

Rathbones Folio Prize

MENTORSHIPS

2017 - 2018

**FIRST
STORY**
Creativity Literacy Confidence



Supported using public funding by

**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

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Mentored by Evie Wyld

Poem: Nature's Reset

I couldn't count the number of times I've walked on this field,
The number of times I've walked back into the gym squelching,
Wringing out my football socks.

I played games like rounders
Badly.

Another day

I'd be rolling my eyes

And never the ball

Through a trying game of football

With an unhealthy balance of the

'Couldn't care less' -ers

And 'don't just fucking stand there' -ers.

"You aren't half exaggerating

I'm lovely and warm."

Said the teacher with her thermals, hat, scarf and finger-less gloves on
(Minding the manicure).

"You're right wusses you lot,
It's only drizzle."

The same teacher putting her broolly up.

I sang songs in hysteria

With my best friend, Nia, on either side of the tennis nets

That we'd ram into the corner of the gym cupboard at the end of the
match;

The most exercise we'd done all lesson.

Back under the frosty whirring air-con,

"What

Does

This

Have to do with yin and yang?"

Our 'there's no such thing as a wrong answer' English teacher asked

Michael -

Pretentious prick -

On a very frustrating Wednesday

Before break

With lots of hangry teenagers.

Jekyll and Hyde... Yin and Yang?

3BC China and Victorian England?

Eh?

"Probably inspired by his fresh haircut." I'd muttered,

Only my best friend catching it

Like we shared a closed circuit frequency.

She snorted.

I dared to look her in the eyes.

We were two pairs of silently wiggling eyebrows

One set freshly threaded and the other more

Cavewoman.

I've never been closer to being kicked out of a lesson.

Queue break time:

Teenagers rioting.

"You're not leaving this room without your blazer on."

Ramming themselves into tight stairways,

Desperate to be first in the line for the £3-two-rasher-bacon-sandwiches

Mums mortgaged their houses for.

Teachers shouting

"You're not getting in this canteen until I see your planner"

(It was the food threats that worked)

While Nia slides me half of hers through the window.
Jammy bastard had R.E. on the canteen floor...

And now,
Here it is,
Bolted up or bulldozed.
No rooms to kick anyone out of now.

It's hot and the air is thick
I don't fancy scaling the fence to get to where I'd usually walk.
Shame too,
It was always quiet there,
Like a vacuum
And now it's the size of a black hole
Swallowing every sound
Save a buzzing bee that resists its
Pull.

So now I'm at the bottom of the hill
And I'm looking upwards
Towards the green gates
That holds two concrete slabs.

The grass is eating at the school paths
And dog walkers have been treading new ones.

One, I can't quite understand -
Like a mug ring on a coffee table,
A halo around a tree.

I look up for a spaceship.

You measure a tree's life like that,

Don't you?

But you chop it down and count the rings

Inside

Instead.

Maybe it's found the key to eternal life and

Nobody's paying attention.

Nature has pressed the reset button.

It's a take-over of gangly dandelions and daisies

And grass tall enough to lose a sausage dog in.

Like a radio station switching from Fortnight Shite tracks

To playing the Beatles all day:

Groovy dude.

The transformation is in that awkward stage of

Growing out a fringe,

The wind uses the old long jump pit
As a bottom lip
To blow long branches
Out of the face of the tree.

Lunch-box days are done.

I pluck a dandelion

From among its peers

And blow it,

Then hitch my backpack

Up between the barriers

As I make

my

way

out.

Short Fiction: Cuts and Bruises

“Stop!” I shrink, making myself as small as possible. I duck as the next slam of the rim of the bottle lands on the glass of the shelter. The shattering makes me poke my turtle neck out from inside my scarf and straight into the jagged lines of shark teeth as the pendulum swings back, sliding straight into my forehead. I reach for my knee, feeling the sensation of playground gravel.

“Stop laughing!” I hear them all again.

I taste blood before I see it.

He picks his next contestant and suddenly I’m alone.

Who - what?

I have to get home.

Where are -? I pat around my body, looking for my iPod, my headphones.

On the verge of tears, the adrenaline wearing off, I scamper around in the darkness, back to the circus circle, feeling my way across the floor. I bite into my scarf to muffle the whimpering as shards of glass press-stud into my knuckles as I fumble for my phone - cracked,

blinking stupidly - and then my headphone cable. Headphones...
headphones? Headphones, they're still on the damp floor.

Stupid buses. 21:24pm.

I'll walk, I decide, but I won't go home to mum.

"Joe?" Did I need to nod? I try to smile instead but it just looks like I've got a twitch. I go to turn away.

An arm grabs me, a smile meets me.

"What in hell happened to you?"

"I was only waiting for the bus."

