

The Manchester Writing School at Manchester Metropolitan University presents:

The Manchester Writing Competition
2018 Manchester Fiction Prize
Short List

2018 Fiction Prize Finalists

Allison Alsup

Allison Alsup lives in a slightly ramshackle Victorian cottage in New Orleans. Her short stories have won multiple American contests, including those from A Room of Her Own Foundation, *New Millennium Writings*, *Philadelphia Stories* and, most recently, the Dana Awards. Her short story 'Old Houses' was selected for the 2014 O'Henry Prize Stories. She is the co-founder of the New Orleans Writers Workshop where she teaches community-based creative writing classes. 'The Proper Protocol for Abandoned Babies' draws from her native San Francisco Bay Area.

K.M. Elkes

K.M. Elkes lives and works in the West Country, UK. He began writing fiction regularly in 2012 and has since won (or been placed) in a number of international writing competitions, including the Fish Publishing Prize, Aesthetica and the Bridport Prize, while his work has appeared in more than 25 print anthologies. His short fiction has been published in literary magazines including *Unthology*, *The Lonely Crowd*, *Structo* and *Litro*. A flash fiction collection, *All That is Between Us*, will be published by AdHoc Fiction in 2019. He is currently working on a debut short story collection and a novel. As a writer with a rural working-class upbringing, his work often reflects marginalised voices and liminal places.

Kate Hamer

Kate Hamer grew up in the West Country and Wales. She studied art and worked for a number of years in television. In 2011 she won the Rhys Davies short story prize and her short stories have appeared in various collections. Her novel *The Girl in the Red Coat* was published in 2015. It was shortlisted for the Costa First Novel Prize, the British Book Industry Awards Debut Fiction Book of the Year, The John Creasy (New Blood) Dagger and the Wales Book of the Year. It was a *Sunday Times* bestseller and has been translated into 18 languages. She's written articles and reviews for *The Independent*, *The Sunday Mail* and *The New York Times*. Her second novel, *The Doll Funeral*, was published in February 2017 and was chosen as an editor's pick on Radio 4's *Open Book* and Book of the Month in the industry journal *The Bookseller*. Her third novel, *Crushed*, will be published by Faber & Faber in May 2019. Kate now lives with her husband in Cardiff.

Rae Meadows

Rae Meadows is the author of four novels, most recently *I Will Send Rain*, which was shortlisted for the Langum Prize in American Historical Fiction and longlisted for the International Dublin Literary Award. She is a past recipient of the Utah Book Award. She has a BA in Art History from Stanford University and an MFA from the University of Utah. She lives in Brooklyn, NY, with her husband and two daughters.

Gabriel Monteros

Gabriel Monteros is a Latino American who grew up in a working-class, multi-racial neighbourhood in Southern California. He attended Yale University where he studied history and Mandarin Chinese. He spent most of his twenties working in Zhejiang, China, for a local company and has pursued entrepreneurship in West Africa. Through work and travels, he developed deep personal, business, and emotional ties to Asia and Africa, especially China, India, Singapore, Senegal and Cape Verde. In his writing he seeks to draw from his experiences to explore the contradictions and realities of multiculturalism. He is currently based in Brooklyn, New York.

Chloe Wilson

Chloe Wilson is the author of two poetry collections, *The Mermaid Problem* and *Not Fox Nor Axe*, which was shortlisted for the Kenneth Slessor Prize for Poetry and the Judith Wright Calanthe Award. She received joint first prize in the 2016 Josephine Ulrick Poetry Prize, was shortlisted for the 2017 Commonwealth Short Story Prize, and received second prize in the 2018 Bristol Short Story Prize.

2018 Short-listed Stories

Allison Alsup

The Proper Protocol for Abandoned Babies

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Allison Alsup

The Proper Protocol for Abandoned Babies

She thought she was imagining things. It seemed impossible. But she twisted beneath the seat belt to look through the Jeep's rear window and saw that it was true: the small figure on the ground was, indeed, *a baby*. A lone baby wailing as it crawled over the sidewalk. The pavement slanted beneath its body towards the curb. In a few moments it would be in the street.

"Pull over," she said.

He released the gas but didn't stop. The Jeep crested the hill, gliding through the yellow crosswalk. Driving past the school had been her idea. He'd been in town only a few days, and she'd wanted to give him the tour. She wanted him to know where she'd come from, the California she'd been missing those frigid years. Why she'd had to leave.

"Pull over," she repeated.

"Where?"

"The curb."

"It's all red."

"Just hit the hazards."

The Jeep jolted to stop, sending the paper bag from her lap into the passenger well. Inside the sack were two still-warm *super burritos al pastor con guacamole* wrapped in silver foil. The real deal, she'd told him at the taqueria, not the bullshit they tried to pass off in Boston. It was nearly 2, and they were on their way to eat at her parents' house up the hill. From the back deck, they'd be able to see across the bay and into San Francisco – much better than the view from her rented studio in the flats.

He peered into the mirror, and she could tell he'd seen the baby as well.

"Shit," he said. His mouth stayed open. She knew the millennia it would take for more words to emerge.

She opened the door, flung it shut. She moved quickly, calling for the baby to stop. But it was crying too loudly to hear and continued to worm its way down the slope. It stretched a hand to meet the air over the curb, and she broke out into a run. She scooped up the small body just before it fell into the road. It clutched at her, grabbing fistfuls of tank top and surprising her with the strength of its tiny grip.

"Hey now," she said, running a hand along its back.

Its skin was flush with heat and panic. It wore a short-sleeved red gingham shirt and pale denim pants with an elastic waist band, little navy velcro sneakers. A boy baby, she thought. His light hair glinted faintly orange in the afternoon sun.

She looked through the chain link fence surrounding the schoolyard. She expected to see a panting mother come running across the blacktop. Or more likely, some stoop-shouldered teenager with headphones and a muttered excuse. But the yard stood empty, the massive play structure silent. It was August and school was still out. The gate at the corner had been left open. As a girl, she'd walked through it hundreds of times. It was how, she assumed, the baby had ended up here at the school's perimeter.

She scanned the surrounding homes, squinting against the glare. However, the heavy doors of the Colonials and Tudors and Mediterraneans were all closed. The lawns of her childhood had been replaced by clusters of drought-resistant ground cover. Jacarandas in full indigo bloom lined the vacant streets.

The baby continued to cleave and bury its face in her ribs. It knows it's been left, she thought. It was why it was trying to crawl away, to get back to wherever it came from. Its bottom felt puffy from its diaper, and she bounced the baby softly, telling it that it was all right now, a good boy. She peeled the small fingers from her shirt and brushed gravel from the soft meat of its palms.

Behind her the Jeep was dinging. He was standing in the street with the driver's door open, one hand curled around the roof rack. The rolled sleeves of his flannel shirt revealed pale arms, bristly black hair. His sunglasses gleamed. He was trying California on for size. If he decided to stay, he'd need to buy lighter clothes.

"Who the hell just leaves a baby?" he asked.

The baby clung hot and damp. She shifted its weight onto her hip, only to reveal a smear of tears on her chest. The baby's face remained pink and shiny though its crying was now reduced to sparse sobs. A thick wedge of snot filled the dip between its nose and mouth.

She walked back to the Jeep. He was still standing in the street, the hazards still blinking, the door still dinging, his mouth still open. She was trying to get used to his beard – if it could be called that – more like a black strap that ran the length of his jaw. He hadn't mentioned it on the phone.

"Hand me a napkin," she said.

"What?"

"Look in the take-out bag."

He handed her a rumpled napkin through the passenger window. It smelled of sweet pork and nearly curdled cream – scents she'd come to miss more than she thought possible.

The baby squirmed as she tried clean its nose. She finally managed and shoved the dirty napkin in the pocket of her shorts. She could see its face now. The shape, more round than tall and the wide cheeks, reminded her of a little of his. She felt angry for thinking it. Suddenly it seemed as if they'd been standing there for years.

"What now?" he asked, as if it was upon her to figure out the impossible.

She'd already considered phoning the cops, but they would take forever. They were also notoriously incompetent; she imagined the baby languishing in some basement cell for years. Or they could take the baby to her parents' and call from there. They could eat the burritos on the deck while they waited. But there was no child seat and besides, if someone saw, they might think she was attempting to steal the baby.

She heard the sound of an engine coming. The steep slope rendered them nearly invisible from either direction, and he shut the door just in time for a boxy Volvo to fly by. Soon there'd be a team of guards with bright orange vests and tall stop signs posted to the crosswalk. But now there was no one. She watched the Volvo climb the next hill. If only they'd come along just a minute later, she thought. Or if the baby had crawled a little quicker. It was only by chance that they'd come exactly when they did.

With her free hand, she pointed to the low white building across the schoolyard. "Drive around the corner. I'll walk. Maybe someone inside the office knows him."

She passed through the gate. She knew he was watching her and the baby, thinking things he shouldn't. She was nearly at the play structure before she heard the Jeep's engine rev and fade.

