

Featured Stories

1. The Unhappy by Gordon M. Wise
 2. Losing My Identity by James Kingston
 3. Stamps, Stamps, Stamps by Madhu Mehrotra
 4. It Happened by the River by Bhekuyise Dlamini
 5. Merida and Mulan by Pollyanna Wood
-

The Unhappy

Gordon M. Wise

Have you ever noticed a solitary man sitting at a bar in a pub? There sits a drink, beer, in front of him. He sits to attention between sips as if that homage to the jug defines the solemnity of the occasion. Sipping small amounts, it takes time, then the nod to the barmaid as she draws another and replaces it. There is a smacking of the lips and a sigh. He looks straight ahead. This is a serious business, the glass, the posture, lost in his own world. After a while, he leaves. There is no idle banter. This is a ritual to be performed with due process. The drinker, sad, distinct, of all the people in the bar, he knows why he is there; there's nowhere else.

He leaves with his little brown parcel of take-away lasagna and treads back to his pad. As time progresses, he is less purposeful now; he goes up the stairs, the dinner into the microwave. The TV turned on and a stubby opened wrestling tonight, the BIG BASH tomorrow.

I started as that man and then I didn't care. I did not reverence the jar. My life began at 10 am when the pub opened, and I felt at home there and peaceful. The bottles on the top shelf were there for other people, Bailey's, Absolut Vodka, Bundaberg Rum. The other drinkers talked to each other, chatter, chatter. I did not talk; I drank until closing. I don't bother with lasagne then; instead, a cardboard carton of Shiraz. No self-contained flat now; instead, I occupied a room at Mrs Maloney's. She would watch me as and remind me if it was Thursday tomorrow, rent day. She had priorities; I had none except to find a glass where I had secreted it under the bed and drink till I drifted off to sleep. I tiptoed to the toilet at night, fearful of waking the others. There was Joe, who was sick. He coughed at night. He once almost burnt to death, the result of smoking in bed. Ronny, was a neighbour, who was an alcoholic but still worked on the roads as a labourer. I sometimes cheated and peed in the handbasin; Mrs Maloney warned me not to do it. My bladder was weak, and I was unsteady in the dim corridor to the toilet.

My life had been ordinary till the accident. I was married for only a few weeks to Jane. Jane was pregnant and our entire life was before us. My world had changed with the car crash. Afterwards, they wheeled me around each day to see her in the ICU. They connected her to a BIRD respirator with a concertina bag which filled and emptied as her chest rose and fell, controlled by the tube in her throat. The doctors had removed the baby by then, a girl. Odd to think that your child can kill you. They asked me whether they could turn off the machine. They said she was brain dead.

I was there for hours watching her rib cage rise and fall, willing her to wake until a nurse put her hand on my shoulder, gripped it and shook her head. The funeral was a blur. I sat in my wheelchair and folk spoke to me, and I remember none of it.

I went back to work in the office, but I couldn't concentrate. The psychologists said I had PTSD. That is when I started drinking. MAIB gave me money, and I had lots of time to think and had an empty feeling, unless I drank.

I awoke one day from my usual dream, drenched in sweat, screaming as I lost control of the car. It was always the same. We were on a country road. Jane's head is on my shoulder. The car surfs and then I remember nothing except the pain when I regained consciousness.

This spring morning, my recurring nightmare did not go away. It followed me into the street. I saw the highway in shop windows. I cursed and swore as I banged my forehead on the wall outside The Duke of Wellington. The image was still there. My mouth was dry. I was sweating with panic. I reached for the door of the pub, but I didn't enter; instead, I walked and walked. I stumbled across the foreshore of the Rocks, along Circular Quay and up Macquarie St to Hyde Park. I felt sick. My stomach was churning, and the terror persisted. The vision was gone, but the effect lingered and became less acute; but remained real.

Around me in the park were couples sitting on the spring grass. The daffodils were swaying in the breeze, and the borders were in bloom. I was terrified, still shaking from the dream. Across the road, St Mary's was coming to life. The bells reminded me of my youth at the mercy of the Christian Brothers at Waverley College. I hesitated, and despite my misgivings, I headed for the Cathedral. When I got there, I just listened. It was a long time since I had been to a Mass. I felt comfortable there and drifted off to sleep. Sensing a memory my parents beside me, and the familiar words of the Latin mass soothed my caged mind. I sat there all day and the next day and then every day and ignored all the unspoken invitations from the priests.

A young priest approached me and tried to make conversation.' Is there something you would like to discuss 'he asked? 'No thanks, I need nothing. I want to sit here if that IS OK.' I murmured. 'Of course, it is, but please, if you wish to talk, come up to the vestry.' I was sober now and taking an effort with my appearance.

I was looking quite respectable. Each morning I arrived at the Cathedral for the 8 am Mass. I always remained at the back, away from the congregation. I felt comfortable there, not committed. The familiarity of the words, the quiet when the service was finished. It was an asylum from the torment of my life. I was not having a religious experience, just renewing acquaintance with a familiar scene, an unchanging one, the comfort of memories.

Every day at 9 and 11 there was a guided tour of the cathedral conducted by an elderly man who turned up, rain or shine, to walk visitors around the enormous building and explain the chapels, the iconography, and history. I joined the tour on three occasions. The usual attendees were a very mixed group of tourists and often school children from Catholic schools. By this time, I was becoming a fixture in the back pews. Nobody tried to get rid of me, and so far, I had resisted all attempts to find out my "story."

One day as I was settling into my favourite pew of the last several weeks; Father Burke came up to talk to me. This was the same earnest young priest who had first sought to engage me. ‘Sorry to interrupt but John Brown, who conducts the tours, has phoned in sick. Would you take the tour? You joined in occasionally and I am sure by now you know your way around. It would be an immense help and I sense you have a Catholic background. It is for today if you were not doing anything pressing.’

I was aghast. They were asking me to lead the tour. I stammered, ‘yes, I will do my best, but I will not be as informative as the usual tour guide.’

‘We would be grateful, thank you,’ he reassured me.

John Brown died that week, and I took over his role. I did guided tours every day at 9 and 11 and at 3 pm during Lent and the Christmas period, I explained Catholicism to Shinto devotees from Japan, Buddhists from India, and the occasional Australian agnostic. School groups were the most fun and when I looked at the little ones, I imagined what it would have been like if things had been different.

Since then, I have had conversations with the young cleric. I have not engaged with the Mass yet. Am I tempted, yes? I still have hang-ups about what happened. The priest understands and is waiting for me to resolve my difficulties. What am I doing here? I don’t know, but I am not drinking, and I have a purpose in life.

Gordon says, “I am a retired surgeon who writes short stories, novellas and now a novel. Most of my output tends to satirical, but for once I decided to be serious.”

Losing My Identity

James Kingston

Hello, my name is Jim. I’m approximately 45 years old. I say approximately because the last few years have been a bit sketchy. I’m 6’ 2”. I have salt ‘n’ pepper hair. I am Welsh, I am British, I am of Irish descent. I am a father, a husband, a son, and a brother. I am a man. I am a human being. I have socialist leanings. I am from a working-class background. I support Liverpool FC. I like to write and paint and play guitar. I am a pacifist. I am a realist and I am a member of the local chess club. But all these things. These qualities that come together to form my identity are getting more indistinct every day. Like the fragments of a dream dissipate upon waking, my identity is quickly drifting distorted, hazily into memory. Because I am homeless. And now, food is foremost in my mind. And temperature. I am usually cold. And uncomfortable. And every day, I lose a piece of what I once was. I feel somehow outside myself. That the inevitable pattern of my life has been shattered and the internal, the personal and the essential have become exposed for all to see. If it continues like this, I wonder where I’ll be in a year, two, ten.

I'd heard the saying that everybody is only three steps away from losing everything. I never took too much notice until it happened to me. First, my wife left me for a man at work. I know. What a cliché. That was a shock. I thought that we were happy. Truly I did. But obviously not. Her new man could give her more than me. More love? More money? More fulfilment? I don't know. They took my daughter. That was the worst. Then I could see her at the weekends. Why is this the case? Because the law says so. They sold my home. And then I lived in a flat. I was now a part time father. I was no longer a husband. Then my parents died. Who'd have thought it? They'd just started their retirement, they had plans, then bang, an articulated lorry had wiped them out. I was no longer a son. Then I lost my job. Unemployed. 40 years old and unemployed for the first time in my life. My savings didn't last long and then there was no flat.

