

Creative writing

by U.C.L. BASc  
Students

BASC2004

Work  
in  
Progress



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This is *Work in Progress*. Welcome, dear reader. We hope you'll forgive our blushes and stumbling, and instead come along with us as we find our feet. The creative writing presented here is the culmination of our work on the UCL Arts and Sciences (BASc) department's creative writing module (BASc2004). Over ten weeks we wrapped ourselves around long-form and in-depth intensive reading, learning how to identify technical aspects of prose fiction, poetry and creative non-fiction. All the while we continued practising our own writing, both in and out of class seminars, with reading aloud our work in class an important aspect of weekly group critiques.

Some of the writers we read and studied included: *Adrienne Rich; Kevin Barry; Julie Orringer; Angela Carter; George Orwell; José Saramago; Denise Levertov; Ron Rash and Ali Smith.*

They've provided us with lots of great examples we can only hope to follow, and have given us lots of excellent advice on how to progress.

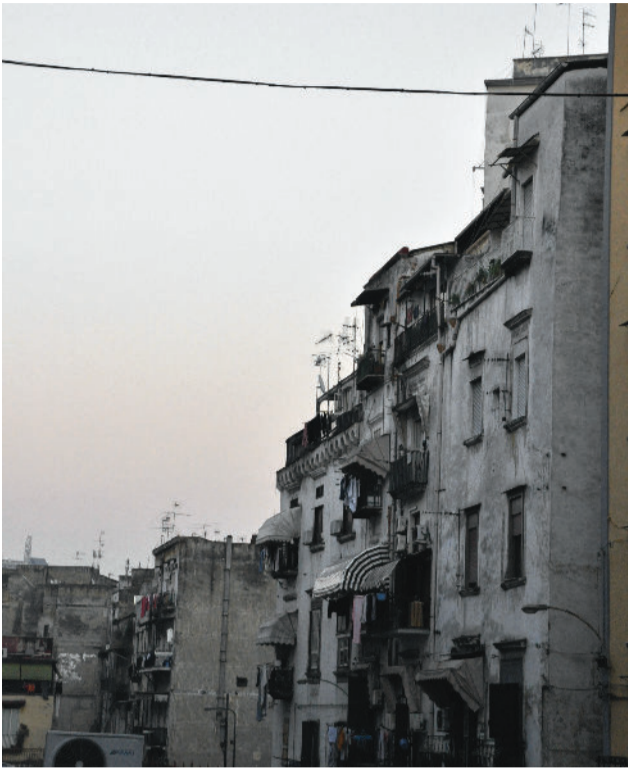
"Well, there's only one piece of advice which I think includes everything, the heart has to be able to act against itself", said Marianne Moore in October 1957, noting that as a writer "you try to be as clear as your natural reticence allows you to be and beyond that - you can't be! ...You must try to be clear even if you don't succeed."

Further advice comes from James Baldwin, speaking in 1960, when he says that "...it seems to me it's the writer's responsibility to try to clarify, first of all for himself, and finally, for everyone else, if I can put it that way, what the world in which he finds himself is like", with Philip Roth, contributing to the same conversation, telling us that "...what the writer's problem is, is the necessity for him to imagine this culture in some way, so that in

imagining a character he not just imagines the moral decay of the society but the possibilities of moral regeneration...".

So everything is under construction, we find. We ourselves are half-built but handy with a screwdriver; have been working hard over ten weeks to construct and conjure from our blank, bleary-eyed notebook pages something inner; perhaps a slip of interval; a paused character noise: a certain poise to this pose. Dear reader, we invite you in to our *Work in Progress*...





# Streets

Noise and chaos

Voice and klaxons

Smell of smog and steaming coffees

Every day looks like a Sunday

If unemployment was a painting

It would certainly be you

Naples,

Transgressive challenger

You chose not to give up on joy

Despite all the reasons you could find

You keep on smiling to adversity

It's like to fight with boredom

Your happiness is simple, pure and juvenile

Here,

The rule is "you give and see what you receive"

Excessive energy

Rock-hard determination obsess me in your streets.

Here,

When I walk,

I can't dream or stroll

I have to answer and smile back

Be aware of the cold marble statues and

Renaissance frescos on the walls

I

Shouldn't touch.

Be careful of the car,

It suddenly emerged

And it's now nonchalantly proceeding

On the left-hand sidewalk way.

And I,

Should fight to make my way

Out of the euphoric dancing crowd.

The movement is slow and fluid

The air stagnates but the fragrance changes

It's a jungle where you don't complain:

Crossroad of Ancient winning games,

Old scars and modern wills.

LS

# People Watching



Waiting for the 390 to Archway. It's dark, it's cold. About 10.30 p.m., so windy it seems the pavements themselves might burst from their concrete supports and smack people around the face. I hope somebody smacks the face of the couple trying to eat one another's faces next to me. I shouldn't think that, it's cruel. It's not liberal. He should be able to publicly knead her bottom should he so wish. And there is nothing wrong with her enjoying the company of a man that looks a little too old for her. Which of these details are important? Which of these people?

A woman who is approaching elderly gets out of her car with a cello, probably just returned from a rehearsal. Has she already had her dinner? Or will she have a late one now? What will she eat? The cello is blown to the side in her hands but she retains her grip as she crosses the road and disappears into her house just behind the bus stop. She's gone.

Why am I going to Archway at half past ten? It's freezing, it's a Tuesday night. All I will be able to find are the mundane occurrences of a November evening in Islington Borough (London's first 20 mph zone - an attempt to slow life down).

The cellist returns - sans cello! Perhaps she is not a cellist. She is only a cello-dumper, abandoning instruments on unsuspecting Camden houses after dark. A hit and run of the stringed variety. Somehow her wide-legged trousers do not snag in the passenger door. Still wonder what she had for dinner. And who is taking care of the cello? There must be a story in that.

The bus arrives, snogging intensifies. I wonder if he wishes he could carry on snogging as he turns to leave.

There is a tin whistle player sat in a sleeping bag outside Archway station. She's quite good. I'm sat on the floor in the corner of the station, facing the ticket gates - the soundtrack is the roar of escalators with harmonic whistle accompaniment. Two black coats walk passed, one bright blue (worn by a bolder character). A navy hoodie with Adidas backpack leans against the wall, are these details important?

On the other side of the gates is a white board with Archway's quote of the day: "I am prepared to meet my maker. Whether my maker is prepared for the great ordeal that is meeting me is another matter." Winston Churchill. I wonder if the maker was ready, and also what this quote is supposed to do for the thousands of commuters that will have passed through the station that day.

A woman stops to talk to the station assistant leaning on the glass barrier next to the gates. Might have misheard, but I think she says she found a SIM card on the tube. The assistant is extremely thankful. Now there is a story, the tale of the lost SIM card. Quite a miracle she found it, highly unlikely anybody will return to claim it. She must have good eyes. (Or eyes, I write on my notepad, is that important?) There are posters in glass cases on the wall. One for Black Mass, looks like a bad action movie. The other for boohoo.com - not sure anybody cares.

