

# Skepsi Magazine

Volume One

Issue One



University of  
**Kent**

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# EDITOR'S LETTER

Dear All,

Welcome to the first issue of the Skepsi Magazine! We have compiled four fantastic short stories and two beautiful poems for you to enjoy, all of which were written by students at the University of Kent.

Based in the Language Centre, Skepsi - which originally means 'thought' in Ancient Greek - symbolises our will to explore the literary imagination of students at our university, and aims to incite conversation around a range of subjects, both social and academic.

We hope that this magazine continues to flourish, that this is the first of many issues that shine a light on students' voices, and maintains creative freedom and expression for years to come.

We hope you enjoy reading this magazine as much as we have enjoyed creating it.

Molly and Vero  
(General Co-Editors of Skepsi)

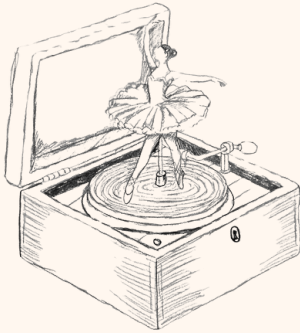
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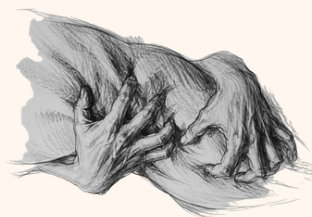
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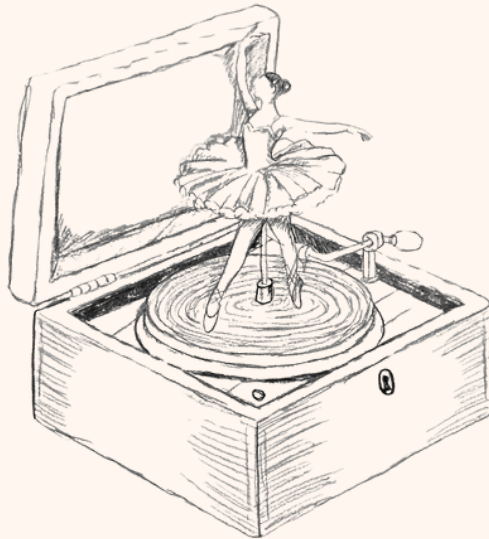
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# TO BE FLAWLESS

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Erin Taylor

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Natalie Seal learned early that mirrors never lied, but they did exaggerate.

A bent knee became a failure of discipline. A tremor in the ankle, a moral flaw. She had trained herself to stand so still before the studio mirror that the glass seemed to breathe with her, fogging faintly where her breath landed, then clearing again as if forgiving her.

Perfection lived there: In the moment just before movement. In the held breath before a *développé*. In the stillness before everything could go wrong.

The studio smelled of rosin and old wood, sweat embedded in the floorboards, years of devotion pressed into the grain. Natalie arrived before sunrise, as she always did, letting herself in with the key her dance teacher, Patrick, had given her on her twentieth birthday.

“You’re serious,” he’d said, pressing the cold metal into her palm. “Serious dancers earn access. Most people only *think* they want this.”

She nodded then, not trusting herself to speak. Want was too weak a word.

She warmed up alone, moving slowly through pliés at the barre, forcing her heels into the floor, correcting turnout, correcting breath, correcting thought. Tendons stretched like elastic pulled too far, too often.

Pain was information. Pain was proof.

Pain meant she was listening.

When the door opened, Natalie expected Patrick.

It wasn't.

"Jesus, Nat," Milo said, dropping his bag by the wall. "It's not even light outside yet."

She didn't look at him. "You're late."

"I'm early," he said, glancing at the clock. "Just not... whatever this is."

"If you're late again, he'll notice."

Milo huffed a laugh, kicking off his trainers. His movements were loose, unguarded, like gravity had made an exception for him. He stretched carelessly, foot sickled, shoulders relaxed.

"That man notices everything," Milo said. "You could breathe wrong, and he'd critique the oxygen."

Natalie lifted into fifth position, arms precise, chin aligned. "That's why he's brilliant."

"Or cruel," Milo replied, watching her now. "You ever think about the difference?"

She held the position longer than necessary. "Cruelty implies intention. He just expects more than people can give."

Milo tilted his head. "And you think you can give it?"

"I don't think," she said. "I do."

Patrick arrived precisely at eight.

Expensive clothes. Controlled steps. A presence that pressed the room into silence. His gaze found Natalie first, as it always did, lingering just long enough to adjust her spine without touching it.

"Again," he said after the first run-through, voice smooth as a blade.

"Your arabesque is collapsing. You're anticipating the landing."

"I'm not hesitating," Natalie said quickly. "I'm controlling the descent."

A pause. Then a thin smile.

"Control shouldn't be visible. Again."