My first night on the streets I didn't sleep. I walked around until my feet were tired. Then I sat and stared. Empty thoughts filled my brain. I didn't feel angry any more. That was gone. I had been angry. With her, with him, with the government, with society, with the lorry driver who'd killed my parents. But now I had changed. I was on a different path. My fate, my freedom of choice had been taken away from me. I was becoming something which I couldn't understand. After three months I had lost three stone. I was gaunt. I ate out of bins. I slept anywhere I could find some shelter. I begged and was beaten for it, so I hid inside my mind. I retreated inside myself. And now I'm here. I sit and watch people go by. I have a different perspective now. A different identity. I have no identity. I have no papers, no passport, no driving licence. I have no possessions to anchor my sense of self. It's all gone. I don't know where it is. It disappeared along with everything else that used to be me.

It's strange. I used to long for time alone, time to think. My mind was so active when I had an identity. Any spare moment I had, I would develop my theories. On life, why we are here, society, philosophy, ethics, damn, I even had theories on how to eradicate homelessness. Almost ironic heh. But now that I've got time to think. To work out what it all means. To question how we form our identity through childhood experiences, societal and cultural influences, hereditary traits, genetics, environment, exposure to incidents both negative and positive. Now I have the time, my mind is empty. I sit and I stare. Or I walk and I watch. But all I see are empty faces. Empty people echoing the emptiness inside me. When I lost my identity, everyone else seemed to lose theirs too. I know that's a lie, but it's how I feel. Soulless.

I always felt that identity was so much more than those traits I just mentioned. That it was somehow innate and was forged in a place before we are even born. I was never religious, but I did believe in an underlying spirituality in all of us. An interconnectivity that transcends blood ties and conscious thought. That we originate in a mysterious place. A place where we will return upon our death. But now. I see the deepest blue skies. They're so bright now. And when the wind rustles the leaves and sends them tumbling in their autumnal splendour, it makes more sense to just watch than to think. It's just an excuse because I've forgotten how to think.

When I try to think clearly, my thoughts flow so randomly. Past events merge with my new reality. My thoughts are out of control. There is no logic. No order. And I see all the people passing by. All those heads. All those bodies. Those brains. Those sentient conscious beings. And I think why? What are they all doing? Who are these people? Where are they

going? Is there a pattern to their lives? Over the fields on the edge of town, the starlings murmuration is miraculous against the razor grey skies. Such beauty. Such order. Such awareness of one another. Behind the power plant. The brambles reclaim the land amongst broken bottles and discarded syringes. Detritus of desecration. It's desolate down by the weir. And I skim a stone, just for the nostalgia. The ripples catch the light and I catch myself falling down corridors with parquet flooring, echoing footsteps of another time. And the fluorescent graffiti suits the old cinema wall. A modern-day Basquiat. Another lost soul. Where are all the enlightened ones? Crowds pass on match day like a symbiotic organism. Belonging, beginning to understand. Chanting primal colours. Scattering pigeons and pedestrians in their wake. And protestors bearing their slogans. Confirming their ideology. Affirming their identity. Of belonging to something, anything.

I've felt numb now for a while, numb like the onset of frostbite, mental frostbite. It started when I was a little kid, too old to know anything worth knowing but old enough to know more than I do now. An older lad hit me, my Grandad died, full force in the face, prone on the hospital bed, nose bleeds but doesn't feel, a cold wall from him. I feel like I'm being watched, constant, round the clock surveillance, the faces of the dead haunt my waking hours and to dream is to make real. I get up from the cold concrete, blood streams from my nose, my toes are cold, and I feel like my socks are drenched with blood, slightly warm, crystalline. It's only sweat, taste of metal, rust in my mouth, in my veins, the scars of last year remain. Iron hands clamp down, the brain journeys backwards towards eternity. I catch a fleeting glimpse, a dying breath, a fading flower on the wall of life, tied up counted and shot, shot down in flames in all its god forsaken glory.

I watch the people pass with a sinister eye. The leaves spiral and dive, the trees sway ethereally over the canal. The apartments juxtapose greyly against the swaying branches. Joggers glance my way then pick up pace. Gin is passed into whisky hands, cold dawn shaking moments, pissing in the cold streak rays of dawn. But it's midday, with nothing left to say. A sad epitaph. Sudden moments distract the already distracted defenses. Words were so important. What are we without language? It forms our identity. It enables us to communicate our deepest desires and emotions. It gives us liberty and it defines what liberty should be. Life is my TV screen and society plays out like a languid drama.

There's a sense of the absurd to the whole situation. Is this real? What am I doing here? People have moved on in a static bubble. It could still be 1999 but the jokes are quieter, and the faces all seem slightly older. Thin grey hairs are apparent. Slowly creeping up alongside the wrinkles and burst blood vessels. Yeah, I guess life eventually takes its toll and leaves its imprint on your physical appearance. But hey ho! You sip another drink, smoke another cigarette as the days get older and your skin gets colder and your family fade away in front of your eyes, no surprise, just slow demise. The generations swiftly switch and now you're the adults, the grandparents, so close, so quick, so soon. And life spirals on continuously, never missing a beat, concentrated upon an unlikely goal. Focused on an evanescent whim. You drift. Haphazardly. And the seasons turn, and you see the re-birth of life all around you. And you're a part of this so it must mean something. And you convince yourself of your immortality. You realise that you're part of existence. How could it be any different?

They sit there like creatures. Sharing their cider and society. And I'm outside again. The pavement cracks are the fragmentation of my mind. And their dark clothes hide the darkness inside. And the others are there with their phones and their friends. Switched on. Constantly connected. Social zombies. Creating their online identities. Their digital demeanors. The pout, the pose, the flex. All part of their society. Their identity is made up of bytes. It is a family album of pixelated publicity. Domain defamatory. And I see them, and I want to scream, 'This is life. Why are you walking around, with your eyes cast to the ground? Searching for the next photo opportunity?' A path to engagement with social acceptance through their cloying network. And there is no conversation. Just dull distraction. Rehearsed recognition. Leading to defamation and deep displacement. A new duality. The real and the virtual. I was virtually a person once but even now, am I more vital than a like, a comment or a swipe to the right? But the dribbling drunks don't see me. And neither do the meandering millennials with their Smart selves. So, I slip unnoticed through the pavement cracks, down the railway tracks into dream.

And the concrete is anthracite grey. Stained with chewing gum and reeking of dog excrement. But the clouds are silver tinged, sweeping by ephemerally. And I long to pass into the farthest obscurity. Far away from this life. From these bludgeoning boundaries. As a child, I saw it all so clearly. With an open mind, the vast eternity was so possible until you became part of the routine. Caught in the caustic trap. It is not how we should be. Our lives. Our identity. All hurtling forward perpetually like time. No chance for meditation. Barely a moment for compassion. And I want to shout but my voice is lost inside the clouds. Pinning me to the asphalt. Beneath the oaks and sycamores. Helicopter seeds twirling down through my consciousness. Acorns falling, landing, catching, growing and becoming. Never questioning, just accepting. Their reality. Their identity. So real, so pure.

And then I'm outside myself. The park's perimeter dissolves into dream. The illusion of existence is clear in my reverie. I see the waves of ideology crashing down hopelessly on transcendent shores of thought. I see a vast and intricate pattern of emotion, swirling, streaming, shimmering, unravelling, oscillating and waking now to dream again. Another mind, another skin.

I was sitting in the park the other day and I saw her. Sienna. My daughter. She looked so grown up. She was laughing with her friends. So positive, so alive. I felt ashamed to be in her presence. I don't know what came over me, but I followed her. And then she saw me. And she knew. Even though I was so changed beyond recognition. She saw beyond the beard, the grey, the smell, the years of hardship, the scars and the deep lines. She took me to their home. They were out, at lunch. We spoke. We cried. She let me use the bathroom, to shower. She fed me. We held each other and we spoke for a long time. I listened to her and she to me. And I saw myself reflected through her. All my old traits, my identity, my personality were suddenly personified through this living person. I was still a father and always would be. I realised that I *had* lost my identity. My previous identity. I had become someone else. Life had changed me like it changes us all. She showed me what humility could mean. And she promised to help me.

Now she meets me every weekend. She's only 13. It's a lot of responsibility. We go to social programmes and volunteer together. In a few weeks' time I am supposed to get sheltered accommodation. It's a step back to becoming a functioning member of society. You see. Our

identity is innate. She showed me that through our similarities. Through her compassion. Through her humility. But identity is nothing without social acceptance. We build our identity from the day we are born to comply with cultural norms and fit in with society's boundaries. And when it all falls apart, the two strands of identity, the innate and the socially constructed are so intrinsically linked that they struggle to function alone.

