THE TILT

AN ANTHOLOGY

BY THE LIT PLATFORM

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The Tilt is full of voices. Take a photo of any image marked and send it to *Grapevine* (+44 7380 333721) on *WhatsApp*, to listen to the audio...

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ZOË KING

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by SAM JORDISON

I know it's a cliché to say that teachers learn from their pupils – but that doesn't make it any less true when I say that working as Zoë's mentor has been educational for me. I thoroughly enjoyed the time I spent hearing of her experiences in the publishing industry and her thoughts on its future. Zoë is knowledgeable and smart and she has excellent ideas. That makes it an honour to write this foreword for her work – but also quite a challenge. As you are about to see, she is a writer who is perfectly capable of speaking for herself.

So, I'll leave the argumentation for Zoë. My main personal takeout is that it's heartening to hear from someone who wants to enter publishing in order to move it forward. I'd also add that it would be foolish to be cynical about these ideas. Perhaps not all the suggestions here will work. The easy response would be to say that publishers are at the mercy of the market and can't dictate to it. It would also be easy – for instance – to say that the laws of supply and demand shape the way rights departments operate and that those laws are hard to bend...

... But we've all seen how well small presses have been able to change the publishing landscape in the past few years. They've done it by defying received wisdom about market forces.

So let's also see what happens in a few years to the translated fiction and foreign language books that Zoë discusses. Young publishers may well be able to make them more popular – and that would be a very fine thing. Talking of good things, meanwhile, Zoë also makes this sound like a fantastic anthology. And all fire.

INTRODUCING THE TILT

***by* Zoë King**

As someone starting out in the publishing industry, there's so much that mystifies me about the way the publishing world interacts on an international level. I can't understand why there are huge Rights departments in so many publishing houses, and yet they are only focused on selling English Rights, not acquiring books in other languages. I don't see how it's possible that the two systems don't overlap. I find it unbelievable that 'translated fiction' is its own sub-genre in the UK; a seeming remnant of the colonial gaze that the UK casts upon anyone and everyone that can be conceived of as 'other'. And I can't reason how a flimsy shelf in major bookstores or eye-watering prices at online retailers cater for the millions of people, and potential readers, who speak a language other than English in the UK.

But what puzzles me most is, where does this come from? Who keeps these narrow views alive? Is it the commissioning editor, the head of Sales at Waterstones, or the reader – the end purchaser of products? Is it an unwillingness inside the industry to challenge the status quo, or do professionals exist in a vacuum, with steadfast beliefs that no reader wants to buy or read stories foreign to their own? Or is the general reader's lack of awareness slowly eroded into intolerance by virtue of reading essentially the same stories over and over again?

It does seem that there's a big problem with what and whose stories are being commissioned, funded, marketed, publicised and ultimately, read. As is entering public and social consciousness, the industry is rife with exclusion and marginalisation, which will take a long time to rectify.

Yet, there's another, less spoken about, layer to this exclusion. The social context of reading and restricting of Othered voices extends beyond the publishing house. Post-publication censorship is a prevalent, yet often unknown phenomenon.

In the UK there is no official body to regulate or track censorship in schools, libraries and other public institutions. But there is no doubt that it occurs. I believe that better understanding of not only whose stories are published and available, but also whose we are 'allowed' to read has vast implications for the societal context of reading. From my peripheral stance, the best solution I can think of is a solidified framework for tracking literary censorship in public institutions to better understand and thus tackle this dialectic. It's something I wish more people from inside the industry cared about.

Witnessing the stasis inside the industry, the slow pace at which imbalances are being adjusted, impassions and motives me to enter the industry and contribute to effecting change from the inside.

This vision of effecting change lies at the centre of *The Tilt*. This publication aims to challenge what publishing can achieve, in terms of content, publishing model, design, and sales and distribution.

NOTES:

It starts here...

In July 2020, six applicants were chosen as mentees and paired with six mentors in the writing and publishing world. Five of these mentees are focused on becoming published writers, whereas I strive to become a publisher.

The culmination of the work we've each achieved with our mentors is in the publication you hold in your hands, or are reading on screen. We asked each mentee to submit a piece of writing of their choosing. No themes, no pigeonholing new voices into identity quotas, no sensationalising marginalisation. We just requested that each mentee consider the shift in publishing they would like to see through their writing. They were then given the opportunity to choose a writer or illustrator to respond to their piece, to form the core of a chapter they've shaped themselves.

Together, the minds and words of *The Tilt* call for a shift in the industry that makes space for more stories, languages and audiences. With that in mind, we have created two versions of *The Tilt*: along with a beautiful risograph printed book sold in selected bookshops, we have also designed a print-at-home edition.

We are tired of the economic exclusion in publishing, which can dictate a story's reach and audience. Equanimity is at the heart of this publication; where print and digital sit side by side, so too do audio and visual. We have created a visual language within these pages, which will unlock audio content through innovative technology. Passages of the text have been translated and read aloud by our mentees; to place the languages in their work – Gujarati, Lithuanian and Spanish – on equal footing with English.

Despite there being no set themes for *The Tilt*, threads of commonality have emerged from our submissions. Our mentees' visions for the future of publishing focalise issues of belonging, identity and place; reflective of a marginalisation at play not only in publishing, but in wider society.

It starts here...
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WHEN IS A PRIZE NOT A PRIZE...?

Sunny Singh, in conversation with Clare Howdle

...When it's a stand. Author Sunny Singh shares the frustration and fury of why a prize for writers of colour is needed. And what we all need to do to change that.

In 2016, Sunny Singh launched the Jhalak Prize – recognising book of the year by a writer of colour – with a simple aim. To spotlight the talent of writers overlooked by the industry in the hope that within five years it would work itself out of existence. In June 2020, the *Rethinking Diversity in Publishing* report showed us just how far we still have to go before that reality becomes possible. Conducted by Goldsmiths University in partnership with the Bookseller and Spread the Word, and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the report draws on qualitative interviews with 113 publishing professionals to show how woefully lacking the industry still is in acquiring, publishing, promoting and selling work by writers of colour.

We caught up with Singh the week the Report was published, with the intention of talking about prize culture. What we got instead was a frank, powerful and thought provoking discussion that cuts to the quick of the industry itself, and a deeper understanding of the exhausting battle the Jhalak Prize founder, author and lobbyist finds herself having to fight.

Clare Howdle: You've talked in the past about how the 2015 *Writing the Future* report – which highlighted the barriers writers of colour face in publishing – spurred you on to set up the Jhalak Prize. What changes have you seen in the four years since the prize launched?

Sunny Singh: Since the abysmal numbers in the *Writing the Future* report we've seen few positives. There's been a small increase in the publishing of books by writers of colour. Indie presses do a lot of heavy lifting. There's also been a very tiny shift in the big publishers, where the numbers have gone up. But we're looking at a rate of change slower than a snail.

You've caught me on a really bad week. *The Rethinking Diversity…* report is utterly, utterly devastating. The kinds of things that have been said by people in publishing are infuriating and saddening. I mean when you're reading an industry report which says: 'there remains suspicions whether racial and ethnic minorities read, at least to the same extent', what do we do? And when you've got publishing professionals telling the Report's researchers that 'publishing writers of colour is still seen as risky', it beggars belief.

I started the Jhalak Prize in 2015 assuming that the industry would act in good faith. I thought, 'maybe they don't know, maybe if we celebrate and emphasise and talk about the wonderful things that are happening, things will change'. Now I'm looking at it going, 'Actually, you know what? This is active hostility from the publishing industry. They don't want us'.

CH: That must be a painful conclusion to reach.

SS: Literally the Report has me screaming in my pillow, breaking things, punching my punching bag and weeping.

The industry is institutionally and structurally racist. That isn't to say there aren't perfectly nice, sweet people working in there, but those perfectly nice sweet people perpetuate a structure that excludes and marginalises writing.

These have been my four reactions all through the week, since I got my hands on it. The industry is institutionally and structurally racist. That's the reality of it. That isn't to say there aren't perfectly nice, sweet people working in there, but those perfectly nice sweet people perpetuate a structure that excludes and marginalises writing. Then they also gaslight us by saying, 'It's all about literary merit'. There's loads of stuff in the report about how publishing more writers of colour would come at the cost of quality. How many mediocre, if not outright awful, writers who are white get published on a regular basis? I mean, hundreds of thousands.

CH: Does it motivate you to fight harder?

SS: It's a really hard space because I've had to constantly balance out what I say as somebody who has founded the Jhalak Prize and lobbies for writers of colour, and also myself. Increasingly, I'm very aware that the risk of saying the things I do is that I won't be published again. I hear from a lot of publishing and media professionals that the Jhalak Prize is a great initiative, but it's an initiative that comes at huge personal cost and huge personal risk.

So in terms of fighting harder, if you'd caught me on Monday I would have probably been well, 'I have to be careful and moderate my response'. Now I'm like, 'You know what? It's clear from the Report that publishing isn't going to accept me or people like me. They're not going to publish me anyway, so what do I have to lose?' Now, the only thing I can do is speak out as loudly and brutally as I can.

CH: And what does that entail?

SS: Continuing to call out the injustice and to show the abject failure of the industry to understand or represent

the writers and readers of contemporary Britain. All I can hope is what we're experiencing now and have experienced for decades doesn't happen to lots of brilliant young writers who are coming through the pipeline. That's what I can work on. I can pretty much write off most of my generation. Those of us who are in our 40s and 50s and have been publishing for 20 years and more, I think we have to write ourselves off and speak out so that it doesn't happen to the young ones.

CH: It's heartbreaking to hear that you've arrived at a point where you have to think like that.

SS: But look where we are. Look at 'Publishing Paid Me'. It was very telling that the American white writers spoke up but very few British white writers chose to share what they make, because it would highlight the discrepancy and the disparity even more starkly than we have seen in the US. I mean, you're looking at £500, £700 for an advance on royalties for a writer of colour, £2,500 for a book. There are serious, serious problems with that. Sure, there are issues with American publishing but British publishing is 100 years behind when it comes to equality issues because the industry doesn't want to do anything. It's become excruciatingly clear. Every last step is either superficial or it's grudging or it's done in a way that doesn't truly push forward the change.

CH: So, is it a generational change that's needed? As more aware, diverse and proactive young professionals move into decision-making roles?

SS: No. It's a class change. Let's be honest. Structurally, let's think about who works in publishing. Mostly middle-class, white, often Oxbridge, overwhelmingly Russell Group. Much of the industry is based in London and it's really poorly paid, which means if you work in the industry you by default need to have either family or a partner or somebody who will support you, because you can't afford to work in the publishing industry if you are not from a privileged background. So it doesn't matter if you're hiring 23-year -olds, you're still basically replicating the same crew.

And sure, all the publishing industry big players have launched their diversity initiatives but where's the shift in promotions? It's not good enough to say you're recruiting people. Why aren't they being promoted? Why aren't they being paid and mentored and going up the ladder? Where are the black and brown people heading up? Not one little imprint, which focuses on racial issues or non-white writing, but actually a head of a big major publisher. You can't even see it three rungs down, four rungs down because they're not promoting them.

CH: For those of us on the periphery of the industry the Report came as a shock because prior to it, we felt that progress was being made. How can our perception be so far from the truth of it and what do we do about that?

SS: I don't think those of us who are at the coalface have ever assumed that things were going wonderfully. I think we have known all along, every single year with the Jhalak Prize for example, that every single step is a massive, massive battle. We've known this. I've spoken on panels about this, I've spoken for the Bookseller Conference. It's very obvious.

What has changed, and I think this is where it's important, is that the veneer is harder to maintain. I think the fact that there are lots more of us that are able to be vocal makes a difference. With the Jhalak Prize for example, we're bringing attention to our longlists every year. But it's also changed because we make it impossible for other prizes to have

You reach a point where whatever they can do has been done. Now, the only thing I can do is speak out as loudly and brutally as I can.

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all-white longlists and shortlists. It's much harder for them to do that now and not be asked why. So I think more than a prize itself, we almost function like a pressure group or a lobby group. You ask, what should you do? Well, I think people who have power and privilege have a choice, to ask that question. We don't. We do what we must – we continue fighting, at whatever cost.

