

FIRELIGHT



EDITOR'S NOTE

Somehow, Christmas is already here. The city is bustling with people prepping for the big day; browsing the warmly lit Christmas market and lugging big bags of presents, stopping for a quick inhale of mulled cider. But us students are only thinking about one thing:

Deadlines.

I think this affected the general mood of our contributors. When I sent out the call for submissions, I also added a lovely seasonal prompt: "You've come home to a log fire and contemplate your exhausting trip, or relive a memory of a Christmas present that didn't go down well." Therefore, within this magazine you'll find the festive themes of death, war, and alcoholism. You may relate to some pieces; others may provide a welcome distraction. Regardless, you're here now, so find the comfiest chair you can, and settle in to the first ever issue of *Firelight*.

Why *Firelight*? Well, we could give you the typical English Professor connotations, like, "this is obviously named after the warm feeling one acquires when reading by the fire," or, "it could be said that reading such works lights the fire of inspiration within you."

This was partly true.

But the name was initially sparked (sorry) by a visit to the King's Meadow archives to see the long heritage of UoN literary magazines; from the first issue of *Gong* in 1895, which I wholly recommend viewing.

In one of these beautiful handcrafted artefacts, we learnt that our Nottingham forefather, D. H. Lawrence, once had his poem *Study* rejected from a University magazine:

*Somewhere the lamp hanging low from the ceiling
Lights the soft hair of a girl as she reads,
And the red **firelight** steadily wheeling
Weaves the hard hands of my friend in sleep.*

We hope that in dedicating our title to one of Nottingham's literary greats, we somewhat make it right. But it shows that no matter how many rejections you receive at this point in your life, you can still achieve your goal. We're not saying you're the next D. H. Lawrence, but we're not saying you're not, either.

Claire Miller, *The Editor*

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SUNSET ON THE NORTHBANK

Ed Wallace

You look at the creature at your feet. Up at the sun setting over the horizon, broken by rooftops and the distant towers, back at the form under your boot.

It does not speak. Just looks at you, eyes baleful and wide. Once again you can scarcely meet them. There is a gun in one hand. Your left. A powder charge, hastily torn free of the careful rows hung from the bandolier beneath your outer coat, is gripped in your other. Delicately, fingers interlaced with a scouring rod. It feels like the sun creeps ever lower, its crimson flares clinging to the clouds like the fingers of a doomed man clinging to a cliff edge.

You never gave it this much thought. Simply gave chase blindly, not stopping to consider what catching the figure pinned under the leather and rawhide of your jackboots would even begin to mean. It ran. You gave heedless chase. Through the twisting streets, on and on, down through Dockside from the marketplaces.

Cross the river.

Cross the river to here; an almost cul-de-sac square opposite Bas-Kithra's. Not far into the Riverside, but deep enough. You feel the eyes. Hidden; seeing but unseen. From the depths of the coffeehouse, from the very walls and half-streets around you. They stare. At you, at the sprawled figure on the rough cobblestones. At the split satchel with its faded brand on the smooth worn hessian, at the mail packets spilt around it. In your head you hear a voice. "You know the Law." Indeed, you do. Seminar after seminar, drilled into you like the bore of your rifle barrel, left forgotten by your watchpost up the hill across the river. The Master-Bailiff's voice has never quite said those words, but you know his travelled voice well enough that he needn't have.

At those ghost words, a decision is made. Somewhere at the back of your mind. It bubbles forward lending steel to your spine, squareness to your shoulders. Resolve to your hands.

You pat down your coat with a full hand of powder, transferring your

scouring rod to the hand that now grips the barrel of your pistol ready to load.

You do not find your shot.

For a moment the decision falters. Resolve wavering with the memory of that crucial pouch hung from a hook in the barracks still. The echo of those invented words resounds in silence within your head. Then you spy it. In the dying rays of the twilight sun. The crimson wax and impressed silver ribbon seal. Slowly you pack the powder down. In lieu of shot, you do not remove the rod. Leaving it there, jutting ever so slightly from the barrel. Instead you slowly lower the wheel lock down towards the ground; to the child at your feet, prostrate under your boot.

The hidden eyes see the flash, even though yours do not. Their ears hear the crack and boom just as yours do.

You do see the rush of petticoated figures from Bas-Kithra's. You saw them even before they came. When the heat of the chase faded and you realised where you stood, and what you must do. Even as the sea of patrons surge across the cobbles, you fall to your knees desperately scrabbling for that red sealed packet to hold it to the sparks of your wheel lock. Again and again it does not catch. It falls from your hand, singed but intact as their hands seize you.

You do not see the twisted mimicry of the setting sun scares hours later as the Northbank erupt into flames.

OTHER

Claire Miller

We sit on the shore of maturity,
tracing blue-sky bird trail sighs,
drinking in their cries and
reflections of formation.
Winds paint the cornflower canvas
with salt spray, whispering
nothings as they run their hands
through your hair, the way I always want to.
And you, with a pocketful of stones;
slate-smooth flat discs,
grained with slithers of brilliance,
clatter to the edge
to release them.
A torrent of others, different colours
and sizes, but all invariably the same.
Black gulls evade your hail,
skimming lines of rippled clouds,
their wake unzipping the world.
The sea washes blue-grey, rose-tinted
freshly-healed scars;
Pastels and waves embracing stoic rock.
We stay until a dainty string of fairylights
illuminates the mountainside,
like hazy veins of copper ore:
until all grows darker,
as ink falls through water
in an upside-down ocean
where this other world
mirrors our moments.

PICK UP 206

Lauren Murray

And the bones are strewn
amidst the stones
and the stones are strewn
across the beach
and it could almost be
an ancient shipwreck
if only they weren't so white.
If only there were a whitewashed
canvas sheet
draped over this heap of broken souls;
if only I could confront this
eternal tragedy,
without some nausea
running through
my cavities.
If only skeletons could live;
if only the soul was in the marrow.
If only flesh was a little less flimsy.
If only I could pick myself up,
dust myself off,
and leave myself
behind
on this earth.