I've almost come full circle now. I have a flat again. I see Sienna all the time. I'm building bridges. They know. They weren't happy at first and there was anger and accusation. But now I think that she, my ex-wife is glad I'm back on track. You can't love someone for that long without it meaning something. Our identities after all, were together once. So now I help others who have lost their identities. I acknowledge their value and we find common ground. Lots of them are complex cases. I feel that my identity crisis and homelessness were simple in comparison. They have suffered a lifetime of abuse, neglect, addiction. But they're so strong and I help them to get stronger and I show them that they do have an identity, they do have a purpose, their lives do truly matter.

Stamps, Stamps, Stamps

Madhu Mehrotra

The rushing boy stamped her foot. The pain went searing up her thigh, to her back and neck. She felt dizzy, the world around her swirled.

She held onto her walker, swayed left, held her ground, stabilized her position, dragged the stamped foot and sat on the pink bench, below the Bankshire bower. The people kept walking past, busy on their mobiles, staring at the screens. The trams, buses, taxis and cycles moved in a line. A gentle breeze blew her scarf while a pair of doves strutted on the stones. The sky was blue, behind the high rise buildings, but the rain would come any time.

"Give me a stamp" and the playmates would stamp the toes. The quick footed would pull back the foot before it was stamped.

Hundreds of children in the school park kept doing so "Pass it on without return. Give him a stamp. Give her a stamp."

The shining pointed shoe toe would be full of dust, as the sluggards were not quick in action.

"Give me a stamp" she had said one break, when a shrill pitched voice with a foreign accent said "Which country? What theme?"

She turned around to see a dark skinned boy with big round eyes, a mop of hair plastered back over his forehead held out his hand "Good Morning, I am Ameel. Ameel from Gujanpore, India. My father is in the diplomatic services. His new posting is here. I have lived in five countries."

She looked at the other children. Some were busy with their game, three laughed aloud.

“India, ha ha, the land of elephants, maharajas, snakes and charmers.”

“The magic rope, high in the air.”

“Can you charm us with the music, I mean magic.”

Ameel swallowed hard, pulled out his card.

It read Ameel Harguna, Standard Five.”

“Please can you tell me which way is Standard Five?”

“Ameel, Ameel” his mother called, leading him in the direction of the Headmistress’ Office.

She continued her game.

Once back in the classroom, the noisy children settled down as the Teacher Missy Pansy Loree entered.

“This is Ameel, your new classmate. Be kind to him, help him.”

Turning to Ameel Missy said “You can sit on desk E 3 indicating the desk position. You get the books tomorrow. Let me know if you need help.”

Ameel walked to his place, the lad at E 2 tried to trip him, but he walked with his head up, stomach in chest out. He sat down and listened intently to what the teacher was saying. He interacted willingly in the lessons. Hardly, anyone spoke or played with him. He came and went punctually.

Days went by, the class went on regularly.

She could not forget Ameel's words “I’ve lived in five countries.” No one else in the class could say that. His response to the class queries indicated five countries in five continents. He had travelled by ship and aeroplane. He went to India for holidays.

When teased about his home country he would simply say “We won the Test Series against you. We have a woman as our Prime Minister. We helped the people of Bangladesh win their freedom. We have a place under the Sun.”

His academic performance, presence on the sports field and on stage, left many envious.

She couldn't resist the temptation to ask him about the other countries.

“Hullo” she said walking up to him as they were out for a Nature walk.

“Hullo, aaaaa...”

“You said something about stamps, countries, and themes. Could you elaborate?”

“Yes, postal stamps. It's fun collecting them. Birds, flowers, sports, animals, personalities, flags and a lot more.”

“And countries?”

“Yes, every country has its own stamps. We can exchange them or buy them.”

“Which countries have you visited?”

“Mongolia, Bhutan, Nigeria, New Zealand, Ecuador, Tanzania, Sweden, France, USA, Spain. And you?”

“Born and brought up here, maybe one day I will travel.”

“Never the mind, stamps like books are a good way to travel.”

The following day Ameel gave her a small yellow envelope, with a stamp of a famous man and his wife, ‘Bapu and Ba’ from his country. Inside the envelope were ten stamps from ten different countries.

She found collecting stamps fascinating. She made pen friends around the world, spending a good fraction of her pocket money and lots of her earnings on them.

Ameel left shortly after as his father was posted elsewhere.

“Hullo, my philately friend”

“Hullo, who?”

“Ameel, back here doing my masters in the University of Glikershire, just came back here for old times sake. What luck to meet you. What you doing?”

“O, oo Ameel, hullo, I am the postmistress at this office. I get to see stamps, first day covers and all the postal stuff. I visit tge countries of the world right here.”

Ameel purchased four whole sheets of stamps in various denominations, a score aerogrammes and a set if stamoed postcards.

Taking one post card he addressed it

“The Post Mistress

P O Lane Lawrence

Dunleediz

25476”

In a flowing hand he wrote

“Dear Postmistress

Thank you for bringing the world together.

Your work is invaluable.

In Gratitude

Ameel Harguna

India”

“I'll pop it into the box, you can receive it tomorrow, officially stamped. I hope I'll see you here, when I return.”

No one had thanked her for her work, a stamp would bring a letter of gratitude.

She worked over three decades at the post office.

At her farewell, an envelope parcel arrived with a hundred stamps.

Ameel had collected and sent the most expensive stamps from a hundred different countries.

“Dear Postmistress

If ever in need sell these stamps, they will suffice your needs.

You could sell them and visit a country of your choice.

Thankyou for extending your hand to a lonely classmate.

Thankyou for keeping the world together.

In Gratitude

Ameel Harguna”

She got up from the bench, slowly taking her way home.

Her passport had been stamped twice - The Republic of India and USA, both times to meet Ameer, stamped as friend for life.

India his birthplace, USA his workplace.

Stamps, stamps, stamps.

It Happened by the River

Bhekuyise Dlamini

They had this tendency of chasing me away or leave me behind when they were about to talk about what they were doing to the girls they were having secret meetings with or when they went to see them— my brothers and their friends. I had three big brothers, the first born was 12 years older than me and he wasn't part of this gang, the other ones were 6 and 4 years older than me, respectively. The day before my second eldest brother was with the neighbour's daughter in the bushes, he was excitedly telling them how amazing the day was as they headed away from me and our home. I stood there wishing I was the same age as them, I wished I had pubic hair, and my penis was as big as theirs. For they told me that I would fathom this better if I had those. It wounded my feelings, but I was getting used to it since it happened often so even that day, I decided to go to the river just to clear my head and forget about my shortcomings. I was cursing my brothers and their friends and wishing I was born earlier than them, I was throwing stones at any bird I came across, throwing hate to everyone and everything that crossed my mind.

Curiosity kept eating me alive like a vulture eating a dead prey, and nobody wanted to save me. I kept on guessing what they were doing to these girls that was more exciting than kissing them. Apart from the drawings of naked women and men of different ages on the books we had in early primary grades, I had only seen a naked woman once when I walked onto my mother and aunt bathing, and I was told that I was never supposed to look at naked woman on the front, where there was a forest of black shiny trees, because I will be blinded. That's how I removed that on the equation and thought there was something else my brothers and their friends were doing with the girls they were spending time with because if they were looking women's forest of black shiny trees, they ought to be blinded by now. My eldest brother was in Johannesburg, at the university, I couldn't ask him. But even if he was here, I was going to get a whipping if I asked such questions. Even my two other brothers know better not to talk about those kinds of things in front of our big brother.

I strolled down until I arrived at the river, I sat on a reddish rock and plunged my feet into the river. The tranquility of the river made you swear the water wasn't flowing. I beat the water with my feet, conjuring transparent bubbles that waned fast, that's when I realized that the water was flowing downward, and I was glad that I contributed in giving it a direction. The tranquility of this river when it hasn't been raining would fool a lot of people but the ones who knows the river when it is full and roaring, can tell you a different story. A story of how you couldn't cross it and

how some people fell victim to its violent behaviour. I saw little fishes inside the water, I wished I had carried my fishing lane. I saw a big cruel bird plunging its feet into the water and when it lifted them, they came out with a fish or two. I watched the bird fly high and away. I felt sorry for those fishes for they were trapped in the claws of the bird like how I was trapped in my feelings. I know it's not fair comparing facing death with being left out by my brothers. The wind that came from the nearby trees worked wonders by deviating the excruciating heat that bounced off from the rocks around the river. I kept on pouring water on the rock I sat on so that my bums weren't turned into braai'd meat, it worked for a couple of minutes, but I had to do that each and every two minutes. I got tired of it and decided to wet my trousers altogether, I jumped into the water. I came out and continued to sit on the rock with my soaked clothes. It felt good. I saw a little smoke. I'm burning! I laughed at what I had uttered.