The first thing I noticed on entering the station (after the tin whistle) was the chunky pillar of bottle green, shiny mosaic tiles. It has two broad white stripes running horizontally all the way around, also mosaic. Perhaps this should have been in an earlier paragraph... And a Christmas tree still in its netted bag opposite. Two boys (men, hardly) pass the column.

"Hashtag for the Shire." They are laughing at the tin whistle player. The one sat in the freezing cold in a sleeping bag with an upturned hat containing a few pennies. May have misheard, but now my mishearing is in text and therefore truth. No, I did not mishear, because he has started singing the Lord of the Rings Shire music. These two scruffy gentlemen could be characters to follow, perhaps a novel would see them develop. I want to criticise them and their double denim. Perhaps it is on behalf of the whistle player. A girl enters with bare legs (must be cold) and starts swearing at them. Apparently they are idiots because they could have checked their oyster card elsewhere. She is going to walk home. "Are you fucking kidding me?" Double Denim exclaims.



It is hard to capture all the people as they hurry on through the night. When I look down to write, to capture words spoken, I lose everybody else. Their stories are gone. The ticket inspector has noticed me, or is pretending not to, which means that he has. Watching him, he seems happy enough, though it is late and cold and he has likely been on his feet for hours. Perhaps he is watching people, like me - composing their stories in his head. He tries to blow a bubble with his gum but he just sticks it out between his lips a bit. Good job nobody is watching.

There is a man leaning against the wall, on his phone. He neither watches nor notices the world around him. Equally, he does not know or care that I am watching him. He wears red canvas shoes, green quilted coat with hood and black jeans. He has a good jaw and nose, near chiseled (this adjective is overused) but his cheeks are somewhat hallowed (or hollowed), he has boring brown hair with a floppy fringe that could do with a wash. Maybe he should care that people are watching. Some of them are thinking nasty thoughts.

Now I go back a few paragraphs. There is a bagged Christmas tree and a pillar missing from the original, so I add it to the text and make it truth. I forgot to write about the lady dressed in khaki who gives the impression of being entirely the colours of grass and straw. And the little French boy with his father. Their stories did not seem as important. And what about the curly haired one with the Cath Kidston handbag, travelling with the man in his city coat? I have a friend with a city coat, though he prefers the countryside and is talented on the tin whistle. I could use City Coat to tell you my own stories, but I already know those. Speculation is more appealing.

Back to the station. Greasy fringed boy doesn't notice the strange girl on the floor that appears to be writing. She looks at them intently as they pass. They don't like it.

Then fringe boy is gone.

"No."

"If you break in I'll call the police and they will be annoyed. Go and get on a bus. I will call the police. I am concerned for your safety. My colleague is not too upset with what you said to him, I hope you aren't upset with the way he dealt with you."

Assistant and Manager left behind. They smirk at each other.

"We are going to have to report that to the police."

I may mishear, but I think it is in case the drunkard returns tomorrow. Safeguarding.

Now there is a story.

(I give what change I have to the whistle player. She's playing Fairy Tale of New York.)

Oh, but that dog! Curled up in his owners arms, the owner with a bobble hat, quilted coat (must be in fashion) and boots. She kisses the creature on the head several times, though does not try to eat his face like the couple at the bus stop. Our eyes meet. The pet leans on her shoulder, snuggling under a strand of yellow hair that has escaped the bobble hat. Stop writing, look up. She's gone.

No - she isn't, she's talking to the station assistant. The dog (she) is scared of the wind. She's a sausage dog. "You can tell when she stands." The dog is on the floor, "There she is. Sausage dog." The assistant has a Cocker spaniel, it is a handful. Owner and dog meet with a girl in a red coat ("Shall we go home?") and I realise Bobble Hat liked being noticed. She was showing off her dog.

What was a reluctant journey to Archway has become an engaging exercise. People watching. The intention was to find increased security at the tube station, to experience an undercurrent of fear, armed officers, an unspoken sorrow in the air.

No chance.

The stories keep moving regardless. Smiling at people when they look increases eye contact. I'm being noticed. I'm not sure I like it.

Two gentlemen that are elderly though the word does not suit (perhaps 'elder' instead?) pass and make me smile. So dapper, in their matching flat caps with a golf umbrella to be shared in the event of rain. It strikes me they are likely Conservative voters. But they look so fancy! I cannot help but like them.

The assistant speaks loudly,

"Do you want me to call the police? Don't talk to me like that. I have a man here, swearing at me, under the influence of alcohol. I don't think he should travel."

Then he is gone, with the troublemaker at the gates, waiting.

Assistant returns, with manager.

"I said nothing," says Drunkard.

"You were effing and blinding," says Assistant.

"Communication problem. Nobody deliberately tried to be rude, sir. If you won't let me..." says Manager.

Drunkard makes incomprehensible noises.

"If you won't let me..."

Incomprehensible noises.

"If you won't let me... Talk, I can't help you. Would you like me to help you?"

**SMc**

# In the Eye of the Beholder

"I am so...oh no... goodness... it's gone everywhere," he spluttered. By now, he was certain his cheeks had reddened to the same burgundy shade as his glass' former occupant.

At this point, his mother would have loudly announced that it was not a good party until someone had spilt something. But he quickly reminded himself that most of her parties happened in a drafty village hall, somewhere far too north to be fashionable, and not in a Mayfair art gallery.

He felt the prickling heat of glares fixed on him from down the noses of disgruntled bystanders. One or two of the closest rolled their eyes whilst surreptitiously assessing themselves for splatters.

His victim, however, did not remove her eyes from the painting in front of her. Bracing himself for the consequences of his accident, he coughed, weakly, attempting to get her attention. Silently acknowledging the panic in his eyes, she reassured him with a slight shake of her head to bat away his fussing. "It's OK, don't worry," the lady spoke gently, "it's an old dress anyway; honestly it was on its last legs. If anything the splash cheers it up a bit don't you think?" She made no attempt to dab the stain, she just left it as it was, so blindingly obvious he could not help but stare.

He flustered, "It's Merlot. That is - no - that was an eggshell dress, I think you are somewhat downplaying the situation." He had seen that dress in a shop window on the Kings Road not two months earlier, having gone in for cuff-links and come out with nothing but a new respect for Marks and Spencer.

He sighed, stomach twisting tighter with self-loathing. Why could he not be the man over there near the window, with the perfectly cut three-piece suit? He bet that man didn't have an elasticated bow tie; of course he could manage to tie his own knots. And the monogrammed handkerchief adorning his pocket would be absorbent...

He frowned, trying to emulate the gentleman's countenance and in his most assertive tone said, "Let me buy you another."

"Drink?" She wrinkled her eyebrows in confusion,

"No, dress. Or at least let me pay for the dry cleaning, please I insist."

"Really, it doesn't matter." The resolute tone to her speech confirmed that, like it or not, this was the end of the matter.

