

# Featured Stories

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## Home Sweet Home

### Elynor Kamil

Everyone is very happy in the house. It's important to call it a "house". It has a hundred rooms, the guest house, and let's not forget the hermitage being built down the yard.

(Yes, it's a yard. No matter how many acres it is, it's a yard.)

It's a cozy house. There are fireplaces which crackle pleasantly at night. In the daytime, the help goes out to gather wood. It's important that the wood is fresh, so it is gathered and dried carefully in one of the woodsheds before being taken in as the sun sets.

If there is an insufficient amount of wood, the help must go out at night and gather more and dig and scrounge and squeeze every ounce of hope into this next pile of twigs and dig and dig and scrape the trees to peel off bark with fingernails and teeth and never mind the blood under the nails when there's wood to gather.

It's a cosy house, and everyone is very happy there. See the gardener, digging up weeds? She is covered in filth and beaming. And that cook, chopping onions? He is crying and smiling so widely. It is a wonderful thing to be at work in this house.

It is the family's house. The family is kind and generous. The family doesn't shy away from those who need. The family is generous. It is a wonderful combination. See that young person wiping the windows? When they lived on the streets, they had to do many unmentionable things. The family found them at night – for the family is only ever active at night – and to that young person, it was like the sun had risen early, just for them. They are fed. They are watered. They are cared for. And their hand is shaking, and their skin is pale and they stumble, and they are so, so happy.

Down in the laundry room is a man who was falsely accused of terrible things, who lost his livelihood and watched his blood relatives turn away. The family would never do such a thing to a man in need. The family are generous. Never mind the skin of his hands rubbed raw and red and blazing with anger, those scabby pinpricks on his neck. His blood relatives don't talk to him,

but the family makes time for him. The family talks to him several times a week. These are fulfilling conversations for the man doing laundry. It is an exchange. The family gives him some attention. He gives them a bit of blood. Just a little. Just a few times a week. In a way, they are better at being family by blood than his actual family. He is happy because he gets to do whatever he can to help the family. He is happy to share his blood with them.

Every day, the help cleans every room. Many rooms are not used, but there is the possibility that they could be used at any time. The rooms are very clean. The help cleans the rooms during the day. It is better to do such inconvenient things during the day when the family are resting. It is important not to disturb the family. Although the family do not clean, they do not forage, they do not lift and carry and build and cook and sweep and shovel and dig and tear and clean, they support the help with their presence. When the family is happy, the help is happy. The help is allowed to be happy when the family are happy. When the family are unhappy, the help are unhappy. They are not allowed to be happy when the family are unhappy.

When the family are unhappy, they get thirsty. The help are happy to give what they can. They know exactly the right angle to lean their necks to give the family a quick drink, or a slow one. The help are very good at this. The help are very happy to be very good at this. Without the family, the help would have nowhere to go. The help would have nothing. Here, in this cozy house, in these hundred rooms (and yard, and woodsheds, and guesthouse, and soon, the hermitage), the help has a single room. This is cozy as well. There is no fire, but it is kept cozy by the happiness of being here.

The room is cold in winter. There is not enough wood to build a fire to keep this room warm. There are many woodsheds and plenty of wood (except when there is not enough of the right kind). This is for the family's use. The help understand this. The help are happy to have beds and food. The help are happy not to ask for more. They are already given so much.

Sometimes, one of the help cannot get out of bed. At times, it is a matter of being cold and dead. This is inconvenient and frustrates the family if they notice. (The help are very good at making sure the family does not notice. The family are too busy being generous to remember all the names or faces of the people they have helped.) At other times, one of the help cannot bring themselves to get out of bed. This is a strange state to be in, and a sure sign they are overwhelmed with happiness.

On the nights when one of the help cannot bring themselves to leave their bed, they are carried to the dining room. It is a wonderful feast that night. Everyone is happy. The remains of the feast are disposed of afterwards.

The family are many things, but they are not cruel. On the night after such a wonderful feast, they visit the cold, the destitute, the desperate. There is space for one more in their house. And that new person is going to be very, very happy.

***Elynor is based in London, England, where she works as an IT professional by day, and writes strange and unsettling stories by night. As a disabled Londoner, she is grateful for places around the city where she can perch and gather ideas.***

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## Family

### Smriti Gupta

“Why are you so slow?” Ma spoke from behind me, her hands rapidly peeling some oranges and setting each carpel on the white porcelain plate in front of her.

I sighed at the half-watery dough in front of me, beginning to pull it together as fast as my aching arm would allow. The kitchen counter was a mess: flour was everywhere, jars with half-closed lids, and some water spilled on the marble. I knew it wouldn't be long before I was chastised for it too.

“Maybe I just hate doing this,” I replied, tone calculated and dulled almost to a whisper.

My mother would miss any sound in the world, but never the ones I half didn't want her to hear. Consequently, I heard the clinking of her red, glass bangles coming to a halt, and my body went stiff in anticipation of what I had already deemed inevitable.

“Do you think you have the option to dislike this?” She asked, not completely furious yet, but she was getting there. I knew it.

“I wish I did.”

I wiped the little beads of sweat off of my forehead on the sleeve of my *kurti*. I was my worst enemy. I knew what would land me in trouble, pull my peace away from me, and sometimes, I proceeded to do exactly that. This was one of those times.

Ma chuckled, self-satisfied, like she knew something I didn't- a secret that had been kept at an arm's length from me up until now and it was time she pulled the dark covers off of it.

“That's all women can do about a lot of things, honestly,” She spoke. “Wish. And it ends there.”

