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Fault Lines
by Sonia Afzal

London, Los Angeles and Greece in 2050. Smartphones have evolved into wearable technology that not only records what we see and hear but what we feel, amplifying our anguish, our prejudices and our loneliness. A middle-aged woman leaves her husband without a word to pursue a more meaningful life creating friction and fissures in all of her relationships. She is freed from the shell of her old life, but at what cost?

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Raf woke on her back one Friday morning to find her skin stretched over her diaphragm like a brand new tambourine poised for a mighty thump. That spongy swelling of fat that she had carried for years on her belly had flattened overnight when she made the decision to leave him. “Enough,” she had whispered to herself the night before. “I’m changing my rhythm.” It wasn’t an angry ‘enough’. It was decisive. Like the clap of a car door latch as it shuts. She decided she wouldn’t leave a note. He didn’t deserve it.

By all other respects, it was an ordinary Friday. Raf had the day off and James was on his weekly business trip in Paris, not due back home until later that evening. She was alone at home. Raf in bed and the cat Uno prowling somewhere in their four-storeyed apartment in Old Street, just off Regents Canal.

She rolled over on her side and hovered a tumbler by the sensor above her side table to activate the zip tap and pour herself a glass of room temperature water. She drank it in one steady stream, save the last few sips, which she poured out into her palm and wiped across her face. She needed to shower to wake up her body and hauled herself off the bed to walk up two flights of stairs to the bathroom on the first floor. She removed James’ T-shirt, a makeshift nighty with holes in the shoulder from when Uno had scratched her as a kitten. Hot water drummed down on her crown like a tribal dance readying her for a secret initiation.

She turned to the floor-to-ceiling tinted window looking out into the garden below and spotted Yianni, their neighbour, sunbathing on his side of the hedge. Reclining on a lounger,
he swiped the air above his face, no doubt flicking through a Tisca deck. The holographic presentation was barely visible to Raf at this distance but she could see his broad caramelised chest. He was definitely working, oblivious to her gaze as she stood completely naked.

It was Yianni who had helped Raf convert the ground floor patio into a luscious garden for Uno to hunt in. He had also helped install a huge outdoor Lumi Wall at the far end, preloaded with a high resolution video clip that made their shared garden appear endless. The digital glass measured the full length of their building and was curved at the top so that it blended seamlessly with the sky. This was Yianni’s trademark that had won him garden design awards. Until Yianni had found a way to weather proof digital glass, Lumi Walls could only be used as indoor room dividers. They were slick and bespoke, allowing everyone to add a unique dimension to their home. But when the video clips were switched off at night, every home in central London was reduced to a hollow glass maze.

Raf followed the hedgeline down to the rim of her window ledge where it was no longer in view and examined her feet on the wet mosaic tiles of her shower. She took note of her own willowy frame and the shape of her slender limbs that had somehow defied her age and eating habits. She inspected her skin, parched, delicately thin and flaking, and scrubbed it with a loofah like she was working out a stain from a shirt collar. Bending down to wash her toes she marveled at her own smallness. She didn't pinch her thigh fat or plan crunches. She just observed herself. Her tummy was decidedly flatter than she remembered, but in this position its skin hung loose, like a broken tent, in memory of birthing two children. Maya and Lola. Eighteen and sixteen. Ripe with expectation. Both at university. Much younger than Raf had been when she went to university, but the times had changed.

She stood up covered in lather and rinsed herself off. Was this what happened as we aged? Conversations slackened with our skin. Relationships suddenly weighed heavy and thick, like egg white leaking through a crack. Clear enough, but no longer fresh. A moment of doubt flickered across her mind, like a screensaver image. The water stopped running. It had been seven minutes already and she hadn’t shampooed. Too late for that now. Too late for anything else but to get ready and leave.
Like Me

by Katharine Elliott

Recovering from a difficult divorce, Jess returns home for a twenty-year school reunion. Memory is deceptive and meeting Sam again – her unrequited teenage love – makes them both rethink the past. An invitation to a mutual friend’s wedding is the catalyst for Jess and Sam to be honest about traumatic secrets they had tried to forget. Truth can lead to reconciliation, but can it also lead to happiness?

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Jess gazed round Caroline’s cluttered, familiar kitchen and heaved a sigh. The two-hundred-mile drive had set her shoulders like rock. She leant against the counter top and made a concerted effort to tease them away from her ears. ‘How can it be twenty years since we left school? It can’t be.’

‘And yet it is,’ said Caroline. ‘Last time I risked a glance in an unfamiliar mirror, I definitely looked thirty-eight.’

‘You look lovely,’ Jess smiled at her oldest friend. They had met at primary school in Millingham, south of Manchester, a town sandwiched between the outer edges of the city and the Cheshire plain. Their friendship was cemented when they both passed the eleven plus exam and found themselves in a class with twenty-six strangers at Millingham Grammar School for Girls.

‘I look haggard. Old and stern, my daughters tell me,’ Caroline said.

‘Ah, the unfiltered comments of children,’ Jess said.

‘Of all family members, frankly.’ Caroline shook her short, dark curls. Grey threads at her temples hinted at the natural hair beneath the chestnut semi-permanent colour.

These were the somethings and nothings of a long friendship – the telephone conversations post nine o’clock watershed – while Philip, Caroline’s husband was out, and once Tom, Jess’s husband had gone. Small children in bed, house finally quiet, and both of them with glass of wine in front of them, their chats ranged across a multitude of subjects. Hair featured heavily. And hair colour was a recurring theme.
Jess didn’t have the guts to colour her hair. Tom had insisted she wore it long – as it had been for most of her teens – and the abrupt shearing of her hair after he left had been a tremendous shock. She’d been aiming for hip and trendy and instead she looked older somehow; fragile. Now, she didn’t have the courage to cut or colour it, nor the financial means to do either.

‘Anyway. Why are we having a school reunion now? Why couldn’t it be twenty-one years? I plan to have my life so much more together this time next year.’