He hovered awkwardly, unsure of how to proceed. Would she want to continue talking to him, after he had made her dress a canvas of its own, or could he slip away before doing any more damage?

She felt sorry for the man standing silently at her side. He wore the pained expression of a person who had just

stubbed his toe, knuckles whitening from clutching the stem of his empty wine glass too tightly. She felt she should warn him that it would snap, but decided no, that would only make him feel worse. Accidents happen, her dress was just a dress and frankly, she was too engrossed in the collection to care. But as much as she wanted to disappear back into her own world with the Art, she felt somewhat responsible for the man's predicament and decided to strike up conversation.

"So... what do you think of the collection?" Hardly an original question, she chided herself, but she was thinking on her feet here.

"Honestly, I only came for the free wine." He looked down at his empty glass and grinned sheepishly.

"Oh the irony!" she quipped.

He continued, "Tell me about it! I didn't even make it in time for the canapés."

"Well, you didn't miss out on much there, they were all suspiciously non-descript."

He raised an eyebrow. "What a disappointment!"

She thought for a second and replied, "I don't know, I think that it's quite clever..."

"You think that they planned to serve bad finger food?" he stage-whispered conspiratorially. People from all four corners of the gallery were staring now, but despite herself, she didn't care.

She continued, eyes widening in fascination, "All these paintings, well, they are so vibrant; serving soggy flakes of pastry just... it seems to clarify the contrast." She turned her head to examine a painting opposite them, slowly realizing she was being watched intently.

After a few minutes of silent observation, he returned to the conversation, "OK, so which canvas is your favorite?" She noticed how he narrowed his eyes slightly awaiting her response.

"You see that one? Right over there." She nodded across the room.

He tried to follow her direction "Which one? The shattered flowerpots..." She looked at him in confusion, to her knowledge there was not a single painting in this collection that resembled his description.

"No, no the one in the silver frame... in front of the bald guy," and noting suddenly that the gallery was full of balding men, she specified, "the one in the pinstriped suit."

"With the emerald shoes?"

"Yeah, the painting in front of him. It's fascinating! You see, it's a painting of a painting in a gallery...in a gallery." She chuckled to herself at the phrase, amused by its nonsensical lilt.

"Art literally imitating life," he muttered nonchalantly.

She felt dismayed that someone could be so flippant about something that held so much meaning to her and was overcome with a desire to enlighten him. Consequently, forgetting the social prohibition of physical contact between two strangers in her excitement, she

dragged him by the elbow across the oak floor, sliding slightly on the fresh wax in her haste, "Come on, you just have to look at it properly. Then you'll understand, I promise!"

The pair stood directly in front of the painting, legs pressed against the fraying velvet rope barrier. Habitually, she leant forwards slightly to smell the varnish, catching sight of their reflections mirrored in the glassy coating.

He interrupted her trance, "Alright, tell me, what exactly am I supposed to be seeing here?"

"What can you see?" She encouraged.

Without a moment's thinking time he replied, "People in a gallery looking at a painting."

"That's funny; you see, the artist wants us to see the painting first, not the people looking at it," she gestured at the line of vision, "He is directing us towards it with their eyes...so we look at what the people in the painting are looking at..."

Unnervingly, his eyes remained fixed on her. She wanted to tell him to stop and look at the painting instead, that was what he should be looking at; it was an art gallery after all.

"Go on..." he insisted.

So she elaborated, "The first thing that I saw when I looked was the painting itself. It seems... so realistic from a distance and yet, just look at the brush strokes, up close they're so bold that every detail is muffled..."

Poignantly, he looked down at the rope. "Maybe the people stood too close, and the image went out of focus," he added.

She was shocked at his reply. It was utterly fantastic for someone who had previously displayed no interest in the painting whatsoever. Her face lit up, "Yes, see! That's it! The people here are looking so closely at the painting, everything in it is reduced down to intertwining colors. There are no concrete shapes just these fluid perceptions..." Realizing she had been talking faster than Concord she paused to breathe.

He unraveled her sentences, concluding, "Basically, you see what you want to see."

Unable to work out if he was mocking her or agreeing with her, she apologized for her exuberance, shrugging, "I'm sorry...I'm getting carried away I just love this painting!"

Steadily, he answered, "Well, I know it can hardly make up for a ruined dress, but it's yours."

She gasped. Something in his expression confirmed his intention. "Don't be absurd; that painting is priceless!" She laughed nervously.

"I think you will find that it is mine to give to whomever I want," the artist winked.

# Etched into my Skin

I've wanted to hold you close,  
Let you sink into my skin,  
I've wanted to draw you out  
And throw you to the wind.

I see you in myself,  
In the lines of my face,  
In the curl of my laugh  
And in every warm embrace.

I've wanted to hold you close,  
Let you sink into my skin,  
I etched your name on my arm  
In an attempt to let you in.

I can't forget the anger,  
The pain of your spite,  
I can't forget the silent jabs,  
Try as I might.

I've wanted to draw you out  
And throw you to the wind,  
But you've always been a part of me,  
In my kindness and my sins.



# Mafia Wife

The wind that walked with us was cold and billowy, crashing settled snowflakes against our cheeks. My grandmother's ruddy face stood out a mile alongside all that whiteness surrounding us, and her big fur coat made her look like she was an upper-class woman or maybe the wife of a big mafia boss of some sort. This couldn't have been further from the truth, as I had regretfully found out after interrogating her on several insistent occasions. I was a descendant of peasants all right, no exotic roots or anything of the sort for neither of us.

"Don't walk in front of me! Walk slower."

I always had to match my pace with hers, otherwise she would get annoyed. She always walked very slowly, which had now turned into incredibly slowly because of the wind.

"You know, when I was a kid, the winters were nothing like this," she shouted suddenly, making me jump a little under the weight of my own coat.

"You mean they were milder?"

"No, of course not. They were very bad, the chicken and geese would freeze to death sometimes."

I frowned at her slightly, but she seemed unaffected.

"What did you and your family do?" I asked, remembering how much she loved talking about her childhood.

"What did you say?" She was a bit deaf, all right.

"WHAT DID YOU AND YOUR FAMILY DO?"

"Oh, we usually gathered around the fire, if we had enough logs to make one. We had no electricity, you know, that's how life was at the country side after the war." She moved her big fur hat slightly, covering her ears better. "I would do my homework by candlelight..."

"...if you had a candle..." I chuckled, knowing how annoyed she'd get.

"Don't interrupt me! So as I was saying, sometimes I also went to school, when I didn't have any work to do around the house." I could sense a slight note of amusement in her tone, which was both reassuring and a little dangerous. She had a short temper, my grandmother, and she had not been afraid to pass it on.



"Did you have to feed the animals?"

She didn't say anything for a few seconds, which made me think that she probably didn't understand the question. We kept walking side by side on the road, which was covered by battered, greying snow. The blocks of flats that surrounded us all looked the same in our little town, grey and dusty remnants of a Communist regime that I had only heard stories about. It was so hard to imagine my grandmother as ever being young, as ever being anything else than a grandmother (a denomination which she also hated), as living a life without us in it.

