

**Миттєва проза: хрестоматія сучасних англомовних  
оповідань для художнього перекладу студентами  
факультету іноземних мов із дисципліни «Основна  
іноземна мова» (1 курс)**

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## INTRODUCTION

### BBC Young Writers' Award 2015

1. Brenning Davies, 15, from Wales shortlisted for **Skinning**, which tells of a transition to manhood, with a twist.
2. Hannah Ledlie, aged 17, from Scotland shortlisted for **Floor Twenty-Two** where a final despairing act is suspended in time.
3. Jessica Phillips, 18, from Merseyside shortlisted for **Safe** where a father's departure leads to a disquieting retreat from the world.
4. Clare Chodos-Irvine, 16, from London shortlisted for **Stars, Sparks and Lightning**, a sultry evocation of the first spark of love.
5. Cassie Beggs, 17, from Wales shortlisted for her mythical tale, **The Sun and The Moon**.

### BBC Young Writers' Award 2016

1. **Liar, Liar** by Sumner Brook, 19, from Hertfordshire. A surreal and wry story with a fairy-tale quality that explores the notion of 'misdeeds reaping just rewards'.
2. A heart-breaking melancholic story of a mind unravelling as dementia takes hold, **Life in Reverse** by Rebekah Cohen, 16, from South Yorkshire, was inspired by a classroom reading of Shakespeare's Seven Ages of Man.
3. **Ode to a Boy Musician** is by Lizzie Freestone, 14, from Cambridgeshire. Inspired by Lizzie's household piano, this is a poetic and lyrical story of a boy set free by music.
4. Hilla Hamidi, 17, from London wrote **The Good Son** which has echoes of Seamus Heaney's Digging. This story is brutal in its depiction of the tension between childhood memories and adult reality as a potent memory is unveiled in all its horror. (Warning: This story contains violence and adult themes.).
5. **Innocence Lost** by Alan Taylor, 17, from London. Inspired by the film, The Revenant and Chinua Achebe's classic novel, Things Fall Apart, this is an atmospheric rite of passage story with a dramatic twist, as a young boy undergoes his initiation into manhood.

### BBC Young Writers' Award 2018

1. Davina Bacon, 17, from Cambridgeshire, shortlisted for **Under A Deep Blue Sky**, the story of an elephant being killed by a poacher.
2. Reyah Martin, 18, from Glasgow, submitted **Footprints In The Far Field**, which tells the story of a mother losing her child.
3. **Unspoken**, by 16-year-old Lottie Mills, from Hertfordshire, explores issues of teenage mental health.
4. Jane Mitchell, 16, from Dorset, shortlisted for **Firsts**, which follows the efforts of a mother to escape the country of her birth.
5. **Oh Sister, Invisible** by 16-year-old Tabitha Rubens, from Islington, explores the struggles of a teenager witnessing the effects of anorexia.

## STORY 1

### Skinning

By Brennig Davies



Today, he says, today I'm going to make you a man.

The boy shifts a little. He didn't know there was a process, besides growing up.

His father slaps the creature down on the table. A bloodied maw. Stirring paws and nose: as if it hasn't even realised it's dead. A rabbit, from the fen, the woods by the house.

The boy's never seen a fresh kill before. He's never seen a kill.

His father grasps its legs in his fist and shakes it, as if to prove it's no longer alive. The eyes in its head burrow into the boy. The sky is one long gasp.

Take the knife, says his father. The boy shakes his head.

Take it. Now.

His fingers brush the hilt; they stay clear of the blade. His hand curls around the knife, slow, as if it's an animal that might bite.

He's never held such a big knife before. Blade shines. He wants to drop it and run; his father grabs his shoulder.

Now, he says, but soft, now cut off its legs. Cut off its head.

The boy wants to be sick. The rabbit lies splayed on the table. The scent of death mixes with kitchen spice. The eyes watch him- the rabbit's eyes, his father's. The room holds its breath.

His hand shakes. Do it, says his father. Don't be a girl.

His hand shakes. His father takes the knife and brings it swinging down. The feet come off; the head goes rolling.

Jesus Christ, says his father. Why couldn't you have done that?

He gives the knife back to the boy and guides the boy's hand to the carcass. Make the incisions. The blade glides through the game, like ribbon, like scissors through paper.

Can you see that? Pink flesh pokes out from beneath the fur. The colour feels rude.

Now, says his father, now grab hold of the fold. The boy's hands reach over and touch the body. It's still warm. His hands sink under the hair, where the cut was made.

His father shows him what to do. He begins to peel. The fur comes off in strips. Comes off easy.

See, says his father. It's not so hard. Not so hard after all.

The boy reaches for the knife again. His hand doesn't shake. He pierces the skin and cuts across the stomach.

Long gash. Thin slash. His fingers plunge into the rabbit's chest.

They go past the ribs. They emerge: his hands are fistfuls of guts, saucers of blood. Out comes the liver.

The boy moves quicker now. The movements come easier. They are more fluid, instinctive; they know what to do.

The boy moves quicker now. The movements come easier. They are more fluid, instinctive; they know what to do.

He cuts through the diaphragm. Out come the lungs, small and pale. Out comes the heart. His father has to prise the knife out of his fingers.

It's exciting, isn't it? Skinning. Gutting.

Isn't it strange, how you thrust your hand down its throat? How you pull out its soul? Bite into it with little teeth, and gnaw at its flesh.

And it's everywhere: the blood. In the small pores in his hand, the crease of his wrist.

Red and red and red, tides of it, rivers: he's drenched in death.

His eyes drop as his stomach does. For a moment, he thinks he might vomit. He doesn't.

Instead, something small within him kicks up. Wakes. Woken by the carnage. Buried deep, surging from the earth.

A still, small voice. A hunger.

Clean your hands, his mother calls. The thing inside him calls too.

Clean up, it says. Go on. Clean it up.

But he's rooted to the spot and the sink, white basin, is over in the bathroom, through the screen door, wired cross like a cell. A rising, an ascendance, a call from the marrow of his bones: clean it up.

Not wash. Not get rid of. Revel in, and clean. He moves in motions he can't control.

The voice says: what fun is control?

Slowly, he leans over. Crouches, by the cold floor and the entrails and the blood, the blood... the blood rushes to his head. The blood weeps on his skin.

He's like an animal. Ready to pounce. Haywire, the circuits in his brain. A frenzy, boiling through him. Threatening to consume him.

Clean it up, says the voice. You know how.

He brings his hands to his face. Out comes his tongue. Like a dog, he begins to lick away the blood.

Lick, lick, lick, crouched like an animal. The licks become bigger; the strokes of his tongue become broader. Lick, lick, lick.

And where's the rabbit now? The body, legs caught up in his father's hand. Being taken through to his mother, who waits with the boiling pot.

And he's so hungry. So very hungry. As hungry as the sky above him.

He never knew blood could taste so good.

It tastes even better now he's a man.

*Shortlisted for the BBC Young Writers' Award 2015*

## STORY 2

### Floor Twenty-Two

By Hannah Ledlie



At first she was shocked by the coldness of the air and the speed at which her body fell through it.

By floor fifty-four she was drifting in and out of consciousness like a cat curled up around a fireplace.

All her fears had faded and as she plummeted downwards, one by one her senses tuned out.

She could no longer hear the buzz of traffic below or the rush of wind in her ears. Karen was as close to being at peace as one could be at sixty miles per hour.

Then, at floor thirty-nine, her phone rang.

She might have laughed if the air wasn't being knocked out of her.

She was the grumpy middle-aged woman who told kids to turn off their phones in the cinema.

She was the one who tutted audibly when a mobile went off in a meeting. She'd rather send a letter than a text message; most of the time her phone was stowed away in a drawer, out of charge.

But now of all times it had to be tucked in her suit jacket pocket, switched on and playing the most infuriating ringtone; a 2 bar jingle from the '90s consisting of cheerful beeps and boops.

If it didn't smash on impact, there was a chance it would still be playing as blood pooled around her body and the first horrified passersby approached. She could only hope they didn't feel the urge to dance.

Somewhere out there, Karen suspected, was a man hoping to sell her double-glazing, or perhaps a toddler who had got hold of their parent's phone and pushed numbers at random.

The few friends she had knew they had a better chance of winning the lottery than having her respond to a call.

It could be her dad- he rung sometimes to check up on her, ever since he'd found the pills in her bathroom cabinet.

He'd thrust them in her face like someone making a dog stare at its own shit in a fevered hope that it would see the error of its ways.

