altar of despair
in case the ache must be fulfilled.

I speak in parables, in prose,
but in the hollows of my vow,
its sacred shadow still arose
a covenant I can't revoke,
a quiet rite I dare not break-
the price I pay in bloodless smoke
when I pretend that I don't ache.

The saints don't see the wound I tend,
the gods don't ask the curse I bear,
but I have seen the start, the end,
the sacrament, the hidden prayer.



So bless this mask,
and bless this lie,
and bless the days I seem complete-
but know, beneath the truth I cry,
where gods and grief and rituals meet.

I will cry, make face,
and keep the blade just in case.

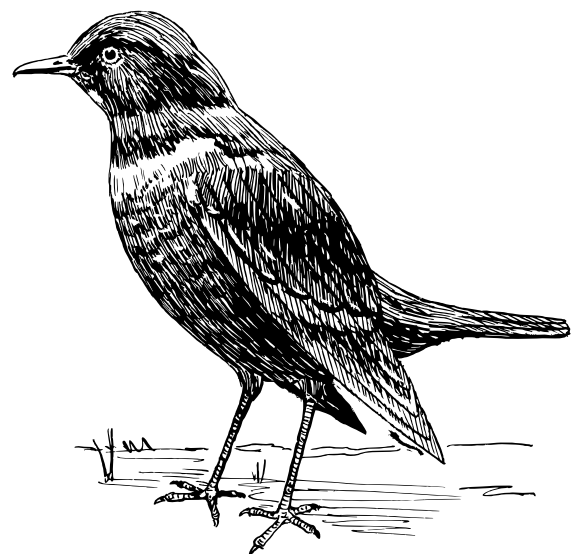
Not out of need.
But reverence
like an old god
I no longer worship
but yearn to anger.

By Lorna West Keogh

SLEEP

If I could sing a thousand songs,
as beautiful as the blackbird,
I would sing all those songs for you.
One's that rhyme in reason,
and that follow harmony.
One's that meander like a lullaby,
and send you to sleep peacefully.
I would lull you to tranquility,
next to me in a blanket of flowers;
immerse you in a dream.
I would soothe your worried thoughts;
I would lay you beside me,
be sure you do not awaken,
or drift into rocky sea.

By Joe Hedges



'For almost 7 years, I have been writing poetry and hoping to bring poetry back to the forefront of literature to be loved and adored by all readers.'

THE CHOSEN LIE

11

PROLOGUE

No one remembers the day the cycle began, only the day it took our first child. Since then, we no longer count years, but games. Once a year, the world holds its breath. Screens flicker; flags fly on rooftops. The

names of the hereditary soldiers echo through the streets. Some cheer; some remain silent. No one disagrees. Not out loud.

“Unity through selection. Strength through sacrifice.” Thus begins the vicious circle under the Zyclira. This is how a system justifies itself, choosing the lives of young people to maintain order and uphold its power.

The starting signal sounds every year on the day of the equinox, the day when light and darkness seem equal for a moment. An almost fairy-tale-like balance, but a deceptive one. Because behind the scenes, behind the doors of the great council palace, there is no balance. Only control, half-truths, and intrigue.

Our world did not fall in a war. It fell in an election. We bought peace with trials – and silence with blood.

The games, officially called S.O.L.U.S, last weeks, sometimes months. The trials are either an opportunity or a death sentence. The losers lose more than just their lives, and the winners gain more than just the games. Their country gains more than just glory; it gains power, influence, but above all, possessions. The nations of the losers fall under its administration, their country as they knew it disappears, they become part of the victorious country, with no way out, no say in the matter. Borders are shifted, languages suppressed, cultures erased. Year after year, empires grow while others disappear. World order not through choice, but through competition.

“S.O.L.U.S – Selection of Unified States”

Solus. Alone.

Because in the end, only one nation remains. One out of 197, that is how it was meant to be.

THE CHOSEN LIE BY A. F. MIGLIACCIO

Lareen

One. Last. Time. Just one last time, a promise to herself, she had repeated so often that it's meaning became useless long ago. But it made her feel better, less disgusted of herself. It made the guilt a little less consuming, a little less present every time she

had found herself kneeling on the bathroom floor. Her mind was racing, her thoughts clawed at her like wild animals, leaving her raw inside. "This time I mean it, it's going to get better soon..." she whispered, as the cold metal touched her skin. The sharp pain immediately numbed her thoughts, a quiet moment in the eye of a storm, Lareen knew, the silence in her head would not last long, the higher she climbed, the more painful the fall will be, but it felt too good to stop. And so, it came, the wave of regret washed over her, uncontrolled and reckless as she looked at the reflection of her own empty amber eyes. They didn't feel like hers, it felt like looking into a stranger's face, even though she knew that this was the most honest version of her, this empty face without the bright smile she would always put on for the newspaper, that she had practiced so often in this very same mirror. To survive was to pretend, yet Lareen was so sick of pretending, she yearned to live a life far away from all those lies. She had nowhere to go, so she had needed to find other ways to cope.



