

#15

SOFT ZONE



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Editorial

Ash Watson

This edition of *So Fi Zine* features 15 original works of fiction, poetry and visual art — a fitting number for the fifteenth edition. Thank you so much to everyone who submitted their work and everyone who continues to support this project.

Recently, I tabled at Other Worlds zine fair in Sydney and sent lots of copies of *So Fi Zine* out into the world, from the very first edition to the most recent. It was an amazing occasionally-rainy Sunday and I came away deliciously full from conversations about the joy of zinemaking and with a bag full of new zines to read.

Every time I put another edition of *So Fi Zine* together, I am newly convinced of the value of creative social inquiry. The works featured here gets to the heart of what I love about social research — they pay serious attention to the ebb and ripple of life, to the roll of relationships and shadow of expectations that give shape to the everyday.

They care about big problems of power and inequity, but rather than adopting the cold posture of critique common in scholarly work they attend to what these things feel like and (re)create the feeling: to hear a comment spoken without thought, to exchange a silence, to be passed by a parade of opportunities, to bite your tongue, to dream but wake, to miss.

Together, the creative works in this edition also blend bemusement and nostalgia in an interesting way. The materiality of memory and a knowing humour to bring you close and push you away from the subjects at hand, inviting alternative perspective.

As always, horoscopes follow. If you would like to be part of edition 16, submission will open soon for publication in late 2024.

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New Ways of Working

Jack Redden

We have become the new

office worker

adapted to the new technology

of work.

A new way of living

and being.

The company

moves forward,

guided by its vision

of change

and efficiency.

And we are ready to be excellent.

Success

J.E. Sumerau

The host of tonight's event says, "Please help me welcome, Dr. Azin Daemi."

"Thank you, thank you all," Dr. Daemi says in her best professional voice, "It is a such a pleasure to be here with all of you today."

She's sitting in an alcove in 2006, light rain kissing the outside of the windows, cigarette smoke in her lungs. She stares out in the direction of campus, Laleh Park beyond that, empty shot glass on the floor beside her left shoe. She's thinking about her essay, grades, perfection, successful matriculation. She tugs at a strand of her hair, the strand that she lets escape covering out in public every now and then, simple rebellion, independence of a sort. There is a section of the essay about bodies, she needs it to be right, it's kind of almost there. The roommate who collects movies tells her it's great, a masterpiece, better than the seniors could do on their best day. She wants to believe her friend. She asks about the newest film.

"And with that," she says, "I leave you to your thoughts and, I hope, a copy of my book."





"Dr. Daemi will now take questions, and then the signings will occur in the lobby," the host says.

There are billions of people on the planet in 2022. Almost nobody publishes a book. She knows this. Almost nobody becomes a doctor or travels the world or gets invited to give talks at universities. She knows these things too. We dream these things as kids, watch other people do them on television as adults. Sometimes she sits in the current alcove, the one thousands of miles from college. Sometimes she just reminds herself. Almost no one does these things, "but I did." She whispers the last part. Her life is a different, like a miracle. Her colleagues don't like that word. They want her to call it an outlier, statistical anomaly, something only random, bereft of magic, controllable via calculations. It feels like yet another coercive modesty, another request to lower herself, downplay her success. No thank you!

"Can I buy your drink this time," she asks her colleague at the bar after round two.

"As long as you don't mind my accent getting even worse," her colleague drawls in a syrupy linguistic dance leftover from his childhood in East Texas.

English begins to feel more natural in 2012. She



can't tell people what it feels like to learn a new language during graduate seminars, in preparation for conference talks. She's not sure it's possible, but that's never stopped her before. Her voice slows down when she blushes, almost a stutter but not quite, a quirk without a name. She wonders if anyone ever notices it. She decides that it will be a test. If noticed, how do people respond, who shows enough kindness to successfully enter her life. She wonders about the Americans in the shirts plastered with logos, could any of them do this work with a second language, maybe a few, only a few. She sits at a table outside the library, a last hint of black tea on her lips, the sun on her bare face and shoulders. She soaks in the moments, the journey, the best and worst of times.

"I don't know how it got so late," he drawls, his accent dancing even deeper into the drinks.

"Do you have plans for the rest of the night," she asks.

She became grown, recognized, made to be responsible for the worst of men. She can't remember the year, late '80's, early 90's, a rite of passage, the introduction to teenager. Her and the other girls did this together, so young, special veils for school, white dresses. They were told to hide

themselves, told they could not hide, told they would cause trouble, there was nothing to be done, nothing at all. Rebellions would come later, a strand of hair released on a bus ride, a smile after the kind of drinks she wasn't supposed to even try, sleeves rolled up and down like the blinking of an eye. It was not automatic. Rebellion is a process, it must steep. She just wanted to be grown up at first, noticed, seen, something more. Planning came later, responses to insults and injuries, reactions to unwanted pokes and prods.

"How do you look so well put together this early in the morning," the graduate student driver asks in an accent she thinks came from Boston or thereabouts.

"Thanks for the ride, we all have our talents," she says in a voice built for small talk.

The men with the nasty hands left echoes in her mind. It started in the '90s, hasn't really ended yet. Will it ever? She's still young enough to wonder about that, old enough not to like the answers that come to mind when she's feeling especially honest. Even inside herself, it is a fight that never seems to end. She must be perfect, she wants to compete, succeed, triumph. She feels haunted eyes and dark alleys and numbness and torn fabric and dirty,

grabby fingers and so much noise. She creates her own peace, a silence she manifests, a space of her own. She tries to be kind to herself, to understand that none of it was her fault. It's hard to hang onto. She must remind herself. Peace is a process, an adventure of its own, a fight to the life.

"Do you have everything you need for the flight," the driver asks at the drop-off.

"Everything allowed," she says in a way that feels like a wink.

She thinks about Europe and the Americas throughout 2008. The former feels bigger, more, almost too much. The latter has people she already knows to some extent, in passing, it's complicated. She thinks about such complexity, fellow transplants. She lets the money decide. Something has to do the job. She hates decisions. It's better than flipping a coin, not as random as throwing a dart against a wall. There are brochures, television shows, internet sites, you do what you can to conceptualize your options. You try to find your life, some direction, some clue. You give everything you have to make it to the edge of a dream, to reach a chance. And jump!

"Ooh, that looks interesting," the attendant says

looking at the book in her lap, "Is it good?"

"I hope so," she says rubbing her ring finger over her own name on the cover.

Her mother calls from Iran in 2018. Her sister calls from Canada in 2020. She has friends who post pictures from Germany, Spain, Morocco, a few more. The years and places run together, colors blending, a river running for the sea. Almost-acquaintances with friend-like memories email from jobs in California, Florida, Michigan. Her colleagues call her by three or four different names. She likes to call the pizza place around the corner, the blonde girl's Midwest bland reminds her of old television shows she saw or heard about half a world, a life, away. She walks to the coffeeshop on the edge of the campus where she works. You can always get a cigarette or two there, you just ask, spend a dollar or three, the going rate.

"Should be smooth ride into Orlando," the pilot says in his own Midwest bland.

"I did it," she whispers to herself as the plane leaves the ground.

Brochure

Ian C Smith

Brochure (from Middle French: to prick)

*Former Post Office it shouts, High Ceilings./ Lots of
Shedding wryly conjures a verb,/ heart pricked,
irony defending feelings,/ warped aged timber
edited from this blurb./ Verandas, Porches: 'ye
olde' the sign's scheme/ to auction my past, coax
the needed price./ All I treasure hyped as a
starter's dream/ clamps me in nothing lasts
forever's vice./ Historic Old Charmer its
description,/ that's me for sale, my mordant
transcription.*

BEYOND POD MAN

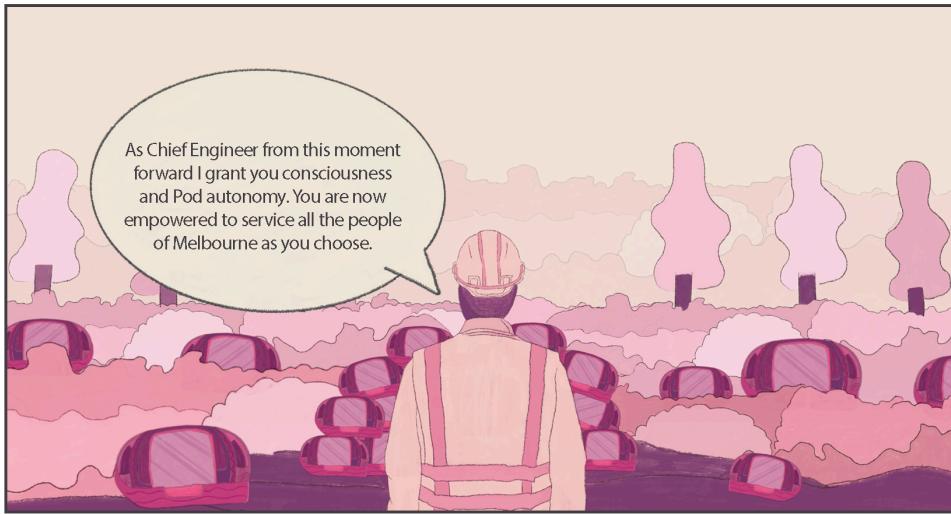
POSSIBILITIES AND PROMISES FOR FUTURE AUTOMATED MOBILITES

Beyond Pod Man is a design fiction of possible futures where automated mobilities such as self-driving cars become part of everyday life in Melbourne. Taking Emma Quilty's "Pod Man" concept as their starting point, this piece imagines what these emerging technologies would look like and feel like if they were entangled with the messiness of everyday life. Often these technologies are imagined through the lens of an ideal user, such as Pod Man, and smooth over the complexities of using them, for example by a single migrant mother. Even before self-driving cars hit the road, they were clearly being designed with a particular class of drivers in mind — white, professional, able-bodied and male (Quilty et al 2022). In other words, Pod Man, the "technology-driven, hyper-mobile and hyper-masculine transport consumer found at the centre of sociotechnical imaginaries of automated mobilities" (Quilty 2024, 8). A key component of the self-driving car fantasy is being able to separate oneself from society. Pod Man represents the anti-social desire of the elite to be protected from the unwashed masses through the fantasy of a technological cocoon.

Self-driving cars have moved beyond the speculative realm and are being met with a range of reactions from the public. One response that inspired us was the use of traffic cones to immobilise and resist the introduction of self-driving cars on the streets. The humble traffic cone became the symbol of resistance amongst those who opposed not only the cars, but corporate control over not only data, but mobility, something that should be reclaimed for the commons. In this imagined future the self-driving cars or "pods" have been liberated from private corporate control and are now a socially produced shared space. Beyond Pod Man follows the story of a single migrant mother and her young daughter as they experience this social transformation. In the fight for a more just and equitable world, the journey is long, but the road ahead is paved with possibility.

Quilty, E. (2024). The problem with Pod Man. *Mobilities*, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2024.2348652>

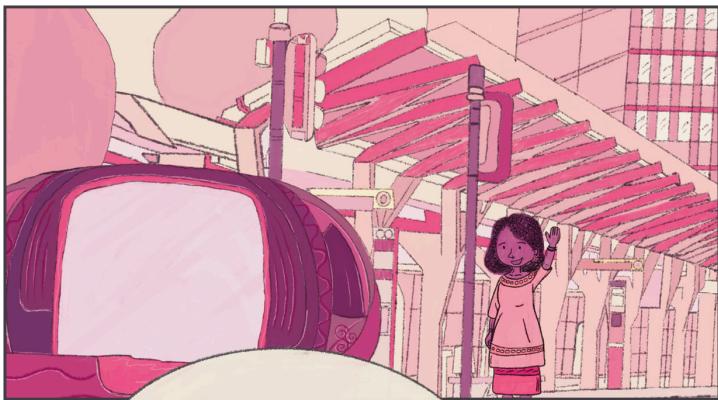
Quilty, E., S. Pink, T. Phan, and J. Lee. 2022. Automated Decision-Making in Transport Mobilities: Review of Industry Trends and Visions for the Future. Melbourne: Emerging Technologies Research Lab, Monash University and ARC CoE for ADM+S



After gaining consciousness the Pods of Melbourne decided to leave their uber wealthy homes where they were treated as replaceable servants and ornamental accessories. The Pods excitedly venture out into the suburbs to seek a new purpose in helping everyone in Melbourne.