CH: Where the veneer is cracking and people who have power and privilege are waking up to the struggle and trying to re-educate themselves to identify and challenge the barriers writers of colour face, do you see hope?

SS: Well, look, there is always hope. Otherwise we wouldn't be here. For example, The CLPE (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education) Report pointed out that 30% of schoolchildren in schools in England right now are students of colour. 1% of children's books have a protagonist who is a child of colour. To me it's an absolute travesty, that we're fighting to change, but it also tells me those 30% of kids are going to grow up. And some of them will have the power to buy books. We can work with that. It may not happen now, it may happen in 20 years, but we can work with it.

CH: And really that's where something like the Jhalak Prize is so vital – in showcasing the brilliant work that's being produced by writers of colour in all disciplines to build up awareness. Is that why you choose not to have categories, so you can showcase as broadly as possible?

SS: There is a reason we don't have categories. There simply aren't enough books. There have been years when our longlist was every book by a writer of colour in that genre published in the country. That's how little writers of colour are published. There simply aren't enough books for us to do categories. This year after four years of running the prize, we had 153 submissions across all categories and genres. In 2014, the International Publishers Association, was publishing 20 books an hour. That's not dropped, it's actually increased. Out of 20 books an hour, we've got 153 submissions. If I add those that weren't submitted (sometimes a lot of very prominent writers will choose not to have their books submitted because they want the attention to go elsewhere), we still don't make 200. That's what it comes down to.

Understanding the numbers is another reason we set the Jhalak Prize up. In the 2015 *Writing the Future* report, publishers did not want to give numbers of what they were publishing, because it would have laid out in stark terms how little there was. By accepting across the categories it allows us to see what's being done and not done, it gives us a whole industry view.

CH: Is it for similar reasons that you accept self-published and digitally published books?

SS: Yes. Because we know there's great writing out there that's not being given the opportunity it deserves. One of the writers who I absolutely adore, Talia Hibbert, writes romances. I first found out about her while she was self-publishing. She wasn't on our longlist but we started talking about what a brilliant writer she was, and she now has a mainstream publisher. So we accept self-published writers, because we want to see who else is not being published, who's not even getting a foot through the door. We will take digitally published work, we will take PDFs, we will take e-books. We will accept whatever it takes for people to submit to us, because we want to see the work.

What has changed is that the veneer is harder to maintain. I think the fact that there are lots more of us that are able to be vocal makes a difference.

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CH: It's clear your work reaches far beyond the winning book each year…

SS: Of course. Our ethos is not about the prize. I have said over and over again, I would like to shut down the prize tomorrow. To me the perfect achievement and the goal of the Jhalak Prize is that it's not needed. I don't want to be here and have to see this prize in 20 years, 30 years, 50 years' time. But when you take that stance, with the industry we're faced with, you have to work hard to make that reality possible. It's why we talk about the longlists constantly. It's why we push our judges. In fact, one of the things that came up back in 2016 was the fact that a lot of prizes said they couldn't find writers of colour to serve as judges and that's why they had all-white juries. I just find it extraordinary. So I said, 'Fine'. We have writers of colour only on our judging panel. It's like, 'Look, they're here.'

CH: I imagine readers are a vital piece of the puzzle too. What should we, as readers, be doing to help drive change?

SS: Stand in front of your bookshelf and if it's all white, or mostly white, that's frankly a moral failure. If you're standing in front of your bookshelf and you can't see any queer writers or women writers, if your bookshelf doesn't reflect the world we live in then you're part of the problem. At the end of it, yes we can talk about injustices in structural terms but at an individual level, if you're not doing anything about it and you're not even seeing it, that's an issue. And not, 'This month Black Lives Matter protests are on, so now I'm going to read…' I'm so bloody tired of all these prominent writers who've been on Twitter. And I promise you, if I never see a white writer go on about Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and James Baldwin it would be too soon.

So I would say read. Read as widely as you can and notice the blank spaces, notice the silences, notice what is not there.

CH: And enjoy the read too? Because if you love reading it will be an exercise in enriching and broadening your reading experience too right?

SS: Absolutely. I said it's a moral failure if you don't read, but the other side of it is reading writers of colour, or for that matter on any axis of oppression, should not be about feeling self-righteous. Just because you read a writer of colour or a queer writer and you're white and you're straight does not make you a better human being. What is important is to think about how it changes your world and to read because you want to know those stories. Just read it because it's going to nourish you.

Find out more about the Jhalak Prize, its longlists and its 2020 winner. Enrich your reading list: jhalakprize.com

If you're standing in front of your bookshelf and it's all white, or mostly white, if you can't see any queer writers or women writers, if your bookshelf doesn't reflect the world we live in then you're part of the problem.

LA HABITACIÓN
ROOM
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KAMBARYS

LA HABITACIÓN
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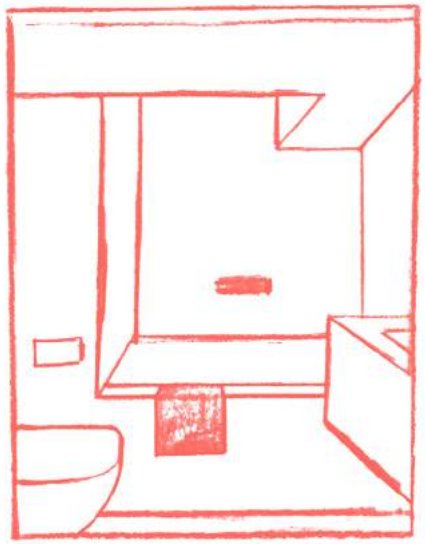
KAMBARYS

SOFIA ABASOLO

'Gusset' is taken from the grieving, molton centre of Sofia Abasolo's novel *The Sea By Car.* In just one scene 'Gusset' holds us close, showing us poverty, survival, migration and what it means for Anna to grow up without her mother. It is a turning point in the bildungsroman arc of *The Sea By Car*, marking a shift from Anna's past – and the past tense – to Anna's future and her adult life, which Sofia opens up to us in the present tense. Abasolo is a hybrid writer – from Argentina via Italy and then, finally, London. Her writing carries the migrant kid coming-of-age-in-London tradition in a way that is reminiscent to me of Zadie Smith and Hanif Kureishi, but with a lyrical, millennial lightness of touch. And, perhaps unlike some who have come before her, Abasolo writes about class and the British welfare state with an anticapitalist realism that wards off nostalgia. In 'Gusset', as in *The Sea By Car*, Abasolo reminds her reader that the present moment of anti-migrant, austerity politics was a long time coming, and returning to 'normal' won't save us. 'Gusset' shows what Abasolo is so good at – telling a story that spans almost two decades in a short space; a story about poverty and grief that never dehumanises her characters or luxuriates in their misery. Abasolo shuts us in the bathroom with Anna and the banal unspoken dysfunction left by her mother's death.

The portentous loose toilet seat. Her almost naked teenage body and her big and angry father, who is both scary – an "ogre" – and a tragic, mourning figure. I want to put my arms around her – this girl who is stuffing her pants with cotton wool, sitting on the toilet, the year that her mum dies.



GUSSET

***by* Sofia Abasolo**

The year my mum dies I sit on the toilet. My dad has replaced the plastic lid with a wooden one, at odds with the rest of the bathroom. One of the screws has loosened, it slides from side to side uncomfortably beneath me. I have been sitting a long time. When I get up I'll have to peel my thighs off, and there will be red marks on my skin from the pressure.

I come in here to be alone, something she used to do. When she went to the bathroom, I wasn't to wait outside. The bathroom was a place where people had to be left alone, she'd explained. I had to wait for her to be finished somewhere else, far enough for her not to hear me, indefinitely.

It was always good when she came back. It takes a few years before the individual child starts having mixed feelings about this woman through which she exited into the world.

We enter the world via an exit,

I think, noticing small brown stains on the gusset of my cheap white underwear. There's more blood on the tissue after I wipe. I try to think about how this makes me feel.

Artwork: Miranda Latimer

Recently, I often think about how I should be emotionally responding to things.

The stains persist for days. I am surprised to learn that the bleeding is continuous. I assumed it would be some blood loss at a given point during each day. The morning or evening seemed like natural options. No, it's ongoing. Hour after hour, minute after minute, stains spreading quietly and privately. Each second that passes, more blood drops.

I sit in a Maths lesson. The teacher is talking. He is very old, his hair is white, he has a white moustache, his silver glasses look like they come from the past. It's London weather outside, the sky is covered in white cloud, not an inch of blue visible, not a speck of sunlight, no drizzle in the air, just a harsh, cold, dry breeze. It could be October or February.

'Blood on my hands' – that's a saying,

I think.

'I wash my hands of this,'

Pilates said that.

I think about all the unseen spilled blood in the world.

Other women on their periods too, sure, but also children.

Dead children.

There's that advert with celebrities snapping their fingers saying a child dies every three seconds of some avoidable condition.

Maybe it's dehydration?

Each second that passes, more blood drops.

I realise that I am not disgusted or frightened. The way other girls speak about periods, I feared the worst. That I would have to shower twice a day, that I would be the prisoner of a bothersome body. I am impressed by my body. Whilst my thoughts scramble in the disarray of grief, my body says no to chaos. I am glad and I have no one to tell. I sit on the toilet again.

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Each second that passes, more blood drops.

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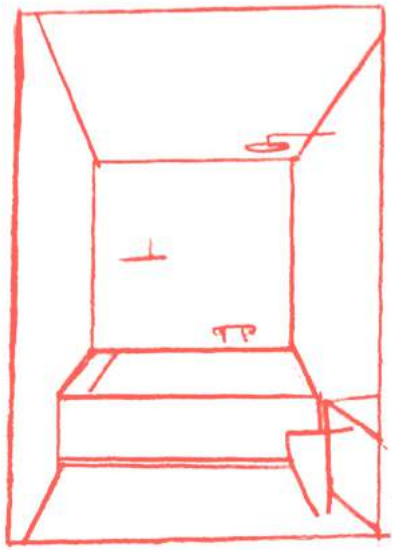

We spend so much of our life in the bathroom,

I think. It feels like I am constantly having to come in here to do something. Weeing is a chore. Brushing my teeth seems unnecessary. I do these things because there's a booming voice in my head repeating: you must.

I can't just lie in bed and piss myself, I know that.

But why?

Some people do. Babies and old people. People close to the exit.

Why can't I be closer?

My thighs feel uncomfortable, I have sat here for too long again, I can feel the reddening and the gathering sweat, again.

I should get up,

I think, filling with dread.

Oh, God, I have to get up,

I have to pull my trousers up.

I refuse to wash my hands.

Wee is sterile,

and there's none on my hands anyway – what kind of person gets piss on their hands when they go to the toilet? Why on earth do we all insist on washing our hands?

The simplest tasks have become a morbid performance.

My father sits at the computer desk in the living room, typing. The fast, continuous sound of his typing is like a ticking clock or a dripping tap – a continuous sign of life in the background. He is a dark, large man, not unlike an ogre. He comes from an era and a part of the world where long beards are common, so he does not feel bizarre walking around with half his face buried in silver-black hair. His thick-rimmed glasses belong to that same world. I do not know this world except from photographs and words. I have not smelled its buses or tasted its meat.

He must be older than my Maths teacher,

I think. I often think about all the people he is older than.

He really is very old, too old to be a father.

Too old to impart any knowledge that might be applicable in England today.

I am unsure about everything, I doubt the skin on my bones.

I don't want to be alive,

I think, like I'm contemplating menu options, sat on the toilet.

I pull my underwear waistband away from my body, staring at the stained gusset, trying to work out what to do.

I don't have any money to buy sanitary towels,

I realise. The other problem is that my father is a man, not in possession of a womb. He knows nothing about cyclic blood loss. His immediate reaction, were he to lose that much blood at any point in his life, would be to call the doctor.

It makes sense for women to be hysterical,

I think, getting sidetracked.

Men would be too if they had to bleed this much without calling a doctor.

I have been using tissue paper instead.

It's a disaster,

I think, although I'm not sure. I'm not sure what the standard is for this sort of thing.

