

Reading Bodies: Burnout, Overload and Resilience



A collection of writing and artwork co-created with educators, academics, health professionals, creative writers, illustrators and members of the public for the AHRC-funded Reading Bodies project (2023–2025). Creating interdisciplinary collaboration for a fairer, healthier world.

Edited by Sally Flint & Katharine Murphy

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Disclaimer: Due to the sensitive nature of the themes addressed, this anthology contains materials that some individuals may find challenging. Please read with care.

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Riptide



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*Yo no puedo dejar de escribir, es lo único que me cura.
I cannot stop writing; it is the only thing that heals me.*

Carmen Martín Gaité,
Nubosidad variable (Variable Cloud)



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PREFACE

This anthology of *Riptide Journal* is the result of a unique collaborative partnership for ‘Reading Bodies: Narrating Illness in Spanish and European Literatures and Cultures (1870s to 1960s),’ funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council from 2023 to 2025. Bringing together specialists in Modern Languages, Creative Writing, Public Health and Psychology, we held a creative workshop on Burnout, Overload and Resilience in literature and visual images at the University of Exeter in June 2024, followed by an open call for submissions. The initiative drew over forty insightful responses from contributors based in the United Kingdom, Europe, the United States and New Zealand, including teachers, academics, health professionals, writers, illustrators and other members of the public.

The workshop and resulting *Riptide* anthology are the foundations of our public engagement activity for Reading Bodies, a multilingual, multidisciplinary project that bridges expertise in Modern Languages and Medical Humanities. Working across five languages (Spanish, French, German, Italian and Portuguese), the research traces narratives of illness in European literatures and cultures from the late-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century and their legacy in the present day. Through its emphasis on gendered readings of psychological and physical conditions, the project analyses the importance of cultural representation for the dissemination and interpretation of ideas about health and illness, including during periods of socio-political upheaval. In the light of the Covid-19 pandemic, these themes continue to resonate.

This volume of *Riptide Journal* presents the outcomes of our public engagement and outreach as a key strand of the wider Reading Bodies project. It offers a selection of writing and artwork by new and established voices, including flash fiction by award-winning authors Kit de Waal and Kim Squirrel, poetry by Andy Brown and Anthony Wilson, and graphic illustrations by former UK Comics Laureate Hannah Berry. I would like to thank all our project partners, workshop participants and contributors for sharing their valuable insights; thanks also to Dr Sally Flint for co-editing this anthology. The creative methodologies developed for Reading Bodies aim to bridge the gap between interdisciplinary Medical Humanities research and lived experience, supporting new ways of considering the health issues addressed. We hope the results will demonstrate the power of storytelling to encourage ongoing dialogue about mental and physical health as we work together towards the University’s 2030 Strategy for a fairer, healthier world.

Katharine Murphy, *Associate Professor of Hispanic Studies and Comparative Literature, University of Exeter, UK; Principal Investigator for Reading Bodies.*

Acknowledgements: This project is generously funded by an AHRC Research, Development and Engagement Fellowship (AH/X01133X/1) on ‘Reading Bodies: Narrating Illness in Spanish and European Literatures and Cultures (1870s to 1960s),’ 2023–2025. For more information, please visit our website: readingbodies.exeter.ac.uk.

INTRODUCTION

Research Objectives and Legacy

What do the terms burnout, overload and resilience mean to different people? This anthology of *Riptide* seeks both to demonstrate the value of writing and visual art for communicating our experiences of physical and mental (ill-)health and reframe the ways in which burnout can be expressed through storytelling. Moving beyond its medical definition as a condition specific to the workplace, our collection explores interrelated factors such as gender, family expectations, relationships, caring, neurodiversity and life stage. This creative initiative was inspired by my research for *Reading Bodies* on literary representations of neurasthenia (nervous exhaustion) in turn-of-the-century Spanish novels and the afterlives of these discourses in present-day conceptualisations of burnout. Through interdisciplinary collaboration, the project brings together literary research in Modern Languages and Creative Writing, with expertise in the Medical School on modern workplace pressures and Psychology-informed studies of stress and resilience.

The volume comprises a selection of poems, micro-fiction, life writing, photographs and artwork, including professional illustrations. Although some contributors have previous experience of creative writing, this was not a pre-requisite for involvement; the anthology showcases a variety of new and established voices. The project elicited particularly high levels of engagement from women in education and health professions in the UK, which we have sought to balance with representation from other demographic groups, including international and intergenerational perspectives. Despite the challenging nature of the topics addressed, several participants told us they had found writing to be a cathartic process, enhancing their understanding of the issues and prompting conversations with

friends and work colleagues. It also demonstrates the value of giving previously unpublished writers the opportunity to be heard.

Contributors reported diverse motivations for joining the project. Many were seeking a therapeutic outlet to express their feelings and experiences. Mental health practitioners told us they were ‘looking for a stimulating perspective and a different approach to understanding and tackling these issues.’ One workshop participant said they ‘valued the process. [...] It has inspired me to explore creative writing practice and journalling, which is helping in my recovery journey.’ Others commented that they found the project to be a source of inspiration and hope. Many of the narratives combine life writing with creative imagination, blurring the lines between facts and fiction, and allowing a degree of distance from individual experiences and situations through the editorial process. We are delighted to share this thought-provoking collection, which seeks to balance diverse perspectives, and hope it will inform future initiatives on the chosen themes.

Prof. Katharine Murphy (Co-Editor), Principal Investigator for *Reading Bodies*

Innovative Methodologies

There’s risk in designing and facilitating any creative writing workshop. Will participants stay, will they write anything – will anyone be brave and share what they’ve written? So, I was prepared for *Burnout, Overload and Resilience* to be challenging as themes and that we needed to be sensitive to what these topics might evoke in a creative space of storytelling. Colleagues contextualising the significance and worth of the project and being present to provide emotional support in the workshop put everyone at ease. Particularly interesting was how participants appreciated being offered unexpected ways of creating, pinning down, building and communicating a personal story which they felt was important to share. It was clear that the topics grabbed,

provoked, resonated and united people, because not only did we have submissions from workshop participants, but also an international cohort of academics, established writers and other contributors who read the submission invitation online.

The editorial process could be likened to putting a jigsaw together, our aim being to best represent all the writing, ideas, conversations and artwork submitted, and to publish a strong and memorable legacy of the Reading Bodies project. As Peter Drucker writes: 'Every first-rate editor [...] reads, edits and rewrites every word that goes into their publication,' and the editorial ethos of *Riptide* has always been to work with and publish award-winning writers alongside those new to or not practised in creative writing. If there is a powerful story to be teased out, as editors, we want to help develop it. This anthology emphasises how this collaborative strategy facilitates a broad range of disciplines, workplaces, personal situations and voices in a fast-changing world. Offering contributors the choice to anonymise and collaborate gave the editors more freedom to represent the voices of those taking part.

There were opportunities to interweave some submissions, as well as hone stand-alone narratives and images, shifting between varying points of view and writing styles. It has been a privilege to edit and bring together this special *Riptide* anthology which demonstrates a need for more research into Reading Bodies narratives and creative outputs, especially in a contemporary, global context. I have also spoken to many who are waiting to read this anthology, because the themes infiltrate and impact their lives. As one contributor said: 'You've opened the flood gates.' It was an experience that shows these are hot topics that should not live in isolation. Huge thanks to everyone who played a part in creating this anthology.

Dr Sally Flint (Co-Editor), Creative Writing Lead

Collaborative Reflections

Time went by very quickly at the workshop and it felt like there was a lot going on for many of the participants. I think it is so important for most of us to pause sometimes, to engage with poetry and art, with our own emotions and senses as a way of taking a (creative) step back for reflection. Being part of this is fabulous, and it was a privilege to hear some of the draft stories and poetry shared by participants. I am now excited to see what they and other submissions have become in this anthology.

Dr Daniele Carrieri, Senior Lecturer in Public Health

The workshop offered a space to safely reflect on personal experiences of burnout and resilience. It struck me that participants were carrying a range of emotional responses to burnout, and it seemed important for these feelings to be named, shared and heard by the group. The group was formed by people from different backgrounds and professions which gave rise to diverse narratives around the themes. Individual ideas were welcomed openly, and the group offered support and validation to one another. The workshop included a useful focus on cultivating resilience and coping well in the face of challenge. There were honest reflections about what is within one's control and the external, systemic influences on burnout and resilience.

Dr Kayleigh Darch, Clinical Psychologist

Thanks to all our participants, from the workshop and open call, for engaging with the project themes with such insight and vulnerability; it has been so inspiring to hear of the confidence contributors have drawn from the act of writing and sharing their writing. I hope that the project has broken down exclusionary notions of who can be an 'artist' or a 'writer' and reminded us that we all have the ability to create something meaningful.

Dr Olivia Glaze, AHRC Postdoctoral Research Associate

RESOURCES

More information about our interdisciplinary research perspectives on the themes of this anthology can be found in a series of articles written for the Reading Bodies project:

Katharine Murphy, 'Reading Bodies in European Literatures and Cultures,' *The Polyphony* (20 February 2024), thepolyphony.org/2024/02/20/reading-bodies and 'Literary Portraits of Burnout in Contemporary Women's Fiction,' readingbodies.exeter.ac.uk/resources

Sally Flint, 'Burnout, Overload, and Resilience in Personal and Planetary Health: How Co-Creating Interdisciplinary Poetry Helps,' readingbodies.exeter.ac.uk/2024/07/26

Daniele Carrieri, 'Workplace Wellbeing: From "Quiet Quitting" to "Anchors",' readingbodies.exeter.ac.uk/2024/06/13

Kayleigh Darch, 'Stress and Resilience: A Psychologist's Perspective,' readingbodies.exeter.ac.uk/2024/01/22

Olivia Glaze, 'Considering Female Mental Illness in Novas Cartas *Portuguesas* (1972): The Hysterical Woman and her Dog,' readingbodies.exeter.ac.uk/2024/02/01/considering-female-mental-illness-in-novas-cartas-portuguesas-1972-the-hysterical-woman-and-her-dog

A summary of the creative workshop is also available on our project website: readingbodies.exeter.ac.uk/2024/06/20/reading-bodies-creative-writing-workshop-burnout-overload-and-resilience-14-june-2024

Reading Bodies: Burnout, Overload and Resilience Project Team

Prof. Katharine Murphy is an Associate Professor of Hispanic Studies and Comparative Literature in the Department of Languages, Cultures and Visual Studies, University of Exeter. She is an affiliate member of the Wellcome Centre for Cultures and Environments of Health and Principal Investigator for the AHRC-funded Reading Bodies project (readingbodies.exeter.ac.uk).

