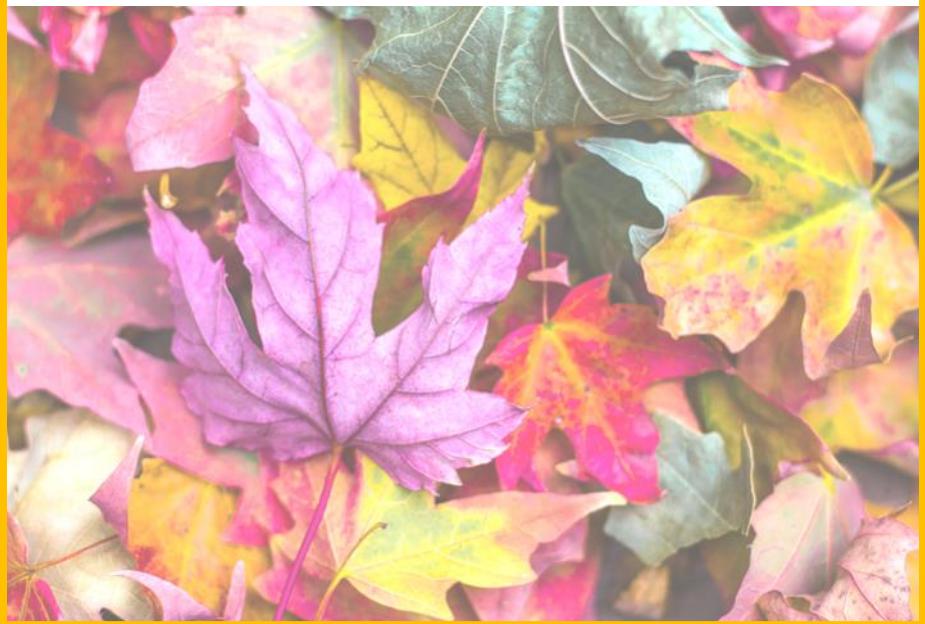




Fully Lit Magazine

Autumn 2020



Fully Lit Magazine

Autumn 2020 Collection

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Thank You for Your Love by Glyn Hoskins-Turner

Your love caresses and soothes me,
protecting me from the harshness and knocks of daily life.

Your love warms up the cold corners,
the dark shadows where my fears reside.

Your love is like the warm sun on cold snow,
pure, beautiful, dancing brightly before my eyes.

Your love fills my world with hope that good people walk this earth,
but that those who are as good as you, are still very rare.

I feel blessed to be sharing my path to eternity with you.

Thank you for the love that you freely give to me every day of your life.

I hold it gently in my hands and it brings happiness into my heart.

And I smile.

Still waters by Glyn Hoskins-Turner

Whenever I see a fish fly, I will think of you.
when the sun breaks from behind the clouds,
I will know that you are there.

As I focus my camera lens to capture life,
I will feel your touch and harness your skills.

When my first son is born, he will be named after you.

Never forget my friend the laughter and the tears we shared,
for you will always be a part of me.

Goodbye for now. Be safe. Be calm. Be happy.
For I will love you from the depths of my soul and that will never change, never go.

Even though you are gone, I will always want you there.

When the sky is blue,
and the air is clean,
and the breeze touches my skin,
I will know it is you.

My one true love.

My dearest friend.

I will keep you safe in my heart in the knowledge that we will meet again.

Release by Glyn Hoskins-Turner

You are my rising sun, my glowing moon.

You are my Christmas fun and my Sunday snooze.

You are my beating heart, my laugh, my cry.

Without you, my world would die.

In you there is a quiet strength,

A calm delight, a ticking clock,

A summer's breeze, a soaring bird,

In you I find a song I've never heard.

You make my life so very full.

So rounded,

So peaceful,

So rare,

So cool,

Like a welcoming breeze on a hot afternoon,

You came into my life and let me out of my sad cocoon.

In No Particular Order by FC Malby

The bookshop door swung open to reveal a man in a suit, sharply dressed, hair neatly combed; no sign of a briefcase. He went straight to the travel section, his eyes lingering over the Far Eastern countries. I'd always wanted to go to Vietnam. Much like grocery shopping, there are two types of customers: those who know exactly what they want, straight to one section, over to the counter and a swift purchase of one book; and those who saunter in and amble from one section to another in no particular order or direction.