Ellie looks older, it must be... 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9... 10 years since we first met - 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5... 4 years since I last saw her this close. The purple hair - wasn't it blonde? - that was stuck behind her ears shimmied to hide them from me. My hands find my pockets again. I jerk as I remember the cuts.

She sees it.

She hesitates over one hand, scanning the criss-crossed scratches on my knuckles before guiding me upstairs by the crook of my elbow.

She understands. I knew she would.

Feeling drained, I let her lead me wordlessly into the mustardy smelling bathroom, where she plants me on the toilet seat. I wobble on the hollow plastic. She looks me dead in the eyes, it's alright, they say.

Doors, well, hinges, always bother me; well-oiled hinges mean I can't have my headphones on over a whisper if I need to see who's coming and squeaky hinges make me jump. So I count the number of stairs on her way back down; 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 - and the same on the way back up. I can look up from studying the blotted bruising on the top of my hand, that way.

She fills the sink with water hot enough to steam with windows, and her face as she inhales. The water droplets on the pane fall in time with ones I realise are rolling down my face. She catches my arm before I can wipe them with my sleeve and drops it again quickly, knowing it's unnerved me.

She wrings out the cotton cloth to dab on the gashes.

"Close your eyes." She asks me.

I twitch as the sting from the salt she has shaken into the water infiltrates the slice on my eyebrow.

"Sorry." I rush as my movement jolts the hovering cloth to a second laceration on my cheek.

She just shakes her head again.

"This will sting."

“Righ-.”

She takes my wrist and dunks it. I hiss.

Why did this happen?

And again.

I was only singing.

Pressurised breath like being under water forces itself through my front two teeth. I couldn't stop.

She ducks to the bottom drawer of the wicker basket stood alongside the sink. I look up and notice a mirror. The shark had barely missed my eye and smeared its blood across my temple from its last feed. Elie notices me, turns the mirror away. She stands herself in front of it. Gently, she presses my hand with a new towel. She's probably wondering how I ended up like this, I can see her eyebrows arguing about it. “Take these.” She orders me, as she drops the tablets into my hand, making sure I've grasped the mug of water with the other, my hand creaks as it closes around it. As I close my eyes I still see the stars from before and feel the dull ache from the bottle rim I'd been smacked with.

I follow her eyes and she's watching my Adam's apple, and then I focus on it myself, its rise and fall as I swallow. My hand feels mechanised as I place the mug back where it was and tilt it 45 degrees to where the handle casts the same shadow as before I'd touched it.

She rustles through the top drawer, this time. A gleam of silver catches the light; tweezers. I gulp.

I try not to go. Suddenly, I'm 7 again and there's too many teachers talking. Too much. Overload. And then reason; Ellie. She understood. She made the room quiet, like she absorbed it into her smallness. "You're scaring him," she told them. Is that what I feel? I'd thought. She hunches over me this time, and carefully tweezes out the tiny pieces of glass without a word. She squeezes my arm as she holds it four times; one for each shark tooth she plies out. She has nice green eyes still.

"Come on, let's sit somewhere else." She says, finally. I take her hand and she leads me back down the 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 stairs into the living room, where the TV is still flickering and the lights make us look like we're part of a Georgian photograph.

"Can I ring my mum?"

"I did it when I came down for the salt." She simpered. "It's alright, she knows you're here. Mobile's changed but ye olde faithful landline still worked."

"What's this?" I ask, nodding towards the telly.

"Sherlock." She replies. "Honestly, how could you possibly not see Bilbo Baggins and Smaug and not think 'that must be Sherlock?'"

My smile cracks into a split lip.

“I’ve got some Maltesers?” she offers.

I nod.

“In exchange for you telling me what’s happened,” she cuts through.

I nod again and settle myself into the same spot I sat in when I was 7 and Ellie's mum made me blackcurrant, and we watched Arthur until my knees didn’t hurt too much.

“Thank you.” I say, hoping she’ll know it’s not just for the Maltesers.

She pulls the cat off of the neon crocheted blanket and wraps it around us both.

“I’m just grateful you came to me, that’s all.”

“You understand” I tell her, as I pat my thigh to signal for the cat to jump up, inclining my head to brush her shoulder. Imitating me, the cat jumps up to push his head up to my palm as I lean in for a Malteser. I stroke him, instead, in one fluid movement. I like watching as his body ripples like a wave. Satisfied, he coils himself into a ball on Ellie's thighs.

I pop my Malteser in my mouth and melt it.

Shakira Irfan

Mentored by AL Kennedy

Short fiction: Brautu

Someone once asked me what serenity feels like.

Being around people that don't complain, I said.