‘It’ll be fun. You said you liked the idea,’ said Caroline.

‘Did I? Was I being polite?’ Although it was a warm July night, the air here felt fresher and purer. Sometimes London air was claustrophobic and stale, as if it had been breathed in and out too many times by too many people.

Caroline handed her a glass of white wine. ‘Sit down. You’ve just driven a long way on a Friday evening with two small children. You can relax.’

Jess slumped into a chair and propped her elbows on the table. ‘No. Can’t place that word. Relax. Rings a vague bell.’

Caroline laughed. ‘Philip won’t be back until late, so it’s just us.’

‘Thank you so much for putting us up. Putting up with us,’ said Jess.

‘It’s great you’re here, and the kids just pick up where they left off.’

‘I know. They were so looking forward to seeing your girls. Let’s hope they’re all still in their own beds. And that they’ve calmed down by tomorrow.’

‘They’ll be fine, we’ll hear them if there’s too much leaping about,’ said Caroline. She narrowed her eyes. ‘When did you last have a break from them?’

Jess looked up from her glass. ‘Oh. Mum has them now and then.’

Caroline dumped a bag of salad into a bowl. ‘Well, you’ll never guess who’s moved back into the family home on Woodham Road.’

Jess took another swig of wine. The only person she knew who once upon a time lived on Woodham Road was Sam Rushmore, and she’d convinced herself she’d stopped thinking about him years ago.

‘Sam!’ said Caroline. ‘Sam Rushmore. Brother of the more famous Will. His mother’s gone into Barton House – the nursing home? And he has the kids at least half the time. His wife’s working in Leeds, or York, or somewhere.’

Before she could stop herself, Jess said, ‘Ex-wife.’
“Did you take the money?” asked José.

Lisa said nothing. She was on the customer’s side of the desk, José sitting opposite, and she felt like a student in trouble at the principal’s office.

“I’m going to have to tell the lawyers something.”

“Lawyers?”

“I’m going to have to file for bankruptcy,” said José.

Lisa lifted up her head and looked at José for the first time since she had entered the office. The sunset light coming through the blinds hid his face in orange shadow. Her breathing lost its even-in-out pattern.

“They’re going to go through the books. I need to be able to tell them where it’s gone. They said it’s fine if it’s my wife. They don’t even need to know where you spent it. Done and dusted.”

Lisa’s gaze drifted down from José and onto the worn edges of the plywood desk. She traced her thumb over the edge, pressing her pad into the roughest bit. There was a streak of dust on her thumb; dust the Santa Ana had brought in.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know if you took the money?” José asked.

“I don’t.”

There were printed spreadsheets on José’s desk. Ed probably put them together — José didn’t know anything about computers. José didn’t know anything about numbers either, but
she saw him looking down at them like he could follow the path from the origin of the number to the end, like it meant something to him.

Lisa raised her thumb from the edge of the desk and ran her finger down a page of the spreadsheet, stopping to trace the lines as if they were raised, their borders edges to wells that numbers drowned in.

“What do you think I did with the money?”
“I don’t know.” José reached out his finger across the table and touched the edge of hers. Her nails were perfectly manicured.
“I didn’t take it.”
“I don’t believe you,” he said. He put his thumb on the other side of her finger, and squeezed. Slowly the skin surrounding Lisa’s nail turned paler. Slowly her finger went numb.
“You should.”
“I don’t.”
“You’re my husband.”
“You’d think I’d be the one person you’d tell the truth to.”
“You would.” She tugged her finger down out of his grasp and scraped it against the edge of the desk. José saw a thin line of red appear under the flap of her skin. She sucked in a bit of air and waved her hand, trying to dissipate the pain.

José stood up and left the office, coming back a few minutes later with the white first-aid box she had bought years ago. He carefully wiped the blood off her finger with some stinging alcohol and wrapped a bandaid around. Gave her finger a gentle squeeze.

“Okay?”
Lisa nodded.
“I’m sorry,” he said.

He went back behind his desk and she stood up to leave, grabbing her purse.

“I won’t ask again. You don’t have to tell the lawyers anything if you don’t want to. I’ll tell them I gave you the money. Jesus, I’ll tell them I stole the money from my own business. I’ll tell the judge I took food out of our kids’ mouths. I’ll tell them I couldn’t put our kids through college because I stole money that I earned. I’ll tell them that my wife has everything she could want and she couldn’t have stolen the money. I’ll tell them—Lisa!”

The door slammed.
It is May 2016 and Grace Malpass is leaving the United Kingdom. Disappearing to the windblown towns of southwestern Andalucía, where she last saw her missing father, Grace slowly realises she has only been a ghost in her own life. Finding herself drawn to a polite and charismatic contraband smuggler, she moves closer to understanding the crisis at the heart of her own family, and herself.

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Grace was woken by the sound of her father, crying like a seagull. She had been dreaming about him; he was standing behind a stack of newspapers, giving her advice. At least, that’s what he said it was. He was laying his hands palm up then palm down on the papers and saying, ‘oh my god.’ He repeated it in time with his hands turning. Oh my god, oh my god. His fourth ‘oh my god’ warped into ‘oh my geowwwww’ and the next time he opened his mouth it was all seagull: loud, caustic, long.

That was enough to wake her. She lay there, remembering her father’s mouth as it spoke seagull, and heard it again. There were quite a few of them; it sounded like the end of an afternoon on an English pier. Except it wasn’t England, she was in Spain. And it wasn’t the end of an afternoon. She reached over for her phone. No messages, an email from Pets Online, and a reminder to pay her credit card. It was 2:37 a.m.

She lay there for a moment, listening. English seagulls were so different to their smaller, sleeker Spanish cousins: the fat white weight of them, the viciousness. One had snatched an ice cream cone from her mother once. Where were they? Some dull pebble-dashed place. Sea the colour of warm beer, foaming ominously at its lip, ratcheting itself sullenly over its shore. The attack was so sudden it had taken everyone a few seconds to work out what had happened. She heard her mother’s yowl of surprise, remembered the ice cream’s instant and total disappearance.