Dr Sally Flint is a writer, editor and Lecturer in Creative Writing who works on linking science, health, education and the arts. She is Creative Lead on *We Are the Possible* (greenfutures.exeter.ac.uk/our-impact/we-are-the-possible) showcased at COP climate conferences and is currently Principal Investigator developing the 'Schools Across the Ocean' programme funded by the British Council. She is also co-founder and co-editor of *Riptide Journal*.

Dr Daniele Carrieri is a Senior Lecturer in Public Health at the University of Exeter and leads Care Under Pressure (sites.exeter.ac.uk/cup), an interdisciplinary research programme that aims to understand the causes of mental ill-health and well-being in health professionals, and make informed recommendations to tackle this problem.

Dr Kayleigh Darch is a Clinical Psychologist for the NHS, working in early intervention with psychosis services. She is also the founder of Body and Mind Therapy (www.bamtherapy.co.uk), a private practice in Exeter which combines psychology with yoga. She is a trained Trauma-Informed Yoga Teacher and Yoga-CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy) specialist.

Dr Olivia Glaze is an AHRC Postdoctoral Research Associate for Reading Bodies at the University of Exeter, having been awarded a DPhil in Modern and Medieval Languages in 2022 by the University of Oxford. Her research examines trauma, gender and the body in Portuguese literature, photography and film.

PART ONE:
BURNOUT



READING BODIES



Katharine Howell

THE MARCH HOME

My father was a dreamer. He walked to work, clocked in, bent his back to the lathe and his dreams dissolved in the milky oil on the knurling bench, in the hot factory noise.

He took his sandwiches to the canal, watched the wind worry the skin of the water and dreamed of swaying in a crow's nest angled against the ocean, sea-salt on his lips. At night, he churned his sheets, cutting swathes through savannah grass on sun-browned legs to campfires and penny-whistle songs under indigo skies.

But always the rain came, screaming against the window and rivered over his dreams. Drowned them. So, he left us and learned to drink instead. He sang sour songs for coins in his hat, for stupored days and black nights.

Then, one day he woke up in a yellow field with June birds shaping circles in a wide sky. He crumbed warm soil between his fingers and found three stones in his palm. One for each of us. And this time, when the rain came, it washed his pebbles bright – ruby, violet, green-veined opalescence. They clicked together in his pocket keeping time on his march home.

And his dreams became my bedtime stories, one stone on my pillow each night, a dragon's eye, a star, a pirate's treasure. And, on my wedding day, he sewed his stones into the hem of my dress. 'For your journey', he said.

Today, I squeezed his hand around them. They fell, grey and brown against the white sheet.

Kit de Waal



IT HAPPENS

It happens in the gaps you find between...

the fretwork and the six vibrating strings;

the pianist's raised finger and the key;

the right note and the other note you hit.

It happens where the match and matchbox meet;

the distance between candle wick and flame;

the hinge that keeps the darkness from the light.

There it is, between the Earth and moon,
the hydrogen and its two oxygens,

the silence between heartbeats, or the in-
and out-breath, filling the space where one book

ends and another begins. You sense it

settling down between effect and cause,

dwelling in the space between the things

you say and the decades of their consequence.

Catch it in the pause that lives between words
and objects. Lodged between hello... goodbye.

It's there, between your lips, when you say Yes.

Andy Brown



ODE TO FATIGUE

Even as I write this you are with me,
in the soft undereye flesh,
full and numb
as local anaesthetic.

Periorbital oedema,
some call you bags, and carry you around
like Medieval public shaming devices,
symbol of sleepless nights
described by some with such
adversarial adjectives: bloodshot, bleary.
How they fuss over you!
How they push and pull
and prod at you, try to conceal,
through some magician's sleeve trick,
some alchemical compound,
your twin hammocks pitched between
each inner and outer canthus.

To me, you are an apprentice,
quiet observer under my (super)vision,
shadowing my every movement,
obscuring the edges of perception
like sitcom dream sequences.

But I will never forget the time you overtook me:
how I closed my eyes and climbed
into the passenger seat,
how you gripped the steering wheel
and took control of the car,
how you careened into that parked van
and kept going, hopping the curb and crashing
into a chain link fence post.

Of course you fled then!
And left me alone to deal with the screaming
owners of the van,
the ambulance and its checkup,
the police questions and the tow.
When we reunited at home,
I wasn't mad, only relieved
no one died.

Ian Evans



THE ONES WHO BURN

‘The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn, like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars’

‘Burn, burn, burn.’ These words from Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* launched my 1000 yearbook pages and burned into my eyeballs for three whole years. They entered my life as a quote, when I had long, soft brown hair and the coolest pair of black platform slides you ever saw. In other words, I was a high school yearbook staffer, who became senior staff member, then editor. Editor was a position thrust upon me, as opposed to my own choice. That’s because my sister was a yearbook editor at our school, and her extreme editorial competence allowed me to follow her into the role.

I still remember the start of it all – when I was just an underling. Editor-in-Chief Heather, pausing in her ‘editing rounds’, always stopping at my grey-blue plastic table-top. She’d draw up a chair, catty-corner from mine, and sit down, pushing her perfect ‘Sleeping Beauty’ blonde hair back from her face to peer over my pages. One day she asked: ‘So, you want to be a yearbook editor?’ Surprised, I looked down at the infinitesimally small dashes that made up the gingham of graph paper squares, out of which we were supposed to craft the narrative of a girl’s life: images cut from real photographs alongside relevant quotations printed in the font of the students’ choice. (Sometimes, the really arty ones included their own drawings.) I could tell by Heather’s stare that I should be responding enthusiastically, I remember thinking – this is a good thing.

That’s because earlier that month, our college counsellor Mrs. Walters, who had a voice like a pencil point, had brought me to her office on trumped-up charges of indolence. That look she had

made me feel like a minute fish, being sized up by a larger, way more intelligent fish that had seen a lot of small fish like me. In that gaze I wondered where I was going to end up – swimming gaily with the tide, or trapped in a fishing net, or worse, condemned to a dinner plate.

Mrs. Walters had made it clear in no uncertain terms that I wasn’t doing enough. ‘You need some literary extracurriculars. So, I’m giving you a choice. You can do the yearbook, “The Eagle”, our school newspaper, or IBE, “The Importance of Being Earnestina”, our feminist creative writing school anthology.’

‘I don’t want to,’ I protested, trying not to sound like a petulant child. My face was getting redder, set aflame like a smouldering firework that has yet to take flight.

‘Your portfolio,’ she drawled on the first ‘o’ – ‘is’ – she held onto the pause for so long that I could feel the ellipses it contained in my bones, ‘is incomplete.’

‘I do theatre,’ I grumbled half-heartedly, hoping she wouldn’t know that I had only been in the chorus of *West Side Story* one time

She raised one perfectly manicured eyebrow, ‘Any clubs?’

‘I’m in French Club and...’ I could feel my voice trailing off inside my head before it faltered in my throat. Now rather than a big fish, a leonine gaze met mine. A lion who understands that his prey knows the game is up, like in that Aesop’s fable ‘the Lion and the Mouse’ illustrated in a children’s book that I used to love. The mouse in that story strikes a bargain for her life and ends up helping the lion escape a hunter’s net. It’s a great story about seeing other people’s value, even if they don’t appear to have any at first shot. However, in this case, the lion let me go, only to catch me another day. She squared herself up, a sure sign that the interview was over.

‘Yearbook,’ she said curtly. ‘Your sister did it. You can do it too.’ Then she indicated the door.

With this conversation stuck in the infinite playback loop in my head, I took a bit too long to answer Heather’s question.

You know when you miss that beat? The beat that shows everyone the enthusiasm that you have for a subject because you just can't wait to dive right into the next sentence? As though your brain and your mouth have cleverly conspired to race ahead to the moment when you gloriously accomplish the task at hand? I missed that beat. Which should be suspect to an attentive listener, because it bears with it the whiff of indecisiveness. Heather was nobody's fool. She played sports like field hockey, for which her blonde hair is a requirement, but she was nerdy too, so always on edge of popularity. Yearbook Editors-in-Chief always were. It's one of their salient characteristics. The rest of the editor bunch is a mix of popular kids, and a few random hardworking nerds that the popular girls don't mind having in their orbit. That was my sister, that was Heather, that was me.

Trying to seem engaged with the question, I finally looked down to the graph paper in front of me, as if its neat little squares could help me out of this one – this catch-22 of droning on towards success or the even worse prospect of embracing failure. Could I give away my next two years of Saturdays to this job? Cropping photos to the same size to make the pages of two friends on opposite sides of the book look the same across the binding, their straight teeth and bright eyes smiling out at you from every photo. If you were lucky, there was a photo of you with a boy. If you were brave, you gave him some kind of caption, intimating that you had been together for at least some significant amount of time and said boy livened up your social life, but that you by no means relied upon him for happiness. It was a brave, but ultimately risky move. Pages were done in October. You could be broken up by January. We of course sympathised with girls that we liked to whom this happened, but we reserved our harshest judgement for the boys. 'He was a jerk,' we would nod to one another.

We used to cackle with glee when we pored over past yearbooks from the boys' school and this scenario happened in reverse. "She lived as she laughed; on the back of a butterfly's wing." Mandi, thanks for all the good times. Love, Peter' – and then at the end of the year,

Mandi and Peter, the star couple, were no more. Mandi, when I asked her about it later, tossed out, 'Oh, Peter was such a sweetie. But he didn't know what he wanted.' The unattributed quote (rookie mistake) that he put on the half-page ad he bought for you in your yearbook says he did, though, Mandi. And what he wanted was you. Like half the girls in my class, I wished it had been me. I had a huge crush on Peter from the moment I noticed the way that his fringe flopped over one eyebrow. He ran his long fingers through it just to accentuate his perfect face, I think, and tossed off a genial smile to everyone he ran into.

Even though Mandi broke up with Peter, they remained together in perpetuity in print. In the accompanying photo (there *has* to be a photo), Peter is looking straight at the camera, holding Mandi in his arms with the biggest smile you've ever seen. Though Mandi faces the camera, too, her smile looks wan, and her eyes dart away – as if something, had distracted her for just a split second from the warmth of Peter's arms. As if she'd rather be elsewhere, maybe. 'He should have known,' I remember thinking. 'He should have known when he saw that photo.' I did. Any Yearbook editor would. Mandi looked a lot more comfortable, natural even, in the photos I had just cropped for her friend Maddox Brown's page: photos of her with her girlfriends, just her sunny, radiant impressiveness without a boy to encircle it. Especially in the dressed-up-group-girls-only photo, all of them in prom dresses from their junior year, wrist corsages with half-wilted flowers worn out from dancing, one caught, mid-gesture, calling another friend to come join them. Just happy, together – for a time.

