

Hope Springs Eternal



*An anthology by
Lincolnshire writers*

Hope Springs Eternal

Edited by Em Burton

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Foreword

I would like to express my gratitude to these wonderful authors for believing in *Lincs & Inks*. It’s been an absolute pleasure working with them, and I can’t wait to show the world the talents they possess. This book consists of poetry, prose and art by writers from across Lincolnshire, and for the first time a select few authors from elsewhere. They were tasked with submitting work inspired by nature, or evoking a sense of hope, and they nailed it. Take a seat, grab a snack and enjoy!

Daffodils

Mand Austen

Daffodils

We sit in silence, she fiddles with her sleeve,
I wait, thinking about the words I want to say, I
fiddle with my necklace

What are you thinking?

She stares out the window,
tiny buds start to awaken as winter
rolls over amongst the fallen leaves

I was just thinking, Spring is my favourite season

Why?

*The stirring of life, a yellow army
majestic and uplifting,*

We sit in silence watching the sky darken
smothering the daylight hours too early,
the garden transitioning as roots flourish
underneath the soil, unseen
like her diseased cells blooming
beneath her red jumper

She returns each week and watches
through the window, I wave as I dig the soil,
placing each daffodil bulb amid the darkness,
months pass, the days lengthen,
we sit and wait,
until one day a splash of yellow arrives
like a screaming child,

We sit in silence, I reach
for her hand
and
we
wait
for
Summer

The Growth of a Bough

Stef Bishop

Bio

Stef Bishop is a Lincoln-based poet and very occasional writer of flash fiction. More the autodidact than the academic, he has only recently started to write more seriously. Born in Birmingham, then immigrated to the USA for the first few years of his life before being raised in and around the West Midlands. He has lived in the city of Lincoln for nearly 10 years. He enjoys reading, writing, long walks, surreal art, music and a nice pot of tea.

The Growth of a Bough

Slowly we creep up into the attic,
our hearts already tethered to hope,
the skylight lets in thick quartz daylight
and we root ourselves in front of the cot.
We entwined each other, we stare
into our love, hoping bright tears come
and fate is kind, wanting breath
to be fresher than the last and wishing
the attic continues being our world
from this moment to eternity.

Then suddenly life sprouts quietly
out the cot and before our very sight
a burgeoning branch grows, natural relief
breathes our minds out of all wilderness.
As the branch stretches out, we shake
joyously and the attic fills with leaves.
Quartz floods the cot, the skylight blinds;
our branch grows and grows, diverges thin,
hatching five white buds, imploring us
to make sense of domestic bliss.

We had another sapling once, its growth
became agony of months, twigs wouldn’t form,
only pale tendrils remained, unable
to cling, before being rejected from the earth.
On the day of our loss, tears turned crystal,
stored up by the sky until a later time.
But that was many centuries ago,
and the later time is now; everything
around us: the attic, cot, the skylight,
so visible and free, we’re so happy.

Three Poems

Michael Cartwright

Bio

Michael Cartwright was born in Kent in 1951. After leaving secondary education he joined the British Army in 1967 at the age of fifteen and served for twelve years. Following the army, he gained employment in the Finance industry then in Security before moving to Boston in 1999. He entered the world of fast moving consumer goods and became involved in the handling of raw materials for a food processor. After being made redundant He returned to education completed an Access to Higher Education course and then gained a place at Bishop Grosseteste University studying Heritage then took a master’s degree at The University of Northampton. He currently researches and writes historical fiction and has published four books to date. He has a great deal of affection for poetry which he also enjoys writing.

Dance Around the Maypole

Dance around the maypole
Run across the field
Swim in the river cold fresh and clean
Laughter echo’s in the trees
Feel free do as we please

Away from voices that try to control
Watching clouds pass above making shapes
Faces float across the sky
Life is so good
No reason to cry

Coins in our pockets
Ice cream to buy
Passing through the fields
Of oats, barley and rye
Never let this dream disappear

Laying on a grassy bank
No tears, no pain, no fear
Only smiles all winter pain healed
Dance around the maypole
Run across the field

Early Spring

How much winter silver does spring gold cost
As the sharp white edges fall away and the first green leaves unfold
Lips turn up in smiles brought by warmth
The bright yellow orb can be seen above
The blemishes that the frost brought disappear

The plants break through their bars of frozen earth
Revealing the tips of life eager to kiss the sun
Rivers flow with the power of melting ice
The tension that gripped the body slowly drifts away
And dreams of what the sun has to bring flourish

No more frozen fingers in need of warming gloves
Steps that recover their lift from the tension of winters grip
Top coats are discarded in favour of comfort clothes
White legs are shown without hesitation
And colours appear to greet each other with easy smiles

Chatter is once again heard around tables of coffee and ice creams
Clusters of friends have time and reason to stop and talk
No anxious looks that say must go
Time grows with each ray of sunlight meeting an upturned face
And life seems good and full of grace

Shattered are the thoughts and feelings
As fingers of silver clutch at every part of land and man
Bringing back the hooded figures struggling on
Moaning winds cut through all that stand in its path
How much winter silver does spring gold cost

Orange Squash

It’s nice to sit on a summer’s day
Watching the kids play
In and out of the paddling pool
Splish splosh
I think its’s time for a glass of orange squash

At peace with life, just sit in my chair
Taking in the summer air
Relaxing not a care
Nothing fancy, nothing posh
Just sitting with a glass of orange squash

Listening to the radio, no cricket today
Just news only arguments nothing much to say
Not a lot of interest
Just a load of bunkum, a load of tosh
Glad to have my glass of orange squash

It’s getting near lunch I feel a little peckish
I wonder if I can have cold meat and relish
Nice to eat in the garden
With a nice big plate of my favourite nosh
Together of course with a glass of orange squash

Closing my eyes I dream of other times
Of places near and far with drinking the juice of limes
But today I’m quite content
Satisfied with what I’ve got, oh gosh
Just sunshine and a glass of orange squash

Must try to rouse myself
Get moving mow the lawn build a shelf
Try not to become too set in my ways
Perhaps I’ll give the car a wash
But first just another sip of orange squash

The sky is clear not a cloud in sight
Everything seems peaceful just right
Don’t care if I haven’t got much money
A house a car and a little dosh
But most importantly a good supply of orange squash

Always Beginning

Steve Eede

Bio

Edenbray developed his style of poetry over 60 years, borrowing from traditional and contemporary writers to create poetry he now refers to as 'beat' or ‘prog-prose’. After writing privately and through a popular Blog he decided in 2020 to compile his extensive back catalogue of 1,000 poems and to publish them in themed chap books. Later in 2023 '**edenbray edits**', his first solo anthology was published, which focuses on life experiences and diverse themes from personal freedom, mind health, nature, anti-racism and art through to war and faith. **edenbray** consistently emphasises his love of words, their vowel sounds and natural rhyming often introducing regional dialects and cultural linguistics into his work, such as in his Americana or Gaelic pieces.

