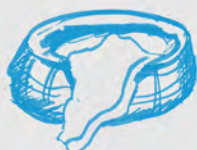


2024

# SCRAPS

A Taste  
of  
Young  
Northern  
Voices



# MENU

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**Scraps** is a collection of writing by members of New Writing North's First Edition programme for young writers aged 18-25. The group meets every week in Newcastle city centre to share ideas, give feedback on one another's work and experiment with new forms of writing. This collection shares some fragments and extracts of new work by First Edition members.

New Writing North is the writing development agency for the North of England.





Walking at first light, in the sort of semi-delusional state known only to the sleepless, is a potent experience. Bearing witness to all hours; the sun's climb and fall, east to west, and then the long, stretching spell of blackness and simple solitude has a transformative power. Your eyes, rather than growing heavy and dim, widen and see all that is hiding in plain sight. It is at that hour and in that lucid frame of mind that I love this city the most.

## 6am

I walked through  
6am in the city and I  
limped  
with the nights last remaining  
drunks  
and scavengers

I gulped deeply in the  
dusty dawn air  
and I ate  
the cheapest cuts  
of the cheapest meat  
I could find,  
drank salty, black  
paper cup coffee  
and gave the first light street cleaner  
an insomniacs grin

a siren sounded and  
a scrappy mass of  
city-bred creatures took flight-  
formed a cluster and  
swarmed  
beneath the monument.  
not a soul watched on  
but me



I saw the homeless  
and watched their dogs whimper.  
watched the rainwater  
bleed  
into their  
sleeping bags  
mercilessly

I watched the construction workers and the taxi drivers  
the impoverished lawyers, cursing this place, trying to find a park  
I watched the sun rise over cranes that tore down something beautiful  
I watched a new light come and persuade yesterday to die  
along with all its stories and its poetry  
I watched a massive humming of humanity rumble together  
towards a  
communal desire  
for a fresh start,  
it was gorgeous  
it was dripping  
and I wasn't under but  
level with  
the climbing sun  
as it drenched everything  
in a  
salmon coloured dawn

and then I trudged on  
Tyne bound  
at 6am.



**Henry Ashton**



# They Call Us Witch

Sally Grey

Tonight is a full moon. An impatient wind tugs at my hair as I follow Miranda's bent shoulders across the Town Moor, placing my feet into the imprints of hers.

I can smell smoke carried on the air. Grey wisps of smog are just visible in the soft, dim glow of the light that is clutched tightly in Gregory's hand.

We shuffle forward, a small group, travelling through the night. The dark pushes against my skin, pulling the hairs on the back of my arms straight.

Miranda turns. "*This be the place,*" she says, in a deep, ragged voice. She stares at Gregory and me in turn, black hair whipping around her thin, pale face.

Then, she raises her right hand, takes a puff from her bright pink vape and blows strawberry smoke into my hair.

"You're kind of ruining the moment, Mir," I say, but I can't stop myself from smiling.

"I just didn't want Greggles to be too scared," Miranda sing-songs, reaching out to ruffle Greg's blonde curls, her hand heavy with rings.

"Oh fuck off, Miranda," he ducks away from her touch. "Look, I really think we should go back. Tabitha?"

Miranda laughs, "You *are* freaked. We haven't even tried any of the spells from my book yet. And Tabs wants to stay – don't you, Tabs."

It isn't a question, but I nod my head anyway. This place used to be a scrubland – a blank, cold space – but now it's somewhere friends meet, somewhere they hold funfairs, somewhere we dance on the bones of the dead.

Miranda flicks her phone torch on and starts pulling things out of her bag. A water bottle follows a half-eaten sandwich and an assortment of books for college.

"Here it is," she strokes a battered, old book with her hand. "The grimoire."

"The what?"

"It's a book of spells, Greggles," I smile. "*Evil* spells."

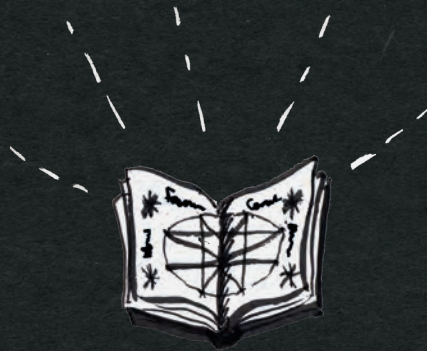
"You know they used to burn witches here?" Miranda says, eyes gleaming.

"No they fucking didn't."

"Uhh, yes they fucking did, Greg," Miranda waves her phone in his face, Google open, showing articles about the witch trials that happened right here, on this very spot.

Greg takes the phone, squints against





the bright light of the screen in the gloom.

I stand just a bit too close to him. "21st August 1650. They put to death 14 witches – 13 women and...one man." I stroke the tips of my acrylic nails down Greg's neck and he yelps, drops the phone.

"Shit, Tabs, what the hell?"

"*They call us witch,*" Miranda reads from the grimoire. "God, I love this shit."

I peer through the gloom at the Town Moor, at the nothingness around us – even the high-rise flats in the distance are blotted out by the dark.

"Can you imagine being burned to death, Greg? Your skin slowly blackening, bones cracking with the heat, your eyeballs melting inside your skull." Miranda smiles with all of her teeth.

"Actually, they didn't burn the witches here," I say. "They were hung."

I watch Greg swallow.

"From a set of gallows – some of them might have broken their necks on the way down, but most of them will have swung there for hours, dying a slow, agonising death. Bodies swaying in the wind."

I can see my own breath on the night air, thin, fragile clouds rising from my lips.

"D'you think the cows were still here then?" Miranda asks, pointing at the dark shape of one of the herd, grazing just to our left. Docile creatures, cows, very biddable. They've been here as long as any of us can remember, making their home on the moor, living around us. I've always liked them.

Something flickers, dark and fleeting, between the legs of the cow. The animal seems almost to stiffen, its large, brown eyes swivelling in the light from Greg's lamp.

"What was that?"

The shape sweeps past my leg, quick and soft and dark. Greg swings the light around us. I can hear his panicked breaths.

Miranda drops the grimoire onto the frosted ground as a sleek shape weaves through the night.

It flits about, passing each of us in turn, running in a triangle, before settling on me. Dark tail twitching in the cold air. A quiet mew. Two large, emerald green eyes.

"Hello, you." I bend down to pick up the black cat, the one I've named Magda. Her pointed ears brush my cheek as I



snuggle her warmth against me.

"Ugh, where did that mangy thing come from?" Greg curls his lip at the cat.

"She's not mangy," I say, cradling her against my chest.

Greg takes a step closer to us and Magda hisses – he lurches back.

"Scaredy cat."

"Oh, shut *up*, Mir."

I let the two of them bicker and crouch down next to the grimoire. It's fallen open where Miranda has dropped it, pages flickering in the breeze. Magda unwinds herself from my arms, walks back and forth across the pages, almost as though she's marking the place.

Flicking on my own phone torch, I read, my fingertips skimming over the hand-drawn pictures of goats, dogs, birds, cows, sheep, cats and mice. The neat sketches of small, unassuming women lovingly stroking various animals. Just next to them: a hurried mess of sticky, black scribbles, the outline of limbs just visible. The page I've studied for days on end, committing every sentence, every word, every single letter to memory.

