

Rathbones

Folio Prize

MENTORSHIPS

in association with FIRST STORY

Short fiction and Poetry
by Nidaa Raoof

Mentored by Lucy Caldwell

Lucy introduced me to the writer Jan Carson, who writes postcard short stories. We thought it would be an interesting challenge to write a short story on a postcard every day for a month and give them to people. I chose my favourite seven and combined them into a series of apocalyptic events, commonly revolving around the theme of nature and climate change.

Part I

The story of the seven apocalypses

Heavy pale smoke filled the sky. Misty mountains skimmed the tips of his wings with their height. The sound of children screaming rattled in his ears. Smoke found his lungs. He flew higher to avoid the intoxication. The smoke wouldn't allow him to escape. He searched for a new home, whilst barely able to carry his weight any longer. Nowhere to rest and nothing to eat. This must be the end. The arrogance of others had killed their home. Every chance of saving the planet was wasted with their mistakes. Now they must all pay.

Her lilac wellies crushed the snowflakes into footprints of ice. The frozen winds tickled her nose. She could feel every mocking laugh of the cold pressing on her cheeks. The smell of smoke flew through the air, intoxicating her lungs. She ran towards the mountains. Her heart skipped a beat, perhaps even two. Her body stuck to the ground with fear. She couldn't blink. Her mind was all that was able to work, but even that was a little broken. And yet her mind chose to follow the screams that were buried inside the flames between the peaks of the mountains. This was the power of nature's revenge, that it could call people to their own death.

New York's stars were shining in the sky for the last night. Humans had become blinded by hatred and arrogance. They first began by tearing the earth apart and all that existed in it. Brick by brick it was torn into pieces. They then turned on each other. The Earth was not broken enough for them. So they decided to remove comfort and happiness from each other as well as their own.

The wet smell of leaves, mud and blood lingered in the fog. He could not smell the petrol from the passing cars. The candy floss across the street. Or the sweat from the basketball court. He remembered none of it. Only the way his mother screamed in agony. Only how his father shouted with fear at the gunshots.

All he remembered was the trigger of the gun being pulled, the smell of cigarettes and mint pressed into the wool of the man's coat and the yellow tape. He didn't remember how quickly he ran. All he remembered was that yellow and black police tape, drawn across either side of the bridge like ribbon. The only way he believed he could forget would be to kill. To kill and avenge his parents. To kill and be exactly the same as they rest of them.

The rose sun oozed into the purple sky. The water held the sky's reflection like a mirror. He needed to leave. He couldn't take the risk of being found. His baby sister was left in the tent, in the hope of being captured with mercy. Perhaps captured by the sun instead of a traitor.

He, however, could not take that risk. He'd be killed without mercy for sure. He had lived for several years in ignorance and pride.

It wasn't his fault for what they did to him. The world had changed him. He had no control - the only thing he was at fault for was leaving his sister to be taken. He hoped the Earth would take her instead of the murderers roaming their land. The planet's animals were dying its people were killing each other and the Earth itself turned to lie on its front and stab itself in the back.

Walking. Walking with heavy steps. As though the ghosts from our past were stuck to our boots. We could hear them. The daemons. The crawling slithers under the soil. They jumped from tree to tree. The echoes from their whispers mocked the birds. Every pebble and leaf shook with fear like never felt before. The swaying branches hung over Earth's skin, casting shadows on the ice floor. 'Will anything remain?' asked the soldier. 'Or will the daemons have taken me before anyone would miss me?'

He heard the footsteps and turned back. Ready to be saved. But the footsteps weren't those of a hero or even a human. The daemons had found him instead. He ran in search of an echo just like he did at war. But the only human echo he heard was from his screams. So he ran to the creation which allowed him to breathe - the trees in the rainforest. This was the last of them. The lungs of the earth were as good as dead. The trees were alone. Clumped together in a group. Him standing with them wasn't enough hope. The chainsaws sat in thousands of trucks. Machines. Monsters.