I tried not to stare at the suited customer, or guess which country he might pick, or why. Two other customers, of the ambling kind, were well out my line of vision. The suited man picked up a book on Singapore, put it back, and picked up another on Malaysia. He walked towards me and placed it down on the counter. He smelt of musk, reminded me of a man I once knew. He looked up and smiled.

"Business trip?" I asked.

"More a proposal," he said, quietly. I assumed he meant a business proposal. "I don't know whether or not she'll say, yes," he continued.

How could she not?

"Good luck," were the only words I could find in return.

"Thank you. I lost my first wife four years ago. Cancer. Never thought I'd want this again."

"I'm so sorry."

"It's ok. Most people don't say anything at all."

"I suppose it's difficult to know what to say, especially if you haven't experienced that kind of loss."

He smiled and half nodded, then fumbled though his jacket pockets, followed by his trouser pockets and pulled out a wallet, curled at the edges. He opened it and pulled out a passport sized photo.

"There you go. Isn't she beautiful?"

I nodded and realised that, for him, it was as though she still existed.

"Do you mind me asking why you picked Malaysia?" I am unsure of why I had asked.

"Not at all. My new partner has a Father from Singapore, but her Mother is Malaysian. They are closer, and I want to ask her in a place that she comes from. She spent time in both countries, but Malaysia is home."

I couldn't fathom why I had asked such invasive questions, or why he was so open in return. I took his card and paused when I saw the name: Charles M. Lawrence. It was my great grandfather's name; Larry, his friends had apparently called him. I looked back at the man then put the card through the till. As I handed it back to him, I saw a note lying loose against his open wallet. The name, Larry, was written at the top in a curly, dated script.

"Thank you for your kindness," he said, to my surprise.

"My pleasure," I said with an air of hesitation. I hadn't done anything, apart from ask awkward questions.

"For listening," he said. I turned to pull a small paper bag from a lower shelf behind me, and slid the book inside.

I turned back towards Mr. Lawrence to hand him his purchase, but he had disappeared. There had been no ring of the bell as the door opened for him to leave. My mind retraced his steps, in no particular order. He was gone.

Grammy Would Never Be Back by FC Malby

Sultry evenings spent on deck chairs, watching the sun lower over the horizon with a hot thermos of tea, were over. A lone striped deck chair in the damp sand wasn't the same. Your heart aches as you look over your shoulder, waiting for Grammy to crack a joke, giggle a little and sip her tea from the ridiculously small cup that doubled up as a thermos lid when the tea was finished. The pain in your chest, the words left unsaid, the wisdom that you miss.

Day trips to Brighton had been the thrill of your childhood, bundling into the car with siblings, squabbling over who would hold the picnic basket, counting turnings, competing over who could see the waterfront first. You could smell sea salt in the air long before you ever got there. It was a simple day out, but it was the best. These days, these moments, vanish they way the swallow migrates south in autumn. Gramps told you once that they cover two hundred miles a day. The journey from Banstead was only forty.

Time is elastic: Days are long, days are short, time slips through your fingers like sand with the ones you love. You don't count the moments. Grammy's face lingers as you watch the sun this evening. You see her in the lone lady walking her spaniel, in the faces of youngsters filling their sandy moats with buckets of water. You see her smile. You are alone, but it's the same sun setting now that set when you left the beach with her as a child, longing for a bath and a hot chocolate by the fire. If you knew then what you know now, you might have listened a little harder to her stories, held onto the ha'penny coin from the 'it's-on-fire' Christmas pudding she last made, held her hand a while longer. Grammy would never be back.

Darren Demaree

it ain't a choir #127

i've been freeing horses i've been working on becoming more than an option i've been turning corn husks into whistles i've been granting the stones their hunger a lot of ghosts have found their tongues on my wrists do you mind the light if it comes from fire fire fire that cannot debate

it ain't a choir #128

every apple is aware that we have teeth the garden the garden is confused by the trampling i've been asked to answer some questions about a book i wrote where a senator's house is burned down the apple knows the apple is a metaphor and i know sometimes i get to pull that blanket to soak it in actual gasoline let's play the game the whole game to the end

it ain't a choir #129

it will be a story the fortune is not a fortress believe when i tell the rule of law is a recorder recording itself over and over again i have a new thought

Shuffle Tutorial by Shane Shick

Raise your left leg into a triangle,
kick forward onto your heel,
slide your right foot backward,
smile in a way that says “See?”

Let your hips and knees write
a thank-you note for all those
possible destinies you and this
body of yours might one day fulfill.