THE LONG MARCH INTO DARKNESS

Phillip Townsley

By midday the final crucifix had been erected roadside, and by four that afternoon they were on the march again.

They rode on in silence. Even the animals were quiet and unassuming. As if even in their bestial disposition they understood the inhumanity of what they bore witness to. As if by some transition of value the beasts were worth more than those who rode upon them. They marched in columnar file, the soldiers of that brigade downcast and irredeemable, each man knowing that to look upon their handiwork would be to commit themselves utterly to the knowledge of what they had carried out in the name of command and order. The captains sat motionless in the saddles. Two among them wept and none thought lesser of them for it.

They marched headlong into a cool pinchbeck dusk. They had not washed or cleaned at all. Those who still dwelled in the settlements turned out into the streets to watch them pass and they spoke no words, nor interacted with the travelers in any regard, and when the last of that column had passed on, the citizenry disappeared again as if they had never existed at all.

In the night the rain came, and it was ceaseless. It seemed as if all the world would be swallowed up in that tempest, and all night did thunder crack without source in the great black sky, and the rain had turned the roads to a dark mud and the horses thrashed and whelped and the dogs shied by carts and by the legs of the other animals and dropped from sight completely. The braces and the saddles of the mounts creaked and whined in the wind and the riders and the riders' invisible shadows slobbered about wildly and they were posted very small and very insignificant against the face of the pale moon like lawless pilgrims consigned to some terrible lunar destiny.

They rode silent and cowering in the eye of the storm. They could make out no landmark or shape of landmark upon the boundless plains. All night the wheel axels of the carts and the wagons groaned like adamantine whores struggling in the mud, but they would not stop. As if to pause would give way to some terrible breathing reflection of their activities and as such would be a

contemplation of insanity itself. They rode into the rain like pitiless argonauts foul and stinking and they watched silent sheetlightning break without form or tangibility in the sky like a white storm erupting in a belljar and still those hopeless migrants rode on.

The horses bucked up the road in the mud and stopped and wheeled about and those unfortunate riders slept in the saddle and slept wherever else they could and not a man in the company stopped. Like legatees of some unusually cruel inheritance of the earth itself spurred forth from the dirt and the rain and the cold. The mud clung to the horses' hooves like clay and the gibbous moon sat squat and very pale and the stars manifold and very bright so that in their arcature they looked like lunar lanterns strung across the firmament. In the predawn light it was still raining and still they passed more of those crosses where hung the bodies of the dead and the still dying moaning like sirens. The soldiers spoke not a word. Tired and alone. Disheveled, attired utterly in blood, like pandemoniac knights born of that terra mortua, and only the dogs kept them company now.

In the morning when it had stopped raining, they sat the horses at the rim of the switchbacks and looked out northward across the quivering daycold. Nothing moved and nothing lived. And perhaps nothing had done so for a long time. In the mist they turned their faces up to the pale sun like dreamers, but no light accompanied them and all their gods had abandoned them a long time ago. Soon in the fog they could see no more but they knew by the sound of the animals and the trembling of the earth that those bleachwhite mesas continued very far.

They thought of their own dead and of each other. Of what end lay in sight. Of whether death was preferable to such misery and whether those already dead would agree. But all they called upon was dark and grey and without respite, and the dead do not speak of such things. The dead do not speak of anything at all.

They packed their things and when the horses were fed and rested they mounted and rode out northward, advancing upon the plains in the newborn light with their faces illuminate against the moon like noble pilgrims pursuing some ignis fatuus lost somewhere in the dark of the world. The horses and the shapes of the horses along the earth one and the same and the steady thumping

of the hooves to dampen their quietude lest it become madness. They thought one and all about the mythos of war and its consequences. Of its primal value. Once in a place many miles away they had heard that life's ultimate equalizer was the killing of a man and they knew without confirmation that this was a lie. To kill a man was no equalizer at all because what can ever be equal to death?

In the darker parts of the world they marched causeless into an eternal night and some would turn sporadically to gaze upon those roadside crosses and wonder if those that had died upon them had done so for any higher purpose, any greater thing. If they had perhaps become emblematic of some stronger cause somewhere out there where the world was still light. Where the sun still lingered.

But they knew each and all that this was no real truth. There are no martyrs in murder. Just the dead, and those that must live with it.



THE DRUID AND THE SOLDIER

William Phillips

It was in a darkened clearing in the depths of the forest that the two men had met. The sun had long since set and now the faint moonlight was the only source of luminescence.

The Soldier stumbled into the clearing, lost and confused. He was far from his home, far from his allies, far from anything that could be called familiar. He bore his blade in both hands, knuckles whitening from the pressure of his grip. His face was pale and sweaty, and his eyes were so wide that white could be seen ringing his irises.

The Druid was waiting in the clearing, calm and content. He was an old man, unlike the Soldier, beard long and fraught with grey, hair tangled with leaves and burrs and twigs that he had not bothered to remove. He sat before a small fire, piled up with logs burning at an unnatural intensity.

When the Soldier saw the Druid, he raised his sword in warning.

When the Druid saw the Soldier, he raised the corners of his lips in greeting.

“Hello, friend,” said the Druid. “Come, sit a while. We can drink some tea to pass the time.”

The Soldier was wary, but he was exhausted, too. It wasn't long before his sword lay discarded to the side, sheathed and forgotten, whilst he sat upon a log beside the Druid.

He held a small, plain ceramic mug in his hands, which contained within it a black drink he could not identify.

“Have you come far?” Said the Druid.

The Soldier nodded. “We travelled from the far North, among the icy tundras, to this green land. I was on a ship for many days, and then a carriage for many more, and then I walked until my feet bled, and then I walked more.”

The Druid nodding, humming slightly as he poured more of the black liquid from the pot above the fire into a mug of his own. It rested on some contraption the Soldier had never seen before, holding the pot high enough above the fire that it would be heated without actually touching the flames.