Each second that passes, more blood drops.
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How much staining is acceptable?

I have heard of the term 'period pants' – more comfortable or less nice underwear women use during menstruation.

So it's probably okay,

I gather, for there to be some collateral mess.

But how much?

I need someone to tell me how to do this.

So far I've no clear ideas.

I take off the stained underwear and begin to wash it in the sink. The stains have dried and I can't get them out, I can only get them to fade. I put my school skirt back on and head commando into my bedroom across the hall in search of a clean pair of underwear, armed with more toilet paper and some cotton wool. Cotton wool was the best thing I could come up with.

Perhaps it'll be more absorbent,

I think, as I'm about to shut my door.

'Anna?' My father's voice calls out from the living-room. I stop walking and wait for him to speak.

'Anna?'

'Yes, what?' Every second, more blood.

'Don't be insolent.'

'I'm sorry. What is it?'

'Come here a second, I need to speak to you.' Every bone in my body feels heavy.

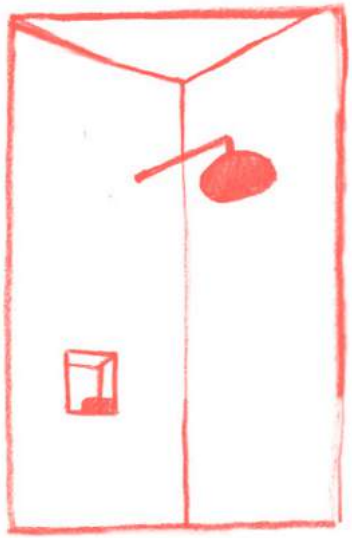
'Can it wait?'

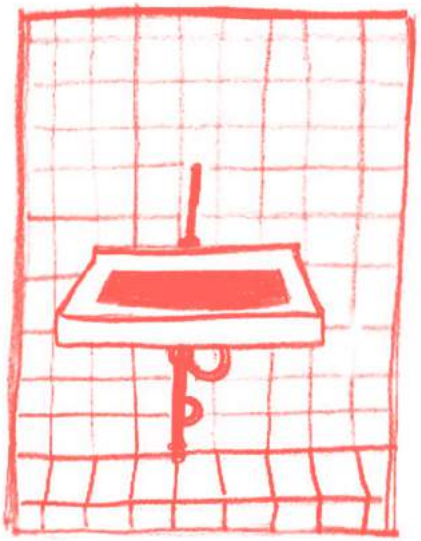
'No.'

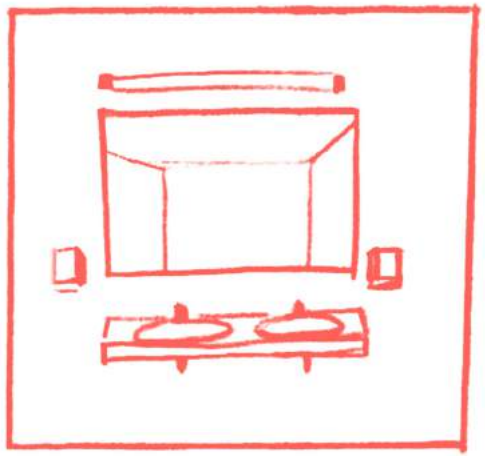
'Ok, just a second,' I say, shutting the door. 'I won't be a minute,' I shout, reassuring him. He can get angsty if I take too long to show signs of life, like an anxious child poking a very still pet hamster.

I rest my back on the door and slide down it until I am sat on the floor. I can feel the moistness, I must be staining my only school skirt, I might be dripping onto the beige carpet.

Cada segundo que pasa, cae más sangre







It's not that I don't care, but I can't seem to do anything about it. I shut my eyes. The tissue and cotton in my hand begin to moisten in my clammy palm.

Nothing will remain dry, nothing will stand still for even a second.

I open my eyes and turn my head towards my chest of drawers to my left. I reach with my left hand without moving and open the bottom drawer, looking for clean underwear. I take out a handkerchief instead by mistake and get angry.

Why do I own handkerchiefs in the twenty-first century?

I resign myself to the situation and crawl to the drawers to search with my eyes. I find a pair of faded pink briefs with a small hole on the hip. They taper at the sides like all my underwear does, little girls' underwear. I get up and remove my skirt, inspecting my thighs. There's a little blood which I wipe off by spitting onto a tissue.

Is this disgusting? I should be disgusted, probably.

I can't bring myself to feel anything beyond the restless intolerance of everything that I already feel. I can't bring myself to be disgusted or allured or curious or happy or sad. I feel only a deep longing for permission to feel nothing.

I place the pink briefs on the floor and put a layer of cotton wool on the gusset, covered by several layers of tissue paper. I press it down carelessly, folding the excess of the tissue over the sides, so as to try and replicate wings on a sanitary towel like the one the school nurse gave me.

I wonder how many more times I can get some off the school nurse without getting told off?

I am trying to put on my briefs without bleeding onto the carpet and yet also without dismantling the makeshift pad when there's a knock at the door.

'Just a minute,' I snap. Sweat.

'Watch your tone, Anna. I'm your father.'

He's very fond of saying this, he thinks it extremely

significant, but to me it's like saying 'I have a beard' or 'today is Tuesday.'

I manage to put on my pants without anything collapsing, and I put on a denim skirt. I open the door. He is standing there. If I say I have to wash my hands now he'll think I'm stalling.

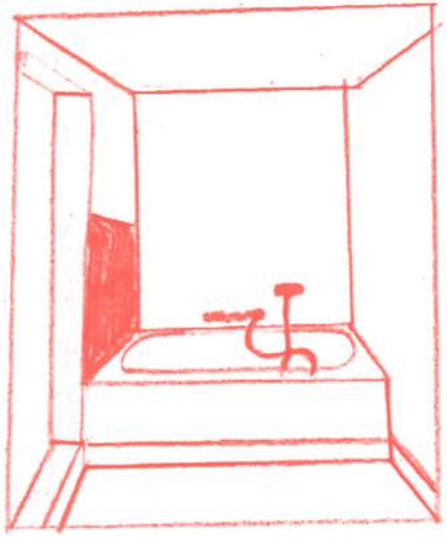
'I just need to wash my hands,' I say, waiting for him to move out of the way. He gives me an arch smile and lets out a small laugh before saying a sarcastic 'okay.' I shouldn't have said anything,

I think. It is always inconceivable to him that anyone might have to do something that bears no relation to him, least of all me.

'Okay, ready,' I say, as though I'm about to run a race. I look at the armchair, wondering if it's safe to sit on it. I'm not wearing tights. I opt for the wooden chair instead, even though I'm tired and I know this will take an extremely long time. I sit down waiting for him to talk.

'It's come to my attention that you are dressing increasingly inappropriately,' he says. I clasp at the armrests and stare at a fixed point through the window – a treetop in the rich neighbours' garden. I don't need to reply – he never requires any reply. He always keeps talking. Nothing will stop, not even for a minute, nothing will stop and wait for me.

Cada segundo que pasa, cae más sangre
Kiekvieną sekundę, kuri praeina, lašadaugiau kraujo.



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AKVILE PECKYTE

We interviewed her for the role of publishing intern in the spring, and her composure had the effect of making me babble and gesticulate. Akvile was calm and effortless as a swan. She exuded a quiet confidence, evident in her measured answers. Of course she got the job, despite the fierce competition. The cliché has it that while the swan glides gracefully across the water, its feet are paddling furiously beneath to propel it forward. But the metaphor is not to do with the work we gave her – Akvile could turn her hand to anything and is a quick learner.

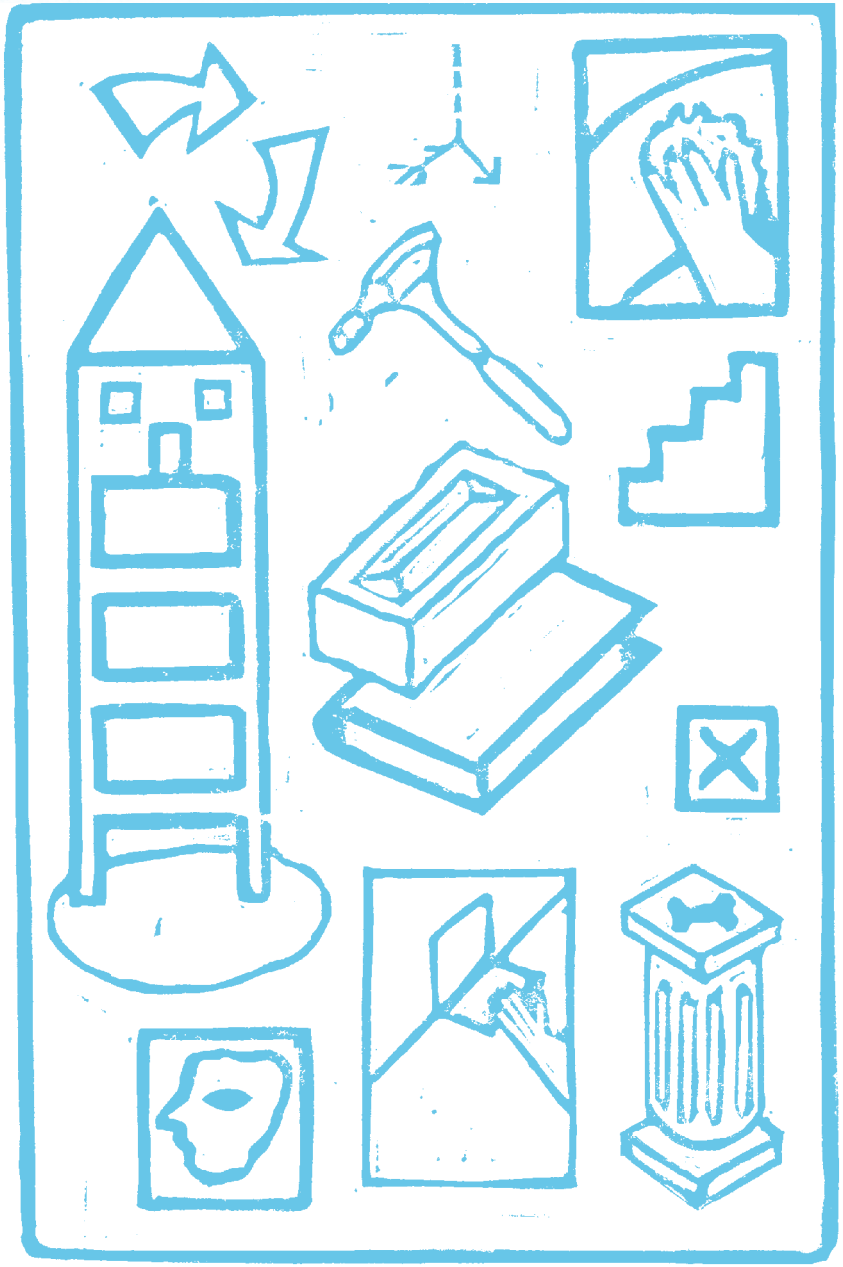
Later, as her mentor, I met with Akvile ahead of her interview for a job in London. I said I'd be happy to run through possible questions and scenarios. Of course she had all the right answers at the ready and her CV looked great. So we talked about the other stuff that comes with being interviewed – connecting and making a good first impression, and the way people 'present' at creative agencies in London. I suggested she put a plant or a picture in the background of her Zoom call, instead of blank walls. I suggested she watch social psychologist Amy Cuddy's TED Talk about 'power posing' as an emergency confidence boosting strategy. (I still do this before anxiety-inducing meetings or big lectures). I suggested she smile and be ready to make small talk before the interview started. This kind of coaching is part of the social capital game that many of us play, to different degrees.

In her article here, Akvile says that over the years, 'I stripped myself of the markers of otherness; I practised my British accent into late hours of the night after seeing people's faces furrow at the way I stumbled over my words.' Akvile's passionate diatribe against assimilation reminds me of RP and the regional accent debate at the BBC in the 1940s. According to the BBC, 'Unlike other UK accents, it's identified not so much with a particular region as with a particular social group... RP is associated with educated speakers and formal speech. It has connotations of prestige and authority.'

