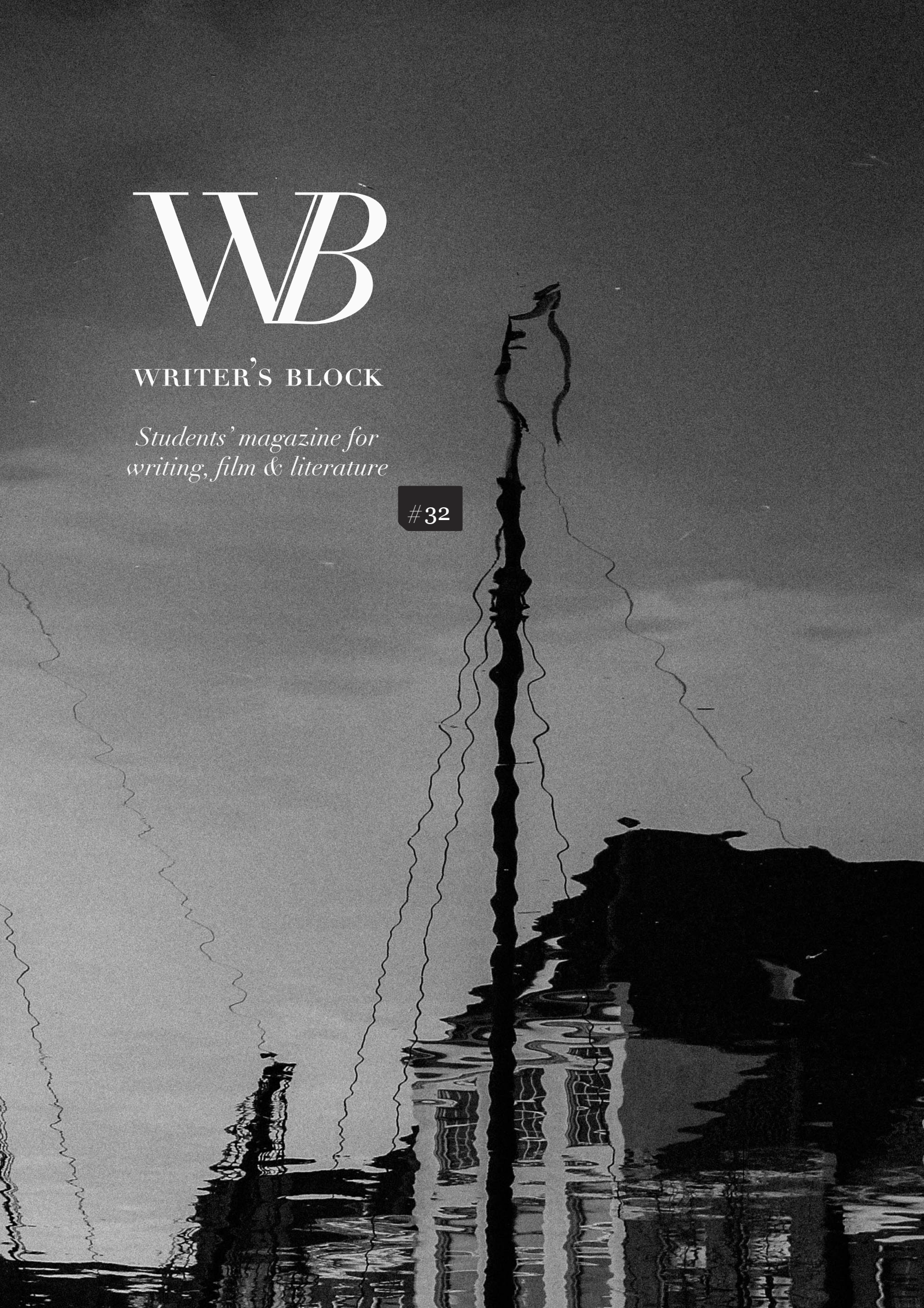


# WB

WRITER'S BLOCK

*Students' magazine for  
writing, film & literature*

#32



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SEAWEED AND OTHER SHORESIDE  
RUBBISH SHORT STORY

# #FANTASTICVOTE

## ROOS GRAVEMAKER AND PAUL HOFMA

As we write this, the Dutch election campaign is in full swing. We all know that nowadays you don't need manifestos or flyers anymore and that you can perfectly convey your political message in a 140 character tweet. It's also a lot easier and you don't have to get past all the fact-checkers or critical journalists. You can create your own reality. Your phone is your oyster.

During the campaign we noticed that Dutch politicians tried to turn their Instagram into a window of their self-fabricated soul. Left-wing green party leader Jesse Klaver shows he's a family man and makes use of the #squadgoals by posing with his two sons in matching yellow swimming trunks. Despite the fact that there is an underrepresentation of female politicians and ministers in the Dutch government, this didn't stop women from randomly showing up on the Instagram accounts to support the patriarchy. The forever single Prime Minister Mark Rutte rediscovers his masculinity when he suddenly finds a sensual woman adjusting his tie. Beloved *Farmer Wants A Wife* presenter Yvon Jaspers shows Dutch housewives what a nice man Labour Party leader Lodewijk Asscher is. Seeing this, it was refreshing to discover from his Instagram account that even though Geert Wilders might be an islamophobic populist, he at least respects blue-eyed blond Dutch women.

It doesn't take a PR specialist to conclude that these politicians are creating their own narratives behind their public image and personality. But are they genuine and sincere? Are they real? In a "post-truth" society full of fake news and internet bubbles, reality has become more unstable than ever and that is also the case with this issue. The winner of our Fantastic Tales Short Story Competition, Christine King, wonderfully employs the fantasy genre in "Dragon Slayer", but at the same time shows the true banality behind the fantastical. Many other authors also drift between the real and the imagined, reality and illusion. This is why we used the picture from Bob Felix as our cover; the real houses and masts may still be visible but their contours are blurred by the wrinkles in the water, resulting in a familiar yet otherworldly image. **WB**



# SHORT STORY COMPETITION WINNER: DRAGON SLAYER

CHRISTINE KING

Fed up, that's the word I would use. Ok, words. I am not a scholar or even a clever man - I am a dragon slayer and a bloody good one, but I am also an old one. Maybe you are picturing me now? Covered in shiny armour, a plume of feathers sticking out of a silver helmet and a mighty sword strapped to my back. Well-polished with a noble stance?