Looking back, I'm surprised she didn't ask me if I was joking because at the time, I was a tattoo artist. If Martin had been around, he would have said something about how I was paid to listen to people complain about their own decision to get a tattoo. There'll be more on him later. Now Martin was wrong.

I was a tattooist for five years and I suppose it's safe to say that it's a part of my life I'm proud of. I was able to take people's stories and make them into illustrations. Over a thousand of them. Somewhere when I started doing all this, there was a man in his forties who came in during a rainy day, slapped a picture of a woman on the counter alongside a crumpled piece of paper with his number on it, mumbled something about calling him when there was a slot available and left. I

remember how his face had droplets of water where it had run from the tips of his fringe and his boot marks remained a wet green-brown on the floor.

There was something about him that made me sit down and work on his piece immediately. The woman on the picture had a kind face and I threw several drawings in the bin because I felt a personal obligation to perfect the delicate laughter lines around her mouth.

After a week, I called the number on the paper he gave me. He arrived a few days later to decide on his final tattoo and then he came back the following Monday. He didn't talk much during the paperwork, you know, confirming his identity and providing written consent and he said next to nothing for the hours that followed. For the average human, needle in skin is enough to get their mouth intimate with the taste of swear words, but he laid there, lying on his stomach with eyes squeezed shut and his fists clenched with all four fingers wrapped around the thumb, breathing. At one point, I felt the need to ask,

“Why do some people get tattoos if all they'll do is curse me, curse themselves and their mothers and maybe even regret getting one after?”

He raised his eyes slightly and it was a minute before he said, “My wife had the answer to that. She would've said, what's the difference between getting a tattoo and getting married?”. He shut his eyes and for

the rest of the session I left him in his silence. That was the first time I realised that there was comfort in getting a tattoo.

I learned a lot about people in the parlour and they told me about the things that made their lives difficult. They said their struggles came in all forms: in the faces of people they'd rather forget, bills that still needed to be paid and the loneliness in their empty beds and I saw the struggle in their faces and maybe that's why when they complained, I didn't get angry. I wasn't even frustrated because without them, I wouldn't have learnt that "it's tough" isn't what people want to hear. I learned to listen because sometimes, more than once or twice, the men and women who lay on our thrones, as we called them, understood what made life beautiful and knew how to appreciate it, like the man who got the tattoo of his wife.

What I really meant when I talked about complaining was rubbish people.

I told her, "It's not about people being rubbish towards me. It's rubbish people in general. I am sick and tired of everyone always inventing drama everywhere I look, and everyone always being offended by everything and everyone else but then turning around and insulting others. I'm tired of oversensitive people being assholes to everyone else in this made-up drama world of nonsense. I wish I could go back to the eighties when all that mattered was going to work to earn a living and enjoying the weekend. Everyone tries to compete with

everyone else in a sympathy battle which is pointless because ninety-nine percent of them live a dream life and are just bored and none of them actually care about anybody but themselves. So, the drama and attention battle are in vain because no one is listening or caring. They're just waiting for their turn to talk and I've had enough with it all."

So, I decided that on some days, serenity was locking my phone in a drawer and working on my art, making coffee, lots of coffee as usual, smoking every now and then and taking the dogs out when the sun was setting. It was and still is my favourite feeling. I like to let them run around on the fields near my home and if they're lucky, I'll run too, but mostly I walk and walk and watch until that pink and orange part at the bottom of the sky goes away.

But here's the thing. What I didn't know about serenity, was that it's like an upside-down painting. What makes it hard to figure out is that you're not the artist, so you don't know what's coming. The artists paint away and none of it makes sense, but when the canvas gets flipped right side up suddenly you see - there's a face, or a setting, an atmosphere - it all changes.

I wasn't in control of how and when that happened to me. But it did.

*

The days I spent inking colours into people's skin came to an end when one day Charlie, the expert at telling underage kids they can't have a tattoo, found me collapsed on the floor of the room leading out to the back of our tattoo parlour. I was taken to hospital and when I came to, I was told I had to stay for at least another three days. The doctors used big words like arteries and aneurysms and I had no strength to understand that I had dangerously high blood pressure. I was too tired, and my mind felt too foggy to care. It took a week and a half for me to do anything other than drift in and out of sleep and need hospital drips to keep me going, well, keep me alive.

I had a lot of time at the hospital to do a lot of nothing. Every time I felt ready to leave, my body told me I wasn't, and I was still stuck there.

So, I started thinking instead of trying to escape and one thing I thought about the most, was family, not my family but just family and what it means to be a part of one. I was moved to a shared ward after the second week and so I talked about family with the lady in the bed next to mine. I expected to be put in a ward with other men, so I didn't really know what to say to her at first or if she wanted to be spoken to, but I started talking to her anyway, wondering if she had the kind of wisdom I didn't seem to have. I told her that my best friend Hannah had started a family with her girlfriend and they were expecting a baby after many rounds of IVF that just didn't work. When she asked me about myself, I told her I didn't know yet. She told me that in life,

there was no use in finding yourself in any relationship, simply for the sake of it or because you're not thinking about it and it 'just happens'.

