

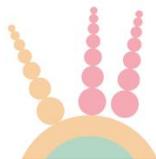


THE
SOLSTICE
PRIZE
FOR
YOUNG
WRITERS

ANTHOLOGY
2019



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



**WRITING
EAST
MIDLANDS**

Well done and thank you to all the young writers that submitted their stories and poems to the 2019 Solstice Prize for Young Writers.

The winners and highly commended pieces in each age category are as follows:

10-13 Age Category

NATIONAL OVERALL WINNER:

An t-Eilean Sgitheanach (Isle of Skye) - Martha Blue (12)

Highly Commended:

The Lord of Masks - William Brown (11)

Oliver - Paige Bettison - (13)

Rewriting the Book - Iona Mandal (13)

Coma - Joe Briggs (12)

Broken - Lucy Masterson (13)

EAST MIDLANDS YOUNG WRITER AWARD

And Now Still - Meri Brooks (12)

14-17 Age Category

NATIONAL OVERALL WINNER:

Care Kids - Tammi-Leigh Ferrin (15)

Highly Commended:

Masquerade 1843 - Lily Osbourne (16)

Who am I to judge? - Elena Tozowonah (14)

Friday 13th - Aasiya Daya - (15)

Syncope - Madeleine Oliver - (16)

Remember That One, Tessa? - Elena Barham (16)

EAST MIDLANDS YOUNG WRITER AWARD

How to be Happy in the 21st Century - Maya Stokes (16)

An t-Eilean Sgitheanach (Isle of Skye)

Martha Blue (13)

blue Skye gathers blue sea, yet remains itself
whose outer world of widest skies and wider sea-scapes
are arcs and sweeps of fragmented stone and sapphire waters
whose moors are as much home to curlew and lapwing as to machair grass
whose cliffs and bluffs are territory to butter-tinted gannet, melancholy-grey gugas,
dappled fulmars, blackest storm petrels and brilliant-white-jet-black sea eagles
whose cry above red-dearg hues of Bealach na Sgairde slopes is so vertical that soil cannot grip

salt-spattered beaches and wind-ploughed trees are proof of harshest fragilities,
Quiraing, Storr, Prison, Needle - Pleistocene bastions of Triassic sediment and Mafic sills -
stone sharp enough to pierce skies and blacker-than-night oceanic squalls,
and fluorescent with slime and wet and moss in patches
against basaltic boulders crumbling into twisted, fantastic stone sculptures

Skye, Eilean of extremes - mountainous Cuillins - colossal monoliths and pillars
beyond Bla Bheinn, the blue mountain, offering glazed and hazed glimpses
of the Outer Hebrides, where Hirta is grinding away into the surf-salted sea,
and microcosmic sheep and bones and stones
whose final-stepping stone is Stac an Armin, cruach, warrior stac,
fighting the sea in matchless futile rage

Ramasaig - raven's bay, Annishadder - eagle's place,
shelters for birds from storms, sea-bound remnants of the air,
once wedged into broken crofts that remain in petrified ruin
like the shattered families, left blank, cleared
through precipice and storms of isolation to cling to their unmapped spirits
villages are now where tourists sleep, and land is farms for cattle and sheep -
industrialised Skye, an island bridged between sea and scape
no longer Camus Tianavaig - bay of refuge -
but more car parks, laybys, caravan parks, quarries and helter-skelter roads to scar the land
where continuous past becomes continuous present

The Lord of Masks

William Brown (11)

The city of Mousillon was a ravaged husk of its former glory. Bodies lay piled up high on carved wooden stakes, writhing in agony as they slowly slipped down the long poles. Moans of pain and terror rose up from the dying as they watched Ushoran stride through the wrecked streets that he had defiled, but he paid them no heed. He was the Lord of Masks, the vampiric ruler of this ruin, and no petty peasant revolution was going to take it from him. He sensed something behind him and whirled to find a horrific creature staring wide eyed at his black cloaked form. Sensing his attention, the beast crawled back into the welcoming shadow behind it.

"Flesh eaters", Ushoran muttered, chuckling to himself.