THE CHOSEN LIE BY A. F MIGLIACCIO

A knock pulled her out of her trance. “Are you okay Lareen? The ceremony begins in 20 minutes, are you dressed yet?,” her mom asked through the door. Quickly she rolled down the sleeves of the forest green ballgown her best friends’ mother, empress Nicole Roth, had picked for her. It was a plain dress, yet the most flattering and pretty piece of clothing she had ever worn. Its soft fabric dancing around her like the shadow of an ancient wood. The bodice, ruffled in narrow folds, seemed to bind her with the weight of the nation’s expectation, while the long sleeves spilled into a cape that trailed behind her like a river, whose flood washes away the truth. The skirt fell in clean lines, brushing the floor but never dragging. Nicole chose the dress because its soft elegance symbolizes the country’s long-lost glory. Germany hasn’t competed in S.O.L.U.S since the 4th Zyclira, since then, their influence decreased by every year they weren’t chosen to play again. That is why Lareen had thought about not attending the announcement ceremony, more than just once, to her it was obvious: Germany hadn’t been chosen in almost 20 years, it wouldn’t be any different this year. But she needed to, there was no escape out of this life, there never had been one and there would never be. “Yes, I am, just give me 5 more minutes, my makeup isn’t done yet”, Lareen replied, hoping her mother couldn’t hear her voice shaking.

Five minutes later Lareen opened the bathroom door, the dark circles around her eyes were gone and her lips, still swollen from crying, were painted in a soft brown perfectly complementing her dress. Her brown hair fell in loose curls, almost down to her waist, adorned with a golden barrette bearing her family crest, two swans turning their back to each other, a wreath of leaves with a sun sitting in its middle, between them. She took a deep

THE CHOSEN LIE BY A. F MIGLIACCIO

breath before entering the briefing room, forcing herself into a mask of normalcy, as if she hadn't just shattered behind the bathroom door. Inside Nicole and her Husband Roy, as well as their daughter Ronja was already sitting on the right side of the table.

Her mothers' blue eyes gazed at her from the opposite side of the room while talking to the empress. Lareen sat next to her brother focused on not wrinkling her dress as she sat down.

"Since when you care so much about your dresses Lala?" he smirked at her, his head tilted, as he always does when making fun of her.

"Maybe since Mom almost threw me out the house last time, because of the coffee stain YOU caused Nelio!"

"I didn't! You bumped into me, so it was technically your fault"

"You know, just as much as I do, that that's not - ", she stopped as their mother gave them an annoyed look. Her thin eyebrows raised, her lips pressed together. Lareen mouthed a quick

"Sorry," as she looked into her eyes, that looked identical to her brothers, a delicate shade of blue like a clear winter sky. They had many similar features, the same pointy nose, the same mixture of a soft, yet slim facial shape, the same "always smiling" lips. The only difference was their hair; whilst her mom had thin, ashy blonde waves, her brother had the straightest, lightest thickest blonde hair of the nation, just like his father. Lareen looked nothing like

Nelio, they were quite like salt and pepper. Her mom always told her, she was the spitting image of her father, who she had never met. She didn't even know who he was or what had happened to him, that justified him not being with her as she grew up. Normally, Lareen didn't care, she has got a new father when she was three, but sometimes, when she looked at the press photos, she hated to look so misplaced, so different from everyone else she loved. She silently drummed her fingers on the table, listening intently to the adults discussing this



THE CHOSEN LIE BY A. F MIGLIACCIO

year's S.O.L.U.S.

"I don't think it is unlikely that, we will be chosen by the Zyklira-council, they might be impartial, but not unpredictable. We shared a record with the USA, being the only two nations to win twice.," Her mother paused, as if she was trying to find the right words, "It is possible that, after the USA got eliminated last year, they'd want us to participate, to see if we could break that "curse". I would even say that our participation hasn't been that likely for a long time"

"I agree with you Maxime, that's why it is important for us to discuss which of your children will take part in the Trials." Nicole pulled out a list and put it carefully under the projector. She pressed a few buttons on the remote, a few seconds later, the list appeared on the canvas next to her.

