

PAPAtango

ISOLATED BUT OPEN

Voices from Across
The Shutdown

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PAPA tango

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Introduction

Chris Foxon

Papatango's motto is simple: All you need is a story. It has held true for over a decade, during which time we have brought to life dozens of new plays from early-stage playwrights. Going on to win BAFTAs, OffWestEnd, Alfred Fagon and Royal National Theatre Foundation Awards and premiere worldwide, these normal people began brilliant careers because of their exceptional stories. Blithely, and with hindsight naively, we never had cause to question our motto.

On 16 March 2020, things abruptly became much more complicated. With less than three hours to go until that evening's performances, the spiralling coronavirus pandemic forced all UK theatres to shut down. Curtains fell across the country. Stages plunged into darkness. The work of months or years disappeared in an instant. Stories honed by the collaborative talent of thousands of theatre artists were snuffed out. Among the casualties was our West End transfer of *Shook* by Samuel Bailey. Having the production cancelled brought home a bleak realisation. With theatres gone, the tacit assumptions underlying our motto were exposed: a story was no longer enough without the infrastructure to share and sustain it.

On 17 March 2020, just twelve hours after the theatres closed, we launched *Isolated But Open: Voices from Across The Shutdown*, to create a new infrastructure that would ensure stories could continue to be told. We committed to produce the world premieres of a series of new monologues, selected from an open call-out. We pledged £2,000 to invest in the ten writers and ten actors who would pen and perform these monologues, guaranteeing them paid work when they needed it most. We promised to share the performances for free online, with captions, so that anyone could enjoy great new stories. Alongside, we announced a range of other initiatives, including

#PTLibrary (to share sixty books for free across an ever-growing chain of readers) and an advice service for anyone in need.

The response was immediate and overwhelming. Thousands liked or shared our online announcements. The acclaimed writers Rachel De-Lahay and Anders Lustgarten wrote two extra pieces, performed by Susan Wokoma and Danny Kirrane respectively, to inspire others to take part. With typical but nonetheless remarkable generosity, Nick Hern Books stepped in to publish the monologues in a free online edition, which you are now reading. Theatres might have been closed, but theatre-lovers were more open, kind and supportive than ever. With the crisis, community.

And community was at the heart of what we sought to engender. We hoped to give anyone who wanted it a spur to express themselves, to create and not be stifled by unthinkably difficult circumstances. Dialogic, structurally precise and craft-heavy playwriting is usually Papatango's stock-in-trade, but now it felt right to call for something less daunting and more open. For this reason, we requested submissions of two- to four-page monologues. Confessional prose pieces are perhaps the most accessible literary form; for many of us, a 'dear diary' entry will be our first foray into writing and self-expression.

We were not prepared for the deluge that followed: a staggering 2,063 submissions in just a fortnight. All we can say is an enormous thanks to all who shared their work with us, because reading these eclectic, surprising, heart-breaking and joyous stories has been one of the most fulfilling and moving privileges of our careers. Selecting just ten has been agonising – but here they are, alongside the monologues by Rachel and Anders. I hope you enjoy them even half as much as we've relished producing them.

I write these words exactly five weeks since we launched *Isolated But Open*. In those five weeks much has changed, some things perhaps for ever. What hasn't changed is how generous, giving and inventive the theatre community is: it has rallied to find new ways to make and share stories. We may be isolated, but we are open.

We'll never see our motto in quite the same way again, but we can once again promise: All you need is a story. Because they're more vital now than ever.

The monologues were produced by Papatango Theatre Company, and first broadcast online on 27 April 2020.

They were filmed and performed by the following actors:

<i>Balcony Bonding</i>	Susan Wokoma
<i>Hungry Like</i>	Rosie Day
<i>Guts</i>	Bryony Miller
<i>rise from the wreckage</i>	Gloria Obianyo
<i>Solastalgia</i>	Danny Kirrane
<i>Leave a Message</i>	Laura Hanna
<i>Pythagoras</i>	Lucy Bromilow
<i>Hips</i>	Josef Davies
<i>Hair to Stay</i>	Shanaya Rafaat
<i>The Second Law of Thermodynamics</i>	Andrea Hall
<i>Wild Swim</i>	Lizzy Watts
<i>One More Son</i>	Daniel Monks

With thanks to Kate Morley PR (publicity), and Sarah Emily Parkes, Jessica Harvey Smith and Michael Byrne (readers).

BALCONY BONDING

Rachel De-Lahay

Rachel De-Lahay's play *Circles*, for which she won the Pearson Award to write, and which won the Catherine Johnson Award from Channel 4, transferred to the Tricycle Theatre in London after a sell-out run at Birmingham Rep. Her play *Routes* opened Vicky Featherstone's first season at the Royal Court Theatre in September 2013. For this, Rachel won the Charles Wintour Award for Most Promising Playwright at the Evening Standard Theatre Awards 2013. It followed her debut, *The Westbridge*, which was also produced at the Royal Court and went on to win the 2012 Writers' Guild Award for Best Play as well as coming joint first for the 2011 Alfred Fagon Award.

In television, Rachel recently wrote an episode of the BBC's series *Noughts + Crosses*, an adaptation of Malorie Blackman's best-selling novels. She has also written episodes of *The Feed* for Amazon, *Kiri* for Channel 4/The Forge and is currently adapting *Mr Loverman* for Fable Pictures and reteaming with Jack Thorne on *The Eddy* for Netflix. Rachel is also developing feature films with Film4 and BFI.

19th March 2020, one day after the theatres closed, one day before the schools.

AMY *speaks straight to camera.*

Dune House – Hi.

Facebook Live here. Hello. Hello. Hi. I don't know if anyone's there so.... (just) hello.

I'm Amy. Number 7. Hi. I just wanted to say that really, as I don't know many of you – any of you, actually. At all. Except for in fact Muzz. Khan – DJ slash actor slash sometime jazz singer. Muzz. Are you there? Am I getting your name right? I looked for you once on this Facebook group – briefly – not properly – just scrolled through the members. It's not like there's many so it didn't take too long. And you weren't... listed. And of course not everyone uses Facebook so why should you be – but then I realised 'Muzz' – not really a 'born' name, is it? Probably a nickname which gets you to thinking – what if I was searching wrongly? What would Muzz be short for? So you go again – don't you? Look for the extension. And then, there – there it was. On the groups members list right at the bottom – a *Mustafa*...

As per 'The Lion King'.

Oooh say it again.

Snort laughs.

Sorry.

That's not... (racist) is it? Sorry. Anyway. I reckon that *that* is you. Which means I do know one of you and... Ha!

Pointing.

I can see eyes down there and have no idea who's watching. Only if it *is* Muzz – *Mustafa*. Oh god sorry. Muzz – hi. And if it's anyone else – also hi.

Sure.

Okay. So. I'm in number 7. And on my own. And that's okay cause I'm an independent woman. Erm – yeah. And haven't met any of you except Muzz and I think a... Phil? Who asked for drain cleaner once – I don't really... (remember.)

Anyway – to get us connected – properly – intimately, or... Yeah. I had this idea. Well. It's not really my idea. Just an idea. Saw it online. Anyhoo – thought...

I read this thing about self-isolating – being in quarantine and what's good for you and what's not and honestly – this is not how we're meant to live. We're meant to have – independent woman or not – we are meant to have others – around us. Peoples. Friends – even. And I know technically right now we have to be on our own but there's...

Reading.

Seven people watching this right now and which means there's seven people with fuck all better to do – like me! Ha.

Snorts again.

Sorry – I really don't know where... (that's coming from.) Have never done that before!

Anyway – since we're clearly such a musical building with Muzz – jazz singer – owns his own sax, I think remember you saying Muzz... And I sing a bit. Not jazz – wish jazz! But jazz-y. And plays a bit. Have actually been learning...

Lifts up ridiculously awkward instrument.

Well wouldn't it be nice if we – you and I...

Quickly corrects herself.

You the seven... eight! Yay! Eight people we have here. If we... Dune House residents, could...

I'm gonna open this window and...

I'm just gonna start...

Starts to sing/play ‘Drunk in Love’ (Beyoncé) / ‘Are You That Somebody?’ (Aaliyah) tentatively, beautifully.

And when you’re ready – Muzz – or whomever...

Just join me...

Continues to sing/play.

Connect with me... Don’t be shy, just...

Music/singing enters the window – at the exact right place a stranger connects.

Oh... wow.

They continue to sing to a perfect end. Then AMY stands to see him. Her face falls and she promptly ducks! Then back at the camera...

So apparently I know three people.

Shuts window.

HUNGRY LIKE

William Drew

William Drew is a writer working across theatre, games and immersive experiences. He makes work through his own company, Venice as a Dolphin, as a Coney Associate, and collaborating with other companies as writer, games designer and dramaturg.