She ran it again. And again.

By the fifth time, her calf burned. By the eighth, her ankle screamed through the relevé. Her balance wavered for a fraction—she corrected it instantly, but she felt it. Patrick did too.

“Better,” he said finally. Then, quieter: “But you’re thinking.”

“I need to think—”

“No.” He stepped closer. “You need to *know*. Thinking is where doubt lives.”

Natalie swallowed. “I know the choreography.”

“I’m not talking about steps,” he said. “I’m talking about ownership.”

His voice softened.

“You want Clara, don’t you?”

The name settled into her chest like something sacred.

Clara.

Not just a role. A lineage. Her grandmother. Her mother. Now her.

“I do,” she said.

“Then stop dancing like you’re asking for permission.”

His hand brushed her shoulder as he passed.

“Meet me later.”

It wasn’t a question.

The relationship did not begin with romance. It began with corrections. Patrick’s office smelled cleaner than the studio. Sharper.

He adjusted her posture with clinical precision—hands on her hips, aligning her ribs, lifting her chin.

“Your body resists itself,” he said.

“You’re holding back.”

“I’m not—”

“You are.” His grip tightened slightly. “You’re afraid of being seen failing, so you never fully commit.”

Natalie’s pulse quickened. “I’m not afraid of failing.”

“Everyone is,” he said calmly. “The difference is whether you let it show.”

His thumb pressed lightly under her jaw, forcing her head higher.

“You have the facility,” he continued. “The extension. The line. But those are nothing without surrender.”

“Surrender?” she echoed.

“To the work,” he said. “To the expectation. To me, if you want my guidance.”

Something in her stilled.

“You want to be extraordinary?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Then stop protecting yourself.”

Milo noticed before Natalie admitted anything had changed.

“You’re limping,” he said, catching up to her outside.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re always fine,” he replied.

“It’s getting less convincing.”

She exhaled sharply. “Some of us actually care about making this a career.”

Milo frowned. “I care. I just don’t think it has to kill you.”

“It doesn’t kill you,” she said. “It refines you.”

“At what point?” he asked. “When you can’t walk? When you stop eating? When you stop... being you?”

She turned to him, irritation flaring. “You dance as if none of it matters.”

“No,” he said, softer now. “I dance like it *does*, just not more than everything else.”

“That’s why you’ll never be great,” she snapped.

The words hung between them.

Milo didn’t argue. He just nodded, like he’d expected it.

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “Maybe.”

Patrick’s approval became a measure she lived by.

“You’re slipping,” he told her one evening. “Your pirouettes are rushed. Your focus is fractured.”

“I’ll fix it.”

“You’ll do more than that,” he replied. “Or you’ll lose it.”

“I won’t,” she said quickly.

“Then prove it.”

That night, she stayed until the studio emptied into silence. She worked the same sequence again and again—spotting harder, pulling tighter, forcing stillness into every landing.

Not because she didn’t know it.

Because she didn’t trust it.

Her body shook as she taped her ankle again, tighter this time.

*Mistakes are choices*, she told herself.

*And I don’t choose them.*

“My God, Natalie.”

She hadn’t heard Milo come in.

“You’re bleeding.”

She looked down. Dark red seeped through satin.

“It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing,” he said, stepping closer. “You’re tearing yourself apart.”

“I’m improving,” she corrected.

“No,” he said firmly. “You’re disappearing.”

She shook her head. “You don’t understand.”

“Then explain it to me.”

“I can’t stop now,” she said, voice tightening. “I’m nearly there.”

“Where?” Milo asked.

She hesitated. *Perfect.*

Casting was announced on Monday.

Natalie stood perfectly still, arms by her sides, as Patrick read the list. “Clara is—Natalie Seal.”

Applause filled the room.

Milo’s face lit up, pride immediate, instinctive. But something else flickered there too—something quieter. Concern, maybe.

He gave her a thumbs-up.

She smiled back.

It didn’t reach her eyes.

Rehearsals intensified.

“Again.”

“Too slow.”

“Too careful.”

“Again.”

Natalie’s world narrowed to counts and corrections. Food became an afterthought. Sleep, an inconvenience. Her body felt lighter, sharper, more precise—and more fragile.

“You’re becoming exquisite,” Patrick said, circling her. “Now don’t lose control.”

“I won’t.”

“You already are,” he replied. “You just don’t see it yet.”

Opening night.

The theatre buzzed with anticipation.

In the wings, Natalie rolled through her feet, testing the floor, aligning everything. Pain threaded through

her ankle, sharp and familiar.

*Good*, she thought. *It means I’m awake.*

Milo squeezed her hand.

“You don’t have to be perfect,” he said. “You just have to enjoy yourself.”

She looked at him—really looked at him, for once.

“Thank you,” she said.

