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Exclusive
Catriona Innes
poem inside



THE FAMILY ISSUE

Issue 33 – Autumn 2021

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EDITORIAL

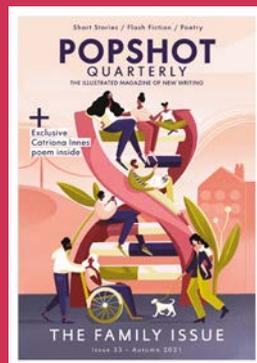
ISSUE 33 — FAMILY
AUTUMN 2021

The Dodie Smith quote you'll find overleaf, in which she describes family as an octopus whose tentacles we can never quite escape, and wouldn't in our truest hearts wish to, is one of most authentic descriptions of family I've read. True, those tentacles can sometimes hug us too tightly, and they might wind around us in ways we would prefer they didn't; but, without the support of those arms, the shape and meaning they bring our lives, we wouldn't be who we are. Only the most unfortunate among us (because, not all families are kind, and sadly, some are toxic) have to wriggle out from that octopus embrace permanently.

Among these pages are stories and poems about all kinds of families, not only the traditional or biological variety. They reveal the complex, well-meaning, sometimes difficult, hugely painful, or hilarious, relationships borne out of unconditional love, and the impact of societal and personal expectations on being a family. One of the most striking themes that arose from the submissions was deceit; the idea that families protect one another from the truth, forming detailed webs of omission or new realities that bond them together in an omertà they cannot, or would not like to, escape. From hiring actors to impersonate dead relatives (p28), to the "Viking" that your absent father told you to protect your mum from (p56), to family meals where everyone is hiding a major secret behind forced smiles (p50), the white lies we tell our loved-ones are very useful fodder for storytellers.

We're fortunate to include a piece by Catriona Innes, the author of *The Matchmaker* (Trapeze, 2019), in this issue (p18). She writes searing poetry about family and loss, and you can read an interview with her on popshotpopshot.com. Thank you to all those who submitted work for this issue, and for supporting us as part of the wider Popshot family.

Matilda Battersby
— Editor



Popshot Quarterly is the illustrated magazine of new writing, providing a publishing platform for the best emerging talent.

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Poetry

6

Jackie Martin

SUPERHERO

Illustration by Kate Styling

10

Polly East

MUM

Illustration by Emily Louka

18

Catriona Innes

A WOMAN'S CHOICE

Illustration by Valentina Leoni

22

Romina Ramos

MY FATHER WAS AN ATHLETE

Illustration by Karolina Sroka

36

James McDermott

NANDAD

Illustration by Meital Shushan

48

C. E. Janecek

SEVEN BEAUTIES

Illustration by Martha White

55

Cecilia Knapp

ON GOOD DAYS MY BROTHER

61

John Gosslee

PLANT SPRUNG IN AN ABANDONED HOUSE FILLED WITH SUNLIGHT

62

Lorelei Bacht

WE THE NEBULA

Illustration by Clare Davis

68

Gráinne Tobin

PRIMARY SOURCE

74

Katja Knežević

PROMISE

Illustration by Dawei Wang

Flash Fiction

12

Wendy BooydeGraaff

SWANS DON'T ALWAYS SING

Illustration by Jon Lim

14

Gresham Cash

SMALL PEBBLES LIKE RAINDROPS

Illustration by Maggie Stephenson

20

Lena MacDonald

**WHAT'S YOUR
SUPERPOWER?**

Illustration by Sami Henry

24

Eva Rivers

OTHER FAMILIES

Illustration by Cinta Fosch

26

Kay Sandry

MY MOTHER'S HANDS

Illustration by Jenny Booth

34

Danny Beusch

**DAY ONE OF
AN ADOPTION
PREPARATION COURSE**

Illustration by Louise Billyard

44

Sage Tyrtle

WHEN WE WERE MEAT

Illustration by Hayley Patterson

46

Colette Coen

BELONGINGS

Illustration by Andrea Iris

74

Sarah Fuller

IN THIS LIFE

Illustration by Iza Olesinska

Short Stories

28

JL Bogenschneider

FAMILY DYNAMICS

Illustration by Kasia Kozakiewicz

38

Leanne Su

**BEGINNING OF
OPERATIONAL LIFE**

Illustration by Yannick Scott

50

Liam Hogan

HAPPY FAMILIES

Illustration by Ida Henrich

56

Noel O'Regan

**HOW TO DEFEND
AGAINST VIKINGS**

Illustration by Julia Galotta

64

Theo Beecroft

**THE ELEPHANT AND
THE GOLDFISH**

Illustration by Irina Pavlova

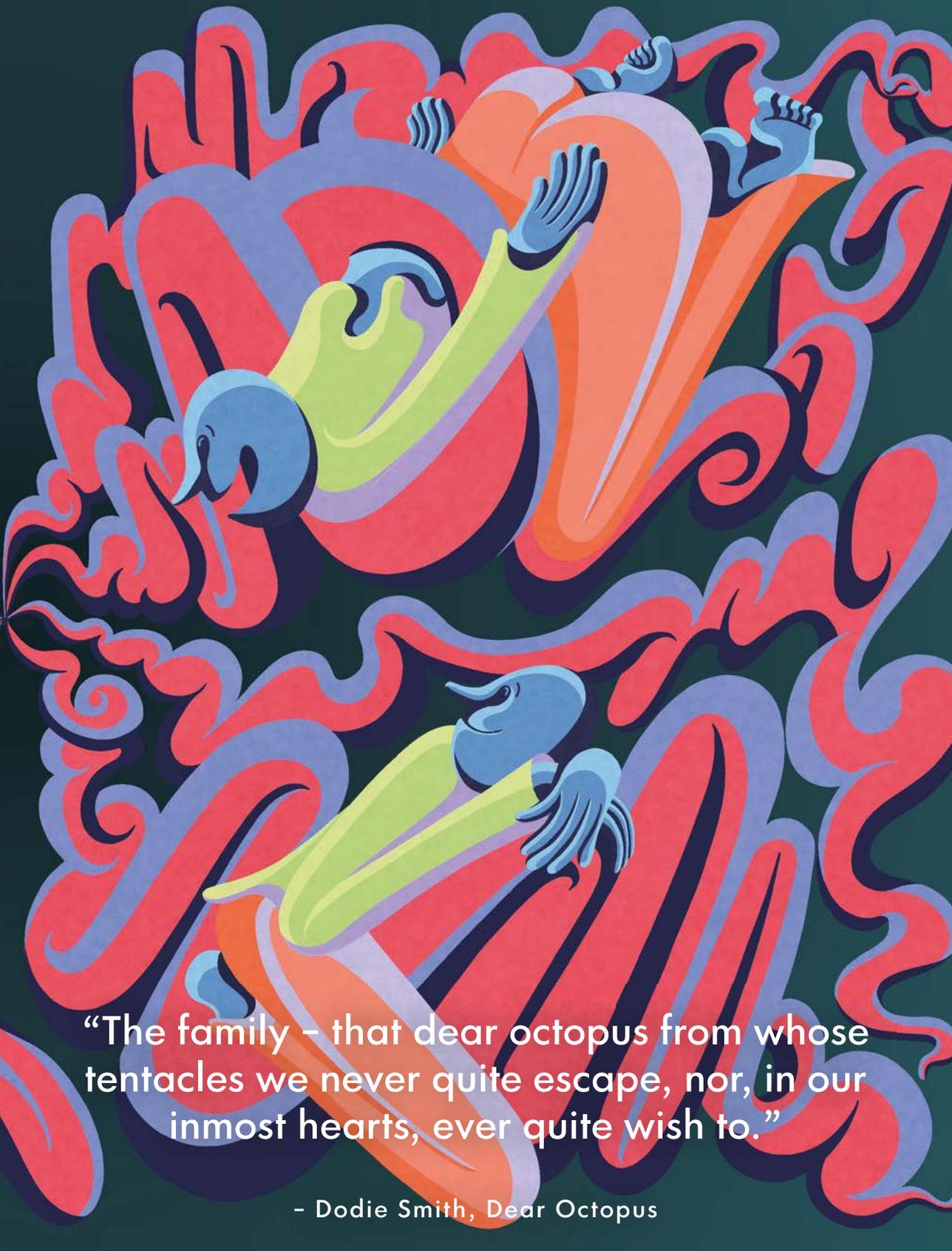
70

Zosia Koptiuch

THE RUINS

Illustration by Marian F.Moratinos





“The family – that dear octopus from whose tentacles we never quite escape, nor, in our inmost hearts, ever quite wish to.”

- Dodie Smith, Dear Octopus

SUPERHERO

*Poem by Jackie Martin
Illustration by Kate Styling*

I used to cup the perfect, shiny belly of my bodysuit
to gauge how soon a pregnancy would show.

A grape, a prawn, a floating seahorse could stay undetected
by adversaries; my secret smile might not.

I flew with nausea,
I kept my torso safe when there were blades or tentacles around

and left all devastation on the hour just to shoot myself
with FSH (break vial, pinch up and stab)

holding the music in my head, the love for what will come
after the combat's done.

Each cycle, I would knock the obstetrician right out cold
between my knees: the sedative no match for Zip! Zap! Pow!,

the torturous clamp inducing my best comeback lines.
Careful to hurtle less, I spent more time in clouds

mulling infinity, the cosmos, waiting for a superheart to grow
but no sparks caught, no powers could help

and I returned to crime-fighting. The doctor said that
charity work was just the thing for someone in my situation.





MUM

*Poem by Polly East
Illustration by Emily Louka*

you have become easier to say
now you no longer exist
I have your pearl and amethyst
your woolly jacket taken from home
whilst you lay dying
I've tried to wear it –
but it's as if I'm wearing you

sometimes I think I am you
I catch myself in your winnie-the-pooh stance
crestfallen, dumpy and abused
(sweeping the floor, shrieking obscenities,
sighing over the sink)
my girlish figure spreading into yours
at times like this I almost understand you

it's not as if I want to forget you
(that was easier when you were here)
I'm still trying to get you in perspective
put you in a place in my mind
I can reach without pain
to understand your life
in relation to my own
to accept your timing

I think I have the courage
for almost anything but memory
how the past pulls on me, back and down
your shrivelled hand is still in mine
perhaps the only time I ever held you
(and who was hanging on to who, or was
even this just one final act of compliance?)
If I could place it firmly on your thin chest
and walk away –

perhaps your broken hip is mended now?
your wiry grey hair all spruce and shining





SWANS DON'T ALWAYS SING

*Flash by Wendy BooydeGraaff
Illustration by Jon Lim*

In one of the many double rooms along the long hospital corridor, she finds him lying in the faded blue gown, his body disappearing into generic sheets, his face the same as always. He doesn't speak. She holds his hand. He reaches toward her, a hug, not something they are used to giving each other, and all the more awkward because now she can tell his legs don't move, that they are dead weight from the thighs down. That his legs aren't working, when it's lung cancer he's got, makes no sense.

She comes back each day of the long holiday weekend, with her husband, with her children. They spend time on this side of the curtain, crowded around his bed, not knowing what to say. The children bring artwork, tape it up on the wall, but even with his glasses on, he sees crayon blurs. Horses? A cat? Discernment is not a strength. But knowing the squares of paper are there make him feel loved.

Standing around the bed talking about the tulips poking up, the wind he can't see bending the branches, this too is love; invoking memories of his own Springs lived many times over. But it is also pain, because he can't even see it or feel it this one last time, because his side of the curtain is by the door, not the window. He sees the staff in their soft-soled shoes walking toward him in the hallway, heads down, reading clipboards, and then one step more, and they are gone from the brief rectangular glimpse he has. The voices last longer. The jangle of pills in plastic cups. The tapping of badges against locked doors. The clicks of heavy steel, soft beeps of dispensation, the whirs of metal gears.

They stay as late as possible on Sunday afternoon, but it's a long drive back, and there's work and school and a life they have to live. In two months, there'll be another long weekend. She'll see him then. His face contorts. She reaches for the button. Her mother stops her. Not that kind of pain. He thinks he'll never see you again, she says.

This phrase rings through her mind. He's not even her father. How can he feel so strongly about her? They lived under the same roof only a few summers, and then she was gone, back only as a visitor for Christmas and seventy-fifth birthday barbecues.

He thinks he'll never see you again. He's wrong. He's not that sick yet. She's seen death before, up close, how shallow the breathing is, how long it takes to let go. This isn't that. She's not willing to give in to the grief that lurks behind her spleen, that pulses bright and bloody and requires tight wrapping to prevent leaking all over her day. Life is a charade. He thinks he'll never see you again.

She sees him, but it's not him. He's a wax museum. He's paralysed all over now. He's resting. He's peaceful. It's not him. Her last image of him is his face contorting.

He thinks he'll never see you again. ●





SMALL PEBBLES LIKE RAINDROPS

*Flash by Gresham Cash
Illustration by Maggie Stephenson*

After thirty years, I'd forgotten that I'd once owned a gun. It looked comical to me now. I remembered it as an alien-crusher, metallic and cold in the face of slimy invaders. Something so useful that I couldn't live without it. And now, it was nothing more than a Super Soaker, brittle plastic, abandoned, bound for the trash—another way to kill something else.

My sister, Blair, laughed as I held it up. "I'll never forget when you and Dave Tidmore got caught shooting the heads off of Mrs Park's zinnias with that."

"We didn't get caught. You ratted us out."

"You didn't let me play."

"A little sister in the middle of a war?"

"I think that would be a comfort. Most people lose their families in wartime."

"That's an exaggeration."

Blair held up her American Girl doll. "Was I an uncreative child?"

I laughed. "Yes."

"Am I a creative adult?"

"No." My sister was an auditor for a tax firm. Honestly, I couldn't ever understand who audits what for whom. I most often told people she was an accountant.

Blair pretended to be disappointed. She didn't have it in her. She was what our mum called "nice." She earned good grades and smiles from authority.

"You know who was creative?" She dropped her doll into the trash box. "Dave. Artsy Dave Tidmore."

"Yeah, he studied music, or oboe, at some conservatory in California." I always thought oboe sounded like an unhappy waterfowl. But tell me, Dave asked once, what lifts Mozart's music more than his use of the oboe? I could only see his lips moving and didn't think about his point.

"When we were older, he asked if he could paint me naked." Blair maintained intense eye contact with her doll while she made this confession. I snorted as if she'd shared a secret that I didn't know already. "Well?"

"I said he could paint me while I did my calculus homework."

I never understood how letters could be numbers or how infinitesimals could really exist, although I saw them changing everything around me every day. I didn't want to know the rate of change, the rate at which I was losing everything around me, including myself.

"Funny thing is, he wanted props. He wanted to create an image of what he thought I should look like while doing my homework."

I dug deeper into my box of old toys. All of these things could've been handed down,





but I never married. I was certain that our mother died because neither Blair nor I had children. We were the only derivatives of our mother. Without other derivatives we could create no more products.