I had forgotten about what my brothers and their friends did to me when my eldest brother's ex-girlfriend came down to the river to wash her blankets. After few minutes of being there, she called me to sit on the rock nearby her. I went. She started talking to me, she's never really talked to me unless she asked where my eldest brother is or when she wanted me to pass a message to him. That's it.

"What are you doing all alone here?" she said.

I fabricated a story; I don't think she cared much about it. There I was having a conversation with her, she knew exactly what to say to me, I felt a tender curiosity inside of me. I don't remember what we were talking about—we talked about anything—and the conversation stole away the fear I had in me, I was comfortable enough to say.

"Can I ask you a question, Sindi?" I said, watching her stamping on her blankets with her not so big feet.

"Yes, you can." she said, putting everything on hold.

"What - my - my brothers shut me out when they talk about certain things they do to their girlfriends. Why's that?"

She chuckled. "What do they know?"

I didn't know if it was rhetorical question or not, so I didn't say anything. She continued.

"Do you want to know the things adults do in secret or do you want to do the things adults do in secret?" she said with a smile that would trick any man who dared to look at it.

I knew what I yearned for; it was the latter, but I was afraid to say it out loud for I thought what I yearned would lend me into trouble. But my mind was transparent enough, she saw through me. She summoned me to help her with stamping on her blankets—that's how blankets are washed where I come from. I remember picking one of my feet after a letup and glanced underneath it, they were dirty when I walked barefoot on my way to the river but now, they were beaming, they were as white as hails. When my mind hoisted my innocuous eyes, my gaze met her fine and

majestic figure; she was close enough for me to eat her if I was a predator and she was a prey. I remember my heart beating faster and I was without any knowledge on why I felt the way I felt. Forgive me, I was merely 9 years old—I was a child—and she was like 20 or 21 years old. I wanted to run but she held my hand, it was okay, I was okay next to her. She assured me. She then pulled the invincible strings around my body, my body moved uncontrollably towards hers. Our lips were merely separated by the Holy Ghost, I was tall for my age, so I was almost her height. It made everything that followed easy. I realized she was right; I was really okay by her side.

“Come, let me show you something you’ve never seen before.”

She held my hand, I followed blindly behind her, I didn’t know where we were going and my mind was working differently, it took time figuring things out. We found a tree behind a tall, big rock, the ground was flat, and the grass was green, the place was as if two people created it for what was about to come.

She kissed on my little lips and said. “Do you really want to know what adults do in secret?”

But I don’t remember what I said to her, but I remember her hand finding its way inside my pants and touching my penis. My penis didn’t know nothing, but something told it to stand up and salute the captain. It did. She took my hand and brushed her forest of black trees; I saw her breathe heavy. Seconds later, she took off her clothes. “Today you are going to do what your brothers merely claim to be doing.”

Claim to be doing? I asked myself but I didn’t have ample time to decipher what she had uttered, for she took off my t-shirt, my trouser followed and then my jockey. She told me to lie down and look at the clear sky, how I wished it were a mirror, so I could’ve seen my facial expression to all this. I was naked. She rubbed my body with her soft and tingling lips. I remember feeling like I was in heaven—only if I knew how being in heaven felt like. I surmised that, that was what she used to do with my eldest brother. It was her turn to lie down and wish the clear skies were a mirror. I remember her hand driving my penis into her, I felt it disappear through the moist forest of black trees, it entered what I couldn’t fathom but there was fire somewhere there or nearby, it was warm. She told me how to work my body, I remember pushing and pushing my body, and a stroke hit me like an unexpected thunder. I felt ashamed and regretful afterwards. I was still puzzled at what had just happened, she comforted and told me that I had just had what is called sex with her. So, this is sex? It occurred to me that I had heard of this name before. *So, this is what adults do in secret? I don’t want it,* I said to myself because I didn’t enjoy it. She told me that I was a man now and that I beat my brothers to it. She told me that my two brothers had never had sex before, they were claiming. She knew this because my brothers’ girlfriends were close to her, and they talk.

It was a victory for me. But she told me never to tell a soul who I had sex with because she will deny it and no one will really believe me. Ever since that day it happened, she treated me like I didn’t exist. One day my brothers and their friends tried to leave me behind, I felt disrespected because I was told that I was more of a man than them, I knew and did things they were only dreaming of in their sleep.

‘I am not staying behind.’ I said.

‘You are staying behind; we will call you when it’s time to fetch the cattle.’ one of my brothers said.

‘This is for men not boy.’ said one friend of theirs.

‘I am a man more than you guys combined.’ I said and immediately I felt bad because it was disrespectful, and I thought I was going to get a beating, but they merely laughed at me. ‘I know more than you guys.’

‘Oh, really now? What do you know?’ my brother asked.

I told them everything about sex, I saw in their eyes that it was true what Sindi told me, they were all still virgins. Some didn’t believe me, we asked an older brother of one of the friends, he collaborated my story about what happens during sex. I got my respect, and they never left me behind ever again, in fact they came to me for advice and questions they had.

I just realized that I was raped by my big brother’s ex-girlfriend, and it happened by the river. I was reading a thread on Twitter about men talking about how they lost their virginity and who they lost it to and at what age, so there was this one particular account, I read his story, some men lauded him for losing his virginity to an older woman, but then other comments came, they were calling what happened to him rape. All along I have thought I was the man for I lost my virginity way before my two brothers, but I didn’t know I was violated as a child. And it fouled me so hard that I have never dated my peers or girls who are younger than me, I’ve always went for older women, I’ve never thought it was that deep. Now I see that I’ve been searching for something akin to that moment in the bushes with my brother’s ex-girlfriend. It was the way she held me in her palm, it was the way her lips caressed my body, it was the way she made me feel safe at the wake of her voice, it was the way she mourned when my fingers touched her private part—I can still hear it echo deep in my ears—it was the way she invited me inside her, it was the way she lead and the way I followed blindly at her steps, she was in command. I never found that anywhere else but all the older women I have been with, they came close. But how can one go around looking for such a messed-up feeling? And it’s even more disturbing that I went around with it like it was some sort of a trophy around my peers, and ignorance made them laud me for it. I was raped by my big brother’s ex-girlfriend, and it happened by the river.

Bhekuyise says, “I was born and raised in Johannesburg, South Africa. I just graduated from the Tshwane University of Technology and studied Event Management. I am currently chasing my dream in literature and this short story, “It Happened by the River”, is one of many I have written but haven’t published.

Merida and Mulan

Pollyanna Wood

I stop. There's nothing more to be said.

"But, Merida - "

"No. I'm done. Yer a lousy prince and I ent straight!"

"My love - "

"Stop! I'll call the guards right now - oh. I'm so sorry, dear."

My girlfriend smirks at me and leans against the doorframe. I look back to the prince and gesture wildly at the door with a glare. He sheepishly exits. Good. Mulan strolls into the room.

"That. Was. Amazing."

"Thanks."

"You wanna go have lunch?"

"Yeah!"

A smile seeps into me and my face heats up. Lovely. Who needs makeup for blush when you've got a cheesy girlfriend?

We go to eat lunch. I stab my food and wolf it down. Gosh, I'm hungry. I look up to take a swig of water and Mulan's gaze hitches on mine.

"What ya staring at?"

She blushes. About time! Her turn now.

"You."

"Aww."

She rolls her eyes. This afternoon, we explore. We saddle up our horses and go up to the mountains. The grassy ones, mind you. I need sun, not snow. Arrived, I descend my horse, give him a sugar cube and splat on the ground, limbs splayed like a starfish with some wonky limbs. Mulan follows suite and wraps her fingers around mine. For a while, we talk of nonsense, like cloud shapes and worms.

Then, Mulan looks at me with those sweet brown eyes of hers and sits up. I do too, wondering what on earth she's doing.

Mulan cups one hand around my chin and kisses me. All I hear is birds on the mountain and a stream burbling as the world slows down. I want to stay here forever.

All too soon, my girlfriend pulls apart from our very first kiss. Butterflies invade my stomach, because the heck do you say after a kiss?! I stare, my cheeks reddening.

"Struck dumb, are you?" Mulan jokes.

"A bit, yeah."

"Did you.... Like it?"

I don't answer. Instead, I hug her and give her a peck on the cheek.

"I take that as a yes? Goodness, Merida, you've never been so speechless. This is a record, I tell you."

"Yes. Sorry, I'm simply not sure of what to say."

Stupid me. I ruined it, didn't I? My lovely girlfriend won't like me anymore! Think, Merida.

Say something!

"You look nice today."

Argh! What've I said?! Seriously, I need to think before I speak! There is no filter between this brain and mouth. Luckily, it seems like my girlfriend is also in shock, although it didn't seem like it at first. She blushes at my comment.

