

A single, dried, brown leaf is centered vertically on a light beige background. The leaf has a jagged, torn edge on the left side and a small hole near the bottom. The text "Life Safari" is overlaid in white, sans-serif font across the middle of the leaf.

Life Safari

Life Safari

Life Safari - Ellipsis Zine #9

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Leaving Him

Rosaleen Lynch

When you say you've run away from home and you're a forty-three-year-old woman, you get that look that says you're a bit old for that and then an 'oh' and they search your face for bruises, wondering if they're under make-up, what you really look like and if that's why you're wearing long sleeves, jeans and a turtle-neck, not just because it's chilly out, and they check the ring finger of your empty hands, and the look of pity becomes a what-the-fuck-should-I-say-now-look, which hangs in the background of the conversation, even after you've changed the subject to the magazine cover in the doctor's waiting room, the before and after picture of the TV star you don't recognise but know she's a woman too, before and after everything, and you wish you hadn't talked to this stranger, others were happy to let it go, at the bus stop, on the bus, in the lift, a wave, thumbs-up or pressing the button to another floor, but this woman won't let it go and asks if you have support or if that's what you're at the doctor's for, then says sorry she doesn't mean to pry but wants you to know there's help and you say thanks, you're okay, you just need to get away, and she asks you plainly, she says because she went on training, if you're thinking about suicide and you say it's good of her to ask, but no, you're just running away from home, and she nods and before she says more, she's called, Maura it seems, and she hesitates, hand in the air, as if leaving you will seal your fate but you say go, not to worry, you're going to see the doctor, that's why you're here and when she leaves, you wonder if she'd feel quite the same if she knew, that though you told her you're leaving him, the 'him' is in fact your baby, and you're at the doctors to make plans to get sterilized, get your tubes tied, and no, if she were to ask, no you won't be going back.

Driving the Horse Ambulance

Elizabeth Ottosson

The mud wheezes through my boots and splatters from Benny's hooves onto my coat and skirt. At least the rain's stopped for a while. The clouds still rest heavy in the air, and I can't decide if they help or hinder the stench of manure mixed with blood and fear.

The fear's rolling off Benny, too. His blinkers help, but they don't stop smells or screams, nor the boom of the guns in our wake.

"All right, laddie," I murmur as we wait for a goods wagon to pass. "You're doing a good job."

"Hoy!" One of the men we're carting still has too much breath in him. "Can't you hurry him up? I could walk to the hospital tent faster than this."

"Why don't you try it, then?" I snap, and guilt pools like molten lead in my stomach. He can't walk; none of them can.

Finally the way is clear, and Benny and I trudge on through the artificial, war-enhanced twilight.

I can see the tent now, dark and squat amid the mist. More importantly, I can hear the shelling behind us, terrible and deadly but quieter and farther away with every step.

"Nearly there," I murmur to Benny.

Once we've unloaded, the one man still complaining, I lead Benny in a turning circle. A pat to his trembling flank, a muttered apology, and we trudge back towards the trenches.

An Unexpected Gift

Kay Sandry

We hunker down by the dunes, dug in low into the sand, escaping the breeze that blows chill even in August.

Kate makes a fire of grasses and salt-bleached twigs shielded by a ring of rocks. It burns, giving out a gentle heat. The sun shines fiercely from its bed of blue. The tide is out; wavelets kiss the shore, barely making a sound.

Gulls wheel in the sky calling out their joy to one another. Further down the beach two riders let their horses linger in the shallow waters.

A family with young ones set up camp behind a windbreak and begin the work of building sandcastles.

A jet skier buzzes the bay, upsetting the swans. While further out to sea, Ailsa Craig shimmers golden on the horizon.

And you start to read.

I listen to you, sharing with us the story you love so well. You do all the characters' voices, making them real – just as we did for you when you were younger. Your voice is rich, full of humour.

Soon peace falls around our fire. There is nothing but your voice. The world falls away and this moment goes on forever. The fire crackles, the sun burns hotter and before long I am asleep.

You're annoyed when I wake up. 'I'll have to read that chapter again!'

You don't know that you have given me a perfect moment that I will store away, have stored away, for when I need it.

The Human Racing

Sharon Boyle

My head breaches through clean water into the warmth of a new dawn. I worm up the sand, shifting past shells, seaweed and crumpled beer cans. Two tiny buds erupt from my sides, then another two, and I'm crawling, uprighting, staggering, walking, growing surer with every step.

I find handholds on a tree and climb, inching up, waiting for my arms to lengthen and strengthen before swinging higher. A snake slithers by, muttering something about an apple for breakfast but I refuse, being Darwinian, not devout. From the top, I observe the world below.

And what a world: culture and war; law and disorder; Shangri-La and slum; haute cuisine and slop. I slaver at the whiff of beef patties from a nearby griddle and jump to the ground on two sturdy legs. My arms truncated, my skin covered in tribal tattoos, my belly empty, my hands clutching spears, I hare to the grasslands for a four-footed lunch.

Home morphs from tree-house to wattle and daub hut built in wild woodland that clears and greens into striped, pressed lawns. I cross the garden to peer in the windows of a mansion. Monochromes serve flamboyant plates of cold aspics, pastries, and pork slices from a pig whose mouth is plugged with an apple.

Taste buds whetted, I load my pistol and go hunting in the forests for a venison dinner. The trees thin and I stumble into a tank-ridden battlefield. I'm slaying the enemy – in my heart righteousness, in my mind survival, in my hands grenades.

By evening, I'm fully evolved, fully knowledgeable and fully vaccinated against all things red-cross-on-doors. Clutching a passport to Earth's lands, seas and moon, I race along the beach, my heart clogging, my belly beach-ball big, my skin smirched by trivial tattoos. I plough on, ignoring the plastic and pollutants, uncaring about the unclean water, just marvelling at how far and fast I've come.