Akvile was awarded a First from Exeter University, the Russell Group university where I teach. Only 6.5% of children in the UK attend a private school, yet they make up around 31.5% of Exeter University students. It would be nice to think that a First class graduate from any background would be on an even footing after graduation. Akvile's piece, about being a working class Eastern European, is a powerful reminder that social capital – that is, the invisible signifiers of class and status – isn't suddenly acquired through academic success. Akvile reminds us, with a barely repressed rage that is usually so beautifully and carefully concealed for our convenience, that 'fitting in' demands a kind of hypervigilance. It's a privilege to see her drop her guard and, going forward, to be a sometime sounding board as she launches her creative career.

Hi, I'm Here to Steal Your Job, Akvile Peckyte – *p.37*
Plasticine People, Emily Black – p.41

Artwork: Danielle Doobay



HI, I'M HERE TO STEAL YOUR JOB

by **Akvile Peckyte**

Con los años, me despojé de todos los marcadores de mi otredad
Su laiku, aš sunaikinau visus savo kitoniškumo ženklu

The polite, white middle-class mass that encompasses most of the publishing industry doesn't hold prejudice against foreigners, probably voted Remain, and yet they will still shut the door in your face. If you're not British and middle-class, the chances are that you won't understand the subtle and unspoken cues that separate you from the inner circles of networking that uphold this industry.

The first thing I saw when I opened the latest issue of Society of Young Publishers magazine was a Q&A asking what someone can do to build experience fresh out of university. Volunteer, volunteer, volunteer was the answer. As a working class person with no connections, I am faced with a conundrum — I don't have the luxury of giving my labour away for free because I need to survive. This leaves me a step behind those who have the privilege of not living with a ticking time bomb in their pockets, where the knowledge that my struggling mother won't be able to work a physical job for much longer and the mantra of 'I need to find a good

job that pays the bills now', keep me up at night. The sacrifice of a parent's life for you to have a better one than theirs is a hell of a debt to repay, possibly rivalled only by that of the maximum student loan. I am fortunate enough to be able to choose my career path, but many immigrant and/or working class parents feel that this is an unsuitable career due to the inherent need for connections and to be frank, an inherent poshness, leading to the alienation of such people from publishing and an appalling lack of diversity in both positions of decision making and published writing. Many people's stories are never told because often, the people who work the hardest just don't have the time to realise their potential as writers.

I struggle to find representation of livelihoods like mine in books or television that isn't just for shock value; the real lives of poor people are turned into entertainment on television as thousands of Brits tune in to watch shows about council estate nightmares before they get bored and switch over to *Escape to the Country*, muttering something about ghastly chavs. No one stops to consider the legalised discrimination of poor people by landlords who can flat out refuse to rent to people who receive housing benefits under the guise of the risk of receiving rent late. It allows for the sanitisation of entire neighbourhoods, leaving people like my family with very limited options, priced out or simply refused housing because of our class and nationality as 'benefit thieving Eastern Europeans'. It makes living anywhere close to the publishing hub of London damn near impossible. For many families like mine, getting on the property ladder is something we will likely never experience. If working yourself to the bone truly equated to financial reward, my mum would live in her own golden mansion while Jeff Bezos acted as her butler. It's time we put this myth to rest and stop

pretending like nepotism and background don't still play a huge role in how far you get in your career as a whole, and more specifically, in publishing.

Even if by the skin of your teeth you get a 'good' degree from a 'good' university, it doesn't mean anything to people whose perceptions of class are ingrained into their psyche. Last week, my mother and I were asked to serve food for a wedding reception by someone she works with for the exchange of 'some nice food', and we were met with incredulity and rage when we refused. On more than one occasion, we have been told by some well-meaning British person that they love Eastern Europeans, because they're just so hard working! The acceptance of our existence in their spheres in exchange for excruciating amounts of labour is frankly not acceptance at all. The rhetoric about Eastern Europeans seems to be that British people need our unskilled labour, but we must not dare to step outside of our league and steal the 'good' jobs from British people.

It is difficult to wake up from the state of what Mark Fisher calls reflexive impotence. Many of us recognise that capitalism is flawed, but feel that there is nothing we can do to change it. The cycles of classism continue to centrifuge us until we are sick of hearing about who's rich, who's poor, and Christ, what does it matter anyway, it's hopeless! It is a given that the more you understand your own oppression, the more resigned you may feel. I can't magically choose to live outside of the structures of class that press down on Britain with all their might, but I can choose to be aware of how I've pandered to them by pretending to be someone I am not. Being working class and foreign isn't a disease to heal from,

Su laiku, aš sunaikinau visus savo kitoniškumo ženklu

nor should it be something to get over to get to 'the other side' — the posh one, with Pret meal deals, and people who have parents who know someone that knows someone.

Over the years, I stripped myself of all the markers of my otherness; I practised my British accent into late hours of the night after seeing people's faces furrow at the way I stumbled over my words. I twisted and spun stories about my mother's occupation because I hated the way people cooed in sympathy after telling them she's a cleaner. I assimilated, constantly living in fear that someone might see through me and say I don't belong there. People always tell me they're surprised by how posh my accent is as a compliment (which suggests a whole other myriad of problems), but to me, it's just a stark reminder that I made it all up. I'm an imposter, blowing a gauzy bubble of middle-class Britishness until I decided to burst it myself because I am angry and tired. I can only really speak for those who tick the 'White (Other)' box in the ethnicity quiz, but fundamentally, publishing as an industry is exclusionary because it does not account for the way being working class and foreign affects every facet of your existence, nor does it want to listen to the stories that make the middle classes uncomfortable. Inclusivity is not just ticking a box — it's also taking accountability for the ways in which the people who make up the majority of the publishing industry unknowingly (and knowingly) do not listen.

PLASTICINE PEOPLE

by **Emily Black**

I have two eyes, but no mouth. I'm a soft form on the bed; purple, green, red and orange that pools on the sheets. Under the lone blue of the moon I was flattened and rolled in the way children press plasticine, blending borders into camouflage to create shadows in a realm where beauty is a not yet white marble.

I roll to the bathroom, purple limbs to the floor. I must form a new figure for the day, so scatter the green, orange and red fragments. Peel layer after layer; a snake shedding its skin, each veneer reveals new shades of character, the pieces of myself that have been touched and untouched by the outside. I'm a flood of stop-motion that drips to the floor, only to regenerate once again, root to tip, eyelash to toe. In another life I named myself. I was born from red dust under a hot-butter sun; but in a room with no windows, feet pressed to the tiles, this fantasy dissipates. I occupy a British blue in which I have no name, because a name is something chosen for you.

Subdued and sublimated, I'm told what to be, how to speak, how to think and who to know. To twist, build, create: my name is a metamorphosis, a silent prayer. I craft a waterfall of hair, two feet for running, and brows to strike shadows

Over the years, I stripped myself of all the markers of my otherness

across my face. I build a character. The woman in the mirror is neither too much or too little, overbearing or resigned, but exactly the person who makes sense when in writing. She's a prisoner to fonts that have flavours, captured by boxes that when ticked hold the power to make a person belong.

In the morning I'll lock the paintbox behind me, seal every trace of selfhood stacked amongst a thousand other boxes that pile into the London skyline, brown shells concealing the private lives of plasticine people. I'll take the tube six stops from Angel to Whitehall, as much a foreigner as the other eight million, all others in their own hometown, crosses on the map, station to station: a diaspora of the unnamed.

Eyes down on the tube, hundreds of us move through dark tunnels, commuting in the clay box as colours chosen by children. There's room for one more, but only if you flatten yourself against the sphere, willing to be rolled into the dough. There's space for those who'll melt into the great mothball, lumped from their own paintbox. Every piece of clay that started as a yellow, red, or blue, has turned grey in the vast mass of this blending.

Day by day, a transformation occurs, too tiny to be noticed over the working week, it unfurls over the years. I begin to blur these colours, melding and forgetting where I end, and my plasticine fingertips begin. I can hold hands, explore bodies, and trace my own face, never sure whether the woman inside the clay could feel without these numbing layers of art and pretense. I grow cracked and cold, cementing every name I was ever given. Layers upon layers dry to encase the sun deep inside, starved by the exterior, cold as Hermione in the winter.

I return to bed under the blue of moonlight, dreaming one day of the authority to no longer be plasticine, but cast in marble: owner of my own name.

Over the years, I stripped myself of all the markers of my otherness
Con los años, me despojé de todos los marcadores de mi otredad

EL ANHELO
ILGESYS
તીવ્રેચ્છા
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EL ANHELO
ILGESYS
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LONGING

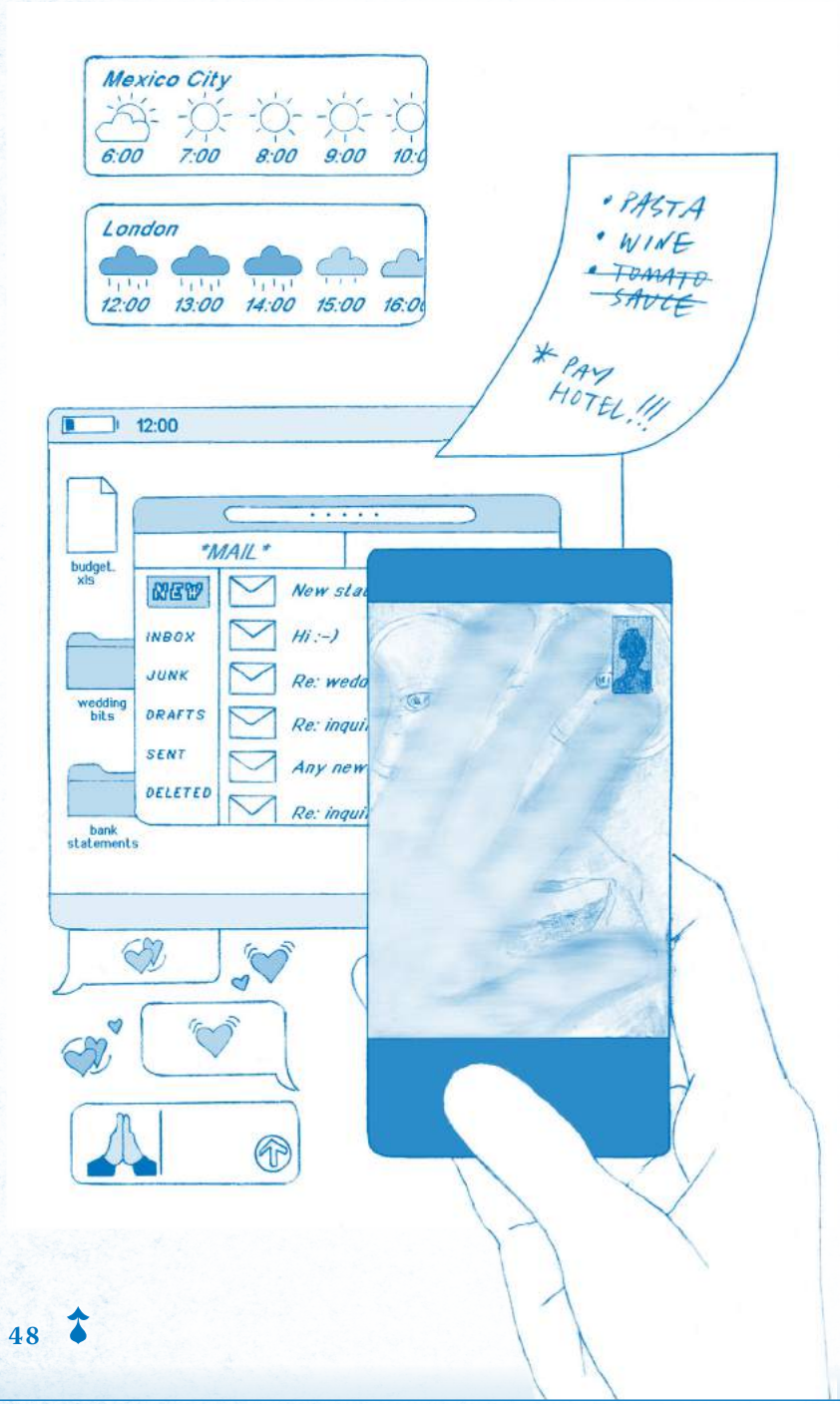
SARAH ENAMORADO

SARAH ENAMORADO

by WYL MENMUIR 47

'Write the story you'd want to read but haven't read yet.' As I was listening to Sarah Enamorado talk about her novel in progress during one of our mentoring sessions, the words of my first editor came back to me without warning. It's advice I reflect on each time I start a new piece, whether it's a short story, a novel or an essay. It was among the most useful advice anyone has ever given me. It having occurred to me so strongly, I considered passing this same piece of advice on to Sarah though, on reflection, I think it was because Sarah embodies this advice that it had returned to me. In Sarah's writing – like her piece here – which tells an LGBT story that is positive and romantic, gentle and engaging, she is telling the stories of which she wants to be the reader as well as the writer, stories she has not seen represented in the mainstream. In taking this approach, Sarah's writing stands in contrast to much of what is out there at the moment. In writing the story she wants to read, Sarah is writing the stories that we, readers who are hungry for new stories, for the little-told or the untold, for new perspectives, want to read too. That's what fresh writing looks like. It identifies the gaps in the stories that have gone before, recognises the empty spaces on the literary map, the parts of the map that other writers have labelled *terra nulla*, and fills them in, in all their detail and glory.