"Thank you. So do you."

We sit in very awkward silence for a while longer.

"Well. Um. I should probably go. Me pa'll be expecting me soon."

I stand up.

"Ah. Alright. See you later, Merida."

I clamber onto my horse and ride away without a word.

Mulan and I don't speak to each other for the rest of the week. Did I do something wrong? I don't understand. It's like a wall has been built since the kiss. I'm hardly even sure she likes me anymore. She avoids my gaze whenever we cross paths, which is rare, because we barely see each other nowadays. This has weighed on my chest for a week now.

Today, I didn't even glimpse Mulan.

Tonight, I notice how much I miss her.

And suddenly, it's too much. As I lie in my bed {alone}, I finally break down. It's been a month since we kissed. I start crying. Not little sniffles and single tears, no. A full-on fit, wailing crocodile tears. Do I even have a girlfriend anymore? My pa walks into my room, obviously having heard me scream.

"Ye alright? What's the matter, poppet?"

I can't tell him. I've not even come out to him yet. No-one other than the prince and Mulan knows.

So, I make something up.

"I lost an arrow."

"Oh, is that all?"

Yep. I'm terrible at lying. But at the moment, I'm too distraught to care.

"Yes, pa. That's all."

"I'll make ye a new one, 'kay?"

I nod, swallowing down my heartbroken pain.

"Love you. I can go and make one right now, Merida."

He leaves. Ok. The suppressed misery swells up again and crashes down on me. I cry and cry and cry and cry, my body shaking with sobs of agony. Oh, Mulan. What is it I've done?

I look up to the ceiling. As I'm looking up, I see a shadow.

"Merida."

Mulan. I hope she sees the heartbreak she's caused me. Wait, no. I want her to see my broken pieces and put me together again.

Mulan sits on the bed beside me.

"Why are you crying?"

She doesn't sound as sympathetic as usual.

"You. Why are you avoiding me?"

"I'm not! You're avoiding me! After.... you know- , you just left and I've barely seen you since!"

"You keep avoiding me and never talk to me when we do see each other."

"That's because I was waiting for you to talk first! But you never did."

Mulan looks down at her feet.

"Do you not like the kiss we shared? Do you not like me?" she whispers.

I wipe my eyes. I need to show her I love her, that I can't bear to be without her.

I sit up. I look her in the eyes. Those sweet brown eyes. She gazes back. I kiss her. She's taken by surprise, but then kisses me back. I break away.

"I love you, Mulan. You need to know that I love you and always will."

Mulan starts tearing up. She smiles.

"I love you too, Merida. Can you still be my girlfriend?"

"Of course."

We hug. My hair's a right mess, my cheeks stained with tears, but I have a girlfriend. I have a girlfriend!

She smiles. I do too. Holding hands, we stand up.

"Would you be able to sleep here tonight?"

"I'm sure I can tell my father a small white lie," she smirks.

Oh, how I've missed her. She spins around, gives me a quick peck on the lips and hops into bed. I climb in too. It isn't super late, but I'm drained. I drift off to sleep, my arm draped around Mulan.

"I have you a new arrow!" Pa's voice awakes me with a start. It can't be more than half an hour since I fell asleep. Then I remember. My girlfriend is sound asleep in my bed. My heart drops to my stomach. Pa's booming voice hasn't woken her up. What do I do? I jump out of bed to stand in front of it, hopefully blocking the fact that Mulan is there. Pa hands me a magnificent wooden arrow, carved himself.

"Thank you so much, Pa! You're the best!"

His face lights up, happy with the compliment. Then his face darkens.

"Who is that in your bed?!" he shouts.

This time, he awakens Mulan, who automatically sits up at the noise.

Pa gasps at the sight.

"MERIDA!"

"Yes, pa?" I manage in a tiny voice.

"If this was the prince, I may be more relaxed about this. But Mulan?! She is a girl!" he yells, shouting the last phrase louder than the rest.

"Yes, pa. She is a girl. I've been meaning to tell you for a while now that I'm a lesbian. But I love her the same way you love ma. How's that a bad thing?"

"No child of mine will ever be like this! Get out of here, Merida. And bring the girl with you. I don't want to see you again. You are no longer my daughter."

Mulan gasps in shock. My mouth drops open in horror.

"You- you beast!" I shout. I sling my bow and quiver over my back and grab a bag.

"Let's go," I say to Mulan. She steps out of bed and squeezes my hand. Pa stands there, fuming, as we walk away.

"Good riddance, child."

We stop at the kitchen to take food and the stables to take our horses. I feel numb, so numb. I realise tears have started running down my cheeks. Again.

The sky is a deep blue. Night is falling. It is not my fear. Besides, Mulan is with me.

"Your father - he- he was so mean," she whispers.

I nod, eyes blank.

"We'll manage. You've got this."

"I haven't," I whisper, "I haven't."

Mulan hugs me tight.

My father. Pa. He was kind, loving. He's changed.

"Have you told your parents?" I ask Mulan.

"No, not yet. I'm not sure whether it's safe."

"Yeah, I wasn't either. Clearly, it was not safe for me."

Mulan rests her head on my shoulder. We stay like that for a moment, in a comfortable silence.

She tilts her head back up.

"Where will we go?"

"I honestly don't know. I feel so young, sad and lost."

"Me too."

Both of our faces are streaked with tears.

"Perhaps we can go to my place. I'll come out to my parents. If they're accepting, we can stay there."

"If not?" I ask.

"It's not like I have anywhere better to be than with you. We could elope!"

I chuckle.

"You are sweet, Mulan. However, I couldn't let you come out so forcefully and have you risk your relationship with your parents."

"I will, though. My parents and I have never been super-close, it's not really like I'd be losing anything. And just imagine if they're open-minded!"

"If that's what you want, yes."

"Thank you! I suppose we should head off. Unless you want to sleep first. It is quite late."

I ponder the idea.

"I'd love sleep, but we should get away from here as soon as possible," I say.

"That settles it."

We mount our horses and set off.

Mulan only lives half an hour away, so if all goes to plan, we can still get a decent night's sleep at her house. We arrive. I'm so nervous. We tie up our horses on two of the few trees around the property, as she doesn't have stables like us.

I can't even imagine how scared Mulan must be. I sneak a peek at her. So far, she looks calm and composed. Knowing her, it's a mask and she's panicking inside.

"You don't have to do this."

"I do."

"Ok. I believe in you."

We walk slowly to the front door.

"Can you come with me?" Mulan asks, in a small voice. She's never looked less confident.

She no longer stands tall with that magnificent air. Instead, she holds herself with a slouch, head down. I almost ask again if she's sure she wants to do this. But I know she'll say yes.

My girlfriend is stubborn. Stubborn and sweet.

"Yes, I'll come with you."

She takes a deep breath and knocks on the door. Her mother opens it.

"Mulan! Home sooner, then? Camping not for you?"

"Camping?" I ask. She stamps on my foot. Oh. The lie she told her parents. Right. Ok.

"Yes, mother, it wasn't great."

"I see. Why is Merida here?"

"Well...."

"You can tell me anything, alright?"

Mulan hesitates. Her mother gives an encouraging nod.

"I'm different. Like, I don't like boys. I - I'm in love. With Merida. I'm gay. She's my girlfriend."

Her voice hitches on the word girlfriend.

"Oh, Mulan. I know. I've seen you together so much, I simply put two and two together. It's ok. You're still my girl. I love you."

Mulan starts to cry.

"Come here," her mother says. They hug.

"What about father? Does he know? Is he fine with it?"

"No, he doesn't know you're gay, not yet. I'm sure he'll be fine as well."

Mulan opens her mouth to reply when we see the shadow. Her father is here. Her eyes widen. How much did he hear? The man disappears. We stay silent. He comes back and steps into the light. We can all see the fury in his eyes. Unlike my father, his rage is silent.

The worst kind. His hands are behind his back, his head bent.

"Father?" Mulan tries.

"Father, please say something. I'd rather you scream than this. Please, Father."

He says nothing. Mulan is sobbing quietly. The man proceeds to take his hands from behind his back. I gasp. My girlfriend looks up and her mother looks too. Her father is holding a knife.

"NO!" I scream.

He lunges forward and stabs Mulan. She doesn't have time to react or grab her sword.

Horror has her frozen to the spot. Her mother is frozen as well. I try to block the hit, but it's too late. The knife pierces skin, right in Mulan's heart.

I feel the pain as my girlfriend screams. I drop to my knees and cry out. Then she falls. I catch her and lay her on the floor. I can't cry. No. I must save her.