Rabbit Snare

Steven Patchett

Mum called our new place the Saloon because it was our last chance. Then she'd laugh in a way that scared me a little.

The men she called my *Uncles* didn't take long to find her. One was kinder than most. I'm Bob, he told me.

Stumped about what to do with a small boy while she slept it off, he took me out into the wasteland of the fields behind our home and showed me how to trap the rabbits that swarmed out there. A simple loop of wire, a firm branch to hang it by.

I watched it writhing and wriggling, every weakening move made the wire pull tighter and tighter until all it did was sit and stare at me, shivering under its fur.

Dead rabbits hung from the kitchen door handle, their heads lolling to the side, thin wire that had throttled them wrapped around the chipped paint. She cooked them as best she could, the meat stringy and mean. I stole a mangled strip of fur that missed the bin. It smelt strange, like fields and earth and suffering.

When she'd pissed off Bob, or whatever his name had really been, callers would begin rat-a-tap on the back door, sliding awkwardly around the side of the house. I pushed my hand into my mouth to stifle the fits of almost laughter at the clumsy altercations when one left and another arrived. Would they share a glance, or look the other way, embarrassed to cross paths with the next in line.

And when their wives found out, we would fetch the dustpan and brush and try to clear the window glass, shards finding us for days after. The latest Uncle covered the window with cardboard and left across the fields.

Afterwards, she rocked me to sleep while I sucked at my thumb. And as she promised me the world, that things would get better, finding a new life one day, I could see the wire around her neck draw tighter and tighter and tighter.

The Sun Vendors

M.L. Watson

Ma shakes me. I stir, barely, feeling the weariness of my bones, the way my skin clings to them, translucent, mirrored in Ma's face. I nod, rise from the mattress, follow her from the house.

We hurry through the streets, dead figures shrouded in capes, dark hoods that cover our faces, hide our shivers. The crowds we join are the same, moving as one, a silent mass with one goal, one destination. The queues they join are long, worming through fields, crossing gates, trailing off at the pavements. A streetlight stammers, shedding black capes in blue light. We stop behind an older man, his back folded, eyes empty. I look at Ma, see her mouth forming silent words, coins clinking in her palm. I pray it is enough.

The line dwindles under the black-fog sky, winds interspersed with rains. I clutch Ma's robe, watch the stalls grow nearer, rickety wooden structures with grey cloth slung across, unmarked canvases. No inscription is necessary; everyone knows the sun vendors.

At the fifth hour we get our turn. Our vendor is tall, silent, eyes unblinking as he stretches a filthy hand, accepts Ma's payment. I hold my breath as he inspects each coin, release my breath as he nods, once, and reaches below the stall. He produces a cardboard box, the corners bruised, flap loose. We hurry back past the crowds, heads tucked low against the hungry stares of those still waiting.

At home, the box sits on the table. Ma stands across, hands poised. She asks if I am ready, but I always have been. I tremble as she eases the lid apart, lets the sun rise to the ceiling. A solid ball, twisting, so bright it burns my eyes, but I can't look away. The warmth ripples my skin, cures my aching bones, stills my pounding heart. I sigh, see Ma's youthened face, strengthened movements. The relief is immense. The relief is fleeting. I watch the sun vanish, sapped clean, the empty box remaining.

What now?

We wait.

For what?

For the sun vendors to return.

And Now For Our Final Act

Jess Moody

The creaks became groans. They'd shored up the Big Top as best they could. Buttresses of worn wooden poles, lashings of rope and rigging. Across it all, bright bunting. Something to keep a spectacle of whimsy; and the crowd just the right side of hysteria. Their cheers tended to screaming, sometimes, but there was enough warm roar of breath for the show to go on.

The jugglers dropped more than usual, but persevered. Eyes dancing. Rapid calculations to adjust to the strengthening gravity: new pressure pulling, pressing on us each day, each hour now.

The acrobats used it well. Tumbling and spinning on its strength; explosions of chalked sand with every fist foot fist foot fist foot strike. Beating back on cracking ground. A spin and a smile and a glittered fuck you too.

The fire-eaters rode the waves. They found the hiccups: the earth-core stutters when the weight lifted for an instance to make us all shocked shadows of spacemen. As nausea surged through stomachs and throats, they distracted us with unspooling flame, floating rivers of rage. Then the spark and the crash once more.

No clowns, of course. Who could bear it?

For the finale, all eyes up. The trapeze artists faced the greatest risk. The new gravity clawed at fingertips, mocked their pretence at flight (for we were all to be rock now). Audience and troupe, friend and foe, we sat fixed and fast to our seats, gazes straining up when necks refused. They fought their grimaced fight as the weight teased over and over, ready to cut through an arc, a leap; a crunching crash into each other's grasp.

And still they refused the net.

The spotlight flickered as it followed the final swing. Two figures strobe stepping through air, as the sides of the tent slapped hard, bulged in, down, the implosion imminent.

The ringmaster stood below. Planted her feet against buckling knees. She tugged down, once, at her waistcoat. Smoothed pockets. Raised sweat-pitted arms. Commanded her world to hold just one second more.

A thousand hearts stopped in the skip of a beat.

Falling Star

Laura Besley

Standing in my mum's kitchen on Christmas Eve, Jake doesn't look like a world-famous singer.

'Hey, you,' I say.

He takes my hand, leads me to the low wall at the bottom of the garden where we sit, our heads tilted up at the tired night sky.

'Cathy—'

'Don't,' I say.