I felt my teeth tighten against each other in my mouth. My knuckles kneaded the dough with more force than before. *Do not speak. Do not speak. Do not speak.*

She set the plate of peeled oranges beside me, putting a hand on my flour-covered arm.

“Get back to that later,” She commanded. “Eat something, Dyumna.”

“No,” I huffed out, taking the first step to successfully fueling my own pyre.

Her touch left my skin, and before I knew it, she had picked up the plate and was walking away with it. I peered at her from behind my shoulder, one hand working the golden-brown mass in front of me and the other holding the *paraat* steady.

“There is no food in my house for ungrateful people.”

And the kitchen door was shut in my face.

*Smriti Gupta is a student of Psychology from India. She is majorly a fiction prose writer, but her interests also venture into academic writing. When not working on community-based mental health projects or writing, you can find her hopping bookstores and brewing coffee.*

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## **The Dress**

### **Natasha Derczynski**

Your magic is laid out in brown pattern leaves, fluttering down onto the coffee table. It is a delicate blend of math, physics, English, art, and domestic science. An exam you pass every time. Your own daughters and granddaughters, not interested in learning, became your first customers, delivering precise requirements as soon as they could speak; this skirt should be poufy but not meringue-y, that print must be flowery but not too ditzy, these sleeves need flounce but not fuss. You listened patiently and asked, should this dress make them look like a fairy, princess, doll or mermaid? Each commission accepted with a nod over your bifocals and diligently noted in your Moleskine.

Your magic takes wing as heavy scissors slicing through satin, like a swan gliding along a river. It is pressed into each confident swipe of tailor’s chalk and held together with rows of pins. It is put on pause only when Spurs are playing, then the delicate, enchanted pile is carried through to the kitchen. Only with the door firmly closed and Husband mesmerized by flashes of blue and white across the screen can your alchemy resume. It is fueled by mint imperials, HobNobs, and tea so weak it’s become a running joke among your relatives: ‘Granny has special teabags, they’re *shy*’. The room fills with a glimmering fog of steam, lint and late afternoon sun. Soundtracked by the gentle whirr of the machine you work calmly and mechanically, drifting between absent-mindedness and fierce concentration.

The landline trills, breaking the spell. Wait for Husband to answer. He doesn’t. It’s your latest customer at the other end of the line. Their voice is small, they sound cornered, ambushed by a crisis of confidence.

‘Granny, won’t people laugh at me?’

‘Sod ‘em if they do.’

‘Maybe the school disco isn’t the best place... should I try it out somewhere else, first? Just wear it round town or something.’

‘It’s up to you. Only do what you feel comfortable doing.’

‘I don’t know if I’m comfortable at all. Maybe I shouldn’t bother.’

You start to agree, wonder if it's too soon, if you should cancel the order of matching buttons and trim you've just placed. Then you remember that same child tapping on your bedroom door, begging to play 'posh ladies'. Their excited jitters as you cinched your pleated skirt around their skinny ribs with a leather belt, tied the baggy satin blouse at their waist. The cream cotton gloves crumpling at their wrists, sunhat flopping over their eyes, your brown court shoes transformed into racy, towering stilettos on ten-year-old feet. How the patio became a catwalk as they sashayed among the wisteria. 'Sleep on it,' you say.

You get back to work, you and your machine churning through the changing season. Through the French doors the garden backdrop is replaced, piece by piece, by invisible stagehands. Leaves are placed back on spidery bare branches; glittering frost is transformed into glassy beads of dew. The new stage is filled with a proud chorus of song thrush, chaffinch, and blue tit. Life that you have enduringly coaxed out of the sea of mud and stones that greeted you when you first moved in. Now, you are transforming a swamp of blue-green cloth and tangled seaweed threads into a dream. A fantasy stitched into being. Everything beautiful about your life was created by you. The garden is yours alone to tend, but your family breaks away and blooms all by itself. In a car, among bickering parents and fidgeting siblings, one little bud of a person sits bolt upright, trembling.

Everyone gathers in the living room, lemon drizzle and teacups balanced on their laps and the arms of chairs. Fear is a snagged thread in your core. Have you been a terrible fool? Swallow the sharp needle of dread as you place the rustling package into a small pair of hands. Smile stiffly as they hurry to the bathroom. They stay in there an awfully long time. Tea is slurped too loudly, forks clinked too sharply. Finally, the door creaks open. He peeps round the door and tiptoes onto the carpet. There he is in the center of the living room. Your grandson. An explosion of tulle and glittery thread. A band of satin stretches across his middle, wrapping him up like the most beautiful gift. The room is truly silent now. His sisters shoot glances at each other, their eyes a silent, mirrored question, 'did you know about this?'. His father clears his throat. They're not ready. What have you done? The boy looks desperately at you, his face crumpled and darkened with panic.

Time to take control. You place your cup down with a clink and clap your hands together. The sounds echo harshly but you press on. 'Go on then, lovely, give us a twirl!'

He hesitates, then lifts onto his toes and begins a wobbly pirouette. Sunlight bounces off the sequined trim, sending blue beams shooting across the room. He lifts the skirt a little then lets it drop, making it bob like a jellyfish. His sisters begin humming, clicking their fingers, shouting 'yes, queen – er – king!'. He twirls and struts, striking high fashion poses, all angles, pout and smolder. As he moves you watch his fear melt away, evaporated in a cloud of your magic.

You catch his mother as she swipes at her eye. Oh no, abort mission. You go to stand, ready to bundle the boy out of the room. Shut it down. Pretend it was all a joke. Then his mother smiles at you. Pride shines out, iridescent behind her tears.

