



The
Chapter
House

• MA CREATIVE WRITING •

ANTHOLOGY

2022

CANTERBURY CHRIST CHURCH UNIVERSITY

contributing writers:

Lauren Busby

Chloe Cook

Nicholas Huggett

Lana Thames

Thomas Blake Thurman

Petronela Trginova

El Tyler

J.C. Williams

cover design by Heather Murdoch

The Greatest Friend I Ever Had

Lauren Busby

Writing human-focused stories brings me unadulterated joy and this piece is no exception. It captures childhood innocence and the profound impact of friendship – in any form. It is destined to form part of my debut novel, which tracks back and forth through the life of a middle-aged woman.

My greatest ever friend had four legs, yellow eyes, and pointy ears. And coincidentally, my favourite ever birthday was my eighth. We were at home in our cosy front room, colourfully transformed with balloons and bunting and banners.

‘Here you go, happy birthday!’ Mum singsonged as she set down a cardboard box on my lap. It was neatly wrapped in shiny pink paper with unicorns dancing on chunky clouds, and there were three holes puncturing each of its sides. And I don’t wish to sound spoilt, but my heart sunk when I saw it; the box was far too big to be the *Nintendo GameBoy* I’d asked for.

‘Why are there holes in the box? Is it old?’ I asked Mum with a raised eyebrow, causing the assembled congregation of friends and family to snort and chuckle.

‘No, it’s not old, silly sweet pea. It’s very young – err, very *new* – about twelve weeks old, if you want to know the specifics,’ she replied.

Twelve weeks old? What could it be?

I was puzzled.

This was serious business, so I yanked off my wonky birthday crown and set it to one side. Then I poked a couple of curious fingers into the box and they wriggled around inside like worms in dirt, desperate to feel a sense of *something*. But there was nothing; it was an endless void.

‘It’s empty,’ I announced, trying to process the fact that my parents had wrapped a box of nothing and given it to me as a birthday present.

‘It can’t be empty, open it!’ yelled bossy Mary from school.

‘Be gentle,’ added Dad.

The room hushed. I tore at the wrapping paper. And then my heart exploded into a million pieces.

A kitten.

A fluffy ginger kitten with shiny white stripes and a fuzzy tail was curled up inside the box, seemingly having the best snooze of its life. I was so overcome I burst into tears.

‘Awwwwww,’ cooed the adults, as the children gathered around me.

‘Is it mine?’ I choked out through dripping snot and sodden cheeks.

‘It sure is,’ said Mum, as she lifted it into my outstretched arms. At that very moment, the kitten awoke and our eyes locked. And I’m not sure I’ve ever felt that wonderfully unexpected, overwhelming euphoria ever again.

We named the kitten Pumpkin, as he was orange and round. Pumpkin was by my side for fifteen beautiful years: through first loves, lost loves, and unrequited loves, through death and desolation, light and laughter, depression and darkness. He greeted me every time I walked through the front door. He wrapped himself around my shoulders like a furry scarf. He sat with me under the giant willow tree in our back garden and listened to all my ramblings without judgement.

I think he loved me even more than I loved him, somehow.

When we said our final goodbyes our eyes locked again and I thanked Pumpkin for being the greatest friend I ever had.

I miss him.

Lauren Busby has a penchant for whimsical prose and vivid, emotive storytelling. She finds humans fascinating and utilises their nuances as inspiration in her writing.

Own

Chloe Cook

This passage from my short story, Own, dips into the mind of a young woman, freshly murdered, who now inhabits a waiting space where she can step into the minds of the women who killed her as they decide what to do with the body, unaware she's still with them.

Tabby turned back to the blood. A place without movement. It would always be without movement after what they had done. The swelling of ribs in her back hit her like a memory she could feel. When we had moved away last night, we were clammy from the contact. Her hands were clammy again now. Sweating the fear free. "We'll need to move her." The words tasted like vomit in her mouth. And I shared it. She looked up to Amy, shaking. Amy nodded. But it was a while before either of them moved.

...

The light shifts. Coldness sets in, not that anyone here can feel it. They're all shadows. Lighter shades of their former selves, almost vanished. This is the lingering place. The other side. The hold-on-tight-to-the-rails-so-you-don't-have-to-go underbelly of the world. A viewing space to see the living. And I watched, outside of my newly dead body...