"It's better to find your definition of love and happiness," she said.

Her name was Zeena and when I woke up a few days later, she wasn't in the bed next to mine anymore and I could only lay there and hope that someone had come to take her home. I never actually found out what happened to her, but Zeena will always be the reason why I fell in love with Stephanie.

After another week of porridge for breakfast, they let me go.

"Right, you're scheduled to see the doctor again in four days and he'll book you in for the next check-up" and while the nurse spoke, I thought of all the reasons why I wouldn't be making any of those appointments.

I went back to our tattoo parlour with a brown box and put some of my stuff in it to take home. Dave and Charlie moved piles of paper from one desk to the next to stay busy and we took turns to keep talking. I felt silly because I knew I wasn't going to say it out loud but being back in hospital would've been better than leaving the parlour. I knew Dave and Charlie felt the same feeling I did because when I was leaving, there was a thickness to our laughter and when we talked, we looked around at the walls of our office where pictures of us were taped. They reminded me to come back soon because "the coffee won't

make itself". I found a job at a garage and I took it, but I spent the nights leading up to my first day feeling like I was stuck somewhere and not knowing how to come out. I wanted to get back to normal, but the new job was something and I only had to go in for a couple of hours each day and plug numbers into computers, tick boxes, answer calls and scribble a signature here and there.

For three months I did as I was told by the people in the garage, because I couldn't really do anything else, and went home, hoping that the next day somebody would call about anything other than contracts and questions. When I wasn't sitting inside the hot, grey office, I helped Martin, yes, the Martin I mentioned at the start, or I talked to our boss Steve and on some Friday evenings, we had miso soup for dinner in the garage.

Martin is a mechanic and he says he does more than fix cars, but he won't tell anyone what he means. As for Steve, he's sort of the father bird of his garage, laughing and shaking his head at something stupid Martin does and asking me if I want to see his tricks for a good engine. I got along with them because there was always something they could tell me that I didn't care to know before I met them, so the garage became a nice place to be with Steve and Martin around.

This was where she found me.

On one of those Fridays, I was packing Martin's tools and pulling plastic chairs out of the office for us to sit on when she walked in.

“Excuse me, sorry. My car’s right outside and I have a flat tyre, any chance you could change it for me? I don’t have a spare”. There was a sweet kind of urgency to her voice and I turned around.

I knew I had to tell her we were closed, and I knew it would be better to wait for Martin to come back with our healthy Japanese takeaway, but I looked at her for a few seconds and knew I didn’t care about anything I was meant to do.

I nodded. She smiled.

Something inside my stomach flipped around and around and I grabbed Martin’s toolbox off the shelf, took one of the plastic chairs and asked her to follow me outside. I put the chair down near her little blue car.

“Make yourself comfortable Miss..?” and I bit my tongue inside my closed mouth.

“It’s just Stephanie and thank you – for the chair and the car”.

Stephanie.

“So how’d you burst your tyre?” and I spent the next few minutes listening to her voice while I nodded and opened Martin’s toolbox, wondering what tool to use first.

I was halfway through removing her tyre when Martin crouched down beside me, the familiar smell of our takeaway in his hands, and he squinted his eyes. He glanced up at Stephanie who was tapping her

fingertips on the back of her other hand and then he looked back at me.

He shook his head, laughed and got up and then he said, “here, I’ll finish off for you. Ma’am, you can follow Mr Happy here inside and he’ll sort out the payment since that’s his job as our accountant”.

“Thanks Martin,” and he laughed again because I looked the opposite of thankful. I looked at Stephanie and she had a small smile on her face. I put my hand out to tell her to go inside. She walked in and I looked at the sun on her yellow hair and wanted to touch it.

“So how much will that be?” she turned to ask me, and I looked away and pretended to rub my eyes.

I tried to find something to say while I walked to the till. She seemed to be waiting for me to give her a number and then she smiled and went back to waiting.

“Nothing, no – nothing don’t worry about it- it’s on me”.

“What? How much?” She sounded confused.

“I mean, you don’t need to pay anything, I’ll cover it”. My eyes met hers and this time I didn’t look away.

“What are you talking about?” she asked me, but her voice was softer. I rubbed the back of my head and looked up at the ceiling and let out a small laugh. This time it was my turn to smile and I told her I would cover her new tyre.

“I don’t understand. I mean, why would you do that?” She tilted her head just a tiny bit and the light in the room rested on her soft pink cheeks.