Always Beginning

back on my haunches
the box is now open
and fear is flying free
the substance of our vulnerability

where lions hide
when the orange moon is shining
behind your honest clouds
of disillusion and regret

a summer gate is open
the muddied lane we trod
sun-dried and well travelled
sign-posts to a new constellation

Two Pieces of Artwork

Julie Eyett

Bio

I am a British botanical and wildlife artist based in the Lincolnshire fens where I have created a wildlife garden in which my little bantam hens range free. I work in pen & ink with ink washes over a graphite ground 'embroidering' ink marks into the paper's surface to create a tapestry of interwoven patterns with echoes of the Celtic knots of illuminated manuscripts & the whimsy of childhood fairytales. I like to study the relationship between the flora & fauna around me and the spirit of a natural world which seems to be increasingly fragile.

My Little Hens



A Cheeky Chick



Early April

Precious Harrison

Early April

Grass grows like grass.
The green is greening.
The lush and blush
of leaves and flowers.

The pulseless earth awakens,
soothed by the morning chill.
The soil tingly beneath the farmer's feet
whispers the promise of harvest.

The farmers out in the morning
ploughing the fields.
Tearing up the earth into mounds.
Soon the corns will sprout.

There are boys in a nearby farm
bent over tilling the loose soil.
The petrichor in the air
caresses their sweaty backs.

From Pink to Red

Blake Harrup Dack

Bio

BLAKE HARRUP DACK is a writer of spooky fantasy and other insanities from Norfolk. He is a student of English Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln, and has been published in the Dead-Ish Poets zine, shortlisted by Hinterland, and has performed his work at Lincoln SLOTH. Currently, he is working on short stories, poetry, and a novel, and bending to every whim of his cat between books and video game binges. You can find him on Instagram @blake_is_busy_writing. He is not as miserable as his work makes him seem.

From Pink to Red

‘Name’s Percy. Percy Turner.’

The words are laced with exhaled smoke that twines around my neck and tickles my lungs as the music pounds the club walls. A scarlet flannel hangs off him, tattered into grunge coat tails dangling over ripped jeans. His face is smooth and sharply defined; staring into the blue of his eyes feels like swimming. He doesn’t ask me for my name.

I shiver in the night breeze. ‘Nice to meet you.’

His eyes drag over me, and goosebumps sprout on my arms. ‘You’re not the type to be here.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘You’re too quiet.’

‘Just preserving my mystique.’

‘Sure you are,’ he drawls.

I stare at the floor. He cups my chin and makes me look at him. ‘It’s cute, I like the shy ones.’ The electricity of his touch magnetises all my body heat to my cheeks, colouring them like dusk skies.

‘Um... I’m here with a friend. It’s more her scene.’

‘And the mystery becomes clear.’

‘Yeah, hardly an Agatha Christie. Y’know what is though?’

‘Do tell.’

The crimson moon leering over us — how many prowlers are out by now? ‘Why the fuck are we having a party during the Hunt?’

Percy chuckles. ‘Maybe we like to live dangerously.’

‘Or die stupidly.’

‘If it’s so stupid, why are you here? Can’t be *solely* for my benefit.’

‘Peer pressure, wouldn’t you believe?’ The absurdity of it hits me like a bottle squashing a fly. The drone of stale music put me in a bubble, but the eerie silence of the night has popped it. ‘I’m gonna go. Don’t wanna become a Branded.’

I kick off the wall and make for the door, but Percy darts ahead so fast he becomes a red streak. The light glints off his annoyingly perfect teeth, ‘Stay for one drink?’

‘I should—’

‘C’mon,’ he fingers my fringe away, ‘just one and then I’ll walk you back.’ His hand trails down my arm and his fingers weave between mine. ‘I won’t let prowlers *look* at you.’

I nibble my lip. It wouldn’t be smart to walk back alone, even idiots know that, and it would be a waste to risk branding for a shitty party — may as well get *something* out of it. Plus, he’s my type. ‘I’ll take water.’

‘You’re not coming in for it?’

‘I’d rather wait out here if you don’t mind? Music is too loud.’

He pulls my hand to his mouth and kisses it, his teeth scrape across my skin. ‘You owe me.’

I bring my hand to my chest with a dramatic sigh, make a show of batting my eyes. ‘Such a gentleman.’

He disappears into the pounding belly of the beast, and I wait outside with the moon. I run through the mental checklist of Hunt survival. Don’t dull your senses, *check*. Wear thick jumpers, *check*. Stay home at night, *almost check*. I’ll be fine; prowlers don’t go for people like me, they have more specific tastes.

Percy returns with a glass of water and a bottle of Jack Daniels. ‘What course you do again?’

‘Zoology. You?’

‘Psychology.’

‘Ouch, have fun with Freud.’

‘Only if you have fun with owl pellets.’

‘I make no promises.’

He toasts the bottle by its neck, bloody light glints off it. ‘Then here’s to three years of misery.’

I scoff. ‘I’ll drink to that.’

We clink. The whiskey disappears down his throat; I suck water between my teeth. Those bony sips hit with the strength of his muscled gulps. The world starts to lose its features, and the breeze almost topples me. ‘What’s... happening?’

Percy’s grin resurfaces — his teeth sharper and glistening with venom. ‘Is everything OK? You don’t look well.’

It’s a struggle to keep from buckling under the weight of my head. My knees soften and I collapse into his arms. ‘*Prowler*,’ I try to yell, but the letters trail off like lemmings tumbling over a cliff.

‘You must have had a lot to drink. Don’t worry, I’ll get you home safe.’

‘Don’t... fucking touch—’ Blackness swallows my fizzing body, and the music fades to whispers.

Sensations return slowly.

I’m in my bed. The uni sheets scratch my stripped back and arms, spread like an angel, and in the dimness of the room I can only make out the pattering of rainfall. Pain hisses on my wrist.

There, brutally scrawled, is its true name: Alastor.

Air flounders in my throat. ‘No...’

‘You’re awake,’ says a voice that sounds like generations of voices hoarse from screaming stitched together and grating over each other.