I know Miranda found this in that shop in town that sells overpriced crystals and incense, that it might not be real, just a gimmick. But in this light, I feel I can almost see the pictures flicker and move, can almost feel the dip in the thick, yellowing pages from the violent pencil markings. In this light, I can almost imagine that this will work. I stroke the title at the top of the page with my finger: *Familiar Controle: Wound, Mutilacioun and Mordre*.

"Tabs?"

"Huh?" I turn to see a tall, thin shadow walking towards us.

"You invited *Liam* here?" Greg stares at me.

"Yeah, I thought it would be fun."

"What the *fuck* is wrong with you?"

I look across at Miranda, frozen, her vape – normally fused to her hand – forgotten at her feet. She doesn't look as if she's breathing. Maybe I should have warned her.

"Hey, Mir – didn't know *you* would be here tonight." Liam swaggers into the circle of light thrown by Greg's lamp. His confidence carries a particular scent, like fresh sea air and Lynx body spray.

Magda makes a yowling sound and twists back into the shadows.

Greg gathers up Miranda's bag. "Come on, Mir, let's go." He places an arm around Miranda's shoulders, steers her away.

"Nah, come on, Tabs said this was a party. I know how much you like a party, Mir."

He stares at my best friend and it's the look in her eyes that tells me I'm doing the right thing.

Liam is older than us, nineteen. I don't know why he was at a sixth form party that night, or why he selected my best friend from the sea of girls there. But he was and he did.

Afterwards: a strange, limbo-like time. I spent days sitting on a cold bathroom floor, holding Miranda's hair back while she vomited. I spent endless nights sitting up with her, keeping sleep away for fear of what she'll dream. We



spent hours in a police station once she wrenched up the courage to report what happened, what he did to her, only to be told, sorry, there's not much we can do, better to just forget the whole thing and move on. Try not to let this ruin your life.

After that, I decided *I* would make him pay. And I thought Miranda might want to see.

I feel the heat arrive beside me, touch my fingers to the flank, stroke the rough, bare hide. Feel the connection, the willing link, open and pliable, waiting for instruction. Just like the grimoire said. I did all the preparations, waited for the full moon, conversed with the cows on the Sabbath, earned their trust.

The moon glows bright above us.

I feel the shift in the air first, a charge, like an electric current. A shock that runs through my body, warmth spreading into the tips of my fingers, making my teeth chatter.

I tell them what I want them to do, where I need them to go.

"Tabitha, I thought you said this was gonna be fun? Like, where is everyone?" Liam sneers at me, the moonlight making his skin sallow, almost translucent.

I'm standing right in front of him now, can see his skinny frame shaking in the cold. I shine my torch light directly into his face and he throws up his hand to cover his eyes. His fingernails are bitten almost down to the quick.

His eyes hold suspicion, cold and jagged. He looks around for Greg and Miranda, for confirmation that, yeah, this is weird, right?

And that's when he sees the cows.

The herd have created a perfect circle around the two of us, unnaturally still, their blank gazes fixed directly on Liam.

Liam's breath sticks inside his throat. Exactly as though he's got something wrapped tight around his neck.

"Don't move," I whisper to him.

Magda mews at me, her tiny, furred body breaking the edge of the circle, just enough for me to slip out, to join the wide eyes and open mouths of my friends.

To watch as the herd begin to move restlessly, push closer to Liam. To listen as he starts to panic, to realise the size of these beasts, the strength in their bodies, the power in their legs.

To hear the helpless screams as my herd hear my call, as they rush forward, as they trample the ground, churning up soil and grass and blood and bone. To listen as the terror fades to silence. To watch as Liam becomes nothing more than a mess of pencil scribbles on an old yellowing page.

I realise Miranda and Greg are no longer standing at my side, that they've vanished somewhere, running footsteps and oddly strangled voices carried away on the wind.

Magda mews softly, turns her face up to mine, eyes warm. She flicks her tail and I start to follow her, back across the Moor, towards home.

I only look back once, to see the cows grazing quietly, docile. Biddable.



# Niewecastel

Struan Gow

lysten  
magpie fugols  
castn song  
rusln leafs.  
roar of rode  
the bublan  
of the ea Ouse  
the smothan of  
hot tar ofer  
anticc huses.  
loc  
to the northern wall  
fele the edges  
of stan from ealder thym  
bilt by ingengas to  
cepe anglisc sols.  
smel  
smoc baelccan from  
niewe cimnaes  
beornan a past age  
out.

toch  
weal grees  
macd by  
scorchan macsens  
and the falan regn  
betan mils head.  
taest  
hoaps bublan  
john baerlecorne  
folc deoful of  
haert and mynd.

our ham  
eald and niewe  
walled and worcan  
bridges spanan  
weidnan gaps.  
Niewecastel.

*fugols: birds*

*ea: river*

*ingengas: foreigners*





Wouldn't you  
rather be  
scrolling?



# The Gorgon of Lindisfarne

James Gardner



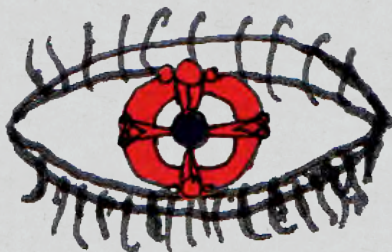
**o, where do I start?**

My torment began the second I was born, the first time I opened my eyes. I remember the warm, gentle arms of my mother... and then her face, beautiful and kind, brimming with delight, yet flushed and slick with sweat. Before I even realised what was happening, her arms grew cold and hard under my swaddling blankets, eyes glazing over.

Her frozen expression is seared into my memory, haunting me, just like the faces of everyone else I killed that day. My father, looking first in confusion, and then in horror as he, too, grew cold and pale. The midwife, collapsing to the floor, her body rigid like a statue. I was only a newborn, in the world for no more than a minute, but the grief and guilt of this accident hit me just as hard as I imagine it would now.

They blindfolded me and bundled me away later that day. A roaring sound, a rumble through the bones of my captor; the sun on my face for the first time in my short life. And then... darkness.

I've lived in this pitiful cellar for as long as I remember. According to the discarded tour maps that get lost down here, the damned place doesn't exist. I hear footsteps above me, clattering against the stone ceiling, voices tantalisingly close... only to be snatched away by earnest cries of "This way, please!" I've given up blaming them. This so-called Holy



Island... if anyone caught sight of me, this place would probably be stripped of that title. Oh, and the monks in the monastery above would be excommunicated for harbouring a “monster from the depths of hell” in their basement. *Yep*, they actually said that, only a few months after I arrived. One day, they even called me ‘Medusa’ – I took that name gladly.

Once a day, the monks bring food and water into my cellar. For a brief moment, I see a warm luxurious light in the constant darkness; then the clatter of a tray and the scraping of a stone, and the light is no more. The food is simple – brown bread with butter, a bowl of assorted vegetables and various vitamin tablets. It’s enough to keep me healthy and somewhat satisfied, but no more than that.

So far in my life, there have only been three visitors. All of them have been branded into my mind – the curious explorer, the unfortunate monk, and the modern-day witch hunter. All disregarding my desperate shrieks of warning, all transfixed by my terrifying visage. All dead, killed before their time because of my own terrible curse. Today, I would add another.