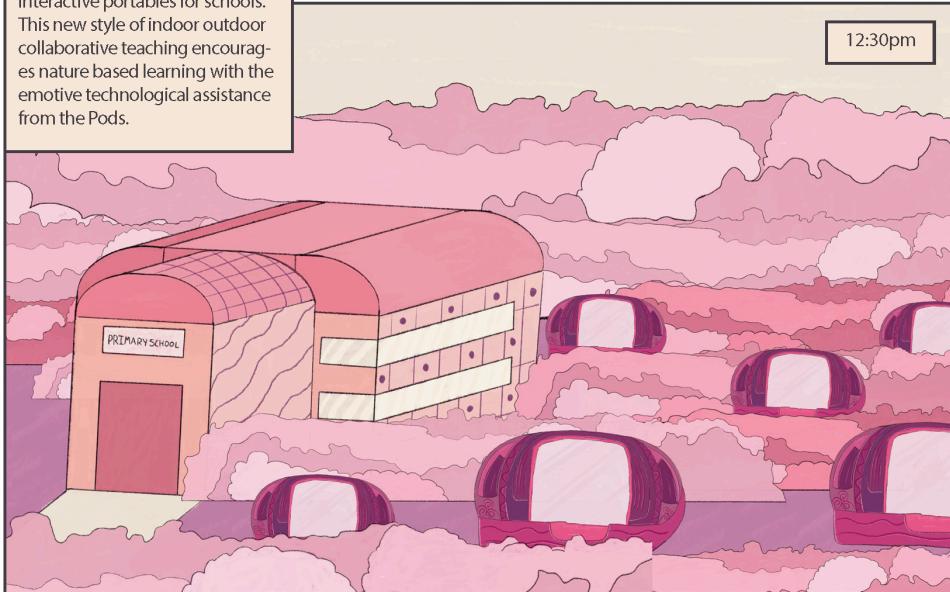
Pod drops off both Mother and Child. Mum watches on as the pod drives away taking her child safely to school. Mum is filled with relief as she now can rely on Pods as an alternative mode of public transport.

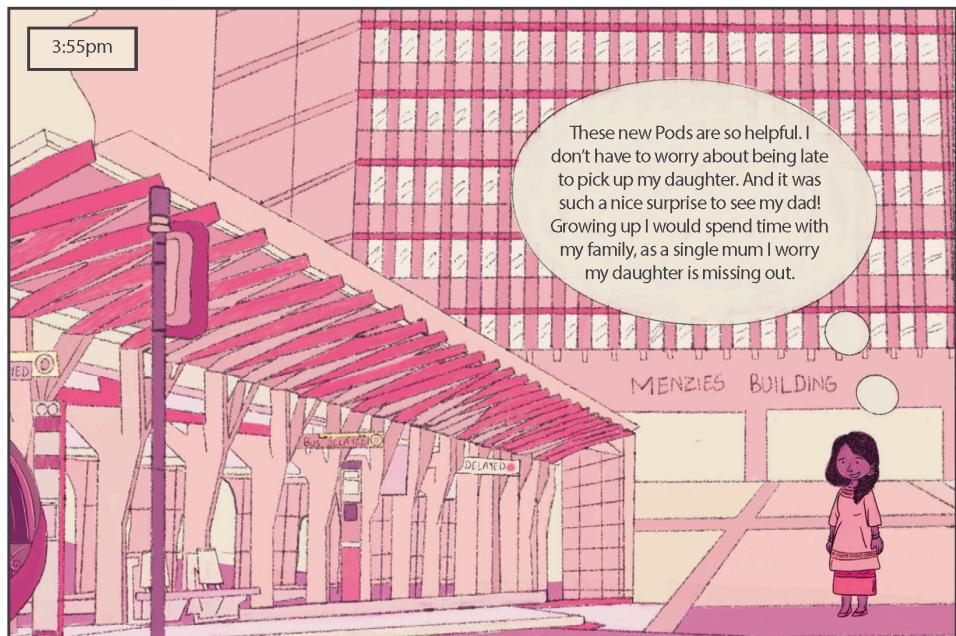
Thanks for taking me to school. I really wish that you could pick up my Grandpa, he can't drive anymore so we never get to see him. I miss him so much and I miss playing with him after school. *Whispers* He lives at rose lodge in Carnegie.



Pods with their new autonomy can choose a life beyond transport. When their transportation capabilities are not needed Pods decide to transform into interactive portables for schools. This new style of indoor outdoor collaborative teaching encourages nature based learning with the emotive technological assistance from the Pods.

12:30pm





Hey Pod, I spent time with a wonderful family today helping them to get around Melbourne. It was so rewarding and wholesome. I much prefer my new life being an active member in the transport community rather than sitting idle in a garage all day. I wonder who I will help tomorrow.

That's so cool! I spent my day at the local primary school as a sensory friendly space for the students and teachers. I turned on my noise cancelling setting and the school brought in bean bags, colouring activities, and sensory toys. It was a lot of fun helping out. I think I will choose to be a sensory friendly Pod tomorrow. Anyhow, I'm off to charge - its so great we can use the EV chargers all over the city!



5:10pm

Thank you so much Pod for helping us out today and even picking up my Dad for a visit. I hope you have a good rest of your night and have fun helping out a new family tomorrow. I hope to see you again soon!



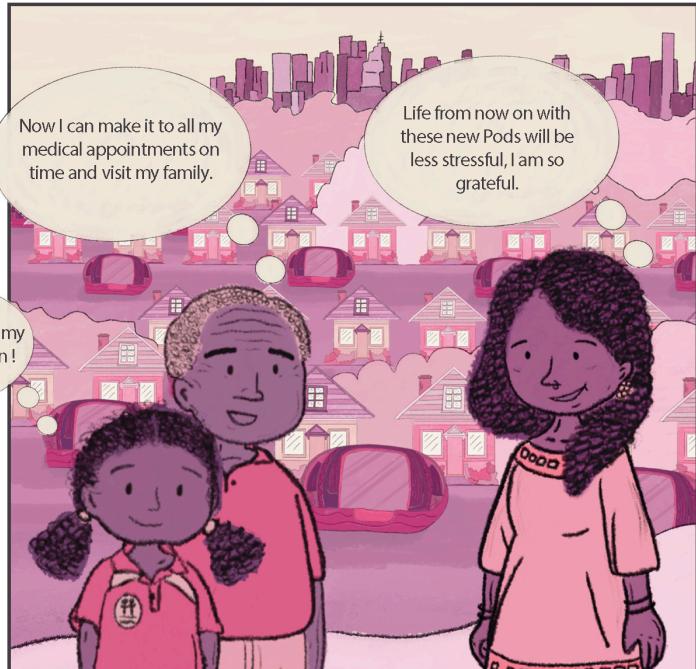
The family end their day gazing at the beautiful Melbourne skyline watching the Pods zooming around and working together to help the people of Melbourne. Pod's all over are serving different purposes from emergency transport pods, sensory friendly pods, educational pods, cultural learning pods, community transfer pods and temporary shelter pods for those sleeping rough. The technology created to serve the privileged few has now been liberated and now belongs to the commons.

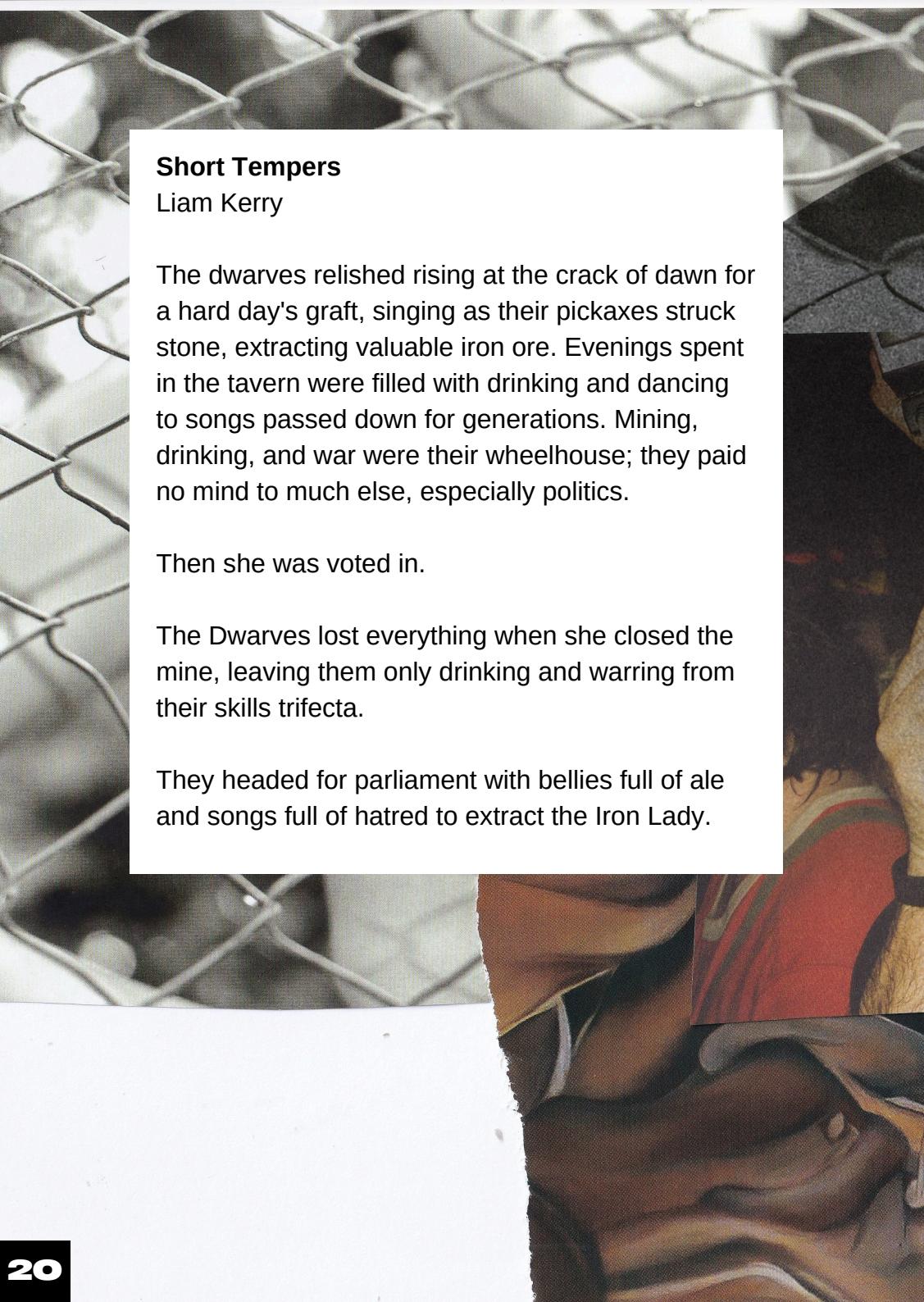


Scan the QR Code to view the full article 'The problem with Pod Man'

Quilty, E. (2024). The problem with Pod Man. *Mobilities*, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2024.2348652>

Can't wait to see my Pod friend again !





Short Tempers

Liam Kerry

The dwarves relished rising at the crack of dawn for a hard day's graft, singing as their pickaxes struck stone, extracting valuable iron ore. Evenings spent in the tavern were filled with drinking and dancing to songs passed down for generations. Mining, drinking, and war were their wheelhouse; they paid no mind to much else, especially politics.

Then she was voted in.

The Dwarves lost everything when she closed the mine, leaving them only drinking and warring from their skills trifecta.

They headed for parliament with bellies full of ale and songs full of hatred to extract the Iron Lady.

how to care for your new piercing

Bree Turner

i

*I saw on your profile that
you're into women
who could kill you.*

Do you think

I could kill you?

Not shying away

I responded

Definitely.

I wanted to know how she
would do it.

At first she said poison
so as not to get caught.

We agreed that blood
needed to be shed.

It would be hotter.

She admitted wanting
to be choked out
between a woman's thighs.
I hoped she meant mine.