***Natasha says, "My name is Natasha Derczynski, I am a fiction writer living in South East London. I have a BA in English Literature with Creative Writing and an MA in Creative***

*Writing from Brunel University London. My work has been published in Queen Mob's Teahouse, Montana Mouthful, The Bombay Review, and has won the NAWG 100x100 competition and been runner up in the Quiet Man Dave flash fiction prize."*

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## **Water and the Womb**

**Ashley Allard**

During the day, Marilee always found the Karoo to be quite empty. Beige, plain, dry. The only changes in palette swept themselves across the horizon, wisps of blue and yellow, sometimes pockmarked with smoky tendrils of a rainstorm bringing a quick pause to the infinite drought. She had familiarised herself with this view, counting the windmills to keep herself occupied, imagining how the rough-cut steel could slice her open; one... two... twenty-three. Mama drove them out here at least once a year, hoping that it would revive something inside their terminal relationship. Something had died that July morning; but the wake had been attended and the ashes scattered. There was no point in resuscitating the dead. Only the flies would feast on the carrion.

The journey always proved to be the same: They would leave in the morning, when the sky was still clad with night, so that by the time they arrived at the hotel, dinner would be wafting through kitchen windows. Dinner was always some variation of lamb and krimmelpap. And then they would go to sleep and wake up and Mama would get quiet and irritable and sad and Marilee would sit and marinate in helplessness. It was routine. Nothing new.

- PLEASE BE ON YOUR BEST BEHAVIOUR, Mama begged. PLEASE, DON'T DO ANYTHING... YOU KNOW. WEIRD.

Marilee nodded, not looking away from the window.

- PLEASE. THERE ARE ONLY SO MANY PLACES IN THE KAROO. I DON'T WANT TO WRITE OFF ANOTHER ONE. I LIKE OUR TRADITION. IT'S... NICE.

Marilee raised her eyebrows slightly. 'Nice' is not the word she would use. 'Emotionally harrowing' was a better description. Another windmill rushed past. She added it; twenty-nine now.

- PLEASE CAN WE NOT RUIN IT THIS TIME, LOVE?

She nodded again. Mama let out a sigh, whether of exasperation or relief she couldn't tell. Marilee's head got hot. She hated the Karoo. Its only consolation, she thought, were the stars. The Karoo is a nocturnal place. It stagnated during the day, only becoming something at twilight. As dusk tucked itself in, Marilee would begin to feel suffocated and serenaded by the billions of stars that would fill the plum-purple sky. She imagined the rush of cool wind and song of

cicadas, swelling in the wet heat before the rain. She would feel less alone, then. The stars spoke to her, gently – they had seen, they knew -, and she could speak back.

The evening came and went just as she had suspected: Dinner she barely touched, stiff linens and mosquito spray and sickly yellow lights. In a terrible fore-thought attempt at saving money, Mama always booked one bedroom with a double bed. But they despised sharing sheets, What Had Happened a third that lay between and crushed them. Indoors, the night would pass slowly and painfully, prone to restlessness and itchy insomnia, with several trips to the bathroom cabinet where Mama's Little Blue Tablets resided. Only after swallowing three would Mama finally fall asleep and Marilee would listen to the frogs and stare out through the thin crepe curtains and watch the neon pool light shimmer from purple, to red, to green, to blue, to purple, to red, to

Rooibos tea, wet scrambled eggs and stale bread for breakfast. As always. The dining room was empty that morning, apart from one woman on the other end, with yellow straw for hair and an orange jersey that was unravelling itself. Marilee watched her empty four packets of sugar into her black coffee, the granules like sand in an hourglass. Tick, tick, tick.

- YOU HAVE TO EAT, MARILEE, Mama whispered, frustrated. She was grinding a concerning amount of salt over the eggs; a pitiful attempt at neutralizing the taste.

- WOULD YOU LIKE SOME CEREAL INSTEAD, LIEFIE? The waitress asked, her apron covered in stains.

Marilee perked up, but before she could say anything, Mama intervened.

- THANK YOU, BUT THAT'S TOO MUCH SUGAR. SHE'S FINE WITH THE EGGS.

- REALLY, IT'S NO BOTHER-

- THE EGGS ARE FINE, THANK YOU.

Mama always got nervous whenever people asked Marilee questions. The waitress nodded, offered a quick consolatory glance and went back to the kitchen. Marilee looked melancholically back down at her food, spotting a stray hair in the wet egg mess.

- DOES SHE SPEAK? The straw-haired woman from across the room called.

- EXCUSE ME? Mama turned around in her chair.

- YOUR DAUGHTER. DOES SHE SPEAK? She repeated.

Mama also couldn't lie.

- NO, Mama said, embarrassed, NOT ANYMORE.

- AH, she nodded, returning her focus to her plate of lamb sausage. THERE ARE A FEW MUTE KIDS NOWADAYS.

Mama listened, but did not acknowledge her.

- WHAT HAPPENED TO HER? The lady probed, SHE SEE SOMETHING?

- PLEASE, THAT'S PERSONAL.

The woman raised her hands defensively.

- SORRY... SORRY... she murmured, CAN'T ASK ANYTHING THESE DAYS.

Both tables fell silent, the only sound the clinking of unpolished silver against cheap porcelain. The waitress returned to fill the straw-haired woman's cup.

- JOHANNA, the straw-haired woman started, reaching for four more sachets of sugar, REMEMBER THAT KID? VAN DER MERWE'S KID?

- THE ONE THAT DIDN'T TALK?

Mama's knuckles whitened, and aggressively she began to saw into her slice of stale bread.

- YEAH, THAT ONE. WHAT WAS HIS NAME?