In the umbra of the room, crimson eyes glare like two Hunt moons. The prowler lurches forward into the light. It stands about seven feet high — even as its gangly spine bends like a shepherd’s crook, like a question mark of its own body. “Percy’s” sharpness is parodied by a face so long and pointy it could shred glass. Rotted teeth sit in its impossibly wide mouth like stalagmites, and its eyes bulge out of their sockets. I try to roll off the bed and run, but it pins my arms to the frame with its large, clawed hands.

‘Your soul is the most satisfying I’ve had for a while,’ Its menagerie of voices moan into me.

A realisation sets in that something is... wrong. My body feels lighter, something separate that I haunt.

It huffs out a cruel laugh — voices clattering like a murder of crows — its coarse tongue drags over my face and leaves colonies of slime. The prowler’s voices clamour in its throat, one rising from its chest into its mouth. It grins. ‘*Mine*,’ it says with my voice.

Morning sunlight oozes through the window. The prowler crawls off and stalks towards a pile of skin beneath the window, shrinking as it does so. It zips the skin up over its body, becoming Percy again.

Percy — no, Alastor — snatches its coat off the floor, swings it over its shoulder, and strides to my door. It stops before leaving. Turns.

Sickeningly, Alastor’s smile still has every hair of its charm. ‘See you around campus,’ it chirps.

The door closes and I’m alone, my body nailed to the bed, my soul leaking out of the brand.

‘I’m just saying, I haven’t seen you in, like, forever. Are you OK?’ Regina’s eyes bore into my face, studying every detail for the slightest

hint of an answer.

Forever is an overstatement — it’s been two weeks. Ever since the Hunt, I’ve been working online; the brand burns when I try to leave my room. The prospect of exploring campus is a nightmare, I keep expecting everyone I pass to pounce and place their name beside Alastor’s. Regina ambushed me in the kitchen this morning and enforced a trip to the cute cafe she found on an open day. Amidst the clinks of cups and chatter, my fight-or-flight twitches.

My hoodie hides Alastor’s name.

‘Fresher’s flu.’

‘Bull-fucking-shit, you did fuck all for freshers.’

My hand vanishes into my sleeve and I bend the limp fabric round my fingers. ‘Probably caught it from you.’

‘Yes, because I’m riddled with it, aren’t I? C’mon, bookworm, talk to me.’

Regina is a spider: secrets that disappear into her ear spew out her mouth over campus in ensnaring webs. ‘It’s just stress. Hard to keep on top of all the reading. Speaking of, I need to go, I haven’t finished this week’s research.’

‘Hey, wait—’ Regina springs from her chair and grabs my arm as I turn to leave. As she tugs, the sleeve slides up.

The name smiles at her.

She gasps, then whispers ‘You’re a…’

Branded.

I snatch my arm back and yank the sleeve over my hand. Regina’s hand shakes, and she covertly wipes it on her jeans.

‘Let’s talk somewhere private,’ Regina says.

Silently, she leads me out.

The street is sparse enough to pass for private. There’s a bench that Regina and I sit on to watch trains pass, lit up by a cold aureola of sunlight. We sit on it, and a cloud covers the light. Regina is enamoured with her cuticles. ‘When did it happen?’

‘Last Hunt.’ My voice shakes as the memory stomps on it. ‘Regina, stay away from Percy Turner.’

She snaps out of her little reality. ‘What? *Percy Turner*? No, he can’t be one — he’s so… you can tell. They’re usually weird. Unadjusted. Percy’s funny, charming. He’s too normal.’

‘Monsters can smile too.’

‘They hit you with venom to take you away, what’s to say it’s not a hallucinogen?’ Trust the law student to whip out every defence.

Panic starts to creep in. ‘Regina, I’m not like the others. I’m not soulless. You believe me, right?’ She hasn’t looked at me yet. When she finally does, the warmth of her eyes is weak as a firefly in a blizzard. ‘Right?’

She sighs. ‘I—’

A scream cuts her off. It’s a guttural noise that comes from under the bridge arching over the track. ‘Someone might be stuck on the track!’ I say and sprint over, Regina struggles to keep up in her heels. There’s no train due, so we march along the tracks to find the source of the noise.

The sight stops us dead.

In the filthy underpass, struggling to move, is a Branded. She has long blonde hair and green eyes — that’s all that can be noted about her. The rest is erased by her brands. The last strands of her skin knot together in a bulging net, failing to keep her body together. She doesn’t ask for help — I’m not sure she can — and she cups her hands in a coffin around her face. Is this what happens when it’s our turn on the slaughterhouse line?

She steals a glance through her skinned fingers, a teal ribbon clasped between them, and her staccato breathing falls to a gentler rhythm.

A creak forces its way from her, ‘You.’ She points to my arm. *How did she know?*

I kneel next to her and offer a hand. She takes it, rolls up my sleeve to see its name. Her eyes drown in pity and she brings a hand to her chest, prodding it with her finger, ‘Cassandra.’ Each syllable crawls on withering limbs.

‘Cassandra. My name’s—’

She moans and keels over in my arms as the net of skin starts to pop. Regina gags. ‘Stay here, I’m getting help.’ She kicks off her heels and sprints.

Cassandra grabs my hand. ‘Find... the menders.’

‘What?’

‘*The menders... can fix.*’ Her grip is like iron, and she stuffs the ribbon into my hand.

Before I can press, the rest of her skin rips, and she lets out one last cry as the prowler’s name savages her flesh like an invisible bear. Long veins of black stretch out from the wounds until her whole body is encased by it. When the last of her humanity is stolen, she slumps in silence.

Fear steals my voice, freezes me in front of her body — if that’s even the right word. Regina calls my name and it barely squeezes into my ears.

A deep burning festers in my neck and arcs up to my cheek; a thousand needles give me a new tattoo. A mirror isn’t needed to know it says ‘*Alastor.*’

Regina’s focus skitters between me and Cassandra.

‘Is anyone coming?’ I can’t look away from her body.

Regina swallows. ‘No one wanted to touch a Branded.’ Then, uneasily, she offers to walk me back to our flat.

The sun doesn’t come out again.

Men don’t get branded.

It’s why I was never taught how to recognise a prowler. Men are supposed to fight, supposed to punch them on the nose so they scurry away. Men aren’t the ones who the articles call ‘streetwalkers,’ the ones who teachers and officers pierce with side-eyes when they tell children to be smart on the street.

I am no longer a man. I’m a streetwalking fool.