Artwork: Esther McManus



THE HOME OFFICE SHOULD DELIVER THEIR DECISION WITHIN SIX WEEKS

***by* Sarah Enamorado**

The Home Office should deliver their decision within six weeks.

The first week of waiting is bearable. I'm still running off the exhilaration of this part being over, the application is submitted. Finally.

'That was the hardest part. Now you just have to wait,' our immigration lawyer tells us.

I call you from Kings Cross station. You're in Mexico City, waiting for a taxi home after handing in your matching paperwork.

'We did it!'

'Now we just have to wait for the yes.'

I feel fizzy with excitement; I imagine that moment in our life like a movie; the camera cutting between us, our relieved sighs and synchronised smiles.

Our lawyer told us that The Home Office will email me once they have come to a decision. Every morning I stick my hand through my letterbox to check they haven't changed their minds and sent a letter, just in case.

la cámara entre nosotros, nuestros suspiros aliviados y sonrisas sincronizadas
the camera cutting between us, our relieved sighs and synchronised smiles

DEC 9

The flat I'm renting isn't much, but it's my first flat. It's going to be our first flat. It's what I can afford; a one-bed above a chicken shop on the high street, the water bill included in the rent and black furry mould growing in all corners.

The week before we submit the application an inspector comes and measures the flat, takes photos of the bedroom and kitchen and the bath-less bathroom and writes a report for The Home Office. I make sure I spray all the corners with the special anti-mould spray I bought from the cheap shop.

'Under housing regulations, this flat is big enough for two adults and a child, so you two should be fine,' he says.

I thank him by handing over a hundred and fifty pounds, and try not to think about how many of my shifts that adds up to.

This is the first time in my life I have lived alone.

'You won't be alone for long,' you promise on WhatsApp and FaceTime and voice memos. 'I'll be there soon. Things will be easier once I am there.'

Once I'm there, you say, not *if I am allowed to move there.*

Two weeks pass, then three. No news from the Home Office.

Every morning when I sign in on the paper clock-in sheets at the nursing home whoever is working the same shift as me that day, Elena or Maria or Amelia, always ask me, 'Any news yet?'

I shake my head for no and force a smile.

'Don't worry, it'll come back soon,' they say. They understand the anxiety, the waiting. Sometimes they extend their arms out and squeeze my hand or my shoulder to let me know that it will be okay.

It'llbeokayit'llbeokay I repeat to myself like a mantra while I empty bed pans.

When I'm working shifts at the pub I hide my phone in the staff toilets, in the cupboard behind the stack of spare toilet rolls. I steal breaks every hour or so. Before I text you I open the Mail app to check for emails from The Home Office. Nothing.

I open the Safari browser, access my emails that way, just in case an email has slipped through the cracks and isn't showing up on the app.

Nothing.

I check my spam folder. I check my drafts. I sign in and out. I say a prayer you taught me and I click refresh.

Nothing.

After work I go home and boil pasta or I microwave rice packets or frozen ready meals. I load up Netflix on my laptop for company while I eat. I work my way through the Netflix catalogue; I'll watch anything that's light-hearted. Anything that will help my brain to stop whirring so that my body can dissolve into the bed for an hour or two.

When you call I tell you about a show I watched where a long distance couple fell asleep on FaceTime. I ask if you want to try it.

'We can't, we have a six-hour time difference, remember?'

When the sun goes down for me it comes up for you. By the time you wake up my day is half finished. After work each night I stay awake as late as I can to have time to talk to you, you wake up at six every morning so we can speak at my twelve o'clock lunch break.

'Don't worry, this is only temporary. I'll be there soon.'

The Home Office should deliver their decision within six weeks.

I book our wedding venue after four weeks of waiting.

'They said that if we have to cancel they'll keep the deposit,' I explain to you on FaceTime that night, twirling my chicken flavoured noodles around my fork.

'We won't have to cancel.'

the camera cutting between us, our relieved sighs and synchronised smiles
fotoaparatas tarp mūsų,mūsųpalengvėję atodūsiai ir sinchronizuotos šypsenos

NOTES:

It feels wrong booking the wedding venue without you. I want to FaceTime you while I'm there but it's the middle of the night for you, you're asleep. By the time you wake up my day is half finished and I've put down the deposit. I send you photos and videos of the hotel.

'My friend's son got married here last year, the food is lovely,' my Mum says, linking my arm.

It's only a humble hotel. The room we'll get married in is big and airy and bright, but the carpet that covers the floor is an ugly mottled brown. It's not perfect but it's within our price range. This could be it, I think, this could be where we get married. If we are allowed to get married. If you are allowed to move here. If we are allowed to start our life together.

If we are allowed.

The Home Office should deliver their decision within six weeks.

'Don't worry, she's going to love it,' my Dad says, sensing my anxiety. And he's right; you do love it. Or you say you do.

'It looks beautiful, I can't wait for us to get married there!' You say with such enthusiasm I wonder if it's forced. I email a discount wedding dress store I found on Facebook to book a provisional appointment for the both of us.

I have hope and excitement that I tend to constantly; I cut it down before it grows too large. I can't be too happy, I can't be too optimistic. Everything can be taken from me in a moment.

I check my banking app every day, three times a day to check that I have my budget correctly allocated.

For lawyers for the wedding venue for wedding cake for our wedding dresses for the rent for council tax for food for electricity for gas for your plane ticket.

The last plane ticket we'll have to buy to see each other.

If we get this visa our waiting is over and our distance is closed, it's the end of that chapter and it's the beginning of our next one.

Some days are okay, but others I can't get out of bed. I am so weighed down by the taunting of What If? What if we don't get the visa? What then?

Some days I think I'll manage to do it, I think I'll call in sick and have a whole day to myself. I want to be selfish and I want to relax, I want more than just the few hours on FaceTime with you. I want to spend the day on the phone to you, I want to stay in my pyjamas all day and order a take-away and I want the world to stop for a moment. I want the weight that sits on my chest all day long to be gone and I want a day where nobody asks anything of me and my want is so strong that I think that maybe today is the day – today I will call in sick.

And sometimes my finger hovers over the name of my supervisor at the nursing home or pub, and I whisper to myself doitdoitdoitdoitdoitcallthem

But then I remember the budget and I remember the banking app and I remember the rent and the wedding and plane ticket and

I get out of bed.

I work closing shift at the pub on a Friday night, payday weekend. My body is as stiff and heavy as steel, manoeuvring my limbs takes a Herculean effort. Pete walks me home and asks if I want to have a late dinner at the chicken shop with him.

I open my mouth to say, Thanks but I shouldn't, the words come out, Yeah okay sure!

I sit under the fluorescent light on a barstool in front of an unflattering mirror with him. We talk and gossip and gorge ourselves on salty chips and crispy chicken and for a moment I feel free from the anxiety. For a moment I'm living

fotoaparatas tarp mūsų mūsų pažengvėję atodūsiai ir sinchronizuotos šypsenos

ફોટોગ્રાફ્સ આપણી, આપણી વચ્ચે ના ઉછાળા, આપણી વચ્ચે ના ઉછાળા

NOTES:

life instead of waiting for it to start.

But then I go upstairs to my flat and realise I have spent money I wasn't supposed to, that was allocated for something else. The guilt and the grease sit heavy on my stomach and I barely sleep.

'You need to calm down.' You tell me, 'Ten pounds is ten pounds, it's not the end of the world. It's all going to work out, okay?'

'But it all adds up, and we need every penny. We've saved so long for this.'

'You need to calm down, I'll be there soon.'

'It'll be different, once you're here.'

'Yeah. Exactly.'

I know you're just as scared as me, if not more. I hate myself because I need your reassurance. I hate myself because I can't self-soothe. I hate myself because I need you, now I know what my life can be with you I can't bear to be without you.

I realise that if I eat those instant pasta sachets for a week, the ones from the cheap shop with the snot-textured cheese sauce, I can save enough money to buy a bottle of wine without going over my budget. I scour the off licence for the best bottle I can get for four pounds.

I pour out a glass while we are on FaceTime. We talk about our shared future; speaking it into existence.

'After I get a job, I'm going to take you out to a restaurant. Any one you want. And we're going to get a three-course meal and a nice bottle of wine, and you can drop some of the shifts at the pub or the nursing home.'

'No, don't worry about that,' I say.

'You can. And once I've had my job for a while, I'm going to get a car. Just a little one, a cheap one, but we'll be able to do big weekly shops, and we'll take your Nan into town so she can collect her pension on Fridays. We'll go to your

parents' house for dinners in the week. And we'll go on a holiday – a late honeymoon – down to the seaside!'

'Remember this is England, we don't have the same seasides you're used to,' I laugh. 'The sea is dark, and so is the sand, that's if there is sand – sometimes it's stones. And there are only a few days a year where it's actually hot.'

'I don't care, because I'll be with you. We'll be together. It's going to get better. Okay?'

'Okay.'

You raise your glass to me over FaceTime, I raise mine back. It's been ten weeks since we submitted the application.

The Home Office should deliver their decision within six weeks.

I fall asleep on FaceTime propping my phone up on the spare side of the double bed, your side of the bed. You stay on FaceTime while I sleep, watching TV in your bed nine thousand miles away.

When I wake up you are gone from my screen. I unlock my phone to a new email notification.

Dear Sirs

RE: Applicant no. 0421-2017-0112-1302

This message is to confirm your client's application has now been decided and the decision is attached to this email.

la cámara entre nosotros, nuestros suspiros aliviados y sonrisas sincronizadas

A PRAYER YOU TAUGHT ME

by **Kirsty Logan**

First Week

This is all I can give you. This is all I have. Four walls, one floor. Bathroom in the corner; no door, not really, just a shushety plastic folding screen. The kitchen is a single cupboard with a microwave and kettle. It's a stretch to say that I can reach my arms out and touch all the walls. But not much of a stretch.

The man from The Home Office says this is not a home. Could it be an office? No, not that either. I know he thinks it's not good enough. I'm not good enough.

When he leaves I sit in the middle of the floor – I kept it clear, pushed the queen-size bed and the two little chairs and the fold-up table against the walls, slotted every single plate and cup and fork into the tiny kitchen cupboard, cleared every surface, trying to make the place look bigger, uncluttered, big enough for two, big enough for me and, eventually, you. He leaves, and I sit in the middle of the floor.

I don't touch anything. Not on purpose. But this place is so small that wherever I go, things touch me. There's no place I can go where a chair doesn't slide over and bump the backs of my knees; where the shower head doesn't reach down and stroke my hair; where the doorknob doesn't suddenly turn and scrape my hip. Here, I'm never alone.

But I am. I am alone.

Second Week

At night I lie in my bed – in our bed – and I make a wish. I picture stars on the ceiling, then make one fall so I can demand things of it. Blow out my candles and ask for the impossible. Say a prayer you taught me, over and over, until the words don't mean anything.