She checked the slatted benches and climbing nets. She squatted and looked up the green tube slide. With every bend, the baby pulled at her like a large, overripe fruit. She peered underneath the raised pilings, unsure if the sight of an inert body in the sand would make her feel better or worse. But it was all just as it had appeared from the sidewalk: empty.

The baby's head bounced as she walked on. Already its weight felt familiar. She expected it to suck its thumb or start crying again, but it stared vacantly, clearly exhausted from its efforts. She saw him pull up in front of the office. Like the beard, the Jeep was new. The Volkswagen conked out not long after she'd left, he'd explained when they'd finally spoken over the phone. He didn't want to keep pumping money into a failing proposition.

Two girls appeared ahead and were hitting a ball against the side of the building. They wore the same short shorts and puff-sleeve t-shirt combos, one purple, the other bright pink; they also had the same stork legs, the same plastic beads in their braids. But she knew the baby didn't belong with them. They were black and too young to watch kids.

“Girls.”

The taller one swung around and put her sandal on the ball, squishing the swirled plastic to keep it from bouncing away.

“Do you know this baby?” she asked.

The older girl narrowed her eyes. “No.”

“Did you see who he was with? Maybe someone at the play structure?”

She shook her head, rattling the plastic beads. “We just got here.”

“What about you?” she asked the younger one.

The smaller girl looked at the baby, then up at her. “He ain’t yours?”

The baby’s head was leaning against the shallows of her ribs. Its eyelids were drooping.

“No,” she said.

“He look like yours.”

“Shut up,” the older girl said. Her hands went to her bony hips. “She don’t know nothing about that baby.”

“Well, if you see someone looking for him, tell them I’ve taken him to the office.” For a moment she thought she might cry. “It’s important, understand?”

She heard the *ponf* of the ball as it smacked the wall behind her.

He was sitting in the Jeep, the windows down. Radio voices drifted out. She sat with the baby in the front seat. She just needed a minute to gather herself. She hesitated to close the door, but the dinging wouldn’t stop, and so she did. The radio chatter was slow and breathy; he’d found one of the college stations. He was still partial to them. The beard made him look more serious, she thought, slightly older in a good way, stronger like the Jeep. She imagined them driving the baby, not to her parents’ house, but back to her studio and rearranging everything.

The voice on the radio gave way to a wall of guitars. He turned down the volume and said her name. With pity or fear. She couldn’t tell.

“Do you want me to come in?”

She remembered the last time he asked the question and shook her head.

Inside the school was empty, cool. The old navy carpet had been switched out for grey. She turned into the front office where two women sat at wooden desks.

“Can I help you?” the first asked in a way that made it clear she had no intention of helping. She wore a crepe leopard-print blouse and bi-focals on a chain. The glass frames were also leopard print.

“We found this baby on the sidewalk.” She faced the baby so that they could see its face. “He was all alone and nearly fell onto the road.”

She waited for the secretary to explain the proper protocol for abandoned babies, but the woman simply stared over her glasses. Her lips were lined with dark pencil, the color not filled in. The second woman, a pasty thing with brassy hair, had already returned to typing.

“He was almost in the street,” she repeated, trying to suppress her rage. “If we hadn’t found him, someone might have run over him.” In her head, they’d already crushed the baby with the Jeep.

“Who is we?”

“A friend.” She pointed to the window. He sat in the front seat, head bobbing to the music. “I’m just trying to figure out who this baby belongs to. You don’t seem very concerned.”

“It’s not my business,” the first woman said.

“He could have been killed. I used to go here, you know,” she added and realized it was a ridiculous thing to say. “I’m calling the police.”

The second secretary paused her typing.

“Is he hurt?” the first woman asked.

“I don’t think so.”

“Then I would wait,” the first woman said. “Do what you feel you must but understand that calling the police will take time.”

“You’ll have to file a report,” the second one said.

“Look, it’s possible he belongs with one of the local daycares,” said the first. “They sometimes bring the kids here to play.”

“But you can’t just leave a baby.”

The first secretary frowned at her as if they both knew this was a lie. “I’m sure that whoever brought him will notice he’s missing soon enough. There’s a chair behind you if you want to sit.”

She looked at the chair. She recognized its rubberized frame, the indestructible vinyl seat in a shade neither blue nor green. The ubiquitous waiting room seat that could be wiped down of anything. Urine, tears, blood.

“No. I’m going to wash his face and get some water.”

“Third door on the left. The fountain’s just beyond.”

“I remember,” she said and did. More than she’d told herself she ever would.

She sat the baby on the counter and ran cool water over a paper towel. She patted the baby’s face, all the while keeping one hand squarely on its waist. Its eyes kept closing. She turned off the overhead lights and held the baby in the dark. It smelled of milk and yeast, and she knew it wasn’t by chance that they’d been driving by when they did.

She didn't bother going back into the office, and headed straight for the Jeep. He was peeling the foil from one of the burritos. She was starving but didn't think it was right to eat in front of the baby.

"What did they say?"

"Maybe one of the local daycare centers. Someone must have forgotten him."

"Jesus."

She laid the baby in the back seat. Within seconds it was asleep. He said her name again. Fear, she decided.

"Look, I know this must be weird for you."

"Weird?"

"Painful."

"Stop," she told him.

She heard the crank of an emergency brake. She looked in the rearview and saw the minivan: powder blue with balloons painted on the hood. A woman emerged and made for the play structure. She was barrel-shaped, dressed plainly in a t-shirt the same brown as her skin and a yellow bandana tied around her head. Her massive breasts heaved like a shelf as she tried to run. She was older and out of shape, her gait lopsided. She looked like she hadn't run in years.

They heard her calling, her voice desperate, nearly hoarse. She had an accent, most likely Caribbean. In her mouth Matthew sounded like *Maht-tiou*.

She looked in the back seat; the baby was lying on its side, eyes open. Listening.

"Let's go," he said.

"Not until she comes this way."

"What are you talking about? The woman's obviously from the daycare."

"I said wait."

"Are you crazy?"

He reached for the door, and she hated him. She knew what the beard was covering, the dimpled chin and soft jaw.

"You owe me," she said.

He paused, then let go of the handle. They watched the woman fall to her knees and raise her hands to the sky.

K.M. Elkes

A Notion of Limbs

On a midweek, midsummer afternoon a man waits for his train home. He carries the same bag as always, stands on the same length of platform as always, enters the same carriage by the same door to sit in the same seat as always. This man has a wife and a daughter. He has a small house with a garden that looks out over low, wooded hills. He keeps birds in an aviary. He sometimes finds himself staring through the wire mesh of the aviary at the low, wooded hills. He loses time easily.

The train dawdles from the station and he sees butterflies rise from the embankment. A cat arches and resettles on a rooftop. There is a suddenness of blue cornflowers on a wall. The man shuts his eyes and lets sunlight warm his face.

When he opens them again, the train is sidling between factory yards and the debris of neglected things, mossy stacks of pallets, rusted machines and tyre piles, crushed boxes in a stand of nettles. Reaching everywhere are long fingers of bramble. Then something drops through the gauzy edge of his vision. Dark against the deep afternoon blue. Faster than a bird. Something black and fluttering and falling. A notion of limbs. He thinks it descends behind one of the warehouses, maybe into a scrapyard beyond. He doesn't see it land. It is over so quickly he blinks and swallows and wonders if he saw anything at all. The train slows, then halts. On the bank outside, yellow grass stirs.

He looks around the carriage and wonders why no-one else has reacted. Did they not see that? The couple in the seat opposite ponder a crossword. The woman in front speaks into her phone: "There's three of us, so get extra milk."

He looks out, but sees nothing in the shadows where he thought it (whatever "it" was) fell. A forklift truck emerges from a nearby building and in the distance cars creep at rush hour slowness across the flyover. The train shudders and moves again. He cranes his neck to look back, but embankments rise on either side and the trees shuffle dark-light, dark-light, dark-light.

When the train reaches his station, he steps off and tarries while the other passengers hustle through the barrier. Within moments they are gone. The conductor blows a sharp blast on his whistle and the train eases round the long curve of track until it vanishes into the heat haze.

Should he tell someone? Inform the stationmaster? The police? But tell them what? That maybe he saw something falling though no-one else did. That whatever he saw (if anything) landed

in a scrapyard, but really, he's not sure. And perhaps, just perhaps, this something was a person, falling from a clear, empty sky? No. No need to inform anyone.

Yet even as he walks along the lane that leads home, even as he snorts at the absurdity of it, he holds doubt like a small bird in his hand. The sun's heat is a pulse in his head, there's a thick weight to the air and the smell of sweet, putrefying silage. When a creature scuttles through the dark tangle of the hedgerow he flinches and moves to the middle of the road.

His wife and daughter are in the garden when he arrives home. His daughter is learning to ride her bicycle. He watches them gladly through the kitchen window, but when he fills a glass with water, his hand trembles enough to make ripples.

After dinner, he goes down to the garden swing with his daughter. It's a treat they have made together before she goes to bed. He pushes her up into the burnt orange dusk until he remembers what he saw that afternoon and knows for sure it was no bird, or plastic bag or floater in his eye.