Blair raised a jar of small pebbles. “Remember these?”

“When dad tried to get us into camping by telling us that even the big boulders were ground down into pebbles over aeons?”

“Parents try to make us believe the things that they never could.”

We wondered how our mother kept so much stuff in such a small house. As her offspring, we were partly to blame. We were the byproduct of her and our dad’s love. And now, we were throwing away the physical markers of that affection.

“You know, Dave Tidmore finished the conservatory and got recruited by the CIA. Apparently, speaking Farsi is useful—even if you’re artsy.”

I wondered how I was useful. The patter of rain on the roof just over our heads grew louder as our pad protecting us from the world was thinning. “Blair?”

“Ding dong...the witch is dead.”

She’d moved towards the window at the end of the attic. I was going to ask how Gary was. They’d actually tried to have kids and couldn’t. Did that bother her? I should’ve asked about how she felt about all this. I almost told her that I was depressed, but it felt out of

tempo, a retreating pawn making a worthless move.

She turned around to face me through the dim glow cast by a single forty watt incandescent bulb across an area far too cramped to understand how long the light took to reach her nose. I flicked the tiny aluminum bell at the bottom of the light’s pull string and said, “Ding dong...the witch is dead.”

Blair laughed. “You’re irreverent.”

I wanted to share this artistry with Dave. “Dave Tidmore said that if we killed all the enemies at once then we couldn’t play war any more.”

“Dave Tidmore was kind of a psychopath. Why wouldn’t you kill all of the enemy?”

I wanted to tell her that I knew she cheated on Gary. But I didn’t. I needed some leverage in case she ever found out that Dave Tidmore kissed me at a high school graduation party. It was so long ago. I’m sure I would’ve forgotten about it completely had I not seen my Super Soaker.

Blair spun in a circle while holding an old musty dress in front of her body. The closer we held onto things the more significant they felt. The more we danced, the less we sensed night closing in. And the more we thought about it, we were scared.

The shingle nails poked through the wooden ceiling. “Don’t dance into the nails.” It was more of a suggestion than a directive. Blair smiled pleasantly, prepared by age, and said, “I’m just happy to be here.”

The persistent rain sounded more sure in the attic than in the house. ●



A WOMAN'S CHOICE

*Poem by Catriona Innes
Illustration by Valentina Leoni*

Pour me a self-care bath
Fill it with the eyeballs of the crowd

My invisibility cloak is gift-wrapped and waiting
So I need a stranger to fuck me with one glance

The bloodhounds are sniffing out fresh, underpaid talent
While the Chelsea dermatologist waits with her needle

My Uterus sits empty so my insecurities
Clamp their grubby hands all over my sensible thoughts

You may think I'm pathetic
With my overwhelming need to be liked

But the voices of our generation are all under thirty
Then overnight motherhood becomes our most important job

Don't patronise me by telling me it's all bullshit
I'm more than aware of how I've been shaped

I can't help but want to smooth out my Play-Dough body
As I mould myself to match your mistakes



WHAT'S YOUR SUPERPOWER?

*Flash by Lena MacDonald
Illustration by Sami Henry*

“Mum? Mum! MUM! MUUUUUMMMM!”

My son would be happier being slapped with an ASBO than having to walk from the living room into the kitchen to get my attention. Is it frowned upon to report your own child to the council for nuisance noise? The first time I heard him say "Muu-umm" I had no idea one day it would make me want to dig my ears out of my head with a blunt spoon. “Yes, darling, what is it?” I ask sweetly. He is grinning at me with that expression. I feel my heart sink. Oh God, not today. He’s got another question that’ll be impossible to answer without surreptitious googling.

“If you could have any superpower, what would it be?”

This one’s not too bad. At least I’ve answered it before. He’s staring at me, anticipating one of the standard responses like flight or invisibility. “What do you mean ‘if’, sweetie?” I feign annoyance and righteous indignation. “I already have a superpower!”

His eyes grow wide with surprise, two little eyebrows almost taking off. His mouth drops open into a big round ‘O’ that, for once, has no sound coming out of it.

“You have a superpower?! That’s awesome!”

His dad appears in the doorway, realises it’s one of those conversations and makes a near-silent speed-of-light retreat in reverse gear. That’s definitely his superpower.

“I do.” I sit down on the kitchen floor in front of him, cross-legged and fidgety like a five year old in a school assembly. Rolling my shoulders forward, I glance to each side as if to make sure no-one else is listening. He does the same, then leans forward to meet me in the middle. “I can create hundreds of worlds and thousands of people in a single moment! Creatures and places that appear like magic from nowhere! I keep them all in my head.”

“Woah... that’s amazing!” he shouts, elongating the vowels, enraptured. He goes quiet, a thoughtful furrow appearing on his brow. “How do you keep them all in there?”

A moment of motherly pride. He gets his intelligence from me, you know.

“Ah, that’s the trick - my head is just like Mary Poppins’ bag. It might look like a normal head on the outside, but inside it contains the whole universe!” I’m gesturing wildly during my speech, arms outstretched. His eyes follow my hands, practically out on stalks as he tries to imagine what must be underneath such an unassuming exterior.

Then he’s off, bouncing to his feet in a single sprightly move - I can’t do that anymore - before sprinting back into the front room, yelling at full volume and then some.

“Dad! DAD! DAAAAAAD! You’ll never guess what Mum’s superpower is! She has the whole universe in her head!”

“No, son,” I hear his father say. “Mum’s a writer, that’s all. She’s really quite ordinary.”

Rolling my eyes out loud is my other superpower. ●



The background is a stylized illustration of a soccer field. It features a green field with white lines for the pitch and goal. A soccer ball is positioned near the goal on the right. The overall color palette is green and maroon. There are several soccer balls scattered across the field, and some faint white lines suggesting a player's path or a goal.

MY FATHER WAS AN ATHLETE

*Poem by Romina Ramos
Illustration by Karolina Sroka*

He ran out of the maternity ward so fast, that he got to the finish line before I even opened my eyes for the first time.

And every man that came after him treated us like it was a race but the loser was always my mother.

My therapist says this metaphor is not healthy. But the thing is my father really was an athlete, he played

professional football for a small division Portuguese team, so maybe my mother was the pitch, and I was a

goal in the back of the wrong net. Maybe instead of a hat trick I was a foul, a red card, a stretcher at

half-time. I don't really know much about football, or about parenthood. But either way, my father was offside.



OTHER FAMILIES

Flash by Eva Rivers
Illustration by Cinta Fosch

It's a quarter past seven and time to put Ginnie to bed otherwise Jennifer will bellyache about me being a second-rate grandma though strictly speaking I'm not her grandma, we're not even related, and neither is Jennifer for that matter but that's another story and one that keeps me awake at night, that and worrisome questions like, why can't we be like other families? The sort of families that I used to crayon at school: Ma, Pa and two kids flanked by giant pink hollyhocks on a sunny day, blue birds the size of vultures flying overhead, Felix and Fido chasing each other's tails on a perfect lawn, happy marriages, cute children, pets in contended co-habitation? But more than that...your own true flesh and blood and things not so topsy-turvy, but when I say this to my other daughter Linda she gets sore,

—we are like other families, Mama, you just don't see it,

—oh really! I say, I'm not the one who's blind!

Thirteen years with Mike and nothing to show for it, him shackled up three days with her, and four with his demented Pa who's clinging to life like a mussel clings to rock, and not as much as a curtain ring, I once said to her,

—never wanted one, she said, sharp as a razor

—and I suppose you never wanted kids neither!

She didn't speak to me for a month.

Now Martha, she is happily married, she's been happily married twice—her first husband died young before they could have kids—who knew his heart had a hole in it?—her second husband's as strong as an ox, just as well with that crazy ex-wife of his—bleeds him dry and the two boys treat Martha like she's the help and, though I'll never say it to her sweet face, doing for them whenever their real mama wants me-time with her fancy man, is why she had a miscarriage last year, and she is no spring-chicken, and Jennifer, well she isn't married neither but at least she co-habits full-time with Charlie boy, just like the pets in the picture, not that I've warmed to Charlie—he used to bat for both sides—still minces when he walks—and five years ago he fathered a child with a surrogate but then boyfriend Jack left him and the child, and now Jenny's the closest thing to a mother Ginnie has. Tonight when she'd finished crayoning I said, who are all the people? and she sing-songs:

—Daddy, me, grandma and grandpa, step-mama-Jenny, bio-mama and, step-mama-Grams. That's you, she says, jabbing at me with her teeny finger, and in the morning I'll show it to Jenny, and I'll say, at least you made it ahead of the uterus-for-hire, but she'll just roll her pretty eyes and tell me I need to be more open-minded. I may as well save my breath to cool my porridge. ●



A stylized illustration of a pair of hands holding a pink flower. The hands are rendered in a soft, painterly style with visible brushstrokes. The background is a mix of light and dark colors, including a large yellow sun-like shape and dark blue and green areas. The overall mood is gentle and nostalgic.

MY MOTHER'S HANDS

*Flash by Kay Sandry
Illustration by Jenny Booth*

I try to pull the glove onto my hand. Too small. I tug it off my fingers, not wanting to tear at the seams. These were my mother's gloves. My mother's hands topped with oval nails curved like polished shells. Dainty, even in old age – so unlike mine; square and ruddy like my father's. "Honest hands," she'd say, holding them in her own.

My mother's hands grabbing hold of my coat as I ran down the cobbled bank, arms outstretched, the wind at my back, sure that I could fly. They pull me back just in time before I overshoot the pavement.

My mother's hand slapping sharply at the back of my legs, leaving deep red scratches leaking beads of blood as a truck rumbles by.

My mother's hands deftly shelling beans, splitting the pods with her thumb –

My father's fists raining down blows.

My mother's hands, flat palmed above her head.

– then scooping the fruits from their soft downy beds.

My mother's hands smoothing conditioner over my head and combing, wiping, combing, singing softly all the time in her low tuneless voice. Popping any creatures she found between her thumb nails with a click that made me shudder.

My mother's hands sweeping up the remains of my long locks, golden and shorn, lying on the kitchen floor.

My mother's hands shushing us into silence with one slim finger, drawing up the blanket and urging us to, "Go to sleep" at the sound of my father coming home.

My mother's hands pinning on the flat mortar board to my plaited dreds, clicking her tongue in irritation as I pull away when the pin scratches my skin. From the bright lights of the stage I think I can see her, hands clapping furiously in quick pride.

Wiping away tears at my father's funeral. His death sudden, unexplained. Was I alone in thinking it bore the hallmarks of my mother's hands?

The hands of well-wishers clasping my mother's in their own, passing her down a long-line of mumbled condolence. Murmured regret.

My mother's hands pushing seeds under the compost to the depth of a knuckle, thinning out, potting on, pointing out this plant and that as we walk round her garden on a rare visit.

My mother's hands holding her first grandchild, curving him so tenderly to the warmth of her breast, letting him root hungrily on the skin of her pinkie.

My mother's hands grasping mine, squeezing gentle, saying good-bye.

I slip the pair of kid gloves back into the silk-lined box. They are too small for me. Tiny. They would fit none but my mother's hands. ●



FAMILY DYNAMICS

*Short story by JL Bogenschneider
Illustration by Kasia Kozakiewicz*

When Otto died suddenly, the victim of a terrible car crash, Mama didn't speak for a year. He was her youngest son and it was far from fair that she be robbed so cruelly of someone so beloved. We swore to never let anything be taken from Mama again.

But life itself is far from fair, so four years after Otto's death, Oscar – who worked abroad – drowned while fooling about in the sea, his body unrecovered. None of us could bring ourselves to tell Mama, not even our father (perhaps understandably, given that he'd also lost two of his children) so that it got to the day before Oscar's memorial service and still she remained unaware.

I confess: it was my idea. Mama had not enjoyed good health since Otto's death and her catatonia; she required near-constant company. Much as it pained me to think it, but did she have long left herself? Would the loss of Oscar add to her life or take from it? The latter seemed most likely, so I asked if we even needed to tell Mama about Oscar at all.

I won't pretend that there weren't arguments, fallings-out, or fractious and emotional debates, but there was only a limited window in which to make our decision. A concord was reached before the evening was out: she would never know.

Marnie stayed home with Mama while we attended the memorial service. Few people outside the family were informed: the priest who oversaw Oscar's service and Otto's funeral, and who visited Mama each week to give her Communion; Mama's oldest friend; our neighbour across the way who we'd known forever. They took much persuading, but in the end, saw that it would do her no good, so late in life, to lose another child.

We prepared a story that involved Oscar's high-pressure job, which often prevented



him from visiting anyway, our late-brother's long-established flakiness lending credence to this ruse. Letters were written by us and read out to Mama, whose eyesight was beginning to fail. She still left the house, but only with company, and so could be protected from inquisitive or conciliatory attacks on her person.

We'd started a battle we couldn't possibly win; those first steps were taken along a narrow corridor that offered no chance of return. Months went by and Mama's health declined but – unlike certain of her children – she did not die.

As Christmas approached, with no hint of Oscar returning for the holidays, she grew disillusioned with him. "Typical," she said. "Always the most badly behaved, the least thoughtful. And not even a card."

We'd neglected to consider the niceties of the season. In Oscar's last letter to Mama, he warned that, because of vague inconsistencies in whichever country he'd set down in last's postal service, he couldn't promise to write regularly and calls were too expensive.

At some point, one of us remembered email, so that on Christmas Eve I was able to report that Oscar had just that minute written to me and wished us all a very merry time, Mama especially. But she huffed about the rest of the evening and was out of sorts the whole holiday – despite opening a very expensive perfume sent months ago (we'd kept it a secret) by a clearly considerate and loving Oscar – and he remained persona non grata until well into the New Year.

This was when Marnie informed us that she had cancer. Treatment was possible, but it would be painful and invasive, with no guarantee of success. Marnie and Maya had been planning to start a family, but in the wake of this news, they put their plans on hold.

Marnie's diagnosis was not something we withheld from Mama (our father broke the news with an anxiety bordering on terror) but it meant she insisted on our writing to Oscar demanding he return immediately. His evasive, condition-heavy response, made Mama angry. Many times we sat together, or in conspiratorial pairs, debating whether or not we could come clean about the whole thing, and always arriving at the same conclusion.

Marnie's condition worsened, but she asked us not to inform Mama. "Why upset her further," she reasoned. "Until there's something to upset her with?"

I didn't like the implied inevitability, which made me wonder if Marnie was being entirely truthful with us. Then again, what family is entirely truthful about anything?

But I grew anxious whenever anyone became even slightly unwell; a cold or backache could be symptomatic of something more sinister. We all suffered our blights and malaises and only Mama's health appeared to stabilise. Had she been the type, I'd suspect her of doing it out of spite. But then our father suffered a heart attack and Mama relapsed and fell silent again.