These pages represented our valuable free time, the events we swapped dresses for, the boys we loved who forgot us, the sports we channelled our insecurities into, and the famous authors we spent so much time with that their voices added structure to our lives. In short, we were who the school had crafted us to be and who we thought we were when we had a second to think about it. We came to love what

we were born to do, or whatever we had thrust upon us, and it grew into part of our identity. We believed in the authenticity of our voice. We believed that the quotes we chose would say something about our inner lives to one another, a coded language of strength and resilience. We bought the idea of a portfolio hook, line, and sinker and never looked back because it fitted in so nicely together, like a page: the crew photo next to the volleyball photo next to the theatre photo next to the family skiing photo next to the prom photo next to the senior day photo.

Our pages further proved that no matter how many extracurriculars we had, our brains were always at work: quotes from Albert Camus, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Langston Hughes, William Blake, Jane Austen, Voltaire, Oscar Wilde, and for one popular girl who could get away with it, country singer, Garth Brooks filled our minds and our pages. I looked down at Mandi in Maddox Ford's page, smiling the smile of one who was loved by Peter, but who didn't for a moment let that define her, and I made my decision. Out of my mouth came a tremulous 'Yes, I guess,' before I could craft it into enthusiasm. Realising the ambivalence in my head had been made audible, I immediately turned it into a humility ploy; '...that is of course, I'll apply! It depends if you'll have me!' I said in what I hoped was a playful tone.

It worked. Heather, whose eyebrows had just begun to crease themselves into a frown, now relaxed her brow. She straightened herself back towards her usual uprightness, and arranged her hair, docilely, straightly, firmly, behind her shoulders. Its golden glow was hidden from me now, but her smile replaced it – even better. She nodded slightly, that nod of approval that makes one feel appropriate to the task and no more, and then stood up and continued on her rounds, onto a freshman yearbook staff member in desperate need of symmetry training whose assigned senior was complaining heartily.

I remember being flooded with relief. I instinctively pawed through the other pages I had completed that morning trying to seem

restlessly busy before Heather assigned me some other nervy senior. Nervy and irritated that they had to let me into their curatorial plan for their life's work. They chose the works, but it was up to me to hang them properly on the page, to make the display convincing to the casual glance. And all I had to go on was the information they told me – the great unsaid filled the grey spaces between photographs the way fog blinds a peak. I was idly correcting a square to diminish that grey space when I ran into Jack again.

'Great,' I thought 'How *original*. A Jack Kerouac quote.' It'll be one of the 'alternative' girls, then. Having Jack on your page was making a statement about your outsider status, your implicit questioning of the school-sports-work-bed-repeat narrative – even though these girls were all applying to the same colleges as the rest of us, even though they were all also on sports teams and wrote or edited IBE. They also didn't escape the quote-photo standard layout on their yearbook pages. Jack was in the same place on your page as everyone else's quotes, because that made it symmetrical. 'Burn, burn, burn...' A stray breeze from the open window ruffled the top of my hair as I picked up the pages. 'I could be outside,' I thought, 'doing something.' Experiencing something. Burning.

I didn't relate to Jack – I hated driving: who voluntarily goes on any road? – but I had spent the last 2 months relating to Percy, whom I had chosen from the xeroxed list of names of English literary giants we were allowed to write a research paper on. Percy Bysshe Shelley, the great Romantic hero. The man who wrote about larks and freedom and died in a boat that he took out in a storm when he shouldn't have – somewhere in Italy. Percy and Jack, they burned. Young and fresh and vital, they burned. They burned with hope, faith, and love; passion, despair, and praise; dreams, prayers, ideas, with all the intensity of a life always on the brink of being worth living, maybe even worth living too much.

And what was I doing? What were any of us doing? Were we burning? Were we 'mad'? Trapped in some converted attic, an

old room that smelled like must and crumbling paint, the white layer peeling to reveal scraps of the light blue underneath? Chasing daylight through each window, windows that only opened halfway for our alleged safety, just so we could see only the tops of the green trees – foliage already turning orange. Will the passage of my sojourn here be just someone else’s perfect page? Or do I get to burn?

Fireworks, or Roman candles, as Jack calls them. I know a thing or two about them, being from DC. We had the best Fourth of July displays every year, and I loved going down to see them with my mom and my sister, standing almost underneath them when they went off and feeling the sizzle of the smoky burn from their sparks on my skin. I loved the way they burn into explosion – for me, it’s the anticipation – the boom when they are shot off the ground and the trace of the spark as it goes up, up, up, through the sky and, at this first burning, you don’t know what shape it’s going to be. The most exciting point is the moment between the BANG and the OOOOH, when it’s right before, before it becomes colour, before it fades in the night sky, its smoky residue becoming the background for the next firework.

Life, then, is not a series of partings, but a series of burnings. I have to believe this. I have to believe that the explosions aren’t it, aren’t the final word – that all you get to be when you’re done burning is the tapestry to someone else’s shine or a page in a dust-covered, leather-bound book that people only look through years later to make fun of your hairstyles – your little lives, rounded with .1 cm white borders (never .2 cm – that’s tacky). I do envy the commitment to burning, Jack and Percy’s, but I can’t embrace it. I can’t quote it. It won’t be on my page because I can’t accept it. I can’t accept that I am wasting my burning time on graph paper and chatter about cropping and day-old bagels flaking on worn-out plastic tables, the smell of Herbal Essences rose shampoo swishing ephemerally through the air as we labour under unnaturally blue-white lights. I am wasting my burning time crafting someone else’s markers of a life. Either I am

wasting my time, or I am already extinguished. That would be really bad, because someone is sure to notice, and then I really wouldn’t get into college. But that’s the trick, isn’t it? To be forever at the point before the fall, the drowning, the explosion: to be always flammable and never consumed.

For now, I have to settle for hope – hope that this is what college is for. Learning combustion. Learning to make fire. Because Heather just sent another senior over here, and this one has way too many photos.

C.S. Mathieu



BURN IN; BURN OUT

I burnt my fingers, going into the microwave.

I didn't burn them. It was the mug with the golden painted handle; shining, burning sunshine gold. 15 million degrees, the centre.

Like a mug, I'd done it before. Not quite a mug, just burnt out. And my charred soul, not wishing to be solely afflicted, set off a chain reaction and set about the burning of my fingers.

It started with work, and marking, and the cost of living, and children, and a letter I didn't want to read. Meanwhile the patriarchy is very ANGRY with me about a feminist train of thought that I expressed on the internet. It's burnt; a bubble forms, the pressure builds and is thus expressed (on the internet) at me, squeezing the juice from the wounds of work-burned men, as if to lance this blister, relieve this pressure, and in so doing extinguish my female flame. I feel his struggle, this agent; his righteous indignation that I should even dare, the responsible weight of the burden he carries, today, as if all by himself. It's heavy work. Uphill. Arduous. Unpleasant. Duty-bound.

In return I might attempt to express the milk of human kindness, but where it flows, it burns on impact and evaporates away. Unsuccessful (on this occasion) and depleted, the patriarchy writes to inform my mother of my sins, 'for transparency'. It seems that's what it does when it gets really cross with you; it tells your mother. Bless its soul. I ignore it. I buy her flowers. I'm exhausted.

As seared as I am by late-stage capitalism, neo-liberalism (and all the isms that mean I'm scathed and tired), by marriage, by family, and other such structures of the patriarchy, I forget that golden paint, when microwaved, will burn like the sun. As I hear my disembodied scream, I smell the skin on my fingers begin to smoulder and recoil. Through the days and weeks, I watch with interest as the blisters rise and bubble, each one reddening, paling, bumping into a pleasing, shiny mound. And so I detach from the me of my hand, and see the



J. Daniel

beauty in nature; in pain, in moving through, in healing.

I half remember that I heard in India they tell a story of a great destruction. I forget the detail, or where the story goes. But it's alright. There's a calm to be found in following a process through to its conclusion; attending to a change in the nature of a living part; a slow, inevitable metamorphosis over which, now begun, there is little control.

I observe, slowly, at peace, disengaging from pain; making my reality a little more internal, a little less bodily, a little quieter, a little more me, a little less me. And this burnt finger, this body: it isn't quite me. It doesn't owe itself to the marking, the letter, the money, the fight. It has its own rhythm and its own life. And, as I watch, it weeps, it scars, it heals. And I let it. I just let it.

I let it. The burn will come and go. It leaves its mark and its memory.

But I will cool and still. I go on. With just a gentle remembering. A little slower, a little sadder, a little wiser.

And I will still. And radiate the light of a golden sun. Resting, recovering, waiting. Considering the ways of burning, and wounding, and healing.

I will be quiet, and slow, and still.

And I won't mark, or organise, or read letters, or argue, or microwave tea that has cooled with the distractions of busyness, of life and work. And a golden handle will do me no harm.

And all
Shall
Be well.

J. Daniel



TURNING TO THE BOTTLE

Gripped nose, closed eyes,
submerged
deeper and deeper
into the bottle.

Glass edges muffling distant sounds,
un-reachable echoes of fellowship
as I preserved myself in time.

A pickled specimen of exemplary achievement,
hair split apart in the liquid,
peering at the blurred bodies beyond the glass.

Surrounded
in liquid loneliness,
as of womb-time origins
re-born through rupture.

Jade Levell



RAIN

Let it all wash out:
The aches, the fears,
The pent up wrestlings
Of year on year;

Let it go.

Hear the drop of water on water
As the sky falls in on the ground
And know,
That even the heavens weep.

Ben Dickenson Bampton



WAXWORK



Ben Dickenson Bampton

SLEEP STORY

Catching the night train to the Arctic circle. Visiting the Arab baths in Granada. Entering the hot springs under the Iceland Midnight Sun.

I've started listening to Sleep Stories each night – stories deliberately designed, crafted, to help you relax and to help you sleep. They came with a meditation app – *Calm* – that I downloaded in the midst of moving house, thinking that perhaps I could just hypnotise myself into calm, that maybe, if I did meditation after meditation, then the calmness would just sort of sink into my veins. But it was the sleep stories I became most attached to – the different voices reading out calming stories to send you to sleep.

My falling asleep now is patterned by particular images. Lots of the sleep stories feature trains, across Norway, America, Canada, Africa, Australia, Ireland. There are so many stories of looking from train compartments at shifting landscapes. There seems to be something about the train compartment, the containment of it, the passivity of it. Other sleep stories feature other small, safe spaces: the circular space of a yurt (in a sleep story entitled 'The Magic of Yurts'). Many of the sleep stories tend to depict travelling somewhere, step by step. Like in the Nordland Night Train story – the narrator is shown leaving the station, seeing the city in the rain, carried out of the city, past the fjord, seeing someone in a rowing boat, crossing the Arctic circle, the sky turning dark. The stories tend to depict moments of warmth – a narrator drinking *a calming cup of tea, a hot chocolate* before bed. The voices reading them become quieter and quieter and slower as you reach the end.