"Push daddy, push again!" his daughter insists. But he won't push anymore. She gets bored and jumps off.

"You're no fun," she says, then runs indoors.

He walks down to the aviary and stands in the half-darkness among birds that shuffle on their perches, shine-eyed, watching him. He looks out over the hills but sees nothing except a notion of limbs looping in his mind.

He cannot settle in the aviary as normal, but when he goes to the house and hears his wife laugh at the television, he turns away and sits instead on the sun lounger. He swipes phone for news, then switches on the radio and waits for bulletins. Later, his wife brings him a drink and smooths her hand along his arm.

"Are you okay? Is everything okay?"

He says he is fine, just tired, a long week.

"Something's taken you away," she says then lies beside him.

He dials the radio down to a murmur and lies quite still, on the sunlounger, in the garden, with his wife, listening instead to a long shrill note, narrow and rising within himself.

There is no news on the radio or the television the next morning. On the train back into the city, as they pass the place where he saw the faller, he moves across the aisle to look out over the factories and the scrapyard beyond. He bends low and looks up at the sky, pressing his cheek against the glass so it leaves a smudge. He sees this and presses again, the cool of the glass on his cheek, the empty sky outside. He circles his head, making the smudge larger. When he moves back to his seat he is aware of other passengers watching him.

He drifts and fidgets through work, until an hour after lunch then feigns sickness so he can catch an early train home. When it passes the scrapyard, he tries to remember how it was the previous day, but it is cloudy and he cannot feel what he did or make the moment come back again.

As soon as he gets home, he goes down to the aviary. The birds are skittish, darting around his head. These birds, he thinks. What are they actually for? Why does he even keep them? He picks up a feather and lets it drop and when it begins to drift to the floor he bends and blows it higher again. He does this many times, cursing whenever it passes out of reach.

He sets the timer on his phone. One full minute. If he can keep the feather up for one full minute, he can leave. Not until then. But when he reaches the minute, he looks to see if his wife and daughter are back and then sets the timer to two full minutes.

It reaches six full minutes before he stops. He is slick with sweat. His suit filthy with dust and bird droppings and wood chippings. The knees of his trousers are shredded and his knuckles cut where he has threshed against the aviary's wire mesh.

He goes to the house, unfolds four sheets of newspaper into a neat square, then strips. He wraps the ruined clothes and drops the package into the bin. In the shower, he thinks about the package in the bin and after dressing goes back downstairs, pulls out the bag and takes it to the fire pit. He sprays lighter fluid over the bundle then drops in a lit match. As smoke rises he wonders why he feels so very guilty, such terror that his wife and daughter might catch him.

He spends the evening searching for news with combinations of keywords: "*Faller. Flightpath. Scrapyard. Sky. Body. Black.*" He checks flight times, but finds no answers. He reads articles on emergency doors that pop, of desperate people found curled around landing gear. He wonders who it was, his faller. He wants to believe that they were dead long before they hit the ground. He wishes, and then doesn't, for a face.

"What is it, honey?" his wife asks when they go to bed.

"Let's put on the news," he says. They huddle together, watching stories of distant wars. There is the usual – sobbing children, soldiers ducking into doorways, rubble and smoke. In every report he notices the sky. How it is always clear.

"This is too sad," says his wife. "Can't we watch a nice film?"

There is something in her voice which makes a flush of rage move over him so quickly he retches. He wants to smash every piece of furniture in the room, shred the bedclothes, shatter the mirror and scrape the shards along his arms and along his chest and across his face. He gets out of bed and stands in the middle of the room, breathless, clasping his hands together.

"What's happening?" his wife asks.

He looks at her.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she says. “Don’t look at me like that again. I won’t have that look.” His anger clears as quickly as it gathered. It vacates him, leaves him emptied out and exhausted. “I’m sorry,” he says. “A strange mood. Just a strange mood.”

His wife turns off the light and settles down with her back to him. He is exhausted now, but pulls away from sleep like a startled horse each time it comes to him. He is afraid, because it is like falling into his own shadow, and forces himself to stay awake until there is thin dawn light at the window and only then does he let go.

In the morning, he gets ready as usual, kisses his daughter as usual, catches the train at the usual time, sits in his usual seat. But when it stops at the small station near the scrapyards, he gets off.

The roads around the station are narrowed by rows of dusty vans and flatbed trucks. A smell of steel and oil oozes through the lanes. The thud and din of machines at work, rises through his feet, a thick heave of sound.

He wanders between the factories and the warehouses, unsure of what he is looking for. What did he expect to see? What did he want to see? There is nothing but sunlight and shadow and pigeons swooping into the road, a knot of men in blue overalls smoking in silence. He feels out of place, intimidated when the men turn to watch him walk by. In the distance, he glimpses the flyover and heads towards it until a turning in the road reveals the high gates of the scrapyards. Beyond are towers of old cars, neatly stacked. The tang of metal in the air makes him scrape his teeth together.

He crosses the yard to an office building and goes through the half-open door. The place is piled high, like the yard outside, with papers and the corpses of old office machinery. The walls are papered with newspaper, browned by nicotine. There is a car seat in the corner of the office with a basket of clean, white washing next to it. A young woman sits behind the desk. Her hair is blue, her skin doll-white. Her limbs look brittle, thinner than straws. Her cleanness glows in the dull office light.

“Are you dropping off?” she asks. “Or is it spares?”

He doesn’t know what his own question should be. He doesn’t know how to fit the extraordinary into something that would sound normal. So he asks if she knows, a couple of days before, whether someone had an accident in the yard, a faller perhaps. She looks at him like an animal startled by a noise.

“Where are you from?” she asks.

He feels foolish with his dishevelled clothes and dirty shoes. Next to her he feels unclean. He tells her he is no-one and that he’s not from anywhere important.

“What do you mean, a faller? What does that mean?”

He tries to explain. The slow train, a fast shadow coming down from the sky, the shapes it made, the plummet of it. How round a corner somewhere, behind a tower of rusted cars or by some oil-filled ditch could be a faller, broken and half-buried within the crust of black filth that covers the yard. The young woman frowns, her perfection cleaved.

“There’s nothing happened like you say,” she tells him. “What sort of person comes in and asks that, if they don’t even know it’s true?”

He feels a static charge of discomfort grow between them. She picks up her phone and he wonders if she intends to call someone. Her boss? The police? Then she puts it down again and says: “Listen, are you all right? Do you need someone to help you?”

He nods, lowers his head. She steps out from behind the desk and he sees she has a leg that will not bend properly, that she leans on the chair back for support.

He wants to confess to this young, fragile woman that something has opened up between his world and another. That the faller, the fluttering mass of their body, landed, broke through, sent him spiralling up in response, losing his tread on solid ground, rising towards an inevitable emptiness of thinning air where he will open his mouth so wide he will be filled until he has dissipated, no more than a shower of rain, impermanent and sudden. And that all his life, he has known the dread of such untethering. He wants her absolution and her blessing.

Instead, he gets up, buttons his jacket and tells her there is no need to worry. He was just checking, about the faller, out of interest. That he is sorry. No need to worry. No need. As he leaves, he smells the clean washing, the false scent of spring.

The young woman shuffles after him, stands in the doorway as he crosses the yard: “It’s all right – nothing happened here. No-one fell,” she says and then: “You take care. Look after yourself.”

At the gates he turns and watches the huge claw of a scrap machine grip and lift the carcass of a car, swing it over a crusher and lower it in. He hears the scream of metal and turns away, not wanting to see the crushed brick that will slide from the machine, not wanting to see how tightly packed it will be, how very small. Instead he finds nearby a small triangle of green between roads and sits for hours watching traffic on the flyover until it is time for the late afternoon train.

His wife is in the kitchen when he reaches home. He kisses her on the mouth and she squeezes his arm. She asks about work and he lies for her. And when his daughter calls him outside to the swing, he goes to her. And when she calls out to him at the top of her arc that she is flying he lies again and says yes, yes she is, then pushes her as high as she wants to go.

Kate Hamer

The Ash Path

When Sarah got the telegram telling her Joey was dead, the wind threatened to pinch it from her fingers as she read at the open doorway of her cottage. She tossed it down and the wind picked it up so it travelled half way down her hallway before falling to the ground. As she walked back into the house her heel stamped the corner of the card with a black mark.

Later a man came. He was wearing a uniform and his hair was trimmed so neatly it made a straight dark line above his neck at the back. He told her again what she'd read in the telegram, that Joseph was 'Missing, presumed dead'.

'I'm very, very sorry,' he said.

'But what does that mean?' she asked. She had visions of Joey wandering France among a sea of people, lost and alone. 'If he's missing then it means I must go looking for him.'

The man startled out of his official demeanour which had made him appear half asleep up until that point. 'No, you must not do that,' he said quickly, the image of a mother wading through the mud in that terrible place, looking for her lost boy, coming to him. 'He's presumed dead,' he repeated.