I stole her thoughts about the previous night. About my ribs hitting the space in her back carved out for me, perfect fit, nails-in-a-coffin tight. I could see the memory in her mind like expression on her face. Can see so many things now. Past, present, future – all lined up and jutting out at the same time. I know this was set. It's all set. Not in stone but in time. Unseen and unchanging. I looked at her. Spikes forming in my shadow-insides: How could she be thinking about the way we fit? about our matched breathing bodies? when she had seen to it we would never fit again? Poor Tabby.

Her lungs filled up and I watched them. Hating Amy for standing so close to her. Hating Tabby for not falling to her knees and holding me – the body I had left behind – unaware I was right next to her. What about my life? I wanted to scream in Amy's stupid face. I did (do) scream it. Again, and again. Laying my words over her babbling. I screamed

and couldn't feel an ache in my throat from it. And she didn't hear me, didn't feel my spit shower her cheeks. She still doesn't.

I looked to Tabby, wanting to be found; for her to take it all away, but she couldn't do that, and it didn't matter how much I willed it. She didn't know where I was in the room, that I was there at all – but she knew all too well the place on the floor where my chrysalis had been left behind. That mouldering mass of meat that attracted all the attention. I pushed the thing I had become back inside its dead shell wondering when the smell of rot would reach the air. *How long do things like that take?* I looked up at Tabby. Blinking through dead eyes. Our gaze finally meeting. Saw the grief beginning to set in. And I can go back to that moment of being looked at whenever I like. Whenever I feel the *need*, I can be seen.

Chloe Cook is a literary fiction writer and fine artist whose work focuses on the uncanny and unexpected to unearth the interiors of the human mind.

The Secrets of the Meadow

Nicholas Huggett

This piece is a short horror piece where the protagonist has received a box of second-hand books in the post. He unpacks them to put them on the shelf. One of the books is on flowers and something goes wrong when it's opened.

Arthur entered the room with a box, closing the door with his foot. The walls were lined with shelves containing hundreds of books. Some of the bookcases had glass doors protecting the contents from dust. The box made a quiet thud when he placed down on the floor. Taking a small scalpel out of his pocket, Arthur sliced through the tape holding the lid closed. Freed from its restraints the lid sprung open, the flaps stretching out and revealing what lay inside. It was a collection of books that Arthur had gotten from a charity shop down the road. He had been told by friends that he bought far too many books for his own good. But it was a sale, and the opportunity to get vintage books was too good to miss.

Reaching into the box he pulled out the first book. It was a hardcover of a long out of print memoir called *The Voyage Over the Sea in a Little Paddle Tug*. The pages had faded from white to yellow, but the cover was still glossy showing a painting of a paddle tug braving a fierce storm, the waves lapping at its bow. Taking it, he placed it on the ledge of one of the bookshelf units. Taking out another book, it was another hardcover. The purple boards were wrapped in a shiny black dustjacket. The cover showed the illustration of a hand holding a silk ribbon which moved round to the back of the book, that showed a black and white picture of the author. In purple letters off set with white outlines was the title, *A Fashionable Crime*. Arthur thought how the book would look great in the shelf with his other vintage books.

Now came the third book. It was a paperback, but a very thick one, there wasn't a blemish on its entire surface, no creases, no scratches, the pages still white. It was as if the book had never been touched let alone read. The green cover was full of flowers with leaves forming the title of the book *The Secrets of the Meadow*. Arthur turned it in his hands before thinking of opening it. Then he paused, was it worth it to possibly ruin the spine of an immaculate book. Perhaps a peak wouldn't be too bad just to see what the writing looked like.

It was a few hours later when Richard came home. Setting his keys down on the table and his bag on the floor he noticed something. It was quiet.

“Arthur?” he called.

Moving to the stairs he shouted again. Still nothing.

“Arthur?!”

Silence, slowly he made his way up the stairs. Reaching the landing Richard saw that the door to the cupboard library was open. Walking over he looked in. For a second, he stood there. Then Arthur rushed into the room kneeling at Arthur's side. Arthur's face was no longer a face, but a rose in full bloom, *The Secrets of the Meadow* in his hand.

Nicholas Huggett is a writer with an interest in creating works in the science-fiction, fantasy, and horror genre particularly ghost stories.

The Legend (A Prologue)

Lana Thames

Marianne is furious at the gods and obsessed with a magical treasure that's been lost for over a thousand years, and when she's lost at sea she doesn't expect the beautiful but far too level-headed pirate who rescues her to hold the keys to her quest.