Governing family: Ronja Roth Allied family: Nelio/Lareen Brand

Elected 1: Gabriel Ender Elected 2: Francis Loher

Lareen tried her best not to let anyone see the storm raging inside her. She had made her decision long ago, but every doubt she has ever had disappeared as she investigated Nelios frightened look, scared to death, quite literally, he looked at his own name, over and over



again, trying to process what burden they have just put onto his shoulders. She couldn't let her little brother go through such pain; it would kill her in a way no trial could.

"I will do it," she said, not a single crack in her confidence. Everyone immediately turned their heads and looked at her as if she just cracked the most unfunny joke. "I will do it," Lareen repeated, "I am eighteen, the maximum age. If I go now, and we win, Nelio still has three years left to compete again if needed. But if he goes this year, and we win, we'll have no one out of our rows for the future. And Ronja and I, we've been inseparable for twelve years. We're already a team, which is advantageous for us. I am the better choice. Trust me, please," she gave a pleading look to Nicole as she spoke the last word. The empress' jaw was tensed, a muscle near her eye twitching as she considered her words. "We have our last hereditary solider," she announced, "And with that we are ready for the ceremony"

By A. F. Migliaccio

'I am A. F. Migliaccio, a student from Germany, passionate about exploring the human side of dystopian worlds. Writing has always been a way for me to process emotions and turn questions about society into stories. When not writing, I love to read and dance. This is my first work to be published and I hope it resonates with others who have ever felt caught between expectations and identity.'

THE DREAM WEAVER

"Her? Who's Her?" My brows furrow with curiosity and hers follow suit.

"I would hope that you remember?" I fear my memory may have run dry as I can't remember or even begin to grasp what she may be talking about. Mogra's eyes widen with shock at my lack of response. Mogra is quick to grab my wrist in her thick and sturdy palm and drag me back down the corridor and back to the old rotary phone. She drags her blunt fingers across the numbers, turning the dial quickly.

"Do you mind? You'll scratch the plastic if you're not careful. It was then a voice boomed abruptly from below. However, when I looked down, the voice was not coming from the phone but from the rubber-like mouth at the base of it. The mouth was long and wide with thick tusk-like teeth protruding from the plastic gums and its lips were rigid and rubbery. I jump back with surprise, grabbing at Mogra's shoulder.

"What the hell???" I exclaim. "Ignore him. He's being dramatic" Mogra replies sternly in a nonchalant tone. Continuing to turn the dial, I stutter and struggle to find the right words to say. But nothing seems to be appropriate enough for this moment. "Mogra? The erm, the phone is talking." I mutter. "Yes, Ivy I'm aware." Mogra says through her teeth. She continues to squish her fingers into the small holes of the dial to turn it. The mouth groans in pain. "Oscar just shut up and let me work." Mogra replies.

"Hey, I have rights!" The mouth, Oscar, retaliates with a seething attitude.

"You're a phone." I state.

"Yeah! A phone with rights!" Mogra finishes turning in the last number then quickly pulls her finger out of the hole. Oscar presses his mouth closed. A harsh ring quickly shrieks out of him, shaking him around. His plastic base bangs against the smooth wood. Oscar wails and flails, his continuous "ow, ow, ow's" distorting due to the motion. Mogra picks up the phone and holds it to her pointed ear.

THE DREAM WEAVER BY ELIN METCALF

"Who are you calling?" I ask. My eyes are still stuck, fixated on the talking phone.

"The secretary." She rushes. Oscar hums in agreement from below.

"There's a secretary?" Why would I need a secretary in my dreams?

"Yes, and she seems to be occupied with something seemingly more important-" it was then the phone clicked, and a cheery voice was heard from the phone.

'Hello! You've reached The Dreamers' Headquarters! This is Debbie speaking-" Mogra is quick to interrupt her. "Yes, hello Debbie, it's Mogra. We have a case of memory loss, and we need the wizard. Huh? What do you mean he's busy? He's not busy, I spoke to him a few hours ago!"

Argumentative mumbles are heard from the other line. "Look, Debbie I haven't got time for this just send him to me!" Debbie seems to argue back. This causes Mogra's brows to furrow.

"Debbie, you are testing my patience where is Wigglefarts?!" Mogra yells into the phone to which Oscar flinches. I pause.

'Who?' I ask, finally diverting my attention away from Oscar. Mogra ignores my question and turns her body away from mine and begins to walk slowly, throwing a finger in my face. Mogra continues to bark at Debbie on the other end of the line. The phone wire is short, so she is unable to get very far but it is far enough away from us where the whispering is inaudible. I get down on my knees and place my hands on the edge of the table. I bring my face close to Oscar.

"Hey, Oscar." I prod at his plastic body. No response.



"Oscar." I try again to get his attention, but I'm met with silence.

"God, what am I doing? I'm talking to a phone for Christ's sake." I stand up and look to see where Mogra is. Her hand is placed firmly on one of her hips, and she's still grilling Debbie on where this Wigglefarts guy is.