Twist your arms in front of your chest
like you’re a muselet that feels only
slightly less bubbly than the
champagne that’s about to pop.

Re-enact, however prematurely,
all the journeys you’ve yet to take,
all the thousands of miles that begin
with these sped-up, single steps.

Whether recorded and shared or not,
preserve, somehow, this alchemical mixture
of rhythm and repetition that transmutes
your many uncertainties into ecstasy.

Dance like the music could stop
and your ears would be blithely ignored.
Move so as to prove multitudes
can be more than merely contained.

Blurb by Shane Schick

The book could be hundreds of pages,
but what's written on the front cover's flap
is never longer than one.

Inside may live the kind of love
that overcomes pride, prejudice and pain,
or a saga that spans generations
of infighting, innuendo and intrigue
among a family whose fortunes
are tested by the tempest of their times.

Or it might be the biography
of a world leader's wanderings
from dropout and druggie to detox,
epiphany and, eventually, electability,
the trajectory of his triumphs
inspiring a particularly in-depth index.

Yet the summary at the start
manages to miniaturize any masterpiece
regardless of the story's scale or sweep,
humbling into paltry paragraphs
what was once a magnum opus.

And in concentrating on the copy
of the dust jacket, I deliberate:
will what I live through be worthy
of a future reader finishing in full,
or will they be satisfied with a synopsis?

And are we actually authoring all this,
or are we simply selling ourselves a story,
establishing the premise, promising
much but leaving ever after to another?

Remote Worker by Shane Schick

The remote control just assumed it was a pet
after all that faithful fetching of channels and shows
as though they'd been playfully thrown across a lawn.

What irritated others in the room as idle flipping,
it enjoyed more than a dog that gets walked
along the same circuitous route every day.

It didn't just lay there on legs and on laps,
that was snuggling; and we didn't realize the
blasting of lights at the TV was a silent bark.

How might our fingers have softened
if it had been able to curl its back with pleasure
at the pressing of buttons, hugged in a palm?

So much trust amid multiple surgeries,
lying with its stomach exposed while we
clumsily replaced its worn-out batteries,

and then the shock of betrayal when we
replaced the set, and it suddenly spied

Beach Bodies by Shane Schick

Every spray-filled skid of the sea-doo
is the watery dotting of another exclamation point
in the enthusiastic letter we're collectively writing
about the sunny serenity of this summer afternoon.

Not that many people are noticing,
eyes drawn instead to the bikini-clad girls
posed on towels like an art exhibit so beautiful
the gallery's overwhelmed walls had to lie down,
Letting them grow beyond the confines of their canvases
but seemingly still stuck in their centres,
while a guy flies a curved strip of kite overhead,
as though trying to take in anything, everything,
Tracing the sand with its invisible eyes

Cleansed by Ryan Norman

We showered under the Buck moon,

one hot summer night, mid-July.

Your celestial body refracted the light—

launching water flecked stars into the inky night,

replacing constellations as they faded to black.

Time had no meaning.

Just us.

The summer.

A pin-pricked sky.

Sandalwood and apples permeated the orchard air.

Crickets chirped a scattered song in the tall grass:

a summer song in our amphitheater,

echoing in a domed atmosphere, closing in.

Stars burst, pyrotechnic, welting skin

unable to be soothed by the breeze

crescendoing into gusts. The sky opened,

doubly cleansed, in a ritual moon bath.

We walked together, one step, two.

Synchronized. Fingers entwined,
pressed between the sheets, stark white.
With wet eyes, a whisper: *I don't love you.*
Moments before, we were ready to jump
into a chariot and flame the sky.
How easily a flame can extinguish.

Labyrinth by Ryan Norman

Waves crashed against his labyrinth, blowing back
his hair as he stared into the angry sea,
a welcome gray, white capped,
unable to corrode his hand placed stone,
mortared by memories cemented in time.

The sea's wet breath whispered seductive secrets
of escape, but to where?
A drum beat in the distance, steadyng his racing heart.
A ship sailed the horizon,
cheapening his plan of counting crests,

breaking to sea-debris against his fortification.
The albatross circled above. He slinked
into the shadows afraid
of what was to come.
Horns trumpeted; cymbals crashed.

Sounds of celebration drew him
from his quarters:
curiosity killed the discrete.
Spied by dark eyes, penetrating his fortress,
reaching out a hand, he backed against

the balustrade and leapt,
albatross-free
falling.
His labyrinth faded in the
plummet.