She'd laughed it off, said she was fine, said she was a grown woman and could look after herself.

In truth she had never felt more like a child than in that moment.

In truth she had never felt more like a child than in that moment.

For now, all Karen could do was squeeze her eyes tighter shut, try to ignore the ringtone and try to remind herself that falling meant freedom; dimly aware that time was passing and she had barely seconds left.

She waited for the smack of concrete, the crunch of bones, the burst of pain. But they never arrived.

Karen knew that for a gazelle close enough to smell a lion's breath, for an ant staring up at the sole of a shoe, for any creature experiencing its last living moments, time surely stretched. But time wasn't stretching for Karen, it wasn't stopping either.

It was simply that, at floor twenty-two, Karen had ceased falling and was hanging suspended mid-air.

This wasn't supposed to happen. She was supposed to fall, and keep falling, then, in the blink of an eye, cease to exist.

Yet here she was, weightless, spread-eagled and floating, gazing up at a bright sky dotted with candyfloss clouds.

Karen reckoned she was probably dead. She resigned herself to waiting for something to happen.

Any second now an angelic hand would take hold of hers and lead her slowly upwards, or perhaps her vision would gradually fade into darkness and she would feel her soul drift away.

She just wished her phone would stop ringing. It was the only thing disturbing the utter tranquillity of the moment. She would wait for it to stop.

The clouds moved leisurely eastwards, pushed by a gentle breeze. Birds flew by, in silhouette against the sun. Night came and the air grew cool. Stars appeared, so bright and so numerous they practically lit up the sky. Perhaps days went by, perhaps years.



Time lost its meaning at floor twenty-two, and still the phone rang on.

The thought came to Karen that it might be God on the other end. He might be a little peeved at having to wait so long for an answer.

Even so, she wouldn't hesitate to give him a piece of her mind. Oh the things she would say.

Karen pulled the phone from her jacket pocket, vaguely wondering what would happen if she dropped it; whether it would plunge downwards or remain afloat in her curious little bubble.

She didn't try to find out, not wanting to lose her chance to talk with the apparent creator of her torment. Instead, she pressed the button the answer the call.

"Karen?"

The voice was familiar, and not faintly godlike. It was timid and gentle and reeked of concern. Some unproven dinner party fact she had heard years ago came to mind: if you were to see your clone on the street you wouldn't recognise them.

"Karen?" It asked again, as she hadn't responded.

"You're not Him, are you." The words barely escaped her, they trembled in the wind.

"No."

"You're me."

"Yes."

"How?"

There was a long silence as a breeze enveloped her.

"I don't know. But the hows or the whys don't matter."

"Then what does?" She was practically pleading, begging for some sort of answer in amongst the mess of life and death and dreams.

"Don't jump Karen."

She burst out a pathetic laugh, "It's a bit late for that."

"You've got to promise me you won't jump." It was her pleading now; this voice in the void with a lump in her throat.

Curling her legs up to her chest, Karen allowed herself to revolve slowly in the air; tears flowing freely as she desperately whispered the only question that really mattered. The question that had pushed her to the edge and over it.

"Why did he have to be taken from me?"

"One day you'll know, but not now, not today. Don't jump Karen. Don't jump."

*Shortlisted for the BBC Young Writers' Award 2015*

### STORY 3

#### Safe

By Jessica Phillips



The day he leaves, coincidentally, is the day my mother buys new curtains.

They make our mother happy, and that's that. Of course, it isn't.

They are a shade of brown that matches the furniture - a deep russet that distorts the pale yellow sunlight streaming in through the windows. The curtains themselves are of a thick material, patterned with a delicate Victorian motif, with beige tassels that hang over the top portion of the window.

I think they're hideous, but I don't say a word.

My mother hums as she strings them up, tugging at the nets beneath to get them to lie flat, ruffling the edge of the new curtains until they hang just right.

She's singing an old pop melody as she moves through to the kitchen to cook dinner, and I don't have the heart to ruin her good mood, not after he left her in ruins for so many weeks and months.

My sister leans over to whisper in my ear, and receives a hard pinch in the side upon voicing her distaste for the new decor.

I tell her they're pretty, and that they make our mother happy, and that's that. Of course, it isn't.

The following Monday, we return from school to find thick black blinds obscuring our view into the house.

I open the door with my own key and call out for our mother - she bustles into the lounge with a tray of freshly baked cookies, croons over Madison's new painting, and ruffles our hair before asking our opinions of the new addition to the house.

She's beaming so hard that I force out my lie through my teeth, a smile of equal volume plastered to my own face.

My sister looks awestruck, and when my elbow collides with her ribs, I pretend it's an accident.

He's been gone for a whole month when she changes the locks.

There, we're much safer now, darlings! she proclaims, and we nod and gush in all the right places.

My mother promises to get another key cut for me as soon as she can, and I nod enthusiastically, not quite believing her.

His presence no longer lingers in the house. His heavy work boots are gone from under the stairs, his rain jacket missing from the porch hooks, the bathroom divested of his cologne bottles.

I wonder after his new life, sometimes, whether he's moved in with Ashley or Hilary or Sandra, whoever the last intern was, or whether he's holed up in a bedsit somewhere by himself, surrounded by dirty socks and plates of rotting food.

I don't know which I want to be true.

On their anniversary, the fuse box blows, and the house is plunged into darkness.

I hush Madison's crying with the promise of ice cream before dinner, and we manage to eat a whole tub before it melts.

My mother promises to go down into the basement to take a look at the blown fuse, but it'll have to wait until morning, because she's forgotten where she keeps the flashlight.

We light candles, instead, and get to work on the rest of the frozen food that won't keep until tomorrow.  
I know what, we'll make it into a game! You like games, don't you, Maddie?

Madison's eyes are wide and glinting with unshed tears, but from behind my mother I beam my encouragement, thanking a god I don't believe in when Madison melds her own expression into one of painfully forced delight.

We play hide and seek in the darkness until Madison's eyes are droopy with the promise of sleep, and she curls up by the fireplace.

My mother lies down beside her, and I watch their breathing slow to match each other's; mother and daughter, safe and sound in slumber.

It's been six months.

School stopped calling after three.

Our mother still hasn't fixed the blown fuse.

My old key sits by the front door; no matter which angle I apply it to the lock, it won't turn.

I wish he'd come back. It's so dark here.

Madison stopped crying a few days ago, and my mother sits on the old rocking chair in the lounge and rocks to and fro, holding her limp daughter in her arms, singing that old pop melody she so likes.

I want to tear down those vile curtains and rip off the blind; break the windows and storm out into the daylight.

But I can't. My mother needs me.

She calls to me, now, reaches out a spindly arm to pull me closer to her, and she holds both her daughters, rocks us back and forth, and sings so sweetly that my eyes drift shut of their own accord, and I drift away.

I drift.

I drift.

Yes. We're much safer now.

*Shortlisted for the BBC Young Writers' Award 2015*

## STORY 4

### Stars, Sparks and Lightning

By Clare Chodos-Irvine



We reflect our professions. Persephone is all sharp lines and cat-like reflexes, inured from decades of mean Russian dance teachers and days on pointed toes.

It was something deep, carrying hints of sandalwood and musk

Her voice is as sweet as lavender syrup, conditioned into a soaring soprano through years with voice coaches and musical directors. She glides where I stumble.

All the time I've spent in the kitchen has made me soft, like the butter I eat too much of, rounding my edges into gentle curves.

The night we met, I was catering with an hors d'oeuvres company.

It was a job I hated. I didn't want to be offering artisanal cheese puffs to sweaty people in black tie. The rooms were always too small, and the odour of hundreds of nervous socialites hung in the air.

Persephone was already doing what she loved. She was performing. This night it was with a jazz band set up in the corner, playing Armstrong and Basie.

I like music as much as the next girl, but something about Persephone was bewitching. I couldn't help but stop and watch.

Her large eyes were closed, the lids shrouded in dark shadows, and a slinky black dress draped off her sinewy frame.

I could smell her perfume, coming towards me in small waves as her chest heaved with Learnin' the Blues. It was something deep, carrying hints of sandalwood and musk.

I stood, neglecting my cheese puffs, to listen to Persephone croon. It was as though the music possessed her, flowing out of her fingertips and the perfect O of her petal pink mouth.

She finished the song, and kept her eyes closed until the band played the last flourishing note. She finally looked up, her nails already tapping out the next song on her thigh, to see me obviously staring.

Our eyes connected, and Persephone winked. I turned bright red, hurrying away to replenish my platter and continue the rounds.