Her father bends down and pulls out the knife. Mulan shrieks. Blood immediately spills out of the wound, pooling around her body.

The man, holding the knife once more, steps towards me.

"No! Run! Run, both of you! Please, leave me! There's nothing you can do for me. Leave before you die too!" Mulan screams. Her body convulses as she starts choking on her own blood.

No. No! My girlfriend, my love. Mulan. She can't die. She can't. She is the anchor that ties me down, my beam of hope in a life of grey sorrow. She is my love. We need each other. I could never live without her.

Her mother and I don't move. Mulan shouts again.

"RUN! I beg you, save yourselves!"

I kiss her soft lips for the last time.

"I love you," I whisper.

The man steps forward again. I grab her mother's hand and we run without looking back.

My heart feels like it's shattering, but there's too many fragments to fix it. And the girl who put my heart back together last time isn't here. She won't be, not now, not ever.

My body is trembling as I wail loudly and shout unrepeatable curses at the psychopath who killed my girlfriend.

I need a test subject to teach my apprentice the fine art of necromancy. You see, I'm getting old, so the next wise leader must have gained my knowledge. I will aid them in my final days.

My apprentice and I wander around foreign parts, wondering where to find a body. As we walk by a large house, my apprentice sees an object near the door.

"Look!" she says, "A young woman, dead."

I walk closer to observe the corpse. Hmm. A murder. Died very recently. Her hands aren't even cold to the touch yet, they're still quite warm. And gosh, so young.

"Perfect. Well spotted, child. I'm sure there'll be more opportunities, but for now, step back, watch and learn. You can try the next one, ok?"

She nods eagerly. I start the ritual, taking out a knife. I cut a slit into my arm and squeeze the blood out, smearing some on the corpse. Using my bare hands, I spread my blood over the gaping hole in the woman's chest, to mingle our bloods. My eyes flash around me and I see a garden near the house. Quickly, I run to it and scoop some large plants out of the soil, careful to keep the roots intact. I dash back and concentrate on the light of life in the plants.

A strong, bright light. I envision taking the light, sucking it out and away to electrify the woman back to life. Using my hands again, I extract the light of life from the plants and hold it in my hands for a moment, hovering. The plants shrivel up and die. It is now I who holds their power of life. I focus. I shoot out my hand, with the strong light projecting into the corpse. I watch as the feeble aura around the young lady brightens and a blinding light pulses into existence around her. She trembles, then wakes up and screams.

"It's ok," I say, passing my hand over her chest. She watches in awe as a thin veil of shadow closes up the wound, healing her.

"I can breathe!"

“Yes.”

“Who are you?”

“You can call me Silas.”

“And who’s that next to you?”

“I’m Ophelia!” my apprentice says, quite enthusiastically for someone who’s just witnessed the deepest kind of necromancy; resurrection.

“What have you done to me? The last thing I remember was my father stabbing me and my mum and girlfriend ran away. I remember telling them to leave me. And I think I died. So... how? What did you do?”

“Long story short, I performed a little bit of magic and you’re alive again. Side effects may include a dark spirit beginning to possess you until it consumes you entirely resulting in death again, but that’s highly unlikely.”

“Oh, god.”

“Yep, I’m kind of in shock too! I’m Silas’ apprentice, you were the example corpse so I can learn how to do it myself next time.”

Ophelia is smiling. I think I have finally found a just heir.

“Um... Ok? Do you know what I can do? Where I should go?”

“No, sorry. Fate will have it. Right, off we go, my dear apprentice! Your turn next, you must be ecstatic!”

I set off, a wild bounce in my step and Ophelia following.

The girl is standing up now, staring at us as we leave her behind.

On the way, we come across a living guy who looks a lot like an older, male version of the young lady. Seems like the father. Well, a life for a life!

“He killed the girl, right?” Ophelia whispers to me.

“Mmhmm. You want to do the honours?”

She nods and zaps him with black light, extinguishing his heart forevermore.

I am somewhat discombobulated. Scratch that, I am extraordinarily discombobulated! What, I'm supposed to believe that a necromancer and their apprentice found me as their guinea pig to demonstrate resuscitation?! I mean, it's not like I have anything better to believe. I do remember being dead, after all. It wasn't the worst thing ever. It was better than living with the pain that my father - no, that monster - killed me. When I was dead, I had no emotion or feeling. I was empty. It was peaceful. It was a nice change.

As soon as that random passerby inflicted dark magic upon me, I instantly felt all of the pain come back. The mental, intensifying pain of my own father murdering me. Filicide. The physical, excruciating pain of the knife. Agony. The emotional, heart-wrenching pain of my cries as I commanded Merida and my mum to leave. Torture.

And now, the odd, conflicting pain of a stranger who helped me leaving me behind. Irony.

All of a sudden, I see two horses galloping towards me. Hold on - towards ME?! I shout and leap to the side, my defense system kicking in. There's a rider on each horse, it could be a danger. My hand reaches for my sword, but then I pause. I think I recognize the horses. Is that...? Khan! My horse! Angus is following! And - that's Merida on Angus and my mum on Khan!! They came back! Thank the heavens, oh thank goodness!

They spot me. Standing up. Alive.

"MULAN!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" Merida shrieks, face suddenly alive with hope and delight.

My mum is crying in joy. As the horses halt, Merida barely waits to jump off, smile and spirit filled with a pure blitheness, one that only she can contain. My mum gracefully descends Khan and rushes towards me for a hug. How I missed her, my dear, lovely, kind-hearted mother. I'm crying too, tears of happiness.

Merida and the horses stand obediently to one side, waiting for me to finish my hug.

Afterwards, Merida flies forward to kiss me and picks me up in merriment, spinning me around and around. I laugh, for the first time in months. My mum looks on, beaming.

Merida's horse and mine tentatively walk up to me as my girlfriend puts me down. They nuzzle me and lick me. It tickles! The joy of being alive has returned.

"Mulan, how are you alive? And without a scar in sight!" my mum asks.

"Well... That's a long story."

"Sweetheart, we have plenty of time for stories now that you're here," Merida says.

"Oh, yes. I can tell you two love each other, both of you are simply radiant, you twinkly little stars!" my mum chuckles.

I nudge her playfully.

“Ok. I’ll tell the story. All the same, we should find shelter first, it’s late. And I’m afraid this story will cost you each a kiss.”

“Oh, stop it!” Merida laughs, clearly pleased at the price of a story. She kisses me again, on the lips.

My mum kisses me too, on the forehead.

“We were heartbroken, Mulan. We both thought you were gone forever. So you owe us a jolly good story!”

“Yes, I do.”

I scan the perimeter.

“I think the house is safe. I have a feeling that man has gone for good.”

“Are you sure?” mum asks.

“Yes. I have an inkling, especially after having met some certain people... They’ll have taken care of him.”

“Good. He was a horror,” Merida says.

“Yes. Yes, he was,” my mum adds.

We go into the house, sit on the living room sofa and I begin to tell the tale.

“Woah. Ok. After a story like that, we should hit the sack,” Merida says with a yawn.

“Yeah,” I agree.

“Alright, poppets. Off to bed with you!” mum says.

We go to bed, heads full of thoughts.

I don’t dream, I have nightmares. The necromancer and their apprentice haunt my nightmares. I hear the same words, over and over again.

“Side effects may include a dark spirit beginning to possess you until it consumes you entirely resulting in death again.”

“NO!!!!”

I sit up, jolted awake by the scream.

Merida and my mum are leaning over me, worry lines creasing their faces.

“Are you alright, Mulan? What’s wrong?”

“Who screamed? It woke me up!”

“You did, Mulan.”

I screamed? I feel a darkness stirring in me, aroused by the cry. NO! THIS CAN’T BE HAPPENING. THEY SAID IT WAS RARE!! THEY SAID I’D BE OK!

“MULAN! Are you here? Are you with me? Why are you shouting in such a way? We’re getting really worried about you...”

I hadn’t realized I had said that out loud. Weren’t those words only in my head?

A raspy voice tells me, “No. No, they weren’t.”

“WHO’S THERE?! WHO’S TALKING?”

“No one is talking, Mulan. Nobody is there.”

“Oh. Uh, it’s fine. Just a nightmare.” Anything to stop their crippling anxiety about me when I’m clearly fine.

“Okkk... Yes, just a nightmare. You can tell us more in the morning, I suppose. Go back to sleep, dear,” my mum says, obviously hesitant.

I nod and my mum goes back to her room.

Climbing back into bed, Merida says, “You know, you can tell me what’s up. I’m your girlfriend; I love you and I care greatly about you. I know when you aren’t telling the truth...”

“No, I’m fine,” I lie carelessly.