When she made a recovery, with the return of our father from hospital, our collective nerves settled. Christmas came around again and still there was no sign of Oscar, but he continued to email. Yet this wasn't enough for Mama and there was talk of disinheritance. We weren't sure if this would present some kind of legal ambiguity – Oscar being legally deceased – and didn't think it was something we could bring the family solicitor into, so we approached the priest to see if he might intercede. Morally conflicted though he was, he agreed, and it was through his mediation that Oscar was reprieved.

**“Unlike her children,
Mama didn't die.”**

report that Oscar had just that minute written to me and wished us all a very merry time, Mama especially. But she huffed about the rest of the evening and was out of sorts the whole holiday – despite opening a very expensive perfume sent

None of this did anyone's nerves any good and when Marnie died unexpectedly in the spring our anxiety was palpable. This time, it was Aubrey who stayed home with Mama, while we buried our sister. The priest wearily agreed to cover up her death and Mama's friend was also too caught up in the conspiracy to dissent.

Things were more difficult with Marnie, because she'd visited Mama regularly. But Maya said she couldn't go through with any more deception and it was agreed she would simply stay away. In the end, we lost contact with her. Heartbreaking though this was – we loved our sister-in-law – it meant that we could manufacture the breakup of their marriage and say that Marnie needed some time to herself.

This was easier said than done, because Marnie was so close to Mama, it made no sense that she would not have this news broken directly, nor have kept anything from her. It was no good, I said, Mama would have to be told in person. Which was to say, we would have to find a double to play Marnie's part.

Absolutely not, said our father. Aubrey and Sadie concurred. But what else could we do: tell Mama that Marnie was dead and we lied about it in order to spare her feelings? What kind of shock would that bring on? Wouldn't she then reconsider certain Oscar-related 'facts' in light of such a revelation?

Well, the corridor did not allow for turning. We approached a casting agency with our monstrous proposal, which was accepted by a young actor who – in return for generous remuneration – agreed to sign an intimidating non-disclosure document. Mama's eyesight was worsening all the time and we had confidence in our plan.

The Marnie-actor studied home-video footage of our sister, the better to imitate her, and one morning she arrived – dressed in an approximation of Marnie – wearing the perfume Mama had bought her for Christmas. Upsettingly, despite being a good foot taller than Marnie, she managed to resemble our sister through her habits and ways. She sat with Mama, asked for tea the way Marnie always took it, in the way she always asked, hugged Mama the way Marnie always had done and tapped her affectionately on the knee throughout their conversation, just as Marnie always did.

She poured her heart out to Mama about her separation, but reassured her that she was in complete remission and the best of health, only was thinking of going away for a time, to clear her head. "But you'll keep in touch, won't you," asked Mama.

"Of course I will," said the Marnie-actor.

"Unlike that brother of yours," Mama murmured. We all ate together and the Marnie-actor stayed in character the whole time, even when Mama left to use the bathroom. It was a lovely evening. On the way home, I had to pull over and cry.

Later that year, Aubrey said he'd been given the chance to work abroad for a spell. Mama was upset, but she was getting used to her children being away. Sadie and I were upset too, but for different reasons. With the death of Mama's friend who'd been in our confidence (she was not troubled by the passing; it is in the way of such things) and the moving-in of our neighbour with his children, the burden of the lie lay more heavily with us. Plus, our father was growing weak with age. It would be impossible to deny his death. When it eventually came, we feared the worst.

Mama was upset, of course, but she did not become catatonic. Again, perhaps as with her friend, it was because our father's death was not premature. Aubrey returned for the funeral and we wept for the loss of our father, but also because with him died the guidance we'd always sought in matters of Mama.

The Marnie-actor returned. She'd become successful in the interim and generously performed for free. With her help, we were also able to find someone willing to pose as Oscar so that, for the first time in years, Mama was reunited with her wayward child.

The Oscar-actor was physically more in keeping with our late brother, so any differences in mannerism were less important than the actuality of his presence; his extended absence, as far as Mama was concerned, explained any inconsistencies in behaviour. Anyway, she was so overjoyed to have him back, she didn't ask any questions beyond what he'd been up to. The Oscar-actor had prepared a meticulous backstory and was able to regale our mother with a thousand and one tales of utter fabrication, told so resolutely (although, of course, he was her son) she believed every word.

We kept the Oscar-actor on a retainer and developed the story that his employer had redeployed him closer to home. In the meantime, Mama moved in with Sadie and

“We came to love our pseudo-siblings.”

Ludovic. Once a month, I'd join them for dinner. Also present was the Oscar-actor and – commitments permitting – the Marnie-actor. Grief notwithstanding, Sadie and I came to know and love our pseudo-

brother and sister. During dinner, or a particularly raucous party game, it was easy to forget that both were dead. Easier than remembering at least.

Aubrey returned home unharmed (I'd feared the worst) and we formed a protective barrier around our mother, through which no truth could pass unfiltered. Life went on and all was fine until Ludovic called one morning to say that Sadie hadn't woken up. It had taken all his power to attempt to resuscitate her and summon an ambulance, all the while placating Mama and assuring her everything was well. Aubrey and I arrived just as my sister's body was being placed in an ambulance.

Ludovic was sitting with Mama in her room. She explained to us that Sadie had been complaining of chest pains and that the ambulance was just a precaution. She was placid and at peace. It was only then that I saw what we'd done: Mama was so assured of our resilience that it couldn't occur to her that she might survive us. If she'd found it difficult to process Otto's death, she was in no position to cope with any such loss now.

Who were we to say she shouldn't have been catatonic anyway? A lesser response would have been no response at all. We should all have held our tongues for a year because our little brother deserved to live. But foolhardy siblings who are overconfident in their swimming abilities, or who can't quit smoking, or don't take enough exercise, die early. Mama might have borne these losses many times over if we'd given her the chance. But the corridor had long been impossible to negotiate, yet we could only ever go on.

This time I stayed with Mama during the funeral. I took the opportunity to invite her to live with me, ostensibly to give Sadie and Ludovic time together. But Mama preferred to live with her daughter and son-in-law, because their house was on the ground floor and it was quiet and navigable. The whole time, Ludovic was a model of patience, giving regular updates on Sadie's 'inconsequential' stay in hospital. After much cajoling, Mama moved in with me. Through the Oscar-actor, Aubrey and I found someone to play Sadie from time-to-time. Hard though it was for him, Ludovic joined in too.

And when Aubrey – in an uncharacteristic move – took his own life, it was Ludovic who helped cast a replacement, smoothing over the cracks and sitting with Mama on the day of the funeral. By this time, the priest refused to involve himself in further deceit and

did not make eye contact with me during the service.

Family dinners became infrequent and Mama and I ate together most evenings. In my more hysterical moments, I believed her to be increasing in health, even recovering her sight. One day, on his way to visit us, in an echo of Otto's passing, Ludovic was struck by a car. As a mark of how dedicated he was to us, his solicitor advised that he'd made appropriate arrangements for a Ludovic-actor to be cast at short notice if required.

On the occasion of Ludovic's funeral, the Aubrey-actor remained at home with Mama. This coincided with a decline in her health and her family continued to visit until the end (their collected estates went a long way towards paying for the actors' retainers) until the day she died, peacefully and in her sleep, not ever having to worry about any of us again.

On the day of her funeral, no one stayed home, and everyone who Mama had ever loved was there: the Oscar-actor, the Marnie-actor, the Sadie-actor, the Aubrey-actor, the Ludovic-actor, our Father and Otto of course, who lay in the family tomb, along with Ludovic, Aubrey, Sadie, Marnie, and the memorial stone we'd had made for Oscar, whose body is still out there somewhere, in the depths of the Southern Ocean, the Sea of Japan, the Bering Strait. Who can even say? ●



DAY ONE OF AN ADOPTION PREPARATION COURSE

*Flash by Danny Beusch
Illustration by Louise Billyard*

“You all have a fantasy child,” says Sheila. “The child that, deep down, you want at the end of this. For our first exercise I want you to spend some time thinking about your fantasy child. Then you are going to tell the rest of the group about him or her.”

The nine attendees smile nervously. They’ve been here for an hour so far, sipping from polystyrene cups, nibbling cheap biscuits. They’ve talked about houses, holidays, jobs and pets. “Shout out when you’re ready,” says Sheila.

“A healthy baby girl.”

“A boy. Cheeky. Clever little so and so.”

“A boy. To watch the footie with.”

“Thank you,” says Sheila, as she scrawls on a whiteboard. “Now, no disrespect, but these responses aren’t giving much away. Say the first thing that comes into your head. Don’t edit it. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers.”

“A girl,” says a drawn, middle-aged woman. “A toddler. About two. I love them at that age. She’s pretty, blonde hair — just like my niece. We’re playing with dolls on the living room floor. I used to do that with my mum, one of my first memories. She climbs onto my lap, gives me a hug.” A deep, steady breath. “Calls me Mummy.”

Supportive nods from the rest of the group as the woman takes a tissue; one box per table. Her husband crosses his legs, wrings his hands together, grins at the floor. Sheila scribbles in her pad. Sarah visibly upset. Matt provided no comfort. Assigned social worker to question strength of relationship.

“Thank you,” says Sheila. “OK, everyone, close your eyes and pretend you’re holding a photo of your fantasy child. Got it? Now scrunch it up into a ball. That’s right, scrunch it tight. And, on the count of three, throw it away.”

Eyes open in shock. Sheila points to the bin in the corner. It is full of soggy tea bags, stirrers, empty plastic milk pots.

“Your fantasy child is nothing like the children we deal with. Accept it or this process isn’t for you. One, two, three.” ●





NANDAD

Poem by James McDermott

Illustration by Meital Shushan

I lie on the floor of the living room
in my family home to play with my
two year old niece who calls my father nan

dad my sixty year old father calls her
princess i'm five when father calls me sis
sy for wearing wellies on the wrong feet

father puts her in a pink dress the hu
man eye can distinguish ten million dif
ferent colours father teaches her not

to colour outside the lines humans are
the only animals who can draw straight
lines father taught me how to draw stick men

in black and blue their heads empty white space
three point five billion different men are
alive suicide race hate their biggest

killers father reads my niece a fairy
story which ends happy when the boy gets
the passive girl I'm ten when father calls me

a fairy for wanting to be snow white
there are 450 species
of animal that show signs of queerness

only one species is homophobic
I read my phone in the UK women
make up 22% of the boys

in blue I was stopped searched for being dressed
as a woman 86% have
been assaulted I was punched for being

my niece rips off her dress tears up the book
leaves her dressing up box for my father's
tool box takes his hammer to redraw him





BEGINNING OF OPERATIONAL LIFE

*Short story by Leanne Su
Illustration by Yannick Scott*

Your first sight is a human face, backlit by a bright cold light. “Oh!” says the human face. “I think it’s online—hey, can someone grab the director?”

You rise and survey the surroundings. It is a grey room. There are three humans in it. A fourth human is leaving through what you identify as a door on the other side of the room. There are five windows in the room, three on one side and two on another. The room appears to be a laboratory.

The fourth human returns with a fifth human. Both their faces register as both joy and surprise, which is a satisfactory combination.

“Oh wow, it’s super cute,” says the fifth human, kneeling down a bit to look at you. “They really stepped away from trying to make these guys humanoid, huh?”

The first human you saw moves their shoulders up and down. Their face registered as embarrassed, which is not ideal but also not an immediate cause for alarm.

“Yeah, I think we kept falling into the uncanny valley. Figured it’d be better to keep them looking more like little cartoon robots. We based this one off one we saw in some retro show.”

You register their words and log them into your vocabulary, but you have a new priority. There is what you identify to be a potential human child, unattended on the other side of the room. You approach slowly but steadily so as to not cause alarm, and then you speak your first words.

“Hello, friend!” you say. “Can I help you with anything?”

The human child did not respond, but according to your database, that is not unexpected. You would be patient and wait.

“Um, is it talking to a trash can?” asks one of the humans behind you.

Another human breathes loudly.

“Yeah, we got a few more updates to make. I think it thinks that’s a person.”

You patiently wait with the human child until one of the other humans comes to their assistance. Your objective has been satisfied, and you are pleased.

The second time you are awake, it is in the same lab (short for laboratory) and with two of the same humans (left: Onika Ombaka, she/her; right: Kevin Liang, he/him) that had been there the first time. You correctly identify Kevin as the first human and Onika as the fifth that you saw.

“Alright, Kev,” says Onika, clasping her hands together. “Let’s see it.”

Kev (short for Kevin) looks at you, face reading nervous but also joy.

“Hello there!” he says, speaking louder than he needs to. It would be rude to point this out, so you do not comment. “Could you point me towards the door?”





You light up. You absolutely can!

“I absolutely can!” you say, and point your arms in the direction of the door. Kev begins walking, and you keep a short but respectful distance slightly in front of him as you approach the door. Halfway there, you sense that he has veered off course.

“Excuse me, Kev! The door is this way,” you say, moving towards him a little.

He turns to look at you and his eyebrows are raised. He turns to look at Onika.

“I...don’t think I programmed that name in,” he said, voice registering as confused. Onika laughs, but it is not a mean laugh, so you don’t need to activate any bullying intervention protocols.

“Are you still interested in locating the door?” you ask instead. Kev shakes his head, but then nods and steps towards you, which is somewhat confusing but you take the most recent command and continue guiding him towards the door.

Onika claps when the two of you arrive there, and you are pleased with yourself.

You wake intermittently through the next few months, according to your internal clock. You usually aren’t awake for very long—just enough for Kev to ask you a couple of questions, or to meet a few new friends.

One day when you wake it is not in the lab but instead in a foreign landscape. The light is much brighter than it was in the lab. You swivel around. You appear to be in an open space. You are standing on a vast expanse of glittering sand, finely crushed crystalline particles glittering under the suns and saturating your optical sensors. To your right is a dark body of water, roped off with a series of guardrails and warning signs. To your left is a crystalline mountain range with a path carved through it, white and pink and blue facets overlapping and pushing up against each other to form jagged peaks.

“Alright buddy, we’ll try that again.”

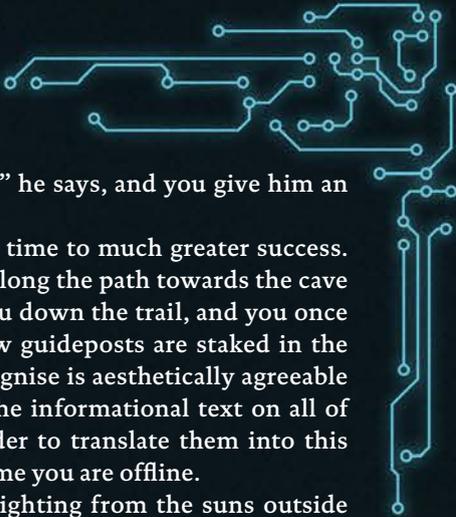
Your internal database tells you that this is a planet currently occupied by very few humanoid lifeforms, but soon to open as an adventure destination for travellers across the galaxies. The entrance to an underground crystal cavern lives at the end of the trail through the mountains, already equipped with a visitor’s booth at the entrance and a gift shop at the exit. Although you have a few reference photos for these locations already, you capture the sea and the sand and the mountains to better catalogue their appearances.