I was packing away dishes at the end of the night, when Persephone approached me.

“Hey,” she stood with her hands on her hips, towering over me as I kept my head bowed and my hands busy with plates and boxes.

“Hi. Is everything all right? Were the mushroom turnovers too mediocre? Any complaints will have to be taken up with my boss,” I told her, flicking my head towards the fat man smoking outside the door.

“No, actually, I wanted to talk to you,” she said. I kept my eyes focused on her bouncing feet. I know now she doesn’t bounce from nerves, but as a way to keep the music from bursting out of her lungs.

“I’m sorry I stared at you earlier,” I flushed again.

“Oh! Don’t worry at all. I find it flattering. I was going to ask you if you were hungry.”

I closed the top to the last box. “I could eat,” I stood with my arms crossed.

“I wanted to see if you’d like to join me for Vietnamese food once you’re done here,” she smiled, and looked up at me through her thick lashes.

“Really?” I was sceptical.

“Yeah. Why not? You seem nice, and I’m tired of eating alone.”

“That’s very sweet of you,” I told her.

“Do you have a car? The place is a bit of a ways, and the band already left with the van. I was counting on you saying yes,” her wide grey eyes crinkled hopefully.

“Yeah, it’s the Volvo out back,” I reached for my bag. We stood uncomfortably for a moment. “We can go,” I urged, leading her out the door.

My trusty station wagon waited for us in the parking lot. We got in, Persephone shifting the seat to fit her large frame.

I started the car, wondering what this stunning girl was doing in my passenger seat. She looked confusedly around at the lavender that cluttered the dashboard and hung on the windows.

She pointed at it saying, “Is this some sort of vampire repellent?” Out of the corner of my eye I saw her smirking at me.

“Breathe in,” I told her.

She raised an eyebrow, but I nodded, inhaling deeply.

Persephone followed. I could feel the sweetness of dried lavender filling my nose.

“Nice, it’s an air freshener,” she explained.

“Yeah,” I agreed, laughing slightly. “I like things to smell nice,” I admitted, a bit understatedly. We drove in silence for a little, down the interstate, Persephone humming quietly to herself as I focused on the road.

*Shortlisted for the BBC Young Writers' Award 2015*

## STORY 5

### **The Sun and The Moon**

By Cassie Beggs



A long, long time ago, the Sun and the Moon walked the earth, living among humans as equals. Without their light, the Earth turned peacefully beneath the light of the stars.

For generations, the people of the world were happy this way, watched over by their two guardians.

The first guardian was mysterious and beautiful, with flowing hair that glistened silvery white, glowing eyes of deepest blue and skin paler than milk.

Every step she took caused new stars to burst from the ground and leap into the sky, and her people worshipped her as a symbol of feminine beauty. They called her Moon.

The second guardian was strong and handsome, with warm golden eyes, copper-brown skin and a mane of soft black curls.

Even his very laugh could make spring roses bloom from their buds, and his followers adored him for his easy ways and the bright glorious smile with which he could light up the whole world.

He was the Sun, and despite their differences, he shared with the Moon a great friendship and respect.

Although the humans loved their Sun and Moon, they took little notice of the other force with whom they shared their land.

The Wind was vicious, and he had long been jealous of the power the Sun and the Moon held over the earth, and of the love that the people had for them.

Slipping through windows and under doors, the Wind whispered poisonous lies

Nobody loved the Wind, for he blew icy breath across the land, and howled in the ears of children. One day, the Wind began wondering how he could claim the land as his own.



"If the Sun and the Moon go to war," the Wind pondered to himself, "they will destroy each other and I will be free to take their lands and people for myself!"

The Wind plotted and schemed and plotted some more, forming a deadly plan. He sent a message to the Sun and Moon, sending them on an urgent fool's errand to the North.

Slipping through windows and under doors, the Wind whispered poisonous lies into the ears of the people, turning them, against each other.

To the Moon's tribe, he claimed that the Sun himself had lured the Moon away from her home and was planning to lock her in the darkest cave far away, where her light could never shine.

"Surely not!" they cried, horrified. "It is so," he assured them, "and I hear that the Sun followers will lead a march, here, soon! They seek a battle to destroy the Moon's home so that the Sun alone might rule."

Aghast, the Moon's followers began gathering their forces, determined to defend their goddess against their former allies.

In turn, the Wind blew over to the Sun worshippers and whispered into their ears.

"The Moon worshippers are planning a brutal attack on your tribe!" he told them. Furious, the Sun followers thanked the Wind for his support and mustered their armies to retaliate.

When the Moon and the Sun returned, they were appalled by the devastation that greeted them. They pleaded desperately with their people, but to no avail.

"Stop!" cried the Moon, but alas, they could not hear her for her voice was too soft and the people's anger was too fierce.

"Enough!" begged the Sun, but the people would not hear him either.

Unable to make themselves heard, the Sun and the Moon retreated from the battlefield, sitting together in deepest despair. The war raged on, but neither side would admit defeat, and soon even the Wind grew sick of the chaos he had wrought.

"O Sun," sighed the Moon, "I am so very weary of these battles."

"As am I, sweet Moon," replied the Sun woefully, "but what can we do?"

The two sat in mournful silence for a long, long while, wondering what in the world could have caused such a conflict. After some time, the Moon's keen ears caught the sound of the Wind, talking idly to himself as he ruffled the surface of a lake behind a distant mountain.

"Poor Wind," said the Moon, "I fear that this endless fighting has driven him quite mad. We should visit him, and see if we can ease his troubles."

With the Sun in agreement, they began the long journey to join the Wind beside his lonely lake. Before they reached him however, his words became clearer and they heard quite distinctly as he raved about the uselessness of his failed plan.

Enraged by the Wind's betrayal and distraught at the damage he had caused to their people, the Sun and Moon swept over the mountain. Determined to stop the Wind from ever hurting their people again, they took from him all words and ability to speak, leaving him helpless to howl his wordless rage to the sky for the rest of time.

Now that they knew the source of their people's troubles, the Sun and Moon returned to the battlefield strengthened and with new purpose.

They threw themselves between the warring tribes and together their voices boomed out, stopping the fighters in their tracks. They explained what the Wind had done, and declared that the battles must cease at once.

With the Wind silenced, the Sun and Moon hatched a plan of their own to prevent the war from starting anew.

"We shall rule together, high in the sky," said Moon, "so that we may never stop guarding you against danger."

"For twelve hours, I will rise and watch over you," continued Sun, "and we will call this 'Day'."

"And when those twelve hours end," proclaimed Moon, "I shall rise with the stars and we shall call this 'Night'."

The people agreed, laying down their arms and returning to a state of richness and calm.

So it was that the Sun and the Moon took to the sky, rising in turn with Night and Day, to watch over their beloved people in peace and harmony for evermore.

***Shortlisted for the BBC Young Writers' Award 2015***

## STORY 6

### Liar Liar

By Sumner Brook



His front door is blue, but I head around the back as usual.

There are all sorts of lies.

White lies and small lies and lies so epic in scale that it's almost easier to bend reality until they become truths than to come clean.

I specialise in lies.

For all you know, I'm lying right now.

There are usually locks; all the trust seems to be gone. What happened to the good old days when people left their back doors open and kids played in the street? Not that I can remember that personally, but I've been told it was nice. A time before we all curled up alone, afraid of what's waiting in the dark. I'm what's waiting in the dark, and I'm not so bad. Usually.

Anyway, locks or not, I always find a way into the house. Then I just have to choose.

They say that everything comes with a price.

They don't usually mean that literally, and yet here I am.

It's a nice house tonight, I think the art on the walls are originals. Shelves of books too. Some of my favourites, some I think I'll check out. It's a bit of a mess, but I don't want to judge. It's strange to be such an uninvited guest.

I met a guy at a bar once who read peoples' gas meter. He understood. That feeling that feeling of spending ten minutes of your day in the centre of someone's universe. We talked about whether it's okay to snoop, whether we were ever surprised by what we saw. I wonder if he got bored after a while like I did.

I'd like to ask a postman about glancing into people's hallways as they sign for packages but I haven't had the chance to meet one socially yet.

I can't tell you how I know which house I have to go to, or how I get inside, or how I do what I do. I'll let you decide whether that's because I don't know myself or

because I just don't want to share. That way, I haven't lied, and if I haven't lied, I won't have anything to pay.

You'd think there'd be more connection between the lie that was told and the thing I take. Sorry about that. I tried for a while, but it gets tiring, trying to work out some grand plan for everything.