She checked her phone again. Nothing. There was another shriek from outside. They all cry the same.
The door to the garden at the foot of her bed was open. Outside, the seagulls changed pitch as a wind stalked in, flicking the white, gauzy curtain up ninety degrees and slamming the door at the other end of the room shut, shunting the beach stone that propped it ajar across the tiles, bringing some strange news from the dark.

Her dream slipped through her mind, cool and unreadable, a ghost. Advice? What advice, Dad?

She got up and walked to the garden door, passed through the gap in the curtain and leant her head on the doorframe. Ahead of her, where she expected to see only dark sky becoming dark sea smothering the beach below, were four lights bobbing in the shape of a cross. It was a boat. The lights looked so soft, rocking back and forth. Romantic. Stowing into the beach for the night, fish, wine, music.

Another wind arrived, snatching the curtain off her back and flinging it up behind her, and as she looked down at the boat she had the feeling she shouldn’t be looking, that without the curtain she was exposed, a body, backlight in the distance. The lights on the boat grew rheumy, as if she was seeing them without glasses, through water, or oil.

The wind died, the curtain came back down, and there was now something practical, almost mundane, about the boat, as if the lights were giving out in service of something, the white flashes of seagull a preparation for some action she could not see.

In the morning, she walked down to the beach early, thinking the boat might be there. Should be, if it was there to be romantic; wouldn’t be, if it was practical.

‘Not that there are only two possibilities,’ said Annalise’s voice, coming through the phone underscored by a gurgling sound that could have been a bus, or an overflowing sink.

‘You sound underwater,’ she said.

‘What?’ Annalise glugged. ‘I’m saying there are more than two possibilities. Plus I’ve never seen a boat there before. Have you?’

‘But what practical reasons can it have?’

She had only brought up the boat in order to bury her real reason for calling, to pile words onto it until it suffocated, but in the process the boat had been made more real; it had assumed dimensions in her head. Telling Annalise had made it bigger. And Annalise tended not to let things go.

‘Grace.’ Her name sounded unfamiliar in her sister’s mouth. ‘When are you coming home?’
With a general election looming and a major company on the verge of collapse, the nation is in political turmoil. Four characters from across the political, geographic and social divide—a politician, a journalist, a factory worker and a public official—each weigh up ambition and loyalty as they fight for their version of justice. Their choices will change the country forever.

Josie sat in her cramped office with an expression of doting concern fixed upon her face. Keeping half an ear on what bald, red faced John Clarabut was saying, she could not stop her mind flickering to the futures that would be forged in the days and weeks ahead. The starting gun was about to be fired and she was stuck here discussing traffic congestion.

She couldn’t help but shoot glances at her phone. Any minute now she would receive a very short but very significant message. Twenty minutes before, in the gap between her last constituent leaving and young Ralph showing in Clarabut, leader of the Council, she had sent a single text to a number marked only as HW: Latest I’m hearing is next week. True?

‘Rest assured, John, I’ll make sure that the parliamentary party takes this as seriously as I do—’

‘Just as seriously as you do?’ Clarabut snorted suddenly. ‘And how seriously is that exactly?’ He was perched forward in his chair, his turkey neck wobbling beneath his jutted jaw.

Josie took a breath, registering for a moment the mild panic on the face of young Ralph looking over from his desk in the corner. Between them, Clarabut dropped his gaze to the beige carpet and for a moment the small room was quiet. Josie met Ralph’s eye with a smile. The councillor wore a determined frown.

‘John,’ she said in her most conciliatory tone. ‘I take this very seriously. It is early days, granted, but we are making real progress. We’re getting there, I promise.’

Clarabut’s face slackened like a dishcloth, before affecting a wide grin.

‘Ah,’ he exclaimed, twisting back to look at Ralph. ‘She promises! Well, job done!’
Ralph shifted in his chair. The Councillor turned back to Josie.
‘Mrs Shah—’
‘Ms,’ interjected Josie, pursing her lips.
‘Ms Shah.’ He coughed. ‘How long has it been since you arrived? A year?’
It was something that the locals had levelled at Josie since the day she’d accepted the party’s nomination.
A wave of impatience washed over her. For a moment she toyed with the urge to pour her cup of coffee over him, picturing it running down his bald head and onto his expensive suit.
‘You’re right of course, Councillor,’ she said softly. ‘I don’t have the long years of service to this town that you do. Sixteen years on the council is it now?’
‘Sixteen this September,’ he murmured. He had a habit of running his fingers over his drooping neck, and when he looked down the skin spilled over the rim of his too-tight collar.
‘It is a wonderful thing, that kind of dedication.’ She reached across her desk to a pile of papers from which she pulled the latest edition of the Herald. ‘Except in reality your achievements look, well, is negligible the word?’
He met her gaze, his thin-lipped smile under evident strain.
‘How has Marford changed under your stewardship? Let’s just think, shall we? Am I right, Councillor, when I say that most of our schools are now rated as needing improvement? When I say that violent crime has increased by four hundred percent in the last decade?’ She opened the newspaper to page 4, laying it out on the desk in front of him, and pointed to a headline spanning the page: FAMILY’S WAIT FOR SOCIAL HOUSING HITS TWO YEARS. ‘Am I right when I say that there are children growing up in B&Bs and on sofas because our council is unable to find them a proper place to live?’
‘Hold on there,’ barked Clarabut. ‘You know our budgets have been slashed thanks to your colleagues in Westminster!’
‘Then why are you working against me when I’m in a position to do something about it?’ Josie’s voice filled the small room. She had risen from her seat, leaning over the desk. Councillor Clarabut sat back, apparently studying his tie. In the corner, Ralph kept his eyes on his computer screen.
Josie folded the newspaper shut.
‘I don’t like entitlement, Councillor,’— she smiled— ‘and I don’t like being underestimated. You’re right of course, I am an outsider, and this is your patch. But you know what that counts for?’ She leaned in closer. ‘Nothing.’
The Age of Independence
by Ursula Hirschkorn

What would you do if your child’s future was under threat from sophisticated Bios engineered to surpass humanity? And what price must parents pay for their ambition? Detective Arden Cauldwell investigates what happens when genetic engineering mixes with competitive parenting in a City where humans are fast becoming second class citizens. His journey starts with a mother slain by her son; it ends with a race against time to save his family.