Jacket zipped up, I walk through the market square — it’s the furthest I’ve gone outside for a month; I wanted to get fresh air before locking myself away for tonight’s Hunt. Everything seems so... obvious. The newsstand is stacked with the headline ‘**MORE SOULLESS THAN EVER: HOW TO AVOID JOINING THEM.**’ The story is a back-handed reinforcement of all the tired rules, ensnaring us in thorny vines. On top of that, there’s the posters of women in red dresses, blindfolded in the woods, saying ‘Don’t dress to impress.’ Adverts that play in shop windows displaying toned men at parties, bewitching girls with a scent before body spray is framed against a red moon, encouraging you to ‘Unleash your wild side.’

Winter makes it easier to hide in plain sight, and Regina bought hydrocolloid bandages to cover the facial brand. I look like a cage fighter that’s been locked in a suitcase of bowling balls and kicked down the stairs — at least I’ve won some masculinity back.

A door swings open as a woman bolts from a butcher’s shop. She trips, and the butcher steps out and looms over her, face red enough to scorn a bull. ‘Can’t you read?’ he barks, jabbing a finger at a window sign: ‘*No Soul, No Service!*’

She scrambles to her feet. ‘George, you know me! I’ve been coming here for years!’

‘And for how many of those years have you been soulless?’

‘Not here—’

He doesn’t let her finish; he spits in her face and stomps back inside.

I want to ask if she’s OK, but the crowd has heard and set upon her like hyenas circling a wounded gazelle. They call her ‘Soulless,’ and all she can do is beg them to stop. They don’t listen.

Agony warps her face the way I know far too well, and as the teeth of the crowd sink into her, new brands carve their way over her eye.

The yells of the mob hound her as she flees.

What would they do if they knew about my brand?

What would I have done if I didn’t have one?

I would shake my head, go about my day, and sleep bundled in snug ignorance, comfy believing that Branded can’t be trusted because they don’t have the same soul as us. But I’m Branded, and the only difference is fear and a monstrous memory that perches on my chest, keeping me from sleep at night, pinning me to my mattress in the morning.

And it’s not just me. It’s all of us, isn’t it?

And for some of us it’s a death sentence.

‘*The menders can fix.*’ How can I find them?

The newsstand man is part of the mob, and today’s headline smashes into my skull at the sight of him. While the stand is unguarded, I steal a paper, slip into a park round the corner and settle beneath a tree.

The article regurgitates the same tips that I wore as flimsy armour, only differing in one point: step eight is an index of areas ‘infested with Branded.’ If the menders can fix brands, there must be Branded coming and going quite frequently. The top three have a similar amount of Branded between them, but the photos of Medusa Square catch my eye. One is of a girl flipping off the photographer, a teal ribbon wrapped around her arm. I’m wearing the same jeans as the day we found Cassandra, the ribbon is stuffed into my pocket. I pull up a bus timetable to see how to reach Medusa Square.

‘What’re you reading?’

The voice makes the brands burn.

Alastor drapes itself on the grass beside me.

I force my voice to stay steady. ‘What are you doing here?’

It flashes those teeth: its cuttlefish light show. ‘I like to keep tabs on my pets.’

‘Go away.’

‘Aw, but you haven’t even asked me how I’ve been.’

The Hunt is tonight and Alastor is already starting to feel the power high, pissing it off could be dangerous.

‘How are you?’ The words come out like barbed wire lodged in my throat.

It slaps its knees and sits up straight. ‘I’m so glad you asked! Right now, I’m trying to figure out what prey to claim — something new or something familiar.’ It winks at me and slides in closer until we’re shoulder to shoulder. ‘It couldn’t come soon enough, I’m getting itchy under here — how do you all wear skin so easily?’

I’m shaking too much to answer.

‘Still shy, huh? Good, stay that way.’

Regina offered to come along today, why did I say no?

It strokes my cheek, and when I pull my head away it grabs my face. ‘You should be proud,’ it whispers. ‘I don’t waste my brand on

just *anyone*. And speaking of the exceptional, that friend of yours is quite the looker. Regina, right?’

I wrench myself free. ‘Stay the fuck away from her.’

‘It has teeth after all! Or what?’

‘Someone will stop you.’

It scoffs. ‘Not if they want to maintain their precious ecosystem. Tell me, do you see anyone desperate to stop us? No? That’s because all ecosystems have a food chain, and you don’t fuck with the species at the top.’ It yawns, exaggerates stretching, leaving itself completely vulnerable. It knows I can’t do shit. ‘You pose as big a threat to me as a fish does to a lion. If I wanted to visit you again, nobody could stop me.’ It plants a sickly kiss on my forehead. ‘I best be off.’

Alastor gets up and starts to leave. The smart choice is to stay silent, but the words slip out. ‘I hate you.’ Tears clog my eyes as it turns back on me. ‘*I fucking hate you.*’

Snarling, it strides over. ‘If there’s one thing I won’t tolerate from my pets,’ Alastor says, ‘it’s bad manners. You need domesticating.’ It rips off my bandage, exposing the brand, and yells ‘*Branded!*’

The street is busier than it seemed a moment ago. Businessmen, mothers with prams, teenagers, and more stop and glare. The corrosive disgust could melt skin.

Alastor vanishes into the mob.

A tomato flies from the crowd and explodes against my face, coating the world in red. I cry out as my forehead splits, tomato juice seeping into what must be a new brand. And there I am, in the eye of a crowd, that thing’s name torn into my face.

I’ve moved down a floor in the food chain, and my new upstairs neighbours hurl abuse and rocks at me as I run to Medusa Square, refusing to stop when my legs start throbbing.

The sign reads *The Short Skirt*. A teal ribbon is tied around it, flitting in the breeze like a beckoning hand.

Alastor’s name is crushing me; I almost didn’t make it. With every brand, this body becomes property — it won’t be long until I’m evicted. A Branded, one of many here, pointed me in the right direction, but even then my legs resisted like wild horses I had to tame.

I stumble up to the triangular building, beat against the door, wait and wait and wait. An elderly woman opens it and gasps. ‘Let’s get you mended,’ she says, extending her branded hand.

Walls drift by as she escorts me up a flight of stairs to a hallway occupied by Branded and leaves me the closest one. The door to his room closes.

‘Are you OK?’ His voice reels my brain back into my head.

The only light in the room comes from a violet lamp. Not much, but enough to see who I’ve been brought to. His face is gentle, the purple light falls like rain over his grassy eyes. He holds out his hand to me, and there, etched onto his palm: *Babi*.

His eyes, wide and soft, speak for him. *Is it OK to touch you?*

The warmth of his hands fights the lingering chill from outside.