Maybe I'd be more motivated if people knew that I was doing it, or noticed the things I took. If I knew people realised what was going on I would probably dedicate more energy to being a force of karmic justice. At the moment though, I strike at random. Mostly.

The bedroom's upstairs. I can always find my way through the house, even in the dark. There are dirty clothes on the floor, and dishes, and books, more books, but I don't put a foot wrong. He's bald, the man I came to see. That's a shame; recently I've been taking hair, and now I have to think of something new. Not that it's a big decision, I usually get a pretty strong gut feeling.

I can always find my way through the house, even in the dark.

Like now. Three steps, across to the wardrobe. It's a big jumble; suits, jeans, a couple of coats, some stuff he must have outgrown a long time ago but that he's still hanging onto. I run my hand across sleeves until I feel leather, right where I knew it would be.

It's a long coat, black, still stiff and new-smelling. I doubt he's ever worn it. It looks exactly like something you would buy in a fit of confidence that dissolves the second you got home. There's a receipt in the pocket, so he didn't want to return it either. It's in coat limbo.

The one thing I do miss about twinning lies to loss were the occasional chances it gave me to play the hero. When I got someone who'd told a white lie, or a scared lie, or said that they were fine to friend after friend whilst they screamed behind their eyes. Then I got to take something that they wanted gone. A lot of nightmares, over the years, of course. A handful of debts. Once I took a sofa that she'd been trying to get rid of for years, the springs gone, leaking stuffing. When she woke up she assumed her room mate had done it.

For a while after that I made up patterns, or games, anything to distract myself. I took left socks, single matches, memories of June third, the nail polish from thumbs. Repeat customers lost one millimetre from their height until they got close to noticing. Still, it's amazing what you can get away with.

I slide my hand down the coat's front, each button falling between my fingers like ripe fruit, no resistance, till I reach the bottom hem. Eight in total, beetle black, the glossy plastic reflecting the street light outside his bedroom window. I close my fingers over them and they're gone, and I carefully replace the coat. Close the door. Like I've never been there.

He rolls over in his sleep as I leave the room.

I haven't noticed yet. Every time I tell a lie, I try and prepare. Before I go to bed I photograph my flat, photograph myself, I make lists and draw chalk outlines and lay traps. I haven't noticed anything go missing, yet. I think the other guys must be better at their jobs. Subtler than me. Or I'm just unobservant.

I wonder about truths too. Every time I find something I was sure I had lost, or remember something I was sure I had forgotten. I can't help but wonder if I'm being rewarded for telling a particularly thorny truth, but it seems pointless to speculate.

Every time I catch a cold, I tell a lie in the hope I'll lose it.

***Shortlisted for the BBC Young Writers' Award 2016***

## STORY 7

### Life in Reverse

By Rebekah Cohen



The fire snaps and crackles in the grate, sunset coloured flames dancing in the moonlight. Each one is like an artist's brushstroke on an invisible canvas – dazzling shades of gold and angry hues of red illuminating the darkness. Somewhere in the distance I can hear church bells singing their melancholy ballad, marking the transition from one day to the next, the brassy tones of the tolling bells reaching in through the open window alongside frigid fingers of cold December air.

It's past my bedtime.

Midnight is a dangerous hour in this house. It's when the shadows merge together, forming vicious wolves that gnash their teeth and snarl as they crawl out of the undiscovered crevices of my brain. I fall down the steep staircases of my own thoughts, stagger through the forgotten catacombs of my mind, all the while searching for some clue that will remind me who I am and bring me back to the comforting assurance of reality and daybreak. The various nurses who come and go during the week have told me to make sure I'm asleep by now. They seem to work on the assumption that if I spend these treacherous hours wrapped in a blanket of drug induced slumber, my mind will be at ease.

As I reach for the tepid cup of tea poised on the table beside me, my arm sends a stack of leaflets tumbling to the floor. The condescending pieces of paper titled 'Managing Dementia' and 'Dealing with Memory Loss' arrive with the nurses and leave the next day with the recycling bin; I rarely give those crumpled pages the satisfaction of looking them in the eye, never mind reading them.

Yet they've made their mark; tomorrow is moving day. I watched, powerless to intervene, as my possessions and memories, a tangible timeline of my life, were sorted into five boxes and driven away. Somewhere inside the abyss of hideous floral carpets and musty air of a local nursing home for the elderly, those boxes are waiting for me. Soon I'll be moving aside as a team of qualified strangers take over the reins of my everyday existence.

Somehow I've ended up knee deep in a second childhood. Except this time, instead of embarking on a quest to forge new memories, my journey of self discovery is

going in the reverse direction – every day is a treasure hunt to discover the important moments that I seem to have lost all recollection of. When darkness falls, my map of familiarity is stolen, the things that remind me who I am are swathed in the thick cloak of night. As a result I'm washed out to sea with nothing but my own tangled thoughts for company, trying not to drown.

Tonight sleep evades me, no matter how exhausted I am from chasing it. Each time I close my eyes I feel myself falling into forgotten memories. Moments float past my eyelids, sparkling and iridescent before quickly fading into murky puddles, grey and bleak as dishwater. The endless corridor of my imagination stretches out before me; gingerly I step into its warped and twisted arms, an onslaught of childhood fantasies running out to greet me. There was the rocket I conjured, the racing car that sped through my adolescent dreams and the myriad of adventures I'd envisaged. Suddenly, the ground shakes and those visions vanish as if they'd never existed. When I try to recall them, they linger just beyond my grasp, laughing at me.

The problem with growing old is that you gather so many memories, you eventually run out of space to store them.

Thoughts and contemplations from many years ago rise up and enclose me in a thick copse of trees, wishes that didn't come true hanging from them like exotic fruit. I reach out to pull one from a branch and peek inside its hard, broken shell – there is nothing there besides the faint whiff of devastation and heartbreak.

Clearly, I'm in the process of unravelling.

My joints creak and my bones are reminiscent of gates swinging on rusty hinges. The hair on my head vacated the premises long ago and my eyesight and hearing are approaching their retirement. However, it is my accelerating mental incapability which scares me the most. The abandoned road of my mind is threatening and eerie, nothing but a shady, beaten track stretching out far beyond the horizon behind me, yet in front it ends abruptly in the near distance. I struggle to match up the names and identities of the faces that hover behind my eyelids, a cruel audience of unrecognised relations observing my decline.

These days, my younger self seems more myth than reality. In my mind he is regarded as a kind of celebrity: someone I will never meet; someone who I desperately want to be like, yet for the most part their life only provides a stark contrast to my current miserable existence.

This strange memory loss seems to be proof of the detrimental effect time can have on a person. I'm old and I'm wearied and it seems like every time I blink another year of my life has been chalked up onto the prison wall. The problem with growing old is that you gather so many memories, you eventually run out of space to store them. In a childish tantrum, my mind has given up the sensible archiving system it developed years ago and thrown all my thoughts at my feet, leaving me to sift through them and recover what belongs to me. Memories get thrown out that

shouldn't be and ideas remain in my possession when I should have already waved goodbye to them...

It seems my mind has had enough of me for one lifetime.

The sunrise is obscured by wisps of silver clouds, the world still half asleep. I look around my home for one last time and notice a pile of leaflets on the floor, though I can't remember how they got there. The condescending pieces of paper titled 'Managing Dementia' and 'Dealing with Memory Loss' look up at me with a cruel smile.

***Shortlisted for the BBC Young Writers' Award 2016***



## STORY 8

### Ode to a Boy Musician

By Lizzie Freestone



The boy begins.

His fingers dance down the black and white steps of the piano, harmony and melody in their movement alone. It is elegant, so fluid you could have mistaken his hands for dancers themselves; partner work impeccable, lifts held and controlled with ease. Wild turns and twists of the narrative song bring changes in rhythm, as the dancers stretch and plummet through the scales. Notes tumble over and over each other like acrobats, each striving to be more beautiful than the last. Movement twists and contorts itself into waves of sound and rhythm.

There's a noise from outside. A car backfiring, perhaps. It doesn't matter. The boy blinks once, twice. Back in this dim world. He sighs. The music stops.

The room is small, walls pasted with a dreary cream paper. On one wall- an oil painting. Black and green and grey swirled into life, trying to capture British spirit in the traditional (gloomy) manner. A man alone in the countryside imposes on the hills, his presence scattering shadows on the frost-greyled grass, dismal light illuminating all. *He* likes this painting, so naturally the boy doesn't. (Which is why it's been put in here, with the piano. Where the boy has to see it.) Overhead, birds screech- that's how the painting tries to make you feel.