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Arden had never seen such darkness, such blank arrogance, as he saw in the eyes of the 16-year-old boy sitting cuffed in the back of the cruiser. His mother’s blood was still drying to a dark crust under his fingernails. His carefully washed and ironed Oxford blue shirt and cream chinos were liberally splattered, the fresh red slowly turning to a murky, ferrous brown. Yet somehow the kid still looked preppy, neat and only mildly inconvenienced by the horror.

He had seen more emotion behind the eyes of a malfunctioning Bio. The few he’d detained after they’d glitched out and injured a human had understood that somehow something had gone terribly wrong. But in the eyes of this boy there was nothing.

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As the boy sat inside the cruiser he was calm. The only confusion lay in why he was cuffed ready to be taken to the police station. His conscience was clear. In his cool mind he had done no wrong. Nor had his mother, she had simply reached the end of her useful life.

This was the world he had grown up in – a throwaway society where Bios were upgraded when a new model with smarter features came out. When something was no longer necessary, it was simply dumped or decommissioned. He loved his mother. She had loved him too. She had worked to give him the best start in life, but now he didn’t need her anymore. Granted, putting an end to her life wasn’t as clean a process as getting an outdated Bio picked up.

Cracking open her skull had been easy enough, like tapping an egg against the side.
of a bowl. There was the first ineffectual tap, the shell resisting, holding firm. The next tap, harder, more determined, saw hairline cracks begin to snake out.

She was still screaming then. Trying to push him away. It made no sense; she had purposefully bred him to be stronger than her, better in every way. Why was she struggling? Surely she should know it was futile. He was an Elite, she a Drudge. The contest was so uneven it was laughable. In fact, he seemed to remember he had giggled a little at this thought – that had silenced her. She had given in then.

The third decisive smash saw her skull yawn open. Blood, a garishly bright red, had gushed from the wound and he could see her brain, pinkish grey. The series of intricate whorls on its surface reminded him of the seashells they had collected at the beach when he was a boy. He was fascinated. This slick, sticky organ was what made us, defined intellect, personality and talents. He marvelled at its vulnerability as it squashed, warm and sludgy, under his fingers. His mother slumped heavily to the floor, extinguished.

She had been so simple to destroy – yet impossible to fix. No matter how brilliant a human mind, it was finite. He thought back to his robotics classes, where everything could be rebuilt, repaired, remoulded to be made strong and invulnerable again. He had felt almost ashamed to be human, to be weak and mortal, his existence as fragile, transient and illogical as his mother’s, as all the other Drudges.

He was lost in thought, and the sound of the kitchen door opening at the Domestic’s discreet touch startled him. Pete, their Domestic Unit, was a mid-range model. His mother had picked him off the shelf a couple of years back. She’d chosen an unthreatening design, a kindly looking man with greying hair and warm brown eyes – he’d fitted seamlessly into their household, looking, acting and almost feeling human.

The DU had been summoned by the kitchen sensors alerting him to a spill of some kind; he’d probably been expecting a mundane puddle of coffee or a smashed glass of water. Instead what confronted him was a mess of gore.

A pool of crimson blood, clotted with grey matter and bone, was spreading slowly, seeping into the oiled wood floorboards. Maria Banks’ body was sitting, propped awkwardly against the kitchen island; her son, James, stood over her body, his hands wet with her blood.

The DU didn’t need to think. The code had been broken. Human life had been taken. He contacted the police.

That was where Arden came in.
The Broygus
by Laurence Kershook

London, 1976. 30-year-old Samuel is unexpectedly introduced to Esther, a terminally ill elderly Jewish woman from Whitechapel. Suspecting she might be his grandmother, he pieces together her life story despite his family’s strenuous attempts to deter him. Disturbing incidents from her past emerge that help him to understand the person she has become and to re-evaluate his own life.

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A haze of pollution hung in the air like a tainted mirage. Sam parked and re-checked the address that Ron Green had given him.

‘Oh, shit, no!’ He banged the steering-wheel with his fist. ‘I’m on the bloody wrong side of Cliften Common!’ Sweat was trickling into his crotch and his shirt was sticking to the seat. He wanted to go home. What did he need another grandmother for, anyway? Especially this one, who’d always been a lunatic and a monster according to Mum. What was he getting himself into? His mind was made up. He’d go back right now, tell Ron the deal was off.

A gap appeared in the traffic. He started pulling out. A red Jaguar hooted, swerved round him, braked too late and ploughed straight into an on-coming Morris Minor. Bodywork and shattered glass flew in all directions. The drivers staggered out, shouting at each other, waving their arms like demented marionettes. He switched off the engine and looked up to the heavens. ‘Okay, I get it. You want me to do this, don’t you?’ He locked his car and headed across the common.

At his second knock, slender fingers opened the door an inch without releasing the chain.

‘Yes?’

He looked at the fingers. Brown. Young. Not her, then. ‘I’ve come to see Esther Symonds. Is this the right address?’

‘Mrs Symonds lives here.’ The woman’s voice was velvety but neutral; not hostile, but cautious.
‘I’m from Hackney Jewish Aid. Ron Green asked me to look in. I’ve brought this back.’

He held up Esther’s handbag. ‘From the hospital.’

‘Oh, just a minute.’

The dark, airless hall smelled of unwashed clothes and stale food. A black telephone sat on three thick London directories. Shaking the hand the woman held out to him, he caught a welcome whiff of her floral perfume and took in her cool-looking linen trouser-suit, crisp white blouse and round, wire-framed glasses.

‘I’m Anna Bijou, Esther’s social worker. Come in here.’