"So I hope you eat enough at university. Are you hungry now?" she inquired in a very serious manner, after the slight pause. My eyes had started tearing up because of the wind.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm ok. Can't you see?"

"But you're so skinny! You should eat more." Her voice became muffled by a sudden rush of both wind and snowflakes and I didn't really hear the last part.

"What?"

"What?"

Naturally, she had not heard me either. I waved my hand slightly and kept walking. I would always get annoyed for being made to repeat things and she would then get annoyed by my unwillingness to do it. She gathered her coat around her and didn't continue telling me about her childhood. She knew I'd heard it before. It wouldn't be long before we would reach home.



IS



# MOSCOW

Every city is known for something. Though Moscow has a lot of vodka and candy like churches, its most intruding characteristic is its people. In 2015, Moscow was ranked the #1 Most Unfriendly City in the World by the Economist, beating Paris, Beijing and Dubai by a landslide. The roughness of the city stings the inside of your lungs as you step onto every street, corner and alley.

As you go to the cashier at the supermarket to pay for your St. Petersburg-made Parmesan (sanctions banned the import of European cheeses), the woman working at the machine does not look up from her scanning. When she does finally give you a piercing blank stare, you smile revealing your straight teeth that you spent 6 years on - two years wearing braces and four more years wearing retainers at night. You don't see the woman's teeth because your smile isn't reciprocated. You try to understand the inexplicable coldness - maybe she isn't smiling because she doesn't like her teeth? Your smile hurriedly evaporates and you leave the shop without even realizing that you did not say 'thank you'.

As you stand in traffic on Tverskaya Ulitsa late for a vaguely important meeting, the loud sound of honking envelopes your car. You look at the navigation to find a route around the mess, only to realize that you are not the only smart-ass with navigation. Someone doesn't let the pedestrians pass; someone else cuts off a motorcycle. As you stall to make a turn, a middle finger soars out of the window of the car next to yours. It's fascinating how everyone thinks that whatever they are late to is more important than whatever everyone else is late to. You turn up the radio to drain out the frustration of the city.

As you push your way into Arbatskaya metro stop, you remember Anna Karenina - actually you suddenly are her. Walking through the marble arches with the carefully painted golden ceiling above you, you feel like you are gliding through a royal ball, rather than underground. No one else seems to notice the majestic atmosphere or no one seems to care. A nasal voice through the speakers announces that the next train is coming in 5 minutes, but you already know that these announcements are as reliable as the London weather forecast. It's hot. People from every direction swarm around you, accidentally (or maybe not), hitting you left and right with their bags. A young boy gets up and gives his seat to an older woman. You step out of the train, relieved to finally get a gulp of fresh air.

As you enter a Russian home, you are forced to take your shoes off and given house shoes that are warm and cuddly. You say you are not hungry, but the hostess brings out dozens of plates of different kind of foods. There is too much food - impossible to leave still hungry. They bring out a bottle of wine that they have been saving for five years for a special occasion. It feels like liquid velvet on your tongue. Someone brings out a guitar and someone else starts singing. You are trapped in a room full of music, laughter and emotion. You leave the apartment feeling too full, too happy, and with an invitation to come back again.

You realize that the world's unfriendliest city is not filled with the world's unfriendliest people. Instead Russians are like watermelons - hard on the outside if you are a stranger, but mushy and sweet on the inside if you are welcomed into their home.

SL



# Learning to Survive



Falling down the stairs, tired eyes puffed,  
Waiting in line with your towel -  
Small boys in line with frail shoulders,  
Except for George Camber whose  
Dad was really rich but was  
Insecure about the size of his penis.  
No sleep in my bunk last night,  
Or the nights before -  
Too much silence  
And not enough light.  
Wheetos for breakfast though,  
And sometimes there are waffles -  
But there's always grime at the bottom of  
Those. Blue. Cups.  
And the boy that runs while its still foggy,  
Frailer than all the rest,  
Part of the business transaction  
Are psychological side-effects.  
But you'll learn to survive soon enough.

**JD**

# How Can we Save the Savivors?

To put it quite simply, doctors suffer the most of us all. They sacrifice non-medically related interests to subject themselves to endless years in school, racking up a debt exceeding £65,000 in order to live the glamorous lifestyle of working thirty-six hour shifts seeing patients back to back with hardly enough time to drink some coffee, and along the way miss holidays, birthdays, and graduations while immersing themselves in a life of sickness, sadness, and death. Why would anyone subject oneself to that, you might ask. Each doctor will reply with a unique spin. Suzy has battled diabetes mellitus her whole life; Willie's mom is a doctor and he has grown up with the terms diverticulitis and mononucleosis; Johnny lost a dear classmate to brain cancer, that unstoppable murderer of the masses. Or maybe there isn't any tear jerking or inspirational story at all, but rather the belief that the human body is the ultimate mystery and a source of endless fascination, propelling them to spend the rest of their lives studying it. The overarching theme, however, remains the same: they became doctors because they feel they can help.

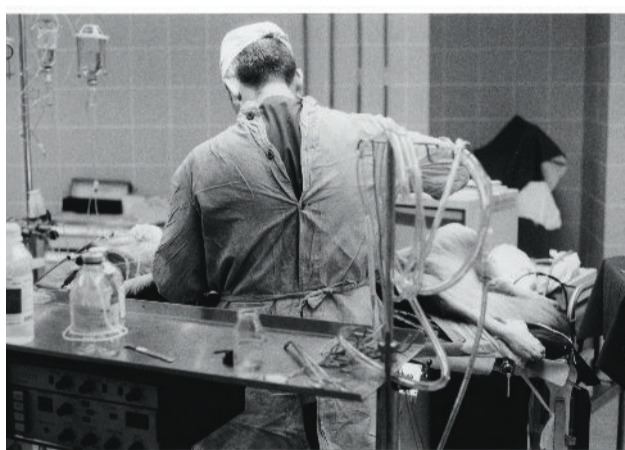
But who helps them? Studies continuously show that doctors are among the most stressed professionals. The gift of empathy is a great and terrible marvel. It makes it so that experiencing the pain of someone we care for equates to experiencing pain ourselves. But doctors are humans and emotional capacity is not endless. Each doctor dies in a way with the first death they experience. However, they must come back to life—there are endless hearts to restart, diseases to identify, lives to save. Along the way, many more lives will be lost: some to the hand of another, others to the hand of nature, and still others to the hand of the doctor himself. When years of experiencing the pain of others becomes too much to bear, many doctors put on their Mask. It is rigid to touch, crumbling somewhat at the edges. At first it may feel uncomfortable and suffocate the wearer, once a bright eyed and idealistic savior with a shiny stethoscope; with time though, it slips on with ease and stays in place for the duration of their job, and sometimes even beyond that.

A ghost in a once white coat, now stained and worn, continues to make its rounds.