The door to the cellar clicked open. I obediently stood and faced the wall, away from the light that streamed in through the open doorway, expecting another silent food delivery. This time, a voice called out to me. An unfamiliar voice... a stranger’s voice.

“Is there anybody down there?”

I stiffened, and clamped my eyes shut. I *would* not open them,



not today. I would not kill another innocent person, would not add another face to my memory.

Heavy, irregular footfalls on the stone steps. The light grew brighter – he must have been carrying some sort of lantern. The temptation to look, to strike this suicidal fool dead, grew stronger, like an incessant buzzing in my head. I only clamped my eyes tighter, clenching my teeth against the rising impulse.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” the voice called out (another, more painful buzz – his voice was like the sweetest music). “I know you’re there. I’m here to help.”

My own voice was scratchy and hoarse. “Don’t come any closer,” I warned the visitor, as I had done before. “Whatever you do, you can’t...”

“Look at you?” A muffled *flump* – a cotton blindfold hit the floor next to me. “I’ve heard the stories,” the stranger continued. “The Gorgon of Lindisfarne, they call you. It’s time your captivity here ended. There’s a blindfold next to you, put it on. I don’t know whether that curse of yours is real, but I’m certainly not taking any chances.”

I obeyed, bringing the cloth up to my eyes and allowing him to tie it tightly behind my head. On and on I fought with that temptation, that desperate *need* to see. Even with the blindfold on, there was still that small, dreadful part of me that yearned to rip it off and look into his eyes, feel that intoxicating surge of power, and burn that man’s face into my mind.

*Eurgh!* I brutally shoved those feelings aside, and allowed the stranger to guide me up the stairs. I was used to moving in the dark, and the stairs were part of my pitch-black territory, so they were no trouble even with the blindfold.

The light in this new world was brighter, and much warmer. A memory stirred within me from that most fateful day. The sound of waves crashing against the shore, the distant calls of birdsong, and that *glorious* light and warmth on my face, seeping through my cold skin, straight through to the bone...

*Sunlight.*

"May I take off my blindfold, sir? I'd like to see the sun, if only this once."

A moment's hesitation from the stranger, then a sympathetic sigh. Another moment, and I felt the fabric loosen around the back of my head. I took a deep breath to control the buzz - *I would not be killing anyone today* - and let the blindfold fall away.

One minute I was in complete control, the next I wasn't. All I knew was the buzz building to a crescendo in my head - a searing, burning, *all-consuming fire*. Before I could stop myself, I whirled around with a snarl and pounced on him. I grabbed his face roughly in my icy hands, and stared deep into the man's bright blue eyes. He gasped, struggled for a moment, and then, transfixed by my deadly gaze, grew still, rigid under my grasp.

He was quite beautiful, as I had imagined. The contours of his face were smooth, yet well defined. Had he not immediately turned a mottled grey, I imagined he might have had a wonderful tan. The fire in my mind blazed behind my eyes as I took in every detail of him, from the slicked-back, greasy black hair, to the impeccable black police uniform, to the taser on his duty belt. Every minute detail burned itself into my memory, searing like a hot poker - painful, yet intoxicating. I giggled with delight - this man was like a delectable feast.

Eventually, the fire died within my mind, and I was at peace. No buzzing, no fear... *No guilt.*

I turned away from Officer G. Williams then, and looked out towards the sea, losing myself in a world of colour.



# Ladybird, Ladybird

Hebe Freya Fern Fryer

You board the bus, the night sky outside soft and inky, folding in on itself.

Taking a seat towards the middle of the bus, you dump your bag down on the seat next to you. You notice at the very front of the bus, a large, tartan dog bed, lined with fleece. What you assume to be a scraggy dog is, upon further inspection, a wizened old woman, curled up in the foetal position, fast asleep.

The bus jerks forward, and she pings off the dog bed, spinning violently in the middle of the aisle. You look around the bus, but nobody seems to have noticed the elderly woman, swivelling on the hump of her spine, like a rusty weathervane.

The bus brakes suddenly, and she rolls towards you. You tuck your legs up out of the way, and she rolls faster, coming to a halt beneath your seat. The bus lurches on but the old lady remains wedged in your footwell.

Coarse, peppery hairs fan out around her face. Her eyes are scrunched closed. In the depths of slumber, she coos like a wood pigeon. There is no way you can put your feet down without waking her.

You carefully hop from your seat, and tiptoe down the steps at the front of the bus. The driver sits on the other side of an opalescent, blue-tinted window. His booth is padded with plush, cerulean

velvet.

«Excuse me?» You ask.

«Ay?» The driver replies, absentmindedly.

«There's a woman asleep under my seat.» You say.

He turns his face from the road to look at you. «Kaffy?»

«I don't know her name.» You say.

«*She stahr off in the dog bed?*» He asks.

«Yeah.»

«*Thaz Dog Bed Kaffy*» He reassures you, and takes both hands off the wheel to rummage for something in the glove compartment.

«I'm sure she's lovely,» you say, «but she's under my seat.»

His brows furrow in confusion. «*Wot, enyoo doan wanna there?*» He pulls a handkerchief from the glove compartment and blows his nose.

«Well no, not really. It's just I can't put my feet down.»

He brakes suddenly, dropping the handkerchief. «*Yoo adja feeh-up?!*»

You steady yourself on the handrail. «Well, yeah, she started rolling towards me.»

«*I cahnt AdumunEve it.*» He chuckles bitterly, sailing through a red light. «Yoo nevah liftja legs up fuh Dog Bed Kaffy! Thaszow she ends up stuck undah yah seaht.»





«I'm sorry.» You say. «I was just trying to keep out the way.»

He rolls his eyes. «Cowrse.»

«Is there anywhere else I can sit?»

«Sorry, lav, thashyor assiyned numbah. Like it or lahmp it.»

You return to your seat, carefully avoiding the old lady. You fold your coat into a pillow and tuck it behind yourself, stretching your legs out under the armrest. Dog Bed Kathy softly snores on the bus floor.

Sleep absorbs you like a warm bath. You feel yourself sinking. Somewhere in the nothingness, a voice finds you. «*Ladybird, ladybird fly away home...*»

You fall, like a penny down a well, into a long, deep sleep, waking only as the bus reaches Cardiff.

The bus cruises past rows of indistinguishable student houses, all engulfed in flames, their walls falling away like the sides of a clown car.

Turning down your street, every other house is on fire.

*On fire, on fire, not on fire, on fire, not on fire, on fire, on fire, on fire.*

The bus trundles to a stop outside your house. It is consumed by flames. Heavy, black smoke clouds form a canopy over your street.

«*Mallifunt Shtreet*» The driver bellows.

You run to the driver's window. Your

arms hang heavy at your side. «I live here,» you say, in a voice smaller than you'd meant.

«*Wewll, ere yoo arr.*» He says. The doors fold open behind you.

«My house is on fire,» you say.

«*Yool afta try the fire departmun, dahlin.*» He says, and turns on his wipers, sloshing the soot off his windscreen.

You look out at the blaze. Flames chew up your house, coughing dust onto the street. You briefly wonder whether your housemates are still inside.