Credits include *Jekyll/Hyde* at VAULT Festival, John le Carré's *The Circus*, *The First Time as Tragedy* at HighTide and Camden People's Theatre, *Your Connection is Not Private* at Free Word Centre, *The Green Gold Conspiracy* at Chester Zoo and The Lowry and *Adventure 1* (co-written with Tassos Stevens). He was associate writer with HighTide in 2019. As a dramaturg, he worked with Collectif and then... to develop *The Machine* at the Barbican Pit (winner of the 2016 Oxford Samuel Beckett Award) and has been a Senior Reader for the Royal Court Theatre. He's written criticism on theatre for *Exeunt* and on video games for *Kill Screen*. He lives in Brighton with a lot of houseplants and no pets.

KATIE's one-bedroom flat. Fixed camera angle: her computer's webcam, on her desk. KATIE adjusts the light and angle occasionally. The curtains are closed so we don't know what the time of day is. Occasional sounds of a city outside. The desk is in the main room of the flat. There are two other rooms: bedroom and bathroom. The door to the bedroom is visible from the position of the desk.

Darkness.

Some fumbling sounds. Half a second before we see KATIE. She is in her late twenties, a vlogger. Think Caroline Calloway if she was earnest. She's clearly just switched on the camera. She addresses her audience, in a lowered voice.

Helloooooo everyone! So first thing I want to say is that I'm just really moved by all the views and the positive comments on the last two videos. It means so much to me and to George. I was telling him how many fans he has out there, all the nice things people were saying and I swear I could see him smiling. So thank you sooooo much, guys.

And to those people who were saying negative things, all I want to say is – and I know a lot of people have already said this in comments but – all I want to say to those people is that: listen, you don't know me, you don't know George and, and... Well I guess that's it. You don't know anything about us. So don't talk about things you know nothing about.

Beatific smile.

You know?

It's all good.

So I hope everyone can hear me okay. I'll check this back before I upload but the reason that I'm trying to keep my voice down is that George is asleep in the bedroom.

Now I know a lot of you are going to be thinking ‘Hey, why am I watching this if George isn’t going to be in it?’ Quite a lot of you will be thinking that. Maybe not all of you and can I just say right now to those guys – and girls – who are all talking about my appearance and stuff, I mean thanks I guess but you know that’s not really the focus of these videos and actually there’s like the whole rest of the internet for that so I don’t totally get why you’re watching my videos if that’s your like motivation or whatever. And the raw meat thing, I mean that’s just gross, I mean seriously since when is that a thing? I mean, I know I’m kind of biased as a vegan but seeing a woman preparing raw meat, seriously? They say whatever gets you through the night, right, but I mean seriously? Seriously?

Okay, sorry. Getting distracted there. Anyway, yeah, to the rest of you, I’m sorry that George can’t be on camera at the moment but, to be honest, it’s been very difficult to find any time to record this video because he just takes up all of my energy and is a bit full-on at the moment. I’m hoping it’s a phase but it’s not the easiest of times.

It’s just...

He’s still beautiful, of course, but...

He’s so big and strong now.

I think he might be stronger than me.

And his teeth, they’re...

A noise from the other room.

Oh shhhh...

Crashing around in the other room.

Okay, okay. That’s him. He’s awake.

(To off.) Don’t worry, sweetie. Just one minute.

Sounds of something ramming the door.

I’m going to have to go. He’s awake and he’ll be hungry now. But I just wanted to check in with you guys and let you know

that everything is good with us and to say thank you. Okay?
Thank you.

Sounds of growling.

Okay, okay, bye, bye, bye. Thanks for watching, guys. See you
soon.

*Switches camera off, growling and bashing continues for
half a second in the darkness, then silence.*

GUTS

Angus Harrison

Angus Harrison is a playwright and journalist from Bristol. He was a staff writer at *VICE* for three years, where he wrote about society, politics and nightclubs. His first play, *6/49*, was selected for VAULT Festival 2020. His scripted work has also been performed at the Jerwood Theatre Upstairs (Royal Court), and the Edinburgh Festival Fringe.

STEPH, *late twenties.*

You start by cutting its fins off with scissors.

Then you push your knife into its arsehole and drag the blade up to its throat. From there it's as straightforward as scooping out its inside parts with your fingers.

Some of the guts won't want to come, you have to tug at those until they snap, bit like breaking an old rubber band. After that you stick a finger in behind its jaw, hook it around the gills and –

yank –

pull 'em out.

Sometimes you might have to descale it. They should give you a proper knife for that, this thing that lets you –

you can scrape all the shards off –

don't know what it's called they never told me, like I said never gave me any proper training.

Easiest to do that over a sink. Run the cold tap and you can watch all its scales just –

fall off. Watch 'em all run down the plughole you know –

see ya.

Getting the bones out, that's the real nightmare, proper fiddly bollocks.

I'm always worried about missing them to be honest, giving fish to old women, them choking on spines when they get home, policeman turning up at the entrance you know –

gesturing over to the counter –

it was her who served her. She did it.

I'm joking, like.

You'll uh –

you'll get a lot of questions, mind.

How long in the oven? Can you braise the whole fish? All of that.

It's a certain type of person who buys food at a counter they could pick off a shelf wrapped in cellophane ten metres away. Certain type of man, is what I mean by that. But you get used to it.

Parents. They leave their kids here. Dump 'em with us while they get their shopping done, you know? Get 'em looking at the sardines, distract them. Pissheads too, sometimes, by the time the evening rolls around on Saturdays. They come in for more supplies and end up over here. Security guards usually try and sling 'em out but I don't mind. We're probably the only people in the shop who can't smell them. Got like a –

wall of guts between us and them.

Sorry shouldn't say pisshead should I?

Tom, the guy you're replacing, he used to say there weren't any difference between a drunk and a child when it came to the counter, they all do the same –

gawp –

look at the eyes.

On that, if I could give you one piece of advice, it would be don't bother coming in hungover. If you can't help but end up on the lash then call in sick because trust me you don't want to be here feeling like that. All this flesh in front of you.

I've only done it once or twice.

Now remember I've worked here since I was sixteen so I wasn't as old as you are now when I started. I was a teenager, working weekends, so not getting on it was –

well you're obviously going to get on it aren't you? It's required at that age, you don't know any better.

One Sunday I'd been in Revs about five hours before my shift started. Came in here and well –
you can imagine.

Felt like I'd been smacked in the face with a car door. That smell. BAM. Ice and guts. I had to go and hide in the walk-in freezer downstairs.

Tom, he came and got me, he –
found me in there, in the dark. Said I looked like I was sitting at the bottom of a lake.

Tom said –

he said I'd better come upstairs because otherwise I'd get in trouble. And I said to him, you know, *you're always hungover?* And he said, *ah but that's different*, he said.

He said everyone would assume he was a good worker because he was from Eastern Europe. He said that's what managers think, those words: *good worker*.

You know he used to –

don't tell anyone I told you this, but if he was hungry before lunch, he used to wrap a raw haddock fillet up in a plastic bag and then run it under the hot tap until it was proper steaming.

Ten minutes later he'd take it around the corner and eat it.

Funny.

First aid then.

If you cut yourself, which you will, you need to get a blue plaster from the box there. And try not to panic. These knives'll be sharper than what you're used to I'd imagine. When you cut yourself with one of them it'll pass right through you like you're nothing, so be ready for that.

First time I nicked myself proper it was just after 1 p.m. on a Saturday, which as you'll see later is about as busy a time as you can get in a supermarket. Awful actually, I was serving this man, this rich-looking dad with about –

four kids. Anyway he asked for this salmon side but he wanted it cut into steaks, and we were busy, like I said, so I grabbed it off the ice, slapped it on the counter, brought my knife down and, well it was a second or two before we realised that I'd taken the corner off my thumb and that the blood that was everywhere weren't the salmon's, it was mine. He just went silent and I was apologising while I tried to wrap all this blue kitchen roll around my hand and the kitchen roll, uh, it started going violet! Like, I'm bleeding so much and it's soaking it all up like a sponge, and all this time I'm getting light-headed, still trying to apologise and wipe the blood off the fish and –

you probably –

that won't happen to you, you don't need to worry about that.

Tom sorted it in the end he uh –

got me a plaster. I was a mess. This was years ago. I was thinking about all that salmon we'd have to throw away and he said he didn't care and neither should I.

It wasn't our fish.

Beat.

He just didn't show up one day. *That's that* you know? Just there one day then gone the next. *Boof*. Somebody you see every day and then they just –

and I didn't have his number so I tried him on Facebook and on his Instagram but it felt weird after a while, doing it too much so I just sort of left it, and that was over a month ago now.

In the end they just had to assume he weren't coming back and hire somebody else, so now you're –

anyway.

You should know if you ever need to share anything, I'll be happy to talk it through. Whatever it is. I want you to know that I'm an approachable –

like if you want to talk about your mental state or whatever.