There was no break-up sex, or final kiss, nor were empty promises made; only goodbye, with the understanding that our worlds no longer aligned.

A smattering of light masquerades as a meteor shower, but I blink and it morphs into a plane, travelling far from here, lights flashing.

Connect

Yashar Seyedbagheri

I give up the Internet. Too many alerts about the Royal family, car crashes, and divorced celebrities. As a result, I see shadows through sunsets and scowls through smiles.

I leave my friends messages. Tell them if they want to connect, to call. Or visit. No emails. No texting.

Of course, they text. When I refuse to text back, they complain. Ask why I'm not sharing this Facebook post about impending wine tastings. Why didn't I like their latest toilet tweets?

Their calls and texts deflate in frequency. Once a day, once a week, once a month.

Some connections just break.

The Facility

Maura Yzmore

A man in expensive clothes inspects the contents of a wooden case. He closes it with a satisfied smile and says, "Very good. Now I'll need to see the facility."

"Of course," replies a woman seated across the table. She wears an elegant dress and a tight bun, and her lips stretch into a smile that does not reveal her teeth or reach her eyes.

A pallid girl in an oversize frock stands next to the woman. The girl leans forward to take the case from the man, and he winces at the sight of crusted blood atop her head, where her long hair parts.

The woman spots the man's reaction and leaps to her feet. She examines the girl's head to confirm there is no fresh bleeding. The woman is not gentle.

The girl keeps clutching the wooden case. Her eyes are vacant.

"A recent harvest?" the man asks, pointing toward the girl.

"Yes," says the woman. "It was a special request from an important client. We don't usually harvest staff."

"I see." The man stands up. "Shall we?"

The woman nods and extends her arm to show the way. The man goes first. The woman and girl follow.

They walk down a long, narrow hallway to a white door that leads into the basement. The man opens the door and walks halfway down the stairs. The woman is right behind him.

The room below is white and windowless, with neon lights. The sounds of drills, suction pumps, and muffled moans come from two rows of hospital cots separated by plastic curtains.

"As you can see," says the woman, "we are a small facility, but we offer full service."

The girl is still at the door. She looks down at the woman's head, raises the wooden case, and strikes.

Give and Take

Sarah McPherson

The sea delivers me a gift every day. Sometimes big, sometimes small. Sometimes the first thing I see, sometimes I have to root around through sand and seaweed and string.

A piece of drift glass, opaque and pitted, smoothed by time and tide. Still, when I hold it up to the light it shines like the green of your eyes in the glow of the winter hearth.

A fish skull, something big, long dead. Off-white and webbed, spiky, light as a feather in the hand. Hard to imagine it as a living thing, wriggling and splashing and slicing through the water. You always said the sea made you feel alive.

A piece of twisty, knotted wood, dark and damp when found but hung up at home, bone dry, striped in shades of cream and brown. From a certain angle it looks like a woman dancing.

A length of net, the rope frayed and abraded, tiny shells caught in its twists like gems. I remember you dancing on the sand, a net scarf draped over your head and shoulders like a veil. I tried to copy you and your laugh carried; the call of a bird on the wind.

An ancient bottle, encrusted with barnacles on the outside but inside, nothing but water and air. Empty; like our house, our bed.

Your absence is a space I fill with the sea's gifts. They crowd together, overflowing shelves, our kitchen table, your dresser. But still every day I search the tide line, the rock pools, the hidden cove where you swam; if I don't I might miss today's gift. And today might be the day it sends you back.

Full Stop

Edward Barnfield

It was a cold summer in the Anthropocene when language became polluted. It started with reports of sickness in far-off places, performance poets falling off stage in New York, tour guides in the Andes losing track. Then it came home. You would end phone conversations with a slick of grammar clinging to your mouth. When you tapped at tablets, the stink stuck to your fingers for a week.

Our first instinct was denial. We rolled out our usual defences – long threads on Twitter, opinion pieces in the popular press. But the threads unravelled, and the press weighed down.

Scientists thought it might be a virus spread via semi-colons and ampersands. They placed the bloggers in quarantine, unplugged the academics' keyboards. Doctors prescribed weeks of Trappist silence. Art provided respite. Abstraction gave little bursts of relief, until a thousand people collapsed at The Tate, overcome by the fumes of someone reading a tombstone.

That was when we burned the thesauri, lexicons, and glossaries.

Rumours spread like spoiled jam. You heard that the elite had retreated to the great mansions of Surrey, conversing in unsullied Brittonic and purified Latin. A group of trust funders fled on a private flight to the Amazon, hoping that Arawak might have escaped the blight. They ended stranded and starving.

It didn't occur to us that words were a finite resource. When we bathed in euphemism, we didn't think we were changing the properties of language, creating something malignant, minatory. It was only when speech soured that we knew we had lost something essential to our essence.

What will we tell our grandchildren, you say? The babies born in isolation, raised without the skills to classify and codify. They will not be capable of asking, and, as we grow sicker, we will not be able to explain.

Animals will survive. Screeches and squawks are unaffected, and barking remains constant. Perhaps the generations that follow will join that chorus.

For now, I type this warning, eyesight blurring, choking on syntax. Preserve the words you have. You will miss it when it's gone.

Not for human consumption.

Boneless Chicken

Kinneson Lalor

Waking before I do, my bones squeeze their way through my pores, small but whole, then shut the bedroom door. They click-clack down the corridor, frisky freedom from blood and fat and muscle. They tick across the kitchen tiles, clattering their tips at the kettle's switch, bamboo chime knuckles in the teacup handle, a rattle of impatience for wind.

They cannot creep beside me—tick, tick, tick, drum-splitting as time—placing the cup on the bedside table. The lamp spreads jaundice against the wall. The tea breathes hot curls of pleas.