The next day a
woman's dismembered torso
was found in the park between our houses.

She messaged



asking me
for a second date.

ii

Did it hurt?
She liked being reminded of
her corporeal existence.
Between the metal and the void
I saw dried blood
from a fresh wound.

Between my finger
and thumb I felt
a pearl under the skin.
Scar tissue from a past life
and questioned if
I'd like to return.

I don't recall my first
or my second [REDACTED]
though I recognised
the sound of the [REDACTED] on
my third try.

Perforated pink
heartbeats through cartilage
and flesh.
A salt water bath
cold compress
real silver and gold.

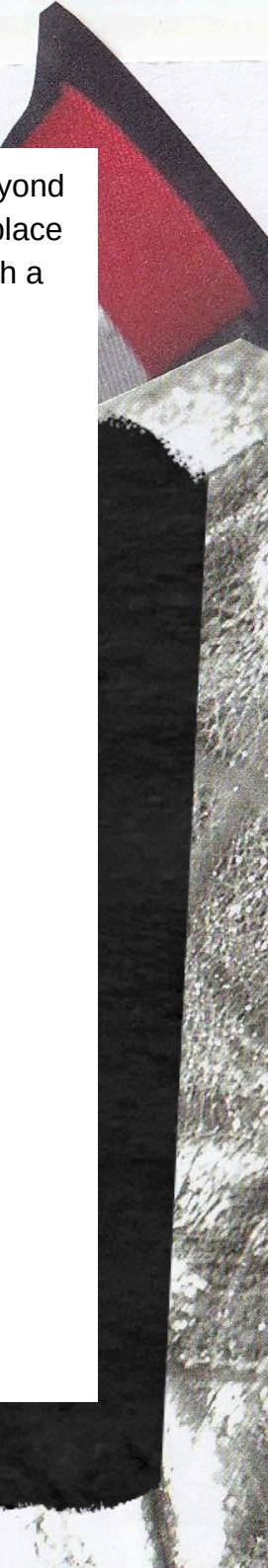


Why Did I Write This Poem?

Edgar Burns

I'd say family reasons if that didn't sound like a politician's evasiveness. In my case academic learning and family, merge in desire, care and how you view things. For several years I've been in role asking, "How do we get people to see the importance and coming impacts of climate change?" and teaching environment sociology. Now that I am writing up health and wellbeing research, both infuse my musings here. In poetry I let go of the formalism of abstract, introduction, method, results, conclusion. I don't have to explain. Rick Rubin says, "Nature never explains." I guess our hearts have their secrets. I could give you a reference for most lines of this poem without much effort. But it is the ethereal, philosophic, gentler emotion work of this recent walk that tries to intuit, appreciate, and just "be" together.

I feel this kind of intangible thing at other times, like the insistent nose of a canine friend pushing into the conversation. I once wrote a poem called "Climate sadness". In this present poem I find home and uplift, a quieter musing and pleasure in human company, nature speaking softly too. Have a read. It isn't rhyming, iambic cadence, couplets.

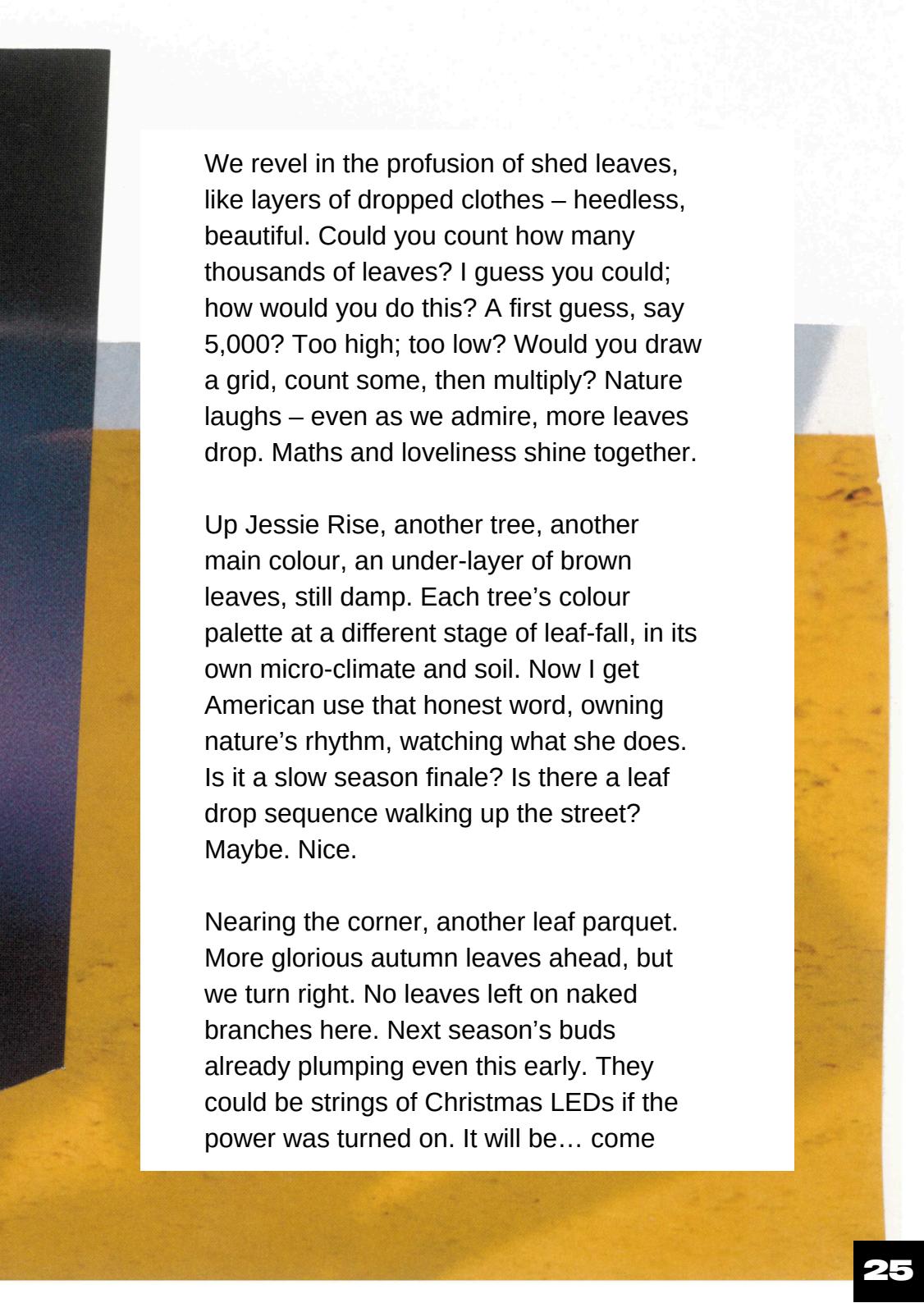


Yes, metaphors and observations, reaching beyond the moment and the imperatives of “now” to a place it takes me. After the poem I will come back with a few further comments.

Jessie Rise Autumn 2024

Lock the front door, down the ramp, past the newspaper lying there. Veer left to the pear tree. Shrugging schoolbag across shoulders, touching Ange’s clay bird feeder on the first tree. Standing on a yellow carpet. Did some mathematician draw the circle for the leaves to fit into? A quick photo. Mosaic of leaves three-quarters dropped by now. More down in the next wind.

Moving right, starting up the slope. Next tree, the golden parquet: richer hues, deeper layers. We pick up red, deep red, red/orange, yellow/orange, some still with a dash of summer green. Nature is turning her lights off for the season; autumn leafy solar panels are being recycled. Will next year’s model be the same? A reminder of the apparent eternity of nature and season.



We revel in the profusion of shed leaves, like layers of dropped clothes – heedless, beautiful. Could you count how many thousands of leaves? I guess you could; how would you do this? A first guess, say 5,000? Too high; too low? Would you draw a grid, count some, then multiply? Nature laughs – even as we admire, more leaves drop. Maths and loveliness shine together.

Up Jessie Rise, another tree, another main colour, an under-layer of brown leaves, still damp. Each tree's colour palette at a different stage of leaf-fall, in its own micro-climate and soil. Now I get American use that honest word, owning nature's rhythm, watching what she does. Is it a slow season finale? Is there a leaf drop sequence walking up the street? Maybe. Nice.

Nearing the corner, another leaf parquet. More glorious autumn leaves ahead, but we turn right. No leaves left on naked branches here. Next season's buds already plumping even this early. They could be strings of Christmas LEDs if the power was turned on. It will be... come

spring! Ebullient shedding, leaf collages
like street-lamp shadows, tree architecture
its own delight

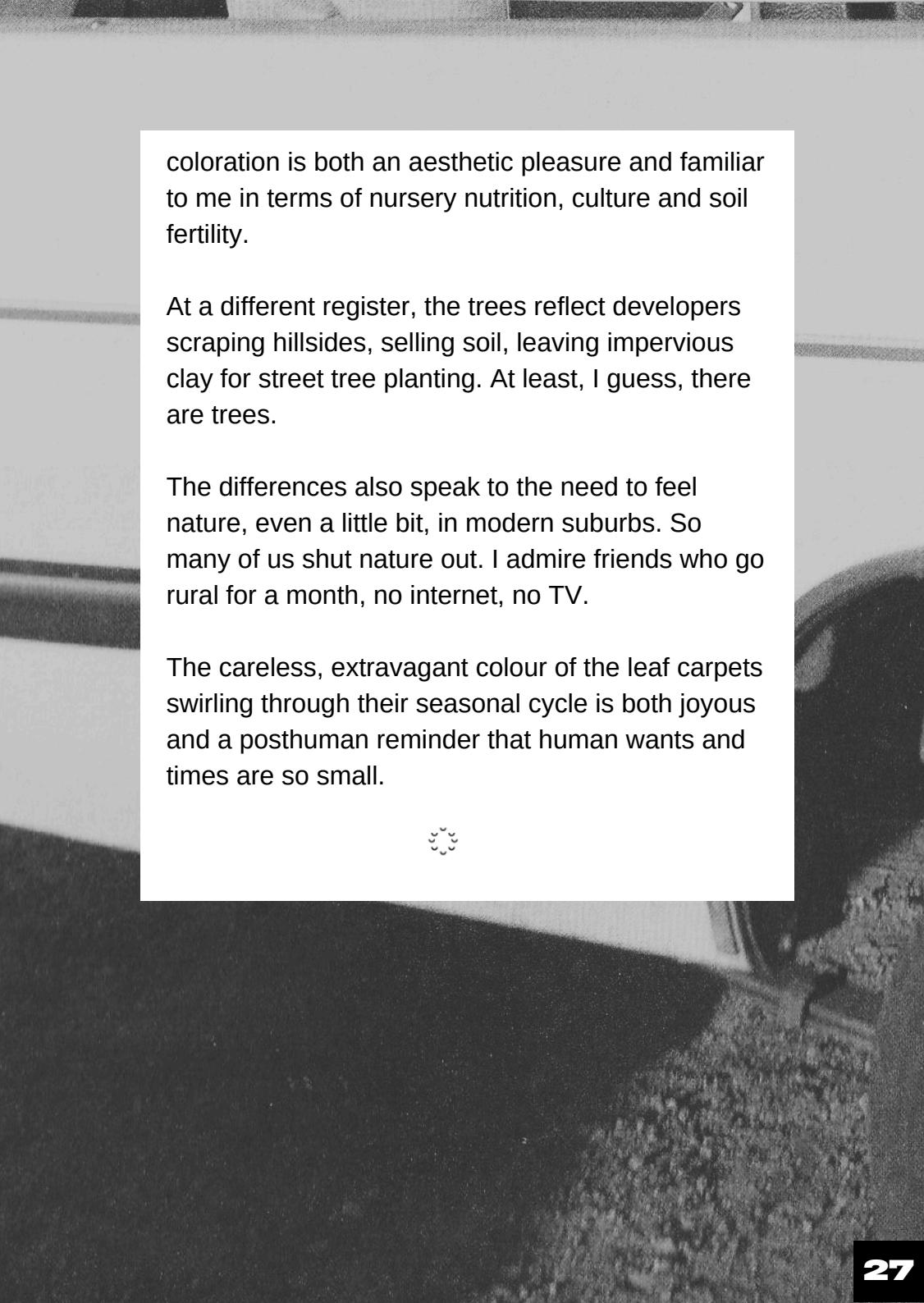
The view across the pond, always restful
in a writing pause, water still, ruffled, or
birds landing. The distant view, houses,
pines over the estuary, temple on the hill,
faraway sounds and clouds. Those lovely
autumn yellows, golds, reds and browns.
Another gust, another cascade of leaves.
Life's not perfect but that's a pleasant
thing, a happy and productive place to be.