One drop in the ocean.
Tossed and tumbled.
Spat out like sea trash,
stung by a sandpaper tongue,
bottled, no postage, return to sender;

into the arms of a stranger.

You look freshly plucked, my goosefleshed, fledgling Icarus.
His limp body tossed over a shoulder, taken back inside,
as he looked back at the sea as it waved.

Heart and soul by Swathi Eruvaram

I made a heart out of clay,

handed it to my son,

said I LOVE YOU.

He gazed at it for a moment.

Then squeezed, poked, pinched, patted and rolled it.

There was no sign of what its original form was.

But that's my heart.

No matter how you treat,

it still loves you with its every beat.

Favourite by Swathi Euvaram

I asked you "Who's your favourite"?

You paused for a second.

Then you started thinking and probing for an answer,

And then said, "You".

But you already lost me there at the pause,

I thought your love for me had no clause.

Apart by Swathi Eruvaram

Scorching sun, racing vehicles,

smoky air, and a dusty path.

Strolling on unknown streets.

Ignoring strange glances,

Neglecting salty sweat stains,

I pick up pace gasping for air.

How about a special surprise?

I walk, walk and walk.

Up, down, across,

my thirsty throat calls for a drink.

But I have no time to think.

Here is where I can get you something for fun.

Done! Now all I need to do is run.

Back to school... back to school as fast as I can.

Common legs ignore the pain just think you can.

I enter the gate and you steal a quick glance of me.

Oh dear, but there is another minute or two to be.

You tap on the glass and sob in tiny tears,

I rush within to pick you up and help you let go of your fears.

Some words, a hug and few kisses do the rest.

You see the bags in my hand and smile your best.

A teary thank you and a happy one,

now let's go home, school is done.

Adventure by Swathi Eruvaram

I neatly tucked dreams in my heart.

A journey to the lion city just us two.

We immersed ourselves in a canvas of views.

Holding hands under foreign skies,

watching beautiful sights through your eyes.

Pushing past the crowds in a shopping hub,

the night started to glide down from the sky.

Waiting in unknown streets for cabs that go past us like the wind,

within me lies a silent fear no one can hear.

Stars float overhead, time is rushing by like a train.

Holding together tears this painful night.

But your look heals my suffering from within,

and your words fill me with hope.

I am not scared anymore.

The odds word in our favour,

bidding adieu to fear, we board a cab.

Moving slowly past skyscrapers we ride back.

You and I smiling side-by-side.

Enjoying your company, caring for none but you.

A Place For Dead Things by Amanda McLeod

The weed sprayer hisses and the poison falls like acid rain, bringing slow but certain death to the dandelions and spindly grasses that dare raise their heads inside these gates. They threaten the quiet order here; the plots laid out in neat grids, each allocated a letter and number, coordinates on a map. Straight gravelled paths, criss crossing like mesh or the weave of a fisherman's net. Bevelled concrete boxes keep everything where is should be and meet the ground flush, perfect joinery. Being here helps me sort the chaos in my scattered mind; I can line my thoughts up with the pathways, the plots, the gravestones. I am here every day. Maintenance outside, maintenance within.

A bee drifts in on the breeze, buzzing lazily, as if it has all the time in the world to search for sweet nectar. I watch it rise and fall, looking for something more than a bouquet of plastic flowers, something rich with life; but there are only doomed weeds and the skeletal remains of once-vibrant fresh floral arrangements, forgotten like the people they once honoured. The bee seems incongruous here, changing directions without warning, straying from the ordered paths, flitting back and forth in its black and gold striped livery. This rash behaviour frays my nerves. I am the first to admit structure calms me, and this winged creature's disregard for the patterns here sets my teeth on edge. I follow it, sticking to the paths, as it veers wildly about. After ten minutes, the bee surrenders to its self-preservation instincts or the allure of sweeter scents, and flies off in search of richer pickings. Order returns to my domain and I am immediately more relaxed. Harmony is restored. That bee should not be here.

This is a place for dead things.