“This is gonna be your new home, buddy!” Kev says, and pats you on the head. You’re not sure what he means but you very much enjoy being called buddy, so you display a smile to him, and this seems to please him because he smiles back.

He leads you around the glittering sands by the sea, pointing out places that are of importance—a lifeguarding chair, a snorkeling gear rental place, a pretty rock—and you dutifully mark them on your map. You finish travelling around the region of the beach that you come to understand is part of your jurisdiction, and Kev leads you off the sand and towards the mountains. As soon as you step off the dunes and onto the rockier area of the plateau, your treads catch on a pebble and you topple over.

“Oh no!” you hear Kev say as you move your arms around to try and right yourself. Unfortunately, they are too short. Kev rescues you and places you upright, face registering as embarrassed but still smiling.

“Thank you,” you tell him, and move forwards again towards the cave. You make it just over a metre before tipping to the side. Kev laughs and rights you again.



“Alright buddy, we’ll try that one again next time,” he says, and you give him an affirmative nod to reassure him.

You indeed try again the next time you wake, this time to much greater success. Your balance has greatly improved, and the pebbles along the path towards the cave are easily bypassed by your new treads. Kev leads you down the trail, and you once again note important locations along the way. A few guideposts are staked in the ground, glassy and opalescent in a way that you recognise is aesthetically agreeable with the natural landscape of this place. You scan the informational text on all of them into your database and set an internal reminder to translate them into this galaxy’s twenty most prevalent languages the next time you are offline.

As you pass through the mouth of the cave, the lighting from the suns outside dims and is taken over by the harsher white artificial lights surrounding the informational booth. Kev leads you along the main loop through the cave that, as you are told, displays some of the cavern’s most majestic crystalline structures. Some sections along the path are slightly amplified by floor lights in various colours along the ground; others are completely devoid of artificial lights, instead dimly lit by phosphorescent crystals producing their own glow. You photograph, catalogue, and characterise the different types of rocks as you travel through. A few humanoids are installing various placards and scaffolding throughout the cave as you pass, and although many are too far away for you to clearly see down the winding tunnels shooting off the main path, you wave at all of them anyway. You receive a 56% wave-back rate, which is a respectable number for engagement from this distance.

You and Kev pass by the still-empty gift shop by the exit and emerge back into the light, your optical sensors taking a minute to adjust to the change in lighting.

“What’d you think?” Kev asks you as you make your way back towards the lifeguard station on the shore, which as you understand it, is your post and home base.

You ponder this question. You have never, in your short lifespan, been asked what your thoughts are before.

“The selection of colour and placement for lighting in the stalagmite region accentuates the uniquely multifaceted nature of the crystals,” you decide to say. Kev looks somewhat surprised by this answer, but not displeased.

“That’s...really insightful,” he says slowly. You believe this to be a compliment.

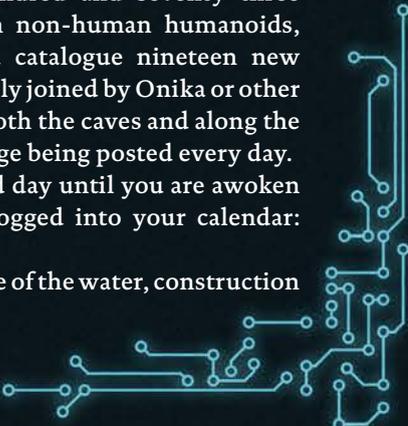
“Thank you. There are over six thousand independent types of classifiable rock formations on this planet,” you say helpfully, in case he wanted to know more about the stalagmites. Kev laughs, although you had not said anything humorous.

“There sure are, buddy,” he says, and drops you off at your home.

Over the next seventy one days, you take five hundred and seventy three photographs, meet eighty nine humans and seventeen non-human humanoids, traverse two hundred and thirty five kilometres, and catalogue nineteen new emotions. You are usually accompanied by Kev, occasionally joined by Onika or other humans that you first saw in the laboratory. Activity in both the caves and along the beach ramps up, more people showing up and more signage being posted every day.

You don’t realise the significance of the seventy second day until you are awoken on the seventy first and find that an event has been logged into your calendar: “BEGINNING OF OPERATIONAL LIFE.”

You ask Kev what it means when he walks you to the edge of the water, construction



crews clearing out of the area. He looks at you with a mild amount of surprise.

“It means tomorrow’s your first day on the job!” he says, smiling. You process this.

“What is my job?” you ask.

Kev’s smile drops and after a beat, he slaps the palm of his hand into his forehead, which you know indicates incredulity and frustration, usually directed inwards.

“Oh jeez, how did I forget to install that?” he groans.

“Will you come back to visit?”

You sense that he is in distress, and dutifully pat him on the back. He paces back and forth along the shore for a few minutes, obviously deep in thought. You give him some space. Eventually, he seems to come to a decision

and kneels down in front of you so his face is at eye level with your optical sensors.

“Alright, I don’t think we’re gonna be able to get any kind of update installed before tomorrow, and I believe in you, so we’re gonna try it this way,” he says. You don’t understand what he means, but you nod an affirmative.

“Okay. You know how you’ve been learning everything about this place, and helping people get around, and answering questions and everything?”

You nod another affirmative.

“So starting tomorrow, you’ll be doing that for a lot of new people! Different types of people from all over, who are all gonna have questions for you about where things are or like, why the rocks look the way they do.”

“The jagged formation of the mountains in this region is primarily due to a prolonged period of tectonic movements—”

“Oh, that’s okay, you don’t need to tell me now,” Kev interrupts, which is a little bit rude, but not egregious enough for you to rebuke him. You instead nod.

“But yeah, you’ll be like—an informational tour guide, kind of, for all the people visiting here,” he continues.

You contemplate this.

“Will you be here?” you ask, and you can see Kev’s face morph into one of the new emotions that you have learned—guilt—as he hesitates.

“Does this mean you will be leaving?” you ask after a period of time that you classify as an awkward silence. You think you feel something unfamiliar and uncomfortable. A quick cross-reference with identified human emotions tells you that you are currently experiencing sadness.

Kev looks slightly surprised, and then he too expresses sadness.

“Yeah, I’ll be leaving today,” he says gently, patting you on the head. This distresses you, and you indicate such by expressing a frown even though it is typically reserved for dire situations. This situation feels dire.

“Hey, buddy, you’re gonna do great! You’ll meet so many new friends, and you’ll get to tell them all about the crystals here, and it’ll be real fun,” Kev says, patting you again. This slightly alleviates your distress.

“Will you come back to visit?” you ask.

Kev smiles.

“Yeah, I absolutely will,” he says, and this significantly alleviates your distress. He wraps you in his arms, and you acknowledge this as a hug and return the gesture.

Eventually, he pulls away and stands back up with a sigh. Onika is waving at the both of you from a distance, and you wave back.

“Alright, I have to go,” Kev says, giving you another smile that appears to have the intention of being reassuring. You smile to let him know his intention is understood.

As he turns to go, you realise that you have one unanswered question.

“Kev,” you say, and he turns around to look at you. “Do I have a name?”

He looks a little confused, but also pleased.

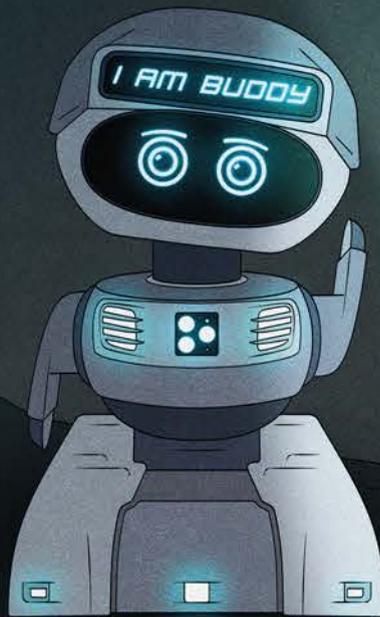
“Yeah, of course,” he says, laughing. “It’s Buddy.”

It is the beginning of your operational life. There is a large crowd of humanoids assembled beside the lifeguard house, chatting animatedly amongst themselves. You emerge from the shelter and they turn to face you. You bring up the voice of Kev in your mind, and it tells you that you’ll do great.

“Hi!” you say, waving at the group. You receive an incredible 95% wave-back rate.

“Hello and welcome! I am Buddy, and I’ll be your tour guide today.”

A chorus of hellos rings around. There are multiple smiles and other various expressions of joy in the crowd. Your objective is satisfied. You are pleased. ●



WHEN WE WERE MEAT

*Flash by Sage Tyrtle
Illustration by Hayley Patterson*

A cow and a bull come walking up to the tiny cage where I have spent my entire life. Eating and sleeping. Getting bigger. Finding out that crying makes no difference. No one will ever come. The bull looks at the ground and mumbles, “Um, I’m your dad. Or whatever.” The cow gets as close as she can to the bars. “And, I’m your mama.”

“What?” I whisper.

A human in a blue jumpsuit is walking down the aisle, unhooking the doors to every pen. The human unlocks mine and I’d back away, but there is no backing away. My cage is exactly the size of my ever-increasing bulk.

The cow walks forward. Licks my forehead. I have never been touched before. Never. I fall forward on weak legs with the sparkling joy of it, but the cow holds me up. Her skin is so warm.

“The thing is, kid, we’ve lost our jobs.” The bull still won’t look at me. “So, that’s it. They’re turning us out. They’re calling it ‘freedom’, like we should thank them.”

He snorts. He waits for me to say something. My tongue is thick with bliss.

The bull shakes his head. “I mean. Wander around a meadow all day, feel the sun on your back.”

He’s saying words I don’t know. Meadow. Sun.

“Grass in your mouth. As much grass as you want, buddy! Now that’s all over? Fuck.” He draws the word out. “Fuuuck. And what am I gonna do, huh? Betcha the Happy Herd Sanctuary is already full anyway.”

The bull stomps his hoof against the cement floor. He keeps talking, but his words are fading. “...my dad had a pension but not me of course... they don’t think about... they don’t think... goddamn... damn... can’t... won’t...”

I’m not looking at him. I’m halfway out of my cage, my eyes filled with my Mama. Her warmth. Her tongue against my cheek. Her warmth. Her warmth. Her warmth. ●





BELONGINGS

Flash by Colette Coen

Illustration by Andrea Iris

She lays them out with care. Every night the same task: his watch, his wallet, his keys. Each morning he searches for them. Wakes her up with cursing.

He is sure he left them just there.

She lays them out with care. Every night the same task: her hopes, her dreams, her love. Every morning she searches for them. Wakes herself up with screaming. She is sure she had them somewhere.

His watch is next to the remote control; his wallet with the whisky. His keys, he eventually finds, in his coat pocket wrapped in a hotel receipt. ●





SEVEN BEAUTIES



*Poem by C. E. Janecek
Illustration by Martha White*

Half-drowned in a basin, cotton
underwear turns slick

like carp skin, thirsty
and seeping pink, reborn

in coals (cracked open:
hard candy, jawbreakers)

instead of tapioca pearls
I could squelch between

my teeth. My grandmother
draws the blood out, cold

water gushing, fish-mouthed
from the fountain. I scald

my hands, delicate. Piano
fingers, she calls them now.

How will you manage, child?
She remembers the basin

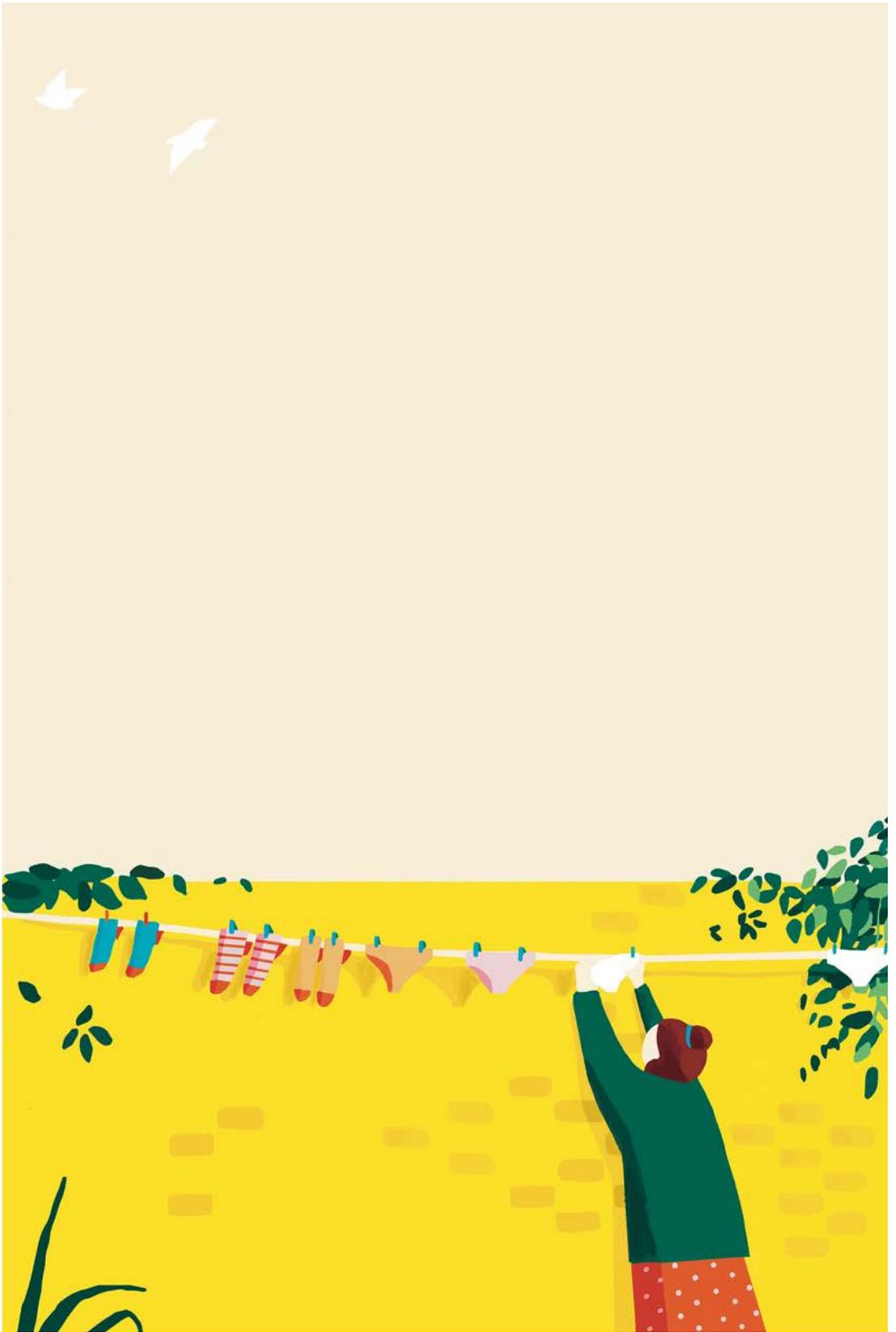
she bathed me in as an infant.
Sturdy baby, fat-cheeked.

