

Finalist

I've Been Absent From My Skin

Emma Brown, Onslow College

November

London

Grandma, I wanted to tell you. I wanted to tell you that we are back in England for the first time in half a decade, to see what of our family is left behind.

That I am wearing shorts even though the temperature is low. That Heathrow is still alive at 5 am on a November morning. My Earl Grey tastes bitter and somehow right. We're sitting on the cracking leather armchairs. The air is tannin and smoke; my vision clouds with it and dry eyes sting with newness.

I stand now on the same ground you lived and died on.

(I wanted to say) that every breath I take in this damned country stings and roars with ugly red grief, as much as I taste hope somewhere at the back of my tongue.

I wanted to tell you how it goes.

So

It goes like this:

At home, the summer is the best it's ever been. The sun has not slept for a thousand years. Here, the light fades away before the afternoon ends and even then it is endless grey horizons.

I never missed New Zealand when I used to come here. When I visited, it was honeysuckle on the radio, and the taste of Ella Fitzgerald in the garden, and I'd sit on your walker and skid across the hardwood floors.

Now, I have no wifi. No way to contact home makes me feel even further away from the other side of the earth. Any last grip I had on the worn rope that leads to my past is fraying.

I think of someone back home who has my heart, maybe.

But we are in the metropolis. There's no rest for this wicked city.

London is sleeping on a thin mattress, and the steamed up single glazed windows of coffee shops.

I see the world in a series of pictures, all taken in low lighting. The walls dance with multi-coloured spots; the beige edges crack and curl. Grainy. Pretty. Like a teenage fever dream.

I walk from Covent Garden to the East End. I leaf my fingers through racks of second-hand men's shirts in fashionable shops. The bottoms of them have been chopped off, and they are now women's wear, oversized and cropped. New and old.

We catch a snow flurry. Fluff hangs in the air, and my cheese sandwich gets too cold.

As ever, the first part of the holiday comes to an end. London is a cruel mistress. She plays with the boundaries of time.

December

Devon

We drive to Devon.

We see Jeremy and Celia: uncle, aunt, and chosen godparents of your favourite little atheist. There is a rowdy Christmas party in a sleepy Devon village called Bere Ferrers for Celia's park volunteers. I sit silent amongst drunk pensioners. Knitted paper chains and apoplectically flashing red Christmas lights droop from low, beamed ceilings. Prosecco is proffered, and I snaffle one of the glasses of peach and snow. A man catches his beard alight while smoking and a group down the patchwork of tables descends into a near hysterical rendition of London's Burning when he returns. I watch my knees. Eventually, we step out into the tranquillity of the village night. Ink falls sideways and drips along my hair, and even then I can see the world is getting brighter with every second that I am still living on it.

We look across the estuary, and I'm trying to soak up every ounce of silence in the far reaches of the air. "... the salt of the earth" my Uncle says into the rain.

In mid-December, we see great aunt Kim. She is living in a home, is bent far too close to double, and is *still* older than the Queen. She is also mercilessly cheery. But every time I look at her my lungs collapse and drop from my body as they fill with salt water. No more too sweet jam, no more shelling peas in a sprawling garden. Another person I loved so much, and she is slipping from my grasp. What can I do, Grandma? I know I am at the worst of beginnings.

I can't take another death in the family.

It's my first winter Christmas. At Jeremy and Celia's watercolour and spiced lentils townhouse, I play the same songs that the shops have on loop. I deck the halls. I try and ignore the lingering sadness.

We have a real Christmas tree.

The world is clear, and oddly pretty, lit by the dim glow of tea lights. I don't remember the last time I saw life in colour. Every day the days grow darker, and the world is so bright I scrunch up my eyes to see. Everything is beautiful, and all of it hurts. Every breath.

Mist hangs on the sage green moors. It's below zero degrees.

Not long after New Year

London

The end of the trip looms as we return to London. She beckons to me from the M25, winks and turns away. I chase the anonymous smoky bustle of the city like I always do. This time, I let the grief come with me.

Night has fallen. I am sitting on a large bed with white sheets, in an air-conditioned room, and am thinking of the future someone else wants and of the future that I might give up for her. The Shard is dotted with rubies in the distance. The leafless trees are strung with outdoor fairy lights, little fires that hang above the pavements. Nothing ever dies here. Not the pain, not the happiness. The rich red blood of life is suspended in crystal.

I put the radio on in the apartment and let it cleanse my skin. Velveten colours strobe across the sky. The beat courses through the Ikea furniture and shatters the floor to ceiling windows. Waterfalls course down the highrise and onto grubby pavements.

I go back to the East End. Back to the vintage stores and the earnest graffiti.

We fly home to New Zealand, and I am ripped apart as I leave you again.

*Late January
Wellington*

The first morning home we go to the farmers market. Scarlet capsicums swim in rays of golden sunlight. I am overwhelmed by the warmth to my senses. A stall sells Fougasse: oily and rosemary specked. We buy vegetables in reusable bags, and I look too long at the pretty girl wearing all cotton.

Is it true that you used to be a chef? The sky is cornflowers. Someone turned the saturation up a notch whilst I was absent from my skin.

I can only ever write the truth. So this is your granddaughter, and I'm leaving things here. This is the truth: vapid and leaf green. This the secondhand version of knowing you that I cling too: thin linen and fuzzy photographs. This is the world getting brighter. This is the thousandth time I choose to write about you because I can only ever write about the truth.