What else.

End of the shift, I'll show you this properly later, but end of the shift we've got to get all the stock off the ice and into these fridges behind us, and then you fill that bucket with hot water and these cleaning chemicals, bleachy-stuff, I'll show you where we keep them, and you froth it all till it's proper stinging your nostrils then you slosh it all over.

Wash it away.

All down the gutter.

Then you can go home.

That's a point actually: when you get home. Have you got a partner? Well anyway, the smell is –

that's something that sticks around, you know? Hard to get a day's worth of fish off. I've never found a soap strong enough. Tell you what I do, I shower. Then I put on my dressing gown and head for the kitchen. I take a lemon from the fruit bowl, slice it in half, and then half again, and I gouge my fingers and my thumbs deep into it. I catch the juice before it rolls down my arms, and I rub it in.

But it never really leaves however hard you scrub.

Pauline who used to work here before she retired, well I saw her recently doing her shopping and she said that even now, years later, she sometimes catches a drift of like –

ice and blood and she –

she wonders if it's her.

rise from the wreckage

Benedict Lombe

Benedict Lombe is a British Congolese writer and theatre-maker. She is one of Theatre503's 503Five Writers for 19/20, Bush Theatre's Emerging Writers and BBC Writersroom London Voices. She has been shortlisted for the BBC Drama Room 19/20, Royal Court/Kudos TV Fellowship and the 2018 Papatango Playwriting Award. She's a big fan of milkshakes and socialism.

The character, WOMAN, is a black womxn in her twenties.

She points a camera at her face, adjusting it to find the right angle.

God, this feels silly.

She clears her throat, a tad self-conscious.

Right fuck it, here goes...

*She lays the camera on a flat surface. Hits record.
Straightens her posture.*

Hi there, future me.

She smiles. Shifts. It's awkward.

What's good? How's it... hanging over there?

Pause.

Right, yes, fully aware this is a one-way conversation... however, I just need to know... are you still *hella fine*? Coz I feel like you probably are, you know, based on genetics, and um, sheer power of will. That's how this works, right? I mean, if there's a single thing I hope the future brings, it would have to be: irrefutable, *undeniable* proof... that black really don't crack.

She hits the woah with a circular motion of her wrists, then dusts off her shoulders.

Aye, big-ups Mumsy, Pops and black Jesus for coming through and doing the *ting*!

Now she's feeling herself. Picks the camera back up with renewed confidence.

Okay, so... I'm starting this project where I'm supposed to document notable things from my day for the next few months.

As future me, you probably already know how this goes down (and whether or not I make a colossal cock-up of it). These recordings will then be sealed in some vault/cloud/digital-coffin-type... thingy... (that is the technical term, yes) and made inaccessible for the next ten years.

Beat.

Do *not* roll your eyes at me, bitch, you think I can't feel you from a different timeline?

She gives the camera a hard stare.

Sure, what I've just described might *sound* like the peasant's version of a trust fund, only on your x-teenth birthday you get a bunch of ramblings from your younger self instead of, you know, *obscene wealth* (because you're not a dickhead with an inheritance). And yeah okay, yes, fine, I *know*, money would've been nice. Money would've been *very* nice. And let's be honest, you'd probz be less pressed about being a dickhead with an inheritance if you, y'know, *had* an inheritance to be a dickhead about, but you know what, you don't. So instead... you get this – and an undying hope for full-blown socialism.

Beat.

You're welcome.

She lays the camera on a flat surface again and gets comfortable.

Anyway, I've decided to start with an uncharacteristically... earnest approach. Yep, yep, I did just feel that giant wave of cringe wash over your entire body, but we both already know you're down, so let's keep it moving.

I had a weird dream today. Like, stupid weird. Like, nothing in it made any actual sense and yet, in a strange way, it made all the sense. So in the dream, we lived in this alternate universe, or whatever, and 90% of the population was on the brink of being wiped out from this unknown natural threat, right? And the 10% who were immune from this were almost entirely... babies.

I know.

So, we decided, collectively, that we would put as many babies as we could in cryosleep, where their bodies would be stored at a mad cold temperature to preserve them. Oh and how do I know about cryosleep, you ask?

A smug smile.

Well, I *am* a fount of knowledge. (...And I may also have seen it in a sci-fi last night before I fell asleep.) *Anyway*, we decided we'd put bare children in cryo, and then we'd find this giant hatch, like the one in *Lost* minus the old bald guy stressing over it (like bruh, it's a hatch, relax?). So, we'd fill this hatch with food and supplies for the apocalypse, and then we'd stick the babies who *weren't* in cryosleep in there, along with the only two adults who would survive the wipe-out – bell hooks and Malala, because – of course.

And the idea with the kids being in the hatch is that they'd grow up (raised by bell hooks and Malala – what a *life*) and once they became adults, they'd take all the other babies out of cryo and then raise them, thereby continuing the human race, forming a new society, bada-bing, bada-boom, yeah science bitch!

(Okay sure, a *few* kinks still to be worked out there, but allow it, man.)

So when I woke up, I couldn't let it go.

I kept thinking about the hatch, and what ‘supplies’ we’d fill it with, you know? Like, if we had time, alongside the essentials like food and drink and... probably a *shit ton* of breast milk, I think we’d fill it with books.

Lots and lots of books.

Ones that could’ve changed our lives.

Ones that *should’ve* changed our world.

Ones that dared to believe that a different way was possible.

Books I wish we’d had access to growing up.

I mean sure, these new babies would have the great minds of bell hooks and Malala to guide them, and to recount history to them, and teach them right from wrong, and how not to be a

fascist prick, or dab in public coz that shit's dead now. Y'know, the basics.

But still. Just *imagine* the possibilities of a world that allowed everyone to exist in their fullness. Not 'later'. Or 'eventually'. Or 'for a while'. But from the very beginning. From the moment you begin to exist – you *see*, and you *learn*, and are *taught* that everything that you are is... perfectly okay.

That's what that ridiculous dream made me think about. That's what that ridiculous dream made me feel. And even in all its ridiculousness, it reminded me that disasters – whatever they've been – have never kicked it solo. They're always accompanied by game-changing possibilities.

Look, don't get me wrong, blind optimism isn't my style, alright? The image of the brooding cynic is *way* sexier (puffing out an elegant smoke as you hold a cigarette in one hand and the world's tiniest teacup in the other whilst looking down at the world with disdain and foreboding from the window of a top-floor apartment as smooth jazz plays in the background? Dreeea-myay).

But this isn't the stuff of fiction. There's a *recorded* history to back all this up – a history of humans rising to the occasion in disasters. Emerging from the wreckage, and building something new, something different... something better.

And right now, in this current timeline, there might be changes taking place that feel immediate and unrelenting. Right now, in this current timeline, we might be fighting despair or disorientation. Because a disaster doesn't discriminate but its effects on a society does.

But in your world, years from now, I hope we remember *this* moment as the moment our world changed... I hope we remember that when touch was out of reach, when we couldn't predict what lay ahead, and we didn't know how to feel – words, voice – *that* became all we had. And my God, I hope we found a way to use it.

I hope we harnessed its power and turned it into action. I hope we used it for those who lived in crisis their whole lives. I hope

we used it for those we forgot, for those we silenced, for those we failed for decades, centuries, over and over and over again until we couldn't get away with it any more. Until we had to admit that we needed each other to survive. Until we were forced to keep each other safe. I hope we remembered the ones who put their lives on the line. I hope somewhere along the way we stumbled on the most basic, fundamental truth – *we need to treat each other better*. And I hope we did.

I hope we saw a chance to rebuild something we always knew was broken. A chance not just to survive but for us all to *thrive*. I hope we didn't request but demanded a new normal. That we cast our nets wide and gave as many as possible a say in creating it. I hope we sustained it. I hope we achieved a reality where we were brave enough, and generous enough and compassionate enough to set a new standard.

I hope we saw a chance to rise from the wreckage. And do better.

Beat.

And I hope we took it.

Longer beat.

God, I hope we took it.

SOLASTALGIA

Anders Lustgarten

Anders Lustgarten is Britain's bravest political playwright, though right now he doesn't feel as brave as a Tesco checkout worker. His plays include *The Vineyard* for the National Theatre, *The Secret Theatre* at Shakespeare's Globe, *The Seven Acts of Mercy* at the RSC Swan, and *If You Don't Let Us Dream, We Won't Let You Sleep* at the Royal Court Downstairs. He tries to tell the truth.

Darkness. Music plays – techno with strings, something plangent, a little menacing. Maybe Robert Leiner – ‘Northern Dark’.

From the darkness, a choir sings a song of hope and redemption and solidarity.

Silence.

The trees were here before the town. The trees will be here after the town.