“Expanding one's horizons is a favourite pastime of mine, I admit,” the

Druid said, eyes crinkling as he smiled at the soldier. “I must admit some envy on my part. What was it like? Seeing all those new places, meeting all those new people?”

The Soldier shivered involuntarily. “It was horrible,” he said. “The heat makes me sweat all day and all night, and I’m sunburnt all over. The people hate us because we come expecting refuge and seeking war. I don’t speak their language, but I can tell they curse us whenever we’re nearby.”

“Ah,” the Druid said, and his voice was distinctly sorrowful. “That’s a shame.”

“Couldn’t you help us end this?” The Soldier asked, gazing at the Druid intensely. “Your people have powers we know not. This war has lasted decades. Why can’t it just be over?”

The Druid sighed sadly, and took a sip from his tea.

“It is not the first time,” he began, “that such a request has been made of us. But whenever it is, I am reminded of why it is I cannot interfere with your squabbles.” He shook his head, then gestured for the Soldier to drink his tea.

Obediently, almost unconsciously, the Soldier took a long draft. The black liquid tasted of leaves, and water, and he almost spat it out again immediately.

“What is this!?” He gasped, as the rancid concoction slid down his throat.

“Boiled beech leaves,” the Druid said, smiling. “Drink up.”

Obeying without really knowing why, the Soldier twisted his lips and took another sip.

“When I was young, I had wanted to involve myself in the workings of other people,” the Druid said, his voice wistful. The Soldier could almost see the figure of a young man, hair still thick and acorn-brown. “My mentor, thankfully, steered me away from that path, advised that I stick to learning as much as I could before I presumed to know more than the people of the world.”

The Soldier turned his head, and he could see the figure of an ancient woman, wreathed in strands of silver hair, bearing a cloak of leaves and grass.

“I studied and devoted myself to the craft,” the Druid continued. Before the Soldier, he saw that young man bent over dozens of assorted materials, plants and roots and branches, waving his hands and focusing and learning the ways of the world. “And I saw what countless others before me had seen.”

The young Druid reared back as though physically struck.

The Soldier drained his tea, eyes focused entirely on the vision before him.

“There is a spell lost to the Druids, one that exists so close and yet so far from our current study,” the Druid said. His voice was longing, almost desperate. “It promises a utopia, an eternity of peace and happiness.” The Soldier saw a glorious expanse of cities threaded with forests, man and nature coexisting in peace. “But it requires nothing less than a single-minded devotion to our craft. Anything less than that would set us back a dozen decades, perhaps centuries.”

The Soldier saw that beautiful utopia slipping away, lost in aeons and forever beyond his reach.

“If I took time away from my study, to help in the petty troubles of the now, I would set that future back immeasurably,” the Druid said. “And so I cannot help - not even for the slightest of moments.”

The Soldier sat there, struck with an intense longing for a future he would never experience.

The Druid and the Soldier remained in the clearing for a time, as the old man pattered about, clearing up his assorted leavings.

Finally, the Soldier stood.

“Please,” he said, and his voice was choked and hoarse. “Please, teach me. Teach me to become a Druid.”

The Druid gazed at the Soldier, his eyes narrowed and shrewd.

Then, finally, he smiled. “Very well.”

As the Soldier dropped to his knees, thanking the Druid and every god under the sun, the smile stretched, baring a hint of teeth, and the eyes widened, glinting with glee under the dappled sunlight.

DAUGHTER

Megan Openshaw

It has long been known that woman is made to fit into the slender space carved out for her by the will of man. The layers of her garments, whether the simple attire she wears to sleep, or the elaborate dresses she must don to accompany her lord, are cut from social fabric. They form the divide that bars her from the lands beyond the walls of his castle; the boundaries of his domain constitute the sum of her world.

The daughter picks up a blade, delivered into her hands from the calloused grasp of her father. They call him ruthless, calculating: Viper. He teaches her all he knows, the skills imparted to him by his own father, or picked up like bright, precious stones as he trod the path from monastery to market to the province he now rules. He schools her to be rational, a stoic and gentle beauty, as he is expected to: for where is the purpose of disturbing order, when there is no need? But alongside this, he shows her thrusts, feints, blocks, and parries. In the company of her cousin, she moves wooden soldiers across a faded map of a land that has torn itself apart for a century or more; a land that will continue to do so, unless there is one willing and able to take on the task of uniting a myriad of warring states.

She gathers what she needs, shielded by the embrace of shadows and a soft, deceptive smile. Their weak points become her strengths. Their follies and slips of the tongue, she sends back to the man who made her, set down on parchment in subtle lamplight haste.

He calls her fondly by her name, one of her many names, and embraces her. Against his robes, dyed the gaudy yet inviting blue of a midday wave, she settles into a child's blind trust. He is her cocoon, a place of nurture and shelter, and she believes in his constancy. He will be, and continue to be, until a day now absent from her thoughts; when she must seize her wings of steel, and stand alone.

This is her reward. This, and something greater to be found upon breaking from her husband's arms, when he is forced to turn the sword upon himself. Something that is, in this moment, unknown and unthinkable. For even when the evidence will be presented with such clarity, with the years lined up as a succession of witnesses to her capabilities, she is merely the Viper's daughter.

CONSUMED

Madeleine Roche

"I'll have a scotch on the rocks," she said, and moments later the glass was placed in front of her. She opened her purse, but the bartender started shaking his head.

"It's on the house, beautiful."

She grinned at him and he melted. She took the drink and leant against the bar to watch the expanse of the club in front of her. There were bodies grinding against each other, swaying to the heavy bass pounding against the walls, the ceiling and against the insides of her skull. They looked like the ripples of the ocean, dim under the strobe lights and moving in sync. There was a lot to watch at the club, but her eyes met his as soon as he descended the stairs onto the dancefloor.