Sarah persisted. 'But if there's no body how can anyone know that? He might be trapped somewhere. I won't believe it until I see him. I must go there.'

'No,' said the man. 'It's dangerous. There are bombs, it's not possible for you to travel there. It wouldn't be permitted.' He was fully alert by now, provoked by Sarah's irrational response. He wanted to leave her grieving but in a state of acceptance. He felt desperate to get out of the little dark house and this woman insisting that she could travel to that dreadful place. There was something about it that almost made him want to scream.

'But he could still be there and can't find his way home because he's in a foreign country, he needs me. Tell me, if he's dead, where's his body? I'll find a way to go,' she was still insisting.

Purposely, she'd kept herself quite apart from newspaper reports, from other mothers with boys fighting in France. She'd begun withdrawing like that many years ago when Joey's dad had left them. She did her cleaning – The Butchers, then The Rose and Crown and then The Bull – and returned home to start Joey's dinner. Though of course after Joey was sent to France the meal was just for her. Now her aloneness had left her unprepared.

The officer grasped his hat with both hands and leaned forward over the teacup that sent steam up in a little plume. The steam veiled his sweating face as he spoke rapidly and without thought. 'No, there is no question. You must not allow yourself that. You have to believe me when I say he's dead. The body, often, can become quite... desiccated.'

After he left, Sarah went out to behind the house to the ash path. It was here everyone spread the cinders from their fires. The hedgerows were foamy with life and in the scattered ashes on the paths were little lumps of coal that pressed up through the thin soles of her shoes. Many times she'd come out here to meet Joey at the end of the day, it was always his route home – down this lane then in through the back door. He was a big lad and the curls on his head bounced as he did that walk that always had something of a forward lurch about it. He'd smile when he set eyes on her and walk a little faster towards her, his arms scissoring by his sides. He wasn't a bad lad at all. Sometimes, as he was growing up, he could fly into terrible tempers but Sarah never felt that she couldn't have the upper hand if she needed it. Not once.

Now, when she screamed, the sound shot down to where the ash path curved and disappeared around the corner. The scream felt like it was meant to summon him and see him once again coming towards her. But when she looked up the path it remained empty and the curve darkened like it was the entry to a hole.

After the war ended a committee came to her door – two men in suits and a woman with a hat that had a peacock feather stitched to the side. They told her there was to be a memorial put up right here on the village green and it was to have every boy and man's name that the village had lost carved on to it. While she was talking the woman turned to point out the spot right in front of Sarah's house and the peacock feather fixed its eye on her. When she turned back she smiled. 'Your name is Bream, so Joseph will be quite near the top.'

'I don't want Joseph's name carved on to it,' said Sarah and the woman stopped smiling.

The smaller of the men cleared his throat. 'But why? It's a privilege and an honour to be named there. So far, you're the only single person to object in the whole village. Is that fair on Joseph?'

'I don't want to have to explain it,' said Sarah. 'I just don't want his name carved.' And she shut the door on them.

When the monument arrived it came in two parts, one wrapped in canvas and the other in a crate. Each had its own cart. The middle of the village green had already been dug and foundations put down. The first half of the monument was a large block of stone that had to be unwrapped and lowered by ropes and pulleys into the hole made for it. It took eight men and help from the ropes to manoeuvre the crate from the other cart and place it upright next to the stone block. By now

twilight was beginning to tinge the sky so the men packed away their tools and left. When they'd gone Sarah crept out of her front door and stared at the wooden crate on the green, trying to guess what might be inside. Then she became aware that she was possibly being watched from the windows of the other houses circling the green and she scurried back indoors.

The next day she kept glancing out of the window to see if the second part of the monument had been uncrated, but it must have happened while she was in the privy out the back, because it was out of its box when she returned. Her mouth went suddenly dry and her hand flew there, stoppering it up. The memorial was a stone boy. Sarah wondered at how it could emerge from the grave-like darkness of the crate looking so completely white and newly minted. The men were already fixing ropes around the figure to winch it up but the stone boy stood easily, leaning on his gun and looking right into Sarah's house. She could see the skill of the carving – the tender way his head rounded out at the back under his cap and the stance of his body under his clothes. Such a beautiful slim boy with a languid dreamy air. From this distance Sarah reckoned he was about the same age as Joey was when he'd got desiccated.

Later, there was a ceremony. Sarah watched from upstairs. The statue had been in situ for several weeks by then. The boy still looked into Sarah's house but now he was higher up she thought he looked as if he owned the place. For the ceremony people dressed in black encircled the stone boy. It was a sunny day and the sun glinted off golden instruments as the band lifted them to their lips to play. Several women wore long black veils and Sarah saw a white hanky disappear up the veil of one woman as the vicar delivered a reading that Sarah couldn't hear. With the music playing and the circle of people all staring up it seemed to her that the stone boy was the new god to have arrived and was now being worshipped by her fellow villagers. At the end of the ceremony they laid flowers at the boy's feet and went away.

As time passed he did not blend naturally into everything. In fact, to Sarah, he seemed to become more distinct. In all weathers – rain falling on his head and shoulders, mist encircling his feet, sunlight bouncing off his gun – he still held his superior gaze with those blank eyes.

Strange notions began to occur to Sarah. At night in bed she sometimes imagined that the band who had played at the ceremony were still out there, that they had been made small by the new god, and were trapped like beetles under his foot, tinny music emanating from his shoe. She tried to put him from her mind but it was hard as the stone boy popped up in every window whenever Sarah forgot herself and let her gaze stray towards the front of the house. He began to look unnatural to her like a relic from a barbaric culture she could only begin to dream of, that came either from the past or from far into the future. Once, she'd seen Stonehenge and another stone circle in Avebury.

Their guide had told them of ancient worshipping practices that had been enacted in those places and Sarah could imagine him as the object of those ancient people's devotions. Sometimes, in her worst moments, she imagined that the thing had walked all the way from France. That it had actually witnessed Joey's death with those stone eyes in some shell hole or trench there. They had taken her son – with his lurching walk and hot temper, with his belly that was always a little too padded – and replaced it with that smooth stone one and now there was no escaping it. Only out the back – in the garden or the privy or on the ash path – could she be free from its presence.

The first time Sarah saw him in moonlight she was about to draw her bedroom curtains. The stone boy always managed to look new and surprising in every change of light or weather, a fresh revelation of his person. Now, with the bluish light striking him his white edges seemed sharper than anything else around him. Sarah went and sat on the edge of her bed. Her chest hurt and her body felt weak. She realised it was a long time since she'd spoken to anyone properly, aside from perfunctory exchanges in her jobs.

Without thinking she left the house, taking her coat from the hook in the hall as she passed. It was the first time she'd set foot on the village green since the boy had arrived. The grass was wet and instantly soaked through her slippers. Made blue by the moonlight the figure was stranger and more monolithic than ever. She looked up into his face and his eyes stared past her. Behind him the stars throbbed in the sky.

She bent her head in defeat and the list of names carved into the base came into view. First, Alton, Harold John, followed by Bream, Joseph William. The carving of her son's name was in a clear classical script.

'No, no,' she shouted out loud. 'They've gone and put it there anyway. I won't, I can't have it.'

Not caring if anyone was watching from the circling windows she picked up one of the big smooth pebbles that surrounded the base of the monument and lifted her arm, bringing down the rock on the J of Joey's name. It hit the stone with a strangely dead sound and bounced away and the carving remained clean and unsplintered. She tried again with her full force, the sound peeling out over the green, but there was too little strength in her arm. The carving of Joey's name could remain for a hundred years without the smallest crumb being lost from its chiselled edge. She stood back and launched the stone at the boy above. It bounced off his chest with a clicking noise and fell to the ground.

That night she crawled into bed still wearing all her clothes. When she woke in the morning the inside of her bed was muddy from her slippers.

Sarah went outside to the ash path still in the same coat and her muddy slippers. It was early summer and the morning sun was hot on her back. It struck light off the knobs of coal spread about

on the path that had been emptied from people's grates. When times were hard she'd sent Joey out here with a tin bucket to collect the remains of the once-burned fuel for their range. There was no shame in it; everybody did the same from time to time.

The memory of him out there with his bucket was so sharp and clear her legs gave way. Slowly she sank to her knees until she was bent over face-first into the hedgerow. The crushed stems of cow parsley pushed into her cheeks and across her forehead and she breathed in their green scent. Her eyelid was being scratched by a thorn but she didn't care, didn't even move. She stayed sunk into the hedge for long minutes, buried into the earth and the green, feeling she would never be able to move from that spot.

It was a gradual thing, the feeling of something out there behind her on the ash path. It was around the corner stirring itself. There was the vibration of the air as it approached. With a trembling breath she breathed in the smell of soil, soil like her Joey must be mixed in with in France, and waited. It was coming from around the corner now, drawing near. Without turning, she lifted her head slightly and the grass that had been bent back sprang up and tickled her cheek. Behind her was Joey; she knew without doubt – she could feel him as clearly as feeling the water that washed your face in the morning. As he passed her bent back she took a deep, choking breath of the hedgerow and it filled her throat.