It has been nine minutes.

Nine minutes is a short amount of time when you think about it, but long enough when you have to practise stretching the little time you have to yourself. Nine minutes is enough to forget about *him* and his stupid paintings and the smell of his breath and his clothes when you have to wash them. So the boy forgets and begins to play again, the music louder now. There is a swell in the sound- a heart in arrhythmia, the gallop of horses, the drum of the battlefield, the scream of a people in combat. A crescendo. And then it creeps down again, softly, softly.

The melody twists into something else. A lullaby maybe? A song for lovers?

*Creak.*

The doorknob turns, tarnished silver breaking the spell of the music. The boy tenses, but he does not stop playing. To stop playing is to admit weakness, to admit fear. And he is afraid, at this point. He is afraid. But nothing in this world could persuade him to stop playing, even for a moment. This is his ground, and he will stand it.

To stop playing is to admit weakness, to admit fear.

The door opens, and a shadow falls on the wallpaper. The muscles in the boy's neck stiffen, rock hard with stress. A scent of something sour, something sickly-sweet and volatile. Like vinegar, or urine-damp sawdust. The source is clear. The boy can feel warm breath on the back of his neck. He knows he must not flinch. His music twitches as he plays now; the rhythm uncomfortable, the lilt less defined. Shaky. But still, he plays. The boy knows that he must carry on playing, because he does not like the music- the solace it brings the boy or the talent which draws attention at school, means he cannot be left and forgotten. The music is the boy's own quiet retaliation. And the man knows it.

He weaves notes into another tapestry, and gets lost all over again. He wanders through the song, marvelling at the beauty of the place. The melody is muted turquoise, cheerful but quiet, while the harmony is dark gold, strange and exotic and beautiful. He's on a journey, away from this hateful place and towards another world, one strange and beautiful and bright.

When he snaps back to reality the room is dark. He is alone. His hands are cramped. He is cold and hungry. The man in the painting glares at him, cutting moonlight illuminating the coldness of the picture.

There's a small pile of something in the corner. Sheet music. It's the one thing he's permitted to buy, in this prison-of-a-house. Beneath it, an even smaller pile of something else – matchsticks.

He nearly has enough.

From what he's heard, oil paint is flammable.

Canvas even more so.

*Shortlisted for the BBC Young Writers' Award 2016*

## STORY 9

### The Good Son

By Hilla Hamidi

**\*\*Guidance warning: This story contains violence and adult themes.\*\***



Father took me to the field one day. We were planting potatoes. I stood with the shovel. Father sat on the stairs, the sack between his legs.

Each breath condensed in the air. I wanted to help him haul the burlap sack, but he coddled it close, gripping the lumps in the sack. Grandmother stood at the porch, watching us go. She held me for a moment, perhaps thinking it was too late for me to be out. But father said mother was okay with it. Said she'd have baked potatoes with butter ready for when we returned. We must have been spots in the distance when grandmother finally went inside. Father showed me how to strike the frozen ground. The sun was setting by the time I dug a deep enough hole. He told me to dig so deep that the fires of hell would roast the potatoes to a crisp.

"Why would we want burnt potatoes?" I asked. He told me to dig. I think I made him proud with the hole I dug, because he forced a grin but he was shivering terribly. Father told me to turn around and watch the sun set.

"This is a special one," he said. I didn't ask why it was special, I just did as I was told. I'd tell mother about all the colours I saw later. I heard a thud against the ground. Father set about refilling the hole. When he was done, it had begun to snow. We looked up at the sky for a moment until father's eyes watered.

On the journey home, father told me I was a good son. I beamed with pride. Father did not say hello to grandmother. He sent me straight to bed. I asked him when the potatoes would be ready.

"When the snow melts away," he replied. He tucked me into bed and said goodnight. I asked if mother would be coming to say goodnight as well.

"Why didn't mother make us potatoes like she said she would?"

"She's resting now. A lady gets tired. When carrying a little one."

I was going to be a big brother. They told me a few months back. I could teach him to dig just like me.

I never got to teach my brother how to dig. Mother had run off with a black man, father said.

I stood over him until he woke. "Son, what's wrong?"

Grandmother soon died of cancer.

"Find those potatoes, boy. Don't ever stop digging," she said with her dying breath. I didn't know what she meant. Life went on.

I too became a father. It made my father proud. My wife made him fat and merry with her cooking.

But my wife and I began arguing. Those fights left us in bitter moods, but it seemed to dig away at father more than anyone else. I found him mumbling one day, brandishing his cane. "She'll get what's coming. My son knows how to dig. He knows how to dig." He was startled when he saw me staring. I didn't know what to say.

One summer's evening, I took my family to the field. Father's arthritis had gotten the best of him. He stayed indoors to rest. We walked until we reached the foot of a hill. Remembering the trip with father, I recounted the story to my children. They asked if we ever harvested the potatoes. I could not answer. Father and I had never gone back to find the potatoes. Perhaps he was too sad after my mother left.

"Why don't we go digging, pa? Let's grow potatoes!" My daughter beamed up at me. What a brilliant idea? When I told father, a cloud hung over his head. He thrashed about. He scared my children. Father begged me, on his knees, not to plant anything at the foot of the hill. I listened to his warning, but paid no heed.

Next day, I carried a shovel as my children dragged a burlap sack. I told them to dig, just as I had done before. They dug and they dug like the good children they were.

We peered into the hole. I reached down to pick up a smooth rock beneath tatters of floral cloth in the dirt. We stared at it. My fingers traced the features with fascination. The top of it had collapsed and when I turned it over in my hands dirt poured from two round hollows. My arms went limp and I dropped it back into the hole. I turned to my children.

"Run along. Into town. Buy a sapling - any'll do." They went, clinging to each other. I brandished my shovel and marched back to the house.

My wife looked up and smiled. I told her. She got into the truck. Off into town, to be with the children. When the dust trail from the truck dissipated, I went inside. Dishevelled hair, wild eyes, and flushed skin greeted me in the mirror. My breath fogged up the glass as I stepped up towards the figure. Its face began to snarl. With a firm grip around the shovel, I smashed it. "I found those potatoes, grandmother."

Father was sleeping. I stood over him until he woke. "Son, what's wrong?" I raised the shovel over my head, my face unmoving. Father looked up, with quivering eyes.

"Black loving tart -" he began, but I swung down the shovel. I dug it down into his brain, the way he taught to me to dig. I braced myself for another swing. And another, and another, digging away.

I folded him up and shoved him into the sack. I dragged him through the field. I think I felt him stir a bit. Once we got to the hole at the foot of the hill, I tossed the sack inside. The stars were out when I was almost done. My wife and children arrived in the truck.

We planted the sapling. I'm sure he'd be proud.

No need to dig there no more.

*Shortlisted for the BBC Young Writers' Award 2016*

## STORY 10

### Innocence Lost

By Alan Taylor



The sun was just going down, as the Umwazis left their little hut on the small hillock by the lake, to sit down around the fire for their evening meal, just like they did every night. The sky shone down on them with an opal blue, lightly tinged with a burnt orange, giving their freshly caught chickens and their dark brown faces a beautiful glow that they would've noticed, had they been less joyful in each other's company. As this was not like any other night. This was the last night before Patrick Umwazi became a man.

It was the day of the Reed in the year of the Salamander, which meant that it was the eve of Patrick's 13th birthday. The celebrations were jubilant, and went on all the night. The neighbouring families, the Chiboks and the Khutans came out to share broiled chickens, ground maize and palm wine. They ate, drank and were merry, as was their tradition.

When the members of the neighbouring families got too tired or too drunk to continue, they went back to their huts to sleep long and sound. And although at that time the celebrations themselves died down, the night became all the more beautiful. The sky was now dark and the stars cast the only faint hue over the black lands. The elders, Kantu and Emwina Umwazi, lay down in each other's arms, and stared at the night, thinking with quiet bliss about the rest of their life. Looking up, they saw their two youngest daughters, Akua and Akosua, playing in the small lake at the bottom of their little hillock. They were soaked, but laughing so brilliantly it cast all the worries in their mind into insignificance. Kantu and Emwina looked at each other, and embraced silently. Patrick was sitting down, looking ahead, with a solemn gaze.

In the morning, Kantu awoke early for the special day. As he left his hut, though, to stretch, he could see Patrick already out, still seated. He hadn't been to bed. He knew what was coming. Turning 13, becoming a man, meant one thing and one thing and one thing only for the Bakwan people. Learning to kill.