The intense ability to feel, which led to the birth of a doctor, has mutated into an unfeeling that buries that person alive. But this metamorphosis can be prevented, the feeling harnessed and turned into something positive and enlightening. To do this, doctors must allow themselves to feel and what is felt must be articulated, understood, and expressed.

The bond between doctor and patient is unique and bears great significance for both involved. For the highest possible quality of care, the relationship must be informed and genuine. When patients' stories are recognized, they become more than the medical record number they are assigned. Background, fears, and hopes add flesh to what can otherwise be reduced to just another problem that requires fixing, another potential success or disappointment. Moreover, by listening to their patients' stories, doctors see how their role becomes intertwined with their patient's and move toward crafting their own.

The use of narrative in medicine is a powerful tool to let doctors know that the ability to feel, even when it hurts, is a beautiful and important virtue. Some medical schools have instated programs that encourage doctors in training to appreciate art and literature and learn to use it to come to terms with the difficult subjects they will encounter over the course of their profession. The benefits of narrative can be explored through various creative media such as writing (both fiction and nonfiction), artwork, or film-making. In doing so, doctors are encouraged to cast off the Mask of the savior and reveal themselves as they are, at once raw and vulnerable and inexorably human. Spanning the intersection of art and science, medicine challenges practitioners to utilize their hunger for knowledge and profound appreciation for stories—those which inspired them in the first place, and what connects us all as human beings.



# Cultural Perspectives Through Soup

As I sit down in my usual seat at the round dinner table, I look at the different dishes of food that my father has prepared. Looking at his cooking, my father speaks with pride in Mandarin Chinese, "I spent two hours boiling the soup to let the flavor seep in. It's not as good as the one people make in Taiwan, but it's the best here." The contagious smile on my dad's face spreads to my mother. She nods in agreement, "I brought this soup to my

norms where children unquestioningly obey and respect their elders. For instance, instead of encouraging me to pursue my passion in psychology, they desire me to pursue a "safe" career in medicine, pharmacy or accounting.

Seeing that I have yet to drink the soup, my mom raises her eyebrows and angrily shoves the bowl of soup to my

own question in my head, "This soup does make dreams come."

Through the upbringing of my Asian parents, I understand the importance of honoring and valuing my family. At dinner time every night, the fact that we sit at a round table and share plates of food "family-style" reinforces the unbreakable bond that exists between my



co-worker's house yesterday and she said her dreams came true." My dad adds, "I added some red peppers and green onions for aesthetics." I look blankly at the soup as my parents banter back and forth about the flavor and presentation of the soup. I am clearly indifferent about the subject of soup and mumble to myself, "It's only soup. Who cares?" Hearing my dissatisfaction about their beloved soup, my parents glare at me in disapproval and shake their heads, "You never appreciate what you have." With a grimace of pain, I roll my eyes and sigh at my parents' relentless lecturing. As a Chinese-American living under the roof of traditionally minded Asian parents, I tend to express my thoughts and opinions more openly than people from my parents' generation. Instead of encouraging me to express my individuality, they view this freedom of expression as a form of disobedience to Chinese cultural

face, "It's healthy for your body and good for the digestive system." I look closely at the variety of ingredients in the bowl. There are fresh ingredients of brown almonds, ginger, winter melons, and ginseng. "Each element of the soup must be included in the soup or else it wouldn't be complete. Just like you need health, love, and happiness to live a good life," my father explains in satisfaction. As I ponder in silence about what my father has said, I recall all the moments in my life that show my cravings for a well-rounded life. I often stay up all night to achieve the grade, yet I have forgotten the rest that my body needs. I spend much time on school, yet I have forgotten the quality time that I need to spend with my family. It is on that kitchen table that I realize the harmonious blend of the different ingredients in the soup represents the balance that is essential in my life. As I finish the soup self-indulgently, I answer

family members. Even the almost single-minded focus that my parents place on my upbringing and education is one that I appreciate. When I have my own family, I will likely fret over my children's education just as my parents are concerned about mine.

These cultural influences - the Chinese culture of my heritage and the American culture that I was born into, the yin and yang - are both undeniably a part of who I am. Learning to proactively combine these different "ingredients" in my life, which is a learning attitude that I continue to pursue today, will allow me to develop the best qualities within myself.

# Hospital Beds



I lumber out of the bed,  
 Reach towards the crisp knife blades  
 Of purple curtain pleats to glance  
 At the plucky matrons, pecking away at the computers  
 in their pen.

Across the room, number 37's skin fades

Day by day,

Stuck in a gritty slumber,

She's able to grasp a muted calm.

Each bed an island,

Desertion shadows the movement of time.

## Number 39

### To call mine.

Little floppy plastic openings

Spill away from the insertion in my arm,

Like the tentacles reaching out from the face of a nautilus.

I can see a little blood has settled

Down the length of the one on the left.

I scratch the yellow bruised skin at the base.

Down my right arm falls my tag,

My collar, my label.

Number **41248902**

I reach for the plastic Tesco bag

Under the table

And feel a stab in my lower right side

From the exertion.

Katherine sees I'm unable,

Passes the plastic case of pills

And I feel the brief taste

Of chemicals on my soft pink tongue

Before the flood of water erases its memory.

A hypochondriac sister.

It's there - the hand sanitiser.

A snag grips me, twists its cables

Around my trunk, tentacles squeezing

Under my grey skin.

I sink to the sterilised floor.

From behind me, a familiar voice of concern.

No cause for alarm;

It's just number 39.



# A Fine Day to Disappear



I am lying on our bed trying to stay as light as possible while simultaneously sinking into it. After a while, I can't move even if I try, I talk myself into the calm reserved for inanimate objects. I'm pliant as a duvet, soft as a pillow, smoother than the highest thread count sheet. This morning I tried to merge with the washing machine and some part of me is still down there, thoughts hovering in time with its gentle, persistent hum. Another part is slowly solidifying in the freezer. Maybe I should cancel my dentist appointment tomorrow morning.

The sound of the front door opening tugs me back into my body, I get up and the pillows re-inflate with a faint exhale, as if I was never there at all. It is often late when she comes back from work, but she doesn't mind; she gets bored hanging around the house too much. If she hears me on the landing or sees me walk down, she gives no indication. Still angry, then, or I've succeeded in becoming completely undetectable. I watch from the stairs as she slips off her shoes, dropping a few inches in the process, stops to look in the hallway mirror with a sigh and tucks away a stripe of hair that has fallen from her ponytail down her neck. It's just like you'd expect someone coming home to look like, if that person lived alone and was exhausted and insisted on a mirror in every part of the house.

I'm almost certain that I'm gone, but I have to check, so I follow her into the kitchen. She's oblivious, sautéing tenderstem broccoli to serve with her salmon - always health-conscious, thinking about the future. At work if she presses the wrong buttons people lose a lot of money. I consider shouting at her to see if she hears, or pushing the pan away, or pitching her plate to the floor, but she pays the rent and knows how to negotiate with the broken coffee machine and I need a back-up plan if disappearing doesn't work out. It has to look like an ac-

cident. There is a glass resting too close to the edge of the counter.