The cannibals had infested the place since it had been razed, drawn to it like moths to a flame to savage the press of bodies that Mousillon offered. Laughing, Ushoran continued the search for his quarry. It felt good to be hunting again. After so many years, it was all he could do not to succumb to the blood thirst that he had inherited and slaughter his wretched servants. With a thought, he changed his guise from the masked features of a pale vampire, to the appearance of a terrified citizen, robes bloodied and eyes wide with fear. Satisfied, Ushoran continued.

Half an hour later, Ushoran stood over the torture rack, running his finger over the sharp edge of another implement.

"It doesn't have to be this way, you know," he said "If you just give in, then perhaps it wouldn't pain you as much."

"I know nothing, beast, and that will never change!" the figure groaned.

"Perhaps a little more pain would do," Ushoran replied, eyes fever bright with anticipation as he reached for a golden needle.

Slowly, deliberately, he raised it above his head, then plunged it in a swift, precise downward motion. It swept into the weak joint connecting shoulder and neck, making the victim emit a wordless shriek of pure agony.

"I'll tell you, I'll tell you!" he shrieked "Anything! ANYTHING!"

They always gave in in the end. Too late now, he mused.

The next day the man was a battered, broken shell of what he had been before. Ushoran had inflicted just enough pain to make him writhe and shriek, but not enough to grant him the mercy of death.

"You will be my herald. Go to the nearest village. You are free."

The man emitted a painful grunt. Ushoran supposed that passed for a yes, as he had ripped out the man's tongue the night before.

"Well, this is goodbye then." Ushoran said, grinning. He turned and walked away.

Cassandra looked at the man, and her heart filled with pity. He had stumbled into the village, with wounds that would never heal. It was a miracle he had lived for as long as he had. She stared at his battered, broken body, and wondered what had happened to him. The man hadn't even told her his name. She walked out of the room, heading towards the door, and then she heard a scream. One of agony by the sound of it. She was used to them: being a doctor is a hard job. She ran out the door of the little hut and

stared at the devastation before her. Smoke was rising from several houses on the other side of the village, and that was where the scream had come from too. She sprinted towards the site as fast as she could, desperately wanting to know what was happening. She finally reached the elders hut, and then watched helplessly as it slowly burnt down, crumbling apart bit by bit. The elder was inside there screaming and shouting for help as he slowly and painfully burned. The fire quickly spread, and as she watched, a dark, looming shape bent over him, and slowly did something to him, which she couldn't see as he went out of sight. The elder slumped, and the newcomer strode out of the burning building, ignoring the flames as a crowd began to build.

The creature (as that was what she identified it to be) walked before them and spoke in a cold, clear voice, "Your leader is dead. I, as his killer, will rule over you now. You will serve me."

One man stepped forward. "No, you won't!" He said as he charged forward, axe raised high. He didn't stand a chance. As she watched the man charge, she saw a silver glint flash through the air, and suddenly the man dropped dead to the ground.

"Now, any other objections?"

The crowd was silent.

Cassandra hurried along the corridor. She knew she couldn't fail in her mission. It had been twenty years since the vampire had burned down their village and made them march miles to his palace to be his slaves. Her younger companions ran alongside her.

"Hurry!" she said.

They jogged slightly faster. Time was of the essence. They ran up to the gate as her companions struggled to open it. Then suddenly their dead bodies dropped many metres downwards to her as screams filled the night, and black shapes took over the walls.

"You actually thought you could make it." Ushoran said appearing out of the shadows. His grinning face was the last thing she ever saw.

Oliver

Paige Bettison (13)

I opened my heavy eyelids and slowly covered my eyes from the blinding sun. For a short second I forgot why I was there. And then it all came back. I sat upon the freshly cut, grassy hill staring down at the small village that I lived in. For once I didn't see it as a small raggedy town, I started to see it as a small opportunity, a small chance. I realised I must have dropped to sleep whilst debating whether I should go through with my plan.

It suddenly came to me that my little sister India usually would have come to get me by now.

Oh well.