After washing in the lake, and on an empty stomach, Kantu gestured for his son to follow him. Silently, the boy got up and walked, with his head held firmly upright,

in the direction of his father. They kept plodding on in silence, past the lake, past the shrubbery, across the dry, cracked farmlands, and into the Wood of the Reckoning.

One quiet word slipped from Kantu's mouth, 'go'.

Soon they came out to a clearing in the trees. It was early, the sun was just creeping out of the cloudless sky, peaking through the holes in the trees. But there were no onlookers in human form. Just Kantu and Patrick. Father and son. Man and boy. Crouching, not looking at one another, each with a wordless acknowledgement of the other's presence. Somehow they both know that, were they to look each other in the eyes, it would confront some unspoken, unknown trouble that had been hiding away for so many years. And for the Bakwans, confrontation was only ever physical. Never psychological.

So instead, Kantu quietly stepped forward and made a rudimentary chicken trap out of sticks and bamboo. He placed it down nimbly, covered it with leaves and went back to crouch with his son. They were careful not to stand too close together, yet he was anxious to be too long without his boy by his side. His baby. The boy he'd watch cry when the sun came out and then watch in awe when it went back down. The boy he'd saved from breaking his neck on the rocks in the Wood. The boy that was becoming a man. He realised these were the last few moments in which his boy, his baby, would still be his. Yet, he carried on looking straight ahead, not turning to look Patrick in the eyes for one last time.

Fleetingly, a chicken rushed out of the trees and fell into Kantu's skilfully placed trap. It squawked in pain and struggled and squirmed to be free. But it was trapped.

One quiet word slipped from Kantu's mouth, 'go'.

Patrick knew what to do. He stepped up, took his short, sharpened knife from the bamboo sheath on his leg, looked at the knife, and looked at the chicken. The knife glistened in the growing morning sun, the chicken had started to bleed from its trapped leg. Patrick stared some more. He drew his knife up, not looking away from the dying animal. He was ready.

And then he felt something. Maybe for the first time in his life. A twang. Somewhere in his chest. He gave the chicken one more look and dropped the knife behind him. And he ran. He ran and ran and ran. He ran through the Wood of Reckoning, past the scorched farmlands, past the lake, past the shrubbery, and didn't stop running until he was at the top of the hillock.

Catching his breath, he could immediately feel something wrong. He could sense it. Something more than the impending isolation from the Bakwans and his father that would come as he had avoided his God-given duty. He could feel a change. A chill in the air. A darkness looming over the bright sun. Then he realised what it was, what he had seen.

He slowly got up and looked down to the lake. He looked upon the clan of masked, white-skinned Makawis, the next tribe along, fleeing in the distance. Then he looked upon his little sister, in the lake. He looked upon her as his parents had looked upon her last night. Except instead of laughter coming out of her mouth, there was a steady stream of blood, pooling up around her and turning the water of the lake a dark, cold red.

*Shortlisted for the BBC Young Writers' Award 2016*



## STORY 11

### Under a Deep Blue Sky

By Davina Bacon, 17, from Cambridgeshire.



Leaves rustled as we crawled through the thick brush. I hushed the others, although I was loudest. Matthew pinched my leg, chuckling softly when a yelp escaped from me. His pinches were deadly. David craned his head to glare over his shoulder, silently reprimanding us: *If you fools continue misbehaving, I will leave you here in the dark, and you can explain what we were doing. See if you'll be laughing then.*

Our path was barely visible despite the yellow headlamp clamped on David's head. Matthew and I followed almost blindly, placing our hands exactly where David had. The trail was familiar. The cold, sharp edge of my rifle fit perfectly into the groove it had carved into my skin years ago, and its weight no longer bothered me. Instead, my mind focused on staying low, silent, and swift.

We reached the watering hole. The view might have been beautiful, had we come to appreciate the way the deep blue sky dotted with a billion stars was streaked with red and violet light coming from just behind the hills along the border. But we hadn't. Instead, we sat back on our haunches and devoured the rice and beans we had brought for the wait. The elephants usually ambled down about ten minutes after we arrived.

Soon the first of the lumbering grey beasts wandered down to drink. In a flash, the rifle was poised in my arms, lifted to eye-level to get a shot. From the corner of my eye, I glimpsed David's gesture for me to lower it. *It wasn't worth it.* Its pale tusks were stunted so they wouldn't reach a decent price, and it would take too long to dig them out of its face. Slowly, I lowered the rifle, and watched the young elephant frolic in the shallow water, oblivious to our presence and its close brush with death. The rest of the herd meandered down, but still David did not give the signal. Patiently, I waited.

Soon the light behind the hills had disappeared. The herd was leaving. I glanced at David, wondering if he had just come for the view after all. His hand was raised, pointing. "Amayi," he muttered in Chichewa. *Mother.* I followed his finger and made out a hazy shape with a smaller shape next to it. But, although darkness cloaked the entire park, I could discern the majestic, sweeping arches of her tusks,

almost glowing with ivory. The baby was trailing behind, and she'd slowed to wait for it while the rest carried on their journey to who-knows-where. Nodding, I aimed the rifle, placed my finger on the trigger and pushed.

The blast shattered the night.

A behemoth shriek pierced the air, and we felt the earth tremble as she collapsed. We jogged over, intending to finish the job quickly and leave. Though she fell silent, she quivered as her calf gently nudged her trunk. I should have finished her then. I should have put a bullet to the top of her gigantic head and killed her. But I couldn't. Perhaps it was the way her calf urged her to stand, perhaps the way those inky black eyes tried to speak, the way they held no reproach. Believe me, if I had killed the creature, I'd be a heartless man.

It couldn't have been more than a second, but it was enough time. I reeled, recalling where I had seen the elephant's expression before. My dying mother had looked at me like that as the life went out of her eyes. I, a boy no older than ten, had squatted and stared uncomprehendingly at her lifeless body on the road, all the coins we had collected that day scattered around her head like a halo. I remembered the funeral, where I and my older sister had hovered behind a group of adults arguing about responsibilities, whose names Amayi had only whimpered in her nightmares. Then a house that smelt like fish, where my sister, thinner than ever, vigorously pounded something in a mortar, while a stout man who glistened with sweat alternated between leering at her, smirking, or intently watching the television where gaudily dressed women paraded in technicolour. And me? I ran away, ran to the streets, ran into trouble.

The rifle clattered to my feet.

Matthew and David looked at me, bewildered, as I sank to my knees. David's eyes hardened, before he scooped up the rifle, placed the barrel to the mother's head, and killed her. Then he turned and did the same to her baby. The ensuing silence rang in my ears. It was broken by the sharp *hack* of his machete against the beautiful corpse's face, my nausea doubling when Matthew followed suit. They didn't care about the way the rich, sticky blood clotted around their leather boots, or the way they almost sliced off her limp trunk. To me, the ordeal seemed to last for eternity.

Eventually, each man cradled a gory tusk. The grand arches were no longer a papery white, but inked with rivulets of blood flowing down the curves. To the side, the carcasses lay still, mere cases of the beings they once carried. Then they turned to me, and for a second, the contempt in David's eyes made me think he was going to kill me too. I had failed him, the man who raised me, taught me to kill, to forget the past. Betrayal was punishable by death. We had been warned enough during training. Instead, he spat on me, his saliva congealing on my eyebrows and dripping down my cheeks to mix with my tears. Matthew looked away. And although I had been spared for now, I knew I wouldn't be trusted again. They would dispose of me later. And perhaps that was best.

Sometimes the past catches up with you, as swift as a bullet, and leaves an emptiness in you, as large as an elephant.

*Shortlisted for the BBC Young Writers' Award 2018*

## STORY 12

### Footprints in the Far Field

By Reyah Martin, 18, from Glasgow.



My mother has no sameness. She pulls at days the way you pull at purl stitches, until the rows are tattered and undone, and nothing can be made. People come to see her – old friends and mothers and the doctor – and they are sorry. Sorry for her loss. Sorry for her heart. Sorry for all her broken pieces, shattered like mirrorglass. She thanks them and looks into the rain, the clatter on the windowpane battered about in the gale. They make her tea. She doesn't drink it. They console her and squeeze her hand, kiss me on the head or put an arm around my shoulder. They smile and say *it wasn't meant to be. One day you will have your little girl* but they know it's not true. They do the things she can't bear to: take away the cradle, give away the cardigans. Find someone who'll take a dead baby's shoes. They have to hold her back, kneading the pillows with their steady mothers' hands.

