

When you think of hope, where does it take you?

Hope is the promise of a brighter future. It's not blind faith that things will work out in the end, it's the trust we place in ourselves and those around us, that the choices we make in difficult moments will lead to better times. That the path we are on, and our story, matter.

Whether it's a small group winning the fight to build a community garden, a parent reflecting on the hopes they have for their children, or finding solace in the daily routine of a beloved pet, these stories demonstrate how powerful a force hope can be in our lives.

This collection has been written by people all over the country, reflecting on the theme of Hope, as part of Scottish Book Trust's annual writing opportunity, Scotland's Stories.

This book is a gift to you from Scottish Book Trust, a national charity changing lives through reading and writing, to celebrate Book Week Scotland, 18–24 November 2024.

If you enjoy it, please consider making a donation so that everyone in Scotland has the opportunity to improve their life chances through books and the fundamental skills of reading and writing.

Happy reading!

#BookWeekScotland
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Scotland's Stories: Hope



Hope

Scottish Book Trust

The people of Scotland share their true stories of Hope, with exclusive contributions from Susi Briggs and Ever Dundas.

Scotland's Stories

This book is a gift to you from Scottish Book Trust, a national charity changing lives through reading and writing, to celebrate Book Week Scotland (18-24 November 2024).

bookweekscotland.com

Hope is a collection of true stories written by the people of Scotland. This book is one of 65,000 **free** copies - thank you for picking it up! If you enjoy it, help us share it with as many people as possible. Dip into it and share a few favourites with friends, display it, gift a copy to a partner, colleague or parent, or even leave it somewhere for a stranger to discover.
(We recommend a reading age of 15+.)

These stories are both funny and moving, paying tribute to the breadth of storytelling across multiple generations all over Scotland. If you enjoy this book, please consider making a donation so that everyone in Scotland has the opportunity to improve their life chances through books and the fundamental skills of reading and writing.

Visit **scottishbooktrust.com/donate** to find out more.

Happy reading!
#BookWeekScotland

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Hope



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**Stories by published authors.*

Please be aware that this book is unsuitable for readers aged 14 or younger as it contains strong language and mature content.

Hope for the world

Hope with Action

Ever Dundas

Dear Not Disabled Yet,¹

You can buy hope.

It can be a one-off payment, but if you're desperate you'll come back for more.

It's funny how expensive hope can be.

When I posted on socials about my usual, pretty humdrum way of coping with chronic pain (in this case using a TENS machine during a flare-up), simply showing my reality and making no comment about how I was feeling emotionally, it attracted this comment from an Instagram wellness life coach:

'Hope your pain gets better today and I'm glad you have tools to help! I use [sic] to love my TENS unit too. It was a lovely distraction.'

So far so kind, if it ended there, but it didn't. In response to my thanks I got:

'Hang in there! I had pain for 20 years and am finally pain free!!! No tens units. No ice, no heat, no more kenesio [sic] tape or SI belts!!! It IS possible!!!!!!'

Ah, so this is what was really behind the past tense in the original comment. Firstly, note the (very quick) shift from praising the TENS machine to the casual dismissal of useful aids that can make people's lives better, the implication that you're doing something wrong by needing them, relying on them. They're not the answer!!! She has the answer!!! But note that she doesn't give that answer, doesn't say how she is pain free. She first has to reel me in with her positive!emphatic!exuberance!

Cue an exchange where I don't play ball and she

says, 'I don't know your story, but...' in response to my list of societal-wide changes that need to happen to improve the lives of chronically ill people. In this context, there's absolutely no need to know my story, but she has to bring me back from political change to the self as atomised individual under capitalism. She ends on: 'There is always hope.' Which I took to mean: following her motivational Instagram and paying for her life coaching. And I will keep hoping and keep paying. Because that positive outcome is always just out of reach... These self-made health gurus tell us: 'You too can be like me... But not until you pay my mortgage.'

People need hope when they have nothing else. Which is why I'll always take to the mat anyone who exploits this by weaponising and monetising hope.

We are not your prey, lady.

*

When people email me and say: 'I hope you're well', I interpret that in my own way because I'm never well and likely never will be. I take it to mean they hope I don't get any illness on top of the usual flu-like exhaustion and 24/7 pain.

Of course, it's my own fault that I'm unwell and likely will never be well again. My own fault for not hoping enough, for not spending enough money on hope: if I don't buy hope, I don't want to get well.

By acknowledging I'll likely never be well and getting on with living my life in the present, does this mean I've 'lost hope'? No. It means I've stopped harming myself trying to live up to the expectations of the well of how the ill should be. I won't perform the martyr nor will I attempt to perform 'overcoming' through 'sheer force of

will' inspiration porn.

*

When it comes to health and wellness people think in black and white. They like simplicity. They like the idea they have control over their health. It comforts them. Oh, how they cling to the idea of control and oh how I laugh like an old crone. They're smug in their wellness, sure of their superiority to those who are sick (if you take even a brief moment to ruminate on where this belief takes a person, you'll find them cosied up with fascists and eugenicists).

To them I must seem like walking chaos, disrupting their controlled, ordered existence with my lived experience.

When people say, 'at least I have my health', what does that mean and what does it imply?

I don't have my health. Does that mean my life is bad
tragic
unhappy?

If the lives of disabled and chronically ill people are a nightmarish struggle, that is a choice. Not our choice (we rebel against it with joy when we can). It's society's. It's yours.

When people say 'don't lose hope' in response to the reality that I'll likely never be well again, I roll my eyes at their tilted-head condescension. I don't need hope. Do you know what I need?

I need for my illnesses to be free of stigma. I need adequate - no, more than adequate, given the years of neglect - funding for good-quality biomedical research. I need a fit-for-purpose stigma-free benefits system, a non-

draconian government, and excellent medical and social care.

We all need this.

And none of it requires hope; it requires action. From you. From all of us.

But you prefer your empty hope and empty platitudes. You'll stubbornly stick with sentiment and fantasies of supremacy.

And I'll go on, living my life, refusing your narratives and building new joyful ones with my fellow crips.² Our hope is predicated on action. And it is not for sale.

Yours,

Ever Dundas

¹ Not Disabled Yet (NDY) or Not Yet Disabled (NYD): a term some disabled and chronically ill people use to refer to non-disabled people; if you have the privilege to live long enough, it is very likely that you will become disabled at some point in your life.

² A punk, political, reclaimed word used by crips for crips.

Nothing but Flowers

Mike Press

She was sitting on a bench reading *The New York Times*. The day before's *Times*. I sat down on the bench opposite, reading my phone.

In the quiet hum of an early Manhattan morning, the community garden, nestled between brownstones, tenements and a couple of glass-fronted condos, was an oasis of calm. An allotment area was laid out neatly below the mural that splashed vibrant colours across an otherwise plain brick wall. Tomatoes hung on the vine next to sunflowers standing tall in the sun now breaking over the buildings behind. Birds chattered from their hidden perches. Four wooden benches were positioned towards the edge of the garden, open to the sidewalk, inviting passers-by to rest awhile and enjoy the tranquillity.

As the woman turned the page of her newspaper, she glanced over the top of her glasses. Her face, serene with the hint of a smile, was framed by tightly curled black hair, shot through with strands of silver. Though she might have been close to sixty, the spark in her eyes suggested otherwise. Her glasses, round and slightly worn, began to slide down her nose. With a gentle push, she eased them back up and turned her gaze towards me.

'Where you from? Ain't seen your face 'round here before.' Leaning forward, she closed the paper, folding it neatly on her lap as the cool morning breeze rustled the leaves above us.

'Scotland,' I said.

'Ah, Scotland.' Pausing, she closed her eyes and smiled

as if pulling up something from her memory. 'That's a whole ocean away. What's got you comin' here?'

'The peace, the flowers. Been walking for an hour and needed to sit down.' It was true; the warmth of the morning sun on my face and the earthy scent of the garden brought a sense of contentment I hadn't felt since leaving home.

This community garden on the Lower East Side of Manhattan had attracted me with its tranquillity and its hope. A garden won by the community from the avarice of developers. A political victory for local people, creating space where nature can be nurtured and neighbours connected.

'Mm-hmm, peace and flowers, that's right. It wasn't easy, but we made it happen.' She gently nodded, closing her eyes again and smiling, perhaps remembering the campaigning, the lobbying, the marching, the public meetings, the leafleting, the struggle and eventual sense of joy when they made it happen.

'You live nearby?'

'Yeah, I got a spot in a hostel two blocks over on Avenue B. Been there a while. Used to live up in Harlem, but things happen, you know? Families, they're never easy, and anyways I like my own company. But this here. This garden. Right here. This is my real home.'

Her eyes wandered to the sunflowers over by the wall.

'Every little thing needs its spot under the sun, a chance to show what it can do. Just gotta mix the right earth, put in some elbow grease,' she paused, her voice warm, tinged with quiet strength. 'And you need that stubborn kind of hope that won't let you quit. That's how you get a garden that's more than just pretty - but a garden of blooming defiance.'

It was here, among the plants, the chattering birds and

gentle hum of New York just beyond, I learned that you
don't need much for home and hope.

Nothing but flowers.

Tae Hear de Spaek

Hannah Nicholson

Dir ivver tellin wis at if we dinna use da dialect, hit'll dee
oot. Wi ivry passin generation we kin hear it dwindle
awa, fewer bairns usin it as time gings on.

Hit's fine den tae hear de, my bairn, broad as onythin
whan du spaeks wi wis. Du's a clivver peerie lass,
nithin gets by de, an in a time whan dir dat mony fock
an influences in dy life at wid prefer at du be 'taught
to speak', hit's fine den at no only is du been 'towt tae
spaek', but at du uses it plenty among wis. I hoop du'll ay
keep it wi de, nae mettir whit, fir wi ivry bairn at sticks
wi it, it staands a better shance o survivin.

Author note: *This was inspired by spending time with
my five-year-old niece last Christmas. She speaks very
broad Shaetlan and it's reassuring to hear as the tongue
becomes increasingly minoritised.*

The Hope of Parenting Teenagers

Cordelia Manson

I hope they learn tae pit their dishes in the dishwasher,
Hope ah cooried thum in enough when they wir wee.
I hope they find a clan tae haud and uplift thum,
Weathering the relationship shifts o' this stage.

I hope they learn tae budget and no spend a' their money
on weeknight Uni drinkin'
Hope they keep coming home tae talk about the guid
stuff, and the hard stuff.
I hope they spik kindly tae theirsells wi words o' grace
and love
At their inevitable missteps.

I hope they ken their claes'll no git clean in bathroom
flair dubs,
Hope I've no screwed thum up too badly and that they
ken I wis daein' ma best
Even when they needed mair than ma best.
I hope they discover who they are, and who they are nae.

I hope they learn dugs dinnae feed or walk theirsells,
Hope they ken I'll ayeways pick thum up fae anyplace
they dinnae feel safe
I hope they learn tae say No
And mean it.

I hope they huv enough self-preservation tae no dae
anything truly stupid,
Hope they ken how deeply loved they are.
I hope they understaun their worth

Jist as they are.

I hope they are gled as often as they wahn't tae be, able
tae deal wi' stormy emotions,
Hope they ken how amazin' they are.
I hope they ken how lucky I feel that they're mine.
And I am theirs.

Author note: *Watching my daughter walk away from the car to an audition she no longer needed me to hold her hand through, with an elder brother away at university, I was struck by how some of my hopes had changed while many of them stayed the same. The first time I've ever written as I speak, because these hopes are tied to this place just as we are.*

Watermelon Friend

Leda Baöl

I've met you late in life, way past
the back-to-school Septembers
the no-credit-for-SMS tragedies
the I'll-never-love-again heartburns,
my friend, my watermelon friend,
my late-summer miracle, yes, way past
all that we have met, and yet
and yet you carry
the child I was on your shoulders
every time you call me 'sister'
every time you march beside me
every time you force me into
taking care
of myself.

Yes, my friend,
my watermelon friend,
my late-summer uprising,
thank you for showing me
that this child has still time
to make friends,
and with these friends then craft
a world which works better
than the one they grew into.