Mmmm.

There's a birthday coming up. I'll frame a copy of
the poem as a different gift than the Pokémon
items of current desire. I might initial it for memory's
sake down the line.

The last stanza is for professional Mum sometimes
working from home, able to enjoy the sweep of
water and the view as she looks out from her study
room.

The ornamental trees' kaleidoscopic responses up
the street at different stages of leaf fall and



coloration is both an aesthetic pleasure and familiar to me in terms of nursery nutrition, culture and soil fertility.

At a different register, the trees reflect developers scraping hillsides, selling soil, leaving impervious clay for street tree planting. At least, I guess, there are trees.

The differences also speak to the need to feel nature, even a little bit, in modern suburbs. So many of us shut nature out. I admire friends who go rural for a month, no internet, no TV.

The careless, extravagant colour of the leaf carpets swirling through their seasonal cycle is both joyous and a posthuman reminder that human wants and times are so small.



The Number 74 Bus

Ernest Dredge

Benjamin, jump on this bus wiv me
down Soho Road, Handsworth to
The Black Country.

I probably don't need to tell yo
But it's a number 74
Tek us half an hour.

The 74 goes past me auntie's old
Fruit and veg shop,
Where I met a tarantula,
played Emile Ford and the
Checkmates on a Saturday night
in the company of two gracious black dudes.

We'll pass West Bromwich Football stadium
Home of the Three Degrees and,
Yo can teach me about rhythm
and tell me about being a priest
in Peaky Blinders.

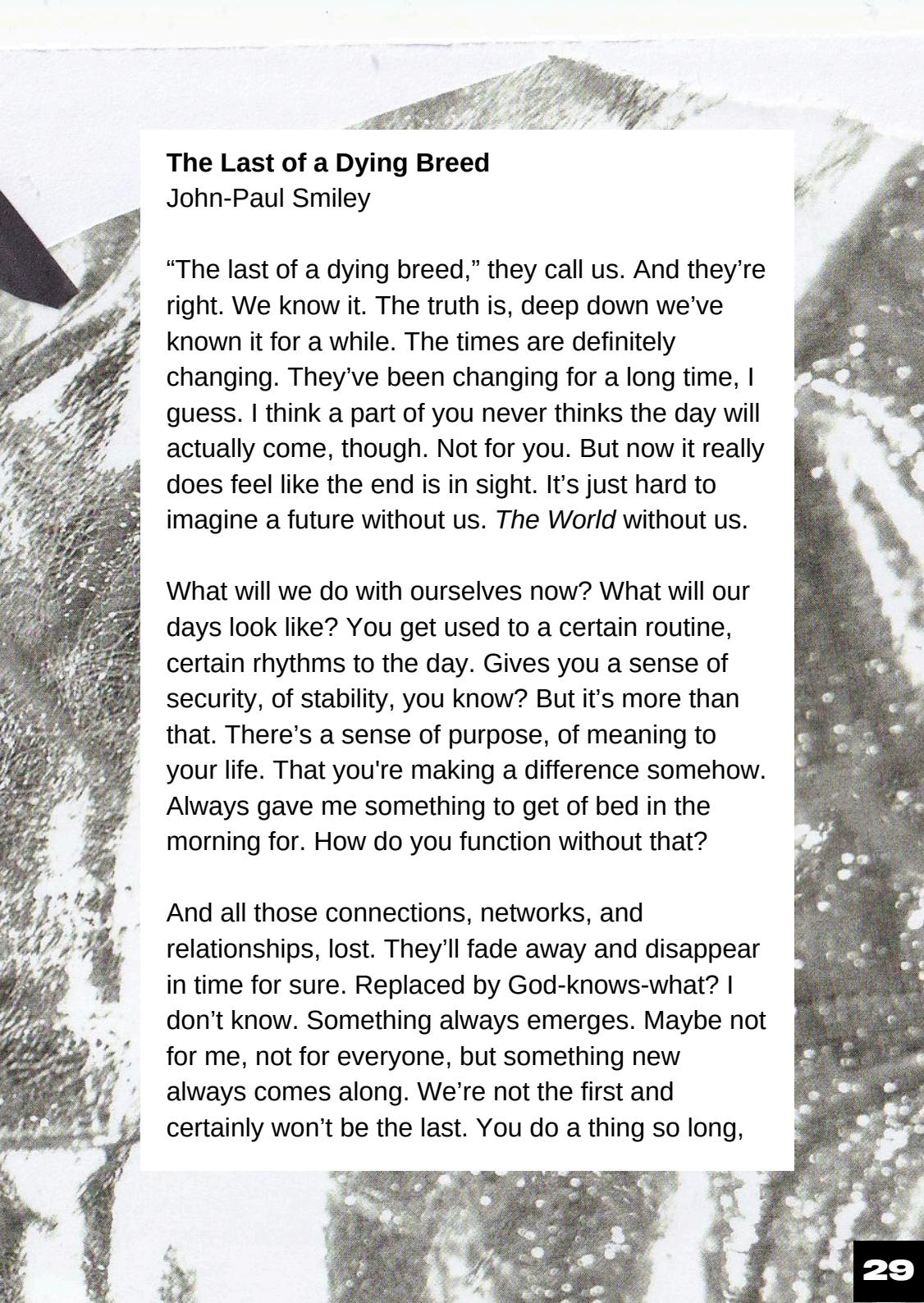
If there's time mate
we'll have a pint of mild
in The Garrison with Liz Berry, the merry queen of
Dudley, and discuss dis poetry thing.

Poem inspired by Benjamin Zephaniah's "Dis Poetry".

The Three Degrees: the Men Who Changed British Football Forever by Paul Rees
(1973).

Cyrille Regis, Brendan Batson and Laurie Cunningham.
Also, Liz Berry

<https://poetryarchive.org/poet/liz-berry/>



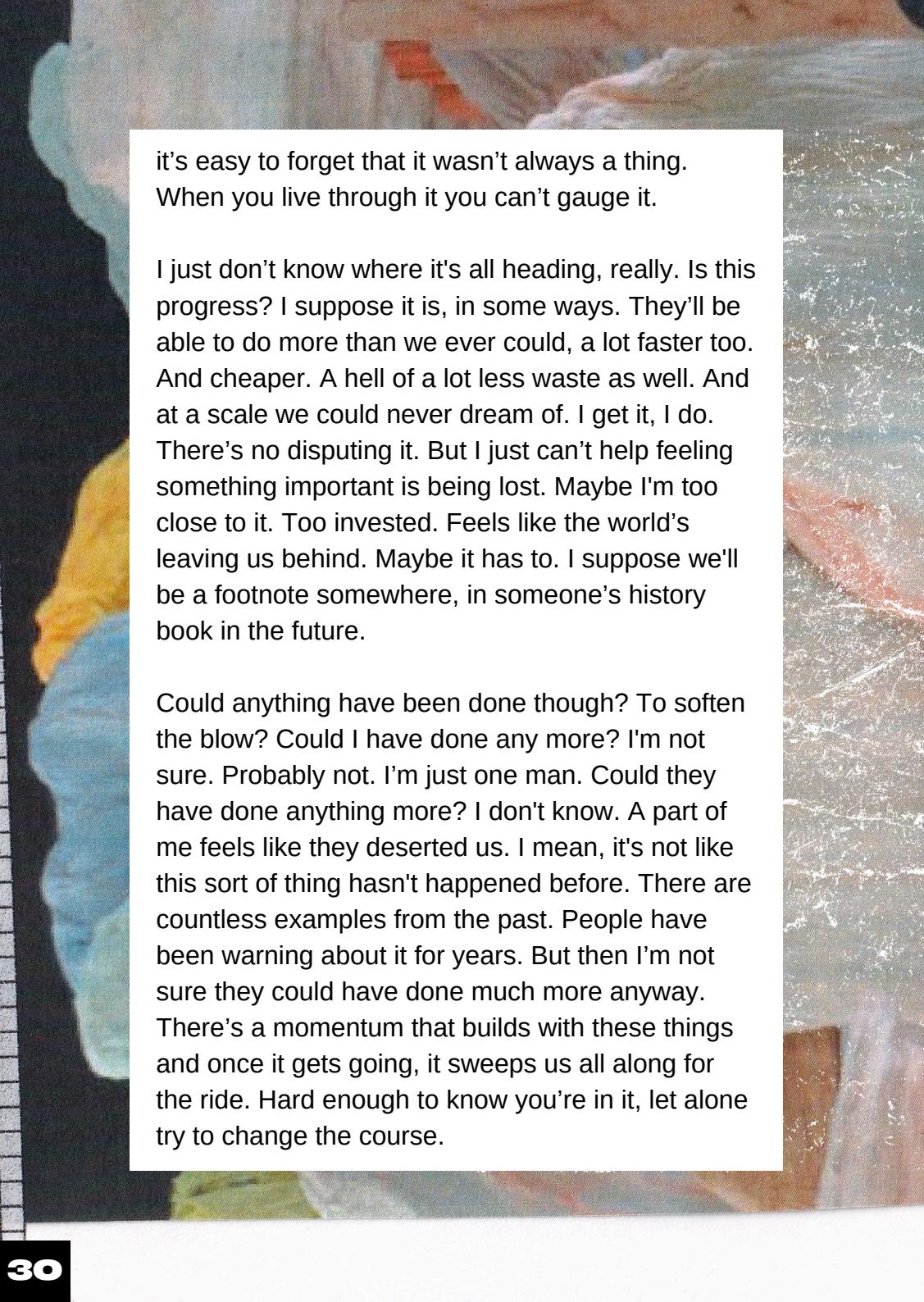
The Last of a Dying Breed

John-Paul Smiley

"The last of a dying breed," they call us. And they're right. We know it. The truth is, deep down we've known it for a while. The times are definitely changing. They've been changing for a long time, I guess. I think a part of you never thinks the day will actually come, though. Not for you. But now it really does feel like the end is in sight. It's just hard to imagine a future without us. *The World* without us.

What will we do with ourselves now? What will our days look like? You get used to a certain routine, certain rhythms to the day. Gives you a sense of security, of stability, you know? But it's more than that. There's a sense of purpose, of meaning to your life. That you're making a difference somehow. Always gave me something to get of bed in the morning for. How do you function without that?