I clenched my fists behind the counter.

I said, “It’d make me feel better if I did”. She laughed, looked down at her feet and looked at me again, sideways with a beautiful smile on her face.

“Well you’ve just made my day”. I knew Martin would come back in at any moment, so I took my chance and asked her if she wanted to have dinner.

She raised her eyebrows slightly as if to see if I was joking. And then, she smiled one more time.

Stephanie wanted to know all kinds of things about me, and not just the usual stuff like my favourite colour or what I do for a living. She’s the kind of woman who doesn’t care if I like coffee but wants to know if I leave cups lying around everywhere. She has a way of doing this thing where she’ll make me stand outside of my own skin and really look at myself in a way I’ve never done before and then she’ll talk about something, anything like her love for wooden furniture. She’ll lean forward, stop talking suddenly and smile. When she does that, I can’t think.

She wanted to know if I had a hero. I wanted to lie and tell her something interesting, beautiful even. So, I put it off and told her I needed to think about it a bit more but a few weeks after she asked me, I called her and told her I knew the answer and that was the first thing I said when she picked up.

“The answer to what Happy?” and there was a softness to her laugh.

“Happy”.

That’s what everyone calls me and really, it’s a little joke. I’m a six-foot, bulky bald man with a brown beard grown to the top of my chest and I usually walk around wearing a lot of black. My real name is Jay, but nobody, not even my family calls me that.

“I know a hero. When I was in hospital, you know, when my arteries decided to burst one by one all those months ago, Dr Olumawe came to my rescue. I know we haven’t talked it in detail before but here it is. My recovery was a long one and by the end of it, I could no longer be a vegetarian. Yes, I suppose I should tell you, I was a vegetarian because my dad told me where our meat came from when I was eight and I guess I never forgave him for leaving it so long until he told me. But anyway, no more vegetarian but I’d rather that than be a dead vegetarian. So, this Dr Olumawe is a large Jamaican man. Between each round of anaesthetic, he spoke to me briefly and the only thing I remembered then was his really wide nose and he had a pretty funny

pair of glasses that sat quite neatly on it. After some time, he sat with me more often to check up on me. I think it's safe to say we got along pretty well and our conversations started off something like this:

'Pain?'

'About a 6 and a half,' I usually said.

'I'll check the blood pressure now'

'Oh good'

'A listen of your chest'

'I know. The stethoscope's cold' – by then I was used to it.

'Not too long to go now,' he would say.

I never bothered replying whenever he said that because it had been a month. He tried to spend five minutes telling me about his day and sometimes, about his life and it was so nice to hear him talk. He came with a newspaper and those were the times I liked most. Since I couldn't use my own body well, Dr Olumawe would read out articles and for those five minutes I stopped feeling like a hermit. I guess almost dying had its perks because without it, I wouldn't have met you."

"Happy," she whispered.

And out of everyone I know who calls me that, nobody makes me feel it like she does.

I think about Hannah, I think about Martin and Steve and I wonder whether I'll go back to Dave and Charlie. I walk past people with tattoos and think about who Dave and Charlie meet every day and the weird and wonderful stories they must hear. Then I think about Stephanie and I know I'd to like to stay in the garage for longer and sometimes, I don't know. When not knowing becomes too frustrating, I run to what I know is real, and help Stephanie throw the ball for the dogs to catch. I take her hand and every single time, I think about how watching the sunset with my dogs and the orange colour of the sky are made better with her standing beside me.

Sometimes when we take the dogs out in the evenings, Stephanie runs ahead with them and I walk, watching her, watching them, and I remember talking to Zeena. I wish I could tell her that I might start a family.

Vincent Otterbeck

Mentored by Ross Raisin

Extract from a novel in progress

Yemi woke up in a mass of sleeping bodies. They were breathing heavily. Some were snoring, filling the air with a thick fug of sleep. All that was between him and the hard, cracked ground was a thin layer of blankets. The man lying next to him grunted deeply as he rolled over in his slumber. Yemi didn't feel like going back to sleep. He could hear the shrill cries of cicadas coming from the jungle's mouth, as if they too were restless with the morning heat. He sat up quietly and squinted to see out of the open doorway.

Outside the hut, it was heavy with darkness. The bright summer moon had dipped beneath clouds, and Yemi could see no more of his surroundings than he could the face of the man who was turned away from him. But already in the screeching of insects and the stirring of men, he could feel the energy of the day to come.

Even though he'd only slept a little while, Yemi was glad to be awake. He lay back down and closed his eyes to listen to the snoring of

the men in the room, the cicadas in the distance, and the stillness of the sky outside the hut's entrance. In a few more hours it would be time to get up. Yemi felt the strength in his body, his worn limbs newly rested and healed. He decided to stay here for one more day.