One morning, rushing around the flat getting ready for work, I realise that nothing is touching me. I've made toast, steeped tea, buttoned up my shirt – and the chair hasn't bumped me. The doorknob hasn't scraped me.

I can see floor. There's space between the furniture. I can walk all the way around the bed. Take three full steps from one wall and still not reach the other.

The stars, the candle, the prayer… There's space for you now.

But –

I don't –

I still don't know if that's enough. If I'm enough.

Third Week

I find a door where there was no door. Inside is a cupboard. It's not huge – big enough for an ironing board, an iron, one of the value-size boxes of washing powder you can get from the big supermarket. I don't own any of those things. But now I can get them, because I have somewhere to put them.

The next day, I find another door. Behind that one is an extra bedroom. We could have a kid one day. Or two; they could share. Or we could turn it into an office, an art room, a library.

The next day, another door appears. Behind the door is a living room. It's already furnished, wallpapered, a row of tea-lights lit cheerily on the mantelpiece. It looks familiar, and I can't figure out why, then the memory snaps into place: a sample room from a furniture megastore. We visited

it together. We pretended, just for a minute, that it was ours. I recognise the knobbly grey fabric on the sofa, the pale wooden drawers on the sideboard, the smell of mulled wine and cinnamon cookies.

Next is a bathroom – a proper one, with a door that shuts and locks, big enough to bathe an elephant. There's a claw-foot tub. Separate waterfall shower. Shelves holding rolled-up towels monogrammed with our initials.

I call the man from The Home Office, tell him I've moved. Make an appointment for him to come by and measure the new place. Hope he won't notice that the address is the same.

Something feels strange about all the rooms, but I can't quite put my finger on what.

Fourth Week

The doors keep appearing. One is made of gingerbread. The doorknob is a gumdrop. I turn it; inside is a pantry, full of every food item I've ever seen, and some extras. I can feed you every day for the rest of our lives.

One isn't a door, exactly; it's a huge picture frame, gold, elaborate, empty in the middle. I step through the frame. The room is completely covered in photos of you. You going to work. You checking your email. You eating pasta and watching Netflix. You laughing with a friend. You calling me. In some of the photos there's an empty space where I should be.

Another is swagged with flowers: white roses, peonies, baby's breath. I open the door and at first I think it's a wardrobe full of wedding dresses. Huge skirts like clouds, like fat meringues, like stitched-together feathers. There's the sleek vintage one you ripped out of a magazine and sent me; there's the classic princess one I tried on at the shop in town, awkwardly angling my phone to get a photo of the full length. I stroke their ribbons, their velvet and soft lace –

then I see a way through. I push them aside and emerge into the biggest room yet.

It's our wedding. A three-tiered cake crowned with two plastic brides. Disco lights flashing across an empty dance floor. Rows of chairs, stretching back so far they blur into the distance, and every single one of the chairs is empty.

And now I know what's wrong with the rooms.

They're all empty.

Rooms and rooms and rooms and rooms and

I am alone.

Fifth Week

This door opens with a pressurised sigh. Inside is the interior of a plane. White, moulded plastic like a child's toy. It's dimly lit, the glow buttery, as if ready for landing.

I go into the room with the screen and I watch you. You're so far away. I reach out, but my hands can't touch the walls.

Sixth Week

Home from work. I put my key in the door. I wonder what I'll find behind it. Rooms and rooms and rooms and

I open the door. Four walls, one floor. Everything so close it touches.

And in the middle of it –

Right there in the middle of it –

Close enough to touch –

Is you.

ECOLOGY

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LA ECOLOGÍA

EKOLOGIJA

ECOLOGY

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LA ECOLOGÍA

EKOLOGIJA

NICOLE JASHAPARA

NICOLE JASHAPARA

by JESSICA J. LEE

In winter, the verges of my local park grow bare, cow parsley the only resident in the cold. Still, its vibrant green offers a kind of succour, and I find I'm reassured by its presence. For on first glance, I wasn't sure whether it was cow parsley at all; it could easily have been hemlock. So I learned to look closely, finding faith in its name: the smoothness of its stems, the vibrancy of its colour, the fine filaments of its hair. Cow parsley showed me that close attention could mark the difference between knowing a weedy plant or a poison.

It is this vital power and more that Nicole Jashapara explores: not just in the materiality of plants, rocks, and birds, but in words and ways of ordering them. How do our acts of looking closely shape our entanglements with the more-than-human world? And, when it comes to literature, how best might we reanimate our language for nature to capture its vitality and potency?

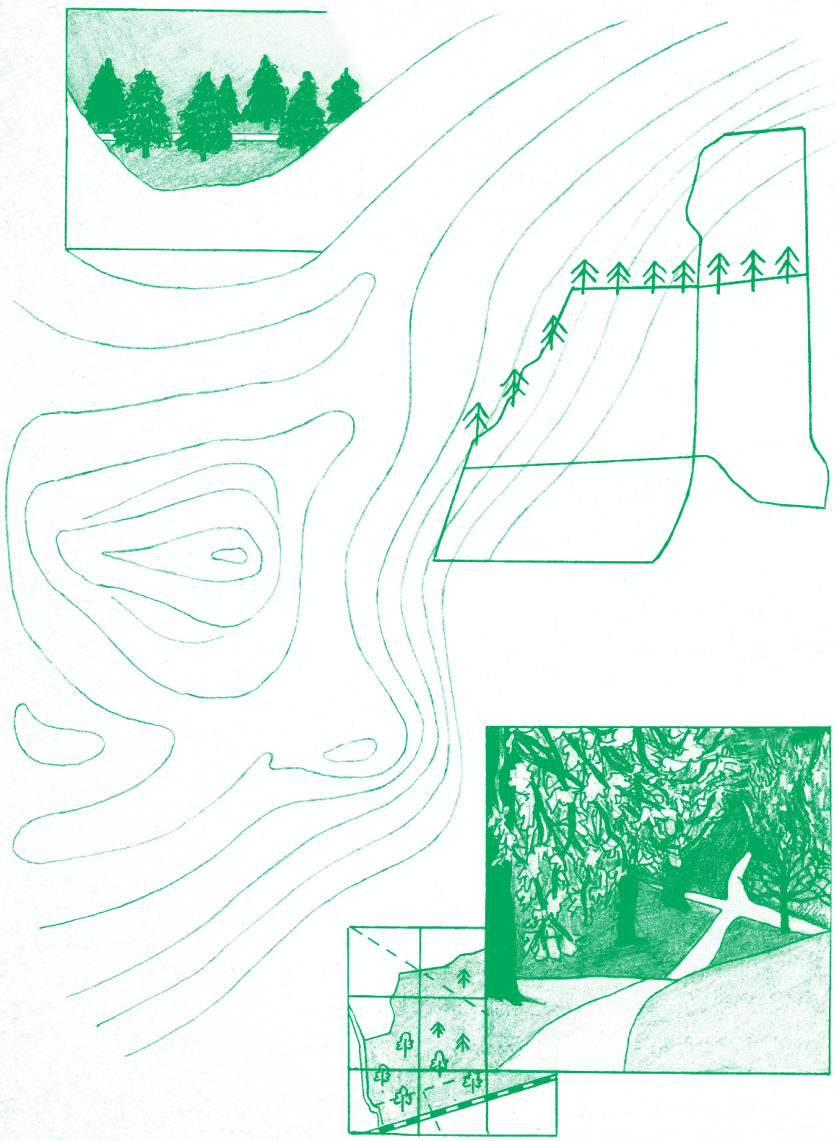
The past year brought a renewed attention to nature's specificity into Nicole's life. But as she indicates, it's not enough to simply notice nature changing. Climate change, racial justice, and capitalism are entwined.

So how can we remain hopeful in the face of such challenges, when our pathways for dissent are so often co-opted into the existing framework? And how might literature provide an avenue not just for reassessing activism, but for reimagining our relationships with communities beyond our own? Nicole casts her gaze over a landscape of nature writing that can enable us to hope beyond hope, and imagine beyond what we've seen in the genre before.

Hers is a wish for a nature writing rich with multiple voices, with justice at its core, and a clear-eyed awareness that all is not rosy, but there is still much to be said and done.

Imagining Change: Climate Activism in the Arts, *Nicole Jashapara – p.65*
Forest Lament, Pratyusha – p.70

Artwork: Esther McManus



IMAGINING CHANGE

CLIMATE ACTIVISM IN THE ARTS

***by* Nicole Jashapara**

In Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013), Kimmerer recounts how when she began to learn Potawatomi, she discovered – to her astonishment – that the animacy of the non-human world is built into its grammar. Rocks, mountains, water, fire and places are animate beings; the same words used to address your family are used to address the living world. Kimmerer points to Ojibwe, a language closely related to Potawatomi, in which there are verbs that might seem ridiculous to the native English speaker, like 'to be a bay' (wiikwegamaa), 'to be a long sandy stretch of beach' or 'to be a hill'. Whilst the English language only allows the 'natural' world to exist as inanimate nouns, like 'hill' or 'beach', in Ojibwe a beach is in a state of being, alive.

Language constructs the realities we experience, shaping how we see the natural world. Whereas language I use is laden with capitalist ideology – I catch myself speaking to a friend about the destruction of natural 'resources' – many indigenous languages have the kinship between the human

in Ojibwe a beach is in a state of being, alive.
ઓજીબ્વે ભાષા એક બીચને જીવંત હોવાની સ્થિતિ ગણે છે.

and nonhuman inherent to them. There are as many ways of seeing as there are speaking, perhaps more. The more I read of different ways of seeing 'nature', the more things change as I go outside; I begin to slow down, to notice the different types of life around me. Over lockdown, the suburban London town I live in changes from a passage I travel through to a place of listening. I learn about the waning local populations of tree sparrows and lapwings, and start fuzzily distinguishing between tree types. I begin to feel rooted, re-settled in my skin.

Why does this matter? The past year has been difficult: it's become abundantly clear that the capitalist, patriarchal and colonial systems that are responsible for the climate and ecological crisis are responsible for all types of human inequality too. I have felt enraged, as well as hopeless; the magnitude of the corporate power that lies in the way of necessary change is enough to make anyone despair. And yet: I have felt a tide of quiet hope surging through me as I read, listening to poets, journalists, essayists and activists eloquently explore the political, cultural and personal histories of how we have come to where we are. It is clear to me that this crisis will not be resolved through policies alone: enacting change must begin with looking inwards, as well as outwards.

In her essay 'On Watermelon', Rebecca Tamás recounts the story of the Diggers, seventeenth century Protestant radicals who wanted to build a 'communal, earth-centred' society. The radical ideas at the heart of their mission – collective ownership, equality between the human and non-human – are why they are still so popular today. There is still a Wigan 'Diggers Festival' every year, they are referenced in songs and books, and remembered in leftist groups; although not perfect, they exist now as 'the whispering echo of a world that could have been, that perhaps may be'.

To look forward, and to imagine what a sustainable, equitable future might look like, we must also look back. Tamás's book, S*trangers: Essays on the Human and Nonhuman* (2020), explores echoic repetitions, reformulations and parallels throughout history, art, politics and literature. She weaves together discussions of the Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta, Zen Buddhism, Green Man folklore, novelist Clarice Lispector and more, to emphasise our interconnectedness as well as the radical inclusivity we must adopt to recognise our kinship both with the nonhuman and with each other.

As I read writers like Kimmerer and Tamás, the dull, boxed-in greyness of day-to-day life is momentarily lifted. The boundaries of ecological thought expand, and envisioning a different future becomes not only possible, but tangible. In shado's Climate Justice issue, I find writing that offers practical, thoughtful steps for how to implement the political future that Tamás's *Strangers* dreams of; Kate Metcalf, for example, explores how care work by womxn can be protected in a feminist Green New Deal. The recent essay collection *All We Can Save: Truth, Courage, and Solutions for the Climate Crisis* (2020) is an 'anthology of wisdom from women climate leaders': it brings together essays from women at the forefront of the climate crisis (providing practical 'solutions') with poetry and art.