#

The glare of noon disturbs me, and I resolve to avoid it today, venturing out early with the intention of withdrawing while the sun is at its zenith. In the misty early morning everything is softer -- the light, the stone, the world is muffled. I pace the pathways, back and forth, following my usual route. I am enjoying the silence the hour brings when the crunch of footsteps on gravel behind me tells me I am not alone. I turn to see a woman making her way down one of the paths, scanning the names on the stones as she goes. I hasten down one of the narrow walkways to my left. Visitors often find my presence disturbing, especially those who have come here expecting to be alone with their grief. She looks too young to be mourning anyone buried this close to the gates. The newer graves are towards the back; fresh earthen mounds with white wooden crosses, still waiting for a visit from the stonemason.

The young woman's face is partially obscured by a large felt hat, and wild black curls spill out from beneath it, tumbling down her back like a waterfall. From what I can see beneath the brim, she is about the same age as my niece. She is clutching what appears to be a hand-drawn map tight in the milk-white fingers of a hand supported by a sling. Her furtive glances left and right make her look like a fugitive, and I imagine a series of backstories for her, each more obscure and fanciful than the one before. She is a spy, looking for a place to hide. No, she is an archaeologist, and has found the location of an unmarked grave of national significance here. No, she is a member of a secret order, and has come to exhume the remains of someone who was buried with a sacred artefact the order wants back. I do this often when I encounter visitors here; it helps pass the hours and keeps my mind active, which is important when you spend so much time among the silent dead. I have yet to find anyone who is even close to the identities I dream up. They are mostly children of the recently interred, lost in their grief and clinging to something they can never get back. This one is too young to be mourning a parent. A grandparent, perhaps. She hesitates where two paths intersect, unfolding the paper between her fingers, muttering under her breath.

Recent plots are towards the back, I call out. To your right, all the way to the end.

She squeezes her eyes shut tight, and her birdlike shoulders heave with a stifled sob. I move down one of the rows and busy myself behind a headstone, leaving her to her grieving, but I watch from the corners of my eyes as she stumbles down the right hand path, towards the recently deceased. I notice she has a slight limp.

#

Curiosity gets the better of me and I follow at a respectful distance. She turns the map in her hands as she walks and this action reminds me of my own mother, forever dragging us rowdy children to some hidden gem bargain store recommended by one of her friends, and rotating the sketch in her hands as she tried to find it before we became too out of control. The memory leaves me melancholy, and I try to shake it off by focusing on the young lady in front of me. When she arrives at the recent plots, she freezes, as many do; the heaps of raw earth are reminders of mortality, of how fragile and fleeting a life is. I find this area challenging for other reasons. There's a lack of order here; lumps of dirt tumble from the piles. Floral memorials, wilting in the heat, spill off the interred like water off rocks, flowing in all directions. Weeds creep in urgently, trying to establish a grip while the ground is still newly turned. The pain here is fresher, more tangible. It's harder to forget.

She recovers, and her stumbling limp gains momentum. There are six newly turned graves at the end of this row; all dug on the same day. Such things were once caused by outbreaks of disease - there is a whole row of people in the old section that died of typhoid on the same day - but now they are usually the result of car accidents or

house fires. Generations of families, ripped away. Last week these graves were surrounded by mourners; different ages, different nationalities. The crowd was huge and I'd kept well away. Theirs had been a different kind of grief. A current of anger flowed beneath it, a black river of rage, pulling it along. A sinister, unsettling darkness. I have not been yet to read the names on the white crosses, to see who it is that lies waiting on the stonemason. A sense of the familiar holds me back.

#

She's there now, standing on the path beside the first mound. Her fine shoulders tremble and she reaches up with her good hand to take off the hat. It dangles from the tips of her fingers, before dropping to the ground. The mist is burning off now and I can see her profile in the morning sun. A white surgical bandage is peeking out from the neckline of her dress, jumping across her collarbone and stretching towards her neck, standing out against the black fabric. She stands in silence, rigid, and like a dam about to break I see her straining as drops squeeze past the barrier, before it bursts and the flood escapes in a fury of sobs. The gravel skitters as she falls to her knees, clutching her damaged arm with her good hand as inhuman sounds tear from her throat. She is bent over now, as though felled by a strong punch to the stomach. I draw closer, agitated by the tattiness of the path edges, the soil overflowing from the graves, the flowers that can't decide whether they are alive or not.

Everything about this unnerves me. She is destroyed by grief, yet here alone, and long after the formalities that come with death are completed. Perhaps she has no one to support her. Most people ignore strangers when they come here, choosing to stay isolated in their own bubbles of despair, disturbed by anyone coming too near. I normally give them space. But I do not feel as though I should leave this one alone. I stop when I reach the last intersecting path before the six graves, and stand in silence, hands clasped before me, eyes downcast, and I wait.