I turn away. I want the biscuit dregs on the bottom, wait for the scald to pass. It'll just be for the morning, perhaps the day. I need to stay here, where the air between feathers traps the remaining warmth. It'll be more than just the morning.

My bones get in beside me, chattering cold. They press against me, ice-bone metal from the small of my back to the dent between my shoulders, now bladeless. My body warms them, and my cooling skin lets them in.

After, I sit and drink the tea. Too much steep, too much milk, and the biscuit doesn't crumble right. Stale powder piles at the bottom of the cup. I chide my bones. The tea is cold.

You Always Said

Elle Lavoix

You always said I could have extra cake. You'd smile as I crammed a thick wedge in my mouth, sloshing it down with store-bought orange juice, chocolate smeared around my lips.

You always said I could buy the expensive crayons, the fat ones that I liked to squeeze in my fist. You'd watch me peel the paper off the pink one first, letting the ribbons float to the floor, then press down on the stub until it skidded across the paper.

You always said I could put extra foam in my bath. You knew how much I liked bubbles, the big, wobbly, glistening ones. You'd watch them slide down my skin in their filmy tracks. You'd lean over and pop one with your index finger, and I'd look away.

You always said it was bath time when Mom wasn't around.

You always said it was bath time when it wasn't.

Magic Follows the Few

Sarah Wallis

The allotment is cursing the caterpillars, worming in the mazy paths, and the slugs leaving their silver treasure trails, worse luck, when an old woman pops up in the soil warrens. She's got tangled in the blue tarpaulins, so concentrated was she on the task of stuffing her mouth full of luscious, ripe, red juice bursting strawberries.

She has been sequestered too long, revels now in the tickle of dewy grass underfoot and fresh berry juice trickling down her chin. An escapologist from the bright lights, incessant TV and supervised baths, she feels the sun on her back at last. The old lady, thinking herself young, but lost at 76, has crowned herself queen in a palace of polytunnels. She reigns over a space of blue, black earth and is alert as a rabbit waiting for a sign. Her eyes widen, as the gardener appears, a woman on his arm.

'Well she escapes, you see, misses her own plot, and adored all her animals, it's understandable... and such a shame,' the woman is saying, while the gardener pats her hand and shakes his head.

'There's no lost queen here,' he says, 'no lop ears or white rabbits either... and come to think of it no Mad March Hares! Not that I've seen any rate,' they laugh, patrol, interfere.

Alice snarls to herself, hunkered down in the strawberry patch. I'll show them, she thinks, and a schoolgirl giggle rises and rises out of her, until there is a bright flash of something white that passes before interloper eyes. When the woman and the gardener turn round to look, Alice stands, lifting in her arms a stray, white rabbit.

Only Child

Andrea Lynn Koohi

People ask sometimes if I have any siblings, and I hate the question because I know the story of the selfish only child, lacking empathy and social skills, and a part of me worries that maybe I'm like that, and I answer no, though the truth is yes – once I had a sister, and no, I never lived with her, and yes she was a half-sister, and no, I'm not sure when I saw her last, but when I was six and she was a baby, I stayed some weekends at our father's place, and I scooped her from her crib in the early mornings and held her to my chest and sang her lullabies, until one day the strength in my arms gave out and she tumbled to the floor, which made her mother lock her bedroom door so I couldn't sneak in to pick her up anymore, and sometimes that memory moves my fingers to type a message in Facebook to ask about her life and to tell her I miss her, and no, I never send it, but when I was seven and she was one, I followed her to the washroom where she found a glass that was left by the tub, and she picked it up smiling and whipped it at the wall, sending glass through the air and a shard to my forefinger where it sliced my skin and a flap of flesh dangled, and my father pushed it down and wrapped it with tissue, not thinking about stitches, so the wound self-healed but the scar is still there, shaped like a hook, and it hurts sometimes without reason or warning, and I believe that's proof that she is real.

Everything She Imagined It Would Be

Diane D. Gilette

The baby would cling to her like a little monkey, every day, every hour making it hard to remember the last time she slept or peed or went outside. But that's what babies did. They stole your memories and your life and the love of everyone around you. It had to eat every two hours, gulping greedily at her breast. Take, take, take. Slowly draining away her life force until she was simply a shell of sustenance.

It was such an alien creature. Limbs too long and thin. Eyes too big for its face. She'd hold it and dance around the nursery trying to hush its wails, trying to remember the way it felt to just let loose and flail around on the dance floor at the club, not caring who saw once the music had taken hold. But she couldn't do that now. Not with a baby in her arms, delicate, like a stray eyelash on a cheek waiting to be blown away with a soft whoosh of air and a wish that wouldn't come true.

Family visited, so she would coo over the baby's pink lips and the shape of its tiny ears. She would tickle its feet and agree that she was so glad they hadn't waited, after all, the way she had wanted to, the way she always said she would. Motherhood is so divine, she'd tell them. Everything she imagined it would be. Only more so.

Boiled Eggs

Kik Lodge

Girlfriend One was erratic with eggs. One Sunday they'd be spot on, another an embarrassment. I'm not saying Dad asked her to leave because of this. She was a relentless chatterbox and always got hiccoughs at the breakfast table.

"I like my yolk spoonable," he said to Girlfriend Two, "my white firm." But her eggs were always hard-boiled. Her and Dad used to make pig noises when they laughed, then she went abroad to find herself.

Girlfriend Three said she didn't trust boiled eggs. "Too bloody mysterious for me," she said, and Dad said nothing. She cooked us fried eggs "because I can see what's what," and the three of us ate them in silence.

Then Girlfriend Four came along and used a timer, and the result was a perfectly boiled egg, but I knew Dad thought "cheat". Last time we saw her she said "Jesus, you two."