Author note: *In the past year, I became part of a group of incredible women. We are united in sisterhood, activism and healing each other. So this is a poem about meeting like-minded people, people who then become your best friends, in your thirties. It is inevitable to feel*

how much of a shame it is not to have met sooner. Your young, vulnerable selves will never support and uplift each other the way you can do now. You would have needed it sooner, yes, for sure. But it's not too late. Being given proof of that is simply a blessing.

Hope for the Classroom Wreckers

Ellie Stranger

Being a teacher in Scotland requires infinite reserves of hope.

Of course, we have hopes for ourselves.

Hope that all the pupils on our new timetables will, against all odds, be winsome wee weans who adore learning, not half-tamed savages who adore wrecking classrooms and dreams.

Hope that our older pupils will pass their exams, that even the ones who only managed to drag themselves into class a handful of times all year will have some sort of divine educational epiphany in the week before and will, somehow, Hoover up all the knowledge and resources laid before them like some intellectual Dyson before setting foot in the exam hall.

Hope that we can single-handedly and effectively support a class of thirty-two teenagers when half of them have additional support needs, and all of those needs are different, and they all need more time and attention than it's possible for one person to give, no matter how hard we want to.

Hope that you can get through the year with only this small pile of resources, because that's all there's money for.

But more than all this, there's the hope that gets us out of bed every morning, that keeps us up at night writing feedback and modifying lesson plans. It's not the hope for ourselves. It's the hope we hold, fiercely, stubbornly, maddeningly and desperately, for them.

Hope that they are going home to a warm house, a warm meal and a warm hug.

Hope that they will realise that their worth is so much more than their appearance.

Hope that the quiet, awkward ones will find a kinder, more tender corner of the world away from the cold, cruel predators of school playgrounds.

Hope that those predators will grow softer in time, once away from whatever makes them so hard and hurtful, will come to understand the pain they caused and bring their own children up to do better.

Hope that they will have the sense to make their own good choices in life, sense enough to know where the fine line between fun and danger lies.

Hope that they can see how blessed they are to live in a country where education remains free and the transformational effect it can have on their future if they work for it.

But most of all, always, underneath everything – hope that they know how much we care about them.

Even those wee classroom-wreckers.

Even after the bell goes.

Even after their final day.

Author note: *The inspiration for my story is the hope and care that teachers have for our pupils, even when they can't see it and react negatively to the things we do to try to help them and give them a good future.*

New dawns

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Pancakes

Robbie Handy

‘DADDY – it’s always crunchy cornflakes. Can we no have wumfing else!?’

When yer three-year-auld laddie gies ye pelters first thing, it’s hard tae stomach.

His sister’s mair diplomatic. But when her wee broon eyes dart fae me doon tae her flakes, I ken she agrees. The Michelin Man’s booncin richt past ma gaff wi his stars stuffed in his sash.

The wife usually works backshift, then studies for her degree once she’s hame. So mornin’s are ma domain, an (when the breakfast’s better) I love watchin the bairns scran up. There’s somethin special aboot seein yer ain wee humans chewin intently as thoughts flicker through their heids. Navigatin life at a million mile an hour, without a care in the world.

The school run’s really a quick dauner. Fifteen minutes along the road while I grip their wee hauns jist ticht enough an nae mair. Ma stroll hame past the hooses is a decompression chamber. But by the time I flick ma laptop on, I’m still feelin shoogly.

I’m a freelance copywriter. So I write words tae help folk sell stuff. Jeezo, what a laugh sayin that oot loud. I cannae even sell masel these days. I’ve had a guid run for a couple o years, ken? But noo the bahookie’s fell sae far oot ma business I find masel spraffin aboot it in the past tense.

It wouldnae be the end o the world if I had a plan B for the future, like. I mind pickin oot jobs when I was young – like shufflin they cairds the bairns have. A fireman? An astronaut? A butcher? A baker? What will I be? At forty-

seven, ‘que sera, sera’ sends a richt shiver.

Money. Ma bank app screams OPEN an moths fly through the cobwebs. Ma business email’s spam-jacked instead o enquiry-packed. Walk ootside tae stretch ma legs. I could honestly greet.

I’m takin a deep breath when ma wife shouts me in. ‘Laptop pingin,’ she says, ‘mi gone bathe.’

I blaw oot a ‘pfff’ as I click the screen back tae life. But here, there’s somethin else instead o the usual. ‘Some work if you fancy it?’ – aye, ye can say that again. Open it fast as a bell-sprung Pavlov’s dug an two corporate pitch decks never sounded sae miraculous.

Then ye’ll no believe what happened next. Cos by the time I read that ane, another was waitin. ‘QUOTE’ it says. Can ye write aboot the menopause? Without a moment’s hesitation, I belt oot, ‘Tootin sure I can.’ Then, at the back o that ane, ‘Women in Construction’ are wavin hello an I can practically feel the hard hat on ma heid as I read aw aboot what they’re efter.

‘Thank God,’ I say. Then I put ma hauns thegether an actually dae thank God. When I tot it aw up, it’ll cover the mortgage an bills for a month or mair. Fae big fat zero tae three-job hero in the space o a few minutes.

When ma wife comes doon the stair, the air’s different. ‘Somethin a burn?’ she says.

‘I made ye pancakes, actually,’ I laugh.

‘Pancakes!?’ she snaps Jamaican, ‘Backside! What got into you?’

Reflection

Susi Briggs

It took me years tae get her tae see sense. That man had dulled her hearin fer far too lang. He had Maggie convinced she wis glaiKET, ugly and had nocht tae offer. He stood in Maggie's road ony chance he could get. She could neer get far. It wis like Maggie had an invisible rubber band roon her waist. She wid get sae far and the resistance wid catapult her richt back and doon again.

Can ye believe how hard it wis fer me tae watch her dim that magnificent licht o hers? Aye ye see it skinklan noo - but it wis hidden fer a lang time.

Yin day she finally heard ma vyce screamin intae her lug ower and ower, 'It's duin! It's duin Maggie!' I dragged her oot o the wreckage, her hert wis heavin sair fer a love that should hae been. She had nae idea that I hae been cradling her hert aw her life. I kent it widna be easy and I had tae keep a close ee on her. I thocht I wid hae ma work cut oot healin Maggie but she wis guid at listenin. There wis a day she telt me that she wisna gan tae let another livin soul dim her licht. I kent she meant ilka word!

Ye see, Maggie had a strang sense that she could manifest what she needed. It wis an airt form fer sumdy that had left hame wi juist the claes on her back. Maggie kens hoo tae turn the pain intae something pretty.

I show her whaur her curves are. Maggie had them hidden. I tell her they are gorgeous and are meant tae be there. Maggie still fechts the urge tae hide them though. Auld habits tak a lang time tae dee.

I am fair prood that Maggie kens when tae walk awa fae storms that ither fowk summon. She disna ey listen

but she can get hersel oot o them fast when she notices. She kens whaur the safe harbours are. I whisper in her ear an mak her laugh. When we play in the shaddies thegither she's gallus and bold.

Hauf her life wis taen up wi domestic chores, workin jobs she didna much care fer and makin excuses fer stayin still. Maggie thocht she wid neer be aw the things she wanted tae be but she is catchin up noo.

It's been a sair fecht and ma voice wis muffled fer years. I kept tryin tae tell her and warn her o hings but she couldna ey hear me. Sae I wid send messages in aw mainner o weys. I wid leave her a bird's feather or play a sang on the radio. I wid dae aw kins o hings tae get her attention. I wid whisper my message intae the lugs o strangers fer them tae say it tae her. She wid tak the mindings and words and keep them safe like treasur.

Yin desperate nicht when Maggie wis at her wits' end she had ran oot barefit and intae the sklent in rain. That nicht Maggie wis close tae gien up awthegither but fer the wirds that rang oot in her lugs that an auld wifie had telt her, 'Ey look fer the stars in the puddles.' Maggie sat drookit on the park bench. She didna move til she saw the stars skinklan back at her in the deep wet glaur at her feet. She didna gie up.

Maggie has ey felt the desperate need tae flee awa when things get ower much. No tae dee. But tae just flee oot o here and intae the liminal tae float awhile. Jist til things stap hurting sae bad.

I show her hoo tae tenderly pluck oot they broken shairds in her identity that ettle her. They mak her want tae submit tae notions that she is nae worthy o great things. I whisper gently tae her, 'Dinna let the daurkness win ower yer licht', ilka day without fail.

I sprinkle trails o glitter on the path ahead so that

Maggie can daunce forrit intae a life that she wants and deserves. Maggie disna ey think she deserves aw that glitter, but I say she dis. Aw folk deserve that skinklan path tae walk.

Maggie's hurt maistly shrouds her at nicht when the busy noise o the day settles intae silence. That's when the soond o the angry vyces and broken plates comes back tae her. The slammin o the door and the threats. The recurring lie that she wis ey the yin tae blame for aw the anguish. The soond o the thud as she hits the flair again and again.

Maggie hears the swell o the love inside her. The hert's love that got dammed up behin invisible waws. There were fowk that she loved that had despised her fer leavin. Maggie neer wanted sides tae be taen. Aw she wanted wis peace and tae no feel sae broken aw the time.

I held Maggie on these daurkest nichts as she gret intae the pillae. I telt her, 'It taks time Maggie. This love yer haudin isna wasted. It will get better. It has tae.' I whisper the soothin words 'Howp and ken' ower and ower.

No lang ago the waws fell and the dam burst. That love has somewhaur tae gan noo. They are healing. Maggie disna greet as much onymair.

Maggie kens that I'm the yin that gaithers in the love offered fae fowk when she disna think she is worthy. I gaither it aw in and yaise ribbons o her licht tae weave it aw thegither intae a magnificent croon. I haud on tae it fer her til she is ready tae receive it.

I ken when she is ready. I ken she can see me. We huv ey been yin an the same.

Maggie gazes deeply intae her een in the mirror and smiles at me. She caws me Diva.

Tha an t-Earrach a' Tighinn

Open Book Gaelic Creative Writing Group

Le Lee, Mihoko, Nic, Petrea, agus Shelagh

Tha an t-Earrach a' tighinn; tha dòchas a' tighinn
Làithean nas fhaide, nas blàithe
A' toirt spionnadh dhuinn
Spionnadh air an robh sinn a' feitheamh ùine fhada
Tro na mìosan dorcha
Coltach ri sìorraidheachd

Tha an t-Earrach a' dùsgadh; tha dòchas a' dùsgadh
Dathan ùra fo ar casan is os ar cionn
Mullaichean geala a' falbh bho na beanntan,
Mullaichean uaine a' fàs air craobhan is preasan
Pinc is geal a' nochdadh aig ceann meuran
Blàthan a' cèilidh oirnn

Tha an t-Earrach ag èirigh; tha dòchas ag èirigh
A h-uile sealladh sa ghàrradh air ùrachadh
Èoin a' ceilearadh fon uinneig
Lusan a' tighinn fo bhlàth
Cearcall na gairnealaireachd
Agus sinne gar n-ùrachadh fhèin

Tha an t-Earrach air tilleadh; tha dòchas air tilleadh
Clann a' cluich a-muigh
Cailc dathte a' nochdadh air na sràidean
Nighean bheag air baidhsagal ùr:
Dà chuibhle an àite ceithir
Ag innse dhut gu bheil samhradh a' tighinn

Spring is Coming

Spring is coming; hope is coming
Longer, warmer days
Reinvigorating us
A reinvigoration long awaited
Through the dark months
Like an eternity

Spring is waking; hope is waking
New colours underfoot and overhead
White tips disappearing from the mountains
Green tips growing on trees and bushes
Pink and white appearing on branches
Blooms visiting us

Spring is rising; hope is rising
Every sight in the garden renewed
Birds chirping under the window
Plants blooming
The circle of gardening
And we are renewing ourselves

Spring has returned; hope has returned
Children playing outside
Coloured chalk decorating the streets
A wee girl on a new bicycle:
Two wheels instead of four
Telling us that summer is coming

A Breath of Fresh Ayr

KG

Sometimes things happen that can change the entire direction of your life. Three years ago, my life, and my son's, was very different. We lived in a pretty cottage in Northern Ireland. I was working part-time, and my son was in secondary school. We had no contact with any immediate family in the area. My son was being bullied in school and we had tried to sort things with the school, organised counselling and tried all the other options people suggested. Then one day my son came home and said words that will stay with me forever.