""Who the hell is Wigglefarts?" I murmur, biting my fingernail.

"Well, he's the most powerful wizard in the land." Oscar cuts in abruptly, making me jump.

"What do you mean?" I pant, holding a hand to my chest.

"He's a smart cookie that one but he's madder than the Hatter himself. He's a small little thing too, only 3 foot 6. But you already knew that." He smirks.

"Huh? I can assure you now I have no idea who this guy is nor do I know anything about him. I'm still trying to migrate myself into this brand-new society which, clearly, is proving to be harder than I imagined." I reply.

By Elin Metcaf

'I'm a 17 year old writer and I've been writing since I was a little girl. Writing is truly my passion, and I want to share my talent with the world.'

THOUGHTS

Silence. And thoughts:
 Thoughts and silence.
 Sometimes these thoughts go
 whizzing about my head and
 rattle around inside my brain
 Like a dice in a cup.
 And the silence before and after
 that dice is shook ...well...
 Crushing. Deafening.
 All consuming.
 Id like to roll around on the floor...
 Break with convention...break from
 Normality...reality.
 Third floor haberdashery??? WTF?
 But I don't.
 Instead I pick up my shiny new pen
 And pour out my ramblings in my
 shiny new book.
 This will pass I tell myself...
 This will pass.
 That's better.
 The trouble is i feel
 Too much...

By *Alison Ryan*

Hi, My names Alison, I'm, *Cough, cough*, years old and had a life long love of reading, writing and
 listening to literature in all forms. An old soul who is young at heart, i like all things light and all things
 dark (You need one to see the other.)

To All The Girls Who Find Themselves Burdens To Society

It was not long after my period that I found out that there were two ways of bleeding: externally and internally

On the verge of becoming a woman, I gradually came to understand my shortcomings, how tough it was to control my anger, and how difficult it was to open my mouth and talk to my family about my insecurities. For the first time, I became aware of what other people thought of me and realized that not all of my classmates were amiable. Every unfavorable comment and critique regarding my character and appearance at the time was like needles, slowly piercing my heart bit by bit. I felt so suffocated that my confidence was crumbling, searching for a way to escape me in the form of tears.

TO ALL THE GIRLS WHO FIND THEMSELVES BURDENS TO SOCIETY
BY MINH ANH NGUYEN

I was bleeding slowly but surely; each drop of blood that flowed out of my body signifies my internal anguish, the pain from being silent and lonely. I was lost and confused, looking for space in society to fit in my unsightly self, to hide it forever. As a matter of fact, being insecure made me grow tired, and it was until I graduated from high school that I could no longer suffer from that never-ending fatigue anymore. I yearned for change. I began applying cosmetics and buying new clothes in an attempt to change the way I looked in the mirror, which I detested. I tried to repeat the same meaningless statement to myself every day: ‘You’re pretty’, ‘You’re doing the right thing’. I mumbled, thinking that expensive makeup and fancy clothing would hide the past I feared—the past in which I was never aware that I was the issue. I befriended everyone I met, putting on an act that I knew everyone would love and adjusting my personality to please my family and friends. I no longer bled; I didn’t feel alone now; everything was just fine.



TO ALL THE GIRLS WHO FIND THEMSELVES BURDENS TO SOCIETY
BY MINH ANH NGUYEN

However, as time flew, some parts of me, parts that I wanted to suppress, felt a longing for the blood that I used to bleed, the suffering I had to bear. I missed being innocent and naïve, craved for the feeling that that I was special in my own way, that I could shine through the society's stereotypes of what was beautiful and what was not. I initially attempted to disregard that impetuous thinking, but if there was one thing in the world that I was so dense and mistaken about as a teenage girl, it was my own wants and needs. So quickly was the need of being seen piling up that I had to learn everything all over again. I had to learn to express my



opinion, to raise my voice in a quiet room, and to learn to acknowledge that I was perfect in my own way and to remove my mask, which was the hardest challenge for me. I waved goodbye to friends that I used to die to talk to and to my old self, who desired to become a grown woman before knowing how to be a teenage girl. I started to bleed again, both internally and externally, but now I no longer avoided my own blood; I embraced it like a little child. Perhaps accepting what you despised is part of growing up; understanding your sorrow inspires you to continue your quest to become the best version of yourself. Pain is simply delayed happiness. Recognizing it will give you the courage to face the problems that girlhood presents.

To all the girls who finds themselves burdens to society, please continue to follow what you desire and love yourself. Let acceptance and self-confidence fill the holes in your heart.

By Minh Anh Nguyen

'A young author who wants to express her love for literature in her own way.'

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