It surprised them both.

Patrick’s voice cut through.

“Places.”

The music began.

Natalie stepped into the light.

This time, she didn’t think.

She *placed*. She *extended*. She *held*. Every movement exact, deliberate. Her body obeyed without hesitation.

This is it, she thought.

Not perfection—control.

She moved through the choreography with ruthless clarity. No excess. No fear.

As the final sequence approached—the turn, the leap—she felt it:

Not transcendence.

Precision.

She glanced to the wings.

Milo wasn’t smiling.

He looked afraid.

For her.

The thought flickered — and vanished.

She took the jump.

For a moment, everything aligned.

Then—

her ankle gave.

The crack was quiet. Internal.

Final.

She hit the stage hard.

The music faltered.

Silence rushed in.

Natalie lay still, staring at the lights. They blurred at the edges, softening into something distant.

Not stars.

Just light.

She waited for pain.

It came—slow, inevitable, real.

And with it, something else.

Not perfection.

Not triumph.

Understanding.

Patrick's face hovered above her, anger barely contained. Milo's voice broke somewhere beside her, his hand warm against her own.

Natalie exhaled.

All that work. All that control.

Gone in a second.

Her lips parted slightly.

"I danced it," she whispered—not to Patrick, not to the audience, but to herself.

And for the first time, it sounded like a question.

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# S.Y.R.M

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Beth Macre

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Dedication: Para mi Tía Siara y todas las mujeres con carácter  
que han influenciado en quien soy

Knowing  
The bite in your bark,  
Your claws rippling time.  
Preying on the feeble,  
Praying for your wit.

Knowing  
The birds in your head,  
You cutting your hair.  
A tedious hassle,  
My stationary image.

Knowing  
Your booming laugh,  
Unrestrained, unadulterated.  
A copy of mine,  
A cheap imitation of yours.

Knowing  
The spirits in your closet,  
Continue to haunt the front door.  
Personality engrained in my veins,  
To carry your torch or burn at its  
flame.

Knowing  
My final words unsaid,  
Looking back and seeing a ghost.  
Your eyes meeting mine,  
Just like the first, and now finally...

I knew. I *knew* you.

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# ANTITHESIS

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Esme - Rose Linares

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The inseparable girls lay on the grass side by side. Nila rolled into the warm, hugging rays of the sun. Finding a spot to plant the flower seeds her brother had given her. Meanwhile, Alin stayed in the crisp cut of the shade, observing.

“My mother tells me that we can do anything we wish to as long as we stay in school,” Alin explained, picking at her fingers.

“Then we must try our very hardest, so we can conquer a castle and live happily ever after as strong, independent princesses.” Nila placed her shovel down by her feet, dropping the seeds into their beds

with grace. She tucked them in and gave them a little hydration from her watering can. Smiling to herself in the hope of the beauty that would bloom over the next few months, she picked up her gardening tools and pushed herself back upright.

“At least we will have flowers.” Nila smiles to herself as she speaks. Alin nods, eyes still focused on her fingers.

“Help me up, would you?” Nila obliged, offering her hand, guiding Alin to her feet. They headed in for lunch. They liked to believe one day they could conquer the world side by side.

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But that was just a little girl's fantasy. Alin wanted to be Nila, so she followed her around like a duckling. Nila led the way back to the house. Alin followed behind, her foot catching the uprooted dirt. She told Nila it was an 'accident', only Alin wasn't sure if it was. That year and every year following, Nila's flowers still bloomed.

Being teens, you are always discovering new things you love or think define you as a person. Well, Nila explored every hidden aspect, allowing herself a wide range of career options, whereas Alin stuck with the first thought Nila had come across. She didn't know how to be her own person. Alin's eyes became tainted with green envy towards her oldest friend's success and security. So Alin took matters into her own hands, conniving with Nila's mind to bring her down. Frustration hit when each attempt swept over Nila's head. Meanwhile, Nila still perceived Alin as her soul sister. Nila's idealisations of Alin stayed present until the cracks let the unfiltered light in on their 'friendship'.

Nila was perceived as diligent, attentive, and altruistic. However, Nila was not aware of her own portrayal. The question '*am I like-*

*able?'* flitted through her mind. Beyond her comprehension, those traits actually did benefit her place in society. Again, Nila was not aware of this. What those qualities did not do was give her a free pass in life. However, they did provide her with the tools to succeed if she was prepared to use them correctly. It was up to Nila whether she applied them or not. It's fundamental to understand that everyone, no matter who they are or where they have come from, has been riddled with the demon known as anxiety. If they claim they haven't, then they are lying. Anxiety was one of Nila's weaknesses, as well as being perceived in a poor manner. So, though Nila had these magnificent tools, she could never quiet the muttering of her insecurities. For it was a rare event that any other being would announce how they enjoyed Nila's companionship and silence those cruel inner voices coursing through her mind. It led to many sleepless nights. Only when Nila listened to Alin's woes did she receive her first confirmation of her own anxieties being a reality. It came as a deafening strike of betrayal. To Nila, the cracks in their friendship began to solidify one

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evening after Alin had received confirmation that she did not meet the grade boundaries for continuing on her course for the next year. Nila offered support, comfort and the new possibilities it has opened up. At that, Alin was angry as she didn't want answers; she wanted to drown in pity. It allowed Alin to have enough confidence to speak up about what she really thinks of Nila and her 'success'. The words slipped from her lips, no regret or guilt sinking in. Only pleasure for tearing something apart.