‘Mum, the kids at school keep telling me to kill myself, and sometimes I think they might be right.’

I hugged him so tight and said all the things I thought might help, but I was scared. I tried to move schools, but I was just told to go on waiting lists. My son was becoming more and more withdrawn. Then I found out that my work was looking for a manager in Scotland. I had been looking for positions in other parts of Northern Ireland but somehow came across this one. I thought about it for a couple of days, then found out that my work would offer a relocation grant. I sat down with my son and asked him if he would like a fresh start in Scotland. He jumped at the chance. I waited a few more days to see if his excitement would fade, but it didn't. I applied for the job, and got it, applied for the grant, and got it. Then I went house-hunting, which was difficult because we have two cats and couldn't just nip over the water for house viewings. So many people said, ‘No pets.’

Then the first place I had inquired about, but had been too late for, became available again. I was delighted.

The estate agent gave me a virtual tour and was very pleasant on the phone. I had never been to Ayr before, only to Edinburgh. I was taking a huge risk: new place, new job role, new school for my son. I know it could have ended so badly. It wasn't a rational choice, but my son needed to be away from the people who made him feel so bad. I felt I couldn't protect him, and we had more to gain than we had to lose.

We packed our stuff and hopped on the boat. It was February and the weather was awful. The rain was like water balloons being dropped on us from childish students in the clouds. The rocking of the boat made me... let's just say uneasy. The drive to the house was in darkness and I hadn't seen it in the flesh. We arrived at 7am and took a walk on the beach. The wind was howling, my hat blew away and my son ran to the swing and shouted to the sky.

'Woo hoo! Scotland!' With the biggest smile I had seen in years.

My new landlord said, 'It takes two years to really make a place a home,' as he handed me the keys.

I don't know if he was just saying that to keep a tenant, but I found comfort in the timeline. It didn't take that long. My son made friends in school really quickly; they loved his accent. His grades improved, he developed new hobbies, and completed the Duke of Edinburgh Award. He came out of his shell completely. There were a few bumps in the road, but he is happy. I settled in well to my job and went back to education from home through the Open University and have just been accepted onto a PGDE course. Sometimes on my walk to work across the bridge with the old-fashioned lamp posts, I stop and look at the river, with its beautiful swans and hypnotic rhythm, and whisper a thank you. So much was going

wrong for us, and so many things, more than I have mentioned, slipped into place when I started to look at Scotland as a possible home.

If one thing had changed, we might not have moved. We even made our first friends because of a prank that was played on us. We were told that there was snow all year round in the north of Scotland. I honestly didn't believe it at first, but they showed me pictures of a year-round ski slope and I was fooled. So, my son and I went for a drive northward, and somehow ended up in Rosslyn Chapel (I got lost). We accidentally joined a tour group and made friends with a wonderful woman, who put us in touch with another single parent and their child. That was almost three years ago, and we are still best friends.

Sometimes you need to smash the foundations of the world you live in, to build a stronger one. I never felt like I was in the right place until I moved. Scotland deserves to have the unicorn because it's a magical place and I am so unbelievably grateful to be here and see my child happy. We love you, Scotland, you're a breath of fresh Ayr.

Author note: *I was walking home from work and my son phoned me to say he would join me. He wanted to convince me to buy a takeaway. As we walked over the bridge he was talking excitedly, without stopping for a breath. For some reason, it just hit me - how happy he was - and it made me smile.*

How Will You Live Now?

Alycia Pirmohamed

After Bhanu Kapil's *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers*

I try to embed love here, at the intersection between a childhood memory of small-town northern Alberta and a public footpath in the Scottish Highlands

where I'm walking alongside a tributary far from its source. This itself is a metaphor.

I steep my hiking boots in mud that coagulates in their rubber grooves. My life is mixing with this landscape.

I'm on a river path that seems to lead further and further away from my family, further and further away from the Midwest prairies. That specific composition of mud.

The source.

There is no end in sight. I try to embed love here, at the glaciated remains of my inheritance. The ongoing melt of my personal history,

an entanglement of heritage that, as a child riven with colonial learnings, I didn't bother to value.

I wanted, instead, the pathway to elsewhere. A landscape where assimilation led to areas of decay. I try to embed love here, still,

knowing it isn't too late to live purposefully, with the knowledge of my ancestors, the woman who crossed river after river.

So, I turn toward saplings growing in the fissures cracked open by time. I transport them, gently, to my homeland

- any place with birch trees, soaking wet in the ongoing rain. Damp leaves reflect my earliest dreams. Whatever buds here is a symbol of renewal,

resilience and determination,

a reminder of the elliptical world, the way love cycles back into the body: what is lost isn't lost. New growth comes from past memory.

Dancing for Hope

Georgia Marlborough

When my psychologist, Christoph, suggested reporting my abusers to the police, it was laughable to me. I couldn't imagine telling a police officer what had happened. Years of denial meant my body had gone to increasing lengths to get me to take notice of what I was actually feeling. A decade of stagnant rage and grief consumed me. My face and back erupted in painful acne, I was regularly debilitated by migraines, battled with endless digestive issues and lived in near constant agony as my sciatic nerve fired down my right leg. There was a period when I couldn't leave my flat without having a panic attack. These symptoms, Christoph told me, indicated post-traumatic stress disorder.

I came around to the idea of talking to the police. Conviction rates were low, so I didn't hold out much hope for that. But if I didn't report my abusers, I was letting them get away with it scot-free. If I did, they would at least be brought into police custody for questioning, confronted with the truth of what they had done. I felt a glimmer of hope, a whisper to let my voice be heard. In its glint, I saw I could let go of this heavy secret I'd been holding onto for far too long.

So I did it. I felt so light, so free. 'I'm walking around like I own these city streets!' I told Christoph with glee. The glimmer of hope kindled into something greater. My feet tapped joyfully on the bus. My mind presented me with images of my body twirling in pirouettes, launching into leaps. In therapy, I realised I didn't have any hobbies. Now, unburdened, I had enough energy to take one up. As a kid, I'd tried everything: painting, singing,

kickboxing, horse riding, kayaking, acting, swimming, putting on performances for family in the sitting room. My first hobby was dancing in a community centre class. Then I went to stage school and learned jazz. But I'd always wanted to try ballet.

I was drawn by the poise, elegance, beautiful costumes and rich tradition in the royal courts of Italy and France. I'd long been fascinated by the Sun King, Louis XIV, a brilliant ballet dancer. I loved that ballet terminology was *en français*. I signed up for classes and bought ballet shoes, putting them on as soon as I got home. 'You're so excited,' my boyfriend said, grinning.

My first class was in January. The night was cold and dark. Part of me was terrified to turn up alone. But another part rode roughshod right over her into the beautiful red brick studio. Inside, the peachy walls, barre and Royal Ballet posters soothed me. Our teacher, a small, dark-haired man called Peter, brimming with mischievous energy, instructed newcomers not to look so terrified. He looked on at us with the impeccable posture of a dancer and told us we'd chosen the hardest kind of dance.

Going to ballet class was humbling. It was hard. Learning technique confronted me with the body I'd abandoned to go live in my head. Just standing still with proper posture requires you to fire every muscle in your legs, core and back. I felt how weak I'd become, especially in my right hip, the epicentre of my chronic pain. I'd wobble like jelly whenever we had to balance, which was pretty much every exercise. My feet had never known anything like it. For the first few months, my right foot felt like it was getting torn to shreds every class. I took a trigger release ball into the office and sat with my shoe off, massaging the pain all day. I'm grateful

to my colleagues who never commented on this odd behaviour.

I slowly got better at balancing, even on my right leg. As we repeated pliés, tendus and glissés over and over, I rediscovered the joy of being present in my body as I moved with the gentle music. I'd push myself every class, leaving with a face like a tomato after finishing with sixty-four jumps. My confidence grew bit by tiny bit as I learned and improved. I found out I liked to turn *en dedans*, inwards. When Peter requested it in Scots-accented French, I'd proudly stand in third position, right foot in front, *ouvert*, open.

Peter was kind, but firm. He would repeat mantras to us. 'I don't ask for much,' he'd boom to the studio, referring to all the component parts of perfect posture, 'I ask for everything!' Once he told us to, 'Embrace the balletic pain.' The one I really took to heart was, 'Tall people, be tall. Small people, be tall.' I learned to use every inch of my five-foot frame.

Ballet posture showed me I'd been cowering: walking with shoulders slumped and head down, subconsciously making myself small, unnoticeable. I started strolling with my shoulders back, chest open, core engaged, head held high. When I wanted to stare at the ground, I'd hear Peter's voice in my head, 'Chin up!'; I looked people in the eye again.

I stopped thinking I was weak, or incapable, because here I was, showing up for myself every week, getting stronger and more graceful, making friends with the other dancers. Ballet showed me the folly of my perfectionist tendencies. When I received criticism, it felt like the world was ending. Even when it was constructive and kind, I would take it personally, ruminating obsessively. But in class, I was greedy for

Peter's critiques, realising they would make me a better dancer.

Taking up ballet was a gift to myself. It gave me confidence, strength, grace and community. Each class I creased with laughter at Peter's jokes. I learned dedication and practice pay dividends. My hope that there was joy to be found in my life again was kindled from a glimmer to a roaring flame. Dancing is an act of hope after all. A celebration of being alive.

Author note: *As part of my PTSD recovery, I reported my abusers to the police, unburdening myself from years of holding onto a heavy, dark secret. Once I'd done it, I was filled with an energy I hadn't felt in years. I used it to learn ballet, and found hope that there could be joy in my life again.*

By Whichever Wind

Sean Kwok

Why do we keep moving, every generation a restless band?

Some came by boat, others spirited by waters alone.
They kept their heads low; the skies took to our land
and made us whisper their parting promise.

I went atop the winds of fate
predicated by history and always
doubting, an island of distress
too busy casting the flag of freedom to the flame
than to see me go, as if to dry our tears.

I crossed the oceans of a thousand fears,
embracing neither pride nor pain
as I switch to a higher address.
Too accustomed to the ruins of a home away;
too much paperwork on our petite plate.

Memory serves as a chalice untouched by day
yet as infectious as a laugh in duress.
I felt the peace of night a lifetime's gain
won by those I failed to offer but a voiceless cheer.

But there is more I can claim as my ain
as I find others who have been oppressed no less
by the walls of their house and still take time to play.
To the tune of the Tweed, you vow to confess
surprise at every sunset, to bear an open heart again.

By whichever wind, you've carried your truth and let me

fly mine
for both homes share the borders of my heart.

Wherever and wherefore I came and am to go,
I promise to follow the winds of life,
for nothing is more undecided,
than whatever our tomorrows would bring.
And we have much we can do together.

Author note: *I was fortunate enough to have relocated from Hong Kong to the Scottish Borders exactly at a time of political turmoil in my home city. Then the pandemic engulfed the world. When I stopped on a walk on a rather windy day, I made a connection with the wind. It was of course the wind that accompanied my flight to Scotland; so too were the 'winds' of historical circumstances and perhaps even a coincidence of timing. I felt guilty for having to abandon my old home and did not readily embrace my new home, yet despite the lockdown, fellow Borderers have generously befriended me. I saw that the idea of home need not be tied to land boundaries but can simply come from the heart, strengthened by connections between people, wherever we come from and wherever we shall go. The transformative aspect of home, like wind, renews my hope that humans can forge better days for each other.*

The Interloper

Cat Paterson

The bin men haven't come yet today. She is conscious of the silence outside and the lack of a Saturday morning alarm, but the silence seems louder. Snow. Must be snow. The baby is sleeping soundly in his cradle beside her, contained in his sleeping bag that always makes her think of a crisp packet.