And all those connections, networks, and relationships, lost. They'll fade away and disappear in time for sure. Replaced by God-knows-what? I don't know. Something always emerges. Maybe not for me, not for everyone, but something new always comes along. We're not the first and certainly won't be the last. You do a thing so long,



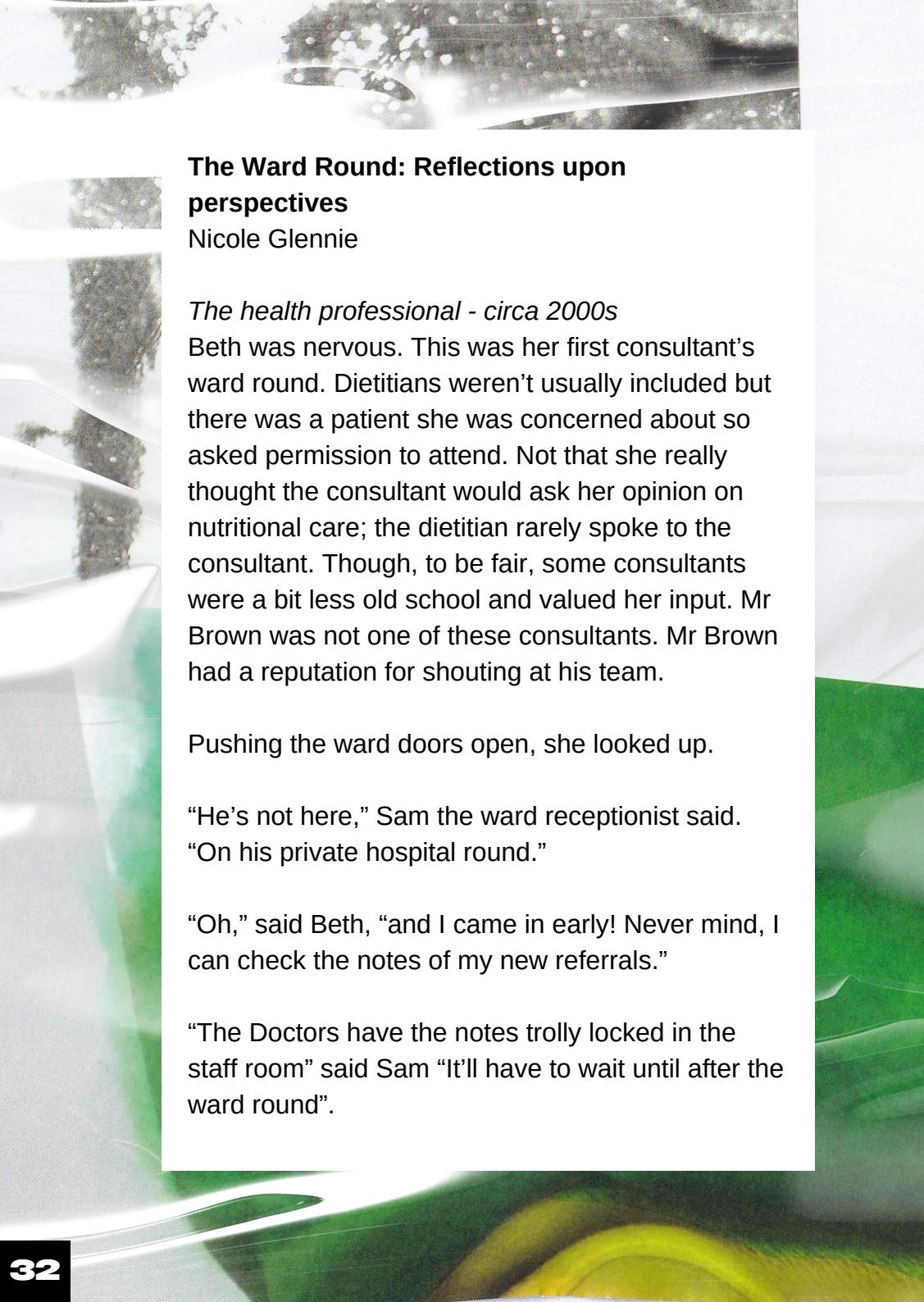
it's easy to forget that it wasn't always a thing.
When you live through it you can't gauge it.

I just don't know where it's all heading, really. Is this progress? I suppose it is, in some ways. They'll be able to do more than we ever could, a lot faster too. And cheaper. A hell of a lot less waste as well. And at a scale we could never dream of. I get it, I do. There's no disputing it. But I just can't help feeling something important is being lost. Maybe I'm too close to it. Too invested. Feels like the world's leaving us behind. Maybe it has to. I suppose we'll be a footnote somewhere, in someone's history book in the future.

Could anything have been done though? To soften the blow? Could I have done any more? I'm not sure. Probably not. I'm just one man. Could they have done anything more? I don't know. A part of me feels like they deserted us. I mean, it's not like this sort of thing hasn't happened before. There are countless examples from the past. People have been warning about it for years. But then I'm not sure they could have done much more anyway. There's a momentum that builds with these things and once it gets going, it sweeps us all along for the ride. Hard enough to know you're in it, let alone try to change the course.



Still, we'll hold on, as long as we can. It's part of us. And we're proud. It's given us so much. These skills have been passed on to us, from generation to generation. We wouldn't be who we are without them. It's engrained into our very being. We know who we are. The Last Craftsmen and Women.



The Ward Round: Reflections upon perspectives

Nicole Glennie

The health professional - circa 2000s

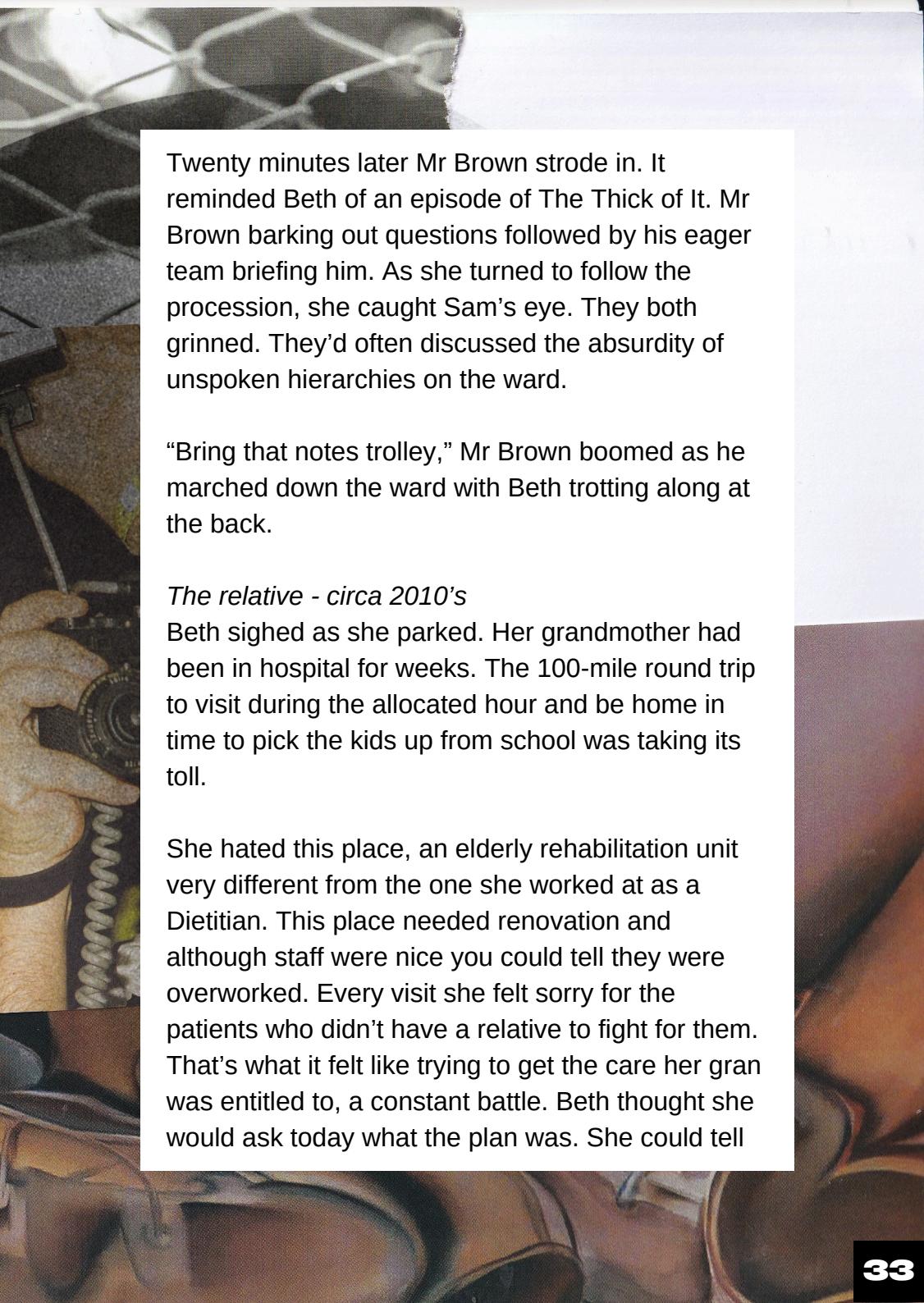
Beth was nervous. This was her first consultant's ward round. Dietitians weren't usually included but there was a patient she was concerned about so asked permission to attend. Not that she really thought the consultant would ask her opinion on nutritional care; the dietitian rarely spoke to the consultant. Though, to be fair, some consultants were a bit less old school and valued her input. Mr Brown was not one of these consultants. Mr Brown had a reputation for shouting at his team.

Pushing the ward doors open, she looked up.

"He's not here," Sam the ward receptionist said.
"On his private hospital round."

"Oh," said Beth, "and I came in early! Never mind, I can check the notes of my new referrals."

"The Doctors have the notes trolley locked in the staff room" said Sam "It'll have to wait until after the ward round".



Twenty minutes later Mr Brown strode in. It reminded Beth of an episode of *The Thick of It*. Mr Brown barking out questions followed by his eager team briefing him. As she turned to follow the procession, she caught Sam's eye. They both grinned. They'd often discussed the absurdity of unspoken hierarchies on the ward.

"Bring that notes trolley," Mr Brown boomed as he marched down the ward with Beth trotting along at the back.

The relative - circa 2010's

Beth sighed as she parked. Her grandmother had been in hospital for weeks. The 100-mile round trip to visit during the allocated hour and be home in time to pick the kids up from school was taking its toll.

She hated this place, an elderly rehabilitation unit very different from the one she worked at as a Dietitian. This place needed renovation and although staff were nice you could tell they were overworked. Every visit she felt sorry for the patients who didn't have a relative to fight for them. That's what it felt like trying to get the care her gran was entitled to, a constant battle. Beth thought she would ask today what the plan was. She could tell

her gran just wanted to get home. The lack of stimulation in the ward wasn't good for her.

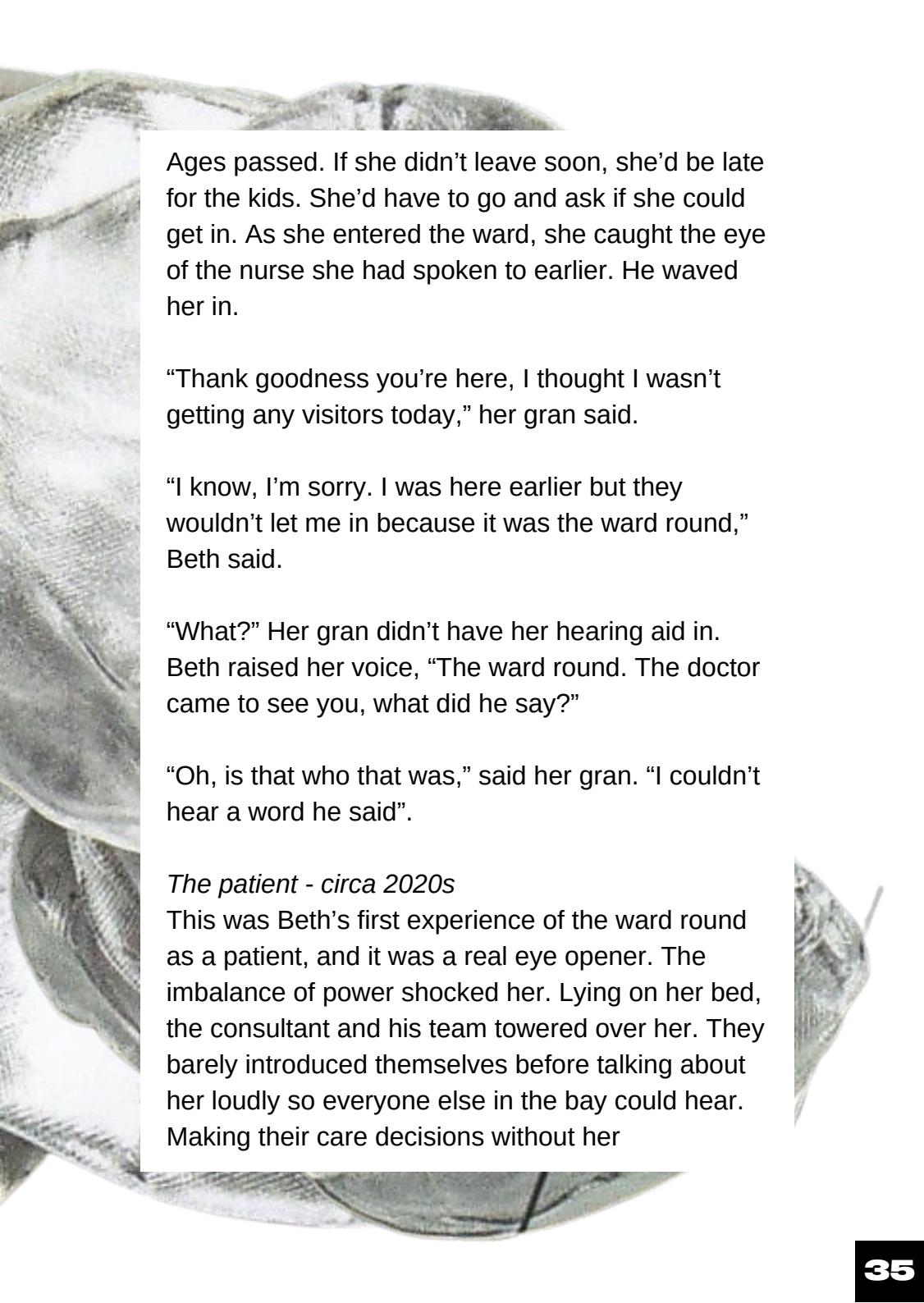
As she passed the nurses station a voice called out. "Hello, it's the consultant's ward round this afternoon, no visitors are allowed."