She smirked at him and he smiled back.

She pushed off the bar and strutted towards him, the sea of people parting effortlessly around her. She stopped in front of him, looked him in the eyes and said, "Your place or mine?"

It ended up being hers, because she had planned it that way. He tried to kiss her three times on the way there but she curved him each time with a devilish smile and a promise that he'd get what he wanted and more if he was patient and listened to her. If he did it her way.

So later, when she had laid him down on her bed and handcuffed his wrists to the headboard, he was just grinning like a goddamn idiot. She moved away from him and he couldn't do anything to stop her.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"We're doing this my way, right?" she said as she stood at the foot of the bed.

"Of course, yeah. Whatever you want." He sounded so eager she wanted to laugh.

"Well I wanna show you something first."

She turned on the TV opposite the bed. It took a moment for the screen to flicker on, but eventually a beautiful woman's face appeared on the screen.

"Ooh!" the man in her bed said and she quelled the rush of anger inside of

her. "Who is she?"

She turned back to him and leant her hands on the bottom of the bed frame. He looked so stupid, half sat up in anticipation, hands cuffed to the headboard, eyes filled with lust.

"Do you not remember her?" she asked, feigning confused innocence.

He looked at her, uncertain for a moment. "Am I supposed to?"

"Well," she moved towards him and sat on the bed. "After all," she leant down over him, "you were the last person to see her alive."

He tried to recoil away from her, push as far back into the mattress as he could. "What?"

She leant further over him. "You were the last person to see her alive." She said it like it was nothing, like she just told him her favourite drink was coffee.

"I- I-" he spluttered. "I don't know what you mean?"

He started squirming around, lifting his legs and hips off the bed, wrists pulling against the restraints. She just sat, perched on the edge of the bed and watched him with bored interest for a moment.

"You know what you did. I just want you to admit it. That's all I want."

It wasn't all she wanted, but she knew how to work men like him. Men who are small, pathetic cowards inside, men who will sell someone else out to save themselves, men who will kill women in cold blood because they turned down his advances.

He was still fighting, thrashing, screaming. She held him down with one strong hand on his chest. He looked to her, fear leaving his eyes and lust flooding back in. The fighting stopped and he lay limp against her sheets, eyes sparkling.

"Just tell me what happened and I'll leave you alone," she said and he looked at her for a moment, his eyes swimming in a mixture of fear and lust she knew too well.

"You'll let me go?" His voice sounded so small it was ridiculous.

"Of course."

"I-" There were tears welling in his eyes but she looked down on him without pity. "I liked her. I asked if she wanted to go on a date with me and she said no. She said she had a girlfriend and I told her that she just needed to meet the right guy. She argued with me, told me that she loved this girl and nothing was going

to change that." His bottom lip was shaking, whether through fear or remorse, she didn't care to know. "She left and I followed her home. I- I don't know what happened next."

Her tether snapped and she gripped his face hard in a single hand. He yelped at the strength she crushed his jaw with. He was looking at her again. She saw his pupils dilate.

"You know what happened next," she said, and her eyes began to well up. "You followed her home, followed her up to her apartment and as she tried to shut her door, you stuck your foot in the frame and let yourself in. And then you killed her."

"No," he muttered.

"And then you killed her."

"No. No," he was muttering, but she ignored it.

"You killed her because she turned you down. Because she has a girlfriend who she loves and who isn't you. Because you think you're entitled to women and to whatever you want."

"No, it didn't happen like that." He was a mess of tears and snot and pathetic little mumbles. There was a pause as she just watched him cry. "What is this? Who are you?"

"My name is Lilith. I'm the girlfriend. I'm a succubus and I lied. I'm not going to let you go. I'm going to do what I do best: fuck and kill."

LOVE? IDK

Botond Farago

Just give me another 3 hours of bliss
whether that's your lips on my neck
and your hand down my grey Levi's
or your head resting on my chest
with your fingers getting lost in my hair
because even though you were drunk
and probably don't remember all I said
I still think the calmest I've felt in so long
was when we held each other oh so close,
defiant of all the sin we're running from.



DREAMS OF YOU

Irfan Chowdhury

When the world is still and the sky is dark,
and the darkness seeps inside my heart,
I hear your voice; it kills despair,
your presence softly fills the air.

When I'm drowning in the sorrow inside of me,
feeling like I'm being swallowed up by the sea,
no pain or heartache is as real as you,
I feel the light endure; do you feel it too?

I sense the darkness leave and my strength return.
I watch in the night as the embers burn.
I watch in awe the sun beaming through,
as I hold onto memories; dreams of you.

DON'T LOOK

Megan Cuerden

She knew there was something there. She was absolutely sure of it. This wasn't like the other times, when she'd watched a scary film too late on her own, or had a nightmare about her French teacher and clowns and giant spiders; this was different. There was definitely someone hiding under her bed.

She stayed as still as she possibly could, her eyes wide open, almost comically, as though if she could only open her eyes just that little bit more she might be able to gain some clarity in the absolute darkness that had consumed her room.

Her heart was pounding. She could feel the fear building up like bile in her throat; choking her. Adrenaline washed over her whole body like she was on fire, making her hands tremble and sweat pool at the base of her neck. She gripped her duvet tightly, for fear her trembling hands would shake the bed. She didn't want HIM to know she was awake. What if he already knew? What if he wasn't a he, but a scary, unusually tall woman like her French teacher; or worse, what if it was something else entirely, something...Not human.

Now she was going crazy for sure.

Monsters under her bed; even her little sister didn't believe in that stuff anymore. But there was someone there, she could feel them as if they were sat on her chest, not hiding under the bed. She could even hear their shallow breaths - or were they hers? She wasn't so sure anymore.

She had to move; sweat was soaking the bedsheets and she kind of needed to pee. It was time to look. Just a peak, just a quick look and she'd be fine. She'd laugh at her own idiocy and fall back to sleep, same as usual.