«*Cahm onn, lav!*» The driver scolds. «I'm beehind shedjool azit is!»

«Sorry,» you apologise, and vacate the bus, hauling your case out behind you.

The doors shudder closed, and the bus speeds away. You stand for a few moments, watching it shrink into the distance. The sky is blood-red, simmering like homemade jam.

You don't know what you're going to do, or where you're going to go, but you know you're not in any great rush. You pull your case away from the curb, and spot a small ladybird, crushed beneath the wheel, oozing out from itself, like a split grape.

You sit on your neighbour's wall and watch your house burn down.



# Truth Runs In Blood

Kitty Evans

*I don't know why I had been heading to Trawden Forest. Now I wish I hadn't. They say you won't regret it until after you feel the consequences but I regretted it quickly; the moment after. I presume that's because I knew; I knew that if I had waited, there wouldn't have been a chance to regret.*

*It's the nineteenth of August sixteen-twelve, and tomorrow I befriend the gallows.*



My name is Alizon Device and this is my story. Whatever the King thinks is relevant to tell the world, he will tell. He, after all, is the King. I don't have that power: I won't be around to show it if I do, but I can write this down. My truth – the truth of a nineteen year old.

I remember the cold in the air the day I went to the forest. It was early March and the frost from February was still fresh in the air. It seems beautiful now, Shakespearean perhaps, the poetic style that I met the coolness my body will soon befriend on the day I led myself to my death. I tasted the bitter breath of the remains of winter, the cruel kiss of the cold. It fogged my mouth and spread beyond, blurring any focus I had. Maybe the blur caused my stupidity. I had wrapped a woollen

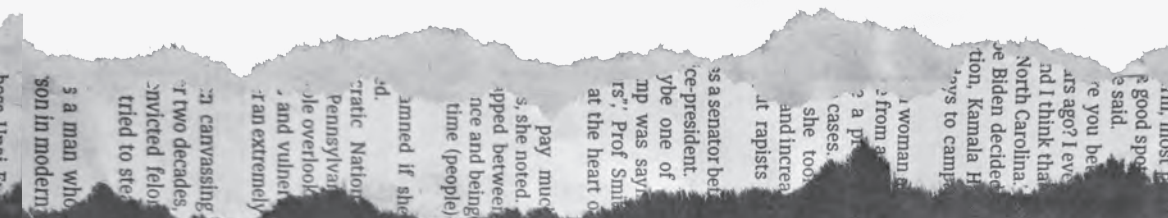
shawl around me and although it was trapped against my front with Mother's cheap brooch I felt the need to tighten it further against me with my trembling arms. I suppose I had set off early assuming I would need a long while to return home; how right I was. Even though I returned early I was not completely home, for my soul was bound to a hotter weather.

I stumbled across John Law on my traverse to the forest. He was a peddler and I was desperate. "Please," I begged him. "Please, be so good as to share with me some pins." Pins are expensive, metal objects of divine power and I had no money, nothing at all but myself and a desire for the pins. They were vital in everything as mother and the old blind matriarch taught me and my brother, James. From healing (usually warts) to divination and in particular, to the delight of a young girl like I had been: love magic. Truth be told, to many and few both, pins were extravagant importances.

He laughed at me and called me a "foolish girl!" He kept laughing, and he was quite clearly not planning on sharing with me the devil's toys. Maybe because of my lack of payment and my begging or maybe for my family life. King James was determined that people like me were dangers, menaces to society. Maybe we were— are, I'm not dead yet. I remember the peddler being afraid. Quite rightly so.

Grandmother died not too long ago; in the cell awaiting trial. Her body is still here; rotting, decaying, consorting with the rats. I try to avoid the vermin but I can't. Not when they're everywhere. Squeaking and biting. Nipping and scurrying. Distasteful creatures but we are distasteful people. Perhaps we go hand in hand.

Old John Law knew of Grandmother, most definitely. A Cunning woman during Elizabeth's reign. We'd all heard the mantra before: A





*Cunning woman heals whilst a witch steals.* Everyone knew: *A Cunning woman heals whilst a witch steals.* I could predict that even the rats know: *A Cunning woman heals whilst a witch steals.* We were Cunning. Not witches – and people came to us, they admired us. When the King was crowned everything changed. Even your village Cunning woman was as feared as a witch.

The peddler refused to share with me his pins and I did something sinful. When a familiar, a small black dog, came trotting up to me as if it was from nowhere, I felt a plan form in my head. When the dog asked what I should wish to do, I replied quite simply. “Make the man lame.”

I didn’t expect it to work, and maybe that’s what horrified me. I cursed the elder and I cursed him to lameness. They say that he walked away three hundred yards before he suddenly dropped down and eventually got himself to a nearby inn where he fell once more. I went to his bedside to apologise profusely: “Please, sir, understand my sorrow! Sorrow – how worthless for how I’ve left you! I’ll proclaim to the Great Almighty, sir, please. I’ll beg He doesn’t grant forgiveness I don’t deserve!”

I hadn’t expected to see results as I told the lame peddler. I wasn’t particularly gifted in cursing and I wanted the old peddler to know I truly meant no harm. I was dumbfounded by the appearance of the man, truly disturbed: his left side lay unable to move, not even able to twitch. The man was weak, his speech sliding into incomprehensible words, blending one syllable into two. His face was so deformed, I feared I couldn’t help him.

I couldn’t have predicted the devastation that would occur from my heartfelt confession.

From being a scared young woman, wanting to right her wrong and do good in the world to having myself, James and Mother carted off to the JP.

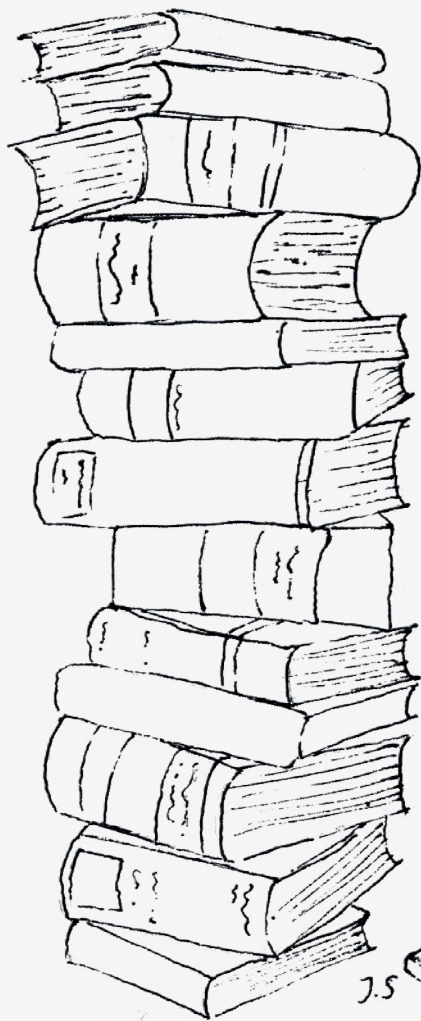
We were no longer Cunning folk: we were Witches. We were the ones that were once loved by many, that were now feared by everyone.