This is where Joey was, where he had been all along – not out the front with that dead cold thing they'd tried to make her worship. All the time Joey had been coming around that corner and down the ash path, making the cow parsley sway as he brushed past. Sarah knew he always would be now, over and over. He'd be making this journey down the ash path forever. He'd be coming around that corner again any minute now.

Rae Meadows

If You Look For Me I'll Be Gone

"Wake up, Dochka."

Her father brushed the hair from Anya's face. His breath was warm on her ear and she smelled the faint bitter herbs from his morning tea. She rolled over under the weight of a thousand blankets, or so it felt, quilt upon quilt to keep out the relentless chill. It was night dark. The sun would not rise today.

"You don't want to be late," her father said.

Anya sat up with a start, remembering what day it was, immune, suddenly, to the cold. Her father laughed.

She cartwheeled across the small bedroom they shared, her heart leaping ahead of her, and flung open the door to the amber light of the kitchen. Her skin was as pale as milk, a thin shroud over the blue lattice of her veins. Her hair, as dark and sleek as mink, hung halfway down her back. Like her mother's. They will make you cut it, he had told her. But it was a small thing, she thought.

The table was set with tea and bread and cheese, and in the middle of her plate, one perfect orange.

"Papa!"

She held the orange to her face and breathed it in. The rarest of indulgences in Norilsk. She closed her eyes and let the extravagant smell transport her, for the briefest moment, to somewhere warm and bright.

"A special occasion," her father said. He crossed one arm over his chest and rubbed his fiery beard with his free hand. His eyes glinted green in the lamplight. "We'll celebrate tonight."

She didn't ask, "What if I am not chosen?" It was what they had trained for.

"Irina's made a *vatrushka*," he said.

Irina lived on the first floor of their building. She came over sometimes and sat at the kitchen table and drank vodka with Anya's father and they would sing *Komsomol* songs and hug each other.

Anya peeled the orange with ritualistic concentration, pulling off the white membrane string by string. She held the soft puckered orb in all ten fingertips, and then laid the little half moons in a ring on her plate like petals.

Norilsk was north of the Arctic Circle, 1800 miles from Moscow. A Siberian town reachable only by plane or ship ramming through cracks in the frozen Arctic Sea. The home of some of the largest

deposits of nickel and copper on earth. Anya had never been anywhere else. The rain burned her skin, the fog made her throat itch, and the air made her cough. The snow blew gray and sharp like tiny nails. The Daldykan ran red from the sludge of copper smelting. During the polar winter, the sun didn't rise for three months. But. Norilsk Nickel employees each were given a *Ynost* black-and-white TV. The store shelves were stocked with sweetened milk, while everyone else scabbled for a block of margarine. The wages were almost twice that of what workers made on the mainland.

Anya lived for the summer, that brief chapel of light, from late May to late July, when the sun never set and a manic joy infused even the old drunk men who left their chess games and traipsed along the tundra hills. Herds of deer emerged from the taiga and came north, galloping right through town. She and her father would shiver into Dolgoye Lake near where the town's heating pipes passed through. Afterwards they would sun themselves on the rocks like seals. They would fill baskets with the bittersweet golden cloudberry under a vast, pale sky, the heat like balm.

There were the bones, of course, that rose up and washed ashore each June, reminders of the camp closed fifteen years before. No one spoke of Norillag. The kerchiefed babushkas collected the femurs and ulnas and skulls and buried them next to their gardens they tended like children, lovingly caring for every plant that dared to grow in that brief reprieve.

"Sometimes you need cruelty to appreciate beauty," her father told her, after he had started in on the vodka.

Anya glanced out the dark window to a row of streetlights that would stay lit all day. The sun wouldn't even begin to rise above the horizon until mid January. Her father was packing cold sausages in his lunch pail to take to the copper plant. At least he didn't go in the mines, she thought, down into the depths of the earth in blackness so complete it could rob your mind. It frightened her to imagine him there. That crushing nothingness.

Anya placed a section of orange on her tongue and held it there before crushing it with her teeth.

They had to have a plan before they went outside. No dawdling. Her father wrapped her in wool scarves and her fur-flap hat until all that was exposed was her nose. She was barely able to see through slits where the edges of the scarves met. It was forty degrees below zero. They paused at the door.

"When will he come?" she asked.

Her father pulled her scarf down so he could hear her.

"The director just said today. Do your best, Dochka."

She always did. She was a serious child. Not prone to laughing or playing around like others her age. "You carry around your own storm cloud," her friend Sveta teased. You can't change yourself, Anya knew. You are who you are.

Her scarf made her neck itch.

"Did you hear about the naturalist?" she asked.

"Who, Ledorsky?"

The eccentric professor lived on the fourth floor and subsisted on kasha and fermented milk, which he claimed protected him against the toxic air.

"He took in a polar bear cub. An orphan. In his apartment."

"Sometimes I forget that you're only eight," her father said.

When they saw the headlights of the bus they pushed into the darkness. The air felt like shards of glass in Anya's lungs. You couldn't wait at the bus stop or you might die from exposure. You couldn't smile or the saliva would freeze in your mouth and the pain in your teeth would make your eyes water and then they would freeze shut. Anya couldn't see the chimneys belching smoke in the dark but even the cold couldn't take away the smell of sulfur. They hurried down Leninsky Prospekt as the bus stopped in front of the stone Lenin, a foot of snow on top of his head.

They fell into seats on the warm bus.

"*Vsegda gotov*," she said. Always ready.

"*Vsegda gotov*," he said.

He had taught her the Young Pioneers motto when she was two.

When the bell rang, the children stripped down to their underpants and laid their clothes on their chairs, sliding their slippers underneath. Boots were lined up outside the door; they never bothered with shoes.

Her friend Sveta bounced on her toes, up in relevé, down, up, down.

"It's today," she whispered. Her pale hair was pulled tight in a bun. "He's coming today."

"I know," Anya said.

They filed into the small windowless room with their goggles and made a circle around the quartz lamp for their daily UV light bath.

"There's a man in our building who has a polar bear cub," Anya said.

"What's its name?"

"Aika."

"Have you seen it?"

"Not yet."

"I tried on my mother's lipstick last night," Sveta said, dropping her voice. "Pink. But she caught me and I got in trouble."

To Anya, lipstick was more exotic than a polar bear cub.

"How did it look?"

"Gorgeous."

Anya had a memory of her mother, a flash of an image, skin powdered and lips red, her hair in a braid wrapped around her head. She looked like a beautiful porcelain doll. Or maybe it wasn't her mother at all. Maybe just a picture she had seen.

After the light session, the children put on their physical culture uniforms. But before they could file into the gym, their instructor walked in followed by a barrel-chested man in an ill-fitting suit, one shirt tail untucked and hanging down below his jacket in the back. He lit a *Laika* and held it in the corner of his mouth. He looked them over with an imposing heavy brow, his eyes squinting through the smoke.

Sveta shot her eyes to Anya. The time had come.

Anya felt her heart skip then catch up with a thud as the man from the Sport Society looked them over. He took the cigarette from his mouth and blew smoke to the ceiling.

"Who wants to be a gymnast?" he gruffed. "The girls. Stand up."

He shook his head at Sasha, the tallest girl in the class, and she sat down. He pinched the fat on Maria's arm and frowned. She sat. He eyed the five still standing.

"Follow me," he said.

They went to the school gymnasium. Instead of the balls and hoops and nets that usually littered the floor, the gym had been cleared out and outfitted with a thick rope to the ceiling, a free-standing metal bar, and some thin rubber mats. Anya and Sveta held hands, their bare feet white and bony against the floorboards.

"Gymnastics is not for little birds," the man said. "It's for little Maria Chechnevas."

Chechneva was born in the north, a pilot in Great Patriotic War, a Soviet hero.

"It's fun, too," Sveta whispered. "Maybe he doesn't know that."

Sveta was the tiniest and best among them. She'd been flipping off chairs and doing press handstands since she was four. But six months ago Sveta's father, a mineworker, got in trouble. He'd told a joke to a friend while sitting in the sauna at the banya: 'A portrait of Stalin hangs on the wall behind a speaker who reads a report on Stalin, the choir sings a song about Stalin, a poet reads a poem about Stalin. What's the occasion? A night commemorating the anniversary of Pushkin's death.' Someone informed on him. He was interrogated at the district militia's office for eighteen

hours. Stalin had been dead for twenty years, and yet he had won the War, and making a joke about Stalin, and really, a joke about the Soviet Union, was suspect. Sveta's father emerged with a broken thumb and a black eye – I fell, I fell, he said – and was stripped of his party membership.

The man led the girls through drills around the gym.

"Climb the rope. Faster. No feet! Legs out!" he barked.

He held a stopwatch and marked things on the side of an envelope.

"Little chubby one," he said to one of the girls. "You're too slow."