This would be the end. He did not leave them. If they died, so would he. So why not suffer with them. And die together.

He climbed the most wonderful of the trees he could find. His heart was drawn to the top like a magnet. The roaring chainsaws hammered into the bodies of trees. With this tree, he fell. With the last tree, he died.

Gentle sunlit rays embraced the blissful peach sea of warmth. Sapphire clouds of darkness lingered above the thunder-struck waves, beaming with lightning. The melting sky kissed what was left of the land goodbye, leaving peculiarity as foreign dust amongst its shadows. Every soul became lost in the Earth's nightmares and the trees one by one stopped casting their cool shade on the ground. Every atom was lifeless. The planet was ready to die again tonight, but the people were not - only this time the sun would be gone forever.

I have also selected my favourite postcard stories which are most personal to me:

The enchanted grove

The summer sun sat in the candy blue sky, its warmth made a peach nest around itself and the clouds. The birds whispered to the leaves and they rustled at the touch of her feet. She felt every breath of fog and every tickle from the howling wind. Whenever she visited, she felt as though she was in an enchanted forest. A forest with the ability to hold her happiness and remind her to smile when she felt down.

A broken tyre swing hanging from the trees. A hobbit's door at the bottom of an oak tree. Helicopter leaves hidden in the glimmering grass. This was home.

Glowing eyes. Burning warmth of the sun resting on her face.

Hair down. An inspiring breeze brushing through it.

She was home.

Alice lost her way to wonderland

The amber leaves settled where the sun tickled the horizon. The whispering winds brushed the branches' elbows. Autumn knew Alice wasn't far from magic. There was frost freezing her nose and a breeze blowing under her dress.

Alice ran. She ran as far as she could. Quickly and quietly. Autumn's presence wasn't far, and neither was its power. From the rage she carried in every step, Alice skid across the glistening leaves.

A force like no other held her down. But this wasn't mother nature's act. It squeezed her ankle tighter than the rope around her heart and pulled her down. Only this time it wasn't the white rabbit. It drew her into a vertical tunnel of mist. Blood lined the walls of her throat and the mist had stolen the warmth from her lungs.

Alice had reached the ground. Only this time it was to meet her death. Death screamed her name with anger. Never again could she visit wonderland again. Never again could she see the only family who loved her. She had lost her wonderland.

A sanctuary of hope

Running. Running was all she could do to be herself. It was the only way she could hide. Inside the city's crowd of screams, shouting and stress she became lost. So she reminded herself of what she could do. Run or stop?

Her heart pounded faster and faster as she bolted from the world like lightning. With the mindset of nowhere to go or hide, she was losing all hope. Running past cars, heavy roads and swaying branches. Running past the pressure. Running away from her worries. She soon found hope. Hidden between the loud buildings and busy roads she stumbled.

Stumbled across a sanctuary. A sanctuary of hope. She had never seen a place of beauty like this before, yet it was here all along. Stonebridge – her new place of hope. A home with animals and kind people. A home which showed her where true happiness lay. Another family. Another forever home.

I decided with Lucy to create a public instagram page to share my writing, after being inspired by Nayyirah Waheed, an Instagram poet. I was challenged to post one poem every day for a month. Here are a selection of my favourites:

Part II

A mother

As perfect as the last blossom in the middle of summer.
With petals as pretty as the tree's ancestors.

Like the comfort found in the voice that sits with you in the dark.
With a sound as sweet as a robin's first chirps.

As precious as the first snowflake falling in winter.
With beauty as distracting as a sunset's colours as they bleed through the clouds.

Like warm rays of light resting on a cold shadow.
With love as everlasting as the sky's existence.

The last blossom. The voice. The first snowflake. The sun.
Not a single word, metaphor, poem or book can describe a mum.