Go back before we came. Great cathedrals of trees, huge trunks looming far beyond view, colossal green spans the ribs of a vast ceiling. Trees the width of a house and the height of a football pitch, whose branches don’t even begin until twenty, thirty, forty metres above the earth, flooding the valleys and swamping the hills in an endless wave. You to them would be as an acorn or a beetle scuttling underfoot. Ridges in their bark go deeper than your outstretched arm. They move to the rhythms of deep time. They breathe in and out, and each breath lasts a century. They never die, because they are part of something that lasts forever, raising up and crashing down and sinking under and growing again.

Underneath them, a swimming green light, a rain of detritus, a million billion insects, then feet and feet of rotten wood and spores and ferns and the sweet putrefaction of humus and an overwhelming, haunting, cathedral silence as long as the universe, punctuated only by clicks, scratches, the chirp and scree of birds.

You’d take it over Attercliffe, wouldn’t you? No offence, Attercliffe.

These trees are gods. They transcend us. They were ancient when the Romans got here. Ancient before people got here. Theirs is a calculus in which we do not figure. They give the lie

to our delusions of grandeur, our self-absorption, our mad belief that we are all there is. And that scares a certain type of person, terrifies them down to their marrow: the thought that we and all our frantic scramblings might not actually mean that much, in the greater scheme of things.

And thus we must get rid of them. Kill the gods.

Holes appear in the roof of the cathedral. Patches of glare grow wider and wider, to the melody of crashing timber. The sound of stone on wood gives way to the sound of iron on wood, of steel on wood, the whine of the electric blade. Fires start up, the tangy smoke of sacrifice.

But the trees fight on, still raising up and crashing down and sinking under and growing again, and in so doing they sow the seeds of their own demise. For as they sink down over the millennia, they and the ferns and the detritus and the birds become the biotic material that turns into coal. They're the coal that fires the furnaces that appear in the patches of glare. They're the timber that heats the huts that spring up in them like mushrooms on a rotten log. The trees become the fuel for their own destruction.

The trees stoke the boilers that make this city what it is, create the iron and the steel and the factories and the wealth that tears ever greater holes in the roof of the cathedral, chops down its pillars, swaps the huts for houses and the immortal green silence for the roar of the M1.

And yet, somehow, we never really notice them. Until now.

LEAVE A MESSAGE

Hannah Mribiha

Hannah Mribiha is a writer, director, and rugby player. She is British-Moroccan by way of the USA, and has been based in South London for over seven-and-a-half years. She studied Drama with Creative Writing at Kingston University where she graduated last year. She has been writing for the stage for over a decade. This is her first professional publication. She can be found on Twitter @HMribiha.

HANNAH, *mid-twenties*.

My father does not phone me. Not even on my birthday. He texts. He sends voice notes.

Hello, Hannah. Just checking to see you are okay? Alright, bye.

Hello, Hannah. Your sister wants to send you a YouTube.

Hello, Hannah. Are you reading your Qur'an? You should read it, just a few pages every week. Promise me, Habibti. It will make me very happy.

I am not a very good Muslim –

I drink.

I have sex.

I have tattoos.

I play the Lottery.

I eat Haribo.

Although, someone once told me there was a loophole with Haribo because it's not the flesh or blood of a pig, it's the bones. And the Qur'an doesn't say anything about the bones. Veggie Percy Pigs have curbed my Haribo craving and saved my conscience.

Other than that I don't eat pork. Except marshmallows. And once my Scottish grandmother fed me a bacon sandwich but I was six and she had dementia.

Hello, Hannah. Just wanted to say Hi.

He never spells my name in his texts correctly.

There's always a missing 'H' or an 'N' disrupting what should be a perfect palindrome.

Hello, Daddy. I am good. I am working late tonight. Love you. Good, be safe.

Be safe means 'I love you' in middle-aged North-African man-speak.

My father has adopted his own vernacular heavily influenced by Tom Cruise films. When I was a child my father would express his love by quoting *Jerry Maguire*.

‘You had me at Hello.’

Mother tongue hiding over and under English euphemisms.

Be safe; I love you.

Are you okay; why haven’t you called?

There’s a nice place down the street you should go there with your mother; I want to recommend you this bar but I cannot acknowledge that my daughter drinks so we will speak in the most vague and broad terms possible.

It’s a very nice place, they do a good burger; It’s a very nice place, they do a good burger.

Are you reading your Qur’an?; I’m worried about your spiritual well-being.

By all measures I am the lapsed Catholic of Muslims. I once got so mad at my father I nearly got baptised into the Christian church to spite him. My father and I have spent the last seven years renegotiating our roles of father and daughter 3000 miles apart, him in America, me in the UK on mobile phones made in China. Ironically the most connected we have ever been is a side effect of being the furthest apart in our history of knowing each other.

So my phone vibrates, it vibrates, it vibrates again. My father who does not phone me has phoned me. I pick it up, half-expecting to hear a muffled pocket. Instead I hear panic.

Hannah, are you okay?

Yes, is everything okay?

You should come home.

I can’t.

Yes, you can. You should come home now.

Daddy, the borders are shut.

You can get a ticket.

Daddy, BA has stopped all flights from Gatwick.

America will get you.

I don’t think they will.

It’s going to get worse, you should come home, Habibti.

Daddy, I have work.

Okay.

Okay.

It's your brother's birthday in two days, don't forget. He's going to be one. Your sister keeps calling him the corona baby. Leave him a message.

We could FaceTime?

No you're busy, leave a message.

Okay, I'll leave a message.

Are you reading your Qur'an, Habibti?

Yes, Daddy.

Okay, I let you go.

I love you, Daddy.

Leave a message, be safe.

He hangs up.

I stare at my phone for a moment. Debating to call him back, to ask how his day is. To hear his voice a second longer. Instead I go to the bathroom, I perform wudu. I return to my bedroom and pull the Qur'an off of the top shelf. I unwrap it from its cloth and stare at its spine.

My phone vibrates and I'm a terrible Muslim so I look at it.

My father –

I love you too.

PYTHAGORAS

Emma Pritchard

Emma Pritchard is a playwright and screenwriter. She took part in the 2019 4Screenwriting programme and has two original television projects in development, *Meat* with West Road Pictures and *Salmon and Ella* with Black Camel Pictures. Her plays include *The Guardians* and *Pirate Queen* (Almeida Theatre Participation), *Armour* (VAULT Festival) and *Split* co-written with Tamar Broadbent (Brighton Fringe, Leatherhead Theatre and VAULT Festival), which won the VAULT Festival Spirit Award. Emma trained in long-form improvisation at The Free Association and performs with their house team, *The Millicent Tendrils Experience* and in their musical show *Starry Starry Eyes*.

DAPHNE, *fifteen*.

Do horses like sweetcorn?

I know they like carrots – and sugar lumps? I don’t know how I know that. It must just be one of those things everyone automatically knows – like if you’re right- or left-handed, or that you shouldn’t eat dry pasta.

Darrell, he ate an entire packet of penne in Geography to impress Maeve. And I know you’re imagining the end of the story to be that Maeve wasn’t impressed at all, and while we were drawing diagrams of longshore drift, Darrell was sicking the tubes up into his pencil case, but actually, Maeve *was* impressed, and they’ve been going out ever since. This was on November 17th last year, and they were two of the definites to lose their virginities at prom, but now that’s cancelled so –

And pasta’s cancelled. Literally none left.

We had this deal, my friends, that that’s when we’d do it you see – ‘an ending, to history lessons and hymens.’ That’s what I officially termed it, and everyone looked at me like – no, Daphne, it doesn’t need a sub-title, it’s just getting smashed then boned.

I can’t stop thinking about all the virginities that won’t be lost at prom now. So many lives just stopping in their tracks.

I mean obviously not all of us – obviously some people have had a lot, like *a lot* of sex already. Like Sarah Finley – she had sex with Callum Davis in the biology block when everyone else went to the emergency assembly to find out if the world’s ending. I can’t imagine being penetrated by Callum Davis underneath everyone’s osmosis experiments. All these potatoes lined up with chunks of water leaking out as he’s got his hands on you – and his – and you’re just –

I mean I've tried to imagine it but I can't.

Sometimes I feel like an osmosis potato – like this stuff is just leaking out of me and there's nothing I can do about it and I imagine the future when everyone's using me as a case study in science.

Not like literally leaking, I haven't had a period since Bonfire Night. I think like revision, the stress and stuff, it made it stop and, Maeve not being –

Apparently if you get too skinny your periods stop, and judging by what Mum's managed to scavenge from the shops, we're all gonna get too skinny for periods. I bet we all get infertile too. A whole generation of girls with no GCSEs and broken wombs.

That's why I've only got sweetcorn to feed Pythagoras. There's not that many options here, so I'm just gonna have to make do.

Beat.

I think if someone was gonna binge-eat pasta to impress me then penne definitely wouldn't do. It'd have to be something hardcore, like an entire box of lasagne sheets.