He didn't say anything to Anya, but she did not let up. The bristly rope was like stinging nettles on the ripped skin of her palms. Her stomach muscles quivered from leg lifts. Her inner thighs were sore from over-splits, one foot held above the floor on a folded mat.

Sveta, still full of energy, executed flawless back- and front-walkovers while waiting for her turn, a 180-degree split-leap when they moved stations. The man with the cigarette did not seem to take notice.

"I can do a back-handspring," she said. "Would you like to see?"

"You were not asked," he said. He folded his arms across his broad chest and looked away. "Get back in line."

Anya tried to focus only on the tasks at hand. She knew enough to know she could only look out for herself.

The five girls hung in a row from the bar.

"Pull yourselves up and stay there."

They struggled up and held their chins over the bar, their bodies swinging slightly. One by one the other three girls slipped down, falling in heaps until it was only Anya and Sveta, arms taut and shaking.

I will win, Anya told herself. She closed her eyes and forgot about her friend, settled into the pain and imagined she was hanging over a chasm in the ice. Falling would mean death first by broken bones, then by cold. She heard nothing but the coo of the wind.

"Anya Yurievna."

She opened her eyes and she was alone on the bar.

"Enough," he said.

Sveta, seemingly smaller, even, than she'd been before, flashed Anya a rueful smile. Anya mouthed, "*Prosti.*" But she wasn't sorry.

"Do you think we made it, Anya?" Sveta asked.

They ate cold *pelmeni* and hot soup from the lunch cart.

“We did what we could,” Anya said.

She wished that hoping for something counted for anything, but she’d learned long ago that it didn’t. Her hands, raw and smarting, smelled like metal and the faintest perfume of orange.

“Come over tomorrow,” Anya said. “We’ll play with the polar bear.”

Sveta leaned over and kissed her on both cheeks.

After school, when Anya got off the bus in the dark, she was met with the wall of cold, but above, curtains of colored light billowed in the sky. Pink, green, yellow, blue, violet. The northern lights. The extreme cold brought more colors. She was used to them but could never really be used to them. They stopped her, held her. Her father had explained to her that as the sun boiled and bubbled, particles discharged, hurtling solar wind into space. As the particles passed through Earth’s magnetic shield, drawn to the north pole of the earth, they mingled with oxygen and nitrogen and transformed into the dance of lights. But knowing this didn’t erase what Anya felt, the knowing, the sound in the silence. Like music, like a woman singing.

She knew that she would make it and Sveta would not. Sveta would be stuck in Norilsk forever. It was not fair. But what was fairness? Sveta still had a mother. Rage and tenderness swirled and then settled within her into something as heavy as a copper ingot.

Anya had stopped for too long and her nose was numb and the air stung her lungs. She ran through the dark along the snowdrift that bordered the road, the lights moving above her, a shifting wave now mostly green and blue, moving higher and higher. She wanted to jump up and grab the aurora, to pull it to her, to keep it from fading away. But soon there was nothing. And she was alone with all that dark, dark sky.

Gabriel Monteros

Kolkata

Him asking me to tell him about Kolkata. Lying in a twin bed, his head on my chest some Saturday night. The whole room lit gray, the only color his voice. Why did you want me to tell you about Kolkata if you're never going to see it? *I want to know this part of you. I want to know everything about you.*

It's monsoon season over there. The rain is drumming on cheap roofs, like thousands of pitched snares, a sound so dominating, so present. That is the silence of Kolkata. Only silent when something vast can cover the sound of everything else. Air waves vibrating the tympanic membrane. Signals traveling up the auditory nerves. Sensation muting sensation.

Me sitting on the red plastic stool in my mother's kitchen. Wearing that blue and white dress I wore every weekend for years. Kicking my feet in the air as I read that old anatomy text book I found in the pile of books my grandpa left us. Finding the pictures fascinating. Humming a tune I don't remember. Mother cooking next to me. The overwhelming din of sizzling oil and drumming rain finally allowing me to read. *Come, Geeti, it's time to eat.*

In Kolkata everything happening at once and nothing happening at all. Tell me more, he's saying. *I don't understand.* I know you don't understand. Kolkata is chaos, my babe. That chaos birthed me. It's loud all the time, even in the middle of the night. It's more than you can handle. Him scoffing at me in the darkness. Me closing my eyes in a city where I need no rain to sleep.

Me carrying around my anatomy book. Reading it between classes, between meals, between naps. Spending hours and hours of every day reading. Tracing pictures of sinews, muscle groups, and organs in my lined notebook. Showing my sister-in-law the pictures of naked bodies. *How can amma let you read this stuff?* Her being grossed out by the pictures of the male reproductive system. Me not being grossed out. Proud that I'm ten years younger and not grossed out. It looks just like uncle's.

Mother yelling at me, calling me a whore. Hitting me across the face. Pain receptors flaring. A thousand names for worthless. A thousand words for vile. Locked in a tiny room alone with all of Kolkata. Chickens bawking as they're butchered in the streets. Cows groaning. Mangy brown dogs yelping when they're kicked and smashed. Spit in my hair and tears on my face. *Come, Geeti, it's time to eat. I bought the phuchka just for you.*

The red plastic stool in the kitchen, a hot Wednesday evening. Standing up and telling my mother I wanted to be a surgeon. *That's quite a goal for a child.* Hoping for her to say more. Waiting for her to say more. A lifetime later finding someone who said more.

Him at Claire's birthday party looking lost, the only one dressed in jeans. Gently touching the shoulder of everyone he's talking to. Looking in their eyes intently. Listening. Me wondering where he came from, whose friend he was. *Claire's friend from back home.* Asking Claire to introduce me. *He's just a baker. He didn't graduate college. You aren't actually interested in him?*

Us being introduced. *Konika, this is Sal.* Talking to him about baking bread. Insisting that he explain each step in detail. The flour, the yeast, the exact temperature for perfect sourdough.

Probing. Probing again. His patience unending. *You need to understand everything, Konika, don't you?* Telling him about my work. Telling him about the red plastic stool in my mother's kitchen in Kolkata. I'm a thrall to his smile. The party fading into irrelevance. Leaving after everyone has long disappeared. Norepinephrine and epinephrine. Glucose pouring out from energy stores. Blood flowing to skeletal muscles. Heart rate increasing. Lateral orbitofrontal cortex shutting down.

Our mutual friends whispering in surprise. *She's too cold for him. She's too serious. Too rational. Too intimidating.*

My sister-in-law buying me small frogs to dissect. Me stealing sharp scissors from school. Opening up the frogs outside. Mother saying they'll dirty the house. It's okay, the chickens are opened up outside too. Finding the dead dog, still whole in the alley by the market. Taking the dog home. Opening up the dog. The smell overpowering. Kidneys. Liver. Bladder. Bones too thick to cut through. Mother screaming. Mother crying. I'm crying and covered in spit. Mother making sure I have enough to eat for the evening. Telling me to work hard in school so I can go abroad to study medicine.

Cutting open the brain of one of my first patients. Twelve years old, messy blonde hair and pale blue eyes, cancerous tumor in occipital lobe. Thinking that the boy's brain looks exactly like the diagrams I'd memorized. Operating on his brain like I do everyone else's. Removing the part of him that's distinctly different, the part that's killing him.

Standing in the hallway holding the boy's crying mother. Explaining that I didn't cure him, that we needed to wait and see. The tumor returning. Cancer metastasizing. The look on his mother's face haunting the hospital lobby. Telling her it was worth the hundreds of thousands of dollars. Telling her we had to take the chance. Telling her to check if her insurance provided counseling options. Going back to work without pause. Realizing at 3am on a rainless night that I was 12 when I found the anatomy textbook.

Him asking about my work. Calling me a healer. The body heals itself, babe. I can't be both a healer and a surgeon. My job is to cut and slice objects that resemble the ones in my textbooks. Not to heal. If I had to heal people, I would've collapsed long ago. You wouldn't understand. You're a baker.

Him always smelling like fresh baked bread. Tall with curly hair. Skin brown like mine, but the wrong type of brown. Mediterranean brown. Me watching him knead dough with delicate force. Watching him measure each drop of oil, each grain of flour, each degree on the oven. The frustration on his face when he's thinking deeply. The shape of his mouth when he whispers. Him pushing me hard against the wall as he places his hand behind my head.

I'm your first? You're almost 30! No, not exactly the first. But the only one that matters. Too busy in medical school, babe. Too focused. Always focused.

Going to college. Studying pre-medicine. Attending an elite university overseas in the land of bland tea, mild food, and rude hosts. My brain becoming fascinated with itself. Finding satisfaction in learning that my invisible thoughts are nothing more than electrical signals traveling down axons and chemical neurotransmitters released into synapses. Residency at a prestigious hospital. Position on the surgical team. Calls home every night. Mother beckoning me home. *Geeti, I haven't seen you in years.*

Sunday afternoons in my bed. Him talking about our souls. Gentle, soothing ignorance painted in his eyes. *We're more than our bodies, my love.* Really, babe? You should've read more science and less philosophy. That's why you're a baker. Of course, babe, I'm teasing. Don't be so sensitive. But, babe, if I hit you hard on the forehead with this book, you would change. Who you are would change because I bashed your brain. Prefrontal cortex damage means a loss of impulse control, a loss of tact, not that you have any anyway. Prove it? I'll fuck up your soul now. Him grabbing my arms. Us wrestling in the sheets. Laughing. Kissing. Whoring.