They make her bed and help her in, dress and undress her like a doll. Tie her hair back, quick and careless. Their voices are soft. Hushing-shushing lullabies saved for darkness. They take time over the bed sheets, hanging up her dresses, closing the door to keep out the draught. They wait with her all day, a vigil at sunset, faces tight and pitying in the firelight. Through the window they can see to the other side of the village. When they look they long to be with their own children. They long to be back in bright lamplight, buttering bread and sitting with babies in their laps. They stiffen with the desire to go. She sighs and stares at the cross, Jesus nailed wooden above the bed.

The evenings are lonely.

She doesn't want me there, seeing her without her painted lips. They talk - *some women get like that, irrational. It's no surprise really, given what she's been through. Still, it's not fair on Michael. He shouldn't be seeing her like that. It's not his fault she...his fault she lost it* -

I hear them on the way out, their soft voices floating. When they get home they light their fires, make their own tea and sit with their children, holding them to their frantic hearts. Sometimes they pass me sweets in paper bags. Mint Humbugs. Pear drops. Sherbet lemons. I smile, take them one at a time. I offer them to my mother. She says nothing. We watch the shrunken chimneys, smoke sputtering to

the sky. My mother says those mothers are blessed. Their prayers have been answered and they are blessed. They have sons, and beside the sons they hold little daughters. Do you see them...little daughters dressed and pretty in front of the stove?

I'm not looking. Her eyes try to find mine. The silence, jagged, sharpens with unsaid things.

*You don't want...that tea, do you?* She catches me off-guard, holding out the cup to me. It spills a little on the pillow; she shakes her head, lowers her eyes blaming the blankets. A sweet is slipping to the back of my throat, if I stay this way I'll choke. I have to lean forward. She presses me. *Have you eaten...eaten anything?*

I take the tea, set it down beside her. I lie to her. I tell her I went to a woman's house; I know her son from school, I met his little sister. His mother made me salty fried bread. I tell her there were four chairs at the big wooden table, and in the middle a pot of jam with the knife stuck in, so that it was slippery with strawberry seeds. I tell her we went to the loch with a picnic blanket in the afternoon, towels white capes around our shoulders. We trod brambles into the ground. The corners of her mouth twitch. Her pale lips open, close in a breath. I think she is smiling but she's turned away again. I take another sweet, stick my tongue through the lemon edge to where the middle melts away. The sugar evaporates in fizz. This new silence becomes unbearable.

*Drink it* she says at last, her right hand raised shaking near the cup. I hesitate. The first shadows spring up after sunset, the flames brighten across the water. *It might be a little cold now, but it'll do you good. Drink it. Then we can go to sleep. I need you with me tonight.*

I believe her. I do.

The next day the women knock loud on the door. My mother, her eyes half-closed, moans in her sleep. She lies warm over me. I think about kissing her, but they let themselves in and it feels out-of-place. It makes them happy though, to see such peacefulness in her face. They're loathe to wake her. Instead they send me to get dressed, find brambles with a boy across the water.

I protest *but she's my mother.*

They are solemn. *Of course she is.* Solemn and quiet, their lips pressed together. *Go on, enjoy yourself.*

The ripe fruit lies in the far field. We pick at midday with the sun in our eyes, me and a boy and his little sister. They bring a picnic blanket, strawberry jam and white towels. We are laughing and gone past sunset. I don't think of her until the lonely evening. Then the lamps are burning out and the women – they should be at home – weep on our doorstep. They reach out to me. They take her body to the black coach. I cry and stain them with juices, colours of bruises and blood. They hold me saying, in the end

*She's with God now.*

The headstone reads the same, and beneath it:

*A loving mother.*

I visit her in the far field. Sometimes I bring brambles and flowers from the women. I ask her, but I know she'd never have wanted them. She waits for little girls' shoes

***Shortlisted for the BBC Young Writers' Award 2018***

## STORY 13

### Unspoken

By Lottie Mills, 16, from Hertfordshire



When my sister ran away that night, we thought it was an anomaly. Just a silly teenage strop, a drunken impulse, the product of a thoughtless boyfriend and too much vodka. We sat up, blanketed and shaking in the living room; doused by the cold light of police sirens, and we stared at nothing, and we waited. When they found her in the small hours of the morning, tear-drenched and frozen half to death, we simply let her slip past, up the stairs to her bedroom, to feign sleep until her alarm went off and pretend the whole thing had never happened.

We didn't talk about it.

When she stopped going to school, we thought it was laziness. She was bright, my mother said, tentatively, just struggling to apply herself. My father was harsher, said she was throwing her life away, that she would amount to nothing if she refused to conform. I kept quiet, simply darting my eyes between them, like a spectator at Wimbledon. Upstairs, my sister slept, or else lay down, knotted in duvets with her bedroom door bolted shut, for hours on end. She did leave the house eventually, the spectre of exclusion from Sixth Form looming over her head, and returned home later that day with puffy red eyes and slumped shoulders.

We didn't talk about it.

When she stopped eating, we thought it was vanity. She was just another body-conscious young woman, we said, just another victim of sexist advertising and a shallow circle of friends. My father thought she should delete all of 'the social media' – convinced that Instagram and Facebook must be to blame – ignoring the never ending exams, the perpetual loneliness, the constant judgement from family, teachers and half-friends. They got into a raging fight about the whole thing, and nobody won. She started to eat again after the exams, but you could still count every single one of her ribs.

We didn't talk about it.

When she got an offer from university, we thought it was an opportunity. She didn't. She longed for freedom from structure, the ability to forge her own path. But her A-Levels wouldn't allow for the life she wanted, so, after much emotional

upheaval, she went. We dropped her off at halls, abandoning her like a foundling baby, as she stood on the corner, openly sobbing and clutching frantically at the last box of home. That night was the first time I cried for my sister, the first tinge of a fear which is now all-too familiar. We all felt that fear, I think. The fear of a word which none of us dared to speak, a word which forever went unspoken.

We didn't talk about it.

When she refused to get a job, we thought it was stubbornness. She was distracted by the party life, my parents claimed, but too immature to support it. Feebly, I attempted to imply that something might be hindering her, be making her afraid. But such things didn't happen, said my parents, not to families like us, not to bright young women like her. So the dreaded word went unspoken still, and they told her that she simply had to get a job and that was the end of it.

That night, she ran away again, arriving at our grandparent's house on a wave of shuddering nausea and gushing tears. We drove down in a panic, that strange weekend, and I snuck into the bathroom to see her. She was pouring herself into the toilet bowl – vomit, tears, blood, makeup, saliva and dreadful, tragic words. She spoke of a sadness older than time and deeper than hell, and all at once I saw the weight of a thousand worlds teetering on her too-thin shoulders, and I was frightened. The damage was in the open now, blatant for all to see – in the gouged marks which marred her smooth plains of skin, the vomit which matted in her hair, the yawning darkness of her empty eyes. In that moment, I almost dared to say the terrible word out loud. But then she scrubbed away the stains of that awful night, went to bed, and in the morning, she was composed – or some paper thin variant of it. We all knew, now, that something had gone horrifically adrift in the chemistry of her mind, but still nobody dared to spell it out. We stayed with my grandparents for a few more days, playacting at functionality, stubbornly ignoring the quicksand around us even as we began to drown in it. My sister didn't say anything at all, just sat there, frozen, watching us.

We didn't talk about it.

When we sent her back to university, we thought it was a good idea. I say 'we', but it's not true, not really, because I heard the desperation that warped her voice as she pleaded with our parents not to make her go, and that terrifying word scrawled itself across my brain once again. But they pushed her, brandishing harsh words about failure and weakness, and so she went. There were no tears when we dropped her off this time, only silence. There were no texts, no phone calls.

Then, the hospital called.

The night which followed is a blur to me. I remember the stench of disinfectant, and the dreadful hum of machines, and then the agonizing silence after the doctors turned them off. I remember the taste of my own tears, and the echoing sobs of my parents, and the useless words I whispered into ears which were connected to nothing, the ears of a corpse. More than anything, though, I remember that word,



emblazoned on every piece of paperwork, everywhere I looked, listed under cause of death. Seven letters which I had never, ever heard said out loud, letters which were now branded into my soul forever.

Now, we sit at the dinner table. We stare at nothing. We ignore the empty chair.

We still don't talk about it.

*Shortlisted for the BBC Young Writers' Award 2018*

## STORY 14

### Firsts

By Jane Mitchell, 16, from Dorset.



I believed we were going to die.