- BEN.

- THAT'S RIGHT. WHERE'S THAT BOY NOW?

- HE'S STILL IN SCHOOL. HIS GRADES ARE GOOD. HE'S DOING WELL.

- DOESN'T HAVE MANY FRIENDS, I IMAGINE.

- I DON'T KNOW ON THAT FRONT-

- WHAT HAPPENED AGAIN?

- THAT MADE HIM STOP SPEAKING?

- YEAH. SAW SOMETHING, DIDN'T HE?

Mama wrenched her knife through the toast, crumbs flying onto the table. Back and forth, back and forth...

- HE WATCHED HIS FATHER SHOOT HIS DOG. WAS JUST A PUPPY, TOO.

- AH, YES. POOR THING. JACK RUSSEL, WASN'T IT?

Johanna nodded.

- THAT'S THE THING WITH BOYS. THEY ALWAYS SEE SOMETHING. THAT'S WHAT SHUTS THEM UP. WITH GIRLS, IT'S USUALLY SOMETHING THAT HAPPENS TO THEM. CAR ACCIDENT. ROBBERY. THINGS LIKE THAT.

- WOULD YOU LIKE ANOTHER SLICE OF TOAST, MEVROU?

- I WONDER WHAT HAPPENED TO *HER*. The straw-haired woman juttred out her chin in Marilee's direction.

Mama sawed and sawed, the knife inching slowly-

- SCHOOL TEACHER MAYBE-

A grating screech silenced the room as metal finally met porcelain, the rose petal design fracturing like lightning. Both Johanna and the straw-haired woman stiffened, the noise still reverberating around the room.

- SHE FOUND HER FATHER'S BODY. Mama said. Her voice was stern and stiff, but steady. HE HUNG HIMSELF. SHE FOUND HIM. SHE HASN'T SAID A WORD SINCE. CAN WE PLEASE ENJOY OUR BREAKFAST, NOW?

Marilee watched their expressions pain. She was familiar with it, the creased eyebrows, the downcast look, the suffocating silence. Johanna delicately made her way back to the kitchen. Mama buttered her knife. Once the initial shock had dissipated, Marilee reached for the salt. The straw-haired woman cleared her throat.

- WAS HE MENTALLY ILL OR SOMETHING?

Summers in the Karoo are unbearable. Bright, white sunlight with winds that offered no relief from the heat. The windmills that barely turned, creaking only occasionally when a canary settled onto one of the blades. Sheep chewing and chewing on dead fynbos. Everything heavy and humid with ennui.

The pool water was stagnant. Mosquitoes twitched and floated on the surface. Marilee suspected that they were laying eggs. Stagnant water was something Mama had always told her to avoid. The larvae will crawl into your ears, Mama used to say. But Mama was inside reading some book and couldn't see her swinging her feet in the water, disrupting these nests from forming in the corners.

She had not swum since he had died. She had never swum without him; he would splash her playfully, hands on her waist, holding her up towards the sky. The sky... Dad and her would spend a lot of time outside at night. Don't wake Mama up, he would always whisper, brushing

strands of hair out of her face. Later, he would point at the different constellations and planets: Orion's Belt, Capricorn, Mars. Her eyes would never leave the sky, counting all the stars she could see, moving from left to right. She never made it past 126. Dad never wanted to stay outside for long, not wanting Mama to wake up to an empty bed and wonder, so they would then tiptoe back inside. He loved the stars as much as she did, but she could never look at them without remembering, without feeling...

She missed swimming. Acacia leaves fell like snow from the overarching tree, settling on the surface, dispersing only slightly with every ripple, every feet-kick. She had never swum alone. But, the water was warm from the summer sun, so she dropped the towel from her shoulders and slid, in one smooth motion, into the pool.

Sound travels differently underwater, she thought. It blurs, lengthens, distorts. Everything from above is instantly silenced. She could finally hear herself think. All she could hear was her heartbeat, slow and steady. Everything above water was deafening; loud and shrill and piercing. When you don't speak, it feels like everyone is shouting all the time. But underwater, nothing was loud. And alone underwater, she found another form of peace.

She watched the rest of the world fade, drown and dissolve. She looked up and saw the soft shimmering lines of light drift and dance on the surface; this must be where God had hidden a vision of heaven. She was enveloped in water, her palms brushing the coarse lining of the floor. Nothing could touch her here. She was safe. And for the first time since that July morning, she opened her mouth and screamed.

She SCREAMED. Loud and shrill, she screamed. Her throat scratched itself raw and her breath escaped her in a flurry of bubbles. She screamed until her vision blurred and darkened. She let herself become lighter than air, she let herself inch toward the unconscious, flirt with death, she let her body slowly buoy up on its own. But she screamed. And screamed.

She could only hear herself. She could no longer hear her heartbeat, the rush of bubbles, the soft creaking of the rope, the strangled muffle of her father, begging her to call her mother, to cut him down, he had made a mistake. *Orion's Belt, Capricorn, Mars*. She couldn't hear him promise, repeatedly THIS IS THE LAST TIME AND I WILL BE BETTER, I WON'T DO IT AGAIN. She couldn't hear his last gasps for air. The warm water negated the cold touch of the night, of his hands, closer and closer and lower and lower and

Water sizzling on hot clay tiles. Her lungs full, her throat raw and blood sputtering out of her mouth. This was new. Her mother towering over her, disappointed. This wasn't.

- MARILEE, WHAT WERE YOU THINKING-

Mama continued to shout. She screamed for a while, too. She was unaware of the straw-haired woman peering out from behind the moth-eaten curtains, watching, listening. Marilee's head grew hot and, addicted, she began to crave the silence of the water once more. Swiftly, she rolled over the pool tiles, splashing back into the pool.