She nudges the girl, who is curled in a ball at the foot of the bed. Tells her to peep out of the curtains. It's still dark but she can tell from the reflection there has been a thick fall overnight. The girl murmurs 'snow' and then goes back to sleep in her spot, like a small, not-quite-tame animal.

When she was a child, she loved snow, found it so exciting. She once wet herself, when she was far too old for accidents, because she was so desperate not to come in from a particularly good sledging hill. She told her friends that a dog must have peed in the yellow slush. They probably knew.

Today will be that bit harder though, that's her first thought. The locals here can't drive in the snow. She won't take her car out in it. He is due home from his night shift any moment now but is probably mired on the motorway, staring at red lights and trying not to crash.

One of the cats starts mithering at her ear, purring urgently. She'd usually have been fed by now.

It is the second to last day of the year. She always calls it the fag-end of the year, unsure why. She's never smoked, not once in her life. It's the sort of thing her dad or granny would have said when she was a child.

She does this a lot, phrases like touchstones anchoring her to her past, where she's really from. She doesn't feel anchored to this place. They're not far from the city, really. Five houses surrounded by trees at the foot of a Marilyn. But in a five-minute drive they could be in the 'village', which really is a suburb with a high street. In half an hour, the city centre. The people here are kind in the way wealthy people can be. But they are guarded. Clothes are understated, people drive Volvos, they communicate with glances and the flaring of nostrils. The place the woman comes from is wild. There is the wind and the sea and little else. People here go on holiday there, but usually only once. Home for the woman is an empty beach, sea the grey of her eyes and unforgiving. Hard blue skies and air that catches the back of your throat like a razor. Seals eyeing you from the surf.

Here, there is no sea.

It's the woman's third month of maternity leave. The baby elbowed his way into their life, hers and the girl's, arriving urgently and angrily on Halloween night. She can't think directly about what happened, but she knows that if one more person says 'at least he made it here safely' she will scream. But what about me? She wants to say. Me, me, me. There is no me. Only us, the 'dyad', the woman at her breastfeeding group calls it. I already had a dyad, thanks very much, she wants to say. The girl and I were perfectly fine. We made bracelets and played with Sylvanians and went to Nando's, where we pretended the broccoli was trees and frustrated the waiter with our refusal to give up the metal chicken from the table, the one they're meant to take away to confirm they've checked on you, because the girl liked making it dance across the table while they ate. She can't say that though,

so she sips tea and allows a woman wearing yellow dungarees to check her latch.

She takes the opportunity of both children sleeping to have a hot, private shower, quietly gets dressed, then wakes the girl and tells her to get her ski suit on. We have to go out, she thinks. She puts the boy in the over-engineered sling, wrapped in a star-shaped blanket and warm against her chest. Over it, she puts on her fur-lined coat. Her mum bought her this for Christmas. It has a section so she can wear the baby, both of them wrapped in fur and only his head peeping out of the top. It makes her feel like a wild animal, a monkey or a polar bear with a cub clinging to her.

They leave the house. She pulls the girl on the sledge, in search of the hill. There is snow, so it must be enjoyed. She isn't sure who she's doing this for, but it has to be done. They walk too far for the girl, she sits down in a drift, tears forming in her eyes. Usually it would be her on her mum's back, or better, both of them running, rather than this grim march. The woman is gentle, 'Hey, how about you build a snowman just now? There's plenty of time to sledge.' The girl nods seriously, gets to work. The sky is heavy and it will snow again today.

The woman watches her daughter's creation form. Lots of sticks need to be found, to give it a spiky hairstyle like that photo from the '70s of the girl's grandfather. She feels the boy stirring against her chest. Flakes of snow are catching as his eyelashes flutter. Then a sound, one she hasn't heard him make before. The girl's head jerks up. 'Mum, the baby!' She looks again, craning her neck to see him properly. One tiny hand is stretched out of the coat cocoon towards his sister. His toothless mouth is upturned at the sides and she realises he is watching and laughing. The girl trots over, takes

her brother's hand and laughs with him as the snow swirls.

Maybe, the woman thinks, this is all going to be all right.

Author note: *Going from being a mother of one to a mother of two was more of a shock than I expected, and my mood was definitely affected. When my baby started interacting with his sister, things got better and I was able to see what our future might look like as a family of four. I'd encourage anyone struggling with postnatal mental health issues to seek help - there are so many kinds of support available.*

Pockets of joy

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Lighter

Tracy-Anne

I woke up this morning feeling a wee bit lighter. I made a coffee and now I'm sitting in my moger of a kitchen with my braw, big dug. I love my dug. I often think of all the pets caught up in the wars of this world just now. It doesn't bear thinking about. Last night, me and the dug went down the shore and she swam in the sea whilst the sun set behind Arran. It was so peaceful. I am so lucky.

I'm sitting here as if I have nothing to do. I actually have umpteen things I could be doing. I'm great at procrastinating.

I was a nurse for twenty-five years. Quarter of a century. That's a long time. But I gave it up last year, feeling I was always failing to meet the demands no matter how many extra hours I put in.

So now I'm a dug walker! It was slow at first but I'm getting there now. I walk a Yorkshire Terrier, a Lhasa Apso, a Pointer, two Shar Pei's, a wee shaggy mongrel, a Cocker Spaniel, a Cockapoo, a Labrador pup and a French Bulldog. My dug walks most of them with me. I charge peanuts but hey ho. I'm skint, but at least I don't need to write notes.

Due to my high levels of skintness, I also deliver pizza most nights. I'm still grieving for nursing; I was good at most of it, but I'm getting used to my new life. Nothing is forever.

I work mostly with guys. The kind of guys who give guys a good name.

Stevie, in his Doric tongue, makes me laugh whilst we do the dishes and mop the floors. He tells me of his childhood in Fife, picking berries and tattie howkin,

running from the Social. And that he doesn't eat tuna or salmon because of the way it is farmed, that the fish are riddled with lice, which pollute the rivers. He tells me of his old job hanging the chickens and having to kill cockerels and of being exploited by the so-called gentry. He's done jobs most of us avoid thinking about.

Him and Chris are kind and wink at me when I'm feeling down. I think they can tell when I've been greetin.

Ashok, too, is kind. One time, on my way to the car with a tower of deliveries, my legs started to buckle under the weight. Ashok screeches his car to a halt, and, like a knight in shining armour, is beside me, sharing the weight and opening the boot of my car for me. After his shift, he goes to work in the all-night garage. His wife works in the pakora factory.

Eric, like me, has a memory that is failing him and is my fellow caffeine addict. Him and his wife are not long back from Arizona, where they saw the eclipse. Eric has a blue car, but gets mixed up and will go into any blue car.

Khan is new. He started during Ramadan and used a cardboard box as a prayer mat in the cupboard. We complain about the potholes here, but he says there were no roads in Afghanistan, so driving here is a result for him.

Aaron takes a size 13 shoe. The council threatened him with an ASBO (not because of his shoe size), but arranged for him to busk with his ukulele instead.

Yalcin is sad because his house is too cold for his son to visit and his wife, who is an English teacher in Turkey, can't get a visa. We have all felt despair at some point. It makes us laugh harder and be kind to each other.

Time for coffee number two. I am addicted to anything

caffeinated, just to keep me going.

My partner is still sleeping. So I've got the kitchen to myself. We have a tangerine chaise longue and I'm lying on it, checking my phone. I have a message from my daughter saying she's not well and had to go to the on-call doctor. My daughter has three weans and little help from me at the moment due to my working hours. I am riddled with guilt. When they were wee, I worked part-time as a nurse and was off weekends, so I was able to watch them. I didn't know when I was well-off.

Covid and lockdown changed me. I take risks and make different decisions now. Life is not permanent. I knew that before, obviously, but feeling it is different.

My future might be better, and it might not. I hope I will be able to work less and be with my family more. I hope the wars sort themselves out and that families and pets are reunited. For me, hope is a feeling, an experience, a sensation. This morning I woke feeling a bit lighter. It is getting easier to lift one foot in front of the other. I sleep better. I don't worry about missing things and someone dying and it being my fault.

Anyway, the dug has her bouncy ball in her mouth and my pizza delivery uniform is not going to hang itself out, so I'd better move.

I hope it doesn't rain.

Author note: *When I woke up feeling lighter, like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders.*

Ribbons and New Socks

Sheena Mason

'I hope it's sunny on Saturday.'

'I hope it doesn't rain.'

'I hope it's at least dry.'

The conversation would always take place the week before the Gala Day - the event which was celebrated in June in most Central Belt towns across Scotland. We were children growing up in the 1950s, just a few years out of rationing. Our school was situated at the park where the Gala was held every year. The day before, the grass would be cut in preparation for the big day, adding to the excitement.

We would start off the day by walking behind the pipe band in the procession up the High Street to the park, our gutties freshly whitened, and wearing new, crisp white socks, ribbons in our hair. Some were even lucky enough to have a new dress. After arrival in the park, there would be the crowning of the King and Queen with the local pompous dignitaries sitting on the podium. 'Stuffed shirts,' some would mutter under their breaths. 'Neither use nor ornament,' said others.

'I hope I don't get a coconut sponge.'

'I hope I get an empire biscuit.'

We just longed for the ceremony to be over because then we would queue up with our friends to get our 'box'. A thin, white square cardboard box which, when you undid the flap, revealed a treasure trove of delights (to us anyway): a pie, a bun and a fancy cake, along with a carton of juice. If you didn't like your cake, you could always swap it with a friend who didn't like theirs. 'Swappies my fruit slice for your French cake!' Suitably

nourished, the rest of the day stretched before us. Pony rides, games and, of course, the sports.

‘I hope he disnae win the fathers’ race again - we’ll never hear the end of it.’

‘I hope I don’t fall flat on my face again.’

The sports began - sprints, three-legged races, egg-and-spoon races - all age-related so even tiny tots could join in. Then came the last three, which we children so looked forward to. First the mums’ race. With skirts tied like pantaloons, they sped towards the finish line, all collapsing in a heap and laughing hysterically. Then the dads’ race. Trousers would be rolled up to the knees and shirt sleeves to the elbows. Then they were off, thundering past the spectators like a herd of elephants making the ground shudder under our feet. Lastly came the *pièce de résistance*: the tug of war. How everyone screamed for their favourite side - the men in their vests heaving away to cries of, ‘Wullie, dig yer feet in man!’, ‘C’mon Tam, gie it some welly’, to bolster them on. And the side that lost would be ridiculed: ‘Couldny knock snaw aff a dyke’, ‘Archie couldny punch a hole in a wet paper bag’.

By this time, our new socks had grass stains on them and the ribbons had been lost from our hair. We no longer had the urge to kick our heels like young fillies in a paddock as the day came to an end.

But how simple just to hope for some sunshine and your favourite cake.

Author note: *A memory I shared with my ten-year-old grandson when talking about Poltonhall/Bonnyrigg Gala Day, where he would dress up as Harry Potter.*

A Wee Pocket of Joy

Rosemary Henderson

Lunchtime brings a delightful mix of locals and tourists to Princes Street Gardens. Children play around the fountain, their shouts and laughter echoing through the air as they chase each other. Tourists pose for the perfect picture, capturing memories with the stunning backdrop of Edinburgh Castle perched high on its rocky crag.

Lining the long paths of the gardens, a series of wooden memorial benches stand in quiet tribute. Each bears a small, polished plaque, inscribed with the names and heartfelt messages of lost loved ones whose memories are intertwined with the beauty of the gardens.

Spotting that one of the benches is empty, I make my way over and sit down, feeling the stress of the morning begin to melt away. From this vantage point, the view is breathtaking. The fountain’s graceful figures seem almost to dance in the sunlight, while the castle looms protectively above.

Reaching into my bag, I pull out a book that I have been meaning to start for weeks. Picked up on a whim, its cover is adorned with intricate illustrations and a title that promises adventure. Holding the book in my hands, I run my fingers over the smooth, glossy cover, savouring the moment.