He sets me down on a chair by the window, curtains drawn shut, and sits across from me. ‘I’m Liam,’ he says, voice smooth as syrup.

I tell him my name, although it’s not mine anymore — robbed away by a magpie leaving only the case it came in.

Why does he still have a... oh. ‘You can’t fix it, can you?’

Liam’s mouth twitches, forming half a smile. ‘We can push it back, but we can’t get rid of it.’

My forehead stings. ‘Then what’s the fucking point?’ Shame rouges my cheeks like fresh punches as the blow of the realisation rocks my body. The tears I’ve been holding back rush out and I start to sob, my heaving chest leaving no room for air.

Even when it isn't in the room, Alastor's shadow chokes me out, ties me to the bed.

Liam's voice, though urgent, stays soft, 'Don't let it take you; use your senses to ground yourself.'

The instructions bob in the unsteady waters of my mind before slowly sinking. Liam's blurry form becomes clearer with each blink.

My hand smooths over the chair's bumpy fibres. Lavender air freshener floats through the air. Floorboards creak in the neighbouring rooms.

I can taste my tongue, clamped between my teeth.

I'm not with Alastor. I'm safe.

When he sees I've calmed, Liam continues, 'We can't fix it completely, but we can push the process back.'

'How?'

His eyes twinkle, like a child about to tell a secret. 'Prowlers don't realise that when they steal from us they leave a little of themselves behind. Not much, but just enough to manipulate our souls' energy. Think of it as a loan: we can use our brands to temporarily transfer the energy of our souls to fill what's missing. At least, that's the working theory here. It can heal all brands but the original.'

I gape. 'We can do that?'

'It's not easy, but yeah.'

'Do it.'

'Woah, not so fast. There's a catch.'

'I'll do anything.'

'Don't be so sure. The soul retains memories and it gets frightened when someone outside comes poking through. The memories flare up. I'm going to see the memory of your branding, and you'll see mine.'

My heart forgets to beat.

'You still want this?'

Through trembling lips, I say, 'Get this bastard's name off me.'

Liam nods. He leans forward and raises his branded palm, inches it towards my head. When the brands touch, his presence knocks on the door of my skull. I let him in.

Moonbeams splatter like bloodstains across the white curtains. A loving grin ages into a serrated sneer as the prowler shucks off its suit. It picks me up, lays me on the bed like a meal on a table and feasts. Tears rake down my cheeks. There's a wall-length mirror opposite the bed. I see myself.

I'm a child.

Violet light cuts through the memory.

Liam slumps into his chair. A hand mirror on the table reflects my brandless face, and a quick inspection reveals the original still there on my arm. His voice barely holds. 'That never gets easier.'

I can't stop myself staring. 'You were...'

'Five.'

'Fuck. What happened?'

'Same thing that happened to us all: my brand showed up and everything changed. My father kicked me out. Not before trying to...'

His voice trails off and he runs a thumb over the messy star of nail marks around his brand. 'He couldn't believe my mother was one of them.'

‘How did you survive?’

‘My aunt’s branded too; she tracked me down. She owns this place.’

‘I can’t believe they’d just throw you out like that.’

‘Why? You wouldn’t be here covered in brands if you hadn’t seen how we treat “soulless.”’

‘You were a child! Hell, I’m still practically a teenager! Why is nobody doing anything about this?’

He shrugs, ‘None of them want to disturb the ecosystem.’

My phone buzzes with a message from Regina. When I read it, I gag.

Percy invited me to the Hunt party. I’m going to go and get evidence on the prick xoxo.

No! My thumbs hammer away on the keys but I know Regina, her mind’s made up.

‘What’s wrong?’ Liam asks.

‘It’s going to brand her. I have to go, there’s still time.’

‘Wait, what?’ He grabs my shoulder. ‘It’s a *prowler*, do you even have a plan?’

‘Yeah. Show it which one of us is the lion.’

Liam’s eyes betray his apprehension, but mine must betray my determination — he lets go.

An egg was left inside me last Hunt, and every blow has sent cracks cascading over its shell. A glorious beast hatches from it: rage.

Savage and starving. With it in my heart, I march to the door, but turn before leaving. ‘Liam.’

He looks at me, and I see the face of the boy in the mirror.

‘I’m sorry.’

Liam nods. ‘Me too.’

Once more into the jungle.

I stopped by my accommodation to grab a knife, and now, outside the club, I slice the fabric of my hoodie. The Hunt moon watches, an eyeball dilated in anticipation. When the cut is made, I tear off the right sleeve, exposing the name. I want it — want everyone — to know exactly who slayed the beast.

The moon still watches as I tuck the knife into my trousers and enter the club.

The pulsing swarm of bodies crushes together as I squeeze through them onto the dancefloor, eyes straining for Regina in a storm of strobes. I call her name but the bass crushes it into indecipherable mush.

There!

In the throng, she dances with Alastor, drink in hand. Is it already poisoned?

The music camouflages my footsteps — I shove past dancers and the strobes gleam off the knife as the blade is buried into the fabric.

Alastor bellows and bucks, Regina trips back and scrambles away. It sees me and its eyes widen into comets of fury — it takes a swing at me. The blow is easy to predict and I sidestep it, grab the knife poking out of its back and tear down.

Skin spools to the floor, and the true Alastor bursts out, bent-backed and hissing. The crowd gasps and stays frozen, unsure if they should run.

Alastor snarls like a cornered wolf — a feral, frightened thing. Its fear is intoxicating, overriding strategy and powering my next lunge. Alastor cleaves the air with its claws and flings me backwards among ribbons of my blood. The ground shudders my ribs, and a howl of pain echoes through my skeleton.

Alastor crawls over, pins me to the floor by my wrists. The wound in my bicep weeps, but what does that matter? I’m already scarred

forever. My legs lash out, it grabs them and holds me still. The voices’ rage hardens to metallic laughter, and it opens its jaw wide.

Regina lets out a war cry as she steps back into view, smashing a bottle into the back of Alastor’s head. It screeches in shock and stumbles. I snatch my feet up to my chest and barrel them into its chest. Alastor stumbles back as I rise. Regina takes command and leads people away.

A feral growl bubbles in my throat and I charge. Alastor swipes. I duck the blow and ram the knife into its heart, throwing my weight against it. We tumble to the floor — I’m on top. The knife glints before I bury it into the beast. The steel saws through Alastor’s flesh, scribing my own brand across its disgusting body. It tries to swat me off, but I elbow its arms away and keep cutting until the brand is finished:

ALEX

The souls caged in the beast’s body squeal in relief as they soar from the slits until Alastor is a writhing, mute thing. Black blood spurts from my name and drenches me. Some gets into my mouth and I spit it into the bastard’s face.