Konika, but even the most scientific among us live as if we have some sort of unique essence, as if we have a soul. Humanity insists on it, don't we? Lumps of fatty tissues and proteins screaming for divinity.

Him overhearing me talking to my mother. Noticing that she called me Geeti instead of Konika. *What does that mean? Honey? Sweetie?* It's my house name, babe. Geeti, because I always sung as a child. I'd sing while getting dressed and sing while studying. I didn't even notice when I was singing. *Sing for me, Geeti.* No, I don't sing. I'm not going to sing for you. Yes, babe, you can call me Geeti. But only you. Only you.

Sitting around the harmonium singing Tagore's songs with my family. Uncle sitting there with me. Next to me. We're all happy he's come to visit for the month. I'm happy he's here. We all cry when he has to leave. I'm sad that he leaves. I cry as he leaves. I wear my blue and white dress.

My babe asking me to heal him. To make the nights of anxiety melt away. To not freak out every time rent was due. To tell him I'll always be there. Me holding him, his head warm on my chest. But I'm a surgeon, babe. I don't heal, I operate. Telling him over and over again that this can only be temporary. You live in fantasy, in passion. You're always this way. You're consistent. You're a rock. But the universe is not consistent.

The first time he came over. Take off your shoes before coming into my apartment. Sit down, you must have tea. Have you had proper chai before? You must eat too. You can't be in my home without eating something. You say this isn't India? Fine, eat me then. Don't stop. Don't ever stop.

Chilies for sale by the basket. Ripe mangos far better than you get here. Bright orange mishti doi served in small clay bowls. The taste of mishti doi. Texture thick like soft crayon. Buds on the tongue bonding to sugars and fats. Electrical signals. Dopamine. Memories of a childhood in Kolkata. *What do you miss most?* Phuchka dipped in tamarind juice by dirty hands. The Kolkata dust adds flavor. It's what makes it nourishing. It's what makes me. His surprise that I would eat such dirty food from street vendors. *Everything about you is clean. You're sanitary all the time.* Of course I am, I'm a surgeon. But I'm only that way here, not there. *Tell me, Geeti. When will you take me there?*

Mother on the phone asking when I'm going to get married. Mother screaming at me. A thousand ways to fail. A thousand debts to pay. I'm the reason she's sick. I'm the reason she can no longer get out of bed. I'm the reason she's going to die soon. My sister-in-law crying on the phone. Bearing everything I should bear.

Him in confusion. Always confused about home. *Your mother's crazy, Geeti. Just ignore her.* No, dear. She's not. She's saner than you. I can't believe you'd tell me to ignore my own mother.

Kolkata covered in decaying graffiti of hammers and sickles. Orange and blue and green sarees. Bicycles with squeaking gears and cars with cracked windshields. Cow shit. Life. The British, they're still in Kolkata, did you know that, babe? They're still present in the old colonial buildings and in the way the Brahmins carry themselves.

Fresh-baked bread he brought to me every Sunday. Strawberry jam, butter, and tea. My babe, no one made bread for me here before. Years I've gone without fresh bread. The olfactory bulb is located close to the hippocampus. Smell triggers memory more than any other sense. The fresh chapatti my mother bakes for me every day. Chapatti and dal and rice and fish. I'll take the bones out of your fish for you, babe. You aren't used to eating fish with your hands.

Phone calls every night. Him telling me not to pick up. Mother insisting I come home. Me insisting she treat my sister-in-law better. Why do you torture her so? Why do you make her wash your feet and change your sheets and clean up your shit as you spit on her? I know you can walk. *Because my daughter left me.* Does uncle still come to visit? Her not answering. Never answering. Norepinephrine and epinephrine. Glucose pouring out from energy stores. Blood flowing to skeletal muscles. Heart rate increasing. Lateral orbitofrontal cortex wide awake.

Grass green pungent around us. Lying in the sun with him. Nourishing our brown. Worshiping our brown. Letting it engulf us. Babe, have you ever thought about the absurdity of what I do? The absurdity of scientists studying the brain? A cluster of neurons working to deny the supernatural significance it's given itself. It's a fundamental contradiction, a conflict of interest. Bad science. Yet we proceed. We probe and experiment and research on without hesitation. Don't kiss me when you can't follow the conversation.

My parents telling me about a family friend who has a son that studied in the UK. Bengali boy. Brahmin. Lawyer. Handsome. Living in Kolkata now. He's heard about me too.

How polite my babe is being to that demented old lady in the bakery. Brain full of amyloid plaques and neurofibrillary tangles. Long term confused with short term. She insisting that he's her daughter's husband and chiding him for not taking good care of her. Him apologizing and promising to be a better husband. I know he would've been a better husband. He is honest that way.

Me finally crying about my uncle to you. You making me weak. Making me soft.

Telling him I'm returning to help take care of my mother. Anger curled on his face. The pretty black curls in his hair. *You don't owe her anything. She never defended you. She treats your sister-in-law like shit. Just put her in a home.* Put her in a home? You won't ever understand, will you? I need to return to Kolkata. That's the right thing to do. The moral thing to do. *But you're a modern woman.* Yes, I am. I am a modern woman.

A grown man crying. Don't cry. That's not fair. His eyes looking like my grandfather's. Tired and aged. The burden of decades of things left unsaid. One day, scientists will describe the physiological process behind those eyes. Maybe it will be me.

Claire asking me what the fuck was I thinking. *He's sensitive. You knew that.* Me having no answer.

Babe, my brain is a tangible mass of intangibles. It's time for me to go home. And I will tell my parents that I'm excited to meet their friend's son. And I will be excited. And I will miss you. Don't be afraid of paradoxes, my love. Just because they're there doesn't mean we don't have an answer.

Tuesday afternoon. Dark clouds, the sky smothered. Me running late to meet him at the movies. My makeup smudged, my hair frizzed. A bit of flour on his cheek he hadn't noticed. Not watching the

show, but watching him. We both forget our umbrellas. The rain silk on my shoulders. His hands strong on my back. Quiet as the monsoons. Quiet enough to study on the red plastic stool in the kitchen.

Chloe Wilson

Communion

I realised almost immediately that mentioning the King of France had been a mistake.

It happened over dinner. Dr Morton was fresh from the shower. He sat, plainly uncomfortable, on his inflatable rubber ring, whose cheerful clown-nose red was incongruous in that tasteful house. Dr Morton wore a clean grey tracksuit. His thin blond hair was damp, his face at once old and babyish now that it was scrubbed clean and blood had risen to the surface of his skin.

He had arrived home unexpectedly that morning, leaving the rest of his family happily skiing somewhere expensive whose name was at once familiar and foreign to me: St Moritz, Aspen, Courchevel. In my mind this was all the one place, twinkling and brittle beneath the pale gaze of the sun.

‘Really, I’ve no-one to blame but myself,’ Dr Morton said. ‘I, more than most people, know how annoying it is when a patient ignores a doctor’s good advice.’

‘You’re not well?’ I said.

There had been no discussion about dinner – whether he wanted any, who would cook it. I had simply gone to the kitchen at dusk and made pasta.

Dr Morton washed chablis around his mouth energetically, as though it were Listerine.

‘No, Susie, I’m not well.’

We each took a mouthful. I chewed mine until it had almost liquefied, stalling while I thought of something to say. Fortunately, Dr Morton spoke first.

‘You may as well know. I have a rectal cyst.’

He looked me right in the eyes when he said *rectal cyst*, as though daring me to discuss it with anything other than a doctor’s clinical detachment.

He stabbed at a tomato and curled his tongue around it. I caught sight of the web of tissue which attached his tongue to the bottom of his mouth and it made my toes curl.

‘The concern,’ Dr Morton went on, ‘is not the cyst itself, but the risk that the cyst will become a fistula.’

Ah, fistula. Here was a Latin word I knew.

‘Like the King of France,’ I said.

‘Pardon me?’

His face had a weary, bacon-fat look about it.

‘Louis the Fourteenth.’

‘The sun king. I’ve heard of him,’ Dr Morton said dryly.

I babbled into the silence, explaining everything: that there was a surgeon who was called in to fix it. That it took six footmen to hold the king down. How the surgery was an unlikely success, and resulted in a sudden fashion for fistulas.

I had learned this in one of my long summer afternoons on the couch, waiting for a shift at whichever call centre or cafe I was working for at the time. There had been a documentary. They showed how the fistula broke away from the alimentary canal, forging its own jagged path to the skin’s surface. They showed a painting of the king sitting triumphant on his horse.

‘Are you saying people somehow gave themselves fistulas?’ Dr Morton said.

‘No, they didn’t actually *have* fistulas. They wore thick bandages around their buttocks to make it seem as if they did.’