Maeve's my best friend. Was. We've known each other since we were like five. On the school tea towel, you know the one where you draw yourself and write your name and they sell it to parents, my mum's still got hers, it's stained with tea and ketchup and stuff, but you can still see us. We asked to be next to each other. I've only got one hand, and Maeve's nose isn't a nose, it's an extra smiley face in the centre of her head. But I swear you can tell it's me and her. That's Maeve, constantly smiling, they just shine out of her automatically, the same way I get blackheads.

It's actually okay, you know, not seeing her every day, 'cause ever since she got together with Darrell, she's been a sort of half, yeah a half best friend anyway. Like she used to give me her yoghurt every lunch, and now she gives it to him. And like, when she smiles, I used to be 100% certain it was all for me, and now I'd say it's maybe like only 20% for me and 70% for Darrell and then 10% Pizza Hut.

Obviously it's fine but the only thing about the yoghurt is I actually need the live bacteria because I have IBS, whereas if Darrell's eating packets of penne, it's just a waste isn't it.

Beat.

I first saw him by accident.

We were doing cross country, and we had a deal that we'd sneak off when we got to the end of Harrow Lane, and go to Spar to smoke. It's not that we're even that rebellious – more just what's the point of doing cross country when the world's ending? Plus Mr Peaks is a pervert and we've all had enough of it. He makes us do hurdles just so he can look at our legs. We can't do hurdles properly anyway, we have to do it on the football pitch, and we only actually have two, 'cause like years ago, two boys on their last day of school stole all the others for literally no reason and they never got replaced. So when we're 'doing hurdles' it means everyone who isn't in the race has to keep grabbing the hurdle that's just been jumped and running to get it in front of the second one before it's too late.

I know it's mental. But that's how you know he doesn't care about the sport, he's just in it for the view.

Anyway, when we got to Spar, everyone stopped and ran inside, but I just kept on going, like a test. See, I was sort of hoping Maeve might call my name. If she had, I literally would have turned back straight away, but she didn't, and when I glanced to look over my shoulder, she wasn't there –

I'm running and I'm imagining her kissing Darrell by the hot-food counter where we used to get wedges at lunch, before Sophie Ambrose said the inside of the grill gives you cancer. I imagining him sticking his tongue down – his hands on her waist, where she rolls her school skirt up three times every day – and her laughing, and the smell of hot oil and –

I stop at the side of the green and throw up. My chest hurts. My eyes are stinging.

The air is silent.

The green is this patch of ground, behind a row of big houses – like not big, big houses, but like big enough to have a sofa bed, or like more than one good knife. It's sort of a park, but there's no swings, just lots of fields dotted around it, and an allotment. A girl got murdered there in the 1930s. Imagine getting murdered just before a war kicks off. Like, no one's gonna care, are they – it's a shame –

I can taste acid in my throat.

I want to cry but I force it down.

And that's when I see him.

Pythagoras.

But this is before he had a name. Right now, he's just...

Brown hair. And these eyes, that soak me up, like a hug and a bath at the same time –

The most beautiful thing I have ever –

Long legs. Strong. But soft. Like he'll carry me places, carry me out of...

And a triangle on his nose, in a perfect right angle.

It feels like we've found each other.

Then I see the mud, from the rain, all over his feet, thick, the field, clogging and sinking and smelling and he can't move. And I realise he's stuck.

Like me.

Beat.

I called him Pythagoras 'cause of the triangle. I don't know anything about horses. Like is it even his nose? Or is it just his head? That long bit –

And this whole time since, while everything's been going on, while we're told it's all over, no more school, no exams, no more prom, no more nothing, I'm only thinking about him.

And –

Yesterday Maeve called me to say her and Darrell are gonna have phone sex instead. She thinks it's better that way anyway, as there's no risk of a condom splitting, and also she was secretly worrying because he watches a lot of porn and she thought he might try to strangle her. They're doing it tomorrow night, she's got a ready-meal lasagne and a bottle of two-pound merlot from the corner shop, because it's got to be posh, she said –

I've tried that two-pound merlot at a house party and it tastes like the inside of a toaster.

Maeve told me she's in love with Darrell. And she knows he feels the same way because he always licks his lips before he kisses her.

I want to tell Maeve that I loved her first, but the words don't come out properly and instead I tell her about Pythagoras – but she doesn't really get it. Not at all. And I realise we're a triangle. Me, her and him. But our sides don't really match. So it can't work. The angle's all wrong.

Beat.

So, yeah, basically, I'm going to save him –

I imagine it'll be like a fairy tale, but instead of the prince arriving on a horse to rescue the princess, it's just me... a potato, coming to rescue Pythagoras.

Mum's on a night shift, so I've got like, three more hours to get there and back.

I know it sounds mental, but one of us has to do something, don't they?

Beat.

Do horses even like sweetcorn?

I know they like apples, and grass but –

I know when a triangle has a right angle, and squares are made on each of the three sides, then the biggest square has the exact same area as the other two squares put together which means if

we know the lengths of two sides of a right-angled triangle, we can always find the length of the third side.

Why can't we have an emergency assembly about horses or...? Why does everyone only literally care about themselves? Why aren't we *doing something*?

I know I loved her first –

*

It's dark at the green. There are stars in the sky. There are lights in some of the houses. I imagine them using their amazing knives to cook their dinner. The roads are quiet.

I can hear him breathing, shuffling. I scrape my arm on the wire of the fence as I push myself through. I can feel the sticky, wet mud on my feet as I stumble through the fields.

I can feel his warm breath on my arm as I stroke him. He's enormous. I'm gonna wait until it's light to feed him. It's actually quite hard to open a can in a field. It's the kind of thing you wouldn't know until you're doing it, saving a horse, in the middle of the night, while the world is ending.

But it's just –

I don't know where I'll put him, I literally just realised. Maybe if I move the sofa, or –

But it's just – just the things we do for love. Isn't it.

Yeah, I'm gonna wait until morning. He can have it for breakfast.

HIPS

Alex Riddle

Raised in Bognor Regis, Alex Riddle has spent the early years of his career working in film and publishing. *Hips* is his first produced work.

My old man was Elvis. Elvis Presley. One of the top three in the South East anyway, and arguably, *arguably*, the best value for money. Particularly in the winter months when he slashed his rate considerably.

He didn't really look like him. His nose was too big. And he was ginger. Which wasn't perhaps historically accurate. He might have made more money as a Mick Hucknall. But the way he moved... I swear if you'd seen him move.

He wore his collar up, of course he did. Top few buttons undone. Flash of gold amongst the wisps of red on his chest. Sunglasses indoors. Hips forever on the verge of going off on one, and a twitching cod-on-a-hook mouth like someone had taken a curling iron to his top lip.

My mum's mum called him feckless. And other words with fs and cs and ks. My parents had met at a hen do over in Brighton in the '80s. My mum was charmed, chucking her M&S panties at him during a stirring rendition of 'Blue Suede Shoes'. He handed them back post-show.

I was a shy boy growing up. And I found it hard to make small talk with a man I was expected by turns to love in person and slag off back at the house later. But we had music in common – our smash-glass-here-in-case-of-emergency conversation. I was an MTV addict and had been wholehearted indoctrinated into the cult of Michael Jackson. A paid-up, card-carrying mega-fan. So he would talk Presley and I would talk Jackson, and The King and the Prince of Pop would do battle all the way back down the M27.

The greatest night of my life came at just ten years old. That might seem a little defeatist, but I don't have particularly high hopes for my forties and fifties. We had a talent night up at the school. Lots of juggling and cartwheels mainly. Christie Carlisle did 'These Boots Are Made for Walking', tassels sellotaped

onto the heel of her Kickers, and made me feel things in places that didn't really have much of a purpose up until that point.

I'd been practising in my room for weeks. Michael Jackson. 'Billie Jean' on repeat. And my dad – he was there. A couple rows behind mum. Headmaster calls my name, I walk on stage. Black hat. White socks. Sequin jacket from Oxfam. Single glove from the lost-property bin. The music drops. And for four-and-a-half minutes I am the coolest kid in school. I'm the coolest kid on earth. And as we all fall into the arms of our parents afterwards, my dad holds my head in his hands, holds it like something precious. 'That's my boy. That's my boy.'

His visits became more frequent. We shared something now. We had a language. We were performers. Entertainers. We'd *uh-huh* and *hee-hee* and *shamown* and *thank you very much*.

He was The King and I was The Prince, and you could trace the line of succession in the way his knees rocked and my ankles kicked, and our bodies, well they were the same. You should have seen the way we moved. And when he'd walk me up the path back home, my mum would stand at the door and say 'Here comes trouble.' And I thought – 'Hey – maybe I'm trouble too.'

I was going into the family business. We'd decided. I was gonna be the best Michael Jackson in the South East, and for my teenage years that's what I worked towards. Elvis and Michael on the same stage. Conquering the world. Or at least Bognor Regis. That was the dream.