I pulled myself up off the floor and started the long and tiring walk back to the village.

The streets were silent as usual. No one to see. No one to hear. Nothing new there then. I strolled up to my house, preparing for my careless mother to scream at me for being late again. It's not like she ever cared anyway.

I opened the heavy door to see my mother and father hugging, A rare occasion, that only ever occurs when a family member dies. I ignored them both, it's probably my Nana thinking the doctors are going to kill her again. I tried to creep past my parents and sneak up the stairs. But something stops me in my tracks. I've seen many of my mother's 'looks': happy, sad and the one I see the most, angry.

But this, this look, this empty glare, was something I had never seen before. I came back the landing and asked if she was okay but as usual, I didn't get an answer. It was as if she was choosing to look straight through me. I rolled my eyes remembering why I chose to constantly run away. If my morbid parents won't answer, I know who will.

I turn to the living room where India is usually singing along to 'The Lion King'. This time it was different. It was as if a dark depression had taken over our living room. Family portraits surrounded by tissues on the floor and sweet little innocent India kneeling next to the sofa.

I walked over to her to ask what was happening but the closer I got to the sofa, the more I felt like there was some sort of spirit present. I forced my now burdensome body over to my sister...

And that's when I saw the problem... I became emotionless as I glared down at the body.

My body...

I stumbled backwards as the memories came flooding back, I grabbed my throat, realising what I had done! I quickly glanced over at my sister as she slowly closed her sad eyes. My knees collapsed underneath me as a river of tears ran down India's face. I ran over to the window and looked at the hill and there, there it was...

The rope.

The rope I killed myself with.

Rewriting the Book

Iona Mandal (13)

Mum took me to the library,
for friendship to blossom with books,
a connection of a lifetime.

Here, at the children's area,
I heard a Polish lady sing nursery rhymes,
to comfort a crying Indian child.

The Jamaican vicar, nose deep in book,
stood up, to lend a helping hand,
to the turbaned, Sikh staff, managing alone,
a busy crafts session gathered around a Christmas tree.

The Jewish boy needed help with the scissors,
so, the Bangladeshi lady stepped in.
The Somali boy coloured an angel in brown,
as the English boy and Pakistani girl shared the baubles.

I noticed a Chinese lady leave prawn crackers
for the beaming Irish Librarian,
who surprisingly, thanked her in Mandarin,
much to my delight!

Just then, a disabled Muslim man,
rushed in wheelchair, profusely embarrassed,
for its wheels, had accidentally pulled down,
the brightest, sparkling star from the Christmas tree.

The Nigerian woman ran to save his grace,
as children watched agape,
wondering and quiet, only until....

The lonely Syrian boy,
broke into a Christmas song, of undying hope,
sending prayers for all.

Its sound of peace pervading the silence,
the star rising once more,
in all its glory, atop the tree.

This place could have been,
a mosque, temple, church or gurdwara.
It just happened to be a library.

Connecting in pride, the language of love,
each one, holding onto the other,
like a social glue,
across identity, language, culture and faith.

Carrying tales kept alive from people's own stories,
while writing new ones,
in this city of mine,
engaged in rewriting the book.

Coma

Joe Briggs (12)

Like a dagger though the heart it stings and burns,
Like a bullet though the brain my thoughts drift away.
I might be a young child, but I can fight, I'm fighting for my life tonight.
I ponder about friends and family: will they miss me or am I just a burden?
I lay on this hospital bed stuck in a trance, crying gushes as I try to get out.
I'm alone in this world with no family or friends: all I have is this coma which never ends.
I can hear their thoughts as they sit by my side,
As I hear them say *Just let him die*.
I know I didn't deserve this but all I can do now is cry,
No-one can hear me; no-one can bide more time.
They're going to pull the plug but right before that second, my life flashes before my eyes.
I remember being a kid, having loads of fun
But then I see the slip which makes my tears run.
I'm lying on the floor completely knocked out, no-one can see me, not a single shout.
Now I know why I'm going to die,
I was a massive cost and simply didn't have enough time.