We're all here now, in our dusty cell. All twelve of us. Each one lying awake thinking of our sins. For me, I wish I hadn't said anything. Maybe I can't change whatever I went to the Forest, maybe I can't replace the desperation for pins. Perhaps I can't do anything about my calling to the black dog or cursing John Law lame but one thing I would change. Would redo. That's going to see him, going to confess. If I'd been good, confessed my sins like any good religious girl we wouldn't have been caught. We'd still be us. Cunning folk. Not Witches. I wouldn't be waiting for my death now, in the damp, in the dark, and with the rats.

Old Chattox stares at me. She was like Grandmother, old and widowed but caused chaotic mischief to men not like our calm protection. I don't think she likes me too much. It's bad enough that I'm Alizon Device, her enemy's granddaughter but I sold us out. I'm the reason that her and her family will die. Did Grandmother get it easy? Is it better to kill oneself before we reach the noose? That begs the question I suppose, did she wish it in deep sin for herself or was it mere consequence? I don't wish Grandmother guilt, not after I traded her innocence for my own so I'll pray for the latter. If He will listen.

I can't continue anymore. This cave-like wall is almost filled and I don't believe my hand will contain anymore blood. This red inked message is from me, Alizon Device from Newchurch in the Pendle Forest. I'm in Lancaster Castle dungeons and I die tomorrow. We are the Pendle Witches.





# For Old Times' Sake

Amy K. Brown







he stack of books swayed and Cecelia steadied it with a light touch. She cut the stack in half and picked up one book at a time, deliberating their place in her collection. A green battered copy of *Treasure Island* with her mother's fading notes in the margins. Keep. A well-kept blue hardback of Jane Austen's complete works, a Mother's Day present that had returned to Cecelia afterwards. Keep. A set of childhood books with cracked spines, tales of princesses and fairy tales, now distant memories of worlds she no longer visited. Give away. The pile to pass on to her neighbour Frances grew higher.

Cecelia sat cross-legged surrounded by boxes, harsh rain hammering down on her windows, soon to be someone else's. A few boxes were full and sealed, ready to be transported to a life with kind friends and a new city. Some sat half full, untaped. Cecelia opened her old wooden keepsake box and added *Treasure Island* to the pile with gentle hands. It had been two years since she last opened it. Inside, she saw tarnished jewellery and her old favourite soft toy. A plastic wallet that contained the speech and poem read at the funeral. Thrown at the bottom, she saw a rock. Cecelia grabbed it and frowned, placing the memory. It was rough and cold in her hands.

*Cecelia stared in wonderment at the steps in front of her. The wind and the chill made her eyes sting, but she couldn't bear to close them. Her mother secured her hat on her head and pointed to the steps. Cecelia met her mother's eyes, the tiredness hidden by her gentle smile.*

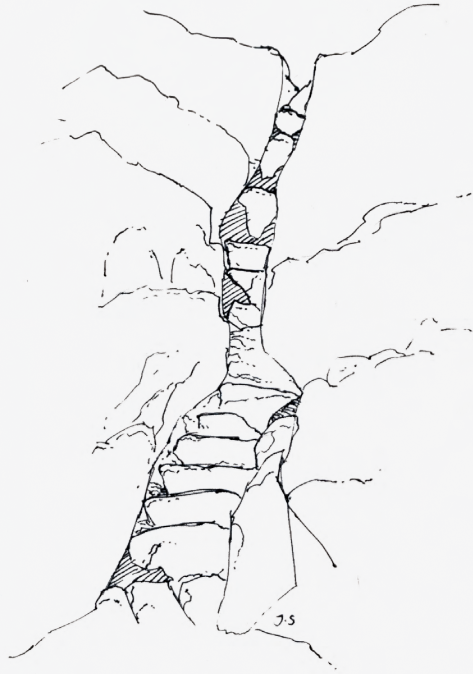
*"There they are, our fairy steps. Told you it was real, didn't I?"*

*The narrow passage and jaggedy steps towered above Cecelia and the ancient limestone walls appeared to glisten.*

*"Can I go up?"*

*"Yep, and remember the story. If you don't touch the edges of the wall, the fairies will grant you a wish."*

*Cecelia took a deep breath, ignoring the harsh breeze on her face. She climbed the steps and the walls moved as she did, threatening to touch. She had to prove herself. To get her wish. The tightness in her chest released as she reached the top and she looked around, hoping for a shimmer of wings or a sparkling light. There was nothing. Cecelia looked down at her boots to see a small rock. She grabbed it and held it in both hands. It glistened.*



*Her mother climbed sideways up the stairs, her hand grazing the cold rock walls as she went.*

*"Did I do it right?" Cecelia said.*

*"You did perfectly, did you make your wish?"*

*She nodded, clutching the rock in her cold hands, "Do you think it'll come true?"*

*Her mother's eyes softened, "I think that the fairies have a way of knowing what we need, even before we know it ourselves."*

*Cecilia stared at the stone, almost waiting for something to happen. "What did you wish for when you came here?"*

*Her mother's expression clouded, "That might be a story for another time, sweetheart. But the fairies always looked after me. I'm sure they'll do the same for you."*

*They descended the steps holding hands, and the wind shrieked through the passage, an echo.*



Cecelia sat with a tightness in her chest, in her half-empty apartment surrounded by everything she owned. The rock didn't look like how she remembered it. No glimmer or sheen, just grey. And in a single flicker, she wanted to grab her phone and call her mother. Ask if she remembered. If she was nervous when she moved places for the first time. How to do it all on your own. She will never know how similar they were supposed to be.

The rain softened, the wind persisting. Frances let herself in after a gentle knock on the door.

"Just me. How's the packing?"

Cecelia dropped the stone on top of the keepsake box, "Almost done. Here for your books?"

She gestured towards a big pile with a strained smile.

Frances smiled but it was faint as she tilted her head towards Cecelia. She approached the stack of books meant for her and ran a weathered hand over the spines. Her fingers stopped on Cecelia's old fairy tales, and her eyes brightened, picking up the first one on the stack. A handmade crafty bookmark fell from the book, drifting slowly to the ground, complete with Cecelia's name in pink glitter.

"My granddaughter will just love these."

Cecelia nodded along, but she drifted back to the top of those steps. When she faced her neighbour, she felt grateful for the kind words and cups of tea. Frances perched herself down on a chair with a sigh and regarded the tower of books.

"You know, Cece, it's alright to hold on. Even for a little while longer."

"I don't know... these are just silly things. I have to let stuff go."

"Keep the important things. You'll regret it when you're old like me."

"I know you're right. I've yet to prove you wrong."

"And you won't, dear."

Cecelia placed the books into a box and picked them up, "I'll bring these next door for you."

Frances stood, her hands using the wall to guide her as she followed Cecelia out of the apartment. A pinch of light stretched through grey clouds as the rain stopped, pointing towards piles of books and the rock on top of her keepsake box, left to rest.