In a hot, cramped kitchen that smelled even worse than the hall, they stood in a space where their clothes were least likely to touch anything greasy.

‘So you’re from Hackney Jewish Aid?’ said Anna. ‘Is this just to bring her bag, or are you assigned?’

He recalled the wreckage of the cars blocking the road, cutting off his escape. ‘I believe I’ve been assigned.’

‘That’s good. She’s just having a nap. I should warn you, she can be a bit cantankerous when she first – Ah!’

He turned and saw the bent, skeletal figure of a woman in the doorway, gripping a wooden walking stick with a trembling hand. Sparse grey hair framed her face. Her fleshless cheeks had subsided to form deep crevices on each side of her nose. Her lips were clamped together, whether in pain or in anger he couldn’t tell. Granite-coloured eyes glinted from behind huge tortoise-shell glasses. Threadbare slippers stuck out from beneath a food-stained candlewick dressing-gown.

He forced a smile, but it froze as she fixed him with a cold-eyed stare. ‘Who are you? I know you. Don’t I?’
Three Weeks in Florence
by Labeja Kodua Okullu

Summer in Florence: a tourist wanders the city like a Parisian flaneur, allowing the Italian streets to evoke memories of his childhood in Ghana, and his young adulthood in London. Every thought has its own chorus. As he undertakes this mental and physical journey, two distinct voices speak from within, directly challenging his shifting identity through time, place and within and outside of family. Who is this narrator? Where does he belong?

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He sat on the mattress, it was hard, but it would solve his back pain during his stay here. Francesca sat on the foldable chair and he paid the rest of his rent. He signed the contract for the coming weeks, and exchanged details. She assured him she would be by his side if there was any trouble. He thanked her, hopefully he was polite, hopefully he was charming, something he hoped, but never seemed to achieve. She left him alone, and he turned on the fan and jumped back as the blade flew towards him.

His phone started to ring, a call from Ghana. He looked at the name, ‘Francis’. He ignored it. He caught his exasperated face in the mirror.

- Sex and mirrors eh, terrible things. -
- Who said that? -
  Borges, pretty sure it was Borges.
- Are you sure? -
- No idea, I know I read it somewhere. -
  Positive it was Borges, anyways what did it matter?
- Good joke I think. -

He looked at the blade of the fan lying on the floor, a ninja star he had successfully dodged pouting over its failure to harm him.

- He should call Francesca. He needs a new fan. -
- No, he shouldn’t. She just left, he’d look too needy if he called her now. -
  Fans are repairable, and he knew how to repair them. Instead of calling his landlady,
he sat down with the body of the fan, tightening essential screws and straightening the metal net that caused the contraption to fall apart in the first place.

‘Francis’ flashed up on the phone again, he ignored it, perfectly satisfied with fixing an old fan, he didn’t want to answer a phone call.

- Wasn’t he a friend? -
- He was a close friend. Maybe the closest. -
That may have been so, and faltering, he quickly shuffled through excuses and reasons as to why he shouldn’t answer the phone. He hadn’t seen Francis in four years -
- But you’ve talked or had the opportunity to. -
Francis didn’t share his opinions or hobbies anymore.
- But did he ever? You played a few games together and you hung out together but you never really shared anything. -
Francis was a devout Christian, he would never be able to understand him.
- You were a devout Christian. Incredibly devout. -
- Maybe you are afraid he’d be disappointed in you? Maybe you are disappointed in yourself? -
He ignored that, and settled on the fact that he just didn’t want to talk to Francis.
- You don’t seem to want to talk to anyone anymore. -
Again, the constant referencing to this new social anxiety. If cities affected your soul, London had caused his harm. In Ghana, he was loud, gregarious, a rioting dust storm within the heat of the marketplace, screams of traders and songs of labourers. The humour and playfulness of the language called for a personality that caused noise pollution. Every person in Ghana viewed it as their responsibility to know and comment on each of their neighbours’ lives. It was a country of cultural critics, and he had to shout to have his voice heard. The moreish sea air on the coast made opening and closing his mouth irresistible; the salt, the fish and the sharp sting of hot pepper sauce from the kenkey vendors as they walked through the outskirts of Accra landed on his lips, and to avoid a constant licking, which might bring sores, he chose to speak, and next to the crashing of the waves, it was better if he shouted.

London, however, was different, tall and imposing. It ignored him because he didn’t live in its social heights. The city was a maze, built to make him feel lost, afraid, but at the same time, giving him a compulsion to figure this ‘thing’ out, to find the exit, to solve the puzzle. His voice struck buildings, rebounded and hit him in the face, constantly oppressed by his views and opinions they hedged him into solitary searches for meaning in galleries, libraries and movie theatres. He had adopted the loneliness, it was natural for him, maybe he was never the loud teenager in Ghana, but always the silent man, who never raised his voice, never got angry, never even emoted.
Florence might be the city to cure him, with or in its self-assured messiness. Florence was the unbuttoned, unironed shirt that still looks cool. Florence was the dirty converse, the ripped t-shirt, the torn jeans, the threadbare scarf worn in the summertime. Florence had the confidence to flaunt its faults, because its strengths were all too obvious. Florence would cure him.
This Place
by Simon Margrave

Richard arrives in Nairobi at the height of the 2007 Kenyan elections to save the daughter of a British diplomat. He enters a world of privilege, racism and institutional corruption, but this is only the beginning. When local journalist, Kennedy, makes a shocking discovery about the girl’s kidnapping, he and Richard find themselves exposed to new limits of human cruelty. This Place: a thriller about the powerful and powerless.

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He forces his way to the bar, pulls out what’s left of the notes in his pocket and waves to one of the overstretched barmen.

‘Tusker baridi.’

The barman ignores him and serves an attractive woman who squeezes in front of him. Attractive to some anyway. Young, blond, lithe. Shorts and tight top. Fucking gap year.

He pushes her aside and speaks directly into the barman’s face. ‘Tusker baridi, now.’

The barman makes like he doesn’t care and winks at the woman. But he still goes to get his beer from the fridge.