"Guaranteed pass!" Those two words brought a trivial echo of doubt through her mind. Those two words brought nausea. Those two words embedded invisibility. Nila faded into herself, as Alin droned on and on and on. Though Nila wanted everyone to have a positive perception of her and her success, she realised in that moment that no one else's opinion matters. Not even her apparent best friend. Especially not if caring put her in this state. So Nila willed those two words to not hold negative power. She would not let them even try to attempt to be her breaking point. As long as she knew how tiresome it was to achieve a vast amount of accomplishments herself. Then that

is all that is significant. But that did not stop Alin's words from cutting her from within. Nila had confided in Alin for what felt like an eternity. All that effort Nila had put in. All the restlessness. All those tears. Frustration. Panic attacks. Everything. It all narrowed down to those two words. Now, it was obvious to Nila that her pain shot straight over Alin's head. That Alin had completely ignored Nila's conflict with herself and her education. It hurt to be looked through. Dismissed. *Is this what it felt like to be a ghost?* At that moment, she knew her friend was hurting too. Nila tried to be there for Alin to help guide her to determination. But Alin hated the idea of trying again. So instead, Nila made a hard decision. A decision to let go of her grasp on her best friend. As she would only weaponise Nila's every happiness that she came by and use her affliction to fuel her own. Tears blurred Nila's vision. As she watched Alin lose sight of life. Followed by her friend's sight of her. The little girl who once had a twinkle of kindness in her eyes was erased. Only Nila's faded memory of Alin's honourable parts shall live on. Nothing to be done now but to leave

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Alin with her own tools. It was up to her if she was going to let them rust. It was never Nila's responsibility to keep them shining.

If someone could be so close to Nila, could toss her humanity aside, never consider anything beyond their own personal reality, then Nila couldn't fathom being friends. Though with deep passion, she understood why Alin lashed out and why Alin felt that way. It stemmed from Alin's own insecurities of portrayal and rejection. Alin was struggling, too. She just could not see through her own pain. Unlike Nila. Alin could not comprehend that pain has the possibility of leaching onto others, too. Alin's suffering did not justify her poor actions. Even more so, with the lack of any apology in sight. Then, as Nila reflected on their friendship, many holes in how Alin treated her fell into place. When Nila lost her grandmother, Alin said, "Oh, really?" to which Nila, in a quiet tone, replied with a simple "yes." After Nila's heartbreaking announcement, they then sat in an uncomfortable silence. Alin was the first to break it. But it wasn't what Nila was expecting. She then had to endure how Alin wouldn't ever be able to breathe again if she lost her

own grandmother instead. Putting herself in the tragedy, rather than guiding her 'best friend' through her grief. No remorse. No sympathy. No prayers. Only the self-inflicted victimisation of Nila's tragedy. But in that moment, and as for the present-day Alin still had her grandmother. Nila blocked out the memory as she was so full of grief that all deeper meaning slipped into oblivion. She wasn't oblivious anymore.

In the end, Nila learnt that Alin was a version of her, just without the drive to not yield. In the beginning, Alin was also perceived as diligent, attentive, and altruistic. Nila once knew it as the truth, too. She even told it, as the truth to Alin. But with a shocking surprise, Alin did not want to hear it. Alin wanted to be portrayed as prey. Even when she was nowhere near its definition. *'Why would anyone want to victimise themselves this much?'* Nila thought that if she did that, then her ability to grow would become dormant. Stagnant. Static. Truly enforcing her fears of becoming nothing into reality. Now Nila knows it was a waste of potential. Where Alin went wrong is she saw the glass door on the staircase to success as a mirror.

She forgot to see the girl on the other side. Alin got caught up in her own reflection. Everyone struggles on the staircase to what present-day society deems successful. Nila learned to stop questioning her worries and persisted in persevering to the top. If Alin saw Nila on the other side of the glass, instead. Then she would have known the stairs were blocked with a glass door. Not a mirror. All she had to do was connect with Nila. At least try to understand. Where Nila would have then guided her to the key so she could open the door too.

But instead, Alin saw it as a dead end. Nila could not help but wonder...that maybe...Alin willingly confined herself to the mirror all along?