Pah! I wear leather because it's warm and easy to clean and in some places I can't be sure where the leather ends and the skin begins. I have never put on a bit of metal in my life; armour just means that once the dragons cooked you to a crisp you're well preserved for the animals that want to eat your corpse. I do have a big sword but it is strapped to my mule along with a big bow and a large stick, any of these can come in handy when you find yourself facing a dragon.

I have lots of battle scars, burns mostly and plenty of red raw skin. I have no hair left now - most of it has been burned away and the healing skin seems reluctant to grow more. I walk with a stoop and I have no idea if the brown stuff on my skin is dirt, or if it's just the colour the sun has baked it. I am riding to face a dragon, my last dragon. I'm old, did I already say that? Well I am, and I'm fed up, and just to make me even happier, I'm dying too.

Kill a dragon and get what? Half a kingdom? Don't make me laugh; no king worth his salt would give away half a kingdom. You try turning up to claim that bounty and see what happens, I guarantee it will involve big, burly guards and a sword up the jacksy. As for the king's daughter's hand in marriage, have you seen most of the princesses? Close up I mean? Inbred, ugly simpering good-for-nothings, and if you think that will make you a future king you're

as foolish as they come. Wait till you're asleep in a big comfy bed and your new wife's relatives decide it's time to say goodbye to the awkward new son-in-law.

Half the blokes in this game are killed by dragons, and the other half by trying to collect the reward. Poison is a good one, too. Anyway who wants to be king? I never wanted that responsibility or that kind of danger. I like to see my enemy in front of me and know who I'm fighting; I like to have friends and fun, not worry and food tasters. I always get payment up-front, and I never ask for too much. Keeps me healthy and popular, or at least it did.

I heard about this dragon from a boy at the local village. Apparently he hasn't been out much recently, nor caused much bother, but he makes the natives restless so I agreed to finish him off for the price of a good meal and a warm bed for the night. I felt a bit bad as I have no intention of killing this one: this one is going to be made famous for killing me. Garder the Dragon Slayer will slay no more, I'm fed up of it all and did I mention I'm dying? Got myself one of those nasty disease things inside me, I can feel it sapping my energy like a parasite. Saw a wizard and he said "No cure." So that's that.

That's why I've decided to die my way, in battle with my oldest enemy. I urge my stubborn mount to the top of the hill and then up a small ridge until I find the dragon's cave. There it is: you can tell by the smell.

I light my black tipped torch, leaving my old friend and constant companion tied loosely outside. I give him a goodbye pat on the flanks, I am

sure he will wander off back to the village if I don't return by nightfall. Hefting my sword and feeling my back creak I head into the stink. The flame of my torch burns green as I get closer to the dragon, tainted by the dragon's fumes, and I can feel the warmth from the fire in his belly and the stench of his body begins to fill my nostrils, but it is a smell I have grown accustomed to over the years.

Finally I see his tail, long and thick and red. I kick it. I kick it again. "Hey you," I shout. "Wake up, dinner time." But the brute doesn't move. I drop my sword on the ground. Holding the torch in my teeth, I climb his slippery scales, my wrinkled and worn fingers finding grab holes to pull me up. I can feel my muscles straining and pulling as they take my weight until at last I can see his head. His eyes are open and his tongue is lolloping out of one side of his mouth. One huge pupil follows my movement. "Come on," I shout, standing unsteadily on his back. "Move," I call out as loud as my dilapidated lungs will let me. He blinks and makes a mewling noise like the largest kitten in the world. Confused and angry, I jump from his back feeling my knees almost buckle under me as I land. I try to light some of the bits of old clothes thrown about the place obviously left behind by the dragon's previous guests, after a few moments I get a small fire going so I can put my torch down. The dragon just watches me, not moving and only just breathing. "You sick?" I ask, not expecting a response. In the light of the fire I can see the dragon better now - his scales have lost most of their sheen and his teeth are yellow with age. "No, you're not sick, just old." Sitting down to face my oldest enemy I feel kinship, and I wonder if dragons can just give up. After all, that's what I was planning to do.

The dragon lets out a bit of steam from his nostrils, making the cave warmer still. I come to a decision, and relight my torch from the glow of the

slowly dying fire. As I hobble out towards the cave entrance, a sigh escapes from the huge mouth behind me, and I am unsure if it is from relief or frustration. The light at the entrance is fading and my ride is getting skittish. I unload his back, hefting the small sac that holds my few possessions on to my shoulder but leaving the bow and stick at the cave opening.

"Go on with you," I bark and slap his hide. But he won't leave me and keeps coming over to nuzzle my neck. I admit defeat. "Come on you foolish old git," I mutter affectionately and slowly guide the mule deep into the cave. He is hesitant at first as he can smell the dragon too but he comes along not wanting to leave me. He is as old as I am, maybe just as tired, and as stubborn as his kind can be. Back now with the dragon I lead us to a warm spot close to the glowing embers of the fire. I can see a look in the dragon's eyes, I wonder if he is glad to see us or if he just wants us to go away. With a grunt I sit at the fire and fish out a few carrots from my bag, for my old steadfast friend. I can see in his eyes that he is unsure of the situation, but he never passes up the chance of a carrot, so with a snort he eats his dinner, his eyes fixed on the large red creature in front of us.