When it stops moving, a fullness settles in me that I haven’t felt since...

I look at my arm.

The brand is gone.

After a rib-crushing hug, Regina leans against the wall with me.

‘Smoke?’ she asks, shivering in her golden dress after calming down.

‘You know I don’t.’

‘Few hours ago, I knew you weren’t a gladiator. Shit changes.’

‘Point taken but it’s still a pass.’

‘Suit yourself,’ she says as she lights hers. ‘I’ve done some digging since that girl in the underpass. It was just... nobody deserves that. Nobody *told* us that. There’s a small collective of law students who want to try and add some protective legislation — I’m meeting with them to talk about it in a few days, figure out how I can pitch in.’ She takes a drag and puffs out a smoke ring. She spent months practising before we moved up, she never told me she mastered it. ‘I’m so sorry.’

‘For what?’

‘I should’ve made more of an effort, and it shouldn’t have taken this to realise.’

I wrap an arm around her shoulder and pull her into a side-hug. ‘I’m just glad you’re OK.’

‘Best buds?’

‘Best buds.’

We try to stay in that warm moment, but the moon glares at us.

‘So what now? Jeopardising the ecosystem is an offence, there’s enough witnesses for you to do time.’

‘You go home.’

‘And you?’

‘I’ll figure something out. For now, the night is still crawling with the fuckers.’

Her eyes bulge. ‘You’re going back out there?’

‘Regina, the brand’s gone; it vanished the second Alastor died. If killing them removes the brands... I could help so many people. I have to, no one else will.’

She raises a hand to object, but clearly she knows me better by now. ‘Just... be safe.’

‘I’ll call you the minute I can.’

‘No, the millisecond.’

I walk her home. When she’s safe, I stare down the moon. I’ll roar through the night, and if I’m still alive by sunrise I’ll wear the beams as my mane.

Two Poems

GP Hyde

Bio

GP Hyde was born on the Wirral, Merseyside and lives in Grimsby, North East Lincolnshire where he writes poetry and short fiction. He studied fine art at Goldsmith's and at the Royal Academy Schools. He has published a pamphlet 'A Gracious Month' and his short fiction has been extensively published by Pure Slush. His poetry has been published by Black Bough Press, Hedgehog Poetry Press, Bent Key and the Starbeck Orion.

Social media: @gphydeauthor

Always be Flowers

‘There will always be flowers / and a fine blessing of rain with fall through the net of the clouds’ Joy Harjo:

Pick up where you left off yesterday.
Sit here at your desk, plod on
through the grey drizzle outside
and the white paper stretching ahead
of you into the distance.

Remember the squelch of your boot
at the edge of the field still stubbled,
waiting for green shoots?

On the grass strip edging the road
as you walked home,
there were five blades of daffodils coming through.

They will always come through,
swanky with yellow trumpets,
picking up where they left off.

Questions on return from exhile

Where is your green flag
to celebrate your escape?
Where is your merry leaf?
What fraction have you grown today?
How many tiny inches have you grown?
Too small to measure?
How far have your roots dared to reach
in search of refreshing waters?
How much have you drawn up
through your roots
to flood your desiccated veins?

But for now, continue.
Your progress is satisfactory.

That One Sunny Day

Amy Newton

Bio

Currently studying MA Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of lincoln, she enjoys creative writing in her free time, specifically writing poems and short stories. Having been part of a creative writing society, she has published poems in other small collections previously and enjoys romanticising the small details in her writing.

That One Sunny Day

Jump into the newness of it all.
New beginnings carved from the things you thought would never end,
but they did. So, you
change the pace, rearrange your day,
A little different than before.
Notice the flowers thriving in cracks of concrete-
you never noticed, never stopped,
paused to look, take a breath.
Take photos of sunsets down your street.

Treat yourself to ice-cream,
a just-warm-enough day to justify.
Learn to bake from that book you’ve had for ages,
You’ve gotten flour on the folds
between pages.
New skills gained from rearranging your time,
thinking this could be every day,
Your new outlook on life.

Everything is brighter now.
Maybe it’s your outlook,
maybe its just that time of year.
Small animals finding their feet,
learning to live life as best they know how.
Flowers grow,
You pick them.
Re-arrange to your taste.
On your table,
In your home,
Where new morning light shines through
Illuminating you.

Standing in Front of an Ocean

Joseph Pearson

Bio

Joseph Pearson is a Lincolnshire based writer. He spends his time thinking about writing, reading other people's work, and then, when it's finally time for pen to touch paper, he realises it's time to put the kettle on.

Standing in Front of an Ocean

Calm collected ocean, beats against pale sands.
Locust of midges swarm my view
as ice cream drips down my hand,
pools on the floor,
and vengeful music pours into my ears,
whilst I contemplate it all.

This water that could drown me
Is the same that thundered against the boat

How easy it would be to walk out towards her,
Allow her to carry me into her.

Cradle me
Collect me

Equilibrise my temperature,
and restore water into my lungs,
which she feels is not there,
like a mother who knows her baby is hungry.

A woman, a creature, a being, an entity, an ebbing and flowing Mistress of the world. Surging through our world, in taps and veins, and freezes and thaws, as she recarves it all.

She’s just pottering about,
collecting things,
she’d left scattered around the place.

One Moon Behind

Jess Purse

Bio

Jessica Purse was born in Leicester and raised between the pork-pie land of Melton Mowbray and faraway Tasmania, Australia. From reading ‘The Famous Five’ to studying English Literature A-Level, a love of all writing and reading just happened. The young writer is heading into her third year of an English and Creative Writing Degree at the University of Lincoln and hopes to create everything from gothic short stories to historical novels.

One Moon Behind

Trickles of it run down my curved spine and navigate my skin. It tickles. Mama nudges me and her foot launches a giggling spray over both of us. I sense my brother bounding towards us. It’s not hard to know when he is approaching as he brings the murky stuff with him in his stride. It ripples around my legs and dances across my ears. He and I both know I’m his senior. I’m bigger, I collect the water if we are out and I stand one behind Mama. Still, I let him play the big guy and he pokes me with his spout and roars his head side to side with glee.