Dad's the one who boils the eggs now because Girlfriend Five is vegan, and yesterday he spoke about Mum's eggs.

How the shell would never be hot but warm. How the buttered soldiers would wait in line to be dipped into the yellow squelch. How when I was little, I'd dunk the soldiers and turn them up the other way, watch the yolk trickle down their bodies as far as my fingers.

Girlfriend Five is dressing the soldiers this morning - not with real butter but with apple cider vinegar and almond milk - and I tell her it's different but it's really very good, because I mean it.

Scroll/Dive

F. E. Clark

11.32pm, sleep has not come, I scroll: street lights rippling on the duck pond in Reykjavik; a feather waves in the breeze on an empty osprey's nest in a Scottish highland glen; offerings are stalled in-progress on Submittable; the flash of red tail lights of a lone vehicle in the M8 Charing X Tunnel. Hands claw-jointed, clutching my connection to infinity, I ache for distraction, for connection—for sleep.

Sitting on the wide sill of a second floor window of the old farmhouse, alone, there's no-one else at all. The window is hoisted high, held open with a stick. It's not night, but neither is it day. I don't know how it came, but water fills the entire valley below, it laps gently on the walls of the house.

01.03 am, awake, blue lit I tap: Chernobyl status is 1.14568046904% safe; on Rockall Island the current wave height at the K5 Buoy is 2.7 metres; microlites swarm over Anaheim; the view of the Earth from the International Space Station passes slowly; a lightning storm flickers in the Philippine Sea off Tokyo. The sweat of miniscule degrees of change ripples through cyberspace, and my seeking heart.

Drifting—in my dream all is calm. The burn, fields, road, garden, and the lower floor of the house are all submerged. Nothing moves, except small flashes of the exotic birds: red and yellow and green and blue. They flit among the tops of trees, which are all that be seen of the pines above the water. The strange voices of the birds echo up to me.

03.17am in my insomniac bubble, I observe: flight paths of light aircraft over Svalbard in the Barents Sea; wireless balloons suspended over Peru; a parcel lost on its way from a depot to here. Sleep-grit in my eyes, my blood beats with the flickering of impossibility.

Finally, at dawn, just when I'm supposed to rise, I fall deeply. I stand on the sill and thrust my arms out above my head, arrow my body. Dive. Into the green I go. Out, with joy, among the iridescent fishes.

Perpetual War: 1979

Kathryn Aldridge-Morris

I never went straight home from school; deviated to the library. I liked the smell of the carpet tiles and reading *Mandy for Girls*: stories of orphans, stepmothers, events beyond control, stories of overcoming ordeals, finding real friends. Between Thursdays when *Mandy* came out, I lay behind the comic rack and pulled out the closest books I could reach. It was there I found Orwell. *Animal Farm* at first. Then *1984*. Nothing in *Mandy* had prepared me for *1984*.

My mother warned me not to read it. Didn't I get enough nightmares? It was true I dreamt of poltergeists and disappearing family and the fear was starting to pool in mottled marks under my skin. But still. I read it, over and over, devouring the dystopia with the same self-destructive fervour with which I got through packs of candy cigarettes.

I saw Big Brother in the Ford Cortina that would pull up outside our house at night, keep the engine running, watching. I heard Big Brother on the end of the phone, me stretching the yellow coiled wire, wrapping it round my fingers, listening to a black and white breath. It was only me and mum who got the calls from Big Brother. I started a diary. I wondered if dad was involved. I swore I saw him climb out of the Cortina one time.

My parents forbid me from watching the film version. I was a nervous wreck already, they said. Look at the eczema, and you're only twelve. But I snuck out from my room, tiptoed downstairs to Oceania and crouched behind the foam, orange sofa watching Winston and the rats, the breaking of a human being, the betrayal of a woman – Do it to Julia! Not me! Do it to her! Watching a man doing whatever it took to look after number one. And with my small body clenched, I crept back to bed, through the blinking of headlights in the hallway. Not before seeing the phone receiver ripped and dislocated, moaning from the floor, a shattered glass and the dent in the chair where dad usually sat.

Night Flights

David Cook

From the window, Holly watched her daughters guide their kites through the buffeting wind. She glanced at the clock. It said 10pm. Her shoulders sagged.

She stared at her children. The burns caressing their faces shimmered in the moonlight. A legacy of the fire. Now Harriet and Katie would only go out after dark and talked only to each other. They blamed her. She'd left the candle alight that night. Now they had barricaded themselves behind blank stares and closed mouths.

Holly watched them reach for one another's hands. Their kites danced silver through the sea of stars.

Nobody's Fault

Tim Love

The stone cottage was surprisingly cheap. Tom insisted on helping me move in. After dumping my suitcases he unplugged the kettle and filled it. "Just like the good old days," he said, and kissed me. I heard the walls whisper, and froze. "Sorry," he said, "About everything. Well, I'd better leave you to settle in."

Over the months my new friends have come to know more about me than he ever did – my past and my future. I haven't seen them yet, but we often talk. They say that thatched cottages are no more likely to catch fire than tiled ones, but when they do, everything goes. I've never had a fire, but I've been in love, an intense burning love that still scares me. Never again.

Now the bath-water's growing cold, the bubble-bath foam popping around me. They say there's no point waiting any longer - there'll only be more red traffic lights to delay the lorry. I put on my best clothes, the ones I wore on our first date. As I stroll along the empty lane I notice a shoelace is loose. I kneel. When a lorry approaches, I'm still finishing a double knot. The driver misjudges the corner, he doesn't see me. I return to the cottage, not surprised that they're waving from the windows, smiling. I feel as if I'm home at last. Next day Tom lets himself in, sobbing as he collects my things. "Sorry," I whisper.