The aesthetic fascinates me, that of the 'sleep story'. The voice in them tends to speak with absolute certainty – the characters in the sleep stories always know exactly what they are going to do. In the Nordland Night Train, we hear the narrator intone *and then I thought I wanted a cup of hot chocolate, so I went to get one*. There's no dithering – no *and then I wondered about getting out of my bed but I wasn't sure and I didn't*

want to leave the compartment and I wondered whether I really wanted hot chocolate. The narrators in these stories move on very smooth rails, gliding from one thing to the next.

They're like a drug, the sleep stories. There's something exhausting about how soporific they are – the way they try to provide you with exact information and then as you try to focus your mind on something it just slips and you sleep. One of them tells you about the history of the Shipping News, another explains the Rules of Cricket. The more you try to focus the more you fall asleep; they make something just hard enough to follow and then you collapse.

When I went away this term, on a conference trip, I imagined what my journey would be like as a sleep story; I imagined what my life would be like, rendered as a sleep story.

* * *

You are travelling back to England, on the evening flight from Montréal. The plane is late, and you are tired; climb the steps and find your seat. Settling into your seat on the plane, you clip your seatbelt into place. You realise, as passengers file onto the plane, that you have an empty seat beside you, and, with a sense of luxury, that this means you will have space to fall asleep, to stretch out. The airline has provided a blanket and slippers. You unwrap the blanket, unfold it and curl it around you. It makes you feel safe, to be covered up, the warmth and the shield of it, creating a compartment of your own. The cabin crew start talking through the safety instructions, and you listen calmly. The pilot tells you that it should be a smooth quick flight, back to London in the morning. At the moment, the pilot tells you, there is light rain in London.

* * *

I started listening to Sleep Stories more and more that winter because something had got worse and worse, something had set in. It was a kind of despair – one small disappointment after another – and then a form of panic, a sense that I couldn't keep moving through my life doing one thing after another that I didn't want to do. There's a point when you've been hurtling from bed, getting the children dressed, making

breakfast for everyone except yourself, the children, the cat, finding clothes for everyone, then dropping the children at one place then another and then going straight into work and printing the handouts and reminding yourself where you're going then rushing straight to the seminar room and launching into it that you think actually, *I'm not sure I can do this one more time*. Something sets in, then, a kind of fear and you wonder whether actually you'd still be able to finish your sentences, or whether you'd just stop at some point, stranded, in the midst of things. And as I taught and mothered and moved about my life something started to set in to the point that eventually I found myself in a meeting in a room with my colleague who was saying but so much of it is nonsense, this job, just focus on the bits you love, focus on teaching and writing and I heard myself saying *But I don't love anything* and I realised that that was true.

* * *

The plane taxis on the runway, and then you lean back, held safely in place as the plane moves. You have a book to hand, chosen for its thickness and the possibility of absolute absorption, but you do not reach for it at first, just letting yourself be drawn upwards, pushed back against your firm seat as the plane takes off.

As the plane settles into its long Atlantic flight, you think of the waves below, and the darkness, and perhaps cruise ships, moving slowly across the ocean. You think about how people used to travel across the Atlantic, and what it would be to take an ocean liner across the Atlantic, for weeks on end, to rest in a deckchair on the deck, to watch the sea. The plane's route is tracked on the screen before you. You can see the plane steadily looping upwards. It will go past Iceland, past all the places you've been longing to see.

* * *

I tried, at first, to think about what had happened. Perhaps I was just tired. I'm always, always tired. Lots of people are always tired. It's why you get, on the Tube, those remedies for exhaustion, it's why the NHS has an acronym for it: TATT, Tired All the Time. I remember

speaking with my mother about it, ages ago – how as soon as we get out of bed in the morning, we reassure ourselves that it won't be long before we can go back to bed. I thought about other things, too. I suggested to the GP, hopefully, *perimenopause*, because I thought that then they could give me hormones, some kind of magic hormone patch, and I would be fine.

Then I read, too, about burnout. The tiredness but also the irritability, my patience becoming paper-thin these days, and the tears always so close to the surface. A colleague suggested it was depression, or that burnout itself was a form of depression, a type of everyday, perpetual grief at life having got to be so much more and less than manageable.

Almost everyone told me to take time away from work; and I imagined it, what it would be like: waking up, with nothing to do. Going on walks. Reading. Watching the sky – Virginia Woolf wrote that when you're ill you get a chance to look around, to look up, to see the clouds, to see the sky.

But there were so many things I wanted to do. There were dissertations I wanted to supervise. There was a conference I wanted to attend.

* * *

In Canada your conference had been pleasant and serene. You had attended panels in the morning, sipping tea whilst listening to the other papers. You had written on immunity. This is a word the writer that you work on, Virginia Woolf, uses over and over and over again. By immunity she means being absolutely content, absolutely cut off from the world, wanting for nothing. You read over your paper before the conference, walking by the pale blue St Lawrence River, which was still frozen at the edges. The sun was warm, but there were piles of old snow by the lampposts. You have been told that in the winter there is so much snow that people take to the underground passages of the city, visiting shops underground, rather than trying to get through the streets. But now the weather was warm, and the hint of winter just a zest

in the air, an edge of awakesness. From your hotel room you could see in the distance the hills behind the river, and imagined the spaces and hills beyond it. In the evenings you drank glasses of wine, by yourself, in the hotel bar, and read your book. It was a time out of time, taken from the teaching term, a space to think. Immunity.

* * *

I wondered what it meant that I didn't want to take time away from work. I wondered if I was just so conditioned for working too hard, just so absolutely built for overwork, that I couldn't countenance taking time away from it. But then I also wondered the opposite, that if I just watched what I was doing instead of what I was saying, how I kept turning up for work, to teach, to write, that maybe I'd discover something about myself: that actually this was what I loved, that I wanted to keep going, that I was keeping going because I wanted to.

There was a time on my way to teaching where I stumbled over on the heel of my shoe and I was falling in slow motion, my hands scraping the ground straight ahead. The moment where you're falling and you think there is nothing, nothing I can do to help myself now.

My hands were bleeding and it hurt to move my wrist. I tried to get up and everything swayed. I sat down again. I could go back to my office; I could cancel my seminar. I knew it would annoy everyone because of the inconvenience, but here I was and I had good reason.

When I went to the seminar room, I kept experimentally flexing my wrist to see if it was broken. I laid my hands on the table in front of me because the cool of the surface helped with the pain. As I started the seminar, opened the discussion, the familiar rhythm started: listening to the students, asking questions, holding one thought against another, seeing new things in the sentences. *Persuasion* I think it was, that I was teaching. I remember reading a sentence about recovery, about resilience: an *elasticity of mind, the disposition to be comforted*.¹

* * *

¹ Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (1818), ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 125.

You can tell that the air steward team are about to bring round the dinner. The stewards are moving through First Class, and to pass the time until they arrive, you turn on the on-flight entertainment. You don't want to become too involved in any long film, you want to sleep, so instead you choose Frozen Planet. You watch as the polar bears move across the ice, with the voice narrating the programme discussing how these polar bears will shortly retire for their long winter sleep.

As the food trolley reaches you, you choose creamy pasta, and a small bottle of red wine. You don't want to drink all of the red wine, but instead pour a beaker of it, generous, enough to make you feel warm and sleepy. When the drinks trolley comes round you choose a decaffeinated tea. You visit the small, clean bathroom, then return to your seat, eating the final cake on the tea tray as you settle. The cabin crew have started to dim the lights.

* * *

Instead, then, of stopping work, I tried everything else. I pared everything down: doing my work, sleeping, eating, surviving. I started trying to move through my life very, very gently. There was a week where I had COVID – I spent a night feverish, my whole body raw, shivering. I took the children to school, and bought myself a cup of tea. I looked at the tea, in its Pret cup, the pale tan colour. I love tea normally. I felt no desire to drink it. I lay down on my office floor and looked at the sky. Then, I opened my drawer and fetched myself a COVID test. It came up almost immediately, all the ink gathering in an instant.

When I got home, I thought it was terribly important that I didn't move at all. That I moved as little as possible. That I went to bed and rested, and drank water, and just stayed still so as not to jolt my body, not to jolt the COVID. I tried to lie down and sleep but when I did that, I felt breathless, so instead I sat up and watched *Grey's Anatomy* – episodes and episodes of it. I measured out my days in 45-minute episodes.

Symptoms came and went. My ears hurt, felt blocked. The fever faded, then returned. All of my body ached. I sent emails, telling people about the things that I couldn't do.

When I emerged from my COVID hibernation, I entered a new one. I kept watching box sets. I rested after coming back from lectures or teaching, as if I had done something heroic. I started taking an anti-depressant: *escitalopram*. I took it with trepidation at first, feeling as if I might be poisoning myself, and as if I were relinquishing something, some sort of integrity – but then after a while I took it almost with glee, knowing that I was buoying up my mood for the next day, that I was cushioning all my emotions, that I was surviving.

* * *

You check the screen on the chair in front of you. You think about how you are contained, away from home, unattainable. No emails can reach you; there is nothing that you can do. Your plane is making its way North, from where it will loop down to land in London.

* * *

Are the sleep stories like hypnosis? Am I being held in a state of acquiescence, soporific, drugged? Are the sleep stories like childhood, like lots and lots of stressed-out adults becoming like children being read bedtime stories? My students, now, listen to more and more books in audio version and I wonder why, why we need to be read to, at this point. I had spoken to my therapist about the antidepressants, and how I might phase them out, and she had said perhaps you don't need to stop taking them, perhaps they need to be put in the drinking water, for all of us. Perhaps this is really hard, for anyone. Perhaps this is just what we need to survive. We all need to be read stories.

A routine can be like a sleep story – waking, caring, working, caring, sleeping. Just moving through one's life can be like a kind of sleep story.

Sleep stories are often in contained spaces, so they remain undisturbed by the rest of the world. But sleep stories are often places you've never been. They make me want to go to all of the places – to go on the Nordland Night Train, to return to the Iceland thermal baths, to visit the old baths in Granada, to travel to the north of Scotland, to take the Blue Train across Africa. I want to see the Northern Lights. I spent the winter listening to these sleep stories, cradled in imagining the North, the cold. There's one sleep story where the narrator goes to sleep inside a glacier, watching candlelight reflected in the ice. There's one on the Orient Express, with the scent of pine in the cold evening air through the window.