Cold. Quiet. Release.

It didn't last long. Suddenly, she whipped around at the ear-shattering sound of a crash. It was her mother, encased in effervescence. They peered at each other, squinting while the chlorine ate at their eyeballs. For a moment, it was silent. Rush of bubbles. Heartbeat. Then, Marilee screamed. Her mother joined her. They SCREAMED. Guttural, grating, the sound of a thousand deaths lived over and over every minute and forever in one moment of space and time. Perpetual. Endless.

(From above, behind the curtain lace, all she saw were bubbles. The acacia leaves slowly dropped and dried in the white heat. A frog croaked occasionally, dragonflies drifted, buzzed along the water's surface. It was a calm day. Peaceful. Not a sound to be heard.)

Water covered them, cooled them. The world silenced. But it could not stay like this, their lungs aching, screeching for air. But they stayed beneath, seeing each other, communicating more than they ever had.

Vision blurred, they finally caved, rising to the surface. They spluttered and coughed out their organs and secrets onto the tiles. Mama's clothes clung to her skin like the lies she had covered herself in for years, hair twisting and curling as it dried. Everything in her prevented Marilee from looking at her mother, bones cemented in place. But, as Mama left, Marilee watched her footprints dissipate in the heat. For a while, Marilee let the sun bake her skin, the shock of being understood and understanding leaving her breathless. Limply, she got up and walked to the hotel room, forgetting her towel, limp like a corpse, on the tiles.

Mama had almost finished packing when Marilee entered the room. Instead of protest – they still had two days left – Marilee started helping. Within twenty minutes, the room was once again plain and empty, no sign of life. No one stopped them from leaving. Instead, Johanna and the straw-haired woman watched from the dining room as red dust billowed behind them, coating the fynbos. It was quiet.

It was quiet in the car. Mama hadn't said anything since before she had jumped into the pool. Marilee glanced over at Mama's hands, veins popping from her skin and hands white from clutching the steering wheel.

"You, too?" Mama finally asked, shattering the humid silence.

"Yes." Marilee whispered.

Mama nodded.

Neither spoke again.

*Ashley Allard is currently completing her Masters in Creative Writing at the University of Cape Town. She was the runner-up for the Sol Plaatje European Union Award in 2022 and*

*has since founded a Western Cape literary magazine called Low Altitude. Ashley has been the co-editor of Moyé Magazine, a Johannesburg-based youth art zine, since 2020.*

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## **There is a Stranger in My House**

**Tamara Jackson**

There is a stranger in my home. He eats, he sleeps, and he speaks. All I wish is that he could do that somewhere else, anywhere else, just not in my home. Home, the place where one lives permanently, especially as a member of a family or household. Blood may relate him to me, but he is no family. He is a parasite that has made my home its host. I've lived comfortably for the first fourteen years of my life, and then he shows up. He waltzed through our doors like he owned the place, and my mother should just do his bidding. He speaks as if he's superior to the rest of us. He does whatever he wants whenever he wants. He doesn't leave his throne, which he has claimed as the living room couch. Eventually, he might as well rot on his throne. He constantly gives orders to my mother, and she never argues back, but she takes care of him by feeding him three times a day and always goes out of her way to fulfill his every desire. Over the course of a year, I can count on just one hand how many conversations we have had. And I mean conversations, not meaningless 'good morning' or 'good evening', I am forced to say. Maybe it's my fault for building this wall, but it is definitely his fault for trespassing it. He traveled over seven hundred and fifty miles, and I only wish he went seven hundred and fifty miles in any other direction than my home. He sits on his throne and watches adult materials on the TV as if nobody else lives in this home. Nobody wants to be woken up to extreme erotica blasting on their living room TV. Is he still oblivious to the rest of us living here? Or does he just not care how his actions affect others? Either way, I want him out. Out of my home, out of my life. Just out. Pack his things and head seven hundred and fifty miles from where he came from. He dumped himself into my home like a parasite and embedded himself here, refusing to leave. I no longer want my home to be a host. I want to go back to the way I was living fourteen years before he came here. Is it bad to hope someone is gone from your life? Riddled by any means necessary? I pray and pray and pray repeatedly just to wish these feelings, these thoughts out of my head. But over and over and over again, they come crawling back. I find myself asking God, "Why, why do I feel this way? Why can't I stop feeling repulsed by this man's presence?" I ask God to rid me of these worldly emotions so I can stop thinking of these sinful thoughts. My mother has said, "He isn't going anywhere." And as much as I try, there is no getting rid of him. So, for now, there is a stranger in my home, and he is here to stay. There is a stranger in my home, and I want him to go away.

# Featured Poems

1. Lettered by Emma Wells
  2. The Visit by Glenis Moore
  3. Breaking the Cycle (Escaping Abuse) by Sally Bonn-Ohiaeriaku
  4. Footsteps by Terry Sadie
  5. Holidays by Vita Luna
  6. Family by Lucky Sharma
  7. From Daughter to Parents by Didar Ş. Şencan
  8. We Share by Teguan Harris
  9. Alice Under Siege by Sarah Jay Sanders
  10. The Sisters and Brothers that were Left to be Forgotten by Kaydence McCullough
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## Lettered

### Emma Wells

Splats of disappointment

shimmer leaden faces

in puddles of truth

where I can't refuse

to stare back

with frigid acknowledgement;

disdain traces my footfalls

as *1984* cameras,

eyeing Winston

in literary corners;

camera lenses zoom in,

crystallising suspicion

with sneered-lip filters.