A tap on the shoulder.
‘Come on, boss, maybe time to go?’

He’s big, this one.
‘It’s a party. I’ll finish my beer, sawa?’
‘Come on, man, you don’t look so good and no need to be speaking to my staff like that.’

On the periphery, a voice, ‘There, that one.’

He has just enough time to look up before a fist crashes into his face.

He’s numb from the coke but still sinks to the floor and covers up as best he can while kicks and punches rain down.

He tries to get to his feet. Don’t give them the satisfaction. It takes a lot of effort, a rib’s gone.

A pint glass sails past, grazing his head and shattering off the side of the bar. A second
bouncer comes and takes his arm. ‘Come on, mate, let’s get you out of here before they do you good. You don’t want that, no?’

‘Who gives a fuck mate, we’re all done in the end.’

He shrugs off the arm and heads out into the night, a persuasive palm in the back helping him on his way. A large garden stretches away down the hill, brilliantly illuminated up top by the halogen lights triggered by his exit. Halfway down, trees and undergrowth drape a veil of darkness that takes back control.

The door closes behind him, keeping him out or keeping them in. Never mind, a cigarette and then he’ll work it out. New Year’s shite and all that.

He lights up and walks down the hill to the bottom of the garden.

He turns to look back at the building, its colonial era façade stretching up into the night sky. High above the bar area, a red-light glows. Another smoker. He squints and can just make out her hand beckoning. He doesn’t want to, but he needs to go there. It needs to end. He walks unsteadily back up the bank and begins to climb up a trellis. Slowly, hand over hand. Each lift of the left arm brings a bolt of pain in his side, like his rib is scratching against a lung. His breath comes out as a wheeze. Still he climbs. They say don’t look down, he looks down. The world 40 feet below swirls, and his knuckles turn white with the effort of holding on. At last he reaches a balustrade and swings his body over onto the balcony.

He looks around but the smoker has gone.

‘Hey, I know what you’re going to say, self-control, yeah?’

Silence.

Adrenaline and the coke are fighting with the pain from the beating and exhaustion of the climb.

‘You’re no better than me. I mean, come on, it’s this place. Let’s just… let’s sort this out and things can be good again, yeah?’

A snap to the right, in a doorway the tip of a cigarette glows brightly.

He smiles, a winning smile. ‘See, come on, happy new—’

Hands grip him roughly from behind, pushing him forward. He plants his feet, but they scrape along the floor, his arms are pinned, he can’t move. ‘No, no,’ is all he can say. His eyes implore but no quarter is given. He’s free. Falling.

‘It’s this place’ the last thought that goes through his head.
Sketching in Ashes
by Marta Michalowska

With an inherited clothbound album, documentary filmmaker and former war photographer Sophie embarks on a journey to understand her late father, Zygmunt. She travels to Lwów, now L’viv in Ukraine, the contested city of his birthplace, and the borderlands along the river Bug between Poland, Ukraine and Belarus. Her journey through the fringes of Europe unearths the unsettling consequences of shifting borders.

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This late autumn she’s here again, in the edgelands of Europe driving down route 816 following the river Bug. She winds down her windows to listen to the birch forest. She thinks she’s starting to understand its language. Its white-barked trees whisper to each other with their trembling branches. They have plenty to say. In their whistling language they are telling her what unfolded in front of them. They couldn’t do anything other than stand by. The sounds of last breaths are still echoing against their peeling bark.

She knows every bend in the road, every pothole. She came here first searching for the line in the river, to see if it existed. Did she really imagine that a line in ink on a map would somehow translate to a physical line dividing the water of the river between ours and theirs? Perhaps she wanted to see a rusty barbed wire sticking out of the slow current.

She turns off the 816 onto a dirt road and leaves the car at the junction. This is a familiar spot. She could walk down to the river from here blindfolded. The glistening water is just about visible in between the bare trees. Then, the edges of their silhouettes blur as her eyes fill with tears. There’s something strange happening to her, even though she has been here before. There’s something profound hanging in the air, but she can’t quite pin it down. It’s something more than a sense of being in a place where nobody is meant to be. She’s only once been stopped by a border patrol, but they seemed to be more interested in small talk than enforcing any law. They were young and bored.

At this time of the year, there aren’t even any dragon flies patrolling the river banks. She’s standing on the water’s edge, staring at a yellow and blue border post on the other side.
Suddenly, everything swells inside her. She can’t hold back the streams pouring out of her eyes.

‘This was our land!’ she shouts across the river. She doesn’t know why. She’s always said to herself that she won’t become one of those pathetic Poles sitting in a Lwów café repeating ‘this was ours, that was ours’. But her father could have said this. He couldn’t speak when they left. Still, he could have said this.

They took their percale bedding, their goose down duvets, their mattresses, an embroidered table cloth, a set of monogrammed napkins, a tarnished silver platter and a handful of porcelain cups. She can picture them with all their stuff piled into a cattle car. They huddle together under a pile of bedding, although it’s a hot summer day. Zygmunt is only a few weeks old and Antonia holds him closely, his little ear next to her heart. She’s trying to stay calm to keep him asleep, but her heart doesn’t listen and keeps on jumping in her chest. The train is barely moving.

At this pace, it will take at least a couple of days to reach Krakow. Forty-eight hours of held breaths. The allies’ pilots won’t know that they are there. They will drop their bombs. They will miss.

He lived all his life with the pounding of his mother’s heart embedded in his cells. He did all he could to kill this echo of the shifting border deafening him relentlessly. He needed more and more to silence the resonance.

It wasn’t her who pushed him over the edge.

She gazes back across the slow flowing water of the Bug to the border post on the other side. Its primary colours glow in the autumn sun, blended together they would make green and fade into the background of tall grasses growing along the bank.
When Vee’s best friend dies, she is determined to investigate. Leaving her religious community behind, she takes a match to her whole life – from her faith to her wedding dress. She travels to Spain with a terrible haircut, a new-found taste for cheap wine and – unexpectedly – a middle-aged man. A wry, contemporary drama about rising from the ashes and starting again.