There's a version called Extreme Sleeps too, which I love, which feature people going to sleep in extreme environments, on extraordinary expeditions. It's soothing, the idea that of course you can get to sleep on top of a glacier on Mount Everest, or on a floating platform on the River Kwai. There's a sense, in these ones, of the resilient possibility of sleep, always, or the sense of being lifted out of one's life, or the sense that you can create small spaces of rest, anywhere. When I went to the conference in Canada, it offered such a moment – just to stop, for a time, the rhythms of term-time, just to take time and think. One afternoon during the conference I took the tube across town and climbed Mont Royal in the sunshine, up into the snow.

There's a point at which I know, following my routine, teaching, sleeping, reading, that I'll get through the term.

* * *

You move your soft blanket around you so that you feel warm and held. You lean your head back on your seat. You listen as people fall asleep around you, as everything starts to quieten. You are going home; you slowly relax into sleep.

Kirsty Martin

CITY GOD

Most of us are pilgrims moving between concrete and stone.
Automatons scrubbing floors,
doing bin runs, gossamer woven
in the neo-colonial web where we drop
pennies in the hands of the homeless.

At night we speak of resistance,
pray for change, to be guiltless.
Our splintered hands carve a new language,
soft chanting inside our blood-marked buildings.
The city ticks as clockwork fingers
manifest to crush the new ROE.

Yasmin Meddour



FALLING

Others say they admire my dedication. They don't see
gaps in a diary, time I take to breathe. My leaving
work late. Hours become cavernous pauses,
I'm no longer productive yet produce tears.
My identity's imploding in a black hole
tucked under a pillow. The precipice
to freedom is to fall like a stone,
failed brakes, out of control,
plummet into a new abyss.
I step through my heart,
follow my breaths.
Thoughts scatter,
storms, treetops,
leaves on wind,
the seashore,
smell of rain,
an icy river.
I recollect
a smile.
I matter.

Collaborative



THE IDEA MAN

'The Idea Man' is an ink-on-paper artwork that, for me, represents the strain and overload of maintaining a façade of productivity while on the verge of burnout. The piece conveys the emotional fatigue generated by both societal and self-induced overexploitation, with great potential being restrained by these pressures.

Christina Todorova



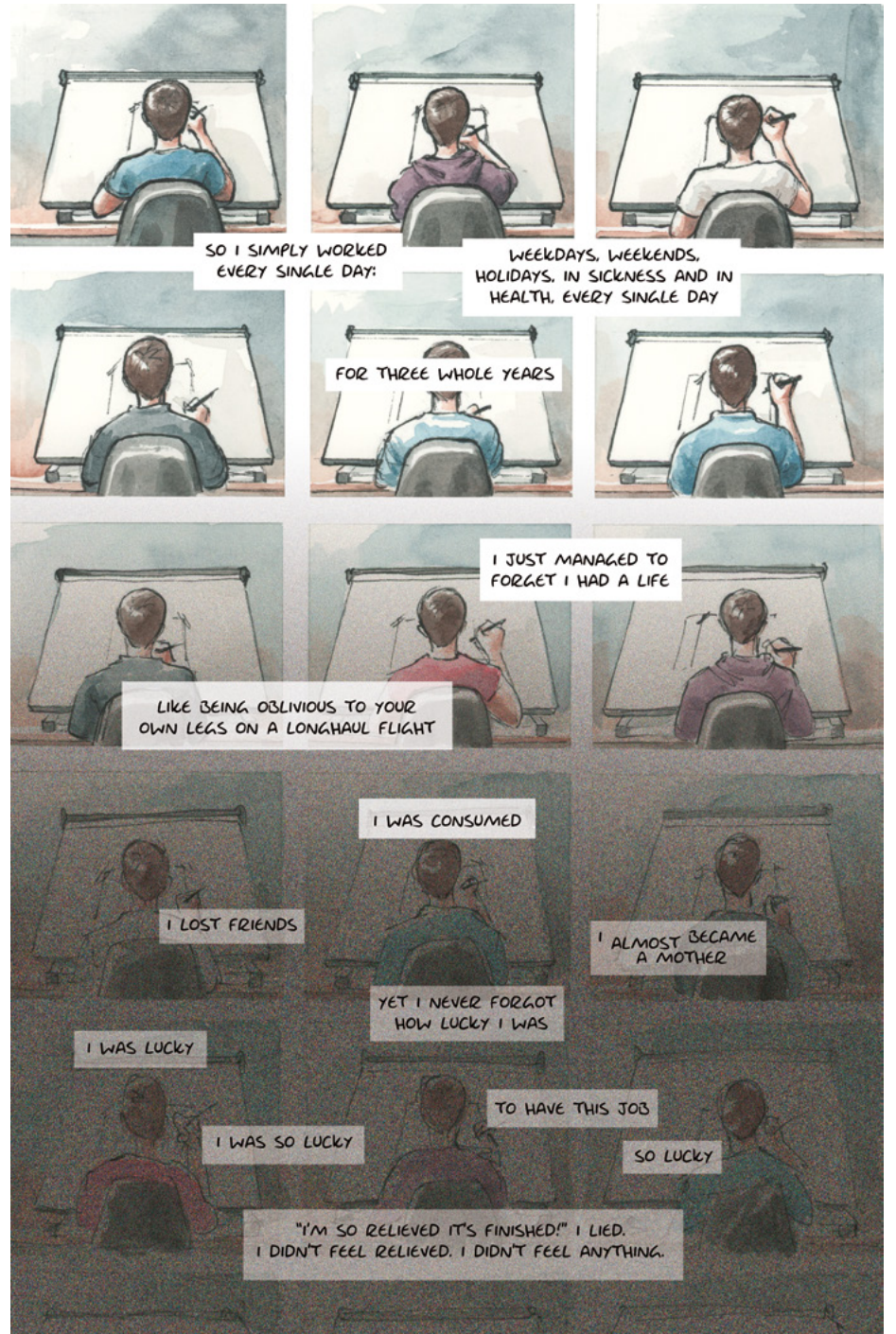
PART TWO: OVERLOAD

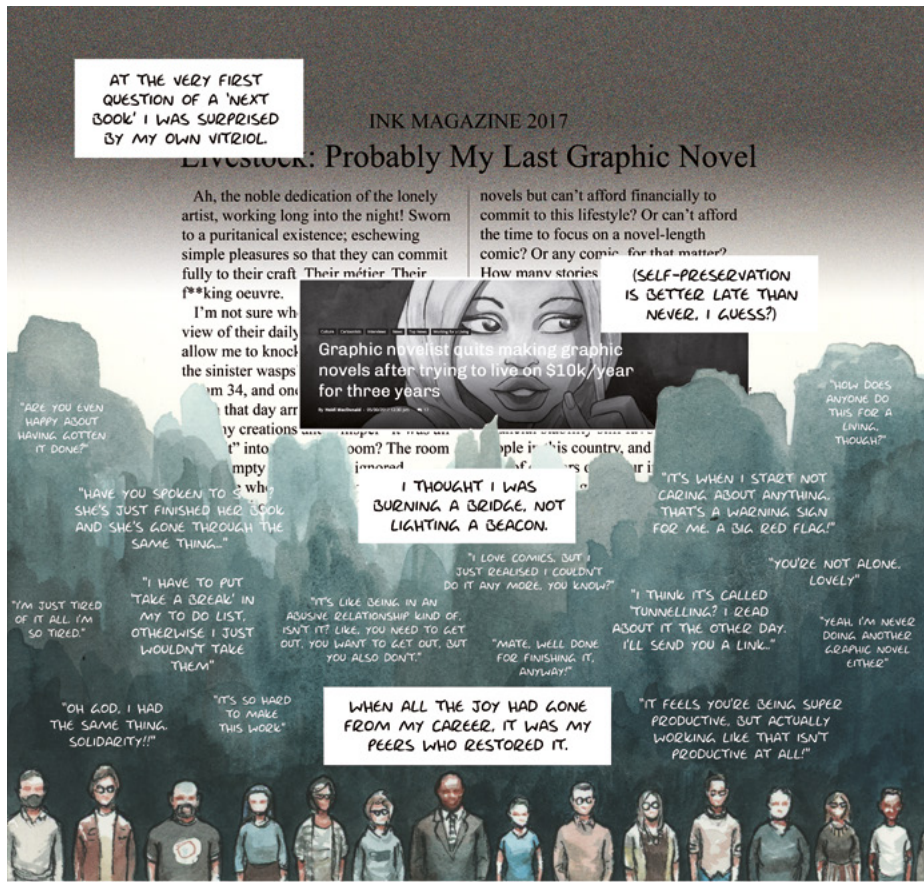


THE BEST JOB IN THE WORLD!



Hannah Berry





CORVUS CORONE

Fingers of sunlight find the gap in tightly drawn curtains, waking me long before the superfluous 6.30 alarm. The silhouette of a crow, waiting, watching from a shadowed corner of the room. But it's not landed heavy on me this morning, hasn't chattered all night, nor pecked at my head. Not yet.

Somewhere outside, dawn's distant chorus of blackbird, robin and starling. I stir, heavy, from my reluctant bed. The crow, with lazy wing beats, shadows my every move as I shower, dress.

'I need a packed lunch today.' 'Remember the bins this morning.' 'Don't forget you're picking me up.' The crow alights, unbidden, on my shoulder. Then, in a confusion of coats and shoes and school bags, all is silent. All except the crow; a persistent, rasping kraa, kraa, kraa.

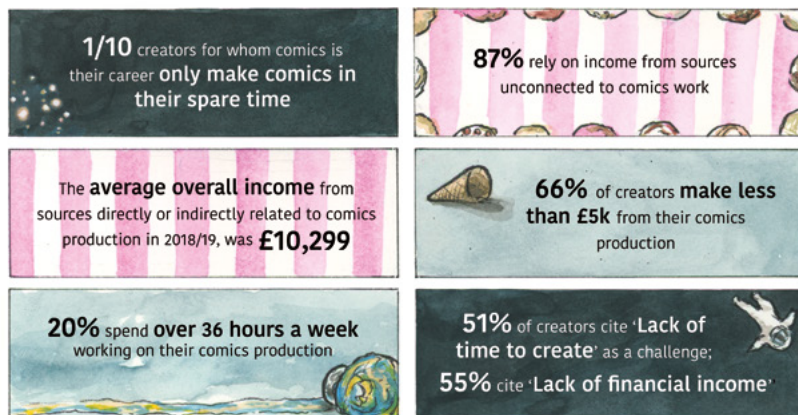
Boots, phone, jacket. The crow stretches its wings in languid anticipation. I walk quickly, past grey commuters commuting to grey offices. The crow is flying directly over me, wings beating against my head. At the edge of the woods, dreary dog walkers alight from their dreary cars. No one notices me and the crow.