I add some splinters of wood strewn about the cave floor and some lichen from its walls to what's left of the fire, it begins to swell and whilst watching it dance, I eat a little of the salted meat that I always carry with me. Casually I offer a piece to the dragon. Finally I can see a look in his eyes that I understand... surprise. I guess I'm a little surprised myself. I settle down to sleep, my sword in my hand, and wonder if this is where I will die. In the warmth of a dragon's cave with my noble steed by my side, my weapon drawn and my enemy in front of me, I guess that is how I always wanted to go. I had expected more blood and pain. Still, you can't have everything. **WB**

# HAVE YOU SEEN THE SCENERY?

JOHN GREY

Where lowbush blueberry blooms  
in the clusters of early June,  
and white pine rules the marshes  
and red spruce, the surrounding hills,  
while cataracts veil misty slate cliff face,  
feed streams giddy across ancient rock,  
and valleys gorge on ferns and trillium,  
and ponds are decaled in lily pad and turtle-back,  
and the waters still speak  
of a lover's naked toes dipping,  
a sixteen wheeler thunders through,  
erasing as it goes.



# MODI-THACKERAY-TRUMP: AN ALLEGORY OF THE POLITICAL FORTUNES OF THE CITY OF BOMBAY AND THE WORLD WE LIVE IN NOW

NACHIKET JOSHI

If one evening you were to step on the roof of one of the tall government buildings that dot the fort area of downtown Bombay, a strange new vista is likely to greet your eyes. The city appears under a new light from this height as its history lies mapped out before you in three broad sweeps.

To the east, you may take in the 19th-century port city that made Bombay's fortunes. A sight composed of rising spires amidst a maze of stone arches, turrets and sloping red-tiled roofs. Down below is a grid of crisscrossing streets that once bore names like Rope-walk Lane and Meadow Street. Here also are the seats of the great banking corporations that flooded capital into British India, and here are articulated in unshakeable sandstone and granite great imperial conceits. A little further to the north the main thoroughfare of D.N. Road emerges onto a wide junction where the headquarters of the Bombay Municipal Corporation flank the mighty Victoria Terminus. Our view ends in the Eastern bay and its civil and naval dockyards where nuclear-powered submarines and fishermen's dinghies moor and unmoor from every day.

Effectuate a 180-degree turn now and let your eyes meet the Arabian Sea, circumscribed by the broad avenue of Marine Drive. Here lies one of the most prominent Art Deco-precincts in the world, with its elegant residences, office buildings and cinema houses. This is the modern metropolis of the 20th century, a modernity whose salient features are ornamental concrete, telephone lines and electric

trams. They are no longer monuments to Empire, but structures that participate in a wider global expression of capitalist creativity.

Our panorama to the east and west, has so far been one of organized quarters of residential and commercial activity, and the eye spots amidst the spires and rooftops, vast patches of muddled green and blue on either side: the famous playing fields to the east, the Arabian Sea to the west. But look northwards, and what stretches out in front of you is the vast urban agglomeration of Greater Bombay. Indeed, it is the rest of the sub-continent that spreads out from this smog-ridden vista. A flurry of great, extremely disparate and unattractive skyscrapers shoot to inhuman heights ahead of you. These are the 21st-century equivalent of the neo-gothic monuments to Empire and the sophisticated

tributes to modernity we left behind. These blue-grey skyscrapers are today's monuments to finance, and we are about to see why and how they actually run things around here; and how unlike Victoria Terminus or the great playing fields, they serve only themselves.

The forest of meteorically rising concrete to your north used to be a quiet green hill overlooking the coast, with mansions for the rich and a tower of silence for the deceased. Only a couple of kilometres beyond this hill lay the old industrial heartland of Bombay, clogged with cotton spindles churning out cloth. Those mills are phantoms of crumbling brick now, derelict tombstones to a

vanished world. The proletariat has been steadily forced out and large private financial institutions have erected glass fronted offices and luxury hotels in its place.

A city glimpsed from this height is akin to a vast urban palimpsest waiting to be read, and to extend our reading is to reach into an allegory of the forces that have shaped the fate of the Indian republic in the past few decades. Behind the inhuman surge of these monuments to finance to your north, and its phantasmagoric power to which we have all succumbed, lies an alliance between this island of prosperity and a peculiar form of demagoguery and vicious communal politics that flourish all over the world today. History bears out that the rise of the neo-fascist outfit called the Shiv Sena<sup>1</sup> in Bombay coincided with the disintegration of the communist party and its efforts at organizing the working classes of the now deserted mill belt. By the mid-70s, industrial and financial interests in the city had grown weary of manufacturing and production as far greater spoils were to be had in real estate speculation.

Moreover, the city's financiers, thrown into disarray by the international debt crisis of the 80s, turned to Bal Thackeray with the undisguised aim of diverting the energies of the striking workers towards a more parochial brand of politics<sup>2</sup>. The struggle for dignity of the labour unions was pushed aside, as Bal Thackeray stepped in as an embodiment of regional pride and communal sentiment. He was quick to point to the bearded and the circumcised (his words, not mine) as the real enemies of the people, stoking the cinders that were to flare up once the labour movement

1 An excellent satirical account of this group, and its despotic leader may be had in Salman Rushdie's *The Moor Last Sigh* (1995, Random House)

2 In *Mumbai Fables* (2010, Princeton University Press) Gyan Prakash discusses the history of the many dubious real estate and land deals that have shaped the urban geography of Bombay, from colonial times, right up to the period referred to in this piece.

was crushed and the mills fell silent for good. What followed was a cycle of violence initiated by the anti-Muslim pogroms of December '93 and the sanguinary ripostes of deadly bombings that went on unabated for the next 15 years (when they could have led to nuclear escalation)<sup>3</sup>. Real estate prices meanwhile continued to soar and the foundations of those monuments to finance just beyond Chowpatty Beach were firmly being laid. Today, more than half of the city's population lives in slums, with even that squalor never fully secure as 'developers' and 'beautifiers' circle the air above. Narendra Modi, the current Prime Minister of India, has succeeded in replicating this hegemony of fascist politics on a national scale, urged on by the financial interests of Bombay who presided over the city's transformation over the last three decades.