“Thank you. For letting me stay here.” Yemi said. Shego looked up at him from the rabbits they were skinning by the fire pit. Her face was so wrinkled, as if a thousand tiny rivers had carved their way across her sandstone skin. He watched the wisps of her white hair blow around her face as she made rough incisions in the animal's flesh.

Yemi looked around them at the small village, where all kinds of activity were taking place. There was a cluster of mud huts, and a crumbling stone well where a line of people stood waiting to get water. Only a few of them looked anything like Shego or the other villagers, and Yemi could only guess at what regions they'd come from. They were migrants on their way up north to the City, stopping to rest and trade supplies. Others were sat around eating and talking loudly. Their voices rang out like cowbells in the blisteringly hot air. Yemi saw a man who had slept in the same hut as him at the edge of the village, carrying a sack over his shoulder as headed towards the north path with a woman. Down the west path, through the dancing heat devils, he could see another group walking towards the village, kicking up clouds of dust. Half a mile

away, spanning from east to west, the jungle loomed. A strange, cool green creature in the delirious heat.

Yemi's hands fumbled as he pushed his knife inexpertly through the skin of the rabbit he was holding, scraping his palms on the rough hilt. The action created a dull tearing sound, and an overpowering mixture of the smells of blood, fur and his own sweat. Shego worked smoothly at twice his pace, showing no signs of exertion. She was an old woman, one of the last natives of the village, but strong as a camel. It had been her who had lifted Yemi out of the ditch on the north path a few weeks before and carried him back to the village, exhausted and starving. She'd fed him and let him stay until he was healthy enough to help her fetch water and prepare meals. She hadn't asked him to help with this work, but it felt like little enough compensation for a woman who'd saved his life. Yemi put down his knife.

"I need your help," he said. Shego coughed, not looking up. "I'm leaving tomorrow." Yemi paused. "I'm going that way."

Shego raised her head to follow the path his hand pointed towards, which led straight into the jungle. She furrowed her wrinkled brow deeply.

"There's nothing for you that way, boy." She spoke with a voice that was deep and measured. "You'd be best going back the way you came."

Yemi looked back towards the path leading to the City, at the last group to leave growing smaller in the oily distortions of the molten air. Their bodies were stooped, the heat on their backs another burden in their long journey to find a new life in the City.

“There’s nothing for me that way, either,” he said.

Ten metres away, a ragged dog lay listless in the heat, its eyes trained on the pile of limp rabbit bodies that Shego was throwing on to a cloth.

“You’re not strong enough to go through the jungle” she told him, cleaning her knife blade with a rag. “Go west.” Yemi shook his head in response.

“The west path has no shade. If I go that way, I’ll pass out again. The jungle has water and shade.” He paused, knowing that she sensed this wasn’t the real reason the jungle called to him. “I’ve gone through jungles before,” he said, “I’ll only need a few things, if you can spare them”

Shego turned the knife over in her palm slowly, both eyebrows raised. Yemi imagined her worrying about his safety, wondering why he would choose such a difficult journey. For a few seconds, she said nothing, but then she looked up and smiled mischievously at him.

“Boy, you got nothing to trade but the clothes off your back,” she laughed. Her eyes had flint-coloured specks in them that caught the light as she tilted her head upwards. “I’ll get you what you need, child,” she said, “but don’t you go getting yourself lost in the jungle now that I’ve just gotten to like you!” Yemi felt a rush of gratitude towards her and beamed gratefully, but she waved him away.

“Why don’t you make yourself useful and fetch an old woman some water, eh?” She said to him. Yemi jumped up and ran towards the well, elated, but when he looked back he saw Shego’s face, staring wearily down into the sand.

He lay awake that night, listening to the deep breathing, watching the cold sliver of moonlight cutting across the bodies on the floor. The men were still, but alive, and their anxiety seemed to hang in the air. Yemi recognised the feeling well, but found he couldn’t at all connect to it. It was like something was dead and buried inside of him, bleeding numbness in the deep pit of his stomach. Flowing out in the slow squeeze of his heart. In the darkness, he touched the worn circle of thread on his wrist, felt it cool on his fingers, imagined its bright colours. Holding on.

The next morning, Yemi had some rabbit meat and flatbread at the fire with some of the migrants, and then he went to say goodbye to Shego. She had given him a small bag of supplies,

containing a knife, a blanket, a rope, food and a little water in a skin. She'd told him that this jungle was full of rivers, so he wouldn't need to travel far before he could refill it. She'd also warned him about the predators in the area, and of the six-day journey through the jungle to the next village. Yemi had listened carefully to all of this and assured her that he could keep himself safe. Whether or not she believed him, he couldn't tell, but as she lived in a migrant village, he knew he wasn't the first child she would have seen travelling alone.