Life has caught up.

Turning page corners,

I burrow to distant lands

absorbing lives of others

as osmosis into fractures

where words fill fleshy holes,

refitting, repurposing

as broken cars

in grease-lined garages,

basking in backstreet splendour.

A blessing lies in this.

Close the door,

hide the world;

its all-seeing sun

shines too brightly.

Instead, I enfold

wearing novels as inky shrouds:

places, characters, themes  
paint vision with silken syntax  
softening my mind to rest  
in papery playgrounds;  
each novel, held in hand,  
is a healing catechism  
gilding edges  
of everyday tatters.

*Emma is a mother and English teacher. She has poetry and prose published with various literary journals and magazines. She is currently writing her fifth novel.*

*Emma won Wingless Dreamer's Bird Poetry Contest of 2022 and her short story, 'Virginia Creeper', was selected as a winning title by WriteFluence Singles Contest in 2021.*

*Recently, Emma won Dipity Literary Magazine's 2024 Best of the Net Nominations for Fiction with a short story entitled 'The Voice of a Wildling'.*

*Her poem 'Rose-Tainted is the winner of the poetry category, Discourse Literary Journal, February 2024 Issue.*

*She has just been shortlisted for her flash fiction writing, 'Agnes Richter', by Anthology.*

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## **The Visit**

**Glenis Moore**

Dad sits in his little room  
surrounded by things he can't quite remember.  
His island kingdom restricted now  
but no less glorious for that.  
When I enter he smiles.

Today he recalls me as his daughter,  
last week I was just a visitor  
to be told stories of rituals  
long forgotten and muddled in the telling.

We talk for a while of my week,  
his does not seem to exist,  
and then he stops.

He looks out of the window  
and starts tales of his youth  
when the sky was always blue  
and his island was joined to the other land  
of work and family  
before the tide came in  
and washed it all away.

*Glenis is a relatively new poet working in the flat lands of the Fens near Cambridge. When she is not writing she makes beaded jewellery, knits, reads and runs 10K races slowly. She has been previously published by Dust Poetry, Impspire, Litbop, Constellations and Cosmic Daffodil.*

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## **Breaking the Cycle (Escaping Abuse)**

**Sally Bonn-Ohiaeriaku**

In a home where violence silently grew,  
A mother, eyes shut tight, hoped the pain wouldn't prolong.

Her son's rage, like a wild storm,

Teachers warned, but she moved him away

Therapy was suggested, but she chose to pray.

Preferring the preacher's words to guide.

Then came a younger sister, a spark of light

But her success sparked envy, son's jealousy brought violence

Each strike, each blow, hidden from sight,

The mother begged silence, fearing the authorities

But how long could the sister carry the weight of silent cries,

A decision forged in pain, beneath tear-stained cheeks.

Leaving home, a heavy heart, but a soul free,

Mom kept enabling, thinking it was right,

But it tore their bond, in the dark of night.

Left behind, a mother's love veiled in misguided care,

Society favoured the son, in his bubble of pride,

Unchecked, he roamed, with darkness to hide.

Their bond fractured, a painful division,

The sister vowed to heal, to leave behind the past,

Never forgiving mom, for how long it would last.

The son, lost in his rage, couldn't see the light,

Trapped in a cycle, that wasn't right.

This story reminds, with a simple plea,

To speak up against violence, and not just obey.

Breaking the cycle, starts with you and me,

Choosing love over anger, setting hearts free.

Time will tell if the mother will see,

The harm of her choices, and set her children free

*Sally Bonn-Ohiaeriaku is Nigerian, an environmentalist and academic researcher, and she is also very passionate about art, particularly writing and photography. She has several unpublished works. When she is not working on research or writing, she loves to volunteer with various NGO. It's a great way to give back to the community and make a positive impact.*

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## **Footsteps**

### **Terry Sadie**

When I heard his footsteps outside my door,

I felt the fear, I remembered the pain.

Memories of sullied shame, still raw,

When I heard his footsteps outside my door.

I was too young, too afraid to withdraw

From the indecent exposure again.

When I heard his footsteps outside my door,

I felt the fear, I remembered the pain.

When I heard his footsteps approach my bed,

I cried for my mother; she was not there.

I needed her love to banish the dread,

When I heard his footsteps approach my bed.

Why she remained absent, she never said.

She left me to endure; she did not care.

When I heard his footsteps approach my bed,

I cried for my mother; she was not there.

His footsteps still haunt me when I recall

Those terrible years, those dark days.

The passage of time heals nothing at all.

His footsteps still haunt me when I recall

Misbehaving boys at the college ball.

I've forgiven him now, his evil ways.

His footsteps still haunt me when I recall

Those terrible years, those dark days.

When he heard footsteps on the chapel floor,

My Sweetheart glanced back to claim his fair bride.

Till death do us part, we joyfully swore.

When he heard footsteps on the chapel floor,

He promised to love, to keep, and adore,

His unborn children, safely by his side.  
When he heard footsteps on the chapel floor  
My Sweetheart glanced back to claim his fair bride.

When they hear our footsteps approach the door,  
Their voices combine to welcome us in.  
The little ones laugh, and giggle, and roar,  
When they hear our footsteps approach the door.  
They are safe, they are loved; ready to soar  
From the nest, with compassion and caring.  
When they hear our footsteps approach the door  
Their voices combine to welcome us in.