Ascending the staircase to the top, Nila leaves all memories and secrets burned in the past for eternity. As she continued with life, her broken friendship blurred into nothingness, but the lesson the ex-friend taught her became her philosophy of life. Identify the fire starters and defuse their intentions before their flames etch into your journey.

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# **THE MAGE-TELL OF IMMZOLLYN**

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Nat Allison

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Note from the Skepsi Editors: This text is fantastical, and should be read as such.

**Hystarea  
A Compendium  
Edited by Agust Brenelbin  
Published 1005  
Zorndalf Archive Press**

The following text is an authorised Auto-Quill transcription (as covered by the Provisionne for Tomes and Journals, 1003) by Tomemaster Llogu E'pi, Department of Tomes, Orbstaff Academy, Arcannas. It is an academic resource and not for further reproduction. Some pages have been omitted, though the specified text is, of course, complete.

## Contained Herein:

Editor's Note by Agust Brenelbin

Foreword by Pharhalba Rinn

Chapter 1: Hystarea: A Literarie Historie

Chapter 2: The Imaginings of Magelords

Chapter 3: The Rise of Neo-Arcanism

Chapter 4: Writings from the Underground

Chapter 5: Literature of the Hystarean Republic

Editor's Note: The texts within this volume are drawn from their originals, not from their altered forms in texts such as Lymn's Hystarea (Collharp Hollen<sup>1</sup>, 823). These texts cannot be unwritten, and engagement with them is a valid goal, though I will not do so here.. This compendium exists to illustrate Hystarea, not the Bureaucracy's idea of it. It is a celebration of our culture and a part of our post-Lymnish restoration efforts. Since 'original' only really means pre-Lymnish, the texts within this volume contain aspects of several different versions in the hopes of synthesising history and creating a stronger whole.

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<sup>1</sup> The first Chief Cultural Executive (CCE) of the Subsidiary State Board of Directors (SSBD), the Lymnish Occupation's government of Hystarea 801-1002. His successor, Burress Bloomey, was much less industrious, and is not included in this volume.

# Pages Omitted by Auto-Quill Instruction

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# The Mage-Tell of Immzollyn

**Author Unknown**

Here is told the Mage-Tell of the Great Immzollyn, whose Greatness was his ending at the town of Al'r'Hin. There were many mages in our Ancient Years, in that First Age of the Arcane<sup>2</sup> when staffs sprung up as trees and spellcraft bloomed and pollinated. Many were renowned, for with power came pride also, and from that pride are the Mage-Tells of today derived. The Great and Famous Immzollyn<sup>3</sup> was chief among these mages of renown, and in fame, he preened himself. One day, in the waning years of that Age of Spells (450-535), that Mage was polishing his staff at his grand dwelling found in Arcannas<sup>4</sup> when a Magecall came to him from the town of Al'r'Hin. It was vague as Magecalls are, saying only that a Great Wizard was required there as quickly as was possible. For a walking wizard, this would be several days, for while he knew a speeding spell, it was quite draining, and at time of need a tired mage would have been a worse fate than a lack of one. So, Immzollyn walked, for there were no Runeways then<sup>5</sup>. There were before him two towns on the road to Al'r'Hin, and he stayed at both of them. First, he came to Hexenspell, where he was quite well known. He was given lodging at a discount, and many gifts also by the townsfolk. He was at Hexenspell a hero, and while there was magework to be done there, he did it not. Instead, he was lauded and made merry, with townsfolk dancing round him and singing of his Spells. The songs of Immzollyn were often sung in those old days before the change in wizardry was made, for those were different days, greater than now but also arrogant. He left Hexenspell well-fed and well-rested.

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<sup>2</sup> Hystarean Years 1-535, from the founding of Hystarea up to Roiamal's invention of RuneMail, initiating the Second Age (536-798) by first applying magic to improving public infrastructure.

<sup>3</sup> This appellation was first used by Krachalk Jyy, in her 546 text Deaths of the Great Mages, whose version of the tale is slightly kinder to the Mage since it was commissioned by his grandson. As it has since become definitive, I have used it here.

<sup>4</sup> Possibly known in Immzollyn's time as Arkannasta, though this is debated.

<sup>5</sup> As these were created in 796 and not implemented until 1004. This story takes place in 485.

He next came to Khast, a town without a wizard. Because of this deficiency, the people borrowed Trypcan's mage, as Trypcan was but an hour's walk away. With no mage, Khast got no Mage-Tells, and so nought was known of Immzollyn. Trypcan's wizard could have brought them, but she was far from talkative, preferring the company of plants. Immzollyn was not lauded as he had been in Hexenspell, but this was no great matter, for he had brought his money. He rented the Mayor's own lodgings at exorbitant cost to stay overnight, and bought also many things, for the artisans were great in Khast and he was fond of ornaments. These trinkets he sent home, employing local youths to carry his bought burden. He left Khast the next day un-tired and un-hungry. In Khast, there had been more Magework than in Hexenspell, for they had no wizard, but none of it was done by Immzollyn. He walked on smiling, satisfied, with no guilt in his heart and no practice in his hand.