Broken

Lucy Masterson (13)

This will not be the end of me. Not after all this pain, all this journey, all that money. I absolutely refuse that this will be the end of me.

Hope is the fuel that I run on.

When your home has been torn apart by war, members of your family killed by the soldiers, all you can really do is hope. Hope that you'll escape. Hope that you'll make it somewhere better. Hope that one day you won't wake up wondering if this day will be your last.

So, when the strange men told me that they would take me to a happy place, a safe place all for a bit of money, I crossed my fingers, paid my life savings and hoped they were right.

When they stuffed me into a cramped van full of terrified faces, my heart broke a little. But those men had asked for so much money that surely the journey to a safer place would get better than that. Surely the boat they piled us onto next should have been better than it was.

Surely it would all be okay?

When I was little my Mama always used to tell me how brave I was. Like the time when I broke my leg. Like the time another child on the playground called me ugly. Like the time they shot my brother.

That bravery I had to carry onto the boat. Not just to keep myself calm, of course, but to convince all the tiny children that they had nothing to fear.

Did they have something to fear?

That was a question I was avoiding myself, yet I couldn't help but notice the sign on the boat saying that it could only carry fifty people. There were at least a hundred of us.

The food was sparse. There quite clearly hadn't been enough of it packed onto the boat, and the food I did get I would give most of to the small children.

And then there was the cold.

As our boat bobbed along, the sea would spray us with its icy chill and our coats barely kept out the wind. Once again, I found myself sharing the few items I had brought to keep me warm, with the children. And when the small children cried in the emptiness of the night, I found myself comforting them and cradling their broken, lonely bodies.

Then the storm came.

The waves beat at our small boat, the wind beat at our frozen bodies and the fear beat my last shred of hope. The boat was steadily filling with water. When people started to jump over the edge and into the gloomy, thrashing water, I realised that we weren't all going to make it.

I must keep hope, was the promise I told myself as I leaped into the water.

Just keep hope is the promise I tell myself now, clinging onto a piece of driftwood, clinging onto the remains of my broken life.

EAST MIDLANDS WRITER AWARD

AND NOW STILL

Meri Brooks (12)

Hen Harrier rising
Twirling, somersaulting
Emerging and re-emerging.
And now still.
Tranquil
sky striped gold
With white.
silver tipped in black.
And now still.
Prey rigid, delicious, glorious!
Feathers, ghosts, plagues.
And now still.
Ignorance
overpowers,
Slaughter, crime,
death,
And now still,
Numbers deteriorate,
magnificent beaks, yellow talons,
And now still.
Your beauty not priority,
Vulnerable and iconic,
Increasing earth's worth
And now, still.
Hen Harrier falling.

14-17 Age Category

NATIONAL OVERALL WINNER:

Care Kids

Tammi-Leigh Ferrin (15)

We scream, we shout, we kick and slam doors
But no one understands the pain we've been through before.
We take drugs and get drunk till we can't feel pain no more.
Then bring us to secure accommodation where we're locked behind 12 doors.
You will never see us cry, not even a tear
Cause we have learnt a sign of weakness is something to be feared.
We smile, we laugh but that is our fake mask.
All our wee hearts are broke, and some can't be fixed
We have all learnt to deal with our problems through fighting with our fists.
We have no place to call home, always feeling alone.
Sick of hearing "phone call at 6", "LAC meeting tomorrow"
"these are the rules that you have to follow"
"family contact at 9" "core meeting at 10"
Everything we say you write down with a pen.
"you can't be with him, nor with her, we're only saying this because we care"
It's like we are all screaming for help, but no one can hear,
But we can't ask for help because that's also something to be feared.
We fall asleep wondering why we weren't enough
We wake up every morning more emotionally tough,
Like nothing in this world would ever bother us.
We fall in love with each other but it's not love; it's just lust,
Because how could we love anyone else when we think no one loves us?
The sad thing is we would do anything to make sure someone else isn't bad
because we know what it's like to feel so sad.
We still stand tall even though it's been tough
Even though it's been hard, even though it's been rough.
We miss our friends a lot, and family so much, and would
Do anything to get back in touch.
We use and abuse but you blame and accuse,
You type up on the computer your views
For your next meeting to review our behaviour
You make my life decisions based on a piece of paper.
We run away, need a place to stay, countless drug debts that we cannot pay.
We sell our clothes, we sell our shoes, for any drug for us to use.
Something needs to be done. Something needs to change.
But if things go wrong you are not to blame
We need more support we need more love.
After all we are all still very young, and such a cruel world we live among
I hope and pray that every care kid makes it to the light at the end of the tunnel.