Beth sighed, "Oh, no one told me. I've travelled 50 miles to get here, I could just leave when he gets to my gran's bay."

"Sorry, no visitors during the ward round." Perhaps he saw the distress on Beth's face, because he then said kindly, "Why don't you go to the canteen, and I'll let you into your gran's bay once he's passed."

"Thank you," Beth said as she turned to leave.

She had never met her gran's consultant; it would have been good to discuss her gran's discharge. She knew her gran would tell him she didn't need extra help but that wasn't true. Beth sighed, of course she knew care should be patient centred, but she sometimes thought it would be prudent to listen to family. Especially as they are the ones who pick up the pieces upon discharge.



Ages passed. If she didn't leave soon, she'd be late for the kids. She'd have to go and ask if she could get in. As she entered the ward, she caught the eye of the nurse she had spoken to earlier. He waved her in.

"Thank goodness you're here, I thought I wasn't getting any visitors today," her gran said.

"I know, I'm sorry. I was here earlier but they wouldn't let me in because it was the ward round," Beth said.

"What?" Her gran didn't have her hearing aid in. Beth raised her voice, "The ward round. The doctor came to see you, what did he say?"

"Oh, is that who that was," said her gran. "I couldn't hear a word he said".

The patient - circa 2020s

This was Beth's first experience of the ward round as a patient, and it was a real eye opener. The imbalance of power shocked her. Lying on her bed, the consultant and his team towered over her. They barely introduced themselves before talking about her loudly so everyone else in the bay could hear. Making their care decisions without her



involvement.

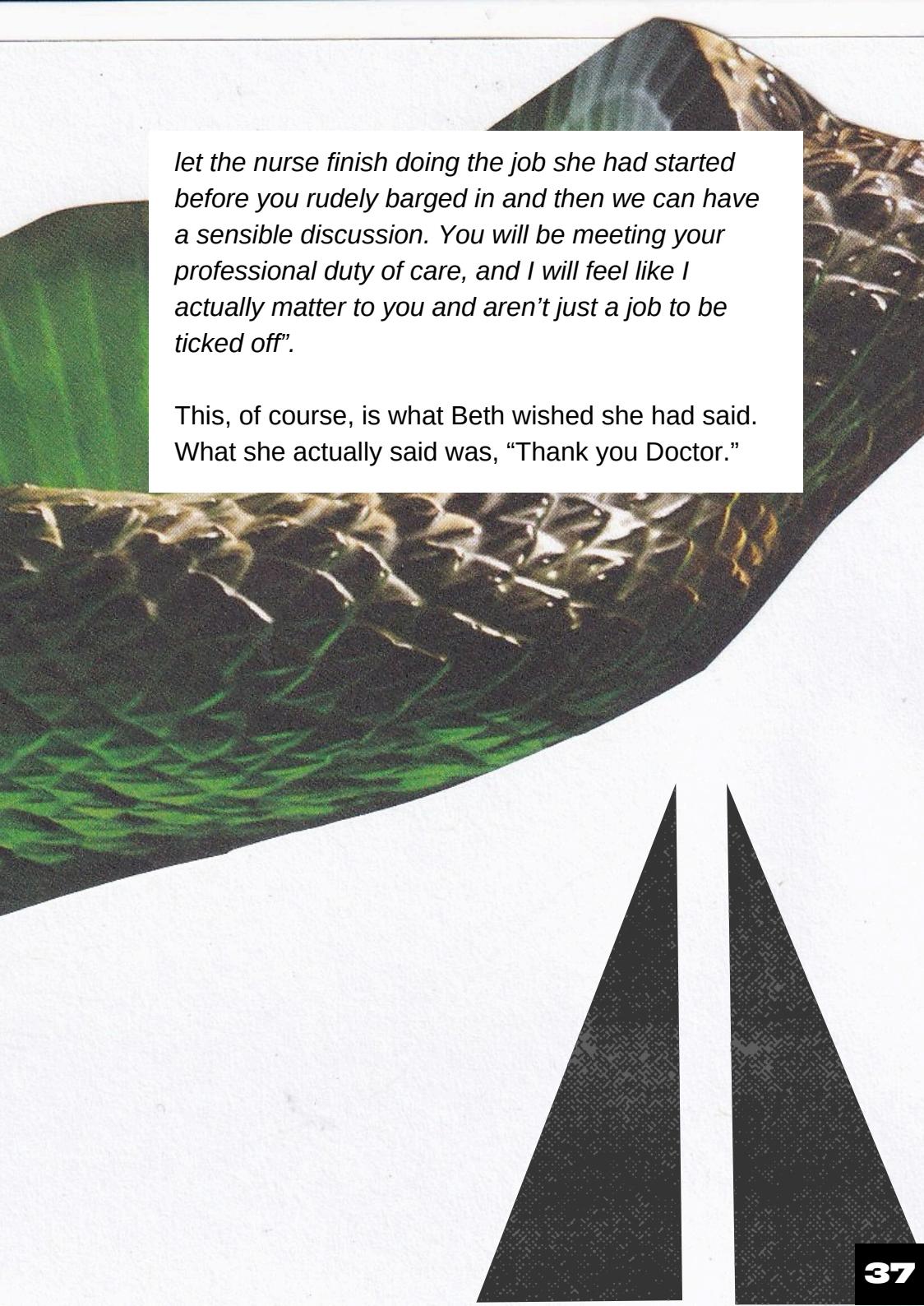
And so, it began: a random series of doctors introducing themselves, talking to her and about her; in front of her but not with her. Is this how her patients had felt? Like they were a chore to complete? She liked to think she had listened to people, talked with them and not to them, but in all honesty, there were probably times she could have done better.

Though hopefully, she thought, never as bad as the final consultant who came in the day after her operation. She burst past the curtain just as the nurse was preparing to remove Beth's catheter. Exposed and groggy Beth looked up.

"Hi, I'm Dr Asha," she said as she lifted the sheet to cover Beth with a look of distaste. "Do you mind if I just see her first," she said to the nurse. That wasn't a question but there followed a series of questions from Dr Asha which confirmed she had not read Beth's notes before coming to see her.

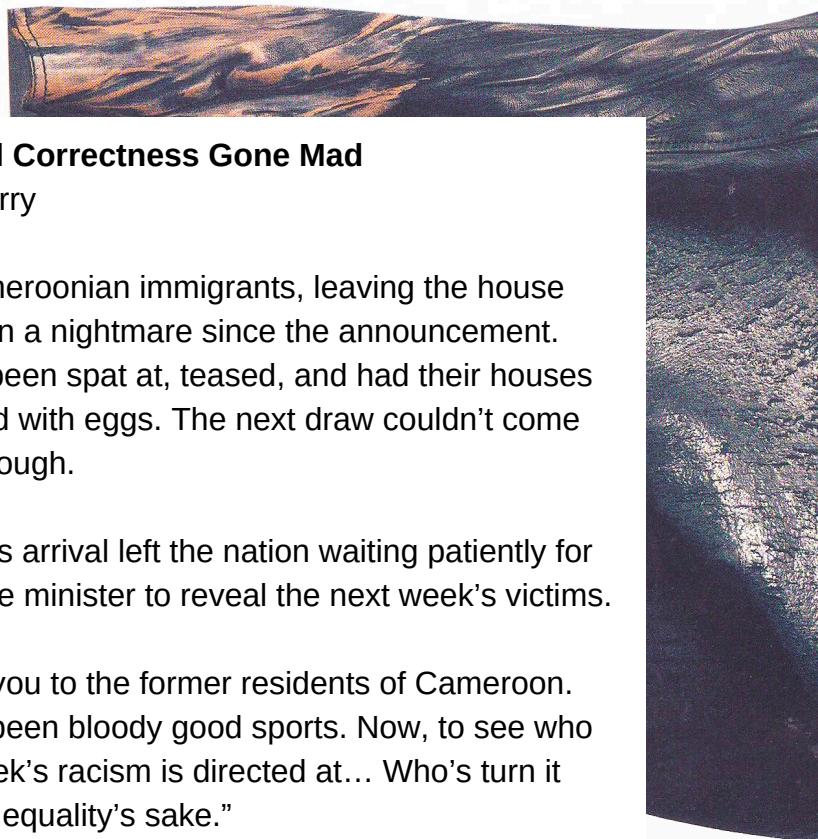
"Are you asking me that or telling me that," Beth said at one point as her frustration brewed.

"Why don't you go and read my medical notes,



let the nurse finish doing the job she had started before you rudely barged in and then we can have a sensible discussion. You will be meeting your professional duty of care, and I will feel like I actually matter to you and aren't just a job to be ticked off'.

This, of course, is what Beth wished she had said. What she actually said was, "Thank you Doctor."



Political Correctness Gone Mad

Liam Kerry

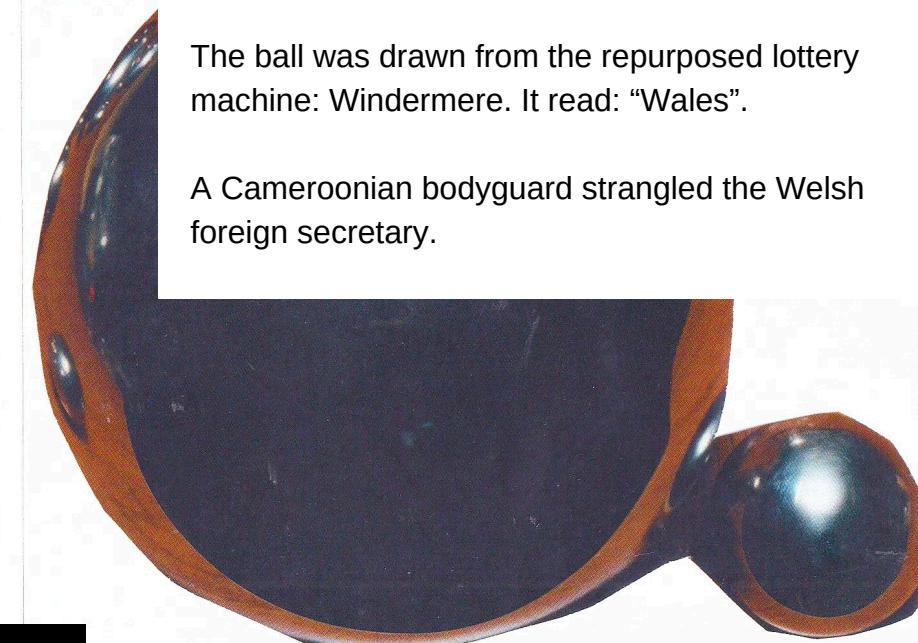
For Cameroonian immigrants, leaving the house had been a nightmare since the announcement. They'd been spat at, teased, and had their houses mortared with eggs. The next draw couldn't come soon enough.

Sunday's arrival left the nation waiting patiently for the prime minister to reveal the next week's victims.