Starting Again Somewhere Else

Sarah Mosedale

Babies have a hundred more bones than adults do. This makes them crunchier. You can chew them up and spit them out more easily. Though, because the bones are smaller and thinner, you may find they get stuck between your teeth. I recommend flossing.

Alternatively you can extract them and create a delicate lattice work, like spun sugar, much more complex and beautiful than anything you could make with those great lumpen adult femurs and whatnot. This makes a lovely wall hanging for a nursery.

A spinster aunt of my acquaintance arranged her set so meticulously, integrating them with slivers of coal and stringing them with cobwebs, that she was able to play the jolliest tunes her visitors had ever heard. Her sing-alongs were legendary; invitations bartered for gold.

Another created an elegant basket which she placed in the hall near her front door. Dolorous black umbrellas wept there for decades on her behalf, freeing her for a life of fragrant indulgence.

A friend built a wildly irregular picket fence with hers to fend off the crowds of emperor penguins who had gathered to stare judgementally through her windows. This brought some relief though the lack of an integrated garage meant she still had to run a daily gauntlet to her car.

One woman I know used them to spell out scatological imperatives which she projected onto the exterior walls of her house, finally ridding herself of sympathisers and scolds alike. Her landlady took photos and between them they won a prestigious art prize.

Mine have always been breadcrumbs, laying a gleaming trail behind me however deep in the forest I wander. Forever leading me back. One day I'll walk away from them and start again somewhere else.

Lodgings

Victoria Stewart

The room at the corner of the house with one window looking down over the lilac tree and the garage roof, and another looking down over the front path. On the bookshelves, the Enid Blytons are eventually hidden behind a layer of Tolstoy and Camus.

The room with a metal sink next to the built-in cupboard, where the bed has a standard-issue brown and cream woollen cover hidden under a blue and pink Indian-patterned one bought from a shop that smells of candles.

The room with the faulty radiator where the advances of an over-enthusiastic medical student are fended off prior to a regretful inward acknowledgement that, if nothing else, he would have provided some additional warmth.

The room with a view up a narrow street of houses that are all more or less identical to each other, towards a pizza parlour outside which a kid is sometimes to be seen sniffing glue.

The room on the ground floor with stripped floors and rag-rolled walls where, waking with the world's worst ever hangover, lying next to a man whose name can't be recalled, the discovery is made, on turning on the radio, that Diana is dead.

The room up in the attic that gets so hot in summer it's easiest to sit around in just knickers; after all, no one can see in through the skylight, and no visitors are expected.

The room where a bird gets down the chimney and can be heard cheeping and flapping inside the bricked-up fireplace, even from underneath the covers, but it can't be rescued, and, helpless in the face of its helplessness, moving downstairs to sleep on the couch seems the only choice. By morning it is silent. Sometimes, in no matter what room, it can be heard still: small, lonely, trapped there in the dark.

Wheel of Death

Emma Allmann

Liz could tell Mimi wanted to fire her. The room was tense. Mimi was not saying what she wanted to say. She was talking about the weather, and then the delays in production and then how Liz should get a cat.

"I don't think I can afford a pet right now."

"They're not that expensive. You can afford a pet."

"Oh. Maybe."

Liz could barely afford her rent. Mimi's face was frozen into a smile that occasionally, when Liz lost focus or was looking out of the corner of her eyes, turned into a sort of sneer. Her bright lipstick highlighted her ever twisting expression.

Mimi's nails clicked against the keyboard as the room fell silent. Liz's time as Mimi's executive assistant could be summed up by this exact feeling. Quiet uncertainty. The only thing she knew was that through this uncertainty she would, invariably, choose the wrong path forward. This was a test. Mimi kept her eyes on the computer. Liz had asked questions when she first arrived. Interruptions were not welcome here.

Liz's arm itched. She tried to think about anything else. Mimi's chipped nail polish. Itchy arm. Maybe she wanted to be fired. Itchy arm. Lunch. Itchy arm, itchy arm, itchy arm. Liz flexed her arm thinking maybe she could satisfy the itch from the inside.

Mimi's sneer/smile had settled into something else. A sort of content smugness. Mimi was enjoying this. Mimi probably knew Liz's arm itched. Probably made it happen. Probably put itchy dust in the AC specifically for this moment. Liz felt suddenly as though she was pinned up to a twirling board waiting for Mimi to throw knives at her. Waiting for the inevitable mistake that chopped her hand off or cut through her heart.

Liz slumped in her chair and itched her arm.

"Something wrong, Liz? Are you bored?"

The power of silence quelled the anxiety pains in Liz's stomach.

"...Liz?" Mimi's head tilted with confusion, pinning her to the target.

Liz stood up and looked down. Mimi's eye twitched. Before Liz walked away she threw two knives.

"I quit."

Our Many Almost Deaths

Alexander Evans

There once was a girl who almost died and then didn't. This isn't the most compelling beginning. We'll all almost dying. On my drive to work this morning, I almost died at every turn, and I'm almost dying now, here at my desk. The ceiling could collapse, an assassin could sneak up behind me, my tea could be poisoned, my dog could go berserk and tear out my oesophagus. What I'm saying is that anything can happen—anything does happen—so what does it matter anyway?

But anyway, the girl. She had a disease. The kind of disease that gets you written up in the paper, that gets strangers to start dropping off casseroles at your door and speaking in low voices in the church refectory. But then she got better, and no one really talked about her anymore. Not after the first Sunday she was back at church. She just went back to being a normal girl.

When I met her, she was working at a hotel off Exit 45, and I said, "you're that girl who was sick, right? You almost died."