She does not notice me.

#

I am close enough to read the lettering on the crosses and my eyes go straight to the second dates on each one, confirming they all passed away on the same day bar the last one, who must have managed to fight into the following day before succumbing. I have seen this before, and I always ache for that flame that burned as long as it could before spluttering and surrendering. The woman sinks her fingers into the loose earth before her as though trying to reach in and pull the person out.

Jamie, Ella, David, Jennifer, Audrey, and Alex. Six crosses, six names. It's Jamie she's reaching for. She talks, quietly at first, her voice gaining strength, approaching normal volume but still with that hushed tone people use in cemeteries, even

though the dead aren't usually bothered by noise.

Oh Jamie. I'm so, so sorry. I couldn't protect you. I tried so hard.

This is typical of those left behind. The guilt consumes them; some of them hate themselves for being alive when their loved ones are not.

I should have been better...we all should...only a matter of time...

I read the wooden crosses again. These are not a family - the surnames are all different. And the birthdates are too close together. All within a year of each other.

The woman moves along the row of graves, touching each one as she talks.

I did my best...I wanted so badly to save you...

Her voice turns high, tight with the effort of letting the words out and keeping the tears in.

He was so fast... so many bullets. You were so scared. But you were so brave...you did everything right... we did everything right. I listen as she tells them a familiar story.

We were unlucky... closest to the door...did all the drills but we're never really ready, you know? The drills... don't prepare you for what... it's like. Howling sobs wrack her body. She recovers enough to choke out her next words. *I took two bullets for you... but it wasn't enough... my job to keep you safe... I failed...I failed all of you.*

As she screams at the sky, all I can make out are the words *I'm sorry*, over and over again, as if saying them often enough will cast a spell to resurrect the dead.

#

I wait until the tempest of anguish blows itself out. By the end she is on her knees, curled up with her forehead pressed against the tops of her thighs, her injured arm tucked in against her chest like a broken wing. She is still and silent. Worried she's slipped into unconsciousness, I take a few steps closer, watching for the rise and fall of her ribcage to tell me she's breathing. Her back lifts slightly and I am relieved. I am two steps behind her now, staring at the bones of her spine outlined beneath her dress. She eases herself up into a sitting position, pushes the curls away from her face, rocking back and forth, as the traumatised do.

She talks to them again.

I'm sorry I couldn't be here...to say goodbye with everyone else...but I was always coming. I still can't believe I'll never walk into the classroom again and see your faces. See you graduate. Talk to you about choosing a university. Have you come back to see me after graduation so I can see how far you've come. She draws a shaky breath. Here comes the anger. I can feel it rising in her like a tidal wave.

I can't believe you're gone. Things have to change. This cannot keep happening.

I remember hearing the same words thirty years ago.

I sat in chemistry class, working through my final exams. I tried to filter out the noise in the hallway, concentrate on getting the marks I needed for college. I didn't even register what was happening until the door flew open and the first shots hit me in the back.

#

She seems so utterly alone, collapsed on the edge of the path, gazing at what's left of six of her students. I break my own protocol and reach out, resting one hand ever so gently on her injured shoulder. Her spine stiffens, and I whip my arm away. She reaches up with her good hand, rests her fingers in the spot where mine just were, rubs gently.

I don't know how long she sits there before she heaves herself to her feet. She looks at them all again, making her way past them, leaning down to caress the piles of earth, whispering to them. The sun is high in the sky when she pulls her hat back down low over her face, and limps off toward the exit. I follow her, to make sure she gets out; and to quiet myself in the older part of the cemetery, following the straight lines, inhaling the order. I don't follow her out the gate. I stay here. This is a place for dead things.

//ENDS

CLEETHORPES by Dani Crundell

These hands held dripping cornets

Sticky in the sun

Swatting wasps with pointy stingers

Mustn't run, mustn't run

These hands waved to smiling faces

from the train, 50p a go

Holding tight to Grandad's arm, sunburned face aglow

These eyes lit up at the sight of boats

Bobbing in the sea

Dinghy under little arm, the safety pool for me

These eyes spotted amusements

with neon flashing lights

Eyes on the prize, hurry up

'We might be here all night'

These ears heard the cackles

of Grannies with skirts tucked in

Some more reluctant

'Come on Doreen, get in, get in'

This nose smelled donkeys

trudging along, side by side

Grandad says they look sick as parrots

Can't wait to have my ride

This mouth tasted candy floss

Fish and chips on the sea wall

Ingoldmells adventures

How I loved them all

Stone Warm Heart by Dani Crundell

‘Good evening Martina.’ His face, framed by the blue security guard’s cap, lit up as brightly today as it did when they first met twenty years ago.