Shego wasn't by the fire pit. She wasn't in either of the migrant huts, where another old villager was gathering up a pile of wool blankets, or near the well or the goat paddock. He eventually found her in one of the larger central huts, where she was stood hunched over a cooking pot that was filling the room with smoke. She was standing next to another woman with white hair who could have been her sister, and both women turned to smile kindly at him.

“Are you leaving now?” Shego asked him. Yemi nodded.

“Thank you for your help.”

He looked at her face and remembered her kindness towards him, and how she had kept him alive.

“Yem Akai,” he said. “That means good luck in my language.”
Shego grinned broadly at him and reached forward to squeeze his
shoulder affectionately.

“Take care, boy”, she said.

Imaru K. Lewis

Mentored by Kamila Shamsie

Extract from *The Misdeeds of Ellis Friar*

Rhu Tilo had been friends with Friar for as long as she could remember. It wasn't that she hadn't tried on multiple occasions to find other friends, it was just that there was no one else in the school who seemed willing to talk to her for more than a couple of days, before they told her formally that she was never to come near them again. Sometimes they would look at her with open contempt, or sometimes with fear. She had been in a short relationship with a classmate, Jim Laurel, who had wound up in hospital for almost a year after he'd 'stumbled' in front of a w3 bus; he'd recovered, just about, but when she'd gone to check on him in hospital, Jim had told her that it was over and that if she didn't leave right now he'd call the nurse. He'd left school the week after he'd been discharged, moved clean to the other side of the city and had not been heard from again. And after Jim had left, Friar had sidled up behind her and given her a friendly pat on the shoulder. He'd said "At least you have me." and Rhu smiled and

agreed. That night she'd wept into her pillow so that her parents couldn't hear-she was stuck with him.

They were partners in crime, or so said Friar. But Rhu thought of herself as more of an unwilling accomplice. He would talk her into a night out, a bit of fun just the two of them going to a movie or some other innocuous activity. Each time Rhu would convince herself that he was telling the truth; sometimes he was, and they would spend a pleasant evening together. But often the night would be a harrowing chain of events which would culminate in the pair of them running from the Police. After the last time, in which Rhu had been tricked out of her bed into aiding and abetting a kidnapping, she had made a promise never to go out with Friar after daylight hours.

It was a Saturday evening. Rhu was in her room and had been trying in vain to entertain herself, while her father was at work; her father was a Police Detective and was out most days and nights of the week. Her mother had died shortly after giving birth to her. Rhu and her father were not the kind of father and daughter, who relished the thought of having deep emotional conversations. If Rhu's father spoke to her, it would generally be because lunch was ready, or because he was tired of asking her to do the damned chores. If Rhu ever spoke to her father it would generally be because she wanted money. It was an efficient, functional relationship, which didn't need to be sullied by, what her father called "soppy heart-to-heart bullshit". So, because they were both far too busy getting on with their lives, Rhu's father never

mentioned that his wife's absence still gnawed at him, and Rhu never brought up that fact that she blamed herself for her mother's death.

A deceased mother and a workaholic father meant that Rhu had the run of the house. She had spent that Saturday scrolling through the unwarranted amount of TV channels. It was around ten o'clock when her phone rang. The number was unknown, but she knew it would be him. Her stomach felt distorted, compressed as though a great pressure from above was pressing down on her, gently but with conviction. In her mind, she played out the events of the next few hours-she would resist the long hum of the phone, it would go to voicemail; but then he would call again, and again until she answered. Best, she thought if she simply answered now, face him down. She was her own person. She didn't need to do what he said all the time. She would pick up, ask him what he wanted, then tell him to fuck off and that would be that.

"What do you want Friar?"

From the other end of the line, Rhu could hear loud music playing, distorted into a tinny crackle, over which she could hear Friar's voice.

"RHU!" he bellowed "Rhu, you've got to come to Clara's, man it's live!" He gave a loud cheer mid-sentence, cutting himself off. "Rhu just come man, you're missing out". Rhu sighed

"Friar, I told you I'm not going a place with you, after last time".

"What? Are you still on that? That was time ago"

“It was three weeks ago, you prick.” She hissed, “And you didn’t even apologise!”

“Why’ve you got to be hurtful?” said Friar, affecting a wounded tone. “Maybe treat your only bredrin with a little more respect? I mean, I don’t see anyone else ringing you up inviting you anywhere. You gonna sit at home watching dead movies on Film 4 until you fall asleep, or are you gonna experience a real life, Clara Black party?” Rhu gritted her teeth. She felt a hot prickling in her cheeks. This is what he did. He would take any reason she had to stay away from him, and then he would use his own brand of warped logic to squeeze and compact it into a form that was trivial and petty, so that she feel guilty for even being bothering to get upset. She felt that guilt now, but that only made her angrier. Hang up on him she thought, hang up on him, before you start shouting. If you start shouting, he wins.