The sun is relentless. I feel her rays dance with the fine spikes poked all along my spine. It is warm and oozes over my body. But if it warms me for too long, I feel myself falling behind my herd. That is why the river is our dearest friend. We have made many river friends and often follow them. Mama believes that we can only stay near one water hole for one moon and one sun. She fears the noises that fill the darkened skies each night. My brother and I don’t understand why. What is there to fear when her tusks nestle us all to sleep? They are long and gleaming white bones. Even the sandy creatures with halos of tufty hair stray far from her white weapons. She towers over my brother but often lowers her trunk and nudges his head when there is a pair of eyes on us. She does not stoop low as my head now tickles the brim of the trees as I remember my fathers did. An electric yellow creature with wings lingered on a big flat leaf, staring.

Today we are moving once again. Mama beckons my brother and I out of the water hole with her rounded foot. It is a tiny gesture, a huff of her toes that barely leaves a cloud of earthy red below it. Still, we know what it means and my brother follows me to the verge. Droplets splatter across my backside as he shakes his ears with zeal. I flex my tail and whip his snout. I know that he now hangs his head so his trunk curls just above the earth. He shoots out a solemn glance at Old Mama. Her wise eyes give him no sympathy but soften as though they might chuckle. Old Mama is our fiery protector. Her skin is crowded with lines seeping in every direction. Her ears are the size of mine and my brothers combined. When she moves, we move and even Mama moves too. A medley of chirps mingled in the air with the constant hissing of the land. A tall, proud flying creature puffed his mighty chest on a branch nearby.

My ears waft the hot air as we head into the brewing sun. She is sinking further and further into the ground. I fear she might pop and leave yellow goo all over the dry land. I see a murky blob on the landscape. We plod on. Mama’s tail waves at me. I long to hang on it and let my strong legs skim the cracked ground. Still, I am not her small one anymore and she would surely topple over if I did. The blob is shimmery and it waves at me as it’s clear tail trickles into the earth’s bed. We halt and collapse beside the stream. My skin is wrought with sandy particles that seem to crawl into my every crevice, crackling and tickling.

The air is as dry as the bones that have started protruding near my trunk. They are not quite white weapons yet. I scoop a cup of earthy liquid and pour it down my throat as my elders taught me. I plop between the waving tufts of sandy green near the sparse water hole. I snooze fearlessly. My brother and I both dream of trees bursting with ripe, squidgy goods and endless holes of muddy, sinking sludge.

I wake to her yellowness filling the sky again. It is painfully bright through the dusty bristles on my lids. I can hear the water lapping. I think it must be my brother but it is not. He is nowhere to be seen. The white shapes above me parted and poured down drizzly gifts. The ground has softened. There are strange markings imprinted in the ground. Two long lines are stomped into the dirt. I nudge my Mama. My brother is not in the dip of her back that he usually slumps in. Mama notices that his little trunk is not curled into the small of her neck. We move on more rapidly than ever before. Old Mama makes us stop to feast. She curls her trunk around the base of a daunting tree and with one shake, it delivers. The squidgy round goodness bursts in my mouth and slumps into my belly. Mama will not feast until he is found. I think if he was here, he would steal my share of juicy goodies, storing them in his cheeky jowls for later.

I can hear his giggle in the musky air. Or is it just a creature of the big blue above? Today we hunt for fresh shrub to feed on. The pale circles in the sky opened and filled our water holes in the night. I imagined him spraying the water into the air and letting it drown the black, flying specks near his eyes. I remember him chasing the flying creatures and never winning the battle. As we enter taller shrub Old Mama bellows her warning call. We all freeze. Its eyes are black and sharp, embedded in a fierce sandy face set with a hissing collection of white daggers. I creep behind my mama’s formidable legs. I set one eye between the crowd of legs and glimpse my Old Mama’s tail sitting stiffly, not swaying like usual. The little but ferocious-eyed creature retreats into the drying blades. Old Mama’s tail swings again and we move.

There! The strange markings in the earth again. I saw them the moon my brother went away. They follow us. I nudge my Mama urgently. The chirps fill the air again. The strange prints lead to a curious sight. It is not moving but it is huge with four black, round legs and two massive, glaring yellow eyes. Beyond is a mob of noise. I hear unnatural shrieks and murmurs that seem to ring around my eardrums, bouncing. All of us sway our heads nervously but Old Mama keeps edging towards the noise. There is a thick stench tickling through my trunk. I cannot remember a scent like it. Passing the unmoving thing we approach long shrubby trees. The sun peeks over my shoulder. Behind the trees is an opening and a craggy cliff edge. We approach and peer downwards to a pond of unusually deep blue. Colours that look like the juicy fruits are splodged on the landscape. They scatter like a network of critters over the bank. There are many animals like me dripped in these strange colours usually reserved for the creatures with wings. On top of our unknown friends are creatures I have never, ever seen. They have four legs, two of which sprout from the top of their bodies. They have pale skin with no lines or fur, just fur on top of round, small heads. A fear rumbles in my belly. In the centre of the pool, he is there. My brother. His tail droops between his legs. He paddles solemnly as the creature lingers on his back. The strong backs of my herd rise and our ears flare. We are formidable.

We travel down the slope and enter the pool cautiously. The curious creatures with colourful bodies huddle together on the bank. They cling to one another in the wake of our heavy steps. One guards them and spreads his top legs in front of the huddle. The creature next to him clambers off another one of our kind. She is a little grey one even smaller than my brother. Yet my brother is not as little as I remembered him. Old Mama flares her ears and rears her tusks. The creature clambers from my little brother’s now protruding spine. His eyes are glazed. Where is the dazzle I know? My Mama’s trunk reaches for him. He wades over cautiously. Old Mama beckons Mama forward. His eyes glimmer and meet my own. He remembers. There is the dazzle. The two stranded, pale creatures splash to their side of the water pool, flailing their arms scarily as they stampede. The creatures retreat up the bank into the shadows of taller trees. They take the ear-ringing with them. My brother breaks his wade and erupts into a gallop through the earthy shimmer. He huddles into the centre of us and we turn our backs. Into the sun we go.

Two Poems

Arushi Rege

Bio

Arushi (Aera) Rege is a queer, chronically in pain, Indian-American poet who simultaneously attends senior year in high school. They tweet occasionally @academic_core and face the perils of instagram @aeranem_26. Their works have been published in Gastropoda Lit, Full House Literary Magazine, fifth wheel press, and more. Their debut chapbook, BROWN GIRL EPIPHANY, is forthcoming with fifth wheel press. You can find their website at arushiaerarege.carrd.co.