‘Jacomo.’ Martina nodded and smiled politely, as usual.

‘You’ve brought something for me in the basket?’ He asked her, hopefully.

‘Ah, Jacomo, your wife fills that tin with good food for you every evening.’ Martina laughed. She would miss this nightly routine, even the mild embarrassment.

‘Besides,’ she said, ‘if I share what I have with you, what will I give to him?’

Jacomo shook his head. ‘He doesn’t appreciate you.’ he said, as he waved her through the gate. ‘We are the ones who will miss you, not him.’

Martina’s heart sank. She had yet to tell him of her plans to leave. Now, on her last shift, she must break the news.

‘At least share the wine with me?’ Jacomo asked, peering into Martina’s basket. She quickly pulled the cloth back over the bottle to hide it.

‘It’s OK. They can hardly fire you for celebrating your last night.’ Jacomo laughed. ‘I suppose you’ll drink a toast with him to say goodbye. You brighten his days Martina.’

She doubted whether that was true. All she knew was that she would miss him greatly but could hardly use him as an excuse not to go to her widowed sister. Viola desperately missed companionship, unlike Martina, who was used to living alone. No, agreeing to go was the right thing to do. Martina’s old bones had begun to ache more and more after these long shifts. She knew it was time.

The squeak of the vacuum cleaner and the sound of her own footsteps broke the silence as she made her way between the exhibits. Usually by herself during shifts, the portraits and figurines scared her in the beginning. More so in Winter, during the dark nights. But after all these years she had become accustomed to their eyes following her. They made her feel not quite so alone.

When she eventually returned to the staff room, she discovered a card taped to her locker with the following message:

“Dearest Martina. Thank you for all your hard work over the years. You are a true angel. We wish you well in your future endeavours.”

Inside, they had included a generous gift voucher to spend in Tigros supermarket. Martina blew out of her nostrils in amusement. They must have given Jacomo the job of placing this. The Fathers were kind-hearted men but not comfortable with public displays of gratitude, unless directed towards our Lord or the blessed Virgin of course. In twenty years of service, she had barely seen them in person. She placed the card inside her basket and took off her work apron for the last time. She had decided to wait until the very end to have her meal with him. That way, after breaking the news, she would be able to leave immediately before anyone could see her tears.

She regretted dressing up in heels instead of her normal work pumps. They clacked so loudly beneath her. She paused in front of the entrance to his courtyard and, smiling at the sight of his strong frame she skipped across the marble floor towards him.

“My love, I come bearing gifts.” She sang, as she gently placed her basket down beside him. “I have something important I need to say to you.”

Martina lifted out the wine and looked up at him. “Now, I’m sorry about the plastic goblets. I know what fine tastes you have.” Pointing to the basket she said, “I made our favourite food. Look.”

Without a pause, Martina carried on talking. “My dearest friend, I have some... upsetting news.” She poured wine into one of the goblets, “Something which...” her lip started to wobble, “Which will not be easy to say.”

A sombre expression spread across her face. “We have known each other for so long. I want you to know that I am thankful for your presence in my life. You have been a great comfort to me for all these years. Your strength has given me strength. I love you, and I always will.”

She took a sip, which turned into a large gulp to calm her nerves. He had been her rock. Heard her every secret, every worry, every problem big or small. She knew her ancient friend would listen now without judgement.

With all the courage she could muster, she leaned towards him and uttered the words, “I won’t be able to see you anymore.”

His expression remained blank.

“My sister needs me. She is widowed and desperately lonely. I know that you have many visitors. You do not need me like does.” She paused. “But I will miss you desperately.”

She looked up at her old friend and a tear began to form at the corner of her eye. Suddenly the weight of sorrow fell heavily on her stomach. No longer hungry for food, she drank the last of wine and rose to be closer to him. “I’m going to go now. It’s no use prolonging this, I am only making myself suffer.”

Standing on tiptoe, she reached up to hold the feet of her beloved Apollo one last time and sobbed, “Goodbye old friend.”

"We can experience nothing but the present moment, live in no other second of time, and to understand this is as close as we can get to eternal life."

P.D. James