And then dad fucked off to Albufeira with his third wife.

When I left school. I didn't have any decent GCSEs, but I knew all the moves to 'Thriller'. What else was I gonna do? I was good. I got work. Holiday parks. Cruise ships. Look-a-like parties where I'd serve canapés with a Geordie James Bond and the Queen, who I knew for a fact worked Thursdays on the till at Tesco.

People went crazy when they saw me. I assume they knew that I wasn't actually him. That Michael Jackson wasn't really

spending his summer in Butlins. But it never seemed to matter. When I was on stage, I was a God. Really I was. And I told myself that I understood my old man. Understood why he'd rather have been up here all those years. A God, rather than a father.

I've never worked more than the summer Michael died. I seemed to have a booking every other night. I honestly believed I was keeping him alive. Some part of him was in me. Not in some bullshit spiritual way, but some learnt part. When you spend your life trying to be someone, you do. You become them. You change. Your cells change.

Then I started to get asked: 'Well, what about the sleepovers?'

And people didn't want Michael Jackson at their party any more.

The bookings dried up long before I threw out the costume. I felt such shame. That's weird isn't it? To feel such shame – such deep personal disappointment – at the things some bloke, some fella six feet under, who never knew me, who never even heard of me, might have done a few fucking decades ago. Because I thought I knew him. Loved him. Was him. You should have seen the way I moved.

My dad got ill last winter. He'd been back in the country a couple months. Realised that in the post-Brexit climate that an English Elvis in the Algarve might struggle to get a working visa. I went to go visit him in the hospital. All the way over I thought I'm gonna tell him about *his* hero. I'm gonna tell him how Elvis hurt women, how he chased after fourteen-year-olds. Make him feel it... that disappointment, that shame.

And I got to the ward, and there's a nurse leaning over him, and he's all little and grey and hardly moving. And as she walks away and draws the blue curtain closed, I can hear his voice come from behind them. 'Thank you. Thank you very much.' And he's not doing Elvis this time. He's not doing anybody but him. But I know without seeing that his lip is curled, and his hips... they're shaking under the cotton sheets.

HAIR TO STAY

Danusia Samal

Danusia Samal is an actress, writer and singer from London. She has performed in numerous UK theatres, including the Royal Court, RSC, Shakespeare's Globe and Royal Exchange. Her screen credits include *Tyrant* (FOX); *Ghost in the Shell* (Paramount/DreamWorks) and Hulu's *The Great* by Tony McNamara (*The Favourite*).

Danusia's writing credits include *Out of Sorts* (winner of the Theatre503 International Playwriting Award); *Busking It*, a musical play inspired by her experience as a London Underground busker (Shoreditch Town Hall/HighTide); *Snap* (Old Vic Connect); *Decolonising History* (Tamasha Digital/SOAS University); *Conditionally* (Soho Theatre/Oxford School of Drama); *Langthorne Stories* (Soho Theatre/Waltham Forest). Danusia is currently collaborating on various projects with UK production companies. In 2019, she was commissioned to write her first TV drama as part of the BBC's TV Drama Writers Programme, and is currently one of Soho Theatre's Soho Six playwrights.

BUSHRA is setting up her camera. She lifts her arm to adjust something above the screen. We glimpse an unshaved armpit. She notices it too. To camera:

Oh yeah, this. Almost cool now, isn't it? Popular amongst arty types.

It's clear she does not consider herself an 'arty type'. She leans in, conspiratorial.

Though, have you noticed, those girls who make a big point of... (*She lifts her arms ostentatiously, showing off her armpits and preening.*) Have you noticed they normally have like, a whisper of hair? And absolutely nothing (*She gestures downwards.*) down here!

Meanwhile I've got Bob Marley in a headlock. And this... this is just the beginning of my well-overdue rebellion.

Doesn't look like much, I know. But you have to understand, my struggle with body hair is a war I've been fighting for decades. Twelve. I was twelve when, scrambling out of my local leisure pool, I came face to face with a pair of pale, shiny, silky smooth legs. They belonged to Amber Dunthorpe. Amber wore a floral one piece and a swimming cap. She glanced down at my wobbling thighs, and the corner of her mouth curled up. So I looked down. By contrast, my legs were covered in soft black hair. I'd never noticed it before.

I'm a bit too brown to turn red – I probably went maroon – and I slithered back in the pool. I stayed there for hours, till a lifeguard sauntered over to tell me they were closing and I had to get out. He looked suspicious – I think he thought I was wee ing.

Didn't dare look at myself in the changing room, just yanked my clothes on and sprinted home – locked myself in the bathroom. My sister had left a rusty Bic razor out and I grabbed

it, ran it over my legs, watching the hair slide off and gurgle down the drain. The rash took a week to fade but for a thrilling five minutes, alone in that bathroom, I slid my hands over legs that were hairless and smooth. ‘This is how I’m *supposed* to be,’ I thought.

Cut to my teens, hours of angsting in a mirror because my eyebrows were fond of each other and had a tendency to meet. My top lip was covered in tiny whiskers, and there was a trail of fuzz that started between my breasts, crept down my stomach, and burst into glorious bush somewhere between my thighs. I got the impression I was not like other women. Adverts on TV amazed me. Women trailing bright pink razors over hairless calves, then skipping out on dates with beautiful men. I had hair *all* the way up my legs. I had hair *everywhere*.

At school, a friend helpfully explained: ‘It’s cause you’re foreign.’ Her arms were sprinkled with fine blonde down. She promised it wasn’t a big deal, that the boys would soon stop calling me Yeti. I just needed to get rid of it. So I used everything. Creams – left on so long I burned the skin around my eyebrows and had to wear hats for a month – wax, epilators, these weird sandpaper things, hours spent under a light bulb and plucking at my face with a 99p pair of tweezers.

Then came sex, and with it a new rule: ‘The less pubic hair you have, the more attractive you are to the opposite sex.’ Now not even those secret bits under my clothes are safe. Legs propped up on a chest of drawers, mirror angled at vagina, wax strips sticking to thighs and bum, and then a last-minute phone call telling me he’s sorry he can’t make it, next week maybe?

...Next week, when regrowth will have rendered today’s torture useless.

I dream of what it must be like to be a man, to have a night of passion on a whim. I once calculated and discovered that with legs, armpits, nether-regions, arms, eyebrows and tache, I spend over three-and-a-half hours a week on body hair. Break that down, that’s thirty minutes a day, fifteen hours a month, 180 hours a year. Over a week of my life lost each year to

de-fuzzing. What other things could I have done with that time? Learned a language? Wrote a novel? Actually had sex instead of just preparing for it?

She pauses now, staring at the camera for as long as she can get away with. She takes a deep breath. A change of tone:

And then. This happened. And so many things became less important. Being strong became very important. The people you love... and the ones you don't. The mantra that we're in this together, though we know it's the same people getting left behind. And what the f*** are we going to build next coz it needs to be better than this.

...I catch the bus to work. Caught. Before. A few weeks ago, I saw a girl. She was about ten, eleven? On her way to school. The flesh between the top of her white socks and her grey school skirt was covered in fuzzy black down, standing on end and catching the sunlight. Her eyebrows met above her nose and spread outward into these little baby hairs that framed her face, travelled downwards into thick sideburns and a slight shadow on her upper lip.

I contemplated her. The bullying that was coming, the years of angst she'd face. Feeling ugly and dirty and ashamed. The cuts, nicks, rashes, ingrown hairs, searing pain, sticky wax residue. She was so beautiful – big dark eyes with thick black lashes. Olive skin. Open-faced and smiling, reminding me of that innocent girl who once climbed out of a leisure pool and was never the same again. The daughter I might one day have, who should never have to feel like her body is disgusting.

I had tweezers in my bag. When I got off the bus I chucked them in the bin.

Is this our chance? To build something better, again?

She lifts her arms.

Bob Marley says yes.

'Three Little Birds' by Bob Marley begins to play as BUSHRA fades away.

THE SECOND LAW OF THERMODYNAMICS

Taflīne Steen

Tafline Steen trained at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. Her acting credits include *Appropriate* (Donmar Warehouse), *Pride and Prejudice* (Regent's Park Open Air Theatre), *King Charles III* (Almeida, West End, Broadway), *Casualty* (BBC), and *The Athena* (Sky One). This is her first written piece.

Cough.

I'd like to talk about the heat-death of the universe.
I realise this likely isn't the topic you were expecting.
I know these sessions are supposed to... I get it's not really a
Q&A, but does anyone know about the second law of
thermodynamics?

Beat.

So it's to do with entropy. Entropy is the amount of disorder in a system. The higher the entropy, the more disordered it is. And the second law says that the amount of entropy in a system must always increase. You go from ordered to disordered. There's heat difference pretty much behind every reaction ever, and the idea is that if all the available energy moves to places with less energy, like, you know, the heat rushing out of a room when you open the door, everything, everywhere will become the same temperature and nothing else can happen.