Masquerade 1843

Lily Osbourne (16)

When Agatha was 12 years old, two men brought her father home covered in coal dust: as limp as a bag of oats. They laid the too still body upstairs in Agatha's mother's room with heads bowed they showed their sympathy then left. Agatha in the days leading up to the funeral, would frequently go and look in on her father she would search for a pulse-she had to be sure he was gone. Every time there was none, Agatha would offer up a prayer of thanks to God.

The funeral arrangements were made fast before the smell of rotting flesh filled the house. There was no time for acceptance for anyone, Agatha was still afraid her father would leap out of the casket, wistfully she thought they ought to have got a bolt for it as a precaution.

When they eventually arrived at the local graveyard late morning beams of light fell through the old cypress trees to dapple the ground, Agatha peered at the white waxy faces around her, was this farewell like her mother claimed, or a performance? A circus all in black: elbow reaching gloves and drab dresses without any adornment or patterns, layers of lace, pressed shirts and polished shoes.

The guests were here to offer their condolences, to feign grief for someone they hardly knew or didn't know at all simply because that's what was expected. Her father was just one of many who met their fate in the mines he plummeted to his death down a mine shaft while trying to repair a pulley wheel.

Only Agatha, her mother, and brother could grieve him because only they had known him. Agatha's mother, however, held elaborate delusions about the monster that laid in the pine box. Upon hearing of his death, she transformed the tormentor of their lives into a saint. Agatha knew by now; death had the strange power to excuse all wrongs and allowed others to reimagine how the deceased lived. A better life was made to commemorate instead of the truth because the truth was too ugly, like how corpses are dressed in their best clothes to hide the wretchedness of decaying-to deny death.

Death was full of lies.

Lies about what happened next, about who was gone and about the impact it would have on the living, this funeral was just a masquerade for the countless lies. Agatha hoped her father went to hell for the beatings he'd delivered - for the rich array of coloured bruises still blooming under the many layers of her and her mother's dresses.

She got one last glimpse of her father before he was to be put in the ground though she couldn't be sure it was him. In the black ill-fitting frock coat a grey tinged face lips bitter blue, eyes glassy. He was unrecognisable as the stern domineering figure she had grown up in fear of - now he was a hollow shell. Her mother whispered tenderly in her ear unnecessary comforts, whilst also caressing Agatha's cheek in a maternal way she hadn't done in years or maybe ever. She then tugged lightly at Agatha's solemn braid. Agatha straightened out the folds of the white dress (she was too young to wear black) and thankfully also excused from mourning traditions.

She knew that the tears would never come and found herself hoping for the rain to hide her impassiveness. Agatha's mother stepped away, she handed Agatha off to her stoic brothers then left to say farewell as a wife, this day marked the beginning of her life as a widow. Agatha's mother's black cape - her widow veil made from crepe was soon damp with her sorrow. It was more than crying that broke from her. It was the kind of desolate sobbing that comes from a person who has been more than broken who's shattered into a million pieces and can never be whole again, a person leached of all hope and faith by the cruelty the world has shown them.

Agatha's father had never taken life insurance; all the money her mother had, they had spent on the funeral. They were left destitute, his death in a way was their own. Swept away by a tidal wave of grief, Agatha's mother sank to her knees and stared down at the dark hole, not caring for the wet mud that dirtied her dress. She crumpled all the petals off the bouquet of lilies she had earlier cradled she began to hit it against the ground in frustration until the white petals were stained brown. Her emotions swell and roil she no longer seemed aware of anything, least of all the crowd of onlookers.