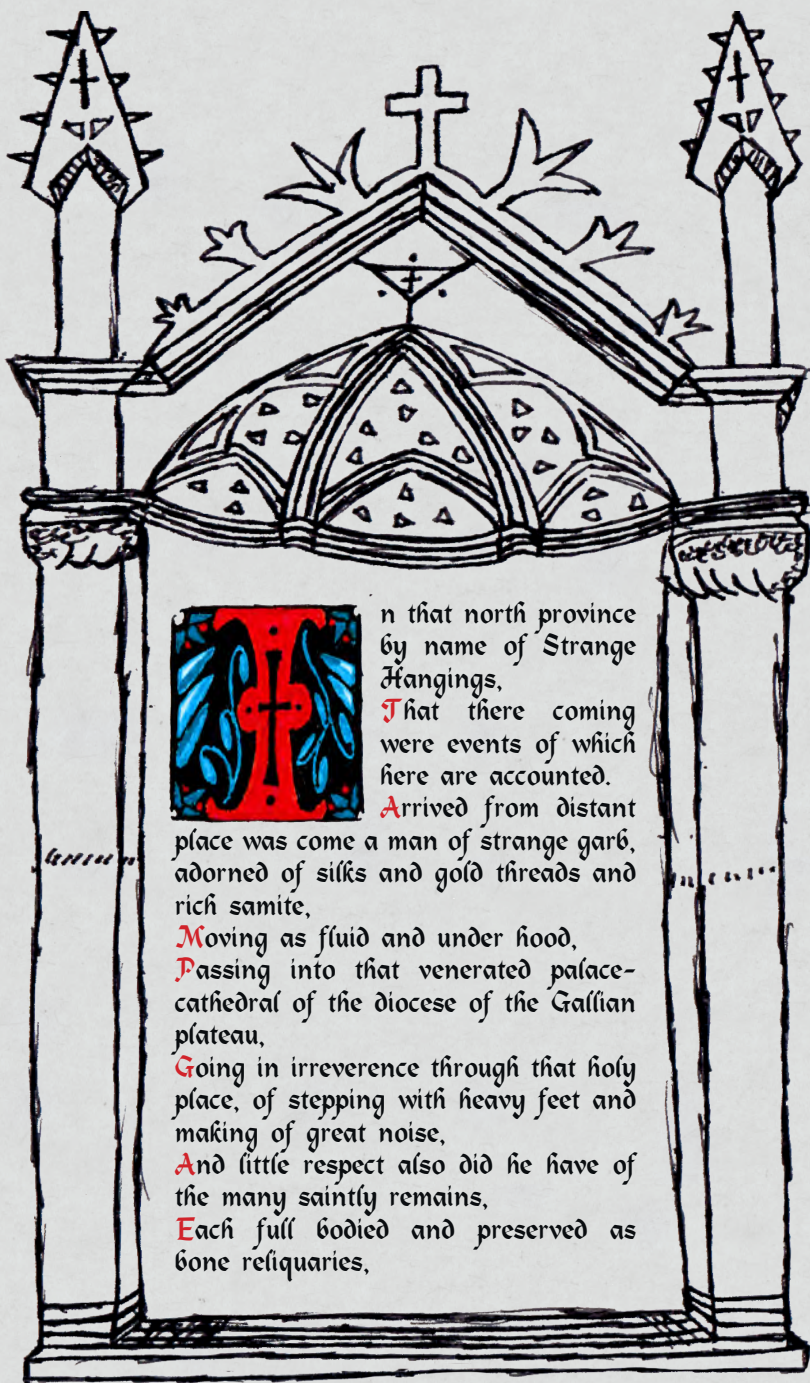


# Strange Comings to Strange Hangings



Amelia Bennett





n that north province  
by name of Strange  
Hangings,

**T**hat there coming  
were events of which  
here are accounted.

**A**rrived from distant  
place was come a man of strange garb,  
adorned of silks and gold threads and  
rich samite,

**M**oving as fluid and under hood,


**P**assing into that venerated palace-  
cathedral of the diocese of the Gallian  
plateau,

**G**oing in irreverence through that holy  
place, of stepping with heavy feet and  
making of great noise,

**A**nd little respect also did he have of  
the many saintly remains,

**E**ach full bodied and preserved as  
bone reliquaries,





All abound of their saintly  
adornments, of books and censers  
and weapons,

Upright or laid in rest, in caskets  
of stern-glass,

Inlaid of gold and silver and  
inscribed of hymns and prayer,

Many miles were walked by him  
now, going by and passing rooms  
of writing and of sleeping and of  
many rooms of prayer,

Up stairs and crossing halls,  
seeing fresco and mural,

Until coming was he at final to  
that place of the nave and the  
chancel,

That being in his irreverence was  
confounded of direction, that had  
he faith his coming to this place  
would have been immediate and  
forthcoming,

Yet he was in his ways to coming  
here, and through the nave was  
he going,

Striding then to the edge of the  
chancel, before him stood there,  
was the bishop of the diocese,

Speaking, then was he commanding  
of the bishop:

Step down of thy holdings and  
spare thee, I shall,

Upon the name that I am called  
here Ah'rad Az-rai of the 23  
sorcerer clans of Somme,


Else that thy corpse be as ash and  
thy palace pillaged and shattered  
'pon the earth,

I have known thee in a dream, and  
that knowing tells that thou has wit  
and will preserve thyself.


The bishop who being calm and  
was called Firmin, at once did he  
alight them in anger and saying he:

Thou would have it so,

That thou have such power upon me,







Above me,  
Beyond me,  
Nay, I shan't have it,  
Cannot accept such to pass,  
Mine is the right to do as I will,  
By grace of **God**,  
By prosperity of men and land,  
Nay, thou have no strength here.

Come then, stand against me,  
Would that thou have such  
courage now,  
Being that I have denied thee,  
No fear resides upon or within  
my breast,  
Thy knowledge of who I am is  
false,  
A craven sorcerer, thy power too  
is false,  
And no power do thou hold in this  
house of **God**, where thou stand  
against **Him**,  
And indeed thy trespass here shall  
see thou hang.

Ah'rad in his being denied of his  
offer, was casting off his hood,  
And was inked upon his skin  
scrawls of boxed triangles, making  
of words unknown,  
Sudden too was in his hand a  
crook of sorcerous makings,  
Casting forth hand and crook,  
bleeding himself and saying words  
of unknown tongue,  
Yet there was nothing about that  
came to be,  
Here it was that being the house  
of **God**, none but **He** had such  
power here,  
Thus it was concluded that the  
custodian-monks were come into  
the nave,  
And were taking the sorcerer in  
his struggle, until the coming day,  
Whereby it came to pass that he  
being sentenced with high treason,  
was given light punishment and  
hung to death.





Gail Bowles



ilias stood face to face with his captor - the wicked Vampire King who'd drained him of his humanity, twisted his form into this... *monster...*

it sickened him. Silas had originally ventured out to the Vampire King's castle to beg him to spare his village. He recalled it well, a day his life was plunged into darkness.

*'I have travelled from the north...'* He had knelt on the ground, head bowed to the ravenous ruler. *'I beg you, your Highness, please spare my village from your wrath.'* He wept, hoping the King would have mercy on his people, but the King and his court laughed in his face.

*'Silas, was it?'* The King of the Vampires ventured down from his gilded throne, cupping Silas' chin in his hand. He tilted his up to face him, as a sweet smile grew on his face. *'I find your pleas for mercy adorable...'*

Hope glistened in Silas' eyes - had it worked? He'd soon find his answer, as the King's sweet smile turned sour, his grip

on Silas' face tightening,

*'So, I shall spare you...'*

He laughed maniacally, the laugh echoed around the room as a chorus of vampires followed in their ruler's lead.