And she said "yeah, that's me."

And I wanted to ask if it had been worth it in the end, the not-dying, but I was chicken, so I bought a room instead, and I took a shower, and then I sat by the pool and watched some kids from Oklahoma try to drown each other in the deep end. When I walked back through the lobby, she was gone. I asked where the not-dead girl had gone, and they told me she'd gone home, and I asked them to call her, to make sure that she hadn't been run off the road or bitten by a venomous snake. They looked at me strangely, but they called, and the phone rang and rang and rang, and they said she was probably out, and they were probably right, and maybe it was worth it, to be out after work, cheating death, a normal girl. Maybe it didn't need to come to anything in the end.

Distance Between Us

Lauren Sharp

We stand opposite in a kitchen that seems mundane after everything I have just said. Need to back up and back track and back into isolation. There's no point in arguing. We listen to the weight my of words and wonder if I'm wrong. The walls slope and the sides slowly fold, packing themselves away. I must listen to the words you speak. They could easily have come from my own mouth. But my speech has caused a shift, there is a change in what surrounds us with unknown results. I pinch the electricity in my stomach, so it doesn't escape. Then a quiet unknown until the distance between us ends and we carry on because it has to be okay.

In the kitchen something has ended but we don't yet feel the consequence. The curtains unravel and the table shudders as it's swallowed by the floor. In the kitchen the bricks start to crumble but we stand a metre apart looking the same. React and go back and it can't be undone. We float further from each other, feet rooted to the spot. If I laugh and take it back will the bricks slot back into place? Could we weave ourselves back together? Would we stand a metre apart, the distance between us gone? No, we are stretching further apart with every passing moment and there is nothing we can do.

Valley of Ashes

T. L. Ransome

This girl was named for a fire. She kindled coal, wood, peat. She breathed smoke, palls of steam that peeled off wet hay, weightless char that flew at her like rain.

She tended the fires of those she lived with. She saw to their burnings, their disposals, their boilings-over. Her scorches bloomed red and yellow, the edges sealing under lava fields of scabs, scar tissue laddering her limbs. She was their ash-can.

One day, a friend took her away. She moved into a suburban semi, had bubble baths that shimmered like oil slicks, sat on benches in the garden. Her lava cooled, hardened, fell asleep.

As summer turned, she got an invitation from home. She RSVP'd. And with the help of a few good women, this girl went to the ball.

She arrived in a silver 911 with thorn-shaped hubcaps and a 3.8-liter twin-turbo. She wore a black catsuit that hid her scars. She marched through the palace in six-inch heels, dousing every fire in the place. She slopped dishwater, champers, punch all over the carved mantels, the verdure tapestries, the venerable hearth-rugs. The great and the good coughed, cursed, and fled from the miasma of floating ash.

She lost a stiletto on the palace steps. The prince found it. He drove a pole-axe through the sole and vowed to hunt her down.

He bled the royal treasury, sent patrols to search the town, ordered six tailors every hour to herald her imminent death. He torched the barley fields and all the thatch went up. The royals cracked and peeled like rotten fruit. A black amen of charcoal wrapped the valley like a shroud.

In the end, they never found her. The fire that smoked them all was named for this girl.

The Dripping

Renato Barucco

Focus on the drip chamber of the IV as a way to block out everything else, like counting sheep in hell. Someone told him about stillicidium, Latin for the dripping of water from the eaves of a house. "Life is a stillicidium." He didn't get it. Then he found out about a form of torture consisting of water dripping on the victim's forehead all the way to insanity. If drops create hollows in stones, a human skull is a walk in the park.

His brother, who was on the receiving end of the IV, invited him to sit on the bed, but no. He feared skin cells and hair follicles would fall away from his body and onto those crispy sheets, the baby blue linoleum floor, the aluminum door handles, leaving traces of him in that organized madness. He asked him to pray for him before he drifted off.

He went for a walk. There was nothing to explore in that city but the past. Some routes stay idle under the skin, voracious like the first cell that turned against his brother. The newsstand was gone because no one buys porn and newspapers anymore, but the church stood strong, faith and fear across centuries. A sensorial avalanche hit him in the guts: the smell of holy water and wax and stone, the body of dead Jesus in a glass box, lit by neon light, its gray glare. And despite the acquired atheism and the buildup of crisis competence, he prayed.

He went back in a hurry because he had to piss. The IV bag was almost empty. The pink and green vitality of his brother's coloring had given way to the pale beige of chemo. Done for today. His brother will be back next week, when he'll be already miles away from the irreparable threats of the past and the future, comfortably strolling in the streets of Brooklyn. But for now, they walked side by side down the hallway, almost indistinguishable, the same eagerness in their step for the dripping had yet to end them.

The Void We Cannot Fill

Melissa Llanes Brownlee

You pull your body away from mine, emptying the spoon you once filled. It's too hot to cuddle, you grumble. I know the heat is more than the weight of summer sheets and no air conditioner. It's that expanse between our imploding stars, the impending death of a universe. You hear me sigh and turn over, away from you. I pull the sheet around myself, the only plane that connected us, but you welcome the freedom, weightless.

You push your body away from mine, scooping out what is left of me. It's too hot to cuddle, you swear. I don't know if the heat will scour my flesh clean of the marks your passage has made. You throw the sheet off our bodies, my skin exposed as I sigh, moving away from you, a detour on the way to something better.

I throw my body against yours, latching on to the edges. It's too hot to cuddle, we cry. I want the heat to subsume us both, rewriting the essential parts of us, keep you, leave you. I sigh as the sheet weaves in and around what's left of us.