The old man did not visit often, but when he did, he spent his nights by the hearth at the pub, spinning sailor's tales for all who cared to listen.

Most did. They gathered around, enthralled by the magic of his voice, the tales of great deeds and mighty heroes, mortals and myths.

That night, he smiled at his audience, sitting on the floor before his chair, crammed into every available seat. Many had mugs of frothy ale clutched in their hands, and the stew simmering in the kitchen filled the air with the scent of spices and smoke. The fire crackled merrily, casting flickering light over his aged, weather-beaten face. "What shall it be?"

A young man, barely more than a boy, called out, "The Sea Queen!"

"There are many tales of the Sea Queen," the old man said. "Which one am I telling tonight?"

"Tell us about the Queen and the Siren," another listener begged.

He hummed, stroking his beard. It was a frequent request. They had all heard it before, of course—it was one of the most popular tales, told at every festival and feast-day.

Nonetheless, the old man smiled, for it was one of his favorites, too. No matter how often he told it, he never tired of it. And no one could tell it like he could. So, he leaned back in his chair, crossed his hands over his belly. He pursed his lips, deep in thought.

His listeners waited with bated breath.

No pub had ever been so silent. Even the rough driftwood of the walls didn't creak as loudly as usual, as if the building itself were waiting for his words.

"The tale of the Queen of the Sea begins many centuries past," he said at last. The entire pub drew in a breath, his audience leaning forward as one. Enthralled. "When the great Elemental, Lady Sea, crowned the first Queen, she bestowed upon this mortal a symbol of favor, a relic that contained great power—the power of the Sea. And when this queen, the True Queen, was felled in battle, this Relic was lost to time and memory, even as others were chosen by the Lady. For ten centuries, it faded from knowledge, until it was no more than a whisper, the faintest dream of an age long past.

“The Kings and Queens of the Sea had been gone for three hundred years when our story begins, in an unremarkable seaport city on the Eastern Continent. It begins, sadly, with the death of parent. A beloved father...And the grieving daughter he left behind. Her name was Marianne. And she had just made a rather remarkable discovery. It was a discovery that would, though she didn't know it then, change not only her life, but the very shape of our world.”

*Lana Thames writes about teen girls battling sea monsters, ghosts,
and unfathomable rage.*

A Troubled Rhapsody

Thomas Blake Thurman

This is the opening sequence for my short story “A Troubled Rhapsody”, both an adaptation of the short stories of Edgar Allen Poe and an attempt to gain insight into his life and his view of writing through the lens of isolation, loneliness and slow-creeping madness that is both heartfelt and tragic.

Scribble, scribble scribble. A font of more words, more words. Heavy bags had formed under his eyes some time ago, but it mattered as little as time itself did here. *Scribble, scribble scribble, scribble.* The darkness pressed in from all sides, suffocating. Thin rays of light from a single small slit towards the ceiling, barred with iron, were shone upon him. Too little to be blinding, but enough to cause the pale blue to shimmer brilliantly to any onlooker. But, of course, there were none. There never were. *Scribble, scribble.* His hand and wrist ached. His back felt like cracked and splintered wood. His eyes were dried such that it felt as if a million tiny needles resided in his cornea. *Scribble.*

The words paused for a moment. He was thinking, but he knew quite well he couldn't afford to spend too long doing so, lest the terrible silence set in yet again. The eye, he thought, as he finally felt the bright drops blinding it, was as good a reason as any. *Scribble scribble.* Ah... yes, there it was again. *Scribble scribble, scribble.* That heavenly sound. *Scribble.* The proof of worthiness to his existence. *Scribble, scribble.* It was his God, his meaning, his hope. *Scribble, scribble.* Each scratch on paper, each line of ink, forming an orgasmic harmony of presence to keep his mind anchored. *Scribble.* He thought that there could be nothing greater than this perfect state he found himself in, nothing but him, the words and the gentle scratching coming from the paper and reflecting off the walls. *Scribble scribble.*

He knew not what words flowed from the pen to the paper. They were to him nothing more than the raving whispers of a damaged mind, enslaved to the orchestra of the ink. *Scribble Scribble.* The tempo built. He felt urges bubble up in him, emotions and instincts the

dreadful walls tried to suppress – but among the beautiful expulsion of the black well - he was once again free, free to fly at his hearts highest fancy.