50 Words that Mean Arizona

desert skies & dust storms & plasterbrick walls & speakeasy at brick road coffee & mother says i
love you & dark green cacti & tempe lake dates & tumbleweed park christmas tree & skateland
with coffeeshop & lavender peach fuel & speech&debate outings at dayungs & flight to Harvard
& bake sale chai & violent red sunset & rooftop parties & redwine dress

Skeleton Flowers in the Rain Tell Me

that rain makes transparency because we
need to know how this works, we need

to understand the secret of the world. you tell
me that the secret to immortality is under

your hydrangeas, dark purple petals under
fields of green, and forests covered with mists

mean that you’re still here with me, because
the planet’s burning up, darling, and i need

you to tell me we’re going to be okay. that in
the face of nuclear winter & fated death &

fated love & fated ruin & me wanting more,
that we’re going to make it out of smoke

filled nights. cut a mango with me & tell me,
under red sunsets & near dark green forests

that you’re going to stay, in the face of a
burning planet. tell the skeleton flowers

that we’ve found the secret to immortality
in laceleaf flowers, forty-eight days after

cuts made, because forever is a second or
forever, and i need to get out of here or be

stuck with you forever. i promise i love you like
salt in a wound & lovers beg for more time &

a house on fire & we’re living on a burning
planet, so i guess what i mean is i need you

to stay. i need you to understand that under
skeleton flowers will we learn the secret of

immortality or love or loss or death or handfuls
of *zoloft* or *prozac* shoveled in your mouth &

we’re the lovers begging for more time but we’re
doomed like corpse flowers are: bound to do

nothing but flower once every ten years, & i’m
sorry that we’re in love on a burning planet but

baby, if it means i get forever with you, i won’t mind.
tell me how we see the secrets of immortality

under skeleton flowers in the rain.

Spring Hope

N Robinson

Bio

Nathan Robinson is the author of "Starers," "Ketchup on Everything, and the acclaimed short story collection "Devil Let Me Go." He has had many short stories published since he began writing in 2010. He lives in a haunted library with his family and two cats. He currently works as a school librarian.

Spring Hope

A billion yellow eyes alive from the funeral of winter.
A sun, fixed in a liar's blue, cold despite the radiance.
Empty furrows, stretching long and brown with seasonal patience.
That green.
That healing green is an ambulance that feels like it’s arriving too late for salvation, yet always arrives when it’s ready.
Spring rivers that tell tales. Their only truth reflected in blue.
Spring; a season that is an old engine that starts when the hope is enough.
Winter must be hoped through blindly.
Imagine a winter that never ends.
We go in.
Not knowing if the season of closure will end with rebirth.
Because Spring is that true hope.
It peels back layers of humanity and uncovers us for what we are.
A band of hoppers, who have nothing but time to offer as we wait for each season to pass.

Metamorphosis

Sadie Kaye

Bio

Sadie Kaye is a transgender woman and a feminist. She is an author and artist and has published a book of poems and paintings, "Kelsey Galileus's loves, deeds and opinions" (available via <http://blurb.co.uk>). Her great grandfather, William Wilkinson was a Lincolnshire farmer in the 19th century.

Metamorphosis

The day was peppery green,
so with a bright red crayon
she draws a dragon-tooth bean;

the next, she paints in azure,
the next tooth is Hooker’s green,
beans tessellate and multiply,

rearranging as a lattice,
each particle, crystallised,
fits in its place. With her eyes

she sees a living matrix,
betraying mathematics,
a lush forest rising green,

growing up and out, filling
the frame with its verdant being
of living wood, hypnotic in its

irregular repetition,
this leafy forest with its
upward-seeking self-volition,

photosynthesising green,
supports stems of earthy umber.
And as she gazes and unfocuses

her dreamy hazel eyes,
beans metamorphose to hungry mouths,
the matrix to metallic mesh

to entrap the verdant forest
in this hot orange world of fire
that’s painted red, blue and unseen.

Dilys

Kate Trought

Bio

Kate is a retired teacher who has always written and been lucky enough to have some poems and books published over the years, as well as many English educational resources attached to established authors. Characters wander into her mind demanding she tells their story. She has no idea how this works. For example a couple of years ago Jarney Sixpence, a young herbalist strolled in. She knew nothing about herbs so had to learn PDQ! The resulting modern fairy tale, Winnie of the Dell, was published by Scaramouche Press.

Dilys

You’ll have heard of Dilys the Duck no doubt
Took millions of selfies perfecting her pout.
She plucked feather eyebrows and practised with lippy
Which didn’t go well as her beak was too drippy.

She’d made the mistake of diving for food
Which turned out to be bread so didn’t lighten her mood.
She shook her head wildly and gave a cross ‘Quack!’
Her makeup all gone – and just for a snack.

She saw a dog walker her charge on a lead
So upended herself to graze in the weed
The spaniel barked loudly and started to dash
Into the water making a helluva splash

Dilys meantime was there underwater
Trying to find a bug she could slaughter
The first she knew of this shocking event
Were two soggy paws and their splashy descent

She popped up in alarm, her beak all a quiver
To see who had dared to jump in her river
The dog was quite happy snorting and shaking
And flapping its ears in the mud it was making

Dilys quite calm in this dire situation
Paddled in circles and quacked in frustration
The dog turned around and made for the bank
As its owner had given its lead a good yank.

The river stirred up by this furry intrusion
Continued to flow in spite of the confusion
The dog walker was laughing and pulled out her phone
Dilys cocked her head sideways and lowered her tone

The chance of a photo she couldn’t resist
And all self publication was not to be missed
Her twirling and fluffing of feathers diminished
The huffing and puffing finally finished

‘Good dog,’ said the owner ‘Now you sit right there,
While I get the light right and don’t get a glare.
Look at you, Alfie, all soggy and silly
I’ll take a quick photo before you get chilly.’

Dilys stopped circling and shrugged her brown feathers
Upended herself and showed off her nethers.

It'll Be Better This Time

Will Smith

Bio

Will is in the stages of graduating from a Masters in Theatre at the University of Lincoln, or as they say, becoming a real life bard. Most of their writing likes to engage with a level of fantasy or myth, both on stage and on paper, or writing songs to perform at live action roleplay events.

It’ll Be Better This Time

Who knew that dappled sunlight
Looked so pleasant behind tears?
Kaleidoscope greens dance
Between carousel browns
But all I see is blue sky.
Who knew that loamy earth
Smelled so sweet in heaving lungs?
Rubbing shoulders with roots
And foxtrots with ferns
But here alone I lie.

That knowledge now lays to rest
In the parted grass nearby.
But woken by blue bells,
I am back in the world.
It’ll be better this time.