Painstakingly slowly she sat up, careful not to make any sound, for fear that even the smallest creak could give her away. Her eyes watered as they scanned through the black of her bedroom. She'd forgotten to blink but dared't risk it now. She pushed the damp duvet to the bottom of the bed as gently as she could, pulling her legs up towards her body to free them. Lifting the torch off her bedside table she gripped it tightly, her thumb tensed just above the on button. She moved to the edge of the old wooden bed and her hair fell softly onto the floor. Not a sound was made as she leaned over the edge. The torch

shook as she pointed it out in front of her, ready to shine a light on whatever horror was in waiting. She was ready. She took a breath and pressed the button.

The light switched on.

HER TRUTH

Megan Cuerden

The room felt heavy, full; yet only two people sat inside. The only movement was the hands of the old clock on the wall, each 'tick' slower than the last, reluctant to pass time in a room where no one would acknowledge it. The air was stiff between the two. No-one dared breathe, as if it wasn't allowed.

The woman cuffed to the table stared ahead blankly, not quite looking at him, but he felt her gaze nonetheless. As though she was assessing, judging whether he was worthy of her time; and her truth.

She leaned back suddenly, her dishevelled hair startling the frozen air. He watched her intently, watched as her demeanour transformed from that of the woman he loved into the stature of a monster they all claimed her to be. He hadn't seen it before now, convinced they were all wrong; they had to be. But as she cocked her head to one side, looking at him unabashedly and yawned, he faltered, and questioned his own confidence.

He leaned across the table sharply, and gripped one of the cuffed hands, frantic, shaking as his tears dripped onto the cold metal cuffs.

'Please honey, where are our kids?'

I KEEP RUNNING

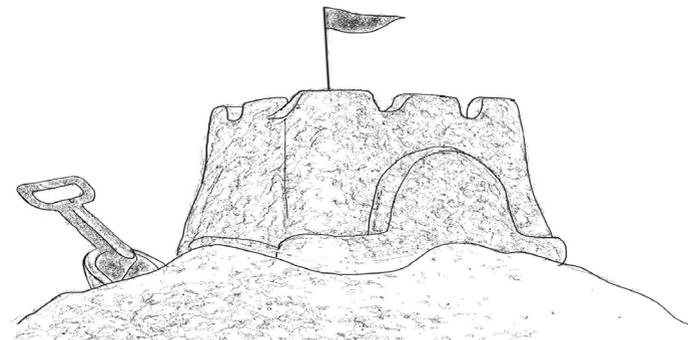
Joe Paternoster

Fleeing from my feared responsibilities, I keep running
 through fields through fate through freedom, I keep running
 from fixation to famed and fabled salvation, surely,
 I keep running, faster still, a fading thrill,
 as I keep running just to spite my lungs, I think
 I keep running to make love with oxygen, sour is
 the taste inside me as I keep running, stifling uncertainty
 sapping as I doubt why I keep running, simulating a
 cheetah hunting, but I don't know what I hunt as I keep running,
 honest to my heart as I keep running away from home,
 away from humanity and my history, I keep running,
 horrified as I haplessly confess that I don't know why I keep running.

And so I stop running, panicking and parking my feet. Emergency stop.
 I turn like a tank but a timid travesty of one, and observe myself on repeat.
 A sick cartoon character, navigating the obstacle course of all my stresses.
 A puzzle piece perplexed at where to slot in. Breaking my back just to
 blockade in a supply of money, friendships, love, loyalty. A dog chasing
 the car that reads 'Pleasing Everyone', but apathetic to how it itself isn't pleased.
 Chucking away happiness like it's sand on a beach, only now understanding
 that I need some to build the foundations of my sandcastle. And so I start
 running,

I keep running, towards the charming allure of nowhere,
 I keep running, towards the glowing hope of everywhere,
 I keep running, escaping the claws of my stress and sin,
 I keep running, confronting these flaws the way I can win,
 I keep running, cuddled by nature's vast serenity,
 I keep running, cuddled no more by inadequacy,
 I keep running, meaningful memories treasured, cherished,

I keep running, terrible tragedies rebuked, perished,
 Hoping to find myself my final aim, I keep running,
 Hoping I can find the cure to my shame, and stop running.



STANDARD NIGHT OUT

Joe Paternoster

A predator strikes me from above, a broken bottle blunting
 my temple and telling me to take a minute to realise
 where I am:

Cannonballing from behind comes some colossal lump of lard,
 as I unwillingly begin a dance of dodgems but I lack the right
 to dodge; caged confined within a mesh of elephantine giraffes.
 Neanderthals in their apathy, greasy flaps stamping shirts to backs, I'm stuck
 in a prison of people as unresponsive as any
 metal bars, absorbed in themselves or tryna fuck the thing that's
 closest to them, whether that 'thing' is a guy or girl or door or
 floor or whatever alcohol-induced fantasy their horny high
 can come up with, primitive in their policy of picking mates,

anything that moves a target in a realm where actual conversation is impossible, drowned out by the club's thunderbolts and lightning, speakers sponges of the ears splashed by the shouts and screams of illiterate shriekers singing 'songs' with no words, music maybe but dancing hard when one has the freedom to move mere millimetres before being swallowed by some band of bingo-winged button-poppers. 'Dancing' amounting to pockets of testosterone jumping up and down like kangaroos or two strangers grinding like a pestle and mortar, lest we remember the price we paid for entry and alcohol to this pristine palace of piss-poor peoples who forget that the world doesn't revolve round them, as they fling their flailing limbs around like they're a fucking helicopter.

"Oi, ya look like ya need 'nother drink fella, come to the bar wiv me" my token friend-who-I'll-never-see-again for the evening tells me, slam-dunking me on the shoulder.

I smile alcoholically, the drink a ticket back to the rhythm of the night, blind again to the primal ugliness of what we call a good time, and yet how we love it nonetheless.

If this is what we endure to destress, I plea those judgmental just imagine the scale of our sheer stress!