To his soul's blackest depths.

But he would never stop his writing even when he no longer knew what the words being thrown onto the page were, for he did not need to see them. All he needed was that sound. That was the art he worshipped. *Scribble, scribble, scribble*. He slowed his pace as his brain burnt out, a numb, throbbing feeling affecting his grey matter in a most curious slump of inspiration that seemed to affect him more and more frequently with every passing day. The words, the sound. It was all unbearably slow now. He needed more, more of his prayer and more answers to it. What was there? How many days had it been since the warden had gone? He needed him back or he would have nothing to write at all.

Thomas Thurman is a poet and writer specialising in experimental works in digital literature and twisting formats. He works with original, imaginative themes both enigmatic and fantastical.

Home

Petronela Trginova

After being born into extreme poverty, a dysfunctional family, and living a nomadic lifestyle, a teenage boy and his alcoholic mother struggle to find their place in the world. A home they could claim as their own. However, both of them fail to realise that the “true” home they are looking for has always been the one within themselves.

Hello, and welcome to my show - a real reality show, not one of those superficial craps you see on TV nowadays. I won't ask you to stay until the very end because you will probably change the channel anyway, but I am glad you are watching for the time being. Let me take you back to '93 to the middle of the middle of nowhere. I was probably just a couple My mother and I were only a family on paper... Or whenever it was convenient for her. I served as her main source of income. You see, I was the main excuse for her to get child support, which she spent on orange pills and orange bottles. My mom was more interested in popping prescription pills in the kitchen, suing the neighbour's dog for pissing on our lawn, and watching reruns of '70s talk shows than establishing a normal mother-son relationship with me. She was a real busy woman, according to her.

I have experienced a modern nomadic lifestyle. Even when there was nowhere for us to go, mom would always find a “somewhere”. We were moving so often that I couldn't tell the places apart after a while. They weren't “homes”. They were just temporary stations. It started with the basement at my grandmother's house, but once the unresolved issues started to resurface and the living room was becoming a boxing ring, mom packed our Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme and we moved to a trailer park two cities away. From then on it became a monthly routine - jumping from one shabby place to another. We changed places so quickly that I didn't have time to make friends. So I made my own, but they didn't like living in my head. Most of them killed themselves eventually. My mom always told me to not play with weird kids, so I stopped playing with myself, even though I was all I had.

As I bloomed into puberty, my confusion started to blossom as well. I realised the full spectrum of my loneliness. Hell, I barely knew my own mother. She was a different person after every bottle and a stranger after each pill. And I resented each version. Our relationship grew distant each time I saw another one of her alcoholic fits. It was our living room that turned

into a boxing ring in the end. We couldn't see past our pain. We fought each other even though we had the same common enemy. She was blaming me for being a single parent, and I was blaming her for having a single parent. Neither of us realised we'd both got screwed by a man who never loved us. You'd think it would make us inseparable, but it drove us further away instead.

Petronela Trginova is a bilingual poet and writer. Her main focus is on creating non-fictional stories that touch on the themes of mental health, self-discovery, and self-empowerment.

Me, My Dog, and the Impossible View

El Tyler

“Me, my dog, and the impossible view” is a folk-horror trans-memoir in which a young trans-girl runs away from home with her dog and battles with distorted, twisted, fantastical everyday creatures.

4.

life as ‘a model village’

The following day we set off early. I packed down the camp and hid my backpack under some fallen branches, washed my face in the stream and trekked towards civilisation.

It took some hours, but we eventually found a small village with garland lined streets and the scent of pastry in the air. Our stomachs whined as we followed the scent to a small green populated with foldaway tables and various vendors setting up pastry, cakes, scones, second-hand clothing, and ceramic ornaments. Greying people with their perfectly white dogs lined up at these stands musing over the nuances of cheese and jam scones and chortling about the ‘delectable fudge’.

I watched them for a moment from the outskirts. I longed for what they had. I longed for money. I longed for nice clothes and fancy cars. I longed to be safe. But instead, I sat here, invisible to them. They were so wrapped up in their conversations that they didn’t notice me swoop in. They didn’t notice me slipping delicate hands into their pockets and pulling out crisp bank notes. I danced through, a phantom-force-Robin-Hood, undetected until a growl interrupted my five-finger ballet.