Soon, he came at last to Al'r'Hin. Upon arrival, He found the town submitted to the rule of a Dark Wizard, one whose humility had been unseated by ambition. Having submitted their Magecall for the Greatest they had heard of, the people had allowed their foe to take over unimpeded, for they trusted the Mage they had called would save them, and wished to avoid more suffering than needful. On the town's main street, Immzollyn stood before the evil mage, and challenged them. As is customary in Mage's Duels<sup>6</sup>, the challenger had First Casting on his side, and Immzollyn knew this well, gathering his magic into a blast strong enough to kill. He let his Mage-bolt go, and it burned toward his foe at Dragon-speed<sup>7</sup>. His foe faced it down quite calmly, and made the signs of a deflection spell. The bolt reached the evil mage, and when the blast was cleared, still they stood, undamaged. The deflection had been of little difficulty to the evil mage, who had trained in deflecting cantrips<sup>8</sup> in their youth. Indeed, the total of all Immzollyn's magic had amounted to the power of a cantrip, so unpracticed was this Mage of great renown<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Consult Qazault Deneira's A Wizard's Guide to Combat for further information on this topic.

<sup>7</sup> The speed of a Dragon's fireball, not the Dragon. The latter is expressed as 'at the pace of Dragonwings' and is used more often for the animate.

<sup>8</sup> A low-level spell of little force and potency. Initiates begin with these due to their simplicity, but they cannot match a well-woven spell.

<sup>9</sup> Inspired by Hrungta Hriing's interpretation, this sentence was too evocative not to include, though it may seem strangely conversational.

Now the etiquette was discharged, the Duel could take any shape at all, for chivalry is a matter of the sword and not the spell. Thus, the dark mage made their counter, sending flying toward Immzollyn a spectral knife of magic shadow, swifter than a whistle and sharper than the night. The Great Mage made the signs of a deflection spell in time to throw this spell aside, and when it reached him, he was ready. The spells collided, and there was a flash of light as spell-blade met spell-shield. The Great Mage was removed by a second spell mere minutes later, for Immzollyn had perished. His deflection was not strong enough, and the shadow-blade had pierced him. This Great Mage, who had indeed been once of skill and mastery, had in his renown put too much faith, and allowed wealth to breed in him complacency.

And so, the Great Mage died, and his foe was defeated by the mage of Trypcan, who had heard of Immzollyn's passing and followed on his way. We know not that mage's name, but we know that she was great, for she was patient, humble and hardworking, as all great mages are<sup>10</sup>. So ends the Mage-Tell of Immzollyn, and so ended many Magelords.

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<sup>10</sup> For those less familiar with the literary tenets of Neo-Arcanism, the contrast in capitalisation serves a crucial purpose. Capitalised, Greatness is associated with the characteristics that led to the fall of Immzollyn, and the defeat of pre-Republican Hystarea in the B'Ding War (798-802). The lower case version is associated with the Neo-Arcanist form of greatness, originated by my ancestor Braws Brenelbin in the seminal essay Greatness in Hystarea (584) and modelled heavily on Zorndalf's influence in the seven and eight hundreds.

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# UNDER THE SKIN

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Veronika Tavecchio

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They said they took her out, but I think they lied. I can feel her. John keeps laughing at me. I don't know why he's laughing. She's inside me. They didn't take her out. Her tiny, little body will rot and fester inside me.

Rest, Esther.

Rest and recover.

I tried to tell him, you know. You have to believe me, but they all keep laughing at me. The whispers and snickers echo in this house they've stuck me in. They've locked the door and trapped me in here with her.

They don't believe me, but I can feel

her. She is inside of me. I don't need rest or recovery; I *need* to get her out of me.

I can see her. She's under my skin. If I tug my skin really tight against my bones, I can see her. She's moving under this paper-thin surface and devouring me from the inside out. I can hear the gnashing of her teeth against my tired muscles and tendons. You have to look carefully, focus your eyes on a small patch of skin. Then you could see her too.

First, you take some skin, and you pull it really tight. It has to be really tight, or it doesn't work. Then you

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have to look closely, past the hairs and the scars. If you do it like this, you can see that strange, nauseating pattern. You have to keep focusing and unfocusing your eyes, and then you'll see her. Yes! There She is!

I have to be careful not to do this in front of John and the others, otherwise they'll all think I ought to rest. I need a distraction. Sometimes I can see her nose, a smooth line poking out; other times I can see the shape of an eye, it moves. The eye, that eye under the skin, follows me about. I know she's in there. She. Sees. Me.