It is important to point out that Indian corporations, or India Inc. as the press likes to call it, is saddled with unpayable debts (non-performing assets), and eyes hungrily every government auction of natural resources, and every tired piece of land that might hide mineral wealth. Convinced that only a more authoritarian regime could meet their demands, the doyens of financial capital turned to Modi as their saviour.

The media that had tried taking Modi to task over his role in the 2002 Gujarat pogroms, slowly shifted their attitude to match those of their corporate owners<sup>4</sup>. All the while they claimed that Modi had 'turned over a new leaf', when in fact the only thing that had changed was their coverage of the man. Most news outlets today are content with

3 In *Maximum City* (2004, Vintage), the author Suketu Mehta, interviews some of the Shiv Sena's storm troopers who led the killings on the ground, as well as the Muslim gangsters who vowed revenge for the murder of their co-religionists.

4 For information about Modi's role in the Gujarat pogroms, look to Rana Ayyub's *Gujarat Files* (2016), a self-published best seller that no publisher in today's India was willing to take on for fear of government reprisals.

regurgitating the fawning press releases from the Prime Minister's office. Scrutiny is dead, and in the name of 'balanced coverage' news anchors repeat the deluded whataboutery of Hindutva fanatics to the most conscientious of dissenters.

The toiling masses continue to seek entry into the aspirational class they see so powerfully advertised around them, and a narrative of economic growth, no matter how poorly distributed has overwhelmed any surviving notion of solidarity. A reactionary consensus once again holds sway, this time at the national level, breached only by recurring tragedies whose connecting dots most journalists are either unable or unwilling to trace. Modi's rise came buttressed by a cacophony of television channels and an unprecedented proliferation of internet trolls. Crazy conspiracy theories and ludicrous pseudo-science has entered national institutions while the middle class has adopted a stance of defiant obedience to the Far Right in power.

The nation has entered a period akin to the Emer-

gency; the Republic is under sustained assault. The media now thrive on authoritarian populists, transforming charisma into ratings, facilitating the rise of tyrants everywhere. Make no mistake, these are Putin's children, and Modi is Bal Thackeray's real heir. The world over, the phenomenon replicates itself while the official establishment can only blink in despair. Donald Trump has been borne to the White House on the back of a carnival of enraged fools; and Marine Le Pen eyes the Elysee palace with an ever-growing sense of plausibility. From this raised perch on the southern tip of Bombay, with its soothing sea breeze, and salty air, with a truly great metropolis coming to life under your eyes, one may be lulled into a contemplative mood, as the faint roaring of the waves down below reach one's ears. But take a step back, and look again at those scabrous towers to your North, that have risen so high in so short a period, and know that it is under their shadow that we now live. **WB**



# THE REALITY OF DATING A MUSICIAN

KEYLA REEDER

Most people dream of meeting their favorite artist or musician one day, and perhaps even fantasize about having a relationship with them. A lot of you might see dating an artist as a very glamorous and effortless lifestyle, but guess again. The truth is that living with a musician can be very challenging and demanding.

Artists do not have a fixed schedule. They don't manage their time like an 8-to-5 office worker and they never really have days off. They spend all their time training, producing and selling their art to the rest of the world. For someone in the crowd, the reality is different, because you get to enjoy the nice part of it. You get to hear their beautiful music that took so many months to write, produce and perfect. But what you don't see is the all-nighters it took to get it all done, the anniversaries, birthdays and dinner dates that they missed for the sake of their art.

Being a musician means that there will be times when you have to be selfish, which is the most frustrating part of it all. Having to share your time and attention with more than just a partner is time consuming and can be mentally draining, for both partners involved. I can recall our very first Christmas together, and having to cut the night short because he had to leave to play that evening. Can you imagine seeing everyone spending Christmas with his or her loved ones, except you? In many ways I felt as if I was not important, or as if I did not matter as much to him as his

music does. There were times when he came home to a cold dinner and an already melted dessert.

All of this came as an overwhelming shock to me because I felt as if I was in a competition that I could never win. I was not ready to deal with the disappointment of having to cancel the days and nights I had planned and looked forward to for weeks, because of a last minute gig. Time after time, I ended up asking myself if this was how I was going to spend the rest of my life, in a relationship but with an absent boyfriend.

I wondered if I was able to accept that lifestyle and make a leap to a place that was way out of my comfort zone. With time I started to realize that maybe the problem was not him. Maybe I was the problem. I used to be so accustomed to have everything well planned and organized that I simply expected everyone to be the same.

At the heart of a lot of musicians lies this: they are creative and inspirational beings, both on and off the stage and its bright lights. They are driven by their creativity and they show it in everything they do. They live for that special moment when they can see people enjoying themselves and becoming captivated by their work.

Musicians are spontaneous and daring beings. Their free spirits don't allow them to keep fixed schedules and ordinary life styles. They would watch evenings turn into mornings staying up

until the sunrise, because when the world is asleep, they get their inspiration. Musicians would go for the extra mile every day, putting everything else (apart from their work, of course) aside, just to live a life most people only dream of having. Maybe for this reason most of them find it hard to be in relationships. It takes a lot to understand and accept this free spirited lifestyle.

I was 19 years old when I first met my best friend and now significant other. My partner is a guitarist, composer and musician. He lives and breathes music and to be honest, I have never seen him not doing anything music-related unless he was asleep. My partner has big dreams of becoming a well-known artist and musician in hopes of touring around the world.

At times I deeply believed that things would change and that he would adapt to my fixed-scheduled lifestyle. But when that moment never came, I realized that I had choice; I could either stay, adapt and try to understand the person I loved the most, or I could leave it all behind and save me from the stress that this way of life brought with it. But then I thought of how my partner showed me the importance of living in the present moment, which I often took for granted because I simply believed that there would be many other moments.