Imperceptible at first, the aroma of rich, earthy humus, pungent wild garlic, and heady bluebell becomes intoxicating. At my feet, a carpet speckled campion-pink, celandine-yellow, and anemone-white. My crow climbs, attention captured by the vibrant canopy of spring's verdant oak, beech and hazel.

My pace slows. I breathe.

A thrush weaves its intricate, haunting melody from high on a hawthorn. Then the repetitious, reassuring coo of a collared dove. And a cascade of quavering notes, impossibly loud for a tiny wren. The symphony of the forest.

Again, that inescapable, unmistakable kraa, kraa, kraa. But this time it's two, three, four voices; companionable, not urgent. My crow soars to greet others circling effortlessly on thermals overhead.



UK Comics Creators Survey 2020 - hannahberry.co.uk/survey/

The Best Job in the World!, Hannah Berry

Too soon, I turn for home. My crow keeping pace, but flying higher,
more freely. Back past multi-coloured people living their multi-
coloured lives.

Slowly, so slowly, my crow and I are learning to live at ease.

Anonymous



Ashclyst Forest, Devon, Anonymous

CREASED

Alone, surrounded by colleagues.
Sweaty room, stagnant air, tapping of keyboards, chorus of voices.
Feeling electric.
Mind blank, so full, can't connect with it, no grasp of it.
Tears forming, deep pools. Lids heavy.
I can hear. I can't hear any more.
So many stories, home and away.
Wearing so many hats. All creased.

Can no one else feel this?

Alone.

A hand on my shoulder.
A current of warmth spreads through my body.
We tend to the hats, placing them in their cushioned boxes.
A crumpled hat remains, I shake off the dust and
hold it tightly to my chest.

Anonymous



FOREIGN BODIES

X-rays expose the shadowy poetry of
foreign bodies. A tack in the vocal folds is
an open umbrella caught in a gust.

Other times, the atomic flash shines light on a
dark romance. A toy soldier's weapon
raised in defence of hearth and home.

The glowing screen makes melodrama
transparent. A banquet of bent pins and a ball of wool,
their way smoothed by applesauce.

Röntgen's shades of grey reveal nothing, though,
about domestic tragedy. A mother's blues or
a force-feeding sister's silent fury.

Corinna Wagner



UNTREATED

She does not do what is expected of her. Months later, in the calmer aftermath, when things are better, she will share her ordeal with her aunties. They are quiet for a long time before one sucks her teeth and shouts at her, *'Why didn't you see the doctor sooner, why didn't you go to the emergency room, why did you just sit there and bleed all day every day for nearly forty-one days?'*

She doesn't have much of an answer. Not an answer she's proud of.

Still, she knows damn well why she didn't do anything about it. She didn't do anything because she didn't think – didn't know – that there was anything to do. Maybe twenty years ago she would have seen it differently. But, the truth is, she's got used to something in her body always being fucked up. The gift that keeps on giving that is chronic illness – which is, for her, multiple sclerosis – is one that slows a person down in more ways than anyone could ever imagine.

Her response capacity shrinks. She slows down her thoughts. Down to a mental crawl. Her foot may be numb that morning but not the next week. The next day, she can't see out of her right eye, but she sees fine by the weekend. Next week she'll wolf down an Impossible burger and, suddenly, she can't remember how to swallow, and she panics, but only a little and just for a few seconds, then remembers and carries on in conversation.

All this time she thought she knew how much MS was slowing her down, and that it would continue to do so at its own sociopathic rate of choice until she died. What she didn't know, what she couldn't conceive of, were all the other ways it slows a person down: a trip, a fall, a busted ankle. In the before times, she'd have gone to urgent care or even called her new bestie for help but, now? Nah. She falls, she injures something, she cuts a finger or breaks a dish – she keeps it moving.

She could rely on the doctors' nonchalance. She was tired of being reminded that there was something wrong with her. Something chronically, forever wrong. So, she lost the will to seek out their opinions. But somewhere along the way she also lost the ability to discern. That's the real slow burn of the chronic condition: erosion. This thing wears you down so slowly it normalises the idea of parts of you just falling away.

As her not-hot girl summer keeps on staying not hot and the medical appointments keep amping up, she does something clever and takes her Paid Time Off for two days every week instead of a real vacation. Her coworkers think it's just so goddamn cool – how she maximised her life with her perfectly balanced, short work-week summer – when really she just scheduled all the doctor appointments on those days because that's much easier for her to manage than to show up for herself on an hourly basis. But she did everything right this summer.

She did not kill herself in her twenties. Instead, she lived. She lived soberly and finished that damned dissertation. She graduated, and even got a job. And she kept going, kept writing, she even wrote an essay that sometimes still haunts her for the mistake that it was, but also gratifies her for the truth that it told.

In her twenties everything happened to her and to her brain, and now, in her forties everything is happening to her and her body. She's not sure she wants to stick around for whatever the next two decades have in store.

Something's got to give, so she decides it's the truth. She keeps writing. Truth will be the variable. Her own narrative is the one thing she can manage – loosely this time.

Linda Chavers

RUNNING ON EMPTY

they said its hypothalamic amenorrhoea
it's basically under-fuelling
and expending too much
that's why I haven't had a period in 11 months

* * *

note to self:
overtraining syndrome
symptoms include
extreme fatigue reduced performance
mood changes
sleep disturbances
other related issues

* * *

it's weird
isn't running supposed to help

stress, low mood, burnout
not be the cause?

* * *

note to self:
I haven't failed
if I don't run the half this year
I'm not a failure if I'm burnt out

* * *

I hadn't heard of it
not eating enough
running on empty

after two weeks
slow down
I just got my period
my jeans won't do up
omg

* * *

getting ready for race day

I'm not the fastest
I'm pacing
I'm trying

no exercise, more food
relax
less pressure
I'm full
the relief

did a 12k
14k
16k
18k
my legs can feel the weight I have gained
not to let past standards weigh me down

* * *

note:
be proud of myself
now I'm running on full

Francesca Leveridge



EXPECTATIONS

'O le ala ile pule o le tautua – the pathway to leadership is through service.'
Samoan Proverb

My family worked hard. We left our roots behind, migrated in search of a better life for those yet to come. We believed in the worth

of education and academia. I've always been a diligent worker. I try to plug gaps before they open, I'm efficient and proactive – care about others.

The workload given to me grew heavier and heavier, expecting me to teach non-stop and be of service. There was no time for research – to think.

I was told to keep going or I'd get 'a reputation'. Each morning filled with dread. I found myself sobbing, burnt out. Yet, some believed in my value and capabilities.

I remembered my parents' and grandparents' sacrifices and resilience, applied them within an institution. Deep down I won't be silenced. I'm a Samoan woman. I've a loud voice.

Sarah McLean-Orsborn



THE COMFORT CUP

The sofa was meant for two people – we were three – bunched together, sitting a little too closely for strangers. My shoulder touching the shoulder of someone's father, while his wife held on to a Costa coffee cup – one you'd recognise – a Christmas one with the red and white pattern – it felt like an inappropriately cheery item in such a pain-soaked room.

'We arrived a bit early,' she said to me. 'I thought I'd grab a hot chocolate.'

I smiled. She seemed as nervous as I was. I didn't see her drink from that cup – not once – and when she left, I wondered if it was just something to hold onto. A comfort cup. I used to do that too when we had tough conversations – did you notice? I would make a cup of tea that I had no intention of drinking, mainly because I never knew what to do with my hands – I didn't want to cross my arms because it looked too stern – something you always accused me of, but I also didn't want you to see my hands shake. It's not that I was scared, just anxious to get through the discussion. I knew the importance of it, the pressure of it, of trying to land a particular point or getting you to agree to something. To see a doctor, go to a therapist, be admitted. Every argument felt like it was now or never. Life or death. I wanted to feel grounded in something. Anything.

So, I understood the woman's need for that comfort cup.

The group were a motley crew, and I became acutely aware that I was the only person who wasn't strictly 'family', whatever that means. One man spoke about his wife – she was relapsing, and he had found her eating jars of lemon curd in the middle of the night. She was secretly spending hundreds of pounds on food and hiding it around the house – Jaffa Cakes under the sofa, Marmite under the sink. Strong flavours. More dopamine. He worried about their tight finances and their toddler finding her mid-binge. He knew one of the other women in the group and I wondered how long they had been coming to the sessions. This woman didn't say much except that her daughter was back in an inpatient

facility for the third time. Everyone murmured their condolences. We all knew the odds of success.

The couple squashed next to me had a daughter in her late teens – medically classified as an ‘adult’ – who was now back living at home. The father joked about how the environment in the house was ‘a little more strained than before’. His morning routine was disrupted. He liked to go into the kitchen, turn on the radio, open the window a little, and make a coffee. Fairly innocuous pleasures. But when his daughter came downstairs, she was on edge about their shared space, the upcoming breakfast struggle. The radio was too loud – it was turned off. The room was too cold – the window was shut. The smell of coffee was disgusting – so he took his cup into a different room. He looked at all of us and laughed:

‘No matter what you do it’s always going to be wrong. I’m just Mr. Wrong. All day, every day. He’s like my shadow!’

Some of us laughed with him, but it was a bit weak. It felt nice knowing that it wasn’t just me who was always in the wrong about everything, no matter what, no matter when, and no matter how. We were a little collective of wrongdoers, united in the endless times that our suggestions had been dismissed as absurd, our comments as not understanding, and our fear as dramatic.

Then there was a man in a suit – a city finance guy – living with his wife and three daughters. It was his first time, and as he spoke, he seemed like someone accustomed to being listened to. He would have annoyed you, but I didn’t mind so much. He gave a quick run-down of his daughter’s situation – her illness wasn’t as severe as many of our loved ones, but it was moving quickly. He was concerned. He could see it gaining pace. He looked around at our group of wrongdoers and said defiantly:

‘Just tell me what to do. Just tell me what I need to do to make all this madness stop. It’s going to destroy my family.’ His voice broke as he said it. In hearing him, a little part of me broke too. He reminded me of my own dad, deeply trusting in processes, actions, and solutions. I sensed the mood in the room.

We all felt for him. We’d all been there at some earlier stage of

our shared nightmare before the realisation had set in of what we were up against.

One of the moderators replied, ‘Unfortunately, it doesn’t really work like that. There is no way of stopping the illness unless your daughter decides to, but we can of course make some suggestions for how the family can support her.’

We all knew the sad list of suggestions that would come. I was always so sick of hearing people’s suggestions. You hated my suggestions. I hated everyone else’s.

‘Well, if no one can help then what the fuck are we all doing here?’ he said.