*Terry Sadie says, "I live in South Africa, where I was born seventy years ago. My husband, John, and I live in a quaint village, Montagu, with two dogs, and a cat. I started writing only a few short years ago. I never liked writing at school and being told to write an essay was considered a punishment for me. My views and likes have changed with age and now I enjoy writing structured poetry and short stories."*

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## **Holidays**

### **Vita Luna**

Family is thicker than blood  
Especially after Christmas Day  
When gifts have come and gone  
But the extra pounds stay

Shouldn't we all try

To see each other a little more?

Not just on the Holidays

And swing by the front door?

Let's have eggs in June

And feasts in July

Let's share poems in April

And not be shy

*Vita Luna (née Vita Luna Jansen) is a Dutch graduate of English Literature. She has published two romance dramedy novels, Love and Loss in Camden and Daniel, David & Denise. She also released another novel, called Breckan and Co.'s Strange Discoveries Volume 1: The Facility, which is a kind of science fiction thriller for middle grade and up. Volume 2: The Aftermath, Volume 3: The Search, Volume 4: The Escape and Volume 5: The Finale have just been released. She hopes to continue sharing her imagination with the world.*

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## **Family**

### **Lucky Sharma**

A family that turns tears to laughter,

Reuniting the lost, their bond ever after. Sharing our burdens, making them their own, Their presence, a comfort, never alone.

Sometimes strict, yet quick to forgive,

Bringing back the innocence of being a kid. Their love, the reason behind every smile, Solving our troubles, mile after mile.

Deliberately letting us win each game we play, Making us feel cherished, in every way.

Their eyes fill with tears when we're apart, A reminder of their love, deep in their heart.

Family, a precious gift from above,

An adornment to life, an example of love. From shared meals to the last morsel left, Their love, an unbreakable theft.

In tales from grandma and toys from grandpa's hand, Their love, a fortress, where we stand.

Dad's weekly allowance, mom's quiet plea,

Their support, our lifeline, in times of need.

Family, the most precious treasure we hold, A sanctuary of love, more precious than gold. In their embrace, our hearts find solace,

For without family, life loses its grace.

*Lucky says, "I'm currently pursuing a Master of Science in Mathematics, but my passions extend beyond numbers. I find immense joy in writing, dancing, and singing. Fiction is my primary genre of choice, where I indulge in the realms of imagination, translating vivid thoughts into captivating words. Poetry also holds a special place in my heart."*

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## **From Daughter to Parents**

### **Didar Ş. Şencan**

My mother and my father, my only reason for being,

Have been the only ones who care about my wellbeing.

We had good and bad days, cried, and laughed together.

We hugged each other even though the pain was forever.

My mother and my father never let paucity wear us out.

My father is the one who taught me how to surmount.

He always hid his problems because he did not want me to get sad;

Even after a bad day, he always had a smile on his face and looked glad.

My mother is the one who taught me how to forbear.

She always protected me; her invisible shield was her prayer.

Sometimes she has been my mother and my father at the same time.

I do not think my parents are supernatural; however, they are divine.

My mother and my father, my everything in this severe life,

Realised I must find my way, so they prepared me for the strife.

“Life is not always beautiful; you know it very well,” they said.

“You will have to struggle with severity; learn how to defeat the dread.”

You have been keeping too many secrets since I was a child;

However, this is the most important one because life is going to be wild.

Mom and dad will not be with me till the end, so I need to be aware.

I must stand on my own two feet; my parents are not going to be there.

I am not scared of anything if my mother and my father are with me;

However, they will be away and I will be lonely; it is frightening to be free.

My mother and my father put their calloused hands right on my heart.

“We are always right here, deep inside, daughter. We will never be apart.”

*Didar says, “I was born in January 2003 in Istanbul. I am currently a veterinary school student. My hobbies are writing short stories and poems, learning Spanish and Japanese, riding my bicycle, and learning about animals. I write for fun, to improve my literary skills, and because I love writing. Maybe I can publish a book about veterinary medicine in the future.”*

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**We Share**

**Teguan Harris**

We share one blood.

We share one mind.

We share one soul.

We share one spirit.

The backbone. The bones that keep us together and make us whole.

The brain. The brain cells that think for the rest of us.

The heart. The heart pumps the blood around our bodies and keeps us warm.

The skin. The skin that wraps us in a tight embrace.

Love.

Love keeps us strong.

Love keeps us together.

Love keeps us sane.

Integrity.

Integrity keeps us close.

Integrity keeps us accountable.

Integrity keeps us bonded.

Kindness.

Kindness keeps us smiling.

Kindness keeps us warm.

Kindness keeps us tied together.

Family.

The blood and the mind.

The soul and the spirit.

Family.

The backbone. The brain. The heart. The skin.

Family.

Love. Integrity. Kindness.

Family.

Us

You.

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## **Alice Under Siege**

**Sarah Jay Sanders**

i hate the ties that bind  
us to our past.  
hopeless heritage,  
broken ancestry,  
cursed legacy.

why must the blade always be brought  
to the dinner table  
for the inevitable defense?  
why must the barbs always come  
on the underside of greenbacks  
with selfish intents?

the ties that bind  
my hands behind my back,  
my sight turning black,  
this cord around my neck!

and she pulls,  
and she pulls,  
and i snap,  
and i snap.

the dye is cast, and  
the black sheep is in;  
everybody laugh,  
she's the scapegoat again.  
at the whim of the mad hatter  
and that bitch queen of hearts,  
paint the roses red

though the garden falls apart.

twenty years and counting,  
this nomad has roamed  
where all the free range chickens  
find a voice of their own.  
the truth will be honored,  
both within and without;  
let kindness and conviction  
be the words in your mouth.

so bleed all the bloodlines  
and fat-timber the tree,  
she's writing a new story,  
and the soul shall be free.