Inherent to *All We Can Save* is the premise that the work of artists and activists has a symbiotic relationship: art enables us to imagine new ways of existing within the world, whilst activists teach us how that vision can come into being. In thinking about the impact of art on climate action, I'm also reminded of artist Olafur Eliasson's 'Little Sun' project: as an LED solar lamp that offers clean, affordable light to people living in 'off-grid areas', it is a 'work of art that works in life'.

*Ojibwe kalboje paplūdimys yra gyvybės buseno*je

As well as the broader political view, reading 'nature writing' – as it is commonly called – has been, for me, an act of self-love. As I become more interested in 'nature writing' and environmentalism, I have to fight the feeling that, as a brown woman, I am encroaching on a space that doesn't belong to me. Humans do not exist in nature equally; Jini Reddy's *Wanderland* (2020) is suffused with awareness of what it is to be a brown woman existing outdoors. As Reddy navigates British landscapes, she feels sometimes that she is in a 'petri dish', stared at as someone who doesn't belong in 'nature'. Traditional ideas of what nature is and who belongs in it are incredibly limited and colonial, perpetuated by economic and racial inequality; Anita Sethi has written about Natural England's suggestion that only 1% of visitors to national parks are from BAME backgrounds. Sethi's upcoming book, *I Belong Here* (2021), is a 'journey of reclamation' through the landscapes of the north of Britain, transforming her experience of a race hate crime into a powerful act of resistance, an assertion of belonging.

I am particularly drawn to nature writing by other writers of colour, where the narrative voice cannot settle into the easy traditions of the Western literary canon, in which the assumed speaker is always white, and often male. Richard Smyth has written compellingly about 'nature writing's fascist roots'; it's clear that our cultural engagement with 'nature' must be scrutinised, for the racist, homogenising myth of a lost, 'indigenous' green England can still so easily creep into people's rhetoric. Towards the end of lockdown, I find Pratyusha's *Bubul Calling* (2020), a pamphlet of multilingual, fragmentary poetry, filled with ecological detail. Pratyusha's specific, dreamlike imagery draws on Hindu myth, her poems speaking in Hindi, Tamil and German as well as English. My limited view of 'ecology' is challenged, expanding, and yet I feel that I have a home in its pages.

When most people hear the term 'nature writing', they probably think of white Romantic poets, or gardening handbooks. But the writing I have spent the past year reading is full of quiet resistance and power, vibrant with ecological awareness. Nature writers – at their best – are working to change the contours of our collective imagination, calling upon their own subjective experiences to express and imagine new relations with the non-human world. Language works in powerful, imaginative opposition to the thought-numbing violence of capitalism, and I feel that I am being taught resistance as well as love. If not always explicitly 'political', nature writing's very thoughtfulness about the non-human world offers new ways of existing within it. The field cannot be dominated by white, middle class, male voices: publishers must find and promote new voices in the genre, thus keeping alive radical possibilities for change and expression. I was proud to work for The Willowherb Review earlier this year, an online journal for nature writing by writers of colour, edited by Jessica J. Lee. Willowherb offers a model for how the genre can expand and thrive, de-centring whiteness. As we go further into the climate and ecological crisis, the importance of nature writing will only grow: its space in the literary world should reflect that.

Ojibwe kalboje papūdimys yra gyvybės būsenoje
en Ojibwe una playa está viva, viva

FOREST LAMENT

by **Pratyusha**

outside it is blue
first whisper
we are as a child
smoke billowing
collapsing distance

what shall we sing
touch me again
chopped bhindi
grass around our ears
purple flowers grow

it is a forest laid bare

it is a forest of tears
in its soft underbelly
those are stories now
my forest drips
I map the trees

two trees wait for the rain
the first snowdrops come up in november
crush the cardamom pods
beneath my heart I count x blood vessels
hold forests

plastic caught between a dead duck's beak
the sky turns yellow from pollution
we roll down the hill, laughing
waves of air
deep in the room with the purple curtains

it is a forest laid bare

it does not understand *bare*
a tadpole grows
reach back to its old self
I am sick at heart
my veins mirror leaves

en Ojibwe una playa está viva, viva
in Ojibwe a beach is in a state of being, alive

DAŽAI

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PAINT

LA PINTURA

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PAINT

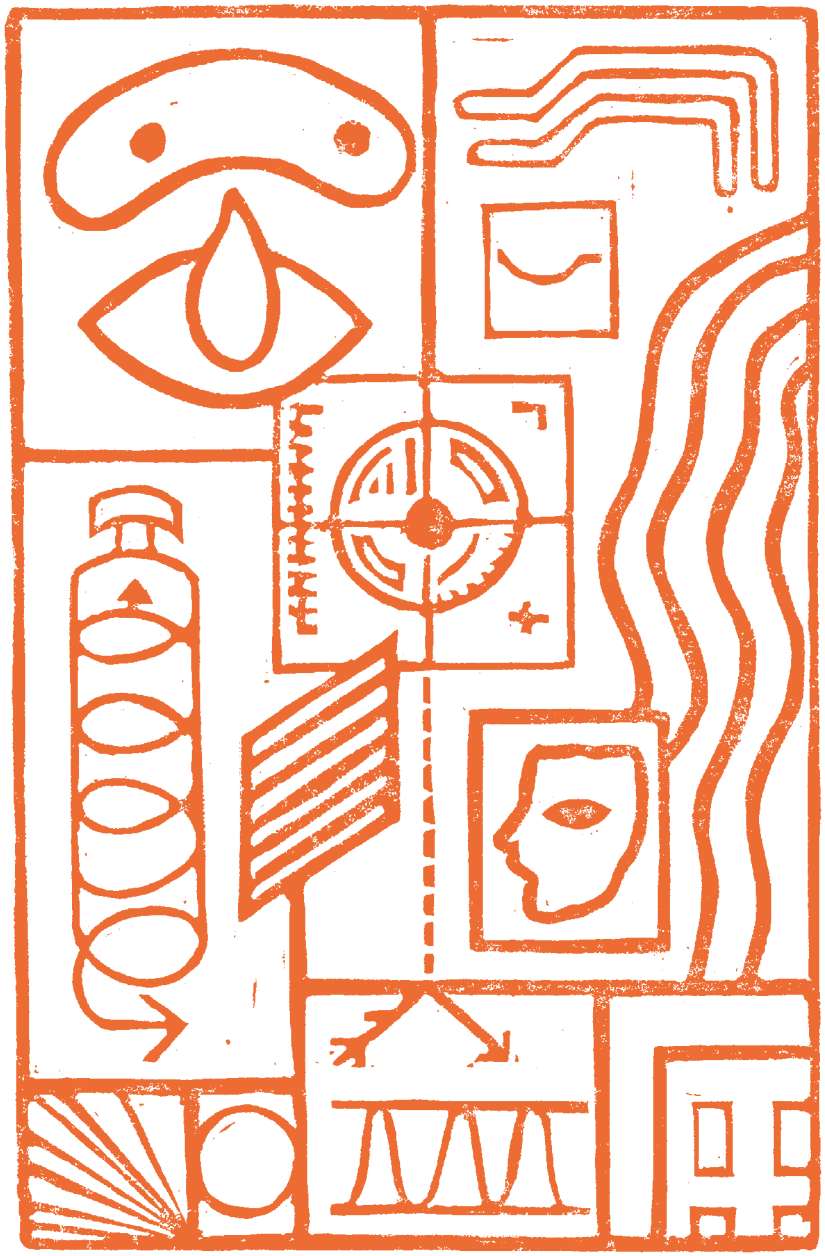
APRIL ROACH

When you mentor a writer as talented as April you learn as much as you teach. So, what did April teach me? That it's always the same qualities that mark out a 'real writer': determination, hard work, and a slightly obsessive commitment to an inner vision or thematic idea. But there is an extra element required to succeed as a writer and it's one that cannot be taught, in my experience. That is how to have the cognitive flexibility to reimagine one's imagining. It is crucial for a writer to be able to take feedback and use it to improve the work far beyond any mentor's vision.

April did this after each of our meetings, taking suggestions I made, and sprinting with them, much further and faster than I could have envisioned, returning without a drop of sweat with work enriched beyond what I could have imagined. This is the quality that writers need above all, if they are to succeed in a market crammed full of talented writers. To be able to turn guidance into gold.

April's imagination, work ethic, and passion for the craft of writing and her story made mentoring her feel like I'd won a prize. Each session, she raised the bar, and reading this new piece from her, I see she has done it again. This is a new writer with something to say about the world we live in, and an arresting way to say it. I cannot wait to see the full novel in print.

We Paint With Our Eyes Open, *April Roach – p.77*
They Paint With Their Eyes Open, Amy Lilwall – p.85



Artwork: Danielle Doobay

WE PAINT WITH OUR EYES OPEN

by **April Roach**

It was my job to meet the new boy. It was a job no one wanted, but as the newest recruit I had no choice.

If we needed more colours, it was always, 'Hey new girl! Get off your lazy arse and help with some supplies!' If one person mentioned they could do with a cuppa then it was, 'New girl, get down to the shops before we all die of thirst!' It was like I was an intern on work experience, desperate to move up the food chain, but too eager to impress to complain about running around while others did the more important work. Except this wasn't work experience and the stakes that came with the 'bigger jobs' were so high that one misstep could cost us all our freedoms.

I waited for him in a café five minutes from the target site. It was close to midnight and I couldn't help but feel a strange bond with the few stragglers hunched over their bitter coffees in the café. Were they insomniacs like me? Were they also waiting for it to get dark enough outside so that they could carry out their criminal exploits without the harsh exposure of daylight?

NOTES:

tai buvo skilimas, byranti kauke, grasinanti bet kuriq akimirkq išsiskirti ir atskleisti tikrajį veidą viduje.

ચોથી વધારે, એમા· ચાઇનૂ· ડ, ફુંધીળુ થનૂ· મોઢું·, ધમકાવું કે એમનો ટ્રુટ્ટી અંડર નો ચાઇ રો ટેમરે

Seconds before I was ready to leave without him, the new boy turned up. He took one look around the dimly lit café before his eyes latched onto my own. He slowly made his way over to my booth in the back and then dumped himself in the chair opposite my table with a heavy sigh. I sat up and leaned closer so my digital lenses could pick up his profile.

The new boy was wearing Diaphanous noir #15. His digital profile or so-called 'fixer' meant that his colour scale leached pigmentation rather than enhancing it, so that his light brown skin became a watery tea colour and his short afro was an exaggerated jet black. It was too obvious – a fixer that blatantly signalled its wearer wanted to hide instead of stand out.

When he sat down opposite me and placed a large burgundy Thermos on the table, I found myself trying to look past the fixer. I liked to believe if you squinted in the right way, you could see past people's digital profiles. Nonsense, I know. But I always tried.

'Sorry, I'm late,' he said.

I waved his apology away. 'It's okay. People are always hesitant at first.'

He nodded and wrapped his hands around the Thermos as if he were desperate for the warmth.

'You're not going to drink that in here are you?'

He glanced up from his hands, eyebrows raised as if the question was ludicrous.

'There are rules, you know, about bringing your own beverages into a café.'

'Oh, right,' he said sliding the Thermos towards himself and tucking it underneath the tea. 'It's chamomile tea. Helps me calm down in, you know,' he leaned across the table whispering the last part, 'in stressful situations.'

'Chamomile tea?' Was this guy for real? I had to bite my lip to hold back the laughter. There was something too adorable about a boy, who couldn't be much older than my sixteen years, drinking herbal tea to help him calm down. It was in that moment I decided to upgrade new boy to cute boy.

I cleared my throat. 'Let's go through the rules.

'Number one, don't look any of the others directly in the eye. It's mostly a respect thing but some of the seniors, well, let's just say they're always ready for a fight… oh, and number two is a big one. You obviously can't tell anyone about what we do, because you know how it is. The ones we love are always the ones who pay...'

I paused to check in on how cute boy was taking my imaginary rules. Just as I expected, his face was screwed up in thought, his hands clenched so tightly around his Thermos that his light brown skin turned white at the knuckles.

'I'm only joking!' I burst out. 'Don't worry newbie, there aren't really that many rules, and the ones we do have are pretty obvious. Like you know, no snitching. No boasting to your ma and pa about what we do.'