She jerks the pan too violently and liquid slops over the side onto the hob. Muttering, she dabs at it sporadically with a tea towel, trying not to get too close to the flames. I pad nearer to the glass. When she still doesn't acknowledge me, I knock it onto the floor, where it lands with a louder shatter than expected.

She jumps at the noise and turns around, abandoning the tea towel. I see it then in her dark eyes, she throws off the act, reminds me that I am here and it is a huge inconvenience. Before she can even open her mouth, the tea towel takes the opportunity to catch fire. Something kicks in - you might call it chivalry but I think it is panic - and I thrust past her to grab the cloth and fold it over itself. It stops the burning, but now she is looking at my arm and yelling and pointing. I hold it up as if to say Is this what you're making such a fuss about? and see that the sleeve of my shirt is blazing insistently. The flames ripple in rich orange and red, looking like they do in films but spreading much faster. It's all just some bad CGI trick, but then the pain comes. Watching it happen isn't doing much to solve the problem, so I drop to the floor and roll onto my side. The heat peaks for a second, then subsides to a reliable throb. I am lying there at her feet as she wraps her arms around herself, face shifting like she can't find a suitable expression.

"What the hell?" she says. In fact, she keeps saying it over and over again, once for the fire, once for me, once for every other unfortunate circumstance in her life.

"I'm sorry," I tell her. Standing up, I feel my heart thudding and my skin searing and sweat trickling down my back, waking up every nerve in its path. There is a shard of glass poking out of me just above the burn. I pull it out and frown as I stick my arm under the cold tap - it is all much too real. She watches me from the other side of the room, presumably thinking that she will have to buy me a new shirt.

I go upstairs to change and find a bandage. There is a whole cabinet in the bathroom that she has dedicated to disaster precautions. When I come back, she is scouring away at a large scorch mark with steel wool. The broken glass has been cleared up.

"Don't worry about that," I say, cringing at how unsure my voice sounds, like I am still getting used to having one. "Let's talk."

Not looking up, scrubbing even harder, she snaps, "You have to do something. You expect everything to just go away by itself."

I want to start a fight and I want to help her. After a few minutes of deliberating, I go to bed. The cool sheets feel alien to my skin, warmer than usual, like I am still burning all over. I remember about the dentist before falling asleep and get up to floss, even though I never normally do. If it weren't for reflections and other people, I probably wouldn't bother with anything. I might not even exist. I would definitely die with really fucked-up teeth.

**RM**

# Block 23

A gaggle of windows;  
 an assortment of apertures differing in  
 size, shape and subject and  
 choked with green  
  
 look out upon  
 charred chalk squares of court  
 that bear no more nods to life  
 than the rest of this statically hollow scape.

A stretch of scorched green like mustard cress,  
 blotted with bleach  
 and scattered with crows as big as dogs:  
 A cluster of crude pixels with callous, arresting beaks

is encircled by buildings  
 the shade of the stubborn dirt  
 that collects in the corner of the pan  
 wash after wash.

Resisting the steady scouring of time  
 defiant in their repeating rows.  
 These pillars of concrete communism  
 stand erect in relentless replication.



KC

# Habitus

His daughter insisted on the laptop. He can hear her now: you've got the money dad, and you'll pick it up in no time, you can google those symptoms you always moan about, watch old films, you can Skype me when I'm in America, it's like a phone call but we can see each other, and you can tweet, no, nothing to do with actual birds, honestly dad, don't be such a dinosaur.

He can't picture his craggy face projected out across the Atlantic ocean. The notion is absurd.

Secretly though, he doesn't mind the idea of joining the productive-looking men tapping away in the city's hip coffee shops. Dives, these places'd be called years ago, but apparently exposed pipes and dim lights are all the rage now. He enjoys the ritual of it all: ordering a coffee, finding a seat by the window, opening the laptop. It is light and smooth and compact, and this somehow makes him feel light and smooth and compact. Young.

He has lately discovered something called Youtube. Here he can ride the old London trolleybuses, rewind favourite boxing matches, or - a guilty pleasure - listen to Dido albums in full. This is what he is doing now, actually: listening to Dido. Her soft burr always soothes. Not that he looks in need of soothing; chin on chest, he sits at ease in his chair, his stout body enveloping its stained frame. A demeanour adopted a few years ago, when he stopped worrying about what everyone else thought, stopped wearing uncomfortable shoes,

stopped hiking in the belly. Nothing about his appearance suggests the state of his insides: the pinpricks along his limbs, the pebble of apprehension that always lands in his stomach about this time.

One hour to go.

His eyes slide from his YouTube screen to the people sitting around him. Illuminated by the artificial light of their own screens, their faces are cold pools shining in the ochre glow of the coffee shop. Outside, people pace past the window amid buses, cars and bicycles; a steady smear of shapes and colours along the pale street.

He readjusts his cap. It is black with a white Mercedes Benz logo and sits low over his face. Oh dad, not that awful thing, it makes you look dodgy, why don't you buy a nice new hat? Below the cap his curly hair puffs out round the back of his head like a rain cloud, or a grimy Elizabethan ruff. Rectangular reading glasses pull his nose down and away from his face; above them, dark eyes lend a sharpness to jowled cheeks. At his elbow sits an empty coffee cup.

Really, he is not like the other men in this coffee shop. Really, he is the type of man who knows when to pick up the best reductions in the supermarket; the type of man who walks up and down a train carriage scouring the seats for discarded newspapers before sitting down.

One hour to go, and then he will rise, put his things away, walk deliberately leisurely out of the coffee shop and around the corner. He will pass a stretch of town-houses, their bricks umber with traffic fumes. He will turn right into a stone building. Through the tall stiff door, a nod to the girl at the desk, a quick readjustment of his cap, and then he will head upstairs to the large, white, expressionless rooms, the whiff of turpentine clinging to his nostril hairs. He will grunt hello to whichever spiky-haired individual is leading tonight's session, and keep the small talk brief. It bores him.

He will walk to the corner of the room and step behind a screen. He will pause. Then he will remove his cap, and take off all of his clothes.

**KFM**





# The Rose and The Beast



A congress of leaves danced between my feet, forever at war to the rhythm of the furious wind. I glanced up at the sky, looking for something to focus on other than my sweaty hands and a quivering lower lip. My eyes drifted to the dying sun as it sank beneath the familiar horizon. A soft breeze tiptoed over my fingers, and I found myself trembling.

"I need to sit down," I said, as if expressing my thoughts aloud meant I had someone who actually cared about me.

And I had, but I had never met her. Not yet. Perhaps I shouldn't. I whisked my head around in hesitation and bit my nails. I should be home, not meeting *her*.

*What if she doesn't like me, or the man she believes I am? What if I say something inappropriate? What if I can't live up to her expectations?* Then I'd be alone again. Forever.

"Be a man, Aaron," I mumbled. This last sentence attracted the attention of a few passersby. A young girl giggled to herself when she walked past me, her curious eyes swiveling to the red rose I held in my hand.