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Vee stood in front of the brazier until the last acrylic ember had stopped glowing, and the whole melted, burned-up mess was safely under control. Although she took full responsibility for burning down her life, she didn’t want to accidentally burn down the Bedrock in the process.

She was slightly hurt that nobody had come out of the house to check she hadn’t set fire to herself with lighter fuel, but her tearful shouts that she wanted to be left alone had been unexpectedly heard. Nobody looking over her shoulder, or wondering what she was up to; nobody checking she hadn’t accidentally set light to her sleeves when she manhandled the firelighters and fabric into the barbeque.

Perhaps it was a good thing nobody was watching. Now that the adrenaline was ebbing away, her dramatic gesture had a whiff of the farcical about it. An hysterical woman wrestling a dress into a barbeque. It was probably a blessing that the community’s constant desire to supervise had been momentarily suspended.

She looked around again, double-checking that there wasn’t someone lurking by the sheds, or hidden behind the greenhouse. The low afternoon light shone gently through the raspberry canes, and she watched the rigid shadows they cast on the ground waver slightly as the plants’ leaves were caught in the breeze. The plum trees rustled in the distance and the rows of mesh and turned earth lay in such painfully perfect order, that the personal mess she had created seemed suddenly grotesque. A small circle of chaos in the middle of a pristine Eden. The adrenaline had gone now, and she picked up a discarded cane to poke the embers
from an awkward distance. The fire had died; there was nothing left.

It was time to go. Lucy’s funeral wasn’t going to be for a week or so – they’d need to wait for the inquest report – and she’d need to find somewhere to store her things in the meantime.

She could have asked anyone in the community for help, and they would have jumped at the chance. No matter that she was casting herself out and wiping her feet on the mat as she left. They’d still help her. They couldn’t stop themselves. They were all riddled with Perpetual Helpfulness – always looking for an opportunity to do something for someone. ‘Please do eat all of my lovingly-made flapjack… oh and let me carry those for you… and oh yes, I’d love to do your mountain of hand-washing…’ It was exhausting. The desire to give selflessly could get out of control if left unchecked. Over time things tended to balance out a bit. Sometimes because the member ran out of energy naturally, and sometimes because they paired off into Joyful Marriage and redirected their helpfulness on a single recipient.

With the fire dead, it was chilly, and Vee made the decision to move. To walk for one last time on the path that ran all the way round the house, down to the front door to pick up the bag and case that she’d stuffed just inside, at the foot of the stairs. She felt a pang of guilt at the mess she was leaving in the garden. The dress had half burned, half melted, revealing its cheap essence in its dying moments. There was a good chance the barbeque would never be the same again, and, after ten years, Vee would leave a permanent mark on the community after all.
This Is Now
by Melanie Quacquarelli

Nina is a struggling student. Life changes direction when she makes friends with Ruta, the college cleaner, an Eritrean refugee. Ruta introduces her to Ben, a second generation British Eritrean who is set on political glory. Their grappling for a sense of self in relation to family and each other is set against the changing landscape of Camden Town and the borderlines of East Africa.

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The top floor art studio, with its vaulted ceilings, was always Ruta’s favourite place to work, particularly in the summer when light streamed in through the glazed roof and gifted its magic all around the room. It was the only place that had ever reminded her of home – the white city of Keren, nestled in its fertile basin, surrounded by hills of majestic granite and beautiful bright blue skies.

Today was a late shift in February, it was dark outside, but the bright lights and pale walls still promised to lift her spirits. She walked the four flights, unable to take the lift, and opened the closet to fetch her things. She was about to turn on the tap when she was surprised by a loud woman’s cry.

Ruta began to sweat and vomit rose in the back of her throat. She fought to calm the trauma centre of her brain, to stop herself crouching on the floor and bracing her hands overhead. She felt paralysed by the old fear. It was an irrational response, she knew that. Still some of the images came, the sounds and even the smells, before she was able to remind herself that this wasn’t home but Goldsmith’s college and she was mopping floors for the minimum wage.

Again, the moaning and crying. ‘Why?’ was all that she could really make out. She ventured into the studio to see who it was.

Exquisite swirls of burnt orange and cerulean blue had mixed to a muddy brown bath on the floor. A young woman lay in a pool of paint. She had a nasty cut on the side of her face. Sobbing, she flailed about, mumbling to herself.
Ruta noticed a bottle on the floor by a bag in the corner, the last few gulps trapped as it lay on its side. The girl tried to sit herself up, as if sensing that she was being watched, but she only managed to spread the sea of slurry further.

Ruta wondered if someone else was coming to help. She listened. Nothing. Nobody.

Always practical, she slipped off her shoes, judging in the moment that her feet would be easier to clean than her pumps. She ventured into the paint, stroked the girl’s head and rearranged her hair to assess the damage.

‘Let me look. You’ve hurt yourself.’ The moaning lessened to a mutter. Ruta made soothing sounds, took the girl’s face in both her hands and said, ‘I’ll help you.’ Any other words would not have worked but this was not a question, not a request for explanations. It had the life-saving effect of a heart patient responding to defibrillation.

It was all that the girl needed.

‘What’s your name?’ Ruta asked, once she had calmed down a little.

‘Nina,’ she managed in a tired voice. ‘Oh God, … I’m in so much trouble.’

‘Don’t worry, we can clean it up. Nobody will know.’

Ruta worked around her, scooping the viscous mess into a bucket with a dustpan, Nina still anchored to the floor.

‘Your work is good.’ Ruta smiled, pointing at the drying canvass. Red-eyed and sniffling Nina managed a laugh. She was beginning to sober up. She stepped unsteadily out of her drenched clothes and Ruta put them in a black bin bag. She helped Nina onto the clean surface, washed the floor, then led her to the shower room, barefoot in her underwear, where she rinsed the paint out of her hair and found her something to wear.