Since they won't take her out of me, I've decided to convince her to come out myself. She will, I know she will. I'll do it at night, so John can't hear me. He said I move too much in my sleep and doesn't want to lie beside me anymore. So I sleep in here. I didn't like that he left me alone at first, but it works well now.

I have to look under the skin in secret. I have a bedside lamp, but I can't turn it on.

You see, the door is uneven, and if I turn it on, they'll see I'm still awake. The full moon is getting closer, so if I sit on the windowsill, I can see her

in the moonlight. This way, they won't come, and I'll have time to look at her.

I took a nap after lunchtime. I didn't really want to, but now I am wide awake, and I have time to see her move under the skin. I inch myself closer to the window. I have to hook my foot under the windowsill so I can balance well enough to catch most of the moonlight. Now I can begin.

Stretch and pull.

Pull and stretch.

I've lost her; I need to stretch more.

Pull, pull, pull.

There she is! I can see her!

Then the most peculiar thing happens. She's moving. I thought she was still, but no, she did it again! She's shaking, or maybe I am. I tighten my grip, my arms hurt - oh, they hurt. I'm getting tired. She's slipping again. She hides beneath my skin. I need to keep her in place, she's dangerous - she crawls and creeps and shivers and she's infecting me.

I had to stop last night, but it's alright. The moon is brighter tonight, so I'll see her perfectly. I told Jennie - or Sarah, or was it Lucy? - that I wanted to mend some clothing today. It was boring, but I

managed to hide some pins in the mattress. They'll be perfect for tonight.

I told them I was tired and wanted to go back to bed. They believed me; it's the only thing they believe about me. I waited until the house stopped moving, then crept towards the window. I have to be really quiet.

Stretch and pull.

Pull and stretch.

She's there, I found her.

I took one of the pins and fixed her. It's so much better this way; my arms won't get tired, and I can watch her properly. It only hurt a little, not much at all. She's all fixed now. She's quivering and throbbing and squirming. She's crawling inside me like some sort of beast. I need to get her out of me now. I can do it! I can see her.

I scrape my nail against her, and I can feel her. The bumps. The nooks. I can feel them. Something is pinching me. I'm sure it's her. She wants to come out. I want her out.

I need to peel it back first. How can she get out with all this skin in the way?

She's already gotten to work; she's scratching and biting from the

inside. Creeping and crawling around. Inch by inch, a tear in my flesh. She's killing me. I need to get her out of me right now, before she rots. It's hard to get a grip. I have to push my nail in deep - yes, she's there. It's very thick, so it will take a long time, but the night has only just started. I have time. I hook and pull. *Strthhhhh*. This was a good first strip; it came off clean. And - oh! She's there! I can see her nail! She's pulling too. I hook again and again and again. *Strthhhh*. I tear, and I tug, and I strip myself raw. I tried to stay quiet, I really did, but she's coming out of me now. She's crawling out from the muck. Out of the blood. The bone. So much flesh. The rot. Her hand peeks through, and the rot bursts out. It's putrid. Yellow oozes. Green sediment spits. She festers and bubbles out.

"Esther, what did you do?" I turn around, and John's there, standing, horrified, looking down at me.

"She's coming out... don't you see? She's leaving now." He went down like a big lump; it must be a surprise for him. I told him she was still inside me. He can't deny it now. Here I pull. Here she rips.

I tear.

She shreds.

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# THE SEASON WHO SHALL NOT BE NAMED

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Chi-Chi Onyema

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SHE is a sweet song to most, but to me a piercing squeal -  
The season of the sun. Months of accursed white-hot hell,  
No choice but to endure HER wrath. SHE forces me to kneel,  
As SHE has come again. No warning - no alarm or bell.

HER sun, a spotlight scanning the earth to single me out,  
Almost sentient, aware I do not want to conform.  
Unable to part with my jackets and jeans, so I shout:  
“Bikini bras and short shorts will not be my uniform!”

HER lips give grazes that can be soft or rather deadly.  
To those lucky enough to be sun-blessed - dark eyes, skin, hair -  
HER presence is accepted, celebrated readily.  
Light eyes, skin and hair, however? Too well they do not fare.

Battle gear is essential - sunglasses, suncream, sunhat -  
To combat HER power. They do not provide much solace,  
As HER army quit their homes to invade my habitat:  
Bees, wasps, spiders, moths and yet to many this season - bliss!

Swaying, I struggle to stay still in HER sweltering sun.  
No compassion for how SHE blinds me, burns me and beats me.  
HER eyes are laser focused; I - the target, SHE - the gun.  
With nighttime still not here, who knows if I'll ever be free.