“Ok,” my girlfriend exhales, dejected.

“Sorry,” I whisper, before falling asleep once more.

This time, the nightmare has stapled my mouth shut so that I cannot interfere. I stand there and contemplate as I see the world burst into flames around me. I am useless. I am incapable. I am nothing.

Without warning, a murky shadow rolls over Mulan, coiling around her in intricate swirls. She drops to the ground, black air squeezing into her lungs.

Her head jerks up in a convulsive movement and she starts to speak in a raspy voice that isn't hers.

“Merida. You fool. You will never get her back. SHE IS MINE!”

I walk backwards several paces, frightened. Of my girlfriend. Or rather, whatever has possessed her...

She starts to walk slowly towards me, a cruel smile shadowing her face.

“You cannot escape. You cannot win.”

Mulan starts to cough, ink as dark as blood spattering the floor in front of her. Hang on - it is blood. The vicious look leaves her eyes and is replaced by fear as she collapses to the floor, breathing hoarse.

“Mulan?”

I step towards her, then change my mind and step back, still a little scared by the ruthless woman. I do so a few more times, a peculiar dance of uncertainty, tainted by love and dread.

I catch sight of a small, frail gesture she tries to make, trying to get me to come to her.

“Sorry,” I hear my girlfriend murmur, before her eyes close.

As she sleeps, I try to make sense of all this. Stroking her hair, I fall asleep curled next to her.

“Merida? Mulan? Where are you, girls?”

Walking around the house, I finally see two bodies asleep on the floor of the hallway, leaning against each other.

“Girls! Why are you sleeping? We need to go and make dinner! Come on!”

As I'm walking up to them, I see specks of blood on the floor. Blood? Concerned, I hurry forwards, no longer speaking in a carefree tone.

“Merida? Mulan? What happened? Please, girls, wake up!”

My voice is getting higher and higher now.

“Mum?”

“Oh, Mulan! What’s happened? Why does your voice sound in such a state?”

“No reason.”

“Is Merida up?”

“Not for a while, she won’t be.”

“Why not?” I ask, slowly backing away from my daughter.

“No reason.”

“Ah. I see.”

“Yeah... Except you don’t see. You never will again.

My daughter thrusts herself at me, sharp nails growing out of her hands by magic. She slashes my face, leaving claw marks behind.

I howl in pain. It hurts. The scratch, not that badly, but the cold-blooded entity possessing my daughter? That stings.

Mulan looks into my eyes, hers being inhumane and empty.

“Useless. You were always useless.”

In that moment, she severs my body from my soul, and I am no more.

I am in the kitchen. What have I done? I’ve killed her, I’ve killed my own mum...

She accepted and loved me for who I was. She’d helped me and stayed with me through every difficult moment...

I am becoming a monster.

I creep back into the hallway only to find Merida crying over my mum’s body. I go back to the kitchen, tormented by the pain I have caused. Unfortunately, the floor creaks and Merida looks right at me.

“Mulan?”

She is terrified. Of me. I sit down and cry.

Faltering, she walks towards me. Instead of away. This makes me cry harder.

“It’ll be ok,” she whispers.

“It already isn’t,” I reply, bawling now.

“Shhh...”

Merida pulls me into an embrace, attempting to comfort me.

“I could hurt you, like I’ve hurt everyone else.”

“First of all, it was never you. You’re being controlled, possessed by some sort of negative spirit. Secondly, I don’t care. I love you too much for you to be able to hurt me.”

“Sorry.”

“What for?”

“I just killed my mum! What do you mean, ‘what for’?!”

“Ah.”

“I can’t go on like this,” I say.

“You can. Be strong.”

“I’m weak. I’m stupid. I’m failing. I can’t be strong for much longer. This creature is consuming me and soon I will not be here anymore, it will just be the demon. I’ll be gone.”

“You can’t think that way!”

“It’s the reality, Merida. I didn’t tell you, but Silas and Ophelia-”

“Who’re they?” my girlfriend cuts me off.

“The necromancer and their apprentice.”

“Oh, ok.”

“Anyway, they said that side effects may include a dark spirit beginning to possess you until it consumes you entirely resulting in death again.”

“Is there a way to reverse the effects somehow?”

“I think it’s too late.”

“No! It’s never too late to make a change.”

“It kind of is, though.”

“Mulan-”

“Merida, no. I know what I can do, and I beg of you, you’ve got to let me do what is right for me.”

“What are you going to do?” asks Merida, eyes wide and voice barely a whisper.

“I don’t want to be something else entirely when I die-”

“You mean if you die.”

“Um... I don’t want to be something else entirely when I die, because I want to preserve my personality, my love for you, my whole self. So... I must yield. I must give up my soul to the dark hands of Death, in hopes that my humanity stays and the darkness leaves.”

“You can’t just give up! You still have some time! You could stay!”

“I can’t. I’m so, so sorry. I can’t.”

Merida’s face is ghostly white. I take her hand in mine.

“I’m sorry,” I say again. Death is pitiless. Death is fiendish. Death is savage. Death is harrowing. Death is bitter. Death is tough. I must hand myself over.

“I love you, Mulan. If this is what you’ve got to do to stay yourself during your last breaths, I’ll be ok with that. But my heart will be broken and shall ache eternally.”

“I know. I deeply apologize. However, our love for each other is strong, it is resilient, and it will last for the life hereafter. When you join me in Death, be it in a week or preferably, in many long years to come, we’ll be reunited and together at last.”

“Ok.”

Ok. Such a small, insufficiently significant word for our last spoken together.

My girlfriend places a final kiss on my lips and I take out my trusty sword for the last time.

Before my spirit disappears, I let a powerful surge of hope flow from my soul to hers.

I will miss you, Merida.

I will miss you, Mulan.

Pollyanna is a young, queer author originating from Manchester, England. They've been dancing since the age of three! Plus, they love to bake, read and write. Pollyanna has a mum, dad, annoying brother and adorable dog.

Featured Poems

1. On the Road by Leo Li
2. Divine by dN eQ
3. 27/11/23, 0 days clean by Vita Luna
4. Cries by Anamarie Davis-Wilkins
5. Through Gritstone Eyes by Jake Williams
6. Hope for You by Akiela Shirley
7. Such is the World by Ma. Tricia Ocho
8. Hope by Remas Dali
9. A Soldier's Hope by Kinjal
10. Hope by Glory Chisom

On the Road

Leo Li

By the time we reached Finchale Priory the clouds
 had fallen behind. Orange-flavoured ice lollies melted
 to illumine the grass with gold. We were oblivious
 of the winds, crooning time's lullabies. Oblivious
 of fatigue, manifest in the road to Newcastle, knowing
 but to run and seize some orgastic future. Running
 through fields of ripe rapeseeds that thawed into seas
 of undulating green. Beneath shades of white
 rhododendrons, we shared our pints, and were in equal measure
 mesmerised and terrified by overhead chemtrails;
 by bees languishing on the bar's patio, defeated
 by the sky's vastness. We were breathless when we reached

the Penshaw Monument, our last stop from urbanity.
 Motherless spirits watched us as we watched their children
 scampering up and down the rugged steps, making myths
 out of our endeavours. Slackened into puddles of mercury,
 clouds from Durham caught up to drown the dusk. We hastened,
 our footsteps not yet chained by idle memories, and darted
 downhill towards River Tyne. Squinting at the last sunrays
 fierce as our hopes for just a coconut sundae
 in an air-conned Jollibee. There, we could reminisce
 about the cathedral sinking into the blue-bleeding sky,
 until it resembled but the bombing decoy we passed by
 half an hour into our walk – a vestige of homely despair; There,
 we could suffer the pain blistering Grainger Street’s night’s coolness;
 There, we could make promises bigger than ourselves,
 of parting roads that’d meet one fine morning...
 The rest was dreams on the southbound LNER crossing midnight.

Leo says, “My works were published in Voice and Verse Poetry Magazine, and regularly featured in Durham University’s official student publication, Palatinate, literary magazine, From the Lighthouse and college magazine, The Dove. My prose fictions, Frieze of Life and Overture have been shortlisted for the UK’s Student Publication Association (SPA) National Awards for two consecutive years (2023 and 2022).”

Divine

dN eQ

The child asks mother:

“That you will ever leave

Where they don't return”

It's not true

Mother answers:

“You came from nowhere

I met you here

I'm going to meet you there”

You will teach me about life

To all secrets and beauty

Reveal world's secrets

Show all the goodness

You will see it yourself

Life teach you everything

I'll just be by your side

Even if I won't be

dN eQ says, “I have always been interested in art. I am always looking for ways to connect with art. I graduated from the institute, but when I decided to work I understood that it was not my calling. I started writing and it became intimate.”