STUPOR

Katherine Gomes

Your outlines blur in spite of volition,
a wounded liver begs for permission
to stop. And denied
once stable legs now
jellified

we become complicit in the sickness that ensues,
clutching bottles when it's minds we lose,
basking in the polished ruse
that we're fine. Perfectly sober.

Watching September nights melt into October,
forgetting the pulsating hangover
that will greet us tomorrow, drinking down

time borrowed that passes overhead and then
crawl out of bed. Again.

A DRAGON AND A PYROMANCER

Ed Wallace

Somewhere in the foothills of the Ettain Mountains there is a small village. The village doesn't have a name, or at least I don't know it and the locals don't use it, the village however exists. I know this because I am currently in it. There is also a dragon in it. Or rather near it, above it... regardless, there is a village, there is a dragon, and there is me.

I. Hate. Dragons.

Of all the potential crises to get caught in the middle of, it had to be a dragon. And oh boy, what a dragon; a Bronzed Laecillian Fourwing. Orange-brown diamond-shaped scales covering forty-odd feet of furious muscle and searing heat, razor sharp charcoal teeth and talons with a hint of deep blue, with eyes the colour of pale emeralds. It was, all in all, a magnificent dragon. But it was still a dragon and, as I said previously, I hate dragons. Now I wasn't about to die in this encounter with a rather large dragon, no. For you see, dragons breathe fire, and I am a pyromancer, a master class pyromancer if I do say so myself (I don't, but that's another matter entirely). So sharp pointy bits of bone and enamel aside, the beast had little to harm me if I kept my distance.

But dragons are also fireproof; see the problem? I possess nigh utter mastery over the element of fire. Now of course dragonfire is a special kind of fire, so I have some advantages; namely my experience in the realm of pyromancy. Your run of the mill fire mage couldn't hope to withstand dragonfire, but me? I can handle the stuff like picking ripe blackberries. But naturally, the four-winged scaly brute that spewed it from its mouth could do the same.

We are at an impasse.

Usually at this point I'd just slip off. What's a village with no name between a man and his conscious? Apparently rather a lot when it's a nice village. My favourite alchemist lives here! Along with one or two rather close friends of mine. Or as close to favourites and friends as one can get as a practitioner, by which I mean they'll wait until after I've actually done a few misdeeds before trying to burn me tied to something or other (last time a cart). But I digress;

dragon.

This particular dragon was allegedly my business. Because it did fire, leaving aside the fact that all dragons breathe fire (except for – no wait never mind), and I did fire, therefore it must be my doing. I could not control dragons. If I could I would be one of two things; emperor, or just very, very rich. Most likely both. But as I am neither emperor nor particularly wealthy, this dragon ain't mine. It is however still there. Now I do carry a dagger. It's a pretty nice dagger, good and chunky, holds a fine edge and will just about hack through a branch or gut a deer. Dragonslaying? Nuh-uh. Not the thing to be doing that with. Though if it weren't for the talons, the teeth, and the massive amounts of physical strength I could just waltz up to it and hack away merrily until my nice dagger did manage a dragonslaying. So an impasse has settled in.

I should mention that the dragon was rather smug went it noticed that I had arrived. In that way that dragons are when they think they've got the drop on someone that thinks they've got the drop on the dragon. It of course believed just that. Knowing that I was a pyromancer, it believed that I believed I would be able to withstand its fire. But of course it knew that I could not, rather it thought that it was going to have a rather amusing exchange with a cocksure fire dabbler, and then promptly melt the momentarily surprised-looking face off of said dabbler.

Needless to say, I did not attempt to banter with the dragon. I was not here to give lie to those nice folktales that say if you beat a dragon in a game of riddles, or impress it with your clever wordplay, it will bugger off and eat the neighbours, nice and crispy. No, if you show up a dragon, you just get an annoyed dragon. However, riddles aside, I did manage to rile him up a few notches. Primarily by being good at my chosen profession. It was not amused to find me diving behind the large obelisk in the sort-of-centre of the village (which may or may not be why I'm rather fond of the place, forget the bloody alchemist) whilst deflecting its small flicker of flame.

To summarise then; I'm stood behind the obelisk, hiding from a dragon that is somewhere, that can't burn me but I can't burn it. I've managed to piss it off, and all I have at my limited disposal is a –

Never mind. Hero.

Unsurprisingly useful things heroes, or heroines, whatever. Much better at killing dragons than pyromancers. Oh wait no, they're headed this way. Swords' out. Her voice is like something pretty - hard, but pretty. Can a voice be like diamonds?

"Fulchard of Gratiff?"

Ah.

I can burn this problem though.

Never met a hero that the careful and gratuitous application of fire hasn't been able to solve.

TIME TRAVELLING SMART WATCHES

Nina Möller

We shouldn't be here. It is wrong and forbidden and I have broken about every rule that I was given on my job. I have just smuggled two people from a place they should have never left to a place they should have never come to, nor even known about. But that's what you do for your friends.

Mary lies on the bed. Wires and cables come out of her shirt and the machine on the stand next to her bed beeps. Water mixed with antibiotics runs down the tube ending in the needle in the crook of her right arm. Drip drip drip. She is coughing again, and her eyes seek mine with a dazed look. I sit on a plastic chair in a clinically depressing room of white and grey under merciless neon light by her bedside. My surgical mask must only add to the scary picture.

"Courage, Mary", I say to her. "Even if it is 'consumption', it's not a big deal nowadays". This is partly a lie because Tuberculosis is still dangerous, and Mary is not in the best condition. But I must encourage her, now that she lies in the back room of the local doctor, a trusted friend of my family and to whom I'm immensely grateful. We could not get Mary checked into the hospital without documents - 200 years away from her time. She gives me a feeble smile and nods slightly.