The water will change

The waves may crash into the shore. Over and over again.
The splashes follow the wind. Each droplet might fall onto your head from the sky. But the temperature will change.
The water may quench your thirst. The gulps falling down your throat. Every glass could save a soul. But the seas will rise. They'll rise to the sky.
All the water in the world will change. Nothing you can do will save it.
For now it's too late. For now you should hide. For now your mistakes must pay.
We told you to stay and protect. But now you must hide, because nowhere has been left to run to.

Silent destruction

Every day we hurt you even more.
We steal from you.
Without giving anything in return, we keep taking.
We are the reason for your destruction.
Every painful agony we raise upon you make our bodies bleed, our bones crack and our souls ache.
We are the cause of our own death – through yours.
'If only you were twice as big and half of you was still unexplored.'
Artist

Creativity falls from your fingertips with a rhythm like no other.
Oh look at the way the paint bleeds from your brush.
Cartridge skies flourish in your mind.
Each graphite line, curl, circle and swirl almost like words.
And every piece of art you create with a message of its own.
Oh If only more knew how to read it.

Happiness

Warm glowing sunshine bleeds into the sky's clouds.
Gentle rays of comfort fall onto every raindrop.

New air fills my lungs.
A cold mist sits in midair.
The temperature bites your fingertips.

A rush of heat rises upon your face.
The day is fresh. The night is at rest.

Spring's love

A hundred things standing in front of me.
Yet a million things have been pushed behind me.
A cool breeze.
An amber glow whistling alongside the wind, through the trees and into my window.
Sun resting on the floor , shining over the cats.
Rainbows hiding in every corner of home.
The year is new. So is my mind.

Where sky meets sea

With every radiant sunrise,
Your violent waves crash with rage.
Your temperature cuts the skin from blood.
You stare silently,
Your voice roars in agony.

You rest your body at the horizon.
Only when the sun begins to bleed do you stop killing.

Inspired by recent events I have written a stand-alone poem about racism.

Part III

Say their names

A world where racism is a pandemic.

A world where one name can ignite a flame of fear and anger in hearts.

Arrogance not allowing us to heal. Words cutting like a knife.

A world where staying silent & patient has become powerless. Voices are our only weapon. Protests and gunshots fighting over who is louder.

Has the planet not crumbled into more than enough pieces already?

Victims' names scream in our heads a thousand times.

Dismissed by those of arrogance and privilege.

Those who tap, scroll and slide past each sign. They swipe through all the stories & posts – and they slowly become blindfolded with ignorance.

Each name. Every clue. Unable to comprehend the pain from their blindness.

Their heavy words and violence have snatched away comfort. They forget we all bleed the same colour. They ignore history. They haven't let you breathe. They refuse to remove the blindfold.

Please. Stop. Take a knee. Pause. And find your stolen comfort again.

I beg you not to draw that knife. I beg you to keep fighting with your voice.

We know it has been too long. We know there are too many names.

You are not the colour of your skin. Or what you dream to win.

You are not the clothes you wear. Or how you tie your hair.

You are not the way you talk. Or the way you walk.

You are not the scars on your skin. But you are the battles you have won.

You are the diamonds that have appeared from the infinite pressure.

You are the sm:)es on your faces. And the voices that roar louder than lions.

You are the people we couldn't live without. You are the ones who will change us today and every day after.

You are the history books. You are the power of love.

You are the ones who started building but got teared down again & again.

You grew into flowers but got pulled out of the ground.

You have been like stars in the daylight.

But you built your walls high around yourselves.

You sprouted from the ground again.

You found your way into the night sky – and there you shone.

But the the sun hasn't set for the last time yet.

If this nightmare continues, I will sit with you in the dark until the sun shows its glowing love again. I will hold your hand and never let go. I will not let you fall again. I will make sure you can breathe.

The darkness will come again and again. But whilst we wait for the sun, allow your stars to shine as bright as ever.
And although the world may never change. We'll stand tall and strong.
And find peace and comfort in each other's voices, love and company.
We will use this power of our comfort to conquer this pandemic.