A serene swim they enjoy while SHE casts her silent spell,  
Too enthralled by HER light, ignoring the fire brewing:  
"But it makes the sea shimmer and sparkle so all is well",  
While the sand sizzles hotter. The chaos is ensuing.

Blazing beams of light batter my sensitive, supple skin,  
Still unrecovered, severely scarred from the year before.  
It worsens yet SHE grows stronger; HER face wears a smug grin.  
Tyranny is upon me - fighting, a burdensome chore.

HER shine reduces me to a pool of perspiration.  
What crime was so awful to deserve this scorching weather?!  
On my knees to spirited Gods, filled with desperation -  
This suffering, it cannot possibly last forever...

Blessed be the last day of August, my prayers have been heard.  
The sun sets sooner; trees drop leaves. Is it really the end?  
Sweat, stink, sunburn. Anguished with the horrors that occurred,  
I long for Autumn, certain SHE will never be my friend.

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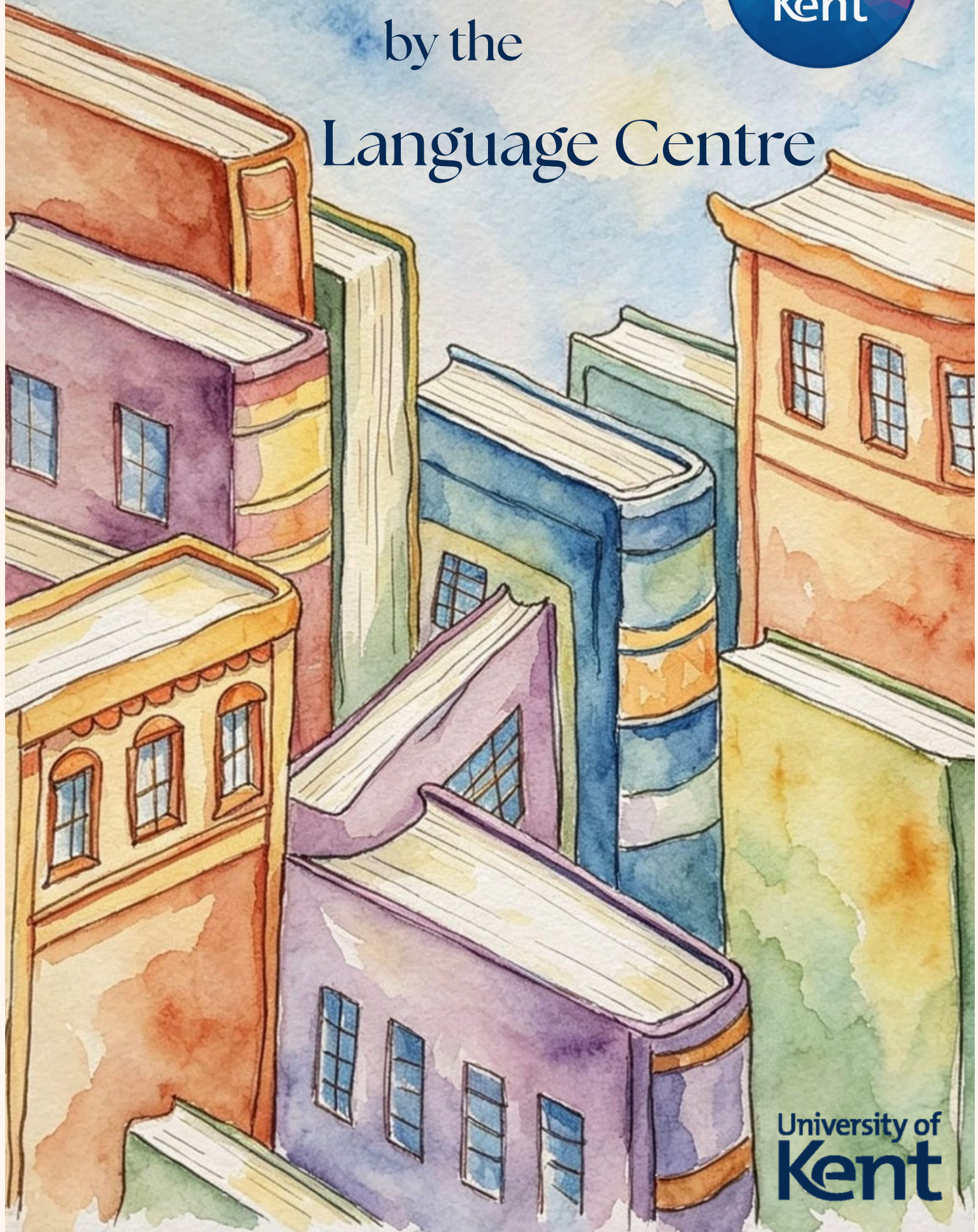
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