Her brother James sits in a chair next to me and his hand clutches Mary's, his other mine. I know he wants to ask me a million questions and that his mind is full of all that he has seen since we arrived in the 21st century. Only hours before, we materialised and woke up stumbling on the ground in a field after the time travel. It takes a minute per century and the passing ages hover on the edge of the mind like lucid dreams. My brother had fetched us there by car and James' head must be spinning from the vehicles, machines, and the beeping medical instruments with lights and a multitude of buttons. But he doesn't ask. His focus is on helping Mary now, everything else can wait.

I think you could tell from a mile off that they are time travellers. Mary's hair is still in parted ringlets around her face from years of imposing a curling iron on it. James may wear denims, trainers and a hoodie but his rigid posture speaks of antiquated upbringing.

When I first travelled in time, it was to an Inn in Derbyshire, September 1804. The modest establishment for the use of traffic on the northwards Post Road was chosen to try out being 200 years ago without making too much of a mess. After all, nobody had travelled in time before. My brother had gone with me as technical supervisor, should anything happen to the smart watches.

The smart watches which allow time travel are substantially my brother's work. He is a brilliant Engineering student and as such the professor involved him in a "special-top-secret-project" to fill the gaps in history. It was him as well who proposed me as a candidate to go back in time. As a historian and reenactor, I was as prepared as anyone could be, he had argued. It was a dream come true.

And all had gone well. It was strangely familiar and familiarly strange. Imagine travelling to another country, but 1000 times more exciting. The second time, we had been sent to Bath where I was to stay in 1808 for almost four months to chase down documents lost by 2018, whether by misfortune or in one of the wars. By chance I struck up a friendship with Mary and James, and soon we became inseparable. Grudgingly, my brother had given in to my pleas to make two additional traveller's watches in secret, grumbling about risking his job so that we could have fun. I had, however, apprehended an emergency such as this, knowing about the dangers and risks of living in 1808.

"The antibiotics are working", Dr Martin says. It is now past midnight and I have been staring at the chart of muscles over Mary's bed for so long that I still see it when I close my eyes. Every bone of mine and James's hurts from twelve hours in these chairs, but the feverish, delirious look has left Mary's eyes and she seems better, even if her breath still rattles in her chest.

"Miss Gardiner has latent tuberculosis, no active tuberculosis, which means her fever and cough are a common if violent influenza with a bout of pneumonia". Thank goodness! Relief floods me, but no more powerfully than James, who thanks Dr Martin profusely, and then pulls me up into his forceful embrace. I hug him back as tight as I can.

We cart Mary to my baffled parents' house at sunrise, where she falls asleep as soon as we put her into my old bedroom and does not notice my mother bustling around her.

James, still shaken but recovering fast, is now bubbly with excitement.

Giving him a tour of our house takes ages. The furniture, the electronic devices, posters, photographs and holiday souvenirs, trinkets, food storage and bathroom are all duly inspected and intensely discussed. Everything is strange and wonderful to him, and it's entertaining.

I make scrambled eggs for breakfast, while James experiments with placing things in the microwave and watching them turn endlessly until the timer reaches zero and the bell rings. I can only in the last moment intercept him from microwaving a plate with gold leaf. Sure, he would have loved the sparks, but I feel no need to renovate the entire kitchen just now.

He is just as fascinated by the milk frother, and tastes his first cappuccino with relish before we are to head out to the Christmas market. This day is going to be fun.

MAGGIE'S PRANK

Liam Martin

“Get back George, don't let them see you,” Maggie whispered.

The old man stepped back behind the curtain.

“We don't want to give away the surprise too early; we should at least let them get through a few eulogies first.”

Maggie peered through the crack

She was surprised at how many people had turned up. The pews were nearly full; old uncle Howard was there, nephew Barney had managed to squeeze himself into his old suit, all the great-grandchildren had come, even Doris, that that doddering woman who lived down the lane was sat in the back row. This is going to be some prank, she thought.

The opening song to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* played in the background. It had been Maggie's only request. It had been a difficult task to convince the devout clergy of St Patrick's Methodist Church to forsake their usual hymns, but her daughter Janet had somehow managed to do it.

The vicar was a scrawny man with a ring of grey hair.

“That's quite enough of that,” he said cringing. He cleared his throat and began, “we are all here to celebrate the life of Margaret Whoosley.” He opened the bible on his lectern and read out a passage.

George tapped Maggie on the shoulder. “Now Mags I need to tell—”

“Just look at her,” she snapped.

“Who am I looking at?”

“Doris. Look at her sat there with that hat on. It isn't even a nice hat. It looks like there's a chocolate trifle on her head.”

“Mags, can you just listen for a—”

“Shush George, I want to hear this bit.”

Her best friend Sylvia was shuffling towards the altar using her rickety Zimmer frame.

She was wearing that black dress they had seen in the charity shop. Maggie had convinced her to buy it, ‘you can't be waiting for tomorrow at our age you know,’ she had said.

Sylvia's eulogy was all about how Maggie had always been a good friend, about how she used to make her laugh, and always found the funny side of any situation, even in ones that shouldn't really be funny.

Next up was Janet. Maggie was looking around the church, planning her big reveal and not listening. If she had been though, she would have heard Janet talk about all of the fond memories she had of her mum, how she loved to play practical jokes on people, but how, since George, her husband of sixty years had passed away a decade ago, her memory had slowly been deteriorating.

“Here I go George,” Maggie said.

“Just wait one second, Mags.”

It was too late; Maggie had stepped out from behind the curtain. “Surprise,” she yelled.

But no one heard her; nobody noticed her waving her arms and dancing around.

Janet passed by and took her place in the pews without even glancing at her, and the vicar spoke of how Margaret was now with the angels, even though she was stood right in front of him.

George stepped out from behind the curtain, “I've been trying to tell you all morning, but you never let me get a word in edgeways! You were always like that in life and you're still like it in death. You're dead Mags. Dead.” He pointed at the vicar who was reciting a poem, “they can't see you, and playing silly buggers won't change that.”