It was also the moment that I realized how exciting my life has been ever since I have met him. Looking back, I can't imagine living an ordinary life anymore. It took some time for me to realize that this free spirited and passionate musician was deeply in love with me, an ordinary girl from a completely different world than his. Despite his hectic schedule and exhaustion after a day of hard work, he always manages to put a big smile on my face and make me feel like the luckiest girl in the world.

For the first time I am starting to understand what it feels like to be living in the moment instead of just anticipating and waiting for a moment that might never come. My partner has taught me to appreciate the small details of music, that I may not fully understand yet, but I am learning. I now understand the sacrifice that he puts in all of his work and his passion. This goes for all of the artists and musicians, poets and writers.

Those long sleepless nights, missed birthdays and arguments that could have been avoided were all for you. But most importantly I am grateful that, even though there were countless moments when I found myself asking if I was able to get out of my comfort zone or if I was going to give up, I chose to fight. **WB**

# THE PROGNOSIS

STEVE SLAVIN

1

When we're dying, we can't pack a suitcase. As they say, "You can't take it with you."

Let's consider a somewhat less drastic decision. If you had to give up every person or thing in your life but one, who or what would that be? For me, the answer to that question was a no-brainer.

2

When we got home from the doctor's office, Robert needed to lie down for a while. I made some tea, but Robert didn't want any. I sat at the edge of the bed, and reflexively placed my hand on his forehead.

"You know, Craig, you don't get a fever just from visiting the doctor."

I smiled. "Well, I'm certainly glad to see that you haven't lost your sense of humor."

"No, not at all! They say you keep it right up to the end."

"Please, Robert. Spare me the melodramatics."

"*Fine!*"

"Can we have a serious conversation?"

"So, talk!"

"You heard what the doctor said. If the lump is malignant, she'll operate, and then she'll do more tests. That's not exactly a death sentence."

"No, but then, in a couple of weeks, we'll be back in her office, and she'll tell us a few cells were found in my lymph nodes. And then..."

"Yeah, I know. You'll need chemo and radiation."

I waited, but Robert didn't reply. He had a far-off look. Finally, he rolled over to one side to face me more directly. "I don't think I can go through that again."

"Are you saying that that wasn't as much fun for

you as it was for *me*?"

This got a smile.

"I know I'm overreacting. Maybe they can just cut out the tumor and that will be the end of it. But this time I'm expecting the worst."

"No, the worst – the absolute worst, was the third time."

"Agreed. But in retrospect, had I known how awful the treatment would be, I think I would have chosen to die instead."

"Maybe. But that was before they prescribed medical marijuana."

That got a chuckle out of him.

"Seriously, Robert – and I *am* being selfish about this..."

"Yeah, I know: you never want to lose me."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that even *you* listen some of the time."

Robert didn't answer. When I noticed his regular breathing, I got up, tiptoed out of the room, and shut the door.

3

An hour later, I found myself lying on a couch in the living room, a book on my chest. It had grown dark outside, and I could hear the rush hour traffic.

I thought about how Robert and I had met at a ridiculous dinner party in Brooklyn Heights. I could not remember who invited me, but after a few glasses of wine, it felt like we all had become great friends. We decided to drive across the bridge into Manhattan. There was a piano bar on Grove Street in the Village. It was called *The Five Oaks*.

Anyone could go in there and sing his heart out. No matter how good or bad you were, everyone generously applauded. You could walk in alone, with another guy, or maybe with a whole party of friendly people – and you would quickly feel right at home.

Robert was with someone else, but he and I had been eyeing each other all evening. When his date went to the bathroom, he slipped me his phone number. As I took it, I squeezed his hand and he blew me a kiss.

That was thirty-seven years ago. Who knows? We might have saved each other's lives. We had met just when AIDS was beginning to reach epidemic proportions. We lost dozens of friends, but like other monogamous couples, we were spared.

We had our fights, but who didn't? Since the early nineties, we've been living in Chelsea, where the you-know-who have practically taken over. I guess you know that's happened when no one notices you strolling around the neighborhood.

I wondered if Robert intuited something – something that even the doctor couldn't know. Maybe this time he would not be able to dodge the bullet. Perhaps he was just tired of trying.

I tried to picture life without him. Would I expect him to be there when I got home? Would I imagine crawling into bed with him – and waking up in the morning expecting to see his face?

Just then, I heard the toilet flush, and then Robert's feet padding down the hall. He looked a lot better. He was even smiling.

4

A week later his doctor operated. After she'd finished, and Robert's chest was stitched up, she asked me to join them in the recovery room. She explained that because he was coming out of sedation, he might not remember everything she said. The entire tumor did not need to be removed – just the malignant part. So, while Robert lay on the operating table, slices of tissue were sent to the hospital's pathology lab. That's why the operation took almost four hours.

While she was confident that they had gotten everything, the lymph node test would be crucial. If no cancer cells were found, we would be home free.

5

A few weeks later, it was time for the test. That morning, I had a revelation. Did it really matter how the test came out? Would Robert get a new lease on life, or perhaps a conditional death sentence? Would we be able to go back to how things were, or would we see our life together coming to an end?

It was just then that I realized an important truth. You know those "crazy people" holding signs proclaiming, "The end is coming"? Well, they've got *that* right!

One day, the end *will* come. But in the here and now, while we still have each other, we have everything that life could offer. **WB**

# CREATURES OF THE ZOO

JOHN GREY

This is the day the rhinoceros looks up from his grazing  
to acknowledge my presence with a snuffle and a huff.  
He is weary of the daily influx of tourists,  
one gazing human specimen no different from any other.