*Sarah Jay Sanders is a recently re-married mother of five children that lives in a mountain community of East Tennessee. Poetry has always been a positive creative outlet for as she has processed childhood trauma, marriage and divorce, single parenthood, and the long journey toward healing and happiness. In the quiet spaces between planning her daughter's fall wedding and working her sons' robotics matches, she is writing her narrative memoir. The attached compilation is a sampling of my poetry.*

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## **The Sisters and Brothers that were Left to be Forgotten**

**Kaydence McCullough**

The world, to start, at wake, and at end, and fall

I left blood. The shining rose color as it

drips past the earth's very floor, soaking the

The term 'family'

In tears that fall, I crumble to family, to the ones forgotten, I care for, the ones that leave themselves in the hands and love of I

In trust they gave me, as the still world moves, as the loud noises man makes, as the loud silence of walls, the whispers of stars, the song the current sings and the laughter they bring with the stories they tell, the open ears they leave for I to fill, and the silence around they Bin, man has nothing but ripples crawling through my skin, ripping tissues as the world my family is, and the

poems they bring, and the songs that heal, and the sun, her tending hands, make the whole in my chest full, like the light disappearing in darkness, but as he rises, his light showing in every dark. As whispers taunt me, hardly hearing gossip from one, to hearing the love brought by another

To the Rain

Sister

To nature

Brother

To the Sun

Mother

To the night

Father

As They watch, as they breathe, as they carry hopes to their hearts, to them they listen to my throats, to them who stayed, to them who never left, to them who love.

To them, they gave I, the releases other say burdened them, to them I sing, to them I feel their pain, to them, I feel myself, to them I feel the ground, the air, each hair on my body, to the Sun as she guides my hope to them, To Sister, who sings with me, so tell stories, to her who drinks my tears, To brother, who hugs himself at night, to him who is to brave to hold the hearts in himself, to him who holds my words to his heart, to him I hold his trust. To Dad, who brings himself to light the dark he hovers in, to him who watches, to him who talks to me, to him who listens to my thoughts,

To family who I take, to them who hold me.

# Featured Essays

## 1. Family by Elynn Ong Jia Wen

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### Family

#### Elynn Ong Jia Wen

The blood inside me is the reddest red anything could be.

Family? It's a word I rarely use, yet whenever I hear the word, it sends countless reverberations through my heart, where it has already squeezed itself halfway through.

I believe every human being in the world is made up of different shades of color. There could be great tints of warm scarlet, there could be a few drops of ocean blue, and there could also be clouds of light grey mixed within. I myself am not sure what shade I am, for growing up as the eldest daughter in an Asian family can make you wonder if you ever had any shade at all.

It was never about what my parents did; it was about what they never did. They built a roof over my head, they put meals on the table, and they provided me with appropriate education. Yet, they were the ones that shaped my insecurities; they were the ones that continuously stabbed my heart; and they were the ones that scarred my already tired soul.

It's a weird sensation, to be exact. I don't actually hate my family, but I don't feel love for them either. Sure, I'd help each and every one of them if they were ever in need; I'd step in and shield them from danger; I'd put a gun at anyone who'd dare lay a finger on them; but would they put themselves in the same position for me?

I'm not quite sure.

They'd probably point out the mistakes I made, though, and how differently I should've handled the situation, and what else I should've done to produce better results, and that they could solve it themselves and that I was never needed.

Yeah, they'd probably do that, I'm quite sure.

During the year I spent cooped up in my room with nowhere to go, it was hard for everyone to manage their daily lives. I knew it was very difficult for my parents, too. Dad would keep talking about how hard his business was, and mom would make a fuss about every little thing that didn't go her way.

That's why I kept quiet.

On the nights when everyone was asleep, I'd be awake, lying on my bed with an empty heart, rethinking where it went wrong. I was thrown into loops and loops of melancholy, drowning in obscure, murky seas of nothingness. In the morning, during lunch, and when dinner was ready, I dreaded getting out of bed. I had to muster up all my energy just to put a decent look on my face and to smile at whatever topic they were talking about, and sometimes I would even feel pathetic for my frail attempts to hide my troubles from them, but I hoped, I hoped that one day maybe, just maybe, someone would notice how shattered I was.

I used to spend 24 hours with them, and laughter would fill the living room as we sat on the couch watching television. Occasionally, there would be fights between my little brother and sister about who'd get the best seat on the sofa. It was until we started university life when times like these started to slowly fade out of our lives, and it was when my mom would start complaining why her children wouldn't want to spend time with her.

It's a puzzle—a puzzle that's always lacking a piece. Maybe we all tried fixing the one we thought was correct in its place, but one corner would always stick out. Soon everyone just left it as it was, for we ran out of resources to carve new pieces. I'd ponder about the many possibilities that could take place: maybe that missing piece is still floating in the middle of nowhere, waiting to be found; maybe that missing piece is something we all have to wait for; maybe that missing piece is already riding on time's back, charging towards us at full speed.

One day, I hope, one day we will pick up the broken pieces of ourselves and find the memories and love scattered in them. We'll shrug and laugh at how silly we all were for throwing harsh words at each other and isolating ourselves from the rest of the members, and everything will turn 180 degrees around, and the word normal can be used to describe our family once again.

Well, we are connected by blood, aren't we?

***Elynn Ong Jia Wen is a university student from Malaysia with tremendous enthusiasm for language and writing, with a few of her works published in local magazines and short story collections. She hopes to convey feelings through bare alphabets and will continue on her journey to become the writer she aspires to be, along with her motto "The ink does not restrict the writer's imagination, so why not let them run wild?".***