Maggie stopped and looked down. She took a hanky from her pocket and dabbed her eyes.

“Sorry love, I didn't mean it like that,” George said. “We've had a good run, haven't we? Remember that time at Mablethorpe when you told the owner of the amusement park that the penny slot machine was rigged, and you kept on at him until he gave you your five pennies back? Or when we used to stop down at Brighton on the weekends?”

“I suppose you're right, love,” Maggie conceded, “it's just,” she put her hanky back into her pocket, “it feels like I've still got things to do. It's Lizzy's first piano recital next Tuesday, and I was meant to be meeting up with the girls this weekend too, and—and the other day I bought a lottery ticket, I'll never see the draw now.”

“You’ve been buying lottery tickets?” George asked.
Maggie nodded solemnly.
“How long have you been doing that?”
“About a year now,” she whimpered.
“The lottery’s just a big waste of money Mags; you’re never going to win, it’s like a million-to-one chance.”
“I think I’ve got more things on my mind at the minute.”
George continued as if he had not heard her. “You’d have been better off flushing a pound down the toilet every week.”
“George, everyone’s leaving. I think we should go too,” she said, taking his hand.
“Bloody typical,” George said, “you can talk for days and days but as soon as I get a chance to say anything you want to go.”
And as *The Time Warp* played on the speakers, and as the church slowly emptied, George and Maggie faded away.

AUTUMN SEMESTER IN REVIEW

Matthew Bird

The year started off with a highly successful Welcome Fair. Those who signed up at the fair were treated to a free book, courtesy of our friends at Angry Robot Books. Over the two days, visitors helped collectively write stories one word at a time. The results were interesting to say the least; starring dinosaurs, Aphrodite, pandas and Transformers—and that was just the first story!

We’ve covered a variety of topics in our weekly Lit Circles; from dialogue and setting to fantasy and crime. Some of the pieces inspired at these sessions were polished up by their authors and submitted to the new and improved Blog. Viking Direct kindly donated us a mountain of stationery, so we’re never short of pens and paper at our events.

In addition to our weekly sessions, we hosted three brilliant guest speakers. Dr Catrin Rutland; scientist by day and writer by night, spoke about writing and sending short stories to magazines. Nottingham’s first Young Poet Laureate, Georgina Wilding, gave an excellent talk about her experiences with the local poetry scene. Finally, the Assistant Editor at Angry Robot Books, Lottie Llewelyn Wells, spoke to us about editing and publishing. I would like to thank all three speakers for being so friendly and open to questions.

Our normal writing space became a gameshow set one afternoon, as two teams of members competed for the prestigious prize of a box of chocolates! With rounds including *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*, *Never Mind the Buzzcocks* and a hilarious game of Chinese Whisper Charades, there certainly was fun all round. And, yes, photos and videos can be found on our Instagram.

Finally, the big event of the Semester was the Murder Mystery where members took on the roles of crazy characters devised by the Committee to find out who murdered Professor Timothy Wimothy, the inventor of Time Travel...

A big thank you to all our members for making my first Semester as President a fun-filled success. I look forward to writing creatively with you all again next semester!

Matthew Bird, *President of the Creative Writing Society*

WHAT WE DO

LIT CIRCLE

Wednesdays, 7pm

Our main event and mid-week pick-me-up. Each week a new theme is explored through a range of activities and prompts. It's a lot of fun! If you're feeling inspired, share your writing, or just sit back and enjoy the musings of others.

FREE WRITING

Thursdays, 7pm

Got a character to create or a rhyme to refine? Are unwritten essays haunting your sleep? Come along to free writing to work on your projects in a friendly environment. Try bouncing some ideas around; who knows what inspiration you may find?

COFFEESHOP CRITIQUES

Saturdays, 1pm (Fortnightly)

Be it the latest chapter of your epic novel, the pinnacle of your poetry collection, or a fun experimental piece, join us for some friendly critiquing over a good ol' cake and cuppa. We have coffee discount, too!

MURDER MYSTERY

Biannual Event

The word 'murder' isn't usually a selling point, but it's a key part of the biggest night of the Creative Writing year! Assume your new persona, meet and interrogate those of suspicious natures (everyone), and try to solve the case. Sure, you might die in the process,* but you won't let that put you off attending, right?

*Disclaimer: no-one is actually maimed or killed during this event.

GUEST SPEAKERS

We are lucky enough to host many guest speakers from throughout Nottingham's literary scene. Speakers so far this semester have included Nottingham's Young Poet Laureate Georgina Wilding, Sci-fi author Dr. Catrin Rutland, and Angry Books Editor Lottie Llewelyn-Wells.

COLLABS

We run exciting collabs with other societies throughout the year, including a worldbuilding session with RPG Soc, a cafe crawl with KettleSoc, and

WANT MORE?

Follow us online for more information about who we are and what we do, and naturally, for more writing!

KEEP UP TO DATE:



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uoncreativewriting@gmail.com

THANK YOU TO OUR CONTRIBUTORS

All pieces were written by members of the University of Nottingham Creative Writing Society. Please check out our blog uncws.com for more of their fantastic work.

Special thanks to Jennifer Peig, who created our beautiful front cover illustration. Jennifer is a freelance illustrator and artist who specializes in fantasy, and draws inspiration from folklore and mythology. She currently resides in Chicago with her chiweenie.

You can find more of her work here:



jenniferpeig.com



[jennpeig](https://www.instagram.com/jennpeig)

PROMPTS

- Take a piece from the magazine and write an alternative ending.
- Winter is darkness and ice. But from the depths, a warm glow...
- What would happen if your New Year's Resolutions worked? What would happen if they didn't?

We'd love to see your responses sent to our Twitter! Members can also send them to the blog.

What did you think of the first *Firelight*? Were there any pieces you loved? What would you like to see more of? Let us know at uoncreativewriting@gmail.com, or @uoncws on Twitter.



**University of
Nottingham
Students' Union**