Something about the word buttocks – about the weird politeness of it – made me blush.

‘People do all sorts of strange things,’ Dr Morton said.

The deal, which now had abruptly come to an end, was that I would house-sit for the Mortons during their six-week holiday. They trusted me, as I was a friend of their daughter Joanna, who was already overseas – on exchange, at a university somewhere in the South of France.

Dr Morton explained the house rules to me over another dinner. We shared a plate of oysters while he listed them: no parties, no men at the house, and I would be required to take care of the two spaniels, grown stiff and barrel-shaped with age, that the Mortons owned.

Dr and Mrs Morton were watching them carefully, judging when they were no longer wringing sufficient pleasure out of life so that they could be painlessly removed from it.

There was one more rule. Dr Morton would need me to maintain his trap. This was a simple thing; a cage with a mirror, baited with bright red dog kibble. The traps were for mynah birds. Dr Morton, between slurping oysters, had told me that they were one of the most highly-ranked invasive species in the world. We had unwittingly made them welcome, he said, because they were adroit at managing in environments with tall structures and little ground cover.

He had grown tired of their presence on his property: hearing their shrieks, seeing the small efficient brown-and-yellow parcels bombing into his garden, taking baths in his swimming pool, pecking at his dogs’ food.

Before he left, Dr Morton showed me how to dispatch the birds. I was to take the trap, place it inside a garbage bag and attach the bag to the exhaust pipe of my car with a piece of washing machine hose he kept for just this purpose.

The process, he told me, would take about five minutes.

I imagined Dr Morton at the wheel of the red convertible he had bought for himself on his fiftieth birthday. I imagined his impatience, running his hands along the smooth leather of the steering wheel, revving the engine just to give his body something to do.

I arrived at the house in the late afternoon. The Mortons had left that morning. I had been instructed that I could take any bedroom I liked, and at first had wandered into Joanna's, thinking that was the natural choice.

She still had childhood things everywhere. This included a little poster which an aunt had given her for her first communion.

The aunt had died. The poster had stayed.

It showed a silhouette of a man standing on a beach littered with starfish. The text explained that every morning this man went to the beach to throw back the starfish that had been washed up by the tide. Any starfish he didn't reach in time would dry out and die.

A second man approached the first and asked him why he was doing something so pointless. There are thousands of starfish on this beach, he said. You can't save them all. There's no way you can make a difference.

The man picked up a starfish and tossed it into the waves.

'I made a difference to that one,' he said.

Seeing it reminded me of being a teenager, of having school to structure my days. That seemed like a long time ago now.

Once I had dumped my things, I made a tour of the house. I did the things I would have been too polite to do had the Mortons been at home: perused the contents of their pantry and kitchen cabinets, looked through the papers piled on Dr Morton's desk, gone into both bathroom and ensuite and examined every tube and packet, looking at the expiration dates on the anti-fungal cream and antacids and sorbolene that I found.

I slept well enough in Joanna's room. But by the third night I was brave enough to move into Dr and Mrs Morton's room at the front of the house. When I opened the bedside drawer, I inventoried the contents with interest: tissues, vaporub, an old pair of glasses, more antacids, a yellowed, foxed copy of *The Joy of Sex*.

I spent time lingering over the illustrations in that book: here was a bearded, shaggy man, here a bemused woman displaying a lush isthmus of underarm hair. Had the Mortons used this book? Had one brusquely read out instructions while the other hauled their knees and hips into position?

The days passed pleasantly, quietly. I took shifts at a nearby pizza restaurant and ate what I brought home. There were no parties, no boys; the dogs were fed and walked their shuffling walk around the block.

There was only one rule I didn't follow. When I had arrived that first day, there had been a mynah, hopping erratically around Dr Morton's trap. I had opened the cage door and allowed it to fly away. Then I removed the kibble, and closed the trap door.

I didn't do this out of any fellow feeling for the birds. It was the thought of sitting in the car I couldn't stand - of turning the key and ticking down the seconds, feeling the hot afternoon sun on my arms, tuning the radio until I found a song I liked and then waiting until it ended before I cut the engine and went to look at what I'd done.

To my surprise, Dr Morton didn't want me to leave.

He was ginger on his feet that morning he arrived home. He almost limped into the bedroom, hoisting his elbows with each step as though he could lift pain out of his body. He saw I had set up camp in his bedroom. I was glad *The Joy of Sex* had been tucked back into its drawer.

I was sure he would politely but firmly tell me to go. But that first night, he said I was welcome to stay. I would simply have to move into Joanna's bedroom.

'Of course,' I said.

The freedom I had known in that house was gone. Now there was Dr Morton watching television and making scathing comments. He was irritable, a bad patient – he ate and left dishes around, read and then fell asleep with a book on his face, snoring and first lightly and then richly, in a way that made me picture the mucous membranes inside his sinuses vibrating. I could often hear him curse from the shower.

I cooked his meals, took the dishes away without a word.

The first time we went to check his trap – Dr Morton, thinking its closure an accident, had re-set it – I worried that Dr Morton would want me to dispose of any birds we found.

We went out into the warm twilight.

'How many of the little buggers do we have today?' said Dr Morton, shuffling painfully, doing that same odd marionette walk.

There was just one bird. Dr Morton reached down and opened the trap's door, groaning as he did so. The bird flapped and tried to back away from him, but he seized it in both hands.

I was trying to remember how to attach the vacuum hose to the car. So when he stood and twisted the bird's neck it was completely unexpected. He made a single efficient gesture, like opening a beer bottle, and it was done.

One day, he called to me from his bedroom. I found him red-faced and sweating, half-supine on the bed.

‘Ah, there you are,’ he said. He mopped at his forehead with a tissue pulled from the bedside table. ‘I must ask something rather revolting of you.’

Before he could tell me what the task was, I saw his bare, dangling feet, the spread newspaper on the carpet, the clippers next to him.

‘If it’s too much—’ he began, mistaking my hesitation for reluctance.

‘No, of course,’ I said.

I kneeled in front of him and took his foot in my hand. It was cold and dry, and the nails had grown surprisingly long, curling over the squarish ends of his toes.

‘A repulsive task,’ he said, smiling in a way that made his lips so white they were nearly blue.

I clipped his nails as gently as I could while he breathed like a steaming iron, trying and failing to mask the pain he was in. It was evident the cyst was worsening, and I wondered whether it had become a fistula, yet; whether he had split open somewhere, how close it was to the surface.

Over those weeks, I found myself staring at the poster in Joanna’s room with a mild, recreational degree of self-loathing. I wasn’t the man throwing back starfish. I wasn’t even a starfish. I was, I thought, something present but irrelevant: a rock, a gull that seemed stationary as it flapped into a strong headwind, a mosquito whining around the bodies of the two men, happy to take blood from either of them.

When the six weeks were almost over, Dr Morton offered to drive me to work. Driving, I knew, was against the Doctor’s orders, but Dr Morton wanted to visit a particular hardware store. He had decided that his simple mesh trap was not enough. There was another kind, tall, almost like an apartment block for mynahs. He had shown me a photograph of it, and researched where he could buy one. His eyes lit up as he described it.

At his most recent doctor’s appointment, Dr Morton had received some bad news. Yes, there was a fistula forming. There was still hope the body might close the wound on its own. But if not, he might end up with a temporary colostomy bag. Dr Morton had told me before he told his wife.

He grimaced as he lowered himself into the driver’s seat, settling his weight on the clown-nose pillow.

When I arrived home, Dr Morton was excited to see me, so excited he was waiting by the front window for my arrival.

'You won't believe it,' he said.

Golden hour, and everything in that yard looked beautiful: the covered swimming pool which the Mortons used a few times a year, the shedding wattle trees, the metal dog bowls overflowing with their riches of kibble. And there it was: the tower-sized mynah trap that Dr Morton had bought, and the twelve birds already trapped inside.

Together we transferred the birds to the smaller trap. Soon we were walking in companionable silence to the red convertible.

I cloaked the trap in a garbage bag, while the birds hopped and flapped, calling out in confusion. Dr Morton passed me the hose and some tape.

'It worked brilliantly,' he said. 'Didn't it?'

I assured him that it had.

'Are you going to do the honours?' I said.

Dr Morton looked at the car seat and winced.

'Would you mind?' he said. 'I thought you'd be quite adroit by now.'

'Of course,' I said. 'No problem.'

He half-smiled, thanked me. I watched him hobble up the driveway.

I turned the key and revved the engine inside that beautiful, heavy car. But after a few seconds, I checked the handbrake was on and stepped outside.

Some of the birds, when I pulled the trap away from the hot throb of the exhaust pipe, were dazed and wandered out drunkenly. Some couldn't move at all. Some hopped out and flew away shrieking. The air was thick and oily with the fumes from the convertible's exhaust.

They showed no gratitude, no meekness. They'd never know how close they'd come.

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Press enquiries: Dominic Smith: dominic.smith@mmu.ac.uk; +44 (0) 161 247 5277. The judges and finalists are all available for interview.

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