The growl rose from the crowd, a pristine retriever nipped at Bear's hind. Another clamped down steel-spike teeth on my arm. I wrestled free but it was too late. The grey, grey people turned their grey, grey faces, noticing me for the first time.

And for the first time, I noticed them.

Their ghastly faces flooded around me. Wrinkled, matted flesh where eyes, ears, and noses should have been. The only feature remaining was their wicked, smiling mouths lined with ice shard teeth; gnashing, grating, *grinding*.

They spoke wicked words, *young man, young man, what are you doing?*

They couldn't hear my protests. They couldn't see my tattered dress. The only truth they knew were the words twisting from their tentacle tongues.

They closed in and Bear disappeared behind a swell of bodies.

I was trapped and they were grasping clasping skeletal hands, asking *what are you doing? What are you doing?* I couldn't breathe, the sky closed up, the bodies closed in, crowding, towering, surrounding.

A mighty roar split the scene. The grey, grey people with their wicked mouths paused. A great black paw swung through the bodies. Bear emerged, growing and growing until he loomed over the crowd. He swung his colossal paw again and again, clearing a path through the nightmarish horde. He scooped me up by the scruff of my neck and pummelled through the crowd, taking us to safety, away from the grey people in the model village.

El (they/them) is a gender-fluid and genre-fluid poet, writer, designer, and musician creating fragmented, emotive works that explore themes of mental health, dysmorphia, and the queer/gender-queer experience.

Janet, Gemma & The Cappuccino Culprit

J.C Williams

Twin siblings, Janet & Gemma, discover the news about the murder of a customer at their local coffeehouse. Eager to solve the case, they join forces with the village's most stubborn detective, however, the truth about their barista colleagues start to become a lot more darker than their usual coffee.

"Look!" Janet said "There's Olu and Tilly! Maybe if we shouted loud enough, they might hear us!"

"Or they might just spot us overall? I mean, we don't exactly dress like everyone or anyone in the village." Gemma said.

"Yeah, and we don't exactly look like twins either..."

As the detectives stepped out of the flashy looking car and were about to walk under the 'POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS' tape that was barricaded across outside the coffeehouse in front of them, DCI Olumide (or 'Olu' for short) Nwadike stopped in his tracks. He turned his head slightly left to take a glimpse at the crowd standing around on the pavement of Willesden Street. And there he saw the pair of... odd-looking twins and his detective rivals, Janet and Gemma, shouting their names whilst frantically waving both of their arms around like lunatics to get his and DS Tilly Garrett's attention (and to perhaps annoy everyone else amongst the crowd). Seeing them across made Olu, as usual, kiss his teeth in annoyance and then roll his eyes. "Oh for goodness sake, not again..." he thought OUT LOUD, making Tilly stop in her tracks a few seconds later; she also spotted them shouting too, and just smiled at them. She gave the twins a small wave from afar as an indication they both recognised amongst the busy and loud-murmuring crowd.

Other police officers were wandering around all over the place of The Evergreen as well as some of the forensics until they saw their bosses and had to stop what they were doing. Whilst on the opposite side of the street, Janet and Gemma finally stopped making a commotion with their arms and loud voices to irritate everyone else thanks to their somewhat their police rivals finally seeing them; to be fair, the twins knew that Olu and Tilly haven't got a choice but to help them out – they both know that they work at The Evergreen especially Tilly being one of their regulars. Olu nodded at one of the policemen who was guarding the entrance and from what the twins saw from their point of view of the street they were on, they both lip-read him saying "Thank you, constable, but give us one moment please." And as usual, Olu started shaking his head and tutting at them as the detectives walked across the street to towards the twins.

Janet and Gemma puzzledly looked at each other, and then to Olu. “But we both work here, mate.” Janet questioned.

“Well, well, well...” Olu said, still tutting. “If it isn’t Mx and Miss Braxton? Fancy bumping into you two here, AGAIN, but are we surprised?”

“I’ll be the judge of that, sweetie.” Olu replied as he snapped his fingers.

Still very much confused at his comment, they both also knew that he was just joking about – that’s just his personality and humour showing off. Well, someone got killed so, they are going to know this is no laughing matter.

J.C Williams is a writer, illustrator and a games designer - specialising in dark comedy, cosy-crime fiction to break down barriers of certain diverse societies.

The work contained in this anthology was produced by students on the MA Creative Writing at Canterbury Christ Church University in 2022 and is the property of the named authors.

www.canterbury.ac.uk