The storm was getting worse, as were the screams. The screams of the ocean. The screams of the people. Beating against my skull like the waves against the wood of the boat. Reaching out, I clutched my thin little girl close, the boat moaning threateningly as if it disapproved of the intimate gesture. Please God, help us, I thought. This wasn't fair, not for her, my little one. Her three years of life on this earth had not yet provided her the joys of being alive, only grief and tears. There was so much I wanted for her, so many possibilities: her first day of school, her first kiss, her wedding. But she'd never get that now; we'd left one war only to be thrust into another. Was God truly this cruel? As if provoked, a profound screech grated against my ears as a large rusty pole collapsed onto the deck. A man screamed. I froze, a vile liquid swelling up my throat as I watched blood ooze down the man's cheek in large clumps. I'm going to be sick, I thought, as I swept my daughter behind me and violently hurled over the edge of the boat. The dark waves mocked me below.

Shaking, I turned and stumbled over to the old man with the bloody face, the mass of people around me clutching their loved ones, others clutching anything on this broken ship that resembled stability. I still held onto my little one. "Please," the man whispered, but he couldn't muster any more words. Kneeling down, I placed my untrained hands against his skin, looking for the source of the blackening blood and what appeared to be a thin, straw-coloured liquid. I stopped breathing. His eye. His eye was gone. Choking back bile, I searched for something, anything absorbent that could be used to stop the bleeding. People saw my frantic stares, but were too frightened to let go of each other. Help me! I wanted to scream, but I knew it would do no good. Out here, on this death voyage, it was every person for themselves.

The bleeding was worsening. We had only come with the clothes on our backs and the memories of a home that had not yet been wrecked by war, so I was at a loss when it came to medical supplies. Thinking fast, I quickly slipped off my socks and knotted them end-to-end, a makeshift bandage which I tied as tightly as I could

around the man's face. He moaned an agonising whimper. It was only then that I remembered a distant day in school when my teacher had described bacteria and germs, but now, I did not have the luxury of clean cloth and sterile equipment to fight their authority. My grimy socks would have to do.

My baby girl was crying behind me. "shh, don't cry!" I whispered, when the harsh whipping of the wind against the boat ripped through all of us like a hot knife through butter. I could hear people's prayers mixing with the thundering of the sky and the contemptuous laughs of the ocean. The boat was shaking more vehemently now; I started humming the lullaby my mother had sung to me when I was a little girl, scared of the dark. Rubbing my hand up and down my child's back, she let out a series of hiccupping- sobs as I sung our song, the memories of a distant land echoing in the winds above.

"Look!" Someone screeched. Hundreds of frightened eyes flashed in the direction of the voice. In the distance, a deep horn bellowed through the night sky, calling to our hearts, followed by the presence of a small yellow boat with several people on board. We all started crying and screaming at them, a cacophony of voices that rivalled the power of the storm around us. A small hint of relief shot through me, intertwining with the adrenaline coursing through my veins; my daughter might still have her firsts.

The man still whimpered next to me, clearly unable to see our hope brimming on the horizon. "It's okay sir, we're almost-"

"Mummy?" I hear, startled. I look up. There's no boat. No mocking waves. No blood. Not anymore. Only my daughter: my brave little one, breaking me free of my reverie.

Snapped back into the present, I now see my little girl skipping towards me through the playground, her lovely dark skin no longer pinched by malnutrition but touched by the smooth softness of youth. She's waving a picture of a butterfly, an excited, proud smile beaming across her face. She is beautiful.

But then I see the silent glares of the other parents; their fearful eyes that scream 'go back to where you came from'. But never their mouths, no; only their eyes scream the words, as for mouths to scream them would appear too shocking. Too shameful.

They know nothing of what we've been through.

My baby girl runs into my arms, her malleable young mind having already warped the memory of the boat and the blood and the night. She shows me her picture, and I smile a smile that matches her own, if only with an intimation of sadness. I pick

her up, breathing in her childlike scent, her hair blocking the hatred and the fear and the ignorance of this new world and I think, oh, my baby girl, my brave little one.

You will have your firsts.

*Shortlisted for the BBC Young Writers' Award 2018*

## STORY 15

### Oh Sister, Invisible

By Tabitha Rubens, 16, from London.



I was always sure my sister was woven from golden thread.

I was merely yarn.

She could stop the breeze with a fingertip and catch sunlight in her fists.

One warm summer night of a distant year, she dragged me from my bed and we climbed out of the bathroom window. With one hand on the drainpipe and the other gripping hers, I pulled myself after her and stretched out on the terracotta roof. We watched the fireflies circling the moon and decided what to be when we were grown.

June Solstice arrived and my sister filled my palms with honeysuckle flowers. She taught me to tease the string of nectar from the pale yellow petals and drop the sweet elixir onto my tongue. Dreams are made of such sweetness.

When the weather turned, and rain drummed across the ceiling, I'd play the piano so that I could hear her sing. My sister could sing as if the notes were alive; as though the crescendos were rushing through her blood and the symphonies reveling in scandalous secrets, unveiling their enigmas in a flurry of sound.

When my sister sung, the whole world stood still.

In mid-July joyful melodies filled the house: Italian love songs and the occasional musical ballad. But at the dawn of August, her preference diverged to tragedy, and her voice would waver in mourning, and break apart as she choked upon each *accelerando*. By September, her grief grew until she forced herself to settle on silence.

On Halloween I brushed her lips with indigo ink and plastered Titanium White over her prominent cheekbones. A skeletal silhouette stared back at me.

Beneath the façade, my sister flashed her Cheshire-cat-grin and led me out to face the monsters. We were flooded with sherbet lemons, pear drops and peppermint

creams, but as the twilight sky blended into night, I watched her drop the confectionary into her pockets. To be forgotten.

Something had shifted in my sister. As the leaves fell to the ground, a part of her wilted, drooped and died. A thread snapped.

Then she started to count.

Steps.

Mouthfuls.

Heartbeats.

She would sink under steaming water in the bath, watching her knees break through the mountains of foam, and count the seconds she could hold her breath, cradling the oxygen between her toes, until her velveteen lungs seemed to shred into ribbons, twirling up the sides of the bath and writing scarlet pleas on the wall.

My sister counted.

And as the tallies spiraled into towering monuments of rock and stone, she began to fade.

At first it was simply the palette of her skin; she paled until I could trace the blood vessels running across her jaw; could see the veins shining like fairy lights beneath her translucent cheeks.

By Bonfire Night she had a ghostly, fluorescent glow. You could look straight past her shadowed bones to her heart. It pulsated and throbbed, flashing crimson in time with the fireworks. I lit a Catherine Wheel and she poured her hot chocolate into the flower bed. Soaking the soil behind the pansies.

She became elusive; self-conscious of her spine, cerebrum and ileum. She blushed and shivered as invisible eyes moved across her kidneys, with their violet tinge, and scrutinized the gentle curve of her liver. She was most ashamed of her stomach. She watched it swell and shrink beneath her lungs, obsession glinting in her eyes. The only thing I ever noted was its emptiness. The unused acid and enzymes and obvious twinges of hollow pain.

She counted those too. She numbered the nauseous, clockwork groans, willing the digit to lengthen and stretch. Unknowingly, she was also numbering her days.

On Winter Solstice she finally turned invisible. As the frost danced up the window panes, she stepped out of sight. The nights drew in and my sister became no more than a memory. A passing shiver in the wind. Traces of her past fluttered round the house: old drawings, photos and certain smells. They tricked me into thinking she still lived. But how can someone live when no one can see them?

Christmas Eve bloomed. A fresh, still night. I lay awake, staring up at the ceiling until my eyes grew weary and unfocused, sending the edges of my vision into a

drunken stumble. As the world blurred, I thought I heard a faint murmur slipping through the stillness.

“One.”

A distant hum.

“Two.”

A Tuneful coo.

“Three.”

Familiar.

I stealthily crept into the corridor, following the count. One. Down the stairs. Two. On to the landing. Three. Staring down at the blood-dappled teardrops streaking the pinewood floor.

I lay on my stomach, ducking beneath the darkness, pressing my eye to the sliver of light beneath her door frame. And I saw.

One. I saw the silence scream obscenities at her.

Two. I saw the stygian quiet tighten around her throat.

Three. I saw a demonic hush hurtle forwards, shifting into a parasitic mold, blossoming in her DNA.

Then the counting stopped.

And I saw courage.

Braveheart, Lancelot, Herculean courage. In a sliver of a girl. A girl who would not let this malevolent, spiteful sickness define her.

“I see you.” I whispered.

*I hope she hears me.*

***Shortlisted for the BBC Young Writers' Award 2018***

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