I clutched the flower tight, its thorns piercing my skin in a delicious manner. Today, my life would change. I wanted this. I wanted *her*.

I found a spot sheltered by a mighty willow tree, two singing sparrows hopping from branch to branch. The bench where I chose to sit had been exposed to the elements, and its iron surface had weathered a somber shade of gray and green. I couldn't help but smirk to myself. Its rusty legs reminded of my own persona. Ugly on the outside, resilient on the inside.

I took a deep breath, then another, then another. If I were a woman, it would probably look like I was giving

birth right in the middle of the park. Not that anyone noticed me, anyway. I had never been the kind of man that got noticed. But she did.

Eryna and I met online. I'd never given these dating sites much credit, but we just clicked. And we had been inseparable ever since. If I had any friends, they would laugh at me for falling in love with a person I hadn't even seen, but I did love her. I was in love with her soul.

I had gathered all these images of Eryna in my mind - sometimes she was a tall brunette, sometimes she was a petite, blonde girl with cute glasses-, and formed my own private puzzle, each piece falling naturally into place. And yet, no matter how I imagined Eryna, her personality always stayed the same, like the unswerving emotion hidden in the ancient Greek sculptures.

I was too engrossed in thought to realize that a wild gust of wind had ripped a lonely petal from my red rose. I shivered against my will and rubbed my arms over my coat to ward off the cold. I jumped to my feet to try and retrieve the petal, but night had fallen quickly, and it was too dark to glimpse anything beyond my moccasins. Eryna should have gotten here by now. Would she be all right? What if something happened to her? Even I knew that was a lie, though I couldn't lose hope. Not yet.

When the icy touch of the night started to seep into my bones, I decided it was time to go home. The day after, I went to the same park, same bench, same willow tree. My rose lost its second petal that evening.

Weeks passed, then months. Soon it will be a year. But my rose remains alive. As long as it has a petal, a single, crimson petal, I'll keep trying, I'll keep wishing, I'll keep dreaming.

Someone can love me.

**LVP**

# Lesson 1

It wasn't just vodka that I had savoured for the first time. It was one of the most liberating revelations a teenager can have: I can get away with this. And I did. Over the course of that year, I had countless more misadventures, none of which I can remember very well. But I enjoyed each of them, even the broken shoes, tearful phone calls and sleepless nights. Most of all, I loved the thrill of sneaking out past bedtime and returning home the next morning feeling triumphant. Of course, looking back, surely my parents must have grown suspicious at the growing frequency of sleepovers, as well as my pronounced eye bags and pale, tired face after each night spent "watching Mean Girls". But at fifteen, all you can think about is how you've finally outsmarted Mom and Dad. You know better than them. They were wrong - or they lied, who knows? And, more importantly, who cares? The dangers I'd been warned about - predatory men, stolen kisses, unknown drugs - were no longer enough to keep me away. And once you begin questioning the truth of one moral lesson, you soon begin questioning all of them.

When I look back at my high school years, all signs point towards the age of fifteen as a turning point in the narrative. Some people might call it the year I lost my innocence, or the year my rebellion began. I think if you asked them now, my parents would be inclined to agree. But at the time, I was simply following the natural trajectory of what I considered to be a normal teenage lifestyle. To this day, Baileys still summons an acrid-tasting memory in the back of my throat, but I miss how free I felt each time I took a sip.

The first time I got proper drunk - slurring, stumbling, words and limbs tangled up in an incoherent pile - I was fifteen (fifteen and five months, if you want to be precise). If you want to know why I took that first shot, generously poured into a coffee mug and offered with a smile, here are some things you should understand. It was the first fully unsupervised party I'd ever been to. We were on an island an hour away from the city, removed from the rest of reality. I was standing in front of a fully stocked fridge and bar, generously supplied by a charitable sibling or cousin, and surrounded by equally drunk fifteen and sixteen year olds who I had only recently begun to call "friends". They were boys that I desperately wanted to kiss and girls that I desperately wanted to be. And, most importantly, my mother thought I was at a nail-painting, cookie-baking sleepover.

I don't remember much of the night itself beyond my sixth shot of raspberry vodka and some Malibu Coconut Rum - or was it Baileys? There are flashes: running down the road to the beach without shoes on, lying on the sofa watching the ceiling spin above me, my head hanging over the dizzying whirlpool of the toilet bowl... the details of that night aren't so important anymore, though I remember these fragments fondly. It was when I woke up that everything changed. Around sunrise, I wandered up the stairs, surveying the damage done that night: one sofa leg, one bathtub, three bed-sheets, countless bottles, thirty or so teenage livers and all of my long-standing beliefs about the dangers of drinking. I crept home around noon, scrubbing my beer-stained clothes until they smelled of nothing but detergent and innocence. I couldn't eat a single bite of food for the next twelve hours, but the rest of my weekend still tasted like victory.

**BN**

# Driven

U-Turn

My Heart

Inside out

Round about

Red

Yellow

Green

Keen

Give way

Drive through

A cross

The high

Way down

The line

Don't

Stop



# Carbon Dating

I am fossilising feeling, turning my heart as to stone  
so that one day, when someone, out walking the dog  
picks me up and pockets me and takes me  
back to hearth and home  
I will fit neatly, not damply,  
alongside the deadwood pile.  
Placed onto the fire I am like a bug in the heat  
uncurling myself upwards outwards  
flower-like in the arms of your setting sun.  
Here, in the cold  
of some other starry winter night,  
I will burst right into flames.  
A smudge of charcoal dusting those same stars  
that we once saw  
as I become stardust, not ash, not grey.

**SWG**

# Finishing a Book

Today I saw a man finish reading a book. It was not an especially long book, a mere 281 pages. When I sat down next to him on the tube he had only 12 pages left, his hands gripping the right side of the book lest it flap shut in the subterranean winds. By the time I stood to leave he had finished it.

I watched him as he read the final few paragraphs, surreptitiously peering down at the page. There was an illustration of a lady, half submerged in what appeared to be a river. She seemed calm, finding resolve in the water. I wondered who she was, what story she had to tell. There was no dialogue, just descriptive passages which converged at a final sentence:

*"She was free".*

With a final full stop, the story was over. All 281 pages of it.

I felt intrusive, a sort of perverse observer to this intimate affair. It was like watching the end of a friendship,

the front, he opened the book afresh, as if hoping to find a hidden passage that he may have missed. I noticed a small pencil marking scrawled in the corner of the opening page.

*"£1.50"*

It had come from a second hand book shop. Others will have finished it too then, on buses, on holiday or tucked up in bed at the early hours. Maybe they had loved it, perhaps they had loathed it. Maybe they had held it close to their chest in a warm embrace or perhaps they had thrown it across the room in disgust. Perhaps that was why they had given it to a second hand bookshop. To expunge it from their bookshelves or to impart the joy onto another. Who's to say?