He probably figures that a blurry view from his dusty corral,  
his side of the ditch, the fence, is as far as he can take this contact,  
he's long ago exceeded his droll quota of such observations,  
and is now content to let the people pass barely noticed, unremarked,

Even the ones hauling noisy kids or the young couple  
kissing, preening each other like chimpanzees.  
What am I to him? The guy who spent the last twenty minutes  
sizing up giraffes? An unrepentant gusher of "How cute"

At the sight of peahen trailed by brood? He has no concept  
of my freedom, his incarceration. For all he knows, each of  
us can only go as far as our ditch, our fence. And as long  
as the food source is reliable and he's in the breeding program...

Curiosity is just a dead end. He turns away, waddles off the  
far end of his exhibit where the grass is more lush and a female  
is resting in a mud-pool. That creature doesn't know he's on  
the endangered list. He's merely satisfied that I am.

# BOOKSANDQUILLS: FROM STUDENT IN LEIDEN TO BLOGGER IN LONDON

ANNA DE BOER

Sanne Vliegenthart, also known as Booksandquills, is a 26-year-old YouTube video creator who studied English at the University of Leiden and now works as a Social Media Producer at Penguin Random House in London. I met with her to hear about her journey from Leiden to London.

*You have a YouTube channel called Booksandquills, would you like to introduce yourself?*

Usually I introduce my channel by saying that I started in 2008, in the first year that I started studying English at Leiden University and sometimes I joke that I put about as much time into my channel as I put into my degree. I talk about books, travel, museums and, now that I work in publishing, I also talk about my internships, what my job is like, and I give some career advice. It's basically a mix of everything I like to talk about.

*What makes a good book review?*

I think what makes a good review is that, if you liked the book, it should make a person want to read that book. What I try and do is explain a little bit about what the book is about. I obviously give my opinion, but I think it's more important to say what experience the book gave you, more than like "this is bad writing" or "this is good writing". I like to talk about what it made me feel and my experience reading it. I always like to pick out some parts that particularly stand out to me, parts that I know if someone would pitch them to me, I would want to read that book.



*Do you think you can judge a book by its cover?*

I very often do, but just because I really enjoy the book as a full package and I think the cover does such an important job of aiming the book at the right audience. It's there for a person to go "Oh that's something that catches my eye!" and obviously every cover is designed with a purpose, so I think ignoring the cover is always a mistake.

*Did it ever go wrong?*

I'm sure I've had books where I loved the cover and didn't get past page 10. But I like the outside, the package, and having them in my flat as much as I enjoy the actual reading of it. I think in the digital world where eBooks are popular as well, a lot of people appreciate the physical book even more. I feel like there are more beautiful editions being brought out because it's such a stark contrast from eBooks.

*Would you say that there's a shift going on moving more towards eBooks?*

I don't think so. Obviously I can't see into the future, but I think for now people still like giving books as gifts and like having them on their shelves. I think it won't go 100% one way or the other.

*What made you decide to start a channel?*

I was watching the Vlogbrothers John and Hank Green about two years before I started making videos and they were talking about topics that I really liked. Then FiveAwesomeGirls started a channel quickly after that. They were my age, they talked about stuff I liked. I think making videos came from the desire of wanting to be part of that community. I really wanted to be part of that discussion. You know when you watch people and you go like "Oh, I'd love to be friends with these people and chat with them" and the easiest way to get involved is to make videos yourself.

*Did you have trouble starting up?*

I think, especially back in 2008, it just took a long time for YouTube channels to grow. I think I had about 300 subscribers for the first two years. I don't think people joined YouTube for the money, there was just none to be made. The biggest YouTube channels had like 10.000 subscribers so it was just an entirely different world.

*You studied English in Leiden, what was your experience studying English? What kind of courses did you take?*

From the beginning, I was always more geared towards Literature courses. I really loved being surrounded by people that liked the same things that

I did, because in high school a lot of my friends didn't like reading and so it was lovely to be surrounded by people that shared the same interest in English culture. I really enjoyed doing my MA in translation, I think when I did that I really found something that I had a lot of opinions about, and I was really excited to just get down to the practical side of that. My favourite course that I took during my MA was a course on apocalyptic fiction. I knew I liked apocalyptic fiction, but when I took that course I was so excited to read this genre and learn about it.

*Did your studies and your MA in translation fit into the work you do now at Penguin Random House?*

I don't really do anything with translation at the moment and I think while I was doing my MA I sort of realised that maybe that was not what I wanted to do professionally. But it was something that I'd always been interested in and that I will always stay interested in. I think the combination of what I was doing at university and what I was doing with my YouTube channel somehow merged and turned into working as a social media manager for a publisher. I didn't realise that until I moved to London and I started doing internships. I didn't realise that not everybody knows how to do social media, I never thought that it could turn into a job.

*Do you have any advice for students wanting to move abroad?*

Prep as much as you can when it comes to documents, figuring out if you want to rent a flat and how much money you need. Saving up money is a huge thing. Also, look at what work experience you already have, even if it's work at a bar or a

shop or in an office, all of that is really valuable when you're moving to a different country. When you're looking for work they're going to ask for some sort of experience. If you want to work in publishing, any sort of office experience is really useful, no matter where it was.

*How has your Dutch been since you moved?*

I think my spoken Dutch is fine, because I sometimes Skype with my parents, my family comes and visits, and I have one or two Dutch friends here. When I meet with them we speak half-English half-Dutch so we're code-switching all the time. I think my written Dutch is much worse, because I basically stopped writing in Dutch the moment that I went to university, so my Dutch writing abilities end at 18 and whenever I have to write formal emails in Dutch I just lose the feeling for what's grammatically right. Writing Dutch emails doesn't come as naturally as it does when I write English emails, because everything I've been doing for the last four years has been writing in English.



*Would you consider moving back, or somewhere else?*

Maybe. I love the US, but it's not the place where I would want to live with the current events. I also love England because the health insurance is amazing and I feel a lot safer here living on my own, without any family to take care of me, knowing there's a safety net. I think it's easier to be a freelancer here than it is in the US, because the risk doesn't seem quite as high.