Self Care

SJ Townend

Admiring the macramé plant hanger with its full head of Boston fern, Sandra smiled with her whole face and cooed as she draped her crocheted cardigan over the back of one of two chairs in the tiny room. Polka dots of peach faux-leather freckled through the holes in the knitwear. Slipping her ten Pinched Cheek Pink painted toes out of her espadrilles, she planted her feet downward on the sisal rug, embracing the warm floor before perching on the edge of the treatment table.

"Any medical conditions, medications?" the masseuse asked, lighting a candle that smelt of sleep.

"No, all fit and well," Sandra replied, shedding her skirt and blouse and brassiere at the masseuse's direction before sliding under the peach seersucker towel. "Terrible knots in my shoulders though. Desk work."

Sandra, thumbs kissing in front of her, rhythmically tickled the air beneath her palms as she spoke, miming the international sign for keyboard.

The masseuse smiled just with her lips and swiped her finger across the screen of her phone. Bluetooth magic wafted harp music in waves of infrared, purple, lilac and violet out of hidden speakers and into the room.

"Oh, and tight calves. Balled muscle fibres, half-hitched, sore. Nordic walking. So many knots." Sandra heehawed, as she placed her face into the hole.

Where before, her jowls had sagged and her skin had been rumpled, her cheeks, now pressed against the rim, had become stretched taut. Gravity pulled just her words downwards; her eyes were greeted with sisal.

"I'll loosen you up," the masseuse assured, dribbling enough oil to dress a salad from a brown glass bottle into her hand. She pressed her industrious mitts together as if for prayers and then pressed her strong palms down firmly between Sandra's shoulder blades.

"Just you relax, unwind. Enjoy your treatment."

"I will," said Sandra, unaware those words would be her last.

"We'll get those nasty knots out."

And she did.

At the end of the treatment, under the towel on the table where once a tangled fishnet woman lay, rested just a yard length of old rope.

Rite of Passage

Sian Brighal

The clatter of glasses forms the melody of lullabies that want to end but don't know how. The rustle of black bin bags is a soft shushing, a gentle hint that even such things as wakes must be put to bed.

The family stand, give their thanks, say farewells. You don't leave with them and I can't. Your sharp glances have pinned me in place. You come over, place your bottle on the table like staking some claim and sit. Years of unsaid things hang between us, and I wonder where you could possibly start.

"Thanks for coming, Simon."

"As if I wouldn't!?"

Lips tighten. How I've missed your silent, elegant accusations. You down it with a drink, but you're right. I almost didn't buy the train ticket. I thought it was because seeing him buried would be too much. But I'm not that noble, it seems. I have come to portion out my shame.

"Do you think he'd have done it if he'd run across the tracks with us?"

You start twenty years ago and unknowingly offer me a platter to fill. "We were thirteen, and beating the train was just a stupid stunt kids did."

"But he didn't jump...and it's like he—"

"What?" But I know. I saw it once, too, and pile your plate high.

"Like he stopped living and was just walking around, waiting for his body to catch up. And when it didn't, he...he made sure it did."

"Yeah, he wasn't the same afterwards, was he?"

Your breath hitches hard. How greedy is grief and how desperate shame!

"It was a stupid joke, you know." You sob. "That he weren't a man because he never jumped. Just a stupid joke."

I tell myself this is the why. I can't swallow any more. Take it from me. This was all about running and dodging trains. It wasn't scared and selfish love; it wasn't making threats and walking out. It wasn't about not jumping when it really mattered. It's a joke gone too far...not a slow murder.

Because how I want to miss him...but dare not.

The Passenger

Leslie Grollman

I don't speak French but I recognize some words. In the rear-view mirror of the Aston Martin he bought her for their wedding gift, I see her eyes blink too much when she says *mother* and sighs. He nods in agreement a lot. Or is he being kind? He says *understand* five times before she stops smiling. His voice hushes as if he were apologizing, but I don't know the French words for 'what I really mean to say'. She blank-stares out the window straight ahead. We pass six mile-markers in silence. *Fine*, she says in English, *it is settled*. Her left hand on the steering wheel, her right hand assures him with a pat. He says something about *rain* and *eat*. I am hungry too, and hungry to be asked a question: 'how are you doing back there, son' or 'are you warm enough'. I want to ask how far we have to go, to remind them I am here.

Life Safari

Johanna Robinson

You're three, and you know what it's like to be a lion, because you watch the smallest one sleep among the trees, between its mother's paws.

You're seven, and you know what it's like to be an eagle, because you feel the air through your feathery hair as you fly from the sofa, the trampoline, down the helter-skelter, when everyone looks so tiny you could pick them up and eat them.

You're twelve, and you know what it's like to be a sea-lion, belonging to two places but never both at once: to two houses, two bedrooms – one sea-themed, one wood-themed. You slip between Mum and Dad, from land to sea.

You're fifteen, and you know what it's like to be a bat, cave-safe, day-sleeping, night-alert, listening for echoes of the past, signals of the future.

You're twenty; and you know what it's like to be a tiger, camouflaged, still and somehow restless.

You're thirty-one, and you know what it's like to be a bee, a drone in fact. They have no sting, says the ranger, don't be afraid. You watch them, hiving, hectic; they never seem to rest.

You're forty-five, and you know what it's like to be a primate. The children hang off you, pull your hair. You read them books, from ants to zebras, make butterflies from thumb prints, bake biscuits in the shape of elephants, smile at the ranger who now shares your shelter.

You're fifty-nine; and you know what it's like to be a white rhino, whose family group is called a crash.

You're seventy, and you know what it's like to be a father, a grandfather. You know what it's like to be you. You're both retired, you and the ranger. You pace more slowly.

You're eighty-five, and you remember it all and hope that for a while, the world remembers you.



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