He continued to flick through the book, opening it on a page with a map of a river. His fingertips traced its now familiar lines, remembering the first time he had seen it, unaware then of its ultimate significance. I thought back to the last book I had finished, the joint feeling of



one that had been cultivated with carefully caressing hands over an indeterminate amount of time. I did not know where this stranger and his book had gone together, what moments they had shared or how they had come to know one another. "I should look away," I thought to myself. "Let them finish their business in peace." I continued to stare. It was a special moment that I longed to be a part of, if only at arm's distance.

Once he had finished the book, he let out a short sigh. Was he contented? Saddened? Relieved? I looked carefully up at his face for a sign. He wore a subtle smile, one of apparent happiness at the book's conclusion, but wistful all the same. He looked at the final page for a spell, before closing the book and holding it in his hands. He turned the book over and re-read its blurb, perhaps reading it clearly for the first time. Turning to

loss and excitement. I had been so keen to finish it, to conquer it as my own, and yet fearful for the end.

Indeed, finishing a book is a conflicted and almost tragic ordeal. One simultaneously comes to fully know and comprehend the book for the first time whilst also bidding it farewell. You bear it like a child as it continues to grow and gestate in your hand, until it is snatched away at the last moment. The relationship you share with it has changed and will never be the same, for better or for worse. A meagre acquaintance becomes an old friend.

As the tube pulled slowly into my stop, I stood up and approached the door. I took one last glance at the man and his book, feeling a strange affection and empathy for one I did not know. The doors opened and I stepped off, making my way home.

# Credits

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**Penultimate~Back page** - images: photos of record player/album covers by SWG

# Contributor (Six Word) Bios

**LS** - Playing and dreaming more than children.

**SMc** - Enigmatically leaves this space completely blank.

**EL** - If found, please return to countryside.

**Pd'A** - Consistently torn between laughter and sleep.

**IS** - What the hell am I doing

**SL** - Came to London and then left.

**JD** - Also marooned in cryptic white space.

**NK** - Decidedly completely indecisive: a perfect paradox.

**TC** - Remains unascertainable but comfortable with blankness.

**SFC** - Stress too much. Should be abroad.

**RM** - So far, so good (sort of).

**KC** - I've run out of creative juice.

**KFM** - Ringleader, tomboy, chum to the weak.

**BN** - Coffee and champagne; give me both.

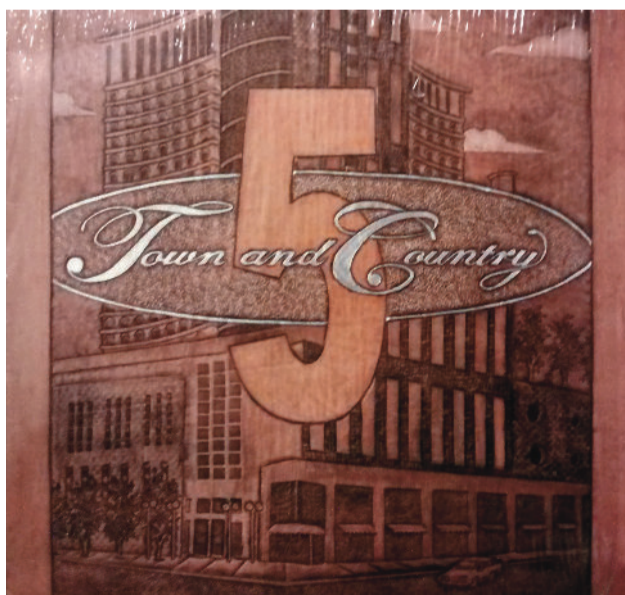
**LVP** - Author of *Diamonds & Coal, Cloud 9*.

**GW** - Wake. Pretend to work. Sleep. Repeat.

**SWG** - Eats, sleeps and lives with library.



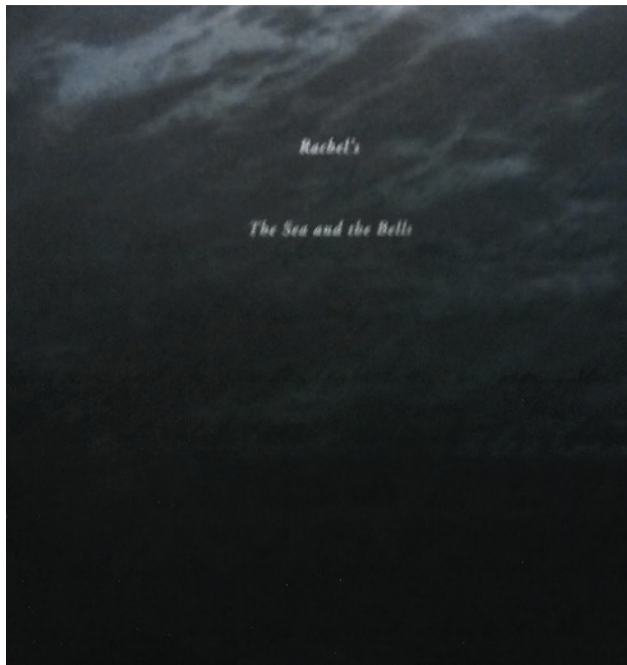
Writing can be a lonely business. It gets quiet around all those corners and sometimes you need a little tune to help you get out of your head the word-song sat within. Luckily SWG always had handy her portable record player, and curated for this course a ten week playlist to go along with writing exercises in class. Find the week by week playlist following and track those vinyl down if you can!



Week 1



Week 2



Week 3



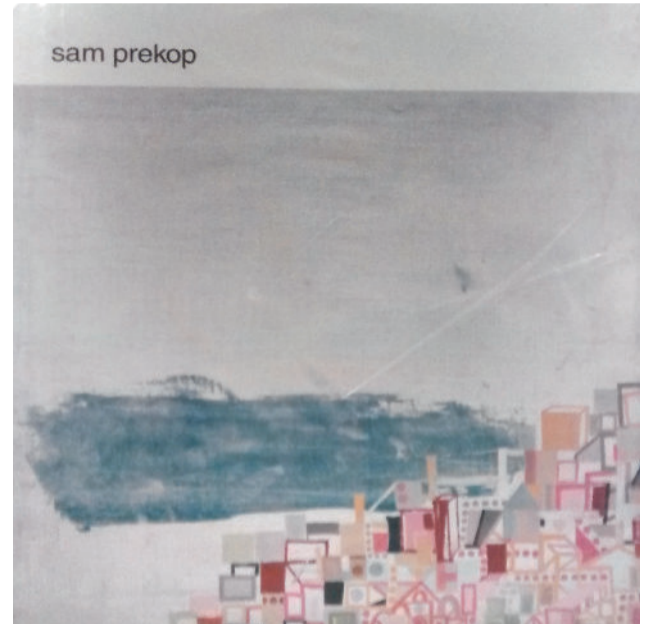
Week 4



Week 5



Week 6



Week 7



Week 8



Week 9



Week 10

*Work in Progress* was written, designed and produced by students from the *Arts and Sciences (BASC)* department at *University College London*, with a little help from their *BASC2004* module leader *SWG :-)*

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