I couldn’t help but smile. He’ll get used to that anger, I thought. Sometimes it drives you and sometimes it crushes you. How many times had I questioned that? How many times had people said to me that until you wanted to get better, nothing I did could really help? That I should really look after myself. That I had a PhD to do. I disagreed, then agreed, and then disagreed again. It would depend on the time, on the day, and on whatever you’d said most recently. I looked at the string of tinsel hung lifelessly over the door frame. It was bare in places, overworked as the years went by. It had clearly seen better days. Well, hadn’t we all?

Those people will never get it, will they? They weren’t there. They weren’t there when you begged me not to let you die. They weren’t there when you asked me to just let you fade away. Such mixed messages, my friend. No wonder I was always the wrongdoer. The villain. It was a set-up. I tried to explain to you that I wasn’t the villain, that your illness was.

As we were leaving, the comfort cup woman turned to me, ‘I hope your friend knows how lucky she is to have you.’

Lucky. You and I both know there’s no luck in this game. Luck implies that someone wins. Even just a little bit. Not with us though. There’s no luck here. Just loss.

And another useless comfort cup.

Olivia Glaze

BRAIN FOG

My patience is fading, and I am fast burning out,
sitting in places where I've lost all my clout.
It's not just at home, with dogs, cats and kids,
I'm trapped in a marriage that's hitting the skids.
That misunderstood brain fog, am I losing my mind?
The mid-life and mid-load that's anything but kind.
Menopause, partner, parents that are getting on a bit,
joints that are creaking, and sleep that is sh*t.
We were born with this notion that we could have it all,
the thought if we'd cracked it, we'd be having a ball.
A big job, a nice house, good marriage and friends,
instead of feeling we are going around the bend.
It's no wonder we are fed up and feeling cream crackered,
spinning the plates that are making us knackered.
Then comes the change to throw it all in the air.
Who am I, where am I, why do I no longer care?

Sarah Clein



PART THREE: RESILIENCE



Reading Bodies



Reading Bodies



CATCHING TIME

Two boys run ahead on a beach, kick seaweed, jump over rocks and crashing waves. I almost catch them up. Sunlight on bare feet and glistening limbs, skin streaked with suncream and salt; all the time they grow and change, every moment rapidly overwritten by another.

It's a week of respite from the never-ending tasks, the to-do list that bookends each day. 8,000 emails in my inbox, an unknown number unread; meetings to attend, classes to prepare, and papers to write. Laundry, post, dinner, dishes, tidy away, sleep, repeat.

I try to hold on, mind and body, to precious minutes of my family's vanishing childhood. Memories captured in photos of sandcastles, ice creams. Expressive faces saved in files, replaced in each frame by newer versions of themselves. Maybe, one day, we'll catch up.

Katharine Murphy



St. Ives, Cornwall, Katharine Murphy

REFLECTION

Hood pulled over my head
I blend between beech trees,
their branches guiding me
like arms. The rain's heavy
between brambles. Thorns
puncture skin. I push on, follow
paths I wouldn't usually take.
I'm sinking, Wellington boots
fill with mud. They pull back,
but part of me had already left
and now I'm at the water's edge.
There in the calm water tiny fish
relaxed, resting on a bed of weed,
and my reflection, still young, still whole.

Collaborative



BUILDING A SNOWMAN

I am a sixty-year-old woman. Life has treated me well and I am fortunate to have lived in a time unburdened by the labels and accusations now directed at our young people. Criticisms, bias, keyboard warriors and social media trolls are part of their everyday lives.

Is it any wonder they live with anxiety and confusion? We overload them with accusations, we misunderstand them, we forget our own youth.

Why do we criticise this extraordinary generation when we don't walk in their shoes? How dare we label them as a 'snowflake generation', a cruel and derogatory term, lazy in its slang? How much better to change the very definition of the term to reflect positively and express our enthusiasm and pride in their uniqueness.

A snowflake is fleeting... Let's delight in its beauty for the short time it exists... Our youngsters grow and melt away in the blink of an eye, and with that comes the responsibility of life, which changes them forever.

A snowflake is unique... So too are our young people, full of promise and quirks, full of individuality which is to be handled delicately.

A snowflake is a delight of nature... Our young people challenge us to protect the natural environment, yet we are slow to heed their words.

A snowflake is a thing of beauty... Our young people are bombarded by images of so-called perfection to which they must aspire.

A snowflake glistens... like the emotions our young people experience, yet we shut them down seeing their mental health struggles as a sign of weakness.

A snowflake generation should be considered a gift... We should gaze in admiration, wonder and occasional puzzlement,

accepting our young people for who they are, without being offended by their opinions, offences and frailties.

We have all been a snowflake... Our lives move on in nature's cycle, but we have been allowed to do so, without the constant negativity our young people encounter from us.

Let our young people thrive, let them grow without barriers, let them honour the time they have without crushing their spirit with labels and derogatory terms. They do have resilience, strength and purpose, and like a snowflake, once grouped together as a snowstorm, they can be a powerful force of nature... one to be respected.

If we want to build a snowman, let's reflect on how many wondrous snowflakes it takes, and admire it for its short life span.

Anonymous



GRANDMOTHER'S TOR

The prayer I have for all of us,
beloved grandmothers, sisters, aunts,
unborn and not yet grown -
be free of this shattering and splintering of self.
Take comfort in our heritage
vibrant, wise ancestors,
our grandmothers lead us to the Tor.
Upwards we journey, passing their fires.
Feel our lost parts returning,
take each step towards the summit
with lighter steps & fleetness of foot
as the love of the ancient ones invites us to join them
in peace, in understanding,
in self-forgiveness and compassion,
and lay your troubles before the entrance
of the yawning cave.
There are no bears here,
only Love, Trust,
Belonging.
In the sacred waters of the Tor,
wash faces, necks and hands,
shake off any doubt and pain.
Be whole again.

Tracey Warrener



MY KNEES AT SIXTY-TWO

How present you suddenly are
after years of ignoring you
by doing nothing
more than getting up each day
and going in to work.
We say that –
Are you going in? I'm going in,
I'm not in today.
Where you are, is there in
or will everything be out?
Today I went in and found you waiting
for me, arms folded, behind your desk,
a question playing on your lips –
suited.
When is enough enough? When?
I find you are in everything,
each conversation over coffee,
each conference, each meeting potentially
my last. Will poems happen in you?
Will sex? I am frightened of bungalows
and red trousers. Please
do not send me there!
I hope you will be kind
as I fade into the sunset, my bat tucked under my arm.
And funny. Funny and kind.
What I hoped for while I worked.
Is that too much to ask?

Anthony Wilson

SIR WILLIAM JONES'S *ANDROMETER*²

There came regret like a blasted bird, and
all the spent flight was limp about its feet.

He was a solemn little bird,
Greasy, and the colour of dead pewter;

And hopped sorely amongst all that past transit—
Threads lacing his dear joints....

No more capable of catching light,
Or forever flying resistless—

Eyes like a chapel roof,
And a voice of soot and solder.

Why figured like this I thought?
Why hop tiredly toward me now?

The little bird opened his cracking beak
To show his shivering tongue.

Bysshe Inigo Coffey

² 'The Andrometer, mentioned by Lady Spencer to have been invented by Mr. Jones, affords a striking specimen of the extent of his views, in the acquisition of intellectual excellence. It may be defined, *A scale of human attainments and enjoyment*; he assumes seventy years, as the limit of exertion or enjoyment; and with a view to progressive improvement, each year is appropriated to a particular study or occupation. The arrangement of what was to be learned, or practised, during this period, admits of a fourfold division.

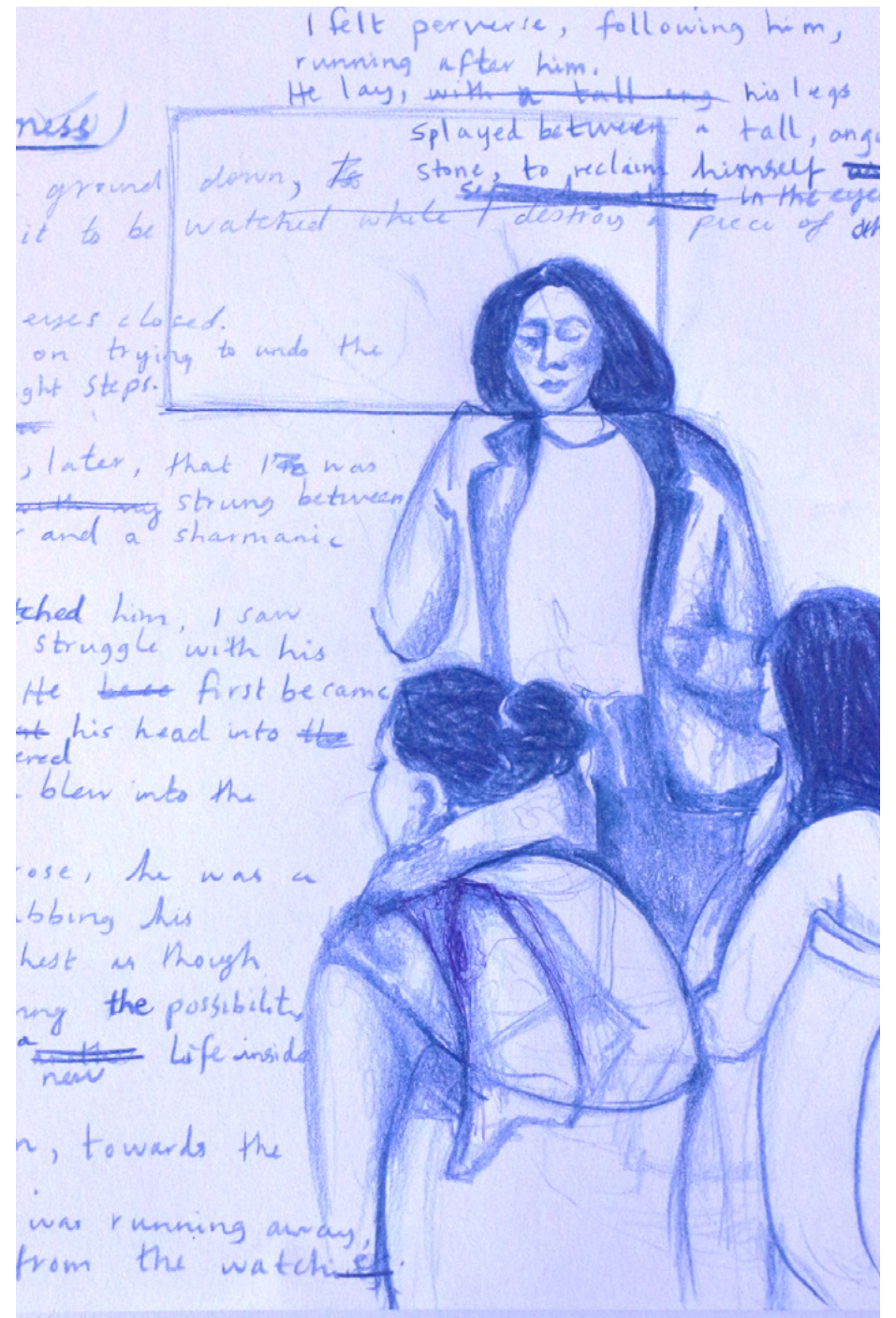
The first, comprising thirty years, is assigned to the acquisition of knowledge as preparatory of active occupation. The second, of twenty years, is dedicated principally to public and professional employment. Of the third, which contains ten years, the first five are allotted to literary and scientific composition, and the remainder to the continuation of former pursuits.