She began rocking back and forth, holding herself like trying to lull herself to sleep. Hoping to wake up from the nightmare but emotion rose, again and again, to overwhelm her. She can't strangle the desperate, animal-like wails that split the air and echo off the headstones.

Finally, Agatha's mother let go. The bouquet of white lilies slipped from her fingers and landed on the casket. Agatha half expected a thump as if the flowers carried the weight of her mother's despair.

Vicar Stanbridge patted her mother's shoulder awkwardly; he was not a man equipped for dealing with weeping women.

'He will be watching over you all.' He promised Agatha as a comfort.

Agatha didn't want to think about her father, not as a ghostly figure watching over them that vicar Stanbridge conjured, not at all. She was already aware of the very real spectre of being sent to the workhouse, bearing over them now. She would likely be separated from her mother and brother, forced to work in a cotton factory in awful conditions for little food. As much as she longed for sleep, she knew it would offer no sanctuary, now it would only be plagued by nightmares about what her future may hold.

Who am I to judge?
Elena Tozowonah (14)

De way yu wear yuh hair
Touching, poking, feeling, sticking-
I won' even lay a stare.
Fah de way I wear me hair
Is not as good as yours
It's filled wid de mystery of unknown cultures-
But yu don' wanna hear no more.
Who am I to judge?
When mi hair cannt be tamed
All me can do is try to explain-
That mi hair will nevah be de same.
Everyday:
Yu tempt me wit advice,
Yu whisper in mi ear
Advice of hellish heat and pain
You wahn me to suffer an
"Put it back in braids" or straighten it again
An again
An again.
But who am I to judge
Wid mi skin as dark as night?
Fah de colour of mi skin
Gives yuh children quite a fright.
If only yu could see dat
I am not from de gang nearby
I am not part of the Crips, Bloods, or even de Kumi 4 1 5's-
Who is god to judge?
When You hav' perfec skin, white as snow
Wid blonde hair that flows,
Acceptable and natural.
Just as everything should go.
Me hair is natural too but
Who is me to Judge?
When ye mock de broken english dat
slips
Right off me foreign tongue.
Yu speak perfec english
An accent angelic as can be
An sometimes I just pray, I plead
Dat I was yuh an you were me

FRIDAY 13TH

Aasiya Daya (15)

A day. Thursday, December twelfth. The country holds its breath.

As do me, myself and I.

A time. Nine fifty-nine, I sit cross-legged in a darkened room,
head hunched over a phone, watching the seconds pass by.

A sound. The screen flashes with a notification, one I'll never forget.

The polls.

It said.

The exit polls.

A swipe. A single movement that takes me to a waiting page.

Just a glance and I see the set stage.

A number. 368. Two numbers. 191. I've never felt number.

A feeling. The feeling of knowing when you're living through a
historic moment, the turning point, end of ends.

A message.

We're doomed.

The optimist in me says

they could be wrong!

Naive and so hopeful.

A hope. A hope. A hope.

A day. Friday. December thirteenth, zero zero one.

I watch a map turn blue.

I watch the hope die.

A watcher. A spectator sits within me, a spectator not only of
myself but a spectator of the happenings shaping the nation.

An anger. A vehemence for those who used the voice I do not have
to ruin a world, I will inherit.

An irony. Friday the thirteenth. The part of me that has not
been forced to grow up too fast almost laughs.

A message.

We're doomed.

Even the optimist in me agrees.

An insanity. Insanity I watch being brewed in the House of
Commons fermented with lies.

A despair. Eyes burning as I type in an empty black room,
vision blurry.

A knowledge. Friday the thirteenth will go down in history as
being a watershed, a climacteric.

An understanding. Friday the thirteenth was made this way by
those who did not think of us.

A realisation. Friday the thirteenth has marked our end.