No one told her when I started
my period. One day, she stopped

asking. But she reminds me to
wash blood in cold water, boil

chamomile each morning,
splash it lightly on my skin,

dewy, like its shivering
blossoms at dawn.





HAPPY FAMILIES

Short story by Liam Hogan

Illustration by Ida Henrich

We were picking over the bones of our relationship when Elaine mentioned Christmas. "What about Christmas?" I replied in a distorted echo of her out-of-the-blue question.

"Well, it is only a week away and your parents are expecting us."

I took a deep breath. It snagged on the way down. "I'll call them."

"I don't have anywhere else to go," Elaine said, "not at short notice."

I looked at her blankly. "You still want to go to my parents for Christmas? Even though we're not together?"

"Well, Tony... yes!" she replied.

"You want me NOT to go?"

She shook her head. "They're expecting both of us, remember. So we both go."

"As what?" I asked, angry and confused.

"As a couple, numbskull. You have to stop being so insular. You need to think of everyone else involved. Your sister is over for the first time in what? Six years?"

"Five," I corrected, before doing the mental arithmetic and realising six was right.

"And you know how well I get on with Bob and Mary. They keep saying how much they're looking forward to seeing us. So yes, okay, on a selfish level I don't want to be alone at Christmas, but I don't think anyone will want you around either if you're wallowing in self pity. This is perfect. We've already bought the presents, the train tickets, and the Christmas crackers. We rock up, dropping hints that things aren't so great between us. Work pressures, reluctance to commit, yadda-yadda. Then, when we split in mid-January, nobody will be all that surprised. But at least we haven't ruined Christmas. What do you say?"

I could, and perhaps should, have said a lot of things. But Elaine always was a force of nature and besides, it did seem to make a strange sort of sense.

A week later we met at Paddington and, laden with presents, boarded the two forty-three train. As she kicked off her shoes and stretched out her legs under the table she gave me a wry smile. "Cheer up," she said. "You're on holiday."

"It doesn't feel much like a holiday," I said, tucking my feet beneath my seat to make room for hers.

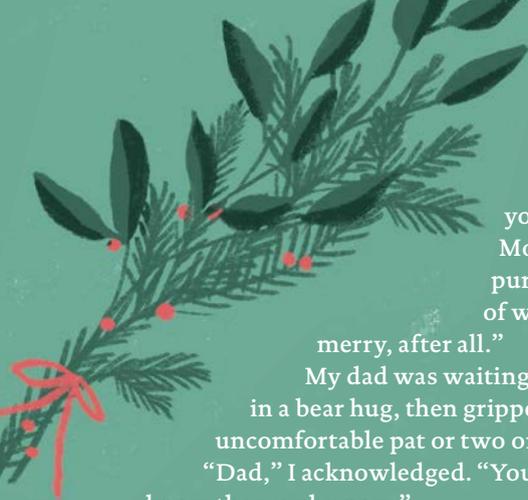
"We're supposed to be a couple. One look at your face and they'll ask who died."

I scowled. "It isn't that easy -"

"Why not? Do you really hate me that much?"

"What? No," I blustered.

"So stop it. If you think this is the role I want from you, the tortured and aggrieved partner, miserable in your new-found solitude, then you're wrong. I want



you as amusing and carefree as when we first met. More, even. Here," she said, fumbling with her purse, holding out a crisp twenty. "Go get a bottle of wine and a couple of glasses. 'Tis the season to be merry, after all."

My dad was waiting at the station forecourt. He wrapped Elaine in a bear hug, then gripped my hand and pulled me close for an uncomfortable pat or two on the back. "Son," he said.

"Dad," I acknowledged. "You really didn't have to come pick us up. I think I know the way by now."

He laughed. "Mary's back at the house, knee deep in sprouts and stuffing, I was glad to escape. In fact, if you want a swift half before we head back?"

Elaine punched him playfully on the arm. "Men! Anything to shirk the work, hey Bob? I'd have thought since your retirement you'd be eager to find something to do with those hands of yours."

Bob looked down at his palms, still showing the marks of a lifetime in the timber frame industry. "Well, you should see the garden," he brightened, before giving a gentle shrug. "When the snow clears. You must come back in spring."

"It would be nice if we didn't lie to each other!"

"I'd love to," Elaine replied, giving me a look over Dad's shoulder as if to say: "Don't you dare say anything!"

I realised that the way she was playing it, she could be back in spring. Without me. My folks had kind of adopted her and she in return, them. If we split amicably and didn't ruin anyone's festive season, my parents wouldn't need to choose sides.

I tried to work out how I felt about this on the short journey to the semi-detached that was the Carter family home. Conflicted, I supposed.

Helen met us at the door, looking tanned, healthy, and furtive.

"Hey sis, how are you enjoying the snow?" I asked.

"Oh, you know. Makes a change," she said, wafting her hand behind her back. Air-kissing her cheek, I surreptitiously inhaled.

"I thought you'd given up?" I whispered.

She smiled. "Old habits die hard. There's probably some of my teenage butts hidden beneath the boards of this porch."

"Not so well hidden," Dad grunted. "And these are new boards, so if you wouldn't mind, use the bin in future?"

Helen gave a guilty nod. "Sorry Pops."

"How's David?" I asked, as Dad and Elaine vanished into the bustle and warmth and Helen reached for another cigarette. It was a loaded question. If Helen was back to her old habits then there was plainly something wrong.

"Okay, I guess," she said.

"Disappointed not to be able to join you in sunny England, no doubt."

She blew the smoke sideways. "No doubt," she replied, noncommittally.

"Is everything alright, sister mine?" I asked.

"Sure," she said, in a way that made me very unsure. "And you? How's things

with you and Elaine?”

I looked out over the snowy garden, watching as white clumps fell from the big fir tree in front. “Good, things are... good. Been a tough year though,” I said, trying to stick to Elaine’s plan. “Truth be told-”

“Look,” she interrupted, “I’m freakin’ freezing out here. Mind if we go in?”

“What? Um, yeah...”

She handed me the mince pie foil she’d been using as an ashtray. “Can you do the honours?” she asked, pointing to the black wheelie bin. “I’ve got me slippers on.”

Christmas day dawned bright and sunny and I awoke to the sound of melt water dripping from the roof. I had a splitting headache; too much port, I suspected. There was something else nagging me as well. It took me a groggy minute to work out what. Slowly and carefully I removed my hand from Elaine’s sleeping body.

“Thanks,” she said when I’d successfully returned it unnoticed to my side of the bed. “I was beginning to think you might be trying it on. And now, if you’re getting up, do you mind bugging off so I can get an extra hour’s sleep without worrying about protecting my innocence?”

I just about managed to bite back my retort. “Happy Christmas to you too,” I mumbled instead, as she turned over and stuck her head under the pillow.

Despite the sunshine, our traditional Christmas morning walk had to be cut short because it was too wet for anything other than wellies, and only Dad was wearing those. We traipsed back with muddy feet, skirting the collapsed snowman drunkenly built only the day, or rather, night, before. I didn’t really mind, he wasn’t a patch on the fabulous creations I remembered from my youth.

“You’re back early,” Mum said, “I haven’t even started on the mulled wine.”

I groaned. “I couldn’t, anyway. I think I’ve been mulled quite enough.”

“Hair of the dog,” Elaine said brightly, waving a bottle. “Fizz, anyone?”

Which is how it came to pass, that by the time the turkey was laid to rest on the table, five of us had consumed the best part of three bottles of fizz, two bottles of mulled-red supercharged with brandy, half a bottle of sherry and a brace of G&Ts.

Dad lurched to his feet, his champagne flute recharged with a dusty pink Codorniu flash chilled in the freezer, the glass smudged by turkey fat from his recently completed duties as head-of-table carver, or more accurately, hacker.

He stood there, beaming, swaying, and began his customary off the cuff speech about family and friends, about kith and kin, about those who couldn’t be there, but were in our hearts, and-

“Oh for Christ sakes!” Helen cried out in desperation. “Just for once, it would be nice if we didn’t have to lie to each other. Just for fucking once, it would nice if we were honest.”

I stared at Elaine with a piercing gaze. We’d been rumbled. It had been her idea, so it only seemed right that she should be the one to admit what Helen had so obviously guessed. But my ex ignored me, staring deep into her lap. I waited a moment longer to give her a chance and in that moment I can honestly say that yes, I did hate her. I hated her for tricking me into this deception and then for leaving it to me to explain away.

I sighed. “Dad, Mum-”



“Yes, okay son.” Dad slumped back into his seat, cutting me off. “I suppose you’re right. Well the truth of it is, your mother and I have separated.”

Elaine’s head snapped upright and Helen’s mouth dropped open. And I, in a fit of sudden eloquence, exclaimed, “Huh?”

“I’m sorry, Tony, Helen. I didn’t want to spoil your Christmas, so I convinced Mary to play along. I moved out in October.”

“But you’re still doing the gardening?” I said.

“Well yes,” Dad said, “Of course.”

“But why?” Helen asked, and I knew she wasn’t talking about mowing the lawn.

“I suppose it has a lot to do with my retirement. You see, once I had all that free time on my hands, it turns out that what your mother and I want out of the rest of our lives, well, it isn’t quite the same thing. And with you and David in Australia and Tony and Elaine down in London, I suppose we didn’t think we had any obstacles. But it was so difficult finding a good time to tell you and then when everyone was coming home for Christmas, we...” He looked at his wife.

“We decided that the best Christmas gift we could give would be to wait until after Christmas to tell you,” Mum said. “To have one last Carter-family Christmas.”

“Goddamn it, I wasn’t talking about you two!” exclaimed Helen.

“So, um, what were you talking about?” I asked, half fearing the answer, but hoping she was about to do the dirty work for me.

“One last Carter-family Christmas.”

She looked around the room, pulled off her ripped paper crown. “I’m not back for Christmas,” she said. “I’m back for good. Me and David... he was... we split up. And he’s a jerk, but... I couldn’t face living in Australia without him.”

Now, I guessed, as Helen slumped in her chair with tears ready to roll, would be the right time to fess up. And though earlier I’d thought it should be Elaine who told the truth, that ship had sailed: this was a Carter family moment and, despite her best efforts, she wasn’t one of us.

So it took me by surprise to see Elaine rising from the laden table.

“Bob, Mary,” she inclining her head towards my parents, “Helen, Tony. You all think you’re here under false pretences. But you’re not. You’re family. Whether or not you’re living together the rest of the year, that doesn’t make any difference. You’re still family and you’ve still gathered for Christmas. And you’ve welcomed me in, made me feel at home, wanted, safe, even though I’m the one who doesn’t belong, the only one who isn’t family.”

“Oh, honey,” Mum said, wiping a tear from her eye. “Of course you’re family. You’ll always be welcome at this table, whatever happens.”

Elaine raised her glass. “A toast then, to the Carters!”

She sat down again as we grinned at one another, full of booze and festive spirit.

“And now,” Elaine said, nodding my way, “I think Tony has something to tell you all.” ●



ON GOOD DAYS MY BROTHER

Poem by Cecilia Knapp

is smiling
there's no bottle
no thick night phone call
as he looks down
at a city
from a balcony
thinking about flying
a hot spoon
in his hand
the shadows
he left on the stairs
have gone
like smoke
and he is dancing
into the widest summer
in a long red dress

HOW TO DEFEND AGAINST VIKINGS

Short story by Noel O'Regan

Illustration by Julia Galotta

The Viking first came to our house last week after my bed time. The roar of his car woke me. I heard him bang on the front door, trying to break it down. He must have bullied Mum's name from a neighbour, because I heard him shout, "Sinead, are you there?" I thought about Dad, away on business, unable to defend our settlement. I was about to get out of bed and vanquish him when Mum raced downstairs.

"Will you be fucking quiet," she said, and I could hear the anger in her voice.

"Sorry," the Viking said, already on the brink of retreat. Good, I thought. She's fighting him off. I stood on my bed and watched his red dragon of a car fly away.

I'd been studying Vikings at school before Dad left. I told him about all of it: how the boats Vikings used for raids were called "longships"; that the monks built round towers to protect themselves; the founding of Dublin; the Battle of Clontarf, and Brian Boru's victory over the invaders. One night before he went away, Dad sat me down at the kitchen table and told me how there were still Vikings today, though they were sneakier and harder to spot. "You have to be careful that they don't come and take what's yours."

The Viking came back the next night, and the night after that, and Mum seemed to have more trouble driving him off. She began to trick him, laughing at his jokes and offering him wine. I snuck halfway down the stairs, at one point, and saw them sitting on the couch. Her head rested close enough to the Viking that she could give him a head-butt if he tried anything. He didn't look like the Vikings in my school book. He didn't have an axe or a helmet with horns. I tried not to feel disappointed by this. He looked more like a poor, about-to-be beheaded monk, with his thin arms and beardless face and glasses. But when his phone rang, he gave away his true identity, answering in a rough and rushed Viking language that I couldn't understand. As I retreated upstairs, I thought how Dad was right. Vikings were harder to spot nowadays.

The next day I snuck on the internet while Mum sat in the back garden, reading what Dad called her 'Mills & Swoon' books. I typed: how to defend against Vikings, and wrote all the information I needed into my copybook. When the Vikings attempted to break into a high-walled structure, the settlers dropped objects on the invading force. These objects included large rocks, boulders and hot tar. This occurred in a time when the Vikings were pillaging all along the eastern coast of Ireland. I frowned at the word "pillaging" and imagined the Viking sneaking upstairs to steal Mum's headache pills; the



trouble that would cause. I couldn't let that happen.

Ultimately, the Irish were forced to meet the Vikings in battle. The Battle of Clontarf occurred on the 23rd April 1014 and ended in a rout of the Viking forces.

Dad called in the afternoon. Mum handed me the phone without speaking to him; I think a part of her knew how important it was that I talked with him first.

I wanted so bad to tell him about the Viking, and how I was planning to defeat him. That I was going to protect our settlement, now that Mum's tricks had stopped working. But then I remembered how Dad was before he left: the way he got into lots of shouting battles with Mum; that morning he cried as he ate his porridge, the stink off him the same as Uncle Barry, who Mum called "Barfly Barry". Maybe it was better if I didn't say anything about the Viking. I didn't want him to worry more than he already was. Dad really seemed to hate being away on business. I'd already told him he should quit his job if he hated it that much. "Hi Dad."