I open the book, feeling the slight resistance of the crisp, unturned pages. The fresh scent of ink and paper wafts up, a scent so distinct and comforting it instantly transports me back to childhood visits to the library. There is something almost magical about the smell of a new book, a promise of unexplored worlds and untold

stories.

As I begin to read, the world around me fades. I'm transported far from the stresses of my daily life. The vivid descriptions and lifelike characters come to life in my mind, and I feel myself relaxing, the tension in my shoulders easing with each turned page. The park's noises - the chirping of birds, the distant sound of children playing, the rustle of leaves - become a soothing soundtrack to my reading. In the background, the gentle and rhythmic sound of trains passing by adds to the ambience. Occasionally, a train sounds its horn, a cheerful greeting to a child standing on the bridge behind the Ross Bandstand, enthusiastically waving to the drivers. The soft clatter of the train wheels on the tracks blends harmoniously with the other sounds of the park, creating a comforting, almost musical backdrop.

For the first time in weeks, I feel at peace. The weight that had been pressing down on me earlier is lighter, more manageable. I become absorbed in the story, my own worries and stresses momentarily forgotten.

As the hour slips by, I am suddenly brought out of the world of the book by the booming sound of the one o'clock gun echoing through the park, sending birds flying into the sky. My surroundings slowly creep back into my awareness. Reluctantly, I close the book, carefully marking my place with a leaf that had blown onto the bench a while ago. I look around, noticing the vibrant colour of the grass, the laughter of children, and the gentle, rhythmic sway of the trees. Everything seems a little brighter, a little more alive.

I stand up, feeling refreshed. Slipping the book back into my bag, I walk through the park towards the exit. Climbing the steps, the sounds of the city gradually grow louder, breaking the peaceful silence of the gardens.

The rumble of buses and trams, the engines of taxis, the chatter of people, and the occasional notes of bagpipes playing in the distance all merge into a bustling symphony.

Reaching the top, I pause for a moment and look back at the gardens. In the midst of life's chaos, I have found a wee pocket of joy. I smile to myself and step back into the busy flow of the city.

Author note: *Last year, I sat in Princes Street Gardens with a book I had been carrying around for weeks but hadn't found the time to start. Life was hectic, and I struggled to justify taking time for myself. One day, while in town for lunch, I decided to eat in the gardens. That simple choice led to a moment of tranquillity and peace that has stuck with me ever since.*

Hope and Consolation

David Pickering

Approaching the care home, the music got louder and louder. I recognised the tune: 'The Wonder of You'.

The Elvis song is a favourite of mine. I've sung the song many times. Parties, karaoke, the pub (often), a hen night (in full jumpsuit, too!) and even a funeral once.

'The Wonder of You' was always my 'go to' song.

It's fair to say the singer was no Elvis. He was putting his heart and soul into it, but this was no King. Harsh? Maybe. It is just possible that I was a teeny bit jealous that somebody was singing 'my' song!

It took a while for a member of staff to answer the buzzer. Halfway through 'Amarillo', as I remember.

'Sorry,' she explained. 'We're in the community lounge. Sadie's celebrating her hundred-and-first birthday!'

I did wonder if Sadie would, honestly, be celebrating her birthday. Can you really enjoy a birthday party in a room full of strangers, when all your friends and maybe your family have passed away?

When I peeked into the room, the Birthday Girl did seem to be enjoying herself though, bedecked in a paper crown and a birthday sash.

The party was in full swing, and the lounge was full of residents and staff now taking part in a sing-song, some more enthusiastically than others. My friend wasn't there, though. I never thought he would be.

I found him in his room. He always seemed to be in his room these days. Often dozing, sometimes staring into space.

I still got a slight shock when I saw him; it happened every time I called. I still expected to see the friend

I remembered from all those years ago, those days when we were young and bright and full of nonsense. When life was fun and filled to the brim with endless possibilities. The golden days when opportunity often knocked. . . And I smiled when I pictured him belting out doo-wop backing vocals at a birthday party we had attended just a few short years ago.

My old pal was more animated than he had been on my last visit, which I had actually feared might be my last. Today, the spark was back in his eyes and he did speak - not that I understood a word. Our conversations were strange affairs, but my hope was that he got something from my visits, anything that might spark a memory or a feeling, or just. . . something. The frustrating thing was that you could never really know.

On a recent visit, one of the nursing staff had insisted that my friend really did understand what we were saying to him. The nurse was absolutely convinced there was still something there, and I cling on to this. As long as the visits are not causing distress, I'll keep coming back.

I didn't stay long, but then I rarely did now. You run out of things to say, and the last thing I wanted to do was bore my mate to death.

I promised I would see him again soon, and squeezed his hand. As I got up to go, on impulse I quietly sang: 'When no-one else can understand me, When everything I do is wrong. . .'

I can't be sure, but I do believe he gripped my hand just a little tighter. And he said something. Maybe he was singing. Or maybe telling me to shut up. Whatever, it was a response.

'You give me hope and consolation
You give me strength to carry on. . .'

On the way out, I met old Sadie, her crown askew, with one of the nurses.

'Happy Birthday, Sadie,' I said.

'This is the best birthday party I've ever had, son!' Sadie replied, her eyes shining. 'I've had such a lovely time!'

I was still humming 'The Wonder of You' when I left the care home.

Ladies and gentlemen, Elvis has left the building.

Uh-hu-huh...

Author note: *The story was inspired by a recent visit to a care home to visit an old friend who has dementia. I often feel slightly apprehensive before I go, and sometimes feel sad when I leave. Not this time, though!*

Thorin ST Gillard

A morning kiss to the trill of alarm clock bells precedes a duvet battle, hard-fought, rarely won.

A communal breakfast follows, in each other's eyeline at all times, because that's the way you like to eat.

We venture onto the Links, blinking through sheets of lashing rain. You shout at passing cyclists and I hold you back, my eyes recycling the same tired apology as they whizz by in hi-vis blurs.

Back home, you make a nest of blankets beside me, a nuzzling bundle of warmth, dozing in perfect bliss. I stroke your fur and feel my mind uncurl, my nerves unravel. It's like a superpower. Without doing a thing, you make me feel like I can do anything.

And on the bad days, when I can't see past these four walls, you are a window, a door, a glimmer in the dark. I look into your eyes and wonder, do you know what you're doing? And if not, does that make it even more special?

Sometimes, I think about the time I almost lost you, the hollow terror and the insurmountable feeling that, somehow, I'd failed. But you were a fighter, stronger than I. You came back.

So, this is for you, my boy, so that long after you're gone, and my mind relinquishes its memories of you, I will remember the hope you gave me.

And the time we had together.

Author note: *My dog Thorin has brought me so much hope over the last five years. This little story is a tribute to him.*

50 Word Non-Fiction

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This year, we introduced a new way for the people of Scotland to tell their stories: **50 Word Non-Fiction**. We asked for the public to share their true tales of Hope in fifty words or fewer, using the premise of our popular monthly writing competition, **50 Word Fiction**. This spin-off version allowed for participants to tell their stories of Hope in a fun, new format. We've chosen a selection of these wonderful short pieces of writing to showcase as part of this collection.

Kat Connelly

Centre fir help
Hame fae hame
Yer mer than jist a name
Honesty void ae any shame
People learning tae cope
Darkness tae light peppered in hope
It's Chris's House but it's Anne's heart
Offering the masses a fresh start
Brick by brick cemented by unity
Unwavering strength embedding community

Lynn Lockhart

My mother wasn't Catholic. Her polite response to the 'wee Kirk men' at our door reminding of communion next Sunday hid her despair. I was surprised when she told me she had gone to chapel. A candle lit for astronauts trying to get back home. Hopeful prayer for unlucky thirteen.

Phoebe Millar

A simple pot of tea means so much more than that to me. I long to hold that steaming mug and share stories like we always used to. You stopped visiting me in my dreams, but I hope you're watching me proudly. I still feel our loving bond so strongly.

Marije Terpstra

Cold toes in wellies, I looked at the unfortunate cow, stuck in a muddy hole with part of a calf sticking out of her back end, and all hope of getting back to my bed while it was still warm evaporated. Should've learned a trade after all!

Vicky Heath

I join the queue of punters snaking along Hope Street, their anxious eyes peeping over masks. Present the Open Sesame app. Shiver with anticipation when the auditorium darkens and the orchestra strikes up. Release salty tears of joy, escaping reality in a much-loved musical. Theatre. My happy place. Finally restored.

KM Dunn

Blow out the candle with an incantation. Make that wish on an eyelash. Lie flat on your back, wrapped in a blanket, and gaze into the night's ink. Once in a while, a meteor will strike the sky like a match.

Marion Boddy-Evans

What we'd hoped for us was truncated. I'm left to find the way to what you'd hoped for me by myself. In the silent solitude of my studio I hear you encouraging and cajoling, forever my number one fan.

Melanie Swales

The cat nudged her arm. The pen jolted and kept moving until the paper was chock-full and Ella was finally content. Giddily, she folded the letter and sealed it into the envelope, adding a kiss for good luck. 'MUM! How long before the letter reaches the North Pole?'

Jennie Tripp

Queuing to pay for coffee, the white-haired lady in front smiled and slipped a voucher onto my tray for a free hot drink. I had woken up feeling so lonely. Perhaps she had too, but her kindness made us both feel noticed and our day a little more hopeful.

Angela Logan

Painstakingly, I remove long tendrils of ivy from the overgrown shrubs of her neglected garden. My mother departed this realm only ten months ago; I now live in the home where she grew old. There's a birdfeeder tangled in the thicket. I pour in some seeds and anticipate life's return.

Richard P Stratton

They're cavorting on the dancefloor, chanting in unison. Joyfully sad, dressed beyond their years, at the cusp between childhood and the unknown. Me, the teacher, reduced to bystander, no longer guiding. Then one of them jokes with the knowing irony of a seasoned comic. And I know they'll be fine.

Sarah Cornelius

We agonised over the carefully pitched offer. Now we wait, we fidget, we squirm. Hoping for success, we prepare for rejection. We will not be able to settle until we know.

A phone rings. Heartbeats are missed. The conversation is swift.

'YEESSS!' she shrieks. 'We're moving in June!'

Anne Black

Morning light streamed in through the window, another day dawned. In the midst of our chaotic world, I heard birdsong: a tiny wren was singing its heart out!

I watched in wonderment.

And as the sun broke through and the pink blossom shone, the morning spoke of hope.

Ann Seed

Five, I'll win the lottery. Four, I'll get a pay rise. Three, I'll stay healthy. Two, I'll find love again. One, I'll keep thinking positive. None, I'll count my blessings for the riches I already have. 'Mum! You're rubbish at skimming stones!' 'I know, son. But I live in hope.'

Emily Longmore

My bag was filled with hospital masks, takeaway coffee lids and parking tickets. And right at the bottom, buried deep underneath the worry, dark thoughts and sympathetic smiles of strangers, was a tiny ball of hope, crumpled and dented from how hard I held onto it.

Elika Granger

Swaying, the only feeling I had felt for eleven days, swaying. The fishing boat reeked of oil and everyone's hope was gone. I lay on my bed in seasickness, trying to stay awake. 'We're here!' a voice echoed down the hall. I sprang up to the deck and saw home.

JL Bleakley

When imposter syndrome comes to call, I find hope in the pages of my library, because behind every epic adventure, spellbinding fairytale, page-turning mystery, swoon-worthy romance, heartbreaking drama and spine-tingling horror is the unwritten story of an author who

battled rejection, slayed the demons and found the path to publication.

Carol Dickson

Barely bigger than a pinhead before being gently buried. Secretly swelling, silently opening, caressed by hidden heat, quenched by human intervention, searching alone for light. First, two leaves, nervously attached to a resolute stem, push through the dark soil. Two more are quickly in their wake. Green, growing, alive.

James Burgon

A forgotten tongue revived. Aspiration born from loch, hill and heritage. Cluinnear Gàidhlig!

Stubble on stubble. Two colognes intermingle. Third decade, new desires, new loves.

Old roots feed new growth, and long-suppressed identities flourish.