*Do you think that the Brexit could influence that?*

I don't know. That's going to be the question, basically. I think it might influence whether English companies hire European employees.

*Where would you say that the weather is worse, England or the Netherlands?*

When I moved, people always said "Oh, it's going to be so rainy!", but I don't think it's that rainy here. It genuinely rains more in the Netherlands, I guess you notice it more because you're always cycling and here you can just get on the tube and you don't realise it.

*Is there anything you really miss about the Netherlands?*

Kaassoufflés. You can get things like stroopwafels at Marks & Spencer's, but cheese, bread, kaas-soufflés, those are the things that I miss. When I go home, my mom will always buy me some nice bread and nice cheese because she'll know that's what I really want. I also miss cycling. Cycling here is fast and it's dangerous so I don't really cycle here at all, but whenever I go to the Netherlands I will cycle everywhere.

*How do you get over a book slump?*

I read graphic novels. I love graphic novels and I think when I'm stuck, all I need to do is sit down and read something start to finish, because once you've done that, you finish and you go "Okay, what am I going to read next?" and then you're excited to start again.

*What book has influenced your life the most?*

Harry Potter, but there is an actual story behind this as well. I don't just love Harry Potter. The fifth Harry Potter book came out in English when I was about 15. I passed a bookshop and saw it there - I hadn't read a full English book at that point. I saw it and I thought "The only thing that's stopping me from reading Harry Potter is the fact that it's in English." and so I bought it. My English was

alright at the time but I struggled my way through it and then read it again. That really sparked my biggest interest in English books. When I was even younger, I was obsessed with figuring out the Dutch and English terms for spells and names in Harry Potter. I have this whole list that I made when I was about 12. I think Harry Potter sparked my interest in translation and English culture. **WB**

*You can find Sanne Vliegthart, aka Booksandquills, on Youtube:  
[www.youtube.com/booksandquills](http://www.youtube.com/booksandquills)  
and on twitter and instagram:  
[@booksandquills](https://twitter.com/booksandquills)*



# LITERATURE REVIEW: PUBLIC ENEMIES BY MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ AND BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY

ABEL VAN OOSTERWIJK

‘Dear Bernard-Henri Lévy, We have, as they say, nothing in common—except for one essential trait: we are both rather contemptible individuals’, is how, on January 2008, French novelist and poet Michel Houellebecq opened a letter addressed to French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy, a letter which would result in a six-month-long correspondence that would later become *Public Enemies*. These two Frenchmen are controversial public figures: Lévy, a heavily politically engaged public intellectual, a man of the ‘moral left’, an activist; and Houellebecq, writer of *The Elementary Particles*, often accused of misogyny and Islamophobia, seen by some as a visionary for his pre-9/11 description of the terrorist attack in *Platform* (released in English 18 days before the September 11 attacks) and for his image of 2022 France in his latest book, *Submission* (published just hours before the attack on Charlie Hebdo), wherein, through the eyes of a university professor, one sees the professor’s university, France, and Europe turned into a hybrid, modelled on the Roman Empire, Islamic state.

In their correspondence in *Public Enemies*, these two ‘contemptible individuals’ discuss topics such as God and belief, science, philosophy, literature, war and the state of Western society, and they reflect on their position within France’s intellectual climate. Houellebecq and Lévy start off their correspondence as if they were duelling, or, rather, as if they were playing chess, not often without using

*The Art of War*-like terminology. Throughout the correspondence, one raises a topic, elaborates on it, and waits for the other to ‘make the next move’. This formula holds throughout the book, but the topics of discussion change when Houellebecq and Lévy quickly find themselves in an affective relationship: they identify common enemies, find their philosophical and religious views to be not so different after all, and, crucially, they meet each other in their love for poetry and literature, especially in their mutual love for Baudelaire.

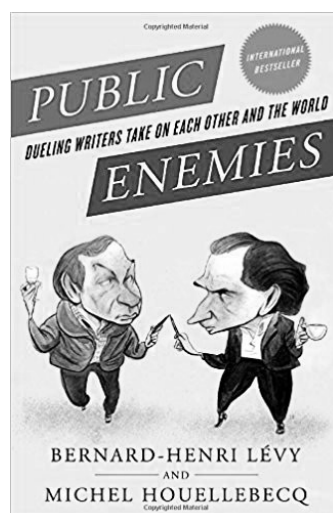
For both, *Public Enemies* then becomes an exercise in confessional writing, which both, and Houellebecq famously, had never dared to attempt before. In an interview with the BBC I once saw, Houellebecq said that he cannot help but lie: once he starts speaking of himself he naturally and consciously deceives, the other, the reader, and himself. As for this exchange of letters, Houellebecq writes to Lévy: ‘Schopenhauer notes with surprise that it is quite difficult to lie in one’s letters’. In *Public Enemies* and only in *Public Enemies*, Houellebecq is able to open up about his childhood and his tragic relationship with his mother, and the early signs of him ever becoming a writer. He reflects extensively and passionately on life, literature, and faith, wherein, as in any other topic, he finds Lévy to be a counterweight.

*Public Enemies* is an honest, revealing, inspirational and at times moving book about the intellectual and emotional lives of two often condemned yet

very important contemporary thinkers. It is the public damnation of these two Frenchmen that allows for insight on Houellebecq and Lévy's self-awareness of their towering intellectual and literary standing, and that does not go without any public responsibility. In their reflection on France's intellectual climate, out of which they've been chewed out, there is an implied sense of awareness of greatness, in that they are conscious of them being today's equivalent to Baudelaire and Flaubert, and therefore aware of their responsibilities in today's declining society that, unlike in prosperous societies (such as 50's France), as Houellebecq maintains, preys on its individuals: 'In Western societies, an individual has the right to stay on the sidelines of the group for a few years and attempt to gallop freely. But sooner or later the pack wakes up, the hunt starts, and eventually they corner him.' To be an independent thinker in today's society, Houellebecq and Lévy stress, is to be condemned. Makes one wonder how individualistic today's society really is.