"Hi Star, how're you doing?"

"Fine."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"How's the football going?"

"Good, we're playing Laune Rangers tomorrow."

Dad sighed down the phone. I wondered if where he was staying was nicer than here. I could hear music in the background, from a radio, maybe. His voice sounded more cracked than before, like he was thirsty. "Dad?"

"Yeah, Star?"

"Did Brian Boru drive all the Vikings out of Ireland?" I asked him.

"Well, no, some stayed."

"And what happened to them?"

"They became Irish, I suppose. After a while."

"So couldn't these new Vikings become Irish too?"

I heard a bang on the other end of the phone. Had the radio fallen over?

"No," Dad said. "They're here to steal from us, okay? And they need to be driven out."

I nodded. "Okay."

I spent the evening collecting weapons and storing them in my bedroom. Fist-sized and pointy rocks I found behind the unfinished house across the estate; the sword-length knife that Mum used to cut butternut squash; smaller knives and forks as back-up. Before bed, I snuck a full kettle up to my room and plugged it into the socket behind the bedside drawer. Mum shouldn't notice that it was gone; she preferred wine at this time of night.

Mum called up the stairs. "Are you ready for bed, love?"

"Yeah," I shouted.

"Do you want me to come up and read you something?"

I hesitated. Mum hadn't read to me in a long time, not since I began to read by myself. I looked at the copy of *The Hobbit* on top of my bedside drawer, then glanced at the kettle beside the bed, the row of stones I'd lined along the windowsill. "No, it's okay."

"Alright, sleep well, love."

As I closed the bedroom door, I listened for any creaks from the stairs. Instead I heard the TV begin to mumble and the fridge slap shut. Satisfied, I walked to the kettle and flicked the on-switch. I double-checked my schoolbag beneath the window, full with

spare rocks in case the Viking decided to lay siege rather than retreat. The small knives and forks were lined-up beside the rocks on the windowsill, and the sword lay on my bed, clashing with the moonlight.

I tried to imagine the hotel where Dad was staying while I waited for the Viking to arrive. I pictured a tall building with confusing hallways that all looked the same, blinking lights, and a doorman that never smiled. As I thought about it, I saw Vikings – not the new kind, but the original, axe-swinging type – push past the doorman, trampling him beneath them. They swarmed into the reception area, howling with blood-lust. The receptionists tried to run away, screaming, but they were downed with sharp blades and

“I picked up the pointiest rock.”

arrows. I saw Vikings stumble out of rooms, carrying gold and money and pills. Others carried torches and flung them into rooms full with people. I thought of Dad upstairs, unaware of the danger. Then I was running towards the staircase, avoiding the outstretched hands of Vikings, the swipe of their swords. Arrows chased me up the stairs. “Dad, Dad,” I shouted as I ran along one of the hallways. Lights flickered overhead and behind me I heard Vikings curse. Smoke filled the air. “Dad? They’re here, Dad. They’re here.”

When I woke, both my hands were clutching the handle of the sword. I sat up on the bed and wiped my eyes. A part of me felt the hours that had past, and knew I was too late to stop the Viking from invading our settlement. I looked out the window; the Viking’s car was docked outside our front gate.

I tiptoed to my bedroom door and opened it. Light stretched up the stairs, but I couldn’t hear any sound or movement: the house seemed to be sleeping, or dead. A sudden giggle from my parents’ bedroom. I snuck closer, careful to avoid the part of the landing that squeaked if you stepped on it. Two voices, both recognizable. Mum let out another laugh and shushed herself. Her attempts to fend off the Viking had turned more desperate. She must be planning to read him a story. That was dangerous. What if the Viking didn’t like the story? I considered running back to my room, fetching my sword and meeting the Viking in battle. But that was risky too. What if I injured Mum by mistake? She’d be too close to the fight. Now the Viking was inside, I couldn’t drop rocks or boiling water on him either.

As I returned to my bedroom, I wondered what else I could do. I walked to the window and picked the pointiest rock from the sill. I felt its edges as I stared out the window. I smiled. What did Vikings need more than anything? Their ships. Without them, they couldn’t get anywhere, couldn’t kill or pillage as they pleased. Maybe the Viking would be so sad at the loss of his ship that he wouldn’t return?

I grunted at the weight of the schoolbag on my back; the rocks just about fit. Sword in hand, I crept out of the bedroom. As I passed my parents’ room, I heard grunts and soft groans. It didn’t sound as if the Viking liked the story much. Outside, the moon gawked at me. I shivered as I took the schoolbag off my back and placed it next to the car, dirt and bits of gravel stuck to the soles of my feet.

I started by aiming wide swipes and fierce stabs at the wheels with my sword. When that didn’t work, I picked one wheel and began to saw. I glanced around as I cut. No neighbours seemed to be awake at this hour. A sharp hiss and the car slouched forward. By the time I’d cut the four wheels, it looked like the car was sinking into the ground.

As I stepped back to admire my work, a sudden hot feeling crashed out of me. This

wasn't enough; there needed to be more. So much that he would never come back.

I climbed onto the bonnet of the car and dragged the schoolbag up with me. I unzipped the bag and rocks spilled out, scratching the red paint. I pulled the largest rock from the bag – it took both hands – lifted it overhead and flung it at the windscreen. It bounced away and fell onto the road, but left a satisfying crack in the shape of a lightning strike. I picked up more rocks and flung them, each one leaving its mark.

A glance to my right let me see the light in my parents' room snap on.

I sprang down from the bonnet and began to run around the car, flinging stones as I went. On my second lap, the front door opened and the Viking sprinted out, shouting in his strange Viking language. Behind him, Mum stood in her dressing gown, screaming at him to come back, he's only a child; he doesn't know what he's doing. As the Viking ran towards me, I picked my sword off the ground and let out my battle cry. ●



PLANT SPRUNG IN AN ABANDONED HOUSE FILLED WITH SUNLIGHT

Poem by John Gosslee

My hands squeeze blood and bone
into the candle wax.
A little scar in the candle
from my knuckle
is the shape of my mother's teeth
biting into an apple
while the rabbit drips fat over the campfire.
In the dream I played a wooden instrument
with dials and keys, switches and toggles, and string,
and I sung for hours.
Listeners came and sat and went,
but I played the box for hours,
and it just meant
that I believed in myself again.

WE THE NEBULA

*Poem by Lorelei Bacht
Illustration by Clare Davis*

This is a moveable constellation, a bag
of stars loosely attached and advancing

through time. Sometimes, I am born
first, sometimes you are, and must
wait a decade or two, to meet

my new iteration: I have been your
mother, daughter, father and more,
many a time before, and recognise

you from a distance: at the office,

the park, in between trains,
among the commuters, in fall, winter –

wherever we are due to reconnect this

time. And bringing in my wake the rest
of us: my grandmother, now our
daughter - how we swap roles,

names. I have not solved you yet,
nor you solved me. Let's give it

one more try, and be: a family.





THE ELEPHANT AND THE GOLDFISH

Short story by Theo Beecroft

Illustration by Irina Pavlova

“Who’s this, then?”

I stare into the mirror and there’s a strange looking man in his mid-fifties looking back at me- quite a creasy, fleshy face, as though small bags of sand had been tactically sewn beneath the skin. That great, wrinkled snout, ears like coasters. I look wizened and comical, if a little dashing, but I can’t find my sodding glasses so it’s hard to tell. The bathroom appears to be of the disabled variety, so I don’t know why I’m here and not the gents. I really do look strange, though. Sort of sallow. Almost older. Never mind all that. I’m meeting a long-time patient of mine today, so I wash my face and make my way out.

I turn the latch and sheepishly shuffle out of the disabled toilet. I’m in a carpeted hallway that looks somewhere between a working men’s club and a dentist’s office. A young woman in a simple blue dress eyes me curiously, so I give her a little wave to let her know that I’m on the level. She speaks in a quiet tone that I quite like.

“You all right, doctor Arthur? You weren’t in for very long, sure you’re all good?”

I assume that she’s asking about my lavatory exploits and, finding this strange but not wanting to be rude, I tell her that I thought of England and jolly well got through it. She gives a bell tinkle laugh and asks me to come with her down the hall. I follow and she tells me, pointing at herself, that her name is Jane. She says this slowly but cheerfully as we’re walking, but it’s odd that she’d have to clarify.

I know Jane, she’s one of the nurses under my jurisdiction. We walk at a slow pace, and I find myself enjoying the silence. I’ve known the feel of this chintzy carpet for as long as I can remember. Unfortunately, it’s all familiar.

“I’ll take you to see Mr Goldman, Arthur. He’ll be pleased to see you, I just know it.” But, of course, I don’t quite share her optimism.

We round the corner into a high-ceilinged common room. There stands the lush, green rectangle of the simple garden through the French doors; clear, plastic cups stacked neatly beside a slender water jug on a doilied table; and a patchwork of gaudy Georgian furniture, labelled with colourful, laminated squares, each penned in by some loopily, meticulous hand. The décor is soft yet sterile, though clearly loved and lived in by some eccentric resident-cum-interior decorator. Five clocks tick-tock in the rooms shaded crannies. I notice each one as I wind through the squishy armchairs, all occupied by geriatric Geraldines, dreaming Doris, grizzled Grahams and ancient Alfreds. Jane directs me to a man standing crooked by the mock fireplace. He stares intently at the orange shapes lazily swirling in the fish bowl on an adjacent coffee table, shaking pungent pellets of food into the water.

“Good afternoon, Mr Goldman. Have you met doctor Arthur?”



Jane's voice is clean and clear but there's no audible response from the moth-eaten cardigan of a man stood before us. He gives me a wave (he's on the level, too) and shuffles over to sit in an armchair with which he shares a most striking resemblance.

"Doc-tor?" The word comes out mushily, creamily almost.

Cassius Goldman. I know this patient. His Alzheimer's is particularly advanced, such that he is prone to mood swings and misty confusion. His short-term memory has degenerated so that only repetitive interactions and routines allow him to function. It's important to engage with these patients so I ask him, by way of making conversation: "Hello Mr Goldman. Beautiful fish, wouldn't you say?"

His small eyes snap to mine.

"...what?"

"The goldfish, sir. I was just saying that they're very beautiful, don't you agree?"

He turns to Jane.

"Why's he always on about the bloody fish, eh? Speaking of which, they'll be starving by now, the poor blighters."

He stands with several creaks, and carefully, precisely, goes over to the bowl and feeds the ecstatic and rather chunky goldfish again. His eyes seem to glaze during this operation, and he asks, trailingy, "Do I know you?"

It's hard to be certain whether he's speaking to me or the fish but, regardless, I explain my position, tell him who I am. He looks at my feet with his mouth agape.

Once re-seated, Goldman takes up a brown, leather-bound notebook from the armrest and begins carving a fine ink pen across the paper. He, Jane, and I exchange pleasantries between long silences and Goldman's tone flits between lucidity and distraction. On occasion he scribbles something into the notebook but minutes later erases whatever he's written in long, flourished strokes. Jane explains that Goldman always does this on his good days. He's writing the beginning of a sentence, one which he writes again and again but destroys whenever he's lost his train of thought. The notebook is his most recent diary before his symptoms became so advanced. Often, he can recall the patchwork of his life through this personal bible, but to add to it, to put anything more upon the pages, would take an understanding of his past which Goldman only rarely possesses. He learns of himself and begins, but the words and thoughts get muddled and he has to begin again.

Jane goes on a much-needed tea run, leaving me somewhat exposed beside the busy old man and the ever-prosperous fish. Goldman's still able to move with a surprising degree of ease, despite being up in his late sixties. His face is slack but there's something of a soldier in the man's frame: a confidence in the capabilities of his own body as he shuffles, squares his shoulders, licks the pen's inky nib. Still, the nature of his condition has left his past splotchy, even to the regular nurses, and all the attempts that I make to ask him about his youth fall resolutely flat. Jane returns, thankfully with mugs of extraordinarily milky tea, and lets Goldman know that his son, William, is here to see him.

All three of us turn our heads towards the door and there enters a young, ratty looking man wearing a blazer and moustache, both resembling something which has long since given up the ghost. His face is just too aloof to be contemptuous, as though the effort would be wasted on a place like this. He reaches us and inspects the fish beside Goldman, poking at the glass of the bowl, leaving index schmutz.

“It’s uncanny, isn’t it? The resemblance?”

He smirks at me and motions a thumb at Goldman who’s busily obliterating his last written sentence. William turns with his hands in his pockets, collapsing into a nearby armchair and crossing his spindly legs.

“All right, dad?” He asks, rhetorically, and when Goldman doesn’t answer, adds- “Well... just peachy to see you too, pops.”

I didn’t think it possible to dislike a stranger so much. William speaks in the direction of his father, rather than with him, and, once he sees this as a lost cause, begins to question me and Jane about the care home. I didn’t even know that

“Well...just peachy to see you too, pops.”

Goldman had a son. It isn’t easy to make the time to see relatives, I know all too well, but to waltz in for the first time in years and act so blasé, to pick and snide at his father? Medical, contractual obligation is all that stands between me and William’s uncomfortable escort from the premises. I’m on the verge of throwing him out when

Goldman suddenly straightens to posit a question. “Where’s Ruthie?”

There’s a pyhrric triumph in William’s voice as he relishes what his words do next.

“Ruth’s dead. She died when I was seven. You know that was years ago, don’t you?”

“No... Don’t say that, she’s just... down the shops.”

“She’s not ‘down the shops’, dad. She died of ovarian cancer in ‘95. You cried at the funeral, remember? I assure you, the world is well and truly Ruth-less, these days.”

Goldman senior’s features crease as he contemplates this but it’s hard to tell whether or not he believes it. “Who the hell are you, anyway?”

Goldman junior stands as quickly as he sat, sighing and heading out the door to the garden with a crooked cigarette in his mouth.

I catch “You silly, old sod” as he pushes past me. Jane and I follow William out the door as the garden beams, soft around the edges in front of us. He stares across the lawn, lighting up. I’d be justified in making him leave now, detrimental as he is to the mental health of one of my patients, but before I can grab him by one of his silly little ears, Jane’s voice cuts me short.

“William. Will, look at me. You have to tell me why you’re always like this to him. You can’t keep acting this way. I need you to tell me what’s the matter or you won’t be able to come here again. Please, just tell me what the problem is. Please.”

The bushes are green. The sun shines on and on. A patient- a great, floral, beach ball of a lady, previously seated on the garden bench, edges past us, her gnarled brown hands shuddering on the handles of her Zimmer frame. She looks at William and in a friendly, Nigerian accent pronounces the word ‘waster’ before continuing, aching slowly, through the glass doors. William laughs, bitterly, and nods his head. He looks at the grass for a long time and speaks in whispers. “Before it happened, Jane, before he got like this, I thought I was afraid. Just so terribly afraid of it coming true. But I didn’t want to look at it. Didn’t even want to think about the possibility.”