Syncope

I put my hand
down the kitchen sink
looking for a toothpick
or a piece of thread or a shoe
but instead,
my fingers meet the clear
cut water
and then, the blue warmth of her
– waxy and wrinkled. My nails pause under
the shape of her eyes and tug at the elastic
fabric of her cheeks. I try to force open her
oyster-shell eyelids, but they're blue tacked
shut, like the two halves of the Christmas
cards that always line the banister.
Here, she is suspended in the
cold dishwater above the
cupboard with the ancient
ice cream tubs filled with
disappointing cracker
crumbs. I feel around
for a smile, or a mouth
at least, but I only find teeth,
touching my palms tentatively. Gently I
tap out Morse code on my wrist, penetrating
through the silty soap suds and the floating
bits of food, and the flakes of your smooth skin,
waiting for a syncopated response. The water is still.
If I could fit you through the plug hole, perhaps,
you would be new again, but your perfect curls won't
budge. I pull my hand out of the tight, round ring and it
emerges
empty and thin.

Remember That One, Tessa?

Elena Barham (16)

Remember that one, Tessa? You should, Mum kept it on the mantelpiece for years. It was Christmas 1984 and we seemed to inhabit a dystopia equalling any Orwellian novel. The miners' strike, Dad calling Uncle Jack a scab – gloriously, gloatingly – then silently joining him on the bus when the money ran out.

Mum behind the camera, 'Smile, girls!', not realising to do so would be to sever a sacred part of ourselves. In the photo, the piano sulks behind us as though a sullen animal, its cigarette and soap bar scent reminding us that it wasn't always ours. Us in our catalogue jerseys fixing the lens with practiced tragic countenances, coolness and sophistication ever so slightly out of our grasp.

Mum said it was a dreadful picture and couldn't we have smiled; and you, always deliberate in every action, asked what there was to smile about. With a sardonic raise of your eyebrows, directed at me but unreturned, you left. Yet still the photograph remained in the living room, issuing removed disapproval to all who gathered there.

That was right before the row. You know, I think you might have been right about that after all – about him. Not that I'd ever say it to your face, and it doesn't matter anyway now he's dead. I found him one morning choked on his own sick. It must've been a hell of a night out; his Doc Martens were still on.

But I'm stubborn like Dad was. Maybe you are too, and that's why we'll never admit fault lest we appear weak. I hate that exposed feeling of apologies.

It was during that fight when Dad brandished a poker and went after Mum. He went upstairs afterwards to lock himself in the bathroom, quickly to conceal shoulders already heaving vigorously and the tears that would follow.

And Mum, having sought sanctuary in the car, clutched our hands and made us promise never to marry a man like him. Remember that one, Tessa?

EAST MIDLANDS YOUNG WRITER AWARD

How to be Happy in the 21st Century Maya Stokes (16)

These days happiness comes in packets of twelve
Twenty-first century serotonin is sugar-coated
Forget Skittles
We swallow small rainbows twice daily
To reshuffle the skewed chemicals in our brains.

Welcome to Generation Z.
You'll fit in here, as long as you can train your brain to be
Politically correct.
We like our divisions invisible
(That way we can pretend they don't exist.)
So let the prejudice fester in your mind but never
Cross your lips.

Here, we keep our zero-hour contracts pinned to the fridge
But bury statistics on starving children like
Bad report cards.
Empathy should be kept to a minimum
To avoid complication. You wouldn't want to smudge
The careful lines inequality has painted, now
Would you?

A word of advice.
Spend some time lengthening your stride
So you can step cleanly over the street debris
Without dirtying your soles, and if the guilt
Starts to taste a little too bitter, toss them a coin to
Freshen your mouth.

On the dress code,
Wear feminism as a fashion statement
But bleach the hairs on your upper lip until
The gene for female body hair is
Recessive.
Spring clean your insides once a month
With diet pills you buy online and remember to keep
Your Instagram feed as colourful as your
Medication.

First published 2020 Writing East Midlands

Unit 4, The Garage Studios 41-43 St Mary's Gate Nottingham NG1 1PU

Tel: 0115 793 4110

info@writingeastmidlands.co.uk www.writingeastmidlands.co.uk

© Writing East Midlands and contributors, 2020