*Public Enemies*, above all, gives insight into two brilliant minds of autonomous thinkers, while one also finds the origin of their ideas. Lévy for instance spends pages on explaining his Jewish faith, which serves as a very good introduction to Houellebecq the atheist, and consequently, to the unknowing reader. More or less the same goes for their expertise on names such as Pascal, Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, Aragon, Flaubert, Baude-

laire, Proust, and Sartre. This only makes *Public Enemies* a worthwhile read, even for the reader who is not interested in the mutual self-loathing of these two Frenchmen. **WB**



*Ennemis Publics* (2008) is translated to English by Miriam Rachel Frendo (*Public Enemies*, 2011) and to Dutch by Martin de Haan (*Publieke Vijanden*, 2009).

# SEAWEED AND OTHER SHORESIDE RUBBISH

ELISE VAN DER LINDE

She left footprints in the soft sand. She always preferred walking over the small stretch of beach where the waves crawled over. The dry sand sank too deep for her taste, leaving her exhausted at nightfall. Hours on end, she would sink, creating little valleys in the white powder. She walked and walked. She no longer knew how to stop. She had committed to this, and committed she'd stay. It didn't matter how the weather treated her. Come rain, come sunshine, come snow, come hail. There was nothing that mattered more to her. And so she walked.

Every day, when the sun would begin to show its death, she would begin to look for her resting place. Her eyes needed to close, her feet needed to recover. She would look for anything remotely safe. An abandoned shed. A lighthouse. A lifeguard post. Anything at all. Sometimes, she would stumble upon people camping. They would usually welcome her into their tent for the night. Other days, people who lived in homes on the beach would invite her in, all of them having guest rooms to spare. On nights like those, she would look to the bleeding sun and ask it what she had done to deserve such kindness.

She did not have a lonely existence. Quite the contrary. All the time she spent in such an open space meant that she would inevitably run into people. She had a gentle and kind face that drew people in. She didn't mind, even when they would catch her off guard. They always had questions for her: where was she from? What was she doing with her life? Where was she going? And when she was done answering all their questions, they would all tell her the same thing: you are a saint.

And while she appreciated the thought, she could never agree. No, she was only a girl, and just because she chose to spend her time doing what she did, did not make her a saint. She was not trying to be either. She did not do what she did to become a saint or anything of the sorts.

Why was she doing this? They would always ask. And every single time, she had a different answer. The truth was that she herself didn't know why, she just knew that she was. One day, she decided that this was what she had to do, and then she did. At first, it bothered her, not having a reason, but she soon realised she could not force the words or thoughts to solidify. It would take time. Her brain needed to cool off so all her evaporated thoughts could come back to her. When she established this, a weight lifted. Her feet didn't dig as deep into the sand, her shoulders relaxed, she stood straighter, and she began to smile. It is this, I believe, that made her pull people in without trying. It's something about her aura, that carefree — not careless — smile, that walking that looks more like floating. Her voice never sounded the same again. It became pure comfort, it warmly seeped into your skin and settled in your heart. If you heard it, you would know it was the only description that would even come remotely close to the truth. All of these things about her trapped people in a paradox: they wanted to be close to her, touch her, surround her, but they all thought that their flaws would damage her. Their sins would wrinkle her skin, scratch her voice, trap her down on this earth.

She knew this. She knew that there would be no person on this earth, sane or insane, that would

ever dare to ruin her. Every single person would want to cease their conversation with her, afraid that somehow they could spread their impurity by speech. Sometimes she wished that was possible, that she could rid herself of the image that had been established of her. She did not believe she was as pure as the world seemed to think. She would catch herself wishing that one person would do something that no one had done before. She knew she would not change, and she hoped that people would realise that and see that they cannot damage her, that she is more than a fragile being. She wanted to share this purity that everyone saw in her with the people that saw it. She thought that maybe that way, people would feel as light as she did. Maybe they would understand then that it is easier to walk on wet sand.

But just as her thoughts and worries before, thinking about this weighed her down. She knew this, and she knew that the only way to stop that weight was to cease lingering. But she could not do that. The weight grew, unlike before where it remained constant. It began to hurt her. Her once-relaxed shoulders began to tense up again. Her feet created valleys and craters deeper than ever. She began to hunch over. And her smile, the one that could warm anyone's heart, it began to falter. She tried to keep it, she clung to it, but it slipped further and further. At one point, she noticed less and less people would speak to her. She tried to keep her heart light, but it was sinking deeper than ever before. Soon, she forgot why she was

doing what she did. She forgot that it had been all she could think of, all she wanted. With no one to ask her the questions she was so used to answering, she forgot who she was. She became bleaker and bleaker, until one day, she stood on a beach for an entire day and did not see a single person. There was no soul that she could see, not even a fly. She stood in the wet sand. Occasionally, a cold wave would lick her feet. Her eyes were glued to the horizon. For the first time in a long time, her brain had quieted down. She could actually hear the sound of the ocean. It took only a split second for her to feel every single inch of her skin. It tingled. She had never felt that before. She wondered if all the people she had met in her lifetime had ever experienced this. If they had, how could they have ever envied her? How could she have lived a life that to others seemed so incredible, if she was missing out on this feeling for its entirety? A dark fear gripped her heart. How long until this goes away? What if it never comes back? She pushed it all aside, telling herself that there is no point in worrying while it was still around.

The feeling remained with her, even when the sun began to bleed. She knew she could not stay there any longer. The tide would begin to turn. The night would fall. So she took a deep breath before turning her back to the sun. A little further off she could see what looked like an abandoned shed. She felt nothing as she walked towards it. And in that moment, all the questions she could never answer had answers. **WB**