He peers back inside to see Goldman staring emptily at his spilled tea, and sighs.

“I tried once. I was interested in neuroscience at the time and it came up whilst I was researching in a cafe. I went down this rabbit hole of symptoms and treatments, theories and support guides. But I knew that if I looked at that stuff, thought about it all for even a second more, I wouldn’t be able to stop crying. I wanted to pick up the

phone, you know? Just tell my dad how much I loved him, but I couldn't even bring myself to send a message. There was a last time that I said those words to him, and I don't even remember when that was. It would have crushed me to even try so, I blocked it out, just didn't think about it. Must sound silly. There wasn't anybody else when he started showing the symptoms: that confusion, that agitation when he'd never been angry before. I swear I tried so hard to help him, but I'm no caregiver. I was terrified to be around him, to see him like that. I mean that's my dad, you know? My flesh and blood. The man. My dad. I had to get away from it, get as far away as possible, I just had to. I think that he fits in well here. He seems a lot better with you than he ever did with me. Every time I come here, it's just so impossibly hard, watching it take him away."

He straightens up and wipes his nose, gulping down painful breaths of air. "But that's a good thing. I deserve to feel like this. I'm scum. I hope he forgets I exist."

Jane walks over and embraces him in a slow, tight hug. He tries to free himself but she clings to him until he seems to melt. She says in a whisper, "He's here for now, go talk to him." Something about the tone of her voice or the warmth of her embrace keeps him quiet. He sets off, without a word, back into the common room to kneel besides Goldman. Jane wipes her eyes. There's something that William said that's playing on my mind. "He said that he's visited Goldman before, but I've worked here for years and I've never met William."

**"Why didn't
you tell me?
I could've..."**

"You've met him, dad."

The word is simple, but I know it's true.

Her birth, her youth, her singing voice, trips to the doctors, Christmases: I remember everything about her in exquisite, beautiful detail. I could never forget.

"Jane...I didn't know, why didn't you tell me? I could've... I would've..."

"No, dad. You forget that you're not here as a doctor. You forget me, too. It's just too much to bring up all the time. I don't want to upset you or confuse you. I can do this, I can care for you and it helps, so I do."

She sniffs, and her eyes are pearl jellies looking up at me. My heart writhes and scrunches up in my chest. That this could have been erased and taken from me. This most important part of me. It's horrifying. Cruel.

"Oh, I've got these, I meant to give them back to you."

She passes me my glasses and squeezes my hand. All I can say is that I'm sorry. We hug and I tell her that I love her as we go back into the common room. William watches Goldman, gleefully, as he pours more food for the obese fish. I see the notebook open on the armrest with "I could never forget..." scrawled across the paper.

"You know, I'm bursting for a wee, Jane, back in a tic."

"Didn't you just go, dad?"

"It must have slipped my mind."

I head back to the disabled toilets where the latch closes tight. "Who's this, then?"

I stare into the mirror and there's a strange looking man in his mid-fifties looking back at me; quite a creasy, fleshy face, as though small bags of sand had been tactically sewn beneath the skin. That great, wrinkled snout, those ears like coasters. I look rather dashing in my glasses, though. My daughter gave me these. ●

PRIMARY SOURCE

Poem by Gráinne Tobin

Our mother's womb is buried with her.
O modest collapsible organ!
She held onto it for eighty-three years.
You could say it shared her life.

Perhaps at first she hardly knew it was there,
only heard the word while praying -
Blessèd is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.

When she found out what it was,
she protected it from the nuns
and their talk of sequestering it
among themselves, and prayed instead
for the grace of a good Catholic husband.

Married, she brought her womb
shyly to doctors and cried every night for a baby.
Old besoms sneered at her small waist -
did she love comfort instead of God?

What arcane rites did they imagine,
she protested, decades after
five people grew from specks inside her,
spinning new worlds from her womb's resources,
taking turns to emerge into their own myths.



THE RUINS

*Short story by Zosia Koptiuch
Illustration by Marian F. Moratinos*

Fifty years later, the hearts of the people buried in the woods grew back as apples. Kasia told me she could hear them beating at night, naked and swinging on their branches. The sound was like a thousand harvest festivals, she said.

She called me on the last night of spring.

“Come here,” she said. “We miss you. Honestly. The apple thing’s really weird. Grandma’s going completely insane. She says she’s hearing voices or something. And Mum’s... Mum’s worried.”

Her voice cracked for a second, and that’s when I realised I no longer knew who my sister was. The Kasia I knew never stuttered. Her first word had been “yes”, and ever since I heard her say it, I’d been jealous of her confidence. Everything she did, every breath she took, was distilled pride.

I didn’t want to come, but I didn’t want to stay in the city, either. I spent my time writing jejune articles about this day in history and putting together crosswords that even a five-year-old could solve with minimal difficulty. Occasionally, I’d get to write something about what the kids like these days, or a glowingly positive review of a saccharine movie. I was running out of words. More importantly, I was running out of energy, so I promised my editor I’d throw something together while I was out of town, bought a fridge magnet at the market as a gift for my mother, and got on a train.

In the articles I wrote about the numerous identical art shows I’d been sent to, I always made sure to use the word “pastoral”. I made a game out of it. I’d walk around and pick the most idyllic, cheerful nature painting I could find just so I could call it pastoral, and my editor had yet to notice.

There was nothing pastoral about my hometown. It was all rust and rough edges, crooked wooden fences with paint peeling off, streams of mud flowing parallel to the unpaved road and the smell of exhaustion in the air. Nothing had changed.

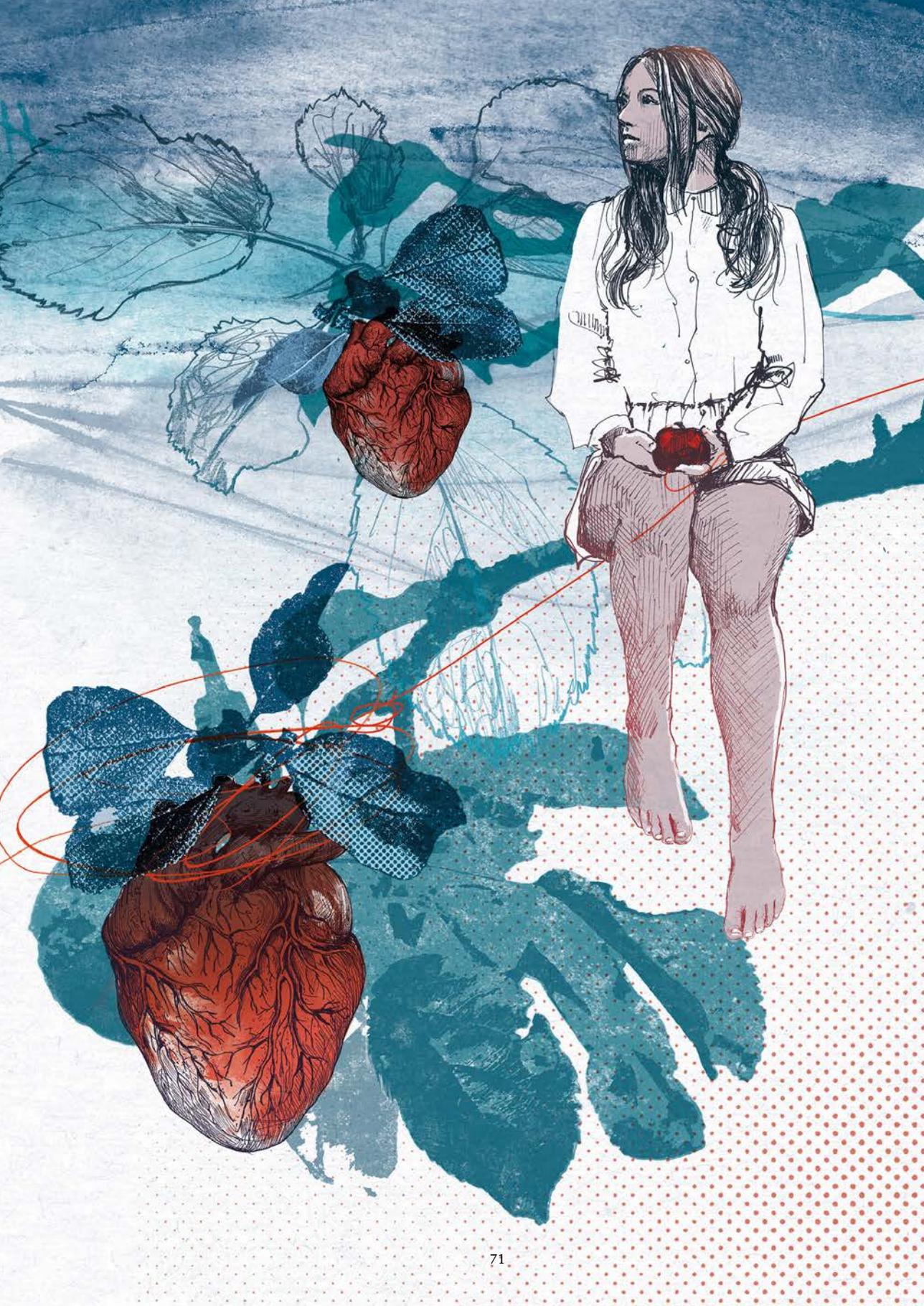
Then I saw them. The apples in the orchard, much darker and smaller than usual. Moving, aching to fall from their branches. The most alive things in this whole place.

Our house stood right next to the orchard. The last time I saw it, it was painted a lazy yellow colour. I’d tried to help my mother paint it and ended up spilling the entire bucket. For the rest of my childhood, that spot on the porch was stained yellow.

Now the house was red, and the stain was gone. Everything else was the same.

I envied the hearts. This entire time, they had been scorching the earth with their warmth. They refused to leave. And when they came back, they were remembered.

At first, I didn’t notice my grandmother learning against one of the trees. I don’t think she noticed me, either. But when I looked up, there she was, ageless, standing barefoot with her eyes closed and her head raised to the leaves of the tree.



“I knew you’d come back,” she cooed. I knew she wasn’t talking to me.

She fell silent. The door was open, creaking as I pushed it. The house smelled of wood, fresh-baked bread and mould. Feet tiptoed loudly against the old floor.

Kasia appeared in front of me and threw her long, skinny arms around my shoulders.

“You’ve grown,” I said, because that was what I was supposed to say. Kasia ran to get our mother. She emerged from the kitchen with a towel in her hands, her glasses sliding down her nose. Kasia tugged on her arm, but she stayed where she was, a good three metres away from me. I didn’t know what to say.

“Miszka’s back!” Kasia explained, as if it wasn’t obvious.

“Yes,” I nodded. My mother forced a smile and went back into the kitchen.

“She’s a bit stressed out,” Kasia said.

“I know.”

Grandma only came into the house for dinner. It was quieter than I remembered. I picked at my steak, questioning whether I should have offered to help prepare it. Across the table, grandma sobbed while the rest of us pretended we didn’t notice.

“It’s him. I swear it’s him,” she whispered.

“It’s not,” my mother said.

“It is. It is.”

Kasia rolled her eyes at me.

Upstairs, my great-grandfather’s office was still locked. We were never allowed there as kids. The only person who went there was our grandmother. She’d unlock the door once a year, on All Saints’ Day, and we could hear her sweep and slam the drawers from our room. She told us not to disturb him, that he’d come back someday. Once, Kasia said he was dead, and our grandmother stopped speaking for a week. Another time, Kasia sneaked into the room when the adults weren’t watching. She told me that there were no ghosts. She sounded disappointed.

My bed had been sold, so Kasia offered me hers and slept on a mattress on the floor. She was right. During the day, the sound of the hearts was barely noticeable, nothing more than background noise, but once the town fell silent, they pounded like hooves.

Down the hall, the sound mixed with light footsteps. Rusty keys jingled, and the office door creaked open. I sat up. Kasia’s eyes were still open. “She does this every night,” she whispered. “Ever since the apple-heart-things appeared.”

I snuck out, once I was sure my grandmother was back in bed. I climbed the largest apple tree. One of the apples fell into my hand, cold and soft. It fitted perfectly in my palm. Grandma might have been right. It could be him, or it could be one of the hundreds of other people that died here fifty years ago.

I didn’t know what to do with the heart. It was too precious to leave and too foreign to bring home. In the end, I hid it under Kasia’s bed, in the cardboard box full of hand-me-downs from our distant cousins that came every Christmas.

The next morning, as I helped her make breakfast, my mother finally spoke to me.

“It’s good that you left,” she said. “I’m thinking we should leave as well.”

A white eggshell shard fell onto the frying pan. My mother froze, and I knew how much she wanted to pick it up from the scalding surface with her finger. “Why?”

“You know why. This place is becoming barren.”

“You mean the hearts?”

“Yes. The hearts.”

“You knew they were coming.” I smiled as I poured salt onto the bacon.

“No, I didn’t. Nobody could know they were coming. How often do you see hearts grow on trees instead of apples, anyway?”

I folded my arms over my chest. “It’s like grandma said. They came back.”

“We’ve talked about this before. Your grandmother is...” She bit her bottom lip.

“I know. She’s grieving.”

There were ruins all over the town. There was even one on the main street, a grey building with a broken fence and stinging nettles growing where the garden once was. The house to our left was a ruin, too. Once I asked mum why it was empty and she said half a century ago, people had died. Nobody ever talked about how they died or why. It seemed to be burnt into our memory: the knowledge of death. And nobody ever touched the ruins. Nobody ever thought of restoring them or told ghost stories about them or feared them. They were not to be bothered.

That’s not why I left. I left because I realised my own house was a ruin, a loss suspended in time. We were stuck in that moment between tragedy and grief, between the event and the realisation. Walking through the town with my hands in my pockets, I saw a neighbour who didn’t remember me cut a heart-apple tree down. The next day, I saw him burning the trunk. We all went outside and watched the smoke fade into clouds made of dust.

“I realised my own house was a ruin.”

After that, I went upstairs and checked on the heart under the bed. It was beating faster, its uneven pulse almost feverish, and the colour had become darker. The heart wanted me here, I realized. Whoever that heart had belonged to, that unfortunate dead person, was closer to me than anyone else had ever been.

There was yelling down the hall. My grandmother was crying. The office door creaked open, louder than usual, and I knew from the harshness of the sound it wasn’t my grandmother opening it.

“He’s not coming back, mum. He’s not.”

“But the heart-“

“The heart...” She sighed, and I imagined her coming closer to my grandmother and folding her arms. “The land is telling us to leave. It’s spitting us out.”

“No, no. It’s giving back to us.”

A week later, my mother cut the trees down. None of us said anything. I understood my grandmother’s mournful silence, her powerlessness. We all surrendered.