*'And only YOU.'*

The next thing Silas knew, the King had turned him into one of his own.

Silas refused to follow the King, causing him to be thrown into the dungeon of the castle where he sat for months, hearing the guards taunt him with their victories, bringing him their trophies from his village, singing songs of how the King plundered his village - it only stoked the flames of his anger.

Eventually, Silas broke free from his prison like a rabid animal, mauling through the vampires in the castle, climbing through each floor to face the King once again, and blood would be spilled.

Silas and the King fought for what seemed like eternity, their burning hatred illuminated by the glistening moonlight - the art of violence being communicated





through the language of dance, twirling around one another in a flurry of attacks.

With one more swing, Silas brings the King to the floor, finally bringing him back to the present. He towers over the King, a stake pressing into his chest - if the King even breathes wrong he could die. His eyes widened with fear, the same fear that Silas once showed in himself, but now Silas had the power over the King.

*'Pl... please.'* The King huffed, trying to keep his composure. *'Spare me, my people need a king.'*

Silas chuckled, leaning closer to the King's face; the King could feel the breath on his face.

*'Oh, your Highness...'* He presses the stake harder into his chest, still not breaking through. *'I find your pleas for mercy... adorable.'*

The King stutters.

*'Wait- wait! I can give you anything! Money? Power? I'll even let you rule the vampires with me!'*

Silas hesitates for a moment, his brow furrowing. Temptation was a cruel

mistress, even the most pure hearted heroes want something, anything, and power can get you everything.

*'So?'* The King smirks, sitting upright. He has him now... *'What do you say?'*

*'...'*

*'...I don't need your power.'* Silas scowled, before plunging the stake into the King's chest; The King screamed, followed by a cacophony of screams from the remains of his people.

The sun began to rise, and although he could never go out into the sun again, Silas was overcome with a feeling he thought he'd never feel again, he felt hope for the first time in a long time.

There was still work to be done, after all, some vampires had fled when their king died. He'd have to wait until twilight before he could leave the castle to go after them, but what was a few more hours of being stuck inside?

When the moon next rose, he'd fly North, towards his village, where he planned to protect his home.





# Texture

I am learning to read by touch  
for when my eyes  
lose more light.  
I find that  
words taste different  
when you digest them by fingertip.  
I find that  
letters are more meaningful  
when they are constellations  
poked backwards through a stencil.  
I find that  
I can't see  
the stars anymore.  
I wonder if the stars  
are another version of Braille  
raised dots in the sky  
poked through by invisible hands  
to read in the dark.

**Megan Adams**

# Elizabeth, Wife of John



She was born in a place that is now underwater.

Where now people sail on sunny days.  
Where, in dry enough summers  
the stonework peeks through the reservoir,  
Where there used to be witches.

She was widow who sued her neighbour  
for calling her a whore.  
Who was tried for witchcraft and  
who confessed that her village had a coven  
Of swallow winged women.

They buried her under an eye shaped window  
so god could watch over her grave  
They planted wild garlic  
around the graveyard walls  
so she could not rise  
They planted rowan in the gardens to ward off witches.

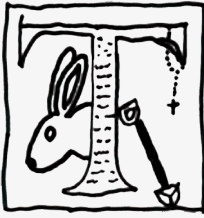
She doesn't have a gravestone of her own,  
just a note on her husband's saying 'wife of John'.

**Megan Adams**



Thomas Ord

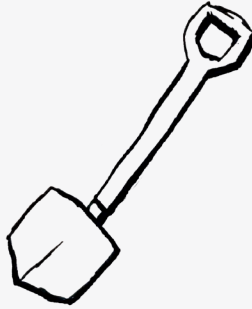
# Burrowed Hunger



onight, more than ever, the graves stank. You'd noticed it as you climbed over the fence. You landed with practised ease, the damp grass was only too kind to dampen your fall. The church loomed overhead, casting shadows good and deep for your line of work. You all hesitated on the edge of the graveyard, noses scrunching at the musk. It was as grimly quiet as any night you came but this scent was new and that had your hackles up.

But caution doesn't fill a stomach. There was work to be done. You'd spotted the poor feller three days ago. A lovely service, done quickly as well so the family could get a look in before he went off. You always made a point of attending the funeral. Just a common decency to acquaint yourself with new business partners. You would come back later. When the grave was settled and the guard grew lazy. Not to worry. They weren't going anywhere.

You dug, relishing in the sensation of a shovel slicing through muck until the lumber slowly emerged and with it the smell. But as you burrowed more you turned over a stench thick and fetid. You were accustomed to the way a body bloats. The odour of foul meat and rotten eggs. But every heaving breath choked you with rot.



Coffin exposed, you pried the boards upward. Unearthing the peaceful man. A strong chin and furrowed brow set like stone. "Evening sir." It was only good and proper to greet your new business partner before rifling through his pockets. Do you remember how squeamish you were the first time? It took so long just to unclasp that lady's brooch. Now you peeled gloves off hands, eased belts free and pulled shoes from his feet. When did the guilt run dry? Was it when you brought pliers?

Gold teeth were not to be missed. Precious treasures, even the wooden ones would be worth something but you were covetous of gold. You peeled the lips back. Forced the rigor'd jaw open and clamped the pliers down hard. No need to be gentle. Just pull and twist. Enjoy the satisfying way meat tore. The way it gave way millimetre by millimetre and then all at once. Coveted gold always glittered differently under moonlight, a warming glint in the dark. You pocketed it and politely slid the planks back over the stony visage, as good as a collegiate handshake, and straightened up.

You relished the small glimmers of success you had secured for yourself only to find it quickly smothered. Chased away by the same feral and rabid odour. The taste caught in the back of your mouth and you retched into the back of your hand. Unwillingly, you conjured images of your lungs. Blackened. Bloated. Tar seeping from the tubes.

Graham and the other lads had idled over. You never bothered with them much. As long as they kept to their plot, and were slower getting over the fence.

“You’ve got a reeker in that box, what did they feed him?” I’m sure you had your own snide remark or witty bit of repartee for him but something shifted under you. A mental lapse? A dizzy spell? No. A lean. The coffin was tilting. You watched the box you had seen held dear by the dirt rock in its cradle. And then the earth began to eat it. You dropped half a foot straight down. You turned and tried to scabble up the wall as the earth churned around the box, swallowing it. Hands from above seized your wrists and hauled you out as the coffin vanished into a roiling grave.

You were indelicately dragged onto the grass and you pulled your limbs as close to yourself as possible. Then the body began to catch up with the mind. Your breath was escaping you. Dirt stung at your eyes but you kept them on the grave. You needed to keep them on the grave. So you could watch Graham be eaten by a shadow.

A shape, an animal, a monster born of midnight and hate leapt from the grave and took the man off his feet with a gut hollowing crunch and carried him across the yard in one fell leap. It was the same man who pulled you from your grave who raised the shovel and charged. You couldn’t stop him if you wanted. You had no words. Only the monster as it rends flesh from bone. You were a bug, pinned to its backing. Dead weight. You always were. You know that. Your life was scavenged from the grave goods of those who built who tilled the fields who moulded metal and bore ships and you came tonight to pick at the scraps a rat, a maggot.