27/11/23, 0 days clean

Vita Luna

Hope

It's the morning after the nails

Have scratched red marks onto my arms

Hope

It's the friend that comes back

And the friend that stays

Hope

It's the only thing we have

When we think it's the end

Hope

It's the only way I can

Write with laptop and pen

Hope

It's the reason I try

To tell truth and not be shy

Hope

I hope when you read this

It will make you feel seen and I

Hope

That you won't think I'm crazy and I

Hope

And hope and hope

If this poem reaches you

I hope I'm still clean

That the red marks fade

That they won't be seen

Yes I hope

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' and 'Volume 4: The Escape' have just been released. She hopes to continue sharing her imagination with the world.

Cries

Anamarie Davis-Wilkins

I hear your cries

Mothers of the world.

Cries from the pain of war

And senseless acts of crimes.

We have cried enough

To fill every bank of

Every river and ocean.

Scream my sisters,

Scream until you

Shake the heavens,

So that it makes room

For our stars.

Pray my sisters,

That the darkness of evil
 Dissipate like the dew
 Of the early morning,
 And the rays of goodness and hope
 Shine like the mid-day sun.

Anamarie Davis-Wilkins is a Mom, proud grandmother, Birth Doula, writer and poet. She has enjoyed reading and writing since childhood. Her first book of poems, Reminiscence and her first novel, Under and Over. Recently a piece published by Poet Laureate of Kansas. She has work published in numerous anthologies and online magazines. She is an active participant in Speak Easy Poets of Topeka, Sunflower Poetry Society of Kansas, National Federation of State Poetry Societies.

Through Gritstone Eyes

Jake Williams

I could count every feather
 High or low in bluest skies
 Whoever wanted to be in my tree
 Or was it a whole forest?
 No mind, yet more than a mind
 The smallest blossoms sounded their notes
 The authority of the purple
 There were flowers before we learned to read or write
 Or daubed our incantations in Ochre
 Three magics
 Stone and water prayed together
 Idlers watched Dove's waters flow

Wild yellow eye met human eye met wild eye
Does a Peregrine enjoy the scent of Heather
On the last summer winds?
In Arbor or moor or bleakest hollow hills?
One soul to all souls
The most democratic forest
Stardust stonedust dreamed of when skies began
A single sedge silently rustled its sibilance
A hunter waited at a water's edge
Or was it every water?
A hunter waited in every within as without
Above or below
Honour dance's fiery release
Hear what might reforge the once broken
First full moon to last full moon
Yet somehow every one is new
How many have watched it rise or will again?
Patiently we chipped our flints
Points took shape
Blood awaited
Another sun narrowed its gaze
I wonder how the colours or the seasons
Would speak if they could

All that was born as the blood moon flamed
 The knight contemplated What would befall him in Mabon

We could all be a Heisenberg particle

A talisman for Taliesyn

Should you discuss faith in a Physics lab?

Heather's gnarled stems loved the oversky

Every leaf aflame

How many r's in Archaeopteryx?

Jake says, "I'm a writer based in Cumbria (the North remembers!), just south of The Wall and my previous publications include Pulsebeat Poetry, Scarlet Dragonfly Journal and To Live Here: a Haiku Anthology (Wee Sparrow Poetry Press). I was born in deepest rural Dorset the year Marvin Gaye asked what's going on. I was Feral Kid from Mad Max 2 if he'd been a character in a Thomas Hardy novel."

Hope for You

Akiela Shirley

What is hope for you?

Is it the desire for a better you?

Is it the need for a better life?

Hope is like a rope

We grasp and we grasp

But it only burns the tighter we grip

It is consolidation in the hard times

The tissue that dries

It's the maybe if everyone tries
 It can also be an asylum for a broken guy
 Hope for some is whatever money can't buy
 Hold your faith
 Only it can undo any wrong
 People may be tormented like an endless song
 Existing is what proves that it's strong

Akiela says, "My name is Akiela, informally known as Keke, and I'm a Jamaican teen who loves to spend her free time watching dramas and reading thrillers/horror novels (because Stephen King is brilliant). Most of all, I love the Lord."

Such is the World

Ma. Tricia Ocho

Is the frigid cold enough to hate
 Or a baren dune to be ignored
 Summer's first breath to sigh,
 The winter's last refrain at night
 Though the green turn into wilt
 She shines like the moon at harvest-time
 A star amongst liars, a liar amongst priers
 But should she be the one contrite
 Of the sins once held, once done, once committed
 A love besmirched by coal and admittance
 Yet she dances with the flowers

And ignored by all others

“Yes that is the universal truth,”

She sings with mire,

“Such is the world.”

Ma. Tricia Ocho enjoys reading, writing, and discovering more about the world around her. She seeks to improve in creative paths, regardless if they directly connect with her future goals.

Hope

Remas Dali

Hope, the gentle breeze that stirs the soul,

A beacon of light in the darkest hole,

A refuge from the tempests that assail,

A promise of better days to come, and fail.

In the depths of sorrow, hope doth shine,

A ray of sunlight that breaks through the pine,

A gentle touch that soothes the heart,

A balm that heals the wounds of life's every part.

Hope is the fire that burns within,

A flame that flickers, yet never dims,

A source of strength that never fades,

A guide that leads us through life's mazy shades.

In times of joy, hope doth abound,
A feeling that lifts us off the ground,
A sense of purpose that drives us on,
A passion that makes our spirits strong.

Hope is the bridge that spans the gap,
Between the present and a brighter past,
A link that connects us to a future bright,
A rainbow that arcs across the night.

In the stillness of the night,
Hope whispers sweet and gentle might,
A lullaby that soothes the soul,
A melody that makes our spirits whole.

In the morning's glow, hope doth rise,
A new beginning that opens wide the skies,
A fresh start that wipes away the tears,
A sunrise that brings us cheer and cheer.

Hope is the anchor that holds us fast,
A rock that keeps us grounded and steadfast,

A shelter from life's raging storms,
A sanctuary that keeps us warm and safe from harm.

In the spectrum of life, hope doth shine,
A beacon that illuminates the divine,
A feeling that encompasses all we know,
A gift that makes our journey worth the woe.

So let us hold on to hope with might,
And nurture it with all our might,
For in its warm and gentle embrace,
We find the strength to face life's every pace.

A Soldier's Hope

Kinjal

Hope for something new,
Hope for something better,
Hope for a beautiful sight,
Hope for a peaceful night,
Am I Right?

The days of longing,
The nights of thinking,

The family that waits for me.

The only fear.....

Will I be able to see them again?

The ones who have no fault,

The ones who love me immensely,

The ones who suffer at the end.

Who hide their sorrow,

Behind those beautiful smiles.

Are they not the bravest ones?

Hope for no regrets,

Hope for being brave like them,

Hope for doing something worthy in this life,

Hope for not being laid back,

Hope for giving my best.

The time has come....

The time to show my bravery,

The time to feel proud enough,

The time to say goodbye.

But all I think is.....

Can't we stop hurting others?

Can't we get time to rest?

Can't we see our family happy?

Can't we all live together?

Can't we see a peaceful sight?

Can't we stop for once?

Can't we?????

All I have is hope,

Hope to see the world safe,

Hope to see the world as One,

Hope for a New Beginning,

Hope for a Better Tomorrow.

Kinjal is a student of class 12th Commerce student in Birla Balika Vidyapeeth, Pilani, Rajasthan, India. She has participated in various National and International Competitions. She loves reading books, writing poems. She is also good at drawing and painting. She also knows karate.

Hope

Glory Chisom

Hope is the light that guides us through the night,

A beacon of strength when all seems lost in sight.

It whispers of a better day to come,

And lifts our spirits when we feel undone.

In times of despair, it's a gentle embrace,

A reminder that life is not just a race.
It fuels our dreams and keeps us afloat,
When everything around us seems remote.
Like a bird on the wire, like a drunk in a midnight oil,
Hope sings its tune, lifting us higher and higher.
It's the thing with feathers that perches in the soul,
And never stops singing, making us whole.
Hope fosters determination and grit,
Enabling us to bounce back and never quit.
It's a feeling we must develop and cultivate,
A state with which we are graced, never to abate.
In the words of Mary Oliver, "Hope is the thing with feathers,"
That perches in the soul and sings without the words it gathers.
Hope is the anchor in life while alive,
A certainty that we strive to revive.
So let's hold onto hope with all our might,
For it's the force that makes everything seem bright.

Glory says, "I am Glory Chisom, an SEO Content Writer. I help brands become visible to target audiences and increase conversion by delivering high-quality search-engine-optimized content."