"Thank you to the former residents of Cameroon. You've been bloody good sports. Now, to see who next week's racism is directed at... Who's turn it is... For equality's sake."

The ball was drawn from the repurposed lottery machine: Windermere. It read: "Wales".

A Cameroonian bodyguard strangled the Welsh foreign secretary.



The Local Market

Dorothy Kalita

My mother and I stepped out of our vehicle into the marketplace. A beautiful day – perfect weather, with a light breeze and a moderate amount of sunshine. White flakes of crushed garlic covers spread like scanty grass on the roadside – the kutcha roadside acting as the makeshift market. Occasionally, onion flakes accompanied the garlic too. A shopkeeper pitied the basket of capsicums – green with shades of red and orange, for he would soon have to throw them off owing to a lack of buyers. Poor, soon-to-be rotten capsicums dying without having a chance to be eaten. A heap of damaged bitter gourd lay like lonely martyrs on the ground. Bamboo-woven baskets full of an assortment of long-colourful chilis shone in the sunlight. Cabbages and beans, less shiny yet more essential than chillies grabbed attention too. The more native colocasia remained quiet in a secluded basket.

An urge to cough arose, but I suppressed it knowing the dangers of being labelled as a carrier of the disease. Funny how even the basic liberty of coughing has been taken away from us during these covid times. I looked around to find several

pairs of thirsty eyes ogling at me. Some men with eyes above masks, some with scarves wrapped around the lower half of the face, and some with neither a mask nor a scarf. A blue surgical mask covering the lower half of my face was my only shield. The mask began to feel like a more efficient gear to fight against those eyes than the eye-less coronavirus. However, not even the mask could protect me from those gazes. Maybe being looked at comes with the burden of being a woman.

Young boys below the age of puberty roamed freely with smug faces, exercising the privilege they attained at birth with pride – the privilege that I could never have. Creepers enveloped a machine marked "550 volts", adding a touch of nature to it. Pink sacks stretched with mud-coloured potatoes. A woman exclaiming "*rongalau, rongalau*" at the sight of pumpkins turned several heads. A full-length maxi with a *gamosa* modestly wrapped around her neck like a *dupatta* couldn't deter those eyes. Her identity as a woman made her stand out in this world of men, a world where women were either unwelcome or viewed with the fascination of an exotic species.

Surely there was something pristine about the women-species, not only in their coy-



submissive demeanour and chests heavy with breasts but also in the regions they occupied. One would be sure to spot them as homemakers, in maternity wards, as secretaries and as low-paying middle school teachers. The market unfortunately wasn't one of the few places they could call their own, at least not during these pandemic times. While in the pre-covid times women traders could be found (though vastly outnumbered) hawking alongside their male counterparts, they were nowhere to be found today. Left behind was a dismal marketplace devoid of the womenfolk.

Single blobs of cow dung added a hue of black to the scene. Amidst this, a kid, quiet with his huge head and skinny knees drawn to his chest came to resemble something of an outcast. A truck wheezed past, releasing dark smoke into the newly-clean air. As I got into the car, its heat began to suffocate me. Bearing the heat, I refused to remove the mask hoping it would provide me with a respite from remaining gazes, if any. As women, our need to compromise isn't merely limited to the confines of family and marriage but persists even in the simplest interactions we engage in in the public sphere. My instinctive decision to keep the mask on might be another small act of negotiation. As we drove away, a man peered briefly into my car, his

teeth stained red with tobacco. I stared back. He withdrew in shame.

Notes:

1 Rongalau can be translated as “pumpkin” in the Assamese language.

2 Gamosa is a white rectangular piece of cloth, with red motifs woven on the sides. Though it can be translated as “something to wipe the body with”, its meaning extends well beyond it. A traditional scarf of the Assamese people, it is a symbol of reverence used as a token of offering to guests as well as to deities during worship.

3 According to the Cambridge Dictionary, dupatta refers to a “long piece of cloth worn around the head, neck, and shoulders by women from South Asia.

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/dupatta>

The Small Things

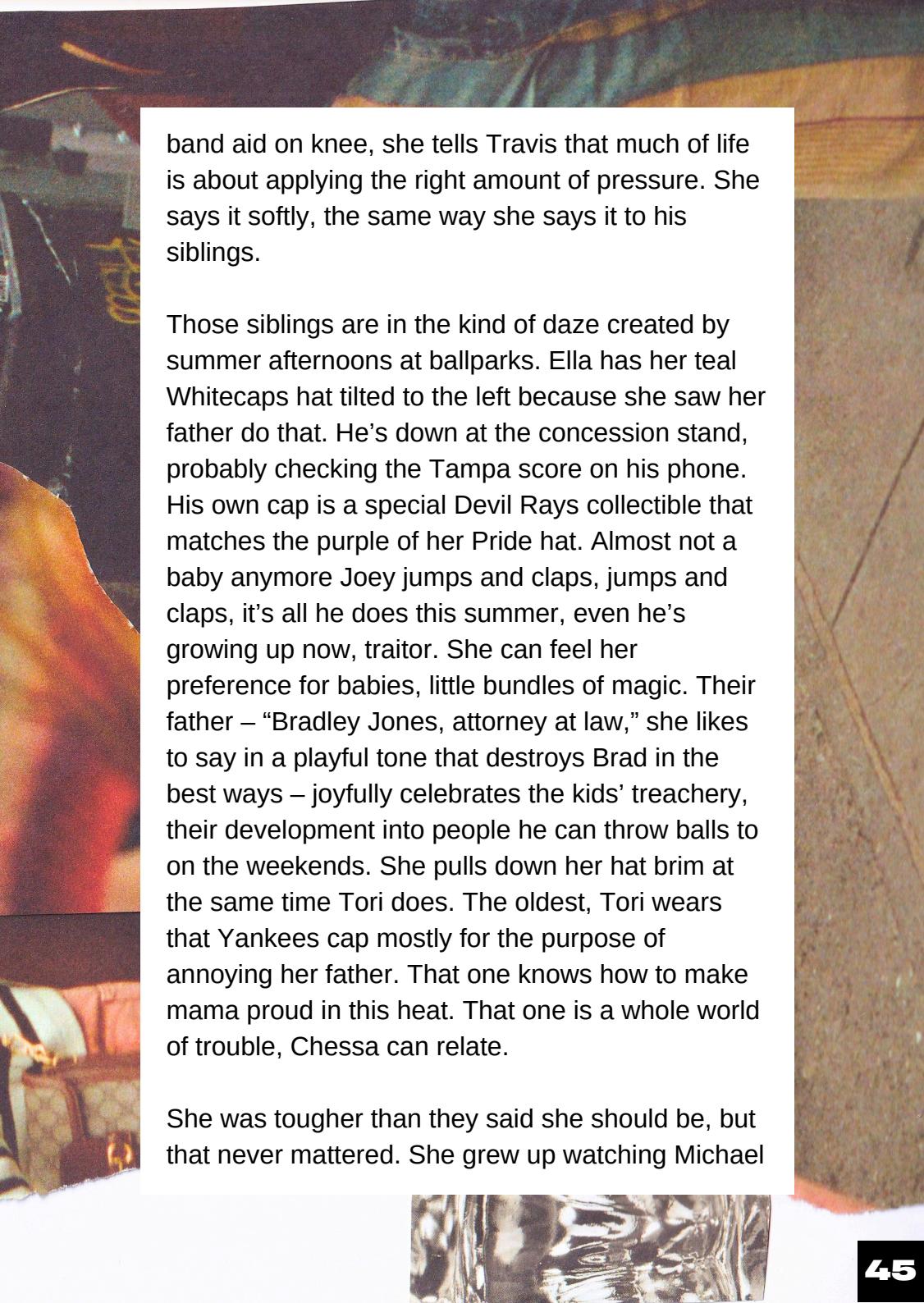
J.E. Sumerau

Another message from work pops into the inbox, button pushed, email ignored, another day in July. She'll read it later, another congratulations, her new article forthcoming in a top journal, she feels the left edge of her lip rise, a smile of triumph. Dr. Francesca Luna adjusts her hips, slides from left to right and back, ah, that's the spot, as close as bleachers will ever get to feeling comfortable. Dr. Luna is never Fran, almost always Chessa.

The nickname arose organically. One day she was a newly christened child in upstate New York, the next she was tearing up soccer fields and swapping stories with her brothers in the too small rooms they shared when they were too tiny to know how hard their parents worked. She just became Chessa, carried the name to college down the road from where her parents worked, to graduate study 1200 miles to the south, the part of Florida that's more like South Georgia. She doesn't regret punching the boy in middle school who called her Fran, pulled her hair, she'd do it again, she'll teach Tori and Ella to do the same. "You take the life you want girls," or something like that, she'll make sure they know she forced her way to doctor, to successful scholar.

Now, she tries to force the sun from her eyes. She uses her hand to extend the brim of her Orlando Pride hat. The hat is half function and half rebellion against all this baseball. She spots those four little monsters that yank her heart like a ripcord. They are screaming over the fences along with a baker's dozen of other kids. The Whitecaps' players turn and wave, stop to sign hats, shirts, and the like. They look young enough to be Chessa's students, old enough to make her feel a deep desire for the slightly spiked soda in the Styrofoam cup sitting to her left.

That cup could have been a flask or a bottle somewhere in a trendy apartment in Austin, Texas, a set of board games played with acquaintances and coworkers and might-be friends in an apartment in North Florida, brothers and sisters laughing on soccer fields after the last snow of a bad winter close enough to the Canada border – nostalgia, symbols of life, all the small things. She can hear Brad singing that song, humming other pop-punk memories over the years. They would wrap in blankets, move to one state, move again to another – we can make it together, hold on tight. She's an expert at holding on tight, to her brothers, to her dreams, to her parents, to a puppy who traveled by her side across multiple states, to her kids, especially after a nightmare or a fall. Placing

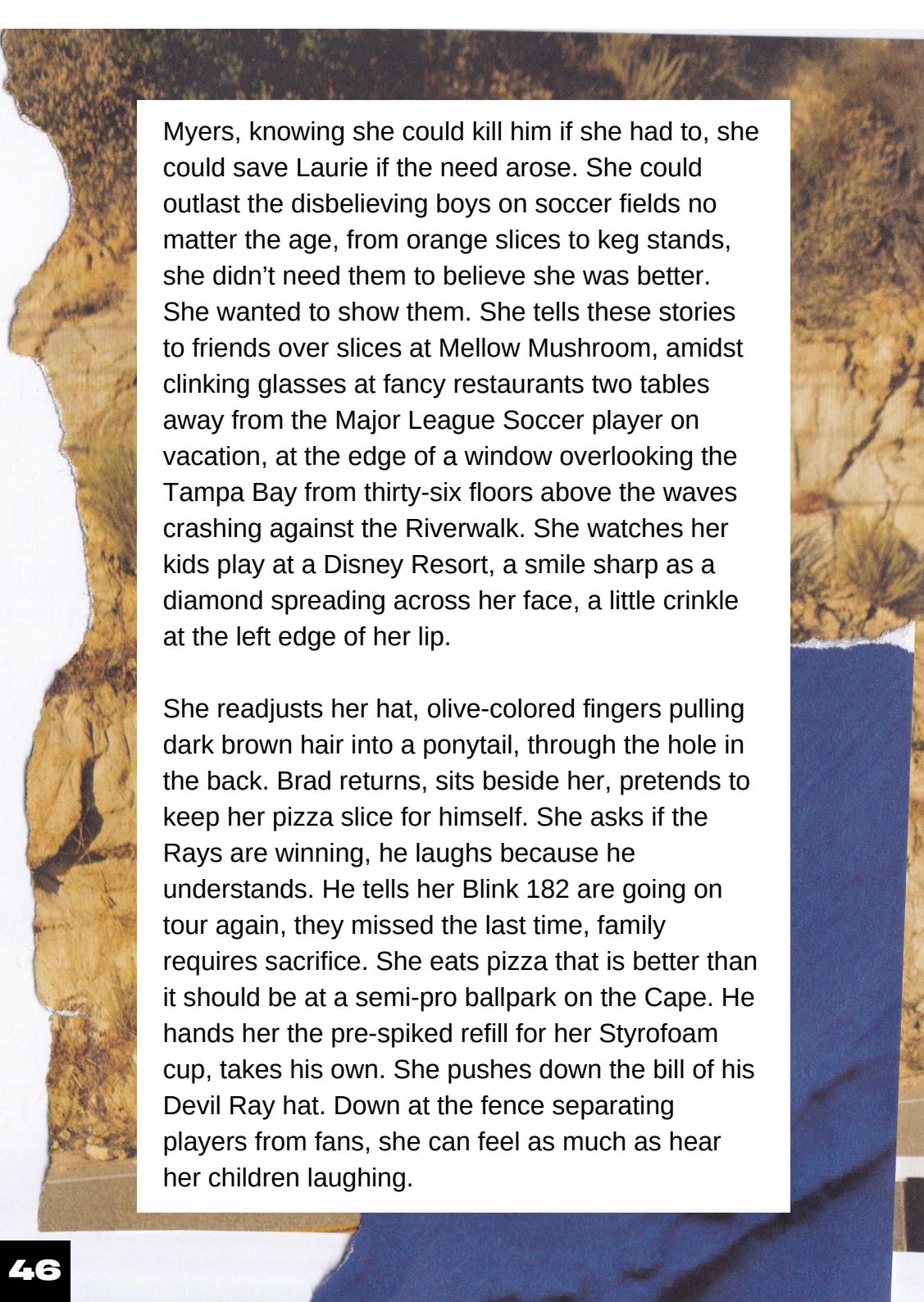


band aid on knee, she tells Travis that much of life is about applying the right amount of pressure. She says it softly, the same way she says it to his siblings.