Before he had the breath to scream, the beast turned to meet him with jagged claws and fury. He was knocked down like a rag doll. Do you remember its eyes? Held in a grotesque conglomeration of wrinkles and gore and whiskers. Blazing red



fire redder and bloodier than any hearth any forge man could muster and glistened. Its snout quivered, its jaws twitched with teeth painted an oily scarlet. The jaws stilled only as then punctured the flesh. The man who you hadn't bothered to remember his name howled into the night as the jaws were so big that it took the whole shoulder in its mouth and pulled him to the grave. The dirt caught the scent of fresh, gushing blood and rose to meet it. A horrible whining mass spilled over the grass. Writhing bodies glistening fur flitting red pin pricks thirsting whines.

The beast raised the man above the hungering earth and broke the man. Molars powdered bone and tenderized meat. Blood spilled in abundance onto the pile and the night was filled with agony. There was so much blood. Too much for the man to remain conscious but still his final scream filled your petrified mind and would stay there till you were old and lame. Even when the creature, satisfied with its work, dropped the twitching body into the mass you could still hear him. The offspring engulfed him. Swallowing flesh and clothing all the same.

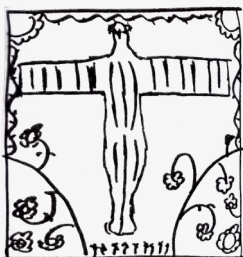
You had forgotten yourself in that moment. Left as witness to truth you considered inconvenient and offensive. You were meat. You'd bothered yourself with gold, with carrion and superiority at the fact you simply weren't dead yet. But the ears. Those long and mangled ears twitched and the red eyes turned to you. A lamb on the fold. And before this, you lay upon your back. Your eyes gazing upon a fathomless sky. And you waited. Still as the dead. Oblivious to the giant rabbit, if such a thing could be named a rabbit, as it stalked over.

Keep your gaze skyward. Relish this time where you can gaze at a sky unblemished by soil.



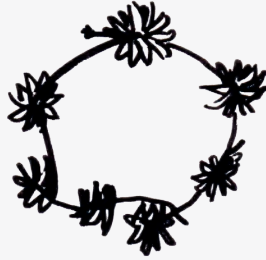
# The Messenger's Lament

Rory Atkinson



he children of the world to come have never heard of angels. They see a giant: the towering patriarch, or all-embracing mother. They do not know those wings, if wings they are, span centuries; years back they reach, to the age of industry, to a gleaming city of seven bridges, where coal, concrete, glass and steel were tamed. A city of sleek miracles. The children of the world to come can no longer blow glass, or twist steel. But they can spin tales. Their eyes knit constellations in the night sky, threading the light years between lonely suns in a moment. This is play.

They dance beneath the angel's feet. Brave little ones clamber up the thighs, curving ribs, reddening their hands with ferrous dust, to gain the majestic head. It considers the horizon, impassive. They trace eyes in the dark hollows, pinch the swooping nose, etch graffiti into the forehead. Giggle, wobble, wave giddily, mock those below with no stomach for heights. Puffed up, pleased, they perch on the giant's shoulders, dangling their legs, surveying the vast green wilderness at first with wonder, then indifference.



One child plaits a crown of daisies and sets it upon the angel's brow. The first crown of the world to come.

Some nights, few within memory, for the children have little use for memory – the sky is filled with dancing colours. The angel is haloed and glorious and splendid. Yet the children have no gold, no gems, no vivid paints, no bold banners, fine silks, expensive dresses or lavish tapestries; they possess no treasures that compare to the celestial lights. Perhaps they love them more dearly for this. Perhaps their imaginations are richer and their spirits more profound because the rusty old thing they found on a hill and crowned with daisies has no history in their budding tongue.

But a tale is begun, before long, that in the early morning if a fair wind blows then the colossus will sweetly sing. A song without message, but enmeshed with sign, symbol, magic. A melody of potent depths, ecstatic heights, yearning and mellifluous. In the early morning the children of the world to come gather round the angel, sitting on the fresh dewy grass, and wait patiently to learn what song is, and how they might one day learn to sing.

Here they sit, listening.



**Henry Ashton** came to the North East to study and was one of the original First Edition members when it formed in 2021. He writes novels, short stories and poems.

**Amy Brown** is a 25-year-old Northern writer who moved to the North East to study English Literature and Creative Writing at Newcastle University. She works mainly with prose, exploring themes of mental health, family and identity using folklore and fantasy as inspirations.

**Hebe Fryer** is a writer and artist from Tyne and Wear. She has an MA (Distinction) in Creative Writing from Cardiff University. She writes poetry, prose, and screenplays. Her work is inspired largely by her dreams, and her experiences with mental illness.

**Megan Adams** is a charity worker and writer is interested in writing about disability in different genres - primarily children's fantasy and horror (but not usually together). She studied English and Creative Writing at Leeds Beckett University and has an MLitt in Children's Literature from Newcastle University. She is most often found writing under a heated blanket accompanied by her co-authors (Chip the dog and Marble the cat).

**Rory Atkinson**, 23, is a Music student at Newcastle University. He writes for pleasure. Other interests include origami, long walks, and baking.

**Amelia Bennett** is an artist and poet from Newcastle. She is inspired by medieval Catholicism, history and literature and often writes fantasy and sci-fi.

**Struan Gow** is a Scottish writer living in Newcastle. His writing varies from poetry to novels, and often connects to his heritage. His work can be found in the *Black Poppy Review*, *Acumen's Young Poets'* section, and *FlashBack Fiction*. The last of these was nominated for the *Best of the Net 2022* and *Best Microfictions 2023* awards.

**James Gardner** is a 24-year-old accountant and Physics graduate from Stockton-on-Tees, who has had a keen interest in creative writing from a young age. He predominantly writes in prose, keeping to science fiction and fantasy genres, often taking inspiration from myths and legends and bringing them into the modern world.

**Sally Grey** completed her Masters in Creative Writing at Newcastle University, graduating with a distinction. She still lives in Newcastle, where she works as a content writer at a marketing agency. Sally enjoys reading anything with a mysterious or sinister undertone, a love which inspires her own writing. She spends most of her time writing, baking and drinking too many cups of coffee. She recently published her debut novel, *Fertile Ground*.

**Thomas Ord** is a performing arts graduate from the University of Sunderland. Starting in script writing and stage work, his interests grew toward experimenting with different ways of storytelling. His writing draws heavily from his interests in folklore and gothic horror and often features identity and overcoming adversity. When not writing he can be found enjoying baked goods and adding to his unhealthy knowledge of ghost stories.

**Kitty Evans** is an 18-year-old aspiring writer from Tynemouth. Looking to study Philosophy and Politics at Liverpool University, she draws on social issues to form her contemporary prose. *Truth Runs In Blood* is a break from her norm, instead choosing to focus on her interests in history and folklore.

**Gail Bowles** is a 20-year-old artist with aspirations to go into the world of indie game development and put her stories into the world through the genre of video games. *Vamps Hunt Vamps* is one of the many stories Bowles has created that is currently being made into a game for her 3D Game Development project, written as a short story to get ideas going.

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Illustrations on page 22, 24 & 25 by Joel Smart  
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