The last ten, constituting the fourth division, which begins with the sixty-first year, are devoted to the enjoyment of the fruits of his labours; and the conclusion of the whole is specified to be a preparation for eternity. *The Works of William Jones With the Life of the Author by Lord Teignmouth*, 13 vols (London: J. Stockdale and J. Walker 1807), I, pp. 239-40.

METAMORPHOSIS

I said I'd watched him struggle,
a fish gasping on the edge of a stream
when he rose as if a woman, rubbing his belly
acknowledging the possibility of growing
a new life within himself. He raced to the circle.
Said that he wasn't running away from me.
I raced after him, saw his legs splayed
between tall, angular stones, as if
to reclaim himself in the eyes of others.
I too was being watched while destroying
a piece of earth, stamping flames down. I tried
to dance away, undo the harm by taking light
steps. He told me, later, that I danced
between a conductor and a shamanic shaker.

Bethan Cramer



Poem and illustration created at workshop, Bethan Cramer

SOMEONE

I'm in a room of strangers listening
to rain hit rooftops, gush along gutters.
I didn't realise I felt so sad, so alone.
How everything is saturated.

Lights flicker high above my head
cast shadows on my page. I am empty,
vulnerable, a phoney, and anxious.
Am I wrong for saying and seeing things

differently, for wanting to be different?
Someone's eating, disturbs my thoughts,
so annoying, so distracting. Does any of this
matter? Do I matter to my son, my family,

my friends? Someone coughs, others scribble.
I listen to someone else's words. They reach out.
I share mine. They tell me I'm strong, passionate. No
matter the rain, I am someone I can love and care about.

Katie Arscott



THE SECOND ACT

She could see the frustration on the woman's face. The afternoon
Teams call had not begun well.

Why did I have to say that? I knew it would cause an issue, she
thought, her mind as usual leaping ahead to the consequences. What
was the point of a mind that was 'faster than normal' if she couldn't
get thoughts into words?

'I don't have time for this,' the woman said, her look of
frustration deepening. 'Just get it sorted by the end of the day.'

She sighed. The fatigue she'd woken with settled a little more
heavily leaving her mind foggy and dull. Why were things always
so difficult? The emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion from
managing her symptoms was close to burnout, and it required all
her resilience to lift herself to a level where she could be seen as
performing and achieving.

After the woman had left the call, she settled down at her work
desk. This time she was determined that she wouldn't be distracted.
She knew she could focus, although to the detriment of everything
else at times, unfortunately, but it was just a matter of balance.

Her mind drifted sideways. Yes, balance, and structure, that
will definitely make a difference. Perhaps she should make a plan for
the work...

She put the final piece into the schedule. It looked amazing;
professional, comprehensive, even elegant. It boosted her confidence.
She smiled, stretched out her arms over her head and looked at the
clock. 10pm.

10pm?! Feelings of exasperation and despair overtook her.
Not again. How had she lost so much time? She recalled the earlier
conversation with the woman, and the feeling of anxiety which had
accompanied the exchange, and she realised she would now have a
long night ahead of her.

She watched the raindrops running down the outside of the

window gathering pace as they joined on their way down the pane. In the past she'd always disliked the feeling of rain on her head and face, even as a child. Perversely she'd now learnt to love walking in the rain, especially when she felt it was reflecting a miserable mood.

She opened the window and began to feel the calming effect of the earthy scent in the air, triggering memories and lessening her anxiety and stress as she sat looking out into the dark. The soft sound of the rain gently pattering and splashing as it became a small stream on the path alongside the house helped her to concentrate and slowed her busy mind.

She remembered the shock when all the elements had fallen into place like pieces of a puzzle that she'd been trying to work out all her life. The sudden realisation of why she was who she was. She felt vindicated, cleared of blame; she was no longer selfish, thoughtless, careless, and lazy. It wasn't her moral and behavioural failings; she hadn't chosen to be the way she was.

During her reflections that evening, she'd begun to appreciate that the situation wasn't all bad. Her impulsive nature, which was masked under her quiet and reserved exterior, had led to some exciting and exhilarating experiences. She smiled; she'd very much enjoyed those times. She would have liked to have had the opportunity to be herself more frequently than she'd felt able to. It would certainly have been less exhausting than concealing her true self to avoid being seen as different, odd, and incompatible with others.

She put the final element into the paper and set the message to send to the woman first thing in the morning. She'd done a good job, although as usual last minute and only when backed against the wall. Not comfortable, but it achieved the outcome required.

The sense of attainment, the relaxing sound and scent of the night-time rain, and her reflections on her situation gave her a renewed confidence and hope for a new start. This was the beginning of her second act... she liked the sound of that.

Karen Marques

POPPIES

Tissue red petals and determined stems
defy concrete crevices and cracked earth.
Valiant warriors - they've survived dust,
detritus, fumes and marching feet.
Their seedheads, a brave battalion, promise
new life across the wastelands.

Collaborative



CYCLE

Left, right, up, down, moving, suspending
Metropolis
Ground
So many people
Riding
Signs, boards, aims
and lies
Hanging on
the sky
Left, certificates
Right, jobs
Up, weddings
Down, kids
Moving, houses
Suspending, cars
Drops, thirsty
Smells, salty
Breaths, anxiety
Fall into
or
Jump out
Left, right, up, down, moving, laughing.

Ziyang Lin



WHEN WE WERE POWERFULLY LIGHT

A six-year-old wrote a poem once...

The moonlight touches everything it sees, It touches the lake
It touches the trees
It touches the houses in my street.

As humans are socialised with deadlines, wrongs and rights and
other musts... poetry dissolved, and angst evolved.

The starlight touches everything it sees,
It sees the sea
It sees me
It sees a pottery tea.

The passion, the flow, the soul started to burn; when passion burns,
it's passion mixed with something else...

The lantern light touches everything it sees,
It touches the dark
It touches the grass
It touches the bushes.

From time to time, a voice outside and then inside, gently whispers
'your poem, your poem, your poem... Cool it out, share it out, sport
it out, love it out, but please, don't burn it out.'

The sunlight touches everything it sees,
It touches the street
It touches the windows
It touches my shivering eyes.

María Rodríguez Bernal and Olivia Siddorn Rodríguez

WE TELL IT AND WE TELL IT

I'm going the long way home past the holiday cottages when I see him. Standing in the front garden. My bike wobbles.

'Whoa,' he says, 'steady girl,' and he puts his arm out. I shove both my feet down, like when Dad tells me off. They make a scraping sound that means I'm going to slide to a stop just where I want to, and I do - not near enough for him to reach me.

'Where you off to in such a hurry?' he says.

He's got a cigarette in his hand but he's not smoking it. I know that because the ash at the end is long like when Dad falls asleep. It'll drop off any minute if no one catches it. But he flicks it off like he's heard me. I think I've seen him before, and that's when he smiles and I know who he is. I go hot all over, and he laughs.

'I just live up there,' I say.

'We're having a party later,' he says, 'everyone's welcome, come down, bring your mam and dad.'

'I got a sister,' I say.

'A sister would be nice.'

But my sister's only six and I can't ask Mum because she had sticky blood that all clumped together, so her heart stopped working. And Dad will say you did what? You talked to a stranger... how many times? So, I don't tell Dad. All the way through teatime I don't tell him and when he comes down from putting Gracie to bed and reads his paper while the news is on, I don't tell him.

When I climb into bed with Gracie, she's boiling hot, so I clamp my cold feet around hers, she only moves a little bit. And then I tell. I tell her. She asks me who it was. I say he had long hair and round hippy glasses, like when we saw him on the tele and he stayed in bed for days and days until everyone made love not war. And she asks me did he have his guitar. Yes he did I say.

That night and every night we tell it and we tell it until she was there and not me.

When Gracie tells Dad about how she wobbled on her bike and John Lennon tried to catch her he laughs and laughs and tells her to tell it again. And she does, over and over to all the aunties and uncles and even Nan who doesn't care for pop stars.

But I didn't tell her everything. I didn't tell her that when he asked me to the party, I said no thank-you, like you have to with grown-ups, I said my little sister needs me to cuddle up to her and if she wakes up and I'm not there she'll cry and there'll be hell to pay.

Kim Squirrell



BLOOD, MILK, MUSCLE

(for S and E)

Tonight, you celebrate
like you've never celebrated before,
even though you're enveloped
by the greatest fatigue you've ever known.
Nothing can stop you holding her.
No-one can say that her lips,
her nose, her fingernails, the pink rivulets
of her ankles where her name bands sit
aren't perfect, because they are.
This is a beauty you've never seen.
It cleanses and cures all physical pain.
Now you are alone for the first time
she stares at you and you at her.
One day she'll place her new-born daughter
in your arms bound not only by blood and milk,
but by the strongest muscle.

Sally Flint



QUIETLY, IN A ROOM ALONE

Tous les problèmes de l'humanité proviennent de l'incapacité de l'homme à s'asseoir tranquillement dans une pièce isolée.

All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone.

Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*

The year had been a year of meditation,
of filling-in the gaps that lie between
a restful solitude and loneliness,

like the single old fruit tree that divides
the orchard's loose huddle of saplings
from the open expanse of the wheatfields,

whispering its windblown tale
of the old man who comes to the windows
each night, his fingers scratching the panes
and his breath conjuring clouds

as he squints in at his younger self
sitting alone with his books - his family,
his friends and his lover all gone - listening
for the animal spirit moving in the leaves.

Andy Brown



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Reading Bodies: Burnout, Overload and Resilience

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Reading Bodies is a multilingual, multidisciplinary project that combines expertise in Modern Languages and the Medical Humanities. Working across five languages (Spanish, French, German, Italian and Portuguese), our research traces narratives of illness in European literatures and cultures from the late-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, and their legacy in the present day. The creative methodologies developed for the Reading Bodies project aim to bridge the gap between interdisciplinary Medical Humanities research and lived experience, supporting new ways of understanding and tackling the health issues addressed.



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of Exeter



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