“Goodbye Friar” she said, concentrating on keeping her voice calm and restrained. Friar kissed his teeth.

“You know what right, do what you want, innit?” He made a big show of sounding disinterested, but he was pissed, she knew. “I’ll be here at the maddest party of the year. If you want to miss out, because of some shit that happened a month ago, then I won’t try and twist your arm”

She hung up then, cutting him off. Rhu stared long and hard at her phone. The screen told her that her call had ended. After thirty

seconds she realised that she'd forgotten to breathe. She gulped dryly. She'd done it. She'd stood up to him. She could enjoy her evening. She turned up the television. During the next break, she'd get a snack from downstairs, she might even dip into her dad's beer. It would be the perfect Saturday. Sighing contentedly, she switched the phone off and settled back into her film.

Friar pocketed the phone. It wasn't his, but it was a piece of shit Android and he was sure the original owner wouldn't mind. They couldn't have, if they'd left it just lying in a sink in the ground floor bathroom. He kissed his teeth again. He was sitting alone at a bar by the living room taking small sips of vodka and coke. He was surprised at how upset he was; It wasn't like Rhu's presence here was even really required for the job. But there was something about the way she had rebuffed him, the way she had hung up on him. She wouldn't have done that before, he was sure. They had been friends for years and she had always been willing to go out. Last month, Friar had been approached by a couple of guys who'd said they had a job for him. They'd wanted him to jump some Kurdish guy who'd been caught selling drugs in their territory, and bring him to a warehouse where he justice would be administered. It had sounded like a laugh, so he'd taken the job and brought Rhu along as an extra pair of hands. It had been just as much fun as he'd expected. They'd found him, loitering around Broadwater Farm, Friar had given him a good clobber with an iron chain he'd found, then the pair of them had bundled him into a

stolen van and had set off for Edmonton. The guy had spent the journey whimpering like a small dog and pleading for his life and when they got to the drop off point he'd screamed when he saw the masked gang members converging on the van. Friar's clients, as he proudly liked to call them, had given him a substantial wad of cash, even putting him onto another job and he and Rhu had been on their merry way. Friar had thought that she'd enjoyed herself just much as he had, but she spent the whole drive home sulking and had told him that he wasn't to talk to her ever again. Her absence had taken its toll on him in a way that made him rather uncomfortable.

"Fuck her", he muttered. He didn't need her to have a good time; and besides he wasn't just here for the fun of it. If he was going to pull this off, he needed to have his wits about him. He took another sip of his drink. It tasted like mouthwash, but teenagers didn't drink alcohol for the taste, he knew. The trick was to look like he was just as wasted as the rest of them and it helped that he couldn't get drunk even if he tried. Friar had spent the whole evening lumbering around Clara's house, tactically slurring words, judiciously scanning every room through bleary eyes. That night Friar perfectly portrayed the teenaged boy, inebriated out of his adolescent mind, and would have fooled even the keenest observer; since everyone here was either drunk or high or a dangerous combination of the two, Friar doubted that he even needed to play the part as well as he was. But only amateurs took chances like that.

He hadn't been that impressed, walking into Clara's house. True it was probably the largest, most expensive house he'd ever laid eyes on. But it looked to Friar like the kind of house that a rich young man thought that he was supposed to own. The house itself was a large cube of glass and steel and looked more like an art exhibit than a home. It was about three storeys high, with each floor containing an assortment of gyms, saunas, and bars, several guest bedrooms and more bathrooms than was necessary for a family of two. To his dismay, Friar noticed security cameras, huddling in the corners of the ceilings. If those cameras had picked him up, then he would become present at the scene of the crime, and since he wasn't even really friends with Clara except in her head, his attendance at a party meant for only her closest mates would draw immediate suspicion. But a surreptitious word with the hostess, eased his fears.

"Don't even worry about those" Clara burbled between sips of vodka "I-I turned those off. Can you imagine if Dad caught this whole party on camera?" She gave a high-pitched chortle before staggering off to go talk to someone else. So far, Friar had acquired a secure method of entry into the house, having found a spare key to the front door while pretending to throw up into a potted plant at the front of the house. All that was left for him to do was to sit and wait for the party to end. As he nursed his vodka, Clara slumped heavily onto a stool beside him.

“Enjoying the party, Friar?” she asked him, giggling. Friar looked at her, then at the large clock on the wall by the stairs. She was very attractive, he thought, and he had plenty of time.

“Yeah, I’m loving it” he said giving her a big grin “Best party all year, in my opinion.”