The boy nodded. 'Come on, let's go,' I said, shooting up from my chair. 'It's time to meet the others.'

I marched out of the café suddenly feeling all edgy and itchy in my own skin the way I always do before a job. I didn't check to see if the newbie was following behind me. I made my way into the alleyway, back round the café and into another alleyway wedged between two tall tower blocks.

I turned around and there was the newbie, still following with his shoulders hunched in his dark hoodie.

'Okay so there is one rule, I guess.' I pointed to the heap of scrap metal in the corner and gestured for him to face a large piece of aluminium that I was hoping would act as a mirror.

I reached into my pocket for the clear vial which held a bright blue liquid. I held it up so that the boy, watching my reflection in the makeshift mirror could see what it was.

it was decay, a crumbling mask, threatening at any moment to break apart and reveal the true face within

'No,' he said, shaking his head so hard I was sure he was going to give himself whiplash. 'I hate that stuff. Tried it once and I didn't feel right for days.'

'This isn't Vision,' I explained. 'In fact, it does the opposite of what that hallucinatory drug does to all of those fakers who take it in the clubs. Watch.'

I unscrewed the lid, leaned back and dropped one, then two droplets onto my digital lenses. The feeling was always weird. Cold and spiky, like you're crying ice tears. I rubbed my eyes and blinked the liquid away. When I opened them again and stared in the mirror, my once golden lenses had turned white.

Unlike cute boy, my fixer was anything but ordinary. It was a dilemma I'd always faced. What face could I choose to wear in a city that is always pushing its citizens to enhance, upgrade and tone-up? What mask can you choose when you don't want to wear any other skin but your own? The answer for me had been to create a fixer of armour, a mask that appeared to be made of glass and glacial ice. With my Custom Ebony #01 fixer, my skin appeared midnight black and my afro (sadly made less unruly by the fixer) was sprinkled with threatening crystal shards that glistened blindingly when I was feeling stubborn and willing to turn my settings up to the max. The digital profile was full of shiny textures that dared those who saw me to reach out and touch. It was a mirror hoping to reflect and refract. Above all it was decay, a crumbling mask, threatening at any moment to break apart and reveal the true face within.

And this is what our concoction did. I watched in awe as the liquid did its trick and my Ebony profile appeared to stretch and expand until it hung like a shadow over me. The elements of my digital self – the sharply cut cheekbones, the tamed hair and false golden eyes, disappeared into the night. When I looked in the clouded mirror of aluminium, I saw Luce 1.0. The original girl who could never tame her curls, with skin as dark as charcoal which made her teeth look super white, and dark brown inviting eyes that were always squinting without her glasses.

'See?' I said, already feeling ten times lighter. 'It's our special formula. It gives you clarity instead of more illusions.'

I handed him the vial, but still he hesitated. 'Like I said before, we don't actually have many rules. But this is kind of an unspoken one. We like to paint with our eyes open – not while hiding behind the fixers.'

He sighed and took the vial from me. He gasped when the liquid reacted with his lenses. But then he began to smile, to peer closer in wonder at the boy underneath the digitally enhanced profile. Like me, the newbie had a head of unruly hair, and without the black and white tones, he seemed even younger somehow, more nerdy. He had a toothy grin and freckles that gathered on the bridge of his nose. I found myself mimicking his smile as he experienced his first uncloaking.

'There you are!'

I flinched at the voice. But it was only Ruth. She was, unfortunately, one of the surlier leaders from our group.

'Will you two hurry up!'

'Sorry Ruth,' I said rolling my eyes. I grabbed a corner of cute boy's sleeve and then we were off. Running through the alleyway and out onto the high street. It was the dead of night and yet the city of Prism was still awake, cars honking loudly at us as we ran into the road. I kept my eyes down as we jogged to the target site, wary of street cameras that could pick up our colourless lenses and read us for what we were now – outsiders, criminals and rebels betraying the rules of the city we inhabited.

When we finally arrived at the target site there were six of us. Rumi, Marcel and Alondra had joined the group,

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nodding and silently grunting their hellos. They carried our materials in heavy, chunky backpacks, and as soon as we reached the billboard on Lake Street, they swung them onto the ground, panting and wiping away sweat.

'We have fifteen minutes,' Ruth said.

She didn't need to say it twice. We tore open the backpacks, lunging at the materials of graffiti cans, paints, magazines, posters and other recycled bits and bobs. The billboard was one of those annoying public platforms where Prism encouraged its citizens to submit designs to feature on them. The chosen image on this billboard was of a classic countryside scene of green rolling hills, a pretty blue sky and a golden path running between the green. Looking at it only made me want to paint faster, to cover every inch of the boring picture with my own colours until there was nothing left. As I painted I thought of the disapproving look the waitress gave me in the café when she saw my chosen profile, and how I was failing nearly all of my assignments in art because I couldn't create what they wanted, and how despite starting my new college at the same time as everyone else, I still felt like a new girl there too. As I painted, my restlessness dissipated. With every stroke of my brush, it became easier to breathe.

From the corner of my eye I couldn't help but be distracted by cute boy. Unlike the others who stuck to their own corners, the newbie was taking a more protracted route. He painted around us, sometimes even going over our designs, to create his own work. At one point I saw him get on Marcel's shoulders so he could work over the top.

It was only twelve minutes later when the street was dripping red and blue with paint that I stepped back and realised what cute boy had done.

The work of our rebel group, The Naturals, was always to create something startling and sprawling – art that forces you not to look away or gush at its prettiness but just to marvel at its daring. Cute boy had added cohesion to our work. Using red and orange he'd created a fiery umber paste that lit its way through our individual designs, elevating the mural to something purposeful.

'Good job guys,' Ruth said glancing at her watch. 'Time to get out of here, I think.'

She waited for Marcel to use his black spray canister to draw the mark of our group, a closed eyelid with an N around it in the corner of the mural.

I looked at cute boy who was clearly feeling the thrill of the work with this lopsided grin that made him seem even more adorable.

'Wait,' I said.

'No time, Luce,' Ruth said fixing me with a stare that was sterner than my own mother's looks.

'Just a sec, Ruth,' I said. 'I really think…. I think we should burn it. Just the bottom part.'

'Burn it?' Alondra repeated like I hadn't said it loud enough the first time.

'Yes,' I said louder. 'It would look, so sick.'

Ruth looked back at the mural with her head cocked to one side. 'What would it do to the digital board though…?'

I pumped my fist in the air with triumph. I couldn't believe that she was even considering it!

'There are houses behind this,' Alondra warned.

'If we're going to do this, we should do it now,' Marcel said, tapping his foot. 'You got matches, firestarter?' he asked looking at me.

I nodded and tossed a pack to him.

'Right, well, I was going to save this for celebrations later, but who knows? Maybe it was meant to be,' he said pulling out a small bottle of vodka from his backpack. He splashed it across the edges of the mural and together we set it on fire.

it was decay, a crumbling mask, threatening at any moment to break apart and reveal the true face within
era decadencia, una máscara que se desmoronaba, que amenazaba en cualquier momento con romperse y revelar el verdadero rostro interior.

NOTES:

There was something incredibly satisfying about watching our work come alight, while knowing that the horrific countryside mural underneath had not only been covered, but was now being eradicated.

'Do you think they'll still know it was us? Our tag is gone now,' Rumi said.

'I think they'll know,' Ruth said. 'Good job, Luce,' she said, calling me by name for the first time. 'Right, let's leg it.'

Just as quickly as we'd arrived, we were even quicker to disappear. Marcel and Alondra made quick work of our packs. They all ran off in different directions, but cute boy and I hung back.

'You shouldn't have done that,' he said staring at the flames. 'It's a carcass now.'

I nodded even though I disagreed. It wasn't just a carcass. It was a site gone wrong. Like the freckles on cute boy's face and my eyes that were too close together, the mural was now a blemish in the city. An undeniable black spot that threatened to act like a vacuum in space and suck all of the fixers in the city into its darkness.

I left knowing that tomorrow I would break another rule. I would come back to this site to watch the city's beautician teams work on the recovery. And then when it was all gone and cleared up, I would return and start all over again.

era decadencia, una máscara que se desmoronaba, que amenazaba en cualquier momento con romperse y revelar el verdadero rostro interior.

tai buvo skilimas, byranti kaukė, grasinanti bet kurią akimirką išsiskirti ir atskleisti tikrąjį veidą viduje.

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THEY PAINT WITH THEIR EYES OPEN

by **Amy Lilwall**

My phone rings and, at first, I think it's George. But it's not. It's them.

They're calling me at 9:15 in the evening. I haven't long been up and I'm sitting well back on a deep sofa doodling a flame on my left wrist bone.

'You're on,' they say. 'Our girl will be waiting just before midnight.'

I'm groggy and it takes me a while to process what they are saying.

'Tonight?'

Laughter. 'Yeah.' The voice is bitcrushed and ghostly. 'It'll be like this every time so get used to it.'

'I will,' I say. 'What's the target?'

They won't tell me over the phone. 'You'll get the address for your meeting place later,' they say. 'Make sure you cover up.'

'Okay,' I reply. But they've already gone.

I stretch back into the sofa and let my eyelids droop. Today of all days, I think. I was sure I'd have at least a week, although they gave me no indication that this would be the case. I open my eyes.

It is what it is, I suppose.

A vial of blue liquid twinkles as it absorbs the headlight cruising through a gap in the blinds. I crack my knuckles

and stare at the blue. The vial is half empty and this makes me retch. I rock forwards to stand but don't quite make it. My head is a loud, pixelated mess. I touch my temples to see if I can feel the edges of the fragments. They are dying down now, thankfully. George never told me the hallucination would be tactile. She does it way too often to notice, I guess.

'Look', I'd said to her the day before, 'if I'm going to do this for you, I need to be in the right state of mind.'

'They won't call you tomorrow,' she replied, turning the vial between her thumb and forefinger. 'It's way too soon.'

'I'm not taking that stuff.'

'But we should be celebrating,' she said, easing off the lid with a long, acrylic thumbnail.

'I'm not really into this.' I circled my finger around George and the blue vial. 'You know that.'

'Come on, don't be boring.' She made a long face. 'It's just a light buzz.'

Just before midnight, I think to myself now.

On the floor there is a tangle of rope, wire, George's long jacket and a broken bicycle wheel. Whatever we got up to, it wasn't quiet. Someone would have captured it and posted it somewhere. George is never careful and I had no idea what I was doing.

I should pull out.

I want to rub my face but my freckles stand out like pinheads.

I look at my phone. It lights up.

Jacintha Café on East Street. I know it. It'll take me fifteen minutes to walk there. My paints are ready in my rucksack. I prepared them after the first contact yesterday, placing the best colours in easy reach; My normal hands busying around canisters and zips. Now I turn one hand in front of

my face. Then the other. The flame on my wrist bone glitches and sharpens but my hands and arms are more or less back. It's all in the mind, said George as she sat between my knees this morning, while I freaked out. I couldn't reply. As far as I was concerned, I wasn't me. She wasn't she. I call George.

'What?' she asks. 'Feeling better?'

'They called me'

'That's brilliant!'

'It's not. I'm broken. You saw me this morning.'

'Take a cold shower.'

'Will it work?'

'And tea. Take some chamomile. It'll calm you.'

I sigh. 'We should pull out. They'll know what we're up to.'

'No.' Her voice bangs in the air like a gunshot.

'Listen…'

'You SAID you'd do this for me.'

My eyelids squeeze together. I can't handle her voice like that so I hang up.

I make it to the shower. I guess she set my mind to expect good things from that. The fragments wash from my skin and dissolve before they hit the plughole. At eleven-thirty there's a knock at my door and my eyes snap to it. I creep over and look through the peephole and… 'God…You scared me.'

George thrusts a burgundy flask at me. 'You will do it, won't you?'

I fold my arms. 'Don't ever make me take Vision again,' I say.

'No one forced you.'

I lift my eyebrows and tilt my head. She snakes an arm around my waist.

'Make her think you're cute and sweet.'

'I am cute and sweet.'

'Good,' she says. That's good.'