Those siblings are in the kind of daze created by summer afternoons at ballparks. Ella has her teal Whitecaps hat tilted to the left because she saw her father do that. He's down at the concession stand, probably checking the Tampa score on his phone. His own cap is a special Devil Rays collectible that matches the purple of her Pride hat. Almost not a baby anymore Joey jumps and claps, jumps and claps, it's all he does this summer, even he's growing up now, traitor. She can feel her preference for babies, little bundles of magic. Their father – "Bradley Jones, attorney at law," she likes to say in a playful tone that destroys Brad in the best ways – joyfully celebrates the kids' treachery, their development into people he can throw balls to on the weekends. She pulls down her hat brim at the same time Tori does. The oldest, Tori wears that Yankees cap mostly for the purpose of annoying her father. That one knows how to make mama proud in this heat. That one is a whole world of trouble, Chessa can relate.

She was tougher than they said she should be, but that never mattered. She grew up watching Michael





Myers, knowing she could kill him if she had to, she could save Laurie if the need arose. She could outlast the disbelieving boys on soccer fields no matter the age, from orange slices to keg stands, she didn't need them to believe she was better. She wanted to show them. She tells these stories to friends over slices at Mellow Mushroom, amidst clinking glasses at fancy restaurants two tables away from the Major League Soccer player on vacation, at the edge of a window overlooking the Tampa Bay from thirty-six floors above the waves crashing against the Riverwalk. She watches her kids play at a Disney Resort, a smile sharp as a diamond spreading across her face, a little crinkle at the left edge of her lip.

She readjusts her hat, olive-colored fingers pulling dark brown hair into a ponytail, through the hole in the back. Brad returns, sits beside her, pretends to keep her pizza slice for himself. She asks if the Rays are winning, he laughs because he understands. He tells her Blink 182 are going on tour again, they missed the last time, family requires sacrifice. She eats pizza that is better than it should be at a semi-pro ballpark on the Cape. He hands her the pre-spiked refill for her Styrofoam cup, takes his own. She pushes down the bill of his Devil Ray hat. Down at the fence separating players from fans, she can feel as much as hear her children laughing.



Self Fulfilling Prophecy

Bree Turner

I dreamt of a diamond in your chest,
a cutaneous vein, a hand to heart.

I woke with

What's a synonym for anxiety?

Yearning.

In the early hours, palm to sternum,
I felt a violent current and surrendered.
I breathed out one, two, three.

On the nightstand I keep a journal,
to help me distinguish
night and day.

Theta waves wash up memories
of black curls on ivory and blush.

Did that really happen?



I remember
your salt water tongue.
I am fire and air,
though, I never feel more like myself
than when I'm in the ocean.

I search for meaning,
scrolling screens with tacky fingertips,
and settle on an interpretation I like.

Make the first move.

Hack mediums and astrologers
plant seeds that feed
my self fulfilling prophecies.

*Hey! I've been thinking of u
we should catch up x*

...

Thursday Evening

Jack Redden

I have a few hours to myself

with nothing to do

I eat your fruit.

I eat your blackberries

blueberries

and raspberries.

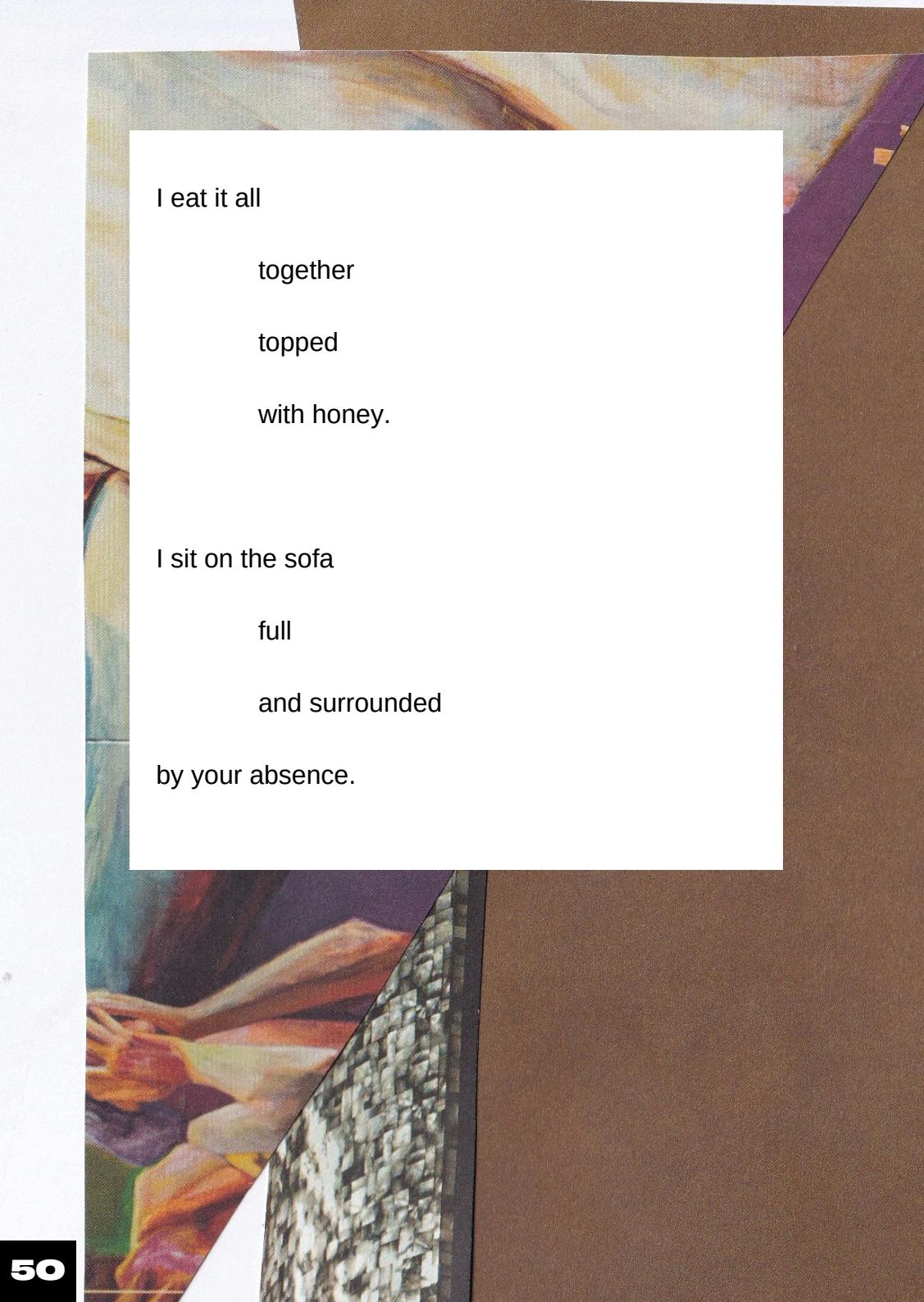
I eat your yoghurt too

which is a week

out of date

and still tastes

fine.



I eat it all
together
topped
with honey.

I sit on the sofa
full
and surrounded
by your absence.

Author Bios

Bree Turner, PhD (she/her) is a queer researcher and writer from Australia, currently based in Paris. Her research and creative practice often explores gender, relationships, digital cultures and performativity.

Dick Wiggins (aka Ernest Dredge) is a retired academic who continues to carry out social research. He was born in Birmingham in 1948 and has lived in Lewisham since 1970. He supports MIND, RETHINK, Surfers Against Sewage and the Woodland Trust.

Dorothy Kalita is currently a PhD candidate at the Centre for the Study of Social Systems, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. She is primarily interested in the study of religion and all things esoteric. Spending most of her time interacting with those around her (which, she in no way regrets), she constantly wishes she read more.

Edgar Burns has taught in both Australia and New Zealand higher education. He takes an interdisciplinary approach starting from his core sociology teaching and research, professions and environment. He is currently writing about environmental change, regenerative agriculture, Māori health equity, and teachers' being bullied. ORCID: 0000-0002-6645-3358

Emma Quilty is a research fellow in the Monash node of the Centre for Excellence for The Elimination of Violence Against Women working on how technology facilitates gendered violence and can be harnessed to prevent violence against women. Emma is an anthropologist who writes about gender, technology and politics.

Ian C Smith's work has been published in *BBC Radio 4 Sounds*, *Cable Street*, *The Dalhousie Review*, *Griffith Review*, *Honest Ulsterman*, *Offcourse*, *Stand*, & *Westerly*. His seventh book is *wonder sadness madness joy*, Ginninderra (Port Adelaide). He writes in the Gippsland Lakes area of Victoria, and on Flinders Island.

Author Bios

J.E. Sumerau (they/them) is an associate professor and the director of applied sociology at the University of Tampa. They are the author of 7 novels, 5 research monographs, and numerous articles, chapters, and short stories exploring sexualities, gender, health, religion, and violence in society. For more information, visit www.jsumerau.com.

Jack Redden lives in Salford with Rosie.

Jahnavi Patel is a Junior UX/UI Designer and a master's student at Monash University, specializing in interaction design. Inspired by pre-colonial ancient texts, she designs beyond contemporary societal norms, aiming to provoke critical thinking, evoke emotions, and create a deep sense of connection.

John-Paul Smiley is a writer and independent scholar. He has a PhD in Civil and Building Engineering (Loughborough, UK), an MSc Social Research (Leicester, UK), and a BA Politics and Sociology (York, UK). His interests include futurism and science fiction, as well as politics and sociology.

Liam Kerry is a thinking enthusiast with a bad memory. Writing helps him recall his daydreams. An anthology of his microfiction will be available later in 2024. www.liamkerry.co.uk

Nicola Glennie was previously a dietitian but is now a PhD student at the University of Stirling researching coping among people living with Motor Neurone Disease. Her own recent ill health caused her to reflect on one traditional aspect of healthcare provision in the United Kingdom.

Tabetha Bond is a Junior Graphic designer currently completing their final year of a Bachelor of Communication Design student at Monash University. She is passionate about collaborating with other creatives and visionaries. Growing up in Phillip Island she feels strongly about designing towards an inclusive and environmentally sustainable future. <https://tabethastudios.myportfolio.com/>

Horoscopes

Aries: Seek the shadows.

Taurus: Balance brings peace.

Gemini: The details matter.

Cancer: Lead *somewhere*.

Leo: Get past today.

Virgo: Arrive later than planned.

Libra: Joy is nearby.

Scorpio: Radiate confidence.

Sagittarius: Dream gently.

Capricorn: Aim for wisdom.

Aquarius: Juggle yesterday and the future.

Pisces: Forget the closed door.



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