Pride from past. Hope from change. As Scotland progresses, I discover me.

The best is yet to come

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Hope: I Carry Your Heart

Gillian Shearer

The surgeon outlines the road map to recovery. ‘Three days in ITU, a week at most, then paediatrics. There’ll be drips, wires, in case we have to. . .’ he stops, looks at me and smiles, ‘but of course, you know this already. . .’

X-rays, scans, cardiographs, bloods, heart tracings, everything explained in minute detail. The eccentricities of the human heart unfolding before my eyes explained yet inexplicable. A map of any human heart could look the same to uncharted eyes, yet you have your unique way of startling me, of throwing me off course.

I imagine the map inside you: the artery having taken a wrong turn, lost in a tangled web. You are playing with your own road map now, the toy track spread out on the playroom floor, the fabric faded. So many hands. I wonder about those children, those mothers who prayed for a miracle. This is a place of miracles. I understand that now. And yet there is science too in the machinery of life. I watch as you play, unaware of your weakening heart; a fluke of nature, a fault line between two intersections, both distinct in their own way but together unmatched.

So much is eradicated from my brain, superseded by other thoughts – your little hands manoeuvring the toy car along the high street past the baker, the butcher, the candlestick maker. . . For no reason other than my unreasoned mind I find myself thinking of the absurdity of it all. How we laugh at funerals, how, when faced with the worst, our brain tricks us with silly thoughts, how they say laughter is the best medicine.

My mind is unravelling.

Thinking back to those early years I see myself as I was then, a first-time mum looking forward with hope. A routine check-up. Six weeks old. Oscillating your chest with her hands, the paediatrician was kind yet indifferent. I tried to imagine what she hears: heart-sounds bouncing back from an echo chamber full of secrets.

‘He is easily tired,’ I said, trying not to sound too concerned.

She smiled. A smile that said: first-time mum. . . over-anxious.

‘And his chest. . .’ I hesitated.

‘Oh, I shouldn’t worry about that. . .’

‘Don’t you think it’s odd though?’

I searched through my lexicon of words, trying to find the correct one, eventually pouncing on the only one that seems to make sense: ‘Uneven.’

‘Vroom! Vroom!’

My boy has found his way out of the city, his little car zooming across the playroom floor.

‘Children are resilient,’ the surgeon says, ‘but his reserves are running low.’ He looks at me gravely. Then, taking a pen from his breast pocket, he draws me a picture. The only paper available: a children’s colouring book from the bundle of toys.

His knuckles are brilliant white against the sickly hospital lights as he outlines the contours of your broken heart. The pen moves swiftly, finally tracking the fault to its source. There’s magic in those hands, I realise. These are the hands that will enter my son’s chest, crack him open like a nut. They will touch his heart in a way I never could. These are the hands that will give him the life I never imagined possible till now. This man, this stranger, will do the impossible.

Author note: *When my son was less than two years old, we discovered that he had a serious heart condition. The only recourse was surgery. It was a difficult time for us and yet, we never gave up hope that he would survive. Now, over thirty years later, he is well, with a son of his own to cherish.*

Hope Times Four

Anne Meale

Every fearsome hiss that greeted me whenever I approached convinced me we had made a colossal mistake that could take twenty years to dissipate.

It did not take much to receive a growl or a swipe. The pocket tuxedo ball had a voice larger than its thirteen-week frame and was determined to use it at every opportunity. As I positioned myself on the floor for the fourth day in a row, work laptop heating my thighs, I avoided eye contact with the panther in the furthest corner of the living room; even looking at her was deemed a heinous crime. I logged on to check emails and sighed. What was intended to be a diversion from a worldwide contagion was rapidly descending into a lost cause.

I had been the instigator, pressing for a rescue cat to join our family. We had gone without pets for ten years; my daughter had been too young to remember furry cuddles and purrs of contentment. The responsibility of caring for an animal was something I felt intrinsically that a child should learn, and the mental struggles of being confined indoors with no siblings was taking its toll. I voiced my opinion that we adults needed to think of the bigger picture: a new focus for our daughter's life in lockdown, a deflection from the global whirlwind.

Much of the country was thinking in tandem, demand for puppies and kittens was astronomical, but six months into internment, we received a call about a young cat that was seeking a home. And so, here we were. In the combat zone.

We had barely clapped eyes on our indignant delivery,

her having darted from the wire carrier to underneath a bookcase, where she had remained ensconced for several days, snarling with trepidation at three sets of reassuring eyes. When she crept out grudgingly to use the litter box, she was a domestic tumbleweed, having acquired months of dust from her inaccessible haven, a lacy veil against her sleek, onyx coat.

This was not turning out to be a cherubic, velvety bundle of optimism for my daughter. She was wary, terrified of getting hurt.

So was my child.

We had things in common, that cowering, angst-ridden package and we humans trying to domesticate her. She was unverifiable feral offspring, and the recent months were evolving us the same way. Meeting after meeting online for work becoming less formal with each log-on: professional top halves above the tabletop, joggers and slippers below, morphing eventually into onesies, with angst and dwindling impetus as accessories. It was challenging to stay sharp and look ahead, find positives in places other than a drive-in test centre. Wondering if that one time popping over to the local shop for milk would change your family's life forever.

Unfair pressure was being pinned on this screeching pile of misery lurking under the rows of paperbacks. This piteous creature was expected to replace coronavirus with cuddles, apprehension with affection, fear with fluffiness – and she was having none of it. We were not certain whether she was eating and drinking enough: while we were in the room, her position never changed from her literary bunker. No amount of coaxing was persuading this miniature spitfire to join our incarcerated family.

Fear of the kitten perishing through anxiety and malnutrition brought us to contact the shelter to take her back. Our hearts ached as we stopped calling her 'Clover' and reverted to her original name. Enough confusion for the tiny tempest. As I viewed her guarded eyes shining at me from her impossibly cramped sanctuary, I acknowledged that we had failed her. Life would continue, in uncertain ways: navigating a virus that was spiralling out of control, encroaching on our world with its mutating markers, entrapped in a cage watched over by strange giants, their ability to hurt ever-present.

Forgetfulness was opportune. Serendipity (n) *serən' dɪpəti*: the act of a person neglecting to collect a petrified, spicy kitten.

The rescue charity would be telephoned the next day to jog their memory about the cat on hunger strike. We were all gathered, miserable, in the living room, achingly aware of the resonating silence in the corner. To avoid baby tuxedo further distress, our eyes were directed towards the television screen rather than her haunted eyes. Poor little babe.

As the latest statistics controlled the news and the futures of the viewers, I became aware of the smallest of sensations against my shin: a nudge, made with a curious black nose: a plucky touch of hope. The nose inspected three sets of legs, none of which dared stir, but the hearts inside those limbs' owners beat excitedly, a rare emotion after months of torment.

The nose sniffed its way over to the food bowls: three, with varying offerings to tempt a ravenous stomach. The hesitant mouth selected a choice and devoured an appetiser, moving on to a heartier main course in the next dish. Dessert would keep for later.

That little face with disproportionately large ears inspected us all above the knee. From its adorable uptilt, I noticed what I initially believed to be a minuscule feather below her lip, in reality a sole dot of white marking amongst a sea of ebony. She stood there long enough for us to spy a sprinkling of pearly toes, and as she turned to visit the litter box, a snowy flash of tummy, now sated with two courses of nourishment.

After several brief returns to the bookcase that evening, she would emerge to inspect us again, as if to decide about these peculiar new lodgings. The house absorbed the decompression of four souls.

That extra day. Those sweet twenty-four hours.

Everything changed for three humans and one destitute kitten. Hope times four.

... And social media gained another user with paws: @cloverscloseups.

Author note: *Watching how far our cat has come in four years, due to the time we were able to give her being at home during lockdown - time she needed, as she is unlike any cat I have had before, and has, with patience and love, managed to overcome some difficulties. Clover is timid with strangers, terrified of the outdoors and is supported daily by our family, who adore the once-spitfire-now-lapcat. Because of her issues, she was indeed a distraction from what was going on four years ago, and we are as indebted to her as she is bonded to us.*

From Cat to Train

Jeanette Scott

The cat nudges the door open and comes over to me. I lie on the sofa with a weight that pulls me so far down into it that I feel I could be part of it. She meows at me, asking for food. She is an old cat; her demands are very few, and she hardly leaves the house. Sleep and food, that's all she requires. Her request for me to feed her feels so simple, but, in truth, it is one of the most challenging things I'll do today.

I roll onto my side and lower myself onto the floor. I only need to get out of this room, through the next and into the kitchen. It's not far, the house isn't big, but it feels like a mammoth challenge. I pull myself to my feet and focus on the door frame. I'll get myself there first. Task achieved. Okay, take a rest before I get through the door and into the kitchen. On wobbly legs, I move myself through and hold onto the countertop. Lowering myself to the floor and catching my breath...

I've made it. I take a minute to recover before I open a cupboard and find the food to feed her. She waits patiently. I reach out and stroke her, thanking her for her understanding, her patience and companionship. If it wasn't for her, would I even feel like I have achieved anything in my day these days?

The doctors say it's CFS, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, and it will just take time to recover. But how much time? Months? Years?

Every morning when I wake, before I open my eyes, I take a moment to scan my body: is the pain still there? The tiredness? The heaviness? The morning headache that feels like a hangover without the drinking? My

heart sinks. There are no improvements. Some days are slightly better than others, I might have a morsel of energy; and others, it is just a choice of where I will lie for the day, in bed or on the sofa. Most days, I choose the sofa. I need some routine, some change of scenery.

It is a strange illness. It is like my whole body is broken and needs to be rebuilt from scratch. It requires everything from me, all my energies. I have decided to accept my situation so far. I will not suddenly wake up feeling well. I need to accept this illness. It is staying. I must sit or lie with it, make peace with it. The unknown is difficult to deal with. Is this it now? Is my life being confined to my home and garden? Will I ever get back to work? Will we have a family? Travel? All plans and opportunities just dumped, no longer on the cards for now. How can they be, when feeding the cat is the most I can accomplish in a day?

I begin to think about what I can do: read, lie in the garden and soak up some nature. I have two close friends who visit weekly and keep me connected with the world outside. And I can feed the cat!

I lie on the sofa. Look out of the window; there has been a lot of construction work out there recently. The train is returning to the town for the first time in sixty years. I am excited by this fact; it's the main reason we chose to live here.

The construction I watch daily is a reminder to me that things do not stay the same forever. Even if you remain constant, things around you ebb and flow and therefore you and your circumstances are changed by them. This idea of the train bringing connection gives me hope! Even if I do not improve, surely with support, patience and time, I can get myself on that train, and then what? A trip to the city, a trip to visit friends, a

trip to London, possibly even a trip connecting into Europe! With the idea of the train comes the promise of connection, opportunity, possibility, change.

Time. It all takes time. Time to construct a railway, time to recover from illness.

I make small signs of recovery; my strength begins to return and I am able to venture a little further from home. The theme of these tiny adventures is to explore the progress of the railway. The day I take myself for a walk to view the tracks being laid is a milestone for more than one reason. I join a small crowd that has gathered and feel myself beginning to make connections with the world around me again after so long of being confined to my home.

Trains begin to run on the tracks, testing for safety and training the drivers. The excitement of what could be begins to build, all those opportunities and experiences just waiting to be explored.

Then it is time for the first passenger train to travel the new line. Those travelling have been awarded a 'Golden Ticket'; they have been nominated to take part in the great celebration of this day, and I am with them! I am well enough to be on the train and take the journey, to experience the climax of all I have watched over the past two years.

The train has returned, and my health has improved. There is still a way to go, but, like the arrival of the train, I am beginning to feel the hope of change and opportunity.

Author note: *Back in 2013, I was diagnosed with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. I was unable to do much at all and really had no timeline for recovery. This illness coincided with the reinstatement of the railway*

to our town. It was seeing the constant change from my window that reminded me that nothing stays the same forever. This gave me hope that it would be the same with my illness. Ten years on and I am recovered, I returned to work, got married and had a family. I also enjoy regular trips on the train and all the places I am able to explore!