Ever.

It's just... done.

Basically, and I really mean basically, some time in the future, like the proper future, when all the possible reactions have taken place, all that will be left is this soup. Matter decayed, stars dead, just... particles, like squash that's been watered down so much it's technically still squash but it doesn't have any of the things that make it squash any more.

And 'heat-death' makes people think it's like all hellish inferno and whatnot which is nice and medieval, but it's actually the death of all differences in heat.

Isn't that... isn't that so much worse?

This static thing. Stuck. Inert.

Sometimes really like, conceptually big things create this feeling inside me of being absolutely, totally out of control. Disordered. Entropic. Does anyone else get that? Not like mad-woo-I'm-an-anarchist but like my brain is this cavity that's

filled with cold air and it's expanding and I'm just this pebble inside it, which is the feeling I get when I think about the heat-death of the universe and ironically the sensation actually sort of reminds of the heat-death of the universe, which sounds ridiculous but you try talking about... without using some pretentious metaphor.

And I know that's what everyone feels like probably.

I've spent all this time talking around it, and Joanna was so nice to bring cake which I'm sure everyone's waiting to eat but I can't get there any other way just...

I want the grief back, you know.

It's heat, and fire, and primal, like the universe expanding.

It can have a direction.

Or at least make you very, just like, present.

Maybe that's an illusion, but then we're into what-if-my-blue-is-different-to-your-blue territory and who's got time for that. Amiright?

Beat.

Yeah, this existential terror is all a bit teenagery, but it's like a really specific flavour. And I remember having this feeling when I was really young and it almost tasting like something... or having a texture? You know like people who see colours when they hear music, it's like that maybe. Or it feels like that, sometimes.

And it's just this thick thing, which I can't do anything with. It's not useful. So I'm trying to make the entropy go backwards, ha. Fly in the face of the laws of physics, or something, by telling you lot, create some sort of reaction, which is all just a way of not talking about my feelings really.

I just miss him.

And you know what they call it?

The heat-death of the universe?

The big chill.

How lame is that.

WILD SWIM

Martha Watson Allpress

Martha Watson Allpress is a Midlands-born, Peckham-based actor/writer currently training on the BA Acting Course at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. After positive responses to her shorter pieces, Martha's debut play, *Patricia Gets Ready (for a date with the man that used to hit her)* received five-star reviews for its VAULT Festival 2020 run, and will transfer to the Pleasance at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2021. As a writer and performer, Martha hopes to amplify females voices and the pure joy of storytelling.

LAUREN is stood alone, in a swimsuit, by a lake.

At my mum's wake we served chocolate eclairs. On a day which so monumentally sucked balls, I remember an internal laugh happening at that. Eclairs are party food, or, like, a really refined munchies snack. They're not what you serve to console people.

So an hour into the wake, I'd snuck outside for a can of Red Stripe and a cigarette, because I'm classy, and because the world's chaos seemed only to be reverberating around my ears. And that's when this woman approached me – I purposely didn't hide or put out my fag, thinking this would be a good heavy hint to my current 'don't touch me or talk to me' state. She touched me and talked to me. She introduced herself as Irene, one of my mum's wild-swimming friends. Her skin was wrinkled like how it gets when you're in water too long, but I think this was more likely because she seemed about seventy, and less probable that she went for a quick dip before the funeral. Very kindly, and totally unnecessarily, she invited me to swim with her sometime. Pierce the water like Mum did.

Darwin would place Wild Swimmers pretty low down on the food chain of natural selection. Why would a human, who has the ability to walk, run, and pay for central heating, choose to plunge in frosty, muddy lakes, twelve months a year, and pay for the privilege?

But I am not such a broken orphan I said this out loud. I smiled, said I'd consider it, maybe in the summer, and walked her to our drive. Waved her off, fag in the waving hand, like one of the Railway Children, feeling pretty smug at my own ability to smile when my insides felt so joyless.

But eventually, you relent, you acknowledge that your grief isn't special, you start hearing your family when they tell you how much you're withdrawing... you start doing. Or, rather,

you understand that you need to start doing... something?
Something to feel her again. I don't feel her.

I knew. As soon as I'd finished my cigarette and waved her off, I knew I'd be going to the lake and seeing Irene (old swimming lady) that summer. I didn't want to know, I didn't want to admit that I was a cliché and my grief wasn't special, but I knew. There's something about being in the same space as somewhere you know your mum was happy – it's like your family tree becomes a real one and you see its branches and its history. You can smell it.

Looking at water, you see how small you are. How insignificant your life might be. How all your emotions are just a shriek into a black hole. But it beckons you to be part of it, to be in the bigness. Make up part of the bigness. I think we like water because it sounds like blood. Moving water sounds like blood. And isn't that what we're all just trying to do? Trying our fucking hardest to hear what's moving around inside of us? Suddenly I think about being five or six or whatever and swimming in the pool and dragging my little puffy belly along the tiled bottom. I wanted to be the water. Not just in it. Be it. You can't help but breathe a little deeper when you're looking at water. Breathe right down to your base and just feel it all. I feel it all.

It all hurts so much.

My foot goes in first, but I feel the cold everywhere. It floods my veins, my cells, all my organs. If I couldn't look down and see my body in its pasty pale glory, my brain would believe it had turned icy blue. I should look like a cartoon drawing of a freezing person. Every part of my body feeling every tingle in total unison. Goosebumps run up, down and across my body in a Mexican wave; the only movement on my totally rigid form. But I'm not stiff. I'm not motionless in fear or shock. I am not frozen. I am alert. I am the most awake I think I've ever been. Ready. I'm ready for something. I'm ready for something. I see everything crystal clear, like a long-preserved photograph; the lake stretching out before me somehow both vast beyond belief and also entirely mine to conquer. I submerge further; legs...

groin... stomach... chest... My ribs concave into my heart and everything is tight. Breath shallow, snatched. All contained like a firework still in its box. Suddenly my swimsuit feels baggy – I should have got the size down, I should have got two sizes down. The mud beneath my feet doesn't feel squelchy and disgusting in the way I thought it would. I imagined it'd be like standing on mushroom pate, but it's more... right than that. It's exactly what it should be. I love it, and then with no thought at all I leave it. I push off into this abyss desperate to explore the reeds and the winter of the water. My extremities are so finally in tune with the rest of me; they are saving my life with each stroke. I dunk my head under and for the first time in six months I can't hear any noise. It's magic. I search for her. I want to find the exact spot my mum fell in love with it. I will find that spot. I will swim next to my mum, or she'll swim next to me. I'll just know she's there.

The water is holding me together and I get it. Fuck me, it feels so good to be held by something bigger than you. Just to be held. Held close and tight and all over. You've been told over and over again how the body is sixty per cent water and you disregard it because you look down and all you see is what's disappointing you. How tragic. We look at our casing and assume that's it, but here and now I feel exactly what I'm made up of. I feel her in me. I feel her. Nothing's going to be the same after this. I can't float forever. I know that. And I'm still not going to have a mum when we get out of this water. I know that. But I'll have had this.

I'm going to push and swim and love and cry and grieve and swim and feel and smile and spit and swim and tire and want and miss and swim and shout and swim and stroke and breathe and shiver and believe and swim and daydream and finish and swim and swim and swim.

ONE MORE SON

Pip Williams

Pip Williams is a writer, actor and director based in London and Cambridge. He is the co-artistic director of We Talk Of Horses Theatre Company, whose show *Where Is Ban Ki-moon?* toured successfully in London in 2019.

He has performed with Somna Theatre, MoCo Theatre and Boundless Theatre; he has written and directed work at Southwark Playhouse and in schools, and is a member of the National Youth Theatre. *One More Son* is his first published piece. He can be found on Twitter @otherpwilliams.

A YOUNG MAN, *probably mid to late twenties*.

So uh –

At the beginning it's just these four notes on the piano, the same note played four times, like the song's just sort of – like it's standing up, like it's going 'Okay, it's time for a song now.' Clearing its throat.

Then there's an organ, like a church organ, that plays all through that first bit, through the first few lines.

It's a bit like –

Well I mean the song's about, the *story* of the song, I guess, is about hope? Or, it's about thinking that the past's too much, that you can't get away from –

From the person you used to be.

But you. Can. (*Beat.*) So it's a bit like church, I guess. Or like he's remembering church, remembering what it was like.

Obviously it doesn't have a story, not like that.

But you know.

Did you –

Like 'Ruby, Don't Take Your Love to Town', that's a song with a story. It's not like that, it doesn't have a story like that. More of a – well, you know.

Did you ever feel –

Actually never mind. You alright? You need – ? I'm gonna – ?

He listens. No response. Carries on.