‘I guess I should dress like this in future,’ Nina joked, stepping into some overalls, her face still blotchy with the hallmarks of distress. She was calmer now but emotional in a different way.

‘Thank you. Thank you for helping me.’ She held out both her hands.

Ruta took them and let Nina draw her in and hug her tight. It was the first close human contact she had welcomed since climbing into the boat that crossed the Aegean.

It was Ruta’s turn to cry as they held each other, rocking gently, neither knowing or needing to know why the other was so upset.
Maria searched all the gardens, as far as she could see. But the blue scarf from her sister was nowhere to be seen. She leaned over the balcony railing again, feeling the cement floor hot under her bare feet. Eight floors below her was a plot of land with two trees that looked forgotten among scattered grass. To her left was a garden where one tree found itself in the middle of a perfectly manicured lawn.

A rush of adrenaline hit her as she continued to lean forward. While holding tighter to the railing, she turned her head to the garden on her right: children’s feet had worn a path to and around a mulberry tree they climbed in search of its juicy fruits. A few terracotta pots with red geraniums were sitting on a gravel path so white it hurt her eyes.

The golden birds on the imprint were so vivid in her mind – it was as if they were soaring towards the sky, while those at the edges smashed against a crimson line. Maria rejected the idea that her sister resembled one of the birds unable to fly beyond the border. The border of her illness. The chemotherapy sessions will help Gabi, Maria told herself. They will. They will.

With a sigh, Maria straightened her back. She looked at the linden trees edging the avenue. Even if the scarf was tangled among the high tree branches, how could she get it? She realised that George would find a solution for that. He always did. And the thought of her husband made her smile.

The linden trees were in full bloom now and their smell was overpowering. She loved being with George on the balcony in the quiet hours of the night, watching the moon and
trying to make out the shapes of stars. George had had a hard time making her see the Summer Triangle.

‘How can I possibly see a triangle among all those stars?’ Maria asked.

‘First, look at the brightest star at the end of my index finger. That’s Deneb. See it?’

Maria nodded. I’ve no idea where it is, she thought. When George looked at her, she burst out laughing.

‘Seriously?’ he asked.

‘Sorry. Start again, please. I’ll focus,’ Maria promised.

She scrutinized the patch of sky until three tiny sequins caught her eye. ‘I see it. I see the triangle,’ she exclaimed.

‘Finally. I was starting to lose hope. You know what they say about blondes.’ She slapped him lightly on his back.

‘We’re not even yet,’ George said. ‘Deneb is the tail of a swan.’

‘Really? Now you want me to find a swan?’

‘Yeah. You know, long neck, big wings…’

‘That could be an ostrich, right?’

They both laughed.

Maria looked up and presently, the swan sparkled elegantly among the stars. While she gazed at it, George was whispering the bird’s story – the story of two brothers. ‘You see, Maria, after one of the brothers dived into a river to find his sibling’s remains and give him a proper burial, Zeus turned him into a swan and…’

George stopped. He took Maria in his arms and kissed her on the forehead. ‘Please, don’t cry. Gabi will be fine, I promise.’

Maria knew that was a promise he just couldn’t keep.

She remembered the scarf. How could she lose it?
Separation of Concerns
by Lara Williams

In a small Silicon Valley school community, two expat families – the Conways and the Bancrofts – see their fortunes diverge, something which Emma Bancroft finds hard to take in her stride. The haves and have-nots of Palo Alto – including a tech billionaire and a struggling single mum – go to extraordinary lengths in the quest for self-realisation; kidnap, betrayal and intrusive surveillance all culminate to undermine the very thing which had unified them: wanting the best for their children.

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Summer had burned through the Santa Clara Valley scorching everything in its path. The sun loomed, ever visible, in the cloudless sky: an unblinking eye over Palo Alto; over its lush lawns and renegade sprinklers, over its stinking landfill and pristine recycling bins, over its residents; the grown men in logo t-shirts leaving coffee shops with take-out cups in hand, the sinewy yoga moms running jogging strollers along searing sidewalks, the suits only ever glimpsed stepping in or out of the latest model electric car. It loomed over those who serviced the good people of the city; women carrying mops and cleaning caddies, their faces chestnut leather as they stepped from outdoor furnace to the indoor refrigeration of multimillion-dollar homes, and the gardeners, mowing and blowing because there were always leaves; all year round, the leaves continued to fall. A message to the townsfolk: we will persist. Because this may have been the birthplace of technology but it was also the city of trees.

Surprisingly few people knew that the town was named after a single, preternaturally tall, redwood. When Emma had moved to Silicon Valley almost a decade ago, she hadn’t known a redwood from an oak; she’d had other things on her mind. It was the heart of the new gold rush, the gentler one, less about greed and more about making the world a better place – though every time she heard someone utter the phrase these days she felt herself wince.

The summer had felt far too long. While she’d contorted herself into teacher and entertainer for three long months, her two small boys, wholly indifferent to her efforts, had run free climbing trees and digging up flower beds like excited puppies. Steve Jobs didn’t go to
summer camp, she’d justified. It had become a running mantra. Each time she compared her
children’s diverging fortunes with those of their friends; when she watched them aimlessly
kicking a ball around while other kids attended thousand-dollar-a-week robotics camps, when
their scooters and bikes were second-hand, when private school was off the table, she would
reassure herself that Steve Jobs had gone to the local public school. Hell, Steve Jobs never
even finished college.

And now watching the sun rise over their heavily wooded back yard, from the boys’
bedroom window, she saw fresh racoon prints, ghostly as tiny deformed human hands, on the
cream garden furniture cushions. It would soon be time to bring them in. Soon, her sleeping
boys would be back at school and the relief of having a moment to herself would be mixed
with melancholy. She would find herself stopping at intervals during the day to look at her
watch and wonder what they might be doing; with an ache in her chest she would pick up a
shirt from their bedroom floor, sneaking a smell, the sweetness of their skin still clinging to the
fabric, feeling their absence as acutely as a shiver of summer flu in her bones, looking around
the silent house furtively even though she knew she was entirely alone.