Dòchas no Aineolas? Shelagh Chaimbeul

O chionn dà bhliadhna, bha mi aineolach. Bha mi ro dheònach na h-abairtean is sgeulachdan mu dheidhinn coin a chreidsinn: nach fhaigheadh tu caraid nas dilse na cù; gun dèanadh iad diofar mòr air do bheatha.

Aig an àm sin, air diofar adhbharan, bha mi gu math ìosal. Ged a bha mi airson bruidhinn ri cuideigin mu dheidhinn, cha robh mi a-riamh math air còmhraidhean fosgailte, domhainn a chumail mu na faireachdainnean agam.

Abair gun cuirinn feum air caraid dileas a nì mo bheatha nas fheàrr, smaoinich mi, is mi fo bhuidhe margaidheachd nan con. Bha mi dìreach air *Flush* le Virginia Woolf a leughadh - nobhail air leth stèidhichte air eachdraidh-beatha cù spaniel aig Elizabeth Barrett-Browning. Bha *Flush* dileas, modhail agus làn co-fhaireachdainn, mothachail den triom anns an robh a charaid, Ealasaid. Nì sin a' chùis, thuirt mi rium fhìn.

Cha robh mi idir an dùil gum b' ann aineolach a bha mi. Leugh mi a h-uile leabhar is artaigil air an d' fhuair mi lorg - bha fios agam mar a dh'aithnichinn tuathanas chuileanan, agus bha làn fhios agam nach biodh e idir furasta dèiligeadh ri cuilean. Bhithinn ag èirigh tron oidhche is a' seasamh sa ghàrradh, biodh iad feumach air tòrr thrèanadh is eacarsaich, bhithinn-sa feumach air tòrr fhoighidinn. B' fhiach e, shaoil mi, is mi dòchasach gun dèanadh e diofar dhomh.

Thog sinn Percy bho theaghlach laghach anns na Crìochan aig àm na Càisge. Spaniel beag, dubh, cruinn, cho eireachdail 's a chunnaic thu a-riamh. Nuair a fhuair sinn dhachaigh, chluich sinn le bàl fad còig

mionaidean agus thuit e na chadal air mo ghlùin. Seo sinn, smaoinich mi – cho luath 's a gheibh sinn seachad air a' chiad sia mìosan, 's dòcha, bidh sinn taghta.

Nach mi a bha ceàrr. 'S e an rud as cudromaiche a dh'ionnsaich mi tron a' bhliadhna ud nach e cù a th' ann an cuilean. 'S e creutair gu tur eadar-dhealaichte a th' ann an cuilean, coltach ri Gremlin. Coltas air aodann molach nach leaghadh an t-ìm na bheul, ged is e uilebheist beag a th' ann fhad 's a tha e na dhùisg. Bidh cuid a' gabhail cearban na tire orra, leis gu bheil iad dualtach a bhith gad bhìdeadh a h-uile turas a tha iad air bhioran no air bhoil (fad na tìde) no cho luath 's a thòiseachas tu air bruidhinn ri cuideigin air a' fòn no ann an coinneamh air-loidhne. Bha agam ri geansaidh tiugh a chur orm a h-uile latha, fiù 's ann am meadhan an t-samhraidh, gus mo ghàirdeanan a dhìon bho fhiaclan geura mo 'charaid'.

Cha robh pìos àirneis, bròg, stocainn, cluasag, lus no pìos pàipeir san taigh sàbhailte. Nochd tuill mhòra sa ghàrradh, agus an uair sin nochd lorgan-spòige eabarach sa chidsin. Bhiodh an cearban ag èirigh a h-uile oidhche mu dhà no trì uairean, deiseil is deònach geamannan a chluich. Bha mi den bheachd gun robh mi a' faireachdainn dona mus d' fhuair mi Percy, ach b' ann na bu mhiosa is na bu mhiosa a dh'fhàs mi. Cha b' urrainn dhomh cadal tron oidhche; cha b' urrainn dhuinn fhàgail san taigh leis fhèin air eagal 's nach biodh sòfa air fhàgail nuair a thilleadh sinn; cha b' urrainn dhuinn a dhol air saor-làithean no air splaoid, leis nach robh esan deònach suidhe sa chàr.

Feumaidh gu bheil mi a' dèanamh rudeigin ceàrr, smaoinich mi, tha e coltach gu bheil daoine eile aig a bheil cuileanan riarachtaichte gu leòr leatha. Am bi iadsan a' caoineadh cha mhòr a h-uile latha? Bha mi cinnteach

às nach b' ann coltach ri Percy a bha a h-uile cuilean – cha bhiodh coin cho pailt nan robh a h-uile duine a' fulang san dòigh seo.

Thàinig latha dorcha, fliuch san Fhaoilleach, nuair nach b' urrainn dhomh seasamh ris tuilleadh. Sgrìobh mi dreachd de phost-dealain chun a' bhoireannaich on d' fhuair mi Percy, ag innse dhi nach biodh e comasach dhuinn a chumail agus a' faighneachd oirre am biodh i deònach a ghabhail air ais. Gu fortanach, cha do chuir mi air falbh e.

Às dèidh a' chiad cho-là-breith aige, thòisich Percy a' fàs na bu shocaire is na bu mhodhaile... gu grad. Sguir e a bhìdeadh ar làmhan is ar casan, thòisich e a' cadal tron oidhche agus thàinig e a-steach air mu dheireadh thall gun robh aige ri laighe san leabaidh aige fhad 's a bha mi ag obair.

Airson a' chiad uair, bha e a' còrdadh rium gun robh cù agam. Rachamaid dhan a' phàirc a h-uile feasgar, agus fhuair mi sìth bhon a bhith a' spaidsearachd fo na craobhan agus ag èisteachd ri na h-eòin is borbhan an t-sruthain, fhad 's a bha esan a' ruith an dèidh fheòragan. Leis gun robh e deònach suidhe gu socair anns a' chàr, dh'fhaodamaid a dhol dhan tràigh, air chuairt san dùthaich agus fiù 's air saor-làithean còmhla ris. Cha bhithinn air post-d a sgrìobhadh gu duine sam bith airson cuidhteas fhaighinn dheth. Bha e na phàirt den teaghlach: cù càrdeil, dileas, dòigheil agus gaolach an àite cearban na tire.

Às dèidh dà bhliadhna, tha mi air gabhail ris nach eil ùidh sam bith aige anns na sgeulachdan no beachdan agam, ged a leigeas e air gu bheil e ag èisteachd rium ma bheir mi briosgaid dha. A dh'aindeoin sin, chan urrainn dhomh ach faireachdainn nas fhèarr nuair a chuireas mi seachad uair a thìde gach madainn agus

gach feasgar ann am pàirc no ann an coille, a' coimhead air cù tuainealach a' ruith ann an cearcallan às dèidh starragan.

Ged a bha mi an dòchas ri Flush, b' e Percy a fhuair mi, agus abair gu bheil e air mo bheatha a dhèanamh nas fheàrr. 'S dòcha nach eil e modhail, socair no sàmhach, ach chanainn 's gu bheil e nas spòrsaile is nas èibhinne na Flush bochd. Airidh air nobhail mu a bheatha-san gun teagamh, nan robh foighidinn gu leòr agus plugaichean-cluaise aig an sgrìobhadair.

Hope or Ignorance?

Two years ago, I was ignorant. I was more than willing to believe all the popular sayings and stories about how a dog is a man's (and woman's) best friend, about how they would improve your life.

At the time I was feeling fairly down, for various reasons. I'd have liked to talk to somebody about it, but have never been good at speaking openly about my feelings. I could definitely use a loyal friend who would improve my life, I thought, under the spell of all the canine marketing. I had just read *Flush* by Virginia Woolf, a brilliant novella imagining the life of Elizabeth Barrett-Browning's spaniel. Flush was well-behaved, loyal and hugely empathetic: always aware of his beloved friend Elizabeth's moods. That'll do, I thought.

I didn't imagine for a minute that I was ignorant. I read every book and article I could find - I knew how to avoid puppy farms, and was well aware that owning a puppy would not be easy. I knew that I'd be up during the night standing in the garden, that the puppy would need lots of training and exercise and that I'd need endless patience. It'll be worth it, I told myself, hoping

ferverently that it would make a difference.

We collected Percy from a kind family in the Borders just before Easter. A small, chubby black spaniel, as cute as you'd imagine. When we got home, we played with a ball for five minutes before he fell asleep on my knee. Here we go, I thought, as soon as we get through the first six months or so everything will be perfect.

I've never been so wrong. The most important thing I learnt during that year was that a puppy is not a dog. A puppy is an entirely different creature, like a gremlin. He might look like butter wouldn't melt in his mouth, but he's a little monster the whole time he's awake. Some people refer to them as land sharks, thanks to their tendency to bite you whenever they're excited or frenzied (which is all the time), or whenever you dare to speak to someone on the phone or in an online meeting. I had to wear a thick jumper, even on the hottest summer days, to protect my arms from my so-called friend's sharp teeth.

No piece of furniture, shoe, sock, cushion, plant or piece of paper in the house was safe. Large holes appeared in the garden, swiftly followed by a trail of muddy paw-prints through the kitchen. The shark woke up every night at around two or three o'clock in the morning, ready for more games.

I had thought I felt bad before I got Percy, but I gradually got worse and worse during that year. I couldn't get a full night's sleep, we couldn't leave him in the house by himself in case we returned to a destroyed sofa, we couldn't go on holiday or even for a day out at the weekend as he wouldn't sit still in the car.

I was sure I must be doing something wrong. Other puppy owners I met seemed to be getting on OK - I wondered if they were also secretly crying most days?

I assumed that Percy must be different from other puppies, reasoning that there wouldn't be such an abundance of dogs if all owners were suffering as much as I was.

I finally reached breaking point on a wet, dark day in January. I wrote a draft email to Percy's breeder, telling her that I couldn't keep him. Would she be interested in taking him back? Thankfully, I didn't hit send.

After his first birthday, Percy gradually began to calm down and remember how to behave. He stopped biting every hand and leg in sight, started sleeping through the night and finally understood that he was meant to lie quietly in his bed while I was working.

For the first time, I enjoyed having a dog. We would go to the park every evening, where I could stroll peacefully under the trees, listening to the birds and the burbling stream while he chased after squirrels. He got used to sitting in the car, meaning that we could go to the beach, for walks in the countryside and even take him on holiday. I wouldn't have dreamed of emailing anyone to ask them to take him off my hands. He was finally part of the family: a friendly, loyal, laid-back, affectionate dog instead of a land shark.

After two years, I've accepted that he has no interest in my stories or opinions, although he'll pretend to care as long as I give him a biscuit. In spite of that, I can't help but feel better after spending an hour every morning and evening walking through a park or wood, watching a giddy dog run in circles after a crow.

I may have been hoping for Flush, but I got Percy and he has certainly changed my life for the better. He might not be so well-behaved, calm or quiet, but I'm sure he's more entertaining than poor Flush. Definitely worthy of a novel about his own life, as long as the writer has a pair of ear-plugs and the patience of a saint.

Stonehaven Beach

Kirsty Niven

Arctic wind flings itself against us,
a frozen flying elbow
as the lemon sun still shines.
A coastal walk captured
in a yawning panoramic shot,
cradled in the crescent curve
of a pebbled beach's smile.
Too cold to clasp hands,
I tuck into your elbow -
emulating the elderly couple
I hope that we'll become.

Hope is Ma Wheelchair

LJ Gray

partner anywhere and everywhere - all from the comfort of my wheelchair.

Hope is fower wheels - twa big yins, n twa wee. Hope is a comfy seat aneath ma bahookie, n it cairies me when ma bones grow wabbit n sair. Hope isny flashy, in fact it's awfy shoogly, a bit skelly, n a wee bit scuffed aroon the rims. Hope is wit haulds the scunnered footrests thegither, weel, that n super glue. Hope is a lifeline, it's level access n automatic doors, it's a cushty disabled duffie, it's an access ramp, n it's a disabled pairkin spot. Hope is when fowk smile at me n no leuk richt past me, avertin thair een, or bletherin awa tae ma companion whan it wis me wit askt the question. Hope is ma freedom, ma fresh air, meeting ma pals for a coffee, it's gawn oot oot, birlin aroon in a brent-new frock wae ma bidie-in whan the DJ plays ma favourit Run DMC sang.