Cool, so, anyway, yeah, there's the organ and that bit, then the guitars and the drums and I think it's a keyboard? Come in, and it's that riff everyone knows, and you know you're really, really,

y'know, *cooking*. Now. It's the sort of riff-drum combo designed to make you clap, and you can hear that slide on the bass when it comes in, and you're like 'Oh fuck the BASS is only just coming in? Come on!' and like it's all just gearing up, like you don't even know what's about to hit you. Like it's all to play for.

Then he sings the first verse, just him and the bass and the drums, so we're not in a church now, it's more like –

A stable?

No not a stable, but it's like – horses. It's got a sort of horse feeling? Like – you're on a horse? Or watching someone on a horse? I'm talking like cowboy kind of stuff, like riding into town kind of vibes, not like – I dunno. A – pony. Or something.

Do you know what I mean?

But anyway, it's less about the past now, what he's singing about, it's not about leaving stuff behind.

Beat.

But about who he wants to be in the future.

I guess did you ever feel like you've sort of got a ghost haunting you but the ghost is you?

Beat. Waits for an answer.

I just thought. I just wondered. Because I know you've had. Like, when you were my age, I know you had a bit of.

And you know, obviously, you know that I've had. Recently. So.

Beat.

But then the chorus comes in and it's really simple, it's not that many words and it's just two chords I think, really simple but – there's so much soul there. So much feeling.

'Don't you put me on the back burner' he says, and I always just think – I'm welling up just thinking about it – I always just think that's such a beautiful line.

Coz I remember the first time I heard it I was like ‘What? He’s American, he doesn’t know what that means’ but now, now I’m like WOW, I know.

Don’t leave me for later. He’s saying. I’m, I’m important, I’m worth it, I guess.

Don’t let me go. I’m for – I’m for now. Not later.

Beat.

Sorry I didn’t really want to ask you that earlier, I was being stupid, I feel like

I’ve.

It’s just really nice being home.

It’s just really nice to be able to talk to you again, Dad.

Beat.

But the thing about this song is the structure, because then you think you’re going to go back to the same kind of tune, the same sort of thing from the first verse, but no, wrong, because actually we go right back to the very first bit, the bit with the organ and the four notes on the piano, the one note played four times, sorry.

Except NOW it’s not with the organ and the piano it’s with the drums and the bass, the horsey bit.

Do you know what I’m saying?

It’s the lyrics from the very first bit but with the music from the bit with the bass

and the drums.

So it’s like that verse has sort of – grown up. It can play with the rest of the song now.

It gets its own horse.

Forget that, sorry, that doesn’t mean anything.

But he sings that first bit again, but with the bass and the drums, but not for too long because then it’s time to go back into the

chorus, except who knows what's going on any more, is it a verse, is it a chorus, who knows? It's all bloody amazing so who cares, it's just like 'yes, yes, yes!'

Beat.

We don't have to talk about this, we can talk about something else. It's just.

You have to say what you want to talk about.

Because ever since I've come back you've been sort of – well we've not really talked properly have we? Not sat down and talked.

And I've – you know, there's a lot that would be good to talk about. Good for me.

Because I'm back now and I'm not going away. Soon.

So if you want to ask me anything, please Christ just ask.

Pause.

Then just when you think you've got the lie of this song, you've got your head around it, then everything cuts out and it's just the guitar, but it sounds different now, it sounds lower, crunchier, more businesslike.

Because what comes next –

And look I know you're angry and I'm sorry you're angry but why don't we –

Sorry.

Because what comes next is, like, the song's... central – uh, *thing*. Its, its *crux*.

'I've got soul but I'm not a soldier' he says.

'I've got soul but I'm not a soldier.' What does it mean? Eh? What the fuck does that mean? That's just words.

But he keeps singing it. He just keeps singing it, 'I've got soul but I'm not a soldier', just him and this crunching guitar. And you can tell that he really means it, coz even though his voice is

quite low now, it's got this sort of animal thing behind it, this *need*, this *push*.

'I've got soul but I'm not a soldier.' And then a fucking choir joins in, and his voice is climbing, getting higher, and he's *needing* and he's *pushing*, and he really means it, you can tell, he really fucking means it, and even though the words don't mean anything, like the way I'm saying them to you now, it probably doesn't mean anything to you, but when you hear him and this fucking CHOIR all singing it like it was a hymn, suddenly you know, you know deep inside you what it means. It makes perfect, perfect sense.

And fuck me if they don't just become the most powerful eight words in the English language at that moment.

'I've got soul but I'm not a soldier' and the choir are screaming, the song looks like it's pulling itself apart, everything's going mental, there's too much in the song, it's going to crack under all the glory, all the truth and the power, and then you hear, you can just hear, it's the singer saying-

He says – You have to listen quite carefully, but he says, he speaks – 'Time. Truth.

And hearts.'

Pause.

Coz I really am glad to be home, Dad, I really am. I haven't felt safe in such a long time, and I do. Now.

And I know... well, we just need to take the time to learn each other again.

I answered the phone the other day and they thought it was you. So it's not – you don't have to stop being angry right away. But. 'Time. Truth. And hearts.'

Pause.

But just when you think the song's about to collapse, it pulls it all together again and you're back in the chorus and it's stronger than ever. And it just keeps going and going.

And the singer sings this bit over the end, just as it's about to finish, like he's signing the painting, summing it all up – 'While everything's lost, the battle is won.'

And you go – course it is. Course it is. How could it not be?

Pause.

Would you like me to describe it again?

PAPAtango

'Remarkable unearthers of new talent' *Evening Standard*

Papatango was founded to champion the best new playwriting talent in the UK and Ireland. We discover and launch playwrights through free, open application opportunities. Our motto is simple: all you need is a story.

Our flagship programme is the Papatango New Writing Prize, the UK's first and still only annual award to guarantee an emerging playwright a full production, publication, 10% of the gross box office, and an unprecedented £6000 commission for a second play. Prize-winners have transferred worldwide, received great acclaim and awards, and risen to leading positions in theatre, film and TV.

'Every year the Papatango Prize comes up with a bit of a cracker.'
The Guardian

The Prize is free to enter and assessed anonymously. All entrants receive personal feedback on their scripts, an unmatched commitment to supporting aspiring playwrights. 1,406 entries were received in 2019, meaning the Prize continues to receive more annual submissions than any other UK playwriting award – and yet is unique in giving feedback and support to all.

Papatango also run an annual Resident Playwright scheme, taking an emerging playwright through commissioning, development and production. It gives in-depth, sustained support to writers who might not otherwise be in a position to win the Prize, for lack of access to resources such as training, commissions or mentoring. Our Residents have toured the UK, adapted their work for radio, and transitioned to full-time careers as writers.

We use the astonishing success of the writers discovered and launched through these opportunities to inspire others that they too can make and enjoy top-class theatre.

GoWrite delivers an extensive programme of free playwriting

opportunities for children and adults nationwide. Children in state schools write plays which are then professionally performed and published, while adults join workshops, complete six-month courses at a variety of regional venues culminating in free public performances, or access fortnightly one-to-one career advice sessions.

GoWrite delivers face-to-face training for over 2000 writers each year, not only free but with £5000 available in travel bursaries to enable anyone to access its opportunities.

This year we launched a new programme named WriteWest to build a playwriting ecosystem across South West England, in partnership with major venues throughout the region. It offers free playwriting courses in Taunton and Plymouth, culminating in free public showcases; a free producing course with £9000 in seed funding to support participants' new productions; and free workshops in libraries and state schools. Again, as well as being free, £5000 in travel bursaries make these accessible to all.

Writers discovered through these opportunities have won BAFTAs, Off West End, RNT Foundation Playwright and Alfred Fagon Awards, been nominated for the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize and Evening Standard Most Promising Playwright Award, and premiered in over twenty countries.

10% of seats at our productions are donated to charities for young people at risk of exclusion from the arts.

Our first book *Being a Playwright: A Career Guide for Writers* was published in 2018 and described as 'a phenomenon for playwriting good... a bible for playwrights' by award-winning writer and academic Steve Waters and as 'an excellent tool for playwrights' by Indhu Rubasingham, artistic director of the Kiln Theatre.

All Papatango's opportunities are free and entered anonymously, encouraging the best new talent regardless of background.

PAPA tango

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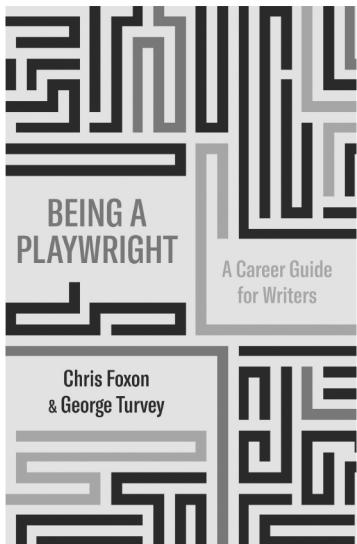
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