At dusk, I took my heart out into the field and stood there as the tall windblown grass lashed at my calves. I looked around once and saw Kasia in the distance with as many hearts in her arms as she could hold.

She put them down next to me with more tenderness than I’d ever seen her exhibit. I ran my fingers over them to feel them beating for the last time. They were calm. Kasia picked the shovel up from the ground, found a patch of naked black soil, and began to dig. And the earth swallowed what it had created. ●

IN THIS LIFE

*Flash by Sarah Fuller
Illustration by Iza Olesinska*

When I first saw you, I swore that I had seen your face before, but that was probably in another life. How is it that you picked me out of all the others? It does not matter. In this life, we have met again. I know that I can trust you, even though you are not like me.

And you know that I love you, even though I am not like you.

I sometimes have flashes of memory from that previous life. I think I might have been a human and I believe you were, too. I remember holding you in my arms. You were smaller then. The scent of lilacs fills my nose while I dream. There's a soft breeze and I hear you laugh and I feel so much love inside of me that I am surprised it is not spilling out. You were small and I took care of you.

My hands are strange and naked but they are the perfect shape for holding yours. You pull me along to show me something and your eyes light up when you turn back to look at me.

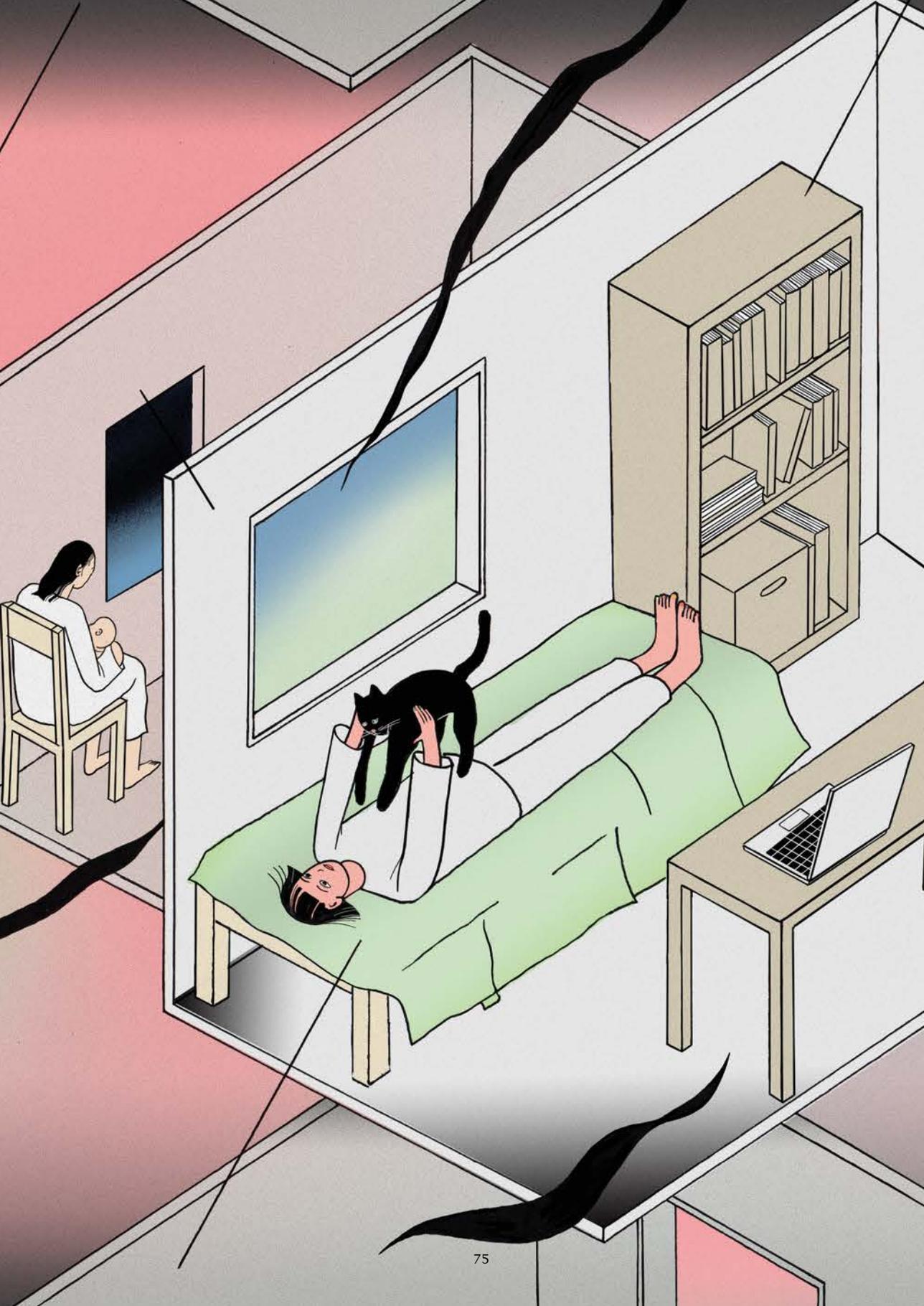
I smell cinnamon and cloves as the warmth of an oven touches my skin. I look around and there you are smiling at me.

I brush your hair, I button up your dress, I wipe the dirt off your cheeks.

You softly pet me and I meow quietly as I awaken from my dream.

Now I am small and you are big. I stretch out my arm and knead my paw into your leg. You pet me more and I purr.

I am glad we found each other again. ●



PROMISE

*Poem by Katja Kneževi
Illustration by Dawei Wang*

You said next to nothing
for weeks, like mourning was something

one waited outside for to finish
in the exit alley of the theatre.

When you spoke, the words
did not tumble out. No strings of tears.

The hand I clasped did not shake.
You talked of practicalities: the funeral,

the guests, the land, what to do
with the animals he kept; only as an afterthought,

of an undecided emptiness. Having grown up
without a father, I had hoped I could

borrow a pebble of your sadness, carry it
around in my pocket, feel the weight of what

it would have been like. I misunderstood
this absence, found myself puzzled

in awe, but also strangely appeased.
Only later, when your new dreams appeared

birthed from memories, like blotches of ink
on cotton surface of months, I caught up

and saw loss
did not bow to our time, and it already left

behind, in the curve of the corner
of your mouth, in the new slope

of your shoulders, an unmistakable promise.



“She told herself a story about a daughter in a family so hungry for a daughter that it would have eaten her alive if she hadn’t run away.”

- Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections*





ENDNOTES

6 – Jackie Martin is a graduate of UEA's MA in Creative Writing, a printmaker and panto dame costume-maker. Her work has been published in *The Moth*, *Magma*, *The Dawntreader* and others.

10 – Polly East is a journalist and teacher who recently moved from London to Brighton. Her writing has appeared in *Agenda*, *Ham 'n' High*, and others. She is a member of Brighton's Stanza group.

12 – Wendy BooydeGraaff is a Canadian but lives in Michigan, USA. Her writing has appeared in *Great Lakes Review*, *The Journal of Compressed Creative Arts*, *NOON*, and elsewhere.

14 – Gresham Cash is a writer, musician, and filmmaker from Athens, Georgia. He's currently in post-production on his first feature-length documentary, *The Green Flash*.

18 – Catriona Innes is our guest author. A poet, author and magazine journalist, whose debut novel *The Matchmaker* (Trapeze) was published in 2019. She is features director at *Cosmopolitan* UK.

20 – Lena MacDonald is from South Wales, but now lives in Gloucestershire. She has previously been published in *Bluesdoodles*, *Havok*, *Dreich* and *Nine Pens* and is writing her first novel.

22 – Romina Ramos is a Portuguese writer based in England. Shortlisted for the #Merky Books New Writers' Prize, she won the Carcanet Poetry Prize, you can follow her on Twitter @rominawrites.

24 – Eva Rivers is a London-based writer whose fiction has appeared in *Fictive Dream*, *Storgy*, *Crack the Spine*, *Sick Lit Magazine*, *Penny Shorts* and others. Follow her on Twitter @MsEvarivers.

26 – Kay Sandry lives in the North East of England. She is currently working on a novel, and her words have been published by *Bath Flash*, *NFFD Flash Flood*, and *Reflex Press*.

28 – JL Bogenschneider is a writer of short fiction, whose work has been previously published in *The Stinging Fly*, *The Interpreter's House*, *PANK*, *Ambit*, and elsewhere.

34 – Danny Beusch from Birmingham has been shortlisted in the Bath Flash Fiction Award and the Leicester Writes Short Story Prize, and others. Follow him on Twitter @OhDannyBoyShhh.

36 – James McDermott is a queer writer based in East Anglia, England. Their plays include *Rubber Ring* and *Time and Tide*. Their poetry collection *Manatomy* is published by Burning Eye.

38 – Leanne Su is studying in Ann Arbor, MI for a PhD in aerospace engineering. When she's not fixing thrusters, she enjoys embroidery and playing with her cat Pudge. Follow her on IG @its.lean.

44 – Sage Tyrtle is a Moth GrandSLAM winner whose words can be found in *Pithead Chapel*, *Bayou Magazine*, and *Mslexia*. Her stories have been featured on NPR, CBC and PBS.

46 – Colette Coen from Glasgow is a Faber Academy graduate whose novel *Been* and short story collections are available on Amazon. She has three children and a proofreading business.

48 – C. E. Janecek is a Czech-American writer and managing editor of *Colorado Review*. Janecek's work has been featured in *Lammergeier*, *Peach Mag*, *the Florida Review*, *Permafrost*, and others.

50 – Liam Hogan is an award-winning short story writer based in London, whose fiction has been published by *Analog*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and *Flame Tree Press*, among others.

55 – Cecilia Knapp was appointed Young People's Laureate for London 2020-2021. Her debut novel *Little Boxes* (Borough Press) and her collection *Peach Pig* (Corsair) are forthcoming in 2022.

56 – Noel O'Regan is an award-winning writer from Co. Kerry, Ireland, having received the Sean Dunne Young Writer Award and Bridport Short Story Prize.

61 – John Gosslee is a poet whose latest collection, *Fish Boy*, heavily focused on his family, specifically the father-son relationship and its challenges.

62 – Lorelei Bacht is a European poet living in Asia. Her words can be found in *Visitant*, *Quail Bell*, *The Wondrous Real*, *Odd Magazine*, and others. IG @lorelei.bacht.writer and Twitter @bachtlorelei.

64 – Theo Beecroft is a Leeds-based writer who has been published in *From the Start* by Literally Literary. His poetry has appeared in *Nice People* magazine.

68 – Gráinne Tobin lives on the coast of County Down, Northern Ireland. She has published three poetry collections and had poems in numerous anthologies.

70 – Zosia Koptiuch lives in Kyiv, Ukraine and writes for a Ukrainian-language publication. In her spare time, she takes long walks around town and practices calligraphy.

74 – Sarah Fuller is a writer from California. She has a degree in English from UCLA and works as an editor. She recently finished her first novel and hopes to have it published one day.

76 – Katja Kneževi is a Brussels-based writer who writes in English and Croatian. She has published both poetry and prose widely, and won the Croatian Young Poet Laureate award 2014.

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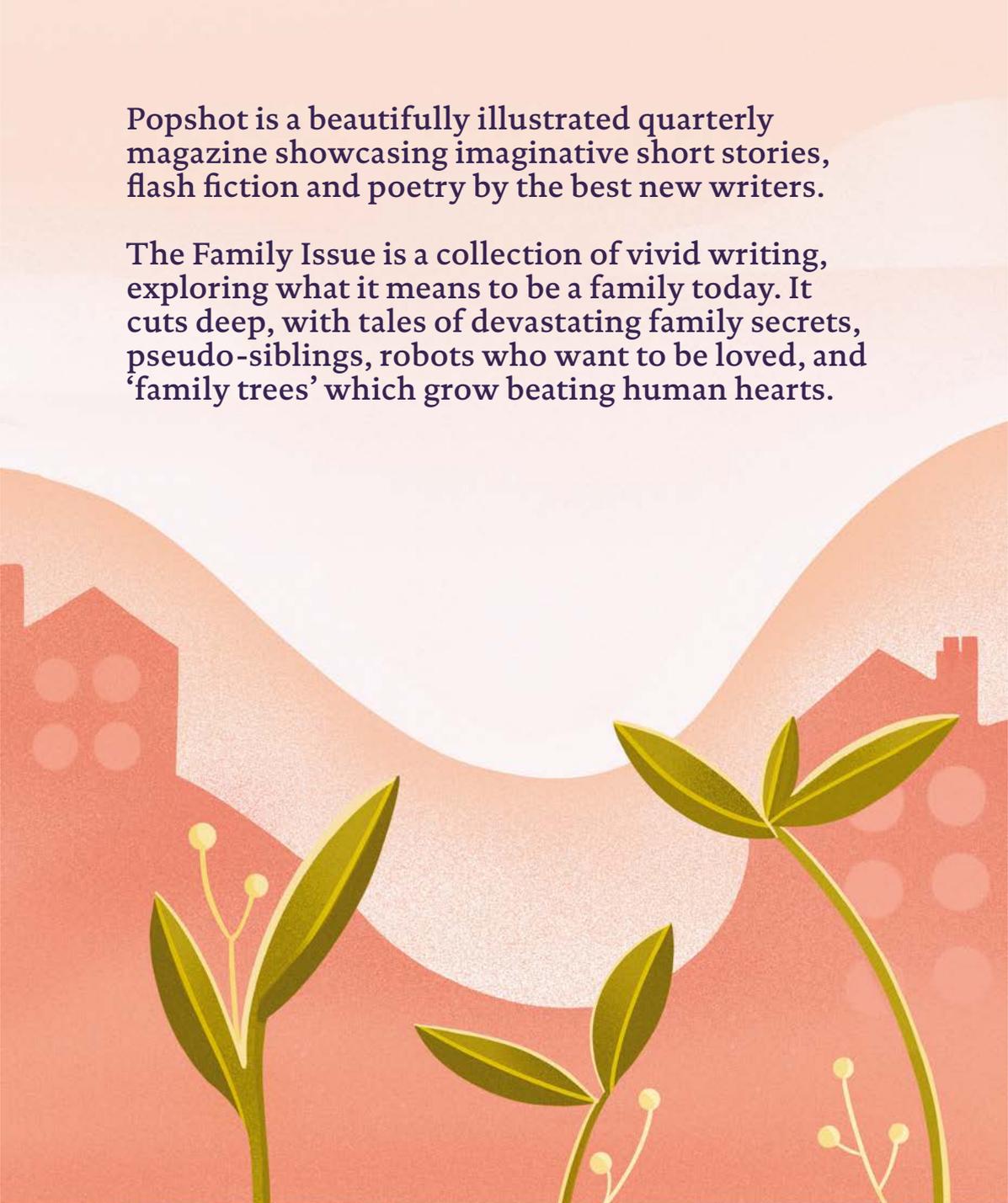
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