Hope picked me up whan a wis feart, whan a felt alane, whan a wis nae weel. Whan wan day ma life changed, hope wis there. Tae tak me tae dae ma messages, or jist get oot fir a wee bit, or tae huv a wee nosey roon a gid beukshoap.

Hope is accessible.

Hope is forrit n ayont.

Hope is the wey aheid.

But maist of aw, hope is ma wheelchair.

Author note: *This story is a wee love letter to my wheelchair, without it I wouldn't be able to live my life as vibrantly as I do. It's about the moment I realised that I didn't have to hide myself away, I didn't have to make myself small, I could dance and sing and have messy nights out with my pals, and go on adventures with my*

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Sràid An Dòchais

Niall O’Gallagher

An robh thu feitheamh rium ag bonn na sràide?
Nan robh, thàinig thu gun fhiosta dhomh,
no dùil gum faighinn thu an lùib ceò
tombaca, glòr na trafaige, sgàilean
an stèisein agus nan toglaichean àrda.
Cha robh for againn gu robh sinn òg.
Choisich sinn fo na lanntairean òr’,
is stad sinn, a’ roinn phògan agus bàrdachd.

A-nis, gach seachdain, bidh sinne coiseachd
air Sràid an Dòchais, a’ dìreadh bho oisean
gu oisean, greim caileig’ air ar làmhan

is nì sinn sreap, suas gu bàrr a cnuic-se;
suas, suas, gun sùil air ais gu ruige
'm mullach, far a bheil an saoghal air faire.

Hope Street

Were you waiting for me down there
at the bottom of the street? If so, I didn’t know,
never thought I’d find you amid that fog
of tobacco smoke and the loud din of the traffic,
the shadows of the station and the buildings
rising high overhead. We had no idea how young
we were. Under golden lanterns we walked,
stopping for a kiss, poetry spilling from our lips.

And now, every week we walk again
along Hope Street, climbing from corner

to corner, our daughter by the hand

as we climb to the top of that hill;
up, up, never looking back until we reach the summit
where the world stretches wide before us.

It's the Hope that Kills You

Julie Drybrough

Beloved one,

When they talk of hope, my mind goes to you, beacon that you are.

I marvel at the way you hold hope in the face of such adversity - that stoic pragmatism, and a determined dose of fact-checking. This is the way you forge new worlds and seek possibility. This is how you hold your spirit. Your explorative nature is endless. Your creativity, boundless. You have more faith in science than God, so you research and seek empirical certainty.

This would exhaust a lesser being... but your essence seems to hold a divining rod, fine-tuned to locate the hope at the deepest heart of the matter. Hope fuels you, no matter what.

I'm in awe.

I told you I was writing about hope and that the words that kept coming up were bleak: *It's the hope that kills you*. You laughed then, a familiar chuckle from a place of: Oh God, sometimes it really fucking does. But you challenged me - write about the good things, find the joy, dig in. Locate the paths away from despair...

Is that how you do it?

Our humour is gallows. We plan an '80s-themed funeral where black is bloody ubiquitous - no buggering about with bright colour - we want people to be FUCKING SAD. Shoulder pads, high heels and little pill-hats with neat lace veils, barely concealing thickly lined eyes, so the mascara really runs. *Dynasty* meets *Dallas* with a Joan Collins red lip. Men in suits - no skinny jeans allowed. We reserve the right to march anyone off

the premises who wears a gilet. I beg to be able to tell stories about car farts and the time we turned up too drunk to get into the concert, but we played posh and held it together, elegantly wasted...

We cackle as we think of the most inappropriate music to play. Me: would a flash mob, doing the final scene from *Dirty Dancing* down the crematorium aisle, be too much? No, you say, I've Had The Time of My Life, Baby! Our laughter nearly tips into tears, then. I look at you, eyes brimming: *Yes. And we aren't done yet.*

I watch as you build holding patterns of possibility - the careful construction of drugs and care and routine - formations which hold... for six weeks... or six months... or less... or more... who knows? Who ever fucking knows?

I watch these holding patterns crumble. I see you flounder, flail and fail. It wrenches me, but I dig in, inspired by you. I watch you, the medical staff and carers rebuild from failure - another configuration, reimaged from something differently possible. Something woven from science and experience, determination and experimentation, spite, love and humour... made effervescent by hope.

But everyone has a breaking point. Even you, beloved, have your moments of bleakness. Even your spirit weakens and you are Just Too Tired.

OK. It's OK.

We can do this.

Breathe.

I put parts of myself aside for a while - the scared, sad, wrecked parts of me. The furious, confused, powerless parts. They rage and demand to scream, to be heard.

I say: Not now.

Later.

I'll come back for you later.

I put them aside and ask my brave parts to step forward. I ask for whatever depleted reserves I have of patience and understanding to be accessible. I give you my best bits – the steady, fearless, understanding bits.

I attempt your stoicism.

I do not panic.

I do not create drama.

I stay steady.

I learned from the best.

I tend to my terror elsewhere. I take it to places it can dissipate. Friends, family, chosen family – loved ones who hold my dread and hopelessness. Ones who check in randomly. Ones who don't head-tilt like I'm broken, but look at me like I've got this... you can do this... I can do this.

I take my weakness to people and places that fortify me and that give me strength.

Their faith gives me hope, gives me courage. I go to them, heartbroken and half mad... and by walking or wine, they shift me.

When it gets really bad, I go to therapy. I swear a lot, mostly about being in fucking therapy... I wish I had more grace.

This is how it is, my darling. I am strong for you, others are strong for me. I don't bring you my fears, I try to fuel your hope... I hope.

And so we work in a holding pattern... of sorts.

What I know.

What I cling to, beyond anything... is that somehow, loss only partially matters.

There is power in loving.

There is power in being loved... and that power lasts, beyond any loss.

You are alongside me.

Infused in me.

Continually with me.

Our stories.

All of this.

Your mark on me.

It is indelible, enduring and endless.

Through this, I hope.

Author note: *A few people and circumstances have inspired this letter, but I held one person most in my mind as I wrote it. Having been through a dementia journey in my own family and seeing cancer and ailments increasingly happen around me... I guess this is an amalgam of how things feel and seem when you are a supporter, not a main protagonist. This letter was forged from love and loss.*

الأرض والسماء

Open Book Arabic Creative Writing Group

By Amna, Nadia and Saffanna

ما أجمل السماء في المساء مرتدية فستانها المرصع
باللؤلؤ كلها بهاء
وكانَ النجوم في عرس تتشارك الفرح والغناء
يُقال أن الأرواح تخرج في الظلام
تتعانق وتتبادل الحب وتتشارك الأحلام
بينما الأجساد على الأسرّة تنام
وأنا أبحث عن قمري في وسط فوضى الأمنيات
فهو من يستمع إلي وأسرد معه الحكايات
يحفظ أسراري ويرسل حنيني لأحبة لي هناك
جميل أن نعيش كما تعيش تلك النجوم في هذه السماء
الواسعة دون شجار
آه ليت البشر يفهمون أن الأرض كبيرة وتتسع للجميع
كما هي السماء

The Sky and the Earth

How beautiful is the sky in the evening,
adorned in its pearl-studded gown,
radiating splendour. It's as if the stars are
celebrating in a wedding of joy and song. It
is said that souls emerge in the darkness,
embracing, exchanging love, and sharing
dreams, while bodies on beds rest. I
search for my moon amidst the chaos of
wishes; he listens to me, and together we
weave tales. He keeps my secrets, sending
my longing to loved ones afar. It's
wonderful to live like the stars in this vast
sky, without quarrel. Oh, if only humans
understood that the earth is vast,
accommodating all, just like the sky.

Dóchas

Áine King

My grandmother was born in a country that did not
exist
myth and imagination
her name unwrote
her passport stamped
Defiance
and Hope.

On a lane
from the town to the sea
she paused us children
by a wall-set plaque.
In curving, curling characters
the Volunteers were ranked
I did not think to think
those names had faces in her memory
hands
held at cross-road dances
guns and kisses stolen
laid soft and secret in the hay
cyphers in shoe-heels and hat-bands and bikes
waiting for ambush
and lament.

Nothing is forever
she said.

The young flag
Leaping from a broken keep
green-shawled Medb on the punt

we song-skipped down Sráid Mhuire
into
the long shadow of the church.

Nothing is forever
we hope.

Author note: *A childhood memory of my Irish granny pausing by a memorial. I glimpsed what her citizenship meant to her, what it had cost. . . and saw that empires do end.*

The Morra

AT McDonald

The tea tray shakes in yer hawns. The two mugs wobble an' the biscuits faw tae the side. Ye slow yer walk in the hope there willnae be spillage. Ye poured too much, we've aw done it. Ye've hud a lot oan so naebody blames ye.

In the living room, ye balance the tray oan wan hawn lit a waiter an' hawn a mug tae yer parent. They take it and thank ye as ye sit doon wae yer ain. Nae spillages! Ye place the tray between yes so baith huv easy access tae the biscuits. Fir near thirty years they raised ye so it's only fair ye start repaying the favour.

There's been a lot a stress lately. What wae the bad news an' that. The trips tae the doctor, then the hospital, then the doctor again, then the hospital. A seemingly never-ending cycle. A barrage ae emotionless texts fae yer parent detailing the objective result ae these trips. X happened. Y happened. Would emojis huv made the reading any easier? Ye'd be sitting in work glancing at yer phone even though ye're no supposed tae, jist so ye can see how much mare time ye've goat wae them.

Well if aw goes tae plan the morra ye'll huv thum a lot longer than ye thought eftir that first hospital visit. The operation is the morra. Doctors unanimously think it'll go smoothly. Ye almost don't believe them despite their degrees. 'Ah know ye're the doctor, but have ye met me? It usually aw goes wrong.' But no this time. Tomorrow the bad bits get removed and ye cin care fir them while they're in recovery fir a couple month. Think ae it as a trial run for when they're older and needing ye tae look eftir thum.

Yer parent takes a sip ae tea and disnae complain about how milky it is. They turn and smile at ye fae the seat they're cocooned in. Ye grimace at yer ain sip. The stress has made simple tasks lit making a cup ae tea difficult. Yer hawns shake aw the time noo. Life has become a cardio workoot in itself. Who needs a sauna when ye've goat tension? Sure maist ae it's yer ain neuroses but this time ye're fairly justified. Ye'd be smug if you wurnae so anxious.

But the stress ends the morra. Tonight ye get tae enjoy some terrestrial television wae them content in the fact that it aw gets fixed. A routine operation. Wid be in and oot if they didnae huv tae rest overnight. Ye'll get yer steps in at the hospital tae, haunting the corridors. Ye take another few good sips ae the milk ye showed a tea bag. The warmness cuddles ye in a way yer parent cannae right now. Even the memory ae those cuddles soothes you. It'll aw be OK. It'll be back tae normal. Ye'll go back tae glancing at texts in work and they'll be daft memes that make you cringe. Ye'll go back tae visiting for Sunday roasts. Ye'll go back tae days oot fir tea or trips tae the pictures. The two of yes will go back tae being happy again. Ye put the mug doon on the arm ae the chair and sigh lit a dug. They look over tae ye at the sound ye've made. 'Ah love you,' they says to you. A wee smile cracks on yer face. The anxious veneer shatters. Aw they hud tae dae was say wan sentence and it's aw better. It'll aw be OK.

'Aye, Ah love you tae.'

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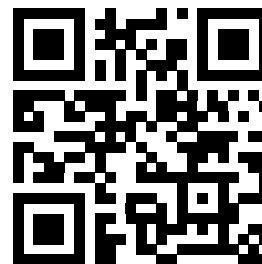
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